

CHRISTEN SCHIELLERUP KØBKE

COPENHAGEN 1810 – COPENHAGEN 1848

Christen Købke was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 1822 at the age of twelve. In time he was to win both the minor and major silver medals, but he never competed for a gold medal. At first he had C.A. Lorentzen (1749–1828) as his teacher, and after Lorentzen's death he became a private pupil of the renowned Professor C.W. Eckersberg.

Eckersberg exercised a crucial influence on Købke, evidenced in the restrained manner in which he recorded what he saw, the crystal-clear treatment of light and the classical structure of his pictures; but Købke also learned from other artists' works, such as C.A. Jensen's portraits and J.C. Dahl's landscapes. For a time at the end of the 1830's, the sculptor Hermann Ernst Freund (1786–1840), Eckersberg's professorial colleague in the Academy, exercised a somewhat problematic influence on Christen Købke. He sought to guide his artistic course of development away from natural, scintillating everyday scenes in the direction of a more intellectual idiom, taking works of classical antiquity for models.

For fifteen years, Købke's father was employed as a master baker in the Citadel in Copenhagen. This defence complex was situated then, as now, at the northern approach to Copenhagen harbour, separated from the city and the Sound by a moat. Most of the motifs in Købke's paintings derive either from the Citadel and its immediate surroundings or from the area around the Sortedam Lake at Østerbro, at that time a northern suburb of Copenhagen.

Købke was very closely tied to his family and so continued living in his childhood home as long as possible. When the elder Købke retired from the Citadel in 1833 and bought an impressive country house in Blegdammen overlooking the Sortedam Lake, Christen also went to live there. Four years later, when he married a cousin of his own age (twenty-seven), a home was set up for the young couple at the north end of the ample parental home.

At the urging of art historian N.L. Høyen, who felt that young Danish artists should devote a portion of their time portraying national monuments in their works,¹ Købke painted an austere, light-filled interior taking its motif from one of the oldest churches in Jutland, The Transept of Aarhus Cathedral, (1830) now in Statens Museum for Kunst. Some five years later he produced a number of pictures of Frederiksborg Castle in Northern Zealand, equally demonstrating his talent.

At the start of his artistic career, for other motifs Købke chose to paint small, undemanding scenes from his immediate surroundings. But as time passed, he set about executing much larger works, all of which were meticulously finished after preparatory sketches and painstaking perspective calculations had been made. View Outside the North Gate of the Citadel (1834), Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, and Morning View of Østerbro (1836), Statens Museum for Kunst, are some of the most important works from this phase.

Købke's portraits were mainly of his closest relatives and people in his circle of acquaintances whom he knew well, for instance his fellow artists. Among the latter, special mention should be made

of the portrait of The Landscape Artist Frederik Sødring (1832), *Den Hirschsprungeske Samling*. (Frederik Hansen Sødring's Rønneby Waterfall at Blekinge, Sweden is included in the Loeb collection).

Around the middle of the 1830's, Christen Købke was gripped by a short-lived feeling of artistic insufficiency; at the same time he became prone to brooding on religious questions. The hitherto tranquil spontaneity of his art was replaced by a more ponderous, sombre and less detailed idiom. This is seen in several huge portraits such as *The Decorative Artist C.G. Hilker* (c. 1837), *Statens Museum for Kunst*, and *The Sculptor H.E. Freund* (1838) *Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts*. Købke's periodic melancholy is also sensed in some of his autumn landscapes, for instance *Autumn Morning by the Sortedam Lake* (1838), *Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen*.

A two-year travel grant from the *Fonden ad Usus Publicos* enabled him in 1838 to embark on a prolonged visit to Italy, most of the time in the company of his friend Georg Christian Hilker (1807–1875). His travels took him via Berlin to Dresden, Munich, Venice, Florence and Rome. But the main goal of the journey was Naples, where the young artists, inspired by Professor Freund, made copies of ancient wall paintings from Pompeii.

As a young man, Herman Ernst Freund had spent more than ten years in Italy, for part of the time as Bertel Thorvaldsen's (1770–1844) closest colleague in Rome. During a visit to southern Italy, his discovery of the interior and decorative art of Pompeii and Herculaneum had had a decisive influence on Freund's view of art. After returning to Copenhagen in 1828, he never ceased wishing he were back in Italy. His official residence in Frederiksholms Kanal was testimony to this, and he persuaded young artists including Købke, Hilker and Constantin Hansen to decorate the rooms throughout the house in a sophisticated Pompeiian style, with the furniture and household utensils also made to the pattern of ancient models.

An excursion by sea to the Sorrento peninsula together with Constantin Hansen, who had arrived from Rome, developed into a three-month-long stay on the island of Capri, while Hilker remained in Naples. While in Capri, despite frequent rain, Købke made a series of drawings and painted sketches for larger-scale paintings he planned to work on after his return home.

Unfortunately, Købke came home to sorrows and problems that would drain his energy and for a time partly deprive him of his ability to work. Freund, his artistic guide and mentor, had died shortly before. One of Købke's brothers had also died, and soon another brother died. His wife Sanne gave birth to the couple's first child, but after a second birth she fell seriously ill and suffered a long and painful period of illness. In 1843, the elder Købke died, and two years later the house in Blegdammen had to be sold. Severely depressed by all this, Købke now found himself compelled to move with his little family to a dark apartment in Copenhagen. Poor financial prospects made him consider becoming a decorative painter, for which reason in 1844/1845 he took part in the decoration of the rooms in the newly-built Thorvaldsens Museum.

The studies he had made in Italy did not lead to success for Christen Købke. He did not feel inspired to paint, and a major work, *View of the Marina Piccola on Capri* (1846), *Gottorp*,

Schleswig, intended to gain him membership of the Academy, was rejected. Købke was deeply distressed by this, and it was no consolation to him that his friend Constantin Hansen also had a painting rejected, a painting for which he also had hoped to become a member. Nevertheless, Købke completed a small number of sunny landscapes, mostly with motifs from the Sortedam Lake, all executed after the return from Italy, which demonstrate that Købke was well on his way to regaining his delight in painting. But in February 1848 he died of pneumonia at the age of thirty-eight.

With the exception of 1846, Christen Købke exhibited annually at Charlottenborg between 1831 and 1847. During his lifetime his pictures attracted little attention outside the circle of his relatives and friends, and it was really only at the end of the century that he received the recognition he deserved. Since then, increasing numbers have come to appreciate his unassuming, limpid works, the best of which, by virtue of their assured brush strokes and impeccable treatment of colour and light show Danish art at its best. Today there are works by Christen Købke in most major Danish museums as well as some of the most famous foreign collections both in Europe and the United States.

In his own day he was of particular importance to the artistic development of J.Th. Lundbye (1818–1848), Dankvart Dreyer (1816–1852) and Thorald Læssøe (1816–1878).

S.L.

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¹On Høyen, see note 6 on Christen Dalsgaard, *Young Girl Writing*.