

DANIEL HERMAN ANTON MELBYE

COPENHAGEN 1818 – PARIS 1875

Anton Melbye's life was adventurous and rich in experiences. He originally wanted to be a sailor but had to give up this idea because he was nearsighted. Instead he was apprenticed in the shipbuilding trade, breaking off this training to become a musician. But in 1838 he found his right place when he started training in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts to become a marine artist. He did this after consulting C. W. Eckersberg and immediately thereafter became his private pupil. The actual training took only about a year, but Eckersberg's favor and occasional influence left their traces on Melbye throughout his life.

Early in the 1840s the young artist began to embark on long voyages to see for himself how ships and the sea behaved in varying conditions, with a view to painting them. This was at first on the recommendation of the Holstein draftsman and art historian Baron C. F. von Rumohr (1785–1843), who enjoyed great respect in the artistic life of the period, partly because he had played an important role in establishing the Royal Collection of Prints and Drawings. Later it was King Christian VIII who ensured that Anton Melbye could take part in various naval excursions to foreign parts. These were at first voyages in the Baltic on the corvette Flora¹ and in the North Sea on the ship Christian VIII, and then as far away as Morocco onboard the paddle-driven warship Hekla. On this latter journey, Melbye is said to have found the motif for his famous dramatic picture Eddystone Fyrtaarn, 1846 (The Eddystone Lighthouse), Statens Museum for Kunst, which brought him the Charlottenborg exhibition medal. Anton Melbye had exhibited his works there since 1840, and this he continued to do throughout his life, though with a number of interruptions as a result of his constant traveling. Anton taught marine painting to his two younger brothers, Vilhelm (1824–1882) and Fritz (1826–1869). They also became marine artists, and all three spent a large part of their professional lives abroad. Through Fritz, Anton Melbye met the young Camille Pissarro (1831–1903) and for a time was his teacher; in 1859 Pissarro exhibited in the Salon as a pupil of Melbye.

From 1847 to 1858 Melbye had his center in Paris, though in 1853 he took part in a ten-month-long French expedition to Constantinople, where among other work he is said to have been asked to make two paintings for the sultan. On returning to Paris, he was presented to Napoleon III and obtained a commission for a large painting for the emperor and for an album of drawings with Asian motifs for the empress. His many distinguished clients reinforced his standing and led to still more commissions. Also in Paris, Melbye became a friend of the landscape painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875), who for a time exerted an appreciable influence on the Danish artist.

Anton Melbye's pictures were dramatic and full of action, with a gripping emotional content that could occasionally verge on the melancholy. In this he was not at all like his teacher Eckersberg, whose art was classical, clear, and sober. For the Romantic Melbye, as for another marine artist and pupil of Eckersberg, Carl Frederik Sørensen (represented in the Loeb collection with Coast with Steep Cliffs

and View of the Sound), the actual reproduction of the ships gradually acquired less importance than natural phenomena such as the behavior of the sea and the sky in varying weather conditions. Reproductions of storms and tempestuous seas, calm waters, sunset, moonlight, or incipient dawn became the mainstays in the paintings, delighting an ever-growing public both in Denmark and far beyond. Melbye's oeuvre is extremely extensive, and yet his pictures never became superficial or simply routine products. Anton Melbye was also one of the first Danish artists to take an interest in the daguerreotype, a technique which he learned toward the end of the 1840s from Louis Daguerre in Paris.

Anton Melbye, who had been awarded neither silver nor gold medals during his brief time at the Academy, nevertheless won the Neuhausen Prize in 1843 and the exhibition medal three years later. In 1846 he was also awarded the Thorvaldsen Medal, and he was given the Academy travel grant for the period 1846–1848. In Constantinople he was honored with the distinguished Turkish Order of Chivalry; in Paris he was made a Knight of the Legion of Honour, and in 1858, when he had returned to Denmark after his long sojourn in France, he was appointed a Knight of the Order of Dannebrog.

After 1858, Anton Melbye lived sometimes in Copenhagen as a member of the Academy with the title of professor, sometimes in Hamburg, where he had many clients among the rich merchants and shipowners of the city, and sometimes in Paris, where he died. In Philip Weilbach's contemporary, and far from uncritical, consideration of Melbye it can be seen that Denmark did not always appreciate the celebrated painter, who was felt to have neglected his talent during the long periods he spent abroad because he had too soon been pampered with major commissions.

S.L.

LITERATURE: Philip Weilbach, *Dansk Kunstnerlexikon*, Copenhagen 1877–78; Henrik Bramsen, *Danske marinemalere*, Copenhagen 1962, pp. 36ff, 101, 113ff; H.C. Andersen's *dagbøger*, VII, 1866–67, Copenhagen 1972; Hanne Westergaard in C. W. Eckersberg og hans elever, Statens Museum for Kunst, 1983, pp. 123–124; Annette Stabell in *Weilbach*, vol. 5. Copenhagen 1996.

¹A corvette is a warship ranking in the old navies next below a frigate and having usually only one tier of guns.