

JOHAN JULIUS EXNER

COPENHAGEN 1825 – COPENHAGEN 1910

Julius Exner was born in Copenhagen and died there after a long and productive life in the service of national romantic genre painting. His father was a musician, an immigrant from Bohemia. The son was apprenticed as a painter, and at the age of fourteen he was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Here he followed instruction from 1839 to 1845 with the intention of becoming a history painter, training under professors J.L. Lund (1777–1867) and C.W. Eckersberg, among others.

The catalogues of the Charlottenborg exhibitions show that the young Exner started his artistic career as a portraitist and that historical compositions were his special interest. Thyra Danebod forsøger at formilde Gorm den Gamle i sin vrede mod nogle fangne kristne (Thyra Danebod Attempts to Mollify Gorm the Old in His Anger with Some Captive Christians) was the title of his first major work in this latter genre. The title of the painting reveals that its creator had an early sense of narrative style with anecdotal features. The work was exhibited in 1849 and immediately purchased for the Royal Collection of Paintings.

It might have been on this occasion that the art historian N.L. Høyen began to take particular interest in the young artist, turning the painter's attention to the special features of the farmers of Amager as a motif for a national genre painting. The fertile flat island of Amager in the Sound lies in continuation of Copenhagen. The island encompasses the districts of Christianshavn and Sundbyerne with Kastrup and Kastrup Airport in the north and the Taarnby, Store Magleby and Dragør districts farther to the south. In 1521 the Danish King Christian II summoned Dutch farmers to Amager in order to have them cultivate Danish land. It was the naturalised descendants of these immigrants who, even in Exner's day, still dressed for festive occasions in beautiful traditional local dress, and whose everyday lives differed little from what had always been known. From 1852 until as late as the 1870's, Exner found most of his motifs on Amager. In contrast to Dalsgaard, it was exclusively the lighter sides of life he portrayed. Often making some narrative point in his paintings, he was fond of picturing affluent farmers in well-furnished interiors or outside their delightful residences, dressed in beautiful, colourful Sunday clothes, engaged in friendly conversation or pursuing innocent pastimes.

In 1857–1858, having been awarded the Academy's travel bursary, Julius Exner went via Dresden and Vienna to Italy and Switzerland, returning home via Paris. But apart from an atypical but interesting picture from Venice, 1859, En gondol (A Gondola), Statens Museum for Kunst, the journey did not bring any decisive changes in his circle of motifs. At the beginning of the 1860's Exner visited Sweden on several occasions and painted a small number of genre scenes. But it continued to be the Amager farmers—and occasionally the population in the central Zealand Hedebo region—in which he was particularly interested. Then towards 1880, he focused on the little fishing community on the small island of Fanø in the North Sea near the German border.

Compared with the earlier paintings, those from Fanø were often subdued, and the characterisation of the figures was more searching. But the reproductions of national costume and of accurate details in original interiors continued unabated. It should be added here that the artists depicting everyday life in Denmark often based their portrayals of the homes and workplaces and the beautiful hand-made furniture on many different visual impressions collected in sketchbooks and pieced together according to their intentions in the finished compositions. These were always executed in the painters' studios. Exactly the same was the case with the national romantic landscape artists who took their most beautiful motifs wherever they were to be found and later placed them side by side in idealised portrayals of the Danish countryside.

Julius Exner was accorded various official distinctions during his long life as an artist. In 1847 he was awarded the Neuhausen Prize for a portrait of his sister, and in 1853 he received the Thorvaldsen Medal. He became a member of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 1864 and was on the Academy Council from 1887. For twenty years Exner was an assistant in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts Life School, and in 1876 he was appointed professor with an official residence in the Academy. It is here we find the ageing painter in the Loeb collection. In addition to his almost annual participation in the Charlottenborg spring exhibitions from 1844 to 1910, Julius Exner showed works in a multitude of other exhibitions both in Denmark and abroad.

Exner's idyllic scenes of everyday life were very popular far into the 20th century. He was a master of scenes including large numbers of figures, creating a coherence between the figures by means of the anecdote, just as he allowed local colour to appear with several recurrent hues in order to create painterly cohesion in his works.

In addition to his many oil paintings, the artist left a large number of graphics and drawings. He also produced the illustrations for the poet Christian Winther's (1796–1876) *Billeder og Vers* (Pictures and Verses), which appeared in 1862.

S.L.

LITERATURE: Nicolaj Bøgh, *Julius Exner, Navnlig Bidrag til hans Ungdomshistorie* in: *Hver 14 Dag*, Vol. 1, Copenhagen 1895, pp. 385–395; P.V. Ørsted, *Julius Exner*, Copenhagen 1903; Th. B. (= N. Lützhøft), *Hvad Exner fortalte* in: *Julebogen*, VII, 1908, pp. 45–68; *Julius Exner*, Smaa Kunstbøger, Copenhagen 1910; Marianne Zenius, *Genremaleri og Virkelighed*, Copenhagen 1976; Annette Stabell in: *Weilbach*, Vol. 2, Copenhagen 1994; Peter Nisbet, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr.*, Harvard University Art Museums Gallery Series No. 8, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1994, p. 10.