

JOHAN LAURENTZ JENSEN¹

GENTOFTE 1800 – COPENHAGEN 1856

“Blomster-Jensen” (“Flower Jensen”) is the popular nickname given to Johan Laurentz Jensen. He made several thousand flower paintings and decided on the genre as his specialty while still studying at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. He was admitted to the Academy at the age of fourteen, as was quite typical. The son of the parish clerk in Gentofte, then a village north of Copenhagen, he had such an obvious talent that he encountered no opposition from his parents when he chose to become an artist. His basic training in the life class culminated with the minor and then the major silver medals after three years of study. He learned flower painting with C.D. Fritzsck (1765–1841), who in his youth was a friend of the great Danish sculptor Thorvaldsen (1770–1844). Fritzsck’s scenes of Copenhagen street life were the models for C.W. Eckersberg’s youthful works in that genre. As a flower painter, Fritzsck worked in the classical Dutch tradition with tightly composed bouquets in vases such as are seen, for instance, in the work of Jan van Huysum (1682–1749).

We know only flower and fruit pieces by Jensen. An unsigned painting from the Botanical Gardens then situated behind the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts at Charlottenborg in Copenhagen has been attributed to him, but the attribution has subsequently been disputed, and a portrait, (sold by Arne Bruun Rasmussen auction 481, no. 78) is probably not a self-portrait, but a portrait painted in 1852 by his namesake Johannes Jensen (1818–1873).

Jensen made his first appearance in the Academy’s annual exhibition at Charlottenborg in 1818, and with a travelling bursary he was able to make a trip to Paris.

Since the Empress Joséphine had acquired the palace of Malmaison in 1798, France had been experiencing a great fashion for flowers. She had all kinds of flowers, especially roses, imported and cultivated, and she created a scientific milieu in which botanists and artists worked together, one achievement of which was the publication of some splendid botanical works illustrated by Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759–1840), including one devoted to the rose.

In 1822 Redouté succeeded his teacher Gerard van Spaendonck (1746–1822), who was a pupil of van Huysum, the Maître des Dessins in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. It is possible to imagine Jensen participating in these courses in drawing and painting, which were open to the public. We know that he sent a copy of a flower painting by van Spaendonck along with drawings of live flowers to the crown prince of Denmark. It is tempting to imagine that it was in this fascinating milieu that he chose the rose as the flower around which his entire production is grouped.

While in France, Jensen spent some time in Sèvres, where he learned porcelain painting, which later resulted in an appointment to the Royal Porcelain Manufactory in Copenhagen (1825–1840). That year he became a member of the Academy, and ten years later he was given the title of professor. He retained his connection with his native town, where he owned a small summer residence. There he taught his numerous pupils, among whom was the subsequent Queen Louise, married to Christian IX,

and her sister Augusta (one of whose paintings is represented in the Loeb collection.) He counted a large number of women among his pupils.

In 1833–1835, he was in the south of France and Italy. He sold to, and exhibited with, the painter and art collector François-Xavier Fabre (1766–1837) at Montpellier.

In Rome he formed part of the Danish colony of artists centred around Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844), who lent him some of his antique vases so that he could paint them, and who also bought from him. Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) tells in his diary for 1834 how, while out walking, he plucked purple anemones for Jensen, who incorporated them into a painting.

With the pink cabbage rose as his focal point, Jensen created his virtuoso compositions in which he juggled flowers rather like modules fitted together. The result is paintings of a uniquely decorative power. Through his treatment of light (in which he selected flowers to illuminate especially, but with the entire bouquet standing out against a dark background), he establishes a link with Dutch flower painting from the 17th century. The light is not the fleeting light of nature, but an idealised light. Strawberries, beech leaves, elder and cornflowers lend a National Romantic tone to some of the works. Even when he worked with the classical international repertoire, his paintings have the same unmistakable quality of a slightly naive sweetness such as one found in Auguste Bournonville's (1805–1879) ballets.

Jensen's oeuvre consists of several types of motif: flowers in clear drinking glasses, flowers in simple earthenware pots, flowers laid out on a table. Each type allows a large amount of space around the bouquets. It was possibly during his later years that he introduced a new motif in which he painted the flowers seen from close quarters without a vase or table, as in classical flower painting. Unfortunately, there is still only scant research on this important Danish Golden Age painter. There are no drawn preparatory works from his hand in Danish collections. Perhaps he simply did not draw, but knew his flowers so well that he could freely combine them on the canvas.

At the age of fifty, Jensen's sight began to fail. With great effort he executed an extensive decoration of garlands of flowers for the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen as part of Gottlieb Bindesbøll's restoration. He travelled south to see the World Fair in Paris in 1855, in which he took part and was awarded a prize. After this he went into decline.

M. T.

LITERATURE: Bernard Nollen, *A Posy of Flowers Painted by Scandinavian Artists in the Time of Hans Christian Andersen*, Liechtenstein 1982; Hanne Westergaard, *H.C. Andersens blomster*, Copenhagen 1985; Barbara Scott, *Johan Laurentz Jensen, the Father of Danish Flower Painting* in: *Apollo*, Vol. CXXVII, no. 309, November 1987, pp. 337–342; Ingvar Bergström, *Johan Laurentz Jensen (1800–1865); Father of Danish Flower Painting*, Hirsch & Adler Galleries Inc., New York, 1988–89; Elisabeth Fabritius in: *Weilbach*, Vol. 4, Copenhagen 1995; Inger Nørballe, *Romantikens blomster blomsteres prog*, Bakkehusmuseet, Copenhagen, 1998.

¹Though J.L. Jensen signed his paintings "I.L." Jensen, we have used the name J.L. Jensen throughout this catalogue, as it is listed in the biographies of the *Weilbach Dictionary of Danish Artists*.