

CHRISTEN DALSGAARD

1824–1907

22. *Young Girl Writing*, 1871

(*Ung pige, der skriver*)

Oil on canvas, 25 x 18¾ in. (64 x 48 cm)

Signed lower right: Chr. Dalsgaard, Sorø 1871

PROVENANCE: Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 548, 1990, lot 42, ill.

EXHIBITED: Paris World Fair, 1878 (undetermined); Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr.*, 1994, no. 3.

LITERATURE: Julius Lange, *Nutids-Kunst, Skildringer og Karakteristikker*, Copenhagen 1873, pp. 249–50; Karl Madsen, *Kunstens Historie i Danmark*, Copenhagen 1901–1907, p. 307–308; Knud Søeborg, *Christen Dalsgaard og hans Kunst*, Copenhagen 1902, p. 94, ill. p. 96.

Perhaps the best possible description of this engaging painting comes from art historian and humanist Julius Lange (1838–1896) in one of his best known works.¹

... in 1871 came the charming painting—in a painterly sense one of Dalsgaard's most beautiful—of the quite young girl sitting by the window, completely engrossed in the important undertaking of writing a letter. We will make no insinuation at all concerning the contents of the letter, which were perhaps not really so important; but in the entire posture, in the way in which she was holding her head to one side to see down the lines and involuntarily twisting her foot round one of the chair legs, the rare and solemn quality of the event were expressed with so much grace and humour.

Altogether, Christen Dalsgaard made four versions of *Young Girl Writing*. Three of them are dated 1871, the fourth is dated 1875.

In 1878 one of them was exhibited in the Paris World Fair, establishing the picture's reputation and its significance in the history of Danish art. Since it cannot be determined with certainty which of the versions was sent abroad, the history of all four paintings is considered here.

The artist's nephew, A. S. Dalsgaard, recalls that his uncle was extremely industrious and always had something in preparation, "either a new idea or a repeat of an older motif that had come to life for him anew."² The same source provides the information that the Dalsgaards had a single child, a daughter, who died as a baby, but the artist and his wife adopted a little orphan girl on whom they both doted. Whether the model for the girl writing her letter is the artist's adoptive daughter, who in 1871 must have been about 13 years old, is something at which we can only guess.³

The features of this young girl are found in other works by Dalsgaard, for instance, *En Rekonvalescent (A Convalescent)*, 1870, now in the Hirschsprung Collection. This work was exhibited the following year at Charlottenborg together with others, including *Young Girl Writing*. In the book quoted above, Julius Lange writes of it: "In 1871, Dalsgaard enjoyed a greater success in the exhibition than usually fell to his lot on account of some small pictures, in particular the superb little painting of a girl writing a letter."⁴ It is no wonder that the artist chose to reproduce his little masterpiece, for there was a market for it.

The three 1871 versions of *Young Girl Writing* are almost identical. They have practically the same dimensions, but slight differences in the execution of each individual work distinguish them from each other. We



FIG. A: VERSION 2 *Young Girl Writing*, 1871
 Oil on canvas, 24¾ x 20 in. (63 x 49 cm)
 Signed and dated lower left: Chr. Dalsgaard, Sorø 1871
 Ribe Kunstmuseum



FIG. B VERSION 3 *Young Girl Writing*, 1871
 Oil on canvas, 24¾ x 20 in. (63 x 49 cm)
 Signed and dated lower left: Chr. Dalsgaard, Sorø 1871
 Owner unknown

will consider Version 1 to be in the Loeb collection. Version 2 (Fig. A) belongs to Ribe Kunstmuseum. The current owners of Version 3 (Fig. B) and Version 4 (Fig. C) are not known. Version 4 (1875) is a little smaller than the others (21¼ x 17½ in., or 54 x 44 cm) and introduces some changes, including a detailed close-up of the girl, though the motif is the same.

There are photographs and records of the provenance of versions 3 and 4 in the collection of photographs in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, but their present whereabouts are unknown.

In the important *Kunstens Historie i Danmark* published in 1907, edited and written mainly by the art historian Karl Madsen,⁵ the author writes about the reception of Danish art in the 1878 World Fair in Paris, when French critics expressed a “unanimous and merciless condemnation of the artistic failings in our national painting.”

For more than thirty years, Danish artists had followed the injunctions of the art historian N.L. Høyen to paint mainly Danish landscapes and Danish everyday life, for which reason artists had adapted very little to the new artistic currents from abroad.⁶ Karl Madsen writes that although there were French critics who made the effort to acquaint themselves with the language of Danish painting and its positive qualities, and who “emphasised the honesty of Danish art, the intensity of feeling in it and the wealth of talent,” most of them nevertheless condemned “its formal incompetence and deplorable predilection for a decorative quality that was devoid of all character.”

The criticism of Paul Mantz was typical of this ambivalence. In the newspaper *Le Temps* of November



FIG. C: VERSION 4 *Young Girl Writing*, 1875
 Oil on canvas, 21¼ x 17⅓ in. (54 x 44 cm)
 Signed and dated lower left: Chr. Dalsgaard, Sorø 1875
 Owner unknown

1878, he drew attention to Christen Dalsgaard's *Letter Writer* as "the most interesting and most significant painting in the Danish section," a work in which "the motif, the will, the thought and the intention deserve the greatest praise." Unfortunately, these gratifying remarks were not allowed to stand without further comment. Mantz goes on to use Dalsgaard's work as an example of his personal assessment of the overall Danish contribution: "But the painter himself, and most Danish painters, are like the young girl. The handwriting is bad, the orthography faulty, the style without art."

Karl Madsen's commentaries on this, twenty-nine years after the catastrophic French reception of the Danish paintings, relativise the event to some extent.

He points out that, in contrast to the art of Eckersberg and especially Købke, the wave of national art had never been able to achieve any particular interest or appreciation on the part of foreign art critics, but that the national line in art was neither vapid nor without content, and asserts that

Young Girl Writing was really a product of Danish national painting (in the form of the girl in her beautiful local costume) and was simply not intended for a French public.

"Despite all the weakness of the form, it tells us Danes with understanding and feeling of the special quality and beauty of our countryside and of the joys and sorrows of the people; it tells both of gentle, melancholy dreaming and of a brave striving towards higher goals, and it also tells everyone of the wise and beautiful thoughts of a great and rich artistic soul."⁷

S.L.

¹Nutids-Kunst, *Skildring*, pp. 249–250.

²Christen Dalsgaard, *Spredte Træk og Minder* in: *Skivebogen, Historisk Aarvog for Skive og Omegn*, Vol. 21, Skive 1929, pp. 77–99.

³Christen Dalsgaard was 47 years old in 1871; he had married in 1857.

⁴Julius Lange, *Nutids-Kunst, Skildringer og Karakteristikker*, Copenhagen 1873, p. 236.

⁵Karl Madsen (1855–1938), painter, art historian and subsequently Director of Statens Museum for Kunst.

⁶Niels Lauritz Høyen (1799–1870), the first real art historian in Denmark, was a considerable figure on the cultural scene, exercising an almost unique influence on artistic life throughout most of the 19th century. One of his achievements was to have founded the Art Society of Copenhagen, *Kunstforeningen* in 1825; together with his colleague, the museologist Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1856) he became joint head of the Royal Collection of Paintings, which purchased the artists' works, and he was an ardent spokesman for nationalism and the sense of a Scandinavian quality in art. Thanks to his infectious commitment, he persuaded Danish painters and sculptors to give expression exclusively to Danish and Nordic history and attributes in their art and to reject all foreign influence. His ideas continued to affect most Danish portrayals of the countryside and the life of the ordinary people well into the 1880's.

⁷Karl Madsen: *Kunstens Historie i Danmark*, Copenhagen 1901–1907, pp. 307–308.