

# CHRISTEN KØBKE

1810–1848

## 69. *The Sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, c. 1828*

(Copy of the upper section of C.W. Eckersberg's painting of 1814,  
presented to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts)

(Portræt af billedhuggeren Bertel Thorvaldsen.

[Kopi efter den øverste del af C.W. Eckersbergs maleri fra 1814, skænket Det danske Kunstakademi])

Oil on canvas, 21¼ x 17⅔ in. (54 x 45 cm)

PROVENANCE: Medaljør F.C. Krohn's Auction, 1883, no. 20; Konferensraad T. Petersen (1884, 1893); Overretsassessor A. Petersen (1912); Painter Carlo Madsen; Grosserer Carl-Eilert Wivel (1953); Karen Margrethe Wivel (1981); Arne Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 465, 1984, lot 58, ill.

EXHIBITED: Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen, *Christen Købke*, 1884, no. 4; Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen, *Christen Købke*, 1912, no. 9; Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen, *Christen Købke*, 1953, no. 8; Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen *Købke og Kastellet, Et dansk Guldaldermotiv*, 1981, no. 1; Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr.*, 1994, no. 14; Statens Museum for Kunst, *Christen Købke 1810–1848*, 1996, no. 9, ill. p. 30.

LITERATURE: Emil Hannover, *Maleren Christen Købke*, Copenhagen 1893, no. 10, mentioned p. 6; Mario Krohn, *Maleren Christen Købkes Arbejder*, Copenhagen 1915, no. 9; Knud Voss, *Guldaldermalerne og deres billeder på Statens Museum for Kunst*, Copenhagen 1976, mentioned p. 91; Peter Nisbet, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador John Loeb, Jr.*, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1994, discussed and ill. pp. 4–5; Hans Edvard Nørregård-Nielsen and Kasper Monrad, *Christen Købke 1810–1848*, Statens Museum for Kunst 1996, mentioned pp. 34, 39, ill. p. 30 (in English); Hans Edvard Nørregård-Nielsen, *Christen Købke, 1–3*, Copenhagen 1996, no. 9, mentioned and ill., Vol. 1, pp. 70–72.

This piece is Købke's copy of a section of C.W. Eckersberg's portrait of Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844)<sup>1</sup> which was painted in Rome in 1814, when the 44-year-old sculptor had been living there for seventeen years. The young Eckersberg had come from Paris where he had been taught the previous year by Jacques Louis David (1748–1825). Thorvaldsen is portrayed in the robes of the S. Lucca Academy, wearing two decorations on his chest and sitting in a reddish brown chair in front of a green curtain above which a section of the Alexander frieze can be seen. (This was the frieze the Danish sculptor had modelled for the Quirinal Palace on the occasion of Napoleon's expected visit to Rome.) In Købke's copy he shows only Thorvaldsen's head and shoulders against a neutral brownish background instead of Eckersberg's fragmentary reproduction of the *Entry of Alexander the Great into Babylon*.

Købke was eighteen in 1828. Shortly before this he had been admitted to Professor Eckersberg's studio, where he was immediately given the task of copying some of his teacher's works. Købke had come from the studio of the recently deceased professor C. A. Lorentzen (1746–1828), whose works he had also been given the task of reproducing. The difference between the two teachers reflects a change of generation and a radical new view of art.

This is clearly seen by comparing the following three works: 1) the portrait of Ferdinand Flachner (in the Loeb collection) executed by the young C.A. Jensen when he was a pupil of Lorentzen around 1815; 2) Eckersberg's 1814 portrait of Thorvaldsen; and 3) Købke's copy of this work executed some fourteen years later. C.A. Jensen's portrait of Flachner is thus almost contemporary with Eckersberg's portrait of Thorvaldsen. But while Jensen had aimed at a lively, vibrant style derived from the artistic rococo idiom, the



FIG. A: C.W. Eckersberg  
*Portrait of Bertel Thorvaldsen in the Robes of the S. Lucca Academy, 1814*  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 29 in. (91 x 74 cm),  
Royal Academy of Fine Arts.



FIG. B C.A. Jensen  
*Portrait of History and Genre Painter Ferdinand Flachner (c. 1815)*  
Oil on canvas, 17½ x 13⅔ in. (44,5 x 35 cm), Loeb collection.

clear, harmonious ideal world of neoclassicism had already made its mark on Eckersberg's approach.

The biggest difference between these first two portraits is the use made of the light source. The Flachner portrait is illuminated from some invisible point from the top left above the frame, directed towards only part of the surface, whereas all the pictorial elements in the Thorvaldsen painting, including the background, are shown in a full uniform light.

It has been said of Eckersberg's incomparable work that its almost surrealist honesty in relation to reality endows his figure of Thorvaldsen with a curious lack of physical presence, like a cardboard figure in a puppet theatre pushed into the narrow airless space between relief and picture surface.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps Christen Købke had similar thoughts when he started copying the portrait. So how has he accomplished his task? If we compare the teacher's portrait of Thorvaldsen with the pupil's copy, we will see a difference between the two solutions to the portrait (besides the smaller format and the changed background): Købke has retained the clear uniform lighting on the figure itself, except for one minor point where he has been unable or unwilling to free himself from Lorentzen's teaching. To create depth and air behind the figure, the young Academy pupil has introduced a shaded area in the lower right-hand corner of the painting in exactly the same way as C.A. Jensen did in his portrait of Ferdinand Flachner. However, a comparison between the Flachner portrait and Købke's painting shows that Købke's is primarily neoclassical in approach.

Whereas C.A. Jensen was aiming at vibrancy and presence in what can be called a momentary psychological impression, Købke's whole objective is to produce the exact opposite; his portrait subject looks introspective and almost timeless. The play of Ferdinand Flachner's facial features and his posture radiate impulsiveness, and the flickering quality of the light gives the viewer a feeling of volatility and capriciousness. Bertel Thorvaldsen's contemplative gaze, directed at some invisible object, harmonises well with the homogeneous composition, the entire idea of which is reflection, balance and spirit.

In time, the difference between Jensen's expressive artistry and Eckersberg's classical detachment should become even clearer. Throughout his life, Christen Købke was affected by his professor's sense of form and his outstanding ability to recreate reality, but C. A. Jensen's colouristic brilliance and sparkling portrait style also proved a source of great inspiration to him. S.L.

<sup>1</sup>See Fig. A.

<sup>2</sup>Eva Henschen, *Menneskeskildringer i Eckersbergs romerske kunst*, in: *C.W. Eckersberg i Rom 1813–16*, Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen 1983.