

JOHAN PETERSEN

1839–1874

98. *American Frigate at Anchor*

(*Amerikansk fregat for anker*)

Oil on canvas, 16½ x 13¾ in. (42 x 35 cm)

PROVENANCE: Nellesmann & Thomsen, Aarhus, Auction 579, 1988, lot 1798, ill. on front page of catalogue; Connaught Brown, 2 Albemarle, London (1988).

EXHIBITED: Possibly Charlottenborg 1861, no. 152 (described as *Et fuldrigget amerikansk Skib, der har kastet bak i stille Vejr*).

Hanne Poulsen, curator in the Trade and Shipping Museum in Kronborg Castle at Elsinore, suggests that this painting is the work of the artist Johan Petersen, who emigrated to America in 1865, making his home in Boston from 1865 until his death nine years later, though spending the years 1867–1868 in the West Indies.

According to the catalogue from the Århus auctioneers Nellesmann & Thomsen, this fine marine painting has been in the possession of one family since it was acquired in the middle of the nineteenth century. According to oral tradition, it was purchased by the then governor of the Danish West Indies.

But when and where was this American frigate painted? There are two possible answers. Because of the provenance indicated above, coupled with the fact of Petersen's visit to the West Indies, the answer to the question of who was governor in the Danish West Indies during the period spent there by Johan Petersen might give a clue. It was Vilhelm Ludvig Birch (1817–1871), one of those remembered for having conducted the negotiations of the sale of the islands of St. Thomas and St. John to the United States, a transaction finalized much later (1917), and who was governor from 1860 until his death eleven years later. A case could be made that Governor Birch requested the Danish artist to depict an American naval visit to Christiansted or Charlotte Amalie on the occasion of the negotiations. The impressive vessel is portrayed in minute detail as though it were some kind of ship's portrait executed to commission.¹ The background scenery, with its cubist buildings and mountains, could represent a West Indian harbor. The climate could also be that of the West Indies; the awnings over the broad deck of the frigate and over the small boats approaching the colossal ship suggest a very warm climate.

But various factors militate against the work having come into being in the way suggested above. If the portrayal of the frigate had been a commissioned work in a traditional sense, it would have contained an indication of the name of the ship, and if the painting had been executed on the spot, which ships' portraits actually rarely are, the identity of the harbor would probably have been clearly shown. Governor Birch would hardly have been content with such an indeterminate portrayal of his residence, and the painter would therefore conscientiously have portrayed what was to be seen, perhaps from a sheltered position in a third boat outside the sphere of the painting.

An alternative possibility is that if the American frigate was not painted in the West Indies, it would likely have been executed in Copenhagen. A stylistic evaluation of the Loeb collection marine painting suggests that we have here a work from a relatively early period in Johan Petersen's life as an artist. Also, the paintings he made in America have a more complicated and action-packed staging than this simple, calm,

almost dozy depiction containing various characteristic features deriving from the artist's classical training. We recognise the Eckersberg tradition's wealth of detail, the precisely determined position of the vessel—in this case in the central axis of the painting—and the careful perspective construction. These are all features suggesting that the huge American vessel, whose monumental appearance is intensified by the low line of the horizon in the background, is the work of a quite young man who was perhaps still under the influence of his teacher and adviser, the marine artist Carl Dahl (1812–1865).

In 1861, six years before his arrival in the West Indies, the then twenty-two-year-old Johan Petersen exhibited a painting entitled *Et fuldrigget amerikansk skib, der har kastet bak i stille vejr* (*A Full-Rigged American Ship Reversed in Calm Weather*) at Charlottenborg. The Loeb collection painting could well be that very painting. At that time, Petersen had never been outside Denmark, which explains the diffuse portrayal of the background in this work. The artist could have observed and drawn sketches of the foreign frigate in the Copenhagen Roads. The staffage and setting were presumably added later while he was working on the finished composition, perhaps with the help of prints from older travel accounts.

Governor Vilhelm Ludvig Birch's successor, Janus August Garde (1823–1893), took up the gubernatorial post several years after Johan Petersen's visit to the Danish possessions, but the two could well have met before this. Janus Garde, a naval lieutenant, had sailed most of the oceans in the world; in 1860, after his return from his latest excursion to Australia and China, he left the navy to take up an important position as harbor master in Copenhagen. It is possible that Lieutenant Garde saw Johan Petersen's painting at Charlottenborg during the spring of 1861 and purchased it. *American Frigate at Anchor* could thus very well be identical with *A Full-Rigged American Ship Reversed in Calm Weather*, and the first owner of the work could have been the naval officer and later governor of the Danish West Indies, Janus August Garde.² This would mean that the oral history of the painting having been owned by a governor of the Danish West Indies is indeed fact.

S.L.

¹On the difference between ships, portraits and marine paintings, see Anton Melbye's *Fishing Boat Reefing Its Sails* in the Loeb collection.

²Information on Vilhelm Ludvig Birch and Janus August Garde are taken from *Dansk Biografisk Leksikon*, Copenhagen 1979–1984.