

# ANNA KIRSTINE ANCHER, NÉE BRØNDUM

SKAGEN 1859 – SKAGEN 1935

*Anna Ancher became acquainted with art through the painters visiting her family's hostelry in Skagen, where she grew up. Situated at the northernmost tip of Denmark, Skagen 150 years ago was a poor market town at the "back-of-beyond"; there was no harbor and no access by road or rail led to it, so it was almost completely isolated from the rest of the country. Nevertheless, Anna Ancher became one of the most famous of Danish artists, the first woman painter to be mentioned on a par with the male counterparts of her time. Her prolific artistic gifts were born in her, and her mother was convinced that this was because the famous writer of fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875), was for the first and only time a guest in the Brøndum Inn on the night she was born.*

*In May 1833 and 1847, Skagen received visits from the Danish Golden Age painter Martinus Rørbye, who like Andersen was fond of visiting unfamiliar parts, and during the 1860s and 1870s increasing numbers of artists began visiting the place. Anna studied the results of their work intensely, and in secret she herself began to paint. In 1874 the young figure painter Michael Ancher arrived; he was still a pupil in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and was overwhelmed with enthusiasm for Skagen and the motifs he found there. Although Anna was then only fourteen years old, the spontaneous liking the two felt for each other soon turned into love.*

*From the start, Michael Ancher and the other artists visiting Skagen encouraged her talents and gave the girl her first professional guidance. Her family, which belonged to the Skagen bourgeoisie, enabled her to spend three winters receiving private instruction in Vilhelm Kyhn's private school of painting in Copenhagen. During the summers she painted on her own in Skagen, in close contact with her fiancé Michael Ancher. The year 1879 was a decisive one for Anna. On visiting the Charlottenborg exhibition, she had her first direct experience of French art and was especially taken with a painting by J. F. Millet (1814–1875) owned by the brewer Carl Jacobsen; Millet's work became of great importance to her. That same summer, Skagen became the meeting place for various painters with European experience, including the Norwegians Christian Krohg (1852–1925), who had trained in Germany, and Frits Thaulow (1847–1906), who was fascinated with the new fashions in French art that were moving in the direction of a more true-to-life and objective portrayal of reality. The ideas appealed to Anna, who intuitively changed her painting style. During the spring of 1880 at the age of twenty, she made her debut in Charlottenborg, exhibiting a painting of an old man carving a stick, a work that attracted decidedly positive reactions both from the press and her artist friends.*

*Plein air painting had come to Scandinavia, and during the following summers Skagen attracted a number of outstanding Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish painters who brought about the Modern Breakthrough in Danish painting. The "Skagen Painters" became a familiar concept, and among them Anna was considered an equal, herself contributing to the movement with important paintings*

such as *Pigen i køkkenet*, 1883–86, (*The Maid in the Kitchen*), now in *Den Hirschsprungeske Samling*, and *Blind kone i sin stue* (*Sunshine in the Blind Woman's Room*) in several versions.

In 1880 she married Michael Ancher, who throughout his life supported her in her professional career. Quite unusually for the time, he understood and respected her talent as the more important of the two. There was no need for her to take care of household chores to any great extent. The couple had many of their meals in Brøndum's hostelry, where her family also gave their help and support when their daughter Helga was born in 1883. So in spite of her marriage, Anna Ancher had no difficulty in painting and exhibiting, which she continued to do throughout her life.

Typical of Anna Ancher's art is her concentration on the visual, coloristic, and human aspects. She preferred simple motifs, which she painted over and over again with small variations, for instance a young woman sewing and seen in profile against a wall lit by sunlight or reflections. Her exposure to the work of Monet in Paris in 1885 quickly made itself felt in her art in the form of a dissolution of the motif, while a coloristic definition of the picture became characteristic of her subsequent work. After her death, a number of spontaneous oil sketches—visual notes showing how intensely preoccupied she was with studying color, light, and people—were found among her belongings and now form a part of the Michael and Anna Ancher museum house in Skagen.

Anna usually painted close to her home in Skagen Østerby. Her works are realistic, at once powerful in expression and yet unpretentious. She showed a predilection for old women and children, often seen in relation to each other. The fishermen's wives, whose features and figures were marked by the toils of a hard life, are rounded figures, harmonious in themselves, and Anna Ancher reproduced the gentle charm of the children with the same rare empathy. She portrayed her own mother, to whom she was very close, in a large number of paintings and drawings.

In a small number of cases, Anna Ancher undertook large pictures containing many figures: in 1890, *En begravelse* (*Funeral*) in Statens Museum for Kunst, and in 1903, *Et missionsmøde* (*A Revivalist Meeting*), Skagens Museum, portraying a lay preacher speaking in the open air, surrounded by a crowd of listeners either sitting or lying on the dunes.

Right from the early days of her career, Anna Ancher was recognized as an artist on an equal footing with her male counterparts, and so she was naturally included in the major Scandinavian exhibitions in the 1880s and 1890s, in international exhibitions, including Chicago in 1893, and in a large number of other official Danish exhibitions abroad. In contrast to the other Skagen painters, Anna Ancher's work has retained its popularity in Denmark over the years and has probably never been more highly rated than now, when a public outside Scandinavia is also learning to appreciate her.

E.F.

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