

CHRISTIAN VILHELM MOURIER-PETERSEN

HOLBÆKGAARD NR. RANDERS 1858 – COPENHAGEN 1945

Both Christian Mourier-Petersen and his father were born at the mansion of Holbækgaard near Randers in eastern Jutland. The son completed his schooling in 1878 and embarked on the study of medicine at Copenhagen, possibly inspired by Johan Rohde (1856–1935), a friend from Randers, two years older than Christian, who had chosen that career path. Rohde practiced as a naval doctor during his military service, after which he took private instruction in drawing and painting until 1881, when he was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Mourier-Petersen broke off his medical studies to become a painter and as early as April 1880 became a student at the Academy.

In reaction to the rigid and antiquated form of teaching, both these young artists soon left the Academy. Rohde remained there for only a year, after which, together with others including Christian Mourier-Petersen, he became one of the pioneers in establishing first Kunsternes Studieskoler (1882) and then Den frie Udstilling (1891). In various ways Rohde played a decisive role in the renewal of the stagnated artistic life of Copenhagen at the end of the century. It was also Rohde who made sure that a considerable number of paintings by Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) were shown in Den frie Udstilling in 1893. The person who had told Johan Rohde about the Dutch artist was Christian Mourier-Petersen, who knew him well.

Mourier-Petersen's studies at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts lasted until spring 1883, when he became a pupil of Laurits Tuxen in Kunsternes Studieskoler, with whom he studied for the next three years. Tuxen taught the principles he had learned from Léon Bonnat in Paris, but it was the journeys abroad that matured Mourier-Petersen as an artist. He spent the period from about 1887 to 1889 abroad, especially in France. In the early spring of 1888 he was in Arles, where he met Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), who had settled there shortly before. The two artists saw a good deal of each other, and van Gogh mentioned Mourier-Petersen in several of his letters to his brother Theo, who was in Paris:

I have made the acquaintance of a Danish artist who talks about Heyerdahl and other northerners, Kroyer etc. His work is dry, but very conscientious, and he is still young. Some time ago he saw the exhibition of the Impressionists in the Rue Lafitte. He is probably going to Paris for the Salon, and wants to make a tour in Holland to see the museums. (Letter no. 468, 10.3.1888.)¹

The many comments Van Gogh makes in his letters about Mourier-Petersen, whose company he appreciates, draw the picture of a likable young man who wishes to be an artist although he has not much experience as yet and who has come to the south of France both on account of his health and in order to paint:

He has studied medicine, but I suppose he was discouraged by the student's life, and by the other fellows and the professors as well. He never said anything to me about it though, except

once when he stated, "It's the doctors that kill people." When he came here, he was suffering from a nervous disorder, which had been brought on by the strain of examinations. I do not know how long he has been painting—he certain hasn't gone very far as a painter—but he's a good fellow to knock around with, and he observes people and often sums them up very accurately. (Letter no. 490.)

On his return to Paris at the beginning of June 1888 Mourier-Petersen followed van Gogh's recommendation and rented a room from his brother Theo at 54 rue Lépici in Montmartre. From here he wrote on June 15 to his friend Johan Rohde:

. . . Am still living at the home of the Dutch art dealer, where I pay for my stay with studies and can make use of a small studio that is quite charming and well-suited although terribly overcrowded with paintings etc., as a result of which I can hardly move without putting my legs or arms through priceless Impressionist works of art.²

The two brothers do not appear to have been very impressed by Mourier-Petersen's paintings, although before the Danish artist's departure from Arles, Vincent wrote:

His last three studies were better and more full of color than what he had done before . . . (Letter no. 488.)

The Hirschsprung collection owns a Mourier-Petersen painting of a flowering peach tree from Arles. Both this and the Loeb collection French Landscape can be seen in relation to the famous series of flowering fruit trees that van Gogh executed in the same place and at the same time.

Back home in Denmark, Christian Mourier-Petersen painted some atmospheric naturalist landscapes from places such as the area around Randers and the Jutlandic heath in addition to portraits and interiors, for instance the Loeb collection's beautiful painting showing the ironing room at his childhood home (The Ironing Room in an Old Country Mansion). In 1895 he lived and worked for a time together with Hans Smidth at Karup in central Jutland. He was employed in the Royal Porcelain manufactory as an underglaze painter with an artist's signature from 1894 to 1895.

In 1925–1926 he visited Estonia and then went on a further visit to France. Here, too, it was the landscapes that were of special interest to him. In the 1930s Mourier-Petersen painted a good many landscapes in the Hornbæk Plantation near the north coast of Zealand.

He exhibited a few works at Charlottenborg 1889–90 but was otherwise a loyal member of Den frie Udstilling from the start of the association in 1891 until 1931.

S.L.

LITERATURE: Johan Rohde, *Journal fra en rejse i 1892*, published by H.P. Rohde with an introduction by N.G. Sandblad, Copenhagen 1955, pp. 12, 33, 73, 89; H.P. Rohde, *Van Goghs verden*, Copenhagen 1964, pp. 252–253; Vincent van Gogh (ed.), *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, Boston 1988 (First edition, 1958); Jens Peter Munk in *Weilbach*, vol. 5, Copenhagen 1997.

¹This and the following quotations are taken from Vincent van Gogh (ed.), *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, Boston 1988. Heyerdahl is probably the Norwegian painter Hans Heyerdahl (1857–1913).

²H.P. Rohde 1964.