

CHRISTOFFER WILHELM ECKERSBERG

BLAAKROG 1783 – COPENHAGEN 1853

C. W. Eckersberg's father was a carpenter and painter from Blaakrog near Aabenraa in Southern Jutland, at that time part of the Duchy of Schleswig. The son trained as an artisan painter at Aabenraa and Flensburg.

In 1803 Eckersberg was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, where the history painter and architect Nicolai Abildgaard (1743–1809) became his teacher. During his six years at the academy he succeeded in winning a silver and two gold medals. The award of the major gold medal qualified him for the academy's major travel grant. From 1810 to 1813 he studied in Paris, where for rather more than a year there he was a pupil of the neoclassical artist Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). He spent the next three years in Rome, where he lived in the same building as the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844).

Between 1829 and 1841, Eckersberg made a number of short voyages by steamship from Copenhagen to Sweden, Norway, Kiel, and Warnemünde, this latter in the company of Thorvaldsen. He also sailed on the corvette¹ Galathea to Dover (spending half a day in London) and Hamburg, Germany.

The huge range of motifs in C. W. Eckersberg's oeuvre encompassed a certain number of genre pictures and paintings of everyday life, among which were some noteworthy scenes from the 1807 Copenhagen bombardment by the English. He also painted architectural pictures and city views of Paris and especially Rome, as well as portraits, figure pictures, and historical compositions. To all this could be added the decoration of Christiansborg palace and some altarpieces, a few landscapes, and a large number of marine paintings. Eckersberg exhibited at Charlottenborg between 1824 and 1851.

In 1818 C. W. Eckersberg was appointed professor at the Royal Danish Academy, a post he held until his death thirty-five years later. His teaching was of enormous importance for the development of painting during the period that has since come to be known as The Danish Golden Age.

*He carried through a series of reforms. For instance, painting from life was modernised. The models were placed in less idealized and more natural postures, and the use of female nudes was introduced into the teaching. (See the Loeb collection for works by his students: Joel Ballin's *Young Girl Undressing*, Constantin Hansen's *Study of a Male Model*, and L. A. Smith's *Female Model Before a Mirror*, 1841.) Eckersberg's pupils learned to use local color and to paint bright daylight into their pictures while at the same time avoiding disturbing reflections or dramatic shadow effects. No subject was too ordinary to be turned into a picture, and honest, meticulous reproduction of what was seen was the implacable requirement. In addition, there were several invariable rules, of which the use of the perspective measuring tool was *de rigueur*. Eckersberg wrote two textbooks on this subject, and his lessons in the use of perspective were epoch-making.*

But what was really new at the time and had never been taught before in any European academy of fine arts were the lessons in the open air. Eckersberg took his students out on excursions into the countryside around Copenhagen and taught them to paint directly from nature. It was thanks to both classical and radical instruction that Danish art acquired its special quality.

Eckersberg was director of the Royal Danish Academy from 1827 to 1829.

LITERATURE: Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, *Forsøg til en Veiledning i Anvendelsen af Perspektivlæren for unge Malere*, Copenhagen 1833, reprint, Copenhagen 1973; Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, *Linearperspectiven, anvendt paa Malerkunsten, En Række af perspectiviske Studier*, Copenhagen 1841. Reprint with preface by Ole Schwalbe, Copenhagen 1978; Inger Hjorth Nielsen, *Studier til C. W. Eckersbergs maleri Moses lader det røde hav træde tilbage og Faraos hær oversvømme*, *Kunstmuseets Årsskrift* 1975, pp. 103–118; Henrik Bramsen, *Om C. W. Eckersberg og hans mariner*, Copenhagen 1972; Hanne Jönsson (ed.), *C. W. Eckersberg og hans elever*, *Statens Museum for Kunst*, Copenhagen 1983, containing articles by the editor and Lars Rostrup Bøyesen, Vibeke Petersen, Bente Skovgaard, and Hanne Westergaard. For a fuller discussion in English of Eckersberg and his theories of perspective, see especially Erik Fischer, *C. W. Eckersberg, His Mind and Times*, Copenhagen 1993; Bjarne Jørnæs in Weilbach, vol. 2, 1994; Peter Nisbet, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr.*, *Harvard University Art Museums Gallery Series no. 8*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1994, pp. 4–5; Philip Conisbee, Kasper, Monrad, Lene Bøgh Rønberg, *Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg 1783–1853*, *National Gallery of Art*, Washington 2003; Anneli Fuchs and Emma Salling (eds.), *Kunstakademiet 1754–2004*, vol. I–III, Copenhagen 2004; Villads Villadsen (ed.), *C. W. Eckersbergs dagbøger*, vol. 1–2, Copenhagen 2009; Kasper Monrad (ed.), *Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg*, *Statens Museum for Kunst*, Copenhagen 2015.

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¹A warship ranking just below a frigate, having usually only one tier of guns.