

GEORG HARALD SLOTT-MØLLER

COPENHAGEN 1864 – COPENHAGEN 1937

Harald Slott-Møller was one of the most talented young painters of the 1880s and belonged to the generation of radical artists who, with Georg Brandes (1842–1927) as their idol, transformed society. Inspired by international currents, especially from England, he revealed himself in the 1890s to be one of the country's most original decorative artists while at the same time continuing to work as a painter. After 1900 he and his wife, the artist Agnes Slott-Møller (1862–1937), née Rambusch, who was an unusually strong personality, gradually found themselves in opposition to the leading modern artists and the general direction being taken by society, and his paintings gradually became more conventional. In this he was subjected to a tragic fate, which has been sealed by the fact that in the judgment of a later age he has often been overshadowed by his wife.

*Harald Slott-Møller lost his parents at an early age, but he was given the opportunity to train as an artist first as a student at the Technical School and then as a pupil of the naturalist artist Karl Jensen (1851–1933). In 1881 he was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, which he left in 1883 in search of better teaching. In Kunstnernes Frie Studieskoler, which had recently been established with P. S. Krøyer and L. Tuxen as teachers, he found the path to pursuing a fruitful artistic course and became an example of the speed with which this alternative teaching produced results. *Fattigfolk* (Poor Folk) or *I dødens venteværelse* (In Death's Waiting Room) (Statens Museum for Kunst), which in motif had already moved away from naturalism, attracted great attention in Charlottenborg in 1888.*

A visit to Italy in 1888–1889 was of crucial importance for the direction taken by his and Agnes's work. The intensive study of early Florentine art from the 14th and 15th centuries, which was an interest new and typical of the age—though not yet in Denmark—led to a predilection for the pre-Raphaelites and other British art, especially the arts and crafts movement. Enthusiasm for the Middle Ages inspired Agnes, who made the range of motifs of Danish medieval ballads into the dominant features of her paintings. A knowledge of kindred spirits in England was of importance to Harald as the designer of artifacts, such as carved and painted furniture, sumptuous jewelery, and articles for everyday use for the Alumina Faience Manufactory in Copenhagen, of which he was artistic head from 1902 to 1905.

*The Slott-Møllers worked zealously to break the monopoly of the Charlottenborg exhibition by establishing an alternative exhibition. Together with Johan Rohde (1856–1935) and J. F. Willumsen (1836–1958) they were in the forefront in establishing Den Frie Udstilling, which opened for the first time in 1891. Here Harald Slott-Møller exhibited a portrait of Anne Marie Brodersen, better known as the sculptor Anne Marie Carl Nielsen (1865–1945), wife of the famous composer Carl Nielsen, in which for the first time he combined painting, gilding, and wood carving. This is something that is also found in later works such as *Tre kvinder, sommeraften* (The Women, Summer Evening)*

from 1895, and *Foråret* (Spring) 1896 (both in *Den Hirschsprungeske Samling*), in which the carved and painted frames are also incorporated as part of the overall work. The couple exhibited in London in the 1890s, finding a greater sympathy for their art there than in Denmark. In 1905 Harald Slott-Møller painted *Paolo og Francesca i Helvede* (Paolo and Francesca in Hell), which is indistinguishable from British art.

In time, Agnes's production became more extensive but at the same time technically weaker and artistically less and less interesting, something that perhaps played its part in impairing Harald's creativity. Apart from an interesting portrait of the poet Helge Rode (1907, *The Museum of National History* at Frederiksborg Castle), his pioneering work as a painter came to an end about this time. The couple changed their political attitudes from those of ardent radicals to becoming champions of national values. So it was something of a paradox that it should be precisely the down-to-earth painters known as "Fynboerne" (the Funen Artists) who became the object of their anger and contempt. These artists included Peter Hansen (1869–1928) and Fritz Syberg (1862–1939), who portrayed their native region, its people, and the rhythm of the seasons in a simple, direct manner on the basis of a naturalist vision and with emphasis on coloristic qualities. In 1907 the Slott-Møllers made a vehement attack on the Funen Artists, leading to a great and bitter polemical debate in Danish newspapers and periodicals. With this, the Slott-Møllers dissociated themselves from society and were frozen out of Danish artistic life.

E. F.

LITERATURE: Bodil Busk Laursen and Susanne Thestrup Andersen, *Naturen og kunsten, Bondemalerstriden 1907*, Faaborg Museum 1986; Bodil Busk Laursen, *Agnes Slott-Møller og Harald Slott-Møller, mellem kunst og idealer*, Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen 1988; Birgit Jenvold, in *Weilbach*, vol. 7, Copenhagen 1998.