

JENS JØRGENSEN JUEL

BALSLEV 1745 – COPENHAGEN 1802

Jens Juel is considered one of the most outstanding of Danish artists. The painter Hans Hansen (1769–1828), the father of Constantin Hansen, wrote of him in his diary, “If angels could paint, I scarcely think they could do it much better.” Juel’s portraiture stands comparison with the best in its age, but he is nevertheless still almost unknown outside Denmark, and little is known of his personality or his life.

Juel grew up in a modest home on the island of Funen, where his father was a schoolteacher. He was first taught to paint portraits with a master in Hamburg, where the dominant ideal was a sound and modest portrayal inspired by Dutch art. At the age of twenty, he continued in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, where he became one of the talented young men who lived up to the expectations of an artistic training in Denmark.

The Academy was founded by the absolute monarch Frederik V in 1754, and French artists brought in for the purpose occupied posts as professors until the beginning of the 1770s. The demands made on composition by history painting did not come easily to Juel, and only in 1771 did he succeed in winning the final gold medal. During his time at the Academy, Juel received numerous commissions for portraits, the results of which reflect his development toward an ever greater sophistication in the use of materials and colors as well as composition. He learned chiaroscuro painting (which was still rococo) from the Swedish-born professor and court painter C. G. Pilos (1711–1793), but he learned more especially from the new French portrait art of his time, which he could study in the magnificent works resulting from the time Louis Tocqué (1696–1772) spent in Denmark in 1758–1759. Juel’s most important work from this period is the portrait of the very young Queen Caroline Mathilde (1769), in Statens Museum for Kunst. She is dressed in a fur-edged turquoise silk dress, the color matching her eyes and forming a contrast to her skin, with its white porcelain quality.

On the basis of several years’ support by a number of private patrons, Juel was given the opportunity to travel abroad to visit the major artistic centers of the time with their local masters and rich collections of art. He left Denmark in 1772, going first to Hamburg, then Dresden, and finally reaching Rome in 1774, where Pompeo Batoni’s (1708–1787) full-length portraits were of great importance to him. In the autumn of 1776 he reached Paris, where he could see modern neoclassical portrait painting. Spring 1777 found him in Switzerland, where his art was so admired that for the next three years he was busily engaged in painting the portraits of the leading families in Geneva. In the best English manner, several of them show figures sitting in a park, for instance Mathilde de Prangin (1778–1779) and the envoy to the French court, Jean-Armand Tronchin (1779), both in Statens Museum for Kunst. By chance, he also here met the poet J. W. Goethe (1749–1832), whose face he drew.

After returning home in 1780, Juel became, in quick succession, court painter, a member of the Academy, and a professor there, and he now revealed his talent and his ability as Denmark’s leading

portraitist. It is thanks to him that we today are so familiar with the appearance of so many members of the royal family, the aristocracy, and the middle class of the time.

Juel's production of paintings and pastels has been reckoned to total more than 800, and he employed several assistants in his studio. His paintings are nevertheless constantly characterized by their great variety and exuberance. In his time he was highly praised for his skill in creating a true likeness in his portraits. His attitude toward his models is always undemanding and is distinguished by a sympathetic approach without any desire to achieve a more profound psychological interpretation. This has given a later age the impression that Juel himself was unreflective, but the latest research has established that he was particularly interested in the Enlightenment philosophy of his time.

Even before his travels abroad, Juel had heard about J. J. Rousseau's (1712–1778) epoch-making thoughts on nature and his belief that children should be treated on the basis of their own abilities and aptitudes, ideas that around 1770 had been tested at the Danish court in the upbringing of the crown prince Frederik. Children begin to turn up in Juel's portraits from his time in Switzerland, where he also had his eyes opened to the landscape. Children are later pictured behaving in a natural manner more and more often in his art, quite often as the center of a conversation piece, the type of group portrait so popular in the 18th century. He himself had a large family with his wife Rosine. She was twenty-five years his junior, and in 1791 he produced a charming portrait of her sitting beside him in front of the easel (Statens Museum for Kunst).

Juel painted landscapes not only as backgrounds for his portraits but he also laid the foundation for true landscape art in Denmark. The area around Jægerspris (Eggen om Jægerspris (1782), Statens Museum for Kunst, has recently been interpreted as expressing the spiritual aims of the order of Freemasons. Juel was himself a Mason, which in an absolutist society was not entirely without its problems in the period after the French Revolution. Perhaps this is the reason why Rosine burned all his letters and papers after his death.

Jens Juel was in any case not particularly communicative, either in letters or in his teaching. This was a complaint of his students, including his two most famous ones, Casper David Friedrich (1774–1840), who attended the Royal Danish Academy 1794–1798, and Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810), who studied there 1799–1801. Juel expressed himself elegantly and straightforwardly through his art, which became “the foundation for the flowering of Danish-Norwegian art that occurred in the 19th century with artists including C. W. Eckersberg and I.C. Dahl.”¹

E.F.

LITERATURE: Ellen Poulsen, *Jens Juels tegninger*, Den Kongelige Kobberstiksamling, 1975; Kasper Monrad, Jens Juel in *Danish Painting, The Golden Age*, National Gallery, London, 1984, pp. 74–85; Barbara Scott, The Danish Reynolds, Jens Juel (1745–1802) in *Apollo* no. 125, June 1987, pp. 411–415; Ellen Poulsen, *Jens Juel, Katalog*, I–II, Copenhagen 1991 (partly translated into English); Charlotte Christensen (ed.), *Hvis engle kunne male*, Det nationalhistoriske Museum på Frederiksborg Slot 1996 (containing texts by Charlotte Christensen, Hanne Lopdrup, Erik Westengaard, Jens Heinet Knudsen); Torben Holck Colding in *Weilbach*, vol. 4, Copenhagen 1996.

¹Colding, 1996.