

MICHAEL PETER ANCHER

RUTSKER PARISH, BORNHOLM 1849 – SKAGEN 1927

Strength of purpose, ambition, and industry were the qualities that ensured Michael Ancher a place among the best in his generation. The path by which he became a successful figure painter was long and difficult. At the age of fifteen he was forced to leave the grammar school in Rønne on the island of Bornholm on account of his father's bankruptcy. He found work in the administration office of the Kalø estate in Jutland, where the beautiful surroundings attracted many landscape artists. In Jutland Ancher encountered Theodor Philipsen (1840–1920) and Vilhelm Groth (1842–1899), and he was seized by a desperate longing to become an artist himself.

In 1871 he was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, where he made rapid progress, but he never managed to take the final examination. In 1874 he made his first appearance in the Spring Exhibition in Charlottenborg, and when he visited Skagen for the first time that summer, he became filled with such enthusiasm about the people and natural surroundings of the place that he decided to develop his skills there by virtue of his own efforts. Playing a part in this decision was his falling in love with Anna Brøndum, who was then only fourteen years old but whose artistic talent he immediately perceived.

*Eventually his goals were met. In 1880 Michael Ancher achieved a unique success with his breakthrough painting *Vil han klare Pynten?* (Will He Round the Point?), which was purchased by the king. That same summer he and Anna were able to celebrate their wedding in Skagen, when she was twenty-one.*

*In 1879 Michael Ancher had his first opportunity to see French art when the brewer Carl Jacobsen of the Carlsberg Breweries exhibited his then-modest private collection in Copenhagen. A painting by J. F. Millet (1814–1875) made a powerful impression on both him and Anna, and that summer Skagen was visited by artists with European experience: Karl Madsen (1855–1938) as well as the Norwegians Frits Thaulow (1847–1906) and Christian Krohg (1852–1925), who brought realism, naturalism, and plein air painting with them. During the summer of 1880, and under their inspiration, Ancher painted the first sunshine picture in Skagen, *Figurer i et landskab* (Figures in a Landscape), now in the museum *Den Hirschsprungeske Samling*, portraying an old man and a young woman sitting on the sand, thereby manifesting himself as a painter of the Modern Breakthrough. The painting made both Ancher and Skagen known among the modern Scandinavian plein air painters, who in succeeding years congregated in Skagen and there formed the colony of artists that came to be known as the “Skagen Painters.”*

Michael Ancher was thus already established as a modern painter when P. S. Krøyer arrived in Skagen in 1882 and the place's character changed for good. Ancher rightly feared competition; his monopoly as “the” Skagen painter had been broken, though the two rivals nevertheless became close friends.

Ancher now moved in several directions. He continued painting naturalist sunshine pictures from Skagen Østerby, in which the main emphasis is on color, mood, and the human element. In addition he produced many monumental compositions presenting fishermen as lifesavers, for instance *The Lifeboat is Taken through the Dunes*, 1883. At the same time he continued painting his traditional motifs centered on the lives of ordinary people, and this produced a secure income for him.

Ancher was over thirty years old before he went abroad. In 1882 he visited Berlin, Dresden, and Vienna, where he saw paintings by Rubens (1577–1640), Rembrandt (1606–1669), Pieter de Hooch (1629–1683), and Vermeer (1632–1675), which made an indelible impression on him and made their mark on his art, as is seen in major works such as *En syg ung pige*, 1882 (A Sick Girl, in Statens Museum for Kunst), and the monumental *En barnedåb* (A Baptism), painted 1883–1888, now in Ribe Kunstmuseum. Ancher never renounced the classical demands on composition, but with his experience of the study of reality ensuing from plein air painting, he created a modern, national figure painting which ensured him a prominent place in the history of Danish art.

The 1890s brought new movements in art, and the time when Ancher formed part of the avant garde was past. Although he was not uninfluenced by developments, there were longer intervals between his major works, for which illness was also partly responsible. Nevertheless, the family portrait *Juledag 1900* (Christmas Day 1900), from 1903, in the Skagens Museum, and *Kunstdommere* (Art Critics), from 1906, in the Museum of National History at Frederiksborg Castle, must be mentioned as striking exceptions.

Road and rail connections to Skagen were established in 1890, bringing tourists and holiday makers in hitherto unknown numbers. Many of them commissioned portraits, and others bought Ancher's paintings in the summer exhibitions in Skagen. The great public interest in the peak period of the Skagen Painters in the 1880s led to Ancher's writing his memoirs in the form of notes containing precise descriptions that also reflect his warm sense of humor. They formed the basis of the first book on the Skagen Painters written by Alba Schwartz (1857–1942).

By 1900, Ancher was one of the most famous and celebrated painters in Denmark, with countless marks of honor to his name. He took part in official exhibitions abroad, including the World Fairs in Paris in 1889 and 1900 and Chicago in 1893. (In 1895 Ancher exhibited in the United States at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Cincinnati Museum Association, and the Twelfth St. Louis Exhibition.)

Ancher was among the founders of Skagens Museum in 1908 and lived to see a long-awaited building completed before he died in 1927.

E. F.

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