NICOLAI ABRAHAM ABILDGAARD

COPENHAGEN 1743 – SORGENFRI 1809

Abildgaard is one of the major figures in the history of Danish art, the first history painter of note to be trained in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, founded in 1754. His contribution as professor and director there and as "Painter to the Court" marks him as the figure to whom Denmark owes its national art, dating from the Enlightenment philosophy of the 18th century. He occupies a prominent place internationally among the history painters of his day.

Though Abildgaard grew up in difficult financial circumstances, he was reared in a cultured bourgeois family. After graduating from grammar school, his father, Søren Abildgaard, made his living by drawing antiquities. Traveling around the country, he drew copies of historical relics such as sepulchral monuments and inscriptions during the warm weather months and then made fair copies of them during the winter, an undertaking financed by one of the king's ministries. Nicolai's brother, Peter Christian Abildgaard (1740–1801), was a pioneer in the field of veterinary surgery, leaving a large scientific output not only writing but also as a teacher. He was the founder of one of the first veterinary schools in Europe.

Nicolai Abildgaard first became a journeyman painter, subsequently entering the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, where he passed quickly through the various classes. At the end of his training in 1767, he was awarded the major gold medal and thus the Academy's major travel grant for six years of study abroad. By then he had proven himself both independent and ambitious. It was obvious to the governing body of the Academy and to the king's advisers that he was gifted as a history painter, an important element in the justification for the Academy's existence.

Abildgaard made a thorough study of the objectives of history painting—to depict subjects from literature, history, mythology, and religion and to present an idea by means of a figure composition. Even before he left Denmark he was well read and spoke several languages. The teaching at the Academy in Copenhagen was influenced by the fact that the first professors there were French or had been trained in France and Rome and belonged to the most radical neoclassicists of their generation. Among them were figures such as Johannes Wiedewelt (1731–1802), who had lived with the famous art connoisseur J. J. Winckelmann (1717–1768) for a number of years. So Abildgaard was familiar with the artistic debate of the period before arriving in Rome and had the background to adopt an independent position.

Abildgaard spent the years of 1772 to 1777 in Rome studying antiquities and the Renaissance masters. He thought the most highly of Raphael, but he also admired Michelangelo. His studies show a predilection for the violent, emotional manifestations of both Hellenism and mannerism, which were new approaches that interested the young artists in Rome at that time and found expression in an idiom marked by pathos. It is found among his friends, the Swedish sculptor Johan Tobias Sergel (1740–1814) and the idiosyncratic Swiss-British painter J. G. Füssli (1741–1825). Like Füssli and the

Sturm und Drang writers, for instance J. W. Goethe (1718–1791), who was of a similar age, Abildgaard now started to read Shakespeare and Ossian, as is reflected in his choice of motifs.

Toward the end of his stay he sent home a painting that sums up the benefit of his studies abroad: Snakebitten Philoctetes, *the Greek hero writhing in agony. This placed him at the center of the pre-Romantics and caused a considerable sensation in the Academy in Copenhagen, where it was evidence of his status as the philosophizing artist with a mastery of ideal history painting. On his way home, he spent three months in Paris, studying modern art and classical French history painting.*

In 1778 he was appointed professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, where he, as director and a teacher, became a great influence on the art of his time. Prior to that appointment, Abildgaard had been entrusted with the task of painting a series of pictures of Danish kings for the Great Hall in Christiansborg Palace, the residence of the absolutist king, Christian VII, the center of the government and administration of the realm. The iconographic programme for the hall had long been determined: a national historical homage to the ruling dynasty, the Oldenburgs, who came to power in 1448. Abildgaard was to illustrate the achievements of the Oldenburg kings in ten panels, each a good three metres (about ten feet) high. He chose, and had approved by the king, a chronological sequence of paintings in which the individual kings are represented in allegorical, narrative settings.

In the period up to 1791 Abildgaard produced the ten panels, splendidly demonstrating the power and glory of the dynasty. After this, the grants for further decorations were stopped, to the artist's great frustration. It was as the tool of absolutism that Abildgaard created this nationalist epic, although he himself was a cosmopolitan and free thinker sympathetic to the ideas of liberty and equality that led to the French Revolution in 1789. Unfortunately only three of the great pictures making up this pièce de résistance have survived, as the palace burned down in 1794. The remainder are known only from descriptions and small painted compositional sketches (Statens Museum for Kunst). "Now my name is burning!" Abildgaard is said to have exclaimed in despair when the great palace stood in flames. Things were not totally bad; the royal family continued to make use of his skill, but his time as an official history painter was indeed past.

Alongside the demanding decorative task, Abildgaard taught, ran the Academy, painted and drew continuously, and fulfilled a number of commissioned works. A key to the understanding of his art is to be found in his large library, in which he continued to expand his learning. The library was an object of interest in Copenhagen, and after his death his books were incorporated into the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts Library, where most of them have been preserved. Abildgaard used a host of literary sources as inspiration for his paintings. Only a few of his most important works need be mentioned here: the blind old Ossian *(Statens Museum for Kunst),* Socrates and His Demon *(c. 1784, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek), the* Niels Klim *series after Ludvig Holberg (c. 1785–1789, Statens Museum for Kunst), and the motifs from Apuleius's* The Golden Ass *(1808–1809, Statens Museum for Kunst).*

Abildgaard's private life was troubled. He was a quarrelsome person and had few friends. Understanding for his learning and his ability was very limited; he felt isolated and was only happy at his

work. His first wife left him after a marriage lasting but a few years, and soon after it ended, his little son died. During the less stringent period of censorship in the 1780s, he engaged in political debate, expressing radical points of view and producing satirical pictures. His library was found to contain the American Constitution and pamphlets from the French Revolution. In the 1790s he created a work publicly expressing his attitude in the Frihedsstøtten (Freedom Column) *in Vesterbrogade, Copenhagen, the monument commemorating the liberation of the peasantry brought about by the "people's friend," Crown Prince Frederik, who in 1784 took power in place of his deranged father. But the heir to the throne did not appreciate the learned history painter.*

In the 1790s Abildgaard demonstrated an unusual originality as an architect and designer. He designed interiors in one of the Amalienborg palaces for the king's half brother, the heir presumptive; these contained overdoors[1] and furniture inspired by antiquity. Abildgaard was assisted in this work by his pupil Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844). He established a close and warm friendship with the son of the heir presumptive, Christian Frederik, later King Christian VIII. The prince appreciated his intellect and in 1809 spoke at his funeral. Small decorative buildings of Abildgaard's design were erected in the newly landscaped gardens at the palaces of Sorgenfri and Frederiksberg. Shortly after 1800, he created a colorful interior with paintings after Voltaire's Le Triumvirat *in a house in Nytorv at Copenhagen.*

Abildgaard was deeply depressed when the French Revolution came to an end, toward 1800. Press censorship was tightened in Denmark and allegories were prohibited, so his sequence portraying Justice, Theology and Philosophy, *1800 (Statens Museum for Kunst), which represents his bitter political testament, was never made public. Abildgaard's last ten years were cheered by a new and happy marriage which produced three children. For their home at Charlottenborg he painted four scenes from Terence's* The Girl from Andros, *each with a background of antique architecture, in which his mastery of perspective was fully demonstrated (Statens Museum for Kunst).*

In Abildgaard's day, very few people were able to appreciate his contribution. His elitist learning had no real relevance for the new age that came after him in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts with C. W. Eckersberg and the Golden Age painters, whose views were completely different. Only with the new Danish and international research at the end of the twentieth century did the depths of Abildgaard's work and his true significance gradually achieve recognition.

<div align="right">E. F.</div>

LITERATURE: Bente Skovgaard, *Maleren Abildgaard*, Copenhagen 1961; Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in the Late Eighteenth Century Art*, Princeton 1967; Bente Skovgaard, *Abildgaard, Tegninger*, The Royal Collection of Prints and Drawings, Statens Museum for Kunst, 1978; Erik Fischer, *Abildgaards kongebilleder i Christiansborgs Riddersal*, in *Kunstmuseets Årsskrift for 1992*, Copenhagen 1992, pp. 4–39 (summary in English pp. 154–156); Patrick Kragelund, *Nicolai Abildgaard, kunstneren mellem oprørerne*, I–II, Copenhagen 1999 (summary in English); Charlotte Christensen, *Maleren Nicolai Abildgaard*, Copenhagen 1999.

[1]*Overdoor*: a picture or carved panel or other decoration over a doorway or door frame.