

P. C. SKOVGAARD

1817–1875

110. *Portrait of Elisabeth Wedell-Wedellsborg, née Scavenius, 1862*

(*Portræt af Elisabeth Wedell-Wedellsborg, f. Scavenius*)

Oil on canvas, 31½ x 24¾ in. (80 x 63 cm)

Signed lower right with monogram and dated: 1862

PROVENANCE: Always in possession of the family; Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 688, 2000, lot 1437, ill.

With her first two names, Karine Lucie Elisabeth Wedell-Wedellsborg was called after her paternal grandmother, Karine Lucie Scavenius, née Debes, whose husband Jacob Brønnum Scavenius (1749–1820) had earned a fortune in India. On his return to Denmark he invested his fortune in the purchase of various estates in Zealand, including Gjorslev, near Stevns Klint on the Baltic shore. He later bought the estate of Klintholm and Møns Klint on the island of Møn east of the southernmost point of Zealand. Jacob Brønnum Scavenius was a keen book collector, especially in the fields of mathematics, history, and language, and over the years he assembled a sizable library.

Jacob Brønnum Scavenius's son Peder (1795–1868) was a gifted jurist, a major landowner, and a very active politician who throughout his life occupied a large number of positions of responsibility in which he unswervingly defended the privileges of the far right wing. In 1840 he was given the title of *Kammerherre*, and three years later he was ennobled. He was appointed by the king as a member of the 1848–1849 constitutional assembly, in which he stood alone in proposing (unsuccessfully) that the 1660 Royal Constitution continue to be observed and absolutism retained with minor changes.¹

In his youth Peder Brønnum Scavenius had become acquainted with European art during a grand tour of Paris and Rome. Throughout his life he retained a profound interest in art and architecture, and he was a knowledgeable and adept collector of the finest examples of Danish Golden Age painting and provided his many residences with modern furnishings and fittings made by the best artists and artisans of the time. Like his father, he was also a great book lover—in his case with a particular interest in astronomy (he even built an observatory at Gjorslev). He had three sons and two daughters by his wife Charlotte Sophie, née Meincke. The oldest son, Jacob Frederik, inherited Gjorslev and became a highly respected minister of culture. The children are said to have had a tolerant and dedicated upbringing, and their parents were on first-name terms with each other, unusual for the time.²

That Elisabeth (1840–1920), who was Peder and Charlotte Sophie Brønnum Scavenius's third child, was also a gifted and unusual personality is clearly proclaimed by Skovgaard's portrait of her. Presumably inspired by Gjorslev's extensive library, she became a writer, though originally not publishing under her own name.

In 1861, then twenty-two years old, Elisabeth married a man fifteen years her senior—Captain of the Horse³ Baron Hans Rudolph Wedell-Wedellsborg (1825–1871). His parents were Lieutenant General (*Kammerherre*) Baron Joachim Wedell-Wedellsborg (1785–1860) and Gregersine Juel. Elisabeth's father-in-law had a long and honorable military career. He came from the estate of Wedellsborg in northwestern Funen and was the third son of the highly esteemed landowner and county prefect *Kammerherre* Count Ludvig Wedell of Wedellsborg (1780–1828).⁴



Elisabeth and Hans Rudolph Wedell-Wedellsborg had five children, but they enjoyed only ten years of marriage, as the baron died in 1871 at the age of forty-six, the same year his young widow published her first poems. Three years after her husband's death she moved with the children to the area south of Holstebro in Jutland, where she had bought the estate of Krogsdal, which remained in her possession until 1897. During the following ten years Elisabeth Wedell-Wedellsborg published several collections of poems and dramatizations of sagas, mainly under the pseudonym of Johan Sandel. In 1896, under her own name, she published a poetical version of the Revelations of St. John the Divine, followed in the years 1904–1912 by an exposition and paraphrasing of the Gospels.

So it was no ordinary young woman P. C. Skovgaard had the task of painting. It might seem surprising that he was given the commission at all. He was a national liberal and a follower of Grundtvigian populism, and he was not a dedicated portraitist. His model came from an ultra-conservative milieu and had just married into a family of the same persuasion. Also, why choose a landscape artist to paint a portrait?

Peder Brønnum Scavenius, with his strong will and his well-known insight into the art of the time, probably had something to do with the choice. Artistic qualifications without doubt weighed more heavily with him than opposing political convictions, and Skovgaard was a talented and respected painter. The Scavenius family undoubtedly knew his landscapes from both Stevns and Møns Klint as well as from various localities in the south of Zealand. Perhaps, too, they knew some of his motifs from the mansion of Nysø, Bertel Thorvaldsen's favorite place of residence after his return from Rome—and these motifs included several group portraits of the ladies of the house. In addition, in an exhibition at Charlottenborg, P. C. Skovgaard had recently shown a beautifully finished portrait of Amalie Elisabeth Freund, the widow of the sculptor H. E. Freund.⁵

Karine Lucie Elisabeth was painted the year after her marriage, about the time the couple's first child was born. Perhaps the expected birth is the reason for Elisabeth's absent and secretly happy facial expression. The cool, limited but very beautiful use of colors and the decorative lines suggest inspiration from a great foreign exemplar, such as the French artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.

The choice of P. C. Skovgaard turned out to be a wise one. Despite lacking experience in figure painting, the artist succeeded in making his portrait of the young Baroness Wedell-Wedellsborg stand as a noble statement about a gifted and distinctive woman.

S.L.

¹The wave of bloody revolutions that swept over Europe in 1848, starting in Paris with the February Revolution and the fall of the French monarchy, and reaching Copenhagen about a month later. But absolutism in Denmark was ended by means of a peaceful revolution on March 20. A new government, the March Ministry, was formed, with Count A. W. Moltke at its head. Leading national liberal politicians, such as Orla Lehmann, D. G. Monrad and L. N. Hvidt, participated in it. Christian VIII had just died, and his son and successor Frederik VII had been proclaimed king. He accepted without objection that he should no longer reign absolutely and even welcomed the formation of the ministry with relief.

²This information on the Scavenius family derives from Bente, Peter and Alette Scavenius, *Klintholm Gods, 200 år i slægten Scavenius' eje*, Copenhagen 1998.

³A Danish military title, in former days called "Ritmester."

⁴Danmarks Adels Aarbog, Jesper Thomassen, ed., Odense 2000, pp. 568–69, p. 573.

⁵*Amalie Elisabeth Freund, née von Würden. Billedhuggeren, H.E. Friends hustru (Amalie Elisabeth Freund, née von Würden, the Wife of Sculptor H.E. Freund)*, 1860. Oil on canvas, 31¹/₂₀ x 24²/₅ in. (79 x 62.5 cm), Statens Museum for Kunst, exhibited Charlottenborg 1861. Hermann Ernst Freund (1786–1840), Amalie Elisabeth Freund (1807–1866).