

J. TH. LUNDBYE

1818–1848

142. *Ships in a Harbor at Kalundborg Fjord*, 1846

(*Skibe i havn ved Kalundborg Fjord*)

Oil on paper laid on canvas, 51 x 61 in. (20 x 24 cm)

Signed lower left with monogram and dated: 46

Signed on the back: J. Th. Lundbye. Fjordparti. 1846.

PROVENANCE: Given as a gift from the artist to Inspector of Customs Johan Thomsen in Kalundborg; Physician Christian Myrdahl; Winkel & Magnussen, Auction 243 (Chr. Myrdahl's estate), 1939, lot 100, ill. p. 7 (described as *Parti fra Refsnæs*);¹ Danish private collection (2014).

EXHIBITED: Fyns Kunstmuseum and Storstrøms Kunstmuseum, *Himlens spejl, Skyer og vejrlig i dansk maleri 1770-1880*, 2002–2003, no. 52, ill. p. 193, pl. 36 (described as *Fjordparti*).

LITERATURE: Karl Madsen (Viggo Madsen and Risse See eds.), *Johan Thomas Lundbye 1818–1848*, Copenhagen 1949, no. 226 A, mentioned p. 253, ill. p. 251 (described as *Skibe i Havn ved Kallundborg Fjord*); to be included in the forthcoming catalogue raisonné and biography of the artist by Hans Edvard Nørregård-Nielsen.

A sunny late summer day. A wide, blue sky with drifting clouds, mirrored in the sea. A scrap of grassy isthmus, separated from a bit more distant coastline by a narrow strip of deep blue water. A figure of a frail man clad in black, wandering along the nearest shore, his reflection following him in the water as a dog would his master. Two people with their backs turned, lingering farther away, are seen as cheerful dollops of color against the rippling waves of the fjord and the yellow cornfields on the other shore. Next our eyes reach ships with masts as tall as the trees from which they are made, rocking on the water side by side, close to a pair of buildings with red roofs. The many withered-green, yellowish, cream white, red-brown, and gray nuances of color in the land, figures, and ships are met by the tile colors of the roofs and matched by the blue notes in the sky and the sea.

This charming little oil sketch was painted in Kalundborg Harbor and could have been made on a boat close to the shore. This is documented by a later watercolor with the same motif, seen from the city and from a greater distance.² However, the artist could possibly have been situated on land. Kalundborg city in the northwest of Zealand is built within a natural fjord on the southern side of the Røsnæs (Refnæs) peninsula that, along with the smaller and somewhat more southerly located Asnæs peninsula, defines the fjord. At the seaside entry to Kalundborg, one passes a small, narrow spit of land, Gisseløre, which points in a southeastern direction and forms a small cove toward the mainland. Lundbye could have been standing with his paint box somewhere here, from where there was a view of the anchored ships by the outer rim of the isthmus and the peninsula of Asnæs.

We are in the late summer of 1846. Lundbye has just returned home after his long journey abroad (cf. biography) and is now back in his beloved Denmark, which he continually longed for and had defined as his life goal to paint.

Kalundborg was the artist's birthplace, where he spent the first eight years of his childhood, and where his mother had returned as a widow to take care of her elderly parents. Just prior to leaving for a trip

abroad, Lundbye drew a picture of his maternal grandfather, customs inspector Emanuel Bonnevie (1763–1846), sitting in his dressing gown by the window in his house at Skibbroegade 129.³

Lundbye was deeply attached to his mother, and after his return to Copenhagen July 18, 1846 on the steamboat *The Lion* from Kiel, he traveled as fast as possible to the Kalundborg region, where letters from him to P. C. Skovgaard (among others) tell how happy he now was and how well he was working. Among other studies, he created one for *The Mill Hill at Kalundborg (Møllebakken ved Kalundborg)*.⁴

However, he does not mention *Ships in a Harbor at Kalundborg Fjord*—nor the other, slightly smaller oil sketch that he gave to inspector of customs Johan Thomsen: *View of the Seaside of Kalundborg (Udsigt over Kalundborg, set fra søsiden)* (cf. note 1).

All that is known about Johan Thomsen comes from an 1845 census, where it was noted that he was the local customs cashier, was 34 years old, was born in Copenhagen, and resided in Skibbroegade in Kalundborg. The street number is not stated. According to the same census lists, Johan Thomsen did not live on the premises of no. 129, where the Bonnevie family resided. However, there can hardly be any doubt that the young customs officer knew the old Bonnevie and may have been appointed as his successor. Thus Lundbye could have met Johan Thomsen through his grandfather, and either of the two customs officers might have inspired this painting by explaining to the young artist the importance of Kalundborg as a port and the maritime duties of the anchored ships.⁵

The small painting is a sketch, not meant as a study for an exhibition piece. The fast, lively brushstrokes add life and nerve to the picture, which makes the human figures appear as thickly applied lines without contours. Professor N. L. Høyen would consider such a work a “smear painting” and would not have approved it as a legitimate work of art. Here, one should think fifty years forward to the French Impressionists who, under great resistance, paved the way for sketch to be considered legitimate art.

Even though J. Th. Lundbye enjoyed recognition for his outstanding animal and landscape portrayals throughout his short life, he often doubted his own worth as an artist. For long periods he suffered from depression, and he was depressed during his tour abroad. On the last page in his travel diary, he wrote from Altona on June 16, 1846, that his friends had said a loving good-bye to a “sickling” but that they hoped to see him again as “strong and healthy.”⁶ And so it was to be.

Lundbye’s pictures from the Kalundborg region are characterized by overconfidence and something close to rapture over his return to Denmark and his hometown. Maritime paintings like this one are not the usual subjects of Lundbye’s work, but this painting of the harbor entrance fully lives up to his own and his friends’ expectations of the journey.

A diary paragraph from December 9, 1846, ends as follows: “... as a lovely fairy tale now the whole journey lies before me, as one of the most wonderful fables we never tire of hearing over and over again—I am so happy in this and thank God for this happiness, for a great happiness I can only consider that which tore me out of my despair and gave me back my joy.”⁷

S. L.

¹The physician Chr. Myrdahl also owned *View of the Seaside of Kalundborg (Udsigt over Kalundborg, set fra søsiden)*. Sign. monogram. 5½ x 9½ in. (14 x 24 cm). This little picture was also given by the artist to inspector of customs Johan Thomsen in Kalundborg. Present owner unknown.

²Wholesaler, painter Axel Peter Ditmar (1833-1899), *The Harbor of Kalundborg (Havnen i Kalundborg)* (around 1859), watercolor. Present owner unknown. Many thanks to Ulla Hørslev, Kalundborg Local Archive.

³*Justice of the Supreme Court, Inspector of Customs E. Bonnevie, the maternal grandfather of the artist*, May 1845. Pen, brush, ink and watercolor, 8¾ x 7 in. (221 x 178 mm). National Gallery of Denmark, Department of Prints and Drawings. Shortly after the old man's death in November 1846, the drawing was used as a model for an etching entitled *Christmas present for family and friends from JTL* 49.

⁴*Study for the Mill Hill at Kalundborg (Studie til Møllebakken ved Kalundborg)*, 1846. Oil on canvas, 9¼ x 12¾ in. (23.5 x 32.5 cm). Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. Lundbye's mother was at Fyn at the time of the return of her son and consequently did not see her son before the end of August. He remained in the home with his mother and his elderly, weak grandparents for fourteen days.

⁵In the picture you see two larger vessels, a schooner and a ketch, along with three one-masted cargo ships (called yachts) a bit farther away. All three are typical cargo ships that conducted domestic trade between the Danish regions, carrying agricultural and other goods, while the schooner and the ketch were used in nearby European shipping to the Baltic Sea, England, and the Canal coast. Here, the outgoing cargo was most typically grain for England, returning with coal for the emerging Danish industrialism. Back then, Kalundborg was a typical grain export harbor, thanks to large estates and other significant farmsteads in the fertile hinterlands of the city. Many thanks to Asger Nørlund Christensen, The Maritime Museum of Denmark.

⁶Johan Thomas Lundbye, *Rejsedagbøger 1845–1846*, The National Gallery of Denmark, Department of Prints and Drawings, Copenhagen 1976.

⁷*Ibid.* Introduction by Bjarne Jørnæs, quoted from Karl Madsen's selection of Lundbye's diary entries, p. 21, p. 274.