

**Ragni Linnet**

## **The Danish Golden Age in Postmodernity\***

The Golden Age commonly denominates the art in Denmark from approximately 1815 to the crucial year of 1849, when absolutism was replaced with a democratic Constitution (albeit with important qualifications). My topic here is the ambiguity of the art of this so-called Golden Age.

Painting in the Golden Age unfolded in the field of conflict between documentary representation and fiction; for the Golden Age does not mirror the homogeneous culture the name seems to suggest. Its pictorial expressions are manifold and essentially different and played a both retrovert and radical role in contemporary society. Indeed the period is partitioned by a scission that can be placed chronologically around 1840. The paintings before approximately 1840 are typically 'Daily Life Pictures', while the later paintings rather qualify as 'Sunday Afternoon Pictures'. The former seem concentrated on establishing a dialogue between the work and the beholder and are rooted in an unpretentious realism of an industrious middle class. The latter, in contrast, only sustain a one-way conversation, a monologue with the

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spectator and have an alienating, starry-eyed approach to visible reality. They expound a fiction about reality that increasingly goes off the rails of the Enlightenment ideals of the early Golden Age.

## The Art of the Danish Golden Age in Modern or Postmodern Perception

The main hypothesis in my recently completed dissertation on the emancipatory and utopian role of Golden Age painting<sup>1</sup> is “...that the bourgeois public opinion, as manifested in the period, contained a number of ideas rooted in Reason which are valid even today both as resistance potentiality and as abstract ideals“. At the basis of this thesis lies a concept of the present which is not easily championed in an epoch so heavily influenced by postmodernist thinking.

It is possible, as does Jürgen Habermas, to speak of modernity as an unfinished project, still developing in that vein of rational yet optimistic thinking, which became dominant with the Enlightenment of the 18th century<sup>2</sup>. In fact, Habermas must be considered a modern continuator of the project of the Enlightenment.

It is regrettably also possible – as do indeed the postmodernists – to talk about a collapse in the classical belief in reason<sup>3</sup>. The ideology of civilisation to which the postmodernists adopt their ‘post’ attitude is by and large identical with the tradition of the Enlightenment and the expectations hitherto connected with it. In 1783 Kant formulated this comprehensive project as “... *der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit*“<sup>4</sup>. Thus the advocates of postmodernity do take leave of a considerable part of the very ideas that

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<sup>1</sup> *Den sande kunst. Gulddaldermaleriets emancipatoriske og utopiske rolle* (The Truth of Art. The Emancipatory and Utopian Role of Danish Golden Age Painting), unpublished ‘magister’ dissertation, University of Copenhagen, Institute of Art History, 1990. The citation is from the preface.

<sup>2</sup> “Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt” (1980), in Jürgen Habermas: *Kleine Politische Schriften 1–4*, Frankfurt am Main 1981 pp. 444–464.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard: *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Paris 1988 (1986), especially pp. 11–32 (Réponse à la question: Qu’est-ce que le postmoderne?).

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant: “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist aufklärung?” (1783), in Ehrhard Bahr (ed.): *Was ist Aufklärung? Thesen und Definitionen*, Stuttgart 1989 (1974) pp. 9–17.

have underpinned the overall comprehension of the social and historical processes of the last two centuries: 1) that they implied progress, and 2) that the main direction was towards emancipation.

Current aesthetic analysis is caught in this controversy between modernity and postmodernity, and one is forced to try and clarify one's own stand in the conflict. In my attempt to meet this challenge, I have found that the eye is opened for a wider potential in the use we can make today of the Golden Age painting. In a positive way, postmodernism has made urgent the necessity of discussing how and for what we use tradition. And the reason for this is ironically enough its own negation of tradition.

It becomes crucial whether to view the Golden Age art in modern, or in postmodern optics, as will be shown later. The same paintings profoundly change their meaning depending on which analytical context they are placed in. Following Habermas, I regard modernity as an unfinished project and find it fruitful to apply his analysis of modernity and rationality to the Golden Age as well as to current social and aesthetic tendencies and cultural policies. In contrast, the essence of the postmodernist approach, its radical critique of reason, actually prevent the postmodernists from asking the questions I particularly want to answer.

A revived understanding of the coherence of the political and the aesthetic in Golden Age art should be based upon the concept of modernity as an unfinished project, and this implies setting it forth in its historical dimension and sorting out the complexity of the Golden Age painting and its changed physiognomy about 1840. In so doing, we may be able to pull out the Golden Age from a commonplace frame of reception which reduces it to perfect idyll and gilt-edged art, sometimes verging on suffocation.

## **Golden Age Art—an Aesthetic and a Political Project**

On the face of it, the art of the Golden Age is disinterested in politics: In its faithfulness to the appearances of reality it seems at first to be pictorially harmonious, socially harmonizing and secluded.

However, one fails to understand the seemingly unpolitical character of Danish cultural life if one neglects the political suppression, which took place through the gradual tightening, bordering on censorship, of the so-called Liberty of the Press Order.

At least up to 1834, when the public acquires a platform in The Assembly of the Estates of the Realm, the overwhelming flow of paintings and prints (and other cultural products) must be seen to have been a reaction against, and an indirect attack upon the absolutist state and its suppression of a political public. In other words, art is thriving as a kind of substitute public voice of the middle classes, whose wishes were not otherwise heard. Thus, cultural expressions including paintings partook of the middle class striving to play a principal part in the political powergame and to destroy eventually the privileges of Crown and aristocracy.

Consequently, the art of the Golden Age was not only an aesthetic but, equally important, also a political project. At the time, there was both an emancipatory and a utopian role assigned to art. Naturally, such a role is not unique for either the Golden Age or for Denmark. It is easy to find parallel roles for art and literature in societies of still greater absolute powers, as for example the contemporary Czarist Russia, and the patronizing Soviet state of our century.

## **Daily Life Pictures, an Attempt at Establishing a Dialogue**

As already mentioned, the Golden Age is not a homogenous culture. The change in its pictorial forms of expression around 1840 segregates painting into Daily Life Pictures and Sunday Afternoon Pictures. Let us begin with the pictures of daily life.

In the middle class painting of the early Golden Age, classical paradigms of mythological, religious, and historical motifs were to a great extent replaced by realistic representations of the imminent, that is of everyday life.



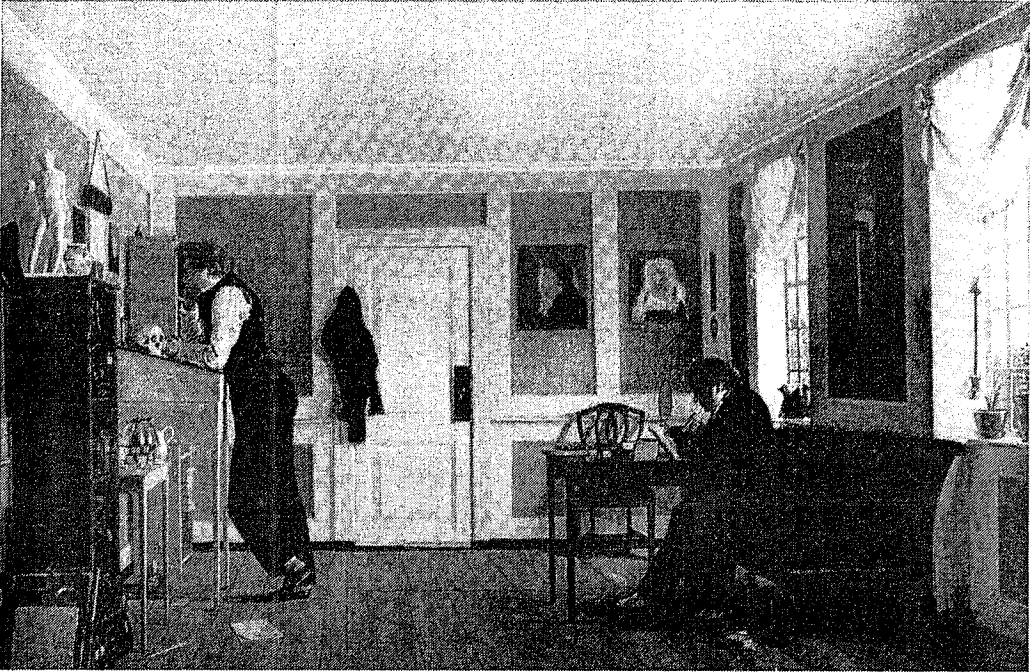
(Fig. 1) Emil Bærentzen, *Familiebillede* (Family scene) (1828).

Emil Bærentzen's *Familiebillede* (Family scene) (1828) shows how an ordinary and respectable Copenhagen family was living indoors (Fig. 1). In *Interiør fra Amaliegade med kunstnerens brødre* (Interior from Amaliegade with the artist's brothers) (around 1830), Wilhelm Bendz depicts a scene he has probably often

witnessed (Fig. 2). In 1834, Jørgen Roed, with his *Afskedsscene på Toldboden* (Parting scene by the customhouse), paints one of the small dramas of everyday life. Wilhelm Marstrand tells a story with a clear moral point in *En flyttedagsscene* (Removal scene) (1831). It is, for good and for evil, observed daily life. Interspersed in the descriptions of everyday life are civic virtues such as reliability and virtuousness, industry and honesty (as for instance in C.W. Eckersberg's *Madame Schmidt* (1818), married to East Indian merchant Schmidt). Also, behold the simplicity, informality, and true love depicted in Wilhelm

Marstrand's *Det Waage Petersenske familiebillede* (The Waage Petersen family picture) from 1836.

All of these paintings have one thing in common: they are unpretentious pictures of daily life<sup>1</sup>. Even the fact that the pictorial ex-



(Fig. 2) Wilhelm Bendz, *Interiør fra Amaliegade med kunstnerens brødre* Interior from Amaliegade with the artist's brothers) (around 1830).

pressions utilized have to be 'true to reality' may be seen as a reaction against the superficiality of the feudal hierarchy with its priority given to external form, as opposed to the middle class emphasis on inner values and the individual. In the bourgeois selfconception, man should not be rated according to rank or birth but by his acts and abilities. Contrary to the absolute monarchy, the bourgeois (or so he professes) has nothing to conceal behind appearances.

At the same time, the acquisition of the paintings brings about new social habits, and goes with the creation of new bourgeois fora,

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<sup>1</sup> For a survey of these, see Kasper Monrad: *Hverdagsbilleder. Dansk Guldalder – Kunstnerne og deres vilkår* (Pictures of Daily Life. The Danish Golden Age – The Artists and their Circumstances), København 1989.

jointly strengthening the group identity. The invigorated bourgeois visits museums and exhibitions, reads art periodicals, and follows the cultural debate in the newspaper columns.

Portraits are now the thing. In 1826, C.A. Jensen paints the portraits of the young lawyer and colonial civil servant, *Johannes Søbøtker Hohlenberg* (Fig. 3), and his wife *Birgitte* (Fig. 4). The paintings are small (23,5 x 19 cm.), straightforward and unsophisticated depictions.



(Fig. 3) C.A. Jensen, *Johannes Søbøtker Hohlenberg* (1826).



(Fig. 4) C.A. Jensen, *Birgitte Søbøtker Hohlenberg* (1826).

Christen Købke's probing portrait of *Etatsrådinde Johanne Pløyen* (Mrs. titular councillor of state, Johanne Pløyen) from 1834 (Fig. 5) establishes a dialogue between her and the beholder. It reveals the gaze of a painter who is on a par with his model and yet can afford being both penetrating and empathic. He needs no recourse to attributes. The same may be said of the above mentioned portraits by C.A. Jensen, and of Con-

stantin Hansen's portrait of *Hanne Wanscher* from 1835.

These early paintings, until about 1840, are rooted in an unpretentious, everyday like realism that establishes a dialogue. They correlate aesthetically to the organic way of thinking called 'optimistic dualism', which was a philosophical trend characteristic of the early



(Fig. 5) Christen Købke, *Etatsrådinde Johanne Pløyen* (Mrs. titular councillor of state, Johanne Pløyen) (1834).

Golden Age (as exemplified by H.C. Ørsted's *Aanden i Naturen* (The Spirit in Nature)). The optimistic dualists were convinced that Utopia could be found in germ in visible reality. Realism was to them an approach to tracking the Absolute, or Divine in the visible phenomena<sup>1</sup>.

Owing to the restricted 'freedom' of the press, the pictures of daily life functioned as a substitute until a public opinion proper began to develop in the middle of the 1830's, that is in a virginal political setting still untainted by the compromise of political pragmatism.

Using Habermas's terminology, the paintings of daily life were assimilated "... *aus dem Blickwinkel der Lebenswelt*"<sup>2</sup>, and art as a culture of experts rejoined to everyday life. The early Golden Age painting became part of the communicative everyday practice of the bourgeoisie as it was used "... *explorativ für die Aufhellung einer lebensgeschichtlichen situa-*

<sup>1</sup> Erik M. Christensen: "Guldalderen som idéhistorisk periode: H.C. Ørsted's optimistiske dualisme" (The Golden Age in the light of the History of Ideas: H.C. Ørsted's Optimistic Dualism), in Henning Høirup, Aage Jørgensen og Peter Skautrup (ed.): *Guldalder Studier. Festskrift til Gustav Albeck*, Århus 1966 pp. 11-45.

<sup>2</sup> Habermas *ibid.* note (2) p. 462.



tion", and related to "Lebensprobleme". It thus entered "... ein Sprachspiel ... , das nicht mehr das der ästhetischen Kritik ist". Seen in this light, the aesthetic experience not only renews the interpretation of our needs but also encroaches on the cognitive decipherings, and on "... die normativen Erwartungen"<sup>1</sup>.

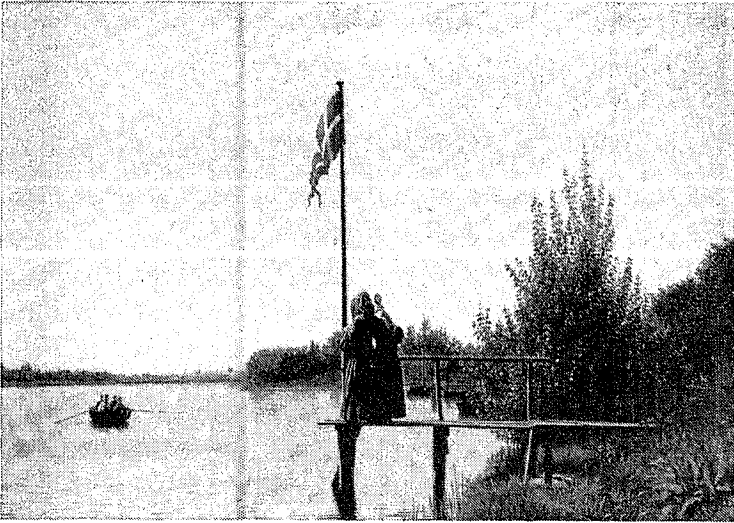
In my own words, the paintings partook of the classical attempt of the early bourgeois public to build a society without lords, an ideal democracy.

### Sunday Afternoon Pictures, and their One-Way Message

From about 1840 the Golden Age painting undergoes changes in character. In the painting of the late Golden Age, the frame increasingly separates the realm of art from that of facts. Reality is increasingly driven out of art as it becomes both socially and politically inconsistent with the ideals. Apparently it is no longer possible to catch a glimpse of Utopia in surrounding reality, nor in keeping with the times to hang on to the aesthetic expression of optimistic dualism: the unpretentious, realistic picture of daily life. In lieu, we are now getting paintings in a monumental style that puts visible reality at a distance and only sustains a one-way conversation, a monologue with the spectator. Golden Age painting was gradually transformed after approximately 1840 into Sunday Afternoon Pictures.

In Christen Købke's *Parti af Østerbro i morgenbelysning* (View of Østerbro in morning light) (1836), it is probably significant that an insignificant motif, namely a rural street in the outskirts of Copenhagen, is mounted large-scale, measuring 106,5 x 161,5 cm. In many ways the motif corresponds to the depiction of everyday life of the 1820's, but the staging is quite different. His *Udsigt fra Dosseringen ved Sortedamssøen mod Nørrebro* (View from Dosseringen at the Sortedams lake towards Nørrebro) from 1838 (Fig. 6) likewise shows that the artist no longer felt satisfied in just painting what he saw. Dannebrog, the national colours, and the monumental, solemn interpretation of the motif, bor-

<sup>1</sup> Op.cit. p. 461.



(Fig. 6) Christen Købke *Udsigt fra Dosseringen ved Sortedamssøen mod Nørrebro* (View from Dosseringen at the Sortedams lake towards Nørrebro) 1838.



(Fig. 7) Jørgen Sonne, *Landlig scene* (Rural scene) 1848.

dering on pompousness, connects the painting with national currents of the time.

We are watching a Danish suburban landscape elevated to timelessness. In Jørgen Sonne's painting *Landlig scene* (Rural scene) from 1848 (Fig. 7), that air of spontaneous presence characteristic of the 1820's has completely disappeared. The motif, taken from daily life, has been transported into a loftier sphere, and the women walking with milk cans on top of their heads look

like karyatids. What mattered now was no longer to give actual accounts but rather to depict the eternal. In a recent analysis of *Haven med den gamle døbefont* (The garden with the old font) (1850), painted by Jørgen Roed, the inclusion of the romantic idea of the harvest as a symbol of eternal life carries conviction<sup>1</sup>. The élitist – or culturally demanding – symbolism built into the painting dissociates it from the genre pictures of the early Golden Age.



(Fig. 8) Niels Simonsen, *En arabisk familie i ørkenen* (An Arabic family in the desert) (1847).

The same solemnity is expressed in Constantin Hansen's beautiful portrait: *En lille pige, Elise Købke, med en kop foran sig* (A little girl, Elise Købke, with a cup in front of her) (1850). Hardly any trace of everyday life remains in the picture. Both the staging of the model and the treatment of the form incorporates the stylistic simplification and monumental propensity of

the late Golden Age. Even the chocolate cup carries sculptural weight.

About 1850 the early realistic school has nearly died out. Danish art has entered for good the larger 'germanic', artistic community. Niels Simonsen's *En arabisk familie i ørkenen* (An Arabic family in the desert) from 1847 (Fig. 8) is very much a case in point.

The change in character of the paintings of the late Golden Age is reflecting a fundamental questioning by real politics of the organic way of thinking, which encompassed an optimistic belief in the

<sup>1</sup> Kasper Monrad: "Religiøs symbolik gemt bag guldalderens hverdag. Jørgen Roeds *Haven med den gamle døbefont*" (Religious symbolism behind everyday life in the Golden Age. Jørgen Roed's *The garden with the old font*), in *Argos* no. 3 (1986) pp. 52–62.

inherent nature of progress. In fact the history of ideas of the 1840's is a time of unrest and upheaval, pushing 'optimistic dualism' into a marginal position for the benefit of newer, and basically different modes of thought, first and foremost the Hegelian one<sup>1</sup>. With recourse to Habermas, the shift that is taking place about 1840 can be described as a growing pragmatism of the political and artistic public<sup>2</sup>. From about 1838 we may notice a turning away from the ideals of the Enlightenment as well as from those of the classical bourgeois public. Public opinion is no longer regarded as being designed to criticise and control the authorities, but is rather becoming reduced to a normative educational principle guiding the civic integration from above. The early bourgeois notion of a society with no lords has turned into an anachronistic ideology.

This is followed by a changed conception of the function of art. Cultural politics no longer takes a Schillerian interest in the aesthetic 'coming of age' of the people. Rather it is now preoccupied with the use of aesthetics to effectuate a vertically directed integration of the people. Admittedly, the starry-eyed Sunday Afternoon Pictures of the late Golden Age assert the ideas of old, by now compromised. But as to size, symbolism, characterization of persons etc. they resuscitate the all too familiar features of the paternalistic dignity of the representative public<sup>3</sup>.

In 1837–38 Christen Købke executed a portrait of *prefect Graah*, (Fig. 9) meant to be hung in the town council-hall in Hjørring. Købke's portrait is awe-inspiring, its dimensions matching the artistic interpretation of the assignment – it is life-size. The fifty-year-old man stands erect, one hand resting on the back of a chair, looking straight at the viewer with a self-assured gaze. We are not witnessing an observed moment in the life of prefect Graah, but a representative staging constructed in the artist's studio. Simplifying for the sake of clarity, this

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Vammen: "Kritisk romantik – om opfattelsen af den danske guldalder. I anledning af en disputats om N.L. Høyen" (Critical romanticism – on the concept of the Danish Golden Age. Note on a doctoral thesis on N.L. Høyen), in *Historisk Tidsskrift* bd. 87 hæfte 1 (1987) pp. 18–37.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, Darmstadt 1986 (1962).

<sup>3</sup> The word representative is here used in conformity with Habermas' theory of publicity.

painting can be taken as a typical expression of the changed mental attitude in portraiture from the mid 1830's<sup>1</sup>. It is beyond doubt that Graah wanted his portrait painted in this way. The self-assurance, even



(Fig. 9) Christen Købke, *Prefect Graah* (1837–38).

selfindulgence voiced in the portrait belongs to another world than that of the slightly shy attitude characterizing for example C.A. Jensen's 1826 portrait of *Johannes Søbøtker Hohlenberg*. While the monumentality of the Graah-portrait may be explicable in the light of the social status of the sitter, his royalist views, and the intended location of the picture, this explanation would be out of the question in relation to Købke's portrait of his sister, *Cecilie Margrethe Petersen*, from 1835. Instead of producing an intimate close-up, he has arranged the sister scrupulously on a large scale. The painting confirms that the pretentious interpretation of the motifs, verging on the affected, even includes 'private' pictures as

for example portraits of the closest relatives. When we compare Wilhelm Marstrand's portrait of *The architect Gottlieb Bindsbøll* from 1834 with the one painted by Constantin Hansen fourteen years later (1847–48), we see the same clear tendency<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This example is in the terms of Max Weber "idealtypisch", see his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen 1972 (1922) p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Even though in this context it must be remembered that Marstrand's painting is a 'friendship-picture', intended for Bindsbøll's family. In its rupture with bourgeois decorum as to bodily and gestic manners it shows us the artist as a bohemian. Hansen's painting, on the other hand, had an official destination: it was to be hung in Thorvaldsen's Museum (in Copenhagen), which had been designed by Bindsbøll himself.

These Sunday Afternoon Pictures, with their one-way messages, may be seen as attempts to legitimize the new bourgeois rulers (termed the National Liberals) and their so-called 'reasonable' claim to absolute power. Understandably, the emancipatory and utopian effect inherent in the representations of daily life of the earlier Golden Age became obsolete, and vanished.

## A Modern and Discordant Universe

Although the pictures of Sunday afternoon, shunning all matters of conflict, are the most conspicuous, the liquidation of a world in perspective, as ev-



(Fig. 10) Martinus Rørbye, *Parti af den romerske Campagne, Tiberen og Monte Soracte* (View of the Campagna, the Tiber and Mount Soracte) (1835).

spective, as evident from the end of the 1830's, found also some other artistic expressions.

Martinus Rørbye's *Parti af den romerske Campagne, Tiberen og Monte Soracte* (View of the Campagna, the Tiber and Mount Soracte) from

1835 (Fig. 10) is a Danish version of the contemporary German romantic tradition that immortalizes the lonely individual confronting Nature's grandeur; incidentally a tradition only rarely reflected in Danish Golden Age painting. This painting oozes existential sensations, and Existence is interpreted in terms of a discordant dualism that remains unredeemed.

Using a metaphor, while the art of the early Golden Age typically placed the spectator in the perspective vanishing point of the picture, this point



(Fig. 11) Dankvart Dreyer, *Udsigt over et skovrigt jysk landskab* (View of a wooded Jutland landscape) (about 1841).

seems itself to vanish in some of the paintings from the 1840's<sup>1</sup>. Dankvart Dreyer has a modern gaze. His labyrinthine and discordant universe visualizes a split existence without a firm direction. Due to the absence

of a harmonizing conductor, some of his landscapes represent a new romanticism of nature not at all congenial with the Golden Age. These paintings have not been subjected to an ideologically inspired composition which force the elements of nature to intonate a common tune of harmony. Not striving for the national, romantic submission of both nature and talent to the coloured gloss of 'good taste', he allows his encounter with nature in *Udsigt over et skovrigt jysk landskab* (View of a wooded Jutland landscape) (about 1841) to liberate his artistic energies (Fig. 11). Nor is the *Carolinekilden ved Næsby på Fyn* (The Caroline spring by Næsby in Funen) (exhibited 1845) a harmonious picture. The composition does not invite the spectator's entry to the scene but

<sup>1</sup> For a further discussion of the connexion between Golden Age pictorial forms of expression and the philosophic trends of the age (optimistic dualism, hegelianism, Kierkegaard's existentialism), see my article "Guldalderens billedudtryk i filosofisk optik" (A Philosophical Inquiry into the Pictorial Expressions of the Golden Age), forthcoming in *Meddelelser fra Thorvaldsens Museum*, Copenhagen 1993.

rather denies his eyes the opportunity to relax in any particular part of it. The uneven rhythm of the trunks pointing in different directions strains the composition, and the shadows that fall across the spring and on towards the spectator, transmit rather a gloomy atmosphere.

## **The Potentiality of Resistance Ingrained in the Golden Age Painting**

In spite of many a fissure or a fracture, there is a current idolatry of the Golden Age painting which cannot avoid the pitfall of seeing it all as perfect idylls. There must be a need for idolatry. When the road to a better future appears to be hopelessly complicated, if not blocked, the myth about the Golden Age is mobilized and used as an escape in our own fragmented age, where moral norms are eroded, and economic growth allotted a priority out of all proportions. But such an approach, essentially rooted in a dogmatic version of the Marxist 'Ideologie Kritik', is not sufficient to explain the present fascination with the Golden Age.

It is the merit of Habermas to have pointed out that the early bourgeois public opinion was rooted in ideas from the Enlightenment's concept of reason which are still valid today. Valid both as abstract ideals and as guide-lines for new ways of resistance, whenever undemocratic trends endanger society. I find this generalization exemplified by the daily life pictures of the early Golden Age. Both with regard to form and content, these paintings were part and parcel of the striving for an ideal democracy carried out by the peculiarly Danish version of early bourgeois public opinion. I like to think that the present fascination with the Golden Age owes a great deal to a congruity in feeling for the values so unpretentiously, yet masterly expressed by the pictorial interpreters of everyday life as they saw it. Their way of realizing their given potentiality of resistance forms an enduring part of our culture, and hence should inspire us to new ways of resistance rather than to escapism.



## The Author's Premises versus Postmodern Positions and Postures

It is obvious that the conclusions above rest on a number of assumptions which are dead against the tide of postmodern values.

First: Belief in the democratic dream and in the rationality of the democratic project.

In rejecting 'The great Stories about Reason and Freedom' the postmodern philosophers clearly wrote off this dream.

Second: Adherence to the tradition of the Enlightenment, which wholly has been turned down by the postmodernists as utterly compromised by events.

Already in 1783, Kant formulated in an exemplary way what enlightening means: "*Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit. Unmündigkeit ist das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen. Selbstverschuldet ist diese Unmündigkeit, wenn die Ursache derselben nicht am Mangel des Verstandes, sondern der Entschliessung und des Mutes liegt, sich seiner ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen. Sapere aude! Habe Mut, dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen!*"<sup>1</sup>.

This dictum is still a forceful motto of the Enlightenment. Logically it forms part of this tradition that the project of the Enlightenment can only be upheld in so far the enlightened way of thinking is mindful of criticising also itself in an incessant selfenlightening of Enlightenment.

Third: Understanding of the Modern as an unfinished project defined in keeping with the aims of the Enlightenment.

These aims being unaccomplished, it lies near at hand, as do the postmodernists, to talk about a breakdown in the classical belief in reason. Alternatively, it is possible to preserve the attractive force of the project as a regulating idea in talking, as Habermas does, about the Modern as an unfinished project in a process of constant development.

Fourth: Conviction that binding truth exists.

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<sup>1</sup> Kant *ibid.* note (4) p. 9.

An idea of vital importance in postmodernism is the allegation that everything is ruled by a chaotic pluralism never to be reconciled in a unified whole: Reality is fragmented, and truth is no more than a non-committal selection of fragments. Accordingly, no ideology can ever prove its own truth.

This I would contrast with Habermas' concept of truth<sup>1</sup>. He insists on the fundamental reality of a binding truth in accordance with universal human goals. This truth is reached through democratic and egalitarian discussions and consists of the resulting consensus. Ultimate truth does not exist, only temporary truths, created and revised by man. Truth is in principle subordinated to a never ending discussion, and these are the terms of cognition from aesthetics to natural sciences. Speaking about truth in art, this procedural concept entails that truth is not an inherent quality of the work, but a quality arising from the interplay between painter, work and recipient. It is thus impossible to delineate the truth in a piece of art isolated from the people associating with it. This, on the other hand, does not reduce its truth to a matter of arbitrariness<sup>2</sup>. In other words, truth in the arts (as elsewhere) is a historical parameter. Today, for instance, as the natural resources are threatened by exhaustion or pollution, the romantic idea of a reconciliation with nature has acquired a truth it was not seen to possess 150 years ago.

Fifth, and lastly: The insistence on the ability of art to formulate its own critique in amplification of that provided by reason.

In their writing-off of reason and the Enlightenment mode of thought, the postmodernists have obviously taken final leave of this ability. Through his critique of reason, the postmodern philosopher is forced to reject any link whatsoever between art and reality, which leaves the

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<sup>1</sup> For instance elaborated in Jürgen Habermas: *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main 1985 (1981).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Bürger: *Prosa der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main 1988 pp. 32–54. This position, although in a different wording, is also defended by Hans-Georg Gadamer, see for example Dieter Henrich und Wolfgang Iser (hrsg): *Theorien der Kunst*, Frankfurt Am Main 1982 pp. 59–69, where Gadamer summarizes his position in *Wahrheit und Methode*.

ultimate role for art to be a sign of the unrepresentable, "*l'imprésentable*" in the language of Jean-Francois Lyotard<sup>1</sup>.

Art is fortunately not always that esoteric. In defined historical situations, art may well be submitted to the established order. At the same time, its autonomy in formal expression may nevertheless enable it to voice a critical stance towards society<sup>2</sup>. (The early Golden Age was exactly such a period).

These five assumptions are jointly spurned by the postmodernists. On their premises, the Golden Age art would be nothing but aesthetic. I actually have a Benjaminian conviction<sup>3</sup> that we can apply these pictures of the past on the present and, in the light of our situation in contemporary society, generate new meanings in them. But the art of the Golden Age can only bear on the present if we (contrary to many a postmodernist) maintain that the present can, and ought to be changed.

## The Aesthetics of the Beautiful and of the Sublime

According to Lyotard, Habermas merely promotes an aesthetic of the beautiful, "*l'esthétique est restée pour lui celle du beau*", when he urges art to bridge the abyss between the discourses of cognition, ethics and politics<sup>4</sup>. In contrast, Lyotard praises the Kantian 'Sublime', which is solely a quality in the mind of the spectator. The feeling of the Sublime arises from aesthetic experiences of such shattering intensity that they cannot be perceived of as being purely delightful. The encounter with the Sub-

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<sup>1</sup> Lyotard *ibid.* note (3) p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> This conception of the autonomy of art is inspired by Herbert Marcuse: *Die Permanenz der Kunst. Wider eine bestimmte marxistische Ästhetik. Ein Essay*, München 1978 (1977) as well as by Hans-Jørgen Schanz's elaborations of the theme in *Tendenser – omkring pragmatik, kunst og modernitet* (Tendencies – on Pragmatism, Art and Modernity), Århus 1988 p. 57 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin: *Das Passagen-Werk* vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main 1983 (1982) and Jürgen Habermas: "Walter Benjamin. Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik" (1972), in Jürgen Habermas: *Philosophisch-politische Profile*, Frankfurt am Main 1987 (1981) pp. 336–376.

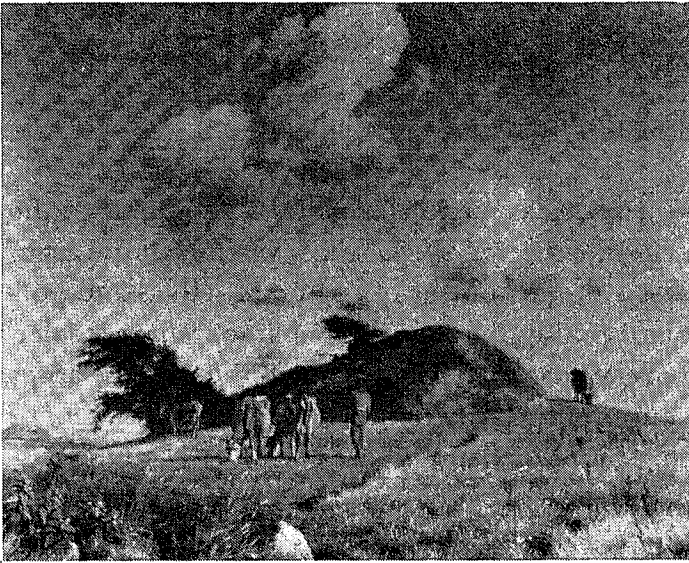
<sup>4</sup> Lyotard *ibid.* note (3) pp. 15-16. The citation p. 27.

lime causes fear, but also devotion, and is a borderline experience beyond analysis.

Lyotard, rethinking Kant, as he says<sup>1</sup>, promotes an introspective, titillating aesthetics permanently revolting against established patterns of experience and knowledge. Unfortunately, if one takes it to its logical conclusion, he is also exempting the individual from the demands of the common good, from human solidarity, and from beauty tempered by reason.

### An Aesthetic of Sensation as opposed to an Aesthetic of Truth

Settling accounts with the postmodern aesthetic of sensation, which is characterized by a subjective arbitrariness towards the work of art, also



(Fig. 12) J.Th. Lundbye, *Hankehøj* (Hanke hill) 1847.

implies being able to point towards an alternative. The alternative is to me an aesthetic of truth that defines the work of art as form, while simultaneously binding it to truth. In so doing, I am particularly drawing on Adorno<sup>2</sup>.

Frankly, truth is a risky concept in art

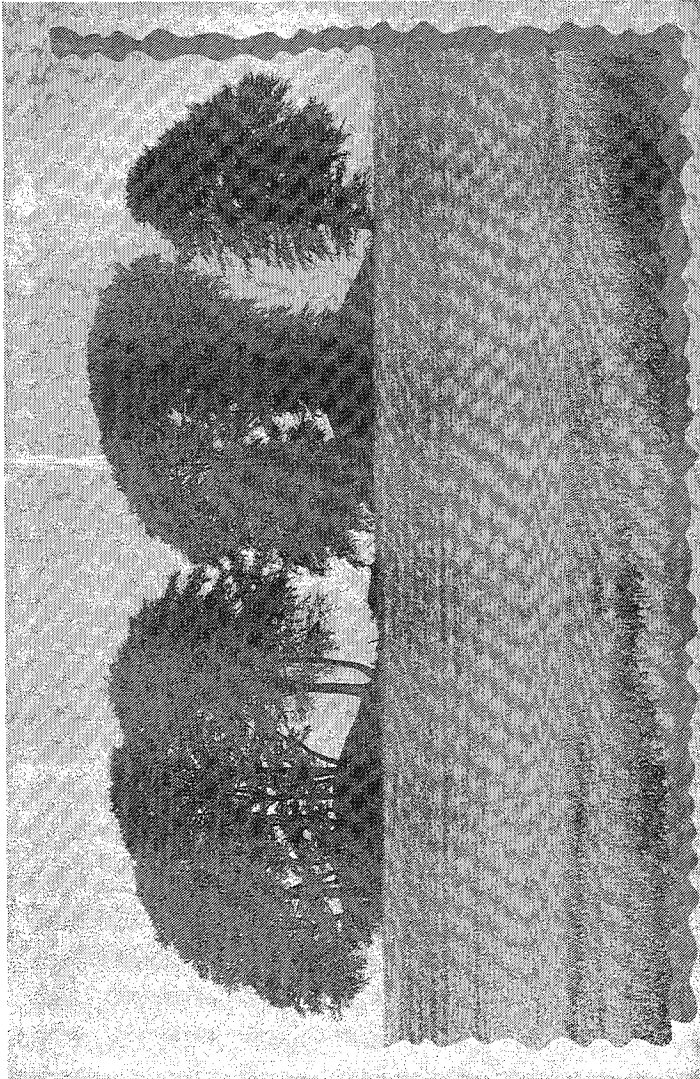
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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. and Jean-Francois Lyotard: "Om det sublime" ("On the Sublime"), in *Slagmark* nr. 9 (1987) pp. 51–58.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno in *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main 1973 (1970), in particular pp. 191–201.

history. For in relation to art, it is also commonly said that no such thing as final truth exists, hence any judgement of art is a purely subjective matter. Clearly attempts to determine aesthetic truth entail great difficulties. Refraining from it, however, means denying the aesthetic experience any point of reference outside itself, and it either degenerates into a mute gaping, or into a hedonistic cultivation of sensations, as practiced among the postmodernists.

The meaning of talking about aesthetic truth is accordingly



(Fig. 13) Postcard.

denied with great consistency by the supporters of the aesthetics of sensation. It is exactly their concern to purge the judgement of works of art of all social and moral philosophical claims. In consequence, the theorist, who wants to maintain 'the spontaneity of pure experience', is logically compelled to issue warnings against interpretation, and is in the end only able to talk tautologically about the aesthetic experience: "It is beautiful, because I like it!".

In contradistinction to the purism of the theorists of sensation, the theorists of truth abide by the insight that – also today – works of art can elicit more in the spectator than an aesthetic sensation, that remains purely subjective and arbitrary.

Besides, without some concept of truth, how could we ever come to grips with our cultural heritage, and define a reasoned understanding of tradition?

## The Golden Age in the Culture-Industry

Although overtaken long ago by other pictorial expressions, the Golden Age art survives in our daily cultural consumption. A salient point is the picture postcard industry. Try comparing J.Th. Lundbye's Golden Age universe in *Hankehøj* (Hanke hill) from 1847 (Fig. 12) with the postcard (Fig. 13) besides. P.C. Skovgaard's *Ved Halleby Å* (At the Halleby Stream) (1847) is revived in many a postcard, and contemporary postcard coast-lines are often so reminiscent of J.Th. Lundbye's *En dansk kyst* (A Danish Coast) from 1842–43.

The picture postcards present the wistful images attached to our vacations. These pipe-dreams, fixed in high lustre and mellow colours, burst the fetters of mundane realities, and often enough transcend the reality of the vacation, too. The picture postcard is a compact, and lovely cheap fiction about a travel to take us away. The pictorial appeal of the postcard is indebted to motifs and styles of the Golden Age art, and we enter the perfect idylls of either by way of the same aesthetic implement: the linear perspective.

The 1920's and 1930's saw the surge of montage, exposing all sorts of chinks, fissures, wounds, and wants hitherto veiled in the illusion of wholeness taken for granted by society. In the city-life of our age, whether in front of the television screen, in the car, or at work in a multitude of isolated units, perception is characterized by unending efforts to assemble the separate, hence by processes akin to montage. Today it is therefore rather the summarizing central, or linear perspective that offers a carrier for critical and utopian thinking. The cultivation of

the central perspective expresses a wish to obtain selfreliance and predictability, for the perspective in the pictures provides the spectator with a command of pictorial space through a sense of direction, centre, and proportions<sup>1</sup>.

The picture postcards accommodate a yearning for a different reality. In the course of time, this wish appears to be more and more difficult to realize (except in pictures), and precisely this element of unfulfillment enhances the attraction to them. The pictures are an entreating fiction commenting on deficiencies in reality, which is why they enchant simultaneously with expressing indirectly a critical stance. The implied wishes for a brighter future are met by the culture industry and its pictorial expressions rooted in the past.

## The Present Day Promotion of the Golden Age

Golden Age art exhibitions have been the great, museal box-office hit in Denmark in the 1980's, and still are. Characteristically, these exhibitions have provided beautiful pictures but scant material for analysis. Almost as if the paintings were highbrow picture postcards, they have preeminently been launched in a way encouraging vague utopianism, sentimentality and pipe-dream travels into the paintings and down into the soul.

I find it difficult to comprehend that the often quite sizeable catalogues published in connection with these exhibitions hardly ever raise the questions: what interest do we have in the exhibited material just now, and how does living in our times influence our interpretations? In short, what are we going to use it for? In the absence of an answer from the museums, the question may be readdressed: What do they use it for? And here the answer is clear: To an exposition of perfect idylls<sup>2</sup>, for entertainment with art conceived of as a retreat. Just occa-

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<sup>1</sup> For a further discussion see Bent Fausing: *Drømmebilleder. Om billeder, drøm og køn* (Visions. On Pictures, Dreams, and Gender), Copenhagen 1988, in particular pp. 126-140.

<sup>2</sup> The recent exhibition on Constantin Hansen at Thorvaldsen's Museum and Aarhus Museum of Art (1991) must be singled out as a thought-provoking exception.

sionally, the catalogues may hint at connexions between art and politics in the Golden Age, perhaps as suggestions that the artists painted their idyllic scenes in attempts to counterbalance economic and social misery (After all, the State went bankrupt in 1814 and the 1840's was a time of high prices and social unrest). But as a rule (and there is no rule without exceptions) this is followed by a quick repudiation of anything problematic. It is deemed to be more gratifying to appraise the period on the basis of its 'best features', as it is said. To me, this *is* in fact the question. What is most gratifying? Is it trying to elucidate a complicated totality, or is it offering to please the eyes for a short moment?

The exposition of perfect idylls in the museums is reflected (and reflected upon) in every corner of the Danish press. This can be seen in exhibition reviews entitled for instance 'Guld og grønne skove' (literally Gold and Green Forest, but with a certain Pie in the Sky connotation), 'Sommerminder 1843' (Summer Reminiscences, 1843), 'Danmark dejligst vang og vænge' (a romantic verse line defying our interpretive powers) or 'Den lykkelige sommer' (That Happy Summer), captions often revealing a certain ironic distance that only flavours the savouring of the idyllic past.

## **Rethinking the Coherence between Art, Aesthetics, and Ethics**

What I would consider to be a distinctive feature of the Golden Age, that it was both a political and an aesthetic manifestation of a nascent bourgeois democracy, vanishes into the blue when exposing these national treasures as merely hall-marked pieces of beauty. When art promoters, art critics and art historians, dealing with e.g. the Golden Age, seem to make such effort to keep their work unsullied from political, moral and social contents, then each separate work of art is imperilled to descend into the subjective haphazardness of sensations, where it is not even abreast of the postmodernist conception of art experience as an 'event' that literally bursts the fetters of reason.

The wider challenge and task, as I see it, is to restore to the interpretation of art those aspects, which the institution of art has largely



weeded out. This also means that we shall have to sacrifice certain truisms, flawed already a long time ago, such as Kants 'pure' judgment of taste and its 'disinterested' pleasure.

At the same time we must debate all those norms that still, as a legacy from German idealist aesthetics, dominate the institution of art<sup>1</sup>, some more than other.

The idealist conception of the artwork as a reflection of 'The Divine Idea' may be meaningless to most of us today. But the same is not true of Schiller's reading of Kant, leading to his formulation of the aesthetic of autonomy<sup>2</sup>. Since Schiller, art has been regarded also as a corrective critique of the civilization process. This important aspect is forsaken, if we, along with the postmodernists, flatly drop the idealist, aesthetic reasoning. In contrast, we should rather try to bring it down from the idealist heaven of art metaphysics. To divest art of its utopian dimension, as does Lyotard<sup>3</sup>, is to deprive it of its radical role of vigilant critic of civilization. On the other hand, conceiving of art according to the paradigm of theology, as Schelling did<sup>4</sup>, blurs its real potentials.

In summary, even today there are good reasons why reflections on art, politics and the utopian that were part and parcel of the idealist aesthetics of the Golden Age, should not be forsaken. It is neither possible, nor recommendable to write off alive and viable traditions, as the postmodernists try to do.

Notwithstanding the ring of novelty about their name, the postmodernists have themselves important roots in the past, notably in Nietzsche. This is why Habermas takes on the tradition for radical critique of reason right from Nietzsche up to the advocates of postmod-

<sup>1</sup> A theme discussed in Peter Bürger: *Zur Kritik der idealistischen Ästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Schiller: *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (1795), in Friedrich Schiller: *Über das Schöne und die Kunst. Schriften zur Ästhetik*, München 1984 (1975) pp. 139–230.

<sup>3</sup> I am well aware that others will contend this point. They will argue that Lyotard's analyses of the Sublime, this 'naughty child', as he nicknames it (*Leçons sur L'Analytique du sublime*, Paris 1991) also embraces the 'utopian' (albeit a different term might be used). They will find the 'utopian' included in his categories of the unrepresentable, the formless, and the moving.

<sup>4</sup> F.W.J. Schelling: *System des transcendentalen Idealismus* (1800), in *Ausgewählte Schriften 1* (1794–1800), Frankfurt 1985, in particular pp. 675–702.

ernism. Nietzsche it was, who first poignantly proclaimed that art was more valuable than truth, and who exalted taste (den Geschmack), “*das Ja und Nein des Gaumens*”<sup>1</sup>, because it was the sole vehicle for a ‘cognition’ beyond true and false, good and evil.

## **Habermas, and my Answer to the Challenge of the Postmodern Frame of Mind**

The debate about ‘postmodernity’ as a philosophical concept is far from having been closed yet. It is an important discussion in forcing us to reflect upon questions, which we are liable to take for granted.

The most coherent and profound alternative formulated to the stream of radical critique of reason from Nietzsche onwards, is to my mind to be found in the work of Habermas<sup>2</sup>. In his thinking, the place of art is not opposite to, nor outside of everyday life, hence neither something ‘totally different’, nor ‘the other of reason’. Art is a reflection on life in its totality, empowered with its own potential of critique, and in demand of its own autonomy<sup>3</sup>. Acknowledging my debt to the thinking of Habermas, I am convinced that the paintings of the Golden Age have an important part to play even in the ‘post-wall era’, where the project of the Enlightenment, including its constitutive, reflexive self-criticism, is at least as crucial as before. These pictures repre-

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche: *Sämtliche Werke* 5, hg. v. G. Colli, M. Montinari, Berlin 1967 ff., p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> I do have a reservation, though, to his ranking of Michel Foucault among ‘the irrationalists’ of postmodernity (see “Modernity versus Postmodernity”, in *New German Critique* nr. 22 (Winter 1981) p. 13). Foucault’s work, as opposed to that of Lyotard, is a testament to sustained critical rationality with political intent, although he decapitalizes all the great concepts. Consult for instance “Space, Knowledge, and Power: An Interview with Michel Foucault by Paul Rabinow” (1982), in Paul Rabinow (ed.): *The Foucault Reader*, London 1991 (1984) p. 249. A discussion of this question is to be found in Dominique Janicaud: “Rationality, force and power: Foucault and Habermas’s criticisms”, in Francois Ewald (ed.): *Michel Foucault, Philosopher* (transl. by Timothy J. Armstrong), N.Y./London 1992 pp. 283–302.

<sup>3</sup> See in addition to those works of his already mentioned “Hegels Begriff der Moderne”, in Jürgen Habermas: *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt 1985 pp. 34–64. As regards *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* *ibid.* note (18) and this complex of problems in particular vol. 2 pp. 548–593.

sent a vision and a message, in both form and content, from a period spanning Enlightenment and Romanticism.

As a precondition, though, we must re-establish the mutual interdependence between the paintings and the social setting from which they sprang. If we succeed in understanding the pictures both in their own context and in their interplay with that of the analyst, we may be spared repressing or overreacting to the titillating sensualism of art, that provokes our concepts. Rather, we can balance that sensualism in keeping with our different objects of analysis. Otherwise, the Golden Age will continue to be a playground for a superficial bourgeois taste of a post-ideological era where an unprincipled notion of art neglects content for form. The paintings of the Golden Age are not – and never were – remote from other areas of social life. Therefore they should be viewed as visual contributions also to the current debate on the ideas of the Enlightenment, of then as of now. The fact is that these paintings remain expressive of a humanism we desire to carry over into both the present and the future.

