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**En fælles forestillet nation – Dansk landskabsmaleri  
1807–1875**  
***A communally imagined nation – Danish landscape painting  
1807–1875***

By Gertrud Oelsner (PhD Dissertation)  
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384 pp.

This deeply researched, persuasively written, and eminently readable dissertation offers a number of significant correctives to the, often problematic, literature on Denmark's Golden Age. Oelsner points out that the apotheosis of C. W. Eckersberg has resulted in both the canonization of his best students and naturalized the assumption of diminishment in those later generations of painters, who did not benefit from his instruction. Art historiography has thus persisted in its reliance on a select group of 'masterworks' to stand for the Golden Age as a whole despite these works representing a rather small proportion of the total number of paintings created between 1800–1875. (Oelsner provides a deep and illuminating analysis of this historiographical tradition, drawing parallels to similar problems in the Danish literature on vitalism, in her introduction.) Such oversights have had serious consequences for scholarship, by standardizing a deeply biased view of the period's cultural production, and by foreclosing the insights into nineteenth-century Danish culture that could otherwise be gained by incorporating these artists into the historical record.

Inspired by literary historian Franco Moretti, and his notion of 'the great unread', Oelsner's approach is thus to consult (as closely as possible) the entire body of Golden-Age artists and their works, without regard to *a priori* verdicts on artistic importance, or aesthetic value, in order to determine whether nineteenth-century perceptions of Denmark (as a national entity) had a formative influence on the development and character of Danish landscape painting during this period. To be sure, the relationship between national identity and landscape painting, in Denmark and elsewhere, has been widely discussed. Oelsner's scholarship, however, has long distinguished itself by its general disinterest in the usual markers of historicized ideology around which this relationship is traditionally seen to revolve; in the present example, for instance, Oelsner bases her analysis on a much more concrete, geographically-determined set of parameters. What is remarkable, path-breaking in fact, is the method of data-collection by which these parameters are established.

In order to gain a complete understanding of what nineteenth-century Danish landscape painters themselves perceived as worthy subject-matter, Oelsner has undertaken a geographical mapping of all landscape paintings exhibited at the Copenhagen Academy's Charlottenborg Salon from 1800 to 1875, literally pin-pointing the location of each selected motif on a map of Denmark. The result is a spreadsheet of 4198 landscape paintings culled from a total body of approximately 20,000 artworks. A critically important choice was to base this mapping solely on the titles of the paintings found, thereby ensuring that the only operative threshold of quality or critique was the one to which all works in the cohort were subject: selection to the Salon. The resultant data set comprises a map that represents, in concrete terms, those geographical locations within Denmark that Charlottenborg artists chose for fine-art representation. With this map in place, Oelsner proceeds with an analysis that at once contextualizes these paintings within the intellectual and literary currents of the day and allows them, as a group, to express telling indications of the cultural and political priorities that underpinned cultural life in nineteenth-century Denmark.

For instance, Part 2, 'En fælles forestillet nation?' [A communally imagined nation?], features an analysis of domestic travel literature, which became an important genre in the nineteenth century. The nexus of mutual influence that emerges from the cooperation of landscape painting and travel literature facilitates Oelsner in her investigation of how the construction of the Danish nation took shape, insofar as both fields were complicit in the process whereby certain regions and places were 'written into' the Danish nation, and others were 'written out'. Not surprisingly, northern Zealand was the most well-represented part of Denmark at Charlottenborg but, as Oelsner's research clearly indicates, there was a varied group of other geographical locations that were regularly cycled in and out of the collective national image. In considering why these geographic prioritizations developed the way they did, Oelsner notes that exhibited artworks tended to favour formulations of the national, rather than the composite, Danish state (fig. 1).

In Part 3, 'Danmarksbilleder cirkuleret' [Images of Denmark in circulation], Oelsner considers how images of Denmark were circulated through various media to demonstrate how pictorial motifs appeared across media, and how they changed depending on when and where they appeared. Oelsner's terms of reference in this passage offer another important corrective, by addressing sources typically overlooked in Danish art history, such as atlases, illustrated geographical and topographical books, and panoramas. As Oelsner goes on to demonstrate, these pictorial motifs appeared not only in purely national contexts, but were also often involved in transnational exchanges, which indicates a comparative approach to Danish nation-building that has gone unaddressed in Danish art historiography.



Fig. 1: Johan Thomas Lundbye, *En gravhøj fra oldtiden ved Raklev på Refsnæs*, 1839. Olie på lærred, 66.7 x 88.9 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum.

Jutland's place in the general construction of a collective national picture is the subject of Part 4, 'Jylland mellem patriotisme og nationalromantik' [Patriotism, national romanticism, and the problem of Jutland]. Beginning with Martinus Rørbye's travel report of 1830, this part of the study explains how and why the patriotic national image of the composite state broke with the national-romantic consensus of the national state. Central to this discussion is the particular challenge that Jutland posed to the construction of a collective visual nation. Oelsner identifies two different strategies whereby landscape paintings incorporated Jutland into the national image: assimilation and inscription. The strategy of assimilation was generally deployed in views of the East Jutland landscape; the resemblance of these images to the East Danish landscape intuitively implied a unity of Danish geography. In contrast to this, were those works that took an overlooking, panoramic view of the landscape that simultaneously managed to inscribe a series of visually new pieces of countryside into Denmark's geography. This was particularly true for panoramic landscape views of the mid-Jutland region which, as it were, visually conquered a 'new' territory for the collective visual nation. An interesting addendum to this analysis is Oelsner's examination of the fossilized underground, which cropped up as a previously untreated motif in both literature and visual art, and thus intimated a new resource-

oriented perspective on those landscapes that would eventually be incorporated into the category of national Danish motifs (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Martinus Rørbye, *Fra Gærum bakker i Vendsyssel*, 1833. Pencil, watercolor on paper, 15.2 x 24.3 cm. SMK, National Gallery of Denmark.

In Part 5, 'Konturerne af en konfliktzone' [The contours of a conflict zone], Oelsner revisits the geographical contours of analysis with which she began, this time to analyze them more closely in relation to the notion of 'conflict zones'. The point of contention implied in this phrase refers here to the battle for determination of the historical narrative and definition of the Danish nation in visual terms. In particular, Oelsner applies her discussion to the clash between the 'nationals' and the 'Europeans': representatives of the latter group have largely been consigned by Danish art history to oblivion: 'the great unseen' referred to above. Oelsner demonstrates that works created by the 'Europeans' were important for the construction of the collective visual nation, notwithstanding the preference in subsequent art-historical reception for an interpretation of Danish nation-building that was more unified than appears to be supported by the historical record.

Oelsner's work is deeply significant not only for its exposure and debunking of several mythical assumptions that have driven the art historical narrative, but also for its rehabilitation of the historical voices which that narrative has selectively silenced or undermined. Perhaps her most radical innovation, however, is in the area of methodology. The colossal work of sorting and classifying required by Oelsner's design not only results in definitively new insights into the rhetoric and construction of nineteenth-century Denmark's national project (fig. 3), but also

indicates the singular value of digital humanities to the priority of historical re-evaluation and revision. What makes Oelsner's work so persuasive, beyond the exceptional power of her scholarship, is that it is based on a simultaneous view of the entire visual record. Collecting data in this manner significantly reduces the likelihood that a sub-category will be accidentally neglected or ignored. The historian is thereby left with the opportunity and responsibility to scrutinize and build her argument on material grounds. It is hoped that more historians will follow Oelsner's magisterial example.



Fig. 3: Vilhelm Kyhn, *Bjerglide i nærheden af Horsens. Eftermiddag*, 1858. Oil on canvas, 139 x 203 cm. SMK, National Gallery of Denmark.

*(All translations from Oelsner's dissertation into English are by the reviewer.)*

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