

Peder Balke

Visjon og revolusjon

[Peder Balke. Vision and revolution]

**Eds. by Marit Ingeborg Lange, Knut Ljøgodt,
and Christopher Riopelle**
**Tromsø: Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum i samarbejde med
The National Gallery, London, 2014.**
141 pp. NOK 300.00

Paintings by Peder Balke

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**London: The National Gallery,
distributed by Yale University Press, 2014.**
127 pp. £16.95

The artistic reputation of Peder Balke (1804–1887) depends almost entirely upon a single journey. In 1832, he was the first Norwegian artist to travel to northern Norway. His masterpieces, *From Nordkapp* (c. 1840), *Lighthouse at the Norwegian coast*, and the *North Cape* (1845), are based on the sketches and impressions he made there, when he was 28 years of age. He was also a student of the Norwegian artist Johan Christian Dahl, in Dresden.

However, when Balke died in 1887 he was more or less unknown. Since then there have been several attempts to ‘relaunch’ his career, the most famous being in 1914 during the Norwegian Jubilee exhibition. During the last couple of years, the most enthusiastic advocates for Balke have been

the director of Northern Norway Art Museum, Knut Ljøgodt, and Marit Lange. Ljøgodt curated a major exhibition at The Northern Norwegian Art Museum in June 2014, a version of which was later shown at the National Gallery in London (international catalogue: *Paintings by Peder Balke*).

The book *Peder Balke: Visjon og revolusjon* serves as a Norwegian catalogue for the exhibition at The Northern Norwegian Art Museum. It contains four essays. One biographical essay by Lange; one essay by Ljøgodt about Balke’s relationship with the sublime and the North; and two shorter essays by Guro Braathen and Christopher Riopelle, the curator from the National Gallery, who reflect on how Balke was rediscovered, including a

discussion, by Braathen of all earlier exhibitions of Balke's. The book is richly illustrated and offers a generous selection of quotations.

The main thesis of *Peder Balke* is that although Balke was an outstanding Norwegian romantic, he died in relative obscurity in 1887 and has only recently been recovered. However, the book never really addresses the question of Balke's significance as an artist. In fact, each of the editors takes for granted that Balke is interesting, that he deserves to be rediscovered. I tend to agree, but I would still like to hear the argument for why Balke is important: is his artwork better than that of his peers, is he relevant for our time, and was he influential on the continent?

The book does however describe Peder Balke as an artist who was on the wrong side of virtually all the major disputes of his time. His mentor Jens Rathke did not have the influence to define the art establishment in Norway and he was not a popular man; from the 1860s there was a growing antipathy towards the government in Stockholm, where his other mentor Frederick Due was prime minister.

The recovery of Balke was driven in no small part by one of Ljøgdø's co-editors, Dr. phil. Marit Lange, whose interest in Balke dates back to 1974. She describes the origins of that interest as follows:

In 1974, I moved into an apartment in Schultz gate. I sat and looked out the window while I was working on my master's degree on Antonio Gherardi. There were some small houses with narrow streets, that accounted for a block that differed

markedly from everything around it. I wondered what the reason could be, and began investigating. It turned out that the houses were built after the great fire of the working district Balkeby, named after the painter Peder Balke. (Excerpt from interview in *KUNSTforum* 3, 2014).

Six years later, in 1980, she assembled her first exhibition of Balke's work at Oslo Kunstforening [the Art Association of Oslo], showing 94 paintings. 40 years later, her contribution to *Peder Balke* is a lengthy discussion of Balke's biography, drawing on his letters and the known facts about his life. This is an interesting read, especially for readers with an interest in Norwegian history: Lange portrays an artist whose career did not fit with the usual patterns of his time, and hence her essay also offers the reader an alternative cultural history of Norway in Balke's day.

Balke's name was Peder Andersen. His father disappeared when he was young and his mother was part of the landless rural proletariat. Balke began by learning house painting and fine decorative painting with his cousin Anders Skrædderstuen. In 1823, when he was 19, Andersen was helping to restore Balke Church on Toten. Two years later he was in charge of the restoration of the interior of Kolbu church at Toten. He became a renowned artisan and lived for a while with the wealthy farmer Andreas Balke at the farm Vestre Balke. It was during this time that Peder Andersen took the name Balke, following a tradition amongst servants of taking the name of the farm where they lived. The future was promising for the

budding artisan, until he was drafted into military service. To escape conscription, Balke left Toten in 1826.

In Christiania, Balke started to study at the Royal Drawing School. It is interesting that the major trigger to start Balke's career as an artist was the urge to escape conscription. His mentor in Christiania was not one of the directors of Christiania Kunstforening or at The Royal Drawing School, but professor of biology Jens Rathke.

Rathke had in his youth travelled extensively along the Norwegian coast, including northern Norway. He had studied the fisheries and their socio-economic conditions. On these journeys, he made a series of fine watercolours of the wildlife on the coast. He was, nevertheless, not an easy man to get on with and emerges from the history of the university as a bitter and difficult man. However, Lange paints him in a more sympathetic light and it is Rathke who advises Balke to study at the art academy in Stockholm.

In Stockholm, Balke found another unlikely mentor. Frederick Due, a junior minister, and later Prime Minister, helped Balke to get in touch with the leading Swedish painter Carl Johan Fahlcrantz (1774–1861). Later he would help Balke to sell his work to the royal family. In 1831, Balke was in a position to choose whether to travel to Dresden to study with Johan Christian Dahl or to northern Norway. Had he asked Oslo Kunstforening, the members would have answered: Dresden. But Balke listened to Rathke, and Due supported him in his decision to visit northern Norway. Balke's subse-

quent journey is well documented in this book.

In short, Lange describes a painter who finds his own paths and isn't at ease with his peers in Christiania. Nor were they especially enthusiastic about him. Balke received a state travel grant for artists in 1842, on the condition that he studied in Düsseldorf, where both Norwegian artists such as Adolph Tidemand and Hans Gude had also studied. However, the award was disputed. The Royal School of Drawing opposed it: the director, the Danish-Norwegian artist Johannes Flintoe, despised Balke, whom he believed to be a dilettante. The architects HDF Linstow and Johan Sebastian Welhaven supported Balke, but they stated their belief that he should receive an academic education. In 1844, when Oslo Kunstforening bought more of Balke's work, the critic Emil Tidemand was unimpressed: the images, he thought, were 'devoid of all, that might have an artistic Interest'.

These reactions by Tidemand and Flintoe were due, in part, to Balke's use of a marbling technique, where the paint was heavily diluted and added over with a priming. Balke could certainly use rags, a sponge – or even his fingers while painting. According to Lange, several members of Christiania Kunstforening viewed these as dilettante techniques.

Knut Ljøgodt's essay sets out to explain why Peder Balke travelled to northern Norway, the journey on which much of his status as an artist depends. He points out that in 1832, northern Norway was not unknown to civilised society. Indeed, Ljøgodt

gives several examples, including the Danish poet Adam Oehlenschläger and English novelist Charlotte Brontë, illustrating that northern Norway may have been the true definition for the European public of a frightening and terrifying place. It is not for nothing that Mary Shelley has Dr. Frankenstein appear for the first time just inside the Arctic Circle.

Ljøgodt argues that a fascination with the sublime is an important context for Balke's career. Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) offered one of the most influential contemporary descriptions of the sublime, linking it to, amongst other things, the 'dark, uncertain, and confused'. To outsiders, northern Norway was nothing if not 'dark, uncertain, and confusing'.

As a reader it is easy to ask: Did Peder Balke travel to northern Norway in order to discover what scares the civilized European man? Such an enquiry was no doubt a familiar part of the romantic project, witness the *Nightmare* (1781) of Henry Fuseli, which represents the animal subconscious that threatens always to disturb our balance. If it is true that Balke portrays the wild nature that threatens our existence even, then this alone secures his relevance in our age of anxiety about climate change.

The reader is never told whether Balke knew Edmund Burke's *Enquiry*, (but since he had little schooling he probably did not) or whether he was driven by intellectual desire to venture out in the unknown. Ljøgodt points out that Balke must have known about travel writing such as Anders

Fredrik Skjöldebrand's *Voyage Pittoresque au Cap Nord* (1801–1802) and that he was fascinated by the German painter Christian Eydorf's paintings of Northern Sweden and Norway. But Balke does not seem like an intellectual. Of course he might have heard of the sublime, but Lange's article describes an artist who is driven by chance, an artist who puts faith in his mentors, rather than one on an intellectual mission. As a result, Ljøgodt's article gives an interesting impression of the intellectual climate at the time and of the growing fascination with the north. It explains why people were curious about Balke's paintings of northern scenes, but does not really tell us much about Balke.

In 1848 Europe was shaken by revolutions. These riots were a political awakening for Balke, and again show him as a maverick, who followed his own path. This irritated his teacher Johan Christian Dahl who wrote in a letter: 'Balke is now Communist'.

The bourgeois in Christiania lost interest in Balke at around the same time: Christiania Kunstforening bought its last painting *Nordkapp i måneskinn* [The North Cape in Moon Shine] in 1849. Balke returned to Norway, engaged in politics, and lost the battle of his time. Lange points out that Balke's politics played a significant role in his fall from favour with the establishment. That was undoubtedly so, but his lack of powerful mentors in the art world certainly also explains why he remained out of favour with the art world – until recently.

The exhibitions of Balke's work at the Northern Norway Art Museum and The National Gallery in London

aim to give him a shot at the posthumous reputation denied him by his contemporaries. Unfortunately *Peder Balke* does not really tell us why he deserves it.

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