

## Hans Gude – En kunstnerreise

### *Hans Gude. An artist's journey*

By Nicolai Strøm-Olsen  
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Nicolai Strøm-Olsen's monograph presents a compelling contextual view of its subject, emphasizing the importance of economic, technological, political, social, cultural, ideological, and artistic influences on him, while devoting substantially less attention to the personal and psychological motivations of this apparently amiable and well-liked artist.

For instance, the framework of the industrial revolution is critical for explaining Gude's career path. The advent of the steam engine not only transformed the relationship between center and periphery, but also allowed the artist to sell his works anywhere in the world while he stayed in one place. A case in point is Düsseldorf, where art exports made artists independent of a domestic market. The ability to get a foothold in the export market – or failure to do so – also often explained differences in socio-economic status between painters. In searching for motifs, the landscape artist increasingly preferred modern modes of transportation rather than strenuous journeys on foot or horseback. As a young artist, Gude was renowned for his mountain motifs, but later in

life preferred to depict landscapes he could easily reach by train or boat, the latter allowing him to demonstrate his masterful ability to depict light refractions in waves.

Gude's life journey also demonstrates the vagaries of the modern economic experience. Born into a family of civil servants, Gude eventually rose to the highest social echelons in Berlin. His marriage in 1850 to Betsy Anker was clearly a driving force in his social mobility. Anker came from the upper echelons of the higher class in Norway, and it seems clear that Gude's strong determination to commercialize his art over the next few decades derived largely from the obligations he felt his marriage to a woman of high economic standing had conferred upon him. While we learn little beyond objective facts about their union, which resulted in seven children, it seems to have been a very happy one.

Gude's rise to prominence was remarkably rapid; he was an established artist by the age of 19, and sold his paintings both in Norway and in Germany as early as 1843. He had the privilege of enjoying the best of both

the official academic system (by virtue of being a well-regarded and successful academy teacher) and the private and ever-growing and internationalized art market, where he sold briskly.

Gude's historical importance results to a large degree from his impact as a teacher on several generations of landscape painters, and his role at the academy assumes an important place in Strøm-Olsen's narrative. The greatest strength of *Hans Gude – en kunstnerreise* [Hans Gude. An artist's journey] is its review of the artist's importance as a teacher over a period of approximately 45 years, during which time he was associated with different educational institutions and mentored students from Scandinavia, the USA, and Germany. Strøm-Olsen's book emerged essentially from his Master's thesis, in which he explored Gude's activities as a professor in Karlsruhe, and this matter is further developed here. Gude played a significant role in shaping the future of German, Norwegian, Swedish, and American landscape painting as a professor in Düsseldorf and later in Karlsruhe and Berlin.

In these years, success for an artist still depended significantly on belonging to an Academy and practicing a recognized academic style rather than the rebellious, idiosyncratic, unruly originality of the avant-garde artist. The role of the artist was more that of an ideal citizen: alert, active, and creative. After the unsuccessful attempts of social revolution in 1847 and 1848, reform – not revolution – was established as the basic principle of social change in Germany, the need for certain social arenas that could

be perceived as apolitical was created. The private home and the living room were such arenas, although one could stress that this style is very similar to or a continuation of the Biedermeier style. One's family, a close circle of friends, and the private parlor became havens where peers could mingle and exchange ideas secluded from public view. Artists' societies filled a similar need, and Gude was a well-regarded participant in several of them.

Strøm-Olsen mentions that a number of Gude's pupils, of more or less importance, managed fairly well. His influence on American landscape art is interesting, although in cases such as Albert Bierstadt, the relationship seems to have been grounded more in admiration than in actual instruction. It would be interesting to study more of these relationships, as this might deepen our understanding of the relationship between the German, American, and Nordic landscape painting. A common ground between Gude and his American contemporaries is preference for local scenes culled from explorations into hitherto unknown landscapes and influenced by the heritage of German idealist philosophers, literati, and historians.

Tired and bored with teaching, Gude tried to establish himself as an independent artist from 1862 to 1864. His attempt to gain a place in the English art market through images painted in Wales in 1862 was unsuccessful, but his visit to Wales and companionship with British artists helped him to develop the more naturalistic approach to undramatic everyday motifs that he later followed in his seascapes from the coast of

Norway and Germany. Gude returned to Germany in 1864, when he was offered the professorship in Karlsruhe. The German landscape was becoming a marker of national identity and the reconstruction of the Karlsruhe academy was a national project with the intention of creating a locally based German art school. However, Strøm-Olsen could have nuanced this argument by including the fact that the nationalization of the German landscape is much older (C. D. Friedrich, Herder etc.). Gude's systematic approach taught his students to unite naturalistic detail with a harmonious composition. The early familiar Romantic ideal of the sublime was replaced by a muted romance that sought the idyllic, the quaint, and picturesque. The image should be truthful, but raw reality was hideous and had no place in an aesthetic sensibility that sought the beautiful. Gude and his students achieved international success at the World Exhibition in 1867 and likewise in Vienna and Munich in 1869.

Gude was completely integrated into the German art scene in his later years. He strongly favored Germany in its war with France in 1869, which increased skepticism towards French art and culture. His most famous German pupil, Hans Thoma, however, was a great admirer of Courbet and challenged Gude's timid realism and harmonizing art. Gude's foremost Norwegian student, Fritz Thaulow, also moved away from Gude, but the two maintained a mutual respect for each other.

Gude had the good luck to move to Berlin where, in the last twenty

years of his life, he became a veteran painter of great esteem with close ties to the imperial family. He was never an important power player in the city's art scene, but he still had a role as a teacher of a new generation – Walter Leistikow prominent among them – that favored neo-romanticism. The Norwegian Thorolf Holmboe, however, continued in a style more closely linked to Gude's romanticism, drawing particular inspiration from the Norwegian seascapes Gude produced in the later part of his life. Holmboe was the first artist in the Symbolist generation to re-appraise the iconography of Caspar David Friedrich and yet, surprisingly, he is among the few Gude pupils Strøm-Olsen leaves unmentioned. As Strøm-Olsen suggests, Gude's proximity to younger generations helped to shield him from criticism in the feud between the older artists and the new generation who settled in Norway in the 1880s.

While Strøm-Olsen's book does not supplant previous monographs, such as *Hans Gude's Life and Works* by Lorentz Dietrichson, published in 1898, or Frode Haverkamp's magisterial dissertation on the artist's work from 1981 and his subsequent publications and catalogues about the artist, this new publication is nevertheless an important supplement. A large number of the illustrations in the book are by Gude's contemporaries, which underlines the contextual perspective of the author.

*Øivind Storm Bjerke*  
The University of Oslo