

Johan Thomas Lundbye and the Danish Landscape

When Johan Thomas Lundbye (1818-48) exhibited his “Landscape near Arresøe” (fig. 1) (*Landskab ved Arresøe*) in 1838 the critics opined that here was a truly Danish landscape, although both the choice of motif and the treatment of the subject were strongly influenced by the prevalent conception of the “dunstfrei” Roman Campagna.

There was in Denmark at this time a great need of national self-assertion. Thorvaldsen had returned home in the same year, and his success abroad was regarded as a triumph for Denmark. “Danish Thor had conquered Roman Jupiter”. Doubts were also beginning to arise about the value of foreign travel. Some critics actually found that travels abroad had a detrimental effect on the naive innocence which was considered the special characteristic of the Scandinavian artists. The art historian N.L. Høyen claimed, for example, that Lundbye’s “naïveté” would not survive a confrontation with a scenery more beautiful than the Danish and a past of greater grandeur.

After his return from Italy in 1841, Lundbye’s friend, Christen Købke (1810-48), painted a large painting of the rocky coast of Capri (fig. 2), and, possibly inspired by Købke’s success, Lundbye began on a similar motif, a large painting of a high Danish coastline (fig. 3). The German painters, C. D. Friedrich and C. G. Carus had already adopted lofty coastlines and landscapes dotted with dolmens as pure Nordic motifs and, as early as 1801, Friedrich had visited Rügen and had sketched such scenery. It is possible that his sketches were known in Denmark. The cliffs of Stubbenkammer and Königstuhl have much in common with Lundbye’s sketches of Danish coastlines. It is as if Lundbye wished to show that Denmark was well able to compete with Italy in wealth of motif.

Despite all warnings, in 1844 Lundbye left for Rome. Here, to begin with, he felt he was being disloyal to his own country every time he fell for the beauty of the Roman countryside. In the end, however, his stay in Italy taught him to see the merits of North and South independently of each other. He was now ready to return to his stern, cold, stony country and paint its scenery without his mind continually turning to the warm and sunny South (fig. 5, 6, 7).

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