What more could an ambitious young painter, nearing the end of his studies, wish for than a chance to show his talents in the form of a publicly accessible work of art? An offer from the University of Copenhagen in 1836 to selected students of the Academy of Fine Arts was thus clearly welcome. The University wanted the vestibule of the main building to be decorated, so that those entering it would not be confronted by bare and dismal plaster walls. The result would fulfil that wish to an extent that the Senate had hardly imagined; the interior decoration of the University vestibule would prove to be the largest and most complex work of art produced in 19th century Denmark.

Fig. 78. Constantin Hansen (1804-1880): *Aurora scattering her roses*, 1844. Detail of the central panel in the ceiling of Copenhagen University entrance hall.
First, I shall give a breakdown of the programme used for the decoration, then detail its history and the stylistic and iconographic premises underlying it. Finally, I shall attempt to read between the lines and examine some of the underlying aims of the programme which were not set out explicitly by Constantin Hansen in connection with the creation of the work.

Constantin Hansen wrote a brief explanation of the decoration when it was completed in 1853. Anyone who was interested could purchase this explanation for a very modest sum. He described the images of the decoration, beginning with the wall on the left, crossing the rear wall to the wall on the right, and ending with the ceiling. Four years later, in 1857, Hansen described the programme once again, now more comprehensively, in *Nordisk Universitetsblad*.

He begins his description with the part that had to be painted first, the ceiling (fig. 78 and 79), since Hilker and Constantin Hansen had chosen to paint a fresco. Eos, the dawn, puts the darkness of night to flight by means of the morning star, Lucifer. Festoons of branches and decorative ribbons divide the ceiling into fields adorned with the signs of the zodiac, together with the most significant of the Olympian gods in the corners. The decorative ribbons also serve to link the pilasters on the walls together in pairs. A detail to which I shall return later.

Following his description of the ceiling, the painter then describes the series of motifs on the main wall. He begins with the picture of Athena, who bestows a soul upon Prometheus’ clay figure of a human (fig. 80). Prometheus, the artist, has done his part in the work, now Athena/Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, steps forward to endow the figure with a spirit. Below this central field runs a horizontal frieze with grisaille figures on a green background. This frieze extends across all three walls and separates the lower area of the space, the base or plinth, from the decorated part of the wall above. The central field of the frieze shows Psyche’s descent into the underworld. She stands before the throne of Hades and, watched by Nemesis, the Eumenides and a Danaide, accepts a small box from Persephone.

In a grisaille frieze set on a blue ground above the central picture, Psyche is led before the throne of Zeus by Eros, while Hebe pours the drink which is to make her immortal.

In the field to the left, Prometheus is punished for having stolen the fire from Mt. Olympus and given it to the mortals. Apollo, who has taken pity on him, seeks to ease his harsh fate by playing his lyre.

In the lower frieze, Eros lights the way back from the underworld for Orpheus. This is the fatal moment when Orpheus glances back and simultaneously loses Eurydice, who is gently restrained by Hermes. In the semicircular field at the top of the wall, Selene drives her chariot across the heavens.

On the right, Prometheus, having suffered his torments, is helped down from the rocky cliff by Heracles, who has just slain the vulture. Heracles is the principal actor in the lower frieze, in which he is shown setting off with Cerberus, accompanied by Athena. In a semicircular field above the picture field, Helios steers his chariot across the heavens.

Constantin Hansen used these motifs to illustrate "The conflict and victory of Life over the Underworld".

The main motif on the left wall is the birth of Athena (fig. 81). The Goddess flourishes her lance in a war dance, having sprung from the forehead of her...
facing the windowed wall illustrate the myths of Saturn, who taught humans to value the advantages of culture, and Rhea, mother of Zeus.

This extensive decoration was commissioned in the years following 1836 when the University's main building was rebuilt after its destruction by fire during the English bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807.

The architect Peder Malling\(^5\) was responsible for the construction of the new temple of learning. He wanted the building to be as impressive as possible: when it was almost complete, he asked his friend, the painter Christian Fejder Høyer,\(^6\) to decorate the vestibule. Høyer, a graduate of the Academy, had just returned from his educational tour of Italy. Malling,

The decorations on the pilasters which divide the walls into three fields are also adorned with a series of motifs, which expand and refine the message of the pictorial programme. The adornment of the pilasters is ascribed to Hilker, but the programme itself must be attributed to Constantin Hansen.

The left pilaster on the main wall is devoted to the myth of Ceres/Demeter, the goddess of the Earth. She can be identified as the figure with the sheaf of grain at the bottom of the plinth, and on the capital. We can also see further references to the loss of her beloved daughter Persephone.

The plinth of the right pilaster shows Bacchus/Dionysus holding grapes, as well as other illustrations of other scenes linked to Bacchus as the god of wine and ecstasy.

As previously noted, the pilasters on the side walls are paired. The two closest to the back wall thus show motifs from the myth of Oceanus, lord of the sea, and Thetis, his sister. These two Titans did not oppose Zeus and were thus allowed to rule undisturbed in their own realm, the Ocean. There was also another reason for Thetis being allowed to live in peace: both Zeus and Poseidon were captivated by her beauty, but a prophecy claimed that she would bear a son greater than his father. Prometheus knew of this secret, but he refused to reveal it to Zeus until he was freed of his chains. Only then did Zeus learn how dangerous Thetis was to him. He himself could have suffered the same fate that had befallen his father.

The pilasters nearest to the windowed wall illustrate the myths of Saturn, who taught humans to value the advantages of culture, and Rhea, mother of Zeus.

However, the programme is not yet complete. The decorations on the pilasters which divide the walls into three fields are also adorned with a series of motifs, which expand and refine the message of the pictorial programme. The adornment of the pilasters is ascribed to Hilker, but the programme itself must be attributed to Constantin Hansen.

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however, omitted to consult the University authorities about his decision, a mistake that would prove disastrous. The huge painted canvases were taken down and apparently destroyed almost immediately. Malling was so upset that he resigned.

During the following years the University authorities vacillated between giving priority to the decoration of the ceremonial hall, called Solenmitetssalen, or to the vestibule. Funds were limited, so they lacked the means to pay for the decoration of both at the same time. On 22 December 1837, a Royal Resolution allocated an annual sum for the purpose of decorating these halls, and it was decided at the same time that the ceremonial hall should take precedence over anything else. Nonetheless, a convincing point in favour of giving priority to the vestibule was that it was the first room encountered by visitors upon entering the building, and should thus be transformed into a worthy environment for guests of this most learned house of the Realm.

Since means were limited the University Senate turned to Denmark's first art historian, Niels Laurits Huyen,7 to seek help in finding a suitable programme for the decoration and to contact a number of competent artists. Huyen was the right person to approach, for he was connected to the University as docent and was also a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts. He wasted no time in pursuing the matter, and proposed a decoration of the architectonic divisions which were already marked out on the walls. These markings included the muses and several floating figures in the recesses halfway up the walls, combined with a relief frieze that runs beneath the ceiling is based on the temple of Isis in Pompeii. In Rome, they meticulously studied the impressive murals by Raphael in the Stanzas and Loggias of the Vatican palace, together with Michelangelo's decoration of the Sistine Chapel. The Loggias provided the model for their pilaster decoration, but it was Hilen who suggested that Raphael's exotic flora and fauna be replaced by Nordic ones. It did not escape Constantin Hansen that Athena and Apollo can be seen in niches in the middle ground architecture of Raphael’s “The School of Athens” in the Stanza della Segnatura. In addition, Bissen had been commissioned to sculpt Athena and Apollo just before he made a study trip to Rome in 1841. The coloration of the Sistine Chapel made a strong impression on Northern artists who visited Rome in the 1840s and 1850s. Diillev Blunc;11 for instance, wrote home to Professor Lund in 1838 that it was impressive to see a decoration which resembled a vast water-colour painting.12 Until the Chapel underwent extensive restoration in recent years, it was difficult to understand this description. In his article, Constantin Hansen clearly acknowledges his sources.13 Reliefs from the Parthenon (fig. 83, 84), Attic patterns and vase motifs supported contemporary conceptions that Constantin Hansen, like Thorvaldsen, was a "Greek" in his classicism.

Thorvaldsen's position in Rome and his extensive activities there have also left their mark; we can assume that his admiration of, for instance, Raphael's treatment of Psyche in the Villa Farnesina may have inspired Constantin Hansen. If Hansen's frieze depicting the Argonauts on the island of the Bebryces looks slightly familiar, the explanation is that the Danish historian and archaeologist P. O. Brandsted14 had just published his book on the Ficoroni Cista, in the Villa Giulia Museum in Rome.15 In his frieze, Constantin Hansen has eliminated all the minor details and reproduced the figure composition itself. Contemporary painters in Rome took a special interest in the use of older painting techniques for murals. The Nazarenes were German painters who succeeded in reviving interest in fresco techniques. They obtained a number of commissions in Rome, including the decorations of Casa Buti and Casino Massimo.16 One of these painters, Peter Cornelius,17 was a friend of Thorvaldsen and deposited his works in one of Thorvaldsen's ateliers when he had to return to Munich for personal reasons. The two Danish painters also paid a visit to Peter Cornelius's school in Munich on their journey home from Rome, to familiarise themselves with fresco techniques and to view works in the city carried out for King Ludwig of Bavaria.

It is possible to gain a partial impression of the way in which the decorations gradually took shape. We have at least seven different drafts by Constantin Hansen and Hilker of the decoration for the University vestibule. It is difficult to date these with complete precision, but they must have been produced in the period beginning December 1838, when Hilker arrived in Rome, and during the years following. Occasionally, Constantin Hansen visualized a grand programme, which was to encompass both vestibule and ceremonial hall.10 His speculations reflect the uncertainty that continued to prevail, because the University authorities and the King had not yet made their final decision. The drawings illustrate the way in which the two artists followed Huyen's proposal. They experiment with various colour combinations, and decorative elements combined with simple figure presentations. Little by little the decoration becomes more and more figure-dominated, until the decorative acanthus boughs almost disappear.

The draft programme for the main wall, which incorporates the portal leading into the ceremonial hall, appears to have been completed by 1840 and this became the proposal eventually supported by the University Senate in 1843. The pilasters and recesses, the creation of the architect, were already there. Hilker's pilaster decorations divide the wall area into three monumental and over-lofty fields between the low plinth and the frieze under the roof. Constantin Hansen countered the effect of vertical upward
thrust by not only filling in the recessed fields with three large paintings, but also by including three smaller series of figures above the paintings. He marks off the horizontal division and separation between the image-bearing space and the plinth with the frieze under the picture. The part around the door is indicated as a brick-patterned black wall.

In the proposal, the frieze is polychromatic. It is only later that Constantin Hansen managed to resolve the relative positions of the individual aspects of his narrative. Nothing is left to chance: over the years he achieved a precisely balanced relationship between painting, sculpture and architecture. Consciously, he uses the painter's unique opportunity to create a cohesive whole and, with the help of the illusion, achieves perfect unity between the art forms.

This aim can be seen clearly in a later essay he wrote on "The unity of the Fine Arts." 21

In 1843 Constantin Hansen was summoned home from Rome and, following his stay at Peter Cornelius's fresco school in Munich on the way, began work in 1844.

Since fresco technique involves painting motifs directly onto a plastered wall, the decoration at the top of the walls must be done first, in order not to spatter work already completed. For this reason Hilker and Constantin Hansen began their decorative murals on the ceiling first. For each field containing a figure composition, Hansen produced a large number of sketches before finalising the figure and making a full-size cartoon (preliminary drawing) (fig. 85, 86 and 87). The procedure is as follows: the drawing is fastened to the painting ground, which is a thin, moist layer of plaster, and the outlines of the drawing are traced into the plaster with a bone stylus. Afterwards the calk is removed and the actual painting can commence. No preliminary drawings of Hilker's ceiling festoons and garlands exist: this task was so simple that he carried it out freehand. Nevertheless, full-scale preliminary drawings of all the other decorations have been preserved. 22

The drawings for the main wall were produced during the course of the winter. In the summer of 1845, Constantin Hansen managed to paint the small semicircular fields showing Selene in the chariot of the moon and Helios in the chariot of the sun, then the middle field depicting Psyche, and finally the main field showing Prometheus, who has created a human figure, and Athena, who endows it with life.

The side fields and the frieze were completed the following summer. At the same time, Hilker worked his way down the pilasters, and the ashlar-patterned base of the walls could thus also be completed.

At that point, the University had intended to stop the work, but Constantin Hansen succeeded in changing the minds of the authorities. He and Hilker...
thus managed to continue their work in the years fol-
lowing. The procedure was the same for the side walls, and finally, in 1853, the entire painting was complet-
ed. In December of that year, the professor of phil-
ology and an ardent archaeologist, I. L. Ussing, de-
scribed the decoration in *Fædrelandet* (The Father-
land).20 He was unsparing in his praise of the artists’
erudition and thorough knowledge of classical
mythology and the pictorial art of antiquity. Ussing
also endorsed their selection of fresco as the correct
technique for a decoration in the grand style. Fresco
demands breadth of vision and confidence: it pro-
vides a challenge that only a master can meet.

Unfortunately, a moist climate and considerable
pressure variation in summer and winter proved a
severe trial for the plaster, as was exacerbated by
undetected cracks in the masonry. As a result, salt
watered its way through to the layers of paint, which
blistered and eventually flaked off. Even during Con-
stantin Hansen’s lifetime the decorations had reach-
ed a sad state of deterioration. Since the original
technique did not prove durable, the walls were restored by experiments with inconceivable means. The most
extensive restoration occurred around the turn of
this century, when the ceiling was washed down with
lye and several sections of the walls chipped off. In
accordance with the tastes of the time, Constantin
Hansen’s spirited and classicist figure compositions
came coarsened with paint on both sides of the
outlines and grimming expressions. In 1978, when the
most recent cleaning and repairs were carried out, it
could be seen that very little of the original
painting remained.

The sorry state of its preservation, however, can-
not overshadow the fact that this is a decoration of
impressive scope, representing a grand concept. The
latter is not the least surprising when viewed in light
of the repeated doubt that surrounded it. The
King, who later became Christian VIII. Unfortu-
nate, there is no indication that knowledge of this
book reached the individual painters.21

Further interpretation of the meaning of Promethe-
us in the decoration with regard to interpretative
directions known from Romanticism, for example
Christological and political, is difficult, if not impos-
sible, because Hansen’s idea of a connection with the
ceremonial hall was never realised. From letters
exchanged between Hansen and his friend Orla Leh-
mann, it is evident that he had intended the house of
scholarship to be a presentation of “Thought in
world history as the complete revelation of godlike
reason,”22 and thus also a lesson in accordance with
the historical views of the 19th century, i.e., the
strengthening of the individual human being so as to
enable him to “see first his place in the nation, then
the latter’s place in humanity.”23,24

By means of these speculations, Hansen created a
rous footnoto to the programmes with which the
absolute monarch surrounded himself in the
courtly halls and audience chambers of his palaces.
This is wholly compatible with Hansen’s efforts to
express his sympathies for a social change that moves
in the direction of modernisation. His wish to rein-
force the content of the motifs and to surpass the
boundaries of individual genres is clearly evident in
his later monumental painting of the Constitutional
Assembly of 1848, which he executed for a supporter
of the National Liberals Party, Consul Hage. The
painting was done in 1862, when the liberals were in
need of moral support, and it speaks clearly of Con-
stantin Hansen’s conviction of the importance of
works of art and their possibility of influencing and
emboldening man.25

Constantin Hansen could not allow art to enter
the service of practical political ends: this he indicat-
ed by rejecting conclusively a proposal of this nature
put forward by Orla Lehmann. Nevertheless, there is
no doubt that he made use of his professional crafts-
manship and intellectual capacity when he felt it to
be in the service of the nation or of humanity. Here
the University of Copenhagen provided the ideal
frame.

Translated by the Translation Center of
the Faculty of Arts Copenhagen University

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1. For further literature on Constantin Hansen (1804-1880), see Hennemarie Ragn Jensen: Constantin Hansen: a 19th-century Danish
3. Description of the Paintings in the University vestibule. Handbill. Printed by J. H. Schultz 1863 (Indholdet af Maalermesters I Universitets
4. Murals in the vestibule. Announcement by Prof. Constantin Hansen. (Freskomalerierne i Universitetets Forhal. Meddelt af Prof. Constan-
5. Georg Christian Hiller (1802-1875)
6. Peder Mølling (1781-1869)
7. Christian Fæderer Hoyer (1775-1855)
8. Niels Laurits Høyer (1775-1850)
9. Hermann Wilhelm Bissen (1798-1868)
10. Albert Thorvaldsen (1770-1844)
11. Christen Købke (1810-1843), Wilhelm Marstrand (1810-1873), Heinrich Ebbesen (1800-1885), Adam Müller (1801-1884), Jørgen Rode
(1806-1888)
12. J. L. Lund (1777-1867)
13. C. W. Eckerberg (1785-1853)
14. Ditlef Blunck (1794-1864)
15. The Royal Library, Copenhagen.
16. see note 2
17. O. C. Brandt (1770-1841)
18. Den Finskernes Cirkus, beskrivet og forklaret af O. C. Brandt. Udg. N. V. Dufay, København, 1847
20. Peter Cornelius (1785-1862)
22. At the University of Copenhagen, also some at Køge Skitsesamling, Køge and the Collection of Architectural Drawings, The Library of The Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen (Samlingen af Arkitekturtegninger, Kunstakademiets Bibliotek, København).
23. Fædrelandet 17. December 1853
24. For more on the iconography of Prometheus, see: Gabriella Tassinari: «Un bassorilievo del Thorvaldsen: Minerva e Prometeo. La sua presenza nella glittica dell'Ottocento e la collezione Poniatowski» in: Analecta Romana Istituti Danici, XXIII, Roma 1996 p. 147-176
25. The reason for using the names of both the Greek Athena and the Roman Minerva for the goddess of wisdom is to be found in Constantin Hansen’ writings, as he alternates between the two.