

# The (Re)birth of Genre Painting during the Danish Golden Age

## The Case of the Studio ‘Portrait’

Kasper Lægning  
Aarhus University, Denmark

**Abstract** In standard twentieth-century accounts of the state of painting during the Danish Golden Age (1801-1864), genre painting is seldom credited with any share of the painterly innovativeness of the period. And although contemporary attempts at a scholarly revision have done much to remedy this situation, Danish Golden Age genre painting is usually not considered outside of its immediate historical context. In contrast, this article, which focuses on the genre of art students painting each other in their studios, argues that genre painting was a driving force in the Romantic turn in Danish painting. It concerns a series of interconnected paintings from the late 1820s, painted by Wilhelm Bendz, Ditlev Blunck and Albert Küchler, and it argues that these works not only stand in relation to past examples from the Dutch Golden Age, they also reinvent conventional concepts in the image of Romanticism. Furthermore, these canvases testify to an intense aesthetic exchange between theatre and painting, it is argued, which is substantiated with reference to the outputs by the poet and playwright Henrik Hertz and the philosopher F.C. Sibbern. Whilst this reciprocity constituted a rapprochement to realism, it by no means implies that the studio ‘portrait’ was just an outcome of an interest in the quotidian; in fact, it is argued that the term ‘reality effect’ might better explain the artistic ambition at work. Lastly, this article makes the case for an interpretation of the studio ‘portrait’ as being equally indebted to, and carefully balanced between, conventionality and experimentation.

**Keywords** Genre painting. Danish Golden Age. Dutch Golden Age. Wilhelm Bendz. Ditlev Blunck. Albert Küchler. Henrik Hertz. Frederik Christian Sibbern. Romanticism. Conventionalism. Iconography.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Enter Genre Painting. – 3 The Studio ‘Portrait’ in the Hands of Blunck and Bendz. – 4 The Rise of Genre Painting and Everyday Aesthetics. – 5 Romantic Reflexivity, Dualism and Transformation. – 6 ‘The Foundational Idea’ of Hertz and Eckersberg. – 7 The Rediscovery of Pictorial Conventionalism. – 8 A ‘Reality Effect’, Reborn. – 9 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

Ever since a Stockholm exhibition in 1964 of Danish art from around 1830, the epithet ‘Danish Golden Age’ has stuck, previously referring to the period roughly from 1810 through 1848, and now often covering the longer period from 1801 through 1864, the years of two devastating military defeats – first to Great Britain, then to Prussia

and Austria. The latter, broader periodisation is favoured in recent publications on the subject and will also be adopted here (Larsen, Olausson 2019, 17; Jackson 2021, 18-23).<sup>1</sup>

It is often said by the previous generation of Danish art historians, such as Hans Edvard Nørregård-Nielsen, that Danish Golden Age paint-

<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Jackson, however, convincingly challenges the very idea of a stable periodisation.



### Peer review

Submitted	2022-01-24
Accepted	2022-06-07
Published	2022-10-24

### Open access

© 2022 Lægning | 4.0



**Citation** Lægning, K. (2022). ‘The (Re)birth of Genre Painting during the Danish Golden Age. The Case of the Studio ‘Portrait’’. *MDCCC*, 11, 53-80.

ers merely painted what they saw in their surroundings, whether in natural or cultural settings, yet I intend to nuance this position. I will argue that it was no coincidence that the projects of several Danish (and North German)<sup>2</sup> aspiring artists of the 1820s, who were enrolled in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, converged in a preoccupation with reinterpreting genre painting.

Whilst scholarly attention has often been devoted to the fact that the Danish Golden Age witnessed a revolution in *plein air* painting from the 1820s onwards, which aligns well with our established understanding of Romanticism, not enough attention has been given to the gradual reversal of the hierarchy of genres that took place at the time. This is perhaps due to the fact that some of these developments do not lend themselves easily to be-

ing considered Romantic. Thus, whilst the decline of history painting during the Danish Golden Age aligns perfectly with the notion of a cultural development that would accord higher status to landscape and portrait painting, the newfound popularity of genre painting during the Golden Age does not.

This article concerns a series of studio portraits carried out in the late 1820s and representing artists at work, which should be interpreted, I will argue, as sophisticated attempts at revitalising genre painting for a Danish audience. For that reason, I will dub them studio 'portraits'. As I hope to demonstrate as well, the tradition of genre painting within the seventeenth-century Dutch Golden Age seems to have provided the Danish artists with an important compositional compass.

## 2 Enter Genre Painting

In just a few years - 1825-28, specifies Henrik Bramsen - Danish painting was thoroughly revolutionised (Bramsen 1994, 169). And, I will argue, in many ways it was remodelled in the image of Dutch domestic genre painting, although genre painting is seldom mentioned in its own right in the dominant accounts of Danish Golden Age painting. A forerunner to this development can be found in C.W. Eckersberg's (1783-1853) family portraits of around 1820, in which the sitters are depicted with extreme informality and intimacy. Another aspect was the Danish artists' growing acquaintance with the genre painting of the English and Scottish schools. It is known, for instance, that both Christen Købke and Wilhelm Bendz saw David Wilkie's 1820 painting *Reading the Will* (Neue Pinakothek, Munich), which Købke even compared to Wilhelm Marstrand's efforts in the same vein (Bramsen 1994, 168).

Several events boded well for a (re)birth of genre painting in Denmark. I will not go into details but only mention that not only the Royal Collection of Paintings, which opened to the public in 1827 when the new Christiansborg Palace was nearing completion, but also several private collections in Copenhagen, such as Count Moltke's, proved to be vital for the artists' access to Dutch art. Many of the artists also acquired first-hand experience with Dutch art from visits to Amsterdam and The Hague (Rønberg 2000, 100, 107-8, 116, 119, 126).

Several contemporaneous mentions of 'genre painting' as a novel or established genre of paint-

ing appear in the late 1820s, both in art reviews and in poems. The most extensive definition is given by the emerging art historian N.L. Høyen (1798-1870) in his 1828 review of the annual art exhibition at Charlottenborg Palace (*Nogle Bemærkninger over de paa Charlottenborg udstillede Konstsager. Some remarks on the artworks exhibited at Charlottenborg*). This exhibition, which was the Copenhagen counterpart to the Paris Salon, had become the key art event in the capital, rivalled only by Kunstforeningen's (The Copenhagen Art Association) exhibitions (Høyen himself was the first secretary of said association). Høyen's review was also his debut as a writer and marked his return to the capital after a prolonged study abroad, which only adds to its cultural significance. The year after, 1829, he would become Professor of Art History at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, in spite of holding no degree, and although his training followed that of the connoisseur, he is considered the first professional art historian in Denmark. A decade later, he would become instrumental in creating a mostly artificial divide between nationally-inspired art on the one hand, his preferred one, and foreign-inspired art on the other, which he considered problematic.

In his 1828 review, Høyen places great emphasis on genre painting, of which he provides a definition:

Historiemaleriet, anvendt paa Scener af det daglige Liv i Arbejder af mindre Omfang, har i

<sup>2</sup> Hailing from the duchies of Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg, which were parts of the Danish Realm until being ceded to Prussia and Austria in 1864.



**Figure 1** Constantin Hansen, *Three Young Girls. Study after Nature*. 1827. Oil on canvas, 62.5 × 81 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS125. Image courtesy of Statens Museum for Kunst

den senere Tid faaet Navn af Genre - Maleri. Jo heldigere Konstneren her véd at vælge saadanne Motiver af det af ham omgivende Liv, som lettest forstaaes af og vække Deltagelse hos Beskueren, desto større vil Virkningen være, som han frembringer.

History painting, when applied to scenes from daily life in works of smaller scope, has lately been given the name Genre Painting. The more successfully the artist here knows how to choose such motifs from his surrounding life that are more easily understood by, and prompts participation by, the spectator, the greater will the effect be that he brings forth. (Høyen 1871, 61)

The most talked-about works of the Charlottenborg exhibitions of the late 1820s bear witness to the fact that genre painting was on the ascent, whereas history painting was in decline (Jackson 2021, 93-4).

The paintings accepted for the 1826 and 1828 exhibitions are particularly instructive in this regard, not least since this venue was conservative by definition. When Constantin Hansen (1804-1880), who would end up being an outsider in Danish art for most of his lifetime, yet today has come to be considered a quintessential Golden Age artist, was preparing a canvas for the 1828 Charlottenborg Exhibition [fig. 1], he wrote:

I Morgen skal jeg til at begynde på et Male-rie forestillende Ingenting [...] Det er ikke andet end et simpelt Genre-stykke - en Gruppe af trende Hoveder.

Tomorrow I shall commence work on a painting depicting nothing [...] It is nothing else but a simple genre-piece - a group of three heads. (Constantin Hansen, letter to Jørgen Roed, 30 July 1827, quoted from Bramsen 1994, 165)



**Figure 2** Wilhelm Bendz, *A Young Artist [Ditlev Blunck] Regarding a Sketch in a Mirror*. 1826. Oil on canvas, 98 × 85 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS280. Image courtesy of Statens Museum for Kunst



**Figure 3** Ditlev Blunck, *Study after Nature [The Battle-Painter Jørgen Sonne in his Studio]*. 1826 ca. Oil on canvas, 121.5 × 101 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS57. Image courtesy of Statens Museum for Kunst

In spite of depicting the painter's three sisters sitting around a table, working, it was exhibited under the title *Tre unge Piger. Studium efter Naturen* (*Three Young Girls. Study after Nature*, cat. no. 68). As we shall see, this tendency to an-

onymise the sitters – thus turning a portrait into a genre scene – was constitutive in almost all of the ground-breaking genre paintings submitted to the annual Charlottenborg Exhibition around this time.

### 3 The Studio 'Portrait' in the Hands of Blunck and Bendz

Now I will focus on a number of examples in which a painter has chosen to portray a colleague, yet has titled the painting without any mention of the sitter's identity. We might call this the studio 'portrait', as it is no ordinary portrait.

The first – and most famous – example, *En ung Kunstner betragtede en Skizze i et Speil* (*A Young Artist Regarding a Sketch in a Mirror*), dates from 1826 [fig. 2]. Here, the painter Wilhelm Bendz (1804-1832) has depicted his fellow student, Ditlev Blunck (1798-1854), at work in the studio. The sitter is not identified in the title of painting, so we must assume that the important aspect of the painting is the situation rather than the person. In any case, this type of painting, which we might term the studio 'portrait', must be considered a vehicle for the exchange of ideas between students in their early stages of their careers – and this probably explains its experimental nature.

Blunck, the only person occupying the space, is holding up a small preliminary sketch for a painting, in which a painter at the easel can be seen, in front of a large mirror, which reflects not only most of the sketch, but also Blunck's features as well. The aim of his action is to check the compositional balance of the picture. Whilst the actual figure of Blunck, who is smoking a pipe and wearing a red cap, is shown in profile, his reflection in the mirror – which is positioned diagonally to the picture plane – appears *en face*. This arrangement occupies most of the painting's left side, and in the remaining space Blunck's easel can be seen in the foreground. Its marked diagonal counterbalances the diagonal of the stretcher of the canvas that Blunck is holding in his hands, and which lights up as daylight falls on it. On the upper part of the easel, a pencil sketch on paper of a young male can be seen. It is affixed to the easel with a compass, and just above the support of the easel, a chalk drawing of two dogs struggling for possession of a rag can be seen. A dresser in front of the large, horizontally split, gilt-frame mirror occupies the middle ground of the picture. A heavily folded, red cloak with patterned edges – belonging not to Blunck but to Bendz, in fact – lies disorderly to the left, with Blunck's pipe visible just above it, while a human skull resides on the right part of

the dresser, on top of a sketchbook, some of whose pages are hanging down, revealing a pencil sketch of the very skull itself. In the foreground, a wooden box of paints, lid open, and with a palette and brushes placed inside, has been placed on an upholstered chair to the left. Next to the mirror, on its upper right side, hangs an apparently suspended bird cage with a bird inside. Behind it, the stretcher and back side of a canvas are visible, possibly leaning on a yellow wall. Lastly, the mirror reflection reveals not only Blunck's face, but also parts of the room otherwise not visible. The full framework of the easel can be seen, as can a corner of the room, which is revealed to be fitted with a cavetto moulding and gilt-edge wall panels. An iron stove towers in the room, and a plaster cast statue of a classical heroic male nude has been placed on top of it. Due to the deformation caused by the split mirror, both the top of the easel and the statue are bisected.

Let us postpone the analysis of this painting for a short while and turn to another studio 'portrait' painting shown at the 1826 exhibition, namely Ditlev Blunck's large canvas depicting battle painter Jørgen Sonne (1801-1890) in his studio [fig. 3]. In all likelihood this was the exhibition's entry no. 56, *Portrait, Studie efter Naturen* (*Portrait, Study after Nature*), which would be another artistic instance of anonymising the sitter in order to shift, or to confuse, the genre of the picture, which cannot be said to be merely a portrait. Again, we are confronted with a colleague painting a colleague, and even this canvas was bought immediately by the royal family. Unlike Bendz's disorienting work, Blunck's painting is more clearly structured. Sonne is depicted sitting – on a military drum, no less – in front of his canvas, looking concentratedly to his right side, smoking a pipe. He is positioned in a corner of a clearly defined interior, whose source of light, a window, can be registered to the very right of the canvas, although some of its light is blocked by a canvas and a Napoleon-like statuette in the aperture. Sonne's focus is directed toward an array – what we would today call an assemblage – of military tokens: an officer's uniform is being held up in a scarecrow-like fashion by a rifle, which leans on the back of a chair, and



**Figure 4** Ditlev Blunck, *The Copperplate Engraver C. E. Sonne*. 1826 ca. Oil on canvas, 69.5 × 56 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS51. Image courtesy of Statens Museum for Kunst

**Figure 5** Wilhelm Bendz, *Portrait of a Young Painter [Christian Holm]*. 1826. Oil on canvas, 59 × 50 cm. Hillerød, Frederiksborg Museum of National History. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

**Figure 6** Wilhelm Bendz, *Portrait of the Painter N. P. Holbech*. 1824 ca. Oil on canvas, 80.5 × 68.5 cm. Toreby, Fuglsang Art Museum, 12. © Fuglsang Art Museum, photography by Mikkel Grønlund

a ball of some sort supports the opulent hat. Other uniforms and a rapier are lying on the floor next to the chair, on whose upholstered seat the skull of a horse has been placed. A guitar leans against the chair, which also serves as a rack for other military accessories. A two-part bookcase can be seen leaning against the back wall, which runs parallel to the picture plane, and, apart from books, it contains various painter's tools, bottles (one clearly containing schnapps) and an anatomical plaster statuette. On top of the bookcase, Sonne has boldly left his cap on top of a human skull. On the light green wall itself, framed and unframed canvases can be seen hanging, accompanied by a palette and a trumpet. Lastly, Sonne's two dogs (of different breeds) can be seen faithfully resting underneath the painter's easel.

Yet an indirect aspect of this painting – the fact that the sketch that Blunck is holding up in front of the mirror in Bendz's composition is the sketch for this very painting of Sonne – could only have been acknowledged and appreciated at the exhibition, where the perceptive viewer had the opportunity not only to compare two outcomes of the same artistic theme, but also to make the connection between them.

To add to the complexity and productivity of the year 1826, Blunck also painted Sonne's brother, resulting in another studio 'portrait', *The Copperplate Engraver C.E. Sonne* (c. 1826, presumably exhibited at Charlottenborg without number) [fig. 4]. In this work, which I will only briefly mention here, the Dutch inspiration is especially felt, as a key work by Gerard ter Borch is featured on the wall in engraved form.

The impact of this new type of studio 'portrait', which was every bit as much a genre painting as it was a portrait of a friend or colleague, must have been felt at the momentous 1826 exhibition, to which Bendz also submitted his *Portrait af en ung Maler (Portrait of a Young Painter)*, in which the sitter is the animal and battle painter Christian Holm [fig. 5]. This work is less radical than his presentation of Blunck, and unlike the Blunck portrait, it does not introduce any symbolically vested items, yet Bendz has again chosen to use the strong diagonals of the chair, the mahl stick and the easel as compositional features. It does not, however, repeat the phenomenological clarity of the Blunck portrait, as the background in particular is a blur made up of various barely recognizable oil sketches hanging on the walls of Holm's studio. And, in contrast to the partially mirrored apparition of Blunck, who remains unaffected by the intrusion of a potential spectator, Holm is presented confidently, looking at the viewer, seemingly welcom-

ing a brief pause from his work and greeting the imaginary visitor – Bendz – whose place is substituted by the painting's spectator. The most striking feature of this studio 'portrait' is the fact that the brownish and olive-green colours on Holm's palette, which he is holding in his hand, have also been employed throughout Bendz's portrait and not merely on the two small canvases that Holm is depicted as currently working on.

A comparison of the Holm picture with Bendz's first known foray into the studio 'portrait', the c. 1824 portrait [fig. 6] of the future portrait painter Niels Peter Holbech (1804-1889), in which the statuesque Holbech lends stability to the composition, and where the diagonals are much less prominent, being minor deviations from an otherwise classically structured composition anchored in horizontal and vertical lines, reveals that Bendz's 'portraits' of friends and colleagues became increasingly experimental in just a few years. In the representation of Holbech, classical training is accentuated by Bendz's use of an *écorché* cast statue to the right as a means of visual stabilisation.

Bendz continued his exploration of the hybrid genre of the studio 'portrait' the following year, when he exhibited the large canvas *En Billedhugger, arbejdende efter den levende Model i sit Værksted (A Sculptor Working after Live Model in His Workshop)* (1827, exhibited at Charlottenborg the same year as no. 68) [fig. 7]. This work differs in several ways from the representation of Blunck: the space has been clearly delineated, the artist at work can be seen directly, the light source – a partially blinded window at the upper part of the back wall – can also be identified, and the emphasis has not been placed on an artists' rectifying measures but on his unmediated act of creation from a live model. This model is a soldier whose nude upper body is to be the centre of attention for the sculptor at work, who is working on a statuette of a classical male hero. The model's discarded uniform, bright red, lies next to him and provides the painting with a dramatic colour accent, as the rest of the tonalities are held in grey and blue. The sculptor, Christen Christensen (1806-1845), is pointing his right arm at his model with a commanding gesture that can signal either a request to change or hold a position or an act of taking measure. The soldier seems to be locked in a fixed, yet combative and defensive position, fists clenched, and his position mirrors that of the pugilist statuette in-progress. Underneath his modelling stand one can see a lap dog in a tub, biting a piece of cloth. The entire visible left wall in the painting carries shelves with plaster casts of famous sculptures, and a comparison with an early sketch for



the painting, now in the Hirschsprung Collection, reveals that both their identity and prominence within the picture space have changed.

In another important genre painting, *En Amagerpige, som vil sælge Frugt i en Malers Atelier* (A Girl from Amager Selling Fruit in an Artist's Studio, 1828, exhibited at Charlottenborg in 1828 as no. 56) [fig. 8], Albert Küchler (1803-1886), a highly popular, yet later forgotten genre painter, has shown how a peasant girl barges in on a painter who is occupied with creating an artwork, presumably a history painting, after a male model with bare torso. The girl is startled by the unexpected scene, and whilst the outstretched arm of the male model is merely a pose, the girl seems to take it as an indecent gesture. For that reason, a standing male figure puts his hands protectively around her upper body, yet the girl is disgusted rather than calmed by this move of his. Meanwhile, the

painter sits extremely relaxed in his chair, and the crowded studio exudes homeliness in general. Just as in Bendz's 'portrait' of Christensen, several pieces of sculpture add to the spectacle, and in Küchler's creation, they come very close to being mere props added for comical effect. It is a modern-day heir to jolly Dutch studio scenes such as Jan Miense Molenaer's puzzling *Painter and Models in a Studio* (1631), whose intended meaning remains a mystery (Franits 2004, 45) [fig. 9]. Other studio 'portraits' stand in relationship to this type of work - in fact, Jesper Svenningsen convincingly argues that Blunck's 'portrait' of C.E. Sonne at work must be partially modelled on Molenaer's comical scene, which Blunck might very well have seen first-handedly in Berlin, and that this affinity would have been evident to a learned audience (Svenningsen 2019, 252-3).

#### 4 The Rise of Genre Painting and Everyday Aesthetics

N.L. Høyen was not alone in noticing the rise of genre painting in Danish art. In fact, a cross-pollination of aesthetic impulses between theatre and painting seems to have played a major role, both in paving the way for the popularity of popular themes within both art forms, and in making possible the gained acceptance of more lowly and contemporary subject matter in art in general. As Lene Bøgh Rønberg explains,

That people of the day were aware of the relationship between the new story of everyday life in contemporary literature and art and the old Dutch masters can be seen for instance from the fact that the literature critics of the time used the term 'genre painting' or indeed 'Netherlandish images' in descriptions of the new realistic literature. (Rønberg 2000, 74)

Increasingly, well-known narratives from theatre found their way directly into contemporary genre paintings, as in the case of Wilhelm Marstrand's (1810-1873) *En Flyttedagsscene* (A Moving Day Scene, The Nivaagaard Collection) from 1831, which was derived from Henrik Hertz's (1797/98-1870) play *Flyttedagen* (Moving Day, 1828), in which Hertz poked fun at Copenhageners' moving frenzy. Hertz has also provided us with the best testament to the turning of the tide in Danish aesthetics around 1830. In his anonymous published *Gjenganger = Breve eller poetiske Epistler fra Paradis* (Ghost letters, or poetic epistles from Paradise, 1830), in which Hertz mimics

the style of the late Jens Baggesen in order to set matters straight in Danish literature, and which consists of several parts (epistles), one epistle is titled *Poesiens Folkestemme contra Æsthetikens Polignac* (Rimbrev fra Knud Sjællandsfar til Prof. C. Hauch) (*The People's Voice of Poetry contra the Polignac of Aesthetics* [Letter in Rhyme from Knud Sjællandsfar to Professor C. Hauch]). Here, Hertz not only critiques the poet and physicist Carsten Hauch (1790-1872), his contemporary, but also presents a poetics which seeks to allow for greater artistic licence than what the classically-oriented training had hitherto been able to accommodate. In other words, it is also a call for a more topical approach to poetry and theatre.

Already by 1820, the so-called 'mythology strife' between factions of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts had challenged the established canon of history painting, leading to greater appreciation of subject matter from Norse mythology. Yet Hertz's epistle challenges the very foundational primacy and aesthetic legitimacy of historical events and ideals, not only the relevance of a particular sort of inspiration from history. The epistle opens with a quotation from Jens Baggesen, who had himself been one part of a poet's feud (with Adam Oehlenschläger), and who had recently passed away in 1826:

Mig synes, at hans (Digterens) høie Stemme  
Bør være Tidens ædle Tolk,  
Og at hans Aand bør være hjemme,  
Hvis han vil synge for sit Folk.

It appears to me that his (the poet's) high voice  
Should be the noble translator of time,  
And that his spirit should be at home,  
If he intends to sing for his people.  
(Baggesen 1814, 19)

As Hertz's epistle is coming to an end, he writes:

Og dog Du troer, 'Poetens svage Side  
Er, at han hænger sammen med sin Tid.'

And yet you think [that] 'the weak side of the  
poet  
Is that he is connected to his time'.  
([Hertz] 1830, 107)

This is a direct paraphrase of Hauch's introduction to his poem *Hamadryaden* from the same year, 1830. Here, Hauch claims that

At Digteren hænger sammen med sin Tid er en  
anden Sag, men dette er ofte hans svage Side,  
de største Digtere stod netop tidt i Opposition  
mod Tiden.

That the poet is connected to his time is another matter, but this is often his weak side, the greatest poets were exactly often in opposition to [their] time. (Hauch 1830, xi)

Yet the most intriguing passage occurs - for our art historical undertaking, at least - midway in the epistle, where Hertz employs metaphors from the world of painting in order to explain the latest developments in theatre:

Naar skal engang den gamle Fordom endes,  
At Den, der vækker „Øieblikkets Liv"  
Ved Kunstens Tryllemidler til et Bliv,  
Hvis Træk til alle Tider vil erkjendes,  
At han i Genialitet  
Staaer under den Poet,  
Hvis Phantasie af fjerne Tider tændes;  
Naar vil man endeligt engang  
For Alvor troe paa, at en Digtters Sang  
Ei vinder Værd ved Stoffet, der behandles,  
Men ved *Behandlingsmaaden*; at ved den  
Et Liv, der letforgjængeligt gled hen,  
Til skøn og varig Existens forvandles? —  
Hvi stikler Du med Afmagts Haan paa hiint,  
Skjøndt flygtige, skitseerte,  
Dog ved poetisk Kraft og mangt et fiint  
Af Livet heldigt grebet Træk marqueeerte,  
Med Ynde malte *Genre=Malerie*,  
Der glædeligt for Kjenderen sig stiller  
I næsten alle Heibergs Vaudeviller? —

When shall we see the old prejudice  
eliminated,  
That whoever awakens '*the life of the  
moment*'  
To a permanence by the magical means  
of art,  
Whose traits will be acknowledged  
in any age,  
That he in geniality  
Stands below that poet,  
Whose imagination is lit by ancient *times*;  
When will one finally once  
Honestly believe that a poet's song  
Does not gain in value by the *subject matter*  
being treated,  
But by the *method of treatment*; that  
by that  
A life that all too perishably passed,  
Will be transformed into beautiful and  
permanent existence? —  
How can you with the spite of ineptitude  
mock this,  
Although hastily sketched,  
Yet with poetic power and many a fine  
By life fortunately seised trait  
distinguished,  
With grace painted *genre painting*,  
Which happily appears before  
the connoisseur  
In almost all of Heiberg's vaudevilles? —  
(Hertz 1830, 104-5)

Hertz's ambition is clearly stated: to elevate ordinary life so that it could become an equally worthy subject matter for the poet, with Johan Ludvig Heiberg's vaudevilles as a case in point. To this end, Hertz refers to genre painting, and his emphasis on the legitimacy of the sketchy rendering of fleeting impressions confirms a shift towards an informal (and Romantic) aesthetic to be active.

It is no wonder that Hertz initially published his polemical piece of imitative 'ghost-writing' anonymously, for his reference to Polignac, the ultra-royalist French prime minister who had just fallen from power in the July Revolution, together with his monarch, Charles X, was extremely bold. It is worth keeping in mind that no freedom of the press existed in Denmark at this time, and that outspokenness against the government could come with dire consequences. As late as in 1836, newspaper editor C.N. David was removed from his professorship at the University of Copenhagen, in spite of having been acquitted for insults against the Danish Monarchy. Only in 1849, with the new constitution, did the Danish public attain full freedom of speech.



**Figure 7** Wilhelm Bendz, *A Sculptor [Christen Christensen] Working after Live Model in his Workshop*. 1827. Oil on canvas, 190 × 158 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS62. Image courtesy of Statens Museum for Kunst



**Figure 8**

Albert Küchler, *A Girl from Amager Selling Fruit in an Artist's Studio*. 1828. Oil on canvas, 71.5 × 60.5 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS120. Image courtesy of Statens Museum for Kunst



**Figure 9**

Jan Miense Molenaer, *Painter and Models in a Studio*. 1631. Oil on canvas, 91 × 127 cm. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, 873. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons



**Figure 10** Christen Købke, *The Landscape Painter Frederik Sødring*. 1832. Oil on canvas, 42.2 x 38.9 cm. The Hirschsprung Collection, 309. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons



**Figure 11** Wilhelm Bendz, *Sketch for A Sculptor [Christen Christensen] Working after Live Model in his Workshop*, detail. 1826-27 ca. Oil on canvas, 23.8 × 21.1 cm. Copenhagen, The Hirschsprung Collection, 37. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Hertz's metaphorical use of genre painting indirectly confirms that both this type of painting and the modern vaudeville served as new and welcome outlets for public sentiment, and even for concealed criticism of the government and the monarchy. Some of Marstrand's early genre paintings from around 1830 wittily thematise both the discipline enforced on the citizens of Copenhagen by the military and the social stratification of the city, although his pictures cannot be said to concern class struggle as such (Svenningsen 2020, 17-18). A

few of his pictures, which showcase drunkenness, prostitution and extramarital affairs, go even further in terms of challenging established morality (Rønberg 2000, 119-20). Additionally, many of Marstrand's works, even the smaller ones, cleverly contain several narratives in one. In spite of its light-heartedness, even Küchler's view of the impromptu gathering of male artists and a girl in a studio confidently announces a bohemian lifestyle to the surrounding world (Larsen 2019, 108).

## 5 Romantic Reflexivity, Dualism and Transformation

Does this mean that genre painting, in its new-found form in Copenhagen around 1830, was only connected, firstly, to a novel bourgeois culture on the rise, and, secondly, to a Romantic acceptance of the ephemeral motif? If this were the case, it would be hard to explain why genre painting, even

in its academically most accomplished disguises, has fared badly in later accounts of the painting of the Danish Golden Age until recently.

The discovery of genre painting amongst the students of the Royal Academy in Copenhagen, who learned just as much from each other as they

did from their professors (Svenningsen 2015), went unacknowledged in Danish art history writing, except perhaps for the occasional admiration of Bendz and Rørbye. Although extremely successful in their own lifetimes, Blunck and Kuchler were relegated to obscurity. It would seem that even slightly acknowledging the beneficial impact of genre painting on the maturation of Danish Golden Age painting was taboo for most of the twentieth century, where only formal qualities were celebrated, and this pervasive narrative for a long time left us with a distorted view of the actual priorities and developments at the time (Rønberg 2000, 102). Recent publications, not least Charlotte Christensen's methodical research on what art was actually exhibited, bought and collected during the period, has greatly remedied these scientific blind spots (Christensen 2019).

When first Rørbye (in 1844) and then Marstrand, his successor (in 1848) became professors at the Royal Academy, it marked an overall concession that a suitable candidate for the professorship in history painting could no longer be found. Instead, the holder of the professorship had now become a genre painter (Svenningsen 2020, 40-1). Genre painting was just intimately linked, not only to the demand for democracy and to the nationalist upheaval at the time, to which Høyen was attached, but also to an increasing acceptance of informal values in art.

Yet this emphasis on the qualities that we have come to associate with the Romantic movement must not mislead us into overlooking what I find to be the most interesting aspect of the Danish Golden Age school of genre painting, namely its combination of novelty with conventionality. In fact, I will claim that the long-standing and ongoing fascination with artworks such as the studio 'portraits' stem from exactly this allegiance to tradition and innovation alike. This is why we can talk of a 'rebirth' and not merely of a 'birth'. David Jackson states that

A significant aspect of Danish art in this era will be seen to address itself to a coming-into-being, a notion of 'what should be', which may be regarded as pragmatic or idealising, depending on one's outlook. (Jackson 2021, 22)

In their contributions to the interpretation of Bendz's picture of Blunck, arguably the most important one of the studio 'portraits', Mogens Nykjær and the late Kasper Monrad almost speak with one voice when both conclude that we are confronted with a hybrid painting that draws and plays ingeniously upon conventions of both

portrait and genre painting (Monrad 1989, 143; Nykjær 1991, 82).

Until Nykjær's reassessment of Bendz's pictorial project, the generally held stance was that the picture of Blunck was compositionally messy, yet finely painted. Its supposed realism was taken at face value (Nykjær 1991, 76-7). Nykjær, however, instead labours to embed Bendz's painting into the predominantly Neoplatonist and idealist cultural climate of the time of its making. He does so by interpreting Bendz's picture in the light of the poetic output by Schack von Staffeldt. Much later, this theme was taken up again when the late Klaus P. Mortensen, Professor of Danish Literature, presented his interpretation of Bendz's oeuvre, in which parallelisation with Hertz's writings compete with Nykjær's focus on Staffeldt.

Let us, then, return to the much-discussed painting of Bendz representing Blunck in order to arrive at an analysis. First of all, it must be noted that the foreground of the painting presents us with the most foundational elements of the craft of painting. To the left, we register a box of paints, brushes, a palette, and a sketchbook, and to the right, we see the easel and even a piece of chalk. As Charlotte Christensen observes, this assemblage of professional, yet basic objects almost constitutes a phenomenological statement (Christensen 2019, 158). There is even a correspondence between the crude drawing of the dog fight - an animal occupying the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder - and the material itself, which lends itself only to preliminary sketching, not to higher artistry. Yet, as we know, almost every picture would begin with a composition roughly sketched on the canvas with chalk that would then become hidden from sight by the paint layers as the painter progressed. The chalk drawing might not be desirable as an outcome in its own right, yet makes up the backbone of the painting. Furthermore, whenever a canvas is placed on the easel, the drawing vanishes from sight - as in the finished product.

Moreover, the painting functions as an allegory of the process of artistic refinement. At the lowest level of the canvas, we see a human skull and its representation on the pages of the sketchbook. This process merely concerns the faithful rendering of an object. Immediately on top of the skull, our gaze meets the sketch that Blunck is holding, yet as both Nykjær and Mortensen maintain, this is not the actual painting, only a partial mirror image of it. Nonetheless, it marks another stage in the artistic process, and yet another, which however precedes the oil sketch, is represented by the pencil sketch of Sonne's face, which is informally 'exhibited' on the easel. Lastly, at the upper part

of the canvas, and only in reflection, we find a classical statuette to be residing – the only apparently finished artwork in the entire spectacle, although even this piece might be a downsized version of an original statue.

It is worth noting that all the artistic media involved in an academic education are present in the picture. The painting thus contains various emblems of the craftsmanship dimension of the art of painting (Blunck is also depicted in his painter's shirt), which is highlighted at the expense of the more intellectual and historical dimensions of said art. As Mortensen highlights, the presence of Blunck is shown both in profile and *en face*, two typical learning exercises in the process of mastering portraiture – but also two separate viewpoints providing access to different visual information (Mortensen 2000, 116).

Both Nykjær and Mortensen present interpretations of the Blunck 'portrait' in which the complexity and constructedness of the imaginary setting are considered tokens of a Romantic mode of reflexivity, and both writers in fact apply this interpretation to Bendz's 'portrait' of Christen Christensen as well, which they find to be the more accomplished painting of the two, since the flow of light here attains individual value and adds another layer of meaning to the composition.

That Blunck's face is mainly seen indirectly, in reflection and not in actuality, is deemed important by Mortensen, who finds visuality and visibility to be its main themes (Mortensen 2000, 115). Nykjær finds this to be an act of appearing (Nykjær 1991, 81). As spectators we are denied complete access to Blunck's features, which makes possible a kind of visual riddle, and this greatly distances the painting from other artists' portraits, such as Købke's 1832 portrait of – and birthday present to – his colleague Frederik Sødring [fig. 10], who appears in plain sight and in entirety.

As is evident not only from the artists' basic materials and utensils displayed in the foreground but also from the gestures of the depicted figure of Blunck, the genesis of the artwork is the main theme in Bendz's interior scene. According to both Nykjær and Mortensen, this theme – the ennobling transformation of matter into spirit by the intervention of the artist genius – proceeds from the material conditions, exemplified by the tools and supplies, and gradually unfolds as the viewer follows the various zig-zagging 'stations' of the composition.

One way of looking at this trajectory would be to focus on the status of completion of the various artworks assembled on the canvas. As it turns

out, not a single item can be said to be an exhibitable artwork, and almost all of them are rendered under dissatisfactory conditions: Brushes block the view to the sketch of the skull, the oil sketch is only partially seen, as is the pencil sketch of Sonne's face, which is reflected in the mirror, albeit in a distorted mode. The statuette – the only almost-perfect artwork to be seen, and the only plastic object present, apart from the skull – is woefully severed visually by the properties of the mirror. In other words, Bendz has depicted the flux of artistic creation and the various means that serve the artist in this process.

If we follow Nykjær, Bendz's reinterpretation of the studio portrait is a celebration of art's immortality and the genius's ability to transcend and transmute perishable material conditions (Nykjær 1991, 82). The mirror becomes the gateway to the eternal side of this duality, and the artist has privileged access to this realm. Mortensen is in no disagreement here, yet adds additional layers of meaning to this interpretative approach. He finds that the phenomenal world meticulously arranged in Bendz's work culminates, by acting as a network of signs, in the viewer's realisation that the artist is the source of these processes of ordering and transmutation, which mirror the morphological and evolutionary processes in nature (Mortensen 2000, 119-20). And the very point of Bendz's picture of Blunck – whose identity is not important, it could be any other inspired artist – is to make this otherwise hidden process visible and intelligible to the spectator (Mortensen 2000, 115-16). The artificiality of the arrangement of stuffs, which some early commentators all too readily dismissed, due to the then-current, and entrenched, formalist priorities, serves an aesthetic function (Røder 1905)

Jackson sums up the dualist pictorial strategy of the Danish Golden Age with the following statement, which would construe Bendz's representation of Blunck at work as the quintessential Golden Age painting (Jackson 2021, 189):

the shared aspect here is a form of romantic materialism, the deployment of scientific principles to understand Nature, but without seeking to deny its divine mystery and authorship. In the art of the Golden Age era this is observable as a classical-romantic hybrid [...] Here the artist's personal emotional experience in the creative act is not discarded, but nor is it privileged. The distinctive product [...] is a cooler or more restrained form of Romanticism, a fusion of rational detachment and romantic subjectivity.



## 6 'The Foundational Idea' of Hertz and Eckersberg

The uniting factor of the Golden Age of Danish painting, or the Eckersberg School, has very often been located in the rise of *plein air* painting and the faithful study of nature. This might be true to some extent, yet this subjective notion suffices neither to reflect the actual artistic pedagogy of Eckersberg nor to explain the aesthetic aims of the art of painting prevalent at the time.

As is confirmed by the anonymity of the painting's original title, this painting is an allegory of painting rather than a representation of Blunck. If we for a moment return to Blunck's 'portrait' of Sonne at work, as a comparison between the two connected works can be instructive, we find that his witty characterisation of the painter's task concerns material conditions only. It is almost a social commentary on the painter's lack of means, for which a compensation can be found in artistic inventiveness, and its boldness resides in its exposure of the pragmatic and irreverent paths that the painter might take in order to make his ambitions come alive – in defiance of various hardships.

Bendz's picture, on the other hand, is both much more serious and much more mysterious, although both 'portraits' share a common ground in the representation of the artist absorbed by his work. In Blunck's work, we are able to view all the assembled items and beings without obstruction, whereas in Bendz's work, what we are allowed to see is wholly dependent both upon the painter's whims and the inescapable condition of the mirror dividing the space along a vertical axis in the middle. Thus, every item has been conveyed in a frustratingly fragmented state. Even the action that necessitates the mirror might be said to contribute to this theme, for Blunck's reliance on an external device for aesthetic assurance poses a challenge to the independence and reliability of his senses. The upper half of the mirror distorts beauty, whilst the lower half aids Blunck in guaranteeing beauty, so the function of the mirror is intrinsically paradoxical.

The progression from incomplete to complete, and from part to whole, is a defining mode of Romantic thought about the world, and about our perception of it. In Bendz's creation, the guarantor of order and unity is the genius artist. This order concerns not only the perceptual access to the world but also a hidden dimension of beauty – the universal principle of the spiritual or divine – that can be made manifest by the intervention of the artist. The artist's command of making this hidden order visible is especially indicated by the placement of the single skull and its representation, the simple drawing, below and the corresponding higher and more

accomplished depictions of a human being in the middle part of the picture. The inclusion of Bendz's cloak in the picture points to him as the originator of this order, in which a potential *mise-en-abyme* situation is avoided: the aim of the painting is not to dissolve reality but rather to enhance it.

As our gaze proceeds upwards, Mortensen notes, the distance increases between the observed object and its visual representation, be it by drawing or by reflection. One might add that only the sketch, placed high up on the easel, conveys Sonne's facial features properly, allowing for verisimilitude. A plausible interpretation might read as follows: the more the artist detaches himself from the minutiae of the observed, by distancing himself both in body and in spirit, the more reality can be transformed. Mortensen couples the now-famous painting of Bendz painting Blunck to exactly this notion, which he finds to be active not only in Eckersberg's teachings but also in the philosophies of Heiberg and Hertz.

In his 1831-32 programmatic poem, *Naturen og Kunsten (Nature and Art)*, Hertz brings to attention the question of ephemerality in our surroundings. How can the contemporary artist capture the essence of nature without getting lost in the overwhelming and ceaseless sequence of fleeting moments?

Naturen gjækker os med en Uro og en Hast,  
Der hindrer os at holde Synet fast

Nature fools us with unrest and haste,  
Which prevent us from staying focussed.  
([Hertz] 1831, 110)

Os hindrer Øieblikkets Magt  
Det Virkelige Væsen at erkjende

The power of the moment keeps us from  
Grasping the essence of the real.  
([Hertz] 1832, 198)

His answer – essentially a poetics – implies that the obligation of the artist means distilling from perception an object's *Grundidee*, foundational, or rather constitutive, idea:

Her har du Kunstens Maal: Poetens Digt,  
Skulpturen, Malerkunsten, alle stræbe  
At give deres Gjenstands *Grundidee*  
Og rendse dem for Stofferne, vi see  
Forstyrrende ved dem at klæbe.

Here you have the aim of art: the poet's poem,  
Sculpture, painting, all strive  
To present the *essential idea* of their object  
And to purify them of the stuffs that we see  
Are clinging to them confusingly.  
([Hertz] 1832, 192)

As Hertz explained in his sequel to *Gjenganger = Breve*, called *Fire poetiske Epistler fra Knud Sjællandsfar til Grandskeren \*\**, *Naturforskeren \*\* og Digteren \*\** (*Four Poetic Epistles from Knud Sjællandsfar to the Scholar \*\**, *the Natural Scientist \*\* and the Poet \*\**, 1831), this happens when the spirited artist reshapes reality in order to bring to light its inner beauty:

Det er din *Sjæl*, din *Tanke*, der forener  
Som i et Middelpunct Naturens  
Phænomenener

It is your *soul*, your *thought*, that unites  
As in a middle point the phenomena of Nature.  
([Hertz] 1831, 129)

En Kunstners Kald er himmelsk, naar han  
skaber  
Den virkelige Verden om, til den  
I skjønne Former viser sig igjen

An artist's vocation is heavenly, when he  
remodels  
The real world until  
In shows itself anew. ([Hertz] 1832, 198)

Mortensen emphasises the fact that Hertz's aesthetic project does not aim to idealise reality; rather, it calls for an increased awareness and reflexivity on behalf of the artist:

*Det er Natur og Sandhed, som jeg søger  
Men Intet misforstaaet Ideal*

It is nature and truth that I seek  
But no misunderstood Ideal.  
([Hertz] 1832, 194)

The parallelism between Hertz and Bendz is only circumstantial, of course, and some readers might take issue with Mortensen's equalising of literary and painterly terms, although, as we can confirm, the traffic of descriptors between theatre and painting was lively in the 1820s. Yet, interestingly, Eckersberg, Bendz's professor, expressed

similar aesthetic sentiments. In his 1833 treatise for students, *Forsøg til en Veiledning i Anvendelsen af Perspektivlæren for unge Malere* (*Outline of an Instruction in the Application of Perspective for Young Painters*), he introduces the notion of the 'foundational image' (*Grundbilledet*):<sup>3</sup>

Ethveert Kunstværks egentlige Værd er for største Delen grundet paa Formens nøiagtige Overensstemmelse med Grundbilledet, og *Ideen* lader sig ikke alene vel forene med Gjenstandens ydre rigtige Form, men denne synes endog at være nødvendig for at hæve eller tydeliggjøre hiin.

The actual value of any artwork is mostly based on the accurate compliance of the form with its foundational image, and the *idea* not only lends itself to be well united with the outer, correct form of the object, but even seems to be necessary in order to elevate or clarify it. (Eckersberg 1833, 4)

This process of transformation is even more prominent in Bendz's 'portrait' of Christensen, the sculptor, which itself underwent several transformations from sketch [fig. 11] to finished - large - canvas. The sheer size of the work, traditionally reserved for history paintings and portraits of the elite, says something about the way in which a new generation of artists pushed traditional boundaries (Larsen 2019, 115). These changes, not least the idealisation of the previously brutish soldier who poses as Christensen's muscular model, suggest that Bendz sought to represent the artistic act of creation in several of his works, making it a recurring theme of his. If so, it would confirm another affinity with the practice of favoured Dutch seventeenth-century artists whose fame rested upon the constant reinvention of established compositions (Ho 2017).

If the 'portrait' of Blunck can be said to be absorptive and introspective in its atmosphere, the 'portrait' of Christensen is highly theatrical and triumphant. On this scale, from the absorptive to the theatrical, a famous dichotomy coined by Michael Fried in order to grasp developments in eighteenth-century French painting, Bendz registers on all, disproving that the absorptive composition - one that negates the beholder in order to confine the action to the picture plane - is the only gateway to the evolution of autonomous modern painting, as Fried would have us believe (Fried

<sup>3</sup> According to Signe Havsteen, Eckersberg's concept of *Grundbilledet* carries both a practical applicability and a philosophical implication. Havsteen 2017, 80.

1980). The sculptor is conveyed as being in command not only of his art, as showcased by his impressive collection of plaster casts of canonical sculptures, ancient and modern, but also of his model. Christensen, the artist, thus has the power of bringing to life the ideal, ennobling 'foun-

dational image', which is derived from even the basest material conditions and everyday dealings. Mortensen likens the commanding gesturing of Christensen to Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel (Mortensen 2000, 125).

## 7 The Rediscovery of Pictorial Conventionalism

Hertz and Eckersberg were not alone in promoting the idea of the need for a compositional sentiment whereby the artist could distil from life a truer reality; philosopher F.C. Sibbern (1785-1872) aimed for the same. In his 1834 tome, *Om Poesie og Konst... (On Poetry and Art...)*, he asserts that

Konstens egentlige Gjenstand overalt er det indre Ideelle, og at Konsten, for ret at hæve det frem og lade det træde ud for os, ikke har at blive staaende ved den udvortes Virkeligheds simple Gjenfremstilling.

The actual object of art is everywhere the inner ideal, and that art, in order to justly emphasise this and let it appear to us, should not stick to the simple mirror representation of outer reality. (Sibbern 1834, 260)

The path to universality of meaning follows endless artistic, highly subjective, iterations of attempting to grapple with a particular phenomenon, Sibbern finds. And this procedure is nowhere more apparent than in his lucid definition of genre painting, which he treats distinctively from landscape painting:

Det saakaldte Genre-Malerie, som giver Scener af det Virkelige daglige Menneskeliv, saavel som de Arter af Skuespillerfremstilling, som hermed have lighed, grændse nær hertil, ere dog ei saa simpelt opfattende; det Billede, de give er paa en mere selvstændig Maade sprunget frem af en mangfoldig Naturbeskuelse, uden at være taget af nogen bestemt enkelt Gjenstand.

The so-called genre painting, which produces scenes from real, daily human life, as well as the kinds of actors' representations, with which it bears likeness, border on it [landscape painting], yet are not so simplistically perceiving; the image that they provide has in a more independent way sprung from a multitudinous view of nature, without having been taken from any particular object. (Sibbern 1834, 176)

This body of thought is easily linked to mainstream Romantic ideas, in particular to the notion that even trivial experiences in nature and culture can become animated, ennobled and universal in the hands of the inspired artist. Yet we must not forget that the treatment of genre painting in mainstream accounts of Danish Golden Age painting has time and time again been synonymous with omission and rejection, which has given rise to the notion that the emergence of genre painting was an aberrant phenomenon that had nothing to do with the study of nature encouraged by Eckersberg, and which was detached from the Romantic impulses for which I have just accounted.

Just to give an example, in his 1898 monograph of the artist, Emil Hannover not only dismissed Eckersberg's production of genre pictures, *tout court*, he also considered their artificiality alien to the emerging *l'art pour l'art* mentality which he deemed progressive (Hannover 1898, 161-2, 302-4). And, writing in 1905, Sigurd Müller found Eckersberg's forays into genre painting nothing less than disgusting (Müller 1905, 26). This reception of 'the father of Danish painting' did not exactly stimulate any interest in his students' experiments with similar subject matter, nor did the fact that Høyen and his followers had stamped the likes of Blunck, who had sided with Prussia against Denmark in 1848, as un-Danish help to arouse any interest in their output, quite the contrary. Thus, genre painting was regarded as insignificant to, and perhaps even in opposition to, the Golden Age when that term began to take hold. Subsequent treatment of genre painting became one of omission rather than confrontation.

However, nothing could be farther from the truth. The small revolution in aesthetics that gave birth to Danish genre painting in the years leading up to 1830 was part and parcel of Romantic thought, as both Hertz's and Sibbern's statements corroborate. The change of dominant subject matter - from history painting to quotidian scenes from Copenhagen - was remarkable in itself, not least since Denmark was only just recovering from a series of devastating blows to the prestige and power of the country, which had be-

come relegated to a minor state in Europe, after suffering bankruptcy in 1813 and losing Norway in 1814 (Vejlby 2019, 126-7). Clearly, genre painting served several ends at one and the same time: by depicting the everyday business of the rising class, the bourgeoisie, it ennobled its moral code; by being intimately connected with contemporary theatre, it could function as a clandestine outlet for critique of society, thus bypassing government censorship; and, in the eyes of the artist, it authorised the aesthetic interest in the everyday, regardless of the class affiliation of the chosen motif, thus gradually undermining the established academic hierarchy of genres.

In spite of being more than a century removed in time, the Danish artists could look to the seventeenth-century Dutch example for inspiration, and so they did, in museums and in private collections, at home and abroad. The studio 'portrait', which has served as the main focus throughout this article, is the best example of a hybrid genre in which the experimenting artist could fuse approaches learned from the Dutch masters with the fresh teachings of Eckersberg, just as good-natured competition between students played no little role in this development. Yet even the enlightening interpretations by keen observers such as Nykjær and Mortensen downplay the importance of past conventions.

The compositional similarities between Dutch and Danish genre paintings were determined in Rønberg's pioneering study, which accompanied the 2001 exhibition *Two Golden Ages* (Statens Museum for Kunst/Rijksmuseum). As she makes clear, when picturing the lower-class social groups that were alien to the bourgeoisie, both Dutch and Danish artists of the two periods had to resort to typification (Rønberg 2000, 75).

One must not confuse genre painting with reality, and that applies to the Danish school as well. As Sibbern perceptively states, genre painting emerges from the compositional and thematic merging of various motifs and concepts, which do not even have to be recent. Throughout his life, Marstrand kept reusing and reworking impressions that he had sketched some ten or twenty years before.

The way in which the Danish artists both borrowed certain motifs from each other and cre-

ated variations on a theme, in this case the studio 'portrait', lies at the heart of what constitutes genre painting and its capacity for endless creative modification. Just to give an example, Jacob Ochtervelt's *The Sleeping Cavalier* (c. 1660-3, Manchester Art Gallery) is not only a pendant to a similar picture (*The Embracing Cavalier*, ditto) by the same artist, who has reused his models, but also draws heavily upon groupings of figures in previous paintings by Gerard ter Borch (*The Sleeping Soldier*, c. 1656-1657, Taft Museum of Art) and Frans van Mieris (*Inn Scene*, c. 1658, Mauritshuis). The most successful genre painters of the Dutch Golden Age would oscillate between innovation and replication in their work (Ho 2017).

Yet, as to the Dutch school and its pioneering representatives, this variation always took place within the bounds of established tradition. Dutch Golden Age genre painting was inherently conventional, in the sense that originality was not valued as an end in itself - in contrast to the later Romantic developments - and in the sense that almost every pictorial innovation was an outgrowth of established concepts. In contrast, the Danish painters had freer rein, aesthetically speaking, but this does not mean that their most intriguing pictures are bereft of conventionality; in fact, I will argue for the opposite - that exactly the engagement with (Dutch) pictorial conventions allowed these painters to add additional layers of meaning to their works.

If we begin with the interrelationship between the paintings - the appearance of Blunck's work-in-process in Bendz's finished work - this alone is a trait which demonstrates the same reflexivity on behalf of the painter's profession found in the best works of the Dutch Golden Age. In Samuel van Hoogstraten's *View of an Interior, or The Slippers* (c. 1658) [fig. 12], the otherwise empty series of domestic rooms end with a wall on which the left part of Gerard ter Borch's *The Paternal Admonition* (c. 1655, Rijksmuseum) can be seen. Furthermore, the hybridity made possible by genre painting itself, which readily encroaches upon several neighbouring genres, opens up avenues of exploration across academically defined genres, and this was precisely what the Danish (and North German) group of artists did in the late 1820s.



**Figure 12**  
Samuel van Hoogstraten,  
*View of an Interior, or The Slippers*.  
1658 ca. Oil on canvas, 103 × 70 cm.  
Paris, Musée du Louvre, RF 3722.  
Image courtesy of Wikimedia  
Commons



**Figure 13** Wilhelm Bendz, *Sketch for A Young Artist [Ditlev Blunck] Regarding a Sketch in a Mirror*, detail. 1828 ca. Oil on canvas, 18 × 17 cm. Private collection, formerly with Van der Meij Fine Arts, Amsterdam. Image courtesy of Van der Meij Fine Arts

**Figure 14** Thomas Wijck, *An Alchemist in his Laboratory*. 1631-1677. Oil on canvas, 75.5 × 64.2 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMSst14. Image courtesy of Statens Museum for Kunst



## 8 A 'Reality Effect', Reborn

In most of the studio 'portraits' covered in this article, this meeting of the genres plays out with an exaggerated accent on domesticity (Munk 1994, 106). The intrusion of public peddling into the semi-private artists' studio provides the main theme of Küchler's painting of the bewildered peasant girl in a crammed interior, whilst in the other works certain domestic features serve to challenge the seriousness of art (Vejlby 2019, 132). This applies to the nonchalant use of a cranium as a piece of furniture in Blunck's picture of Jørgen Sonne and to the abandoned cloak belonging to Bendz in his picture of Blunck. In both paintings, the painters' loyal animals, which would normally be in a household, not a public institution, are competing with classical artworks for our attention.

In the antecedent Dutch paintings from the mid-seventeenth century, artists' studios are commonly featured as motifs of genre pictures, even in highly jocular ways, yet the way in which domesticity has become a theme in its own right, and out of context, distances the Danish artists' studio paintings from their Dutch counterparts. Bendz, Blunck and Küchler have not only learned from their Dutch predecessors the method of using various attributes but also how to imbue them with new meanings by switching the context. Whilst the skull in the 'portrait' of Blunck is perhaps the most conventional symbol, still being a *vanitas* emblem, the encaged bird has been used in a new way. Nykjær sees it as the artist's enchained soul (Nykjær 1991, 84), but it could also be a symbol of fidelity (just like the dogs in the picture of Sonne), and in any case its use here is far removed from the Dutch context where it was commonly used to signify maidenhood, innocence or childhood (Franits 2004, 180). And this is not the only instance of a wholly transformed significance involving birds in Danish genre paintings (Rønberg 2000, 107-8). What remains, however, is that the Danish artists equally resorted to established, yet reformed symbols in order to convey a message, in spite of being less and less subservient to established conventions in painting.

Also the use of statuary in these hybrid paintings is significant. Both the inclusion, the positioning and the gesturing of the statues featured in Bendz's 'portrait' of Christensen have undergone major changes, which should at least allow for the possibility that even the inclusion and brutal severing (by the composite mirror) of the statuette in his 'portrait' of Blunck have not been left to chance. "Paintings by Bendz and Küchler question

the instructional merit of antique statuary", Leslie Anne Anderson concludes (Anderson 2011, 63).

A surviving sketch for the painting [fig. 13] (ca. 1828, private collection, formerly with Van der Meij Fine Arts) features the mirror without any reflected objects, nor disturbances, except for the main scene of Blunck and his canvas. Here, even Sonne's face is nowhere to be found (Søndergaard 2017, 53). All of these elements must have been added gradually. The finished canvas reads like a programmatic statement in defence of the art of painting and its methods (Larsen 2019, 113), and the fact that the statuette has been placed so as to invariably cut it visually in two might imply Bendz's partisanship in the *paragone*, the famous debate on the primacy of either painting or sculpture. It was common for entrants in this debate partisan to sculpture to claim that only sculpture had the capacity for combining multiple viewpoints into one. Yet various seventeenth-century paintings featuring mirrors or other reflective surfaces "demolished the traditional claim of sculptors that only a freestanding statue could present different but equivalent views of the same figure" (Hecht 1984, 126). Due to the reflexivity permeating Bendz's painting in every detail, it seems likely that it serves as his contribution to the *paragone*. In any case, the *paragone* surfaces in some Dutch Golden Age paintings, although seldom as their main theme (Franits 2004, 255).

As we have seen, transformation of inert matter into animated form runs like a thread in Bendz's oeuvre, and its presence makes possible a further interpretation. The probing attitude and absorptive attention to matters at hand of the painter embodied by Blunck closely resembles the stock figure of the alchemist that was extremely popular in seventeenth-century Dutch art. It was the hallmark of the painter Thomas Wijck, whose pictures, according to a recent book, "demonstrate not only the mastery of the painter over nature, in illusionistic depictions of texture, light, and form, but also painting's ability to make use of alchemical products — pigments, solvents, and so on — to capture the practice of alchemy itself" (Drago 2019, 219). In fact, a painting of *An Alchemist in his Laboratory* by Wijck [fig. 14] has been part of the Danish Royal Collection (now the Statens Museum for Kunst) since 1760, yet Bendz could hardly have seen it, as it was hung in Fredensborg Palace until 1965. In this picture, the main protagonist is wearing a red hat not unlike the one worn by Blunck, just as an inhabited bird cage is also included. Thus, by mimicking elements from the conventional Dutch

picture of the alchemist, Bendz achieved to carry his theme of transformation even further. Here it must also be noted that when Rønberg claims that “the anonymous figures of an earlier age were largely replaced by identifiable persons”, it does not entirely hold true for the studio ‘portrait’ type of genre painting (Rønberg 2000, 100). Blunck has been reduced to a type who is known by his attributes – the ‘fundamental image’ of a painter – in order to highlight processes common to all painting (Larsen 2019, 110).

Furthermore, as philosopher Søren Kjørup has pointed out, the way in which Blunck holds his sketch in front of the mirror would not serve himself very well but makes sense if the true aim is to reveal to the potential spectator the contents of the work-in-progress (Kjørup 1994, 122).

All of these facets converge in the most important legacy from the Dutch school of genre painting that has been actively rediscovered in the Danish pictures, namely the so-called “reality effect” – a term Wayne Franits introduces in his interpretation of Gerrit Dou’s dazzling output of domestic genre scenes (Franits 2004, 121). By this, Franits means that the typical high-end Dutch genre painting was a sophisticated collage of impressions from reality that were combined in such a way as to compose a space that could not have been the actual abode of its inhabitants, nor have housed all of these objects, in spite of the authenticity of the objects assembled therein. Both the architectural spaces, the accoutrements and many of the pieces of furniture shown in Dutch Golden Age genre paintings are either far removed from the actual interior environments of the time or out of touch with the buying power of the depicted social class (Franits 2004, 106, 186). Even when artists’ studios are shown, the interiors are either idealised or – in some cases (Adriaen van Ostade) – impoverished on purpose (Kleinert 2006).

In the paintings by Bendz, Blunck and Küchler, this ‘reality effect’ is not as pronounced as in the output of their Dutch forebears, yet it is compelling enough to sway our interpretation of them (Larsen 2019, 112). Domesticated animals which might or might not have been present in the studio have been carefully included in the compositions as emblematic beings. Other eye-catching items with a long history of signification, such as the skull, have been carefully included as well. Yet whereas paintings such as Dou’s, in spite of displaying a hyper-domesticity, can be said to be explorations of a particular lifeworld, the domestic interior, the paintings by the young Danish (and

North German) artists orchestrate confrontations between public and private worlds. This forms the very narrative of Küchler’s painting but also informs the other ones in more subtle ways. As Alena Marchwinski notes, even the ‘portrait’ of the sculptor Christensen – the least domestic picture of them all – represents an asymmetrical meeting of two separate worlds (Marchwinski 2009, 26-37). The theme of privacy was certainly active in the Dutch paintings but in a very architectural manner – as “figures cloistered in intimate spaces” – and not in any confrontational sense (Franits 2004, 162).

This ambition – which Rønberg identifies with the aesthetic category of “the interesting” (Linnet 2000) – sets the Danish paintings apart from their Dutch precursors, yet it is the ‘reality effect’ of the latter that makes possible the compositional combinatorics of the former:

[T]he ambiguous Dutch genre paintings might have constituted a source of inspiration for the Danish artists who were intrigued by ‘the interesting’ as a category. For they might have helped to show the Golden Age artists how a realistic but nevertheless ambiguous kind of picture could be used to express more complex statements. The ambiguous Dutch motifs might thus fundamentally have constituted a model that could be taken over by the Golden Age painters as it could be used to express some of the existentially coloured, part personal and part collective, experiences which during the Golden Age it became increasingly necessary to express figuratively. (Rønberg 2000, 122)

By the time of the early nineteenth century, this “reality effect” had pluralised, due to the impact of new technologies of display, into “the adjacency of disparate and dissonant reality effects”, argues Jonathan Crary, to whom “some of the unique strangeness and heterogeneity of European painting in the first half of the nineteenth century” can be explained by this impact. He writes:

During a period from roughly 1790 to around 1820, there is a remarkable and in some ways unprecedented openness on the part of the painters to questioning the traditional ground of painting itself, the literal identity and physical limits of its surface. (Crary 2009, 60)

This certainly holds true for the experiments of Bendz in the late 1820s.





**Figure 15** Julius Friedlænder, *A Fisher Boy Poses for a Painter at a Beach*. 1858. Oil on canvas, 38 × 47 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

## 9 Conclusion

That a group of Danish (and North German) painters active in the late 1820s managed not only to introduce genre painting into Danish art but also to do it with an extreme degree of historical responsiveness and reflexivity is a remarkable (re)birth of a genre, and it is thus all the more inexplicable that this artistic accomplishment has gone both unnoticed and unrewarded in Danish art history until the emergence of fresh perspectives during the last two decades or so. Any consideration of the 'Golden Age of Danish painting' worth its salt must take this turn of events into account, which is intimately linked with contemporary developments in aesthetics.

Whereas the subject matter of the – often jocular – pieces by Bendz, Blunck and Küchler was new, bold and directly derived from the everyday studio setting, what was being reborn and rein-

terpreted was not so much aesthetic and compositional issues that were endemic to Danish painting but rather compositional concepts from the Dutch Golden Age which were brought to bear upon a Danish context, and which were expanded upon in a Romantic vein. Paradoxically, at least from the possible perspective of the later avant-gardes, it could thus be done to create highly independent and innovative paintings, carrying contemporary messages, without doing away with all tradition. The tradition that was challenged, however, at the Copenhagen Academy around 1830 was the primacy assigned to history painting, and the waning of this much more solemn genre must be seen in light of similar cultural turnings of the tables, as demonstrated by the stage successes of lighter, more topical plays written by the likes of Hertz and Heiberg.

The movements that came after, such as Realism and Impressionism, ran the risk of spiritualising everyday environments altogether, by delivering painting into the hands of empiricism. Yet as the examples covered here show, Bendz, Blunck and Küchler understood the art of painting to be a moderate translation of reality, not the channelling of unmediated sensory experience – and Hertz and Sibbern would concur. For that reason, the studio 'portrait' of the 1820s should continue to fascinate us, as it reflects a threshold between early modern pictorial conventions and modern pictorial conventions still in the making.

According to several scholars, an increased idealisation left its mark on Danish painting around

1840 (Monrad 1989, 277-9; Linnet 1994). Both compositions and narratives became simpler. Nonetheless, the reflexivity expressed in the works from the late 1820s still found its way into genre painting. In Julius Friedlænder's *En fiskerdreng står model for en maler på stranden* (*A Fisher Boy Poses for a Painter at a Beach*, 1858), the painter has presented us with a typical situation from his own life as a genre painter who at this time specialised in maritime folklore [fig. 15]. Here, the studio 'portrait' has left the studio for the landscape, leading to further hybridisation of genre painting, and once more confirming its aesthetic capacity for absorbing changes within the framework of convention.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to two anonymous reviewers for a number of helpful comments and suggestions for improvement.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, L.A. (2011). "Painting Instruction: C.W. Eckersberg and Artistic Labor in the Danish Golden Age". *Athanos*, 29, 59-67. <https://journals.flvc.org/athanos/article/view/126702>.
- Baggesen, J.I. (1814). *Poetiske Epistler*. København: J.R. Thiele.
- Bramsen, H. (1994). *Nydansk kunsthistorie*. Vol. 3, *Fra rokokko til guldalder*. København: Forlaget Palle Fogtdal.
- Christensen, C. (2019). *Guldalderens billedverden*. København: Gyldendal.
- Crary, J. (2009). "Nineteenth-Century Visual Incapacities". Elkins, J. (ed.), *Visual Literacy*. New York: Routledge, 59-76. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203939574>.
- Drago, E.B. (2019). *Painted Alchemists: Early Modern Artistry and Experiment in the Work of Thomas Wijck*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048537778>.
- Eckersberg, C.W. (1833). *Forsøg til en Veiledning i Anvendelsen af Perspektivlæren for unge Malere*. København: Thiele. <http://kunstbib.dk/samlinger/sjaeldne-boeger/sjaeldne-boeger/000037095>.
- Franits, W. (2004). *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.37862/aaeportal.00040>.
- Fried, M. (1980). *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520322462>.
- Hannover, E. (1898). *Maleren C.W. Eckersberg. En Studie i dansk Kunsthistorie*. Kunstforeningen. <http://kunstbib.dk/samlinger/sjaeldne-boeger/sjaeldne-boeger/000044690>.
- Hauch, C. (1830). *Hamadryaden. Et episk og romantisk Digt*. København: C.A. Reitzel. <https://books.google.dk/books?id=y2VWAAAAAAAJ>.
- Havsteen, S. (2017). "Grundbilledets geometri: Perspektiv- og sandhedskonstruktion i tre af Eckersbergs romerske tegninger". *Periskop*, 18, 64-83. <https://tidsskrift.dk/periskop/article/view/105147>.
- Hecht, P. (1984). "The Paragone Debate: Ten Illustrations and a Comment". *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 14(2), 125-36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3780590>.
- [Hertz, H.] (1830). *Gjenganger = Breve eller poetiske Epistler fra Paradis*. København: Peter Nicolay Jørgensen. [https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/11530806239D\\_bw.pdf](https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/11530806239D_bw.pdf).
- [Hertz, H.] (1831). *Anonym Nytaarsgave for 1832. Af Forf. af Gjenganger = Brevene, Forf. af Amors Geniestreger, og Flere*. København: Schubothe. [https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/11530806239D\\_color.pdf](https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/11530806239D_color.pdf).
- [Hertz, H.] (1832). *Foraarets Nytaarsgave for 1833*. København: Schubothe. <https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/115208031972.pdf>.
- Ho, A.K. (2017). *Creating Distinctions in Dutch Genre Painting: Repetition and Invention*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048532940>.
- Høyen, N.L. [1828] (1871). "Nogle Bemærkninger over de paa Charlottenborg udstillede Konstsager". Ussing, J.L. (ed.), *Niels Laurits Høyens Skrifter*, vol. 1. København: Gyldendal, 32-83. <https://archive.org/details/nielslaurits03hy>.
- Jackson, D. (2021). *Danish Golden Age Painting*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kjørup, S. (1994). "Guldalderforskningens paradigmer – eksemplificeret på et maleri af Wilhelm Bendz". *Meddelelser fra Thorvaldsens Museum*, 114-25.
- Kleinert, K. (2006). *Atelierdarstellungen in der Niederländischen Genremalerei des 17. Jahrhunderts: Realistisches Abbild oder glaubwürdiger Schein?*. Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag.
- Larsen, P.N. (2019). "A Place of Work and Worship: The Artist in His Studio". Østergaard 2019, 104-21.
- Larsen, P.N.; Olausson, M. (2019). "World Art Between Disasters". Østergaard 2019, 14-25.
- Linnet, R. (1994). "Guldalderens billedudtryk i filosofisk optik". *Meddelelser fra Thorvaldsens Museum*, 21-35. <https://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/artikler/guldalderens-billedudtryk-i-filosofisk-optik>.
- Linnet, R. (2000). "The Garments of the Body and Soul. On 'The Interesting'". Rønberg, L.B.; Monrad, K.; Linnet, R. (eds), *Two Golden Ages: Masterpieces of Dutch and Danish Painting*. Transl. by W. Glyn Jones. Amsterdam; Copenhagen: Rijksmuseum; Statens Museum for Kunst, 142-56.
- Marchwinski, A. (2009). *Mødet med den anden: Et motiv i dansk kunst fra Wilhelm Bendz til L.A. Schou*. København: Museum Tusulanums Forlag.
- Monrad, K. (1989). *Hverdagsbilleder: Dansk Guldalder – kunstnerne og deres vilkår*. København: Christian Ejlers' Forlag.
- Mortensen, K.P. (2000). *Spejlinger: Litteratur og refleksion*. Hellerup: Forlaget Spring.
- Mortensen, K.P. (2011). *Det pittoreske øje: Et guldalderessay*. København: Gyldendal.
- Munk, J.P. (1994). "Kunstnerportræt – selvportræt: Om guldalderkunstnerens sociale og kulturelle selvforståelse, når de portrætterer sig selv og hinanden". *Meddelelser fra Thorvaldsens Museum*, 103-13. <https://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/artikler/kunstnerportraet-selvportraet>.
- Müller, S. (1905). *Nordens Billedkunst*. København: Gyldendal. <http://kunstbib.dk/samlinger/sjaeldne-boeger/sjaeldne-boeger/000059791>.
- Nykjær, M. (1991). "I kunstnerens værksted. Omkring Wilhelm Bendz". *Kundskabens billeder: Motiver i dansk kunst fra Eckersberg til Hammershøi*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 75-91.
- Østergaard, C.H. (ed.) (2019). *Danish Golden Age – World Class Art Between Disasters*. Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst.
- Røder, A. (1905). *Maleren W. Bendz*. København: Køster.

- 
- Rønberg, L.B. (2001). "Bourgeois Home Life in the Two Golden Ages – Influences and Correspondences". Rønberg, L.B.; Monrad, K.; Linnet, R. (eds), *Two Golden Ages: Masterpieces of Dutch and Danish Painting*. Transl. by W. Glyn Jones. Amsterdam; København: Rijksmuseum; Statens Museum for Kunst, 72-141.
- Sibbern, F.C. (1834). *Om Poesie og Kunst i Almindelighed, med Hensyn til alle Arter deraf, dog især Digte-, Maler-, Billedhugger- og Skuespillerkunst; eller: Foredrag over almindelig Æsthetik og Poetik. Første Deel*. København: Privately printed. [https://www.europeana.eu/da/item/368/item\\_UELOLAIU6GZL2EP2VSF5ND3UKJ6YCM7T](https://www.europeana.eu/da/item/368/item_UELOLAIU6GZL2EP2VSF5ND3UKJ6YCM7T).
- Svenningsen, J. (2015). "For morskab og for penge. Det danske friluftsmaleri i 1820'erne". *Perspective*, 1-13. <https://perspectivejournal.dk/morskab-og- penge-det-danske-friluftsmaleri-i-1820erne>.
- Svenningsen, J. (2019). "From Obscure Wit to Popular Jokes: Humour in 1820s and 1830s Painting". Østergaard 2019, 248-65.
- Svenningsen, J. (2020). "Wilhelm Marstrand – En kosmopolit fanget i billedstrømmen". Svenningsen, J; Villumsen, A.-M. (eds), *Wilhelm Marstrand: Den store fortæller*. Fuglsang; Nivå; Ribe; Viborg: Fuglsang Kunstmuseum; Nivaagaards Malerisamling; Ribe Kunstmuseum; Skovgaard Museet, 10-54. <https://perspectivejournal.dk/wilhelm-marstrand-en-kosmopolit-fanget-i-billedstroemmen>.
- Søndergaard, K.B. (2017). *Blunck: En biografisk og kulturhistorisk fortælling om en anderledes guldaldermaler og hans samtidige*. Nivå: Nivaagaards Malerisamling, 2017.
- Vejlby, A.S. (2019). "Hiding in Plain Sight: History Painting in the Golden Age". Østergaard 2019, 124-35.