

# CHRISTIAN FRIEDRICH (FRITZ) WILHELM HEINRICH SYBERG

FAABORG 1862 – PILEGÅRDEN NEAR KERTEMINDE 1939

*His friends called him “the Baron,” a friendly bit of teasing referring to the German origin of Fritz Syberg’s father. Franz Friedrich Anton Ernst (Freiherr von) Syberg, a distillery manager, was of a German aristocratic family but a man of slender means without contact with the family from which he was descended. He died in an explosion of steam at his workplace while Fritz was quite small, leaving the mother and two small children in dire poverty. Fritz lived through some extremely difficult years as a child in Faaborg. From his ninth year he worked in a tobacco factory while attending school. At the age of about thirteen he became a swineherd on a country estate, and the following year (1876) he was apprenticed as an artisan painter, at the same time attending classes in the Technical School in Faaborg, where one of his teachers was the decorative painter Peter Syrak Hansen (1833–1904).*

*In 1882, Fritz Syberg qualified as a journeyman and was given a job at Syrak Hansen’s workshop. This was at the invitation of Syrak Hansen himself, and Syberg worked for him the following three summers. During the winters he attended classes in the Technical School in Copenhagen under Holger Grønvold (1850–1923). In 1885, after a very brief period at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and a summer working as a painter in Funen, Syberg became a pupil of the artist Kristian Zahrtmann (1843–1917), who that year had become the head of Kunsternes Frie Studieskoler. He remained a pupil of Zahrtmann until 1891. In 1889, Fritz Syberg also received instruction in woodcut technique.*

*The contact with Peter Syrak Hansen and his family in Mesterhuset in Faaborg was of crucial importance to the young Syberg. The journeymen were treated as members of the family, where art and music were a natural part of everyday life. Syrak Hansen himself had been trained as a decorative painter at the Academy in Copenhagen, and his sons Peter (1868–1928) and Syrak (1866–1961), and his daughters Marie and Anna, became Syberg’s friends for life. In 1894, Syberg married Anna, who developed into a distinctive and talented painter. After her tragic death in 1914, when he was left with seven children, Fritz married her elder sister, Marie.*

*Syrak and Peter also became pupils in Zahrtmanns Skole, where together with Fritz they mixed with like-minded young artists, including a merchant’s son from Kerteminde by the name of Johannes Larsen (1867–1961), who soon became a close friend and a valued guest in Mesterhuset. It was this inspiring environment that led to the formation of the group of artists known as Fynboerne, the Funen Artists.*

*Fritz Syberg showed paintings in the committee-approved Charlottenborg exhibitions from 1887 to 1892. From 1893 he was a member of Den frie Udstilling, though interrupted by a year’s participation in the rebellious artists’ association Grønningen, 1916–17. His motifs were unadorned, penetrating scenes of everyday life from the area around Faaborg. Among the most important are Dødsfaldet (The Death), 1890–92 (Statens Museum for Kunst), Foråret (Spring), 1891–1893 (Den Hirschsprungeske Samling), and*

his main work *Aftenleg i Svanninge Bakker* (Evening Games in the Svanninge Hills), 1900 (Faaborg Museum). In addition, he painted and drew portraits—including many of his wife Anna and their rapidly increasing family—as well as marines and, in particular, landscapes. Like Johannes Larsen, Fritz Syberg produced several works of illustrations, the best-known and probably most moving of which are the eighteen pen drawings for Hans Christian Andersen's *The Story of a Mother*, which he made between 1895 and 1898 (*The Royal Collection of Prints and Drawings*, Statens Museum for Kunst).

Fritz Syberg took a number of journeys abroad. He went to Berlin and Flensburg with Anna in 1894 in the vain hope of being able to earn a living as an artisan painter. In 1899 he went to Småland in Sweden with his family to visit Johannes Larsen and his wife Alhed Larsen (1872–1927), who was also an artist. In 1902 he was again in Germany, and 1905 saw him in Florence along with another Funen artist, the painter Jens Birkholm (1869–1915). Three years later, he was in Amsterdam. Here he was joined by Anna, after which the couple went on to Paris, visiting the Louvre many times. In the Durand-Ruel salon on the rue Lafitte, they saw canvases by Monet (1840–1926), Renoir (1841–1919), Manet (1832–1883), Sisley (1839–1899), Degas (1834–1917), and Cézanne (1839–1906).

In 1910, the patron of the Funen artists, tinned-goods manufacturer Mads Rasmussen (1856–1916), established a museum for the painters in Faaborg. Five years later the present museum, financed by Mads Rasmussen and designed by the architect Carl Petersen (1874–1923), was opened. Rasmussen bought the works for his collection from the still unacknowledged artists and thereby ensured help for them and even enabled them to make extended visits abroad. In the case of the Syberg family, this led to a period of three years at Pisa in Italy from 1910 to 1913.

Apart from the time spent in Pisa, which resulted in a series of beautiful watercolors, Fritz Syberg painted almost exclusively in Funen. During their early years, he and Anna lived in the little town of Svanninge near Faaborg, after which “Pilegården” near Kerteminde became his home for the rest of his life. Much of both Anna's and Fritz Syberg's work also derives from the family's regular summer visits to Fyns Hoved at the top of the peninsula north of Kerteminde.

“The Peasant Painters” was the name accorded to the Funen artists as the result of a number of critical and derogatory articles in 1907 in the daily newspaper *Politiken*, written partly by the husband-and-wife artists Agnes and Harald Slott-Møller. The art historian Karl Madsen (1855–1938) defended the Funen painters, as did the author and poet Johannes V. Jensen (1873–1950), who on that occasion became personally acquainted with Peter Hansen and became a friend and champion of the entire group of artists.

Fritz Syberg was awarded various grants by the Academy during his first difficult years. As the years went by, he also received many important marks of distinction, including the Thorvaldsen Medal in 1927. In 1902–1903 Fritz Syberg was a teacher in the school of painting for women and from 1910–1937 he was a member of the board of management of Faaborg Museum.

S.L.

LITERATURE: Poul Uttenreitter, *Fritz Syberg*, Copenhagen 1935; Herman Madsen, *Fritz Syberg*, 1937; Bente Scavenius, *Historien om en moder*, Faaborg Museum 1985, pp. 40–49; Vera Rasmussen, *Fritz Syberg*, Faaborg Museum 1992; Karin Meisl, *Bondemaler og baron*, 1992; Vera Rasmussen in *Weilbach*, vol. 8, Copenhagen 1998; Erland Porsmose, *Fritz Syberg, kunsten, natauren, kærligheden*, Copenhagen 2010.