

PETER CHRISTIAN THAMSEN SKOVGAARD

HAMMERSHUS NEAR RINGSTED 1817 – COPENHAGEN 1875

P. C. Skovgaard was born to parents living in modest circumstances on the copyhold farm of Hammershus near Ringsted in Zealand. His father subsequently took over another farm, though he soon had to give it up, after which the family moved to Vejby near Tisvilde, where Skovgaard's mother managed a small grocer's shop and his father sought work in Copenhagen. The boy was thus brought up solely by his mother, who herself had some artistic gifts. As a young woman she had even received a little instruction from the flower painter C. D. Fritzsch (1765–1841), J. L. Jensen's first teacher.

Skovgaard was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 1831 where he, along with Dankvart Dreyer (1816–1852) and J. Th. Lundbye, became pupils of Professor J. L. Lund (1777–1867). The three artists became lifelong friends. While studying in the Academy, Skovgaard was also apprenticed as an artisan painter. He became a journeyman in 1835 and qualified in the Academy in 1845. Skovgaard won no medals, but from 1836 to 1875 he exhibited at Charlottenborg almost every year.

The commitment of N. L. Høyen (1798–1870) and the pastor and poet N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) to causes Nordic and national were of great importance to the young landscape artists. Skovgaard moreover came into contact with many of the leading national liberal politicians, including Orla Lehmann (1810–1870), who commissioned paintings from him and backed him throughout his life.

In 1851 P. C. Skovgaard married Georgia Marie Louise Schouw, the daughter of one of the well-known figures of the day, botanist and politician Joachim Frederik (Friedrich) Schouw (1789–1852). Three years later the couple went to Italy, Skovgaard's first journey abroad. Some years after that he also visited London and Paris, and in 1869 he was again in Italy.

In 1860 Skovgaard was made a titular professor in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts but otherwise never made any effort to follow an academic career, preferring his personal freedom. Together with especially J. Th. Lundbye and Dankvart Dreyer, he is considered one of the main creators of Romantic Danish landscape painting. But while Lundbye—and to a certain extent also Dreyer—preferred painting open landscapes, Skovgaard's pictures evolved more and more into grandiose, atmospheric depictions of forests, which he portrayed as great columned halls in a solemn and lofty universe.

The aim of the new national painting was to emphasize the history of Denmark and praise the beauties of the countryside. So it was of great importance to the painters to seek out features in the landscape that possessed peculiarly Danish qualities that could awaken recognition and pride on the part of the Danish viewer. To Lund's pupils there was nothing wrong in piecing together motifs selected from various localities in order to achieve this "typical" quality. However, such an approach ran completely counter to the convictions of J. L. Lund's colleague, Professor Eckersberg. It is said that

Skovgaard once showed one of his landscapes to Eckersberg, who then asked him what area it represented. When Skovgaard replied that his painting was a free composition, he received the following testy reply: "Well, there we are. You people want to do things better than God can do them; if you could only do them as well, you would have reason to be happy."

S.L.

LITERATURE: Henrik Bramsen, *Malerier af P. C. Skovgaard*, Copenhagen 1938; H.G. Skovgaard, *P. C. Skovgaard udstilling i 150 året for kunstnerens fødsel, Om P. C. Skovgaards landskaber*, Skovgaard Museum, Viborg, 1967, pp. 7–14; Henrik Bramsen in *Dansk Biografisk Leksikon*, vol. 13, Copenhagen 1983; Nina Dahlmann Olsen in *Weilbach*, vol. 7, 1998.