Educating the People

The Museum of National History at Frederiksborg

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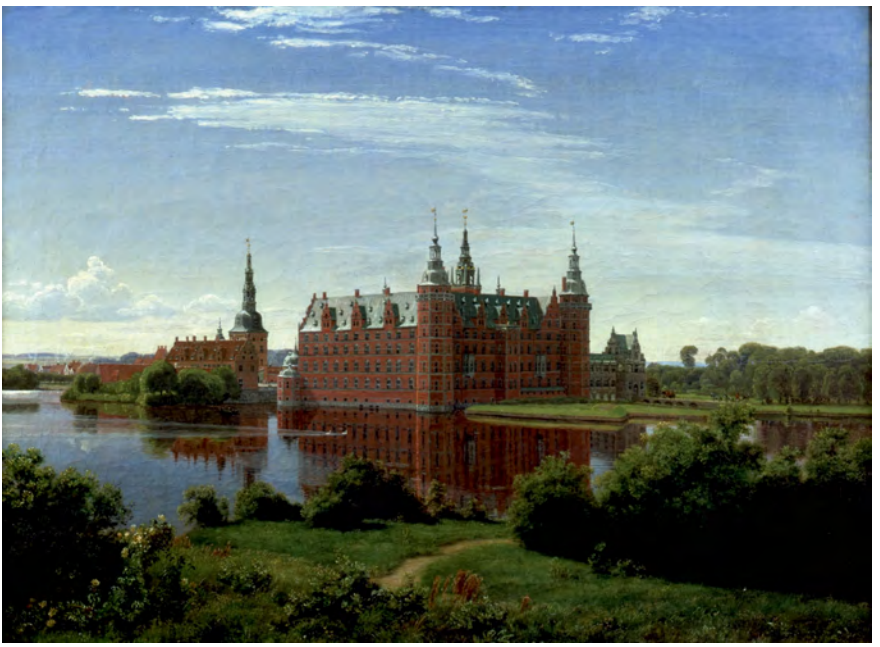
Det Nationalhistoriske Museum (The Museum of National History) in Denmark was founded in 1878. It is located at Frederiksborg Castle, a former royal residence in the town of Hillerød, about 40 kilometres north of Copenhagen (fig. 1).

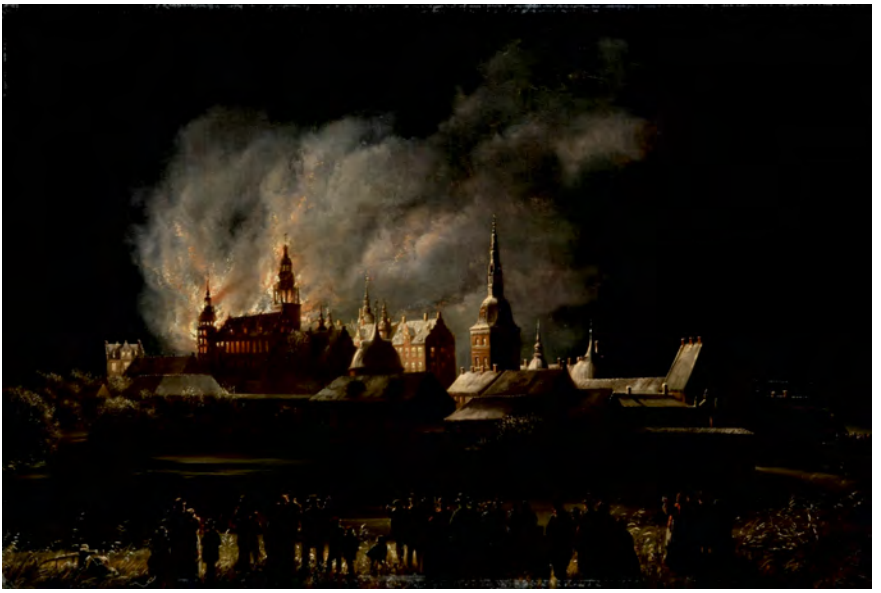
Fig. 1: P. C. Skovgaard, Frederiksborg Castle, 1841, oil on canvas, 44 x 60 cm.



In December 1859, a fire had destroyed much of the interior of the castle. A huge treasure of tapestries, furniture, paintings, and other irreplaceable cultural relics was lost, an event that was considered a national catastrophe. Spontaneous nationwide collections

and contributions from the king and the parliament facilitated the rebuilding of the castle (fig. 2). The restoration of Frederiksborg was a national issue, and local committees were formed around the country to support the work.[1]

Fig. 2: Ferdinand Richardt, The Fire of Frederiksborg in 1859, 1859, oil on canvas, 76,5 x 112,5 cm.



These widespread reactions to the fire reflect the strong national sentiments that were linked to Frederiksborg. The castle had been built by Christian IV (r. 1588–1648), king of Denmark and Norway; during this heyday of Danish history, the country's territory was relatively large and included parts of what are today Sweden and Germany. The castle would go on to play an important role in the history of the Danish nation due to its magnificence, which also allowed it to host important events and ceremonies. For instance, the palatial chapel was the venue for the coronation (or so-called anointment) of the absolute monarch from 1671 through 1840, with only one exception (fig. 3).[2]

The monument and its character as a site of memory, or *lieu de mémoire*, made it an important symbol during the national awakening of the early nineteenth century. Accordingly, Frederiksborg became a favourite subject for Danish painters and writers. The castle's status as a locus of memory was further underlined by the fact that it housed the royal collection of portraits depicting important men and women from Danish history. This rendered it a kind of national pantheon. Two-thirds of this collection were destroyed during the fire.[3]

1 Eller 1964.

2 Eller 1976. The 1767 ceremony whereby Christian VII was anointed took place at Christiansborg.

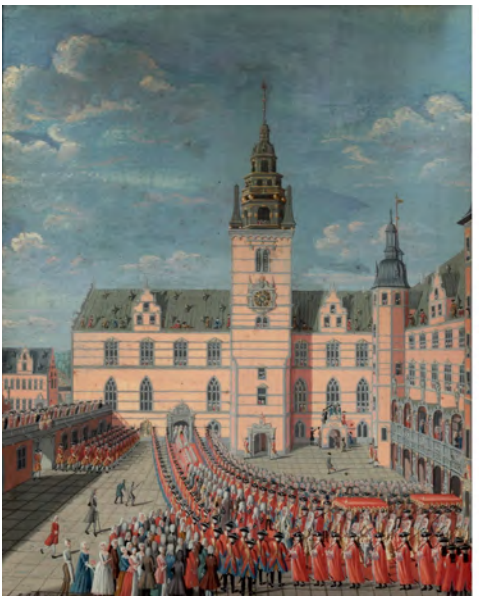
3 Heiberg 1997.

Frederiksborg's importance for the Danish nation manifested in the united efforts to reconstruct the castle during the 1860s and 1870s. The chapel, which had only suffered minor destruction, was reinitiated in 1864. Given its function as a parish church, there was no question that the chapel would be restored, whereas for other parts of the complex the situation was not so clear. When outside Copenhagen, the new king, Christian IX (r. 1863–1906), preferred to use Fredensborg, another palace in north Zealand, as his residence. In the end, Frederiksborg was turned into the Museum of National History, but no one had put forward this idea publicly until 1877.[4]

The person who came to play the decisive role in this was the founder of the Carlsberg breweries, Jacob Christian Jacobsen (1811–1887). He made important donations from the beginning of the reconstruction and throughout the entire transformation of the site. When the chapel was reinitiated, Jacobsen organized a competition soliciting ideas about how to best reconstruct the king's oratory: this small but extremely extravagant and intricate room had, before the fire, been one of the most well-preserved spaces from the time of Christian IV, and its appearance was documented through paintings and descriptions.

The next projects proceeded at a very large scale. In 1874, the restoration of the Great Hall began, and two years later Jacobsen set in motion the recreation of 'the Rose', another of Christian IV's splendid halls. Through such undertakings and the corresponding financial support, Jacobsen became a driving force in the restoration of Frederiksborg Castle. In 1877, he suggested that a museum of national history be established at the site.

Fig. 3 (left): Johan Jacob Bruun, The Procession in the Inner Courtyard for the Coronation of Christian VI in 1731, ca. 1737, gouache, 24,3 x 20,1 cm; Fig. 4 (right): August Jerndorff, Brewer Jacob Christian Jacobsen, 1886, oil on canvas, 165 x 110 cm.



4 Bligaard 2008.

To understand the background for this initiative, it is necessary to dwell a little on Jacobsen and his time. Jacobsen was an entrepreneur with great confidence in the ability of science to improve all aspects of society. In his youth, at the Polytechnic, he had attended the lectures of the famous Danish physicist H. C. Ørsted. He trained at his father's craft brewery in Copenhagen, which he later inherited, and constantly strove to make improvements in beer production, including by implementing new scientific findings. In 1847, he founded the Carlsberg brewery, producing beer with innovative, modern techniques. Carlsberg soon became a leading brewery in Denmark and made Jacobsen extremely wealthy.

Jacobsen's travels in Europe proved important to his work in improving brewing technologies. Here, he also enhanced his skills in foreign languages and his knowledge about culture and history. Among the historical sites and museums Jacobsen visited, the *Musée national de Versailles* (Versailles Museum; today the *Musée de l´Histoire de France* / Museum of French History), established by King Louis-Philippe (r. 1830–1848) in 1837, and the *Statens porträttsamling* (Swedish Portrait Gallery), at Gripsholm Castle near Stockholm, served as great sources of inspiration for his later vision of a museum at Frederiksborg. In both cases, former royal residences had been transformed into museums where the public could be educated in the history of their nation.[5]

Broadly speaking, Jacobsen was very engaged in society. He was politically active in the liberal movement, which in 1848 succeeded in pressuring the king to accept a new constitution, transferring the Danish government from absolutism to democracy. Jacobsen was elected to the Copenhagen City Council and to the Danish parliament. He was also very concerned with the national question, not least the problems in the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, home to a mixed Danish- and German-speaking population. In 1864, Denmark lost the duchies to Prussia and Austria, thus becoming a very small and vulnerable state.

Jacobsen's spirit of public service manifested in his wish to give some of his wealth back to the society, and he remains one of the most important Danish philanthropists to date. In 1876, he created the Carlsberg Foundation with the purpose of supporting science; as an independent branch of this organization, in 1878 he founded the Museum of National History at Frederiksborg, and later he bequeathed his brewery to the foundation. Though Jacobsen's work as a patron took many forms, the Carlsberg Foundation and the museum at Frederiksborg were probably the most impactful, and they are still in operation today (fig. 4).[6]

When, in 1877, the brewer expressed his intentions for the museum to the restoration committee, he used the following words:

> Association with the relics of the past wakens and sharpens the historical sense of the people and strengthens its consciousness of having contributed to the development of culture in general, and thus its awareness of the tasks laid upon present and future

5 Skougaard and Lyngby 2011.

6 Glamann 1991.

> generations by this inheritance from their forefathers. Such an awareness cannot fail to strengthen the pride and moral courage so essential to a small nation such as ours.[7]

The museum was meant to educate visitors in their cultural and national history. In doing so, it sought to strengthen the public's sense of a shared past and destiny as well as of belonging to a common nation in the present. The larger purpose of this was to commit the individual to engage in society.

Jacobsen offered to subsidize the refurbishment of the castle entailed in converting it into a museum. This philanthropic gift was accepted by the king and the state, with the caveat that the refurbished site would suitably accommodate its continued use for certain royal festivities; in addition, the Danish state should have no financial commitment to the museum, whereby it was agreed that it would be designated an autonomous branch of the Carlsberg Foundation.

The museum was intended to constitute a stimulating and comprehensive presentation of Danish history from the introduction of Christianity to the present day. This evocative and coherent account was to be achieved through the display of history paintings of crucial events as well as portraits of famous men and women. As conceptualized by Jacobsen, these works should be exhibited in period rooms alongside furniture and crafts. In this way, the museum was to be a continuation and expansion of the royal portrait collection that had been largely destroyed in the aforementioned fire. Works of portraiture were gathered for the new museum, and when it was not possible to acquire some of the famous originals, copies were made. Historical memorials as funeral monuments and runestones were also cast and exhibited.

Jacobsen compiled a list of the more than 200 episodes in Danish history that he found most important. Artists were then commissioned to execute paintings, with great emphasis on making the scenes as historically correct as possible; at the same time, the history paintings were meant to be engaging, such that they would appeal both to visitors familiar with national history as well as those with lesser knowledge.[8]

Of course, among contemporary historians it became sport to criticize and find errors in the paintings – a tendency that increased around the year 1900 – and as a result of this reception, new commissions of history paintings were abandoned. Jacobsen's larger plan for the paintings was never realized, but important works with great impact, including afterlives as illustrations in books, were executed. Exemplifying this is a frieze of paintings illustrating the Danish conquest and rule of England in the early eleventh century, executed by the artist Lorenz Frølich between 1883 and 1886. In a similar spirit, Jacobsen also commissioned a 1:1 photographic copy of the entire Bayeux Tapestry, on account of the fact that the Normans who conquered England in 1066 were descendants of Danish and Norwegian Vikings.

One of the most famous of the museum's history paintings is Otto Bache's account of the last Danish regicide in 1286 (executed 1882). Bache depicts the conspirators riding away from the burning Finderup barn, where King Erik V (r. 1259–1286) lay murdered.

7 Jacobsen 1894, 27.

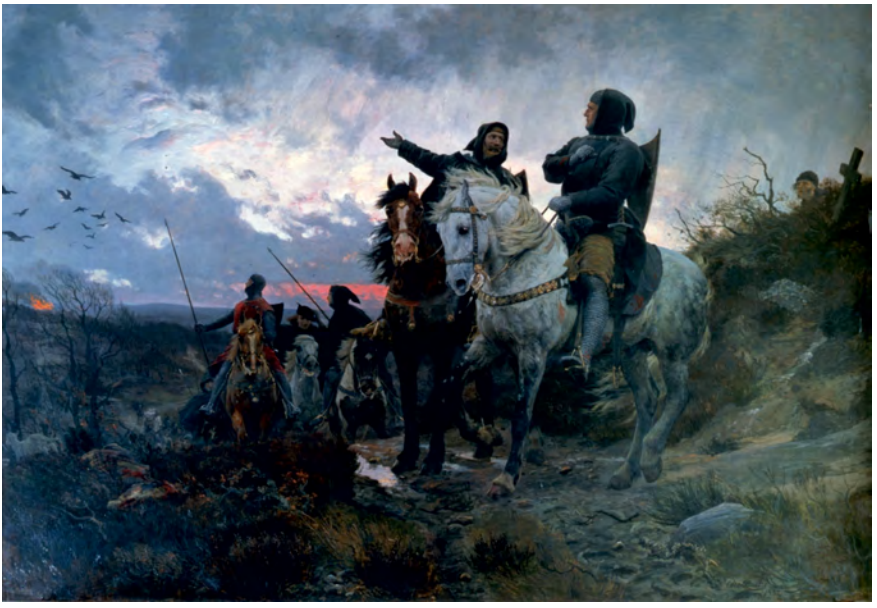
8 Eller 1989.

In their bloodstained clothes, they halt their horses at the top of a hill to look back towards the scene of the murder. At far right, a frightened peasant crouches trembling in the heather beside a toppled cross. The picture's sinister atmosphere indicates that strife among the leading classes, in this case resulting in the assassination of a king, often has disastrous implications for the common man, who can also be seen as representing the nation (fig. 5).[9]

Bache also painted a scene of the 1596 coronation of Christian IV (executed 1887). He did his utmost to make the depiction as historically correct as possible by using as sources contemporary prints of the event as well as portraits of the most important participants. However, the artist has also reflected on contemporaries here. Jacobsen's own face can be seen in one of the windows of the house, and that of his wife appears in the other window. The history painting opens up connections between past and present by positioning not only Jacobsen but also the viewer as witnesses to the historical event (fig. 6).

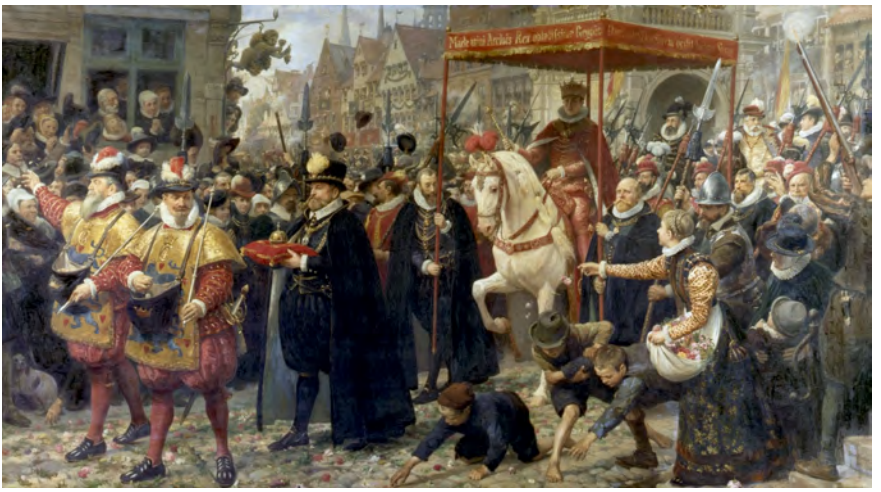
Some of the galleries in the museum featured decorated ceilings and other elements that corresponded to the topic and period of the artworks they were intended to house, such that the space became a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For example, room 31 has a ceiling showing signs of the zodiac. The room was appointed in this way to reflect the period around the year 1600 – when the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe had carried out his research – from which the other artworks in the room dated.

Fig. 5: Otto Bache, The Conspirators Riding Away from Finderup Barn after the Murder of King Erik V in 1286, 1882, oil on canvas, 254 x 377 cm.



9 Lopdrup 2011.

Fig. 6: Otto Bache, The Procession after King Christian IV's Coronation in 1596, 1887, oil on canvas, 293 x 543 cm.



The overall concept of the museum was that the visitor should experience a journey through the important events of Danish history, walking through interiors where shifts in style reflected shifts in the country's cultural history. In this way, the organization of the Museum of National History at Frederiksborg ran contrary to the classic museum's systematic, typological presentations of collection objects and emphasis on material authenticity. The latter modes of display were organized after scientific principles and oriented towards visitors with special preconditions and required an effort on the part of visitors to gain full benefit and understanding. Jacobsen, however, opted for the principles he had witnessed at Versailles, principles that were advanced for their time and still quite controversial: in order to address many people with museum exhibitions, it was necessary to appeal both to educated visitors and to the more ordinary men and women. Furthermore, to achieve this, what was needed was a national-cultural formula that could be immediately understood by anyone, regardless of education level, age, and other variables. The design of the museum's rooms aimed to elicit visitors' empathy with the past and thereby with the nation.

The museum experience was like a theatrical performance: every room one entered represented a new scene, illustrated a new set, a new period of the nation's history, with the most important persons and events, in a way that was comprehensible yet engaging. The museum's emphasis on accessibility and appeal positioned the visitor as a coplayer in the experience. In this context, visual 'authenticity' was a top priority, featuring rooms that were composed of portraits of key characters, history paintings dramatizing important events, furniture and other objects from the era, as well as ceiling paintings and other decoration that underscored the atmosphere of, or something else essential about, the historical period. Everything was organized to give visitors the sense that they were at the centre of the history of the nation.[10]

10 Skougaard 2003.

This type of presentation has been maintained through the present. It remains compelling as a medium for storytelling about past events – and may even be more impactful for today's visitors, who come to the museum with more limited education and knowledge regarding history.

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