



## NATIONALMUSEET

### The Danish Approach

This is an example of Danish architecture - the University of Athens, built by the Dane, Theophilus Hansen - and this is what Danish sculpture looks like, made by Bertel Thorvaldsen in 1807.

Few nations have been so enamoured of classicism as the Danes. And this goes for all branches of the arts. A Danish painter who visited Greece in the 1880'ies describes Greek art as the hight of perfection, "even Rafael cannot bear comparison". His praise includes the use of words such as "artless, innocent and natural" - just what Danish art of the <sup>19th</sup> ~~past~~ century had been. Simplicity, harmony and artlessness are, in fact, qualities that still are highly valued within Danish design and architecture ~~today~~. But in the visual arts things are ~~different~~ somehow more complex.

Through the work of Thorvaldsen the classical world was made accessible and, so to speak, brought home to roost. His achievement has weighed heavily on subsequent generations and still provokes contradictory feelings and research around the difinitions of copy and imitation, paraphrase and quotation, free interpretation and ironical comment.

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In the 1860'ies an effort was made, by art-historians, to turn the interest of Danish artists away from the promised land of Antiquity and to make them focus on the Danish countryside and population. And a most radical attack on the emotional ties to the Old World was made by Asger Jorn and his Cobra-friends in the 1940'ies. They passionately rejected the classical inheritance. In alliance with historians and archaeologists they set out to explore the artistic relics of the North. They conjured up a glorious world in the Scandinavian fimbul-winter: Thor, Odin, Frej and Loke, sacred moors, rock carvings, runic stones, magic and archetype-symbols. They made their point during the German Occupation in World War II and followed it up with foreign colleagues in the post war years. But ~~then~~<sup>to</sup> the generation of the 60'ies the romantic concept of the North and its pre-history was less attractive. And up cropped again the so-called common European past, which is a truth with . . . modifications.



In the late 1960'ies the revived interest in the individual manifested itself by an interest in the art that takes man as its theme. Suddenly one could use the Antique. Both its form and its contense. One might call it classicism revisited, re-used or re-cycled. Compared to the Neo-classicism of a. 1800 with its ethic -aesthetic cult of beauty, our age is less interested in morality, less chaste, more direct and raw. "What matters to me", so writes a Danish artist, "is to place Antiquity in the middle of our own era and see what use we can make of it. Ruins and fragments are part of our existence. Also one's knowledge of the past, as of the surrounding world at large, is fragmentary. Reality is pieced together of fragments: torso, arms, legs and head. In the 19th century one restored and completed the remains from Antiquity, to-day one peals off the additions - like one has done in the case of Thorvaldsen's reconstruction of the sculptures from the temple of Aegina, now at Munich. Fragments are considered more true than a reconstructed whole. Fragments are part of modern life... they are being fabricated. The Antique is the raw material, a motif and a style"... such is the credo of Richard Winther, artist and professor, and a vital person in the arts of to-day.

\* Winther has photographed the statues by Thorvaldsen and made them look like people on a beach, and he has made pictures of himself, his wife, and friends posing as sculpture. Recently he staged an exhibition of casts

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\* from human models in the poses of famous works by Greek  
sculptors - and that at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek which  
\* houses our finest collection of sculpture from the  
Antique. He is a master at the art of breaking barriers  
and tampering with taboos. His permanent dialogue with  
\* the past puts into relief the problems of style and the  
definition of reality, then and now. The past - or  
what is left of it - is used to illustrate existential  
problems. And like many Danes he takes a humorous view  
of things. Not bright and witty - like the French - but  
combined with a mild sort of irony which can be used as  
a shield against the outside world or turned against one-  
self.

Jørgen Haugen Sørensen is a sculptor who lives and  
works at Pietrasanta in Italy where some of our best  
sculptors gather. His workmanship is superb and his  
\* way of combining bronze and coloured marble - smooth  
to the touch, erotic and pliable - is "anti-classical",  
yet related to the technique of the Romans.

\* When asked to decorate a College he felt provoked  
by the anonymous classical(?) functionalism of the  
\* building. With enigmatic, half-mythological shapes  
- a pile of pink marble and an un-civil tongue put out  
to dry on the wall - which might be considered as  
caricatures of classical sculpture, he made an ironi-  
cal comment on the architecture.

\* In his more recent sculpture, however, there are  
more straight forward references to a cyclopean era.



\* His figures of yellow travertine have an archaic matter  
-of-fact strength which to my way of feeling is far closer  
+ to Antiquity than this modern work by an academicist .

\* Bjørn Nørgård's attitude to the past is that of  
\* a boy let loose in a sweet-shop. He takes a bite here and  
nibbles a little there, finally to run off with a whole  
\* box of goodies - not unlike Ernst Lohse, the Danish archi-  
tect whose fantasies were much in evidence in the "Images  
imaginaires"-exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. Not that  
Nørgård is not serious - but he likes to disguise himself  
as a jester. In the 60'ies he worked with Beuys and in  
1970 his ritual killing of a horse and preserving the  
pieces in jam-jars created an uproar which proves that  
rituals still appeal to common emotions.

Since 1974 he has increasingly concentrated on sculp-  
ture. Departing from specific historical monuments he  
has constructed many ambiguous and humorous paraphrases  
\* like the Tomb of King Christian III with Royal Danish china,  
eggcup and rolls, a dead herring in the place of the cru-  
cifix and Michelangelo's slave with the red flag. The  
sublime and the blasphemous, history and every-day. He  
challenges the past and attempts a fusion with the pre-  
\* sent. In "Thorvaldsen's workshop", arranged at the Thor-  
valdsen Museum he sabotages <sup>the</sup> high seriousness of the works  
\* of the neo-classical master. As a comment to the situation  
of to-day he represents mutilated humanity in the shape  
of the Belvedere-torso on the temple of Nike replacing  
\* the statue of Victory. A rather more whimsical cave and

x temple are part of a large decoration for a library which  
 \* includes a pyramid of steel and glass and a wooden tower  
 \* basic geometrical shapes  
 /squeezed together in a small courtyard - and on the roof,  
 4 ~~being~~ triumphant and free, two bronze-casts of the  
 artist and his wife, like acroteria.

In Nørgård's art Antiquity is paraphrased, quoted  
 and imitated at the service of his <sup>narrative</sup> own creation and  
 \* culminating in "The Human Wall" - now placed in front of  
 the Royal Museum of Copenhagen.

Totally different is the attitude of Søren Georg  
 Jensen who is indebted to the ancient world of measure,  
 \* balance and order. A sort of capital on a slender stem  
 \* or a block which might have come from some amphitheatre  
 carved in travertine at the Danish Academy in Rome. This  
 is really serious and done with talent and feeling for  
 the material, yet may be characterised in the words  
 used by the painter, Per Kirkeby, about formal classicism:  
 "It was, and still is, a very special blend of power and  
 boredom".

Kirkeby has been teaching in Germany for some years  
 and showed at the Biennale in 1980. To him classicism,  
 in the positive sense, is not a stylistic concept, but  
 what he calls "a biographical possibility in all artists  
 at all times. It is present and past, matter and thought,  
 made visible and a knowledge of infinite disorder which  
 is at its weakest when it appears most orderly."



[REDACTED]

A very similar view expressed with obsessive artistic power runs through the production of one of our prime draughtsmen, Palle Nielsen. All his working life he has struggled with the deamons of doubt, fear, introspection and death. He has given classical names to several of his haunting series of prints and woodcuts and with reference to Greek tragedies he leaves us little hope for the future. Danes of to-day are disbelievers or non-believers in all senses of the word. It is our strength and our greatest shortcoming. [REDACTED]

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~~Today~~ After the tabula rasa of Cobra and the artistic anarki of the 60'ies the artists have been set free. Their sources of inspiration are manifold. Their inclination towards the Classical world is a personal choise - and so much the more significant,

Gertrud Købke Sutton