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Peder Balke's Visions of the Far North

Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

As the Sinebrychoff Art Museum, Helsinki, presents the Norwegian painter of the Arctic Peder Balke for the first time to Finnish audiences, Gill Crabbe meets the show's co-curator Knut Ljøgdøt to discuss his collaboration with those involved in the exhibition

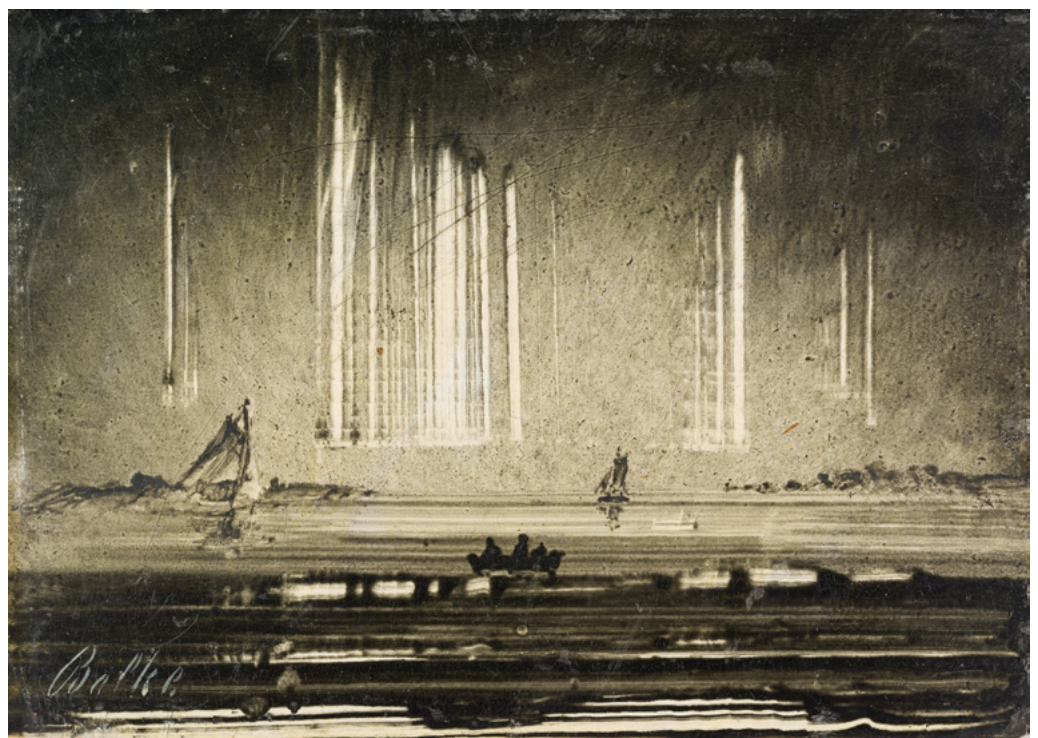
When we think of the Arctic explorers of old we might imagine elaborate maps of the Ultima Thule adorned with images of writhing sea monsters, puff-cheeked deities of gale-force winds, or square-rigged ships foundering on rocks. The extreme climate in the Far North lends itself to sublime depictions of turbulent storms, dramatic mountainscapes and awe-inspiring glaciers carving out deep valleys. Yet while much of the region remains just as inhospitable as it was centuries ago, climate change is causing a different kind of overwhelm. As global warming accelerates and we are increasingly exposed to images such as monumental chunks of glacier plunging into the ocean, the Sinebrychoff Art Museum's monographic exhibition of Peder Balke (1804–87), the first Norwegian artist to travel to the Arctic to paint its landscapes, is both timely and urgent.

'Peder Balke – The Spell of the Arctic' is the first exhibition of the Norwegian artist to be mounted in Finland. Balke himself was clearly spellbound, as his journey along the west

**Peder Balke, *Northern Lights*,
1870s, oil on panel,
10.5cm x 15.5cm**

**Private collection, Nordnorsk
Kunstmuseum**

Photo: Kim G. Skytte / Nordnorsk
Kunstmuseum, Tromsø





Peder Balke, *North Cape*, 1848, oil on canvas, 102cm x 140cm
 The Gundersen Collection, Oslo

Photo: Morten Heden Aamot / The Gundersen Collection

coast of Norway to the North Cape in 1832 was to be a lifelong source of inspiration for his paintings. Scenes of the North Cape and the Vardsø fortress painted from 1845 up until the 1870s are on display in the show, as are soaring mountains (*The Seven Sisters Mountain Range*, c. 1845–50), topological wonders (*Jostedalsglacier*, 1840s) seascapes at night (*Moonlight on the Coast of Steigen*, 1842) and magical displays of the Aurora Borealis (*Northern Lights over Coastal Landscape*, 1870s). The perfect subject matter for a painter of the sublime, even for a Romantic visionary.

Like the landscape, Balke's story had its own dramatic twists and turns. From humble beginnings, this son of landless peasants forged a career that took him to the Royal Drawing School in Christiania (now Oslo), to the Far North of Norway to paint, to Dresden to learn from his forebears in landscape painting such as Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857), and later to Paris to receive commissions from the king of the French Louis-Philippe. Around 1850, when he was back home in Christiania, Balke's career plummeted and he retreated from public exhibitions, turning instead to social reform, politics and building community. But he continued to paint for friends and acquaintances, and his newfound freedom from the public gaze and the art market saw his work shift from grand works of sublime character (*North Cape*, 1848), to small-scale iconic works that became increasingly abstracted expressions of a Romantic visionary (*North Cape*, 1860s–70s), still articulated through the subjects closest to his heart – his memories of his expedition to the Far North.

So what and who brought Balke to Helsinki for this exhibition? It comes on the initiative of the Sinebrychoff Art Museum Director Kirsi Eskelinen, who has long been an admirer of the Romantic painters Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner, but who also knew that it would understandably be difficult to borrow works by these artists. 'I was talking to the Finnish art critic Timo Valjakka about my dreams of Friedrich and Turner, when he asked me if I knew of



Curators of the exhibition, Director of the Nordic Institute of Art, Dr philos. Knut Ljøgdø and Museum Director of the Sinebrychoff Art Museum, PhD Kirsi Eskelinen

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

Peder Balke,' she says. 'We had a very interesting conversation about Balke, and this was the impetus for me to organise an exhibition. It was also important to me from the start that Balke was presented in the context of his time. It therefore includes works by other Romantics who inspired him or served as his teachers, such as Friedrich.'

At the beginning Eskelinen started curating the show herself, but she soon realised that she would need a Balke expert to co-curate the exhibition. 'Then I came across the name of Knut Ljøgdø and the Nordic Institute of Art', she explains. 'I thought we also needed someone who knew the Norwegian museum scene and could introduce us to the museums. After all, this exhibition is the first time that we have collaborated with Norwegian museums on such a large scale. Balke's total output is not very extensive and the works are in numerous museums around Norway and many are in a private collection (the Gundersen Collection), which was difficult to access,' she continues. Knut Ljøgdø's expertise and networks were crucial in this respect too.

The Nordic Institute of Art (NIA) was co-founded in 2017 by Knut Ljøgdø (Dr philos.), who is co-curator of the exhibition along with Eskelinen. Ljøgdø has been one of Balke's most consistent champions in recent times. 'I had for a long time been interested in the artist, but I first collaborated on Balke outside of Norway in 2014 in the London show of his work at the National Gallery,' he says. 'It was partly to demonstrate that, actually, we do have more historic artists in Norway than Edvard Munch. I think that smaller countries tend to believe they only have one or two internationally important historic artists.'

Creating more international interest in the less well-known artists from the Nordic region is a major reason that the NIA was set up. As an alumnus of The Courtauld Institute in London (as well as of the University of Oslo) and a former curator at Norway's National Gallery and Museum Director of the Northern Norway Art Museum, his network of connections places him well for the collaboration with the Sinebrychoff Art Museum. 'Independent institutes are working to bring out those hidden artists. So for us it's important that museums and universities also stimulate this kind of research,' he says. 'This is what was so good about collaborating with colleagues at the Sinebrychoff Art Museum in order to expand the perspectives on Balke.'

Ljøgodt's vision of promoting research into neglected artists is one that concentrates on facilitating more intimate, in-depth shows. At the same time his approach also questions art-historical notions of national artistic trends. 'Rather than look at national art histories, we can consider Nordic art as a shared art history because there are close similarities in the Nordic region, especially in the 19th century,' he says. 'The Nordic artists in Paris, for example, would stick together because outside the Nordic region they felt like they were one people.' Indeed, Ljøgodt has been commissioned to write a general historical survey of Nordic art by Yale publishers which will further develop his connections across the Nordic region.

The Balke exhibition at Sinebrychoff Art Museum is a good example of the mutual benefits to be gained from the collaboration with the Institute. From the NIA's viewpoint it promotes a Nordic artist who has been under represented, putting him more firmly on the map. From the museum's standpoint it introduces a significant Nordic painter to Finnish audiences and stimulates interest in the historical transnational contexts of the painter, as well as opening new themes from the research for the show.

'We were like a team from the beginning', says Ljøgodt. 'I was first contacted by Kirsi. Then I visited the museum and Claudia de Brün, the project manager, showed us the beautiful gallery in the basement which prompted discussion on possible different angles for the exhibition – should it be Balke the painter, his technique, the way to experimentation and almost abstraction? Or should we concentrate more on the discovery of the North? Then Kirsi said, can we do both?'

The show, and its accompanying catalogue, also draws on Ljøgodt's extensive research knowledge from previous exhibitions and on his book on Balke, *Sublime North* (2020) – based on works in the Gundersen Collection – in addition to his well-established networks for securing loans. 'For this project I thought it would be interesting to look more closely at the Nordic, and especially the Finnish, connections. We knew that Balke had visited Helsinki briefly, but thanks to the collaboration with Claudia and the Sinebrychoff, we could verify it and find the specific dates. Also, I thought – in dialogue with Kirsi and Claudia – that it would be interesting to look at the so-called discovery of the Nordic and Arctic landscape and the role travelling artists played in this. Artists like Anders Fredrik Skjöldbrand (1757–1834), as well as participants of the *Recherche* expedition, all visited Finland in connection with their Arctic travels. There are so many elements here that connect the histories of our two countries.'

Ljøgodt's wish list would have included several paintings from the Louvre, and works from a private collection in New York, but budget challenges prompted the team to concentrate the search for loans to Norway, Sweden and Finland. 'However, we had so many

**Wilhelm Maximilian
Carpelan, *The Sognefjord
Meets the Sea*, 1819,
watercolour,
14.8cm x 24.6cm
Aspelin-Haapkylä
Collection, Finnish National
Gallery / Sinebrychoff Art
Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Hannu Pakarinen



Charles-Melchior Descourtis,
*The Lütschine River Issuing
 from the Lower Grindelwald
 Glacier*, undated, aquatint on
 paper, 21.7cm x 32.5cm
 Antell Collections, Ramsay
 Bequest, Finnish National
 Gallery / Sinebrychoff Art
 Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Pakarinen



museums and private collections in Norway to draw on that I don't think we lack anything to tell the full story here,' he points out.

Interestingly, such limitations can turn up new significant works. 'I think some of the works that are often reproduced in books and loaned by the larger museums that are considered part of the canon are there because they hang in the museums, but I think it's also good to find new works of importance,' he explains. Here he mentions the large-scale painting from the Gundersen Collection – which loaned 18 of its 50 works by Balke – of the North Cape, painted in Dresden in 1848, which he believes is easily on a par with the more well-known variant hanging in the National Museum of Norway. There has also been the discovery of a new small-scale painting of the same geographical landmark, *North Cape* (c. 1845), by KODE Bergen Art Museum. 'KODE's portfolio includes the house museum of the famous Norwegian composer and violinist Ole Bull (1810–80), known as the Paganini of Norway, who was also a friend of Peder Balke,' explains Ljøgodt. 'A year or two ago this work was discovered wrapped up in their archive, and they brought it to me for attribution. I said it would have been typical of Balke to give a small-sized painting like that to one of his friends.' It is on public display for the first time in the Helsinki exhibition.

As the first Norwegian artist to travel to the Arctic region, in 1832, Balke's subject matter and its art-historical context is a major theme of the exhibition. 'To find a context in which Balke is the main character we wanted to show his work in a wider perspective – that the "discovery" of the Nordic and particularly the Arctic landscape was part of a larger movement at that time,' Ljøgodt points out. Accordingly, in the first room the exhibition presents paintings by his mentors, the Norwegian landscape artist Johan Christian Dahl (*View of a Glacier*, 1844) and Sweden's leading landscape painter of the period Carl John Fahlcrantz (1774–1861, *Sunset in The Mountains*, undated) alongside Balke's works. In the second room there are drawings by Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) – whose works Balke saw when he visited Dresden in the 1830s – showing wilderness scenes (*Hilltop with Rock and Naked Tree*, 1825), as well as ruins typical of the German Romantic period, presented here in conversation with Balke's large painting *North Cape* (1848), which while it might seem to echo the typical moonlit scenes of the period in terms of atmosphere, here shows the uniquely magical ethereal light of the midnight sun filtering through clouds above serene waters.

For the museum, it was important to generate research that would reveal links to the Finnish National Gallery's collections, as it owns no works by Balke himself. Claudia de Brün therefore began to search the FNG collections, to expand the contextual history surrounding the artist by researching earlier, as well as contemporaneous, artist explorers painting the North and related archival materials such as travelogues.

'We thought it would be interesting to show the imagery of the Arctic before Balke,' says de Brün. 'In the FNG's collections there are strong connections to the Old Masters such as the Dutch painter Allaert van Everdingen (1621–75), who visited southern Norway and Sweden in the 1640s, and whose etchings in the exhibition depict the Northern landscapes of a wild and inhospitable Nordic character.'

From among Balke's immediate forerunners the FNG has fine watercolours of the North by the Finnish-born army officer Wilhelm Maximilian Carpelan (1787–1830), such as *The Sognefjord Meets the Sea* (1819), executed on one of his journeys as *aide de camp* to the Swedish governor in Norway with a view to mapping the country. While Carpelan is more widely known in Sweden and Norway, in Finland he is something of a hidden treasure. 'Carpelan is truly a Nordic artist,' says Ljøgodt. 'Born in Finland, educated in Sweden, travelled in Norway and a pioneer in depicting the Norwegian landscape.' The Finnish National Gallery's Antell Collections also bore fruit, such as Charles-Melchior Descourtis' aquatint *The Lüttschne River Issuing from the Lower Grindelwald Glacier*.

When de Brün – in dialogue with Ljøgodt – started to research illustrated travelogues from Balke's time she looked to the National Library of Finland. 'The most interesting for me were the big folio works such as the prints from the *La Recherche* polar expedition of French scientists and artists in 1838–40,' she explains.

A major contextual theme for this exhibition is presented in rooms devoted to the development of Balke's own artistic perspectives and techniques. From the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm comes J.M.W. Turner's *A View of Deal* (1835–40), this show being the first time that Balke's works are exhibited alongside his great British contemporary. 'Here we are showing how Balke's technique evolves towards what we consider as abstraction – although he might not have thought in this way himself,' Ljøgodt explains. Paintings such as *From Nordland* (1860s), show how Balke experimented with very thin layers of transparent colour, wiping back some areas to the white ground, here leaving the motif of a mountain to dominate. Visible fingerprints in several works are testament to moments where he dispenses with the brush. 'Balke might not be working in a similar painting style to Turner, but in a similar way of thinking – starting by looking at nature but eventually removing oneself so much that it's not really about nature, but rather about experimenting with form, to give form to an inner vision of the landscape.'

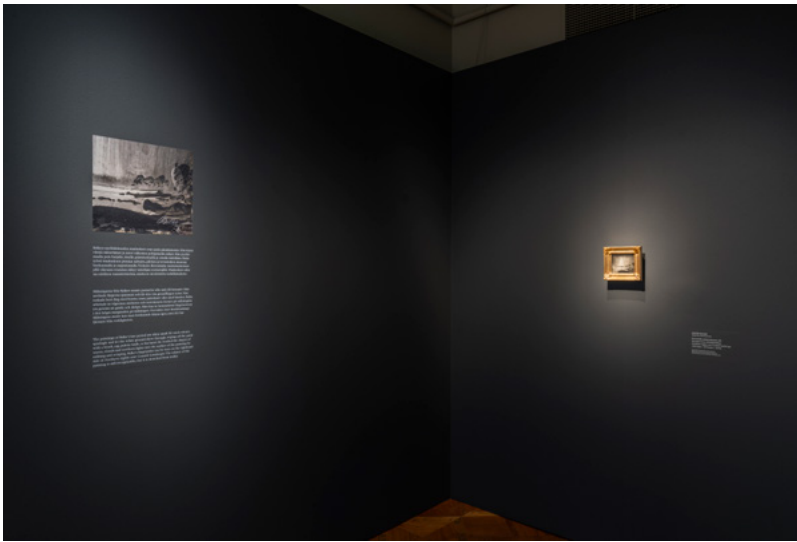
In this sense Balke belongs, argues Ljøgodt, to a tranche of visionary Romantic artists – visionary both in their depiction of the landscape but also visionary in their experimentation with form, placing Balke among the likes of Victor Hugo (1802–85), Eugenio Lucas Velázquez (1817–70) and Thomas Cole (1801–48) in the US, as well as his Norwegian contemporary Lars Hertervig (1830–1902).

This is actually the subject of another exhibition, 'Visionary Romantics', presently on show at the Stavanger Art Museum in Norway, having earlier this year been shown at the Museo Lázaro Galdiano in Madrid, organised by the two museums jointly with

Peder Balke, *Landscape Study from Nordland*, 1860s, oil on paper, 34.5cm x 26cm
Gothenburg Museum of Art

Photo: Hossein Sehatlou /
 Gothenburg Museum of Art





Installation view of Peder Balke, *Northern Lights over Coastal Landscape*, 1870s, oil on cardboard, 10.5cm x 12cm
 National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

the Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica and the Nordic Institute of Art.

But doesn't the Northern landscape naturally lend itself to this kind of reduced colour palette and simplified form, rather than being a sign of a movement towards abstraction? 'Most depictions by mid- and late 19th-century artists were more realist, and many don't capture the grandeur of the landscape,' counters Ljøgodt. 'They were too eager to paint every little detail, whereas Balke managed to paint the bigger picture and in that sense he is truer to that nature.'

Indeed as Balke progressed, the essence of the natural forces of the Far North were captured through a reduction of scale, as well as of form. In the room usually reserved for imposing star works, Claudia de Brün suggested hanging just one tiny oil painting, *Northern Lights Over Coastal Landscape*, from the 1870s, depicted on a format measuring just 10.5cm x 12cm. It is a masterstroke of exhibition design, given that such small paintings are often swamped by larger works and thus passed quickly by. Instead one is invited to become intimate with the piece, drawn towards it by a curiosity that is complemented by the surrounding dark-coloured walls which – devoid of artworks – support close looking at this single



Peder Balke, *Shipwreck*, 1870s, oil on cardboard, 10.5cm x 12.7cm
 Drammens Museum

Photo: Drammens Museum

work. This sense of intimacy is carried through to the next room which displays just ten small works from the 1870s that appear to become almost totally abstracted, save for one or two motifs. 'Balke is working like a musician who is repeating the same *étude*; using repetition in order to refine his technique and style,' says de Brün. 'It is the same but it changes. Each time he repeats the same motifs and places and minor motifs, like the boat and the birds, they develop into something more abstract or more expressive.' Here the Northern Lights are conveyed through a vertical scraping back through the paint, while horizontal scrapes evoke the Arctic Sea at calm (*Northern Lights*, 1870s). Swirled wipings become stormy seas on which a ship struggles, while the black specks of birds flounder in the sky (*Shipwreck*, 1870s).

The final room of the exhibition presents a further shift in scale, showing Balke's commissioned wall paintings for the wealthy owner of a Norwegian manorial estate. *Presterød Manor in Tønsberg* (c. 1860) measuring 1.5m x 2.5m, depicts the manorial landscape in the pale transparent hues he typically used at this time. The room demonstrates the versatility of the artist's production and re-evaluates these works as an important part of his oeuvre – as landscape works in their own right, more than simply decorative projects.



Peder Balke, *Bird Cliff*, 1870s, oil on panel, 8cm x 11.5cm
The Gundersen Collection, Oslo

Photo: The Gundersen Collection / Morten Henden Aamot

As with all museum shows, the actual process of preparing and presenting it creates further research questions. One area of interest has been prompted by the inclusion of the Carpelan watercolour paintings. 'I think it would be good to enlarge the theme of Carpelan, as he was one of the surveyors trained to draw maps and landscapes, who put the Nordic landscape on the map. And there is plenty of material available on him in Norway and Sweden,' says Ljøgodt. Another question concerns the need for more technical research into Balke's painting methods and materials, which would help in more precise dating of his works, and assist in Ljøgodt's ongoing project of compiling a *catalogue raisonné*. 'We still have a lot to discover about his techniques,' Ljøgodt continues. 'He experimented with different kinds of colour, for example, the intense blue he used in *Bird Cliff* (1870s). Norway had cobalt mines producing cobalt blue pigments mainly for glass and porcelain ware but in a letter from Balke held in the mining museum's archives he places an order for some blue powder made from Norwegian cobalt. I would like a conservator to make a technical assessment of the colours to determine if it was cobalt blue or an artificial blue like Prussian blue.'

The Sinebrychoff Art Museum exhibition of Peder Balke undoubtedly places a less well-known artist more firmly in the public domain. Like the memories of the landmarks and features of the Arctic that sustained Balke's production during his life, the images of his paintings are ones that will endure beyond the physical encounter with them in this show.

'Peder Balke – The Spell of the Arctic', Sinebrychoff Art Museum, Helsinki, until 14 January 2024

Claudia de Brün and Kersti Tainio (eds.), *Peder Balke: Arktisen lumo – Förtrollad av Arktis – The Spell of the Arctic*. Sinebrychoff Art Museum Publications. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Sinebrychoff Art Museum, 2023