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ART HISTORY AND THE LEGEND OF THE ARTIST IN BERTEL THORVALDSEN'S PAINTING COLLECTION

Ditlev Martens. *The House of Michelangelo in Rome* (detail), 1833. Oil on canvas, 57.5 × 71.9 cm. Inv. no. B262. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen

Introduction

In Copenhagen's Thorvaldsen's Museum there is a notable collection of nineteenth-century paintings,¹ the major part of which Bertel Thorvaldsen put together in Rome between 1798 and 1838. The most recent tally of the collection, based on an evaluation of the inventory, totals approximately 280 works by 137 artists, all acquired during Thorvaldsen's lifetime.² The collection, consisting largely of German, Danish, French, and Italian artworks, provides a cross section of the painters working in Rome in the early-nineteenth century (figure one) and it is probably the most significant private collection of German Romantic painting to have survived from the entire first half of that century. For instance, although Senator Martin Johann Jenisch the Younger, from Altona, Hamburg, amassed a thematically similar private collec-

tion, his motivation was different right from its conception.³ Thorvaldsen's painting collection is molded by the intellect and tastes of the man who assembled it. Indeed, it is the collection of an artist; not only does it represent the artistic attitudes of the 1800–40 period, it is a surviving example of the strong culture of friendship, community, and close cooperation among artists working in Rome at this time (figure two). In his landmark essay of 1993, Bjarne Jørnæs persuasively set out the successive phases of Thorvaldsen's collecting activity,⁴ which began around 1800 with the acquisition of drawings by the much-admired German artist Asmus Jacob Carstens.⁵ The significance that Thorvaldsen's contemporaries were already attaching to the collection, which they saw, above all, as a record of the period's artistic currents, is made clear in Alfred von Reumont's description, who traveled in Italy in 1837–38:

1. On the paintings collection at Thorvaldsen's Museum, see especially Nikolaus Lützhöft, "Thorvaldsens Malerisamling: Tyske og italienske Kunstnere," in *Meddelelser fra Thorvaldsens Museum* (1931), pp. 7–50, <http://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/artikler/thorvaldsens-malerisamling-tyske-og-italienske-kunstnere> (accessed 28.1.2018); Gustav Lindtke, "Deutsche Romantiker im Thorvaldsens Museum in Kopenhagen," in Paul Brockhaus, ed., *Der Wagen: Ein Lübeckisches Jahrbuch* (Lübeck, 1964), pp. 81–90; Dyveke Helsted, "Thorvaldsen

as a Collector," in *Apollo*, 96, no. 127, 1972, pp. 32–39; Bjarne Jørnæs, "Bertel Thorvaldsen's Painting Collection," in Kasper Monrad, ed., *The Golden Age of Danish Painting*, exh. cat. Los Angeles County Museum (New York, 1993), pp. 28–36; Katharina Bott, "Thorvaldsen's in Italien gesammelte Gemälde," 2017 <https://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/articles/thorvaldsen-in-italien-gesammelte-gemaelde>, 2017 (accessed January 4, 2018); A. Westers, *Thorvaldsen's schilderijen-verzameling*, Ph. D. diss., 1959 (archive copy accessed in Thor-

valdsen's Museum); Kira Kofoed, *Thorvaldsens malerisamling—en samling med en særlig udeladelse*, Thorvaldsen's Museum, 2015, <https://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/artikler/thorvaldsens-malerisamling-en-samling-med-en-saerlig-udeladelse> (accessed January 4, 2018).

2. Confer with Bott 2017 (see note 1).

3. Confer with Christine Knupp, ed., *Die Gemäldesammlung des Hamburgischen Senators Martin Johann Jenisch d. J. (1793–1857)*, exh. cat. Altonaer Museum (Hamburg, 1973); Bärbel Hedinger and Alexandra Köhring, eds., *Die*

Gemäldesammlung moderner Meister des Hamburger Senators Martin Johann Jenisch d. J. (1793–1857), exh. cat. Altonaer Museum, Jenisch-Haus (Berlin, 2000).

4. Jørnæs 1993 (see note 1).

5. Confer with Gertrud With, "Et trekløver—Asmus Jacob Carstens, Joseph Anton Koch og Bertel Thorvaldsen i Rom," in Stig Miss and Gertrud With, eds., *Asmus Jacob Carstens' og Joseph Anton Koch værker i Thorvaldsens Museum* (Copenhagen, 2000), pp. 13–24.

Fig. 1. Christian Gottlieb Schick and Joseph Anton Koch. *Heroic Landscape with Ruth and Boaz*, 1803–04. Oil on canvas, 87.6 × 116.4 cm, Inv. no. B158. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen



Fig. 2. Peter Cornelius. *The Entombment of Christ* (after Raphael's painting), 1816–25. Oil on wood, 34 × 47.1 cm. Inv. no. B113. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen



Fig. 3. Heinrich Reinhold. *Landscape, with the Good Samaritan*, 1823. Oil on canvas, 38.6 × 52.3 cm. Inv. no. B145. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen



6. Alfred von Reumont, *Römische Briefe von einem Florentiner*. 1837–1838, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1840), p. 172.

7. The compilation of evidence from Louise Seidler, Ernst August Hagen, Johann Karl Baer, and Just Mathias Thiele is referenced in Bott 2017 (see note 1).

8. Confer with Bott 2017 (see note 1).

One sees many old paintings in Rome, but Thorvaldsen's is the only collection of newer work worthy of consideration. It is important here in two respects. First, there is a complete lack of more recent foreign art, if one excepts the "old German" frescoes of the Villa Massimi and the former Casa Bartholdy; consequently, this collection, assembled with such sensitivity and skill, is where one can fairly exactly trace the development of such art over the last forty years. It would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, to assemble such a gallery elsewhere; only in Rome, the center on which from all sides the sunlight rays of modern art for the moment converge, was this feasible. And Thorvaldsen's lofty artistic status made it possible for him to acquire for his collection masters' works otherwise only, and with difficulty, to be seen in the salons of private individuals, while his long residence

in Rome has brought him into contact, successively, with everyone who has been in his vicinity, whether for a long time or a short one.⁶

Nearly every traveler to Rome who visited Thorvaldsen's studio and house highlighted in their memoirs the painting collection that the sculptor plainly and freely showed to his guests.⁷ He supported artists who were in need or experiencing financial hardship by buying their paintings (figure three), and he also received presents from the artists that he had helped. A significant number of the paintings in the collection served as collateral, because the relatively well-to-do Thorvaldsen lent money to needy artists.⁸

Some of them may have been pledges that could not be redeemed by repayment. However, the pictures were often instruments of artistic friendship; there are frequent accounts of the personal relationships that existed

Fig. 4. Wilhelm Bendz.
*Artists in Finck's Coffee-house
 in Munich*, 1832. Oil on
 canvas, 94.8 × 136.6 cm.
 Inv. no. B197. Thorvaldsen's
 Museum, Copenhagen



Fig. 5. Ditlev Blunck.
*Danish Artists at the Osteria
 La Gensola in Rome*, 1837. Oil
 on canvas, 74.5 × 99.4 cm.
 Inv. no. B199. Thorvaldsen's
 Museum, Copenhagen



between Thorvaldsen and other artists, which have significance above and beyond the purchase of pictures or the collection's expansion through presents, swaps, or pledges. In this respect, the paintings in his collection were not simply artworks with varying degrees of iconographic interest, or characteristic examples of individuals' styles, but portable objects that played an important role in friendly relations and social organization among artists. Through being exchanged as gifts, the objects could be imbued with memories or become laden with emotional significance.

A subsequent question arises regarding the thematic focus that Thorvaldsen applied to the exchange of pictures. What appealed to him were the lives of the artists and art-historical themes, and these figure quite prominently in the collection. It is unquestionably that historical perceptions of the artist as a figure interested Thorvaldsen. Indeed, there is a notable group of works with historical themes, many portraits of the sculptor, and well-known scenes of contemporary *vie Bohème* including Wilhelm Bendz's *Artists in Finck's Coffee House in Munich* (figure four) and Ditlev Blunck's *Danish Artists at the Osteria La Gensola in Rome*, both dated 1837 (figure five). These works are at once genre paintings and group portraits, taking artists' bourgeois socializing as their theme and bringing out this aspect of cosmopolitan society. They fulfilled an important function in Thorvaldsen's collection, commemorating the protagonists of contemporary art, in contrast to a number of other works in the collection, which took the history and historicity of art as their theme.

Aesthetic Historicism

Thorvaldsen was interested in the paintings of the Nazarenes principally because they represented a phenomenon of their time: a productive engagement with art history. Reumont complained that the really significant figures of the new German school, Johan Friedrich Overbeck and Peter von Cornelius, were not adequately represented in the collection:

The modern religious "old German" school is less well represented in the Thorvaldsen collection. Neither Cornelius's *Entombment of Christ* nor Overbeck's *Virgin and Child*, nor yet W. Schadow's *Road to Calvary*, seem to me able to support claims to any great worth.⁹

How Overbeck's *Virgin and Child* (figure six), which is identified with the work exhibited in the Palazzo Caffarelli, came into the collection is not clear.¹⁰ All the same, this work cannot have achieved what Overbeck had in mind when he painted it. It would have been most unlikely that in Thorvaldsen's house it would have been used as a devotional painting; Thorvaldsen, although a Protestant, described himself as a heathen and an agnostic. However, in the context of a generalized expression of friendship for the artist, he may have been interested in the work's emulation of Raphael, which had found a noteworthy modern reinterpretation in Overbeck's gentle manner of painting. In the early days of the Brotherhood of St. Luke, Overbeck is known to have taken on the role of Raphael, while Franz Pforr, who died in 1812 and whom Thorvaldsen also became acquainted with in Rome, assumed that of German old master Albrecht Dürer. The synthesis of Raphael and Dürer, Italia and Germania, would come to define the new style of patriotic art.¹¹ It may be that Thorvaldsen took Overbeck's painting into his collection as a reference to this trend. It is noteworthy that the collection contained two copies by contemporary German artists after Raphael Madonnas and another after Pietro Perugino—one of them the 1831 copy by Blunck, after Raphael's *Madonna del Granduca* (figure seven) (significantly, this work was received as a pledge for a loan of 200 scudi, and then remained in the collection).¹² It is conceivable that this and the Overbeck painting were also hung close together, so as to bring out imitation and difference—the principal criteria for judging modern art. Otherwise, Overbeck's *Virgin and Child* remains the collection's only example of a genuine Nazarene and Catholic devotional painting.

9. Reumont 1840 (see note 6), p. 175.

10. Andreas Blühm and Gerhard Gerken, eds., *Johann Friedrich Overbeck 1789–1869: Zur zweihundertsten Wiederkehr seines Geburtstages*, exh. cat. Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte (Lübeck, 1989), pp. 128–29.

11. Confer with Michael Thimann, "Raffael und Dürer: Ursprung, Wachstum und Verschwinden einer Idee in der deutschen Romantik," in Michael Thimann and Christine Hübner, ed., *Sterbliche Götter: Raffael und Dürer in der Kunst der deutschen Romantik*, exh. cat. Göttingen, Kunstsammlung der Georg-August-Universität (Petersberg, 2015), pp. 8–41.

12. Copenhagen, Thorvaldsen's Museum, Archives, gml, no. 47.



Fig. 6. Johann Friedrich Overbeck. *The Virgin and Child*, 1818. Oil on wood, 65.8 × 47.1 cm. Inv. no. B136. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen



Fig. 7. Ditlev Blunck. Copy after Raphael's *Madonna del Granduca*, 1831. Oil on canvas, 85 × 57.5 cm. Inv. no. B35. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen

Raphael's Glory

Thorvaldsen's great interest in Raphael, and hence the Romantic cult surrounding the artist (espoused more strongly by the Germans than by other European nations),¹³ is also reflected in the collection by artistic interpretations of Raphael's legends. It is unquestionable that Thorvaldsen was an admirer of Raphael—and it is well-known that on September 14, 1833 he took part, as a witness and art-historical expert, in the opening of Raphael's tomb in the Pantheon, in the course of which Raphael's corpse and his true skull came to light (the latter superseding another skull that was previously thought to have been Raphael's).¹⁴ Thorvaldsen secured for himself a relic in the form of a piece of limestone from the grave in which Raphael had lain (figure eight); he may even have retrieved it from the earth himself as the skeleton was recovered. This souvenir must have been of the greatest personal significance to him, bringing Raphael's genius within touching distance, almost like a contact relic.

The unprepossessing piece of stone, reminiscent of a meteorite from a distant star, is preserved in the collection in an attractive box. Such presentation of the relic

must be seen as an intimation from its owner, who, as he opened the box, probably uttered momentous words to convey the physical proximity of genius being transmitted to observers. Thorvaldsen also acquired the 1836 painting by Francesco Diofebi (figure ten), which recalls his presence at the opening of the tomb and that took the nineteenth century's semi-religious adoration of Raphael to its apogee, and at the same time, much like the opening of a saint's tomb, helped to proclaim the stand-alone truth and authenticity of the Christian painter.¹⁵ Diofebi's picture is conceived as a history painting and is also a detailed factual portrayal of the opening of the tomb. The anatomist Antonio Trasmondi vouched for the authenticity of the skeleton; in the picture, he turns toward the viewer, attesting the validity of the find; Thorvaldsen is also depicted, his intent gaze directed toward the grave, casting him in the role of a witness.

Thorvaldsen owned further copies after Raphael (figure nine), numerous prints, and a drawing that was supposed to be an original—and as the most valuable object in the Casa Buti, hung above his bed (figure eight, p. 95).¹⁶ The 1821 watercolor *Raphael's Dream* appears twice among the papers of the Riepenhausen brothers. Thorvaldsen's keen interest in Raphael is also very



Fig. 8. Chalk from Raphael's tomb in the Pantheon, Chalk and paper in light blue cardboard box, 7 × 5 cm. Inv. no. N87. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen

13. Ernst Osterkamp, "Raffael-Forschung von Fiorillo bis Passavant," in *Studi germanici*, vol. 38, issue 3, 2000, pp. 403–26.

14. Confer with Christine Hübner, "Die Exuvien eines der schönsten Menschen, in jedem Sinne": Die Schädel Raffaels zwischen Reliquienkult und Anthropologie," in Thimann and Hübner 2015 (see note 11), pp. 73–91; France

Nerlich, "Raffaels heilige Reliquie: Überlegungen zu einem kunsthistorischen Ereignis," in Gilbert Hess, Elena Agazzi, and Elisabeth Déculot, eds., *Raffaels als Paradigma: Rezeption, Imagination und Kult im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, Boston, 2012), pp. 47–81.

15. On this painting, see Hübner 2015 (see note 14), pp. 78–80.

16. Passavant too was convinced of the correctness of this attribution and also tells the story of how the drawing came into Thorvaldsen's possession. Johann David Passavant, *Raffael von Urbino und sein Vater Giovanni Santi*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1839–58), pp. 490–91.

Fig. 9. Johann Leberecht Eggink. *The Vision of Ezekiel* (copy after Raphael's painting), date unknown. Oil on wood, 40.5 × 29.4 cm. Inv. no. B38. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen



clearly indicated in the painting collection via a similar large-scale history painting by Johannes Riepenhausen, *Bramante Presenting Raphael to Pope Julius II* (circa 1836). Thorvaldsen acquired the painting (figure eleven) from his friend Johannes Riepenhausen, whose brother Franz had died in 1831. The painting reprises an identical episode included in the cycle of etchings on Raphael's life, published by Johannes in 1833.¹⁷ The young Raphael's presentation to Pope Julius II marked his entry into

court circles and the start of his rise during his years in Rome, which involved his participation in every important papal building and decorative schemes.

It may be that this episode had a personal meaning for Thorvaldsen, who had forged a similar career in Rome and, though a Protestant, even erected a papal tomb in St. Peter's Basilica.¹⁸ The Riepenhausen painting is more or less emulated as a mirror image in the painting *Pope Leo XII Visits Thorvaldsen's Studio Near the Piazza Barberini*,

17. Johannes Riepenhausen, *Vita di Raffaele da Urbino* (Rome, 1833), pl. 7. See Ekaterini Kepetzis, "Romantische Identitätsfindung: Zur Konstruktion des Idealkünstlers in den Viten Raffaels

der Brüder Riepenhausen," in Hess, Agazzi, and Décultot 2012 (see note 14), pp. 3–45; Thimann and Hübner 2015 (see note 11), pp. 124–45.

18. Volker Reinhardt, "Fremdkörper? Pius VII, Consalvi, Thorvaldsen und der letzte Grabmalstreit in St. Peter," in Horst Bredekamp und Volker Reinhardt, eds., *Totenkult und Wille zur*

Macht: Die unruhigen Ruhestätten der Päpste in St Peter (Darmstadt, 2004), pp. 241–55.

Rome, on *St Luke's Day, October 18, 1826* by the architectural painter Hans Ditlev Christian Martens (figure twelve), who came from Kiel and trained at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts.¹⁹ Several of his works belonged to Thorvaldsen's collection, though not this particular one, which Martens sold to the Danish king. The episode depicted was important in the history of ideas of contemporary painters: the prelate's gesture in visiting the studio seems not to reflect an increased interest in art, as a personal mark of favor for the chosen court painter. In nineteenth-century Rome the tradition of popes going to artists' studios was inaugurated by Pope Leo XII's elaborately-staged visit to Thorvaldsen on *St. Luke's Day, 1826*.²⁰ The Pope proceeds to the artist's studio, but is received on an equal footing by a sovereign in his realm

of art. Thorvaldsen is depicted wearing smart clothing, rather than a sculptor's grubby workaday wear, emphasizing his social status.

Both Martens and Riepenhausen were touching on the theme of the artist's social elevation and his sovereignty. Whereas Riepenhausen incorporates this notion in the historical archetype figure of Raphael, in Martens's painting, Thorvaldsen is identified as having achieved this status through being an artist. One may assume that Thorvaldsen acquired the Riepenhausen painting on account of a special fondness for its theme and not just to give a helping hand to the perpetually hard-up Johannes—who died an indigent charity case in Rome in 1860. That painting is a historical meditation on a young artist's arrival in Catholic Rome at the Pope's



Fig. 10. Francesco Diiofebi. *The Opening of Raphael's Grave in the Pantheon in 1833, 1836*. Oil on canvas, 54.9 × 70 cm. Inv. no. B73. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen

19. Dörte Zbikowski "Detlev Martens," in Dirk Luckow and Dörte Zbikowski, eds., *Die Kopenhagener Schule: Meisterwerke dänischer und deutscher Malerei von 1770 bis 1850*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle zu Kiel (Kiel/Ostfildern-Ruit, 2005), pp. 256–57.

20. On this picture, see Gerhard Bott and Heinz Spielmann, eds., *Künstlerleben in Rom: Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844): Der dänische Bildhauer und seine deutschen Freunde*, exh. cat. Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum/Schleswig, Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landesmuseum (Nuremberg, 1991), pp. 529–32.

Fig. 11. Johannes Riepenhausen. *Bramante Presenting Raphael to Pope Julius II*, circa 1836. Oil on canvas, 4,7 × 62,2 cm. Inv. no. B154, Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen



Fig. 12. Ditlev Martens. *Pope Leo XII Visits Thorvaldsen's Studio near the Piazza Barberini, Rome, on St. Luke's Day, October 18, 1826, 1830*. Oil on canvas, 100 × 138 cm. Inv. no. Dep.18. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen (on loan from the National Gallery of Denmark)



Fig. 13. Ditlev Martens.
*The House of Michelangelo in
 Rome*, 1833. Oil on canvas,
 57.5 × 71.9 cm, Inv. no. B262.
 Thorvaldsen's Museum,
 Copenhagen



21. Passavant 1839–58 (see note 16), p. VII.

court, and thus, a reflection of the Danish artist's own life trajectory via the figure of Raphael; for the Romantics, he was the “most complete artist”—as Johann David Passavant put it—who ever lived and was “recognized for the finest genius of the art of modern times.”²¹

The Artist's Palace

Adulation of Raphael is patent in another painting: a work by Hans Ditlev Christian Martens that encapsulates a particular angle on this theme of the artist (figure thirteen). It is a view of a Renaissance palace's entrance hall including a staircase, a barrel vault richly adorned with grotesques, and a view through to the garden. All this takes on a special meaning when one knows the building depicted, which was a tourist attraction for nineteenth-century visitors to Rome. It shows Michelangelo's residence in a small palace close to Trajan's

Forum, which in 1879 fell victim to urban redevelopment and was rebuilt below the Capitol, before again being demolished and its façade re-erected on the Janiculate Hill, where it still stands. In obvious emulation of an 1806 work by François Marius Granet—the first person to paint the subject—the palace interior recurs frequently in early-nineteenth-century paintings and prints, with or without a staffage of figures. Martens's painting acquires its particular meaning from the figures. It is not hard to make out that it is Michelangelo himself, elegantly dressed in black, descending the stairs to receive a younger man carrying a portfolio, and who is politely raising his hat; clearly the latter must be Raphael who is calling on Michelangelo at his home.

The work is a testimony to the harmonizing aspirations of Romanticism. Its theme is not the artistic jealousy and resentment that Vasari describes regarding the relationship between Michelangelo and Raphael, but

22. Gerd Blum, "Michelangelo als neuer Mose—Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte von Michelangelos 'Moses': Vasari, Nietzsche, Freud, Thomas Mann," in *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 53, 2008, pp. 73–106.

23. Elisabeth Shröter, "Italien—ein Sehnsuchtsland? Zum entmythologisierten Italienerlebnis in der Goethezeit," in Hildegard Wiegel, ed., *Italiensehnsucht: Kunsthistorische Aspekte eines Topos* (Munich and Berlin, 2004), pp. 187–202.

24. Reumont 1840 (see note 6), p. 177.

25. The first German-language edition has been consulted: Adam Oehlenschläger, *Correggio: Ein Trauerspiel* (Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1816).

26. On the play, see Uwe Jap, *Das deutsche Künstlerdrama: Von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin, New York, 2004), pp. 72–86.

27. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. De Vere (London, 1912–15), <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/v/vasari/giorgio/lives/part3.3.html> (accessed March 27, 2018).

28. Adam Oehlenschläger, "Selbstbiographie," in idem, *Schriften: Zum erstenmale gesammelt als Ausgabe letzter Hand*, vol. 2 (Breslau, 1829), pp. 144–45.

the harmonious interaction of two exceptional men. The painter visiting the sculptor to pay his respects serves as a historical prefiguring of the numerous painters who sought Thorvaldsen's patronage and financial help. This message is reinforced by the artworks depicted in the painting. On the right is the sculpture of Moses from Pope Julius II's tomb, one of Michelangelo's major works and also the symbol of a sculptor (Moses, the originator of the Tables of the Law, with their carved lettering, was seen as the progenitor of sculpture);²² opposite it stands an antique monument to Victory—the friendly meeting of the two Renaissance artists occurs in a space between the ancient and the modern.

We don't know how paintings such as these were regarded, let alone how Thorvaldsen himself thought of them. All the same, they testify to an aesthetic historicism that represented the past as a distant place for experiencing a better reality, thus allowing nineteenth-century, north-European painters in Rome to forget their often-precarious social conditions.²³

The Death of Correggio

In his discussion of the collection, Alfred von Reumont singles out a small painting by Albert Küchler (figure fifteen) and goes on to name its previously unidentified literary source:

From *Blunk*, a Dane, *Noah and His Family* at the moment the dove returns with the olive leaf, not without a talent for compositional grouping; from *Hopfgarten* from Berlin, *The Miracle of St Elizabeth*, a pretty picture but rather coquettish and stilted for its period and subject. *The Death of Correggio* by A. Küchler depicts the final scene of Oehlenschläger's play.²⁴

Danish playwright Adam Oehlenschläger's 1811 tragedy *Correggio* enjoyed popularity in the early-nineteenth century, and Reumont immediately identified it as the stimulus for the painting (figure fourteen).²⁵ This is not the classical artist's life according to Vasari, but a

modern poetic reworking that, oddly, illustrates a not particularly glorious episode in the life of the great Parmesan painter.²⁶ Vasari reports Correggio's—historically somewhat unlikely—death on the road from Parma to Correggio:

He was contented with little, and he lived like an excellent Christian. Antonio, like a man who was weighed down by his family, was anxious to be always saving, and he had thereby become as miserly as he could well be. Wherefore it is related that, having received at Parma a payment of sixty crowns in copper coins, and wishing to take them to Correggio to meet some demand, he placed the money on his back and set out to walk on foot; but, being smitten by the heat of the sun, which was very great, and drinking water to refresh himself, he was seized by pleurisy, and had to take to his bed in a raging fever, nor did he ever raise his head from it, but finished the course of his life at the age of forty, or thereabout.²⁷

Correggio, obsessed with thrift, supposedly sought to bring home on foot earnings of sixty scudi, but in the process caught a fever, of which he perished miserably. Oehlenschläger took the great painter's distressing death as the theme of the final act of his artist drama, which uses the highly poetically-reinterpreted example of Correggio to address the artistic *vie Bohème* in general. What interested him about Correggio, an unworldly but highly-gifted painter, was the "the sweet naivety of a natural genius," and the opportunity "to portray the life of a great but tormented artist in the most momentous of moral situations."²⁸ Oehlenschläger, whose departure from historical truth in *Correggio* was severely criticized by Ludwig Tieck, justified himself in his autobiography, where he emphasized that he was not seeking to deal with art *per se*, but with the artist as a human being who, through his existence and his work, affected the people around him. Significantly, here Oehlenschläger is at pains to make a comparison with Thorvaldsen as an original genius of his own day:

Fig. 14. Title page of Adam Oehlenschläger's play *The Tragedy of Correggio*, 1811.

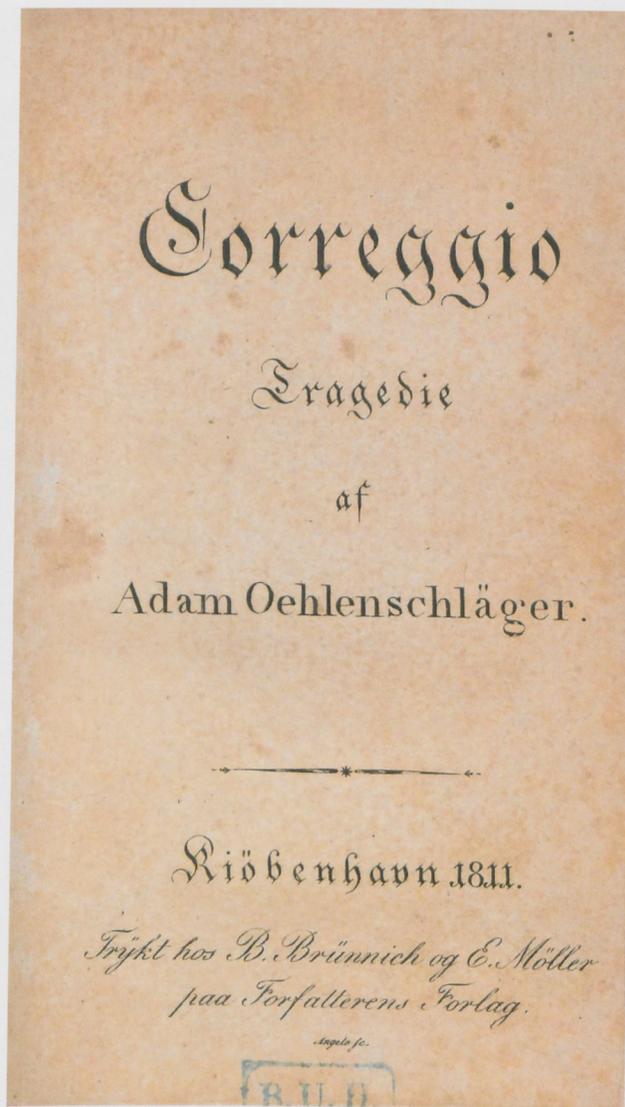
I was not at all concerned with portraying Art but wanted to show people—people who were Artists. And everyday experience shows that one can be a great artist and still speak plainly and simply about art. Thorvaldsen speaks so plainly and simply, and yet he is a great and complete artist. Was Correggio more complete? And Thorvaldsen, if he had a great new collection of pictures, would he not in those first moments talk of it in semi-coherent words and with childish joy, rather than spouting a Tieckish *catalogue raisonné*?²⁹

However, this allusion to Thorvaldsen and his pictures makes it clear that Kùchler's painting was scarcely likely to have come into the collection by chance, but may well have been conceived and painted with Thorvaldsen in mind—or, at any rate, acquired by the sculptor because of his particular interest in the picture's theme. Oehlenschläger goes on to observe that his play was plainly one of Thorvaldsen's favorite texts:

The piece did not appeal to all my German friends in Rome, but the Danes, and Thorvaldsen in particular, were very pleased with it. I shall never forget how as I read the piece aloud, at the passage where Coelestina crowns Correggio, Christel [Johannes] Riepenhausen said rather carelessly, "Hmm, that's nice!" Thorvaldsen jumped up, looked at him with flashing eyes and shouted, "No, that's great!"³⁰

Oehlenschläger was in Rome in 1809/10 and struck up a close friendship with Thorvaldsen, and this was the context in which *Correggio* was conceived. The Riepenhausen brothers too were part of this circle of friends, and a caricature of Oehlenschläger as the author of *Correggio* is attributed to them, and hangs in Thorvaldsen's Museum (figure sixteen).³¹

So the play was composed under the direct influence of visual artists of the day, and in this respect it reflects contemporary ideas of the artist's role, heightened by the historical figure of Correggio. Oehlenschläger presents the character of Correggio as a sensitive human being,



basically melancholic but friendly and enthusiastic; a man whose tragic death would arouse the audience's sympathy. At his death, his was still a great and mature soul, and—as the audience was expected to recognize—therein lays the moral superiority of the naïve natural genius. Albert Kùchler subsequently interpreted this in his own painting and gave Correggio's death a stronger religious import. Correggio was known not only as a master of color and the creator of paintings depicting the Madonna as well as *The Holy Night* (or *La Notte*), but also a virtuoso executant of erotic, mythological history paintings with a particular mastery of skin tones—though

29. Ibid., pp. 146–47.

30. Ibid., p. 148.

31. See Meir Stein, "En Karikatur af Oehlenschläger," in *Meddelelser fra Thorvaldsens Museum*, 1947, arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/artikler/en-karikatur-af-oehlenschlaeger, pp. 49–62 (accessed 27.1. 2018).

Fig. 15. Albert Küchler.
The Death of Correggio, 1834.
 Oil on canvas, 83.7 × 74.5 cm.
 Inv. no. B243. Thorvaldsen's
 Museum, Copenhagen



32. Adam Oehlenschläger,
Correggio: A Tragedy, trans.
 Theodore Martin (London,
 1854), p. 135.

33. Alberto Crielesi, *Il pittore
 Fra Pietro da Copenaghen al secolo
 Albert Küchler: Quando la povertà con
 l'arte diventa poesia* (Rome, 1999).

Oehlenschläger didn't mention this. As a master of profane art, Correggio's biography is perhaps not quite as dedicated to the sacred as Raphael's. The dominant figure in Küchler's 1834 painting is not Correggio himself, whose body is partly obscured by his grieving wife, Maria; it is the standing form of the hermit Silvestro, who first appeared at the outset of the drama and who has long recognized Correggio's essential moral greatness:

There lies the martyr, fall'n already,
 Beneath the load of jealousy and want.³²

Küchler brought out the religious dimension of the theme, in keeping with his own Christian commitment (which led to his conversion to Catholicism in 1844 and, ultimately, his entry into the Franciscans).³³ Correggio appears in the painting as a dead man who should have received the last rites from the hermit who has rushed to the scene. But Silvestro came too late: Correggio was already dead. Küchler has painted the death scene, which in Oehlenschläger's play is heightened by a complex sequence of events. From Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, it borrows the crucial detail that, exhausted by walking

34. Oehlenschläger 1854
(see note 32), p. 136.

and carrying the heavy sack of coins, he enjoyed a refreshing drink and then fell ill—so that this became his death draught. In Oehlenschläger's play, the bringer of the drink is Lairetta, a beauty and an outsider to Correggio's unworldly sphere of art, and the antithesis of Correggio's virtuous wife Maria. Not only does Lairetta give him the drink, she also sings a song that poetically heralds the impending death. This chronological sequence of events is evident in the painting, where the lovely Lairetta is seen in the middle ground leaving the scene with a pitcher on her head, like a Rachel or a Rebecca. The foreground focuses on grief for the lifeless painter. His wife Maria and son Giovanni bewail their spouse and father, while the hermit Silvestro sees in the dead man the universally tragic fate of artistic nature: never recognized in life, but able to hope for eternal fame in the afterlife:

Bewail him not, the blessed one! 'Tis true,
His weary head has droop'd, but the twin wreaths
Which circle those pale temples tenderly,—
The wreath of honor, of remembrance,—these,
I say to thee, resplendently will shine,
When many a golden crown has fallen in dust!³⁴

As we have shown, Küchler's small painting is not only closely linked in biographical terms with Thorvaldsen and his friendship with Oehlenschläger; it also reflects on the nature of being an artist, where a misunderstood, natural genius can die in misery, despite having contributed so much beauty to the world. This Romantic reinterpretation of the historical artist's life, modeled as a modern psychological drama depicting independent and unworldly artistic genius, must have moved Thorvaldsen very profoundly.



Fig. 16. Attributed to Franz and Johannes Riepenhausen. *Caricature of Adam Oehlenschläger*, circa 1809. Pen and pencil heightened with white on paper, inscription in pen, 27.6/27.7 × 17.5 cm. Inv. no. D1829. Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen