

## PAINTING'S JOURNEY: A VISIT TO OSLO'S NATIONAL GALLERY

By John Parman

Art itself often contributes to our tendency to put what we see into words. Some of the paintings in the National Gallery in Oslo are almost pedagogical in their desire to convey lessons to the viewer. Others are more like jokes or gossip—Gerhard Munthe, for example, standing in a smoke-filled café in his fur-collared coat, looks out incongruously toward his paintings of farmhouses and other country scenes in the next gallery. A professor nearby is depicted as a womanizer and bon vivant. They are like character actors, these people—familiar to us because we imagine we know their type.

In separate rooms, there are studies of a woman named Tine and her family. The painter, Christian Krogh, stayed with them during a year spent in their fishing village. The paintings convey the empathy he felt for her life as a young mother, with its cares and burdens. The sleeping child has her mother's cleft chin. We find ourselves wondering anxiously if the older child whose hair Tine is combing might be the younger one whose sickbed she tends so faithfully three rooms away.

In the next room is the painter's wife, Oda Krogh, a modern woman with her hands on her hips. Two rooms beyond are her own paintings, a child cutting up a newspaper and a Japanese lantern in a blue nightscape. She signs herself Oda Lasson, her maiden name. An important figure in the art world of Oslo at one of its cultural high points, she married Christian Krogh, her second husband, in 1888.



Christian Krogh, "Portrait of Oda Krogh," National Gallery, Oslo

### **A painter's development**

Walking back in time, we find a painter that portrays an 18th-century family through two generations, capturing their progress from the provincial judiciary to the capital. The paintings get better in step with the rising fortunes of their subjects. The passage of time frees them from a board-like stiffness, not unlike the development of photography a century later. This is one kind of progression. Elsewhere, we see an early 20th-century academic portrait of a woman artist. Fifteen years later, in the 1920s, the same artist paints a polychromatic, half-expressionist scene of a father reading under an umbrella, his house behind him, bathed in sunlight, and his daughter in shadow in a hammock.

The evolution of the painter Harriett Backer used to be similarly visible, her academic leave-taking picture contrasting with her blue room in Paris and her post-Paris impressionist look outward from a realistically-painted country church in Norway. Now, though, Backer's older paintings are in storage. What's left is in the bigger room dominated by Krogh's monumental "Albertine," while Munch has small room in the corner with its sense of intimacy and better light. Munch also has the large central room, the repository of paintings so famous that it's hard to look at them without thinking of their fame. It's originality that distinguishes Munch from his contemporaries. "The Sick Child" is so singular, while "The Scream" is so iconic that it slams the door on emulation.

### **Time paused and caught**



Harald Sohlberg, "Summer Night," National Gallery, Oslo

Near Backer's paintings are two others of lakes viewed in the summer twilight. Peering into the half-light, we can see men rowing. A column of smoke rises from a hidden and distant chimney. Elsewhere, this same summer light is captured by Harald Sohlberg in a panorama that takes in a deck, a summer house, a fjord, and mountains. The sun, setting to our right, is reflected in the windows. An evening meal, with its plates and vessels, the wood lapboard and the French doors of the house—these remind me of my own in Berkeley. We make these associations, but we don't expect the sun to set or the diners to emerge. It's as if the moments of time that these paintings of summer nights convey are meant to be stored away and savored later, when daylight is scarce.

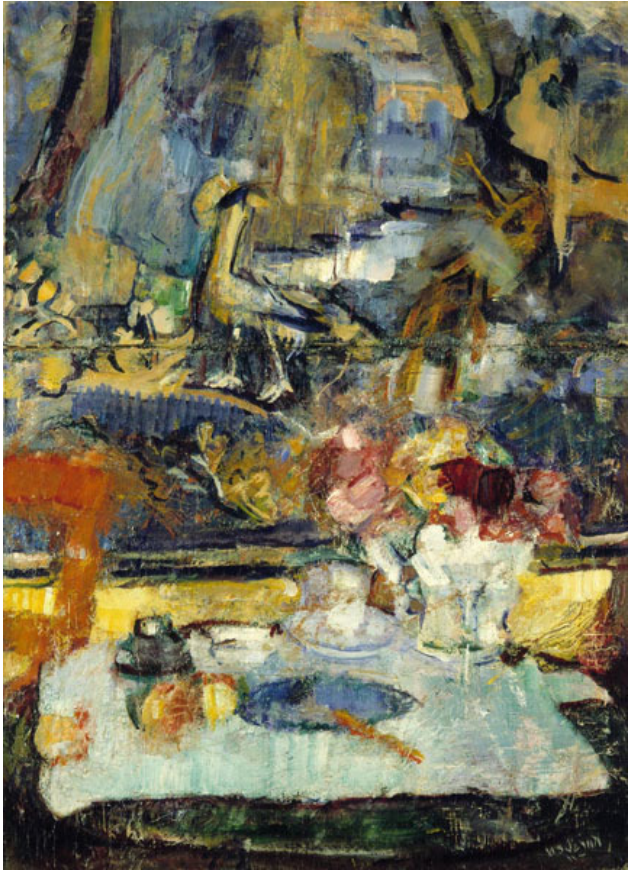


Harriet Backer, "The Blue Room," National Gallery, Oslo, Norway

Backer's "Blue Room" is my favorite painting in the National Gallery. My response to it is like my feelings for the cello. The color and the sense of wholeness of the composition are like Vermeer; the plant in the window is like Balthus. The woman who sits facing the window is preoccupied with her sewing. Across from her are chairs whose slender legs could all too easily take flight. The stillness of the room is momentary. Only her concentration on her work holds life in suspense. Only the imagined sound of a clock or the particles of dust that our minds see drifting in the sunlight, reminds us that time is passing. The "Blue Room" holds out that possibility.

### **Painting's acts of letting go**

In the space of six or seven rooms, we see the work of three generations of painters. More accurately, we move a decade at a time from the 1880s to the 1930s. In the process, we see these painters begin to sever the tie to storytelling characteristic of the mid-19th century. They move toward what might be called visual expression—something "seen" and conveyed visually, without an obvious story or subtext. Munch is the pivot-point of this transition, caught up in both impulses, which he combines in ways that we find later in the work of Max Beckmann and Francis Bacon, for example. Other painters come down on one side or the other—and increasingly on one side only, the side of the purely visual. As they move toward abstraction, painters drift away from realistic depiction. Soon, it they will abandon it altogether.



Ludvig Karsten, "Gobelin," 1911, Stenersen Museum, Oslo



Erling Enger, "Farm," Stenersen Museum, Oslo

I was reminded of this progression by an incident in Berkeley, just after the death of Willem de Kooning. At Peet's, a local café, a man waved a copy of de Kooning's obituary and said loudly, "My nine year old can paint better than this!" The obituary in the *New York Times* noted that de Kooning's last work was shaped, so to speak, by his final illness, Alzheimer's disease, and therefore of questionable merit. Yet Oliver Sacks' neurological case studies suggest that creativity and human impulse can endure in the face of neurological deficits. That de Kooning continued to paint, despite his condition, may indicate that he found it less of an impediment than the critics imagined. Being severed from his life's narrative may actually have liberated his artistic vision and its expression, taking it beyond words.



Willem de Kooning, late painting, Carlo Billoti Museum, Rome

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