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On view at Scandinavia House in 2013 and 2014, the exhibition *Danish Paintings from the Golden Age to the Modern Breakthrough: Selections from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr.* showcased a collection of masterworks by leading Danish painters from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Co-curated by Dr. Patricia G Berman, Theodora and Stanley Feldberg, and Dr. Thor Mednick, the exhibition traced key developments in Danish painting from the late neoclassical, to the romantic, to the early modern eras—a period of unprecedented artistic creativity that saw the emergence of a distinctive national school of Danish painting.

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Composed of 37 paintings and drawings, the exhibition features the work of a range of artists, including Nicolai Abildgaard, the first history painter of note to be trained at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts; the “Danish Golden Age” artists Christen Købke, L.A. Smith, and Vilhelm Kyhn; and the modern painters Berthe Wegmann, Anna and Michael Ancher, P.S. Krøyer, and his pupils Harald Slott-Møller and the internationally-renowned Vilhelm Hammershøi.

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Organized by The American-Scandinavian Foundation, the exhibition was drawn exclusively from the private collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr., regarded the finest collection of Danish paintings outside Scandinavia. Beginning from the years when Ambassador served as United States Ambassador to Denmark from 1981 to 1983, the collection later grew to include 128 works by 63 artists spanning more than 200 years, and have since stimulated international interest and transformed the reception of Danish art.

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*Danish Paintings from the Golden Age to the Modern Breakthrough* covered a period from roughly the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the early 20<sup>th</sup>, one of enormous political and social upheaval in Denmark that saw dramatic changes not only in the character of Danish painting, but in the country’s sense of national identity. The relative peace and prosperity of the 18th century was brought to an abrupt end by Denmark’s involvement in the Napoleonic Wars, which left the country bereft of its once-powerful navy and global prominence.

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Ensuing decades of political and economic instability, driven by economic collapse and then a rising middle class and rural proletariat, saw the demise of Denmark’s 1,000-year-old absolutism and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Artists, writers, and political thinkers alike participated in a new nationalistic fervor and the perceived need to redefine what it meant to be Danish.

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This exhibition focused on the extraordinary outburst of artistic creativity that occurred during this period, as successive generations of Danish painters sought to create a national school that would rival those of France, Germany, and England. The works on view document the full richness and variety of their work.

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Paintings from the 1780s to the 90s included important examples of neo-classically inspired history paintings by artists such as Nicolai Abildgaard and Jens Juel. One of the first students, professors and later director of the Danish Royal Academy, Nicolai Abildgaard is considered a founding father of 19-century Danish painting.

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*Alexander and Diogenes*, circa 1780-90, is drawn from an episode from Plutarch's *The Life of Alexander*, and depicts the moment the philosopher asks Alexander to step aside because he is blocking the sun.

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Christen Købke's *The Sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen*, c. 1828, pays homage to Denmark's greatest neoclassical sculptor, in a close-up, penetrating portrait, painted while Købke was a student in the studio of C.W. Ecksberg.

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Works from the 1810s to 1850s, the so-called "Golden Age" of Danish painting, reflect the conscious rejection of academic neoclassicism in favor of a new nationalistic art that celebrated the land and its people.

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Its legacy includes Christen Dalsgaard's charming *Interior with a Young Girl Writing a Letter* pictured here.

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Romanticized views of the Danish countryside by Vilhelm Kyhn and J. Th. Lundbye epitomize the idealizing and unabashedly patriotic approach typical of the Golden Age painters, such as in Kyhn's *Evening Atmosphere*, 1861, and Lundbye's *Landscape Near Lake Arresø, Frederiksværk*, 1838.

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By contrast, L. A. Ring's *Harvest*, 1886, in which a rural laborer — the artist's brother — wields his heavy scythe in the hot sun, presents a markedly less idyllic view of rural life, presaging the social realism embraced by many turn-of-the-century Danish painters.

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The final section of the exhibition explores the varied responses to modernist innovations at home and abroad—a phenomenon collectively known as "the Modern Breakthrough."

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The enormous impact of French Impressionism, with its free brushwork, brilliant effects of light, and emphasis on subjects from everyday life, is apparent in works such as Otto Bache's

sparkling view of *Flag Day in Copenhagen*, after 1892; Laurits Tuxen's *Collecting Mussels at Low Tide at Le Portel, France*, 1888; and Harald Slott- Møller's *Summer Day*, 1888.

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The exhibition also includes a number of works by the influential husband-and-wife painters Michael and Anna Ancher, who participated in an important artists colony at Skagen Beach, in northern Denmark, where they and their fellow painters excelled in plein air views of the town's beach and fisher folk.

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Anna Ancher's *On the Way to Church*, circa 1928, depicts three older women, likely members of a Christian revival movement called the Inner Mission, to which the artist's mother and three sisters belonged.

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Perhaps the most successful and still best known of the Danish Naturalists was P.S. Krøyer, represented by a vibrant self-portrait of the artist at his easel on Skagen Beach, from 1902.

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The exhibition culminates with a remarkable group of seven works by Vilhelm Hammershøi, the greatest and yet most enigmatic of Danish modernists. A far cry from the chromatic brilliance of the Danish Impressionists, Hammershøi's austere and radically simplified landscapes and interiors owe much to Vermeer as well as to Whistler and the Symbolist movement.

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*Interior, Strandgade 30*, 1899, is one of several works on view devoted to the artist's favorite motif: a room in his Copenhagen apartment in which a somberly clad woman—the artist's wife—quietly performs a domestic task.

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For many, these restrained, nearly monochrome paintings, with their subtle explorations of light and mood of psychological introspection, exemplify the unique qualities and character of modernist Danish art.

#### CREDITS

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All artwork images from the Collection of John L. Loeb Jr.

Installation images by Eileen Travell/ASF.

