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## The Light of the North

Peder Balke and the Mountains of Norway

The art of any country can be greatly affected, even directed by its topography and climate. Perhaps none exhibits this more than Norway where soaring verticality and forbidding beauty have shaped an artistic structure, where glacial hardness has rendered sharp, clear landscapes reflecting life on the margins of Europe.

A painting of a mountain can hold an eternal timelessness within its frame 'but in its momentariness reflects also its endless shiftings – it is a moment of time caught in the seeming eternity of the landscape.'<sup>1</sup> So the artist not only records form and topography but also documents the passing of time and the structuring of memory. Mountains especially have that capacity to provoke a tangible landscape of memory. Places that had a profound effect on you, that perhaps made you, may alter you to become more like them. What the youthful mountaineer initially discovers and possesses in the mountains may, in the end, be what possesses them.

That a landscape could imbue a sense of self and of isolation yet at the same moment endorse a feeling of solidity, of belonging, of knowing the land and its history, was a development of Romanticism. Landscape can maintain a purity, mirrored in art, but also a darkness and atmosphere that few mastered better than Peder Balke (1804-87). The main features of his mountain landscapes are dramatic lighting and subject matter. This Norwegian landscape artist quickly became an explorer within his own terrain. This attitude became known as Romantic Nationalism and revealed a pride in his homeland, its history and folk traditions that drew him into the empty places.

Balke was attracted to extreme images where the immensity of the mountains and the vastness of the sea allowed intense and exciting colour structures. The desolation and rawness he found in his homeland was painted delicately and skilfully; there was never an attempt to revel in the harshness of the terrain but to record accurately the colour structures he found and the vivid atmospherics surrounding them. From his interest in national history, he drew from the landscape a form of realism that was never based in nostalgia or folk memory. What he captured was the spirit and essence of the landscape in its emptiness; absence became rendered as presence.

The artist becomes explorer, beginning 'a journey from acute and precise observations of the peculiarities of nature and natural phenomena'<sup>2</sup> to a

1. D Jasper, *The Sacred Desert*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2004, p110.

2. Jasper, p111.

resolution about time and space, colour, and form. This is a journey that mountains can activate and embody in an emblematic stance. We respond to the demands of the mountain environment and in that demand, we are at once the insignificant dot on the massif and an organ of perception extending many miles over the landscape, contacting it, touching it. These are aspects of the world neither beautiful nor hostile in themselves: 'a place pure and simple, on its own terms, absolute'.<sup>3</sup> One of the defining aspects of these unique places over and above the recording of the topography is the interpretation of atmospherics. Whether stormbound or bathed in sunlight the impression of a mountain is radically altered by the mood of the weather. Any sense of character will be greatly enhanced by an accurate analysis and execution of the sky and climatic conditions.

Peder Balke was born on the island of Helgøya in Hedmark in 1804 into a household whose name was Anderson. They were a family of landless farm labourers, and his childhood was stark and impoverished. His father disappeared from Balke's life at an early stage in the boy's life and thereby education was not an option. By the 1820s he was training as a house painter and quickly established himself as a craftsman with a high reputation that secured him many commissions. Around 1825 he spent a long period at Vestre Balke farm where he was very well treated and he adopted the name Balke thereafter. Interested in expanding his abilities he spent several months working alongside Ole Nielsen (1750-1838) at Fåberg who had studied at the academy in Copenhagen. While developing new techniques he still regarded himself as an ambitious artisan who had several apprentices working under him.

He narrowly avoided military conscription and arrived in Christiania (Oslo) in 1826. At this point he had decided to become a master painter in the capital and to that end worked with the painters Heinrich Grosch and Jens Funch, in addition to attending classes at the Royal School of Drawing. Between house decorating contracts and donations from wealthy friends Balke financed his art education so that by 1828-9 he was producing his own work, albeit somewhat imitative of the style popular at that time. In the next few years, he travelled extensively through northern Norway discovering the dramatic unrecorded landscape, and also to Copenhagen and Stockholm visiting artists and collections to increase his knowledge and ability.

In 1830 Balke made an ambitious journey on foot through the Telemark region and over the mountains to western Norway. 'He walked to Rjukan and up the notoriously dangerous path beside the waterfall, crossed the Røldal Mountains and descended to Kinsarvik in Hardanger'<sup>4</sup> and continued on to Christiania. He had travelled further than any other Norwegian artist and returned to Stockholm in 1831 where the king purchased his studies of the mountains and of the new road to Trondheim. He made his first journey to the far north of Norway in 1832, sailing from Trondheim via the Lofoten Islands to Trømsø and recording landscapes illuminated by the midnight

3. Jasper, p126.

4. M Lange, *Peder Balke*, National Gallery, London, 2017, p16.

sun. A military convoy took him to Vordø, sailing past the North Cape 'around which swirled the mighty waves of the Arctic Ocean.'<sup>5</sup> In 1836 and again in 1843-4 Balke visited Dresden where he polished his style alongside Johan Dahl and Caspar David Friedrich and advanced his understanding of German *Stimmungsmalerie*, 'mood painting', 'which ultimately would be the decisive influence on his view of nature.'<sup>6</sup>

Several journeys through Germany visiting collections and galleries, friends and fellow artists, seeing diverse forms of architecture and design showered Balke with new impressions. A trip to Paris introduced him to the work of Isabey (1803-86), Huet (1803-69), and Gudin (1802-80) whose striking compositions amazed him. Despite these new fascinations Balke found it difficult to sell his work at home as there were few exhibitions in Norway and relying on private commissions from a small clientele was precarious.

The three examples selected show recurring motifs in his work and developed a distinctly northern iconography that shaped the history of Norwegian painting and informed the art of Europe.

### 'From North Cape'<sup>7</sup>

This feature is situated on the extreme north coast of the island of Magerøya, on the northernmost part of Europe. In this painting (see p114) Balke presents darkness visible with a light at the end of the tunnel: a quality that recalls aspects of Genesis and a spirit moving over the waters but well within the Norse framework of an ancient land structured by Norse gods. The boat in the central foreground is in darkness about to penetrate the light. That is where Balke takes us to the edge of discovery and exploration.

Darkness frames the canvas curving across the top of the image centring the light, allowing us to see into the primordial blackness. As viewers we are placed in attendance at the discovery of this feature. The two bars of moonlight on either side of the cliffs stand as creational dividers measuring the span and distance of the rocky feature as if newly formed. We travel from the dimness of a dull reddish tone reminiscent of a vast amniotic fluid spreading over a dark, calm sea towards the light and a stark topography of the seemingly emergent North Cape.

This is an image of fear and wonder, an awesome spectacle few would be brave enough to venture towards. Here light delineates form, and form is monumental. What is offered is a bold challenge to approach this feature, to travel north, accept the dangers and explore beyond the North Cape.

### 'Mountain Range Trolltindene'<sup>8</sup>

Trolltinden (2018m) is in the heart of the Rondane mountains inside the Rondane National Park. Despite the large marine foreground and the receding folds of terrain in the mid ground, and an area of dramatic sky

5. Lange, p20.

6. Lange, p52.

7. P Balke, 'From North Cape', oil on board, 67.5cm × 84cm, National Gallery, Oslo, 1840.

8. P Balke, 'Mountain Range Trolltindene', oil on canvas, 30.8cm × 41.9cm, Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, Tromsø, 1840.



'From North Cape' by Peder Balke. (*National Gallery, Oslo*)

equalling the foreground in scale, it is a darkly dominant mountain ridge that confronts us. The turbulent clouds fill the lower valleys with mist and violent waves on the sea set the tone of the picture. Balke's deeply serrated skyline overshadows the image, rendering a ferocity to the atmosphere that at once repels and draws us into this strange landscape. The peaks and horns of the Trolltinde demand closer inspection and exploration. This volatile glimpse only whets the appetite and has the capacity to remind us of other extreme mountains at the far ends of the world, as in Patagonia. Cloud spilling down and around the base of the cliffs creates a mystical presence, adding a mythological quality to this feature in northern Norway. Balke's gift is the realisation that such seemingly mythic landscapes exist in reality.

For the Romantics, the life of emotion was at the core of their philosophy and their notion of the sublime. If the concept of the sublime was centred on things that overwhelmed the individual and caused fear and alarm, then the dramatic landscape of northern Norway held it in abundance.



'Mountain Range Trolltindene'. (Asbjørn Lunde Collection)



Another interpretation of the Trolltinden; Balke returned to favourite subjects like the North Cape and Stetind several times.

While storms at sea and moonlit landscapes were a common characteristic of the Romantic era, Balke 'translated these motifs into an idiom that could convey the far north's unique atmospheric conditions.'<sup>9</sup>

### 'Stetind in Fog'<sup>10</sup>

This dramatic rock feature is situated in the Steffjord near the head of the Tysfjorden and was selected in 2002 as Norway's national mountain. Located an hour's drive south-west of Narvik in Nordland, it is about 15km north-east of Kjølsvik. Smooth sides reaching down to the fjord give the granite mountain of Stetind (1392m) an almost obelisk-like form that dominates this corner of the Scandinavia mountains.

Grey fog envelopes and isolates the peak, creating a dramatic, precipitous and apparently inaccessible rock tower. The diminutive figures in the foreground boat along with those ashore looking out to sea form a human counterpoint indicating humanity's status in mankind's relationship with the forces of nature. This majestic landmark was first climbed in 1910 by Ferdinand Schjelderup, Carl Rubenson, and Alf Bryn. Arne Naess introduced aid climbing to Norway in the late 1930s at Stetind and claimed the first winter ascent of the mountain by the east wall.

Several versions of this scene were produced over the years alongside many drawings and colour studies. Twenty-six sketches of the area were sold to Louis Philippe I of France and are now in the Louvre while other images of the mountain are held in the National Gallery in Oslo and in the Metropolitan Gallery in New York.

In his lifetime, several European monarchs purchased Balke's paintings: Karl Johan of Sweden and Norway, Louis-Philippe of France, and Frederick William IV of Prussia. Yet by the 1850s his work had become unpopular. His pictures may have lacked the intricacy and finesse expected by the Norwegian public and at his death he was known as a respected member of Oslo society but as an artist was totally forgotten. Interests and themes in painting had moved on and he left no successor in the field of dramatic reproduction of the Norwegian north. Yet it is this severity that attracts the viewing public now. The darkness, atmosphere and boldness of his paint handling are recognised as strengths and no longer a lack of academic refinement.

Given the nature of these paintings and the profound impact they had on the Norwegian public of the day one could ask if this was a case of landscape as a reflection of the national psyche? Where 'the fragility of man confronted by brute force'<sup>11</sup>, the force projected by this seeming emptiness, was adopted as national characteristic? The north was a fearful, lonely place and sparsely populated. Balke was not trading in anxiety and dread but revealing, through his ability to render atmospheric accurately, the symbolic hardness of life within his country. His ability to create the moods and effects

9. Lange, p52.

10. P Balke, 'Stetind in Fog', oil on canvas, 58cm × 71cm, National Gallery, Oslo, 1864.

11. Lange, p62.



'Stetind in Fog'. The first ascent of this rocky peak was made in 1910 by Ferdinand Schjelderup, the Himalayan pioneer Carl Rubenson and Alf Bryn, author of *Peaks and Bandits*. William Cecil Slingsby described Stetind, which he failed to climb, as being the ugliest mountain he had ever seen. (*National Gallery, Oslo*)

of the weather, uniquely indicating their power and authority in nature, was his gift. If, as Thubron claimed, 'a journey is not a cure. It brings an illusion, only of change, and becomes at best a spartan comfort'<sup>12</sup> then Balke achieved this in his canvases, where a moment in the eternity of time is captured, but also the 'spartan comfort' of natural phenomena within the striking northern climate. Was this what possessed Balke in old age?

12. C Thubron, *To a Mountain in Tibet*, Vintage, London, 2012. p10.

His paintings are held in many major and national collections. Seventeen of his works are housed in the Norwegian National Gallery in Oslo. These are images of endless confrontation yet symbols of resilience also in the face of nature's indifference. He possessed a unique perseverance that over time formulated a visionary landscape for his time and place. A form of this manner of painting was briefly touched on by Bierstadt's symbolic heightened visions of the west, which emerged as a kind of glorification. Balke's work was never concerned with adoration but the profound need to reveal the beauty of the far north. His visual interpretations may have flown in defiance of the conventions of the day, yet it is still the reason we enter the beautiful chaos of the mountain regions and set out on those thrilling adventures.