

Brian Dudley Barrett

Yankee Artists at Skagen in 1882

Anyone acquainted with the history of European art in the late nineteenth century will be aware of the invasion of northern France by American enthusiasts, both of the Left Bank and in the many artists' villages that were beginning to spring up around the periphery of Brittany, Normandy and the Forest of Fontainebleau, especially after the success of the School of Barbizon.¹ Less familiar, yet substantial in number, was their artistic 'colonisation' northwards at least as far as Amsterdam. Approximately one quarter of all participants in the many Dutch rural artists' colonies were American, seen in the popularity of villages such as Katwijk-aan-zee, Laren and Volendam. This percentage increased with the formation of 'summer-schools' in hamlets such as Rijksoord and Egmond-aan-zee, set in the North Sea sand-dunes.² Egmond appeared to be the most northerly limit of such Yankee group migrations, until now.

Less well-known, if at all, is one single incursion into that

¹ Sellin, David, *American Artists in Brittany and Normandy, 1860-1910* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1982). Pont-Aven and Concarneau had particularly high concentrations of American painters, yet, as early as 1850, a surprising number lived and worked in Barbizon.

² Stott, Annette, *Hollandgekte – de onbekende Nederlandse periode in de Amerikaanse kunst en cultuur* (Amsterdam: Olifant, 1998).

quintessential Nordic artists' colony at Skagen, what Holger Drachmann called an 'El Dorado for artists.'³ What is particularly remarkable, and not publicly noted before, is that not only did a trio of Yankee painters lodge there, in the famous Brøndum's Hotel, but they visited it at the very moment of Skagen's greatest artistic blossoming, the autumn of 1882, when P.S.Krøyer, the modern 'Aladdin', arrived to boost the group's core formation of painters Christian Krohg, Viggo Johansen, Karl Madsen, and newly-weds Anna and Michael Ancher.

As with all the greatest artists' colonies, Skagen was cosmopolitan in outlook and vision. It was a true forum of international talent and ideas, a mixture of experienced professionals and youthful students bursting with fresh enthusiasms. They were modernists looking for an edge, not backward-looking revisionists withdrawing to an easy rural Arcadia. There were approximately ten nationalities present in Skagen's artists' colony in this important pioneering stage, but nowhere before has it been recorded as mentioning any painters from outside Europe.

Because of Skagen's situation at this northernmost tip of mainland Denmark, one might imagine that native artists predominated, but Norwegians and Swedes formed the majority, at times, of its early core-group. Oslo and Göteborg are nearer to Skagen than Copenhagen, after all. Thus, for example, painters Eilif Peterssen, Charles Lundt, Vilhelm Peters, the young Oscar Björck, Johan Krouthén and the redoubtable Krohg all appear in the definitive portrayal of this fledgling artists' colony, *Ved Frokosten*, 1883, by the then-Norwegian Peder Severin Krøyer. The only two Danes to be seen in this iconic figure composition of Skagen are the painter Michael Ancher and his brother-in-law, the innkeeper, Degn Brøndum. Sometimes called *The Artists' Luncheon*, this dazzling work captures well the mood of early fellowship in the hotel's, now-

³ Jacobs, Michael, *The Good and Simple Life* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985) p. 93.

famous, dining room, before its more-formal decoration and self-conscious organisation. This canvas, which was positioned at the heart of that later, wood-panelled decoration, is a masterpiece of bravura painting. The attention to light is typical of the latest fashionable French *valeur* technique and yet it also exemplifies the pioneering spirit of rural social creativity that was blossoming everywhere across Europe.

Possibly the most exotic artist commonly mentioned in the not inconsiderable literature about Skagen and its pioneers, is the young Greek marine painter Jean Altamura. He only paid one short visit, in 1876, yet he managed to beguile the impressionable innkeeper's daughter, Anna Brøndum, and consequently these affections enraged her beau, the rather stolid and 'melancholy Bornholmer',⁴ Michael Ancher. One German, Fritz Stoltenberg, visited Skagen in the summer of 1884 and subsequently Krøyer painted his portrait for the hotel's growing collection. There was also a curious Anglo-Austrian couple, painters Marianne and Adrian Stokes, whose presence may be traced in other 'sketching grounds' in Brittany, Cornwall and Holland. They visited Denmark in 1885 and 1886, at the invitation of Krøyer, whom they met at Pont-Aven, on the south coast of Brittany. Krøyer also painted their portraits, individually, which were eventually all arranged in the 'pelmet panel' for the hotel's dining-room collection. The Stokes also feature in one of Michael Ancher's finest works, *Christening in Skagen Church*, 1888, a celebration of the Anchers' and the colony's only child.

Interestingly, the three Yankee painters, Robert Swain Gifford (1840-1905), Francis Davis Millet (1846-1912) and Edwin Austen Abbey (1852-1911), and Michael Ancher had something in common, which was generally typical of the period, for they were all looking for a suitable *mis-en-scene*. Ancher had admired the fishermen back on his home-island of Bornholm and wished to find a

⁴ Ole Wivel, *Rejsen til Skagen* (Lyngby: Stockholms Forlag, 1977) p. 71.

similar or better setting, which he did at Skagen. This resulted in his first salon triumph, *Will She Clear the Point*, 1879. The Americans were looking for similar authentic experiences and settings, which brought them also to Skagen. Later, two of the three Americans found it in the Midlands of England, surprisingly. There, Abbey and Millet hosted a select artists' colony at Broadway in the rather Shakespearian, unspoilt and picturesque countryside of the Cotswold Hills. They found no inspirational abbeys, castles or medieval ruins in North Jutland.

Brøndum's, Skagen's only hotel at the time, was never considered luxurious, even after the insurance company paid for the major fire-restorations in 1874-5.⁵ 'Spartan' is commonly used to describe the facilities of this converted yet typical *vest-jydske* farm-house. Spartan lodgings are not what one wishes in such a windswept and exposed location. The bedrooms on offer were small and there was only one shared bathroom, conditions that so appalled Krøyer on his first visit, in June 1882, that he complained and almost left straightaway. The dingy public bar, down-stairs, had a low, slanted ceiling. Here, in the gloom, the fishermen sat at long wooden benches and tables. Lise Svanholm, in her excellent recent commentary on Skagen life, shows that this truly remote, cut-off village had a remarkably large population at the time, c. 1600 inhabitants.⁶ Its population had actually increased slightly from when the first artists arrived, in the 1830s, yet there had been no official lodgings for there were so few regular visitors. When, 17th August 1859, Hans Christian Andersen, a friend of both the Brøndum and Rørbye families,⁷ lodged at Skagen he was one of the first guests at the

⁵ The hotel fire started on 11th January 1874. Luckily, the hotel was insured. Michael Ancher first arrived later that year, in July.

⁶ Lise Svanholm, *Malerne på Skagen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2001) p. 13. Probably the best book on Skagen's artists for dates, data and details. (English trans. *Northern Light. The Skagen Painters*, 2004).

⁷ B.D. Barrett, *North Sea Artists' Colonies* (diss.), Rijksuniversiteit Groningen,

recently registered, and only, *gæstgiveri* in the village. That license was only granted to Eric Brøndum on 17th March 1859. Andersen not only wrote about the village's attributes and its proprietor, almost immediately in 'En historie fra Klitterne' and his *Folkekalender for Danmark, 1860*, he made further entreaties to artists to visit this highly-atmospheric peninsula. Few painters responded at the time,⁸ yet, slowly, along with the inevitable trickle of government officials and civil engineers, there was an increase in the numbers of cultured visitors who were curious about this enigmatic extremity of the country. It must be noted that Skagen was not a picturesque village, but it triggered a powerful set of emotions in many visitors. There was no special maritime or architectural features, although the old church was dramatically, half buried in the sands. It did not have spectacular cliffs, as at Møns Klint, a popular artists' sketching ground. However, its geographical position, 'Between Two Seas,' another title of a Skagen piece by H.C. Andersen, gives it a special psychological value, as well as a moody ethereal atmosphere.

Hotel Brøndum's register is a surprisingly small book, measuring only 14 x 11 cm., and consisting of 138 pages in all. The few other artists' colony hotel guestbooks that have survived have a much larger format, more ledger-like and contain official stamps or a printed forward, such as those from Spaander's Hotel in Volendam, Auberge Ganne in Barbizon and Hotel Baudy in Giverney.

2008, pp. 234-45. Martinus Rørbye is recorded as the first painter to work in Skagen, in 1830. He met H.C. Andersen on 1st June 1833 aboard the steamship *Dania*, which ferried them from Copenhagen to Aarhus, when they were both house-guests at the Tjele estate near Viborg.

⁸ Poul Carit Andersen, *Skagen i fortid og nutid* (Copenhagen: C. Andersen, 1980) p. 44. Only two painters seem to have followed H.C. Andersen's entreaty, by visiting Skagen in 1863: Janus la Cour (1837-1900) and Peter Raadsig (1806-82).

dag	Navn og Stand.	Adresse eller iidsse Poholdestet.
1875		
11 Juni	Michael Ancher maler.	Kjøbenhavn
1 Juli	Vilhelmine Bang Line Sparling. Høimortens Lise Gaotberg Miss Ponderens	Kjøbenhavn. Sandholt Sandholt. Sandholt.
3 Maj	Karl Hassens pater.	Kjøbenhavn
2 Juli	Ove Petersen Architekt Carl J. Grove Typograf bedrebering Høimortens Ella Petersen Journalist	Kjøbenhavn do do do
4 Juli	Johann J. J. Petersen Kjøbmand O. H. Carl Kjøbmand M. H. Carl Kjøbmand	Kjøbenhavn Kjøbenhavn Kjøbenhavn

The First Page of Brøndum's Hotel Register, 1875, starting with Michael Ancher's signature.

Brøndum's first page, however, does offer a hand-written, signed notification by the police authorities, which is repeated at

intervals throughout the book. Volume 1 starts on 1st July 1875 and finishes on 3rd January 1889, both signed by the same officer from *Skagens Politikammer*. The first name on the list of lodgers is ‘Maler’ Michael Ancher, with his colleague Karl Madsen signing in a few names further down, but who wrote his arrival date as 5th May.

It can be seen from this register that the visitors came not only from the local region, as one would expect, but many from distant Copenhagen and even as far away as Møgeltonder, to the far south, which at that time was part of Prussian North Schleswig. Interestingly, the party from Copenhagen which arrived on the 5th July included Count Frederik Moltke and his son, Johannes, plus Greve Anton Broekenhuis-Schack, whose ancestral castle, Schackenborg, is in Møgeltonder.⁹ On the 2nd July the lodgers included one architect, Ove Peteresen, and a lighthouse engineer, Carl F. Grove, both from Copenhagen, which appears to indicate growing state investment in this distant yet strategic location. There was not to be a harbour, railway or road for another decade so all visitors risked an uncomfortable ride along the treacherous sands, where ships foundered even in calm weather.

Naturally, rival entrepreneurs soon arose to challenge the Brøndums’ monopoly but they did not share the same feelings of friendship with the peripatetic artists. However, the likes of rivals Lars Holst and *købmand* Winthers did seem to further fuel the ambitions of the Brøndum clan, ambitions that had grown since Denmark’s most famous living artist, H.C. Andersen, had lodged there back in 1859. Aspirations rose once more as the hotel became the social centre for the artists’ colony elite. In fact, there

⁹ Grev Frederik Moltke was appointed the Danish Foreign Minister on the 11th June 1875. He lived in Copenhagen at nr. 2 Dronningens Tvaergade, which is still known as *Moltkes Palais*. The trip to Skagen may have proved too exhausting, for he died on the 1st October, yet he had been a valuable patron of the arts and his substantial painting collection was always made available to art students.

are many shared characteristics between the artists and the chosen proprietors, which resulted in many mutual benefits. The happy atmosphere that resulted was low-key, creative yet festive, full of goodwill and caused the hotels to be freely decorated in gratitude.

Some of the lodgers who came the furthest are the most difficult to explain. On the 6th September, 1875, for example, there was another party of three, two 'gentlemen' from England and a man from Iowa. However, the latter's name was Søren Olsen, occupation 'Farmer', possibly, one imagines a recent emigrant to the USA, or family to Danish emigrants, on a return trip to the old country. On 18th August, 1879, another party of three arrived, from Germany. They were the Danish painter Ole Juul, from Düsseldorf; painter August Fricke from Berlin; and, the much travelled and influential landscape painter Eugen Dücker, soon to be professor at Düsseldorf's prestigious Art Academy. However, they only lodged at Hotel Brøndum for a single night. Finally, on the 20th August, 1881, there was another group of three visitors who came from Oxford University. One was Lord George Fitzgerald, at Christ Church College, while his two gentleman companions were at Pembroke College. It is not recorded when they left. It can be seen from these examples that Skagen had already experienced a slow yet exotic supply of the great and the good, on a national and international scale, by 1882, although it was not quite on the major tourist map, compared with the artists' colonies at Barbizon, Dachau, St. Ives and Turveuren.

The spread of rail networks all across Europe by this time is usually given as one major cause for the development of rural artists' colonies, yet Skagen is a shining example of the exception that proves the rule, for its branch-line was not inaugurated until the Spring of 1890. By this time its artist-pioneers were already well-established and producing works regularly of an outstanding quality. What is equally as important, in practical terms, is that these artists were also exhibiting internationally and selling to major

patrons, such as Heinrich Hirschsprung in Copenhagen and Pontus Fürstenberg in Gothenburg.

There is little evidence to suppose that the three Yankees, Gifford, Millet, and Abbey, knew much about Scandinavia's modern masters before they accepted the travel commission from publishers Harper & Bros. of New York, although Millet wrote later, in their subsequent illustrated article, that they "already knew the names of Cattegat [sic], Skager-Rack, Skagen and the Skaw"¹⁰ from school geography class. More typical of that era, these artists were actively participating in the new wave of interest in regional character and topography. They were all members of an artists' travel society, *The Zigzag Club*, whose main aim was to picture a fast-disappearing culture. This meant that they were seeking out traditional folk customs, costumes and unspoilt locations, particularly in Europe and across North Africa. Millet wrote: "We were running off the maps of Baedeker and Murray"¹¹, those early essential travel guides for civilized travellers, that did not, in fact, mention Brøndum's Hotel or anything in *Nord Jylland* for decades. They were of the opinion that: "Certainly in Jutland the people had not yet made the acquaintance with a sewing machine and ready-made clothing",¹² factors that caused the death-knell for authentic genre painting, in their collective opinion.

Only those familiar with the new wave of artistic rediscovery of the Dutch countryside, at that time, know of Abbey's work. No connection by Skagen's many art historians seems to have been made before. Abbey had worked for years along the Dutch coast and was responsible for advertising the charms of its fishing villages, such as Marken, Monnikendam, Veere and Volendam.

¹⁰ Millet, F., 'A Wild Goose Chase' in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 1885, Part II, p. 938.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

Abbey and George Boughton made a famous tour of North Holland in an open-top, horse-drawn wagon, visiting Volendam and other picturesque villages, which was written up and published in a series of illustrated articles for Harper's and, eventually, a book.¹³ It was, thus, in this light that the same publishers encouraged the three Yankees to visit Denmark.

Abbey met up with fellow New Yorkers Gifford and Millet in Lübeck. They steamed off to Copenhagen, which they found "desultory." Sadly, they missed seeing the colourful costumes of the *Amagerfolk* nearby, whom Julius Exner, amongst other genre artists, was still painting at that time. They also failed to hear of distant Fanø, a North Sea island community also unspoilt by modernisation, famed for its characteristic folk costume and cosy secular architecture. Nevertheless, Millet wrote: "the remote districts fired our ambition to visit them...".¹⁴ However, the national rail network proved inadequate and tedious: "In Denmark it took so long to get from one place to another...the trains are so unutterably slow, ten miles an hour being considered quite a cross country rate of speed."¹⁵ Reaching the northern-most tip of Jutland from Copenhagen required organising transport by land and sea. First, they caught a steamboat to Aarhus, just as Andersen and Rørbye had done together in 1833.

The group of Yankee artists explored all along Limfjord, on board the thrice-weekly steamboat, but did not complete many sketches. They found the "lazy little towns...all wharf and warehouses" surprisingly tree-less, yet the inhabitants were "without

¹³ G.H. Boughton, 'Artist Strolls in Holland' in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 1883-84, vols. 2-4, pp. 387, 520, 683; vol. 6 p. 523; and, G.H. Boughton & E.A. Abbey, *Sketching Rambles through Holland* (London: Macmillan, 1885).

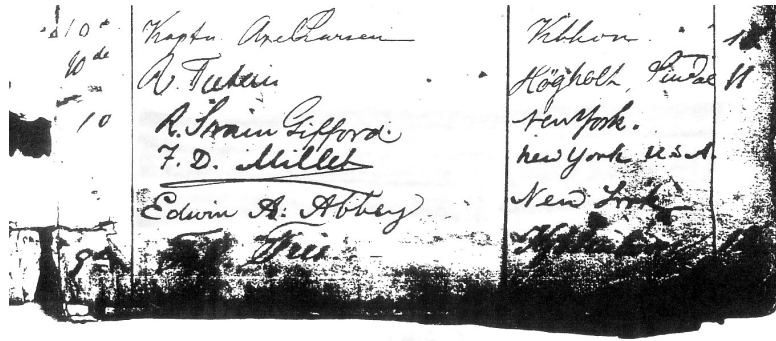
¹⁴ Millet, *A Wild Goose Chase*, p. 938.

¹⁵ Letter from Abbey to his friend Parsons, August 20th 1882, in E.V. Lucas, *E.A. Abbey – Royal Academician* (London: Methuen, 1921) vol. I, p. 122.

exception, ...agreeable, curious and polite.”¹⁶ They travelled on to Aalborg and Frederikshavn, where they heard more about Skagen from their un-named and rather perfidious innkeeper. This proprietor told them that the Brøndum’s Hotel was in a poor state and persuaded, i.e. sold, them victuals to take along, including a case of wine. He was wrong on all counts. However, they did learn that Skagen had one resident painter, presumably Michael Ancher. In fact, unusual for the core group of most such colonies, Michael and Anna Ancher were to remain the only resident artists, at least amongst its pioneers, for decades. As for alcohol, the Skagen’s painters gained an early reputation for bibulous behaviour, seen in the many typical group festivities that followed the formation of their artists’ club, the *Aftenakademie*, patroness Anna Ancher. Champagne bottles are also conspicuous in what is perhaps the most well-known of Skagen’s paintings, yet another masterpiece by Krøyer, titled *Hip hip hurra*, 1884-88.

These Yankees were also badly advised as to the journey’s length and travel conditions, for they set off at mid-day from Frederikshavn and failed woefully to reach Skagen by nightfall. They had to hire a carriage for the mail-coach, they were told, only took two passengers. The last 20 kilometers along the sandy beach was a little dangerous for the coast was scattered with ship-wrecks from what was, nevertheless, a very busy shipping lane at the mouth of the Baltic. The trip to Skagen was in complete contrast to other ‘rural’ artists’ colonies, usually a safe day’s journey from cities, and sometimes even less, as was the case with Laren, Volendam, Giverny, Grez-sur-Loing, Tervuren, Varberg, Fleskum, Tuusula and even Worpswede, which were all easily accessible by trams or suburban railways by the 1880s.

¹⁶ Millet, *A Wild Goose Chase*, Part III, pp. 18-9. “North of Lymfjord we saw scarcely enough trees to make a day’s fire for an Adirondack sportsman.”



Brondum's Hotel Register, page 126, August 1882, showing the signatures of the Yankee artists from New York.

Some of the most important factors holding artists' colonies together were social; the feelings of mutuality, of fellowship and of peer group support and affirmation. These occurred irrespective of artistic technique, training, provenance, religion, politics or gender. These artists were not hiding away in seclusion, as happened with brotherhoods, such as the *Nazarenes* or the *Barbus*, but, at best, they were exploiting or employing the latest theories and technological innovations. They usually retained strong ties to the city or cities, where the art dealers asked for and received 'pot-boilers', or series of paintings sharing the same popular characteristic motifs, which were often the result of financial necessity. They were proud to be independent artists, yet they were not averse to developing strong financial links, demonstrably, with the new industrial print-publishers. This was the case with the three American artists and Harpers of New York. In Denmark, the name of 'Xylograf' Hendriksen, in Copenhagen, is closely associated with many professional painters. They were also close friends with the more progressive art galleries, which, again in Copenhagen, meant the firm of Winkel & Magnussen, on Østergade, and especially Gallery Val-

demar Kleis, on Vesterbro, which is where the largest Scandinavian modernist initiative, *Den Frie Udstilling*, fermented in the early 1890s.¹⁷ It is no surprise that most of the Skagen artists had strong ties with *Den Frie* and the new radical art dealers, yet they all maintained contacts with the old salon cliques and official authorities as well.

Krøyer is crucial to the huge success of the artists' colony at Skagen, not just because he was so talented - which could and did lead to problems with his colleagues. His quick wit was celebratory and also conciliatory, for he had considerable social skills: for example, he knew it was important to reconcile the early spat with Michael Ancher over 'territorial rights' immediately. Krøyer thrived on the social creativity at Skagen. It is a pity he did not meet the American group, although they lodged at Brøndum's Hotel at about the same time. Michael Ancher, whom they did meet, lacked the same dynamism and camaraderie. Krøyer had actually arrived from Copenhagen that summer on July 9th. Oscar Björck arrived direct from Stockholm Art Academy on July 11th and Vilhelm Groth on the 8th August, so the village was already filling up with *plein-air* painters. In fact, the hotel was full when the Yankees arrived long after the lights were out.¹⁸ Degn Brøndum eventually let them in and made them welcome with a late fish-supper accompanied by two bottles of claret. Bounteous and cheap fish potage is somewhat synonymous with all coastal artists' hotels, from Concarneau to Cockburnspath. In fact, fish dishes were all the Yankees were ever offered in Skagen, monotonously so.

The three slept on makeshift camp beds and the sofa. It did not raise their spirits. Millet wrote later that

¹⁷ B.D. Barrett, *North Sea Artists' Colonies, 1880-1920, their Development and Rôle in Marketing Modernism* (Diss., University of Groningen, 2008).

¹⁸ Millet, *Wild Goose Chase*, p. 940. Skagen's mail-coach ran only twice a week and only carried two passengers at a time.

It was strangely like Cape Cod...the same low, straggling out-buildings, the ladders, and broken-down cart, the manure heaps, the hen-coops, the smell of fish overpowering all other odours.¹⁹

Their three signatures are recorded in the small hotel register, for 10th August 1882, along with their provenance, but it neither shows their profession nor their departure date, which was probably after just the two nights. They walked around the windswept village which lacked paved streets, any focal point and harbour front. The houses were scattered over a wide area, nestled in amongst the dunes, with sunken kitchen-gardens and barely a full grown tree to be seen. There were long racks of fish drying behind the beach and fishermen hauling in nets, but no folk costumes and little to inspire these artists. Ancher, 'the melancholy Bornholmer', did little to raise their spirits. The New Yorkers completed only a few sketches, which, although used later for compositions and in illustrations, contain none of Skagen's special character, no stoic fishermen or wives in kitchens.

The whole trip was something of a shambles from the start, not helped by Harper's editor. Abbey had complained to him before about working to deadlines,²⁰ then still a relatively new occupational hazard for artist-illustrators, but one that greatly encouraged the making of stereotypical imagery and the use of symbolism.²¹ They returned to Frederikshavn, where they took the next train south, via Esbjerg curiously, and where, again, they entirely missed Fanø's many artistic attractions (busy sailing fleet, harbour front, cosy interiors, folk costumes and special light) which were almost visible from the station platform on the mainland.

¹⁹ Millet, *Wild Goose Chase*, p. 944.

²⁰ Lucas, *Abbey*, vol. I, p. 108.

²¹ See amongst others, Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth Century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

They sped on to Hamburg, Vierland and the village of Bergedorf, which offered another distinctive folk costume but little else. Serendipity had not shone on their searches. They never returned, although Millet and Abbey soon started their own rural artists' colony, mostly for American 'ex-pats', in the heart of the English countryside, where the likes of Henry James, James McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent, amongst others, came for highly-congenial working holidays. One can only speculate on what might have resulted if these Yankee artists had met up with P.S. Krøyer rather than Michael Ancher at Skagen that Autumn of 1882.