The artists’ colony of Ekensund

How a collection of landscape paintings represents the image of a region.

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Abstract: The Museumsberg Flensburg, a museum for art and culture at the northern border of Germany, collects especially objects of fine art made around the Flensburg Fjord. The landscape at this part of the Baltic Sea is characterized by sandy beaches, forests which grow directly at the brink of the water and smooth rising hills. The specific profile of the region became popular among landscape painters in the late nineteenth century. They founded an artists’ colony and their paintings created and spread the image of this place. Today, visitors can experience this image, which is a suggestion of maritime lifestyle and the mixture of German and Danish culture, in the picture gallery at the Museumsberg. Even tourist agencies still use photos, films and other media to advertise the Fjord as an idyllic paradise for outdoor activities. Telling the history of landscape painting at the Flensburg Fjord and how these artworks became an integral part of a museum collection, reveals how the image of this region was born 150 years ago and developed until today.

Keywords: Collecting, landscape painting, tourism, artists’ colony, image, Germany, Denmark

According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a museum is a “not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that [...] collects [...] tangible and intangible heritage”. This is also what the Museumsberg Flensburg does. As one of the biggest museums for art and cultural history in northern Germany, it gathers especially oil paintings made in Schleswig and Sønderjylland, which are the German and the Danish parts of a region that straddles the border between these countries. These paintings have both an art historical and a cultural value, because they are an example for the development of landscape painting in Germany and demonstrate how the image of the region was born. The most important place where these paintings were made was Ekensund, a small village at the north coast of the Flensburg Fjord. Artists from all over Germany, but especially from Schleswig-Holstein,
have gathered and worked there since the 1870s. Art historians characterize this community as an artists' colony (Redlefsen 1967).

The paintings from Ekensund show narrow bays and small forests, sometimes sailing ships or houses at the coast. The landscape appears quiet and familiar, but it was the great variety of vegetation, topographic landmarks and the changeable weather which attracted the artists. They depicted the northern coast of the Flensburg Fjord first in a realistic, later in an impressionistic way. They helped to create the image of this region, which is still advertised in tourist marketing campaigns. This essay shall outline how the artists discovered Ekensund and why this place was so interesting for them. At least it will be outlined, how the paintings became part of the collection at Museumsberg Flensburg.

**Development of the artists’ colony**

Today, Ekensund has about 1,500 inhabitants and is an administrative part of the city of Sønderborg. The village is located at one side of a strait, which is crossed by a bridge. At the end of the eighteenth century, Ekensund became important because the production of bricks started around the village. The labourers at the brickworks mostly came from Poland or rural regions in Germany, while the inhabitants of Ekensund were fishermen or farmers. The brickworks stood next to the harbour, where
the kiln-fired bricks were loaded on sailing ships which carried them to other countries (Redlefsen 1967: 31). These characteristic buildings were constructed with a low ground floor and high red roofs.

The landscape around Ekensund is also quite characteristic. Formed during the last glacial period around 10,000 years ago, it consisted of smooth rising hills, forests and sand and pebble beaches. At some places, even high cliffs dominated the coastline. All those elements appear in one of the earliest landscape paintings made at Ekensund by the Danish artist and professor of the Academy of Fine Arts at Copenhagen, Christopher Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853), in 1830 (Fig. 1). In that year, he visited the owner of the Rennberg brickworks who was a friend of his (Redlefsen 1967: 33). Today, this small painting is part of the collection at Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen.

Eckersberg could be characterized as a predecessor of the artists’ colony, the actual origins of which have been dated in the 1870s (Schulte-Wülwer 2000: 17–19). This was just a few years after Prussia and Austria started a war against Denmark. The King of Denmark wanted the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein to become an integral part of his country. They belonged to the Danish crown but were also part of the German Confederation. Even the majority of the population in the duchies was German. The conflict escalated, and in April 1864 there was a battle at the fortress of Dybbøl near Ekensund. On their way to the battlefield, not only soldiers, but also some artists and poets marched through the village. They were sent by the Prussian government to report on the war. Of course, they glorified the victory of the German armies in poems and paintings. But they also recognized the beauty of the landscape. The painter Wilhelm Camphausen (1818–1885), for example, remarked that the quiet blue surface of the Fjord, the small bays and the bushes must be a “beautiful motif in the summer” (Schulte-Wülwer 2000: 14). Perhaps Camphausen, who worked as a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf, talked to his colleagues about the landscape he found at the northern edge of Germany. In any case, more and more artists became curious about the area, which became part of Prussia in 1866 and of Germany in 1871. Without political borders, it was easy now to travel to Ekensund by train via Hamburg or via Kiel. For the last few kilometres, the painters could take a steam ferry.

In the 1880s there was a core group of around 10 people who belonged to the “first generation” of the colony (Schulte-Wülwer 2000: 20). Most of them were from Schleswig-Holstein and found accommodation at a rural hotel during some weeks in the summer. Others lived nearby more permanently, because they were born in the region and returned after their studies at the academies of fine arts in Berlin, Düsseldorf or Dresden. Apart from Louis Jensen (1858–1908), who came to Ekensund several times, there were no Danish painters among them. Obviously, this was a result of the war in 1864 and the following years of antagonism between Denmark and Germany (Schulte-Wülwer 2000: 45). Even though women were also a very small minority, Emmy Gotzmann from Berlin became an integral part of the colony (Redlefsen 1968: 69). The artists worked in a conventional way and depicted the landscape realistically. They sent their pictures to exhibitions in various German towns, also to the “Glass Palace” in Munich. This was a building of glass and steel, where annual international exhibitions with hundreds of artworks took place.²

In 1890, a scholar from the local academy of fine arts visited the Glass Palace. This was...
Otto Heinrich Engel (1866–1949), who would become the most important member of the second generation at Ekensund. In letters to his father, he wrote about his first trip to this place in 1892 (Wodicka 2009: 25). With his colleagues, Engel painted at many different locations on both sides of the Fjord. They also produced many impressionistic paintings and worked outside at the coast or in the woods, sitting on a folding chair with a small canvas on their knees. In Germany in the 1890s, this was still a progressive way of painting, even though in France the first Impressionists like Edouard Manet, Claude Monet and Alfred Sisley had established the new style more than 20 years earlier.3 The colony reached its peak at that time. There were also intensive social relationships among the painters, which is an important aspect when characterizing the group in Ekensund as an artists’ colony (Schulte-Wülwer 2000: 33). This could be compared with the situation at Skagen in Denmark (Pese 2001: 280). Peder Severin Krøyer painted the community at Skagen in 1888 (Fig. 2). The picture is named “Hip, Hip, Hurrah!” and shows the celebrating colony members with some
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children sitting around a table. People from outside should see that they live together like a family. This picture is part of the collection at Göteborgs Konstmuseum.

When Engel visited Ekensund in 1910, this was also around the time of the end of the colony. Some of his friends were already dead or did not come to the village any longer, so he continued his work at other places, like on the islands in the North Sea, which became more attractive to him (Schulte-Wülwer 2000: 25). In 1920, the northern coast of the Flensburg Fjord became part of Denmark, and German painters stopped working at Ekensund. After some years in Berlin, where he became a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Engel bought a house in Glücksburg, a neighbouring town of Flensburg, in 1933. He lived there until his death in 1949.

The stylistic development within the colony

Christopher Wilhelm Eckersberg could be characterized as a predecessor of the artists’ colony, because he was one of the first painters who worked at Ekensund and looked at this

Fig. 3. Otto Heinrich Engel, Sunset, 1893, oil on canvas, 90 cm x 105.5 cm, Museumsberg Flensburg.
ordinary place with the eyes of an artist. However, he depicted Ekensund with a completely different intention in mind than others such as Engel. This can be demonstrated by a comparison of two of their paintings. The first one was made in 1830, the latter more than 60 years later by Engel in 1892. Eckersberg painted the already mentioned view of the Rennberg Brickworks. This picture seems to be a quickly produced study, also because of its small dimensions. However, the elements on the canvas are composed in detail. In the foreground, there are some dark green bushes exactly in the middle of the canvas. Left of them, the coastline curves to the left, in the same way as a cliff above. In the background, on the other side of the Fjord, there are hills with some dark green sections of forest. The horizontal line separates the lower third of the canvas from the upper part, which is painted with white clouds in the blue sky. Even the position of the clouds is chosen very reasonably, because they create a diagonal structure. According to the German art historian Werner Busch, this way of painting is typical for the Romantic movement in the first half of the nineteenth century (Busch 2016: 497). Like his very famous German friend Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), Eckersberg built up his motifs like an architect, following mathematical principles. The construction of the coast, the hills and the clouds was intended to underline that within the physical world everything is carefully planned. Of course, nature was created by God, but the manifestations on earth could be more and more proven empirically with scientific methods. It was the time, when Charles Darwin started developing his theory about the origin of species. Philosophers like Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) also thought about this and tried to bring together human intellect with religious faith. Painting was intended to be a vehicle within this theory. The artists’ task was to observe the world intensively and reproduce the mood he had while standing in front of his motif. He should depict what was called the “idea”, the “character” or the “essence” of something (Olson 2016: 41). In other words, a painter like Eckersberg became a translator. Eckersberg even wrote two manuals about the correct use of the linear perspective in 1833 and 1837. Perhaps this was a result of his discussions with Hans Christian Ørsted, a Danish philosopher and scientist. They met each other in Paris, where Eckersberg studied painting from 1813 to 1816 (Busch 2017: 20).

Engel, in contrast, defined himself as an Anti-Romanticist (Wodicka 2009: 24). An example for this is his “Sunset” (Fig. 3). It presents a summer evening at the shore of the Flensburg Fjord and contains many typical impressionistic elements. On the left of the canvas, the sinking sun is painted with thick white and red brushstrokes. On the right there are some houses, and here the sun is sparkling in many small windows. In the middle there is a path consisting of seagrass, glimmering dark red, green and blue. An old man and a girl are standing on the path. However, this motif is not depicted in detail. Engel depicted this scene to prepare a greater, more elaborated work, which he finished in 1893 when he was back in Munich. Unfortunately, just the study is part of the Museumsberg’s collection today, while the elaborated version was sold in the USA.

Paintings like this were created spontaneously, catching the atmosphere of a specific moment. In France, Claude Monet and other “Impressionists” had established this way of painting since the 1870s. Their pictures should appear like a snapshot, by containing many narrative elements such as people, animals, carriages or cars in movement. Painting became a rival of the young medium of photography.
In Germany, Impressionism was not accepted because it came from a hostile country and such paintings broke with academic rules. If a museum director wanted to collect such objects of fine art, he was confronted with massive critique (Kohle 2009). Yet, young painters like Otto Heinrich Engel were fascinated. Already in September 1887, he went on a journey and tried to paint like an Impressionist, in front of a castle at 5.00 am, when it was quite cold and the sun began to shine (Wodicka 2009: 20). In Munich, where he was a student of the Academy of Fine Arts, he had the chance to admire impressionistic paintings at the exhibitions of international art in the Glass Palace. Paintings by Peder Severin Krøyer, Viggo Johannsen and Anna Ancher, who was even born at Skagen, Eduard Diriks from Christiania or Bruno Liljefors from Upsala, impressed him very deeply (Wodicka 2009: 33).

At Ekensund, Engel found a place where he could continue working in this way. In the archive of Museumsberg Flensburg, there is a postcard written to his wife Olga (Fig. 4). Engel notes that he had been painting a forest scene in the morning, and in the afternoon a farmer working with his horses. To underline this, he sketched this scene on the postcard. In the foreground of the sketch, the painter himself appears with another man walking along the coast. Engel leads the way with a pipe in his mouth, and they are both carrying some painting tools. In the background, high above the water, a farmer and two horses are standing on a hill. This sketch also illustrates how painting outside in the landscape was a logistical challenge.

Another prolific painter at Ekensund was Alex Eckener from Flensburg. He also focused on the production of bricks (Redlefsen 1968: 64). In the Museumsberg’s collection there is a painting named “Brickworkers at Ekensund” (Fig. 5), made in 1895. It is typical impressionistic work, containing many narrative elements. Its composition leads the viewer’s eye directly to the middle of the canvas. Long rows of bricks on the right and a machine pulled by two horses on the left point to the centre, where two other horses stand in front of a waggon. Some other elements underline this composition, for example a wooden wheelbarrow in the foreground.

While the painters observed the landscape and architecture at Ekensund, they also came in contact with the inhabitants. Language was sometimes a problem, because most of the painters could not speak the local dialects of Danish and German (Wodicka 2009: 24). However, Engel and the fisherman Asmus Sommer became friends. There is a portrait of Sommer, in which he is wearing a blue jacket and a cap (Fig. 6). He has an imposing nose, blue eyes and big ears. His curly grey hair and beard, his brown and red coloured face characterize him as someone who spends much time outside and does hard physical work. Maybe this portrait and a painting like “Sunset” could be characterized as an example for the correlation between landscape and people, how these
two elements may create the typical image of a region.

**Excurus: Is there a link between the artists’ colony and present-day tourism?**

Today, local tourist agencies at Flensburg and Sønderborg advertise the Fjord as a paradise for cycling and hiking. Around 150 official trails lead throughout the region. One of them is the Gendarmstien, named after the guards who protected the border between Denmark and Germany since 1920. The route is about 80 kilometres long, mostly along the north coast of the Flensburg Fjord. It is divided into five parts. One of them leads through Ekensund and is called the “brick section”. This refers to the time when the production of bricks was the main business at Ekensund. The tourist agency of Sønderborg provides very detailed information about the Gendarmstien on its homepage. The artists’ colony is also mentioned there, noting that more than 50 of their paintings are part of the Museumsberg’s collection. Nevertheless, this is the only occasion when the painters are presented as an integral part of regional cultural history. Instead, other attractions like the Flensburg Fjord Route for cyclists are advertised. It is part of a project called “Flowers build bridges” (“Blomster bygger broer” in Danish). This project was initiated by regional institutions and financially supported by the European Union from 2019 to 2022. The intention was to bring people together from both sides of the border by offering many outdoor events. The Flensburg Fjord Route is about 300 kilometres long, around the cities of Flensburg and Aabenraa and on the island Als. Cyclists can choose between six short segments that can be completed within one day, or longer trips which take up to six days. On the project’s webpage, Museumsberg is menti-
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The tourist agency at Flensburg does also not mention the artists’ colony. But on its homepage, places like the Holnis peninsula, depicted by the painters in the past, are presented.8 Another example for a recent marketing campaign without mentioning the painters from Ekensund is a strategy paper initiated by the government of Schleswig-Holstein, to define guidelines for high-quality and sustainable tourism up until 2030.9 It contains ten areas for action. The brand slogan – “Schleswig-Holstein. The Real North” – was established to underline the link between nature and people. Both have a particular character, formed by the maritime setting. The aim is to incite curiosity in visitors and appeal to inhabitants to develop the regional image. In photos and video clips, men with thick woollen clothes, boots and long beards stand at the beach and smile into the camera, not caring about wind and rain. The target groups are particularly people and families who enjoy the outdoors, hikers and cyclists. This reminds directly of the landscape paintings and portraits made by Otto Heinrich Engel, for example. The artist was fascinated by the countryside and the people, and by depicting them he delivered a pattern for those who want to attract visitors, today. So it would have been suitable to attract not only outdoor enthusiasts, but also art interested visitors.

**Paintings from Ekensund in Flensburg, Germany and abroad**

Although the artists at Ekensund were neighbours of the museum at Flensburg, their paintings were not part of its collection. Heinrich Sauermann (1842–1904), who was a rich and successful producer of historicist furniture, established a museum for arts and crafts in 1876 and served as its first director. Sauermann collected cupboards, tables, chairs, sometimes even whole old peasant rooms to document the rural culture of the region (Zölner 1979). Most of these objects were made between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the one hand, Sauermann put them on public display, on the other hand, he used his collection to teach his workers. They were to adopt renaissance or baroque ornaments to create new cupboards, chairs and tables in a historicist style. In 1903, Heinrich Sauermann opened a new museum building to the public with much more space for his collection. But objects of fine art were still not part of the collection. Just sometimes drawings or sketches by unknown artists were donated to the museum.

In October 1904, Heinrich Sauermann suddenly died because of a heart disease and his son Ernst (1880–1956) became the second director. He had just finished his university studies with a PhD in art history and worked already as an assistant for his father for some years,
so he was very familiar with the collection. Even so, he changed the agenda and started to collect oil paintings. This was difficult, because the museum was a municipal institution. The budget for new acquisitions was quite small and the city council had to give its permission. Ernst Sauermann argued that oil paintings had a high documentary value, because they could illustrate how the rural population lived in the past. Consequently, objects of fine art would be a suitable addition to the other exhibits on display. This satisfied the city council. Moreover, the first paintings were donated for free by local artists. This was the start for today's painting collection at Flensburg. However, Ernst Sauermann was more interested in contemporary art than in the artists' colony at Ekensund. This was apparent from the exhibitions he organized. In January 1907, Ernst Sauermann presented graphics and oil paintings made by Käthe Lassen, who was born and lived in Flensburg. In June, he organized the first museum exhibition for an artist group called “Brücke”. Today, Emil Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff are international known stars among the so-called expressionistic painters, but at that time their unconventional works were harshly criticized, also in Flensburg. This kind of art was completely different to the artist's colony at Ekensund. Its first member who was presented at the museum in Flensburg was Heinrich Petersen-Angeln. He had died in 1906 and was honoured with an exhibition one year later (Schulte-Wülwer 1993).

Lacking institutional support and a sufficient art market infrastructure, the painters sent their works to exhibitions in Berlin, Munich or Düsseldorf on their own. In these cities, they had studied a few years ago. Otto Heinrich Engel's final version of “Sunset” even found its way to the World Fair at St. Louis in 1904. It was also exhibited in Germany and in Austria on several occasions (Schulte-Wülwer 2000: 131). In 1909, Engel got a room at the academy of fine arts in Berlin, where he presented 16 paintings, including some motifs from Ekensund (Schulte-Wülwer 2000: 166).

Despite these successes, the number of pictures from Ekensund at Flensburg grew very slowly. The paintings found their way into the museum mostly at special events. For example, in 1941, when Otto Heinrich Engel celebrated his 75th birthday. Fritz Fuglsang, the fourth director of the museum at Flensburg, organized a great exhibition to honour the painter and the artist donated the already mentioned study for “Sunset” to the museum. Later, descendants of the Ekensund-Painters also donated or sold paintings to the museum (Schulte-Wülwer 1980). Some paintings were also bought on the art market. Unfortunately, there are too many to display them all in the permanent exhibition, so most of the paintings are kept in storage. Even so, visitors to Museumsberg do get to experience why Flensburg Fjord was so fascinating for painters at the end of the nineteenth century and how a museum collection grows.

Notes

2. https://www.bavarikon.de/object/bav:BSB-CMS-00000000000004471. The Glass Palace was built in 1854 in the Botanic Garden, near the main station. From 1889, there were annual exhibitions with artists from all over Europe. The catalogues are digitalized and available online. The Glass Palace was destroyed by a fire in 1934.
3. In Germany, many museums have illustrated the development of impressionistic painting with great exhibitions, for example the Städel Museum in
Frankfurt with the presentation “Monet. The Birth of Impressionism” in 2015. Famous Norwegian Impressionists include Harriet Bakker and Gerhard Munthe. Their paintings are part of the permanent exhibition in the Nasjonalmuseet in Oslo, see https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/samlingen/.

4. Museumsberg Flensburg, graphic archive, estate Otto Heinrich Engel
5. https://www.visitsonderjylland.dk/turist/oplevelser/aktiv-sammen/vandring
6. https://www.gendarmst.dk/
8. https://www.flensburger-foerde.de/
11. Ibid.
12. Museumsberg Flensburg, administrative archive, 1903ff.

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