

# P.O. Brøndsted and the neo-antique interior

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In this short paper<sup>1</sup>, I want to try to place our hero in the fertile environment of which Peter Oluf Brøndsted formed an active part. It will be no more than a few hints to suggest that he might have played a greater part in the direction taken by Danish art than has hitherto been recognised.

The cultural debate in Denmark in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to a considerable degree centred on the subjects of globalisation and nationalism, though the prospect was rather different from what is current in Denmark today. In an international perspective, the decorative art of the period was characterised by the efforts to profile the various countries' national heritage. In Denmark, this process was much spurred on by the defeats the country had suffered to Britain, i.e. the bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807 and the loss of the fleet. These disasters were followed by a national bankruptcy in 1813, and there were mutterings here and there in the community.

Oehlschläger's poem "The Golden Horns" from 1803 has always been considered the beginning of Romanticism in Denmark. Together with folklore studies, archaeology became an instrument that could reinforce the small country's estimation of its own worth, and Danish history became a special concern in a large number of fields, including art and science, which during this period were transformed from having been a source of support for the monarchy to now being very much a tool of national politics.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period filled with intellectual

currents moving in different directions and intermingling with each other. For at the same time as focusing on a sense of things national and Scandinavian, Denmark also experienced a strong classicistic movement within the decorative arts, which – in contrast to classicisms elsewhere in Europe such as Empire, Biedermeier, George III and Karl Johan etc. – was not an adaptation of Antiquity's abundance of idiom and ornamentation, but was based *directly* on the *original* model, that is to say the art of Antiquity, often even to the extent that it is almost possible to talk of copies.

P.O. Brøndsted played some role or the other in this movement, which was to turn out to be long-lasting and vigorous.

It is a striking feature of Danish art in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that a small number of families who were related to each other by marriage put their stamp on cultural life. The mansion of Iselingen in southern Zealand became such a focal point of culture, but in contrast to nearby Nysø, where Thorvaldsen and Hans Christian Andersen were among Baroness Stampe's distinguished guests, Iselingen has not achieved the same prominence. This is despite the fact that artists such as Constantin Hansen, P.C. Skovgaard, Jørgen Roed, C.A. Jensen and last but not least P.O. Brøndsted were regular visitors, and that Danish Golden Age interior design received some of its essential impulses from Iselingen.

In 1813, Brøndsted had married Frederikke Koës, the sister of his travelling companion in Greece, Georg

1. Translated by Glyn W. Jones.

Koës. Frederikke died as early as 1818 while giving birth to their third child. The three children were raised by her sister Marie and brother-in-law Holger Halling Aagaard, the owners of Iselingen. Iselingen now not only became the home of the Brøndsted children, but in practice also of P.O. Brøndsted himself, as, due to the sorrow he only overcame at a late date, he never achieved the home he had dreamt of together with Frederikke. The lack of a home of his own is clearly to be seen in his letters to Marie and Holger.

Danish furniture underwent a flourishing period in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In brief, Danish interior decoration during this period can be divided stylistically and formally into three groups: a French-inspired royal empire, a bourgeois empire and finally, what I have called a neo-antique. The source of inspiration of the latter was antique depictions of Greek and republican Roman furniture (fig. 1), supplemented by the few surviving pieces or fragments of furniture that could be seen in the museum in Naples.

Relative to the subject of this conference it would of course have been appropriate to be able to link the Danish artists' interest in ancient Greek art and archaeology directly to our main figure, but it is probably not quite so simple. The threads are interwoven, and as we have very few written indications indeed relating to the physical world of that time, such as for instance how people arranged their lives and homes, this must be limited to an attempt to view the environment in which Brøndsted moved. But there can scarcely be any doubt that he played a part in the fashioning of an important segment of Danish furniture – a segment that later became of importance to Danish furniture design in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Ida Haugsted's seminal documentation<sup>2</sup> of Danish artists' relations with Greece, we repeatedly encounter examples that demand closer investigation relating to their subsequent effect within the realm of Danish decorative art. Here, mention need

only be made of the architect Jørgen Hansen Koch, whose fascination with Greek art dated from about the same time as that of Brøndsted, and whose interest in the construction of buildings is an early example of a feature that is also a characteristic of neo-antique furniture – construction and form being prioritised as highly as decoration, if not more highly.

Be that as it may, Denmark experienced a strong interest in Greece, which seems at the same time to have been related to a dissociation from the Imperial Rome that especially Napoleon and after him several of the European princely houses, including the Danish royal family, had cultivated. I have elsewhere dealt with the conspicuous political element in this phenomenon, which already found expression in the writings of the philosopher Tyge Rothe from about 1780 and is paralleled in several works, including the furniture, by the painter Nicolai Abildgaard.<sup>3</sup>

Starting as early as the beginning of the 1790s, Abildgaard was the first to re-create a number of pieces of furniture palpably and directly modelled on Antiquity (fig. 2). The fashion in Europe at large was otherwise to reformulate and modernise rather than to copy the idiom and decorative principles of Antiquity. However, it was the Danish artist's intention to go back to the source – perhaps also because this turned out to harmonise with a certain simplicity in style towards which Danish artists were moving during this period. Whether this had any influence at all on Brøndsted's interest in Greek archaeology, I cannot say, but Brøndsted must surely also have received impulses from his surroundings. Examples from other branches of science are referred to in Ida Haugsted's book.

Starting out from the collection of letters in the Royal Library in Copenhagen, Jesper Brandt Andersen has recently written an account of the many family relationships in the group centred on the small country mansion Iselingen.<sup>4</sup> Of central importance, as is well

2. Haugsted 1996.

3. Gelfer-Jørgensen 2004, 178-315.

4. Andersen 2005, 39-100. I am grateful to Nils Ohrt for this reference.





Fig. 1. Apulian pelike from Christian VIII's collection (no. 316). The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.

known, was Brøndsted's friendship with the philologist Georg Koës, who had studied the Greek writers under the German philologist F.A. Wolf in Halle. The two brothers-in-law, however, first spent some time in Rome before embarking on the journey to the eastern Mediterranean, and it was to Rome that Brøndsted returned after the death of Frederikke. It is from letters from Rome to his sister-in-law and brother-in-law, Marie and Holger Aagaard at Iselingen that we can gain an impression of his circle of friends there. Moreover, these deeply personal letters, which deserve to be published, provide an insight into the pain from which he never recovered.

Among the subjects he talks of in the letters is his friendship with Thorvaldsen. A factor that might have been of significance for the neo-antique movement in Danish furniture and interior decoration – something that I cannot verify, but only suggest – is his meeting in Thorvaldsen's workshop with the young sculptor Hermann Ernst Freund. Freund had come to Rome the previous year, and for ten years he now became the master's closest associate. It is also interesting that when the Prince, Christian Frederik, came to Italy on a prolonged visit in 1819, Freund was invited to dinner with him along with Brøndsted and Hansen Koch.<sup>5</sup> It would be useful to know more about the Brøndsted, Hansen Koch and Freund constellation.

When, after spending 10 years in Rome, Freund reluctantly returned to Copenhagen in 1828 in order to assume the professorship of sculpture, he sought to re-create his "Herculanum on Zealand" in his official residence. Walls, ceilings and floors were decorated as closely as possible in accordance with the interiors in the ancient cities near Naples (fig. 3) and not in the adapted Pompeiian style that was to be seen everywhere in Europe at this time. This latter had been formed on the basis of Roman grotesque painting such as had been re-created in Raphael's loggias in the Vatican and Villa Madama; Freund's decorations were to be as much like the ancient originals as was feasible. The same applied to the furniture, which, where possi-



Fig. 2. N.A. Abildgaard, klismos chair in gilded beech wood with blue painted cane seat, early 1790s. The Danish Museum of Decorative Art, Copenhagen.

ble, was shaped like the Greek (fig. 4); where, as in the case of the cradle, beds and piano, this was not possible, the pieces of furniture were given an extremely simple form that acted as a background to the near-antique decoration (fig. 5).

In the case of Abildgaard and the later Golden Age painters there are many suggestions that the choice of Greek and Republican Roman art as models – rather than the far more extensive material from the later imperial age – hid an element of social criticism, not to say a political choice. This appears not to have been true of Freund. What persuaded just this artist not merely to follow the general stylistic trends of the time but to go back to the sources can scarcely have been the inspiration from Abildgaard, who was dead before Freund embarked on his artistic training. And although

5. Haugsted 1996, 64.





Fig. 3. Section of wall from H.E. Freund's residence in Materialgaarden in Copenhagen with sofa and chair by the artist. Oil paint on canvas on more recent wooden frame. The Danish Museum of Decorative Art, Copenhagen.

the interior decoration in Abildgaard's official residence in Charlottenborg was famous, it seems unlikely that Freund had seen it.

So here hypotheses must take the place of facts. And this is where Brøndsted enters the arena. He writes home that he visits Thorvaldsen almost every day, where he presumably equally often found Freund, who had taken up residence in Thorvaldsen's apartments the year before Brøndsted returned to Rome.<sup>6</sup> And Freund was fond of listening to "Brøndsted's brilliant and inspiring illustration of so many an archaeological question [that] had his entire interest."<sup>7</sup>

6. Freund 1883, 59.

7. Freund 1883, 64.

8. "et af de fortræffeligste Mennesker, jeg kender, min inderlig hengivne Ven." KB (The Royal Library/Det Kongelige Bibliotek,

In a letter to his family, Brøndsted talked of Freund as "one of the most excellent people I know, my profoundly devoted friend".<sup>8</sup> During Freund's journey back to Denmark, the two met in Paris, where Brøndsted "especially examined the cabinet of coins and the collections of antiquities".<sup>9</sup> Freund was, of course, neither the first nor the only artist to be fascinated by the art of the Greek and early Roman period, from which articles for everyday use could be studied in the museum in Naples, but together with Abildgaard he was the first to make use of the archaeological sources, that is to say the *originals*, as a *direct* model. It is plainly to

Copenhagen), NKS (New Royal Collection/Ny kongelig Samling), 4648 (4648 4<sup>o</sup>: Letters from Brøndsted to his children a.o.), letter to Marie Aagaard.

9. Freund 1883, 150.



Fig. 4. H.E. Freund, armchair of mahogany veneer on deal. Upholstered seat and backrest with later cross-stich embroidery. 1830-36. The Danish Museum of Decorative Art, Copenhagen.

be seen throughout the account written by his son of his father's life as an artist that the purity of Greek art had fascinated him: he had been taken "into the arms of Phidias" while in Italy.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the meeting with the Parthenon sculptures had made a deep impression on him.<sup>11</sup> In Copenhagen "[Bishop] Münter's extensive knowledge of Antiquities attracted him to the Bishop's Palace"; he was a regular visitor in the home

of Münter's sister, Frederikke Brun, the merchant H. Puggaard and his wife Bolette, née Hage, and he was frequently to be seen in "Brøndsted's circles".<sup>12</sup>

Before Freund died in 1840, the various rooms in his home had each been given its Pompeiian decoration; of these, only a single one now survives. The rooms were at the same time provided with an array of "Greek" furniture and other household utensils. Knowledge of Greek art was at this time limited in comparison with the number of publications on Roman art. When the art from the ancient cities near Naples was introduced as a model, it was, however, not only due to the lack of relevant information, but primarily because Pompeii and Herculaneum were considered to be the heirs to Greek art, and because, as is well known, the vases were thought to have been imported from Greece. Be this as it may, Freund's home became a great source of inspiration for many Danish artists, several of whom had helped to decorate furniture and walls. From this, an interest in Greek and Roman *republican* art spread to many parts of Danish decorative art with a long-lasting effect (fig. 3).

Brøndsted returned to Denmark in 1832, and interest in Greek antiquity scarcely diminished in the little group of artists around Freund, who perhaps even attended some of Brøndsted's very popular series of 44 lectures on Greece.<sup>13</sup> As suggested above, alongside the archaeological interest, the neo-antique movement reflected a political standpoint. In Denmark, Greece was very much the focus of interest of an important group of figures from cultural life with an interest in politics. As is well known, the Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453, and three years later, Christian Athens had fallen under Islamic rule. Not until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was there fertile soil for a national, Greek liberation movement, which was immediately

10. Freund 1883, 248.

11. Freund 1883, 251.

12. Freund 1883, 203-04.

13. Greek inspiration being limited to a small, but centrally placed group of artists and art lovers is not least due to the fact that the instruction provided by the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts

for architects and artisans, not least cabinet makers, was characterised by the German-born architect G.F. Hetsch's norms for ornamentation. One of those for whom Hetsch had worked before coming to Denmark in 1815 was Napoleon's court architect Charles Percier, whom he thought of as his teacher. He thus represented a classicism inspired by imperial Rome.





Fig. 5. H.W. Bissen, cradle of oak and deal decorated with oil paint by G.C. Hilker. Ca. 1836. The Danish Museum of Decorative Art, Copenhagen.

supported by many European groups and refugee Greeks, who were inspired by the French Revolution. The Greek War of Independence was fought between 1821 and 1829, soon involving several European nations. It became a battle between Christianity and Islam, but it was also a battle in which the Greeks held up history as a model when in the peace treaty of 1829 the country became a republic with a liberal constitution.

As said above, when we delve into the group of Golden Age artists and families who had an interest in art, we quickly discover how closely they were related

to each other. And a constant feature in this group of national liberals, which included the politician and later member of the constitutional committee, C.C. Hall (who married one of Brøndsted's daughters in 1837), is the ideological struggle for the abolition of absolutism and the introduction of democracy. In this connection, Brøndsted also played a part, and not only as an archaeologist. Before leaving for Rome in 1818, he had been appointed Danish court agent to the Holy See and consequently had the duty of making reports. But the authorities in Denmark became concerned that in several of these he expressed sympathy for the King



Fig. 6. The Madonna room at Iselingen. Old photography. The Royal Library, Copenhagen.

of Naples, whom a rebellion had moved to grant his realm a free constitution. Despite this, he made no secret of his enthusiasm for the new freedom movements, especially the Greek, and later for the results of the July Revolution. The impulses from these were of course interlinked. The interest in ancient Greece naturally resulted in an interest in the new modern state, which again had its influence on Danish conditions – and so back and forth, and further there was the synergy between art, archaeology and philology producing impulses from one area to the other.

It was only while examining the letters to his family in the Royal Library that I realised that Brøndsted might have played a bigger part than so far assumed relating to the decoration of one of the most striking,

but no longer surviving rooms in the history of Danish Golden Age art, that is to say the so-called Madonna Room that was created some time towards the end of the 1840s. The name was given to a room in Martin Hammerich's home as Head of the School of Civic Virtue (Borgerdydsskolen) in Christianshavn, which was re-created at Iselingen when the Hammerich family took over the mansion in 1867 (fig. 6). Martin Hammerich, who started his academic career with the dissertation "The Conditions of the Freemen in Rome's Age of Freedom" (1830), and who was present at Brøndsted's lectures on the Parthenon frieze in 1834, was invited to Brøndsted's musical evenings, where he soon became a weekly visitor.<sup>14</sup> Hammerich, who later became a member of the Constitutional Assembly, was an important figure in the neo-antique environment, which, as can be seen, has only been sporadically charted. Furthermore, it was through Brøndsted that Hammerich joined the group associated with Iselingen, where he met his future wife, Anna Mathea, who was the daughter of Brøndsted's sister-in-law, Marie Aagaard. In addition, Martin Hammerich published Brøndsted's studies of the Bassae temple in 1861.<sup>15</sup>

Today, we can only form a pale impression of the Madonna Room, and neither have the Iselingen rooms from Hammerich's time been preserved.<sup>16</sup> But through the son Holger's description<sup>17</sup> we gain the impression that it was a quite unusual room and that the Madonna Room was in the true sense of the word a piece of *Gesamtkunst*.

The room was given its name after Raphael's "Sistine Madonna", which Jørgen Roed had been given the task of copying from the original in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden in 1851.<sup>18</sup> As in Germany and elsewhere, Denmark in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

14. This account is contained in a letter quoted in Andersen 2005, 94.

15. Brøndsted 1861.

16. KB is one of several places where there exist a small number of photographs from Iselingen after it was rebuilt in the 1860s. However, these photographs provide a good impression of furni-

ture and paintings. Several of them are reproduced in Gelfer-Jørgensen 1988, figs. 135-37, 140. On Iselingen see also Hammerich 1913 and Kjærboe 1969-1970.

17. See preceding note.

18. The painting is today in the main room in the mansion of Fuglsang on the island of Lolland.





Fig. 7. C.A. Jensen's copy from 1822 of Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia* in the Pitti Galleri in Florence. Oil paint. Private collection.

experienced a growing interest in Raphael and his art, resulting not only in people being inspired by his manner of painting, but also directly copying his works so that they so to speak could be experienced in Denmark (fig. 6 and 7). This became a not unimportant aspect of Danish Golden Age art. The enthusiasm for Raphael flourished in many parts of Europe at this time, as also did the interest in the painters from the early Renaissance period, the pre-Raphaelite age. This is obviously a complex phenomenon, but one stimulus was again a predilection for the simple and original, since Raphael was seen as an heir to the art of Antiquity.<sup>19</sup> One of the earliest examples of a copy of works of art from the Renaissance – something that accelerated towards the second half of the century – can in fact be traced back to Brøndsted. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 1822 he wrote the following in a letter to his sister-in-law Marie Aagaard:

“It has amused me that neither you nor Holger in your

19. Ohrt 1999, 60-74.

20. “At hverken Du eller Holger i Eder Skarpsindighed har udfundet af hvem vel Originalen til den lille, meget vellykkede Copie som Jensen [har malet] for mig, kunde være, har moret mig. Jeg lod Eder ... Flid uden bestemt Angivelse derom, da jeg først skrev om min lille Pakke, for ikke at bestikke Eder til gunstigere Dom om dette søde Billede end dets indvortes Værd fortjener. Originalen er i Florens og dens Forfatter en til sin Tid udi Maleriet- og Tegnekonsten haabefuld ung Mand nemlig – Raffaello



Fig. 8. M.G. Bindesbøll, chairs from Iselingen in oak with painted decoration and original upholstery. Ca. 1850. The Museum of South Sealand, Vordingborg, Denmark.

perspicacity has discovered who might be the original of the successful little copy that Jensen [has painted] for me. I deliberately left you without any specific information about this when I first wrote on my little package so as not to bribe you to make a more favourable judgement of this sweet picture than its innate value deserves. The original is in Florence, and its source a young man who in his day once showed hope in the art of painting and drawing – that is to say Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino. Now I imagine you will realise whence the blessed Mother received her full face and the child a glance that in a remarkable way unites loftiness with child-like innocence. This latter task is difficult, and so most painters who portray the Christ Child are stranded either on one rock or the other, as they either give us an unusually beautiful child or, what is still worse, such a terribly wise little creature that no human being can believe that this is a child in its first tender years”.<sup>20</sup>

Sanzio da Urbino. Nu tænker jeg Du indseer hvorfra den velsignede Moder fik det fulde Aasyn og Barnet et Blik som paa forunderlig Maade forener Højhed med barnlig Uskyld; denne sidste Opgave er vanskelig, hvorfor ogsaa de fleste Malere som fremstille Christusbarnet strande enten paa den ene Klippe eller paa den anden, idet de enten give os et almindeligt smukt Barn, eller, hvad der er endnu værre, et saa forskrækkeligt klogt lille Væsen at intet Menneske kan troe at samme er et Barn i de tidligste spæde Aar.” KB, NKS, 4648.



Fig. 9. M.G. Bindsbøll, chair of gilded and painted wood, beech, oak and deal. Seat cushion originally with pale yellow silk cover. 1840s. The Danish Museum of Decorative Art, Copenhagen.

This Madonna is still in Florence, in the Palazzo Pitti. A few years ago, C.A. Jensen's little copy of Raphael's "Madonna della Sedia" (fig. 7) was sold at auction. This presumably must be the painting from Iselingen, although there is no provenance to provide information relating to Jensen's painting.<sup>21</sup> In addition, prints of the motif are to be found with descendents of the Iselingen family. Furniture for the Madonna Room

was commissioned from the architect M.G. Bindsbøll; this includes a set of chairs, the back supports of which were given the same shape as that on which the Madonna in Raphael's painting (fig. 7) is sitting. In the room, too, there was a piano designed by Bindsbøll on which the keyboard was supported on two griffins of the type he had designed for the showcase for cameos and intaglios in Thorvaldsens Museum.

21. Danish poets, including Ingemann, cultivated early Renaissance art. See for instance Ohrt 2004, 23ff. According to Charlotte Christensen, the merchant, economist and publisher M.L.

Nathanson also commissioned a copy of the Madonna della Sedia from C.A. Jensen, which was "painted after a copy of the original". Christensen 1991, 96.



Bindesbøll created another piece of *Gesamtkunst* for the home of the Puggaard family in Store Kongensgade in Copenhagen. Parts of the wall decorations have survived, as have a set of chairs and a pair of stools that were copied from some of the bronze furniture in the Naples museum.

There can scarcely be any doubt that the charismatic Brøndsted was a central figure both in Copenhagen of his time and in the circle that regularly met at Iselingen – his actual home. How direct Brøndsted's influence was on the Danish artists must remain an open question. The neo-antique, the form of classicism whose model was the archaeological discoveries, gradually spread: "into the circle which, profoundly concerned with the ideas of the July Revolution, sought to prepare

the way for the ending of absolutism, at the same time as presenting itself as the warmest protector of literature and art. In the residences of Hage, Hammerich, Hornemann, Puggaard, Lehmann and others, as at the homes of the artists, it was possible to see Greek chairs, tables with carved legs, couches etc."<sup>22</sup>

That this fashion spread further to other groups is demonstrated by the following passage, which could be read in the publication of The Industrial Society in 1852: "I once heard of a man who wanted some new furniture talking about this to a cabinet maker. When the latter promised to show him some beautiful models he had received, the man replied: Oh yes! As long as it is not something Greek!"<sup>23</sup>

22. TFK, 1885, I, 182.

23. Ussing 1852, 66.