

Faaborg Museum and the Artists' Colony



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We are very grateful to the following foundations whose generous contributions made it possible to carry out this project:

15. Juni Fonden

Augustinus Fonden

Arne V. Schleschs Fond

Beckett-Fonden

Bergiafonden

Den Hielmstjerne-Rosencroneske Stiftelse

Frimodt-Heineke Fonden

Knud Højgaards Fond

Landsdommer V. Gieses Legat

Ny Carlsbergfondet

Oda og Hans Svenningsens Fond

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Faaborg Museum
Aarhus University Press

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Preface

Behind the rolling hills of Svanninge (Svanninge Bakker), overlooking the fjord and the South Funen islands, is an art museum sprung from Funen soil. Visitors step in from the winding streets of Faaborg to enter a time warp where cheerful, dynamic classicist architecture forms the backdrop to art by the circle of artists known as the Funen Painters (*Fynboerne*). In the galleries of this museum, art, architecture and design combine to form an expressive, multi-faceted *Gesamtkunstwerk* that is full of surprises, narratives – and contrasts. The artists depict the landscapes of the area, the hard-working local farmers, and details from daily life in this provincial market town, but the collection also features works that hark back to ancient classical and Norse myths, while the architecture itself draws inspiration from Japan, ancient Greece and Baroque-era Italy.

Driven by tremendous energy, industriousness and creativity, the artists, architect and patron came together to create this communal work – its motifs, materials and scale connecting the colourful museum galleries to the urban spaces outside and the verdant Funen landscapes beyond. The museum represents a delightful coming-together of creative and enthusiastic spirits, their different voices joining in a unique polyphony. In this book, their stories are presented together for the first time as part of the overall story of Faaborg Museum and the artists' colony in Faaborg.

Faaborg Museum was founded in 1910 by the tinned-good and preserves manufacturer Mads Rasmussen as a celebration of the art created in and around Faaborg. He invited a circle of artists to help him create a collection for public display, and when it outgrew its initial setting in the patron's summer flat in Faaborg, the architect Carl Petersen was appointed to design a new museum building. Inaugurated in 1915, this building presents a collection of art created by many local artists, and the collection and the building itself are inextricably linked. Faaborg Museum has long been regarded as a masterpiece of Nordic classicism, but the museum is also a monument to an artists' colony that embodies a particular direction within Danish art around 1900. While the museum's architecture has won international acclaim, the artists' colony that served as its foundations has received rather less attention.

Mads Rasmussen himself emphasised that his activities as a patron rested on local art created by artists who were not just passing through, and at the museum's inauguration the artists' spokesman, Nicolaus Lützhøft, called Faaborg an *artists' colony*. However, Faaborg is quite unique among artists' colonies. From the 1880s and well into the 1920s, the town enjoyed a rich cultural life and experienced the presence of many artists, but these painters had not been attracted to the area by the beautiful landscapes and the picturesque rural life on the

local farms. They were already there. Born and raised in the area and trained as housepainters in the town. Having spent a few years at Kristian Zahrtmann's school of painting in Copenhagen, they returned to their native soil to paint its landscapes and people. By contrast, only very few among the more than 3,000 artists who set out from the cities of Europe around this time to engage in *plein-air* painting in places such as Barbizon in France, Worpswede in Germany and Skagen at the northernmost point of Denmark actually came from the region where they settled to work. This makes Faaborg an atypical kind of artists' colony.

Four artists in particular were pivotal to the colony: Peter Hansen, Anna Syberg (née Hansen), Fritz Syberg and Jens Birkholm. Together, they created a new way of depicting rural Denmark. They reinterpreted nature, provincial life and intimate family scenes, opening their contemporaries' eyes to a wealth of new subjects and themes. All four lived in the town and in the nearby village of Svanninge for long periods of time. Peter Hansen and Fritz Syberg became prominent figures on the Danish art scene, establishing new ways of depicting modern country life. Anna Syberg reinterpreted plant and flower motifs in her watercolours and is now regarded as one of the most important figures from the circle. By contrast, Jens Birkholm became a major name on the Berlin art scene and is still awaiting reassessment in his native Denmark.

The four Faaborg natives worked closely with the two local artists Harald Holm and Søren Lund, who had also completed apprenticeships as housepainters. However, artists from elsewhere also settled to paint in Faaborg for long stretches at a time, particularly the painters Nicolaus Lützhøft, Karl Schou, Albert

Gottschalk and Harald Giersing. The most important figures of the colony are represented in the museum collection, which includes some of their main masterpieces, but the collection does not restrict itself to artists who worked in the area. The artists' circle also included painters from other parts of Funen, such as Johannes Larsen and Poul S. Christiansen, and the circle preferred to refer to itself as 'the Funen Painters' rather than as 'the artists' colony in Faaborg'. However, this designation is not exhaustive either. Artists who were not born on Funen, and who found their subject matter in other parts of Denmark or Europe, also found their way into the museum collection through their friendships with the 'real' Funen Painters. Among these we find Kristian Zahrtmann. Thus, Faaborg Museum came to be a monument to a wider movement within Danish art around 1900.

Rather than specific local ties, the common denominator linking these artists may in fact reside in the way they approach their surroundings openly, directly and with a sense of genuine equality, often engaging in *plein-air* painting. The artists also applied this practice when settling elsewhere – whether in Kerteminde on north-eastern Funen, in the working-class neighbourhoods of Copenhagen or in rural Italy.

Mads Rasmussen, who funded the collection and building alike, was one of the most important industrialists in Faaborg. From 1904 on, he bought the occasional work by local artists to adorn his own home, but in 1910 he decided to build a larger collection of the artists' works and make it accessible to the public. The works for the collection were selected by an acquisitions committee that comprised the key members of the artists' circle and Rasmussen himself.

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That is to say, the museum was a museum of contemporary art right from the outset, and Mads Rasmussen gave the artists and the young architect, Carl Petersen free rein to create a monument to their art. Allowing a circle of artists to create a museum in this manner was quite unheard of, and the artists appreciated their patron's generosity. They made their very best works available to the collection and got directly involved in the management and development of the museum. Faaborg Museum is special precisely because this was a joint project where the patron, artists and architect worked closely together to merge art, architecture and design.

When he received the commission, Carl Petersen was a relatively unknown architect, but he became a leading figure within his profession and within Danish architecture as such, not least due to his work on Faaborg Museum. The ambitions for the new museum were high from the outset, and very shortly after its inauguration Carl Petersen's building was regarded as a striking example of modern classicist architecture. The monument created, however, is adapted to the town for which it was created: Faaborg, a market town with low houses and small squares. The name and logo reflect this too: the museum is named in a simple, straightforward manner after the town, whose medieval seal is incorporated in its logo. In correspondingly down-to-earth fashion, the building is scaled to match the town, its narrow façade discreetly joining and merging with its setting.

A similar sense of scale can be observed in the museum's interior, which constitutes a highly unusual, unified totality where the ground plan, colours, patterns and furnishings enter into a sophisticated interplay, appealing

directly to our senses. With its tile roof and mosaic floors made from local clay, the museum is quite literally built on and of Funen soil, becoming a symbiosis of local nature and culture. However, it is also expressive of monumentality and aspiration, looking ahead to the future. Carl Petersen's building established an ambitious, generous and bold setting for the art inside. The truly unique aspect of Carl Petersen's work resided in his wish to create a totality where colours, texture, lighting and scale are all crucial elements of the overall experience. To this we may add his work on designing the museum furnishings in cooperation with the young architect Kaare Klint. Similarly, Petersen's collaboration with the sculptor Kai Nielsen helped reaffirm the museum's position as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

We see, then, that Faaborg Museum is the result of joint efforts and contributions from many professions, creating a monument to the artists' colony that resided in the town. When the museum celebrated its hundredth anniversary in 2015, scholars from different professions were invited to present new research and insights about the museum building. In this book, selected chapters from that publication are published in English for the first time ever. The decision to do so was prompted by the arrival of new research and an exhibition about the artists' colony in Faaborg, and the book now casts light on these hitherto unexplored aspects of the museum's history and the museum building.

With this book – the first major book about the museum in English – we are able to present a comprehensive collection of information about the museum and the art it houses. The book does not offer a single, consistent narrative.

Rather, it is kaleidoscopic in nature, testifying to the diversity and openness characteristic of the museum from the outset. Respecting this background, the book is an anthology whose individual chapters all address different aspects of the lively, yet entirely cohesive unity that makes up Faaborg Museum and its collection.

The book opens with a chapter by Gry Hedin, exploring the artists' activities in Faaborg and its environs in light of the European-wide phenomenon of artists' colonies. Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen then goes on to consider the artists' genre paintings while considering the spread of such themes among other European artists' colonies. The third article, also by Gry Hedin, examines the landscape paintings created by the artists' colony and how they reflect a close affinity with the settings depicted. The fourth chapter, written jointly by Gry Hedin and Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen, takes a closer look at the interplay between Carl Petersen's museum building and the art collection as a whole. Flemming Brandrup follows this up in the fifth chapter with a study of the process underpinning the creation of the museum building, based on unpublished written sources, drawings and photographs. Anders V. Munch considers in the sixth chapter the furnishings inside the museum, especially Carl Petersen's and Kaare Klint's Faaborg Chair: originally designed for the museum, the chair now holds a central position within Danish furniture design. Finally, Peter Thule Kristensen presents his take on Carl Petersen's building, which places its distinctive mannerist and picturesque features within the wider history of architecture.

Lavishly illustrated, the book includes photographs of the building taken in January 2015 by the internationally acclaimed architectural photographer H el ene Binet. With

her images, Binet has opened up entirely new ways of looking at the museum's architecture. The book also sees a range of archival materials published for the first time, notably a range of designs and plans for the building and its furniture as well as photographs of the original hang. Much of this material is housed at the Danish National Art Library, Designmuseum Danmark and Archipelago Museum, Faaborg. With the publication of this book, we hope to raise the profiles of the artists' colony, the museum and Carl Petersen within international research. At the same time, the research presented here constitutes an important foundation for the future preservation and development of the museum.

We wish to convey our warmest thanks to all the authors who have contributed new knowledge about the building, putting the results of their research at our disposal, and to the many archives whose staff have made materials available to this project and received us in such a welcoming fashion. We are very grateful to the many foundations whose generous contributions made it possible to carry out this project. For a full list of acknowledgements, see page 2 in this book.

