



Peder Severin Krøyer (1851-1909) was a success. By middle age, Denmark's favorite painter had shown his work in Copenhagen, Brussels, Paris, Vienna, Florence, Stockholm, Munich, Ghent, Budapest, Venice, Hamburg, Chicago, and St. Petersburg. He won prizes, good reviews, and large commissions; he was decorated by governments, four times over; he became wealthy. But in a reversal worthy of a Shakespearean tragedy, it did not end well for Krøyer.

Peder was a golden boy. At age nine his stepfather, a noted marine biologist, asked him to draw what he saw in the microscope. The boy turned his back and made drawings of such detail and accuracy that they were used in a scientific paper. Peder was then given private art lessons, entering the Danish Royal Academy at 14, graduating with honors in 1870, at age 19. Soon after, Krøyer met the industrialist Heinrich Hirschsprung who bought the first of many paintings, gave money for a three-years study abroad centered in Paris, and warmly opened his home to the young man whose stepfather had just died. Returning from his travels, Krøyer became the leader of an artist colony in the remote, austere fishing village of Skagen in the north of Denmark. Very long summer days were filled not only with work, but also shooting on

the dunes, and drinking parties at night with Krøyer as master of revels. A handsome man, Krøyer was also a success with women, impregnating one of the Skagen village girls in 1888. Krøyer escaped to Paris. There he soon met, and in 1889 when he was thirty-eight, quickly married Marie Triepcke, who was 16 years his junior and widely reputed to be the beauty of her generation. Marie was an artist herself: a spirited young woman of some means, she started her own art studio for women, who were not permitted entry to Denmark's official art schools at the time. Now she was in Paris, on her own in her early twenties, studying at Puvis de Chavannes's studio. Following the marriage, blissful, productive years followed, in which Krøyer showed Italy to his bride, and showed her grace and gaiety to the world in many beautiful portraits.

Writing in 2009, psychiatrist James C. Harris notes that Krøyer was born in a mental institution to a woman who was a patient, father unknown, and sent to his mother's older sister for adoption. Another aunt on his mother's side, and eventually his daughter, Vibeke, had clinical depression. For Harris, Krøyer was stalked by his heredity propensity for depression, and it began catching up to him in the 1890s. In 1886 Krøyer spent six weeks in a sanitarium in the Pyrenees for persistent stomach ulcers; in 1888, he was treated with mercury for syphilis. After the birth of Vibeke, in 1895, Marie could not quite recover her balance; the birth was difficult, and she too became depressed. The marriage became strained, and before 1900 they were traveling separately, and spending long periods apart. Krøyer was committed to a mental hospital for seven months beginning in March 1900. It could have been depression; it could have been tertiary syphilis. Krøyer was starting to go blind. In 1903, he was admitted for "melancholy," and in 1906, for violent episodes of "mania." The money evaporated. In 1902, Marie met the Swedish composer Hugo Alfvén in Taormina; their affaire was intense. Marie asked for a divorce, which Krøyer only granted after Marie gave birth to Alfvén's child, a daughter Margita, in 1905. Krøyer died four years later.

Otto Friedrich tells a harrowing story of syphilis in Paris at the time of Manet. Writing in 1992, Friedrich states that by 1900, 20% of the adult population of Paris had the disease. The percentage was much higher among the artists and writers set, where it was something of a badge of honor, as the manic euphoria that accompanied the later stages was thought to be a boon to creativity. There was no cure, but the disease could go dormant, making it hard to associate secondary and tertiary episodes with the original infection. Deborah Hayden (2003) notes that the common treatment of mercury pills generally had doses 9,000 times recommended human consumption, making the treatment as bad as the disease.

Some of Krøyer's marital stress was of his own making. When asked to offer criticism to Marie's women's painting studio in the early 1880s, Krøyer was dismissive of the "young lady painter's school." Soon after her marriage to Krøyer, Marie gave up painting, feeling that she could not

compete with her virtuosic husband, a feeling that might well have been encouraged by him. She turned her hand to design and was the architect for homes for Alfvén, and to a lesser extent Krøyer. Following the work of William Morris and Charles Rennie Macintosh in art magazines, she made influential, up-to-date designs of interiors and furniture. Reading about the Macintoshes must have been bittersweet, as Charles' wife Margaret was an equal partner in their design collaborations, being primarily responsible for textile design. Charles wrote to his wife: "Remember, you are half if not three-quarters in all my architectural work ..." Closer to home, Peder and Maria's friends Anna and Michael Ancher managed parallel artistic careers, raised a daughter, and had a happy, supportive marriage that Marie surely compared to her own.

As a painter, it pains me to acknowledge that Krøyer's best work is from the period of his decline. I see four periods in Krøyer's work: his early academic period, his large-scale commissions, his private portraits of his wife and friends, and his last oddly troubling seascapes. To some extent the "periods" are thematic rather than strictly chronological. According to contemporary Danish critics using the terms of Krøyer's time, the paintings of Krøyer's first success are of a style denoted as *Naturalism*: these are, perhaps, painted from life models, but set-up in the studio. The paintings depend on storytelling, even allegory (Daphnis and Cloë), the kind of painting taught in the academies of Paris and Copenhagen, rather than the brute *Realism* of the Impressionists who were showing in alternative venues only four years before young Krøyer's first Paris study sojourn, 1878 -1881. Soon after his debut and for the rest of his life, Krøyer was favored with large commissions of many figures, also set-ups, such as *Social Evening in the Banqueting Hall of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, 1888. There is no question of Krøyer's mastery of the medium; these group portraits were shown in various European exhibitions as high art, not just as commercial product, and justly praised for their quality.

But today, Krøyer's reputation rests on his *Realism* – point blank paintings of his wife (*Marie Krøyer*, 1890), and the generous, informal poses of his friends (*The Writer Sophus Schandorph*, 1895). Of course, these paintings are naturalist as well, but with their Impressionist brushwork, their heightened color saturation, and their capture of momentary gesture, we feel the presence of the painter in ways that we do not in the Naturalism paintings. And more likely, these works are painted *en plein air*. Above all, Krøyer's current reputation rests on his nocturnal seascapes – sometimes called the Blue Paintings, for which he looked hard at nature and painted what he saw, but which are also loaded with emotion. These "mood" paintings were made in Skagen during the 19 years from the time of his marriage until his death, the time of Krøyer's collapse into illness.

Psychiatrist and concert pianist Richard Kogan gives lecture/performance detailing the mental illness of musical geniuses. With Kogan, there is an implication that a deep sense of

abandonment, and consequent self-loathing, propels the creative artist to genius. Let's use mathematical notation to stand for a complicated exposition, and please forgive the insult of the abbreviated terms:  $C+A=G$ , *only a crazy artist can become a genius*. Psychiatrist James C. Harris's exposition above might be in set theory notation.  $((C), (A), (CAG))$ , *in the group, there are crazies, artists, and crazy-artist-geniuses*. No causality is implied. As outlined in his book "The Artist in Society," psychiatrist Lawrence J. Hatterer's theory could be represented by a different equation:  $G+A=C$ , *being an artistic genius makes you crazy*. When I read Hatterer's book fifty years ago, I imagined a group of Pacific islanders standing in a circle trading goods for cowry shells. The shells were fiat money, only valuable because everyone agreed that they were. Maybe there is fiat reality: Conventional wisdom, what everybody knows, is that shadows are black because, don't be stupid!, shadows are not in the light. If someone paints shadows on a face that are purple or green, they are *fou*, and their work is Fauvism. (Of course, the ridiculed *Fauves* were right: because of the simultaneous contrast of color, the hue of shadows can appear to be different than the hue of the unshaded object.) Hatterer made it clear just how disagreeable society can be when you disagree with its perception of reality, and how fundamental a rejection must be applied to those who invalidate that fiat reality. Further, for an artist to change a popular style later in life – to risk being disagreeable with a new vision of the world, there must also be an implicit repudiation of previous work.

My thesis is that whatever the impact of Krøyer's physical ailments, whatever his heredity propensity for depression, and whatever the stress of the dissolution of his marriage, there is an additional self-inflicted impact on his person due to his noble desire to grow as a painter. For this thesis to be convincing, we must concentrate on the difference, the discontinuity, of the Blue Paintings with earlier work.

It is often said that *Summer Evening on the Beach at Skagen*, 1899, is Krøyer's masterpiece. Exposition usually concerns the figures: stiff-necked Marie is pulling away from a visibly aged Krøyer who is trying to hold on to her. All true. But most of the painting is of the ocean. Like Monet's *The Beach at Sainte-Adresse*, 1867, there are many colors to the ocean, colors that define different wave patterns, that in turn define the seabed below. The sun setting off to the right bathes the figures in orange light. The reflection of the moon skips along the water highlighting the different states of the waves. These surface effects, to my mind, are secondary to the volume of the ocean, to the pull of the deep. In the mood paintings, the figures are painted as before; the difference is the ocean and the figures relationship to it.

Photography is the lever that moved Krøyer's later work. Like other artists of the period, Krøyer bought a film camera; Krøyer's first was in 1885. Over 250 of Krøyer's photographs still exist. He used photography to capture a passing moment, especially later with the roll-film camera, but he also used the camera to sketch and model scenes for his paintings. The clearest example

of this is a series of works in 1893: *Summer Evening on the South Beach at Skagen*. It is reported that Krøyer was struck by the scene of Anna and Marie walking together on the beach after dinner, as viewed from behind. He then reenacted the scene and photographed it, at least twice. Using these photographs, there followed three painted versions, all in 1893, in which he moved the figures farther, and farther again, then less far from the viewer of the painting. It appears that having the photographic record to work with allowed Krøyer to experiment with the emotional impact of different scales of figures in a landscape.

Michael Ancher also used photography this way. His 1902 "Anna Ancher Returning from the Fields," is based on H. P. F. Londsteen's photograph, c.1890: the painting and the photograph share the same pose, with the same dress and hat, with the same flowers, and with the same play of shadow on the face. The difference is in the scale of the figure to the landscape; in Ancher's case, the figure in the painting is brought closer to the viewer.

Since he was nine years old, Krøyer had an inexplicable, innate ability to draw. Whether he is sketching, painting, or sculpting, Krøyer had an astounding ability to capture a likeness. But given photography, what is the true value of this talent? Indeed, what is painting for? After 1890, Krøyer accepted the challenge that photography represented to painting, and the threat to his work costs him something of his peace of mind. In fact, writing to his wife from the mental hospital in 1900, and sounding very much like an artist worried about his work, Krøyer laments: "When will I be able to work again, and will the public want to have anything to do with me at all? And what then? I can find no answer to the question – which I ask myself a hundred time a day – how will all this end?" (as quoted by Munk and Svanholm in *P. S. Krøyer: Tradition, Modernity*. P. 168)

Investing landscape with psychological meaning is very different from the Academy painting of Krøyer's early and continued success. In these academic paintings, models posed in a studio are placed in the painting in a generic landscape that has no impact on the characters, or on the viewer. It may be painted with a flourish, but it remains always a passive background, leaving the figures to enact the intension of the painting. And there is something (we painters would say) illustrative about using the figures in this way, "illustrative" with a negative connotation. Far better to create a fusion of the landscape with the figures, in Krøyer's case, a fusion of the ocean with the figures that contrasts their humanity and vulnerability to the vast, impersonal deep. This emotional use of the landscape is, perhaps, what the young Krøyer found so original and powerful in the paintings of Bastien-Lepage that he loved, although he was unable to articulate the specific component of originality at the time.

Krøyer chooses not to rest on his laurels; not to depend exclusively on his talent. Rather, he chooses to take the risk of pushing his painting to the next step. Making the landscape be the agency of the painting, and the figures more of a passive effect, Krøyer expands the mental

state of his characters so that it blooms out and affects the environment. Krøyer's "modern breakthrough" harks back, with a completely contemporaneous look, to Bastien-Lepage and to the Impressionists, but also to Giorgione's *Tempest* where the landscape and weather is the agent working on the characters and thus working on us as viewers. In doing so, he propels painting forward to the psychological portraits of Munch and Picasso.

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After everyone Rembrandt loved died, after the powers-that-were no longer had any propaganda use for his work, Rembrandt, broke and lonely, painted his last self-portraits that defined Northern Humanism for generations to come. Monet's *Nymphs* turned Impressionism on its head. The philosophy of painting the furtive, specific instant that Monet spent so much of his life inventing and perfecting becomes, at the end with the *Waterlilies*, a general abstraction that swamps the present moment in time. While Monet worked on them, the artworld moved on without him.

The least we can say of the late work of these artists (including Krøyer) is that they took advantage of reduced circumstances. More, we can say that by tolerating the stress of isolation, of saying something different, of implicitly repudiating earlier work, of risking all (or rather what was left), of putting their mental balance on the line, these artists turned their talent into genius.

Tony Robbin, Gilboa, 2017

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Special thanks to the Stamford (New York) Village Library for reaching far and wide for hard to obtain volumes.

