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Holger Drachmann on Fanø

Depicted in paintings, sketches, letters, travelogues, poems and contemporaneous documents.

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English Summary



In the Museum of Art on the island of Fanø (Fanø Kunstmuseum) in the Danish Wadden Sea about 30 beautiful pencil drawings by the Danish marine painter and poet, Holger Drachmann (1846-1908) are on display. They are drawings he made during his stay on Fanø in 1893 and 1894. Among the drawings there are subjects from Nordby Harbour (North Fanø) with images of fishing boats, grand sailing vessels, the post-boat servicing Esbjerg, and women, dressed in traditional Fanø costumes, driving their cows to pasture.

Drawings from the newly built spa hotels by Fanø North Sea Beach Resort include pictures of basket chairs, bathing machines and bathers in a stiff wind. On a visit to the village Sønderho (South Fanø), Drachmann made sketches of towering beacons and the old post mill the year before it burnt down.

At the apogee of his life, Holger Drachmann enjoyed great popularity, and also in many ways as an outstanding as well as a disreputable, poet. He behaved as the precious "*Dannerskjald*" (Dane-Scald). However, a great part of the middle classes despised his bohemian life style and unorthodox matrimonial affairs.

His literary achievements were extremely extensive and universal. From his début in 1872 until a short time before his death he published about 60 books, plays and melodramas among which *Der var engang* (*Once upon a time*) should be mentioned.

In his childhood and youth, he used to frequent the Copenhagen naval harbour, where he mingled with able seamen among naval vessels. Born with a natural talent for drawing, in his early life he threw himself upon maritime subjects. After graduation from high school he visited the island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea. Here his preferred subjects were seascapes with ships in rough seas.

Back in Copenhagen, and convinced about his talent as a painter, he applied for admission to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, where he was tutored by the eminent professor and maritime painter C.F. Sørensen.

In all likelihood, it was C.F. Sørensen who inspired Drachmann to visit Fanø. Way back in 1847 Sørensen himself had made several paintings from the West Coast of Jutland. Some of these paintings from the 1850s are on display in the Museum of Art on Fanø.

In September 1875 Drachmann went on a journey along the "new" Danish-German border, which had been drawn after the 1864 war. He also visited the Western part of Jutland as well as Fanø. Unfortunately, from this journey neither drawings nor paintings by Drachmann are to be found. However, the travel may have inspired him to write the collection of poems: *Dæmpede Melodier (Subdued Melodies)* from November 1875. The publication is decorated with beautiful woodcuts presenting images from the West Coast of Jutland.

Drachmann's second visit to Fanø was in 1883. At that time he already had behind him a failed marriage with two children. In 1879 he got married for the second time and had two more children. Drachmann's tempestuous life, a labile temper, frail health, and on top of that, a bad financial situation resulted in long periods of sickness and depression.

Due to his "*affected Nervous System*" he and his wife, Emmy, travelled to Fanø for a rest cure. They only stayed on the island for a few days because, as Drachmann wrote in a letter to his publisher in Copenhagen, "*the Weather was vile, and the Bathers were like the Weather*". From Fanø the couple continued to Bremen in order to test the North Sea spas on the East Frisian Islands in Lower Saxony including Norderney and Borkum. However, from Bremen Emmy decided to travel back to Copenhagen whereas Drachmann went on to Oostende in Belgium.

From this visit to Fanø only a single sketch is known with a motif from the Nordby Harbour. In the foreground lay an ever (a type of flat-bottomed boat) with a fitted leeboard and loaded with general cargo. The cargo may have been supplied by merchants in Varde or from country houses further inland in Jutland. Notice the brig lying in the fairway. As the drawing was made in mid-summer when all ocean-going ships would have set sail for destinations over-seas, it is likely that the brig is newly launched from the shipyard in Nordby. The building in the background is Fanø Krogård, which may be where Drachmann and his wife had stayed.

Nine years passed before Drachmann visited Fanø again. The intervening years have been turbulent: two more children were born, his health was continuously deteriorating with the strain on his nerves and a miserable financial situation.

In 1887, when Drachmann turned 40, he met a 21-year-old cabaret singer, Amanda Nilsson, in a café chantant at Frederiksberg in Copenhagen and promptly fell in love. In the following 10 years or so his fate was interwoven with hers in a common destiny, and together with her he went into a new period of life and a high point in his poetry.

The new relationship created a great scandal among the respectable citizens at Frederiksberg, and as time went on the situation became so intolerable for the two of them, that for a number of years they moved to Hamburg. In order to make a living Drachmann resumed painting and Amanda took up singing in St. Pauli's small alehouses. As a bohemian and an artist in Hamburg Drachmann was celebrated by the prominent and influential ship owners and bankers. Once a friend of Drachmann described the nature of the connections: "*Concerning Drachmann he is not only read by many, but in the course of years his appearance made him one of Hamburg's most well-known men. Everybody, who walked him along the Jungfernstieg [name of the main street in Hamburg], would notice that*". Among his acquaintances were Albert Ballin, the director of the

big shipping company Hamburg-America-Line (HAPAG), the ship owner A.W. Lohmann and not least the German-Austrian financier Sigmund Weisz.

During the 1880s, the bathing and general tourism on Fanø had been quite modest. In Europe the growing discussion concerning "*the curative influence of the sea*" had not yet come to Fanø. Around Europe fashionable seaside hotels and spas were already established on the island Foehr and Neuwerk in Germany, Scheveningen in the Netherlands, Oostende in Belgium and Brighton in England. Such grandiose establishments of international reputation could not yet be found on the extensive, white beaches along the Danish North Sea coast. However, the newly established Danish Tourist Society together with business people and entrepreneurs in Berlin and Hamburg had great plans for coastal development. One of those, the said Sigmund Weisz, saw Drachmann as a door opener to influential cultural celebrities such as the critic and author Georg Brandes and Peter Nansen, chief editor of the leading Copenhagen newspaper, *Politiken*.

In a short time the financial foundation for the establishment of the first grand building at Fanø North Sea Spa succeeded, and in 1892 on July 22 the fashionable '*Kurhotellet*' (Spa Hotel), designed by the architects Janda and Puttfarcken from Hamburg, was opened at a lavish celebration. Distinguished guests arrived at Esbjerg on special trains with saloon carriages where champagne was served. Participants came from Copenhagen and Hamburg, from where Drachmann also arrived. *Politiken* reported from the festival and one could read: "The food was excellent. In Copenhagen it would have been difficult to obtain a more sumptuous feast for so many people. However, 'Fanø North Sea Spa' has a famous chef from Hamburg. Among the many speeches Drachmann's elegant oration to the charming and beaming hostess, Countess Raben-Levetzau, was considered most successful". No pictures by Drachmann from the day of the opening are to be found. However, his good friend and student, the painter Carl Locher was invited to the party and he made drawings for the popular periodical *Illustreret Tidende* (*Illustrated Chronicle*).

After the celebration Drachmann went back to Hamburg from where he wrote moving reports for newspapers in Copenhagen about the cholera epidemic, which raged in the German city. The same year Drachmann separated from his wife Emmy. She was left alone with four children.

In 1893 Drachmann suffered from severe depression and he was recommended to slow down, so in October he went to Fanø in order to get some rest, to write and take up drawing and painting. From his frequent letters to Amanda, which exist in The Royal Library in Copenhagen, we know that he made several sketches and oil paintings: "*I am working hard – almost more than I can endure – and I know perfectly well that there may come a fatigue reaction later. Nevertheless, I want to finish these pictures – and besides, the sea and the air have an effect as the good bottle of wine you drank on my birthday. In a way, the weather is intolerable – wind, rain, fog, sun for a quarter of an hour and then fog again – and all the same, beneficent*".

During his stay, Sigmund Weisz in the company of a delegation of investors, visited him in order to build another spa. On October 11 Drachmann wrote to Amanda about the expected visit: "*Tomorrow our 'salvation angels' in the human shape of banker Weisz together with no less than twelve (not apostles) wealthy Berliners to take a good look at 'the world-famous seaside resort' on Fanø. That's why I worked so hard. If only they will buy a couple of my paintings! Amen!*" Unfortunately, the wealthy Berliners didn't buy any of Drachmann's pictures.

Late October, Drachmann returned to Hamburg. 'Kurhotellet' on Fanø was officially occupied in 1892, and in the summer of 1893 was succeeded by the building of a smaller 'Strandhotellet' (The Beach Hotel). The same summer the building of the impressive 'Hotel Kongen af Danmark' (The Hotel King of Denmark) commenced. It was the plan to arrange a grand opening at Whitsun, 1894. To this event Drachmann and other important personalities were invited.



Letter from Holger Drachmann shipped from Harwich to Amanda Nilsson in Hamburg

During his stay on Fanø Drachmann had the opportunity to embark on the paddle steamer *Koldinghus* on a voyage from Esbjerg to Parkeston near Harwich. The ship departed on June 6, 1894 and on June 8 it arrived at Parkeston. The next day he sent Amanda a postcard from Harwich with the following text: "My own little heart! Now we set the course back to the coast of Jutland. I have bought some English china for my own little porcelain-bride. I forward a lot of little delicate good kisses. Tomorrow evening I'll write to you from Esbjerg. See you later! Your own Holger". As it appears from the postmark the card arrived at Hamburg on June 11 in the morning between 6 and 7. Those were the days with an efficient postal service!

In the meantime, in the end of April 1894 Drachmann had already taken up residence on Fanø. With a few intervals his stay continued about one and a half months until mid June. In addition to writing, drawing and painting he delighted in the maritime environment, and he followed with great enthusiasm the life by the harbour, not least when tall sailing ships appeared.

On June 6 he had a great experience when he got the opportunity to cross the North Sea from Esbjerg to Parkeston and back on board the paddle steamer 'Koldinghus'. From Parkeston he wrote to Amanda: "Then we finally crossed the North Sea and I have planted my foot on Old England's Soil – and in fact it looks like the Sound (Øresund at Elsinore and Copenhagen) – apart from a broader beach, the more stiff houses, and people are speaking English. Yesterday I spent most of the day alone on the ship's deck. A half gale was blowing, the breakers towed their long gleaming hair, I painted English fishing vessels, and I was the only passenger to take dinner, in all fairness in the company of my honest friend captain Thomsen".

Back in Denmark was also the end of Drachmann's fifth visit to Fanø. On July 16 he left the island for good. However, plenty of impressions were included in the great account of a journey: "*Fanø oh Fanø*" published in the Danish magazine; "*Tilskueren*" (*the Spectator*) in the 1894 July-August edition.

Again in 1895, Sigmund Weisz invited prominent guests on a trip to Fanø, including Drachmann, Georg Brandes and Peter Nansen. But Drachmann declined the invitation. The daily management of the spa hotels was extremely costly and the economy appeared to be failing. That was why Weisz and partners in Berlin, Copenhagen and London were negotiating in order to raise new capital. The efforts failed and a catastrophe was unavoidable. In 1896 on May 30 Weisz shot himself in his Hamburg office. A bankruptcy was inevitable and new economic power must take over, but that is another story.

At that time Drachmann was beyond reach. His health was very poor and once again he tried to get a grip on his depression. Everything comes to an end, also the relationship with his beloved Muse, Amanda, who over 10 years had bewitched and inspired him to do his best writing. Over the years Drachmann's many letters have secured a unique knowledge for posterity of his time on Fanø.

At a lively artistic party in Copenhagen in 1897 he met a young Norwegian vocalist. As he betrayed Emma in 1887 he now did the same to Amanda. Now he had committed another betrayal before this "*Life-ecstasy Lover*" and "*The Poet of the Seas*", Holger Drachmann died in 1908, at only 61 years of age.



This summary is identical with the summary in my book "*Holger Drachmann on Fanø*". See also my homepage concerning Drachmann www.aldus.dk/fanoe/drachmann

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