

Faaborg Museum and the Artists' Colony



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Faaborg Museum and the Artists' Colony

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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.

Faaborg by Heart

The Artists' Colony

1880–1928

Beautiful landscapes discovered by making a random stop on a steam train, or a fishing village whose beauty reveals itself after a long coach journey made on sandy beaches. European artists' colonies such as Giverny in France and Skagen in Denmark were often found by sheer serendipity – at least according to the many myths propagated by the artists themselves.¹ Faaborg, too, had an artists' colony according to the newspapers of the time: 'The small, idyllic town of Faaborg is currently home to an entire artists' colony as an array of painters are eagerly producing studies of the town and its beautiful environs.'² Unlike the other European artists' colonies, however, the well-preserved market town of Faaborg and the hilly landscapes of southern Funen cannot lay claim to having been 'discovered'. The artists were already there. They comprised a group of artisans who, having completed their apprenticeships as house painters in Faaborg, set out to Copenhagen to become artists and subsequently returned to their native town in search of subject matter and a simple life. They brought along several fellow artists from Kristian Zahrtmann's art school in Copenhagen (ill. 1)

Simple life or no, several of these artists became major figures on the Danish art scene. The most prominent members of the group, Peter Hansen and Fritz Syberg, were particularly praised at the time for depicting rural life with a special authenticity. It was said that they had

a keen instinct for capturing 'the earth and what comes from the earth'.³ Portraying nature and rural existence in an authentic manner was a particular objective for many artists in the artists' colonies of the age. However, very few artists in these colonies actually came from the region in which they settled. Anna Ancher, the daughter of the hotelier Degn Brøndum at Skagen, is one of the rare exceptions to this rule.⁴

European artists' colonies constitute a very diverse, multi-faceted phenomenon, and the concept of an 'artists' colony' in itself can encompass many things. It is used to describe communities of artists who – bound together by friendships and at times by marriage – settle in specific geographic areas in order to inspire each other artistically. However, the more than 3,000 European and American artists who settled outside the major cities in the decades before and after 1900, wanting to depict nature and life in the countryside, often only did so for brief periods of time, and many cut across national boundaries and visited several different colonies. The artists' colony phenomenon was closely associated with the general growth in tourism: artists would use the infrastructure of tourism such as railways, steamships and hotels, and in modern parlance they helped to 'brand' areas of outstanding natural beauty and coastal regions. Often, such colonies gathered at local inns and hotels, but in some towns the artists



1. Peter Hansen, *At Zahrtmann's School*, 1890. Faaborg Museum

set up homes, and a few built villas where art and life merged. Even so, the artists maintained a certain distance from the entire business of tourism, for example by deliberately omitting tourists, seaside hotels and railways from their paintings.⁵ They were keen to create an illusion of authenticity, and in this regard their immediate impressions of country life helped generate the desired effect. Even so, they tended towards observing their rural surroundings through the slightly nostalgic gaze of the tourist,⁶ and part of the motivation for venturing far afield was to find a sense of community and independence far away from the cities and their academies.

The artists of Faaborg cultivated a similar sense of fellowship and painted the same subjects as the artists of the other colonies. But the fact that so many of them were locals sets them apart. They had no need to stay at a hotel or an inn, but could lodge with friends and family. Hence, the Faaborg colony became a more private group, and less freely open to

outsiders, than those of other towns where the local inn served as a regular haunt. Their own background meant that they could lay claim to a close affinity with their models and the places they depicted, and their way of looking at the city and landscape may be infused with a deeper awareness of the lives and work of ordinary citizens and peasants. Hence, they may be said to actually live the ideal of authenticity and affinity with provincial life that the artists of many other artists' colonies strove to achieve.⁷ Still, we must investigate these local ties and affinities further and specify exactly which artists belonged to the Faaborg colony in order to properly identify this.

International literature rarely describes Faaborg as an artists' colony, whereas the Skagen colony is addressed in books and exhibitions about the European artists' colonies. The purpose of this chapter is to present data on the Faaborg colony, thereby creating a basis for considering it as an artists' colony in international research.⁸

Artists' colony and museum

One may speak of Faaborg as an artists' colony from the 1880s up until 1928. Even so, the term did not gain widespread use until 1910. This was the year in which Faaborg Museum was founded and opened to the public by Mads Rasmussen, a manufacturer of tinned goods and preserves. Housed in his summer flat, the museum presented works selected and hung by the artists of the circle. One of them, Nicolaus Lützhøft, stated in the museum's first catalogue that the late 1880s and 1890s had seen the emergence of 'an entire artists' colony in and around Faaborg'. Newspapers only begin to use the designation 'colony' to describe the Faaborg artists' circle from this point on.⁹ Thus, the connections to the wider artists' colony movement are first made as part of the launch of the museum.

However, Lützhøft only uses the designation in a fleeting reference, immediately going on to establish that 'it is highly unusual in this country to see a provincial town have an art collection spring forth from its very own soil.' He emphasises how it was crucially important to Mads Rasmussen that the artists were part of the local populace, not 'transient visitors'.¹⁰ Since that reference, we can find other examples of a certain hesitancy when calling Faaborg an artists' colony. However, no further studies have been carried out, including comparative studies that involve the wider European phenomenon.¹¹ The Faaborg colony is distinctive by virtue of its close ties to the local communities, but it still has definite affinities with the European artists' colonies. Here we shall consider how research into the phenomenon can pave the way for a new perspective on the circle of artists known as

the Funen Painters (*Fynboerne*) by the general public.¹²

But who were the members of the 'colony', and when did they settle in Faaborg and the villages surrounding the town? If we take as our point of departure those artists whose works were exhibited at Faaborg Museum, the core of that group comprised Peter Hansen, Anna Syberg (née Hansen), Fritz Syberg and Jens Birkholm. They were all born in Faaborg and lived in the town and in the nearby village of Svanninge for prolonged periods at a time. However, the colony also included the lesser-known local artists Peter Syrak Hansen the Elder, Syrak Hansen, Harald Holm, Søren Lund and Carl Knippel. To this we must add the sculptor Kai Nielsen and the painters Christine Swane (née Larsen), Alhed Larsen (née Warberg) and Johannes Larsen. They came from other parts of Funen, but can be numbered among the circle because they created works based in the Faaborg area. The painters Albert Gottschalk and Nicolaus Lützhøft and the architect Carl Petersen also created works in the town and were closely connected to the Faaborg-born artists through friendships. Some artists became part of the circle through marriage. In 1891, Peter Tom-Petersen married a daughter of the estate manager at Brahetrolleborg; she was a friend of Anna Syberg's, prompting Tom-Petersen to visit Faaborg often after his marriage. The painter Karl Schou married Peter Hansen's sister, Marie, and also painted several scenes from the area. In 1917, the rather younger Harald Giersing married the Sybergs' daughter, Besse, and painted a series of works in and around Svanninge.¹³

If we consider this narrow circle only, the colony numbers nineteen artists.¹⁴ Many of them



2. Peter Hansen, *The Farmer and the Painter*, 1911. Faaborg Museum

were closely linked to the city and the area, but a certain distance is evident too; it is quite clear that throughout the period, the artists' colony was characterised by a dual outlook. They were simultaneously natives and strangers to the place, and there is a great difference between observing and being observed – as demonstrated by Peter Hansen in *The Farmer and the Painter*, in which Jens Birkholm appears with his paint box (ill. 2). In Faaborg – as in the other artists' colonies – 'colony' also means 'colonisation', with all that this entails in terms of subjugation and objectivisation. This is a different, darker meaning of the term 'artists' colony', with implications beyond those of simply settling somewhere and thriving there. In a book about his brother-in-law, Peter Hansen, Karl Schou described a lack of connection between the citizens of the town and its artists:

It is said that no one is a prophet in their own land, and the citizens of Faaborg were quite indifferent to the circle of painters who called their town home, and while Syberg and Peter Hansen both had friends – and, in the case of the latter, family – among the rural residents of the region, they associated very little with the townspeople.¹⁵

Karl Schou problematises the relationship with the citizens of Faaborg, emphasising the artists' close relationship with the rural population, but there can be no doubt that the artists stood out from the crowd. Their choice of occupation

alone marked them out as different. Their income often fluctuating, based on sales of their paintings, they were Bohemian characters who would usually live simply and modestly. Especially while still studying, the artists would live on small incomes. For example, in addition to working as a house painter, Peter Hansen made a living as a stenographer and a scenic painter, while Fritz Syberg polished silverware.¹⁶

They were not just bohemians; they had also upped sticks and left their native soil behind. Peter Hansen attended school in Copenhagen, and on completing his apprenticeship in Faaborg he and Fritz Syberg both set out for Copenhagen to study art there. Jens Birkholm became a journeyman, travelling and working in Germany and spending a long period of time in Berlin. Even when they got older and were more firmly settled in Faaborg and Svanninge, they were still – like their European colleagues – fond of travelling down through Europe.

The colony's busiest years 1880–1902

The activities in the artists' colony can be divided into three periods defined by which of its central artists were residents of Faaborg at the time. During the first phase, beginning in the 1880s and continuing until 1902, Peter Hansen and Fritz Syberg were important figures. The two artists grew up in a market town that



was witnessing great changes. Faaborg was surrounded by farmland where family-based farms cultivated the fertile Funen soil, but by this point agriculture was characterised by a transition from self-sufficiency and grain production to animal farming. From having been a centre for trade in grain and similar commodities, Faaborg became a town where factories and industrial plants processed agricultural produce. In addition to the wine and tinned-goods factory taken over by the museum's patron, Mads Rasmussen, in 1892, the town's industries included a cooperative slaughterhouse, an egg-packing facility, a wool spinning mill, a wallpaper factory and an iron foundry.¹⁷ The population grew from 2,328 in 1850 to 4,721 in 1925, and during this period the process of industrialisation made itself palpably felt in the town, the place where the artists grew up and trained as house painters and decorators.¹⁸ Faaborg could be reached by boat from Copenhagen and, from 1906, by train too. It was no fishing village far removed from everything, but nor was it a town that could be reached on a one-day trip from Copenhagen. Faaborg was an industrious market town, a fact that sets it apart from the many other artists' colonies, which tended to be set in villages and fishing communities – such as Skagen, Pont-Aven and Worpswede.

The colony first arose in the 1880s in Mesterhuset (*The Master's House*) in Faaborg. Here, Peter Syrak Hansen the Elder had his house-painting and decorating workshop, and this is where his children, Anna, Peter and Syrak, met and mingled with the apprentices: Fritz Syberg, Harald Holm, Carl Knippel and Søren Lund. Jens Birkholm, who was apprenticed as a house painter elsewhere in Faaborg, also visited Mesterhuset,¹⁹ which had

an important formative effect on the young artists. According to Poul S. Christiansen, they learned there 'as much of the nature of the craft as is required of all artistic endeavour which does not aim to lose itself in airy theory and blunt academic tastes'.²⁰ Even though Mesterhuset was – according to Fritz Syberg – not 'an art school, but entirely and exclusively a painter's workshop, infused with firm tradition',²¹ it had still amply prepared Peter Hansen, Syrak Hansen, Fritz Syberg, Harald Holm and Carl Knippel – mentally and in terms of craftsmanship – when they enrolled at Kristian Zahrtmann's school in 1885–86.²²

As part of the simmering revolt against the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Zahrtmann's school trained its artists to paint reality as their individual temperament saw it. As Peter Hansen put it, the young painters were encouraged to be a gathering of 'disparate elements ... where each asserted their own personal freedom' fuelled by 'a youthful hatred of the academy'.²³ In this regard the artists were entirely in line with the new departures and searching for new modes of expression that characterised much European art, and which found particular havens for free expression when artists gathered and formed communities outside the major cities.

Peter Hansen and Fritz Syberg brought pupils from the school with them to Faaborg. Their numbers included Johannes Larsen, Nicolaus Lützhøft, Karl Schou and Albert Gottschalk. The traces of their movements in the area mainly find expression in their paintings. For example, Lützhøft and Karl Schou create paintings that include 'Svanninge' in their titles (see ill. 3, p. 74), while one of Syberg's vases appears in a flower painting by Johannes Larsen (ill. 3). Lützhøft plays the



3. Johannes Larsen,
Immortelles, 1895. The
National Gallery of
Denmark



4. Fritz Syberg, *At the Organ in Svanninge Church*, 1887. Faaborg Museum



5. Fritz Syberg, *Chess Players*, 1891. Faaborg Museum



6. Anna and Fritz Syberg and Jens Birkholm in Svanninge, undated. Faaborg Museum



7. Fritz Syberg painting in Svanninge Bakker, undated. Archipelago Museum, Faaborg

organ while Peter Hansen listens in *At the Organ in Svanninge Church* (1887), while *Chess Players* (1891) shows Syrak Hansen the Elder playing chess with Harald Holm at Mesterhuset (ill. 4, 5). These scenes illustrate the fellowship that arose between the artists, and they are as close as this circle comes to promoting their own artistic community, a trait more widely evident in works from other artists' colonies, including Skagen.

In 1894, Fritz and Anna Syberg got married and rented a home from a Svanninge farmer. Their home became a new regular haunt of the artists, and Anna Syberg embarked on painting the watercolours that have since won her great recognition within Danish art history (ill. 6, 7, 8, 9). Anna and Fritz Syberg both depicted their chosen subject matter with great sensitivity and empathy, regardless of whether they were

portraying local villagers, family, visitors or simply flowers and other plants. Anna Syberg was a trained porcelain painter, but also informed by the tradition of depicting plants that permeated Mesterhuset. In her paintings of plants such as wallflowers, one senses a close kinship with Harald Holm, who also lived in Svanninge. The plant is depicted up close with a clear appreciation of its distinctive colours and wildly proliferating growth (ill. 10, 11). Around 1900, Christine Larsen (later Swane) and Ellen Johansen attended painting classes under Fritz Syberg in Svanninge, and Christine Larsen can be seen painting in one of Fritz Syberg's watercolours (ill. 12). Peter Hansen was also in the area: in 1898 he married Elise Neckelmann, and the couple settled in Odensevej on the northern outskirts of Faaborg.





8. Anna Syberg, *Wild
Roses*, 1898. Faaborg
Museum



9. Anna Syberg, *Spring Flowers in a Glass Vase*, 1900. Faaborg Museum



10. Anna Syberg,
Wallflowers, 1898.
Faaborg Museum



11. Harald Holm,
Wallflowers, 1894.
Faaborg Museum