

THE WILD HUNT FOR NORWAY:
PETER NICOLAI ARBO AND ARTISTIC
HYBRIDITY IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY

by

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DEDICATION

To Josh and Nick. Be well in Valhalla, old friends.

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ABSTRACT

Norwegian artist and historian Peter Nicolai Arbo created *Åsgårdsreien* or *The Wild Hunt of Odin* in 1872, while on a sabbatical in Paris, France, under the influence of the École des Beaux-Arts. Before his travel to Paris, Arbo attended the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Germany, which proved to be an influential presence in his artwork. *The Wild Hunt* is not only a painting of the mythological story, but a metaphor for a hunt for national representation of his home country of Norway in the late nineteenth-century. The histories, pedagogies, and artistic trends emanating from these institutions will be detailed, which will reveal continental European tastes in art, established and progressive forms of education, and sets the stage for how Arbo's artwork changed and developed during the course of his education and travel. Although his themes never changed, his composition, color palate, and hardness of line changed in accordance to the styles he was exposed to in Düsseldorf and Paris. *Åsgårdsreien* was an attempt at creating a national identity for Norway, which was during a period of rising nationalism as Norway was on the verge of gaining its independence from Sweden. Arbo combined his training, observation, and heritage to create his master history painting; the success of this is questionable, according to critics in his contemporary. *Åsgårdsreien* stands as a hybrid between earlier genres of painting and realism, and is an example of a transitional work of art in an era of rapid modernism.

GINNUNGAGAP: INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of what a Viking looks like, the image of a large, lumbering man on horseback wearing a horned helmet, holding a sword or an axe, with a nefarious facial expression while murdering an innocent human being or carting off an unwilling woman comes to mind. Despite research and archeological studies, the image of a Viking as a barbarian has been perpetuated since the late eighteenth-century by artists who were interested in the medieval history and mythology of Scandinavia, Norway in particular. Peter Nicolai Arbo was one the artists who participated in the renewal of medieval and Viking history in visual art, as he was motivated by his heritage. Arbo helped bring Norwegian art to a platform similar to that of the rest of continental Europe, in an attempt to create a national identity for his country, which was under Swedish occupation. His images of Vikings, old Norse kings, and characters from Norse mythology are the synthesis of his heritage and his international artistic education. His most advanced history painting is called *Åsgårdsreien* or *The Wild Hunt of Odin* (figure 1), created in 1872 and is a culmination of his contact with the cultures and arts of Düsseldorf and Paris. Arbo's experiences outside his home country allowed him to develop his distinctive hybrid style, based on the conventions of Neoclassicism, Romanticism, and Realism.

Arbo began his education at the University of Oslo in 1849 and after a year-long apprenticeship at the Copenhagen Academy, he continued his art education at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie from 1852 to 1861. At the Kunstakademie he studied under Carl Sohn, an artist known for his mythical and poetic content, and Emil Hünten, who

was an accomplished painter of war scenes and horses.¹ After his education at the Kunstakademie, he traveled to Paris where he was in contact with the artists of the École des Beaux-Arts and the contents of the Louvre. While he did not attend the École des Beaux-Arts, his time in Paris was critical to his overall development as an artist. After spending eleven years in Paris, Arbo settled in Oslo in 1874 where he continued to paint and became a board member for both the National Gallery and the Christiania Art Society.²

Åsgårdsreien was created during a period of medieval and Viking revival themes in Norway, despite Arbo painting the work while he was living in Paris. Arbo was an avid historian and was interested in depicting Norse themes as a way of communicating Norway's nationalistic fervor, as Norway was vying for independence from Sweden. The particular theme that is depicted in *Åsgårdsreien* is the Wild Hunt, where the Norse gods spread terror during midwinter. The painting serves as an endpoint of education and the academic approach and style results in a particular synthesis of native and learned cultural traits.

Arbo stands out as a painter as he was the only Norwegian artist who dedicated his artistic career to the cultivation of history as a genre.³ This distinction from his fellow Norwegian painters, including those who attended the same school or traveled to the same places. Despite this distinction, Arbo is in very little academic scholarship and fails

¹ Norsk malerkunst i Nasjonalgalleriet. *Katalog Nasjonalgalleriet*, 74.

² Oslo was known as Christiania during its occupation by Denmark and Sweden. After Norway gained independence, the name changed back to Oslo.

³ Ljøgodt. *Historien*, 69.

to be referenced in surveys of the nineteenth-century paintings or surveys of Norwegian artists.⁴ Arbo created his artwork during a transitional period, in which Norway was stuck finding a path which lied between its medieval past and its modern future, all while being occupied by foreign powers.

By exploring the political conditions of Norway during the nineteenth-century and tracking Arbo's artistic experiences across continental Europe, we stand a greater chance of understanding the part he played during the artistic transition of Neoclassicism and Romanticism as the prevailing styles to Realism in Norway. This analysis will serve as a mechanism of tracking the impact academies had on Arbo as a student and provide insight on the changing conditions of Norwegian art and Arbo's place within said development as an artist focused on creating a national image for his home country.

⁴ Lange. *Historiemaleren*, 8.

NORTHMAN: ARBO IN RELATION TO NINETEENTH-CENTURY NORWAY

Åsgårdsreien, or *The Wild Hunt of Odin*, is a product of Norway's changing artistic milieu and a product of Norway's extensive political history. Its artist, Peter Nicolai Arbo, was an avid historian and his interest in Norway's political and medieval history is evident in his master history painting, which is based on a poem written in 1859, during the height of Norway's medieval revival. While the subject is a mythological one, it speaks to Norway's desire to become an independent nation by using a subject that is so integral to Norway's identity-- Vikings. *The Wild Hunt* is not only a painting of the mythological story, but a metaphor for a hunt for national representation in the late nineteenth-century.

Swedish artist Richard Bergh wrote: "Authentic Nordic art must differ as much from authentic Mediterranean art as a fir tree from a pine."⁵ However, that was an easy statement to make as a Swede, as Sweden never suffered from occupation or colonization from its fellow Scandinavians. Norway was different as it was a province of both Denmark and Sweden and suffered from a lack of national identity. It was a difficult task to be Norwegian, as being Norwegian meant being Danish and being Swedish. Arbo came out of a struggle from nationalist dependency and used imported artistic conventions in order to stay continentally relevant, but with Viking subjects to stay Norwegian. This chapter will cover Norway's political history, its struggles with

⁵ Facos. *Nationalism and the Nordic Imagination*, 47.

representing its national identity, and the devices of inspiration ultimately applied by artists to give voice to Norway.

Arbo should be thought of as a historian who utilized painting as a way to communicate history. In a letter to the Norwegian commissioner for the Copenhagen Exposition in 1872, he wrote that “history has always been [his] favorite subject,” especially the history of Norway, which includes Norse mythology.⁶ Arbo would have been interested in his country’s history, as he began practicing during a time in Norway when independence was right around the corner and growing nationalism fueled creativity as a way to communicate national identity. However, it took Norway, as a dependency which suffered wars and occupations, a considerable amount of time to be confident and comfortable enough to demonstrate its uniqueness.

From the fourteenth-century till the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Norway was under the rule of Denmark. Since all of the ruling class was in Denmark, Norway was left impoverished and the Danish Council decided that “Norway shall henceforth be and remain under the Crown of Denmark, the same as any of the other provinces [...] and it shall henceforth [...] not be called a kingdom in itself.”⁷ This was a significant blow to Norway’s national identity; in the eyes of the world, Norway had ceased to exist outside of Denmark. In fact, Norway was known only in conjunction with Denmark as Denmark-Norway. No native nobility existed in Norway, instead the upper officials were appointed by the Danish king and could be Norwegian born. These appointed officials and Danish

⁶ Lange. *Fra Romersk*, 40.

⁷ Derry. *A History of Scandinavia*, 89.

administrators separated themselves from the peasants by speaking Danish with each other. They owed their positions to their absolute monarch and formed an elite community which thrived until the effects of the Napoleonic wars were actualized.⁸

After a very brief period of prosperity for the elite of Norway during the Napoleonic Wars, the Danish king was tired of the British commandeering their ships and searching them for French imports. He decided to protect the cargo ships with warships, which deeply offended the British and led them to start an attack on Copenhagen. After a second attack by the British, Denmark made an ally out of Napoleon, who agreed to not attack Denmark and its territories; however, this halted all trade, which caused famine and death.⁹ After Napoleon's defeat in Russia in 1812, Sweden turned on France under the rule of King Karl Johan, who, emboldened, turned and marched on Denmark, forcing their hand to release Norway and take it for Sweden.¹⁰

Norway was left poor. During the short months between the transfer of Norway from Denmark to Sweden, January to November of 1814, Norway's legislature attempted to vie for independence. This did not work and Sweden took control of Norway, which Norway "recognized," a lip-service to King Karl Johan who believed Norway was his according to the Treaty of Kiel.¹¹ While Karl Johan may have been expecting to gain Norway as a landscape to exploit, he ended up with a country that was becoming semi-autonomous.¹² Norway yearned to be their own country, but were left as another

⁸ Nordstrom. *Scandinavia since 1500*, 166.

⁹ Stenersen, Libæk. *A History of Norway*, 66-67.

¹⁰ Derry. *A History of Scandinavia*, 212.

¹¹ Derry. *A History of Scandinavia*, 214.

¹² Nordstrom. *Scandinavia since 1500*, 180.

dependency. The economic disparity and immediate handover to Sweden left Norwegians feeling an intentional denial of their heritage.¹³ Despite this new status as a dependency, slowly their economy began to grow, almost solely relying on the Storting, Norway's legislature, which was established in 1814, and the creation of the first bank, the Bank of Norway.¹⁴ The newfound independence through stability changed the government of Norway from oppressed agrarians to a publically representative body. The creation of the public council led to social stratification, where the intellectuals and farmers were separated, the latter being kept in the cultural dark. Once touting the strong nature of the Norwegian farmer, the members of the public council turned to call them uncivilized.¹⁵

From the turn of the nineteenth century, advancements in hygiene and nutrition caused a boom in the population, filling out the cities and flowing into the countryside. Farmers had the ability to buy and use better equipment. The Storting began to build public buildings like universities, the National Hospital, and create a national collection of art.¹⁶ Norwegian linguists discussed what language Norway was going to use: *bokmål*, a Danish-Norwegian hybrid; or *nynorsk*, a cobbled together analysis of local dialects; or *samnorsk*, a combination of the previous two.¹⁷ Schooling in Norway was made compulsive in 1848, where children were taught practical subjects.¹⁸ Textile, mining, and machining industries grew and thrived. The faster they grew, however, the more

¹³ Wilson. *Vikings and Gods*, 48.

¹⁴ Stenersen, Libæk. *A History of Norway*, 73.

¹⁵ Stenersen, Libæk. *A History of Norway*, 75.

¹⁶ Stenersen, Libæk. *A History of Norway*, 78.

¹⁷ Nordstrom. *Scandinavia since 1500*, 189.

¹⁸ Nordstrom. *Scandinavia since 1500*, 194.

susceptible to the global market they became, for better or worse. During the years between 1850 and 1880, the years in which Arbo practiced, Norway experienced an economic and social Golden Age,¹⁹ which corresponded with the rise in nationalistic tendencies in art and culture. While still under the thumb of Sweden, Norway united with its Scandinavian neighbors culturally by way of their shared Viking past. This cultural unification manifested itself through the preservation of folk cultures and stories, oral history, and a renewed interest in runes and Viking ships.²⁰ These themes would be translated on to canvas in Norway's developing artistic community.

Dazzlingly popular in the North was Romanticism, a style of art begun during the Enlightenment, based on the writings of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed that the quest for the true human experience would be found in the primitive core of mankind.²¹ Emotions and human experiences were central to Rousseauian discourse, as they are the most essential qualities of what it means to be human. The call for what can be called "primitivism" urged artists, authors, and historians alike to depict and describe the folk and the naïve. There was no better place to depict wild, untamed landscapes full of barbarous people than Norway and Scandinavia, as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe even describes the landscape of the North, in a positive light, as "the antithesis of the classical Mediterranean world."²² Tourism to Norway by fellow continental Europeans was on the rise, as they could experience for themselves the

¹⁹ Derry. *A History of Scandinavia*, 232.

²⁰ Nordstrom. *Scandinavia since 1500*, 192.

²¹ Chanover. "Rousseau," 1148–1158.

²² Barton. *Essays*, 26.

thrilling and sublime landscapes they had seen in paintings and read in stories, but still be close enough to home.²³ Of course, it was also disappointing, as the people who lived in Norway did not match what tourists had imagined them: the peasant and the feudal king, the cottage and the stave church, as Norway was developing an urban core, much at the same rate as the surrounding countries.²⁴

There was a double-edged sword for artists like Arbo, as Norwegians wanted to be recognized as exceptional by way of establishing a national identity, but simultaneously wanted to gain tourism, which pushed a folksy aesthetic. While the urge to base works of art on the past as a part of national identity and to gain tourism to Norway was genuine, there was still the desire to be recognized as just as industrialized and modern as the rest of Europe. Greco-Roman beauty, prose, art, and culture were perceived standards of timeless values, virtues, and the measures of civilization in Europe.²⁵ Norway, as well as the rest of Scandinavia, had to carve a path into the European zeitgeist to be seen as equals. Since the thirteenth century writers and cataloguers Icelander Snorri Sturluson and Dane Saxo Grammaticus argued their Norse gods were just as important as the Roman deities.²⁶ Histories written and stories collected were meant to elevate, not necessarily to instill nationalistic tendencies. However, their collections of writing would be called upon during this period, fulfilling a desire for a history from texts that elevate Norse mythology. Norwegian artists would have been

²³ Barton. *Essays*, 26.

²⁴ Barton. *Essays*, 30.

²⁵ Orrling. *Vikings*, 354.

²⁶ Orrling. *Vikings*, 355.

familiar with the imported conventions of Neoclassicism and Romanticism, as most artists traveled outside of Norway to learn how to paint. Danish artist Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg studied under French neoclassicist Jacques-Louis David and it is evident in his work *Loki and Sigyn*, 1810 (figure 2). The lines are strong and bold, as are the colors, and the setting is shallow, keeping the viewer's attention focused. Eckersberg brought his experience in France back to the Copenhagen Academy of Art, where he was a professor until his death. Johann Heinrich Fuseli, a Romantic Swiss artist, painted *Thor Battering the Midgard Serpent* (figure 3) in 1790, in which a nude Thor snatches Jörmungdr, the serpent that keeps the world from falling apart, with the giant Hymir, also in the nude. Thor resembles Hercules and his rippling muscles recall Michelangelo's *David* (figure 4). Equally as muscular, Hymir cowers in the boat, with wild hair and beard like Poseidon. The supernatural, tenebristic painting would have been known by Norwegians that traveled to Germany to study and would have been acceptable under the standards set by continental Europeans. Danish artist Nicolai Abraham Abildgaard was known for his Neoclassical training; however, when painting Norse subjects, his style leans towards Romanticism. This can be seen in his painting *Ymir suckled by the cow Audhumbla* (figure 5), made in 1777. The scene is of the giant Ymir being nourished by the cow, who is licking the salt stone to create the first woman. The cow is all but a copy of the *Capitoline Wolf* (figure 6), with heavy teats, directly staring at the viewer. The brushwork is painterly and dramatic, with large swaths of burnt orange cutting diagonally across the scene. While the bodies are perfectly proportioned, the action is mid-scene and active.

Despite an effort to display Norse gods in a Romantic context, Northern painters were still labeled ‘brigands’²⁷ and their works were still unfavorably compared by the standard set by those creating art with Greco-Roman models and Neoclassical heroes. German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann provided fuel to the fire wrote in 1762 of the Norse gods: “How should one portray *Odin*, the Scandinavian *Jupiter*, *Thor* as *Vulcan*, *Freya* as *Venus* [...] I would conceive that the figure be Greek and the names be Gothic.”²⁸ To Winckelmann, there was no way to elevate the Norse gods to the Greek status. The irony is palpable as Scandinavian artists began to use Neoclassical and Romantic conventions of the West in order to depict their heritage, not realizing that these imported artistic styles and ideologies contradicted their native tradition and voice, leaving behind the historical accuracy now available to them through catalogues of archaeological reports. Given the prestige of Neoclassical paintings, these works would be perceived as Truth of the past, as the Greco-Roman model signified a set of standards and expectations universally regarded as truthful.²⁹ If the viewer saw Odin with the body of Jupiter, they would understand the importance of the figure, despite perhaps not knowing what significance Odin has in the Norse pantheon.

Landscape paintings were an established tradition on Norway, with prominent painters like Johan Christian Dahl and Peder Balke. In Dahl’s 1827 painting *Winter at the Sognefjord* (figure 7) the viewer is met with a monolithic stone in the foreground, which is highlighted by snow and decorated with ravens. Its stark, bleak, and acts as a *memento*

²⁷ Wilson. *Vikings and Gods*, 24.

²⁸ Wilson. *Vikings and Gods*, 28.

²⁹ Wilson. *Vikings and Gods*, 34.

mori as the location is a twelfth-century battleground, where lives were lost in deciding new kingship. The scene faces the real location of Fimreite, a site that is important to the national Norwegian consciousness.³⁰ Balke's vertical landscape *Stetind in Fog* (figure 8), painted in 1864, renders a spiked tower of a mountain, looming in heavy fog over a tumultuous seascape. Two small ships battle the sea, making the mountain seem even larger and more imposing and act as a reminder of the sublimity of Norway's topography and how human life is insignificant in comparison to nature.³¹ The customary continental European way of depicting history was by using history paintings, a format introduced by the French Royal Academy in the seventeenth-century, usually sporting idealized subjects. Although displaying history and mythology, the first painting device used by Norwegians to render Vikings was landscape, where heroic figures populated vast scenery.³² An example of this can be seen in the painting *The Harbour in Skiringssal* (figure 9), painted in 1835 by Johannes Flintoe, which illustrates a duel between two Vikings. Landscapes were not valued very highly by Mediterranean artists; therefore, the addition of figures in Nordic landscapes was a conscious decision made in order to elevate paintings to a standard acceptable to continental Europeans. Eventually the figures become larger and the scenes become more specific; however, even the Norwegian artists who did paint grand history paintings, like Arbo and Christian Krohg, the larger breadth of their work consisted more of genre scenes, portraits, and mythological illustrations.

³⁰ Ohlsen, Messel. *Kunst fra antikken til 1945*, 66.

³¹ Ohlsen, Messel. *Kunst fra antikken til 1945*, 82.

³² Wilson. *Vikings and Gods*, 50.

Poetry and writing arguably had more leeway in terms of the representation of Norse mythology, as the Vikings and Northmen were skilled in the art of oration and had established styles of storytelling and later thirteenth-century writing. The *Prose Edda* was written by Snorri Sturluson in the early half of the thirteenth-century and lays the foundation of how Norse poetry is structured in the section called *Skáldskaparmál*, which describes *kennings* and *rímur*.³³ The *Prose Edda* includes some foundational Norse mythology, including describing Asgard, the place of the gods, and Ragnarök, the apocalyptic destruction of the universe. The unknown author of the *Poetic Edda* includes the story of Odin the Allfather losing his eye to gain wisdom, the myth of Thrym, Thor, and Freyja, and the famous Völsung Saga, which details the epic story of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer.³⁴ These *Eddas* acted as the only written history in the Nordic countries and provided plentiful inspiration for later authors and artists.

Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger was a Romantic poet and author from Denmark and was known as its best national poet. He traveled through Germany and learned its methods of storytelling documentation at the turn of the nineteenth-century. In 1807, he broke away from other Romantic poets and wrote on the subject of Norse mythology and published *Nordiske Digte (Nordic Poems)*. His epic poem *Nordens guder (The Gods of the North)*, published in 1819, was considered to be a modern *Edda*.³⁵ Oehlenschläger was so significant that he was used as a unit of measure. Art historian Lorentz Dierichson

³³ *Kenning* is a literary device of using two or more words to allude to a different word; *rímur* is a style of prose where the stanzas rhyme and has a double-four-line structure.

³⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica, “Edda.”

³⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica, “Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger.”

wrote in 1866 that he had yet to see “the Oehlenschläger of painting,” at the Scandinavian Art Exhibition in Stockholm.³⁶

Oslo born Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Engebretsen Moe collaborated their individual collections of Norse folklore and published *Norske folkeeventyr* in 1837. Moe came from a wealthy family and while he traveled to tutor students, he would collect stories. Asbjørnsen was a botanist and zoologist and collected his stories while studying in Norway’s many fjords. The publication was special; the authors followed the Grimm Brothers’ example for their collection and made it easily accessible for all readers, including in writing it in *bokmål*.³⁷ These stories resonated with Norwegians and Arbo illustrated the myths in one edition of Asbjørnsen’s collections.

Norwegian poet Johan Sebastian Welhaven was a staunch advocate for the conservation of Norse literature. He believed that national progress relied on the education and artistic refinement of its citizens. Welhaven was known for collecting sculptures created by fellow Norwegians for the nation’s benefit.³⁸ Unlike his more nationalistic peers, he did not support scraping Danish influence on Norwegian culture as it was as part of their nation’s fabric.³⁹ Welhaven’s poem *Åsgårdsreien* was penned in 1859 and was as much of a muse for Arbo as the entirety of Norse literature written beforehand.

³⁶ Ljøgodt. *Historien*, 99.

³⁷ Encyclopæda Britannica, “Asbjørnsen and Moe.”

³⁸ Lange. *Fra Romersk*, 40.

³⁹ Encyclopæda Britannica, “Johan Sebastian Welhaven.”

The political climate in Norway was a breeding ground for the search of a national identity, after centuries of being governed by other nations. However, visually representing this evolving sense of character proved difficult to artists, as they wanted desperately for their works to be recognized on the same level as the Classics, as well as depict their pantheon in a thoroughly engaging manner. Norway was figuring out how to communicate their heritage as an occupied country with an imported, impregnated culture. Norwegian artists had to come to terms with how to synthesize their heritage into works of art. As we shall see, this tension of Greco-Roman bodies on Norse gods begs the question of how much is left of true Norwegian themes are left in Arbo's history painting and how much continental conventions were absorbed.

GOTH AND GAUL: ARTISTIC PRECEDENCE IN DÜSSELDORF AND PARIS

Students of art traveled from continental Europe and the New World to train in the two premiere cities of Düsseldorf, Germany, and Paris, France. While Paris was already an established cultural center during the nineteenth-century, Düsseldorf was rising in popularity. After a year-long apprenticeship at the Copenhagen Academy, Arbo received artistic guidance from master artists in both locations: the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie and the École des Beaux-Arts, even though he was not a recorded student. Arbo transferred to the Düsseldorf Art Academy in 1852, where his education continued for nine years, and then he traveled to Paris in 1863, where he lived for eleven years in the shadow of the École des Beaux-Arts. The histories, pedagogies, and artistic trends emanating from these institutions will be detailed, which will reveal continental European tastes in art, established and progressive forms of education, and sets the stage for how Arbo's artwork changed and developed during the course of his education and travel.

Düsseldorf Kunstakademie

Austrian art historian Rudolf Eitelberger wrote in 1855: "However little value one may attach to German art, one must always speak of it with respect. The excellence of its intentions makes up for the imperfection of its works."⁴⁰ While a disparaging review of Germanic art, the sentiment is clear: the ideas of artists practicing in Germany, whether German by heritage or German in artistic technique, are more important than the quality

⁴⁰ Deshmukh. "Between Tradition and Modernity," 439.

of the art produced. This important distinction between intention and talent is reflected in the sentiments amongst critics and art historians when discussing art of the Düsseldorf Academy and is one that can accurately describe the works of art created by Arbo. To explain this reaction towards Germanic art, this section will detail the creation of the Kunstakademie, its founders, pedagogy, and detail the three teachers that Arbo shadowed: Karl Sohn, Otto Mengleberg, and Emil Hünten.

Düsseldorf was not a major cultural center like Paris or Rome, which called into question why the location was chosen for the creation of Germany's most prominent art academy of the time. However, it became an important artistic center with the founding of the Kunstakademie.⁴¹ Sitting on the Rhine River, within a few miles of the North Sea, Düsseldorf was known in the eighteenth-century as being a commercial hub in Prussia's Rhineland provinces, as it was a great center for trade with the Netherlands, Belgium, and France.⁴² The landscape surrounding the city was fairly barren, dotted with small farming and fishing communities. The *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* in 1857 described the students of the Kunstakademie as having to try harder in the bareness around them.⁴³ This struggle is a shared quality of the students at Düsseldorf; they tried hard to create decent pictures despite the uninspired landscape which enclosed them.

Conversely, this bleak setting appealed to the Kunstakademie founders, Peter von Cornelius, Friedrich Overbeck, and Wilhelm Schadow, as they sought to escape the confines of established academies for a new artistic beginning. The modernity searched

⁴¹ *Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, 154.

⁴² Deshmukh. "Between Tradition and Modernity," 446.

⁴³ *Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, 154.

for by this group of artists was one that rejected eighteenth-century academic standards. These three young men, who met while studying the Old Masters in Rome, were tired of the subjects taught and wanted to create a “freer field” in which to practice their skills and in teaching.⁴⁴ They connected with other artists and created a revolutionary, but short-lived, group called the Nazarenes, who rejected the conventions of Neoclassicism for the freedom of Romanticism, and who embraced so-called truthful depictions of Biblical stories in a distinctly anti-scholastic manner.⁴⁵ Despite this pioneering impulse, all three of these young men, upon returning to Germany, would embrace a pure form of Neoclassicism, while retaining their original motivation of cultivating authentic emotions in art, a Romantic concept. The desire to be modern in approach on teaching the creation of art, the three founders turned to medieval methods and subject matter as a way to access Romanticism and authenticity. They justified using medieval teaching methods, one of which was called the *Masterclass*, modeled on the idea of the medieval master and apprentice.⁴⁶ It was developed to make the learning environment at the academy more personal; however, it had the ability to repress and inhibit dramatic innovation, which may be one of the reasons why many critics were left underwhelmed when observing Germanic art.

After a brief period of direction from Cornelius, Schadow was made director of the Kunstakademie in 1826 and served until 1859. Schadow created an environment at the Kunstakademie that concentrated on fidelity to nature with a discipline of line

⁴⁴ *Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, 154.

⁴⁵ Chu. *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 163.

⁴⁶ Vaughn. “Cultivation and Control,” 151.

required by the conventions of Neoclassicism.⁴⁷ He favored drawing, mathematical proportion, and symmetry, which are all distinct Neoclassical qualities of art production. He implemented classes, starting at what was called the “elementary” level, where students would make copies of Old Master works and plaster casts, learned the principles of light and shadow, focused intensely on the quality of drapery. Days, sometimes weeks, would be spent studying the intricacies of parts of the human body during his master classes.⁴⁸ Professors of history painting stressed the importance of preliminary drawing exercises, which in turn would cause students to lament that they were pursuing the “laborious and seemingly uninspired [...] draftsmanship and meticulousness at the expense of spontaneity.”⁴⁹ The meticulous nature of the art produced at the Kunstakademie was noted in the *Bulletin of the American Art-Union*, 1850, where the author noted that the canvases were so detailed that “one can almost botanize and geologize” the perfect specimens.⁵⁰ To counter concerns from students of the narrowness of the Neoclassical curriculum and in order to create a more diverse artistic environment, Schadow implemented a fashionable balance of the genres of painting, not allowing for the hierarchy seen at other academies. In this environment, the continental European “low” genres were accepted, like landscape and everyday genre scenes alongside the “high” genres of history and portraiture, and were able to practice Romanticism. This allowed for the student artists to practice *juste milieu*, which was a compromise between

⁴⁷ *Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, 155.

⁴⁸ Deshmukh. “Between Tradition and Modernity,” 451-3.

⁴⁹ Deshmukh. “Between Tradition and Modernity,” 463.

⁵⁰ “Gallery of the Düsseldorf Artists,” *Bulletin of the American Art-Union*, 9.

idealism of Neoclassical history painting and the naturalism of Romantic landscapes.

This appealed to burgeoning middle class patrons, who appreciated the novelty of being able to purchase a work that is very modern but compatible with contemporary sensibilities.⁵¹ Schadow's conscious decision to allow students to create works of art important to them reflects contemporary criticism of the Academy.

Three of Arbo's professors at the Kunstakademie will be analyzed and their adherence to its instruction: Karl Sohn, Otto Mengelberg, and Emil Hüntten. Berliner Karl Ferdinand Sohn was an "exquisite colorist" and an excellent draftsman, and for this reason he was in charge of the antique *Masterclass*.⁵² His piece *Tasso and the two Leonores* (figure 10), 1839, is based on the melancholic play written by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe about a sixteenth-century Italian poet. The foreground is shallow and is largely occupied by people, there is a depth of field emphasized by a Renaissance structure in the background. Leaning next to a fallen Ionic capital is Tasso, intensely focused on his work, and the two beautiful Leonores attempt to grab his attention, but fail. The scene is intimate and focused, with heavy emphasis on the natural world around mathematically proportioned human figures. The veins of each individual leaf of the surrounding fruit trees is delicately rendered. The treatment of the plants looks Medieval and reminds the viewer of the *Unicorn Tapestries*, more specifically *The Unicorn in Captivity* (figure 11) from the fifteenth-century. The close, cataloguing quality seen in the

⁵¹ Deshmukh. "Between Tradition and Modernity," 454.

⁵² J. W. E. "The School of Art at Dusseldorf," 7.

execution of the flora can be attributed to the Kunstakademie's insistence on rigorous drawing.

Cologne born Otto Mengelberg was also the student of Karl Sohn and primarily focused on religious subject matter in his paintings, as he was a practicing Protestant and aimed to reform how Christian art was created.⁵³ *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (figure 12), painted in 1848, is based on the Biblical parable of redemption after disobedience. The Neoclassical scene features the father and son, embracing as the son falls over in disgrace, who wear robes and sandals, as they would have been in the Bible; however, the surrounding audience wears contemporary garb. All the fabric is hugely accentuated, each fold is careful to both cover and reveal the bodies underneath. The marble column and descending landscape indicate a focus towards the Old Masters and Classicism, which was the preferred subject of Nazarene and founder Schadow. Arbo appears to have synthesized Mengelberg's propensity to perfect accentuation of fabrics and how it reacts to its atmosphere.

Parisian born but German raised Emil Hünten was a skilled painter of horses and war scenes; this skill earned him an accompaniment with the Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia during his army campaigns. Hünten first trained at the École des Beaux-Arts before teaching at the Kunstakademie, starting in 1851.⁵⁴ His painting *Marshall Forwards* (figure 13), 1863, is an equestrian portrait of a military man in all black, raising his curved sword, guiding his army forward upon a rearing, white horse. The scenery is

⁵³ Hammer. "Die Melanchtonforschung im Wandel der Jahrhunderte," 449.

⁵⁴ Williamson, *Bryan's Dictionary of Painters and Engravers*, 306-307.

non-descript, the brown of the earth is reflected in the clouds above. The anatomy of the horse is meticulous and painted sculpturally, while the rider could easily be replaced and features no distinct characteristics. There is passion and fear in the horse, as an animal would have reacted in the real situation. Hüntén gained this superior skill of depicting natural appearing horses from his teacher at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Horace Vernet. Vernet was also a skilled painter of scenes of war and painted for the reinstated Bourbon monarchy.⁵⁵ His painting *Italian Brigands Surprised by Papal Troops* (figure 14), 1830, features emotional, raging horses, which, in their action, are no longer on firm ground, which extends the limbs and stretches the muscles for more accurate artistic accentuation.

Many Norwegian artists availed themselves in this living and working environment in the *Kunstakademie* and were called the Düsseldorf Norwegians. Not only were these Düsseldorf Norwegians the peers of Arbo, but their works impacted his own as these Norwegian artists attended the *Kunstakademie* not ten years before Arbo joined. Of the Norwegians, there are three that exemplify the *Kunstakademie*'s propensity to landscape and Nazarene-style biblical devotion: Hans Gude, August Cappelen, and Adolph Tidemand. Hans Gude, native of Oslo, is considered to be one of Norway's most prominent landscape painters.⁵⁶ In his 1854 painting *Norwegian Highlands in Sunrise* (figure 15) the space on the canvas is equally visually split into two parts, the alpine, mountainous terrain and the morning sky. A soft pink glow illuminates the mountain range and opposes the browns, blues, and greens of the highlands in the foreground. The

⁵⁵ Chu. *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 209.

⁵⁶ Ohlsen, Messel. *Kunst fra antikken til 1945*, 87.

subject is Romantic, a vast, sublime landscape, dotted with a single human figure to remind the viewer of how small humanity is in comparison to nature; however, the techniques reflect the style of realism, as every single object present on the canvas is detailed to the absolute extreme. Every crag in the rocks, every snag of the dead tree branches, and every wisp of cloud is minutely detailed, which adds to the overwhelming sublimity of nature. This same style of painstaking detail rendered in a landscape can be seen in the Düsseldorf works of August Cappelen. Cappelen has a small amount of work to study as he died at the age of twenty-five and his piece *Waterfall in Telemark* (figure 16) was created in 1852, the year of his death.⁵⁷ The highly-detailed landscape features three figures engaged in a Romantic action: relentlessly attempting to build a bridge across a rapid, white-water river. Their struggle is infinitesimal compared to the uncaring river, the expansive trees, and unsettling, cold fog creeping over the mountain range. Like Gude, each individual object is carefully treated with microscopic detail, the viewer can even see the knit of the sweater worn by the closest figure in the foreground. Adolph Tidemand, conversely, used the same intricate detail, but for genre scenes during his time in Germany. In 1848, he painted *Low Church Devotion* (figure 17), which features a scene of a sermon being held in a small, dark church.⁵⁸ Heavenly light falls on the preacher, holding a Bible, in a fog of smoke from the furnace in the far background behind the pews. The audience of young and old, men and women looks uninterested, in anguish or pain, or sheer boredom. The triangular composition stops the viewer from

⁵⁷ Ohlsen, Messel. *Kunst fra antikken til 1945*, 93.

⁵⁸ Ohlsen, Messel. *Kunst fra antikken til 1945*, 84-85.

looking around excessively and places the focus directly on God's word. The clear, concise lines and details of the composition speak to his academic training, however using normal people and objects from his native Norway.

While Arbo found his fellow Norwegians admirable and interesting, their interest in landscape and genre paintings did not gratify his expectations as a career painter of history and Norse mythology. He was not content to paint within the same parameters as they followed. In order to practice in mythology and more embellished history, Arbo would move to Paris for eleven years in order to expand his breadth of work.

In the Shadow of the École des Beaux-Arts

French lawyer Montesquieu wrote, according to Stendhals's 1833 review of the French Salon: "If you always follow the ancients, you will never rival them."⁵⁹ It was a call to the blatant copyists of Antiquity that Stendhal was calling attention to, as Neoclassicism was the style currently taught and imposed at the École des Beaux-Arts. This was the France that Arbo would have come into contact with. While Arbo was not a member of the Academy or the École, his participation and long-term habitation in France, eleven years, had a palpable impact on his art, while in France and in his eventual return to Norway. Arbo would have been able to see paintings displayed at the Salon, as well as, presumably, had personal contact with artists practicing in Paris. This section will analyze the works of five Parisian artists, whom I believe had an impact on Arbo's content, composition, form, and painting style.

⁵⁹ Millard. *Sculpture and Theory*, 17.

The École des Beaux-Arts was founded in 1819 as a conglomeration of the schools of painting, sculpture, and architecture which had existed since 1648, and was controlled by the Royal Academy, which was freshly reinstated under the rule of Louis XVIII and referred to as the Restoration Period. The Academy controlled who was able to teach, how difficult the entrance exam was, and the Rome Prize competition at the École.⁶⁰ Since members of the Academy served for life, their age would get in the way of progress, according to newer and younger students. The biennial Salon exhibitions during the Restoration period were dominated by the students of Jacques-Louis David and his Neoclassicist style.⁶¹ There was a strong genre hierarchy at the Salon, meaning that the only paintings ever considered for the grand prize were history paintings. There wasn't much incentive for students to stray outside of the loftier genres of history and portraiture.

Despite the propensity towards Neoclassicism and history, there was a desire for “new art,” which contemporary art critic Stendhal, né Henri Boyle, defined in his review of the Salon of 1824 as having “a soul [...] some human emotion or spiritual impulse in a vivid manner intelligible to the general public.”⁶² One of the representatives of “new art” was Horace Vernet, who, as mentioned above, was an ambitious painter for and student of the École des Beaux-Arts. His works of art were contemporary to their time and focused on recent history instead of grand visions of the past, mythology, and allegory. He wanted Romanticism, but not one that included the nude or medieval subjects.

⁶⁰ Chu. *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 205.

⁶¹ Chu. *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 206.

⁶² Chu. *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 208.

Madame de Staël, however, saw the potential for Romanticism in France to flourish by using Medieval subjects and myths, which were more native to France than Classicism.⁶³ While Vernet set the stage for what was to be considered as the new, his contemporaries Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres expanded on the ideas of what is new and what can be considered Romantic. His fellow contemporaries in the Academy, Isidore Pils and Alexandre Cabanel, synthesized Romantic ideas with their previous Neoclassical training to create a style called *academicism*.⁶⁴ This synthesis of differing styles and content allowed for a broader range of works created, while still adhering to the Academy's strict scholastic regimen.

Parisian Isidore Pils was one of the principle painting instructors at the École des Beaux-Arts, nominated in 1864 along with Cabanel, and was the recipient of the Prix de Rome in 1840 while he was a student.⁶⁵ His 1849 painting *Rouget de L'Isle Singing La Marseillaise* (figure 18) features the contemporary captain of the French Revolution, Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle, singing the song he is said to have written, *La Marseillaise*, a patriotic tune calling people to war. The scene is passionate, all of the figures stare admiringly at Rouget as he dramatically orates. The painting has a strong sense of line, both on the figures and setting and in the implied line of the people's gaze, which are essential elements of Neoclassicism. However, the content of the painting follows Stendhal's version of the Romantic, as it depicts a piece of recent history without allegory or myth, but with passion and devotion.

⁶³ Chu. *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 207.

⁶⁴ Chu. *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 532.

⁶⁵ Chappay. *Les professeurs*, 96.

Alexandre Cabanel was a well-respected member of the École des Beaux-Arts, where he won the Prix de Rome in 1845 and after his appointment as a painting professor in 1864, he was often made a member of the Salon jury.⁶⁶ His treatments of human bodies, especially nude females, are delicate and careful; they appear to be made of pure marble, soft like a Bernini sculpture. Looking at *Birth of Venus* (figure 19), 1863, Venus is perfect, there is not a blemish on her body and not a single curve out of place, not even the sea that holds her obscures her body in the slightest. She is meant to be absolutely consumed by the viewer, barely conscious and not interacting with everything around her, including the observer's gaze. Venus's perfect and proportionate body speak of Neoclassic training and Romantic subject are fused into his distinct academic style. Cabanel was accused of appealing to the bourgeoisie and being insincere, belonging to style called *l'art pompier*, a derisive term referring to Attic-style helmets found at Pompeii.⁶⁷ While not particularly impassioned or thoughtful, Cabanel's *Venus* speaks to a public desire for passive, consumable female bodies.

Théodore Géricault had a short artistic career, as he died at the young age of thirty-two, and while others have argued that his short career could not have had an impact on Parisian art; however, his engaged brushstrokes are exceptional, especially in his renditions of horses.⁶⁸ He created his 1821 painting *The Derby of Epsom* (figure 20) late in his artistic oeuvre. The composition is split horizontally across the middle of the canvas, with the galloping horses dividing earth and sky. The horses are so engaged in

⁶⁶ Turner, *Dictionary of Art*, 341–344.

⁶⁷ Harding. *Artistes pompiers*, 7.

⁶⁸ Chu. *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 209.

running that they appear to be floating across the scene, not unlike Arbo's *Åsgårdsreien*. There is a certain relatability to the figure in Géricault's *Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Field of Battle* (figure 21), 1814, as he leads his equally terrified horse off the battleground and into safety. As Géricault was a pioneer of Romanticism, it's logical that he would retain his early education. The downward diagonal, the color treatment, and the sublimity of the contemporary situation depicted keep the painting modern and Romantic, while his careful drawings keep it in the realm of trepidatious Neoclassicism.

Eugène Delacroix turned to the erotic, the past, and the fictional for the content of his paintings, which are painterly and packed with emotionality in order to communicate his interpretations of exciting exoticism. Based on the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, *Dante and Virgil* (figure 22), 1822, is as epic as the poem, featuring desperate lost souls, crying in agony, while Dante and Virgil look upon them with disgust. Delacroix's painterly style communicates horror to the viewer with the writhing bodies and the turbulent landscape. The raw emotions that Romanticism brings to Delacroix's canvas would have been inappropriate for Neoclassicism. Delacroix was not only skilled in depicting emotions in human beings, but in animals as well, mainly horses. *Collision of Moorish Horsemen* (figure 23), 1844, features two horsemen in the foreground, their horses crashing face to face, as part of an Arab military exercise.⁶⁹ Both horses are rearing, the black one throwing its head back violently, with a wild mane and its eyes red with rage. The dramatic, short brushstrokes provide more intensity to the scene, reminding the viewer of Peter Paul Rubens, a main source of inspiration for Delacroix.

⁶⁹ The Walters Art Museum, "Collision of the Moorish Horsemen."

Still, his compositions are clear, indicative of his time at the Academy, but never without passion and emotion.

Between the confines of Neoclassicism and Romanticism was Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, who preferred to paint subjects on the Oriental, contemporary events, mythology, and history. In *La Source* (figure 24), 1856, there is no denying the attention to the lines of the model's body and the scrupulous attention to the detail of the amphora and cascading water. However, her sensuality is alluring, as she stares out at the viewer. Her skin is so flawless, she looks unreal, with hardly any creases or unattractive shadowing. Unlike Delacroix, he advised his students to look forward, not backward to artists like Rubens, in order to create something entirely new while still having an educated foundation.⁷⁰

This survey of various professors and practitioners at the Kunstakademie and the École des Beaux-Arts has permitted us to trace the stylistic threads that Arbo utilized during his painting careers. The artists and professors from the Kunstakademie developed an equal field in which artists could develop whatever subject or genre they wished to create; however, students were still required to develop incredible line work and preliminary drawings. The artists and professors from the École des Beaux-Arts encouraged both Neoclassicism and Romanticism, but were still stuck on the perceived hierarchy of genres. From the Kunstakademie, Arbo retained his Neoclassical attention to detail, figural groupings, and fidelity to his source materials. While there is not much documentation of Arbo's time spent in Paris, as he was not a registered student at the

⁷⁰ Chu. *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, 223.

École des Beaux-Arts, he spent eleven years in the city, 1863-1874, and it was an artistically productive time of his life. It is in Paris where Arbo allows himself more freedom and adapts to more open compositions, softer light, and Romantic views of history and mythology.

VIKING: ARBO'S NORWEGIAN IMPULSES AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Whether attending the Kunstakademie or frequenting the École des Beaux-Arts, Arbo continued to paint Viking and Medieval subject matter. Although his themes remained squarely history or genre, his style changed in accordance with the Neoclassical and Romantic works of art he was exposed to in Düsseldorf and Paris. This survey of Arbo's works during his formative periods on the continent will show that he was particularly intent on pictorializing the major figures and events of eighth- to thirteenth-centuries in an increasingly bifurcated approach that acknowledges current Neoclassical and Romantic trends within the academies. In the analysis that follows, I will consider the paintings in two groups that maintain his constant interest in early Norwegian history, but also show how his style continues to develop along two trajectories.

Düsseldorf

Arbo created a series of lithographs on the life and deeds of Saint Olav, according to *Heimskringla*, a chapter in the *Prose Edda*, written and documented by Snorri Sturluson, Olav Haraldson, before he was a saint, was the King of Norway during the eleventh-century and was killed in 1030 CE during battle of Stiklestad, which was considered a brave and honorable way to die. As part of an illustrated history of medieval Norway, titled *Billeder af Norges Historie*, the last of which is titled *Olav den helliges død under slaget ved Stiklestad*, or *Saint Olav at the Battle of Stiklestad* (figure 25),

created in 1860.⁷¹ However, it is not known whether King Olav was killed by the opposing forces of peasants or by his own legion of Christian warriors, as his half-brother was crowned king soon after Olav's death.⁷² According to Arbo, in his lithograph of the event, Olav is speared by a dirty, drab peasant rather than a Christian, in the heat of battle. Olav is the brightest and most central figure of the composition, which is rife with commotion. Even in death he is majestic, wearing a red tunic trimmed with gold and a large gold cross. The focus of the composition is on the battle, there is no real landscape apart from a vague, misty outline of a mountain range. Each character is carefully illustrated with meticulous line work and basic colors that don't distract the viewer. There is emotion, but the figures are quite rigid and unmoving. He raises his shield in agony, steadying himself against a large boulder, which also supports one of his fallen comrades. The composition is like a frieze, where all the action moves laterally across the canvas and the groupings are tightly knit. His Christian army are also clad in color, mostly blues and muted reds, while the peasants, which one assumes are the antagonists based on their rendering, are grey, dark, and dirty. His use of hard line and deliberately muted color palette are evidence of the artistic training taught at the Kunstakademie.

Arbo's oil painting *Håkon den gode og bondene ved blotet på Mære*, or *Håkon the Good and the peasants at Mære* (figure 26), 1860, depicts another story from medieval Norse history. Håkon the Good is so-called as one of the first kings who attempted to bring Christianity to Norway. Before he became king, his half-brother, Eric

⁷¹ Ljøgodt. *Historien*, 75.

⁷² Ljøgodt. *Historien*, 76.

Bloodaxe, took the throne and implemented a huge tax on the peasant farmers in his kingdom. Håkon usurped his brother and promised to relieve these taxes. The scene that Arbo chose to represent is the precise moment when the peasants enter the meetinghouse and demand tax relief from the king.⁷³ Sitting upon a throne, wearing royal red and gold, and holding a drinking horn, Håkon addresses the angry villagers around him with calm civility. Figures with their backs turned to the viewers act as repoussoir devices, leading the viewer back to King Håkon. Every character is draped in historically authentic garments and are positioned horizontally across the canvas. Arbo carefully constructs a mathematically correct interior, showing his skills and training in perspective. The walls are covered in accurate tribal tapestries, consisting of assorted registers and patterns. Above the tapestries are *urnes* engravings, a style that consists of gripping beasts and stylized flowers. While the central characters betray naturalism of physiognomy and dress, they are Classically posed and naturally rendered, down to each tassel adorning a robe and each strand of hair of their beards. Arbo's love of history and detail is evident in this painting, and it acts as proof that he was able to create authentic paintings of medieval history.

Kong Sverres flukt or *King Sverre's Escape* of 1862 (figure 27), depicts the twelfth-century warrior king in the midst of battle against the Voss Mountain tribes. He appears on rearing horse, holding a large horn, with his cape fluttering dramatically behind him at center, much Napoleon in Jacques-Louis David's famous painting of the general crossing the Alps. According to the *Sverris Saga*, begun in 1185, King Sverre

⁷³ Ljøgodt. *Historien*, 80.

was a short man who was challenged in leading battles, so he accomplished this on horseback, a tactic unusual to warrior kings. During the Voss Mountain battle, he was ambushed by the locals as he was leading his troops in an assault on Bergen. King Sverre sounded the retreat and the troops withdrew, another rare tactic.⁷⁴ Arbo's composition puts King Sverre in the center of the canvas, his cape drawing all attention while his comrades fall around him. Without a landscape to relieve the viewer, he or she is faced with a detailed depiction of the carnage, not unlike that scene in *Saint Olav*. In *Sverre*, painted at the end of his education in Düsseldorf, Arbo is beginning to arrange the figures on the canvas more fluidly and is using the space to the advantage of the story; however, its awkward combination of stillness and movement, along with minute representations of detail, keep it firmly within the lines of the Kunstakademie's curriculum.

There is a new addition to the canvas that is crucial to Arbo's artistic development—horses. Emil Hüntén, one of Arbo's instructors at the Kunstakademie was particularly skilled in painting horses and would have passed on that passion to Arbo. Arbo's horses are animated, emotional, and rearing. While still a little awkward in their design, these horses are the beginning of a life-long love affair with these powerful animals and what they represent in Norse history and mythology.

Beside the fact that these three works are depictions of kings facing adversity or distress, they share the sense of death and defeat, there is a presence of death and defeat. In keeping with the tenets of Neoclassicism, his Kunstakademie compositions appear crowded and his forms appear solid. His fidelity to the subjects keep the visual language

⁷⁴ Ljøgodt. *Historien*, 87.

informative. The figures are frozen in an arrangement that communicates the conditions of war and negotiation: there is no room for misinterpretation or of another opinion, the canvases are faithful to their historical subject matter.

Paris

While staying true to his love of history, Arbo will move away from a surface absorbed, androcentric view of Norse history and will create forms of greater precision and freer placement, and integrate mythological themes and women subjects as a result of study in Paris. Arbo worked in the shadow of the École des Beaux-Arts for eleven years, fraternized with artists and professors, viewed the collections of the Louvre, and soaked up the latest trends of Neoclassicism and Romanticism. He learned that the old and the new, history and mythology could be synthesized to create a new expression useful to the depiction of Norse themes. Arbo's drawings are more precise. He positions his figures in space much more fluidly. These new developments will be shown in the three Norse mythological and historical paintings described below.

As the psychopomp handmaidens of Odin, the Valkyries retrieve the fallen warriors selected by Odin after the goddess Freyja had chosen hers. The Valkyries would give them horns of ale and carry them on their horses to Valhalla, the Hall of Odin. These women are the meditators between life and death for warriors on the battlefield.⁷⁵ In *Valkyrie* of 1869 (figure 28), Arbo has depicted one of Odin's many handmaidens, possibly one of the named Valkyries: Geirskögul or Geirahöð, as their names mean

⁷⁵ Ljøgodt. *Historien*, 102.

“spear-shaker” and “spear-fight,” respectively, since the Valkyrie rendered carries a shield and spear.⁷⁶ The composition is not tight or bound, but is open and airy. She is wearing a full chainmail tunic with a tunic underneath that is cinched at the waist with an ornamental belt, a cape held on by period-correct Viking disc-shaped fibula, and a gold, crown-like helmet. Her lack of shoes speaks to her ability to cross between the worlds of the living and the dead. Similar to her Norse mythological position as mediators, she is caught between ceremony and battle: there is not a scratch on her shield, despite it being raised to cover her vital organs; her spear looks unused; her hair is untamed and not pulled back; and her helmet would be worthless in hand-to-hand combat. Behind her, her fellow Valkyries are no different, as they thunder through the skyscape they all inhabit, riding their black horses, accompanied by Odin’s ravens. The Valkyrie’s horse is disconnected from the clouds below and rides on nothingness, much like Gericault’s horses in *Derby of Epsom*. The Valkyrie is in the center of the painting, surrounded by a Romantic skyscape that becomes darker and more menacing closer to the land below. Her body is realistic and no part of her is oversexualized or flawless. It has been recorded that the woman who posed for *Valkyrie* was a “blonde Parisian,” meaning that Arbo was able to paint the intensity from a live model.⁷⁷ She looks directly at the viewer, but not in the way that is expected of a female subject, which would be passive and inviting; she is threatening in her pursuit for the souls of the slain. This female figure is presented just as powerful as any of Arbo’s male representations of kings.

⁷⁶ Bellows. “Völuspá,” “Grímnismál,” *The Poetic Edda*, 14, 99.

⁷⁷ Lange. *Fra Romersk*, 42.

While the Valkyrie was active, Rude, the wife of Bjarke and step-mother or Hjalte, is passive in *Bjarkes og Hjaltes død* or *Bjarkes and Hjaltes death* of 1872 (figure 29), where she comforts the men on a battle-scarred landscape and is the only woman present on the canvas. The painting is an adaptation of the epic poem written in 1827 by Oehlenschläger, *Hrolf Krake*, which was based on the chronicle by Saxo Grammaticus on the thirteenth-century. Bjarke, a Norwegian hero, and his Danish step-son, Hjalte fought together against the Swedes, unsuccessfully, and succumb to their wounds on the battlefield after word of their leader, King Rolf, had died.⁷⁸ The three main figures are composed in a tight, triangular grouping. The scene is as melancholic as its subject, reflected in the cold colors of the field and sky, and the melodramatic gesture of dying Hjalte. Everything within the canvas is minutely detailed within the Romantic landscape. The subject may have been loaded with political and historical significance, as the scene depicts a Norwegian and a Dane as family, on the same side. Since Norway was under the occupation and control of Sweden since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, this story and painting could have been a nostalgic look into the past to the simpler times of Norway under the occupation of Denmark. During his stay in Paris, Arbo would have had more reminders of the impact Napoleon had on continental Europe and his home country.

The Battle of Stamford Bridge of 1870 (figure 30) portrays the heat of a battle at Stamford Bridge, a battle occurring months before the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the Battle of Stamford Bridge was the bloody confrontation between Norwegian King Harald

⁷⁸ Ljøgodt. *Historien*, 97.

Hardrada and Tostig Godwinson, brother of the English King Harold Godwinson.⁷⁹ As the history goes, both King Harald Hardrada and Tostig Godwinson die on the battlefield, but Arbo made the conscious decision to not include the English leader. This may have been because the Battle of Stamford Bridge has been recognized as a symbol for the end of the Viking Age and Arbo, being a Norse historian, would have wanted to keep the focus on the Norwegians. King Harald Hardrada is the central figure, in bright Neoclassic blue, staggers backwards after being shot in the throat with an arrow. The viewer is confronted with dead bodies and horses, which are cut-off and seeping past the canvas. While the painting is just as highly detailed as *Saint Olav*, its softer in color palette, more dynamic in composition, and Arbo's use of space is more refined.

Arbo's works of art created during his French period are well drawn but have a softness and an airiness that could not have been accomplished during his education at the Kunstakademie. Having access to the Salon and the works of art created by the instructors and students of the École des Beaux-Arts, Arbo was able to synthesize the Romantic and Neoclassic trends from the school for the benefit of his art. Arbo's fluid horses skirt over, not on, the earth below. His figures are softer and less stiff, with beautiful and ideal facial types. This dramatic transformation from hardness to softness is thanks to the large breadth of work available for Arbo to synthesize in France.

No matter if Arbo was in Düsseldorf or in Paris, he remained faithful to his subject matter: his heritage as a Norwegian. At the Kunstakademie, Arbo kept his compositions tight and crowded and kept his color palette austere, which was under the

⁷⁹ Ljøgodt. *Historien*, 85.

guidance and leadership of his professors who primarily taught Neoclassicism and realism. In Paris, being in contact with the artists and professors of the École des Beaux-Arts, Arbo allowed his compositions to be open and spacious and his palette became more colorful in the landscape, which was in following of pervasive Romantic attitudes. His fidelity to his heritage despite his physical location keeps his milieu focused, but without being so stiff that it inhibits change, adaptation, and developments.

ÅSGÅRDSREIEN: ANALYZING THE *WILD HUNT*

Åsgårdsreien or *The Wild Hunt of Odin* (1872) is the amalgamation of Arbo's artistic experiences both at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf and in the shadow of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and was attached to his Norwegian heritage. His painting was an attempt at creating a national identity for Norway, which was during a period of rising nationalism as Norway was on the verge of gaining its independence from Sweden. Arbo combined his training at the academy, observation in Paris, and heritage of Norway to create his master history painting, which will be analyzed throughout this chapter. Shortly after it was painted, *Åsgårdsreien* was acquired by the National Gallery in Oslo and was received with mixed reviews, calling into question whether the painting was a success.

Arbo's grand history painting, *Åsgårdsreien* is a tumultuous skyscape above a scorched swath of earth. Stampeding diagonally through the canvas is a hoard of Vikings, Valkyries, berserkers⁸⁰, and gods riding frenzied horses. They appear out of the black and green clouds like a bad omen, backlit by what can either be described as the rising sun or the warmth of Asgard, the home of the gods, as there is a second sun or moon cresting the blackened landscape below. Leading the pack are two bare-breasted Valkyries and a male figure, whom I believe is Sigurd the Dragon Slayer, which will be explained later. The

⁸⁰ Berserkers are assassins for hire, who often were heavily drugged during their missions.

swarm is accompanied by black ravens, the animal companion and accessory of Odin⁸¹. The ghostly crew behind them is led by Thor, highlighted by the sun and raising his gleaming hammer, Mjölner, while being pulled in his goat-drawn chariot. Several berserkers are in the foreground, wearing furs and heavy armor, two of whom forcefully carry nude women off as captives. The trees are thin, small, and blackened, sticking precariously out of the black earth. Wafts of smoke drift from the ground, as if a great fire had swept through thanks to the invading party above. Arbo's brushstrokes are soft and airy around the landscape and skyscape, but hard and manipulative on the bodies present; however, everything blends smoothly together, without sharp contrast.

While Arbo created two other large paintings titled *Åsgårdsreien* before this piece, in 1868 and 1871, it is the watercolor (figure 31) he painted in 1870 that provides insight on Arbo's intent for the scene and development of the final 1872 version. A swarm of figures and horses descends from the sky onto the viewer in Arbo's watercolor rendition of *Åsgårdsreien* in a fury of quick brushstrokes. Three figures lead the hoard, two nude Valkyries and a nude male, all wielding weapons. The black horses rear and trample frantically, heads twisted with hysterical eyes and open mouths. Thor leads the center of the crowd, wearing a crown and raising his hammer Mjölner, while being carried by his goat-drawn chariot. A swarm of ravens floods the right side of the composition; mirrored are several cats, the accessory of Freyja the goddess of love, sex,

⁸¹ The term 'accessory' is used here to denote the importance of the animal to the deity, as they were more than a familiar or a pet. These animals can act as a mediator for the gods.

war and seiðr.⁸² There is little sky above the swarm but the sky below is tumultuous and richly colored in candy blues and pinks. The figures are created with quick stipples of blues, browns, and greys. Scorched and black, the landscape dips below, creating a sublime descent into unknown terrain. The watercolor is less horrific in content, as there are no victims of the crowd above. The frontal, square composition is impending and threatening as the eyes of the central Valkyrie and her horse stare with crazed eyes directly at the viewer, ready to snatch their prey. The viewer is pulled into the composition, as if he or she is the one being hunted by the hoard. Questions of why the Valkyries were changed to partial nudity and why the composition changed so drastically can hopefully be explained by Arbo's education at the Kunstakademie, as well as exposure to the Louvre.

Before analyzing the painting stylistically and historically, the viewer must understand the poem which *Ásgårdsreien* was based on. The poem was written by Norwegian author Johan Sebastian Welhaven in 1859 and describes the myth of the Wild Hunt, which is an annual procession of the gods, accompanied with their psychopomps and animal accessories who thunder through the sky during midwinter. The Hunt could be led by two figures: Odin, the Allfather, or by the legendary Sigurd the Dragon Slayer, accompanied by Gudrun, a witch who falls in love with Sigurd. Welhaven describes a grim scene, where the otherworldly beings clamor through the sky, sending a message of horror to the villagers below, who are drunk from the joyous festivities of a wedding

⁸² Seiðr refers to the type of mysticism practiced during the Viking age and is a relatively unknown religion.

ceremony. Suddenly, the horde above kidnap, maim, and dismember members of the wedding party, including the bride and groom. Two heroes are sent to combat the hoard of gods and only one survives, who lives to a reverent age. This is an interesting ending, as it is seen in older Icelandic texts that there is glory in death, not survival. Valuing life instead of a Viking death indicates an important shift away from practicing Norse religion, and instead keeping it as a subject for art and poetry. The descent of the swarm in Arbo's painting is described in the first two stanzas of the poem:

Loudly through the air at night they haste,
 An uproar on wild black steeds!
 As a storm the wild crowds travel by
 With nothing but clouds for foothold.
 Over valleys, the woods and meadows –
 Through darkness and weather, they never heed.
 The traveler throws himself frightened to the ground.
 Listen...what clamor! It's the forces of Asgard!

Thor, the strong one, his hammer high,
 Stands tall in his rig, in the front of the pack.
 He strikes his shield and red hot flames
 Light up the nightly raid at the scene.
 Horns blow, and an awesome noise
 From bells and riding gear resounds.
 Then the pack roars loudly and people listen
 With rising fear in the quaking homes.⁸³

The riders, the black horses, the screaming, the earth below, Thor with his hammer-- it's all present in Arbo's pictorial interpretation. It's the heat of the moment, the hoard has already claimed their first victims, which are the three nude female bodies. They continue

⁸³ Fortunately, I was able to find one translation of the poem in question. There are almost no mentions of his writings in academic publications. I was able to source a translation from a native Norwegian speaker.

their hunt, which is signified by Arbo's use of the diagonal and Sigurd pointing his sword toward the next unseen target. However, the figures are not Northern but are direct interpretations of Gothic gods as described by Winckelmann, quoted in the first chapter. For example, Thor does carry a hammer, but not one so small and he does not wear a crown. Valkyries, according to Old Norse carvings, wore their hair pulled back, carrying horns of ale, and wore clothing; they were not half nude with untamed hair. The Hunt would have targeted the whole wedding, not just inexplicably nude women.

Åsgårdsreien shares the same compositional arrangement as his Kunstakademie work, *Saint Olav at the Battle of Stiklestad*, which has a heavy focus on the action and diagonal movement, but without the viewer being involved in the scene. Arbo focuses on hard lines and minute details for the figures and their dress, which is a quality of his German training. Observing the painting more closely, the detail (figure 32) reveals that despite the darkness no surface on the figures is left in obscurity: the Viking's helmet on the left shines in the darkness; the weight of the horn blown by the figure in the center is emphasized; the chainmail and bridle of Sigurd's horse are detailed down to the last ring and tassel. These qualities of realism taught by the Kunstakademie and absorbed by Arbo help the scene not fall into obscure brushstrokes with no easily readable qualities. However, historically correct details of Medieval and Viking artifacts are missing from *Åsgårdsreien*. They are particularly evident when compared to *Saint Olav*, *Håkon the Good*, and *Sverre*. All three works of art contain objects and costumes which are rendered faithfully to medieval artifacts. Arbo collected items from the medieval Viking period and used them in his artworks to help make them more authentic and to help give the

viewer a realistic view into the past.⁸⁴ He continues this tradition of canonical costuming and weaponry in his historical paintings made in Paris, but consciously chooses not to use them or reference them in *Åsgårdsreien*.

To show his refusal to include authentic objects in his master history painting, three examples of medieval objects will be compared to their counterpart in *Åsgårdsreien*: a runestone of Thor's hammer, four silver Valkyries, and a stave church portal carving of Sigurd. Mjöltnir is described as being so powerful that it can destroy mountains and its pounding in the sky causes the world to rumble and thunder. In the majority of Viking examples of Mjöltnir it is double-headed and imposingly large, as made evident in the Stenkvista runestone (figure 33), found in Södermanland County in Sweden. The majority of the runestone is dedicated to Thor's hammer, signifying not only the importance of Thor to the patron of the stone, but to the power within the hammer held by the god. Other artists contemporary to Arbo were depicting Mjöltnir in such a fashion, like Swede Mårten Eskil Winge in his 1872 painting *Thor's Fight with the Giants* (figure 34). The hammer that Winge's Thor holds can be believed to cause the world to rumble, when Arbo's Thor appears to be holding a metalsmith's tool, rather than an otherworldly weapon.

According to Viking depictions of the Valkyries, they wore long dresses with aprons to keep their arms and legs free and ready for action, which can be seen in four small, silver figurines (figure 35) from Uppland, Sweden, from the ninth-century. Their hair is knotted and tied back, as wild hair would get in the way on the battlefield.

⁸⁴ Lange. *Fra Romersk*, 38.

Additionally, they wore precious jewelry to mark their status as a being between the worlds of the living and dead, and to their importance to the Allfather, Odin. While *Valkyrie* indeed wears clothing which is appropriate to the battlefield, her hair is undone and she lacks the horn of ale, which would have quenched the thirst of those who just died during battle. The Valkyries in *Åsgårdsreien* are partially undressed, have wild hair, wear minimal jewelry, and appear to be hunting down the souls to bring to Valhalla, rather than bringing them ale and accompanying the dead on their journey. This conscious decision to paint the Valkyries as beings of great beauty, while remaining threatening, indicates an importance on the beauty of the canvas rather than emphasizing the importance of mythological accuracy.

Medieval depictions of Sigurd (figure 36) show a strong, stoic man, almost always in the heat of his mission, as seen in his slaying of the dragon, which is on a church portal. While the origins of the story of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer can date back to the Migration Period (CE 375-568), he is fully developed in the *Völsunga saga*, written in the thirteenth-century in Iceland. Sigurd is made legend by killing Fafnir, a man turned into a dragon by his greed, with a sword named Gram, which was so powerful it cut through the anvil on which it was made. Upon killing Fafnir, Sigurd requests that the dragon give him his heart in order to drink its blood to understand the language of birds, connecting him to Odin's ravens.⁸⁵ On the stave portal, he holds his mighty sword, protected with a shield, and is accompanied by various vegetal motifs. Arbo's rendering of Sigurd in *Åsgårdsreien* shows a man in the heat of battle, carrying a special, distinct

⁸⁵ Byock. *Saga of the Volsungs*.

sword, which is thrust through the composition. As previously stated, the Wild Hunt can be led by Sigurd, which leads me to believe that it is him, not a god, that is depicted in Arbo's painting. Since Sigurd is a human and is the only figure that is remotely close to his medieval counterpart, it is my theory that the introduction of Norse mythology into his breadth of work became a mechanism of artistic freedom and interpretation, which Arbo would have synthesized during his stay in Paris.

Asgårdsreien and Arbo's other works created in Paris share use of space on the canvas, coloring, and heavy use of mythology, as well as introduce the presence of female bodies to his repertoire. In addition to his access to the artists and professors creating at the École des Beaux-Arts, Arbo had easy access to the Louvre, which contained works of art from all known eras. In order to answer the question of why Arbo changed the Valkyries from nude in the watercolor to partial nudity in the final oil, one has look at what was available for viewing at the Louvre that featured strong, powerful women.

Artemis, or Diana, and the Amazons provided a Classical model which would have been familiar to Arbo, as his education at the Kunstakademie was based on Johann Joachim Wincklemann's view on the hierarchy of artistic production, which is quoted in the first chapter, as figures depicted from Norse mythology should have Greek bodies and Gothic names. Two Classical examples for Arbo to base his Valkyries on are *Artemis with a Doe* known as *Diana of Versailles* from the fifth-century BCE (figure 37), and the *Sarcophagus: Battle between the Greeks and the Amazons* (figure 38), dated at 180 CE, found in Thessaloniki, Greece. In *Artemis with a Doe*, Artemis, goddess of the hunt and

of chastity, is rendered in her shortened chiton with her legs exposed and is in motion while pulling arrows from her quiver while she strides forward. No part of her is needlessly exposed, which is canonical to her mythology, as she was never meant to be seen nude or in a state of undress.⁸⁶ However, Artemis's canonical chastity did not stop artists in the eighteenth-century from depicting her in the nude. Available to Arbo for viewing in the Louvre was *Diana* (figure 39), created in 1790 by Jean-Antoine Houdon. The nude Diana holds her bow and arrow not for a hunt, but in order to draw attention to her body.⁸⁷ Associated with the goddess Artemis are the Amazons, a group of warrior women in Greek mythology. A group of Amazons are seen on the *Sarcophagus* in which each is dressed in a short chiton with one breast exposed. They are fierce and focused during their battle on the horizontal frieze, much like the Valkyries. Arbo's access to these Classical and contemporary examples show that he modeled his depictions of strong, female warriors on Artemis and the Amazons, who were perfect qualifiers according to his education. Viewers who understood the cultural importance of Artemis and the Amazons would, in turn, understand the power of the Valkyries.

Contrary to the strong Valkyries are the passive, completely nude female figures that are taken as possessions by the hoard. They have no identity but it can be posited that these women are victims taken from the wedding party, as described in Welhaven's poem. Without an identity, the nude women are present and posed for viewer consumption, both in the delicacy of their flesh and in the sublime horror of their being

⁸⁶ Martinez. "Artemis and Doe."

⁸⁷ Valérie. "Diana."

the victims of a Viking attack. Their consumption as objects can be assumed as they would not have been nude for a wedding. Like Cabanel's *Birth of Venus* and Ingres's *La Source*, the nude women are de-sexed and posed seductively, despite their current situation of being kidnapped. Despite being carried, both women are completely exposed and unrealistically modeled. Arbo was able to hire live, female models to pose for his works. This and access to artists like Cabanel and Ingres shaped the women in *Åsgårdsreien*, particularly because it was his only painted theme that contained female nudity.

Åsgårdsreien is distinctly a painting of fantasy, as it differs so distinctly from the breadth of Arbo's work in its inclusion of female nudity and historical inaccuracy. This can be attributed to the infectious desire of the *other* in France. Compared to his Kunstakademie works of art, *Åsgårdsreien* is not informative or in possession of a comprehensive visual language. Rather, it is a work of pure fiction.

The compositional changes from a more frontal view in the watercolor to the active diagonal in the finished oil can be attributed to Arbo's synthesis of French painters around him, like Delacroix and Gericault. Delacroix's composition of *Dante and Virgil* keeps the Romantic sublimity of the subject just outside of the realm of the viewer. While the bodies begin to slide into the viewer's space, they never make full contact or confront the viewer personally. Gericault's horses and riders in *Derby of Epsom* glide diagonally across the canvas, a trait that Arbo adapted in his paintings of horses, including *Åsgårdsreien*. *Åsgårdsreien* stylistically appears to be a compromise between *Derby* and the watercolor sketch: imposing, but not overwhelming; close, but not engaging the

viewer directly. The viewer is safe from confronting the hoard, which gives the viewer space to comprehend the content of the canvas, as to not be offended by its composition. Keeping the viewer safe may not have been the correct choice for Arbo to make, as it will be revealed what the critics thought of the painting after it was obtained by the National Gallery.

Åsgårdsreien was acquired by the National Gallery in April of 1872, the same year in which it was painted, along with other works created by Norwegian painters, according to the year's purchasing catalog. Procurements of Norwegian-made artworks began when the Storting decided in 1836 to pour money into a national collection of art and painting. First managed by the Royal School of Drawing and Art, the National Museum was royally sanctioned the following year in 1837 and maintained the national collection.⁸⁸ As discussed in chapter one, Norway experienced many blows to their national identity, which made the act of collecting arts from Norway a priority to bolster the country and create "patterns of inspiration" for the public and art students.⁸⁹ After bouncing locations from unfinished rooms in the Royal Palace to the Royal Frederik University library, the National Gallery moved to Tullinløkka in 1882, which was a tumultuous period for Norwegian art. Older Norwegian artists, including Arbo, received their education abroad and stayed abroad for long periods of time; however, when the standards of living rose in Norway it prompted artists to return home. This return correspondingly prompted artists to band together and create the Autumn Exhibition,

⁸⁸ Ohlsen, Messel. *Kunst fra antikken til 1945*, 12.

⁸⁹ Ohlsen, Messel. *Kunst fra antikken til 1945*, 12.

which was artist led and displayed in the National Gallery. This exhibition of new works became the main source of art acquisition for the Gallery, meaning that the Gallery was more concerned in gathering new Norwegian works and acquiring fewer and fewer pieces of older art.⁹⁰ Most Norwegian citizens who viewed *Åsgårdsreien* enjoyed having a history painting to call their own, which can be considered a marked success on Arbo's behalf.⁹¹ Norway was attempting to make itself as modern as the rest of continental Europe and Arbo's master painting was created in time to be a national purchase and was engaging.

However, this engagement was not necessarily positive. While most critics and fellow artists admired the composition, the use of light and color, and the epic nature of the content of *Åsgårdsreien*, they also attacked Arbo's naivety and questioned if the piece was truly Nordic. Danish critic Sofus Larpent, who was a collector of Norwegian art and quite knowledgeable of the nation's works, wrote after the debut of *Åsgårdsreien* that Arbo had an incredible capacity for depicting the popular fantasy, which he deemed beneficial to people's consciousness. However, the praise ended there, as he continued that the painting was sufficient "at least until one fuller or more engaging turns out and displaces [it]." Larpent recognized the need for Norway to possess paintings that "populate our spiritual atmosphere with ideal images," and while Arbo's sufficed, his works were not enough.⁹² Norwegian critic Jens Thiis was enthusiastic when physically describing *Åsgårdsreien* by using phrases like "dazzling female bodies", "mighty, stormy

⁹⁰ Ohlsen, Messel. *Kunst fra antikken til 1945*, 15.

⁹¹ Malmanger. *Fra klassisisme til tidlig realisme*, 347.

⁹² Lange. *Historiemaleren*, 8.

sky”, and “suffocating the moonlight’s gritty light.” However, Thiis was critical of Arbo himself, saying that he was stuck “between romance and naturalism,” and that he “does not remind one of the genius of Delacroix or any idea of life that Impressionism imparts to painting.”⁹³ Thiis, when writing Arbo’s biography, describes him as too reliant on French art for the creation of Norwegian images.⁹⁴ Arbo, even while being a contemporary artist who learned in the shadow of French artists like Delacroix, was considered old-fashioned because he embraced the ideals of the École des Beaux-Arts.

Danish critics Julius Lange and Erik Bøgh both attended and wrote on the 1872 Nordic Exposition in Copenhagen, where *Åsgårdsreien* was revealed. Lange was known for negatively reviewing Norwegian artworks, yet his opinion on art was highly valued, even in Norway. He treated Arbo with an expected coldness, saying that *Åsgårdsreien* was a “spectacle piece” and that the elements depicted perhaps would appeal more to French audiences than to Norwegians.⁹⁵ Perhaps Lange was correct, as *Åsgårdsreien* was made in Paris and had stylistic attachments to Arbo’s time in France. Bøgh was not as critical and did not call attention to its French qualities, but instead called it the best of its genre in Nordic art.⁹⁶ A painting meant to unite Norway with a new national identity was simultaneously considered divisive, wonderful and not good enough.

In later art history and criticism, Arbo’s artistic contributions were viewed nostalgically. He started to appear more often in articles and newspapers around Norway.

⁹³ Lange. *Historiemaleren*, 11.

⁹⁴ Thiis. *Norske malere*, 211.

⁹⁵ Lange. *Historiemaleren*, 11.

⁹⁶ Lange. *Historiemaleren*, 11.

Twentieth-century art historian Norwegian Leif Østby called *Åsgårdsreien* “imaginative” with “an excellent composition.”⁹⁷ This must have prompted the sale of his pieces, which were going for high prices according to the newspaper *Drammens Tidende/Buskerud Blad*.⁹⁸ In the same publication in 1986, the paper announced the first exhibition that featured Arbo’s artwork since 1892 in Drammen, where Arbo was born.⁹⁹ The newspaper article expanded on his works coming to Drammen, citing his life history and the themes that attracted him. The authors wrote that Arbo’s work could be admired for its mood and drama, not his technical skill.¹⁰⁰ Arbo appears in the daily Socialist newspaper *Klassekampen*, October 12, 2012, on the 120th anniversary of his death and uses a cropped copy of *Åsgårdsreien* as the article image in which his life and paintings are described in brief, but they also claim that he was lost in the shadow of the fellow Düsseldorf Norwegians.¹⁰¹ Arbo trickles through newspapers and publications over the late 20th and early 21st centuries, coming in and out of relevance. A common theme for viewing Arbo’s works was trepidation. His dotted but continuous resurgences, to me, mean that there is something special and persistently engaging about Arbo’s body of work.

⁹⁷ Lange. *Historiemaleren*, 13-14.

⁹⁸ “Arbo er populær på kunstauksjoner” In *Drammens Tidende/Buskerud Blad*, December 12, 1998

⁹⁹ Skaug, Anne-Berit, “Arbo-utstilling,” In *Drammens Tidende/Buskerud Blad*, June 2, 1986.

¹⁰⁰ Thorkildsen, Asmund, “Stor Arbo-utstilling på museet,” In *Drammens Tidende/Buskerud Blad*, June 5, 1986.

¹⁰¹ “Historiemaleren,” In *Klassekampen*, October 12, 2012.

Arbo's final master history painting *Åsgårdsreien* certainly exemplified his education at the Kunstakademie and the École des Beaux-Arts circle, as well as his heritage as a Norwegian fighting for Norway's independence. Arbo's master history painting exemplified the importance that Düsseldorf and Paris had for those seeking artistic development as well as the importance of fidelity to home and heritage. His Kunstakademie training manifested itself in the hard, realistic lines and attention to detail in the figures present. His Parisian synthesis was shown in his open composition and nude, idealized female forms, which are absent from his other works of art featuring women. *Åsgårdsreien* was not just a fantastical painting, but was peculiar even in his breadth of work. While it wasn't received well in its time, *Åsgårdsreien* has floated in and out of the consciousness of Norway and of Norwegian art. Perhaps the coldness of his reception had more to do with the time in which he painted it rather than the subject itself, as continental Europe and the rest of the developed world was moving faster into modernity and had no time for fiction.

RAGNAROK: CONCLUSION

While Peter Nicolai Arbo has not received a significant amount of scholarship, the lack of research does not coincide with his importance in the development of Norwegian art during the nineteenth-century. His education and travel is ordinary of an art student during this time period; however, what makes Arbo so unique in his milieu was his ability to stay true to his heritage through history painting, as he was the only Norwegian artist during his time that cultivated the genre of history throughout his entire career. Arbo drew on multiple cultural sources for his works of art. Arbo painted excerpts of Norse history and mythology written by two thirteenth-century historians: Snorri Sturlson and Saxo Grammaticus, instead of letting the texts fall into obscurity or coopted by another culture. He painted portions of poems authored by nineteenth-century poets Johan Sebastian Welhaven and Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger. Lastly, he collected medieval Viking artifacts and reproductions as a mechanism of inserting historical truth into his paintings and lithographs. Perhaps it was this unyielding devotion to his source materials that left him in scholastic obscurity and his sole painting that broke his mold, *Åsgårdsreien*, which included the presence of nude female figures and Romantic darkness, is the painting that kept him from being forgotten.

Norway was occupied by Denmark for nearly six-hundred years until the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Before Norway had a fighting chance to petition for their independence, the king of Sweden took advantage of Denmark's allegiance with France and forced Denmark to release Norway. Being denied independence was a blow to Norway's national identity. However, this did not stop Norway from creating a small,

local government, called the Storting, which established the National Bank, universities, and began a collection of art. The art produced in Norway during that time was mostly landscape, which piqued the interest of continental European travelers to travel to Norway and witness its romantic, unbridled scenery. Outside of visual arts, Norwegian poets and authors collected old stories and folktales, of which Arbo considered in the canon of Norse history. Since painting does not require a solid economy, of which Norway was not possessing currently, Arbo thrived in Norway's rocky and uprising political, social, and economic environment.

During his training at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Arbo was taught the artistic conventions of Neoclassicism, which emphasized line work and stressed the importance of preliminary drawings, and the freedom of Romanticism, including softer line work and the pursuit of non-academic subjects. Arbo was not the only Norwegian to attend the Kunstakademie during the nineteenth-century. Called the Düsseldorf Norwegians, this group of artists mainly painted realistic, minutely detailed Romantic landscapes. Conversely, Arbo's artworks created while in Düsseldorf are crowded, highly detailed, and limited to a primary color palette. Arbo's expectations of his art did not coincide with the artwork of his fellow Düsseldorf Norwegians, which resulted in him moving Paris in order to pursue his interest in mythology. In the shadow of the École des Beaux-Arts, as he was not a registered student at the academy, Arbo absorbed the artistic trends set by its students and teachers who produced artworks with softer light and more open compositions, as well as the collection at the Louvre. While staying true to his love of Norse history and mythology, Arbo's artworks in Paris became less tense and airier in

their composition. However, his Parisian paintings were infected with fluff, rather than the informative visual language seen in his Kunstakademie paintings. These palpable changes show Arbo's synthesis of the artistic changes surrounding him and the transitional hybridity of his style.

All of Arbo's experience and education led to the creation of *Åsgårdsreien*, known as his master history painting. Based on the poem of the same title by Welhaven, the Romantic skyscape depicts the yearly Wild Hunt, an event in which the gods and otherworldly beings snag living souls from the earth. While the exceptional attention to detail in the figures and the horses is indicative of Arbo's education in the Kunstakademie, the open composition, muted colors, and inclusion of nude female bodies are from being under the umbrella of the École des Beaux-Arts and the Louvre. *Åsgårdsreien* was presented to the Norwegian public as a way of giving a national identity to Norway; however, the painting was not well received alongside this message. It was considered too French, too continentally European. *Åsgårdsreien* was a hybrid of continental taste in art and Norwegian culture, which might have caused unease in critics while viewing. The painting is a fusion of Romanticism and Neoclassicism, as well as a mixture of realism and history, all while depicting a mythological scene. Just as the hoard of Vikings and gods fly between Midgard, the earth, and Asgard, the heavens, *Åsgårdsreien* is between genres. It is a transitional painting between established traditions and the burgeoning modernism that was to come.

After Arbo and some time had passed, *Åsgårdsreien* was beginning to be considered more important than previously realized, as publications and public thoughts

gave Arbo the title of Norway's most important history painter. Despite this beginning of a newfound appreciation for his contribution to Norwegian art, Arbo's paintings are hard to find. The National Gallery in Oslo, as of writing this paper, does not display any of Arbo's artwork. Instead, a work of Christian Krogh is hung in its place.¹⁰² Surprisingly, it is easier to find *Åsgårdsreien* non-academically, as it is the cover artwork for the 1988 musical album *Blood Fire Death* by Swedish death metal band Bathory. The image is pervasive amongst the metal community, where it can be seen adorning battle jackets and album collections. Over one hundred years later, the academic painting *Åsgårdsreien* was being used for something as un-academic as metal music, as its power of convincing its viewers that it was the reality of Norse mythology was formidable enough to manipulate those uneducated on academic painting conventions and practices.

As Arbo has captivated my interest, I intend on researching other qualities of *Åsgårdsreien* and of Arbo himself in the future, as I do not feel that his life and artworks have been fully fleshed out. One area of research includes the disappearance of Freyja's cats from the watercolor sketch to the finished oil painting. It may seem small, but it is an important omission, as Freyja was always the first to select fallen warriors from the battlefield, not Odin. Another area of research would be the importance of horses to Arbo. There are far too many horses in his works, especially in his later paintings that were made when he moved back to Norway, for them to be considered just as something

¹⁰² The painting *Leif Erikson Discovering America*, 1872, by Christian Krogh hangs in the grand staircase of the National Gallery in Oslo. This information came from my communication with Martin Raddum, the Storage Supervisor for the National Gallery, during a tour of the storage facility.

he liked to paint. I hypothesize that his use of horses was a connection to Greece, as his Kunstakademie education was based on the writings of Winckelmann who put the Greeks above all, since both mythologies feature horses that can travel between the lands of the living and dead. Additionally, I would like to further study his impact on the National Gallery as a board member. Lastly, once the new National Gallery complex is open in Oslo, I intend to return to Norway and observe how contemporary Norwegians interact with Arbo's paintings.

Arbo and *Åsgårdsreien* were stuck between the rapidly changing art styles and tastes of continental Europe and Norway. His adherence to an academic style of painting pulled him out of the modernity that was craved in Norway. Conversely, he was too late to join other academics more interested in his historical subject matter. Arbo's hybridity has yet to be recognized fully, which could bring more insight on how art from the end of the nineteenth- to the beginnings of the twentieth-centuries changed and the values of society which the art reflected. It is my goal to eventually bring Arbo out of obscurity and into scholarly recognition.

Figure 1. Peter Nicolai Arbo, *Åsgårdsreien*, 1872, oil on canvas.



Figure 2. Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, *Loki and Sigyn*, 1810, oil on canvas.



Figure 3. Johann Heinrich Fuseli, *Thor Battering the Midgard Serpent*, 1790, oil on canvas.



Figure 4. Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-1504, marble.



Figure 5. Nicolai Abraham Abildgaard, *Ymir suckled by the cow Audhumbla*, 1777, pastel on paper.



Figure 6. Unknown, *Capitoline Wolf*, 11th-12th century, bronze.



Figure 7. Johan Christian Dahl, *Winter at the Sognefjord*, 1827, oil on canvas.



Figure 8. Peder Balke, *Stetind in Fog*, 1864, oil on canvas.



Figure 9. Johannes Flintoe, *The Harbour in Skiringssal*, 1835, oil on canvas.



Figure 10. Karl Sohn, *Tasso and the two Leonores*, 1839, oil on canvas.



Figure 11. Unknown, *The Unicorn in Captivity*, fifteenth-century, wool and silk.

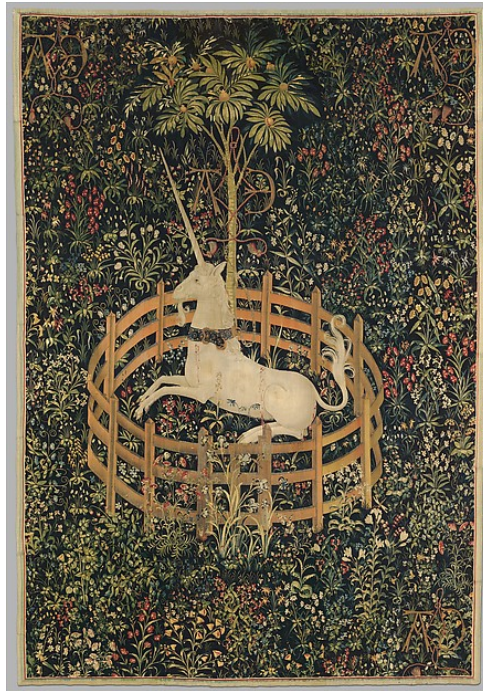


Figure 12. Otto Mengelberg, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1848, oil on canvas.



Figure 13. Emil Hünten, *Marshall Forwards*, 1863, oil on canvas.



Figure 14. Horace Vernet, *Italian Brigands Surprised by Papal Troops*, 1830, oil on canvas.



Figure 15. Hans Gude, *Norwegian Highlands in Sunrise*, 1854, oil on canvas.



Figure 16. August Cappelen, *Waterfall in Telemark*, 1852, oil on canvas.



Figure 17. Adolph Tidemand, *Low Church Devotion*, 1848, oil on canvas.



Figure 18. Isidore Pils, *Rouget de L'Isle Singing La Marseillaise*, 1864, oil on canvas.



Figure 19. Alexandre Cabanel, *Birth of Venus*, 1863, oil on canvas.



Figure 20. Théodore Géricault, *Derby of Epsom*, 1821, oil on canvas.



Figure 21. Théodore Géricault, *Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Field of Battle*, 1814, oil on canvas.



Figure 22. Eugène Delacroix, *Dante and Virgil*, 1822, oil on canvas.



Figure 23. Eugène Delacroix, *Collision of Moorish Horsemen*, 1844, oil on canvas.



Figure 24. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Source*, 1856, oil on canvas.



Figure 25. Peter Nicolai Arbo, *Olav den helliges død under slaget ved Stiklestad* or *Saint Olav at the Battle of Stiklestad*, 1860, lithograph.



Figure 26. Peter Nicolai Arbo, *Håkon den gode og bondene ved blotet på Mære*, or *Håkon the Good and the peasants at Mære*, 1860, oil on canvas.

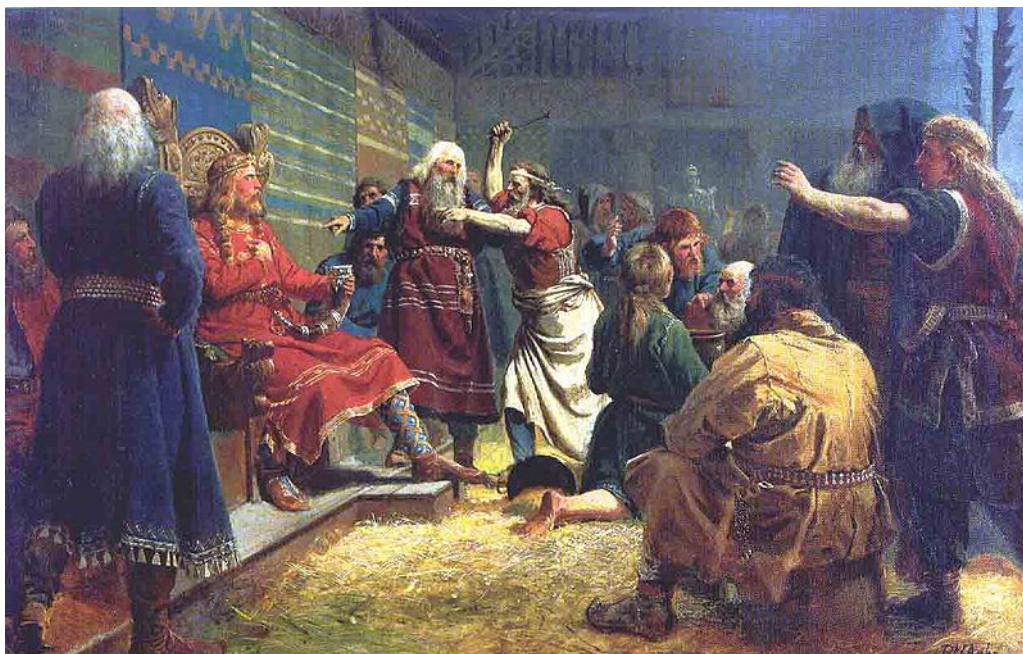


Figure 27. Peter Nicolai Arbo, *Kong Sverres flukt* or *King Sverre's Escape*, 1862, oil on canvas.



Figure 28. Peter Nicolai Arbo, *Valkyrie*, 1869, oil on canvas.



Figure 29. Peter Nicolai Arbo, *Bjarkes og Hjaltes død* or *Bjarkes and Hjaltes death*, 1872, oil on canvas.



Figure 30. Peter Nicolai Arbo, *The Battle of Stamford Bridge*, 1870, oil on canvas.



Figure 31. Peter Nicolai Arbo, *Åsgårdsreien*, 1870, watercolor on paper.



Figure 32. Peter Nicolai Arbo, detail of *Åsgårdsreien*, 1872.



Figure 33. Unknown, Stenkvista runestone, eleventh-century, Södermanland, Sweden.



Figure 34. Mårten Eskil Winge, *Thor's Fight with the Giants*, 1872, oil on canvas.



Figure 35. Unknown, Figurines of Valkyries, ninth-century, silver, Uppland, Sweden.



Figure 36. Unknown, Sigurd the Dragon Slayer, eleventh-century Stave Church Door Portal, wood, Norway.



Figure 37. Copy of bronze by Leochares, *Artemis with a Doe*, marble, fifth-century BCE.

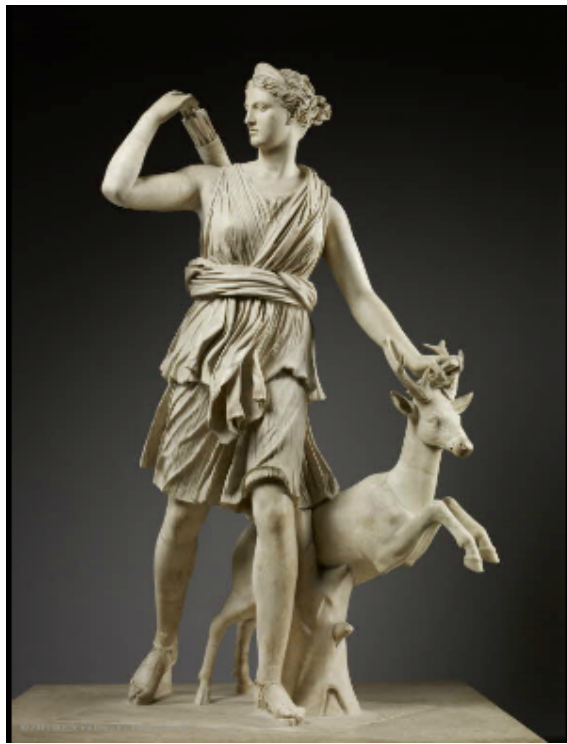


Figure 38. Unknown, *Sarcophagus: Battle between the Greeks and the Amazons*, 180 CE, Thessaloniki, Greece.



Figure 39. Jean-Antoine Houdon, *Diana*, 1790, bronze.



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