

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

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Gabriel P. Weisberg

book review of

*Le Mythe du Retour: Les Artistes Scandinaves en France de 1889 à 1908* by Vibeke Røstorp

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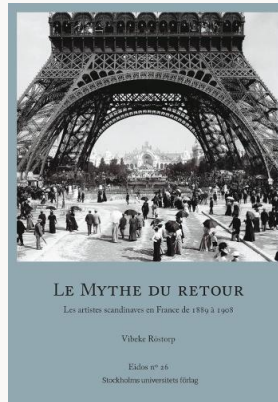
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Vibeke Røstorp,  
*Le Mythe du Retour, Les Artistes Scandinaves en France de 1889 à 1908*.  
Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2013.  
447 pp.; 142 color illus.; index of names; bibliography; appendix.  
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Examining the foundational belief held by historians of culture and art that Swedish and Norwegian artists who had been studying in France prior to the World's Fair in Paris of 1889 returned to their Nordic homes has provided Vibeke Røstorp with considerable room for debate. In her extensive text, she questions a series of fundamental assumptions made by cultural historians about the ways in which Scandinavian artists worked or had been trained. The first assumption questioned is that Scandinavian artists who had been working in France left the country in 1889 to return to their homelands, not returning to France until 1908 with the arrival of students linked to Henri Matisse. More importantly, as she examined French archives, sales catalogues, and publications linked to Salons in France, she noted that more than 380 Swedish and Norwegian artists remained in France; they did not go home as believed at the time. The persistence of this falsehood provides the basic premise for her text as she exhaustively examines the role of Scandinavian artists in France between 1889–1908, just the years when they were supposed to have disappeared, almost entirely, from their adopted country. She raises issues of why this happened. Why most did not leave? And in her book she carefully musters the evidence, including a wide array of actual works of art that demonstrate exactly what Scandinavian artists created during this period.

Aside from an introductory section, which examines the conditions of artistic training in their Scandinavian homelands, Røstorp lays out her evidence carefully and concisely. One chapter studies those Scandinavian artists who remained in France for their entire careers under the rubric of a “*carrière française*”; a second chapter studies those Scandinavian artists who were in France for a number of years in the 1890s. Another chapter called “A second flow of artists around 1900” looks at those artists who came to Paris around the end of the century; the

fourth chapter covers the power and importance of Edvard Munch often seen as a Germanic artist, rather than one who was linked to Norway. In this largely biographical section of her book the author provides insight into the ways in which various artists developed their careers. By locating personal papers as well as a number of works that contributed to French exhibitions, Röstorp provides fresh information on many forgotten artists and their work. She reproduces examples by these painters, often in color, and establishes their importance in naturalist circles including works by Allan Osterlind such as his portrait of Maurice Rollinat (1898) or his watercolor of *Rodin in his Studio* (1889). Röstorp's examination of Osterlind's significance as a Scandinavian artist working in France, and the critical reaction to his work there, is an important accomplishment. Osterlind was so well established in France that his family members occasionally became the subjects in paintings and pastels by other artists; in 1901, the Swiss portraitist Louise Breslau painted a portrait and a pastel of a young child as an artist who was Osterlind's son. At the time, Breslau was studying at the Académie Julian, an independent atelier that gave artists an opportunity to study outside of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and had accepted female students since 1897. These works attest to the way in which this Scandinavian artist was extremely well known and accepted in the international art community in Paris.

The second large section of the book, divided into five chapters, disputes the theory of the myth of the return. The first chapter examines the ways in which certain Scandinavian artists exhibited in Parisian Salons. By locating considerable documentary evidence Röstorp reveals that the departure of Scandinavian artists is a complete falsehood and did not actually happen. She examines what types of work were publicly shown, establishing that among many of the exhibitors were women of talent. She also demonstrates that the decorative arts were given a great push since they were strongly supported by many in France. In a second chapter, she examines carefully the identity of many Scandinavian creators, paying special attention to the ways in which a huge Scandinavian artistic and intellectual community flourished in France. By focusing on how, and how often, Scandinavian creators such as Henrik Ibsen were painted, Röstorp explains why Ibsen was so famous in France and why his plays were so often seen in Parisian theatres. In other cases, as she examines the importance of Fritz Thaulow or Ville Vallgren, she posits the role that these artists' wives had in sponsoring art work and in contributing to the importance of the decorative arts through their own creative endeavors (227–28). This is a valuable approach as it brings women out of the shadow, establishing them as creative talents in their own right. In a third chapter, she examines the national identity of some artists. A fourth chapter focuses on Scandinavian artists who actually decided to leave France and why they did. Since many were then excluded from French exhibitions, this becomes a valuable section of the book, especially since some artists were written out of histories because they were women (277–78). Some artists who remained in France, such as Frits Thaulow, were continually excluded from Scandinavian exhibitions as late as 1987 (279). Why? Because he remained in France, or perhaps because the manner in which he worked was still judged insignificant in an age of modernism.

In concluding chapters, Röstorp explains why the falsehood of the return persisted so long. In one instance she posits that France was thought to be unimportant for Scandinavian artists, an obvious falsehood if one looks at the work created by Scandinavian artists at the time (283). In another late segment she touches on the debate—one still happening today—whether Scandinavian art reflected a national ideology pertinent to a particular country or whether there were more powerful international currents at work. Mustering aid, she comments on

how Léonce Bénédite, the director/curator of the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris, was in support of Scandinavian artists (just as he was in support of all the decorative arts) and wanted Scandinavian artists to be more widely collected and appreciated in French national collections (297). In the conclusion of her book, Röstorp confirms the central thesis of her book exposed in previous chapters, namely that by eliminating the “*mythe du retour*” she freed Scandinavian art from the shackles wrongly constructed by others so that new light could focus on the genuine achievements of Scandinavian artists who were open to international currents from 1889 onward.

What is the achievement of this book? Who will be able to read it and use it? The book is dense with information and documentation, and the work that Röstorp has accomplished is prodigious. The fact that she has carefully combed through primary sources, and that she has found a number of unknown art objects to illustrate her case, provides visual evidence that the artists she discusses must be further studied and appreciated against the cultural and aesthetic theories of the era. This alone guarantees that the book will be consulted. In addition, her book will be the first stop for cultural and art historians who wish to learn about Scandinavian art produced between 1889–1908. It is also a book that sheds light more generally on the cultural and artistic life in Paris, and the kind of study that could be applied to artists from other countries such as America, for example. Röstorp is a trailblazer, a pioneer, whose desire to properly evaluate the past has led her to create a majestic study of genuine importance for the future.

Gabriel P. Weisberg  
Professor of Art History  
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis  
vooni1942[at]aol.com