

# The Narrative of National Romanticism in 19th-Century Painting: The Danish Golden Age and Beyond

Marta Kipke\*, Rie Schmidt Eriksen\*, Kristoffer Nielbo & Katrine Baunvig

*Center for Humanities Computing, Aarhus University, Denmark*

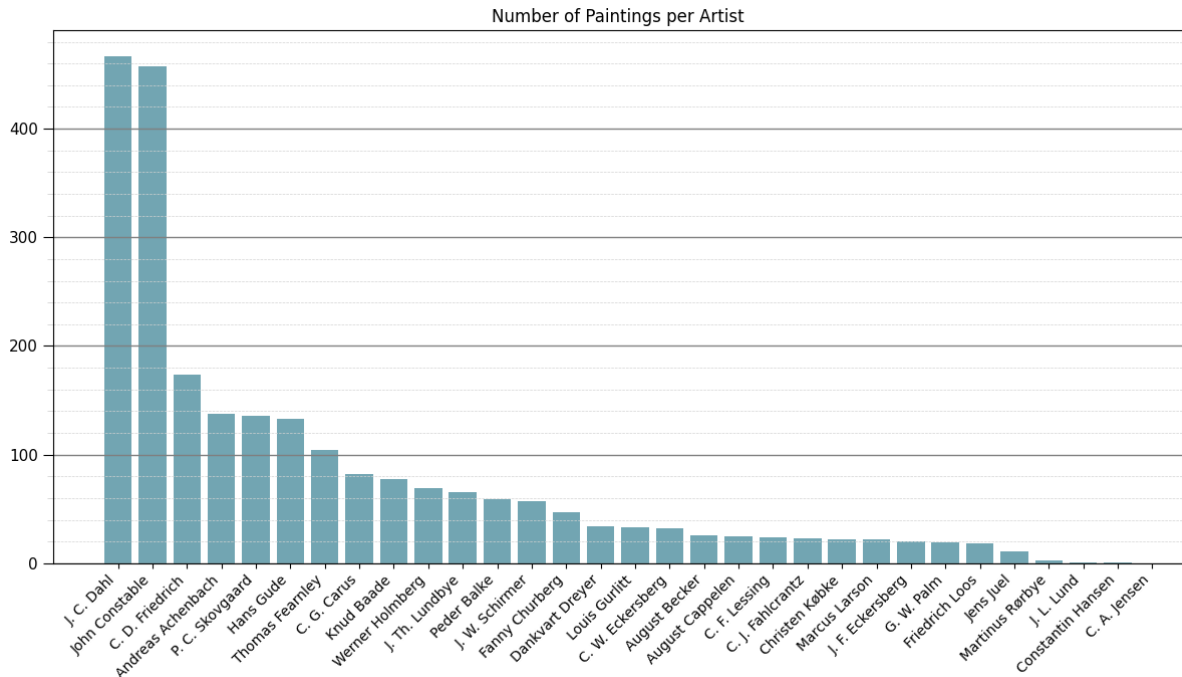
What makes the Danish Golden Age *Danish*? During the 19th century, artists in Denmark developed a national romanticism, showcasing their respective landscapes in an idealistic yet distinctly Danish manner. As previous work has shown, this particular development was carried heavily by the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen and specifically its director Niels Laurits Høyen (Ljøgodt 2012; Monrad 2000; Łukasiewicz and T. Mednick 2023; Schlosser Schmidt 2020). In this paper, we extend this approach to investigate how Danish landscape painting relates to other Scandinavian and Northern-European landscape painting schools and how we can implement computational methods to study this phenomenon.

The reality of 19th-century Denmark was not nearly as *golden* as the term may imply, as the first half of the period was defined by war and political transformation (Bjørn and Helmer Pedersen 1988; Grand et al. 2013). From this turbulence, the Romantic art movement emerged as an outlet for questions of identity and power (Stewart 2015; on the political nature of landscape, see Warnke 1994). At the same time, Norway, Sweden and Finland experienced major transformations as well. Norway claimed its independence, and Finland adjusted from Swedish rule to Russian (Korti 2014). These developments instilled a desire for national art in these regions, resulting in the emergence of notable landscape painting movements (Kent 1987; Gunnarsson 1998; Pennonen 2020). More importantly, the rise of landscape painting across the Nordic countries went beyond purely aesthetic aims. The painted landscapes reflected changing borders, growing national movements, and the discomfort of political change (Konopka 2025). They became instruments of national pride, shaping and reflecting the emerging national identities of the Nordic regions (Fowle 2017; T. J. Mednick et al. 2022).

However, artists from across Scandinavia continued to travel to Copenhagen to learn their craft, while others were influenced and inspired by artistic schools in Düsseldorf or Dresden, creating an intricate network of artists who, despite their pronounced preoccupation with their national landscape, were quite interconnected (Luckow, Zbikowski, et al. 2005). This leads to several questions regarding national romanticism in the Nordic countries: What role did the artist hubs in Denmark and Germany play in the development of these movements? How did they influence one

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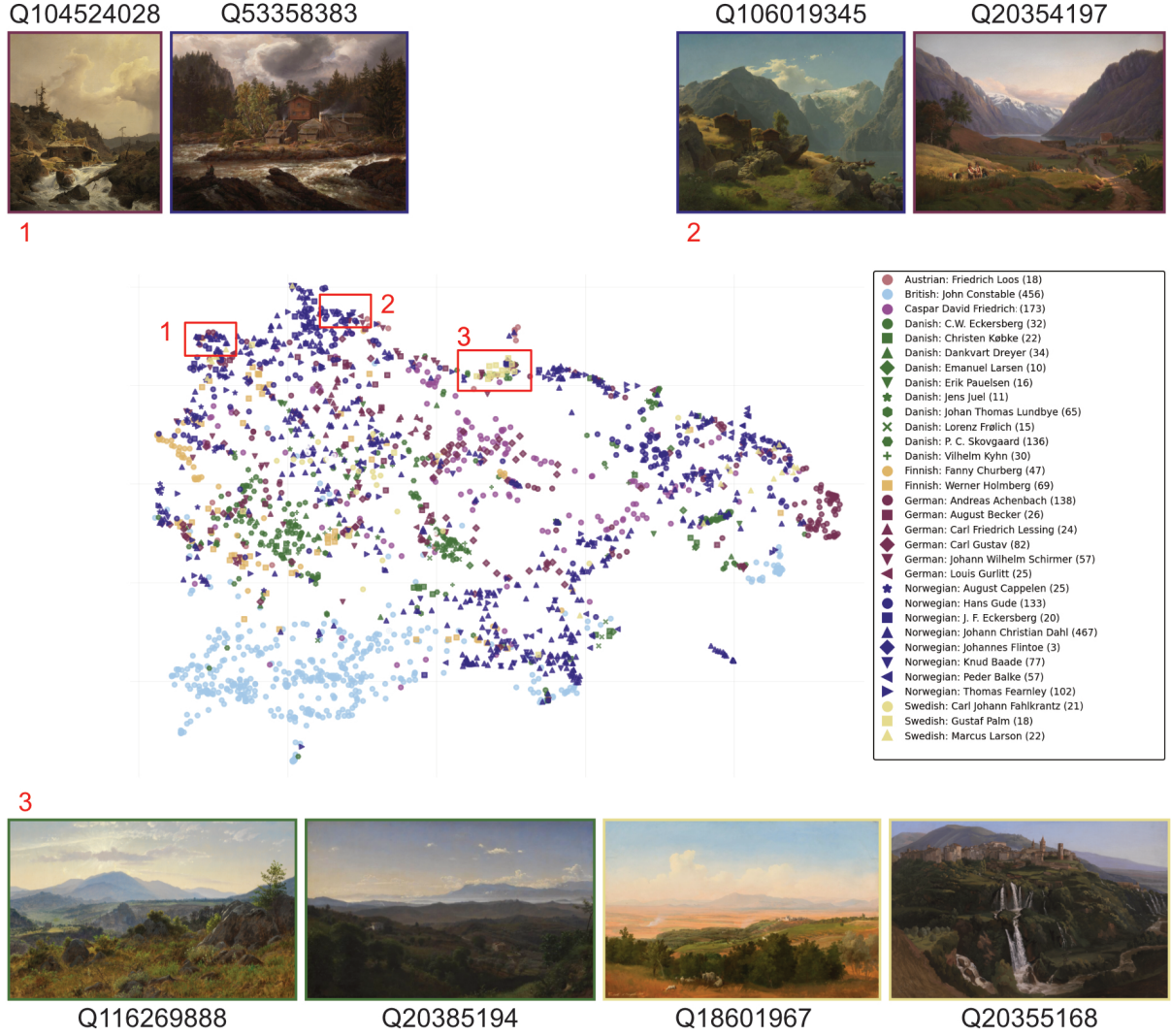
\*These authors contributed equally to this work.



**Figure 1:** Number of paintings per artist in the dataset (total amount of paintings: 2710; total amount of painters: 123). It combines the SMK data with selective collection efforts regarding Scandinavian landscape painters. The distribution reveals gaps in the data of the SMK with non canonical painters being underrepresented.

another? And our core research question: What truly constitutes a *national* art movement? The style – influenced from teachers and colleagues –, the motif – determined by regional geography and flora – or – the *narrative* that frames it? Finally, this narrative relates not only to the painters themselves, but is also theoretically embedded in both natural philosophy and science (Pennoen 2020) and the construction of nature as cultural expression (Schama 1996 - 1995).

To study this phenomenon, we created a dataset with selected painters from Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Germany. They were chosen for their interconnectedness and mobility within Europe and their importance for the overall art movements according to art historical research (tab. 1.1–1.2). As for our image sources, we combine museum datasets (Statens Museum for Kunst, Nivaagaards Malerisamling, Den Hirschsprungske Samling) with Wikidata entries of hand-selected painters, which results in a heterogeneous data set including not only our targeted painters, but also other noteworthy works from relevant collections, allowing for a nuanced investigation of the artworks and their visual relationships. This spatio-temporal approach to dataset compilation already emphasizes network connections within the investigated time frame, such as the Norwegian painter Johan Christian Dahl’s influence on Norwegian landscape painting from his base in Dresden (Møller 2020). Many German painters, on the other hand, for example Caspar David Friedrich, traveled to Copen-



**Figure 2:** UMAP reduction of image embeddings (paintings accompanied by Wikidata identifiers).

hagen to refine their craft (Bukdahl 2005). Furthermore, some painters visited England and were particularly impressed by Wilhelm Turner and John Constable (Kent 1987, 65). They are therefore also considered in the dataset, even if their influence might be minor.

Methodologically, we implement a pre-trained model<sup>1</sup> to extract embeddings for each painting and then process them for image classification and unsupervised feature exploration (on transformer models and image exploration, see Dosovitskiy 2020). By focusing specifically on dimensionality reduction techniques, we also address the narrative potency of visualizations as such – a discussion initially strongly carried by Johanna Drucker (Drucker 2015; Drucker 2020) and also held in art his-

<sup>1</sup>eva02\_large\_patch14\_clip\_336.merged2b; it emerged as the best performing model in a series of benchmarking tasks on art, see Hansen et al. 2025.

torical spaces (Glinka and Dörk 2018). We investigate how the visualization of feature space can enhance and sometimes challenge (art) historical narratives such as National Romanticism. This approach aligns with various other efforts in Digital Art History, for example, the network analysis in the MoMa Inventing Abstraction project, which challenged the narrative of cubism formation in the 20th century (Lincoln 2020) and, in a broader sense, Computer Vision approaches to image similarity in art historical data (for a general overview, see Bell and Ommer 2018). Furthermore, this approach aligns with the "Distant Viewing" methodology introduced by Arnold – Tilton (Arnold and Tilton 2019).

Our preliminary examination of the resulting feature space (fig. 2) indicates nuanced visual references between the paintings, with some distinct clusters aligning with painters and schools, but also many indicative overlaps and outliers. The latter ones are the most informative regarding what the feature space actually represents: Cluster 1 and 2 showcase paintings by non-Norwegian painters during their Norway travels, whereas Cluster 3 consists of paintings depicting Italy. This indicates a strong correlation of the data distribution with regional motifs, which are representative of the painters mobility rather than their distinct styles.

To pursue these observations further, we plan to expand the dataset and delve deeper into issues of motif and style. We are going to include collections from other Scandinavian Museums, such as the National Museum of Sweden and the National Gallery in Oslo. We also intend to fine-tune a model with more detailed image segments and artist / nationality labels to focus on the personal style of the painters and more textural qualities of the motifs, such as tree leaves, which would reflect the different flora between the regions. Furthermore, we plan to implement visual network analysis and centrality measures to compare how art historical and computational narratives align with key figures of the Danish Golden Age and their influence on Scandinavian landscape painting (Eriksen et al. 2026).

Ultimately, this study aims to reconsider the very notion of *national style* as an evolving narrative that relates to the interconnected artistic geography of 19th-century Europe. Our first look into those phenomena already revealed nuances of mutual influence on the one hand, but also strong thematic focal points on the other. This suggests that style, motif, and narrative are deeply interconnected in national landscape painting. The very nature of these connections is at the core of our research.

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Artist	Dates	Nationality	Connections	Mobility (Selection)
C. W. Eckersberg	1783–1853	Danish	Key figure of the art scene in Copenhagen	1810–1812 France; 1816–1817 Italy
J. L. Lund	1777–1867	Danish / German	Friends with Friedrich	1802–1810, 1816–1819 Italy
Christen Købke	1810–1848	Danish	Eckersberg student	1838–1840 Italy
Martinus Rørbye	1803–1848	Danish	Eckersberg student	1834–1837 Italy
Constantin Hansen	1804–1880	Danish	Eckersberg student	1835–1843 Italy
Vilhelm Kyhn	1819–1903	Danish	Eckersberg student	1850–1851 Italy
P. C. Skovgaard	1817–1875	Danish	Lund student	1854–1855, 1869 Italy; 1866 Paris and London
J. Th. Lundbye	1818–1847	Danish	Lund student	1845–1846 Italy
C. A. Jensen	1792–1870	Danish	Outcast of the art scene in Copenhagen	1818–1823 Italy
Dankvart Dreyer	1816–1852	Danish	Outcast of the art scene in Copenhagen	
Jens Juel	1745–1802	Danish		1772–1804 Italy
J. C. Dahl	1788–1857	Norwegian	Inspired by Jens Juel; “Father of Norwegian landscape painting”	1811–1818 Copenhagen; later Dresden; one summer in Norway (1826)
Thomas Fearnley	1802–1842	Norwegian	Dahl student	1821–1823 Copenhagen; 1826 Norway; 1823–1827 Stockholm; 1832–1835 Italy; 1849–1850 England
Peder Balke	1804–1887	Norwegian	Dahl student	1829–1832 Stockholm; 1835–1836; 1843–1844 Dresden; 1849–1850 England
Knud Baade	1808–1879	Norwegian	Dahl student	1827–1830 Copenhagen; 1836–1839; 1843–1845 Dresden
Hans Gude	1825–1903	Norwegian	Flintoe, Schirmer and Achenbach student	1862 Wales

**Table 1.1:** Overview of artists, relationships, and mobility. Please note that travels to Italy usually include stops in other European countries, such as the Netherlands, France or Germany (for example Munich) as well.

Artist	Dates	Nationality	Connections	Mobility (Selection)
August Cappelen	1827–1852	Norwegian	Gude and Schirmer student	1845/46–1849/50 Düsseldorf; 1846–1847 Norway with Gude and J. F. Eckersberg
J. F. Eckersberg	1822–1870	Norwegian	Gude, Schirmer and Flintoe student	1846–1847 Norway with Gude and Cappelen
Marcus Larson	1825–1864	Swedish	Student of Achenbach	1841 Copenhagen; 1849 Norway; 1852 Düsseldorf
C. J. Fahlcrantz	1774–1861	Swedish		Never left Sweden
G. W. Palm	1810–1890	Swedish		1833 Norway; 1841–1851 Italy
Fanny Churberg	1845–1892	Finnish	Düsseldorf Academy	1875–1878 Paris
Werner Holmberg	1830–1860	Finnish	“Father of Finnish landscape painting”; Düsseldorf Academy with Gude; inspired by Achenbach	
C. D. Friedrich	1774–1840	German	Key figure in German romanticism; Dresden	1794–1798 Copenhagen
C. G. Carus	1789–1869	German	Link between Düsseldorf and Dresden	1828 Italy
Louis Gurlitt	1812–1897	Danish / German	Denmark → Düsseldorf; friends with Achenbach	1832, 1835 Norway; 1844–1846 Rome
August Becker	1821–1887	German	Düsseldorf Academy	1844, 1847 Norway; 1854 London
Andreas Achenbach	1815–1910	German	Key figure in Düsseldorf Academy; friends with Gurlitt	1835 Norway, Denmark, Sweden; 1839 Norway; 1843–1845 Italy
J. W. Schirmer	1807–1863	German	Teacher at Düsseldorf Academy	1838–1840 Italy
C. F. Lessing	1808–1880	German	Teacher at Düsseldorf Academy	
John Constable	1776–1837	British	Key figure in British romanticism	
Friedrich Loos	1797–1890	Austrian		1846–1848 Italy; 1855 Copenhagen

**Table 1.2:** Overview of artists, relationships, and mobility. Please note that travels to Italy usually include stops in other European countries, such as the Netherlands, France or Germany (for example Munich) as well.