



**ÅSGÅRDSREIEN: NATIONALISM AND MYTH IN TWO PAINTINGS BY PETER  
ARBO**

**ÅSGÅRDSREIEN: NACIONALISMO E MITO EM DUAS TELAS DE PETER  
ARBO**

*Pablo Gomes de Miranda*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article seeks to explore the relationships between the artistic production of Peter Nicolai Arbo and the political transformations in Scandinavia between the 19th and 20th centuries. Arbo, born in Drammen in 1831, Norway, is well known for the production of two paintings known as Åsgårdsreien, the first in 1868 and the second in 1872, both influenced by Johann Sebastian Welhaven's poem of the same name. Although it is known that the official date of Norway's Independence is 1905, it is nevertheless necessary to remember that different artists sought to culturally construct their identity as a nation already in the previous century in a project of sovereignty that rejected the influences of Denmark and Sweden. New cultural projects were built to express Norway's yearning for independence using characters from medieval literature and mythology as a way to reinforce their national identity.

**Key-Words:** Åsgårdsreien; Old Norse Mythology, Peter Arbo, Wild Hunt.

**Resumo:** Este artigo procura explorar as relações entre a produção artística de Peter Nicolai Arbo e as transformações políticas na Escandinávia entre os séculos XIX e XX. Arbo, nascido em Drammen em 1831, Noruega, é bem conhecido pela pintura de duas telas conhecidas como Åsgårdsreien, a primeira em 1868 e a segunda em 1872, ambas influenciadas pelo poema homónimo de Johann Sebastian Welhaven. Embora se saiba que a data oficial da Independência da Noruega é 1905, é, contudo, necessário recordar que diferentes artistas procuraram construir culturalmente a sua identidade como nação já no século anterior, num projecto de soberania que rejeitou as influências da Dinamarca e da Suécia. Novos projectos culturais foram construídos para expressar o desejo de independência da Noruega, utilizando personagens da literatura e mitologia medieval como forma de reforçar a sua identidade nacional.

**Palavras-Chaves:** Åsgårdsreien; Caçada Selvagem; Mitologia Nórdica; Peter Arbo.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. in Religious Studies (Universidade Federal da Paraíba). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3421-8783> E-mail: [pgdemiranda@gmail.com](mailto:pgdemiranda@gmail.com).



The objective of this article<sup>2</sup> is to discuss, at least initially, two paintings made by the Norwegian painter Peter Nicolai Arbo, homonymously titled *Åsgårdsreien*, which depict an "Asgardian horde" ready to torment men, displaying, to those who examine it carefully, its connections to Norse mythology. It is difficult to objectively point out intentions as a mere analysis, at the risk of being limited to a superficial essay. We are concerned more with the elements that somehow motivated Arbo's production and creative forces, including the expectations around his works and the political climate at the end of the century.

Peter Nicolai Arbo was a Norwegian born in 1831 Drammen, in the parish of Buskerud, located in the eastern part of the country. From an early age, Arbo could enjoy an education that prepared him for a career in the Arts, coming to study at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, a prominent school which had not only a great impact among Germanic intellectuals at its time, responsible not only for establishing new aesthetic proposals (especially in landscape representations) but also serving as a meeting place of different names that was later known as prominent names of the Scandinavian Romanticism.

Peter Arbo probably took advantage of such an educational experience, expanding his network and keeping himself in the forefront of romantic traditions, the same that opposed the exacerbated nationalism that was slowly taking hold in Norway. The inspiration sought in Johan Sebastian Welhaven, a writer from his own country, can be seen within this positive romantic spectrum: as we will point out, the poem *Åsgårdsreien* was vital to Arbo's paintings. We do not know if the painter had direct contact with Welhaven, but at least we know that the writer was close to different Scandinavian artists who attended the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.

Many of his influences come from French and Flemish artists, including Ernest Meissonier, Jean Antoine Watteau, Nicolas Lancret, and Philips Wouwermans, from which his first sketches with hunting themes originated. From these, Arbo discovered a passion for painting animals, exemplified by his painting from 1863 *Hesteflokk på høyfjellet*. The hunt

---

<sup>2</sup> This article derives from another written once published in Portuguese, having been re-evaluated and expanded for the current edition. For our original questions and previous formulations, see MIRANDA, 2017.



and the horses would be repeated to exhaustion, for Arbo had a passion for the Páthos evoked in mythological narratives, war, and battles, extending his production to paintings about the ancient Nordic kings and gods, with all the martial elements that surround them.

Arbo stayed out of his native country, returning occasionally when in 1866 he received honors from the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olavus and the Order of Vasa, and in 1873 became a knight in the Order of the Iron Crown. He settled in Paris between 1863 and 1874, when he moved to Christiania, producing his works until near the end of his life, by the year of 1892<sup>3</sup>. After this brief biographical digression, we can observe several points relevant to the discussion we propose here. When we come across the elements that circulate the two paintings named *Åsgårdsreien*, which we have previously stated that are of our interest, we cannot help but wonder how all these issues present themselves as an intertwining between the artist's aspirations, inseparable from his political and social context, and the inspirations found in the old narratives, in mythology, and Nordic folklore. We will try to point out these connections the best as we can.

### **The Creative Forces of Scandinavian Romanticism - 1868's *Åsgårdsreien***

Scandinavian fine arts began to distance itself more and more from French culture from the 19th century on. This abrupt, but necessary placement is pertinent because, in general, Paris was still the great compass of the artistic desires that guided Europe. The Neoclassicism or Academicism that expressed the post-French Revolution bourgeois values predominated in the fine arts academies with artistic conceptions of the classical world and a so-called Renaissance. The reactions to Neoclassicism, coming primarily from the cultural changes of the Industrial Revolution, were translated in Europe into several different movements: Realism, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism filling artistic spaces close to Romanticism, an artistic movement that curiously seemed to approach not only the old medieval Gothic but also the Baroque.

---

<sup>3</sup> Several biographical details about Peter Nicolai Arbo can be found on the website Norsk Kunstnerleksikon: [https://nkl.snl.no/Peter\\_Nicolai\\_Arbo](https://nkl.snl.no/Peter_Nicolai_Arbo), accessed in August 1, 2021.



Such distancing from the French metropolis drove philosophers and artists to a search for German ideas, invariably bringing them into contact with the Romantics. At the head of this movement, we need to mention the name of the Norwegian Henrich Steffens, an important scientist, and philosopher with a special interest in mineralogy, that when studying in Germany comes in contact with a series of important thinkers: Goethe, Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, Schiller, and Schlegel. When he returned to Denmark, he gave a series of lectures in 1802 that was attended by a number of names important to Scandinavian Romanticism, especially the poet Adam Oehlenschläger<sup>4</sup>.

In Sweden the Auroraförbundet published the manifesto *Phosphoros*, a romantic pamphlet signaling a new beginning and revealing a curious feud: the Auroraförbundet was situated in the university city of Uppsala and placed itself in an ideology diametrically opposed to the Classicism with a strong presence in Stockholm: “*Phosphoros* was one of several Swedish periodicals contesting the classicist style and trivialization of literature that came from epigonic and imitative practices in eighteenth-century letters” (RIX, 2015, p. 396).

Norway, on the other hand, was late to manifest its romantic vein, but it emerged with unbelievable force through the poetry of Henrik Wergeland and his poem *Skabelsen, mennesket, og Messias*. Wergeland understands mystical experience to be located in nature and a divine spark within man. The developments of awareness of these elements would lead to political freedom, and this search is predominant in Wergeland's writings.

It is difficult to ignore the political events of this moment, as mentioned above. Denmark had been damaged by its participation in the Napoleonic Wars and ceded Norway to the Kingdom of Sweden through the Treaty of Kiel, signed in 1814. The treaty also allowed for the former Norwegian provinces of Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands. The Norwegians tried to resist in their way by formulating a national constitution and elected their king, but Sweden thwarted these plans with an attack on the city of Fredrikstad, which culminated in the Moss Convention, also signed in 1814. According to RIX (2015, p. 397),

---

<sup>4</sup> GOMBRICH, 1951; DAVIES; DENNY; HOFRICHTER; JACOBS; ROBERTS; SIMON, 2011.



Norway could maintain its liberal constitution and institutions independently, but the Swedish crown would administer its foreign affairs.

The publication of the collection *Norske Folkeeventyr* by Jørgen Moe and Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, based on extensive collecting in the Norwegian countryside and with a strong inspiration from the work of the Brothers Grimm, goes back to this moment. Peter Nicolai Arbo was directly involved in the publication of this material, producing images for the first editions of the collection<sup>5</sup>. This work marks how historical and national identity also ran through Folkloristics and was mirrored in some way in Gothicism: "A long-standing nationalist movement in Sweden reaching back to the brothers Johannes and Olaus Magnus in the sixteenth century" (RIX, 2015, p. 397).

Additionally, as we are informed by Bo Grandien (2018, p. 503), historical sources about the Norwegian past, in particular Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, became a popular reading during the eighteenth century, and the Viking Age thus becoming an inspiration for national liberation, when in the past Norway itself had been independent until the mid-twelfth century, before being subjected to the kingdom of Denmark.

Other important artists relevant to Scandinavian Romanticism are also associated with the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, some noteworthy examples include the duo Mårten Eskil Winge and August Malmström<sup>6</sup>. Winge, in turn, had been close friends with Carl Wahlbom and Nils Blommér. All mentioned here were artists who, inspired by Romanticism, devoted themselves to paintings of themes referring to the ancient Nordic world (Icelandic sagas, myths, and folklore)<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> Arbo's engravings illustrate the stories *Per Gynt* and *Jutulen og Johannes Blessom* (ASBJØRNSSEN, 1896, p. 164 and p. 239, respectively).

<sup>6</sup> Malmström is a remarkable case: despite all his exposure as a great artist and plenty of contact with the Düsseldorf academy, the Swedish painter's inspiration seems to come more from his education at the *Kungliga Akademien för de fria konsterna*, the Royal Academy of Arts in Stockholm, and some later experience in Düsseldorf, without necessarily formal contact. We know that Malmström travelled with Mårten Eskil Winge to Paris, a very common journey among Scandinavian painters, but it is possible that they also travelled to Düsseldorf together to enrich their technical repertoire.

<sup>7</sup> The state of financial ruin affected artists of different kinds until the middle of the 19th century and pushed them to seek education elsewhere: "The writers fared better, but for the visual arts totally new institutions had to be built up. It also took a long time before a public with greater spending power



We should make one last reference to the poets, especially Johan Sebastian Welhaven. Poets like Adam Oehlenschläger, Henrik Wegerland, Thomas Thorild (belonging to the Sturm und Drang movement) had already paved the way since the 18th century, and with vigor in the 19th century, for the elements of Romanticism employed by Welhaven, who, in turn, also had relations with the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, coming to write, as we pointed out previously, the poem *Asgaardsreien* (*Åsgårdsreien*), the same title of Arbo, as pointed out in LJØGODT, 2012, p. 160.

Amid Scandinavian romanticism and its political unfolding, to mention the yearnings for the independence of Denmark and later Sweden, Peter Nicolai Arbo's production brings to our eyes this depiction of the Wild Hunt or the Wild Ride under a very peculiar representation described as *Åsgårdsreien*. What should we think of when we first observe the Norwegian artist's painting? It might be interesting for this article to have some examples of the account of the Wild Hunt, accounts that the painter could have known, or at least would have been familiar with:

Taddak Tveit once rode with the *oskorei* to Mykland. Taddak was an old man, and he had gone to bed. But before he knew it, he was on horseback in the middle of the host. They rode so hard that the sparks were flying. Nottov Haugann saw the light streaking across Grennes Hill. He counted thirty horses. At Lake Høvring the water was open. The horses went in up to their fetlocks. The *oskorei* stopped at Brenne and drank some Christmas beer. They did not dare tap from the barrel, so they thrust a knife into the wall and tapped from the shaft. Then the man on Brenna saw that Gyro had a tail. "Pull in your tail, Gyro!" he shouted. The host scattered and rode home. Taddak ran right into the corner of the storehouse so that the whole building was askew, and he knocked himself out. Suddenly he was in his bed once more, dripping with sweat. At the same moment, the host reached Mount Tveite. People heard it rattle when the *oskorei* rode into the mountain (KVIDELAND; SEHMSDORF, 1999, pp. 272-273)<sup>8</sup>.

---

emerged. The leading artists had to find purchasers elsewhere. After studies in Copenhagen, Munich or Düsseldorf, they settled down abroad and returned to their native country only for summer excursions. With few exceptions it was only in the 1880s – with the coming of Romanticism – that they could establish themselves permanently in Norway" (GRANDIEN, 2018, pp. 504-505).

<sup>8</sup> This was collected by Johannes Skar in *Setesdal* (Aust-Agder, Norway) and it was printed in Skar, *Gamalt or Sættesdal* volume 1, in 1961.

And:

On Aase in Flatdal, they were drinking and carousing one evening around Christmas time. Two men Strapped themselves together with a belt and fought with knives. One of the men was stabbed and lay dead on the floor. Then the *oskorei* came riding in through the door, took the dead man with them, and threw a firebrand on the floor. They left some reins behind on the attic floor. The reins have been kept at Aase ever since (KVIDELAND; SEHMSDORF, 1999, pp. 273)<sup>9</sup>.

These are accounts collected in different parishes at the beginning of the 20th century, in which the dead appear to collect the body of someone who had been violently murdered. These kind of narratives shows us how alive in folk memory is the myth of the Wild Hunt, the collective fantastic being found all over Europe under various names and composed of diverse beings and ancient gods. The relevance of this narrative for us comes from the reflections on a very peculiar production around the theme itself produced in the previous centuries, mainly around the theme of Melancholy, which we will comment ahead.



Image 1: Åsgårdsreien, oil on canvas by Peter Nicolai Arbo, 1868<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> This was collected by Kjetil A. Flatin in Seljord (Telemark, Norway) and it was printed in Flatin, *Tussar og trolldom*, v. 76 (1930).

<sup>10</sup> <http://rojalist.se/product/%C3%A5sg%C3%A5rdsreien-1868-av-peter-nicolai-arbo> access in August 1, 2021.



Images 2 and 3: details from the painting *Åsgårdsreien*, 1868.

The first painting is currently in Nordnorsk Museum in Tromsø, although it originally belonged to Drummens Museum. In it, a bearded man with a golden crown occupies a privileged space in the center of the painting. Among the four figures on horseback, the god Thor (detail in Image 2) leads the violent host. We identify the character by the hammer he wields and by Welhaven's verses: *Thor, den stærke, med løftet Hammer, /staaer høit i sin Karm, er forrest i Laget* (Thor the Strong, with the hammer raised, stands haughtily in his chariot, at the head of the horde). We know that the cult of Thor, particularly of an agrarian character, was strong in Norway, and perhaps we may even conjecture that some folkloric connection in this sense may have remained among the nineteenth-century folk.

It is possible that there was a certain influence brought about by the search for the antiquarian material that had been published since the 16th century, more or less along the lines of the Gothicism movement begun in the previous centuries: it is also possible that the description of the Uppsala temple found in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, attributed to Adam of Bremen in the 11th century, represented its power in depicting Thor with a scepter (his hammer?), while in Arbo's painting he is the only god leading the cavalcade, perhaps because he is the most powerful of all gods, according to Adam of Bremen:

That folk has a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of Sigtuna and Björkö. In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the





people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wotan and Frikko have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops. The other, Wotan- that is, the Furious- carries on war and imparts to man strength against his enemies. The third is Frikko, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals. His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus. But Wotan they chisel armed, as our people are wont to represent Mars. Thor with his scepter apparently resembles Jove. The people also worship heroes made gods, whom they endow with immortality because of their remarkable exploits, as one reads in the *Vita* of Saint Ansgar, they did in the case of King Eric (Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, book 4, xxvi)<sup>11</sup>.

Another explanation may be linked to one of the greatest exponents of Germanic romantic culture in the 19th century, Richard Wagner. These paintings were produced a few years after *Die Walküre* (MJÖBERG, 1980, p. 217): Odin as a deity linked not only to the world of the dead but also the Valkyries (represented on the painting with helmets and shields, Image 3), supernatural entities responsible for the collections of the dead warriors on the battlefields are central figures in what would become Wagner's tetralogy. Wagner's oeuvre as a whole founds the modern representation of the Germanic myth, while merging it with the Celtic myth and its representations. The Germanic ancestors of the historical and legendary past, (according to LANGER, 2009, p. 137), were redeemed by nineteenth-century ideals as supermen who would regenerate the chaotic West through their organization and command.

A point should be made around the general characterization of the characters represented in the painting. Only at the end of the 18th century, Johann Gotfried Herder and the Schlegel brothers brought to the Germanic world the idea of defining Identity by exploring History and Culture (LJØGODT, 2012, p. 142). The needs created by post-French Revolution ideas brought an odd challenge: there was abundant written material about the past, including mythological, Scandinavian. By the end of the nineteenth century, artists and writers began to be concerned with the information coming from material culture, for example in the

---

<sup>11</sup> Translated by Francis J. Tschan



Norwegian edition of Erik Werenskiöld's 1899 *Heimskringla*, in which helmets were depicted without the details of the Wagnerian works (according to MJÖBERG, 1980, p. 227).

### **The Needs of an Artistic Community - 1872's Åsgårdsreien**

The sense of the whole network of confluences among the artists of Nordic Romanticism (among them the clear influence of Düsseldorf on the construction of this Germanic identity), also reaches the clear innovations presented in the second Åsgårdsreien of 1872. Despite the landscape predilection among the frequenters of this academy, a new challenge became patent and was faced by all these artists together: how to represent the gods and heroes within a Germanic context? As pointed by LJØGODT, 2012, p. 146, the painters had no idea how the ancient Nordic people imagined their gods and heroes!

The imagetic fabrication of this past must have been created not only from the sparse literary descriptions of the peasant clothes of the inland populations but also in a pastiche with Greco-Roman culture and with the medieval representations of Central Europe. Despite the search for material culture, the most significant excavations would only take place at the end of the century.

Between the years the 1820s to 1860s, Archaeology concentrated on the study of monuments, instigated by the characteristic standards of the time, with concerns relating to classifications, monumental unearthing, and precious objects. After this moment, the study of the culture of fragile organic materials (wood, textiles, bones, organic remains, etc) began to be investigated and discovered at various sites in Scandinavia, including Bronze Age and early Iron Age clothing, facilitating the reconstitution of ancient and medieval daily life<sup>12</sup>.

Of course, when we speak of a pastiche with Greco-Roman culture, we are referring to a long Western pictorial custom that crossed the Middle Ages and was reused by Romanticism in general. Paintings that preserved a "Gothic" mentality: "It was paintings like those by Lochner and Fra Angelico which first captured the imagination of the romantic critics of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Examples of works on this period are *Lifvet i Sverige under vikingatiden* by Oscar Montelius, published in 1872 and *The Viking Age* by Paul du Chaillu, published in 1890.

nineteenth century, men such as Ruskin, and the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite school” (GOMBRICH, 1951, p. 197).

Here we must consider two paintings by artists of the same time of Arbo:



Image 4: Ängsälvör, oil on canvas by Nils Blommér, 1850<sup>13</sup>.



Image 5: Älvalek, oil on canvas by August Malmström, 1866<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://digitalmuseum.se/021046508702/angsalvor> access in August 1, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> <http://emp-web-84.zetcom.ch/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=18226&viewType=detailView> access in August 1, 2021.



Images 4 and 5 also represent two myths popular among the Scandinavian peasant population, the Elven Ball present in ballads that typically could be known as *Elveskud*, ("Elf Shot") in which a man about to be married finds a crowd of dancing elves and is invited by a maiden to join them. Refusing, the groom returns home in agony and about to die. These are tales narrated and collected by folklorists (as with the account of the Wild Hunt previously cited), among whom the Brothers Grimm are the most celebrated, and which are involved in the clear effort of identity construction. But where was the power to which the discourse of this construction was referring<sup>15</sup>?

It is the community around the artist, whether he is in the country, in the city, in Norway, Germany, or Paris, that gives him his inspiration and the creative force that becomes real in the execution of the work. The public authorizes or maintains the tradition to which the artist belongs, while at the same time, the moment he breaks with it, it is public approval or reproval that directs him somewhere. There being no more challenges proposed by the community, the artist appeals to tradition, hence the importance of comparing poetry and painting, which took popular stories as the basis for mythical representations, while being aware that it is the political context that defines, within Romanticism, the boundaries between Symbol and Illustration, which allows us to read representation as an allegory<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>15</sup> Elven Shot. We have given predilection to Danish because of the popularity of ballads of the "Elven Shot" type in the country, which early on, with the end of the Napoleonic wars and the onset of Romanticism, finds the pursuit of ballads growing stronger, although formal publications of ballads in general rival Sweden's early interest in ballads. Between 1812 and 1814, the *Udvalgte Danske Viser fra Middelalderen* by Abrahamson, Nyerup and Rahbek was published, preceded by Grundtvig's *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* (between 1853-83) which influenced English, Scottish and Scandinavian ballad production. Interestingly ballads in Sweden were also popular early on, mainly because of its proximity to Finland. Much of its ballads have themes in common with the rest of Scandinavia, leaving ballads that are of local composition and handed down by the humble population. The Swedish collections: *Svenska Folkvisor* (1812-14) by Geijer and Afzeliu with songs recorded since 1700, *Svenska Fornsånger* (1834-42) by Arvideson, *Sveriges medeltida ballader* edited by Bengt R. Jonsson, Maragareta Jerssild and Sven-Bertil Jansson (TAYLOR, 2014, pp. 8-15).

<sup>16</sup> Of course, we think much like Ernst Gombrich in this: "It was the community which set the artists their tasks - be it the making of ritual masks or the building of cathedrals, the painting of portraits or the illustration of books" (GOMBRICH, 1951, p. 444). Also, we agree that the political expression within Romanticism is key to our understanding of the rationalization of supernatural themes, as expressed by Gombrich (1985, pp. 120-126).



Swedish painters have dealt with mythological themes and battles described in medieval sources, but such narratives belong more to a general framework where a sense of belonging to a Scandinavian community is embedded. The examples in Images 4 and 5 evoke myths popular also in Denmark and Sweden (Blómmer and Malmström are both from Sweden), which could perhaps never have been painted by Arbo, who was engaged in a very particular identity construction project in Norway, given its *sui generis* political context.



Image 6: Åsgårdsreien, oil on canvas by Peter Arbo, 1872<sup>17</sup>.

---

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/collection/object/NG.M.00258> access in August 1, 2021.



Images 7 and 8: details from the painting *Åsgårdsreien*, 1872.

In Image 6, the second painting with the name *Åsgårdsreien*, we find the united elements in the production of the northern "barbarian" presented consonant with Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* and the works of various artists of his time, but also with Scandinavian folklore, in particular the accounts of *oskoreia*. These are questions, as we expressed earlier, are vital for the analysis of the elements that surround Arbo as an artist: the creative forces of his time expressed in the poems and paintings (as well as sculptures, architecture, etc.), and the community and its public that consume and evaluate the painter's works according to their needs<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> In 1872 a major industrial and artistic exhibition was held in Copenhagen, which brought together some of the most famous artistic works with the theme of Nordic Mythology (Nordiske Industri og Kunststilling, Nordic Industry and Art Exhibition). Among the hundreds of paintings and sculptures exhibited were: *Valkyrjen*, painted by Peter Arbo in 1869; *Freja sökande sin make*, painted by Nils Blommér in 1852; *Odin* painted by Herman Freund in 1825. Yet the two major works on display had been executed in the same year as the event: *Tors strid med jättarna* painted in 1872 by the Mårten Eskil Winge, and, of course, *Åsgårdsreien* painted by Peter Arbo in the same year. Winge's painting of Thor became the most celebrated image of this god in the West to this day, while Arbo's work reflected both nationalist yearnings and folk and regional motivations and is even perpetuated today on rock record covers (for example, Bathory's album from 1988, *Blood Fire Death*). The exhibition was set up near Tivoli Park in central Copenhagen (now Rådhuspladsen), It was open from 13 June to 1 November 1872 and brought together a total of 3,000 exhibitors from many places in the world of the world and 600,000 visitors. This was one of the few times that works by different Scandinavian artists were gathered together in one place. Today Winge's Thor and Blommér Freia are in the collection of the National Museum in Stockholm, while the two paintings by Arbo are in the National Museum of Arts and Design in Oslo. Additionally, Herman Freund's sculpture of Odin is in the Copenhagen Glyptothek. More about this: <http://jdpecon.com/expo/wfcopenhagen1872.html> and



As we can observe in Image 7, in the background the god Thor, with flying cape and the hammer Mjölner raised, seems to incite to the cavalcade the army of the dead, the half-naked Valkyries wielding weapons and the horde of men in confusion give volume to the gang. It can be seen that many of them are still wearing robes resembling those depicted in artistic traditions that dealt with mythology and classical culture. Two mysterious figures take the lead and can be observed in Image 8, in the 1868 painting the naked man and woman on white horses are now depicted here in a more violent form, she with a spear and bare breasts, he vociferating with a sword in hand and wearing on his head a helmet along the lines of Wagnerian Romanticism. If we are guided by the repository of Norwegian folk ballads, they are Gudrun Horsetail and the hero Sigurd:

Sigurd the Young roughed up his gaming companions, who told him he would do better to be out looking for his father. His mother sent him to her brother Griep and gave him a horse, Grani. Sigurd left and met an ogre, whom he permitted to mount up behind him, but Grani threw him to the ground. Griep told Sigurd that his father was dead, gave him a chest filled with gold, and urged him to go back home. Grani brought him to a swamp, but there the horse broke a shoe, and the hero dropped the chest. He then met the Wild Hunt led by Gudrun Horsetail, who asked him if he would prefer being the first in her troop or the last in heaven. Sigurd chose to follow her: *so ride eg med deg til oskor i dag* (LECOUTEUX, 2011, p. 191)

This Gudrun is not to be confused with the hero's consort in the Nibelungen Cycle: she is a furious female spirit, certainly familiar to descriptions of the Valkyries, perhaps fitting among those supernatural beings whom the Old Norse sources call *Dísir*. The appearance of spirits during the Christmas season, seeking food and drink, terrorizing animals, and tormenting men, is easily narrated among Norse populations. There may be some connection between the *Dís Gudrun*, the hosts of dead warriors, and Sigurd with the horse without one

---

<http://kunstbib.dk/samlinger/udstillingskataloger/samlingen/000084434> both with access in August 1, 2021. We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Johnni Langer for bringing these data to our attention. Of course, these brief considerations deserve a more refined appreciation from the Reception Studies.



of its horseshoes and subtracted from his gold. This Gudrun is very Troll-like, described with a tail like a *hulder*, similar to Gyro from the previous description from Aust-Agder.

The willingness to paint mythological subjects were rare, not only among Norwegian artists, but among all Scandinavians. Even though Arbo started by painting historical subjects, especially those connected to Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, only in 1865 his first painting of a mythological subject appears, named *Valkyria*<sup>19</sup>. The painting earned him praise from his countrymen, yet the mythological theme continued to be received skeptically, even though the beautifully and elegantly depicted female figures pleased the salons of Paris<sup>20</sup>. This must not have impacted Arbo in any negative way, as the painting *Åsgårdsreien* of 1872 again depicts the female figures in their elegant, yet terrible, ways<sup>21</sup>.

Arbo could have felt the subject fascinating and popular among the public, enough to feature in his paintings and be exhibited to the dilettante or specialist community. The European community itself was already celebrating the folk motif of the Wild Hunt in Flamenco School painting as early as the 16th century when Lucas Cranach the Elder produced his painting. The European community itself was already celebrating the popular motif of the Wild Hunt in Flamenco School painting as early as the 16th century, when Lucas Cranach the

---

<sup>19</sup> According to Bo Grandien (2018, pp. 516-517), the scarcity of production of artistic works related to mythology during the nineteenth century, however, is not limited only to painters and sculptors: in Norway, Denmark and Sweden, most works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century expressed a preference to medieval historical themes than to themes linked to mythology or pre-Christian religion, a scenario that existed even among book illustrators and fresco painters.

<sup>20</sup> Additionally: "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" (HUVAERE, 2018, p. 57). Even if we do not agree with the words used to describe Arbo's Parisian paintings as "infected with fluff", Huvaere traces well the changes in the artistic elements arranged in Arbo's paintings.

<sup>21</sup> "It shows the wild hunt of Odin, with the tumultuous band of gods, who, on a dark stormy night, traverse the wind-harassed earth on foaming horses and in passing pull with them naked young women from the ground. This scene does not correspond very closely to any Old Norse source, and, particularly in the female figures, Arbo's Parisian influences reveal themselves" (GRANDIEN, 2018, p. 511-512).





Elder painted the theme of Melancholy and inserted on the horizon armies riding by land and air a fantastic host led by a Landsknecht, ensuring the warlike character of the band.



Image 9: Melancholie, oil on canvas by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1532<sup>22</sup>.

These are connections worth pointing out, as it demonstrates a historical circulation of the myth that reached, we do not know if directly, Peter Arbo, and were much centuries before.

<sup>22</sup>[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6b/Cranach%2C\\_Lucas\\_d.\\_%C3%84.\\_-Die\\_Melancholie\\_-\\_1532.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6b/Cranach%2C_Lucas_d._%C3%84._-Die_Melancholie_-_1532.jpg) access in August 1, 2021.



The Wild Hunt remains in the Germanic imagination, and can be found in the 16th century not only in the paintings of Lucas Cranach, but also in the song of Hans Sachs of Nuremberg in his poem on the *Wütende Heer*, where evildoers are condemned to wander in this 'earthly heaven' until, at the Final Judgement, justice is done<sup>23</sup>.

### Concluding Remarks

It is difficult to address the topic satisfactorily in a limited space like that of an article. To write about Peter Nicolai Arbo and Scandinavian Romanticism is a challenge that deserves greater attention and it is necessary to continue investigating these connections so that the text presented here are not only ideas gathered around an analysis of the paintings on the Wild Hunt by Arbo but it can serve as a guide of ideas for future analyses. Our intention was also to explore the political and cultural powers that surround these productions, the expressiveness of the myths by the Romantics attracts by the resignification of something that the man of the 18th to 20th centuries clearly understood or thought as Gothic (with all the problems that this expression carries with it)<sup>24</sup>.

When we began to gather our materials to examine the paintings pointed here, we had in mind Carlo Ginzburg's considerations of the possibilities of a Warburgian method and his search for *Pathosformeln*. We have no illusion that we are operating fully in a method of this kind, but we consider first an insight established by Gombrich that considers the change of stylistic paradigms as a central problem for the History of Art, and, second, another established by Ginzburg, who reminds us of the need to maintain a historical process in the transmission of *Pathosformeln*:

---

<sup>23</sup> Not only the theme of Wild Hunt, of course, but numerous wonders dated from the Middle Ages found their places in the production of different artists in later centuries as briefly discussed in LE GOFF, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> For those who are interested in this painter and want to research more about his life and work, we recommend Dani Kathleen Barrett Huvaere's Master's thesis, whose greatest quality was to trace an overview of the artistic influences in Düsseldorf and Paris on Peter Arbo, which the author defined as a hybrid style between the conventions of Neoclassicism, Romanticism and Realism (HUVAERE, 2018, p. 1).



Through the notion of *Pathosformeln*, the representations of the myths inherited from antiquity were conceived as “evidence of mental states transformed into images” in which “later generation ... Sought out the permanent traces of the most profound emotions in human existence.” This followed the interpretation of mimicry and gestures as traces of violent passions experienced in the past, suggested to Warburg by Darwin’s *Expression of the Emotions in Men and Animals* (1872) (Ginzburg, 1989, p. 20)<sup>25</sup>.

Although we have not focused on this, so that we barely quote the authors and their methods, we think we have written with these ideas in mind. The creative forces that led Arbo to paint his pictures, in particular, the two paintings named *Åsgårdsreien*, although they are participating in the maintenance and expression of Romantic thought in Scandinavia, in particular Norway, cannot lead us to limit the permanence of their inspirations and longings to a single place, nor Scandinavia itself. Arbo studied in Düsseldorf, lived for years in Paris, was inspired by Neoclassic and Rococo painters, his romantic color palette is inherited from brushstrokes that were born from earlier artistic movements, but that was wisely reused since Arbo did not limit himself to one artistic school or style.

Even more, Arbo was able to draw on poems and paintings by his contemporaries. Ultimately, the mythology painted in his paintings can be referred, of course, to the medieval and mythological sources that were preserved and edited in modernity. However, we intended to see how Romanticism attempted to maintain a 'Gothic spirit' by painting, narrating, rhyming, and celebrating this mythology. The very theme of the Wild Hunt hardly appears in the older narratives, stemming from the Poetic and Prose Edda, Arbo painted other pictures representing the gods and the valkyries, *Åsgårdsreien* originated from the popular, living narrative circulating in the visual arts since the 16th century in the paintings of Lucas Cranach.

---

<sup>25</sup> And of course, this is a perspective that can be analyzed entirely as a historical process, as seen in the examples set in GINZBURG, 2015.



### Bibliographical references

- Adam of Bremen. *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- ASBJØRNSEN, Peter Christian. *Norske folke-og huldre-eventyr i udvalg*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1896.
- DAVIES, Penelope J. E; DENNY, Walter B; HOFRICHTER, Frima Fox; JACOBS, Joseph; ROBERTS, Ann M; SIMON, David L. *Janson's History of Art - the Western Tradition*. London: Prentice Hall, 2011.
- GRANDIEN, Bo. Painting and Sculpture in Norway. In: ROSS, Margaret Clunies (ed.). *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North - research and reception, volume I: from the Middle Ages to c. 1830*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2018, pp. 503-520.
- GINZBURG, Carlo. *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- GINZBURG, Carlo. *Paura Reverenza Terrore. Cinque saggi di iconografia politica*. Milan: Adelphi, 2015.
- GOMBRICH, Ernst. H. *Story of Art*. New York: Phaidon Press, 1951.
- GOMBRICH, Ernst. H. *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*. New York: Phaidon Press, 1985.
- HUVAERE, Dani Kathleen Barrett. *The Wild Hunt for Norway: Peter Nicolai Arbo and artistic hybridity in the nineteenth-century*. Bozeman, Montana State University, master thesis in Art History, 2018.
- KVIDELAND, Reimund; SEHMSDORF, Henning. K. *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- LANGER, Johnni. *Deuses, Monstros, Heróis: Ensaios de Mitologia e Religião Viking*. Brasília: Editora da Universidade de Brasília, 2009.



- LECOUTEUX, Claude. *Phantom Armies of the Night. The Wild Hunt and The Ghostly Processions of the Undead*. Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2011.
- LE GOFF, Jacques. *Heroes and Marvels of the Middle Ages*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020.
- LJØGODT, K. Northern Gods in Marble. The Romantic Rediscovery of Norse Mythology. In: *Romantik* (Aarhus University), v. 1, n. 1, 2012, pp. 141-165.
- MIRANDA, Pablo Gomes de. A Caçada Selvagem de Asgard, Nacionalismo e Mito na Noruega do Século XIX: considerações sobre a obra de Peter Nicolai Arbo. In: *Roda da Foruna*, v. 6, n. 1, 2017, pp. 232-249.
- MJÖBERG, J. Romanticism and Revival. In: Wilson, D. M. (org.). *The Northern World*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1980, pp. 207-238.
- RIX, R. W. Introduction: Romanticism in Scandinavia. In: *European Romantic Review*, n. 26, v. 4, 2015, pp. 395-400.
- TAYLOR, Lynda. *The Cultural Significance of Elves in Northern European Balladry*. Leeds University, 2014.
- WELHAVEN, Johan Sebastian (1844). *Asgaardsreien*. 1844. Available at: [http://heimskringla.no/wiki/Asgaardsreien\\_\(J.\\_S.\\_Welhaven\)](http://heimskringla.no/wiki/Asgaardsreien_(J._S._Welhaven)) August 1, 2021.