

Nathanson, Eckersberg's *Moses*, and Danish *Haskalah* ('Reformed Judaism')*

Patrick Kragelund

Peer review and editing managed by:

Elisabeth Kofod-Hansen, Danmarks Kunstbibliotek / The Danish National Art Library, Copenhagen

Reviewers:

Karina Lykke Grand, Kasper Monrad

Abstract

Among the patrons of the young C. W. Eckersberg (1783-1853), the Jewish merchant M. L. Nathanson (1780-1868) was the most important. A key figure in the process eventually leading to the Danish Jews obtaining complete legal and civic parity (1849), Nathanson can be shown to have pioneered art patronage as a platform for social and cultural integration. His commissions for patriotic "Galleries" (imitating Boydell's British *Shakespeare Gallery*) and for family portraits illustrate his efforts to give art a new role in this process. Hitherto ignored, so does his commission for a monumental *Moses Crossing the Red Sea* – a work that in its iconography, as developed by Eckersberg between 1812 and 1817, represents a remarkable fusion of Jewish, Greco-Roman and Christian elements that combined with overt loans from Raphael and Giovanni Donducci gives it a unique place in Eckersberg's *oeuvre*.

Contents

Introduction

Nathanson and the Danish Art Scene

Nathanson and Eckersberg

Eckersberg's *Moses* – an Emblem of Jewish Reform

Introduction

- [1] The bicentenary of Jewish emancipation in Denmark (1814-2014)¹ calls for a re-examination of the connection between the foremost of early Dano-Jewish reformers and the painter Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783-1853).²
- [2] Mendel Levin Nathanson (1780-1868) hailed from the Jewish community in the then Danish free-trade emporium in Altona just outside the German merchant metropolis of Hamburg, from whence, as a poor, semi-literate boy, he came to Copenhagen to work in the firm of his uncle.³ Gifted, self-taught and energetic, Nathanson soon found success and wealth in the burgeoning Baltic trade. Determined to bypass Hamburg-Altona as the

* The article was finished before an Islamist terrorist on the 14-15th February 2015 wounded six and murdered two persons, among the latter a Jewish volunteer guarding the entrance to the main Copenhagen Synagogue, where children were celebrating their Bat Mitzvah.

¹ For relevant literature, Bent Blüdnikow, "Jews in Denmark. A Historical Review," in: Mirjam Gelfer-Jørgensen & Bent Blüdnikow (eds.), *Danish Jewish Art – Jews in Danish Art*, Copenhagen 1999, 21-45 is where to start; for the issue in question, Martin Schwarz Lausten, *Frie Jøder? Forholdet mellem kristne og jøder i Danmark fra Frihedsbrevet 1814 til Grundloven 1849*, Copenhagen 2005 is fundamental; complete equality between Jews and Danes was only obtained with the Free Constitution of 1849.

² The relation is documented in the monumental edition of Eckersberg's diaries by Villads Villadsen, *C. W. Eckersbergs Dagbøger i-ii*, Copenhagen 2009; both sat on the Committee for the Freedom of Greece: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 283; contact seems to have been broken off after ca. 1838; sadly, Eckersberg's papers preserve no letters from Nathanson: *Additamenta*, 298-305, Manuscript department, the Royal Library, Copenhagen.

source of his imports, the 18-year-old merchant set out in 1798 across the North Sea and succeeded in establishing direct business contacts in Leeds and Manchester, where Nathanson found a generous patron in the great cotton mill owner, Sir Robert Peel the Elder (1750-1830), the father of the future prime minister.⁴ Himself a social reformer, Peel clearly took a liking to Nathanson, for whom he opened London doors so that Nathanson, on repeated visits, could familiarise himself with the parliamentary system, the thriving industry and the advances in statistics and economic theory, factors that were to exert a lifelong influence.⁵

[3] Back in Copenhagen Nathanson soon found his life's vocation as a philanthropist and social reformer, supporting education and artists. This approach was of course ultimately a response to the calls for reform of Jewish life from the great Berlin philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786).⁶ The so-called *Reformjudentum*, in Hebrew *Haskalah*, of which Mendelssohn and his ally Paul Friedländer were the most prominent proponents, had as its ultimate goal civic integration through school, language, *Bildung* and a reformed religious practice. In the vibrant and lively Jewish congregation in Hamburg-Altona⁷ these novel ideas had soon taken root and in Copenhagen Nathanson joined groups eager to turn such ideals into action. Their projects profited from royal support. A school, first for poor Jewish boys (1805), later joined by one for girls, was the group's chief instrument of integration. King Frederik VI allowed the latter to be named the Caroline School (as it is still called) after his eldest daughter. Learning the national language would bring Jewry out of uneducated, Yiddish speaking marginalization.⁸ Legislation had already granted the Danish Jews access to guilds, Academy and

³ The basic biographical outline remains Otto Siesby, *Mendel Levin Nathanson. En Biographisk Skizze*, Copenhagen 1845; Nathanson's involvement with the arts: 86ff.

⁴ Robert Peel: Lis Jacobsen, "Fra Ghettoen i Altona til Højskolen i Vallekilde," in: *Politiken* 26/2, 1961 (quoting what seems reliable family tradition).

⁵ Nathanson is a typical 'port Jew', open to the new and of cosmopolitan outlook: Torben Wagner, "Port Jews in Copenhagen: The Sephardic Experience and its Influence on the Development of a Modern Jewish Community in Denmark," in: David Cesarini (ed.), *Jews and Port Cities 1590-1990*, London 2005, 49-60.

⁶ On Mendelssohn, see Amos Elon, *The Pity of it All. A Portrait of Jews in Germany 1743-1933*, London 2002, 33-64; Andreas Brämer, "Der lange Weg von der Duldung zur Emanzipation, 1650-1871," in: Arno Herzig & Cay Rademacher (eds.), *Die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland*, Hamburg 2007, 80-97, and Shmul Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn, Sage of Modernity*, New Haven - London 2010.

⁷ Developments in the influential Jewish communities in Hamburg-Altona: M. Studemund-Halévy, "Grandezza und Hoheiten: Sefardische Gemeinden in Hamburg," in: Herzig & Rademacher, *Juden in Deutschland*, 72-79, and U. Randt, "Zur Geschichte des Jüdischen Schulwesens in Hamburg (ca. 1780-1942)," in: Arno Herzig (ed.), *Die Juden in Hamburg 1590 bis 1990*, Hamburg 1991, 113-30; Blüdnikow, "Jews in Denmark", 32-35, rightly stresses the impact of developments in Berlin and Hamburg-Altona on Jews in Denmark; given the closeness of the tolerant Danish monarchy to Hamburg, the *vice-versa* impact seems worth examining in more detail.

⁸ Nathanson seems a typical second generation member of the Haskalah movement, more focused on mercantilist and civic progress than on Hebrew tradition and Mosaic doctrine; for German parallels, see David Sorkin, *The Berlin Haskalah and German Religious Thought*, London 2000; but note Nathanson's patronage of Hebrew poetry: n. 62.

University, now the dissemination of literacy and of a shared historical and cultural perspective would allow the congregation's members to become Danes, be they of Jewish faith or, as was not unusual among Mendelssohn's followers, of the Christian faith to which almost all Nathanson's children eventually converted. Nathanson himself remained loyal to the old faith, but, as will become apparent, it is worth noting that he was an effective, but by no means unchallenged spokesman for the introduction of a reformed ritual in the Copenhagen Synagogue, with hymns and sermons in Danish.

- [4] At heart probably a convinced constitutionalist (Peel would have hammered it in), Nathanson, who later became the editor of Denmark's leading conservative daily, understood the value of steering clear of conflict with the heavily paternalistic Danish absolutism that lasted until 1848, preferring instead to go as far as he could in influencing government and public opinion, for instance by repeatedly defending the politics of tolerance and emancipation. In response to anti-Jewish polemic in 1813 he promoted a Danish translation (1813) of the prominent German sociologist A. F. Lueder's *Ueber die Veredlung der Menschen, besonders der Juden, durch die Regierung* ('On the Ennobling of Men, and in particular Jews, by the Government'), to which he added a substantial postscript; years later, his biographer claimed that Nathanson also influenced the king's decision to grant Danish Jews virtually equal political and civic status (1814); be this as it may, the king certainly made a point of showing his favour to this reforming and successful Dano-Jewish subject whose open attitude to the newest trends, in Hamburg, Berlin and London, gave him such notable clout.

[<top>](#)

Nathanson and the Danish Art Scene

- [5] From abroad, Nathanson also brought home a new understanding of the role of the arts in civic society. What seems arresting is the speed and self-assurance with which this Jewish *arriviste* succeeded in obtaining an avant-garde position in a cultural sphere that hitherto had been reserved for members of the traditional elite, be that royal or noble. There were of course late 18th century parallels, but as a rule there had, till around 1790, always been some kind of 'top to bottom' patronage. What basically changed the world of letters and the arts were, first, the more egalitarian ideals of the period and, second, the rapid evolution of a market that profoundly changed the relation between the public and the arts, in particular by creating openings for considerable middle class initiative.
- [6] In this field, Nathanson soon made his mark. Like many North European contemporaries he shared the new enthusiasm for Shakespeare.⁹ In his evening salons where painters, composers and actors joined men of business and trade, the young actor Peter Foersom

⁹ In the pre-19th-century Danish and, indeed, European reception of Shakespeare, Abildgaard is among artists a pioneer: Patrick Kragelund, "Abildgaard, Füssli and the First Shakespeare Paintings outside Britain," in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 2010, 237-54; in literature, the impact was stronger and more widespread: A. Henriques, *Shakespeare og Danmark*, Copenhagen 1940, passim.

(1777-1817), the first Danish Hamlet, was a frequent guest. Agreeing that Denmark needed a translation of all Shakespeare, Nathanson encouraged Foersom to proceed with a translation project and eventually helped finance the work's four instalments.¹⁰

[7] From Britain Nathanson was familiar with one of the great artistic commercial projects of the period, Boydell's Shakespeare engravings.¹¹ The idea of bringing together a group of artists to illustrate works by a nation's foremost cultural hero had in Denmark already inspired the poet Jens Baggesen (another friend of Nathanson's), the painter Nicolai Abildgaard and the engraver J. F. Clemens to do something similar for the father of Danish literature, Ludvig Holberg.¹² Their illustrations (1785-1789) for Baggesen's translation of Holberg's Neo-Latin masterpiece, the satirical novel *Niels Klim* set the pattern for the project on which Nathanson in 1810 decided to resume work by commissioning a long series of illustrations of scenes from Holberg's comedies, eventually to be engraved and published.¹³ These projects strengthened Nathanson's links to the artists of the Academy from whom he, in another act of patriotic philanthropy, had already ordered, first a painting (1808) and then an engraving (1808-1809) illustrating the effects of the devastating British bombardment of Copenhagen in September 1807.¹⁴ This was an event that, when it was followed by the British seizure of the Danish fleet, roused the nation's indignation to unprecedented heights. Nathanson's support for an engraving (the proceeds from the sales went to rebuilding the fleet) is one among several kindred projects for monuments and commemorations that in a period of national 'awakening' launched a new type of interaction between a middle class public and the arts. Now history painting became a channel for moulding and interpreting the

¹⁰ Among Nathanson's guests in his mansion at Frederiksholms Kanal 6 were the painters Kratzenstein Stub and Eckersberg, the poets Baggesen and Hertz and the composer Kuhlau; his friendship with the actor Foersom: Nicolai Bøgh, *Peter Foersom, en Levnedskildring*, Copenhagen 1895, 72; Nathanson's support of the Shakespeare translation: Siesby, *Nathanson*, 92; he paid for a portrait of and, no doubt also entertained the much-admired Jewish actress Emilie Pohlmann from Hamburg: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 193; 200 (1825) = Emil Hannover, *Maleren C. W. Eckersberg*, Copenhagen 1898, no. 347.

¹¹ Nathanson and Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery: Siesby, *Nathanson*, 89; in fact there was a personal link: in 1803 Nathanson was painted in London by James Northcote (private coll., reproduced in Jacobsen, "Ghettoen"), one of the foremost British Boydell artists: Rosie Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness. John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and the Formation of a National Aesthetic*, New Haven – London 2013, 108-25; Dias seems unaware of the impact of the Boydell Gallery on developments in Scandinavia.

¹² Abildgaard's *Niels Klim*: Patrick Kragelund, *Abildgaard, kunstneren blandt oprørerne*, Copenhagen 1999, 321-24, 357-60, and Dorothee Gerkens & Mareike Wolf, "Bilder gegen Kirche und König. Abildgaards Illustrationen zu Holbergs Roman 'Niels Klims unterirdische Reise'," in: Hubertus Gassner & Jenns Howoldt, *Nicolai Abildgaard, der Lehrer von Friedrich und Runge*, Hamburg 2009, 110-19; Abildgaard's *Liberty Column* (1791-97) is the most important early Danish example of art in the service of middle class political aspirations: Kragelund, *Abildgaard*, 376-88.

¹³ The Holberg gallery: Jens Frederik Nørbæk, *Det holbergske Galleri*, Copenhagen 1967; it was in the main painted by C. A. Lorentzen and engraved by Clemens: Leo Swane, *J.F. Clemens. Biografi samt Fortegnelse over hans Kobberstik*, Copenhagen 1929, 335-41.

¹⁴ Siesby, *Nathanson*, 86: Nathanson commissioning C. A. Lorentzen's *The Bombardment of Copenhagen* (1808) = Hans Ditlef Schepele, *C. A. Lorentzen*, Copenhagen 1971, no. 33; he further financed Clemens' engraving from 1808-09: Swane, *Clemens*, no. 327.

significance of national events, not just as they were perceived by court and nobility, but also by ordinary people. Just as Boydell aimed at "exhibiting Englishness" (in Rosie Dias' apt phrase), Nathanson made Holberg a banner proclaiming not just Danishness *tout court*, but also his own. It is in this context that the links between Nathanson and the period's foremost Danish history painter are of special interest.¹⁵

[<top>](#)

Nathanson and Eckersberg

- [8] It was the engraver J. F. Clemens (1748-1831) who established initial contact between Nathanson and the young Eckersberg. To fill the gap left by the premature death in 1809 of the Royal History Painter Nicolai Abildgaard (1743-1809), Eckersberg was the Academy's prime candidate. And the rumour spread. By the time he was leaving for Paris (summer 1810) Eckersberg not only had the Academy's support: by then he had in fact already landed a private commission that when finished would bring a welcome supplement to his Academy stipend.
- [9] Nathanson's first commissions were for his 'Holberg Gallery',¹⁶ which Eckersberg finished while still in Paris (1810 and 1812);¹⁷ then followed Nathanson's single largest commission, a huge painting depicting *Moses Crossing the Red Sea* (Fig. 6). This was precisely the kind of exercise, with "many handsome groups and figures of all ages" (as Eckersberg himself observed)¹⁸ that the young history painter needed as a training for future public commissions. With sundry interruptions the project would keep Eckersberg busy, first in Paris and then in Rome, until he returned home in 1816.

¹⁵ Vibeke Woldbye, "Jewish Patrons of the Arts in Denmark," in: Gelfer-Jørgensen & Blüdnikow (eds.), *Danish Jewish*, p. 515-42 at 520-21 has nothing on the patriotic element (Clemens' engraving and the Holberg and Oehlenschläger galleries) in Nathanson's activities as art patron. Yet, this was where he, as a patron, had a distinctive profile.

¹⁶ The format (73 x 60) of the first painting commissioned by Nathanson on 18/6 1810 (= Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 51) shows it was a Holberg Gallery painting (all ca. 73 cm wide). With the order for *Moses* (n. 33) followed two for smaller mythological paintings that were never finished: Kasper Monrad & Peter Michael Hornung, *C. W. Eckersberg – Dansk malerkunsts fader*, Copenhagen 2005, 122, and Kasper Monrad, *Dansk Guldalder – lyset, landskabet og hverdagslivet*, Copenhagen 2013, 52.

¹⁷ Eckersberg and the Holberg Gallery: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 51 = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 95 and 109; Nørbæk, *Galleri*, 55; Nathanson organised an exhibition of the Gallery in 1828: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 284-87; after his final bankruptcy in 1831, Nathanson made a solid comeback, but he never apparently regained the wealth that between 1810 and 1831 allowed him to purchase more than 15 paintings by Eckersberg; the story that he acquired some 40 such paintings (Woldbye, "Jewish Patrons", 521) seems without basis.

¹⁸ Eckersberg to Clemens 12/10 1812 = Henrik Bramsen, *C. W. Eckersberg i Paris*, Copenhagen 1947, 98, "mange skjøne Grupperinger, og figurer af enhver Alder"; in discussions of Eckersberg, this stylistic aspect has traditionally been seen as all that matters: n. 37.

- [10] On his homecoming there followed further acquisitions from Nathanson, of a Raphael copy¹⁹ of Roman prospects (a wedding gift for the eldest daughter),²⁰ and of yet a painting with mythological theme;²¹ Nathanson further commissioned paintings for a planned new patriotic 'Gallery' with episodes from the 'Old Norse' tragedies²² by Scandinavia's leading Romantic poet, Adam Oehlenschläger (Fig. 1). Once again, Nathanson here opts for motifs from a classic in the *national* repertoire. Generally overlooked, the three known entries, one of which was engraved, are notable for their fine handling of dramatically charged confrontations in a Norse setting.



1 C. W. Eckersberg, *Hagbart and Signe*. Oil on canvas. 26,5 x 19 cm.
c. 1820. KUNSTEN. Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg

¹⁹ A Raphael copy bought by Nathanson: Letter from Peter Oluf Brøndsted to Thorvaldsen 18/2 1817 = The Thorvaldsen Letter Archive:

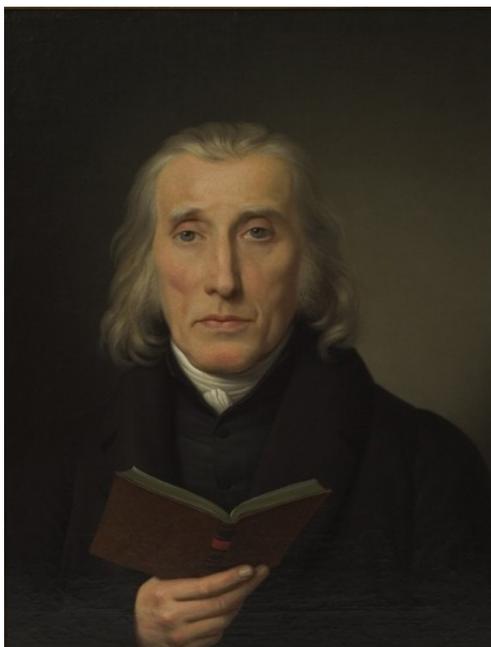
<http://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/dokumenter/m51817,nr.6>; as the anonymous readers inform me, it had probably originally been commissioned by the Crownprince, but Nathanson himself had previously also asked for a Raphael copy: Jette Kjærboe, "C.W. Eckersbergs altertavler," in: *Kunstmuseets årsskrift* 62, 1975, 119-64 at 128-30.

²⁰ Roman prospects a wedding gift for Bella Nathanson: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 190 (1825) = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 318 and 331 (now in *David's Samling*, Copenhagen); later Nathanson acquired a *View from Elsinore* and a *Sailor with his Lass* for himself: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 419 (1830) = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 409 (now in SMK) and Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 303 (1828) = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 400.

²¹ *Papirius and his Mother* sold to Nathanson in 1823: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 175 = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 137; Monrad, *Guldalder*, 52 and 143 mistakenly claims that by this time Nathanson had lost interest in mythological themes: cf. n. 22.

²² The (commonly ignored) 'Oehlenschläger Gallery': Siesby, *Nathanson*, 88; three works were finished: (i) *Axel and Valborg*: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 144 (1818) = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 231; (ii) *Yrsa and Skulda*: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 471 (1831) = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 446; (iii) *Hagbart and Signe*: KUNSTEN, Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg inv. no. 47 = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 123; the latter is, quite implausibly, dated to ca. 1812, Hannover overlooking the fact that in the Eckersberg auction catalogue 17th January 1854 (digitized at www.kunstabib.dk) lot no. 486 is a drawing datable to 1820; the format confirms that drawing and painting are part of the Nathanson project.

- [11] On top of this there were of course portraits, of the king, of an admired Jewish actress, of the head master of the Jewish boys' school (Fig. 2) and of the Nathanson family itself.²³ These portraits by the painter, who along with C. A. Jensen was to become the period's leading portraitist of all who counted in the Denmark,²⁴ are further instances of what might be termed²⁵ assimilation by proxy, a process wherein the art scene serves to establish symbolic, but also real communal spheres of interaction.



2 C. W. Eckersberg, *Gedalia Moses*, Oil on canvas. 43 x 35.5 cm. 1822. Danish Jewish Museum, Copenhagen

- [12] Even in a climate of strong public tolerance, the need for such emphasis on shared values was clearly obvious. Also in Denmark, the post-Napoleonic economic havoc and the, to many, alarmingly increased social mobility caused by the industrial revolution gave rise to outbursts of anti-Semitism, first in a literary feud, but in 1819 also in the sinister and violent form of so-called 'hep-hep' riots.²⁶ In their insistence on success and

²³ Nathanson's portrait of the Jewish boys' school's head master Gedalia Moses: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 171 (1822) = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 288 (Fig. 3); Eckersberg also portrayed Nathanson's colleague on the Jewish school board, Joseph Raphael: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 184 = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 322 (now in *Den Hirschsprungske Samling*); portraits of the Nathanson family: (i) of himself : Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 151 (1817) = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 252 (now in *Frederiksborg*); (ii) of the whole family: n. 31; (iii) of the two eldest daughters: n. 32; (iv) of Sara: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 339 (finished?).

²⁴ Illuminating statistics in Monrad, *Guldalder*, 80-81; until Nathanson, Jews had apparently preferred to be portrayed by fellow-Jews: Lise Svanholm, "Dansk-jødisk malerkunst," in: Gelfer-Jørgensen & Blüdnikow (eds.), *Danish Jewish*, 481-507 at 481-87.

²⁵ On Jews and the Danish art scene, Gelfer-Jørgensen & Blüdnikow (eds.), *Danish Jewish*, offer a panoramic survey; G. Frick, "Judiska konstsamlingar i Sverige vid sekelskiftet – ett led i assimilationsprocessen," in: *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 57.3, 1988, 32-45, is more analytically committed to the parallel issue of, notably later, assimilation through art in Sweden.

²⁶ Anti-Jewish feud and riots: Lausten, *Frie*, 16-35 (with bibliography); Bent Blüdnikow, "Jødefejden 1819-1820," in: Martin Schwarz Lausten (ed.), *Jøderne som frie borgere*, Copenhagen 2014, 60-75 has unravelled police reports illustrating the fierceness of the 1819 riots, window breaking at the Nathanson residence a recurrent item.

respectability, it is therefore not surprising if some of the portraits commissioned by Nathanson seem slightly overemphatic.

- [13] On their marriage in 1798, Mrs Nathanson had already been painted by the country's then leading portrait-painter, Jens Juel (1745-1802);²⁷ now Eckersberg was asked to portray her husband, whose clean shaven elegance is clear in declaring his reform-friendly leanings.²⁸ Following this commission, it was, to judge from parallels, perhaps slightly extravagant also to ask Eckersberg for a group portrait (1818) of the whole family (eight children all counted) – above all, when one sees how this painting goes out of the way to advertise Nathanson's high public standing (Fig. 3). Not for him the, in the period, usual group portrait *en famille* (of which an initial drawing with the merchant and his wife surrounded by their children has survived [Fig. 4]).²⁹ Instead (Jesper Svenningsen has recently discovered) Nathanson apparently asked for a modification that – unusually – compelled Eckersberg to fuse the public and private spheres of his patron's life.³⁰ While the painting's left focuses on the sphere of privacy, of piano playing and of children dancing, this activity is, as it were, interrupted by Mr and Mrs Nathanson's homecoming, not from just anywhere, but according to family tradition from a royal entertainment, an idea supported by the velvety elegance of their clothes. By retaining these tokens of the couple's social eminence, the interior is no longer only that; rather it is a meeting of two worlds and two visual conventions, that of the successful citizen with access to the Royal Court with that of domestic intimacy. Mr Nathanson meets our eye, almost as if to invite us inside, to look and admire, whereas Mrs Nathanson's tall and dignified figure seems the focal point of family attention. In the children's (not wholly coordinated) reactions to their parents' homecoming there still seem to be elements of the original composition that sit uneasily with the new, but what in the early composition was a chain dance has adroitly been recast as an 'S' patterned movement forward to greet the homecoming parents, discreet hints of the classical relief with the dancing Borghese Graces giving the group, with its well-observed local colour, an air of noble perfection.³¹

²⁷ Ellen Poulsen, *Jens Juel*, Copenhagen 1991, no. 698.

²⁸ In Jewish portraits of the period, the lack of beard was an unmistakable signal: Richard I. Cohen & Vivian B. Mann (eds.), *From Court Jews to the Rothschilds*, München – New York 1997, nos. 28, 68, 151 (Isaac Daniel Itzig, the first Jew to obtain Prussian citizenship in 1791) and no. 231 (David Friedländer).

²⁹ The readers rightly object that in Denmark such *en famille* group portraits only became common in the late 1820's, but Eckersberg would have seen plenty such portraits during his stay in France and Italy. And from Britain Nathanson himself may also have had ideas about the kind of portrait he wanted.

³⁰ Jesper Svenningsen in: Ida Haugsted, Jesper Svenningsen & Anna Schram Vejlbj, *Borgerskabets triumf – Eckersbergs portrætter af hr. og fru. Schmidt*, Catalogue, Den Hirschsprungske samling, København, 2012, 22, has discovered the request for the children to greet the homecoming parents; it is written on the back of Eckersberg's drawing.

³¹ On this iconic family portrait (= Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 239), I have found Mogens Nykjær, "Eckersberg og den menneskelige orden" (1983), in: Mogens Nykjær (ed.), *Kundskabens billeder. Motiver i dansk kunst fra Eckersberg til Hammershøi*, Aarhus 1991, 9-30 (prominence of wife and



3 C. W. Eckersberg, *The Nathanson Family*. Oil on canvas. 126 x 172,5 cm. 1818. National Gallery of Denmark



4 C. W. Eckersberg, Sketch for *The Nathanson Family*. Pen, pencil, paper. 13,9 x 19 cm. 1818. Den Hirschsprungske Samling, Copenhagen

[14] Also notable is a group portrait of Nathanson's two daughters that deftly develops formats with which Eckersberg during his stay in Paris had become familiar. In a Danish context the choice of a full figure format and of dimensions normally reserved for the traditional elite speaks loudly of self-assurance; the use of profile and fully frontal portrayal gives the ensemble a hieratic solemnity, while the colourful parrot in its cage adds to it all an atmosphere of luxury and the exotic (Fig. 5). Here as in the larger group portrait, the costly oilcloth floor, tasteful furniture and elegant fittings are a discreet

mother); Alena Marchwinski, *Fra antikkens smukke atleter til vor tids gipsfigurer – otte eksempler på billedanalyse*, København 1989, 154-56 (the meeting of two worlds), Monrad & Hornung, *Eckersberg*, 199-201, as well as Anna Schram Vejlbj in *Borgerskabets triumf*, 25-32 (details of composition), illuminating and helpful; all have further relevant bibliography.

suggestion of great affluence. As a gift to Nathanson's Altona relatives, this was a portrait that spelt out clearly the success of the Copenhagen branch of the family.³²

[15] It should be underlined, however, that despite their size and frequency, there is, in itself, nothing untoward about these commissions. In the period, portraits, if perhaps in smaller numbers, are what one would expect. The same cannot be said of the *Moses* – which is singular in several respects.



5 C. W. Eckersberg, *Mendel Levin Nathansons eldest daughters, Bella and Hanna*. Oil on canvas. 125 x 85,5 cm. 1820. National Gallery of Denmark (www.smk.dk, Ill. from Google Art Project)

<top>

Eckersberg's *Moses* – an Emblem of Jewish Reform

[16] What sets *The Israelites Resting after the Crossing of the Red Sea* (Fig. 6) apart is firstly its sheer size (two by almost three metres). This is a painting that from the outset proclaims itself public. Along with Eckersberg's and J. L. Lund's royal commissions from 1818 onwards, this is the most remarkable Danish history painting of the period. Add to this the unusual character of its motif. The *Exodus* is the central episode in Mosaic history and religion. This is the event commemorated at Passover ever since – a fact which raises interesting questions as to the possible intentions and purpose of this commission.

³² Bella and Hannah: Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 260, with discussion and further references in the above (n. 31); in my view, Dutch parrot iconography is unlikely to have been familiar to Eckerberg and his sitters; luxury is what it in this context seems to connote. The anonymous readers rightly inform me about the oilcloth floor, new at the time: Svenningsen, 13.



6 C. W. Eckersberg, *The Israelites Resting after the Crossing of the Red Sea*. Oil on canvas. 203,5 x 285,5 cm. 1816. National Gallery of Denmark

- [17] First, however, briefly about its genesis. The project had its beginning in the autumn of 1812, while Eckersberg was still working in the Paris studio of Jacques-Louis David. In a letter of 22nd August 1812³³ Clemens informs Eckersberg that Nathanson wants a large painting representing 'The Jews crossing the Red Sea'.³⁴ In the *Statens Museum for Kunst* in Copenhagen and the *Nasjonalgalleriet* in Oslo a series of drawings have convincingly been linked to this initial stage.³⁵ Drawings of details and single figures and what looks like a version of a finished presentation sketch document how Eckersberg at first planned to proceed.
- [18] In his reply of the 12th October Eckersberg confides to Clemens that for his motif he has chosen the moment in the *morning* (as in *Exodus* 14.24-27) with the Jews reaching the safe shore, while the Egyptians drown in the background. When outlining why, in painterly terms, this would be an advantage: 'The effect of the morning sun will be good' (as, indeed, it is),³⁶ he then, in parenthesis, adds that this moment would 'also further

³³ Clemens to Eckersberg 22/8 1812: the original seems lost, but a transcript was published by I.W. Mørch, "Breve til og fra bekendte Mænd og Kvinder," in: *Museum. Tidsskrift for Historie og Geografi*, 1894, 188-202 at 189-92, cf. Inger Hjorth Nielsen, "Studier til C.W. Eckersbergs maleri: Moses lader det Røde Hav træde tilbage og Faraos hær oversvømme," in: *Kunstmuseets Årsskrift* 62, 1975, 103-18 at 103.

³⁴ "Israeliternes Tog igjennem det røde Hav" (with reference to *Exodus* 14): Clemens to Eckersberg 22/8 1812 (n. 33); Monrad, *Guldalder*, 54 assumes that the initial plans were for a depiction of the actual crossing, but surely, this reading is too literal: Eckersberg had no problems labelling the finished painting in exactly the same terms: Eckersberg to Clemens 2/1 1816 = Henrik Bramsen & Hannemarie Ragn Jensen (eds.), "Eckersbergs brevkoncepter 1813-16," in: *Meddelelser fra Thorvaldsens Museum*, 1973, 41-123 at 99; paintings and engravings with this title almost invariably show the Israelites in safety on the other shore and the Egyptians drowning (n. 39); where Eckersberg differs is in toning down the latter aspect.

³⁵ Hjorth Nielsen, "Studier", identifies the preserved sketches.

³⁶ Peter Hjort, "Nogle Bemærkninger over de af det Kgl. Akademie for de skønne Konster udstillede Konstsager," in: *Athene*, 1817, 446-75 at 457-59, emphasises the novelty of Eckersberg's use of the morning light; this is a first in Danish history painting: Monrad & Hornung, *Eckersberg*, 130.

(enable him) to avoid the mystique inherent in the tale' (*for ogsaa tillige at undgaae det Mystiskladende i Fortællingen*). This motivation has traditionally been taken as exemplifying Eckersberg's undramatic temperament – an explanation that does not, however, seem entirely satisfactory.

[19] This, after all, is a religious motif, a fact that the traditional art historical focus on style fails completely to take into account.³⁷ Surely it is of relevance here that much early 19th century Protestantism was as emphatic in distancing itself from the miraculous as were the followers of Moses Mendelssohn. Indeed, the religious thinking was in both areas rich in parallels. Not for them and neither for Eckersberg³⁸ the traditional iconography with the columns of fire or dust and with Pharaoh's soldiers drowning in the foreground in cascades of water, while Moses gathers the faithful on the safe shore.³⁹ Eckersberg had, as we shall see, clearly acquainted himself with this traditional iconography by consulting the so-called 'Bible of Raphael', i.e. one of the numerous engraved renditions of the renowned Old and New Testament frescoes by Raphael's assistants in the Vatican *Loggia* of Clement X (Fig. 7).⁴⁰ When Eckersberg opts for a very different iconography it is therefore not due to lack of knowledge or temperament, but to well-considered choice. It is probably for similar reasons that, on these early sketches, there is no trace of Moses' traditional iconography. Horns⁴¹ and staff are absent, his figure emphatically human. In short, more Moses the man than Moses the miracle-working prophet.

[20] The toning down of the mythical and miraculous is so much in tune with Nathanson's own reformist tendencies that it seems unlikely to be accidental. It might be objected that Eckersberg during this period had little known contact with his customers, most of his correspondence being with J. F. Clemens, but the record of what he and others wrote is clearly incomplete, even where orders would have been equally demanding. Given this

³⁷ Eckersberg's *Moses* has traditionally been discussed as little more than a stylistic exercise and without reference to the iconographic tradition, is from Hannover onwards deemed the relevant approach: Hannover, *Maleren*, 94; most recently Woldbye, "Jewish Patrons", 520-21; Monrad & Hornung, *Eckersberg*, 128-31, and Monrad, *Guldalder*, 54, the latter claiming that the motif 's many figures in varied poses was what "primarily mattered" (*var ... hovedsagen*) for Eckersberg; Hannover, himself a Jew, admits however that to Nathanson it no doubt meant more.

³⁸ In Eckersberg's Christian paintings, emphasis is likewise almost exclusively on Jesus' role as a moral teacher; in typical Protestant fashion, the word outshines the miraculous deed: Nina Damsgaard, "1800-tallets altertavlemaleri og tidens religiøse strømninger," in: Niels Ohrt (ed.), *Troens stil i Guldalderens kunst*, Catalogue, Nivaagaard 1999, 10-27 at 20-21; similarly, Monrad & Hornung, *Eckersberg*, 306-19.

³⁹ For the Renaissance iconography of "Moses Crossing the Red Sea", Leopold D. Ettlinger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo – Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy*, Oxford 1961, 63-65, and Janet Cox-Rearick, *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, Berkeley 1993, 217-22, cite works by Cosimo Roselli, Raphael's assistants, Tizian, Pierino del Vaga and Bronzino (to name but the most famous). Eckersberg's original positioning of the drowning Egyptians to the left is overwhelmingly what he would have found in the tradition (Fig. 8).

⁴⁰ The Raphael loggia in engravings, from the 16th century onwards: Nicole Dacos, *The Loggia of Raphael*, New York 2008, *passim*.

⁴¹ Neil Stanford kindly reminds me that the horns first become an attribute of Moses when he comes down from Mt. Sinai (as on Raphael, Fig. 13), but already in Renaissance iconography they are often identifiers irrespective of context.

commission's cost, size and importance it is therefore not unreasonable to assume that there at some point was a (subsequently lost) communication between painter and patron.⁴² But whatever the details, the early sketches and the final painting come across clearly as the result of a process that has thoroughly recast the old theme, partly, probably, in response to Nathanson's reform-friendly profile and partly, no doubt, as a result of Eckersberg's own, more ethical than mystical religious outlook.



7 Moses Crossing the Red Sea, engraving after fresco by Raphael's assistants in the Vatican Loggia by Cesare Fantetti, in: *Imagines veteris ac novi Testamenti a Raphaelo Sanctio Urbinate in Vaticani Palatii xystis mira picturae elegantia expressae*, Rome [1674] tab. 31. The Royal Library, Copenhagen

[21] At this stage in his career Eckersberg was of course deeply influenced by what he saw in Paris. While planning how to illustrate the Exodus, he would, on a day to day basis, be looking in awe at David's *Rape of the Sabines* and *Leonidas*.⁴³ Now he had himself a commission for a similarly well-populated composition. Instead of David's level, 'stage-like' settings, Eckersberg chose a rocky landscape, its central high plateau allowing the standing Moses (with Aaron seated at his side) to rise high over his people that in a circular movement enters from below right. Some are coming to rest much as in the Raphael (Fig. 7), here, however, not in shelter behind, but beneath the towering figure of their saviour whereas the most energetic of the men move on to look back out towards

⁴² I am grateful to the anonymous readers for the chance to clarify that there is no extant communication between Nathanson and Eckersberg concerning the *Moses* (n. 2). This, however, by no means proves that there was none. As examples of such communication there is not only the letter to C. F. Berner of 30/11 1811 (= Bramsen, *Paris*, 207f.) kindly mentioned by the reviewer, but also the hitherto overlooked request from Nathanson for a change in the composition of the family portrait (n. 30). There are, moreover, many *lacunae* in the extant documents, for instance no previous reference even to such a costly commission as to buy some 600 ancient coins on the Roman antiques market for Johan Bülow: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 121.

⁴³ Eckersberg on David's *Sabines*: Eckersberg to O. O. Bagge, ca. Nov. 1811 = Bramsen, *Paris*, 74-75 with Charlotte Christensen, "Von Blåkkrog nach Paris, C.W. Eckersberg als Schüler Jacques-Louis Davids," in: *Nordelbingen* 78, 2009, 9-32; Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 1278-88.

the sight of the drowning Egyptians in the left background. As for local colour and a suitably Egyptian setting, Clemens advised him to consult publications on Egypt – as Eckersberg actually did (hence the exotic palm tree).⁴⁴ Add to this that for the group of young men carrying bundles (Figs. 8-9) Eckersberg clearly relies on the 'Raphael Bible' (Fig. 7). The miracle itself that in Raphael is front-stage-left has, however, here been relegated to the distance of the left backdrop, as it were, its drama toned down and only reflected, as if by proxy, through the reaction of a decorous group of spectators pointing and commenting (Fig. 8).



8 C. W. Eckersberg, Sketch for *The Israelites Resting after the Crossing of the Red Sea*. Pen, black ink, wash. 26,3 x 21,8 cm. Paris, Sept. – Oct. 1812. Royal Collection of Prints and Drawings. National Gallery of Denmark



9 C. W. Eckersberg, Sketch for *The Israelites Resting after the Crossing of the Red Sea*. Pen, black ink, wash. 23,9 x 37,6 cm. Paris, Sept. – Oct. 1812. Royal Collection of Prints and Drawings. National Gallery of Denmark

⁴⁴ Eckersberg consulting books on Egypt: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 78 (5/3 1813); cf. Hiorth Nielsen, "Studier", 103.

- [22] These foreground groups are almost entirely male. Already in his first letter Eckersberg mentions plans for 'young armed men' and in the foreground perhaps some exhausted elders and children. No women are mentioned. In late-Napoleonic Paris Eckersberg could see a great deal of history painting with such exclusively male and military thematics.
- [23] On Eckersberg this trend made quite an impact. Take, for instance, his unfinished response to the official French *Prix de Rome* competition of 1812 calling for a painting on the brutal theme of *Ulysse et Télémaque massacrant les prétendants de Pénélope*.⁴⁵ As the sketch (Fig. 10) shows, he has, like his French colleagues, clearly taken a good look at John Flaxman's pioneering illustrations of Homer from 1793 (Fig. 11).⁴⁶ It seems, however, to have gone unnoticed how closely Eckersberg's sketch still mirrors the winning entry by his close coeval Louis-Vincent-Léon Pallière (1787-1820).⁴⁷ While aspects like Ulysses' bow and Telemachus' spear are narrative "givens" (their parallel occurrence therefore of little individual import), Telemachus' gleaming helmet, the festive garlands and red cloaks of the doomed suitors are, on the other hand, details that have no clear parallels either in Homer or in previous iconography. Surely, these are features that Eckersberg owes to Pallière.⁴⁸ Like Flaxman and unlike Pallière, Eckersberg has, however, chosen a more frieze-like format along which to distribute the suitors, who in animated, desperate self-defence make use of the furniture as shields against arrows and spears (a trait likewise borrowed from Flaxman and, ultimately, Homer himself).⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Eckersberg saw the *Prix de Rome* entries in July 1812: Villadsen, *Dagbøger* 67; the Homer enthusiast Count Caylus listed this motif as suitable for painting: *Tableaux tirés de l'Iliade, de l'Odyssée de Homère et de l'Énéide de Virgile – avec des observations générales sur le costume*, Paris 1757, 258-63; the 1812 *concours*: Philippe Grunchev, *La grand prix de peinture. Les concours des Prix de Rome de 1797 à 1863*, Paris 1983, 152-153.

⁴⁶ Flaxman and Eckersberg: Bjarne Jørnæs, "Flaxman, Thorvaldsen und einige andere dänische Künstler," in: Werner Hofmann (ed.), *John Flaxman, Mythologie und Industrie*, catalogue, Hamburger Kunsthalle 1979, 195-200.

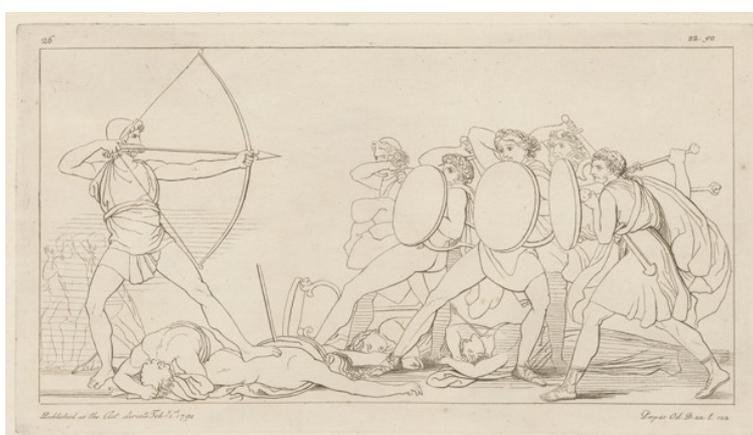
⁴⁷ Early 19th century Homeric iconography: Hofmann, *Flaxman*, 178-194, and Emmanuel Schwartz, *The Legacy of Homer – Four Centuries of Art from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts*, Paris, New Haven 2005, 224-25.

⁴⁸ Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 67, n. 10 quotes, but does not discuss Pallière's painting; another known entry to the competition in 1812 by Christoph Thomas Degeorge (1786-1854) differs significantly in its layout from Flaxman, Pallière and Eckersberg: Grunchev, *La grand prix*, 153, pl. 2. A reproduction of Pallière can be seen at <http://if-hommes-nus.blogspot.dk/2013/11/leon-louis-vincent-palliere-ulysse-et.html>.

⁴⁹ Table as shield: Homer, *Odysee* xxii, 75; the golden goblet with two handles is right out of Homer: *Odysee* xxii, 9; Jan Stubbe Østergaard, "'At see og studere antikerne' – et romersk forlæg for C.W. Eckersbergs *Odyseeus hjemkomst*," in: *Kunstmuseets Årsskrift* 69, 1992, 36-45, acutely expounds, how Eckersberg in his *Homecoming of Ulysses* aimed at "authenticity" by quoting Roman terracotta reliefs. He probably knew these reliefs from Aubin-Louis Millin, *Galerie mythologique*, Paris 1811, clxxiv, 636 and 642; in any case it was, one might add, clearly in Millin he found a model for the relief at the centre of the painting's background alluding to the episode, when the boar wounded Ulysses, thus giving him the scar that reveals his identity to the nurse: Millin, *Galerie mythologique*, clxxii, 628.



10 C. W. Eckersberg, Sketch for *Ulysses and Telemachus Killing the Suitors*. Oil on canvas. 24 x 42,8 cm. 182-14. Den Hirschsprungske Samling. III. from Google Art Project



11 John Flaxman (engraved by Thomas Piroli), *Ulysses Killing the Suitors*, from the edition Florence 1800. Danish National Art Library

[24] In the convincing handling of this drama there is clear evidence as to what Eckersberg had learnt from working in David's studio in terms of drawing, composition and *mise-en-scène*. Here, Eckersberg and the other pupils learned to draw and paint from a whole range of mainly male models, one nicknamed 'Hercules', another 'the gladiator', a third either 'Bacchus' or 'Antinous'.⁵⁰ Indeed, Eckersberg's *Ulysses* and his drawings for the *Moses* faithfully illustrate David's characteristic trajectory from heroic nudity to semi or fully clothed figures. Like the *Ulysses*, the *Moses* shows the full range, from Moses and Aaron in dignified toga-like garb, to boys and men wearing tunics and bearing weapons, their gestures and physiognomies creating stronger associations with soldiers in a Spartan or Roman camp than with the Exodus. True, there are in the *Moses* also women to be seen, but the foreground figure in kneeling profile is busy preparing a meal for her weary soldier husband and is thus emphatically unrelated to the actual drama, while the women in the centre's second line seem too preoccupied with their mundane tasks of carrying things to take any visible interest in the grand affairs of the men. At this point

⁵⁰ Models in David's studio: Eckersberg to Clemens 14/10 1811 = Bramsen, *Paris*, 66-67.

children are still almost invisible, one sleeping with its mother in the shadowy left foreground while another tumbles along, holding on to its mother's hand.

- [25] The next we hear of the painting is from Rome, where Eckersberg in July 1813 returned to the grand project. Progress was not easy and other works intervened, so he only had a sketch ready by early 1815.⁵¹ In letters and diary there is much evidence of doubts, revisions and changes, but no sketches prepare us for the entirely different final result. And unfortunately we have no letters from or to Nathanson revealing whether he actually received and, if so, reacted to a previous draft. But Thorvaldsen, Eckersberg reports, took a look at the overall sketch, making very helpful suggestions.⁵²
- [26] The resulting new version is in numerous ways different, symmetry replaced by dynamic asymmetry, the miracle moved from left to right and the people's circular movement abandoned in favour of a diagonal trajectory, moving from the low right background upwards and onwards towards the left foreground. Eckersberg is now more in tune with the relevant Biblical iconography: Moses (now easily identifiable by his traditional staff and horns (Fig. 12) – a traditional feature that, tellingly, met adverse criticism, when the painting was first exhibited⁵³ – is here joined by the high priest Aaron whose standing figure has become more dominating. Both stand tall, now fully engaged in the drama itself (Fig. 6). Aaron's figure and gesture are clearly influenced by what Eckersberg had seen in Rome. When pointing upwards to the people's divine protector above, who in Eckersberg's own words "had saved his children, led them onwards and made this miracle",⁵⁴ Aaron has become a latter day incarnation of Raphael's Plato in the *School of Athens* (Fig. 13),⁵⁵ and Moses now raises his magic (and emblematic) staff menacingly high against the pursuers of the Chosen People precisely as he does, for instance, in the Vatican *Loggia* (Fig. 7). Kasper Monrad has rightly observed that Eckersberg also seems to draw upon Poussin's *Moses Striking the Rock* – but also there an influence from Raphael is tangible.⁵⁶ The emphatic merging of Old Testament imagery with that of ancient Athens (both as depicted by Raphael) and the introduction, more on which below,

⁵¹ Start on the final version: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 106 (12/1 1815).

⁵² Thorvaldsen's advice: Eckersberg to Clemens 13/10 1814 = Bramsen and Ragn Jensen, *Rome*, 62.

⁵³ Hjort, "Nogle Bemærkninger," 457, objected to Moses' two horns as being 'unhistorical'; Eckersberg later, be it on the suggestion of Nathanson or otherwise, gave the originally beardless Moses (Hiort, 453) his iconic beard.

⁵⁴ God saving the Israelites: Eckersberg to Clemens 12/10 1812 = Bramsen, *Paris*, 98.

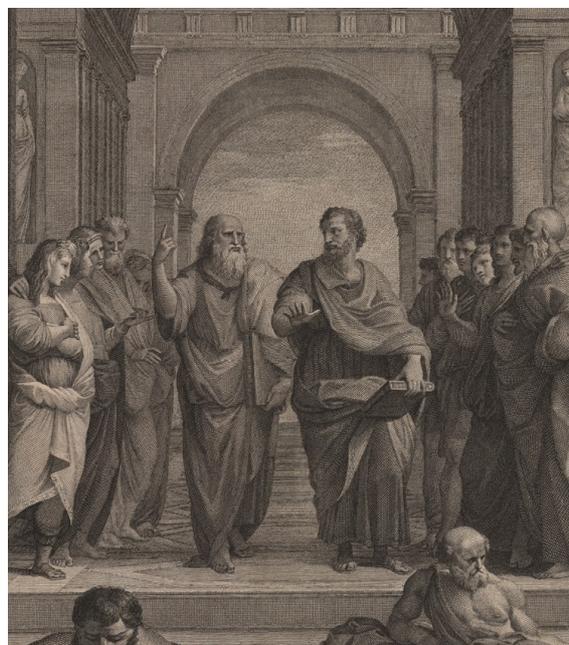
⁵⁵ Raphael's *Plato*: Bjarne Jørnæs, "Eckersberg som historiemaler," in: Dyveke Helsted et al. (eds.), *C.W. Eckersberg i Rom 1813-16*, Catalogue, Thorvaldsens Museum 1983, 47-52 at 49 (but mistaking him for Aristotle).

⁵⁶ I am grateful for the reference to the Poussin in Edinburgh of which Eckersberg may have seen an engraving: Kasper Monrad, *Mellem guder og helte. Historiemaleri i Rom, Paris og København 1770-1820*, catalogue, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen 1990, 84-85. Its Aaron is right out of the *School of Athens*, but the rocky landscape may well have been an inspiration.

of Christian elements, has tellingly turned Nathanson's *Exodus* into an emblem of what the Mosaic faith shares with Christendom rather than what separates it.



12 *Moses Handing the People the Ten Commandments*, engraving after fresco by Raphael's assistants in the Vatican Loggia by Cesare Fantetti, in: *Imagines veteris ac novi Testamenti a Raphaele Sanctio Urbinate in Vaticani Palatii xystis mira picturae elegantia expressae*, Rome [1674] tab. 36. The Royal Library, Copenhagen



13 *Plato and Aristotle*, detail of engraving after Raphael's *School of Athens* in the Vatican Stanze by Giovanni Volpato, *Le stanze nel Vaticano dipinte da Raffaello*, S.I. et d. Danish National Art Library

[27] There are, however, two further aspects to consider, one that seems closely linked to Eckersberg's personal development and another that points to a painting that Eckersberg

in all probability studied closely, when embarking on this second and final version of the *Moses*.

- [28] As for Eckersberg's personal development it seems reflected in his depiction of the Jewish people. As outlined above, the Paris version had a strong and typically 'Napoleonic' emphasis on male values, on energetic leadership and athletic warriors. This is the world of war as seen from David's studio – militant, male and muscular.
- [29] In Eckersberg's Roman version, the emphasis has changed, completely. Focus is here on the family, in all kinds of configurations, old and new-born, male and female and, perhaps most notably, mothers with infants. As Mogens Nykjær⁵⁷ has long since made clear, this 'domestic turn' that from Norse and classical myth and poetry almost invariably chooses episodes illustrating and giving exemplary status to the bonds of loving man and woman is a distinctive characteristic of Eckersberg's early 'mythologies'. Rather than the lone and desperate heroes of his teacher Abildgaard's early works, the titles alone of Eckersberg's early history paintings illustrate this focus on domestic and conjugal values. *Loke and Sigyn, Hector and Andromache, Ceyx and Alcyone, Hagar and Ismail* – whether Norse, Greek, Roman or Biblical, these are paintings celebrating parental or conjugal love as the basis for a new, more humane civic order.
- [30] Against this background it seems telling that Eckersberg at precisely this time seems to have abandoned the Napoleonic brutality of his *Ulysses Killing the Suitors* (Fig. 10). This shift in emphasis from war to the domestic and conjugal is in his Roman *Moses* then broadened out to involve all the nameless Israelites following their leader on their journey to the Promised Land. Wives with husband and children, young lovers hugging each other and, most notably, the mother with child are figures that not only in general but, as we shall see, also specifically are linked to Eckersberg's stay in Rome.
- [31] And here again not only to the way he saw the world, but also to what he had actually seen. Indeed, Eckersberg's configuration with Moses, the Israelites and a prominently positioned Madonna-like mother with baby at her breast (Fig. 14) has a striking parallel in a work that Eckersberg, during his stay in Rome, may well have come across. In the Vatican fresco (Fig. 7) there is, of course, also a mother with child at her breast, but she seems very Madonna-unlike. Still, the *Loggia* fresco may well have set the ball rolling, eventually eliciting a painting that gives this configuration remarkable prominence. In the *Galleria Spada* in Rome one could and can, then as now in the second hall, study *Il passaggio del Mar Rosso* (Fig. 15) by the so-called *il Mastelletta* alias Giovanni Andrea Donducci (1575-1655).⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Nykjær, "Eckersberg," 9-30; Mogens Nykjær, "Motivi classici nell'arte danese del primo Ottocento," in: Patrick Kragelund & Mogens Nykjær (eds.), *Thorvaldsen, l'ambiente, l'influsso, il mito*, Rome 1999, 199-210; similarly, Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 1298-99.

⁵⁸ Donducci's painting has been in the Galleria Spada since 1678 (inv. no. 185); at a revision of the collection in 1820 it was situated in the Gallery's *Sala seconda*: Federico Zeri, *La Galleria Spada in*



14 C. W. Eckersberg, Sketch for *The Israelites Resting after the Crossing of the Red Sea*. Pencil. 28,7 x 17 cm. Rome, 1814-15. Royal Collection of Prints and Drawings. National Gallery of Denmark



15 G. A. Donducci, *Il passaggio del Mar Rosso*. Oil on canvas. 104 x 127 cm. c. 1610. Galleria Spada, Roma

[32] There is no positive evidence that Eckersberg visited the Galleria Spada, but given the parallels between the two paintings it seems reasonable to conclude that it was during such a visit that Eckersberg received new inspiration as to how he should organise the groups and figures of his future painting. In the Donducci painting's left foreground, just below the dominating figure of Moses raising his staff Eckersberg could here study an Roma, Firenze 1954, 70-71; the much reprinted guides to Rome by J. J. Volkman, *Historisch-kritische Nachrichten von Italien* II, Leipzig 1770, 425-28, and Mariano Vasi, *Itinéraire instructif de Rome* (here consulted in the edition Rome 1792) discuss the palace and its collections as part of the sightseeing orbit.

instance of how to link his presentation of the Chosen People with its future generations. Donducci's foreground group counts four such Madonna-with-child-like figures, a trait so distinctive that its recurrence in Eckersberg's painting seems unlikely to be accidental.

[33] Eckersberg, however, has deftly opted for greater variation, one mother holding a child in hand, two others having a child on their shoulder whereas only the fourth, most prominent, relies clearly on the Madonna-with-child iconography with which Eckersberg had familiarised himself when copying some of Raphael's holy families, first the *Holy Family of Francis I* and *Madonna dell'Impannata* in the Louvre, then *Madonna del Foligno* in the Vatican.⁵⁹ In Donducci's case this Madonna configuration has an overt Christological dimension, Moses the Redeemer of his people protecting what in the future would be the redemption of mankind. And strange as it may now seem, this is an aspect that would not have been foreign to the reformed religious standpoint of Eckersberg's client and patron, who despite his own religion in fact bought one of Eckersberg's "Holy Family" Raphael copies for himself. In early 19th century *Reformjudentum*, the borders between the Mosaic and the Protestant denominations were sometimes described as almost non-existent. As Moses Mendelssohn had famously observed: 'our being humans unites us more than our Mosaic and Christian faiths divide' (*unser Menschentum eint uns mehr als unser Judentum und Christentum trennen*).⁶⁰ The painting's merging of Greek, Jewish and Christian traditions seems an apt expression of this utopian, humanist vision.

[34] But what was the painting for? Its sheer size makes it a quasi-public statement, but sadly, there is no evidence as to where in the Nathanson residence it was put up.⁶¹ But given his (far from unchallenged) aspiration also to become a reformer of the congregation's religious life, for a period promoting Protestant style Jewish confirmations accompanied by hymns and sermons in Danish, the *Exodus* painting may well have come across as an affirmation of his basic loyalty to the faith of his fathers. While most of the Nathanson family eventually converted, there seems for himself to have been no doubt, and no concealing what his origins were. He remained a Dane of Jewish extraction, loyal to his old faith no less than to its culture. In his youth he supported the publication of the Hebrew epic on Moses by Mendelssohn's old fellow combatant Naphtali Hartwig Wessely; and, at the end of his life, he would himself be the first to chronicle the history of Jews in Denmark.⁶² Given this background it therefore seems telling that he, while still in fairly

⁵⁹ Eckersberg copying Raphael's *The Holy Family of Francis I*: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 58 (7/5 1811) = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 97; *Madonna dell'Impannata*: Villadsen, *Dagbøger*, 80 (19/4 1813) = Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 116; in Rome, he repeatedly copied *Madonna del Foligno*: Hannover, *Maleren*, no. 169-171 (ca. 1816).

⁶⁰ Mendelssohn quoted from Mirjam Gelfer-Jørgensen, "Emancipation og borgerlige idealer," in: Gelfer-Jørgensen & Blüdnikow (eds.), *Danish Jewish*, 457-69 at 458.

⁶¹ Jewish-Danish confirmation: Lausten, *Frie*, 162ff.

⁶² Nathanson and Wessely's *Moseide*: Wolf Alois Meisel, *Leben und Wirken Naphtali Hartwig Wesselys*, Breslau 1841, 166; Wessely as a reformer: Sorkin, *Berlin Haskalah*, 106-21, and Feiner, *Sage of Modernity*, 78-79. Jewish history: Mendel Levin Nathanson, *Historisk Fremstilling af Jødernes Forhold og Stilling i Danmark, navnlig Kjøbenhavn*, Copenhagen 1860.

solid economic shape, sold his *Moses* to the then Royal Picture Gallery, thereby making this Dano-Jewish emblem one of the first of Eckersberg's paintings to enter the national collections.⁶³

[<top>](#)

⁶³ Not counting his first copy after Raphael (n. 594), already acquired by the king at an exhibition in 1812; the anonymous readers inform me that the *Loke and Sigyn* painting, while inventorised in 1827, may have been acquired earlier.