

**Visionary Romantics: Balke, Lucas, Hertervig**  
 Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid  
 16th March–21st May

by DAVID JACKSON

This thought-provoking exhibition links the Norwegian artists Peder Balke (1804–1887) and Lars Hertervig (1830–1902) with the Spanish painter Eugenio Lucas Velázquez (1817–1870) to showcase their different yet complementary practices of experimental landscape painting. Comprising sixty-three works from the collections of the Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid, Stavanger Art Museum and the Gundersen Collection, Oslo, it presents a dazzling array of technical virtuosity under the rubric ‘Visionary Romantics’. In defining the artists thus, the curators, Knut Ljøgodt and Carlos Sánchez Díez, in collaboration with Inger M.L. Gudmundson, want to draw attention to the fact that these artists were painting motifs drawn from their imagination. As Ljøgodt explains, ‘their works should not be seen as the naturalist depiction of a particular topography – even though they could be inspired by certain geographical areas – but rather as an inner landscape, a landscape of the mind’ (p.7). These artists were part of the Romantic tradition of the first half of the nineteenth century, but they lived on the edges of Europe and most of their works date from the 1860s or later. With their innovative

painting techniques, they kept the spirit of Romanticism alive into the second half of the nineteenth century and beyond.

The exhibition is displayed in a single space; the works of the individual artists are hung in recesses, creating separate yet connected displays. The exhibition is complemented by a perceptive and well-illustrated catalogue that examines the three practitioners through a series of stimulating analyses aiming to situate them beyond locality or nationality as part of a transnational phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Both the exhibition and the catalogue also seek to set these artists within the wider context of nineteenth-century art.

As apparent as their similarities of vision are the differences between these artists. They represent the North and the South, the Nordic and the Mediterranean, the young Norwegian state and the ancient Spanish nation. Their careers followed distinctively dissimilar paths. Lucas, often considered Goya’s heir, was a successful painter of ‘*costumbrismo*’ scenes of everyday Spanish life. As such, his imaginative experiments with landscape painting in pencil, ink wash and

watercolour might be regarded as the creative curiosity of a master flexing his artistic muscles in private works intended not for public consumption but rather for personal development, to be seen only within his intimate circle. He employed the influential blot technique, devised by Alexander Cozens in 1785 and also used, for example, by Francisco de Goya, J.M.W. Turner and Victor Hugo. With this technique, Lucas transformed random and unpremeditated marks into identifiable subjects, allowing chance to play a role in the work’s gestation, as in his *Landscape with dead trees* (1850–70; Museo Lázaro Galdiano; cat. no.L8). Although Lucas was an established figure in Spanish visual culture and his art highly collectable, his reputation has remained limited mainly to Spain – something that this exhibition and accompanying publication set out to rectify.

By contrast, Balke represents an artist marginalised by the artistic establishment of his day and who, although well-travelled and successful in terms of early-career commissions and his connections with leading figures such as Johan Christian Dahl and Caspar David Friedrich,

*7. Mountainous landscape*, by Eugenio Lucas Velázquez. 1850–70. Ink, wash and watercolour on paper, 45 by 60.7 cm. (Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid).



## Exhibitions

eventually settled permanently in Norway. Of humble origin and active as a social reformer, his sublime and transcendental landscapes of the Arctic (which at the time was terra incognita), including such unique and experimental paintings as *Seascape with cliffs* (1870s; Gundersen Collection; no.B6), met with critical disdain or total disregard, and as a result he ceased to exhibit officially. Interest in Balke and his work resumed with a number of exhibitions and publications in Norway in the twentieth century and more recently with a retrospective in London in 2014–15 and the exhibition *Peder Balke: Painter of Northern Light* in New York in 2017.<sup>2</sup>

A native of the rural south-west of Norway, Hertervig was a precocious talent, who began his career by studying in Oslo and at the Düsseldorf Art Academy but was taken ill and returned to Norway in 1856, where he was variously diagnosed with melancholia, dementia and schizophrenia and discharged in 1858 as ‘incurably insane’ (p.128; from today’s standpoint it is difficult to know

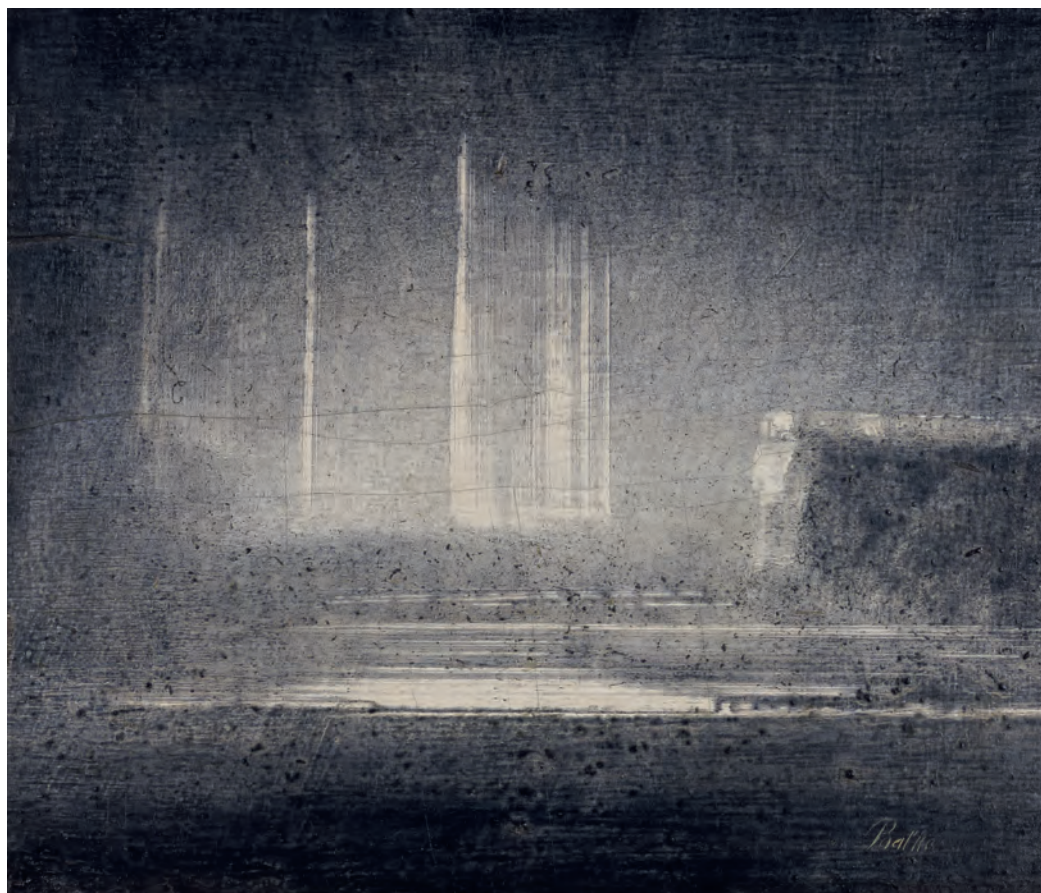
what such a diagnosis meant). The remainder of his life was spent on the island of Borgøy and around Stavanger, where he worked in relative isolation and poverty, at times employed as a decorative artist in a local workshop, and later living on charity and with relatives. He continued to paint for the rest of his life, working in watercolours, gouache and drawings, cultivating images drawn from the surrounding landscape, merging fact, fiction and memory, as in his *Mountain landscape with crippled tree* (1872; Stavanger Art Museum; no.H15). The exhibition organisers have avoided explaining Hertervig’s often sombre images, such as *Old pine trees* (1865; Stavanger Art Museum; no.H11), by reference to his illness, chiefly because it remains vague and unverifiable. Instead, his output is assessed as temperamentally that of a visionary romantic, but with a greater audacity born of his independence from artistic customs. Hertervig was ignored in his day, and of the three artists in the exhibition he is the least known, being rarely seen outside Norway. This exhibition should go a

**8. Northern lights by North Cape, by Peder Balke. 1870. Oil on panel, 20 by 24 cm. (The Gundersen Collection, Oslo).**

long way to redress that by introducing his brooding and enigmatic landscapes to wider scrutiny.

Despite their different circumstances all three artists successfully sought a liberation from convention that allowed them greater autonomy and freedom to experiment. They shared an insistence on the primacy of the individual temperament, of emotion over rationalism, and the pursuit of a means to liberate inspiration and imagination. For all of them, technique became as important as subject-matter and was an expressive means in itself. They attempted to express their inner vision by increasing abstraction and simplification, both of form and colour, so that the painting becomes just light and atmosphere. Lucas’s *Cliff* (1850–70; Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid; no.L1) is a vibrant example.

Nevertheless, each artist had a distinctive working practice and approach. Lucas, more assertive and self-confident, worked on a larger scale than the others, building up detailed landscapes from dabs and blobs of randomly applied ink (no.L14; Fig.7). He indulged in creative rivalry with his contemporaries, vying to see who could produce the most works within a set period of time. Balke cultivated a restricted palette, which at times becomes nearly monochromatic, and explored his subject-matter in an increasingly simplified manner. He painted memory landscapes that evoke natural phenomena using techniques that included removing parts of his main layers of paint with a brush, cloth or even his fingers to let the white ground show through. At times these works teeter on the edge of abstraction; his black-and-white images of the Northern Lights, for instance, almost resemble a barcode (no.B15; Fig.8). Hertervig never abstracted as much as Lucas or Balke, but rather experimented with both form and medium, producing mystical motifs of a visionary nature. One remarkable idiosyncrasy was his use as a painting support of tobacco wrapping paper, a high-quality acid-free material; an inverted watermark brand logo occasionally shows through his paintings (no.H16; Fig.9).





In their own day the works exhibited here would have been deemed unconventional and incomplete, aspects that are now regarded as their stamp of modernity. They are finished works of art in their own right, independent and experimental, not preliminary steps towards a more polished work of art and commercial commodity. The loose, erratic and occasionally uninhibited techniques these artists utilised, and their rejection of any coherent visual narrative, combined

with a seemingly intuitive and spontaneous mode of expression, has tempted some to view them as precursors of Impressionism and Modernism. Yet, as this exhibition demonstrates, these artists are situated between tradition and modernity. Although they were in many vital ways idiosyncratic and remarkable pioneers, the transcendental aspects of Romanticism and its conceptual models, such as the Sublime, the Picturesque, an introspective melancholy and the presence of God in nature, fuelled these painters as it did other prominent names of the age such as Friedrich and Dahl but also Turner, John Constable, Carl Gustav Carus, Philipp Otto Runge and Thomas Cole, who similarly shared an impetus to investigate and innovate.

The catalogue sets these artists in a broad and informative social, political, economic and cultural context. Romanticism developed at a different pace in Spain and Norway as a result of varying political, economic and cultural issues, and the essays provide a helpful framework for placing these three artists in the context of their time. An intriguing examination by Begoña Torres González of the lack of a landscape tradition in Spanish art adds another,

welcome layer of complexity. The catalogue also outlines the progressive and generous patronage, collecting and publishing activities of the financier José Lázaro Galdiano (1862–1947), whose superlative art collection, housed in his magnificent neo-Renaissance style home, is now the museum bearing his name.

In showcasing Lucas, Balke and Hertervig, this absorbing exhibition successfully draws attention to a group of singularly enthralling works that defy convention and conformity. It offers an intense experience for a modern international audience, demonstrating how these innovative talents progressively developed and adapted their practice in the service of their inner visions.

**1** Catalogue: *Visionary Romantics: Balke, Lucas, Hertervig*. Edited by Knut Ljøgdø and Carlos Sánchez Díez with contributions by Inger M.L. Gudmundson, Begoña Torres González and Hanne Beate Ueland. 244 pp. incl. 134 col. ills. (Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, CEEH, Madrid), 2023, €38. ISBN 978-84-18760-11-2. Spanish edition: *Visionarios románticos: Balke, Lucas, Hertervig*. ISBN 978-84-18760-12-9. The exhibition will be on view at the Stavanger Art Museum between 29th September and 31st December.

**2** M.I. Lange, K. Ljøgdø and C. Riopelle: exh. cat. *Peder Balke*, London (National Gallery) 2014–15; the catalogue was reviewed by Roger Cardinal in this Magazine, 157 (2015), p.554.

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