

A Big Splash in Shallow Waters: The Statue of Frederic V and the Danish Colonial Past

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Splash! The darker sides of the eighteenth century resurfaced to present-day Denmark, at the sound of a dry plaster cast copy of King Frederic V (1723–1766) hitting the salty waters of the canals of the harbour in Copenhagen.

Yet another incident of denigration and destruction of a monument connected with the colonial eras had met its fate. But this time it misfired, causing mostly collateral damage. It instantly threatened any possibility of stating a positive outcome of identity politics, decolonization or renewal of our historical understanding. If anybody dared to mention such matters, they would immediately risk being placed alongside this illegal act of destruction, caused by babbling foes of good taste, democratic debate and history proper.

As part-time curator at the national gallery (SMK), I witness the basic facts of public interest in the arts every day: early modernist art from around 1900 draws a public of thousands, because it serves the myth of individual genius, and depicts everyday life in colorful ways. Art before 1800 was mainly for an elite, and still only attracts an elite. Contemporary art either suffers an almost complete lack of interest or begets anger, because it is strange and hard to understand. So, an eighteenth-century king meeting contemporary art and decolonization, hits shallow waters.

Around a thousand people with intimate relations to the contemporary art scene, have signed a petition saying that the event was not an act of eradicating Danish cultural heritage, but “an attempt to make it relevant, by conducting an act

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of resistance against Frederic V in effigy and his leading role in Danish colonial times.”¹ As far as I can tell, no one else is listening in their direction.

As for the drowning of the bust, it might or might not qualify as an artistic event, but it failed to live up to basic rules of successful (bourgeois) communication, its means and ends being so violent and hard to grasp the meaning of. It rather cancelled debate, than evoked it – so what was the response?

The exception

There is one single exception to the rules of interest in the arts I outlined above. The monument in Copenhagen harbour, placed in front of the West Indian Warehouse, named “I am Queen Mary. A hybrid of bodies, nations and narratives”, made from a 3D-scan of the two artist’s dressed bodies, La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers, has drawn massive, ongoing attention – positive and negative – nationally and worldwide, since it was unveiled in 2018. It has turned out to be one of the most often mentioned, most important contemporary artworks of that year; perhaps it will end up in the top ten of the decade.²

It was the first sculpture depicting a black female in Denmark, one of the first to refer to the nation’s colonial history seen from the side of the oppressed, and it showed up just as colonial monuments in many countries were being toppled. The Ford Foundation purchased a version of it in 2019.

In the aftermath of the destruction of the bust of Frederic V, IaQM became the “good example” opposed to the “bad” one of the bust-happening, used by politicians in the debate about government spending in 2021. A million DKKR is to be allocated to the National Museum to fund an investigation into the possibility of creating some sort of institution that focuses on colonial history. To my mind, Denmark is the only country with such a history that does not have a specialized institution focusing on it. Perhaps because we still to some degree control Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

Thanks to the empowering spirit and presence of IaQM, the Warehouse built in 1783 to store products produced by enslaved labour was mentioned as a place to put it. Behind its solid walls looms the very white Royal Cast Collection, of which I am curator. It was on the ghostly passing by of white and black history through

¹ Author’s translation of: Vi opfatter ikke aktionen som et forsøg på at udrydde dansk kulturarv, men som et forsøg på at aktualisere den, ved at udføre en modstandsaktion mod Frederik V in effigie og hans ledende rolle i dansk kolonitid. Denne type billedlige modstandshandlinger spiller en historisk vigtig rolle i Danmark. <https://www.idoart.dk/blog/solidaritet-med-katrine-dirckinck-holmfeld-og-anonyme-billedkunstnere>

² Website of *I am Queen Mary*: <https://www.iamqueenmary.com/>

the quiet space of the Warehouse that the idea of having the IaQM monument set up outside in public space, and to create a new institution like the one about to be planned came about.

The “CEO room” of the West Indian Trading Company (Det Kongelige Danske octroyerede Vestindiske Handelsselskab, 1778–1785) still displays its neoclassicist splendour at the top of the building. No other place equals it in authenticity and atmosphere. But discreet plans to sell off the Warehouse to private investors have been around for many years, threatening every initiative and the perseverance of the location. The cynical, economic thinking of the eighteenth century still lingers on. But the bust-happening might nevertheless have done some good for our cause.

On the other hand, since the money for the investigation is going to an already existing traditional museum starved of funding, and since we had to take down most of the IaQM monument a few days ago (January, 2021), after damage caused by stormy weather, we might have lost our mojo. But as I said, these matters are ghostly. The times are out of joint, the spirits demand action, the outcome is unknown, and we might not live to see it.³

History is history

A video produced by those who sacrificed the king to the waterways on which his wealth depended, appeared on the online media for contemporary Danish art, I do Art, on 6 November 2020, under the heading “The founder of The Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen thrown into the harbour”. In the adjoining text, the purpose is explained: “By sinking Frederik V into the canal, we want to articulate the ways in which the colonial era is invisible, but still has direct consequences for minority people inside and outside the academy.”

In the storm of arguments against the event, traditional historians stepped in trying to calm the waters, saying that (1) Those behind the sinking of the bust are wrong in stating that the colonial era is invisible. Long before Black Lives Matter made itself felt in Denmark, local historians worked hard on writing the history of colonialism. For instance, Danish colonial history was addressed in the prestigious,

³ The Greenland newspaper *Sermitsiaq* mentions the early demand for funding of a centre dedicated to colonial history, and the location of the West Indian Warehouse, adding that the statue of Hans Egede might end up there as well. <https://sermitsiaq.ag/node/222543>. The art historian Matias Danbolt and the classical archaeologist Amalie Skovmøller argue for placing unwanted monuments at the Lapidarium of Kings in the Christian IV Brewery in Copenhagen, mirroring the Zitadelle-Museum in Berlin. <https://kunstkritikk.com/ripple-effects/>

five-volume hardcover books *Danmark og kolonierne* (Denmark and its colonies), in 2017. (2) Those who claim that Frederic V had nothing to do with the issues of colonialism and slavery are wrong, and the artists are right: The king was indeed deeply involved in the slave trade. But throwing cultural heritage into the harbour helps no one. 3) M/S Museet for Søfart in Elsinore has just received a major grant making it possible to revise their permanent exhibitions, which are only 10 years old. Their plan involves turning away from a thematically organized experience to a chronological one, and to add “new voices from the former colonies” at a particular part of the exhibit, where they introduce eighteenth-century global trade and enslavement.⁴ Happy now?

Not quite. The historians did their duty, delivered some facts, and hoped for the best. But from a perspective of attributing value to a diverse representation of authors, “Danmark og kolonierne” failed to live up to the expectations. No people of colour contributed to it. And it was published just when BLM made itself heard in Denmark. I do not know what kind of colonial history others would be able to write about us. I wonder if they would ever let BLM have a voice in their exhibits? The historians offer good reasons why a bust of the king should be thrown into the harbour, they just don’t like it being done. Did the enslaved ones like it? Do those who suffer discrimination today? In the online magazine *POV International*, there are several voices trying to connect past and present, using I am Queen Mary and/or the bust-happening as their point of departure, one being Roger Courage Matthisen, who find traces of discrimination in the reactions towards the statues, as well as in the words of Danish politicians, such as Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen.⁵

I wonder if the historians ever got stuck in their affluent self-understanding by the problem of “tokenism”? “Adding voices from the colonies” is just that, a nice but superficial symbolic act with no profound consequences for, say, the entire museum exhibit or the self-understanding behind having it at all. Did they get stuck in their doings by reading Audrey Lorde’s famous words: “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”⁶

⁴ Benjamin Asmussen and Jacob Ingemann (author’s translation: Dropping cultural heritage into the harbour helps no one) At smide kulturarven i havnen gavner ingen’, *Politiken* 19 December 2020. The National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen has taken similar measures, trying to shift focus from a Copenhagen-centred one to displaying people from the colonies, plantation owners and enslaved alike: <https://en.natmus.dk/museums-and-palaces/the-national-museum-of-denmark/exhibitions/voices-from-the-colonies/>

⁵ Roger Courage Matthisen: <https://pov.international/om-buster-slaver-nye-narrativer/>

⁶ https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde_The_Masters_Tools.pdf

Collateral damage

The deliberate, staged act of destruction of the bust followed weeks of seminars on decolonialism at the Academy, and years of identity politics and protest led by movements like Anonymous, Occupy, #MeToo, Yellow Vest Movement, Trumpists, FridaysforFuture, Black Lives Matter etc., all trying to set the agenda for change.

First, the action was presented by a group naming themselves “Anonymous artists”. But as the legal consequences for all those implicated became obvious, the artist and teacher at the Academy, Katrine Dirkinck-Holmfelt, took full responsibility for the act, taking the thrust of the accusations, and was fired from the Academy.

Next, she was chewed to pieces by the lion’s teeth of public debate, and for years to come she will have to face the consequences of removing and destroying the object, since a legal charge of causing deliberate, premeditated destruction of possessions belonging to the nation has been issued against her. In Denmark, this accusation holds a severe legal penalty, up to six years’ imprisonment.

This played right into the hands of right-wing politicians like Nikolaj Bøgh (Konservative), who took the opportunity to ridicule contemporary art, the Academy, and the artist, and ensured that she was charged by the police. The Arts Council at the Academy, responsible for the artworks in the possession of the institution, had to follow suit.

Morten Messerschmidt from Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People’s Party) summed up his reasons for asking the authorities to take action: “We can have a debate and a discussion about our history. But when someone turns to violence, destruction and vandalism, legal procedures have to be taken, grave ones, even.”⁷ This particular politician probably faces trial for improper use of funding from the EU, and has vented his anger on “anti-Trump media”.⁸ These cases might cause him trouble, even among his own base of voters. But his view of this event won the general opinion.

If only the artists had made a replica of their own, and thrown it in the harbour, then the aesthetic argument would have been much easier to hold on to. But the destruction of the bust has placed its own arguments, including my own in an almost completely defenceless situation, drowning any talk about the issues the artists wanted to promote concerning the history and aftermath of slavery or present-day identity politics.

⁷ Author’s translation. (– Vi kan debattere og diskutere vores historie. Men når man tyer til vold, hærværk og vandalisme, så skal det selvfølgelig retsforfølges. Endda hårdt, siger han.) <https://www.berlingske.dk/aok/uvurderlig-dansk-historie-smidt-i-koebenhavns-havn>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/mrmesserschmidt/status/1248373636232331265>

The Academy lost a bust of its founder, but in the eyes of a public already hostile to the strangeness of contemporary art, the entire “elite” of “politically correct” intellectuals, artists, and educational institutions training them, instantly seemed to live up to every possible kind of prejudice and risked their credibility by supporting the happening.

Many more were to be sunk in the aftermath following the event. The Academy lost its newly appointed Director Kirsten Langkilde a month and a half later, on 14 December 2020. From the very beginning of her time in office, she had large parts of the Academy against her because she followed the orders and intentions of the Ministry of Culture without asking the opinion of the staff and the students. The toppling of the bust made it seem likely that Langkilde had lost control of the Academy, if she ever had any. Langkilde had to leave behind an institution in turmoil, threatened with destruction from the inside as well as from the outside. Employees had already complained about her compliancy to the authorities, to the authority itself, the Ministry of Culture. Inside the Academy, sides had to be taken between factions supporting identity politics and those in favour of a more aesthetic attitude in their art.

In response the Ministry of Culture issued a plan for supplying the Academy with a board of trustees, to help decide which direction research, education and practice should take in the future. Former professors and employees of the Academy had to come together in order to write back, reminding the Ministry, politicians, and the public about the principle of division (“armslængdeprincippet”), ensuring the freedom of the academy from politically motivated interference coming from the outside.

Students and employees at the Academy met up with me, all of us silent, saddened and battered, at the cast collection, inside the West Indian Warehouse, where some serious taking cures took place. The dark history is still there to be felt, there are still things to be done, and some of us feel the need to give it a try. There is healing and forgiveness to be allowed for. The bust can easily be replaced. We have another copy of the exact same version at the cast collection to make a mould from. Even the Academy itself can make one since they own a version in bronze to make it from.

But it is perhaps time for a more contemporary take on it all, one that lives up to the intentions of the artists, but is different from their deed. Perhaps the video of it disappearing under water should be running at the spot where the bust was once located? As Jeannette Ehlers reminded me, when we rolled IaQM away, identity politics, suppression of minorities and decolonization is here to stay, and IaQM may return even stronger. May we have a centre for colonialism, not just an add-on to an existing museum, in Denmark? Perhaps historians of the eighteenth century should take in more decolonial texts, like Audre Lorde’s, to be ready for the future?