Revisiting Asta Nørregaard in the Studio

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ABSTRACT

In 1883 Asta Nørregaard (1853–1933) created her programmatic self-portrait where she is seen working alone in her studio on the altarpiece for Gjøvik church in Norway. This article presents Nørregaard’s previously unpublished correspondence with her close friend Hildegard Thorell (1850–1930), which provides critical insights into the artist’s life in Paris, her work and studio practices. Instead of understanding the self-portrait’s contemplative spirit as expressive of a feeling of isolation in contemporary society and art circles, as put forward by previous research, this study argues for reading In the Studio as a variation on the theme of the Romantic artist as solitary genius.

Keywords
Asta Nørregaard, self-portrait, studio, artistic identity, Romanticism, Hildegard Thorell

SAMMENDRAG

I 1883 malte Asta Nørregaard (1853–1933) sitt programmatiske selvportrett der vi ser henne alene i atelieret mens hun arbeider med altertavlen til Gjøvik kirke i Norge. Denne artikkelen presenterer den upubliserte brevkorrespondansen med hennes nære venn Hildegard Thorell (1850–1930), som gir oss en kritisk innsikt i kunstnerens liv i Paris, hennes arbeid og praksis i atelieret. I stedet for å forstå selvportrettets kontemplative stemning som uttrykk for en følelse av isolasjon i det moderne samfunnet og kunstskrikler, som hevdet i tidligere forskning, argumenterer denne studien for å se på I atelieret som en variasjon av temaet om den romantiske kunstneren som et ensomt geni.

Nøkkelord
Asta Nørregaard, selvportrett, atelier, kunstnerisk identitet, romantikken, Hildegard Thorell

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THE ALTARPIECE

In her programmatic self-portrait of 1883 (ill. 1) Asta Nørregaard has depicted herself alone in her Parisian studio, contemplating the altarpiece for the Gjøvik church (ill. 2). Nørregaard was the first woman artist in Norway ever to receive an official commission for a religious work.1 In her self-portrait she captures this important step in her career. Nørregaard’s unpublished letters to her friend and colleague, the Swedish painter Hildegard Thorell2 in the collection of Nordiska Museet in Stockholm, allow us to follow her work on the altarpiece and reveal parts of the process which led to the final composition.3 By September 1882, Nørregaard had moved to a new studio, which was situated in conveniently close proximity to the guest house Villa Beaucour in the Rue Faubourg St. Honoré, where she lived at the time. She was satisfied with her new environment, but needed to adjust to the altered light situation in the studio, stating: “Because of the lighting a great deal needs to be changed; now I have fewer figures and I think it will become much better.”4 Two weeks later she let her friend know that she had decided to reduce the number of figures and named the biblical sources she intended to use as a basis for her composition: “The altarpiece is almost completely changed – I am taking away one figure after the other and find that it becomes better – I have chosen the text – you find it complete in Luke 4:18 – but it is actually by the Prophet Isaiah – 61 – say, isn’t it beautiful.”5 She would later note her source in the lower right corner of the finished painting. Nørregaard further accounted for the problems in finding a suitable model for the central figure of Christ: “I allow myself plenty of time – have not started painting yet – but you have no idea where I have to search for models and how difficult it is – a good Christ type is not to find.”6 Six weeks later the artist referred to the hard physical labor involved in working on the large canvas: “I walk up and down the ladder all day long – and it tires twice as much to paint large paintings – it is nevertheless enjoyable – it seems as if I can be finished by summer.”7 The self-portrait reflects the difficult working conditions, as it documents both the sharp daylight falling in through the window and the ladder, which the artist had used to reach up to the large canvas.

3. Letters from Asta Nørregaard to Hildegard Thorell, Hildegard Thorell collection, E1:8, Brev från konstnärer, Nordiska Museets Arkiv IV, Stockholm [all letters if not otherwise stated are from Thorell’s collection]. The complete artist letters in the collection will be presented, analyzed and contextualized in my upcoming doctoral dissertation.

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Ill. 1
Asta Nørregaard: *In the Studio*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 64.5 x 48 cm. Private collection. Photo: UiO, Arthur Sand.
ILL. 2
By comparing a contemporary photograph from 1883 with the altarpiece as it presents itself today, Anne Wichstrøm demonstrated that Nørregaard had made final alterations in situ in the church, enlarging the figure of Christ by 10 to 15 centimeters, presuming that he had appeared too small in relation to the accompanying figures. As all documentation concerning the transaction with the church is lost, Wichstrøm suggested that the congregation might have been discontented with the work, asking the artist to rework the composition. However, writing to Thorell in early June 1883 from her summer domicile in Snekkestad, Nørregaard explained: “On Sunday I will thus go up to Gjøvik – to change a bit on the altarpiece – the figure of Christ had unfortunately become too short, and I want to correct this. Of course, there were varying opinions on it, I guess – but up there the architect and all are much contended.” It seems as if Nørregaard decided on her own account to rework the composition and was not forced to do so by her customers. The persistency with which she worked on her altarpiece testifies to the commission’s importance. Whenever writing to her friend during the process between fall 1882 and summer 1883, Nørregaard presents herself as a willful character, self-critically reflecting on her progress and showing determination, paired with a positive attitude.

A FRIENDSHIP UNCOVERED

Apart from the 49 letters written to her Finnish friends Lina and Walter Runeberg between 1888 and 1920, Asta Nørregaard has left few personal traces behind. In her eminent research on the artist Norwegian art historian Anne Wichstrøm has meticulously traced her life along preserved paintings, exhibition-catalogues, newspaper articles, and the like, which in 2011 resulted in a comprehensive monograph on the artist. In light of the scarce body of source material, the correspondence with Hildegard Thorell presents itself of considerable importance for our understanding of Nørregaard’s life and work. It consists of 19 letters (16 of which written prior to 1888) that cast new light on her Parisian period. Additionally, the collection at Nordiska Museet comprises several hundreds of letters that Hildegard Thorell wrote to her husband Reinhold, a lawyer, who had allowed his wife to pursue her artistic career. The artists’ letters combined give vivid testimony to their shared experience abroad.

During her study trips to Paris, Thorell regularly informs her husband about her everyday life in France, often mentioning her Norwegian colleagues. In the winter of 1879/80

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10. The letters are preserved in the Walter and Lina Runeberg collection, Svenska litteratursällskapet, Helsinki.
12. Letters from Hildegard Thorell to Reinhold Thorell, 1879–1912, E1:10, Nordiska Museets Arkiv IV, Stockholm [all letters if not otherwise stated are from Thorell’s collection]. The letters from Paris in 1879/80 and 1881 comprise more than 500 written pages and will be presented in detail in my doctoral dissertation.
she studied at Madame Trélat de Lavigne’s atelier together with Harriet Backer, whom she alongside the Swiss artist Sophie Schäppi referred to as “den andra storheten”, or “the other celebrity” of the school, and praised her as “a very diligent artist.”\textsuperscript{13} In the mornings Backer and a few promising students were allowed to choose the best seats in class prior to the others.\textsuperscript{14} Backer and Thorell soon united over their admiration for Jules Bastien-Lepage, whom both preferred over the other teachers at the school.\textsuperscript{15} Thorell mentions Nørregaard for the first time in February 1880, when the latter, accompanied by her compatriot Kitty Kielland were having dinner at the guest house in Rue des Bruxelles, where Thorell had rented a room.\textsuperscript{16} Almost immediately Thorell and Nørregaard became friends and started to conduct joint excursions across the city: “Asta is a most adorable girl, with whom I get along extremely well. We have decided to devote at least our Saturdays to trips and look at what is within our reach in Paris.”\textsuperscript{17} In the spring of 1880 they found recreation in the park of Bois de Boulogne, travelled by steam ship across the Seine to St. Cloud, had coffee at Boulevard des Italiens, visited exhibitions or viewed the exotic creatures at the Jardin des Plantes.\textsuperscript{18}

After having returned to Paris in May the following year, Thorell expressed her joy over Nørregaard’s success with the history painting \textit{Waiting for Christ} (ill. 3) at the Salon, which laid the foundation for her recognition as a painter of biblical subjects: “Yesterday I […] met Asta Nørregaard, who had just received notice that her painting has been taken in for the Salon – imagine the joy of having been accepted. She looked completely blissful, too.”\textsuperscript{19} Thorell further reported upon visiting the exhibition: “Many women, female painters, distinguished themselves in this Salon. I liked Asta’s painting quite a lot – it depicts the sick and cripples waiting for Christ, whom one sees arriving in the background – an immensely difficult task, which I find she solved with a lot of tact and finesse.”\textsuperscript{20} She further attested that her friend had made “great progress.”\textsuperscript{21} Regularly both women commented in their letters on one another’s development and criticized one another’s works.\textsuperscript{22}

The letters further show that both took lessons from Gustave Courtois at Académie Colarossi in 1881, which was mainly visited by Scandinavian artists: “We are quite a few students, \textfrac{3}{4} of us Scandinavians, therefore I do not hear any French the whole day.”\textsuperscript{23} In her free time Thorell conducted study trips to a private garden in the outskirts of Paris inviting Nørregaard, whom she started to work alongside with and considered her closest friend abroad: “Yesterday […] Asta and I were in Asnières and spent most of the day there

\begin{enumerate}
\item 13. H. to R. Thorell, 18 November 1879.
\item 14. H. to R. Thorell, 25 November 1879.
\item 15. H. to R. Thorell, 22 December 1879.
\item 16. H. to R. Thorell, 15 February 1880.
\item 17. H. to R. Thorell, 27 March 1879.
\item 18. H. to R. Thorell, 21 March, 20 and 30 April 1880.
\item 19. H. to R. Thorell, 10 April 1881.
\item 20. H. to R. Thorell, 13 April 1881.
\item 21. H. to R. Thorell, 12 May 1881.
\item 22. A. Nørregaard to H. Thorell, undated letter from spring 1883.
\item 23. H. to R. Thorell, 13 April 1881.
\end{enumerate}
in my garden (i.e. the one I am allowed to paint in). Each of us did a study [...] and now we plan to go more often to the countryside and do sketches, we get along so well, I don’t know anyone except you that I am more sympathetic to than Asta.”

The apartment that Nørregaard shared with her close friends, the family Birch, in the Boulevard de Batignolles during the summer of 1881 turned into a meeting place for Norwegian artists, where she used to entertain the colleagues with her piano playing. Thorell was enthusiastic upon meeting Eilif Peterssen there one afternoon, immediately being “head over ears charmed” by his kind character.25 Her Norwegian neighbors turned into a second family for Thorell. She frequently expressed her affection for Anette Birch, who used to treat her like a daughter.26 In the summer Thorell and Nørregard worked in Villiers-le-Bel outside of Paris, painting en plein-air and renting accommodation in the same house.27 After Thorell had left for Stockholm in October 1881, both painters stayed in touch, exchanging letters at least until 1899. In these Nørregaard informs her friend about her life in France and Norway, her travel plans, her fellow colleagues and exhibitions in Norway, her idea of studying with Pierre Puvis de Chavannes – whom she considered too modernist, after all – and about working as a successful society portraitist: “Well, you complain about portrait painting as well. Yes, by the way, it also has its good sides – I would not know, for instance, where to take myself here in Christiania, if I did not have portrait commissions – and one has to live from it [...]. However, the thing is that one can learn to work quietly without tension, but that is the great difficulty, as one depends on the models.”28 Such remarks testify to the ambivalence in being professional portraitists, which both experienced upon returning home. Consequently, they dreamed themselves back to their shared study periods in Paris: “how one longs for a little bit of change and refreshment. [...] It would be a pleasure to see the Salon again – wouldn’t it – apart from that one knows Paris by heart.”29

25. H. to R. Thorell, 1 June 1881.
27. H. to R. Thorell, 21 July 1881.
A UNIVERSAL ARTIST

No other work captures Nørregaard’s Parisian period quite like the self-portrait. All objects that Nørregaard has assembled in her studio, as Anne Wichstrøm has demonstrated, can be read as symbols for the artist’s claim for professionalism. In the foreground Nørregaard has placed a paint box that overflows with tubes and brushes, thereby forming an appealing still life in an academic manner. On top of the pile the eye rests upon a hand mirror, a metaphor for self-reflection and the tool with which the artist might have painted her self-portrait. The artist’s ability to paint landscapes is indicated by a view onto a group of trees through the window. As if by sheer coincidence, several works by Nørregaard’s hands


III. 3
Asta Nørregaard: Waiting for Christ, 1881. Oil on canvas, 93 x 115 cm. The National Museum, Oslo.
are scattered across the room. Nørregaard has placed a copy by Titian on the wall opposite her altarpiece, thereby entering into a competition with the old master. Finally, in the right corner of the room, a Biedermeier chair and a drapery refer to portrait painting. In her self-portrait, the artist meticulously demonstrates her ability to master all genres – portrait, interior, history painting, still life and landscape – in one single painting, paired with a stylistic variety ranging from the purely academic still life to the naturalist, almost impressionist landscape rendered outside the window. However, she clearly puts history painting first – in the **spotlight**, thereby demonstrating her indebtedness to the academic tradition.

By putting her name in big antiqua letters in the lower right corner of the painting, Nørregaard quotes her teacher Bastien-Lepage’s signature.\(^{32}\) Nørregaard decided to write the S in *Asta* reversed or mirror-inverted, as if trying to make it harder for the viewer to identify her as the author of the work. Normally the signature functions as a means to clarify the identity of the author, establishing a direct interrelationship between painting and artist. Nørregaard, as I suggest, deliberately interrupts that connection by means of the reversed letter “S”, thereby emphasizing the artificiality of her self-representation.\(^{33}\) By slightly encrypting her name, she points to the fact that the self-portrait can always only represent an aspect of its maker.

**THE STUDIO AS SANCTUARY**

The interior with the artist in its center is composed from a bird’s eye view, allowing the viewer to observe the scene from a distance. The composition resembles a stage, seen from a box above, turning the studio into a theater with the artist apparently playing the main part. Nørregaard has placed herself in the middle of the composition, firmly standing on the wooden paneled floor, which, just like the canvas, gives the room a vertical drive. Viewing the small, meticulously painted portrait, one can get the impression of looking down at the artist through a magnifying glass, in which the painter’s entire world reveals itself in a theatrical setting.

Standing straight with palette and brushes in both hands, Nørregaard scrutinizes the painting placed a few feet in front of her. While her facial expression seems relaxed and calm, her eyes bear a concentrated, vigilant air. It seems as if she is about to analyze the painting in front of her from an objective distance, maybe trying to simulate its later effect in a church interior. The artist presents herself in a meditative moment of contemplation, emphasizing the mental aspects of her work. The manner in which Nørregaard places herself in relation to the easel, relatively far from her work, while firmly holding her tools in hand, is reminiscent of Rembrandt’s *The Artist in his Studio* (ill. 4). Even in size and execution, the painting resembles a Dutch seventeenth-century interior painting or cabinet.


piece. Nørregaard was most likely acquainted with Rembrandt’s work, who was represented with several works in the Louvre and underwent a remarkable revival among artists at the time. Likewise, artist portraits drawing on the concept of **inventio** were popular in French art of the time: In 1850, for instance, Delacroix chose to portray Michelangelo (ill. 5) in the role of the resting sculptor in thoughtful pose, with his head resting on his right hand. Nørregaard indirectly refers to such traditions of the melancholic artist and gives her work an intellectual air. While the artist is contemplating her work, a ray of daylight falls dramatically upon the altarpiece, highlighting the figure of Christ. Thereby, the painting on the easel gains a transparent, almost transcendental appearance, while the studio interior with the artist turns into a mystical scenery. On a straightforward level, Nørregaard used the dramatic light to demonstrate her skills, but it can also be understood as a metaphor for inspiration and invention.

**III. 4**


In nineteenth-century visual culture, the painter’s workshop transformed into a space for secret, lonely and contemplative creativity. It functioned as a token to the artist’s withdrawal from society as well as a guarantor for creative ingenuity. In this environment, the strong public interest in the artist’s private work place began to take on the form of a cult, which led to the idea of the studio as an almost holy space. Considering the subject-matter and intended location for Nørregaard’s painting, the artist might have considered the imagery of the studio as sanctuary a suitable reference for her self-portrait. Therefore, I suggest that Nørregaard placed her self-portrait in contemporary discourses around the studio, reflecting its newly acquired cultural implications, while strongly identifying with a notion of artistic labor as a secret and solitary – almost divine – endeavor.

A ROOM OF ONE’S OWN

At the same time, the image of the painter in French painting began to increasingly reflect the growing interest in the artist’s temperament, milieu and unique position in cultural debates.39 In this environment the genre of the *artist in his studio* emerged as a preferred “platform for self-expression and experimentation.”40 Gustave Courbet staged himself in his famous *L’atelier du peintre* as a human fix point in the center of friends, intellectuals and anonymous types of society.41 Similar gatherings recur, for instance, in the work of Frédéric Bazille (ill. 6) or Henri Fantin-Latour, here representing the studio as a gendered all-male environment, while drawing from Bourgeois domestic ideals.42 According to Heather McPherson, the studio turned into a powerful cultural concept and “sociological and psychological marker of individual identity that expanded the expressive parameters of portraiture.”43


43. McPherson, ”The Artist in His Studio,” 83.
Even in Scandinavian art, the self-portrait in the studio developed into a popular subject matter, especially during the 1880s. Interestingly, its popularity is particularly evident in the work of women artists, such as Eva Bonnier, Mimmi Zetterström or Kitty Kielland. All of them stage their Parisian work environments as markers of professional identity in self-portraits, friendship portraits and studio interiors: Eva Bonnier (ill. 7), for instance, dramatically illuminates one of her sculptures in a painted studio interior, thereby emphasizing her versatility as an artist similarly to Nørregaard; Kitty Kielland (ill. 8) represents her friend Harriet Backer in their shared studio during a break from work, concentrating on a book and turned away from the beholder; Mimmi Zetterström (ill. 9) likewise turns her back onto the viewer, while painting one of her characteristic Lappish motives in a Bohemian environment.

III. 7

III. 8
Kitty Kielland: *Studio Interior (Harriet Backer)*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 42.5 x 37 cm. Lillehammer Art Museum, Lillehammer.

III. 9
In contrast to their above mentioned male colleagues, Nordic women artists tend to present themselves quite alone, absorbed in different forms of engagement, situated in studios filled with personal references, obviously commanding every inch of their newly won professional environments. In their imagery, the studio is conceptualized as a room of one’s own, defined by Virginia Woolf as a necessary precondition for creativity often denied to women. Nørregaard and her Nordic female contemporaries extend their search for artistic identity onto the space, apparently finding what they were looking for in their studios in Paris. They negotiate professional identity mainly through a juxtaposition of the body and the space, thereby often establishing strong polarities between the absorption of the figure and the theatricality of her surrounding environment. In order to understand the artists’ self-representations, it is thus imperative to increasingly start reading their work both in the context of the continental and French discourse surrounding the artist and the studio, as well as by means of comparative analyses across Nordic national borders.

THE ARTIST ROMANTICIZED

In a letter to Thorell from September 1882, Nørregaard stated about working on the altar-piece in her studio: “I think of myself most of the day, because there is not a single soul here to worry about – Je suis toute seule encore – I have it cozy in my studio – oh, how much I enjoy painting for myself.” A few weeks later she added: “Don’t you think that autumn is sad – I am happy that I am so busy with work so that I do not have the time to see the leaves fall – grey sky and dreary streets – Luckily my temper is so balanced and good right now, that loneliness does not affect me – and when one is contented, everything is just as well. […] Besides, there is no loneliness that is unbearable, when you have work and books.”

45. On the idea of the studio as a room of one’s own for women see: Renate Berger, Malerinnen auf dem Weg ins 20. Jahrhundert. Kunstgeschichte als Sozialgeschichte (Cologne: DuMont, 1982), 165.
46. On the tension between body and space in nineteenth-century interior painting see Susan Sidlauskas, Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). In his study on painting and beholder in the age of Diderot, Michael Fried stated French art was divided from around 1750 until long into the nineteenth century between the two opposing concepts of absorption and theatricality: the first denying the presence of the spectator in a self-sufficient painterly world, the second willingly engaging with its implied beholder. Nørregaard’s self-portrait, as a fiction of aloneness in Fried’s sense, seems to bring together both concepts through body and space. See Michael Fried, Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). The argument is further developed and applied onto Gustave Courbet’s work in Michael Fried, Courbet’s Realism (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), here 109.
47. In my PhD thesis I will develop my argument further by presenting detailed comparative analyses of these and further studio interiors by Nordic women painters. Apart from few exhibition projects, most research on these women has yet been conducted along national borders or in monographic approaches.
49. «Lykkeligvis er mit Humeur for Tiden saas pas jevnt og godt – at ikke engang Ensomheden tarer paa det – og er man tillfreds saa er alt vel da […] Og desuden ingensomhelst Ensomhed er uudholdelig, naar man har Arbeide og Bøger.» A. Nørregaard to H. Thorell, 14 November 1882.
Viewing the painting in light of these statements, it seems as if Nørregaard has turned her self-chosen loneliness – which for her went naturally along with committed work – into the subject matter of her painting.

Previous interpretations have identified the artist’s solitude as a central feature of the self-portrait, however, referring to it mainly in terms of its negative connotations. According to Swedish art historian Barbro Werkmäster, the painting evokes “a severe, almost isolated feeling. The artist seems enclosed in a constructed room, the shut door and the crossbars on the window evoke a prison. Freedom is outside, and loneliness is the price she pays for painting.”50 In her reading Werkmäster further compared the artist, who is standing motionless in the middle of the room, to a doll in a doll’s house.51 In her otherwise convincing interpretation Anne Wichstrøm agreed with Werkmäster’s reading when she claimed that the isolated atmosphere of the studio symbolized the “dilemma of female professionalism” with its “restricted room for maneuver” and coincided with the artist’s reserved personality.52

In light of the fact that many female artists living in Paris at the time could not afford to rent their own studios and needed to work in overcrowded private drawing schools, Nørregaard’s room for maneuver presents itself as extremely wide in a both literal and metaphorical sense.53 Therefore, in this case solitude appears rather as an ennobling feature of distinction. The spacious room itself identifies Nørregaard as a successful professional just like the altarpiece placed inside it. Instead of following the analogy of a prison, one can also understand the room’s seclusion as a metaphor for the artist’s serious commitment to her work and compare it to the iconography of the learned man, such as Saint Jerome in his Study: Nørregaard, as a modern, female version of a pictor doctus in her intimate study suited for concentrated work.54 The iconography of the learned man recurs in the work of her friends Harriet Backer and Eilif Peterssen from their joint Munich period.55 Contemporary descriptions of artist studios in the French press also tended to return to such ideals, when emphasizing the quietness and peculiar sense of timelessness as characteristic of a well-hidden artist workshop.56 Even the understanding of Nørregaard as reversed

51. Ibid.
53. In the letters to her husband Thorell frequently complains about the working conditions, loudness, heat, and crowdedness in the studio.
and isolated amongst her Norwegian colleagues needs to be partially relativized in light of
the newly discovered letters, in which she appears to have a substantial network of friends
and colleagues. In stark contrast to a doll, who is by definition heteronomous, Nørregaard
freely disposes of herself and her work space – a luxury compared to the average Bourgeois
woman, who was closely tied to her family, her husband and the home with all its accom-
panying commitments.57

In Nørregaard’s letters resonates the idea that loneliness is a necessary precondition of
creativity. Nørregaard refers to the virulent notion according to which the artist needs to
break free from society in order to be creative.58 Such an idea stands partially in contrast
to images of the artist as a social figure or celebrity, surrounded by crowds of admirers,
colleagues or models, as in, for instance, Bazille’s studio interior. I would suggest reading
Nørregaard’s self-portrait in the studio as a variation on the theme of the Romantic artist
as a solitary genius or "self-oriented individual” that only “reluctantly corresponds to the
world.”59 By comparing the manner in which Nørregaard interacts with her surrounding
studio space, one can discern striking similarities with depictions of the artist in his studio
in German Romanticism. Nørregaard had studied in Germany and was probably familiar
with the Dresden Romantics, who had been highly influential even in Norway. The noble
and lofty atmosphere of her studio, the simplicity of the interior as well as the stillness of
the artist’s posture, resemble Georg Friedrich Kersting’s portrait of Caspar David Friedrich
in his studio (ill. 10), who believed that “all extraneous objects disturbed his inner pictorial
world.”60 The pointed austerity of the interior of 1812 figured as a manifestation or “spatial
expression” of the artist’s strong ethical and artistic convictions.61

57. Germaine Greer used the term “reduced scale of female life”, when she stated that women in bourgeois society
were not allowed to occupy much space: not only figuratively in being quiet and modest, but also literally in
the sense that they needed to share space with other women, while often being denied a private space in the
home. Germaine Greer, The Obstacle Race. The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work (London: Secker and
Warburg, 1979), 108.

58. On the history of the dichotomy between artist and society see: Adeline Walter, Die Einsamkeit des Künstlers als
Bildthema 1770–1900 (Hofheim im Taunus: Universität Frankfurt am Main, 1983). Cf. Marc Gottlieb, «Creation

59. On inwardness as constitutive for the romantic artist see Donald B. Kuspit, “The self-portrait as a clue to the
artist’s being-in-the-world,” in Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Aesthetics, ed. Rudolf Zeitler
(Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets Förlag, 1972), 237.

60. Joseph Leo Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape (London: Reaktion, 2009), 220–222.
Three slightly varying versions of the Kersting’s portrait of Friedrich in his studio exist today. Here, I refer solely
to the Berlin version.

61. Uwe Fleckner, "Das Atelier als Portrait. Menschenleere Räume in der Kunst von Caspar David Friedrich bis
 Hessisches Landesmuseum), 96.
Nørregaard and Friedrich are self-oriented, encapsulated in their studio, holding palette and brushes in hand, while contemplating their paintings from critical distance. In both paintings, the atmosphere appears dense, as if the scene had frozen in time, while the world outside the windows seems far away. Even Nørregaard’s symbolic use of dramatically staged lighting is reminiscent of the Romantic aesthetics, which used light as a carrier or source of inspiration and tended to transform the act of painting into a ceremonial ritual. By employing the Romantic studio imagery, she subversively appropriates the concept of the artist genius, which was extremely gendered and considered as exclusively male. Asta Nørregaard, who probably, indeed, had felt the dual isolation of not only being a foreign artist but also a woman, might have recognized the iconography of the Romantic artist as a suitable reference for her own self-fashioning.

**REVISITING THE STUDIO: CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The correspondence with Hildegard Thorell provides critical evidence that broadens the understanding of Asta Nørregaard’s Parisian period, her work in the studio and the creation history of the altarpiece for Gjøvik church. Having located Asta Nørregaard’s self-portrait in relation to nineteenth-century discourses surrounding artist and studio, I have proposed to read *I atelieret* as an appropriation of the notion of the artist genius combined with the imagery of the Romantic studio interior. In her self-portrait, Nørregaard fashions artistic identity by means of a juxtaposition of space and body, intertwining the theatricality of the studio with the absorption of the artist. In the work of Asta Nørregaard and other Nordic women painters in Paris, the studio is transformed into a discursive space for artistic self-representation and identity formation.

This case study forms part of the doctoral project “Artists in the Making. Nordic Women Painter’s Self-Fashioning in the Late Nineteenth Century” (2016–2020). Its wider purpose is to analyze how Nordic women painters negotiate professional identity in painting between 1870 and 1900 in self-portraits, friendship portraits and studio interiors. I would like to thank the High Seminar in Art History at Stockholm University and Nick Parkinson for attentive readings of my draft for this article and valuable suggestions, as well as Anne Wichstrøm for her kind interest in and support of my project.


III. 10
Georg Friedrich Kersting: *Caspar David Friedrich in his Studio*, ca. 1812. Oil on canvas, 53.5 x 41 cm. Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.