



KING FREDERIK V BUST

Copenhagen, Denmark

55.6832,12.6044



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Executive Summary

In the autumn of 2020, a bust of the 18th-century King of Denmark and Norway Frederik V mysteriously disappeared from its pedestal at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. It was later found to have been thrown into the canals of Copenhagen in a filmed protest by a group of artists seeking to raise awareness of Denmark's overlooked colonial history. The head of the Art Academy department took full responsibility for the incident, and her employment was terminated the same day. This case study looks at the response of the Academy and Danish Society to one of the first controversies to arise over the country's colonial history and the powerful role art can play as a form of protest.

Introduction

In November 2020, a bust of Frederik V, the 19th-century king of Denmark and Norway, housed in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, went missing. A few days later, it was revealed that an anonymous group of artists had removed the bust from its pedestal, transported it to the edge of the Copenhagen Harbor canals behind Charlottenburg Castle, and subsequently thrown it into the water. The group had released a video showing the process of the bust's removal and subsequent dunking. It revealed that the reasoning behind this act was an attempt to initiate a dialogue revolving around Denmark's colonial past, which included trade in enslaved persons and sugar. The Academy Council was quick to condemn this act. A week after the video's release, the head of the Art Academy department, Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, took sole responsibility for the disappearance and dunking of the plaster bust and was subsequently released from her position.

Background

The plaster bust in question depicts Frederik V, King of Denmark and Norway, from 1746 until 1766. King Frederik V has been described as a 'likeable but ineffective king,'¹ whose inadequate education and complete dependency upon his advisors caused him to be widely characterised as 'one of the weaker kings of Denmark.'² During the time of Frederik V's reign, Denmark was 'one of the seven major colonial superpowers,' with colonies on four continents and heavy involvement in the slave trade.³ In addition, King Frederik V has been 'condemned as being one of the representatives of structural violence committed by colonial powers' and a beneficiary of the slave trade, having owned enslaved persons himself.⁴

Frederik V founded the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 1754. In recognition, he was represented in the form of a plaster bust, which has been housed in the Academy's Assembly Hall since its last renovation several decades ago.⁵ The bust was, in fact, a replica made in the 1950s, based on an original equestrian sculpture of Frederik V, by 18th-century French sculptor Jacques Saly.⁶ The Academy initially proclaimed the bust to be the actual original sculpture by Saly and, therefore, of extremely high value. However, this claim was withdrawn after the bust was identified as a plaster replica of Saly's sculpture.⁷ Nevertheless, the main function of the bust's

¹Britannica, "Frederick V King of Denmark and Norway," *Britannica*, January 10, 2021.

² Royal Danish Collection, "Frederik V 1746-1766," *The Royal Danish Collection*, accessed March 4, 2021.

³ Kate Brown, "An Explosive Debate Has Roiled Denmark After a Department Head at Its Top Art Academy Was Fired for Drowning a Bust of a Former King," *Art Net News*, December 2, 2020. ; Nada Prlja, "The Sinking of King Frederik V - an Art Happening or a 'Bit of Everything'?" *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, November 25, 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kate Brown, "An Explosive Debate Has Roiled Denmark After a Department Head at Its Top Art Academy Was Fired for Drowning a Bust of a Former King," *Art Net News*, December 2, 2020. ; Amalie Skovmøller and Mathias Danbolt, "Ripple Effects," *Kunstkritikk*, December 4, 2020.

⁶ Ibid. ; Nada Prlja, "The Sinking of King Frederik V - an Art Happening or a 'Bit of Everything'?" *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, November 25, 2020.

⁷ Amalie Skovmøller and Mathias Danbolt, "Ripple Effects," *Kunstkritikk*, December 4, 2020.

installation was the representation and commemoration of the Academy's founder, and therefore, as stated by the Academy, it served a 'symbolic political function' within the institution.⁸

History of the Contestation

The plaster bust of King Frederik V was displayed on a pedestal in the Academy's Assembly Hall for several decades, attracting little attention until its disappearance in the Autumn of 2020. On 6 November, a video was released on the website 'I Do Art', by *Anonyme Billedkunstnere* (Visual Artists Anonymous), which revealed the bust's fate. The footage showed the plaster cast being removed from its base in the Assembly Hall and thrown into the waters of the nearby Copenhagen Harbor.⁹ In a statement accompanying the video, the group stated that the motive behind this act was to 'pledge solidarity with all the artists, students, and people all over the world who have had to live with the aftermath of Danish colonialism, affected by Denmark's colonial past, and to spark a dialogue with institutions created during that time.'¹⁰ Furthermore, the artists aimed to 'articulate the ways in which the colonial era is invisible but still has direct consequences for minority people inside and outside the art academy.'¹¹ To spark a conversation with the art world regarding these matters, to get them to 'take responsibility, not only for the actions of the past but for how colonialism is still active today.'¹²

On November 13, approximately a week after the initial release of the video, Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, the head of the Academy's Institute of Art, Writing and Research Department, stepped forward and took sole responsibility for the plaster bust's removal and sinking.¹³ On the same day, Dirckinck-Holmfeld's actions were formally condemned by the Minister of Culture, Joy Mogensen, and as a result, Dirckinck-Holmfeld was removed from her post at the Royal Academy.¹⁴ The incident immediately gained widespread media attention, dividing public attention within Denmark regarding the country's colonial legacy and remnants.¹⁵ In an interview with the press, Dirckinck-Holmfeld clarified that she had been inspired by the takedown of other monuments, such as Cecil Rhodes in Oxford, stating:

Such a symbol should not be glorified by a contemporary education institution which ought to be studying, questioning, and challenging the structures of power symbolised by the bust of Frederick V. In Denmark, there has been little to no engagement with legacies of colonialism and slavery in today's

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. ; Cara Buckley, "The Sinking of a Bust Surfaces a Debate Over Denmark's Past," *New York Times*, February 9, 2021.

¹⁰ Ibid. ; Amalie Skovmøller and Mathias Danbolt, "Ripple Effects," *Kunstkritikk*, December 4, 2020. ; IDOART.DK, "Det Kgl. Danske Kunstakademis Grundlægger Smidt I Havnen — I Do Art," *IDOART.DK*, November 6, 2020.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cara Buckley, "The Sinking of a Bust Surfaces a Debate Over Denmark's Past," *New York Times*, February 9, 2021. ; Amalie Skovmøller and Mathias Danbolt, "Ripple Effects," *Kunstkritikk*, December 4, 2020. ; IDOART.DK, "Det Kgl. Danske Kunstakademis Grundlægger Smidt I Havnen — I Do Art," *IDOART.DK*, November 6, 2020.

¹³ Amalie Skovmøller and Mathias Danbolt, "Ripple Effects," *Kunstkritikk*, December 4, 2020. ; Kate Brown, "An Explosive Debate Has Roiled Denmark After a Department Head at Its Top Art Academy Was Fired for Drowning a Bust of a Former King," *Art Net News*, December 2, 2020. ; Cara Buckley, "The Sinking of a Bust Surfaces a Debate Over Denmark's Past," *New York Times*, February 9, 2021.

¹⁴ Nada Prlja, "The Sinking of King Frederik V - an Art Happening or a 'Bit of Everything?'," *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, November 25, 2020. ; Amalie Skovmøller and Mathias Danbolt, "Ripple Effects," *Kunstkritikk*, December 4, 2020.

¹⁵ Ibid. ; Kate Brown, "An Explosive Debate Has Roiled Denmark After a Department Head at Its Top Art Academy Was Fired for Drowning a Bust of a Former King," *Art Net News*, December 2, 2020.

cultural and educational institutions.¹⁶

The sinking of the bust was publicly condemned by numerous high-level Danish stakeholders, including the Academy Council, an artistic advisory board that owns the bust, the Royal Academy's (now former) Director Kirsten Langkilde, the Danish Minister of Culture, Joy Mogensen, and the Deputy Chairman of the Danish People's Party, Morten Messerschmidt.¹⁷ The Academy Council was quick to underscore that it is 'important that we do not impose the norms of our time on the past' and that even though past abuses should not be downplayed, it should be recognised that 'slavery was considered a normal and common practice during King Frederik V's time.'¹⁸ Other statements targeted Dirckinck-Holmfeld more explicitly, with Langkilde describing the act as 'criminal' elaborating that 'one cannot claim to be above the law under the pretext of creating art.'¹⁹ Criticism from the art world was also pronounced, notably from artist Bjorn Norgaard, the art critic of Berlingske Holger Dahl, and the Director of the Overgaden Institute for Contemporary Art, Marete Jankowski. All of which condemned the incident, while the latter two went as far as to compare the actions of *Anonyme Billedkunstnere* to being akin to Taliban attacks against historical monuments.²⁰

While negative criticism and condemnation of the incident were widespread, so was the support. Dirckinck-Holmfeld gained public support in the form of a petition organised by artist Melanie Kitti, calling for her reinstatement at the Academy. As of March 2021, the petition had been signed by nearly 1000 people, including cultural workers, artists, and students.²¹ In a public statement, Kitti outlined her reasons for starting the petition, stating that:

As a person of colour in Scandinavia, and in the art world, in particular, I have direct experience with the consequences of colonialism and racism. Still to this day, you will find people who are unaware that the King of Denmark owned slaves. For me, it is important and heartwarming to see faculty like Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld use their platform and teach about these themes. It gives me relief and hopes that people of colour do not stand alone in this struggle.²²

Decision-Making Processes

The incident was handled internally by the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Dirckinck-Holmfeld stepped forward and took sole responsibility for the incident on November 13th, in the newspaper *Politiken*. That same morning, a meeting was held between Dirckinck-Holmfeld, her lawyer, her Union representative, (now former) Director Kirsten Langkilde, and the Head of the Academy's

¹⁶ Kate Brown, "An Explosive Debate Has Roiled Denmark After a Department Head at Its Top Art Academy Was Fired for Drowning a Bust of a Former King," *Art Net News*, December 2, 2020.

¹⁷ Ibid. ; Nada Prlja, "The Sinking of King Frederik V - an Art Happening or a 'Bit of Everything'?", *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, November 25, 2020.

¹⁸ Cara Buckley, "The Sinking of a Bust Surfaces a Debate Over Denmark's Past," *New York Times*, February 9, 2021.

¹⁹ Kate Brown, "An Explosive Debate Has Roiled Denmark After a Department Head at Its Top Art Academy Was Fired for Drowning a Bust of a Former King," *Art Net News*, December 2, 2020.

²⁰ Cara Buckley, "The Sinking of a Bust Surfaces a Debate Over Denmark's Past," *New York Times*, February 9, 2021. ; Nada Prlja, "The Sinking of King Frederik V - an Art Happening or a 'Bit of Everything'?", *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, November 25, 2020.

²¹ Kate Brown, "An Explosive Debate Has Roiled Denmark After a Department Head at Its Top Art Academy Was Fired for Drowning a Bust of a Former King," *Art Net News*, December 2, 2020.

²² Ibid.

Administration Jes Gjørup (currently serving as Interim Director) who the Ministry of Culture directly appoints.²³ During the meeting, a decision was made by the Director and the Head of Administration to send Dirckinck-Holmfeld home until further notice and pending an investigation into the incident.

Additionally, both parties reached an agreement that Dirckinck-Holmfeld would be to receive the press release from the Academy, which would include the meeting's decision before it was sent out to members of the faculty, students and the press.²⁴ However, Dirckinck-Holmfeld did not receive the press release but a notice from the Academy's Director calling for her immediate expulsion and termination. The Union underscored that the punishment was disproportionate to the artistic utterance.²⁵ Dirckinck-Holmfeld's Union later called an additional meeting to negotiate and reach a compromise before the period of hearing of the parties had been reached, but no agreement was reached.²⁶

Subsequently, a group of former Directors and professors of the Royal Academy appealed to the Academy Council and requested for the active police case regarding the incident to be dismissed. Moreover, the appeal called for the Academy Council to reduce the estimated value of the bust from 200,000 DKK, which the Council initially claimed it was worth, to a more realistic estimate of 10,000-15,000 DKK, as the bust, as the bust is a plaster copy of the original dating from approximately the 1950s - 1980s, which exists in many copies and not the actual original piece.²⁷ In addition, a settlement was proposed to the Academy Council, where Dirckinck-Holmfeld, in collaboration with the former associate professor of the Academy's plaster lab, would recast the bust as a replacement for the sunken bust. The Academy Council refused this proposition, as well as any of Dirckinck-Holmfeld's requests for a meeting.²⁸ Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld's union is, as of June 2021, filing a court of arbitration suit against the Art Academy, which will be held in the Supreme Court later in 2021.

Summary and Conclusions

The sinking of King Frederik V into the Copenhagen Harbour is one of the first disputes in Denmark over the representation of a historical figure, linked to Denmark's oft-overlooked trade of enslaved people during the country's colonial era. The authorities' reaction to the removal and sinking of the plastic bust has brought this incident to national attention, opening a discussion on Denmark's slavery-era legacies and its impact on contemporary Danish society.

The incident gained widespread media attention, albeit mostly negative, after Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld took responsibility for the act. Dirckinck-Holmfeld was dismissed from her position at the Royal Academy the day she stepped forward, and efforts to form a case for

²³ Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Online Interview by Theodotos Nikola, Zoom Meetings, March 24, 2021.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, "Email Message to Author," April 26, 2021.

²⁸ Ibid.

negotiations regarding her reinstatement remain ongoing. The Academy Council has been opposed to all suggestions made so far, and the case has yet to be resolved.

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Last updated May 2022

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(Cover Image)

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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Published by IHJR-EuroClio in February 2021
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To cite this publication:
The Contested Histories Initiative, "Bust of King Frederik V in Denmark", *Contested Histories*
Case Study #325 (May 2022), retrieved from [link].

The Contested Histories Initiative receives support from the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

