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AD ARCHAEOLOGIAM
ET ARTIVM HISTORIAM
PERTINENTIA

VOLVMEN XXXVI (N.S. 23)

SCIENZE E LETTERE

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Ediderunt

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Marina Prusac-Lindhagen - Sissel Undheim



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OLAF STEEN - KIRSTI GULOWSEN

A caricature seal, a papal portrait, and a bronze bust of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Three key works by Hans Stoltenberg Lerche in Bjørnson's home at Aulestad

Abstract

At Aulestad in Norway, in the home of the Norwegian poet, writer and public debater Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910) our attention is drawn to three works by the Norwegian artist Hans Stoltenberg Lerche (1867-1920). Lerche lived his professional life established between Rome and Paris, from 1901 to his death he stayed in Rome where he was also a door opener for Norwegian artists to Italy.

The three works at Aulestad are a caricature seal, mocking Rodin's famous Balzac monument, an innovative statuette portraying Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903), and a portrait bust of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson himself. The pieces are key monuments in Lerche's artistic career, and helped him advance his career and fame throughout Europe. The caricature seal can be connected to Bjørnson's strong engagement in the Dreyfus affair, and the papal statuette was an intimate portrait which Lerche made immediately after transferring to Rome in 1902, it was also a commercial success which accompanied him for many years. The portrait of Bjørnson was also a great success, and brought the artist closer to Bjørnson himself. Correspondence between the two shows this relationship, but also their common engagement to present Norwegian art to the European public.

Keywords: Hans Stoltenberg Lerche; Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson; Aulestad; Honoré de Balzac; Pope Leo XIII; Auguste Rodin; La Biennale di Venezia; Frida Hansen.

At Aulestad, the home of the Norwegian poet, writer, and public debater Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910) our attention is drawn to three works by the Norwegian artist Hans Stoltenberg Lerche (1867-1920). Lerche established his career first in Paris, before moving to Rome, and enjoyed immense contemporary success in his professional life in both cities. The three artworks at Aulestad are a plaster caricature seal, a plaster statuette portrait of Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903), and a monumental bronze torso portrait of the master of the house himself. These works were admired and respected, dispersed in many copies, and not least, they gave Lerche a position as an artist in Italy and Europe.

The Lerche artworks fit perfectly into Bjørnson's home at Aulestad, which reflects the writer's relationship to the eternal city, to Norwegian artists abroad, and his general affinity for monumental art. It also mirrors Bjørnson's broad European engagement, and especially his close contacts with international artistic circles and intellectual society. Bjørnson kept returning to Rome, and stayed for long periods over many years.

Correspondence between Lerche and Bjørnson reveals that their relationship was characterised by respect, but not without intimacy and humour. For Lerche, it was obviously important to befriend the great poet, who was his senior in age, and whose fame gave him a special position in the artistic and intellectual life of Norway and Europe. Lerche needed Bjørnson in his effort and engagement to present Norwegian art to the Italian and European public, and not least to promote his own career and work.

What was the historical context of these three key artworks by Lerche in Bjørnson's home, and the relationship between Lerche and Bjørnson?

Hans Stoltenberg Lerche

Hans Stoltenberg Lerche was born in Düsseldorf, where his father, the well-known Norwegian genre artist Vincent Stoltenberg Lerche (1837-1892), had been living since 1856. After studying to be a ceramic artist in Düsseldorf, he studied for one year at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence in 1886; in 1891 he finally left home for Paris where he would remain for many years. He travelled frequently to Naples, where he sketched life under water at the famous city aquarium, making his way by selling illustrations to magazines.¹ His father helped him start a career by introducing his art to exhibitions in Kristiania at the *Kristiania Kunstforening* (Art Society), and at the *Düsseldorf Kunstverein*.²

In Paris, Lerche became a successful producer of applied arts. He mass-produced jewels, medallions, statuettes, and vases in a variety of materials, often richly combined. He worked with the renowned foundries of Adrien Hébrard, Paul Louchet, and later Eugène Blot.³ The ceramics and pewter factory Goldscheider located both in Vienna and Paris, also mass-produced his designs. Lerche first exhibited at the *Salon des Beaux-Arts* in 1895, and on a regular basis after that. He always mixed smaller works in the sculpture section with ceramics and other applied arts in the section for *arts decoratifs*.⁴

Lerche's real breakthrough as an artist of applied arts was at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1900. He was awarded a gold medal for his bronze statuettes, and a silver medal for his ceramic work.⁵ He moved to Rome in 1901, and that city would be his home for the rest of his life. In Rome, he also established himself as a portraitist, and he was especially successful in making portraits of children. He actively promoted Norwegian artists in Italy, and seems to have opened doors for many. At the *Esposizione internazionale d'arte decorativa moderna* in Turin in 1902, he invited the Norwegian textile artist Frida Hansen to exhibit

¹ Pica 1906a; Pica knew Lerche and followed him over many years.

² Kristiania changed its name to Oslo in 1925.

³ 4814: *La revue du Musée d'Orsay* 22, Printemps 2006, 75.

⁴ Exposition 1895, 54, 57, 62.

⁵ Hammer 1904, 69, 73.

alongside him.⁶ The exhibition was an enormous success for both. Here, he established himself at the forefront of contemporary *art nouveau* decorative arts in Europe.⁷

Lerche's next great success was at the *Biennale di Venezia* in 1905, which also enabled him to become an active supporter of the first independent Norwegian exhibition at the *Bienale* in 1907. From 1911 on, his artistic development took another direction, and he turned to art glass production in Venice in cooperation with the workshop *Fratelli Toso*. This was a final turning point in his career. His revolutionary glass art made him an artist of international standing, paving the way for modern Venetian glass design. His career tragically ended when he died from the Spanish flu on 17 April 1920, only 52 years old. Today, Hans Stoltenberg Lerche is almost unknown in Norway, but he is considered one of the most important artists of the *art nouveau* movement in Italy.⁸

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and his home at Aulestad

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910) was a national writer, poet, public debater, and a central figure in Norwegian and European arts, intellectual life, and politics throughout his career. Bjørnson received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1903. He would write to people and in newspapers all over Europe, and was engaged in most political and social issues of the day. He spent long periods in Paris and Rome throughout his artistic life. Both cities gave him inspiration, new perspectives, and the ability to work undisturbed. Bjørnson came to Rome for the first time in 1860. As a young author, he soon became central in the Scandinavian and Roman artistic communities, and in the *Circolo Scandinavo* which was established that same year. He was at the same time engaged in Italian contemporary life, learned Italian and had Italian and international friends and contacts. In his lifetime, he returned five more times to Rome, and spent in all around ten years of his life in that city. He had an enormously strong personality, and expected to be at the centre of all goings on, wherever he was.

Bjørnson bought a beautiful and impressive farm at Aulestad north of Lillehammer in 1874. This became his home in Norway for the rest of his life. The home at Aulestad is unique, since nothing has been moved after his wife Karoline died in 1934, 98 years old, creating a very special time warp. It is peppered with art gifts and memorabilia from Rome. Sculptures and small models and souvenirs are spread all over tables, desks, and shelves. Paintings, photographs, reproductions, and other prints cover the walls. Some were given by well-known masters, some are reproductions, and some are family photographs or greetings from aspiring artists and intellectuals. His dear friend, the painter Christian Meyer Ross (1843-1904), is represented by three famous portrait paintings of the Bjørnson family and several lesser works and studies. Of course, several portraits of the poet himself, both in the form of paintings and photographs, adorn most rooms. There are engravings by Piranesi and Vasi from Rome amongst a great deal of other *vedute* of the city. There are also many plaster casts, models, and plaster portrait heads of famous artists, intellectuals, and writers. Amongst these are the three works by Hans Stoltenberg Lerche.

⁶ Pica 1903; Hansen to Schirmer 1901.

⁷ Pica 1906a.

⁸ Quesada 1992; Quesada 1996.

Un pas en avant – a caricature seal

In the far corner of the living room, behind Karoline Bjørnson's comfortable chair, some seemingly trivial small plaster objects have found their place (FIG. 1). One of these is an extraordinary little fellow, a sort of humanoid seal. In the museum catalogue of Aulestad, it is correctly characterised as a caricature of the French sculptor Auguste Rodin's (1840-1917) monument to the famous author Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850). What kind of an art piece is this? What would be the link between Rodin, Bjørnson, and Lerche? Why would Lerche create a piece that ridicules Rodin's famous monument to Balzac, and which even ended up in the home of Bjørnson at Aulestad?

The plaster figurine is 22 centimetres high. The plinth is engraved *Un pas en avant*, literally modelled in the seal's posture with its right foot, or rather flipper, sliding off the plinth and creating a mock classical contrapposto, almost a ballet posture, with its big head in a coquette tilt, arms also reduced to flippers - Balzac transformed into a seal (FIG. 2). The plaster seal was sold at the famous Parisian market of Montmartre just after the opening of the *Salon des Beaux-Arts* in the spring of 1898.⁹

This same year, Rodin presented his model for a monument to Balzac at the *Salon*, where the catalogue described it as the "clou" of the year, juxtaposed by Rodin with his full-scale marble version of the iconic work *The Kiss* from 1892, which the French government had commissioned (FIG. 3).¹⁰ Balzac's whole body, with arms, is enveloped in his foot length cape, as a monolith, crowned by his head which is turned up, lost in his own thoughts. His right foot steps forward, crossing the plinth. The whole effect is elevated, introvert and at the same time self-conscious. The monument had a very mixed reception. It was highly debated, both praised and ridiculed. Critical commentary described it as Balzac in a sack, Balzac as an owl, a toad, and a seal.¹¹ In his little seal, Lerche caught these special features and ridiculed the self-consciousness of the great writer and the portrait itself in just a few gestures.

What an insult! An artist of minor arts and commercial mass production, mocking the great Rodin himself! In *Le Gaulois* the seal was praised as a typical Parisian joke, which left Rodin with no choice but to laugh along. But the reception of the Balzac monument was the ultimate defeat in his artistic career.¹²

In the course of that year, Lerche's figurine gained a deeper significance, relating to Rodin's unwillingness to take a stand on the politically and socially overshadowing Dreyfus affair. Alfred Dreyfus (1859-1935) was a French officer of Jewish heritage who was falsely accused of treason and was sentenced to prison on Devil's Island in 1895. The scandal continued long after the real culprit had been identified, because of his acquittance and a subsequent cover-up by French military authorities. After that, Dreyfus was further accused. Dreyfus was eventually pardoned in 1899, but only exonerated and reinstated with his military rank in 1906.

The case divided both French and European society into two camps, where the establishment generally supported French authorities, while artists and intellectuals took the side of

⁹ *Le Gaulois* 1898.

¹⁰ Proust 1898, 93-95.

¹¹ *Dac.* 1898, 3.

¹² Butler 1993, 329.

Dreyfus. Bjørnson was, of course, deeply engaged in the matter. In January 1898, just six days after Émile Zola's famous letter "J'accuse" in the newspaper *L'Aurore*, Bjørnson published a letter of support in the same newspaper.¹³ At this point, Lerche lived in Paris, and Bjørnson in Rome.

As chairman of the *Société des Gens des Lettres*, Zola had commissioned Rodin to make a monument to Balzac in 1891. Zola lost his position in the French writer's society in 1894, and the new board was not satisfied with the very slow progress of the monument. Rodin finally presented his full-scale model at the *Salon* in April 1898. As mentioned, the reception was highly divided. He lost his commission, but a number of well-known artists, led by Zola, started fundraising for the monument. They were all sworn supporters of Dreyfus. Feeling himself drawn into the Dreyfus affair against his own will, Rodin simply withdrew the sculpture. He had no intention of taking a position, and for this he was also accused of cowardice. The sculpture was first finished 22 years after his death, in 1939.¹⁴

While this drama unfolded, Lerche seized the moment and the opportunity, and in a flash of inspiration, created his little plaster seal. His initially harmless joke had suddenly gained profound significance.

Lerche's correspondence to Bjørnson shows that the figurine did not please Rodin, but that both Lerche and Bjørnson obviously found it rather amusing. In his letter to Bjørnson in September 1906, Lerche is delighted that an Italian had found his way to Aulestad, where he found "una statuetta del 'Rudin' rapresentante un phoca".¹⁵ He hoped that the almighty Rodin, who, as word would have it, did not like his caricature, would not read the article in *La Tribuna*.¹⁶ Lerche obviously also saw the work for what it was, a pure caricature, and he never presented it at art exhibitions. However, this little figurine has in time found its way to the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Jersey, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, and of course there are copies at the Maison de Balzac and the Musée Rodin, both in Paris. This last copy is from the home of Rodin. As a part of his collection it was donated to the state in 1916. It might be a gift from Lerche, but that is hardly likely. If it were, Lerche probably would have mentioned it in his letter to Bjørnson.¹⁷ The tone in Lerche's letter of 1906 does not indicate that the little seal had been a gift from him to Bjørnson either; on the contrary, he seems surprised to find it at Aulestad, so Bjørnson must have acquired it in other ways. Bjørnson's active involvement in the Dreyfus affair would have triggered his enjoyment of the little seal.

The Dreyfus affair was prominent in all newspapers the year the Italian had been at Aulestad, since it was this year that the French officer was finally exonerated and the painful story officially concluded. In the aftermath, there was heated criticism of French authorities throughout the year. Lerche's figurine may have had some sort of revival in its popularity because of its association with the case.

¹³ Zola 1898; Bjørnson 1898.

¹⁴ Butler 1993, 315-329.

¹⁵ Lerche to Bjørnson 1906.

¹⁶ As far as we can see, the only article in *La Tribuna* that year describing a visit to Bjørnson's home was by an Italian actor, Vittorio Rossi-Pianelli, on 12.07.1906, p. 3. This article describes a pleasant visit at Aulestad in February. There is no mention of any art objects in the house. Maybe someone described the home of Bjørnson somewhere else, and Lerche had mixed up his memory.

¹⁷ Lerche to Bjørnson 1906.

There is no doubt that Rodin was the greatest sculptor of his time, casting a shadow over all other contemporaries. In 1912 he went to Rome to celebrate the placement of a bronze cast of his work, *L'homme qui marche*, at the French Embassy in the famous renaissance Palazzo Farnese. It depicts a powerful nude male torso with legs, striding energetically on a low base. Several Italian artists were invited to the occasion.¹⁸ During the honorary dinner at an elegant restaurant, the assembled artists were challenged to make a simple sketch of the great master on the back of their menu cards. And, of course, the sharp-witted Lerche made not just one, but two sketches (FIG. 4). One of them clearly refers to his own earlier caricature of Rodin's work. In the sketch, Rodin holds up a small statuette of a nude boy child, almost a putto, cut off at the chest. The forefoot steps off the monumental base, just like in Rodin's Balzac, and as amplified in Lerche's caricature seal. He just couldn't help himself.

A portrait statuette of Pope Leo XIII

The second plaster figurine behind Karoline Bjørnson's chair, is a portrait statuette of Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) (FIG. 5). It is a surprising and innovative work, a monumental expression in miniature, only 31 cm high. We meet an over ninety years old pope, sunk in St. Peter's chair, weighed down by the great papal tiara. He almost seems to be tipping over. The right hand is broken off, but from other copies of the statuette, we know that his bony, old hand is lifted in a gesture of blessing. It may seem strange that his gaze does not follow this gesture, towards his congregation. The Pope looks to earth, maybe as a farewell. He looks down in tender sadness and love, an emaciated old man, with a mild, smiling expression. The Leo XIII portrait is inscribed *S. Pietro 3. Marzo 1903*. It has been cast both in plaster and in bronze.

The statuette had actually already been exhibited in 1902 at the *Salon des Beaux-Arts* and at the same time in the *Esposizione internazionale d'arte decorativa moderna* in Turin.¹⁹ How could this be? Lerche came to Rome probably in the autumn of 1901. He needed to establish himself in the eternal city. What better way than to portray the pope himself? He must have done it almost immediately, to be able to exhibit in the spring of 1902. However, there is still the mystery of why the statuette was redated from 1902 to 1903. We propose that Lerche simply did this after the Pope died in July 1903. It would boost his sales to have a statuette dated in March of that year.

Pope Leo XIII is historically viewed as the first "modern" pope, as he wished to bring the Church closer to modern life: to daily life, church life, and the ecumenical experience. The modernity of Lerche's little monument mirrors this. The portrait of the Pope is very realistic, with robes and pontificalia, whilst the Chair of St. Peter is briefly outlined, almost scenographically sketched in one solid block, framing him clearly as head of the church. The abstracted symbol of papal authority encompasses and almost oppresses the old man, suffocating him with symbols of his authority.

This is the first of Lerche's papal portraits. He portrayed all three popes who reigned during his adult life. He was obviously enormously proud of this statuette, which he also used as

¹⁸ G.B. 1912, 253.

¹⁹ Baschet (ed.) 1902, cat. no 130, a plaster copy in the sculpture department and cat. no. 153, a bronze copy in the department for *objets d'art*; Pica 1903, 85-92.

a prop in a portrait made by a painter named F. Hornisch (FIG. 6). He kept the painting in his studio, and it appears in several photographs of the artist surrounded by his art. In the summer of 1906, the succeeding pope, Pius X, received Lerche. Lerche presented him with a sketch for a small portrait which Pius had allowed him to make while praying in St. Peter's Basilica. Lerche's opening had been the enormous success of the statuette depicting Leo XIII.²⁰ A full-scale sculpture was hardly ever Lerche's plan. His artistic success consisted in making small statues, figurines, and objects, and selling a number of copies. However, for any ambitious artist in Rome, portraying the pope would be important. The funeral monument for the Lateran Basilica was designed by the Italian artist Giulio Tadolini (1849-1918), in a traditional monumental style, and became that artist's most recognised work, quite different from Lerche's approach. It was finished in 1907.

Lerche exhibited the statuette throughout his career. It was shown at the *Esposizione Internazionale del Sempione* in Milan in 1906, and then at his great solo exhibition in Berlin in 1909.²¹ Three variants turned up at the *Panama-Pacific International Exposition* in San Francisco in 1915.²² Since it was as successful as *La Tribuna* described it, it must have been widely shown and available for sale. There is scarce information on the sculpture's exhibition life but it must surely have been both known and exposed for sale for many years. It was even shown at the Galleria Pesaro in Milan in his solo exhibition in January 1920, just before he died.²³

The Leo XIII portrait was also produced in different versions, as shown in the S. Francisco exhibition in 1915. Besides the original as at Aulestad, there is one where only the torso is depicted, liberated from the throne. The chair that oppresses the pope is omitted and the bust is monumentalized on a marble plinth, shifting the focus. There is also a bronze medallion showing the same motif in profile, in which the sunken old man is suffocating under the collar of his robes, and a hand is raised in a simple gesture of benediction. This medallion is more in line with the statuette at Aulestad.

In addition to Bjørnson's copy at Aulestad, another was given to their mutual friend, the author Bernt Lie, for whom Lerche also made a medallion portrait.²⁴ Bjørnson was always eager to discuss religion, and had a profound respect for the Catholic church.²⁵ It is, however, hard to believe that he would actually buy the statuette. It must have been a gift from the artist, probably given in the hope of an introduction into the social circle of the great Bjørnson. Furthermore, very few contemporary artworks in Bjørnson's home seem to have been acquisitions; they are mostly gifts from artist friends and admirers. At Aulestad, the statuette may not have had such a great impact, but as long as Bjørnson kept it exposed on a mantelpiece in Rome, Lerche knew that it would be seen by a great number of people, and many important people at that.

We believe that the placement of both the portrait statuette of Pope Leo XIII and the Rodin mock seal, as we encounter them at Aulestad today, is the original presentation. This is

²⁰ *La Tribuna*, 22.06.1906, 2, 'Arte, lettere e scienze': "...del quale tutti hanno presente il grande successo ottenuto col piccolo ritratto di Leone XIII in cattedra...".

²¹ Pica 1906b; *Sonderausstellung von Hans St. Lerche, Rom, Künstlerhaus Berlin, December 1909*.

²² San Francisco 1915, xxiii, 112.

²³ Pica 1920, catalogue no. 120.

²⁴ Lie to Lerche 1904.

²⁵ e.g. Hoem 2011: 432-433.

not confirmed by the photographs by the photographer Anders Beer Wilse, who took a series of photographs at Aulestad in 1908. In this series, the home is obviously styled for the photographer, just as in modern ‘at home’ feature articles in glossy magazines. Family photos are tidily placed, and all the minor ceramics, plasters, silver pieces, and everyday flowers and bustle are non-present. But in photographs of Karoline as an old woman in her favourite chair, their placement is clear.²⁶

The master of the house in bronze

“Ich möchte Ihnen gern eine Büste verehren von dem Modell, für welches Sie mir so freundschaftlich im Frühjahr gesessen haben”, Lerche wrote in his letter to Bjørnson in 1905.²⁷

This monumental bust, or rather half-figure, has found a prominent place in the main hall at Aulestad (FIG. 7). The bust is not very big, only 52 cm high, but has a monumental appearance. The head is modelled with precision, giving a fresh and direct portrayal, whilst the torso is more sketchily outlined. The likeness is striking, Bjørnson’s characteristic features are strengthened and at the same time distil his character. The hair and eyebrows are especially exaggerated. The torso is rather heavy, even slightly oversized in comparison to the head. His right, writer’s hand, relaxes in his lap, whilst the left hand disappears into nowhere, as does the rest of his body. On the back of the torso we learn this is the very first bronze copy: *Bjoernstjerne Bjoernson, cire perdue No. 1, modelée et retouchée d’après nature, Rome 20. 4. 1905, H. St. Lerche.*

Lerche continues his letter to Bjørnson by saying that he wishes to cast only the head for him, “... da die Figur schwer wirkt! Ich glaube dass der Kopf allein ein completeres Werk wird als auf dem zu halben Körper”. In hindsight, the monumental torso adds weight and authority to the portrait. At what point and by whom the decision to cast a complete bust for Bjørnson was made is not known. The inscription says that the bust was modelled on 20 April 1905, less than a month before Bjørnson left Rome after a staying a whole year. According to Lerche’s own notes, Bjørnson’s second sitting was on 4 April.²⁸ On that occasion, Bjørnson spoke constantly, joking with Lerche’s wife and talked about Lerche’s father, Vincent Stoltenberg Lerche, whom he had known at school.

The transport of the bust from Italy was arranged through the Norwegian art dealer Blomqvist in February of 1906.²⁹ The bust arrived at Aulestad in August, and on the sixteenth of the same month, Bjørnson wrote to thank for the work. He was most pleased with it, even though at first he found it a little dry. But now, the bust had settled in, and his family was happy to have it in their midst.³⁰ In September 1906, Lerche wrote to Bjørnson in response, advising him that the bronze be polished with a wool cloth to soften the appearance.³¹

²⁶ Jubileumsalbum 1932, 11; Photograph: Karoline Bjørnson 1930.

²⁷ Lerche to Bjørnson 1905.

²⁸ Lerche, Gespräche 1905.

²⁹ Blomqvist 1908.

³⁰ Bjørnson to Lerche 1906: “Til å begynne med fant vi den lit tørr, men nu, den er blet husvant, glæder vi os alle ved å have den blant os. Tusen, tusen tak!”

³¹ Lerche to Bjørnson 1906: “Soviel ich verstehe fanden Sie zuerst die Büste etwas trocken; sie gewinnt durch frottieren mit einem wollenen Lappen! Es freut mich aber dass Sie sie im Grunde doch schätzen.”

The bust was clearly a gift from the artist to Bjørnson, and it seems that Lerche also paid for the freight, since the invoice remained with Lerche. Of course, Bjørnson was a popular model and in much demand among both Norwegian and foreign artists, and was constantly photographed.

For Lerche, the portrait bust of Bjørnson was an important work. We can trace the bust through correspondence between the artist and his model, as well as through exhibitions around Europe, before it reached its final destination at Aulestad. Lerche writes to Bjørnson that he was very satisfied that it had been reproduced in the German magazine *Der Tag*.³² It was also presented in *Die Woche* in 1905, where there is a brief notice with a photograph of the plaster cast and another of Lerche in his studio with his bust of Bjørnson.³³

The bronze bust was exhibited for the very first time in Berlin in the late summer of 1905. Lerche intended it for an exhibition in Munich that same spring, but the work was finished too late.³⁴ This is almost certainly the same bronze that was sent to Norway in February 1906.

In the spring of 1906 Lerche exhibited the original plaster model in Rome, now with bronze patination. While he had been away travelling, someone had knocked off the eyebrows, which irritated him immensely.³⁵ He then had it sent to Milan for repair before the all-important *Esposizione Internazionale del Sempione*, which took place from 28 April to 11 November that year.³⁶ However, in his letter to Bjørnson, Lerche writes that it arrived after he himself had left. Lerche was broadly represented at the exhibition with statues, ceramics, bronzes and lesser works, and a workshop must have repaired Bjørnson's eyebrows. That same spring, he also exhibited a bronze bust at the *Salon* in Paris, together with three other bronze sculptural works and other decorative works in different materials.³⁷

On 3 August there was a tragic fire, which caused great damage to the *Esposizione* in Milan. It destroyed most of the exhibition of Italian applied arts, where Lerche was represented. He lost every single one of his works, none of which were insured.³⁸ The original plaster model of Bjørnson was also lost.³⁹ In the weekly insert of the newspaper *La Tribuna*, *La Tribuna Illustrata*, the destruction of his work was one of the main stories. Lerche hastily arranged for works to be sent from Paris, Rome, and Berlin while the pavilion itself was rebuilt in record time.⁴⁰

In 1907, with the pain of the fire still a fresh memory, Lerche presented his *Cire perdue No. 2* at the *Biennale di Venezia*, where it was also acquired for the *Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna*.⁴¹ The Bjørnson portrait was presented at the *Sala Norvegese*. He presented

³² *Der Tag* 1905.

³³ *Die Woche* 1905, 1628. The bust is reproduced alongside a photograph of Lerche in his studio.

³⁴ Lerche to Bjørnson 1905.

³⁵ Lerche to Bjørnson 1906: "Das original Gipsmodell von Ihren Büste war 'bronsiert' in der Ausstellung von Rom dieses Frühjahr. Im meiner Abwesenheit, ich war in Paris und Mailand, wurden von böser Bubenhand die Augenbrauen beide abgeschlagen!"

³⁶ Pica 1906a.

³⁷ Hérissé 1906, Bjørnson no. 1853.

³⁸ According to *La Tribuna* 04.08.1906, he lost works at the total value of over 100 000 lire.

³⁹ Lerche to Bjørnson 1906: The letter to Bjørnson continues, saying that the original plaster model was "mitverbrannt".

⁴⁰ *La Tribuna Illustrata* 1906: 505, 520-522.

⁴¹ Venezia 1907: *Sala Norvegese*, 38-39. The sculpture was bought by the *Associazione Industriali e Commercianti Veneziani* who donated it to the *Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna di Venezia* the same year. *Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna, Venezia*, inv. no. 0360.

innovative works in the *Sala Internazionale, L'Arte del Sogno*, and his new papal portrait of Pius X in the *Sala di Roma*, together with Italian artists.⁴² He had now exchanged his Leo XIII for Pius X; it was necessary to move on in time. The statuette of Leo XIII was by now five years old, and had probably been shown at many important exhibitions over the previous few years. The two years old Bjørnson portrait, on the other hand, was perfect in a section where Norway presented itself for the first time as an independent nation.

Pope Leo XIII and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson – Lerche's two most diffused works

There is no doubt that Lerche's portraits of Pope Leo XIII and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson are absolutely central to this period in his artistic life. The renowned Italian art critic Vittorio Pica described Lerche's art at the 1906 Milan exhibition in the bimestrial periodic *Emporium* three times that year. First, an ovation in June, then a lament for its loss in the great fire in September, and lastly, an admiring notice in November regarding Lerche's ability to call in works from Rome, Berlin, and Paris to create an exhibition of the same high standard as the lost art.⁴³ Vittorio Pica gave Lerche's portraits of both Bjørnson and Leo XIII high praise:

“[Bjørnson]...pure attenendosi con lodevole scrupolo alla rassomiglianza fisica, ha rivelato la dote non comune di saper cogliere l'espressione psicologica di una fisionomia di pensatore e di artista. Ma laddove il Lerche è riuscito a raggiungere come scultore un eccezionale efficacia è nella minuscola statuetta, che rappresenta Leone XIII sul trono papale, mentre solleva stancamente la mano per benedire la folla e piega la testa emaciata e stanca sotto il grave peso del triregno.”⁴⁴

As mentioned, Lerche had a solo exhibition at the *Künstlerhaus Berlin* in 1909. The comprehensive catalogue shows that both the bust of Bjørnson and the statuette of Leo XIII were for sale, along with bronze medallions of both.

In the catalogue Lerche has scribbled prices, revealing that the Bjørnson bust was available both in plaster and bronze.⁴⁵ The number of copies sold in Europe and beyond, and in plaster or bronze, is impossible to say. Now, the two works went hand in hand, promoted at all occasions and every opportunity. Lerche's statuette portrait of Pope Leo XIII was a popular piece from its conception and throughout his life. It was supplemented by the later portraits of Pope Pius X and Pope Benedict XV, but these never acquired the same following.

Lerche continued exhibiting the portrait sculptures of Bjørnson and Leo XIII for many years. For example, he showed them both in different versions at the mentioned *Panama-Pacific International Exposition* in San Francisco in 1915, while showing Leo XIII in Milan in January 1920. Here he exhibited a total of 272 works, just three months before he died.⁴⁶

⁴² Steen 2000: 183-199.

⁴³ Pica 1906a; Pica 1906b, 178; Pica 1906c, 340.

⁴⁴ Pica 1906a, 418.

⁴⁵ Sonderausstellung 1909.

⁴⁶ Pica 1920.

Hans Stoltenberg Lerche's relationship with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson

When Bjørnson returned to Rome in 1904 for the sixth time, Lerche was on the board of the *Circolo Scandinavo*, to which he had been elected in 1903.⁴⁷ He was obviously busy making contacts in the Scandinavian milieu. Lerche was now a good friend of the author Bernt Lie, who Bjørnson cherished highly, but he probably was not close to Bjørnson's dearest friend, the Norwegian painter Christian Meyer Ross. This friendship went back many years.⁴⁸ In his 1905 letter, Lerche offered Bjørnson any practical help in Rome, knowing well that this had always been the privilege of the now deceased Ross.

Lerche's approach to the *Circolo Scandinavo* seems to be in many ways parallel to that of Bjørnson in his own time. A young man, ambitious and enthusiastic, he threw himself into Scandinavian social life. Over time, Bjørnson had gained enough prominence in his own right to expect society to visit him at his home.⁴⁹ He kept an open house, and only went to the *Circolo Scandinavo* in the beginning of April 1905, to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of H.C. Andersen. This was the first time in many years that Bjørnson had set foot there.⁵⁰ Lerche, for his own part, may have felt his Norwegian and Scandinavian identity was less important as he became more famous and moved on to new enterprises in Venice.

We must assume that Lerche managed to work his way into Bjørnson's circle by 1905, since the famous writer agreed to a sitting. Bjørnson would have known that Lerche, true to type, planned to mass produce the bust, and approved of his skills as a portraitist. He was no stranger to sitting for a portrait, and perhaps the idea of having his profile circulated throughout Europe did not displease him. Nevertheless, as may be seen in the brief sketch Lerche jotted down to summarize their second sitting, the tone was amiable and Bjørnson spoke and lectured without pause.⁵¹

The first letter to Bjørnson at Aulestad, from September 1905, is written in German, in an almost formal tone, and it would seem that the two did not know each other well at that point.⁵² But Bjørnson's answer in Norwegian, just a few days later, is much more personal. He complains that his previous year's income does not allow a trip to Rome, and also offers his views on the ongoing separation between Norway and Sweden, explaining the matter to Lerche, who probably knew little about Norwegian politics and political debate.⁵³

In the same letter from 1905, Lerche asked Bjørnson directly for help in creating a Norwegian section at the *Esposizione Internazionale* in Milan the following year. Without delay, Bjørnson relayed the request to the Norwegian artist Gerhard Munthe in September, and in the above-mentioned letter to Lerche, confirmed the same day that he had written to Munthe. Munthe immediately replied to Lerche that he was uninterested and found mass exhibitions to

⁴⁷ *Circolo Scandinavo: Generalforsamlingsprotokol*, D2, 1879-1904, 125-129; *Circolo Scandinavo: Generalforsamlingsprotokol* D5, 1904-1924, 1-46.

⁴⁸ Lie to Lerche 1903; Lie to Lerche 1904; Ross 1902; Hoem 2011: 469-473. There is no remaining correspondence or signs of direct contact between C.M. Ross and Lerche.

⁴⁹ Ross 1902, 474: "I Rom går han nødig ud, men er overordentlig glad ved at se sine venner hos sig..."

⁵⁰ Hoffmeyer 1927, 85.

⁵¹ Lerche, *Gespräche* 1905.

⁵² Lerche to Bjørnson 1905.

⁵³ Bjørnson to Lerche 1905.

be a waste, referring to the Turin exhibition in 1902. That exhibition had in fact been an enormous success for both Lerche and Frida Hansen.⁵⁴

Bjørnson's 1906 letter thanking Lerche for the bust is jovial, inviting Lerche and his dear wife and quick little boy to come to Aulestad. Lerche's response to Bjørnson in late September 1906 takes on a much more intimate tone, and is written in a more relaxed hand. By now, they were obviously on more familiar terms, as can be seen with the reference to the caricature seal and the fire in Milan show. They also had mutual friends and acquaintances among Norwegian and Italian artists.

After the 1906 fire in Milan, Lerche, always looking forward, asked for help again. He was now a sort of agent for the projected Norwegian section at the *Biennale di Venezia* of 1907, for which he was actively preparing. He had written to the painter Eilif Peterssen to invite him to exhibit, and had visited Venice together with Gerhard Munthe, who was going to decorate the Norwegian section.⁵⁵ However, he was disappointed with the response of the Norwegian government, and asked Bjørnson to pull some strings to move things forward. This time, Norway had its own exhibition of arts as an independent nation at the *Biennale di Venezia* for the first time.

Between 1904 to 1906, Lerche had clearly managed to befriend the great poet, his senior in every way.

Concluding remarks

Hans Stoltenberg Lerche was a master of applied arts, and obviously had a nose for popular motifs. A papal statuette and a bust of Bjørnson would give him respect in the artistic community and, at the same time, were highly vendable. The caricature seal, on the other hand, was a spur-of-the-moment trinket created for the sharp-witted Parisian society, never exhibited as an art object.

Lerche had obviously befriended Bjørnson by 1905. They also had mutual friends and acquaintances in both the Norwegian and Roman artistic communities. This asymmetrical relationship was seemingly amicable. Lerche's mercantile approach to art seems not to have bothered Bjørnson, who readily lent his name to help the younger artist. The friendship was of great help to Lerche in his attempts to create a network within the Norwegian artistic community, and in promoting his own career.

We propose that the plaster cast of Leo XIII was given to Bjørnson during the period of 'courtship' in 1904-1905, before the sitting in April 1905. Bjørnson was obviously happy and grateful for the portrait bust by Lerche, but Lerche was required to pay all the expenses, including transport of the bust to Norway, well knowing that he would make good sales on the portrait – which again would also serve Bjørnson's own vanity. The Rodin seal figurine, however, had most probably found a home with Bjørnson by other means.

The three works that represent Lerche in Bjørnson's home at Aulestad are key pieces in Lerche's artistic career. Lerche may not have appreciated the caricature seal as such, but today it has historical significance. Each of the portraits, of Pope Leo XIII and Bjørnstjerne

⁵⁴ Bjørnson to Munthe 1905; Munthe to Lerche 1905.

⁵⁵ Lerche to Peterssen 1906; Fradeletto to Munthe 1906.

Bjørnson, was respected in its own right, and helped carrying his contemporary fame into its next phase, when Lerche moved on to his ground-breaking involvement with glass design in Venice.

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FIG. 1: The living room at Aulestad, Karoline Bjørnson's corner. Photograph: O. Steen and K. Gulowsen.



FIG. 2: Hans Stoltenberg Lerche, *Un pas en avant*, 1898. Photograph: O. Steen and K. Gulowsen.

FIG. 3: Auguste Rodin, *Honoré de Balzac*, Musée Rodin, Photograph: Beyond My Ken, Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).



FIG. 4: Lerche's menu card sketch of Rodin with 'L'homme qui marche'. *Noi e il mondo rivista, mensile de La Tribuna*, 1912, p. 253.



FIG. 5: Hans Stoltenberg Lerche, *Pope Leo XIII* at Aulestad. Photograph: O. Steen and K. Gulowsen.



FIG. 6: F. Hornisch, *Portrait of Lerche*, undated, private collection. Photograph: ©Claudia Muzii.

FIG. 7: Hans Stoltenberg Lerche, *Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson*, Photograph: Stavdahl, Leif / Aulestad, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's home.



FIG. 8: *Lerche in his studio in Rome*, date and photographer unknown. Private collection.

