



Edvard Diriks: A Viking on Montparnasse

Øystein Sjastad

Øystein Sjastad is associate professor in art history at the Department of Philosophy, History of Ideas and Art and Classical Languages, University of Oslo. He has written the books *Christian Krohg. From Paris to Kristiania* (2012), *A Theory of the Tache in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (2014) and *Christian Krohg's Naturalism* (2017).

oystein.sjastad@ifikk.uio.no

SUMMARY

Few Norwegian artists have had as much success in Paris as Edvard Diriks (1855–1930). In the years between 1899 and 1922, which are here called "the late French period", he was well integrated into the international avant-garde milieu at Montparnasse. In contrast to an often lukewarm mention in Norwegian criticism and art history, he was truly celebrated as an original landscape painter by several French critics. This article examines what the French critics emphasized and admired in Diriks' art. He was nicknamed "the Scandinavian giant" and "the painter of the wind" and was seen as a modern Viking - rough, energetic, primitive and original. These are also terms that were used to describe his pictures.

Keywords

Landscape, Paris, art criticism, post-impressionism, Marius-Ary Leblond

ABSTRACT

Few Norwegian artists have had the same kind of success in Paris as Edvard Diriks (1855–1930). He flourished in the years between 1899 and 1922, here called "the late French period", well integrated into the international avant-garde milieu at Montparnasse. Unlike his rather cool reception by Norwegian critics and art historians, he has been celebrated as an original landscapist by French critics. This article will investigate what the French critics noticed and admired in his art. Diriks got nicknames such as "the Scandinavian giant" and "painter of winds" and was perceived as a modern Viking - rough, energetic, primitive and original. These are also terms that were used to describe his paintings.

Keywords

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Diriks' art has always had difficulties to contend with and has always been marked by it. He is a heavy-handed artist, an artist with more raw power than taste. His big strong body, his hardy and rough-built limbs speak more strongly through what he has painted than his spirit. [...] His art, in its primitive brutality, is the antipode of Thaulow's feinschmäcklerier - the pure chaos of "these bad, bluish-sour colours", which gourmands hate.

But Diriks' art has undeniably attracted considerable attention in recent years in Europe, especially in radical artistic circles in Paris. His colleagues at home have had difficulty understanding this "success", unable to explain it and partly questioning it. But it is a fact.

Jens Thiis¹

At the very beginning of the book *In Smaa Day trips to and from Paris* (1897) wrote Christian Krohg about the departure from Kristiania, on the way to more southern regions. The last person Krohg caught a glimpse of from the ship before he left Norway was Edvard Diriks: "When we passed Næsodden, Diriks was standing there on the outermost pinnacle in Jägerskorte sleeves, waiting for the freshness of the sunset wind".² This sentence sums up the peculiarity of Diriks' personality and art: In the landscape - at the very edge - wearing sportswear and ready to face the raw nature with brush and palette. In 1909 described *Le Temps* Diriks as pure temperament and instinct with a sense for the wild, fierce and epic Scandinavian nature. He had, according to the French critic, the same spirit as the legends from the Norse sagas.³ Louis Vauxcelles i *Gil Blas* called Diriks "one of the best among our younger ones" in 1904, and in the same year Arsène Alexandre stated that Diriks was possibly among the most remarkable landscape painters he had seen.⁴

Alexandre, who often wrote about Diriks, claimed that "Edvard Diriks is a dramatist of landscapes, just as Ibsen is a landscape painter of the soul. It is impossible to watch his paintings unfold without being surprised, upset [*trouble*] and finally the grip [*subjugated*]"⁵

What was it about Diriks' art that excited the French critics in the capital of the avant-garde? The answer may be found in the view of Diriks as a modern Viking chieftain. Even Jappe Nilssen wrote that Diriks was "an excellent painter, an honest mind and *men down to the bone*"⁶ [my edit.]. In Paris, Diriks was seen as a wild, uneducated artist who painted as a Viking would see nature: primitive, fast and violent.⁷ He was presented as masculine, single-

1. Jens Thiis, *Norwegian painters and sculptors*, volume 2 (Bergen: John Grieg, 1907), 326–7.

2. Christian Krohg, i *Small day trips to and from Paris* (Christiania: Aschehoug, 1897), 2.

3. *Le Temps*, 13 December, 1909. "Le peintre Edvard Diriks, dont on expose, galerie Druet, rue Royale, une centaine de tableaux ou d'esquisses, n'est de tempérament et d'instinct. Il a le goût de grandeur âpre et de combativité farouche que les vieilles Sagas scandinaves prêtent aux héros légendaires qu'elles célèbrent, et ses interprétations de la more violente et rageuse capricieuse des fjords, ses traductions d'un ciel de perpétuelles tormentes, ont des allures d'une rudesse épique'.

4. Louis Vauxcelles, "Exposition Diriks", *Gil Blas*, 26 March, 1904; Arsène Alexandre, "I. Les Indépendants", *Le Figaro*, 22 February, 1904.

5. Arsene Alexandre, "De Paris à Christiania", *Comoedia*, 4 Dec., 1909. "Edvard Diriks est un dramaturge de paysages, comme Ibsen fut un paysagiste d'âmes. Il est impossible de voir se unroller la suite de ses peintures sans être surpris, troublé, et enfin subjugué».

6. Cited in *Stavanger Aftenblad*, March 18, 1930.

7. Marcel Pays, "Le peintre Edvard Diriks", *Laugh Radically*, 28 Feb., 1913. See also the reference to Thiis in note 2 and Thiis' contribution in Harald Aars et al., *Norwegian art history*, volume 2 (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1927), 478–9.

clever and hardy both in text and pictures. These qualities, the critics believed, were reflected in the wild and raw paintings.

THE FRENCH NORMAN

The French sculptor Antoine Bourdelle stated in 1920 that Diriks' art presented a French Norway [*une Norvège française*].⁸In Norway, Diriks was known as the painter in Paris, and in Paris he was "the famous Scandinavian master".⁹He is an artist who is mentioned in the margins of Norwegian art history and rarely exhibited. He is best known for his folders with diary notes and drawings which are in the National Library; a source filled with anecdotes about Norwegian and French personalities. Diriks' paintings, on the other hand, are rarely included in any art historical discourse, even though he was one of the most exhibited and discussed Norwegian painters in Paris in the years after 1900. One reason for this is, according to Vibeke Röstorp, that Scandinavian artists whose careers were primarily in Paris in the late 19th or early 20th century was overlooked by contemporary and later art historians.¹⁰They did not fit into the national narrative of the artists' return home after years of study abroad. Röstorp points out that at the Salon d'Automne in 1906 Diriks' *Nuages en mer Effet de ciel sur l'eau* (1906) (ill. 1) placed in the general department, and not in the Scandinavian one. Later that year, he was represented with six works at the Galerie Druet exhibition "L'exposition des Artistes français", together with works by Émile Bernard, Pierre Bonnard, Henri Edmond Cross and Maurice Denis.¹¹As Röstorp shows through numerous examples, Diriks was well integrated into the Parisian art environment, and perhaps that is why he has never been given a "fixed place" in Norwegian art history? Diriks has never been forgotten, but the mention of his art has undoubtedly gradually died down over the years. This is paradoxical in view of the large number of mentions and good criticisms in the contemporary French press.

THE LATE FRENCH PERIOD

Edvard Diriks is part of the golden age generation in Norwegian art. He first had ambitions to become an architect and studied at the Polytechnic College in Karlsruhe in 1874. Here he became part of a circle of art students that included Christian Krohg, Frits Thaulow and Max Klinger.¹²He accompanied Krohg and Klinger to Berlin and continued his architectural studies there until 1877. Then he decided to become a painter instead. He was perhaps inspired by his painters-

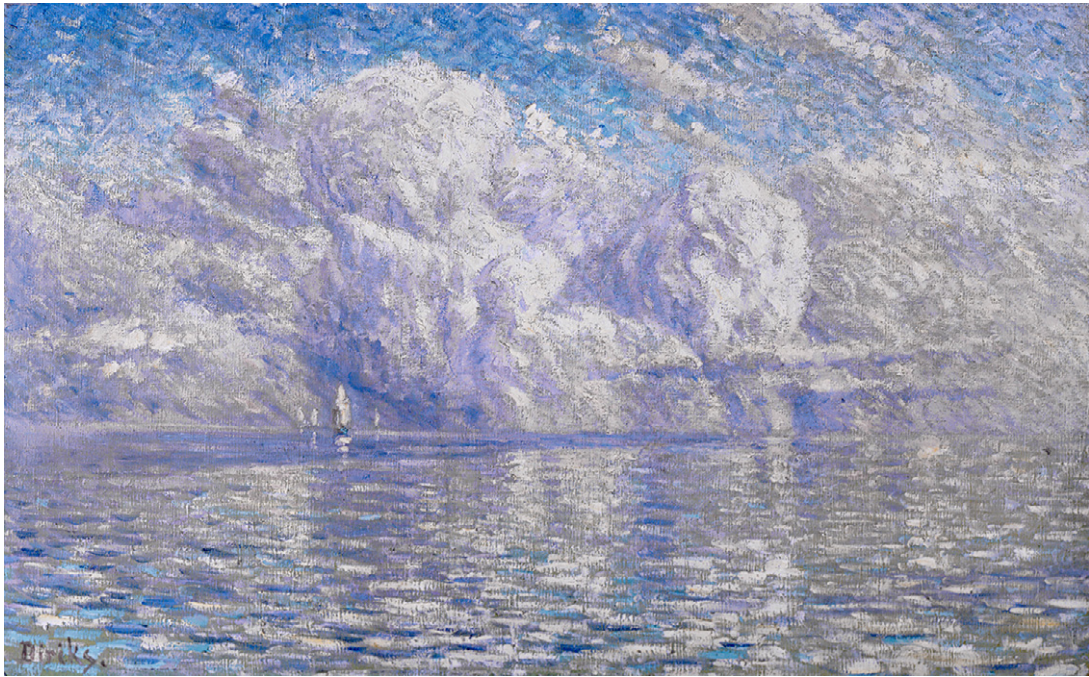
8. Quoted in F. Jean-Desthieux, "Le peintre Diriks", *L'Homme Libre*, 17 October, 1920.

9. Vanderpyl, "Le vernissage du Salon d'automne", *Le Petit Parisien*, September 25, 1925.

10. Vibeke Röstorp, *Le myth de retour. Les artistes scandinaves en France de 1889 à 1908* (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2013).

11. *Ibid.*, 275 and 148-149.

12. The biographical information is paraphrased from Leif Østby, "Edvard Diriks", *Norwegian artist encyclopedia*, volume 1 (Oslo: University Press, 1982), 487-491. I also enjoyed the interview with Diriks in connection with his 70th birthday in *Aftenposten*, June 6, 1925. See also, Mentz Schulerud, *Norwegian artistic life* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1960), 332-337, 394-404 and 462-463; Arne Eggum and Jan Kokkin, *Rodin and Norway* (Oslo: Orfeus, 1998); and Frank Claustrat, "Edvard (Karl) Diriks", i *Échappées nordiques. Les maîtres scandinaves & finlandais en France - 1870/1914* (Lille: Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille/Somogy édition d'art, 2008), 102.



III. 1

Edvard Diriks: *Nuages en mer Effet de ciel sur l'eau*, 1906. Oil on canvas, 80.7 x 125.1 cm. Musées des Beaux-Arts de Dunkirk. Photo: Direction des Musées de Dunkerque, MBA.

friends; there are many amusing drawings from his student days in Germany that demonstrate the close relationship between these artists.¹³ Diriks made his debut as a painter in 1879 in Kristiania and Munich, with motifs from Weimar. In the years that followed, he painted a number of cityscapes from Kristiania.

He only came to Paris in 1882 and, like so many others, he became particularly interested in Impressionism. The great Claude Monet exhibition at Durand-Ruel in 1883 seems to have been decisive. The influence from Impressionism can be seen in *La Rue de Rome* (1883) which was accepted at the Salon.¹⁴ His paintings became brighter after these first years in Paris, but the biggest and most significant changes came in what I call his "late French period", from the latter part of the 1890s until he moved back to Norway in 1922.

Diriks moved from Norway in 1895 and traveled in Europe before finally settling in Paris in 1899, following the advice of the symbolist poet and critic Julien Leclercq. It wasn't long before he had a name in town. He often exhibited, and his apartment in Paris became a meeting place for both Scandinavian and French artists and intellectuals. For many years, Diriks was *itscan*

13. Several of these are reproduced in Schulerud, *Norwegian artistic life*, 333–7.

14. Today the picture is in the Canica Art Collection. See, Ella Woie, "Karl Edvard Diriks" in *From Dahl to Munch: Nordic painting from the Canica Art Collection*, ed. Knut Ljøgodt and Andrea Elia Kragerud (Tromsø: Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, 2015), 235–8.

the Dinavian artist for the Parisian art public.¹⁵ He sold several works to the French state, such as *Navy* (about. 1908), which is today in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay (ill. 2). In 1907 he received the Légion d'honneur (Legion of Honour), an event marked by a banquet in Diriks' honor, hosted by a group of friends that included Auguste Rodin, Bourdelle, Paul Fort, Gustave Kahn, Emile Verhaeren, the Leblond cousins and Stuart Merrill.¹⁶



III. 2

Edvard Diriks: *Navy*, possibly 1908. Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm. Musée d'Orsay. Photo: RMN/ Hervé Lewandowski.

15. Édouard Renard says the following in an interview in connection with an exhibition with Prince Eugen in 1929: "Les toiles de maîtres tels que Cézanne, Claude Monet, Signac ont pu vous montrer la route à suivre: mais, vous avez su regarder, avec vos yeux d'homme du nord, les perspectives que ces artistes vous avalent ouvertes. Nous connaissons déjà, des pays scandinaves, les monts calmes, les fjords, les ciels ouatés de beaux nuages, que nous en avait donné le Norvégien Diriks. C'est une tout autre vision de ces sites étranges, de ces effets si curieusement exceptionnels, que vous nous apportez aujourd'hui. Nous vous devons maintenant mille expressions merveilleuses de ce beau pays aux contrastes si marqués, aux forêts mystérieuses, aux eaux tour à tour lumineuses et profondes, à la vie intérieure si intense, d'une gaieté à la fois fine et grave". *Le Temps*, April 24, 1929.

16. *L'Aurure*, June 23, 1907.

CLOSERIE DES LILAS

It was at Montparnasse that Diriks made friends among the avant-garde: Symbolist poets and painters such as Paul Fort and Pablo Picasso.¹⁷Fort stated that: "It was Moréas, Edvard Diriks and I, who created Montparnasse".¹⁸Around 1900, this was the place for young, radical artists. It was also the most international part of the city and included a large group of Scandinavians.¹⁹

Diriks and Krohg were the two ring leaders in this Norwegian artist colony on Montparnasse. Krohg lived there from 1901 to 1909 and was a professor at the Académie Colarossi. Thaulow was also in the city at the same time, and these three were among the most prominent Scandinavian painters in Paris in those years. These three knew each other well from their student days, but the relationship between Diriks and Krohg supposedly soured after 1900, and André Salmon described the two "Vikings" as rivals.²⁰While Krohg sat at the Café Versaille with his "court", Diriks sat at the other end of the Boulevard Montparnasse at the Closerie des Lilas. In the words of the Swedish painter Gunnar Cederschiöld: "Lilas had vizme his own Norwegian fighting figure, the old painter Diriks, also he with his wife and son, and he and Krohg were not better friends than in their time Björnson and Ibsen".²¹ Author Margrete Kjær also describes the time from the Closerie des Lilas: "Diriks was the oldest in the circle, a recognized painter both at home and in Paris, and felt superior".²²

It was the American symbolist poet Stuart Merrill who brought the French poet Paul Fort, "prince des poètes", to the Café de Versailles in 1901 to introduce him to the two "grand old men" in Norwegian art, Diriks and Krohg.²³Fort soon became a regular, but after two years he installed himself at the other end of the boulevard, at the Closerie des Lilas. Diriks soon followed. Fort held a fort at Lilas every Tuesday, and then the cafe was packed with guests.²⁴ They became good friends (ill. 3), and Fort's journal *Verse and Prose*, established in 1905, was edited from Diriks' studio.²⁵Per Krohg writes in his memoirs that Fort saw something inspiring in "Diriks' jagged, restless paintings".²⁶

Fritz René Vanderpyl wrote nostalgically in 1929: "...ah! long ago the happy days when famous Scandinavians, such as the good Diriks and the impressive Thaulow, were present and brought fame to old Closerie des Lilas!".²⁷The cafe became a very important meeting-

17. Vibeke Knoop Rachline, *In the heart of the world: Norwegians in Paris* (Oslo: Stenersens forlag, 1997), 146.

18. Axel Otto Normann, "'The poet's prince' as a playwright", *Aftenposten*, 4 August 1926. The entire quote: "It was Moréas, Edvard Diriks and I who created Montparnasse," he said the other day. I love Diriks so much, greet him, embrace him from me."

19. Ludvig Karsten called the Norwegian artists' colony at Montparnasse "the bohemian rakers" in a letter to Edvard Munch. Quoted in Nils Messel, *Ludvig Karsten* (Oslo: Messel publishing house, 1995), 39.

20. André Salmon, *Souvenirs sans fin. 1903-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 225.

21. Gunnar Cederschiöld, *After living mode* (Stockholm: Nature and Culture, 1949), 131.

22. Margrete Kjær, *Nils Kjær and his contemporaries* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1950), 101.

23. Paul Fort, *Mes mémoires. Toute la vie d'un poète 1872-1943* (Paris: Flammarion, 1944), 83. See also, Billy Klüver and Julie Martin, *Kiki's Paris: Artists and Lovers 1900-1930* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 24.

24. Charles Douglas, *Artist Quarter. Reminiscences of Montmartre and Montparnasse in the First Two Decades of the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), 137.

25. Trygve Nergaard, *Pictures by Per Krohg* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2000), 36.

26. Per Krohg, *Memoirs. Memories and opinions* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1966), 68.

27. Fritz René Vanderpyl, *Le Petit Parisien*, May 18, 1929. Original: "...ah! ils sont loin les jours heureux où des célébrités scandinaves, comme le bon Diriks et l'imposant Thaulow, se contentaient et faisaient la gloire de l'antique Closerie des Lilas!" See also, *Aftenposten*, May 8, 1930.



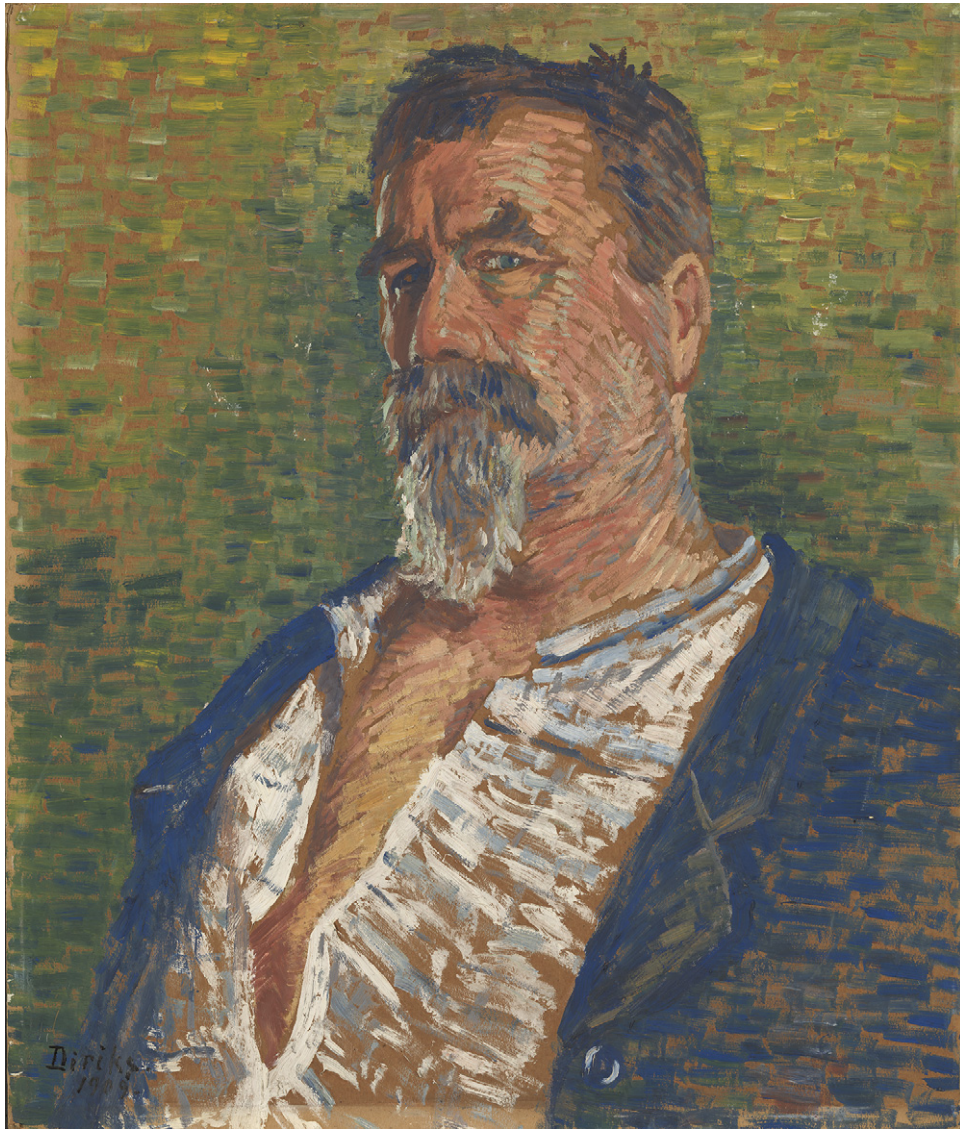
Gammelt billede av Paul Fort og Edvard Diriks.

III. 3

Photograph by Paul Fort and Edvard Diriks from *Aftenposten* August 4, 1926. Photo: The National Library.

space for artists and intellectuals for many years, especially for symbolists and avant-garde poets such as Fort, Salom and Guillaume Apollinaire, cubists such as Picasso and futurists such as Gino Severini, and later also for the surrealists.²⁸ Diriks was part of this environment for more than twenty years, and it was during this period that he received nicknames such as "le grand géant", "du bon géant" and "du géant scandinave". In 1913 he was called a "blue-eyed giant, with the face of an old viking".²⁹ In 1920, he was described by F. Jean-Desthieux as: "A grey-bearded giant, tactfully walking with a heavy gait, but with his eyes turned towards the heights of imagination, eternally smiling: this is how the painter Diriks appears".³⁰ *Le Figaro's* longtime critic Arsène Alexandre, described him as "the great and energetic [*fougeux*] Norwegian painter Diriks", and *Le Petit Parisien* as "the energetic [*fougeux*] Scandinavian".³¹

28. Francis Carco, *From Montmartre to the Latin Quarter* (Copenhagen: Athenæum, 1943), 124–125 and 150–152. Original version: Francis Carco, "De Montparnasse au Quartier Latin. IV", *La revue de Paris* 5 (1926): 588. See Jean-Paul Caracalla, *Montparnasse. L'âge d'or* (Paris: Denöel, 1997), 20–33; Douglas, *Artist Quarter*, 130–131 and Gustave Fuss-Amoré and Maurice Des Ombiaux, "Montparnasse," *Mercure de France* CLXXV (1924): 677–712. (Diriks is mentioned on p. 702). See also, André Salmon, *Montparnasse* (Paris: André Bonne, 1950), ch. 4; and, André Salmon, "La marmite merveilleuse", *Le Petit Parisien*, March 15, 1941. Salmon writes: "Après vinrent les peintres Fritz Thaulow, Edward Diriks, l'impressioniste des brouillards, et dont le fils est docteur de notre Faculté médecine; le professeur Krohg, régent de la plus cosmopolité et la plus parisienne à la fois des académies de la rue de la Grande-Chaumière avec, pour massier de treize ans, son fils Per Krohg, dont aujourd'hui les toiles trouvent place rue La Boétie, auprès de celles de Dufy, Derain, Vlaminck et Marie Laurencin". André Salmon, «Les étrangers de Paris. IX. Du nord au sud», *Le Petit Parisien*, Aug. 15, 1928.
29. "Le sourcier Diriks et le docteur Marage", *Le Journal du dimanche*, April 27, 1913. Original: "...géant aux yeux bleus, à la face de vieux Viking".
30. Jean-Desthieux, "Le peintre Diriks". Original: "Un géant à barbiche grise, des pas formente cadencés, à la démarche, lourde, mais aux yeux tournés vers des hauteurs imaginaires, éternellement smilein, tel apparaît le peintre Diriks".
31. Arsène Alexandre, "Le Salon d'automne", *Le Figaro*, 17 October, 1905; *Le Petit Parisien*, 31 Oct., 1922.



III. 4

Edvard Diriks: *Self portrait*, 1909. Oil on cardboard, 70.5 x 60 cm. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design. Photo: Børre Høstland, National Museum.

Diriks thus had a personality and appearance that was noticed. In 1924, after Diriks had moved back to Norway, André Warnol wrote that "Diriks, with his white beard, was an unforgettable type".³² It is hard to disagree when we see Diriks' self-portrait from 1909 (ill. 4). Here the painter looks down on his viewers, confident, perhaps arrogant, with his shirt open. He plays out his masculinity in a simple but effective image. The portrait well illustrates the quoted descriptions of the bearded energetic giant: a modern

32. André Warnol, "Les scandinaves de Montparnasse", *Comoedia*, April 6, 1924. Original: "Diriks, avec sa barbe blanche, est une figure inoubliable".



III. 5

Christian Krohg: *Edvard Diriks*, before 1891. Pencil on paper, 458 x 320 mm. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design. Photo: Anne Hansteen Jarre, The National Museum.

ving³³In Christian Krohg's drawing by Diriks for the first volume of *Artists* (1891) (ill. 5) we see the plein air painter out in the winter landscape. The skis are planted in the snow right next to the easel. Smoking a pipe and wearing sporty clothes, he stands wide-legged and concentrated, like an artistic Nansen, on a journey of discovery in Norwegian nature. In 1904, Theodor Kittelsen drew a caricature of this Krohg drawing. Here is Diriks in an exotic fantasy landscape with palm trees and cacti,

33. It is probably this self-portrait Henry Bidou mentions in his criticism of Le Salon des Indépendants in 1910.

Henry Bidou, "Les Salons de 1910", *Gazettes des Beaux-Arts* 52 (1910): 376. "M. Directly sent, avec les paysages qu'on a accoutumé d'admirer, une très belle esquisse de figure, qui est, si je ne me trompe, son propre portrait».

surrounded by reptiles such as scorpions and snakes (ill. 6). In the middle of the wild nature, insects crawl over both his body and the canvas. Underneath the drawing is written "Man must go abroad to find happiness". Here, Diriks becomes in many ways everything that Kittelsen is not - non-Norwegian and exotic. In Oda Krohg's beautiful picture *Portrait of Edvard Diriks* (1903) (ill. 7) we again see the masculine artist. This is not a nervous cigarette-smoking dandy, but a confident, relaxed male figure, with a good grip around the pipe, dark squinting eyes, clear furrows on the forehead and an impressive goatee and gag. A great nose in profile - possibly sunburned after a working day out in nature. He looks "very weather-beaten", as Anne Wichstrøm observes.³⁴



III. 6

Theodor Kittelsen: *Edvard Diriks at the easel*, 1904. Crayon and pen, 35.9 x 48.3 cm. CODE. Art museums and composers' homes. Photo: Dag Fosse / CODE.

34. Anne Wichstrøm, *Oda Krohg. An artist's life* (Oslo : Gyldendal, 1988), 87. As Wichstrøm writes, the picture was exhibited at the Salon des artistes independants in Paris in 1903. Krohg also painted a replica of the picture that we can see on the wall in Christian Krohg's *Self-portrait in a wicker chair* (1917). Christian Krohg painted several informal pictures of the Diriks couple in the 1890s. Look, Oscar Thue, *Christian Krohg's portraits* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1971), 15–16.



III. 7

Oda Krohg: *Portrait of Edvard Diriks*, 1903. Oil on canvas, 94 x 119.5 cm. CODE. Art museums and composers' homes. Photo: Dag Fosse / CODE.

"LE PEINTRE DU VENT"

In Frédéric Paulhan's *L'esthétique du paysage* (1913), Diriks is mentioned as one of the most successful representatives of the contemporary landscape school. Along with Paul Gauguin, Armand Guillaumin, René Seyssaud, Jean Laurent Challié and Georgette Agutte, he is referred to as an artist who shows a world that is vibrant and strong, at times violent, brutal and energetic, but also delicate, painted with rich colours.³⁵ Referring to Diriks' landscape paintings as violent, brutal and energetic is often repeated in the French art circles from this time, and Diriks' most famous nickname was "le peintre du vent" - the painter of the wind. It was in an article in *Le Grande France* in 1902 that he was referred to as this by Marius-Ary Leblond – the pseudonym of the critic cousins George Athénas (Marius) and Aimé Merlot (Ary).

35. Frédéric Paulhan, *L'esthétique du paysage* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1913), 193. Original: "De nos jours l'intensité est devenue une qualité très recherchée, et quelques artistes ont trop sacrifié à une violence qui va parfois jusqu'à l'insolence, la justesse, la vraisemblance, la nuance, la distinction des valeurs et d'autres qualités précieuses. Mais d'autres ont mieux réussi. Gauguin, Guillaumin, Diriks, Seyssaud, Challié, Mme G. Agutte, nous offrent un monde éclatant et fort, violent parfois, exubérant, richement coloré, sain et parfois brutal, parfois aussi délicat».



III. 8

Edvard Diriks: *Portrait of Ary Leblond*, 1909. Oil on cardboard, 95 x 76 cm. Musée Léon Dierx. Photo: Musée Léon Dierx.

The Leblond cousins were in the circle of Mallarmé and the Symbolists in Paris and were good friends with the writer Léon Dierx and the art dealer Ambroise Vollard.³⁶ It was in many ways the Leblond cousins who "discovered" Diriks in Paris, and they also collected several of his works. Diriks also painted a portrait of Aimé Merlot, *Portrait d'Ary Leblond* (1909) (ill. 8), which must be said to be a major work in the artist's oeuvre. Here we see the critic sitting in a chair, contemplating with closed eyes.³⁷ The Leblond cousins wrote about Dirik many times, and they were keen to describe how his paintings are characterized by the Nordic soul

36. Bärbel Küster, «French Art for All! Museum Projects in Africa 1912–1931 between Avant-garde and Colonialism», *The Museum is Open. Towards Transnational History of Museums 1750–1940*, ed. Andrea Meyer and Bénédicte Savoy (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 249.

37. The portrait was painted in the same year that the Leblond cousins received the Prix Goncourt for the novel *A France*, and it was also one of approximately forty works of art that the two donated to the art museum in Le Réunion in 1912–13. The portrait hangs today in the Musée Léon Dierx. Félix Fénéon also donated works to the museum, by artists such as Maximilian Luce and Paul Signac. Diriks is here effortlessly included in a collection of French post-impressionist art. For more on this collection, see *ibid.*



III. 9

Edvard Diriks: *Landscape with trees*, undated. Oil on canvas, 135 x 198 cm. Private property.
Photo: Blomqvist art shop.

ferocity, that the brush is carried across the canvas like a wind.³⁸In the encounter with Diriks' art, you come face to face with the fierce and raw Norwegian nature, they believed.³⁹They were particularly fascinated by the way Diriks represents movement, such as trees twisting and turning in the storm.⁴⁰Examples of such pictures are *Landscape with trees* (without year) and *Dwarf tree in storm* (1907) (ill. 9–10). In Leblond's book *Peintres de Races* from 1909, they chose Diriks as a representative of the Scandinavian race. This book, based on a vulgar positivist view of art, is a study of the connection between style, landscape, race and the artists' temperament. Starting from such a perspective, they explained Diriks' naive and rough style. It is therefore his Nordic background with the raw Norwegian landscape, the wild nature and the harsh weather that is the reason for the expressive style.⁴¹

The positivist view of art of the Leblond cousins, where the nature of a nation is linked to the artist's temperament and the style of the pictures, is often repeated in the reception of Diriks in France. This may help to explain the enthusiasm for his art - he paints Norwegian landscapes in a "Norwegian" way: naive, brutal and straight forward, and not like a schooled French Salon painter.

38. Marius-Ary Leblond, "Diriks le peintre de la Norvège", *Revue illustrée*, June 1, 1905. Original: "On sera d'abord frappé par la violence d'une âme septentrionale et la fougue d'un pinceau aux beaux gestes de vent".

39. Marius-Ary Leblond, *La revue du mois* (January–June, 1909): 618.

40. See, Maurice Le Blond [sic.], "Les œuvres de M. Diriks", *L'Aurore*, March 31, 1904.

41. Marius-Ary Leblond, *Peintres de races* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1981), xii–xiii and 49–63.



III. 10

Edvard Diriks: *Dwarf birch in a storm*, 1907. Oil on cardboard, 63 x 84 cm. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design. Photo: Dag André Ivarsøy, The National Museum.

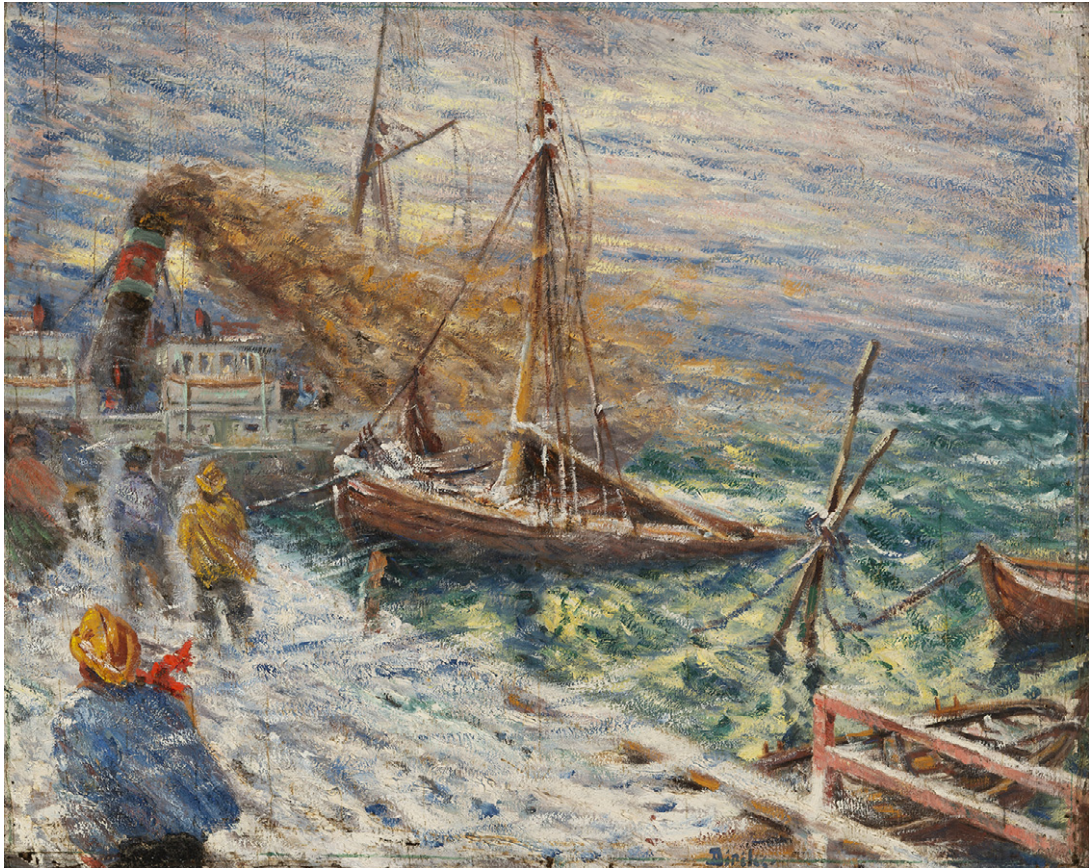
This is also in line with the age's taste for the naive and so-called "primitive". He even calls one critic "the wild man from the north".⁴²In 1908, Pascal Forthuny writes in *Le Matin* about Diriks' violent landscape paintings and ends the article with a definition of the painter: "original, indigène, native, fierce as a wave and beautiful as a hurricane".⁴³In other words, he is referred to as primitive - an ancient man.

When Diriks exhibited forty pictures at the Galerie Bernheim in 1908, an enthusiastic Alexandre called Diriks an energetic and robust lutteur. He wrote that there was nothing petty in the paintings, but passionate and wild. The painterly flaws in the pictures are Diriks' own, as his best qualities, he claimed.⁴⁴François Monod, in *Art et Décoration*, reviewed the same exhibition. He continued in the same vein when he pointed out Diriks' uneven, confused and piggy

42. Léon Rioter, "Un peintre norvégien: Diriks", *La Rappel*, 28 May, 1903. Original: "le farouche homme du Nord".

43. Pascal Forthuny, "Edward Diriks, peintre", *Le Matin*, May 29, 1908. "Que la mer soit d'argent liquide, aux heures calmes, ou de plomb fondu, dans la tempête, ou d'or fluidem sous le crépuscule boreal, que la rafale balaye le motif, que la pluie brouille la palette, que le pôle souffle sur les décors cristallisés sa glaciale haleine, Diriks, alors, se réjouisit et peint en beauté. Son tableau s'anime, sa couleur s'y ploie comme un jonc soumis aux rages de la tourmente, et c'est là vrai Diriks, original, indigène, autochtone, véhément comme la vague et beau comme l'ouragan».

44. Arsènes Alexandre, "Les petites expositions", *Le Figaro*, May 22, 1908.



III. 11

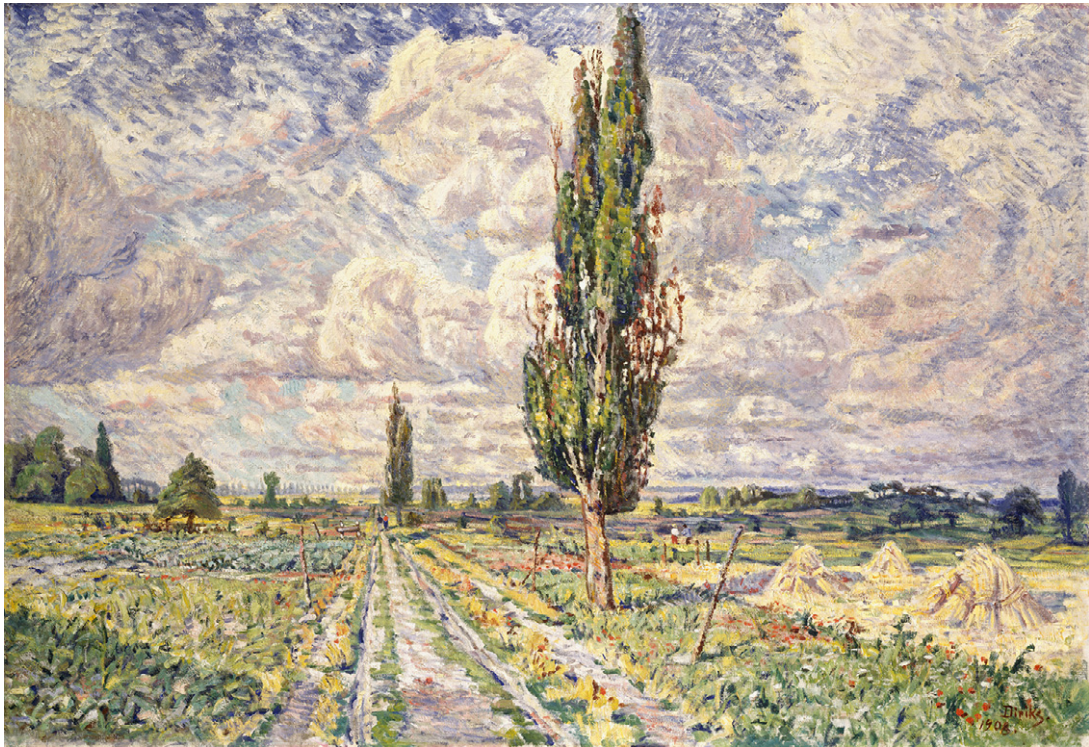
Edvard Diriks: *Turbulent sea*, without year. Oil on canvas, 83 x 101 cm. CODE. Art museums and composers' homes. Photo: Dag Fosse / CODE.

stroke as a quality, characteristic of Diriks' artistic vision – the fast, sudden, atmospheric, colorful and polychromatic.⁴⁵In other words, Diriks is original.

When you go through the large amount of French art criticism in which Diriks is mentioned, there are a number of common denominators, and it is almost always the expressionist motifs of trees and stormy seas that are the favourites.⁴⁶As one critic wrote, Diriks managed to plant the easel in the ground

45. François Monod, "Supplement", *Art et Décoration* (June, 1908): 2. Original: "M. Diriks a une manière impressionniste à lui: la touche est, à la vérité, inégale et parfois confuse et ébouriffée, mais elle gate quand elle a répons à la vision du peintre, une vision prompte, brusque, très atmosphérique, colorées et diaprée».

46. A number of these criticisms are referred to directly in this article, but in my work with Diriks I have read many more, e.g. these, which will be of interest to those who wish to study the reception of Diriks in more detail: *Le Figaro*, 7 Dec, 1909; Arsène Alexandre, "De Paris à Christiania", *Comoedia*, 4th December, 1909; *Le Petit Parisien*, 19 March, 1910; Georges Lecomte, "Le Salon des Indépendants", *Le Matin*, 20 April, 1911; *Les Hommes du jour*, 30 September, 1911; *Laugh Radically*, 30 March, 1913; Arsène Alexandre, "Au Salon d'automne", *Le Figaro*, 1 November, 1919; *L'Homme Libre*, 5 November, 1919; *L'art libre*, 1 January, 1920; *Le Petit Parisien*, 26 April, 1920; *Le Petit Parisien*, 15 October, 1920; André Gybal, «Le Salon d'Automne. Paris 1920», *L'Art Libre* (December, 1920): 220; *Comoedia*, 23 Oct., 1920; "Salons and Exhibitions", *Le Petit Parisien*, April 3, 1921.



III. 12

Edvard Diriks: *Isle of France*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 135 x 196 cm. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design. Photo. Jacques Lathion, National Museum.

without him and the painting matters being blown away by the wind.⁴⁷Diriks was often described as robust, energetic and dramatic, and he received compliments for being a master in the treatment of atmosphere and light.⁴⁸He was seen as a brave, imposing, raw, fierce, passionate, honest and original artist; he was able to show the changing nature of the seasons and the battle of the elements. *Turbulent sea* (undated) (ill. 11) is a good example of the sour Norwegian winter weather that made Diriks so popular. Art critic Paul-Armand Hirsch even wrote that Diriks can be compared to Claude Monet in the treatment of lighting effects.⁴⁹The images were also described as refined, spiritual and poetic. One critic called him "the poet of the clouds and the sea"⁵⁰, another wrote: "In a swirl of incredible colors, the elements blend and harmon-

47. FM, "Le Mois Artistique", *L'Art et les Artistes* VII (1908): 188.

48. An example: "remarquable paysagiste, peintre des atmospheres, luministe puissant". Morin-Jean, "La Salon d'Automne", *La Gerbe* 2 (Dec., 1919): 69.

49. Paul-Armand Hirsch, "Exposition Diriks", *L'Humanité nouvelle. Revue Internationale* IX (1903): 738–739. "Celui-là, avant tout, un peintre de tempérament, qui sait sentir les diverse aspects de la nature et les rendre d'une palette sincère, sans se cantonner en une manière exclusive et sans aller, pourtant, jusqu'à un éclectisme dévoilant le procédé"; "Le peintre est imprégné de son sujet plutôt qu'il n'en est inspiré, et il se joue avec maëstria des effets de lumière intense ou des calmes sobres: sans en avoir subi l'influence, il est comparable à Claude Monet".

50. Louis Hauteœur, "Le Salon d'automne", *Gazette des beaux-arts* 55 (1913): 502. Original: "M. Diriks, poète des nuages et de la mer, sait à merveille jouer avec les reflets de la lumière impalpable».

seen under the magical brush of master Diriks".⁵¹In pictures like *Nuages en mer* *Effet de ciel sur l'eau* and *Navy* the tumult of the clouds is the main motif - but they are at the same time abstracted with the help of broken, smaller brushstrokes that create an extraordinary dynamic in the images. Atmospheric clouds are reflected in the sea, and a picturesque drama is formed. It is not just pictures of the world, but painterly experimentation inspired by Neo-Impressionism and Fauvism. The same can be said about *Isle of France* (1908) (ill. 12), an image that, with the help of a refined abstracting technique, imitates the fluttering of real visual impressions – one can sense the enthusiasm of contemporary critics in such images. Diriks' clouds are unique.

DIRIKS AS A POST-IMPRESSIONIST

Diriks belonged to the generation of Norwegian artists who had their heyday in the 1880s and 90s. Jens Thiis believed that Diriks, with his bold and manly art, is an "artist who finds it very difficult to place himself in a specific context" and that "after his age, he belongs to the octogenarians' cult of naturalists, but with his art he has gone his own way and approached the young".⁵²Diriks was a "late bloomer" and only found his distinctive style after the turn of the century. It is therefore more correct to place him in the era characterized by post-impressionist currents, rather than in naturalism, national romanticism and symbolism. He himself did not seem to be concerned with style, although he has referred to himself as an impressionist.⁵³In the French reception, he was also occasionally seen as part of the Impressionist school,⁵⁴ and in Camille Mauclair's *L'Impressionnisme* (1904) one can read about the "energetic [*fougeux*] the colorist Diriks".⁵⁵The art critic F. Jean-Desthieux saw him as an original successor of Impressionism and Pointillism, but believed that Diriks nevertheless had his own unique look at the landscape.⁵⁶

It seems reasonable to refer to Diriks' late art as post-impressionist. He is in an art environment characterized by French literary symbolism and French avant-garde painting.⁵⁷The term "post-impressionism", introduced by Roger Fry in 1910, is of course problematic as a style

51. FAC, "Exposition Directive", *La Jeune Champagne* (1904): 247. Original: "En un tourbillonnement de couleurs exasperées, les éléments se mêlent et se symphonisent sous le magique pinceau du maître Diriks".

52. Jens Thiis, *Norwegian painting in the National Gallery* (Kristiania: Mittet, 1912), 29.

53. Letter from Edvard Diriks to Edvard Munch, Paris 7 May 1904. The Munch Museum, MM K0101.

54. "Nous signalons encore parmi ceux qui, ayant débuté à des dates diverses, péuvent plus ou moins exactement se rattacher au mouvement dit 'impressionniste', le rude et grandiose peintre norvégien Diriks". Arsène Alexandre, "Le Salon d'Automne", *Le Figaro*, 5 Oct., 1906. Charles Morice wrote in 1905: "Diriks, impressionniste non pas né, mais du lendemain, paysagiste de l'orage". Charles Morice, "Le XXI^e Salon des Indépendants", *Mercure de France* (1905): 548.

55. Camille Mauclair, *L'Impressionnisme. Son histoire, as esthétique, ses maîtres* (Paris: Librairie de l'art ancien et moderne, 1904), 14. Original: "le fougeux coloriste Diriks".

56. Jean-Desthieux, "Le peintre Diriks". Original: "Ce peintre ne voit pas le paysage avec les yeux des autres peintres." Il semble avoir gardé des leçons du pointillisme et de l'impressionnisme je ne sais quelle éducation de la vue qui l'amène à distinguer toujours dans une gamme de tones autre chose qu'une harmony ou qu'une nuance: des cellules de nuances et de tons qui recomposent l'harmonie dans un patient détail. Je crois que peu d'artistes auraient la faculté de proceder ainsi».

57. "At home with famous people V: With Edvard Diriks and his wife", *The A magazine* (April 26, 1928): 8.

designation, but it is useful when talking about artists working with painterly problems related to representation and form – formal problems that arise in impressionism but are not solved by impressionism.⁵⁸ Diriks struggled with the transition from empirical representation to *decor*, expressionism and abstraction, just like the pointillists, fauvists and cubists. This "painterly struggle" characterizes much of avant-garde art around 1900. The term post-impressionism is also useful when writing about artists working in an era characterized by stylistic chaos, where new isms were born every year. Belinda Thomsen sums this up in her standard work on post-impressionism:

What we find, then, in Paris-based art of the late nineteenth century is a wealth of talent, ambition, and drive to succeed, a great variety of technical and stylistic innovation, and a surfeit of theory. There were complicated personal relationships, bitter rivalries, arguments and self-imposed exiles, groupings, regroupings and scissions.⁵⁹

Diriks thus belongs to Norwegian post-impressionism at the beginning of the 20th century, at the same time as the so-called Matisse students, the neo-impressionists and the cubists.

LAST YEAR IN NORWAY

On March 17, 1921, the following headline could be seen in *Aftenposten*: "Edvard Dirik's home again". When asked by the journalist if Diriks is satisfied with his long stay in Paris, he replies:

Have no reason to do otherwise. I have been received with the greatest goodwill both by colleagues and the press. The French state has bought several of my pictures, and a well-known critic, André Salmon, wrote about me that the forest of Fontainebleau and the Seine had entrusted me with their secrets. It was also a great honor for me to be invited to exhibit at the Salon d'Automne, where I had an entire wall at my disposal. That honor has previously only been shared by Matisse and the Belgian de Groux.⁶⁰

Diriks received a good deal of attention and recognition after his return to Norway. In the same year, he exhibited 90 pictures – landscapes and portraits – at Blomqvist's. According to him, this was his first exhibition in Norway in nine to ten years *Aftenposten*.⁶¹ In 1928, a group of young artists organized a retrospective exhibition, and they also had a pamphlet published with contributions from several key artists (including his cousin Edvard Munch). Bourdelle wrote how much he appreciated having a fresh, honest Diriks landscape in his Paris home – it was like having a piece of nature in the living room. Erik Werenskiold also contributed and concluded: "It is a tough art, Diriks'; no sweetness there!"⁶²

58. Roger Fry, *A Roger Fry Reader*, ed. Christopher Reed (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 109.

59. Belinda Thomson, *The Post-Impressionists* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1983), 10. See also, John House and MaryAnne Stevens, eds., *Post-impressionism. Cross-Currents in European Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

60. *Aftenposten*, March 17, 1921.

61. *Aftenposten*, March 30, 1921.

62. Quoted in *Aftenposten*, March 14, 1928.

When Diriks died in 1930, the funeral was organized by the Artists' Association and Unge Kunstneres Samfund - a sign of the painter's status.⁶³ Anna Diriks, the widow, organized a memorial exhibition in Oslo in November of the same year and borrowed a number of works from France. Franz Jourdain, the director of the Salon d'Automne, also organized a memorial exhibition for Diriks as part of the 1931 exhibition.⁶⁴ Gustave Kahn himself wrote a review for this exhibition, in which he summarized how Diriks broke with the unfortunate German painting tradition early on and instead let himself be inspired by the French Impressionists and began to paint the magnificent Norwegian nature with the tumult of clouds over stormy seas along the steep coast. Kahn pointed out how Diriks also had a remarkable ability to give the French landscapes polytonal variety, and he concluded the article with the following words: "There are some beautiful pictures here."⁶⁵

This article began as a post at the "Munch, modernism and modernity" conference in the Munch Museum, 18 November 2016. I would like to thank everyone who has given feedback afterwards. A special thanks to Nicholas Parkinson for his help in working with the French newspaper articles. I would also like to thank the two anonymous colleagues for very useful input.

63. *Aftenposten*, March 24, 1930. There is also a photograph from the funeral in the article.

64. *Aftenposten*, Nov. 8, 1930.

65. Gustave Kahn, "Art", *Mercure de France* CCXXXII (1931): 456. Original: "Edouard Diriks, peintre norvégien, a surtout vécu à Paris et dans la campagne française. Il fut en Norvège de ceux qui rompirent avec de mauvaises picturales d'origine Germanique, pour interpréter, selon la leçon de l'impressionisme français, les magnifiques beautés de leur pays. Diriks peignit donc des tumultes de nuages blêmes ou cendreaux sur la mer houleuse, près des côtes escarpées, non sans atteindre à la grandeur. En France, il aima les paysages riants dont il réussissait à donner l'étonnante diversité polytonale, aux lendemains d'averse où la terre mouillée est d'un ton plus limpide et les verdoyantes rajeunies. Il ya là de belles pages». When Diriks exhibited for the first time at the Salon d'automne, Kahn characterized Diriks' pictures as "âpre et robuste". Gustave Kahn, "Le Salon d'automne", *L'Aurore*, 31 Oct., 1903.