

Case Study 6

Florence and Peter
Johansen: the
National Museum of
Denmark and the
art market in the
1920s and 1930s

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL PUZZLES
IN A MUSEUM**

Egyptian Fabrics from the 1st Millennium AD
at the National Museum of Denmark
(Online Exhibition)

Case study 6 Florence and Peter Johansen: the National Museum of Denmark and the art market in the 1920s and 1930s

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Peter Johansen was born in 1881 in Sommersted, Danish Schleswig, but his family relocated to the Copenhagen area when he was still a child. As a young man, Johansen joined the Danish army and, by 1902, he had obtained the rank of second lieutenant. Around the same time he travelled to Thailand to serve in the gendarmerie, where he spent the following 11-12 years and rose to the rank of captain.

In 1914, Peter Johansen returned to Denmark with 54 cases of artefacts that he had collected during his time abroad. He rented a couple of rooms from a widow named Petra Busch, who lived with her relative Alma Jensine Jæger. Johansen and Jæger decided to go into business together as dealers of antiques under the name *Johansen & Jæger* based out of Petra Busch's property on Vesterbrogade 70. Johansen's main income probably hailed from his other firm, *Eastern Commercial Co.*, which exported rice and other goods from Thailand, and therefore he is often listed as a wholesaler or director, rather than an antiques dealer. In 1929, Jæger left *Johansen & Jæger* but Johansen continued to trade under the same name and it was also around this time, that he bought the property on Vesterbrogade 70 previously owned by Petra Busch. His shop at this address was called *Kinagaarden* ("The China Yard") and it became a fixture in the Copenhagen antiques and art dealer community, and was especially

famed for having its own buyers in Thailand and China, who provided the *Kinagaarden* with antiques.

Peter Johansen married at least three times and moved several times during his life both inside and outside of Denmark. He died onboard his sailing boat *Misse* in the summer of 1948 off the coast of Zealand.

It was not, however, Peter Johansen, who sold the textile fragments to the National Museum of Denmark, but his second wife, Florence. Born Maren Hansine Frederikke Petersen in Copenhagen in 1885 to a coachman, who later became a farmer, she left Copenhagen around 1911, and presumably Denmark altogether. She reappears in 1916 in the United States as the opera singer Florence Bodinoff. She seems to have taken on a completely new persona and posed as the daughter of a Russian diplomat, who had served in Denmark at the time of her birth. She does not seem to have engaged actively in singing after 1921, and perhaps it was around this time that she returned to Denmark, where she married Johansen in 1924. Bodinoff was actively engaged in her husband's dealings and hosted her own gallery and boutique in *Kinagaarden*, where several Danish and Nordic avant-garde artists exhibited in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1931, she moved her gallery out of *Kinagaarden* and named it *Labyrinten*. *Labyrinten* seems to have been short-lived, probably closing when the Johansen family left for London in 1932/1933. Florence Johansen is mentioned as working for the exhibition *Samlerens Kunststudstilling* in 1934 and as a seller of antiquities to the National Museum of Denmark in the late 1930s. In 1936 Florence and Peter Johansen divorced and her life after 1940 is not known.

The Johansen family relocated to London because of the so-called "Valutalov", a law passed in January 1932 with the intention of curbing inflation of the Danish krone, for example by demanding that foreign currency made through export had to be changed into kroner. Peter Johansen himself described his decision to move to London as a choice between exile or inactivity.

The London arts and antiquities market was booming despite the general economic depression of the 1930s, and large quantities of "Coptic" textiles are mentioned as having been traded through auction houses such as Sotheby's, which received a large collection of "Coptic" textiles from Cairo in 1931 and is mentioned as a seller of "Coptic" textiles throughout the 1930s. Johansen, however, preferred to frequent smaller antique shops and auction houses with a smaller clientele, the identities of which he was careful not to reveal when asked.

During his time abroad Johansen travelled extensively in Northern Europe, especially Scandinavia, where he held temporary exhibitions of antiques in luxury hotels such as the Grand Hotel in Stockholm and Hotel Cosmopolite in Copenhagen. Among his buyers were museums as well as private collectors. He is also mentioned as a "middleman", where donors provided the National Museum of Denmark with money to buy artefacts from his exhibitions; anonymous donors are also mentioned as having donated this way.

The textile fragments sold by Florence Johansen to the National Museum of Denmark in 1933 are stated as having been bought at auction in London. The

year suggests that the textiles may have been sold as the Johansen family was relocating to London; perhaps they came from *Labyrinten* when Florence Johansen closed it down. The statement that they were bought in London might also suggest that they were purchased after the Johansens relocated there and then sold to the National Museum during a visit to Denmark. If this is the case, they must have been bought at an auction held in either 1932 or 1933 in London.

Johansen remained in contact with MND over the following years and made a large donation to the museum just months before his death in 1948. In a memoir about Johansen published after his death, it was mentioned that the museum had lost "an ever loyal friend".

Sources

The above text is based mainly on information from Danish, British, and American newspapers accessed through online databases: The Danish Royal Library's digital media collection *Mediestream*, the British Newspaper Archive, and the National Digital Newspaper Program's *Chronicling America*.

Other sources: the directories for Copenhagen (*Kraks Vejviser*), census records and parish registers in the Danish National Archives, and the police registers in Copenhagen's City Archive (*Københavns Stadsarkiv*), *Samling af Anmeldelser til Handelsregistrene* (collections of announcements for the trade registers), as well as *Geografisk Tidsskrift* regarding donations to the National Museum of Denmark. Regarding P. Johansen's trading in Thailand, see A. J. H. Latham, *Rice and Industrialisation in Asia* (2021).

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This document was downloaded from the website of the National Museum of Denmark, for the full exhibition or other documents also a part of this exhibition, see:
<https://en.natmus.dk/museums-and-palaces/the-national-museum-of-denmark/exhibitions/classical-and-near-eastern-antiquities/archaeological-puzzles-in-a-museum/>