A doctor and a wallpaper in Surnadal valley

Heinrich P. Bauer (1785–1863) had a history as a military surgeon in Germany and (as prisoner in) France during the Napoleonic era before he became medical officer for the Romsdal Corps and settled in the Surnadal valley in the Nordmøre region. Here, he renovated a farmhouse, and the wallpaper he used can be seen in the living room at the farm to this day. Bauer’s history is more glorious than what local historians have given him credit for.

During an assignment in Surnadal I was contacted by Ingebrigt B. Moen who is currently living at the Austistua farm. He told me about Dr Bauer and mentioned that they had preserved the wallpaper that the doctor had used to decorate the living room when he still lived at the farm.

The Austistua Moen farm around 1900. The contrast between the exterior of the house and the elaborate living room at the farm must have been seen as considerable. The living room with the wallpaper is on the ground floor to the right. Photo: Unknown
The first half of the 19th century has been described as the golden age of wallpapers, especially in France. From this period we have bold colour combinations, such as orange and lurid Schweinfurt green (5), chrome yellow and blue. Finishing the wall decoration with a band along the top was another element which is typical of the period (6). In more grandly, the wallpaper patterns were in the form of draperies, designed true to nature and with a three-dimensional effect, as illustrated in a comprehensive British presentation (7). Towards the 1850s the colours became somewhat more subdued, and the patterns left the Empire mould, returning to old style elements from the Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo in a modernised and adapted form.

On a question to Das Deutsche Tapetenmuseum, Dr Astrid Wegener replied (personal communication):

«The wallpaper is a beautiful specimen from the Empire period 1800–1810. The famous German wallpaper manufacturer Johann Christian Arnold in Kassel made similar designs, although not this one. The design may possibly also be French. I have submitted the issue to my French colleague Bernard Jaqué. He deems it to be of French origin and dating from 1805–1810.»

The wallpaper from Austistua farm is thus an Empire wallpaper with a stylised drapery motif, as was the fashion during the first half of the 19th century. The assumption that it was Dr Bauer who decorated his living room with this wallpaper can thus be supported in light of what we know about his profession and places of residence.

The time and place where Bauer bought his wallpaper are left for speculation. However, at the time when the wallpaper most likely was made, he was in German-French service and may have obtained the necessary contacts. Bauer’s history may thus be more glorious than what local historian Hans Hyldbakk gives him credit for.

References

Received 10 September 2013 and approved 24 September 2013. Editor: Erlend Hem.