

About Den Frie (1891)

In the triangular gable above the blue door, the gilded Pegasus shines almost as bright as the sun. According to myth, the powerful hoofbeat of the winged horse brought forth the Hippocrene spring on the mountain of the Muses, and its waters granted poetic inspiration to all who drank from it. Today, with a nude youth on its back, Pegasus strikes its hooves against artist and architect J. F. Willumsen's white wooden building, galloping across a budding landscape. For 135 years, it has been an image of the free spirit of art.

This spirit has always lived behind the white, windowless walls of the temple-like building. This is Den Frie, one of Denmark's oldest art institutions and a defining force in Danish art history. At Den Frie, artists have always presented the very latest in contemporary art. Emerging and established artists alike—Danish as well as international—have inhabited the spaces: exhibition halls, stairwell, restrooms, and Café Pegasus. Here, the spirit of the times has been challenged, new paths forged, and countless artists, driven by a rebellious energy, have pushed the boundaries of how art can unfold and be experienced.

Driven by a strong belief in community, a group of artists founded Den Frie in 1891 as a protest against the conservative artistic ideals and censorship of the time. At the association's first exhibition, J.F. Willumsen inscribed one of his works: "The old art has its old language, which people have gradually learned to understand. New art has a newly formed language, which must be learned before it can be understood." The new direction in art caused a sensation and crowds flocked to the exhibition. Thanks to its remarkable success the group was able, in the years that followed, to present international kindred spirits such as Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin.

The sensation created by Den Frie Udstilling echoed across Europe, and in 1897 the artists' association gained a lasting wooden home—built for art by the artists themselves. At first, the pavilion stood between H.C. Ørsted Park and Tivoli, but in 1913 it was moved to Oslo Plads, opposite the new train station at Østerport. Here it has stood ever since, evoking a mysterious presence in the urban landscape—monumental in form, light in body, free in spirit.

After several expansions and renovations, the building was granted protected heritage status in 1986. In 2014, Den Frie grew new roots with the addition of a lower level, where Café Pegasus and the exhibition space OSLO found their place within the life of the house. The forecourt and foyer were restored in 2024, opening onto a new sculpture zone surrounding the building. Here, three striking sculptures stand as landmarks amid the rumble of traffic and the rush of the city's wings.

On the building's north-western side stands Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen's sketch for a sculpture of Queen Margrete I on horseback. The artist was a member of Den Frie, and studies for the sculpture were exhibited in both 1897 and 1910.

In Den Frie's south-facing garden lies Egyptian Egg by the Danish contemporary artist Sophia Kalkau, who is also a member of Den Frie. The ellipsoidal sculpture—three meters long, two meters high, weighing 17 tons—is named in tribute to the ancient Egyptian temples that inspired J.F. Willumsen when he designed the building.

In front of Den Frie rises Isa Genzken's monumental work Vollmond, whose 16.5-meter-high structure reaches toward the sky and shines like an extra moon over the city. Like the building itself, it is at once raw and romantic.