SCANDINAVIAN ART AND ITS NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE: BY HENRY REUTERDAHL

Editor's Note: The author of this article was born in Sweden and has the personal acquaintance of many of the leading painters of the north. Although American as a man and artist he gives a first hand view of the Scandinavian painters and the nationalism of their work. Mr. Reuterdahl served on the advisory committee which assisted the president of the American Scandinavian Society in formulating the first plans of the American exhibition of Scandinavian art which is given under the auspices of this society. The exhibition opens in New York, December fifteenth, and will be shown in many of our principal cities.

LOOK toward the North! See the light over the horizon. Look again, how it is rising, flaming high like the Aurora. It is the light from home—it is calling you. The blue mantle over the earth is the snow turning bluer under the reflections from the dome above, and the golden sheen over the distance makes the blue more intense. Silent, somber and in dark purples stand the wooded hills above each other, receding; the bigness of it all wipes out detail, the rocks are like massive monuments against the snow, and the trees lose their outlines, melting into each other under the yellow light of dawn.

"There is spring in the air—or is it the surge of your blood! The breeze is from the North, but gentle because from home. Longing, I am pining to see the red of the farm houses, the white birches, the dark forest and its still pools—and for the yearning of the North itself—Come Home!" Thus pleaded Richard Bergh, the Swedish painter, in his intense appeal to his fellow artists—sunning themselves on the banks of the Seine or imbibing the false romanticism of New Italy.

In the early eighties, the Scandinavian painters saw the light of impressionism and cut loose from the bituminous darkness of the Munich and Dusseldorf schools. These were years of stress and the smashing of old idols. To Paris they flocked to learn the new order of things. They established a colony of opposition,—painters, authors and poets, all trying to see things their own way. Strindberg, then the young firebrand, assaulted the bureaucracy at home and wrote sonnets of spring on the studio walls of the quarter. In the summertime in Grez, a village in the Fontainebleau forest, they painted under real sunlight, found the shadows purple, and strove for breadth of technique. But somehow they were influenced by Bastien Lepage and his pale colors hung like a film over their palettes and toned down their native lust for color. Exiles in mind, these husky northerners were painting French peasants in faded grays.

But a new era was coming and a declaration of artistic independence was made. Poor, but filled with red-blood enthusiasm, this band of free thinkers returned to their own land of snow to
A PEASANT GIRL OF MORA IN HER WINTER DRESS: FROM A PAINTING BY ANDERS ZORN.
"IN THE JUNGLE": Modeled by the Swedish Sculptor, C. Milles.
PORTRAIT OF THE POET HANS JAEGER,
FROM A PAINTING BY HENRIK LUND.
"THE OLD CASTLE," FROM A PAINTING BY PRINCE EUGEN OF SWEDEN.
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batter down the academic stay-at-homes. Larsson, Zorn and Nordstrom and, among the Norwegians, Christian Krogh were to the old painters so many lunatics beyond the reasoning of man. Nevertheless the young men continued to look around their own country, and their fresh eyes found a new world of beauty in character, form and color. Awakened, they saw for themselves, and went forth in their new ways grasping for an expression which would reflect the true nature of the land and the real spirit of the people.

The art of the north shows countries of violent contrasts, of powerful colors, of strong light and inky darkness; the lines are severe, the mountains dark and heavily silhouetted against the pale summer night. And this underlies particularly the art of the two Swedes, Liljefors and Nordstrom. As Hedberg says: "Two giant painters of the east and west coasts reaching hands across, dreaming of the big land, northward of the mountain ridges, the midnight sun and the white winter." With fired imagination the northern man has developed a peculiar sense of patriotism in paint that seem to exist nowhere else. He is a fanatic, no longer a world-drifter,—his own land is too beautiful, his own people too wondrous and the common things in their every-day life glow to him in Homeric light. Of a primitive race he worships the lowly, the toilers of the soil, the seafarers; for him the city crowd—they are only to buy pictures or sit for portraits.

The intense individuality of the northern art is but a direct outcome, racially and nationally, of the strong insularity and ingrowing patriotism of the Scandinavians. Their traditions are so old, so gripping and so simple—the sagas of the Vikings stir even the most jaded. The countries, except perhaps little Denmark, are so wrought by nature that unconsciously the small, the futile and puerile fade away and only rugged sincerity and vital expression can face tradition of nature or time. Then, too, the remarkable homogeneity of the Scandinavians as a race contributes its quota of strength and depth to all their expressions, literary, artistic, musical. Be the artist from whatever section he may, he is sure that his countrymen as a whole will understand what he is trying to say and know if his message is sincere. The bond of blood is so deep that whatever foreign element is introduced, it is at once fused with the whole—even as Grieg, half Scotch, became wholly Norwegian.

It is that common pulse, that rhythmic throb, that glow of Sweden for the Swedes, Norway for the Norwegians which make their arts as easy to recognize as is the Northman by his geographic habitat or physical trait. And in spite of, or rather because of this
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homogeneity their painters have been free to cut loose from the stereotyped and sing their own lays to any melody they chose.

That love for the open, the tradition of the homestead has driven the northern painters out of the cities to settle among subjects which inspired their brush. Their homes are fashioned like those of the locality, not foreign villas, but fitting the soil. Like Winslow Homer they live the life they paint, but not as recluses, curiosities to the neighbors. Nor is theirs a life apart, as with us.

The Norwegian is as proud of Werenskiold and Munthe as of Nansen. The Swede smiles over his own Carl Larsson and buys another picture book of the Larsson kiddies. Zorn celebrated his fiftieth birthday congratulated by Prince Eugen, who as representative of the throne arrived by special train offering the greetings of the King; the select men of the village suspended meeting and in a body paid their respects, and the peasants came in a torchlight parade—all just to honor a painter. It may not be within the scope of this article to surmise in all probability that Winslow Homer, America’s great painter, crossed his half-century mark stimulated by his own society, a bottle of beer and a ham sandwich. And honor does not come alone to these men, their pictures are bought. At a recent exhibition in Stockholm paintings to the value of sixty-five thousand crowns were sold the first week—this in a town of the size of Cincinnati.

The writer suggested some years ago an exhibition of Swedish art in New York and the plans were laid before Karl Wahlin, art critic, the Huneker of Sweden. The reply read that the day should never come when Swedish painters would have to go abroad for support. This view, insular and even narrow, illustrated the position of the northern painter, who having a market in his native land is encouraged by his own people to do what he feels, and three meals a day plus a smoke are great factors in a man’s development.

Of that bizarre muser and soul stirring painter, Edvard Munch, the Ibsen of Norwegian paint, the Christiania Museum has more than ten canvases—and the painter still in the flesh. No one can say that these visions of sickness, these passionate wild longings, high notes in paint, are there to please the mob; they were purchased by the State because of their importance to the nation’s art. And the tender color and Whistlerian tones in the portraits and interiors of Hammershoi, the Dane, are not often found outside his native land. Eight of the ten examples shown in the current exhibition are from the Bramsen collection, from one man’s home.
Again Anders Zorn, truly a living impressionist of the life which moves—the play of light, shadows on mere flesh, movement, singing crowds, gestures, frowns and laughs are all his, done in a few tones and with a handful of colors. Feted and medaled, jaded by conquest and success, he turned to his ancient birthplace and heeded the call of the soil. It was not enough for him to paint his own people, he had to live their life and make himself useful to their purpose. He revived their old traditions and made them go back to the customs and dress of their forebears—a return to brilliant hues and homemade ornaments—the natural outlet for the color sense of these primitives. Zorn rejuvenated the old forgotten lays and folklore; he built dancing pavilions in the open, and away from store-clothes civilization the old life of the peasant came back. Home among his own, Zorn is painting the Venuses of Dalecarlia, fresh chubby girls, splashing at the river’s edge or half hidden behind foliage, nature’s children who find no shame in posing nude for one of their own kin. Sculptor as well is Zorn, and his quivering little bronze Faun and Nymph gives that joy of life which belongs to a hefty race where neurasthenia is not even a term. His statue of Gustavus Vasa, the liberator and Sweden’s first king, has the other side of the northern character, steadfastness and daring, the Viking spirit.

Even for one of northern blood it becomes difficult to absolutely characterize the difference of tendencies in Swedish and Norwegian art. The Norwegian may be more uncouth, more rugged. It is easier to place the Dane; his art is like his country, pleasant, with easy going, rolling lines, flat stretches. The domesticity of the Dane, his fondness for the good things in life, his jollity, all crop out in the national art. It does not tear your emotion, you do not argue about it as you do over Ibsen and Strindberg—you are just pleased. The vein of the national temperament, the droll whimsicality, as in Hans Christian Andersen, is to the fore in modern Danish art—of course expressed in the technique of the day and like all good art dealing with its own time. Germans stay at the cafés, but the Danes at home, and so Viggo Johansen visualizes the family ties and the unity of the hearth. His pictures, somewhat akin to those of Simon, are marvels of fresh paint, lamplight effects, mother and children around the fire or the Saturday bath. And with Johansen, Julius Paulsen’s glimmering canvases give the cheery and tenderer side of the Dane. But the physicist, the apostle of Weltschmerz in this joyous land is Einar Nielsen, who, like Munch the Norwegian, deals with pain and infinite sorrow: while Willumsen personifies the bright gaiety of Copenhagen, its sun, the Strand life. Architecture, ceramics,
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sculpture are all one to his amazing talents, and his paintings of sunlight, archaic and Greek in design, Cezannelike in color are almost the last word in modernity—excluding of course, the young Matisses, who, growing on every international bush, are still men without a country.

NOW the northern painter is honest, with him technique is only the means, and like Van Golgh, he looks for the soul of the thing. His pent-up emotions, the intoxication of patriotic painter-pride over the beauty of the fatherland fires him and without knowing how or why he has given out that indescribable something which is more than paint surface. And when simple toilers make a shrine to the memory of a dead artist it is not because of his painting but because of that which lies behind it. In the islands of Lofoden, up the coast of Norway and above the Arctic Circle, lived Gunnar Berg. He painted the fishers and their storm and stress, and the gull-laden rocks. Berg died, but his studio stands there today filled with warm rich canvases, painter-joys, a set palette, fat paint tubes—just as if he had gone outside for a smoke—a mausoleum from horny-handed fishermen.

No artist is closer to the Swedish people than Carl Larsson. Almost a genius—this man has no counterpart anywhere. And supreme is his nationalism, so genuinely Swedish (their sunny side) the long summer night, hospitality, good-cheer, the flowing bowl—all are behind his brush. And all is meat to this remarkable man, great murals, water colors, oils, drawings, humor and verse. When Larsson laughs, Sweden laughs with him. Those pleasing water colors of his simple hand-made country home bubble over with charm and the impulsive humor of this never-grown-up. The peasant was becoming modernized in his common store clothes and home fittings, and Larsson’s water colors came as a tract against what we would call “the folding-bed-renaissance,” a protest against gaudy and overburdened architecture and a plea for the simple life and dress, a revival of the national arts and crafts.

Modern life is mostly gray in clothes and thought, everything anæmically dull and equal, Puritanically cold and “high brow,” so that the color joy of the primitive comes like a blow. To the Northerner, color is vital and necessary to lighten the darkness of winter which makes day into long night; that is why the houses are red, the clothes brilliant and the colors of the household utensils virile. These things brighten the northern temperament, heavy with the sun below the horizon. The old peasant love for strong color is still a racial characteristic, and if on the decline still underlies the insipra-
FOXES: FROM A PAINTING BY BRUNO LILJEFORS.
tion of the Scandinavian painter. Take that able Swede, Wilhelms
ton, figure painter with a color sense akin to our own Lawson, but fuller. He paints the worker, but not posed studio figures, out of flesh and blood under God’s own sky. There is an Oriental, almost “ruglike” quality in his big picture of the fisherfolks rowing to church—yellow sunlight, green boats. The sad, almost too heavy faces of the devout people going to worship, reflect in the water in oily streaks and the shawl of the woman in the foreground makes an arabesquelike pattern which dominates the picture. Wilhelm
don deals in big things; his underlying love and respect for labor fills his canvases; he presents the north sincerely, but without sadness.

In the north they call Liljefors the discoverer of nature. He found something in the heart of his country which no one had found before,—the magic poetry of the silent forest, the melodies of the wilderness and the deep meaning of animal life. As Whistler made night out of paint, so Liljefors created a national Swedish landscape. The deep wood where the shrill hoot of the owl breaks the eerie surge of the bending firs; the edging rocks, lashed by the open sea with the sea eagle as king—when night hangs over the snow-laden pines, with the clouds racing each other, ragged; the foxes making for shelter against the elements—these are the salient characteristics of this poet-painter.

THE coming exhibition of Swedish art in America will have several pictures by Prince Eugen, the brother of the present king, a sincere student, hard-working, not a prince who paints, but a prince of a painter. He roams around the country with his paint-box over his shoulder, freezes in the snow, and blue nosed with cold comes home with a bully sketch.

Pelle Molin, painter-poet, half Lapp, half gypsy, exotic in mind, wrote of his own rockbound lair: “I visualize my mountain home—gray houses, bunched so as not to be alone when the winter sweeps over the country. The glimmering windows are like the shining eyes of the wolf-flock, but under the light of the summer night my village lies like a herd of goats waiting for the sunrise,”—the extremes of the north where men grow hard fighting the battles of life. But under the rugged surface there is ever that strain of Sehnsucht, of yearning in the people and in the nature so wonder
duly translated in Hesselbom’s poetic canvas, “Our Country.”

In Norway nature stands rugged, barren rocks swept by ocean tempests, glaciers and mountain peaks—straightforward, uncoddled—the people the same. Pugnacious and proud is the Norwegian,
caring not at all for the opinion of those "above." He calls his
monarch Mr. King. And his statements in paint are bald, truthful.
When Christian Krogh wrote his novel and painted his picture,
"Albertine," the old story of the city streets, he became a marked
man and barely escaped jail. That same fearless and direct per-
sonality underlies the work of Werenskiold whose sterling canvases
of peasant life and portraits of the literary giants of Norway have
given him a national and continental renown. In his footsteps follow
Lund and Karsten, the former a sturdy big-hearted painter, the lat-
ter an analytical technician of high plane. The portraits of Lund
carry conviction instantaneous in expression, and have that freedom
of speech belonging to the descendants of Harold, Fair of Hair.

It is curious that in delineation of rugged Norwegian nature a
Swedish woman, Mrs. Anna Boberg, wife of the celebrated architect,
has so well succeeded and in such a manly way to penetrate the
atmosphere of Northern Norway; the mountains, shimmering under
the midnight sun, in winter snow-white against inky water dotted
with red fishing boats.

Before me lies a little volume, "Sweden as Seen by its Artists,"
by Carl Laurin, filled with splendid color reproductions,—a whole-
souled tribute to the brush of these men. My emotions rise as I
translate its last paragraphs, brimful of appreciation of our painters
and poets:

"Stockholm sleeps—In the church of the knights the chimes peal
over city and water; one thinks of the great who sleep in the vaults
beneath—of all those who have written and worked down in the
city—and the thought goes afar, south and north, to the north under
the midnight sun and with thanks we remember those who in song
and paint have shown us the precious beauty of our Fatherland."

When the time comes that the people of the United States rise
to such deep sense of appreciation of their poets and painters—then
we shall have a truly national art, no longer an echo of abroad.
These northern nations of Europe not only materially support their
artists, but look upon them as national assets, figures of importance
in their spiritual development. The land here is as beautiful as any,
even more; our people interesting and paintable, the wonders of
our great cities stirring and immense. In the fusing of races there
have arisen big American painters, Winslow Homer, the greatest
national figure; and among the younger living there are men whose
art belongs here exclusively,—Bellows and Luks, the most American
of all. But even a century of painters cannot establish an art na-
tional in spirit without the encouraging support of the people.

And this shall be America's great lesson from the north.