



*Detail, the Norway Building at Little Norway, c. 1960.*  
Photo by Merk Hobson. Little Norway Collection.



# ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY

**I**t is fitting that Norway chose a stave church as its entry to the 1893 Exposition. In many ways, this represents the culmination of Norway's search for a place in the artistic world of the turn of the century. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, new impulses of Norwegian nationalism caused artists of all disciplines to look for ways to express a rediscovery of their Nordic heritage. There was a flowering of artistic achievement in the fine arts, and the arts and crafts enjoyed a revival stemming from folk traditions. Artists drew upon ancient motifs dating to Viking times to create works that expressed a truly Norwegian character. The artistic theme that came to be most recognized on the international scene was the "Dragon Style," a blend of artistic elements borrowed from Viking ships, the ancient stave churches dotting Norway's landscape, Viking burial finds and folk art sources. "The style was at its height in Norway in the decades following 1880, and found its expression above all in architecture and the crafts of the cabinetmaker and silversmith."<sup>1</sup>

Waldemar Hansteen, the architect of the Norway Building, was deeply involved in the artistic climate of his day. Born in Christiania in 1857, Hansteen was educated abroad and returned to Christiania in 1881. In following years, Hansteen became the head teacher at both Skien and Christiania's evening technical schools, he was the architect for many government and institutional buildings, and was the principal architect chosen to carry out the restoration of the Gol stave church when it was moved from Hallingdal to the Royal Estate at Bygdøy in 1884 (now the Norsk Folk Museum).



*Crafts of the Norwegian cabinetmaker and silversmith display dragon-style influence. Two examples from the Little Norway collection include a silver Viking ship and a bench with carved ends.*  
Little Norway Collection.







*Frognersaeteren (Frogner Chalet), Oslo, Norway, c. 1910. Architectural details in this building show many elements of dragon-style influence.*  
Little Norway Collection.

The Gol church project was probably the formative key that immersed Hansteen most deeply in the dragon style movement. Gol required extensive restoration, and the architects involved in the project answered many technical questions by studying other stave churches, including Borgund Church. Many of the elements found in the Norway Building, particularly in the interior details, reveal that Hansteen was intimately familiar with these two stave churches.

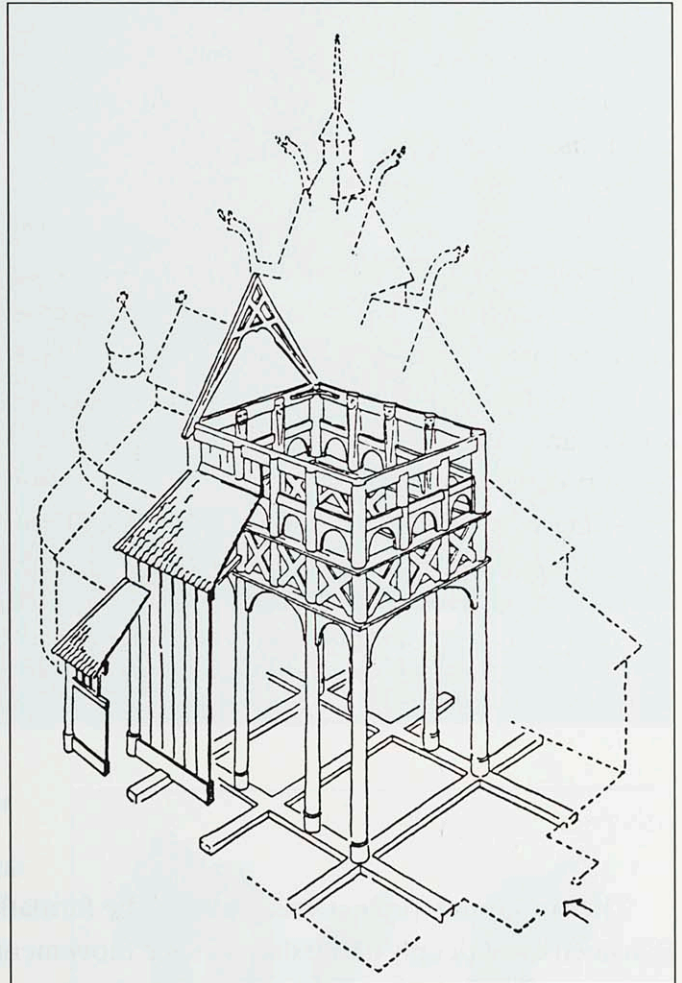
The Norway Building is constructed on a framework principle which makes it a classic stave church structure. Paul Anker in *Art of Scandinavia* defines stave churches as having two basic elements: a support framework of intercrossed logs (the *chassis*), and the vertical columns (the *staves*), which create the 3-dimensional framework of the building itself.

The Norwegian word *stav*, which means a pole, applies to the corner posts and columns which are essential for upholding the entire structure, and for joining the fundamental chassis to the upper braces.<sup>2</sup>





*The Gol Church, postcard view, c. 1913. Hansteen, architect of the Norway Building, was a member of the architectural team responsible for the restoration of this church when it was moved from Hallingdal, Norway, to the Royal Estate at Bygdøy in 1884. The Royal Estate later became the Norsk Folk Museum.*  
Little Norway Collection.



*Perspective drawing of the Gol Stave Church shows the support framework (chassis) at ground level. Rising from the chassis are the staves, which support the gridwork and roof bracing, above. It is evident from the drawing that the staves are the interior elements; the exterior walls only enclose the building and do not support the structure.*

*Drawing courtesy of Stav og Laft i Norge, Norsk Landsforbund, Oslo, Norway, 1969.*



The Norway Building has a chassis made of huge logs set into a stone foundation. Two long beams run the length of the building, and a grid of intercrossed logs join the beams together. At each intersection of the logs a stave rises, and these are tied together in the rafters with a framework of self-supporting scissor beams. The inner-most, highest roof is buttressed by the lower roofs, allowing the central nave to soar 36 feet.

The staves of the Norway Building are constructed of four logs bolted together to make a larger, bundle-like stave. This was a practical solution to the problem of making the building portable, but it created a challenge for the architect. The old stave churches often had carved faces as the column capitals, but the visual effect of the four-part staves meant that pairs of faces needed to be employed instead. These have been interpreted as the kings and queens from the Norse Sagas. The tradition of carving these faces with individual personalities, almost as caricatures, is very much alive. No two faces are alike, and some are humorously ugly. The dragons carved into the interior quadrant brackets are reminiscent of the Gol Church.

The clerestory level is dominated by a row of St. Andrew's crosses, and a series of transom windows admit light from above. Visitors from Norway are often struck with the brightness of the building's interior, in marked contrast to the dim interiors of the old stave churches. Large numbers of windows, both above and below, admit daylight, answering the need for natural lighting in a public exhibition building. An elaborate parquet floor, thoroughly contemporary to the 1890's, gives the Norway Building the richness of multi-colored wood tones. The interior wall surfaces are coated with a creosote finish, as the original stave churches would have been.

Particular attention must be paid to the carvings surrounding the Norway Building's entryway. These carvings are a studious composite of other stave church portals, and were executed by Peder Kvaale of Orkdal, an employee of the Thams company who was originally a farmer. Heads of great beasts emerge from the lower corners of the doorframe, and their tongues become an elaborate, zoomorphic tangle of serpent bodies, birds' necks and floral vines. Biting heads intermingle with grasping claws with impressive Viking intensity. The style is marvelously pagan and vigorous. Acanthus motifs define the doorposts themselves, and a more formal frieze of acanthus leaves makes up the portal base. The church portals of Ål,





*The Norway Building's chassis is evident in this photo, taken beneath the building.*  
 Little Norway Collection.



*The Norway Building's roof construction includes scissor-bracing (top) and nave posts, connecting the roof to the staves (below).*  
 Photo by Randy Winner. Little Norway Collection.





*Seventeen pairs of carved faces, representing the kings and queens from the Norse sagas, peer down from the stave capitals in the Norway Building's interior.*

Photo by Randy Winner. Little Norway Collection.



*Dragon heads form the ends of the quadrant brackets. This detail is a direct influence of architect Hansteen's involvement with the Gol Stave Church restoration project.*

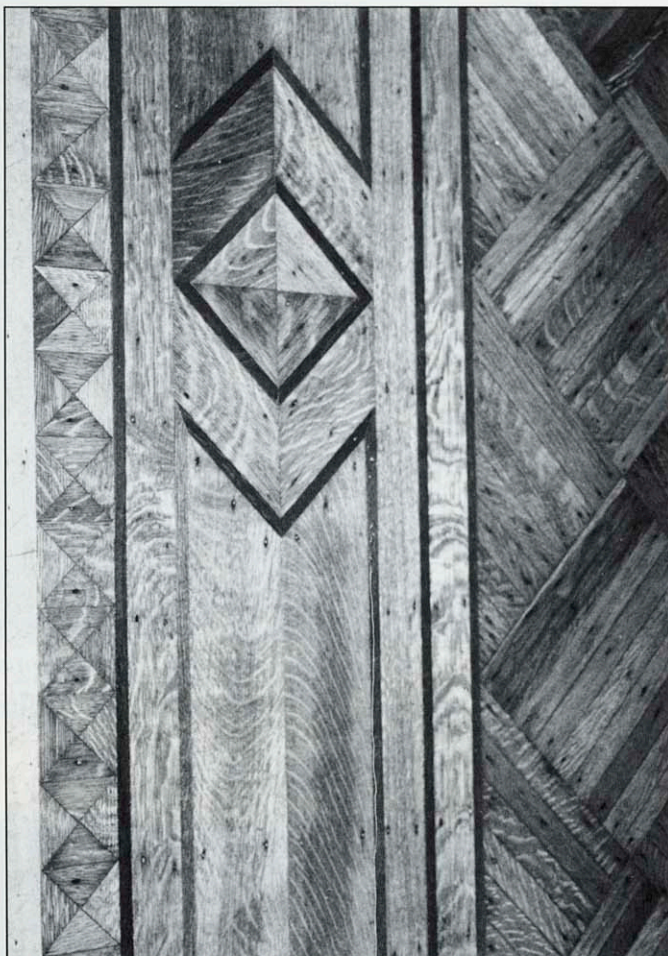
Photo by Randy Winner. Little Norway Collection.





*Upper detail of the Norway Building's nave shows the clerestory windows and St. Andrew's crosses.*

Photo by Randy Winner. Little Norway Collection.



*Detail of parquet floor, contemporary to the 1890's.*

Photo by Randy Winner. Little Norway Collection.

Borgund, Hegge and Gol all have these same elements as part of their design. The massive door is ornamented with hand-wrought iron hinges and a ring knocker, and is almost 3 inches thick.

On the exterior of the building, the multi-level rooflines originally were sheathed with heavy, dragon-scale shingles. The unusual texture was further enhanced with multi-colored paint, giving the roof a most distinctive character. Fire-breathing dragons define the roofpeaks and accentuate the verticality of the structure. Other similarities to the old stave churches, such as the latticed gables, dragon-surmounted tower and heavy porch posts, all suggest much careful study.





*The Norway Building's portal carvings and door.*  
Little Norway Collection.





*Detail, left door panel. An elaborate tangle of carving emerges as a tongue from the beast's mouth, lower right corner.*  
Little Norway Collection.





*Detail, right panel. Biting heads, acanthus motifs and the doorway's hand-wrought metalwork are visible.*

Little Norway Collection.

The Norway Building is neither a church nor a direct copy, but rather an adaptive interpretation of the Stave Church Style. The traditional semi-circular chancel and the enclosed ambulatory were not incorporated as part of the design because they were not essential to the building's use as an exhibition structure. The Norway Building is, however, a representation of Norway's unique contribution to architectural history, a beautiful building, and a valuable artifact from the 1893 Columbian Exposition.

1. *The Art of Norway, 1750-1914*, ed. Louise Lincoln, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts and The Regents of the University of Wisconsin, publishers, 1978, p. 175.

2. Paul Anker, *Art of Scandinavia*, Vol. 1, Paul Hamlyn Publishing Group, LTD., London, 1970, p. 377.





*Restorations completed in 1992 returned the Norway Building to its 1893 appearance. For the first time since its tenure at Lake Geneva, dragon ornaments crown the peaks of all three roof levels. Dragon-scale shingles and decorative details were also restored.*

Photo by Randy Winner. Little Norway Collection.