

**Geographies, Topographies, and Northern Light:
Crafting a Nordic Identity at Skagen**

by

Olivia Woodruff

Submitted to the Board of Art History and Anthropology
School of Humanities and Natural and Social Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2019

Sponsor: Sarah J. Warren

Second Reader: Jason Pine

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and guidance of Sarah Warren and Jason Pine. Thank you both for your enthusiasm and insight.

I want to thank the Art History and Anthropology faculty whose classes have introduced me to incredibly valuable and exciting topics. Much of the inspiration for this research has been pulled from the content of your classes, and I want to thank everyone for their dedication and passion for teaching.

Thank you, Tanya Chernyak for your friendship and compassion. You are a dream peer and have pushed me to be a more thoughtful and engaged learner.

Finally, I want to thank my parents for their patience, guidance, and love.

Table of Contents

An Introduction to Nordic Light and Romantic Nationalism at Skagen	4
Nostalgia and Tradition at Skagen	7
Crafting an Identity at Skagen	16
Myth and the North.	20
P.S. Krøyer at Skagen.	30
Conclusion	38
Bibliography.	45

Geographies, Topographies, and Northern Light: Crafting a Nordic Identity at Skagen

Our land, our land, our Fatherland! Ring out, dear word, oh sound! No rising hill, or mountain grand, no sloping dale, no northern strand there is more loved to be found than this — our fathers' ground.
— Johan Ludvig Runeberg, Vårt Land (1848)

An Introduction to Nordic Light and Romantic Nationalism at Skagen

At the turn of the 20th century, Scandinavian artists were advocating for a distinct Nordic art that was separate from the stylistic traditions of mainland Europe. In doing so they were in search of subjects of an unmistakable national character, and by extension, a visual representation of “Nordicness”. Born out of this desire to identify and capture a collective national identity, a return-to-folk movement came into effect at the end of the 1870s, as Nordic artists left the cosmopolitan centers of Europe to return home and focus on the defining geographical and cultural characteristics of the North. Suddenly a core national identity was being forged in images relating to the northern landscape and the rustic folk peasant.

There was no better subject to demonstrate this new focus on the uniqueness of Nordic nature than the phenomena of the Northern “white nights”. The midsummer white nights unify the northern countries and serve as a marker of their unique geographical location; during the long hours of daylight in the summer, the sun will dip below the horizon around 10 p.m. and cast a blue haze over the landscape. This “Nordic light” was promoted by Scandinavian artists as the defining atmospheric condition of all Scandinavian landscape paintings.¹ The painters at the artists’ colony at Skagen in Denmark would fully embrace the image of Nordic light and would

make use of its associations with the northern countries to promote an authentic image of nature and Nordic identity.

Of the Skagen artists, Peder Severin Krøyer (1851-1909) was one of most prominent figures in both the rural artists' community and the cosmopolitan cities of Europe.² Like many Scandinavian artists at the time, Krøyer traveled to Paris where he was introduced to French Realism and a vibrant atmosphere of artistic innovation that saturated the urban centers of Europe. Yet Krøyer, like many of his fellow Scandinavian artists, felt that if this new style of Realism were to be effective, then it must be applied to a local subject matter.³ Thus he returned to Denmark in the nationalists currents of the 1880s to paint a subject that was deemed closer to the Danish national spirit. The return-to-folk movement was felt nowhere more strongly than at Skagen; the small fishing village on the northern coast of Jutland was a haven for artists who sought a simplistic and quasi-primitive lifestyle. Skagen was a place of full blown folk-primitivism, where people were seen as having an almost “pre-rational contact with nature and tradition”.⁴ For the artists there, themes of rustic simplicity, the pastoral, and unspoiled nature were charged with moralistic interpretations that were reflected in their art.

Krøyer's painting, *Evening on the South Beach at Skagen* (1893) (Figure 1.1), depicts the midsummer white night as it blankets a calm and harmonious stroll on the village shores. Two women glide across the beach dressed in white linen dresses as a blue haze washes over them and the landscape. The two bodies are set in unity with nature in a way that indicates a sense of quasi- domesticity. Here, all of the associations with Northern landscapes as being dangerous or harsh are ignored, and instead a new kind of image of nature takes over. Nature, here, is a place of homely comfort — the ease in which the women's bodies move across the beach is as if they were gliding through a familiar room in their home. The movements are effortless: the women's

bodies seem to melt into the blue light of the landscape and the water is so calm it looks like glass.

Krøyer's painting demonstrates an idyllic image of nature. It disrupts the common imagination of a harsh Northern landscape where the fragility of the human body is pinned against the brutality of the land. Krøyer's painting offers an alternative to this where humans and nature are woven into one another to the point where there is no separation between the two and they become a seamless pair. It is worth noting that this idealization of the land suggests that there is something special about the *Nordic* individual's ability to live in harmony with the landscape. The rhetoric of the image implies that there is something about the Nordic person that is more natural, and closer to the land. These ideas became very popular in the late 1880s and early 1890s when the antagonistic geo-political debates between Sweden-Finland and Denmark-



1.1 P.S. Krøyer, *Evening on the South Beach at Skagen*, oil on canvas, 1893, Skagens Museum, Denmark.

Norway began to subside, and a belief in the “natural man” became a unifying image for the Nordic states.⁵ Matti Klinge describes the “natural man” as being positioned in harmony with nature and thus submerged in the superiority of rural life. Krøyer, and the other Skagen artists, fully supported these ideas and promoted them in their art as moralistic interpretations of Nordicness. The idealizing of humans in nature in *Evening on the South Beach at Skagen* would serve as the ultimate image of Nordicness. Furthermore, the moralization of these themes of ruralness and simplicity would be mined in the development of the “Nordic identity”.⁶ This kind of reading would go as such: the Nordic man not only loves nature, but *is* loved by nature, and thus becomes the ultimate emblem of purity and naturalness. This “closer to God” mentality is at the very core of Scandinavian nationalism.

Nostalgia and Tradition at Skagen

Fellow Skagen artist Michael Ancher (1849-1927) engaged with similar themes of rural simplicity, yet positioned the Skagen *natives* as the ultimate emblem of Nordicness. Ancher’s painting *Will He Clear the Point?* (1879) (Figure 1.2) focuses on the local working-class fishermen at Skagen. The men are depicted as hearty, down-to-earth workers; their thick clunky work boots, and practical simplistic sweaters distinguish them from the bourgeois world of flowing white afternoon dresses from Krøyer’s *Evening on the South Beach at Skagen* (Figure 1.1). Yet Ancher, like Krøyer, is crafting a strong rhetorical claim that peasant life at Skagen is marked by a unification of humans with their landscape. The warm earth tones of both the men’s clothing and the sand and sky form a homogenous image where the bodies are seamlessly integrated into the landscape. Rather than positioning the Nordic body in domestic harmony with

the landscape like Krøyer, Ancher relies on the fishermen's rustic heroism as the bond between the vast unruly landscape and the Skagen locals.

This idea of rustic heroism became the focus of Ancher's work at Skagen. *The Lifeboat is Taken through the Dunes* (1883) (Figure 1.3) features a similar kind of hard-working moralizing ethos. In the painting, the masses of bodies stretching out into the distance, unified in communal labor, has surprising similarities to a sort of nationalistic propaganda poster that seeks to mobilize the workforce. Yet what stands out the most in Ancher's paintings is the sense of a moral elevation of simple lifestyles that focused on strong work ethics. The fishermen's simple dress and unglamorous labor demonstrates a disregard for the frills and unnecessary excess that was associated with urban life at the time. These men are not working in standardized factories,



1.2 Michael Ancher, *Will He Clear the Point?*, 1879, Private Collection.



1.3 Michael Ancher, *The Lifeboat is Taken through the Dunes*, 1883, Statens Museum for Kunst, Denmark. operating machines, but are rather working with their bodies in close contact with the natural elements, no matter how brutal the conditions may be. Ancher locates a kind of heroism in this work, and celebrates it as rustic authenticity. Moreover, Ancher and the other Skagen artists are positioning the simplicity of the locals' lives against what they viewed as the frivolous materialistic lifestyle in the Industrialized cities.

In the 1880s, Scandinavia was undergoing rapid industrial growth. As the countries were late to urbanize in comparison to the rest of Europe, artists across the North shifted their concerns from keeping up with the stylistic trends of places like Paris and Berlin, and instead grappled with defining a nationalist style of painting back home. At Skagen, the artists viewed their revival of a spiritualistic contact with nature and tradition as a rejection of everything they

felt was wrong with modern urbanized society. Ancher and Krøyer in particular insisted that simplicity was the hallmark of the Nordic identity.⁷ As a whole, the Skagen artists considered the rustic lives of the Skagen natives to be a more authentic representation of Scandinavian identity. For Michael Ancher in particular, the people of Skagen represented something lost in the industrialization/Europeanization of Scandinavia: down-to-earth, humble individuals who were seemingly untouched by industrialization. As Scandinavia quickly started to urbanize and become increasingly integrated into Western and Central Europe, past traditions such as handicrafts, small-scale fishing, and peasant farming symbolized a kind of “way of the past” that was thought to be lost in the Industrial Era. There is an interesting overlap between this argument from the Skagen colony, and the ideologies of English Arts and Crafts thinkers like William Morris and John Ruskin who saw traditional handicrafts as a righteous alternative to industrialized production.⁸ In strikingly similar ways, the Skagen artists viewed the simple practices of peasants to be morally superior to trivial bourgeois sensibility.

What made Skagen so appealing for artists and tourists alike, was its appeal to a strong sense of nostalgia that arose out of the Industrial Era. At Skagen, life was “slow”. There was still a strong craft tradition in areas such as carpentry and glass work, and the population was generally self-sustained on fishing and local farming. Marie Krøyer’s (1867-1940) painting *At the Loom* (1890s) (Figure 1.4) pairs the image of a traditional craft practice with sensations of ease and comfort. The light pastel colors mimic those of the Nordic “white nights” seen in her husband P.S. Krøyer’s *Evening on the South Beach at Skagen* (1893) (Figure 1.1). Although the scene is an interior, the vivid use of light suggests a strong connection between the indoors and outdoors as it is mediated through the window. This soft blanket of light over everything creates a sense of “naturalness” or ease in the painting that indicates craft work as being aligned with a

close contact with nature and domesticity. Similar to the fishermen's work clothes in Michael Ancher's paintings, the woman sitting at the loom is dressed in very simplistic and modest attire. There is a sense of practicality and plainness that is reflected not only in her manner of dress, but also in the physical act of her work. Here, craft is emblematic of humility and thoughtfulness, and submerged in the nostalgic longing for a production process that had been lost. The feeling of slowness and quietness in the painting works to enhance the claim that traditional craft is in opposition to the rapidity and inattentiveness of industrial production. Marie Krøyer was deeply invested in the Arts and Craft movement during the 1880s and 90s.⁹ One of the movement's main goals was to bring dignity and value back into craft in a way that was pushing back against industrialized production. In *At the Loom*, Krøyer locates a similar way of making objects that aligns with the values of the Arts and Craft movement.

However, it is worth questioning to what extent the strong craft tradition at Skagen worked as a model for similar return-to-folk movements that were popular among upper-class circles. These craft skills were learned out of a necessity for the Skagen locals. There is obvious doubt surrounding how aware the locals were of their handicraft's association with intellectual revivalist ideology. Thus it is important to keep in mind the disconnect between the romanticization of peasant crafts and the role of everyday utility that these objects held for the locals of Skagen.

The nostalgic longing for a way of the past was seen not only in the craft traditions at Skagen, but were heavily associated with collective Lutheran values around the region. In 1870, Skagen underwent a religious revival that prioritized humility, poverty, and simplicity above all else.¹⁰ Historically, Lutheranism served as the consolidating force for the Nordic countries. Throughout the shifting political borders and tension between the Nordic countries, religion

(alongside geographical uniqueness) remained the fundamental feature of Nordicness.¹¹ During the 1870 religious revival, Lutheranism became an essential characteristic of National identity.¹² It represented a move toward simplicity — it ingrained a do-it-yourself type attitude, and emphasized modesty and primitiveness. Lutheranism in the north rejected the excess and spectacle that was associated with Catholicism. In visual culture, the image of the peasant farmer (through hard work and close contact with the land) was considered to be an emblem of the humble pious citizen. A strong work-ethic and pared-down lifestyle were cherished by Lutheran standards; this kind of imagery was a dominant theme in the works of the Skagen painters.

Interestingly, the majority of the Skagen artists like P.S. Krøyer, Christian Krohg, and George Brandes were atheists. No matter how removed from Christianity the artists were, there is no denying that they shared a common interest in peasant imagery with the religious revivalists at the time. Of the Skagen artists, Anna Ancher (1859-1935), wife of Michael Ancher, was the only painter to integrate overt religious imagery into her works. Brought up in an evangelical environment, Ancher's use of religious themes are most prominent in her portrait paintings of her mother, Ane Brøndum.¹³ While the portraits of her mother are characterized by a particular kind of stoicism, her application of religious themes on the depiction of the Skagen locals is much less harsh. Her painting *A Prayer Meeting* (1903) (Figure 1.5), captures the details of an unsophisticated meeting set in a field and led by a lay preacher. The location of the meeting suggests a sense of spontaneous simplicity to the religious practice of the Skagen natives. There is a feeling of an on-the-go, DIY approach to religious experience without frills or spectacles. The rendering of the women's faces is reminiscent of the stoicism of Ancher's portraits of her mother, who is often portrayed as being reserved and dressed in plain clothing with her



1.4 Marie Krøyer, *At the Loom*, 1890s, Skagens Museum, Denmark.



1.5 Anna Ancher, *A Prayer Meeting*, 1903, Skagens Museum, Denmark.

hair covered. However, the treatment of the light in *A Prayer Meeting* pivots from the seriousness of the Ane Brøndum portraits: the scene is illuminated by the warmth of the sunlight that sits just beyond the horizon, and the vibrancy of the grass energizes the entire scene. Ancher treats natural light in a similar way as P.S. Krøyer: although less atmospheric than his *Evening on the South Beach at Skagen*, the glow of the sunlight glazes over the individuals' faces and unites them within the landscape. The "naturalizing" of the locals as if they belong in nature is once more being evoked by these visual cues. Yet in this case, Ancher is looking at the provisional religious meeting as a testament to the rustic character of the Skagen natives.

Moving beyond the more explicit scenes of religious life at Skagen, many of the artists incorporated visual imagery that demonstrated Lutheran values without the work being directly about religion. For example, Viggo Johansen's (1852-1935) paintings of quiet interiors speak to the aforementioned fixation on simplicity. His painting *Kitchen Interior* (1884) (Figure 1.6), shows a woman with her back turned arranging flowers in a vase. The kitchen itself is very simple: a basic stone floor, white walls, and a rudimentary wooden door painted green. It is implied that the only light source is coming from a single window off to the right of the frame. The bareness of the interior emphasizes the utility of each object in the space. Vases and pans are placed on the wall not for decoration, but for practicality and functionality. The lack of ornamentation and frill suggests a pragmatic attitude toward design, commodities, and material objects. This type of utilitarian thinking is in line with a wider Lutheran outlook on simplification and efficiency.

There is a clear resemblance between *Kitchen Interior* and Anna Ancher's *The Girl in the Kitchen* (1883-86) (Figure 1.7). Both kitchen scenes capture a still moment of mundane tasks. Once more, the unadorned simplicity of the spaces underscores the value of function over



1.6 Viggo Johansen, *Kitchen Interior*, 1884, Skagens Museum, Denmark.



1.7 Anna Ancher, *The Girl in the Kitchen*, 1883-86, Skagens Museum, Denmark.

ornamentation. Even the ways both the women are dressed in unpretentious and uncomplicated silhouettes addresses these issues of utility versus decoration. Furthermore, the tension between functional simplicity and non-functional embellishment can be understood as part of the complicated relationship between mechanized production and traditional handicrafts. The rooms and material objects from Johansen's and Ancher's paintings align with the ideologies from the Arts and Crafts circles that positioned craft and tradition as a morally uplifting alternative to the Industrial Era not just in terms of the actual designed objects but in the lifestyle associated with them. For the artists and craft revivalist alike, this nostalgic glorification of past traditions correlated to a simpler and more moral way of being that was embedded in Lutheran values at the time.

More than anything else, the role of nostalgia at Skagen was in reaction to a larger rejection of the expanding industrialization of the Scandinavian cities. The growing interest in what were considered “authentic” traditions, and the revivalist mentality towards craft marked a shift in the nation’s relationship with the past. For many, Skagen represented an alternative to industrialization. P.S. Krøyer viewed nostalgia as a sentimental appeal to a romantic way of the past. His paintings featured dreamlike euphoric moments that were steeped in themes of childhood comforts and whimsical summer nights. This contrasts Michael Ancher’s depiction of male-centered heroism as the ultimate emblem of nostalgia. In Ancher’s paintings of fishermen, the past is understood as the image of hard work and self-reliance. Anna Ancher and Viggo Johansen utilize scenes of quiet contemplation paired with a feeling of humility as a foundation for a moralizing rhetoric steeped in a sense of longing for the past. However different these approaches may be, the artists are all romanticizing the lives of Skagen locals in ways that they themselves were trying to uphold.

Crafting an Identity at Skagen

It is worth exploring the ways in which the artists saw themselves as different from the locals of Skagen. The Skagen artists were not natives to the archipelago, and almost all of them had come from cosmopolitan and upper-middle class backgrounds in the centers of Copenhagen or Paris. Michael and Anna Ancher made several visits to Skagen as a vacation destination before settling there in 1880.¹⁴ P.S. Krøyer traveled around Copenhagen, Paris, and Stockholm to study painting, and was very connected to the wider artistic movements happening outside of Scandinavia even while he was at Skagen.

Before the artist colony was established, the Skagen region was intensely isolated.¹⁵ As Hans Christian Anderson describes his trip to Skagen in 1859, the town could only be accessed by a single dirt road running up the archipelago.¹⁶ The introduction of the railroad to the region in 1889 made Skagen a more accessible destination where wealthy tourists from the cities of Denmark would flock to experience an idyllic retreat away from the demands of city life.¹⁷ Compared to the artists, the native people of Skagen were traditional fishermen and farmers who had little contact with the urbanized regions of Denmark. Despite this difference, when the artists came to the region they simultaneously aligned themselves with the lifestyle and simplicity of the peasant community, and differentiated themselves as an Other that was “forward thinking” and attuned to more intellectually progressive ideas. The Skagen artists formed a distinct community of individuals who would shape the spirit of the region drastically. Skagen went from a rural region of peasant farmers to a popular destination for artists and intellectuals alike; most importantly, Skagen was filled with the promise of quaint charm and rustic authenticity.

For the artists, the desire to move to Skagen was done so in an attempt to return to something they felt was lost in the fast pace of industrialized life, and out of a dissatisfaction with the hollowness of the urban experience. There was something authentic and desirable about the peasant lifestyle. And for the Skagen artists, they could play a dual role: the artists could be both absolved from the duties of city life that they were against, and enlightened with the pre-rational contact with the landscape. There is a clear tension between these two identities; on the one hand they distanced themselves from the locals by insisting on the close-knit intellectual circle, and on the other they tried to adopt this quasi-peasant lifestyle by “going native”.

The tricky integration of the Skagen painters and the local people demonstrated that the concept of “the primitive” and “traditional” was fluid. The most intriguing example of this

dilemma is made apparent when the artists cast themselves into the roles of the peasant in their paintings. In Anna Ancher's aforementioned series of paintings of her mother, Ancher puts Brøndum into the role of the modest local to craft an idealized view of the pious peasant. If the Skagen artists wanted to project an idealized image of peasantry onto their own personal lives at Skagen, then it quickly becomes apparent that their adopted identities were unstable.

P. S. Krøyer's *Artists' Luncheon at Brøndum's Hotel* (1883) (Figure 1.8) shows the fellow artists associated with the colony in 1883. Michael Ancher can be seen in the background along with hotel proprietor, Degn Brøndum. The scene depicts a usual gathering of artists around Brøndum's dining room table, where they often met to discuss and share intellectual thoughts and ideas. The informal community of artists are seated in an airy, light-filled room, wearing suits and drinking liqueurs — it is a relaxed afternoon scene of comradery, sociability, and carefree comforts. However, when comparing the scenes from everyday life of the artists, such as in this painting, to that of the locals, there is a disconnect between the two worlds. The Skagen artists worked to craft their personas to seamlessly match the rustic spirit of the local subjects they surrounded themselves with. Yet, their afternoon dresses and clean linen suits are a world apart from the working class fishermen in *Will He Clear the Point?* (Figure 1.2).

Perhaps what made Skagen so appealing to the artists was that it stood for a utopic ideal of an alternative way of living. Skagen represented a world of simplicity and humility that was desirable at the time; yet it simultaneously had internal contradictions and issues that were unresolved. As the artists relied on a seamless association between the folk-peasant and Scandinavian identity, the most glaring issue with this rhetorical stance is that by 1890, the majority of Scandinavians were not living in this simplistic rustic way that the Skagen artists



1.8 P.S. Krøyer, *Artists' Luncheon at Brøndum's Hotel*, 1883, Skagens Museum, Denmark.

considered the national identity. Even the artists themselves were not fully partaking in the peasant lifestyle they advocated for (as is represented in *Artists' Luncheon at Brøndum's Hotel*). Yet the appeal of this idealized image was very powerful. Moreover, the style of painting contributed to the belief in the myth of Skagen: the atmospheric and romantic scenes have a beguiling affect. Perhaps the most compelling element of the Skagen painters' style is the fact that it easily communicated a *feeling* of Scandinavia rather than the facts. The paintings were carefully crafted myths that had a lasting impact on the shaping of a national identity. They were the most effective tools for communicating the message that the national character should be aligned with the romantic and esoteric folk-peasantry at Skagen.

Myth and the North

This land is still as fair, the sea is blue around it, and peace is cherished there. Strong men and noble women still uphold their country's honor with faithfulness and skill.

— Adam Oehlenschläger, “Der er et yndigt land” (Danish National Anthem), 1819

For the Nordic countries at the turn of the 20th century, national identity was being crafted through a complex system of myths which had a lasting impact on the cultural self-image of the nations. Much of the current scholarship on the Skagen artists' colony tends to overlook the role that the artists' works had in generating a myth of a singular Nordic identity. This myth is complex, contradictory, and hard to pin down. In simplest terms it can be described as the *feeling* of Nordicness. For example: the peasant living in harmony with landscape, vast pastoral scenes, a glimpse of the unique Northern light, or the comfort of domesticity. Images such as these portray a seamless connection between geography and peasantry, and came to be understood as the authoritative expression of an authentic Nordic identity.

When trying to make sense of myth-making in Scandinavian culture, it's useful to look at it through the lens of Roland Barthes' theory of myth; his theory is best used as a foundation for thinking about the ways in which the myth of a singular Nordic identity has become a solidified image. As Barthes convincingly argues in "Myth Today" (1956), myth is a set of semiological systems that distorts a thing by stripping it of all its richness and contingencies, to then leave a purely signifying object.¹⁸ In other words, when an image, object, word, etc. is caught by myth, all contradictions or problems associated with it are masked, and the image, object, word, etc. then becomes a static form in to which the new concept is attached (the myth). For an American reader, it is useful to imagine the image of the American West at a time such as the Gold Rush as a form of mythical speech. All of the contradictions and problems associated with the West — the cruelty of the landscape and the brutal conflicts between white settlers and Native Americans — are flattened by myth as the form of mythical speech absorbs a new meaning of American heroism, rugged individualism, and vast potential. As Barthes argues, myth is not concerned with being true or false, and often myth is used as an alibi to cover something up (often to naturalize a set of power relations).¹⁹ Thus myth is used in the service of power and is incredibly effective in justifying the set of power dynamics because of its able to shape a new reality. In the case of the American West, we accept its associations with freedom and heroism as our own reality. This association is instantaneous: agreed upon by a whole culture, and understood without explanation. This is the power of myth.

Myth's ability to reshape reality and naturalize a complex set of relationships can be extended into thinking about the ways in which national identity is formed. At the turn of the 20th century, Scandinavia found itself at point of intersection. During the move toward Europeanization through industrialization, the Scandinavian countries were becoming more and

more like the countries of Central and Western Europe such as France or Germany. As a push back against this, the rise of nationalism in the 1880s was linked to the desire to preserve a unique national identity that was separate from the other European countries.²⁰ In this sense, the Nordic countries were going through what could be described as an identity crisis: not quite European, yet not quite completely isolated/independent. It is within this uncertainty about the national identity that the myth of Nordicness actually emerges. The new need to solidify and naturalize a distinct Nordic identity correlates with this period of nationalism that is steeped in broader issues of geo-political conflict, and issues surrounding cultural assimilation across Scandinavia.

In general, Lutheranism and the shared Nordic linguistic family are stressed as the unifying cultural elements of Nordic identity.²¹ However, these characteristics are quickly challenged when the reality of the Nordic countries' cultural diversity is taken into account. Most notably, the Sami — the indigenous peoples ranging across northern Scandinavia and into Russia — do not fall within the cultural criteria of Nordicness. The Sami languages come from the Finno-Ugric language group, and they have their own unique religious practices. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Sami have been continuously scrutinized, mistreated, and alienated from Nordic society.²² In his book titled “Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden Norway, and Finland”, Gunnar Broberg describes the surge of pseudo-scientific Darwinistic writing on topics of race and ethnicity in Scandinavia in the late 19th century that pointed towards the Sami, and other ethnic minorities, as being inferior to, and separate from their “own people”.²³ Much of this writing, rooted in eugenic ideology, sought to not only determine who was and who wasn't “Scandinavian”, but to then make sense of what to do with the people who were outliers. One solution was to Christianize the Sami: waves of

missionaries, such as Lars Levi Læstadius and his pupil Juhani Raattamaa, initiated the Christianization of the Sami that correlated to the religious revival taking place across the Nordic countries during the 1870s.²⁴ In addition, Sami languages were systematically being suppressed through language bans in schools and workplaces. All of this was done as a form of forced cultural assimilation; the Sami were to be considered Scandinavian, but only to an extent. Ethnically they were still considered “Other”, yet if the Sami assimilated into Scandinavian culture it would contribute to the *appearance* of a homogenous Nordic identity. Broberg convincingly argues that the appearance of homogeneity was in the governments’ best interests. If they crafted the myth of cultural uniformity, they could ignore the pressing issues of land rights and usage, ethnic discrimination/minimization, and violence that threatened the Sami peoples. In this instance, myth was used as an alibi for continued oppression that maintained the current power relations at the time, and justified the subjugation of the Sami. In short, if the government denied the problems surrounding the Sami, and were able to present an image of cultural uniformity, then they could get away with mistreatment much more easily.

It is worth mentioning that while cultural homogeneity was being prioritized throughout the late 19th century and into the early 20th century, a simultaneous subjugation of those deemed as being Other was taking place. Broberg describes the connection between eugenic ideologies/practices and the strong nationalist movement happening at the time as an interesting paradox: those viewed as Other were on the one hand alienated from the hegemonic model of Nordicness, and on the other were being “made Nordic” by a series of rhetorical efforts. Notably, Herman Bernhard Lundborg’s 1918 exhibition of racial types across Scandinavia sought to present a holistic cultural image of Sweden under one unified and patriotic identity, yet ended up highlighting race biology through a series of scientific lectures and photographic documentation

of different races.²⁵ Lundborg was a leading figure of Race biology in Sweden, and describes in his book, *The Racial Characters of the Swedish Nation* (1926), a need to formulate an accepted model of Swedish ethnicity and culture. Moreover, he viewed the “racial power” of peasant farmers to be superior over the “shriveling up” middle and upper classes in the cities who, as he saw it, were more concerned with wealth and luxuries rather than self-denial and modesty.²⁶ This direct prioritization of what can be understood as Lutheran values of humility and peasantry is striking, and clearly points to what (or who) the idealized Nordic identity was.

Similarly, this need to craft a new reality that distorted cultural differences and nuances to fit into a homogenous model relates to the cultural-political problems surrounding Finland at the time. Since the 16th century, Finland had been under Swedish rule until Russia claimed the country in 1809 during the Finnish War between Sweden and Russia.²⁷ Historically torn between Swedish and Russian rule and seeking independence, Finland experienced a swell in nationalism in the 1860s that advocated for a strong Finnish cultural identity. In reaction to the intense Russification and class-based conflicts between the Swedish-speaking upper classes and Finnish speaking peasants, Finnish nationalists wanted the Finnish language to be the official language (rather than Swedish), and embraced the idea of a distinct Finnish identity. As Finland sought to be an independent country, there arose a new need to legitimize the claim that Finland was Nordic and should be politically and economically united with the other Nordic countries.²⁸ It is worth noting that similar situations were happening (although not in the same time period) in Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands. Where in order to justify the unification of these countries through subjugation, a myth that the nations were naturally united through the shared aura of Nordicness needed to be cemented in the cultural discourse. Swedish historian Peter Aronsson describes a similar form of “productive mythmaking” where national identity was

constructed as a cultural negotiation that distilled Nordicness into a singular unified model.²⁹ Ultimately, in order to archive this, a reconstruction of cultural differences was necessary.

Visual imagery became among the most efficient way of communicating the myth that the North was unified under one identity. Many paintings from the 1880s and 90s in Scandinavia have strong ties to the nationalist movement, and convincingly demonstrate a shared feeling of Nordicness, and most importantly, assign a distinct *aura* of the North that had a powerful impact. At Skagen, a unique kind of nationalist paintings were being produced. It is worth noting that the paintings from Skagen were by no means the main source of propagating the myth of the Nordicness; other forms of visual imagery that reached a wider audience would have transmitted the claim more efficiently. However, the Skagen paintings can and should be read as being symptomatic of wider nationalistic sentiments from the time. Indeed, the majority of the Skagen painters were drawn to Skagen because of its status as an authentic representation of Nordicness. The subjects and treatment of the paintings respond to this idea of authenticity that was associated with nationalist ideologies in ways that should not be overlooked. The aforementioned themes of peasantry, simplicity, and tradition are linked to this wider dialogue, which suggests a deep connection between the Skagen work and the myth of a singular national identity. Thus, the Skagen artists' colony should be understood as not just a joyful retreat into the countryside, but rather a symptom of politically motivated forces.

At Skagen, this was articulated most clearly through the images of folk peasantry, and cultural traditions. Thinking on Michael Ancher's *Will He Round the Point?* (1879) (Figure 1.2), the folk-peasant is celebrated as a heroic symbol of Nordic identity. The fishermen's physical bond with the landscape (through color choice and treatment of form) brings to mind the popular narrative that the Nordic body is "one with the land" that was popular during this era. Aligning

the Nordic body with the landscape as an intrinsic characteristic of Nordicness became a fundamental tool for deciding who was and who wasn't Nordic. As myth tries to normalize one version of Nordicness by prioritizing unity through sameness over cultural diversity, a new ideology of Nordicism takes its place: suddenly the Nordic identity is tied to an essential bond with nature. However, there are a number of issues that arise with this placement. On the one hand, to claim that anyone living in the North who has a strong connection to the landscape (whether through labor practices or harsh geographical location) is homogenously Nordic becomes problematic. It minimizes all cultural differences and autonomies, and leaves no room for the subjugated population to form a nuanced and complex identity of their own. On the other hand, from a practical stand point, the majority of the Northern population had little connection to the landscape in the ways that were being depicted in *Will He Round the Point?* or the other Skagen paintings. Claiming that the Nordic identity is rooted in an inherent connection to the land reveals a disconnect between this idealized image and the reality that people were actually working in factories and living in urban sprawl. Despite this, the Skagen painters clearly prioritize the images of peasant workers, and simple ways of living as the core of national identity.

Anna Ancher's *A Prayer Meeting* (1903) (Figure 1.4) points to a similar kind of fetishization of the folk-peasant as the emblem of Nordicness. Unlike Michael Ancher's fishermen paintings, the folk-present is not celebrated because of the harmony between labor and the landscape, but rather for an embrace of religious piety that extends into living a modest lifestyle. Here, religion is highlighted as a unifying force, and one that could be understood as stretching across the entire Nordic countryside. The location is purposefully ambiguous: it leaves room for the viewer to image a similar scene are happening all around the country. In the

painting, Lutheranism not only becomes a form of cultural unification (a reason to gather around a shared belief), but a naturalized religious identity. Once again, the landscape plays a key role in the naturalization of the myth — religion is almost intrinsically linked to the land through a harmonious synthesis of the rolling hills, the people's bodies, and the religious sermon. This naturalization is at the crux of Barthes' theory that myth becomes a justification for a set of power relations. Here, the linking of the landscape and religion serves to justify Lutheranism as a unifying force between the Nordic countries, and by extension, justifies the efforts to Christianize groups like the Sami, and further contribute to a hegemonic model of Nordicness.

P.S. Krøyer's painting *Midsummer Eve Bonfire on Skagen Beach* (1906) (Figure 1.9) shows a traditional midsummer celebration and festivities. Krøyer intended for this painting to be a historically important work that was to capture all the friends and artists at Skagen in one image.³⁰ In the foreground to the left is Krøyer's daughter, Vibeke, behind her is Marie Krøyer's brother Valdemar Trierpcke. Fellow Skagen artists Michael and Anna Ancher, Viggo Johansen, Holger Drachmann, and Laurits Tuxen are present. And members of the Skagen community such as Captain P.K. Nielsen and Mayor Otto Schwartz with his wife Alba, can all be seen gathered around the fire. The painting was intended to portray the close community of friends at Skagen as a kind of time capsule: a frozen moment in time that represented the social unity at Skagen.

Beyond its personal importance to Krøyer as a time capsule of life at Skagen, *Midsummer Eve Bonfire on Skagen Beach* emphasizes a feeling of community that is unified by tradition. Skagen natives, and artists come gather together to celebrate what could be considered the most quintessential Scandinavian tradition: midsummer. As a tradition, midsummer celebrates the summer solstice and involves a number of festivities centered around the landscape. Dancing, drinking, feasting, and playing games outside are the foundation of midsummer celebration.

Most importantly, these activities have a close tie to the landscape, and particularly the extended period of daylight. Krøyer's painting *Evening on the South Beach at Skagen* (1893) depicts the midsummer white night in a similar celebratory way, that emphasizes the uniqueness and cultural importance of midsummer.

Indeed, the painting articulates a strong sense of national identity; *Midsummer Eve Bonfire on Skagen Beach* highlights the idea that Scandinavians are unified by tradition and landscape. The masses of people, both locals and artists, are united by the blazing bonfire in the center of the painting that casts a glow over the bodies and faces of the people. For the viewer, the beach feels familiar from Michael Ancher's fishermen paintings or Krøyer's romantic depictions of strolls along the shoreline. This sense of familiarity points to the similar feeling established in Anna Ancher's *A Prayer Meeting*, where the ambiguity of the location contributes to the notion that this scene could be taking place anywhere in the North, and thus could be copied and pasted as a foundational model of Nordic tradition. The painting is celebrating the midsummer tradition in a way that positions this as the ultimate representation of life at Skagen, and by extension, Scandinavian life more broadly. If we read the painting through Barthes' theory of myth, then there is a covering up of cultural inconsistencies and issues on a broader scale. By distilling the midsummer tradition as the emblem of Nordicness, the painting points to a singular Nordic identity as being bound to tradition.

Ultimately, in all three of the paintings, the concept of the landscape is used as an effective rhetorical tool. The idea of 'the Land' is filled with nationalistic sentiments of geographical pride, topographical uniqueness, and a general feeling of belonging. The land holds profound authority — in the paintings it serves as the hinge between the hegemonic ideology and everyday lived experiences. It authenticates the myth by standing as the literal naturalizing force,

one that cements the ideology attached to myth as something inherently true and to not be questioned. When thinking about these concepts attached to the Land, it is useful to look at the ways national anthems use terms such as “Fatherland” or “home soil” to appeal to feelings of patriotism and belonging that are rooted in the landscape. Here, Land is associated with an esoteric origin story: a claim that a group is naturally bound to the landscape because it is the source of an imagined lineage. The term “homeland” positions the connection between identity and geography as almost intrinsically written into the DNA of the people. Thus, a sense of truthfulness and authority is attached to the Land, making it an ideal vessel for myth to attach itself. More than anything else, this nuanced way of thinking about the connection between national identity and landscape makes it difficult to pin down the myth because it is masked by a naturalizing image. During the nationalist movement, the need to solidify a unique Nordic identity in response to cultural/political conflicts directly used the authenticating force of the landscape as an appeal to the pathos of the nations.



1.9 P.S. Krøyer, *Midsummer Eve Bonfire on Skagen Beach*, 1906, Skagens Museum, Denmark.

P.S. Krøyer at Skagen

P.S. Krøyer's work can be understood as a counter to the Realist style popular among the other Skagen artists. As painters like Michael Ancher, Viggo Johansen, Christian Krogh (1852 – 1925), and Oscar Björck (1860 – 1929) were concerned with capturing an authentic representation of peasant life at Skagen, Krøyer instead, focused his interests on the auratic beauty of Skagen. Krøyer's style of painting is much closer to the atmospheric elements of Symbolism rather than Romantic Nationalism or Realism that dominated the Skagen colony. His paintings can be characterized as sensorial and alluring, and promote a generalized feeling of comfort and beauty in everyday experiences. For instance, *Evening on the South Beach at Skagen* (1893) (Figure 1.1) demonstrates this turn to the auratic through the use of light. In a similar way, *Summer Evening on Skagen Beach. The Artist and His Wife* (1899) (Figure 1.10) features an illuminating light that is central to the Symbolist canon. The softness of the light and paired down color palette is very different from the hard contoured lines and strong color changes in Michael Ancher's *Will He Clear the Point?* (1879) (Figure 1.2). In an interesting way, both of Krøyer's beach paintings suggest a feeling of domestic comfort in nature. The stillness of the water and softness of both the sand and linen clothing evoke feelings of dream-like leisure. Here, Krøyer isn't interested in the ruggedness of nature, but rather softens the landscape and transforms it into a serene domestic space.

Certainly Krøyer was aware of the Symbolist movements happening in Europe at the time. Like many Scandinavian artists during the 1870s and into the 1880s, Krøyer studied in France and embraced the avant garde developments happening in central Europe. As Kirk Varnedoe describes, Symbolism valued the irrational and spiritual contact with inner life, while Realism often focused on national histories and ideologies.³¹ However, Varnedoe's description

of Symbolism seems too simple. Although he argues that Scandinavian painting did not fit into a linear notion of stylistic development, he himself is setting up a binary in which Symbolism is pinned against Realism. The rigidity of his argument leaves no room for an artist like Krøyer who traversed the boundaries of style that Varnedoe lays out. Krøyer can perhaps be recognized as an artist who synthesized the stylistic elements of Symbolism and Realism to create a new kind of painting: one that focused on cataloguing everyday life with an auratic evocation.

According to Lise Svanholm, Krøyer seemed to be well connected to the art movements Varnedoe describes in France.³² It is there that he saw James McNeill Whistler's (1834 – 1903) *Nocturne* paintings that featured a strong atmospheric blue haze blanketing a cityscape. It is easy to see the similarities between Krøyer's illuminated hazy beach and Whistler's auratic scenes. Yet at Skagen, Krøyer chooses to lighten the esoteric mysticism of Symbolist painting, and instead focused on more lighthearted subjects yet still maintaining the sensorial experience of Symbolism. In this way, Krøyer was able to demonstrate a style of painting that rejected a distinct category — not quite the esoteric mysticism of Symbolism, nor the ethnographic representation of Realism. He doesn't cleanly fit into either category Varnedoe is describing, and it's this uniqueness that makes his work worth looking into further.

While the other Skagen artists sought to almost catalogue local life at Skagen in a way that emphasized the outsider gaze, Krøyer chooses to highlight his own personal experiences at Skagen. He was less concerned with the quasi-ethnographic approach of his colleagues, and seemed to distance himself from local life at Skagen to an extent. Krøyer was often characterized as a cosmopolitan that didn't quite fit in at Skagen; when he first arrived in June 1882, Krøyer was horrified by the uncomfortable living conditions and threatened to return home.³³ As Lise Svanholm describes, Krøyer was used to the bourgeois comforts of Copenhagen and Paris and

was uninterested in fully integrating into local life in the ways other artists at the colony would.³⁴ Moreover, Krøyer's cosmopolitan attitude would cause many years tensions between him and Michael Ancher. As Svanholm describes, when Krøyer told Ancher that he would visit Skagen in 1882, Ancher was upset that the sophisticated urbanite was encroaching upon the little haven he made for himself at Skagen.³⁵ Krøyer's outsidership would be emphasized even more as he aligned himself not with a particular Danish identity, but with a "citizen of the world" type mentality. Krøyer's background was complex and filled with gaps: he was a Norwegian who grew up in Copenhagen with foster-parents and moved back and forth between Copenhagen and Norway. Later he traveled around Europe studying painting before settling in Skagen. The lack of a distinct home or native region meant that Krøyer could not engage in the popular idea of having a "native land" or "native roots" that was central to Scandinavian identity at the time. Moreover, the notion of having distinct regional roots was a main tenet of the return-to-folk movement in the 1880s which aligned artistic authenticity with a personalized native subject. Perhaps it is this lack of homeland that made it easier for Krøyer to distance himself from the Skagen locals and instead paint his own personal experiences.

Krøyer's painting *Roses* (1893) is an example of the kind of everyday personal experiences that dominate his work. In the painting the artist's wife, Marie Krøyer, sits in an armchair in the garden of Mrs. Bendsen's Farm. This scene of summer leisure decentralizes the image of the local peasant that dominated the paintings of other Skagen artists. *Roses* instead serves as an inward looking view at an individual experience at Skagen — one that contrasts the feeling of distance between the subject and the painter. For example, in Anna Ancher's *A Prayer Meeting* (1903), there is a feeling that Ancher herself is removed from the subject in a way that establishes a distance between the local people and the artists' colony. The religious meeting on



1.10 P.S. Krøyer, *Summer Evening on Skagen Beach. The Artists and His Wife*, 1899, Skagens Museum, Denmark.



1.11 P.S. Krøyer, *Roses*, 1893, Skagens Museum, Denmark.

the hillside is not from the everyday experience of Ancher herself, but rather viewed from an outsider's gaze. In this sense, the painting can be understood as quasi-ethnographic. On the other hand, Krøyer offers an alternative to this gaze, by redirecting it in favor of a more personal subject. Krøyer himself was interested in painting a time capsule that would represent life at the artists' colony and his own involvement within it.

It is through this unique approach to his paintings at Skagen that Krøyer was able to put forth some of the most effective myth-making images. Although he was not engaged with the romanticization of peasant life, Krøyer established a mythic image of Scandinavian life that extended beyond folk-primitivism. Most importantly, Krøyer's paintings brought the idealized version of Nordicness into a wider context. His scenes of middle-class life were arguably more relevant to the majority of Scandinavian audiences at the time, and thus could more effectively represent the image of Nordicness for the conventional bourgeois audience. For Krøyer, the ultimate emblem of Nordicness was not the folk-peasant's connection to the landscape, but rather the middle-class individuals' ability to oscillate between nature and domesticity in harmony. In interesting ways, Krøyer's paintings evoke the Victorian concept of The Garden: which positioned the garden as a liminal space between untamed wildness and cultivated restraint. In the Victorian tradition, the garden stood as a place of recreation and leisure — privileged to being not quite wild and not quite domestic. Writer and founder of the garden city movement, Ebenezer Howard, views this Victorian tradition of the garden as a utopic ideal for urban planning and modern living: where human lives become enriched by the contact with nature in a controlled space.³⁶ Yet unlike this Victorian perception, Krøyer doesn't position humans as masters over nature, but rather identifies the Nordic person as able to live in harmony with nature without the need to dominate or cultivate the wilderness. Krøyer contributes to the myth that

being Nordic means to be able to exist within nature with ease and comfort, and by extension, Nordic identity is represented by a close connection between humans and nature.

There is no denying that the stylistic qualities of Krøyer's paintings contribute to their authority as myth-making images. Just as the concept of the Land is pointed at the pathos of national identity, the way Krøyer establishes an alluring image of beauty and nature is crucial. The atmospheric style of his paintings are efficient vessels for the myth to arise from: it makes the myth appealing and aligned with a beautiful and sensorial image.

However, Krøyer was not just concerned with atmospheric outdoor scenes as the main emblem of beauty; in 1898, Krøyer painted three watercolors of the interior of his home at Skagen. These domestic scenes show charming and warm family values as the model for middle-class Scandinavian culture. The Krøyer house at Byfogedskoven in Skagen Vesterby was redesigned by Marie in 1895. Marie, as an avid supporter of the Arts and Crafts Movement, paid close attention to the work of English artists like William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Marie designed the entire interior in the Krøyer house and even the furniture for the family sitting room.³⁷ This design sensibility would be articulated not only in the house but in the families clothing: Marie and her daughter, Vibeke, designed and wore clothing that was inspired by the Empire style and nostalgic ideals of the of English Arts and Crafts Movement. This fluency of design throughout every aspect of the Krøyer's lives contributes to the Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art, that they valued at Skagen.

The painting *Marie and Vibeke Krøyer in Front of the Fireplace in Their Home* (1898) (Figure 1.12) features this Arts and Crafts style interior design. There is a clear influence from Swedish artist Carl Larsson (1853 – 1919) who, as Lise Svanholm states, was painting watercolors of his family home in Dalarna just a few years before. Indeed, Krøyer was in contact

with Larsson, the two met at the Exhibition of Art and Industry in Stockholm in 1897. Krøyer would write in a letter to Larsson in 1902: “Incidentally, inspired by you, I have also started a number of pictures from my home in Skagen”.³⁸ Larsson’s *The Lazy Corner* (1895) indicates the home as a place for relaxation, recreation, and comfort in similar ways as Krøyer. The dainty illustrative style of both artists’ home paintings features clean, bright spaces filled with light whimsical colors. One could argue that this is an indicator of what Scandinavian interior design would come to be known as years later: bright clean spaces that prioritize natural light and simplicity. Just a year after Krøyer’s home paintings, Larsson’s book “Ett Hem” (At Home) was published in Sweden in 1899 and gain widespread international popularity. The book featured similar illustrations of the Dalarna home as a representation of an ideal Nordic lifestyle removed from the cityscape. Family bonding, creativity, and comfort were heavily promoted. Certainly the way Larsson’s illustrations of homes were marketed appealed to the idea that a happy and aesthetically pleasing home dwelling was possible for every family in Sweden.

In the same way as Larsson, Krøyer’s paintings of home show a glimpse into idealized middle class domestic sensibility. Both Larsson and Krøyer are putting forth a utopic ideal of what middle class home life should be: where the home symbolizes protection and comfort in a way that feeds into larger family values in Scandinavia.

Ultimately, Krøyer represents an alternative to both the popular styles and subjects of the other Skagen artists. His atmospheric Symbolist style was a counter to Romantic Nationalism, and moreover, the turn to inward looking personal subjects was pushing back against the ethnographic gaze associated with folk-primitivism. Krøyer decentralized the folk peasant as the emblem of authentic Nordicness, and instead focused on depicting the values of middle-class Scandinavians. This turn to the middle-class subject can be understood as a way of solidifying a

hegemonic set of cultural values for the entire nation. It is in his interior scenes that this becomes most clear — where the nuclear family is aligned with beauty, comfort, and safety. More than anything else, Krøyer's paintings serve as effective vessels for communicating these ideologies because of their appeal to a cultural pathos through auratic beauty.



1.12 P.S. Krøyer *Marie and Vibeke Krøyer in Front of the Fireplace in Their Home*, 1898, Skagens Museum, Denmark



1.13 Carl Larsson, *The Lazy Corner*, 1895, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

Conclusion

The Skagen artists' colony represented a generation's aspirations for locating a new Nordic identity. In the wake of complex cultural and political changes to the North, the Nordic countries found ways of establishing a distinct national identity that separated themselves from the rest of Europe. The Skagen painters laid out a clear model of what they thought the Nordic "brand" should be: a strong connection with the land, a focus on tradition, and simple ways of living. As artists like Michael and Anna Ancher highlighted the Skagen native as the emblem of these ideals, P.S. Krøyer applied this new set of standards to the everyday lives of middle-class citizen in a way that was arguably more impactful. Ultimately the goal of the Skagen artists' colony was to attempt to locate a unique Nordic identity in the face of globalization and Europeanization.

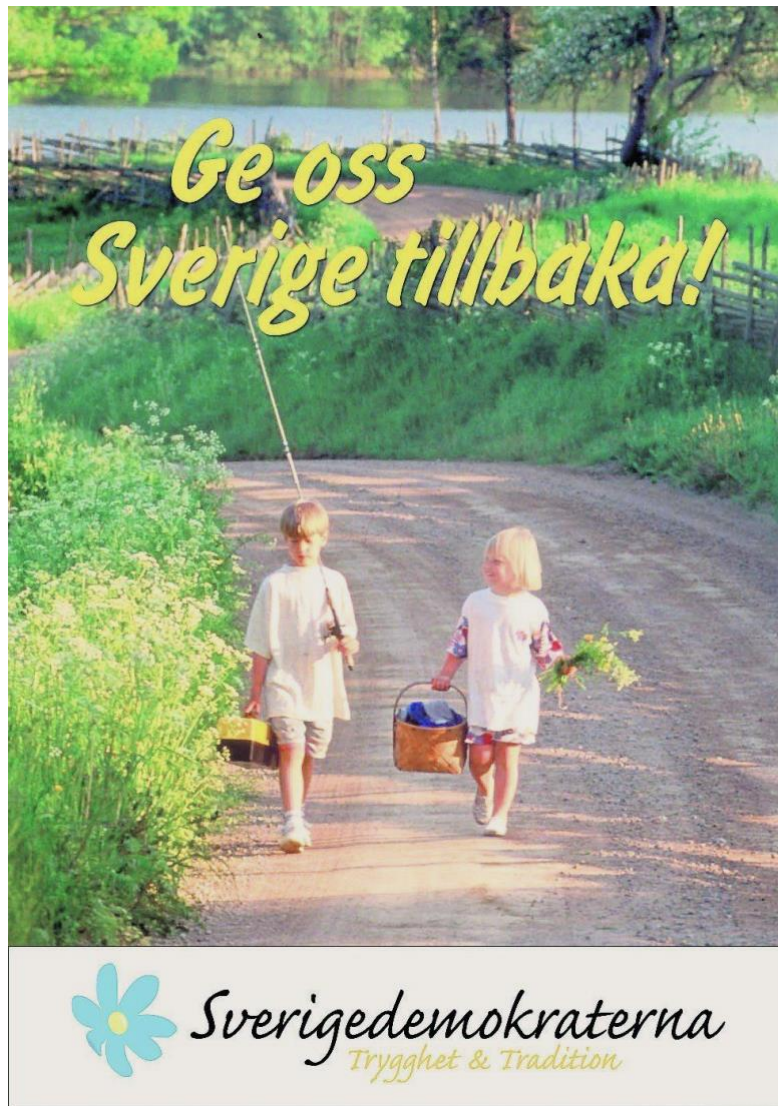
At Skagen, this goal proved to be complex and at times contradicting. On the one hand, there was a desire to craft a completely *Nordic* identity that was completely removed from the rest of Europe. On the other, the means used to achieve this goal (the use of the folk-peasant as the emblem of this national identity and the retreat into the countryside) overlapped with return-to-folk movements happening all across Europe. Two examples of this can be Gauguin's interest in the rustic natives of Brittany and the establishing of the Abramtsevo peasant-craft workshop in Russia, suggests that this desire to look to folk-peasantry in search of authenticity was felt all around Europe. In terms of aligning national identity with rustic peasantry, nothing could be more European.

Today, these themes of an authentic Nordic identity are again rising to prominence as Scandinavia grapples with growing quasi-fascist rhetoric and imagery. Ultimately, this topic holds importance, especially as we make sense of contemporary populist aesthetics and the lasting impact of nationalist imagery on a nation. The image of the authentic Nordic citizen

promoted in the Skagen paintings bears striking similarities to visual imagery associated with contemporary nationalist parties. Images of blonde bodies in harmony with the landscape, with vague references to tradition and peasantry are evoked in many of these political parties' posters, pamphlets, and advisements.

In Sweden, the Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) are a far-right populist group who rely heavily on the image of "Nordicness" that was established by groups like Skagen. In a recent advertisement, two blond children are seen walking down a path in the Swedish countryside (Figure 1.14). There is something unmistakably Krøyer-esque about the presence of light in the photo that has a similar atmospheric and unifying quality — the viewer can recognize a seamless connection being formed between the young children, and a blissful landscape through the use of light. The sun light hits the two bodies and surrounding landscape so as to create a golden hue over everything. This feeling of bliss and summertime comfort present in the photograph is central to a Krøyer paintings such as *Summer Evening on Skagen Beach. The Artist and His Wife* (1899) (Figure 1.10). Both the painting and the advertisement show a lighthearted summer stroll where the landscape is an inviting and beautiful place to find comfort in. Some of Krøyer's most defining themes of homeliness outside of the home and outdoor domesticity are equally as present in the Sverigedemokraterna advertisement. Even the advertisement's color palette is strikingly similar to Krøyer's *Roses* (1893) (Figure 1.11) as the greens and whites are illuminated by natural sunlight. In the simplest sense, both the paintings and the advertisement stand for comfort, happiness, and harmony.

Moreover, the advertisement's use of two children addresses a model of middle-class family values that positions children as the emblem of domesticity in a moralizing way. There seems to be a reference to the nuclear family model in the coding of the children that recalls the



1.14 Sverigedemokraterna advertisement, 2015.

domestic idyll of Krøyer's watercolor series from his own home. His painting *Marie and Vibeke Krøyer in Front of the Fireplace in Their Home* (1898) (Figure 1.12) clearly established a connection between a standardized model of "home" and security. Yet in the Sverigedemokraterna advertisement, home not only means safety, but the particular *kind* of home in the image — white, blonde, Nordic —represents a preservation of traditional values.

The Sverigedemokraterna advertisement relies on already established emblems of Nordicness to serve their own interests. The caption "Give us Sweden back" laid over the

photograph suggests that this version of Nordicness is being lost and must be reclaimed, preserved, and protected. Through this overt nationalist sentiment, there is an attention to the legacy of myth-making that took place in order for this image to be instantaneously understandable. The solidified image of Nordicness developed at Skagen is now being used to serve the populist interests that seek to preserve this very image. In unexpected ways, the Skagen artists' colony and the Sverigedemokraterna are using the same ideology.

Beyond the implications of Nordic nationalism, the themes addressed at Skagen bring into question the colony's potential as a utopia. The folk-primitivist ethos evoked at Skagen has the potential to be understood as a utopic model for what Nordic life should be. The dreams of a life removed from the excesses of urban life and reduced to absolute necessities was appealing to the generation of Skagen artists who left the city centers to retreat into the countryside. The ideals of a modest and reduced lifestyle proved to have a lasting appeal as they circulated in unexpected ways through other craft-revivalist, DIY, counterculture, and alternative-living communities who were drawn to a similar move towards simplicity. In this sense, the Skagen artists' colony can be viewed as rooted in a larger trajectory that spans generations and nations. Many of the ideologies we associate with more contemporary alternative-living communities and movements overlap with the rejection of industrialized life felt at Skagen. The deep connection between the land and humans, strong-work ethics, and DIY mentalities were central to life at Skagen and play a key role for similar movements that rejected an industrially-oriented modern lifestyle. The return-to-folk impulses at Skagen were symptomatic of the time, yet it is clear that the dissatisfaction with modern life never went away.

Both of these current and more recent movements have similarities to the general back to nature movement happening at Skagen, although this is not a totalizing explanation of the

relationship. Ultimately the Skagen colony addressed a new need to develop a model of Nordicness that was deeply tied to the culture and political landscape at the time. Despite the contradictions associated with their ethos, the goals and aspirations of the Skagen artists provide valuable insight into Nordic culture and identity making at the time.

Notes

- 1 Alison De Lima Greene, "Peder Severin Krøyer," in *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavia, 1880-1910*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1982), 178.
- 2 De Lima Greene, 172.
- 3 Kirk Varnedoe describes this as the paradox of Paris, where artists were drawn to the exciting new innovations and ways of thinking that were unheard of in Scandinavia, and yet wanted to return to their homelands to apply the style to local subject matter. It's as if these artists were being pulled in two directions contingent on the idea that a Scandinavian subject was more authentic (I will focus on this issue of authenticity in another section).
- 4 Kirk Varnedoe, "Nationalism, Internationalism, and the Progress of Scandinavian Art," in *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavia, 1880-1910*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1982), 18.
- 5 Matti Klinge, "The North, Nature, and Poverty: Some Background on the Nordic Identity," in *Dreams of a Summer Night*, ed. Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse (London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986), 50.
- 6 Klinge suggests that these moralistic ideas associated with nature also have a lot to do with the Scandinavian countries' relationships to Lutheranism. She argues that where Lutheranism idealized poverty and simplicity, these themes were then projected onto the land and then manipulated into nationalistic rhetoric.
- 7 Lise Svanholm, *Northern Light: The Skagen Painters*, trans. Walton Glyn Jones (Denmark: Gyldendal, 2001), 49-50.
- 8 See William Morris, "The Lesser Arts" (1877) and John Ruskin "The Nature of Gothic" (1853) in *The Industrial Design Reader*, ed. Carma Gorman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 14-18; 35-39.
- 9 Svanholm, 157.
- 10 Svanholm, 19.
- 11 The unique role of Lutheranism is often overlooked in contemporary discourse on Scandinavian painting from this era. Perhaps a part of this is a result of the Scandinavian countries being considered progressively nonreligious. However, historically, Lutheran values have played a critical role in the formation of a distinct Nordic identity that should not be brushed aside.
- 12 Matti Klinge, 48.
- 13 Svanholm, 162.
- 14 Svanholm, 44-48.
- 15 Katharina Alsen and Annika Landmann, *Nordic Painting: The Rise of Modernity*, in section "Artists' Colonies from Skagen to Önningeby" (Munich: Prestle, 2016), 151-162.
- 16 Svanholm, 17.
- 17 Svanholm, 21.
- 18 Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," In *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1986).
- 19 In this example, myth does more than just stand as a symbol for the concept, but rather an alibi (or distortion) for a larger narrative that covers up the crimes of American settlers, and naturalizes the American settler's right to the land. This structure is outlined in Barthes' three ways to read myth, 115.
- 20 See, for example, Knut Berg, "Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century," In *Dreams of a Summer Night*, edited by Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse et. al., (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986), 29-38. And Kirk Varnedoe, *Northern Light: Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

21 Matti Klinge positions Lutheranism and this shared linguistic family as the two features that allowed
for the Nordic countries to isolate themselves from the rest of Europe as an appeal to nationalistic
sentiments.

22 Katharina Alsen and Annika Landmann, *Nordic Painting: The Rise of Modernity*, in section “Inner
and Outer Perspective: The Painting and Graphic Arts of the Sami” (Munich: Prestle, 2016), 51-58.

23 See Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in
Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996).

24 See Alan Ivvár” Holloway, “The Decline of the Sámi People’s Indigenous Religion,” University of
Texas: Sami Culture, accessed 4 April 2019, <https://www.laits.utexas.edu/sami/diehtu/sida/christian/decline.htm>.

25 Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, 86.

26 Herman, Lundborg, “Degenerationsfaran och riktlinjer för dess förebyggande”, Svenska Sällskapet
för Raskhygien Skriftserie 9 (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söners, 1922), 21-22, 24-25.

27 Jaakko Paasivirta, *Finland and Europe: The Early Years of Independence 1917-1939* (Helsinki:
Finnish Historical Association, 1988), 14, 15.

28 See Katharina Alsen and Annika Landmann, *Nordic Painting: The Rise of Modernity*. (Munich:
Prestle, 2016), in section “Identity Formation in Finland: Distorted Ideologies”, 45-49.

29 Peter Aronsson, “Uses of the Past: Nordic Historical Cultures in a Comparative Perspective,” *Culture
Unbound* 2 (2010): 553-63.

30 Lise Svanholm, 204.

31 Kirk Varnedoe, “Nationalism, Internationalism, and the Progress of Scandinavian Art” in in *Northern
Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavia, 1880-1910*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe (New York: The
Brooklyn Museum, 1982), 23-28.

32 Lise Svanholm, 35-37.

33 Svanholm, 65. It is also worth noting that when P.S. Krøyer told Michael Ancher that he would
be visiting Skagen for the first time in 1882, Ancher was horrified. He viewed Krøyer as a privileged
outsider, who was encroaching upon his own little haven. This would be the start of a long history of
tensions and falling outs between Krøyer and Ancher.

34 Svanholm, 60-66.

35 Svanholm, 60-61.

36 Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1902).
Originally published under the title *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in 1898.

37 Svanholm, 157.

38 Svanholm, 148.

Bibliography

- Alsen, Katharina, and Annika Landmann. *Nordic Painting: The Rise of Modernity*. Munich: Prestle, 2016.
- Aronsson, Peter. "Uses of the Past: Nordic Historical Cultures in a Comparative Perspective." *Culture Unbound* 2 (2010): 553-563.
- Barthes, Roland. "Myth Today." In *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag, 93-149. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1986.
- Berg, Knut. "Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century." In *Dreams of a Summer Night*, edited by Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse, 29-38. London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986.
- Broberg, Gunnar, and Nils Roll-Hansen. *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996.
- De Lima Greene, Alison. "Peder Severin Krøyer." In *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavia, 1880-1910*, edited by Kirk Varnedoe. New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1982.
- Holloway, Ivvár. "The Decline of the Sámi People's Indigenous Religion." University of Texas: Sami Culture. Accessed 4 April 2019. <https://www.laits.utexas.edu/sami/diehtu/sii da/christian/decline.htm>.
- Howard, Ebenezer. *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1902. Originally published under the title *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in 1898.
- Klinge, Matti. "The North, Nature, and Poverty: Some Background on the Nordic Identity." In *Dreams of a Summer Night*, edited by Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse, 48-53. London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986.
- Lundborg, Herman. "Degenerationsfaran och riktlinjer för dess förebyggande." *Svenska Sällskapet för Rashygien; Skriftserie* 9 (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1922): 21-25.
- Morris, William. "The Lesser Arts." In *The Industrial Design Reader*, edited by Carma Gorman, 35-39. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

Paasivirta, Jaakko. *Finland and Europe: The Early Years of Independence 1917-1939*. Helsinki: Finnish Historical Association, 1988.

Ruskin, John. "The Nature of the Gothic." In *The Industrial Design Reader*, edited by Carma Gorman, 14-18. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

Svanholm, Lise. *Northern Light: The Skagen Painters*. Translated by Walton Glyn Jones. Denmark: Gyldendal, 2001.

Varnedoe, Kirk. "Nationalism, Internationalism, and the Progress of Scandinavian Art." In *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavia, 1880-1910*, edited by Kirk Varnedoe, 13-37. New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1982.

Northern Light: Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.