Nationality and Community in Norwegian Art Criticism around 1900

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Back in 1857, the Norwegian writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910) considered the establishment of a theatre institution in Christiania (Oslo) as a vital necessity for the nation. One of his main arguments for having such an institution in Norway was what he saw as a lack of certainty, of self-confidence, in the people of Norway. This lack of confidence was easy to spot when a Norwegian stepped ashore on a foreign steamer-quay. He would be groping for his sense of ease, and end up conducting himself in a ‘rough, short, almost violent manner’, which gave an uncomfortable impression. In Bjørnson’s narrative, this feeling of uncertainty relates to the theme of modernity. Bjørnson described his home country as a small America – where factories and mining were expanding – dominated by the sheer material life. The solidity of tradition had gone; it was a time of flux, decoupled from the past.

Modernity’s splitting of traditions was a common theme in most European countries, so why was the rough, short and violent behaviour so characteristic of Norwegians? According to Bjørnson, it was because Norway did not have an artistic culture that could negotiate the feeling of fragmentation and uncertainty. Arts such as theatre, music, painting and statuary could express what was common in what seemed like fragments. The arts could unite. However, cultural institutions that could support the arts suffered from a lack of funding, a vital deficiency of Norwegian society. Through art’s ability to unite, the nation could be united; through art, Bjørnson wrote, one could come to an understanding of one’s national identity. Through art, the (chaotic) power of the people could find ‘form and freedom’. Art was to function as a counterweight to the corruption of a coarse material life.

1 Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, ‘En Storthingsindstilling’, Morgenbladet, 21 June 1857. ‘Man kan f. Ex. paa en udenlandsk Damskibsbrygge meget godt se, det er en Normand, som stiger i land; men man kan ogsaa se, at han ikke længer er ganske vis paa sig selv, famler efter sin Form og søger at dække det gennem en brusk, kort, næsten voldelig Fremtræden.’

2 Bjørnson, ‘En Storthingsindstilling’.
Bjørnson’s claim for the importance of artistic culture in establishing national identity was to be a central theme in art and literature for many years. In this paper, I will investigate how this theme came to be expressed in art criticism related to painting in Norway during the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the twentieth. It was during this period that some of the institutions Bjørnson sought were actually set up. In 1884, Statens kunstutstilling (‘The Autumn-exhibition’) was formally established, having been arranged as a private initiative by a young generation of artists since 1882. This was also the decade when Norwegian artists began to settle and work in their homeland, after years of effective exile. Norwegian painters used to live and work in Germany, where they had received their education and where they could find a market for their paintings. Although artists still had their formal education abroad – that would not change until the Norwegian National Academy of Fine Arts was founded in 1909 – the establishment of art shops and new exhibition venues made it easier for artists to live and work in Norway.

The interest in art as an expression of national identity can have political roots, as when national themes in art became a symbol of opposition in Finland during the era of Russification. Even though Norwegians gained their independence only when the union with Sweden was dissolved in 1905, the focus on national identity in Norwegian art did not have the same strong political meaning as it carried in Finland. Norway had always enjoyed a high degree of political autonomy, and there was no strong cultural influence from Sweden. The interest in national identity in art in Norway seems to be a reaction to the process of modernisation, with the growth of cities and the sense of alienation that aroused. I will follow this theme in this essay, and investigate how critics in Norway thought about ‘the national’ in art in the decades around 1900.

I will investigate different critical positions, from the interest in Naturalism in the 1880s, to the fascination for decorative painting and colourism during the 1890s and first decades of the 20th century. The different artistic trends were all imported from abroad, mostly from France, where the young generation of Norwegian artists found their artistic inspiration, after decades of German influence. How a national art could spring forth from...
foreign impulses came to be a fundamental critical question in artistic debate in Norway.

City life and the need for belonging: art criticism in the 1880s

Richard Terdiman has stressed the feeling of atomisation and alienation that modernity brought about, and he views it as a memory crisis. Terdiman, building on the work of Ferdinand Tönnies, insists on the significance of past memory for our feeling of belonging and of identity. What precedes us is the basis of our self-understanding. With modernity, the uninterrupted flow of time and our natural place in it had become problematic. Modernity, with its city-life and uprooting from the countryside, created a sense of uncertainty and unrest, a feeling of nervousness, as intellectuals often expressed it at the end of the 19th century. Both artists and critics in the second half of the 19th century recorded a crisis regarding the relationship with the past. This was also the case in Norway where, by the 1880s, Kristiania (Oslo) had reached a population of more than 100,000, which made it a big city, even by European standards.

Urbanisation and the sense of nervousness went hand in hand. In traditional village societies, intentions and forms of behaviour were usually easy to understand. The opposite was true for cities. Here, one was engaged in an endless process of interpretation. Artists and critics interested in the communal function of art, its expression of unity and community, often turned towards the still existing traditional societies to re-establish a lost sense of community.

During the 1880s, critics who promoted Naturalist painting understood the re-establishment of this national community as connected to the artist's choice of subject matter: the depiction of the (rural) land and its people, the peasants. In contrast to the anxious atmosphere of the cities, critics often lauded an art rooted in the soil of the rural home territory for its ‘naturalness’ and its depiction of an ‘immediate reality’. Naturalist critics usually understood French plein-air painting as a model to emulate. In 1884, the Norwegian art critic Andreas Aubert (1851–1913) published a pamphlet on the recent developments in French painting, where he professed his interest in the paintings of Jules Bastien-Lepage and Jules Breton. Bastien-Lepage took his subject

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matter from Damvillers, his home village in the north-eastern part of France (Fig. 1). This gave his paintings a certain authenticity:

From there, from the earth of his home ground, his art derives its healthiness, its naturalness, its saturation, which is like a breath of country life for a culture, ridden by ennui, nervous sensibility and sweet sentimentality.  

It was this breath of fresh air and country life that Aubert also wanted to see in Norwegian painting, and he established Bastien-Lepage as an example for Norwegian artists to emulate. He regarded French Naturalism as a healthy challenge to the art in Munich, where most Norwegian artists were trained in the 1870s. In 1881, Aubert described the art and artistic education in Munich as a turning towards the past. Artistic, however, should give

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Fig. 1. Jules Bastien Lepage, October, 1877, oil on canvas, 180.7cm x 196cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1928
This digital record has been made available on NGV Collection Online through the generous support of Digitisation Champion Ms Carol Grigor through Metal Manufactures Limited
voiced to contemporary life, and French artists had led the way. French art was important for Aubert, because French painters had introduced the objective, Naturalist style.

Conservative critics, such as the art historian Lorentz Dietrichson (1834–1917) and the philosopher Marcus Jacob Monrad (1816–1897), often referred to naturalist art as raw, as being without sympathy for their subjects. Dietrichson stated that naturalism was a positivist art, inclined towards determinism and denial of the freedom of spirit. Commenting on literary Naturalism in France, he stated that it was not created for the sake of the unhappy and suffering poor – the subjects of Naturalist art – but for the ‘over-refined society, for the weary rich, for the dulled nerves, that need to be stimulated, for the blunted tastebuds, that need cayenne pepper to taste’.⁷

⁷ Lorentz Dietrichson, Betegner den moderne naturalisme i poesien et fremskridt eller et forfald? Foredrag holdt i Studentersamfundet lørdagen den 11te november 1882 (Kristiania: Chr. Schibsted, 1882), 30. ‘Men disse romancer, der tale saa stærke Ord om det lidende Folk, om det fordaervede Folk ere ikke skrevne verken for det lidende eller for det fordaervede Folk, men for det overforfinede Selskab, for de trætte Rige, for de sløvede Nerver, der behøves at pirres, for de enerverede Ganer, der behøve Cayennepeber for at smage.’
Dietrichson claimed that the falseness of the Second French Empire gave birth to this art, which also bloomed naturally in Bismarck’s Germany. Marcus Monrad criticised naturalist painting for adopting a scientific point of view; that is, he saw naturalist art as fragmented, characterised by what he called a ‘realistic-episodic’ depiction. When naturalism did involve a search for a comprehensive depiction, its artists typically chose a deterministic rendering, where individual life was shaped by imprints of their social milieu. A painting such as Christian Krohg’s (1852–1925) *Albertine to See the Police Surgeon* (1887, Fig. 2), with its depiction of prostitutes in Kristiania, was typical of naturalist painting of this kind. Even Aubert, champion of naturalist art, raised his critical voice when Krohg exhibited the painting in March 1887.8

Instead of paintings depicting the darker sides of society, Aubert wanted naturalist art to nationalise painting in Scandinavia. When in 1885, Erik Werenskiold (1855–1938) showed *Peasant Burial* (Fig. 3) at the Autumn Exhibition in Kristiania, Aubert referred to it as a ‘major work of our younger national art’. In his review, Aubert focused on Werenskiold’s ‘energetic love towards his people and the nature of his home country’.9 The religiosity of the Norwegian people was manifest in this simple picture. Werenskiold had painted his pictures in close connection with the material reality of the (rural) home territory; and for Aubert, this was the best way to re-establish a feeling of community. Consequently, he urged all Nordic painters to settle down in their home countries. Aubert confirmed this view in his dissertation in 1896, when he insisted that French painters needed nourishment from their home soil too:

> Present day France, which in Paris concentrates and combusts its life, needs strengthening from these sources, to be affected by the soil and the sky of their home ground. In the old, traditional culture there is ‘an originality and energy’ that one must become aware of and make fertile for the whole of France.10

Aubert’s statement is an echo of the French art critic Louis Brès, who in his reception speech addressed to the Academy of Marseilles in 1883, stated: ‘The capital, tired and disgusted with
its artificial life, finds nothing better than to immerse its art in the heart of the provinces.’¹¹

The sympathetic attitude that Werenskiold showed towards traditional peasant life was important for Aubert. Nils Messel has drawn attention to Aubert’s religious view of life and his interest in the writings of the Danish pastor and poet N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872). Grundtvig’s interest in the national tradition and his understanding of nature as a manifestation of spirituality, was important for Aubert’s understanding of Naturalism.¹² For Aubert, Naturalist art was not a positivist depiction of the material world and its dreary social condition, but a spiritual view of life. With Lotta Nylund, we can label it ‘protestant Naturalism’.¹³

¹³ Nylund uses this label, derived from the writings of the French critic Ferdinand Brunetière, to characterise Helena Westermarck’s statements on art. Lotta Nylund, *Naturalsmens Problematic*, 79.
In 1894, Aubert published his doctoral thesis, *Den nordiske naturfølelse og Dahl: hans kunst og dens stilling i aarhundredets utvikling*, in which he identified a unique feeling for the nature in the Nordic countries, a feeling for the more sublime aspects of nature. According to Aubert, contemporary artists in Norway felt a resonance with J.C. Dahl (1788–1857) for his expression of a national sentiment. However, already the year before Aubert delivered his thesis, Gerhard Munthe (1849–1929) had depicted this national sentiment in an anti-naturalist style, in decorative painting.

‘The decorative’ and the communal hope

Munthe, who during the 1880s had been an uncompromising naturalist, showed his new decorative art in Kristiania at the graphic art exhibition ‘Black and White’ (*Sort og hvitt*), early in 1893. Norwegian folk tales inspired the coloured drawings of Munthe, and his style was revivalist, inspired by Norwegian folk art (Fig. 4). In his review, Aubert insisted that Munthe had found a genuine expression of the ‘childlike ingenuous, unpretentious, audacious’ that characterises what is Norwegian. He saw in Munthe’s coloured drawings a search for a new style with a typical Norwegian spirit, and he found in them a specific ‘Norwegian sense of colouring’. Nevertheless, he was not ready to proclaim Munthe’s new anti-naturalist art an artistic expression that would replace Naturalism. Naturalism had played too important a role in marrying Norwegian painting to its home country for it to be replaced. Even so, Munthe’s decorative painting was a vital complement.

The young art critic Jens Thiis (1870–1942) was more inclined to understand Munthe’s new art as an overcoming of Naturalism. Thiis was a student of Lorentz Dietrichson, and he was an influential critic and art historian, and held important positions as a museum director. He proclaimed the new art of Munthe as the answer to those who had tired of the positivism of Naturalism. ‘In secrecy,’ he wrote in his review, ‘we longed for a new ideal art, for daring imagination, that could lead us somewhere we had never been before’. Thiis longed for an art that could re-establish a bold and simple colour palette, one that was rhythmic and could exert a *mystical* power over the soul, related to music. In short, he longed for *style* in art. Thiis was a fervent critic of

14 Andreas Aubert, ‘Ny Kunst: Gerhard Munthes billedvævmønstre’, *Nyt Tidsskrift* (Ny række) 1 (1892–93), 617.
15 In 1895, Thiis was appointed conservator of Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimusem (Nordenfjeldske Museum of Arts and Craft) in Trondheim. In 1908, he became the first director of Nationalgalleriet (The National Museum) in Oslo.
naturalist art, and he would become an ardent supporter of both Munthe’s decorative style in painting, as well as Edvard Munch’s (1863–1944) Symbolist paintings of the 1890s.

The British art historian T.J. Clark has shown how the use of seminal critical terms such as ‘decoration’, ‘synthesis’ and ‘style’ vary profoundly from text to text in European art criticism during the last part of the 19th century. The reason for this is that these critics had the difficult task of welding together the aesthetic and the social. On the one hand, ‘decorative’ signalled an art that could re-establish continuity with the past and create a community in the face of the fragmentation that characterised modern times and its art (Naturalism). On the other hand, decoration also signalled a shallow art: ‘Decorative means merely...

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decorative – meaning overt in its simplification, ostentatious in its repeated patterning, and unashamed of its offer of visual delight.’18 These two meanings alternate in the critical discussions of modern art in this period; they are central in the critics’ endeavour to come to an understanding of the new, modern art that presented itself in various exhibitions.

The interest in style was typical for the critical climate of the 1890s, which saw a turning away from Naturalism. In 1889, the Danish art historian Julius Lange (1838–96) published his essay Studiet i marken. Skilderiet. Erindringens kunst (Field study. Picture. Art of Memory)19, in which he criticised artists who were contented with painting field studies. Instead, he insisted that the purpose of art was to bring people together, to create a feeling of community. This could be achieved through a personal art, created not in front of nature, but in the atelier, where the outward-directed eye of the painter could rest, and images from the inward-directed eye could come forth. ‘Even though a society is dissolved into atoms’, Lange wrote, ‘it may once more be knitted together through personal expressions.’20

Aubert was impressed by Lange’s concept of an art of memory that would bring about a more communal art, although he was not convinced that a personal/subjective art was the answer. In 1896, reflecting on decorative colouring, Aubert identified artistic style as an expression of a people, of their world view. This meant that Aubert came to distrust an art that was too idiosyncratic or too personal. He saw Munthe’s art as a reaction against a modern cult of personality and individualism, a cult that had contributed to the disintegration of traditional values and national community. Instead, he hoped for a style that would grow organically from ‘the natural conditions and the natural instincts’ of a people. He wished for an art that could express what he thought of as the ‘higher personality’, the individuality of a whole people.21 This view was shared by Munthe, who, reflecting on monumental art, claimed that ‘the whole of art history and all logic, points towards the national’.22

When Aubert surveyed the history of Norwegian art in 1900, he had apparently come to distrust the

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18 Clark, _Farewell to an Idea_, 131.
20 Lange, ‘Studiet i marken ...’, 166. ‘Selv om et Samfund er nok saa opløst i Atomer, knyttes det Masker paany gjennem indbyrdes personlig Meddelelse.’
22 Gerhardt Munthe, ‘Kunstværdier’ [1898], in _Minder og meninger: fra 1850-aarene til nu_ (Kristiania: Cammermeyer, 1919), 72.
Fig. 5. Frits Thaulow, *River, Northern France*, 1898, oil on canvas, 46cm x 55cm. Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo

Photo: Nasjonalmuseet CC-BY-NC
communal importance of Naturalism. Aubert now turned his back on Naturalism and identified decorative principles as the leading artistic principles. He criticised Naturalism for its individualisation and its analytic observation of nature (related to the fragmentation of scientific observation), and advocated decorative art as a synthesis created by memory and fantasy. Artists were searching for a decorative style in cooperation with architecture. Aubert regarded the decorative principles as simplifying and liberating. The decorative style could establish a feeling of community, a national community that could bridge both the split and the fragmentation caused by scientific culture and the split between present and past.

Aubert’s reflection on the communal function of decorative painting is related to the French critic Georg Albert Aurier and his theorisation of Symbolism. In 1891, Aurier described Paul Gauguin’s art as ‘ideist’ (an expression of ideas), ‘symbolic’, ‘synthetic’ and ‘subjective’, characteristics also summed up in the notion of ‘decorative painting’. This decorative painting had the communal function that customary easel paintings lacked. Easel painting was nothing more than ‘an illogical refinement invented to satisfy the fantasy of the commercial spirit in decadent civilisations’. Modernity and commercialism went hand in hand; the world and the arts had become decadent. For Aurier, true art meant decorative art, and by bringing it to life again, he hoped that art could recover its communal function.

Nils Messel and Magne Malmanger have investigated the meaning of ‘the decorative’ in the Norwegian artistic debate around 1900. They both emphasise how the first of Clark’s two positions came to be important for the community of painters and intellectuals centred around Erik Werenskiold and his home in Lysaker, south of Oslo, where he had moved in 1896. Both Munthe and Aubert were a part of Lysakerkretsen (the Lysaker circle), and their interest in medieval Norwegian art was also an interest in the moral character of this art. Messel states that while (formless) naturalist painting was seen as international and cosmopolitan, decorative painting was regarded as our national artistic expression. The interest that Lysakerkretsen and Aubert showed in the decorative principles of art is related to the English Arts and Craft movement. The concept of ‘the decorative’ signalled an art that was not an autonomous easel

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23 Andreas Aubert, *Det nye Norges malerkunst. 1814–1900. Kunsthistorie i grundlinjer*. 2nd edition (Kristiania: Alb. Cammermeyers forlag, 1908), 98–101. Aubert’s interest in the decorative simplification of painting was inspired by Emmanuel Löwy, who had claimed that art originally was not imitative, but conventional, shaped by the synthetic activity of memory and the imagination. The art of Munthe was a return to these fundamental principles, according to Aubert.

24 Aubert, *Det nye Norges malerkunst. 1814–1900*, 100. ‘(...) den decorative kunst kræver en frigjørelse og en forenkling for at slippe løs av naturalismens overlæsselse og knuende tyngde.’


painting, but an art of style that was deeply embedded in the fabric of society. Malmanger points out that ‘the decorative’ came to signal the religious, ethical and social meaning of an artwork integrated in its physical surroundings. At the same time, the concept of ‘the decorative’ proved important in the artistic debate in Norway, since it could establish a connection between traditional Norwegian folk art and modern European art, preoccupied with the means of art and the artistic qualities of painting.

Malmanger’s statement confirms T.J. Clark’s view about the ambiguous use and meaning attributed to a concept like ‘the decorative’. Clark’s assertion that this concept also could signal a shallow art is proved by the critical reorientation of Aubert. In 1901, he stated that the interest in the decorative was about the urge to embellish. The problem with decorative paintings was their shallowness. In contrast, pictorial representation (‘billedfremstilling’) comes from a deeper human need, a need for expressing the world of thought. Eschewing the shallowness of decorative painting, he now supported what he designated as ‘spiritual Naturalism’.

In 1907, Thiis declared his opposition to Lysakerkretsen, writing: ‘Out there in Lysaker they cultivated “the national” and their famous explorer of the North Pole. With rising reputation, they created bourgeois paintings.’ Nevertheless, Thiis shared their interest in ‘the decorative’, and reflected upon how decorative principles were used in modern art. In an essay from 1907, he discussed how modern painters used decorative principles very differently in their art. Commenting on the paintings of James McNeill Whistler and Vincent van Gogh, he found that both artists’ works were characterised by their decorative abilities. Whistler’s art tended towards the liberated decorative, towards the taché and the use of line as pure visual delight. It was an art for the eye. Aristocratic and disinterested, it kept the audience at a distance. The paintings of van Gogh, on the other hand, showed an interest in style and expression.

Thiis came to understand the paintings of van Gogh and Paul Cézanne as the most vital and important art of the modern period. Reflecting on French painting exhibited in the Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne in 1912, Thiis criticised Naturalism and Impressionism for their tendency to render the
world in fragmented, objective and (especially for Impressionism) instantaneous impressions. This left little room for personal expression, so that the subjective connection between man and nature/world was absent. In opposition to this artistic pendant to positivism and a scientific world view, the paintings of van Gogh and Cézanne demonstrated a decorative simplicity and expression. Thiis characterised van Gogh as ‘the opposite of a virtuoso and a self-admirer’, and commented on his simple and religious soul, how his art was an expression of his feelings towards people and nature. Likewise, Cézanne’s artistic ambition was to surmount ‘the contingency of matter, through an artistic unity, that transcends all of nature, all illusion and all technical experiments’. Thiis saw it as an art that was on the verge of mystery, the mark of all great art.

Thiis’s interest in the foundation and seriousness of art, his preference for an artistic unity that disclosed a subjective view of the world, had implications for his attitude towards the concept of the national. Although he could make ironic remarks about Lysakerkretsen’s cultivation of national artistic values, he recognised the subjective and expressive values of a nationally oriented art. In 1907, he identified the decorative as ‘the urge’ of the time, happily noting that the Norwegian painters had found national forms for this. It was a typical anthropophagic understanding.

**Anthropophagic versus anthropoemic strategies**

When France celebrated the centenary of the French Revolution with the World Fair in Paris in 1889, the painter Kitty Kielland (1843–1914) was part of the committee that organised the Norwegian section of the art exhibition. Afterwards, she was challenged in the periodical *Samtiden* to state what exactly was the ambition of the Norwegian painters, and what status words such as ‘national’ and ‘fatherland’ occupied in contemporary art. Kielland stated that the ambition of the best Norwegian painters was to see with a fresh eye, to see their nature and life with a ‘Norwegian eye’. While she admitted her initial fear that Norwegian art might have been too caught up in the French art that inspired it, this fear had proved groundless: ‘What they had been taught abroad was properly digested; it had entered

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33 Thiis, ‘Betragtninger og karakteristiker av Moderne franske malert’, 39. ‘Og tingenes bund var for denne gamle katolik og reaktionære revolutionære den aandige forflyttinge av tingenes tilfældighet i en kunstnerisk enhet, som ligger over al natur, al illusion og alle tekniske eksperimenter.’

the Norwegian blood, and had strengthened the national [orientation], not weakened it.'\(^{35}\)

Kielland’s comment on the Norwegian painters’ relationship with French art that inspired them can be put into a theoretical context through Claude Lévi-Strauss’s distinction between *anthropophagic* and *anthropoemic* societies. They are two different strategies for dealing with otherness. The *anthropophagic* strategy is cannibalistic; the foreign body is swallowed and digested, making it a part of the body swallowing it. The anthropoemic strategy is bulimic; the foreign body is vomited or spat out. Protecting oneself from foreign influence is an anthropoemic strategy. Kielland identified an anthropophagic reality in Norwegian art; while the painters were inspired by foreign (French) art, they used it to express something personal or homely. Dietrichson understood the creation of a national painting as more of an anthropoemic strategy. Around 1890, he insisted that one had to free oneself from both French and German influence to create a true national painting. Like Kielland, he claimed that painters had to learn to see Norwegian nature and everyday life through ‘Norwegian eyes’. But this had to await a new generation; present day painters still saw with German or French eyes.\(^{36}\)

Aubert and Kielland’s opinion was that Norwegian painters had already freed themselves from the French influence and were able to use their native eyes when they studied nature. In 1890, reflecting on the Nordic paintings he had seen at the World Fair in Paris the preceding year, Aubert stated that Norwegian art was more national than Swedish art, a view he would find confirmed by leading French critics. They had referred to the Norwegian paintings as *rustic*, a characterisation Aubert gladly embraced. Swedish artists, on the other hand, had not been able to digest foreign impulses properly. Swedish painters had become Parisian painters; they had taken up the Parisian ‘refinement’. The result was a ‘homeless’ art. Aubert characterised the colours of the Swedish painters as ‘softened by the present neurasthenic taste’, a taste that he identified with city life.\(^{37}\) This meant that rural parts of Europe, like the Nordic countries, were of interest as a healthy alternative. To avoid the decadence, Nordic artists simply had to anchor their art in their home country.

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\(^{35}\) Kitty Kielland, ‘Lidt om kunst’, *Samtiden* vol. 1 (1890), 224. ‘Men nei, det i udlandet lærte var godt fordøiet, var gaaet ind i det norske blod og havde blot givet styrke til det nationale, ikke svækket det.’


\(^{37}\) Andreas Aubert, ‘Svensk Malerkunst paa Verdensudstillingen, sammenstillet med den norske’, *Dagbladet*, 30 November 1890. The Finnish painter Edelfelt was also an elegant Parisian, in Aubert’s view, even though he regarded him as the most truthful of the Nordic painters in Paris.
The concern that modern man had developed a neurasthenic sensibility, reflects a general concern about Western civilisation in crisis, heading towards self-destruction. The sociologist Max Nordau identified in this era a degeneration of modern man, caused by ‘an exhausted nervous system’. The nervous system was overloaded by a frenzied city life. Jean Clair sees Symbolism as a ‘desperate attempt to restore the natural and ancient links that man, as a thinking being, had established with the world’. For Aubert, much of what was produced under the banner of Symbolism was rather an expression of the sense of alienation brought about by city life. He identified Edvard Munch as a typical representative of a neurasthenic art in Norway, a decadent, a ‘child of a refined, over-civilised time’. Munthe’s decorative Symbolism, on the other hand, was a healthy alternative, with its roots in the national past.

Decoration was important as a contrast to this refinement and over-civilisation, rooted as it was in traditional culture. Aubert admitted that the interest in decorative art and national expression was imported from outside, from English Arts and Craft. In 1898, Munthe reflected upon how to respond to this kind of influence:

-One kind of Civilisation is the study of how to acquire taste for what is imported, even when there is lack of consideration as to our own state of life, or our concepts. However, we get there only by losing our sense of the meaning of art.

Foreign art should not be imported directly into the Norwegian artistic milieu; it should be assimilated into national ideas and understanding – a typical anthropophagic strategy.

In Norwegian art criticism and art history, Jens Thiis has a reputation for being a critic who was more interested in the pure artistic qualities of painting than its moral aspects. In a debate with Aubert regarding the paintings of Edvard Munch, Thiis defended Munch’s art against Aubert’s allegations of amorality. The only judgement he could accept regarding the value of art was a judgement about artistic value, he contended. Even so, Thiis came to differentiate between what he regarded as a healthy and a decadent taste in art. In 1907, reflecting on art history and criticism in Denmark, Thiis described the Danish critic

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40 Andreas Aubert, ‘Høstutstillingen. Aarsarbejdet IV. Edvard Munch’, Dagbladet, 5 November 1890.
41 Aubert, ‘Ny Kunst: Gerhard Munthes billedvævmønstre’, Nyt Tidsskrift (Ny række) 1 (1892–93), 616.
42 Munthe, ‘Kunstværdier’ [1898], 76. ‘En Art Civilisation er Læren om at finde sig i og faa Smag for det importerede, selv naar det ingen Hensyn tager hverken til vore Livsforhold eller vore Begreber, men det er ved at miste Sansen for Kunstens Mening, at vi naar dit.’
43 Thiis’ contributions were printed in Morgenbladet, 14 and 25 May 1902; Aubert’s contributions, 17 and 30 May.
Emil Hannover (1864–1923) as a ‘decadent, with an unfortunate inclination towards that kind of refinement, that also is a deterioration’.44

For Thiis, the history of French art was the history of modern art. The challenge for Nordic artists was how to cope with this influence. It was all about being able to create a genuine expression from the impressions you acquired. This had also proven a challenge for an artist like Paul Gauguin. In contrast to the serious and almost religious art of Cézanne and van Gogh, Thiis would describe Gauguin as more of an eclectic, tempted by ‘colouristic gourmandise’.45 His criticism of Gauguin discloses a concern that artists may be too caught up in an international style, free-floating and eclectic, without a firm foundation in the observation of nature or in subjectivity. This criticism Thiis also directed towards Frits Thaulow (1847–1906), an artist who was regarded during the 1880s as a standard-bearer of Naturalism. In his survey of Norwegian art, Thiis claimed that Thaulow had become a ‘colouristic sweet tooth’, and criticised his recent art for being seductive and false, flowing too easily from his hands (Fig. 5). As a celebrated international painter, his art had yielded to economic interests and lost the best of his artistic qualities from the 1880s, when Thaulow had painted his *plein-air* pictures in Norway. For Thiis that had been an art founded in the observation of nature, like Munthe's paintings from the 1880s. But while Munthe had established during the 1890s a new foundation in the domestic artistic tradition, Thaulow’s paintings had lost their foundation and seriousness.46

The criticism of Thaulow’s later paintings was also directed against his eclectic use of a Rococo tradition that was especially French. In 1906, the critic Carl Wille Schnitler (1879–1926) stated that Thaulow’s paintings were marked by the French Rococo, and shared both its virtues and vices. The vices were related to Thaulow’s claim that art should be viewed as aesthetic gourmandise, which had stamped his paintings as perfumed and sugared.47

**Colourist modernism**

Both Messel and Malmanger have emphasised ‘the decorative’ as a concept that gave the formal qualities of the artwork priority. This meant that ‘the decorative’ did more than establish...
a connection back to traditional visual culture; it also became a concept that could establish a connection with international modernism. By its focus on the picture surface, Malmanger contends, ‘the decorative’ came to be an important concept for the critical interest in the pure visual qualities of the work of art.48

We can find this interest in the critical writings of Rolf Thommessen (1879–1939) around 1900. Thommessen had close connections with Aubert and the Lysaker milieu. In 1900, reviewing the ‘National Art Exhibition’, he called for the establishment of a national artistic style, using decorative, architectonic and artistic principles.49 In 1901, he identified a group of young artists who were mostly interested in colourism and the pure artistic merits of painting. He described this as an art for the eye; its purpose was to embellish, just what Aubert had criticised earlier the same year. The new art was characterised by a ‘decorative strength in its form’ and a ‘shifting beauty in the colouring’.50 This was an art of little human concern, an autonomous art with its own value, cultivating pure artistic qualities.

Jens Thiis often expressed his belief that this artistic value was the only value by which a work of art should be judged. According to Nils Messel, Jens Thiis’s interest in French art as the foundation of modern Norwegian painting meant that he did not care much about Aubert’s interest in the national visual culture.51 However, this simplistic view of a polarisation between Aubert and Thiis needs to be revised. Although Thiis made ironic remarks over the cultivation of the national at Lysaker, he nevertheless came to identify different national artistic traditions, traditions that were also vital for modern painting. In fact, Thiis was probably the critic who best succeeded in integrating the two aspects of decoration: on the one hand the interest in a serious art that was anchored in the past, on the other, an art that was ‘unashamed of its offer of visual delight’, as T.J. Clark expressed it. For as much as Thiis insisted on the interest in colours and colourism as a specific modern trait in contemporary painting, he also established a specific tie to the national tradition through colourism.

In 1914, reflecting on the paintings exhibited in the centennial exhibition in the Frogner district of Oslo, Thiis identified a colouristic interest in contemporary Norwegian painting. This new colourism had French connections, since many of the

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young Norwegian colourists had studied French painting. This was true of Thorvald Erichsen (1868–1939) and Oluf Wold-Torne (1867–1919), as well as Edvard Munch and the young Norwegian students of Matisse. Erichsen and Wold-Torne had studied under the Danish painter Kristian Zahrtmann in the 1890s. And even though they had acquired what Thiis regarded as a very welcome Danish culture and feeling for form, Danish painting had done no good for their colour sensibility. They both brightened their colours when they returned to Norway around 1900 (Fig. 6). Thiis regarded this colourism as a vital national thread in painting, going all the way back to J.C. Dahl.52 Dahl’s colourism had its roots

Fig. 6. Thorvald Erichsen, From Kviteseid in Telemark, 1900, oil on canvas, 101.8cm x 132.5cm. Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo
Photo: Nasjonalmuseet CC-BY-NC

in the Norwegian landscape, where the crisp air gave the colours of the landscape a sparkling quality.

For Thiis, there was a natural connection between the characteristics of the art of a nation and its landscape. Writing about his impressions of the Danish art in the journal *Politiken* in 1908, Thiis found it natural that Danish art was characterised by its linear quality, and that its greatest artist was the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. His work reflected the linear qualities of the Danish landscape, with its broad undulating lines of the countryside, silhouetted against a towering sky. Norway, however, brought forth a different image, of rough form and flickering colours. This explained the different characters of their art. While Danish artists excelled in drawing and form, their colouring had too little brightness and energy. Norwegian art, on the contrary, was characterised by a less developed formal culture, but showed its strength in its sparkling colours.

In 1923, Gothenburg celebrated its 300th anniversary with a great exhibition. The art exhibition pavilion showed contemporary Nordic art. Jens Thiis, who had participated in the planning of the exhibition of Nordic art, wrote a long review, which he published under the title *Nordisk kunst idag* that same year. Thiis made positive remarks about the Swedish art, but he was critical of the Danish art for its lack of colourism, and harshly rejected most of the Finnish paintings. The Finnish section displayed ten paintings by Helene Schjerfbeck, which Thiis could enjoy, and a few paintings from the Septem Group, which also gave him a pleasant impression. However, most of the Finnish section did not appeal to him:

*One felt surrounded by a foreign race in these painting halls. (...) Mongolian and tartarian types grimacing from the walls. A confined environment of lowbrow peasants, lay-reader and liquor emanates from dozens of these tales of everyday life. Besides, the bleak grey and dirty colouring that characterised the exhibited paintings (...) gave a general impression of levelled down democracy, a feeling of dispiritedness.*

The main target of Thiis’s criticism were the paintings of the November Group, who depicted scenes from the rural parts...
Fig. 7. Axel Revold, Farming, 1922, sketch for Bergen Børs (Bergen Stock Exchange building), oil on wood, 145cm x 137.5cm. Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo
Photo: Nasjonalmuseet CC-BY-NC, © Revold, Axel / Kuvasto
Fig. 8. Edvard Munch, *The Girls on the Bridge*, c. 1901, oil on canvas, 136cm x 125cm. Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo
Photo: Nasjonalmuseet / Børre Høstland CC-BY-NC
of Finland in dark tones. Their paintings showed a social spirit, a style and colouring that was very different from ‘our own’, he stated. As Timo Huusko has pointed out, it was a common racist prejudice in this period to believe that the Finnish peasants were of (inferior) Mongolian descent. Thiis’s criticism of the Novemberists’ depiction of them echoed previous reviews by other Scandinavian critics.54 Prominent among the November Group were the paintings by Tyko Sallinen (1879–1955). Thiis found the people occupying his paintings hideous. At first sight, the colouring appeared grey and without mellow contrasting colours. On looking again, however, Sallinen’s paintings showed a surprising beauty, a beauty that was to be found exactly in the colouring. At a distance Thiis found a ‘marvellous and mystical vibrating splendour’ in his paintings. Sallinen’s grey was a living grey, and Thiis proclaimed him the greatest Finnish painter of the young generation.55

Entering the Norwegian section of the exhibition from the Finnish one was, according to Thiis, like coming from a dark attic into a flowering garden. Here he took a special interest in the paintings of Thorvald Erichsen, Ludvig Karsten (1876–1926), the young Alf Rolfsen (1895–1979), and the former pupils of Henri Matisse: Axel Revold (1887–1962), Henrik Sørensen (1882–1962), Per Krohg (1889–1965), and Jean Heiberg (1884–1976). Thiis was especially interested in the sketches Revold had made for the fresco decoration at the Bergen Stock Exchange building (Bergen Børs), sketches that had secured Revold the commission (Fig. 7). In contrast to the Finnish art, Thiis was happy to see that the Norwegian art rose above the depressing social reality of the time:

Something light and airy, colourful and robust characterises the whole. Nowhere can one sense that this art comes from a land of prohibition and bitter pietism. Whatever the situation in literature and politics, pessimism has not got hold of the art of painting.56

Thiis saw these light, airy and colourful paintings as characteristic of a Norwegian tradition stretching back to Dahl. Criticising what he saw as dark and muddy colours in the paintings of Alf Rolfsen, he advised him to adjust his colours to ‘the

55 Thiis, Nordisk kunst idag, 63–64. Sigurd Frosterus had curated the Finnish section of the Nordic exhibition, where he had given a prominent position to the Novemberists. Sallinen’s feeling for colours had also impressed Frosterus, who described his use of colour as characterised by a ‘confident feeling of rhythm and a pronounced personal feeling’ (‘koloristisk taktsinne och av utprägld personlig kjensla’). Frosterus, Solljus og slågskugga, I: Ur hemlandets konstkrönika (Helsingfors: Söderström, 1917), 250.
56 Thiis, Nordisk kunst idag, 66. ‘Noget lyst og luftig, farveglad og sterkt gaar gejnnem det hele. Ingensteds sporer man at denne kunst kommer fra forbudenes og den sure pitismsens land. Hvordan det enn er med litteratur og politikk, pessimismen har ialfall ikke faatt tak i malerkunsten.’
Norwegian line’, which he described as ‘true to nature, wakeful and vigorous’ (‘livsnær, våken og frodig’). It was a vision of an exuberant colourism.

When Thiis surveyed the history of painting in Norway in 1927, he stated that ‘if anything should be called our national line in painting, it is the colouristic’. This time he traced a colourist tradition that went beyond Dahl, going all the way back to medieval church interiors and their tapestries. This medieval colouristic tradition lived on in the folk art of the Norwegian inland, until J.C. Dahl revived it in his landscape paintings, inspired by the Norwegian nature, full of contrasts, fresh and sparkling colours.

Even Edvard Munch could be associated with this Norwegian colouristic tradition. When Thiis reflected on Munch’s paintings in 1914, he drew attention to the shift in Munch’s paintings around 1900. At this time, Munch turned his back on the Symbolism of the former decade, opened his eyes to a saturated vibrating nature, and started to paint landscapes in Warnemünde and later in Kragerø, a little coastal town south of Oslo. In 1933, when Thiis reflected upon Munch’s use of colour in The Girls on the Bridge (1901, Fig. 8), he insisted that ‘in truth, this is Nordic classic’. The triad of the white, red and green dresses was typical of Norwegian colouring. ‘No Frenchman, no Dane, no Swede would have dared this’, he wrote, underlining Munch’s qualities as a colour composer.

Conclusion

The critical practice in Norway around 1900 is clearly related to the weathering of tradition and the fragmentation caused by the growth of cities and of the techno-scientific culture that had developed during the 19th century. As a contrast to the feeling of nervousness or uncertainty (as Bjørnson called it) caused by this profound change in sociocultural life, critics expressed their hope in art to restore the experience of unity and man’s connection with nature. The concept of ‘the national’ was important in the critical discourse around 1900 as an entity that signalled a unity that had been lost, and that could be retrieved by art. Naturalist critics, like Andreas Aubert in the 1880s, came to support an art that took its subjects from the rural part of the country, where he saw old traditions still existing. This art promised a healing
for a fragmented and rootless city culture, in Norway typically associated with Kristiania (Oslo). An authentic art depended on artists working independent of a cosmopolitan city culture. Therefore, Aubert was inclined to value art according to the distance it kept from the ‘decadent’ or ‘refined’ city culture.

The 1890s brought about an interest in the style of painting. This interest in style and decorative painting was a reaction against Naturalism, which was now regarded as analytical and commercial, related to scientific culture and capitalist markets. In contrast, style in painting signalled a specific attitude to life, a more spiritual art, and decorative painting was marked by this stylization, which bore witness to a people’s world view. Relating decorative painting to a tradition of monumental art, it was almost by definition a communal art, and critics could embrace the art of Gerhard Munthe as an embodiment of Norwegian sentiments. Critics viewed Munthe’s decorative-inspired art as a colouristic rustic painting, the opposite of painterly ‘refinement’, in which the national tradition was invoked by the colouring and the decorative form.

Norwegian art criticism around 1900 is usually seen as polarised, with the nationally oriented Lysakerkretsen on one side, and the more internationally oriented critics – with Jens Thiis as the leading figure – on the other. And even though critics like Aubert and Thiis often had their disagreements, not least regarding Munch’s art, in hindsight their consensus is just as striking. They were both advocates of an anthropophagic strategy and understood French artists as the most important models to emulate. Around 1900, they expressed their highest expectations for the same Norwegian artists, painters like Munthe, Erichsen and Wold-Torne, whom they praised for developing decorative paintings with a distinct national character. For Thiis, this national character was to be found in the colours; the paintings could be decorative, like Revold’s frescoes from Bergen Børs, or more expressive, like the paintings of Edvard Munch and Henrik Sørensen. What gave them their Norwegian quality was their common grounding in the fresh and sparkling colours of the Norwegian landscape.

The fact that even an internationally oriented critic like Jens Thiis would embrace the concept of ‘the national’ is a testimony to the strong impact of the concept. It signalled that art, faced
with the fragmentation and alienation caused by the modern city and techno-scientific culture, could restore man’s relationship with his world, and create a feeling of (national) community and a continuity with the (national) past.

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