Encounters between Art and Folk Art around 1900 in Norway

Gerhard Munthe, Theodor Kittelsen and Frida Hansen

Vibeke Waallann Hansen

Throughout the 19th century, various forms of folk culture – literary, musical and visual – were highly valued in Norwegian society. It was the cultural history of the peasantry that the country’s intellectuals worked hardest to preserve and perpetuate. By the end of the century, folk art had assumed a central place in the Norwegian art discourse and artists had begun drawing their inspiration directly from the folk art and vernacular literature that had been collected over the previous 100 years, and which had then become widely accessible through museum displays and publications.

Common to three of the most prominent Norwegian artists around the turn of the century was their use of this folk material and the extent to which they were influenced by the debate about art and folk art. The decorative works of Gerhard Munthe, the enchanted scenes based on fairy tales, legends and myths depicted by Theodor Kittelsen, and Frida Hansen’s tapestries, all have their roots in folk traditions. The innovative art they developed was the outcome of their interest in and thorough knowledge of Norwegian folk art. In this paper, I will consider the sources to which these three artists had access and discuss their reasons for using this material in their creative work. I will argue that it was their knowledge of folk art and their determination to engage it in a dialogue with contemporary trends in European art, such as Symbolism, the Arts and Crafts movement and Art Nouveau, which made them key players in spreading modern art to Norway.
The widespread interest in the idioms of folk art in Norway during this period is often associated with the parallel struggle for national independence that dominated the political climate of the time. Leading critics, theorists and museum directors advocated the cultivation of a Norwegian art tradition along similar lines. What mattered for them was to identify what was specifically Norwegian and to encourage artists to pursue a national style. But was the notion of the national a decisive consideration for Munthe, Kittelsen and Hansen in the work they produced?

**Folk art, the same as peasant art?**

The concept of folk art is relative, and what the term refers to depends on when and where it is used and on the historical context. The ambiguity of the label is confirmed by the diversity of objects that are now displayed under the label of folk art in museum collections around the world. The term ‘folk art’ was first used by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl in an 1894 article entitled ‘Volkskunst. Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie’ (Folk Art. Household Production and Household Manufacturing).1 Folk music and folk literature were by that time already familiar concepts in Europe, and it was an obvious step to extend the exploration of national and regional cultures further into the field of visual expression. Riegl’s definition of folk art was based on historical factors. He believed that the period of folk art was a phase that had been superseded, in that it was inextricably linked to a less developed way of life and was in part a consequence of household production. He was critical of museum colleagues who facilitated and stimulated the continued production of folk art for the market. By encouraging rural populations to continue to use primitive forms of production, one was effectively ‘condemning’ them to live in the past and excluding them from modernity, a position that Riegl considered was unethical.2

In Norway, one of the first to respond to Riegl’s article was the art historian Andreas Aubert (1851–1913), who began to use the term folk art in 1897.3 Folk music and folk literature were by that time already familiar concepts in Europe, and it was an obvious step to extend the exploration of national and regional cultures further into the field of visual expression. Riegl’s definition of folk art was based on historical factors. He believed that the period of folk art was a phase that had been superseded, in that it was inextricably linked to a less developed way of life and was in part a consequence of household production. He was critical of museum colleagues who facilitated and stimulated the continued production of folk art for the market. By encouraging rural populations to continue to use primitive forms of production, one was effectively ‘condemning’ them to live in the past and excluding them from modernity, a position that Riegl considered was unethical.2

In Norway, one of the first to respond to Riegl’s article was the art historian Andreas Aubert (1851–1913), who began to use the term folk art in 1897.3 A central figure in the Norwegian cultural sphere around the turn of the century, Aubert promoted a view of folk art as something fundamental to the Norwegian art tradition. Inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement and Art Nouveau, he advocated a closer connection

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1 Diana Reynolds Cordileone, *Alois Riegl in Vienna 1875–1905: an institutional biography* (Surrey, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2014), 109–43. Riegl’s text ‘Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie’ is available only in German, and his definition of the phenomenon and the current discussion are based on Cordileone’s reading.
between crafts, architecture, fine and applied arts, articulating a range of thoughts on the subject.\textsuperscript{4} In his writings, and more generally in Norwegian art history, the term folk art was used almost synonymously with peasant art. In an article published in 1907 to coincide with an exhibition of Norwegian Folk Art in Copenhagen’s Museum of Decorative Arts, Aubert declared: ‘The exhibition of Norwegian folk art encompasses more than a thousand items of very different kinds (...). But all of the objects on display can be grouped around one central characteristic, the Norwegian peasant (...). The Norwegian peasant’s home, Norwegian peasant art in its highest manifestation (...).’\textsuperscript{5} In Aubert’s view, the unique and distinctive aspects of the nation’s culture were to be found in the traditions of the Norwegian peasantry. For him, peasant culture was ‘the essential repository of national artistic heritage in our country’.\textsuperscript{6} This view was widely held in the debate about ‘the distinctively Norwegian’ and what kind of traditions the nascent art of the young nation ought to build on in years to come.

Two other major figures who, like Aubert, promoted folk art as a rich source of inspiration for modern art and design, were the art historian Lorentz Dietrichson (1834–1917) and the lawyer Henrik Grosch (1848–1929). Both were instrumental in setting up the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design in Kristiania (Oslo) in 1876. Grosch had no formal education in the field, but was self-taught and passionate about the museum, and in 1886, he became its first director. Both Dietrichson and Grosch shared Aubert’s passionate interest in peasant art. They argued that the Museum should collect and spread knowledge about these kinds of objects, and saw it as an important means to ‘preserve and develop the remains of Norway’s own Folk industries, which were inherited from our forefathers and carry the distinctive imprint of our nationality and are still preserved in our valleys’.\textsuperscript{7} The Museum of Decorative Arts and Design defined its purpose of collecting folk art primarily in terms of making it accessible as a model and a source of inspiration for contemporary crafts and industry: ‘Our own interest relates to the artistic and technical aspects of these works. What we wanted was (...) on the one hand, to strive for a revival of old handcrafts and, on the other, to render this rich material of benefit to the craftspeople and industries of today.’\textsuperscript{8} The emphasis was on collecting older examples and looking for


\textsuperscript{5} Andreas Aubert, ‘Om norsk bondekunst’, \textit{Tidsskrift for kunstindustri} (Copenhagen: Industriforeningen i København, 1907), 138.

\textsuperscript{6} Andreas Aubert, ‘Om norsk bondekunst’, 146.

\textsuperscript{7} Lorentz Dietrichson, \textit{Aftenposten}, 1886. Quoted here from Randi Gaustad, ‘Kristiania Kunstdrømmuseum og folkekunsten’, in \textit{Om kunstindustri} (Trondheim: Kunstdrømmuseumene i Norge, 1991), 49.

\textsuperscript{8} From a speech by conservator H.A. Grosch to mark the museum’s 10th anniversary, in 1886. Here quoted from Gaustad, ‘Kristiania Kunstdrømmuseum og folkekunsten’, 50.
‘the masterpieces’ of Norwegian Folk Art. In other words, as was the case with Riegl, folk art was conceived of here as a more or less historical form of cultural expression. The possibility of reviving old domestic crafts was discussed, but for the art historians the crucial aim was to preserve traditions through renewal and by assimilating them into contemporary crafts and methods of production.

As the above citations show, terms such as ‘folk art’, ‘peasant art’, ‘household production’ and ‘domestic industry’ were often used interchangeably. In the ensuing discussion, the term folk art in a narrow sense is taken to denote primarily the examples of woodcarving, rose painting, tapestry and rug weaving that were collected by the Norwegian museums of decorative art and which were considered objects of art-historical value at the time. However, Munthe, Kittelsen and Hansen drew inspiration not only from these objects but, as I will show, also from folk tales and myths, folk music lyrics, traditional styles of dress and architecture. In general, they were fascinated by folklore and clearly saw the aesthetic value in the cultural traditions of the people. I use the term folk art therefore in a wider sense, referring more in general to folklore.

Folk art, fine art and the idea of the nation in the 1890s

Large-scale projects to collect and preserve folk culture were initiated in many parts of Europe throughout the 19th century. Folk literature in the form of legends, myths, songs and fairy tales was transcribed, categorised and published. Similar efforts were underway in the field of material culture, documenting and assessing craft traditions, regional costumes and vernacular building styles. Two pioneering figures in Norway were Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, now celebrated for their collection of Norwegian folk tales, the first volume of which was published in a series of booklets in December 1841. Further, artists and historians were investing considerable energy in amassing information about historical craft traditions, practices and aesthetic preferences. Among the efforts of Norwegian artists in this regard, the best known are J.C. Dahl’s devotion to Norwegian stave churches and their preservation, and Adolph Tidemand’s documentation...
of diverse folk costumes. As this collecting work progressed, and the quantities of preserved material grew, the need for some form of systematisation and academic analysis became increasingly pressing. Towards the end of the century, work began on organising the material to make it accessible to academic study. When it came to presentation, the museums of decorative art played an essential role. In addition, the year 1894 saw the founding of the Norwegian Folk Museum and the University Collection of National Antiquities. As even more material was classified and made accessible through museum displays, photographic documentation, drawings and a multitude of publications, artists and writers began to draw inspiration directly from this material. They were not the first to do so, but compared to the trends of the 1890s and 1900s, the primary concern of earlier generations had been documentation.

The integration of folk art into fine art that took place around 1900 has often been interpreted in conjunction with the ambition to develop a national style and as a manifestation of a national Romantic ideal: ‘Rejecting historical revival styles (…) Romantic nationalists drew from “national vernacular or (...) folk motifs”, and turned these folk motifs into national design idioms.’ This interpretation is particularly true of the work of artists who were active on Europe’s periphery, such as the Nordic countries, during this period. The ideal of creating fine and applied arts of a distinctively national character found clear articulation in the Norwegian art debate at the turn of the century, and, as we have seen, folk art was lifted out of its regional context and elevated to a heritage of national value. But there is good reason here to distinguish between what was presented as a theoretical artistic ideal and the pursuits and objectives of individual artists. In addition to the ideal of establishing a national art for Norway, there were other reasons for seeking inspiration in folk art. These included a broader interest in the people as a nation, the creation of an art for all social classes, the preservation of traditions, and an emphasis on the regional rather than the international. The turn towards popular traditions and folk culture that we find in the work of Munthe, Kittelsen and Hansen was part of a Europe-wide movement that reflected intellectual currents that had to do with much more than just the concerns of nation building. Since

13 Johan Christian Dahl was the force behind the founding of the Foreningen for norske Fortidsminnesmerkeres Bevaring (Society for the Preservation of Ancient Norwegian Monuments) and one of the first to highlight the importance of preserving the nation's stave churches. Tidemand’s studies of Norwegian folk costumes are of great historical value. Made over a period of some 30 years (1843–74), this material runs to almost 150 drawings, now in the keeping of the National Museum. For more on this, see Aagot Noss, ‘Adolph Tidemand: tilhøvet folkedraktstudier og folkelivsbilete’, in Tidemand og Gude, exhibition catalogue (Oslo: National Museum, 2003), 61–69.


the 18th century, a Romantic tendency to idealise the ‘unspoilt peasantry’ had been spreading across Europe. It was claimed that the peasantry constituted a repository of traditions dating back to prehistoric times. Essentially, the movement was about a form of cultural rediscovery; it was for the most part unpolitical and unaccompanied by external agendas. The rediscovery of folk traditions closely associated with the historically neglected peasantry and their transformation into ‘national traditions’ is attributable primarily to the efforts of the intellectual elite. The perspectives that mattered for the latter included the preservation of traditions, concord between social classes, and the local and regional versus the international. There is no compelling justification to equate the cultural awakening movement with the nationalist movements that steadily gained in strength towards the end of the century.17

In other parts of Europe, the interest that artists showed in folk art was not necessarily linked to the ideal of creating a national style. For a number of intellectuals, such as Riegl, it was to be viewed as yet another contribution to the ongoing search for new styles that typified the 19th-century art world. Riegl was critical of the restlessness of the era and believed that the art world was too preoccupied with the vagaries of international fashions. In his view, the ‘discovery’ of folk art was yet another attempt to find an artistic cure-all that could serve as the basis for a modern style.18

For Munthe, Kittelsen and Hansen, it was not just the national art debate that shaped their work; they were also influenced by international trends. In terms of both its formal aesthetics and its content, folk art had certain qualities that harmonised well with modern ideals of art. It was a period in which the term ‘primitive’ had become a badge of honour, with the consequence that ‘primitive’ folk art was now accorded a similar value to the ‘primitive’ art of the European Middle Ages or the stylised art of Japan, both of which were further sources of inspiration for these three artists.19 With this context and understanding of modern art in mind, the question to ask is: What use could these three artists make of folk art in their work?

17 Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Hobsbawm writes about the various phases of nationalism and the development of nation states. The early 19th-century cultural awakening that he describes, in other words the interest among the bourgeoisie and social elites in wanting to preserve folk culture and all the work it involved, was first placed in a political context by later generations. Hobsbawm maintains, for example, that the Folklore Society, founded in England in 1878 with the aim of reviving and popularising folk song, was no more nationalist than the Gypsy Lore Society (Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780, 137).


Gerhard Munthe – fine art or folk art?

When I later read about Alcinous’ garden in the Odyssey, for me it was the gardens at Krogen.

Gerhard Munthe, ‘En reise til Krogen i Sogn’
(A Trip to Krogen in Sogn), 1856

There are two sides to the artistic output of Gerhard Munthe (1849–1929). Here we will set aside his considerable production of oil paintings in order to concentrate on his decorative works. Munthe was a radical creator of style and a design pioneer. In this respect, he was shaped in large part by his belief in the qualities of Norwegian folk art. Munthe is associated with nation-building, and he strongly favoured the ongoing quest in his day to find national characteristics, whereas he viewed art as rooted primarily in the subjective and the individual’s imagination and creativity. What was unusual about Munthe’s ideas was that he viewed nationality and personality almost like two sides of the same coin. For him, nationality was all about an individual’s local roots, and as such it was in no way incompatible with artistic demands for uniqueness and originality in style. In the above quote, Munthe associates the garden of Alcinous in Homer’s Odyssey with the garden at Krogen, the Munthe family’s farm located deep in Sogn og Fjordane. This comparison neatly sums up his views about how personal experience forms the basis for both the creation and the appreciation of art.

As a young student, Munthe visited many Norwegian valleys, studying local customs, traditions and crafts, such as woodcarving and weaving. One of his sketchbooks from 1870 contains detailed drawings of life as he found it in the Norwegian villages (Fig. 1). The sketchbook is divided into sections: ‘Everyday Life’, ‘Parts of Buildings’, ‘Nature’ and ‘Fairy-Tale Life’. Munthe’s role models at the time were scientists, collectors and other artists who had travelled the country, collecting information about Norwegian peasant culture. However, it would be another 20 years before he began to use those insights in his own artistic work.

For an exhibition in Kristiania in 1893, Munthe presented 11 large watercolours of scenes based on Norwegian fairy tales and legends. These were perceived as ground-breaking in both...

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21 Art historian Jan Kokkin uses these terms in discussing Munthe’s decorative works in his two books about the artist: Jan Kokkin, Gerhard Munthe. En radikal stilskaper (Lillehammer Art Museum, 2011) and Gerhard Munthe: Norwegian pioneer of modernism (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishing, 2018).
22 I have previously written about this topic in The Magic North: Finnish and Norwegian Art around 1900, exhibition catalogue (Oslo and Helsinki, 2015). See also Margaretha Rossholm, Sagan i Nordisk sekelskifteskunst: En motvihistorisk och ideologisk undersökning (Stockholm, 1974), 294.
23 Hilmar Bakken, Gerhard Munthe dekorative kunst (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1946), 8.
their content and style. Illustrating fairy tales had long been a popular preoccupation for many Norwegian artists, but Munthe wanted something else. His own works were more than just illustrations or attempts to visualise a text. They encapsulated the artist’s personal encounters with Norwegian legends, songs and folk tales. His ambition was to make imaginative art based on themes he found in folk poetry. Certain aspects of these pictures

Fig. 1. Gerhard Munthe, drawing from a sketchbook, 1870. The National Library of Norway
can be traced back to Magnus B. Landstad’s *Norske Folkeviser* (Norwegian Folk Tales), from 1853, a publication Munthe knew well and which he referenced later in works such as Åsmund Frægdegjevar (Åsmund the Worthy), *Lindarormen* (The Big Serpent) and *Draumkvæde* (The Dream Ballad). In folk literature, he found themes of universal human relevance that were at the same time also local. The colours, forms and ornaments of the watercolours on display in 1893 were heavily inspired from Norwegian peasant art. In addition to the content being carved out of a Nordic storytelling tradition, Munthe developed a colour...
palette based on observations he had made in old tapestries, rose paintings, stave church interiors and folk costumes. In *Friere* (The Suitors), also known as *Nordlysdøtre* (Daughters of Aurora Borealis), from 1892 (Fig. 2), the florid designs on the sides of a bed have been transformed into independent decorative devices. By repeating elements such as three polar bears, three princesses, three stars and three birds, he has used the number symbolism of the folk tale to create a visual composition. Many folk tales contain the number three, for instance three brothers,
three princesses, three wishes or an action that is repeated three times. Other common numbers are seven and nine. Ornaments from folk art can also be traced, like the stylised animals in *Three Princesses* (Fig. 3).

Many critics and colleagues thought the watercolours were sketches for tapestries. But the spatial effects in Munthe’s watercolours are more three-dimensional than was characteristic for traditional tapestries, a formal element that partly counteracts some of the abstraction in the scenes. At the same time, the use of bold decorative borders disrupts the illusion of space and draws the pictures more towards the decorative. His palette consisted of colours that he referred to as ‘deep red’, ‘reddish violet’, ‘pot blue’, ‘bluish green’, and ‘bold yellow’, in addition to grey, black, and white. It was vital for Munthe that the colours drew on those from Norwegian folk art. However, there is also a correspondence between the colours he used and those used by some of the leading artists of the day, such as Paul Gauguin, Émile Bernard, and Maurice Denis.24

In his 1946 biography of Munthe, Hilmar Bakken wrote that Munthe did not directly imitate anything in folk art.25 In fact, it is hard to find direct copies of folk-art elements in Munthe’s works, even though there can be no doubt that they were a crucial source of inspiration. There are good reasons to assume that Munthe was steeped in the fairy-tale and folk music traditions from his native region of Elverum and Solør. Folklore research has shown that folk ballads, such as *Den onde stemor* (*The Evil Stepmother*), *Ridder Valivan* (*Knight Valivan*), *Agate og havmannen* (*Agate and the Seafarer*) and others were sung in Solør, and were still part of a living tradition when Munthe was a child.26 Thus he could have drawn not only on a literature of national importance but also on his personal memories.

Munthe’s fairy-tale watercolours placed him on the European art map. They were exhibited in a number of countries in the mid-1890s, and soon became widely known in Scandinavian art circles. The contemporary Swedish art critic, Edvard Alkman, described his work as follows:

> *Although one has never heard the story, one understands it even so. One is overcome by the spirit of the tale (...) and with that the artist has achieved what he wanted. His pictures are*


not intended to be mere illustrations of a story’s events, but rather freely imagined visualisations (...) a highly individual artistic perspective that makes Munthe’s work entirely different from, for example, Werenskiold’s famous Asbjørnsen drawings... 27

For Aubert, as well as several other art theorists and critics, it was Munthe who really succeeded in using national material and in combining decorative and national elements in his work. In Aubert’s words, Munthe had laid ‘...his decorative art over Norwegian tradition, in accordance with folk art’s distinctive sense of colour’. 28 Munthe was a writer as well as an artist, reflecting on his own work and the view of art on which it was based. 29 Concerning the background to the fairy-tale watercolours, he wrote: ‘...many different things(...) from ancient memorials in the Louvre to the youngest Symbolist works, have informed the gaze that was for me an absolutely necessity. As much of a necessity perhaps as knowing our own ancient crafts and literature.’ 30 He made it clear that his platform was art history in general and Symbolism in particular. Munthe was well versed in contemporary art theory, and the French symbolist-synthetic mindset, as formulated e.g. in Albert Aurier’s article ‘Le symbolism en peinture: Paul Gauguin’, from 1891, and Maurice Denis’s ‘Définition du neo-traditionnisme’ (1890) 31, provided him with a conceptual framework that accorded with his own ideas of combining pictorial art with the decorative principle. According to Aurier, the decorative was essential to symbolic art. In Denis’s essay, the preservation of tradition played a central role. For Munthe, it made sense to view Norwegian peasant art as a tradition that needed to be preserved and developed via contemporary art. Munthe himself made no direct reference to Aurier or Denis, but the number of similarities between their views is striking, especially between those of Denis and Munthe. Viewed from this theoretical angle, the stylistic potential of Norwegian folk art is strikingly evident. In addition to the preservation of tradition, and that of stylistic and national characteristics, there was another aspect to Munthe’s conception of art that probably strengthened his interest in folk traditions. He was sympathetic towards the contemporary ideal of breaking down artistic hierarchies. It

29 These texts are collected in Minder og meninger: Fra 1850-årene til nu.
31 Aurier’s article was published in Mercure de France, March 1891, 155–65. Denis’ article was published in Art et critique 5, 23 and 30 August 1890, 540–42.
was from this vantage point that he saw the potential of both
the literary and the craft aspects of Norwegian folk art. For
him, no single style of any epoch or culture could be ranked
higher than any other. In this respect, he advocated a central
principle of European modernism, one that allowed him to
adopt a different perspective on folk art, among other things.
Feeling the dominance of the Renaissance in Western art to be
restrictive, Munthe called for greater imaginative freedom of
the kind he found, for example, in Viking art: ‘We are always
so quick to conclude that what was lacking was the capacity
for naturalistic reproduction; (…) in my view what was lacking
was determination and the urge.’ Describing himself and his
fellow artists as ‘students of classicism’, he was opposed to the
Naturalism that dominated in his own day.32 For him, this was
just one of many possible directions one could take in art: ‘The
one thing that is always demanded of art in our day is objective
likeness, “photographic” likeness, (…). This stems from interests
that are now in fashion, but it has nothing to do with art (...). The
concrete view, Naturalism, was now cultivated territory, yet it
too is built on abstraction, which is the true hallmark of art…’33
Unlike Naturalism, folk art does not pursue objective likeness as
an ideal. By bringing elements from this tradition into the sphere
of fine art, Munthe’s fairy-tale watercolours took a step that was
in its time transgressive. Contemporary critics and audiences
were uncertain about what kind of artefacts they were being
confronted with. This is evident in the way in which the works
were discussed in their day. Ten years after first seeing Munthe’s
watercolours, Jens Thiis wrote: ‘One stood there, somewhat
bemused by this new art. What was this anachronism, which
denied all realism, seeking to achieve? Was it a cartoon for a
tapestry? What kind of art was it?’34 By assimilating folk art into
fine art, Munthe was challenging the Classical art tradition.35

32 Widar Halen discusses the role of
the Fairy Tale in Munthe’s attempts
to leave behind Naturalism, see
‘Gerhard Munthe og det even-
tyrlige’, in Kari Brantzæg (ed.), Kyss
frosken: Forvandlingens kunst (Oslo,
Nasjonalmuseet, 2005), 52–61.
33 Gerhard Munthe, ‘Stilarter og illustrering
af oldtiden’, Mindes og meninger: Fra 1850-årene til nu
(Kristiania: Cammermeyer, 1919), 80.
34 Jens Thiis, Gerhard Munthe: En studie
(Trondheim, 1903).
35 The fact that Munthe’s watercolours
were purchased by the National
Gallery, rather than the Museum of
Decorative Arts and Design, shows
that they were regarded as fine art,
rather than as cartoons for weaving.
Theodor Kittelsen: visualising folklore

Imagine you undertake to depict a hare laughing...
If that’s your aim, you certainly can’t let yourself be bound by your model.

Christian Krohg on Kittelsen, *Kunstbladet*, 1888

In the first half of the 1890s, the interest in legends, myths and fairy tales grew steadily among both artists and writers. The creatures of folk belief were reimagined in a variety of contexts. The Danish publication *Troldtøj* (Trolls), from 1890, which includes texts by Holger Drachmann and illustrations by Joachim Skovgaard, Thorvald Bindesbøll and August Jerndorff, is one of several examples – as was *Trold* (Trolls), from 1891, by the Norwegian author Jonas Lie, Munthe’s fairy-tale watercolours (1893) and Theodor Kittelsen’s *Troldskab* (Troll Folk) (1892). An earlier example is Ernst Bojesen’s inter-Nordic Christmas magazine *Juleroser*, the 1887 edition of which focused on a selection of figures from Nordic legends. This work included texts by Lie and Drachmann, while Carl Larsson, C. Bloch and August Jerndorff were among those who supplied illustrations.36 Writing about the Nordic mythic creature, the draug, Jonas Lie describes the challenge for the artist: ‘I shall be intrigued to see what the artist makes of the draug (…). What will he look like? – I imagine a painter would not be too happy to depict him – as painters these days seem required to do – sitting on an upturned boat in a naturalistic style, looking him straight in the face. The face, indeed! He doesn’t have a head, but just a clump of seaweed; even so, one could still stare him in the face.’37

Lie is suggesting in a humorous way that the Naturalistic approach does not extend this far. Kittelsen was not among the contributors to this publication. Even so, during the 1890s he would become one of the most dedicated exponents of this genre, and – as the above citation from Krohg indicates – one who was not always ‘bound by his model’.

Kittelsen was primarily a book artist and illustrator. The illustrations that Asbjørnsen and Moe commissioned from him for several of their collections of folk tales were in a class of their own. The first publication that Kittelsen illustrated was entitled *Eventyrbog for Børn. Norske Folkeeventyr* (Fairy Tales for Children. Norwegian Folk Tales) and consisted of three volumes published

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in the years 1883–87. Kittelsen returned repeatedly to fairy-tale illustrations over a 30-year period. From 1887 to 1889 he lived in northern Norway, and it was there that he began work on one of his defining projects, *Troldskab*, a presentation in text and pictures of a selection of creatures from folk belief. Each drawing was accompanied by a text about the respective creature – Nøkken (the Water Sprite or Nix), Huldra (the Wood Nymph), Draugen (the Sea Ghost), Trollet (the Troll), etc. A mixture of literary fairy tale and legend, the texts give the impression of being drawn from oral transmission but were in fact written by Kittelsen himself. Like Munthe’s fairy-tale watercolours, *Troldskab* presents us with the artist’s personal interpretations of popular tales handed down by word of mouth. Stylistically, the drawings

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38 It was around this time that Kittelsen began to work on these drawings. Jonas Lie was supposed to write the texts, but due to his failure to deliver on time, Kittelsen eventually wrote them himself. As a result of the delay, the book wasn’t published until 1892.

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Fig. 4. Theodor Kittelsen, *Nøkken / The Nix*, 1887, pen, pencil and wash on paper, 33.1cm x 46.6cm. Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo
Photo: Nasjonalmuseet / Jacques Lathion CC-BY-NC
in *Troldskab* are varied, reflecting various sources of inspiration. Some of them resemble the fairy-tale illustrations he had made on earlier occasions. The most important literary inspiration was Andreas Faye’s *Norske Folke-Sagn* (Norwegian Folk Tales), from 1833. Faye was the first Norwegian to collect folklore in a systematic way. Several of the pictures and texts in *Troldskab* are fairly direct interpretations of Faye’s narrative, and it is tempting to view the book as an extension of the latter’s collected folk tales. Throughout the work, Kittelsen was in contact with his friend, the folklorist Moltke Moe (1859–1913).\(^{39}\)

In addition to publishing the oral material he had collected, Faye hoped to establish the place of Norwegian folklore in its broader and more general European context. In the introduction to *Norske Folke-Sagn* he wrote: ‘When we compare the popular beliefs of neighbouring and closely related nations, we notice the same ideas and superstitions in slightly different forms.’\(^{40}\) He drew parallels to Norway’s neighbours, including examples from Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Germany, Scotland and the Orkney Isles. Kittelsen’s text and picture for *Nøkken* (Fig. 4) show parallels to Faye’s account. Interestingly, Kittelsen did not confine himself exclusively to Norwegian legends. Faye wrote that it had been said of the *nøkk* that ‘(h)e can transform himself into all kinds of things, sometimes into a half-boat on the water, sometimes into a half-horse on the shore, sometimes into gold and other precious things. If you touch these things, the *nøkk* will immediately gain power over you. He is, however, only dangerous after sunset…’ He added that in Iceland, the *nøkk* revealed himself as ‘a beautiful grey horse who entices people to mount him, whereupon he carries the rider straight into the water’.\(^{41}\) The *nøkk* also appears as a horse in Shetland, albeit as ‘a small beautiful pony that lures people’.\(^{42}\) In *Troldskab*, Kittelsen wrote: ‘The *nøkk* can transform himself into all kinds of shapes. Often he lies on the shoreline like a beautiful glistening jewel. If you touch it, he has you in his power (…). He turns himself into an old barge, half up on land (…). Once in a while, the *nøkk* turns himself into a grey horse that starts grazing right beside the tarn. His aim is to trick someone into climbing onto his back, at which point he will head straight for the water.’\(^{43}\) The drawing of the *nøkk* was close to Faye’s description of the Scottish water sprite: ‘In Scotland, the *nøkk* appears sometimes as Shellycoat, covered in seaweed and


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 50.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 53.

Encounters between Art and Folk Art around 1900 in Norway: Gerhard Munthe, Theodor Kittelsen and Frida Hansen

EUROPEAN REVIVALS
From Dreams of a Nation to Places of Transnational Exchange
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VIBEKE WAALLANN HANSEN

Fig. 5. Theodor Kittelsen, Boy on White Horse, 1890–1909. Th. Kittelsen Museum / Blaafarveværket
Photo: Th. Kittelsen Museum / Blaafarveværket

Fig. 6. Theodor Kittelsen, Nøkken / The Nix, 1909. KODE Art Museums of Bergen
Photo: KODE, Bergen
mussels, sometimes as Kelpie...’ But it was Faye’s description of the popular Danish idea of the nøkk that had the closest parallels to Kittelsen’s drawing in Troldskab: ‘...a monster with a human head, who lives both in the sea and in lakes.’ Several years later, Kittelsen made a number of other pictures of the nøkk, this time in the guise of a horse. Gutt på hvit hest (Boy on White Horse, Fig. 5) and Nøkken (Fig. 6) were probably responses to Faye’s description of the Shetland water sprite. The nøkk’s tendency to assume the form of a horse was also an element of Norwegian folklore, but it was the seductive and alluring nøkk that Kittelsen chose to depict in these two works. Conceptions of supernatural figures from continental Europe, in addition to the Norwegian tradition, also played a part for Kittelsen. He was familiar with the illustrations of the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales, but in regard to international influences, it was probably Arnold Böcklin who offered the greatest inspiration. Kittelsen borrowed ideas from Böcklin for both his sea serpent and his mermaid.

These elements show that Kittelsen channelled more than just folklore into his Troldskab series. Indeed he had a wide interest in mythology. He was not only focusing on what was typical for the Norwegian tradition.

For the folklorist Moltke Moe, folk literature was an expression of the ‘mythical mindset’, something that possessed value as symbolic narrative of universal significance. The fact that folk beliefs can be seen as expressions of fundamental universal ideas was an important aspect of their reception in general and of research into this material. They were not merely the products of ignorance and superstition, and the study of folk literature represented not just ‘the collecting of curiosities and bric-a-brac, but (...) a route back to the broad universal foundation from which ultimately all human culture has emerged’. Faye’s Norske Folke-Sagn was a contribution to the comparative mythology that became a popular discipline in the 19th century. Asbjørnsen and Moe’s work in collecting Norwegian folk tales was also a contribution to this field of research, which straddles the boundaries between ethnology, psychology and anthropology.

Kittelsen’s works show an awareness of the importance of legends and supernatural beings, and the stories and creatures he chose to represent in Troldskab are those he regarded as holding a deeper meaning. The mythical aspect of folk culture harmonised...
well with contemporary Symbolism and Neo-Romanticism, one of the goals of which was to represent human intuition and emotions and the life of the soul. In Symbolist art, allegories, myths and biblical themes were reformulated using a new iconography, and Kittelsen used the historical-mythical material of folklore to evoke a world of universal experience. Norway’s natural environment and folk beliefs provided the inspiration, but the framework was Symbolism.

Mythological and biblical themes were a focus of renewed interest among painters in the 1890s, and Kittelsen’s private library reveals that he was no exception in this regard. On his bookshelves one finds works such as *Illustrert mytologi* (Illustrated Mythology), from 1875, which covers Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Nordic and Germanic mythology, and *Mythologisk haandbog* (Mythological Handbook), from 1872. Kittelsen’s first major artistic achievement was his set of drawings for an edition of the *Batrachomyomachia* (Homer’s *Battle of Frogs and Mice*), which actually had nothing to do with Norwegian history or folk traditions. In his younger years, Kittelsen lived and studied in Munich, where, as mentioned above, Böcklin’s pictures were a source of inspiration for many, Kittelsen included. Böcklin’s integration of existential themes with a world of visual fantasy was widely admired. The personification of Nature was one of the driving forces behind folk tales and other popular legends and myths. Symbolist art is also inclined to ascribe human traits to animals and natural phenomena and to use fairy-tale figures as symbols for human experiences and feelings. This is something that especially characterises Nordic Symbolism. Figures such as trolls, nøkks and personifications of pestilence serve as reflections of human fears, in that they symbolise phenomena we find too frightening to confront or are unable to explain.

As with Munthe’s fairytale watercolours, some contemporary critics contrasted Kittelsen’s artworks with the fairytale illustrations of Erik Werenskiold (1855–1938). This juxtaposition was made to highlight Munthe and Kittelsen’s imaginative results. For instance, Jens Thiis drew such a parallel, emphasising Kittelsen’s imagination:

*Despite my profound respect for (...) Werenskiold’s fairytale drawings, it ought to be asked whether Kittelsen’s*
best drawings are not more successful in capturing the burlesque tone of fairy tales. His drawings are bolder, wilder, and possess more of the spirit of fairy tales than the wise, meticulous works of Werenskiold, which are often more like naturalistic depictions of peasant life than fantastical fairy-tale illustrations. Kittelsen has shown us once and for all what a Norwegian troll looks like, whether it be the mountain variety, the forest troll, the tarn troll or any of the many other enchanted and supernatural creatures of this country.\textsuperscript{52}

Werenskiold was dedicated to Naturalism and his drawings very often render what he in fact had observed on his many travels in different Norwegian valleys. It was in regard to these more realistic folklore renderings that Kittelsen represented a contrast. It was this depiction of peasant life – which kind of continued the older generation of artists’ national Romantic motives – that Kittelsen freed himself from. To a greater extent he found inspiration in the texts.

**Frida Hansen: how to make the most out of a Norwegian peasant woman’s weaving tradition**

*I am glad that in 1889 my path took me to Sognefjord, rather than to the Gobelin factory in Paris.*

Frida Hansen

Frida Hansen’s career began with an åkle – a traditional Norwegian rug (Fig. 7). In the 1880s, she ran an embroidery shop in her hometown of Stavanger. Anna Rogstad’s book, *Kjente menn og kvinner. Fra deres liv og virke* (Famous Men and Women. From their lives and works), published in 1926, quoted Hansen as saying about this period:

...one day a woman came in with a beautiful old rug that she had bought in Telemark. It was threadbare and had a few holes, and she asked me to repair it ... Suddenly, I recalled the words of my brother-in-law Carl – ‘You should be weaving such rugs.’ It shot through me like fire. Yes, that’s what I would now do! I would take up the old Norwegian craft of weaving,
so as to renew it and make it available, both as decoration and as a field of activity for many. And thus began my life’s work, which has occupied my thoughts, my creative drive and my life.53

Hansen was familiar with old woven textiles of this kind from the collection of her brother-in-law, the painter Carl Sundt-Hansen. She herself had no experience of the technique, but soon became aware that it was on the verge of dying out in the local villages. Fortunately, there were others who were also eager to preserve Norway’s textile traditions, and at the

Fig. 7. Åkle, 19th century, tapestry, 152cm x 126cm. Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo
Photo: Nasjonalmuseet / Frode Larsen CC-BY-NC

invitation of a friend, the women’s rights campaigner Randi Blehr, she took a trip to Sogn in order to gain her first experience. Blehr encouraged women to pursue home crafts during a period when the interest in Norwegian folk culture was widespread.\textsuperscript{54} One of her discoveries was Kjersti Hauglum, a young woman who wove tapestries using a technique that had survived in Norway since the Middle Ages. In 1889, Blehr organised a course in Lærdal on tapestry weaving using warp-weighted looms, with the aim of reviving the tradition. Hansen took part and quickly decided to focus on this technique in depth. However, she was not satisfied with the colours of the woollen yarns that were available. So she set off to visit the farms in Ryfylke to collect recipes for plant-based dyes from the older women of the region. In due course she established Norway’s first plant-dyeing workshop in Stavanger, and the following year, in 1890, she founded the ‘Atelier for haandvævde norske Tæpper’ (Studio for Hand-woven Norwegian Rugs).

In 1892, Hansen decided to move to the capital in order to share her knowledge with others and to show that Norway ‘had something that was bound to inspire respect and admiration – in other words,’ she said, ‘I wanted to build a new branch of Norwegian applied art’.\textsuperscript{55} Five years later, together with Blehr, Hansen set up the Norsk Aaklæde og Billedtæppe-Væveri (Norwegian Rug and Tapestry Workshop).\textsuperscript{56} In the autumn of 1897, the workshop exhibited its first product, a floor rug. On that occasion, the Director of the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design in Kristiania, Henrik Grosch, was rather sceptical about the project. Despite being an advocate for the preservation of Norwegian textile traditions, a theme he frequently promoted in his public speeches, Grosch thought the pattern of the floor rug was ‘second-rate’, the execution irregular, and the dyeing of the yarn a failure.\textsuperscript{57} A few days later, Hansen published her response in ‘Innovation in the Field of Art-Textiles’, explaining that, for this floor rug, she had developed a new technique that combined modern tapestry weaving with the very oldest methods, and that the irregularities that Grosch had highlighted were the very point of the work. For her, the effect created by this technique ‘introduced something ancient and fresh into the over-refined home. This yearning for the authentic and the simple is what is in the air today’.\textsuperscript{58} Evidently, Hansen could justify the use of this old
technique in terms of the current taste for a decorative art that prioritised simplicity and stylisation.

Hansen became closely involved in the efforts to spread knowledge about textiles and tapestry weaving, while at the same time building her own career as an artist. The number of women who were professional weavers in these years became quite substantial, yet few were as ambitious as Hansen. Ancient textile traditions from Norwegian rural communities formed the basis for her considerable output, and throughout her career she justified her choice with artistic arguments and by remaining true to her heritage. Over the years, she wrote a number of newspaper articles and took part in debates about textile art and the development of Norwegian applied arts. Historically, the aesthetic standard in the field of tapestry had been the French Gobelin. This was a type of tapestry characterised by technical refinement that allowed the realistic treatment of themes. On several occasions, Hansen discussed the status of the French Gobelin, claiming that it was an error to judge the quality of all textile art on such a basis. In 1913, she wrote in Aftenposten about the Norwegian ‘weaving renaissance’ to which she herself had contributed over the previous 20 years:

On the other hand, if we have turned our backs on the Gobelin, it is certainly not for any lack of ability, but because, in my view, we are best served by preserving our own tapestry weaving (...). If we have turned our backs on this kind of work, it is because we did not want to weave paintings. We wanted textile art (...). I am glad that in 1889 my path took me to Sognefjord, rather than to the Gobelin factory in Paris.59

But renewal was also needed. Hansen recognised the importance of new designs and refined the technique accordingly. Paradoxically, she based her first tapestry on a well-known Norwegian painting. In her memoir in Rogstads’s book, she said: ‘...but what should I weave? (...) I chose a Norwegian theme, a woodcut of Bergsliens’s painting The Birkebeiner Carrying the Royal Child over the Mountains. I didn’t want to misappropriate or copy old tapestries, since I realised that – beautiful and decorative as they may be – they could never serve as models for a modern line of work due to the primitiveness of their figure drawing.’60
solution was to elicit a dialogue between folk art and fine art. So what would she weave? In November 1891 an article by Hansen appeared in *Morgenbladet*, in which she reflected on where modern Norwegian tapestry weaving should look for designs. Under the heading ‘Our National Tapestry Weaving’, she pointed out that Norwegian traditions offered ‘a rich field to work from: themes from our legends and fairy tales, amazing animal and flower forms, ornamental and ground patterns, etc. (…) Our old tapestries, with their patterns and colour combinations, should be the basis on which we develop further work.’

Hansen wrote this two years before Munthe exhibited his fairy-tale watercolours and a year before Kittelsen published his book *Troldskab*. Hansen saw Munthe’s watercolours when they were exhibited in Kristiania in 1893, and in response she wrote to Blehr: ‘Fairy-tale themes (…), that’s what we should be weaving, in my opinion (…). Just think! What fantasy there is in our ancient fairy tales, legends and yarns…’

Initially, Hansen’s subjects concentrated on Norwegian tales and, like Munthe, she found inspiration in Landstad’s *Norske Folkeviser*. A significant work from these early years was *Olaf Liljekrans*, from 1894 (Fig. 8), which consists of two large tapestries and four sets of portières, made as a commission for the Skøyen estate. In other words, like Munthe, she chose the most Norwegian of Norwegian themes.

As we have seen, from the outset Hansen’s aim was the preservation of traditional Norwegian crafts, but in order to create a living tradition she was convinced that preservation had to be combined with renewal. A few years after her comments in *Aftenposten* about seeking inspiration in ‘Our Ancient Tapestries’, her thoughts were once again in print, this time concerning the need for new, original designs to ensure the development and continued viability of tapestry weaving as an industry. She had started out pursuing the ideal of Norwegianness, probably influenced by the ongoing debate at the time about a national style, but after a few years this had been toned down. In the spring of 1895, Hansen travelled abroad, first to Cologne, then Paris. She went to Cologne to copy late-medieval German art and to study drawing at the city’s art school. What she sought in medieval art were ways in which to simplify figurative elements. As in tapestries, medieval painting emphasised the two-dimensional...
Fig. 8. Frida Hansen, *Olaf Liljekrans II*, 1894, tapestry in gobelin technique, 358cm x 175cm, Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo
Photo: Nasjonalmuseet / Frode Larsen CC-BY-NC
surface, making medieval designs highly suitable for transfer to the particular Norwegian weaving technique she worked with. After a few months she moved to Paris, where she took life classes. None of the surviving sources mentions where in Paris Hansen studied, but probably it was with Puvis de Chavannes. A number of young Norwegian women studied with him and, according to a newspaper report from 1892, a door curtain that Hansen had woven using the åkle technique was sent to him as a gift from ‘some of his Norwegian female students in Paris’.66 It is also probable that Hansen attended his classes as a guest during a stay in Paris in 1895. But whether or not she studied with Puvis, we know that she was acquainted with his art, and her stylistic and thematic development after 1895 certainly suggests that his work was of major importance to her. Before travelling to Paris, she had focused on Norwegian themes, but her encounters with Symbolism, Art Nouveau and Japonism took her in a new direction. It was in Paris that she made the first sketches for one of her best-known works, Melkeveien (The Milky Way), from 1898 (Fig. 10).

After Paris, Hansen began working with more international themes. She always kept herself well informed about the latest developments in art, even if her opportunities to travel were limited. Among other things, she subscribed to The Studio.67 She was fairly free in her treatment of themes and did not worry unduly about whether or not they were Norwegian. The same was true of her colour schemes. But where she did remain consistent was in her use of the warp-weighted loom, the technique she had ‘discovered’, and she continued to dismiss the French Gobelin as a medium that essentially amounted to rendering paintings in textiles: ‘There is absolutely no reason why our technique should be an obstacle to the making of tapestries similar to the French Gobelins. If we wanted to do that, we could. But of course, we don’t want to. For weaving, the road ahead is not to copy paintings. In that direction, the French have already taken things as far as they can possibly go.’68 Ironically, her tapestries were compared to paintings on several occasions. When she exhibited a number of works in 1894, the critic for the Dagposten in Trondheim wrote: ‘This is genuine art – painting in yarn!’69

At the Bergen Exhibition in 1898, Hansen and Munthe’s tapestries appeared for the first time in the same exhibition. In

66 Thue, Frida Hansen: En europeer i norsk tekstilkunst omkring 1900, 43.
68 Frida Hansen, Nylænde, 15 September 1900, 277.
69 Thue, Frida Hansen: En europeer i norsk tekstilkunst omkring 1900, 23.
Bergens Aftenblad, Munthe’s *C’est ainsi* (Fig. 9) was compared with Hansen’s *Melkeveien* (The Milky Way). For the reviewer, Hansen’s was the more original and powerful work. But the exhibition also triggered a debate about the direction Norwegian textile art should take, with some remarking that Hansen’s tapestries were not sufficiently Norwegian. Jens Thiis, who by that time had become Director of the National Museum of Decorative Arts in Trondheim, was himself advocating a new national textile...
art, and for him Munthe stood out as a central role model.\footnote{For details on this debate see Thue, Frida Hansen: En europeer i norsk tekstilkunst omkring 1900, 63–65 and 74–80.} Despite gaining highly positive reviews, *Melkeveien* was not purchased by any of the Norwegian museums of decorative arts, whereas Munthe’s *C’est Ainsi* was bought by the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design in Kristiania. The refrain was that Norwegian textile art should be based on what was nationally distinctive. The following year, *Melkeveien* was shown in Berlin, where it was purchased for the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg. The professor of art history, Julius Lessing, was impressed by what he saw: ‘The great tapestry (...) by Frida Hansen is an artwork of the highest rank. Compared with a French tapestry, its simple expanses of colour may seem primitive, yet this simplicity does not equate with a
lack of strength; on the contrary, it must be a sign of strength, when a composition of such exalted simplicity and greatness can grow from it.\textsuperscript{72} For Norwegian critics, Hansen lacked what was distinctively Norwegian. Their German colleague found the idiom of her tapestries primitive compared to French examples. However, primitiveness was a quality that carried a positive value in the European art debate around the turn of the past century, and for Lessing, Hansen’s work was art of the highest rank, regardless of its national associations.

Hansen let a traditional, almost extinct technique play the leading role in her artistic work. This was her basic idea. At the same time, she chose to put this Norwegian tradition into dialogue with motifs, colours and patterns that were fashionable in the international art environment of the time, and because of this she succeeded with her ambition in preserving and renewing the tapestry tradition. As we have witnessed in the debate about Hansen’s artworks, she was not considered a contributor to the development of a ‘national style’ by her contemporaries. Nor has she later been seen in such a context and today she is more widely regarded as a representative of the European historical revival style, than a pioneer of a national revival style.\textsuperscript{73} But just as fully, her work of art was fundamentally based on a Norwegian weaving tradition stemming from peasant women. Hansen saw the potential in this technique and the beautiful tapestries that were the result. That this was a tradition associated with women’s culture also played an important role for Hansen. In addition to making her own art, it was essential for her to create jobs for women in her own time. Her activities helped women enter into professional life and at the same time they were continuing a significant craft tradition that had been carried out by women for centuries.

The preservation of folk traditions through artistic work

For Munthe, Kittelsen and Hansen alike, their interest in folk art was of decisive importance for their artistic activities. Although each had different motivations, they grappled with various aspects of folk traditions, and by transferring elements from folk art into fine art, they created new styles of expression that broke with older aesthetic ideals and thus brought them into line with the ideals...
of modern art. Whereas the ideology of the nation mattered to them in varying
degrees, what they did share was a general desire to communicate the traditions
of Norway to their contemporaries. Of the three, it was Munthe who placed the
greatest emphasis on developing a particular Norwegian style, and in the art-
historical literature he is also the only one to have been cited with any consistency
in discussions about the importance of folk art in relation to the development of a
national art. Kittelsen’s visualisations of the creatures of folk belief brought trolls,
nekks and hulders into the shared Norwegian culture, although in choosing his
themes it would appear that Kittelsen was motivated more by a general interest
in popular culture than by any particular issue of national identity. He wanted
to honour the popular imagination and was interested in these stories for their
potential to reflect something universally human.

Against the background of the Symbolist interest that was current in the fields
of visual art and literature at the time, these artists recognised the opportunity to
build bridges between folk art and fine art. Munthe, Kittelsen and Hansen all chose
mythical themes. Some of these they found in Norwegian tradition, but others
were derived from a broader European heritage. The Symbolist inclination towards
favouring literary references in visual art meant that fairy tales and myths were
perceived as particularly relevant material. Supernatural and fantastical subject
matter were well suited to the desire to reach beyond the mundane and the rational.

In Norway, it was a fairly obvious step to link the cultural awakening that
folk art represented with the ambitions towards nationhood that became so
dominant in the 1890s. Many people saw these as traditions that carried little
trace of ‘foreign influence’. This was an argument made by prominent critics, such
as Aubert, and supported by a number of artists. For most artists, however, there
was no explicit wish to create a national art that required them to seek inspiration
in popular traditions. We have seen that Kittelsen, Munthe and Hansen all adopted
a considered approach to folk art, finding both formal and thematic ways to
engage with it, not primarily because as a material it was thoroughly Norwegian
or because they wanted to create a specifically Norwegian art, but rather because
folk art possessed qualities that corresponded well to the current preoccupations
of art in Europe. What mattered for them was not so much the creation of a
national art as making this national material more universally interesting and
relevant for a new era.

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