The Accidental Canon

Reverse Engineering *Northern Light*

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This case study in decanonization examines the making of the exhibition *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880–1910* (US and Sweden, 1982–1983). The exhibition became established in the Anglophone world, and internationally, as a framework for understanding Nordic art. It has become a canon that has shaped – and continues to effect – academic and museum practice. The article examines the institutional apparatus and the contingency of circumstances that shaped the contours of the exhibition and thus the canonical model it generated. Among them are the national exigencies in the US (and the five Nordic nations), the scholarly vision of curator Kirk Varnedoe, the exceptional rapidity with which the exhibition was realized, the relatively few Anglophone scholarly sources available in English, and the various pressures placed on the project. The article questions the process of canonization through which an ephemeral exhibition, created for a manifest national purpose in the U.S., generated an enduring art-historical model, even a stereotype. Through a close study of the planning process, the contingent nature of the canon is examined.

Keywords: *Northern Light, canonization, Kirk Varnedoe, exhibition practice, national identity*

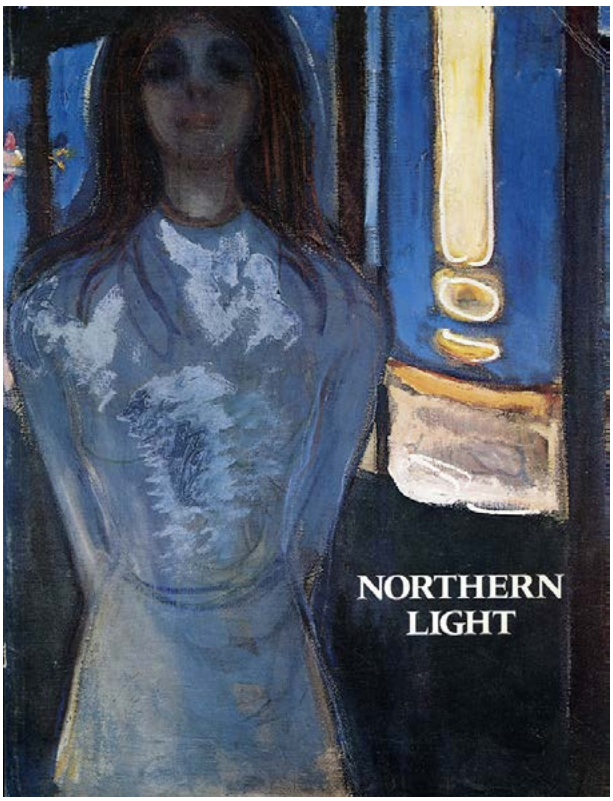

Image 1. Cover, *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880-1910,* exhibition catalogue, The Brooklyn Museum, 1982. Image: author's collection, all rights reserved.

Literary critic Gregor Langfeld states that "canonisation practices represent an area of research that deserves more attention," since art historians have traditionally studied "*art* as such and have in the process themselves contributed to the establishment of *this* art as worthy of study and therefore participated in its canonisation." He contends that the critical study of canonization processes and practices uncovers the mechanisms at play in determining value and taste.[1] The retrospective "process study" of *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880-1910*, an exhibition that toured the United States in 1982 and 1983, offers such an opportunity. Opening at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; traveling to The Brooklyn Museum and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, it was then held under the title *Nordiskt Ljus* at the Gothenburg Art Museum in the summer of 1983. *Northern Light* represents a canonization process or rather several nested canonization processes.

Art-historical canonization is not a "one-and-done" phenomenon, but a process entailing an accrual of acknowledgements. Occasionally an intervention in the art-historical imaginary, such as an exhibition, will have sufficient weight to concretize a selected group of works as exemplary. Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s "Cubism and Abstract Art" at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1936, for example, had such an effect. Unlike the MoMA exhibition, which was part of a longer-term institutional strategy,[2] *Northern Light* offers a fascinating case study as a kind of "accidental canon" in that it was curated in immense haste and was created in the service of a larger American cultural diplomacy project. While in no way as embedded in the history of modernism as Barr's exhibition, *Northern Light*, and its aftermath, provide a case study in the shaping of national and international narrative histories. To recount the process of organizing *Northern Light* is to consider the contingency of canon formation and its ripple effects over time and geography. Some of the dynamics and actors shaping the 1982 exhibition included the competition among nationalisms in the five Nordic countries, the personal tastes of an American curator, the responsibilities of directors and curators at the five national museums

1 Gregor Langfeld, "The Canon in Art History: Concepts and Approaches," *Journal of Art Historiography* 19 (December 2018), 2, https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/32456294/langfeld.pdf

2 Susan Noyes Platt argued that the organization, rationalizing structure, travel, and promotion of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s 1936 exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art" decontextualized Cubism from its historical moment and so successfully inserted it into a teleology of modernism that, despite numerous critical revisions, the movement has been hard to decouple from Barr's structure. The 1936 exhibition became its own canon, based on preexisting sub-canonical critical discernment. See Platt, "Modernism, Formalism, and Politics: The 'Cubism and Abstract Art' Exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art," *Art Journal*, 47, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 284–295.

Image 2. Installation shot, *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880-1910*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., September 8–October 17, 1982. Image: courtesy of the Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York, all rights reserved

Image 3. Installation shot, *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880-1910*, The Brooklyn Museum, November 10, 1982–January 6, 1983. Image: courtesy of the Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York, all rights reserved.

and other Nordic museums, cultural exchange organizations, the U.S. government, diplomats, and corporations.

This article is an attempt to "reverse engineer" the exhibition because, although it is over forty years since it opened, the "Northern Light" thesis and its catalogue had immediate international impact and continue to find purchase in university pedagogy and museum display.[3] I write in the first-person voice, something I do not usually practice, because, as a graduate student, I was the research assistant on the exhibition and followed or engaged in its planning step by step. Based on archival materials, notes, my memory of events, and an excellent article by American scholar Michelle Facos,[4] I here consider some of the forces and actors that formulated the exhibition as a case study in the canonization process.

"A new and interesting legacy"

> Pretty dismal, to say it immediately and without beating around the bush at all: it is certainly not thrilling now that this American exhibition of our Nordic painting has appeared on our home ground. [...] At home at the Gothenburg Art Museum, it will be met with more reservation, with criticism of incomprehensible choices, real errors, and unforgivable omissions… [5]

With those words, Danish art critic Pierre Lübecker (1921–90) reviewed *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880–1990*. The exhibition was unique at the time in its strategy of blending and seeking consonance among fin-de-siècle paintings from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. *Northern Light* was curated by Kirk Varnedoe (1946–2003), a professor at the New York University Institute Fine Arts (and later Chair of Painting and Sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art), at whom Lübecker directed particular disparagement: Varnedoe "is the man in the center; he is the one we should focus on," a scholar who only had "eyes for Munch" and whose selections sensationalized "loneliness, sickness, fear of death, alienation, religious fanaticism, bigoted egotism, ravings, and mysticism," with an emphasis on the stereotyping "magic of the Nordic summer nights or [...] a special melancholy feeling for nature."

Despite Lübecker's condemnation, *Nordisk Ljus* attracted the largest crowds in the history of the

3 A version of this essay was presented as a keynote at Helsinki in November 2023 at the conference "Rethinking Art Historical Narratives and Canons" and as the introduction to Nasjonalmuseet (Oslo) and University Oslo's collaborative project "Firing the Canon." As I contemplated the call for papers for the conference, I considered three of its suggestions: the role of art historical canons in the networks of cultural memory and forgetting; the meaning of national canons in a global world; and the role of art-historical scholarship in shaping and challenging nationalist narratives. Representing the "Firing the Norwegian Canon," a project that involved the University of Oslo and the Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo, were Mai Britt Guleng, Bente Solbakken, Eilif Salemonsen, and Talette Simonsen, National Museum, Oslo; MaryClaire Pappas, Savannah College of Art, US; and Tonje Haugland Sørensen and Ingrid Halland, University of Bergen, Norway. I thank Marja Lahelma for the invitation to speak and also to submit this paper. For research help, I thank Janice Bell, National Endowment for the Humanities; Alexander Ross, Los Angeles; and especially Lynn Carter, American-Scandinavian Foundation, and for editorial advice, I am grateful to Mai Britt Guleng, Michelle Facos, MaryClaire Pappas, Øystein Sjåstad, Lynn Carter, and Edward Gallagher, and I am indebted to the Feldberg Chair at Wellesley College for research support.

4 Michelle Facos, "The Dawning of Northern Light: An Exhibition and its Influence," in *A Fine Regard: Essays in Honor of Kirk Varnedoe*, ed. Patricia G. Berman and Gertje R. Utley (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2008).

5 Pierre Lübecker, "In a Mirror of Sorrow: Nordic Art Seen with American Lens," *Politiken*, May 12, 1983 (translated into English), Telefax from Carl Tomas Edam to Kirk Varnedoe, Archives of the American Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

Gothenburg Art Museum.[6] Björn Fredlund, at the time the director, and Per Bjurström, Curator of Prints and Drawings at Stockholm's National Museum, called *Northern Light* "an international breakthrough for Nordic painting" in an essay they published in the *Nordiskt Ljus* catalogue. The exhibition, they wrote, presented:

> …a new and interesting legacy for us. [...] The American organizers also approached the material in a creative, interpretive and, as some opinions have it, self-inflicted manner [...] The exhibition's strength is also due to the fact that they dared to refrain from diffusing the art of the period. Thus, history painting, biblical or mythological scenes, Saga motifs, depictions of folk life, and Vitalism, as well as several artists who may seem obvious to us – with claims to representativeness – are missing.[7]

Rather than represent each nation's imagined teleology, or its late nineteenth-century eclecticism, the American exhibition "allowed Nordic distinctiveness to emerge more clearly." In a 1991 article in the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, Swedish art historian Hans-Olof Boström (Chief Curator of the Gothenburg Art Museum from 1983–1987) acknowledged that the American curator "taught we northerners to completely understand the value of our own turn-of-the-century art."[8] The exhibition quickly became canonical, in that its organization, checklist, and general thesis became the standard by, or against, which other studies were organized. The exhibition initially occasioned a series of similarly configured exhibitions in Oslo, Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Helsinki, and then in Paris and London,[9] which attempted

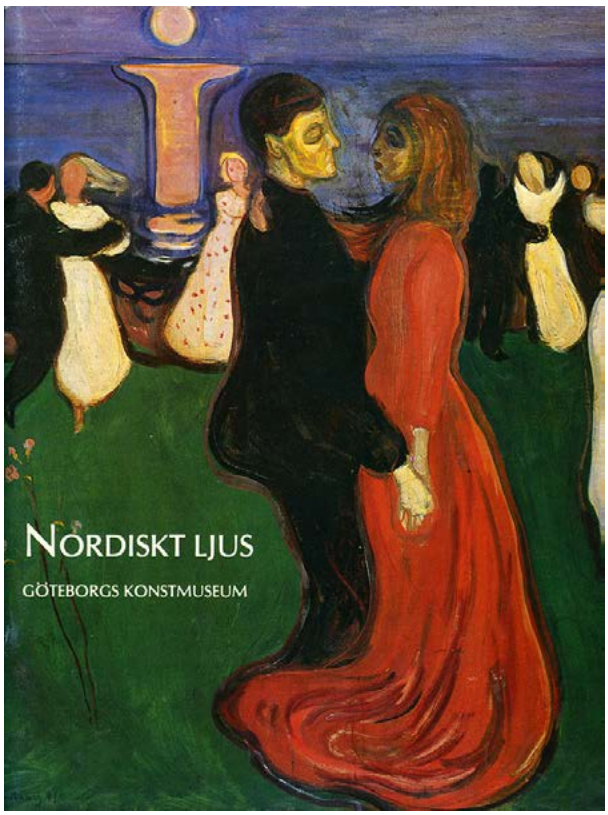

Image 4. Cover, *Nordiskt Ljus: Realism och Symbolism i Skandinavisk Måleri 1880-1920*, exhibition catalogue, Göteborgs Konstmuseum, May 7–3 July 3, 1983. Image: author's collection, all rights reserved.

6 A telegram sent to the American-Scandinavian Foundation confirmed, "When the museum doors closed yesterday in Gothenburg 82.000 visitors had been registered, an all-time record of the Gothenburg Art Gallery. Their ticket machine broke down yesterday so not all were registered at the end." Undated telegram from Carl Tomas Edam, Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York. Also mentioned by Edam was the exceptional promotional material: Nationwide television reminded the public not to miss the exhibition and a colour spread had appeared in *Dagens Nyheter*, the newspaper of record. See also Göteborgs Konstmuseum, "En hunderaårlig historia," https://goteborgskonstmuseum.se/100ar/.

7 Per Bjurström & Björn Fredlund, "Nordiskt sekelskifte i amerikansk belysning," in *Nordiskt Ljus: Realism och Symbolism i Skandinaviskt Måleri 1880–1910*, ed. Lena Boëthius & Håkan Wettre, ex. cat., Göteborgs Konstmuseum, 7 May – 3 June, 1983, 2.

8 As quoted in Facos, "Dawning of Northern Light," 66.

9 *1880-årene i nordisk maleri* (Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo; Nationalmuseum, Stockholm; Amos Andersons Konstmuseum, Helsinki; and Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, 1985-1986); *Dreams of a Summer Night: Scandinavian Painting at the Turn of the Century* (Hayward Gallery, London and co-organized by the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986); and *Lumières Du Nord: La Peinture Scandinave 1885-1905* (Musée Du Petit Palais, Paris, 1987). Michelle Facos observes that these exhibitions share many of the same authors, none of them from the *Northern Light* project, in "Dawning of Northern Light," 64.

to push back against perceived misunderstandings of the American curator and fill in some of the exclusions of the exhibition. Yet they were still organized on its paradigm,[10] reifying a "Northern Light" phenomenon.

In fact, the "light of the north" generated its own force field as a trope and even a stereotype. In the wake of the exhibition were others that seemed to ascribe artistic agency to light itself, rather than to the artists: *Northern Light* (Madrid and Barcelona, 1995); *Baltic Light: Early Open-Air Painting in Denmark and North Germany* (Ottawa, 1999); *Now the Light Comes from the North: Jugendstil in Finland* (Berlin, 2002); *Christen Købke: Danish Master of Light* (London, 2010); *Northern Light* (Paris, 2021); and *Beyond the Light: Identity and Place in Nineteenth Century Danish Art* (New York, 2023); And the list continues, including an exhibition provisionally entitled "Northern Lights" currently being organized by the Fondation Beyeler in Basel.[11] I also must admit to being a party to such viral illumination through a book entitled *In Another Light* and an exhibition entitled *Luminous Modernism* in New York.[12]

Broadly speaking, an art-historical canon can be defined as a body of work determined to be authoritative and of indisputable quality, a reference point, a standard against which others are measured. Art-historical canons are organizing mechanisms often intertwined with national or regional identities and that may provide the visual and material confirmation of identity itself.[13] As such, canons are configured from ideas as much as they are of material objects.[14] Canons are shaped by generational need and the political and social circumstances that give rise to a selection of materials that seem to represent or embody a culture both in a moment and over time, works that, taken together seem indexical of a place or a space or a people. Their contours change with shifting political and cultural needs and considerations, particularly when national canons interact with international understandings and reception.[15] What constitutes a canon and the durability of that configuration is constantly challenged by competing ways of thinking and by competing tastes. To canonize is to declare a set of objects, producers, or texts as the highest order of their kind, and to stabilize or confirm group identity at a given moment. Consequently, as norms change, canons are always under construction.[16]

Objects that enter the permanent collections of museums, particularly national museums, for example, receive the imprimatur as established entities, accessible candidates for reproduction

10 Facos, "Dawning of Northern Light," 62.

11 *Northern Light* (Museo National Centro de'Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, and Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, 1995); *Baltic Light: Early Open-Air Painting in Denmark and North Germany* (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1999); *Now the Light Comes from the North: Art Nouveau in Finland (Das Licht kommt jetzt von Norden: Jugendstil in Finnland*; Bröhan-Museum, Berlin, 2002); *Christen Købke: Danish Master of Light* (National Gallery, London, 2010); *La lumière du nord*, (Bendama/Pinel Art Contemporain, Paris, 2021); and *Beyond the Light: Identity and Place in Nineteenth Century Danish Art* (Metropolitan Museum, New York, 2023).

12 Patricia G. Berman, *In Another Light: Danish Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Vendome Press; London: Thames & Hudson; Copenhagen: Aschehoug Forlag, 2007; paperback edition Thames & Hudson, 2013); and *Luminous Modernism: Scandinavian Art Comes to America: A Centennial Retrospective 1912 | 2012*, ex. cat. (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation and SNAP Editions, 2011).

13 See Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

14 Hubert Locher, "The Idea of the Canon and Canon Formation in Art History," in *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe*, ed. Matthew Rampley, et. al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 37.

15 See for example Martha Langford, ed., *Narratives Unfolding. National Art Histories in an Unfinished World* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

16 Locher, "Idea of the Canon," 31, 33–34.

and other modes of diffusion.[17] Through their appearance in loan shows, analyses in scholarly tracts, reproductions as postcards and calendars, and other means of circulation, certain works become the "always already" designees as canonical or agreed-upon reference works. The convergence of museum display and organization, survey books, and the diffusion of particular images into the common culture create the circumstances through which certain kinds of work become valorized and the stickiness of valorization attaches to our turns of thought. Gregor Langfeld reminds us that scholars should be critically engaged in parsing such a process of repetition or "parrot[ing] out" as it has "led and still lead to some artists being included in the canon and entering history, and others being excluded."[18]

Comprising ninety-four paintings representing thirty-six artists, *Northern Light* proposed a commonality among the five Nordic nations in terms of their embrace and practice of modernism embedded in national identity and in a convergence of Realism and Naturalism commingled with nature mysticism. It was never curator Kirk Varnedoe's intention to create a definitive new canon or cohesive survey. He prefaced the *Northern Light* exhibition catalogue with the statement that:

> The paintings in Northern Light were selected to encourage comparison and contrast between the Realism and Symbolism that shaped a generation of Scandinavian artists in the 1880s and '90s and linked them in important ways to the formation of early modern art. They were not intended to form an inclusive or evenhanded survey of all the developments in Scandinavian painting in the late nineteenth century. Given the problem of representing five nations over more than two decades, the works were chosen with the intent of strengthening the thematic and visual coherence of the exhibition as a whole, as well as with the idea of effectively demonstrating a limited number of key aspects of the art of the five nations. The selection was determined by the quality and interest of individual paintings, rather than by a predetermined list of artists required to be represented.[19]

Yet once this selection of works was set into motion and became the virtually unique introduction of Nordic works of the 1880s and 1890s to the Anglophone world, it was received as definitive and instructional.

Varnedoe had long held an interest in modern painting in Northern Europe, material that was generally absent from the study of modern art in the United States. He had published a book on the German artist Max Klinger in 1977,[20] and a much-admired 1979 article on Norwegian painter Christian Krohg and his influence on the work of Edvard Munch.[21] In the following year, he advocated for a broader geographic, and therefore conceptually complex, understanding of modernisms outside of Paris (at that time seen as the model for avant-garde modern art). He twice cited Robert Rosenblum's 1975 book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* for its reevaluation of Caspar David Friedrich as an example of how northern European painting had been so little studied in the Anglophone world.[22] He also argued against "simple teleologies" of modernism,

17 Bruce Robertson, "The Tipping Point: Museum Collecting and the Canon," *American Art* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 2.

18 Langfeld, "Canon in Art History," 1.

19 Kirk Varnedoe, "Author's Note," *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting 1880–1910*, ex. cat. (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1982), 12.

20 Kirk Varnedoe, *The Graphic Works of Max Klinger*, with Elizabeth Streicher (New York: Dover, 1977).

21 Kirk Varnedoe, "Christian Krohg and Edvard Munch," *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 53, no. 8 (April 1979): 88–95.

22 Kirk Varnedoe, "Revision Revisited," *Art Journal*, Autumn-Winter, Vol. 40, nos. 1 and 2 (1980): 348–349.

such as the orthodoxy that painting progressed from Naturalism to Impressionism to Post-Impressionism/Symbolism in a linear manner, and he castigated American Francophilia as a form of "intellectual provincialism" and insularity. Instead, he argued for "expanded understandings" of nineteenth-century studies that could usher in "the paradigms for powerful revisions within the central territory of modernism."[23] He struggled with the problem of the "additive approach" to nineteenth-century art history[24] – to expand but not to shift fundamentally – by tentatively considering the very different cultural dynamics at play within and among nation states. To be invited to organize *Northern Light* was therefore an opportunity to put his ways of seeing into motion. In particular, he was interested in reconsidering late nineteenth-century Realism not as retrograde, but as part of a more complicated dialogue with anti-naturalistic art.[25] However, he was not the original curator to be offered the curatorship of the exhibition. The exhibition itself, furthermore, was not a standalone scholarly and aesthetic enterprise, but in part a United States government-sponsored project in cultural diplomacy.[26]

International cooperation

Northern Light was organized by "Scandinavia Today," a U.S. celebration of contemporary cultures in the Nordic Countries, the final in a series of six year-long cultural projects that had included "Mexico Today" in 1978, followed by Canada, Japan, Belgium, Egypt, and Scandinavia. The overall project was designed at the time of the U.S. Bicentennial celebrations in 1976 to educate Americans about other nations "with an eye to North|South and East|West axes."[27] The Scandinavia Today initiative was unique in that it incorporated five countries into one project, a gesture that in the first instance emphasized regional collaboration and Nordic unity and similitude. All of these projects were generated by the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

The Scandinavian Today initiative was organized by the American-Scandinavian Foundation (ASF), based in New York City, the first multi-country cultural exchange organization in the U.S., founded in 1910.[28] The pan-Nordic

23 Ibid., 351.

24 Saloni Mathur, "Response: Belonging to Modernism," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 559. Responding to a very different dynamic within art-historical study and valuation, Mathur nonetheless addresses the challenge of adding cultural materials to a pre-conceived Eurocentric canon without providing a new framework for, and making visible, shifting criteria and power imbalances. Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999) is a classic contribution to the persistent challenge of the Western canon of genius.

25 Kirk Varnedoe, "Northern Light: The History of an Exhibition," *Scandinavian Review* 72 (Spring 1984): 14.

26 I use the term "cultural diplomacy" here not to signify the propagandistic dimensions often associated with it, but, following the U.S. State Department's definition, to encourage cultural relations: "'the direct and enduring contact between peoples of different nations' designed to 'help create a better climate of international trust and understanding in which official relations can operate,'" as cited in Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht & Mark C. Donfried, "The Model of Cultural Diplomacy: Power, Distance, and the Promise of the Civil Society," in Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 13.

27 *National Endowment for the Humanities, Seventeenth Annual Report* (1982), 74; and Patricia McFate, "Introduction," *Scandinavia Today National Calendar* (1982), 8. Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

28 The arrangements are outlined in "Informationsblad. 'Scandinavia Today' Efteråret 1982," dated January 1980. Archives of Nasjonalmuseet, Eb-0015, file N6, 1980–82, 2.

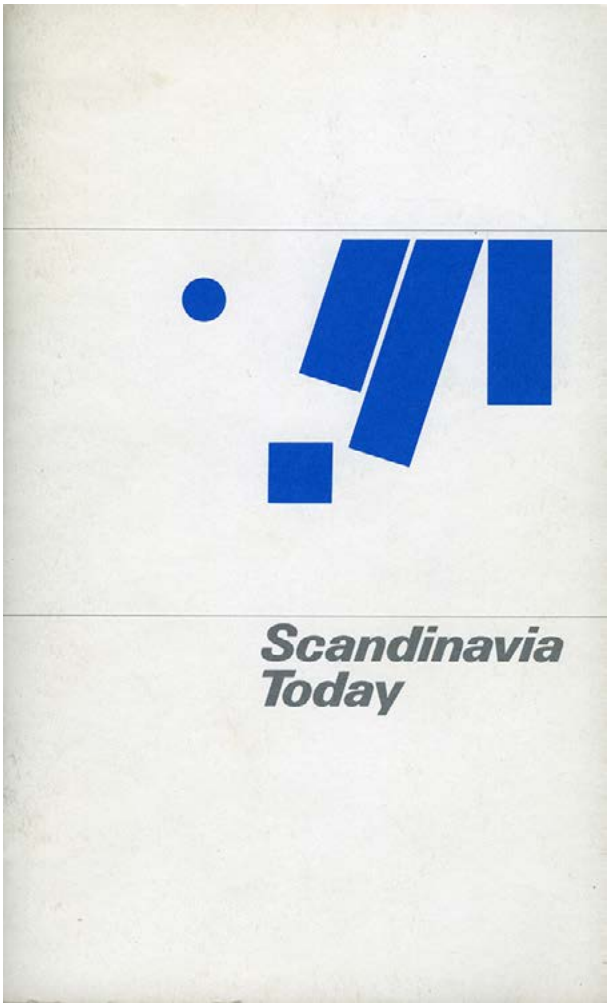

Image 5. Cover, *Scandinavia Today National Calendar*, New York, 1982. Courtesy of the Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York, all rights reserved.

foundation worked with the five national governments, a Steering Committee established by The Nordic Council of Ministers and the Secretariat for Nordic Cultural Cooperation, with major funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The foundation had been designated as the organizer of Scandinavia Today and Patricia McFate (d. 2014), who had served as Deputy Chairman of the NEH, was appointed to oversee the project. She became Executive Vice President of ASF in June 1981, and was elected President in May 1982.[29] Brooke Lappin, a renowned vanguard theater producer who had overseen the previous "Today" initiatives, was appointed as National Program Director for Scandinavia Today and Danish art historian Carl Tomas Edam, Secretary General of Scandinavia Today, served as a European facilitator. In addition, corporate sponsorship (literally) fueled the project with Volvo and Atlantic Richfield as the major sponsors, along with other entities.[30] All of these actors contributed to the contours and promotion of the exhibition and to its reputation.

Between 1982 and 1983, Scandinavia Today coordinated other major exhibitions in the US including *Sleeping Beauty – Art Now: Scandinavia Today*, an exhibition of contemporary art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in N.Y.; *The Frozen Image*, an exhibition of Nordic photography; *The Scandinavian Touch*, a textile exhibition that went on to be displayed in Helsinki; and *Scandinavian Modern 1880–1980,* a survey of modernist design. These ambitious exhibitions were among over 500 cultural programs presented year-long throughout the U.S., with five cities selected as central hubs – Washington, D.C; New York; Seattle, Washington; Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota; and Los Angeles, California, along with supporting regional cities Chicago, Illinois and Tacoma, Washington – and a host of other local organizing locations. Each city had a special planning committee coordinating lectures, films, TV broadcasts, concerts, and

29 Telex dated February 2, 1981, from David A. Swickard, President of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, to Niels Toft, Secretary General, Scandinavia Today, Nordisk Ministerråd. Archives of Nasjonalmuseet, Box Eb-0015, folder A6, 1980–82. I also thank Edward P. Gallagher, President and Chief Executive Officer of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, for an email message dated September 30, 2024, and Lynn Carter, Senior Advisor and Secretary to the Board, American-Scandinavian Foundation, for email messages dated of September 30 and October 7, 2024.

30 As noted in Varnedoe, *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting*, frontmatter, unpaginated colophon page.

performances that, taken together, strategically and successfully created a U.S. consciousness about various forms of Northern European visual and performative cultures.[31] One target audience was the Nordic émigré community, the members of which "care deeply about who will write the history of our times, who will recall their languages and dialects, and who will understand and remember what their parents and grandparents thought wise, beautiful, and significant."[32] Scandinavia Today was also conceived in light of contemporary cultural politics, with an emphasis on Norden's social democratic principles as articulated by Patricia McFate, the then-President of the American Scandinavian Foundation: "But the Northern light of Scandinavia may also be seen as a metaphor, an expression of humanitarianism which is central to society in the Nordic countries … the Scandinavian concern for human welfare."[33]

Generated at the beginning of the U.S. presidency of Jimmy Carter, the six planned "Today" partnerships mirrored that administration's late Cold-War view of America in the world as peacemaker. Scandinavia Today, held under the aegis of the newly elected administration of Ronald Reagan, with its cut-backs in social programs, was both a celebration of expressive culture and of social democratic values. McFate writes,

> It is no longer possible to live in isolation. We are all members of a single community [...]. We all know our world to be a complex and troubling one, one in which understanding is devoutly to be sought [...] And the Scandinavian countries know more than most about international friendship: the unique phenomenon known as Nordic cooperation will be a central theme of Scandinavia Today.[34]

Northern Light was therefore generated as much a cultural intermediary as a scholarly endeavor.

The Accidental Canon

Northern Light, organized with exceptional haste, was a last-minute replacement idea: At its start in 1979–1980, the exhibition was planned as a survey of *contemporary* art, hosted by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and curated by Jane Livingston (Associate Director and Chief Curator) and Pontus Hultén (Pompidou Center, Paris and then appointed Director, Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles).[35] For two intensive weeks in June 1980, Livingston and John Beardsley (Adjunct Curator) visited collections and artists' studios in the five Nordic countries, in consultation with Hultén. After their trip, Livingston and Beardsley recommended a change of plan:

> …neither of us has unqualified enthusiasm for presenting an exhibition of current Scandinavian art. The avant-garde aesthetic in the Nordic countries is still nascent [...] We also wonder if it is appropriate to present the work of contemporary Nordic artists in the U.S. before their regional antecedents are known here. There are many marvelous turn of the century Nordic painters who are unknown to the American art public, but who are respon-

31 In 1982, the American-Scandinavian Foundation reported that within three months of the opening of Scandinavia Today, over 1300 pages of newspaper clippings had been collected. *1982 Annual Report for the American-Scandinavian Foundation*, (New York, 1982), 4. Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

32 Patricia McFate, President, 1983 *Annual Report, American-Scandinavian Foundation*, New York, 1983, 4, Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

33 Patricia McFate, "President's Introduction," *1982 Annual Report, American-Scandinavian Foundation* (New York, 1982) 2. Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

34 Ibid., 8.

35 "Informationsblad. 'Scandinavia Today' Efteråret 1982," 3. Archives of Nasjonalmuseet, Eb-0015, folder N6, 1980-82.

> sible for introducing modernism to Scandinavia. [...] Perhaps the greatest service we could render to the American art public would be to exhibit Munch in the context of his excellent contemporaries. This would be a revelation to American audiences.[36]

The new concept – to focus on the years around 1900 – required a complete turn-around in orientation that led to major institutional and personnel changes.[37] For various reasons, the Corcoran Gallery relinquished its role as organizing institution, Jane Livingston left the project, and the newly conceived turn-of-the-century exhibition was assumed by The Brooklyn Museum in early summer 1981 (the agreement was signed on July 2 of that year).[38] Its working title was "Contemporaries of Edvard Munch."[39]

As late as May 22, 1981, the curatorship of the new turn-of-the-century exhibition was still undecided. However, Knut Berg, Director of the National Gallery in Oslo, who had met and admired Kirk Varnedoe while the latter had researched his Krohg article in Norway, recommended him.[40] Varnedoe was brought onto the project in the summer of 1981, signing his contract as late as July 26. The contract read in part, "While it is the intention of all concerned that the project deal with paintings from approximately 1880–1905 and focus on Realism and Symbolism, it is not intended to be an encyclopaedic overview of the period."[41] Sarah Faunce (1929–2018), Senior Curator at The Brooklyn Museum, was appointed institutional partner. She managed the processes at the museum, travelled with Varnedoe to collaborate on the selections, and she worked as the anchoring in-house co-curator with the caveat, as noted in Varnedoe's contract, that if there was any disagreement, Varnedoe would have the "final word." A checklist was to be completed by September 15, 1981, meaning that the exhibition theme and contents had to be constituted in under six weeks.

Nested Canons

Varnedoe travelled to the five countries between late July and September 8, 1981 and made nearly all the selections during that period.[42] His strategy was to make two "sweeps" of the museum collections in one trip, the first with a "naïve eye,"

36 Report on inter-Scandinavian travel by Jane Livingston and John Beardsley, June 12 – June 28, 1980 [Corcoran Gallery of Art letterhead], Archives of Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo, Eb-0015, folder N6 1980-1982. The proposal was also made to hold both exhibitions as "Contemporaries of Edvard Munch" and "Modern Art of Scandinavia," but the cost was prohibitive. Letter from Peter C. Marzio, Director of the Corcoran Gallery and School of Art to Brooke Lappin, dated August 19, 1980. Archives of Nasjonalmuseet, Eb-0015, folder N6, 1980–82.

37 Contemporary Nordic art was instead represented by *Sleeping Beauty – Art Now: Scandinavia Toda*y, one of three exhibitions held in 1982 under the title "Northern Visions" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

38 Michael Botwinick, Letter of Agreement dated July 2, 1981. Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

39 Niels Toft, General Secretary, The Nordic Steering Committee, Scandinavia Today, Nordisk Ministerråd, to Knut Berg, Nasjonalgalleriet, dated September 15, 1980. The titles "Turn of the Century Nordic Painters" and "Early Modernist Painters in Scandinavia" were listed as alternatives.

40 After learning that Dr. Livingston withdrew from the project, Michael Botwinick wrote to Knut Berg stating that the Corcoran Gallery of Art was still enthusiastic about hosting the exhibition (April 29, 1981). Three names were proposed as potential curators: Varnedoe, Carlton Overland (Elvejem Museum, Madison, Wisconsin), and Marion Nelson (University of Minnesota), which Knut Berg was requested to rank. Telex, from Brooke Lappin to Knut Berg dated May 18, 1981. Archives of Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo, Box Eb-0015, folder N6, 1980-82. On May 22, 1981, Berg recommended Varnedoe as his top candidate. Telex delivered via the U.N. Norwegian, Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

41 Contract dated July 26, 1981, signed by David A. Swickard, President of the American-Scandinavian Foundation on that date and by Kirk Varnedoe on July 27, 1981. Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

42 Undated telegram. Archives of the American Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

armed with reproductions of works sent to him by Nordic museum professionals. He then retraced his steps, accompanied by Sarah Faunce to review the collections with Nordic museum professionals and finalize the requests.[43] Knut Berg and Pontus Grate, Chief Curator of the National Swedish Art Museums in Stockholm, were instrumental in making introductions and securing loans.[44] Arrangements were made in haste: A letter of introduction from the Icelandic Embassy in Washington, D.C. requesting access for Varnedoe, for example, was dated July 21, 1981, citing Berg as a contact and the Nordic Council of Ministers and Secretariat for Nordic Cooperation as facilitators.[45] Berg's reputation, and his political authority with the cultural, economic, and political entities, ensured institutional cooperation with the American curator. Varnedoe arrived on July 28, assisted by rapidly prepared agendas of museum visits.[46]

43 Kirk Varnedoe, "History of an Exhibition," 15. Also see Telex from Varnedoe to Knut Berg, dated July 13, 1981. Archives of Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo, Box Eb-0015, folder A6, 1981–82.

44 For example, Pontus Grate was instrumental in securing the loan of Richard Bergh's *Nordisk Sommerkväll* (1899–1900) from the Gothenburg Art Museum. In a letter to Varnedoe dated March 16, 1982, he reported on the progress of the discussions, suggesting that the loan would hinge on the appointment of Björn Fredlund as the incoming museum director. Archives of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Collection 2008.M.60. That painting was among the most reproduced images in the promotion and reviews of the exhibition.

45 Blanket letter of introduction addressed "To whom it may concern," signed Hans G. Andersen, Ambassador to the US, Embassy of Iceland, Washington, D.C., dated July 21, 1981. Archives of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Collection 2008.M.60.

46 "Programme for the visit of Mr. K. Varnedoe to Iceland July 28-August 1' 1981," dated July 24, 1981, Archives of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Collection 2008.M.60.

By his own admission, Varnedoe initially knew very little about Nordic art and quickly developed his organizing structure while in transit, shaped by his instinct or insight that modernism had taken a unique path in the north. His idea, however, was one that has endured: that Nordic painting did not follow a normative "Parisian" teleology and expressed a particular set of tensions between cosmopolitanism and regional identity; that formal experimentation in the north, conditioned by local nationalisms, gave rise to a form of modernism in dialogue with but outside the circuit of Parisian vanguard production; and that Realism and Naturalism (as both social and aesthetic categories) merged with the *innerlichkeit* of Symbolist practice. He was interested in the ways in which locality – including social democracy, varying registers of industrialization, and emerging and contested forms of national and regional autonomy – intersected with internationalism. He also noted a particular aesthetic that emerged from the infusion of nature mysticism into the careful scrutiny of the local topography. Of course, the exhibition was full of blind spots – some – but not many – women were included – Greenland, Åland, and the Faroe Islands were invisible. Sápmi was not a consideration. Media outside of painting, other than one textile by Gustaf Fjæstad, were not included. In this, Varnedoe followed the path of long valorized material-based hierarchies and canons.

Varnedoe met with curators from the five national museums as well as from other museums in the Nordic countries, who, in turn, introduced him to private collectors and signaled other collections to visit. The Nordic curators saw particular works in their home countries as essential to national self-definition, importance, and communication – paintings that had been canonized for decades as representative of their nation's particularism from the latter nineteenth century. One initial list of suggested works, prepared by the National Museum in Oslo, offered an embarrassment of riches including four works by Harriet Backer,

five each by by Halfdan Egedius and Harald Sohlberg, and six by Edvard Munch, paintings held in the collections of the National Museum, Munch Museum, Bergen Art Museums, and private collections.[47] And in this way, during his visits to the five countries, Varnedoe assembled five separate checklists of potential works, compiled on the recommendation of each nation's scholar-curators. In short, as he had alerted his hosts at the outset, he began to reach into five separate national canons as determined by local experts to assemble them into what he considered an integrative theme and unified exhibition.[48] Knut Berg later commented on Varnedoe's singular, lightning-speed capacity for decision making as he moved through galleries and storage rooms.[49]

While examining the works recommended by the local experts, the American curator also noted paintings that were seen to be of secondary importance to some of the curators, such as *The Daughter on the Farm* (1902) by the Swede Carl Wilhelmson. He did not include some "representative" works for the exhibition, such as those by the Norwegian Erik Werenskiold or the Swede Helmer Osslund. Varnedoe also rejected Saga and history painting as being anachronistic. Some of the paintings he might have wished to borrow could not travel, such as those by Jens Ferdinand Willumsen. As the checklist assumed firm contours, and loan letters went out, Varnedoe was occasionally invited to rethink the inclusions. Particular concern was expressed by Danish professionals that the selections from their nation were not comparable to those of the other countries.[50] While the other countries had agreed to the loan requests, Denmark's museums were the last to commit works to the exhibition for conservation or other reasons, a dynamic that became a controversy and was briefly perceived as a potential boycott.[51] This is all to say that while presented with five assemblies of what had been considered each nation's canonical works, the American curator at times "misunderstood" local signaling and instead was seen as assembling a non-canonical selection from the five national recommendations. Some of the museums offered diachronic selections in parallel, national teleologies of the later nineteenth century for the purposes of cohesion and international edification; Varnedoe opted

47 Typed list, Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, n.d., Archives of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Collection 2008.M.60.

48 Varnedoe, "History of an Exhibition," 15.

49 Knut Berg, Personal communication, based on the author's dissertation notes from 1984.

50 Draft Minutes of the Nordic Steering Committee, Nordic Council of Ministers, March 26, 1982. Ref. no. 359-1-4, 1. Archives of Nasjonalmuseet, Box Eb-0015, file Ng, 1980-82. Lars Rostrap Bøyesen, Director of the Statens Museum for Kunst, also voiced concern about The Brooklyn Museum as a venue, considering it to be peripheral to the main museum culture in New York. Letter from Rostrap Bøyesen to Knut Berg, Salme Sarajas-Korte, Pontus Grate, and Karl Kristjonsdottir, dated July 17, 1981. Archives of Nasjonalmuseet, Box Eb-005, folder N6, 1980–82.

51 A letter from Lars Rostrup-Bøyesen assures Carl Tomas Edam that the lateness of his and other Danish correspondence did not signal a boycott of the exhibition, but rather reflected the sum total of institutional complexities within the museums as well as larger concerns of conservation (Letter dated January 28, 1982). Archives of Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, Box Eb-0016, folder N6 "Northern Light" Scandinavia Today, 1981–83. Rostrup-Bøyesen was responding to a particularly contentious article for which he had been interviewed, published in *Politiken,* that castigated Varnedoe for requesting loans without first inquiring about their ability to travel, in which the author characterized him as "an extremely determined and picky man" who refused to accept substitutes. Henrik Bach, "Museer afviser at udlåne kostbarheder: Nordisk udstilling i USA kommer i klemme," *Politiken*, 9 September 1982. Rostrup-Bøyesen offered to substitute works from the Statens Museum for those that could not travel from the Hirschsprung Collection and other museums in several missives, including the above letter to Carl Tomas Edam dated January 28, 1982.

for a synchronic and integrative theme.[52] In the creation of a cohesive theme, the exhibition interrupted and bent the trajectories of the five national stories into a multi-country narrative of "Realism into Symbolism," based on taste and scholarly conviction, precisely Pierre Lübecker's criticism.

Border Disputes

An initial checklist was produced in September 1981. It underwent some modification as Varnedoe did further research, and as conservation or other logistical issues arose.[53] This assembly of works was also affected to some small extent by cultural diplomacy: In the months following his research trip, Varnedoe made several pitches to diplomats and to the corporate sponsors. As his assistant and slide projectionist, I was present when queries and national disagreements were aired. To be honest, I do not remember precisely who was in the room at each turn, but I do recall the outlines of some diplomatic conversations regarding numerical inclusion: Representatives of Denmark wanted the same number of paintings in the exhibition as Sweden. Norway wanted as many paintings as the other two. Finland wanted the same number of paintings as the other three. Iceland, given its later emergence as a so-called national school in the period 1880–1910, seemed more or less in agreement with its inclusions. A manifest purpose of the exhibition was to examine cross-fertilization and intercultural relations among the artists and institutions of the turn of the last century, and to secondarily demonstrate the reflexivity of Nordic art with French and German fin-de-siècle painting, in other words, to suggest both regionalisms and cosmopolitanism. Instead, one event that I remember well was a political negotiation about primacy and representation: Which country had the oldest academies? Who had the deepest collections? Who deserved to be on the posters, on the catalogue cover, on the landing wall, etc. Given that it was the task of the cultural representatives to see after the best interests of their five home countries, the diplomatic session seemed as much a border dispute by proxy than a collaboration. At another of Varnedoe's presentations, to the potential funders, a parallel set of concerns about visibility ensued among national business interests. Consequently, Varnedoe negotiated the contours of the exhibition to a very small extent within the competing interests in the name of diplomatic harmony.

To summarize so far, *Northern Light* only came into being when the previous idea for Scandinavia Today, a pan-Nordic contemporary survey exhibition, was set aside. The research for the *Northern Light* exhibition activated five national collections and thus five national canons, five national projects as implicated in painting. The Nordic curators, with a view to their nations' patrimony, offered what they believed to be both important and typical. Representatives of the consular and economic interests were concerned with their international visibility vis-a-vis one another and put some minor pressure on the contents of the show. In the end, the checklist

52 Varnedoe, "History of an Exhibition," 15. Varnedoe later also reflected that "the Nordic Council more or less gave me free hand, and you had these five different nations, all of whom had an academic canon of who their local heroes were, and whose national identities were built up in sort of fierce opposition to Sweden's to Norway's, Norway's to Sweden, Denmark's to – so to get them all together on one thing was odd – it was against the grain – and to allow me to demote some of their heroes and raise some people they didn't think so much of, in order to produce a coherent show [...] [that] rode a particular hobby horse I was riding, actually, at the moment; which was, that the American vision of progress in modern art is so Francocentric, and so Parisocentric, that you feel the baton being passed from Manet, to the broken brushwork of Monet and Impressionism, and then, after that, to [Georges] Seurat and Cézanne. Then comes symbolism, then comes Munch." Kirk Varnedoe in conversation with Sharon Zane, The Museum of Modern Art Oral History Program (28 November 2001): 38. https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/archives/transcript_varnedoe.pdf

53 Early checklists with hand modifications are in the Archives of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Collection 2008.M.60.

represented a negotiation among nations, aesthetics, and global prestige. One government office, quoted by Varnedoe in the Gothenburg catalogue stated, "When we try to sell a product abroad, we don't send out something that foreigners should want, but instead we send out what they say they want. Business is better that way."[54] In other words, the business interests were concerned with satisfying American tastes.

The Horizon of Expectation

What this unnamed business person said – to send out what customers say they want – constitutes what literary critic Hans Robert Jauss termed the "horizon of expectation," the pre-supposition of the rightness of a body of work, the framework of a generational understanding.[55] But what could Americans understand of Nordic art in 1982? Norden was itself, from the popular U.S. perspective, already steeped in exotic borealism, was a place of ice, forests, and polar bears. Prior to 1982, if North American art audiences thought about historical Nordic art at all, other than Vikings or Munch (the manifest focus of Scandinavia Today's "turn-of-the-century" concept), it was in part in the wake of the large and much-lauded Munch exhibition entitled "Edvard Munch: Symbols and Images," held at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. in 1978 and that traveled as a smaller exhibition, "The Masterworks of Edvard Munch," to New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1979.[56] But it was also due to the primary English-language text available, *Scandinavian Art Illustrated*, a joint venture published in 1922 by the American Scandinavian Foundation. Organized into three separate sections – Norway, Sweden and Denmark – the book traced the parallel national genealogies of art and architecture. There were other English language publications prior to the early 1980s, but very few. Consequently, this book served as the authority.

This 600-page survey was a greatly elaborated version of an exhibition that had toured the U.S. in 1912. In that year, the American Scandinavian Foundation, newly founded as an organization facilitating educational and cultural exchange, organized an exhibition of art from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. The "Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art," a survey of Post-Impressionist, Symbolist, and early Expressionist works by living artists, opened in New York City and traveled to Buffalo, N.Y.; Toledo, Ohio; Chicago, Illinois; and Boston, Massachusetts. The exhibition was anchored by Christian Brinton (1870–1942), one of New York City's more prominent art critics. In turn, Brinton tasked three curators, each representing one of the Scandinavian nations, to make their internal selections.[57] Each curator bore the responsibility to reflect his national contemporary art scene and provide an explanatory essay for the catalogue. But each one interpreted "contemporary" in a different manner, impelled by aesthetics, ideology, and social and cultural affinity.

Karl Madsen (1855–1938), director of Denmark's Statens Museum for Kunst, himself a painter, critic, and art historian, painstakingly wove an intricate story of triumph over Danish academic constraints in genre and facture. Madsen's short essay in the exhibition catalogue identified modesty and honesty as virtues embedded in the Danish character and in its art, and he

54 Varnedoe, "Northern Light – historien om en utställning," in *Nordiskt Ljus*, 8.

55 The term is a central concept in reception theory as articulated in Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 28.

56 *Edvard Munch: Symbols and Images*, curated by Reinhold Heller, created its own canon of Munch's works, as well as a new canonical catalogue format in the Munch literature. See Patricia G. Berman & Reinhold Heller, "Munch utenfor Norges Grenser," in *Exit! Historier fra Munchmuseet 1963-2019*, ed. Elisabeth Byre (Oslo: Munchmuseet, 2019), 153–179.

57 On the exhibition and its structure and rhetoric, see Berman, as in footnote 12.

emphasized cultural coherence and continuity and not modernist radicalism. The Swede Carl Laurin (1868–1940), the author of several books about Swedish painting and a player in the building of Sweden's art infrastructure, exclusively put forward artists from the 1880s and 1890s generation and excluded the "Frenchified" younger artists. These cosmopolitan Swedish painters associated with the Artists' Union in turn boycotted the exhibition. The resulting Swedish section favored panoramic views of the deep forests and luminous twilit skies associated with National Romanticism. Laurin, in fact, branded Sweden through his selections as a mystical realm of belonging, of rootedness. He wrote in the catalogue "The Swedish people are [...] the true children who have refreshed themselves, with almost religious ardour, at the maternal breasts of nature."[58]

In contrast, the Norwegian Jens Thiis (1870–1942), who was allied with internationalist tendencies in his native Norway, favored works that intertwined with continental vanguard art, locally interpreted. Narrating Norway's endurance of its integrity through four centuries of cultural affiliation with Denmark and then Sweden, Thiis wrote an evolutionary history in the catalogue emphasizing the cultural roots within Norway's youthful art world, and he used Edvard Munch as a dividing line between optically inspired art and " a purely personal interpretation" of the world that left its mark on the younger artists.[59] Taken together, the three sections of the exhibition catalogue asserted distinctive national characteristics.

Brinton wrote the introductory essay to the catalogue narrating instead an essentializing and troubling organic attachment to nature inherent in the Scandinavian body and spirit, characterizing his subjects with a marked degree of hyperbole that clashed with the restrained, scholarly, historical voices of the three Scandinavian curators.[60] Stating that the Scandinavian artists had an "inalienable racial heritage," he emphasized the "virility," and "the possession of a spontaneous, unspoiled esthetic patrimony," that they were "intrepid sea rovers" and "rugged sons of mountain and fjord." [61] His characterizations were significantly toned down in the 1922 book, but the sturdiness, isolation, and elemental "aesthetic physiognomy" of Scandinavians, their "virile, organic nationalism," remained.[62] As art historian Andrew J. Walker has emphasized, central to Christian Brinton's understanding of art was the imbrication of individual endeavor into a national and racial inheritance, an idea that Brinton deployed in all of his curatorial endeavors.[63]

Such characterizations framed the art of such people as original, authentic, spontaneous, and atavistic expressions of a modern spirit distinctly different from, and "purer" than, that of America. In fact, the exhibition, and later the book, constituted, for him, an opportunity to educate American tastes, and to push back against America's supposed degeneration: "It is the typical expression of a race whose civilization is young, yet whose roots lie deep-anchored in

58 Carl G. Laurin, "The Art of Sweden," in *Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art* (New York: The American Art Gallery and the American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1912), 30.

59 Jens Thiis, "The Art of Norway," in *Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art* (New York: The American Art Gallery and the American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1912), 51.

60 Christian Brinton, "Introduction," in Carl Laurin, Emil Hannover & Jens Thiis, *Scandinavian Art Illustrated* (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation; London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1922), 16, 21ff.

61 Christian Brinton, "Introduction," in *Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art*, 18, 12, 22, 12, and 16.

62 Brinton, *Scandinavian Art Illustrated* 14, 34.

63 Andrew J. Walker, "Critic, Curator, Collector: Christian Brinton and the Exhibition of National Modernism in America, 1910-1945," PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1999, 7.

the past, and whose present is the direct product of certain definite, pre-natal conditions. And not only does the racial factor enter largely into this work, but back of it looms a still more sovereign source of strength. The marked unity of tone – that blond clarity so characteristic of the North."[64]

The notion of the northern atavist as a "pure" human spirit, was, of course, embedded in the distortions of nineteenth-century racist sciences and social theory.[65] In the 1850s, the French anthropologist Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882) had posited separate human races with "Aryans" at the top of his proposed racial hierarchy, a category that Russian-French anthropologist Joseph Deniker (1852–1918) later recast as "la race nordique."[66] In the U.S., Madison Grant's scurrilous and highly influential book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) adopted Deniker's term "Nordicism" as the pinnacle of a racialized population hierarchy and the apogee of human endeavor. According to Grant, both in his book, and in his articles of the earlier 1910s, "the Nordic race [...] is the white man par excellance," and is "all over the world, a race of soldiers, sailors, adventurers, and explorers, but above all, of rulers, organizers, and aristocrats [...]"[67] This hierarchical racialization, associated with the Scandinavian peninsula and other parts of northern Europe, was a response in the U.S. to the large wave of Irish, Italian, and Eastern Europeans who had emigrated to the United States in the prior three decades.[68]

When the Scandinavian exhibition opened in New York in 1912, its reception had already been inflected by scientific racism, and by the growing body of Nordicist social theorists. The horizon of expectations at that time implicated Nordic art in the Nordic body and, reaching back to Tacitus and citing Hippolyte Taine, to an organic and mystical oneness with nature. As Brinton wrote in the 1912 catalogue and in the 1922 book, "You will fail to grasp the spirit of Northern painting if you are not in some degree familiar with the conformation of the country and the composition of the light that slants obliquely upon shimmering fjord or sparse upland pasture [...] and it should be apparent to any observant persons that these divergences are in large part due to circumstances of race, clime, and climate."[69]

In the U.S., in the second half of the twentieth century, the term "Nordic" carried the shameful and horrific associations with this body of pseudoscience and its Nazi appropriation. At the time of Varnedoe's travels, the title of the exhibition, *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880–1910,* had yet to be determined, identified only by the descriptor "turn of the century";[70] the title was established only after the selections were made and was determined by Varnedoe upon his fascination with the luminous summer nights, in consultation with

64 Ibid., 25.

65 Two excellent books trace the history of this fictive notion both of purity and superiority: Jon Røyne Kyllingstad, *Rase – En Vitenskapshistorie* (Oslo: Cappelin Damm, 2023); and his *Measuring the Master Race: Physical Anthropology in Norway, 1890–1945* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2014), https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0051. On the construction and embeddedness in the United States of the notion of European northernness as an embodiment of racial purity, see Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

66 Arthur de Gobineau, *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* [1853–55], (London: William Heinemann, 1915).

67 Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race, or the Racial Basis of European History*, [1916], (New York: Scribners, 1923), 27 and 228, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/68185/68185-h/68185-h.htm#Page_167.

68 Hamilton Cravens, "Scientific Racism in Modern America, 1870s–1990s," *Prospects* 21 (1996), 471, as cited in Walker, "Critic, Curator, Collector: Christian Brinton and the Exhibition of National Modernism in America, 1910–1945," 6.

69 Brinton, *Scandinavian Art Illustrated*, 11.

70 Typed list, Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, n.d., Archives of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Collection 2008.M.60.

his Nordic museum colleagues.[71] "Scandinavia" refers to the Scandinavian peninsula, constituting Norway, Sweden, and northern Finland. "Nordic" or "Norden" is a geographic designation for Denmark, Finland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Åland, Norway, Iceland, and Sweden. Although "Nordic" would have been a more accurate geographic and cultural moniker than "Scandinavian" in the title and marketing of *Northern Light,* "Scandinavia" carried positive associations in contrast to the tainted "Nordicism" of Deniker's and Grant's (and Nazi) theories.[72] The Swedish exhibition title *Nordiskt ljus* or "Nordic Light" was not subject to the same American racializing associations.

I reach back to the 1912 exhibition catalogue and the elaborated book of 1922 to suggest that the title of *Northern Light* was itself the subject of negotiation and cultural translation from the naming of geography to the avoidance of white nativist ideology. I also make the case that prior to 1981, in the U.S. and the Anglophone world, Brinton's volume was among the very few primary survey resources in English.

"If only we could read Finnish/ Swedish/Danish/Norwegian/ Icelandic"

Initially, following a meeting of representatives of the five national museums, it was determined that "[N]o need was seen to make a prestigious catalogue."[73] Yet when a catalogue was planned for the exhibition, based in part on the model of the "Belgium Today" catalogue, *Belgian Art: 1880–1914* (The Brooklyn Museum, 1980).[74] Returning from his whirlwind trip to the Nordic countries in autumn 1981, Varnedoe taught a seminar on "Scandinavian Painting" at New York University to accomplish the ambitious plan for the catalogue, a quick switch from a planned course on Auguste Rodin. Selecting eight of us to populate the seminar, Varnedoe tasked us to write exhibition catalogue entries for the paintings. None of us knew one thing *at all* about Nordic art, culture, or politics at the outset. He asked me to prepare a preliminary bibliography of political, literary, and social history readings to be assembled for the seminar; this we studied and expanded. Varnedoe later prepared for the catalogue research by contacting George C. Schoolfield, Professor of Germanic and Scandinavian Studies at Yale University, at the time the leading literary scholar of Nordic literature in North America, who shared his reading lists.[75] We, the graduate students, reached for the comprehensive 1922 book, which seemed to be the canon.

One of the challenges we all face when working with material largely published in local languages is the translation wall that precludes deep international scholarship. A lack of robust work in translation, or the inability of international audiences to read one language or another, inevitably privileges whichever few sources are readily available and turns them – good or bad – into the canon. If local scholarship has not made it into hegemonic language circulation, the subjects of that language, and the geographies outside of agreed-upon canonical spaces

71 Kirk Varnedoe, telefax to Carl Tomas Edam in response to Lübecker's review in *Politiken*, May 20, 1983, Archives of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

72 See for example Johannes Hendrikus Burgers, "Max Nordau, Madison Grant, and Racialized Theories of Ideology," in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72, no. 1 (January 2011), 119-140.

73 Telegram from the Det Kgl. Utenriksdepartement, Norway, to Uffe Himmelstrup, Danish Embassy, Washington, dated October 8, 1980. Archives of Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, Box Eb-0015, folder E6, 1980–82.

74 Letter from Brooke Lappin, Scandinavia Today, to H. E. Knut Hedemann, Norwegian Ambassador to the United States, July 6, 1981. Archives of Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo, Box Eb-0015, folder E6, 1980–82.

75 George C. Schoolfield to Jeffrey Weiss, November 11, 1982, included reading lists for Scandinavian 462a, and Scandinavian 151, "Decadence in the North," Yale University, Archives of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Collection 2008.M.60.

of study (such as Parisian modernism), are of course invisible. What *is* available frames the horizon of expectation among scholars outside the national circuits, extending the selections, tastes, and ideologies of the published authors.

And this was surely the case with that 1922 book by Brinton, Thiis, Laurin, and Emil Hannover (1864–1923), now a co-author in place of Karl Madsen's earlier participation in the 1912 exhibition.[76] While the absolute spuriousness of Brinton's writings was clear to us graduate students who wrote for Varnedoe's catalogue, the overall emphasis on wild nature, light as a psychic force, and even the discourse of endurance, entered our naïve consciousness. We all had to unlearn some of what the available literature stated, and to parse the personal tastes of Thiis, Laurin, and Hannover. Varnedoe was assertive in calling out the racializing discourses in the earlier writings, adding to our reading lists such studies as Fritz Stern's *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (1974). The curators and scholars in the five Nordic countries patiently wrote and forwarded short catalogue entries to use as the bases for our own admittedly nascent interpretive work,[77] and they forwarded publications in the Nordic languages as well as French and German. Several culturally sophisticated translators in New York corrected some of our misunderstandings. Nonetheless, certain areas of determinism and all of the blind spots from the English publications became ours.

And this is surely the case, now, with *Northern Light*. Bolstered by the English-language books, articles, and exhibition catalogues in its wake or that cite it as an authority – the exhibition catalogue and subsequent expansion into books continue to be much-used references in the Anglophone art world. The *Northern Light* model has been consequential to the ways in which Nordic art has entered American museums as well as to the display of that art, creating its own "horizon of expectation." This is not at all to say that the contents of *Northern Lights* lacked authority. Varnedoe's scholarly voice and aesthetic choices have continued integrity. Only that it is worth contexualizing the circumstances of its production and its authors' frames of reference, to recognize the strengths and limitations of an "outsider" view, and to note the mutual effects of textual availability, museumification, and canonization.

Rapid Canonization

All of this is to say that the contents of *Northern Light* were first and foremost the result of Kirk Varnedoe's taste and intellectual lenses. Varnedoe's frame of reference had been arbitrated in part by local scholars, each of whom had

76 A hand-written reserve list (by the author in 1981) for the seminar includes seven books about Nordic painting, with the Laurin, Thiis, Hannover, and Brinton volume at its top. The others were *The Art of Norway, 1750–1914* (Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, 1978); *L'art Suedois depuis 1880* (Musée de Jeu de Paume, Paris,1929); Vagn Paulsen, *Danish Painting and Sculpture* (Copenhagen: Det Danske Selskab, 1979); *Post-Impressionism: Crossroads in European Painting* (London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1979); *Edvard Munch: Symbols and Images* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1978); *The Masterworks of Edvard Munch* (MoMA, 1979), and Franz Servaes, *Anders Zorn* (Berlin: Verlag von Velhagen & Klasing, 1910). Archives of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Collection 2008.M.60. *Edvard Munch*, ex. cat. (Museum of Modern Art, 1951) was also available for our research. Anyone reading this footnote recognizes how spotty it was, even in 1981.

77 The scholars who provided significant research direction, provided texts, and shared writing credits for the catalogue entries with the graduate students at New York University were: Görel Cavalli-Björkman and Pontus Grate (National Swedish Art Museums, Stockholm); Björn Fredlund (Gothenburg Art Museum); Salme Sarajas-Korte (Fine Arts Academy, Finland); Kasper Monrad (Statens Museum, Copenhagen); Bera Nordal (National Gallery of Iceland); and Magne Malmanger, Tone Skedsmo, and Oscar Thue (Nasjonalgaleriet, Oslo).

in mind the most representative works of their respective nations; each offered a personal and national canon. The national endowments and the consular representatives participated in the realization of the exhibition as a form of public diplomacy and the exercise of soft power. The American-Scandinavian Foundation embraced the exhibition as a culturally instructive endeavor. Nordic corporations saw the exhibition as a form of nation branding. The public information department of The Brooklyn Museum, which published the *Northern Light* catalogue, as well as the promotions staff at the other American museums centered works by Munch as a touchstone (such as on the cover of the original *Northern Light* catalogue), emphasized the biomystical dimension of the exhibition's works.[78] Members of the press corps invoked the pervasive stereotype of those large, sturdy denizens of the far north, playing out their lives in the mystical light of the north. Consequently, the genesis and realization of the exhibition was a collective affair.

The reception of *Northern Light* was beyond any of our expectations. A reviewer in the *Washington Post* wrote that:

> Nothing has prepared us for the astonishing exhibit that goes on view tomorrow at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. "Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting 1880–1910," is so good that it is scary. It will leave the viewer shaken. It will shake his insular, comfortable assumptions about early modern painting. It will expand his list of masters. It will also show him ghosts.[79]

The rapid canonization of the *Northern Light* model can be attributed to a number of factors, including the timing of the exhibition: At a moment when historians of nineteenth-century art were emerging to consider the possibility of multiple modernisms (which is to say at the time within Europe), the exhibition offered an alternative voice to a French teleology of modernism. Canonization also always has implications for the marketplace,[80] and the overheated art market of the 1980s embraced the "new" material.[81] In no way did *Northern Light* single-handedly open new vistas for collecting, but within the Anglophone world, it presented works not so much seen outside of their home countries: Michelle Facos noted that Sotheby's and Christie's held their first auctions of Nordic art in the late 1980s in the wake of *Northern Light* and its 1980s European progeny, the leading edge of a boom that lasted until the early 1990s, and that continues today:[82] The initially modest prices of Nordic works, such as those by Vilhelm Hammershøi, have literally skyrocketed: In 1981, an indemnification estimate for Hammershøi's *Interior with Piano and Woman in Black* (1901, Ordrupgaardsamlingen, Copenhagen) for *Northern Light's* tour was $21,135.[83] In 1990,

78 The Press Release for the exhibition emphasizes the summer night, nature mysticism, and the intertwining notions of melancholy and sensitivity to climate that were emphasized in the general press coverage, such as that cited in footnote 78.

79 Paul Richard, "Spirits from the Dark: Scandinavia's Haunting Art at the Corcoran," *The Washington Post* (September 8, 1982). https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1982/09/10/spirits-from-the-dark/fc15dab8-73e6-4bcd-b220-93f151eb55f8/

80 Anna Brzyski, "Introduction: Canons and Art History," in *Partisan Canons*, ed. Anna Brzyski (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–26.

81 The "Editors of *ARTnews*" offer a quick glimpse of the 1980s art market in "115 Years: The Manic Market of the Go-Go '80s," January 9, 2018, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/115-years-manic-market-go-go-80s-9614/

82 Facos, "Dawning of Northern Light," 55.

83 Telex from Carl Tomas Edam to Brooke Lappin, "List of Works to Lend," dated September 29, 1981, Archives of the American Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

a similar motif by the same artist, *The Music Room, 30 Strandgate* (minus the image of his wife, Ida Ilsted), sold at Christie's, London, for $130,720.[84] That painting, now in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, achieved the price of $9,124,350 in 2023 at Sotheby's, New York.[85] The echo effect among these sales, exhibitions, and projects has established an audience for Nordic cultural production that had heretofore been nascent in North America and that can still be gauged by exhibitions in the U.S. and the growing number of museums that endeavor to collect modern Nordic art. Exhibited in permanent public collections and on loan to traveling exhibitions, appearing in important sales, and reproduced in art catalogues and survey books, works allied with paintings introduced in *Northern Light* have developed their own forcefields.

In the Nordic countries, the syncretic model likewise began to reshape national art histories, making the painting of the 1890s legible to scholars who had not interrogated it with any conviction for some decades. As Facos has also observed, the art of the 1890s, paintings associated with National Romanticism, had become a mild embarrassment among Nordic intellectuals, especially Swedes, by the 1920s. Viewed as retrograde in comparison with the later waves of Expressionist and other modernist works, they appeared as too local and provincial.[86] In the wake of World War II, the notion of rootedness in the soil, Facos observed, had become strongly associated with Fascism for post-war scholars to emphasize. With a view from outside, Varnedoe was, in Facos's words, "liberated from the assumptions of the local scholars and institutions."[87] Bringing late romantic imagery into focus, *Northern Light* began to rehabilitate National Romanticism or New Romanticism for a reassessment and offered them as essential pathways to modernism. Although it is hard to see from the perspective of the 2020s, Varnedoe reached into an archive of material awaiting reactivation.

German Cultural historian Aleida Assmann has observed differences between a canon – which actively circulates memory through repetition and thus keeps the past present – and an archive – which "passively stored cultural memory, preserving the past as the past […] dispersed and largely disregarded."[88] Objects in a canon, she writes, are in motion; objects in an archive are "silent and forgotten, but always hold the potential for activation." The acts of curating, collecting, reproduction, and display are active forms of animating cultural memory. Michael Camille emphasized, too, that a canon is not so much composed of objects *per se*, but of representations. Reproductions are important elements

84 March 29, 1990. Lot 78, Christie's, London, 80,000 pounds ($130,720).

85 May 16, 2023, Lot 106, Sotheby's, New York, U.S. $9,124,350: Price as cited on Artsy.net : https://www.artsy.net/auction-result/7119061 (read January 20, 2024). It is currently in the permanent collection the Art Institute of Chicago.

86 Facos, "Dawning of Northern Light," 61, writes: "Nordic intellectuals from the 1910s until the 1980s viewed most of their turn-of-the-century art as embarrassingly provincial, with the notable exceptions of Edvard Munch in Norway, Helene Schjerfbeck in Finland, and Vilhelm Hammershøi in Denmark. Considering the popularity in Sweden of artists like Carl Larsson, Bruno Liljefors, and Anders Zorn, this may seem hard to believe. Nonetheless, for decades Swedish intellectuals avoided the National Romantic era because it seemed tainted by chauvinistic parochialism, a judgment that has been revised only in the past two decades."

87 Ibid., 60.

88 Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive," in Cultural *Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 103.

in the processes of canonicity.[89] Assmann notes that the constituents of a canon are marked by three qualities:

> …selection, value, and duration. (Selection presupposes decisions and power struggles; ascription of values endows these objects with an aura and a sacrosanct status; duration in cultural memory is [...] instead independent of historical change and immune to the ups and downs of social taste [...]). This constant interaction with the small selection of artifacts keeps them in active circulation and maintains for this small segment of the past a continuous presence.[90]

She also notes that cultural forgetting marks the dynamics of the canon and the archive, and that the continuous process of forgetting is part of "social normality."[91] Through action, such as the destruction of objects and images, or through passive means, such as changes in taste or use, objects, images, and texts fall "out of frames of attention," and become nascent.[92]

The paintings of the Nordic countries, actively collected and displayed in museums and collections largely in those nations prior to 1982, can hardly be considered to constitute an archive of the forgotten. However, to the scholarly community in the U.S., Nordic art was, in a sense, unclaimed marginalia on the periphery of Europe. That began to change quickly in the 1980s and 1990s: As noted, several exhibitions were assembled in the years just after *Northern Light,* each one setting the record straight yet mirroring most of Varnedoe's selections. Varnedoe issued an expanded Norwegian-language version of his catalogue as a book in 1987, published by Stenersen Forlag in Oslo under the title *Nordisk Gullalder-Kunst*, this time including a few artists and works either previously overlooked or unavailable, such as those by Willumsen.[93] In the following year, Yale University Press published an English version of the Stenersen volume entitled *Northern Light: Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century*. Reviewing the Yale volume in *The New York Times*, the American Munch scholar Reinhold Heller noted that it introduced unknown artists and works to international audiences, but that Varnedoe's "binding aesthetic" at times suppressed national differences. However, particularly salutary was the curator's "effort to weigh and balance what he calls 'progressive' artistic manifestations with the 'regressive' ideological implications of the adulation of Nordicness, primitive life, vitalism, emotion and a vague mysticism tinged with revived Northern paganism is highly commendable and deserves further, more detailed study."[94] In this way, *Northern Light* provided an important, and at the time updated, corrective to the 1922 book that we (the graduate students) all needed to digest and from which we had to seek critical distance.

89 Michael Camille, "Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters," in "Rethinking the Canon," *The Art Bulletin*, 78, no. 2 (June 1996), 198.

90 Assmann, "Canon and Archive," 100.

91 Ibid., 97.

92 Ibid., 98.

93 *Gullalde*r, or the "Golden Age," like "Northern Light" is another arena of myth making. The moniker "Golden Age" is always granted retrospectively, nostalgically, to a time and a place deemed to be more authentic, exemplary, and coherent than the present moment, articulating the desire for a "past perfect" in a period of instability. A Golden Age is therefore a device for both amplifying desired antecedents to the present moment and forgetting disturbing circumstances. In Denmark, the term was applied to early nineteenth-century Danish poetry by a literary critic and it increasingly came, in the 1960s, to signify, and even brand, nineteenth-century Danish painting. Finnish art of the late nineteenth century constitutes its "Golden Age," a term that was applied across the Nordic countries in Varnedoe's expansion of the *Northern Ligh*t catalogue, *Nordisk Gullalderkunst* (Northern Light), trans. Ingrid Askeland (Oslo: JM Stenersens Forlag, 1987).

94 Reinhold Heller, "Painters from the Midnight Sun," *The New York Times*, Section 7 (August 21, 1988), 13. https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/21/books/painters-from-the-midnight-sun.html (read February 15, 2024).

More exhibitions ensued in the Nordic nations, especially monographic exhibitions of artists from the 1880s and 1890s long overlooked,[95] survey books were rewritten, international curators took interest, and even now, according to a few Nordic scholars, the interpretive frame that *Northern Light* built more or less still stands. In fact, the forty-year focus on the 1890s, with all of that real and rhetorical light, has blinded art historians to Nordic art produced in the decades that followed.[96]

Upon reading Pierre Lübecker's review of, and his scepticism about, the American curator, Varnedoe responded:

> The exhibition's purpose was to reflect the unity of the five nations who sponsored it, the specific mandate given to the organizers was to select groups of works which spoke of the cultural currents shared by those countries – rather than simply assembling five separate national schools as had been customary [...] Might he admit the possibility that there are disadvantages inherent in local politics, and problems having to do with conventional ways of understanding the art of one's own nation, that might obscure and impede a clear vision of some aspects of Scandinavian art?[97]

How quickly a project can become canonized, can become a frame of reference, can become viral. With its origins as an exercise in cultural diplomacy and an ambitious component of a vast network of Nordic activities in the U.S., its birth as an abandoned contemporary survey, and its assembly remarkably accomplished in months, *Northern Light* was offered to the curator as he queried the narrative of nineteenth-century art. Reaching into national collections that had been "outside of the frame of attention," the exhibition animated materials that have since become part of the larger nineteenth-century canon. The organizers of Scandinavia Today, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the consular representatives, the American-Scandinavian Foundation, the graduate students, and the Nordic and American curators engaged in a task that they could not have predicted would serve as the starting point for their, and later, scholarly interventions. Through critique, emulation, reproduction, and its outsized presence in the English-language literature, *Northern Light* became an accidental canon. Its durability has prompted scholars worldwide to query and trouble the Nordic contribution to the larger European canon.[98] The process of reverse engineering enables us to look back at how and why we hold the beliefs we do and whose taste and ideas, whose assertions of soft power, whose marketing, and whose texts form the membrane through which our research flows.

95 See Facos, Dawning of Northern Light, 63–64.

96 See for example MaryClaire Pappas, "Making Modern Viewers: Painting in Norway and Sweden, 1908–1918," PhD diss., Indiana University, 2022, 23–24.

97 Kirk Varnedoe to *Politiken*, telefax dated May 20, 1983. Archives of the American Scandinavian Foundation, New York.

98 See for example recent projects generated by Nordic institutions: "The Art of Nordic Colonialism: Writing Transcultural Art Histories" (University of Copenhagen); "Cultural Amnesia and the 'Golden Age' of Finnish Art: Unravelling the Narratives of Finnish Art History, c. 1880s–1910s" (University of Helsinki); "Norwhite: How Norway Made the World Whiter" (University of Bergen and LODE); and the proposal for "Firing the Norwegian Canon: Reframing National Narratives of Art" (University of Oslo and Nasjonalmuseet).

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