

Noetic Norden: assembling and disassembling the art of 'the north'

Stuart Burch

Nottingham Trent University

stuart.burch@ntu.ac.uk

The following paper begins to explore the concept of 'the north' (or 'Norden') as an organising principle in the fine arts. This supposedly geographically delineable and stylistically identifiable category has been established through a lengthy and ongoing sequence of temporary, travelling exhibitions. The informal series began in 1982 with Brooklyn Museum's 'Northern light: realism and symbolism in Scandinavian painting, 1880–1910'. Variations on this regional theme have continued ever since, with the most recent manifestation being 'A mirror of nature: Nordic landscape painting, 1840–1910'. That these titles feature two similar, but not identical terms to characterise 'the north' – Scandinavian, Nordic – is revealing. So too is the fact that, whilst the earlier of the two included portraits and domestic interiors, the latter focused entirely on landscapes. And it is this genre more than any other that is said to be synonymous with the art of 'the north'. But whilst this might arguably be true of works produced at the end of the nineteenth-century, is there such a thing as 'Nordic art' today? And, if so, what is its style, subject and medium?

Such questions were raised, but not answered, by the contemporary art exhibition, 'Five Nordic women artists' held in Liverpool in the autumn of 2008. Whilst a discernable 'Nordic dimension' was *aesthetically* absent, 'the north' as an *organising principle* was not. For this is a category wholly constructed by institutions and organisations that operate under the guise of 'the north'. Using a range of examples I will seek to argue that 'the north' is, in cultural terms at least, a *noetic* phenomenon: an abstract or intellectual concept made powerfully real by being objectified in museums, depicted in galleries and named in catalogues, many of which carry the logos of such funders as the Nordic Council, the Norden Association or, last but not least, 'Nordic Spaces' – the consortium that fittingly provided the grant for this paper.

Noetic Norden: assembling and disassembling the art of ‘the north’

In May 2009 I travelled to England’s second city, Birmingham in search of ‘the north’. It came in two guises. One was an exhibition entitled ‘Northern lights’ held at Birmingham University’s Barber Institute. The other was a talk hosted by the Ikon Gallery entitled ‘Thomas Bewick, artist of the north’ (Uglow 2009). These were two very different norths. In the latter it referred to the wood engraver and naturalist, Thomas Bewick (1753–1828). His north was Northumberland in England, specifically the workshop he ran in Newcastle upon Tyne. ‘Northern lights’, on the other hand, dealt with nineteenth century paintings and engravings of landscapes on loan from Sweden’s national collection (‘Northern lights: Swedish landscapes from the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm’, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 27.02 – 31.05.2009).

After visiting the exhibition I sat in a café and read a newspaper as I waited for the talk on Bewick to begin. I came across a review of an exhibition entitled ‘Rank: picturing the social order 1516–2009’. One line of the article was extracted from the text and printed in a much larger font. It read: ‘The gulf between much of the south and the north emerges repeatedly from these images.’ In the main body of the text the reviewer of the exhibition had written:

It is the gulf between much of southern England and the north that emerges most repeatedly from many of these images, often more dramatically than do the socioeconomic disparities between England, Wales and Scotland. It is indicative that Rank is an exhibition that has been generated in Sunderland, and that it is showing only in three northern cities... Even in Victorian times... levels of individual wealth were still probably highest in the south-east... [T]he split between north and south has been widening at a faster rate since the 1970s, not just because of de-industrialisation and the drain of money and talent southwards, but also because mass awareness of these things seems to have deepened (Colley 2009).

Cultural solutions have been sought to counteract such negative perceptions of ‘the north’. A pertinent and topical example of a positive utilisation of ‘the north’ is the ‘Great North Museum’, which opened to the British public in May of this year. This is the new name for a £26 million rebranding of Tyne and Weir Museum’s natural history and archaeology collections centred around Newcastle – the place of work of that ‘artist of the north’, Thomas Bewick. A portion of the money invested in this ‘new’ museum – £15,000 to be exact – was spent on an orange-coloured arrow. Agenda Design, the company behind this logo, claim that this ‘upward arrow symbolises the museum’s northern roots, as well as suggesting ‘vitality and excitement’ (Billings 2008).

All these differently nuanced uses of the word ‘north’ underline the fairly obvious fact that the notion of northness largely depends on one’s vantage point. It also demonstrates that any invocation of a geographical location is often loaded with cultural and political implications. ‘There is not one single mental image of the North; a host of partial and often contradictory assessments are found’ (Hamelin 1979: 7). So said Louis-Edmond Hamelin in his 1979 book *Canadian Nordicity*, a publication which is as much about the mental map of northness as it is about locating the north on the map of the Canadian nation.

There are other norths. Even the south has a north. North for Australians is the Northern Territory. Lesley Instone has recently examined the ‘mutual constitution of frontier and belonging in suburban backyards in Australia’s urban north’ with particular reference to local anger at the mandatory fencing of swimming pools in the area. This was instituted in an attempt to reduce the incidences of child drowning in the Northern Territory, which then stood at three times the national average (Instone 2009: 830).

These notions of frontier, frame and belonging are particularly apt when it comes to my own research interests, namely the art of the Nordic region. In this context ‘the north’ is literally framed in art historical terms by an exhibition such as the Barber Institute’s ‘Northern lights’. Its title carries an echo of the show that established ‘the north’ as an organising principle in the fine arts. This was Brooklyn Museum’s 1982 travelling exhibition, ‘Northern light: realism and symbolism in Scandinavian painting, 1880–1910’ (Varnedoe 1982). It looked back on a previous period of defining ‘the north’ in art. At the turn of the twentieth century a centre of the art world – Paris – was the vantage point from which a northern periphery of art was conceived. Northern artists meeting in the French capital produced paintings that to this day encapsulate the image of ‘the north’.

Brooklyn Museum’s ‘Northern light’ was followed shortly afterwards by ‘Dreams of a summer night’ mounted by London’s Hayward Gallery in 1986 (Ahtola-Moorhouse 1986). Variations on this regional theme have continued ever since, with the most recent manifestation being ‘A mirror of nature: Nordic landscape painting, 1840–1910’ (Gunnarsson 2006). Whereas ‘the north’ is here named as ‘Nordic’, the two earlier displays in New York and London favoured ‘Scandinavian’. The presence of these similar, but non-identical terms to characterise ‘the north’ is revealing. That they reference different things is a point well made by Götz (2003: 324) among others. These two words nevertheless have a more precise delineation than the use of ‘northern Europe’, a phrase that also featured at Birmingham’s Barber Institute in 2009. Running concurrently with ‘Northern lights’ was the exhibition ‘The changing nature of landscape: northern European prints from the Barber collection’ (6.2. – 31.05.2009). Here ‘the north’ was Dutch, British and German.

From these exhibitions one can quite correctly infer that *landscape* more than any other genre is said to be synonymous with the art of ‘the north’. This it seems is not true of all northern regions or nations. Hamelin’s previously mentioned book *Canadian Nordicity* features this striking assertion: ‘Canadians have not, as a nation, put the North anywhere near the centre of their mythology’ (F.K. Hare cited in Hamelin 1979: 8). This was the verdict of the environmental scientist, Frederick Kenneth Hare (1919–2002). It would be interesting to test this assertion today; any deviation from such a mind-set would reveal how attitudes towards ‘the north’ have changed. Hare’s statement, from an art historical perspective at least, seems surprising given the existence of the ‘Group of Seven’: a circle of Canadian landscape painters from the 1920s. Two of its members, Lawren S. Harris (1885–1970) and A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974) painted Alberta and the Northwest Territories and travelled to the Arctic (Hill 1975: 27). These artists are as central to Canadian art history as Nils Kreuger (1858–1930), Richard Bergh (1858–1919) and Karl Nordström (1855–1923) – the so-called Varberg Group – are to the canon of Swedish art.

The Barber Institute’s ‘Northern lights’ exhibition would seem to confirm that, unlike Canada, Sweden as a nation has most certainly put ‘the north’ near the centre of its national mythology. The importance of landscape is just as strong in the other Nordic states, not least Norway. This was further confirmed in the Birmingham exhibition. Although the artists were exclusively Swedish, there were examples of their work that depicted the landscapes of other places – from Rome in ‘the south’, to Sognefjord in ‘the west’. The latter took the form of a sublime, monumental canvas by the Swedish painter, Marcus Larson (1825–64) entitled, *Norwegian Fjord in Moonlight. Motif from the Sogne-Fjord* (1861, oil on canvas, 130 x 177 cm, Nationalmuseum, acc. no. NM 2000).

Images of such iconic landscapes form part of the visual vocabulary of many Nordic residents and visitors. They constitute a lexicon of places and vantage points that people pursue in search of the supposed ‘true’ essence of ‘the north’. A painting such as Larson’s *Norwegian Fjord in Moonlight* both contributes to and consolidates the ‘Nordic open-air tradition’ (*nordisk friluftstradition*) whilst at the same time serving to locate those areas deemed to con-

stitute the epitome of, in this instance, Norwegian-ness. (The entwined issues of a ‘nordisk friluftstradition’ and Norwegian identity were topics discussed in detail by my fellow conference panellists, Klas Sandell and Wera Grahn.)

It was probably Marcus Larson’s dramatic moonlit scene that prompted one exhibition visitor to write the following comment in the Barber Institute’s visitors book: ‘Full of Scandinavian folklore and mythology. It makes me very proud’ [Lars Erikson, Oslo, April 9, 2009]. The pride of this Norwegian for a Swedish art exhibition confirms the sense that ‘Nordic citizens feel that they are members of an (invented) Nordic family’ (Stenius 2003: 21).

The Barber exhibition – like all such displays – came about as the result of a process of selection and framing. There were, for example, no women painters (despite the fact that Swedish female artists of the Düsseldorf school – including Marcus Larson’s pupil, Josefina Holmlund (1827–1905) – have been the subject of recent research (e.g. Lindberg 2008)). The Barber’s all-male line-up contrasted with another Nordic themed exhibition that took place elsewhere in England. Entitled ‘Five Nordic women artists’ and held in Liverpool in the autumn of 2008 it brought the category of the Nordic to bear on contemporary art.

When taking a historical perspective it becomes easier to place safely dead individuals into categories and styles (hence the two ‘-isms’ ‘realism and symbolism’ in Brooklyn Museum’s ‘Northern light’). This is further aided by the fact that artistic hubs – such as Paris – were fewer in number. Artists met, formed groupings and went on to establish artistic colonies where they could collaborate closer to home, modifying their style in the process in a way that was conducive to the formation of an identifiable ‘national’ style based on ‘national’ motifs. But today the situation is very different in terms of the ways that artists interact with each other, move around, gain ideas and choose to work in a variety of media. A good instance of this was Liverpool’s ‘Five Nordic women artists’ (Novas Contemporary Urban Centre, 20.09 – 30.11.2008). It was difficult to identify anything that was distinctly Nordic or northern to unite the two Icelandic artists, Katrin Fridriks (born 1974) and Laufey Johansen (born 1968) with Laila Strandberg (born 1970) from Denmark, the Norwegian, Maren Juell Kristensen (born 1976) and Åsa Johannesson (born 1979) from Sweden. It seems fitting therefore that the best response to the oft-posed question ‘do we have contemporary Nordic art?’ has been provided by the Swedish painter, Jens Fänge (born 1965): ‘No, there isn’t any’ (Kristensen 2007: 10).

This, however, does not prevent the Nordic dimension being used as an organising principle. For this is a category that is sustained by institutions and organisations that operate under the guise of the Nordic – a carefully prescribed version of ‘the north’. Examples include the Carnegie Art Award (‘established [in 1998] to promote Nordic contemporary painting’ (CAA 2008)); the Nordic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale created in 1965 (UN 1965); and the Nordic Council formed in 1952. The latter’s Art and Culture Programme, during the period 2007–9, seeks among other things to ‘renew and revitalise the Nordic art and culture co-operation in the Nordic region’ (Nordic Culture Point c. 2007).

It is these organisations that promote ‘the north’ – or at least that version of northness that can be packaged as ‘the Nordic’. In this regard the Nordic is a top-down elite construction (cf. Stenius 1997: 161). The Nordic – like all notions of ‘the north’ – is, in cultural terms at least, a noetic phenomenon (OED 2009): an abstract or intellectual concept made powerfully real by being objectified in museums, depicted in galleries and named in catalogues, many of which will carry the logos of such funders as the Nordic Council, the Norden Association or, last but not least, ‘Nordic Spaces’ – the consortium that fittingly provided the grant for this paper (Nordic Spaces 2007–11). The latter’s generosity has encouraged me to look for a northern space and fill it with meaning.

This would seem to confirm Norbert Götz’s claim that there is ‘no doubt that ‘Norden’ [‘the north’] is essentially a discursive construction’ (2003: 324). He points out that certain

basic units and features are deemed to constitute a region (Götz 2003: 325). Some of these 'basic units' are clearly cultural productions, including art works.

It is for this reason that I have given my paper the subheading 'assembling and disassembling'. The first word – assemblage – is invoked in terms of the choices made when selecting items for inclusion in north-themed exhibitions. Disassembling is adjacent to 'disassemble', thus the same works featured in one exhibition can be taken down (disassembled) and reconstituted elsewhere for a similar but subtly different reworking of 'the north'. As when Edvard Munch's painting *The Voice* (1893, oil on canvas, 90 x 118.5, Munch museet) appears on the cover of Brooklyn Museum's *Northern light* catalogue, and resurfaces four years later in the pages of *Dreams of a summer night* (Ahtola-Moorhouse 1986: 193). But the verb 'to disassemble' is to deliberately ignore something. We know from nationalism that forgetting is as important as remembering. Indeed, forgetting is 'a crucial element in the creation of nations' (Renan cited in Billig 1995). This is also true when it comes to the 'meso-layer' that makes up regions. It is only from the outside – and preferably from a distance – that they look alike (cf. Hultén 1982: 11). Thus it was that, from the distant vantage point of Birmingham, a Norwegian could look upon an exhibition of Swedish landscape painters and feel a deep sense of Scandinavian pride.

Bibliography

- Ahtola-Moorhouse, Leena; Edam, Carl Tomas & Schreiber, Birgitta (eds.) (1986) *Dreams of a summer night: Scandinavian painting at the turn of the century*, London, Hayward Gallery.
- Billig, Michael (1995) *Banal nationalism*, London, Sage.
- Billings, Scott (2008) 'Brand and deliver', *Museums journal*, 03.12, viewed 10.06.09, <http://www.scottbillings.co.uk/?p=38>.
- CAA (2008) 'The project', *Carnegie art award*, viewed 27.10.08, <http://www.carnegieartaward.com/project.asp?Year=2008>.
- Colley, Linda (2009) 'Rank and file', *Guardian*, 16.05, viewed 10.06.09, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/may/16/picturing-social-order-ngot-sunderland-class-divisions>.
- Götz, Norbert (2003) 'Norden: structures that do not make a region', *European review of history*, vol. 10, No. 2, summer, pp. 323–341.
- Gunnarsson, Torsten et al (2006) *A mirror of nature: Nordic landscape painting 1840–1910*, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst.
- Hamelin, Louis-Edmond (1979) *Canadian Nordicity: it's your north, too*, Montreal, Harvest House.
- Hill, Charles C. (1975) *Canadian painting in the thirties*, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada.
- Hultén, Pontus (1982) 'Little history and explanation', in *Sleeping beauty – art now*, New York, Guggenheim Museum.
- Instone, Lesley (2009) 'Northern belongings: frontiers, fences, and identities in Australia's urban north', *Environment and planning A*, vol. 41, pp. 827–841.
- Kristensen, Julia (2007) 'Do we have contemporary Nordic art?', *Kiasma magazine*, vol. 10, no. 36, pp. 9–10.
- Lindberg, Annie (2008) 'Svenska kvinnliga landskapsmålare och düsseldorfsmåleriet vid 1800-talets mitt', *Högskolan i Halmstad*, viewed 10.06.09, <https://dspace.hh.se/dspace/handle/2082/2877>.
- OED (2009) 'Noetic' (adj. & noun), *Oxford English Dictionary*, draft revision, September 2009, viewed 01.10.2009, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00325738>.
- Nordic Culture Point (c. 2007) 'The Art and Culture Programme', viewed 27.10.2008, <http://www.kknord.org/?pageID=36&lang=eng>.

- Nordic Spaces (2007–11) *National History – Nordic Culture: Negotiating identity in museums*, <http://www.nordicspaces.eu> & <http://webappl.web.sh.se/nordicspaces>.
- Stenius, Henrik (1997) 'The good life is a life of conformity: the impact of Lutheran tradition on Nordic political culture', in Sørensen, Øystein & Stråth, Bo (eds.) *The cultural construction of Norden*, Oslo, 1997, pp. 161–171.
- Stenius, Henrik (2003) 'State, citizenship and civil society', in Götz, Norbert & Hackmann, Jörg (eds.) *Civil society in the Baltic sea region*, Aldershot, 2003, pp. 17–25.
- Uglow, Jenny (2009) 'Thomas Bewick, artist of the north', talk given on 16.05 to accompany the exhibition 'Thomas Bewick *Tale-pieces*' (Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 08.04 – 25.05.2009).
- UN (1965) *Agreement concerning a joint Nordic pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 23 July*, United Nations Treaty Series, Vol. 955, 1–13692, pp. 422–423, viewed 27.10.2008, http://untreaty.un.org/unts/1_60000/26/23/00051102.pdf.
- Varnedoe, Kirk (1982) *Northern light: realism and symbolism in Scandinavian painting, 1880–1910*, New York, Brooklyn Museum.