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DISCOVERING THE NORDIC BARBARIANS- INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS AND WORLD FAIRS 1900-1914

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For my generation, who grew up during the decades after World War II, the concept “Norden” or “The Nordic countries” was plain and obvious: it meant the five countries Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. Often it was also regarded as equivalent to “Scandinavia” or “the Scandinavian countries” (Iceland usually excluded). The great political changes in Europe the last 15-20 years, however, have made us realize that the concept “Nordic Countries” is by far as self-evident, plain and indisputable as we used to think. We now realize that the concept includes greater parts of northern-Europe than what we used to believe. Historically the concept “The Nordic Countries” or “Norden” has changed considerably through the ages. Up to the early 20th. century, both Northern Germany and The Netherlands were often included. The De-Stijl-artist and writer Theo van Doesburg for instance, wrote a lot about “Nordic” culture meaning mainly the German and the Dutch. In the Renaissance it was common to classify all European countries north of the Alps as “Nordic”. To-day it is more natural to use the term “Northern” in this connection. “Nordic” (Nordisch) has also been used to denote protestant Europe in contrast to the catholic. The adjective “Nordic” has in certain circumstances and situations been tied to characteristics, cultural expressions and traditions that were claimed typical of a special branch of the Germanic (Teutonic) race, particularly widespread in Scandinavia, the so-called Nordic-Germanic race. To connect notions of race to the “Nordic” was particularly widespread from the last decades of the 19th. through the three or four first decades of the 20th. century. In this period it was also often claimed that the Germanic and in particular the Nordic-Germanic race was superior to others. After World-War II one has, for obvious reasons, been very reluctant to speak about races in connection with humans and nations. And very few are willing to associate the concept “Nordic” with cultural manifestations typical of a particular race as was common in the early 20th. century.

In the following, I am using the term “Norden”, “Nordic” in the way that is still most common to-day, that is identical with Scandinavia or Fenno-Scandinavia, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland.

The widespread notion of one shared Norden that had developed out of similarities in culture, history and -partly- language also led to the belief that the similarities could be traced in art, architecture and design. Particularly strong were these ideas from the late 19.th century onwards and well into the 1950`s and -60`s. Within architecture and design the concept “Scandinavian design”, stamped in the early 1950`s, is well known and marks an apogee to this point of view. Interestingly enough the idea of “Nordic” and “Scandinavian” was all along combined with a strong conviction that cultural expressions of the individual countries also had its own specific and strong national character in addition to “the Nordic” imprint.

But did the outsiders really perceive such differences and similarities in art, architecture and design from the Nordic countries? And, if so, how were these characteristics described? In the following I will focus on the World's fair in Paris in the year 1900 and describe how architecture and design from the four northern countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, was received and interpreted outside Scandinavia. My main sources are reviews and reports in English and German news-papers and periodicals.

Paris – exhibition and L'art nouveau

The Paris exhibition was organized to celebrate the turn of the century. Its chief aim was to show how far different countries had developed in technology, science and art and to demonstrate what was new, modern and imaginative in different parts of the world. Within art, architecture and design the Paris exhibition is often looked upon as the breakthrough of art-nouveau. Many art-historians, however; consider the exhibition of decorative art in Turin two years later, in 1902, as being the new style's summit (Peter Greenhalgh and Elisabeth Holt), while the Norwegian expert, Stephan Tschudi Madsen is of the opinion that the style already "had passed its peak" by 1902. Phillippe Jullian in his popular book, *Triumph of Art Nouveau*, describes the 1900 fair in Paris as being: "... the capital of Art Nouveau, a movement of which it marked both the apotheosis and the decline". (p.17)

However, many testimonies from people attending the exhibition, bear witness that the new style's apotheosis and triumph was far from as explicit at the exhibition as stated by Jullian and others in posterity. A great many reviewers and others reporting from the "Fair of the Century", felt disappointed that the new trends in architecture and decorative art that had been so evident in the late 1890s were not more pronounced at the exhibition. The German periodical *Kunst und Handwerk*, for instance, stated that the exhibition had one big, negative surprise, namely that the world of art was far less modern than one had believed (1900-1901 p.40). Another German journal, *Innendekoration*, wrote about the exhibition architecture that it was technically impressive enough, but the decoration was so hideous that one was tempted to "run away in disgust". The same journal also stated that there were few indications, particularly among the French, of understanding that new times also needed a new style. The fair was quite simply "an enormous reservoir of bygone cultures" ("...ein gewaltiges Reservoir der ganzen Kultur der Vergangenheit" (*Innendekoration* XI Jahrg. 1900 July p.105). And in the same line *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* claimed that most of the show consisted of "European antiquated art".

The reporter in the English journal *The Artist* was not less severe than his German colleagues reporting on the architecture:

"Most of what there is to be seen is the architecture of yesterday and the day before yesterday. There is far too little of the architecture of to-day. And there is almost nothing that might be a germ for the architecture of to-morrow" (London 1900 Vol.28 s.144)

The art-historian and later Director of the Danish museum of Arts and Crafts, Emil Hannover, reviewed the exhibition in the Danish *Tidsskrift for Industri* (Journal of Industry). I quote him because I find his analysis particularly well formulated and clear: (My translation. In the following all translations from non- English sources are my own.)

" It is very likely that future historians will date the ultimate Manifestation of the new style to the World Fair of Paris in the year 1900. However, quite as successful as the new style has established itself during the last few years in journals and magazines, is it apparently not yet when it comes to reality. If one imagines that at the exhibition it came to a fight between things in old-fashioned styles and things in the new, the latter would immediately be crushed by the overwhelming quantity of the old". (1900 p.1)

But, he goes on, although the fair included only one pioneer of the new for thousand defenders of the old, all interest was nevertheless concentrated on the new. The new appeared, according to Hannover, as "...refreshing oases after a long journey through the desert of the old".

Many shared the Dane Hannovers` views on the distressing proportion of new to old at the exhibition and many of those from countries outside Scandinavia, found that the contributions (participation) by the Nordic countries, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland, were exceptions to the general impression and actually appeared like Hannover`s "refreshing oases". In particular the German reporters and reviewers were enthusiastic about the Nordic countries` pavilions and stands. They regarded them as an inspiring and promising contrasts to the distressing exhibits from countries "of former glory" like France, Italy, Spain. These countries who were used to look upon themselves as "the world`s cultural centers" now, according especially to the German-speaking reviewers, presented only recycled, stiff and frozen copies of products from their great bygone.

Nordic Participation

The most popular part of the Paris-exhibition and that drawing most visitors, was the so-called *Rue des Nations*, the Street of the Nations (German "Völkerstrasse" = street of the peoples). This was a several hundred meters long row of houses, pavilions and palaces mainly along the river, designed to demonstrate the national characteristic of the different participating countries. Most of these building were scaled-down copies or paraphrases of well-known buildings from the different countries. Many were even designed by architects from the host-country France. No wonder these buildings by many were characterized as architectural national clichés.

The four Nordic countries all had their own pavilions at *Rue des Nations*, and contrary to what was the case with most of the other, the Nordic houses were all designed by architects from the respective countries. Finland concentrated all its exhibits in its pavilion. The three other countries were in addition represented at various departments around the precincts.

The Swedish and the Norwegian pavilions were both very prominently situated near the riverside, the two others were at the rear, not facing the river. The spectacular Swedish pavilion, designed by Ferdinand Boberg, caught much attention with its balconies, wings and towers connected by foot-bridges. The building was adorned by flags and streamers and gave an impression of fantasy, festivity and joy. Philippe Jullian characterizes the Swedish pavilion as "...a harmonious blend of popular art and Art Nouveau" (s.74)

The Norwegian pavilion was a sort of mixture of a stave-church and a traditional farmer`s store-house (stabbur). The wooden building had high gable-walls, porticoes and a roof-turret with a steeple. It was painted deep red and brown. The architect was Holger Sinding-Larsen.

Denmark`s pavilion was a white half-timbered house with steep roof, red roofing tiles and leaded windows. The house, designed by the architect Valdemar Koch, was criticized in Denmark for being a pastiche and not very national. Many non Scandinavian reviewers, however, found the house typical Danish.

Finland was enrolled as participant in the exhibition only in the last minute, due to political intrigues. For Finland it was particularly important to be represented at the World Fair to manifest itself as a nation with its own identity within the Russian empire. The Finns took their national profile very seriously, in contrast to other countries, like Sweden and Norway who, according to Kerstin Smeds "...took it in a much more playful spirit" (p.21).

The Finnish pavilion was designed by the young Finnish architects, Eliel Saarinen, Hermann Gesellius and Armas Lindgren. The indoor decorations were made by Axel Gallén.

The building was shaped like a kind of church with a nave, steeple and high-lying windows. Both the general public and the many commentators and reviewers unanimously found the details of construction and elaborated ornamentation and and other kind of décor very interesting, innovating and new. Finland`s house was without doubt the one that caught most

attention of the four Northern pavilions. There was hardly a review of the fair that did not present at least one photograph of this spectacular structure. Many were of the opinion that the Finns' contribution was the best and most interesting of the whole fair.

Reception

Reports, references and reviews of the fair were countless. Every paper and magazine with self-esteem had to present something on this great event. In the following I am concentrating mainly on English, German and some French sources.

The northern countries were mentioned in most of the reviews in magazines of art, architecture and design. Many wrote extensively both on the Nordic countries' pavilions and on their presentations in other sections of the fair.

The French *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* covered the fair in a big special issue, a kind of commented catalogue. The Norwegian pavilion was mentioned as a very good example of Scandinavian building. The reviewer, like many of his colleagues, was particularly enthusiastic about the colors.

"Every person that has seen the Norwegian fjords a summer evening and has experienced how the landscape is transformed into deep blue and rose shades of colors will realize that the Nordic sense of colors must be inspired by nature". (s.53)

The reporter from the French *Art et Décoration*, found that the Finnish pavilion demonstrated "...une vie très différente". It was probably too massive and rustic to French taste, he admitted, but nevertheless pleasant. He maintained that the Finns were not like their neighbors the Swedes and Norwegians, satisfied just with seeking inspiration in tradition and local culture. The Finns were in addition very creative and imaginative. They were experts in combining the old and the new. Thus they succeeded in giving architecture and decoration an original and modern as well as a national appearance.

The Vienna newspaper *Die Zeit*, had a long article concentrating on the fair's architecture. It was written by the well-known art-historian Richard Muther. (1.may 1900) Generally he was very disappointed with what he saw. The great buildings were placed at random all over the area without any unifying plan. In addition they were overloaded with décor. Most of the pavilions at the *Rue des Nations* fell victims to Muther's dissection. "It is a great misunderstanding that one has to build in historical styles to make a building look national", he writes. This maybe was meaningful to nations like Spain or Greece "whose importance lies in the past, but it is not meaningful to modern nations". ("...deren Bedeutung in ihrer Vergangenheit liegt, nicht bei modernen Völker".)

For Muther only a few pavilions showed independence from historicism and confusion of styles and had succeeded in creating something new and fresh. As examples the pavilions of Finland and Sweden were mentioned. According to him the Swedish pavilion was the very best at the fair and he described it in this way:

There is no hollow pomp (splendour), no embarrassing copying. The simple wooden structure gives the impression of something straight forward and unique. Everything is developed in an attractive and logical way from the character of the material. (siteret fra artikkelsamling AufsätzeBerlin 1914 s. 165)

The Finns and the Swedes were the only nations that received unreserved praise in Muthers article. These nations was characterized as "**the pioneers of a young victorious (triumphant) beauty**" ("sie erscheinen auf dieser Ausstellung als die Pioniere einer jungen, sieghaften Schönheit".)

Berliner Tageblatt published a number of detailed reports from the Paris fair, all signed by Fritz Stahl. The Nordic pavilions were characterized as “small, unpretentious and genuine, quite the opposite to all the others” (1900 27/7) Stahl comments satirically on the host-country’s request that the pavilions at Rue des Nations should be built in national styles. This had apparently given the countries great trouble. They had speculated a lot over “what style is the most characteristic for our country?” The Nordic countries on the other side, had clearly not had such problems because here the national style was still present and strong. He mentions the Swedish house as a good example of the Swedes’ “Joy of life” and he is of the opinion that in particular the Finns had succeeded in giving the national a fully developed artistic form. He too, like a great many other reviewers, expressed great respect for the Finns “this tribe that are fighting for their freedom and distinctive character”. The Finland house gave voice to something new and modern at the same time as it was rooted in tradition. Thus it did not, according to Stahl, display a tendency of something arbitrary or fantastic, like for instance in the art and architecture of Vienna, in what he characterizes as “..the artificially overheated greenhouse atmosphere of the secessionist movement”.(B.T. 14/8 1900).

Maybe even more international attention than the Nordic pavilions was achieved by these countries in other departments of the fair and in particular the departments of arts and crafts and design. A recurrent theme was once more that the exhibits from the Northern countries were seen as modern, new and fresh in contrast to the regurgitation of by-gone styles that dominated elsewhere.

The French Journal *Art et Decoration* declared that in the Nordic countries arts and crafts flowered because it was based on national traditions and folklore in combination with international art-nouveau. Specifically mentioned were among others, the Norwegian Frida Hansen and a tapestry woven after the watercolor “cray-fishing” by the famous Swedish painter Carl Larsson.

A recurrent theme in German reviews and critiques was that the world’s fair proved that the old cultural nations, Italy, Spain and in particular the host-country France, were culturally left behind and that the new, modern and fresh presently was created in the Germanic and Nordic countries. Typical of this view is Max Osborne in the German journal *Innendekoration*.

“The modern culture that was born out of the spirit of the 19th century, has its home in the Nordic and Germanic countries. It seems here (in Paris) to be isolated and lonely, an intruder without relations in a foreign world.” (Max Osborne *Innendekoration* 1900. juli p. 105)

And he underlines his main point: “The French boast of their great past in the service of art. But it does not work anymore **The Nordic barbarians move forward. The next centuries belong to them**”. (Die nordischen Barbaren rücken vor.... Ihnen werden die nächsten Jahrhunderte gehören”. *Innendekoration* 1900. July p.106)

Fritz Stahl in the *Berliner Tageblatt* maintained that the Nordic countries had luckily escaped the preceding century’s so-called renaissance in arts and crafts, a renaissance that in most countries had led to unconscious copying of styles. As a result of this happy elusion, the Nordic countries’ decorative art expressed a self-evident, plain, natural and traditional simplicity that was exactly what other countries aimed for in order to create a new style. Luckily, the Nordic countries had luckily escaped influences from “the southern countries”, Stahl goes on, implicitly he means the classical. His conclusion is that the Nordic countries’ art and culture deserves the greatest attention. **Here is a lot that we Germans will feel related to and here we can find what we are in search of.** (Alles im Allem verdient das ganze künstlerische Leben dieser Völker unsere grösste Aufmerksamkeit. Wir finden da vieles was wir verwandt anmuthet, und finden vieles erfüllt, was wir suchen”. (B.T. 27/7 1900)

The English Journal *The Studio* was also very enthusiastic about what was shown from the Northern countries. In English reports the adjective Northern was used nearly exclusively instead of Nordic. Maybe this was a way of keeping a distance to the German close to hysterical enthusiasm and exuberance in characterizing the “Nordic”. The reviewer underscores, like many of his French and German colleagues, that although the products from the four Northern countries had much in common, **“the character of the individual countries will always produce great contrasts in artistic style”**. (Studio 1900, 3, p. 196). He was highly impressed by the achievements from the distant countries of the north.

In conclusion it may be said that in these remote countries a powerful art movement is facing its way into the general art development of Europe, and it will undoubtedly ere long claim greater public attention” (Studio 1900, 3, p. 199)

Similar views were expressed in the English *Art Journal*. In a special supplement on the Paris fair we can read: **“Scandinavia seems just now to be the centre of a strong artistic revival in many branches of manufactures”** (A.J. spec. issue 1901 p.180).

Other exhibitions

The Turin-exhibition in 1902 was the first international fair exclusively for arts and crafts and art industry. Like in Paris, the organizer had chosen “the modern” as chief theme and goal. And, according both to contemporary reviewers and retrospective art-historians, the goal was on the whole reached to a much greater extent than in Paris. The Nordic countries, however, were much less in the foreground in Turin than they had been in Paris, firstly because the quantity shown from these countries was much less than in Paris and secondly because what was exhibited had been exposed before and therefore appeared like a sort of repetition. It was not perceived as revolutionary, new and fresh as it was two years earlier in Paris. Denmark and Sweden showed porcelain, ceramics and glass (Royal Copenhagen, Bing and Grøndahl, Rørstrand, Gustavsberg, Kosta) Norway textile and ceramics. Finland did not participate in Turin.

The Baltic exhibition in Malmö, Sweden, in 1914, included exhibitors from the countries around the Baltic Sea, at that time, there was only four: Denmark, Germany and Russia (Finland included) in addition to the host-country, Sweden. Unluckily this exhibition was overshadowed by the outbreak of the First World War, and did not attain the attention the organizer had expected and hoped for.

Conclusion

A recurrent issue in the world of art in this period was whether it was possible to be modern and international and at the same time keep a distinct national character. As a rule this was denied. The most widespread view was that modern art was international without any national or regional distinctiveness. Art with a specific national character, automatically was stamped as being old-fashioned or conservative. Typical of this view is a commentator (*Kunst und Künstler*) who talked of two opposite “age-spirits” or “-energies” (“Zeitenergie”) that manifested itself in all branches of art at the present, one avant-gardistic, modern and international, the other conservative and national.

The exhibits from the Nordic countries at the international exhibitions around the turn of the century 18-1900, proved a challenge to this prevalent view. According to the majority of the commentators and reviewers the secret of Nordic countries success` within architecture and

decorative art was precisely that the products demonstrated something new, fresh and modern and at the same time they were rooted in local tradition and folklore.

Seen from Central- and southern Europe the Northern countries seemed in many ways underdeveloped. But, in spite of the backwardness, they were not regarded as uncivilized and primitive like many other un-industrialized countries. Judging from what was written, it was a widespread notion that the Nordic people had an alert and open attitude towards new cultural currents. The Nordic artists, architects, artisans and designers were admired for being independent of conventions and academic classicism. They had understood what was essential in "the modern" at the same time as modernity's most exaggerated monstrosities were kept at a distance by a firmly rooted cultural tradition. By selecting the best from the two camps (or as the commentator in *Kunst und Künstler* had called it, "time-energies") international modernism and cultural conservatism, the products of the Nordic "barbarians" were seen as announcing something new and promising.

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