The Nationalmuseum’s First Exhibition:
On the Scandinavian Art Exposition in 1866

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Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, is published with generous support from the Friends of the Nationalmuseum.

Nationalmuseum collaborates with Svenska Dagbladet and Grand Hôtel Stockholm. We would also like to thank FCB Fältman & Malmén.

Cover Illustration

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Berndt Arell, Director General

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Nationalmuseum Photographic Studio/
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Graphic Design
BIGG

Layout
Agneta Bervokk

Translation and Language Editing
Gabriella Berggren, Erika Milburn and Martin Naylor

Publishing
Janna Herder (Editor) and Ingrid Lindell (Publications Manager)

Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum is published annually and contains articles on the history and theory of art relating to the collections of the Nationalmuseum.

Nationalmuseum
Box 16176
SE-103 24 Stockholm, Sweden
www.nationalmuseum.se
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ISSN 2001-9238
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"Interior from the exposition palace in Stockholm", in Ny Illustrerad Tidning, 14 July 1866.
“God save the Nordic region, its art and its artists!”

2016 marks the 150th anniversary of the inauguration of the Nationalmuseum’s building on Blasieholmen. The construction process had been a long, convoluted and widely criticised affair. The reputation of the new Nationalmuseum was therefore tarnished. In the summer of 1866, the historic collection was installed on the ground floor, but the upper-storey galleries, intended for the national collection of art, were still empty. Only part of the Museum was open to the public.

The Nationalmuseum was not yet an independent government agency but subordinated to the Board of Public Works and Buildings and closely affiliated to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Both the curator and director, Johan Christoffer Boklund, and the senior curator Fritz von Dardel thus had dual assignments. Boklund was a professor at the Academy, and von Dardel’s impressive CV included several prestigious positions in the contemporary art scene. A standing comparable to simultaneously being the head of the National Property Board and chairman of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. He was a close friend of the king.
and belonged to his circle of practising artists. Von Dardel’s caricatures are not merely amusing but also provide a sharp resumé of the cultural elite at the time. It was Fritz von Dardel who launched the pragmatic proposal to fill the empty top floor of the Nationalmuseum, in connection with the Scandinavian Exhibition of Industry and Art in Stockholm, with contemporary art from Sweden’s neighbouring countries.2 The Royal Academy of Fine Arts was, in other words, formally responsible for the Nationalmuseum’s first exhibition.

The Scandinavian Art Exposition was aimed at adding splendour to the opening of the Nationalmuseum, with the intention of establishing the institution as a palace of fine arts, a stronghold of nationalism and the Swedish people’s museum. The exhibition opened on 15 June 1866.

The Age of World Fairs
The second half of the 19th century was the age of world fairs. The objects displayed at these events manifested the industrial and artistic progress of their nations; they offered the latest products from the crafts industry and highlighted contemporary art. Unlike the regulating and didactic ambitions of the museums, these fairs were considerably freer arenas that demanded neither

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Fig. 2 Julius Exner, Scene from a Farmer’s Feast in Amager, 1854. Oil on canvas, 84 x 110.5 cm, National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen, KMS713.
a sense of aesthetics or a knowledge of history. They attracted a broad public from all social classes, and were thus included, together with the museums, in the discourse on the mission of art and crafts to foster good taste. The first major world fair, *The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851, was, according to art historian Anna Lena Lindberg, a broad, popular event to nurture a sense of taste, a milestone in the development of art pedagogy (Fig. 2).

The art exhibition on display in the Nationalmuseum helped support the Scandinavian manifestation and the organisers were obviously hoping that visitors would also venture into other parts of the museum building. The plans and preparations included a multitude of practical decisions on borrowing art, shipping, admission fees and sales of both art and photographic reproductions (Fig. 1). A request to borrow works was drafted and sent via Crown Prince Oscar to the Norwegian government, the Royal Academy of Art in Denmark, and the Art Association in Finland. Moreover, the government promised free transportation from Norway and Denmark by Swedish Rail, as noted in an unsigned article in *Post- och Inrikes Tidningar*, in July the same year. To make ends meet, an admission fee was charged, and the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* noted that visitor numbers were higher on days with reduced fees. Several of the works of art were for sale, a fact that received a great deal of press coverage. It was reported what had been bought, by whom, and at what cost. But the actual prices were not openly displayed; instead, interested buyers were referred to the curator, Mr Johan Christoffer Boklund, for further information. Another commercial aspect was the sale of poster-sized photographs. Johannes Jaeger’s photographic studio depicted a selection of the objects in the exhibition and offered posters for SEK 3 each.

The media thus covered many different facets of the event. In *Ny Illustrerad Tidning*, Lorentz Dietrichson, an art historian, writer and, for a brief period, an amanuensis at the Nationalmuseum, summarised his impressions of the exhibition in ten articles. Skilled printers were also employed by the publication, and quality reproductions of selected works introduced the readership continuously to Nordic contemporary art. In the exhibition, visitors encountered several of the Nordic artists who had studied in Dusseldorf, Munich and Paris. On the art scene in the German cities, genre painting was fashionable. The Nordic art, and consequently the Museum’s exhibition followed this tradition and leaned predominantly towards small-format vernacular painting and landscapes (Figs. 2–4).

Dietrichson’s articles reflect the impact of nationalism on contemporary art preferences. He began with an overview of genre painting, giving special attention to the national traits, and highlighting the artists Julius Exner (1825–1910) from Denmark, Adolph Tidemand (1814–1876) from Norway, and Johan Fredrik Höckert (1826–1866) from Sweden. The painting *Sermon in Løjmok Mountain Chapel in Lapland* by Höckert had been shown at the Paris Salon in 1855 and was acquired by the museum in Lille in 1856. It was praised as a masterly work, for its colours and composition. Although the Norwegian artist Tidemand was said to be skilled at capturing the multifaceted soul of the Norwegian people, Dietrichson criticised his recent paintings for reproducing a sense of aesthetics or a knowledge of history. They attracted a broad public from all social classes, and were thus included, together with the museums, in the discourse on the mission of art and crafts to foster good taste.
The Danish artist Exner was unlike both Höckert and Tidemand. His paintings were characterised by naturalism and a humorous rendering of reality. Another observation Dietrichson made was that while most of the Swedish male genre painters had studied or been inspired by the Dusseldorf style of painting, Swedish women artists were less tied to a specific place, and were predominantly genre painters. Among the women artists, he was particularly impressed by Amalia Lindegren (1814–1891) (Figs. 5–7).

Dietrichson’s presentation gives a good overview of Nordic art at the time, but it does not describe the layout of the exhibition itself. A somewhat more detailed spatial and physical picture of the Scandinavian Art Exposition, however, is found in a letter to Post- och Inrikes Tidningar, which describes exhibition features such as lighting and the position of paintings in the galleries. The daylight from the frosted glass sections in the ceiling was considered satisfactory, whereas the hanging of the paintings was criticised:

It would have been preferable if the paintings, where space allowed, had been placed at a suitable level; at present, many excellent paintings are so high up, that spectators can study them in detail only with great difficulty.

In other words, the first visitors to the Museum encountered paintings that were set close together as in a salon. The Norwegian section hung to the right in the domed gallery, and was mentioned specifically in the article, which stressed Tideman’s and Hans Gude’s (1825–1903) studies in Dusseldorf, and their influence on Swedish artists, not least through the exhibition of Danish and Norwegian artists organised by the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in the early 1850s.

Three decades later, in connection with the 1897 Art and Industry exhibition on Djurgården in Stockholm, a letter published in Nordens Expositionstidning reflects on the exhibition in 1866:

Although neither overwhelming nor magnificent in scope, its inner qualities were all the more striking; this was an art exhibition whose content people of all social classes, the learned and the uneducated, could understand and thus took such indescribable pleasure in viewing and getting to know more closely.

The letter emphasises the public’s reception; visitors are lively, gesticulating and eager to share their experiences, and the writer claims it was the capacity of the artists at the time to capture vernacular scenes that cut across distinctions of class and social status that was the reason for this popularity. There had been a mutual understanding between the practitioners of art and their audience, the writer asserted, and continued:

The current modern style, with its peculiar play of colours and especially the widespread symbolism that is completely incomprehensible to most art lovers, had not then gained a foothold in the artists’ output. The artists were unanimous in their efforts to achieve such art works that could satisfy the public’s desires, and in them cultivate a taste for, and sensibility to, the noble, the beautiful, the sublime.
The *Scandinavian Art Exposition* is also an excellent example of the temporary exhibition, as a specific phenomenon with its own history based on the culture of art and industry fairs, which arose around the mid-18th century and continued to grow with the 19th-century world fairs. Their purpose was to give nations opportunities to manifest themselves and present their contemporary industrial and cultural progress. The exhibition can therefore also be understood against the background of emerging commercialisation of the arts and the emergence of popular culture and an entertainment industry. In this context, the Nationalmuseum and the exhibition served as a public and commercial arena for the current national and Nordic tendencies. It thereby also had a discursive influence on development as exhibitions became more geared towards a larger and broader audience – and an emerging art public (Figs. 8–9).

Art did not have a high status in Sweden, and the Stockholm audience can only be described as unfamiliar with both art and exhibitions. In hindsight, it appears that what was originally just a pragmatic solution rather than an intentional plan, turned out to be a stroke of genius. With the *Scandinavian Art Exposition*, the Nationalmuseum was immediately established as the Swedish people’s art institution. The Nationalmuseum’s first exhibition was not connected at all to its collections, but nevertheless reflects its ambition to serve as the capital city’s most important forum for art.

**Facts**

The *Scandinavian Art Exposition* in Stockholm:
15 June–14 October 1866

*Exhibition Curator:* Professor Johan Christoffer Boklund

*Exhibition committee:* Fritz von Dardel, praeses RA (Royal Academy of Fine Arts), Chair, Axel Nyström (1793–1868), Secretary, RA, Carl Gustaf Östlund (1810–1867), board member, RA, Johan Fredrik Höckert (1826–1866), artist and professor, RA, Edvard Bergh (1828–1880), artist and professor, RA.

*Participating artists:* 224 artists, of whom 99 were Swedes, 53 Norwegians, 54 Danes, and 18 Finns.

*Number of borrowed works:* 679, of which 355 were Swedish, 169 Norwegian, 109 Danish, and 46 Finish.

*Number of objects from the Nationalmuseum collection:* 0

*Exhibition catalogue:* Yes.

*Subject:* Contemporary Nordic painting.

*Exhibition principles:* Group exhibition organised according to nation.

*Dominant genres:* national characters, vernacular scenes, Norse mythology and Nordic history, landscapes.

*Venue:* The Nationalmuseum, upper storey.

*Number of visitors:* 91,045

Comments on the fair in 1897 also reflect on some essential aspects of the *Scandinavian Art Exposition* in 1866 as a public event and subject of debate. Above all, the 1866 expo was considered to transcend class boundaries, which probably means that it was supposedly aimed at a broader, not necessarily middle-class, audience without any knowledge of art history. The emphasis on the lively, gesticulating visitors is contrary to other late-19th century descriptions of how museum visitors should behave, trained, as they were, to adopt civilised, orderly manners. None of that is in evidence here. Moreover, the exhibit itself was described as representative of the soul of the people, not the nation. The fair-like exhibition practice was, strictly speaking, focused on getting individuals to identify with a people’s national ideals, rather than on educating their aesthetic taste and improving their knowledge of art history.
Fig. 8 The Main Stairs at the Nationalmuseum. Original drawing by O. A. Mankell. figures by G. Janet, in Ny Illustrerad Tidning, 20 October 1866. Note that the elegantly dressed ladies in the foreground are the first thing that captures the viewer’s attention. The figures in rural costume looking at Fogelberg’s sculpture are drawn more softly and placed to the far left in the picture. In this way, the illustrator emphasises that the new public art is a predominantly middle-class affair; a distinction which is staged in the space of the entrance hall and the upward movement of the main staircase towards the art galleries. The bourgeois is depicted standing on the stairs, while the parochial representatives are placed down below.
Notes:
9. Lorentz 1866, pp. 39f.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid.