

2022

## Art for All! Nordic Art and Cultural Democracy, 1945–1959

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### Recommended Citation

Edling, Marta. "Art for All! Nordic Art and Cultural Democracy, 1945–1959." *Artl@s Bulletin* 11, no. 2 (2022): Article 5.

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### Cover Page Footnote

It would not have been possible to write this article without the kind assistance of the Swedish Section of the Nordic Art Association giving me access to their archive. Also, many Nordic colleagues have helped me to improve my arguments in the final draft of this text. I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Hanne Abildgaard, Maria Görts, Kristian Handberg, Paulina Immonen, Tore Kirkholt, Maija Koskinen, Marja Lahelma, Camilla Larsson, Pella Myrstener, Katarina Wadsten MacLeod, Håkan Nilsson, Oscar Svanelid, and Annika Öhrner. The article was written as part of the research project Exhibiting Art in a European Periphery? International Art in Sweden during the Cold War, funded by the Swedish Research Council 2018-2021

# Art for All! Nordic Art and Cultural Democracy, 1945–1959

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## Abstract

The article will by emphasizing a transnational and geopolitical approach, investigate eight exhibitions of modern art from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden presented in Nordic cities 1946–1959. The text highlights the importance of this regional context and argues that the artworks can be seen as socially interconnected signs mediated through the communicative agency of the exhibitions. By focusing on subject matter and artwork titles presented, the article suggests that the exhibitions can be viewed as part of interacting artistic, civic, and political agendas aiming to democratize culture in the postwar Nordic welfare states.

## Abstract

I artikeln undersöks med hjälp av ett transnationellt och geopolitiskt perspektiv åtta utställningar med modern konst från Danmark, Finland, Island, Norge och Sverige som visades i nordiska städer 1946–1959. Texten understryker vikten av detta regionala nordiska sammanhang och hävdar att konstverken kan ses som socialt sammanlänkade tecken som förmedlades genom utställningarnas kommunikativa agens. Genom att fokusera på motiv och verkstitlar, föreslår artikeln att utställningarna kan ses som en del av samverkande konstnärliga, medborgerliga och politiska agendor som syftade till att demokratisera kulturen efterkrigstidens nordiska välfärdsstater.

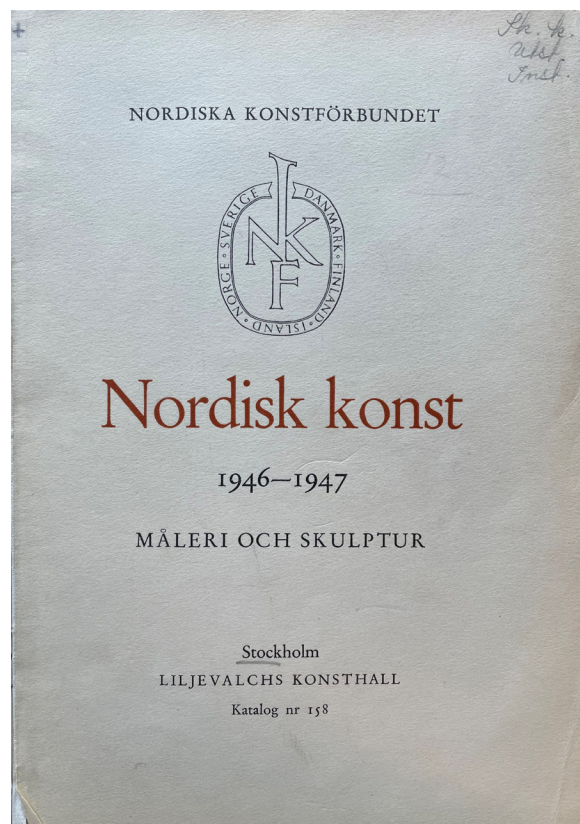
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This article focuses on eight large-scale temporary exhibitions of Nordic modern art presented between 1946 and 1959 that, despite their size, transnational reach, and large number of visitors, have been surprisingly overlooked in Nordic art history. Arranged by the Nordic Art Association (Nordiska konstförbundet, NKF), their aim was to present recurrent overviews of recently exhibited painting, sculpture, and graphic art from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Each exhibition lasted approximately one month, and the presentation of the artworks was organized by nationality up until 1953, and thematically by style in 1957 and 1959. The exhibitions were held in major public art galleries and art museums in Nordic cities, and the eight catalogs contain a total of 4,110 entries by 635 artists.<sup>2</sup> These Nordic events also caught the public's attention; examples of the number of visitors suggest they were well-attended events; 10,000 visitors in Oslo, Norway, in 1946; 17,000 in Helsinki, Finland, in 1950; and 15,000 visitors in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1957.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The exhibitions also occasionally presented monumental and textile art. "Nordic" art refers in this text to art presented in the exhibitions as made by artists from the five nation-states. The term "Scandinavian" refers here to the region of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.

<sup>2</sup> All exhibition catalogs are illustrated and contain a total of 313 illustrations. The printed catalogs are *Nordisk konstförbunds utställning måleri och skulptur* (Oslo, 1946); *Nordisk Konst 1946–1947 Måleri och skulptur* (Stockholm, 1947); *Nordisk Konst 1946–47 Grafik* (Stockholm, 1947); *Norroen list* (Reykjavík, 1948); *Den store nordiske kunstutstilling i København 1949* (København, 1949); *Pohjoismaiden taidetta Nordisk Konst* (Helsinki, Helsingfors 1950); *Nordisk Konst 1953* (Bergen and Oslo, 1953); *Nordisk konst 1947–1957* (Göteborg, 1957); *Nordisk kunst gennem 10 år* (Odense, 1959). A complete visual survey of all 4,110 entries has not been possible to achieve. The visual analysis of the artworks in this article is based on the 313 illustrations and further extensive searches for artists and artworks in online auction catalogs or national collections, for example, the National Gallery of Denmark <https://www.smk.dk/en/article/the-collection/>, the National Museum of Norway <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/collection/>, Moderna Museet in Sweden <https://sis.modernamuseet.se/en/>, the Finnish National Gallery, <https://www.kansallisgalleria.fi/en/search> and artworks of the National Gallery of Iceland in the online collection Sarpur, <https://sarpur.is>

<sup>3</sup> Martin Strömberg, *Konstliv i Norden* (Stockholm: Nordiska Konstförbundet, 1972), 9, 18, 32. A full search in the Nordic archives for the number of visitors for these and other larger temporary exhibitions was not within the scope of this article. However, there is sufficient data to indicate that these exhibitions were popular. At Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, the second-largest city in the Nordic countries, with 719,000 inhabitants in 1940, growing to 920,000 inhabitants in 1950 (the largest Nordic city, Copenhagen, had circa 1,000,000 inhabitants in 1940), the average number of visitors per month to exhibitions in 1947 was 10,600 (the year when one of the NKF exhibitions was held at the museum). By comparison, Oslo and Helsinki had fewer than 500,000 inhabitants between 1940 and 1950. This indicates that the NKF exhibition attracting 15,000 visitors in Helsinki in 1950 and 10,000 in Oslo in 1946 drew a comparably large audience. On exhibitions at the Helsinki Taidehalli, see also Maija Koskinen, *Taiteellisesti elvyttävää ja poliittisesti ajankohtaista* (Diss., University of Helsinki, 2018). On the number of inhabitants of Nordic capitals, see *Growth of the World's Urban and Rural Population, 1920–2000* (New York: United Nations, 1969), 108; on the number of visitors to Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, see *Meddelande från Nationalmuseum nr. 72: Statens konstsamlingars tillväxt och förvaltning 1947* (Stockholm, 1948), 55, <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:nationalmuseum:diva-396>



**Figure 1.** Cover of the catalog *Nordisk Konst 1946–1947 Måleri och skulptur* (Stockholm, 1947). The emblem of the NKF suggests the shape of a rune stone with the names of the five nation states inscribed inside a band. The Viking symbolism is further accentuated by the ascenders of the letters N and K alluding to the grip and pommel of a sword. The emblem was frequently used on the covers of exhibition catalogs; however, its Viking symbolism was never commented upon in the texts. Intended for a Nordic audience, the symbol appears to have aimed at promoting the idea of a shared heritage among “Northerners.” During the war, the idea of a Nordic unity had indeed been severely undermined by nationalistic wartime politics. Photo: Author.

Despite their wide reach and the interest they attracted at the time, there is almost no mention of these exhibitions in art-historical works. In critical remarks from the period, one finds arguments that shed light on this later lack of attention. Swedish critics, for example, argued that these large exhibitions of Nordic art lost their quality when aiming to give an overview of each national art scene. As Nils Palmgren (1890–1955) put it in 1947, it was perhaps a “fair” way of doing it but also more “boring.”<sup>4</sup> This judgment is further illustrated by a comment made some years later by Torsten Bergmark (1920–1996)

<sup>4</sup> Nils Palmgren, “Nordisk konst,” *Aftonbladet*, April 21, 1947; cf. Alf Jørgen Aas, “Nordisk kunst i Göteborg,” *Aftenposten*, October 23, 1957.

which made clear that the selection of artwork displayed in Helsinki in 1950 in many ways presented a “fine Nordic exhibition of quality”. However, it was tainted by art showing an “insistent provincialism.”<sup>5</sup> Other critics commented upon the diverse, and even confusing, character of the broad presentation of the exhibitions, blending figurative and abstract art and the styles of both older and younger generations.<sup>6</sup>

Irrespective of matters of taste, we may conclude that these large Nordic overviews appear to have deviated from the more selective selection of art gallery exhibitions, and this annoyed, or confused, the critics.<sup>7</sup> The all-inclusive approach can also be seen as the reason why later art historians have not paid attention; showcasing too much and differing art by too many artists, they have not been considered landmark events providing material for canonical art history.<sup>8</sup>

The article will by emphasizing the interrelatedness of art and society and a transnational and geopolitical approach discuss the exhibitions in relation to the regional Nordic context in the early postwar period. It will argue that it is important to highlight them simply because of their scale and reach. Their purpose was not only to give an overview of the variety of recently exhibited Nordic modern art but also to target the general public in Nordic cities. I will show that the exhibitions can be seen as part of interacting artistic, civic, and political agendas and the result of a civil society in tune with, although not dictated by, political efforts to democratize culture in the building of the postwar Nordic welfare states.

<sup>5</sup> Torsten Bergmark, “Nordisk konst i Helsingfors,” *Dagens Nyheter*, March 26, 1950. On the Norwegian critics’ harsh critique of the Finnish section in Oslo in 1946, see also Rolf Nummelin “Måleri og grafik” *Konsten i Finland: Från medeltid till nutid*, ed. Bengt von Bonsdorff (Esbo: Schildt, 1998), 304.

<sup>6</sup> For example, O.Z [sign.] “Nordisk konst I,” *Hufvudstadsbladet*, April 5, 1950; Hans Eklund, “Nordiska horisonter i Göteborg,” *Aftonbladet*, October 24, 1957; Reidar Revold, “Ingen skandale,” *Aftenposten*, June 11, 1959.

<sup>7</sup> The best example in this period of the selective strategy of commercial galleries is the Paris art market. See Julie Verlaïne, *Les galeries d’art contemporain à Paris: une histoire culturelle du marché de l’art, 1944–1970* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2019), e.g., 383–389. For a Swedish example, see Martin Gustavsson, *Makt och konstsmak: sociala och politiska motsättningar på den svenska konstmarknaden 1920–1960* (Diss., Stockholm University, Stockholm, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> For a critical discussion on exhibition studies reaffirming the art-historical canon, see Linda Boersma and Patrick van Rossem, “Rewriting or Reaffirming the Canon? Critical Readings of Exhibition History,” *Stedjelijk Studies* no. 2, 2015. For a historical overview of research on exhibitions within art history and architecture, museum, exhibition, and curatorial studies, see Natalie Hope O’Donnell, *Space as Curatorial Practice: The Exhibition as a Spatial Construct* (Diss., Oslo School of Architecture and Design, Oslo, 2016), 21–62.

The exhibitions were produced, displayed, and consumed in a particular political and societal habitat with the jobs market for artists, public support for art and cultural institutions, and public access to art at its core.<sup>9</sup>

Fundamental to my arguments and theoretical and methodological approach is the premise of the signifying function of art. I take as my starting point Norman Bryson’s idea that representational artworks can be seen as “material signs,” being part of “the same circulation of signs that permeates or ventilates the rest of the social structure.” Here I argue that the artworks’ visual and textual material (motifs, titles) by being presented in this Nordic framework of the exhibitions took part in a regional “discourse” on the relevance of art and culture in everyday life during the early postwar period.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, this article also draws on the art historian and curator Bruce W. Ferguson’s idea of exhibitions as the “main agency of communication” of artworks. Studying exhibitions as “material speech” means asking questions on the “network of interests,” the agencies behind them, as well as the intended recipients and outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

## Public Funding of Art and Cultural Democracy

It is important, first of all, to note the relevance of placing the Nordic collaborations on exhibitions discussed in this article in the wider context of the resumption of regional contacts after World War II. At the heart of Nordic political collaborations were the jobs stimulus by opening the borders for labor,

<sup>9</sup> On geopolitical art history, see, for example, Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, «The German Century: How a Geopolitical Approach Could Transform the History of Modernism?» in *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, eds. Tomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (New York: Routledge 2015), 192–197. On the shared cultural, social, and political situation in the region in the postwar period, see Mary Hilson, *The Nordic Model: Scandinavia since 1945* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 11–24, and Peter Duelund, ed., *The Nordic Cultural Model* (Copenhagen: Nordic Cultural Institute, 2003), 481–509.

<sup>10</sup> On the “immanently social characteristic of the sign” (xxii) and the function of artworks as part of a wider sign system, see Norman Bryson, “Introduction,” in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, ed. Norman Bryson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); for the quotations above, see xxii and xxiv. Bryson’s discussion focuses on artworks as representations; however, the focal point is the “signifying work,” which may also include non-figurative art (xxvi)

<sup>11</sup> Bruce W. Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense,” *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Sandy Nairne, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Reesa Greenberg (London: Routledge, 1996). For the quotations above, see 175–176 and 181; cf. also 183.

a common passport union, and the strengthening of cultural democracy. The Nordic ministers for culture set up the Nordic Culture Commission in 1946 to advise their governments on cultural exchanges and collaborations.<sup>12</sup> Also, Nordic artists revived old regional networks and collaborations, resulting, for instance, in the founding of NKF in November 1945.<sup>13</sup>

By this time, art and culture were becoming an integrated part of the Nordic public sector by it providing the primary economic base. The national art markets were small, with few actors, a modest turnover, and besides a few wealthy patrons of art, it lacked the customer potential for any substantial commercial expansion.<sup>14</sup> So, to secure arts funding and safeguard the “principle of equality,” there was a need for publicly financed culture. This Nordic welfare model of the democratic distribution of culture meant providing public libraries, concert halls, museums, galleries, as well as subsidized entrance fees or tickets, and publicly funded higher art education and financial support for a geographically distributed system of civil society art organizations providing cultural activities for children and adults.<sup>15</sup>

The grateful recognition in the exhibition catalogs of government and municipal funding and the financial support given by museums and major art galleries reflects that NKF was part of this funding system as an autonomous cultural civil society organization.<sup>16</sup> Even if the catalogs (as well as NKF’s archival documents) hardly mention cultural policy, it is evident that many of the organization’s aims

were clearly in accord with the political efforts to support the arts. The exhibitions could stimulate the jobs market for artists; the artworks in each exhibition were for sale, and by including graphic art, they offered affordable art to low-income earners. In keeping with the ideal of the diffusion of culture outside of the capitals, three of the exhibitions were presented in regional cities: Bergen (as well as Oslo) in 1953, Gothenburg in 1957, and Odense in 1959.<sup>17</sup> All exhibitions were displayed in public museums or art galleries and could thus also be said to be in line with the ideals of providing art for the general public and educating taste.<sup>18</sup>

## Alumni Networks

At the inaugural meeting of NKF in November 1945, it was decided that one of its aims should be to arrange regular exhibitions presenting a selection of the “best art of living Nordic artists” exhibited during the last two years.<sup>19</sup>

National juries appointed by NKF’s national committees selected the artworks for each of the eight exhibitions.<sup>20</sup> Directions for selecting the artworks were noted in the minutes of the inaugural meeting in 1945. It was stated that “quality” should be the leading selection criterion; however, it was also noted that younger generations should be represented.<sup>21</sup> What constituted “quality” appears not to have been further clarified judging from the critical response, the catalogs from 1946 to 1959, and the minutes of the annual meetings of NKF’s federal council. Instead, the all-inclusive approach emerges as the guiding principle.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Kharkina, *From Kinship to Global Brand: The Discourse on Culture in Nordic Cooperation after World War II* (Diss., Stockholm University, Stockholm, 2013), 49–58.

<sup>13</sup> On the formation of NKF, see *Redogörelse för Nordiska Konstförbundet och dess bildande* (Stockholm: Vardagstryck Kungliga biblioteket, 1945). On earlier Nordic contacts, see Marta Edling, “Building New Collaborations With Old Networks,” in *YEARS – The Nordic Art Association’s Swedish Section*, eds. Björn Norberg, Camilla Larsson, and Jonatan Habib Engqvist (Stockholm: Arvinius + Orfeus Publishing, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Simo Häyrynen, “Renegotiating Cultural Welfare: The Adoption of Neoliberal Trends in Finnish Cultural Policy and How It Fits the Nordic Model of a Welfare State,” *Art and the Challenge of Markets. Volume 1 National Cultural Politics and the Challenges of Marketization and Globalization*, eds. Victoria D. Alexander, Samuli Hägg, and Simo Häyrynen (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 156–157, 160; Finn Jor, “Public Support of Culture and the Arts,” in *Nordic Democracy: Ideas, Issues, and Institutions in Politics, Economy, Education, Social and Cultural Affairs of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden*, eds. Erik J. Friis, Folmer Wisti, et al. (Copenhagen: Det Danske Selskab, 1981), 504–505; Per Mangset, Anita Kangas, Dorte Skot-Hansen, and Geir Vestheim, “Editors’ Introduction,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* vol. 14, no. 1, 2008: 2.

<sup>15</sup> Duelund, *The Nordic Cultural Model*, 487–490.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, catalogs of the exhibitions held in 1947, 1949, 1950, 1953, 1957, and 1959 for references to financial support given by the authorities.

<sup>17</sup> The reach of the exhibitions outside of the capitals after 1950 is commented upon in the 1959 catalog *Nordisk kunst gennem 10 år: 1949–1959: maleri, skulptur, grafik* (Odense, 1959), iv; cf. also *Nordisk Kunst 1953* (Bergen and Oslo, 1953), 6. The inclusion of publicly financed monumental art in 1949 was highlighted as a topical event in the catalog *Den store nordiske kunstudstilling i København 1949*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> The founding documents emphasized that NKF would act as a stimulus in the wider context of Nordic cultural exchange. See *Redogörelse [1945]*, 26. The art exhibited in the Nordic exhibitions was for sale; all catalogs refer to price lists available at the museum.

<sup>19</sup> Strömberg, *Konstliv i Norden*, 41, and Nordiska Konstförbundet. Förbundsrådsprotokoll 1945. Archive of Nordiska Konstförbundet, Stockholm. The exhibitions were less frequent in the 1950s, and the period spanned up to ten years in the exhibitions in 1957 and 1959.

<sup>20</sup> The members of the national juries were presented in the catalogs.

<sup>21</sup> Nordiska Konstförbundet. Förbundsrådsprotokoll 1945. Archive of Nordiska Konstförbundet, Stockholm.

However, the selections were not random. The educational backgrounds of the 449 Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish artists presented in the exhibitions reveals an underlying social logic. Several of them who sat on the juries and/or participated in the exhibitions were, or had been, professors at the schools of the art academies in Copenhagen, Oslo, and Stockholm. Further, more than half of all participating artists from these countries, and many Icelandic artists, were alumni of these national institutions.<sup>22</sup> The inclusion of early career artists annoyed their more renowned peers, and minutes from meetings of NKF's federal council testify to voices arguing for a stricter selection, that is, focusing on more senior names.<sup>23</sup> However, even in 1959, the exhibitions' founding principle, namely, that they were not "elite exhibitions," was emphasized.<sup>24</sup> Presenting the "best art of living Nordic artists" had to be a well-considered balance between generations of professionals united by collegial loyalties.

Another significant aspect of the alumni networks was their regional connections. The oldest generation of professors had had regular contacts in Paris and Copenhagen since the 1910s and had created a Scandinavian artists' association in Paris in the 1920s and early 1930s. They also collaborated on, and participated in, Scandinavian and Nordic exhibitions in Paris and Scandinavian cities during the interwar period.<sup>25</sup> Also, in Finland, it was the Swedish-speaking artists, well connected to these Scandinavian networks, who dominated NKF's Finnish committee.<sup>26</sup> In fact, these transnational and regional connections were fundamental to NKF's

creation, and these professional contacts continued to dominate the organization during this period.<sup>27</sup>

## Francophile Taste

The fact that many of the participating artists were interconnected through their educational and professional backgrounds may lead to the assumption that artistic reproduction and stylistic similarities can be found in the artworks selected for the exhibitions. A first impression of the visual material, however, is that it does not provide any clear evidence that the national sections had such biases. On the contrary, the widespread influence of earlier European contacts in Nordic art was everywhere to see. An overview of the art and artists presented, for example, as found in the 313 illustrations in the catalogs or in searches in later online museum collections, attests to the transnational contacts of Nordic artists both before and after WWII.<sup>28</sup> The exhibitions displayed not only the historical changes of styles of different generations in the exhibitions but also traces, just like sediments, of the presence of contacts, mainly from French but German art as well, in 1910s and interwar Nordic art. In short, the exhibitions' national sections presented different stylistic traits stemming from cross-border contacts of earlier periods.<sup>29</sup>

A closer look at the list of participating artists reveals, however, continuities. The most obvious is the dominance of Francophile attitudes in Nordic art as far back as the turn of the twentieth century. This comes through in the illustrations in the catalogs as either a post-cubist formalization and refinement of volumes revealing stylistic traits from Cézanne, Picasso, and Braque, or emphasizing the surface effect and a vivid and gestural use of color and brushwork stemming from French Fauvism and

<sup>22</sup> Edling, "Building New Collaborations With Old Networks." On the state of Icelandic art in the 1940s, see Kristján Fridriksson, *Islenszk myndlist Art in Iceland* (Reykjavik, 1943) and *Den store nordiske kunststilling i København 1949*, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Nordiska Konstförbundet. Förbundsråds-protokoll 1947–1949, 1953, 1956. Archive of Nordiska Konstförbundet Stockholm.

<sup>24</sup> Nordiska Konstförbundet. Förbundsråds-protokoll 1959. Archive of Nordiska Konstförbundet Stockholm

<sup>25</sup> The importance of Paris as a hub for Nordic artists was underlined in the 1946 NKF yearbook. See Finn Nielsen, "Nordisk Kunstforbund spiller opp," *Nordisk Kunstforbunds årsbok*, ed. Finn Nielsen (Oslo, 1947). On the network L'association des artistes Scandinaves à Paris, established in Paris in 1923, see Edling, "Building New Collaborations With Old Networks." On Copenhagen, see Cecile Marie Dahlhoff, "Marvellous Inspiration: Copenhagen as a Nordic Artistic Centre in the First Decades of the 20th Century," in *Nordisk modernisme*, ed. Cecile Marie Dahlhoff (Aalborg: Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 212–214. Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, "Routes and Ruptures. Swedish Artistic Mobility in the Early Twentieth Century," *Art@s Bulletin* vol. 11, 2 (Fall 2022) and Andrea Kollnitz, "Charting the Beyond. On the Two "First" International Surrealist Exhibitions in Scandinavia," *Art@s Bulletin* vol. 11, 2 (Fall 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Kristina Linnovaara presents interesting data on NKF's Finnish section in her doctoral dissertation *Makt konst elit* (Diss., Helsinki University, Helsinki, 2008), 92–93.

<sup>27</sup> On the brotherhood logic of NKF's network, see Edling, "Building New Collaborations With Old Networks." A telling fact is that the Nordic avant-garde artists collaborating with Léger and attending the Académie Moderne in Paris in the 1920s were not part of this network and were, with few exceptions, never showcased at the NKF exhibitions.

<sup>28</sup> On the access to visual material discussed below, see footnote 2.

<sup>29</sup> On the international travels of Nordic artists, see Charlotte Ashby, "Nordic Modernism," *Nordisk Modernisme*, ed. Cecile Marie Dahlhoff, 208, and Skrubbe, "Routes and Ruptures."

late post-impressionism (e.g., Matisse, Bonnard, or Derain). This well-tempered modern refinement of figurative subject matter was adopted by the network of the older Scandinavian Paris travelers and their many alumni. It also manifested itself in the Finnish and Icelandic sections, although here German expressionism can also be identified.<sup>30</sup>

The exhibitions also presented Danish and Icelandic artists deviating from the cubist or Fauvist formulas by focusing on surrealist or geometric/expressive non-figurative art. Among them, the Danish artists who were members of the Cobra group are perhaps among the most well-known and (more or less) the only artists in the exhibitions who could be said to have showcased “avant-garde” art.<sup>31</sup> Their peculiar brand of expressionist primitivism had its origins in Parisian surrealism and German expressionism. Several of them were part of the artist collective Helhesten (The Hell-Horse), founded during the war in Nazi-occupied Copenhagen.<sup>32</sup> As the art historian Kerry Greaves has highlighted, Danish and Icelandic “radical artists” such as these were “tolerated” in Denmark as long as they did not challenge the dominant networks.<sup>33</sup> The more notable members of this Danish group also had connections to the legitimate networks since they were alumni and later also professors of the school of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Ejler Bille (1910–2004) was presented in the Nordic exhibitions in 1950 and 1955; Henry Heerup (1907–1993) in 1947, 1949, 1950, and 1955; and Egill Jacobsen (1910–1998) in 1948, 1950, 1955, and 1957. Their expressionist and abstracted primitivism also characterized the art of the Icelandic members of the former Helhesten collective, such as Svavar Gudnason

(1909–1988), who participated in the Nordic exhibitions in 1946, 1947, 1953, 1955, and 1959, and Sigurjón Ólafsson (1908–1982) in 1947, 1949, 1950, and 1953.<sup>34</sup> This kind of expressive and gestural art, intense in color and brushwork, is repeatedly visible in the illustrations of the Icelandic art in the catalogs of the exhibitions. The catalogs show, in this way, the span of artistic idioms that characterized the Icelandic and Danish sections and the national exhibition committees’ need to balance the effect of competition and tolerate deviations to legitimize their selections. What thus appears as an effect of peaceful co-existence can better be described as an equilibrium achieved by a deliberate negotiating of the NKR juries’ co-optive selection strategies and the repressive effects of the alumni networks, most often dominated by artists inclined to use Fauvist or cubist idioms.<sup>35</sup>

## A New Exhibition Format

During the period 1946–1959, the 313 illustrations and the 4,110 artwork titles in the catalogs signal the increased presence of abstract art in the Nordic countries.<sup>36</sup> Early career artists with an inclination toward abstraction had already been included in the first exhibition in 1946, and non-figurative art was first represented in the illustrations in the catalogs in 1947, showing the Icelandic artist Thorvaldur Skúlason’s (1906–1984) painting *Composition*, demonstrating a vivacious, colorful, and playful abstracted form and energetic brushwork.

The escalating interest in abstraction was also a key factor in the decision not to have separate national sections in the 1957 exhibition. This year and in 1959, the artworks were instead arranged thematically along artistic ‘affinities’ according to style,

<sup>30</sup> On this Francophile tendency in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish art, see Kari J. Brandtzaeg, “Unionalen – A Travelling Scandinavian Exhibition Platform,” in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries, 1925–1950*, eds. Benedikt Hjartarson, Andrea Kollnitz, Per Stounbjerg, and Tania Ørum, vol. 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 581–585. On Finland, see Erik Kruskopf, *Ljusets byggare: bildkonst i Finland på 1940–1950-talen* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2010); on Iceland, see Anna Jóhannsdóttir, “Turbulence in Icelandic Art,” in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde*, eds. Hjartarson, Kollnitz, Stounbjerg, and Ørum, 913–914.

<sup>31</sup> On Cobra, see, for example, Karen Kurcsynski, “Asger Jorn and Cobra,” in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde*, in Hjartarson, Kollnitz, Stounbjerg, and Ørum, and Kristian Handberg, “Exhibiting Cobra across the Iron Curtain: Exhibition diplomacy and modernism as Ostpolitik across borders in Northern Europe during the Cold War,” *Art@S Bulletin* vol. 11, 2 (Fall 2022)

<sup>32</sup> Kerry Greaves, *The Danish Avant-Garde and World War II: The Helhesten Collective* (New York: Routledge, 2019), e.g., xii–xxix.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Edling, “Building New Collaborations With Old Networks” for examples in the eight exhibitions of ‘odd’ Swedish artists. On the Swedish alumni networks’ co-optive strategies, see Marta Edling, “A Radical Academy of Fine Art? Power and Social Dimensions in Recruitment to the Fine Art Professorships at the Royal College of Art in Stockholm, Sweden, 1938–2000,” *Passepartout - Skrifter for kunsthistorie*, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Titles such as “Composition” that avoided representational interpretations and/or indicated abstract content increased in number. See, for instance, below the titles of artworks in 1959 by the Danish sculptor Robert Jacobsen. On postwar abstraction in the Nordics, see Tania Ørum, “The Post-War Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries,” in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries, 1950–1975*, eds. Tania Ørum and Jesper Olsson, vol. 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 25–32.



mixing artists from the different Nordic nations.<sup>37</sup> The originator of this new exhibition arrangement was the Norwegian painter and art critic Håkon Stenstadsvold (1912–1977).<sup>38</sup> Arguing that Nordic art had apparent similarities, both in content and form, he suggested that artistic orientation, rather than national borders, should decide the artworks to go on display. He suggested that the presentation of artworks should be organized along three formal tendencies: “classic representations of nature,” “symbolic and romantic expressive art,” and “non-figurative abstract and concrete” art.<sup>39</sup>

In late autumn 1957, the members of NKF’s federal council were in their evaluations positive about this new thematic organization of the exhibition. Observing the approving reviews of Nordic art critics, they, however, also noted that representational art risked falling short due to the hanging of artworks creating a new divide between what appeared as topical and traditional art.<sup>40</sup> The observation also highlights what now disappeared with the closure of the national sections, namely, the mix of recent and older artistic styles, and as a result, also the blend of generations. What was now introduced was a template that disconnected the artists from their national networks, instead inscribing them in a narrative of aesthetic affinities. Moreover, as noted above, some members of NKF highlighted that this could undermine the notion of modern art as common ground for generations and figurative/non-figurative styles.

The new hanging of artworks, introducing the fundamental principle of a separation of abstraction and figuration, implied a new idea of formal kinships in art and indirectly the idea of a genealogical line of stylistic developments where realist approaches

became outmoded. The fact that this new way of displaying artworks originated from an artist-cum-art critic is not surprising. It was in tune not only with the economic logic of the increased competition and consequential differentiation of the galleries in the Paris art market but also with a “modernist” shift in the historiographical idea of the development of the styles of modern art, as presented, for example, in Werner Haftmann’s (1912–1999) *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert* (München, 1954).<sup>41</sup> In Haftmann’s narrative, the idea of national schools became obsolete; instead, the separation of realism and different modes of abstraction was presented as a result of a necessary genealogical development of modern art where abstraction was considered the universal language of the future.<sup>42</sup>

## Everyday Life

The discussion above has highlighted characteristics of the style and formal features of the artworks and the exhibitions’ all-inclusive approach. Below the article instead turns its attention to motifs and subject matter, as presented in the titles of the 4,110 entries and the 313 illustrations in the catalogs, since this, surprisingly enough, contradicts the impression of diversity.<sup>43</sup> In all eight exhibitions, one finds a regional coherence in the frequent use of titles in catalogs referring to what the art historian Norman Bryson has called “low-plane reality,” that is, representations of “routine existence.” The titles refer to toils, work, and everyday life in local milieus and renderings of small, local urban or rural landscapes.<sup>44</sup> The titles alone do not, of course, give

<sup>37</sup> In the catalog, the artists were organized by medium and presented in alphabetical order. No information was given on the order of hanging the artworks in the exhibition. See also footnote 39.

<sup>38</sup> Most Norwegian art critics were by the 1950s also active as painters. See Tore Kirkholt, “Kritikken av overflaten,” in *Kunst og kultur* no.4, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Nordiska konstförbundet. Förbundsprotokoll 1956. Archive of Nordiska Konstförbundet Stockholm. See also the following reviews: Gotthard Johansson, “Nordisk konst i Göteborg,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, October 13, 1957; Håkan Tollet, “Samnordisk konst i Göteborg,” *Hufvudstadsbladet*, October 18, 1957; Alf Jørgen Aas, “Nordisk konst i Göteborg,” *Aftenposten*, October 23, 1957.

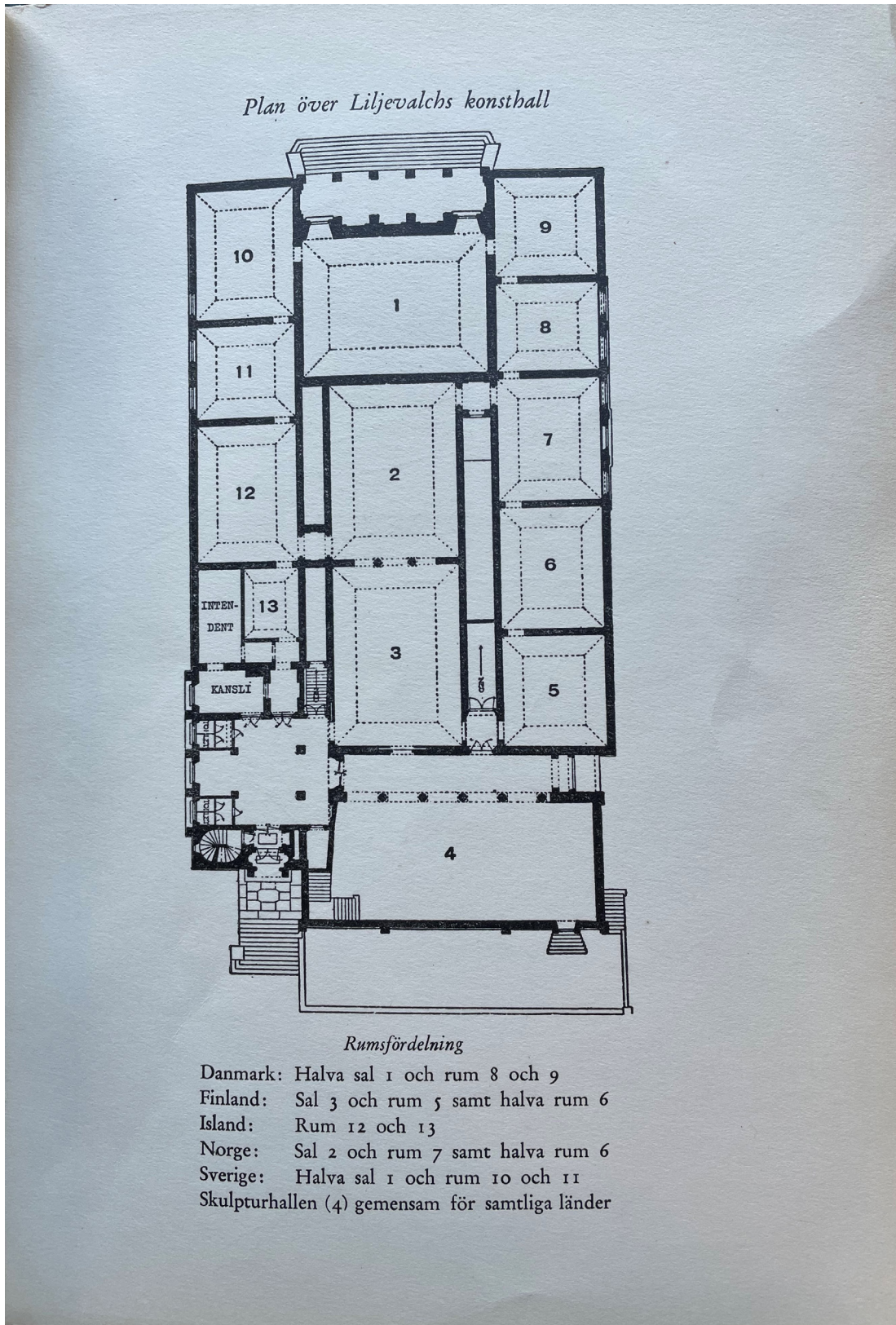
<sup>40</sup> Nordiska Konstförbundet. Förbundsrådsprotokoll 1957 and Nordiska Konstförbundet. Svenska sektionen. Styrelseberättelse 1957. Archive of Nordiska Konstförbundet Stockholm

<sup>41</sup> On the differentiation of the Paris market, see Verlaïne, *Les galeries d’art contemporain à Paris*. On “modernist” art history, see Charles Harrison, “Modernism,” in *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1996] 2003), 191–192.

<sup>42</sup> Werner Haftmann, *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1954), 12 and 480. For the theoretical context of Haftmann’s book, see Christoph Zuschlag, “Die theoretischen Diskurse über moderne Kunst in der Nachkriegszeit,” in “*So fin man einfach an, ohne viele Worte.*” *Ausstellungswesen und Sammlungspolitik in den ersten Jahren nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, eds. Julie Friedrich and Andreas Prinzing (Cologne: De Gruyter, 2013). On the liberating and political role ascribed to abstraction, see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Naissance de l’art contemporain 1945–1970: une histoire mondiale* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2021), 38–48.

<sup>43</sup> The survey of catalogs was also in this case complemented by further searches in online museum databases (as referred to in footnote 2).

<sup>44</sup> Norman Bryson discusses the notion of “low-plane reality” in connection with the genre of still life; however, it is clear from his discussion that it can also encompass motifs from everyday life in a more general sense. See Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990); cf., for instance, 14, 60–61, 158, 160, and 178.



**Figure 2.** Plan of the rooms in the catalog *Nordisk Konst 1946–1947 Måleri och skulptur* (Stockholm, 1947) presenting the national hanging. It reveals the diplomacy involved in distributing and sharing space: the grand hall at the entrance housed sculpture from all five nations, the three rooms in the middle focused on the larger nations, placing Island in two of the smaller rooms. Norway was presented in rooms 2, 7 and 6, Finland in 3, 5 and 6, Sweden in room 1, 10, 11 and Denmark in room 1, 8 and 9. Photo: Author.

any indication of how the subject matter was rendered. However, the fact that most of the titles indicate representational content is interesting given that, as discussed further below, illustrations in the catalogs show that also non-figurative artworks could have titles referring to reality. Even as late as the 1959 exhibition in Odense, Denmark, circa 250 of 454 artwork titles refer explicitly to renderings of familiar objects or milieus, for instance, children, friends, and family members in their homes or in local settings, often busy doing daily household work, manual labor, etc. And early on, as evident in the catalog of the first exhibition in 1946 in Oslo, there were exceedingly few exceptions to this rule.<sup>45</sup>

A survey of titles of this kind indicates recurring points of interest. Many reflect everyday routines and tasks in homes, schools, and workplaces, for example, *Spårvagnens hållplats/Trikkeholdeplassen* (The Tram Station, Gunvor Grönvik, Finland, 1946); *Jernverket* (The Ironworks, Reidar Aulie, Norway, 1947); *Skopudser og siddende man* (Shoe-Cleaner and Sitting Man, Dan Sterup-Hansen, Denmark, 1947); *Flickor som bär hem ris* (Girls Bringing Home Brushwood, Emil Johanson Thor, Sweden, 1948); *Fiskere i storm* (Fishermen in the Storm, Finnur Jónsson, Iceland, 1949); *Tukinuittajat/Stockflottare* (Log Drivers, Aimo Tukiainen, Finland, 1950); *Stenkrossen Söndrum* (The Stone Crusher Söndrum, Sven Erixson, Sweden, 1953), *Kelneren* (The Waiter, Ludvig Eikaas, Norway, 1957); and *Skolebaenken* (The Desk, Ernst Eberlein, Denmark, 1959).<sup>46</sup>

Given this interest in human labor and everyday life, it is interesting to note that the illustrations in the Nordic catalogs produce very few examples of the kind of “Modernist realism” emphasizing the vulnerability of the human figure that frequently appeared in European figurative art of the postwar period up until the late 1950s. This kind of realist and existentialist art, as found, for example, in Britain in the works of Francis Bacon (1909–1992)

or the “kitchen-sink” painters Jack Smith (1928–2011) and John Bratby (1928–1992), paid close attention to “modern life” and “dramatic tensions” and was often, as described by the British art historian James Hyman, “permeated with a sense of threat and anxiety.”<sup>47</sup>

This British art was in October 1959 presented in the German art journal *Das Kunstwerk* in a special issue on realist art from the US and Europe between 1940 and 1959. In the illustrations, one finds an extensive overview of the kind of “modernist realism” described by Hyman, for instance, works by the American artist Ben Shahn (1898–1969), the French artists Bernard Buffet (1928–1999) and Francis Gruber (1912–1948), the Italian artist Renato Guttuso (1911–1987), and the German-Austrian artist Werner Berg (1904–1981). The many illustrations in the special issue also reflect Hyman’s observation on psychological or existential interests in contemporary British, French, German, Italian, and US realist art.<sup>48</sup> Providing a basis for a comparison, this special issue presents a telling contrast to the Nordic catalogs. In the illustrations in the German art journal, one finds a more somber, austere, and distant attitude that, with few exceptions, lacks the more intimate atmosphere and sympathetic aspect of the Nordic artworks.<sup>49</sup>

It should be said that this contrast between the US/European and Nordic examples does not mean there are no similarities. In most portraits and representations of the human figure, as found in the illustrations in the Nordic catalogs, there is, not unlike the illustrations in the German journal, repeated attention given to the human figure’s ability to

<sup>45</sup> Judging by the titles of the 393 works listed in the catalog of the 1946 exhibition in Oslo, not more than circa 10 percent refer to other kinds of topics, such as religious motifs, neutral titles as, for example, “composition,” psychological states of mind or fantasy worlds, literature, historic events, the recent war, and renowned individuals.

<sup>46</sup> Gunvor Grönvik, <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/collection/>; Ernst Eberlein <http://www5.kb.dk/images/billed/2010/okt/billeder/object644630/da/>

<sup>47</sup> James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain during the Cold War, 1945–60* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 13–37. The Danish graphic artists Henry Heerup, Palle Nielsen, Dan Sterup-Hansen, and Sven Wiig Hansen presented in graphic exhibitions in Copenhagen in 1956, 1958, and 1959 art that reflected a more somber realism, as characterized by Hyman. See Liza Burmeister Kaaring, *Mennesket i tiden* (Diss., University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, 2015); cf. Hyman, *The Battle for Realism*, 178–179. The Danish artists also participated in the Nordic exhibitions, showing, however, here a wider range of subject matter, for example, “Piano Picture” (Sterup-Hansen, 1949); “Torso” (Wiig Hansen, 1953); and “Happy Child” (Heerup, 1947).

<sup>48</sup> What is not highlighted in the German journal is, interestingly enough, the political commitment of many of the presented artists.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. illustrations in *Das Kunstwerk*, no. 4, vol. 13, 1959, for example, Ben Shahn, “The Blind Accordion Player,” 1945: 9; Bernard Buffet, “La Naine,” 1955: 10; Francis Gruber, “Avant l’Orange,” 1944: 11; Jack Smith, “Shit with Cutlery,” 1956: 13; Werner Rosenbusch, “Roma Quirinale,” 1959: 16; Robert Förch, “Interieur,” 1959: 16; Giuseppe Mig-neco, “Contadini nell’aranceto,” 1958.

communicate existential and ethical dimensions of ordinary human lives. However, the more quiet and low-key Nordic renderings of the human figure reflect little or no drama. The illustrations in the Nordic exhibitions' catalogs show almost no existential gloom or predicaments but instead unpretentious self-portraits of artists, quiet renderings of women and children or elderly people in their homes, and sculptures of children and young people, all artworks with careful attention given to their everyday bodies and lives in ordinary settings, without any sense of existential crisis, for example, *I havestuen. Septemberdag* (In the Garden Door. September Day, Knud Agger, Denmark, 1946); *Pekka* (Olli Miettinen, Finland, 1947); *Statuette* (Sigurd Nome, Norway, 1947); *Mor och barn* (Mother and Child, Torger Enckell, Finland, 1949); *To gamle mennesker* (Two Old People, Folmer Bendtsen, Denmark, 1949); *Ikkunan äiressii/Ved vinduet* (By the Window, Axel Revold, Norway, 1950); *Truls med spaden* (Truls with the Spade, Hans Jacob Meyer, Norway, 1953); *Mañana mañanina* (Gottfred Eickhoff, Denmark, 1957); *Peter* (Stig Blomberg, Sweden, 1959); and *Kvinna med gosse* (Woman with Young Boy, Ina Colliander, Finland, 1957).<sup>50</sup>

Highlighting the lack of existential tension or drama does not mean that the Nordic exhibitions did not show representations of human suffering. The trauma of the war is present in the early postwar years, yet in surprisingly few works given the hardships and Nazi occupation of Norway and Denmark, the American presence in Iceland, and Finland's wars against the Soviet Union. There is no evidence (as found in the subject title or illustrations) of motifs glorifying the war or patriotic motifs or protests; instead, artworks referring to the war highlighted individual sacrifices and the many victims, for instance, a monument commemorating seven fallen freedom fighters (Henrik Starcke, Denmark, 1946); *Flyktningar* (Refugees, Martin Emond, Sweden, 1946); *Gasskammer* (Gas Chamber, Arne Bruland, Norway, 1947); *Stupad kamrat* (Fallen

Soldier, Unto Pusa, Finland, 1948); and *Krigsblinde* (War Blind, Dan Sterup-Hansen, Denmark, 1953).<sup>51</sup> Similarly, titles signaling heroic national motifs, or outspoken political rhetoric, are almost completely absent. There are few exceptions to the lack of overt ideological content. However, we find recurrent religious motifs, often focusing on the life of Christ, for example, *Pieta* (Gunnar Finne, Finland, 1949); *Getsemane* (Bror Hjorth, Sweden, 1949); *Kristusfigur* (Christ, Ivar Lindekrantz, Sweden, 1957); and *Getsemane have* (The Garden in Getsemane, Dagfin Werenskiold, Norway, 1959).<sup>52</sup>

Judging from the illustrations and titles in the Nordic exhibition catalogs, one also finds, of course, artworks that attest to quite different lines of interest in Nordic art. The increased number of abstract and non-figurative artworks in the exhibitions is indicated by the marked presence in the 1957 and 1959 catalogs of artwork titles that avoid references to representational content, such as the Danish sculptor Robert Jacobsen's seven sculptures in 1959: *Tredobbelt træk* (Triple Strokes), *Skulptur* (Sculpture), *7-11*, *Skulptur 74* (Sculpture 74), *Skulptur 114* (Sculpture 114), *Passager* (Passages), and *11-17*.

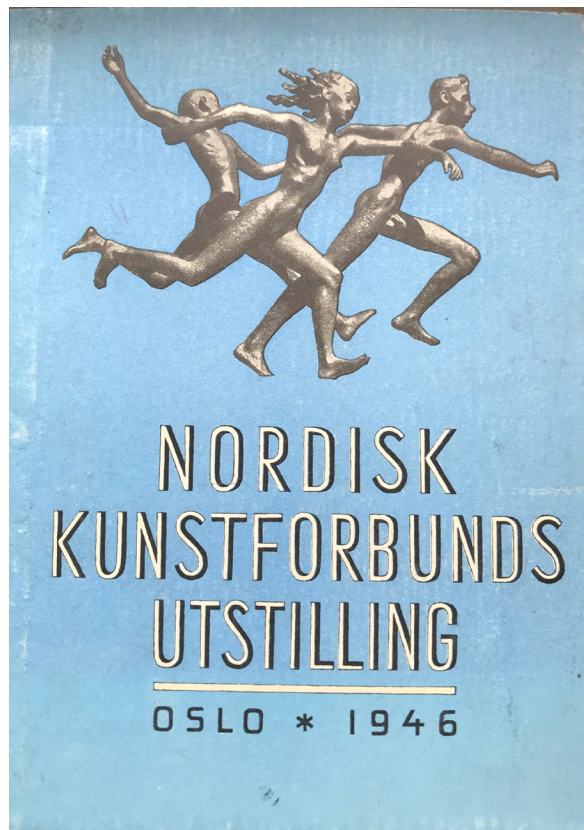
Another, more traditional contrast to the attention given to mundane subject matter is sculptures idealizing the young (often female) body, with titles such as *Pomona* (Johannes Bjerg, Denmark, 1947 and 1950); *Kevät/Våren* (Spring, Erik Grate, Sweden, 1950); *Staaende pige* (Standing Girl, Gerhard Henning, Denmark, 1953); and *15 år* (15 Years Old, John Lundqvist, Sweden, 1957).<sup>53</sup> They belong to a more traditional school of Nordic sculpture emanating from Parisian studio traditions and the turn-of-the-century and early twentieth-century French sculpture of, for example, Charles Despiau or Aristide Maillol. The French elegance was, however, often turned into a more rustic, archaic, and compact form, and often reflecting the interest in

<sup>50</sup> Knud Agger, "I havestuen"; Folmer Bendtsen, "To gamle," <https://open.smk.dk>. Olli Miettinen, "Pekka"; Ina Colliander, "Sirpale," <https://www.kansalligalleria.fi/en/search>; Stig Blomberg, "Peter," <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki>.

<sup>51</sup> Unto Pusa, "Fallen soldier," <https://www.kansalligalleria.fi/en/search>; Dan Sterup Hansen, "Krigsblinde," <https://open.smk.dk> (several versions available). On the paucity of war-related subject matter in Nordic art between 1939 and 1945, see Tulla Grünberger, *Svenskt måleri under andra världskriget* (Diss., Stockholm University, Stockholm, 1984), 203–206.

<sup>52</sup> Bror Hjorth Getsemane, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki>.

<sup>53</sup> Eric Grate, <https://sis.modernamuseet.se/en/>; Gerhard Henning, "Dansk pige" <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki>



**Figure 3.** Cover of the printed supplement to the catalog *Nordisk kunstforbunds utstilling maleri og skulptur* (Oslo 1946) featuring the bronze statue *De badande barnen* (The Bathing Children) by the Swedish artist Stig Blomberg. The sculpture, which represents the summer holiday motif of excited naked adolescents racing in shallow water, had been erected in the Swedish town of Laholm in 1940, and in Antwerpen in Belgium in the early 1950s. Photo: Author. Reproduced by permission of Jane Blomberg Fredlund.

everyday subject matter in renderings of, for instance, children, young people, athletes, and animals: *På badstranden* (On the Beach, Mikko Hovi, Finland, 1948); *Morgonbestyr* (Morning Cares, Carl Wilhelms, Finland, 1948 and 1953); *Ung flicka* (Young Girl, Bror Hjorth, Sweden, 1947); and *Nainen/Kvinna* (Woman, Gerdur Helgadóttir, Iceland, 1950).<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Bror Hjorth Margit, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki>. On Swedish sculpture, see Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, *Skulptur i folkhemmet: Den offentliga skulpturens institutionalisering, referentialitet och rumsliga situationer 1940–1975* (Diss., Uppsala University, Uppsala, 2007), 154–171. On Finnish sculpture, see Kruskopf, *Ljusets byggare*, 139–155; Nummelin “Skulptur” *Konsten i Finland: Från medeltid till nutid*, ed. Bengt von Bonsdorff (Esbo: Schildt, 1998), 279–292, and Pirkko Tuukkanen and Timo Valjakka (eds.), *1950-luku: vapautumisen aika 1950-talet: frigörelsens tid* (Helsinki: Suomen taideyhdistys, 2000), 33. On Danish sculpture, see, for example, Henning Jørgensen, “Tradition,” in *Ny dansk kunsthistorie Bd 7 Tradition og surrealisme*, ed. Henning Jørgensen and Villads Villadsen (Copenhagen: Fogtdal, 1995), 14–23; cf. also 124–125. On Norway, see Even Hebbe Johnsrud, “Mellomkrigstidens skulptur,” in *Norges kunsthistorie*, eds. Christian Norberg-Schulz, Trygve Nergaard, Even Hebbe Johnsrud, and Alf Bøe (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1983), 259–305. On Iceland, see, for example,

## Landscapes and Local Neighborhoods

Corresponding in an interesting way to the renderings of the everyday human figure are the many titles indicating representations of Nordic nature and its seasons. Titles such as *Vinterskymning* (Winter Dusk, Gunvor Grönvik, Finland, 1946); *Granskov. Lys Aften* (Spruce Forest. Bright Evening, William Scharff, Denmark, 1947); *Pakkashuurua/Frostdimma* (Frost Fog, Guðmundur Einarsson, Iceland, 1950); *Nuoskaa lunta/Våt snö* (Wet Snow, Sören Steen Johnsen, Norway, 1950); *Vårsörja* (Spring Slush, Yrjö Saarinen, Finland, 1957); *Vinternatt* (Winter’s Night, Erkki Heikkilä, Finland, 1959); or *Når isen knækker* (When the Ice Is Cracking, Svavar Guðnason, Iceland, 1959) indicate, in the same way as the portraits, interiors, and renderings of mundane objects and toils, a close or intimate experience of the subject matter. The many landscapes, local sceneries, and neighborhoods in the illustrations and titles in the catalogs reflect ways of living close to nature and a familiarity with being able to sense changes in the weather and seasons, necessary for spending time in nature both for leisure and work. Nature is frequently rendered free of drama and effect; instead, the emphasis is on nature as a familiar place, found close by in local settings of native places and living quarters in small urban milieus or rural, agricultural districts. It was also depicted as wild nature where Nordic citizens by old tradition had public access.<sup>55</sup> Hence, in the rendering of local milieus, as presented in the catalog illustrations, no distinction is made between rural and urban as a difference between traditional/provincial and modern/metropolitan. Instead, the local is most often rural, and the few urban contexts appear as small-scale or familiar places.

Nature was also a recurrent subject matter found in abstract or semi-abstract art during the 1950s. Examples from the illustrations in the catalogs show

Gunnar J. Árnason, Hrafnhildur Schram, and Aesa Sigurjónsdóttir, *Islensk listasaga II* (Reykjavik: Forlagið, 2011), 136–143, 216–243.

<sup>55</sup> On the tradition of public access in Norden, see *Allemansrätten i Norden* (Köpenhamn: Nordiska ministerrådet, 1997) This kind of closeness of art and nature is not something unique. Malcolm Andrews highlights a similar “integration of the human and natural world” as it occurs in older landscape painting. He cites John Constable’s 1836 lecture on a winter landscape painting by Jacob van Ruisdael. See Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 184–185.

how abstraction could be used as a method to render grass: *Spidser der rækker mod himlen* (Points Reaching for the Sky, Else Alfelt, Denmark, 1949); seaside cliffs, *Abstraktion av landskap* (Abstracted Landscape, Lage Lindell, Sweden, 1953); or a quay in central Paris, *Quai Malaquais* (Olle Nyman, Sweden, 1953). Non-figurative form could also be used to represent animals, such as a sea bird, *Rödnäbbad tärna* (Red-Billed Tern, Sigurjón Ólafsson, Iceland, 1957); or cows, *Brokiga kor* (Motley Cows, Alf Olsson, Sweden, 1957); or biological cells, *Cellformationer* (Cell Formations, Endre Nemes, Sweden, 1959).<sup>56</sup>

The Nordic representations of rural environments and wild nature were clearly part of a Western tradition of modernist renderings of national landscapes.<sup>57</sup> Yet, in the context of the Nordic exhibitions, such artworks, I argue, signal, even if differing in formal aspects demonstrating realist, gestural, and abstracted idioms, not so much the nationality of nature but mediate what Linda Nochlin has called “a sense of place” and the locally connected experience of living, working, traveling, or idling about in nature.<sup>58</sup> The titles do not refer to eye-catching or attractive qualities or to grandeur or (patriotic) idealism. Instead, the catalogs indicate a low-key and close interest in nature as a familiar physical context of daily life.<sup>59</sup>

By way of summing up the above observations, it is interesting to note that even if we consider the presence in the exhibitions of the more traditional tendencies in Nordic sculpture, or surrealist painting, religious motifs, and representations of the traumas of the war, as well as the increase in semi-abstract, abstract, and non-figurative art, mundane life and local environments are everywhere to be found in the catalogs throughout the period.

<sup>56</sup> Else Alfelt Points, <https://www.wikiart.org>; Lage Lindell and Olle Nyman, <https://sis.modernamuseet.se/en>

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Jóhannsdóttir, “Turbulence in Icelandic Art.”

<sup>58</sup> Citation from Linda Nochlin, “Courbet, Oller and a Sense of Place: The Regional, the Provincial, and the Picturesque in 19th-Century Art,” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1991), 20. Nochlin’s phrase “sense of place” refers to “the regional, the marginal, the peripheral,” and an “ungeneralized, unidealized configuration” of a local setting.

<sup>59</sup> Anna Jóhannsdóttir suggests a similar conclusion, although stresses this is part of building national identity. See Jóhannsdóttir, “Turbulence in Icelandic Art,” 917–918.

## Nordic Art and Cultural Democracy

In postwar Western Europe, politically committed art was an important part of the development of modern art. Many artists in, for instance, Britain, Italy, and France believed engaged art to be a way of contributing to building a better future; one such example is Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), who became a member of the French Communist Party in 1944.<sup>60</sup> Left-wing, and socially committed and radical, art had also been a part of the modern Nordic art scene and can be traced back to the late nineteenth century.<sup>61</sup> Evidently, some of the artworks highlighting everyday life were made by Nordic artists who had taken a political stand during the interwar period, such as the Norwegian painters Willi Middelfart (1904–1975) and Reidar Aulie (1904–1977), the Swedish painter Albin Amelin (1902–1975), the Danish artist Folmer Bendtsen (1907–1993), and the Finnish artist Tapio Tapiovaara (1908–1982).<sup>62</sup> However, one finds in the exhibitions a wide range of art with subject matter stemming from local, rural, or small-scale urban milieus, homes and families, workplaces, and manual labor, produced by artists not associated in art history with socially committed or left-wing art.

These renderings of everyday life have, instead, been seen, both by contemporary criticism and later art history, as expressing a nostalgic preference for domestic idylls or provincial, backward values and national ideals.<sup>63</sup> More favorable accounts have dis-

<sup>60</sup> Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s–1980s: A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 14–32; Hyman, *The Battle for Realism*, 67–85. French and Italian left-wing art was even influential in the German Democratic Republic. See Jérôme Bazin, “Le réalisme socialiste et ses modèles internationaux,” *Vingtième siècle* vol. 109, janvier–mars 2011. On Picasso, see Joyeux-Prunel, *Naissance de l’art contemporain 1945–1970*, 21–26

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Anna Westerståhl Stenport, “Scandinavian Modernism: Stories of the Transnational and the Discontinuous,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, eds. Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 479–494; Kjersti Bosdotter and Maths Isacson (eds.), *Fram träder arbetaren: arbetarkonst och industrisamhällets bilder i Norden* (Stockholm: Arbetarnas kulturhistoriska sällskap, 2009); Tore Kirkholt, “Krohg, Werenskiöld og naturalismens politiske kraft,” *Kunst og Kultur* no. 3, vol. 96, 2013; Riitta Ojanperä and Timo Huusko (eds.), *Yta och djup: den tidiga modernismen i Finland 1890–1920* (Helsinki: Konstnuseet Ateneum, 2001), 276–291; Henrik Bramsen, “Århundredets første tredjedel,” in *Dansk kunsthistorie. billedkunst og skulptur. Efter 1900. Vort eget århundrede*, ed. Vagn Poulsen (Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag, 1975), 45–53.

<sup>62</sup> Bosdotter and Isacson, *Fram träder arbetaren*.

<sup>63</sup> On Sweden, see Folke Edwards, *Från modernism till postmodernism: Svensk konst 1900–2000* (Lund: Bokförlaget Signum, 2000), 91–96 and 100–109. On Finland, see Liisa Lindgren, “The Return to Nature,” in *Figuration/Abstraction: Strategies for Public Sculpture in Europe, 1945–1968*, ed. Charlotte Benton (New York: Routledge, 2004), 215; Nummelin “Måleri och grafik”, 304, 306. On Norway, see Hans-Jakob Brun, “Etterkrigstid,” and Sidsel Helliesen, “Grafikk,” in *Norges malerkunst*, ed. Knut Berg (Oslo:

cussed these recurrent themes as conditioned by national artistic traditions.<sup>64</sup> Yet, if we note the fact that a majority of the artwork titles of *all* the five nation-states referred to everyday places, people, and routines, these nationally orientated interpretations appear less relevant.

Instead, a significant aspect of the Nordic exhibitions is their highlighting of the important relationship between everyday life and art, an ideal also at the heart of contemporary Nordic cultural policy. If we take as a starting point this assumption that a common denominator of a majority of the artworks in the exhibitions appears to have been the idea that art must matter to, and correspond to, “routine experience” and daily life, it makes sense to also consider the similar and, by this time, very influential ideal in Nordic social and cultural politics of the integration of art in society and the importance of publicly funding culture.<sup>65</sup>

## Art for All!

The idea that art and culture were important to everyday life and that there was a need for a “welfare-based cultural policy” was widely held among liberals and social democrats as well as the labor movement in early postwar Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.<sup>66</sup> However, it is important to note that culture in this context was understood traditionally as high culture and not thought of as a political instrument nor as a weapon for the working classes; rather, it was conceived of idealistically as an educational tool for spiritual cultivation. An aesthetic experience was perceived as valuable, as something compensating for everyday hardships

and toils. As such, it could also potentially reconcile antagonisms in society since the values of art could be appreciated beyond social differences. In doing so, it could also fulfill an educational mission and strengthen the nation-state by stimulating dialog and tolerance between social classes and encouraging mutual respect for the shared cultural heritage.<sup>67</sup> High-brow culture should therefore be accessible to all, not only in public spaces but also in schools, workplaces, and homes.<sup>68</sup> To facilitate consumption by low-income earners as well, citizens should be able to participate in cultural events thanks to subsidized entrance fees or by buying original art, for example, graphic art, at a low price.<sup>69</sup> As noted, being both “egalitarian and paternalistic,” these ideals of democratic access to culture also implied controlling behavior as an instrument forming “taste, consumption, and conduct.”<sup>70</sup>

Here it is important to note the fact that this governance of culture in Nordic politics can be characterized as “consensual,” presupposing a voluntary, self-regulatory participation of both civil society and the individual.<sup>71</sup> And, in contrast to the center of the art market, Paris, there was also in the Nordic countries enormous public enthusiasm for modern art and culture.<sup>72</sup> Art associations and amateur art clubs sprouted up all over the Nordic countries; their numbers rapidly increased in the immediate postwar years. Art educational activities intensified, and the dissemination of high-quality, low-priced

Gyldendal Norsk forlag, 1993), vol. II, 203, 207–216, and 432. On Denmark, see Henning Jørgensen and Villads Villadsen, *Ny dansk kunsthistorie Bd 7 Tradition og surrealisme*, 83–87.

<sup>64</sup> On Denmark, see, for example, Jørgensen, “Tradition,” 11–96, 161–179; on Norway, see Brun, “Etterkrigstid,” 216–228; on Finland, see Nummelin “Skulptur,” 279–290; on Sweden, see Grünberger, *Svenskt måleri under andra världskriget*, 18–22.

<sup>65</sup> Duelund, *The Nordic Cultural Model*, 487–497; Erkki Sevänen and Simo Häyrynen, “Varieties of National Cultural Politics and Art Worlds in an Era of Increasing Marketization and Globalisation,” in *Art and the Challenge of Markets Volume 1*, eds. Victoria D. Alexander, Samuli Hägg, and Simo Häyrynen, 21, and Häyrynen, “Renegotiating Cultural Welfare.”

<sup>66</sup> Duelund, *The Nordic Cultural Model*, 485. On collaborations between social democrats and liberal/farmers parties as well as communist parties in Nordic countries, see Hilson, *The Nordic Model*, 37–46. In Finland, this ideal was cherished in civil society organizations and not in politics.

<sup>67</sup> On ideas on the democratization of culture, see Carl Eric Bay, “Kulturradikalismen i nordiskt perspektiv,” in *Kulturradikalismen: det moderna genombrottets andra fas*, ed. Bertil Nolin (Stockholm: B. Östlings bokförlag, 1993); Hanne Abildgaard, “Avantgarde Strategies versus Democratization and ‘Popularisation,’” in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde*, eds. Hjartarson, Kollnitz, Stounbjerg, and Ørum, 622–624; Anders Frenander, *Kulturen som kulturpolitikens stora problem* (Möklinta: Gidlund, 2014), 92–99; Linnovaara, *Makt konst elit*, 172–176.

<sup>68</sup> Cf., for example, the exhibitions of reproductions of fine art at Norwegian factories. See Harry Fett, *Kunst på arbeidsplassen* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1946), and the Swedish association Föreningen konst i skolan (the Society for Art in Schools). See Marita Lindgren-Fridell, *Föreningen konst i skolan: pionjärinsats i skolans konstbildning, 1947–1976* (Falköping: Gummessons förlag, 1984).

<sup>69</sup> Duelund, *The Nordic Cultural Model*, 487–497. A lack of art education among adults was often understood as a need for distribution and a lack of access to art. See Anna Lena Lindberg, *Konstpedagogikens dilemma: historiska rötter och moderna strategier* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1991), 260–261.

<sup>70</sup> Sevänen and Häyrynen, “Varieties of National Cultural Politics and Art Worlds,” 32–33.

<sup>71</sup> On “consensual governance,” see Axel West Pedersen and Stein Kuhle, “The Nordic Welfare State Model,” in *The Nordic Models in Political Science: Challenged, but Still Viable*, ed. Oddbjørn Knutsen (Oslo: Fagbokforlaget, 2017), 222; on the ideal of self-discipline, see Henrik Stenius, “Nordic Associational Life in a European and an Inter-Nordic Perspective,” in *Nordic Associations in a European Perspective*, eds. Risto Alapuro and Henrik Stenius (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2010), 50–51.

<sup>72</sup> On the lack of French public support for, and interest in, contemporary art, see Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s–1980s*, 100–106.

modern art was a priority, often through civil society art organizations organizing traveling exhibitions that sold original graphic prints.<sup>73</sup> In Finland, the number of art associations increased by 63 percent between 1945 and 1949, by a further 53 percent during the period 1950–1954, and by an additional 62 percent between 1955 and 1959.<sup>74</sup> In Sweden, the minister for education referred to the popular interest in buying art, attending art exhibitions, and enrolling in adult art education classes as a result of the higher standard of living and the pedagogical initiatives of civil society art organizations, such as Konstfrämjandet (the People’s Movements for Art Promotion), distributing affordable art under the slogan “Art for all.”<sup>75</sup> By presenting both figurative and abstract art and referring to familiar contexts, places, and identities, the NKF exhibitions could meet the expectations of this varied audience.<sup>76</sup>

## The Partnership of State and Civil Society

Apart from the self-regulatory behavior of the consumer and the presumed voluntary aspect of assimilating cultural democracy, as mentioned above, it is important to underline the fact that this micropolitical function also characterized the relationship between the individual artist and state authorities. It was through financial support, and not political decrees, that artists’ careers were dependent on the political state. This text has already highlighted the similar aims of the Nordic exhibitions and cultural policy. This may, in fact, be seen as an exemplary case of the kind of “integrated

partnership” characterizing the relationship between state and civil society in the Nordic countries until the 1960s. Cultural policy can be said to have been choreographed as a mutual venture to further “community norms,” where the role of the state authorities was “to facilitate and motivate the formulation of commitment and understanding, rather than to control.”<sup>77</sup>

In earlier research on the Nordic welfare model, the collaborative co-existence of capitalism and state socialism has been highlighted as a characteristic feature. This co-existence can also be said to be present as a precondition for the NKF exhibitions.<sup>78</sup> The varied supply provided by the exhibitions of both figurative and abstract art, with titles and motifs highlighting Nordic everyday life, matched its intended audience. Instead, unlike most elite galleries, which catered to a connoisseur audience, the exhibitions reached thousands of more recent art enthusiasts not yet familiar with, or fully corresponding to, the elite taste of the avant-garde.

Taking this general interest in art into consideration also helps us to see that the NKF exhibitions were not less commercial but commercial in a different way than the private galleries. The exhibition venue offered a marketplace for both low- and high-income earners, but it also was receptive to the political support of art through purchases by public national museums and major galleries. Presenting art in these venues could not only lead to purchases of individual artworks for public art collections but also to Nordic artists getting to exhibit at other public venues in the same country.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>73</sup> On Norway, see Helliesen 420–421 and Dag Solhjell, *Fra akademiregime til fagforeningsregime: kunstpolitikk 1940–1980* (Oslo: Unipub, 2005), 221–226; on Denmark, see Hanne Abildgaard and Connie Hansen, *Arbejernes kunstforening: kunst til folket 1936–2009* (Copenhagen: Arbejdermuseet, 2009), and Hanne Abildgaard, “The Barber Painter: John Christensen,” *Perspective* October 2015, <https://perspective.smk.dk/en/barber-painter-john-christensen-cult-figure-interwar-art-scene>

<sup>74</sup> *Cultural Policy in Finland: Report by the panel of European experts*, ed. Jacques Renard (Helsinki: Arts Council of Finland, 1995), 193–197; cf. Linnovaara, *Makt konst elit*, 163, 172–176.

<sup>75</sup> 1948 års konstutredning *Konstbildning i Sverige: förslag till åtgärder för att främja svensk estetisk fostran* (Stockholm: Kihlström, 1956), 9–11, and Lindberg, *Konstpedagogikens dilemma*, 260–263.

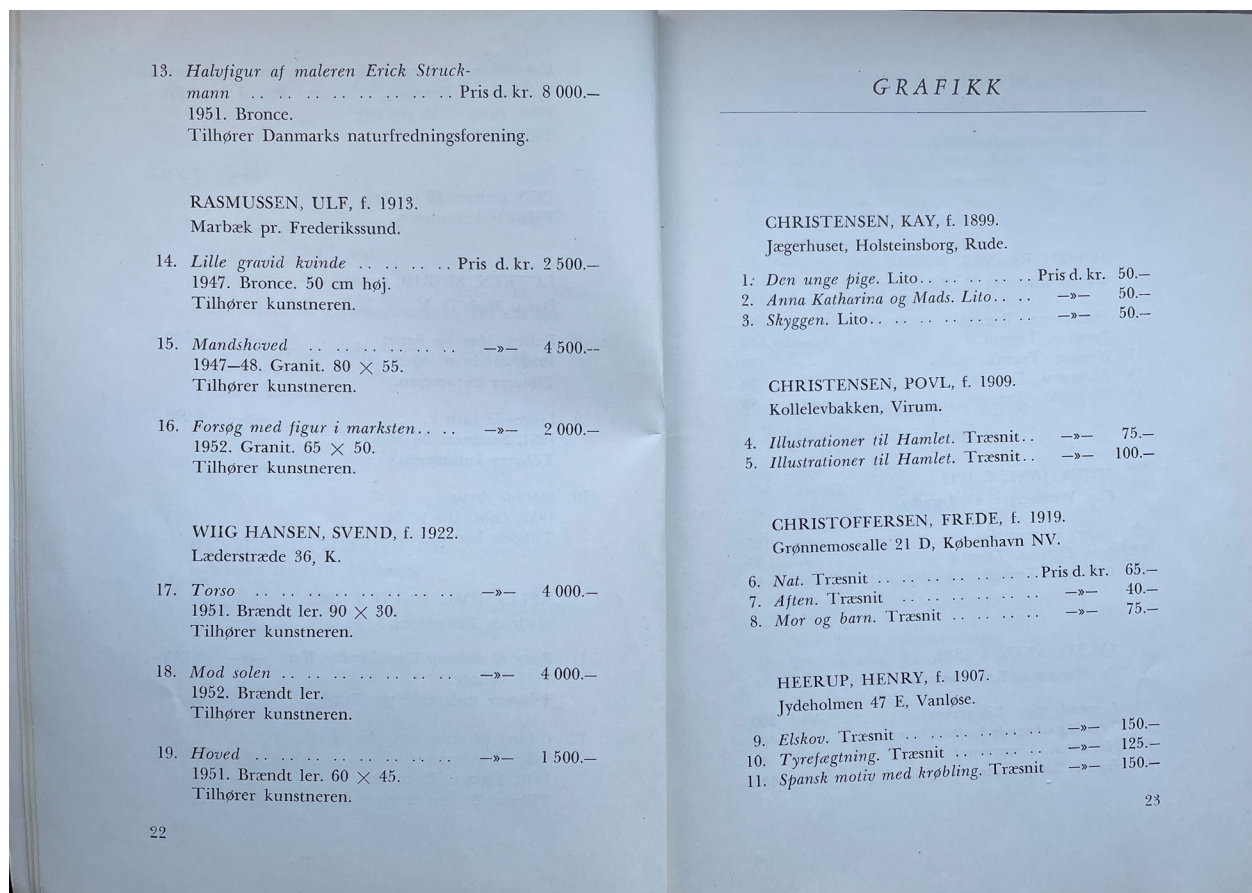
<sup>76</sup> In his review, Håkan Stenstadsvold referred to the ability of the art in the 1953 exhibition to respond to different visitors due to its varied character. Håkan Stenstadsvold, “Nordisk kunst i forvirringens tidsalder,” *Aftenposten*, March 11, 1953. The general public’s interest in art was also commented upon in the introduction of the Swedish section in the catalog *Nordisk Kunst 1953* (Bergen and Oslo, 1953), 95.

<sup>77</sup> On the “integrated partnership,” see Ronald L. Jepperson, “Political Modernities: Disentangling Two Underlying Dimensions of Institutional Differentiation,” *Sociological Theory* vol. 20, no. 1, March 2002, 73–74.

<sup>78</sup> On the coalition of capitalism and socialism in the Nordic labor markets, see Karl Ove Moene, “Introduction,” in *Selected Works of Michael Wallerstein: The Political Economy of Inequality, Unions and Social Democracy*, eds. David Austen-Smith, Jeffrey A. Frieden, Miriam A. Golden, Karl Ove Moene, and Adam Przeworski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and in relation to the ideals of the welfare state, see Hilson, *The Nordic Model*, 87–91.

<sup>79</sup> Purchases and spin-off effects were occasionally reported in the national press. See, for example, “15 000 såg nordiska konstutställningen i Göteborg,” *Hufvudstadsbladet*, October 15, 1957, reporting on sales of Finnish graphic art, paintings, and sculpture to private Swedish individuals and the Gothenburg Art Museum, and an invitation to present Finnish art at the Lund Art Gallery.





**Figure 4.** The spread from the catalog *Nordisk Kunst 1953* (Bergen and Oslo, 1953), presenting art from the Danish section, illustrates the price range of the artworks. The sculptures to the left ranged from 1000 to 8000 Danish kroner, the graphic sheets to the right held more modest prices. The woodcut *Evening* by Frede Christoffersen could thus be purchased for 40 Danish kroner. Photo: Author.

## Conclusion

Investigating NKF's Nordic exhibitions in the light of the political and civic support of cultural democracy in the region has shown the relevance of highlighting this geopolitical setting. It also highlights artworks functioning as socially interconnected signs and the communicative agency of art exhibitions. Framed by the Nordic context of the exhibitions, the titles and motifs a majority of the exhibited artworks acted as "minor elements in a major story" on the importance of familiar milieus and everyday life to art.<sup>80</sup> Outside of these venues, voluntary art associations and political ideals confirmed that "art was for all" and should be part of the very spaces where this everyday life took

place, namely, in homes, schools, and workplaces. Through their subject matter, the artworks thus asserted their relevance to the general public, and the exhibitions organized by NKF and presented in public museums and galleries confirmed and performed, in turn, the cultural democratic aims of Nordic civil society and politics.

<sup>80</sup> Ferguson, "Exhibition Rhetorics," 183.