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[WATERMARK]

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[ANDERS RIEL MULLER]

Welcome back to another episode of Challenging Nordic Innocence, a podcast series that scrutinizes the depiction of the Nordic region as particularly benevolent, egalitarian, or green.

Through a series of conversations, we aim to make an online archive that combines a catalog of critical scholarships and activist accounts seeking to undo this master narrative.

My name is Anders Riel Müller or Son Yeonjun in Korea, and I am an associate professor in city and regional planning at the University of Stavanger and a member of the research group Social and Spatial Justice.

This podcast is a collaboration between the Social and Spatial Justice Research Group here at UAS and the Center for Sustainable Futures at the University of Copenhagen.

My co-host is Sebastian Lundsteen Nielsen, as always, who is a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Sustainable Futures at the University of Copenhagen.

Hi, Sebastian.

[SEBASTIAN LUNDSTEEN NIELSEN]

Hello.

And today we're excited to have with us Mathias Danbolt, who is a professor of art history at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark.

Hi, Mathias.

Hi, thank you for having me.

Thank you for taking the time.

Over the last decade, his research has centered on the contact zones between art history and colonial history in a Nordic context, with special focus on memory politics, monuments, and art in public space.

Danbolt has been leading several collective research projects that examine the effects of colonial politics today.

For example, The Art of Nordic Colonialism, writing transcultural art histories from 2019 to 2023, and Moving Monuments, the material life of sculpture from the Danish colonial era, a project that is about to finish.

And that is in this context that you did this work that we are going to discuss today.

So today we are going to talk to Mathias about the exhibition and book about Normandsdalen, Art, Power and Materials in 18th Century Denmark, Norway.

And it's currently on view at Kode Bergen Art Museum until October 12th.

And this is also part of the Moving Monuments research project, as I said.

The exhibition and publication on Normandsdalen is co-curated and co-edited in collaboration with researchers Tonja Haugland Sørensen and Helene Birkeli  and KODE curators Peder Valle and Morten Spjøtvold.

So welcome, Mathias.

And maybe we should just jump into it right away.

And maybe we should start to contextualize and tell a little bit.

What is Normandsdalen?

Where is it located?

What is its history?

[MATHIAS DANBOLT]

Yeah, thank you.

Nordmandsdalenen, I think, usually needs a bit of an introduction because it is a sculpture project that not a lot of people really know about, which might point to the fact that 18th century sculpture is maybe not a topic that has been on people's mind a lot lately or historically.

And also because even just the name in English, for instance, Nordmandsdalen, which could be translated into the Valley of the Norsemen or Valley of Norwegians,

is also really peculiar.

But short as a kind of way of zooming in, the name describes a sculpture park about an hour north of Copenhagen in North Zealand in the park of Fredensborg Castle.

This is a castle that the Danish absolute monarchy built in the 1720s and established an enormous Baroque garden.

It was supposed to be the kind of version of La Versaille in France in the 1720s.

And later on, in around 1760s, the whole park was reimagined by Frederick V, the king during the Danish-Norwegian absolute monarchy.

And this sculpture park was established in the corner that includes 70 life-size sculptures of Norwegian, Sami and Faroese peasants, workers, fishermen.

And they are installed in a big kind of amphitheater in three circles.

So these 70 kind of normal people stand in these three circles centered to look towards a big column in the middle, a so-called victory column in Norwegian marble, in gold with a golden orb on top that symbolizes the king.

So there's kind of an enormous, you could call it almost like a party installation, a celebration of the king, where the Norwegian and Sami and Faroese peasants, the subjects of the king, kind of come to celebrate the monarchy and they all bring gifts in terms of objects that they work with.

So they kind of come from the north

down to Copenhagen symbolically in this park in order to demonstrate and manifest the riches of the north.

So this is a big sculpture part made in sandstone by a Danish-German royal carver called Johan Gottfried Grund.

And they were, as I said, made between 1764 and 1784.

But if you go to the park today, the park is surrounded or very close to the castle where the queen and the Danish royal couple is still residing in the spring and the autumn at Fredensborg.

It's now open as a park for the public, but the sculptures you see there today are not.

250 plus years old, they are re-carved 20 years ago because this is a part of a quite important symbolic value historically, but also I think symbolic even today because it shows the role that art has played in relation to the monarchy and as a kind of a celebratory function of art.

[ANDERS RIEL MULLER]

Yeah.

Well, so, so maybe you could sort of like, maybe explain, um, first of all, maybe the historical trajectory, like, because it does, those sculptures come from small wooden carved sculptures.

So maybe you can talk a little bit about like, how did, like, what was the history behind it, but also how has these sculptures and the history has been discussed, uh, what you could say, like mainly within some kind of like nationalist frame and, and in

[MATHIAS DANBOLT]

yeah yeah sure um so maybe to start why i became interested in this because uh i think if you had asked me like 10 years ago if that i would be working on royal sculptures outside of the queen's capital i maybe would have been surprised um but um my research within Nordmandsdalen is part of this project moving monuments which is a research project that in a way takes the starting point in the

later years new attention given to monumental sculpture.

So after social movements as Rhodes Must Fall and Black Lives Matter have asked us to look again at the sculptures that are in public space and have pointed out the historical legacies that they are embedded in or part of

of normalizing, celebrating power dynamics that are often embedded in racial, colonial, imperial values, logics, and economies.

So the Moving Monuments Project had a starting point to try to see what happens if we look at the Danish establishment of the tradition of monumental sculpture in Denmark, which is where I reside in Copenhagen.

from that perspective of a kind of an imperial aesthetic.

If we re-look at the sculptures, because in the Danish and Norwegian tradition, you know, the whole idea of putting statues up in public space, basically it starts in the late 17th century, but the kind of infrastructure is organized and set around mid 18th century.

And during that research, we have been looking a lot, me and my colleague Amalie Skovmøller, at equestrian statues, fine name of statues of men on horses, usually in bronze and a high pedestal in public space.

And Denmark has a lot of those.

But then in that process of looking at how the king was visualized, I became...

aware of and interested in this project that is so rare because we don't usually have any statues of the people at this moment.

Almost the whole concept of art in the 18th century is kind of part of the propaganda machinery for the absolute monarchy.

That is the function of art.

So art as we know it today as something that deals with freedom and aesthetics that is for its own sake, you know, that concept is way more modern.

Art at this time is

is used as an instrument to show and demonstrate certain ideas and usually to celebrate the king because that's the only thing you could do in a so-called public that isn't public yet.

Places where people meet is an extremely regulated area in the 18th century during the absolute monarchy.

There is a censorship and everything published.

So art is about idealizing the king and kind of manifesting the fact that the king is given by God.

It's not something you can critique.

So during this time when art is kind of focusing on the king, this other project happens where suddenly there's like 70 sculptures of normal people.

And to me that was a research question worth looking into.

Because we are not the first that have been working on Normandsdalen.

And in Norway there is a tradition, at least dating back to the early 20th century, but specifically maybe the 1970s, to look at Normandsdalen as a source of how Norwegians looked in the 18th century.

So the established discourse around Norman style is basically coming from cultural history and ethnography, because it's been looked upon as a unique source to how the normal people, the laborers, the peasants, how they actually dressed.

which is one of its important elements for sure.

But that research kind of goes, you know, builds upon a longer tradition of, you could call it maybe national romantic, or at least like a national framework of trying to understand Norway's specific history.

And since a lot of these sculptures show the kind of normal people in their folk costumes, bunads as we call it in Norwegian, which today we know as a celebratory festive attire, but at that time that was basically what the laborers were used both in their everyday but also of course for kind of celebratory purposes.

It's been kind of written into a research tradition that deals with a specifically Norwegian and as also as a kind of a happy moment like finally we found something that could give an authentic almost like window to the past of how the normal people looked.

And so it has had the discourse around Nordmandsdalen in art history, which has not been huge, but it has been there, has been one kind of emanating of democracy and freedom and like, you know, the real peasants not corrupted by the Danish

monarchy and by all the things that art at that time which is you know the 18th century is known in art history as the time of rococo which is this kind of decadent you know gold and lavish and everything is like over the top and think of the king in silk stockings and huge wigs and powder everywhere and it's like a Marie Antoinette kind of French aesthetics and then you have this sculpture park of

of sandstone sculptures of quite like butch like these are not elegant the statues they are like big and huge and the men and women have huge hands and like they're kind of they're sturdy so they're kind of they are so different and people have been excited about that as maybe a sign of the purity of the Norwegian history and the Norwegian peasants

But in that story, there's a lot of things that haven't fit into that story.

One of it is kind of the 18th century.

What is the 18th century?

That is a century before the idea of nationhood is established as we know it today with a kind of nation state.

It's before we have the concept of the people, the national people in the same way.

It's also before the concept of publicness, because everything is so regulated.

And so all those elements have kind of gone through the background in the existing literature.

But also, for instance, the presence of Sami.

How come in something called Nordmandsdalen Valley of the Norwegians, why are there Sami and Faroese theaters there?

They have...

not been talked about basically because they didn't really fit.

So we have been interested in trying to ask those questions.

And through that, we have followed the existing research that also has led this sculpture project in Copenhagen back to one of its origin points, which is in Bergen in Norway, my old hometown, which is also why the exhibition we have made is at Kode in Bergen.

Because this big sculpture project happening in Copenhagen grows out of a postman coming to Bergen around 1750 from Hallingdal.

And Hallingdal in Norway was and has been known for its wooden carving craft.

And the royal family in Copenhagen had all the way back to the 17th century

brought Norwegian carvers to Denmark to carve in ivory because it's been kind of a handicraft that has had a long tradition.

But this one guy, Jørgen Christensen Garnaas, comes to Bergen in the 1750s, takes up a job as a postman.

We don't know a lot about him because he was a laborer and as you know, archives and history is written usually focusing on people in power.

So we don't have a lot of, we don't basically have almost any traces of him except from when he meets the people in power.

So we have letters and receipts from him when he comes to Copenhagen and meets the king.

But he starts to produce small dolls in wood, 20, 23 centimeters tall of couples.

Men and women, they're in wood, but they're also dressed in these very detailed clothing.

And we have a fisherman in leather attire that holds a huge halibut fish and there's a big set of these dolls.

And we don't know how these dolls for sure end up in Copenhagen, but these dolls end up in the Royal Collection in Copenhagen.

We have a theory, we can come back to how they get there.

And so Jørgen Gaarnaas is asked to meet King Frederick V at Fredensborg in 1764, and he gets a job to carve

miniature versions of these dolls in ivory.

So he gets money between 1764 and 1771, 100 Riksdaler per year, which is a pretty decent salary to produce miniature figures like 8 to 10 centimeters tall.

And he produces a set of these figures.

And these figures are then used as the starting point for the Royal Carver Grund to make the big sculpture park in Copenhagen.

So this project, not only in a way, is an entry point to understand what public sculpture, monumental sculpture, that story.

But also for us, it's a project that speaks to the history of craft and labor.

Invisible art history has often had an ambivalent relationship to craft because it's been seen as less important, more materially specific, not as ethereal and artistically valuable.

But also the whole series of craftsmen who have been involved in these projects

We don't know a lot about them and we have been interested in that.

And we have been interested in the materials, because this project is a project where an image of the people is mediated through a wide range of materials, from wooden dolls in wood, through ivory, through sandstone sculpture, and then also through porcelain.

Because in 1775, when the park is about to be finished, the Royal Porcelain Factory is established in Copenhagen.

And one of the first series that they produce is the series of Nordmandsdalen.

of these figurines of the Norwegian peasants than in the most luxurious material at that time.

Today we maybe think of porcelain as kind of kitsch but in the late 18th century porcelain is high technology and it's the sign of luxury.

So we have been looking at these materials and the different kind of meanings in the 18th century, which opens up, complicates the democratic narrative, complicates the idea of art as disconnected from politics and material life, and opens up all these other avenues.

[ANDERS RIEL MULLER]

Great.

Before we maybe go on to talk about the figures again, I think one thing that I just to sort of get it clear for me.

So what you're trying to say is like most of the interpretations of the figures so far have been sort of been embedded in sort of a...

national romanticist but also this idea of like the people as the subject of the nation right and so then what you're doing in this project maybe is probably looking more at it as like what was the original like sort of perspective from the absolute monarchy like what were we have to understand it in the context of when they were produced is that correct

[MATHIAS DANBOLT]

Yeah, that is surely one of the ambitions of the project.

In one way I guess we try to do two things.

In one way we try to say what is the 18th century, what is that for a period?

Because it is in one way a period that is neglected both in Danish and Norwegian historiography to a certain degree.

In Norway, the 18th century is kind of a no-go, like nothing really happens.

If you open a big art history book of Norwegian art, you will see that there is an enormous focus on the Viking age and the medieval times.

And then there is like maybe four or five pages that's called the Danish era, Danske Tiden, which is basically kind of maybe inspired by Per Gynt, by Ibsen, where the Danish era is called the 400 year night.

The night when like nothing happened because everything was ruled from Denmark.

And then in Norwegian art history books, 1814 is like a starting point.

And then, you know, everything happens again.

So in Norwegian art history and kind of cultural history in general, the 18th century doesn't really fit because the power center is Copenhagen.

And the narrative internally in a Norwegian history has been that Denmark was kind of a colonizer, not only abroad, but also in a way internally towards Norway.

So Norway was...

was a colony, some would argue, hence we didn't have an independence.

But the farmers, they were the ones who were not corrupted by this power, which is why I think a lot of kind of 19th century Norwegian scholars and also 20th century scholars have been interested in Nordmandsdalen because it's been an ability to kind of find something uncorrupted by power in the 18th century, something that we could say was Norwegian.

at the time where kind of Denmark ruled.

From a Danish perspective, everything connected to Norway has become just totally uninteresting.

Also after 1814, when Denmark-Norway split up, you know, everything connected to Norway, specifically things problematic like the colonization of Sápmi, the Sápmi areas that happened specifically intensified in the 18th century, kind of became a Norwegian problem.

So we have been interested in trying to understand what happens in the 18th century, because we would argue that it's a very formative period for the development of both the history of aesthetic, the infrastructures of that, establishing art academies and art institutions, and also language around art.

But it's also very politically formative.

Borders are made, ideas of the people is starting to form, and a radically different understanding of resources and economy and nature and materials is formed.

So that's kind of maybe our main starting point for the project.

But then we also have been interested in how Nordmandsdalen has been a project that has been taken up and used.

So we tried to uncover or at least understand its 18th century function.

But what is interesting with art in relation to other items is that art objects often persist or they have a life.

In relation to history, in disciplinary history you often write about a past that is lost, you need to reconstruct that past.

In art history we have the sometimes benefit that we can be together with an object, and that object is then interacting with different times, so it gets other meanings.

So although our project has been kind of critical to the

to the national romantic reading of Nordmandsdalen, we also find that reading really interesting.

Like we find it interesting how artistic objects that can be maybe created in one context for one purpose suddenly can be repurposed for all these other means.

And one example, now that we are in Stavanger,

It could also be that in the 1989 and 1990s a lot of Norwegian municipalities started to reclaim sculptures from Nordmandsdalen.

Because in Denmark they were about to re-carve these sculptures for the park because the queen, I guess, thought it looked a bit old and they wanted it to look a bit more sharp in her garden.

So they started an enormous ambitious project of re-carving all 70 sculptures.

And then Norwegian municipalities heard about it and thought, well, we want those sculptures.

They can look good here as well.

So in Karmøy, just a bit north of here, they ordered three copies of fishermen from that area.

Because in Nordmandsdalen, the sculptures are very regionally specific.

So that was put up by the Queen Sonja.

She was the crown princess then in 1898.

But like a big ceremony that was framed as a homecoming for these sculptures.

And now they are still at Skudenes Havn in Karmøy.

a halibut fisher and a lobster fisher and his wife and now they are used as a kind of a tourist attraction as a sign of something very historical even though they are you know the sculpture themselves are 40 years old or 30 years old they are a version of a sculpture

made by a Danish guy that is a version of a figure.

Like, you know, there's so many translations.

It's kind of like this Russian doll where you open up.

But so, of course, so these sculptures work now.

They are, if you go to Skudenes Havn, they're just by the tourist office.

And, you know, they're part of a tourist economy today.

So we are interested in that as well, not as something fake, it's a radically different take that has very little to do with the 18th century.

And yet it is kind of connected in a way, because it is connected to the role of art.

Art is often instrumentalized, it is used, and it's been reused and repurposed and reappropriated.

For us to understand those uses in plural is something I think as an art historian is very interesting because art history is often, have often focused solely on the so-called original context.

But art often has these weird lives with all of, and for any sculpture to have a sense of permanence, people need to maintain it.

So the labor that goes into maintaining, as in re-carving or cleaning, there's a politic to that too that speaks to ideas of cultural value.

What do we deem important enough to, for instance, re-carve or to copy or to distribute widely or make into a tourist economy today?

And what stories don't get that attention?

So those value politics, I think, has connections back to the 18th century as well.

[ANDERS RIEL MULLER]

Yeah, I think we'll go through sort of the different repurposing of these sculptures.

I thought we maybe could start just like, because you write in the book that it's, that first of all, we have to understand that this is within the context of the absolute monarchy, but also this sort of like,

sort of emerging natural sciences, the idea of mapping, categorizing plants, animals, and all of this.

So maybe you could start with, like, how does it, because when you're looking at the 18th century, you see like almost like parallel movements that sort of become embedded in these figures.

[MATHIAS DANBOLT]

Yeah, maybe back also to the question of why this project was made in the first place.

I can maybe tap into that a bit.

Because at least in our argument, we kind of try to follow the establishment of the interest in Norwegian workers that we follow back at least to the political interest in the early 18th century in Denmark, Norway, to try to find out what kind of values do we have in the realm.

So in 1720, Denmark-Norway ends this big, long Nordic war with Sweden.

It's been one of the many wars that's been between Denmark and Sweden since the 16th century.

And Denmark, Norway is quite poor.

The economy is really in tatters.

It's not going very well.

And the Danish spend all the money on war.

So of course, the king creates ,, the castle.

Because even though you're poor, you can always find money for a big castle in a park for yourself.

But then they also start, they establish a college of commerce and kind of a body in the government that's trying to do a mapping of all the economy in the realm and how to try to effectuate or make the economy more efficient.

And, you know, during the absolute monarchy, it's not only kind of a power system where you have the king, the God-given king on top, but it's also a mercantile economy at the time, which is...

you know, an economy that is based on maximum export and minimal import.

So you don't want to spend gold out of the country.

You want to amass all the riches yourself, which is why having colonies has quite come in handy because then you don't need to pay to get resources.

You have that, you can resource extract it and bring it into the economy itself.

And within that logic, the government in Copenhagen realized that we have quite a lot of land.

Denmark, Norway has, of course, colonies at that time, not only in India and in Africa and the Caribbean.

And Greenland is about then around the 1721, where that is kind of established as a colony.

And the Sami territories is also about to be formally included

But Norway in itself is part of the realm that is not really used a lot.

So Norway is the kind of point of concern and different measures is taken in order to map the resources available in Norway.

And in part, there is a kind of a questionnaire being sent out in 1743 to all the Norwegian parishes to map, like, what do people do?

What do they work with?

How can we get more economy out of it?

And then at the same time in Copenhagen, there is an enormous focus on establishing more knowledge and scientific knowledge about agriculture.

How can that be optimized?

How can wood be made into more kind of a plantation logic?

So you establish a lot of natural cabinets, like museum collections that we will see today.

And you have the Danish government invites researchers to come from basically a lot from France, like botanists to map.

And as part of this project, there's also...

the first kind of opening maybe of the public debate, because everything in the public is so regulated, you cannot write, you cannot just write an op-ed to the newspaper saying that the economic policy of the king is horrible, then you will lose your head.

But because the government is really in dire need of more information of how to make this small empire more efficient, they open up a kind of a competition to write about ideas for maximizing the economy.

So a journal is established called the Danish Norwegian Magazine of Economy, my translation, and that is edited by a bishop, Erik Pontoppidan, who's based in Bergen.

And Pontoppidan is quite an amazing scholar.

He's a priest, but he...

He's sent to Norway to Bergen, not by his own will, but because of a religious conflict in Copenhagen.

And he basically hates being in Bergen, but he writes a lot.

So he writes one of the first books about the Norwegian language.

And then in the 1740s, he starts making a big book about the natural economy of Norway, which was published in 1751-52 in two volumes.

where he travels around, as bishops do, to meet with the peasants.

And he gathers information about what do they work with, what kind of fish do they fish, what kind of values are from all along the coast.

And so there is this enormous attention to science, to how to optimize the nature.

And one of our arguments in the book is that we see Normandsdalen, the project, as intimately connected to this.

And in part we do that because when we have read Pontoppidan's,

book about the natural history of Norway in detail, we see that the figures he describes are almost identical to the figures that Garnaas, the Bergen postman, makes.

But Pontoppidan writes quite beautifully about, for instance, the importance of maritime pilots, or "los" that we say in Norwegian, that are securing that trade can go by.

uh in Mandal in southern Norway and he describes how you know that labor is extremely important but also dangerous labor they die all the time the widows have had maybe five or

six maritime pilots and he describes very specifically where they are from and their importance and we have that all the way through pontopadan's book he writes about the halibut fishers and the lobster fishers in Karmøy

They write about the woodcutters, the lumberjacks in the inner country.

And when we see Garnaas' figures, specifically the ivory figures, almost all of them can be found one-to-one in the descriptions of Pontoppidan book.

And given that Pontoppidan lived in Bergen, Garnaas lived in Bergen, Pontoppidan wrote, at least we know he wrote several thousand letters, there is a big chance that he have known the postman in the area who had to talk to the bishop to be able to travel.

We haven't been able to find letters that confirm it yet because the archives are big.

But to us, we see Nordmandsdalen as, or at least our argument or hypothesis, is that Pontoppidan perhaps have ordered these dolls to be made as a materialization or an illustration of the book.

that could be then shown to the king.

And that Pontoppidan , who was in very close dialogue with the absolute monarchy in Copenhagen, have brought the dolls or the ivory figures.

Nothing is dated specifically.

We can only have dates when receipts for things are bought by the king.

But in Copenhagen.

And that's why this postman from Bergen ends up being invited to Copenhagen and take up this job to make ivory figures.

[ANDERS RIEL MULLER]

I think this is the... Also, when we talked about this earlier, I think this is really interesting because then Normandsdalen becomes sort of like...

not just a part of the king's subjects but it becomes the part of the king's productive subjects and their commodities right so it's not just a part of the people celebrating king but a

The people who are contributing to the king's wealth, if that makes sense.

Is that what you're arguing?

[MATHIAS DANBOLT]

Yeah, absolutely.

And if you come to the park today, when you enter it, it is this, as I said, this kind of amphitheater in three levels.

Everyone is surrounded by this column in the middle.

but when you enter you have four figures who two who dances and two who plays music a fiddle player and a drum player so kind of you enter in this mode of celebratory like the people are dancing for the king right and then they stand there with their goods

that show their productivity and show their value and they kind of bring those goods to the king so the king as an act of celebration um and i think that whole because the park at that time was not a public park like nowadays since the 20th century has been open to the public at that time it was only open to the kings

guests, you know, diplomats and so forth.

So one needs to imagine it as almost like a puppet theater of power where the king brings in this kind of a rock garden, you know, there's avenues, but then you suddenly come into this kind of magical place where there were pine trees.

Pine trees wasn't natural to Denmark that was planted and moved because, partly because of this park

So you kind of come into this valley of pine trees where you see these white sculptures, because they were made in Sandstone, they were painted white to emulate marble, because marble is more expensive and looks better, with people bringing stuff to the king.

So, of course, it has been a materialization and a kind of a performative gesture that so the king could show, you know, Denmark-Norway is...

quite a romp we have all these amazing people that know and have all these riches that they bring and they have probably then had parties where they had eaten you know some of those the game that some of the hunters are bringing or the fish that some of the fishermen are bringing and then in the castle they have been

where they've had miniature versions of these same figures as conversation pieces in porcelain on the table at the same time.

So there is all these kind of levels of performative kind of propaganda machinery happening, which I think says something about the...

importance for the absolute monarchy to always demonstrate and show off that they are powerful.

Because in a kind of despotic political system like that you all the time need to manifest power because people are scared that the people would just chop your head off like they did in France.

So there is that kind of push and pull between performing godless kind of power but also continually kind of performing to each other and to other royal that you have money enough to do something so lavish as to make an enormous sculpture park that is only visible for a few people.

But it also maybe also speaks a bit to the role of Norway symbolically in the absolute monarchy.

Because it's called the Valley of the Norsemen, but it includes Faroese and Sami figures.

And in today kind of national realm, you know, that seems a bit weird.

Why would Norway, like something called the Valley of the Norwegians or Norsemen include that?

But that I think speaks to the role that Norway had symbolically in the realm.

Because all the way back when Denmark and Norway became this so-called twin monarchy, that was the way Denmark got access to Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, and of course the Sami areas.

Because that's historically “bilande” [Secondary territories], we call it in Norwegian or in Danish.

They were like realms attached to the Norwegian kingdom historically.

And we know that Nordmandsdalen park was also supposed to include Icelandic figures.

It was never finished totally, even though 70s sculpture and its huge park, it was even supposed to have been bigger.

But because of political changes, the economy stopped and that didn't happen.

But I think it also kind of points to the role that Norway have had symbolically as a realm in its own that had its own kind of power dynamics in relation to the Faroe East, to Iceland, to Greenland, which we have seen later on in the political scrambles over Kalaallit Nunaat,

over Greenland in the 20th century when Norway tried to argue for its sovereignty of North and East Greenland over Denmark.

[ANDERS RIEL MULLER]

Sebastian, you can just jump in if you have questions.

[SEBASTIAN LUNDSTEEN NIELSEN]

No, but thank you so much.

I mean, this is so, so very interesting and I really love how you in your book kind of and in your project with your colleagues kind of look into the many lives of these monuments and these sculptures and they're kind of being used or mobilized for projects

different kind of purposes and they give like different kind of meanings according to context like historians kind of look at them as like an entry to like an unmediated past perhaps or it's been used to sort of like to display the king's wealth but there's also something about sort of

the movement of the of the sculptures and and kind of the the models upon models and upon models the babuska as you as you were talking about um but i wonder kind of i mean in each of these settings you know they kind of foster different conversations so i wonder like in your project and kind of bringing this history back can i say to to Bergen like what kind of discussions

Do you aim to inspire or what kind of discussions do you want to create by taking these stories and these sculptures back to Bergen?

Because I see there's a double-ness to it.

There's both a Danish and a Norwegian one.

And I wonder...

Yeah.

What kind of discussions, what kind of conversations do you aim to make or provocation by bringing these back to Norway?

[MATHIAS DANBOLT]

Well, that's a great question.

Thank you.

You know, Bergen is a peculiar city.

In Bergen's own self-story, 1814, of course, was not a liberatory moment for Norway.

It was the crisis of Bergen.

That was when Bergen went from being Norway's kind of center to become a periphery because everything moved to Oslo.

So Bergen has its own, I guess, self-narrative that in one way we are trying to complicate a bit.

Because even in the Bergen history, there is a lot of focus on the medieval times and the 16th century, the Hanseatic moment of trade.

The 18th century, people don't know a lot about what happened in Bergen in the 18th century.

It's often also seen a bit as kind of the Danish times.

But the fact that Bergen in the 18th century was a colonial hub,

you know we have kind of old historians or like economic historians who argue that the Sápmi or the Sami areas was kind of a colony of Bergen because Bergen had the monopoly on trade with fish in Sápmi so Bergen of course was extremely important as a trading port for the northern realms and also notions of power there but Bergen was also the

starting point for the colonization of Kalaallit Nunaat or Greenland at the time.

It was the Bergen trading company, kind of a private endeavor that got the the letter of allowance and monopoly to establish a colony in today's Nuuk.

So Hans Egede traveled out from Bergen

And Bergen  was also before that in the late 17th century with Thormøhlen, the big trading magnate, who both traded with whale traders.

whale oil that was so important to lightening up the cities, but also with enslaved people from Africa.

So Bergen had, you know, there were sugar refineries in Bergen.

Like Bergen has been not a periphery in Danish, Norwegian Realm or within Norway.

It has been kind of a global port.

And I think that story is something that a lot of people in Bergen don't really remember nor talk about, because we talk more about the German-Norwegian connections a couple of centuries before.

And so in one way, we have kind of hoped to give some attention to both the political and economic importance of Bergen as a gathering place, as a colonial gathering place as well.

but also as a place where a lot of different crafts happened.

So the trade wasn't only with far away, but it was also kind of locally.

And you can kind of see that in Nordmandsdalen, in the different dolls.

A lot of them are also not from the city, but from the outskirts of the city.

In Bergen, you know, we talk about Stril, this concept of a kind of a, you know, that now maybe we use as a kind of a hackney, like, you know, someone who's a bit,

not cool or like there is that kind of center like the city, the cool modern city people and then the kind of primitive farmers outside.

Nordmandsdalen gives a lot of attention to the outskirts, to the labors and in a way monumentalizes it literally but also gives it a certain value and a lot of those are craftsmen.

that have been extremely important, both in order to create value, both in the subsistence economy, but then in the 18th century, those subsistence economies started to be structured in a different way to gather money, not only for themselves and the local communities and in those kind of collaborative communities between fishermen and hunters, but also to gather economy towards rich companies.

So I think we have been interested in trying to also look at the Norwegian or the Bergen, the local history as really kind of a part of a global.

And one example of that is perhaps just the fact of ivory.

So these ivory figures, figurines, have not really been written so much about, and people haven't really talked about, like, you know, just ivory was a luxury object at that time.

But how did ivory come to Denmark, Norway?

Like, where did ivory come from?

We know that the ivory that Garnaas used are mainly ivory from elephants.

Some of them are argued that they might be ivory from whale rust tusks, which then came from Greenland.

But most of it is from elephant, and given that there were not a lot of elephants, I guess, in Norway in the 18th century, you know, they came basically from Africa.

Of course, you have elephants around the Danish colony in India, Danish colony in India as well, but the African elephant are bigger, the ivory tusks are three times the size.

So those are the shit to have.

And we know that there was an enormous sale of ivory from the so-called Gulf Coast, from the Danish-Norwegian forts, and that they were used as ballast on the ships of enslaved people to the Caribbean, and then they came with sugar to Kobanning, but also to Bergen.

So when you look on the lists of goods coming into the port of Bergen in the 18th century, you see a lot of sugar and a lot of other colonial commodities, but you also see mention of ivory.

So in the start, we thought that Garnos got access to ivory in Copenhagen, and he definitely did that.

But we also have realized that he probably had access to ivory in Bergen as well, because that was not a weird thing to have access to, because Bergen was connected to a colonial trading machinery.

And the fact that then we have these small figures of Norwegian laborers and Sami figures in ivory, which is like one of the most...

you know almost like so literally colonial materials that is not only pointing towards the destruction of ecology and nature in Africa but that also is part of literally part of the same ships and the enslavement trade and is part of those barters

And then someone is sitting in Bergen and carving a Norwegian kind of a puppet for the king in that.

There is just something when you start thinking through what that means, what such an object speaks to all the both physical material circulations.

This object comes out of an elephant who's been on a plaie somewhere in Africa being killed.

moved through the Caribbean to Bergen to then end up in the king's castle as a luxury object.

And the fact that if you visit Copenhagen and go to Rosenborg, the royal collections, in the basement they have

An enormous collection of ivory objects, because ivory was, yeah, before porcelain came and replaced it, the luxury object per se.

Just think of all the, you know, all the lives of animals, but also of people.

Like, it's, you know, it's such a, it's such a kind of a violent material in a way.

yet it is displayed and talked about as just luxury but the labor that goes in to creating that you know just kind of a classic Marxist uh commodity fetishism logic where the history of production you know is always usually forgotten in order for us to look at something exotic or beautiful that is a logic that art the discourse of art has taken for so long right that we we look at something and we're invited to just look at something aesthetically

not connected to material histories, political histories, economic histories.

And so specifically when we've been interested in looking at these ivory figures, because they are so small, they can seem so, you know, playful almost, but then to try to connect them to these larger systems

uh it just kind of made a lot of at least me look at at a lot of these kind of luxury objects that we see in palaces a bit differently because it's like whoa this is kind of a portal to all these extremely complicated infrastructures but also these complicated ecological and economical stories

[ANDERS RIEL MULLER]

I think it's super interesting.

And I think that's what I love about the book.

It sort of both explains sort of the imperial colonial gaze of the absolute monarchy, but also the materiality of it, right?

It has all these other elements that talks about an even broader history of colonialism and imperialism.

Where did the materials come from?

And so on.

And I just wanted to come back because you mentioned that,

that there has been sort of this struggle of like, what do we mean?

Like, why are these Sami and Faris figures within?

And you talk about like how the Sami figures and sculptures also have a relation to sort of colonial or imperial disputes between the Danish-Norwegian monarchy and sort of like, what do you call them?

[MATHIAS DANBOLT]

competition with for example Sweden and Russia could you say a little bit about that because I think it's important that we also get this these sure yeah the the presence of there are three Sami figures in the sculpture park and also in the

Well, today we at least have a few also in ivory and in porcelain.

And people have had a kind of a hard time understanding why they're there.

And they don't hold objects like a lot of the male figures of the series.

They have a turnip or wood or an axe.

But the Sami's are just kind of present.

There is a couple from Finnmark and then one from Troms.

the Sami man from Troms holtd skis.

So, of course, that points towards movement and kind of something, but it's more something exotic in a way with the Sami to a certain degree.

But in our research in this project, I have been interested in specifically the presence of Sami because I have done a lot of research of the presence of Sami representation in 18th century court culture in Denmark because

We don't talk so much about that because Sami history has basically been forgotten or erased from a Danish colonial debate because it's looked upon as a Norwegian thing.

And in Norway too, 18th century has gotten very little attention.

So that kind of methodological nationalism, the way the modern notion of nation-state reorganizes the past, you can even see it in the Truth and Reconciliation Report, that the mandate that the report in Norway, when that was given in 2018, it was to look from the 19th century and forward.

So the 18th century, everything happening before Norway became a state, was not part of the mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee.

Now, the committee itself did end up including a chapter on the 18th century because you cannot understand it without having it.

But it meant that the whole role of kind of the Danish-Norwegian political culture had been erased.

It wasn't part of it, the debate.

But Denmark has, there's a lot of material in Danish archives in the 18th century that speaks to Sami.

And the representations of Sami in Nordmandsdalen are not the only representations of Sami in court culture.

So I've been interested in that story and one of my takes on it that we also touch upon in the book here is the fact that during the end of the Nordic war between Denmark and Norway in 1720, they decided that we need to figure out the border in the north.

So today we know it as Finnmark, but at that time that was a so-called common district.

So both the Swedes, Denmark, Norway and Russia all wanted sovereignty over those areas in the north.

Denmark and Norway had fought with Sweden many times over this, tried to figure out a border, didn't really happen, but they decided in 1720, we need to figure this out.

So they made a border committee that took 31 years to figure it out.

But in that process, they did an enormous work of interviewing, like really kind of carving out where to put the border, where is the correct way to do that.

When Denmark Norway started that process, they realized that the Swedes were just so much better at doing the preparatory work of colonial infrastructure to claim that the Sami are Swedish and this is part of our nation.

Because the Swedes had established churches and used the missionary as a kind of colonial frontier.

um back to the 17th century and specifically in the early 18th century so Denmark-Norway intensified its missionary practices around 1720s and onwards um and also started a large project of knowledge production so they sent missionaries to make books and write books about the

kind of the Danish, about what they call Danish Finnmark.

And it wasn't about making the Sami assimilate.

Because assimilation, that's a concept that comes later.

The idea of national homogeneity wasn't important because the state, the Realm, was connected through the king.

But they needed to have to confirm that the Sami were subjects of the Danish-Norwegian king and not the Swedish king.

So there was an enormous kind of machinery set in stake with establishment of churches, of missionaries, and then also of different kind of political negotiations.

of nationalizing, so what we call the Danification process before the Norwegification process of the Sami in a way, that had different logics.

It had in one way more kind of respectful understandings of the Sami because it wasn't important for them to, for the state to make them identify as Danish or as Norwegian, as long as they identified with Christianity, that was important, and identified as subjects of the king.

So we look into that and when you start looking at that, you see that the Sami does have a lot of presence in court culture.

So there is a series of 35 paintings.

We have some of them in the exhibition that the king, Frederick V, orders from his court painters in 1748 of showing Sami life, which is like a huge series of paintings.

The royal court painters have never been to Sápmi.

They paint based on some missionaries' sketches, which makes the Sami look a bit like Frozen by Disney, the first one, before Disney started collaborating with Sami people.

You know, the reindeers, I call them Rococo reindeer.

They have very elaborately beautiful... It has nothing to do with the animal, but...

But when you're going to start looking for Sami presences in the Danish court culture, they really pop up.

So now in Copenhagen, in front of the Royal Palace at Amalienborg, there is one of the most famous equestrian statues to Frederick V, like a huge, it's part of the cultural canon.

All school kids in Denmark needs to know this monument.

But in its original version, it was supposed to have two bronze sculptures on the base of it representing Denmark and Norway.

And the Norwegian one was supposed to be a Sami woman laying with a reindeer.

So the French artist Saly, he ordered to get reindeers to Copenhagen so he could paint, draw them by heart.

So in the first Salon exhibition in Copenhagen in the 1750s that Saly organized, he exhibited a series of drawings of reindeer that he writes is from nature.

And I think this all speaks to the fact that this was highly political.

This was a really, really important question of sovereignty.

Not necessarily so much to control the Sami, but because of the area's geopolitical importance.

And now the sculpture, the Asiatic colonial company didn't have money to pay for these sculptures.

So the Sami woman with a reindeer was never cast in bronze.

It doesn't lay in front of the king.

And I think if that had happened in the 1770s, maybe we would have remembered that story better because we would have had, now we have some Sami figures in a park an hour outside of Copenhagen, it's easier to overlook.

But so we enter, we focus on the Sami specifically because I think it speaks to the relationship between science, missionary and art and how that is also part of the power dynamic.

which has its specificities, which means that some of the laws that the Danish government, the Danish Norwegian government made in the 1750s around the border agreement, it's still actually active.

Some of the, and they are more radical.

in a way than some of the later, because they had an understanding of the so-called Sami nation, as it was called at that time, that it was a nomadic nation.

So I think it is an interesting moment also in Sami history, which of course Sami historians have done a lot of important work on.

but that I think in Norwegian history and Danish history that has been neglected.

So we kind of tried to bring some of the debates in Sami historiography also to get that closer into debates in art history today.

[ANDERS RIEL MULLER]

Excellent.

Sebastian, do you have any more questions?

No?

Well, I can see the time is running.

It's so fascinating.

I actually have a lot of more questions I would like to ask, but I think we will be running for two hours.

But so going back to sort of the focus of this podcast series and...

Like how can your reinterpretation of Normandsdalen and especially sort of like your knowledge of the 18th century as sort of also the sort of the peak of like colonial imperial ambitions of the absolute monarchy.

How do you think like focusing more on the 18th century and art history, what can it tell us about sort of like this sort of narrative or myth of the good Nordic region or the innocent Nordic region?

[MATHIAS DANBOLT]

It's such a great question.

Maybe at least two things, hopefully.

One, you know, since art history as a discipline has been part of a nation building project, art history has often been kind of celebratory.

It's often been about creating, you know, the goal is to create a historical narrative that is a good narrative.

And that is kind of a narrative of

of innocence insofar in a Norwegian context at least, that it is about independence, about freedom, about liberty, like it's so kind of part of a Norwegian art historical narrative and a

Danish art historical narrative in its own, that has its own kind of political history with 1864 and the loss of land in wars.

So art history as a discipline has denaturalized a kind of a happy orientation where both

There is an expectation when you go to an art museum that you will be like uplifted and that art is positive and it, you know, is nuanced and it's fantastic.

And I think we don't often speak properly and more nuanced enough about art.

The history of art is also a history of instrumentalizing aesthetics.

for different political purposes.

And that art is often part of not only opening up the world, but also closing down specific narratives.

And I think the national romantic thrust that has been so central to kind of in different ways, both Danish and Norwegian art history, and even...

despite the fact that it's been criticized for a lot of years, there still is a kind of a habit of going there in museum exhibitions and so forth.

And that kind of innocent story, I think we need to, I hope we complicate that.

On the other hand, I hope that exhibition will also make people more interested in stuff that look innocent.

So like, for instance, the small figurine in porcelain that we might think now as, yeah, as an innocent little kitsch thing.

But to try to understand, like, what are the labor involved in this?

What economies?

And that's what my co-researchers at the project, Tonja Haugland Sørensen, she works with the history of lumber in Norway, for instance.

to look at, you know, we have lumber all over national romantic paintings, but often it's talked about as the wild nature.

But she talks about, no, these are extractive landscapes.

You know, the 18th century is a moment where our kind of contemporary understanding of

of seeing nature as economic resource is really being developed and being unfolded.

The 18th century is the time where Norwegian forests are replaced basically as a plantation forest all over the place.

It's the moment where Norway's emptied of marble because of mining.

It's the moment where the intensification also of

of silver, which I started earlier, but it's a moment where porcelain, which in itself is a material, it's an effect of quartzite and other... So that way of looking at nature as an economic resource and that economic perspective always will dominate.

I think we keep forgetting that when we look at these kind of cute objects in art museums all around the place that these cute objects come like they're connected to that extractive economy and that cultural heritage is part of an extractive history of extractivism.

So I hope that we can inspire more people to think kind of colonial art history and ecological art history to make the visit in museums maybe a bit more, maybe not like innocent and cute but at least more kind of provoking and in that way more fun because suddenly objects that we might just see as these

you know, these lavish Rococo-esque thing, like they have a political history.

And if you start asking those questions, I think the world becomes much more connected and complicated in a fascinating way.

[ANDERS RIEL MULLER]

I think that's a very good way to end.

If you don't have any more questions, Sebastian, then I just want to say thank you, Matthias, for joining us today.

And if you can make it to Bergen before October 12th, 2025, then you can still see the exhibition there.

[MATHIAS DANBOLT]

And we have also a book, the English version is about to come.

The Norwegian version is available.

Perfect.

[ANDERS RIEL MULLER]

And we will try to link that in the podcast as well.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[WATERMARK]

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