ARLIS NORDEN AND NORDIC CIVILISATION

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Six qualities of Nordic civilisation are identified: the spirit of co-operation which links the five Nordic countries; the acceptance of the differing identities of distinct countries, places, and cultural traditions; mutuality of individuals and society; commonality – the inclusion of everybody; care of the environment; and world citizenship. While the Nordic spirit of co-operation in particular is exemplified by ARLIS NORDEN, each of these qualities is perceived to have implications for the arts, for art libraries, and for ARLIS NORDEN, and together they illuminate an international role for art librarians – to help each other to serve local communities and to cherish local arts.

It means a lot to me to have the opportunity to address this first Annual Meeting of ARLIS NORDEN. Of course I am delighted to witness yet another step forward in the development of internationalism among art librarians, which has come on so fast in the last decade and which I have been fortunate to have been associated with. But I am especially happy to be here and to be your guest.

This is only my second visit to a Nordic country, but long before my first visit I had fallen in love with an idea and an image of this part of the world. I know that my cherished image must differ from reality; I know that it is partly a personal ideal identified by wistful thinking with an actual region; yet I do believe that it is not entirely imagined, and that without doubt the reality which you belong to, by virtue of inhabiting and creating it, is a worthy locus for human hopes and aspirations, a good example of what civilisation means and of what the human race can achieve.

Perhaps I should confess that my image of a Nordic way of life owes a good deal to the world of Nordic children’s literature and to books which I have shared with my own children and they with me – books by Tove Jansson, Astrid Lindgren, Anne-Cath Vestly; illustrations by Ion Wikland. It owes something too to the fact that as a parent I handle Lego bricks almost daily – real pieces of Nordic civilisation, visible reminders of a Nordic commitment not just to good design, not just to ‘good play’ and creativity, but to the building of a better and a peaceful world for our children. As never before we are conscious of living in one world, its different parts inter-connected and interdependent; elements of Nordic civilisation are welcome ingredients in our English homes. But ours is also a troubled world, and my adult perceptions of it consistently confirm an impression that the Nordic countries are havens of sanity and sanctuaries of hope.

There is nothing new in singing the praises of the Nordic countries; many have done it before. But that is no reason for not doing it again, for it is my contention that it is vital for the qualities which I associate with Nordic civilisation to become building blocks for the world and for all our futures. In this talk I intend to identify those qualities and to link them to our endeavours as art librarians and to ARLIS NORDEN in particular. But before I start to do that may I make one thing clear, and that is, that I am acutely aware that ARLIS NORDEN represents five distinct countries; that it is an inter-national organisation and that you are an inter-national audience; and that when I talk of ‘Nordic civilisation’ I am really talking about a group of different cultures which it is only permissible for me to lump together because your separate countries have chosen to join together in a unity which embraces diversity. Without that vision we would not be here this morning, or in this building. And at the heart of that vision is the very essence of civilisation.

The qualities of civilisation which I associate with the Nordic countries in particular, and which I want to talk about today, are these:
1. co-operation between nations;
2. acceptance and celebration of different identities;
3. mutuality of individuals and society;
4. commonality – the quality of including everybody;
5. care of the environment; and finally
6. world citizenship: inter-nationalism on a global scale.
Co-operation between nations

I hardly need to tell you about neighbourliness and co-operation between Nordic countries. The declaration of King Oscar I of Sweden, in 1856, that ‘Henceforth, war between Nordic brothers is impossible’, is very much a part of your history, and subsequently the spirit of those words has been translated into practical action in virtually every sphere of life, assisted and symbolised by Nordic associations and official bodies including most notably the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers. In the field of culture, a Nordic Cultural Commission was established in 1947, and in 1971 a Cultural Agreement was signed with the aim of developing contacts of all kinds. The Nordic Council of Ministers has Cultural offices at Copenhagen and administers a Nordic Cultural Fund. This Nordic Arts Centre in Helsinki is one of a number of permanent cultural centres which have been created as a result of joint cultural initiatives. In our field of librarianship, Nordic co-operation dates from at least the beginning of this century with the launching of the journal Nordisk tidskrift för bok- och biblioteksväsen; the first Nordic library conference was held in 1926. Several co-operative ventures, including a co-operative acquisitions scheme for research libraries (NVBF), were merged, in 1976, to form NORDINFO, a permanent body under the administrative umbrella of the Nordic Council of Ministers and its Cultural Secretariat. NORDINFO’s achievements include the development of a union list of periodicals (NOSP), and the establishment of SCANNET which co-ordinates and offers advice on databases. NORDINFO has also supported a number of initiatives within particular subject areas, notably science and technology, medicine, agriculture, and economics. With all this co-operative activity going on within the Nordic countries, and bearing in mind also the development of national and international co-operation between art libraries including the formation of ARLIS Norge, the creation of ARLIS NORDEN was inevitable, sooner or later. I congratulate you on creating it sooner!

Rather than dwelling on the virtues of co-operation between nations, I want to move on to the second of the qualities I have identified, since without it co-operation can only be temporary and fragile.

Differences and identities

An essential feature of Nordic unity is its disunity or diversity: its inbuilt respect for national sovereignty and distinct national identities. By developing co-operative links to a high degree without compromising the distinct identities of the participating nations, the Nordic countries have created a model for international co-operation which is of particular value in the field of culture and the arts, in which so much depends upon difference. National, and other, identities, need the arts as a prime means of their expression; the arts in turn need all the richness of diversity which different traditions can provide. Co-operation between countries which is based on mutual respect offers the possibility of cultural interchange without cultural imperialism. The principle of difference and distinct identity of course extends to localities and to groups of all kinds, including minority groups and including peoples like the Lapps whose identity cannot be confined within national boundaries.

So far as art libraries is concerned, although there is a great deal to be gained from drawing closer together, learning from one another, and developing co-operative schemes and networks, the ultimate objective is not to make all our art libraries the same but to build upon and take full advantage of their essential differences – differences which arise from each library’s location in a particular place and tradition, and from its serving a particular community or clientele. A responsibility of many art libraries must be to collect and sometimes create documentation of local art; these libraries can then make a unique contribution to a national network, at the apex of which a national art library or art department in a national library is likely to have overall responsibility to the nation and to the world. Only in this way can we hope to maintain, and to provide access to, adequate documentation of the art of the world in all its variety.

Comprehensive worldwide documentation of art which pays proper attention to the local, and in which nothing is overlooked, is essential, and not simply to satisfy the curiosity of (for instance) someone in San Francisco who has an interest in Norwegian stave churches, or of someone in Stockholm who wishes to study the art of the Maoris in New Zealand. It is essential in order to resist cultural imperialism, which is only too happy to ignore or to trample underfoot other cultures – such as those of isolated, small, or weak nations or peoples – which are relatively vulnerable; it is essential in order to prevent, or at least to enable the correction of, that kind of distortion of art history which identifies Nordic artistic achievement solely with Munch and regards him as an entirely isolated phenomenon. You are well aware of the dangers, and of course you will be familiar with Sven Sandström’s contribution to the development of AICARCS as a movement committed to preserving, through a network of documentation centres, evidence of artistic activity outside the widely accepted but narrowly drawn map of ‘modern’ art. The scholar or interpreter who pioneers original pathways through the maze of art history will always be likely to illuminate certain works of art, or to open our eyes to inter-connections of which we were previously unaware. But this kind of scholarship itself makes the point that no single pathway can ever be the only route; moreover, it is dependent on the existence of works and documents which previous travellers passed by. The practice of art scholarship requires comprehensive documentation of art to allow room for manoeuvre.
It is inconceivable that ARLIS NORDEN will not safeguard and promote national initiatives or be actively concerned with the documentation and bibliography of national and local art, and it is very appropriate, right and proper, that we are to learn about Finnish art and its documentation this afternoon.

Society and the individual
The third quality I want to focus on is the achievement of a balance, or reconciliation, between individuals and society. It seems to me that the Nordic countries have each in their own way created and occupied a middle ground between extremes. These extremes comprise varieties of totalitarianism on the one hand, and excessive individualism on the other, and they also include that dangerous modern hybrid which, whether strictly correctly I don’t know, I shall call monetarism. What I have in mind is that kind of unbridled capitalism which purports to uphold the rights of the individual and which ostentatiously flies the flag of freedom, when what it really encourages is greed and the pursuit of wealth which divides people from one another, depriving many and subjecting all in one way or another to the thrall of larger and larger corporations, culminating in today’s multi-nationalists which have the power to destroy nations and the fabric of the world itself.

The Nordic nations have understood that individuals need society and that society needs individuals; that none of us can develop our full potential without participating in and, to a degree, submitting to the constraints of, community. Of course, this has fundamental implications for our profession, that is, for librarianship as a whole, since the principle of free access to information depends upon it, and it depends upon free access to information; an over-powerful state will withhold information which ought to be public, and trespass upon personal territory which ought to be private, yet without social organisation ‘public’ libraries could not exist and the most powerful individuals would hoard information, as wealth, for their own benefit.

So far as the arts are concerned, understanding of the interdependence of individuals, and thus, of individuals and society, results in considerable scope to individual artists, without leading either to a totalitarian art enslaved by the state or to the making too much or too exclusive a virtue of the idea of artistic ‘freedom’ which can so easily become a justification for lack of rigour and for self-indulgence. Understanding of the crucial relationship between individual and society will guarantee essential freedoms without losing sight of equally essential disciplines; it will both challenge artists and extend the range of opportunities available to them by offering possibilities of serving others through their art, of articulating shared as well as private perceptions and aspirations, of contributing to communal and national identity and to enhancing the quality of life; thus it will not undervalue those arts – craft, design, architecture – which contribute most directly to everyday life. Furthermore, it recognises and underpins a positive role for public and state support for the arts. This in itself is of some importance to art libraries, but in addition an approach to art which encompasses the different ways in which individual artists, and the arts themselves, can function within a social context, has implications for the documentation of art and for the scope and role of art libraries, which should take us far beyond focussing all our attention on the so-called ‘fine’ arts or on art history as a roll call of individuals of genius.

This brings me to the next aspect of modern Nordic civilisation which I would identify as an essential quality of a complete civilisation, and that is, the way in which it includes everybody, is created by everybody, and embodies the idea that ‘the artist is not a special kind of person; everybody is a special kind of artist’.

Community and commonality
In each of the Nordic countries, the development of a national consciousness and identity during the last 200 years has incorporated an awareness and appreciation of the role and cultural life of the so-called ‘common’ people. The Danish clergyman Grundtvig (1783-1872), for example, in formulating a notable and influential vision of a distinct Nordic civilisation rooted in a common history, saw this civilisation as created not by the state but by individuals, and not by an elite but by everyone, and thus indubitably embracing the ‘folk’. Folklorists, historians, scholars and poets recorded and cherished folklore, folksongs, and ways of life and work, contributing to the accumulation of a shared body of national self-knowledge and pride. In England much of the equivalent material has been lost for ever; we talk about our ‘national heritage’ but our concept of national heritage does not always or unambiguously embrace everybody; class factors and political bias have played and continue to play a part in the construction and manipulation of a ‘national heritage’ which attempts to impose an illusion of unity on a deeply divided nation.

The Nordic countries have cherished folk art and craft, not simply in marvellous open-air museums which have led the world but also as a living and evolving tradition which has contributed to the development of an aesthetic which does not divide art from design or separate art from everyday life. This has obvious implications for art documentation and art libraries, and not just in Nordic countries; it is significant that libraries in other countries will often, like my own library, possess more books on Nordic folk art than on the folk art of their own countries: because the books exist, because the art has been cherished and scholars have chosen to study it. A personal link with Nordic civilisation which I am proud to acknowledge, is a debt to and modest collaboration with the Danish folklorist Eske Mathiesen, whose recognition of ‘family
art' opened my eyes to a topic which I have explored with much pleasure and satisfaction.3

‘Family art,' which encompasses the many and various ways in which families create their own visual traditions, shape their own surroundings, and reflect and portray their identity, illustrates the value of art, as a means of personal growth and of expression and as an element in creative living, to everyone — not simply to the family but primarily to the individual and to the groups and communities in which individuals discover their identity, including villages, towns, and nations. It is not wrong to treasure great works of genius; invariably such works speak for all of us; but to pay attention only to genius, to despise folk and amateur art, is to lose sight of the importance of art as process — as if reverence for the great works of literature could ever be a reason for not keeping a diary or writing a letter. Art too is a language, available to us all, which can be effective without eloquence. Thus even those of us who are most committed to making the heritage of art and the contents of our art libraries and artoteks accessible to everyone, need to remind ourselves that there should also be a place, on the shelves of some of our libraries, for the art documentation which will stimulate amateur practitioners, and for the better practical books which will help amateurs to improve their technique in different media and crafts. Again, the importance of photography in the context of ‘family art' is a reminder that the camera has provided people of all kinds with an effective means of image-making, and books on photography are always popular. Exhibitions and library shelves which convey a sense of the validity of the creativity of children and ordinary people as well as professional and recognised artists will tend to encourage such creativity, rather than elevating the making of art beyond most people's grasp. And if suitable classes are not available elsewhere, why shouldn’t they be organised by libraries?

Guided by the spirit of Nordic civilisation, Nordic art libraries are unlikely to neglect either the art of the people or the role of art in everyday life; nor can they fail to provide a service to the people, meaning everybody rather than just an elite. In this context it is appropriate to draw attention to the Danish group Kunstfaggrupperen, and to their commitment to the use of art departments in public libraries, and of artoteks, to promote the role of art in the community, and to ensure that in our very different modern and predominantly urban world, art has as vital a role in everyday life as folk art once had for so many people. This approach is not confined to Kunstfaggrupperen, but I do not know of any other group who have pursued it with such passion and dedication. I very much hope that ARLIS NORDEN will set an example to art librarians everywhere by bringing together colleagues who may have very different roles to perform, including the representatives of national, scholarly and academic institutions and also those who serve the public.

Environment

The fifth quality I wish to speak of is that of cherishing the environment. The Nordic countries have shown how it is possible to inhabit the natural world without despoiling it, and how it is possible, and necessary, for us humans to acknowledge that we belong to and have responsibility for an ecological community of all living things. From an environmental point of view you have been fortunate in the lands and natural resources you have inherited; fortunate, too, in that industrialisation developed relatively late and in association with a clean source of power, hydro-electricity. But Nordic countries have also taken a very positive lead in pioneering pollution controls — which ironically have not protected you from invasion by pollution — and in developing renewable-energy technologies. It is indeed a comment on the respective governments of Britain and Norway, that developments in the generation of energy from the ebb and flow of the tide, abandoned by Britain, are being carried forward by Norway. Underlying all of this is the all-important fact that Nordic people love and value the lakes and mountains, coasts and forests, which make up your landscapes. Because your interaction with the uniqueness of landscape is a dynamic and living relationship which is part of your local and national traditions and at the heart of your sense of what is real, Nordic wilderness can never become simply an income-generating tourist attraction — indeed, measures have been introduced to protect it from tourism — nor a superficial national symbol; the refusal of Nordic people to accept an entirely urban way of life, and the Swedish tradition of allemansrätt (free access regardless of ownership) manifest the sense in which the land truly belongs to the people and is cherished as a common spiritual and re-creative resource.

So far as the arts are concerned, this means that the environment remains a wealth of inspiration and a common ground for artists of all kinds. It would hardly be possible to imagine a better example of how Art can work with Nature than a piece of music by a Finnish composer which was recently broadcast on British radio — the Summer sounds for flute and grasshoppers by Merilainen. In the visual arts natural beauty and the integrity of natural materials are an essential touchstone for craft workers and designers; their predecessors include the builders of traditional and humble structures which made good use of local materials and invariably looked at home in the landscape. A particular responsibility rests with today's architects and planners whose task it is to ensure that, in relation to the environment above all, human creativity is an extension of natural Creation and does not evict the spirit of place. Once again, we can remind ourselves of areas which art documentation and art libraries must not neglect — crafts, and local traditions of building, for instance, and also provincial and national 'schools' of landscape painting which, irrespective of considerations of genius
and regardless of prevailing fashions, constitute a precious record of people’s relationship with place. Paintings of this kind speak directly even to people who may have little interest in them as art, and not least to the successors, inhabitants or visitors, of those who painted them. There is no reason to look down on an approach to paintings like these which sees them primarily as a record of place, and museums and libraries alike have a responsibility for the history, and the continuity, of people’s experiencing of their own locality and landscape.

World citizenship
I have spoken of several qualities which I believe are exemplified in Nordic civilisation. I come, finally, to the matter of global citizenship—the need to extend the principle of inter-national cooperation beyond one’s immediate neighbours so as to embrace the whole world; the urgent imperative for nations to join together, not to oppose other nations but in order to piece together, Lego block by Lego block, a whole and lasting global civilisation. Geographically, if not strategically, you are on the edge of the world; having learnt better than most of us how to live at peace among yourselves, you might be tempted to withdraw, but no—the Nordic countries have approached the rest of the world in a generous and positive spirit, often putting other countries to shame. In the visual arts your five nations have been willing both to give and to receive. They have contributed, through craft, design, and architecture, to the style of contemporary life in many countries, and to an aesthetic based on simplicity and integrity which is not extravagant or ostentatious and which demonstrates that good design and pleasing surroundings need not and should not depend on wealth; they are a human right. There is much else in Nordic arts for the rest of us to admire and enjoy if we will. Yet the Nordic countries have achieved distinct cultural traditions without rejecting outside influences; the most Nordic of Nordic artists have generally travelled, worked, and learned in other countries beside their own; as art librarians you are eager, both because of demands made upon you and also because you see it as a vital part of your mission, to provide information about the arts worldwide, to bring the world’s art, as it happens, to your own people.

For all his patriotism, the fellowship which Grundtvig sought was ‘as wide as humanity’. Writing during the 1st World War, and remembering how narrowly Sweden and Norway had—to their credit—avoided war in 1905, the Swedish writer Ellen Key invoked Rudolf Goldscheid’s concept of Kulturpatriotismus: the idea that love of country should be expressed through cultural means rather than nationalist aggression and expansionism; and she showed how this led to what she called ‘patriotic internationalism’. That is, the best way of caring for one’s own country is to care for other countries too, and to appreciate that every nation will be safer if everybody can learn to appreciate how different cultures enhance one another and contribute to a world culture. I quote:

Only the narrow-minded and the short-sighted are unable to see that love of humanity and love of country ought to be as easy to combine as the love of home and native village, or love of country and native village. Only those who are mentally colour-blind can speak of nationalism in contrast to the drab background of internationalism. These colour-blind people have never seen the shining bow of promise above the present flood. It is just because there are so many colours that this bow has such a splendour. It gives one the promise of a time, when the different characteristics of the nations will stand side by side and melt together in as beautiful a harmony as the colours of the rainbow.*

Art libraries are custodians of some of the richest ‘colours’ in the world; those colours derive their variety of hue not only from national characteristics, but also from locality, from individuals, and from groups and communities, and from the whole range of the arts from the ‘fine’ to the ‘applied’, and from ‘fine’ to ‘folk’. Ellen Key wisely anticipates that, as nations draw closer together, ‘national colours will not be as sharply defined as now’, but she doesn’t extend the metaphor to observe that mixing two colours produces a third: in the arts there can be no contradiction between caring for the integrity of distinct cultures and rejoining in the mingling of cultures which we sometimes think of as a feature of our modern ‘multi-cultural’ world but which in truth is as old as civilisation itself and has contributed so often to the dynamic of cultural development.

ARLIS NORDEN is a living example of the spirit of Nordic co-operation, but in addition I feel certain that your endeavours will in one way or another reflect all of those qualities of Nordic civilisation which I have identified. Not least, I believe and hope that you will interpret the role of art librarianship in terms of ‘patriotic internationalism’—in terms, that is, of the duty of the art librarian to care for local traditions and the art of one’s own people on the one hand, and on the other, to provide local access to all art, everywhere. I contend that these same qualities illuminate the true purpose of internationalism—to work together to help one another to cherish and to hallow, and to share, our global ‘commonwealth’ in all its infinite variety, here, there, and everywhere. Art, and internationalism, and by implication art librarianship also, are about the particularities and uniquenesses of our world and ourselves and the work of our hands and minds, seen as parts of a whole and in a universal light—sub specie aeternitatis.
References

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