

The Hidden Narrative of Manor Houses and Their Cultural History in Norwegian Museums

Aina Aske

Larvik Museum

aina.aske@larvik.kommune.no

My comparative outlook in this paper is related to a specific category of combined museums and cultural heritage monuments; a rather small group of manor houses, mansions, villas and residences in urban and rural environments. The majority can be dated back to between 1665 and 1850. Some were protected as monuments and museums in the early twentieth century; however the majority were institutionalised during the period 1950-1990 and function today as historic houses, museums and even national monuments. Early nineteenth century political incidents gave rise to a romantic cultural movement as Norwegians sought to define and express a distinct national character. It was as a result of this movement the long union period with Denmark was referred to as “the Danish era” or “the 400-year night”. Collection of immaterial and material cultural heritage was followed by academic work, and folk tradition was mediated in new ways and with new explanations, contributing to the notion of nationality. Museums were important institutions in the nation-building, as vehicles for the encouraging of national values and identity in the aftermath of 1814. Institutions like the National museum for art, architecture and design, The Norwegian Museum of Cultural history and The Museum of Cultural History lead the way. How might the study of the noble and elegant, but disregarded group of mansions and manor houses contribute to the larger picture and understanding of national museums, or rather the decentralised Norwegian national museum structure? There are more reasons: Historically they belong to the last centuries of the union with Denmark, and many were protected when the opinions towards the “400 years night” were at their strongest. This makes them particularly interesting from a cultural history perspective. Secondly, some of them are among the exclusive group of national heritage monuments, and thirdly – in a subtle way the majority seems to have close connections to the ramification of the folk- and open-air oriented museum movement and its strong national overtones.

Introduction

The birth of the museum in Norway was strongly related to a complex set of factors in the late nineteenth century society; the modernisation of industry, transports, science, urbanisation and notions of patriotic feelings. The most important issue on the public agenda was political independence, and at the turn of the century a strong national mentality gained firmly foothold. It was above all politically based, but also culturally. As such it was rooted primarily in the rural society with its traditions and heritage as opponent to urban Norway and its Danish-Norwegian culture.¹ The coupling of nation-building and cultural heritage² was common for many European countries; however Norway's situation had its distinctive features. In 1814 Norway was forced into a union with Sweden after being taken away from Denmark in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. The Norwegians revolted against the imposition of another union, establishing the Norwegian Constitution on the 17th of May 1814. Although this gained Norway some degree of internal self-rule, the Norwegian state was nonetheless compelled to enter a new – albeit loose – union comprising two nations under the same monarch. The union with Denmark lasted for 434 years³, from 1536 to 1814, and the secession from Sweden took place in 1905 as a peaceful dissolution.

In Norway the unitary and long-term function of 1814 as a key year for the growth of the nation has no parallel in other Nordic countries.⁴ The early nineteenth century political incidents gave rise to a romantic cultural movement as Norwegians sought to define and express a distinct national character. It was as a result of this movement the long period in union with Denmark was referred to as “the Danish era” or “the 400-year night”.

Collection of immaterial and material cultural heritage was followed by academic work, and interpretation of the national treasure was orientated just as much towards the present and the future, as to the past. Folk tradition was mediated in a new way and with new explanations, contributing to the notion of identity and national fellowship. Museums were important institutions in the nation-building, as vehicles for the encouraging of national values and identity in the aftermath of 1814.

The series of articles and literature originating from “Prosjekt 1905”⁵ give interesting perspectives on nation and nation-building in general, and as such an inspiration to look further into the Danish-Norwegian issue. In his article Peter Aronsson says that:

In stead of building monuments after the dissolution of the union, Norwegians developed a monumental cultural nationalistic environment in the capital Christiania (Oslo). Like other open-air museums in Scandinavia, the Bygdøy area with the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History established in 1894 represented national folk culture. (...) The Gokstad and Oseberg ships excavated in the 1880's and 1890's were exhibited in purpose built museums with an almost sacred architectural expression.⁶

1 Rogan 1999:11.

2 Pedersen 2003:32.

3 See my article for NaMu I: <http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/022/023/index.html>.

4 Aronsson 2005:217.

5 This is a Swedish-Norwegian research program on the dissolution of the union and Swedish-Norwegian relationships during 200 years. <http://www.hf.uio.no/iakh/forskning/forskningsprosjekter/1905/english.php>.

6 Aronsson 2005:219. My translation.

It seems as the Norwegian folk culture was re-connected backwards to the pre-Reformation rural society and the era of the Vikings in one strategic move. The museums founded during the second part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, were national in terms of representing and reflecting the constructed image of national politics, knowledge, culture and economics. Their mission was triple: a) to play an important role in the lives of ordinary people, b) as vehicles to shape national identity and c) to democratise access to information and knowledge.⁷

The Study of Manor House Museums as an Approach to National Issues

In Norway it was an urgent task to demonstrate that the country was a nation through history. History was given the role of shaping identity, besides its traditional scientific function. Cultural regionalisation and consciousness was a parallel movement. There was no contradiction between nation-building and weight put on the regional/local; remote areas were understood as just another approach to the national. The decentralised structure was a hallmark for Norwegian museums at a very early stage. The local and public-minded foundation of the cultural history museums made the shaping of local identity just as important as support to a common national identity.⁸

My comparative outlook in this paper is related to a specific category of combined museums and cultural heritage monuments; a rather small group of manor houses, mansions, villas and residences in urban and rural environments. The majority can be dated back to between 1665 and 1850. Some were protected as monuments and museums in the early twentieth century; however the majority were institutionalized during the period 1950-1990 and function today as historic houses, museums and even national monuments.⁹

How might the study of the noble and elegant, but disregarded group of mansions and manor houses contribute to the larger picture and understanding of national museums, or rather the decentralised Norwegian national museum structure? - For example as a vehicle to define Norway's identity and its place in the world? There are more reasons: Most belong historically to the last centuries of the union with Denmark, and many were protected when the opinions about the "400 years night" were at their strongest¹⁰. This makes them particularly interesting from a cultural history perspective. Secondly, some of them are among the group of national heritage monuments, and thirdly – in a subtle way the majority seems to have close connections to the ramification of the folk- and open-air oriented museum movement and its strong national overtones.

7 St.meld.nr. 22 (1999-2000) 74.

8 With reference to articles in the key-work of Norwegian museology; Amundsen, Rogan, Stang. 2003.

9 The Eidsvoll site was purchased for the purpose of cultural heritage monument and museum in 1837.

10 Introductions to the subject can be found on the internet sites: <http://www.norway.org/history/upto1814/>.

Figure 1. Fossum Manor 2008.



The paper is an outline and meant to be included as part of the Master plan for Herregården (the Princely Residence/Manor House Museum) in Larvik. The building was protected by the Cultural Heritage Act in 1923 and plans were made for the museum some years ahead of this.

My intention is to establish a framework for the purpose analysing individual “framing” processes – like for example the Manor House Museum in Larvik – and compare them in order to understand how narratives are selected, promoted and mediated within the decentralised Norwegian museum structure. An introduction is presented below, based on the actual members and potential members of the newly established network.¹¹

The Situation of Today: The Norwegian National Museum Network

The newly established museum network is one of the results of the Norwegian Museum Reform programme¹², and participating museums are intended to cooperate in order to develop their subject specialist field on a national level .

11 The national networks are presented on the website of the Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority (ABM-utvikling), unfortunately not available in English. <http://www.abm-utvikling.no/museum/nasjonale-museumsnettverk>.

12 The reform was first discussed in the Report to the Storting no. 22 (1999-2000) Sources of Knowledge and Experience and further developed in the Report to the Storting no. 48 (2002-2003), Cultural Policy up to 2014.

Table 1. Manor House Museums in Norway

Site	Founded	Place	Heritage/ Museum	Institution/Owner
Oslo county				
Bogstad	1760-80	Oslo	1956	Norsk folkemuseum/Oslo kommune
Oslo ladegård	1720	Oslo	1950	Oslo kommune
Linderud gård	1713	Oslo	1954	Linderud stiftelse/Oslo kommune
Frogner hovedgård	1791/92	Oslo	1909	Oslo Museum/Oslo kommune
Østfold county				
Rød herregård	1790-årene	Halden	1961	Halden historiske samlinger
Elingaard herregård	1749	Onsøy	1923/76	Fredrikstad Museum
Buskerud county				
Austad gård	1808-13	Drammen	1963	Drammens Museum
Gulskogen gård	1806	Drammen	1961	Gulskogen stiftelse/Drammens Museum
Marienlyst	1770	Drammen	1911	Drammens Museum
Fossesholm	1763	Eiker	1973	Kongsberg, Øvre Eker, Numedal kulturhistoriske museum
Hedmark county				
Gjøvik gård	Tidl. 1800	Gjøvik	1956	Mjøsmuseet
Akershus county				
Eidsvoll	1770	Eidsvoll	1837	Staten/Stiftelsen Eidsvoll 1814
Vestfold county				
Herregården	1677	Larvik	1921	Larvik Museum/Larvik kommune
Eidsfoss verk	1697	Eidsfoss	1922/1990	Nord Jarlsbergmuseum/foundation
Telemark county				
Ulefos Hovedgård	1807	Ulefoss	1943	Stiftelsen "Statsråd Niels Aalls Minde"/Telemark Museum
Søndre Brekke	Tidl. 1800	Skien	1909	Telemark Museum
Vest-Agder county				
Gimle gård	1790-årene	Kristiansand	1982	Vest-Agder-museet
Næs verk	1665	Tvedestrand	1967	Næs jernverksmuseum/private/foundation
Hordaland county				
Damsgård hovedgård	Ca. 1770	Bergen	1983 1993	Vestlandske kunstindustrimuseum/ Bymuseet i Bergen
Alvøen	1790 (1830)	Laksevåg	1923 1983	Vestlandske kunstindustrimuseum/ Bymuseet i Bergen
Baroniet Rosendal	1665	Sunnhord.	1927	Baroniet Rosendal
Trøndelag county				
Ringve gård	1860-årene	Lade	1960	Ringve museum
Austråttborgen	1656	Ørlandet	1923	Staten/Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum

In 1999 the Norwegian museum structure counted for 800 museums and collections distributed on 700 administrative units in Norway, underlining the decentralised and democratic pattern already mentioned. Manor house museums and the like belong to the many-sided and complex category of cultural history museums which accounts for 83 % of the institutions and 95% of built heritage in museums, 23 % of objects and 85% photography. The majority of the built heritage is open-air museums focusing the peasant, traditional craftsmanship and building.

By means of appropriate restructuring and financial stimulus, a national Museum Reform was launched in 2002. In order to make the sector stronger and more efficient, an important goal is to re-structure the museum sector on a local level into larger regional units. Regional units will form the basis for a gathering of the museums in a national network in order to secure national division of labour and coordination, counteract overlapping, and thereby secure professional coherence and resource utilization. Today 21 fields of subjects are selected as national, and among them is the network for manor houses and mansions – called Herregårds-nettverket. The term “national” is applied as “nationwide” and is more about structure and organization and role, than actually content.

As a result of the reform the monuments and museums within Herregårdsnettverket are either part of a larger administrative unit (regional museum or municipal administration) or have been accepted as individual institutions. The fact that are organised in a national network simplifies further research, at the same time it legitimizes their existence as a theme of national interest or meaning.

Framing

A common trait for the actual buildings and sites is the decision taken at a certain point of time “to frame” them as cultural heritage:

For the simple act of extracting a site from a continuing history of use and development means that a frame is put around it, separating that site from what was prior to the moment of its preservation. Dedicated to a new use as, precisely, a historic site, it becomes a facsimile of what it once was by virtue of the frame – which may be as simple as a notice or as elaborate as piece of legislation – which encloses it and separates it off from the present.¹³

The list above gives information which year the cultural monuments were legitimised by the Cultural Heritage Act, or became public responsibility either through local or national initiative. The majority were documented and researched by art historians and/or historians and presented to the public in articles and writings during the first decades of the twentieth century. Below is proposed some preliminary premises or criteria for the analysis of the process of turning buildings into heritage resources:

Time: Age and Style

The history of manor houses and mansions in Norway can be divided into three phases; from the Medieval until 1660, from the Absolute monarchy until early nineteenth century and from early nineteenth century until to day. None of the buildings in the network goes behind 1665,

13 Bennet 1995:129.

and most of them belong to the second half of the eighteenth century or first decades of the nineteenth century. Some, mostly mansions with continuity in ownership, are still surrounded by gardens, parks and drives and have valuable collections of furniture, arts and books. The founding of the Fortidsminnforeningen¹⁴ was an important premise for the preservation of built heritage and later on as well for the growth of local and regional Folk museums which generally had an open-air museum profile.¹⁵

The years before and after the turn of the century a new set of values and criteria based on age and style was introduced to the heritage sector. This can easily be spotted in literature, museum guidebooks and brochures from the early decades of the twentieth century. The manor houses and mansions importance to Norwegian architectural history style is strongly argued because they represented continental baroque, rococo and neoclassical and exemplified a foreign culture brought to the country by the owner, the architect and/or the master builder.¹⁶

Origin

The aspect of origin is related to “age” in terms of contextualisation; information about owners and his (or her) social and cultural background, architect or builder, function and so on. Looking into the origin the manor houses on the list, many were re-erected on older sites, and/or renovated several times. The cultural site may have a history as estate or manor owned by noble families during the Danish era. However, at the time of erection (or complete renovation) the owners were either representatives from a small but influential elite group within the farming society or ambitious, innovative representatives from the upper level of the Norwegian bourgeoisie. Some descended from Danish noble families, others were married to descendants, some were actually ennobled in the second half of the eighteenth century and the better part generally had close relations to Denmark, England and other parts of the continent through relatives and/or business and education. Among them were individuals closely connected to the nation-building process in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.¹⁷

Place

Cultural monuments can almost pass through as “history”. In other words; their potential to communicate history, commemorate historical events and persons legitimize them.¹⁸ Another aspect of cultural heritage as resource is their ability to make us think and commemorate *where* history happened rather than *when* it happened.¹⁹ One example within the network is the Eidsvoll building – strongly associated with the events in 1814 and regarded by the nation as a monument over the Constitutional work in 1814.²⁰ The place contains a concentrate of national history which makes chronology less important and verifies the notion that “temporal

14 The Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments 1844-49.

15 Ågotnes 2000:69-91 His article present the specific form of national way of thinking dominating the protection of historic monuments in Norway.

16 See for example guide books for Herregården in Larvik, Linderud hovedgård, Elingaard herregård, Eidsvoll, Fossesholm.

17 See Schnitler C.W. 1911 and Coldevin A. 1950.

18 Eriksen 2000:5.

19 Ibid. 15.

20 Risåsen 2004:7.

and topographical memory sites emerge at those times and in those places where there is a perceived or constructed break with the past”.²¹

To sum up: An interesting scope would be to look further into these aspects and how the narrative potential was interpreted and institutionalised into a museum context. It should be taken into consideration then, that the institutionalisation process in itself probably influenced on interpretation and how the national narrative was made attractive to the general public.

Figure 2. Eidsvoll, 2008



Institutionalisation

On one hand cultural monuments “are” or represent history, on the other they also tell about the historical period that once pointed them out as “heritage resources”.²² The early museum institutions in Norway follow to major lines; formation of encyclopaedic museums in the major cities with natural history objects, antiquities, ethnographic material and medieval collections. A parallel movement was the construction of museums focusing national identity, common culture and communication. The Norwegian Museum of Cultural history formed a prototype to the Folk museum, characterised “as an open-air museum joined together with systematically culture history collections”.²³

The Norwegian Museum of Cultural History – formerly translated as the Norwegian Folk Museum – was founded in 1894. According to the Museum’s Articles of Association, its objective was to bring together “everything that can elucidate the cultural life of the Norwegian people”. The Museum’s early organization and the classification of its collections can be regarded as an expression of scientific approach to culture, but also an expression of cultural political ideology. During the first years the principle organization of the Museum comprised “the National department” which mainly encompassed the peasant culture and the “the Department of towns and the lives of the upper classes”. Here the Norwegian national question concerning the strong contrast between the

21 Gillis 1994:8.

22 Eriksen 2000:5.

23 Ågotnes 2000:82.

immigrants and the governments officials in the towns compared to the genuine Norwegian rural classes is clearly illustrated. (..)

In the long run the division or polarising of collections, inspired by the nineteenth century Romantic Movement, was unacceptable and criticized for more reasons. There were for example more opinions on national culture, or rather what was the most national. Another issue was the contradiction between the ordinary people and the elite for example between folk culture and elite culture emphasized by the organization of the collections.

(..) An attempt was quickly made to bridge the gap in a new department in which items were categorized according to their purpose and application. When the museum was reopened at Bygdøy in 1902 the old cultural and political contrasts no longer existed due to an objective and scientific organisation of the collection.“ The contradiction between the national and rural Norway and the foreign European in the towns was dissolved to the favour of a harmonious, homogenous and unambiguous picture of rural cultural life and the elite culture in the towns, mutually dependent of each other.²⁴

The museum had an important impact on the development of regional museums and cultural history museums in general from the beginning of the century until after World War 2. Dag Vestheim²⁵ writes that the regional museums were within a national culture tradition. Their superior cultural historic and cultural policy context was national, and sometimes international. The government supported their foundation financially, first and foremost the establishments in the middle of Norway, where folk culture would be particularly strong.²⁶ Before the end of 1930 more than 100 museums inspired by the folk museum were established in Norway and more were to come. The responsibility of the regional museums was to collect and exhibit regional and local cultural tradition. It seems like they also had an obligation to represent national identity and nation-building ideology.

Conflicting Representations from the Past?

Is it possible to trace how aspects of time, origin, place and institutionalisation contributed to the framing and shaping of cultural heritage and museums? They all had the historical and narrative potential; but did concepts and exhibitions try to vary, discuss or even oppose the harmonious and perhaps rather national ideal? Three examples are chosen to illustrate some perspectives to be followed up in further research:

Søndre Brekke

The mansion is located outside Skien town and was owned and run by prominent families since late seventeenth century. The farm property was bought by Niels Aall, one of Norway's largest and most successful proprietors and ship owners, in 1810. He was also the town's chief administrative officer. Within few years he carried through a complete renovation of the buildings and cultivation of the farming area. The property was bought for museum purpose in 1909. “The beautiful neoclassical mansion provided the most exquisite and suitable rooms

24 BJORLI 2002:41.

25 VESTHEIM 1994:48.

26 This is according to Lise Emilie Fossmo Talleraas and her forthcoming thesis on Norwegian museums.

for exhibitions.”²⁷ All together 20 rooms were carefully restored and fitted out for displays of the museums collections of rural items, folk art together with elegant furniture, paintings and other items from urban environments. The museum opened in 1913 and is currently the administrative seat for the county museum of Telemark.

Figure3. Søndre Brekke, 2008.



Marienlyst

The beautiful “villa suburbana” is situated just outside the city centre of Drammen. In the eighteenth century a country residence was erected on the property for the pleasure of prominent bourgeois families until 1820. The farmland supplied the town household with agricultural products and fodder for the farm animals. The area was urbanized in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and. In 1909 the site and the buildings came on municipal hands and the building was restored for museum purpose in 1911. The ambitious plans for an open air museum on the site were never realized. In 1928 a new museum building was erected, and Marienlyst almost disappeared into oblivion. Today Drammen Museum is a regional museum, and the building is under restoration.

Figure 4. Marienlyst, 1911.



27 Brænne and Winness 1999:35.

The Princely Residence/the Manor House Museum in Larvik.

Ulrik Frederik Gyldenløve, the Governor of Norway, was ennobled as earl of Larvik in 1671.²⁸ His high position among the aristocracy in Denmark was reflected in his representational mansion in Copenhagen. His residence in Larvik was erected 1674-77 surrounded by a magnificent formal garden.²⁹ The last earl, Frederik Ludvig Ahlefeldt-Laurvig kept the Residence as private property until 1813. Some years after, the town decided to purchase the building for various purposes. One hundred years later the Magistrat and Chief Constable in Larvik, appealed to his good citizens for the founding of a museum in the former Residence. A committee was appointed and besides the protection of cultural heritage in the town and surrounding rural districts, their ambition was to take Larvik to the same cultural level as its neighbour towns. Today the residence is owned by Larvik municipality and administered by Larvik Museum.

Figure 5. The Princely Residence/The Manor House Museum of Larvik



Conclusion

Anders Sandvig³⁰, a marked early twentieth century museum character, visited Søndre Brekke in 1909. He suggested that the site and the buildings should be restored in order to illustrate the life and culture at “our old manors and mansions and larger farms, a new and unique part of our museums”.³¹ Perhaps he had in mind something more authentic than the actual result, which turned out to be a “traditional” open-air museum with old timber buildings from the valley arranged in the outskirts of an English garden, a mixture of systematically arranged exhibitions of rural and urban objects in the main buildings and wings.

28 All together two earldoms and one barony were erected in Norway during the Absolute monarchy.

29 Presentation of the “old regime” and its representational culture in e.g. Blanning T.W.C (2002) *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*. Oxford.

30 Anders Sandvig was the founder and first director of the second largest open-air museum in Norway.

31 Livland 1987:99

Both Brekke and Marienlyst represent late eighteenth century elements of foreign, urban and continental culture, characteristic for the upper middle class and upper class Norway. The buildings were bought and planned for as museums on initiatives from the town's honourable and trusted citizens. The sites just outside the town centre were ideal locations for ambitious museums providing space for gardens and parks and not at least premises for open air museum-ambitions. The buildings themselves were spacious and provided enough place to house collections – and exhibitions which seemed to be downscaled copies of the folk museum ideal. Both museums even contained the “compulsory” displays of ecclesiastical treasures. Besides, it seems like practical reasons – like the proper housing of collections, were just as or even more important than the elitist architecture and narrative potential.

The residence in Larvik bring into the picture representation of noble and aristocratic culture and lifestyle, not unfamiliar to the others – however subdued. But even here what was originally meant to appear as authentic seventeenth and eighteenth century interiors turned out more like a mix of bourgeois home with rural elements banished to the dark corridors and remote rooms.

The notion of the Danish era as “a conflicting representation from the past”³² seemed to be easily solved at for example Søndre Brekke and Marienlyst with the rescue provided by the folk museum model in terms of focus on style and the harmonious, homogenous and unambiguous picture of rural cultural life and the elite culture in the towns. It seems like the Princely Residence in Larvik was less suited for the big picture as a legitimate part of the national narrative. It could not easily be modified and democratized into the narrative of important families, individuals and their activities to the prosperity and progress of the Norwegian nation. The alternative; commemoration of a Danish aristocrat and the Danish Monarchy was controversial and not to be elaborated here.

This group of monuments and museums – with Eidsvoll on the one side of the scale and the residence in Larvik on the other, were framed and institutionalised as parts of the national narrative in various ways and more or less successful. The narrative of the noblemen, the Danish-Norwegian elite and the upper class is hidden within the structure of the regionalised national museums structure. Their bonds to continental culture, their influence on the Norwegian society, their architecture in relation to the egalitarian and democratic concept of post-colonial Norway and its narratives offer an interesting field for further research. It seems like both local ambitions and national ideology and ideals – presented by for example the folk museum and other national museums – are aspects that need to be further looked into.

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32 Gillis 1994:8

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