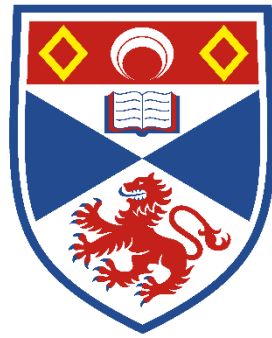


# Fridtjof Nansen and the Lysaker Circle: ornamenting Norwegian independence



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## Introduction

*“The touchstone of real culture should be the feeling of solidarity.”<sup>1</sup>*

Dr Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) both embodied and created symbols within the Norwegian movement for independence at the turn of the century. Seemingly tireless, his numerous occupations (scientist, explorer, diplomat, delegate to the League of Nations, and Rector of St Andrews) made him one of the most celebrated men in Norway and thus a representative for the country abroad. Nansen was also an amateur artist, his skill in this area never quite reaching the heights he had found in other spheres.<sup>2</sup> However, he was one of the architects for his home in Lysaker, Polhøgda. An oft-overlooked aspect of his life is the role he played in the Lysaker Circle, a group of artists who, in a period of increased calls for independence from Sweden, wanted to create a national “Norwegian” style.

Nansen was seriously concerned with the issue of Norwegian independence from Sweden. Ceded from Danish to Swedish rule in 1814 due to the Napoleonic Wars, Norway had unsuccessfully attempted to declare independence from this new authority. Norwegians objected to Swedish foreign policy since they believed it led to them being overlooked on the world stage.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Lysaker Circle wanted to improve Norwegian artistic output, making it nation specific to give them a more respected cultural standing within Europe. Nansen’s international importance stemmed from his Arctic expedition, which gripped European attention.<sup>4</sup> He became a representative for Norway politically but was also a symbolic figurehead, since his many achievements reflected well on the country. If Nansen, with all his “rugged athleticism”,<sup>5</sup> intellectual prowess, and seemingly infinite zeal for progress, was the typical Norwegian, then the nationalist position would seem admirable abroad.

The Lysaker Circle believed a Norwegian national style should draw from folk art. Themes of nature, morality, Norway, and the figure of the peasant linked their artistic and

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<sup>1</sup> Fridtjof Nansen, *Adventure, and Other Papers* (London: Leonard & Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1927), 16.

<sup>2</sup> He lamented in his diary, “I see something beautiful that I should like to bring out perhaps, but the power is lacking.” Jon Sørensen, *The saga of Fridtjof Nansen*, trans. J.B.C. Watkins (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932), 140.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Larsen, *History of Norway* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 485. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/10.1515/9781400875795>.

<sup>4</sup> Lill Eilertson, “Freedom Loving Northerners: Norwegian Independency as Narrated in Three National Museums,” in *Great Narratives of the Past Traditions and Revisions in National Museums*, ed. Dominique Poulot, Felicity Bodenstien, and José María Lanzarote Guiral (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012), 183. <https://ep.liu.se/ecp/078/ecp11078.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Clarence Burton Sheffield Jr., *The Lysaker Circle and the Development of Peasant Imagery in Norwegian Painting (1880-1920): From Naturalism to Modernist Expressionism*, (PhD thesis, Bryn Mawr College, 1999), 110. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/lysaker-circle-development-peasant-imagery/docview/304517461/se-2>.

nationalistic aims. They used their art to argue that Norwegians had an innate connection to their land to weaken the political claim of Sweden. They focused on ornamentation that was inspired by natural motifs rather than cosmopolitan styles, looking to the outside to decorate the interiors of their Lysaker neighbourhood. However, their international training meant they were not simply borrowing forms and mediums from folk art. Instead, they appropriated rural art styles for political gain. Nils Messel noted they had moralistic overtones,<sup>6</sup> since they positioned their art as inherently Norwegian, and the inherently Norwegian as morally superior. This ethical aspect was centred on the figure of the peasant, which Patricia G. Berman argued "was constructed as a timeless, pure primitive in the popular imagination."<sup>7</sup> Erik Werenskiold was a central figure in the group, notably a proponent of moralising their artistic output.<sup>8</sup> Due to their physical proximity as neighbours, he and Nansen grew close, and he encouraged Nansen creatively.<sup>9</sup> In this essay I will investigate how Nansen presented himself as a symbol of Norway in his art and how this connected to other symbolic representations of the nationalist movement—that he financially and ideologically supported—using examples from his home Polhøgda.

### Nansen and St Andrews

*“A truth acquired by the use of your own eyes, though imperfect, is worth ten truths told to you by others.”<sup>10</sup>*

Elected Lord Rector of St Andrews in 1925, Nansen felt “honoured” by the student body.<sup>11</sup> He left five of his own artworks in the care of the university over his time as Rector, a flag from the ship (the *Fram*) that carried him on his Arctic expedition, and a collection of photographs of himself. The five artworks—three lithographs<sup>12</sup> and two drawings, one in pencil

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<sup>6</sup> Nils Messel, “From Realistic Portrayals to Decorative Form: The Lysaker Circle and ‘Norwegian’ Tradition,” trans. Rosie Hedger, *Art in Translation* 9 V ol. 4 (2017) doi:10.1080/17561310.2017.1382087.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia G. Berman, “Norwegian Craft Theory and National Revival in the 1890s,” in *Art and the national dream; the search for vernacular expression in turn-of-the-century design*, ed. Nicola Gordon Bowe (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992), 162.

<sup>8</sup> Magne Malmanger, “Painting,” in *The Art of Norway, 1750-1914* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1978), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Sørensen, *The Saga*, 354.

<sup>10</sup> Nansen, *Adventure*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Liv Nansen Høyer, *Nansen, a Family Portrait*, trans. Maurice Michael (London; New York: Longmans, Green, 1957), 258.

<sup>12</sup> Lithographs are a type of print. The artist will draw using an oily crayon then apply ink and use a press to create copies. Nansen first learnt lithography as a young man and Werenskiold convinced him to pick it up again in his later life. Leif Østby, *Fridtjof Nansen the Artist*, trans. Geir O. Kløver (Oslo: The Fram Museum, 2023), 83.

and one in pen—reveal his hopes for his legacy (Figures 1-5). These pieces refer to the methods he used to serve his country and gain international renown, as an explorer and statesman. Of the five artworks, three are self-portraits and two are Arctic scenes that include a polar bear. Nansen depicted these subjects frequently in his art, so the St Andrews collection is arguably representative of his wider work. Since the works are similar, I will analyse two of the five to show the typical aspects of Nansen's work.

The head-and-shoulders pencil self-portrait, signed and inscribed 'To the students of St Andrews University from Fridtjof Nansen November 1925' (Figure 1), depicts Nansen as a dignified statesman. It is currently displayed in Wardlaw Museum, proof of its powerful message and distinctive style. The strong directional lighting illuminates his profile in bright light while the majority of his face is in deep shadow. This creates chiaroscuro that emphasises his wrinkles; yet, instead of making Nansen seem vulnerable, the range of tones gives him an aura of strength, as if he is carved from rock. He appears strong and stable, an ideal Norwegian envoy in various political positions around Europe. Looking towards the source of light could be symbolic of a bright future, an implicit promise against slowing down. The visible pencil strokes he used to construct this portrait convey a sense of energy, mirroring the drive that allowed him to achieve so highly across such a diverse range of fields. Moreover, these lines make the audience aware of the creative process, since their visibility forces the viewer to imagine why Nansen chose to make each specific mark. Ultimately, a self-portrait is an attempt to self-mythologise, and this one presents the subject and artist as an elder statesman, crucially one that is still actively working. This was stereotyped as a Norwegian trait in a larger cultural and artistic context that centred the peasant (a figure with connotations of being hardworking and humble) as a purified metaphor of the nation. Paradoxically, by personifying Norway, Nansen would be pushed to the international stage to make the country's struggles more sympathetic in Europe.

Nansen created many lithographs of polar bears in his later years, as evidenced by the works exhibited in Polhøgda and the Fram Museum (Figures 6 and 7). At such a remove from his Arctic expedition, he would use his own contemporaneous pen drawings, like the ones he used to illustrate his various writings on his expeditions (Figure 8), or photographs of polar bears at Christiania Zoo as references.<sup>13</sup> Polar bears can be read as a motif of Norwegian patriotism, since Nansen's Arctic expedition created a significant cultural moment of national

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<sup>13</sup> Østby, *Fridtjof Nansen*, 243.

pride in Norway.<sup>14</sup> Nansen's continual depiction of Arctic scenes was part of an evolving Norwegian landscape tradition, one that had changed due to the influence of his Lysaker neighbours to focus on national specificity over international movements. Norwegian artists in the 1880s were largely trained in Germany because Norway did not have its own art academy.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, for a period, Norwegian artists depicted the Sublime, a German movement that examined the psychological division between nature's beauty and terror to challenge the viewer. This had changed by the 1890s, so Nansen deals with the same themes in *Polar Scene* (Figure 2) but the natural threat is physical. This embodied threat is representative of the Lysaker Circle's rejection of international artistic trends in favour of patriotic scenes. In this work, the polar bear dominates the piece by towering over the dogs, the domesticated animals a symbol of human encroachment into the Arctic. The leftmost dog has been captured mid-bound and this gives the veristic sense that it has been created at the very moment of threat. This landscape has a frieze-like composition: since it is split along horizontal planes the eye is not drawn upward but across. This creates a sense of narrative and is reminiscent of the Lysaker Circle's tapestries and murals that depicted Norwegian folk tales (Figure 10), meaning that the Lysaker influence is seen in both the work's themes and forms.

Nansen's writings about his expeditions reveal his sensitivity to the beauty of nature: "can there be anything more beautiful than the northern winter landscape, when the snow lies foot-deep, spread as a soft white mantle over field and wood and hill?"<sup>16</sup> While these reflections are on an Arctic scene, the natural world became an important symbol of Norway. It was in the unseen and untouched (from the perspective of bourgeois artists at least) rural areas that the Lysaker Circle would search for a Norwegian identity. Nansen's poetic reflections on landscapes were undeniably linked to this emerging tradition: "in 1900, Polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen defined nationalism (literally 'the love of Fatherland' - fedrelandskjaerlighet) as 'the love that binds us to our family, to the home, to the farm, to the rural area, to the land.'<sup>17</sup> Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén argues "landscapes, some more overtly than others, are inherently political because humans, even the nomads within the species, think and act territorially."<sup>18</sup> However,

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<sup>14</sup> Larsen, *History of Norway*, 482.

<sup>15</sup> Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén, "Territorialising Nature," in *A Mirror of Nature: Nordic Landscape Painting 1840-1910*, ed. Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse, Frode Ernst Haverkamp, and Torsten Gunnarson (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 2006), 219.

<sup>16</sup> Fridtjof Nansen, *The First Crossing of Greenland Vol. 1*, trans. Hubert Majendie Gepp (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1890), 83.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia G. Beraman, "Making family values: narratives of kinship and peasant life in Norwegian nationalism," in *Art, Culture, and National Identity in Fin-de-Siecle Europe*, ed. Michelle Facos and Sharon L. Hirsh (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), page.

<sup>18</sup> Gallen-Kallela-Sirén, "Territorialising Nature," 212.

for the Lysaker Circle the landscape itself was less important than what could be found within it: like motifs of flora and fauna or the figure of the peasant. By claiming these symbols, nationalists believed they were making a moral claim to the land. The Norwegian, the natural, the beautiful, and the ethical were all inextricable components of the nationalist ideology, one supported by Nansen. For instance, he conflated beauty and morality in a speech to Dundee students in 1926: “Whoever had said that 'beauty was going to reform the world,' he thought was right. It was for them to make life more beautiful and make the world a better place to live in.”<sup>19</sup>

Both Nansen and nature came to symbolise Norway at the turn of the century due to the movement for independence. On a personal level, the artworks that he left the University of St Andrews show Nansen’s concern for his legacy: part statesman, part explorer. Through creating these images of himself and storing them in the St Andrews collection, the constructed identity of the respected Norwegian would be safeguarded for a future non-Norwegian viewer, his role as international representative preserved.

### Nansen and Norway

*“And Norway, our fatherland, what has the old year brought to thee, and what is the new year bringing? Vain to think of that; but I look at our pictures, the gifts of Werenskiold, Munthe, Kitty Kielland, Skredsvig, Hansteen, Eilif Pettersen, and I am at home, at home!”*<sup>20</sup>

Nansen’s strongest artistic ties in Norway were to the Lysaker Circle. By financially supporting these artists—who were also his neighbours—he helped them, and their nationalistic aims, become culturally dominant.<sup>21</sup> Instead of training in Germany, Erik Werenskiold went to France and returned inspired by the Impressionist method of *plein air* painting.<sup>22</sup> So began a trend of nationalist artists and art theorists, specifically the central critic in the Lysaker Circle Andreas Aubert,<sup>23</sup> who believed naturalism should inform Norwegian painting. However, by the time the Lysaker Circle formed in the 1890s, the de-facto leaders of the group—

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<sup>19</sup> "St Andrews University Rectoral Installation," *St. Andrews Citizen*, Saturday 13 November, 1926, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Fridtjof Nansen, *Farthest North Vol. 1* (Westminster: A. Constable and Co., 1897), 320.

<sup>21</sup> Sheffield, *The Lysaker Circle*, 133.

<sup>22</sup> Nils Messel, “Norwegian Impressions,” in *Impressionism and the North: late 19th century French avant-garde art and the art in the Nordic countries 1870-1920*, ed. Torsten Gunnarsson, Nils Messel, Karin Hellandsjo (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2002), 208.

<sup>23</sup> Messel, “From Realistic Portrayals.”

Werenskiold and Aubert—had turned against grand landscape scenes in favour of folk-inspired ornamentation.<sup>24</sup> It was almost as if artists zoomed in on their landscapes to take small details of the natural world as motifs. International methods like plein air painting no longer excited the Lysaker Circle, instead they emphasised the specificity of place and its people. Nansen was the Circle’s “centre of gravity,”<sup>25</sup> he hosted these artists and funded their endeavours in the hopes that establishing a nationalistic cultural milieu would separate Norway societally from Sweden.

Polhøgda, the second home that Nansen built for himself in Lysaker (1900-1901), was representative of Nansen’s artistic identity. Along with Hjalmar Welhaven, he was one of the architects and he personally hired Erik Werenskiold to decorate some of the rooms. However, despite the Lysaker Circle rooting their style in Norwegian traditions—as did Nansen’s first house, Godthåb—Polhøgda’s plan took inspiration from Henry Simon’s mansion, Lawnhurst Castle in Manchester.<sup>26</sup> Nansen met Simon when he became Norwegian delegate to Great Britain in 1906.<sup>27</sup> This house represents Nansen’s ability to balance the dichotomy of being a national icon with an international outlook. The open living room, single tower, and brick façade are notably non-Norwegian in style. The columns and arches that separate the living area from the foyer are simple and neo-classical (Figure 9) deviating from Nansen’s initial Lysaker home, Godthåb, that used the typically Norwegian *dragestil* (dragon style).<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, the architecture is revelatory of the international concerns that characterised Nansen’s later life.

However, most of the interior, especially the parts designed by Werenskiold, is indicative of the Lysaker Circle’s ethos of drawing inspiration from rural areas. By appropriating peasant styles, they felt they were participating in a creative history that was untouched or unsullied by outside cosmopolitan influences (despite their own international training). The mural by Werenskiold in the dining room is representative of this (Figure 10), showing the folk tale *Liti Kjersti*.<sup>29</sup> This story follows a woman who marries the King of the wild, is rejected by her family, and eventually joins her new family in the woods—her daughter offers her a potion that will help her forget her old life. This could be read as an allegory for the Lysaker Circle because they retreated to rural communities to connect with the land and disregard Swedish control. The frieze makes use of natural scenes, but is characterised by an

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<sup>24</sup> Messel, “Norwegian Impressions,” 223.

<sup>25</sup> Messel, “From Realistic Portrayals.”

<sup>26</sup> Ivar M. Liseter, *Polhøgda: From the Home of Fridtjof Nansen to the Fridtjof Nansen Institute* (Lysaker: Fridtjof Nansens Institutt, 2017), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Sörensen, *The Saga*, 362.

<sup>28</sup> “Dragon style”, a Norwegian style that was inspired by Viking ships.

<sup>29</sup> Berman, “Norwegian Craft Theory,” 163.

almost naive lack of depth and saturated colours that show Werenskiold's debt to folk art. Due to their propensity for taking inspiration from, and reinventing it from a modern, political perspective, the Lysaker Circle undoubtedly appropriated folk art.

Messel asserts that, for the Lysaker Circle, decorative art was "Norway's truest form of national expression."<sup>30</sup> This definitive statement can be attributed to the group's preoccupation with crafts, furnishing their Lysaker homes in a quintessentially Norwegian way. For instance, the wallpapers Werenskiold hand-painted for Polhøgda. His use of the saturated tones of tomato red, yellow, and green not only shows the special instinct Norwegian artists supposedly held for colour but make the 'secretary's room' feel cheerful and nostalgic for a bright past (Figure 11).<sup>31</sup> The simple natural motif of the flower is representative of the Lysaker Circle's philosophy of taking rural elements into domestic spaces. By absorbing this nationalistic art into everyday life, they hoped to do more than signal their Norwegian identity: they believed it would make them better people. Aubert highlighted the "good moral character" of traditional Norwegian art.<sup>32</sup> They associated the peasant with traits of being humble, hardworking, and pure. Therefore, for Lysaker artists, especially Werenskiold, the role of art was to highlight being Norwegian as an inherently moral characteristic. The other wallpaper he created for the 'ladies' room' has similar traditional roots (Figure 12). It is a woodland scene of trees, reindeer, and rivers, the forms are simplified and blocky. This mimics wood carvings like jamb planks from the 12th century that have a similar pattern of entwined animals (Figure 13). Werenskiold therefore situated his work within a timeline of Norwegian art history that sought, propagandistically, to be a series of undisrupted national traditions.

Ultimately, Nansen's Norwegian home was characteristic of the Lysaker artists' aims: to generate a national style by appropriating the aesthetics of folk art. This included the focus on natural motifs as well as a moralising element that linked the peasantry with the idea of being a true Norwegian. Yet, Nansen did not attempt to obscure his international influences in the same way that the Lysaker artists did. Rather, his inspiration from across Europe shows how he could identify as both proud Norwegian and international luminary, as representative of Norway on the world stage.

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<sup>30</sup> Messel, "From Realistic Portrayals."

<sup>31</sup> Sheffield, *The Lysaker Circle*, 112.

<sup>32</sup> Messel, "From Realistic Portrayals."

## Conclusion

*“Dream, dream of home and beauty!”*<sup>33</sup>

Nansen influenced all areas of turn-of-the-century Norwegian culture through his iconic expeditions, his political clout, and the artistic culture he cultivated from his living room. This artistic culture dealt in nature and morality with a fixed purpose of independence. The Lysaker Circle appropriated folk culture, and the romanticised way they mythologised the peasant was primitivist propaganda that ultimately succeeded. Nansen’s own artworks are propaganda of a different sort. Instead of securing Norway’s legacy, they show him attempting to solidify a narrative of his own life through the medium of art, a method of communication obviously dear to him. The Lysaker Circle dealt with the present through referring to the past; but Nansen, as he had his whole life, used his own art to reflect on the future, one that he hoped would remember him.

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<sup>33</sup> Fridtjof Nansen, *Farthest North* Vol. 2 (Westminster: A. Constable and Co., 1897), 494.

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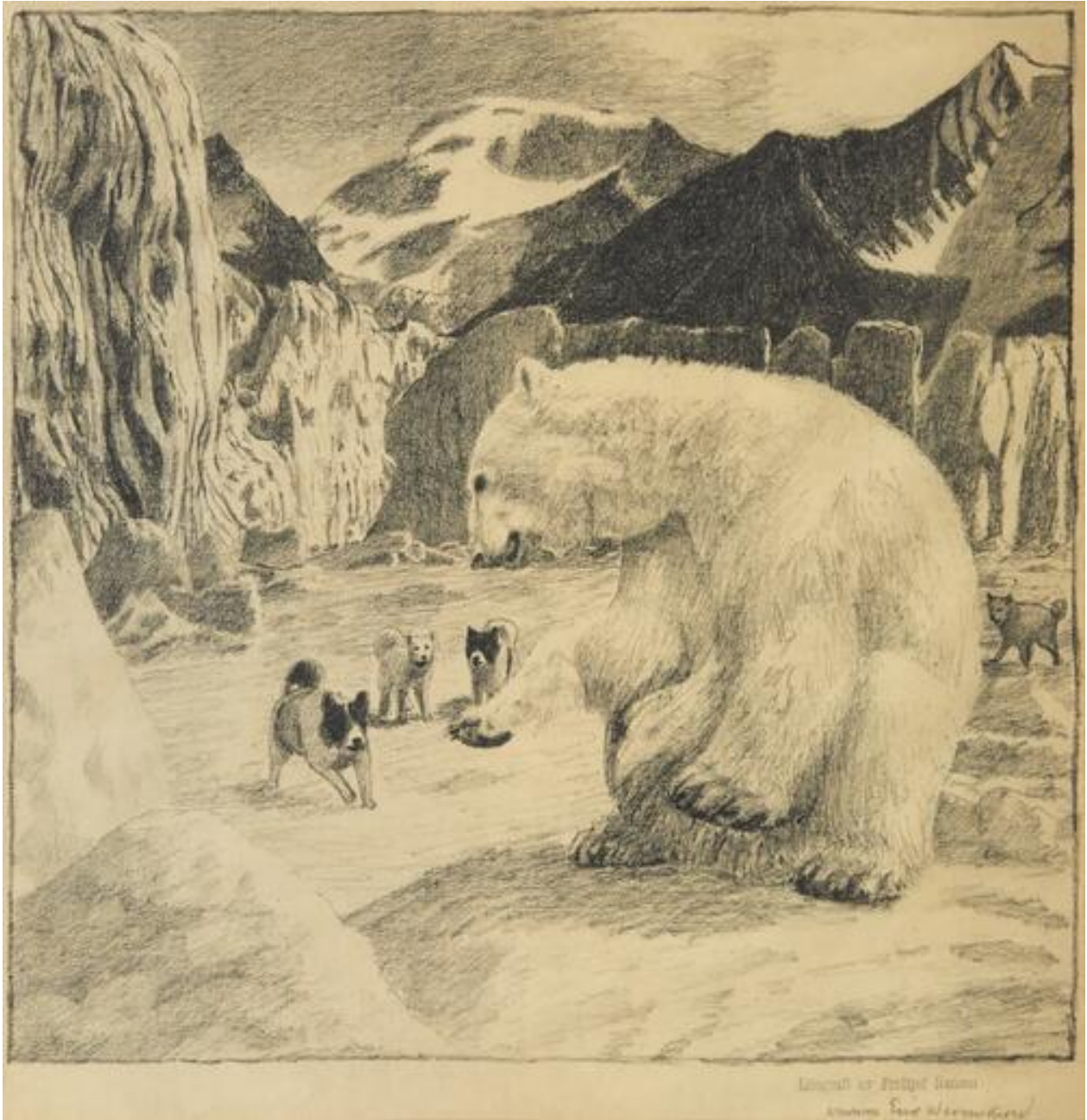
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Illustrations



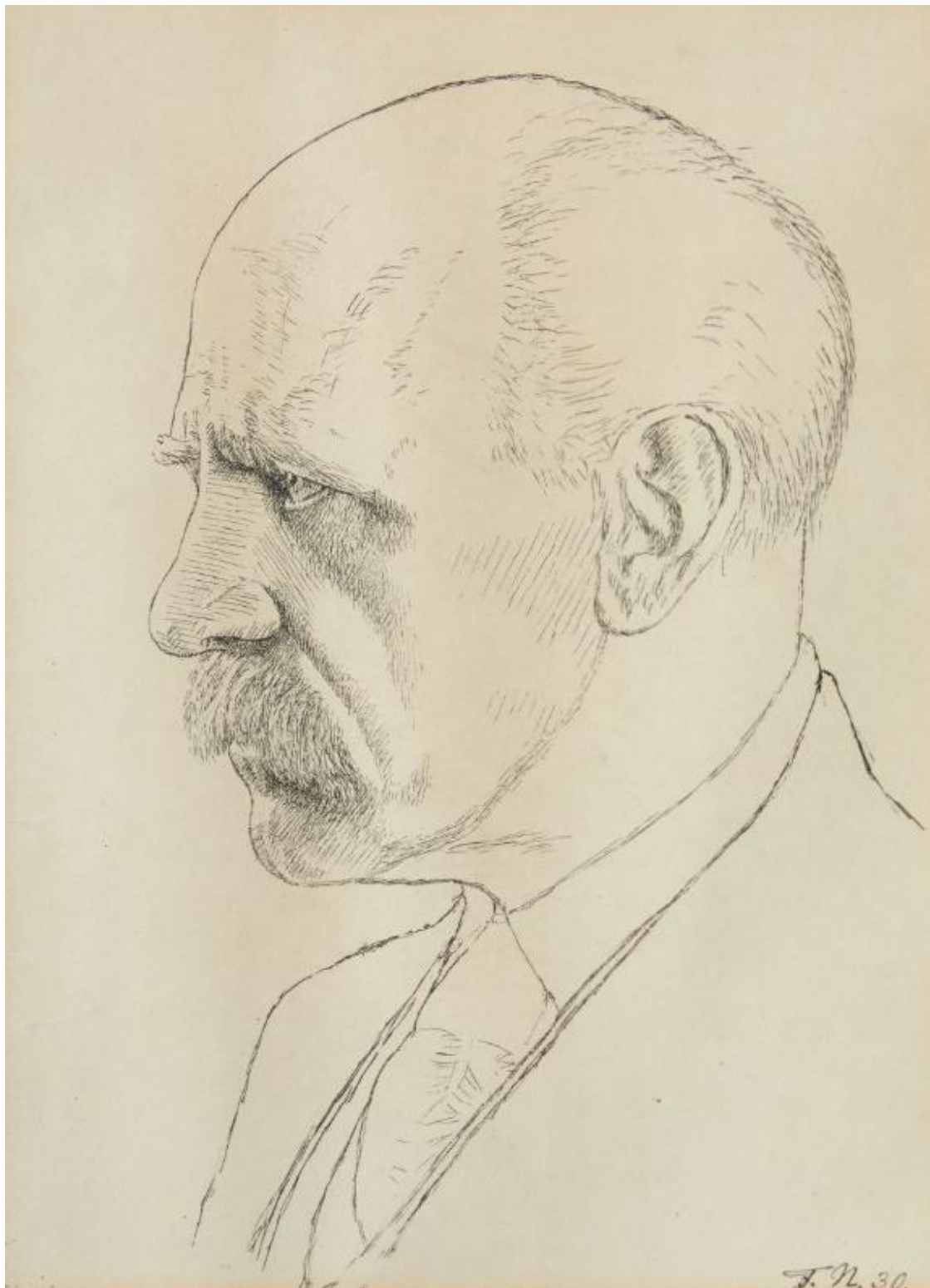
**Figure 1.** Fridtjof Nansen, *Dr. Fridtjof Nansen: Self Portrait*, 1925. Pencil drawing. University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums.



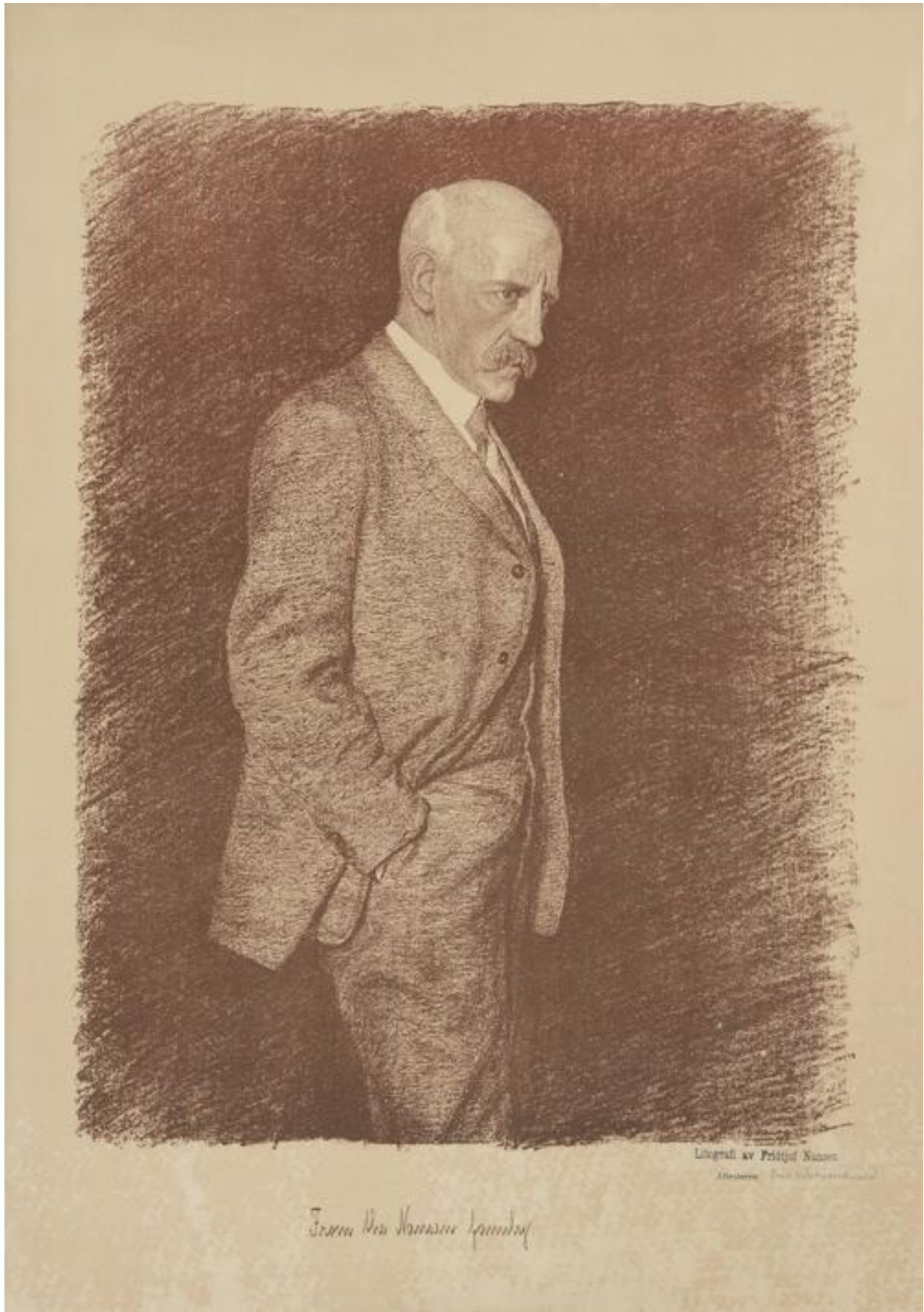
**Figure 2.** Fridtjof Nansen, *Polar Scene*, 1893-1952. Lithograph, 50 x 51cm. University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums.



**Figure 3.** Fridtjof Nansen, *Lithograph print of a polar bear in the snow by Fridtjof Nansen*, undated. Lithograph. University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums.



**Figure 4.** Fridtjof Nansen, *Self-portrait of Fridtjof Nansen*, 1930. Ink on paper, 40 x 33cm. University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums.



**Figure 5.** Fridtjof Nansen, *Portrait of Fridtjof Nansen*, undated. Lithograph. University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums.



**Figure 6.** Fridtjof Nansen, *Polar Bear Visiting the Fram*, undated. Lithograph. Fridtjof Nansens Institutt. Photograph taken by author.

*Fridtjof Nansen*  
**THE ARTIST**

**THE ARCTIC**

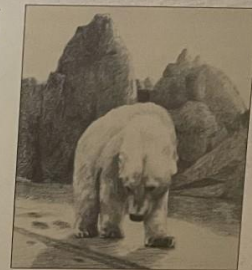
However, the Arctic Sea motifs, especially those featuring polar bears, hold far more significance. Some of them are based on pen drawings made for “Blant Sel og Bjørn”, such as the depiction of the grumpy old male bear. Others appear to be more independently conceived for lithography, with a foundation in photo studies from zoos. Among the finest examples are the bear sniffing at a ski track on the ice and the evocative print of a roaring bear as a formidable silhouette against the darkening polar sky. There are also prints showing a bear intently observing a seal and a nocturnal visit to the ship *Fram* during the Fram Expedition. Notably, the graphic print titled “Fram in the Winter Night” stands out. This work employs scraping to achieve a nuanced and full tone; the pressure ridge and rigging softly stand out with meticulous attention to detail against the night sky adorned with a crescent moon and a pair of twinkling stars. An authentic Arctic ambiance is also captured in the print of his daughter Liv on the deck of *Veslemøy*, titled “Summer Night,” originally an illustration in “En Ferd til Spitsbergen”. These prints are also based on Nansen’s own photographs.



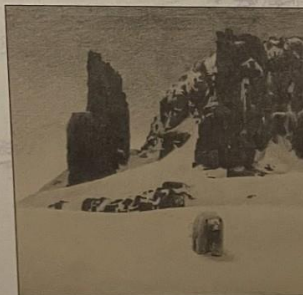
Fridtjof Nansen’s most famous lithograph, a polar bear sniffs at a skitrack on the ice. Privately owned.



Another classic polar bear lithograph with matching photo from Antwerp zoo. Privately owned (Fram).



Nansen’s photos of polar bears in the zoo in Antwerp, Belgium, on 10 June 1927.



Polar bear with background landscape from Franz Josef land and photo from the zoo. Privately owned (Fram).



Studies of polar bears. Drawings.

Roaring polar bear. Lithograph. National Library of Norway.



Polar bear with three dogs. Lithograph. National Library of Norway.



Figure 7. The Fram Museum, [Image of Nansen the Artist Exhibition], 2024. The Fram Museum. Photograph taken by the author.



**Figure 8.** Fridtjof Nansen, “Light Phenomena in the Polar Night, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1893.”, 1893. Pastel sketch. University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums. In *Farthest North Volume 2*, by Fridtjof Nansen, plate IX, Westminster: A. Constable and Co., 1897. Photograph taken by author.



**Figure 9.** Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Welhaven, [Image of Polhøgda columns], 1900-1901. Fridtjof Nansens Institutt. Photograph taken by author.



**Figure 10.** Erik Werenskiöld, *Liti Kjersti*, 1904-1907. Frieze painting, Fridtjof Nansens Institutt. Photograph taken by author



**Figure 11.** Erik Werenskiold, [Secretary's room wallpaper], 1904-1907. Handpainted wallpaper. Fridtjof Nansens Institutt. Photograph taken by author. Note that the lithograph on the wall is another print of the one hanging in University Hall.



**Figure 12.** Erik Werenskiold, [Ladies' room wallpaper], 1904-1907. Handpainted wallpaper. Fridtjof Nansens Institutt. Photograph taken by author.



Figure 13. *Jamb planks from Øye stave church, 1100-1200. Kulturalhistorik Museum Oslo. Photograph taken by author.*