

Fridtjof Nansen and the Lysaker Circle: ornamenting Norwegian independence

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Dr Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) was elected Rector of St Andrews University in 1925. An Arctic explorer and humanitarian, he gained world renown, but he was also an amateur artist. The five artworks he left in the St Andrews University collection centre on his Norwegian nationality. Nansen also acted as patron to the nationalist art group the Lysaker Circle, who wanted independence from Swedish rule of Norway. They aimed to create an essentially Norwegian style that was inspired by folk crafts. Politically motivated cosmopolitans, they appropriated rural folk art to create a narrative that their ‘untainted’ Norwegian art was morally superior to internationally inspired art. Both Nansen and the Lysaker Circle recognised the importance of art in creating legacies, Nansen’s art highlighted his own identity while the Lysaker Circle aimed for social change.

What I found in St Andrews

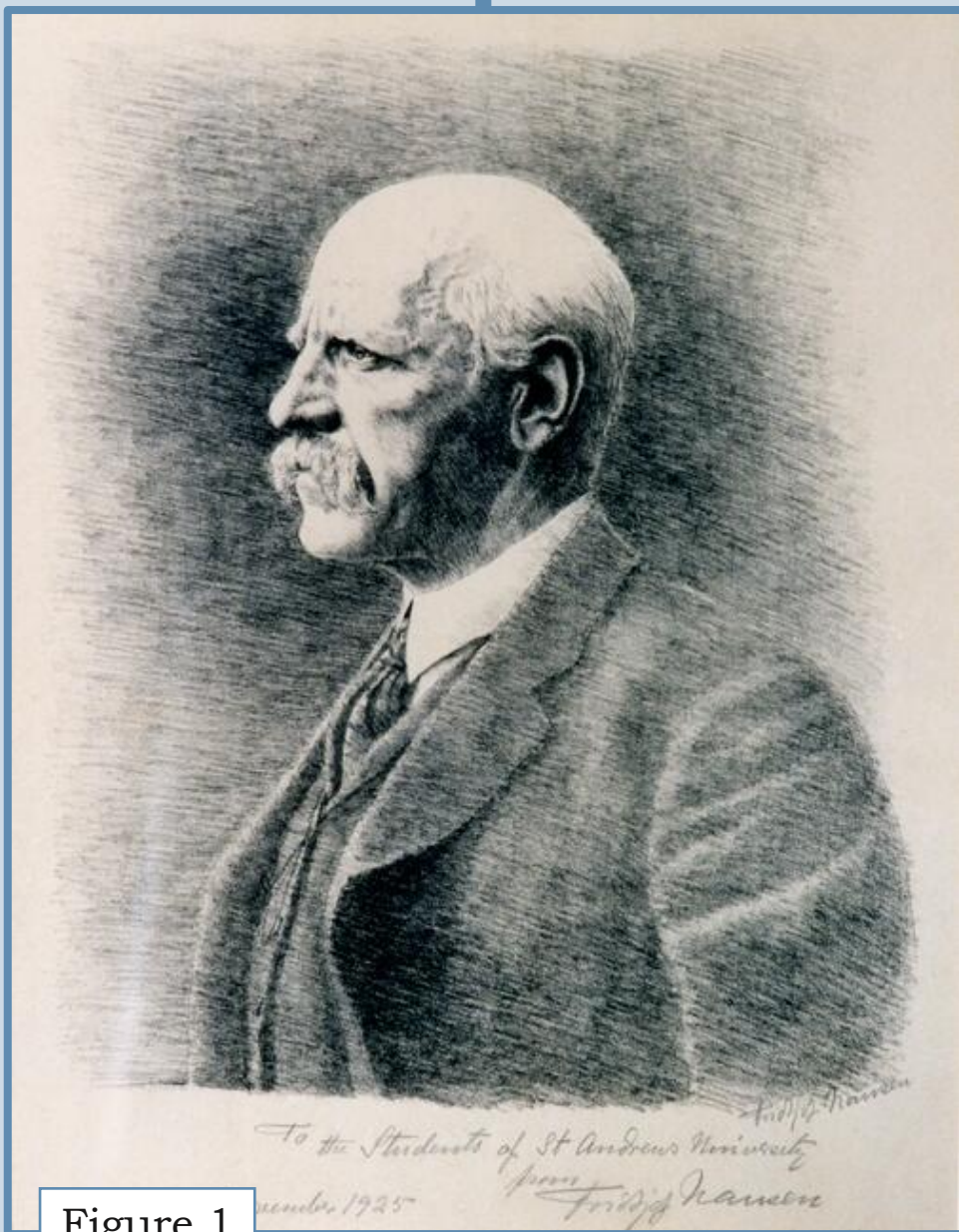


Figure 1

Aims and Methodology

- Illuminate previously under-researched elements of the university collection.
- Evaluate St Andrews within a new artistic context.
- Make this research accessible.
- I saw all 5 artworks in the university collection: 2 on display at Wardlaw Museum, 2 in storage, and 1 hung in University Hall.
- In Special Collections I read books authored by Nansen, along with some personal letters.
- I travelled to Norway to see Polhøgda, the house he co-designed and that Lysaker artists decorated.
- I visited museums in Oslo to see the artistic and social context Nansen was operating in.
- And, of course, plenty of time in the library.

This self-portrait is a pencil drawing dedicated ‘To the students of St Andrews University from Fridtjof Nansen November 1925’. Nansen presents himself as a stable leader by using extreme lights and darks to emphasise his wrinkles without vulnerability.

Polar Scene is a lithograph (a type of print) that deals with a subject that Nansen would continually return to—the polar bear. Nansen’s Arctic expeditions launched his international fame. His preoccupation with these landscapes in his later life serves to highlight how he initially came to symbolise Norway on the world stage: as a scientist and explorer.

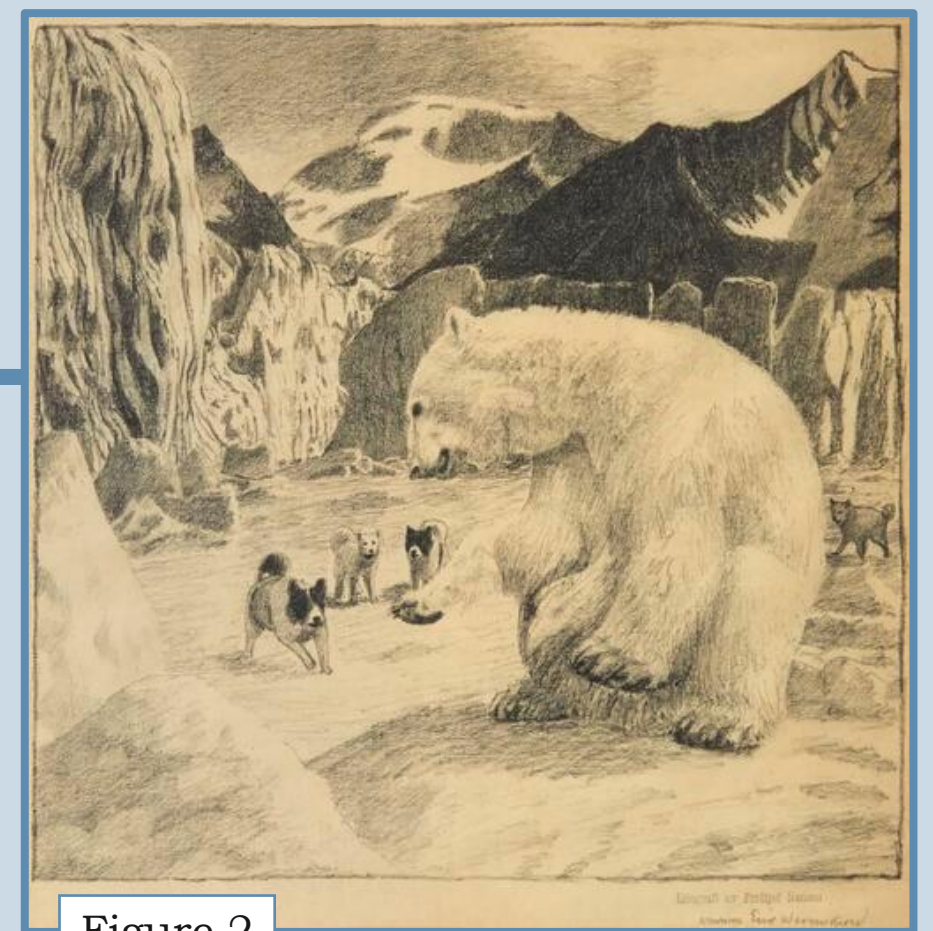


Figure 2

This wallpaper was hand-painted by Erik Werenskiold, a famous Norwegian artist and Nansen’s close friend. The Lysaker Circle often took rural elements into domestic spaces, which they moralised as representing an essential Norwegian spirit.

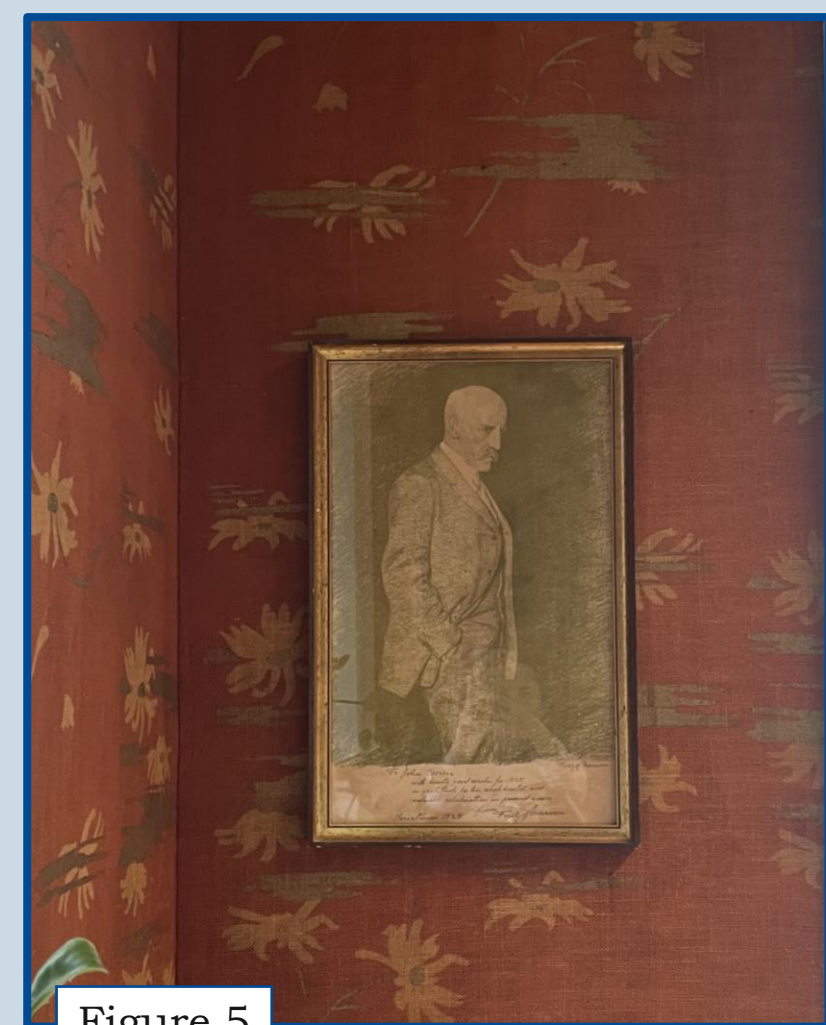


Figure 5



Figure 3

What I found in Norway

The neo-classical columns of the open-plan living room have European origins. This deviates from the rest of the Lysaker Circle’s focus on finding a purely Norwegian style, exemplified by the mural Werenskiold painted in the dining room of the folk tale *Liti Kjersti*.



Figure 4

Links for essay, blogs, and more!



Nansen’s art is interconnected with a mythology of Norwegian identity stemming from the independence movement. However, his international outlook makes these artefacts remarkable cross-cultural products as he attempted to market his image on the world stage. Ultimately, we should be critical of the way the Lysaker Circle and Nansen presented their art as a “pure” national style because it appropriated folk art through the lens of their cosmopolitan training.

- I posted two blogs on the Museum of St Andrews website and created an Exhibit that takes the viewer through the five Nansen artworks in depth.
- I curated a display case in the School of Art History foyer of some of the Nansen artefacts.
- Overall, I hope that I made some fascinating local and international history more accessible to the public.

Conclusion and Outcomes

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw foundation for funding, my advisor Dr Shona Kallestrup for her invaluable guidance, Bente M. Sommerstad and Fridtjof Nansens Instiutt for access to Polhøgda, and Special Collections and the Museum of St Andrews for helping me with primary materials and their enthusiasm for this project.

References

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. Erik Werenskiold, *Liti Kjersti*, 1904-1907. Frieze painting. Fridtjof Nansens Instiutt. Photograph taken by author
Figure 4. Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Welhaven, [Image of Polhøgda columns], 2024.

Fridtjof Nansens Instiutt. Photograph taken by author.
Figure 5 Erik Werenskiold, [Secretary’s room wallpaper], 1904-1907. Hand-painted wallpaper. Fridtjof Nansens Instiutt. Photograph taken by author.