

'Scandinavian Design' as Discourse: The Exhibition *Design in Scandinavia, 1954–57* Jørn Guldberg

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In his review in *Interiors* of the traveling exhibition of Scandinavian arts and crafts and industrial design, *Design in Scandinavia*, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., head of the design department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MOMA), expressed a favorable appraisal of the show as a whole.¹ Like other commentators, Kaufmann stressed the importance to Americans of this exhibition and anticipated that "... a Scandinavian vogue will again flourish over here."² But, unlike most critics and reviewers, he eventually addressed the physical qualities of the objects on display, such as the tables, screens, and show cases that constituted Danish architect and industrial designer Erik Herlöv's highly flexible installation design. The fixtures were themselves manifestations of the "taste and skill" that the exhibited items featured, Kaufmann stated, and he continued: "Erik Herlöv's cases, tables, platforms, and lights not only provide an admirable setting; they are the key to what is good in American eyes about Northern design generally. Clean, well-finished, unobtrusive, carefully considered, ingenious, sensible and elegant."³

The question is, however, whether the attributes Kaufmann cited actually concern things and their objective qualities. Being "carefully considered" and "well-finished" refers to a given object as a product; that is, the qualities are evidence of human invention, planning, and manufacture. The other attributes—clean, unobtrusive, ingenious, sensible, and elegant—may refer to properties of things, but even more, they apply to human beings. Consider their appropriateness in describing the appearance of a well-dressed, polite, and sociable individual.

With his account, Kaufmann exemplifies one of the core problematics of the *Design in Scandinavia* show: ambivalence in regard to the actual object of criticism and evaluation, which is characteristic of most texts related to the exhibition. Thus, the general question to be raised and qualified in this article is how the meaning of the label, "Scandinavian Design," was construed within the context of this particular exhibition. The attempt to provide an answer entails a further question about the semantic choices in relation to various writers' identification of the Scandinavianness of Scandinavian things. Finally, the most delicate question is whether the charac-

1 Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., "Scandinavian Design in the U.S.A.," *Interiors*, May 1954, 108–14, 182–5.

2 Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, 108.

3 *loc. cit.*

Figure 1

The front of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, January 1954 (Svensk Form, Stockholm)



- 4 Leslie Cheek, Jr., "Do Americans Have Good Taste?," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, June 6, 1954.
- 5 Letter from Elizabeth Gordon to Mac Lindahl, dated October 19, 1951, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Archive of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Box B1072801: Directors Office Correspondence, 1933–1977, Folder: "Design in Scandinavia."
- 6 The exhibition visited 22 other places (in order of appearance): Baltimore (Museum of Arts); Brooklyn (Brooklyn Museum); Hartford, CT (Wadsworth Atheneum); Manchester, NH (Currier Gallery of Art); Cleveland (Cleveland Museum of Art); Toronto (Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology); Ottawa (National Gallery of Canada); Pittsburgh, PA (Carnegie Institute); Toledo, OH (Toledo Museum of Art); Detroit (Detroit Institute of Arts); Minneapolis (Institute of Art); Omaha (Joslyn Memorial Art Museum); Kansas City (William Rockhill Nelson Gallery); Colorado Springs, Cal. (Fine Arts Center); Houston, TX (Museum of Fine Arts); Dayton, OH (Dayton Art Institute); Chicago (Art Institute); Seattle, WA (Seattle Art Museum); Vancouver (Art Gallery); Portland, OR (Art Museum); San Francisco (Museum of Art); Los Angeles (County Museum); and finally, Indianapolis (John Herron Art Institute).

teristics attributed to "Scandinavian Design" apply to things or to people. Do they account for physical and functional qualities of things, or should they more likely be understood as an American projection of desirable social and psychological characteristics?

The objective of this article is to throw light on the construction of "Scandinavian Design" as discourse. After a brief, general presentation of *Design in Scandinavia* as an exhibitionary complex and event, I discuss three in some detail: the main text of the exhibition catalog, written by Gotthard Johansson, president of the Swedish Arts & Crafts Society, an article in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* by Leslie Cheek, Jr., director of Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and finally, Kaufmann's review in *Interiors* and its contribution to the discourse of "Scandinavianism."

"Design in Scandinavia" as an Event

The exhibition, *Design in Scandinavia* (DiS), was shown at 24 locations in the United States and Canada during the years 1954 to 1957. In the U.S., it was prepared by the staff at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in Richmond, VA, under the directorship of Leslie Cheek, Jr. Cheek wrote a brief introduction to the exhibition catalog, in addition to the previously mentioned programmatic article in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* in June 1954, in which he compared American design traditions to contemporary Scandinavian material culture.⁴

The initiative for the exhibition seems to have been taken by one American, Elizabeth Gordon, then editor-in-chief of *House Beautiful*. In fact, the oldest document relating to the matter and filed as such in the archives is a letter from Gordon to Mac Lindahl at the Swedish American News Exchange's office in Stockholm.⁵ Formally, DiS was organized as a joint enterprise by the national associations of craft, applied art, and design in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden and the American Federation of Arts. Cheek functioned as an enthusiastic middleman between the parties.

The exhibition opened at VMFA in Richmond on January 15, 1954 (Figure 1), and the doors were closed behind the last visitors to the show in Indianapolis on May 19, 1957.⁶ The total number of visitors was about 660,000, and in all cases (except four or five) the exhibition broke all local records in attracting visitors to temporary exhibitions. In each place, the exhibition was open to the public for about four weeks. Information on the whole sequence was compiled in a table in the official exhibition report from 1958 (Figure 2).

Two publications were issued in connection with the exhibition. A catalog, *Design in Scandinavia*, listed the designers and manufacturers actually taking part in the touring exhibition, and a *Directory of Arts and Crafts Resources in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden* included information on a wider selection of artists, designers, and manufacturers, as well as on their representatives in the United States.⁷

Figure 2

Table of the Design in Scandinavia exhibition sequence; places, institutions, terms and number of visitors (From the report, *Design in Scandinavia*, Stockholm, 1958).

			Visitors
1954			
Richmond, Va.	Virginia Museum of Fine Arts	15/1 —14/2	9.955
Baltimore, Md.	Museum of Art	1/3 —30/3	22.454
Brooklyn, N. Y.	Brooklyn Museum	11/4 —16/5	66.224
Hartford, Conn.	Wadsworth Ateneum	1/6 —30/6	6.228
Manchester, N. H.	Currier Gallery of Art	16/7 —14/8	4.740
Cleveland, Ohio	Museum of Art	1/9 —30/9	57.055
Toronto, Canada	Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology	19/10—14/11	9.000
1955			
Ottawa, Canada	National Gallery of Canada	1/1 —30/1	15.000
Pittsburg, Pa.	Carnegie Institute	16/2 —14/3	29.570
Toledo, Ohio	Museum of Art	1/4 —30/4	16.000
Detroit, Mich.	Institute of Arts	16/5 —14/6	30.000
Minneapolis, Minn.	Institute of Arts	1/7 —30/7	18.850
Omaha, Neb.	Joslyn Art Museum	16/9 —14/10	9.725
Kansas City, Mo.	William Rockhill Nelson Gallery	11/11—30/11	19.433
1956			
Colorado Springs, Col.	Fine Arts Center	1/1 —31/1	9.604
Houston, Texas	Museum of Fine Arts	16/2 —14/3	16.650
Dayton, Ohio	Art Institute	1/4 —30/4	25.617
Chicago, Ill.	Art Institute	16/5 —14/7	95.325
Seattle, Wash.	Art Museum	16/8 —14/9	30.744
Vancouver, B. C.	Art Gallery	1/10—30/10	18.850
Portland, Oregon	Art Museum	16/11—14/12	15.000
1957			
San Francisco, Cal.	Museum of Art	8/1 —15/2	22.369
Los Angeles, Cal.	County Museum	20/2 —20/3	99.871
Indianapolis, Ind.	John Herron Art Institute	15/4 —19/5	10.000

- 7 The information given in the catalog, in transportation registers, and in installation lists allows for some (rude) statistics relating to the exhibition. About 240 individual artists and designers were represented with one item or (in rare cases) a small series of designs. The representation of the participating designers as regards nationality was roughly as follows: Denmark: 80; Finland: 40; Norway: 55; Sweden: 65. The products that were displayed at the 24 exhibitions represented about 150 manufacturers, but in many cases, the designer was also the producer. In other words, a considerable part of the manufacturers were operating on a one-man business basis, or the manufacturers were small companies.
- 8 In Chicago, for instance, the public relations program was heavy; a folder was distributed in 50,000 copies through libraries, schools, and commercial organizations. In addition, 3,000 posters were placed throughout the city. A lecture series including eight talks was co-sponsored by the Art Institute, the University of Chicago, and the Chicago Chapter of the American-Scandinavian Foundation. The lecture series included talks by, among others, Edgar Kaufmann, John van Koert, Meyric R. Rogers (the Art Institute's department of decorative arts), and John E. Brown. In many places "Scandinavian Weeks" and, for example, a "Norwegian Day" were proclaimed.

The exhibition was physically organized in four theme sections under the following headings: (1) "Good Articles for Everyday Use" (inexpensive household goods, such as furniture, glass, cutlery, tableware, and textiles (Figure 3)); (2) "Living Tradition" (contemporary handicraft and domestic industry (Figure 4)); (3) "Form and Material" (exclusive arts and crafts in ceramics, glass, and metal work (Figure 5)); and (4) "Scandinavia at Home" (furniture, textiles, and lighting in combination with photos of houses and interiors (Figure 6)). An introductory section included huge landscape photos, as well as line-image prints with ornamental renderings of objects (Figure 7).

In general, the exhibition became an event. It was featured as such in journals and magazines and so covered by the press. In addition to news coverage, several newspapers published features on Scandinavian culture and society, and radio and television stations produced shows and talks devoted to the exhibition. Concerts featuring music by Scandinavian composers were broadcasted, and excerpts of Scandinavian literature were recited on radio programs. Most of the host museums and institutions arranged public lectures, showed films, and developed special programs for schools and colleges.⁸

Figure 3

View of the section; "Good Articles for
Everyday Use," Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,
Richmond (Riksarkivet, Oslo)



Figure 4

Examples from the section; "Living Tradition,"
Norwegian wood carving (From the catalogue
Design in Scandinavia)

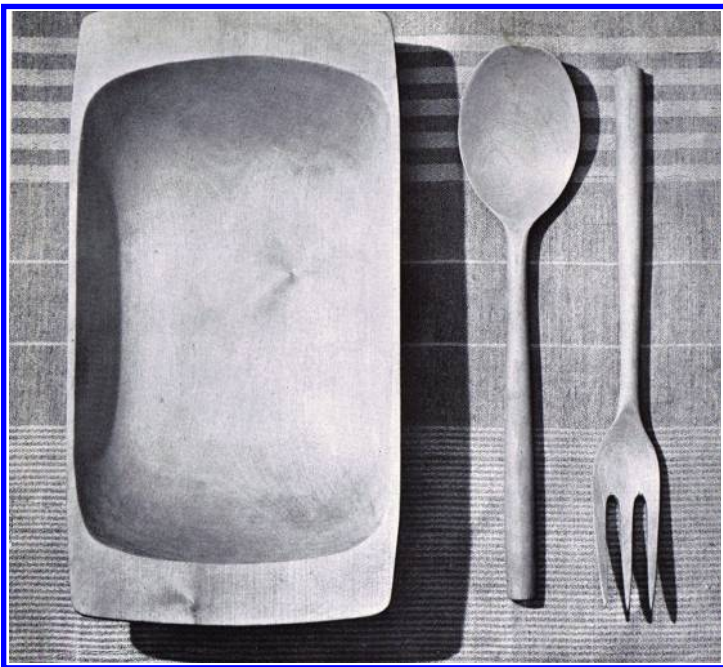


Figure 5
View of the section; "Form and Material,"
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
(Svensk Form, Stockholm)



Figure 6
View of the section. "Scandinavia at Home,"
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
(Svensk Form, Stockholm)



Figure 7
View of the exhibitions entrance
with landscape photos and in-line photo
prints, Museum of Art, San Francisco
(Riksarkivet, Oslo)



- 9 Letter from Elizabeth Gordon to Mac Lindahl of October 19, 1951, see note 5.
- 10 They were: (1) a British-born architect and journalist, G. Howard Smith, who was working as a correspondent with the Boston paper, *Christian Science Monitor*, and an American news syndicate, (2) a Swedish sculptor, Thyra Lundgren, who for many years had reported on Swedish design for French and Italian home magazines, and finally (3) the editor of the Swedish magazine *Hem i Sverige* (Homes in Sweden), Ulla Molin, whom Lindahl characterizes as “one of the sharpest brains in this country when it comes to Swedish design” (letter from Lindahl to Gordon, November 6, 1951 (see note 3)). It should be noted that *Hem i Sverige* was a popular magazine with no formal connection to the Swedish Arts & Crafts Society. The official journal of this body was *Form*.

DiS: A Journalistic Project?

How did the idea of DiS emerge in the first place? The organizing process following the decision concerning the realization of the idea of an exhibition was rather conventional and formal (i.e., committees were formed, objects selected, competitions on exhibition logo were arranged, and so on), but the less formal and more chaotic process began with an intense exchange of rival ideas and gives some indications of the spirit in which the exhibition was conceived. One may speak of a particular tendency of the dominant discourse at that stage. As mentioned, the idea first came to Elizabeth Gordon. In her capacity as a magazine editor, she “discovered” Scandinavian design at the 1951 Milan Triennale. According to the archive material, Gordon first discussed her idea with the Swede, Elias Svedberg, in-house designer and public relations officer with Nordiska Kompagniet in Stockholm, and H.O. Gummerus, spokesman for the Finnish company Wärtsila (the Arabia potteries in Helsinki). Next, Gordon turned to “an old friend of mine,” as she told Lindahl in her letter of October 1951.⁹ This “old friend” was the director of the VMFA, Leslie Cheek, Jr., whom she had known at least since 1946, when he worked as the architecture editor at *House Beautiful*. Thus, Cheek was not only “an old friend” but also a former member of the journalistic staff at Gordon’s magazine. The next person to get involved was Mac Lindahl from the Swedish-American news agency. Having received Gordon’s letter, Lindahl approached three Swedish journalists and correspondents to engage them.¹⁰

As director of an art museum, Leslie Cheek seems to represent an exception to the professional profile of this group. He graduated from the Yale School of Architecture in 1935 and afterward was engaged as a lecturer in art history at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, VA. The following year, he managed to establish a department of art history with a library and exhibition facilities at the college. He became the head of the department,

Figure 8
 “Finnish lake and forest scenery,”
 “Finland’s thousand lakes and vast forests,”
 both from the catalogues



and his famed exhibition there in 1938 of drawings and models by Frank Lloyd Wright paved the way for his museum career. Cheek's appointment as director of the Baltimore Museum of Art followed in 1939. After the War, and until his appointment to the VMFA in 1949, he worked with the editorial boards of *Architectural Forum* and *House Beautiful*. Two so-called picture biographies of Cheek leave the reader with an impression of a museum administrator who favored "settings" for the presentation of art works and who liked to engage audiences both intellectually and physically (the latter by means of an almost choreographic staging of the visitor's passage through the galleries).¹¹

A strong "communicative" urge seems to have been a most dominant characteristic of Cheek as an outstanding museum personality. His professional, educational background did not include art or design history as academic disciplines. Many of the exhibition environments he (and his staffs) created through the years were conceived as spectacles, and the shows were presented as events with distinct "messages." Maybe, then, Cheek's approach was *not* that different in the end, in that it could function as an alternative to the way the group of press officers saw the future exhibition. The point is that the whole group (Cheek included) *thought* and *acted* professionally as they were accustomed to; that is, they all considered the presentation of Scandinavian design as a matter whose actuality and relevance had to be legitimated and marketed to the general public as an event. Both Gordon and Cheek actually saw DiS as a *historical* event with great news value in a journalistic sense. For example, after her return from a study trip to Africa in early 1952, Gordon wrote a short note to Cheek, stating: "Having examined the artistic and design cultures of Kenya and South Africa, I am more than ever convinced that the Scandinavian contribution to our times is THE contribution of this era—and something should be done to dramatize its position in the world today."¹² With its potential tribalization of Scandinavian design culture, this statement adds, in a curious way, to the ambiguity of both the expectations in connection with the exhibition and the idea of the "message" it was believed to communicate. Emphasizing Scandinavian design as an alternative to African ethnographica—even Gordon's idea of making such a bold comparison—seems out of step with the authors of the texts to be examined below in the next section. They carefully sought to impede any attribution of exoticism to Scandinavian design.

Maybe Gordon's favorable statement on Scandinavian design should be seen against another background, then. In the years around 1950, Gordon was promoting the idea of an authentic, American material or design culture and lifestyle in the pages of *House Beautiful*. Home, family, closeness to nature, hiking in the landscape, and, for instance, the use of natural materials became ideals associated with an American way of life.¹³ In the context of her project, Gordon was impressed by the quality and elegance

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- 11 *Living by Design. Leslie Cheek and the Arts*. A Photobiography by Parke Rouse, Jr., (Williamsburg, The Society of the Alumni of The College of William and Mary, 1986), and *Designing for the Arts. Environments by Leslie Cheek*. A Photo Essay with Text by K. Richmond Temple, (Williamsburg, The Society of the Alumni of The College of William and Mary, 1990).
- 12 Letter from Gordon to Cheek of February 17, 1952, see note 5.
- 13 Monica Penick, "Marketing Modernism: *House Beautiful* and the Station Wagon Way of Life," paper to the Design History Society Conference, Hatfield, England, September 2009, unpublished. In her account of (the Finnish contribution) to DiS, Hilde Hawkins also focuses on Gordon's preoccupation with a recovery of genuine American values; see Hilde Hawkins, "Finding a Place in a New World Order: Finland, America, and the 'Design in Scandinavia' exhibition," Marianne Aav and Nina Stritzler-Levine (eds.), *Finnish Modern Design*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998), 244f.

of Scandinavian craft and design at the 1951 Triennale and—so it seems—simply decided that Scandinavian objects could serve as models for the way of life she idealized.

The initial expectations in relation to the coming “American show” among the representatives of the four Scandinavian professional societies varied. Only a few examples are given here, and they are confined to the very first reactions to the prospect of an upcoming exhibition in the United States. The Finns wanted to handle their participation as a continuation of their massive and rather successful promotion of Finnish design.¹⁴ The board of the Norwegian organization reacted by entering in the minute book “that the task now is to clear up the meaning of the notion of design.”¹⁵ In a presidential address to the members of the Swedish society, Åke Huldt foresaw prosperity and an increased turnover for Swedish firms and products on the American market.¹⁶ And finally, one member of the board of the Danish society wanted comments, such as “the importance of showing the differences in the design cultures of the Nordic countries,” to be noted in the minute book, while another member wanted to stress “aesthetic differences.”¹⁷ In other words, from the outset there were very different agendas.

Scandinavian Design as Scandinavian Text

The president of the Swedish organization, *Svenska Slöjdföreningen*, wrote the official introduction to *Design in Scandinavia*.¹⁸ Gotthard Johansson’s task was to provide background information that would enable an identification of the specific qualities of craft and design from the four Scandinavian countries. This discourse established an identification of the structure, shape, and performativity of artifacts by making pleas for their rootedness in tradition, their natural conditioning, and their communitarian and egalitarian affordances. Much of the myth of Scandinavian design is due to such traditional, naturalistic, and “democratistic” conceptions. They might also explain why most texts concerned with the characteristics of Scandinavian design are, in fact, narratives about people rather than things.

Johansson’s catalog text, then, is about Scandinavians and their histories, landscapes, and nation building. The editorial perspective on the text was, of course, that the introduction should serve readers who were demanding background information about common characteristics of the Nordic design cultures, as well as about the qualities that distinguished the individual features of each country. Consequently, the text was written with an explicit intention of producing a favorable and coherent picture of what was presented and represented in the exhibition, and, at the same time, a picture that would appeal to an American readership. There are several indications of how the author was anxious to meet the presumed expectations of American readers. The cultural attaché at the Swedish embassy in Washington DC, art historian Mårten Liljegreen, advised

14 Hawkins *op. cit.*, 236–39.

15 Report of the board meeting, December 4, 1952; the archive of Foreningen Brukskunst (Arts and Crafts Society), Riksarkivet, Oslo, Arkiv PA 895, A5 (1A310).

16 Åke Huldt’s memorandum to the members of the Swedish Arts & Crafts Society of December 17, 1952: the archive of Svensk Form (Swedish Form), Center för Näringslivshistoria, Bromma (Stockholm), Arkiv F 3B: 6.

17 Report of a meeting in the executive committee of Landsforeningen Dansk Kunsthåndværk (The Danish Arts & Crafts Society) June 1952, Erhvervsarkivet, Aarhus, Arkiv LDK A 133/4B.

18 Gotthard Johansson, “Design in Scandinavia,” Arne Remlov (ed.), *Design in Scandinavia*, Exhibition Catalog, (Stavanger, 1954), 11–20.

Åke Huldt, the director of the Swedish Arts & Crafts Society, to supervise closely both the writing of the introductory text and the way the objects for the exhibition were photographed so that he might adjust the pictorial presentation to the rhetoric characteristic of American visual culture. Liljegreen even suggested that Huldt engage a particular Swedish photographer, Sune Sundahl, who he said knew how to make “Americanesque” pictures. The care taken in producing the “right” text by the people involved is evidenced by the number of handwritten notes and drafts, of typewritten manuscript versions in Swedish and English, and of proofs of the texts at various stages.¹⁹

The very concept of the exhibition forced Johansson to mobilize all his rhetorical skills to construe an argument about Scandinavian unity. His strategy was to show a unique Scandinavian capacity to bridge opposites, such as shared Nordic values and national differences, solidarity and individual cause, past and present, living tradition and modernity, home industry and mass production. He did so by insisting on *continuity* and *contiguity* in all cases. Accordingly, what the text construed was a discourse of absence—the absence of polarities, dramatic changes, demographic and cultural differences, and segregation within the product cultures and so on.

The first issue addressed by Johansson was that of contiguity: namely, the geographical and political closeness of the four countries. He wanted readers to conclude that the unity of the Nordic countries was a characteristic of great importance, and that this closeness was reflected in the exhibition, which stood out as a unit, too. He even emphasized that this unity had never before been as strong as it was by the mid-1950s. However, both in historical and contemporary terms, this unity is questionable. The history of Scandinavia is characterized by centuries of warfare and territorial confrontations, occupancies, and struggles for independence. Johansson referred the history back to the Viking Age, and in his depiction of subsequent centuries “war, country against country” was replaced by “fraternal strife” in the catalog text.²⁰ In both instances, he mentioned the sword as the instrument of warfare—an anachronism that served to mythologize or at least minimize the seriousness of conflict. Another question is what kind of political unity could actually be pointed to in the mid-1950s. Of course, the Nordic Council had been established as recently as 1952, and this event was obviously reflected in Johansson’s declaration of Nordic unity. However, this forum of inter-parliamentary exchange soon faded out and became an organ for the promotion and service of cultural relationships and, for instance, the annual award of a literary prize. The NATO alliance was established in 1949, and while Denmark and Norway were among the founding members, Sweden *would not* join, and Finland *could not* because of the geo-political situation in post-war northern Europe and the cold war.²¹

19 All notes and manuscripts are kept in the archive of Svensk Form, Archive F 3B, various folders in boxes 8–10.

20 All quotations are from the exhibition catalog or the drafts in the Swedish archive.

21 Finland eventually agreed to enter a so-called partnership with NATO in 1994 (i.e., after the cold war), but full membership has not been obtained.

The next question Johansson addressed was that of diversity among individual nations within the Nordic unit. Here, he turned to nature and landscape, and his reflections on cultural diversity were illustrated by photos of landscapes, one from each country (Figures 9–12). Visitors and readers of the catalog were presented not with landscapes that showed contemporary industrial plants or landscapes of an urbanized modernity (see Figure 7). Instead, the Finnish landscape was without explicit references to the presence of humans; furthermore, it was seen from a bird's eye view, which, in the photographic media, turns landscape into a flat ornament. The Norwegian landscape was a remote, faraway, archaic idyll, while the Swedish one was characterized by its picturesque setting, showing a clearing and a typical farmhouse in the middle of forests and groves. The Danish landscape, meanwhile, stood out as cultured. The scenery was observed from a position on the tiny relic of uncultivated soil in the foreground, whereas the vista was dominated by a view of what environmental and agricultural historians call "the economy landscape:" the landscape of possessions, enclosure, and the right to cultivate the parcels.

The photos represent four quite different statements about the natural/agricultural environment of designed artifacts. Immediately after his topographical characteristics (see the quotes in the captions to the figures), Johansson mentioned the traditions of folk art that he related to the places of living and to the economic necessity of self-sufficiency. He described the geographical conditions as being contingent, yet eventually accounting for Northerners' specific "sense of form and material, their standards of quality, and their manual skill." This folk tradition lives on today, he said,

...in Norway wood-carving is a well established national craft, in Sweden and Finland the art of weaving has been proudly handed down from generation to generation, while Danish pottery still draws its inspiration from the past.²²

The argument concerning the endurance of home arts traditions, however, forced Johansson to maintain that "Scandinavian design of today is not to be regarded as an ethnographic curiosity." Johansson wanted to stress the continuity with the past, but at the same time, he also emphasized that Scandinavian designers had readily adapted themselves to the needs of the modern consumer and the general requirements of the modern age. Consequently, Scandinavian things "are created for the people of today, people who live under conditions which are essentially much the same as those of the average American."

This last statement might be read as just another example of how stress on continuity can be used as a rhetorical device. What Johansson said was that the form of objects reflecting age-old Scandinavian customs might appeal directly to the average American. Why? His reasoning was that *the* special characteristic of

22 Gotthard Johansson, *op. cit.*, 12.

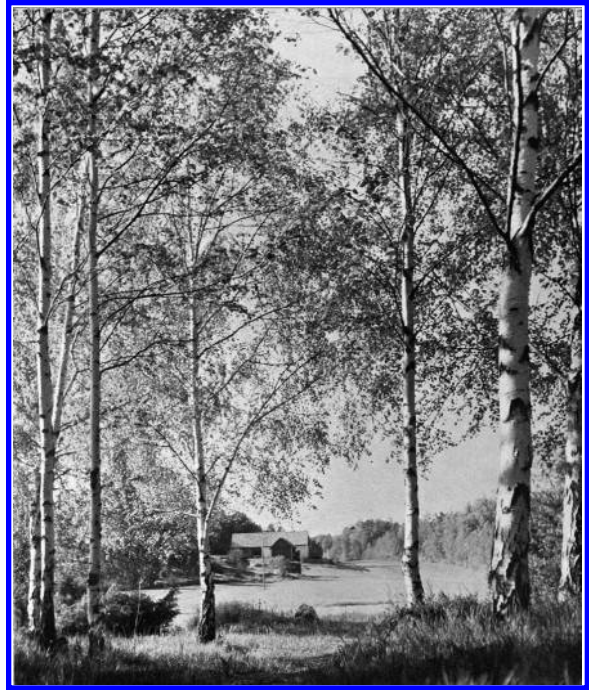
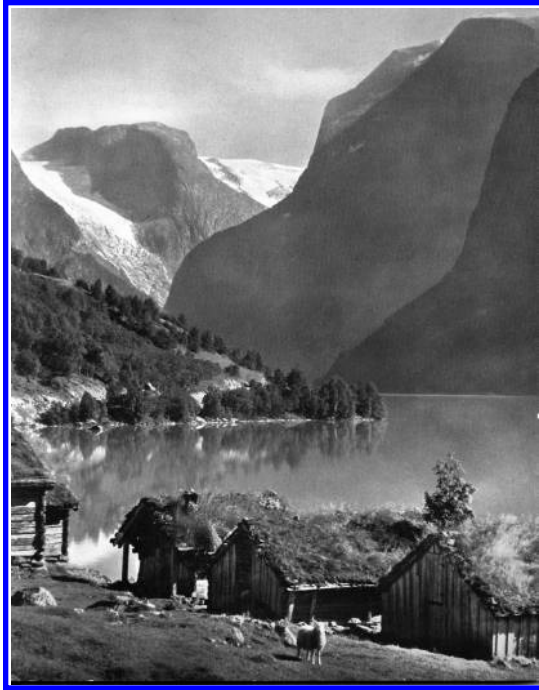


Figure 9 (top left)
Norwegian fjord, "Norways high mountains and deep fjords," both from the catalogues

Figure 10 (top right)
From central Sweden, "Sweden's birch coppices and interplay of valley and mountain, land and water," both from the catalogue

Figure 11 (bottom left)
Typical Danish farmland, "Denmark's green fields, trim farms and rolling heath," both from the catalogues

Scandinavia and Scandinavian design was “the intense interest in everyday problems and everyday things.” This interest in design for everyday use, Johansson continued, placed the common “man,” family, and home in the center. In addition, the democratic outlook, the social conscience, and the striving for a high general standard of living were forces that together generated *common* things—things that did not function as status symbols and that were unaffected by short-lived fashions and idiosyncrasies.

In this connection, Johansson also referred to socio-economic conditions that supported this argument of the everydayness, ordinariness, commonness of Scandinavia, the Scandinavians, and their things. Thus, he postulated an intimate relationship between designer, producer, and consumer and underlined the homogenous character of the population. Furthermore, Johansson claimed that the Scandinavian mentality seemed to break down the usual conflict of interests between designer and producer, producer and consumer, because all shared a common interest in good-looking and well-functioning things. The homogeneity of the populace, as well as the small differences in economic resources, was also a guarantee of social and cultural continuity and coherence.

Most importantly, Johansson underlined the special characteristic of Scandinavian design culture by drawing attention to the existence of organizations whose aim was to unite designers, producers, entrepreneurs, industrialists, art and cultural critics, philosophers, and art historians in a single body. The Arts & Crafts Societies in Scandinavia were among the oldest in the world, and this long-term history meant that the effects of their activities had been considerable.²³ Their educational, research, and promotion initiatives had been of great importance to the spread of the ideal of “good design.” In no other place was it possible to see the same objects for use both in public (and semi-public) places and in private homes—yet another manifestation of continuity.

Of equal importance was the “Scandinavian way” in which manufacturers engaged designers or artists. (Johansson referred to the most renowned examples, such as Swedish potteries and glass-works (e.g., Gustavsberg, Orrefors, etc.), but he could have mentioned examples from all four countries: Arabia in Helsinki, Royal Copenhagen in Denmark, or Porsgrund in Norway.) More than elsewhere, a characteristic of the Scandinavian design tradition, he claimed, was the unique long-term employment of artists as in-house designers. Their job was to develop models and prototypes for assembly line production; yet, at the same time, they were provided a studio where they could carry out sophisticated experiments and have an artistic production in private. Of course, it is difficult to evaluate the exact effect of such arrangements, but they underline what Johansson, among many, considered to be one of the most conspicuous aspects of the continuity issue: the continuity between individual artistic production of unique objects and mass (or at least

23 The Swedish society (in an international context, the oldest of its kind) was established in 1845, the Finnish in 1888, the Danish in 1908, and the Norwegian in 1918.

serial) production for the mass consumer and thus the *general* high quality of industrial products from Scandinavia.

Thus, one reading of Johansson's catalog text might lead to the conclusion that there are no real or dramatic gaps in Scandinavian politics, household economy, demography, history, artistic traditions, or material culture. However, Johansson said absolutely nothing about Scandinavian things and their qualities as concrete, physical entities to be touched, moved around, and used by humans.

"Scandinavian Design" as an American Text

A sequence of texts written by or attributed to Leslie Cheek of the Virginia Museum reflects many of the statements in the catalog introduction. The communicative rhetoric used in the American text(s) is different from the one used by Johansson, but the interesting commonality is a shared effort of both texts to appeal to Americans. The two are discourses of identity, sameness, and otherness. They are not general accounts of the characteristics of Scandinavian design objects, but discourses yielding a "Scandinavianism"—a notion to be discussed more deeply in the final section.

The Cheek article was published on June 6, 1954, in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Two drafts exist—one dated December 28, 1953, another dated February 8, 1954.²⁴ The first draft from December 1953, with the title, "Taste: America vs. Scandinavia," is the only one actually written by Cheek. The second, "Taste at Home," from February 1954, is a rewrite by his wife, Mary Tyler, a journalist by training. The final and published version, "Do Americans Have Good Taste?," was a rewrite by the culture editor of the NYT *Sunday Magazine*, Lewis Bergmann.

The original text, the first draft, was explicitly yet politely criticized by the editor of the *Sunday Magazine*, Lester Merkel. He found it too critical of the taste of Americans and simply refused to accept Cheek's statements about there being no ugly places, houses, or objects in Scandinavia. Mary Tyler then tried to find a more balanced way of describing both the qualities of Scandinavian material culture and some promising aspects of material culture in America.

The correspondence framing this writing process did not contain any direct indications of editorial reactions to the re-write by Mary Tyler, but in comparing her text to the one published by Lewis Bergman, it seems fair to conclude that, in the published article, the views of both Cheek and the *New York Times* are being put forward.

The comparative drive of the three texts reveals what the real issue and motivation of the authors is: telling Americans what to do about their insecure attitude toward craft and artistic qualities and their incapability of making straight, personal judgments concerning the relationship between the visual appearance and performative capacity of household objects. The textual and contextual strategies used by the authors to underline the superiority

24 Both drafts and copies of the published article are, together with a correspondence in relation to the writing of this piece, found in the archive at the Library of Virginia, Richmond; see note 3.

of the Scandinavian example became still more sophisticated. In this process, Scandinavia, Scandinavians, and Scandinavian things were projected as a background for a correction of American attitudes—that is, for addressing the inferiority of average Americans.

The core problem in relation to the American attitude to objects for use, according to the three texts, was that Americans bought ideas and Hollywood mythologies rather than buying things; they bought narratives rather than the visual, palpable, or performative properties of things. Their sensibility was being shaped, or rather, distorted, because of the lack of common historical roots and traditions. As a consequence of a culturally destabilizing social mobility, the gap between artistic production and industrial mass production was uncrossable. All three texts emphasized that the previous two decades or so had seen a renaissance for American craft. The problem, however, was that these art forms were being produced for the elite and therefore, in economic terms, were out of reach for most Americans.

Basically, all three texts ultimately address American inferiority and Scandinavian superiority in relation to the artistic aspects of material culture. However, the way in which these differences are stated rhetorically differs. In the first text by Cheek, the most determined and committed of the three, the principal point is that the high quality of Scandinavian things in the end is secured by Scandinavian consumers, who know the names of the designers of the things they own; their American counterparts, meanwhile, know the name of the Hollywood movie star who, in some ad, is seen with the object in her hand.

In her rewrite of February 1954, Mary Tyler stated that not every door handle in Scandinavia was beautiful and well-designed. However, the monstrosities were fewer than in the United States. Scandinavian design culture manifested a unity—a common quality that marked every object, from the most expensive one-of-a-kind object to the mass-produced cheap ware; meanwhile, a general unevenness characterized the product culture in America. Therefore, her conclusion was that the popularity of the DiS exhibition was proof of the willingness of Americans to learn the principles behind graceful living.

Lewis Bergmann stated in the published article that the items included in the exhibition were a result of careful selection (i.e., they were not representative of Scandinavian product culture in general.) His point was, then, that the best things enjoyed more popularity “there” than the best things by Americans designers enjoy “here.” Scandinavian things were both an element in and an expression of a “way of life” that was characterized by a balanced relationship between physical and spiritual values, past and present, mass living and artistic qualities of things, and the environment (Figure 12). Once again, the texts were concerned not with the properties of things, but instead with the qualities of people and their way of

life—at least a way of life as seen through the distorting lenses of bold generalizations.²⁵

Concluding Remarks on “Scandinavianism”

More than half a million Americans showed their interest by visiting the exhibition, thereby helping the museums to break records of attendance; thousands spent money on buying duplicates of Scandinavian products in the exhibitions in department stores,²⁶ so the reaction from the professional communities of American designers and craftsmen was in most cases very appreciative. Furthermore, such positive valuations contributed to the construct of “Scandinavian Design” as discourse. One example may suffice. The American Craftsmen’s Council arranged its first national conference as an adjunct to the DiS show in San Francisco in January 1957. The panel chairman of one session, Arthur J. Pulos, summarized the following in his report:

The Scandinavian countries are the greatest source of inspiration and challenge to American designer-craftsmen. The excellence of their metal arts today is a direct result of their funding of art and crafts societies in the last century to counteract the general debasement of taste accompanying the advent of industrialism. In this country during the same period, our conglomerate ancestry, our borrowed culture, and the absence of a protective guild system were all factors in the headlong rush to abandon a young craft tradition to embrace the Industrial Revolution. We are today many years behind the maturity evident in Scandinavia.²⁷

The notion of Scandinavian Design replaced other terms that more or less precisely referred to something “Scandinavian.” Among others, Norwegian design historian Frederik Wilhagen, in his book *Norge i form*, has drawn attention to the fact that “Scandinavian Design” was not a Scandinavian invention but was introduced in connection with the Triennales of 1951 and 54 and DiS.²⁸ Previously, terms such as “Swedish Grace,” “Swedish Modern,” and “Danish Modern” were used with different purposes. Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., noticed in his review of DiS that, for example, “Swedish Modern” was used as a label in a broad sense to signal that things were modern, though not in the style of the Bauhaus.²⁹ Kaufmann states:

Because of that [the virtues he enumerates in relation to Herlöv’s installation, JG], these designs don’t seem strange, however much they are marked by a native style, [...] they are directly acceptable and enjoyable here.³⁰

The attractiveness of Scandinavian things was not only a result of their “familiarity.” The great tradition with which Scandinavian design was in dialogue counted for its plainness and unobtrusiveness. Kaufmann explains:

25 It should be noted that Cheek’s prime concern is with the visual qualities, isolated from functional aspects.

26 The immediate commercial impact of DiS was, in fact, considerable. In November 1955 the Danish consulate-general reported to the embassy in Washington, consulates in the United States, and governmental bodies in Copenhagen that the estimated value of the export of Danish furniture to the U.S. in 1954 would amount to 10 million Danish kroner. It also stated that the export had doubled in one year and doubled 44 times since 1950. The statistics reported also reveal that in the context of U.S. imports of, for instance, chairs made of massive wood, Denmark had replaced Italy as the prime exporter by 1955. The Royal Danish Consulate-General, New York, Report nr. 2185, November 23, 1955, by Eyvind Bartels.

27 Arthur J. Pulos, “The Socio-Economic Outlook,” *Asilomar*, (June 1957), 29.

28 Frederik Wilhagen, *Norge i form* (Norway in Shape), (Oslo, Stenersens Forlag: 1988), 167.

29 Kaufmann, *loc. cit.*

30 *ibid.*

Among the inheritors of the great nineteenth century arts and crafts tradition today, Scandinavia seems to be in command of its legacy. This sureness was perhaps bought at the price of slow development, less sensational than elsewhere, but reliable. Now in the last five years one can trace in Scandinavian exports to this country a determined urge to experiment, formally if not technically, to gain a more authentic present-day expression, personal or at least national.³¹

Kaufmann seems less inclined to ignore the conservatism of Scandinavian design and even suggests a deficit as to expressive power to match the “real” present, and not only the “ideal” present projected by other critics and commentators. Kaufmann was a master of discrete criticism, and his professional background allowed him to act as the connoisseur of Scandinavian design and in this capacity even to judge what was missing in the exhibition, what was trivial, and what was familiar. In any case, Kaufmann’s text was seen by Scandinavian officials as an approval of the DiS show as a whole, but it was Leslie Cheek who stated that DiS was a *triumph*. To the director of the American Federation of Arts, Thomas Messer, who had the responsibility for the tour around the United States and Canada, Cheek wrote as DiS left Richmond that the show was “... not a monster to apologize for, but a triumph to shepherd about.”³²

To sum up, in his capacity as president of Svenska Slöjdföreningen, Gotthard Johansson and his advisers fabricated a narrative of “Scandinavian Design” for the exhibition catalog to relate contemporary Scandinavian product culture, its ethics and aesthetics, to history, political culture, and, not least, the Nordic *terroir*.³³ As mentioned, this catalog text was rewritten and re-edited several times to accommodate an American readership. The prime rhetorical device used in this respect was the figure of *continuity*. Many of the corrections made to words and arguments during the writing process stressed this idea of endurance, coherence, and harmony. At least one of the proofreaders was American, a designer named John van Koert, who was engaged by The American Federation of Arts as a special commissar of DiS in the first period. One of the manuscripts in English in the Swedish archive has a number of handwritten corrections and remarks, all in van Koert’s hand.³⁴ One example of his intervention has already been cited: the revision from “war, country against country” to “fraternal strife.” Furthermore, he made two major deletions of passages containing characteristics of a range of object forms from each country. However, those omissions were later included and popularized in the press releases he wrote and were circulated with the exhibition to the effect that Koert’s string of words referring to conspicuous features of Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish objects were quoted in numerous newspaper columns.

31 *ibid.*

32 Letter from Cheek to Messer of February 8, 1954, Archive of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Box B1072801: Directors Office Correspondence, 1933–1977, Folder: “Design in Scandinavia.”

33 The French word, *terroir*, has been reintroduced in connection with the invention of the “New Nordic Cuisine” around 2003 to 2005 to indicate the influence of the natural environment on crops and wild herbs and animals. The doctrine of the New Nordic Cuisine is, first, to limit (not to say, shun) the use of raw materials other than those having the Nordic *terroir* as their natural habitat, and, second, to reconstruct, deconstruct, and rethink traditional Nordic recipes.

34 The archive of Svensk Form, Archive F 3B: 8.

The most popular string reads in its entirety:

No dominant nationality emerges; the personality of each country is distinct. This reality is revealed, for example, in the chairs on display. The Danish chairs, with their intricate workmanship and highly sculptured surfaces, come from a country where hand operations in small shops are very much the rule. In contrast, the Swedish chairs are more frequently designed for factory production. Suave in line, comfortable, well made, equally successful, they are conceived from a different point of view and are produced in the light of a different set of economic circumstances. Finnish fabrics, for the most part, are characterized by muted color in arrangements of very close values. Upholstery materials from Norway are in more intense colors and reveal a national preference for well-defined patterns and bold contrasts between light and dark values.³⁵

In the context of the whole field of texts relating to DiS, this description exemplifies how stereotypes come into being. It accounts, for instance, for the reason that the ideas of the Dane's delicate artistry, the Swede's graceful rationality, the Finn's sensuous finery, and the Norwegian's outspoken peasantry became commonplace in the press coverage. It may be that journalists varied the terminology, but the core meaning was remarkably stable, and the rhetorical device remained the same: to perceive (visual) properties of things as expressions of the mentalities of nations.

Thus, the combination of (1) the prevalence of stereotypes, (2) the emphasis on "otherness" and "us" in contradistinction to "them," and (3) the highly systematized representations of stereotypes and the Scandinavian "other" approximate the discourse of "Scandinavian Design" to a "Scandinavianism," which is, of course, another localization of the power relations, principles, and processes that Edward Said described by means of his much disputed theory of "Orientalism." This article is not the place to challenge Said's position (or that of his critics).³⁶ However, the three elements mentioned constitute an open model or figure of thought that functions productively as such, irrespective of the lack of historical evidence to support Said's own postcolonial argument for which he has been blamed, along with his misreading of sources. His description of a totalizing, dichotomizing, and essentializing discourse as the backbone of his "Orientalism" applies very well to the "-ism" on which we've focused in the present context.

Only one "irregularity" seems to arise from the case in question in comparison to the case of Said'ian "Orientalism." The difference is that the Scandinavians themselves provided much of the "stuffing" of the discourse of "Scandinavian Design." For instance, Johansson's keen construction of "otherness" is a tribute to a Scandinavian essential, and implicitly, his argument is based

35 "Since *Design in Scandinavia* is the product of collective effort, are national traits and preferences clearly revealed?" Press release issued by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, January 1954. Library of Virginia, Archive of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, General File, Exhibition Files 1936–76, B1072668.

36 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York, Pantheon Books: 1978). My reading of Said owes much to James Clifford's sort of rehabilitation of the view put forward in *Orientalism*, especially by his subscription to Said's identification of an orientalist discourse and its structure and ingredients; see "On *Orientalism*," James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1988), 255ff.

on a dichotomous line of thought that emphasizes what makes the Scandinavian material culture unique, without mentioning all the conditions that Scandinavian designers, manufacturers, and consumers have in common with others. Then, from the mid-1950s, Scandinavian commentators, critics, historians, and others simply adopted the discourse of “Scandinavian Design” after it had been elaborated, refined, and made sophisticated abroad. Actually, two different discourses exist: a commercial one in which “Scandinavian Design” stands for a general brand, and a design cultural one referring to the elements of the continuity issue, as discussed. This double discourse also invokes a conception of the post-war decades as a “Golden Age,” the legacy of which is now being considered a yoke by contemporary designers and exporters.