Foreword

The special issue “Objects of the North” is a result of the UiO:Nordics research group Collecting Norden (2021–2023). This collection of articles explores the biographies, utilization and reception of objects obtained from the North – indeed central to the understanding of the Nordics – and investigates their relevance in shaping narratives and imaginings of the region. Covering a time span from the 1600s to the present day, the six articles provide new insights into the multivocality of the North.

What do we mean by “Objects of the North”? What makes an object “northern”? Here, we have chosen origin as the decisive criterion: Sámi artefacts (De Vivo), specimen of whales caught or found in Norway, Iceland and Greenland (Simon-Ekeland & Delsett), stave church portals and Viking ships from Norway, Sámi and Netsilik/Netsilingmiut artefacts (Spring), a Canadian polar bear (Nutting), Swedish writings on the Andrée expedition to the North Pole (Kaasa), and paintings by German artists of landscapes in the Danish-German borderland (Heft).

To understand terms such as “North” and “northern” only from a geographical perspective, however, is problematic. Before entering museums, books or other collections, the objects discussed here were all mobile, they moved (or were moved) from place to place and circulated between various settings. While they maintained their “northerness”, they were integrated into new contexts, renegotiated in dialogue with their environment, and as a result, the understanding of what constituted “North” changed. A central question then regards, as Ryan Nutting writes in his contribution, “the interpretation and reinterpretation of places through objects”.

The difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of defining the terms “North” and “northern” from an exclusively geographical vantage point becomes apparent when tracing the biographies of the discussed objects. The polar bear, shot in Canada, became an exhibition piece representative of the Arctic in London. Whales killed by Norwegians or retrieved at Nordic coasts became subjects of scientific investigation and/or spectacular exhibition pieces in museums in Oslo, Copenhagen, and Paris. Everyday objects crafted by the Sámi in Sápmi were integrated as exotic prestige objects into Italian collections. Texts written by Swedish expedition participants in the Arctic became part of Swedish literary-documentary collages on the expedition. Archaeological finds excavated in Norway and cultural artifacts acquired in the Canadian Arctic both served to articulate Norwegian national identity when exhibited in a museum in Oslo. Landscape paintings produced by mostly German artists around 1900 in present-day southern Denmark (then northern Germany) now shape the perception of this landscape as museum objects and on tourism websites.
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Tracing the objects’ biographies allows us to better understand the different contexts in which these objects have been collected, curated, and displayed. For one, it may widen the understanding of collections and collecting practices: In her article on written records reproduced in writings on the Swedish Andrée expedition, Janicke S. Kaasa approaches books as new collections “that possibly may generate new interpretations of the objects and of their initial contexts”. Moreover, the tracing of objects’ biographies may serve to revise and correct such contexts. As Erika De Vivo points out in her article, “complex histories [embodied by] objects (...) are often silenced and (...) the biographies of artifacts can offer insights on power relations and international networks”. Likewise, Alexandre Simon-Ekeland and Lene Liebe Delsett emphasize “the importance of the networks of scientists and museums in the circulation” of whale specimen. Last but not least, juxtaposing object biographies may help to highlight mobility forms that bridge time and space. The popularity of both Viking ships and objects from Roald Amundsen’s Gjøa expedition among tourists may, as Ulrike Spring suggests, owe much “to ongoing European imperialist expansion and exploration”. An approach that focuses on the biographies of objects enables us to rectify silences as well as raise numerous questions about the “northernness” of these objects.

The artist colony presented by Hendrik Heft, painted landscapes of northern Germany, which, due to political changes, are now part of southern Danish. These paintings “helped to create the image of this region”. How do such new national demarcations play into the understanding of what and where the “North” is? Similarly, do the books discussed by Kaasa about the Andrée expedition belong to an Arctic or Swedish space, or perhaps to both? From the perspective of Central European tourists examined by Spring, were objects from northern and southern Norway regarded as “Norwegian” and thus as “northern”? Why are whales often referred to as northern animals, even though they belong to many other habitats as well? Or, as Simon-Ekeland and Delsett ask, why did whales from the northern regions become dominant in European natural science collections in the second half of the nineteenth century? How was the “northernness” of the Sámi objects, as examined by De Vivo, interpreted in Italian cabinets of curiosities during the Renaissance? And finally, to what extent did the origin of the polar bear in Nutting’s study, play a role in the interpretation of “northernness”? What if the polar bear had originated from, say, Spitsbergen instead of Canada? Could it have been co-opted for British imperial-colonial discourses? The latter question concerning the significance of these objects of the North in explaining, justifying, and supporting European colonialism, regional or national processes of nation- or empire-building, runs through all the contributions.

The examples above testify to how the objects discussed in this issue feature a variation of biographical aspects. Depending on which of these aspects we focus on, their stories unfold in different directions, opening up unexpected and novel perspectives on the objects themselves and on their historical and
contemporary contextualisation and interpretation, here specifically related to the “North”.

The authors explore a wide spectrum of sources to investigate these objects. They follow the traces left by the objects in archival materials, museum catalogues and inventories, literary works, travelogues, and guidebooks. Some are what we may call “lost objects”: they no longer exist in physical form – or are no longer traceable in the physical world – but are accessible to us through written and/or visual sources. Their biographies may terminate in a letter or a travel account, as De Vivo demonstrates with some Sámi objects. Alternatively, these lost objects can, as Kaasa argues, be re-created in literary texts and thus their biographies be rewritten or extended. Sometimes, the sources themselves are incomplete or misleading, as Simon-Ekeland and Delsett point out in their investigation of whale specimen in three museums.

Not only do the objects have a variety of biographical features, but the sources used to trace these biographies also determine which aspects are discussed and highlighted. Similarly, the authors’ disciplinary and professional perspectives play a central role in the analysis. The multivocality of the objects as well as of the “North” is reflected in the cross-disciplinary ambition of the special issue and in the diverse backgrounds of the contributors: cultural anthropology, history, paleontology, museology, literary studies, art history, academic researchers, and museum professionals.

The various perspectives and objects discussed in this special issue then serve as puzzle pieces that help us understand the different interpretations of the “North” from the seventeenth century to the present. We do not here pretend to encompass all these interpretations but aim to render the multivocality of the objects in question and of the region. Most importantly, we hope the six contributions will stimulate further reflections and reinterpretations of how objects are relevant in shaping our narratives and imaginings of the “North”.

Ulrike Spring & Janicke S. Kaasa