

Subject: Love thy neighbour: Queen Victoria's granddaughter, Abba and a border-crossing lorry all play their parts in a series of exhibitions marking a centenary of Norwegian independence

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The year 1905 proved to be an eventful one for Queen Victoria's granddaughter, Maud. She began it as a regular princess, and ended it as a Norwegian queen.

London's Victoria and Albert Museum is currently charting her life through a display of gowns dating from 1896 until her death in 1938. This exhibition is just one element of an extensive programme marking the dramatic events in Scandinavia during 1905.

The Napoleonic wars had a profound impact on Scandinavia by ending 400 years of Danish rule over Norway. Shortly afterwards, Norway was compelled to enter into a union with Sweden in 1814.

Norway was granted considerable autonomy and its own parliament, but in return it was obliged to accept the Swedish king as its head of state and to concede all matters pertaining to foreign relations to its dominant partner.

In 1905, the parliament in Kristiania (Oslo) voted to withdraw from the union. This triggered a series of events culminating in the accession of Prince Carl of Denmark to the throne of a fully independent Norway, with Maud as his queen.

The Norwegian people, keenly aware that their actions were viewed by many as dangerously revolutionary, felt that a constitutional monarchy would be more acceptable than a republic, especially if the queen happened to be a daughter of the British king and the wife of a Danish prince.

This year marks the centenary of Norway's independence and accounts for the presence of Maud's wardrobe at the V&A. The garments and other clothing accessories are from the decorative art collection of Norway's National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo and represent important examples from the first fashion houses of Paris and London.

They serve to trace the specific transformations in Maud's life while also charting the shifting social status of women during a period of great change.

The Norwegian Embassy in London helped organise the exhibition at the V&A, and Britain is just one of 11 nations working in partnership with Norway during the centenary. A steering group established by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs is handling the commemoration in Norway.

Museums have benefited from the funds at its disposal, including two projects that developed in tandem. In the late 1990s, two Norwegian museums, the Norsk Folkemuseum (Norwegian Museum of Cultural History) in Oslo and Lillehammer's Maihaugen open-air museum, made contact with Sweden's Nordiska Museet and the Royal Armoury, which are both in Stockholm.

The aim was to mount twin exhibitions, one highlighting the relationship between the monarchs and their subjects during the union period (1814-1905), the other addressing relations between the 'brother peoples' of Sweden and Norway up to the present day.

The impetus for these collaborative projects was the anniversary of 1905, but it was also inspired by the acrimonious collapse in 1999 of a planned merger between the principal telecommunication companies of Sweden and Norway.

Olav Aaraas, the director of the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, felt that museums had a social responsibility to increase awareness of, and appreciation for, similarities and differences between Swedes and Norwegians in the wake of this falling-out.

Deriving its title from the motto of the last union king, The Welfare of the Brother Peoples is the result of collaboration between two very different museums. Maihaugen in Norway focuses on folk art and possesses an extensive open-air collection of vernacular architecture, while Sweden's Royal Armoury occupies the vaulted cellars of Stockholm's royal castle where it displays a superb array of ceremonial and militaristic paraphernalia.

This difference is reflected in the exhibition, which features a combination of regal attire, heraldry and related symbols of state, alongside folk art and other examples of popular culture decorated with royal motifs.

Ann Grönhammar, the project leader at the Royal Armoury, said that it was a revelation to see the Swedish monarchy from a Norwegian perspective. 'That the 19th-century kings of Norway were the same as our own very familiar ones didn't exist in our minds,' she says.

This thought is encapsulated in the opening display case in which a revolving dais displays the very different ceremonial robes worn by the first union king at his coronations in Stockholm and Trondheim.

This effectively conveys the complex dual role that each monarch had to perform: he was the king of Sweden in one land, the king of Norway in the other and he literally changed his costume at the border.

According to Grönhammar, it quickly emerged that neither she nor her Norwegian collaborator, Else Braut, 'had a very clear conception of any union king, or indeed how the union actually functioned'.

On top of this came the distortions of nationalistic writing of history and a predilection for reading history backwards so that the rupture of 1905 appears inevitable.

Given this, and the fact that exhibitions in Norway and Sweden still have a tendency to be 'books on the wall', the succinct way this display conveys a wealth of historical information is especially welcome. Quite sensibly, greater depth and analysis is reserved for ten richly illustrated essays in the accompanying catalogue.

Grönhammar stresses that from the outset of the project they 'wanted the objects to decide the content'. This was not without its repercussions: the original plan of representing the people's attitude towards their king had to be modified because of a paucity of relevant material.

This contrasted with the wealth of art and artefacts pertaining to the monarchs at the Royal Armoury. They decided instead to focus on the gifts and letters beseeching help sent to the king from his Norwegian subjects.

In this, Grönhammar sounds a note of self-criticism: she doubts if it conveys a rounded enough notion of the people and says that, because the relationship between the Swedes and their king is

not addressed, it has not been possible to ascertain if the kings dealt with their subjects differently. 'The concept of the union in itself remains extremely difficult to present to the public,' says Ann Grönhammar.

The parallel exhibition at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History and Nordiska Museet had the onerous task of conveying not only the union, but also what came after it, right up to the present.

Norwegians and Swedes: 1814-2005 charts the myriad interactions across Europe's longest land border, which in turn delineates the frontier of Nato and the European Union (Norway joined the former in 1949, but has twice voted to stay outside the EU).

Despite their entwined heritage and mutually understandable languages, competition between the two is intense and jokes at the other's expense are rife. Many see themselves as 'siblings' or 'cousins', and as with any family there have been tensions, not least during the second world war when neutral Sweden watched on as the Nazis occupied Norway.

A thematic approach was taken to the telling of this and other narratives – with each element developed through the close cooperation of a curator from each country. Berit Rönstedt of the Nordiska Museet says that this ensured that 'different angles and interpretations' emerged.

A questionnaire asked each national group what they knew about the other and what stereotypes and mental images they held about their neighbour.

Hildegunn Bjørgen, the project leader at Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, says that from this it became clear that contemporary Norwegians possess a far greater awareness of their Swedish counterparts than vice versa.

She speculates that this is partly a legacy of the 'big brother/little brother' rapport and also because Swedish media is so widely available in Norway.

While 1905 is a crucial date for Norway, it is seen as less so in Sweden. For Grönhammar this represents 'the most clear and distinct difference in our national perspectives'.

Mindful of this, at the Nordiska Museet text labels will be 'slightly varied' to suit a Swedish audience. It will also market the show differently by emphasising the contemporary relationship rather than the historical union.

So, while both these exhibitions are genuinely collaborative, it is clear that they originate in Norway – where they have garnered far more attention: Maihaugen has reported a 12 per cent increase in visitors this year, thanks in part to the union exhibition. In contrast, Stockholm's Royal Armoury is not anticipating particularly large audiences.

Both exhibitions are very much 'top down' productions, even if they incorporate elements of popular culture. But in the case of the Norwegians and Swedes exhibition in particular, more could have been done to involve the public.

It would be good to know how visitors have responded to the exhibition and the recollections it has inspired. Such feedback could have contributed to the dialogue between the people and opened the museums to alternative ideas.

This would have been in keeping with the tone of an exhibition that blends conventional display with some unusual elements, not least a karaoke machine where one can sing along to Abba's Waterloo, with its lyrics, 'the history book on the shelf is always repeating itself'.

This missed opportunity to make the museum a genuine forum for debate was more obvious in a third and final collaborative venture.

Built by Swedish Travelling Exhibitions and Norway's National Touring Exhibitions, Unizone involves 12 contemporary artists, a theatre company and a group campaigning for disabled rights. All their work responds in some way to the concept of 'borders', be they of love, pain, language, politics or culture.

The collection was packed into an adapted lorry and, accompanied by two exhibition facilitators (one Norwegian, the other Swedish), this brightly coloured truck zigzagged to 17 locations on either side of the border.

Anne Britt Strømnes, the head of Norway's National Touring Exhibitions, said that the idea was to 'sew the countries together' in a 'loud and friendly' manner. Each stop took in campsites, marketplaces, parks and festivals, attracting people who might otherwise not go to museums or galleries.

The fact that all of these institutions have embarked on their first substantive collaboration adds a further dimension to a period of unprecedented interaction between Swedish and Norwegian museums.

Despite minor differences in working practices, and the bureaucratic hurdle of transferring museum objects across the EU border, this has been a positive experience.

The two countries are culturally and politically close enough to ease any problems of communication, and yet they are sufficiently dissimilar to bring out differences and facilitate self-reflection on the part of the curators and, one would hope, visitors alike.

The centenary of 1905 also shows that, in the right circumstances, museums can and should capitalise on such commemorative moments in order to address contemporary concerns.

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