The People’s Artist

He may not have created the trolls, but he showed us what they looked like.

By Mark Littlefield
ASK NORWEGIANS OF ANY AGE who is their favorite native artist and the answer will most often be Theodor Kittelsen. Not the greatest artist, mind you, but the one closest to the hearts of his countrymen. For more than century, he has been familiar to virtually every Norwegian since childhood. His fanciful depictions of Norway’s ubiquitous trolls have enchanted, and frightened, many a child and implanted indelible memories that last through adulthood.

Kittelsen was born in 1857 in the little town of Kragerø on the extremely rugged coast of southernmost Norway. Thus, his formative years coincided with Norway’s golden age of learning and creativity—in the arts, literature, music, science and exploration. His father died when he was very young, leaving his widow with eight children to raise under extremely difficult circumstances. Sadly, Theodor was born into poverty and never really managed to escape it. From an early age he showed an unusual talent for drawing, which his mother encouraged, and it wasn’t long before he would almost never again be seen without a pencil and paper.

At the age of 11, Theodor was apprenticed to a watchmaker and into a trade that completely failed to enthuse him. Not until he was 17 were his artistic gifts discovered by Diderich Maria Aall, who became his patron and

Kittelsen painted this oil-on-canvas self-portrait in 1891. It measures 60 x 45.5 cm and is found at Norway’s National Gallery in Oslo.

Opposite page: Inga and Theodor Kittelsen in a leisurely moment, ca. 1909.

PHOTO: A. WILSE
The nøkk (Nøkken) is a mysterious water creature that lives in tarns or small lakes and can transform itself into a beautiful white horse and trick children into the water. It also lures adults to mount it and then races into the water with its victim. This pastel drawing was made in 1909 and measures 90 x 140 cm.

**Opposite page:** After 1905, Kittelsen again started to illustrate folktales and submitted 56 drawings and covers for 21 new tales under the title *Kvitbjørn Kong Valemon*. Its caption is a quote from the tale, “Have you ever sat softer? Have you ever seen clearer?” Done in mixed technique, it measures 100 x 70 cm.

arranged for him to begin studies at Wilhelm von Hanno’s drawing school in Oslo (then Christiania). It was later, in 1876, with Aall’s help, that he was able to leave to study in Munich, a popular destination for aspiring Norwegian artists of the day. Also in Munich at the time were painters Erik Werenskiold, Christian Skredsvig, Kitty Kielland and Eilif Peterssen and the dramatist Henrik Ibsen. By 1879 Aall could no longer afford to support Kittelsen and the artist was forced to start selling drawings to German newspapers and magazines. This is presumably around the time that he foresaw that he was not going to realize his childhood ambition of becoming primarily a fine art painter. It was also a time when he felt compelled to point out his poverty to a larger public. In an application for a travel grant in 1880, he concluded his letter with the following sentence: “With regard to my pecuniary circumstances I take the liberty of stating that I am currently without any support and, as a result, am leading a rather miserable existence.”

Between stints in Munich he was granted a state scholarship to study in Paris in 1882 and spent eight months there. The majority of his colleagues were thrilled by their stay in the French capital whereas Kittelsen was basically homesick for Norway. When he returned to his homeland he would never go abroad again except for brief trips. But he did have an extended trip to the Lofoten Islands where he stayed with his sister’s family. It was there
Assorted trolls from Kittelsen’s myriad depictions: A “happy” troll family (above left), an unfinished work showing the troll suffering the effects of his eating contest with Ashiadj (above right) and two versions of the well-known forest troll (below left and opposite page).
This beautiful scene, entitled *When Aspens Bleed*, appeared near the Kittelsen home, Lauvila, in 1905. It is done in mixed technique and measures 61 x 48 cm.

In this pencil-and-watercolor work Ashlad has just thrown the troll into the rushing waters of the Rjukan waterfall. It is from 1908, measures 145 x 115 cm, and is the property of Norsk Hydro.
Petter Dass, a famous 17th-century Norwegian poet, wrote about these seven mountains in northern Norway called the Seven Sisters. This is Kittelsen’s version of the mountains done in pen and ink in the late 1880s. It measures 31 x 48 cm. and is found in the National Gallery in Oslo.

The Nokk peeking out of the water was done in 1904 in pencil, india ink and watercolor. It is 47.5 x 70 cm. and is the property of Norway’s National Gallery.

A young boy shouts toward the surrounding mountains from a rowboat in the middle of a fjord. It is an 156 x 110 cm. oil painting appropriately called Echo.
In this illustration Kittelsen exaggerates experimental procedures in an effort to underscore his aversion to animal experimentation and vivisection.

The portfolio *Do Animals Have Souls?* contains 20 plates, two of which are shown on these two pages. The cover is seen at left. Kittelsen made the drawing above as a satire on a work called “Sick Love” in a bohemian literary publication of the day.
He also depicted animals and insects, revealing an uncanny knowledge of their anatomy.

that he started writing texts for his drawings. Soon after his return to his true element, southern Norway, he met, fell in love with, and married Inga Kristine Dahl. They would eventually have eight children plus one adopted child.

Meanwhile, back in 1881, Kittelsen had been asked to join a number of other artists to illustrate the Norwegian folktales compiled by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, the foremost writing partners in Norwegian history and most prominent literary figures in the country in the 1840s. Their contribution to Scandinavian literature was enormous, as was the mark they left on the Norwegian language. Asbjørnsen was a zoologist, born in 1812. By his 20th year, however, he had found a new passion—folk tales and legends—walking throughout Norway collecting them and writing them down. When he learned that another Norwegian, Jørgen Moe, one year his junior, had the same ambition, Asbjørnsen looked him up and a lifelong partnership was born. By 1842-43, they published the first installment of Norwegian Folk Tales (Norske Folkeeventyr), which was immediately received all over Europe as a valuable contribution to comparative mythology. A second volume was published in 1844 and a new collection in 1877.

Of the many tales contained in Asbjørnsen and Moe’s three volumes the most well-known are probably “The Billy Goats Gruff,” in which three young goats outwit the troll attempting to block their crossing of a bridge leading to their pasture. Other favorites include “The Ashlad Who Had an Eating Match with the Troll,” “The House Mouse and the Country Mouse,” and “The Soria Moria Castle,” in which the hero liberates three princesses by beheading three-, six- and nine-headed trolls and, after overcoming many subsequent obstacles, marries the youngest princess. These are tales that Kittelsen had a hand in. Asbjørnsen and Moe had explained who the trolls were and what they did; but Kittelsen showed us what they looked like.

There were other artists at the time, notably Erik Werenskiold, who depicted the trolls of Asbjørnsen and Moe’s many tales, but the one who came to dominate the visual conception of trolls and other supernatural life forms was Theodor Kittelsen. Overlooked are his contributions as a writer. He wrote the text that accompanied many of his illustrations and, in 1892, he published a small volume entitled Trolldom, consisting of 17 vignettes with both drawings and text. He also depicted animals and insects, revealing an

Three years before he died, Kittelsen created this both humorous and mournful drawing of a troll lamenting about how old he has gotten to be. It is done in mixed technique and measures 65 x 49 cm.
Inga and Theodor with eight of their nine children at Lauvlia in 1909.

An uncanny knowledge of their anatomy. A noteworthy work was a portfolio entitled *Do Animals Have Souls?* with 20 insightful plates.

In 1892, Inga and Theodor thought they were finally sufficiently solvent to build a house of their own in the Sigdal valley near Lake Soneren, west of Oslo. They named it Lauvlia. Sadly, the joy and happiness they found there would not last. Theodor’s severe arthritis and a growing neurological disorder forced the couple to sell Lauvlia at auction and move to Oslo.

Kittelsen’s health deteriorated steadily after that. The government had finally awarded him an artist’s pension of 1,600 kroner per year for life in 1911, but it came far too late. On January 23, 1914, Theodor Kittelsen died at the age of only 56. Present at his bedside were his wife Inga and all nine of their children. His last words to his wife were, “Do you see our children? They will be good-looking angels in paradise.”

The author wishes to thank the following for facts and images:

Sverre Følstad from the Kittelsen Museum at the Cobalt Mines, Modum, Norway,
Th. Kittelsen: *Kjente og Ukjente Sidor ved Kjøtrene*, by Holger Koefoed and Einar Økland,
*Norges Litteratur Historie*, Bind 2,
*Trolls: An Unnatural History*, by John Lindow.

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