



THE NORDIC WAY

Newly reopened, the Nordic Museum is a cultural treasure trove highlighting some of the world's northernmost countries.

BY HALEY SHAPLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ISAAC ARJONILLA



● When the Nordic Museum reopened in May 2018, the event reverberated far beyond Seattle city limits. On a national level, it got attention from The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times; on an international level, dignitaries from all five Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden—attended.

One look at the new museum, and you can be pretty sure they're happy to have made the trip.

Graduated from an old schoolhouse to a custom-built, multimillion-dollar space, the Nordic Museum is a place where every detail—from locally carved door handles to Danish-designed light fixtures—has been thoughtfully planned. The main portion, Fjord Hall, features angular walls that narrow as they go, reminiscent of a fjord. On the second floor, bridges connect the two sides: one representing Nordic history, the other the Nordic-American experience. Crisscrossing back



THE NORDIC MUSEUM'S PERMANENT COLLECTION COMPRISES MORE THAN 77,000 ITEMS, INCLUDING HOUSEHOLD AND OCCUPATIONAL OBJECTS, FURNITURE, CLOTHING AND TEXTILES, FINE AND DECORATIVE ART. THE COLLECTION REPRESENTS THE MATERIAL CULTURE BROUGHT OR PRODUCED BY NORDIC IMMIGRANTS FROM 1840 THROUGH TODAY.





By 1900, nearly a quarter of foreign-born residents in Washington state were of Nordic heritage. They often came for the jobs and were reminded of home.

and forth between the two is meant to represent the push and pull of emigration and immigration, the fluid nature of cultural exchange. (If you're really paying attention, you might notice that the bridges progressively get larger, an intentional choice as traveling between the Nordic countries and the U.S. became easier as time went on.)

"As soon as you walk in, the mood is set," says Jan Woldseth Colbrese, deputy director of external affairs at the museum. "The metaphors with the fjords and the walls and the cleanliness and simplicity of design really works well with the stories we're telling."

This main exhibit covers 12,000 years of history swiftly, delving into everything from Norse mythology and the contents of a Viking grave to 19th-century folk costumes and midcentury modern furniture.

Beyond transmitting just the facts of the Nordic countries, the museum connects to the spirit of these cultures. A re-created birch forest soothes with projections of Nordic

landscapes, and hard-to-translate ideas like the Danish *hygge* (a feeling of cozy contentment) and the Icelandic *dugnaðarforkur* (a concept associated with the spirit of resilience and will to survive) are explained through objects.

The museum's neighborhood of Ballard is well known for bridging the gap between old and new. In that spirit, sandwiched between the working waterfront and all the hip restaurants and boutiques that have popped up in recent years, the Nordic Museum deftly combines the ideas of reminiscing and forward-thinking. A robust schedule of events includes appearances by the likes of indie pop bands, grunge rockers, and present-day fashion designers.

"To look at what's happening now and see what authors, filmmakers, musicians, and chefs are doing—being able to share that with people in the region and internationally is very satisfying," says Jonathan Sajda, program manager at the museum. "Our goal is to bring in more contemporary programming that will allow us to engage areas of arts and culture that

Above: The permanent exhibition offers a view into the ways Nordic life and culture have evolved over the last 12,000 years, including changes brought by emigration and immigration.



Above: Examples of Nordic craftsmanship. Opposite page: A portion of the museum is reserved for special exhibitions covering a variety of topics, including contemporary art.

are continuing to define the Nordic identity and what Nordic culture and art is.”

Even without the impressive range of programming, the Nordic Museum occupies a unique spot as the only museum in the country to cover the cultural history of all five Nordic countries.

That understandably leads to the question: Why Seattle?

It starts with the people. By 1900, nearly a quarter of foreign-born residents in Washington state were of Nordic heritage. They often came for the job opportunities and were reminded of home. As Thomas Ostenson Stine evocatively wrote in 1900, “When you throw your eye upon Puget Sound, and behold the fleet of fish barges, rolling upon her briny breast, a reminiscence of the coast of Norway steals into your soul.”

The similarities are more than just geographical, though. Seattle and the Nordic countries share a certain sensibility as well.

“We have a strong connection to what would be seen as

progressive Nordic values: commitment to social justice, sustainability, openness, innovation—those sorts of things tend to be cultural values embraced here in the Pacific Northwest and in those Nordic regions,” says Eric Nelson, CEO of the museum.

But even if you have no Viking blood in your lineage, can’t catch a fish, or have never woken up on Sunday mornings to the smell of Swedish pancakes, this is still a museum you can enjoy.

“You don’t have to be Nordic to come to this museum,” Sajda says. “The Nordic Museum exists not just to share Nordic arts and culture but also to inspire people to look at their own histories and identities and cultural backgrounds and think more about them.”

Just don’t be surprised if you find yourself incorporating a few of the Nordic traditions into your own life. The resourcefulness to craft ceramics from lava, the respect for nature to design furniture that will last a lifetime, and the egalitarianism to believe everyone deserves beauty in their surroundings is something we all could probably use a little more of.

