



Charlotte Ashby. *Modernism in Scandinavia: Art, Architecture and Design.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 256 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4742-2430-7.

Reviewed by Ingrid Nordgaard (Yale University)

Published on H-SHERA (February, 2018)

Commissioned by Hanna Chuchvaha (University of Calgary)

In scholarly accounts of European modernism, Scandinavia is often viewed as peripheral to the cultural centers of France, Germany, and Spain—a side note in the grander histories and stories of modernism as a movement. In her book, *Modernism in Scandinavia: Art, Architecture and Design*, Charlotte Ashby challenges this viewpoint and offers a fascinating introduction to more than eight decades of modernist culture in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Ashby's study exhibits the diversity of expressions found among Scandinavian artists, architects, and designers, paying special attention to the period 1890–1970, and her monograph aims to be a new history of modernism in Scandinavia. Rather than focusing exclusively on internationally acclaimed figures such as Edvard Munch and Alvar Aalto, Ashby includes lesser-known artists whose contributions must be considered to understand the full magnitude of Scandinavian modernism. Throughout the book's five chapters, Ashby convincingly presents the unique nature of every artwork she explores. Instead of heralding individual artists as prominent exceptions, however, Ashby continuously foregrounds the importance of looking at the bigger picture and explores artistic communities, networks, and social settings in order to explain the significance of each work. In such a fashion, Ashby is also able to convey how Scandinavian

modernist art, architecture, and design respond to historical changes, social concerns, and modernity at large.

In her introduction, Ashby argues that the art historical label of modernism should be expanded to embrace the multitude of artistic expressions that appear in different times and places. Ultimately, Ashby views modernism as an “accumulation of impulses, events, discussions and objects” (pp. 2–3), and the study as a whole reveals how various art forms play a role “in mediating societies’ and the individual’s experience of past, present and future” (p. 4).

Apart from the first chapter in the book, which introduces the decades prior to 1890, the four remaining chapters each cover twenty years of artistic production. Each chapter is structured by a series of case studies through which Ashby explores both visual and applied arts in relation to their respective locations and historical contexts. The artworks discussed reflect “the surrounding infrastructure of influential cultural institutions, the professionalization of art and design practice and the markets within which works were produced” (p. 3). Ashby's case studies offer formal analyses that strike an impressive balance between commenting on the artworks in their own right as aesthetic objects and as objects of sociocultural significance. As a result, the reader is encouraged to con-

template the intricate interplay between various artworks and their function in society.

In the first chapter, Ashby indirectly comments on the foundations that were needed for modernism to develop: new institutions, an urban middle class who invested in art, and public and private organizations that stressed culture as ideologically significant. The chapter highlights artworks that exemplify how late nineteenth-century culture responded to the desire to modernize but also looked backward to explore the cultural roots of the nation. Scandinavian art and design of this period sought to encourage new achievements while simultaneously reaffirming ties with the past. This manifested itself in works that combined different styles and art historical orientations to create objects that reflected both the old and the new, the national and the international. Especially interesting in this chapter is Ashby's case study of the Norse Revival vase, designed by August Malmström and produced by the Gustavsberg porcelain company in Sweden between 1872 and 1883. Through the concept of Norse Revival, designers such as Malmström looked back to Scandinavia's Viking heritage and celebrated the era by drawing on its aesthetics. Ashby's analysis sheds light on the changing relationship between fine and applied arts, and reveals how art was theorized in response to nationalism and national culture.

In chapter 2, Ashby centers on the decades 1890–1910. Artists of this period continued to blur the borders between the past and the present and experimented with mixing different media. Ashby presents a fascinating example of the latter by analyzing how the Norwegian artist Gerhard Munthe used his home, Villa Leveld, as a place to explore the relationship between painting and design objects such as furniture and textiles. To Munthe, the home was an aesthetic concern as well as a functional one, and it was an important stage upon which to perform (national) identity. Another work which defies traditional genre categories is Richard Bergh's work *Nordic Summer Evening*

(1899–1900), which Ashby suggests embraces the tropes of national landscape painting while also exhibiting characters with psychological depth. Ashby convincingly argues that the painting, although embedded in national themes, “reflects a modern engagement with contemporary thought” (p. 60). Ashby further notes that a characteristic of Scandinavian modernism as a whole is how it does not always view modern subjectivity as being at odds with the collective. Instead, the individual and the community share their search for meaning in the face of a changing world.

Whereas the second chapter emphasizes the cultural diversity of the turn of the century, chapter 3 explores how several artists, architects, and designers returned to the aesthetics of Classicism as a mode of expression in the period 1910–30. In the sculptural works of Gustav Vigeland, for instance, Ashby sees an example of how the classical body is used to repair the wounded symbolic body of postwar Europe. However, Ashby's commentary on the Stockholm City Hall, built between 1902–23, uncovers how the trend of mixing different styles within a single artwork was still in fashion. According to Ashby, the city hall is characterized “by a conspicuous emphasis on craft and materials that makes it heir to Arts and Crafts design reform thinking of the 1890s and 1900s” (p. 94). At the same time, the period manifested a growing awareness of the function of public art, and debates took place regarding how art and design might help solve social challenges. As an example, Ashby investigates how architects responded to the rapid growth of urban communities and strived to synthesize social and aesthetic concerns. Ashby here highlights the Puu-Käpylä housing development in Helsinki as a project that sought to improve urban everyday life through its architectural vision.

Art in relation to society is also stressed in chapter 4, which covers the decades 1930–50. As the Scandinavian countries experienced population growth, mass production gained prominence and several artists and designers started engaging with

industry. “Design for the people” became a slogan, but the commercial potential of art and design was highlighted as well. Artists also responded to the political realities of their time, as seen in Alf Rolfsen’s fresco, *Working Norway: From the Drift Nets to the Forests of the East*, which decorates one of the walls in the Oslo City Hall (1931–50). The narrative quality of the work is striking and emphasizes labor as a theme. Ashby suggests that this is but one example of how art, design, and architecture became key components in the democratization projects taking place in Scandinavia during this period. As she points out in her commentary on a series of frescoes made by Lennart Segerstråle, “art was used as a cultural tool to educate the people and improve social cohesion in line with an image determined by those in authority” (p. 161).

Chapter 5 is entitled “Postwar Modern” and concludes the book by reviewing the period 1950–70. As the Scandinavian countries slowly recovered from World War II, the art of the era was marked by both national solidarity and optimism. Ashby shows how architects were still involved with large housing initiative projects and city planning. In her analysis of the SAS Hotel Copenhagen (1958–60), designed by Arne Jacobsen, Ashby further emphasizes how buildings of this era reflected modern life but also aimed to be a total aesthetic experience. The SAS Hotel, for instance, was designed to induce both physical and psychological comfort. Another artwork that responded to its environment, although in a different fashion, is Siri Derkert’s mural of 1965, which decorates the Östermalmstorg subway station in Stockholm. Derkert’s work not only referenced the radical politics of its time but was also executed in a manner that took the subway station as a public and social space into account. This was achieved by constructing a mural that does not rely on the viewer approaching it as a whole, but that instead allows for meaning to be extracted from its fragments. By emphasizing this “relative freedom of viewpoint” (p. 200), Derkert’s subway mural exemplifies how mod-

ernist art is in constant dialogue with societies in change.

Throughout the book, Ashby comments on paintings, design, and architecture with great scholarly authority, and with an ease that makes the reading experience both engaging and thought-provoking. Her formal analyses are stunningly detailed and well composed. Combined with Ashby’s rigorous historical commentary, these interpretations breathe new life into the objects discussed. One of the greatest strengths of the monograph is undoubtedly how lesser-known artists and works are given attention in a manner that (re)asserts their position within Scandinavian modernism. The book deserves special praise for highlighting the works of female artists, such as Helene Schjerfbeck and Synnøve Anger Aurdal, and Ashby specifically addresses how the careers of these women were often challenged or questioned by gender bias.

Ashby’s case studies are convincing and thoroughly place each work discussed within its national, historical, and sociocultural context. Due to the sheer quantity of case studies, however, her overall narrative at times seems somewhat fragmented, and it becomes difficult to trace the argument Ashby wants to make in each individual chapter and in the book as a whole. Since Ashby exhibits such authority and impressive knowledge in her formal analyses, the author’s voice could to great effect have been more present throughout to address the motivation behind the choice of case studies and, in addition, to guide the reader through the history being written. This could, for instance, have been achieved by tying the case studies together by means of more frequent and consistent comparison, by including a more detailed introduction and conclusion to each chapter, or by offering a smoother transition between the different analyses.

In her concluding remarks, Ashby points out how modernism in Scandinavia was as diverse as the aesthetic expressions of the artists, architects,

and designers who contributed to the cultural production of 1890–1970. However, she also points out why different generations of artists should not be examined in isolation from one another. Ashby stresses continuity as an important facet of Scandinavian modernism and argues that this continuity can be traced ideologically—in “the endurance of concepts, such as the total work of art and art for everyday life” (p. 210) and in the search for “a solution to the necessity of creating art for a challenging modern world” (p. 211). While Ashby’s case studies support this view, the conclusion would have benefitted from unpacking the concepts of both ideology and continuity in more detail. Furthermore, the relationship between continuity and modernism as a global movement could have been theorized to a greater degree. This would have allowed for a more complex argument to emerge and would have further strengthened the book’s contribution to modernist studies at large. Nevertheless, Ashby masterfully shows why the Nordic countries should not be underestimated or ignored in the larger narrative of international modernisms, but rather carefully analyzed from both a regional and a transnational point of view. Ashby’s book will prove a valuable resource for students and scholars who seek a diverse and thorough introduction to the rich history of modernism in Scandinavia.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shera>

Citation: Ingrid Nordgaard. Review of Ashby, Charlotte. *Modernism in Scandinavia: Art, Architecture and Design*. H-SHERA, H-Net Reviews. February, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51160>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.