

# How to Have a 'Good Home'

## *The Practical Aesthetic and Normativity in Norway*

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*This article presents an exploration of home decoration and domestic aesthetics in the Norwegian town of Skien. The analysis of everyday domestic aesthetics is derived from original ethnographic research in which a normative social reference point such as practicality is investigated in the organization of material culture and decorative order. I analyse domestic aesthetics in terms of Campbell's discussion of need or desire-based rhetoric as forming the basis of consumer choices. I discuss this position through an analysis of 'the practical' (praktisk) as it pertains to ideas of the 'good home' in Norway. I suggest that practicality can be described as an idiom through which an acceptable image of individual priorities is projected. The articulation of socially legitimate objectives also allows a certain disjuncture between words and actions and underpins one expression of the normative home.*

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## Introduction

This article begins by examining the relationship between domestic aesthetics and a commonly valorized value of practicality in the Norwegian town of Skien. This analysis of home decoration is derived from ethnographic research, in which the practical aesthetic is investigated as a salient category in the organization of material culture and domestic decorative order.<sup>1</sup> Although householder respondents frequently accounted for their domestic choices as practical, I found that the term ultimately defied exhaustive definition. The practical choice was presented as a 'common sense' solution to everyday concerns; living on the ground floor if one had difficulty managing stairs, or having a washable leather suite or sturdy furniture in a house with small children. From these examples, and many others, practicality represented a positive category, in terms of making domestic life easier, more comfortable or better in some way. As a value-statement, the practical choice appeared to me to apply more to a quality of the 'good home', however conceptualized, rather than to any physical reality. The material on which this article is based is the result of fourteen

months of fieldwork in the town of Skien in south-east Norway, carried out during 1997 and 1998. Fifty interviews were conducted in middle- and working-class households in two locations, specifically, apartments in blocks of low- and high-rise flats on the periphery of the town and detached and semi-detached nineteenth- and twentieth-century houses in the centre of Skien. These two areas represent mainstream local housing, although families in the latter location professed a stronger 'traditional working-class' identity than elsewhere in the town. Research was carried out through unstructured, prearranged interviews and in-depth ethnographic analysis of residents in both locations. All interviews were conducted in the living room of my informants' homes and discussion was largely focused on this space. Themes touched on included dwelling history, past and present decorative schemes, comparisons with friends' and neighbours' homes and biographies of central objects.

My argument focuses on three points; first, that emphasis on 'the practical' inheres individual consumer choices with normative values, that is norms, conventions or moralities that guide social behaviour and inform 'overarching cultural categories'.<sup>2</sup> I take

normality here as an ambiguous category, which requires effort to achieve because fitting-in is uncertain; it involves experimentation, one is never quite sure how one's home is interpreted. Through a study of the practical, normativity emerges as a complex notion through which ideas of individualism and conformity are made central, such that the recognition of socially endorsed norms provides a common framework for a wide variety of contrasting tastes and practices. The articulation of socially legitimated objectives equally allows a certain disjuncture between words and actions. Secondly, I argue that the practical is not only what Colin Campbell terms a 'vocabulary of motive' that situates individual preferences, but is also active in the realization of aesthetic tastes.<sup>3</sup> I develop this point by looking at the work of social historians who illustrate how pan-European intellectual traditions were locally assimilated in a Norwegian cultural context. Thirdly, analysis focuses on consumption choices as they pertain to ideas of the 'good home', however this ideal might be constructed. In this respect I follow Alan Warde in criticizing academic literature that conflates a certain experience of modernity with introspective or narcissistic individualism, and that tends to ignore the endurance of conventions, the residues of class culture and symbols of respectability: '[t]he very persistence of systematic, readable, general patterns of consumption suggests that the dynamic involved remains a collective one, indicating high levels of attachment to particular group identifications.'<sup>4</sup> Warde's point is of particular relevance to a study of Norway, where a salient category in social intercourse concerns the ideal of egalitarian individualism. This term and the set of values to which it refers have been skilfully analysed by Marianne Gullestad as 'equality-as-sameness'.<sup>5</sup>

## The social home

In a European context, the home-centredness of Norwegian culture is a topic of much academic reflection.<sup>6</sup> At the forefront of this field is Marianne Gullestad, who argues that 'in modern Norway, the home is a key context for intimacy.' This intimacy does not relate solely to individuals who occupy the home; the home also serves as a 'key symbol, suggesting and justifying a complex set of cultural categories, values and relations'.<sup>7</sup> This 'home-cent-

redness' is often the first thing that foreigners notice; friendships may be solidified by gaining access to the domestic space and there are numerous small routines or cues, which distinguish this space as separate from the public world. A comment made frequently to me during fieldwork was that Norwegians 'just go home', after classes, sports or work. It was not common to linger and socialize. This does not just work on a symbolic level; until the 1980s, Norway lacked a developed pub or restaurant culture, so there were few outlets for meeting people except within the home. Even today, it is still largely uncommon to go to pubs and restaurants in Skien during the week. Therefore it may appear counter-intuitive to examine the home, the private sphere, as an instrument of social participation, especially in view of the 'home-centredness' with which many Norwegians are attributed. From a broader perspective, this observation is not confined to Norwegian households, however. The perception of the private sphere within Euro-American societies as 'other' to the interactions and negotiations that make-up daily public life is common. Indeed, in academic debate the 'private sphere' has increasingly come under critical focus with various attempts made at undermining the idea of rigid boundaries and distinct spheres.<sup>8</sup> While Scandinavian forms of domesticity hold similarities to more widespread international practices, however, this separation between public and private spheres appears more stark in Norway than elsewhere. Norwegian academics confirm this observation, describing the centrality of the home,<sup>9</sup> the importance of domestic privacy and individual space,<sup>10</sup> or the impenetrability of Norwegian families.<sup>11</sup> Øystein Gullvåg Holter contends that although the Norwegian home has a 'public' character, in the sense that outdoor pursuits are highly valued, the home is still a 'private world', a quality that is largely derived from its historical background and the Protestant ethic.<sup>12</sup> This emphasis on privacy can be linked to Gullestad's use of the term 'symbolic fences'.<sup>13</sup> Having something in common, perceiving each other as alike, seems to be of great importance in face-to-face interaction. Without some common factor, she argues, a 'symbolic fence' can be erected, which may make individuals 'unavailable' to each other. The concept of likeness is closely related to the Scandinavian version of egalitarianism, and has been written about widely as an important symbol in

Norwegian identity. The value of likeness or egalitarianism does not necessarily, however, mean factual equality. According to Brit Bergreen, it has more to do with the visibility of one's likeness.<sup>14</sup> Being equal means being seen to be equal. The question remains, therefore, how is equality as a value perceived or demonstrated in a sphere renowned for being private? To address this question I turn to material culture.

## The practical aesthetic as need or desire

Many of my informants discussed the 'functional' and 'aesthetic' qualities of goods in their homes as separate and distinct entities. Function was often privileged as defining the 'essence' of an object, while style referred only to surface embellishment. Nonetheless, and as I show below, non-functional objects were frequently defined as 'practical'. Campbell explains this response as a class-based consumer rhetoric that justifies purchase. The middle classes espouse the 'philosophy of need', and privilege comfort over pleasure, while the 'philosophy of pleasure', expressed in Bohemian or youth-centred movements, ranks pleasure over comfort.<sup>15</sup> The Puritans, he argues, were responsible for a bias in favour of need-based consumption, to the extent that 'requirement', 'need' and 'necessity' play a critical role in facilitating social action. In common with the uses of the term 'practicality' by Norwegian informants, he contends that these 'vocabularies of motive' are employed in self-justification as well as validation of one's actions to others.<sup>16</sup> Relevant here is the particular distinction drawn by his informants between the perceived functional requirements of need and the subjectivity of desire. A state of need refers to 'a state of deprivation, one in which there is a lack of something necessary to maintain a given condition of existence'.<sup>17</sup> Pleasurable consumption, on the other hand, relates more to individual taste, a pleasant or unpleasant reaction to certain stimuli. The difference between engaging with real objects that satisfy needs and the search for pleasure by exposing oneself to certain stimuli suggests two mutually exclusive orientations, one essentially 'objective', the other essentially 'subjective'. According to Campbell, consumers do not so much reconcile these different orientations as categorize their actions in terms of one or the

other, more usually privileging the former emphasis on need, objectivity and function over desire, subjectivity and pleasure. In so doing they draw on specific rhetorics in order to justify patterns of expenditure. For example, explanations of 'need' may be employed by individuals in order to legitimate consumption choices. Therefore, finding the right vocabulary is necessary for justifying action to oneself and others. Owing to its self-reflexive nature, this 'vocabulary of motive' can be more appropriately described as rhetoric rather than discourse because it legitimates as well as explains.

Campbell's argument is of direct relevance to an investigation of practical aesthetics, as the play on ideas of function and desire is central in the exegesis of decorative predilections. Throughout my interviews, the issue that was elaborated most was the idea that a home is where one lives in comfort. Here comfort is one term for a broader spectrum of values encompassed within the Norwegian word '*koselig*'. In a domestic context, *koselig* is experienced as a pleasurable and cosy environment, spoken of in terms of imaginative and sensory qualities, such as the look and feel of furnishings, colour schemes, textures and physical comfort. For some informants, such as Knut (discussed below), comfort is directly tied to practicality and expresses uncluttered space and tidiness, where adults can move with ease and children can play with impunity. Having a home filled with furniture or 'fine things' (*fine ting*), which inhibit movement or demand great care, is described as 'impractical'. The practical home is thus placed in opposition to perceptions of a 'fine home'; it emphasizes comfort over material embellishment and articulates domestic priorities such as tending to the home's residents. As such it refers more to a 'need' rather than a 'desire' rhetoric. Knut, a fifty-three-year-old architect who, we may imagine, had given his home considerable thought, explained it thus:

Yes, it is important to have my home practical in every way. This is a *brukshus* (community house). Some people have very fine houses in Norway where you can't move, here we have grandchildren visit and we have nothing that we need to be worried about, the children can just play as they like. So we have this big kitchen like they always used to have in Norway in the old days, and that is where people used to work and live and then they had a fine living room which they used at Christmas, but we wanted to have a *brukshus*, although it is clear with a big

kitchen that when you cook you can smell the cooking all over but . . .

Here Knut is repeating what he had in mind when designing their home. They chose an open-plan arrangement in order to have space for large family visits and playing children, whilst allowing the adults to sit in the kitchen area and supervise while chatting amongst themselves. He portrays his home as practical because it is not 'fine'. 'Fine' in this example suggests excess and a misguided clutter of the domestic space. He describes with pride their lack of concern for furnishings and the freedom with which his grandchildren can play. In reiterating the practical quality of his home, he is legitimating his choices in terms of prioritizing his family and personal comfort over emulation.

From informants' comments it is clear that money spent on the home is placed in a category of priorities, whereby caring for the household is, for many, a materialization of care for its occupants. Through routines of housework such as cleaning and tidying, the householder is maintaining the particularity of the private sphere and reasserting its concomitant ideals of domestic nurture. For example, Sonia, a divorced mother of two, described how she struggled to replace those objects that she had lost as a result of the separation from her husband. In providing for her family home materially and decorating it to make it 'cosy' (*koselig*), she is also providing for the comfort of her children and for their emotional well-being: 'I have to make a home for my children . . . [and] . . . now perhaps because of my life situation, I am at home a lot and that means that I am more occupied with making it pleasant and that the children think it is pleasant.' Beside the concerns articulated by Sonia, there is also an acute awareness that decoration can be taken to excess and the purpose of the elaboration forgotten. Being house-proud may imply a delicate negotiation between comfort perceived as care, and display perceived as materialism. In some cases, the latter is seemingly applauded in the national media, such as when television personalities are interviewed and photographed in privileged surroundings by gossip magazines such as *See and Hear* (*Se og Hør*), or when media attention is given to the popularity of yachts among the Oslo upper classes. From another point of view, it holds more ambiguous nuances, implying the transmogrification of a positive impulse

into a social pathology. I will return to this point below.

The practical can be codified as an idiom on which householders draw to legitimate their consumption preferences. As Siri Nørve suggests below, emphasis on the practical aesthetic works to underplay distinctions between householders, and accentuates similarities in approaches to the home.<sup>18</sup> This observation corresponds with Campbell's argument that consumers are strategic in defining purchases in terms of necessity in order to validate want-based action. Eulogizing the practical is, however, not only employed as a euphemism to assuage feelings of doubt but also, I argue, is characteristic of an aesthetic genre. That is, utility and functional concerns inform notions of aesthetics, domestic decoration, collecting and satisfaction. Now I will present some ethnographic examples to illustrate this point.

## Tine and Marius

Tine is a fifty-five-year-old primary school teacher who lives alone and who described her consumption strategies to me as follows:

I have a different relationship with things I could use, like if I saw something which I really liked, and was undecided whether to buy it or not, I would think about what I could use it for. If I couldn't use it, I would probably leave it there. I think I fall for things easier when I know I can use them for something. It might have something to do with investing money in something which would just stand there.

Looking at Tine's home, her choice of furniture, fittings and decoration hold particular associations with a form of aesthetic functionalism—'objects which don't just stand there'—objects that are *usable* rather than used. On her living room wall hang a range of carved ornaments, including a wooden spoon and fork, which are contemporary copies of traditional originals. Tine claims to evaluate her purchases with reference to their function and, because of this, she has accumulated vast quantities of objects, which, although conforming to a practical aesthetic, serve no immediate purpose.

While Tine tended to buy only 'useful' objects, the quantities of such objects have gradually filled her basement to capacity. For example, she regularly used to purchase a box of second-hand household goods,

such as kitchen utensils, in local auctions. She would bring the cardboard box home and in triumph and excitement look through her trophies, explaining to me what each gadget could be used for. 'This is for slicing eggs, this is for frying one egg at a time, this is for cutting tomatoes in decorative shapes, peeling potatoes in slices', and so on. Occasionally she had to call on her aged mother for explanations of the various utensils that she collected in her cellar for lack of storage space. They were nevertheless 'good to have' (*kjekt å ha*). Even if Tine didn't use all the utensils, she explained to me, her daughter would inherit them when she died.

Tine's preferences regarding her purchases came from a deep interest in traditional farming culture (*bonde kultur*). Emulating a simplicity that she associated with pre-industrialized society, she took an avid interest in the farming-culture implements that



Fig 1. Wooden spoon. According to the author's informant, this is an original antique purchased in a local auction



Fig 2. Washing board, part of an 'old style' decorative theme

appeared in auctions from time to time. Since the 1960s, peasant artefacts such as old tools or household utensils have been fashionable as domestic ornaments in Norwegian homes.<sup>19</sup> In Skien, Tine's decorative tastes are not unique as antiques and contemporary copies of originals are widely popular as ornamental pieces. Traditional artefacts used as decorative household goods include items such as antique sewing machines, spinning wheels, weaving paraphernalia, washing boards, wheels, tables, buckets and carved wooden chairs [1–2].

Because originals are so much in demand and are sold at exorbitant prices, many consumers make do with decorative copies of originals. Wooden bowls are particularly popular and one finds such bowls decorated with traditional painted motifs (*rosemaling*) in a number of households [3]. The attractions of these artefacts are multiple, but one feature that Tine emphasized relates to their functional and ornamental

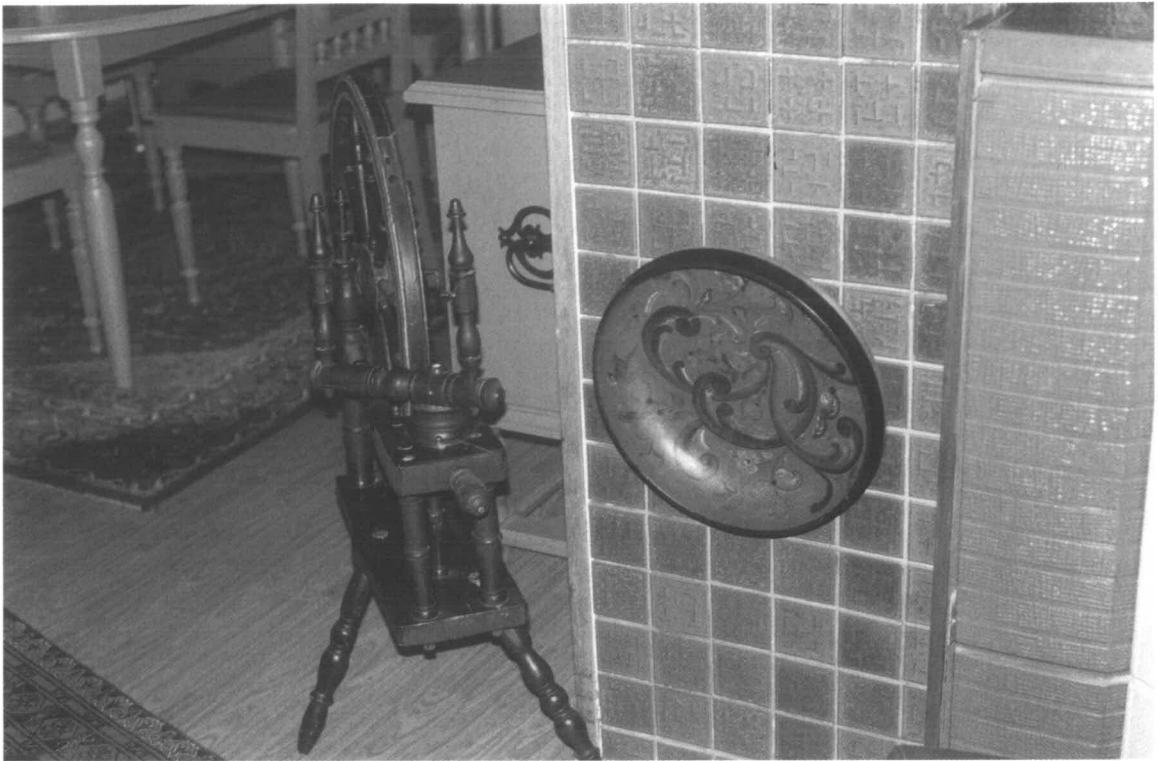


Fig 3. *Rosemaling* bowl. A modern copy of a traditional type decorated with floral designs

roles. As she explained to me, ‘they didn’t have ornaments in those days—they just decorated the things they had and used.’ And while Tine collects them purely for decorative purposes, their previous practical use—or their likeness to used originals—enhances their aesthetic appeal for her. In view of her more general concerns for the ‘functionality’ of material culture, therefore, these objects fulfil some of her aesthetic criteria.

The example of Tine differs quite considerably from Marius, who was in his mid-twenties when I met him, worked as an accountant and was an avid participant in local auctions. Marius maintained that he held a strict practical ethic regarding his consumption practices and rationalized his purchases in this regard. His accumulation of memorabilia and his interest in collecting antiques would be unsurprising, however, if he did not insist that he was only interested in having a ‘practical house’. He claimed to favour space and free movement, as was evident by his large living room, but this was thwarted by a large collection of furniture and crammed shelves. At the same time, he insisted that he hated senseless materi-

alism and took a rational approach to the problem of gift-giving, even at Christmas. Christmas ‘is so stupid’, he once said:

People go and buy things for all their friends and they can’t afford it and then they buy things on credit, just to show how well off they are and how much money they have and they don’t have the money for it and then they get the bill in March. Why spend all this money on stupid things which no one needs?

In common with many other homes at Christmas, Marius’s home exhibited a practical aesthetic in his choice of decorations; Christmas curtains and tablecloths, Christmas cups, Christmas paper napkins, Christmas mineral waters and beers. Interestingly, and in addition, however, Marius had also amassed a huge number of miscellaneous goods, including two pin-ball machines (one from Chicago, an original and sought-after collector’s item, he hoped), and numerous framed newspaper clippings announcing Elvis’s death. When I met him, he was collecting a ‘Hard Rock Café’ T-shirt from every ‘Hard Rock’ restaurant in the world, which would be followed, he

promised, by the same from every 'Planet Hollywood' restaurant. The crux of the issue for Marius was that he saw a potential use-value in all his possessions. These purchases were not emblematic of conspicuous consumption but rather represented a strategy for improving his financial situation. They were an investment in his future.

## Modesty and creativity

In his discussion of Tadeusz Kotarbinski's philosophy of practicality, 'practical realism' or praxiology, Wojciech Gasparski provides us with a definition of 'practicality' as referring to an ethos of efficiency and economy of activity.<sup>20</sup> If one thinks of practicality in terms of this type of cost-efficient rationality, however, it seems paradoxical to find aesthetic concerns inherent in practical tastes. As a conceptual tool, the 'practical' receives widespread currency in Norwegian social interaction, but not necessarily in the sense that Kotarbinski describes it. In order to understand its importance, one must first depart from viewing practicality as pertaining only to functionalist concerns but rather see it as an idiom for action. Anthropologists Tian Sørhaug and Jorun Solheim define pragmatism as based on concepts such as usefulness and adequacy and suggest that it is an implicit and common Norwegian assumption underlying much daily interaction.<sup>21</sup> It is linked, they argue, to 'implicit knowledge', gained through experience and felt as belonging, in contrast to theoretical knowledge, which advertises one as foreign or inexperienced. As an expression of domestic priorities, on the other hand, it is found in numerous spheres of action, including leisure pursuits such as 'doing something sensible in one's spare time' and home decoration. It is similarly echoed in Gullestad's argument that 'Norwegians generally emphasize all those things that are practical and useful and place little direct and explicit emphasis on aesthetics and playful creativity'.<sup>22</sup> Recourse to functional and economic reasoning, Gullestad suggests, allows homeowners to pursue contradictory values. On the one hand, they want their home to be considered tasteful, cosy and personal, yet at the same time it is important to avoid connotations of lavishness or status-seeking.

While actual consumption choices are not restricted by practical options, however, the explanation and presentation of those choices as 'normal'

allows them to be categorized in accordance with 'everybody else'. Nørve illustrates this premise, arguing that when householders discuss their domestic choices, they do so in terms of socially acceptable criteria; wooden floors can be easily cleaned, sofas with detachable covers are easily washed, and so on. They thus avoid being derided by friends or neighbours as affected or irrational.<sup>23</sup> Nørve suggests that the principle underpinning this rhetoric is an attempt to deal with dissimilarity by finding a criterion common to all. On the one hand, the emphasis on practicality accentuates a social empathy with equality and sameness. Through accentuating the common ideals that prioritize a householder's decision, one can overlook the fact that the actual arrangements and decorative choices may vary considerably. One point of disjuncture for different tastes might be found in class distinctions, for example. For much of the twentieth century, class difference has been underplayed in Norway, and while social class is becoming increasingly conspicuous, this point of differentiation can be avoided by touching on points of similarity or complementarity. While the material culture of the home differs greatly in relation to preferences and resources, the articulation of this taste is codified in a similar manner across all social sectors.

Emphasis on equality as perceived through ideas of social homogeneity or equality-as-sameness, as Gullestad terms it, suggests that in certain forums competition as a value is packaged in many textured layers.<sup>24</sup> While domestic routines such as DIY and tending the home have become expressions of emotional investment in the domestic space as the material locus of the familial relationship, practicality is similarly one means through which questions of competition, social emulation and materialism can be bypassed. The sentiment of 'putting people first' above material gains achieves its greatest resonance in the domestic sphere, which stands as an ideological icon of nurture and care, beyond the alienating influences of an abstract, monetarist system. Equally, creativity and care are suggested by personal agency in tending to the home and its occupants whilst remaining modest, in keeping with a social code that emphasizes perceived Norwegian egalitarian values. Significantly, both Gullestad and Nørve suggest that values of this sort relate more to the framing of the domestic space than to any physical reality. In arguing that pine floors are cleaner than carpets, or

that refurbishment will add to the value of a property, one is negotiating a variety of social and personal priorities that make up decorative choices.

Returning to Campbell and the distinction between need and want rhetorics, it is argued that each stems from different philosophical positions and traditions of thought. The first, the need rhetoric, is primarily Puritan-inspired and valorizes utilitarian-based motives whilst condemning desire-based action. The second rhetoric is largely, although not exclusively, inspired by the Romantic movement. Campbell suggests that in contemporary Western society the two discourses continually confront each other; the middle classes largely embracing the need-based ethic while youth-centred counter-culture is conventionally associated with want-based ideals. In applying this line of argument to a specific Norwegian case-study, emphasis on the practical aesthetic should first conform to a middle-class discourse and, secondly, should be evident in facilitating consumption. This latter point is in agreement with Gullestad, who argues that Norwegians use practical or functional 'excuses' to express creative impulses. Yet from my interviews with both working- and middle-class Norwegian informants, it is also apparent that descriptions of the practical aesthetic have relevance beyond a legitimating rhetoric. Not only can a practical element be incorporated into an aesthetic object, but on many occasions the practical aspect is fundamental in enhancing the desirability of an object, and in defining it in aesthetic terms. Tine's appreciation of a household ornament is dramatically enhanced if it has a functional form, even if this functional aspect is purely aesthetic, such as an ornamental carved wooden spoon. She collects functional kitchen utensils, which are kept in basement boxes for lack of storage space but are nevertheless 'good to have'. The knife illustrated in [4] belongs to a young woman who works as an administrator in the local social welfare offices. She had inherited the knife, she said, and decorated with flowers used it as an ornamental piece on her living room wall. Aesthetics can be seen as the socially derived practice of categorizing visual phenomena according to a cultural scheme of value.<sup>25</sup> Often decorative objects are chosen because they manifest visual characteristics that are associated with the realization of desire or the performance of a social role. Similarly, objects categorized as practical or functional may be chosen

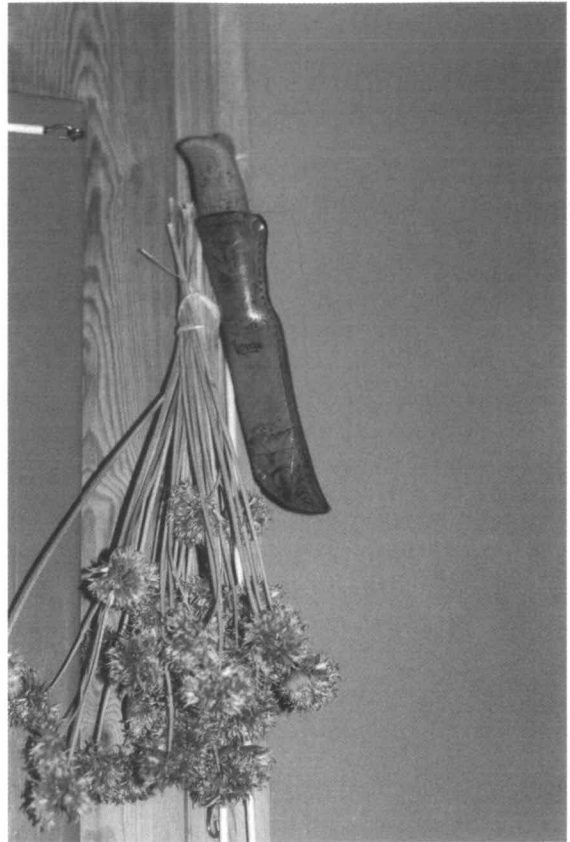


Fig 4. Knife, used as an ornamental piece on the living room wall

because this aesthetic form contributes to normative visions of domesticity, whilst allowing these ideals to be personalized. Through combining decorative choices with ideas of practicality, Marius can conceptually transform a domestic situation that may seem impractical to an onlooker into a practical investment. In so doing, householders are transforming objects to fit their rationale of an ideal home and also personalizing social ideals of aesthetics. Rather than causing a tension between the negotiation of self and society, individual preference and conformity are facilitated, despite contrary material expression. The point is not that there is one overriding belief about how a Norwegian home should be organized, but rather that a common rationale can encompass the myriad of differences within. One consideration for this complementarity of opposites—the functional and aesthetic—lies in the unique historical trajectory of Scandinavian society. It is to this I turn next.



## A rational national Romanticism

In discussing the origin and location of need- and desire-based action, Campbell draws a distinction between different philosophical perspectives, distinguished by a Puritan-inspired and utilitarian paradigm on the one hand and a romantically inspired, bohemian tradition on the other. The Puritans, it is argued, were responsible for condemning excess and over-consumption beyond the necessary satisfaction of needs. The celebration of desire, pleasure and emotion on the other hand derives largely, although not exclusively, from the Romantic movement. Both perspectives are institutionalized in contemporary society, yet an important point here concerns the degree to which each found historical expression in specific European societies. In the following section I question whether the practical aesthetic blends Puritan-based moralities with a romantically inspired emphasis on beauty, influenced by Scandinavian studies, which show that European intellectual and philosophical movements were assimilated in local contexts in quite specific ways.

Nina Witoszek argues that the Enlightenment remains the 'founding tradition' of Scandinavian cultures, and one that continues to bear on present-day cultural horizons. As a result of this historical circumstance, she suggests, Nordic acceptance of Romanticism has been largely subverted by the tenacity of Enlightenment influence. For example, one overlooked aspect of the Scandinavian creation of the 'peasant mystique' is its flight from, rather than its conformation with, romantic stereotypes. She argues that 'in Norway, it was not the romantic, spiritual peasant at one with nature but the rationalist peasant (*bonde*) who was elevated into a cultural hero.'<sup>26</sup> The 'national' peasant, therefore, was more the bearer of Enlightenment and old classical virtues than mystical romance. The Enlightenment, as a movement spanning the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, placed new emphasis on rational decision-making over theological belief systems and took hold in much of Scandinavia through education, primarily developed through local popular movements. Educational organization was aimed at a greater proportion of the population than, for example, the German system where education catered primarily for civil servants and the bourgeoisie. The situation in Norway allowed peasants to

articulate and define their needs and political preferences.

In nineteenth-century narratives one finds an exultation of the 'power of rationalism' on the part of the peasantry. Writers such as Jacob Aall gave an account of the peasants (*bønder*) in the province of Telemark where Skien is situated, who, with 'their knowledge of the sagas prepared the ground for rationalist theology'. Henrik Wergeland, on the other hand, courted criticism for his excessively romantic poetry, but also praised the peasants of the sagas because they embodied the 'classical virtue of freedom', rather than wild spirit.<sup>27</sup> Witoszek draws on this to argue that the Enlightenment took root so vigorously in Scandinavia that it, in effect, subverted the appropriation of subsequent romantic influences. She contends that in most countries in Europe Romanticism in literature and the arts was a replica of a revolutionary experiment in the social realm, breaking boundaries, defying taboos and so on. This was to a large degree lacking in Scandinavia, chiefly because of the great influence of Puritan/Pietist religion and the cosmology of the Enlightenment. She continues:

[t]he resistance to romantic poetics and world-view was especially vehement in Norway. The majority of the Norwegian cultural elites of the day received Romanticism as an anomaly, a violation of native cultural codes of perception and expression, an ethics and aesthetics of excess . . .<sup>28</sup>

For example, leading Norwegian writers and historians such as A. Schweigaard, J. P. Welhaven, J. Collett and P. A. Munch, who were socially influential in the nineteenth century, condemned profusely almost everything European Romanticism prized, such as the priority of emotions, formal experimentation and spirituality. The explanation for this unfaltering Puritanical perspective can be found in the combined effect of a number of factors.

First, religion had a powerful and modifying presence on the reception of new ideas. One important factor was the emphasis that Pietism placed on the individual rather than this-worldly institutions. Revolution was posited as a movement not against any external enemy but against the enemy within each individual: the Reformation was a state-driven project, not a protest from below. Equally, Henrik Stenius argues that work is the main principle of

Nordic societal organization. The poor become part of society by working and the rich participate socially in the same way: 'When work is holy, ostentatious consumption is also a sin (or a display of bad taste).'<sup>29</sup> Over-consumption offends the ideal of simplicity. Nordic popular movements criticizing the old society expressed specific educational ideals. And these educational ideals were directly tied to the peasantry. The message they mediated declared an individual-oriented protestant ethic. Thus one finds praise of 'holy poverty' and a shared patriotism rooted in nature imagery and idealized peasant values.

Within this framework one can see why ideas related to Romanticism assumed a singular interpretation when cast against a Scandinavian Pietist cultural background. While the peasant became part of a national nostalgia, the particular characteristics of this peasant culture maintained a rationalism peculiar to post-enlightenment Norwegian society. Witoszek's thesis illustrates how romantic impulses found articulation within a cultural context dominated by enlightenment ontology. I have questioned the impact of these circumstances on present-day concepts of function, aesthetics and consumption strategies within a domestic context.

## Conclusion

Gullestad makes the point that Norwegian society is less homogeneous than it is perceived to be, but that difference is underplayed through various social mechanisms. This notion of homogeneity is rightly defined more as a social perception than a social reality, but within that perception one finds various forms of classification that are recognizable and broadly understood by many informants. Some informants described their homes as 'standard Norwegian' whilst falling short of pinpointing what constitutes 'standard'; others recognized differences in the decorative strategies of certain age groups ('pensioners have begonias in their windows'), or classes ('working classes have red Christmas curtains, middle-classes have white').<sup>30</sup> Despite such differences, broad similarities were evident in many homes, not only materially but also in a discourse of practicality. I have argued that practicality can be linked to perceptions of the 'normal', conventional home in underlining particular priorities. Materially providing for the family demonstrates emotional provision, placing

comfort uppermost in importance and bypassing overt suggestions of competition or social emulation. Richard Wilk makes the point that differences in taste can be a defining factor in identity creation; in the present discussion, however, the opposite appears to be the case. Nuanced heterogeneity appears as the backdrop against which convention-as-sameness is constructed. Practicality allows a certain degree of difference to be subsumed within common forms of speech and reference, while 'softening' the risks inherent in displaying personal tastes.<sup>31</sup> This argument illustrates how the practical as an ideal provides one model for social inclusion or complementarity in the face of some, but not total, material distinction.

Additionally, the significance of Witosek's argument is that it casts light on the historical background to ideas of practicality as function. Within a Norwegian context she argues that nineteenth-century 'romantic' inspiration was subsumed within an intellectual heritage dominated by the Enlightenment. She highlights the specific local experience of intellectual traditions and world-view current throughout Europe at that time. Her argument thus suggests that while European intellectual, philosophical and religious traditions are institutionalized in contemporary society, concepts surrounding function and beauty may differ in a Norwegian context. Given the focus on the peasantry in nineteenth-century national romantic debate, it is not coincidental that some informants link the practical aesthetic—resonant with associations of simplicity and wholesome consumption—with peasant artefacts. And, for many, the practical resonates further and encompasses ideas of the good home. Individual delight in kitchen utensils or Elvis paraphernalia assumes a conventional image of investment in individual projects, care and nurture rather than prestige, ostentation or emulation. Through the notion of making practical choices decorative projects are imbued with moral purpose.

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## Notes

- 1 Resulting from this fieldwork was 'Decorative order: transgression and normativity in a Norwegian home', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University College London, 2002. Other published works from this thesis include 'Organized disorder: moving furniture in Norwegian homes', in Daniel Miller

- (ed.), *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, Berg, Oxford, 2001.
- 2 Marianne Gullestad, *The Art of Social Relations: Essays on Culture, Social Action and Everyday Life in Modern Norway*, Scandinavian University Press, Oslo, 1992.
  - 3 Colin Campbell, 'Consumption and the rhetorics of need and want', *Journal of Design History*, 1998, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 235–46.
  - 4 Alan Warde, 'Consumption, identity-formation and uncertainty', in *Sociology*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1994, pp. 877–98, at p. 892.
  - 5 Gullestad, op. cit., pp. 184–5.
  - 6 Gullestad op. cit.; Kjell Rolnes, *Med Smak Skal Hjemmet Bygges*, Aschehoug, Oslo, 1996; Dagfinn Ås, 'Om, hus, boliger og hjem', *Tidsskrift for Samfunnsforskning*, vol. 34, 1993, pp. 383–99.
  - 7 Marianne Gullestad, 'Home decoration as popular culture: constructing homes, genders and classes in Norway', in T. Del Valle (ed.), *Gendered Anthropology*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 131.
  - 8 Nancy Duncan (ed.), *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, Routledge, London, 1996; Hanne Haavind, 'Power and love in marriage', in Harnet Holter (ed.), *Patnarchy in a Welfare Society*, Scandinavian University Press, Oslo, 1985; Gabrielle Vom Bruck, 'A house turned inside out: inhabiting space in a Yemeni city', *Journal of Material Culture*, no. 2, 1997, pp. 139–72.
  - 9 Gullestad, op. cit. 1992.
  - 10 Anne Cohen-Kiel, *Continuity and Change: Aspects of Contemporary Norway*, Scandinavian University Press, Oslo, 1993, p. 66.
  - 11 Øystein Gullvåg Holter, 'Norwegian families', in Cohen-Kiel *ibid.*, op. cit.
  - 12 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
  - 13 Gullestad, op. cit., 1992, pp. 165–72.
  - 14 Brit Berggreen, *Da Kulturen Kom til Norge*, Aschehoug forlag, Oslo, 1989.
  - 15 Campbell, op. cit., p. 238.
  - 16 *Ibid.*, p. 236.
  - 17 *Ibid.*, p. 237.
  - 18 Siri Nørve "'Det er så praktisk" Om funksjonelle begrunnelser i hverdagslivet', *Sosiologi i dag*, vol. 4, 1983, pp. 59–66.
  - 19 Arne Lie Christensen attempts to explain the current penchant for old things in Norwegian society in terms of technological advancement and accelerated social change. Nostalgia, he posits, is today found in all social classes and is iconic of continuity in a society racked with the contradictory condition of longing for the original, old and secure whilst simultaneously pursuing the new and ephemeral. Arne Lie Christensen, 'Vi som elsker gamle ting', *Dugnad*, no. 2/3, 1992, pp. 29–44.
  - 20 Wojciech Gasparik, *A Philosophy of Practicality. A Treatise of the Philosophy of Tadeusz Kotarbinski*, Helsinki, 1993.
  - 21 Tjan Sørhaug & Jorun Solheim, 'Hvis du ikke har vært her før, då har du ikke noe her å gjøre: om norsk pragmatisme og selvulstrekkelighet', *Samtiden*, no. 4, 1987, pp. 2–8.
  - 22 Gullestad, op. cit., 1992, p. 80, see also Tove Nederlid, 'Use of nature as a Norwegian characteristic', *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, vol. 21, 1991, pp. 19–33.
  - 23 Nørve, op. cit., p. 59.
  - 24 Gullestad, op. cit., 1992, pp. 183–200.
  - 25 See Alfred Gell, in 'On Coote's *Marvels of Everyday Vision*', in J F Weiner (ed.), *Too Many Meanings. A Critique of the Anthropology of Aesthetics*, ETU Publications, Adelaide, 1995.
  - 26 Nina Witoszek, 'Fugitives from utopia: the Scandinavian enlightenment reconsidered', in Øystein Sørensen & Bo Stråth (eds.), *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, Scandinavian University Press, Oslo, 1997, p. 86.
  - 27 Johan Sannes, *Patrioter, intelligens og Skandinaver: norske reaksjoner på skandinavismen før 1848*, Universitets-forlaget, Oslo, 1948, quoted in Witoszek, op. cit., p. 86, emphasis in original.
  - 28 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
  - 29 Henrik Stenius, 'The good life is a life of conformity: the impact of Lutheran tradition on Nordic political culture', in Sørensen & Stråth, op. cit., p. 165.
  - 30 When I asked informants to describe exactly what they meant by 'standard' Norwegian as a description of their homes, they talked about the totality of the home, rather than about any specifics.
  - 31 Richard Wilk, 'A critique of desire: distaste and dislike in consumer behaviour', in *Consumption Markets and Culture*, vol. 1, no.2, 1997, pp. 175–96.