

The History of Bergen Museum

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Abstract

The presentation will give an overview of the history of the Bergen Museum from its creation in 1825 until the foundation of the University of Bergen in 1946. In the course of this time span the function of the museum went through considerable changes. At the turn of the century the museum had developed a relatively distinct institutional profile, with an emphasis both on research and diffusion of knowledge, thus laying the basis for the later university foundation. The presentation will argue that one continuously important factor for the development of the museum was the fact that it was firmly embedded in the Bergen bourgeois society.

In 1946 Norway's National Assembly, Stortinget, decided to establish a second Norwegian university in Bergen, Norway's second largest city, situated on its West coast. The new university was built on the basis of two existing institutions: 1) a hospital owned by the municipality of Bergen, and 2) Bergen Museum, which was a private institution, though to a large extent funded by public means.

This presentation will not focus on the university foundation as such, but will give an outline of the history of Bergen Museum from its creation in 1825 up until its centenary in 1925. By that time the embryo of two faculties existed at the Museum: a faculty of sciences and a faculty of arts. However, I want to mention that without the existence of Bergen Museum, it is almost certain that no university would have been established in Bergen until the increase in student numbers during the 1960s triggered new universities all over the Western world.

My presentation will focus on the function of Bergen Museum and describe how the Museum gradually changed from an antiquarian oriented institution to a modern research oriented institution, in which dissemination of knowledge to the general public held a special place. By the time of its centenary, Bergen Museum was strongly embedded in Bergen society, especially bourgeois society, but the interaction reached

wider than that, and I shall argue that the university cause acted as a motor for integration as well as for internal change.

First period: W.F.K. Christie's time: An antiquarian focus

At its inception in 1825, Bergen Museum was in reality a private club, the initiators of which had extended invitations to the townspeople of Bergen and non-residents of Bergen to join a museum association. The aim was to establish a museum containing a collection of antiquities and a cabinet of curiosities of nature, whether in the form of minerals, plants or animals. Thus the Museum from the outset contained these two collections, which again laid the basis for the later establishment of a historical-antiquarian and a natural-historical department. In addition, the collection soon included contemporary items, like paintings, plastic arts and craft objects.

The plans for the museum that were presented in the invitation mentioned above have sometimes been described as modern and forward-looking.¹ This is due to the fact that scientific research is mentioned as an objective. However, there is good reason to maintain, as several people have done,² that the activities of the museum board from its inception until Christie's death at the end of the 1840s, and even a bit beyond that date, had a typical antiquarian focus.

The distinguished Italian historiographer, Arnaldo Momigliano, describes the archetypal antiquarian of the 16th Century as a magistrate and a member of parliament, a bachelor, an inveterate traveller, far more so than his shaky health and his duties should have allowed. And when he died he left collections of books, medals, plants, minerals, scientific instruments, and whatnot.³

This description fits in well with Wilhelm Frimann Koren Christie's characteristics. He even was a bachelor, although one with two children born out of wedlock during his student days in Copenhagen. Yet the important thing is that it was Christie who dreamt up Bergen Museum, who took the initiative that led to its creation, who

¹ Haaland 1996.

² Lidén 2002; Christensen 190.

³ Momigliano 1990: 54-55.

recruited people for its board and its cause, who corresponded with foreign institutions, such as the British Museum and its Danish counterpart, the National Museum, and with collectors both foreign and domestic. As the county governor of Hordaland, Christie travelled a lot and he used his travels to build up his own collection. Due to shaky health he retired as county governor, and it was at this point that he started his work for the museum cause. Christie had an exceptional social stature, which he could use to rally people to the cause. He had been a delegate to the elected assembly that wrote Norway's constitution in 1814, this happened in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. He was elected the first President of the Storting, and he was a member of the initial ordinary assemblies of the Storting in 1815 and 1818.

Christie was without question the dominant figure among the board members, although a bishop and a schoolmaster were also very active members. The board in addition included two apothecaries and a language teacher. The board's main objective was to expand the collections. At the outset the Museum did not have its own building, and a room had to be borrowed from a secondary school. From 1832, when the first museum building was acquired, the collections were occasionally opened to the general public. But generally, access was limited to members of the museum association, donors, and foreign guests. Cataloguing the collections took up much of the board member's time, and eventually they started to use the collections as a basis for articles. During a period of ten years, Christie and his closest collaborators published an antiquarian journal called *URDA*. Both the cataloguing and the articles published in *URDA* during this first period reflected the antiquarian interest of the board members in the systematic description of objects.

Second period: D. Danielssen and the pioneering of scientific research

Daniel Danielssen was Bergen's foremost institution builder within the field of science during the second half of the 19th Century. He became a member of the Museum board in 1852, and was president of the board from 1864 until he died 30 years later.

Danielssen was a medical doctor by profession, and an internationally renowned leprosy researcher. He was the tutor of Armauer Hansen, who discovered the leprosy bacillus, and who also became a board member. Danielssen also co-wrote several dissertations on zoology, and his passionate interest for this science was to influence the direction that the Museum took during his presidency.

Danielssen's main aim as president was to turn the Museum into a modern scientific institution. He was decidedly not an antiquarian. He advocated and pushed through a strong division between the natural-historical collection and the antiquarian one, and would have liked to get rid of the latter altogether. Given the previous emphasis in this field, this was not possible, but he gave away the picture collection to a municipal picture gallery, while other objects went to a newly established Arts and Crafts Museum. Danielssen was also involved in the establishment of a Society for the advancement of Norwegian fisheries, to which he transferred Bergen Museum's collection of fishery related objects.

The upshot was a concentration of the activities at the Museum. It was to a large extent due to Danielssen's audacity that the board acquired public means to build a new building, which was opened in 1864, and which remains the symbol not only of the Museum but of the subsequent University of Bergen as well. The last decade of Danielssen's reign saw a breakthrough for the Museum as a scientific institution. During the 1870s and especially the 80s, professional researchers for the first time joined the staff, among others archaeologists and zoologists. He also appointed Fridtjof Nansen to do oceanographic research, but lost him when he became a famous explorer. Finally, in the early 1890s, the establishment of a marine biological station represented a breakthrough for marine biology at the Museum.

Third period: Jørgen Brunchorst and the dissemination of knowledge

Jørgen Brunchorst joined the Museum in 1886 as a conservator after completing botanical studies in Germany, including a doctorate from Leipzig. He quickly became the leading light at the museum. He initiated marine biology, oversaw a two-winged expansion of the museum building, and laid out a botanical garden. He was the first

professional director of the museum's collections. In 1901 he was appointed director of the Museum, a post he held until his resignation six years later.

More than anything, Brunchorst concentrated his efforts on making dissemination of knowledge an integral and essential part of the activities at the museum. The creation of a botanical garden was part of his outward reach. The museum staff was encouraged to publish in the Museum's *Yearbook*, Brunchorst himself edited *Naturen*, a journal popularising scientific results. Most importantly, Brunchorst took charge of an association called The Society for the Advancement of Scientific Endeavours, which in line with Auguste Comte's ideas organized popular lectures. The establishment of this Society was Danielssen's doing, but once Danielssen had passed away, Brunchorst closed the society and incorporated the popular lectures into the Museum's activities. When the museum building was enlarged, a large lecture hall was added to the building, providing the premises for these lectures, which at the turn of the last century could attract audiences of as much as nearly 10,000 people every six months.

Brunchorst's passionate involvement and interest in the dissemination of knowledge to a broad public, and probably also his success in doing this, meant that he was not keen on developing the Museum into a university. He would much rather it became some sort of teacher's training school or college. His view on this matter was not widely shared, and this fact led to his resignation in 1906.

Fourth period: The Bergen university cause

It was in the 1890s that the Museum board adopted the idea of developing the Museum into a university. Initially, the board sought in various ways to attract external means to the Museum. For example, a donation from the city's richest merchant enabled the establishment of a chair in zoology. However, the expansion of the Museum was a very gradual process.

In 1913 the university cause had a break-through when the department heads at Bergen Museum received professor status. The Great War provided another break-through. The war increased the income of Bergen merchants, especially ship owners,

and parts of these new riches were diverted to the Museum to support its development towards a university. The bonanza bred optimism, and plans were made to establish a university in connection with the centenary of the Museum in 1925. The plans included new buildings and an expansion of the academic staff. The most important new research environment was the Geophysics Institute, which again attracted Wilhelm Bjerknes to Bergen. Bjerknes was soon able to establish the scientific paradigm that became known as the Bergen School of Meteorology. By the early 1920s, plans had been developed for the creation of a faculty of sciences, based on Bergen Museum, and a faculty of medicine based on the municipal hospital. In 1923, a public meeting with participants from the University of Oslo as well as from many parts of West Norway was held to further the cause. At this meeting, the public demand for a faculty of arts was so strong that it could not be ignored and it was duly incorporated into the existing plans.

However, in spite of the significant progress made, the dire economic developments of the 1920s and early 30s prevented the university from being established, although several new buildings were added to the Museum in connection with its centenary. And it was not until the economy improved in the second half of the 1930s that the university cause was reawakened and brought to fulfilment after the war.

The integration of Bergen Museum into Bergen bourgeois society

One very important consequence of the university cause was that it strengthened the interaction between the Museum and the city as well as the region in which it was situated. The idea of establishing a university in Bergen had not originated with the museum. It took several decades from the time the idea was launched in Bergen's newspapers until Bergen Museum took it up at the end of Danielssen's presidency. From that time on, it really became a cause rallying support from local politicians, newspapers, schoolmasters, academics and the enlightened public in general, attracting private funds to the Museum. Internally it became a motor for change and development, and it provided direction for the museum's development. As mentioned before, it is doubtful whether a university would have been established in Bergen until the 1960s, had it not been for this general rallying for the cause.

The mobilisation for the university cause in the run-up to the centenary of the museum can be seen as the high point in the Museum's interaction with the city and the region. It can also be seen as a culmination of a development that started during Danielssen's presidency and which gained momentum during Brunchorst's directorship.

As we have seen, Bergen Museum started out functioning more or less like a private club for amateurs. Access to the collections was normally restricted to members of the museum association, donors, or foreign guests. Once a year, at Whitsun to be exact, the collections would be opened to the public. Danielssen understood that for the Museum to obtain public support, the Museum had to be opened to the public on a permanent basis. The new building opened during the 1860s made this possible. In many other respects, Danielssen's focus on turning the Museum into a research institution did not strengthen the Museum's links to the city, at least not initially. As we have seen, he diverted important parts of the museum's collections to other institutions. Danielssen also played an important role in setting up a number of associations for the purpose of spreading scientific knowledge, but again he did this outside the Museum.

In the course of the 1870s and 80s, Bergen Museum, and not least its board, became a stronghold for Darwinism as well as Positivism. The journal *Naturen* under the editorship of Brunchorst became a vehicle for popularising knowledge about Darwin's paradigm. Its reception in the Bergen bourgeoisie was mixed, and it probably did not help the Museum's standing in the city in the short run. In the long run, the positivist message of Auguste Comte became part of the ethos of the Museum, and contributed significantly to embedding the Museum in Bergen society as well as the region.

The positivist ideology influenced the function of the museum in two major ways. Firstly, the positivist doctrine emphasized the link between research and the potential users of the scientific results. This kind of thinking had a profound bearing on the museum's ethos, and resulted in a concentration of research on the Vestlandet region, that is, the south-western part of Norway, with the objective that it should benefit fishermen, farmers and the like. The sciences thus came to focus on oceanography,

marine biology, meteorology and forestry, whereas the linguists studied the dialects and names of the region.

Secondly, as already mentioned, Brunchorst made the dissemination of knowledge to the general public an essential part of the activities at the Museum, both in the form of publishing and lecturing. Brunchorst himself left the Museum in 1906, but the tradition he had created continued, so that when new media like the radio appeared, it was immediately put to good use.

The adherence to the positivist doctrine also reflected the fact that the Museum was an environment for progressive political thought in the second half of the 19th Century. Both Danielssen and Brunchorst were elected to the National Assembly, and Brunchorst served as a minister. Board members often had political experience. In addition the Museum also had a Council to which persons who had done the museum special services were appointed. During the first decades of the 20th Century, two former prime ministers were appointed to the Council.

The ethos established at the end of the 19th Century came to have a bearing on the Act regulating the University of Bergen in that it introduced an Objects Clause, a novelty for a Norwegian university. The Objects Clause not only strongly emphasized the importance of research, in addition to education, but included “dissemination of scientific knowledge among the populace.” Needless to say, Brunchorst would have been pleased.

The intention behind this clause was to maintain the traditionally close contacts with the city and the surrounding region. Whether this in fact happened is a different matter. It is, however, interesting to note that research interest in the region made the orientation of the sciences at the University of Bergen well equipped when North Sea oil and gas production and fish farming became linchpins of the Norwegian economy.

Based on the following literature:

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