



Painted Rooms

Scandinavian Interiors by Sigmund Aarseth



Text and photographs by Gudmund Aarseth

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THE NORWEGIAN HOME

Appearances can be deceptive in Norway. From the outside houses are often low-key and conservative in the use of color, typically painted either red or white. However, behind the doors of the most anonymous looking and modestly sized farmhouse you pass on the way there may be hidden gems that remain unknown to passers-by.

Norway has few majestic palaces, grand cathedrals and imposing manors. What Norwegian buildings might lack in scale however, is often compensated for by stunning natural surroundings that would put the largest of man-made constructions in the shade.

Since Norway is a relatively small country on the northernmost fringes of Europe, it has traditionally had a less urban culture than its neighbors Sweden and Denmark. Norway has always been open to foreign influences, although such cultural imports have been merged with a strong sense of national pride and tradition.

The wooden house

In a country where vast areas are covered by pine forests, it comes as no surprise that wood has always been the building material of choice. Log houses have been built in Norway since medieval times. They must surely rank among the simplest wood constructions imaginable, since they use more or less untreated logs in their construction. As industrial saw mills made

prepared wooden planks and paneling cheaper and more available, many such log houses were clad in wood paneling both inside and out. Gradually, wood frame constructions came to dominate since they required fewer raw materials and allowed for generous quantities of insulation.

In urban areas wooden houses had their distinct disadvantages—virtually all Norwegian cities and towns, originally made up of wooden houses, have at some point in their history been ravaged by devastating fires and rebuilt in brick or stone.



Traditional log houses renovated by Sigmund Aarseth.

Painted Rooms

The painted interior is typical for Norway and Sweden. Continental domestic interiors may have been filled with richly decorated arts and crafts objects in the form of rugs, cabinets, furniture and paintings. These, however, were traditionally kept in white rooms with dark beams and doors. The Norwegian painted interior on the other hand, could often be a piece of art in itself. The architecture, interior, furniture and decor were at all times perceived as one entity, and the interplay and integration between the different elements were carefully considered.

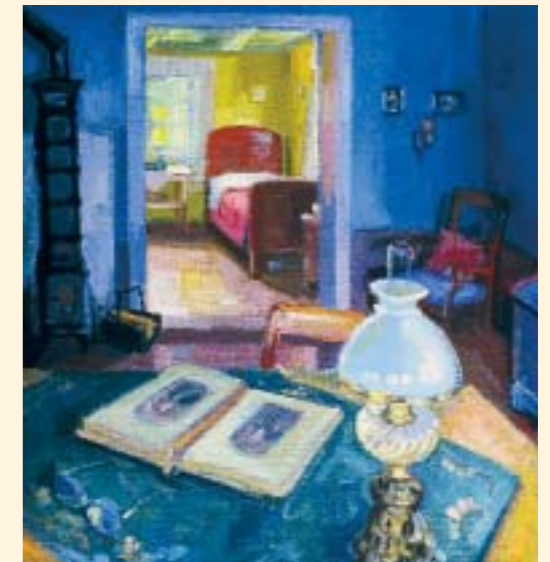
In earlier times, like elsewhere in Europe, decorated interiors were only to be found in churches and other grand buildings. The tradition of painting ordinary domestic interiors started around the beginning of the eighteenth century. This was a period of considerable development and economic growth in Norway. The era brought modernization and change to rural life, and was particularly open to artistic expression in all areas. With a burgeoning economy to support it, richly decorated artifacts and interiors became a way for people to express their newfound wealth.

The extent to which the interiors were adorned obviously varied, but it became commonplace to have an element of color in each room, and variations from room to room. Typically, there would be a blue room, a yellow room, a red room and so forth. It was only in the poorest households that almost everything remained unpainted.

Central to the new trend towards painted interiors, was the simultaneous development of the decorative style known as *Rosemaling*. The *Rosemaling* style

incorporated Renaissance, Rococo, Baroque and Empire elements imported from the continent. These influences were adapted rather than copied outright. They were combined with local decorative traditions and personal style in the process. The Rococo styles that developed in Norway were thus in many respects more dynamic and expressive than the more formulaic style found on the continent.

Rosemaling was a highly adaptable decorative motif, it could be used on craft objects such as bowls and boxes as well as furniture, from chairs to cupboards and cabinets. This decor came to be used on interior details, or to cover entire ceilings, the insides of box beds or the walls of the home itself. It could be used on its own, as an abstract decorative pattern or in combination with figurative elements such as stylized portraits of people, mythical figures or a depiction of places.



Colorful rooms in a traditional Norwegian house: painting by Sigmund Aarseth, acrylic on canvas.



A 'framskåp' with traditional Rosemaling decor.

The *Rosemaling* tradition started in rural Norway, rather than in the cities, and was explored to its fullest in individual homes. Each district developed its own characteristic style, and there were enormous regional as well as individual variations. Some of the most prolific practitioners of *Rosemaling* were to be found in the remote highland valleys of Norway.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as the industrial revolution swept across Europe, *Rosemaling* lost its momentum as a dominant force in Norwegian decorative arts. By the early twentieth century it was considered an extinct art form. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in *Rosemaling*, but there is little education or training available in Norway. It is currently predominantly practiced on a hobby basis.

All the colors of the rainbow

There is no doubt that the natural environment and climate contribute to variations in interior design and decor. Around the mediterranean for example, cool white interiors and exteriors are surely the perfect contrast to the hot mediterranean climate.

In Norway on the other hand, one quickly comes to realize that the circumstances are quite different. In many parts of the country nature's own colors and decoration, in the form of plants, flowers, lakes and fields, are covered by a white blanket of snow six months of the year. The Norwegian tradition of richly decorated and vividly colored interiors is perhaps founded in a desire to bring some of nature's own sumptuous colors indoors.

The modern Scandinavian interior

The increasing dominance of modernism in Scandinavian architecture and design of the twentieth century must be seen in relation to the prevailing global trends as well as the economic and cultural situation during this time. Norway re-established



This colorful interior includes several decorative elements inspired by nature. The cabinet features a Rosemaling design with clear flower inspirations, and stylized clouds on the ceiling.

itself as an independent country in 1905, after being dependent on its neighbors Sweden and Denmark for the previous four hundred years. This transition took its toll on the nation's economy. Occupation during World War II and the subsequent rebuilding further strained the nation's resources.

In both design and manufacturing the emphasis shifted from individuality to uniformity, with a focus on mass production at a low cost. Simple and functional styles and the use of modern, high-tech materials such as concrete, aluminium and glass became economic as much as stylistic decisions.

In current times, decorative elements were reduced and stripped down to the basics and 'Scandinavian design' soon established itself as a trademark for functional but stylish products around the world. This deliberate break with the old stylistic elements has had a significant impact on Norwegian arts and crafts traditions. Many of the artistic skills that had taken hundreds of years to develop and refine were lost in the span of one generation.



This richly decorated farmhouse living room is a good example of a modern 'traditional' interior. A traditional color scheme has been used, and all of the woodwork has been painted, including the floor.



This interior represents a mixture of seemingly conflicting influences, but with an interesting and individualistic end result. The fireplace, grandfather clock and cupboard are traditional ingredients in a Norwegian interior. The color combinations on the other hand are contemporary and fresh, so the overall ambience is quite urban and modern.

The continuation of a tradition

The latter part of the twentieth century was a period of renewed economic growth in Norway, this time fuelled by newly discovered oil resources and high-tech industry. In this environment the clean, uncluttered and undecorated style of modernism is often seen to be better adapted to modern lifestyles and tastes.

Having said that, Norway is a country where individuality and personal choice have always been important factors. Many people want more than just functionality in their homes. They wish to retain a sense of Norwegian traditions and national characteristics. The work featured in this book is the living proof of a renewed demand for colorful and decorated interiors.