



Decolonizing the Museum

Unhighlighting Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum's Iconic *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* (1840)

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DECOLONIZING THE MUSEUM

Unhighlighting Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum's Iconic
Laestadius Teaching Laplanders (1840)

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art
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collection highlights
decoloniality
Sápmi
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*This essay presents a decolonial analysis of the French painter François-Auguste Biard's *Le Pasteur Laestadius instruisant des Lapons* (1840). A highlight at Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum (Northern Norway Art Museum) in Romsa/Tromsø, Biard's work represents the pastor Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861) preaching to a group of Sámi people outside their goahthis in winter. Exhibited in 1841 at the Salon (1667–present) in Paris, the painting originates in sketches Biard did during his travels with the French expedition La Recherche to Scandinavia and Spitsbergen in 1839. Taking this centrepiece from Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum's collections as a reference point, I discuss the original colonial context in which it was painted, with particular focus on Laestadius's role in assisting the French explorers with the collecting of Sámi human remains in the name of science. I then make a leap in time to the museum's acquisition of the work in 2002 and its subsequent display in Romsa. At that time, the painting represented the institution's costliest acquisition, and substantial media coverage and fundraising were used to come up with the funding to secure it. Once in-house, *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* was immediately presented in a "neutral" display as one of the museum's most treasured works. My analysis applies decoloniality as a framework for acknowledging*

institutional blind spots, countering museum neutrality, and recognizing the interwoven complexities of Indigenous and settler coexistence. It aims to intervene in art museum practices to emphasize the ongoing need for healing from colonial trauma through reconciliation and reparation. By exposing the museum's disregard for and implication in the colonial legacy of this work, I will insist on the ethical inability of neutrality in museum displays and the inherent need to “unhighlight” Laestadius Teaching Laplanders and other art with similar problematic histories and contexts.

Introduction

Did anyone tell you
that we live in Sámiland

Did they say
this is Sápmi
Did they also admit
that this is ours

Or did they talk about
the primitive culture
with simple people

did they also state
that they brought the light

(Áillohaš/Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, 1994)

This essay presents a critique of – and an argument for change in – art museum practices at Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum (hereafter NNKM) in Romsa/Tromsø, Northern Norway. In 2002, NNKM acquired the work *Le Pasteur Laestadius instruisant des Lapons*¹ (The Minister Laestadius Teaching Laplanders) (1840; [Figure 1](#)) by François-Auguste Biard (1799–1882), portrait painter to the French court.

1 Title provided in the *Salon de 1841* exhibition list (see [Ténint 1841](#)).

The painting combines elements from genre and history painting and depicts the minister Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861), who founded the conservative Lutheran revivalist movement *Laestadianism*. In Biard's painting, Laestadius is preaching to a group of Sámi people outside their *goahtis* (tents) in winter. In representing a historical character and his recorded work as minister in the Sámi communities of Gárasavvon/Karesuando and Bájil/Pajala, Biard's work aligns with elements of history painting. And yet the scene does not refer to a specific historical event, as Laestadius's



Figure 1 François-Auguste Biard, *Le Pasteur Laestadius instruisant des Lapons* (The Minister Laestadius Teaching Laplanders), 1840. Oil on canvas, 131 × 161 cm. Collection of Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum (NNKM.00952). Photo: Kim G. Skytte.

sermons and preachings to the Sámi were a recurring feature. In this way, Biard’s work likewise represents, and perhaps to a greater extent, the everyday scene of a genre painting.

Exhibited at the Salon in 1841, *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* originates in sketches Biard did during his travels to Scandinavia and Spitsbergen in 1839 with the French scientific expedition *Commission du Nord*, commonly known as *La Recherche* (Matilsky 1985, 78; Aaserud 2005, 29, 31). Altogether he spent approximately a month in Sápmi during which time he also met Laestadius.²

Even before it arrived at the museum in 2002, Biard’s painting became the highlight of the collection. Museum collection highlights are showcased as iconic works of art and are what comprise the art-historical canon. Typically displayed on permanent view, visitors can discover and explore these objects in a variety of ways, for example through programmes, online resources, publications, and branded merchandise. Critical to the status of *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* as a museum highlight, this essay starts by discussing the object within the colonial context it was painted, with particular focus on Laestadius’s role in assisting the French explorers from the *La Recherche* expedition with

2 After fourteen days in Hammerfest, Biard and d’Aunet sailed to Svalbard on 17 July 1839 (D’Aunet 1854, 85). On 14 August they headed south, arriving in Hammerfest on 26 August (105, 107). Departing Hammerfest on 28 August bound for Kåfjord (108), they

travelled in Sápmi until they turned south, arriving outside Torneå, Finland, on 21 September (146), before arriving in Stockholm on 12 October (*Aftonbladet*, 12 October 1839). Sápmi is the Sámi name for

the collecting of Sámi human remains for race biological research. From there, the essay examines the time of acquisition and subsequent display of the painting by the museum. Contextualizing the painting against the history from which it is inseparably connected, I aim to problematize the institutionalized colonial legacy and to highlight the inherent need to address the curatorial challenges of a work of this origin.

Decoloniality as practice

the borderless region that its Indigenous people inhabit in four nations, stretching across large parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia.

This case study applies decolonial theory as a framework of analysis to acknowledge institutional blind spots, counter museum neutrality, and address the institutional tendencies of passive disacknowledgement of Nordic colonial history. Drawing on the theoretical work of Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh (2018, 5), I use decoloniality as “a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice, and praxis” to provide a more accurate historical contextualization and recognize the interwoven complexities of the past, present, and future of Sámi and Norwegian coexistence.

3 Jérémie McGowan was director of NNKM from 2016 to 2020. Prior to his position at NNKM he was a senior curator at The National Museum – Architecture in Oslo.
4 A term coined by Jérémie McGowan.
5 The “x” footnote is a disclaimer that points out that SDMX is a museum performance (partly a fiction).

I write as curator at NNKM (an insider) and a settler born and raised in Alaska, and an immigrant in Sápmi, Norway (an outsider). As an act of self-critique from within the institution, it questions the validity of collection highlights. Part of this work deals with the core values of the institution and demonstrates that museums produce meaning through active and passive framing. Like many other museums in Norway, NNKM is haunted by colonial legacies. I argue that choosing not to address local histories of colonialism is museum passivity, not neutrality.

This essay participates in a larger international discussion on the need to decolonize and Indigenize museums (Phillips 2011; Lonetree 2012; Coombes and Phillips 2015; Gibling, Ramos, and Grout 2019; Shoenberger 2019) and the potential of museums as agents of change (Janes and Sandell 2019; Murawski 2021). My self-reflexive questioning in museum practice is informed by recent institutional change at NNKM, initiated in 2017 by former museum director Jérémie McGowan (2018a, 2018b).³ This shift in direction is perhaps best illustrated by the museum performance⁴ *There Is No Sámi Dáiddamusea^x* or Sámi Art Museum,⁵ as translated from North Sámi, a project characterized as a decolonial project co-authored and co-produced by NNKM and RiddoDuottarMuseat in Kárásjohka (Danbolt 2018a; McGowan 2018a, 2018b; Shoenberger 2019; Rugeldal 2020, 2021; Caufield 2021; McGowan and Olli 2022).

Encounters in the contact zone

In this part, I account for the creation of *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* from its origin in the cultural contact zone in Sápmi to its exhibition and reception at the Salon in Paris in 1841. A significant amount of the secondary literature on Biard's experiences from the expedition comprises scholarship from NNKM's former director Anne Aaserud, in addition to the French author Louis Boivin's biography, written in 1842 and dedicated to Biard's expedition (Berthoud 1839–1840; “M. Biard” 1843; Aaserud 2005, 2006a, 2017; Krane 2005; Gille, Henriot, and Alvim 2020). I have not succeeded in identifying sources by Sámi knowledge holders, nor have I found first-hand descriptions by Biard from the limited primary sources that exist (Biard 1839a, 1839b, 1840–1841, 1862). The closest we come to Biard's personal account is the French author Léonie Thévenot d'Aunet's (1820–79) travel journal from 1854. Biard's fiancée at the time, d'Aunet travelled with him on the expedition and was purportedly the first woman to set foot on Svalbard (Urberg 2007, 169).

As we will see, ethnocentric attitudes and genre requirements strongly influenced and limited Biard's visual representation of the Sámi and Laestadius's role and personae. *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders*'s visual rhetoric represents Biard's Western interpretation of the space of interaction between the Sámi and Laestadius. Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the “contact zone” helps one to understand the inherently imbalanced power relations of Biard's encounters in Sápmi. In her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt ([1992] 2008, 8) defines “contact zone” as “the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict”. Within these unequal and deeply asymmetrical spaces of colonial encounters, the dominant culture provides a “negotiated” space for cultural exchange to ensure the maintenance of the imperialistic programme (Boast 2011, 57). Pratt shows how European travel writing about non-European parts of the world shaped relations between the (European) centre and the (non-European) periphery. Arguably in her theoretical work Pratt ([1992] 2008, 8) shifts the binary opposition of the “colonial frontier”, softening it into a more nuanced relation of cross-cultural negotiation and translation with the “contact zone”. In this sense, *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* is the result of ethnocentric encounters in the contact zone, and exemplifies how asymmetrical power imbalances found their visual expression in European painting.

As this essay examines the painting within a museum context, it is helpful to consider James Clifford's application of Pratt's work to museum studies. His conception of the “museum as contact zone” (Clifford 1997) frames the

museum as a potential site of collaboration, shared control, complex translation, and honest disagreement (208). Museum practice in a contact perspective moves beyond consultation, opening to the possibility of subversion and reciprocity. In short, this plays out through dialogue and collaboration, such as inclusionist programmes in exhibitions, shared curatorship, and access to collections (Boast 2011, 56). Clifford argues that encounters, even though ethnocentric, open the possibility to produce reflection and cultural critique (Clifford 1997, 198). Through his example of the Portland Museum of Art’s consultation with Tlingit elders over objects from the Rasmussen Collection, he demonstrates how these objects can never be entirely possessed by the museum from a contact perspective; on the contrary, he identifies the objects as sites for negotiation (194). Further, he poses an important question that we can apply to the circumstances surrounding *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders*: “Can museums claim political neutrality?” (205, 206). Could Clifford’s concept offer a possible framework to redress the work’s “colonial status” within the context of the art museum?

To focus this question, let us first examine the painting. *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* shows a group of Sámi people – four women, a young girl, and three men, some seated, others standing – at the feet of a man wearing a top hat in the foreground. The man, Laestadius, holds an open book, presumably a Bible, in his left hand while speaking to those gathered. Contributing to a long lineage of missionary imagery, *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* confirmed to the Salon visitors that due to the hard work of missionaries, modernization and enlightenment could reach even the “periphery of the North” (Decker 2021, 277). The presence of Laestadius and the way he is portrayed seems illustrative of the importance the expedition’s French members assigned to his clerical work. With his back half turned, Laestadius directs our attention by way of his posture and gaze towards a group of Sámi who have congregated outside a *goahhti* and in front of a tall wall of solid ice whose dark and grey colour can be mistaken for stone. The facial expressions of the Sámi figures range from attentive, curious, and intrigued to sceptical and disgruntled. Due to their diverse expressions, one can perhaps speculate that Biard wanted to show different stages of enlightenment in the group. For instance, the icy landscape could suggest that the Sámi are emerging from the ice and into civilization. According to Paul Gaimard (1796–1858), the leader of the *La Recherche*, Laestadius “spreads civilization among his people, he enlightens them and helps them in their sufferings” (Posti 2003, 19). Their small figures and passive postures, against the grand standing position of Laestadius, suggest that these Sámi have been “conquered” by Christianity and the Swedish crown. As put forward by Sigrid Lien (2018, 8), in Biard’s eyes, “the Indigenous people of the North were about to leave the distant past”. Elevated in an open space, they stand in the face of the civilized Christian world.

Laestadius Teaching Laplanders is based on studies and sketches Biard executed in the field (i.e. the contact zone) in 1839. While biologists of the *La Recherche* accounted for and catalogued new organisms by arranging them into a system of classification, Biard ordered the Sámi figures he discovered into specific types in his sketches, with titles such as *Young Lapp Rowing. Study* (38.5 × 29.5 cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm), *Old Lapp Nomad in the Snow* (38.5 × 30 cm, private collection), and *Female Lapp. Study* (38.5 × 30 cm; Fridtjof Nansen Institute, Oslo; Figure 2). Sketched in oil on paper and mounted on canvas, the depicted figures and their garments are finely detailed. For instance, *Female Lapp. Study* shows a young woman seated inside a *goahiti*, dressed in a white *gákti* and wearing a *ládjogahpir* (an upright headdress worn by Sámi women). Although the strong attention to detail observed in the sketches transferred over to *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders*, Biard labelled the figures homogeneously as “Lapons” (Laplanders) in the title of the painting. Thus the Sámi individuals Biard met and interacted with in the contact zone became silenced and nameless objects of study.

Biard’s fascination with the Sámi is evidenced by his possession of various artefacts from Sápmi and other parts of the world that turned his Paris studio into a museum of his travels. Boivin (1842, 44) writes that Biard returned from the *La Recherche* expedition with a precious collection of costumes and all kinds of interesting and unknown objects, complete with a series of plant and mineral samples. Among other things, Biard kept the *goahiti* he used in Sápmi, along with a sled and a set of reindeer antlers. Described as “curiosities” and “precious bibelots”, it remains uncertain how Biard acquired these items. According to Boivin, Biard was extremely fascinated by the Sámi and worked nearly twenty-four hours a day sketching them (29). During the expedition Biard executed fifty-five paintings of the Sámi, which Boivin described as “exact portraits” (43). That these aspire to be ethnographic representations is evidenced by Boivin’s comment that the proper place for Biard’s paintings of the Sámi would be “in the great museum of natural history” (43). These same sketches formed the basis for Biard’s *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders*, painted on his homecoming to Paris, most likely in 1840 (Aaserud 2006a, 152).

Within history painting, “history” relates to a narrative or story, not the accurate or documentary description of actual events. Importantly, the painting dates to the era of pre-photographic Arctic expeditions. As sketched types, separated from their natural cultural environment and specific historical context, the Sámi individuals became suitable figures Biard could move around to make his paintings cohere to then current genre requirements, aesthetic tastes, and the cultural perceptions of his audience. Indeed, like aesthetic props, we can identify the same figure across several of Biard’s paintings.⁶ Biard’s work demonstrates the discrepancy between his real and visualized meetings and the final work.

6 For example, the hunched-over man in *Laestadius Teaching*

Laplanders also appears in *Campement en Laponie* (<https://digitaltmuseum.org/021047997103/sami-camp>).



Figure 2 François-Auguste Biard, *Femme lapon. Étude* (Female Lapp. Study), 1839. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 38.5 × 30 cm. Collection of the Fridtjof Nansen Institute. Photo: Kim G. Skytte.

A series of imagined elements in the painting underscore the colonial context of the painting and Biard’s outsider view of Sámi people and the northern landscape. Although Laestadius may have owned a top hat, it was not part of his customary clerical attire. For example, it is well known that he lived in utter simplicity, condemned worldliness, and preached in vernacular language (Heith 2018, 50). This unrealistic element places emphasis on Laestadius as representative of the dominant culture (the “centre”), as minister of the Swedish Lutheran Church (Heith 2016, 92). Moreover, the

scene would have taken place in the warmth of a church, not out in the snow. According to French author Xavier Marmier, also a member of the expedition, the reindeer-herding Sámi belonged to specific parishes and would travel long distances to go to church once a month in the summer. Each winter, by contrast, the reindeer-herding Sámi of Laestadius's parish returned to the village of Gárasavvon, where they would attend church sermons almost every Sunday (Marmier [1840] 1997, 104). In addition to representing an ethnic type, the painting's outdoor scene demonstrates the reindeer-herding Sámi's way of life in a wholly imagined polar landscape with sensational snow formations, perhaps true to Biard's experience on Svalbard in July 1839, but which do not reflect the snow-free, rainy conditions that Biard and d'Aunet actually experienced in Gárasavvon in early September.

As a Salon painting in the Romantic tradition, Biard's work had to fulfil certain criteria, which may explain the dramatized, unrealistic components. Stylistically, the painting's naturalistic rendering in combination with vivid romantic imagination catered to its audience (Lien 2018, 6). Exhibited at the *Salon de 1841*, along with two other of Biard's works, the critic Ulysse Ladet in his review in *L'Artiste* writes:

The temple is outside and certainly the most bizarre ever formed by nature. The eternal icefields raise their threatening heads here and there and form a sort of frigid but sheltered valley, where the worthy minister has gathered some hideous creatures that one would scarcely believe have been created in the image of God. Men and women, standing or crouching, covered with raw pelts, blue eyes, unintelligible expressions, pay devoted attention to the words of Laestadius. ... He is the civilized in the presence of barbarians. The sky is grey, the atmosphere glacial, and everything bears a stamp of truth and desolation that could not be reasonably disputed. (Ladet 1841, 279–80, my translation)

Ladet's commentary responds to popular and artistic tastes for the Arctic sublime, presented for the consumption of the Salon audience's appetite for the fantastic and the unknown. Inscribed by colonial fantasies, the Arctic sublime is a Romantic and Victorian aesthetic category comprised of threatening landscapes, terrible creatures, and deathly danger (Morgan 2016). The Sámi seem caught within this landscape of snow and ice, awaiting rescue through religious enlightenment.

The use of the Arctic sublime and Ladet's remarks about the Sámi echo d'Aunet's sentiments. In her travel journal, D'Aunet (1854, 65, my translations) describes her experiences as a woman who: "The more I travel, the more I feel the sun and civilization, this other sun, fades away". Throughout the book, her tone clearly reflects the ethnocentric attitudes towards the Sámi and Norwegian people, writing: "It's only with a feeling of deep pity that one

can think of the destiny of those poor people doomed to spend their whole life in such dire conditions” (134). In descriptions of a “gloomy country, nothing enchants the ear; everything is sad, even the birds!” (191), she transfers this perspective on to the non-human world. D’Aunet’s reflections stem from her position in the bourgeois circles in Paris. Defining culture as French, d’Aunet writes that the Sámi, “a strange population” (137), are spiritually and materially poor, “do not eat bread, nor wear underclothes ... he ignores all science and art ... The Lapp never sings; He even does not have that music, which we could call natural and of which, it is believed, any primitive tribe knows” (148). She continues: “Bordered by civilization on three sides (Norway, Sweden, and Russia), they did not borrow, understand or desire anything; They spent their lives in complete apathy, almost without needs, pleasures, or wishes” (149–50). To sum up, “they are a miserable and coarse people, surviving in a kind of moral and physical paralysis, suitable only for life at the end of the frozen world, where life withdraws from the sun” (149–50). Although one cannot assume that Biard’s opinion of the Sámi was similarly demeaning, d’Aunet’s Eurocentric viewpoints resonate with the colonial context from which Biard operated and his art was received.

Missionary and Grave Robber

In Sámi history Laestadius is a complex figure who is both respected and contested. Of South Sámi descent himself, Laestadius was married to the Sámi woman Brita Katarina (Kajsa) Alstadius (1805–88) who bore their twelve children. Preaching in Sámi and Tornedalian Finnish (today called Meänkieli), Laestadius is seen by many as a saviour of the Meänkieli, Kven, and Sámi languages, who empowered the Tornedalians, Kvens, and Sámi to engage in opposition against the politics of assimilation by using their mother language (Heith 2016, 90). One of Laestadius’s primary concerns was tackling social problems associated with the widespread use of alcohol. Despite this defence of the Sámi, he also represented the church that actively engaged in oppressive and humiliating practices towards them. Moreover, he successfully integrated Sámi traditions and beliefs into his teachings (Harlin and Pieski 2020, 84), and in this respect he was more efficient in eliminating elements of pre-Christian Sámi religion than his Swedish colleagues, Lutheran pastors situated outside of Sámi society (Harlin and Pieski 2020, 84).

As a botanist, Laestadius had contact with several leading naturalists and was invited to join the *La Recherche* expedition based on his expertise in local botany and as a “connoisseur of Lapland” (Larsson 2004, 50–52;

Heith 2016, 93; 2018, 47–50). Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the collecting of Sámi human remains through barter, excavation, and grave robberies was common practice throughout large parts of Sápmi. As the existing collections of Sámi skulls at central Nordic universities in Stockholm, Lund, Uppsala, Helsinki, and Oslo bear witness of, European scientists exhumed human remains for race biological research. Although Sámi communities protested, scientists ignored this and pursued their work (Ojala 2016, 995). One undertaking of the *La Recherche* expedition was to plunder graves and burial sites to steal “true Sámi” crania and other human remains (Pohjanen 1981). As a guide for the expedition, Laestadius showed the Frenchmen where skulls and skeletal parts were available and helped procure them, as described in an unsigned newspaper article attributed to Laestadius (Franzén 1973, 213; Broberg 1982, 27–86; Lundmark 2008, 145–46; Ojala 2016, 999–1001; Heith 2018, 150–51). In 1838 the group made an excursion to Eanodat/Enontekiö in Finnish Sápmi. Laestadius writes (and please be warned: the following quotations are deeply offensive):

Here [at Eanodat] President Gaimard, Mr Robert and Sundevall found a big treasure, perhaps the best find made during the whole trip, that is 2 storage sacks full of Lapp [Sámi] skulls and human bones. At the end the President himself eagerly collected every bone fragment that came out of the grave. Only Dr Sundevall worried that our work as gravediggers might become known among the Lapp people; we should rather have taken a gravedigger from Karesuando with us to dig up the graves.

Indeed, a settler later also asked me if it was right to plunder the sacred tombs of the dead in this way, but I consoled him that the bones which were now taken out of Enontekis [Eanodat] cemetery would be arranged in the same order in which they had been in the bodies, in such a way that the whole skeleton would stand upright in a very beautiful space, which would mean almost half a resurrection. But I didn't get off as easily another time when I took several other naturalists to the same Enontekis cemetery who took only skulls; afterwards an old woman who had heard of the circumstances brought up the Sadducees' question how the resurrection of the dead was supposed to happen when the head was separated from the body by several hundred miles. (Laestadius, *Nyare Freja*, 27 November 1838, my translation)

Eight years later, in a letter to the zoologist Carl Jakob Sundevall,⁷ Laestadius again writes about the practice in cold-hearted detail:

If Brother would be so kind to give my message to Dr or Professor Retzius (whichever of the brothers you meet first) that it isn't easy to get a cranium of a newborn Lapp child. But Wretholm sometimes travels here in the winter and the grave[yard] is open all winter long[.] Couldn't he as a surgeon cut off the neck of such a child's

⁷ Letter from L. L. Laestadius to C. J. Sundevall, September 1846. Laestadius brev till akademiker 1818–1860, Læstadiusarkivet,

<http://www.laestadiusarkivet.se/>
(accessed 5 November 2020).
Original in Lund University Library.

corpse? Otherwise nothing new – All fruit grew and ripened here this year. We feel well. Sincerely, L. L. Laestadius. (Letter from Laestadius to C. J. Sundevall, September 1846, my translation)

Laestadius’s tone of nonchalance and abrupt turn of topic, from Sámi infant bodies to produce, sheds light on his view of the Sámi. Arguably, it also sheds light on the authority of science as beyond any human or ethical consideration. For Laestadius, the activity of selling “Lapp skulls” to the (in)famous anatomist Anders Retzius (1796–1860) in Stockholm was a means of income to lift his family out of poverty and starvation (Pohjanen 1981, 72; Heith 2018, 150–51). His association with the explorers of the *La Recherche* expedition demonstrates his complicity in the racial sciences that justified and supported European supremacy and colonialism. Indeed, his accounts here, filled with the glee of a treasure hunt, express no internal conflict regarding his engagement in grave robbing. To the contrary, the group cracks vulgar jokes and laughs about displaying the collected items in “grand rooms” (*granna rum*, Pohjanen 1981, 81; Heith 2018, 151) in reference to the numerous institutions that would acquire the human remains for their collections. Sámi crania taken from Guovdageaidnu by the *La Recherche* expedition are today part of the collection at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris (Ojala 2016, 1000). Sámi *dáiddar* (artist) and poet Peaká Heiká Bigá Nilsá Ragnel Rosmare/Rose-Marie Huuva is one of the leading activists demanding the return and burial of Sámi crania and bones stored in Swedish museums and archives (Ojala 2009, 242).

As Carl-Gösta Ojala (2016, 999) points out, although extensive literature about Laestadius’s life and work exists, few scholars have focused on his participation in grave robbing. To my knowledge, the above passages have not been previously translated into English.⁸ Similarly, NNKM has not addressed this issue in their displays of Biard’s painting. The possibility that for some visitors these embedded colonial histories are hiding in plain sight becomes deeply disturbing.

8 Anne Heith (2018, 151) paraphrases excerpts of these passages in English. Carl-Gösta Ojala (2009, 245–56) cites portions of these passages in English in his PhD dissertation.

Colonial semantics

Norway carried out a thoroughgoing and brutal process of assimilation of its Indigenous people with massive repercussions for the Sámi and Kvens, at its most intense from 1850 to 1970 (Nergård 2019, 114). As a consequence of nationalism and in accordance with the ideology of the nation-state based on cultural, ethnic, and linguistic unity among its dominant people, the Sámi should, it was upheld, be assimilated into the Norwegian ways of life and languages (Aamold 2017, 78). This official policy of assimilation was

9 See https://uit.no/kommisjonen_en.

10 Nergård has four decades of research experience with Sámi people.

called “Norwegianization” (*Fornorskning*), and it is the term Norway’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission⁹ uses today. While the same term is used in the Norwegian curricula and public reports on Sámi languages and social conditions (Kramvig 2020, 89), the professor of education Jens-Ivar Nergård¹⁰ contends that given the harsh practices it entailed, the term “Norwegianization” is too “peaceful” (Olsen 2012). “Colonization” would more accurately describe the violent nature of the policies that enforced cultural purification. Indeed, artists, politicians, and academics in Sápmi use the term colonization to describe this history of systematic assimilation (Brattland, Kramvig, and Verran 2018).

Despite this documented history of assimilation and trauma, the majority culture in Norway understands colonialism as something that happened elsewhere. As Mathias Danbolt has found, this is also the case for Norwegian art history; colonial history is a blind spot (Danbolt 2018a, 2018b). The belief in Nordic exceptionalism, that Norway does not have a colonial past, and what scholars call the “Nordic colonial mind”, extends to the other Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden (Palmberg 2009, 35; Höglund and Burnett 2019, 6).

As Lorenzo Veracini (2015) points out, settler colonialism is a global phenomenon that many scholars emphasize is a structure, not an event (Wolfe 1999; Tuck and Yang 2012; Glenn 2015). A forerunner in employing settler colonial theory to current affairs in Sápmi, Sámi scholar Jovnna Jon Ánne Kirstte Rávdná/Rauna Kuokkanen’s recent work is an important contribution to expose the Nordic states’ colonial, assimilationist practices and policies, sentiments almost entirely unknown to the mainstream population, and often also to the Sámi themselves. Kuokkanen (2020, 299) emphasizes that “settler colonialism is a structure characterizing Sápmi, both in the past and present”.

NNKM in Centre – periphery politics

In 2002 NNKM acquired Biard’s *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders*. To understand why and how the acquisition happened, it is crucial to provide the institutional context and the centre – periphery politics to which this core collection piece is inseparably bound.

According to the centre – periphery framework developed by professor of comparative politics Stein Rokkan (1999), regional identities are formed by economic, political, and cultural tensions in relation to the centre. From this perspective, the cultural tensions indicate the centre’s lack of integration and respect for regional cultural expressions (Stein, Buck, and Bjørnå 2021, 39). Thus the spatial dimension (distance from the centre) matters and affects

trust in politicians (Stein, Buck, and Bjørnå 2021, 39). Concerning the circumstance of the acquisition, the centre–periphery dimension has explanatory value for the voices critical of the acquisition.

NNKM opened its doors on 17 March 1988 as the “northernmost art museum in the world” (*Nordlys*, 16 September 1986). It has a similar institutional makeup as The National Museum in Oslo. Both museums are state-funded, but as foundations are not state-owned. While they operate under the arm’s length principle, arguably they can function as an extended arm of the Norwegian state (Mangset 2012). Three of the NNKM board positions, including the chair, are appointed by the Ministry of Culture and Equality. NNKM was founded in 1985 by a group of local and national organizations: Nordnorsk Kulturråd,¹¹ the University of Tromsø, Riksgalleriet (The National Touring Exhibition), and Nasjonalgalleriet (The National Gallery/Museum). The museum’s objective is “to create interest in, awareness of, and knowledge about art and craft in the north of Norway” (§ 3).¹²

Envisioned as “an art museum for Northern Norway” (Aaserud 2006b), the institution serves a vast geographical area that stretches over Norway’s two northernmost counties including Svalbard.¹³ Prior to the museum’s opening in 1988, the local paper *Tromsø-magasinet* (19 February 1988) proudly announced that “[a]rt history has arrived in Northern Norway”. Understanding art history as something arriving and settling (from the south), this statement suggests colonial implications. In a 1988 television programme about the museum opening, a reporter seems to mirror this understanding about where art comes from when asking: “Is there a strong tradition of Northern Norwegian art? If so, is it good enough to fill a museum?” (Hansen 1988).

How did the process of defining Northern Norwegian art operate, and was Sámi *dáidda* (art) a part of the concept? Despite the art museum’s location, presence, and geographical mandate in Sápmi, the words “Sámi”, “Sápmi”, “*dáidda*”, and “*duodji*”¹⁴ (a Sámi concept involving “craft” making, philosophy, and cosmology) are not mentioned in the museum’s statutes. Arguably, this oversight reflected a suspicion that art was absent in Sápmi/Northern Norway. Starting from scratch, the early NNKM collection comprised long-term loans from The National Gallery/Museum, Norsk Kulturråd (Arts Council Norway), and Riksgalleriet. “We got everything we could of Northern Norwegian art. Everything ... is sent north to us”, stated the museum’s first director, Frode Haverkamp¹⁵ (*Tromsø-magasinet*, 19 February 1988). The new collection was intended to systematically document “the development of artistic life in the north of Norway, including that of the Lapps [his term]” (Haverkamp 1988, 226). Haverkamp selected contemporary works (as long-term loans) by artists included on the membership lists of the Artists’ Associations of Northern Norway (NNBK and NKNN).¹⁶ A minimal number of

11 Nordnorsk Kulturråd (Northern Norway Arts Council) was decommissioned in 2007.

12 “Nordnorsk Kunstmuseums formål er å skape interesse for, øke kjennskapen til og kunnskapen om billedkunst og kunsthåndverk i den nordnorske landsdel”. See <https://www.nnkm.no/nb/innhold/nordnorsk-kunstmuseums-vedtekter>.

13 In 2015 NNKM established a satellite called Kunsthall Svalbard.

14 For more on *duodji*, see Gaski and Guttorm (2022).

15 Frode Ernst Haverkamp was the first leader at NNKM, from 1986 to 1994, and senior curator at Nasjonalgalleriet for several years.



16 Nordnorske Bildende Kunstnere and Norske Kunsthåndverkere Nord-Norge.

17 John Gustavsen specializes in Sámi rights and socio-political issues related to the Barents region. Gustavsen, Marry Áilonieida Somby, and Nils-Aslak Valkeapää initiated the founding of the Sámi Girječálliid Searvi/Sámi Writers Association.

18 *Sámi Stories* was organized and produced by Norges arktiske universitetsmuseum (The Arctic University Museum of Norway) in collaboration with NNKM.

works by Sámi and Kven artists, such as Ánddir Ivvar Ivvár/Iver Jáks and Kåre Kivijärvi, were selected from collections in the south.

Sámi writer and journalist John Gustavsen¹⁷ (1988, 28) criticized the opening exhibition for its lack of Sámi *dáidda* representation. Instead of leaning into criticism, Haverkamp (1988, 226) responded, “neither the architect nor the author of this article, who were jointly responsible for the exhibition, feel they should reply to criticism that the arrangement of the pictures, sculptures, and objects is too tidy, too ‘museumy’, and not exciting enough. Readers are cordially invited to visit our museum and judge for themselves!” Further, NNKM was criticized in the popular press as a satellite museum of Nasjonalgalleriet (today’s National Museum of Norway). These allegations were substantiated by the fact that Haverkamp, along with all three directors that followed, were all previously employed at The National Museum in the capital.

Gustavsen, in addition to other critical voices in the media, seems to have experienced NNKM as what scholars term a “settler museum” (Phillips 2011, 24–26) that operates within the logics and system of settler colonialism, and can be understood as an institution promoting colonial narratives that position the settler state as universal and benevolent in the interest of Indigenous people (Macoun and Strakosch 2013, 428; Kuokkanen 2020, 298). Without having “Sámi” and “Sápmi” in its mandate, the museum can then comfortably include or exclude Sámi *dáidda* and *duodji* at its own convenience. Arguably, through an absence of information, the museum participates in the naturalization of colonial legacies by educating museum visitors to ignore its existence (Kosasa 2011, 154).

Institutional critique resurfaced again in 2014, during NNKM’s international exhibition *Sámi Stories: Art and Identity of an Arctic People*.¹⁸ In his review of the two-volume book set (Gullickson and Lorentzen 2014; Hauan 2014) that accompanied the exhibition, John Gustavsen (2014) accused the museum of colonizing Sámi art. He called for more contributions by Sámi writers and authors and asserted that when academics write from an outsider’s perspective, one can get the feeling the artist’s agency is taken from them and the curators and academics know best. As one of the curators involved at the time, I failed to understand Gustavsen’s critique and acknowledge my role in the museum’s disacknowledgement of coloniality in Sápmi/Norway.

The acquisition of a museum highlight

19 Anne Britt Aaserud was director at NNKM from 1994

In 2002, shortly before the acquisition of *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders*, the museum’s director, Anne Aaserud,¹⁹ suggested it would be great to have the opportunity to tell Her Majesty Queen Sonja of Norway the

to 2008. Aaserud was the administrative leader at Nasjonalgalleriet from 1984 to 1994.

20 Due to delays in the acquisition process, the painting was not displayed in NNKM until after the inaugural opening on 15 June 2002.

history behind the painting and the enthusiasm of acquiring it for Northern Norway at the inaugural opening (*Nordlys*, 5 March 2002). Part of the strategic rationale for the acquisition was the museum’s relocation to another building. Aaserud made it clear that the painting would be displayed when the museum reopened on 3 April 2002 (*Tromsø*, 27 February 2002).²⁰ Intended to be a centrepiece “with a place of honour”, the painting would serve as the main attraction for museum visitors (*Tromsø*, 27 February 2002). Making use of a metaphor many associate with the British Empire’s acquisition of India, the most important of all the British colonies, Aaserud stated that “it would be the jewel in the crown in the presence of the Queen and the [Norwegian] Minister of Culture” (*Nordlys*, 5 March 2002). She further described the painting as “commissioned by the King [of France] along with two other pictures from the [*La Recherche*] expedition. One hangs in Versailles; another is now for sale. That’s why this is a pearl that will fit perfectly in our type of museum” (*Nordlys*, 21 February 2002).

Dependent on external funding to secure the acquisition and bring it “home” (*Avisa Nordland*, 21 February 2002), substantial media coverage and fundraising were used to come up with the 1.75 million Norwegian crowns (NOK), negotiated down from the 2 million NOK asking price (*Nordlys*, 6 April 2002), to purchase the painting from the art dealer Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox in London. Anyone could join the cause by depositing a contribution into the “Laestadius bank account” (*Nordlys*, 5 March 2002).

Supporters of the acquisition focused on the painting’s cultural historical value as a documentation of the Sámi and the heroic figure of Laestadius. As emphasized by local businessman and cultural entrepreneur Kåre-Bjørn Kongsnes (*Nordlys*, 22 February 2002), attention also centred on honouring the memory of Laestadius, “who means a great deal to the region. ... Especially considering his work to strengthen the self-respect of the Sámi people”. Critics, on the other hand, raised their concerns about the problematic aspects of the work, its associations with the bourgeoisie, and the unrealistic representation of the scene and landscape. Groups in the local community felt the painting conveyed more about the French than the Sámi or Laestadius.

Critical to the acquisition, Sámi *dáiddar* and writer Odd Marakatt Sivertsen questioned why Aaserud emphasized the grandeur of a painting he described as a “distorted perception of Laestadius depicted in the name of exoticism, where outsiders again resort to cheap effects that seem heroic, with a dubious understanding of culture. Should that be perpetuated?” (*Nordlys*, 6 March 2002). Sivertsen suggested that Aaserud should “search for better paintings of Laestadius in a landscape where he actually was – without the fanfare of a class-distinctive top hat, submerged in an ice and snow hellscape” (*Nordlys*, 6 March 2002). He also brought up the museum’s commitment to ask questions and guide the public in asking critical questions concerning art.

Ben Schei, chair of the museum's board, called Sivertsen's commentary an attack against the museum, and Aaserud noted that "Odd Sivertsen shows a certain arrogance by criticizing an artist's choice of motif 150 years later" (*Nordlys*, 9 March 2002). Sivertsen replied by deeming the painting an exotic mystification that produces peripheral constructs and stated, "My hope for Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum is that it may eventually become a place that reflects the power of survival, the creative necessity and history of a people in an area that, to borrow from the words of the author Magnar Mikkelsen, have lived 'hundred years under the whip'" (*Nordlys*, 19 March 2002).

Despite local resistance (*Nordlys*, 9 and 14 March 2002), the museum was able to purchase the painting with funding from the Arts Council Norway, the Norwegian Ministry of Culture, the Fritt Ord Foundation,²¹ and the Norwegian Church Endowment (OVF), in addition to the funds raised from businesses and private donors. At the time, it was the museum's costliest acquisition.

After the finalized purchase in London, the painting was displayed for a week in Oslo at Nasjonalgalleriet while in transit to Romsa, "largely in part to show the central allocating authorities an example of what we [NNKM] do" (Aaserud in *Tromsø*, 16 May 2002). Impressed by the quality of the painting, museum colleagues at Nasjonalgalleriet praised the acquisition (*Tromsø*, 16 May 2002). Sivertsen reached a different conclusion, however, arguing that the display of the painting in the centre was evidence of systemic power, a means of seeking southern approval to lessen critique in the north (*Nordlys*, 8 June 2002). If we return then to Rokkan's centre-periphery framework, Sivertsen's sentiments can be understood as endorsement from museum professionals in the south appropriated by NNKM to gain trust in the north.

Once installed, "the treasure" (*Nordlys*, 5 March 2002) was on continuous display for nearly eighteen years, taken down on two occasions, described below.

21 The Fritt Ord Foundation is a private non-profit foundation that is intended to protect and promote freedom of expression, public debate, art, and culture in Norway. See <https://frittord.no/en/about/what-is-the-fritt-ord-foundation>.

Collection highlights and contested monuments

In his book *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Arjun Appadurai (1986, 5) argues that "we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories". In their entangled relationships with people, other objects, and places, all things are moments in a longer social trajectory (Appadurai 2006, 15). In short, objects have a social life. Within this framework, *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* changes meaning as it enters and begins a new

life in the NNKM museum space. With status as a collection highlight, *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* is not simply an object or commodity, it is also emblematic of the museum. Appearing on the cover of the collections catalogue (Aaserud, Ljøgodt, and Berg 2008), Biard’s painting has been referred to by former NNKM directors as a “signature piece” and “one of the most prominent works in the collection” (Aaserud 2006b, 82; Ljøgodt 2007). Framed as an object of aesthetic contemplation, the work has been displayed together with other “more or less exotified depictions of the Sámi and the Northern landscape” (Heith 2018, 50) and museum “tombstones”, wall labels providing bare-bones information about the objects. In a “neutral” chronological presentation, the painting is left to “speak for itself”.

The museum’s behaviour surrounding the acquisition and its subsequent display until recent years points to what Janet Marstine (2006, 9–11) defines as the “shrine” and Elaine Heumann Gurian (2002, 79) the “treasure-based” museum. Within this paradigm, the purpose of works of art is to be beheld as things of beauty (Duncan [1995] 2005, 16). When dislocated from history and placed in another context without contextualization, however, works like *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* perpetuate the colonial legacy.

Highlights are not the result of inadvertent decisions. Art museums arrive at these works through systems of judgement (Fraser 2005, 142–43). Like contested monuments, museum collection highlights are markers of the past and reminders of memory. Indeed, as indicated by Elaine Heumann Gurian (2014, 476), art museums and other “institutions of memory” are part of the visible “soul” of society. In light of the ongoing BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) movement, nations are forced to reckon with their racist histories and colonial legacies. In nations around the world, monuments to colonial, imperial, racist, and sexist figures are being confronted, moved, replaced, and in some cases destroyed. Stepping the figures down from their pedestals makes it possible to confront these monuments (Buchan 2020).

While monuments may have an aura of permanence, they are not made to last forever. On the contrary, they change over time and require maintenance and mindsets to keep them standing.²² If we return to Appadurai’s (2006, 15) perspective, similar to monuments, works of art are invested with the properties of social relations. In spite of the object’s aspiration to the illusion of permanence, Appadurai reminds us of the fragility of objecthood itself (2006, 15). As such, the artwork’s status as a highlight is not as eternal as one might expect; upholding its stability requires maintenance and action in its social life.

The Biard painting was taken down on two occasions, first in 2017 during *There Is No Sámi Dáiddamusea*^x, and in 2020 during *HOS* (At) when

22 Paul Farber, “Monumental Conversations: What We Found When We Analyzed America’s Monuments”, Mellon Foundation, 29 September 2021; <https://mellon.org/news-blog/articles/monumental->



conversations-what-we-found-when-we-analyzed-americas-monuments/ (accessed 4 October 2021).

NNKM temporarily transformed into a craft and *duodji* museum. Here it is important to consider what replaced *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders*. Western categories of high art (such as architecture, sculpture, and painting) and low art (such as prints and crafts) are anchored in hegemonic power structures. By removing an iconic painting, replacing it with Sámi *dáidda*, *duodji*, and craft, NNKM intended to challenge dichotomies in Western understandings of art.

Unhighlighting

I will now return to Pratt’s concept of the contact zone to demonstrate how it might serve as a decolonizing tool by offering an alternative reading of *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders*. Importantly, the contact zone can emphasize the value of spaces of interaction to offer a lens for better appreciating the complexity of entanglement and a plurality of perspectives. Can we, regardless of Biard’s intention, imagine that the artefacts depicted in Biard’s painting have agency? One example is the women’s *ládjogahpirs*, which were in use and highly valued by Sámi communities until the end of the nineteenth century. Due to colonist suppression, the *ládjogahpir* nearly vanished from Sámi culture.²³ Recent efforts such as the project *Máttaráhku Ládjogahpir* (Foremother’s Hat of Pride), a collaboration by Finnish archaeologist and doctoral candidate Eeva-Kristiina Nylander and Sámi *dáiddar* Outi Pieski (2017–), work to revitalize and reclaim the *ládjogahpir* as a symbol of rematriation in Sámi society.²⁴

23 There are other speculations that the *ládjogahpir* simply fell out of fashion because of its impractical nature (Harlin and Pieski 2020, 86).

24 Eeva-Kristiina Nylander’s former surname is Harlin.

Indigenous scholar and curator Nancy Marie Mithlo (Fort Sill Chiricahua Warm Springs Apache) suggests that objects are flexible and can be mobilized to speak at will to the concerns of the maker, the viewer, or the subject represented in the artwork (Mithlo 2012, 112). Drawing on Mithlo’s perspective, could Biard’s representation of *ládjogahpirs* redress the colonialist and hurtful narrative of the painting? How then could a refocus on the *ládjogahpir* work in practice? Could we apply Clifford’s notion of the museum as contact zone? From this perspective, museum practice extends beyond consultation and sensitivity to active collaboration and sharing of authority (Clifford 1997, 210). Further, it requires museums to think of their mission as contact work, and understand themselves within spaces of interaction as opposed to a centre and position of dominance (204, 213). While Clifford offers positive potential in drawing on Pratt’s idea, he proposes his concept with a note of caution in pointing out “the long history of ‘exotic’ displays in the West” and uneven reciprocity (197). Until museums do more than consult with the relevant

communities or continue “business as usual”, the museum as contact zone will remain a utopian ideal (207–9). As indicated by scholar Robin Boast (2011, 66) in his critical analysis of the contact zone, although the periphery may win some small, momentary, and strategic advantage, ultimately the centre gains. Boast argues that despite postcolonial status and progressive aspirations of inclusion and collaboration, the intellectual control has largely remained in the hands of the museum (58). While NNKM initiated institutional change in recent years, Boast’s exposure of the contact zone as “a site in and for the center” reiterates the imminent need for art museums to operate at times self-critically and confront neocolonial pitfalls (67).

Although the potential agency of the *ládjogabpirs* in *Laestadius Teaching Laplanders* may open up to different readings of the painting, it risks becoming a trope and what Tuck and Yang (2012, 1) identify as a settler move to innocence. Given the asymmetry of the contact zone and the violent colonial content and context of the work, acknowledging agency is too easy. A better approach may be to *unhighlight*, through confronting and demoting, the Biard painting and other art with similar problematic histories and contexts in order to create space for a more accurate historical contextualization, nuance, and ambiguity. Such a space would be open precisely to the kind of counter-narratives in the form of artist voices attesting to decolonization that have long existed in Sápmi (Sandström 2020). Áillohaš/Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, the legendary Indigenous activist, Sámi *dáiddar*, writer, musician, and *juoigi* (a practitioner of *jouigan*²⁵), illustrates this beautifully in the poem at the opening of this essay. The poem was written six years after NNKM opened, and in it Áillohaš calls out the dominant colonial narrative of history from a Sámi perspective.

25 The North Sámi word for the Sámi vocal genre, a medium for the performance of narratives.

Aligning with such projects to decolonize museums and evoke institutional change, the analysis presented here aims to provide museum professionals with tools in terms of language and perspective that they can use going forward. As demonstrated, the path of learning to see from different perspectives and undo colonial silences is in-depth, ongoing work, and invoking a decolonized future is a slow and delicate process (Minott 2019, 573). Processes of institutional change require scholars and museum professionals to do this hard and necessary work from their own positionality and within their own cultural and institutional context while developing a sensitivity and openness towards Indigenous histories and perspectives. Failure to acknowledge self-reflective work as critical, ongoing, and complex may risk perpetuating colonial perspectives and centre–periphery structures this essay aims to expose (Tuck and Yang 2012). By bringing these problematic issues to the reader’s attention, I insist there is no easy fix.

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