

fig.1
Panoramic photograph of
Astruptunet, 2015



Nikolai Astrup and the Modernist Project

MaryAnne Stevens

To understand Astrup, one has to see his farm Sandal [Astruptunet], the houses, the sculpting of the terrain—the interior decorations of the houses are reminiscent of nothing else in this rural community. Astrup is a wizard!

Ludvig Ravenstein

Thus Ludvig Ravenstein (1877–1958), artist, relation of Edvard Munch and friend of Nikolai Astrup, responded with awe to a visit which he undertook to Sandalstrand in the company of Astrup’s long-time friend and supporter, the distinguished author Hans J Kinck (1865–1926), in the first part of July, 1922. What they experienced was a miracle of transformation undertaken over the preceding decade by Astrup. A wholly unpromising parcel of land had become a beautifully crafted terrain and productive farmstead which Astrup was to refer to as ‘paradise’. Indeed, Sandalstrand, perched precariously on a steep, north-facing slope of the fjord-like Jolstravatnet, a property into which Astrup had moved in December 1912, had been translated from a harsh, inhospitable plot into a productive farmstead, an assemblage of old dwelling houses and a horticultural oasis; a studio was to be completed by 1925. Such a process had been informed by the necessity to provide food for his growing family, fascination with horticultural inquiry and experimentation, commitment to conservation and preservation, the aesthetic drive to craft motifs for his art, and a profound appreciation for the beauty of nature. It also essentially became a manifestation of a Norwegian.

Any account of the evolution of Sandalstrand has to draw upon a detailed scientific research project and conservation plan undertaken by Arkadia Landskip, and completed in 2017. This research project involved paleo-botanists and botanists, geologists and agricultural, landscape and building heritage historians. Their reports complemented a rich reserve of extensive archival documents, including important correspondence between

Astrup and his friends and supporters, historic photographic records and Astrup’s own pictorial accounts of the farmstead as well as interviews with surviving members of the artist’s family and friends. This rich and deep understanding of the development of the property over a period of fifteen years permits Astrup’s life’s project to be recognised as the product of towering ambition which delivered a landscape project of local, national and international significance.

Nikolai Astrup exhibited an early interest in plants and horticulture which makes his ultimate engagement with the horticultural challenges of Sandalstrand a logical outcome. Scattered throughout three notebooks recording potential motifs for paintings, kept between 1898 and 1909, Astrup had demonstrated intense interest in, sensitivity to and an intimate knowledge of plants that he observed in the landscape around his childhood home in Alhus (see below). He notes individual species, their characteristics and their aspects according to the different seasons. In addition, evidence of an interest in horticulture can be found in the many views that he executed of his parent’s parsonage garden—both looking northwards across the ornamental garden to the house (see cats. 00–00), and southwards across the productive garden, past the old burial mound to Jolstravatnet and the mountains beyond (see cats. 00–00).

Having failed to acquire a farmstead on the northern shores of Jolstravatnet, in 1910 Astrup moved across to Myklebust, on the southern side, having acquired a relatively small plot of land. He clearly had ambitious plans. He built what he referred to in an extensive ‘autobiographical’ letter addressed to Kinck and dated 10 January 1922 as ‘a comfortable villa’, (fig.2) and then moved hundreds of loads of earth and stone to construct an artificial promontory out into the lake on which he erected two cabins, a small studio. By September 1910, he had begun to create a garden by planting an apple tree, fruit bushes and rhubarb. A plot of an

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Engel and their first – born child, Kari, moved into the ‘charming villa’ in January 1912, but the residency was short-lived. A bitter dispute with the owner of the property over the legitimacy of the sale had dire consequences: although in May Astrup was exploring the potential acquisition of another property, originally intended to be the kitchen garden and farm to feed the family, in July the family had had to move out, and two months’ later Astrup acquired Sandalstrand for 3,300 Kr.

Sandalstrand had little to recommend itself to a potential purchaser. It initially consisted of a plot of c. 7.5 acres, with an additional parcel of land for a summer farm. It lay c. 350 m above the 20 kl-long Jolstravatnet, on rocky land which rose abruptly from the lake, and whose steep gradient exposed it to the threat of avalanches, landslips and water erosion. Its north-facing aspect delivered a relatively shorter growing season than on the lake’s northern shores and exposure to cold air blowing of the Jolsterbraeen (glacier) to the south ensured that the climate was challenging to anyone with agricultural or botanical ambitions, as Astrup noted in a letter to Magnhild Odvin Bukdahl in 1927:

The climate is hellish here in this highland village during winter,the

fig.4
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close proximity of the sea via open corridors between the mountains towards the west makes it raw, – at the same time it is almost high altitude weather with cold gusts from the Jostedalstræen; the raw air is as cold as moist air can become without turning to rain; not that it matters—it rains plenty as well; we have the greatest amount of rainfall in the country, as well.... Furthermore, the site could only be accessed by a steep set of steps cut into the rock, and had one old dwelling, Gamlestova, a small barn and a summer cattle shed in states of considerable disrepair, and another dwelling in which the previous owner had right of residency until death.

The transformation of Sandalstrand can be understood through three development strands: the construction of buildings on the site; landscaping, and planting.

The existence of Gamlestova, a small wooden building probably dating from the 18th century, permitted the Astrup family to move into Sandalstrand in December 1912. For the next decade, a programme of building was undertaken in order to provide additional accommodation for Astrup's rapidly expanding family as well as improved facilities for the farm. By March 1913, the foundations of a second dwelling building, Kokkestova were laid with construction of a re-constituted dwelling probably dating from the seventeenth-century being completed in summer 1914. With obvious satisfaction Astrup reported to his friend and unofficial agent, Isabella Host that 'Engel and the children have moved in and now have sunshine and the most wonderful views.' (fig.3).

Then followed the extension of the barn with Astrup using dynamite to blast the foundations out of the granite in the autumn of 1914; the building, using materials provided from an older house recently demolished by his neighbour, Flugel, was completed in 1916. It consisted of two sections, a two-storey upper section for the storage of hay and grain and a single storey lower structure on the northern end for livestock. Two years later, on the death of Nils Olsson, the previous owner of Sandalstrand, his dwelling building came into Astrup's ownership and he embarked on what was to be the most extensive of his building projects. From 1920 to 1925 despite ill-health and financial difficulties, he incorporated Nilsstova into a group of four 'Borgen' (castle), to which was added an additional floor to create a function specific studio. He had been yearning for such a facility for many years, as he admitted to Kinck in 1922: 'Every year I said to myself: this year we will build a studio here, but we could never afford it, for the war came and with it high prices'. Astrup's initial designs for a studio atop the Borgen, with its projecting large studio window referencing mainstream contemporary artist studio fenestration, was much grander than the realised version(fig.4).

However, although reduced in scale, the result evidently afforded Astrup considerable satisfaction: 'I have now moved into my new studio—and have excellent light to work in. I have

until now worked almost in the dark—if only I can make better art—and more—or a larger production.' Meanwhile, with the arrival of Engel's widowed mother, Emerenza, to assist Engel with the children, the running of the farmstead and to enable Engel to devote more time to her work as a craftsperson, the so-called Bestastova (grandmother's house) had been erected c.1920, part of it having been moved down the lake from Sunde.

While the landscaping of Sandalstrand was primarily dictated by the need to make an effective working farmstead, the provision of flower beds and the creation of specific landscape features were also part of Astrup's ambition. As early as the autumn of 1912, Astrup tackled the poor accessibility to the farmstead by excavating a more gently graded pathway which wound its way up the slope from the lake to the farmyard and was wide.

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Nikolai Astrup
(Norwegian, 1880–1928)
Foxgloves, 1920
Color woodcut
30 3/16 × 39 in. (77 × 99 cm)
Savings Bank Foundation DNB/
Astrup Collection/
KODE Art Museums of Bergen



Chronology

Kesia E. Halvorsrud

The Astrup genus originally came from Ribe in Schleswig Denmark. Astrup farm In Denmark had been under Prussian and German rule since 1866. The Astrup family came to Norway in 1707 and the men had been priests and officials for generations.

1880 August 30: Nikolai Johannes Astrup is born in the municipality of Bremanger in Sogn og Fjordane. Nikolai Astrup was the firstborn of the total 14 children of Christian Astrup (1844-1920) and Petra Constanse (born Lodtz) (1860-1930), daughter of glove manufacturer Peder Mørch Lodtz in Bergen.

September 26: Nikolai Astrup baptized at Bremanger parsonage.

1883 The Astrup family moves to Ålhus in Jølster municipality where Christian Astrup gets a job as a priest. In Jølster there are 1811 inhabitants living in 1900. The whole area was largely a farming community. Nearest metropolis was Bergen. The Bergen Railroad was developed in the period 1883-1908 to greatly improve the itinerary between Bergen and Kristiania.

1887 Ålhus parsonage was from 1819 and in poor condition. Three of Astrup’s siblings die within a week due to diphtheria (true body). Petra Constanse was only 5 years old. Kristian turned 4 and Johannes Andreas died at the age of two. Nikolai Astrup is plagued with lung disease from a young age and out of life.

1892 Angel Sunde is born on Sunde in Jølster, just 20 km from Ålhus parsonage.

1895 Nikolai Astrup moves to his grandmother in Trondheim to study for a middle school diploma in Latin. He is distinguished by the best grade in science, but has a lot of unjustified absence. Astrup gets to know Arne Giverholt. Their exchange of letters becomes an important source of Astrup’s interests in youth.

The newly established Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustri Museum in Trondheim exhibited modern monumental textile art, art nouveau and Japanese art. Several drawings from this period are collected in the Children’s and Youth Drawings.

1897 April 26: Writes home to her parents about hearing Bjørnstar Bjørnsons lectures in Trondheim, as well as about the dangerous exploration of the towers in Nidaro’s cathedral in the evening. Passes the middle school exam at Trondheim Cathedral School, with “Good” as the main character. Will return to Jølster in the summer.

October 3: Astrup is confirmed in Ålhus church.

1898 May 16–October 2: The “Bergen Exhibition” was a national event and a comprehensive pattern of Norwegian industry, arts and crafts in Bergen. Here was a large exhibition of oil paintings and in the house craft exhibition, among others Gerhard Munthe, Thorolf Holmboe and Frida Hansen were represented. Hansen won a gold medal for weaving the Milky Way.

Astrup states in an undated manuscript that he oversees the exhibition.

A letter from Astrup to Giverholt testifies to an interest in international news such as the Dreyfus affair and the Greek-Turkish war.

1899 Arrives in Kristiania in the fall and lives at in Bogstadveien 35. Begins at The Royal Drawing School and then at Harriet Backer’s private painting school where he attended for 2 years. Draws postcards and paints photo backgrounds to afford painting tubes. In a look back in a 1911 interview, Astrup describes the first time in Kristiania:



1867



1867

Olav Kvaale
Alhus Church in Jolster, 1922
Silver print
County Archives of Sogn og Fjordane

Olav Kvaale
Alhus Church in Jolster, 1922
Silver print
Private collection
Nikolai Astrup can be seen in profile center right, wearing a pale-colored hat.

It was in 99 that I came in here to start painting. The same day began at the painting school Svarstad, Torbjørnsen, Robert Wiit, Henrik Lund and several others. I started up in the Pultosten with Miss Backer. The kitten called us the Painter larvae in the Pultosten. There were an awful lot of young painters, which it was pretty bad for at the time. Yes, here was such an amount, and we came straight up in the lean years after the job. God must know it was small. Laureng, who was one of the best placed, kept us company on fried bread slices and black coffee. Wigdehl and I lived together a lot; he thought it was so valid to come to Laureng. I lived a week of fifty pennies. We had a “Young Artist’s Pool”. Every Thursday we made 30 ore each for a punch bowl. It wasn’t too much to drink. And then we held together so well and helped each other.

1901 January 16: Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin dies.

Participates with Autumn Rain in the mountain countryside at the “Spring Exhibition” at the more conservative viewing site Christiania Kunstforening.

November: Astrup travels to Germany, via Copenhagen and Lübeck, with Olaf Schou’s scholarship. Kandiatuure was recommended by Kitty Kielland. Visits “Die Kunsthalle” in Hamburg, where he admires Frans Hals. He enthusiastically describes Böcklin paintings “With whom everything is feeling.” In particular, *Das Sweigen im Valde* and the *Holy Fire*, *Maria Magdalena in Hamburg* and *Spring in Berlin* stand out.

December: Arrives in Paris. Stays at Hotel Jacob in Rue Jakob 44.

December 24: he writes to his friend Enok Abrahamson about the view from a lonely hotel room:
The big cafes are beaming, people are pouring in galore; for the Parisians celebrate their Christmas in cafes; But I don’t go to the

cafe tonight. I light a cigarette and bend out the window, such a delicious warm wind, I wipe the cigarette ash on the thick pencil outside the window and look down into the street. - The rooftops are so dark, and the sky is warm from all the light in Paris. The whole sky is like a very dull lamp dome, it flickers in it by a light that keeps turning off. Down in the garden go, girls with bright aprons, and dark wagons from which you can glimpse the yellow wheels. On the wet rooftops the stain of a black chimney stains, and far away in the row of the dark rooftops, a tiny roof window glows, it is probably one that sits at home like I do; and far beyond, stretches the long beautiful line of rooftops, which are so sharp against the sky.

Gallerie Vollard, in 6 Rue Lafitte, was a half-hour walk from Rue Jacob. The gallery had shown Munch as part of a painting and graphics exhibition in 1896 and Edvard Dirik’s paintings in 1899 and has probably been well known in the Norwegian environment. In March 1902 a large Cezanne exhibition was shown there.

1902 Begins at Académie Colarossi in Paris, where he is taught by compatriot Christian Krohg. In the application for Henriksen’s scholarship, Astrup states that he also attended Academie Julian. Bypasses the Krohg circuit and Louis Karsten in Paris. After the stay, the artist states that it was the new naive art that interested him in Paris, especially Henri Rousseau and Maurice Denis. At this year’s Salon des indépendants, extra space was dedicated to Henri de Toulouse-Latrecs (1864-1901). Starting diary. Refers in later notes to the “Book of Paris” (lost).

May 16: Arrives Jølster.

1903 Bergen visit with visits to an Arnold Thornam exhibition and a meeting with Christian and Oda Krohg with discussions on

“the latest art”. To Henrik Lund, he writes of a frustrating but obviously experimental period:
I haven’t done anything this summer just with something I can’t do—I have been influenced by Ravensberg, I think, or maybe it is Hokúsai who made me cringe). You must be so kind to greet Laúreng and Svarstad from me. I long for Xania terribly, but my miserable chest even stops me from come outside the door now a day

1904 Astrup cuts its first woodcut: “Little self portrait” and Foss and glacier.

100th anniversary of Svanøe main farm. The farm was a social and cultural center in Jølster. Astrup became acquainted with Knudhild Holm and the two were lovers for a while.

Artist Birgit Abrahamson asks Astrup for weaving patterns, but Astrup declares his interest in this past. Find this letter and make a link to the Abrahamsen siblings.

1905 Apr. First separate exhibition at Blomquist Art Store in Kristiania. Stabbur in Jølster (Sad autumn day) is purchased by the National Gallery.

October 26: Union resolution between Norway and Sweden: Norway becomes independent.

Astrup gets commissioned to illustrate Bjørnstärn Bjørnsons Farmer stories. A number of pen drawings are executed in the period 1905–7, but the assignment is not completed.

1906 January 16: Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin dies.

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December 24: he writes to his friend Enok Abrahamson about the view from a lonely hotel room:
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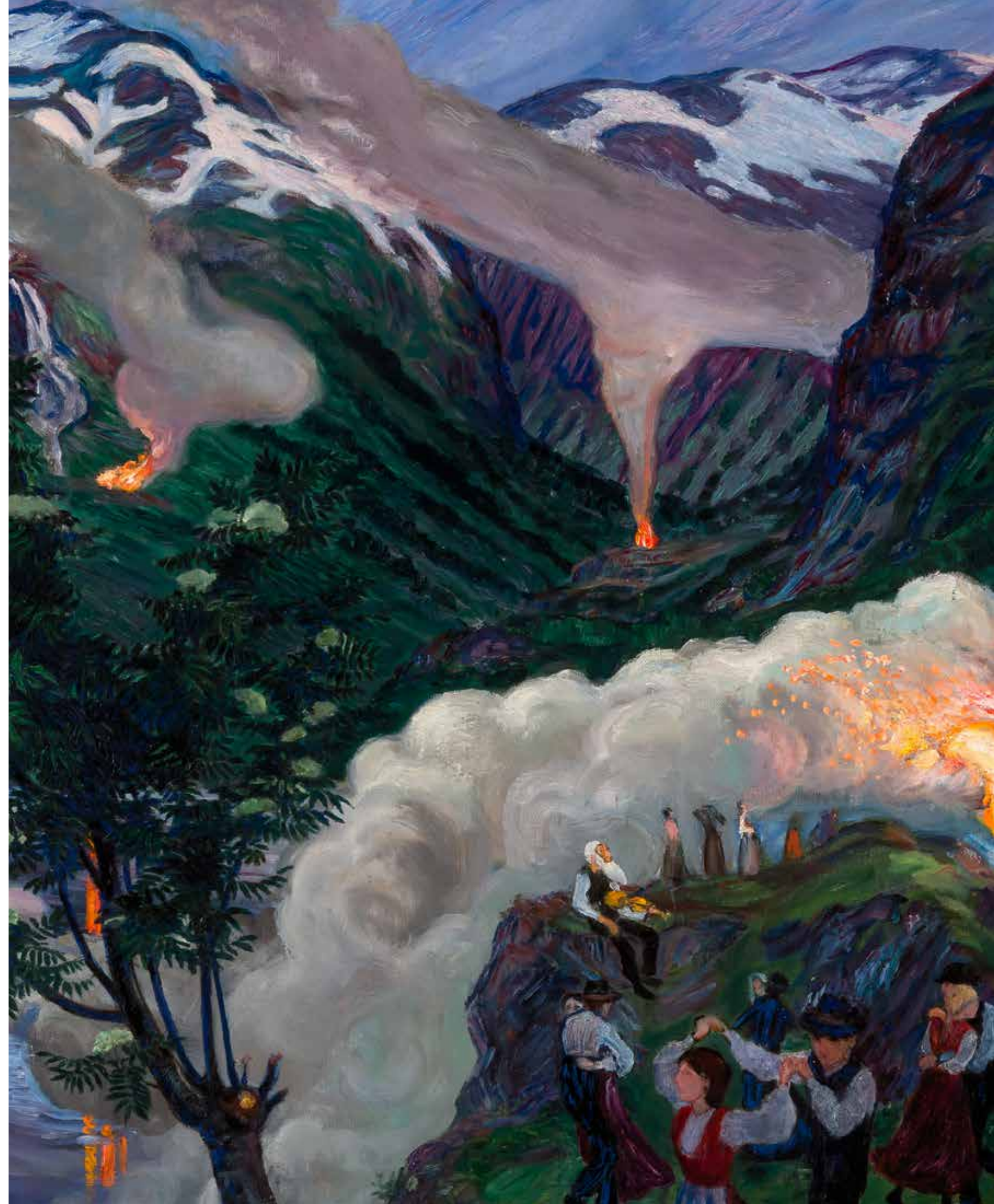
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1867

Transformations and Midsummer Bonfires



oo
Storehouse in Jølster
(Artist's original title: *Sad Autumn Day*)
Before 1905
Oil on canvas, 26 × 39 in. (66 × 99 cm)
National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, acc. no. NA.00.00

In the wake of Astrup's financially and critically successful first solo exhibition, held at Blomqvist's Auction House and Gallery, Kristiania, in April 1905, this painting was acquired by the National Gallery through the active support of two Neo-romantic artists Eilif Peterssen (1852–1928) and Gerhard Munthe (1848–1929), whose work Astrup had long admired. Astrup was doubtful of the quality of his work, stating in a letter to

Peterssen 'that he 'was not completely satisfied with my picture', and assuring Munthe, two years later, that it was only Munthe's personal conviction that the painting belonged in the national collection that he was persuaded to agree to its acquisition.

The original title for the painting, *Sad Autumn Day*, encapsulates Astrup's emphasis upon, and determination to capture, the specific mood of place, season, and weather in his work, rather than providing an objective record of a traditional western Norwegian storehouse. Nevertheless, this foremost structure, large and centrally placed on the canvas, demands attention: resting on spindly piers of wood that are, in turn, set upon rough-hewn stone, the simple building towers above the sloping hill on which it is built, obscuring the mountain

and much of the harsh landscape beyond. The Norwegian storehouse, or stabbur, housed grain after harvest, as well as other foodstuffs. Building storehouses on piers helped keep mice and other vermin out of the grain. Astrup, by presenting the structure as monumental, emphasizes the building's significance to the individual farmer and the larger community.

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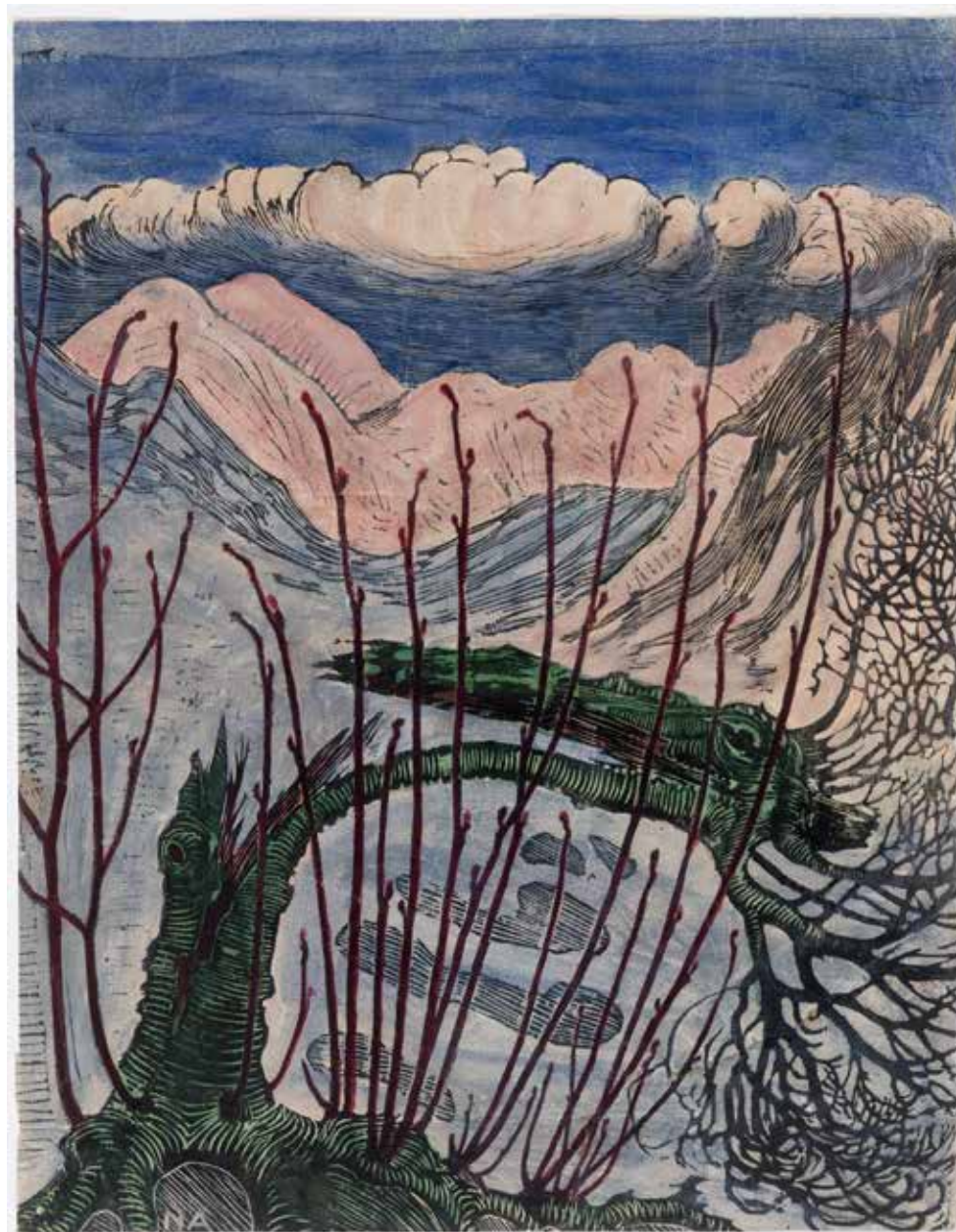
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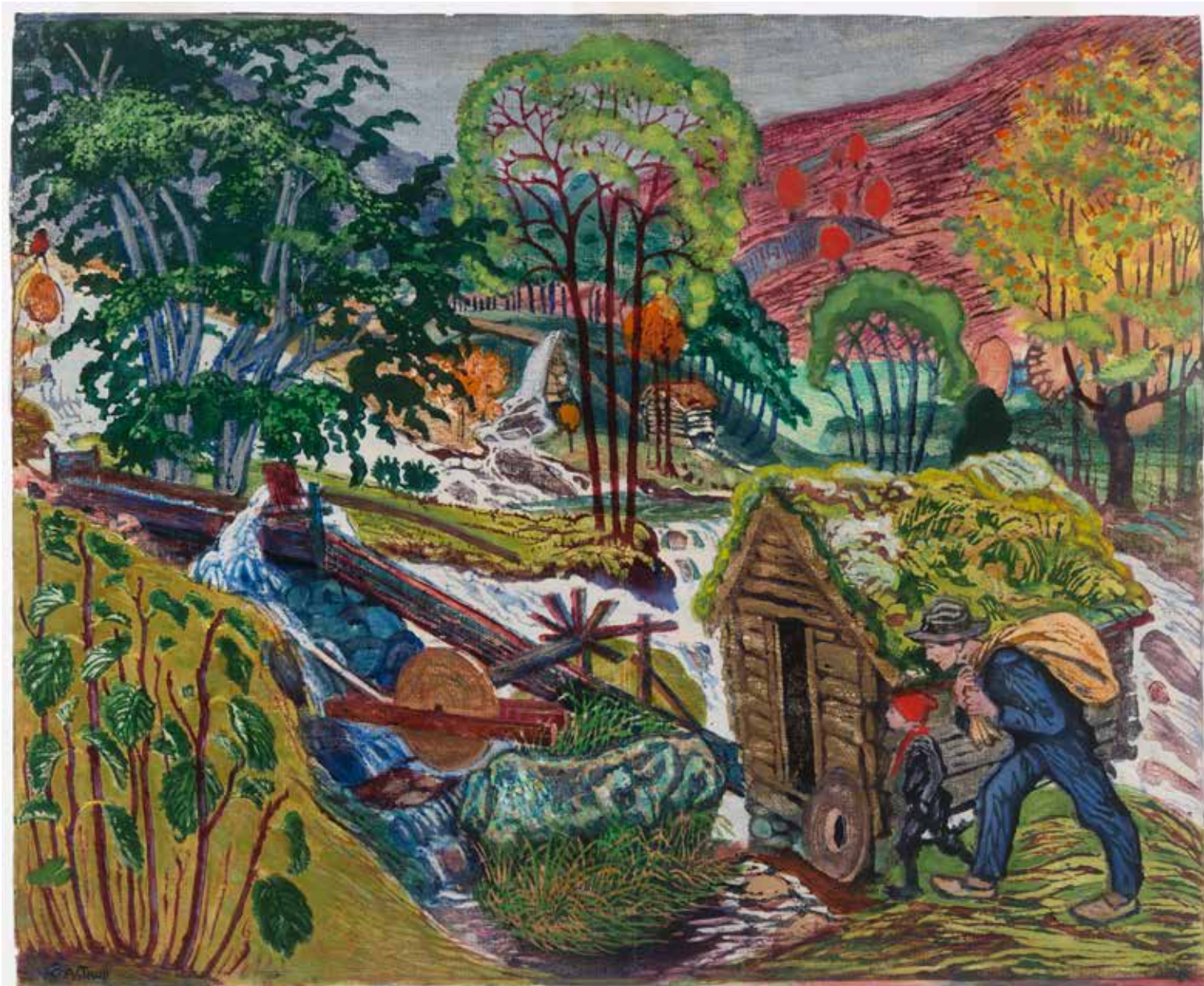
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Design, Oslo, acc. no. NA.00.00



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Storehouse in Jølster

(Artist's original title: *Sad Autumn Day*)

Before 1905

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In the wake of Astrup's financially and critically successful first solo exhibition, held at Blomqvist's Auction House and Gallery, Kristiania, in April 1905, this painting was acquired by the National Gallery through the active support of two Neo-romantic artists Eilif Peterssen (1852–1928) and Gerhard Munthe (1848–1929), whose work Astrup had long admired. Astrup was doubtful of the quality of his work, stating in a letter to

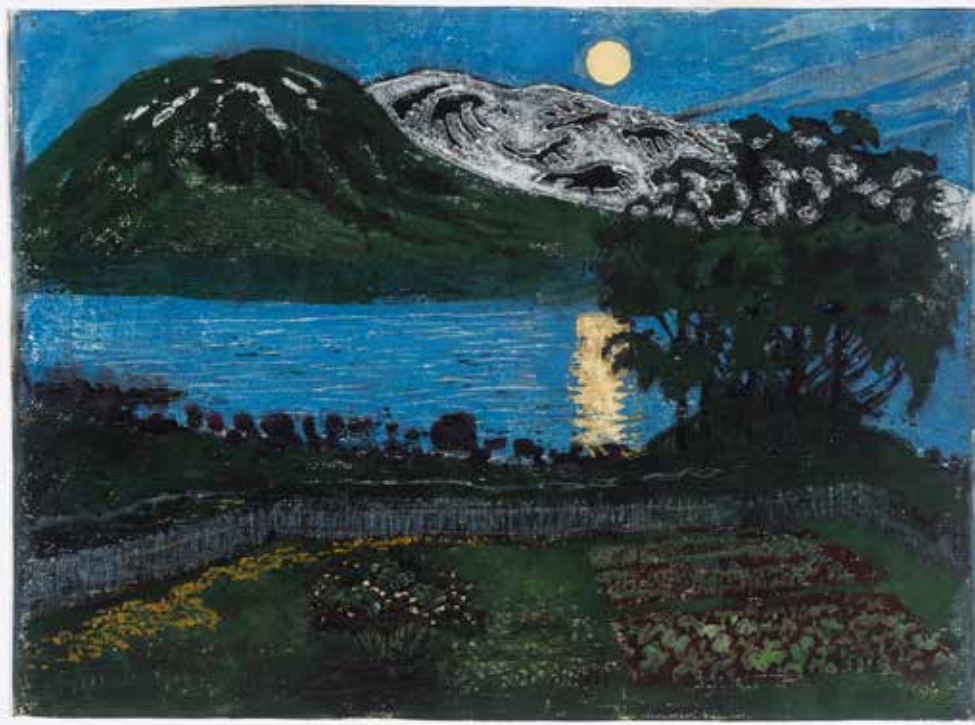
Peterssen that he 'was not completely satisfied with my picture', and assuring Munthe, two years later, that it was only Munthe's personal conviction that the painting belonged in the national collection that he was persuaded to agree to its acquisition.

The original title for the painting, *Sad Autumn Day*, encapsulates Astrup's emphasis upon, and determination to capture, the specific mood of place, season, and weather in his work, rather than providing an objective record of a traditional western Norwegian storehouse. Nevertheless, this foremost structure, large and centrally placed on the canvas, demands attention: resting on spindly piers of wood that are, in turn, set upon rough-hewn stone, the simple building towers above the sloping hill on which it is built, obscuring the mountain

and much of the harsh landscape beyond. The Norwegian storehouse, or stabbur, housed grain after harvest, as well as other foodstuffs. Building storehouses on piers helped keep mice and other vermin out of the grain. Astrup, by presenting the structure as monumental, emphasizes the building's significance to the individual farmer and the larger community.

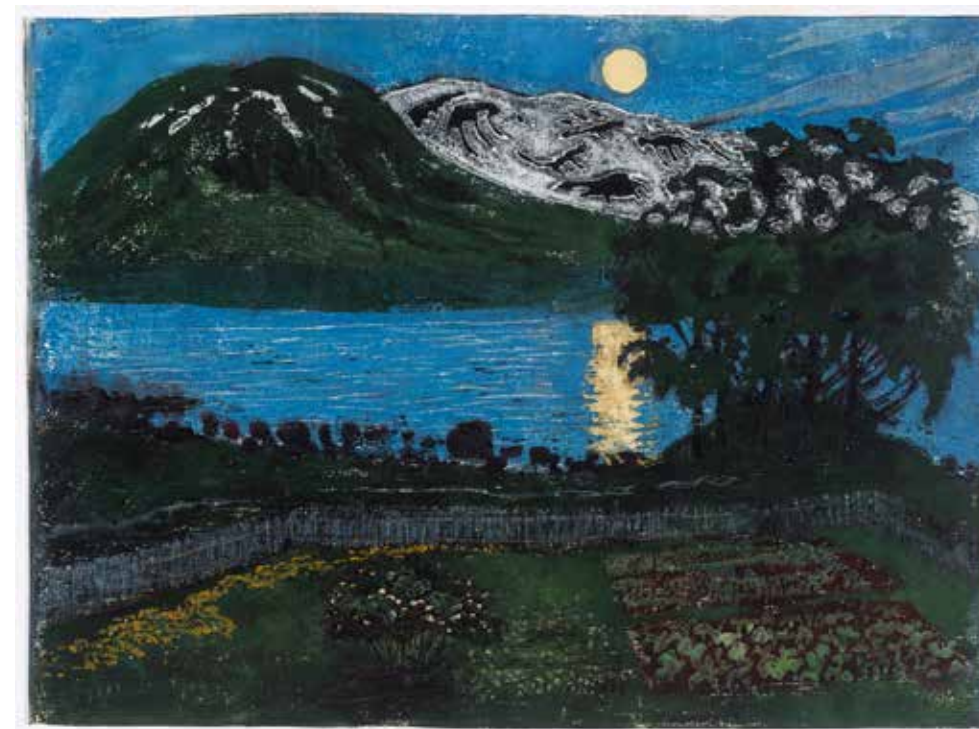


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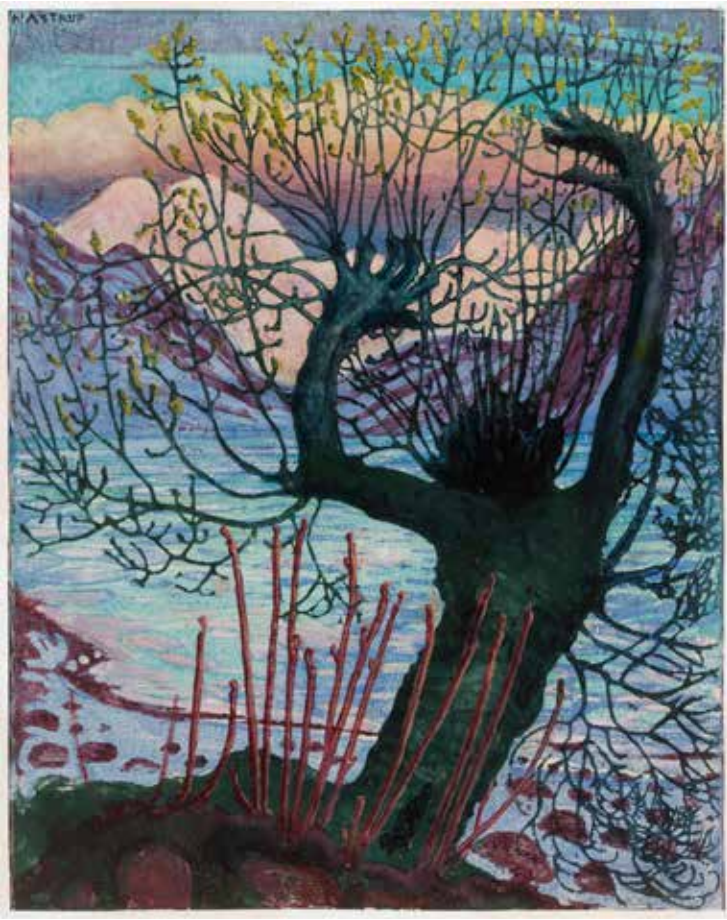
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