

THE Art OF Trolls



ROOTED IN NORSE MYTHOLOGY, TROLLS WERE POPULARIZED IN THE COLLECTIONS OF SCANDINAVIAN FOLKLORE AND FAIRY TALES OF THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES.

BY ROWDY GEIRSSON

The concept of trolls has occupied the Scandinavian imagination since time immemorial. The term “troll” itself is somewhat amorphous and has evolved over the centuries but has most often been used as a sort of catch-all for mysterious entities that lurk in the darkness and, more likely than not, behave maliciously. In this sense, the idea of a troll ranges from the traditional, evil-doing trolls of the ancient Norse sagas to the dimwitted, hostile trolls of Tolkien’s fantasy world (and others directly inspired by his) to the toxic individuals who presently poison the internet with their bad intentions.

With such a wide range of troll types, it naturally follows that there also exists a wide range of depictions of trolls. Trolls have been visualized in numerous ways as evidenced in the “Harry Potter” and “The Lord of the Rings” films, the Moomintroll works of Tove Jansson, and even the bright-haired toys created by Thomas Dam in Denmark in 1959. But the specific visualizations of trolls that have most profoundly impacted our collective notion of what a proper troll looks like remain those that were popularized in the collections of Scandinavian folklore and fairy tales of the 19th century.

Folktale Inspiration

In the 1830s, Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Engebretsen Moe began to collect folktales from the Norwegian countryside in a fashion similar to the Brothers Grimm in Germany. They published the collection of stories in 1841 as “*Norske folkeeventyr*” (“Norwegian Folktales”), which included stories now known the world-over, such as “*De tre bukkene Bruse*” (“The Three Billy Goats Gruff”) and a smattering

“Forest Troll,”
Theodor
Kittelsen,
circa 1906

of stories about the archetypal Norwegian folktale protagonist known as *Askeladden*—the Ash Lad—who has more recently also inspired a series of Norwegian films that bear his name. Expanded

versions of “*Norske folkeeventyr*” and new collections were published over the course of the following several decades, and these began to include illustrations.

The first collection of Norwegian folktales to feature illustrations was released by Asbjørnsen without Moe under the title of “*Juletræet*” (“The Christmas Tree”) in 1850. The illustrations in this volume were created by Johan Fredrik Eckersberg, who depicted the trolls as hairy and somewhat deformed humans, rather than as the bulbous, humanoid—but not human—monster-like things that we now tend to generally associate with their appearance.

The watershed moment for that style of troll depiction came in 1879 with the release of “*Norske Folke- og Huldre-Eventyr i Udvalg med Illustrationer efter Originaltegninger*” (“Select Norwegian Folktales and Fairytales: With Illustrations from Original Drawings”), which featured illustrations by Peter Nicolai Arbo, Hans Gude, Vincent Stoltenberg Lerche, Eilif Peterssen, August Schneider, Otto Sinding, Adolph Tidemand and Erik Werenskiold.

The volume provided a bit of a who’s who among Norwegian illustrators at the time; each of the aforementioned artists was a formidable talent. Arbo’s and Gude’s paintings of historic scenes and landscapes in particular have remained among the most noteworthy examples of Norway’s National Romantic style. While most of the illustrators involved in “*Folke- og Huldre-Eventyr i Udvalg*” followed in the footsteps of Eckersberg, portraying their trolls primarily as deformed or oversized humans, Erik Werenskiold blazed a new trail, portraying them as less human and more monstrous—exactly how we, in the present day, would expect trolls to look.

Evolving Illustrations

Werenskiold was a formidable artist in his own right, creating a number of landscape and portrait paintings during his lifetime as well as the illustrations for

PHOTOS (TOP TO BOTTOM): BY THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART / ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN / THE VISUAL ART COLLECTIONS

TK

the 1899 Norwegian edition of Snorri Sturluson's "Heimskringla" (the medieval epic of legendary and historic Norwegian kings). He was also the father of Dagfin Werenskiöld, the sculptor who created the wooden reliefs depicting scenes of Norse mythology that adorn the facade of Oslo City Hall. Erik Werenskiöld's illustrations for "Folke- og Huldre-Eventyr i Udvalg," however, showed that he was clearly in the vanguard of the latest, and what would become the most enduring, evolution of the depictions of trolls.

While Erik Werenskiöld got the ball rolling in terms of illustrating trolls as monstrous beings, Theodor Kittelsen took the ball and really ran with it.

Hailing from Kragerø, southwest of Oslo, Kittelsen made the illustration of trolls a core part of his life's work, not just a temporary offshoot of it, as was typically the case with his predecessors in the field. Kittelsen created illustrations for Asbjørnsen and Moe's collections as well as stand-alone illustrations (both of trolls and non-troll Norwegian fairytale beings such as water sprites and magical bears) and is highly regarded for the manner in which he often blended his trolls into the surrounding landscape.

His trolls didn't just live in the woods and mountains, but were a part of them in many cases, as is shown in his famous illustration "Skogtrollet" (The Forest Troll), which graced the cover of the 1907 edition of Asbjørnsen's "Udvalgte eventyr" (1907). This illustration, alongside others such as "Trollet som grunner på hvor gammelt det er" ("The Troll Who Wonders How Old He Is"), has helped cement Kittelsen as arguably one of the two best known names in the history of the illustration of trolls.

The only other illustrator to have reached a similar degree of renown for his work with trolls is the Swedish artist John Bauer. A contemporary of Kittelsen, Bauer created most of his troll illustrations for the "Bland tomtar och troll" ("Among Gnomes and Trolls") annual publication established in Sweden in 1907. This was a compendium of short stories: new, original fairy tales written by Swedish authors in a vein similar to that of Hans Christian Andersen.

As such, the series was very family-friendly and the trolls depicted in it appeared a little more happy-go-lucky visually than most of their Norwegian counterparts. Some of Bauer's iconic illustrations, such as those that accompanied Walter Stenström's "Bland tomtar och troll" story, "Pojken och trollen eller Äventyret" ("The Boy and the Trolls, or The Adventure"), have left an indelible imprint in our collective imagination of what a troll should look like. Bauer had a promising career ahead of himself that



Above: "Askeladden and the Troll" Erik Werenskiöld, 1884.
Below: Illustration of Walter Stenström's "The Boy and the Trolls," John Bauer, 1915.



PHOTOS (TOP TO BOTTOM) BY: THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART / ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN / THE VISUAL ART COLLECTIONS, PUBLIC DOMAIN

was tragically cut short in 1918 when he and his family drowned in Lake Vättern in Sweden.

From Fairy Tale to Fantasy

The man who took over the mantle as the second illustrator for "Bland tomtar och troll" was Gustaf Tenggren. Tenggren's name never reached the same lofty height as Bauer's or Kittelsen's in the world of folklore and fairy tale inspired illustrations, and that itself is something of a great irony. His work with trolls is no less impressive—but it wasn't his life's work. He completed 10 editions of "Bland tomtar och troll" and emigrated to the United States where he found work with a variety of magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Life*, and provided illustrations for the American edition of Hans Christian Andersen's "Fairy Tales."

After gradually building his reputation in the world of print, he eventually made perhaps the biggest impact of any of the artists who had cut their teeth drawing trolls one way or another: he became the lead conceptual artist for the first Walt Disney animated feature film, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," for which he was responsible for creating and orchestrating all of the film's aesthetics. Subsequently, he fulfilled the same role for "Pinocchio," "Fantasia" and "Bambi."

After these, he left Disney and began working with Little Golden Books, for which he illustrated "The Poky Little Puppy," which by the start of the 2000s had become the best-selling children's book of all time. Despite these accomplishments, Tenggren's name remains relatively unknown, and his contributions to the illustrations of trolls early in his career remains even more unknown.

Enduring Legacy

The heyday of troll illustrations ebbed as the 20th century wore on. Asbjørnsen and Moe's collections of folktales were no longer regularly released as new issues full of new artwork, and the splash made

by subsequent illustrators of "Bland tomtar och troll" never quite reached the zenith established by Bauer (a new volume continues to be published in Sweden each year, however).

But the legacy of these early troll artists endures. Current artists continue to walk in the footsteps of those that came before them, adding their own unique twists to the imagery of trolls and other folkloric beings, such as Johan Egerkrans, Reine Rosenberg, Ulla Thynell and Peter Madsen, who has contributed illustrations to recent editions of "Bland tomtar och troll" but is perhaps best known for his comic series, "Valhalla."

Trolls also continue to linger in the popular imagination and make their appearances in various mediums to delight or frighten audiences. Films such as "Trollhunter" and the "Trolls" animated series (based upon the Danish line of bright-haired toys) as well as novels such as Johanna Sinisalo's "Troll: A Love Story" and Nancy Farmer's "The Sea of Trolls," and even public art pieces such as the Fremont Troll that lurks under a bridge in Seattle all provide solid evidence of this. And these trolls all look more or less like we'd expect them to, thanks to the establishment of troll aesthetics developed at the hands of late 19th and early 20th century artists like Werenskiöld, Kittelsen, Bauer and Tenggren. ▼



"Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," Gustaf Tenggren, 1937