

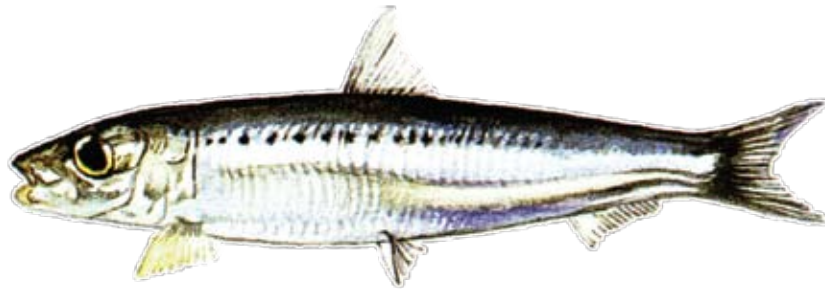
FineBooks & COLLECTIONS



Your article begins on the next page »



Ibsen, Hamsun, and a Tiny Smoked Fish



On a Self-Guided Literary Tour of Norway, Wonders Abound

BY ERICA OLSEN Polar bears on ice floes. Speed skaters and Vikings. Polar explorers swathed in Arctic gear. In the early years of the 20th century the print shops of Stavanger, Norway, created these and other throwaway masterpieces of color lithography by the millions, all to market a tiny smoked fish. 🇳🇴 A fish just like the ones hanging in a silver row in front of me, neatly threaded on skewers. It was the day they fired up the smoker at Stavanger's Hermetikkmuseum, or Canning Museum, and the apron-clad men knew a sardine-eating novice when they saw one. "Twist off the head," they told me. 🇳🇴 The smell of sardines used to hang over Stavanger, on Norway's southwest coast. Along with fish came printers' ink. A town of 30,000 at the turn of the



COURTESY OF THE NORWEGIAN CANNING MUSEUM, STAVANGER

Nordic imagery helped sell sardines around the world. Other polar-themed labels featured explorers Roald Amundsen and Fridtjof Nansen.

The need for can labels kept the printers in business, and in turn, the lithographers' and printers' skills helped sell Norwegian sardines around the world.



Can label artwork preserved on a lithographic stone in the collection of the Norwegian Printing Museum, Stavanger.

19th century, by 1918 Stavanger boasted 60 canneries employing more than 4,000 workers. In 1915, exports were an astonishing 350 million cans.

A sizeable printing industry sprang up in tandem with the canneries, explained Piers Crocker, curator of the Canning Museum. The need for can labels kept the printers in business, and in turn, the lithographers' and printers' skills helped sell Norwegian sardines around the world. In 1912 Stavanger's 15 printing companies employed almost 900 people. One of the main printers, Stavanger Lithografiske Anstalt, was printing 3 million labels per week.

Called *iddisar* in the Stavanger dialect, the brightly colored labels became collector's items. Today the Canning Museum counts some 40,000 different designs in its collection, plus a half-dozen printers' sample books.

As North Sea oil replaced sardines in Stavanger's economy, the industrial history of Norway's fourth largest city was at risk. "It was essentially the former workers who got together" and saved the equipment that is now in the Norsk Grafisk Museum, or Printing Museum, said Crocker. "They're very strongly unionized, printing workers in Norway. And so they put the word round: Are there any volunteers who would like to do this and keep the old skills going?"

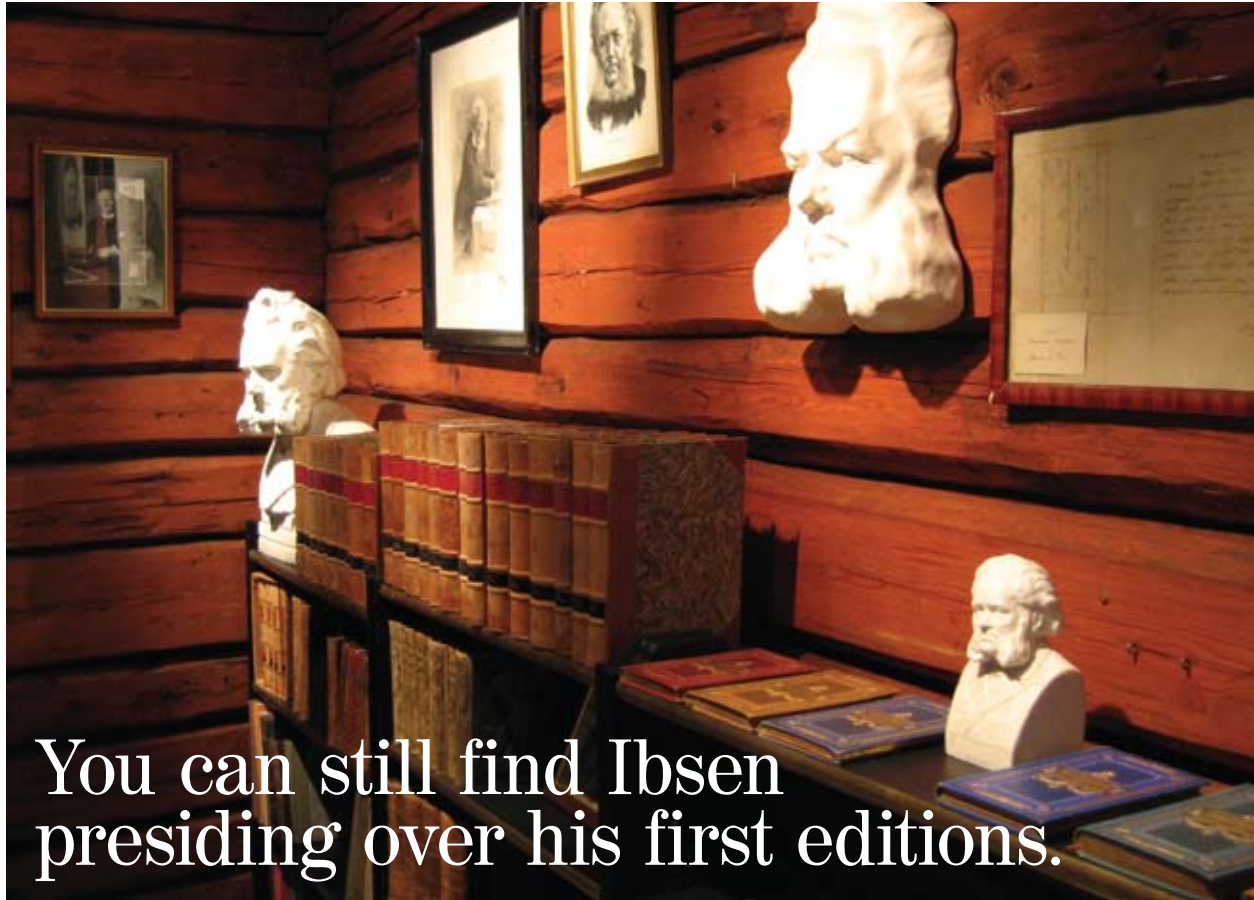
Opened in 1993 in the former warehouse of leading canner Christian Bjelland, the museum covers printing technology from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, with many working presses, including a Linotype. Together the canning and printing museums offer an unusual start-to-finish look at an industrial process. (For comparison, neither of the two well-known American cannery towns, Bellingham, Washington, (salmon), and Monterey, California, (sardines) used local printers for their labels.)

The gem of the Printing Museum collection may be its dozens of lithographic stones with original label artwork, iconic images like the sardine-loving polar bear. Some of the stones were saved by chance. "Somebody was using them upside down as a garden path here in Stavanger," Piers Crocker explained—and there they remained until someone recognized the telltale rounded corners.

The Printing Museum is open for group tours by arrangement. According to Gunnar Nerheim, director of Stavanger Museums (which administers both the Canning and Printing Museums), plans are pending for the Printing Museum to move to a new location closer to the city center.



Part of the collection of lithographic stones at the Norwegian Printing Museum, Stavanger. Photo: Erica Olsen



You can still find Ibsen presiding over his first editions.

At the Ibsen Museum in Grimstad, the playwright watches over his first editions.

PHOTOS: ERICA OLSEN

The Poets' Town

While Stavanger's printing history seems serendipitous, Grimstad, on Norway's south coast, has capitalized on its literary heritage, marketing itself as the *dikternes by* (poets' town).

Henrik Ibsen arrived in Grimstad as a pharmacist's apprentice in 1844 and began his writing career there. His relationship with the town during his six-year stay was fraught; he fathered an illegitimate child, and his play *The Pillars of Society*, 1877, criticized Grimstad's provincial society. But association with literary celebrity meant opportunity for Grimstad. In 1916, just ten years after the playwright's death, the town opened its Ibsen Museum in the building where the young Ibsen had lived and worked. (Other Ibsen museums would follow in Oslo and Skien, his birthplace.)

Today Grimstad is a town of 20,000 and a popular summer resort. But on a winter visit, with snowy streets muffled in fog, it was easy to imagine the town of Ibsen's time. The museum is closed during the off season except by arrangement; I was fortunate to have Gunnar Edvard N. Gundersen of the museum staff as my guide through the pharmacy and Ibsen's room (both with original furnishings). "Ibsen was born in Skien, but the writer Ibsen was born in this room," Gundersen said. With exhibits renovated in 2006, the museum focuses on the young man writing in the sparsely furnished room behind the pharmacy, who could not know



The Grimstad Reading Club was active during Ibsen's time in the town. The club's library is preserved at the Ibsen Museum in Grimstad.

that gilded editions awaited him. This was the Ibsen who lived in Grimstad—"not that boring guy with the beard," Gundersen laughed. The museum's interpretation combines history with a fresh, contemporary sensibility.

At the museum, you can still find the bearded Ibsen presiding over his first editions, including his scarce first play, *Catiline*, 1850, published under the pen name Brynjolf Bjarme. Also housed at the museum is the library of the former Grimstad *læseselskab*, or reading society—a 19th-century precursor of the public library. It's believed that Ibsen had access to this collection of 300–400 books. The

well-used volumes, many bearing old catalog numbers on their spines, come across as a bridge between small-town Grimstad and the world of authorship the young Ibsen aspired to.

Interpretive skills are needed when it comes to Grimstad's other author, Knut Hamsun, who lived at nearby Nørholm farm from 1918 until his death in 1952.

Probably Norway's second best-known writer, Hamsun made his mark with *Hunger* (1890), a pioneering work of literary modernism, and received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1920. The year 2009 is the 150th anniversary of his birth, a date that is being marked in more subdued fashion than the worldwide festivities commemorating the 100th anniversary of Ibsen's death in 2006. The reason: Hamsun was a Nazi sympathizer, a prominent supporter of the German occupation of Norway during World War II. He visited Hitler in Germany and even presented his Nobel Prize to Goebbels. After the war he was put under house arrest and eventually tried for treason (he was acquitted, but fined).

The 150th anniversary has made it clear that Hamsun won't go away. The National Library is organizing exhibitions and other official events (see <http://www.nb.no/hamsun2009/english>). Scheduled to open in August is the Hamsun Center in Hamarøy, where Hamsun spent his youth; it's a major architectural commission by Steven Holl Architects.

Located north of the Arctic Circle, Hamarøy is well off the beaten path. By contrast, Grimstad is a popular destination with a long-established literary attraction. The town already presents Hamsun in two guides to country walks inspired by his last book, *På gjengrodd Stier* [On Overgrown Paths], 1949. And now, from overgrown paths to highly visible public space: Making news a few days before I arrived in Grimstad was the announcement that the place in front of the town's public library would be named Hamsuns Plass. Plass, not Gate (street), because while Henrik Ibsen streets are ubiquitous in Norway, public objections have made it impossible to name a street for Hamsun. The library will move to a new location, making the building available for a museum. The building itself was formerly the courthouse where Hamsun was on trial—an appropriately mixed message.

For both Grimstad and Stavanger, civic heritage has been determined by chance as well as intention. The poets' town got lucky with Ibsen: he's a figure everyone wants to celebrate. It's not so easy with Hamsun, who reminds people that heritage is not just what you want to remember, it's what you aren't allowed to forget. Like it or not, today's "pillars of society" have to deal with Hamsun. It's a drama Ibsen surely would have appreciated. 📖

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J. W. Cappelens Antikvariat in Oslo.

Book Collecting in Norway

Oslo has Norway's greatest concentration of antiquarian bookstores, many within an easy walk of each other in the center of this city of 550,000. One of the largest and oldest is J. W. Cappelens Antikvariat. Founded in 1829, Cappelens currently occupies an airy space at Tollbugt. 31; the shop's central open space is the site of their twice yearly auctions. Ibsen is a shop specialty. Bookseller Kamilla Aslaksen says, "Considering Ibsen's the second most played playwright in the world after Shakespeare, it's amazing that you can get a really nice first edition for 5,000 NOK [about U.S. \$750]. It's really affordable."

Norway offers much more for the collector than Ibsen or Hamsun. Take Theodor Kittelsen (1857–1914), the illustrator whose trolls are as firmly fixed in the Norwegian imagination as Munch's *Scream* is in the world's popular image of Norway. Kittelsen's work, in the folk tales compiled by Asbjørnson and Moe or his own *Svartedauen* [The Black Death], transcends language barriers. And in Norway—where collectors like "the cold stuff," says Kamilla Aslaksen—*polarlitteratur* is everywhere. Look for works by explorers Roald Amundsen, Fridtjof Nansen (who illustrated some of his own work), and Robert Peary.

Can't make it to Norway? Bookmark Antikvariat.net. The online marketplace allows the user to search the databases of Scandinavian members of the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB). There are 99 bookseller members in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden listing more than 1.5 million titles altogether.

Antikvariat.net also puts out a guide to Norway's antiquarian bookshops. The brochure, which includes a map of the Oslo shops, is available at Norway's *antikvariater*.

PHOTO: ERICA OLSEN