

Titel: «The ideal man”: physical anthropological photography and the Norwegian self image

Abstract:

Photography played a significant role within physical anthropology in the interwar years. Bodies were measured and photographed. The measurements were used in statistical analysis accompanied by photographs in scientific publications. In the popular dissemination photographs were widely used. At the same time physical anthropology played a significant role in constructing or shaping a national self image in many western countries. In Norway, physical anthropological research was funded by the government as well as included in prestigious cultural historical introductions. In this paper i examine how physical anthropological photography contributed in constructing a Norwegian self image in the interwar years. The paper analyses the use of photography and physical anthropology in “Norske bygder” as well as Alette Schreiner’s “lokalundersuchungen in Setesdal”.

Norske bygder” was published in 1919/1920 by Norsk Folkemuseum, the Norwegian cultural history museum, and the museum’s director was the main editor. Other important members of the Norwegian academic and cultural elite, such as Anton Wilhelm Brøgger and Edvard Bull, were part of the editorial board and the Norwegian Storting granted the publication with funding several times. The aim was to describe Norwegian folk culture through a collection of various perspectives on specific areas. As the editors wrote in the preface: “What characterises a people as a national unit, is its culture as well as this is the strongest bond that binds them together. Knowledge about ones own culture and its routes is one the richest origins from which a people gets its national strength.” In the three first issues of “Norske bygder” physical anthropology was granted a separate chapter all of which included a rich amount of photographs.

In this paper I suggest that to comprehend how physical anthropological photography contribute in shaping a Norwegian self image in “Norske bygder”, it is enlightening to look closer at Alette Schreiner’s use of the term “the ideal man” and photography in “lokalundersuchungen in Valle”. Even though photography is widely used within Norwegian physical anthropology in the interwar years, few mention or discuss them. Schreiner’s book is a rare exception, even though photography is hardly discussed, more noticed, in the book.

Keywords: physical anthropology, cultural history, history of photography, national self image

Thale Sørli

Thale.sorlie@tekniskmuseum.no / 95871929