

Many Places. Many Design Histories (Umeå, 6–8 May 26)

Umeå, Sweden, May 6–08, 2026

Deadline: Sep 30, 2025

Elin Manker, Art history and Visual studies

Many Places, Many Design Histories.

The Nordic Forum for Design History Biennial Symposium, 6-8 May 2026, Umeå/Umeå, Sápmi/Sweden.

Design as a practice is undergoing substantial transformations. Ideas about what is considered to be design, as well as who designs, and where design is done, have expanded. How is this expanded understanding of design reflected in how we comprehend, write and exhibit design's history? In this symposium, we hope to bring together and explore which other stories can become visible when design histories are made from diverse places, with multiple materials, and through interdisciplinary perspectives.

Sidestepping the binary oppositions that long formed a leitmotif in design history – between design or craft, urban or rural, center or periphery, industrial or handmade, modern or traditional – this symposium encourages participants to think about and discuss design from viewpoints of inclusion, and as a development through a variety of histories. As this is the first time the Nordic Forum for Design History convenes in Sápmi, it offers an alternative vantage point to conventional perspectives within 'Nordic design', which have been situated, formulated, and institutionalized in metropolitan areas of the global North. It is there that the 'modern' and the 'innovative' have been sought and found, defining the economic and cultural capital that has come to shape design history as a discipline. As a result, complexities, power struggles and practices from other geographies have disappeared, creating design historical blind spots. Also, being in Sápmi, it becomes unavoidable to call attention to the darker side of Western modernity, where histories of colonialism have seldom been included in the understanding of design history from the Nordic region.

We welcome contributions that reflect on a wide variety of world makings, and which discuss a broad range of micro histories. Contributions could present case studies of design or craft that have been formulated outside the traditional center, or methodological inquiries and material explorations, as well as reflections upon the institutional frameworks of design.

We wish to encourage contributions of design histories that speak from and with many different Nordic geographies and practices. We invite explorations of how alternative design historical perspectives are reflected, or could be reflected in a new way, within museums, design organizations, archives, and interdisciplinary contexts. We hope to see contributions discussing how design museums could – or already do – work with diverse practices and communities, and examples of

museums which might not be considered a “design museum” which have in interesting ways opened up new perspectives on design history. What design histories could for example be found in regional museums? Or what design histories could be told from places and perspectives where “design” is defined from other than art historical viewpoints?

We look forward to contributions relating, but not restricted to, the above suggested topics and are curious about and welcome other formats and interpretations of the symposium theme.

Confirmed Keynote Speakers

Gunvor Guttorm, Professor in duodji (Sámi arts and crafts, traditional art, applied art) at Sámi allaskuvla/Sámi University of Applied Sciences, Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino in Norway.

Bart Pushaw is Assistant Professor of art history at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA.

Submissions

We invite submissions in the formats of papers, panel discussions and pictorials. If you have a suggestion for another format, please submit an additional description of the format you propose. Proposals will be reviewed by the conference convenors, appointed peer reviewers, and the Nordic Forum for Design History’s board and working group.

Please submit an abstract of 300-400 words, including a title and a 50-word biography (50 words each if multiple authors/persons).

Deadline: 30 September 2025

Notification: 15 December 2025

Submissions and conference enquiries: nordicforum2026@umu.se

Symposium Convenors

Maria Göransdotter, Associate Professor, Umeå Institute of Design, Umeå University.

Elin Manker, Associate Professor, Department of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University.

Christina Zetterlund, Associate Professor, Department of Design, Linnaeus University.

About the Nordic Forum for Design History

The Nordic Forum for Design History was founded in 1983 by Norwegian design historian Fredrik Wildhagen in collaboration with Dane Mirjam Gelfer-Jørgensen and Swede Lars Stackell. It is an open forum for scholars working within the field, a network which in recent years has expanded beyond the Nordic region. The Nordic countries take turns in hosting this event: the forum’s last conference in 2023 was hosted by the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Norway. The forum’s network base is at the University of Southern Denmark Kolding. To join the forum’s email list, please contact: Pernille Dahl Kragh, pdk@sdu.dk

The Nordic Forum for Design History’s Board and Working Group

Anders V. Munch, Professor, Department of Design, Media and Educational Science, University of Southern Denmark, Kolding, Denmark.

Dr Denise Hagströmer, Senior Curator, National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, Norway.

Dr Leena Svinhufvud, Leading Researcher, Architecture & Design Museum Helsinki, Finland.

Maria Göransdotter, Associate Professor, Umeå Institute of Design, Umeå University, Sweden.
Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir, Director, Museum of Design and Applied Art, Garðabær, Iceland.

Reference:

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