

Preface

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This publication has its origins in a conference session convened by Frances Fowle and Marja Lahelma at the Association for Art History's Annual Conference, which took place at the University of Edinburgh, 7–9 April 2016. The vibrant exchange of ideas and fascinating discussions during and after the conference gave us the impetus to continue the project in the form of a publication. Building on Peter Davidson's influential publication *The Idea of North* (2004), our aim has been to investigate the mythical associations and cultural appropriations of the North and northernness in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European visual culture. Mythical notions of the north have existed in European culture since antiquity, fuelled at various times by archaeological discoveries, Arctic expeditions and cultural revivals. Romanticism brought on a veritable “cult of the north,” which gained in strength throughout the nineteenth century, riding on the back of the nationalist wave that swept across Europe at the fin-de-siècle. Northernness is not a simple concept; inhabitants of Nordic regions have been described as pure and spiritual, but also as feckless and irrational; the northern terrain could be portrayed as idyllic and enchanting, but also as remote, barren, and inhospitable. The articles in this volume shed light on mythical conceptualisations of the North and northern identities from various perspectives relating to art and visual culture in the Nordic countries, Scotland, and Canada. The idea of North emerges here as a complex notion that can be employed as a tool for idealisation as well as abuse. The authors examine revivals

and assimilations of the North, taking into consideration issues such as mythical origins, spiritual agendas, and notions of race and nationalism, tackling also those aspects of northernness that attach themselves to politically sensitive issues. We wish to extend our warmest thanks to the authors for their thought-provoking contributions, and to the Birch and the Star for their financial support and for providing a platform for this publication.