

# Troll Magic enchants with a magic all its own

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*The mysterious creatures of Norwegian folklore as Theodor Kittelsen saw them*



*Image: Wikimedia Commons*

*Who would guess that hilltop is really the head of a huge Forest Troll?*

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Have you ever seen something out of the corner of your eye, especially in the forest, in the mountains, on the seashore, but when you look for it, it's gone? How do you explain the one group of trees swaying as if something had just passed through them? And even more sinister, what actually happens to people who disappear without a trace while hiking in the mountains or out at sea? What about those humps and objects on the shore of a lake at dusk or when they are out on the skerries in a raging sea storm?

These are things that classically have explained by Norwegian folklore: the belief in the supernatural, in human-eating trolls, in the "mountain folk" like *huldre* who lure young men to their doom inside of mountains, in "little people," or in sea monsters that can bite a fishing boat in two. What would these creatures actually look like if you could get a good look at them?

In the last couple hundred years, artists and writers have sought to document the stories about these creatures and to illustrate how they might appear. One artist stands out from the others in the pen-and-ink sketches he made in the late 1800s, one who actually wrote the text to accompany his images. That was Theodor Kittelsen.

Theodor Kittelsen was born in 1857 in Kragerø, Norway, in Telemark. After he was recognized for his talent (lucky for us) and was sponsored by a wealthy patron to attend an art academy in Munich, Germany, Kittelsen wanted to become a fine art painter but realized that was not in the cards for him. After losing the support of his patron in Norway, Kittelsen scraped by on the meager earnings he got from selling his pen-and-ink drawings to German newspapers.

Theodor Kittelsen determined that he needed to get back to his roots. He wrote to a friend, saying, “What appeals to me are the mysterious, romantic, and magnificent aspects of our [Norwegian] scenery, but if I cannot henceforth combine this with a wholesome study of Nature I’m afraid I’m bound to stagnate. It is becoming clearer and clearer to me what I have to do.....I must get home ...”

Back in Norway in 1881, Erik Werenskiold convinced Peter Christen Asbjørnson and Jørgen Moe to commission his friend Kittelsen and several other artists, to illustrate the fairy tales in *Eventyr Bog for Børn* (Folktales for Children). This was a turning point for Kittelsen, as he became a regular illustrator of folklore, of trolls especially, and became well known across Scandinavia and beyond.

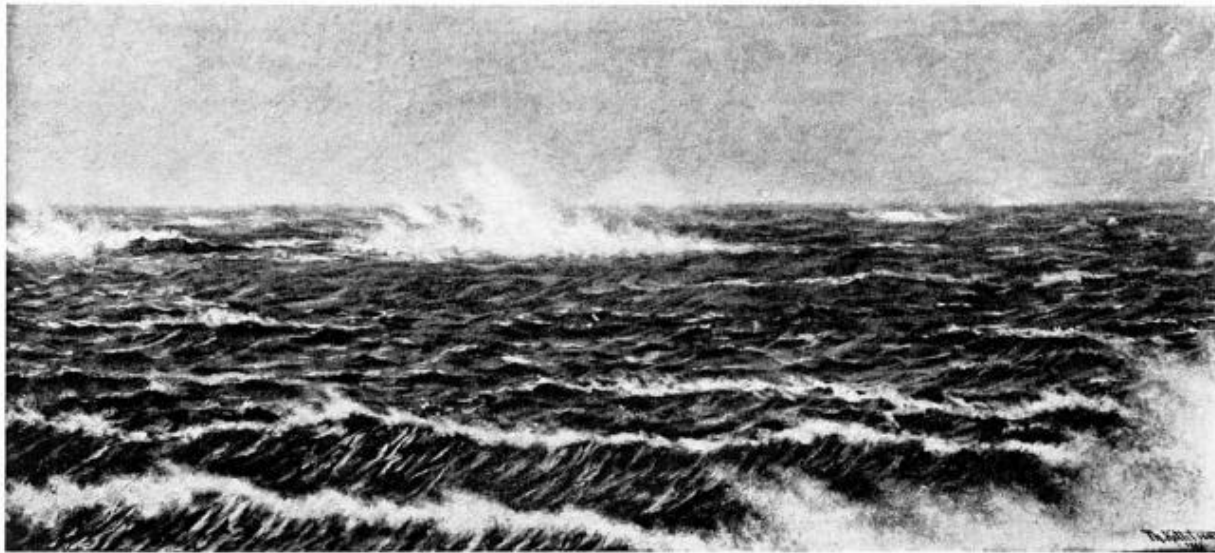


Image: WikiArt

Theodor Kittelsen captured the wild waves and wind, with foam blowing off the wave crests, looking out to sea from Skomvær Island, which spurred him to draw and write the story of the fearsome sea troll.

But his life became especially interesting when he joined his sister and brother-in-law in moving to an extremely remote island off of the Lofoten peninsula to tend the newly built lighthouse on Skomvær. He stayed with them for five years, from 1887 to 1892.

The rugged mountains and steep-sided bird-covered islands, the flocks of cormorants and seagulls that inhabited them, quiet harbors and bays, and the crashing surf and storms helped Kittelsen develop a unique perspective and mythology about the creatures from Norwegian folklore and their connection with nature. Many of the illustrations he produced while on Stormvær were first published in Kittelsen’s book *Troldskab* in 1892.

Now, Tiina Nunnally, an accomplished translator of Scandinavian books to English, has produced the first English translation of *Troldskab*, *Troll Magic – Hidden Folk From the Mountains and Forests of Norway*, published by the University of Minnesota Press.

*The Norwegian American* has published reviews of several of Nunnally’s books, including *The Complete and Original Norwegian Folktales of Asbjørnsen and Moe*. Nunnally’s translations are so masterful because they make for easy reading, so well done that her work fades into the background.



What is especially unique about *Troll Magic* among the Norwegian folklore illustrators was the text written by Kittelsen. Originally he had planned to have the

author Jonas Lie write the text (not to be confused with Jonas Lie the Norwegian-American painter, nor the Norwegian politician, who lived around the same time). But the collaboration with Lie never materialized, so Kittelsen wrote the text himself.

The result was a set of 18 brief stories, sometimes just descriptions of mood surrounding his illustrations, stories that are completely unlike the classic folktale formulas of Asbjørnson and Moe, who later commissioned Kittelsen to provide illustrations for their later folktale books. In *Troll Magic*, Kittelsen takes nature and the creatures of folklore beyond the magical and into the realm of the mysterious, the sinister, and the macabre.

In *Troll Magic*, you can almost hear the quiet voice of the late-night storyteller, who begins once the hearth fire has burned down to glowing coals, who dares us to contemplate the unseen, or seen fleetingly. Some of his stories are humorous, others thoughtful and prosaic, but he devotes plenty of time as that late-night storyteller trying to give you the “creepy-crawlies.”



Image: Wikimedia Commons  
The next time you visit a peaceful lake, especially at dusk, beware of the Nøkk!

Kittelsen told the newspaper *Aftenposten* in 1904, long after he had mastered his mission as folkloric illustrator, that “it is not the dramatic ‘effects’ of nature that I am concerned about. It is the mystical aspect of it, the calm, the secretive ...”

Nearly all of the images Kittelsen drew for *Troll Magic* were conceived during his stay on that remote Lofoten island in the North Sea, so it’s not surprising that many of the creatures he tackles are related to the sea. He illustrates the sea troll, *fossegrim*, sea serpent, troll birds, *draug* and *nøkk*, images and descriptions that have since become the defacto definitions of these creatures for readers worldwide.

On the lighter side, he also illustrates and tells a story about the irascible *nisse*, the seductive *hulder*, and the dreamy mermaid.

He sets the stage like all classic storytellers, not with “once upon a time” but with observation and history, such as his tales from “The Troll Bird,” where a poor fisherman regularly went to an area to fish, “and then he would notice that things were not always as they should be out there on the bird island. He didn’t dare go ashore. Something seemed to whisper to him that it would not be wise to do so.”

In “The Sea Serpent,” he begins: “There have always been quarrels and disputes about the sea serpent. Some folks will laugh in your face if you happen to mention it. Others will staunchly claim that the serpent does, in fact, exist.”

In “Supernatural Creatures I,” the narrator says, “I once knew a young man who firmly believed in supernatural creatures. When I asked him whether he’d actually seen any, he replied, “No, I haven’t, but my brother has. And my brother never lies.”

Then there are the silly trolls on their way to a feast at the “Troll Castle.” As they hike through the forest, they “wade” through spruce and pine trees that reach almost to their waists. (Trolls are big!) Then, one troll carelessly breaks off his foot. But the group decides to forge ahead, until they inexplicably discover another foot lying on the ground, and then another. And so on ... until they finally realize they’ve been walking in circles for 100 years!



Finally, Kittelsen begins the book with “The Forest Troll,” where in the voice of the narrator, he explains that “the forest, the utter wildness of the forest, has left its mark on us. We’ve become part of its very nature. We love the forest exactly the way it is, strong and melancholy.”

For Kittelsen, we humans are as much a part of nature as trolls and *drauger* and *huldre* are part of nature. One could say that these creatures exemplify the silly, seductive, mysterious, and fearsome aspects of our lives. Since you can’t really escape them, for they are us, you might as well accept them or even enjoy them.

Right along with those spine-tingling creepy crawlies.

*Pick up a copy of Troll Magic and see for yourself! You can view more of Kittelsen’s illustrations at the National Art Museum in Oslo ([nasjonalmuseet.no](http://nasjonalmuseet.no)).*

**All images represent the artistic work of Theodor Kittelsen.**

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*Image: Wikimedia Commons  
Even Theodor Kittelsen’s self-portrait, from 1891, is a little mysterious.*



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