

arts

A lesson in

Some of the Beat Generation's most important art works are hanging in a school in Norway. **Jon Bryant** explains how they ended up in small-town Scandinavia



Kristiansand Cathedral School, on the southern tip of Norway, is like most other secondary schools in Scandinavia. It is full of pine furniture and serves open sandwiches on wheatgerm bread in the dining room. What makes it unique is that it owns the finest collection of American Beat Generation art outside the US.

More than 100 of the movement's works line the school's corridors, classrooms and canteen. In the staff room, timetables are pinned up alongside works by celebrated Beat artists. "Ever since the first consignment came over from San Francisco in 1971, it has just seemed very natural to have them here," says the headmaster, Arne Rosenvold. "The students find the paintings highly inspirational and are very proud of them."

The collection belonged to a

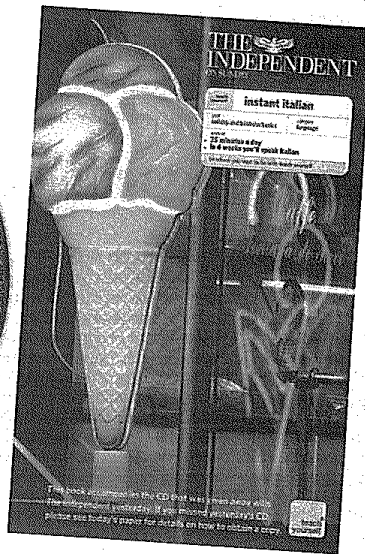
Norwegian doctor named Reidar Wennesland, who lived in North Beach, San Francisco, in the 1950s and 1960s, when the Beat Generation was at its most disdainfully creative. He became known as someone who appreciated experimental art and accepted paintings instead of payment for consultations. He used to help the artists financially, offering them lodging and paying their studio bills. As a doctor, he was also able to help them "calm down" after excessive use of drugs. Most important, however, he began a collection of Beat Generation art, which at the time few people understood.

Born in 1908 and brought up in Kristiansand, Wennesland trained as a doctor and became head of a recovery team caring for concentration-camp victims. He moved to the US after the



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Beat history



"The Beat Generation artists didn't have the money for really good materials, and a lot of the work is on paper... many of the paintings require repairing and reframing; canvases need re-stretching, and paint is cracking off."

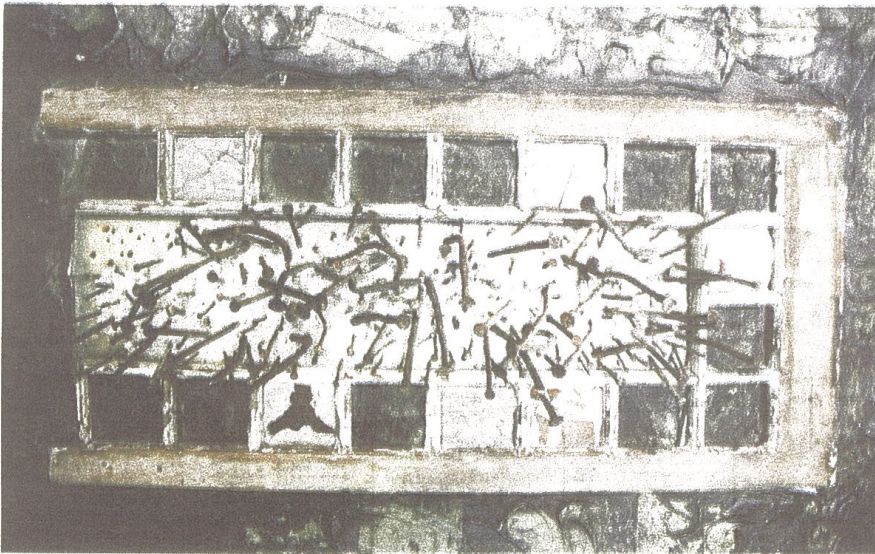
In the university basement is a storeroom of about 60 large canvases, a jade monkey belonging to the doctor, and drawers full of sketches and prints. It's a massive task even to identify the art. "Some pieces have required a lot of detective work to find out who painted them and when. Some of the labelling was incorrect or absent, and new things are still coming to light. A few years ago, a version of Jess Collins's distressing collage *Going Deep* (1952), made up of cut-outs from *Time* magazine, was uncovered in the stores. It is now framed and in the university lobby," says Frivold. "It's weird because most of the artists would never have expected their art to be exhibited."

Managing the collection is a challenge, particularly as the new university building has not been kind to artistic display. Much of the art is bolted on to the walls in narrow corridors with no natural light, and there is a general anxiety about doing what Wennesland "would have wanted". Those involved are not gallery-owners or art experts; they are teachers and administrators.

Students lean up against abstract works alongside display cases of stuffed ravens. Upstairs, canteen staff clear away food in bins beneath Michael Bowen's *Head of Woman*. On the stairs is his blue portrait of Janis Joplin – a former girlfriend. And Arthur Monroe's *Temptative Assumption*, for which he forged the twisted nails by hand, is over a table in the school canteen.

As the Beat Generation members grow old (a number have already died), many have become successful artists and have voiced concern that their legacies (in school corridors in a small Norwegian school) need better care; they may even wish they were somewhere more public. Art critics admit that some of the best work produced by the generation is in the Wennesland collection. Jay DeFeo's *The Wise and Foolish Virgins* is hanging over the stairs on the way to the science labs.

Frivold adds: "The only occasion when there has been any unrest over the art was when a group of MA students decided one of the paintings was too depressing and hid it behind a cupboard while they were revising."



The Beat school: there are more than 350 works in the Wennesland collection, including (clockwise from main image): Michael McCracken's 'Three Sides of an Egg'; Michael Bowen's 'Portrait of Janis'; Arthur Monroe's 'Temptative Assumption'; and McCracken's 'Cosmic Factory' in the school library JON BRYANT, TOR MARTIN LIEN

Second World War, and became a physician for Norwegian seamen. He had also developed a lucrative test to check levels of carbon dioxide in the blood. Almost all his money, however, went on helping artists, buying art and keeping scores of exotic animals,

including monkeys and a South American kinkajou.

The Beat poet Allen Ginsberg lived with him for a while, until they had a row. In the mid-Seventies, the local council banned exotic pets, and the doctor could no longer maintain his

private world. The Beat artists had all but vanished, and Wennesland asked the San Francisco Art Institute if it wanted his collection. It declined. Insulted by what seemed a lack of respect for the culture of the time, he presented it to his home town

of Kristiansand, initially to the school where he'd been a pupil, and later, in a further instalment, to the town's Agder University College. Together, they have more than 350 works.

"They wouldn't refuse the collection now!" says Ellen

Frivold, curator of the university's half of the Wennesland collection. Nevertheless, though welcome, the donation has been "an expensive gift", she says. She estimates that the university needs Nkr400,000 (£33,000) a year to maintain the collection.