



A look at the life and legacy of

Anders Beer Wilse

Norway's beloved, self-taught photographer whose pictures both captured and catapulted the country's national identity in the early 20th century.

BY RACHEL GUYAH • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDERS BEER WILSE

Lens *on a* New Era

Anders Beer Wilse
at Lysaker River
near Oslo (1941)

COURTESY NORWEGIAN FILM MUSEUM

When many of us think of Norway, a few key images come to mind—rosy-cheeked kids riding a kicksled; cross-country skiers slicing through fresh powder; and of course, endless panoramas of jaw-dropping cliffs plunging into deep fjords tinted emerald and turquoise.

These snapshots have become synonymous with Norway, and there's one man whose pictures played a pivotal role in shaping the country's modern image: Anders Beer Wilse. Fueled by a passion for photography, the outdoors and his homeland, he spent decades snapping photos all across Norway. Royalty, Sámi, farmers, fishermen, seascapes, snowscapes, city streets and more—Witse captured the beating heart of a nation at a pivotal time in its history. Here's a look at Wilse's compelling life and work.

EARLY LIFE

Witse was born in 1865 in Flekkefjord, Norway, but spent most of his early years in Kragerø, a charming sailing port along the southeastern coast. His early aspirations were not in art, but engineering: He earned his technical degree early on, but had a hard time finding work. He ended up setting his sights on America in 1884. Wilse's work started in Minnesota as a railroad engineer, but he soon headed west to Seattle to work as a cartographer. After a few years, Wilse bought his first camera and started snapping photos in his free time. He initially partnered with another photographer, Daniel W. Kirk, but was relegated to running the Seattle office while Kirk traveled taking photographs. Being shackled to the darkroom did not sit well with Wilse, and after six months he bought the business from Kirk.

SNAPSHOTS OF SEATTLE

Witse spent years in Seattle as a commercial photographer, documenting businesses, buildings and important public construction projects. His photos were often used for promotional purposes, to portray the region as a beautiful place brimming with prosperity and promise.

His time in Seattle also coincided with the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897–1899—a time



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Daily life

Lofoten Fishermen (1910)

Three fishermen holding their huge catch of the day. The photo was taken in Ballstad, a village located on a small island in the Lofoten archipelago. This photo was commemorated on a stamp in 2015 as part of the 150th anniversary of Wilse's birth.

Men Dancing on a Country Road (1906)

Are they celebrating? Or just hamming it up for the camera? Either way, this lively shot of men dancing on a rural road in Norway is dripping with personality. On the left, a man dances while holding skis and poles, and on the right, a mustached man in a bowler hat flashes a smile at the camera. Curious minds may wonder what song is playing on that antique music box behind him.

Aulestad (1908)

In this photo, taken at the farmstead of Nobel Laureate Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, two men take part in *hesjing*, Norway's traditional method of drying hay by stacking it on wood and wire racks. The beloved poet and playwright lived here for many years with his family. Today, the house still stands and is one of Norway's best-preserved historical artist homes. It operates as a museum with public guided tours.



A Shift to Lifestyle Photography

Wilse captured the intimate, candid moments of some of Norway's most notable people. Clockwise from top left:

Royal Family (1937)

This photo was taken at Harald V's baptism and features Crown Prince Olav V, Crown Princess Märtha of Sweden, Princess Ragnhild and Princess Astrid.

Anna Rogstad (1911)

Anna Rogstad was a teacher, businesswoman and politician.

Crown Princess Märtha and Prince Harald V (1939)

The two are playing in the snow on a cold January day.

Knut Hamsun (1930)

The Norwegian writer was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1920.

Roald Amundsen (1910)

This intimate shot of Roald Amundsen features the legendary polar explorer at home in his office. Very likely, he was busy plotting his historic expedition to the South Pole—he was the first person to complete the journey—which would begin just a few months after this photo was taken.

when thousands of people descended on Seattle, stocking up on supplies before setting north to Canada in hopes of striking gold. Wilse documented this historic time for the city, capturing images of steamships, dogsled teams and merchants selling supplies.

His photography in Seattle also had ties to Norway: In 1898, he documented the arrival of more than 100 Sámi people and 500 reindeer from the Lapland region. They were brought over to carry food and emergency supplies to the gold miners. Before continuing their journey to the Yukon, the reindeer stayed at Seattle's Woodland Park for a week and quickly became a huge sensation, drawing thousands of visitors. However, by week's end, 12 reindeer had perished from a combination of park grass and snacks fed to them by visitors. The eventual fate of the remaining reindeer would also turn grim: Most of the herd died later on due to exhaustion or starvation while traveling around the Yukon.

RETURN TO NORWAY

Wilse returned to Norway in 1900, just a few years before the nation regained its independence. Seeing an opportunity to document Norway's rapid growth and rebirth, Wilse spent years traveling the country with his 20-pound camera and tripod in tow. He snapped pictures for postcards, books and other special assignments. An avid outdoorsman, Wilse belonged to The Norwegian Trekking Association and thoroughly enjoyed venturing out for both work and play. Rain or shine, day and night, Wilse worked tirelessly until he found just the right shot(s)—whether that meant following cross-country skiers as they glided toward a snow-capped peak, or trailing behind a car driving under a colossal (and precariously perched) rocky overhang.

Wilse's photography helped paint Norway as a true wonderland of dramatic, natural beauty. There's a captivating energy, excitement and splendor in his

snapshots—a testament to his ability to select and arrange elements from the environment for maximum visual effect.

Wilse also took extensive photographs of urban life, and the Directorate for Cultural Heritage hired him to document various styles of Norwegian architecture. In Wilse's photos you can see the streets of the capital, as well as Bergen and other bustling cities teeming with activity and life—punctuated by hotels, cathedrals and other historic landmarks.

NORWAY'S FINEST

In terms of fame, the subjects of Wilse's portrait photography ran the full spectrum. In addition to documenting everyday fishermen, farmers and families, the legendary photographer took pictures of Norway's most prominent figures. His photos marked a shift away from the traditionally formal, posed portraits. He often opted for more intimate, candid shots—reflecting a modern movement toward lifestyle photography. In his photos you can see Nobel Laureate Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and his wife reading letters at home, and legendary polar explorer Roald Amundsen deep in thought in his home office.

This shift in style also rippled over to his most famous subjects: the Royal Family. For many years he followed the family, taking not just formal portraits, but also laid-back shots of them enjoying Norway's beloved pastimes. In Wilse's collection you can see Queen Maud and King Haakon VII (the first King of Norway after the country regained its independence) leisurely skiing with their dog. Wilse was there to photograph big moments, like the christening of Harald V—the first Norwegian-born prince in over 500 years, and now the reigning King of Norway. But it's in the little moments you can really see the Royal Family come alive. For example, many shots feature a playful young Harald building snowmen, playing dress-up and tagging along with his sisters for a bike ride. 📷

Learn More

Wilse continued taking photos until his death in 1949. His staggering collection of more than 200,000 images is now divided among several institutions across Norway:

- Norwegian Folk Museum
- National Library of Norway
- Oslo City Museum
- Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology
- Preus Museum Norwegian
- Maritime Museum

Wilse also wrote two books detailing his adventurous life and photography: "En Emigrants Ungdomserindringer" (Life of a Young Norwegian Pioneer)—available in English and Norwegian

"Norsk Landskap og Norske Menn" (Norwegian Men and Their Country)—Norwegian only