



Expedition: Art History as Activism

Demonstrating Climate Change and Societal Perception Shifts Using the Visual Records of the North Pole, Svalbard, and the Greater Arctic

SUMMARY

Grace Cordsen, a polar activist and proficient climate communicator, carried WINGS Flag #33 while voyaging from Svalbard to the North Pole as a researcher studying the visual record of the Arctic.

This expedition from Svalbard to the North Pole and East Greenland involved art historical research using visual and written records to highlight environmental changes and shifting perceptions of these Arctic regions, particularly focusing on climate change as represented in art.

Grace aimed to create a compelling narrative through historical visuals and contemporary artwork, motivating action against climate change while appreciating the cultural and natural heritage of the Arctic.

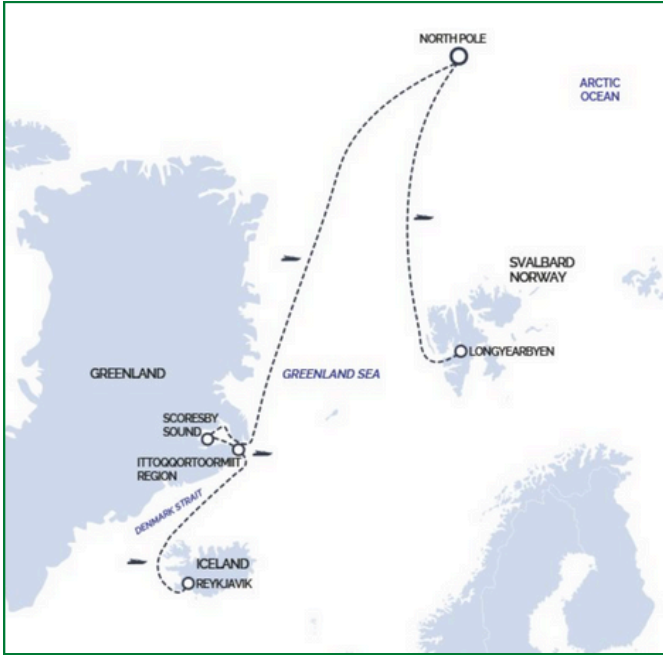


THE EXPEDITION

The expedition, sponsored additionally in part by the Arctic Research Foundation and Ponant, brought together tourists, researchers, scientists, and communicators to navigate the Arctic region, ultimately reaching the geographic North Pole.

Grace conducted fieldwork that examined the historical and contemporary visual narratives of the Arctic. Her research explored how artistic representations of the region have evolved in response to environmental and societal changes. Onboard, she lectured on the role of art history in climate activism, drawing connections between historical paintings, early photographs, and modern-day imagery. These lectures fostered discussions on the power of visual storytelling in driving climate awareness.

Additionally, she documented the rapidly shifting Arctic landscape through photography and engaged with scientists to better understand the environmental data they were collecting. Her collaboration with the Arctic Research Foundation included a complete social media takeover, offering real-time insights into the expedition's progress. By connecting with a broad digital audience, Grace expanded the reach of the expedition's findings and highlighted the importance of Arctic conservation.



WHO: Grace Cordsen

WHAT: Art historical research to highlight environmental changes and shifting perceptions of these Arctic regions

WHEN: July 26-August 12, 2024

WHERE: Svalbard, North Pole, East Greenland

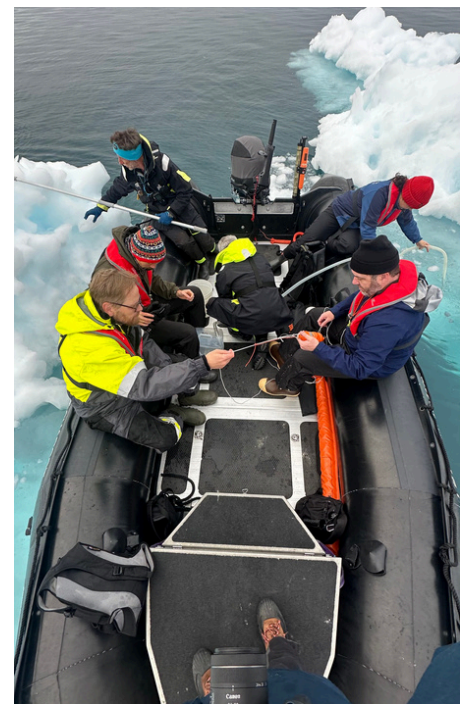
WHY: To create a compelling narrative through historical visuals and contemporary artwork

EXPEDITION GOALS

The initial primary goal of the expedition was to conduct art historical research, using the visual and written records of the North Pole, Svalbard, and the broader Arctic to illustrate both the drastic environmental changes and perceptual shifts experienced by these regions. Through this research, Grace sought to create a visual timeline comparing historical representations with contemporary images, using art as a medium to communicate the impacts of climate change.

While aboard the expedition, an unexpected and impactful opportunity emerged: serving as a climate and science communicator. Collaborating with the onboard scientific team, Grace helped translate complex scientific concepts into engaging narratives for a broader audience. This included facilitating discussions with passengers, conducting interviews, and creating content for the Arctic Research Foundation's media channels.

Grace captured striking images of melt ponds and receding glaciers, further evidencing the ongoing environmental changes in the Arctic. Her role as a communicator expanded beyond the voyage, with subsequent publications and speaking engagements continuing to amplify the expedition's discoveries. This intersection of science, storytelling, and art enhanced the overall impact of the expedition, fostering a deeper understanding of Arctic climate change.





EXPEDITION RESULTS

The expedition's results extend beyond the Arctic, informing my continued role as a climate communicator and advocate. Through publications, lectures, and visual storytelling, the lessons learned at the North Pole will continue to inspire climate action and foster dialogue on the fragile beauty of the polar regions.

To this end, the expedition yielded numerous outcomes that continue to generate impact: Publications and Media Engagement: Grace authored an article for the Arctic Research Foundation's Arctic Focus platform, reflecting on the journey and the significance of Arctic climate storytelling. Additionally, she led a complete social media takeover for the Foundation, sharing real-time updates and educational content. Grace also has upcoming articles with them regarding the scientific work that was conducted on-board as well.

Lectures and Speaking Engagements: Grace conducted onboard lectures and discussions during the voyage, sharing insights on Arctic art history and environmental changes. That summer, she presented further reflections during subsequent Arctic travels. Future engagements include guest lectures at Yale University and EarthX in Dallas, Texas, in April 2025.

Podcast Appearances: Grace shared expedition experiences on podcasts, including Green.org, bringing conversations about Arctic exploration and climate storytelling to wider audiences.

Academic Contributions: Grace's art historical work continues, comparing contemporary photographs of the Arctic (such as of communities, melt ponds, ice formations, and more with historical visual records). This research will contribute to forthcoming articles exploring the intersection of art, history, and climate change.

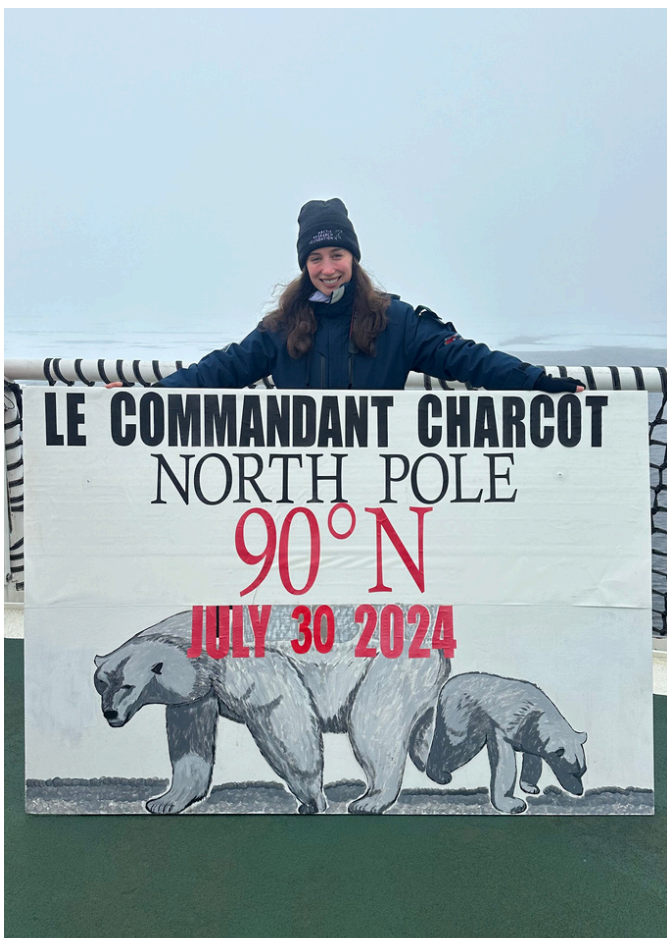




CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

One of the primary challenges Grace faced was the limited ability to conduct detailed art historical research in advance. Unlike traditional projects where specific sites are known and can be thoroughly studied ahead of time, many of the locations we visited were uncertain until she arrived.

This unpredictability meant she often had to rely on rapid observation and documentation, capturing as much as possible during the voyage. Her post-expedition work has since involved delving into archives and historical records to contextualize and analyze the visual material she gathered. The Arctic also presented its own set of physical and technical challenges.



Navigating the unpredictable polar environment meant adapting to rapidly changing weather conditions and icy terrain. Technical challenges in capturing photographs under harsh conditions highlighted the importance of preparation and resilience. An equally significant challenge was the emotional toll of witnessing the visible impacts of climate change. Observing melt ponds and thin ice underscored the urgency of Arctic conservation efforts. Engaging in discussions with scientists about these changes deepened Grace's understanding of the interconnectedness of polar ecosystems and global climate patterns.



ABOUT THE FLAG CARRIER

Grace Cordsen is a polar communicator and sustainability strategist committed to making climate science accessible and actionable. With expertise in climate crisis communications, sustainability, and polar exploration, she bridges science, activism, and storytelling. Her background in polar logistics, sustainability strategy, and media production allows her to craft compelling narratives that bring the urgency of climate change to global audiences.

Since graduating from Princeton University, Grace has worked extensively in both Poles as a logistics manager, educational director, researcher, and journalist. In 2024 alone, Grace not only was one of the youngest women to manage a camp on the Antarctic interior, where she had the chance to visit the geographic South Pole, she also voyaged to the geographic North Pole as an Arctic Research Foundation journalist and WINGs Flag Carrier.

Grace has worked with leading platforms such as EcoWatch, Climate & Capital, The Arctic Research Foundation, and The Polar Collective, ensuring that climate stories reach decision-makers, activists, and the public.

Grace is currently pursuing her Masters in Sustainability Management at Columbia University in NYC where she has integrated her mission of turning exploration into action into her studies.



CONTACT INFORMATION

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