

Women behind Swedish Grace: Success and Neglect

The Swedish national museum of art and design, the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, has launched a project to research and collect works by women designers in the inter-war period. So far, the project has resulted in a catalogue and an exhibition of more than 140 objects by 22 women designers, most of which have been acquired in the past few years. Under the mottos of 'more beautiful wares for everyday use' and 'artists for industry', many women designers were hired by Swedish decorative arts companies in the 1920s. Known as Swedish Grace, Swedish decorative arts and design won acclaim at the 1925 Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes in Paris. Anna Petrus and Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg were awarded gold medals for their work but in spite of this, their names were omitted in the catalogues. Another example is Sylvia Stave, who had a design career in modern materials until she married and was forgotten. When the Italian firm Alessi resumed production of one of her shakers, they thought Marianne Brandt had designed it. Although successful during their time, women designers in the Swedish inter-war period were ignored and forgotten due to their family situation, gender-biased company relations, and not least institutional neglect by the Nationalmuseum.

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Introduction

When the Swedish luxury liner M/S Kungsholm had crossed the Atlantic Ocean and arrived in New York on 3 December 1928, everyone gasped in admiration. The newspapers reported that even the French could not have done it better. There were glamorous salons in red and black, furniture made of exotic woods with silver inlay, and magnificent staircases that could have featured in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel of 1925 *The Great Gatsby* (Fig. 1). Every detail, from the champagne glasses to the textiles, furniture and the interiors as a whole, had been created by the most prominent designers of the time. Sweden was experiencing a heyday in decorative arts and design, and M/S Kungsholm was a floating showcase for the decorative arts industries.¹

The reputation had spread since the success of the Swedish pavilion at the 1925 Paris Exposition, British critic, Morton Shand eventually coined the term Swedish Grace to describe the often classical design of glass, ceramics, furniture, and other decorative arts.² Two years later, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York gave Sweden the opportunity to exhibit its finest decorative arts and design. Needless to say, expectations were high when M/S Kungsholm arrived in New York.



Fig. 1. The first-class smoking room on M/S Kungsholm with cast iron reliefs by Anna Petrus on the fireplace. Courtesy of Sjöfartsmuseet Akvariet, Göteborg.

- 1 Anne-Marie Ericson, *M/S Kungsholms inredning: Mästerverk i svensk art deco* (Lund: Bokförlaget Signum, 2005); Marie Rehnberg, *Anna Petrus: Skulptör och industrikonstnär* (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Signum, 2009), 139–147.
- 2 Morton Shand, "The Stockholm exhibition," *Architectural Review* 68 (August 1930), 73–83, referred to in Anne-Marie Ericsson, *Svenskt 1920-tal: Konsthantverk och konstindustri* (Lund: Bokförlaget Signum, 1984), 8.



Fig. 2. Anna Petrus (1886–1949).



Fig. 3. Anna Petrus, Relief 'The Earth' 1928, copper, produced by Ragnar Myrsmeden. Purchase by Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, Nationalmuseum, NMK 64/2013.

Anna Petrus (1886–1949), one of the designers featured in the Nationalmuseum's acquisition and exhibition project *Women Pioneers*, had designed the large copper reliefs that were intended for the first class library on the ocean liner (Fig. 2). These were striking compositions on the four elements, inspired by Greek mythology and daringly depicting Earth as a female centaur with a small child on her shoulder (Fig. 3). At the time, this was considered an astonishing accomplishment for a woman. With her strong hands, Anna Petrus processed even the hardest materials such as stone and iron. She was the first woman in Sweden to work with cast iron and had a breakthrough at the 1925 Paris Exposition, where she was awarded a gold medal.³

But the war arrived, and when the American soldiers took over M/S Kungsholm in 1941 all the interiors disappeared. Luckily, Anna Petrus' reliefs of the four elements had yet to be mounted, which is why they are still preserved and could recently be acquired by the Nationalmuseum and shown in the exhibition at Läckö Castle and Kulturhuset Stadsteatern in Stockholm 2015.

War, Taste, Marriage, and Dominant Companies – Four Reasons for Neglect

The exhibition, *Women Pioneers – Swedish design of the interwar period*, features more than 140 objects of glass, metal, and ceramics. Textiles are not included in the project, due to practical reasons of exhibition display but also because it is a part of the collection where women are well-represented. Most of the exhibition's 22 women artists and designers, although forgotten today – it was even difficult to find photographic portraits of some of them, which is quite striking – were prominent in the inter-war period. They participated in exhibitions in Paris, London, New York, and many other cities, they attended the Technical School, now called *Konstfack*, the University College of Arts, Crafts, and Design in Stockholm, or the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, and several of them went to Paris to study with well-known artists and sculptors. For many reasons, however, these women were later forgotten or neglected.⁴

One reason was, of course, the Second World War, which for years closed Sweden's doors to the outside world. At the 1939 New York World's Fair, Sweden had one of the most noticed pavilions, but the possibilities for further contacts and sales were barred when the war broke out. Then, after the war, a new generation took over.

Another reason for the neglect was the question of taste, and in this case, the Nationalmuseum is somewhat responsible. For a long time, the Museum saw itself as a guardian of good taste, and the notions of good taste meant that the more colourful and exuberant objects designed by these women in the 1920s and 30s did not fit the prevailing acquisitions policy of the Museum. Instead, the Museum favoured the more terse modernist style. Values change with time, however, and since 2012 the Museum has been actively collecting objects by women designers in the inter-war period. Unfortunately, many interesting pieces from this period had already been taken out of Sweden by the 1980s, as there was greater interest and knowledge abroad.⁵ Since 2012, the Museum has acquired 92 objects by women designers that are featured in the exhibition.

A third reason for oblivion is the dominance of companies. When Anna Petrus designed flower pots with the same decoration she had used for the columns in the Swedish pavilion at the 1925 Paris Exposition, she was not even allowed to have her name in the product catalogue of Näfveqvarn, the foundry she worked for, even though the names of her male colleagues were listed.⁶

In other cases, the company name may indeed be the reason why artists and designers were forgotten. The interior design shop, Svenskt Tenn from 1924, literally Swedish pewter, is one example.

3 Sonja Lyttkens, "Min mor Anna Petrus," in *Anna Petrus: Konstnär och formgivare* (Uppsala: Sonja Lyttkens in collaboration with Bror Hjorths Hus, 2005), 21; Rehnberg, *Anna Petrus: Skulptör och industrikonstnär*, 159.

4 Magnus Olausson and Eva-Lena Karlsson (eds.), *Kvinnliga pionjärer: Svensk form under mellankrigstiden* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2015).

5 Magnus Olausson, "Inledning," in Olausson and Karlsson, *Kvinnliga pionjärer*, 4.

6 Marie Rehnberg, "Anna Petrus och Paris 1925," in *Anna Petrus: Konstnär och formgivare* (Uppsala: Sonja Lyttkens in collaboration with Bror Hjorths Hus, 2005), 35, 38.



Fig. 4. Estrid Ericson (1894–1981).
Courtesy of Svenskt Tenn archive
(Photo Erik Holmén).

The founder, Estrid Ericson (1894–1981), made sure the company name took pride of place, rather than the individual designers she hired, and she knew well which products were sellable (Fig. 4). 'All models are the property of the company', Ericson wrote in the product catalogue from 1931, in which she presented some of the 300 models in her assortment. In the late 1920s, she started collaborating with Anna Petrus, who, amongst other things designed a lion that Ericson used and re-used in various ways (Figs. 5 and 6). The objects are representative of the material culture of the 1920s and include tobacco jars, matchstick holders, boxes with lid, trays, mirrors, book-ends, etc. Even in the 1970s, Ericson composed a plate on which she used a cast of a lion that Petrus had designed in the 1920s.⁷ Ericson was a business woman with an eye for what would be commercially viable, but this method of adjusting somebody else's design was only possible in a time with a different view on copyright and the designer's

influence on the final product. The brand was unequivocally the firm Svenskt Tenn and the name Anna Petrus was consequently forgotten. It is only during the past ten years that she has been recognised as one of the most original and influential designers of the inter-war period.⁸

Estrid Ericson had founded her company, Svenskt Tenn, in 1924, focusing on pewter as a cheaper alternative to silver. In this way, she contributed to regenerating the status of pewter as a modern material. Similarly, the decorative arts industries highlighted other materials as modern and affordable to a wide audience. The Museum's acquisitions of objects by women designers includes some pieces in German silver, which also was cheaper and more modern than real silver; earthenware, which was simpler than porcelain; and cast iron, which had mainly been used for stoves and fireplaces but was now popular for flower pots and other household items. Perhaps the most exciting material was the Swedish version of Bakelite, *isolit* from Skånska Ättiksfabriken, later called Perstorp. Wilhelmina Wendt (1896–1988) was the daughter of the factory founder and owner. She was also the first woman master silversmith in Sweden, a combination that gave her the idea to work in silver and the new plastic material (Fig. 7). She graduated from *Högre konstindustriella skolan* at *Tekniska skolan* in Stockholm in 1929 and was inspired by the Art Déco era. In 1946, she opened her own studio and production back home in Perstorp.⁹

⁷ Rehnberg, *Anna Petrus: Skulptör och industrikonstnär*, 101–103.

⁸ Christian Björk, "Estrid Ericson och Anna Petrus," in Olausson and Karlsson, *Kvinnliga pionjärer*, 42–44.

⁹ Anders Bengtsson, "Wilhelmina Wendt," in Olausson and Karlsson, *Kvinnliga pionjärer*, 30–36.



Fig. 5. Anna Petrus, Sculpture 'Lion' 1926, pewter, Svenskt Tenn.
Purchase by The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, Nationalmuseum, NMK 67/2014.



Fig. 6. Estrid Ericson and Anna Petrus (décor), Bowl 1944, pewter, Svenskt Tenn.
Purchase by The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, Nationalmuseum, NMK 66/2015.



Fig. 7. Wilhelmina Wendt, Brush 1935, silver, black isolite (plastic), Skånska Ättiksfabriken, later Perstorp AB. Donated by Nationalmusei Vänner, Bengt Julin's foundation 2013, Nationalmuseum, NMK 74/2013.



This ambition to renew and develop the art industries is summarised by the motto 'more beautiful wares for everyday use' and 'artists for industry', which the Swedish Society for Arts, Crafts, and Design promoted since 1914 in line with its German sister organisation, the Werkbund.¹⁰ In the case of earthenware, for example, several manufacturers had realised that it no longer sufficed to simply reproduce peasant vessels from the collection at the Nordic Museum, or to copy foreign factory products. To compete on the international market and increase production, it was necessary to hire professional artists and designers who could create products that people actually wanted to buy and could afford. Examples of women designers are Tyra Lundgren (1897–1979), artistic director of the Arabia porcelain factory in Helsinki and the first woman designer at the Venini glassworks outside Venice, Anna-Lisa Thomson (1905–1952), the first permanently employed artist at St Eriks Lervarufabriker, and Maggie Wibom (1899–1961), the first permanently employed woman at Bo Fajans (Fig. 8). Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg (1898–1988), who was among the first group of professionally trained furniture designers, opened one of the first interior design companies in Sweden, Futurum.¹¹ Another woman designer was Sylvia Stave (1908–1994), artistic director of the goldsmiths C.G.

Fig. 8. Anna-Lisa Thomson, Vase 1936, stoneware, glazed, Gefle Porslinsfabrik. Purchase by Nationalmuseum, NMK 129/1936; Vase 'Shell' 1945, earthenware, partially glazed, Upsala-Ekeby. Purchase in 1945, by Nationalmuseum, NMK 60/1945; and Vase, faience, Upsala-Ekeby. Donated by Upsala-Ekeby through director Rolf Sterner 1943, Nationalmuseum, NMK 96/1943.



Fig. 9. Sylvia Stave, Water jug '3834' 1936, electroplated silver, blackened wood, C.G. Hallbergs Guldsmeds AB. Purchase by The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, Nationalmuseum, NMK 198/2013.

Hallbergs Guldsmedsaktiebolag. The exhibition included a whole room with her glamorous cocktail shakers, glasses, and coffee sets in silver and German silver, in a Bauhaus-inspired style (Fig. 9). In 2013, the Nationalmuseum had the opportunity to acquire a large collection of her work from the German-Swedish collector and connoisseur Rolf Walter. Since the Museum receives no public funding for acquisitions, it was thanks to the Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation that we could acquire some 40 objects designed by Sylvia Stave.¹²

Sylvia Stave brings us to a fourth reason why successful women designers were so quickly forgotten and neglected, namely marriage. Stave had a blossoming career and her works for C.G. Hallbergs were exhibited at the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition and the 1937 Paris World's Fair. But in 1940, at the age of 31, she married a doctor in France and retired from the design field, to become a housewife. She never worked as a designer again, and when the Italian firm Alessi resumed production of one of her cocktail shakers in 1989, they thought it was designed by the German Bauhaus-trained designer Marianne Brandt. However, Rolf Walter and the Bauhaus archive were able to identify the real designer, Sylvia Stave, and re-establish her name within the design community.¹³

There are indeed several exciting and moving life stories embedded in the project about women pioneers in design. It is with great pleasure that the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm is now collecting objects and filling in the gaps in its inter-war design collection. The Museum building is currently closed for a major renovation, and when we open again in 2018, women designers will feature more prominently in the permanent exhibition.

¹⁰ Gregor Paulsson, *Vackrare vardagsvara* (Stockholm: Svenska slöjdföreningen, 1919); Gregor Paulsson, "Better Things for Everyday Life," in Lucy Creagh, Helena Kåberg, and Barbara Miller Lane (eds.), *Swedish Modern: Three Founding Texts* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 72–125.

¹¹ Olausson and Karlsson, *Kvinnliga pionjärer*; Sigrid Eklund-Nyström, *Inredningsarkitekt på 1930-talet: Om inredningsfirman Futurum och hur en ny yrkesgrupp etablerar sig* (Stockholm: Nordiska museets förlag, 1992); Maria Perers, "Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg: Artist of the 'People's Home,'" *Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm* 22 (2015), 61–70, <http://nationalmuseum.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:991809/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed June 26, 2017).

¹² Magnus Olausson and Micael Ernstell, "Sylvia Stave," in Olausson and Karlsson, *Kvinnliga pionjärer*, 46–52.

¹³ Ibid. Alessi, <http://store.alessi.com/and/en-gb/catalog/detail/90021-cocktail-shaker/90021> (accessed June 26, 2017).

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