

*"Remember January" by Mona Starfelt*



# MONA STARFELT

## *From Poems to Paints*

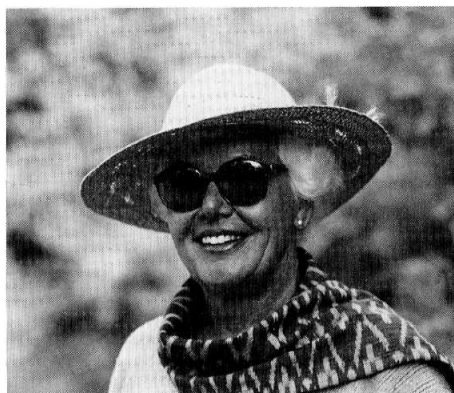
Sweden's Mona Starfelt has America to thank for starting her career in art. As a child growing up in Stockholm she had learned the basics of painting from her mother, a professional portrait painter.

But Mona's first steps led down quite a different path. She studied literature, Scandinavian languages, and history, receiving her M.A. degree in 1956 at the University of Stockholm. She married Nils Starfelt, a nuclear physicist who was a professor of applied physics at Linköping University and then research director at Atlas Copco Corporation. She gave birth to two daughters, Sisela and Camilla. She taught drama, Swedish, art, and history for twenty years in Stockholm high schools and colleges. Poetry was one of her many literary interests.

She might never have become a professional artist if fate had not leant a hand in the form of an invitation to Nils, in 1979, to be Sweden's science attaché in the embassy in Washington, DC. This was an honor for the Ph.D. in the family, but a puzzle for the M.A. During the minimum three years the

family would live in the American capital, Mona would have to leave her teaching and find something new to do.

It turned out to be a busy five years. The key was Mona's enrolling at age 50 in the Corcoran School of Art, where she attracted the attention and then the interest of her teacher, Gene Davis, an artist whose work is in the permanent collections of many museums around the world, including the Tate Gallery in London and the Metropolitan in New York.



*Mona Starfelt [Photo: Lena Ulvenstam]*

Maybe it was predictable that Mona would some day explore her mother's world of art. But Mona chose a path that was her own. Portraiture and realism interested her not at all. "I paint existence as it ought to look," she said later, "not as it actually looks."

Gene Davis has also talked about her special approach. "Mona Starfelt could be characterized somewhat ambiguously as a sophisticated primitive. Her charming depictions of childhood memories and recollections of times past in Scandinavia project a remarkable innocence of eye for an artist who appears to be thoroughly familiar with art history. Mona Starfelt creates an original and poignant world most of us would like to inhabit. Her paintings are liting fantasies inhabited by strange inverted perspectives, happy people, and sunlit days. I, for one, am delighted that they are around for all of us to enjoy."

Mona chooses themes of memory: "I don't paint what I see, I paint what I saw." Dreams coexist with the mundane in her pictures, as when she turns Majken Johansson's wry little poem "Remember January" into one painted scene where simultaneously we see Stockholmers enduring urban slush, spatter, "snuffling and coughing", and we see their sustaining dreams of "the apple-blossom splendors around Kivik" or even of "our most ordinary Swedish gardens in the summertime."

Few artists have drawn so directly from literature. Mona has interpreted poems by Werner Aspenström, Olof Lagercrantz, Edith Södergran, Bo Setterlind, and Tomas Tranströmer. Her solo shows have been richly illustrated poetry feasts.

Mona Starfelt's paintings have been exhibited in Cincinnati, Minneapolis, Houston, Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, as well as in galleries in Europe and Australia.

- David Mel Paul

*David Mel Paul is an American writer and a translator of Swedish literature ranging from Strindberg to Jersild.*