

Ulla Wachtmeister's Colorful World

Countess Ulla Wachtmeister has had a public life in international political and social circles as the wife of Wilhelm Wachtmeister, who was for many years Swedish ambassador to the United States and the dean of the diplomatic corps in Washington, D.C. Yet, despite traveling extensively in Algeria, Spain, Portugal, Russia, and the United States, Ulla Wachtmeister has found the time to be a practicing artist, the creator of an art of sensuality in its joyous colors, shapes, and patterns. Her paintings are about the other Ulla Wachtmeister, the inner life and personal world of a woman who has lived most of her life in the public eye.

Born Baroness Leuhusen, Wachtmeister had a father who was a cavalry officer and a mother who was the daughter of the founder of Norsk Hydro, one of the largest industries in Norway. Ulla Leuhusen studied chemistry before she married Count Wilhelm Wachtmeister in 1947 and raised a family of three children. The Wachtmeisters came to New York in the 1950s where her husband worked with Dag Hammarskjöld and the Swedish delegation at the United Nations.

Ulla Wachtmeister soon began studying art in New York, and held her first show in 1961 at the Green Gallery in New Rochelle, New York. The 1960s and early 1970s were an enormously busy time in which she participated in numerous trans-Atlantic group shows and was featured in many one-woman exhibitions from Florida and South Carolina to Vienna and Tunis. In 1979 she had a show at the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, and in 1993 she had two one-woman exhibitions, one in Stockholm and one at the American Swedish Historical Museum in Philadelphia. In October, 1994, she will exhibit at Sotheby's in Stockholm.

When walking through her studio in northwest Washington, D.C., and talking to Countess Wachtmeister about her art, one realizes how diversified her artistic life has been. She has created



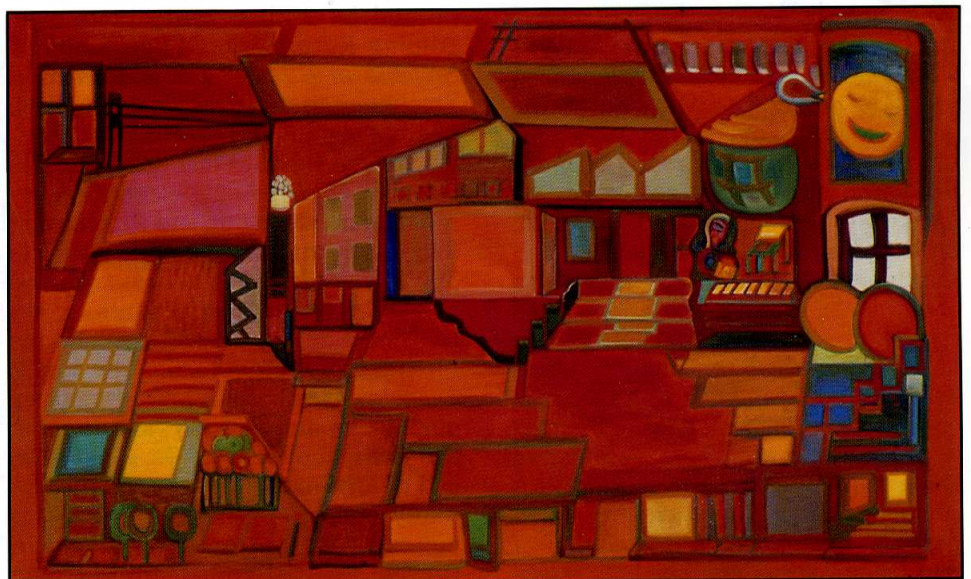
sculpture and designed silk scarves, decorative window displays, and even some of her own clothes. It is, however, her painting that reigns supreme.

The art of Ulla Wachtmeister has evolved stylistically since her years in New York, yet there are continuities which span the decades. Her subjects—an array of familiar images from interiors to flowers, and cityscapes to birds—are often derived from places she knows well. These places are metamorphosed by imagination. Some of the subjects of her paintings bring to mind her Swedish heritage. That every image seems to have its own place in the basic composition is a subtle reminder of this. The organization hints at the neat and tidy way Swedes of all classes give a sense of order and restraint to their homes.

The paintings are a feast for the eyes. This art is as delightfully optimistic as a child's drawing or a folk painting from Dalarna. It also presents traditional and personal symbols, such as candles, dandelions, and butterflies, that express fragility and the precariousness of human life. There is much to see and learn when viewing the radiant mosaic-like patterns of color and the whimsical charm of Ulla Wachtmeister's art.

—Karin M.E. Alexis

Karin Alexis is an art historian living in Vienna, Virginia. She is the coordinator of the Smithsonian Art History Certificate Program, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. She dedicates this article to the memory of DeEtte Hedlund Holland and Dr. Theodore Turah.



Ulla Wachtmeister's "Cityscape" 1986, 98" x 60"