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# Sweden & America

Swedish Folk Art



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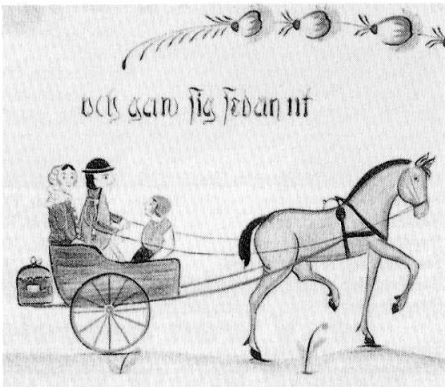
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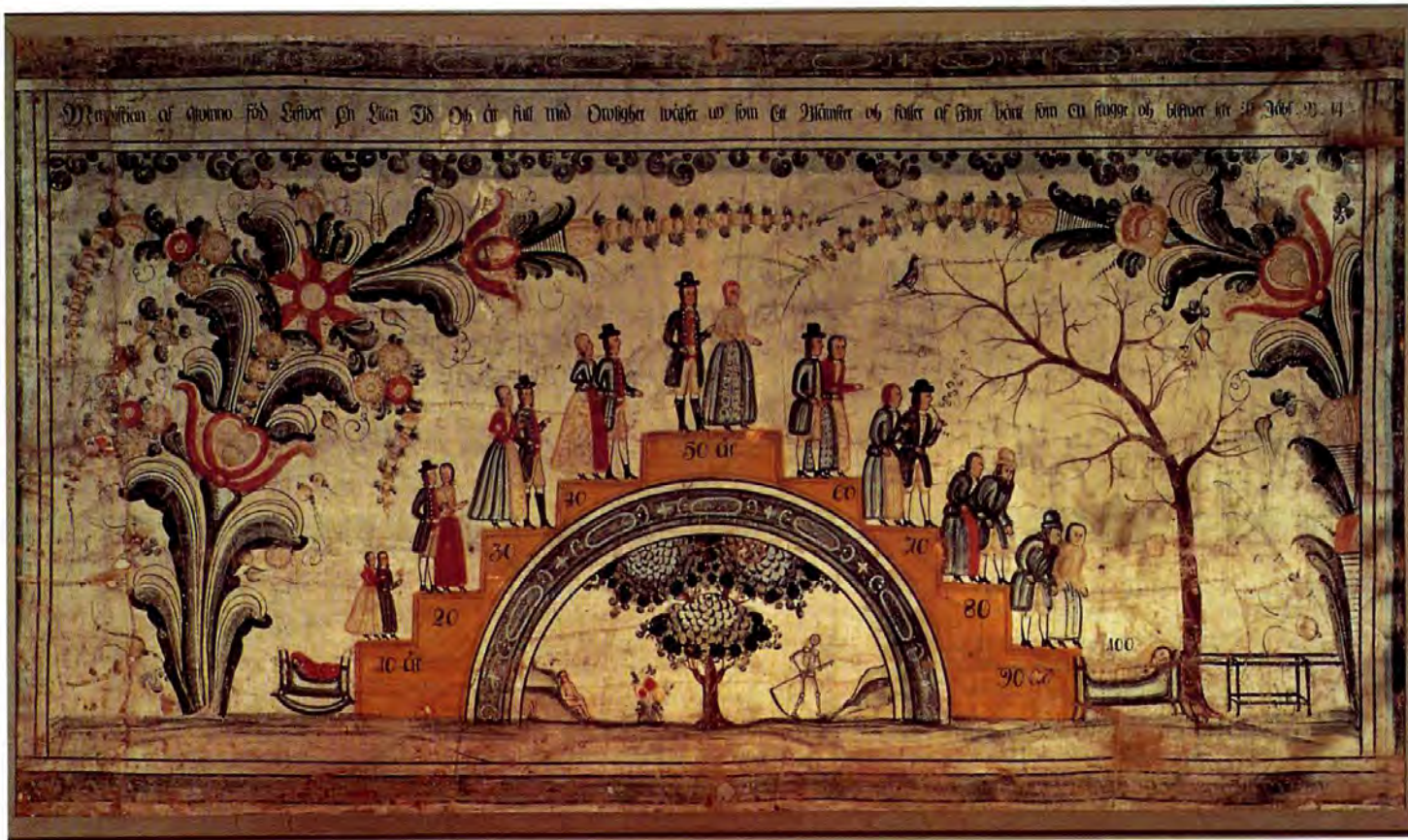
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**Cover:** A painted wall hanging by Swedish folk artist Anders Bengtsson (1814-1867) from Norra Bökeberg in Femsjö parish in Småland. Credit: the International Folk Art Foundation Collection in the Museum of International Folk Art, a unit of the Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe. Photo by Blair Clark.

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There is much talk in Sweden today about how we should adapt to the rest of Europe—the New Europe. At the same time there is increasing emphasis on the importance of each local area and its specific profile. Local communities are working to strengthen their identities in different ways.

For many years, we Swedes have considered the *rosmålning* painting technique as typically Norwegian. *Dalmålning* can be thought of as a type of *rosmålning*, but in a style that is typical of the province of Dalarna—"the heart of Sweden". Similar colorful paintings from Sunnerbo in southern Sweden are easily differentiated from *dalmålningar* by the trained eye.

All are folk arts tied to particular regions. Within certain parameters, all have developed their own styles filled with joy and individual fantasy. The subjects are the same for these folk artists—very often religious paintings from the farmers' everyday experiences, decorated with fantastical

flowers, shrubbery, and birds.

In Dalarna, these paintings—which began to appear in the early nineteenth century—have come to represent something characteristic for the province. The centers for this activity have been the parishes of Leksand and Rättvik.

At the same time, tapestry painting developed in southwestern Småland and in the province of Halland. In Sunnerbo in Småland, four generations of one family—both men and women—earned extra income by painting tapestries on linen during the hundred years between 1750 and 1850. By the end of the 19th century this type of folk art had lost its appeal, as it represented an era and a mindset which people wished to leave behind. Many rolled up tapestries were stowed in attics or tossed in the garbage.

In the 1930s a renewed interest was apparent. It was during this time that many of these paintings started showing up in the United States. There are examples of both *dalmålningar* and southern Swedish tapestry paintings in museums around America.

One person is worth mentioning here: Florence Dibell Bartlett. She visited Sweden in the thirties and returned to Chicago with 42 tapestries, both original paintings and copies. Today 29 of these are at the Art Institute of Chicago and the rest are at the

# Swedish Folk Art

*Tapestry painted by Winter Carl Hansson (1777-1805) from Dalarna, Sweden, shows the "Age Staircase" motif. It is one of the objects in the "Swedish Folk Art: All Tradition Is Change" exhibit opening on December 4, 1994, at the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. [Photo: Mats Landin, Nordiska Museet, Stockholm]*



Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a museum founded by Florence Bartlett. A large exhibit of Swedish folk art opens there in December, 1994, and later will tour throughout the United States.

Nine paintings are at the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, gathered with other articles from Dalarna by H.G. Thomas, nephew of W.W. Thomas, the American consul in Sweden during the U.S. Civil War. The collection came to Portland, Maine, in 1905 and lay unpacked in storage until 1940, when the Swedish-American artist Gustaf Tenggren found them. After his death in 1951 they were donated to the ASI. In the American Swedish Institute's auditorium are the *dalmålningar* painted in the 1980s by Bengt Engman (see following story).

In the grand entry of the American Swedish Historical Museum in Philadelphia a Sunnerbo painting is on display. Several others are in the museum's collection. These are copies made in Sweden in the 1930s.

If one wishes to study this folk art in Sweden, it is best to visit Nordiska Museet in Stockholm. But it is more fun to see examples of *dalmålningar* in their home areas—at the museum in Falun or at the House of Culture (*Kulturhuset*) in Leksand. Likewise, the best place to see southern Swedish tapestry painting is in the museum in Halmstad.

It isn't always easy for non-experts to see the regional differences. For many Swedes, as well as for Americans, they all seem to be *dalmålningar*. But it is exciting to begin to recognize the regional differences in their execution, color, and design.

I wish that the *dalmålningar* and the southern Swedish tapestry paintings that are in the Art Institute of Chicago's collection could be exhibited at, for

example, the Swedish American Museum Center in Chicago. Together with information on Florence Dibell Bartlett, these would tell how persons can build bridges with a common form of art expression, which even today engages and gives joy to people in both Sweden and the United States.

Above the door to the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe is a sign which appropriately states, "Folk Art is a Bond Between People."

—Lena Larsén

*Lena Larsén is on the staff of Kulturen i Lund (The Museum of Cultural History), located in Lund, Sweden.*

### Swedish Folk Art in New Mexico

*Dalmålningar* and other examples of Swedish folk art will be on display at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, starting December 4, 1994. They are part of the exhibit "Swedish Folk Art: All Tradition Is Change" which will tour four or five sites through 1997. The exhibit is put together by the New Mexico museum and Kulturhuset in Stockholm and is supported by a major grant from IKEA.

**K**ulturen i Lund is the closest thing to Skansen that you will find outside of the Swedish capital. Located in the center of Lund, in southern Skåne, the museum is owned by *Kulturhistoriska föreningen för södra Sverige*—the Cultural History Association for Southern Sweden, founded in 1882. Kulturen (as it is commonly known) is an open air park with 36 buildings, some originally from Lund and some which have been transported here from other parts of Skåne and southern Sweden.

Major exhibits are on view in "The White House," the main building at Kulturen, but nearly all buildings are furnished with antiques, giving Kulturen visitors a sense of what life was like in past eras. One can visit a vicarage from 1755, a deacon's house from the 15th century, a "burgher's house" from the 16th century, or an old grocery store from the early 19th century.



Of special interest to Kulturen's staff is the documentation of Swedish folk art, of which *dalmålningar* and tapestry paintings are prime examples. Lena Larsén, chief of the Program and Education division of Kulturen, who wrote the previous article, has asked that anyone with examples of Swedish folk art, such as *dalmålningar* or tapestry paintings, write to her at Kulturen i Lund, Karlins plats, Box 1095, 221 04 Lund, Sweden.



Bengt Engman

*Bengt Engman visited the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis in 1983 and painted the "To America" frieze in the new auditorium. The panel above says, "De sålde sina hemman och gav sig sedan ut" ("They sold their farms and left the land").*

# MINNEAPOLIS'S *DALMÅLNINGAR*

*Dalmålning* is principally a narrative form of illustration and more than just decorative painting on cupboards. It was used by self-taught painters in isolated villages in Dalarna from the end of the 18th to the end of the 19th century.

The appeal of *dalmålningar* is in its narrative joy, the naive designs, and the fantasy and richness of its ideas. With simple gestures, symbols, and props, the artist could describe an event or evoke a mood, or even provoke a laugh. There was also a curious juxtaposition of the ancient and the contemporary. The artist depicted, for example, Biblical characters in 19th century costumes from Dalarna. One of the artists who upheld the *dalmålning* tradition well was the late Bengt Engman.

Bengt Engman was king in his own little kingdom. Until his death in 1987 he lived in Skamhed, outside of Vansbro in western Dalarna. He didn't copy old paintings; instead, he created new *dalmålningar*, using his own designs and vision, painted in the traditional way.

In his youth, Bengt Engman dreamed of becoming an artist, but his father said, "No thank you, no bums in our family." Artists had a poor reputation. Honest craftsmen and prosperous farmers saw them as vagrants.

His father was a house painter and Engman apprenticed with him at an early age. He learned that a house painter needed to know both how to decorate cupboards and to paint *dalmålningar*. He learned the family's secret paint recipes that had been passed down

from generation to generation. He learned which fish were best to use as paint binders. Even horse hoofs, bone, and curd could be used for this purpose. As Engman used to say, "Maybe those who painted in the castles and the manor houses used egg in the tempera, but the poor artists in western Dalarna probably stuffed the eggs in their mouths instead."

While a student of Bengt Engman, I had the privilege to be a part of the painting in 1983 of the "To America" frieze at the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis. It depicts the immigration from Sweden, how the newcomers fared, their visits to "the old country," and their return home again.

The frieze took two months, and during its painting was influenced by

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*The Swedish folk art tradition lives on in America as well. Rita Sharpe Walker of Lindsborg, Kansas, recently was represented at the folk art exhibition at Kulturhuset in Stockholm. Walker, who cannot claim any Swedish heritage, was married to the late Robert Walker, a Lindsborg artist. Together they continued the dalmålning tradition with, for example, George Washington Almost Comes to Dinner. A group of Swedish-Americans are welcoming George Washington to dinner by serving lutfisk. The rearing horse and the startled look on Washington's face represent the reaction of many Americans to this Swedish Christmas tradition. In the summer of 1996 Rita Walker is planning a lecture tour of the West Coast. Any group interested in further information should contact her c/o the Folklife Institute, 118 S. Main St., Lindsborg, KS 67456. (Photo: Folklife Institute of Central Kansas. Used with permission of the artist.)*

many moving reminiscences of visitors to the site. They had themselves immigrated from Sweden when young, or had heard stories about the immigration from their parents or grandparents. These contained experiences of hope, adventure, success, setback, joy, and humor, but also elements of melancholy and sorrow. The tales gave inspiration to the painting.

The Engman creation depicts Swedish-Americans swimming in Minneapolis's Lake Calhoun, and visiting Eriksson's bar and the Bank of America. One immigrant dreams of childhood memories of midsummer celebrations and early Christmas morning church services. Another visits Sweden and tries to impress the farmers, who see Americans as braggarts. The return trip is, of course, on SAS. The tie of friendship between Swedes and Swedish-Americans is summarized in the final panel:

*Snart vänskapen var stiftad  
Vi tryckte allas hand  
Vi voro alla son och dotter  
Av samma fosterland.*

(“Soon friendships were formed/We shook each other's hand/We were the

sons and daughters/Of the same native land.”)

The majority of the frieze was painted in the late evenings and at night, as the day's impressions became clearer and the inspiration flowed . . . and we had some peace and quiet. Although the work was very intensive, it was never tiring. Sometimes Bengt said that he had “unseen” help. Even back at the studio in Skamhed he insisted to me that when it was going well, it seemed as if someone was holding his brush.

I hope that you will view *dalmålningar* with new eyes, as well as see “To America” at the ASI in Minneapolis. *Dalmålning* is a part of our cultural heritage and is unique both for Sweden and in the history of art.

—Birgitta Hedengren

*Birgitta Hedengren is a contemporary painter of dalmålningar. She has exhibited her works at the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis and at the Swedish American Museum Center of Chicago. Her works will be at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle in November-December, 1994.*