Nils Kreuger’s Drafts for the Covers of *Bland Franska Bönder* (1889) by August Strindberg and *Ord och Bild* (1897)

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The Nationalmuseum has acquired a number of important cover sketches by Nils Kreuger (1858–1930). As one of the driving forces in Konstnärsförbundet (the Artists’ Association) and a central figure in the Swedish arts at the turn of the last century, Kreuger’s oeuvre is primarily identified with painting. His illustration art does not receive as much attention, but Kreuger was perhaps the busiest illustrator in the Artists’ Association and its circles and was responsible for many noteworthy illustrations for journals and books, as well as posters. The characteristic contour lines that he gradually evolved are particularly suitable for this genre, but are also found in his popular paintings featuring horses from Alvaret, on the island of Öland. Generations of Swedish schoolchildren have also encountered Swedish rural life through Kreuger’s wall charts. The drawings acquired by the Nationalmuseum are fine examples of Kreuger’s illustration art and excellent reflections of the diligence in his working process.

Nils Kreuger’s draft for the cover of Bland franska bönder by August Strindberg (1889)

When August Strindberg (1849–1912), inspired by his time at the Grez-Sur-Loing art colony, among other things, was publishing a record of his travels, Bland franska bönder: Subjektiva reseskildringar (1889), the author proposed himself as illustrator. Publisher Albert Bonnier (1820–1900) instead chose to give the commission to Nils Kreuger (1858–1930). Strindberg and Kreuger had met in Grez in 1882 and, despite Kreuger accepting this job, they remained friends over the years.

As Magdalena Gram has previously described, Strindberg also remained very involved in the appearance of the book. He believed that the book required an illustrated cover – not yet common at that time – but when he saw Kreuger’s draft he thought that the artist had been too free in relation to the text. Albert Bonnier quickly asked the artist for a new draft. The publisher was very satisfied with the figures “in the medallion”, but wanted more emphasis on the landscape above it. He felt that otherwise it would not work as a cover illustration. It is easy to see what Bonnier meant. Kreuger’s delicate cover is characteristic of illustration art in the 1880s, which had become increasingly detailed, partly from the desire to utilise new and improved opportunities for reproduction. However, in this case, the draft is perhaps more reminiscent of an elaborate vignette, or combination of vignettes, typical of a frontispiece or other interior decorations of a book. The light touch to the ink strokes, the element of asymmetry in the overall composition and the calligraphic appearance of the title all have traces of Japonism, which had become fashionable in Paris in the 1880s. It is likely that its influence also contributed to Kreuger’s cover illustrations from this period being so decorative, ornamental or vignette-like.

The Nationalmuseum’s acquisition (Fig. 1) is thus the first draft and allows an
interesting comparison with the one that was printed. On the back of the drawing, Kreuger has written: “First cover sketch. Rejected by Bonnier because there are no figures – he got a poorer one – and was perhaps satisfied”. With both versions available to us, the first draft appears more emphatic than the one accepted by the publisher (Fig. 2), paradoxically enough, bearing in mind Bonnier’s opinions. Despite the publisher referring to the new version as being “more powerful”, the composition has now on the whole become more crowded and, perhaps a little less distinct. Bonnier must certainly also have been pleased with the calligraphy in the title, which had been enlarged on his request. However, overall the printed version appears to be a compromise in which the artist has taken account of discordant desires, which is of course natural, given the opinions of both Strindberg and Bonnier. The distinctive long shirt worn by this farmer, of a type also worn by the author in some of his self-portraits from the period, recurs in one of the figures – walking along a country road with a dog – that Kreuger, added to the upper section of the cover. Interestingly, two drawings that the Nationalmuseum

Fig. 4 Nils Kreuger (1858–1930), Donkey in Gréz-sur-Loing, probably 1883. Pencil and ink, wash on paper, 105 x 69 mm. Purchase: the Axel Hirsch Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 10/2017.

Fig. 5 Nils Kreuger (1858–1930), Street View with a Horse, probably middle of 1880s. Pencil and ink on paper, 110 x 900 mm. Purchase: the Axel Hirsch Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 8/2017.

Fig. 4 Nils Kreuger (1858–1930), Donkey in Gréz-sur-Loing, probably 1883. Pencil and ink, wash on paper, 105 x 69 mm. Purchase: the Axel Hirsch Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 10/2017.

Fig. 5 Nils Kreuger (1858–1930), Street View with a Horse, probably middle of 1880s. Pencil and ink on paper, 110 x 900 mm. Purchase: the Axel Hirsch Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 8/2017.
Among the generous epithets that Ord och Bild has received in the press, “Scandinavia’s premier journal” is an oft recurring one. There can be no doubt that Sweden has the best resources for nurturing a body that, in everything, would motivate this name. By affiliating ourselves with local editorial boards in Helsinki, in Christiania and in Copenhagen, we have chosen to aim for such a target and the result, as it appears in this sixth [sic] year, has encouraged us to continue along this path. Entirely Swedish in purpose, but with an open mind and lively participation in everything that can broaden our horizons and increase our spiritual assets, this new year of the journal marches out below the four Scandinavian coats of arms with the intention of not only calling upon our countrymen, but also the attention of our kinsmen, to the life that has been lived and is

Nils Kreuger’s drafts for the cover of Ord & Bild (1897)
Kreuger’s artistic endeavours were broad and wide-ranging; in addition to paintings and illustrations, they included posters and the applied arts. Early on, illustration commissions were some of the few relatively regular sources of income that Kreuger could count on. However, he worked sporadically as an illustrator throughout his career, perhaps primarily because his powerful drawings were particularly suitable for this. Kreuger illustrated journals such as Jul and Söndags-Nisse, as well as publications on the political left such as Folkbladet, Socialdemokraten, Julfacklan, Första Maj and Tiden. In 1897, Kreuger created the cover and vignettes that were used for Karl Wåhlin’s (1861–1937) liberal-leaning cultural journal Ord och Bild from 1898 until 1953. Arthur Sjögren (1874–1951) was responsible for the more Art Nouveau-inspired design that was used for the journal’s first six years. In the drawings acquired by the Nationalmuseum, it is possible to see how Kreuger carefully works towards the final result, characterised by an almost baroque weight and impact. Here, the title is written in a decorative speech scroll as big as the other ornamentation, which comprises the four Nordic coats of arms. Sweden was still in a union with Norway when the new cover was created, and the journal’s contents of the time often represent a “Nordism” that emphasised the Nordic countries’ shared cultural foundation, while not uncommonly also highlighting Sweden’s exceptionality. The new cover was first used for the first issue in the journal’s seventh year. Instead of advertising, as was usual, for this issue the back cover featured an announcement about the new cover illustration. It was signed “the Editorial Board” and there is good reason to quote a longer excerpt here, as it describes the motivation behind the appearance of the new cover in more detail:

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acquired along with the draft for the book have a direct relationship to this painting. One includes the same donkey carriage as the painting (Fig. 4) and the other features the figure with the distinctive untucked shirt (Fig. 5). In one way or another, this later drawing relates both to the other works with this figure in the long shirt, as well as to the original draft cover illustration, as his pose in relation to the horse is reminiscent of the figure in the draft’s medallion. This way, Kreuger would thus meet the wishes of the publisher and perhaps subtly play on Strindberg’s direct interest in and opinions on how the cover illustration was presented. He tucks in the shirt of the man with the horse and the untucked shirt instead comes to characterise one of the strolling, conversing figures – perhaps the travel writer himself – that he adds to the landscape at the top. In later correspondence with the publisher, Strindberg was tough in his criticism of Kreuger’s illustrations for his other works, such as Svenska öden och äfventyr (two volumes, 1899) and Sömmgångarnätter på vakna dagar (1900).
lived within our borders, whilst also aiming to draw attention to the primary cultural phenomena of our neighbours and, further afield, throughout the entire advanced world.\footnote{16}

Kreuger appears to develop the subject after initial hesitation about adopting the central element of Sjögren’s previous design: the lit oil lamp (Fig. 6). The artist soon moves to a design characterised by the coats of arms but, along the way, appears to have first created a kind of clover leaf in which the Swedish coat of arms, with three crowns, is as big as the other three coats of arms together (Fig. 7). “The clover crown” is divided by a central burning torch, possibly a result of the former design featuring the oil lamp. However, the torch is then removed and the clover leaves are soon equally sized (Fig. 8), before being lifted out and “permitted” to become coats of arms in their own right. Of the four cover sketches that have been acquired by the Nationalmuseum, one is decidedly closer to that which was finally printed. In this draft (Fig. 9), as in the printed cover, the coats of arms are borne by heavy trunks of oak, but unlike the later version in which the oak leaves are finer and more numerous, the oak leaves in the draft are rougher, drawn in ink with broad strokes.\footnote{17}

All these drawings by Kreuger were in the possession of the former curator at the Nationalmuseum, Kjell Boström (1921–1953), who also authored a biography of the artist that was published in 1948. Seen together, the draft for *Bland franska*
bönder and both its directly associated drawings gain special significance, as they can perhaps reinforce the idea that Kreuger incorporated a “portrait” of Strindberg as a farmer, in both the book cover and the painting Cart by the Haystack. In addition, the draft for the bookcover, as well as the drafts for Ord och Bild’s cover, demonstrate how hard-working Kreuger was in capturing the intentions of his clients and how well he succeeded in doing so. The drawings also show Kreuger’s ability to embody different artistic movements in his illustration art, tastefully and superbly applied for the purpose of the commission.

Notes:
6. The provenance of all the drawings covered in this article is the Ragnhild and Kjell Boström collection. Bukowskis, 26 December 2016, auction nos. 846833, 841540, 846842 and 846904.
17. Kreuger reused the design with oak leaves and a speech scroll in his poster for the exhibition of August Strindberg’s art at Hallins konsthandel in Stockholm in 1911. See Gram 2004, p. 137 (ill.), cat. no. 108. Over the years, Kreuger kept careful accounts of income and expenses and, on 4 November 1897, these state that he received 150 kronor for: “Various drawings for Ord & Bild (spine and & cover, etc.).” Nationalmuseum, Konstnärsförbundet’s archive/Swedish National Archives, Nils Kreuger, 3 vols.