Portraits and Dining Services from the Grill Family

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Daniel Seghers (1590–1661) and Erasmus Quellinus the Younger (1607–1678), Flower Garland with the Standing Virgin and Child, c. 1645–50. Oil on copper, 85.5 x 61.5 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7505.

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In 2018, the Nationalmuseum acquired two works in pastels by Gustaf Lundberg (1695–1786), showing the couple Anna Johanna the Elder (1720–1778) and Claes Grill (1705–1767). The portraits had formerly hung in the Chinese Room at Godegårds, Östergötland, where they were surrounded by eight Chinese paintings on rice paper, depicting landscapes and buildings, as well as a few smaller paintings, also with Chinese subjects. Godegårds manor and works were owned by the couple’s nephew Johan Abraham Grill (1736–1792) from 1775.¹

The Grill family had Dutch roots and played an important role in Swedish trade and industry in the 17th and 18th centuries.² Claes Grill’s father, Abraham (1674–1725), and Abraham’s brother Carlos (1681–1736), founded the Grill trading company in Stockholm. This was where Claes was trained, eventually taking over the business, which mainly exported iron, copper and wood products. Grill owned ironworks and shares in mines, as well as docks and vessels. Imports among others consisted of colonial goods. The founding of the Svenska Ostindiska Kompaniet [Swedish East India Company] in 1731³ caught the attention of the Grill family. Claes and his two brothers, as well as his nephew Johan Abraham, were eventually made directors. The latter also participated in journeys to China as supercargo. The Chinese Room at Godegårds was not simply an expression of 18th-century chinoiserie,
but also carried a personal meaning for its owner.

Naturally, the Grill family ordered porcelain via Ostindiska kompaniet, a total of six dinner services with coats of arms and two with monograms. The Nationalmuseum has acquired a tureen with a lid and plate (Figs. 1–2) and a lidded punch-bowl (Fig 3). The Grill heraldic animals, a pair of entwined cranes with crickets (grillo in Italian) in their beaks, are shown on a white base with blue underglaze. Other ornamentation consists of flower garlands, palmettos and shells. The pattern has been hypothetically ascribed to Jean Eric Rehn (1717–1793). A single crane stands at the centre of the Grill escutcheon; the unusual image with two entwined birds probably means that this dining service celebrates the alliance between spouses. Two pairs of cousins have been named as possible commissioners: Claes and Anna Johanna the Elder, who married in 1737, or their son Adolf Ulric (1752–1797) and Anna Johanna the Youngest (1753–1809), who married in 1778. In addition to trade, the family was also active in the applied arts. For example, Anthoni Grill (1639–1703) and Baltzar Grill (d. 1697) were goldsmiths, with the latter also being director of Kungsholms glasbruk. Later generations continued the interest in high quality art and applied arts. For example, Claes Grill ordered one of the foremost examples of Swedish Rococo silver, a ewer and basin produced by Johan Collin (d. 1779) in 1745, probably after a model by Christian Precht (1706–1779). It is likely they were intended for Anna Johanna’s dressing table. When these silver objects were donated to the Dutch Reformed Church in Stockholm they were given a new function as christening basin (acquired by the Nationalmuseum in 2006, NMK 110a-b/2006). Claes Grill also owned one of his time’s foremost art collections in Sweden, with both older Dutch and contemporary Swedish works. The artists that Claes and Anna Johanna Grill were in close contact with included Gustaf Lundberg, who dominated Swedish pastels in the mid-18th century. Lundberg had dedicated himself to this technique during his time in Paris, where he arrived in 1717. A few years later, the Venetian artist Rosalba Carriera (1675–1757) also arrived in Paris. She was far from the first person to produce portraits in pastels, but was significant in increasing the popularity of this medium and influenced a number of contemporaneous artists. However, according to Merit Laine, Gustaf Lundberg was the only one who as good as abandoned oil painting for pastels during Carriera’s time in Paris, 1720–21. More and more artists in France followed the same path in the fol-
Fig. 4 Gustaf Lundberg (1695–1786), Anna Johanna Grill (1720–1778). Pastel on paper, mounted on panel, 48 x 39 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2741.

Fig. 5 Gustaf Lundberg (1695–1786), Claes Grill (1705–1767). Pastel on paper, mounted on panel, 48 x 39 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2740.

Lundberg's pastels of the Grills are undated. Because portraits are always staged and more or less idealised, the ages of those depicted are difficult to assess. Their half-length portraits are probably the first examples. After these, copies were executed in pastels, oils and engravings, probably produced in Lundberg's environs. The portraits are not composed as pendants – the wife is seen almost en face (Fig. 4), while the husband is shown in profile (Fig. 5). Anna Johanna is wearing a white bonnet with a pink ribbon tied in a bow beneath her chin. A thin fabric rests on her shoulders; it is lifted by a breeze, giving a sense of airiness. Similar compositions are also found in other portraits of women by Lundberg, although these women are generally depicted in half-length and en savoyarde, carrying a small box in which a genuine Savoyarde would be expected to keep a marmot for display. Anna Johanna Grill's portrait lacks these elements of role play. The focus is on the face and on her gaze, which is directed straight at the observer. In the profile portrait of her husband too, this outward gaze is clear in the only visible eye. Strict profile is unusual, not only for Lundberg, but generally in portrait painting. Both these pastels are high quality and representative examples of Gustaf Lundberg's work. The artist has succeeded in creating an illusion of immediacy, a visual contact between model and observer.

Alexander Roslin (1718–1793) was also in the Grill family's circle. In 1775, he executed a group portrait of Anna Johanna the Elder with her children, Anna Johanna the Younger and Adolf Ulric. The deceased father of the family is present as a portrait in the portrait; on the wall in the background, Roslin has copied Lundberg's pastel portrait of Claes Grill. Just over a decade later, Roslin painted a self-portrait in which his wife, the artist Marie Suzanne Giroust (1734–1772), is depicted working with a pastel that shows Henrik Wilhelm
ACQUISITIONS/PORTraits AND DINING SERVICES FROM THE Grill FAMILY

Peill (1730–1797) (NM 7141). In the left of the painting there is a small gold box with two barely visible portraits, probably Peill’s future wife and mother-in-law, Anna Johanna the Younger and the Elder.14

Notes:
5. Bo Lagercrantz has dated the service to the 1780s, attributes the model to Jean Eric Rehn and links the commission to Adolf Ulric and Anna Johanna the Younger in Lagercrantz 1951, pp. 102–106. On stylistic grounds, Jan Virgín dates the service to c. 1755–60. He also names Rehn as the probable creator of the model, but links the service to Claes and Anna Johanna the Elder in Virgín 1998, p. 141, cat. no. 148.
9. Ibid., pp. 56 f.
13. The painting belongs to the Gothenburg Museum of Art, inv. no. GKM 1027.