“Sweden’s Greatest Artist”
The Reception of the Landscapes of Anna Boberg

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One of the best-represented artists in the collections of the Nationalmuseum is today one of the less well-known of Sweden’s landscape painters. Anna Boberg (1864–1935) was once celebrated in the American press as “Sweden’s greatest artist”, but is today mostly forgotten in the Swedish historiography of art. Art historians have sought to explain this by claiming that very little has been written on Boberg and her artistic oeuvre. However, ongoing research at the Nationalmuseum has begun to uncover the rich literature on her work, its reception, and her legacy within Swedish art history and beyond.¹

Boberg was the daughter of the celebrated architect Fredrik Wilhelm Scholander (1816–1881) and his wife, the theosophist and translator Carin Scholander (née Nyström, 1830–1912). In 1888, Anna married the promising architect Ferdinand Boberg (1860–1946), and together they formed one of the most important partnerships in Swedish art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Sources differ as to when Boberg started painting, but we know

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Fig. 1 Anna Boberg (1864–1935), Fishing Harbour with Sunlit Mountains. Study for Inloppet till Svolvaer. Oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 34.5 × 69 cm. Anna and Ferdinand Boberg bequest 1946. Nationalmuseum, NM 4300.-
that she, taking after her father and elder sister Maria Scholander- Hedlund (1856–1951), had probably begun painting in watercolour by 1887 and began exhibiting her work around the same time. Boberg was a contemporary of Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) and in October 1888 they both showed work at the Swedish Association for Art (Sveriges allmänna konstförening). Among her earliest commissions as a decorative painter we find the dining room of Count Hallwyl’s Ljusne villa and wall decorations in the Hotel Rydberg. In 1893, she exhibited three watercolours at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In 1894, she painted a frieze for the famous Swedish illustrator and architect Axel Haig (Hägg) (1835–1921) for his home outside of London. However, in the journal Idun the writer Claës Lundin (1825–1908) suggested that it was in the wall decorations at the Grand Hotel Saltsjöbaden, completed in 1895, that she emerged as a “fully fledged independent artist” and showed “a significant talent for composition”.3

Yet it is 1901 which is the most significant year of Boberg’s career as a painter. In the summer, she travelled to Lofoten, Norway, for the first time. The unique Arctic landscape that she encountered there would come to change her life. Tellingly, her autobiography begins with the sentence “There you see the Lofoten Wall”, followed by an account of her second visit to the Lofoten Islands. On her first visit, she had been bewitched by the landscape and had refused to return home with her husband, who had had to travel back without her, stopping in Trondheim on the way to acquire and send painting materials to his wife. All she wanted to do was to “paint, paint, paint”.4 As noted, she opens her autobiography with her return to Lofoten and the fishing village of Svolvær a few months later. It appears as if her life began when she encountered Lofoten’s dramatic mountain-and-seascape, as if she became synonymous with it. She describes her impression of the “luminous” Arctic islands and the towering Lofoten Wall as “a gathering of granite giants who, since the dawn of time, have stood knee-deep in the sea with their snow-covered heads above the clouds resisting the furious onslaughts of hurricanes”.5

She returned to the Arctic in the winter. During her summer sojourn, she had become so familiar with “the Three Greats” of Lofoten that she imagined that “the sigh of the ocean, the whisper of the wind and the silence of the mountains” were all saying she should return in winter: “when the full moon, like a sun made of ice, disperses the night of noon, when the aurora borealis flares among the stars and storm clouds and waves chase each other, when the Lofoten Wall forms a wondrous stronghold with bastions and towers of alabaster… and the sea becomes dotted with armadas of Viking ships. Return then, stranger, to behold the apotheosis of Arctic beauty and wilderness!”

And so, she did. Svolvær came to be her second home as she became completely consumed with the problem of capturing the sublime landscape. Her husband Ferdinand, always considerate, realised what had to be done and wrote to her that he had drawn up plans for a studio house to be built off the port of Svolvær.

In 1903, Anna Boberg exhibited twelve of her Lofoten paintings for the first time in Stockholm at Vinterbilder från Lofoten (Winter Scenes from Lofoten), at the Swedish Association for Art. The exhibition was a success and was shown in Berlin at the Galerie Eduard Schulte as well. At this point she was not an unknown artist, but rather, as one critic recognised, an artist “with a reputation to preserve”.5 Her first exhibition was met with mixed reviews, some of which were more damning than others. However, unlike today, critics were not reluctant to place Boberg within a wider art-historical context. Whether they approved of her first attempt at depicting the Arctic landscape or not, they took her art seriously. Moreover, most reviewers were positive, praising her sensibility as a colourist, her strong compositions and the energy in her work.6 At the same time, critics also noted the “strangeness” of her technique and how, like van Gogh, she used a palette knife for some compositions.7 In 1903, her attention to the effects of light was most frequently compared to Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Giovanni Segantini (1858–1899). While critics initially disagreed over the merits of the exhibition, it was well attended and a reproduction of the painting Inloppet till Svolvaer (The Approach to Svolvær), considered by many to be the most successful, appeared in Idun (Fig. 1).8

Boberg was not discouraged by some of the exceedingly negative reviews.9 Instead, she went back to Lofoten and resumed her romantic project of interpreting and representing the “Three Greats” of the island group. In 1905, an exhibition of fifty-seven Lofoten landscapes at La galerie des artistes modernes in Paris brought her further recognition. The show garnered glowing reviews from French critics and Swedish foreign correspondents. Again, her peculiar technique was noted as reviewers commented on how different each painting was from the other. It was as if she had approached each composition as a particular problem to be solved, rather than a collection of canvases expressing adherence to a style. As such, Boberg’s style varied over the years and even between paintings.

Discussing Anna’s artistic mentorship of Gustaf VI Adolf’s first wife, Crown Princess Margareta, Ferdinand said that his wife considered herself to be an expressionist, in contrast to her close friend and protégée who was an impressionist.10

In 1905, reporting on her success, the Swedish correspondents reverently referred to the Parisian critics such as François Thibault-Sisson (1856–1936) and Arsène Alexandre (1859–1937), who had praised Boberg’s exhibition in Le Temps and Le Figaro. French critics were quoted in Sweden as saying she could paint “everything” from “bright daylight to dark night, to hurricanes and storms, as well as stillness”, all done with the same “eagerness and clear intelligence”.

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Fig. 2 Anna Boberg (1864–1935), *Northern Lights. Study from North Norway.* Oil on canvas, 97 × 75 cm. Anna and Ferdinand Boberg bequest 1946. Nationalmuseum, NM 4258.
Le Figaro called her landscapes “the newest” art to be displayed that season. Her execution was at once both naïve and intelligent, “almost classical”. Back in Sweden, her success was celebrated as “a victory for Swedish art”. Critics eagerly anticipated her future Swedish exhibitions, and from that moment on Boberg was met with nearly equal praise in her native country.

Her Paris exhibition was particularly well received in the British magazine The Studio. She was commended for her courage and for finally having mastered her métier. It was concluded that rarely had “lovers of landscape and seascape seen such an interesting exhibition”. According to “F. L.”, her paintings were seen to represent: a sort of epitome of the life of the sailors of the North of Norway: their departure with the fishing fleet, their return in storm or calm, and their arrival in some sheltered harbour, surrounded on one of its sides by the rude wood cabins in which they live; and, at the same time, they form an invaluable record of the marvellous effects of light and colour which are to be observed within the Arctic circle... The originality of her facture – which, being entirely self-taught, owes nothing to the schools and conventional methods of painting – greatly pleased me... (Figs. 2 and 3).

Her exhibitions in Paris in 1905 and 1906, praised by for example Louis Vauxcelles (1870–1943), led to Anna Boberg’s global breakthrough. In 1906, a feature published in Idun, which seems to have been translated into English, also contributed to her new-found fame. Similar articles appeared for example in the Chicago Daily Tribune and in the Boston Daily Globe, where Boberg was introduced as “Sweden’s greatest artist” in an article with the sensational title “Barefoot in Polar Snow: Swedish Woman Artist Braves Cold for Arctic Effects”. Boberg became a phenomenon through her conquest of the Arctic landscape and her “skilful touch”, which was able to catch “the opalescent effects of the long sun rays glinting across the glacial expanses.”

Sometimes, it was reported, it was so cold that she had to tie her paintbrushes to her...
numb hands. She had succeeded, the American press wrote, “not only in overcoming her relatives’ objections, in laying aside city habits of ease and comfort for the rude life of the Arctic wanderer, but in creating a new departure in the realm of landscapes by reproducing faithfully the atmosphere and the color of the windblown snows”. Swedish critics agreed with this assessment. Her Parisian success had asserted her place among the very best of Scandinavian landscape painters.

When Boberg exhibited her work in Paris in 1910, the exhibition was noted in several international magazines, among them American Art News, in which she was commended for the “eminently clever work” shown at the galleries of Durand-Ruel. The critics observed her “striking atmospheric effects”, which had been well received in Brussels and Venice too. In 1914, she exhibited her paintings at the Women’s International Art Club exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in Mayfair, London, where Roger Fry (1866–1934) had introduced the British public to Post-Impressionism. Here, she was singled out for her “admirable work”, which was “as bold and vigorous in handling as it well could be, but infinitely [sic] delicate and lucent in the result, sensitive alike to form, colour and atmosphere”. The reviewer writing in The Academy argued that “If only to see Miss Boberg’s works these Galleries are worth a visit.”

Anna Boberg was particularly appreciated in America. In 1912, American Art News and the New York Times reported that six of her Lofoten scenes had arrived in New York as forerunners to the forthcoming Scandinavian Exhibition that was set to open at the American Art Galleries. Boberg’s contribution was particularly welcomed and she was presented as “the foremost woman painter of Scandinavia, and one of the most interesting personalities in the northern art world”. Throughout her career, she would continue to receive praise from critics in America, and became prominent among Scandinavian contributors to exhibitions there. When the Scandinavian Exhibition went on tour, Boberg was mentioned as one of the most interesting artists, alongside Anders Zorn, Gustaf Fjæstad, Bruno Liljefors, Otto Hesselbom, Eric Hallström, Prince Eugen and Carl Larsson, when the well-attended display opened at the Chicago Art Institute in 1913.

A few years later, Swedish artists continued to draw large audiences at the “Exhibition of Contemporary Swedish Art”, which had first been shown at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915 and went on tour from Brooklyn to Boston to Philadelphia to Pittsburgh to Detroit to Chicago to Minneapolis to St Louis to Indianapolis and finally to Toledo. A record number of 141,256 members of the public visited the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. Swedish landscape painters were viewed as particularly strong by critics such as Christian Brinton, writing for the American Magazine of Art.
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Fig. 5 Anna Boberg (1864–1935), *Night at Store Molla. Study from Lofoten*, Oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 33 × 50 cm. Gift of Ferdinand Boberg 1940. Nationalmuseum, NM 3397.

Fig. 6 Anna Boberg (1864–1935), *The Graveyard in the Mountains. Study for The Fisher’s Cemetery*, 1920. Oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 24 × 33 cm. Gift of Ferdinand Boberg 1940. Nationalmuseum, NM 3439.
landscape artists, he was especially drawn to “the vigorous Lofoten Island color-sketches of Anna Boberg”.28 She was also well received at the Carnegie International Exhibition (1922–23), in which she participated several times. The twenty-first International Exhibition of the Carnegie Institute was so successful that seventy paintings were selected to tour America. In October 1922, the exhibition arrived at the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester. A critic wrote: “Outstanding are the canvases by Valentin de Zubairre, Laura Knight, Jean Julien Lemordant, Anna Boberg, Albert Besnard, Sir John Lavery, Sir William Orpen, Lucien Simon and Jean Marchand.”29

As Boberg’s international reputation grew, her standing among Swedish critics followed suit. As such, Anna Boberg’s reception in Sweden and abroad needs to be reassessed. We also need to uncover her connections with other artists to begin to understand her influence within the art world of the early 20th century. Let us therefore now return to the previously mentioned Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. In February 1915, American Art News announced that one of the most exciting contributions to that exhibition would be the Swedish art on view.27

As the exhibition opened, the high expectations were met, the critic M. J. Coulter thought, as “the work of Liljefors, Schultzberg, John Bauer, Fjaestad, Carl Larsson and Anna Boberg may be said to show the strength and variety of the exhibition”.28 In fact, Anna Boberg was described as an “exceptionally strong painter”. Her work was “vibrant with life and color” and exemplified “deep study and an intimate knowledge of her subjects”, Coulter advised. The painting Huts and Boats was “particularly pleasing”, and was one of the first Swedish paintings to be purchased. Ultimately, three of Boberg’s paintings were sold: Huts and Boats, Drying the Sails and Spring in the Mountains.

In a recently unearthed article from 1922, the writer John D. Barry (1866–1942) relates a conversation between himself and the American modernist landscape painter Maynard Dixon (1875–1946), famous for his paintings of the American West (Arizona and New Mexico in particular). Dixon, like Boberg, was an autodidact and admitted in the interview that he considered himself to be something of a rebel.29 The artist’s knowledge of his subject matter was what Dixon considered to be most important: “a painter’s knowing thoroughly everything he undertook to paint”.30 Barry went on to ask how Dixon had developed his artistic technique, to which the painter replied:

*By working alone and by watching and talking with the other painters. We’re always learning from one another. And don’t think I’m referring to other men only. I’m thinking of the women, too. I’ve had a lot of help from women in my life. There was the San Francisco exposition, for instance. Don’t you remember the work of the Swedish painter in the Palace of Fine Arts? Wasn’t it immense? Well, Anna Boberg did a lot for me. She knew how to paint.*31

It was Anna Boberg’s Arctic landscapes that had made such a vivid impression on Dixon. And there is admittedly something distinctly Boberghian about Dixon’s luminous modernist landscapes and the towering mountains of the American West that dominate his compositions. Future research would do well to further explore Anna Boberg’s possible transatlantic influence on American Modernism, and possible connections to other landscape painters of the West, such as Georgia O’Keeffe.

John D. Barry had also written a book-length account of the Panama-Pacific Exposition, in which he attends the exhibition with an anonymous artist, who may or may not be Maynard Dixon. The pair were especially captivated by Boberg’s paintings. They perceived her work as being less decorative than that of Fjaestad, for instance, and admired Boberg’s attempt at “realistic effects”.32 Her big, broad,
sweeping brushstrokes were deemed “good bravura work”. When discussing the smaller picture Drying the Sails, they reiterated the commonly expressed view of her as a strong colourist. But they were also struck by the originality of her titles, which they considered more evocative than descriptive, as in The Fisher’s Cemetery and Arctic Night (see related examples in Figs. 4, 5 and 6). The anonymous artist explained to Barry: You see, she doesn’t care to tell you that this picture or that represents a particular place. She isn’t interested in competing with photographs. She’s not a servile copyist. But she does care for outdoor painting and she wants us to realize her purpose, which is to catch effects of light and shade. She is particularly successful in her use of broken color and in the securing of rich tones.33

In 1992, Marianne Nyström wrote that a full account of Anna Boberg’s reception was yet to be written that had not been tainted by the negative criticism she received from some of her male Swedish contemporaries. Today, the recovery of Boberg within the historiography of art has begun in earnest, with her work included in the permanent display at the Nationalmuseum since the reopening in 2018.34 Aside from her Arctic art, we also need to reconsider her painting beyond Lofoten and her landscapes from Jerusalem, Italy, France and Switzerland (examples of which can be found at the Nationalmuseum), which are reminiscent of the work of Cézanne (1839–1906), members of the Bloomsbury Group, and Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917) (Fig. 7). In Anna Boberg’s intense and imaginative, positively obsessive, observations of the landscape and life of the Arctic Lofoten Islands, her work has perhaps never been more timely and relevant.

Notes:
1. The author wishes to express her sincere gratitude to Hans Henrik Brummer for many conversations about Bobergiana and for his generous guidance and encouragement.
3. Claïs Lundin, “Anna Boberg”, in Idun, vol. 24, no. 391, 14 June 1895, pp. 185–186, p. 186. Anna Boberg’s practice, moreover, was not limited to painting; she also designed textiles, ceramics and glass for Handarbets Vännér and Rörstrand. She was a talented writer as well and wrote the libretto for Wilhelm Stenhammar’s Viking opera Turfing, which premiered in Stockholm in 1898. Anna was also involved with the costume design and several of her sketches are in the collections of the Nationalmuseum. Among her published writings we find a spirited autobiography and an engaging travel account recounting how she and Ferdinand accompanied the Crown Prince (the future Gustaf VI Adolf) and his second wife, Louise, on an official visit to India: Genom Indien i Kron-prinsparets följe, Stockholm 1928.
4. Anna Boberg, Envar sitt ödes lekboll, Stockholm 1934. All quotes are from this edition and translations are my own.
17. Ibid. p. 40.
22. See Jeff Werner, Medvölgens estetik: Sverigebilder i USA, Del 1, Möklinta 2008. Boberg’s work was championed, for example, by Katherine Tingley and the Theosophical Society.
24. “The Scandinavian exhibition, February 27 to March 16, was very successful and brought Scandinavian people to the Art Institute in great numbers. Two evening receptions were held in the galleries by Swedish and Norwegian residents. The total attendance during the exhibition was 69094.” See Anon., “Notes on Past Exhibitions”, in Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago (1907–1933), 6/4, 1913, pp. 51–52, p. 52.
25. “Contemporary Swedish Art”, in American Magazine of Art, 7/8, 1916, pp. 303–313, p. 311. The work of the painter Elsa Backlund-Celsing received attention as well. Reproductions of one painting by each of them accompanied Brinton’s review, Boberg’s expressionist Fishing Fleet at Anchor and Backlund-Celsing’s Skiing. Similar articles by Brinton also appeared in the Fine Arts Journal and The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly.
29. Boberg did receive a few weeks’ training at the Académie Julian in Paris, although sources differ as to the year she attended. Depending on the source, it appears that she was there in 1884, 1888 or 1893.
31. Ibid., p. 8.
33. Ibid., p. 24.