Supplice de Loke – A Sculpture by Ida Matton

Barbro Norbelie†
PhD English Literature, MA Art History
Retired Associate Professor, Uppsala University

Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm
Volume 28:1
Cover Illustration

Publisher
Per Hedström, Director General.

Editors
Ludvig Florén, Magnus Olausson and Martin Olin.

Editorial Committee

Picture Editors
Jonas Burvall and Jenny Phan.

Photographers
Nationalmuseum Photographic Studio: Linn Ahlgren, Anna Danielsson, Viktor Fordell, Cecilia Heisser, Olle Andersson, Erik Cornelius, Ambrose Hickman and Hans Thorwid.

Photo Credits
The Schoolmaster – Noël Hallé’s Tender Look at Education in the Mid-18th Century
Photo: Conservation des œuvres d'art religieuses et civiles (COARC), Paris (fig. 2, p. 14).
Photo: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art/Public Domain (fig. 3, p. 15).
Photo: The National Gallery, London (fig. 4, p. 16).
Photo: Utpictura18 (figs. 5–6, p. 17).

Pierre Jacques Volaire’s View of Solfatara
Photo: Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples/CC-BY 4.0 (fig. 2, p. 21).

Louis Masreliez’ Allegory of War – Between History Painting and Interior Art in a Sequence of Interrelated Propaganda
Photo: The Royal Academy of Arts, Stockholm (fig. 6, p. 27).

Still Life with Flower Arrangement and Fruit Basket by Antoine Berjon

Old Italian Woman with Distaff by Jean Victor Schnetz
Photo: Clermont Auvergne Métropole, MARQ/Florent Giffard (fig. 2, p. 32).
Photo: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Orléans/François Lauginie (fig. 3, p. 32).

Allegory of Sunday – A Painting by Ditlev Conrad Blunck
Photo: H. M. the Queen’s Reference Library, The Royal Collection, Copenhagen (fig. 2, p. 36).
Photo: Kunsthalle zu Kiel/Martin Prommehagen (fig. 3, p. 37).

19th-Century Finnish Landscape Painting. From Romantic Views to Colour Experiments
Photo: Finnish National Gallery/Public Domain (figs. 3–4 and 9, pp. 42–43 and 46).
Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain (fig. 5, p. 43).
Photo: Finnish National Gallery Archives (fig. 8, p. 46).

Mary Cassatt’s Portrait of her Sister Lydia. A Free Study for The Cup of Tea
Photo: 2023 Image copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence (figs. 3–4, pp. 49–50).

Julia Beck’s Painting Autumn Day and 19th-Century Transnational Naturalism
Photo: MBA, Rennes, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Adèle Beaudoin (fig. 2, p. 54).
Photo: Brucebo Foundation archive, Visby (fig. 4, p. 56).
Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain (figs. 5 and 7, pp. 56 and 58).

Supplice de Lake – A Sculpture by Ida Matton
Photo: Ida Matton’s archive, Uppsala University Library (figs. 2–4, pp. 60–63).

Isabelle Mann Clow’s Dining Room Furnishings and Swedish Design in 1920s USA
Photo: Ray isbell, findagrave.com (fig. 2, p. 66).
Photo: Chicago Historical Society, Chicago (figs. 3 and 9, pp. 66 and 70).
Photo: 2023 Image copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence (fig. 4, p. 67).
Photo: Svenskt Tenn’s archive (fig. 5–6, p. 69).
Photo: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Gottscho-Schleisner Collection, LC-DIG-gsc-5a02318/LC-G612-T01-21928 (figs. 8 and 11, pp. 70 and 71).

Nature Inside: Plants and Flowers in the Modern Interior
Photo and repro photo: the author (figs. 1–5, 8–17, pp. 73–75, 77–82).
Photo: Period Postcards/Public Domain (figs. 6–7, p. 76).

Graphic Design
BIGG.

Layout
Ludvig Florén.

Translation and Language Editing
Clare Barnes and Bettina Schultz.

Publishing
Ludvig Florén, Magnus Olausson, and Martin Olin (Editors) and Ingrid Lindell (Publications Manager).

Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm contains articles on the history and theory of art relating to the collections of the Nationalmuseum and is published with generous support from the Friends of the Nationalmuseum.

The Nationalmuseum collaborates with Svenska Dagbladet, The Wineagency, the Friends of the Nationalmuseum and the American Friends of the Nationalmuseum.

Nationalmuseum
Box 16176
SE-103 24 Stockholm
Sweden
www.nationalmuseum.se

© Nationalmuseum, the authors and the owners of the reproduced works

E-ISSN 2001-9238
Supplice de Loke – A Sculpture by Ida Matton

Barbro Norbelie †
PhD English Literature, MA Art History
Retired Associate Professor, Uppsala University

Fig. 1 Ida Matton (1863–1940), Supplice de Loke (The Penalty of Loki), 1897. Plaster, 113 × 130 × 85 cm. Gift of Åke and Marie Matton 2021. Nationalmuseum, NMSk 2409.
When the art collector and chairman of the Swedish Society in Paris, Edward Björkman, was planning to donate his entire art collection to Stockholm’s Nationalmuseum in June 1925, the sculptor Ida Matton wrote the following: “Mr Björkman knows that I have told him that as long as I live I will not allow anyone to donate any of my works to Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, since a few years ago the men in charge treated me and one of my greatest works poorly, to say the least.” Matton had donated Björkman’s portrait bust to the club “in memory of and as thanks for what you […] have done for us in the Swedish colony.”

What had happened to make Ida Matton so vehement about Nationalmuseum not acquiring any of her work? In February 1917 Matton had offered to sell a marble sculptural group, Supplice de Loke (The Penalty of Loki), to Nationalmuseum at the price of 33,000 kronor. The museum had declined the offer. Two years later, Matton offered to donate the artwork to the museum but her offer was again refused with the statement: “When this sculpture was made available for purchase at the board meeting on 28 February 1917, the committee felt that the sculpture should not be purchased because it was lacking in quality. For the same reason the committee has decided, with their gratitude, to decline the offered donation.”

The sculpture group Supplice de Loke is in many ways unique in Ida Matton’s body of work. It is one of only a few public artworks by her hand. She primarily produced portraits and tomb sculptures for family and friends, for which she often received good reviews when they were exhibited. In addition, Loki’s twisted and crouching body is a far cry from the contrapposto of classical sculptures, and the only example of a naked male figure in her entire oeuvre. It is also the only time she borrowed a motif from Nordic mythology, Loki’s punishment for tricking Hodr into killing Baldur, the favourite of the gods, with a mistletoe arrow, was to be bound to a rock and to be tormented by a venomous snake.

The following text does not only highlight the different issues related to the production, reception and eventual fate of Supplice de Loke, but also says something about the prevailing view of female sculptors and their work. Like many of her female counterparts, Ida Matton’s work was relatively well-received in France. Supplice de Loke drew attention mainly because of its unusual style, subject matter and composition. In Sweden the sculptor and her work had a tough time gaining recognition, though.

**The production of the work**

So far, it has been impossible to determine what inspired Matton to produce the work. She often visited the grounds of Fontainebleau; perhaps she was inspired by the strange stone dubbed L’Éléphant, photos of which are in her archive (fig. 2). She was probably influenced by the currents introduced to Paris at the end of the 19th century, mainly by her teacher Emmanuel Frémiet (1824–1910), known for his realistic animal sculptures. He, in turn, was influenced by Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) in his choice of subject matter, including confrontations between humans and animals. The Norwegian sculptor Stephan Sinding’s (1846–1922) *The Slave* (1878) is rendered in a style resembling Ida Matton’s Loke. Matton has portrayed Loki as a man with physical strength and mental determination. According to her address book, the model was a certain Mr Joseph Vitti “who posed ‘a session’ for my sketch of Loke.”

Relatively early on in her career, Matton considered the figure’s possible shape. At Académie Julian in Paris, where she was enrolled from 1889 to 1892, women had the possibility to sketch both men and women in nude figure drawing classes. In December 1896 she asked her brother Waldemar to find out what the writer and poet Viktor Rydberg had written about Loki. The same year she received an answer to her question directed at the future national antiquarian if he could send some photos of the bound Loki from the Isle of Man where he had seen “some of the runestones carved during the Viking era with images, some of which depicted the bound Loki.” Matton modelled the work in the course of 1897 and her
earlier teacher and good friend Denys Puech (1854–1942) maintains in a letter of recommendation that *Supplice de Loke* is a “very powerful creation and very acclaimed among French artists.”10

The plaster piece was first shown in 1897 at the traditional Société des artistes français (SAF) salon and a second time at the Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs (UFPS) salon in 1898 (fig. 1).11 Ida Matton had hoped to be able to exhibit the plaster model at the 1900 Paris Exposition and had sent a photograph of the sculpture to Anders Zorn, but it was not accepted. Ida Matton expressed her dissatisfaction to Zorn and to Christian Eriksson, but to no avail. Zorn answered: “I have received both of your letters and I wish to state that I no longer have anything to do with the jury’s work since a deputy has been selected in my stead.”11

*Supplice de Loke* was carved in marble and exhibited at the SAF salon in 1909 and one year later at the UFPS salon (fig. 3).14 Matton’s brother Emil asked what she was planning to do with *Loke*. Does she intend to offer it to the Swedish state? Shouldn’t she try to have it exhibited in Stockholm at National Museum? He writes: “I really think that the male sculptors who are unwilling to acknowledge a female colleague are behaving badly. They reveal their small-mindedness and lack of nobility of character. So much is certain, that it won’t be easy for any male sculptor to get anything from me after this.”15 In Sweden the group was exhibited at the Baltic exhibition in 1914 and at the exhibition organised by the Association for Swedish Women Artists (Föreningen svenska konstnärinnor) at Liljeholms in 1917. In connection with the latter, Matton hoped that her friend Nathan Söderblom, pastor in the Swedish congregation in Paris and future archbishop, would put in a good word for her at National Museum: “I write in connection with my marble statue *Supplice de Loke*, which, as you know, I am currently exhibiting at the gallery and which I have always dreamt of being acquired by the state for National Museum. In Stockholm, whence I just came, I spoke to Richard Bergh, the curator Axel Gauffin, Chr Eriksson amongst others. I tried in vain to get in touch with Zorn. Someone asked if I knew Prince Eugen or the Crown Prince, but I don’t.”16

In the end Emil Matton offered the marble carving of *Supplice de Loke* to the City of Stockholm to be placed in the newly built city hall, which was noted by daily newspapers such as Dagens Nyheter and Aftonbladet. The sculpture was accepted by the City Council in October 1922 and, in a telegram to her brother Emil, Matton writes: “Accepted. Hurray Emil [...] I am delighted!”18 Emil confirms that *Loke* has been purchased for 30,000 kronor.19 The group was placed in Palmstedt’s grotto and Svenska Dagbladet’s critic “…one” thought that “the blindingly white marble comes into its own against the grey-green violet background.”20 Ida Matton herself was, however, dissatisfied with the placement of the work and the fact that it was already covered up in early autumn and too close to the water.21

At the end of March 1925, Matton worked on a Loke meant to be cast in bronze and left a sketch with the bronze caster E. Rudier in Paris.22 The sculpture was exhibited at both SAF’s and UFPS’s salons in 1937.23 There it garnered moderate attention in the French press for its realistic anatomy and for the depiction of a tortured body, but it was ignored by the Swedish press.24 The following year, the work was donated to Gävle Museum, once again by her brother Emil Matton, which was mentioned in the local papers.25 Today it is placed outside the entrance to the County Museum of Gävleborg.

**Contemporary Reception**

Contemporary reviews of *Supplice de Loke* were mixed, but it is worth noting that the work was noticed in French newspapers and magazines before it was even mentioned in the Swedish press. Some French critics had visited UFPS’s salon at Georges Petit in 1898 and remarked on Ida Matton’s work in particular. The pseudonym Paul Maryllis wrote that women no longer need the support of men to triumph. “They are emancipated in art. From now on they can fly on their own wings, secure of their own merits and social abilities”; Matton is named as one of them.26 Matton’s Loke is also described as “a virile figure by Mlle Ida Matton, symbolising a chapter of Scandinavian mythology with energy.”27 Another positive opinion was voiced by the pseudonym Edouard Hubert, who after mentioning a number of uninteresting works comes to *Loke*, “a proper sculpture […] that will assuredly hold its own at the next salon, among the work by the male artists.”

In 1902 Matton exhibited the original plaster version of *Supplice de Loke* in Sweden for the first time, at the Swedish Artists’ Association at Valand in Gothenburg. Svenska Dagbladet made space for two reviews, both disparaging. John Hertz wrote: “Ida Matton proves that she possesses the purely superficial skill of using a modelling tool in her large-scale ‘Loke’, a boundlessly heavy bombastic figure, anatomically weak and lacking in muscle tension.”29 Tor Hedberg is even more negative in his evaluation: “Ida Matton’s ‘Loke’ who does not want to get bitten in the back […] belongs to the kind of sculpture that should ideally not exist at all.”30 He also dismisses Alice Nordin and Sigrid Blomberg while Carl Milles finds favour in his eyes. The pseudonym E.A. in Dagens Nyheter does not mince his words either: “Ida Matton’s Loke is a masterpiece of primordial awfulness.”31 In Göteborgs Aftonblad, on the other hand, the pseudonym Gert praises the sculpture: “An almost masculine power distinguishes Ida Matton. Just look at her Loke! Who could believe that it was not modelled by a man?”32

*Supplice de Loke* in marble was met with more positive reviews. Svenska Dagbladet’s critic wrote: “At this year’s salon (SAF 1909) Miss Ida Matton is exhibiting a larger work in marble, *Supplice de Loke*, which has been favourably mentioned by critics and been considered for the third medal. According to reliable sources, only the fact that no foreign woman has ever been awarded this honour before, prevented the jury from
giving it to Miss Matton.”33 The following year the newspaper’s critic once again praises the group: It has been given “pride of place in the middle of the sculpture section in front of the large stairs, a place that is usually reserved for the creations of the president of the society, the Duchess d’Uzès.”34

Matton’s marble group was also mentioned in French newspapers. Le Figaro notes that there are not many sculptures at the UPSF salon (1910), but there are “a few pieces of merit: Supplice de Loke by Mme Ida Matton” and Le Journal des arts notes the work as “a beautiful, piece inspired by Scandinavian mythology.”35 La Revue Générale is astonished by the fact that “the creator of this masterpiece is a young woman, since it has been executed with such power and such energy. This artwork deserves a place in one of the state museums, where it can serve as an example of what a woman’s hand can produce.”36

When it comes to the exhibition by The Association for Swedish Women Artists at Liljevalch’s konsthall a few years later (1917) the Swedish critics are divided. One points out that the work has “attracted great and well-deserved interest” while Aftonbladet’s critic, the pseudonym Marcelle (Martha Rydell-Lindström), writes that “the only large composition Supplice de Loke should
not have been made at all. Why use so much marble without any innovative value?”

It is in this context that Ida Matton approached Nationalmuseum with her offer of *Supplice de Loke*.

**Ida Matton – a rediscovered sculptor of her time**

Ida Matton returned to her hometown Gävle in 1937 where she died in 1940, thus disappearing from the art scene. She is mentioned in a few lines in *Svenskt porträttgalleri* (1901) and Philibert Humbla, the first director of the County Museum of Gävleborg, wrote in 1952 that “Ida Matton’s contribution to Swedish art history is an episode. In a way she stands alone, not joining in the Swedish tradition and not contributing to the nationalist strivings so typical of her time. She did not have any Swedish pupils either and Ida Matton’s artistic production meant nothing for the development of art in this country.”

It was only in connection with a commemorative exhibition at the County Museum of Gävleborg (1963) that she was, to some extent, rediscovered. *Arbetarbladet*’s art critic admits that he was surprised by the fine qualities in her work. He argues that “it is the refined, elegant salon pieces and the intimate small sculptures that are her proper genre”, not the monumental works like *Supplice de Loke*.

Ida Matton’s oeuvre was largely ignored in art historical research until her archive became accessible and was catalogued in 2009. A couple of articles were published on the occasion of the memorial exhibition in 1963 but it wasn’t until 2012 that Matton and a number of other female sculptors from the same time came to the fore in connection with the publication of Irja Bergström’s *Skulptriserna*. This was also the year I presented my master’s dissertation in art history, which aimed at highlighting Matton who, despite finding a place for herself on the Parisian art scene, has only marginally featured in Swedish art history. A biographical article about Ida Matton has also been published in *Svenskt kvinnobiografiskt lexikon*.

Times change and today women artists are rediscovered and integrated into museums and art history. In 2016 Nationalmuseum acquired a piece by Ida Matton, an early terracotta bust of a young woman (1891). Furthermore, Nationalmuseum highlighted twelve Swedish women sculptors from the turn of the last century in the spring/summer 2022 exhibition “What Joy to be a Sculptor!” *Swedish Women Artists 1880–1920*. Several works by Matton were included, not least the original plaster of *Supplice de Loke*, which has also been donated to the museum. Thus, although Matton never managed to sell or donate *Supplice de Loke* in marble to the museum, the plaster has now been incorporated into the collection, a work that Matton’s friend and teacher Denys Puech deemed “a work for a museum or a public space.”

---

Fig. 4 Ida Matton in her studio at 233 rue Fabourg Saint-Honoré, Paris, with her marble statue *Supplice de Loke*, c. 1910. Ida Matton’s archive, Uppsala University Library.
Notes:

2. Nationalmuseum, copy of the minutes of a City Council meeting, 28 February 1917, Ida Matton’s archive, Uppsala University Library.
3. Nationalmuseum, copy of the minutes of a City Council meeting, 30 April 1919, Ida Matton’s archive, Uppsala University Library.
5. Stephan Sinding. Norwegian sculptor, lived in Paris sporadically (1874 and 1891) before he settles there for good in 1910 until his death in 1922.
6. Address book, Ida Matton’s archive, Uppsala University Library. The Italian family Vitti opened an art school in Paris in 1889 that supported women artists in particular.
16. Letter to Nathan Söderblom 17 February 1917, Ida Matton’s archive, Uppsala University Library.
17. “Nytt från Stadshuset”, in Dagens Nyheter 14 October 1922, Aftonbladet 14 October 1922.
18. Telegram 17 October 1922, Ida Matton’s archive, Uppsala University Library.
22. The foundry Rudier was owned by Alexis Rudier (died 1897) and his son Eugène (1875–1952). The foundry worked with some of the best-known sculptors of the 19th- and 20th centuries, including Rodin, Bourdelle, Miklos, Maillol and Daumier.
28. La République française 22 March 1898.
29. Konstutställningen i Göteborg”, in Svenska Dagbladet, 2 February 1902.
32. “Utställningen à Valans”, in Göteborgs Aftonblad, 8 March 1902.
36. La Revue Générale, partially quoted in Dagens Nyheter, 16 June 1911.
37. Trelleborgstidningen, 31 January 1917; Aftonbladet, 18 February 1917.
44. Diary, 16 November 1922, Ida Matton’s archive, Uppsala University Library.