Isabelle Mann Clow’s Dining Room Furnishings and Swedish Design in 1920s USA

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Isabelle Mann Clow from Lake Forest, Illinois, visited Europe in 1928 to buy furniture for her and her husband William E. Clow Jr.’s new and exclusive, hyper-modern home, which was designed in a classicising style by society architect David Adler (1882-1949).¹ The Clow’s fortune came from the foundry giant James B. Clow & Sons, which made products that were crucial to expanding modern cities, such as prefabricated elements, water pipes and fire hydrants. Her shopping list included a glass dining table from Lalique in Paris.² However, she changed her plans after visiting Svenskt Tenn’s showroom in Stockholm, and commissioned architect Uno Åhrén (1897–1977) to design a spectacular suite of pewter and brass clad furniture. This included a three-part table that seated 16 people and a tall four-leaf folding screen (figs. 1–3).

There could be several reasons why Mann Clow chose to visit Sweden on her European shopping trip. She had probably seen examples of Swedish applied arts and design in the US. Her hometown of Chicago had large Scandinavian immigrant community, including people who ran import companies. There were Swedish designers and makers who had recently immigrated to

Fig. 1 Uno Åhrén (1897–1977), Table and folding screen, 1928. Produced by Svenskt Tenn. Gabon, oak, pewter, brass, 75.5 × 242 × 122 cm (h × l × w) [table], 330 × 202 × 7.5 cm (h × w × d) [screen]. Gift of the Friends of the Nationalmuseum and Hirsch Fund 2021. Nationalmuseum, NMK 48–49A–B/2021.
and highlighted many objects that that were included in the Swedish exhibition in Paris, some of which were also shown at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1927. There is also a possibility that both Adler and Mann Clow, like many other Americans who were interested in modern art and design and could afford the transatlantic crossing, visited the 1925 Paris Exhibition themselves. Another source of new ideas was likely to have been David Adler’s sister, the noted interior designer Frances Elkins. It has also been suggested that Adler and Mann Clow collaborated with the American designer Eyre de Lanux, who lived and worked in Paris in the 1920s, making a brief stop in Chicago in 19279.

the US and joined American design firms. Swedish design was shown at exhibitions and several leading American art museums purchased and exhibited modern Swedish design in the 1920s.4

She had definitely read about Swedish architecture and design, and discussed the subject with her architect. During work on the new residence she gave Adler a book by the Swedish architect Hakon Ahlberg, Swedish Architecture of the Twentieth Century (1925), a gesture that naturally indicates her wishes.5 Ahlberg’s book was richly illustrated with photogravures, elevations and plans. It described buildings by both older, well-established professionals and a younger generation of architects who were the same age as Adler. For example, it presented innovative work by Gunnar Asplund, Carl Bergsten, Cyrillus Johansson, Sigurd Lewerentz and Ivar Tengbom that combined classical ideals with a modern, streamlined and rational approach.

Adler also owned a copy of The Modern Decorative Arts of Sweden (1926), written by Erik Wettergren, then head of the Nationalmuseum’s Decorative Arts Department.6 This was published in French in 1925, for the international art industry exhibition in Paris, L’Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne.7 The book had a historical point of departure, depicting the evolution of Swedish design up to the 1920s. It was richly illustrated

Fig. 2 Isabelle Patchin Mann Clow (1887–1939) photographed in front of the pewter screen in the dining room.

Fig. 3 Raymond W. Trowbridge (1886–1936), photographer, Interior view of Clow residence, Lake Forest, Illinois, September 1929. Chicago History Museum, Chicago. On the table by Uno Åhrén stands a couple of silver centerpieces by Josef Hoffmann.
Mann Clow was a passionate collector and acquired works from various countries, but more research is needed to help answer specific questions about how Mann Clow took an interest in modern Swedish design. From a general perspective, however, light can be shed on why the interest in Swedish decorative arts grew in the US in the 1920s, eventually steering Mann Clow towards the Svenskt Tenn showroom in Stockholm.

**The US and the 1925 Paris Exhibition**

This is often described as a breakthrough for Swedish design in the US, but was the result of multiple layers of important connections linked to aesthetics and design reform, as well as to trade and politics. The attention that Swedish glass garnered at the 1925 Paris Exhibition paved the way, but the way that American and Swedish agendas aligned on a number of other issues was also important. Lessons learned by the US delegates at the exhibition in Paris can be used to illustrate the American agenda. The travelling exhibition featuring Swedish contemporary decorative arts, which started in New York in 1927, speaks of common Swedish-American aims, but also of a tour that was, from the Swedish perspective, a matter of public diplomacy.

The exhibitors participating in the 1925 Paris Exhibition were requested to only show work produced in a modern spirit, so objects in more historical styles were not welcome. In addition, the producers were also asked to name and highlight the artists and designers. The largest exhibition area was allocated to France, but generous space was also reserved for Great Britain, Italy, Belgium, and the US, who had been France’s foremost allies in the First World War. The US declined the invitation, however, since an internal assessment concluded that the American applied arts did not have enough attractive modern design. Instead, the US Secretary of Commerce sent a commission to visit the Paris Exhibition and, with the help of 180 American specialists and delegates from different national trade associations, they were to report back on any...
impressions that could benefit the development of the industry back home.9

The commission’s report concluded that the US should have participated after all, to show goodwill and to reciprocate for France’s participation in the 1914 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, despite the fact that the German army was advancing on Paris at the time. It also concluded that, in order to stand up to international competition, the US had to develop products adapted to modern life and the needs of the broader market. The American decorative arts industry had the capacity to mass produce and mass distribute but, according to the commission, there was resistance to new ideas. The industry continued in its old, conservative rut, hoping this was the way to guarantee profitability. Unlike Europe, US industry lacked artistic directors and designers with artistic training who pushed for progress. There was also a dearth of higher design education with practicing lecturers who were leaders in their field. Furthermore, there was a need for lobby organisations and exhibition practices that conveyed knowledge and provided inspiration.

In order to spread this message and highlight good examples, the American Association of Museums organised a travelling exhibition with 398 hand-picked objects that had been shown in Paris. The exhibition opened in Boston in 1926 and was subsequently shown in New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis and Minneapolis. All the objects in the exhibition were for sale.10

French objects dominated the exhibition, but there was also some Swedish design. The collection included nine engraved Orrefors glass objects, designed by Simon Gate and Edward Hald, as well as weaves and carpets by Märta Måås-Fjetterström, Annie Frykholm for Thyra Gräfström’s textile shop, Carol Wästberg for Handarbetets väänner (the Friends of Handicraft Association) and Eva Nilsson for the Malmöhus Hemsöjdsförening (Malmöhus Handicraft Association).

**Swedish Design on show in the US**

The conclusions of the American commission came as no surprise. There had been ongoing debate in the US for quite some time, discussing how to reform the applied arts. Newark Museum had already exhibited industrial arts in the 1910s, and in 1917 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York started producing annual exhibitions meant to inspire renewal.11 Historical styles dominated, but from 1922 onwards the influential curator of the Decorative Arts Department, Joseph Breck, who was also the assistant director of the museum, started acquiring and showing more modern design from France and Denmark, amongst others.12 The touring exhibition in 1926 shook things up and in 1927 the annual American exhibition of decorative arts was replaced with the **Swedish Contemporary Decorative Arts Exhibition**. This collection of objects had also been shown in Paris in 1925 and, just as in Paris, the chairman of the Swedish arts and crafts society, Gregor Paulsson, acted as curator with Carl Bergsten as exhibition architect. This was the first exhibition in the US to be dedicated solely to the decorative arts of a single country. The Swedish examples provided some perspective on the American industry and had an impact on public opinion, if only in a limited circle. The presentation conveyed progressive ideas about the important role designers could play in the industry, propagating for social aims such as “beauty for all” and “better things for everyday life”.13 Breck also stated that the design was rooted in a vigorous folk art tradition and French 18th-century aesthetics, here transformed into classic simplicity marked by a “discipline of self-restraint”, elegance and refinement – an assessment of Swedish design that is still stressed in different ways.14

The Swedish arts and crafts society and its members naturally wanted to spread these reform ideas, for both commercial and ideological reasons. It was an honour to be invited to exhibit at one of the world’s leading art museums and from an official Swedish perspective the exhibition was an important opportunity for public diplomacy, through which knowledge of Sweden could be improved and bonds of friendship formed.

The Sweden-America Foundation was formed in 1919 to strengthen the cultural and scientific relationship between Sweden and the US.15 The Swedish politics of neutrality during the First World War had damaged Sweden’s reputation in the US. Thus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Sweden-America Foundation together established the American-Swedish News Exchange in New York, with the goal of spreading knowledge and understanding of Sweden.16 A Swedish exhibition was completely aligned with these ambitions. The story goes that the idea was hatched during the Paris Exhibition and presented to Sweden’s crown prince, Gustaf Adolf – who was very interested in arts and crafts, as well as being an amateur archaeologist and collector of Chinese ceramics – when he visited the Metropolitan Museum in 1926. The project was also actively supported by the Swedish envoy Wollmar Boström and the consul general in New York, Olof H. Lamm. Prince Eugen was also included in the royal exhibition committee, as were Herman Lagercrantz, the former Swedish envoy to the US, and Josef Sachs, the director of the luxury department store Nordiska Kompaniet (fig. 4).

Joseph Breck stated in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* that the exhibition provided knowledge of Swedish art and culture and fostered better understanding between the countries. It enjoyed royal patronage, but despite his evident scepticism about the antiquated monarchical order, Breck welcomed the exhibition to the democratic US. He even stressed that the exhibition was, in fact, rooted in democracy since among the many beautiful pieces you could find both high-quality objects and objects that did not cost so much and thus appealed to “the taste and needs of the middle class”.17

The exhibition moved on to Chicago and ended its tour in Detroit.18 As mentioned above, the objects were all for sale, with one
of the buyers being the influential George Booth, who founded the Cranbrook Academy of Art that same year. Booth bought an urn by Wilhelm Kåge from the Gustavsberg porcelain factory, a vase by the ceramics manufacturer Bobergs fajansfabrik, a stool by Carl Hörvik, a chest with intarsia décor by Carl Malmsten, a Diana urn by Ivar Jonsson from the foundry Nåsveqvarns bruk, as well as a light fitting in engraved glass from Orrefors.19

**Isabelle Mann Clow’s dining room furnishings**

The international attention and positive reception of modern Swedish architecture and design attracted particularly interested people to travel to Sweden. Mann Clow arrived in Stockholm in the summer of 1928 and checked in at Grand Hotel, a stone’s throw from both the Nationalmuseum and Svenskt Tenn’s showroom.20

Svenskt Tenn was a natural place to visit. The company had been founded in 1924 by Estrid Ericson, whose idea was to design and produce modern and artistic objects in pewter at reasonable prices. Success came quickly, and the company’s products were shown in Paris in 1925 and in the travelling exhibition in the US.

When Mann Clow visited the showroom, she decided to order a table and four-leaf folding screen from Svenskt Tenn rather than a glass table from Lalique. Ericson commissioned some of the most radical designers of the time, and this job went to Uno Åhrén. The encounter with Le Corbusier’s work at the Paris Exhibition had had a fundamental effect on Åhrén, making him re-evaluate his role as an architect and designer, leading to the publication of a series of polemical articles. In these, rather than personal expression, he emphasised the importance of societal involvement and working for the good of the collective.21 This probably did not correspond ideologically to Mann Clow’s ambitions, but his style matched her vision. However, it was urgent, as she was to travel onward the following day. Åhrén quickly produced drawings in accordance with her instructions and the price of SEK 7,000 was approved (figs. 5–6). The result was unique dining room furnishings in oak and gabon, clad in matt pewter with shiny geometric brass inlays. The table is in three parts, almost five meters in length and 122 cm wide. The screen was 330 cm tall and two meters wide. The pieces were made with a craft-based approach, but the simple, smooth shapes and brass pattern, created with machine precision, look to the future. This shows how the Swedish design of the 1920s teamed tradition with innovation; classicism meets a modern material and machine aesthetic.

When the commission was ready, the new head of the Nationalmuseum’s Decorative Arts Department, Åke Stavenow, saw the furnishings in the showroom. They roused his interest to such a degree that he wanted to exhibit them to the Nationalmuseum’s visitors before they were exported to the US. Estrid Ericson, who was a skilled and intelligent designer and businesswoman, seized this opportunity and the project grew
into an exhibition featuring products from Svenskt Tenn designed not only by Uno Åhrén, but also by Ericson herself, Nils Fougstedt, Björn Trädgårdh, Evdin Ollers, Robert Hult and Torvald Alef. The press were divided, but mostly positive. The table and screen were described as skilfully made. One critic stated that the furnishings had fine proportions and exquisite brass inlays, whose mild glaze was well displayed against the matt tin, despite them being in a purely functionalist style, whose devotees usually delight in the complete absence of anything that does not have a purpose (fig. 7).22 Others were more negative. The screen was likened to a robust safe door and the “Babylonian voluminous pewter pieces” had art critic Gustaf Näsström feel as if he was imprisoned in a Venetian lead chamber.23 However, Ericson’s staging was highly praised. The pewter furnishings stood against a matt green wall. The table was dressed with green damask place mats, silver cutlery with ivory handles, glass and porcelain that were attractive of the grey tabletop, flowers and a mirrored tray ornamented with engraved goldfish. Chairs upholstered in natural calfskin stood around the table. The exhibition was open for a little more than two weeks and, in the middle of April, the furniture was packed for shipping to the US.

The house in Lake Forest still stands, but has changed over the years. However, photographs from the early 1930s provide good insight into its original milieu. The architecture of the symmetrical, white-rendered villa has been described as Greek Revival and strict neoclassicism (fig. 8). Adler’s role models, Mies van der Rohe and Josef Hoffmann have been highlighted, particularly Hoffmann’s Villa Primavesi from 1913.24 However, there is also great recognition when seen through Swedish eyes, with the thoughts going straight to the Swedish classicism of the 1920s. As well as Åhrén’s pewter furnishings, the photographs show that Clow also invested in other Swedish and Danish items. The garden wall, which was decorated with an
impressive meandering pattern in high relief, featured a row of modern cast iron urns with a classical design from Näveqvarns bruk (fig. 9). Their products had a prominent role in the Swedish pavilion in Paris in 1925, as well as in the American travelling exhibition of 1927. They were particularly fitting for the context, given that James B. Clow & Sons was a foundry. Inside the house was a ceiling light fitting by Poul Henningsen, in a model that had a prominent place in the Danish pavilion at the Paris Exhibition. The large salon contained armchairs in a model originally drawn by Uno Åhrén for an elegant ladies’ parlour in the Swedish pavilion at the 1925 Paris Exhibition (fig. 10). The rosewood veneered chair, covered in off-white silk, was part of a suite designed by Åhrén, with a matching chaise lounge, a side table, a large round rug with a pattern of woven concentric circles, and a cupboard with inlays in Brazilian walnut, eucalyptus and olive wood depicting scenes from the Garden of Eden. These pieces, especially the rosewood chairs in the Clow residence (fig. 11), suggest that Adler and Clow did visit Paris in 1925, or had connections who had done so. The cupboard was prominently featured in colour in a book about Swedish decorative arts that Alder owned. However, the chair was not pictured, nor was it part of the travelling exhibition.

The dinner table and screen were placed in the house’s large quadratic dining room. The pewter furnishings’ shapes and brass inlays complemented the room’s symmetrical form and geometrical motifs. The walls were decorated with split-straw marquetry in a checkerboard pattern, and the room contained a square fireplace with semi-circular sculpture alcoves on either side. The dining room was one of the most distinctive rooms in the house, and possibly the result of the Paris-based American artist and designer Eyre de Lanux having a hand in its design.

The pewter furnishings were acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago in 1959. In the 1980s they were placed in the Member’s Lounge and the Women’s Board Room. One of the two smaller tables is still part of their collection, but the large table and screen were de-accessed in 1999 and sold at auction. In 2021, the Nationalmuseum was able to acquire these unique pieces thanks to a generous gift by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum (Otto Andersson Fund, Max Dinkelspiel Fund, Brita and Nils Fredrik Tisell Fund, H.M. Konung Gustav VI Adolf Fund, Marit and Herbert Bexelius Fund, Barbro and Henry Montgomery Fund) and Hirsch Fund. Since their acquisition, the pewter furnishings have been shown in the Nationalmuseum’s exhibitions Scandinavian Design & USA. People, encounters and ideas, 1890–1980 (2021) and Swedish Grace. Art and design in 1920s Sweden (2022). The screen is now on show in the 20th century section of the Museum’s collection presentation The Timeline. From the 16th Century to the Present Day.
ACQUISITIONS/ISABELLE MANN CLOW’S DINING ROOM FURNISHINGS

Notes:
2. Sign. Bris, “Modernistiskt tenn i Nationalmuseum”, 14 April 1929, in BJT; Monica Eriksson, Svenskt tenn från Svenskt Tenn, Stockholm 1985, p. 68.
7. The profit on the book’s sales in France was spent on the acquisition of French applied arts for the collections of Malmö museum. Erik Wettergren, L’art décoratif modern en Suède, Malmö museum, Malmö 1925, back cover.
17. Breck, 1927, pp. 4 and 41.
18. Exhibition of Swedish Contemporary Art (exh. cat.), Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago 1927.
19. Cranbrook Archives, Box 23, Folder 14, Art Collection, Purchase Records, Swedish Association of Arts and Crafts, 1927. Ceiling fittings from Orrefores were later also used in the large dining hall at Cranbrook Academy of Art.
20. Monica Eriksson, Svenskt tenn från Svenskt Tenn, Stockholm 1985, p. 68.
28. The Art Institute of Chicago, accession no 1959.484B. Gift of Mrs. Cedric Hagenbuckle in memory of her mother, Mrs. Isabella Mann Clow.
29. Correspondence with the AIC’s EDA department, June 2021.