Roslin’s Self-Portrait with his Wife Marie Suzanne Giroust
Painting a Portrait of Henrik Wilhelm Peill

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Alexander Roslin (1718–1793), The Artist and his Wife Marie Suzanne Giroust Portraying Henrik Wilhelm Feil, 1767. Oil on canvas, 131 x 98.5 cm. Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Sophia Giesecke Fund, Axel Hirsch Fund and Mr Stefan Persson and Mrs Denise Persson. Nationalmuseum, NM 714.1.

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When Fredrik Sparre left Paris in the summer of 1754, Alexander Roslin (1718–1793) had to take over various purchasing commissions entrusted to the young diplomat by his uncle, Count Carl Gustaf Tessin. These related to both a variety of luxury items and works of art, but above all to books. Payments were often made via the Grill trading house, which had numerous contacts in banking. Roslin admittedly found these recurring assignments tiresome, but for the sake of his career he needed powerful patrons. When Tessin’s protégé Henrik Wilhelm Peill arrived in Paris in the mid 1760s, Roslin and his wife received him with open arms. Peill, whose mother was a member of the Mijtens family of artists, was on an educational tour of Europe, in preparation for a future position with the firm of his cousin’s husband Carlos Grill.

As an outward sign of the close friendship that developed between them, the artist painted this portrait of himself and his wife Marie Suzanne Giroust (1734–}
Suzanne Giroust, has the same historical origins as the work the Museum has now acquired with the support of the Axel Hirsch Fund and the Sophie Giesecke Fund. The purchase of the Roslin family portrait would not have been possible, either, without a very substantial contribution from the Friends of the Nationalmuseum and Mr Stefan Persson and Mrs Denise Persson. It is gratifying to note that an important part of Sweden’s cultural heritage has now been saved and will in future be able to be shown as part of the permanent collections of the Museum.

Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand why Roslin felt called upon to paint the Grill Family Portrait (Fig. 2) before he left Sweden in September 1775. This picture of the widowed elder Anna Johanna Grill and her children Adolf Ulric and the younger Anna Johanna (married to Peill) readily tied in with the group portrait of the Roslins now acquired by the Nationalmuseum. It did not include the son-in-law Peill, however, but another individual, the deceased paterfamilias Claes Grill the Elder. As convention demanded, he is represented in a different degree of reality, in the form of Gustaf Lundberg’s well-known pastel portrait. The inscription, Unis à jamais (“United for ever”), closely echoes that of the companion painting, Loin et près, opening up a multiplicity of meanings. In the Österby Collection, moreover, these two works joined an older family portrait painted by Martin van Meytens the Younger during his stay in Stockholm forty years earlier, showing the elder Anna Johanna as a girl, with her parents Carlos Grill and his wife Hendriana, née Mijtens, who was also Henrik Wilhelm Peill’s maternal aunt.

The Roslin family portrait was the last painting in this trilogy still in private hands. For a long time it belonged to the descendants of the man who was the heir of Henrik Wilhelm Peill and his wife, the younger Anna Johanna Grill, namely her nephew, the ironmaster Baron Per Adolf Tamm. This unique work by Alexander Roslin from the Österby Collection eventually passed to Baroness Stina Nordenfalk, née Rålamb, whose heirs have now sold the portrait to the Nationalmuseum. Roslin’s perhaps best-known painting, The Lady with the Veil, another portrait of his wife Marie

1772) at her easel, working on a pastel of Peill (Fig. 1). The painting came into being in 1767, as Peill’s stay in the French capital was drawing to a close. The portrait within the portrait has not been found, though there are several extant copies of another version, made by Giroust a year earlier. The gold box with portrait miniatures which Roslin is pointing to adds to the rebus-like character of the picture, and may possibly have been a lavish farewell gift from Peill. That the portrait really was a token of friendship is made clear by the inscription on the frame – Loin et près ("Far away and [yet] close"). The motto of course takes on a somewhat comical note, given that the couple’s friend is always present in the form of the portrait on the easel. Peill most probably acquired the painting at the time or in the years immediately following. Quite soon after his return home he married the younger Anna Johanna Grill, daughter of the late director of the Swedish East India Company, Claes Grill the Elder, who had died in 1767. Most of the indications are that the younger woman portrayed on the gold box is Miss Grill, while the older woman is presumably her mother, the elder Anna Johanna, Peill’s cousin and future mother-in-law.

Fig. 2 Alexander Roslin (1718–1793), Grill Family Portrait, 1775. Oil on canvas, 131 x 100 cm. The Gothenburg Museum of Art, CGM 1027.