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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, ÅNSK

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In early February 2013, the Nationalmuseum closed its main building on Blasieholmen in Stockholm for several years of refurbishment. In June, the first of a number of exhibitions in the Museum’s temporary premises opened. The exhibition, Carl Larsson: Friends & Enemies, was shown in three large galleries at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts on Fredsgatan in Stockholm.

The subject of the exhibition was chosen partly in view of the summer visitors and the vast number of Swedish and foreign tourists who usually come to the Nationalmuseum during the holidays. Carl Larsson is one of the most popular artists in the collection, and Swedish and Nordic art from around the turn of the 19th century is generally loved by the summer audience. The theme – a presentation of Carl Larsson as a proponent of fin de siècle art and traditions – seemed to be perfect for Stockholm in the summer of 2013. The exhibition featured Carl Larsson’s own works together with several works by famous Swedish artists from the period, including Anders Zorn, Hanna Pauli and Karl Nordström.

The focus was on Carl Larsson as a leading figure on a highly dynamic arts scene. In Swedish cultural history, the late 1890s are often described as a golden era, and the 1890s appear to have been a pivotal decade when several prominent artists and writers were at the zenith of their careers. The most internationally famous of these was, of course, August Strindberg, who was a close friend of Carl Larsson for many years, but

Carl Larsson: Friends & Enemies

Per Hedström
Director of Exhibitions
13 June – 3 November 2013

Fig. 1 Carl Larsson (1853–1919), August Strindberg, 1899. Charcoal and oil on canvas, 56 x 39 cm. Nationalmuseum, SMB 398.
eventually became one of his worst enemies. In 1908, Strindberg viciously attacked Carl Larsson and his wife in *A New Blue Book*, under the heading “Fabricated Characters”. Carl Larsson was deeply offended. A small section of the exhibition was devoted to the relationship between Carl Larsson and August Strindberg. It featured Carl Larsson’s portrait of Strindberg (Fig. 1), along with one of Strindberg’s paintings.

The exhibition was largely arranged according to themes, based on Carl Larsson’s personal relationships and his influence on the arts scene around 1900. But it also presented Carl Larsson’s life and oeuvre and covered his life and artistic development from his impoverished childhood in Stockholm, his studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and his time in Grez-sur-Loing, to the portrait painting and prestigious public commissions in later years. Visitors thus had an opportunity to see a number of Carl Larsson’s most famous works, including many pictures of his home and family at Sundborn in Dalarna. These are the images that made him so immensely popular (Fig. 2).

In 1883, Carl Larsson married the Swedish painter Karin Bergöö. They had met in France, and Karin eventually had a crucial impact on Carl Larsson’s artistic career. Karin Bergöö studied art in Stockholm and Paris, but stopped painting after marrying Carl, who had voiced negative opinions regarding women artists in general in several contexts. Karin found other outlets for her creativity, however. She played an important part in designing the unique interiors of the family home, which grew into their joint artistic project. It comprised not only the interior design but an approach to family life and various lifestyle choices. One particular theme in the exhibition concerned Carl’s many portraits of Karin (Fig. 3).

Despite his success, Carl Larsson occasionally encountered obstacles, for instance in connection with the commissions he received for public embellishments, such as the one for the Nationalmuseum staircase.
A conservative establishment headed by King Oscar II were opposed to his art, while some of his politically radical artist friends found him too right-wing. The exhibition included several sketches for Carl Larsson’s commission for the Nationalmuseum. Oscar II was represented by a portrait painted by Oscar Björck.

Carl Larsson’s success was based partly on the support of a small group of patrons who bought his art at exhibitions and commissioned new works. Portraits of the more important of these patrons featured in the exhibition. At the time of Larsson’s breakthrough, the merchant and art collector Pontus Fürstenberg and his wife Göthilda were undoubtedly his most important patrons. Later, they were joined by the banker Ernest Thiel and Prince Eugen.

The exhibition comprised some 120 works, almost 100 of which were by Carl Larsson. Other artists who were represented included Julia Beck, Hugo Birger, Oscar Björck, Eva Bonnier, Per Hasselberg, Ernst Josephson, Karl Nordström, Hanna Pauli, Georg Pauli and Anders Zorn. The Nationalmuseum’s own collection of Swedish fin de siècle art and works by Carl Larsson was complemented by loans of key works from several other Swedish and Nordic museums and private collections in Sweden. The exhibition had 61,633 visitors and was accompanied by a richly-illustrated catalogue in Swedish, English and German, with essays by Martin Olin, Görel Cavalli-Björkman, Torsten Gunnarsson and Per I. Gedin.

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Interior from the exhibition *Carl Larsson: Friends & Enemies.*
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