Hans Gedda

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Curator, Swedish National Portrait Gallery and Royal Castles Collections
5 December 2013 – 30 March 2014

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Alexander Roslin (1718–1793), The Artist and his Wife Marie Suzanne Giroust Portraying Henrik Wilhelm Peill, 1767. Oil on canvas, 131 x 98.5 cm.

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HANS GEDDA (b. 1942) is one of the most innovative Swedish portrait photographers of the 20th century. Over more than a decade of actively collecting photographic portraits, the Swedish National Portrait Gallery has incorporated 39 works by Gedda in the collection. The earliest acquisition was made in 2006, for the exhibition Kings in Black and White at Gripsholm Castle, and consisted of ten photos from the series made by Hans Gedda for King Carl XVI Gustaf’s 50th birthday in 1996. It was donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum. These photographs include both the official image of His Majesty, and Gedda’s own compositions. The latter include the most radically innovative Swedish royal portraits from the 1990s, such as the photo showing the King’s hand firmly grasping the hilt of his sword. The series was exhibited again in 2010, this time in The Bernadottes in Black and White at the Nationalmuseum. In the years leading up to the current exhibition, these photographs have been complemented with a representative selection of other portraits by Hans Gedda. The emphasis has been on people
who are active in the arts, but the collection also includes a few politicians and industrialists. Four self-portraits demonstrate the artist’s playfulness and experiments in staging himself in a variety of roles.

The exhibition _Hans Gedda_ would have been impossible without the photographer’s great generosity. The Nationalmuseum has had free access to his photo archives, his correspondence, press cuttings and other documentation. Gedda’s agent, Mia Bengtsson Plynning, has also given us invaluable assistance. The perception of Gedda’s photographic imagery has been both broadened and deepened in the process. Previously-published monographs were written either by authors of fiction (Lars Forssell and Bodil Malmsten) or journalists (Björn Nilsson). These books are obviously crucial to understanding Gedda; in the case of Forssell and Malmsten, the texts are literary works of art in their own right. Hans Gedda himself has also published articles on his work, mainly focusing on the practical aspects of photography. However, until now, we have lacked a more comprehensive art historic interpretation. Access to the material in Gedda’s archives resulted in a catalogue with the potential for a life after the exhibition. But that obviously does not mean that the last word has been said about Gedda’s multifaceted oeuvre. Hopefully, it will inspire even more studies.

The main emphasis of the exhibition was on Hans Gedda’s portraits. Frequently published photos such as that of the author _Tove Jansson_ (1967) and _Nelson Mandela_ (1990) were mixed with less well-known images. The pictures of Mandela appeared on the covers of magazines and newspapers all over the world after his death, which, coincidentally, was the day Hans Gedda’s exhibition opened. Among the more unknown faces was a series of sensitive, charismatic portraits of anonymous older men, who were photographed by Gedda in connection with a commercial shoot for Dockers Jeans in the mid-1990s, shown here for the first time. In these portraits, Gedda shows a particular kinship with the paintings of the
Caravaggists in the parallel exhibition Masters of Darkness. As with the 17th-century masters, the individual person emerges through the pictorial surface of Gedda’s powerful renderings.

Gedda’s portraits combine the typical with the unexpected. Often, the photographs do not correspond with the standard image of the person in question. Instead, Gedda has occasionally presented a new version that has, in some cases, come to influence other photographers. The unexpected expression in a portrait adds further depth to our idea of the depicted person.

Many of the photographs are characterised by melancholic, not to say sad, undertones. In Charlie Drevstam’s documentary Geniet från Flen (The Genius from Flen, 2012), Hans Gedda comments that laughter is less suitable for portraits, since it tends to look like a grimace, a grin.

One example of a paradoxical smile could be Hans Gedda’s portraits of Georg Rydeberg (1971) for the magazine Femina. In the colour photos for the article, his smile is seductive yet not quite convincing. Since the original for this is a small diapositive, it could not be shown in the exhibition, but is included in the catalogue. The exhibited photograph, taken on the same occasion, instead shows a serious man – an image that exudes loneliness and isolation. Is that version more true than the other? This is one example of how Hans Gedda frequently approached portrait photography. Alongside the photos that adhered to the client’s requests and were subsequently chosen for publication, Gedda would produce his own series according to his own mind. Sometimes, the difference is subtle, sometimes astronomical. Even if portraits of the exhibited persons have been seen frequently in the press, these were not necessarily the same versions as those now exhibited by the Nationalmuseum, or the ones that Gedda himself chooses for a presentation of his work.

To broaden the picture of Hans Gedda, the portraits are complemented with images from the world of the circus and still-lifes. In addition, the exhibition features a
few early photos, in a photo journalistic style, taken by Gedda in the 1950s in Flen where he grew up. These surprisingly mature pictures, shot by a mere teenager, led the way into his later artistic oeuvre.

In recent years Hans Gedda has only engaged marginally in portraits. In order to encompass Gedda’s current oeuvre, the exhibition showed a selection of his still-lifes and a closely-related sculpture, *The Soloist*. Here, we also find parallels with Caravaggist imagery, since the still-life evolved into a painterly subject in its own right in the early 17th century. In Hans Gedda’s photography, genres constantly merge with one another. Similarly, the line between different parts of the exhibition is also blurred. Is, for instance, the photo of a saw blade, a nail and a shard of glass a still life or a self-portrait. One thing does not exclude the other, as Gedda’s photographs are constantly transcending boundaries.

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Notes: