A Portrait of Gertrud Fridh as Medea, by Rolf Winquist

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Alexander Roslin (1718–1793), The Artist and his Wife Marie Suzanne Giroust Portraying Henrik Wilhelm Peill, 1747. Oil on canvas, 131 x 98.5 cm.
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The photographer Rolf Winquist (1910–1968) was the director for many years of the popular studio Ateljé Ugla in Stockholm. Best-known for its portraits, Stockholmers flocked here to have their 50-year-olds, wedding couples and tiny tots immortalised. The display window on Kungsgatan attracted both professionals and amateurs. Several generations of photographers sought out Winquist, but he did not offer any formal classes. Instead, his young assistants learnt through practical work. For instance, Hans Gedda related how he would enter the studio after Winquist had left, to examine his settings and how he had positioned the lights and camera, etc. Although the Swedish National Portrait Gallery already had works by several prominent photographers who have been employed at Ateljé Ugla (including works by Hans Gedda and Hans Hammarskiöld), there were no works by Winquist himself. Therefore, the acquisition this year of one of his portraits of Gertrud Fridh is especially noteworthy.

Like many others, Winquist became interested in photography in his youth. In the 1910s and 1920s, pictorialism was a major trend in Swedish photography. Photographers such as Herman Hamnqvist, Ferdinand Flodin and Henry B. Goodwin wanted to improve the status of photography and to have it recognised as an art form. Winquist was not apprenticed to any of these, however, but attended the Slöjdföreningen (a crafts college) in Gothenburg, and later studied for the portrait photographer David Sorbon. Around 1930, Winquist’s works began to appear in various publications. In the 1930s, he worked for several studios, and as the official photographer on the Swedish American Line’s ships Gripsholm and Kungsholm. He also developed an interest in street photography in those years, a genre he continued to pursue parallel with portrait photography throughout life. Whereas his later street pictures are more documentary, his earlier work demonstrates a greater social pathos. The contrasts were enormous between the elegant passengers on the liners and the impoverished, outcasts on the streets of Leningrad.

Before Winquist ended up at Ateljé Uggla, where he stayed for nearly 30 years, he worked for some time with Åke Lange. Around 1940, the portraits by the two photographers, who were roughly of the same age, were stylistically very similar, with suggestive lighting, and contours that were often soft. Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, Winquist progressed towards stronger, clearer light and sharper lines.

In 1951, the director Ingmar Bergman made a production of the French writer Jean Anouilh’s Medea for Swedish Radio. The female lead was played by Gertrud Fridh (1921–1984), and Anders Ek played Jason. Fridh was an actress with a broad repertoire in both tragedy and comedy, but is now mainly remembered for her roles in Bergman’s stage dramas and films. Her first major film role was as the variety singer in the Bergman tragedy A Ship to India from 1947, and her last role for the director was in the stage production of August Strindberg’s play To Damascus in 1974. Gertrud Fridh was usually intense in her interpretations. Her large, soulful eyes contributed to this, especially on film, with its potential for close-ups.

Rolf Winquist executed a series of portraits of Gertrud Fridh as Medea the year she played this part in Bergman’s radio drama. They differ radically in character from his equally suggestive but usually elegant, aloof portraits of women. The tragic role as Medea, the Greek princess who is betrayed by Jason the Argonaut and has her own children killed, is characterised by incredibly strong feelings. In these portraits, Winquist has captured Fridh’s interpretation of Medea, with its combination of smouldering rage and bottomless despair. Here we find the entire range from wild fury to the collapse after her total defeat. Some of the portraits are dominated by violent gestures. In the photo that the Swedish National Portrait Gallery has now acquired, Medea’s fury has passed the phase of violent wrath and is locked into self-destructive, introverted anguish. Her arms are wrapped tight around her body. Her mouth has stiffened into an aggressive, almost bestial grin with teeth bared. Her eyes are filled with hatred. They stare into the distance but she is blinded with unfathomable fury. Medea/Fridh is locked into eternity in her never-ending, raging desolation.

Exceedingly few female portraits reveal an aggressive intensity such as that which Winquist and Fridh together have achieved in this interpretation of the raving Medea. On the whole, expressions of anger are rare in portraiture. When they do appear, they are usually associated with male subjects, such as military men. In history painting and in role portraits, Medea has been an intriguing figure for artists wanting to represent strong emotions. In many of these works, Medea is shown as guileful, despairing or seductive, rather than furious. To find an expression as intense as that in Winquist’s picture, we must go to photos of the opera singer Maria Callas’ interpretation of Medea for the stage, or Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film from 1969.

The acquisition of this portrait of Gertrud Fridh as the raging Medea has enriched the National Swedish Portrait Gallery with one of Rolf Winquist’s most powerful works.

Notes:
1. Rolf Winquist’s life and work are summarised in Rune Hassner, Minnesutställning – bilder ur fotograf Rolf Winquists produktion under trettioåtta år, exh. cat. Liljevalchs Konsthall, together with the Association of Swedish Professional Photographers and the Friends of Fotografiska Museet, Stockholm 1970. The information on Winquist’s education and the rough outline of his career are from this publication.
2. Jean Anouilh’s Medea was published in his Nouvelles pièces noires: Jézabel; Antigone; Roméo et Jeannette; Médée, Paris 1946. Médée is based on both Euripides and Seneca. Anouilh’s version, however, is only loosely based on the classical dramas – see Charles R. Lyons, “The Ambiguity of the Anouilh ‘Medeal’”, in The French Review, published by The American Association of Teachers of French, vol. 37, No 3 (January), Champaign 1964, p. 312.