Three 17th-Century Paintings from the Collection of Gustaf Adolf Sparre

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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. Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Sophia Giesecke Fund, Axel Hirsch Fund and Mr Stefan Persson and Mrs Denise Persson. Nationalmuseum, NM 7141.

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The Nationalmuseum has acquired three important Flemish and Dutch cabinet pictures from the former collection of Count Gustaf Adolf Sparre (1746–1794): two genre scenes in a smaller format by David Teniers the Younger (Fig. 1) and Jacob Toorenvliet (Fig. 2), and a landscape by Gijsbrecht Leytens (Fig. 3). All three paintings are in their collector’s distinctive carved and gilded wood frames in Neoclassical Gustavian style, in two standard designs.

Gustaf Adolf Sparre af Söfdeborg (Fig. 5) was heir to one of Sweden’s wealthiest merchant families.1 Born on 6 January 1746, he was the son of Rutger Axel Sparre, a director of the Swedish East India Company. His mother, Sara Christina Sahlgren, was from a prominent and cultured Gothenburg family of merchants. Their marriage in 1740 brought an influx of wealth to the Sparre dynasty. Following the fire which in winter 1746, a week after Gustaf Adolf’s birth, destroyed the original Sahlgren house in Gothenburg, Sara’s mother Birgitta Sahlgren commissioned Bengt Wilhelm Carlberg (1696–1778), the city’s leading architect, to rebuild on the same site, facing Stora Hamngatan and its canal, in 1753. This impressive Neoclassical palace, known as the Sahlgren-Sparre Palace, which was to house Gustaf Adolf Sparre’s collection, still stands today.

Gustaf Adolf’s parents died when he was still young. He was educated at the universities of Lund and Uppsala, but the strongest influence on his further education was his highly cultivated grandmother,

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Fig. 1 David Teniers the Younger (1610–1690), Tavern Interior with Peasant Lighting his Pipe, 1640s. Oil on oak, 23.9 x 19 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7125.
Birgitta Sahlgren, who encouraged her grandson’s interest in the arts. From the middle of the 18th century onwards, generations of wealthy young Swedes were encouraged to make the Grand Tour of continental Europe. Birgitta Sahlgren thus encouraged her grandson to travel and provided the necessary funding. Gustaf Adolf was abroad continuously from 1768 until the end of 1771. Some of his diaries and his correspondence with his grandmother have survived, and provide an insight into his growing interest in the arts, especially painting, and his urge to collect. Paris was a magnet to which Swedish Grand Tourists were drawn, and French culture and taste in the arts predominated, including the collecting of paintings, drawings and sculpture. This was the age of Count Carl Gustaf Tessin (see article on p. 109), whose magnificent collection constitutes the core of the French Rococo holdings in the Nationalmuseum, which are among the greatest and best preserved outside France. Tessin also assembled an important collection of Old Master drawings. Sparre’s large collection was similarly built up primarily through extensive purchases in the Netherlands and in Paris during the later 18th century, and was considered one of the very best in Sweden next to the Royal Collection.

By New Year 1772, when Sparre returned to Gothenburg from his European travels, he was the owner, together with his cousin Jacob Sahlgren, of the Sahlgren-Sparre Palace. He decided to modernise the building, redecorating and refurbishing in fashionable Gustavian style a suite of rooms, in particular two drawing rooms on the first floor that were to house his picture collection. The style of the decoration reflected the recent remodelling of the Royal Palace in Stockholm, and it seems likely that Sparre employed the same architect and decorators. Around 1775 Sparre commissioned ornamental frames for the paintings, to match the rest of the gallery’s decor. These were probably made by the same joiners, including the sculptor Gustaf Johan Fast, who created the apartment’s mirror frames and panelling. The Swedish art historian Ingmar Hasselgren noted that Fast, who had executed some of the decorative work in the Royal Palace, was responsible for four mirrors in Sparre’s apartment, and suggested that he may also have been responsible for the boiseries in the redecorated rooms in the Sparre-Sahlgren Palace. Since Fast usually worked under the court architect Jean Eric Rehn, whose work resembles the renovations in the Sparre apartment, Hasselgren also suggested that Rehn may have been Sparre’s architect.²

As an art collector, Sparre was particularly keen on Dutch and Flemish genre painting, from simple depictions of drinking and smoking peasants to the richly detailed fijnschilderij of the Leiden artists. He also assembled a collection of Old Master drawings, eventually inherited by his son-in-law Jacob Gustaf De la Gardie, parts of which are today housed in the Nationalmuseum.³ The majority of Sparre’s picture collection comprised small-scale Flemish and Dutch cabinet pictures from the 17th century. Although Sparre did acquire copies of some large-scale religious paintings, such as Peter Paul Rubens’ Descent from the Cross and Anthony van Dyck’s grisaille ricordo of his
Crucifixion, he purchased very few large works.4 Indeed, few pictures of any dimensions greater than one metre entered the Sparre collection, one exception being Jan Lievens’ magnificent The Apostle Paul at his Writing Desk, which the Nationalmuseum was fortunately able to acquire in 2012.5 Sparre’s tastes were entirely in line with prevailing trends among 18th-century connoisseurs in the Netherlands and Paris where, as graphic reproductions, the works of Dutch and Flemish artists were widely appreciated at this time. The recently acquired Tavern Interior with Peasant Lighting his Pipe (Fig. 1) from the 1640s, by the Antwerp painter David Teniers the Younger (1610–1690) – the artist represented by the largest number of works in Sparre’s collection – and Man Holding a Jug (Taste) (Fig. 2) from around 1679, by the Leiden fijnschilder Jacob Toorenvliet (1640–1719), are prime examples of the tastes of the age. Another important group in the Sparre collection consisted of landscapes and pastoral scenes. The impressive Wooded Mountain Landscape with Waterfall and Travellers (Fig. 3) is a typical Flemish fantasy landscape in the tradition of Joos de Momper, probably painted in the first half of the 17th century by the rare Antwerp landscape painter Gijsbrecht Leytens (1586–c. 1642/56), who is better known for his atmospheric winter scenes. With its characteristic features – an imposing north European mountain and forest landscape combined with fanciful Italianate buildings, pastoral idylls and exotically dressed groups of travellers – the Stockholm picture is closely comparable to the artist’s late Mountain Landscape in the Rain (Fig. 4), one of his very few landscapes other than winter scenes.6 The painting is representative of key trends in Flemish landscape painting after 1600.
During Sparre’s lifetime, the greater part of his collection, fifty-eight out of a total of up to a hundred pictures – including the three recently acquired by the Museum – was displayed in the gallery that he had set up in the Sahlgren-Sparre Palace. Sparre moved some of his collection to Castle Kulla Gunnarstorp, the country seat near Helsingborg that he had bought in 1775, and where he lived after his marriage to Elisabeth Ramel in 1777. An inventory drawn up following his death in 1794 gives the precise locations of each of the fifty-eight paintings kept in Gothenburg, all of which were in the Blue Drawing Room. Allowing for paintings that have been dispersed, it would be possible to recreate this hanging fairly accurately. The pictures were hung in symmetrical groups – portraits, landscapes and genre scenes mixed together – with a common vertical centre-line, and pendants arranged at the sides. Teniers’ Tavern Interior and Toorenvliet’s Man Holding a Jug, which are in identical frames, seem to have been hung as pendants, as part of an arrangement that had as its centrepiece a large Bacchanal by Jacob Jordaens. The latter was surrounded mostly by small-scale genre pictures by artists such as Adriaen van Ostade, Willem van Mieris and Adriaen van der Werff, including several with drinking and smoking peasants. On another wall, Leytens’ Mountain Landscape was hung as a pendant to an identically framed wooded landscape by Alexander Keirinckx showing A Skirmish between Cavalry Men and Foot Soldiers. King Gustav III rearranged his own art gallery in the 1780s, very much along the lines of the new hanging in Gothenburg, which Hasselgren suggested may have served as the model for the king.7

Sparre’s tastes as a collector were formed during his Grand Tour of England, Holland and Belgium, as well as during longer stays in Paris in the years 1768–1772 and 1779–1780. While Paris certainly made a great impression on the young Swede, it was nonetheless his travels in the Low Countries that shaped his collecting tastes, making his collection rather unusual in the Scandinavia of his day. While he wrote extensively about what he saw on his travels and what impressed him, he remained silent on the subject of his acquisitions. However, it is clear that he started to collect Dutch and Flemish Old Masters on his first visit to the Netherlands in 1768–1769, and he continued to buy in a very similar taste at auctions during his stays in Paris. Sparre left Sweden for the first time in the summer of 1768, travelling to London, where he stayed with Malte Ramel, a friend from his student days and his future brother-in-law. A letter from Birgitta Sahlgren dated 3 August, thanking him for his two earlier letters, contains some good advice and reveals the strength of the bond between them. She hoped “that my dearest grandson is careful with

Fig. 4 Gijsbrecht Leytens (1686–1642/57). Mountain Landscape in the Rain. Oil on oak, 40.2 x 71.5 cm. Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig.
his money, remembering that it is easy to give out money, but not always easy to bring it back into one’s purse...". Sparre seems to have enjoyed life in London, where he frequented the theatre and opera. Here he met and befriended the architect William Chambers, born in Gothenburg to English parents, and it seems likely that Chambers provided an introduction to London collections.

Sparre’s first months of travel in the Low Countries are well documented in his surviving diary from 4 October–4 November 1768. He left London for Flanders on 4 October, travelling to Bruges, where he spent the better part of eight days visiting the city’s art treasures. Among the works he saw, he especially admired those by the Netherlandish 15th-century masters Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling, Baroque masterpieces by Rubens, and Michelangelo’s famous sculpture of The Madonna and Child in the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk. He then left for Ghent, where he continued to seek out picture collections, noting works by Rubens and Anthony van Dyck, Gerard Seghers and Gaspar de Crayer. In the Michielskerk he admired Van Dyck’s Crucifixion. After a three-day stay in Ghent, Sparre then travelled to Antwerp, staying overnight in the Schelde city before continuing on to Amsterdam via Utrecht and Gouda. In Amsterdam he admired Rembrandt’s Nightwatch, along with pictures by the Rembrandt pupil Govaert Flinck and by Van Dyck. Of greatest interest from this short stay in Amsterdam is an entry in his diary noting that someone there had made arrangements for paintings he had purchased to be forwarded to Gothenburg.

After six days in Amsterdam, Sparre travelled to Haarlem on 22 October, then on to Leiden and The Hague. At The Hague he may have had introductions through Count Gustaf Philip Creutz, who had been Swedish ambassador there and who, as ambassador to France, was to become a close friend. Sparre visited the celebrated Cabinet of Willem V, largely formed in the 1750s and ’60s, and still being added to at the time of his visit. Here he made detailed notes of the pictures on display, and this collection clearly made a strong impression on him. He was most taken with Paulus Potter’s Bull and Gerard Dou’s The Young Mother, both now in the Mauritshuis. Other artists mentioned form a roll call of those he was to collect himself, among others Gabriel Metsu, Van der Werff, Jan Steen, Adriaen van Ostade, Teniers, Brouwer and Karel Dujardin. Sparre then travelled to Delft and to Rotterdam, where he visited the collection of Jan and Pieter van Bisschop, admiring an array of cabinet pictures of the kind his own collection would eventually comprise, works by Dujardin, Wouwerman, Mieris and Dou. From Rotterdam he went back to Antwerp, where he admired the Baroque altarpieces and sculptures in churches and monasteries. He singled out for praise Rubens’ Descent from the Cross in the cathedral. Seeing this work must have inspired him to purchase the
small copy of it on copper, though it is not known whether he bought it during this visit to Antwerp or on another occasion. He probably also visited the Dominican convent of St Catherine, which housed Van Dyck’s altarpiece of Christ on the Cross Adored by Saints Catherine and Dominic, of which he owned the artist’s autograph grisaille ricordo. The latter is reputed to have been kept by the nuns in the convent, and later sold to an unidentified Swedish nobleman. In Antwerp Sparre also visited dealers, noting down prices, although his diary does not specify what he himself may have bought. At the dealership of Jean Pilaret, he admired a Teniers “extraordinaire” – though probably not, by its description, any of the ones he owned. He visited the premises of Jacques Emanuel van Lancken, where he noted a landscape by Teniers as well as a small Ostade of a peasant smoking.

We do not know when Sparre left Antwerp, or what his movements were in the last weeks of 1768, but he was in Paris early in 1769 and seems to have remained there until 1771. He clearly enjoyed life in the French capital, staying on despite entreaties from his grandmother to return home in 1769. He spent substantial sums there, and we may assume that some of these were for pictures. In 1769 he sat for a portrait by the French painter Joseph Siffred Duplessis (1725–1802) (Fig. 5). Like many young Swedes visiting Paris, he probably stayed at the Swedish embassy, where the ambassador, Count Creutz, held sway over a cultivated circle of friends. Creutz was extremely influential, and certainly helped Sparre, along with many other young Swedes, to gain access to French cultural life. He had a notable collection of what were then contemporary pictures. In autumn 1770 Sparre travelled to Geneva, visiting Voltaire on the return journey to Paris. Letters from his grandmother reveal her increasing frailty, and on 12 May 1771 she died. This seems to have precipitated Sparre’s return to Gothenburg. On his homeward journey he stopped in Kassel to see the celebrated collection of pictures belonging to the landgraves of Hesse-Kassel, which has as its core a large group of Dutch and Flemish cabinet pictures of the kind Sparre evidently enjoyed. When Sparre returned to Paris several years later, in 1779–1780, staying as the guest of Ambassador Creutz, he took the opportunity to add to his picture collection. Buying at the Poullain sale in 1780, possibly with Langlier acting as his agent, he acquired Gerard Ter Borch’s remarkable picture of A Horse Stable, now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, as well as others by Isaac van Ostade and Jordains.

Sparre and his wife Elisabeth Ramel had only one child who survived infancy, Christina, who married Jacob Gustaf De la Gardie. It is not known precisely when Sparre’s widow Elisabeth moved the entire picture collection from the couple’s Gothenburg residence to Kulla Gunnars- torp, where she remained until her death in 1830. Upon her death, Kulla Gunnarstorp and its contents passed to her grandson Gustaf Adolf de la Gardie (1800–33). Gustaf Adolf remained childless, so that when he died in 1833 the estate passed to his father Jacob Gustaf de la Gardie (1768–1842). De la Gardie sold Kulla Gunnarstorp in 1837 to Count Carl de Geer, and a few years later, probably around 1840, the picture collection followed. Count De Geer kept the collection intact for a few years, but in 1855 he sent the vast majority of it to his granddaughter, who kept it on her estate of Wanås.

The Nationalmuseum’s acquisition, made possible by a generous donation from the Wiros Fund, constitutes a significant addition to the collection of 17th-century cabinet paintings. At the same time, it provides a valuable insight into patterns of private collecting in 18th-century Sweden.

Notes:

1. Georg Göthe, Tafelsamlingen på Wanås, Stockholm 1893; Ingmar Hasselgren, Konstsamlaren Gustaf Adolf Sparre, 1746–1794, PhD diss., University of Gothenburg 1974; idem, "Konstsamlaren Gustaf Adolf Sparre och Sparreska vänningen i Göteborg", in Konsthistorisk tidskrift 57, 1988, pp. 141–144. The details of Sparre’s biography and description of his collection given in the present article are based on Hasselgren’s seminal book unless otherwise noted.
4. The Rubens copy and Van Dyck’s ricordo both sold at auction in London, Sotheby’s, 5–6 December 2007, lots 6 and 110.
8. The correspondence, kept in the De la Gardie Archive at the University of Lund, is quoted by Hasselgren 1974, pp. 21–22.
9. A picture by Adriaen van der Werff, Two Children Playing with a Cat Holding a Bird in Its Jaws, seems to have been purchased at auction in Amsterdam in 1769. See the sale catalogue, London, Sotheby’s, 5 December 2007, lot 14.
10. The collection was passed down through the Wachtmeister family and kept at Wanås, where, until 1978, it was held as entailed property. Over the years, the original Sparre collection has been dispersed, most recently in 2007, when some 40 paintings were auctioned at Sotheby’s, London, and on 5 December 2012, when another four were sold at Bukowskis, Stockholm, including the three now acquired. In 2012 the Nationalmuseum was able to acquire The Apostle Paul at His Writing Desk directly from the owners.