Rolf Winquist and Kerstin Bernhard: Two Classics of 20th-Century Swedish Portraiture

Magnus Olausson
Director of Collections and the Swedish National Portrait Gallery
Thanks to two generous gifts, the Nationalmuseum has been able to add to its collections works by some of the classic figures of 20th-century Swedish portrait photography. The photographer Hans Gedda, who was an assistant to Rolf Winquist in the 1960s, has given the Museum a major portion of the material the latter left behind, while Kerstin Bernhard’s nephew, the photographer Carl Johan Bernhard, has donated a selection of her best portraits from the 1930s and 1940s. Between them, these images provide a rich insight into two of the most significant bodies of work of the period, which combined technical brilliance with an eye for the character of the sitter.

Rolf Winquist (1910–1968) was an extremely versatile photographer, with a repertoire that ranged from advertising and fashion work to street photography and experimental solarisations. But it was above all for his portraits that he became famous. The display case outside his studio, Ateljé Uggla at Kungsgatan 18 in Stockholm, acted as a magnet to professionals.

Fig. 1 Rolf Winquist (1910–1968), Harriet Andersson (b. 1932), actress, 1959.
Gelatin silver print mounted on cardboard, 59 x 39 cm.
Gift of the photographer Hans Gedda.
Nationalmuseum, Swedish National Portrait Gallery, NMGrh 5029.
and amateurs alike, and many young photographers turned to Winquist for advice. A somewhat reclusive man, he did not offer regular teaching. Instead, many of his assistants had to acquire their knowledge indirectly, by studying camera settings or helping with practical tasks. One of Winquist’s assistants, Hans Gedda, who continued to run the business for two years after the photographer’s death, has donated what remains of his estate, consisting above all of exhibition material and work samples that were retained in his studio.

Previously there was just one work by Winquist in the Swedish National Portrait Gallery collection, his powerful portrait of the actress Gertrud Fridh as Medea (NM Grh 4894). With the images now acquired, he emerges more clearly in the role with which he is chiefly associated – that of the portrait photographer. When Winquist did not feel too constrained by his commissions, he was able to develop his innovative side. His portraits of the actress Harriet Andersson (Fig. 1) and Albin Johansson, director of the Swedish Cooperative Union (Fig. 2), are both excellent examples of his sophisticated treatment of light. In his rendering of actress and model Lena Madsén, Winquist plays with different levels of reality, contrasting the sitter with a silent-movie still of Greta Garbo (Fig. 3). Finally, his sensitive image of an elderly couple in his studio has become a document in its own right of the photographer’s day-to-day environment (Fig. 4).

Rolf Winquist first worked in a Pictorialist spirit, but soon turned his back on this form of fine-art photography. Hans Gedda has said of Winquist that he felt the greatest freedom as a street photographer, capturing passers-by unawares on his Leica. Yet his significance for 20th-century portraiture cannot be underestimated. Winquist took part in a succession of international competitions and thus gained renown outside Sweden, despite his retiring nature. Richard Avedon was among his admirers.

Kerstin Bernhard (1914–2004) is best known for her fashion and food photo-
graphy, but began her training with two of the most sought-after portraitists of the early 20th century, Ferdinand Flodin and John Hertzberg. She initially worked as a portrait photographer with a studio of her own, which provided a steady income as she embarked on her career. Bernhard struck a skilful balance between personal expression and the conventions of the day. One of her best and most groundbreaking portraits is that of her brother Carl Gustaf Bernhard, taken in 1939, which surprisingly won her an award (Fig. 5). The sitter is shown at work as a doctor, a specialist in the neurophysiology of vision. Here, Kerstin Bernhard demonstrates both ingenuity and humour, with a documentary element that represents a break with convention.

Bernhard’s photograph from the same year of her sister-in-law, the opera singer Gurli Lemon-Bernhard, on the other hand, follows the standard template for portraits of star performers. The subject is depicted
Fig. 5 Kerstin Bernhard (1914–2004), *The artist’s brother Carl Gustaf Bernhard (1910–2001), doctor, neurologist and Professor*, 1939. Gelatin silver print, 29.7 x 23.9 cm. Gift of the artist’s nephew and the sitter’s son, Carl Johan Bernhard. Nationalmuseum, Swedish National Portrait Gallery, NMGrh 4982.
in the role of the page in Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro* (Fig. 6). To a portrait photographer visibility was essential, and Bernhard therefore deliberately chose to take portraits of famous figures of stage and screen, images which often graced the covers of fashionable magazines such as *Idun*. Another example of the genre is a character portrait of the celebrated actor Lars Hanson, probably as Herod in the Royal Dramatic Theatre’s 1945 production of Kaj Munk’s play *Herod the King* (Fig. 7). The staging of the shot reflects the dramatic lighting of the studio tradition, with a close-up of the subject’s face in sharp contrast. The mode of representation is reminiscent of publicity stills for drama films.

A typical example of the studio tradition of the time is a portrait of the actress Viveka Brising, a close friend of the photographer’s (see p. 99). Her downcast eyes mirror the stereotyped image of women as sweet, passive and introverted. For the creative Kerstin Bernhard, standard portraits eventually lost their interest. After the Second World War, as borders reopened and she was able to travel across Europe again, she struck out in new directions.

Photo reportage and fashion photography in a French setting provided one source of income, a fundamentally pragmatic choice that Bernhard turned into great art. In fashion work, especially, her experience of portrait photography would stand her in good stead. In the post-war years, Bernhard also tackled new subjects as she revolutionised food photography. Overall, Kerstin Bernhard produced an extremely broad range of work, within which her portraits would for a long time be overshadowed.