Two Original Illustrations for the Songbook
*Mors lilla Olle och andra visor af Alice Tegnér.*
Created by Elsa Beskow in 1903

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Fig. 1 Elsa Beskow (1874–1953), Ekorn satt i granen (Squirrel in the Spruce Tree), 1903. Pen and black ink, watercolour, 380 x 280 mm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 63/2014.

Fig. 2 Elsa Beskow (1874–1953), Småjäntorna stå i dörren (Little Girls are Standing by the Door), 1903. Pen and black ink, watercolour, 380 x 275 mm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 64/2014.
**Elsa Beskow (1874–1953)** was one of the pioneers who set the tone for children’s books in Sweden. For more than half a century, she wove classic tales, in words and images, for generations of Swedish children. With her brush and pen, she conveyed fragrances and moods which, through the country’s nurseries, have penetrated deep into the national consciousness. By seeing the world through the eyes of a child, she also managed to impart a magic to those things in life, close at hand, that we often neglect. In her world, the harsh realities of nature and life were transformed into an enchanted fairy tale that stretches across the seasons. Her idyllisation of a secure childhood home and the light Swedish summers was something Elsa Beskow had in common with another great illustrator and artist, Carl Larsson. The same can be said of her watercolour technique, her linear style, her light palette and her method of composition, with its use of a series of flat, parallel planes. Like Larsson and many other contemporaries, Beskow found inspiration in both Japanese woodblock prints and the English magazine *The Studio*. At a personal level though, she would, early on, distance herself from Carl Larsson on account of his view of women.

In the 1890s, Elsa Beskow settled in Djursholm, just north of Stockholm, where her husband Natanael Beskow became a lay preacher at Djursholm Chapel. Here she made the acquaintance of Alice Tegnér, who played the organ for the services. When a group of friends wanted to publish Tegnér’s songs in book form, Elsa Beskow prepared the illustrations. The resulting volume, *Mors lilla Olle och andra visor af Alice Tegnér* ("Mother’s Little Olle" and other songs by Alice Tegnér), became one of the most cherished songbooks of all time, appearing in countless editions. It was first published in 1903, and on her birthday that year Tegnér received a portfolio containing the eleven original illustrations for the book, put together by “grateful Djursholm friends”.

By inheritance, these sheets were gradually dispersed among various members of the Tegnér family, and eventually they found new owners. In 1995, thanks to a generous gift from the composer Benny Andersson, the Nationalmuseum was able to acquire four of the original images in watercolour and ink, representing some of the best-known illustrations from the book: *Mors lilla Olle* (Mother’s little Olle), *Blåsippan uti backarna står* (Hepatica blue on wooded slope), *Bå, bä vita lamm* (Baa, baa, black sheep) and *Sov du lilla vide ung* (Sleep, you little willow young). With the assistance of the Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund, the Museum was able to purchase another two at the Bukowskis autumn sale in 2014: *Ekorren satt i granen* (Squirrel in the spruce tree) (Fig. 1) and *Småjäntorna stå i dörren* (Little girls are standing by the door) (Fig. 2). As a result, over half the illustrations are now in public ownership.

The acquisition of these works of Elsa Beskow is no isolated phenomenon, but part of the Nationalmuseum’s broader mission to collect children’s book illustrations. Its holding in this area comprises important works from the 18th century right down to the present day. As early as 1974, the Museum was able to acquire from Beskow’s descendants all the original illustrations for *Tomtebobarnen* (Children of the Forest), which first appeared in print in 1910. Over the years, the Museum has turned the spotlight on Elsa Beskow’s art on several occasions, most recently in 2002 with the exhibition *Elsa Beskow: A Childhood Picture Treasury*, and in 1995 with *Elsa Beskow*.

At the turn of the 20th century, when Ellen Key was a major influence on the debate about children’s education and development, Beskow’s storybooks were entirely in tune with their times. Today, more than a century later, some of her works may seem old-fashioned and almost too idyllic. It would be a mistake, though, to underestimate the significance she has had for several generations of Swedish children, in terms of shaping their view of nature, for example, and encouraging a love of reading. Attention is often drawn to the close connection between words and images in her storybooks, the balance between humour and education, and last but not least, the natural tone of her narrative. Among the gems of children’s literature which Elsa Beskow left behind, her illustrations for *Mors lilla Olle och andra visor* shine particularly brightly.