Two Watercolours by Ivar Arosenius

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Fig. 1 Ivar Arosenius (1878–1909), Evil Powers, 1907. Pen and black ink, watercolour, gouache, 230 x 315 mm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 61/2014.
**Ivar Arosenius (1878–1909)** died of complications resulting from haemophilia on 1 January 1909, at the age of just 30. In his short life he had led a dissolute, bohemian existence, but in later years he had settled down, married, and fathered a daughter, nicknamed Lillan, whom he worshipped. He left behind a treasure trove of paintings, many of which reflect the circumstances of his life and feature a distinctive, dreamlike, fairy-tale atmosphere. The majority are small-scale watercolours, in which bizarre and burlesque elements are mixed with seriousness and quiet melancholy. The repertoire of themes includes the eternal riddles of life and death, and questions of good and evil. Some of the works also contain allusions to the seven deadly sins, including lust and gluttony. In the spirit of the Swedish 18th century poet Carl Michael Bellman (1740–1795) and his alter ego Fredman, Arosenius often preaches a somewhat trite gospel of hedonism in these works, suggesting that if you have a glass in your hand and a girl on your knee, you can sit back and watch the world go by with gentle indulgence.

Although Arosenius’s talent was recognised early on by the city art museum in his native Gothenburg, for a long time the Nationalmuseum owned very few of his works. Not until a major solo exhibition was staged in 1978 did the Museum take the opportunity to enhance its collection with extensive acquisitions from the artist’s descendants. Over the years, these have been continuously supplemented with additional works. Another two were purchased in 2014, further highlighting the broad scope of the artist’s oeuvre.

The first, titled *Onda makter* (Evil Powers), is dated 1907 and depicts a personification of evil in veiled, jocular form (Fig. 1). In a sterile, rocky landscape surrounded by black mountains, a she-dragon has given birth and is suckling some twenty bickering young reptiles. Some of them, having had their fill, have contentedly begun to explore their surroundings. One is doing its business on the ground, and at bottom left another has sniffed out and sunk its teeth into a black-clad clergyman. The scene plays out in a pale green moonlight, which imbues the image with an air of terror.

The second watercolour is very different in nature, its exotic features evoking the fairy-tale atmosphere of the Arabian Nights. It is one of many sketches and proposals prepared by Arosenius in 1908 for a fairy-tale series without text entitled *Kalifens guldfågel* (The Caliph’s Golden Bird) (Fig. 2). The story tells of the caliph’s goose, famous for laying golden eggs, which escapes from its golden cage but is caught by a poor peasant boy on whom fortune is smiling. In the end, the boy is granted the hand of the princess and half the kingdom by the grateful caliph.