Two Forgotten Names: Carl Hörvik and Björn Trägårdh

Anders Bengtsson
Curator, Applied Art and Design

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Fig. 1 Carl Hörvik (1882–1954), Cabinet and armchairs, 1925. Produced by Nordiska Kompaniet. Oak, partly veneered, gilded, iron, H. 173 cm (cabinet). Oak, partly veneered, cane, horsehair, H. 80 cm (armchairs). Gift of Ernst and Carl Hirsch through the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, and of the Friends of the Nationalmuseum. Nationalmuseum, NMK 91/2015 and NMK 92–93/2015.
In 2015 the Nationalmuseum’s exhibition Women Pioneers: Swedish Design in Between the Wars, shown at Läckö Castle and Nationalmuseum Design at Kulturhuset Stads- teatern in Stockholm, gave prominence to a number of women designers working in the interwar years—many of them now forgotten and unknown to the general public (see articles on pp. 61 and 163). Some male designers of the period have also been forgotten by all but a small circle. Among them are Carl Hörvik (1882–1954) and Björn Trägårdh (1908–1988), who mer-
rit renewed attention on account of acquisi-
tions made by the Nationalmuseum in the past year.

During 2015, the Museum received a magnificent gift from Ernst and Carl Hirsch, father and son, who together with the Friends of the Nationalmuseum donated a cabinet and two armchairs that were part of a suite of furniture designed by Carl Hörvik for the Swedish pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition of 1925 (Fig. 1). The Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes was to prove a major success for Sweden, which—after the host nation France—won more awards than any other country participating, claiming no fewer than 36 Grands Prix, 100 gold medals and numerous honourable mentions.

The Swedish exhibits and the Swedish pavilion, designed by Carl Bergsten, represented a restrained, pared-down classicism that garnered acclaim from the interna-
tional critics of the day. The pavilion was pro-
vided with a suite of furniture designed by Carl Hörvik (Fig. 2) and made by Nordiska Kompaniet (NK), Sweden’s leading department store at the time. The furniture—consisting of a cabinet, a table, sofas, arm-
chairs and tabourets—won a Grand Prix, the highest accolade of the exhibition. It is monumental in character, with clear inspiration from Classical and Egyptian antiquity—the tomb of Tutankhamen had been discovered in 1922, and the new finds were to have a major influence, not only on Hörvik’s work. With their exclusive ma-
terials and design, these pieces are clearly luxury objects. The cabinet and the chairs are made of oak inlaid with various other woods, the chair backs are of woven rattan cane, and the seats are upholstered in horse- hair. The cabinet is intended to be viewed with the doors open, and has three gilded niches for the display of works of decorative art. The Nationalmuseum already had in its collections the diploma Carl Hörvik received in connection with the exhibition and the chandelier, designed by Carl Bergsten, that was displayed with his furniture.¹

Carl Hörvik (born Nilsson, 1882–
1954)² was a native of Hörvik in Blekinge and was to take the name of his birthplace as his surname. He trained as an architect at Stockholm’s Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), graduating in 1909 together with the better-known Gunnar Asplund. Hörvik was regarded in his day as an ar-
chitect of great talent, and set up his own practice as early as 1913, at the age of 31. He worked on the interior of the Röshska Museum in Gothenburg in 1916 and began designing furniture for Nordiska Kompaniet the following year. Hörvik took part in many of the most important exhibitions in Sweden and abroad during the 1920s and 1930s, often with great success. In 1937, as the recession began to bite, he took up a position as an architect with the Swedish Royal Air Force Administration and, from that point on, seems to have given up designing for other clients. For a long time Hörvik was a forgotten name, and it was only in the 1980s, as some of his furniture from the major exhibitions began to appear in sales, that he deservedly attracted renewed attention as a furniture designer. Today, he is one of the most acclaimed Swedish designers internationally.

Like most architects of his generation, Carl Hörvik abandoned the classicism of the 1920s to wholeheartedly embrace functionalism. At the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930, he mainly showed tubular-steel furniture in this new style.

Björn Trägårdh, who belonged to a younger generation of designers, began

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¹ See article by Bo Nilsson, “Gröna kompositioner: Carl Hörviks möbelformgivning,” in Sko
² This text was adapted from an article that appeared in the Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Volume 22, 2015, pp. 58–61.
to collaborate with Estrid Ericson and the firm of Svenskt Tenn in 1928, at the age of just 20. Trägårdh’s future wife, the textile artist Göta Hellström (Trägårdh), who was already working in the Svenskt Tenn shop provided the link. Both Trägårdh and his wife-to-be were studying at the time at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. Ericson saw his talent and engaged him to create pewter pieces that were in keeping with the new functionalism of the period. At the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930, a tea service designed by Trägårdh was shown, its teapot consisting of a rectangular box with a spout and handle – entirely in line with contemporary ideals. In time, Trägårdh would also design entire interiors and furniture for Svenskt Tenn. In 2015 the Museum acquired a pair of armchairs attributed to him, a purchase made possible by the Barbro Osher Fund (Fig. 3). The chairs are functionalist in character, cube-shaped with original covers of striped woollen fabric, velvet and leather. The functionalism of Björn Trägårdh and Svenskt Tenn was never intended for a mass market; these were handcrafted luxury pieces, ill suited to the more social aims of the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design (Svenska Slöjdföreningen).

Part of the reason Trägårdh was for many years relatively unknown as a designer is that Estrid Ericson rarely gave prominence to the people who designed her products; the emphasis was always on the trademark Svenskt Tenn. In general, therefore, the firm’s pewter objects from this period were never signed with the designers’ names, with the exception of Anna Petrus’s work, as she insisted on it. This makes it difficult to say who designed what in Svenskt Tenn’s early production. Most of the items now sold under the name of Björn Trägårdh are attributed to him on stylistic grounds, but we do not know for sure. In the case of furniture, design drawings can be found in Svenskt Tenn’s order catalogues, but usually with no indication of their creators (Fig. 4). One example of the difficulties involved in attributing a design is a mirror acquired by the Nationalmuseum in 2013. It belonged to Trägårdh himself and was not stamped by Svenskt Tenn. The decoration consists of a “panama” pattern, which was also used by Estrid Ericson and has traditionally been ascribed to her, based on an anecdote citing her husband’s panama hat as the inspiration. However, Ericson did not meet her future husband until 1939, and the first hallmarked objects with the panama pattern were made as early as 1930.

In parallel with his work for Svenskt Tenn, Trägårdh was active as an artist and dreamt of being able to support himself as a painter. Following a crisis in the family,
thing in common, giving up furniture design relatively early in their careers. Hörvik’s employment with the Royal Air Force Administration can be seen as a “retirement post” forced on him by a harsh economic reality. Trägårdh’s work with buttons for French fashion houses was of course a form of artistic activity, but can also be interpreted as a way of putting bread on the table when he was unable to earn enough from painting. His work as a furniture designer, meanwhile, fell into oblivion, with one reference work on 20th-century Swedish furniture making no mention of him at all.

Carl Hörvik’s cabinet and armchairs and the chairs attributed to Björn Trägårdh are very important as part of the Nationalmuseum’s endeavour to strengthen its collection of early 20th-century applied art. In the last 30 years, much of the magnificent Swedish furniture made for the major exhibitions of the 1920s and 1930s has been sold abroad, partly perhaps because the Swedish public have not set enough store by it. There have been no legal safeguards to prevent such pieces being exported, as there are for 18th-century Swedish furniture for example, even though these exclusive 20th-century designs have always been rarer, produced as they were in limited editions. Today, very little of this furniture remains in the country.

Notes:
6. Current Swedish legislation only protects Swedish-made furniture from before 1860.

Fig. 4 Design drawings, Svenskt Tenn’s order catalogue. Svenskt Tenn Archive and Collections.