Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg: Artist of the “People’s Home”

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The artist Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg (1898–1988) played an active part in the development of the Swedish welfare state, but would herself fall victim to the conflicting pressures of life as a professional woman and as a mother bringing up four children on her own. She trained with the leading sculptors of the time in Stockholm and Paris, set up one of the first modern interior design firms, Futurum, and took part in exhibitions promoting art for all in the emerging “people’s home”. The Nationalmuseum has now been given her archive and a chess set that won her a gold medal at the Paris International Exhibition of 1925 (Fig. 1).
Building a “People’s Home”

Rats, lice and tuberculosis were everyday realities in Sweden, as its towns became increasingly crowded in the wake of industrialism. Up to the early 1930s, Stockholmers had some of the poorest housing standards and the most cramped living conditions in Europe. Over half of them had neither a bath nor a shower in their homes.¹ It was no coincidence, therefore, that the Social Democrat leader Per Albin Hansson used the metaphor of a “good home” in his famous “people’s home” speech: “In a good home, equality, consideration, cooperation and helpfulness prevail”, he said.² And when his party came to power in 1932, the “people’s home” (folkhemmet) became a symbol of the new welfare state. To the incoming government, building became a way of combating both unemployment and poor housing. The architects of the day contributed their visions of modern, light and well-planned homes for all.

One of the most talked-about construction projects was Sweden’s first “collective house” (kollektivhus), completed in 1935 at John Ericssonsgatan 6 in the Kungsholmen district of Stockholm. Just around the corner from it, Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg and her sister-in-law Margareta Köhler had recently set up their interior design firm Futurum. They got off to a flying start when they were commissioned to design the furnishings of the day nursery and other spaces in the new building. Among its features was a restaurant with a dumb waiter straight up to the apartments, so that residents would not have to cook when they arrived home from work exhausted. There were day-care facilities, where children could also spend the night. And there was a laundry and an affordable cleaning service. The “collective house”, in this sense of an apartment building with a range of shared facilities, became a symbol of the new ideas about life at home and in society. It was a realisation of the sociologist and Social Democrat Alva Myrdal’s vision of an ideal home for the modern family, where it went without saying that married women could also go out to work and children could receive a good upbringing in a communal nursery. Myrdal had studied in the United States, and been inspired by the latest educational approaches and new ideas about free play. There she had also seen “family hotels” with every conceivable form of service, a concept to which she and the architect Sven Markelius added a well-organised day nursery when they designed a collective house for the “people’s home”.³

This concern for children had been very much to the fore since the turn of the century, when the debater and educationalist Ellen Key, in her book The Century of the Child, had championed the right of children to better conditions.⁴ In the 1930s, designers such as Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg, Margareta Köhler and G. A. Berg, along with politicians and organisations, sought to make space for children, in the home and in society. The initiative to build some of Sweden’s first day-care centres came from the tenants’ savings and building society HSB. To HSB, communal child care was every bit as important as good, affordable housing, not least for the working classes, as a nanny was beyond most people’s means. So the organisation set up day nurseries, where children could spend the entire day with qualified staff, take part in educational activities and have their meals. The sunny rooms were adapted to their needs, with children’s furniture, toys, gym equipment and outdoor play areas.⁵

For the nursery at the collective house, the furnishings were, as we have seen, designed by Futurum. Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg created playful hand-made rag dolls, elephants and dolls’ houses, while Margareta Köhler designed furniture and play cubes – large wooden cubes which the children could carry around, build with, sit or climb on, and play freely with, turning them into trains or whatever else their imaginations came up with. Köhler’s play cubes were thus an embodiment of contemporary ideas about preschool children’s need for free play, movement and exercise of the large muscles of the body.⁶ She also designed tables and chairs adapted to the size and needs of children. Above all, she saw it that all the corners and edges were well rounded, knowing as a mother of young children what harm sharp corners on furniture could cause. The playroom of the building also offered wall bars, a small theatre stage with a backdrop of blue linoleum on which the children could draw scenery, a sandpit, and a paddling pool lined with shimmering green tiles – indoors!⁷

Futurum was almost the only design business interested in children’s furniture, and newspapers often used images from the firm to illustrate the importance of giving children space in the home, even in a small modern apartment. Futurum sold its toys, furniture and interior designs for children to institutions and other customers throughout the country, as well as showing such interiors at several exhibitions (Fig. 2).⁸ Summing up the work of the firm in her diary later in life, Idestam-Blomberg drew particular attention to the collective house nursery and noted that “our children’s furniture and toys set a trend”.⁹

Modern Home Design with Futurum

Homes in Collective Houses was one of many home design exhibitions in the 1930s and 1940s to which Idestam-Blomberg’s firm Futurum contributed. Because it was not enough simply to build collective apartment buildings and other modern homes; people also needed to learn to live in them. This was far from easy. How were they to warm to kitchens inspired by the efficiency of assembly-line manufacturing? How could they be weaned off the idea of having a “best room” in a small apartment, and instead embrace the living room as the most important space in the home? Architects, politicians, and organisations like HSB, the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design, the Swedish Housewives’ Federation and the Business and Professional Women’s Club were all agreed that campaigns were called for, not least in the shape of exhibitions. Home design shows
set out to teach the public to make the most of the new architecture’s potential, and to educate and enlighten consumers in the art of modern living.

For Homes in Collective Houses, held in 1935, the organisers, the Society of Crafts and Design, tried a new approach to get their message across. To demonstrate that there was room for individualism even in a collective apartment building, a writer was commissioned to make up stories about imaginary residents. Interior design firms such as Elsa Gullberg, Carl Malmsten, Svenskt Tenn and others were then able to furnish the rooms of the collective house according to the needs of these fictitious individuals. Among them were a divorced leading actress with a 4-year-old son, a self-supporting single woman, an intellectual couple and a house painter from the country. In the home of one couple, a telephone engineer and a home-based dressmaker, the Society had brought together cheap furniture from various firms, including Alvar Aalto and Futurum. In pictures from the children’s corner of the apartment, we can see Futurum’s low children’s chairs with woven-webbing seats and the firm’s practical storage unit with smooth painted surfaces. For the restaurant, Idestam-Blomberg had designed the curtaining at the back of the room. She had hand-printed 22 metres of linen fabric with large, bold leaves of the Swiss cheese plant (Monstera deliciosa), which in the 1930s was popular both as an indoor plant and as a pattern. This fabric proved so popular that it was printed for many years to come. Idestam-Blomberg later told her daughter that she felt her patterns had been plagiarised, but in those days asserting design rights was not easy.11

Futurum’s image as a modern interior design business was due in no small part to its fabrics, produced both in-house and by other suppliers. While Margareta Köhler designed the furniture, Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg looked after the textiles and other design elements for people’s homes. She had a natural talent for creating attractive environments and window displays. She designed curtain and furnishing fabrics which she printed by hand using linoleum blocks or stencils she had cut herself (Fig. 3). The archive given to the Museum includes complete interior design proposals, with colour schemes, furniture suggestions, and fabric, wood and wallpaper samples glued onto cardboard. Idestam-Blomberg also designed teacups and other household pottery, with simple, undecorated shapes and matt glazes.12

Most of Futurum’s customers were newly-weds who were setting up home, and self-supporting women and men interested in the new, modern style of interior design.

Fig. 2 Ideal nursery shown at the Auktionshallen anniversary exhibition in Stockholm in 1933. Children’s furniture by Margareta Köhler in birch, painted pale emerald green and cream, with a table top of linoleum. Curtains, rug and dolls by Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg. Nationalmuseum Archives.

Fig. 3 Hand-printed fabrics designed by Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg for Futurum, 1930s. Nationalmuseum Archives.
They belonged to the cultivated middle classes, who liked the light, airy ideals of modernism, far removed from traditional matching sets of furniture in historical styles. In keeping with the times, Futurum aimed to

create simple, beautiful furniture and household objects that offer the brighter, lighter and friendlier domestic colour schemes which modern people and modern homes require (Fig. 4).

As a consequence, many of those living in the collective house, including its architect Sven Markelius himself, shopped at Futurum. Soon Idestam-Blomberg and Köhler had found their style and their business received acclaim from journalists, who also noted that it was run by young women. As one article put it:

Two women who politely decline male collaborators. Modern women, in other words. They have taken the plunge into male spheres, but with no sense of being temporary guests there. That's why they call the store ‘Futurum’.

Modern Art for All

In parallel with her work at Futurum, Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg took part in several exhibitions aimed at making art known to a wider audience. In a major feature on Futurum in the home design magazine Boet in 1935, we read:

Mrs Idestam-Blomberg is one of a growing number of artists in our time who have discovered that art also needs to become part of the everyday lives of the many people for whom great art is, in general, much too far from the beaten track of the working week for them to have the energy to reach out for it.

Just as organisations, architects and designers sought to spread the word about modern ideals of domestic living in the many home design exhibitions of the 1930s, there was a similar mobilisation to ensure that art did not remain the privilege of a chosen few. Museums, adult education as-
sociations, art societies and other bodies arranged exhibitions, lectures and study groups on painting, sculpture and print-making. The Swedish “people’s home” had a strong voluntary sector, with solid roots in the labour, farmers’ and temperance movements. In 1941, HSB – which since its inception in 1923 had promoted good housing for all, including the working classes – invited its many members to an exhibition called *Good Art in Every Home*. In the foreword to the catalogue, Ragnar Hoppe, a curator at the Nationalmuseum, welcomed HSB’s initiative and the growing interest in art:

*Rising standards of education and improvements in comfort and taste in our homes mean that many quite naturally feel a need to acquire and own, on their own account, one or more good works of art in the original. However, with prices relatively high for a wider public, good art has up to now been quite difficult to come by, which must be regarded as an unsatisfactory state of affairs and a loss to both the public and the artists themselves.*

The curator praised the initiative HSB had taken “to remedy, if possible, this unsatisfactory state of affairs” by holding an exhibition of recognised artists, in which no work would carry a price tag of more than 200 kronor, and many would cost considerably less. He pointed out how showing low-price sculpture, as well as contemporary painting, was a new departure, and how form could be done justice equally well in plaster as in bronze or marble. “Fine, expressive form is what we should enjoy in sculpture”, Hoppe continued,

*and it would be gratifying if this exhibition could teach the public that a room cannot have a more beautiful ornament than precisely that – a good sculpture.*

As a sculptor, Idestam-Blomberg preached the same message when a major evening newspaper carried a story on Futurum: “What is more, there should be wider re-
cognition of the part sculpture can play in adorning a room”, she said, suggesting that it be combined with single-coloured walls and sparing use of pictures. In the HSB exhibition, she was one of 57 painters and sculptors, several of whom, like Isaac Grünwald and Tyra Lundgren, were among the most recognised artists in Sweden.

The catalogues Idestam-Blomberg saved from exhibitions in which she had taken part reinforce the impression of a nation that set great store by popular adult education and the role of art in society. She herself is included, as if as a matter of course, among the ranks of contemporary artists. One of the catalogues is from the spring exhibition of 1933 at the Liljevalchs Art Gallery, arranged by the Swedish Association for Art (Sveriges allmänna konstförening), which had been set up in 1832 to support contemporary artists by buying works that were then raffled to members. Another is from touring exhibition no. 4 (1933–36) of the National Federation of Fine Arts Societies (Riksförbundet för bildande konst), a body formed in 1930 by museums, institutions and organisations with the aim of creating opportunities to see good art in as much of our country as possible, as well as promoting wider interest in and understanding of art by means of educational activities in speech and writing.

From this exhibition, the Nationalmuseum bought Idestam-Blomberg’s marble sculpture Convalescent, now in the Moderna Museet (Fig. 5). She was thus represented for the first time in the public collections of art.

The politicians of the day very much put their weight behind the promotion of art for all, and in 1937 the Swedish Parliament decided to set up the Public Art Agency (Statens konstråd), a central government body with responsibility for art in state buildings and facilities. At the same time, the “1 per cent rule” was introduced, requiring 1 per cent of the cost of a building to be spent on artistic decoration, a clear signal of the importance of art in society. Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg took part in the Public Art Agency’s exhibition at Liljevalchs in 1939, where all the works were for sale. The same year she also contributed to a display of contemporary art, arranged by the Royal Academy of Fine Arts as a follow-up to a show the previous year. The foreword to the catalogue points out that scarcely any exhibition which the Academy has arranged in recent decades has had attendance figures like those of the summer exhibition of 1938.

The target audience was Swedish and foreign tourists in Stockholm, and a large number of the works shown were for sale. Idestam-Blomberg exhibited three portrait sculptures, in limestone, clay and plaster, respectively. As an illustration of how different organisations were working together to promote art for a new, broader audience, HSB’s furniture store placed a full-page advertisement in the catalogue. It includes a picture of a living room, with an abundance of books and a couple of paintings, set against light walls of a single colour and a light-coloured curtain with a pattern of large, leaf-like forms. This was an ideal which Futurum shared, an ideal of a modern home with room for culture that was also within the reach of customers of HSB. It was an ideal that says something about the visions that existed in the Swedish “people’s home”.

Life as a Female Sculptor

As a student of the leading sculptors of the time, Carl Milles in Stockholm and Antoine Bourdelle in Paris, Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg had received a solid training (Fig. 6). She had also been awarded a gold medal at the Paris Exhibition of 1925 for her chess set with personally sculpted pieces. But making one’s mark as a sculptor was not easy. In an interview in connection with a Scandinavian exhibition of sculpture in Copenhagen in 1935, she talked about how few women artists worked in that medium:

Sculpture meant everything to me, but as an artistic genre it is so difficult, so very demanding, at the same time as it is such a difficult commodity to sell that it isn’t strange if most artists choose painting instead.

Asked whether she had ever abandoned her art for other interests, Idestam-Blomberg herself confirmed the difficulty of combining the role of the artist with motherhood:

To me, sculpture has always been the greatest and most delightful of all my interests, but I married and had four children, so obviously there was a time when I had to give sculpting a rest.

Now, she went on, she was running Futurum and furnishing people’s homes:

It’s captivating work, and of course you can’t even make a living as a sculptor, because people are not yet educated to value the decorative qualities that a beautifully modelled head in fact represents.

Reviews of exhibitions in which Idestam-Blomberg showed her work confirm how difficult it could be to reach a wider audience, despite training and critical acclaim. At a show at Liljevalchs in 1932, the critics were surprised:

Best of all the sculptors is, without doubt, Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg, a sculptor of great talent, yet one hitherto completely unknown to me. It is certainly unusual for artists to have to wait as long to make their debut as Mrs Blomberg has clearly had to do.

Stockholms-Tidningen’s reviewer wrote that, hitherto, she had kept her work so well hidden that she is presumably almost a new name to the public. After this presentation, though, it is a name people will not forget.
In particular, he pointed out how her sculptural portraits had “an expression of naked humanity, which irresistibly moves us”.26

Collaboration with Svenskt Tenn

Of Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg’s works, the one that has attracted most attention is her chess set, which the Nationalmuseum has now received as a gift from her heirs. Among the cuttings she kept, we find newspaper headlines like “The lady behind the chess set”, as well as interior design and fashion features down to the 1960s in which the set appears as an elegant accessory from the interior design firm of Svenskt Tenn (Fig. 7). Idestam-Blomberg showed the original version, in ebony and ivory, at the Paris Exhibition of 1925, where, as we have seen, it won her a gold medal. Sweden in general claimed an impressive haul of accolades, receiving the largest number after the host nation France: 36 Grands Prix, 100 gold medals and even more honourable mentions. In all, 15,000 awards were conferred at the exhibition.27

Estrid Ericson, who had founded Svenskt Tenn in 1924 and quickly made a success of it, saw the chess set’s potential and included it in the firm’s product range, in brass, pewter and gilt pewter. A large, silver-coloured catalogue published for the business’s fifth anniversary in 1929 included, among hundreds of products, an image of the chess set along with the name of the designer – an honour Ericson reserved for the more original items listed. As she was constantly seeking to improve and develop her range, though, the chess figures also appear as corks and seals – but without the name. In her own copy of the catalogue, however, Idestam-Blomberg has noted in pencil, with an “NB” in the margin, which products have been decorated with her figures: a cork, an ashtray, a ruler and three seals. A fountain mask inspired by Archaic art is allowed to carry the designer’s name, but not the gilded angel on the last page before the price list.28 To Estrid Ericson, her business name was more important than

Fig. 6 Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg with male fellow artists at the Technical School in Stockholm, 1919. Nationalmuseum Archives.
Inspiration from Far Afield
Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg’s pawns are inspired by Russian peasants, and the queen is pregnant, as the artist herself was most of the time she was working on the chess set from 1919 to 1925 (Figs. 8–10). In her diary she writes that her husband, the poet Erik Blomberg, had been irritated at their three children, but that she herself was happy. Soon a fourth child was born.30 The Russian inspiration comes from her childhood in St Petersburg, where her father worked as an engineer and she attended art school, at a time of avant-gardism in Russia. There, the vsechestvo – “everythingism” – movement called for a free amalgamation of every possible style and period, from folk art and 15th-century frescoes to Suprematism and Cubism. There is thus an understandable breadth to Idestam-Blomberg’s work, taking in graphic design, fashion drawings, illustrations for children’s books, interior design, ceramics and sculpture.31 The broad range of her sources of inspiration is also evident in her sketchbooks, in which Persian miniatures and cubo-futuristic figures rub shoulders with stylised children’s book illustrations and fabric patterns. At Christmas 1921, her husband gave her richly illustrated German art books that went far beyond the traditional confines of Western art, depicting Archaic sculpture, Mexican art, Asian sculpture, Indian domestic architecture and miniatures, and Chinese miniatures and landscapes.

Epilogue – Artist and Woman
Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg had every chance of succeeding as an artist, with her exciting background in Russia and a solid artistic education in both Stockholm and Paris. Despite her training, her success in Paris in 1925, her work for a flourishing interior design firm, and praise from the critics, the picture that emerges is one in which her art nonetheless remained comparatively unknown and her large family of course also made demands on her time. Her marriage lasted until 1934, when she successfully launched Futurum together with Margareta Köhler. Unfortunately, in the long run it proved impossible to combine this work with the responsibilities of a single woman with four children. For a long time her mother helped out, but when she died in 1938, Idestam-Blomberg had to give up her day-to-day involvement with Futurum. A few years later, in 1941, the two women closed the firm down in the face of financial difficulties and the limitations resulting from the Second World War.32

Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg was active at a time of progressive ideas about women’s rights to employment and child care, but in practice things were not as
simple as that back then. She was in many ways a typical product of her time, and confirms our picture of how difficult it could be to combine professional life and motherhood. The year she left Futurum and the war broke out was when one of the greatest reforms for women was introduced in Sweden, a law giving them employment protection: that is to say, a woman employed by the government could no longer be given notice because she married or became pregnant. In 1944, the state began to provide funding for child care, as Alva Myrdal had advocated, although only in the late 1960s would day care for children become a major political issue in Sweden.

Notes:
8. Ibid., pp. 295–296.
9. The archive given to the Nationalmuseum includes several notebooks and diaries. For more information on toys and play environments in Sweden, see *Swedish Wooden Toys*, Amy F. Ogata and Susan Weber (eds.), New Haven and New York 2014.
12. Ibid., pp. 200–204, 223.

20. Svensk nutidskonst, (exh. cat.), Riksförbundet för bildande konst, Stockholm 1933, n.p. The chairman was Baron Fr. Ramel, Governor of the County of Malmöhus, and the vice chairman Dr Axel Gauflin, Director General of the Nationalmuseum.


22. Training: School of Free Art, taught painting by the court painter Alfred Eberling, St Petersburg 1916; Carl Wilhelmson’s School of Painting, Stockholm 1917; Technical School (now University College of Arts, Crafts and Design), Stockholm 1918; Royal Institute of Art, sculpture under Carl Milles and etching under Axel Tallberg, Stockholm 1919–21; Académie de la Grande Chaumière, sculpture under Antoine Bourdelle, Paris 1921, 1927–28.


24. Ibid.

25. Efraim Lundmark, extract from a newspaper article in Idestam-Blomberg’s scrapbook, Nya Daglig Allehanda, 6 March 1932.

26. Gunnar Mascoll Silfverstolpe, extract from a newspaper article in Idestam-Blomberg’s scrapbook, Stockholms-Tidningen, 7 March 1932. Her scrapbook includes further cuttings from group exhibitions in which the critics single out her sculptures, with a particularly large number from the Scandinavian sculpture exhibition in Copenhagen in 1935, arranged by the Danish Sculptors’ Association of 1933, which included eleven artists from Sweden.


29. Jessica Kempe, “Marie-Louise Idestam-Blomberg”, in Kvinnliga pionjärer: Svensk form under mellankrigstiden, Magnus Olausson and Eva-Lena Karlsson (eds.), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm 2015, p. 80. There are two letters from Svenskt Tenn in the Nationalmuseum Archives concerning the discounted price of a chess set. The set at the MMA has the accession number 48.174.3 a–p, aa–pp, q.

30. Ibid., p. 80.

31. Ibid., p. 76.