A Collection of Scottish-Swedish Family Portraits

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Thanks to a generous gift from Lorenze Seton, the Swedish National Portrait Gallery has received a fine addition of portraits of members of the Scottish-Swedish Seton family over the past three centuries. The donation also included a coat of arms in carved and painted wood (Fig. 1). Lorenze Seton’s husband was Patrick A. Seton. The earliest of the portraits is of his great-great grandmother’s brother, George Seton. The Nationalmuseum collection already includes furniture and a longcase clock from the family’s former residence at Ekolsund.

Contacts between Sweden and Scotland are deeply rooted in past centuries. The Scots were renowned, among other things, for their military skills. In 1563, at the outbreak of the Nordic Seven-Years War, Sweden’s King Erik XIV attempted to enlist 2,000 soldiers from Scotland. Throughout the rest of the 16th century and Sweden’s entire period as a great European power, the Swedish army continued to recruit considerable numbers of Scots. There are also a few individual officers named Seton or Seaton in Swedish military records. Some of these Scots chose to settle permanently in Sweden. As a rule, however, they maintained contacts with Scotland.

Meanwhile, other Scots moved to Sweden to engage in trade. Some had previously been in the army and now wanted to supplement their income by trading in the countryside, which was illegal. Others established themselves as town burghers and worked in commerce or as artisans. One of

Fig. 1 Manne Björk, The Coat of Arms of the Seton Family. Painted wood, c. 125 x 125 x 30 cm. Gift of Lorenze Seton. Nationalmuseum, Swedish National Portrait Gallery, NMGrh 5086.
these was George Seton (1696–1786). Born in Scotland, he came to Sweden via continental Europe in 1718, and established himself as a wholesaler. The year before he died, Seton bought Ekolsund Manor in Uppland from King Gustav III, who had mainly stayed there when he was a crown prince; in the 1780s, however, the king was more interested in other locations. Another reason for selling Ekolsund was to finance new construction projects. To make it possible for Seton to own an estate exempt from dues to the Crown, Gustav III had to naturalise him as a Swedish nobleman. Since he had no heirs, his nephew, Alexander Baron Seton (1738–1814) was also knighted so he could inherit the property when George died. Ekolsund remained in the family until the early 1900s. The portraits donated to the Nationalmuseum cover the entire Seton era at Ekolsund. Since the family operated on both sides of the North Sea, these paintings represent 150 years of British and Swedish portrait history. The portraits are also fascinating with regard to fashion history; the costumes of the sitters range from fine 18th-century muslin and 19th-century satin dresses and uniforms, to a 20th-century suit with a decorously knotted tie.

The founder of the Swedish branch of the family, George Seton, is portrayed in a plaster relief by an unknown artist. In style, the round medallion with its classic male profile resembles the works of Johan Tobias Sergel. It is not signed, however, nor is it mentioned in any written source on the oeuvre of that sculptor. The portraits of Alexander Baron Seton and his second wife, Anne Innes of Cathlow (1770–1796) are also unsigned. In all probability, these paintings were not made in Sweden. The picture of Anne Innes, particularly, is very similar to British portrait paintings from this period. In a white, loosely draped dress, the height of fashion in the 1790s, the model is set against a landscape with a dark, stormy sky.

The mid-1800s generation, the offspring and daughters in law of Alexander Baron Seton’s son Patrick Seton (1766–
1837), are especially well-represented in this family portrait gallery. Patrick’s son Alexander Seton (1806–1884) spent most of his time at Preston, a Scottish family manor. In consequence, the portraits of him and his two wives, Mary Campbell of Dunmore (1821–1846) and Mary Isabelle Baillie (1829–1864), were made on the British Isles. The picture of Alexander Seton is signed by the Irish, London-based artist Samuel West (Fig. 2). Both the painting itself and its contemporary frame are intriguing. Frame-maker’s names are rarely known, but the back of this frame bears the distinct stamps and labels of Charles Roberson and Aitken Dott. Roberson was one of the most distinguished sellers of artist materials in London in the 19th century. His customers included the Edinburgh-based firm Aitken Dott, which was not merely a “Carver and Gilder” but also undertook conservation and interior decorating assignments: “Picture Frames Made to any Pattern // Pictures Lined, Cleaned & Repaired // MIRRORS CORNICES MOULDINGS &c. // Old Frames Regilt”. Samuel West did not date the portrait of Alexander Seton. It is believed to have been painted in the 1850s or 1860s, since the frame, judging by the addresses of Roberson and Dott can be dated to a period between 1853 and 1863.

An unknown, presumably British, artist painted the portrait of Alexander Seton’s first wife, Mary Campbell of Dunmore. The largest piece in the collection is a full-length portrait of his second wife, Mary Isabelle Baillie, and their two children. It was painted by the Scottish artist Colvin Smith, known mainly for his portrait of the author Sir Walter Scott.

Since Alexander Seton lived in Scotland, he sublet the Swedish estate to his brother in law, Colonel Carl Gustaf Adlercreutz, whose wife was Margaret Seton (1805–1870). The year they married, 1826, Johan Gustaf Sandberg was commissioned to portray Margaret and her older sister Elizabeth (1804–1827). The paintings are good examples of Sandberg’s oeuvre from this period (Figs. 3–4). They have
been composed as companion pieces. Elizabeth’s red shawl is balanced by Margaret’s dress of the same colour. The unmarried Elizabeth Seton looks straight at the viewer and appears more animated than the introvert portrait of Margaret. It was considered more decorous for a young bride to display a placid attitude. In a later portrait, by Carl Stefan Bennett, Margaret Adlercreutz seems to have matured into a determined lady, boldly challenging our gaze (Fig. 5). Bennett excels in convincingly capturing the lustre of her black satin dress. In her dark hair we glimpse a wide chequered silk ribbon with a red background. Even if this does not correspond exactly with the Seton tartan, the pattern is likely to be more than a mere fashion detail and is probably meant to hint at Margaret Adlercreutz’s Scottish ancestry.

Margaret’s nephew Patrick Baron Seton (1849–1911) and his wife Beate, née Rosenkrantz (1855–1925) represent the late 19th century. He worked in both Scotland and Sweden and took over the responsibility for Ekolsund from his aunt and uncle. In 1891 the genre and portrait painter Ivar Nyberg signed a three-quarter-length portrait of Patrick Seton wearing his Swedish court hunting master (hovjägmästare) uniform (Fig. 6). Beate Seton’s portrait is the only one in the collection painted by a woman artist; it is signed by Hildegard Thorell in 1889 (Fig. 7). Even if the paintings by Thorell and Nyberg are not companion pieces, they complement each other well and demonstrate the ideal gender roles of the time – the man in uniform, indicating his public office, and the woman in elegant, fashionable dress, defining her social standing, but without any professional attributes. A large hunting dog looks faithfully at its lady.

The last Seton owner of Ekolsund, Alexander George Seton (1882–1966), appears in the final portrait in this series. It was painted by Robert Löfgren in 1942, thirty years after the family seat had been sold (Fig. 8). The portrait of Alexander

Fig. 5 Carl Stefan Bennet (1800–1878), Margaret Seton (1805–1870), married Adlercreutz. Oil on canvas, 71.5 x 59.5 cm. Gift of Lorenze Seton. Nationalmuseum, Swedish National Portrait Gallery, NMGrh 5082.
George brings us back to more recent times and to his daughter in law, Lorenze Seton, who donated the collection to the Nationalmuseum.

Notes:
2. A chandelier, a cabinet, four armchairs, two stools, and a long-case clock were acquired from Patrick A. Seton in 1984 and 1986 respectively. Nationalmuseum, NMEkol 1–9.
5. Ibid., p. 38; Fischer 1907, pp. 49, 87, 179.
11. No mention is made of a portrait of George Seton in Göthe’s catalogue of Sergel’s works; Georg Göthe, Johan Tobias Sergels skulpturverk, Stockholm 1921.
12. Nationalmuseum, Swedish National Portrait Gallery, NMGrh 5075
14. Both portraits were formerly attributed to Henry Raeburn, but this can no longer be confirmed.
17. The information on Aitken Dott was accessed from http://www.npg.org.uk/research/conservation/directory-of-british-framemakers/d.php (accessed 15 March 2016); information on Samuel Roberson was accessed from http://www.npg.org.uk/research/programmes/directory-of-suppliers/r.php (accessed 15 March 2016). As part of a research project on framemakers and dealers in art supplies, the National Portrait Gallery in London published detailed lists on its website of British firms and individuals working in these fields, under the headings of British Picture Framemakers, 1600–1950 and British Artists’ Suppliers, 1650–1950 respectively.
20. Adlercreutz also owned Nynäs in Södermanland, where the collection is now managed by the Nationalmuseum.