Women Pioneers: Swedish Design in Between the Wars

Läckö Castle
13 June – 23 August 2015
Nationalmuseum Design@Kulturhuset Stadsteatern, Stockholm
4 December 2015 – 14 February 2016
Magnus Olausson
Director of Collections and Research
Women Pioneers: Swedish Design in Between the Wars

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Fig. 1 Wilhelmina Wendt (1896–1988), Brush, 1935. Produced by Skånska Ättiksfabriken, later Perstorp AB. Silver and black isolite (plastic), 8 x 9 x 0.7 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMK 74/2013.
The exhibition Women Pioneers: Swedish Design in Between the Wars featured works by 22 artists and designers, some well-known and some less so, including Estrid Ericson, Greta Magnusson Grossman, Tyra Lundgren, Anna Petrus (Fig. 4), Sylvia Stave and Wilhelmina Wendt. In all, there were 150 featured pieces from the Nationalmuseum collections, in a range of materials including cast iron, ceramics, glass and silver. For various reasons, however, the exhibition did not include textile art. These women were successful designers and artists during the interwar years but have since been more or less forgotten.

Swedish crafts and design enjoyed an upsurge in popularity between the two world wars. The style of this period is often referred to internationally as Swedish Grace and is known in Sweden as early Functionalism. With a few exceptions, the role played by women in this period of inventive and colourful design is rarely highlighted. History has forgotten these female designers. One reason is that modernism as an artistic project was identified with male characteristics. By definition, the great artist genius was, according to the contemporary mindset, a man, and only rarely a woman. Another reason is that many of the women artists of the time made their debut in the 1920s, when an ornate, colourful style was in fashion (Fig. 1). When tastes changed in the 1930s, these artists were not necessarily successful at reinventing themselves, so they appeared dated and were overlooked. Moreover, many of them worked for large companies such as Svenskt Tenn and C. G. Hallberg, which preferred to highlight the company brand rather than individual artists (Fig. 2). Nor can we disregard the devastating effects of the Second World War, which cut off channels of communication and supplies of raw materials essential to artistic production. The postwar generational change accelerated the process whereby previous generations of artists, male and female, were forgotten.

For a long time, the Nationalmuseum upheld the task of educating public taste, and this hampered the breadth in the acquisition policy. Coupled with a lack of funding for new acquisitions, many significant design objects from the interwar years were absent from the Museum’s collections. In 2012, therefore, the Nationalmuseum launched a project to actively collect works by women pioneers of design. The results can be seen in this exhibition, in which half of the pieces were acquired in the past few years.
years. The most significant acquisition is a collection of works by Sylvia Stave, produced during a short but intense period of her career (Fig. 3).1

The exhibition was co-produced by Nationalmuseum and Läckö Castle (exhibited at Läckö Castle 13 June–23 August 2015), and curated by Magnus Olausson. A book in Swedish (Kvinnliga pionjärer: Svensk form under mellankrigstiden) was published on the occasion of the exhibition, with articles by Magnus Olausson, Christian Björk, Anders Bengtsson, Micael Ernstell and Jessica Kempe.2 In September 2015, the exhibition project was presented at the first historical workshop of MoMoWo – Women’s creativity since the Modern Movement, a project co-funded by the European Union. The project is presented in the very first MoMoWo open access publication.3

Exhibition curators: Magnus Olausson and Maria Perers
Exhibition design: Johan Rosenqvist, YoYoTech
Lighting design: Jan Gouiedo, Jan Gouiedo AB
Exhibition technology: Tomas Emtemo, Pär Lindblom, Thomas Lundgren, Carl Rehnström
Graphic design: Agneta Bervökk
Conservation: Ulrika Schaeder and Veronika Eriksson
Exhibition coordinator: Anneli Carlsson

Notes:

Fig. 4 Anna Petrus (1886–1949), c. 1925. Unknown photographer.
EXHIBITIONS / WOMEN PIONEERS: SWEDISH DESIGN IN BETWEEN THE WARS

Interiors from the exhibition Women Pioneers: Swedish Design in Between the Wars.