The Most Important Events of the Caroline Era: A Series of Allegories for Queen Hedvig Eleonora’s Drottningholm

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Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum
Stockholm
Volume 22
The year 2015 was the tercentenary of the death of Queen Hedvig Eleonora (1636–1715). Born a princess of Holstein-Gottorp, in 1654 she became queen of Sweden through her marriage to Charles X Gustav (1622–1660). She presided over the regency for her only son Charles XI (1655–1697) until he was declared of age in 1672, and subsequently retained a very prominent position at court until her death. As dowager queen, she was also to be one of the most significant collectors and builders in the Sweden of her day. The majority of the paintings she once owned now belong to the Nationalmuseum, where her extensive collection of portraits forms the historical nucleus of the Swedish National Portrait Gallery.

In recent years, a growing body of research has been devoted to the political strategies of female rulers and their carefully considered presentations of themselves as women of power, in an age when such a notion was regarded by most people as contrary to the divine and natural order. Such strategies also informed the self-representation of Hedvig Eleonora. The celebrations surrounding her wedding clearly underlined her responsibilities as spouse and mother as central to her identity as queen. Those responsibilities were to remain the principal motifs in the representation of her role as queen even when, after her husband’s death, she herself was largely able to control it. Her variations on the fundamental theme of spouse and mother reflect patterns that had long been well established for patrons from a female elite: a wifely sense of duty, faithful tending of her husband’s memory, piety, family and dynasty, and the interests of male members of the family – in Hedvig Eleonora’s case, chiefly those of Charles XI. While the king was still a child, she visually articulated the ideal of strong royal power, thereby anticipating and paving the way for the political developments of her son’s reign.

Today, an overall impression of Hedvig Eleonora as a patron of the fine arts can above all be gained from her summer palace of Drottningholm, which the leading architects, artists and craftsmen of the period spent over 40 years shaping into a monument to the Palatinate dynasty and the dowager queen herself. The intended message is most clearly conveyed by the many allegorical

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**Fig. 1** David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl (1628–1698), Allegory of the Regency of the Dowager Queen Hedvig Eleonora, probably 1692. Oil on canvas, sight size 353 x 222 cm. Audience Chamber, Drottningholm Palace. Nationalmuseum, NMDrh 125.
paintings at the palace, executed by several different artists from the late 1660s to the early 1700s. This was a period of great political change, of ascent and decline in the fate of the dynasty, of births and deaths, and of changing roles within the royal family. All these things are reflected in the compositions and meanings of the paintings. The changes that occurred over time presumably also affected patronage of the arts at Drottningholm. The palace was owned by the dowager queen, but its evolution into a monument to the royal house also made it a concern of the increasingly autocratic Charles XI and the circle that shaped his royal persona.

In the following, I shall discuss the visual strategies pursued at Drottningholm in the light of a series of allegories produced by the court painter David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl (1628–1698) in the years 1692–93. The series consists of a ceiling painting and six wall panels showing Hedvig Eleonora, Charles XI, his queen Ulrika Eleonora of Denmark and their children, surrounded by allegorical and mythological figures illuminating the events of the time and the virtues of those portrayed. With two exceptions, the compositions are explained in Ehrenstrahl’s well-known publication *Die vornehmste Schildereyen* (”The most prominent paintings”, 1694), in which the subject matter of the ceiling is summed up as “Immortal glory”, and that of the wall panels as “The most important events in the royal house between 1660 and 1693.” In fact, the principal subject of the paintings is the life of Charles XI, from the 4-year-old king he became on the death of Charles X Gustav to adult ruler, husband, and father of new heirs to the throne. Some of the wall panels depict events that had occurred many years before, but the intended meanings and possible contemporary interpretations must of course be understood in the light of the historical situation at the time they were created.

**Six Wall Panels and a Ceiling**

Chronologically, the first painting in the series is the *Allegory of the Regency of the Dowager Queen Hedvig Eleonora*, which is devoted twice as much space in *Die vornehmste Schildereyen* as any of the others. According to Ehrenstrahl’s summary, the composition represents Hedvig Eleonora’s education of her son in piety and kingly virtues, the government which she and the other members of the regency exercised during his minority, and her role as a patron of architecture (Fig. 1). The relief on the step below the dowager queen’s throne, with its reference to Isaiah (11:6), symbolises the peace that prevailed under the regency. The same reference can also be understood as a reminder that, even as a minor, Charles was king: Isaiah speaks of a happy kingdom led by a little child, in which predators and their prey live in peace. The dowager queen’s body language visualises a loving maternal role that expresses care for her son, but also a broader responsibility as a mother to the subjects of the realm. Maternal affection was the strongest argument for those who considered the mother of an underage prince suitable as regent, despite her sex; her love for her child was seen as a guarantee that she would always act in his best interests and those of his kingdom. The enthroned Hedvig Eleonora is surrounded by personified virtues, which together are to be understood as representing her rule. According to Ehrenstrahl, Justice, Magnanimity, Fortitude, Prudence and Temperance also represent the regency council that assisted the dowager queen in her task. The artist, however, emphasises that it was she herself who governed: “aber das Ruder selbst, oder der Griffel, bleibt in Ihrer Maytt. Hand alleine” (”but the rudder itself, or the tiller, remains in Her Majesty’s hand alone”). This description did not tally with the reality, however: Hedvig Eleonora’s formal power was limited by that of the other members of the regency. We can thus sense a desire here to project backwards in time the strong royal power of the 1690s. At the same time, the prominent and positive image of the dowager queen’s fellow regents seems remarkable, given the harshness with which they were called to account during the subsequent reign of Charles XI and the negative picture of them that was spread about generally.

The themes of *The Regency* had been employed in several ways in the earlier decoration of Drottningholm. In these earlier images, the dowager queen herself is not visibly present, but they represent an implicit tribute to her as the person who brought up the king and preserved his kingdom. The clearest link is to be seen in the State Bedchamber. There, in an opulent architectural setting, we find paintings and reliefs depicting Hedvig Eleonora’s marriage to Charles X Gustav, the queen as a pious, reverent and mourning widow, and, above all, the education and virtues of Charles XI (Fig. 9). The upbringing and virtues of the young king are also the subject of Ehrenstrahl’s *History and Fame* (1675), which was one of the overdoor paintings in Hedvig Eleonora’s private apartments at Drottningholm. A long inscription describes how, even as a child, Charles XI was a consummate, amiable prince, pleasing to God and man. Among the motifs in the vault above the staircase, we find medallions representing four wise and dynamic queens of ancient times, who according to the historiography of the time had a “Gothic” connection and were thus Hedvig Eleonora’s predecessors. These historical exempla allude to Hedvig Eleonora as dowager queen, head of the council of regency and protector of her son. They are also effective rhetorical arguments for the ability of women and their right to govern during the minority of their sons.

The following painting, *Allegory of King Charles XI Receiving the Reign from his Mother Hedvig Eleonora* (1692, Fig. 2), refers to the declaration of the king’s majority in 1672. This image is one of two in the series not described in *Die vornehmste Schildereyen*, and its meaning in the context of its creation is therefore less clear. However, it seems far more problematic in relation to the ideology of the time and of Swedish absolutism than the *Allegory of the Regency*. According to the Declaration of Sovereignty formulated at the Diet of 1693, the king was given his power by God, nature and
Fig. 2 David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl (1628–1698), Allegory of King Charles XI Receiving the Reign from his Mother Hedvig Eleonora, 1692. Oil on canvas, sight size 353 x 220 cm. Audience Chamber, Drottningholm Palace. Nationalmuseum, NMDrh 126.

Fig. 3 David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl (1628–1698), Allegory of the Peaceful Reign of King Charles XI. Oil on canvas, sight size 359 x 205 cm. Audience Chamber, Drottningholm Palace. Nationalmuseum, NMDrh 130.

hereditary right, and was answerable to God alone. This theocratic notion assumed great importance in the court literature and visual art of the period, but is undermined rather than expressed in the present painting, where it is the dowager queen who hands over the sceptre to her son. The kneeling figures below the throne, presenting the other regalia, seem to be appealing to the king, but the humble position of the first woman in particular also suggests an equality between king and dowager queen, who both seem equally elevated in relation to her. To the right, the national standard is held by a standard-bearer with features of the Roman goddess of war Bellona, and below, putti hold up a helmet and shield. Hedvig Eleonora’s gesture towards this group appears to allude to martial exploits still to come, but can also be read as a call to action from mother to son. It was hardly unusual for a mother to guide a young prince, and the queen as an adviser had previously found visual expression at Drottningholm in the figure of the wise Disa. The advice and influence of a royal mother could nonetheless be seen in a very unfavourable light, all the more so if envisaged as continuing forward in time and shaping the actions of an adult absolute monarch. The mother–son relationship portrayed here could presumably also be associated in the mind of a contemporary viewer with real complications in
royal houses across Europe, where it was not unusual for the immediate family circle to be an arena for political conflict.\textsuperscript{17} There was no open strife in the Swedish royal family, but it may be noted that Charles XI’s great filial piety and the dowager queen’s precedence over the queen consort stretched the boundaries of their culturally ascribed roles.\textsuperscript{18} Hedvig Eleonora’s real influence has been insufficiently studied, but was noted by contemporary diplomatic envoys.\textsuperscript{19}

The other painting not mentioned in \textit{Die vornehmste Schildereyen} is the \textit{Allegory of the Peaceful Reign of King Charles XI} (1693, Fig. 3). Like \textit{The Regency}, it represents a summary of an extended period of time. Here, the peaceful kingdom of \textit{The Regency}, under the rule of the boy-king, continues in the reign of the adult Charles XI, in which there is abundance, the arts flourish, and lions chew up the weapons of war. The king’s role as a patron of architecture is hinted at by the north front of Stockholm’s Royal Palace, below which we can make out banners, alluding to the victories that preceded the peace.

The next three wall panels – \textit{Allegory of the Nuptials of King Charles XI and Queen Ulrika Eleonora} (1692, Fig. 4); \textit{Allegory of the Union of King Charles XI and Queen Ulrika Eleonora} (also known as \textit{Allegory of the Resolution of Swedish–Danish Discord by the Union of Charles XI and Princess Ulrika Eleonora}, 1692, Fig. 5); and \textit{Allegory of the Consolidation of the Kingdom by Heirs to the Throne} (1693, Fig. 6) – represent the securing of the dynasty by the marriage and children of Charles XI and Ulrika Eleonora of Denmark. There is no reference, though, to Ulrika Eleonora’s death in 1693. The union between king and queen is portrayed as crucial to the peace and happiness of the realm; the temple of Janus is closed and Mars is persuaded, with the help of Wisdom, to lay down his arms.

\textit{The Consolidation of the Kingdom} points to the future of the realm and the dynasty, which at the time the pictures were painted seemed happy and secure. The ceiling painting, \textit{Allegory of the Glorious Deeds of Swedish Kings} (1693, Fig. 7), for its part, recalls the illustrious history of Sweden. The northern celestial bodies and constellations depicted around the apotheosis of the kings emphasise the northern context, picking up the threads of the Gothic allusions of the Drottningholm staircase, but in a different visual language.\textsuperscript{20} The themes of the painting \textit{History and Fame}, mentioned above, which places Charles XI alongside Gustav Vasa, Gustav II Adolf and Charles X Gustav, also recur in the ceiling.

As noted, \textit{Charles XI Receiving the Reign} and \textit{The Peaceful Reign of Charles XI} are not included in \textit{Die vornehmste Schildereyen}. Instead, Ehrenstrahl describes \textit{The Coronation of Ulrika Eleonora the Elder} (probably 1694, Fig. 8) as part of the series. In this painting “nach leben”, the king, the queen and more than thirty other individuals are depicted in a real setting – the Great Church of Stockholm – and allegorical elements are entirely absent.\textsuperscript{21} Here, in contrast to the other compositions in the series, the royal family are not represented as part of a dynastic continuity linking the present
to the past and the future. Instead, the painting expresses the position of the king and queen in relation to their subjects – represented by the clergy, the court and the Council of the Realm – who constituted an extended family to which, according to the ideology of the time, Charles and Ulrika Eleonora were to be like a father and a mother.22

In the Audience Chamber or the Antechamber?
From the 1690s to 1709, two of the state rooms at Drottningholm were possible settings for the paintings discussed above. The room adjoining the State Bedchamber – sometimes, but not always, referred to as the Audience Chamber – was lavishly fitted out in the 1680s. This interior has not been preserved, however, and only certain details of it are known.23 The earliest description of the room outside the Audience Chamber, sometimes called the Antechamber, is found in Die vornehmste Schildereyen. The text suggests that the paintings were already in place in the Antechamber, but that was not the case; rather, the artist’s description documents what was intended just after the allegories were painted.24

According to Ehrenstrahl, pilasters in the corners of the room were to be decorated with gilded medallions portraying the kings of Sweden, from Gustav I to Charles X Gustav. Above the portraits, the monarchs’ emblems and devices were to be displayed, and below them their “symbolum oder denckspruch”. These medallions would have reinforced the ceiling painting’s references to the history of Sweden and its kings. Above the six doors, emblems linked to the themes of the paintings were envisaged. With its symmetrically arranged doors and false doors, pilasters, paintings and detailed medallions, this design for the Antechamber is clearly reminiscent of the State Bedchamber (Fig. 9).

The chronology of the wall panels and the dimensions of the canvases permitted two conceivable arrangements of the original series in the room, beginning either on the north wall (cf. plan, Fig. 10) or on the south wall, immediately to the right of the door from the guard room. In either case, the visitor’s gaze would first fall on the dowager queen’s tribute to her son as a peaceful ruler, placed on the far wall, between the windows. According to Die vornehmste Schildereyen however, that was where the series was to begin (with The Regency), concluding with The Coronation on the north wall. This order disrupted the chronology, but was made necessary by the measurements of the coronation scene.

In reality, the paintings were installed in 1696–98, the ceiling painting in the Audience Chamber and the wall panels probably in the same room, where there is definite evidence of their presence from 1709.25 At that time, The Coronation of Ulrika Eleonora the Elder was placed in the Antechamber. We can thus make out three stages in the history of the paintings through the 1690s: first, the creation of the allegorical series around 1692–93; then Ehrenstrahl’s description of the Antechamber, from 1694, in

![Fig. 5 David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl (1628–1698), Allegory of the Union of King Charles XI and Queen Ulrika Eleonora. Oil on canvas, sight size 354 x 194 cm. Audience Chamber, Drottningholm Palace. Nationalmuseum, NMDrh 128.](image)
which *The Coronation* replaced two of the allegories; and finally the installation of the original series in the Audience Chamber, probably as early as 1696–98, but at all events before 1709.

**Charles XI and his Families**

*Charles XI Receiving the Reign*, then, was one of the allegories excluded from Ehrenstrahl’s account of the Antechamber. The painting represents Charles XI’s accession to power, and the origins of that power, in a way that can be viewed as weakening the theocratic ideology of an absolute monarchy. It also appears to suggest a position for the king’s mother which undermines his authority, conflicting as it does with a patriarchal order that saw the queen as the king’s subject. These possible negative interpretations of the picture must of course have been unintended. At the same time, this painting, together with the *Allegory of the Regency*, reflects a desire to highlight Hedvig Eleonora’s importance more clearly and tangibly than had previously been the case at Drottningholm. The other painting excluded was the *Allegory of the Peaceful Reign of Charles XI*. Perhaps Charles’s role as a soldier was perceived as too toned down in the series as a whole, when *Charles XI Receiving the Reign* with its clear martial element was excluded. Otherwise, it is difficult to see how an unfavoura-
role as queen and mother is passive, compared with the active role of the dowager queen.

Insight into both the problems of the original series and the coronation picture as their solution is provided by an analysis of the French dowager queens’ strategies as regents:

in a society in which hierarchy and status were demonstrated in public performance, regents reassured observers with “normal” gender behaviour to imply that their only “abnormal” behaviour was the public exercise of authority. Regents then resubmerged this “abnormal” exception in the performance of “normal” gender-ascribed functions. Regents subsumed unacceptable public behaviour under the performance (often hyperperformance) of acceptable gender identities.27

This analysis relates to the performance of one queen, but in the paintings we are concerned with here, the balancing of the “abnormal” with the “normal” is performed by two, Hedvig Eleonora

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Fig. 8 David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl (1628–1698), The Coronation of Queen Ulrika Eleonora the Elder (1656–1693), probably 1694. Oil on canvas, 348 x 565 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMDrh 276.
The artist had long been a highly trusted servant of the dowager queen, but for several years his influence on the arts at court had been declining. It seems likely that, in Die vornehmste Schildereyen, he was primarily a spokesman for Charles XI’s chief adviser in this field, the court architect Nicodemus Tessin the Younger. Like Ehrenstrahl, Tessin had enjoyed the patronage of Hedvig Eleonora, but it was the portrayal of absolutism and the persona of Charles XI that he saw as his true mission. As scholars have emphasised, Tessin was to gain an increasingly firm grip on the public image of the king.28 And perhaps it was his desire to give prominence in every context to the king alone that caused the dowager queen, in the allegories, to accentuate her own significance more clearly than earlier imagery at Drottningholm had done. What Charles XI’s own attitude was, we cannot tell, not least because it is unclear whether the original series was installed before or after his death.

The decoration of Drottningholm shows how Hedvig Eleonora availed herself of subjects and rhetorical formulas that were well established for female royal patrons, and how she modified them to lend visual expression to and legitimise her position. As noted in my introduction, however, other voices besides that of the dowager queen asserted themselves at the palace. Ehrenstrahl’s representations in words and images of “the most important events in the royal house”, discussed in this article, are a clear example of this. If these representations are defined as a chronologically extended “portrait” of Charles XI and his family,29 then the form they assumed and the varying ways in which they were combined can be seen as a dialogue about what needed to be included and excluded in order to strengthen the image of the king taking shape in the last decade of his reign.

Notes:

1. On Hedvig Eleonora as a collector, see Lisa Skogh, Material Worlds: Queen Hedvig Eleonora as Collector and Patron of the Arts, Bidrag till Kungl. Vetenskapsakademis historia 44, Stockholm University 2013 (diss.).


Fig. 9 The State Bedchamber at Drottningholm Palace, c. 1668–1686. Architect Nicodemus Tessin the Elder (1615–1681), executed by David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl (1628–1698), Burchardt Precht (1651–1738), Nicolaes Millich (1629–c. 1699), Johann Georg Breuer (d. after 1695) and Carlo Carove (d. 1697).
Fig. 10 Nicodemus Tessin the Elder (1615–1681), Drottningholm Palace, plan of the first floor. Pen, wash and watercolour on paper, 38.5 x 80.5 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMH Cels 45/1875 (1 Antechamber, 2 Audience Chamber and 3 the State Bedchamber).

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12. For this painting, see for example Olin 2000, pp. 99–100; Skogh 2013, pp. 250–254.


14. See, in particular, Ellenius 1966; Olin 2000, pp. 59–60; Mårten Snickare,

15. See note 13.


18. For an introduction to the role of the royal widow, see Schattkowsky 2003.


21. Snickare 1999, p. 66. The picture was painted some 15 years after the coronation, so it is difficult to be sure how Ehrenstrahl’s words “nach leben” are to be understood. An undated preliminary study (Nationalmuseum, NMH 2/1867) offers only a very schematic rendering of the faces.


