



Lions in the Garden of Eden

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When the Nationalmuseum reopened on 13 October 2018 after a five-year closure, we were able to offer our visitors not only a newly renovated museum, but also a host of new encounters with works acquired in the interim. One of the finest of these is Uno Åhrén's (1897–1977) cabinet *The Garden of Eden* (Fig. 1), generously presented as a house-warming gift to the Collection of Applied Art and Design by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum. This piece is one of the fruits of a strategic campaign by the Museum to acquire Swedish design from the 1920s, usually referred to as Swedish Grace, a version of the international Art Deco style.¹

“The Swedish applied arts are not a matter of luxury”, the art historian and reformer Gregor Paulsson argued in an article about Sweden’s participation in the Paris International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in 1925.² The claim may seem a strange one, given that the majority of the objects shown were exclusive works marked by fine craftsmanship and artistic originality. Alongside furniture with marquetry in exotic woods, handwoven textiles and elegant cast-iron urns, gracefully engraved glass from Orrefors was presented. All these things were very much luxury items. But for Paulsson, who in 1919 had stressed the social ambitions of Swedish design in his pamphlet *Better Things for Everyday Life* (*Vackrare vardagsvara*), it was important to make clear that the objects shown in Paris represented “the pinnacles



Fig. 1 Uno Åhrén (1897–1977), *Cupboard “The Garden of Eden”*. Produced by Mobilia, 1924. Brazilian walnut, eucalyptus and olive wood inlay, 202 x 92 x 57 cm. Gift of the Friends of the Nationalmuseum. Nationalmuseum, NMK 1/2018.



Fig. 2 Anna Petrus (1886–1949), *Candlesticks*. Produced by Herman Bergmans konstgjuteri, 1923–28. Tin, cast, 37 cm. Purchase: the Axel Hirsch Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 204–205/2018.

of production that is focused on everyday needs”.³

Paulsson’s ideological manoeuvrings are illustrative of the ambivalence of historians of Swedish design to the country’s considerable successes at the 1925 exhibition. In their writings, the essence of Swedish design has been expressed as a matter of practical function, efficient mass production, and aesthetically pleasing, unadorned simplicity for broad groups of consumers. The story has usually been written in terms of a straight line leading from the Home Exhibition of 1917, at which the social visions surrounding design and consumption were formulated, to a specific Swedish simplicity, established in 1930s functionalism and developed in the Swedish Modern of the 1940s and Scandinavian Design of the 1950s. It is not hard to understand that the exclusive elegance of the 1920s proved so problematic for this narrative that Paulsson spoke in 1968 of the design of that decade as a “stylistic epoch with no future”.⁴

That view has also left its mark on the Nationalmuseum’s collection of applied arts and design from the period. For a long time, the holding lacked any significant Swedish design from the 1920s, a deficiency the Museum has actively sought to remedy since the turn of the present century.

Gregor Paulsson was not the only one who dissociated himself from Swedish Grace. At the Paris Exhibition in 1925, the Swedish architect Uno Åhrén saw Le Corbusier’s modernist pavilion *L’Esprit Nouveau*, prompting him to be sharply critical of decorative design:

*Didn’t it make you downright rebellious against it all and ready to hate all artistic concern for practical objects! Decorative forms in every millimetre of our existence – how unspeakably nauseating such an environment would be in the end!*⁵

Marquetry cabinet

Åhrén, in other words, distanced himself from his own contribution to the Paris Exhibition when he also advocated the modern design of functionalism. The latter was to be created by anonymous designers, working in the service of society and never calling attention to their own individual artistic ability.⁶ Consequently, in standard works on the history of design, Åhrén's lady's drawing room at the Paris Exhibition never merited more than a black-and-white photograph. Parts of the Swedish pavilion in Paris, including Åhrén's furnishings, were also shown in Detroit and Chicago in 1927. Following the exhibition, his cabinet remained in a private collection in the United States. Not until 2011 did the Nationalmuseum acquire a chair and a table from the Swedish pavilion, with funds from the Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, and in 2018 it was also given the unique *Garden of Eden* cabinet by the Friends of the Museum.

Like many objects included under the heading of Swedish Grace, the cabinet is relatively simple in its basic form. Its rectangular shape, with two glazed doors and a writing flap, rests on four straight legs. What makes the cabinet so magnificent is its marquetry decoration, quality craftsmanship, and attention to detail in the handles and mounts. The maker, Mobilia in Malmö, produced a superb piece of craftsmanship based on Uno Åhrén's drawings.

The marquetry depicts scenes from Paradise, with Adam and Eve living among exotic plants and animals. Slithering across the lid of the writing surface is the treacherous serpent that tricks them into eating the apple growing on the Tree of Knowledge. Costly materials have been used. The marquetry on the sides and doors of the cabinet is made from Brazilian walnut, eucalyptus and tropical olivewood, the writing surface from African ebony. The doors are fitted with glass in various geometrical shapes, behind which the



Fig. 3 Axel Einar Hjorth (1888–1959), *Armchair*. Produced by Nordiska Kompaniet, 1929. Veneer, steel, leather, 110 x 60 x 57 cm. Purchase: the Barbro Osher Fund and the Axel Hirsch Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 102/2017.

light-red leather lining the cabinet can be seen. In Paris in 1925, the objects displayed on the shelves included engraved glass from Orrefors. The handles, key and mounts are made from silver-plated metal.

Magnificent lions

Two lions with curly, cascading manes, each seated on a low plinth and proudly bearing a candleholder on its head (Fig. 2). These monumental pewter candlesticks are the work of the sculptor and designer Anna Petrus (1886–1949), and were probably designed by her in 1923–25. The lion was a recurring motif in her work, becoming something of a signature feature. Petrus took her inspiration for the shape of these candlesticks from Chinese foo dogs. Chinese art attracted considerable interest in Sweden in the early decades of the 20th century. In 1914 one of the world's first public exhibitions of it was held at Stockholm's Royal Academy of Fine Arts.⁷ 1926 saw the establishment of the East Asian Collections, Stockholm, as a state museum, later to be known as the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities.

After Petrus had lost most of her sculptures in a fire in 1920, she started designing works of applied art. In 1922 she presented her first exhibition of such objects, including trays and tables. The Nationalmuseum acquired one of these tables in 2010, paid for by the Weber Fund. At the Paris Exhibition of 1925, Petrus attracted notice for her slender cast-iron columns, manufactured by Näfveqvarn. After the exhibition, the individual parts of the columns were turned into plant pots. Although it was at this time that Anna Petrus began to collaborate with the firm of Svenskt Tenn, the lion candlesticks were not produced in that context, but created independently by her. They were cast at Herman Bergman's konstgjuteri in the 1920s and are the only known pair of this design made in Petrus's lifetime.

Spectacular armchair

Like Anna Petrus's design, that of Axel Einar Hjorth (1888–1959) has attracted growing interest in recent decades. After training as a furniture designer, working for Carl Bergsten and others and in his own design office, Hjorth was taken on in 1927 as chief designer for the furniture department of Nordiska Kompaniet. This brought his furniture to the attention not only of prestigious customers such as the singer-actress Zarah Leander and the businessman Ivar Kreuger, but also of international audiences at exhibitions in London, Brussels, Paris and New York.⁸ Much of his work is characterised by exclusive woods and carefully executed details, but he also designed tubular steel pieces and pinewood furniture for week-end cottages. Despite Hjorth's extensive and varied production of furniture and interior design objects, his name, like that of Anna Petrus, was largely forgotten in the Swedish modernist historiography. His armchair from 1929 (Fig. 3) is therefore an important acquisition for the Nationalmuseum collections, made possible by the Barbro Osher Fund and the Axel Hirsch Fund.

This idiosyncratic chair, with a solid back that extends right down to the floor, was designed as a desk chair with an accompanying desk. It was presented at Nordiska Kompaniet's spring exhibition in 1929. Stylistically, it displays feature of both 1920s elegance and 1930s simplicity. The materials employed are exclusive: zebrawood veneer, leather and dull nickel-plate steel. Junctions and transitions between the different parts and materials of the piece have been executed with meticulous precision, a characteristic of the quality of Swedish Grace.

Notes:

1. See, for example, Anders Bengtsson, "Two Forgotten Names: Carl Hörvik and Björn Trägårdh", *Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm*, vol. 22, p. 57.

2. Gregor Paulsson, "Sverige i Paris II", *SSFT*, 5/1925, p. 106.

3. Ibid.

4. Gregor Paulsson, "Stilepok utan morgondag", *Fataburen: Nordiska museets och Skansens årsbok*, 1968, p. 109.

5. Uno Åhrén, "Brytningar", *Svenska Slöjdföreningens Årsbok*, 1925, p. 8.

6. Åhrén wrote: "How easy it has been for a time now to make a name for oneself through originality – but now we have to be able to deny ourselves. *Artistic form given to practical objects without its 'artisticness' being noticed: that is the specific characteristic of the truly modern.*" Åhrén 1925, p. 8. See also Cilla Robach, "Den goda smaken", *Konsten 1915–1950*, Signums svenska konsthistoria, Lund 2002, p. 322. Anne-Marie Ericsson, "Paris 1925", *Formens rörelse: Svensk Form genom 150 år*, Stockholm 1995, p. 81.

7. *Utställningen af Kinesisk konst och konsthandverk i Stockholm 1914*, Stockholm 1914. The exhibition was held on the initiative of Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf, later Gustaf VI Adolf, and featured 524 objects.

8. Christian Björk, Thomas Ekström and Eric Ericson, *Axel Einar Hjorth Möbelarkitekt*, Stockholm 2009, p. 8.