

Elsa Beskow's Illustrations for  
*The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman* (1897, c. 1947)

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Daniel Seghers (1590–1661) and Erasmus Quellinus the Younger (1607–1678), *Flower Garland with the Standing Virgin and Child*, c. 1645–50. Oil on copper, 85.5 x 61.5 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7505.

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## Elsa Beskow's Illustrations for *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman* (1897, c. 1947)

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*“Once upon a time there was a little, little old woman, who had a little, little house ...”* With this traditional turn of phrase begins the equally untraditional and influential classic of Swedish children's literature, *Sagan om den lilla, lilla gumman* (The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman), created by one of the pre-eminent Swedish children's book illustrators and authors, Elsa Beskow (1874–1953). It was her first book and was originally published in 1897 (Fig. 1).

Elsa Beskow has described how she drew inspiration for the book from, among others, the English designer and illustrator Walter Crane (1845–1915), whose work she had seen at an exhibition organised by the Swedish Association for Art (Sveriges allmänna konstförening, SAK) in Stockholm in 1896.<sup>1</sup> Among the works on display were Crane's original illustrations for classics of children's literature such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1804–1864) *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (1892, original edition 1851), a few of which were acquired at the time by the Nationalmuseum.<sup>2</sup> Beskow was perhaps especially impressed by Crane's own children's book *Flora's Feast* (1889). On seeing the originals for this work, she realised that Crane's style, and general sense of design, closely matched what she herself had had in mind as she sought to realise her long-held dream of creating a children's book of her own.<sup>3</sup> Although unquestionably influenced by Crane's use of line, Beskow's illustrations are more intimate compared with the



Fig. 1 Elsa Beskow (1874–1953), “Once upon a time there was a little, little old woman who had a little, little house”, Illustration for *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman*, revised edition 1950, c. 1949. Watercolour, pencil, pen and ink, on paper, c. 320 x 310 mm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 5/2019.



Fig. 2 Elsa Beskow (1874–1953), “And a little, little cat that said meow”, Illustration for *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman*, revised edition 1950, c. 1949. Watercolour, pencil, pen and ink, on paper, c. 320 x 310 mm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 7/2019.

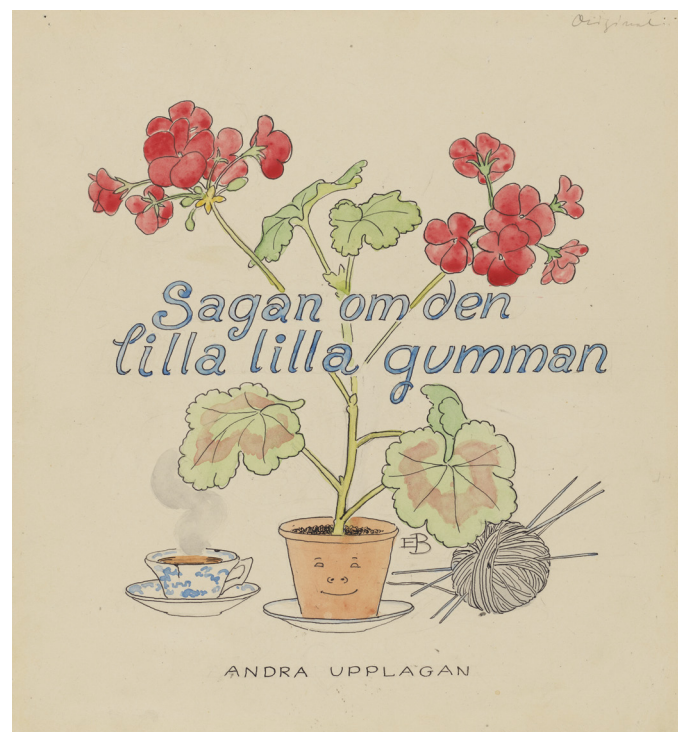


Fig. 3 Elsa Beskow (1874–1953), *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman*, title page for the second Swedish edition 1909, reused in the revised Swedish edition 1950, c. 1908. Watercolour, pencil, pen and ink, on paper, c. 265 x 235 mm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 4/2019.

Pre-Raphaelite-inspired, quasi-mediaeval appearance of his work.<sup>4</sup>

Beskow's book is an adaptation of an old Swedish nursery rhyme, in which the artist harmoniously integrates the pictures with the handwritten words.<sup>5</sup> Beskow's maternal grandmother had been very keen on fairy tales and nursery rhymes, and *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman* was one of the ones she told most frequently. According to Beskow, however, the direct model for the old woman was a lady who sold Easter twigs in Östermalmstorg square in Stockholm. At the time, Beskow was teaching drawing at Anna Whitlock's school in Stockholm. To be able to focus on other work in between her classes, which were quite scattered, she rented a studio at Johannesgatan 10, not far from the school. Beskow has described the conception of

the book in this small studio as a happy and enjoyable time.<sup>6</sup> Her interpretation of the subject has a cheerful charm and joy which create a rare and special childlike feeling, perhaps in particular through her narrative use of various sound effects such as *Moo* and *Meow*, which was unusual for those times (Fig. 2). According to the artist's own account, the circles of geranium and clover for example, which frame the different scenes, can be likened to windows through which the reader, or viewer, peeks into the world of the little, little old woman and, by extension, the world of childhood.<sup>7</sup>

Both Beskow's choice of subject and her specific artistic approach to it could, to some extent, be viewed in the light of ideas from both the National Romantic and the Arts and Crafts movement. The nursery rhyme, in this case one considered speci-

fically Swedish and squarely placed in an idealised Swedish countryside, is framed in a contemporary artistic aesthetic and medium, the children's book, perfectly suited to fostering good citizens through the propagation of good art.<sup>8</sup> Yet there is nothing really didactic about the book. Rather than defining the scenes and settings of the narrative in an overly literal, in-your-face manner, Beskow's illustrations instead capture their essence, with a few choice details suggesting a larger world, always leaving a door, or window, open for the child's own imagination. A characteristic of Beskow's art which Tove Jansson (1914–2001), for one, has praised.<sup>9</sup>

As a young woman artist presenting quite a pioneering children's book for consideration by the publishers Wahlström and Widstrand, she naturally





Fig. 4 Elsa Beskow (1874–1953), “Shoo kitty!!!!”, Illustration for *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman*, revised edition 1950, c. 1949. Watercolour, pencil, pen and ink, on paper, c. 320 x 310 mm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 14/2019.

felt some trepidation. But to her surprise they liked her work, and although the original recompense was quite small for the time, she was pleased that the book would soon be published.<sup>10</sup> It quickly became very popular. The work was reprinted several times, internationally as well as in Sweden, and over the years the editions saw a number of changes. For example, the title page was revised for the second edition because the artist had married and changed her surname from Maartman to Beskow.<sup>11</sup> But she also took the opportunity to edit and make additions to the actual illustrations, including some that could underline the little old woman's both jaunty and diligent disposition: a steaming teacup, a ball of thread and a flower pot with a smiling face (Fig. 3).

The original ending of the tale – “Shoo kitty!!!!” (Fig. 4) – was perhaps somewhat abrupt, and at the prompting of the publisher, who remembered the end of the nursery rhyme differently, she later added a further page describing the final fate of the cat: “and the cat ran to the forest never to return”.<sup>12</sup> In the additional illustration, the cat is perched on a branch high up in a typical Swedish pine tree (Fig. 5). Here the cat, and its enigmatic expression, are at the same time quite reminiscent of John Tenniel's (1820–1914) classic illustration of the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's (1832–1898) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).<sup>13</sup> Further evidence, perhaps, of how Beskow drew inspiration from English children's book illustration.



Fig. 5 Elsa Beskow (1874–1953), “And the cat ran to the forest never to return. But perhaps he still came home in the end. E.B.” Illustration for *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman*, revised edition 1950, c. 1949. Watercolour, pencil, pen and ink, on paper, c. 320 x 310 mm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 15/2019.

Unfortunately, Beskow's drawings for the original edition were lost at an early stage. They had been transferred to lithographic stones which, because of all the reprints, eventually became completely worn, resulting in increasingly poor reproduction of line and colour.<sup>14</sup> Probably as a result of Bonniers taking over the publishing rights in the late 1940s, Beskow was commissioned to create new illustrations based on the old printed ones, but now edited and adapted for the photographic printing process.<sup>15</sup> These illustrations, together with the original for the title page of the second edition which was preserved and reused in the reworked edition, were recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum.

Although Beskow was more or less obliged to redo the illustrations, this also

meant that, in her twilight years, she had an opportunity to artistically revisit her breakthrough work one last time. Interestingly, Beskow later described how she had never felt that the lithographer who had transferred her original drawings to the printing blocks in 1897 had really managed to capture the likeness of her work.<sup>16</sup> In the new illustrations, she changed the appearance of the cat drawn as part of the initial letter of the title on the cover, for instance. In addition, her experience as a mother and grandmother in the years since the original publication of the book had led her to believe in the need for comforting words at the end of a fairy tale or nursery rhyme. She therefore modified the end of the story even further. A line was added that could possibly put at ease the minds of those who were still wondering where the old woman's cat disappeared to: "But perhaps he still came home in the end. E.B."<sup>17</sup>

The fact that the reproductive technique was now photographic meant comparatively less detail in the lines and colour hues from the outset, something that was clearly taken into account by Beskow when redoing the illustrations.<sup>18</sup> This gave them a slightly simplified, but at the same time perhaps more immediate expression which, incidentally, was quite well matched to the kind of children's book illustration that was fashionable in the mid 20th century.<sup>19</sup>

Elsa Beskow compared the instant critical and public success that *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman* received upon its release in 1897 to the cat's step up onto the stool in the story: it was to be her first step on a new path, with a clear intention of continuing upwards.<sup>20</sup> Which, in turn, resulted in one of the most distinguished careers in Swedish children's book illustration, encompassing numerous other classics such as *Tomtebobarnen* (*Children of the Forest*, 1910), the original illustrations of which are also in the collections of the Nationalmuseum.<sup>21</sup>

#### Notes:

1. Elsa Beskow, "Sagan om en bilderbok", in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 22 September 1952, reprinted in *Natanael och Elsa Beskow – Studier och minnesbilder*, Stockholm 1954, 1965, 2nd ed., pp. 65–67.
2. Stina Hammar, *Elsa Beskow: En biografi*, Stockholm 1958, pp. 164–174.
3. Beskow 1952; Hammar 1958. Nationalmuseum inv. nos. NMH 46–54/1896, *Meddelanden från Nationalmuseum nr. 21. Statens konstsamlingars tillväxt och förvaltning 1896: Underdånig berättelse afgifven af Nationalmusei intendent*, Stockholm 1897, Gustaf Upmark, *Handteckningssamlingen*, pp. 9–10, A. Köp [Acquisitions], Sept. 18: "En samling aquarellerade teckningar. 9 st., af den nu lefvande engelske konstnären Walter Crane, utförda för verket »The Wonder Book». Inköpt å utställning i Stockholm." [A collection of watercoloured drawings, 9 in number, by the now living English artist Walter Crane, made for "The Wonder Book". Acquired at an exhibition in Stockholm]; <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1315311/FULLTEXT01.pdf>, (accessed 15 May 2020) Erik Gustaf Folcker, "Konst. Walter Crane. Med 11 bilder", in *Ord och Bild*, vol. 5, 1896, no. 9, pp. 425–432; <http://runeberg.org/ordochbild/1896/0473.html>, (accessed 15 May 2020).
4. Beskow 1952.
5. Ibid. That she should have been able to achieve this intimate effect, despite drawing direct inspiration from Crane, is something that surprised even Beskow herself.
6. Ibid.; Hammar 1958.
7. Beskow 1952.
8. Ibid.; Hammar 1958.
9. Hammar 1958. In this respect, Beskow's work both precedes and reflects, for example, selected writings by Ellen Key (1849–1926), published just a few years later, in particular *Skönhet för alla* ("Beauty for All", 1899) and *Barndomens århundrade* ("The Century of the Child", 1900), as well as the thinking behind the creation of the "Saga Library" (*Sagabiblioteket*, 1899–1954), instigated by the teachers Emil (1853–1910) and Amanda (1854–1935) Hammarlund, which achieved a very wide distribution in Swedish elementary schools during the first half of the 20th century. Charlotte Christensen, "Elsa Beskow, Swedish illustrator (1874–1953)", in *Dictionary of Women Artists: Vol. I: Introductory Surveys; Artists A–I*, Delia Gaze (ed.), Chicago and London 1997, pp. 254–255.
10. Tove Jansson, "Sagan inom verkligheten – Den ärliga Elsa Beskow", in *Bonniers Litterära Magasin (BLM)*, vol. 28, no. 5, May–June 1959, pp. 419–420; Boel Westin, *Tove Jansson: Ord, bild, liv*, Stockholm 2007, p.; Petter Karlsson, *Muminvärlden & verkligheten: Tove Janssons liv i bilder*, Stockholm 2014,

- p. 111; Sven Sandström, "Vänlighetens och lekens slott", in *Bonniers Litterära Magasin (BLM)*, vol. 28, no. 5, May–June 1959, pp. 421–423.
11. Beskow 1952; Elsa Maartman, *Sagan om den lilla, lilla gumman*, Stockholm 1897.
12. Beskow 1952; Hammar 1958.
13. Beskow 1952; Hammar 1958.
14. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, part of a two-volume set with *Through the Looking Glass*, New York 1946 (original edition 1865).
15. Beskow 1952; Hammar 1958; Elsa Beskow, *Sagan om den lilla, lilla gumman*, Stockholm 1950.
16. Beskow 1952.
17. Ibid.; Hammar 1958.
18. Beskow 1952; Hammar 1958.
19. Beskow 1952; Hammar 1958.
20. Beskow 1952.
21. *Tomtebobarnen* has also been published in English with the titles *Elf Children of the Woods* and *The Little Elves of Elf Nook*. Nationalmuseum inv. nos. NMH 1–31/1974. *Elsa Beskow 1874–1953: En minnesutställning* (exh. cat.), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm 1974, *Elsa Beskow: Vår barndoms bildskatt* (exh. cat.), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm 2004, here, the illustrations for the *Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman* were exhibited with the cat. nos. 11–21 (although the fact that the original illustrations from 1897 were lost, and that the works on display were done in the 1940s, was never mentioned).