

## LANDSCAPE IN SWEDEN

Several Swedish artists, starting to feel constrained by the Academic traditions and isolated in Sweden, moved to Paris in 1872. Later known as Paris Lads, they established a colony in the City of Light and exhibited regularly in the Paris Salon.

By the 1890s, Swedish artists were returning home, building on the lessons learned in France. They moved away from detached, ethnographic considerations of landscape, favoring instead to immerse themselves in their subject matter. This practice presented landscapes in such a way that the viewer gained an immediate access to them. These works are characterized by a sense of emotional power and lack of sentimentality not often found in works by their continental counterparts.

These early forays outside of Sweden paved the way for the next generation of artists. Swedish artists, looking for inspiration beyond the Academy, continued to study in France, and became interested in *plein air* painting, or painting outdoors. They were particularly taken with the tonality and fidelity of place in the work of Jules Bastien-LePage. The importance of Bastien-LePage to this generation of Swedish artists is summed up by Georg Pauli in his autobiography:

As long as I can remember, there has never been a time when the interest of the young artists of France, no – Europe, no, I may even say – the world, has been so concentrated around one focal point, one name, as it was in the first five years of the 1880s, around Bastien-LePage. He was the genius who was going to solve the riddles of art. Not its beauty, but its meaning.

If it had not been for Bastien-LePage and the *plein air* movement in France, Swedish artists might have continued creating studio works, instead of the open-air landscapes, painted directly in nature, taking full advantage of the strong qualities of light and nature in Sweden, depicting it with accuracy and power. Bastien-LePage's work helped the artists reject the Italianate landscape tradition derived from 17th-century artists such as Claude Lorraine. This time in France allowed these artists, upon their return to Sweden, to focus their attention on accurate and powerful depictions of their own landscape, qualities of light, people and culture. Their return in the 1890s coincided with the development of Swedish nationalism and a greater awareness of conceptions of national identity. Like elsewhere in Europe, the artists utilized the training undertaken in France to create an artistic practice that was uniquely Swedish in its consideration of the landscape and qualities of light.

## NAIVISTS

Beginning in about 1915, when Sweden was isolated from the rest of Europe, The Naivists emerged in reaction to the international modernists, instead favoring art that was modest and immediately personal – looking to their own neighborhoods, families, and friends for inspiration. The group went further than their predecessors in rejecting the Academy, by having little if any artistic foundations, unburdened by academic teaching or travel abroad. They were a group of young, intentionally unskilled and ignorant artists, proudly trusting their own feelings and sensitivity to painting. Gideon Börje (*Landscape*) and Eric Hallström (*Garden, Akersberga*) met while both were briefly attending a drawing school in 1917. At the time, Börje was working as a surveyor, and when he showed his weekly earnings to Hallström, the two decided to immediately rent a studio, purchase paints and canvases, and begin painting, having little-to-no experience. They also rented a gallery space and hosted a show a year later, with paintings filling the walls. Such a story, while perhaps somewhat apocryphal, allows the reader a sense by which the group regarded technical routine a handicap.

These intentions were carried on by the second generation of Naivists (such as Sven “X-et” Erixson, in the lower galleries) whose work embodies a more romantic and optimistic response to environments and people. The second-generation artists did not completely reject training or travel.

## NORTHERN LANDSCAPE

The politics of the 1880s, committed to socialist political positions, gave way to an emphasis on returning to the homeland. The cosmopolitan experiences of Paris had a paradoxical effect on these artists: while it provided a model from which to break away from the Academy, it also provided an increased sense of Swedish identity and awareness of a Nordic spirit and culture, stronger even than that felt by those in Sweden itself. The expatriate artists' communities were spaces where return-to-the-fold ideas fomented. They became places of the interaction of seeming opposites: metropolis and wilderness, progressive internationalism and resolute parochialism.

The most powerful themes in Swedish art at the turn of the century were those that fused Symbolist currents of inward-turning subjectivity with the local motifs of nation-affirming Nordic identity. Foremost among these themes was the Nordic summer night, with its traditional overtones of the erotic, the primal and the cosmic. Turning towards symbolism, works from this period, such as Maria Fröberg's *Norrland Landscape*, are distinguished by the highly personal subjectivity, unnatural color and formal patterning.

## **SVEN BIRGER SANDZÉN (1871-1954)**

Born in Bildsberg, Västergötland, Birger Sandzén spent his lifetime attempting to capture the ‘great power of light,’ and his mature style owes much to the artists of late 19th century Stockholm and Paris. His artistic ability was recognized early and at the age of 10 he was sent to the Academy and College in nearby Skara. Once he reached university age, he enrolled in the University of Lund to study aesthetics and French, but the lure of Stockholm drew him away after just one term. Upon his arrival in Stockholm, he planned on enrolling in the Royal Academy, but instead studied under Anders Zorn, as well as under Richard Bergh, Nils Krueger, and Karl Nordström. These three painters forged distinct style of painting that was characterized by a directional brushstroke that was reminiscent of Van Gogh. Sandzen visited these artists in Varberg in 1893.

In 1894 he moved to Paris to study, viewing it as an important rite of passage, studying in the studio of Edmond F. Aman-Jean, a symbolist painter whose work reflects the style of Jules Bastien-Lepage. In a letter home to his father, Sandzén reflected:

The activity which most occupies the young artist is to go to the various salons to study the different trends in Modern European art. One must go several times to the salons and take in only one or two rooms on each occasion.

Many of Aman-Jean’s students were American, and Sandzén liked their friendly optimism, and the possibility of being freed from artistic movements and counter-movements. In another letter, this one to Carl Swensson, president of Bethany College, Sandzén spoke glowingly of America, seeing it as “[a] free new country, it should be heaven for a painter. Out there in the West a painter could develop a style of his own to fit the country.” He soon set sail for America in 1894, destination: Lindsborg, Kansas to take a position at the soon-to-open Bethany College.

In addition to painting, Sandzén was a skilled printmaker, a media that he did not engage with until his arrival in Lindsborg. Even though printmaking was a late addition to his repertoire, he developed his handling of various media to bring out their inherent characteristics, and in a way that mimicked his thick brushwork to engage with the ‘great power of light.’

## CHARLES HAAG (1867-1933)

Swedish-American artist Charles Haag studied and worked in Paris during the 1890s at the same time as two other Swedish sculptors Carl Eldh and Carl Milles. Haag considered his time in Paris to be his best. He took on many jobs including composing figures, designing silverware and jewelry, and decorative work for private homes, churches, and public buildings.

After immigrating to the United States in 1903 (he became a citizen in 1915), Haag wanted to create his own authentic American art. *The Immigrants* is exemplary of one of Haag's major concentrations in his art- a social realism, influenced significantly by French sculptors such as Auguste Rodin and Constantin Meunier. Perhaps Haag was also playing with his unique immigrant experience and what it meant to be a Swedish-American in this work. Social commentary is also recognized in the humanity he has depicted in labor scenes like *Puddling Iron* and class scenes such as *Shell and Kernel*, both which can be compared to the work of Jean-François Millet. Some of his untitled figures of women with elongated and exaggerated hair are a callback to the languid, lounging female figures found in French artist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes' paintings. Rodin's pensive *The Thinker* can be compared to Haag's *The Knot*, similarly grounded in a seat and deep in thought.

Although not gaining a significant international recognition like many of his counterparts, very likely because of his staunch convictions to his practice and unwillingness to compromise, Haag was still a well-regarded artist.

## CHARLES HAAG ARCHIVE AT THE SWENSON CENTER

Materials in this case are from the Charles Haag collection at the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College. The collection includes information from Charles and Sofia Haag's personal and professional lives, including hundreds of images of their artwork, articles describing their work and exhibitions, and correspondence with other Swedish-American artists and art museums.

The Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center is a national library and archives for the study of Swedish immigration to North America. The Swenson Center also helps people research their Swedish-American genealogy.

See more materials from the Charles Haag collection in “In Union there is Strength: Swedish-American Sculptor Charles Haag” an exhibition on display at the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center in Denkmann Hall through February 15.

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