

A New Portrait of Sweden's Queen

BY PETER TRIPPI



On June 11, a small but elegant celebration occurred at Gripsholm, a turreted castle located approximately 35 miles west of Stockholm. In the presence of her husband, King Carl XVI Gustaf, Her Majesty Queen Silvia of Sweden unveiled a new oil portrait of herself, painted earlier in the year by fellow Swede Urban Larsson (b. 1966). Gripsholm is home to the Statens Porträttsamling (Swedish National Portrait Gallery), and its latest acquisition was underwritten by several corporate and individual donors in honor of the Queen's 70th birthday, which will actually occur on December 23.

Believe it or not, Gripsholm contains the oldest national portrait gallery in the world. It was conceived by the Enlightenment king Gustaf III, but his assassination at a masked ball in 1792 (which inspired Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Un Ballo in Maschera*) delayed the gallery's formal establishment until 1822. Now a branch of Stockholm's Nationalmuseum, the institution has proceeded to hang the Queen's new portrait in a heavily trafficked room, and it has attracted considerable media coverage in both Sweden and the Netherlands, where Urban Larsson lives.



Gripsholm Castle
Photo: Hans Thorwid/Nationalmuseum

UP TO THE CHALLENGE

Born in Stockholm, Larsson harbored a passion for painting and drawing in childhood, but studied art history and architecture as an undergraduate in his native city. He then attended the only atelier in Europe where what he now calls "traditional realism" was being taught in the late 1980s — operated by the American-born painters Charles H. Cecil and Daniel Graves in the one-time church converted into a studio by the 19th-century sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini. Larsson spent nearly three years there, happily learning, in his own words, "to draw and paint from life according to time-tested principles." In 1991, he followed his Dutch girlfriend (now his wife, the paintings conservator Lara van Wassenauer) to Amsterdam, where he has worked full-time as an artist ever since. There he paints portraits, figures, still lifes, and landscapes, which are handled in Holland by his Amsterdam gallery, Lara Wijismuller Fine Art. In his remarks during the unveiling ceremony at Gripsholm Castle, Larsson acknowledged his aesthetic debt to the historical Dutch masters, and also to the modern-day Dutch lovers of painting who have enabled him to pursue a successful career in their country.

Working in the north-lit studio once occupied by the Dutch artist G.H. Breitner (1857-1923), Larsson says his art is based on "the study of nature, the visual language and techniques of artists of earlier centuries, and the concept of beauty." This approach starts with the "logical" (e.g., draftsmanship, values, and coloring, which must be learned) and is then transcended by the "irrational" (the intuition, mood, feeling, and spirituality residing within every artist). This second aspect cannot be taught, of course, but in Florence Larsson eagerly

The Queen unveils the portrait with assistance from Urban Larsson.
Photo: Hans Thorwid/Nationalmuseum





Urban Larsson (b. 1966)
Her Majesty Queen Silvia of Sweden
2013, Oil on canvas, 53 x 39 1/4 in.
Swedish National Portrait Gallery, Gripsholm Castle



Urban Larsson at work

acquired the sight-size method, through which painters continually stand back to compare their canvas with the subject. Sight-size's significance to Larsson is epitomized by the long, runway-like floor mats he wears out striding to and from his easel. During Queen Silvia's sittings, just such a mat was laid down for Larsson in the Chinese Saloon at Drottningholm Palace, the Swedish royal family's official residence seven miles west of Stockholm.

Surrounded by the inspiring artworks made during Holland's Golden Age, Larsson believes "that artists in all art forms, from visual art to music to literature, hope to create something that will outlast our lifetimes." He says, "We have a need to 'mark' our presence in this life, which consequently gives life a meaning." Needless to say, a commission to paint a reigning queen for a national collection constitutes a very permanent "mark," and Larsson came to the project deeply experienced in portraiture. "There is," he feels, "nothing as interesting and challenging as painting the human being," and his previous sitters have included Wim Kok, former prime minister of the Netherlands, and Gerdi Verbeet, former speaker of the Dutch parliament.



The portrait at a very early stage



Midway through the painting process

Orchids in the Queen's left hand



Books at the Queen's left side



The Queen's head



AN EFFICIENT AND PLEASANT PROCESS

Queen Silvia is well versed in portraiture as well. Born Silvia Renate Sommerlath in Heidelberg, Her Majesty had a German father but got her dark good looks from her Brazilian mother. She married the King in 1976, and roughly 15 years later the royal couple sat for large individual portraits painted by the American artist Nelson Shanks, which now hang in the royal palace in central Stockholm. The Queen had sat for no official portrait thereafter, and in recent years there was consensus at court that a new one was required to complement the King's 60th-birthday portrait, painted by the Swedish artist Olle Hamngren and donated in 2006 to the national portrait gallery by the members of Parliament.

In 2009, Larsson and his wife were invited to meet Sweden's King and Queen during their state visit to the Netherlands, and one of the Swedish ambassadors bought a Larsson painting. Yet, although the artist was certainly familiar to the Swedish court, it was actually the critical and commercial success of his first solo show in Stockholm (at Skajs Antikhandel in October 2011) that stimulated the commission to paint Queen Silvia. Several court officials enjoyed seeing that show, as did a representative from the Nationalmuseum. In the summer of 2012, Larsson met with the Queen in Stockholm to discuss the possibility of painting her portrait.

"People have," Larsson believes, "a need for reflection. In our time, when we are overwhelmed with high-speed images ... and often spectacular, attention-seeking contemporary art, it is, in a way, anachronistic to paint something which is trying to be subtle, silent, and apt

King Carl XVI Gustaf and Her Majesty Queen Silvia with Urban Larsson (center)
Photo: Hans Thorwid/Nationalmuseum



for contemplation, but maybe just because of this anachronism, it is important and meaningful." Portraiture must be appreciated slowly, and Larsson relatedly feels it is important to paint the sitter from life, to converse with that person in order to capture her or his personality, in addition to the physical likeness. Though her official schedule is crowded, Queen Silvia grasped the necessity for multiple sittings, and agreed to schedule them for February and March 2013.

The dimensions of the painting were predetermined at 135 x 100 centimeters (approximately 53 x 39 1/4 inches), primarily because protocol required that it be somewhat smaller than the King's portrait by Hamngren. Moreover, it was decided that Her Majesty could not appear in formal attire (such as a floor-length gown), since her husband had recently been painted in a business suit. Larsson originally wanted to pose Queen Silvia in Drottningholm's green Queens' Chamber, which is lined with the portraits of all the European queens who reigned immediately after the Napoleonic wars. For logistical reasons, this was not possible, but Larsson alluded to those earlier portraits by including in his composition the oval-framed edge of that of Marguerite of Prussia. And in real life, the Chinese Saloon is painted blue, but Larsson felt that the greyish-green wall of the Queens' Chamber would be more appropriate as a backdrop to the Queen's crimson suit.

Larsson remained in Stockholm for seven weeks, working through eight sittings, each lasting 150 minutes. These visits were spread out sufficiently to allow him time to work on passages unrelated to the Queen herself, and so, during their final time together, he was able to complete

her head and sign the portrait. Its appearance was never a surprise for Her Majesty, who followed its entire development with interest thanks to a mirror that Larsson had set up behind his easel. A crucial feature of the process was their ongoing conversation, which not only kept them both entertained, but also allowed Larsson to infuse her face and body language with personality. Playing throughout the sittings were recorded concertos by Johann Sebastian Bach, whose church in Leipzig, Germany, is the same one where Queen Silvia's paternal uncle served as a minister in the 20th century. Sitter and artist also discussed the rich sculpture collection of Sweden's 17th-century queen Christina, which had recently been rediscovered in a storeroom at Madrid's Museo del Prado. At the start of one sitting, Her Majesty brought King Carl XVI Gustaf in for a peek; he particularly admired the huge array of brushes that Larsson had on hand, just in case a specific thickness or type would be needed.

Larsson always seeks to include something white in his pictures, so the Queen proposed the orchid blooms that appear here because one of her husband's grandmothers had grown them. Orchids epitomize rare, delicate beauty, of course, but Larsson was pleased to learn that they also symbolize the

protection of children, the primary mission of the World Childhood Foundation, which Queen Silvia co-founded in 1999. (She entered that field after serving as patron and host of the first World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. She also advocates for youngsters struggling with physical disabilities, dyslexia, and substance abuse issues, as well as older people afflicted with dementia.) In view of these causes, Larsson inscribed the spines of the books stacked at the Queen's side with related titles, the uppermost being "Childhood." Her Majesty decided to wear not only her customary pearl necklace, but also a colorful bracelet that the World Childhood Foundation gives to members of the public who donate to the organization. (Its hues symbolize the different rights of children mandated by the United Nations.)

Because the Royal Family will always have to travel to Gripsholm Castle to enjoy Larsson's new portrait, the artist decided to present the Queen privately with a smaller painting replicating her head and shoulders. This is now hanging in her private quarters, surely giving as much satisfaction there as the larger image does for visitors to the national portrait gallery. Do consider visiting Gripsholm next time you are in Sweden, not only for its portraits, but also for the displays about its fascinating history. ■

Information: *Gripsholm Castle*, kungahuset.se/royalcourt/royalpalaces

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