The Two (or Three?) National Museums of Sweden, 1840–1910

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As in other countries, the nineteenth century in Sweden brought with it discussion of public museums: Were they something that was desirable? What was their purpose? Who should pay for them? Partly as a result of the terrible state of the royal family's finances, the royal art collection had become the property of the state during the second half of the eighteenth century. A few years after the assassination of Gustav III in 1792, part of the royal palace in Stockholm was opened to the public as the *Kongligt Museum* (Royal Museum).[1] Its chief attraction was the sculpture collection bought by the late king in Rome through the intermediary Francesco Piranesi, who also sold to the Swedish monarch the remaining contents of his father Giovanni Battista's sculpture workshop.[2] Adjoining the two galleries that housed the marble sculptures were smaller rooms in which other parts of the collection were displayed, such as a cabinet of Egyptian objects, but it soon became obvious that the space available in the royal palace was inadequate. (fig. 1)

A museum for the nation now became a political question. Proposals made to the *riksdag* (parliament) were initially voted down almost without debate. During the 1830s and 1840s, schemes to establish a national museum were brought before every parliamentary session. Since the late Middle Ages, the Swedish parliament had consisted of four estates: the nobility, the clergy, the burghers, and the peasants. The presence of the latter group was almost unique among early modern European parliaments, but at this point in the nineteenth century, landowning peasants as well as middle-class groups were pressing for broader representation. The establishment of a museum was initiated by a network of members of the higher estates consisting of courtiers, officers, and intellectuals, some of whom were also amateur artists. All proposals were firmly rejected by the peasants, who held that the idea was wildly extravagant, both in terms of cost and its lack of utility, above all for the group represented by this estate. All this begged the question: What was the purpose of the national museum, and who was it for?

1 Most often styled with the first word abbreviated, '*Kongl. Museum*'.

2 Leander Touati 1998.

Fig. 1: Pehr Hilleström, The Gallery of the Muses in Kongl. Museum, Royal Palace, Stockholm, 1796, oil on canvas.

Studying the parliamentary debates leading up to the eventual decision to found a museum, Per Widén distinguishes three types of supporting arguments, although these were, in practice, often amalgamated: education (in the sense of the German word *Bildung* or the Swedish equivalent *bildning*); national prestige and identity; and benefits to society.[3] The first proposition was idealist in its nature and connected to currents in contemporary philosophy. The goal of education (*Bildung*), according to these philosophical discourses, is to develop in us what is truly human. Art can connect the individual with the ideal; it can bring men and women closer to God and to the Eternal. Art makes us better people and should therefore be supported by the state.

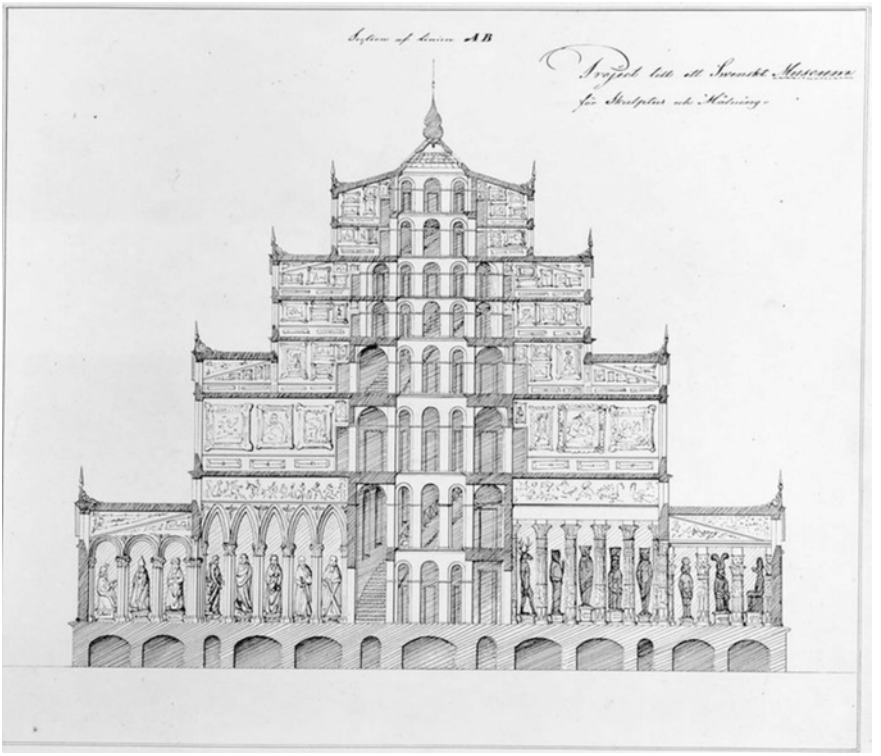
The second argument, however, advocating a museum on account of its importance for national identity, carried more weight. "It is truly with a sense of humiliation that we learn how foreigners view with pity the lack of care and space devoted to our collections of fine arts",[4] Count Claes Fleming, the marshal of the realm, lamented in an 1828 debate in the House of Nobility. Competition with Denmark, Widén notes, was a particularly sore point, as most foreigners ventured to Stockholm after having visited Copenhagen. If Sweden should be counted as a civilized nation, it needed a museum. By this logic, an emphasis was placed on displaying works of art from the foreign schools – Italian, Dutch, and Flemish paintings, for instance. The nationalist argument united conservatives and liberals and helped carry the eventual proposition through parliament.

3 Widén 2009; Olausson and Widén 2018.

4 Olausson and Widén 2018, 65.

What, then, were the benefits of a museum to the nation, beyond this ostensible increase of national prestige? Here, the reasoning focused on the advantages of museums for the industrial arts, whose competitiveness on the international market was believed to rely on access to suitable models and inspiration. In many countries, this argument provided a backdrop to the foundation of museums specifically dedicated to the applied arts, and indeed a few decades later it came up again in Sweden in the context of discussions of the educational role of the applied arts and whether the collection should be displayed in the national museum or in a separate institution. Finally, it was asserted that a national museum must be made available to everyone, for the betterment and recreation of all social classes.[5]

Fig. 2: Nils Månsson Mandelgren, Project for a National Museum on Kungsholmen, ca 1844, drawing.



A few projects for a museum building survive from the decades in which such debates occurred. Their exact context has been difficult to pin down. Nils Månsson Mandelgren's pyramid-shaped castle for the arts appears to us perhaps more like a cartoon or a quickly scribbled ideogram than a serious suggestion for a building. It does, however, address some of the central questions posed in the debates, such as the relationship

5 Ibid., 63–69.

among classical, Norse, and Christian culture and how to manifest this complex heritage in a Swedish national museum.[6] (fig. 2)

Fig. 3: Lars Jacob von Röök, Project for a National Museum in Stockholm, 1840s, pen, black ink, and watercolour.

Lars Jacob von Röök, the curator of the Royal Museum, drew two versions of an elegant, colonnaded, two-storey building with a low dome, vaguely recalling Karl Friedrich Schinkel's *Altes Museum* (Old Museum) in Berlin; the two drawings stage the building at different locations in the capital. The background to this project is uncertain, although the early 1840s seems to be a plausible date.[7] (fig. 3)

In the middle of that same decade, a political decision to construct Sweden's *Nationalmuseum* (National Museum) was finally reached. This came at the price of angering and estranging the peasant estate, whose violent opposition to spending tax money extracted from the poor in order to support "dead things" was passed over.[8] There also existed by this point a plausible project for the museum, put forward by the *Överintendentsämbetet* (National Board of Architecture). Curiously, the architect chosen by the board, Fredrik

6 Von Malmborg 1941, 78–81; Bjurström 1992, 107.

7 Bjurström 1992, 103.

8 Von Malmborg 1941, 28–29.

Wilhelm Scholander, was a mere 27-year-old, still training abroad.[9] He had in fact presented the design as if it were the solution to an academic assignment, focusing to a large degree on the magnificence of the architecture and the attractiveness of the drawings themselves. Having developed the proposal while still a student in Paris, Scholander sent it home to the National Board of Architecture, where, moreover, his uncle was one of the leading architects; indeed, it has been suggested that the talented student had to some extent been groomed for the assignment by his relative and the latter's associates. The rather simple exterior recalls a Renaissance palace. In the watercolour view, flocks of fashionably dressed people, looking perhaps more like Parisians than Swedes, walk leisurely in the museum's garden under a blue sky.[10] The interior is grandly classical, with a central monumental staircase and a domed hall for solemn meetings, inhabited by marble statues of Norse gods and Swedish kings.

Scholander returned to Stockholm and provided revised and more detailed plans for the museum, which were officially approved by the authorities but met with a storm of opposition in the press, both from jealous colleagues and a few museum officials and antiquarians who resented not having been consulted. In order to ease the tension, the king, Oscar I (r. 1844–1859), determined that a foreign architect of note should be asked to assess the various proposals and to make a statement as to their suitability and beauty. The Berlin architect Friedrich August Stüler, a pupil of Schinkel, was engaged to do so.[11] An established and respected architect and professor at the *Bauakademie* (Building Academy), Stüler was at this time occupied with the construction of the *Neues Museum* (New Museum) in Berlin. He visited Stockholm in 1847 to evaluate the designs in relation to the intended building site and other factors.[12]

The German architect judged Scholander's proposal to be the best, but for reasons that have never been fully understood, Stüler himself was asked to take over the project. In 1849, his drawings for a three-storey museum building in a Florentine-Venetian, or at any rate Italianate, neo-Renaissance style were approved by the king, and construction could begin. (figs 4, 5) The process was complicated and took around 15 years, but the finished building, on the whole, followed the original design. What should be noted is that the museum was conceived as a multipurpose structure in which several institutions were to be housed: the art gallery, the national library, the archaeological museum, the armoury, and the numismatic collections. From a philosophical point of view, the project could be labelled universal in that it would serve as a shrine not only to the arts but to history in general, as expressed in the inscription on the façade: "*Antiquitatis litterarum artium monumentis*" ("[This building is] for collections of antiquities, literature, and the arts"). On the ground floor would be housed the archaeological and historical collections. In a lavish watercolour section of the proposal for the complex, they are shown adjacent to the Royal

9 Ibid., 49–55; Grandien 1976. The protracted and painful story of Scholander's projects for and involvement in the building of the museum cannot be addressed in this essay but is discussed in detail by Grandien and later writers.

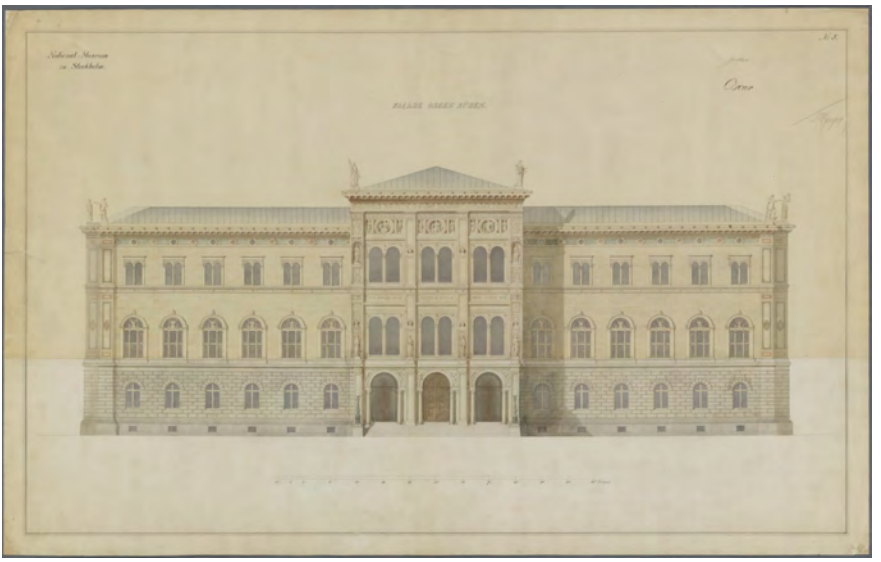
10 Fredrik Wilhelm Scholander, *Förslag till museibyggnad i Kungsträdgården* (Proposal for a Museum in the Royal Garden), Stockholm, Riksarkivet.

11 Von Malmborg 1941, 50–58.

12 Laine 1976, 84–86.

Armoury. Meanwhile, the first floor was intended to house the *Kungliga biblioteket* (Royal Library).[13] In some of the project drawings, bookcases can be made out. During the later stages of construction, however, it was realized that the library needed its own building, necessitating a reconceptualization of the first floor.[14] On the ground and first floors, natural light from the large windows illuminated showcases with typologically arranged collections.

Fig. 4: Friedrich August Stüler, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Main Façade, 1849, pen, black ink, and watercolour.



After ascending the monumental staircase to the second floor, the visitor encountered a collection of plaster casts of ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, in fact copies of copies, yet powerful signifiers of the perceived summit of human cultural achievement.[15] The National Museum building in Stockholm, with its stylistic references to the Italian Renaissance and ancient Greece, voiced an understanding of culture as universal and ideal. The foreign nationality of the architect was considered a strength, not a weakness, and the parallels to contemporary German museums are evident.[16] For example, a rather close parallel in Stüler's production is the *Magyar Tudományos Akadémia* (Hungarian Academy of Sciences), which he executed between 1862 and 1865.[17]

13 In English, the institution has recently adopted the designation 'National Library'.

14 Kåberg 2018, 76–78.

15 Söderlind 1999; Dahlström 2022.

16 Laine 1976, 97–100.

17 Sisa 2015; Sisa 2016, 307–314.

Fig. 5: Friedrich August Stüler, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Section, 1849, pencil, pen, brown ink, and watercolour.

The Nordic Museum and 'Skansen'

However, the winds of the cultural climate were about to veer violently. The universalism and international outlook expressed by the National Museum building and its programme were beginning to look problematic within years of the institution's opening to the public in 1866. It now dawned on the Swedish intelligentsia that the traditional way of life of the now suddenly idealized peasant class was all but irretrievably lost. Indeed, the abandonment of customs and beliefs among the *allmogen* (common people) came to be deplored as evidence that the nation as a whole was losing its soul, purity, and purpose – as in the recent passing of a golden age, of an innocent era when peasant society had remained untouched, or at least unharmed, by the calamitous forces of modernization. The collective sense of imminent loss led to a number of scientific initiatives involving the gathering of ethnographic objects and information. Two national manifestations of

this broad movement will be considered here: the establishment of the *Nordiska museet* (Nordic Museum) and that of the open-air museum *Skansen* (literally, the 'sconce'), close to each other in Stockholm. The pioneering ethnologist Arthur Hazelius founded both, and they remained part of the same organization until 1963.[18]

As for the Nordic Museum, an early version opened already in 1873, but it was not until 1907 that the museum's monumental building could be inaugurated. (fig. 6) The building committee and the architect Isak Gustaf Clason had originally conceived it on an even grander scale, but only the central section was realized, with its great hall surrounded by galleries on three levels.[19] The architectural style and decoration of the structure are redolent of national history, explicitly that of the independent nation founded by Gustav I (or Gustav Vasa) in 1523 and thus also the Protestant aspect of Sweden's history. The Catholic and prehistoric periods, with their much more complex and even contradictory national identities, remained at the National Museum, to be transferred later to a museum of their own (*Historiska museet* / The Historical Museum).[20]

Fig. 6: View of the exterior of the Nordiska museet, Stockholm, winter 2004, photograph.

The Nordic Museum was always meant to cover the breadth of Nordic countries in the interest of Scandinavian unity, but Sweden was its focus, and particularly the country's central regions. The museum not only collected and displayed objects related to the way

18 On the history of the institutions, see Medelius, Nyström, and Stavenow-Hidemark 1998; Biörnstad 1991.

19 For the architecture of the Nordic Museum, see Mårtelius 1987; Mårtelius 2020.

20 The treatment of the Viking era is of great interest in this regard yet falls beyond the scope of this paper, see Knell et al. 2011.

of life of the Swedes, its great hall was also intended as a place for national celebrations. The latter purpose was severely impeded, however, when the Royal Armoury was transferred to the museum upon its inauguration, being installed in the hall; this included the armoury's trophy collection, which was displayed hanging from the first-floor gallery. Despite this, the discourse of the Nordic Museum remained primarily ethnographic and ethnological, i.e. focusing on traditions and customs, whether long-standing or more recent.

Skansen opened its gates in 1891, with a clear emphasis on the buildings and traditions of rural Sweden. It pioneered the expansion of the very idea of a museum, moving farm buildings, a manor house, a church, and even a stretch of a street into its landscaped premises to represent the nation in miniature – all within a park in the capital's most affluent neighbourhood. Moreover, the presence of animals, both wild and domesticated, on the grounds made the museum popular with families and children, while also suggesting the adjacency of national identity to the country's nature and wildlife. This hybrid character – namely, of museum cum amusement park cum zoological garden – has proven successful on the whole, although some aspects of the inaugural programme have, perhaps with good reason, since been abandoned. Mattias Bäckström has discussed the case of Stockholm upper-class ladies dressing up as peasants for the *Skansen* spring festival to rally the patriotism of working men and women on a Sunday outing.[21] It should be stressed – and was often emphasized in debates of the time – that the founding of the Nordic Museum and *Skansen* was less an expression of widespread popular patriotism than a supposed remedy for a lack of patriotism in the population as perceived by elites, especially in comparison with the other Nordic countries.

The yearly performance, or re-enactment, of nineteenth-century rural traditions at *Skansen* has arguably fulfilled the institution's original purpose of contributing to a Swedish national identity founded on the love of nature, life in the countryside, and traditional crafts rather than on warlike historical achievements. (fig. 7) Meanwhile, the Nordic Museum, with its majestically patriotic building, has in recent decades displayed some uneasiness in relation to the tenets of its founding. As a result, it has sought to be more inclusive and innovative in its collecting strategies and its definition of national culture.

What about the National Museum? As a consequence of various administrative shifts involving the state art collections, it has become an institution dedicated almost exclusively to European or Western fine and applied arts. Objects from other parts of the world, such as the important collection of East Asian antiquities, have been transferred to other museums, making it difficult for the National Museum to engage in discussions of global issues or situate itself in an international context. The 'national' in the museum's name has largely lost its connection to the idea of national identity, as exhibitions of international art are more conspicuous than in other Stockholm galleries.

21 Bäckström 2011.

Fig. 7: A woman at the Midsummer celebrations at Skansen, ca 1970, photograph.

130 years ago, however, the romantic and nationalist ethos prompted the decision to dress the hostesses of the National Museum in the traditional costume of Dalecarlia, a province in central-west Sweden. A photograph taken during the 1890s on the upper floor, at the top of the central stairwell, shows three women dressed in the attire of Rättvik in Dalecarlia, with its striped apron. (fig. 8) The figures are juxtaposed, a little absurdly perhaps, with the plaster casts of antique statuary, the foremost expressions of the universal, idealist aspirations of the previous generation. The contrast illustrates the broad conclusion of this paper, namely, that this universal, idealist discourse was replaced in Sweden in the 1880s by a romantic, nationalist – and to a certain extent also performative – paradigm that in some ways remains a dominant cultural framework for Swedish national identity. It is within this framework that the country's heritage institutions are compelled to operate.

Fig. 8: Women from Rättvik in traditional costume in the upper hall of the Nationalmuseum, 1890, photograph.

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Fig. 5: Riksarkivet, Stockholm, ÖIÄ, PS132:19.

Fig. 7: Digitalt Museum, https://digitaltmuseum.se/021017052288/kvinna-avbildad-vid-midsommarfirandet-pa-tingsvallen.