
Art Treasures in The Ghost Palace

A building belonging to the University of Stockholm houses Sweden's third largest repository of old classical art outside the National Museum. Among its treasures are paintings by Tiepolo and Bruegel. Surprisingly, the collection is accessible to the public only by special arrangement.

By Richard J. Litell



DROTTNINGGATAN (QUEEN STREET) IS ONE OF STOCKHOLM'S most venerable streets. Way back, in fact, it was the Swedish capital's gateway to the north. It stretches from the Foreign Ministry by the waterway separating the center of town from the tiny island containing the Riksdag building (Sweden's Parliament) northwest to Observatory Hill, the only remnant of the long ridge that once cut right through town. Today, while narrow, it is a pleasant walking street lined with restaurants, shops and residential buildings. Along the way you pass the Strindberg Museum.

At the very top of the street, number 116, lies Merchant Scheffler's Palace. Hardly anyone in town knows who Scheffler (the original 18th-century owner) was but most know the building by its other name, Spökslottet, the ghost palace. It houses a formidable collection of seldom-seen art.

The Ghost Palace was a private residence from the early 1700s until 1924, and in 1925 it was acquired by Stockholm's Högskola (College) and made into an administration building. In 1959 the college became a university and the house was turned over to the state but the university retained use rights. Since 1976, when the university moved to a site outside the city's center, the Ghost Palace has been used for meetings and small conferences and as a museum repository for the university's art collection, consisting of about 380 works.

During its three-century existence the Ghost Palace has passed through the hands of several owners, the earlier ones, of course, using it as a residence. Following Hans Peter Scheffler, there were, for example, the von Dübens, the Löwens and the Knigges. The rumor about the house being haunted originated with the latter. It seems Knigge, sometime in the late 1700s, was going away for a while and decided to lock his wife in the basement while he was gone. When he returned he found her dead. Since then generations of gullible individuals have perpetuated the myth that her ghost still roams the house, some claiming to have seen a woman ascending the cellar stairs, insisting that doors mysteriously open and close on their own and witnessing other phenomena that exist only in the minds of the superstitious. However silly these stories are they have succeeded in bestowing an attractive appellation to a palace that might not otherwise be as well-known.

And known it should be, both for the number and the quality of the artworks it contains, and also for the collection's dynamo of a curator, Nina

The Ghost Palace's main hall (above) has a well-preserved ceiling painting (facing page) attributed to artist David von Krafft. It expresses the merchant's hope that trade will make the realm flourish and is the only painting in the building that has always been there.

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Weibull, whose grasp of the history and quality of art as well as her knowledge of Stockholm history are truly impressive. Those who successfully arrange to see the collection will be fortunate to have Ms. Weibull as a willing and spellbinding guide.

The core of the collection, today about two-thirds of its paintings, was bequeathed to the university by an engineer and naval captain by the name of Johan Adolf Berg and his widow. Berg (1827-1884) was one of Sweden's most significant art collectors during the latter half of the 19th century. He had amassed his collection over the course of 25 years from purchases made at estate auctions, and had wanted his paintings to serve as the basis for instruction in art. Naturally, some art had always existed in the palace and subsequent acquisitions have also been secured.

Ms. Weibull has written and/or edited two excellent book/catalogues to serve as guides to the Ghost Palace. One is entitled *The Ghost Palace: The Building and Art Collection, the other Masterpieces from the Ghost Palace*. Unfortunately, neither one exists in English translation. What you can see are numerous and varied examples of primarily Swedish, Venetian, Flemish and Dutch art treasures covering several centuries. The following pages provide but a small sampling. Perhaps the most



outstanding work is *The Assault* by Peter Bruegel, the Elder, believed to be the only painting by this artist in Sweden. It has a fascinating history, having once belonged to Kaiser Rudolf II. It was taken as war spoils when the Swedes stormed Prague in 1648 and incorporated into Queen Christina's art collection. At her abdication only six years later, the painting left Sweden only to reappear 200 years later when Sweden's ambassador in Paris was able to purchase it. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's *Jupiter Appearing to Danaë* is also especially treasured at the Ghost Palace.

An added attraction at the Ghost Palace, for those who know about it and request access, is the copious glass collection bequeathed by the heirs of Agnes Hellner, daughter of Consul Johan Ekman, who became owner of the Orrefors Glassworks in 1913. Ms. Hellner started collecting Orrefors glass early in life and had amassed 700 items by the time of her death. A large-format, 362-page book/catalogue entitled *Kärlek till glas* (A Love of Glass), in Swedish and English, is available at the Ghost Palace.

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Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, born in Venice in 1696 and dead in Madrid in 1770, has been described as the most brilliant master of the Venetian rococo. This 41cm x 53cm oil-on-canvas painting is entitled *Jupiter Appearing to Danaë*. The mythology behind the scene is as follows: Acrisius, father of Danaë, is told by an oracle that one day his daughter will have a son by whose hand he will perish. Thereupon Acrisius locks his daughter and a nurse in an underground bronze chamber (some say a tower). But Jupiter, drawn to the girl's charms, finds his way into the chamber in the form of a shower of gold and frequently visits Danaë. The result is the birth of a son, Perseus. And, yes, many years and adventures later, Perseus throwing a discus during funeral games, hits Acrisius in the head, killing him.

One of the most impressive paintings in the building is this one by the great Dutch master Pieter Bruegel, the Elder entitled *The Assault*. It is painted in oil on a panel, measures 96 cm x 128 cm and is considered, compositionally, one of the artist's most admirable master-pieces. The scene is a desolate heath. A farmer and his wife, apparently on their way home, have been surprised by three heavily armed highwaymen. Worn but intact, the painting is from 1567, two years before the artist's death in Brussels.





The work of Swedish artist Lorentz August Lindholm (1819-1854) is felt to be undeservedly forgotten. His production was not impressive but the quality of his oeuvre is deemed occasionally outstanding. This painting, *Young Seamstress at Work*, a detail of which appears on our cover, measures 28cm x 36.5cm and is done in oil on panel. In the company of a cat and a caged bird, a young woman sits in a tavern attic, glancing up from her sewing. There is an unmistakably sensual air prevailing—the intimacy of the chamber, the girl's yearning pose, her sensitively lighted profile, her naked shoulder and the bright red of the footrest.

It's hard not to smile at the caricature-like faces of the three middle-aged men sitting round this food-and-drink-laden table, and at the characters grouped behind them, all dissimilarly occupied. The broad, flat facial forms are typical for Joos van Craesbeeck (1605/08-1662), who was a pupil of Adriaen Brouwer in Antwerp. The motif has been interpreted to depict the five senses, a theme the artist developed in another work.





Swedish Peasants Gathered at the Statue of Gustaf I of Vasa is a scene at Stockholm's Riddarhus Square painted by Johan Gustav Sandberg (1782-1854). Oil on canvas, it measures 104cm x 76.5cm. Among the crowd of peasants in parish costumes you can glimpse to the far right a mounted Carl XIV Johan as well as the artist himself accompanied by his wife. The motif is, first and foremost, to praise Swedish monarchs from Vasa to the first Bernadotte king, but also to depict the many parish costumes that Sandberg had studied and to present a characteristic Stockholm milieu.



This painting, *Interior of a French Inn*, is also by Lorentz August Lindholm (see page 50). Here, the artist has created a rather bleak interior with simple people clad in blue or brown work shirts enjoying beer and their clay pipes. Two men are conversing while a little boy hands a morsel to a dog. The men to the left are listening to a man reading from a newspaper. The lighting is masterly; the room is dominated by a cold blue-green, brown and gray. Oil on panel, the painting is 37cm x 51.5cm.



Swedish artist Pehr Hilleström, the Elder (1733-18160) worked as a weaver at the royal palace through most of the 1760s, but from 1773 devoted himself increasingly to oil painting. His own records show that he completed more than 1,056 paintings between 1773 and 1810. This one, *At the Fortune Teller's*, oil on canvas, measures 80cm x 110cm. There is no date on the painting but it is believed to be a work from the 1780s, inspired by the 17th-century Dutch tradition.



Vincent Sellaer is believed to have been born ca. 1500 and to have died in 1589. He belonged to the group of Leonardo-inspired mannerists active in Antwerp. This 81cm x 112cm painting is entitled *The Holy Family: the Madonna with the Christ Child, the young Saint John with his Parents and Two Children*. The Madonna is holding Christ while a diadem-clad child clammers on her back. The young John the Baptist is standing next to another child, who in turn is in front of his old parents Zacharius (possibly Joseph) and Elisabeth.