



1. Otte Sköld, *White Star*, 1917, oil on canvas, 100 × 125 cm; Norrköpings konstmuseum. Photo: Per Myrehed, Norrköpings Konstmuseum

# Cubism in Sweden – from experimental to moderate

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## Introduction

As with other avant-garde art movements, and in many other European countries, cubism was first met with rejection by some and with curiosity and interest by others in the Swedish art field at the beginning of the 20th century. Among the many Swedish artists who studied art in Paris in the 1910s and experimented with prismatic and other cubist effects in their paintings were: Dick Beer (1893–1938), Agnes Cleve(-Jonand) (1876–1951), Nils Dardel (1888–1943), Siri Derkert (1888–1973), Arvid Fougstedt (1888–1949), Bertil Bull Hedlund (1893–1950), Karl Isaksson (1878–1922), Vera Nilsson (1888–1979), Georg Pauli (1855–1935), Arthur Percy (1886–1976), Lilly Rydström (1891–1937) John Sten (1879–1922) and Elsa Ström-Ciacelli (1876–1952). Gösta Adrian-Nilsson (1884–1965), known as GAN, went to Berlin in 1913, where, through the group Der Sturm, he came in contact with several avant-garde movements. Swedish artists also visited the Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne in 1912 and the Werkbund exhibition in the same city in 1914. Kurt Jungstedt (1894–1963) and Otte Sköld (1894–1958) found inspiration in cubist works at exhibitions and private collections in Copenhagen, which became a center for Scandinavian artists during World War I<sup>1</sup>.

In 1912 George Pauli had been one of the first Swedish artists to study for André Lhote, who practiced and taught a moderate form of cubism. He also introduced Lhote to the Swedish painter and royal Prince Eugen and together they arranged solo exhibitions for Lhote in Sweden in 1913, 1916, 1923 and 1938. Pauli and the prince were followed by approximately two hundred Swedish pupils who learned Lhote's moderate cubism, and developed it in various artistic directions<sup>2</sup>. At the beginning of the 1920s there was a widespread belief among Swedish art critics that cubism was over, that it had simply



<sup>1</sup> See B. Lärkner, *1900–1950*, [in:] *Konst och visuell kultur i Sverige 1810–2000*, Ed. L. Johannesson, Stockholm 2007, pp. 159–164.

<sup>2</sup> See *Form och färg: André Lhote och svensk kubism*, Ed. A. Meister, K. Sidén, D. Prytz, Stockholm 2017.



<sup>3</sup> See B. Lärkner, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> M. Bring, *Motsols*, Göteborg 2007, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> See S. Behr, *Att differentiera modernismen*, [in:] *Utopi & verklighet. Svensk modernism 1900–1960*, Ed. C. Widenheim, Stockholm 2000. See also I. Winell-Garvén, *Konsten att bli utvald*, [in:] *Moderne kvinder. Kvindelige malere i Norden 1910–1930*, Ed. A. Kielgast, København 2006.

<sup>6</sup> See B. Lärkner, *op. cit.*, pp. 137–143.

been a productive artistic exercise, and a reaction against the formal dissolution of impressionism and expressionism<sup>3</sup>. However, the artist Maj Bring (1880–1971), who went to Paris to study art in 1922, wrote in her memoirs that it was the cubists that everybody talked about, and that André Lhote’s school in Montparnasse in particular attracted many Scandinavians<sup>4</sup>.

In this article, examples of various forms of cubism practiced by Swedish artists will be described and analyzed regarding form, content and reception in the field. I will place a certain emphasis on female artists, since there is a need for differencing the narrative of modernism regarding women’s contributions, often disregarded in their own contexts as well as in the writing of art history<sup>5</sup>. Attention will also be paid to changing notions of cubism in the field of art.

### **The Swedish context at the beginning of the 20th c.**

The beginning of the 20th c. in Sweden was characterized by industrialization, rapid urbanization, food shortages, demonstrations for universal suffrage, and recurrent strikes resulting from substandard working conditions – all important issues rarely reflected in the art of the time. A number of positive political changes also occurred, accelerating the democratization process; royalty lost the right to grant commoners knighthood, the death penalty was abolished, and, although they did not achieve voting rights until 1921, married women were granted independent control of their property. The king’s direct influence on national politics was also contested and diminished.

The art scene was beginning to change, from a nationalistic and romantic art at the turn of the century, when artists in Konstnärskörbundet (The Swedish Artists Association) strove to depict the Swedish landscape in an ideal and moralistic fashion, to a freer artistic climate. Artists such as Axel Törneman (1880–1925) and Tora Vega Holmström (1880–1967) introduced new expressionist perspectives into their art, including the use of freely drawn, non-realistic forms and colors. They had studied with Carl Vilhelmsson at Valand Art School in Gothenburg, with Adolf Hölzel in Dachau and at Academie Colarossi in Paris<sup>6</sup>. At the beginning of the 1910s a group of young Swedish painters, many of them trained at Konstnärskörbundet’s art school, returned home from Paris, where they had encountered the art of Matisse and other Fauvists. Among these returning artists were Tor Bjurström (1888–1966), Isaac Grünewald (1889–1946), Edward Hald (1883–1980), Leander Engström (1886–1927), Birger Simonsson (1883–1938), and Gösta Sandels (1887–1919). Several of them were active in the art group De Unga (The Young), and generated a lot of interest through their exhibitions at Hallins konsthandel (Hallin’s Gallery) in 1909, 1910 and 1911. They were regarded by many Swedes as the avant-garde of modernist art in the country. In 1912, led by Grünewald, the group changed its membership and its name, accordingly, to De Åtta

(The Eight). They also arranged a new exhibition which, for the first time, included the works of a woman, Sigrid Hjertén (1885–1948)<sup>7</sup>. Although the members of these groups were well aware of cubist art, and experimented with its moderate aspects, they were more inclined to work with expressionism<sup>8</sup>. Initially De Unga, explicitly in their statutes, excluded female members. In 1910 a group of women founded Föreningen Svenska Konstnärinnor (Association for Swedish Women Artists), which within a few years attracted about a hundred members, representing various styles and genres<sup>9</sup>.

One of the most influential critics of modern art in Sweden was August Brunius (1879–1926). He appreciated the expressionism of Matisse and De Unga, but not Pablo Picasso's cubism. To Brunius, these two movements represented an eternal opposition between color and form, between colorism and construction, and between inspiration and calculation<sup>10</sup>. In 1913, the Swedish writer Pär Lagerkvist (1891–1974) published a book, *Ordkonst och bildkonst* (Verbal and visual art), about the various forms of modernism. He considered the visual arts as a model for literature and advocated cubism in particular, which he introduced to the Swedish public<sup>11</sup>. In the spring of 1913 he had spent some time in Paris, where the principles of cubism were eagerly discussed. The previous year Apollinaire had published *Les peintres cubistes*, one of the central programmatic texts on cubism, originating from the poet's friendship and discussions with Picasso and his friends at Bateau Lavoir. In Paris, Lagerkvist's knowledgeable guide was John Sten, a Swedish painter inspired by cubism who, for a while, painted in a semi-abstract style, but who died quite young on a journey to Bali in 1922<sup>12</sup>. According to Lagerkvist, a cubist painter was anti-naturalist, anti-impressionist and anti-expressionist, reacting against all kinds of mimetic depictions, evanescent atmospheres of beauty and sensual grace. The artist's creativity was regarded as purely intellectual work, the goal being to reach absolute, invariant beauty, and to strive toward an understanding of the intrinsic nature of matter. This was possible since all important art was seen as dependent on mathematical laws. Lagerkvist compared cubist artworks with construction drawings<sup>13</sup>.

The Swedish painter Karl Isaksson appreciated what he regarded as finely tuned ascetic colors and firmly constructed form in the art of the group of French cubist painters who exhibited together in Paris in 1911; he was especially taken with the cubist art of Picasso, as well as with paintings by Cezanne. Isaksson, with his newly acquired knowledge concerning artistic form, continued developing his painting when he returned to Copenhagen<sup>14</sup>.

As mentioned, Copenhagen became a Scandinavian culture metropolis during World War I. Here Nordic and foreign artists met to work, amuse themselves and discuss the latest trends in art. Christian Tetzen-Lund's art collection was an important source for the study of contemporary developments in the arts. It contained works



<sup>7</sup> See K. Borgh Bertorp, *Det svenska avantgardet*, [in:] *Svenskt avantgarde och Der Sturm i Berlin*, Ed. J. T. Ahlstrand, S. Reinhardt, Osnabrück-Lund 2000, pp. 60–62.

<sup>8</sup> See F. Lalander, *Sverige och modernismen – 10-talets konst*, [in:] *Modernismens genombrott. Nordiskt måleri 1910–1920*, Ed. C. T. Edam, N.-G. Hökby, B. Schreiber, Stockholm 1989, p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> See B. Lärkner, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> See C. Elsner, *Expressionismens framväxt: August Brunius skriver om konst 1904–1913*, Stockholm 1993, pp. 146–147.

<sup>11</sup> See G. C. Fabre, G. E. Mørland, T. Hansen, *Electromagnetic: Modern Art in Northern Europe 1918–1931*, Ostfildern 2013, p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> See G. Lilja, *Svenskt måleri under 1900-talet. Från Ernst Josephson till Max Walter Svanberg*, Stockholm 1968, p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> P. Lagerkvist, *Ordkonst och bildkonst*, Stockholm 1991, pp. 21–29.

<sup>14</sup> See G. Lilja, *op. cit.*, pp. 52–53.

2. Ninni Bergsten, Siri Derkert, 1914.  
Photo from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Siri\\_Derkert\\_painted\\_by\\_Ninni\\_Bergsten.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Siri_Derkert_painted_by_Ninni_Bergsten.png) (access date: 3.06.2024)



<sup>15</sup> See **H. van den Berg**, *The Early Twentieth Century Avant-Garde and the Nordic Countries - An Introductory tour d'horizon*, [in:] *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1900-1925*, Ed. **idem [et al.]**, Amsterdam 2012, p. 39; *Locations of the Nordic Avant-Garde*, [in:] *A Cultural History...*, pp. 254-255. See also **T. Brunius**, *Christian Tetzen-Lunds samling i Köpenhamn och de nordiska konstnärerna*, "Konsthistorisk Tidskrift" 1988, No. 3/4.

by Eugène Delacroix and Honoré Daumier but also younger representatives of the impressionists, the cubists, and the futurists<sup>15</sup>. Herwart Walden also arranged several exhibitions, including one in 1918 called "Internationale Kunst: Ekspressionister og Kubister". He showed 133 works by 24 artists from various countries, including cubists such as Picasso, Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger and GAN. In 1917 the Danish artist Axel Salto founded the publication *Klingen*, which became the voice of cubist-inspired Copenhagen painters like Vilhelm Lundström, Jais Nielsen, Olaf Rude and William Scherff. A number of Swedish cubist-inspired artists, such as Otte Sköld, Kurt Jungstedt and Bertil Bull Hedlund, were among those who stayed in Copenhagen for longer or shorter periods. Sköld's art was bolder than that of the other two, as evidenced by his painting

*White Star* (1917) [Fig. 1]. He also experimented with cubist-inspired collages, but around 1920 he returned to a realistic style of painting<sup>16</sup>. Between 1920 and 1927 he stayed in Paris, worked as a teacher at the *Académie Montparnasse* and *Maison Watteau* 1925–1926, was a leading figure at the *Académie Scandinave*, and set up an art school in Stockholm when he returned there in 1928. The following year he became a member of the Swedish Art Academy. Later on, Sköld was named professor and served as the leader of the academy school, and in 1950 he became the director of The Swedish National Museum. He was appointed director in 1958 of the new Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm, which was to become an important hub for the development of modern art in Sweden. Tragically, Sköld died just a couple of months after the grand opening, at the age of 64<sup>17</sup>.

The *White Star*, from 1917, is a boldly colored painting showing two women dancing. It is made in a rather synthetic cubist style with a futurist touch, and the dynamic composition is based on geometric shapes and diagonal lines. The skirts of the two women in red are shown as circular shapes against a background of overlapping planes in yellow, green, and blue, and half abstract forms in black and white indicating a café with musical instruments and waiters. This painting gives an idea of the dynamic social and artistic arena in Copenhagen at the time.

Stockholm, however, was the center of the Swedish art market in the 1910s and 1920s. Here, the artists, dealers and collectors interacted with the critics. Conservative critics such as Carl G. Laurin, who promoted the nationalistic romantic art of *Konstnärsförbundet*, as well as the modernists' proponent August Brunius, had significant influence on the purchasing policies of the Swedish art museums, dealers and collectors. Since Sweden, like the other Scandinavian countries, did not take part in the World War I, it was possible to build up a strong economy, and art dealers took the opportunity to approach the Stockholm market where most of the continent's modern stylistic movements – expressionism, cubism, futurism – were introduced and vigorously debated<sup>18</sup>. The suddenly expansive, rather overwhelming presence of avant-garde art on the Swedish art market might have contributed to the more toned-down, moderate, anti-radical attitude that dominated the art field and the general public's reception of modern art in Sweden for quite a long time<sup>19</sup>.

### **Siri Derkert, Agnes Cleve and their friends**

In Parisian art schools such as La Palette and Académie Russe, many artists, for example the Swedes Lilly Rydström and Vera Nilsson, were inspired to experiment with cubist painting. The formal discipline of cubism became significant for these two women; for Rydström in decoratively stylized landscapes and for Nilsson in her later, more expressionist, works.



<sup>16</sup> See G. C. Fabre, G. E. Mørland, T. Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> See G. Hillman, *Vem är vem i svensk konst. Från runristaren Balle till Ulf Rollof*, Stockholm 1993, p. 203.

<sup>18</sup> See A. Kollnitz, *Promoting the Young – Interactions between the Avant-garde and the Swedish Art Market 1910–1925*, [in:] *A Cultural History...*, pp. 276–278.

<sup>19</sup> See B. Lärkner, *Det internationella avantgardet och Sverige 1914–1925*, Malmö 1984, p. 275.



<sup>20</sup> See S. Behr, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> See A. Öhrner, *Cubism in Transit: Siri Derkert and the Early Parisian Avant-Garde*, [in:] *Transferts, Appropriations et Fonctions de l'avant-Garde Dans l'Europe Intermédiaire et Du Nord*, Ed. H. Veivo, Paris 2012, pp. 37–39.

<sup>22</sup> See B. Lärkner, *1900–1950...*, p. 160.

<sup>23</sup> Several of these paintings can be seen on the internet.

<sup>24</sup> See A. Öhrner, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

Siri Derkert was one of the Swedish artists in Paris who most intensively immersed herself in experimenting with cubism. She had grown up in Stockholm and studied at the Art Academy there in 1911–1913, before going to Paris in 1913, where she studied, possibly for Léger in the atelier of Marie Vasilieff<sup>20</sup>. Annika Öhrner, who has specialized in researching Derkert's art, suggests that Derkert probably studied for another teacher at Academie Russe, and that she went to croquis classes at Academie Colarossi and Academie de la Grande Chaumière, but that her actual studies in the academies were not particularly extensive. What Derkert appreciated in Paris were the more open ideals of art and art education than what she had experienced at the Royal Academy in Stockholm. She and her colleague, sculptor Ninnan Santesson (1891–1969), felt that their ideas and ambitions were taken more seriously by the students and teachers in the Parisian art schools they attended, than at home where the work of female students was not considered as important as that of male students. Back to Paris in 1914, after a journey to Algeria, Derkert visited museums and salons, took part in social events among the Montparnasse bohemia, and often joined compatriots at parties and café reunions. Derkert also visited avant-garde artists together with her partner, the Finnish artist Valle Rosenberg<sup>21</sup>.

Determined to break with the artistic ideals that prevailed in Sweden, Derkert spent a couple of years around the mid-1910s in Paris and on Sicily, painting some of her best work in analytical cubism; among other works the famous *Självporträtt* (Self-portrait) from 1915<sup>22</sup>. She also painted *Stilleben* (Still Life) in 1915, with a teapot on a sloping table top, situated in a warm, sand-colored landscape, created by quasi-geometric, shaded facets, built up by visible brushstrokes. In 1916 Derkert painted *Balkongen* (The Balcony), showing two women on a balcony with a cityscape in the background, all constructed in a cubist style. The same year Derkert painted *Självporträtt med parasoll* (Self-portrait with a Parasol), and in 1916–1917 *Ryttare* (Equestrians), showing two people riding horses in an urban park<sup>23</sup>.

In 1916 Derkert felt confident, and, wanting to show her new art in the avant-garde art scene in Stockholm, she left Italy and returned to the Swedish capital. To promote herself, she contacted the gallerist and futurist painter Arturo Ciacelli, collaborated with the influential art critic August Brunius on his book *Svenska original-träsnitt* (Swedish Original-Woodcut), 1917, and seems to have contacted Isaac Grünewald and the group of former students of Matisse in his Académie in Paris. However, her efforts were in vain. Derkert's cubist work was exhibited for the first time in 1919, in a show with works by Anna Petrus and Ninni Bergsten, not in Stockholm but abroad, in Copenhagen, at Den Frie Udstilling (The Free Exhibition)<sup>24</sup>. She got a positive review in the Danish newspaper "Politiken", in which her *Självporträtt med parasoll* was mentioned. Her first exhibition in Stockholm was in 1921, at the collective women artists' April exhibition at Liljevalchs konsthall,

the new art exhibition hall where many avant-garde exhibitions took place. Despite a positive reception in the press, her cubist works still did not get the level of attention in the Swedish art scene that she was to receive later on. She turned to other styles of painting, and experimented with a variety of materials<sup>25</sup>. In the 1930s, due to Nazi activities in Europe and the civil war in Spain, she became active in the women's peace movement, which became a subject for her art. In 1937 she was back in Paris where she studied for André Lhote, but in the 1940s and 1950s she destroyed several of her early works by painting them over<sup>26</sup>. At the age of 56 in 1944 Deckert finally had her artistic break-through, with a solo exhibition at Gösta Stenman's gallery in Stockholm. In 1962 she had the honor of being appointed to represent Sweden at the Venice biennial exhibition, primarily with her paintings. By that time, she had also started to work with reliefs in concrete, and got commissions for installing reliefs as decorative elements in two central subway stations in Stockholm<sup>27</sup>.

Agnes Cleve(-Jonand), another female painter with modernist ambitions, also had a long wait for acceptance in the art community. She is representative of the many female artists who experienced difficulties combining family life with a career in the arts. Although she eventually found a way to combine family life and art, she was not recognized as an interesting artist until her first solo exhibition at the age of 53. From the age of 21 she studied painting with Carl Wilhelmson at Valand Art School in Gothenburg, married a lawyer there and had two children. She divorced the lawyer in 1912 and had to grant him custody of the children. Cleve then returned to her travelling life and went to Paris with the Swedish artist John Jon-And, whom she was to marry in 1915<sup>28</sup>. In 1914 they studied with Le Fauconnier at the Académie de la Palette in Paris. They also bought the book *Du Cubisme* written in 1912 by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, to study the theories of cubism<sup>29</sup>. Cleve followed the ideas of analytical cubism in her *Sittande dam* (Sitting Lady) [Fig. 3], painted around 1914. Here the figure is reduced into semi-abstract geometrical forms and lines, the space and volumes of the room are broken up, flattened and seen from several angles, and the colors are finely tuned in a reduced blueish-green color scheme, with limited red and pink contrasting areas. Cleve continued to use cubist perspectives in later paintings.

The Swedish couple also became acquainted with the painters Gabriele Münter and Wassily Kandinsky. Münter and Cleve travelled to Copenhagen in the autumn of 1915 to study the works in Christian Tetzen-Lund's collection of modern art. In 1916, Cleve and her husband visited New York, where she produced the painting *New York* (or *Fire in New York*), a highly expressive, dynamic and colorful composition. Back in Sweden, she had her first important exhibition, together with her husband, in 1917, at Gummessons Konsthandel (Gummesson's Art Gallery). The same year she created the cubistic painting *Vindskupa* (Dormer) (1917), with a room turned into



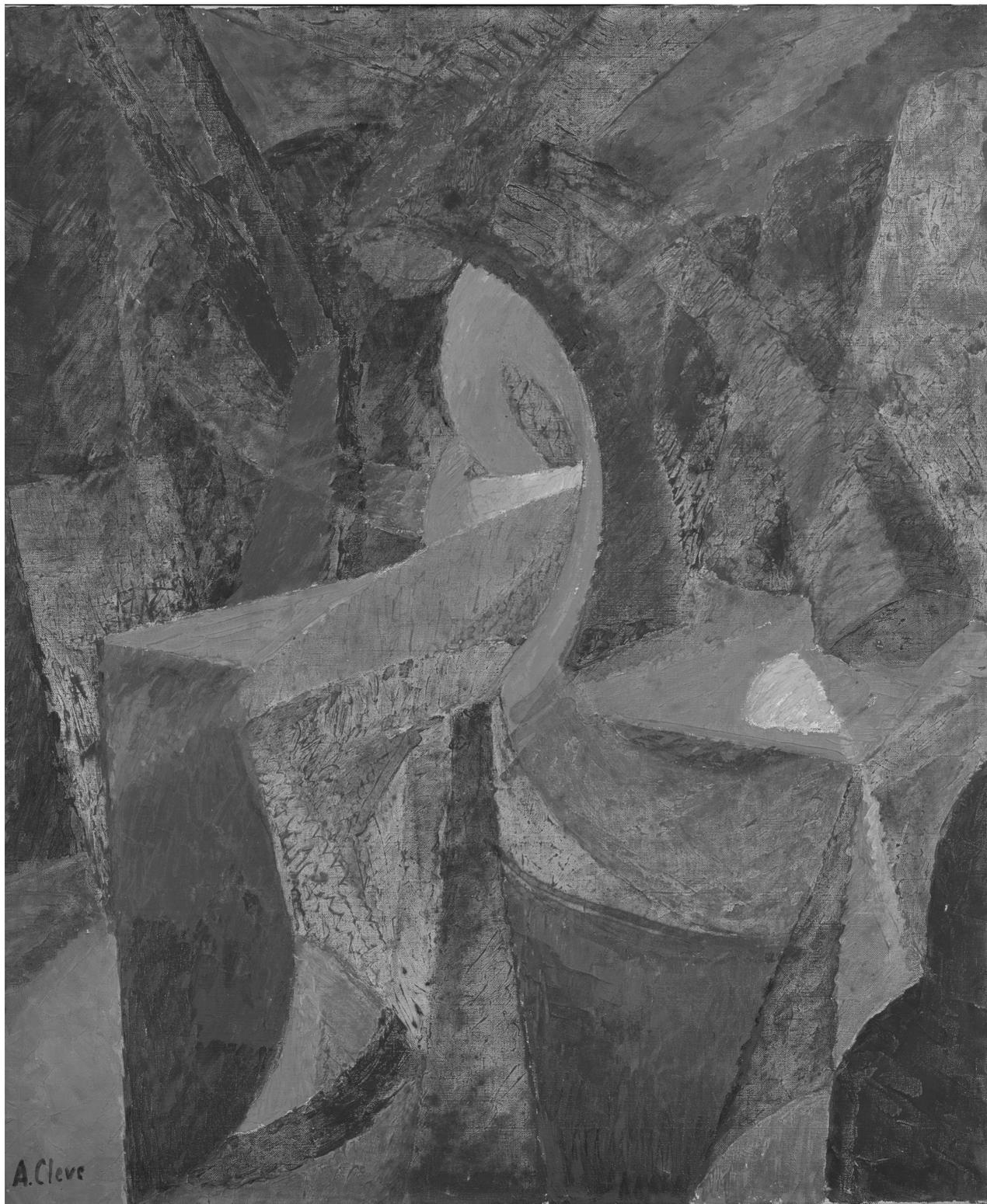
<sup>25</sup> See I. Winell-Garvén, *op. cit.*, pp. 78–85.

<sup>26</sup> See A. L. Lindberg, *Törsten efter det nya. André Lhote och hans svenska elever*, [in:] *Form och färg...*, pp. 72–73.

<sup>27</sup> See B. Werkmäster, *De berömda och de glömda. Kvinnliga svenska modernister 1900–1930*, Halmstad 2006, pp. 80–81.

<sup>28</sup> See A. Tuveros, A. Kollnitz, T. Brunius, *Agnes Cleve: svensk modernist i världen*, Halmstad 2014, pp. 119–122.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 34.



3. Agnes Cleve, *Sittande dam* (Sitting Lady), ca. 1914, oil on canvas, 72 × 60 cm; Norrköpings Konstmuseum. Photo: Per Myrehed / Norrköpings Konstmuseum

a prismatic pattern in a variety of whiteish nuances with shades in blue and yellow. In 1919 the couple also took part in an exhibition at Den Frie Udstilling in Copenhagen. In her paintings Cleve often combined expressive colors with cubist perspectives. Despite her extensive production and a notably significant network in the field, it was not until 1929, at the age of 53, that she was able to hold her first solo exhibition, in Gummessons Konsthandel. John Jon-And worked for many years as a successful illustrator and theatre decorator<sup>30</sup>.

### GAN and his friends

Gösta Adrian Nilsson, GAN, (born in Lund in the south of Sweden, from where he could easily go to Berlin, where he also studied) cooperated with Herwart Walden and Der Sturm gallery and included cubist aspects together with expressionism and futurism in his radical modernist paintings around 1915<sup>31</sup>. At the Werkbund exhibition in Cologne in 1914 he had experienced Bruno Taut's *Glass House*, with its play of rotating light-color shapes projected as patterns on the surrounding inner walls. These effects constituted for GAN a strong experience in the dynamic spirit of cubism, and in his own art he tried to achieve a similar effect of form and color. He made montages of zig-zag-lines, spirals and geometric shapes with pointed angles, and sometimes used fragments of verbal text that turned his works into visual, frequently aggressive, poems. Fascinated by modern urban life, he often chose motives that emphasized metallic, masculine power and machine dynamics. He also used deliberately disharmonic effects, especially in his paintings with war motives. In 1915 and 1916 he exhibited paintings of this kind at Der Sturm shows in Berlin<sup>32</sup>. In 1916 he made the painting *Hästitämjaren* (The Horse Tamer) [Fig. 4]. Here the motive is a fight between two powerful creatures – a white horse and a man in yellow. Their bodies are broken up in cubist, kaleidoscopic fragments by a circular, futurist movement where geometric forms can be discerned, such as the bow signifying the tense back of the horse's neck and the s-forms indicating the tamer's whip. The zig-zag-lines and pointed angles, together with strong primary colors, contribute to the painting's dynamic expression.

In September 1916 GAN moved to Stockholm where he met with Wassily Kandinsky, and competed for attention in the press with the highly renowned expressionist painter Isaac Grünewald. In 1917 he published a manifesto in Georg Pauli's publication *Flamman* (The Flame/Blaze), a predecessor of the Danish magazine "Klingen". GAN used experimental, modernist typography for the text, which ended with:

Power and the triumph of the male will  
An aeroplane engine thundering through the air  
The Artist following its flight with his eyes  
His gaze is blazing, firm and free<sup>33</sup>.



<sup>30</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 122–129.

<sup>31</sup> See J. T. Ahlstrand, *GAN, Berlin und Der Sturm*, [in:] *Svenskt avantgarde...*, pp. 29–39.

<sup>32</sup> See G. Lilja, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted from: G. C. Fabre, G. E. Mørland, T. Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 136.



<sup>34</sup> Quoted from: G. Lilja, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>35</sup> See G. C. Fabre, G. E. Mørland, T. Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>36</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 137–139.

In 1919, in the same journal, he published another text, ending with the words: “Electricity! Energy! Wonderful, strong, hard time! Victory of the power and male will!”<sup>34</sup>. GAN stayed in Stockholm from 1916 to 1919, where the galleries Gummessons konsthandel and Liljevalchs konsthall exhibited his controversial art. In the summer of 1919 his friend, the engineer Egon Östlund, introduced him to three young painters from Halmstad, a smaller town in the south of Sweden. These three young artists, the brothers Erik Olson (1901–1986) and Axel Olson (1899–1986) and their cousin Waldemar Lorentzon (1899–1984) had formed an amateur art group called *Gnistan* (The Spark). Later on, in the 1930s, they became famous in Sweden as *Halmstadsgruppen* (The Halmstad Group) when they developed their own surrealist painting styles. Around 1920 GAN became something of a guide for the group in the landscape of modernism, and advised them to go to Berlin and Paris to study<sup>35</sup>.

In 1920 GAN himself went to Paris where he got acquainted with Fernand Léger and Alexander Archipenko. GAN had already started to distance himself from his kaleidoscopic modernism and now he moved towards synthetic cubism. He read Albert Gleizes’ text *Du Cubisme et des moyens de le comprendre* (1920) and studied Amédée Ozenfant’s and Le Corbusier’s publication *L’Esprit Nouveau*. At Léonce Rosenberg’s gallery L’Effort Moderne he was exposed to new kinds of cubist art and saw Max Ernst’s dadaist collages at the bookshop Au Sans Pareil in May 1921. For a couple of years GAN also created some collages, onto which he glued subway tickets, restaurant bills, fragments of newspapers et cetera. One notable example is his collage *L’Esprit Nouveau* from 1921. He also considered the new machine technology of the industrial society as a materialization of the human spirit, and was interested in theosophy. In 1921 he wrote the text *Den gudomliga geometrin* (The Divine Geometry) which was printed a year later in Helsinki. In the text he explains how to construct a painting using a geometric structure. But GAN’s geometry had nothing to do with conventional Euclidian geometry. It was based on his own intuition and theosophic ideas, conceiving works of art as mirrors of the divine harmony ruling the universe<sup>36</sup>.

### Otto G. Carlsund and friends

In 1924 GAN introduced the Swedish artists Otto G. Carlsund (1897–1948), Waldemar Lorentzon and Erik Olson to Fernand Léger, who became their teacher at his Académie Moderne. His group of students also included the Swedish artist Siri Meyer (1898–1985), the Norwegian Elsa Lystad and the Dane Francisca Clausen, and they all developed their own variations of post-cubism. Carlsund, Clausen, Lorentzon and Olson exhibited with Léger at the Maison Watteau, which, led by the Swedish sculptress Lena Börjesson (1879–1976), was a meeting place for Nordic artists in Paris in the twenties. Erik



4. Gösta Adrian-Nilsson (GAN), *Hästitämjaren* (The Horse Tamer), 1916, oil on canvas, 145 × 100 cm; Norrköpings Konstmuseum. Photo: Per Myrehed / Norrköpings Konstmuseum



<sup>37</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 141–143.

<sup>38</sup> See D. Prytz, *Från esoterisk form- och färglära till dekorativ formgivning. Att söka ett kubistiskt språk och dess tillämpning i ett urval av svenskt konstnärverk och konstindustri*, [in:] *Form och färg...*, p. 278.

<sup>39</sup> See G. C. Fabre, G. E. Mørland, T. Hansen, *op. cit.*, pp. 145–147.

Olson, who had been working in a mechanical workshop in Halmstad, regarded himself as an idealist engineer artist, and painted works such as *Maskinisten* (The Engineer) in 1924, and *Konstruktören* (The Constructor) in 1925. The Swedish artist Vera Meyerson (1903–1981) who also studied for Léger in 1925, (after having studied for Lhote), created a series of paintings called *Composition mécanique* in 1925. Christian Berg (1893–1976) also studied for Lhote and then Léger and Ozenfant at the Académie Moderne. Starting out as a painter, then turning to sculpture, he went on to become the leading (post-)cubist sculptor in Sweden<sup>37</sup>.

Otto G. Carlsund had his solo debut in Paris with an exhibition at the Galerie “Mots et Images” (Gallery “Words and Images”) in 1927. Léger wrote an enthusiastic introduction to the catalogue in which he designated Carlsund as an example to follow regarding radical and pervasive modernism. Carlsund was considered one of the leading avant-garde constructivists. In April 1930 he was among the artists who formed the group Art Concret with Theo van Doesberg. In May of the same year he got an opportunity to show and propagate for modernist art in Stockholm, at the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930, where functionalist architecture and modern art were to be introduced. He was invited by the general commissioner Gregor Paulsson and the chief architect Erik Gunnar Asplund to decorate the Park Restaurant at the exhibition area. Carlsund accepted, and produced the non-figurative mural paintings *Rapid* in the restaurant Little Paris [Fig. 5]. He also started to plan for an international exhibition of post-cubist art. Back in Paris, he assembled 107 works by 31 artists for a collective exhibition, created in the café Puck at the Park restaurant. A catalogue was produced in which the works were divided into seven different schools, all said to originate from cubism: cubism, post-cubism, purism, constructivism, neo-plasticism, sur-realism and sur-impressionism<sup>38</sup>. The Art Concret group was described as a combination of absolute purism, neoplasticism and constructivism<sup>39</sup>. The exhibition included artworks by, among others, Léger, Ozenfant, Piet Mondrian, Georges Vantongerloo, Jean Arp, Sofie Tauber-Arp, Franciska Clausen, László Moholy-Nagy, Charles Edouard Jeanneret, Theo van Doesburg, Antoine Pevsner and the Swedish artists GAN, Christian Berg, Erik Olson, Greta Knutsson-Tzara (1899–1983), Erik Grate (1896–1983) and Bengt Österblom (1903–1976).

The Stockholm exhibition was planned to be the breakthrough for Modernist design and architecture in Sweden, and indeed, it reached that goal. The functionalist building ideal was spread through fine examples of well-designed white houses, such as villas, department stores, a restaurant, et cetera and the concept was widely accepted in the general population and by people in the building sector, even if, of course, not everyone was convinced. A booklet with the encouraging title *Acceptera!* (Accept!), arguing for an architecture designed for modern life, was spread and read by many. Carlsund’s art exhibi-



5. Otto G. Carlsund, wall painting at the restaurant Lilla Paris, the Stockholm exhibition, 1930. Photo: G. Cronquist, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stockholmsutst%C3%A4llningen\\_1930\\_Restaurang\\_Lilla\\_Paris.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stockholmsutst%C3%A4llningen_1930_Restaurang_Lilla_Paris.jpg) (access date: 3.06.2024)

tion, on the other hand, was no success. In Swedish art history it has often been regarded as a failure for concretist art, receiving largely negative criticism and with very few works sold<sup>40</sup>.

Carlsund's intention had been to convince the Swedish art world of the truth of concrete painting and the essential abstract significance in the perfection of its details, but these values were denied and ridiculed by many of the reviewers. However, Carlsund wrote in a letter to GAN after the exhibition, even if it had been an economical fiasco, he had achieved his goals: to present a general overview of contemporary radical painting in Europe and to arrange a confrontation between this and the Swedish public, including the intellectuals and the general population as well. He counted on having won about ten converts to his cause. According to Andrea Kollnitz, the exhibited, non-figurative works were seen by the critics as devoid of content, understandable meaning, personality and national identity. Kollnitz

<sup>40</sup> See J. D. Werner, *Svansviftningens estetisk: Modernismen ur provinsens perspektiv*, [in:] *Utopi & verklighet...*, p. 102.



<sup>41</sup> A. Kollnitz, *Universal Language on National Ground - Otto G. Carlsund and Art Concret at the Stockholm Exhibition 1930*, [in:] *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1925-1950*, Ed. B. Hjartarson [et al.], Leiden 2019, pp. 311-316.

<sup>42</sup> See J. D. Werner, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> See A. Meister, *Att förstå det nya som skall fram. Georg Pauli och prins Eugen - de första svenska Lhoteeleverna*, [in:] *Form och färg...*, pp. 80-82.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

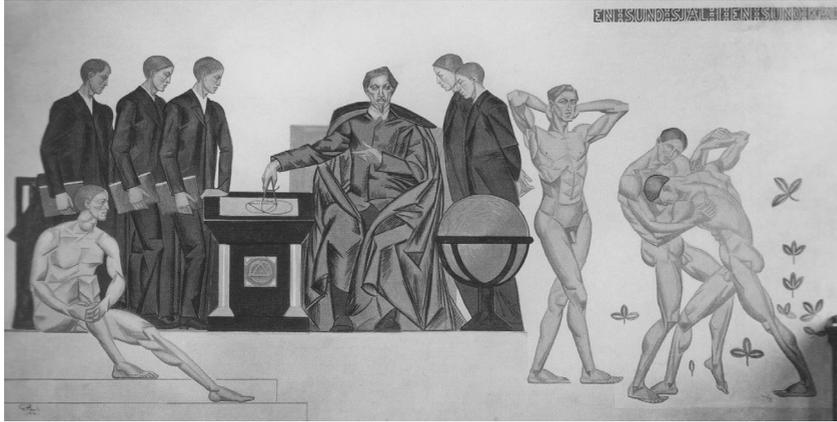
suggests that the Swedish critics' negative reactions may be related to their dislike of elitism, especially in the developing societal context where the idea of "art for all" was gaining ground<sup>41</sup>.

It was not until after World War II, around 1947, that non-figurative modernism in art was more widely accepted, with the works of new concretist artists such as Olle Baertling (1911-1981), Olle Bonniér (1925-2016), Randi Fisher (1920-1997) and Lennart Rodhe (1916-2005)<sup>42</sup>.

### André Lhote, Georg Pauli and their friends

However, parallel to this development into concretism and non-figurative art, a more moderate form of cubism was being created by Swedish artists. Georg Pauli was 56 years old when he went to Paris in 1911 to find out more about cubism. He visited the Autumn Salon, and in the room with cubist art he saw *The Harbor of Bordeaux*, by the 27-year-old André Lhote, and got really interested. He bought the work and got invited by Lhote to discuss art with him in his atelier where he lived with his wife. Pauli started studying cubist drawing for Lhote in 1912, and he sent Lhote's works home to Sweden to offer them for sale to interested artists and art lovers. Pauli also introduced Lhote to the Swedish painter Prince Eugen, who then, in 1913, joined Pauli as Lhote's student in Paris. Neither of them planned to become a cubist, but they were interested in understanding how pictorial elements were constructed in cubist painting, in order to be able to renew their own art and keep their artistic knowledge up-to-date. The same year, Pauli and Prince Eugen arranged Lhote's first exhibition in Stockholm<sup>43</sup>. Following the example of Pauli and Prince Eugen, about two hundred Swedish adepts, almost half of whom were women, studied at l'Académie Lhote until the beginning of the 1960s. Lhote's artistic ideas became important for many of the Swedish artists who attended his school, including the painters Gunnel Heineman (b. 1921), Agda Holst (1886-1976), Tyra Lundgren (1897-1979), Laila Prytz (1907-1982), Olle Baertling, Bengt Lindström (1925-2008) and Gösta Werner (1909-1989), the art photographer Christer Strömholm (1918-2002), crafts artists and designers Wiwen Nilsson (1897-1974), Evald Dahlskog (1894-1950), Lars Gynning (1920-2003) and Adele Änggård (1933-2023), and illustrators Torsten Jovinge (1898-1936) and Iwar Donnér (1884-1964)<sup>44</sup>.

His Swedish students considered Lhote an excellent pedagogue. Swedish ex-students have mentioned that he was good at giving critique, that he arranged good compositional exercises, taught the students not to use the avant-garde technique "*tourner autour*" ("turn around", i.e. see from different perspectives), but rather to think as Cezanne had done about stable form. In 1911, Lhote had been part of the group *Section d'Or* (The Golden Section), and exhibited with Picasso, Braque, Léger, Gleizes, etc., but in his books *Traité du Paysage* (1941) and *Traité de la Figure* (1950) he wrote that his version of cub-



6. Georg Pauli, *Mens sana in corpore sana* (A Healthy Soul in a Healthy Body), part of wall painting, Jönköpings läroverk, Sweden, 1912. Photo: N. N.

ism was in fact a recapturing of classical methods. One way of trying to describe his method was “*la nature organisée*” (organised nature), and he recommended working with basic geometrical forms. Accepting the demands of three-dimensionality was regarded as more important than following poetic impulses<sup>45</sup>.

Pauli and Prince Eugen used their new knowledge about form when painting monumental works – the Prince for a mural in Stockholm city hall, and Pauli in 1912 for murals in a School building in Jönköping, where he had spent his childhood [Fig. 6]. The theme for Pauli’s mural was *Mens sana in corpore sana* (A Healthy Soul in a Healthy Body), and it shows a group of naked, male athletes, and two groups of students dressed in suits, gathering around a teacher of mathematics and another teacher of Latin. The forms of the human bodies are reduced to semi- abstraction and the painting is characterized by stable volumes. The mural was the first public art work with cubist characteristics in Sweden, and the public reacted negatively. The art critic August Brunius, one of very few who reviewed the work, was mostly positive, but felt that the work lacked soul and expression<sup>46</sup>.

Why was there such an interest among Swedish artists to study with Lhote? Of course, after World War II as well as after World War I, there was a postponed desire among the artists to leave their isolation and go abroad and get new ideas, not leastwise in Paris, Europe’s artistic center<sup>47</sup>. As previously mentioned, Maj Bring had noted that in 1922 everyone in the art community was talking about the cubists, and that André Lhote’s school in Montparnasse in particular attracted many Scandinavians<sup>48</sup>. Georg Pauli had also written about Lhote in his avant-garde art journal “*Flamman*”, presenting him as artist, cubist and teacher, and also published articles about cubism written by Lhote. *Flamman*, which was published from 1917 to 1921, was distributed by Svensk-Franska Konstgalleriet (The Swedish-French Art Gallery), where Lhote had had several exhibitions. Probably Lhote’s recurrent lectures on art in Stockholm at the invitation of Pauli and Prince Eugene also generated interest. As this article has shown, rather than the radical avant-garde cubists Picasso and Braque, it



<sup>45</sup> See A. L. Lindberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 52–58.

<sup>46</sup> See A. Meister, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>47</sup> See A. L. Lindberg, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>48</sup> M. Bring, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

 <sup>49</sup> See A. L. Lindberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–52.

was the more moderate André Lhote who broke through the general public's resistance to cubism in Sweden<sup>49</sup>.

### Swedish cubism – conclusions

In the early years of cubism, a considerable number of Swedish artists experimented enthusiastically with prismatic and other cubist effects in their paintings. For most of them this was a temporary activity, although many felt that they had acquired new insights concerning artistic form. Some of them further developed their findings into new directions of modernist art, such as post-cubism, purism and concrete art. Women artists were active in all of these movements. However, female practitioners of modern art found recognition more difficult to achieve and longer in coming than did their male counterparts.

Most Swedish cubism proved to be of a moderate sort, such as the works by Georg Pauli. On the other hand, Agnes Cleve, Siri Derkert, Gösta Adrian-Nilsson (GAN), and Otto G. Carlsund never ceased to generate bold forms and compositions. Regardless, it took a long time for Swedish art audiences to accept this form of visual art.

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#### Słowa kluczowe

szwedzki kubizm, kubizm eksperymentalny, kubizm umiarkowany, post-kubizm, artystki, sztokholmskie wystawy

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#### Keywords

Swedish cubism, experimental cubism, modest cubism, post-cubism, women artists, the Stockholm exhibition

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### Summary

#### **MARGARETA WALLIN WICTORIN (Karlstad University, Sweden) / Cubism in Sweden – from experimental to moderate**

In this article, examples of various forms of cubism practiced by Swedish artists are described and analyzed regarding form, content and reception in the field. A certain emphasis is placed on female artists, since there is a need for differencing the narrative of modernism regarding women's contributions, often disregarded in their own contexts as well as in the writing of art history. Attention has also been paid to changing notions of cubism in the field of art.

In the early years of cubism, from the 1910s, a considerable number of Swedish artists experimented enthusiastically with prismatic and other cubist effects in their paintings. Many of them went to Paris, Berlin and Copenhagen to see the new art, and brought new ideas to Sweden. For most of the artists who experimented with different kinds of cubism, it was a temporary activity, although many of them felt they had acquired new insights concerning artistic form. Some of them further developed their findings into new directions of modernist art, such as post-cubism, purism and concrete art. Women artists were active in all of these movements.

The art market in Stockholm thrived in the 1910s and 1920s. Several of the art critics and large parts of the art audience had difficulties understanding cubism, and rejected the non-figurative art exhibited at the Stockholm exhibition in 1930. However, most Swedish cubism proved to be of a moderate sort, such as the works by Georg Pauli. On the other hand, Agnes Cleve, Siri Derkert, Gösta Adrian-Nilsson (GAN), and Otto G. Carlsund never ceased to generate bold forms and compositions. Regardless, it took a long time for Swedish art audiences to accept this form of visual art.