

**ON SHOW:** Attractive art whose appeal is its lack of a message, and - love it or loathe it - Empire furniture

# Sweetness and light amid the Swedish gloom

**I**T WAS the kind of conversation you might expect to overhear at an exhibition devoted to Carl Larsson, particularly one taking place in Stockholm.

A blonde girl aged about seven whispered to her friend: "I've got that one on my bedroom wall... and that one."

"Well, I've got the one over there."

Few Swedes, and probably few Scandinavians, have not at one time or another had a Carl Larsson print on their wall or read one of his picture books.

The painter has the kind of mass appeal that can make art lovers wince. The reasons are clear enough.

Larsson (1853-1919) painted honey-sweet pictures of children playing in idyllic landscapes or going about day-to-day tasks in comfortable, middle-class homes. They are relaxed, informal, domestic scenes in the main, which were greatly in vogue in the United States in the Sixties.

Many who have never seen Larsson's paintings may be familiar with his work through his picture books. These collections of watercolours were painted in and around Larsson's country house at Sundborn, in Dalarna, which is now a museum. The picture books were designed like idealised family photograph albums. Such was their success that Larsson took to painting his neighbours and their homes. Over the years these dearly loved, simple interiors have come to be regarded as the ideal of Swedish living and design: here is modesty, contentment and comfort.

To be fair to Larsson, he had good reason to concentrate on the more pleasant side to life. His childhood, spent in the Stockholm slum of Ostermann (ironically, now a highly desirable area), was miserable. His father was a gloomy introvert who openly disliked his son, although in later years he became the model for many paintings. Relations with his mother were warmer, and it was she who encouraged him to apply to the Swedish Academy of Art.

Larsson's early academic studies, which he continued in Paris, occupy one room at the exhibition and include a number of works rarely seen in public. Most of them are ponderous academic works, many drawing on historical themes, and they conspicuously failed to impress the Paris Salon.

Making little headway in the French capital, Larsson returned to Sweden, where he began to earn what became a comfortable living by illustrating various publications. This work, also shown, caused a significant

## Albert Ehrnröth on the influential and very popular art of Carl Larsson

development in his style: clear contours and attention focussed on particular details - a talent common in all fine illustrations - which were to become characteristic of his later work.

Through this work Larsson became a friend of Auguste Strindberg, for whose books of criticism and history he drew the illustrations.

In the autumn of 1881 he again sought success in Paris, but was once more rejected by the Salon. After suffering a mental and physical breakdown, he recuperated with a friend at Grez-sur-Loing, which was a colony for international artists near Fontainebleau. The experience proved to be the turning point in his life.

"I looked at nature for the first time," he said, recalling his time there. "I threw the oddities on to the rubbish heap and my strange and wonderful combinations of ideas went overboard. Let them stay there."

Larsson discovered plein-air painting and, discarding all his academic mannerisms, he started afresh. By recording a small corner of reality, refinement became much more important than anecdotal figures and soothing landscapes. The exhibition contains one wonderful room with all these "snapshot" paintings, usually showing a lone figure in an ordinary setting. There is no message and no story.

A splendid example of all the best things he picked up at Grez-sur-Loing is the painting that goes by that name. Although he painted it in 1887, when he had already become famous, *Grez-sur-Loing* sums up the period before the picture books. In it, a woman leans out slightly from a boathouse on the banks of the flowing river. It is spring, and the early green colours and greyish water and sky are in perfect contrast to the woman's red dress and hat.

Supported by several important commissions, Larsson moved to Sundborn in 1889 with his wife, Karin Bergo. The house was a gift from Karin's father.

It was here where Larsson was to find his "hallmark" - the rhythmic linear style which he reinforced outlines in the paintings with ink. It was an attempt to create a genuine Swedish style with the help of French realism. With Karin and

their seven children, Larsson could at last experience the pleasures of domesticity which inspired the subject matter for his picture books. The first, *A Home*, appeared in 1890, and it was followed by *Spadorvet* (1903), the name of his farm, and *On the Sunny Side* (1910).

These idyllic, homespun images, while hardly revolutionary, had a significant influence on interior design.

In a period characterised by dark and heavy furnishings, Larsson recreated airy, light and almost functional interiors. The children's clothes too, designed by Karin, were eminently practical and comfortable.

Typical of his inventiveness is the apron-type dress seen in many of the paintings.

Most of the self-portraits show the artist with a humorous twinkle in his eye, in contrast to Larsson's sad *Self-Appraisal* (1906). Painted after his son died suddenly of a ruptured appendix, the painter faces the viewer with soul-searching eyes. Frightened that he should emotionally let go, he clutches the doll which maniacally mirrors his mood.

Finally, there is no better place than the National Museum to see Larsson's monumental work. Here the entrance hall is decorated with solemn themes drawn from Swedish history.

Depression, caused by artistic setbacks and a venomous attack by his former friend Strindberg, who accused him of being a false schemer who had built up his reputation on deceit, marred Larsson's last decade.

Whatever the truth or otherwise of this, a greater contrast between family life as seen in Strindberg's tortured dramas and that portrayed by Larsson can hardly be imagined.

Carl Larsson, National Museum, S Blasieholmshammar, Stockholm, Tel. 080593. Until May 10 in Stockholm, then in Gothenburg from June 6 to September 30. Catalogue also available in German.



Grez-sur-Loing (1887): Larsson recovered from a nervous breakdown at the international artists' colony in Grez, near Fontainebleau



Karin Reading (1904): Larsson at his most attractive, using ink to reinforce the outlines of his clear, rhythmic watercolours

# Imperial curlicues swagger through a land of simplicity

**W**HILE Christians have always been taught that a fiery furnace awaits all those who do not believe, the atheist playwright Jean-Paul Sartre preferred to imagine miserable sinners suffering for eternity in a room full of Empire furniture, writes Albert Ehrnröth.

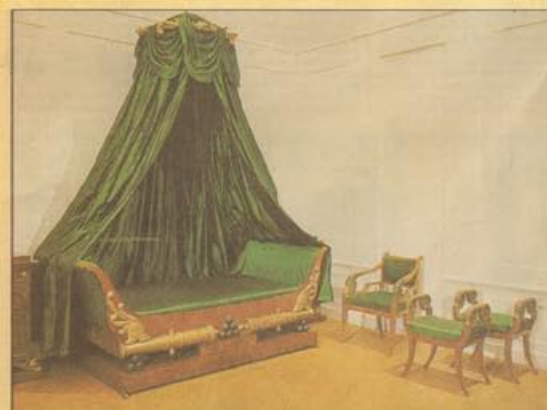
Love it or loathe it, the Empire style - that extravagant monument to Napoleon's ego - has never allowed itself to be ignored. Now it is resurfacing in Swedish form at an exhibition which marks the 200th anniversary of the National Museum in Stockholm.

In an orgy of neoclassicism, mahogany-veneered furniture adorned with lions, sphinxes, busts or palm leaves began to invade French drawing rooms during the time of the First Empire (1804-13). Napoleon, inspired by the grandiose styles of imperial Rome, made the furnishing of the period reflect his political triumphs.

The simple contours of Greek classicism marked the revolutionary era. Egyptian designs followed his campaigns in Egypt, while eagles and laurel wreaths immortalised his numerous military victories.

The style soon fired the imagination of Napoleon's neighbours, and quickly spread throughout Europe. In 1810, a former field marshal of Napoleon - Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, later King Karl XIV Johan - was elected crown prince of Sweden. The stylistic consequences were a variant of Empire style, known as Karl Johan style.

In the 1820s, the Swedish bourgeoisie, ever eager to



Empire suite: mahogany, elaborate gilding and sumptuous drapery favoured by Bernadotte

follow in aristocratic footsteps, looked to Bernadotte the German interpretation of the neoclassical revival, to make the Empire trend more accessible. It relied on birch-wood, which had practical advantages for the Swedes because mahogany, the customary Empire material, had to be imported at great expense. Birch, being a local wood, provided an affordable and attractive alternative, as the chairs displayed in the exhibition prove.

Meanwhile Karl Johan, with his biding coffers, could maintain the Empire tradition

in its pure form. When his bedroom was refurbished, in 1823, no expense was spared. He adopted the ornamental symbolism favoured by Napoleon: the bed rests on cannonball feet, with an ornamental cannon on the frame, and lances and spears support a canopy of green taffeta. The room is one of several that have been reconstructed for the exhibition.

Other exhibits show how the impoverished Swedes adapted and improvised on the styles of their wealthier French counterparts. Where lesser-quality materials were

used, a veneer, painted marble or imitation bronze could create an authentic effect. For wall-hangings, skillfully painted friezes were a cheaper substitute.

The contrast between the elaborate style and the simple designs traditionally associated with Sweden has created quite an impact, and the exhibition is to be extended for seven months as Swedes discover a neglected part of their history.

The exhibition is at Stockholm's National Museum, until October



A catacomb near Rome

# Unwrapping a donation of Constantine

EXCAVATIONS are to begin in Rome this year on a basilica dating from the time of the Emperor Constantine, writes Desmond O'Grady. It is thought to be that of St Mark, the 54th successor to St Peter as Bishop of Rome. The basilica, of which only the foundations remain, had been lost for about 1,200 years despite energetic searches by archaeologists.

Its discovery in the extensive San Callisto complex, by the Appian Way just outside Rome's walls, is due to a worker who noted that a pattern in the grass, some of it shorter than the rest, followed a curvilinear path. He alerted the Pontifical Commission for Archaeology which found that the pattern corresponded to the shape of five basilicas built by Constantine after he recognised Christianity in 313 AD.

When Constantine conquered Rome, he began a programme of church building, usually to honour the burial sites of martyrs; hence, for instance, the first St Peter's. In 336 AD the basilica of St Mark was built.

The Pontifical Commission has excavated more than a metre and has struck stonework corresponding to the surface grass pattern. What are thought to be masonry foundations have been found nearby.