Highlights: Famous and Forgotten Art
Treasures from the Nationalmuseum

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THE EXHIBITION  

Highlights: Famous and Forgotten Art Treasures from the Nationalmuseum featured a selection of works from the Museum’s various collections – many of them sorely missed by the audience while the museum building on Blasieholmen is closed for refurbishment. The exhibition included paintings, sculptures, crafts and design. A large number of works from the 16th century up to today were chronologically presented. Early masters, such as Rembrandt, Judith Leyster (Fig. 1), François Boucher, Anne Vallayer-Coster and Clodion, were succeeded by later artists such as William Turner, Gustave Courbet, Rosa Bonheur, Auguste Renoir and Berthe Morisot, to name but a few. Foreign names were interspersed with Swedish artists such as Elias Martin (Fig. 2), Alexander Roslin, Ulrika Pasch, Marcus Larson, Anders Zorn, Bruno Liljefors, Eva Bonnier, and many others.

Alongside paintings and sculptures, the exhibition gave equal prominence to a rich selection of objects from the Museum’s collection of applied art and design, with several key works from the Renaissance up to our own times. Apart from objects such as Meissen porcelain and faience from Rörstrand and Marieberg, the exhibition featured modern design and pieces by contemporary Swedish and international crafts designers, including Michael Eden, Eva Hild and Frida Fjellman. Also featured were 1960s and ’70s applied art objects in the collection that have rarely or never before been shown, for instance,
Ettore Sottsass’ so-called Monument to Mustard (Fig. 3) and Magdalena Abakanowicz’s textile sculpture Abakan (Fig. 4). There was also a separate section on portraits, under the subheading Selfies: Now and Then (see separate article on p. 131).

As a complement to the rich selection of famous paintings, sculptures and applied art objects, wall texts and the exhibition catalogue asked why some works have grown more well-known and popular than others. Words like “highlight”, “classic” and “masterpiece” were examined. What constitutes a “masterpiece”? Who decides? And how has the attitude to masterpieces changed over the years? The exhibition referred to how these issues had been explored in debates, museology research and museum studies and the discussions about an art history canon over the past decades. With its selection of works and texts, the exhibition focused on the question of what powers in the past and present influenced and still influence our views on art and art history. The exhibition specifically discussed the historic influence of museums in this process – not least the Nationalmuseum. The accompanying texts described how individual works had achieved stardom, and discussed works that had once been famed but for various reasons are now more or less forgotten. As a complement to the theme of famous and unknown masterpieces, the exhibition also featured a few works that are rarely or never shown at the Museum – obscure but nonetheless captivating art that has not previously been given much attention despite its merits. Thus, the works chosen for the presentation were a motley crew from art history – celebrated masterpieces alternating with forgotten or comparatively obscure works. The changed attitude to various works by Rembrandt and other Dutch 17th-century painters over time was discussed, and how this has impacted on their fame.

Changed views on later oeuvres over the past century were also commented upon, exemplified with works by August Strindberg, Ernst Josephson (Fig. 5) and
The exhibition also included examples of art that was praised from the beginning and has maintained its popularity. Olof Arborelius painted his view of a lake at Engelsberg in 1893, and the painting was bought for the Nationalmuseum collection the following year (Fig. 7). It has been one of the Museum’s most popular paintings ever since. Its fame was augmented when it was chosen as the “Sweden Painting” in 1935 by the Swedish Tourist Board and reproduced as such in a plethora of contexts. This painting is also the Museum’s most frequently copied work by visiting artists and art students.

One of the aims of this exhibition was thus to shed light on the forces that have shaped our views on art and its history and influenced our appreciation of individual works. By means of the selected examples, it demonstrated how museums and other media have identified “masterpieces” and “highlights”, and how opinions change over time. Another primary purpose of this exhibition was to show a rich selection from the Nationalmuseum’s collection – famous and unknown works that were brought out into the light for a while, before the refurbished Nationalmuseum once again opens its doors.
Exhibition curators: Mikael Ahlund and Anders Bengtsson
Exhibition design: Joakim E. Werning
Lighting design: Jan Gouiedo
Exhibition technology and installation: The Technical Department at Nationalmuseum, under the supervision of Lennart Karlsson
Chief conservators: Britta Nilsson, Maria Franzon and Nils Ahlner
Exhibition manager: Anneli Carlsson
Exhibition coordinator: Lena Granath
Education officer: Helén Hallgren Archer

Exhibition catalogue
Highlights: Kända och okända konstskatter från Nationalmuseum (Swedish edition);
Highlights: Famous and Forgotten Art Treasures from the Nationalmuseum (English edition)
Nationalmusei utställningskatalog nr 671 (Nationalmuseum exhibition catalogue no. 671)

Fig. 7 Oluf Arborelius (1824–1915), Lake View at Engelsberg, 1893. Oil on canvas, 81 x 120 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 1472.

Interior from the exhibition Highlights: Famous and Forgotten Art Treasures from the Nationalmuseum.

Fig. 6 Carl Hjalmar Norrström (1853–1924), Urn with cover, 1893. Steel, gilded, etched and blued, H. 133 cm, W. 54 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMK 21/1894.