Experimental Jugendstil Glass

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NATIONALMUSEUM @
The Stockholm Exhibition of 1897 proved a watershed in Swedish glassmaking history. The country’s glassworks were entirely focused on the profitable production of sparkling crystal glass, without a hint of interest in contemporary Art Nouveau or Jugendstil. Prince Eugen meanwhile, as chairman of the committee overseeing the art section of the exhibition, was a driving force in inviting the world’s leading glass designers, with a view to being able to present modern design in Stockholm. It took a great deal of effort, but the end result was that visitors to the Hall of Art were able to admire glass by such prominent figures as Louis Comfort Tiffany, Émile Gallé and Ernest-Baptiste Léveillé. The reviews that followed the exhibition were merciless in their criticism of Sweden’s glassmakers.¹

Kosta, one of the most important Swedish glassworks at the time, was quick to take the criticism on board, making the decision to hire the artist Gunnar G:son Wennerberg (1863–1914). Wennerberg’s strength was his feeling for the character of flowers – something he shared with Émile Gallé – and the result was a simple overlay glass following in Gallé’s footsteps. It was

Fig. 1 Betzy Åhlström (1857–1934), Vase, Julkaktus (Christmas Cactus), designed 1901–02. Produced by Reijmyre Glasbruk. Glass, marqueterie de verre, 17 x 14 cm. Purchase: Anna and Ferdinand Boberg Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 230/2015.
this glass that the Kosta factory chose to present at the *Universal Exhibition* in Paris in 1900. After the exhibition, Kosta donated the remaining overlay glass to the Nationalmuseum.²

Wennerberg worked at Kosta from 1898 to 1902. Another artist, Alf Wallander (1862–1914), was engaged from 1908 by the Reijmyre glassworks. Previously, the two designers had been employed by the Gustavsberg and Rörstrand porcelain factories, respectively, to raise the aesthetic standards of their production. In a Swedish context, Wennerberg and Wallander are early examples of artists working in industry. Their designs were incorporated in the Nationalmuseum collections by my counterparts at that time.

*Jugendstil* Glass in the Collection

The Nationalmuseum’s collection of glass from the *Jugendstil* period was for a long time confined to the work of male designers, even though the most interesting pieces were in fact created by women. That no examples of work by female designers were acquired in their own day is remarkable. Over the last two decades, the Museum has worked hard to remedy this misleading state of affairs – no easy task, given that the output of women designers was not particularly large and such objects therefore rarely appear on the market. In 2015, however, the Museum acquired a vase by Betzy Åhlström (1857–1934) from 1902 and a
bowl by Agnes de Frumerie (1869–1937) from 1930 (Figs. 1–2). Åhlström and de Frumerie are two of the real pioneers of Swedish glassmaking (Figs. 3–4).

Betzy Åhlström
In preparation for the Turin Exhibition of Modern Decorative Arts in 1902, the Reijmyre glassworks began to develop technically advanced art glass, turning to the artists Betzy Åhlström and Anna Boberg for help. Åhlström, who throughout her working career was a school art teacher in Gothenburg, served Reijmyre as an art-glass designer from 1901 to 1902. Surviving letters give us some idea of how she was remunerated for her efforts. In May 1902, for example, she received 200 kronor for a set of design drawings and 72 kronor for 12 free-hand drawings. There was no question of royalty payments. Today, we know of between 10 and 15 examples of art glass by Betzy Åhlström. It is most gratifying, therefore, that the Nationalmuseum has now been able to add her Christmas Cactus vase (signed “Reijmyre B.Åhm #56”) to its collections (Fig. 1).

Åhlström employed a complicated technique known as marqueterie de verre, inspired by the glass art of contemporary France. This involves rolling the parison in crushed glass and then reheating it. Further decoration in the form of cut shapes of glass can be added to heighten the effect. The highly skilled glassblower Fredric Kessmeier (1859–1946) was working at Reijmyre at the time, and as the decisive stages in this technique take place when the glass is hot, it requires close collaboration in the hot shop between artist and glassblower. Åhlström was the first in Sweden to develop such a working relationship, although it would become normal practice for glass designers as the 20th century progressed.

Reijmyre also availed itself of the services of Anna Boberg (1864–1935) for the 1902 Turin Exhibition. She designed advanced glass objects with trapped air bubbles as decoration, using the same technique as Åhlström. The exhibition was a triumph for both women. The international press praised the glass from Reijmyre, and Åhlström’s pieces were described as works of genius. In 1905 Reijmyre gave five replicas of the two designers’ works to the Staatliche...
ACQUISITIONS/EXPERIMENTAL JUGENDSTIL GLASS

The Nationalmuseum’s exhibition Swedish Jugendstil Glass, was its unknown designer Betzy Åhlström rediscovered.

Other women glass designers of the Jugendstil period include Ellen Meyer and Greta Welander. They, too, were previously unrepresented in the collections, but in 2010 a vase by Meyer was acquired, made at Reijmyre in 1913 (NMK 37/2010).

Agnes de Frumerie
The sculptor Agnes de Frumerie also worked in the Jugendstil spirit. As a glass designer, she too had been absent from the Nationalmuseum’s collections until a bowl by her from 1930 (signed “A de F 1930”) was acquired in 2015 (Fig. 2). It is made from pâte-de-verre, with relief decoration in blue against a greenish yellow background. The decoration of swimming female figures and fish is typical of the artist.

De Frumerie had been living in Paris since 1893, and it was there, around 1920, that she began experimenting with glass in a studio of her own. In the 1920s she moved back to Sweden and opened a new glass studio, where she carried out all the stages in the work process entirely on her own.8

The pâte-de-verre technique de Frumerie worked in was used by several French glass designers, among them Albert Dammouse, and it was when she came into contact with him that her interest in the method was awakened in earnest. Using it, she was able to handle the entire production process in her own workshop, although there would be many failed experiments before she truly mastered the technique. By mixing pulverised glass with a binder, pouring it into moulds or modelling it freely, and then firing the objects formed, de Frumerie achieved an expression in keeping with Jugendstil ideals. The result was an opaque glass with a matt surface and pale colours, often with decoration of gentle lines fashioned in relief. Many objects, however, cracked in the kiln. Most of her surviving works – over 100 pieces – were left in her will to the Västergötland Museum in Skara. Only a few are in private ownership.9

From the point at which she started working in glass, de Frumerie’s style was considered outdated, and when she wished to take part in the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 – which saw the launch of functionalism in Sweden – she could not understand why her Jugendstil pieces were refused.10 The bowl now added to the Nationalmuseum’s collection of glass is dated 1930 and was probably intended to be shown at that exhibition.

In that her works expressed an ideal whose time had long since passed, Agnes de Frumerie was an isolated phenomenon. But she was Sweden’s first studio glass designer, and in recent decades the technique she used has seen a revival, with several Swedish glass artists now working in pâte-de-verre.

Notes:
2. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 19.
5. Ibid.