

***Flowers & Monsters: Hand-carved
Furniture by Karl von Rydingsvärd***
April 3—December 31, 2016

Exhibition labels

Curated by Carrie A. Hogan, Senior Curator

American Swedish Historical Museum

Beginning of a Conversation

Flowers & Monsters is the beginning of an ongoing conversation about who Karl von Rydingsvärd was and what made his work special. ASHM would love to learn more and start an inventory of his surviving works. If you have information about Karl von Rydingsvärd, or know where additional pieces can be found, please consider contacting the Museum at curator@americanswedish.org

copyright American Swedish Historical Museum, 2016



"A Valentine's Day kiss" The sideboard and dish rack are in the background. 1965



The table and chairs decorated for the holidays. ca.1960s



The tall-back chair sits in the background of this 1968 photo of a family dinner.



Four generations of the family, including Grandmother Hazel Foster (in white blouse) and baby Phillip Milliken, ca. 1940. Hazel received the furniture from her friend, Beda Townsend, who was Ida von Rydingsvärd's niece.

LENDER'S NOTE

Karl von Rydingsvärd's Furniture: A History of Ownership By Phillip Milliken

The furniture seen in this exhibition has belonged to our family since Karl and Ida von Rydingsvärd passed away in May of 1941.

My Grandmother, Hazel Foster, personally knew Karl von Rydingsvärd and she always stressed to our family how important he was. I believe that she met the von Rydingsvärd's through a mutual friend, a woman named Beda Townsend, who was Ida von Rydingsvärd's niece. We knew her as "Aunt Beda." It is quite possible that Beda Townsend was a student of Karl von Rydingsvärd. She was an heir of the Rydingsvärd Estate and lived in the Rydingsvärd residence in Portland, Maine from 1942 to 1951.

Grandmother Foster and Aunt Beda were close friends. Aunt Beda gave Grandmother Foster the furniture in the late 1940s. Grandmother passed some of it onto my parents at that time. When our family moved in 1954 the furniture was taken with us and remained there until our mother passed away in 1972. During this period, Grandmother Foster passed on additional pieces of Karl von Rydingsvärd furniture. The furniture, consisting of the table, six chairs, high-back chair, armchair, sideboard and plate rack, were an integral part of our family's home furnishings. The table, chairs and sideboard were used for dining during the holidays. During the rest of the year the table was set with a table cloth, a centerpiece and candle holders. The sideboard was used to serve food during dinners and for the display of a Christmas scene during the holidays. The plate rack hung on the wall for years and was used for displays.

My wife and I acquired the furniture as part of our inheritance when my mother's estate was distributed. The furniture was used in a similar function in our home. The furniture was in our possession until April 2001 when we passed most of the pieces on to our daughter, Kristina Dera. She now owns the dining table, six chairs, tall-back chair, sideboard, plate rack and armchair.

The other pieces seen in this exhibition were inherited by my siblings. They also currently use them as household furnishings.

Phillip Milliken



Plate Rack

Karl von Rydingsvärd

White oak

c. 1905

This plate rack appears in a period photograph of Karl von Rydingsvärd working with his students in his Manhattan studio. The center rail was remounted incorrectly with the dragon terminal upside down.

On loan from a private collection

Sideboard

Karl von Rydingsvärd

White oak, brass

c. 1905

The deep gouges and nicks on top of this sideboard suggest that it was used as a work bench. It might have been an undelivered commission piece that Karl repurposed. Beneath the top is a shipping label to Karl and Ida von Rydingsvärd's last home in Portland, Maine.

On loan from a private collection



Table & Dining Chairs (5 of 6)

Karl von Rydingsvärd

White Oak

c. 1910

This sturdy table has been in everyday use since the owners received it in 1941. Part of the Rydingsvärd coat of arms is carved into each chair. The griffin symbolizes valor and bravery. The six-sided stars represent Swedish nobility. The coronet with two pearls on top of the shield is a ranking symbol typically reserved for titled or "high" nobility. It is not in the Rydingsvärd coat of arms.

On loan from a private collection



Dining Chair (1 of 6)

Karl von Rydingsvärd
White Oak
c. 1910



The official coat of arms from Ridderhuset (House of Nobility) in Stockholm, Sweden (bottom) reflects the story of Erik Ryding (1679-1730), Karl von Rydingsvärd's knighted ancestor. The coat of arms that Karl carved into his chairs, (detail) however, is different.

The most common characters in Swedish heraldry are lions and eagles. A Lion symbolizes bravery and an eagle symbolizes valor, usually in a military context. The griffin, a mythical combination of both animals, was frequently used as well. The coat of arms have six-sided stars within the shield; symbolizing nobility. The griffin holding a sword, along with a single barred helmet above the shield, signifies a strong and loyal fighter. These armament characters were commonly used in the coat of arms of knights. On the chairs, Karl carved his family's shield and then added a crown with two pearls. This type of coronet is typically reserved for titled or "high" Swedish nobility.



On loan from a private collection





Tall-back Chair

Karl von Rydingsvärd
White Oak
c. 1905

The design of this tall-back chair was a favorite in Karl von Rydingsvärd's classes. This one is carved with lions surrounding a praying figure in protection. The long, single stalks of corn symbolize divination.

On loan from a private collection



Arm chair

Karl von Rydingsvärd
White oak
c. 1905

This heavily carved arm chair is representative of Karl von Rydingsvärd's well-known Norse style. Karl frequently carved dragons into his furniture and he encouraged his students to do as well. He believed that Norse motifs, especially dragons, were naturally crude and imperfect, which made them excellent characters for beginners. The carvings of the chair portray scenes from the Norse tale of Sigurd the Dragonslayer.

On loan from a private collection



Bellows

Karl von Rydingsvärd
White oak, leather, brass
c. 1905

Making bellows was a common project for Karl von Rydingsvärd's more advanced students. They can be seen hanging in the background of period photos of his studios. Karl didn't sign much of his work, but this bellows has "K. von. R." carved under the face.

On loan from a private collection



Humidor

Karl von Rydingsvärd
White oak, glass, metal
c. 1905

This humidor was originally painted in vibrant gold with hints of burgundy and blue. Karl usually did his own painting for pieces this size. The design is reminiscent of a traditional Swedish trinket box.

On loan from a private collection



Cabinet

Karl von Rydingsvärd
White oak
c. 1905

This cabinet is a custom piece with the letter "T" carved into the front. It is likely that the letter stands for Townsend; the last name of Ida von Rydingsvärd's sister, Gertrude Simpson Townsend. It was used as a T.V. stand.

On loan from a private collection



Magazine Rack

Oak
c. 1905

Karl von Rydingsvärd taught his students the mechanics of basic furniture making with simply constructed shelves like this one. The stylized oak leaves and acorns seen in this magazine rack were motifs favored by American arts and craftsmen from the east coast. Because so many were made and Karl did not sign much of his work, it is possible that this magazine rack was carved by a student. It is also possible that it was made by Karl and used as a model template in his classroom.

On loan from a private collection



Drop-front Desk

Karl von Rydingsvärd
White oak
c. 1907

This desk is a custom piece with "GST" carved into the front. The initials are likely those of Gertrude Simpson Townsend, Ida von Rydingsvärd's sister. The original finish has been stripped off, but it offers a unique look at the carved details. The year 1907 is carved into a lower board.

On loan from a private collection



Three-legged Chair

Karl von Rydingsvärd

White oak

c. 1905

Corner chairs with three legs like this one were popular during the Arts and Crafts movement (1880-1910). The original finish on this chair has been stripped off, but it offers a unique look at the carved details.

On loan from a private collection

Chest

Karl von Rydingsvärd

White Oak

c. 1905

This chest is characteristic of the Celtic decorative style and it shows Karl von Rydingsvärd's versatility as a carver. The top of the lid has a two-headed eagle interlaced with a serpent and shamrocks. This scene symbolizes a union of opposites, wisdom, and perpetuity. The side panels depict beasts eating the roots of the tree of life. On the front panel, two female deer in a resting position symbolize peace.

On loan from a private collection



Engraving & Chip-carved Frame

Engraving:

Paper and ink

ca. 1717

Sweden



Picture frame:

Wood

ca. 1880

Sweden or United States

This small engraving depicts a rocky path and broken trees. In the background is the Rydingsvärd's family home, which, in the early 1700s, was a farm on the outskirts of Stockholm in the province of Södermanland, Sweden.

The inscription reads:

A Monsieur de Rydingsvärd
Lieut-Colonel et Chavelier de L'Ordre Militaire
For son tres humble et tre obeisant Serviteur J.E.
Göes
N. Ellfbourge le 24 Decembr 1717

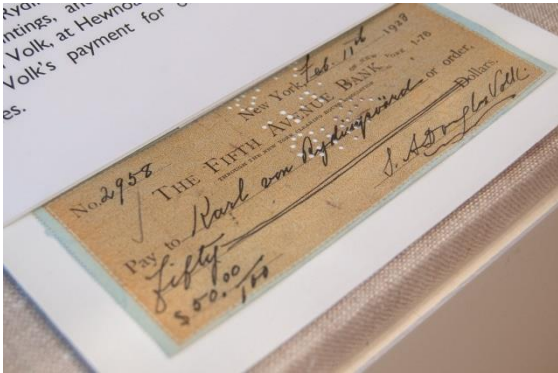
To Sir Rydingsvärd
Lieut - Colonel and Knight of The Military Order
For his very humble service and obedience J. E.
Göes
North Elfsborg (Gothenburg) December 24, 1717

*The etching and frame were donated in 1964 at the bequest of E. Axel Rydingsvärd, Karl von Rydingsvärd's first cousin.

*American Swedish Historical Museum
Collection 1964.005 A & B*

Cashed Check

**From Douglas Volk to Karl von Rydingsvärd
February 11, 1923**



Stephen Arnold Douglas Volk (1856-1935) was an American portrait and figure painter, muralist, and educator. Douglas Volk and Karl von Rydingsvärd were friends and colleagues. Volk met von Rydingsvärd at Felix Adler's Society for Ethical Culture in New York. Von Rydingsvärd carved frames for a number of Volk's paintings, and taught woodcarving to his son, Wendell Volk, at Hewnoaks artist's colony. This check is likely Volk's payment for one of von Rydingsvärd's frames.

ASHM Collection

Image of picture frame

**Karl von Rydingsvärd
Oak
Set with a Douglas Volk portrait of Frances Lyle**



The Revival of Woodcarving, Charles de Kay

“A pioneer in “legitimate” wood carving is Mr. Karl von Rydingsvärd, a Swede, who has been a teacher of and lecturer on carving in New York for the past sixteen years. He passes his summers in Maine – appropriate place for workers in wood. At Brunswick, Me., he brings about him zealous pupils from families of the well-to-do and from those also who are breadwinners. Mistress and maid, rich and poor, engage in the delightful task of producing articles of furniture which are beautiful without losing their usefulness, chests of drawers, sconces, ornamented bookcases, tables for hunting lodge and summer cottage, deftly carved bellows for the wood fires that in Maine are apt to be comforts in June and necessities in September. And in winter his workshop in New York is the haunt of pupils old and young who are learning the craft for their support or only satisfying the longing to create objects with their own hands and brains which shall be different from anything to be found in the trade.”

*The Revival of Wood Carving, by Charles de Kay
American Homes and Gardens; January, 1906*

Karl von Rydingsvärd Teaching Resume

Karl von Rydingsvärd had an impressive teaching resume. He taught at the Rhode Island School of Design and the Institute of Arts and Sciences in Manchester, New Hampshire. Winning a silver medal at the 1893 world’s fair in Chicago was a prestigious marker that led to an appointment as Director of Art and Craft Training at the Teacher’s College of Columbia University. He also taught at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Worcester Art Museum, and the Troy School of Arts and Crafts.

In California Karl von Rydingsvärd trained teachers to help rehabilitate World War I veterans and he advised New York Hospital about the role of craftwork in correcting nervous disorders.

Moving the Family to the United States

A year after Karl and Anna von Rydingsvärd were married, the young couple began moving Karl's struggling family out of Sweden. In 1887, Karl helped his younger brother Gustaf, a decorative house painter, and then his parents, Axel Georg and Emma in 1888. The trio settled in Rhode Island not far from the design school where Karl was a teacher. In 1891 his brother Alfred, a decorative model and mold maker, joined them. In 1892, Rosa Josefina, Torsten Nathanael, and Hellevig Sofia, who had been running the family's country store, made the move. Rydingsvärd cousins also came to the U.S. and settled in Norfolk, VA, Los Angeles, CA, and one settled in Philadelphia to work in the shipyards as they had in Uddevalla, Sweden.

Interestingly, none of Karl von Rydingsvärd's relatives use "von" in their official immigration or naturalization documents. Not even his father.

The Arts and Crafts Movement (1880-1915)

The Arts and Crafts movement initially developed in England during the latter half of the 19th century. Subsequently this style was taken up by American designers, with somewhat different results. In the United States, the Arts and Crafts style was also known as Mission style.

This movement, which challenged the tastes of the Victorian era, was inspired by the social reform concerns of thinkers such as Walter Crane (1845-1915) and John Ruskin (1819-1900), together with the ideals of reformer and designer, William Morris (1834-1896). Their collective notions of good design were linked to their notions of a good society. This was a vision of a society in which the worker was not brutalized by the working conditions found in factories, but rather could enjoy doing the work and take pride in his craftsmanship.

In New York, Gustav Stickley (1858-1942) was trying to serve a burgeoning market of middle class consumers who wanted affordable, decent looking furniture. By using factory methods to mass produce basic components, and utilizing craftsmen to finish and assemble, he was able to manufacture vast quantities of furniture. Stickley's rectilinear, simpler American Arts and Crafts forms came to dominate American architecture, interiors, and furnishings.

Arts and Crafts (1880-1910) Characteristics

Truth to materials

Preserving and emphasizing the natural qualities of the materials used to make objects was one of the most important principles of Arts and Crafts style.

Simple forms

Simple forms were one of the hallmarks of the Arts and Crafts style. There was no extravagant or superfluous decoration and the actual construction of the object was often exposed.

Natural motifs

Nature was an important source of Arts and Crafts motifs. The patterns used were inspired by the flora and fauna of the countryside.

The vernacular

The vernacular, or domestic, traditions of the countryside provided the main inspiration for the Arts and Crafts Movement. Many of those involved set up workshops in rural areas and revived old techniques.

Tack så mycket! (Thanks so much!)

Flowers & Monsters: Hand-carved Furniture by Karl von Rydingsvärd is possible because of grants from the American-Scandinavian Foundation, SWEA New Jersey, and SWEA Philadelphia. Additional support is provided by the ASHM Auxiliary, Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, George C. and Esther Ann McFarland Foundation, Midsommarklubben, and an anonymous foundation. Support provided in part by the Philadelphia Cultural Fund. Funding for the American Swedish Historical Museum is supported by a grant from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.



Many thanks to the Milliken family for working closely with us and lending their Karl von Rydingsvärd collection to the museum: Phillip and Jean Milliken, Kristina Dera, Anne Simpson, Jean Thomas, and Linda Milliken. The late Robert Edwards, who appraised the Milliken's furniture and whose enthusiasm for the exhibition convinced us all it should be done. Leila Sabouni, who cleaned, repaired, and conserved the furniture and taught us her secrets. Vicki Cassman and her students from Winterthur's conservation program for giving us their time and expertise. Eve Kahn from the New York Times for covering our exhibition and connecting us with rare photos of Karl von Rydingsvärd and his students. ASHM interns: Petra Tieu for her dynamic graphic design; Julia Gilander for beautifully finishing what Petra started, and Josh Sundermeyer installation help.

—Carrie Hogan, Senior Curator