

# *The Swedish Experience in Mid-America*

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The roots of a flourishing, early twentieth-century democratic arts culture in the American Midwest are found in 1880s Sweden. In 1881 a young, radical Anders Zorn (1860-1920) broke with the elite Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm over issues of artistic freedom, monopoly of the art market, and a curriculum that had changed very little since

the seventeenth century. This set the stage for a democratic movement now known as Swedish National Romanticism. A group of disgruntled Swedes established a defacto artists' colony at Grèz-sur-Loing just outside Paris in the early 1880s, absorbing modernist philosophies and the trends that declared art to be about the here-and-now of ordinary people's lives lived rather than propagating out-dated and irrelevant values. Swedish artists Zorn, Richard Bergh, Per Hasselberg, Carl Larsson, and Bruno Lilje-

fors were among those who banded together in 1885. In their minds an authentic Swedish art would reflect its own time, interpret nature and the land, and be independent of artificial conventions while keeping Swedish folk traditions alive. These Swedish National Romantics shared their democratic approach to art with the next generation, unintentionally spreading tenets of "art for all" into the New World.

When these transplanted Swedish artists immigrated to the United States, they par-



*Art for All: The Swedish Experience in Mid-America* is on view through October 20, 2019, at the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, 401 North First Street, Lindsborg, Kansas, 67456, 785-227-2220, [www.sandezen.org](http://www.sandezen.org). A 22-page catalogue accompanies the exhibition, which will travel to the Swedish American Museum, Chicago, spring 2021, and the Hillstrom Museum of Art, Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota, fall 2021.

All illustrated images are from the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery unless otherwise stated.

RIGHT: Margaret Sandzén Greenough, *Girl in Swedish Costume (Signe Larson)*, 1943, o/c, 30 x 24, Greenough Collection.

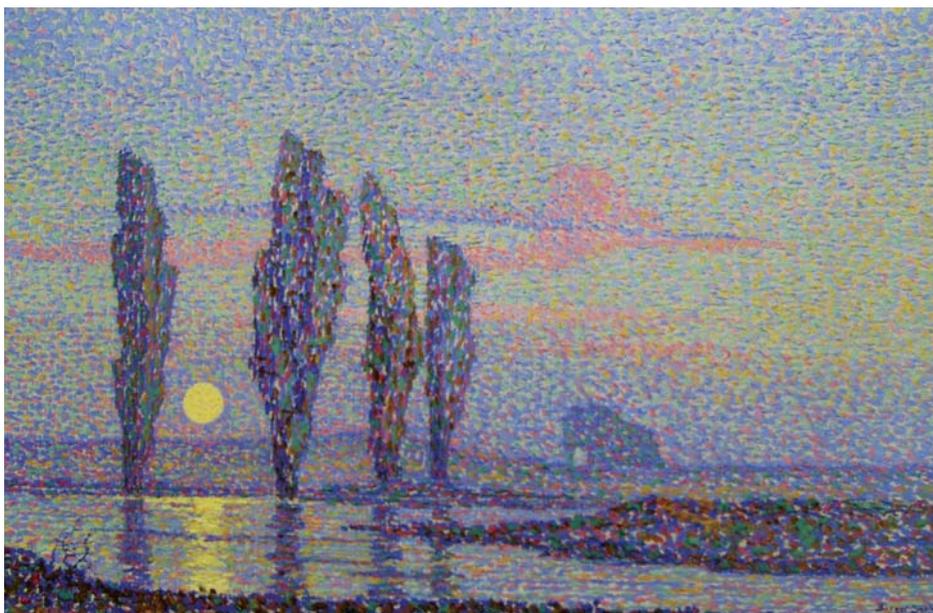
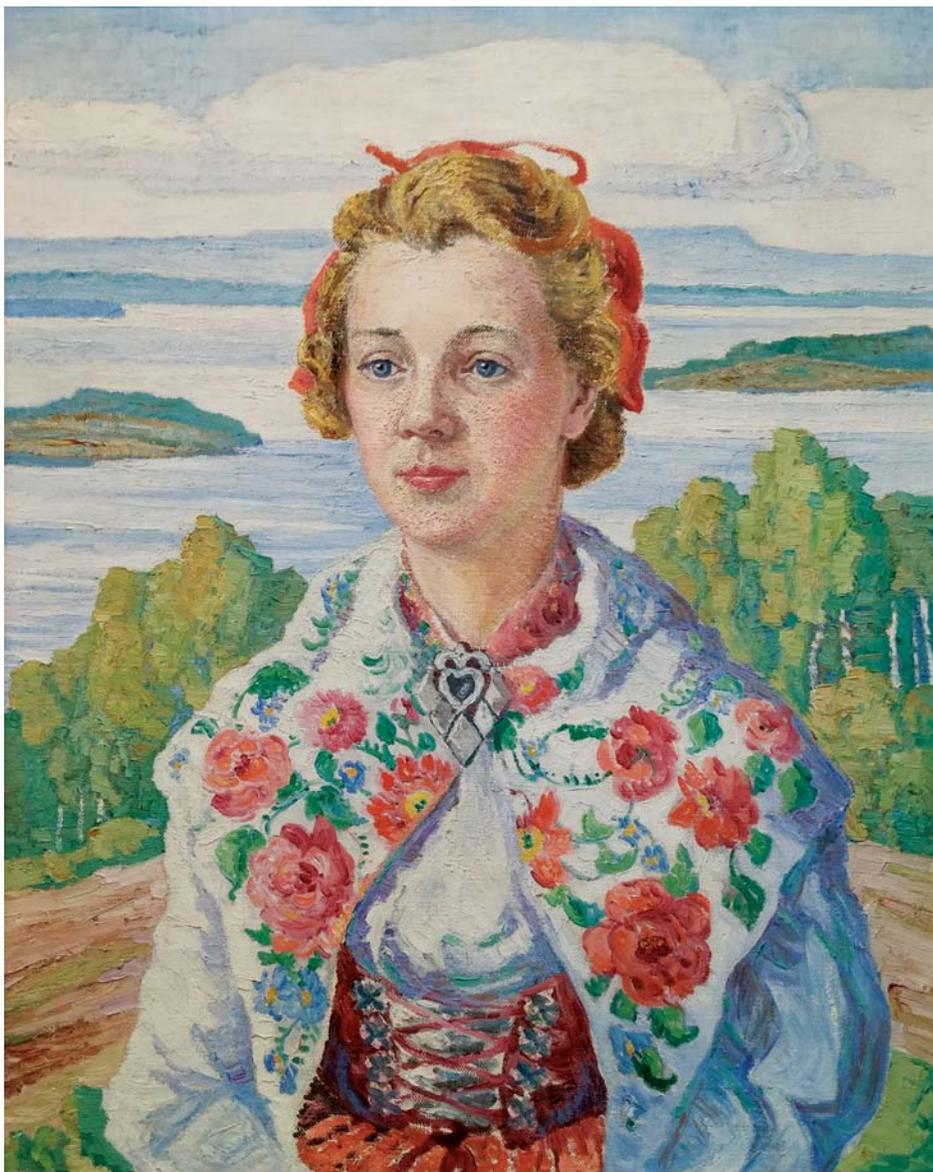
BELOW RIGHT: Birger Sandzén, *Moonlight and Creek*, c. 1912, o/c, 16 x 24, Ellen Strom Collection.

LEFT: Elof Wedin, *Factory Town*, 1939, o/c, 31 x 36<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>, Hillstrom Museum of Art, gift of the Reverend Richard L. Hillstrom.

anticipated in the founding of exhibition annuals and established art collections in public schools and libraries in their new communities of Lindsborg, Kansas; Chicago, Illinois; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. Birger Sandzén (1871-1954), who arrived in America in 1894, became serious about creating an environment in which the arts flourished and in developing an influential midwestern arts culture. He set out to advance an American art, attuned to a national need just as his Swedish mentors had done.

Sven Birger Sandzén was born in the rural parish of Blidsberg in the Västergötland agricultural province of Sweden. When Birger turned eight years, he was given his first watercolor set and then allowed to take drawing lessons. Following graduation from Skara College the young man informed his parents that he wished to pursue a career as a professional artist.

While waiting impatiently to be accepted into the Royal Academy's school, Sandzén registered at the *Tekniska Högskolan* [Trades University], a school for architects and craftsmen. This is probably where Sandzén first met Arvid Nyholm (1866-1927), a Stockholm-bred young man who was ostensibly studying architecture but wanted to be an artist. Nyholm knew Anders Zorn and he is believed to be among those who orchestrated the highly-regarded portrait painter into offering private lessons. This plan was the seed of the





ABOVE: Oscar Brousse Jacobson, *Children and the Sea*, 1910, o/c, 22 1/8 x 16, gift of the Sohlberg, Deere, Fry, Cochran, O'Leary Family Collection.

ABOVE LEFT: Carl Sprinchorn, *Purple Mountains*, c. 1946, o/c on aluminum panel, 16 x 28 1/4, Hillstrom Museum of Art, gift of the Reverend Richard L. Hillstrom.

LEFT: Birger Sandzén, *Rosa Bragoli*, 1891, o/c, 21 1/2 x 16, Greenough Collection.

RIGHT: Carl (Gustafson) Lotave, *Untitled (scene near Lindsborg)*, 1897, o/c, 12 3/4 x 16, gift of Margaret Eddy, through inheritance from B.G. and Sarah Gröndal.

BELOW RIGHT: Birger Sandzén, *Swedish Farm*, 1899, w/c, 12 x 15, Greenough Collection.



Artists League school, with classes led by painters Zorn, Bergh, and sculptor Per Hasselberg, that opened to the public in the fall of 1891. Sandzén, Nyholm, and four others, including Carl (Gustafsson) Lotave (1872-1924), began their lessons in Zorn's studio in October of the same year.

As a whole, the Artist League members were passionate about their country's landscape and the people in it. Sandzén fit in this environment comfortably. At some point during 1892 Sandzén must have been commissioned to paint and construct a standing screen with seven panels of recognizable Swedish landscape scenes. The screen reveals all the popular late nineteenth-century trends of *Japonisme*, the English Arts and Crafts movement, and the tenets of Swedish National Romanticism. The painted screen resurfaced in a March



1987 London auction of Scandinavian art. The artist's daughter, Margaret Sandzén Greenough (1909-1993), managed to place the winning bid and have the piece shipped home to the Sandzén Gallery.

In January of 1894 Sandzén enrolled in the Paris studio of Edmond François Aman-Jean, a noted Symbolist artist recommended by Bergh. He found himself surrounded by Americans, who may have inspired him to correspond with the president of Bethany College in Kansas, the Rev. Dr. Carl Swensson. Sandzén was offered a faculty position teaching modern languages and voice for \$40-\$45 dollars per month, plus (heated) room and board. By September of that year he had arrived in Lindsborg to begin. The painter Olof Grafström (1855-1933) was in charge of Bethany's art department and taught the painting and drawing courses. Although Grafström and Sandzén had very different training courses in Stockholm, they did



share an affection for Zorn in common.

When Grafström relocated to Rock Island, Illinois, to develop an art department

at Augustana College, Sandzén might have expected to take over art classes at Bethany, however, President Swensson felt the col-



ABOVE: Oscar Brouse Jacobson, *Portrait of Birger Sandzen*, 1902, o/c, 24 x 18, Greenough Collection.

LEFT: B.J.O. Nordfeldt, *Mending the Boat*, c. 1917, color woodcut, 11 x 12, Greenough Collection.

BELOW LEFT: Oscar Gunnarson, *Man Milking a Cow*, c. 1927, o/c, 17 1/2 x 23 1/2, gift in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Lindquist by their sons Donald and Roger Lindquist.

ABOVE RIGHT: Birger Sandzén, *Untitled* (7-panel standing screen), 1892, o/c on board, 69 3/4 x 150.

BELOW RIGHT: Alfred Jansson, *Autumn Landscape*, 1921, o/c, 11 x 14, Hillstrom Museum of Art purchase with funds donated by Dawn and Edward Michael.

advertising flyers to inundate the train depot the next day was undertaken. The next afternoon “everybody had one or more of our fliers in their hands.” The hall was packed, with artists walking among the visitors “serving as guides.” Soon dubbed the *Midwest Art Exhibition*, the shows grew larger every year, with more artists participating from further away and 2019 marking its 121st year.

Oscar Jacobson (1882-1966) studied with Sandzén at Bethany College, enrolling in the associated Bethany Academy art classes when he was just thirteen. Despite the age difference, Sandzén and Jacobson enjoyed ranging over the prairie hunting and sketching together. After graduating from the college, Jacobson found a posi-

lege still needed him to teach languages. Over the summer break of 1897, Swenson took a recruiting trip back to Sweden, taking Sandzén along. The artist tracked down his Artist League classmate Lotave and convinced him to come to Kansas.

Coinciding with the 1899 Eastertide performance of Handel's *Messiah*, Sandzén,

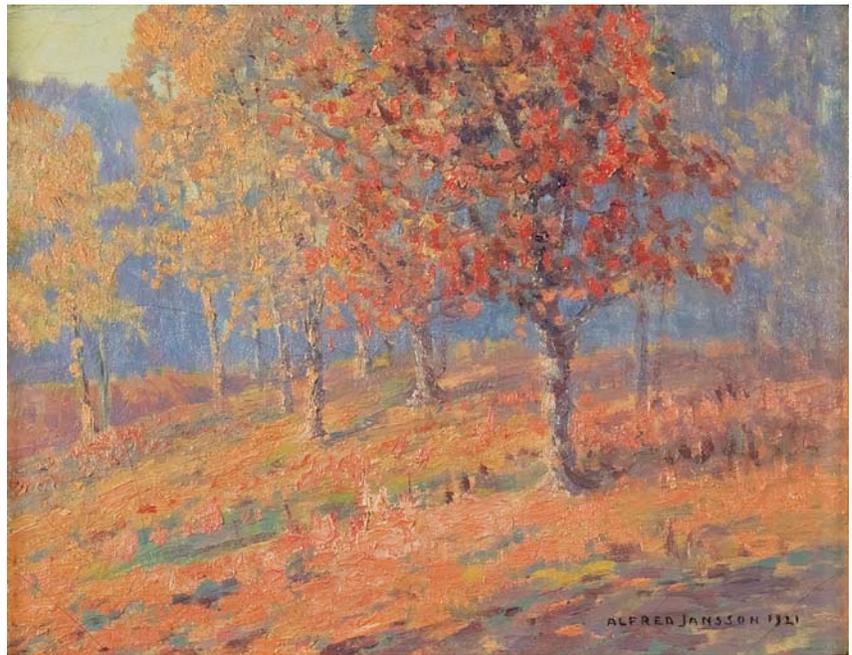
Lotave, and Lindsborg artist G.N. Malm established the first Swedish American annual art exhibition in the Midwest. The three men worked all night, anxious for the crowds to appreciate the Herculean effort and wondrous art works. However, the next day only an elderly woman, who could not see well, attended. A plan of printing



tion as attaché to the Royal Swedish Commission at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. Later he directed the art programs at the University of Oklahoma and was among the first to promote Native American artists, particularly the Kiowa Six.

Sandzén's sabbatical to Sweden and Western Europe in 1905-06 coincided with the beginnings of a long tradition of Swedish American art shows in Chicago. Sandzén received a letter from Nyholm informing him of the newly-created Swedish American Art Association that was preparing an exhibition in October to be held at a Chicago gallery. Nyholm suggested that Sandzén should have his friends in Lindsborg pack up and arrange for transport of eight canvasses, immediately.

After immigrating in 1889 from Sweden to complete a mural commission for the Swedish Building planned for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, Alfred Jansson (1863-1931) remained in Chicago. Along with Nyholm, he was deeply involved in Swedish American art circles and the Association's annuals. Jansson's work appeared in all the Swedish American exhibitions in Chicago at the Swedish Club and the Art Institute of Chicago. Sandzén also invited Jansson to show in the *Midwest Art Exhibition* at Bethany College several times.



B.J.O. Nordfeldt (1878-1955) first connected with Sandzén after the 1912 Swedish American exhibition at the Chicago Swedish Club. A long-standing friendship began with a few letters and an invitation to the 1913 *Midwest Art Exhibition*. Being an immigrant Swede greatly influenced the trajectory of Nordfeldt's career, and his connection to Kansas artists

came from an extremely strong Swedish American network. In 1891, the family settled in the Swedish neighborhoods around Andersonville, Chicago, and from 1896 to 1898 the young artist attended the school of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1914, Nordfeldt began summering in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and developed a new method of creating color



ABOVE: Birger Sandzén, *Untitled*, c. 1891, ink on paper, 8 x 5, Greenough Collection.  
 ABOVE LEFT: Birger Sandzén, *Still Life with Peonies*, 1913, o/c, 14 x 20, Greenough Collection.

LEFT: Raymond Jonson, *Pierrot*, 1914, o/c, 44 1/2 x 39, gift of Mrs. C. J. Smalley.  
 ABOVE RIGHT: Oscar Brousse Jacobson, *Winter Forest in Sweden*, 1914, o/c, 18 x 24, Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman, gift of Hal Johnson, 1983.

RIGHT: B.J.O. Nordfeldt, *Women on the Shore—Provincetown*, 1916, w/c and graphite on paper, 11 3/8 x 14 1/4, Hillstrom Museum of Art, gift of the Reverend Richard L. Hillstrom.

dent of Nordfeldt in Chicago, was invited to Bethany College's *Midwest Art Exhibition* for the first time in 1914 and exhibited in Lindsborg many times over the ensuing years. Jonson's *Pierrot* was shown in 1917 in the nearby McPherson High School annual and purchased by the exhibition's organizer, Carl Smalley. The McPherson school district art collection became so large that when the McPherson Museum opened at a new site in 1999, construction plans included an art gallery to exhibit the district's art.

In 1915 Sandzén invited the Swedish American artist John F. Carlson, Director of the Woodstock School of Landscape, to show several oils in the McPherson High School annual exhibition. In turn, Carlson invited Sandzén to visit Colorado Springs

woodcut prints, the "white line" print. He helped to found the Provincetown Printmakers group, the first American organization to promote the woodcut medium, as

well as celebrate the "white line" practitioners. Following World War I Nordfeldt moved to Santa Fe.

Raymond Jonson (1891-1982), a stu-

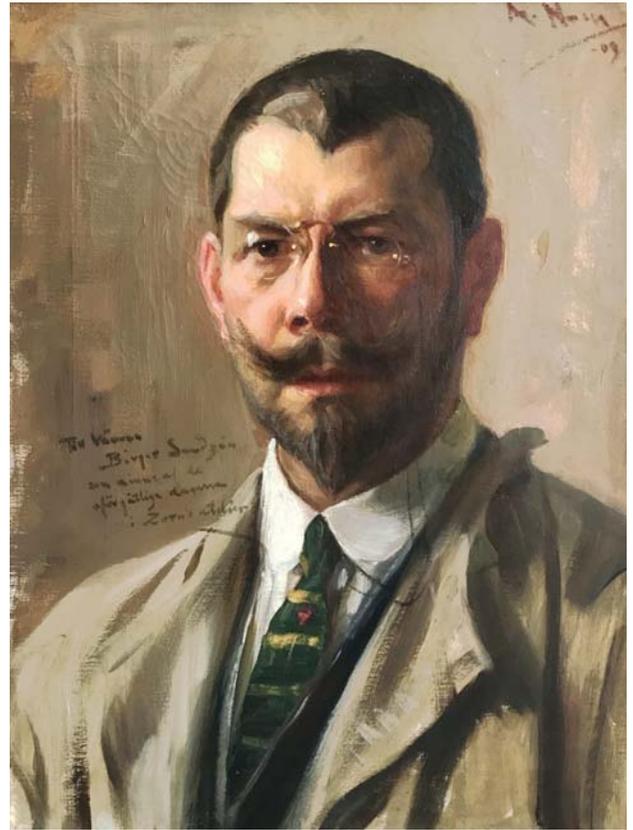


and lecture at the newly opened Broadmoor Art Academy summer school that Carlson directed. The Broadmoor Art Academy engaged Sandzén to teach landscape painting during the summers of 1923 and 1924.

An important contribution to the history of prints and democratic art was the founding of the Prairie Print Makers on the cusp of the Great Depression. Eleven charter members met in Sandzén's Lindsborg studio on December 28, 1930, to establish a print society that would attract a wide audience of artists and collectors and get affordable art into every home. The Prairie Print Makers set in place a subscription program through which a member would be offered a gift print each year at the price of \$5. Sandzén designed the first gift print.

Just a few years after founding the Prairie Print Makers, Sandzén established the Prairie Water Color Painters in con-





ABOVE: Arvid Nyholm, *Self Portrait*, 1909, o/c, 20 x 15, Greenough Collection.

ABOVE LEFT: Arvid Nyholm, *Bretagne*, 1912, o/c on board, 25 1/2 x 21, Bethany College Collection.

LEFT: Bessie Helström, *Untitled*, early twentieth-century, o/c, 11 7/8 x 13 3/4.

RIGHT: Birger Sandzén, *Sunset in the Mountains*, c. 1923, o/c, 18 x 24, gift of Thelma Tichenor.

BELOW RIGHT: B.J.O. Nordfeldt, *Buffalo Dance*, c. 1919, o/c, 27 x 32, Oscar Thorsen Collection.

junction with the new Kansas State Federation of Art. The mission of the Federation was to make high quality, low cost traveling exhibitions of art available to Kansas towns, with particular accommodations for underserved populations in rural areas. Ex-

hibitions could be rented by the week for an average of \$5 per week. Both the Prairie Print Makers and the Prairie Water Color Painters had new shows offered each academic year, along with a few single-artist or thematic collections such as “Kansas

Painters” or “Architectural Drawings.” The rental shows were very popular and soon demand extended beyond the state’s borders to Oklahoma, Colorado, and occasionally as far as California and New York, and once to Derby, England.

Margareta Elisabeth Sandzén inherited her father’s creative talent, gravitating to drawing and coloring at a very young age. At seven years old, Birger described his daughter to his brother Gustaf as cheerful and lively, observing “Greta thrives best in the studio. When I stretch out the canvas she stands by me with tacks in an ink bottle,” handing them out one by one, and then stands by at the paint box and “picks



out tubes of paint she wants me to use.”  
Margareta became known as a portrait painter, earning commissions, and left behind a large number of portraits of family and friends, such as the canvas of fellow Lindsborg artist Signe Larson, outfitted in traditional Swedish garb. She was devastated when her father passed away on June 22, 1954, but was determined to carry on his work. Through the efforts of his family his legacy lives on in the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery in Lindsborg, Kansas. The Gallery opened doors in the fall of 1957, co-directed by Margaret and her husband Charles Pelham Greenough, who curated exhibitions of contemporary artists they knew and admired, along with ever-present shows of Birger Sandzén’s paintings and prints.

—For annotation see the accompanying exhibition catalogue from which this article has been adapted.

