

Pharmaceutical subjects and symbols in Swedish art

Gunnel Wallin

St Damien

One fascinating aspect of interest in art is that the science of art is very often a living science. Something you took for granted yesterday is not always so today. Until recently, a mural painting representing St Damien was thought to have been made by the most famous Swedish church painter of the Middle Ages, Albertus Pictor. But later research on the St Damien painting has shown that the technique is not typical of Albertus Pictor's works. It has also been revealed that there often are two layers of paintings in the church but in this case only one. It was quite common for Albertus to paint over older pictures and he has done so in other places in the same church. The St Damien picture had been completed before Albertus Pictor's active period.

Another earlier opinion was that due to the Reformation, we have few paintings of saints left in our churches. But as a matter of fact it was not until the 17th and 18th centuries that many pictures were painted over with lime, which was then the fashion of the time. The truth is that you can find many paintings of Nordic saints in Swedish churches; the lime has been washed away in several instances, but this one is the only painting of St Damien.

The Blackamoor

A Stockholm pharmacy, the Blackamoor, was established in 1670 and closed down in 1978. The owner of the pharmacy appears to have chosen this name because he wanted to impress his clients with the fact that he imported remedies from exotic countries. There is a painting by David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl from 1670, the same year that the pharmacy was established. It is from the Swedish court, showing that there was a moor in the king's entourage. I think that naming the pharmacy the Blackamoor was also a way to give it status. At that time, another pharmacy in Stockholm was called Guenon. Two

guenons are to be found in the picture. There is also a parrot – but we have no record of such a pharmacy in Sweden.

C W Scheele

No portrait was ever made of our most famous pharmacist, C W Scheele, during his lifetime, 1742-1786. Therefore, no one knows what he looked like. In 1892, the Swedish sculptor John Börjesson made a statue, which has its place in a park in Stockholm. But what you really see is one of the sculptor's sons.

Carl Milles, a Swedish artist who worked in the USA for many years, made a sculpture of Scheele in 1912. It actually resembles a caretaker at the house of Milles'. It is to be seen in Köping. It was in the Köping pharmacy Scheele worked from 1775 until his death in 1786.

In 1930, a miniature was bought by the Swedish Academy of Pharmaceutical Sciences under the impression that it was a true likeness of Scheele. In 1942, 200 years after his birth, a great number of postage stamps were printed showing this picture and distributed all over the world. Until then, no one had understood that the painting could not have been made during Scheele's lifetime. The clothes worn by the man in the picture were not common until the beginning of the 19th century.

Two years after Scheele's death the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences decided to honour his memory with a commemorative coin. Scheele visited the Academy only twice during his lifetime and the last time was eleven years earlier. To be able to make a portrait of Scheele seven members of the Academy who remembered him from that time worked together with the artist who was to make the gravure. The result was a kind of phantom portrait but nowadays this is regarded as bearing the nearest likeness to Scheele.

A Comic Picture

Albert Engström (1869-1940), a highly appreciated artist in Sweden, made beautiful paintings of nature, but he is known mostly for his humorous works and founded a comic paper called *Strix*. Quite often he made fun of pharmacists and their clients. He was familiar with the business through his brothers – one was a pharmacist, another a physician. Albert Engström was a professor at the Swedish Academy of Art and was also a member of the Swedish

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Academy. One picture shows a farmer entering a pharmacy and asking for morphine for his mother-in-law.

The pharmacist – “Yes, but morphine is a poison. Do you have a prescription?”

The farmer – “No, no, but I have her portrait.

Another picture shows an old woman lying in her bed, with all her remedies beside her on the bedside table, and knowing she is going to die.

She says to her husband – “When I am dead, you’ll wander around here like a hermit with no one to take care of you.”

The husband – “Don’t worry, I am already engaged to be married.”

Christ as Apothecary

A Swedish artist, Uno Vallman, born in 1913, was a close friend of the late pharmacist Karl-Vilhelm Gorton and, on some occasions, pharmacies inspired him in his art. K-V Gorton, who lived in a town called Nora, often held art expositions in his pharmacy, which was nicknamed Nora Art Pharmacy. One of the paintings, from 1981, is a modern version of the old theme “Christ as Apothecary”. You can see Christ standing at the counter, blessing the remedies and helping handicapped and sick patients. The animals on the painting refer to remedies from the animal kingdom and there is also a fish, a symbol of Christ. In the background Christ is to be seen on the mountain after the Resurrection.

In Sweden, we have three paintings from the 18th century with the same motive. One of them is in the pharmacy museum at Skansen in Stockholm. Skansen is an outdoor museum with a small zoo, old buildings, farmsteads, etc. showing the cultural history of Sweden.

Could Deprol have saved van Gogh’s ear?

Ann-Sofie Sidén, a Swedish artist living in New York and widely recognised in both Europe and the USA, has been interested in how art and artistic expression are applied in advertising pharmaceutical products. She has made an installation of different advertisements for psychodrugs, which she found in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* during the period 1966-1980. The title comes from one of these ads.

It contains two pictures by van Gogh – one showing a depressive person and the other a very sunny landscape. It is often said that art can be regarded as a direct reflection of the artist's inner state.

The Rosary

In 1997, the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm had an exposition, where a diptych, “The Joyful Mysteries”, was part of an installation made by two artists, Ingrid Falk and Gustavo Aguerre. The left side of the diptych is a pair of surgical gloves; the right side is a rosary made out of ordinary red-coloured tablets with scores in the middle. I talked to Ingrid Falk and asked her for an explanation, but artists are not always keen to make any statement and often say that it is in the eye of the beholder. I interpret it as two ways of seeking good health: perhaps one for the body and one for the soul.