

TILL KARIN

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Karin Larsson

– Were Karin Larsson alive today, we would certainly be seeing her in our interior design magazines as a designer, interior designer or even a garden expert, says Marianne Nilsson, curator of the Carl Larsson estate.



Karin Larsson's letters, now in Uppsala University Library, are a mine of information. They show the reader her thoughts about the family, art and the textiles that contributed significantly to the creating of Sundborn.

Marianne Nilsson herself discovered Karin Larsson's textile works in the mid 1960s, and is constantly finding new design elements and ingenious instances of problem solving in the heap of textiles preserved here at the family estate in Sundborn, some kilometres from Falun.

During the tour she gave us round the house groups of visitors passed at regular intervals. There has always been a lot of interest in the Larsson couple's home. Each year between 55,000 and 60,000 people visit the world famous home. And according to Marianne Nilsson, there was been a marked increase of interest in what Karin Larsson created.



The spaced weave curtains in orange were woven so that a golden light would filter through the window.

KARIN LARSSON, née Bergöö, started life in Hallsberg on October 3rd 1859. She was given a typical bourgeois upbringing which at that time meant handwork was a natural part of it. Her mother Hilda, herself a skilled embroiderer, shared her skills generously. In addition to handwork, literature was Karin's mother's great love, which she was keen to encourage in her children. Karin's father Adolf was a successful merchant. He established his enterprise in Hallsberg, between Gothenburg and Stockholm, in the middle of the developing railway network junction. And Karin's maternal aunt, Elise Sahlqvist, built up one of the country's leading hat factories.

It was this business like and creative setting in which Karin Bergöö grew up, and when, at the age of fourteen, she went to Stockholm to study, it was with her parent's active support.

SHE BEGAN on her artistic path immediately by applying to the Slöjdskola (School of Crafts), the forerunner of the Technical College that later became Konstfack. It was there she learnt to engrave on wood and metal in addition to perspective drawing and life drawing. In the years following she acquired skills in painting and drawing and on 3rd September 1878 was accepted as a student at

the Academy of Art, only nine years after the first female student had been allowed to register at the college. One of her fellow students was Otilia Adelborg, and the bond of friendship that grew between them during their time of study was to be life-long.

In spring 1882, the 23-year-old Karin Bergöö travelled with some friends around Europe, passing through the great metropolitan centres such as Berlin, Dresden, Prague, Vienna and Graz. Their final stop was Paris. The trip formed a natural component in their artistic education, and after visits to the Louvre and many encounters with the known artists of that time, they moved on to the little artists colony at Grez, 70 kilometres south of Paris. It was here she was to meet the love of her life, Carl Larsson. The first time she mentioned him was in a letter to her parents, dated August 13th of that year:

Carl Larsson and a Nordic Mr. Lund have abandoned their pension and come over to our place, so we have a lot of fun.

One month later Carl Larsson wrote to Karin's parents. *Shall I get it over with quickly? I love your daughter! Superlatives that would indicate the degree of my love are unnecessary, for I am saying I love her as a man of honour should love a young woman of honour. Who am I? There is*



not much to show yet! It is not my present position that confirms me in the hope of proving worthy of your daughter, but my firm belief and conviction in the future that I can create with my strength and willpower. My love has raised me from the depths of despondency; but I need a year of assiduous endeavour to now build and plan the future. I will then return, that more worthy than today – to be able to dare to request your daughter's hand in marriage.

On June 12th 1883, nine months later, they were married in Adolfs Fredriks Church, Stockholm.

– I think they did have a very happy marriage, full of respect and playfulness, said Marianne Nilsson as we stood in the entrance hall of their home.

We crouched to enter the low door, finding ourselves right away in the *Verkstaden* (The Workshop). In the middle stood the gobelin loom, as if Karin Larsson had just left it.

Karin Larsson began weaving only at the age of 40. The eight children had by then been born and the studio which Carl Larsson formerly used had been turned into what is now called Verkstaden. Apart from the gobelin tapestry loom, there was a loom and carpentry bench for the children. One can imagine all the creativity budding in this home. As far removed from a proper middle class turn of the century home as you can get. A home which was to become an inspiration and model for a huge number of people for a long time after. Much of this is thanks to Karin Larsson.

She would draw the designs for her weaves in charcoal on wrapping paper which she fastened under the warp. In her letters to her mother she describes the strength of her longings for the loom and how she sometimes would forsake the household jobs to steal some time for weaving.

After they had moved in 1901 for good from Stockholm to Sundborn, Carl Larsson

top / The recipe for the vertical striped blue-white repp rugs came from her parents home. Today IKEA and others have copied them, and they look more modern than ever.

centre / Karin designed the bedspread for the local weavers so that they would have something to get their teeth into. **below** / The Four Elements was woven by Karin Larsson for her husband's fiftieth birthday. Karin sewed small pom-poms on the purchased peasant weaving and the cushion with the Jugend design is one of the many embroideries at Sundborn.



son continued to travel abroad, or with his commissioned work around Sweden. Karin and the children mostly stayed at home. If she went along the trip would sometimes go in unexpected directions. The aim might be to visit friends in Falun, but a chance desire might move them on and they could suddenly land up in the middle of Berlin.

The summer when Carl Larsson painted the watercolours for *Mitt hem*, however, they were at home. The rain was bucketing down and the restless Carl was in a foul mood as it was impossible to paint outside.

– Paint inside then. Paint our home, said Karin Larsson, reminding him of a successful watercolour he had done earlier with one of the children as the subject.

So he created a series which was to be displayed at the 1897 World Exhibition in Stockholm and met with such an unexpected and exuberant reception. It receives, for example, a mention in Ellen Keys book *Skönhet för alla*, and there was a write-up about their home in the trend-setting magazine of the day, *The Studio*. The indoor settings of the home showed Karin's textiles, her colour schemes, flower arrangements and the children dressed in the clothes Karin created for them. All fashioned with her awareness and sure feeling for colour and form.

– Perhaps that is what fascinates me the most when I look at her textiles, said Marianne Nilsson. The refined way she uses the whole colour palette.

Our tour round the house continued into the Dining Room. Hanging over the sofa was Karin's first tapestry, *The Four Elements*. She wove it on a gobelin loom she got from Handarbetets Vänner. It was woven for Carl's fiftieth birthday and took a couple of years to weave. Many of the subsequent weaves were gifts for Carl. For Christmas and birthdays.

She would weave the livelier and freer textiles on the gobelin loom, often in close proximity to Carl's easel, where she would make the final judgment about a picture whilst weaving.

– Leave it alone Carl. It is finished now, she is quoted as saying in Carl Larsson's memoirs entitled, *Jag*.

And according to the accounts of several witnesses, he did listen to the person that in his view had a keener eye and better sense of colour than himself.



Karin Larssons' textiles often show a liberating lack of pedantry, and she herself expressed this as one should see the presence of the hand. Out with everything that breathed routine and predictability.

Her next big textile work was a tablecloth for the library table. A chequered border was woven on the gobelin loom and later stitched to a white woollen fabric. On the tablecloth there is an inlaid pear. The copy of a real pear that one of the children had brought in to mother. A clear indication that the children were always present. The tablecloth was a Christmas gift for Carl in 1908, three years after she had started it.

The more than 600 letters to her own mother, apart from describing life at Lilla Hyttnäs, give a clear guide as to when and how her textiles came about. In one of the letters she begged her mother for the recipe for the lengthways striped repp rugs of her childhood. And today, a century later, they are still in. The copies by IKEA lie in the Drawing Room at Sundborn surrounded by white painted furniture.

One floor up, in what is called the Children's Room there is a remarkable hanging which separates the room where Karin slept with the children from Carl's room with the singular bed. The hanging was woven in a technique that cannot be likened to anything. Some describe

it as macramé, others as a type of kelim technique. She herself just did what she did without thinking that much about what it should be called.

You have to dream up your weaves, she wrote in one of her letters.

The hanging was a response to the nameday present in the form of a painted border that Carl gave her in 1894.

When one's eye is disposed to see her textiles, one can happily walk round the house for many hours and just feast on them. In addition to the well made folk embroideries with geometric forms, adorned with tassels or fringes, there are intense tapestry weaves in vibrant colour ranges. A seat cushion purchased at an auction has been given small thick pom-poms. A gossamer flower peeps out from a white curtain and the couple worked closely together on several of the textiles. Such as for the tapestry *Pegasus* in the studio, where Carl made the cartoon and Karin wove it up.

PEGASUS IS ONE OF THE FEW originals the visitor can still see at Lilla Hyttnäs today. The original textiles have been put away because of fading and the

wear and tear of time, and skilled embroiderers and weavers have copied many of Karin Larsson's textiles. Partly so that we can have a truer picture of how the original colours looked, but above all to save the originals for posterity.

On the next opening there is an article on one of the weavers, Berit Lindgren, who with her meticulous work and accuracy has revitalized Karin Larsson's textiles.

When Carl Larsson passed away, Karin was left on her own at Lilla Hyttnäs. The diaries she wrote in her latter years tell us some of her thoughts.

Weaving was still an important part of her life. She mostly wove functional weaves and useful textiles for her children's homes. On November 28th 1920, she wrote

At present I'm weaving rag rugs with wefts of many memories. Here, red streaks from the little girls red coats I made them and in which their father often painted them. The white rags were once baby clothes. A blue-spotted strip is from a dress in which I modelled with the children running naked amidst the woody growth at Bullerholmen

The rug was for Kersti. Λ

Replicating Karin Larsson's woven textiles

Once Karin Larsson's textiles, dating back nearly a century, had slowly begun fading, something needed to be done. Berit Lindgren, a weave teacher from Stockholm, was consequently given the commission to replicate the art weaves. This work brought her closer to Karin Larsson both in her person and as an artist.

NEARLY ALL the textiles at Sundborn are by and large now copies. The originals are looked after by the Family Association and stored at Sundborn.

A good ten years ago, when Berit Lindgren was asked if she wanted to weave some of the copies, she regarded it as a mark of trust and a challenge. It was some years earlier, at the end of the 1970s that she had visited Sundborn.

– I was at the time quite overwhelmed by what I saw. And it was Karin Larsson that impressed me the most, both the person she appeared to have been and her textile work.

Then some years later, when Berit Lindgren was about to start on the work of representing the originals, she returned to Sundborn and selected the first weave. It was Love's Rose, the hanging like a bead embroidery suspended between the couple's sleeping areas.

– I suppose it was because it challenged all my weaving skills, she said.

The hanging was woven and knotted in cotton twine and wool and it took time for Berit Lindgren to work out how it had been carried out technically. She wove it on a loom and wound it bit by bit onto the cloth beam as it progressed. On one occasion Berit Lindgren was paid a visit by one of Karin and Carl Larsson's children, Brita. She was then an older lady, but she had a clear memory of her mother's textiles.

After looking at the weave for a while Brita asked her, - Shouldn't there be a little snake somewhere?

And sure there was, but it had hidden itself in the weaving already rolled up on the cloth beam.

BERIT LINDGREN had always wanted to be a textile teacher, but was not given a place on the course. She was left-handed. Instead she trained as a weave teacher at *Johanna Brunssons*. Before that she did a course arranged through the Handcraft Association in Malmö. A course which mainly involved

the copying of old Skåne textiles. Useful skills which came into their own when she later worked her way through the replicating of the Sundborn textiles.

All the textiles woven by Berit Lindgren have called for different skills with regard to technique and knowledge of materials. She has woven them both on vertical looms and horizontal warps. And for each weave she researched the correct shades and materials.

After Love's Rose she decided to copy the big woollen tablecloth with its chequered border. The border was woven separately on an upright gobelin loom, and when finished attached to a big piece of broadcloth. The borders are only on the sides that face into the room, and on one corner a pear was woven in. The vadmal cloth covering the table top has no decorations. Books can pile up and people can be together.

– She had an incredible amount of ingenuity, Karin Larsson, and there are a lot of examples of it in this weave, said Berit Lindgren.



left / the chair upholstery fabric is unique to each chair.

middle / Berit Lindgren made two copies of The Four Elements. One is at Sundborn, the other is in Karin Larsson's parents' home in Hallsberg.

right / Accuracy and patience. Those are the most important factors in working on the copies, according to Berit Lindgren.

below / Berit Lindgren replicated Karin Larsson's rölatan throw with exact precision.

Down in The Workshop at Sundborn there are today a number of blue-green chairs upholstered in handwoven fabric. When Berit Lindgren was going to weave some new upholstery fabric it turned out the seats had already been re-upholstered. But a close relative of Karin Larsson, who had seen them in their original form, commented that the current version was not correct. The new seats were all identical, while she remembered that each chair had pattern elements in different places.

When they then took out the original fabrics it turned out they were indeed completely different to each other. Berit Lindgren then wove the fabric unique for each seat, exactly as Karin Larsson had. They were then as they had once been.

The Workshop at the Carl Larsson estate also contains the unfinished gobelin tapestry called The Four Elements. Geometric patterns are formed from a mass of colours in bold combination.

For this weave, as for all the weaves, Berit was responsible for the dyeing of

the yarn. Her meticulous precision was applied throughout, which meant it took time to find the right shades. Assisting her was a good friend, a skilled dyer, and together they attempted to reproduce the colours of the original.

Which is not always so easy. Different colours look different in daylight, electric light and evening light.

– I might in the evening have decided on a shade and then changed my mind the next day. Everything has to develop gradually, said Berit Lindgren.

Berit Lindgren wove the copies during the autumn and winter part of the year, when the Carl Larsson estate is closed.

The first weave, Love's Rose, was made in 1981 and then came roughly one weave a year. Ten in all.

In Love's Rose, as in several of the other weaves, there are small weaving errors. Errors that Berit was careful to include.

– Without the weaving errors and an exact copy of Karin Larsson's personal weave technique, they aren't copies, she continued.

The life work of the Larsson couple was shown over 1997-8 at the Nordiska Museum in Stockholm and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London attracting a great deal of attention.

MARIANNE NILSSON, curator at Sundborn, told us that those in charge at the Victoria and Albert Museum would have rather had the original textiles on display but chose instead to show the copies. They would demonstrate best the rich colour palette and bold colour combinations in Karin Larsson's textile work.

BERIT LINDGREN was invited both to the Nordiska Museum and the Victoria and Albert. Nowhere was it mentioned that Berit Lindgren was behind the weaves on display. She herself says she is not bothered that much by it. For her the whole project around Karin Larsson meant something completely different.

– I got the chance to get closer to her by weaving her weaves. That was fine for me, she said. A