A history of dead ends: the historiography of early twentieth-century Swedish mural painting

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Introduction

The title of this article, *A history of dead ends*, is what I would like to call the established Swedish historiography of mural painting from the early twentieth-century until the mid-twentieth century. The literature on Swedish public art is extensive, but only a few studies have been conducted from a critical historiographical perspective that tries to explain or reformulate the history of public art in Sweden. This article does not aim to reformulate this historiography, but rather to describe and explain a key feature of its structure – the occurrence of a series of never-realised proposals for mural paintings as key monuments. During the studied period, public art was always discussed as permanently installed and often made for a specific place. If we think of the history of mural painting as a history of actual accomplished and realised works of art on their intended sites, then the inclusion of never-realised proposals as important paintings in this historiography points at something missing from the public arena – a never-realised possibility. In other words, they are not there representing art we actually can see as part of the urban visual culture, but something else. I am not arguing for a historiography solely based on realised works of art or whether these proposals

1 I here refer to mural painting as a sub-section of public art that is essentially organically connected with architecture.
3 This critical historiographical perspective I discuss here takes its departure from the understanding of history writing as in one or the other way biased and never far from fiction, as discussed in, for example, Hayden White, ‘The Value of Narrative in the Representation of Reality’, in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, 1–25. However, fiction is not necessarily tantamount to untrue or even false.
4 Although the permanency and site specificity of public art has become increasingly complex in recent years, it was still relatively unproblematic during the first half of the twentieth-century. For a discussion on site specificity, see Rosalind Krauss, ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’, *October*, 8, 1979, and Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002. My point here is that the permanency of public art in a material sense was taken for granted during the studied period.
deserve a place in art history or not. Instead, I see these ostensibly ‘paradoxical’ inclusions as excellent indicators of the underlying narrative structure of this historiography. These inclusions, I will argue, not only point at a narrow definition of Modernism as the selective norm, but also a story based on a centre–periphery relation between the international avant-garde and the national and regional traditions. In this article I will question this narrative because with this biased focus on highlighting the few moments when Swedish artists had come into direct contact with the international avant-garde, we have been ignorant about regional developments and have consequently further strengthened a hierarchical narrative of art history.

In this context, Skissernas Museum – Museum of Artistic Process and Public Art in Lund is of special relevance because it focus on sketches for public art – not only realised works of art, but also sketches for never-realised proposals. This makes the museum’s collection and exhibitions ideal to analyse with the purpose to understand the Swedish historiography of mural painting. Although we could follow this historiography from when it was established in the mid-twentieth century until today, I will in this article focus on two cases. The first case is the Swedish artist Isaac Grünewald’s (1889–1946) proposal Triangle for the decoration of the marriage chamber in Stockholm Law Court from 1914, including both its role in the established historiography and at Skissernas Museum. The second case is an analysis of one of the most ambitious efforts to summarise and reformulate Swedish Modernism, the exhibition Utopia & Reality: Modernity in Sweden 1900–1960. This exhibition was arranged in the year 2000 by Moderna Museet (the Museum of Modern Art) in collaboration with the Swedish Museum of Architecture and Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. My reason for focusing on this exhibition is not only because it was presented as a rereading of Swedish Modernism, but also because it had a great international impact because the exhibition later was displayed at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture in New York and the catalogue was translated into English.

Skissernas Museum

The collection at Skissernas Museum was initially based on the possibility of a separation between the creative process and the final result in the creation of public art (if the work of art has been realised as intended). Skissernas Museum is, in other words, a very unusual museum in that it almost exclusively collects and exhibits

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5 Skissernas Museum was founded by Ragnar Josephson (1891–1966), professor of art history at Lund University, as an archive in 1934. In 1941, it became a public museum.
sketches for public art, materials that are seldom preserved in museums. Perusing the permanent exhibition at the museum reveals an enormous collection of sketches and models, most of them presented only as ideas and never realised at their intended sites. It is an appealing and stimulating collection, especially in the way this material points towards something not yet realised, something becoming. The exhibitions are consequently both referring to art as an important part of our visual urban culture and art as ideas, possibilities, and dreams. In collecting and exhibiting more or less complete series of sketches for public art, the purpose of the museum is to make it possible to follow, based on this material evidence, the creative process of the creation of art. Although the study of the creative process has been the main purpose of the museum, it has always had a permanent exhibition of public art in Sweden complemented with exhibitions of work from the other Nordic countries and an international collection.

In *Museum Skepticism*, David Carrier writes about paintings as vehicles for time travel in museums and the power that art has to give the viewer a feeling of travelling back to earlier eras. He describes this as pure fantasy, before going on to say, ‘[b]ut this is an important fantasy because it helps explain why we value art. We care about these artifacts because they allow us to be in contact with the same paintings as were described by Vasari, Diderot, and Baudelaire.’ However, these artefacts not only allow for this feeling of a historical connection, they also bring into focus certain parts of history. The display of these selected artefacts in public museums functions as a plot-structure creating a historical narrative. Time travel in museums consequently generates narratives – art histories. Of paramount importance here is the collectability of the material and the choice to display it in an art institutional context. From that point of view, Skissernas Museum plays a very important role in the historiography of public art in Sweden.

**Grünewald’s Triangle – a breakthrough or a setback for Modernism?**

In 2007, there was an exhibition at Skissernas Museum featuring the work of Grünewald as a mural painter. The exhibition could, of course, not show any actual murals, but instead presented a large collection of sketches for murals. One of the first sketches the visitors saw upon entering the exhibition was Grünewald’s proposal for *City and the Country* (1918), which was for the decoration of the upper

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7 Although the majority of the collection is sketches, the museum also has several examples of completed works of art such as Sonia Delaunay’s large paintings *The Instrument panel*, *The Propeller* and *The Engine* from 1937. These three paintings were part of the decoration of the *Palais de l’Air* at the World Fair in Paris 1937.


9 Carrier, 148.

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stairwell at Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. Although the work was never completed, this sketch sets the tone for Grünewald’s lofty ambitions as a mural painter – a young artist, on his own initiative, submitting a proposal for the decoration of the most prestigious art institution in Sweden. Later in his career, Grünewald became very successful as a mural painter and stage designer with prestigious assignments, for example, the decoration of the so-called Grünewald Hall at the Stockholm Concert Hall in 1926.

Walking through the exhibition, I was able to study one project after the other, most of them paintings that do not exist as murals on their intended walls. Most of the plans for mural paintings presented in the exhibition were never realised as such. But, because most public art is the result of competitions, this is, of course, not a surprise, and definitely not something unique for Grünewald.

A former director of Skissernas Museum, and one of the authorities on public art in Sweden, Gunnar Bråhammar (1922–2011) wrote one of the chapters in the exhibition catalogue. Here he describes Grünewald’s first proposal for a mural painting as ‘[…] the breakthrough of Modernism in Swedish monumental painting.’\(^\text{11}\) The painting he referred to was not hanging in the same gallery rooms as the rest of the exhibition; it was already hanging in the museum’s permanent exhibition of public art in Sweden. There Grünewald’s proposal Triangle for the decoration of the marriage chamber in Stockholm Law Court, made in 1914 but never actualised as a mural, has been displayed as one of the most central works of art in the museum’s collection since it opened in 1941 (fig. 1).\(^\text{12}\)

![Image of Ragnar Josephson standing in the exhibition of public art in Sweden in 1953. Isaac Grünewald’s proposal Triangle for the decoration of the marriage chamber in Stockholm Law Court is displayed in the background (photo: Lennart Nilsson/Scanpix).](image)


\(^{12}\) On the opening of the museum and the first display of paintings at the museum, see Qvarnström, 2010, 302–309.
In the competition for this decoration, Grünewald earned a prize but did not win. Instead, it was the older, well-established muralist Georg Pauli (1855–1935) who won the competition. Interestingly, however, none of the proposals submitted to the competition were commissioned because the building committee for the construction of the law court rejected them all in the end. So, in a sense, the competition resulted in nothing; it was a big failure. Instead, the architect behind the building, Carl Westman (1866–1936), made a sketch for the marriage chamber. Filip Månsson’s (1864–1933) decoration firm later used this sketch as a starting point for the actual painting we still see in the room today. The name of the artist who actually painted this mural was Olle Emanuel Nordmark (1890–1973), an artist almost totally unknown to art historians today (fig. 2).\footnote{Qvarnström, 81–151.}

At Skissernas Museum we were able to see all of the prize-awarded proposals for the decoration, and also some other sketches displaying a wide range of solutions for the decoration. What we did not find exhibited was the sketch by Westman or any other material related to what can actually be seen in the marriage chamber. Westman’s sketch remained unknown, or more likely of no interest, until I tracked it to the home of Westman’s great-grandson in 2008.\footnote{The sketch has, since spring 2017, been incorporated into the permanent exhibition, loaned from the owner, due to a great extent to my dissertation about the competition, which made the museum personnel aware of Westman’s sketch.}
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It is not only Skissernas Museum in Lund that until recently has not shown any interest in the actual painting in the marriage chamber or in Westman’s sketch. Reading through the Swedish literature on early twentieth-century art, one will not find much about the painting in the marriage chamber. Until recently, the only published picture of the painting in the marriage chamber I have managed to find is in a book about Swedish textiles, and this picture actually illustrates the carpet on the floor and not the painting on the wall behind it. The other prize-awarded sketches by Oscar Brandtberg (1886–1957), Ture Lundgren (year of birth and death unknown), Pauli, Ture Tideblad (1889–1967), and Olof Ågren (1874–1962) have been displayed at the museum since the 1950s, but primarily presented as more or less traditional contrasts to Grünewald’s modernist proposal. The permanent exhibition, although changed in details several times and complemented with new works of art, has always been based on a roughly chronological narrative starting on the south wall with the sketches for decoration of the marriage chamber. In the display at Skissernas Museum, Grünewald’s full-scale sketch Triangle, dominating the south wall of the exhibition hall, consequently has emerged as a starting point for a narrative of public art in Sweden (fig. 3). This starting point clearly shows a narrative emerging from the opposition between Grünewald’s avant-garde position and traditional academism.

In Swedish art historiography, Grünewald’s sketch Triangle is generally thought of, as Bråhammar stated, as the breakthrough of Modernism in Swedish mural painting. Considering that his proposal was rejected, this statement sounds contradictory. But in conjunction with this statement, it is also often described as ‘[…] setback for Modernism and a great disappointment for Grünewald.’ In the, until recently, most important book in establishing a narrative of twentieth-century Swedish art, Den svenska konsten under 1900-talet (1955), by Rolf Söderberg, Grünewald’s sketch Triangle maintains an important position. Söderberg


16 This is at least how the display at the museum has been presented as in one of few introductions to the museum’s collection, Gunnar Bråhammar & Kristina Garmer, Vägar till konstverket: skisser ur museets samlingar, Lund: Skissernas Museum, 1981, 10–13.

17 Even though this analysis is based on the latest major rearrangements of the permanent exhibition in 2005 and 2017, the general structure in this exhibition follows the earlier arrangement in the museum since 1959 when the newly built Swedish Hall opened. For a comparative analysis of the rearrangement of the permanent exhibition of public art in Sweden at the museum, see Qvarnström, 307–316.

18 ‘[…] en hård törn mot modernismen och en stor besvikelse för Grünewald.’ This formulation is not Bråhammar’s but comes from another contribution to the same exhibition catalogue, Kristina Garmer, ’Isaac Grünewald i stort format’, Isaac Grünewald, exhib. cat., Lund: Skissernas museum, 2007, 22.
states that ‘[i]f Isaac Grünewald in 1913 had had the support from the authority he could have been allowed to make something internationally unique, namely a fauvist interior decoration.’\textsuperscript{19} Similar formulations can be found in later art historical handbooks arguing that Grünewald should have been given the opportunity to realise his modernist mural painting, but unfortunately never was given the chance.\textsuperscript{20} What is emerging is a narrative were Grünewald’s proposal primarily is presented as the modernist possibility in contrast to what was realised in the marriage chamber and in several of the other proposals for the decoration.\textsuperscript{21} As a setback and a possibility, the sketch becomes very important in this narrative because it is the first example of a possible modernist mural art and consequently the teleological starting point for a modernist narrative of public art in Sweden. We thus find the breakthrough Bråhammar talks about in the later historiography when this narrative is formulated, and not on the art field in the 1910s. As we will see, this first example of a modernist dead end will, in the historiography, be followed by


\textsuperscript{21} For a more detailed analysis of this historiography see Qvarnström, 336–344.
several other setbacks. Grünewald’s *Triangle* is consequently the first and paradigmatic example in a series of dead ends.

**Utopia & Reality**

In the preface to the catalogue of the exhibition *Utopia & Reality*, the director of Moderna Museet, David Elliot, and the director of the Swedish Museum of Architecture, Bitte Nygren, write:

> Swedish Modernism has international roots, but it also has local features. Out in Europe – not least in countries to the east of [what] used to be the Iron curtain – one finds today firmly established local forms of Modernism, in which the ‘centre’ is modified by its relationship with what is often tellingly described as Europe’s outskirts or ‘periphery.’ Is there also a ‘typical Swedish’ form of Modernism?22

Here the two authors give the impression that they are trying to display a multifaceted Modernism where local forms are highlighted, a perspective unravelling differences, unequal development, and a pluralistic understanding of identifications *internal* to Western Modernism and so-called Eurocentrism. We thus might expect to find artists and works of art that had not previously been part of our established art historiography. An exhibition diverging from the established standard story.

Because this article focuses on the historiography of mural painting, as a subsection of Swedish art history, the contribution ‘Modernism and Public Art’ by the art historian and curator Per Hedström to the exhibition catalogue is of special interest. Although the title of Hedström’s text indicates that it is about ‘Public Art’ in general, he focuses on mural painting with only a few examples of sculpture. Looking only at the illustrations to Hedström’s article gives a good idea of what is discussed and highlighted as being important. Hedström’s article is illustrated with 13 pictures in direct connection to the article, and he also refers to two illustrations elsewhere in the catalogue. Of these 15 pictures, six are sketches of public art. One of these is a sketch of the first proposal by Eric Grate (1896–1983) for the sculptural decoration of the schoolyard at Katarina Realskola in Stockholm from 1932.23

Another of the sketches is Lennart Rohde’s (1916–2005) sketch for *Parcels Galore*, a decoration in glazed tiles at Östersund Post Office made in 1948–1952. The other four sketches illustrated in the article are of never-realised proposals for mural paintings, namely Grünewald’s and Sigrid Hjertén’s (1885–1948) proposals for the decoration of the civil marriage chamber at Stockholm Law Courts from 1913, Otto G. Carlsund’s (1897–1948) proposal for the decoration of a cinema in Paris from 1925, and Bengt O. Österblom’s (1903–1976) proposal for the decoration of Stockholm City Library from 1926.

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23 *Utopia & Reality*, 91.
The other nine illustrations referred to in the article are of realised public art. One of them is Vera Nilsson’s (1888–1979) painting *Money Against Lives* from 1938. The painting was planned as a public mural on a gable wall, but was not accepted until 1964, when it was placed in the theatre foyer at Skövde Cultural Centre as a kind of interrupted realisation of a public painting, clearly indicating the difficulties in creating radical modernist art for public places. Another of the realised mural paintings among the illustrations is Carlsund’s painting *Rapid* in Little Paris, the park restaurant at the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930 (fig. 4). Carlsund’s mural was in a temporary building that was demolished after the exhibition, making it an example of more of an experiment than a realised, permanent piece of public art. Carlsund also arranged an international exhibition with post-cubistic and non-figurative art as a part of the Stockholm Exhibition. This exhibition together with the mural *Rapid* has been described as scandalous in the art historiography, a great disappointment for Carlsund, and a setback for avant-garde art in Sweden. In our art historiography, this scandal has been emphasised as a very important event, similar to Grünewald’s proposal for the marriage chamber in the Stockholm Law Court, although the magnitude of the scandal can be questioned. Carlsund’s position as muralist is consequently built on his ideas for a mural art and not on what he actually painted. These examples clearly indicate the difficulties that the acceptance of modernist public art faced in Sweden before the 1950s.

Only looking at the illustrations, it is clear that readers of Hedström’s article find almost as many examples of ideas and proposals for public art never realised

on their intended sites as they do examples of public art that at the time was accessible as such. There is only one example of both a sketch and the realised version, Grate’s sculptural decoration of the schoolyard at Katarina Realskola in Stockholm. The sketch, together with the photograph of the realised version, illustrates how the artist had to abandon his original modernist idea for something much more conventional that was based on a realistic figure composition (fig. 5). In other words, the images illustrate a process in which the artist had to conform to forces other than his own artistic conviction. Consequently, it is, in a sense, also an example of an unrealised idea. The illustrations in Hedström’s article consequently reflect the two problems public art faced in relation to the emerging Modernism in the beginning of the 1910s, identified by Hedström as follows:

The tradition that public art should be subordinate to architecture began to be called into question, and at the same time a problem arose associated with the general public’s reluctance to appreciate Modernist art. It proved hard to produce works of modern art that could be appreciated by more than a few.25

The unrealised proposals discussed and illustrated in Hedström’s article are all examples of the ‘general public’s reluctance to appreciate Modernist art’. Together they form a narrative of modernist public art, but not based on realised and preserved works of art as part of our urban visual culture, but instead as a series of

possibilities. Because the sketches by Grünewald, Hjertén, Carlsund, and Österblom are not complemented by photographs of the actual paintings made by other artists on the intended walls, we never experience the other side of this narrative.

The calling into question of architecture’s superordinate relation to public art is also visually stated in the article. The illustrated sketches put the focus on the two-dimensional sketch instead of the final version in its intended public space. Also, the photographed public art is framed to emphasise the paintings and not the room. Of the nine illustrations of realised public art in Hedström’s article, only five of them were photographed in a way that illustrates their place in a room or their location in open space. The others only show a detail of the painting or give no indication of the actual room the murals are placed in. The focus is on the formal aspects of the paintings without any reference to the architectural framing.26

Although I got the impression from the preface to the catalogue that I would read a story diverging from the established historiography, the selection of works of art in Hedström’s article basically follows what we find in art historical survey texts going back to the mid-twentieth century, with only minor variations. And the same goes for the whole exhibition.27 If anything, the exhibition and catalogue _Utopia & Reality_ emphasise abstract and post-cubistic trends within Swedish Modernism. Artists such as Gösta Adrian-Nilsson (1884–1965) and Carlsund, who are clearly connected to these trends, are paid unusually close attention. As a rewriting of Swedish Modernism, the selection is very cautious and is made completely within a modernist framework.

**Dead ends and the late breakthrough of Modernism**

Hedström’s narrative is not only representative of the established story of public art in Sweden in its selection of works of art, but also of a story built around a sequence of dead ends, the unrealised avant-garde proposals. These sketches and ideas create a genealogy of their own, a series of setbacks. In Hedström’s article, Pauli’s mural _Mens sana in corpore sano_ in the stairwell of Jönköping High School (now Pehr Brahe High School) from 1912 plays the role of an early Cubism-inspired mural artwork, but in a modest version, an angular Classicism that has not really reached Cubism.

26 In many cases, it is easier to publish a sketch of a monumental painting than a photograph due to difficulties in photographing paintings indoors in stairwells, corridors, and other odd spaces. But, in doing so, we lose the architectural framing and the fact that we never are able to see the actual painting separated from its surrounding space.

As such it stands for a breaking point between a remaining National Romanticism and Modernism, but never fully developed into a modernistic decoration. In this narrative, Grünewald’s sketch for the marriage chamber in Stockholm Law Court consequently becomes the first example of a ‘truly’ modernist proposal for public art in Sweden, just as in the permanent exhibition at Skissernas Museum. In Hedström’s text, Grünewald’s sketch is represented as the first of several dead ends, followed by the proposals and demolished paintings by Carlsund, Österblom, etc. This narrative is clearly based on Modernism as an interpretive matrix, and this is not surprising because Hedström states already in the title of his article that he is discussing ‘Modernism and Public Art’. But, in relation to the ambitions of Elliot and Nygren, as cited above, in referring to ‘a “typical Swedish” form of Modernism’ Hedström’s article becomes interesting. When discussing Österblom’s proposal for the decoration of the periodical room at Stockholm City Library (fig. 6), Hedström offers it as an example of one of few artists interested in ‘[i]nternational ideas of Modernist art in public environments.’ Hedström does not mention the result of the competition for this decoration, nor does he discuss the winning proposal by Hilding Linnqvist (1891–1984), his naivistic tapestry *Swedish Sailors in Foreign Ports* made in 1928–1931 and still hanging in Stockholm City Library (fig. 7). However, in this narrative, a naivistic composition, such as Linnqvist’s, could be discussed in relation to ‘a “typical Swedish” form of Modernism’. Naivism maintained a strong position in the Swedish art scene in the first half of the twentieth-century, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s. Although not directly connected to the international avant-garde, Naivism could be an important factor in discussing

28 Elliot & Nygren, 12.
29 Hedström, 90.
Swedish Modernism, but the focus of such discussions is instead on abstract and non-figurative art.

Österblom’s proposal for the City Library, as well as Carlsund’s *Rapid* at the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930, are clearly connected to these international modernist ideas. With Österblom and Carlsund, a connection is revealed between, as Hedström states, the ‘[r]adical concepts of Post-Cubist and non-figurative, architecturally oriented pictorial art [...] developed by, among others, Fernand Léger, Amédée Ozenfant and Theo van Doesburg.’ In the same way, Hedström presents Grünewald’s and Hjertén’s proposals for the decoration of the marriage chamber in Stockholm City Law Court as revealing ‘[…] clear traces of their time as pupils of Matisse.’ These paintings are in clear contrast to the Jugend-inspired mural painted in the marriage chamber in Stockholm Law Court, a mural which still can be seen in the room today but not in our historiography.

The logic behind this selection of works of art is based on a quest to establish connections between Swedish public art and its contemporary international avant-garde, what I would like to call a canonisation by association. In case after case, Hedström describes the eagerness of artists to align with the international or Parisian avant-garde, but, in trying to please conservative donor foundations, politicians, and the general public, they are forced to compromise their own artistic convictions or see someone else get the commission. None of the setbacks included in this historiography are representing anything but Modernism. All of these avant-garde setbacks described by Hedström have, of course, an important function in our art historiography. They point to the modernist possibility at the same time as they are

30 Hedström, 88.
31 Hedström, 88.
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explaining the *late breakthrough* of modernist public art in Sweden. It seems as if Modernism is a natural force that sooner or later will come, although encountering decades’ worth of temporary obstacles along the way. We most certainly can see how the material fits into general western art history, a development from Naturalism to Abstraction with emphasis on the surface and painting as a medium; however, at the same time, we can see that this narrative has departed from what actually exists on the walls of our buildings. The interpretive matrix here is clearly based on a particular aesthetic canon and, consequently, on the view of Modernism as a *style* rather than *Zeitgeist*. However, this narrative can also be connected to contemporary politics. After the Second World War, post-cubist and abstract art became associated with democratic values, in contrast to the Social Realism of the totalitarian regimes.33 In exhibitions as *documenta* in 1955 and 1959, Abstraction served as a *lingua franca* of the visual arts, making it possible not only to interpret contemporary art on the basis of a universal explanatory model, but also to make connections between art from all four corners of the globe and from all of history.34 By depoliticising the avant-garde, it was made useful for political ends in the Cold War era. These are circumstances that are only very briefly mentioned in Hedström’s article but are of great importance for understanding the emphasis put on abstract and concrete art in the modernist historiography. In Hedström’s article, the focus on Post-Cubism and Abstraction is instead motivated by the fact that he consider it as an ‘architecturally oriented pictorial art’, indicating Post-Cubism and Abstraction as the most-suited artistic sentiment for *monumental* painting in its most positive sense.35

For the historiography of mural painting, this modernist narrative has resulted in a situation where we have been forced to dig up all of these rejected proposals and ideas, putting them forward as key monuments in the creation of a logical genealogy. This task is easily undertaken because most of the material is to be found in Skissernas Museum’s collection. At the same time, we have had to neglect the possibility of continuity and progressiveness within the regional tradition. As a narrative, it becomes a long row of suspensions, where the modernist public art never gets any real chance until the 1940s, when concretist artists such as Rodhe, Lage Lindell (1920–1980), Karl-Axel Pehrson (1921–2005), Olle Bonnier (1925–2016), and Pierre Olofsson (1921–1996) made their debuts. Not until then do


35 Although Hedström uses the words *mural*, *wall*, and *monumental* painting interchangeably in his text, the connection between monumental and post-cubist and abstract art is obvious in other important texts in the Swedish historiography on public art. See for example Sandström, Stensman & Sydoff, 5–8, 11. The monumentality in monumental art has since the mid-twentieth century in a Swedish context had a positive connotation of something above mere decoration, with a certain dignity and often connected to a certain artistic sentiment, in this case Post-Cubism. For discussions on the use of these words in a Swedish context, see Karlsmo, 253; Sjöholm Skrubbe, 43–49; and Qvarnström, 160–164.
we get a pure modernist public art (fig. 8). According to the art critic Thomas Millroth, Concretism was not only the first realized modernist public art, but on the whole the first Swedish Modernism. As a narrative, I not only find this restricted to a modernist frame, but also within a narrow definition of Modernism as aligned with a post-cubist tradition.

The centre–periphery relation

In the historiography on mural painting in Sweden, there is always something that replaces and prevents a modernist breakthrough. What replaces the avant-garde possibility is the regional artistic expressions – the kind of art that was actually realised and that forms an important part of the public art still visible as part of our visual culture. This art could, if we solely focused on the accomplished commissions, form a completely different narrative. Or, if we embrace other never-realised possibilities than modernist, yet another narrative. Even if accepting Modernism as the dominating or most interesting artistic sentiment of the first half of the twentieth-century, many other regional traditions or interpretations could have been put forward as the ‘typical Swedish’ form of Modernism they were striving for in the exhibition catalogue *Utopia & Reality.* Unfortunately, this story

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37 Elliott & Nygren, 12.
has not been written, and we have ended up with a very specific story about what we could have had (our modernist desire).

Hedström does vaguely point at some regional traits when he discusses the 1930s and 1940s as ‘dominated by figurative paintings of a narrative and illustrative character, often with a tendency towards the idyllic.’\(^{38}\) Hedström also includes two illustrations fitting into this category – Sven X:et Erixson’s (1899–1970) mural *Nils Holgersson* in the Olovslund School in Bromma from 1935 and Bo Beskow’s (1906–1989) mural *Chaos-Cosmos* in Stockholm Higher Public Grammar School for Girls from 1939 (fig. 9). But, once again, they are motivated by references to developments elsewhere – in this case murals in Norway and Mexico – and represent an art that Hedström, in a less-than-excited way, describes as ‘idealized depictions of young people in pleasant summer landscapes.’\(^{39}\) In the end, he cannot resist pointing at the avant-garde possibility, also in connection to Beskow’s painting, namely the surrealistic entry by Sven Jonson (1902–1981) *Building Life* (fig. 10). In this narrative, he is consequently always falling back on a centre–periphery relation. This is a historiography that is clearly based on the idea of cultural circulation as diffusion or influence where ideas of knowledge are spread from their origin in a cultural centre to elsewhere – what can be described as the model of vertical art history.\(^{40}\)

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38 Hedström, 93.
39 Hedström, 93.
40 For a discussion on this kind of centre–periphery relation and studies of diffusion, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004, especially chapters 5 and 6. Piotr Piotrowski has developed a critique of vertical art history and has instead argued for an art history that is polyphonic, multidimensional, and free of geographical hierarchies – a horizontal art history, Piotr Piotrowski, ‘On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History’, *Umeni/Art*, vol. 56, no. 5, 2008, 378–383, Art & Architecture Source, EBSCOhost (accessed May 9, 2018).
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Figure 10 Sven Jonson, Building Life, proposal for the decoration of Stockholm Higher Public Grammar School for Girls, 1939, Skissernas Museum, ADK 17263 (photo: Andreas Larsson/Skissernas Museum, © Sven Jonson/BUS).

My point here is not to criticise Hedström, who actually is opening to write a story of modernist public art in Sweden. The whole exhibition, as well as the catalogue, is about Swedish Modernism. The main problem with the exhibition, and especially the catalogue, is that the attempts to describe ‘a “typical Swedish” form of Modernism’ are made in relation to Modernism as a style and strictly within the framework of a centre–periphery relation between Sweden and the idea of an international avant-garde, and also to the fact that there are no alternative stories published either as part of the exhibition or elsewhere. However, in the catalogue there is one article by the art historian Jeff Werner that addresses the centre–periphery relation and, in a sense, criticises the exhibition on a fundamental level. Werner presents a narrative we can follow in several of the published handbooks about twentieth-century Swedish art history, and this narrative describes twentieth-century art history as being constructed with several dominating ‘isms’ as guiding principles. Although this is not any news for us, he describes this historiography with the help of such metaphors as turnpikes and blind alleys. The turnpikes we find in the centre, the international avant-garde, and the blind alleys form Swedish Modernism. Every expression pointing to regional independence becomes a blind alley until Swedish art once again comes into contact with the international avant-garde – the turnpike. This means that the governing

41 Although ‘modernism’ has been translated to ‘modernity’ in the title of the English version of the catalogue, there are no discussions on the relations between the work of a particular artist and modernity in his or her contemporary world.
43 The title of my article is, of course, inspired by the title of Werner’s catalogue text.
principles, or the dominating interpretive matrix, are always found outside Sweden. With few exceptions, we find the governing principles for this narrative in the Parisian avant-garde. As a national historiography, two parallel perspectives or traditions emerge – the regional or national and the international. The unifying logic, described by Werner, is an oscillating movement between these two perspectives, where the international perspective is the leading and normative one. In our art history, attempts to develop independent regional traditions are often described as reactionary periods until one artist or a group of artists once again establishes contact with the international avant-garde.

Because twentieth-century art history (at least the first half of the twentieth-century) has principally become synonymous with Modernism, this logic has resulted in the exclusion of everything that does not fit or cannot be fitted into the modernist narrative. The fundamental problem lies in that most historiographers have dedicated themselves to the established canon, or, when attempts are made to apply a critical perspective by rewriting twentieth-century art history, such attempts are still made within a modernist framework. Despite Werner’s contribution to the exhibition catalogue, this is what happened at Moderna Museet in 2000. Interestingly enough, the oscillating movement between the regional or national and the international traditions had been described much earlier. Söderberg had previously described these turnpikes and blind alleys in the 1950s, but without the critical historiographical perspective that Werner represents. Söderberg made this observation in the previously mentioned influential book on Swedish Modernism, *Den svenska konsten under 1900-talet* (1955). There he wrote:

Swedish twentieth-century art reflects this international process. One can find a fluctuation between openness for the foreign (the Matisse-students, 1920s, the time after the Second World War) and striving for isolation (1890s Romanticism, the Naivism, the movement of the 1930s) [...].

Söderberg’s statement here is not a critical reflection on Swedish historiography, but is instead an evaluating standpoint supporting his own story of Swedish art. He points out when Swedish art is in contact with the international avant-garde and when it is going in the direction of regionalism and, consequently, into a blind alley. In this context, Söderberg’s formulation ‘striving for isolation’ is crucial as an evaluating expression. I would say that the 1930s and early 1940s are our most step-motherly treated artistic heritage, like Naivism. Of course, our Naivism, Primitivism and the splendid colours of the 1930s are appreciated, but in the established art historiography these expressions are always treated as if they were not in phase with their time, as a regional or national oddball in relation to the international trend. They are included as part of what Georg Kubler would call the same
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‘systematic age’, but not as part of the same ‘art historical time’ as the contemporary avant-garde. It seems as if we in the oscillating movement between the regional and international are dealing with expressions not belonging to the same contemporaneity. The periphery in this context is not so much a geographic location as a spatio-temporal device, which establishes a pattern of classification that is generative of historical narratives. As a temporal classification device, it distinguishes between art that is recognised as contemporary and art from the margins, caught up in a process of catching up with avant-garde developments elsewhere. This logic, already evident in Söderberg’s classical book and identified by Werner as a history of ‘blind alleys’, is most clearly stated, I would say, when it comes to the historiography of mural painting. The modernist possibility that has come to constitute the canon is easily identified because the avant-garde examples included in this historiography constitute a series of never-realised proposals – a series of dead ends.

Back at the museum

Now we return to the circumstances in which this narrative was established. Going through Swedish art historiography, we can easily track down the time when this narrative enters into the academic discourse, and this was basically in the 1950s, despite that we seldom find the word Modernism used before the 1960s. Since then, we have literally merely filled the gaps and have never seriously challenged the narrative structure. What is also interesting is that several of the art historians who participated in this history writing in the 1950s were students of the professor in art history at Lund University at that time, Ragnar Josephson – the founder of Skissernas Museum. So, here we are back where we started in this article, at Skissernas Museum, the most important institution for the Swedish historiography of public art.

Going through the museum’s accession catalogue, a pattern reveals itself during the late 1940s and the 1950s, when the museum collected and exhibited sketches by the contemporary concretist artists almost as soon as the paint on them

47 For a definition of the term ‘contemporaneity’ and a discussion on its relation to ‘contemporary’, see Karlholm, 2014, 59–72.
48 See, for example, Gösta Lilja, *Det moderna måleriet i svensk kritik 1905–1914*, (diss.), Malmö: Allhem, 1955. The selections of ‘important’ works of art from the early twentieth-century can be traced back to the early 1920s in texts summarising the century’s first decades, but it is not until the 1950s, I would argue, that these selections and the narrative were institutionalised. Hans Hayden, among others, argues that this institutionalisation was taking place in the 1960s, which is true with respect to the use of the term Modernism and a more ideological understanding of Modernism, but not when it comes to the formation of the modernist canon, cf. Hayden, 2006.
had dried. In a sense, the museum was at that time very up-to-date with respect to the contemporary art scene. However, what also attracted my attention was that at the same time sketches by artists like Carlsund, Adrian-Nilsson, and Österblom were being tracked down, bought, and exhibited.49 Together they give us a wonderful genealogy of abstract and non-figurative art – the *lingua franca* of its time in western art history. In the museum’s exhibition featuring public art in Sweden, these sketches were nicely fitted together as a morphological development – a development where the contemporary Concretism becomes the logical outcome and also can partly explain the structure of our historiography. I would say it is a beautiful example of how Modernism – as the winner on the art scene in the mid-twentieth century – is writing its own history and is being institutionalised.50 Although not a student of Josephson, the previously mentioned book by Söderberg, *Den svenska konsten under 1900-talet* (1955), closely follows this narrative, not least of all in the chapter on ‘Monumental painting’. Contemporary Swedish Concretism as the teleological endpoint for his selection of art was so striking that the art critic Gotthard Johansson, in a review of the book, called it ‘Art History for Concretist.’51

Although we can find all of these avant-garde proposals in the collection at Skissernas Museum, they form a restricted part of the collection. In the museum, not only the avant-garde examples of proposals for public art discussed by Hedström and others have been incorporated, but also sketches for many of the actualised murals neglected in our art historiography, and rejected proposals for public art representing a wide range of artistic sentiments. Even though the permanent exhibition at the museum has been dominated by Modernism as the selective norm and the museum’s presentations have followed the establish narrative, the vast collection of sketches and the museum’s exhibition strategy with sketches hanging close together, filling the walls and up in the ceiling, opens for many kinds of time travels and possible readings. This potentiality in the museum has always been there, although, unfortunately, my impression is that the historiography of public art in Sweden has nevertheless become increasingly biased and one-sided.

**Historiography on the fringe**

Although I have focused on one specific institution, one group of art historians in the 1940s and 1950s, and one major exhibition in 2000, I think my examples not only should be understood as a unique historical narrative, but also as a striking example of the hierarchical narrative of art history, which has been particularly dominant in connection to twentieth-century art. I think it presumably is typical for a provincial historiography – something we can find in many other historiographies written from the perspective of what for a long time has been treated as peripheral or

49 Qvarnström, 369–372.
Swedish art history has always been thought of as provincial, or as Charlotte Bydler stated in an introduction to Nordic art from 2014:

The Nordic countries form a region in Europe that often does not quite count as properly European. Few European art historical features are found in the periods of which they are generally thought to be a part.\(^{52}\)

This is a position, as a part of heterogeneous historical situations, that could be strategically used as a point of departure for a new understanding of not only Modernism, but on a more general level, of western or global art history. However, in the frequent attempts made to highlight the few moments when Swedish artists had come into direct contact with the international avant-garde, we have been ignorant about regional developments, and consequently further strengthened a hierarchical narrative of art history based on a centre–periphery relation.

Instead of trying to describe the typical Swedish form of Modernism that Elliot and Nygren were seeking, and which calls for a centre–periphery thinking, we should strive for a story where the modernist canon is initially abandoned and the modernist passion for innovations, revolution, and confrontation, as well as a preoccupation with capturing the present, do not need to be the norm. To be able to do so, we must abandon the model of vertical art history and embrace the heterochrony of time and strive for a much more multi-faceted and contradictory narrative.

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