

# The Rise and Success of a Portrait As Told by the Portrait Painter

## The Beginning of the Idea

I had been painting a SWEA for almost a year. Big painting. Full size lady. Not official and not to be. Hanging in a dining room. Called “Mormor.” My thoughts when all this was done went to Agneta. I had grown increasingly impressed over the years with what a wonder woman (*krut kvinna*) she is.

I saw what was happening; Agneta was stepping down. The new generation of SWEA presidents and boards was taking over, not always understanding whom they were representing, not altogether paying the proper respect in my book to the founding of SWEA and all the work that had gone into it.

I am a teacher and an educator. Fil. Mag from Gothenberg University in 1961. Rallying around a portrait would be an instruction into reverence of the past, into work that had been done. I thought it would be good for members of SWEA, old and new, to put their respect and awareness into celebrating the image, the symbol of the founder, the icon.

I have always believed that it is the captain of the ship who sets the tone, and ever since I was on my first and only cruise—LA to Puerto Vallarta, Cabo San Lucas—and met the Swedish captain of that cruise ship, I have been convinced. The ship sponsored a boarding school for orphans in Puerto Vallarta.

So here we have Agneta, same age as me, she was born in 1940, I in 1939. She has recently resigned from the board of SWEA International and become Chairman Emeritus. She is giving a last birthday party at her house at the famous garage in Manhattan Beach. It is not far from LA airport where her beloved Gunnar used to receive Swedish stars as they arrived directly from Stockholm on their way to Hollywood. I remember being on the plane with Bibi Andersson and Max von Sydow.

Agneta is preparing to sell her house and move to a “Scandinavian colony” in Thousand Oaks, adjacent to Cal Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks. She looks good. She is not yet 75. I see the window of opportunity. Agneta should be painted now, before she departs from her old life to set sail on her new. Now was the fall of 2013.

I did not really think money. Money comes, money goes, as in any business. I wanted a minimum of pressures. The main thing for a portrait to be a success is to have the right energies flowing. But I did think that SWEA, with its 7,500 members in 70 chapters around the world, probably would want to contribute to such a cause, a portrait of the founder, Agneta Nilsson, and it would make all SWEAs aware that there was a founder, there was a captain. Such awareness is always strengthening and unifying in the long run.

I approached Agneta in the fall of 2013. I had no big job going. I paint portraits in Sweden and the US, and in other parts of the world, but I answer to no gallery to whom I must give 60% of my income. I consider myself an old time portrait painter. My idols are Sargent and Zorn, who painted in the late 1900's and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They did not have any agents. My clients like the fact that they are dealing with me, the portrait painter herself, and my work comes from word-of-mouth.

And I have a real portrait painter's education, which makes me feel comfortable and at ease. For the past 25 years I have been the old-fashioned portrait painter who arrives at somebody's house or castle, is welcomed in to set up a studio situation wherever I find it suitable. I take a look at the rooms, looking for the constant north light, and I mostly end up in the attic, library or the bathroom. Normally I choose the library, and whoever is a subject sits for me like a lamb for hours on end, although he or she may be very high up on the ladder of how much the minutes they set aside to do this are worth in pecuniary terms. One of my earliest portraits of this kind was of Knut Hammarskijold, who at the time was the CEO of IATA. Or take Carl Axel Wachtmeister at Wanå's whose younger brother was William, our ambassador in Washington.

Here we are, Agneta and I, and we decide to charge ahead and just do it. At this point I would like to apologize to all those SWEAs whom we did not tell and did not ask, and that is everyone. I did not want to have the pressure of anyone following my slightest move, and I did not want to wait. “*Värp först, kackla sén,*” was one of Birgit Nilsson’s *motton* (catch phrases). I did not know it then, but this is exactly how I argued.

I arrange a perfect studio according to the rules of my education at Cecil-Graves Studio in Florence, 1984-1986. Agneta’s son’s room has the north light coming in through the window on the left, and there is enough room to put her next to it so that her temple is aligned with the image on my canvas, which is placed on an upright easel next to her. There is also room for me to step back in a straight line, three times the height of the 30” x 40” canvas, so that I can compare the painted image with the subject. All of this is what a sight-size painter steeped in the sight-size tradition thinks about. You all know the one dollar bill with the portrait of Washington painted by Gilbert Stuart. Stuart was trained in the sight-size tradition at the Royal Academy in London. His teacher for 6 years was Benjamin West, also an American, who founded the Royal Academy and was its president from 1792 to 1820. So there! Washington’s portrait, and Agneta’s, are sight-size portraits.

The sight-size studio in Manhattan Beach has been rigged. What are my thoughts and intensions with this portrait? I asked Agneta to bring out some clothes and jewelry she might find appropriate. I had three choices: a soft, beige cashmere sweater; a batik dress given to her by the SWEA chapter at the world meeting in Kuala Lumpur; and a jacket-coat in Thai silks and many colors, mostly blue and yellow. I knew immediately. Here I was, dealing with a Swedish icon (the mother of SWEA), who loved and dealt in amber at every Scandinavian fair. That coat had to be there with the spectacular amber necklace to go with it. After all, amber opened the trade routes of Scandinavia to Greece and Constantinople during Viking times. We could have included the big medal of honor from Ellis Island but decided against it. Somehow the yellowish colors went with the tone of Agneta’s hair, which seemed grayish towards the golden side, something that happens to us older Swedes here in Southern California.

I had seen Agneta at her best, standing, welcoming her guests or her audience, paying much attention to everyone. So standing it was. I could have painted Agneta full size, but I think I was pushing the limit at three-quarters. I think Agneta initially had thought a smaller portrait. I went with the biggest linen canvas one can buy commercially. As it happens, it fits exactly into the largest portfolio case sold, and it is this size that can travel “oversize luggage” by air. By now this portrait already had been back to Sweden in my care, covered by my ticket and a surcharge.

So now we have the subject, the studio, the outfit, and the blank canvas, and we are ready to go.

The fall of 2013 has gone by. The new year begins. Agneta has a year before she is going to be 75. I will be 75 that spring, two days before Agneta’s birthday. Eyes can give out, hips and *kotor* (vertebrae) can break, even hearts can make themselves heard around 75. It is time to begin.

And we did. On January 12, 2014, I first made a small sketch in oil. It is often done. Then I made an attempt at the face only, on a smaller canvas. I saw this golden glow and I decided to have a golden, ochre ground. That meant that I prepare the white canvas with a color before I start the portrait. All the colors I put down after that will have to relate to this golden ground.

I took pictures of Agneta. The camera has definitely entered into the picture. Not for Charles Cecil in Florence, who fights it by not allowing any camera into the school. But I have had to go with David Hockney, who points out that every age has taken advantage of its tools offered, even in Old Masters’ painting.

When I was 16 I spent a year as an AFS student at Downer Seminary in Milwaukee. A few months into my stay, my uncle arrived with a Voigtlander from my parents. In some ways this is when my career as a portrait painter began. I was seeing life through a lens, or even better, “framed

So I did take some good photos of Agneta, decided on the look and pose both she and I liked, and that is how Agneta stood for me in our improvised studio in Manhattan Beach during the spring of 2014.

Soon after my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, two days after Agneta's, the painting had taken on its character. This happens. First you, the painter, are in charge when the canvas is all untouched and you start making your marks. Sooner than you think, the image that you and your God created takes over. It took awhile before I got to the point when I would "let" Agneta "be in charge." I did not want any image of a 74-year-old lady. I wanted the decisively sharp look, and where was it sitting? That is always my question as I search for what makes that person and that image tick. Mostly, it sits in the *snor-ränna* and in the tension between the eyes and the corner of the mouth. The two eyes of a person are always different, and I like to point that out. In Agneta's case there was a droop of her left eye, the eye to the right in the painting, that I could not ignore. It made her look inquisitive, asking the questions. I also wanted to point out the vision, the vision of global SWEA that those eyes showed.

Sometimes I am asked to make an eye look "as when I was twenty," but I am not a plastic surgeon. The beauty sits in the irregularities and in the eye of the beholder and the color of the eyes. Agneta's eyes were sometimes a beautiful green, sometimes a beautiful blue. Agneta was a wonderful model. She writes in an email to me: "*Det är en ren fröjd att se dig arbeta och se din spanande blick i mitt ansikte ledsagad av glada tillrop och positiva, vänliga kommentarer!*"

For the hands I used the photo a bit. I am good at hands, but nobody can hold them in the same position for long. And in Agneta's case the rings were important, especially one. It was from her mother.

I have a son who by profession is a medical doctor, but he too was trained to paint portraits by Charles Cecil in Florence. My son is my biggest critic. We went to an important conference on figurative painting run by Cal Lutheran University. We came into a big room where Odd Nerdrum, who is my present-

day hero, was going to be on the panel. My son says, “In this room nobody besides Odd could have painted your portrait.” That was high praise.

So the portrait was approved. Agneta called in some close friends and her sons. I showed it to a few friends. And now to the next part. Where was it to hang? SWEA owns no property. What are the official places? Swedish Embassy in Washington?

We used to have a consulate in Westwood where I remember Ingela Sörenson took care of us Swedes in need. At this time there is a small suite in the outskirts of San Diego that is supposed to do the job of at least renewing passports, and there is the Norwegian-Swedish church in San Pedro. I think Agneta’s heart and soul is in Sweden.

I knew about Gripsholm. These National Portrait Collections are very dear to me. The National Portrait Gallery next to the National Gallery in London is one of my homes. Another magical one is Fredriksborg’s Castle in Hilleröd housing the Danish National Portrait Collection. A whole castle, filled with portraits, surrounded by water, where I take my students every year from my Höganäs studio. It turns out that Gripsholm sorts under the National Museum. Its collection is part of the National Portrait Collection of the Swedish State.

Gripsholm is in Mariefred. You can get there by *skärgårds färja* (ferry) from Stockholm or drive for an hour south to southwest towards Katrineholm. There is a painting by the entrance of the king, the queen and the three children opening Christmas presents, painted by Franzen, who was famous for his Cadillacs and palm trees in Venice, California. There is a new portrait of King Carl Gustav painted by Olle Hamngren. Otherwise, not much has been happening when it comes to present-day royalty.

Until the summer of 2012 when I picked up a Swedish ladies’ journal, *Svensk Damtidning*, and saw an article on “red.” Our Queen Silvia had been painted sitting on a chair, holding a flower, dressed in a red suit. The portrait was by Urban Larsson and the portrait was to hang at Gripsholm. I know Urban. Urban

came as a young student to “my school” in Florence. Urban started as a young man in 1989, as I remember, because I had returned to Florence to spend a month getting prepared to do an important job in Stockholm. I know Urban has been working in Amsterdam of late, and now he has been doing the Swedish Queen Silvia.

I did not come to portrait painting as a young lass. I came to Charles Cecil because my husband had a sabbatical from UCLA and we had decided to spend the year with our five kids, aged 21-5, in Florence. I had been painting portraits for 17 years, mostly self-taught, but I did study with a few outstanding painters like Jan Saether and Picasso’s Françoise Gilot. Cecil-Graves was a real school. Housed in a basilica on the left side of the Arno, the former studio of sculptor Romanelli, it is the oldest still-working atelier in Florence. I worked every day, left my five-year-old Emily off at the American School, and bicycled on to 68 Borgo San Frediano. “Find the green door and enter the Carrara marble stairs.” As it turns out, I lucked out. This is one of the best portrait schools in the world.

I called Hans-Henrik Brummer, who had been at UCLA, then went back to Mora, Sweden, to write the new definitive book on Zorn, then manned Waldemarsudde and National Museum.

“Hans-Henrik Brummer, to whom do I talk about this idea of Agneta Nilsson hanging at Gripsholm?”

“Magnus Olausson,” said Hans-Henrik. “I will give you his number.”

I made a call to Magnus Olausson, the head of all the portrait collections of the Swedish state. “Hi, Magnus.” Well, not quite like that, but it is hilarious how you can just call anybody in Sweden, even dignitaries at the Swedish Royal Court, and they will pick up and talk to you in their educated Swedish in a most straightforward and friendly way. Not uptight, not snobbish, not condescending.

So this time when I called Magnus Olausson, he picked up just like that. I introduced myself as a portrait painter represented by the Swedish Portrait Archives that used to be housed in a building next to the National Museum. It

has since moved, but I used to love its wood paneling and all the boxes with cards and information about one's work. People who needed a portrait done could come there and find their portrait painter. Emilia Ström was in charge of the Archives.

So I asked Magnus Olausson what the requirements were for a portrait to be accepted into the portrait collection. I had visited Gripsholm many times. On the upper floor, just like at Fredriksborg, the contemporary portraits hang, starting around 1900. The portraits seem to be a bit random, of well-known Swedes like musicians, writers, actors and politicians, sometimes by painters whose names you recognize.

One time when I was inquiring into the practices of accepting portraits, a curator told me that only photos had been accepted since 2001, and that the dampness of the rooms was already a threat to the portraits. I went again this year, in 2015, and things had improved, and there was Urban Larsson's portrait in oil of the Queen in the Hall of Kings.

Back to my most interesting conversation with Magnus Olausson. He said, "What is important, besides the fact that the person portrayed has served Sweden well, is that it is *ett porträtt i tiden* (a contemporary portrait).

That sentence sat with me. I mentioned the fact that I had seen the portrait of the Queen by Urban Larsson, who had been a student of Charles Cecil's in Florence. "Yes," said Magnus Olausson, "it was the Queen's wish to be painted by him. But keep in mind that we have no space to hang more portraits at this time. We are in the midst of renovating the National Museum until it opens again in 2017."

And that turns out to be an important part of the story. It might be the explanation why once the portrait was finished and offered as a donation by SWEA to the Swedish State, we did not hear anything for one year.



The portrait was done soon after Agneta's birthday. I would have loved it if SWEA Los Angeles had taken over at this time, to promote the portrait and find a place. But this matter seemed to be a concern for SWEA International to take on. I learned that there was to be a meeting of the board of SWEA International in Florida in May. I geared up, had photos made of the portrait, wrote a letter presenting it, and sent it all off to Åsa Jena Lööf who, very sweetly and with lots of encouragement, set the wheels in motion.

There were two questions: (1) How is the portrait going to be paid? (2) Where is the portrait going to hang? Both questions were answered with "no clue" wherever I turned. Meanwhile, Gripsholm, or as we had learned, the National Swedish Portrait Collection under which Gripsholm's collection falls, was still the favorite and, as many of us felt, the "right" place.

Margareta Sikkens wrote a splendid letter and sent it on to Magnus Olausson in July of 2014 (see attached).

The answer came from his co-curator, Eva-Lena Karlsson: *“Magnus Olausson, chef för Nationalmusei samlingar samt för Statens porträttsamling, är åter från sin semester vid mitten av augusti. När han har hunnit se bilden av porträttet, hör vi av oss till Margaret Sikkens Ahlquist, President i SWEA International.*

After this we heard nothing until Christina Moliteus, Emilia Ström and I became active again a year later. I argued to myself: The portrait is up for consideration. I might just enjoy this interim period before the surely negative censure comes. My grandfather's motto was: *“Bättre höra den sträng som brast än aldrig spänna en båge.”* (Better hear the spring that broke than never.) I sent out a few feelers to people whom I had painted and who would actually appreciate the fact that their portrait painter had a portrait up for consideration at the highest level in the state. I did contact a SWEA whose portrait hangs in the south of France, together with that of her husband. I had given a talk on sight-size to SWEAs of that region years ago. Could she think of a place? The answer was:

“Hey again, Inger,

Coming back to your great painting of Agneta Nilsson, my sources in Stockholm confirm that Magnus Olausson is head of the Collections at Nationalmuseum and the person dealing with Svenska Porträttsamlingarna. There should be no reason why they would not accept the portrait as a gift. The advice I got was that SWEA should just send a reminder – maybe the letter got lost .... I wish them and you good luck.”

Meanwhile, I forgot to tell about the money, the anonymous donation which nobody but Agneta knows about. One can always speculate as to who the donor is, but I am not about to do this. However, I can say, “Thank you for your generous support,” and send it out into the atmosphere.

At the end of May 2015 I had decided to go to Stockholm and see a few people. I had some new commissions to pick up. I e-mailed Emilia Ström. Her response was: “Vacation coming up, much welcome in August.” I was not going to be in

Sweden in August. For a change I was leaving the Swedish summer early because of the wedding of my daughter Emily in L.A. on September 12.

I wrote another email to Emilia Ström. I asked questions like, “Is this normal that it takes more than a year for a donation to be considered?” Slightly frustrated is how I am beginning to feel, I know.

A response comes within no time: “I forwarded your email to Eva-Lena Karlsson, who can better answer your questions.” I was ready to sink through the floor. Had I shot myself and our cause in the foot? Emilia Ström sent my email on without checking with me! I had not dared approach Eva-Lena Karlsson. I did not think it was my place as the painter.

I am very upset. And then I thank my dead son, Nicholas, to whom I give matters I cannot handle myself. Let him and the universe take care of this!

This is my side of the story, trying to help the painting find a home.

Meanwhile, however, without my knowing it, Christina Moliteus, a former president of SWEA International, had grown increasingly impatient and had decided to contact “the friends of Gripsholm” who told her to contact Magnus Olausson. On the first of July, Eva-Lena Karlsson received an email from Christina Moliteus.

Från: Christina Moliteus

Skickat: den 1 juli 2015 17:22

Till: Eva Lena Karlsson

Ämne: Porträtt på Agneta Nilsson, SWEAs grundare

Hej Eva-Lena

Förlåt att jag stör mitt i sommaren (som jag hoppas nu bilvit varmare i Sverige) men jag har äntligen fått besked från Timmy Cox på Gripsholmsföreningen (som jag trodde handlade dessa ärenden) att jag ska vända mig till dig för förfrågan att donera ett porträtt till

er tavelssamling på Gripsholms Slott på Agneta Nilsson, SWEA Internationals grundare, som i år fyller 75 år.

SWEA grundades 1979 och har vuxit till en världsomfattande organisation som nu har över 7500 medlemmar i 75 avdelningar i 35 länder och är den största Sverigefrämjande organisationen utanför Sverige.

Jag medsänder en bild på porträtt och information från konstnären Inger Hodgson: *Porträttet målades "live" i Manhattan Beach under 2013-2014 föreställande SWEAs grundare Agneta Nilsson. Det är målat i olja på linneduk med inlägg av blad-guld och blad-silver, brons och aluminium. Jag är utbildad på studio Charles cecil i Florence, 1984-86, och arbetar i Höganäs och Malibu.*

Det vore en stor ära både för SWEAs organisation och Agneta Nilsson om denna tavla kunde tillfalla tavelssamlingen på Gripsholms slott över kända svenskar.

Met vänlig hälsning från vackert Vermont, USA  
Christina

It was this letter that did it, as we say in Swedish, "*gjorde Susen*" "*tog krat,*" "*gick hem.*" Instead of the string of the bow breaking, the arrow reached its target.

Three days later, this letter of acknowledgement arrived from Eva-Lena Karlsson.  
(See attached)

Our universe did it. This means that Agneta and SWEA have received the honor. I am in there too. In the future maybe, when some of us are already gone, the National Gallery, “National Museum,” will stand in all its renovated glory and there will be shows to come like “Swedish Women Painted by Swedish Women” and SWEA will be celebrated like it should be celebrated for its global role in the Swedish world.

Because we are all Swedish, even though we have been working and living outside Sweden like so many other women before us. We have had the fortune to have Princess Christina as our protector and to be organized by our founder Agneta Nilsson. *“Leve hon; leve SWEA i många herrans år med hjälp av detta porträtt.”*

And may this portrait serve us all. It did come home. SWEA is now grounded.