

Mediating Authenticity

Gustavian Style Period Furniture in the 1930s and 1940s

Hedvig Mårdh
Uppsala University
Sweden

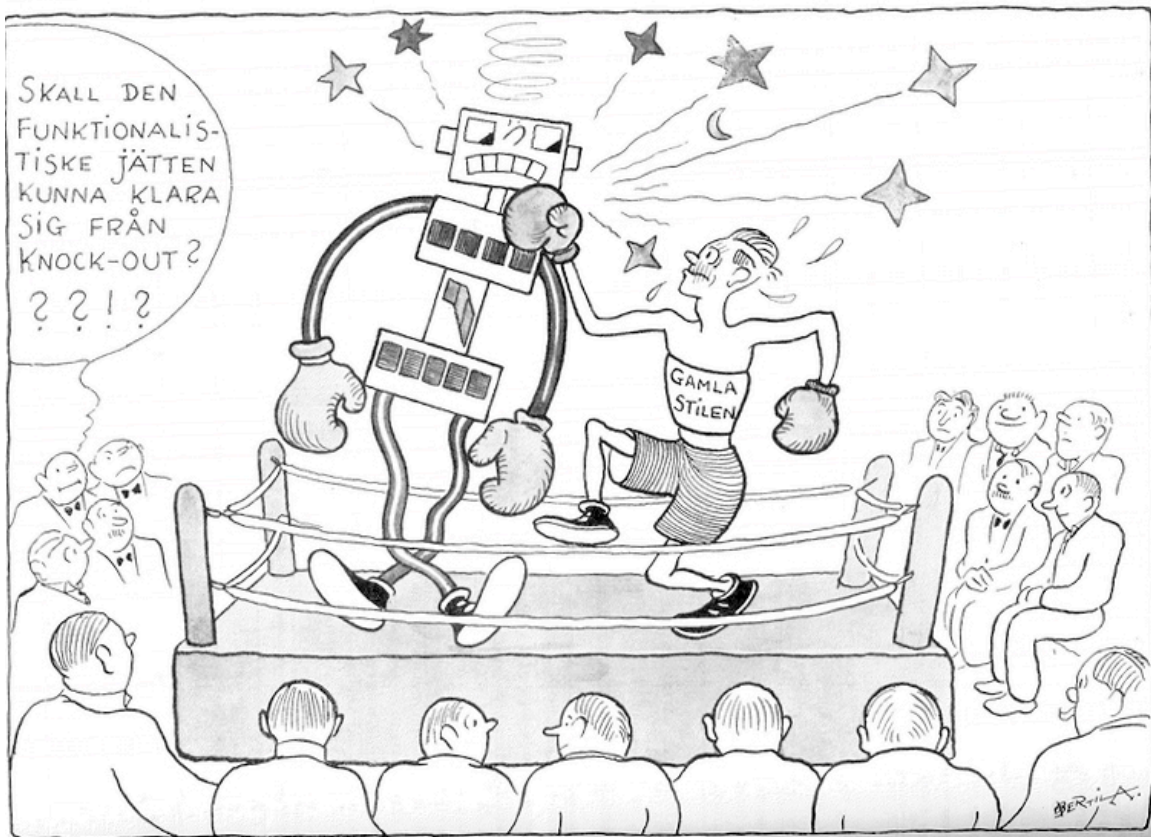
Abstract: *Swedish home interiors in the 1930s and 40s were shaped by a powerful nostalgia as well as modernist ideals of efficiency. This was a contradiction that generated controversies as well as creativity. This paper focuses on debates and negotiations about ideals concerning period furniture, especially relating to production and the concept of authenticity. Further, it explores how these ideals were mediated among professionals and to the individual customer. There were many different types of period furniture available to the customer; antiques, high-class copies, updated and simplified furniture, and industrially produced furniture of varying quality, also flat-pack versions. The specific example discussed in this paper is Gustavian style period furniture. The paper argues that this sometimes-controversial type of furniture was an important component in debates about design at the time, focusing on notions such as taste, honesty, and authenticity. By studying the debates about this alternative category of production, period furniture, this paper wishes to contribute with a complementary approach, which acknowledges a complexity found in the material from the 1930s and 40s.*

Keywords: *Period furniture, Gustavian style, furniture production, authenticity, mediation*

FUNCTIONALISM AND HISTORICISM IN FURNITURE PRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 19th century the Gustavian style has been a piece of the past, ready for interpretation, re-use and revival. These revivals help show how the past keeps playing an active part in the present, and whenever it fills a purpose it can be re-evaluated and repackaged. Hence, there were a number of different 18th centuries available during the 20th century, and each of them had their specific moment of revival, where they seemed to match a specific demand in contemporary society - moments that reflect the agendas, perceptions and arrangements of that time. This paper focuses on how

professionals within academia, museums and the furniture industry negotiated ideologies and values associated with Gustavian style period furniture in the 1930s and 40s. Further, its explores how these values were mediated between these actors and to the individual customer.



1. In 1930 there were many in audience, watching the game, who asked themselves whether the giant of functionalism or the boxer representing the old style would win. Furthermore, what would effects would a victory have for production and trade? Some actors argued for a peaceful co-existence, maintaining the qualities of both contestants, while others did their best to support an efficient knockout. The outcome was not certain and the debate was heated on the pages of *Möbelvärlden* and *Form*. Illustration by Bertil Almqvist published in *Möbelvärlden*, 1930, no. 4, p. 74

acceptera, Form and Möbelvärlden

Negotiations concerning period furniture could be found in various forms of mediations in the 1930s and 1940s, for example, exhibitions, courses, advice literature, and advertising or in the personal meeting between seller and buyer. In this paper we will primarily look at the debates and controversies found in three publications; two professional journals *Möbelvärlden* and *Form*, and the modernist manifesto *acceptera* (1931). All three had overt agendas and acted with an outspoken ambition to shape the discourse and views of their readers.

The texts, illustrations and advertisements found in the mentioned publications are all part of a production-consumption-mediation paradigm that can be associated with the production of Gustavian style period furniture during the 1930s and 40s. This paradigm includes a broader exploration of the cultural meanings of artefacts, and acknowledges that design is also its surrounding practices and discourses. (Lees-Maffei, 2009) Further, the analysis in this paper is based on close reading as a method for textual analysis. It is often used in literary studies as well as in feminist scholarship, and developed in the 1940s and 50s. Close reading indicates that the context of the text is taken into consideration, as texts originate from varying sources and genres. The texts analysed in this paper were inserted into an institutional practice, for example, museums, Svenska slöjdföreningen (the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design (the society changed its name to *Föreningen Svensk form* in 1976), universities, as well as national associations that united retailers, suppliers and producers. This position made them powerful in producing discourses and social relations. These texts can provide facts, however, by close reading it is also possible to move beyond the factual account to understand what social, cultural, historical and political relations that are mediated. In all three publications we also find numerous illustrations, mainly photographs, which have played an important role in the mediation of Gustavian period furniture.

The journal *Möbelvärlden* represented producers, distributors and retailers of furniture in Sweden and was published 1921-1973. *Möbelvärlden* reflected the mix of traditional craft, modern serial production, functionalist ideals and the sizeable production of period furniture that characterised the market at this time. The mix was also reflected in the choice of illustrations. (see figure 2) *Form* was, and still is, an important arena for professional debate acting as the official publication of Svenska slöjdföreningen. The journal included design reform criticism, reviews and featured top-down propaganda for good taste, as it was dictated by the society. The editors held an ambition to reach a wide readership, also outside the members of the society; which included designers, producers, retailers as well as consumers. *Möbelvärlden* shared some of its writers with *Form*, however, it reprinted texts from a variety of professional journals and I would argue that the opinions about period furniture and serial production presented in the journal were more varied and closer to the heterogeneous positions of the producers than *Form*. *acceptera* (1931) had six different authors, and all of them were involved in the Stockholm exhibition 1930. The functionalist manifesto was partly a summary of the exhibition but it also included extensive discussions about style resulting in a critique of historicism and tradition, while at the same time opening up for “an amalgam of old and new”, promoting a modernism that was less radical than was the case with the European avant-garde. (Mattsson & Wallenstein, 2009)

When reading through the issues of *Möbelvärlden* it is clear that Svenska Slöjdföreningen actively worked to influence the attitudes of the readers of *Möbelvärlden*. The directors of the society, Gregor Paulsson and Åke Stavenow both published in the journal, and the editor of *Möbelvärlden* and in 1938, the furniture producer Edvard Miltopæus argued that you needed to consider the society’s opinions even if both artists and producers often held other views. (Miltopæus, 1938) He also criticised *Form* for primarily directing themselves towards the intellectual middle class, and not solving the problems for the general public. In 1938, *Möbelvärlden* published a speech prepared by the designer and interior decorator Gustaf Axel Berg. The speech was

held at a meeting for furniture producers in Nässjö. Berg's text was published to initiate a debate about modern furniture production and the furniture industry Berg accused of clinging to old ideals that were created for clothes and customs of past generations. (Berg 1938) As Miltopaeus had suspected, the readers and writers of *Möbelvärlden* did not unanimously accept Berg's message of standardisation and simplified designs, some producers were afraid that functionalist furniture would result in fewer job opportunities and less profit for the industry. Producers such as Eric Boberg also questioned the profitability of modern design per se. (e.g. Boberg 1938) Further, they argued that old styles could be adapted to modern times, rather than being discarded completely. Still, they asked themselves; if you continued producing period furniture, what was the right or tasteful way of doing it?

The two journals mainly focused on contemporary production, however, this was not without reference to the past. So far, most research about the period has overlooked the numerous examples of articles about for example, the history of furniture production in Sweden, including 18th century furniture makers such as Georg Haupt, Gottlieb Iwersson and Gustav Precht, as well as reprinted texts from exhibitions catalogues and year books from Nordiska museet and Nationalmuseum. These texts focused on historical production and consumption of furniture, and many writers seemed to have found history an indispensable resource, as important for production as the modern machines used. There were also frequent reviews of publications from Nordiska museet and academic researchers that described historic styles, collections or historic interiors. In 1939, the editor of *Möbelvärlden* described such a publication as “..an inventory that is as important to a furniture manufacturer as a newly invented mechanical equipment for the same price.”(1) (Miltopaeus 1939)



2. The advert on the back cover of *Möbelvärlden* from 1949 shows a machine offering exact hole punching. The illustration reflected the strong interest in the aesthetics of the machine at the time. During the same period a surprising number of covers of the journal *Möbelvärlden* featured 18th century furniture and interiors. This front cover from 1949 features a Gustavian chest of drawers made by a furniture producer in Tibro after an original from the 1780s. *Möbelvärlden* 1949:9 back cover, 1949:10 front cover.

Learning about historical styles

The articles show how critics, designers and curators were concerned with the public and furniture producers' lack of knowledge about historical styles. How would consumers be able to choose the right furniture for their homes if they did not know how to judge what they saw? The choices made by producers and consumers were seen as important, not only for their own benefit but also for society at large, connecting both moral and pragmatic arguments. Knowledge of the history of styles was believed to help the public as well as the producers make these informed choices, and help them differentiate between true and false, good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Thus a basic knowledge of art

history and the history of styles became an important ingredient in the education of a democratic citizen as well as a conspicuous consumer. Museums as well as individual art historians played an important part in educating designers, producers, dealers and consumers via the articles, handbooks, courses and catalogues they produced. Still, while acknowledging the importance of knowledge about the past, the supporters of functionalism, for example the director of Svenska slöjdföreningen Åke Stavenow, certainly did not want a production of copies. They saw the past as a resource that could be used to make producers understand and be inspired by the *quality* in both style and execution that could be found in original furniture. (Stavenow, 1932) In 1949, a review in *Form* acknowledged the importance of studying the history of styles, and described it as an effective antidote against a diffuse and conservative style romance, instead knowledge would lead to “a healthy development of styles”. (Ullrich, 1949) Among the many historic styles available, the Gustavian style was seen as specifically suited for modern use. (e.g. Aurelius 1938) The “light and bright historical styles, such as Louis XV and XVI” offered an escape from what was seen as the out-dated dark interiors of the 19th century, and could in this sense have a “modernising effect” while other styles were completely dismissed. (Sparke, 2009; Zettervall, 2012)

The efforts to educate the public about art history and the history of styles would become intimately linked to the concept of *smakfostran*, which can be translated as “education in taste”. *Smakfostran* had been launched as a democratic right and was integrated in the construction of the Swedish Welfare State through state funded initiatives focused on education and housing. In 1953, the art historian and director of *Föreningen Konst i skolan*, Marita Lindgren-Fridell clarified the two main aspects of *smakfostran* in *Form*; individual comfort and economical considerations. (2) (Lindgren-Fridell 1953/1986)

Courses were a popular way of mediating ideas about interior decoration and production not only within the furniture trade but also to the general public. The format was used both by museums, various societies, worker’s unions as well as commercial

initiatives such as Kooperativa Förbundet, Swedens Co-operative Union. Svenska Slöjdföreningen organised some of the most influential courses, and nation wide courses started in 1944. *Smakfostran* included the taste and knowledge of the sales assistants. From the 1930s this professional group were offered courses on a regular basis, where the history of style was an important feature. The courses were the result of collaboration between Köpmannainstitutet and Centralförbundet and were reviewed and advertised in *Möbelvärlden*. The two weeks long courses aimed to give an overview of the furniture trade and encourage self-studies. The course included visits to museums, manufacturers and stores. Museum curator Marshall Lagerquist at Nordiska museet was one of the teachers at the course. He also produced a compendium for the course about the styles of Swedish furniture. The compendium was published in *Möbelvärlden* in 1940.



Den moderna SJÖGRÄSSTOLENS föregångare på 1700-talet såg ut på detta sätt. Vanligen var sitsen flätad men ofta förseddes den, som detta exemplar visar, med en lös dyna. Tillhör Nordiska Museet.

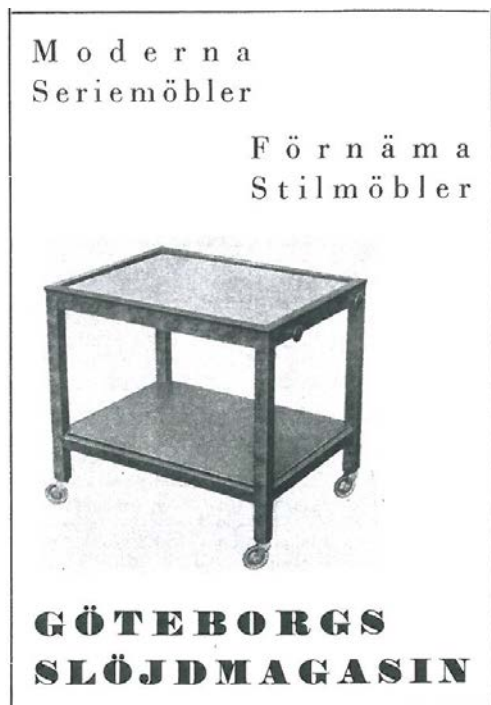
3. A recurring argument for serial production was to refer to its traditional origins in 18th century production. This illustration of an original 18th century version of the modern carver chair was used in an article written by Gösta Selling in 1933 in which he compares contemporary serial production and furniture production in the 18th century. The chair is in the collections of Nordiska museet and has been on display in Skogabholm manor house, Skansen. G. Selling, *Form*, 1933, p. 130

Handmade or Machine-made?

“Let us allow one or two generations brought up in the religion of patina and the ‘handmade’ to fade away quietly. “ (Le Corbusier 1925)

Le Corbusiers machine classicism and modernist agenda resonated also in Swedish furniture production. The actors in the industry seem to have experienced that they were active at a moment of change in both style and mode of production. The change included a transition from handmade suites of furniture to serial production and lower prices. In 1939, the editor of *Form*, Kaj Andersson, stated that serial production would deliver the deathblow to the previously popular suites of furniture. Moreover, he pointed out that state funded enquiries had established that such suites could be devastating for smaller households, mainly because of the cost but also because they were considered unpractical. (Andersson 1939) The editor of *Möbelvärlden*, Edvard Miltopæus, was not so categorical; he thought that Andersson exaggerated; there would always be wealthy homes that needed to be furnished. (Miltopæus 1939)

Furniture production in Sweden in 1900-1950 was concentrated to the landscapes of Västergötland and Småland, where it was easy to find raw materials, skilled workers, and the industries were often placed next to the railway. The numerous small companies specialised in different types of furniture, while a few larger industries with serial production were established in the 1920s and 30s. (Jonsson, 2013) This became a period of modernisation of the industry when more efficient machines and electricity were introduced. The professor of Economic History, Sverker Jonsson, has suggested that at the time the Swedish furniture industry was more interested in rationalisation and streamlining the production than committing to new styles and designs. For a long time production included both mechanised and handmade elements, and identifying a clear distinction between craft and industrial production is not always possible. (Jonsson, 2013)



4. 'Modern serial production' or 'distinguished period furniture'? In 1932, the consumer was offered both at Göteborgs slöjdmagasinet, however, as most often is the case in *Form*, it was the modern furniture that is picked for the advert. *Form* 1932, p. 78

What was the difference between handmade or machine-made? In his text, *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (Benjamin, 1936/2008), Walter Benjamin discussed the difference between *manual* and *mechanical* reproduction, using film and photography as the example. Benjamin found that the *aura* of objects withered with mechanical reproduction. (Benjamin, 1936/2008) Hence, the conditions of production would determine the reception and authenticity of the object. Even though art had always been reproduced, the introduction of mechanical means to do it represented something new to Benjamin. Despite the value placed on handmade furniture, the analysed journals suggest that the aura of authenticity was not considered to have been automatically lost in the process of modern serial production; rather it was transformed into iconicity and a pastiche could be accepted if was done the right way, and with taste and knowledge.

Benjamin claimed that mechanical reproduction separated the object from *tradition*, while the authors of *acceptera* wanted to downplay the difference between industry and handicraft. (Asplund et al., 1931) It was not the use of a machine *per se* that made the difference. Rather it was a question of standardisation and mass production versus commission based production on a small scale. The illustration below (see figure 5) highlights at least three different aspects of serial production of period furniture relevant to the functionalist movement. Firstly, it illuminates what the critics claimed to be a “false” feeling of authentic craftsmanship. This type of furniture couldn’t own an originary authenticity, since it wasn’t what it claimed to be, e.g. handmade rather than machine-made. Secondly, the picture strengthened the argument of the authors of *acceptera* that there were close links between handicraft and the industrial process, and that it wasn’t the use of machines that was the biggest difference. Thirdly, it shows how “new furniture in antique styles” did become part of modern furniture production as industrial production developed.



5. “This is how “new furniture in antique styles” is made.” This illustration was used in *acceptera* to illustrate that period furniture and modern serial production were more closely related than you would think. Published 1931. (p.250)

The debate about serial production was fierce in *Möbelvärlden* and *Form*, and opinions differed about what it implied to Swedish furniture production. The writers in both journals used 18th century production as an example to strengthen their arguments. Serial production in the 1930s and 40s was usually defined as a specialisation and rationalisation that would result in reasonably priced furniture of good enough quality. However, that serially produced period furniture could be of high quality as well as of good taste was far from agreed upon.

Originary Authenticity

During the 1930s and 1940s there were many different types of period furniture available to the consumer; antiques, high-class copies, updated and simplified furniture produced by the crafts movement, and industrially produced furniture of varying quality, also flat-pack versions. It is possible to identify three main types of reuse of the Gustavian style, which all adhered to the concept of authenticity in different ways. Firstly, there were faithful copies and high-quality furniture made with direct inspiration from 18th century originals, typically intarsia. These were usually made in small numbers and the cost was relatively high, however, some of these faithful copies also became part of a more large-scale serial production. Museum exhibitions and publications played a decisive role in this production. Secondly, we find furniture produced by the crafts movement that was less dependent on the original. Usually, this type of furniture was painted, and the proportions were slightly adapted and the details could be radically simplified. What is interesting is that both of these ways of appropriating historical styles were seen as distinctive from the historicism that had fallen out of vogue. They were perceived as different because they were based on knowledge, honesty, authenticity and high quality craftsmanship rather than a superficial historicism. And lastly, there was a market for antiques, where the question of forgeries was a constant issue.

A conspicuous consumer was not supposed to be satisfied with false and soulless versions of period furniture, they were expected to look for furniture that could present a

factual and spatio-temporal link with what it claimed to be, “an originary authenticity”. (Outka, 2008) This idea of originary authenticity was one of the main concerns in the debate and some of the articles discussed how authenticity should be mediated to the consumer. Several museums saw it as part of their mission to educate both producers and consumers how to avoid bad imitations of older styles. Marshall Lagerquist (1907-1977), curator at Nordiska museet, was involved in the debate. He found that new period furniture usually were of good technical quality. However, there were many examples when the copy and the original were too different, or “distorted” as Lagerquist phrases it. To avoid this, Lagerquist suggested that producers needed more information about the original. (Lagerquist, 1945) He concluded that producers often used photographs, rather than original furniture; moreover they lacked careful measurements and information about colours. Lagerquist suggested adaptations that should be made in production to fit the ideals of authenticity and how to mediate this authenticity. Furniture, he argued should be marked with the signature of the maker, and the producer should also be responsible for accompanying every piece of furniture with a description of the original. This narrative should accompany the product, not at least since it could provide the salesman with stronger sales arguments and help them meet the competition from the antiques market.

DISCUSSION

During the 1930s and 1940s the production of period furniture existed parallel to, and in dialogue with the development of functionalism. Further, the production highlighted some of the key features of the modern movement; truth, technology, function, progress, anti-historicism and internationalism. (Greenhalgh, 1990) Moreover, this was a period when *good taste* was propagated by state-funded initiatives, societies and museums in Sweden. Many arbiters of taste seem to have accepted that people bought period furniture, but only as long as they were able to differentiate the right historical references from those, which were less appropriate. The arbiters of taste seem to have more or less

agreed that, compared to other historic styles; the Gustavian style could easily be integrated into your modernist home, creating an acceptable aesthetic mix. This presupposed, however, that production related to tradition and demands for an originary authenticity where the consumer could experience a factual and spatio-temporal link between the object and what it claimed to be. To achieve this, both producers and sellers needed to make adaptations in production to fit the ideals, moreover they had to mediate furniture in a way that could be understood and appreciated by the consumer. Museums would see this as part of their mission, to educate the general public but also to promote high quality, authentic models for the furniture industry, and were involved in the education of producers and salespersons.

Throughout the 1930s and 40s historicism as well as modernism helped shape furniture production in Sweden. This was echoed in a lively debate about period furniture involving art historians, critics, consumers, designers, museum curators, suppliers and producers. This paper has aimed to show how period furniture became an important component in this debate about Swedish design, focusing on notions such as taste, honesty, beauty and authenticity. The material explored in this paper show how Gustavian style period furniture not only survived functionalism, the production actually thrived while historicism was a highly controversial subject among trendsetters and critics. Gustavian style was even partly integrated within the functionalist project, promoted as the national and historic roots for the modernist movement, and used to motivate both serial production and traditional materials. The idea that there existed a connection between functionalism and the 18th century was re-launched during the neo-functionalism of the 1990s.

ENDNOTES

1. “.ett lika viktigt inventarium för en möbelfabrik som en nyuppfunnen maskinell anordning till samma pris.” (Miltopaeus 1939/1:29)
2. “Den smakfostran, man uppställer som önskvärd, har två aspekter: den ena rör individens trivsel och glädje i kontakten med tingen, den andra har en nationalekonomisk räckvidd genom att tingkonsten blir tingkunskap, blir estetiskt omdöme och kritisk sans.” (Lindgren-Fridell 1953/1986:81)

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Authors' note:

This article includes some of the preliminary results from the forthcoming dissertation “Mediating the Past – Reviving Gustavian Style 1890s-1990s”.

All correspondence should be addressed to:

Hedvig Mårdh
Department of Art History
Box 630, 751 26 Uppsala

hedvig.mardh@konstvet.uu.se