

# *Johan Tobias Sergel* *and his friends*

Dear friend,

I hope this writing finds you well.

I am writing this letter with regard to an artist that I have discovered in my work for the collective exhibition 'Collect yourself' on Sergelgatan, Stockholm. He is the artist whom the street is named after - **Johan Tobias Sergel**, Sweden's greatest sculptor. His talent was admired greatly across Europe at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th. His sculptural work can be seen in the main art museums: **Musée du Louvre, Nationalmuseum, Museo del Prado, Metropolitan Museum of Art**, yet his art is not known the public today. My project aims to show his personality and the time that he lived.

He was born 28th August 1740 in Stockholm. The son of immigrants, he began his artistic career with the French sculptor **Pierre Hubert Larchevêque**, who was hired by Gustav II as the Court sculptor. As a student of the Academy of Art, Sergel received one of two annually given prizes in 1758. The same year, he accompanied his mentor on a seven month journey to Paris, where he stayed for three months as a pupil of the French Academy of Art. He was presented with the Academy's silver medal (1st class) for his work in modelling. In 1763, he received the accolade of Master of sculpture from the same art school attended by the participants of '*Collect Yourself*'.

Sergel personifies the transnational artist. When studies at the Royal Institute of Art were completed, he moved on to State Stipendium in Italy, where lived for eleven years. He spent several years advancing his artistic skills at the French Academy of Rome. During this time he visited England, Germany and, more frequently, Denmark.

Sergel had an aquiline nose and corpulent bulk. The pleasures of the table were very important to him and he consequently put on weight quite early in life. As he wrote in one of his letters, he had two Masters in Rome: "*the Antique and Nature herself*". Every morning, he spent more than four hours studying Classical art, and in the evenings he studied the nature of the human relationship in all its forms. He placed emphasis on the pleasures of a fun-loving life. Through this time he formed a circle of friends with whom he made Sunday excursions to the Villa Madama, Villa Farnesina and other well-known places. There they copied the frescoes, while servants were sent for food, which was eaten in the park. After a siesta the day was spent playing 'boccia', his favorite game. Sergel also enjoyed bacchanals with young girls. All these 'natural' studies was immortalised by Sergel in hundred of drawings.

Sergel's reporter-style of drawing was flourished in Italy. In close contact with contemporaries and friends, he developed a free, expressive technique. He learnt from the caricature, a traditional Italian expressive form, and in the latest drawings, he started to create narrative sequences. These techniques eventually later developed to become what we know as 'comics'.

As noted above, his sculptural work is better known than his drawings. But, this project is more interested in Sergel as a draughtsman, a role he employed in his sketches of everyday life and ceremonious occasions. Sergel felt free to express his mood and to depict the everyday life of his friends and the society in which he lived. He was like a photographer. He caught his friends off guard and therefore rendered their remarkable individuality. In fact, his drawings are an insight into the quotidian life and customs of the *Gustavian Age*. At an artistic level, his sketches and figures reflect the aesthetic development of his time. From the baroque and Rococo tradition, going through Neo-classicism style and seeing the dawn of Romanticism and of Göticism, the national movement was concerned with the revival of ancient Nordic culture.

Sergel had a great capacity for making friends and to maintain these connections for all his life. Yet, he had a tendency towards melancholia and suffered two deep depressions in his life. The first one was when **King Gustav III** recalled him to Stockholm to become Court Sculptor in 1778. Leaving Rome was hard for him because his residency there was in many respects the happiest period of his life. Furthermore the Scandinavian weather was not good for his rheumatism and gout which had afflicted him early on, probably as a result of his Dionysian habits. He was to yearn for southern Europe for the rest of his life, for not only the climate, but for the energy and artistic excitement he had experienced in Rome.

In Stockholm, he arrived as an internationally recognised artist. He was given a professorship at the Academy of Fine Arts there and was soon occupying a central position in the social and artistic life of the Swedish capital. This aided his battle with depression. Among his friends were the French architect **Louis-Jean Desprez** (who designed the The Copper Tent at Haga Park in Solna), the Court painter **Carl Gustaf Pilo**, the poet **Bellman** and landscape painter **Elias Martin**.

His second bad attack of depression was in 1795. One year before, his wife and love of his life **Anna Rella Hellström** passed away. Rheumatism got continuously worse, attacks of gout became stronger and he increasingly feared growing old. The drawings of this time reflect his attitudes and feelings. They were made only for his private consumption. For this reason, he felt free to express his moods toward the physical afflictions and the tribulations of spiritus-melancholia. Art historians have compared these series of drawings with the '*Caprichos*' by Goya.

He moved to Skåne and Copenhagen and stayed for a long time with friends. As a result of their care he recovered his mental health. He received national recognition for his work when was ennobled and appointed the first director of Sweden's Academy of Art in 1810.

He died in his native city on 26 February 1814.

Sergel was an artist acting as a witness of the turbulent second half of the 18th century and early years of 19th century, involving many dramatic events; the decadence of the Swedish Empire; the rise of Russia as an European dominant nation; the wars against Norway; the murder of Gustav III; the advent of the revolutionary ideas against established authority and the fall of the French monarchy; the attempt by Napoleon to conquer Europe and his fall.

Sergel was a great artist, not only for his outstanding talent, but also because he was always surrounded by a group of friends that supported him. See information below on a small selection of the most influential people in Sergel's life.

---

## CARL MICHAEL BELLMAN

**Bellman** is one of the best Swedish popular poet of all times whose songs are often associated with the high-spirited social life of the *Gustavian Age*. He was a songwriter, composer and performer. His work remains a powerful influence in Swedish music, as well as in Scandinavian literature. Several of his songs, including '*Gubben Noak*' and '*Fjäriln vingad*', are known by heart of many Swedes. His lyrics are famous for lively and graceful virtuosity and displayed a gift for evocative description. This literarian style used elegant rococo classical references, in ironic contrast to his sordid drinking and prostitution habits.

The son of a family of humble means, his parents had intended him to become a priest, but he fell ill with a fever and on recovering found he could express any thought in rhyming verse. **Bellman** was a very smart person. He spoke French, German, Italian, English and Latin. Despite working in a bank he ironically fell quickly into financial difficulty and filed for bankruptcy before moving to Norway to escape prison for his debts. One research from the bank on the behaviour of its young employees describes **Bellman** as a ringleader of gambling, masquerades, picnics and suchlike -**Sergel** was one of his supporters in these activities. **Bellman** was therefore forced to end his banking career.

**Bellman**, already in poor health from alcoholism, went into decline. His drinking increased heavily and likely worsened his ongoing gout in 1790. Also this year, the Swedish Academy awarded **Bellman** its *Annual Lundblad Prize* of 50 Riksdaler for the most interesting piece of literature of the year. People from the Academy described the writings of **Bellman** 'outside of the standards of elegant taste'. But the **King Gustav III**, who called him "*Il signor improvisatore*" (the master improviser), ensured that **Bellman** won the prize.

**Bellman**'s songs describe life in Stockholm, from Bacchanalian feasts and jolly gatherings to moods of the deepest melancholy and presentiments of death. He was a very good friend of **Sergel**, who depicted him in several drawings as a sad, troubled figure. In one of **Bellman**'s poems, he made an analysis of the genius of **Sergel**:

<< *A Sergel into his clay a muted marvel pours, / both life and warmth play in the cool marble folds, / And the blood's ebb and flow*>>.

He was buried in Klara churchyard with no gravestone, the grave's location now unknown. The Swedish Academy belatedly placed a memorial in the churchyard in 1851, complete with a bronze medallion by **Sergel**.

**Bellman** has been compared with poets and musicians as diverse as **Shakespeare** and **Beethoven**. His poetry continued to be read and sung throughout the nineteenth century. His songs were sung especially by the urban bourgeoisie and in fraternities, but also in aristocratic circles and ordinary people in the countryside.

---

## NICOLAI ABRAHAM ABILDGAARD

A Danish friend of **Sergel**, he was a neoclassical and royal history painter, sculptor, architect, and professor of painting, mythology, and anatomy at the New Royal Danish Academy of Art in Copenhagen. Art historians have said that he was a cold theorist, inspired not by nature but by art. His style was classical, though with a romantic trend.

He met **Sergel** in Rome, where he studied sculpture, architecture, decoration, frescoes and murals. **Abildgaard** returned to the Academy in Copenhagen and was promoted to professor in 1778. For several years he served as Academy Director. He was also assigned as a royal artist during 1780 to 1805.

In the company of **Sergel** and painter **Füssli**, he began to move away from the classicism he had learned at the Academy. He developed an appreciation for the literature of **Shakespeare**, **Homer**, and **Ossian** (the legendary Gaelic poet). He worked with themes from Greek as well as Norse mythology, which placed him at the forefront of Nordic romanticism.

One example of this period is the commission by the Danish government to paint large monumental pieces depicting a history of Denmark, to decorate the entirety of the Knights' Room (Riddersal) at Christiansborg Palace. The paintings combined not only historical depictions, but also allegorical and mythological elements that glorified and flattered the government. The artwork shows that **Abildgaard** had a keen sense of color.

**Abildgaard** won immense fame in his own generation and helped lead the way to the period of art known as the *Golden Age of Danish Painting*. He was depicted by **Sergel** in several quotidian manners in a sombre mood. The pair had different attitudes to life: the Danish artist was more quiet and measured than his Swedish friend, who was more frequent to the wild orgy, banquets, and feasts. However, **Abildgaard** was a very good support for him when they spent time together in Copenhagen, where **Abildgaard** helped **Sergel** to emerge from his second deep depression.

---

## GUSTAV III

**Gustav III** was King of Sweden from 1771 to 1793. He is remembered as the patron of the arts and benefactor of arts and literature. He founded several academies, among them the Swedish Academy (known for making the annual decision on who will be the laureate for the Nobel Prize in Literature) and built both the *Royal Swedish Opera* and the *Royal Academy of Art*. **Sergel** was to become the first director of the Royal Academy. **Gustav III** spent considerable public funds on cultural ventures. For example, he gave privileges to the Royal Academy of Painting & Sculpture. He was criticised for this, alongside controversy about his reign. One of his legacies was to be the first neutral head of state in the world to recognise the United States during its war for independence from Great Britain.

One of **Sergel's** portraits depicts the King arriving at his studio in the morning, wearing an enormous hat as a disguise so as to go unnoticed in the public space. **Gustav III** recalled **Sergel** from Rome to be his Court Sculptor. The King always showed a great admiration for **Sergel** as an artist, but also grew to respect him as a person. In 1783, **Gustav III** chose him as his '*Cicerone*' when he decided to visit Italy in 1783.

**Gustav III's** absolutist ideas made him a lot of enemies in the political scene. In 1793, **J.J.Anckarström** shot him at a masquerade Ball at the Opera. He died 13 days later. **Sergel** felt ashamed and sad for the murder of the king.

**Sergel** made an amazing sculpture dedicated to **Gustav III**. Today, it is located in front of Royal Palace in Stockholm.

---

## ANNA RELLA HELLSTRÖM

**Sergel's** doctor ordered him to take long walks due his health problems. On one such walk **Sergel** passed the inn where **Anna Rella** was employed. Very soon, she was incorporated into **Sergel's** household and was promoted to "*mademoiselle*". By 1783, they were living in a '*mariage de conscience*', a legal relationship similar to an unmarried partner.

A friend of **Sergel** described her as "*a pretty and modest blonde, extremely prepossessing and so natural in her manner*". In his drawings, **Sergel** expressed tenderness in the most intimate situations by using light pen-strokes. The softness accentuated the comfort of the domestic scene. These sketches are far away from the humor of his burlesque drawings.

**Hellström** had several children with **Sergel** but only two of them survived - **Gustaf** and **Johanna Carolina Elisabeta**. In a very popular drawing, **Sergel** portrayed himself with **Anna Rella** and their son, **Gustaf**. **Sergel** had prepared an artistic career for his son, but **Gustaf** preferred agriculture. **Sergel** purchased the manor-farm of Sponga where his son became manager.

**Sergel** and **Anna Rella** lived happily until her death in 1796, which worsened his second depression.

---

## CARL AUGUST EHRENSVÄRD

**Ehrensvärd** was a Swedish naval officer, painter, author, and neo-classical architect. He came from a military family in Fästningsö, outside Helsinki in Finland, where he received his education from his father, **Augustin Ehrensvärd**, and the artist **Elias Martin**.

When he met **Sergel**, his naval career was going well. In 1789 he received the command of the Finnish archipelago fleet. At this time, Sweden was at war with Russia for the control of the Baltic sea. **Ehrensvärd** wisely ignored **Gustaf III's** orders to immediately attack after taking time to calculate the strength of the Swedish and Russian archipelago fleets. In the summer, Russians troops attacked and Sweden lost the battle.

The military commented on the battle saying: '*Your majesty has no more fleet in the archipelago*'. Despite the defeat, **Ehrensvärd** was admired by his comrades for his valiant effort and strategy in the defense of the Swedish's positions. In 1790, he was elected a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.

Though active as a naval officer during his entire life, he is mostly remembered for the burlesque caricatures of often famous people from this era, with which he decorated his letters. He was also the author of a satirical drawing of **King Gustav III** and his procreation with his Queen. **Ehrensvärd** was a prolific letter writer and had contacts with the cultural elite of Sweden, like the architect **Olof Tempelman**, poet **Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna** and shipbuilder **Fredric Henric af Chapman**. His graphic talent was mainly influenced by **Sergel**, with whom he had a close friendship, despite a great disparity in essential matters - **Ehrensvärd** was a freemason, **Sergel** a sceptical rationalist. The military was violently opposed to **Gustav III** yet the artist felt a great admiration for the king.

It was the art and the pleasures of life what held the friendship together. They travelled together to Italy where they shared mutual admiration for Classic Art and spiritual affinities. The trip was a great experience for **Ehrensvärd**, even causing him to consider whether to change his profession.

When **Sergel** was depressed for the second time, **Ehrensvärd** invited him to spend time in his new country house at Dömostorp in Skåne, Southern Sweden. **Sergel** wrote: '*Health, well-being and activity*' in reflection on his time there. This positive atmosphere gave him the inspiration to start to draw again with great sensibility and virtuosity. They spent time exchanging drawings, many of them depicting pornographic scenes.

---

## ELIAS MARTIN

**Martin** was a Swedish history, and landscape painter. His well-known works are watercolour paintings of Stockholm and his landscape oil paintings that feature romantic lighting effects. The National Encyclopedia describes him as Sweden's "*first great landscape painter*".

He started his career as a designer of ship ornaments. This job led to an apprenticeship with **Augustin Ehrensvärd** (a lieutenant Colonel in the artillery and father of **Carl August**) and encouraged him to pursue his painting.

He lived in Paris and Rome, but it was in England where he spent most of his time on landscape painting, receiving inspiration from **Claude Lorrain** and the English landscape school. He painted several paintings in this style, but also experimented with portraits, genre paintings, and historical paintings. **Martin** gained a good reputation in England for his paintings and he became a member of the Royal Academy in London.

In 1781 he earned a membership at the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts and a year later he traveled to Sweden. He went ashore in Helsingborg and passed through Lund, Karlskrona, and Kalmar before arriving in Stockholm. He later depicted the many views he saw on his travels in watercolour and oil paintings. In the summer of 1791 he was recalled to Sweden by **King Gustav III**. He remained there until his death.

**Elias Martin** met **Sergel** in London 1779. When **Ehrensvärd** died, **Martin** became the closest of his friends. Both of them formed an exclusive group of artists with the French architect **Desprez**, the poet **Bellman** and the painter **C.G. Pico**. They moved in the same circles and the friendship formed in their youth lasted into their old age.

During his final years in Stockholm, **Martin** produced several engravings and paintings, primarily depicting landscapes, in watercolour and oils. He also became an art teacher. **Martin** is one of the people who is depicted most frequently in **Sergel's** sketches of his friends from Stockholm. **Sergel** felt a great admiration for **Martin**, yet he was also the butt of **Sergel's** jokes.

---

## FREDRICA LÖF

**Fredrica** was a pretty famous actress on the Swedish stage. She was the first female star at the newly founded Royal Dramatic Theater in 1788.

Her family was poor and **Fredrica** lived with seven sisters and one brother. To help her family financially, she and her sisters were working as high class prostitutes. They were known as '*Löven girls*'.

When **Fredrica** began to study in the French Theatre at Bollhuset in Stockholm, she adopted the French version of her first name as a stage name and changed her surname to her father's original name, calling herself "*Fredrique Löwen*". After her education, **Fredrica**'s reputation as an actress grew. She undertook roles in plays by **August von Kotzebue**, **Racine**, **Voltaire** and **Favart**. She played the title role in "*Semiramis*" by **Voltaire**, where she was admired for her "*majestic*" interpretation; the title roles in "*Athalie*" by **Racine** and "*Drottning Christina*" by **Gustav III**, and Susanna in "*The Marriage of Figaro*" by **Mozart**. She also became an elective member of the *Actors Board of Directors at The Royal Dramatic Theatre* under the authority of the Royal Swedish Academy of Art.

**Fredrica**'s private life was a great topic of discussion. Among her lovers was **Sergel**. **Fredrica** never married but she had three children. According to rumors at that time, one of them was a son of **Sergel**. They lived together after **Anna Rella**'s death. **Fredrica** resided at Gustav Adolfs torg, where she entertained the cultural elite, such as **Sergel**, **Carl Michael Bellman** and **Louis Masreliez** and her colleagues. She had her own carriage to take her to and from the theatre.

The life and successful career of **Fredrica** has a great worth: she could not read text, and was forced to learn her parts by having others reading her the scripts.

There are several images of **Fredrica** kept at the Nationalmuseum, many of them made by **Sergel** during her last years on the stage. According to **Sergel**, she was insane at the time of her death.

---

I apologise that I am writing to you in English -**Emma Clayton** helped me-. **Sergel** wrote his friends in French. Maybe it would have been more appropriate to write in Swedish but I wanted it to be possible for lots of people to be able to read this in order to discover more about this genial artist and friendly person.

Respectfully,

Juanma