

# Do Women Have to Be Extraordinary to get Exhibited in Swedish Museums?<sup>1</sup>

## Cultural Heritage Sites, Museum Exhibitions and the Commercialization of Women from the Past

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### *Introduction*

“I have been thinking about how my life would have been if I had been a man instead.”<sup>2</sup>

This quote is collected from the exhibition *Rebel girls* at Christinehof castle, in southern Sweden. *Rebel girls* claims to show the rebellious lives of women related to the castle’s original owner, Christina Piper. As such, it features more of these startling quotes, written in the style of memoirs of the women portrayed in the exhibition. Exhibiting thoughts and feelings give visitors an insight in to lives of women from the past. However, there is no way for the museum visitor to know if the above, and other similar sentences, were ever thought, said, or written down by any of the women shown in the exhibition. The chosen style can be called over-narrativization, and it is characterized by blurring the lines between fact and fiction without considering the consequences for the museum practice. And more importantly—the consequences for maintaining the integrity of the historical women portrayed. We claim that this, alongside other issues found in *Rebel girls*, is a result of women’s history evolution into a unique selling point, a USP, in Swedish exhibitions in recent years. Exhibitions on the topic of “women” have become commonplace and there are cultural heritage sites in Sweden which are fully committed to showing the lives of women of the past. Or at least, so they claim.

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased: Guerrilla girls, Do women have to be naked to get in to the Met?, lithography, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Authors’ translation. Original: ”Jag har funderat på hur mitt liv hade blivit om jag istället varit en man”, Exhibition sign: ”Magdalena Rudenschöld: Krossad till själ och hjärta”, Christinehof Castle 2022.

Elisabeth Callihan and Kaywin Feldman call for more intersectional perspectives in regard to women in museums and curating. Callihan and Feldman see a risk of museums reproducing injustices found in society and ask for an intersectional perspective. As they state: “Paradoxically, excluding marginalized groups only serves to reproduce inequality and reinforce the very patriarchy that feminism is purportedly fighting against.”<sup>3</sup> An important critique Callihan and Feldman raise is that feminism is not inherently inclusive. They claim that historically feminism has mostly served white, cis, straight and able-bodied women.<sup>4</sup> Instead of equality, where women would receive the same as men, the writers call for equity, which implies that each identity is different and has different needs. In a review of the exhibition *Feminine Power* at the British Museum, writer Anna Souter discusses issues regarding the conceptualization of exhibitions claiming to showcase women and power.<sup>5</sup> Many of the problems stem from the thought that men are the norm and women the “other”. Souter claims that there is an absence of the complexities of gendered experiences and objects. She writes:

Where the works are by (or assumed to be by) male artists, *Feminine Power* suggests what such images might have meant to male worshippers or what they might say about a patriarchal belief system — but it generally fails to consider what such images might have meant to women. The realities of women’s lives are conspicuously absent from this show about the feminine.<sup>6</sup>

In her review of the exhibitions, Souter hits the nail on the head regarding the unsatisfactory way exhibitions about women often turn out. The reality of everyday life with its trials and tribulations are often forgotten or ignored for more “interesting” takes on the past lives of women. Often the view of women’s lives is still conceptualized through a lens shaped by the male gaze. This critique from Souter shows that the execution of exhibitions with aims of telling the history or experiences of women do not always hit the mark. This is similar to the critique Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry raise in *Politics in a Glass Case*:

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<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Callihan & Kaywin Feldman Presence and Power: Beyond Feminism in Museums, *Journal of Museum Education*, 43:3 (2018) p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Callihan & Feldman, (2018) p. 181.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Souter, The British Museum Takes the Feminism Out of *Feminine Power*, *Hyperallergic* (2022), collected December 21, 2022, <<https://hyperallergic.com/752644/the-british-museum-takes-the-feminism-out-of-feminine-power/>>.

<sup>6</sup> Souter (2022).

*Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, wherein they note that feminism has become more included in the institutions but has created little sustainable change as it has “lost its bite”.<sup>7</sup>

Missing the mark in exhibitions regarding women is something that also unfortunately happens in public history in Sweden.<sup>8</sup> Our perspective stems from our experience of working both as creators of museum exhibitions and as museum educators, as well as being avid visitors to museums. We argue that there are two major trends in terms of the conceptualization of women’s history in Swedish exhibitions. The first concept could be considered *women as add-on history*, where women are included separate from the main narrative of the exhibition with little or no context. The women found in this concept could be considered add-ons. The other concept, *a skewed claim to diversity by including women*, we see as part of a larger change towards commercialization in the cultural heritage sector. In this chapter, we will exemplify trends of exhibiting women with cases from exhibitions, publications, as well as educational and curatorial practices from the Historical Museum at Lund University, Svaneholm Castle Museum, The Vasa Museum, Nationalmuseum, and Skokloster Castle, Christinehof Castle and Skarhult Castle.

In 2022 two new exhibitions, *Lovely to be a Sculptor!* at Nationalmuseum and *Chatelains and Convent Sisters* at Skokloster Castle, both focused on women’s history, opened their doors in cultural heritage institutions run by the Swedish government. They were marketed as fresh perspectives on a stale, male dominated history. However, in this chapter we argue that the new exhibitions should be understood in relation to a general development within the Swedish Museum sector. It can be argued that it started with Skarhult Castle and the exhibition *Power in Disguise* (or with a translation closer to the original Swedish title: *The Hidden Power of Women*) that was launched and presented as providing a previously untold history and unique insight into the lives of women

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<sup>7</sup> Angela Dimitraka & Lara Perry (red.), *Politics in a glass case: feminism, exhibition cultures and curatorial transgressions*, (Liverpool 2013) p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Public history is a concept that encompasses the history that is being mediated outside of academia, at arenas such as museums and within re-enactment groups. Faye Sayer states that all forms of public history are unified by the urge to communicate with and increase the public’s engagement in what history is being written. In this context, museums hold a high level of credibility. Faye Sayer, *Public History: A Practical Guide* (London & New York 2019) pp. 3–4, 13. See also Julia Håkansson, “*Mød Vikingerne – I gränslandet mellan fakta och fiktion på Nationalmuseet*”, in Irene Andersson, Erik Alvstad & Ingmarie Danielsson Malmros, *Identitet i en föränderlig värld: Sju nya historieskrivningar* (Malmö: 2021) p. 181–183.

with power.<sup>9</sup> This exhibition has been very popular, and we see it as the possible precursor to the other exhibitions mentioned in this chapter. Women finally getting a place in public history could be seen as something positive. However, we have observed a couple of troubling concerns regarding representation, critical reflection, and intersectionality. Drawing on our years of professional experience in the museum sector, we aim to highlight what we argue to be a skewed selection of women being portrayed in Swedish museum exhibitions. By showcasing these malpractices, we claim to have pinpointed some of the problems caused by claiming diversity. The majority of the women represented are exotified, glorified, and simplified — with possible complexity surrounding them and their context being ignored. It is no longer possible to depict them as human; they are women representing the *outstanding woman*.

### *Androcentrism and Ambivalent Sexism Theory*

That the exhibited women are mostly of so-called noble birth represents another issue, giving a skewed social representation of the history of Swedish women. The women are always gendered, with androcentric history still the supporting pillar of the narrative. The term androcentrism refers to the prioritization of men as the standard and women as being gender-specific and othered.<sup>10</sup> April Baily claims that women are more often given gender-specific labels (such as *woman*) and that men are generally thought to represent examples of *humanity* in Implicit Association Tests.<sup>11</sup> Men have represented humanity in museums up until recently and, despite an increase in the visibility of women, men are still considered the norm.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding male and female representation, it is important not only to “count heads”, but to instead take a qualitative look at what the exhibitions tell or show the visitors about the gendered experience. This is especially important when the aim is to show new perspectives and put forgotten groups in the limelight. When producing exhibitions, the museums or cultural heritage sites are at risk of reproducing gender norms and stereotypes both in the past and present. Kerstin Kowarik and Jutta Leskowitz have studied how women are portrayed in pre-

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<sup>9</sup> The original Swedish title is *Den dolda kvinnomakten*.

<sup>10</sup> Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The lenses of gender: Transforming the debate on sexual inequality* (New Haven, 1993) p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> April H. Bailey, Marianne LaFrance & John F. Dovidio, “Implicit androcentrism: Men are human, women are gendered”, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 89 (2020) p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Callihan & Kaywin Feldman (2018) p 179.

historic archeological exhibitions in Austria. Their findings show that women are often depicted as passive and non-productive to society.<sup>13</sup>

Two useful concepts for analyzing this effect are *hostile sexism* and *benevolent sexism*. Originating from social-psychologists Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske's Ambivalent Sexism Theory, the concepts aim to show how sexism, often only defined as the *hostile* kind, has more than one expression. Glick and Fiske write:

Benevolent sexism encompasses subjectively positive (for the sexist) attitudes towards women in traditional roles: protective paternalism, idealization of women, and the desire for intimate relations. Hostile sexism encompasses the negative equivalents on each dimension: dominative paternalism, derogatory beliefs, and heterosexual hostility. Both forms of sexism serve to justify and maintain patriarchy and traditional gender roles.<sup>14</sup>

The Ambivalent Sexism Theory uses these two concepts to measure sexist attitudes towards women and is intended for use in psychological studies. Instead, we borrow the concepts as they summarize tendencies we see in the cases presented. Rethinking the concept of sexism to also include the benevolent definition provides the concepts for analyzing the phenomena of the increase in exhibitions about women in Swedish museums in our intended qualitative manner.

### *Museums, Exhibitions and Commercialization of Cultural Heritage*

Museums are important cultural heritage institutions. According to The International Council of Museums, ICOM, the definition of a museum reads:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kerstin Kowarik & Jutta Leskovar, "Women without History? History without women? Studies on the representations of prehistoric gender roles in Austrian exhibitions", *Les Nouvelles de l'archéologie [En ligne]*, 40 (2015). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/nda.3029> (January 23, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Peter Glick & Susan T. Fiske, "The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70:3 (1996) p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> International Council of Museums (ICOM), <<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>> (August 5, 2022).

This definition from August 2022 marks a shift in the mission of museums towards contributing to conversations about important current topics such as diversity. In this chapter we will examine the difficulties Swedish museums and other cultural heritage institutions face when making women the focus of exhibitions. Previous studies of Swedish museum exhibitions have shown that the gender representation of those depicted does not strike a balance between men and women, with some studies reporting the number of women depicted as low as 30%.<sup>16</sup> This poses the question: If museums are cultural heritage institutions, whose heritage are they reflecting?

Many of the sites referred to in this chapter could not be defined as museums, nor do they claim to be. Instead, they could be considered cultural heritage sites. But they do claim to show an important part of cultural heritage: the stories and lives of women. Some of them claim to reveal a “hidden”, “forgotten” or “untold” part of history through their exhibitions. Women are not a single category but a heterogenous group of individuals. However, in these exhibitions they are commonly depicted as the former.

### *Cultural Heritage as Industry*

Following historian Robert F. Berkhofer Jr, what was formerly known as the heritage sector has now turned into an industry. This means that (some) actors within the sector are driven primarily by the prospect of turning a profit.<sup>17</sup> LAM-researchers Nanna Kann-Rasmussen and Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen have studied recent changes within the LAM-sector (Libraries-Archives-Museums). Their findings show that museums have focused on why the public fail to visit them, and subsequently tried to find solutions to remedy this. One such solution is the production of so-called blockbuster exhibitions with popular themes, which are subjected to heavy marketing. The level of success of a museum is often measured against how many tickets they sell.<sup>18</sup> As Kann-Rasmussen and Hvenegaard Rasmussen state: “...the commercial logic has made its breakthrough as an imperative for increased use” in museums.<sup>19</sup> We argue that

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<sup>16</sup> Charlotte Hyltén-Cavallius & Fredrik Svanberg, *Älskade museum: svenska kulturhistoriska museer som kulturproducenter och samhällsbyggare* (Lund, 2016) p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> Robert F. Jr. Berkhofer, *Fashioning History: Current Practices and Principles* (London 2012) p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> Nanna Kann-Rasmussen & Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen, “Autonomiparadokset i ABM: En analyse af ABM-institutionernes ændrede omverdensrelationer og deres implikationer”, *Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidsskrift* 22:2 (2019) pp. 220, 223.

<sup>19</sup> Kann-Rasmussen & Hvenegaard Rasmussen (2019), p. 222. Authors’ translation. Original: “...den kommercielle logic har slået igennem som et imperativ om øget brug”.

this process of commercialization of the museum sector (or industry) has led to museums striving to find a unique selling point (USP) in the market, and that women's history has become one such USP in a Swedish context. As museums has moved their practice beyond exhibiting objects encased by mahogany and glass —accompanied by minimal information — towards an increased number of ready-made interpretations presented to the public, the importance of stories and conceptualization of history in museum exhibitions has increased.<sup>20</sup>

### *Working with Exhibiting Women as Add-on History*

In the following section we will discuss our own experiences from working with exhibitions where the inclusion of women's history has resulted in being part of the trend of *women as add-on history*. In exhibitions of this kind women are included, but as separate histories served as side dishes to the main course: history with a male-dominated perspective. This male perspective could be seen as a type of hostile sexism, as women are consequently excluded. The examples given in this chapter all consist of exhibitions where women's history is separated from the main exhibitions of the museums. Therefore, it can be considered as an add-on to these main exhibitions. We claim that women's history cannot be viewed simply as an add-on history, such as it was treated decades ago by the discipline of history.<sup>21</sup> Rather, women's history should be integrated into the main practices of these museums and cultural heritage sites, otherwise it risks reinforcing rather than challenging hostile sexism.

When one of the authors of this text, Malin Jonsson, worked at the Historical Museum at Lund University, it became apparent that visitors had a great interest in guided tours regarding women. Although most permanent exhibitions in the museum relate to the large archeological collection of the museum, some of them could be used as a springboard to discuss gender and intersectionality with a guide. Temporary exhibitions were most often developed with regard to recent research in archeology, with one exception: The last bishop of Denmark and the

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<sup>20</sup> Berkhofer (2012) pp. 143–154.

<sup>21</sup> As historians we see parallels with how women and their history made their way into academia. In the 1960s and 1970s inclusion of women as topics for different kind of research began to take form in academia. In broad strokes, the background to the research tradition of women started around 60 years ago. From the inclusion of women, the research began to focus on the social aspects of gender during the 1980s and 1990s, including intersectional questions such as socioeconomic factors and ethnicity. Parallel to the history of gender and intersectionality the history of sexuality and queer history began to take form. Helena Bergman & Emma Severinsson, "Kvinnohistorier: Kvinnor i svensk historisk forskning", *Historisk tidskrift* 141:3 (2021) p. 398–399. In short — the research of women's history is complex and not one where a few women highlighted here and there is enough to interpret the past.

first of Sweden — Peder Winstrup (1679), was found mummified in the cathedral in Lund when his tomb was opened, and the mummy of the bishop was exhibited on a lit de parade for visitors to see. This was later followed up with a temporary exhibition regarding the bishop's life. In this exhibition visitors got to meet the bishop both as “a man and a mummy.”<sup>22</sup> The biographical approach did not include discussions regarding gender or intersectionality, although some discussions about class could be read in between the lines.

The exhibition also included his second wife, Dorothea, through a label retelling the story of her smuggling goods through the city tolls of Lund into the Bishops House. The exhibition provided little other information about her. Her life as the wife of a bishop was in no way like that of other women. It became clear that less research was done by the museum about her than the bishop. Instead of discussing the society of 17<sup>th</sup> century Sweden, the life and mummified remains of the bishop were communicated to the public. An opportunity to discuss the lives of people other than the bishop was found in the bishop's casket. Wrapped in cloth and placed by the bishop's feet was a fetus. This highly fascinating find could have provided an insight into reproductive conditions affecting women throughout history, especially since the bishop's first wife had died while giving birth. This is an example of one of many ways to write the history of women in a more general way, by conceptualizing through larger questions rather than “adding” a named woman to the main narrative. It does not necessarily have to be tied to individuals. Even so, in this case there was evidence of women close to the bishop.

This text's other author, Julia Håkansson, has similar experiences as Jonsson from working at Svaneholm Castle Museum, albeit with projects focused primarily on women's history. Svaneholm Castle Museum was founded in 1934. Since then, it has largely kept the characteristics of an old homestead museum, dominated by objects with few narratives and little contextualisation. From 2019, however, the museum received substantial financial funding as a participant in the EU-funded project *South Baltic Manors* (SBM), and thus received the opportunity to modernize its exhibitions. Two of the sub-projects within SBM in which Håkansson was involved were the book *Women at Svaneholm*<sup>23</sup> and the

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<sup>22</sup> Per Karsten & Andreas Manhag, *Peder Winstrup: historier kring en 1600-tals mumie* (Lund, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Margareta Andreasson, Julia Håkansson & John Wickman (eds.), *Kvinnor på Svaneholm*, (Malmö 2021).



exhibition *The Fates of the People of Svaneholm*, both aimed at bringing to the fore previously neglected stories related to the castle.

Following our categorization, even the title of the exhibition, *Women at Svaneholm*, suggests that it falls within the category of women as add-on history. Considering that a book about the castle's "general" history was released the same year, *Women at Svaneholm* can be perceived as an appendix, or even afterthought.<sup>24</sup> This interpretation of the different statuses assigned to the books is strengthened simply by the fact that there is no book titled *Men at Svaneholm*. Instead, men over-populate the main narrative of the castle as presented in the "main" book. Women, who with some minor archival work could have been touched upon more than briefly, have been neglected in this book.

Examples of the women previously unknown in the history of Svaneholm Castle are the many servants that have lived and worked there. The exhibition, *The Fates of the People of Svaneholm*, remedies this by centering around the lives of ten servants working at the castle during the period 1780–1920. The exhibition highlights the lives of five women. A housekeeper, a cook, a malt maker's daughter, a chamber maid, and a governess. These women also have their own chapter in *Women at Svaneholm*, titled "Women in the coulisses at Svaneholm".<sup>25</sup> Including women other than those of nobility is certainly a first step in the right direction in regard to museum practices.<sup>26</sup> However, it would have raised greater intersectional awareness if they had been included in the "main book" about Svaneholm.

### *Observations of Exhibitions Treating Women as Add-on History*

Through observations of exhibitions and by studying accompanying publications and marketing materials, we have found that the first trend in the conceptualization of women's history in Swedish museum and heritage site exhibitions can be termed *women as add-on history*. The practice of inclusion by writing a separate history is recurrent in several of the exhibitions analyzed in this

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<sup>24</sup> Carin Bergström, Håkan Cerne & John Wickman, *Svaneholm: Människor, minnen, myter* (Malmö 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Karin Andersson & Lena Axelsson, "Kvinnor i kulisserna på Svaneholm" in Andreasson, Håkansson & Wickman (eds.) (2021) pp. 74–82.

<sup>26</sup> Another recent publication highlights a very illustrative example of that the relationship between the nobility and other people in the village of Skurup has not always been friction free. Emma Severinsson, *Skräddat för herrskap: En kulturskatt på Svaneholms slott*, (Malmö 2022) p. 26.

chapter. This is benevolent sexism, since it aims at positive results for inclusion, but functions as a means of exclusion, as the assumed differences between men and women are reinforced by means of categorization.

The exhibition *Vasa's Women: always present – often invisible* opened in the spring of 2017. The Vasa Museum is part of The Swedish National Maritime and Transport Museums. With nearly one and a half million visitors in both 2017 and 2018 (pre-pandemic figures) it is the most popular museum in Sweden.<sup>27</sup> The museum's press release for *Vasa's Women* stated that "...the exhibition shows that women in the 17th century had more power and influence and more room for maneuver than, for example, legal texts and other legal documents suggest."<sup>28</sup> The exhibition centers around four women, of which two are known from historical sources. The other two were on board the ship when it sank on its maiden voyage in 1628. The exhibition *Vasa's women* is located away from the main exhibition. Just as the women in *Women at Svaneholm* are separated from the main history of Svaneholm, the women of Vasa are kept separate from the ship with which their memories are associated.

A recurring feature in *Vasa's women* is blaming "History with a big H" for the lack of women's history concerning the ship. In the introductory label, it is stated that "The lack of focus on women's history has been a greater problem than the lack of sources."<sup>29</sup> The exhibition texts also put emphasis on the fact that new research has been conducted for the purpose of *Vasa's women*. An exhibition text with the title "Researchers" reads: "The image of women in history is strongly marked by the historical vision of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. That is why research on women less commonly reaches the public. Popular history, the media and textbooks have traditionally seen women's history as something to one side of 'real' history."<sup>30</sup> Here, the Vasa Museum problematizes the androcentric practices of history writing that still characterize public representations of the past.

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<sup>27</sup> A list of the most visited museums in Sweden during the year 2017 on Sveriges museers webpage. <<https://sverigemuseer.se/nyheter/svenska-museibesok-i-topp/>> (August 20, 2022); Carl Peterson Moberg, "Här är Sveriges mest populära museer", *Göteborgs-Posten (GP)*, (July 11, 2019) <<https://www.gp.se/kultur/kultur/h%C3%A4r-%C3%A4r-sveriges-mest-popul%C3%A4ra-museer-1.16179257>> (August 17, 2022).

<sup>28</sup> Authors' translation. Original: "...visar utställningen att kvinnor under 1600-talet hade mer makt och inflytande och större handlingsutrymme än vad till exempel lagtexter och andra rättsdokument antyder." <<https://www.vasamuseet.se/om-vasamuseet/pressrum/kvinnorna---alltid-narvarande-sallan-sedda>>.

<sup>29</sup> Introductory exhibition text, "Vasa's women: Always Present – Often Invisible", Vasa Museum, Stockholm.

<sup>30</sup> Exhibition label, "Researchers", Vasa Museum, Stockholm.

However, the Vasa Museum have themselves decided to make a separate exhibition about women physically located to one side of the main exhibition about the ship. Also, the claim presented in the first sentence from the exhibition label is simplified and doesn't ring entirely true with today's historical research.

However, the Vasa Museum clearly harnesses an ambition to incorporate this new history writing in their main exhibitions. The "In the future" label further develops this ambition: "From our own collections and sources we will look for new narratives and perspectives which give a more comprehensive picture of Vasa and her time."<sup>31</sup> Although it has been five years since *Vasa's Women* was opened, not much seems to have changed for us as visitors. The ambition for a more comprehensive history writing is shared by Nationalmuseum in Stockholm.

During a visit to the exhibition *Lovely to be a sculptor!* Malin Jonsson overhead a man asking "So... Who was the best?"<sup>32</sup> This quote, from a visitor who appeared to have read all the information presented may seem silly, but the fact that the question is posed is telling. The focus of this temporary exhibition, on female sculptors from 1880-1920, was to show female artistry from a time in Swedish art history where female artists often were hidden or opposed. After paying entrance to the exhibition, not included in the free admission, the visitor can learn about the lives of a group of female sculptors active during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The information provided is limited and little is told about their techniques, creative processes, or skills.<sup>33</sup>

The exhibition gives some context about the societal norms for women of the time. However, it lacks discussion on how norms and possibilities differ between women from different economic backgrounds. The context given in this case relates to the unsuitability of women as sculptors due to it being dirty work and the requirement to often work with nude models. The conditions of female sculptors, their day-to-day work and the how their artistry differed from the male sculptors of the time – or even difference amongst the women depicted are difficult to understand. Instead, the visitor can read some misogynistic quotes from reviews of the artists' exhibitions plastered on the wall. This paints a picture that all exhibited women were faced with the same critique and had similar

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<sup>31</sup> Exhibition sign, "In the future", Vasa Museum, Stockholm.

<sup>32</sup> The visit took place August 23, 2022. The Swedish title of the exhibition: "Härligt att vara skulptör!".

<sup>33</sup> This is something that artist and writer Marianne Lindberg De Geer also has criticized the exhibition for: Lindberg De Geer, "Därför var kvinnorna så usla konstnärer", *Expressen*, March 21, 2022.

experiences. The quote mentioned in the beginning of this chapter touches on the same problem. When these female artists are depicted as coming from similar social backgrounds, faced with the same critique and with little interest in their actual artistic expression, it is hard to differentiate between them. They are exhibited because they were female, not because they were artists and sculptors. The fact that they actually exhibited their work in a undoubtedly sexist art world is less problematized. The women are portrayed simultaneously as forgotten, extraordinary and living under gender norms affecting all men and women of their time. The absence of a clear discussion about class or economic standing during the time makes the exhibition rather limited. These women came from wealthy backgrounds. Showing the lives of these extraordinary women is not in itself problematic, but with little societal context it in fact excludes the majority of women. These women may have been forgotten in the Swedish art canon and that is both interesting and important to exhibit – wiser would be to exhibit them as artists, whose artistic careers were made possible by their social backgrounds, not merely as women.

The neglect shown to a discussion of the women's social and economic backgrounds has consequences for the visitors' understanding of the possibilities these women had in their specific historical contexts. The remaining exhibitions that we will discuss in this chapter are all placed in castles and center mainly around women from the Swedish nobility. In these circumstances it is noteworthy that the importance of class is more or less not at all discussed.

### *Towards a Skewed Claim to Diversity by Including Women*

Skokloster Castle was a private palace until it was sold to the Swedish state in 1967, which turned it into a museum. The exhibition *Chatelains and Convent Sisters* centers mainly on the female owners of the castle. To access it one needs to buy an admission ticket additional to the ordinary guided tour of the castle, just as with *Lovely to be a Sculptor!* at Nationalmuseum. From what we gather, the research and work behind the exhibition *Chatelains and Convent Sisters* have not led to any changes in the ordinary guided tour, where women are still mostly only mentioned in relation to their husbands. Since *Chatelains and Convent Sisters* is only planned to run for three years (2022–2024), one may wonder what will happen to women's history at Skokloster thereafter. Perhaps all that will remain is the book of the same name as the exhibition, at least until it runs out of

print.<sup>34</sup> Just as in the case with Svaneholm Castle, the “main history” is told in another, more extensive, book.<sup>35</sup> Thus, once again, women’s history is seen and sold as an appendix to “proper” history.

Both in the book and exhibition, the blame for women’s shunned role in the history of Skokloster falls on History, but not on those who run the museum. This premise — that “History with a big H” has hidden the history of the women of Skokloster — seems to be accepted by many writers in the anthology *Chatelains and Convent Sisters*.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it is evident from most of the cases that we have presented in this category of exhibitions that a preconceived notion exists that history writing “in general” is to blame, although it is not clear who is supposed to bear responsibility for the lack of inclusion of women. Ironically, this accusation of hostile sexism within history is perpetuated by practices that express benevolent sexism.

### *A Skewed Claim to Diversity by Including Women*

In this section we will analyze a different trend from the *Women as add-on history*. The differences between the cases presented in the two categories *women as add-on history* and *women as a skewed claim to diversity* is not always crystal clear. What constitutes an issue with the latter category of exhibitions is that women are brought to the fore and even celebrated because of their power. This risks missing the mark to an even greater extent in regard to equal representation of men and women in exhibitions. Often there is little or no discussion of intersectional perspectives of the portrayed women, especially in regard to class. Skokloster Castle does, at least in part, illustrate the relationship between the nobility and their servants, which is done at neither Christinehof nor Skarhult. This leads to a lack of important contextuality and understanding of how women of different social and economic backgrounds have co-existed in these places of cultural heritage. This practice provides a simplified interpretation of the past where “the history of women” is represented by women from the nobility in a biographical manner. Just as Kowarik and Leskowiak concluded that women in Austrian museums were portrayed as passive and non-productive, so do these

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<sup>34</sup> Annika Williams, *Slottsfruar & klosterystrar: Kvinnors inflytande och ansvar på Skokloster genom århundraden* (Skokloster 2022).

<sup>35</sup> Carin Bergström et al. (eds.), *Skokloster slott under 350 år*, (Karlstad, Göteborg & Örebro 2017).

<sup>36</sup> Jessica Söderqvist, ”Förord”, in Williams (2022) p. 6; Jonas Häggblom & Rothlind, Ann-Cathrin, ”Slottet och porträttsamlingen”, in Williams (2022) p. 10.

exhibitions give a skewed view of society, since women who did not belong to the nobility are disregarded entirely.<sup>37</sup>

The main problem is that the focus of these exhibitions often revolves around women with similar backgrounds, thereby skewing the claim of telling a more diverse history. The visitors are promised something they haven't seen before; history served as novel food. It is important to note the aim of museums or cultural heritage sites when creating exhibitions about women. To exhibit the lives of women by creating specifically dedicated spaces and spheres is one clear way of challenging a lack of women in exhibitions. The current norm of depiction is however problematic. The main way of communicating the history of women is influenced by profit-making heritage sites, such as Christinehof and Skarhult. We have visited Christinehof castle and Skarhult castle multiple times in recent years. Additionally, Håkansson has worked as a museum educator at Skarhult.

Christinehof is a castle museum devoted to the life and works of its founder, Christina Piper. The narrative about Christina mainly centers on her position as a powerful woman of her time, as well as (what is anachronistically called) her entrepreneurial skills. Christinehof Castle Museum has a clear focus on women's history, and as such most exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, are conceptualized around the theme of women's room for maneuver during different time periods. However, the focus on power means that the women represented are exclusively part of the nobility. What Christinehof fails to do is problematize the power wielded by the women in their exhibitions. One might even claim that by not talking about the less powerful women, Christinehof contributes to silence around the exclusion of the history of lower- and working-class women.

Since the exhibitions at Christinehof are conceptualized around a female perspective on history, their USP has become women's history. This is problematic not only in the skewed claim to diversity it entails, but also because the lives of historical women are squeezed into narratives that fit that USP. In order to be exhibited at Christinehof, women must be exceptional, like Christina Piper herself.<sup>38</sup> A narrative trope about the self-made woman has made an impact in exhibitions that use women's history as their USP. Buzzwords such as "powerful", "influential", and "entrepreneurial" are sprinkled throughout texts in

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<sup>37</sup> Kowarik & Leskovar (2015).

<sup>38</sup> Svante Norrhem, "Förord", in Mia Gröndahl, & Helena Rietz, (eds.), *Makt och skaparkraft: en antologi om den makalösa Christina Piper*, Gröndahl & Rietz, (Borrby 2021) p. 11.

marketing campaigns, exhibition labels, museum publications and guide manuscripts. Such vocabulary has spread from cultural heritage sites to government-run museums, which can be seen in the fact that Skokloster Castle also makes use of these specific epithets to describe the women depicted.

The exhibition *Rebel Girls* at Christinehof is problematic in a number of ways. First of all, it stretches the meaning of the word rebel. We assume that the exhibition is named after the book *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*<sup>39</sup> which has gained a lot of attention in the contemporary world. The book highlights the lives of women who have somehow stepped out of societal standards and gone their own ways. However, *Rebel Girls* at Christinehof is about four women from the nobility who experienced dramatic events in their lives. The only real selection criterium was that they were related to Christina Piper. As such, what made them rebellious is not evident in the exhibition.

Christinehof uses women's history as a USP and this leads to an over-narrativization in their exhibition practice. This is evident in the manner in which they present information about the women portrayed in *Rebel Girls*. The exhibition texts are mainly written from a first-person perspective, in which there is no telling what is fact and what is fiction. The women are attributed thoughts and feelings in a way in which the museum visitor has no way of knowing whether they were actually thought or felt. Topics such as mental health, which should be treated with seriousness, are trivialized and dealt with in a rather tasteless manner. By way of example, one of the texts about one of the women says: "How often have I wished I was dead", and "I have been thinking about how my life would have been if I were a man instead".<sup>40</sup> We claim that this is overstepping of ethical boundaries that results from the commercialization of the fates of people from the past. Here, we would like to argue that it is important to consider the following words from Dominick La Capra: "it must actively be recognized that the past has its own 'voices' that must be respected especially when they resist or

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<sup>39</sup> Elena Favilli, *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women*, (Los Angeles 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Authors' translation. Original: "Hur ofta har jag inte önskat att jag vore död" and "Jag har funderat på hur mitt liv hade blivit om jag istället varit en man", Exhibition label: "Magdalena Rudenschöld: Krossad till själ och hjärta", Christinehof Castle 2022. Another, arguably more problematic part of an exhibition text, reads: "I can also be depressed, but that is probably mostly due to the darkness of the winter. Then I take some opium, and everything becomes much brighter!" Authors' translation. Original: "Jag kan också vara deprimerad, men det beror nog mest på vinterns mörker. Då tar jag lite opium och så blir allt mycket ljusare!" Exhibition label, "Aurora Taube: Jag njuter av allt som livet har att bjuda på", Christinehof Castle 2022.

qualify the interpretations we would like to place on them”.<sup>41</sup> The narrativization of the lives of women is in stark contrast to the respect and recognition that La Capra calls for. The intention might be to bring voice to previously voiceless women, but the result is in fact the opposite. It is a way not of giving but rather of claiming power over these historical women. The visitor does not know if these “quotes” are taken from letters, diaries or other sources left behind by these women, which they may not have wanted to be publicly displayed or known, or if they are mere fictional constructs.

As we see and understand it, the increase in exhibitions about women in Swedish museums and cultural heritage sites started at Skarhult Castle, which opened its doors to the public in 2013. Their first exhibition, “Power in Disguise”, claimed to challenge traditional male-oriented history. As such, the initiative is worthy of praise. However, the exhibition was problematic, primarily due to its focus on power. The women in the exhibition—one per century from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century — were acknowledged as important due to the privileged position they held during their lifetime. More specifically, they were praised because they had possessed and wielded power. This is an exemplary form of history writing that can be traced back to a period between 1850-1950. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, historians started to question why those with power should stand in the foreground within history writing. Thus, social history (that later gave way to cultural history) emerged. Skarhult Castle returned women’s history to an outdated form where some people were considered to be superior, and thus worthy of more attention, than others. In no case were people recognised who these women held power *over*— half of whom would have been women.<sup>42</sup> In this way Skarhult started a trend in which women of parts of the population other than the nobility were made invisible.

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<sup>41</sup> Dominick La Capra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca 1983) p. 64.

<sup>42</sup> The author of the chapter on Mette Rosenkrantz, historian Peter Ullgren, gives a very clear example of her power over other women: “Sometime before her death, she got it in her head that a witch in Malmö had made her sick, that is the reason why she had her imprisoned at Skarhult.” Peter Ullgren, “Härskarinnan med riddarhjärtat”, in Alexandra von Schwerin (red.), *Den dolda kvinnomakten: 500 år på Skarhults slott* (Stockholm 2014) s. 45. Authors’ translation. Original: “Någon tid före sin död fick hon för sig att en trollkona i Malmö gjort henne sjuk, varför hon lät fångsla henne på Skarhult.” This is but one example that would have made for a very interesting discussion of the way in which Rosenkrantz wielded her power. It was so great that she, without further trial, could confine someone to the dungeon in her own castle.



Another issue with the presentation of women's history at Skarhult Castle was the fact that it was repeatedly proclaimed as covering uncharted territories in the field of history. This was part of Skarhult's marketing strategy, with the aim of establishing a USP for their exhibition. From the examples given in the previous section of this chapter, it is evident that this strategy has been adopted by other purveyors of exhibitions focusing on women's history. This is troubling since it is simply untrue. Women's history has been integrated in the field of history for decades. To exclude the work done by historians interested in questions regarding gender obscures research carried out in academia.

The fact that Skarhult had made a name for themselves as a cultural heritage site focusing on women's history seemed to arouse problems for them. In 2018 a new exhibition titled *You go boy!* was opened. The exhibition focused on "benevolent" manliness, and the purpose behind it was declared on their website:

Since time immemorial, women and men have sat together on the same branch. Like a pack of monkeys in a tree on the African savannah, we play, tease, and pick each other's lice. Each attack on the other gender becomes an attack on the branch we are all sitting on. Men and women need each other.<sup>43</sup>

This excerpt is problematic in a lot of ways, not all of which will be unpacked here. The quote is, above all else, exceedingly heteronormative. What can be said, in keeping with the purpose of this chapter, is that the commercialization of women's history within the cultural heritage sector has created the perception of a continued requirement to provoke and arouse the interest of the audience. This is the clearest case of benevolent sexism gone awry from its claimed intentions. This is a dangerous path to tread due to the risks of reinforcing rather than challenging gender norms, belittling the struggles of and further silencing women from the past.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Museum exhibitions with a focus on women's history have increased in number in Sweden during the last decade. This change could be seen as a step towards a more inclusive public history with museums such as Museum of Women's History in Umeå, and the digital museum Stockholm Museum of Women's

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<sup>43</sup> Skarhult, *You go boy!*, <<http://skarhult.se/en/57/the-exhibitions/you-go-boy>> (September 25, 2022).

History. However, other exhibitions that promote themselves for their focus on women's history, display problems related to how the exhibitions and the women portrayed in them are conceptualized. Women are regarded either as a (temporary) addition to "ordinary" history, or as an archetype of an extraordinary woman. This type of history writing often lacks further context and nuance and has responded to contemporary demands for commercially viable cultural heritage rather than attempt to increase the presence of women in history writing. Through this process, women as historical subjects are turned into objects. This cynical approach instead has the effect of cementing a sexist division between women and the grand narrative of history.

Swedish sites for cultural heritage have entered a kind of "female boom" in which the history of women has become an important USP and a way to attract visitors. This should be considered a major step forward regarding representation of different groups of people. Museums no longer deal strictly in histories of kings and wars. Instead they risk retelling a dangerous interpretation of the past — where only the extraordinary women are shown. There is a risk of misinforming visitors that all women could break social norms, have lovers and wield power with little risk. Little is said about power structures between women from different (or even the same) socioeconomic backgrounds. In the absence of a wider context and by cherry picking who and what is interesting to exhibit for financial reasons, "the untold history" of women becomes the history of only a few women. By not showing the lives of ordinary women, a cheerful and shallow history is being told. Financial incentives are prioritized, rather than preserving and managing cultural heritage for the common good. In the creation of new cultural heritage sites and exhibitions solely about women who could be considered extraordinary, *benevolent sexism* becomes apparent as the women become idealized. In existing exhibitions women are treated as an "add-on" to show "inclusion" and the benevolent sexism instead amplifies the former invisibility of women in permanent exhibitions.

The commercial element of Swedish cultural heritage sites heavily effects the conceptualization and merging of women to tell the same story and excluding those who are not as interesting from a commercial standpoint. The exhibitions do not contribute to the inclusion of women, but instead they turn women of the past into essentially the same woman. It is not wrong to tell the history of noble or extraordinary women — but the exhibitions become limited without socioeconomic context. The claim of telling the "history of women" also becomes

skewed. The history being told is that of a few women — most of whom lived lives with privileges more similar to those of the men rather than the women of their time. When stories are told from a first-person perspective, by speculating about feelings and relationships or not problematizing a person in power, exhibitions are at risk of skewing, belittling, glorifying, or even demonizing women. When women's history is turned into easily digestible narratives, served as either side-dishes or novel food, complexity is sacrificed at the altar of commercial success.

This does not help to fill the gaps of a forgotten or untold history. Instead, it poses the risk of widening the gap between different groups of women. Many of the cultural heritage institutions discussed in this chapter are completely dependent on visitors. This means that they must come up with interesting temporary exhibitions with USPs. To tell a very ordinary life story of women in historical Sweden, with hard times, poverty and illnesses, may not cause visitors to flock. But telling the extraordinary stories in contrast — and emphasizing that contrast — would be a more honest way of showcasing history. These institutions do not tell the history of women as they claim; they tell stories of a few women.

The heritage sites' focus on biographical depictions of extraordinary women has spread to government-run museums. The focus on the extraordinary woman becomes problematic as it sets the tone when making exhibitions regarding women. Thus, the change we highlight in exhibitions depicting the lives of women in the heritage sector and the hunt for the same successful USP waters down the initial aim: to include more women. One quote regarding the history of women often reads: "Well behaved women seldom make history". This is part of the problem. We are not claiming that the women depicted in these exhibitions were ill-behaved. Instead, it is the focus on normative deviations such as power, money and other privileges that becomes a problem. Throughout history most women have not had the privileges to be rebellious, wealthy or extraordinary. These women deserve to have their history written about and exhibited too. The women presented in the exhibitions discussed are not naked, as in Guerilla Girls' lithography. But they are still exploited as objects of history through benevolent sexism with the aim of financial gain.