

The Grey of the Days and the Blue of the Dreams - On Ruth Milles

“The light spring evenings in Paris! The sky in shades of opalescent pale blue. The air, vibrating of undetermined desires, of a longing with no fixed aim, which, in itself, was a feeling of happiness...”

Thus writes Ruth Milles in her *Recollections*. Her entire artistic production is characterised by longing. “The Grey of the Days and the Blue of the Dreams”, the title of her collections of poems from 1918, could also be the title of an essay on the life of Ruth Milles. In her poems, *Recollections* and letters, there is a constant longing and dreamy fantasies of days gone by. Many of her sculptures are also tinted by a romantic wistfulness. The present is grey while the memories and dreams are transfigured by the sheen of blue.

Ruth Milles shared Romanticism’s view on art and the world, with its enthusiasm for the past, its interest in mysticism and its love for nature, as important components. This 19th century stylistic movement assumed a partly different expression at the turn of the century, albeit with a similar content, through Symbolism and National Romanticism. Thus, Ruth Milles’ art is in many respects typical of its age.

Ruth Milles completed her *Recollections* in 1923. She gave them the title *About an Artist*. On the cover she placed an image of her brother, the sculptor Carl Milles. She is not so presumptuous as to write about her own life. It is all about her famous brother. In this context, Ruth is an important reporter, as she, his big sister, had a unique opportunity to follow his career. She sees it as her duty to share her observations.

The talented girl

In her *Recollections*, Ruth writes about their childhood at Örby Gård outside Uppsala, their schooldays and the years in Paris and Stockholm. We learn much about brother Carl but also about sister Ruth.

Ruth was always the talented one. “They stuffed me with knowledge like you stuff gooseberries in a bottle.” Lieutenant Emil Andersson was proud of his daughter, with whom he had a warm relationship, most likely due to the fact that his wife and the mother of his children, Valborg, died in childbirth when Ruth was six. Emil Andersson was equally concerned that his daughter, as well as his two sons, Carl and Stig, should receive an education. He taught them in such disparate subjects as the history of art, the name of constellations, and the proper manner in which to remove a hook from the mouth of a pike. Ruth claimed that she was the child who was most interested and quick to learn.

Ruth writes: “My impressions of life were transformed into drawings. I covered the entire paper...”

Many of her child drawings have survived. Ruth drew princes and princesses, made birthday cards and portrayed her relatives.

When it was time to start school, Ruth was boarded with relatives in Stockholm and began at the State Normal School for Girls. She continued at the Technical School. This was, she said, a truly happy period of her life, as she could concentrate fully on her art. She continued at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts, where she was considered so talented that she skipped a year. Ruth was awarded grants as well as a medal for her sculpture *Köld* [Cold] during her years at the Academy. She made many good friends, had crushes on boys as well as her professors, and she was often in love.

She also attended lectures at the Theosophical Society and on occasion participated in spiritual séances, which she did not like. However, theosophy became the foundation of her world view, she says in her *Recollections*.

At a wedding she met Count Birger Mörner who asked her to make a portrait bust of the writer Ellen Key. She and Key became good friends and she writes about her work with the portrait: "I measured her nose with a metre-measure, inexperienced as I was. It was about 6 cm long. When the bust was transported to the plaster caster, the nose fell off. Yes, it was a nuisance."

In Paris

In autumn 1899 Ruth Milles travelled to Paris where her brother Carl had been living for several years. He rented a studio for her. An inheritance gave Ruth financial stability in the beginning, enabling her to sculpt, study drawing at the Académie Colarossi and attend anatomy lectures at the École des Beaux-Arts. Soon, however, she had to support herself by drawing and illustrating. Ruth made illustrations for Swedish magazines, Christmas cards and other commodities. The siblings, who had now changed their surname to Milles after their father's nickname "Mille", were always short of money but they lived a free life. They made friends from different countries, including two Austrian girls, Olga and Lintschi Granner, who lived in the same house as Ruth. Ruth and Carl Milles started spending a lot of time with the Granner sisters. They had dinners at local restaurants and took long walks to take in the famous sites. In the summers, Ruth travelled to Normandy where she worked.

In her *Recollections*, she gives a solemn description of her encounter with Paris' art treasures, its many museums, monuments and churches. She writes:

"For us, Paris of the boulevards, the luxury and the great fashion stores held no attraction; occasionally we visited the theatre and the music-halls, for example the Moulin Rouge; but first and foremost it was Paris of the great art that we loved and lived."

Ruth and Carl's economic situation improved when, in collaboration with a colleague, they founded a company that produced casts of statuettes in large editions. Everything went smoothly until they were tricked by the agent whom they had employed. Nevertheless, Ruth could still support herself during her years in France. Her statuettes with motifs of women and children in a realistic style were much appreciated and relatively easy to sell. Importantly, Ruth received an honourable mention at her first participation in the Paris Salon in 1902. Her

sculpture bore the title *Le Chaperon Rouge*. An honourable mention was a great accolade and important for her future career.

By her own initiative, Ruth made some illustrations for books by the Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf and was persuaded by her friends to send them to the author. Selma Lagerlöf replied politely that she liked the drawings and some years later she asked Ruth to illustrate her novel *Herr Arnes Penningar*. At the time, Ruth was busy finishing a sculpture commission and had to decline the offer. She met Selma Lagerlöf several years later in Stockholm and they corresponded for a few years. They never collaborated but Selma Lagerlöf bought a statuette by Ruth.

Ruth's deteriorating health

Ruth had a happy time in Paris but there is also much pensive melancholy in her *Recollections*. Dear friends departed the city, there were constant problems with her income and living situation and Ruth was often ill. She travelled to the countryside for the salubrious country air, she was treated by doctors and admitted to hospital where she was looked after by nuns. In the autumn of 1902, she writes that she preferred to work sitting down, to preserve her strength. When Olga Granner returned to Paris after a couple of years back home in Graz, she moved in with Ruth to help her. Due to her illness, Ruth finally left Paris in the spring of 1903. Suffering from constant fever, she was worried that she would not be able to support herself in Sweden and she had severe doubts as to whether she would be happy with what she later called the ossified conditions back home.

The rest of Ruth's life would be marked by illness, the cause of which remains obscure. She talks of nerve pain, insomnia and immovability, and later of problems with her stomach and teeth.

Back to Stockholm

Back in Sweden, Ruth Milles rented an apartment and studio on Grevgatan and worked as a sculptor, illustrator and writer. She was interviewed in the magazines *Idun* and *Dagny* and was considered a promising young artist. She received a commission by Dramatiska teatern [the Dramatic Theatre] to carve two busts in marble, one depicting the singer Jenny Lind and the other the actor George Dahlberg. She also received commissions for medallions for tombs and other memorials. She made several journeys to Europe and participated in exhibitions in Sweden and abroad. In an exhibition in Buenos Aires, she was awarded the silver medal and all her statuettes were sold. Nationalmuseum in Stockholm also bought works by her. Ruth Milles lived an active life, worked and had many friends. Still, she did not feel well and often consulted medical doctors.

In Stockholm, she had an unhappy love affair. It was, she wrote, an experience of the most difficult kind. A friend of Ruth and Carl's, a well-known professor, wanted to divorce his wife in order to be with Ruth. Even though she was in love, she did not seriously consider his proposal. Instead she suffered, as she said, most horrendously for many years.

In the hope that the country air would improve her health, Ruth moved to Dalängen on the island of Lidingö in 1913, where she rented an apartment in a villa. She

describes how she decorated her home to make it cosy. She knows that, due to her illness, she will not be able to leave her apartment and because it will become like a prison, “at least I want to be incarcerated in comfort and beauty.”

Aunt Ruth

Several of Ruth’s siblings lived on Lidingö, especially her much-admired brother Carl who was busy constructing Millesgården and filling it with art. At Carl’s, many of the great cultural personalities of the time congregated and when Ruth was well enough she socialised with people like Verner von Heidenstam and Ellen Key.

Ruth Milles was 40 years old when she moved to Lidingö. Her siblings had children and Ruth was the kind, sickly aunt who grew fatter and more immobile. She treated her nieces and nephews to hot chocolate, fairy-tales and memories, but she was unhappy with her life and longed for foreign shores. The children thought it was exciting to visit Auntie Ruth because there was plenty to see at her place and she was rather eccentric.

She was a great lover of animals and her commitment to all sorts of animals was sometime boundless. Her nephew Rolf recalls that as a child, at Auntie Ruth’s, he had to shine a torch on the doorframes before closing the door to make sure that there were no tiny insects that risked being crushed to death. His sister Ingegärd remembers the white dancing mice that Auntie Ruth kept in a cage that contained a tiny mice amusement park. On her balcony, Ruth kept tame squirrels. She detested bullfights and in 1924 she drew up a petition to stop bullfighting in Spain. Her aim was to collect the signatures of famous Swedes and send the petition to the Pope in Rome. Verner von Heidenstam was one of the intended signatories. He wrote to Ruth that he agreed with her cause and that he would gladly sign the petition but he did not think it would help.

Poet and author of children’s books

In 1918, Ruth Milles published her collection of poems, *Dagarnas grå, drömmarnas blå* [The Grey of the Days and the Blue of the Dreams]. She wrote it lying on her chaise longue, unable to leave her apartment for many months after an operation. Ruth claimed that her *Recollections* would have been much more interesting if her illness had not stopped her from moving in society after 1915. She also said that she no longer was able to support herself. It was Carl who gave Ruth the money that she needed. She finished her *Recollections* with the words: “Well, here I am, an old, broken human being, but in my mind I run around in the grounds like a happy little girl.” Ruth was 50 years old. The same year she made her debut as an author and illustrator of children’s books. She had already written and illustrated short stories for children that were published in various anthologies. In 1923 she published her first book, *Trollskrattet* [The Laughter of the Troll]. The following year saw the publication of *Didrik flygare och andra sagor* [Didrik the Aviator and other stories], and in 1926 came *Glohit och Glodit* [Looky Here and Looky There], the book about two trolls, which the entertainer and songwriter Povel Ramel, in his memoirs, describes as the most important reading experience of his childhood and a major inspiration for his future career.

Ruth Milles’ stories are filled with princes and princesses, trolls and angels. The texts are romantic and often moralising. The illustrations are well-executed and typical of its age.

To the Italy of her dreams

Some years later, in the beginning of the 1930s, something unexpected happened. Ruth Milles, who was almost 60 years old, moved to Italy. Carl Milles, who was to be appointed Professor at an Art College outside Detroit, wanted his sister to move to Italy, a country that offered both sunshine and culture. Ruth stayed in many places during her years in Italy - Florence, San Remo, Rome and Subiaco - and always in boarding houses. During her first years in Rome, she wrote and illustrated several short stories for children, which were published in Sweden. She was immobile and poorly but was still able to see some of the art that she loved so much. In her many letters, she often returned to her illnesses, as well as to family gossip. Her friendship and love for her brother Carl and her sister-in-law Olga was very strong, and the distance between Rome and Detroit must have felt immense when Ruth sat there on her own and wrote. To keep her company, Carl arranged for their young relatives to travel to Rome on their school breaks. They made excursions with Ruth, had tea with her, and listened to her stories about her childhood summers at Örby Gård and her youth in Paris. Sometimes Ruth sent them out to buy fish, which they fed to Rome's many stray cats. Ruth was still a lover of animals.

When things became unsettled in Europe, Carl wanted Ruth to return to Sweden but she refused. Ruth complained in letters that Carl wanted to force her back to Sweden. It did not happen. When the war broke out, Ruth moved to the little town of Subiaco, 100 kilometres outside Rom, where she stayed at the Belvedere Hotel. She was the old lady on the ground floor, as she could not climb the stairs. In order to provide shade for her room, the family that ran the hotel planted a tree in front of her window.

In 1941 Ruth died in Rome after having contracted gangrene and had her leg amputated. Her siblings in Sweden as well as Carl and Olga in the US had long been worried and, despite the war, had tried to arrange a journey home to Sweden for Ruth. Before all the formalities were sorted out, Ruth died and was buried in the Protestant cemetery in Rome. Carl Milles was disconsolate. He and Olga cried and gathered all her books, poems and letters on a table. Carl wrote to his brother Stig in Sweden that he wanted to collect all Ruth's sculptures and exhibit them at Millesgården as a memorial. Long after Ruth's death, he continued to write letters to her.

Ruth Milles

- 1873 Born 19 April at Bällsta Gård, Vallentuna
1892-93 Studies at the Technical School, Stockholm
1894-98 Studies at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts, Stockholm
- 1898-1903 Lives and works in Paris
1902 Receives an honourable mention at the Paris Salon
1904 Participates in an Art and Design exhibition in Norrköping
1905 Participates in an exhibition in St. Louis, USA and wins the silver medal
- 1906 Participates in an exhibition in Budapest, Hungary
1910 Participates in an exhibition in Buenos Aires, Argentina
1911 Participates in an exhibition in Rome, and at the Women Artists Association exhibitions in Stockholm and Lund
- 1913 Moves to Lidingö
1914 Participates in the Baltic exhibition, Malmö
1915 Participates in an exhibition at the World Fair in San Francisco, USA
- 1918 Publishes her collection of poems, *Dagarnas grå, drömmarnas blå* [The Grey of the Days and the Blue of the Dreams]
- 1923-26 Publishes illustrated fairy-tales:
Trollskrattet [The Laughter of the Troll], 1923
Didrik flygare [Didrik the Aviator], 1924
Glohit och Glodit [Looky Here and Looky There], 1926
- 1932 Moves to Rome, Italy
1931-36 Writes and illustrates fairy-tales for anthologies
1941 Dies in Rome on 11 February. Buried in the Protestant cemetery in Rome