

In each instance, one has to look for the human being behind the facade - on Olga Milles

Olga Milles has often been described in relation to her husband, the sculptor Carl Milles. He was grandiose and she was unobtrusive, both as an artist and as a human being. He made his mark with his monumental artworks, and she was invisible. She worked as an artist throughout her life but she rarely showed her work to anyone. She had a great need of integrity and solitude and seldom looked for confirmation from the outside world.

Olga Milles was born Olga Granner in Graz, Austria, and embarked on her artistic education as a twelve-year old, encouraged by her parents who considered her an artistic child prodigy. She received her education from the landscaper painter H A Schwarch at the Landschaftliche Zeichen Academy in Graz.

Self-supporting

As a teenager she painted portraits, often of children of the Austrian upper classes. She travelled between manor houses and kept scrupulous records of her expenses and incomes, which show that she received between ten and twenty portrait commissions a year and thus was able to support herself and her family.

A still life by the fifteen-year-old Olga has survived. The painting, as well as the many portrait drawings in pencil and charcoal she made as a teenager, show great talent and indicate that her education rested on an academic tradition in which drawing was the foundation for all artistic creation.

At the age of nineteen, she received a grant and travelled to Munich to study art at the private painting school Azbé-Schule. In Munich, Olga continued to accept portrait commissions despite the fact that she could live off her grant. She thought that the training in Munich was old-fashioned and too severe, so after a couple of years she wanted to move to Paris. When it turned out that she could not use her grant for studies in Paris, she returned to Austria and produced numerous portraits in order to finance a trip to Paris in 1899.

From this time, there is, among other things, a large-scale full-length portrait in oil of her sister Lintschi in a white dress. Lintschi stands in a room in a beautiful white dress and a pale yellow hat, with her hand on the armrest of an armchair. On the wall, there is a landscape painting. The treatment of colour and light shows that the painting was done by a skilful artist with a great deal of experience in portraiture. Olga Granner was able to infuse her model's face with character and depict the various qualities of the dress's fabric. She created a sense of space in the painting through the sharp contrasts between the light sections of the face, skin and dress, and the dark backdrop, which made the model come to the forefront in the painting.

An artist in Paris

When Olga travelled to Paris, she was an artist with a solid education and a great deal of professional experience. She travelled with her sister Lintschi. They moved into a studio house where they lived and worked. Olga studied drawing at the Académie Colarossi and worked on developing her painting. Among other things, she made a self-portrait, sitting

at her easel with a palette in her hand dressed in a painter's frock. In the background we see the model, her sister Lintschi, and a painting on the wall. Through the painting she affirms her professional identity.

After a short time in Paris, Olga and Lintschi befriended the Swedish siblings Ruth and Carl Milles, with whom they spent much time together. They visited museums and churches, made excursions to parks and castles and attended concerts. They were interested in the great masters from Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, not contemporary art or culture, of which there is little evidence in Olga's art.

To choose a lifestyle

Olga Granner was brought up in Catholic home in a family of active churchgoers. She had promised God never to marry and she saw her future as a drawings teacher and artist, preferably in a monastery. When her relationship to Carl Milles became friendlier, Olga was worried.

One day in November in 1900, when Olga had sold a painting to a museum, Carl Milles came to congratulate her. They took a walk and visited Nôtre-Dame. With Paris at their feet, Carl kissed Olga on the mouth. Olga, who did not wish to fall in love, was shocked but nevertheless happy. After the kiss they considered themselves secretly engaged. Ruth Milles wondered, in her Recollections, why they kept it a secret. Olga's insecurity in regard to what she wished to do with her life, the expectations from her parents and her poor financial situation are perhaps some of the reasons why the engagement remained a secret and why the wedding was a long time coming. The letters between Carl who remained in Paris and Olga, who had returned to Graz, contained both hopes for the future and anguish. Olga explained in many letters that she was not suited for wifehood. She, who had studied art from an early age, had never learnt how to cook and look after a home. In addition, she wrote, she wanted to work and she was not particularly sensual. Carl replied that he loved her soul and that she fine as she was. He tried to persuade her to come and live with him.

During her engagement, Olga made portraits and participated in an exhibition in 1903 at the Mährischer Kunstverein Brünn with seven paintings. From this year, there are many paintings, including the portrait of her parents and the peculiar self-portrait in which one of her eyes is blurred. The same year she made a study trip with Carl Milles to Holland where she painted landscapes and panoramas, including the girl with the geese. These are the only remaining images of exteriors by Olga.

Olga had doubts about her choice of profession and her talent. In a letter to Carl in 1904, she writes: "I can no longer force myself to work like I did before - making beautiful portraits in pastel. Either I want to paint images that can be called art, or I want to choose a completely different profession. I detest simple handicraft, I detest it with a vengeance. Ever since the six weeks I spent in Paris last spring, I have come to realise what I really want to achieve with my portraiture."

Mrs Milles

Olga Granner and Carl Milles finally married in 1905 in Graz. The wedding took place in the Evangelische Kirchengemeinde, a Protestant church, and Olga thus left the Catholic Church, after careful consideration. She had always been deeply religious but she had come to mistrust dogmas and church decrees after her contact with the Church. She

found many of the representatives of the Catholic Church hypocritical, and chose her own religious path, in which the most important thing was complete honesty.

The first year as newly-weds, Olga and Carl spent in Munich. In an interview in the *Vecko-Journalen* magazine in 1955, Olga talks about her life with Carl Milles. Her recollections centre on the great sculptor and his many successes. She depreciates her own artistic work: "Oh, it was not worth anything. But I always found it easy to bring out the personality and capture the likeness of the model, and people liked it."

When she talks about her time in Munich, she puts the emphasis on her shortcomings in the kitchen. She burnt the food, she did not understand to keep fresh produce in a cool place and she did not know that salted herring had to be soaked in water. She ate all the failed dishes, both as a punishment and in order to hide her failures. And, of course, one could not throw away food, she says in the interview.

The truth is that during this time she had to work harder than usual, because Carl was severely ill for a long time and Olga had to support them with her paintings. She made portraits and painted on ivory.

To Sweden

Carl Milles had many commissions waiting for him in Sweden, so after some years in Munich they moved to Sweden. They made their first home in Carl's sister Ruth Milles' apartment and studio on Grevgatan.

Ruth writes in her *Recollections*: "When, at long last, I met them at the Central Station, I understood that a move such as this was no trifle for Olga. Everything was unfamiliar to her, including the language, everything was so different to what she was used to. We had no Alps, no small chapels decorated with edelweiss, no pictures of the Madonna, no crucifixes leaning at the side of the road, no ringing of the Angelus bell. And she had never been this far away from her beloved parents."

In Sweden, Olga immediately began taking Swedish lessons, and she painted. Ruth's studio was cramped but she managed. Carl Milles rented an old butcher shop where he could work.

In her interview in *Vecko-Journalen* magazine, Olga says: "The most important thing in a portrait is the soul. The likeness of the facial features is a prerequisite but it's only cosmetic. To bring out the personality, that's the main thing. And that's why it's so difficult, and so interesting, to paint portraits. In each instance, one has to look for the human being behind the facade."

Olga and Carl moved to an apartment with a studio on Odengatan. There, Carl Milles fell ill again, this time with pulmonary haemorrhage caused by inhalation of crystalline silica dust while carving his sculptures. The result was a year in sanatoria in Austria and Italy. Olga accompanied him.

Self-criticism

When they finally returned to Sweden, they began constructing what was to become Millesgården. Olga longed for flowers and greenery and was happy about the move to Lidingö. Initially, she worked in a room on the upper floor, the present-day library. After an extension she received a real studio, which was called the Monk's Cell.

“The Monk's Cell is spacious, straight-lined and whitewashed, the ceiling is high, as in a church, a large studio window faces north, as it should...”

Olga had stopped using oil and gouache and instead made her portraits in crayon and pastel.

“I have not talked about Olga's work for a long time, for the simple reason that I was not allowed to see it, no one was allowed to see it, hardly even Carl. She had many commissions for children's portraits, which she produced in private with the model, and she barely showed the result to the commissioners. Thus she painted little Pauline Boström: 'Lilla Pin', and the two children of Count von Rosen of Örbyhus, and others. In the winter of 1915, she commenced a portrait of the Count's mother, Mrs Caroline Wijk. I am convinced that she painted the most marvellous things. In her youth, she had painted many children's portraits for the Austrian aristocracy, the Counts Stubenberg, the Princes Windisch-Grätz, and others, while staying at their manor houses. At that time, I think Olga had to show her creations.

“She is almost morbidly self-critical, because her standards are so high that she, in her humbleness, can never satisfy her demands on herself. She is entirely devoid of vanity and ambition. All this creates a lack of self-confidence, to the detriment of her production, but perhaps not to her development as an artist.”

From About an Artist. Recollections by Ruth Milles.

Olga did not exhibit in Sweden but she continued to work. Her portraits became more stripped-down. She drew the faces of her models in thin lines and put in a lot of work on the eyes. The drawings no longer comprised depictions of the rooms - the faces were surrounded by empty space. Her production was small.

Ruth writes: “It is a pity that such a fine artist is tormented by such morbid self-criticism, so that very few people have actually seen her work. Her tendency to rework her pieces again and again, until she destroyed many of them, is why her production is so limited.”

No dishonesty

On one occasion, Olga collaborated with her husband. It was when Carl Milles produced his Gustav Vasa sculpture for Nordiska museet in Stockholm and Olga coloured it. She also participated in the decoration of Millesgården's interiors, particularly during the major extension works in the 1920s. She laid the mosaic floor in the Gallery and the Music Room with Carl and also produced the floor decorations in plaster for the small hall outside the Music Room. Further, she made the decorative paintings on the cupboard doors in the Breakfast Room.

It was Carl's idea to make Millesgården as grandiose as possible. Olga had no need for such settings. She said: "We have no forks and no sheets - but we have columns. Carl can always afford to buy columns."

When Carl wanted to sculpt her, standing on the terrace in a skirt and shawl, she replied: "Why? The result will not be me but a Greek or Roman statue with drapes. For Carl, all shapes are sculpture. He is no longer interested in the actual portrait."

Olga Milles had great integrity and was not impressed by titles or luxury. Neither was she interested in ignorant talk about art and could leave a dinner table if the conversation became too superficial. In her Recollections, Ruth describes how Carl and Olga received a visit at Millesgården by Prince Eugen and Queen Sofia. Olga refused to accept the royalties. She considered it demeaning.

"One should not crawl in the dust, other than for the great geniuses or the great benefactors of humanity. This is my opinion."

Longing for Austria

Olga spent several months a year with her family in Austria. She even visited during the First World War, not least to bring food to her family, who, like many of their compatriots, were poorly off. She had not seen her family for three years, due to the war, and it was an emotional reunion. The Granner family lived in a house outside Graz that Carl Milles had bought for them. There were two goats and some chicken and some plantations in the garden. One of Carl Milles's brother's children said: "She lived there. More there than here, I think. She always talked about them. She wrote letters to them every day."

In the USA

In 1931 Carl Milles was appointed Professor at Cranbrook Academy in Detroit, USA and moved there with Olga. Olga was almost 60 years old and was now even further away from her family in Austria, her sister-in-law Ruth, and her friends in Sweden. Nevertheless, the people who met Olga in Cranbrook say that she was more sociable than in Sweden. She had a studio and painted some portraits. According to her letters, she sometimes helped Carl in his studio, and looked after their home. She wrote to Ruth, who was in Rome, that they did not really like it in Cranbrook. Their main distraction was watching Western movies. "Interesting actors, Indians, Mexicans." Olga also enjoyed funny stories and cut out comics from the *Saturday Evening Post* from which she used to read out aloud to visitors.

Olga and Carl remained in the US for 20 years. It was a dramatic time in the history of Europe, culminating in the Second World War. In her letters from this period, and also earlier, Olga expressed her sympathy for both Hitler and Mussolini. Her family in Austria was in favour of the annexation of Austria to Nazi Germany in 1939. Her brother Erwin, a long-standing member of the National Socialist Party, influenced her. When Olga visited Graz in the mid-1920s, she wrote to Carl that in Graz there was a powerful anti-Semitic movement and that she, in her old age (she was 51 at the time) had become interested in politics.

In Rome and back to Graz

Olga would move again in her life. From 1951 she and Carl lived in Rome during the winters and at Millesgården during the summers. She finally consented to show her portraits and participated in the organisation of an exhibition of her works at Anne's House in conjunction with her 80th birthday in 1954. In Cranbrook, she had tried to make sculptures. For Carl's 80th birthday she made a medallion with his face in semi-profile.

When Carl died, Olga moved to her childhood home in Graz where she died in 1967 at the age of 93. She was buried at Millesgården, next to her husband who had died twelve years earlier, on the terrace Little Austria, which had been constructed in her honour.

Olga Milles - Biography

1874	Born 25 January in Leibnitz, Austria
1886-92	Studies under landscape painter H A Schwarch at the Landschaftliche Zeichen Academy in Graz.
1893-95	Studies art at the private painting school Azbé-Schule in Munich
1895-98	Supports herself as a portrait painter in Austria
1899-1901	Studies at the Académie Colarossi in Paris
1900	Engaged to Carl Milles in Nôtre-Dame in Paris
1903	Participates in an exhibition in Graz
1903	Travels to Holland with Carl Milles
1905	Marries Carl Milles, moves to Munich
1906	Moves to Sweden and Stockholm. Lives for a time on Grevgatan at Ruth Milles'
1907	In Austria and Italy with Carl Milles who is admitted to sanatoria
1908	Moves to Lidingö where Millesgården is constructed
1908-31	Lives at Millesgården. Spends a couple of months a year in Austria
1920-30	Contributes to Millegårdens' extensions and rebuildings
1931-51	Lives mainly in Cranbrook outside Detroit, Michigan, USA where Carl Milles works at the Cranbrook Academy of Art
1951-55	Spends the summers at Millesgården and the winters in Rome
1954	Exhibits her art at Anne's House in conjunction with her 80 th birthday
1967	Dies in Graz on 3 January. Buried in the chapel in Little Austria, Millesgården