

# GUSTAF TENGGREN FOLK TALES & DISNEY

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TEXTS FROM THE EXHIBITION

## INTRODUCTION

You have probably seen several of Gustaf Tenggren's illustrations without being aware of who the artist is. The exhibition charts Tenggren's versatile artistic career, from a driven teenager in Gothenburg, via his success in New York to his time as Art Director at Walt Disney Studios. Gustaf Tenggren was able to combine the dark and fateful Nordic and German fairy tale tradition with Disney's charming characters.

Gustaf Tenggren (1896–1970) grew up in a small village in the west of Sweden, with six siblings. He knew from an early age that he wanted to be an artist. When he was 13, he received a scholarship and was admitted to an art school in Gothenburg. In 1914, Tenggren was awarded another grant and enrolled at the Valand School of Painting in Gothenburg. His painting teachers emphasised the importance of acquiring skills from which one could make a living, so many students focused on newspaper drawing, illustration and advertising. This is when Tenggren secured his first commissions: painting stage sets for the Stora Teatern in Gothenburg and illustrating books and newspapers.

From 1917, Tenggren illustrated the popular annual fairy tale anthology *Among Gnomes and Trolls*. Thanks to his feeling for the atmospheric, magical settings with moss-covered stones, he was contracted to illustrate ten annual volumes. After completing a commission for a Danish publisher, for 32 colour illustrations for *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Tenggren was an experienced illustrator and set his sights on the west.

In the summer of 1920, Gustaf Tenggren and his wife Anna emigrated to the United States, where two of his sisters already lived. After a 12-day crossing on the *S/S Hellig Olav* steamer, they arrived in New York and first settled in Cleveland. Tenggren showed his portfolio to a major newspaper and was immediately employed as an illustrator. And so it continued at breakneck speed: he produced posters for theatres, advertising images for department stores and newspapers. Six months later he was established and in the 1920s, Tenggren was one of New York's most well-reputed and best-paid illustrators. His income also included commissions for portraits of New York's socialites and celebrities.

In 1936, Walt Disney Studios were seeking talented people for the screen version of the Brother Grimm's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Disney wanted illustrators who could bring the figures to life and create an atmosphere that would move the viewers. On his travels in Europe, Walt Disney had purchased more than 300 picture books. As a successor to John Bauer, Tenggren would be able to add the European art tradition that Disney desired. Tenggren's illustrations were used as the visual marketing material for the motion picture *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The film poster is one of the best known in cinema history. Tenggren worked for Disney until 1939 and contributed to several of the studio's major films, including *Pinocchio*, *Bambi*, *Dumbo* and *Fantasia*. While working on *Bambi*, Tenggren travelled to Oregon and set up his easel in the middle of the woods, surrounded by

sequoia trees, to capture the wild forest scenes that appear in the film. The imagery of *Pinocchio* with its South German Tyrolean environments was created by Tenggren and he contributed greatly to the magical and somewhat eerie tone of the films.

In the following 20 years, Tenggren worked predominantly with children's book illustrations, including the *Little Golden Books*. As of 2000, Gustaf Tenggren's *The Poky Little Puppy* was the all-time most popular children's picture book in the United States.

Tenggren spent his last years with his second wife Mollie on Southport Island. Here he illustrated his last two books, *The Canterbury Tales* and *King Arthur and the Knights around the Round Table*. In 1970, Gustaf Tenggren died of lung cancer in Maine. The couple did not have children and Mollie bequeathed his artworks to the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. On his death, Gustaf Tenggren was almost forgotten in his home country, even though many of the books he illustrated were published in Sweden.

1896-1920

## SCHOOLING AND SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

Born on 3 November 1896 in the small village of Magra in the county of Västergötland, Sweden, Gustaf Adolf Tenggren was the sixth child of Aron and Augusta. His father worked as a painter and his mother made knitwear for a textile factory. It became impossible to support the large family in the croft and in 1898 the family moved closer to the city, to a flat in Gårda in Gothenburg. Shortly thereafter, Aron travelled to the United States. Gustaf Tenggren never saw his father again.

After four years at school, Tenggren began contributing to the family's livelihood, first as an errand boy and later as an apprentice at two offset printers. Tenggren's artistic talent had been recognised at school and one day his head teacher sought out his mother. The teacher felt that Tenggren deserved a proper education. At the age of 13, he was awarded a scholarship which enabled him to enrol at the School of Design and Crafts in Gothenburg.

After three years at the school, Tenggren received a new grant enabling him to study at the Valand School of Fine Art in Gothenburg. His painting teachers emphasised the importance of acquiring skills from which one could make a living, and many of Tenggren's peers became successful newspaper and advertising illustrators: Rudolf Petersson, the creator of the comic *91:an Karlsson*, was a student friend, Evert Taube was another.

A common source of inspiration for the students was Arthur Rackham, the British artist who had illustrated *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, among others. At an exhibition at Valand 1914, Tenggren saw the art of Akseli Gallén-Kallela and was influenced by the Finnish artist's treatment of colour and dramatic narrative. The same year, Tenggren received a remuneration of 15 SEK for achieving excellent study results and together with some fellow students he was the recipient of a travel grant which enabled them to visit the *Baltic Exhibition* in Malmö. Tenggren experienced works *in situ* by Ivar Arosenius and John Bauer. Carl Milles was another Swedish artist who was represented with a number of sculptures.

Gustaf Tenggren received his first commission as a student. He painted stage sets for the Stora Teatern in Gothenburg, illustrated books and magazines, painted portraits and decorated a cinema. The commissions were often interchanged by parties. Tenggren led a turbulent life with much partying, carousing and numerous love affairs. According to his relatives, he was prone to whims and playing pranks and in 1915, he was sentenced to three months on parole for stealing a wallet.

When artist John Bauer tired of illustrating the successful *Among Gnomes and Trolls* annual, it was Gustaf Tenggren who was best suited to succeed him. Tenggren's sensitivity for atmospheric, enchanted environments with moss-covered stones resulted in him being hired as an illustrator for ten annual volumes – more than John Bauer. And now Tenggren's career took off. When a Danish publisher planned to publish *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, the commission was given to Tenggren and when the same publisher simultaneously offered him the opportunity to illustrate ten volumes of Jules Verne, he also accepted. He had married in 1918 and the work flowed in. In the spring of 1919, he and his wife Anna settled in Copenhagen. Their next move would be to the other side of the Atlantic. In the summer of 1920, Gustaf and Anna travelled to the United States on the *S/S Hellig Olav* steamer.

1920-1935

## RENOWNED ILLUSTRATOR IN NEW YORK

Gustaf and Anna Tenggren arrived in the United States in August 1920. They first settled in Cleveland, Ohio, where two of Gustaf's sisters lived. Under "Length of Stay" they wrote "three months". Perhaps their primary purpose was to visit the family. Fate, however, would prove a different story.

Thanks to a determined effort to establish himself in the new labour market, Tenggren soon gained a good reputation among both artist colleagues and publicists. His fairy tale-inspired, mood-saturated paintings and illustrations were initially regarded as exotic and foreign for American tastes. However, it soon became apparent that his skill and flexibility had great potential in the newspaper and book markets. His ability to adapt stylistically as well as his entrepreneurial spirit paved the way for success.

A year later, his illustration *The Crescent Moon* was featured on the cover of *Life* magazine. In 1923, Gustaf Tenggren relocated to New York with Malin "Mollie" Fröberg, who became his second wife in 1927.

If the work pace had been high in Cleveland, it intensified further in New York with its multitude of established commercial artists. Breaking into the prevailing hierarchy and securing a position required much tenacity, something Tenggren did not lack.

During his first year in New York, Gustaf Tenggren illustrated seven books, one of which was the annual *Among Gnomes and Trolls*, a commission he retained until 1926. Newspaper illustrations and advertising assignments were other important sources of income. Watches, silverware, nylon stockings and glassware were motifs in the extensive and nationwide advertising campaigns that both consolidated his professional reputation and provided him with an income. In his studio on Fifth Avenue, he also portrayed members of New York's social and celebrity circles. In the 1920s, Tenggren was one of the most renowned and highest paid illustrators in New York.

With fame came intense partying with colleagues in the artistic district of Greenwich Village. A weakness for women and alcohol created tension in his marriage. One month after the stock market crash in 1929, in an attempt to pull her husband away from the temptations of the city, Mollie Tenggren bought a property in Rhinebeck in Upstate New York where they lived for the first five years of the Depression. During this period Gustaf Tenggren worked on the book *Sven the Wise and Svea the Kind*, a collection of tales with a certain similarity to *Among Gnomes and Trolls*. In the autumn of 1934, the couple returned to New York City. Tenggren no longer received the high fees he had enjoyed in the 1920s.

Now only a miracle could save his career. It would come from an unexpected direction.

1935-1940

## WALT DISNEY STUDIOS

After the success of the first animated short film with sound, the 1928 *Steamboat Willie*, in which Mickey Mouse shot to fame, Walt Disney produced a series of short films.

### SNOW WHITE

In the mid 1930s, Disney decided to make a major investment: the studio would create the first animated feature film, of the Brothers Grimm's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. In 1935, Walt Disney spent six weeks travelling in Europe and purchased more than 300 picture books. With the journey fresh in his mind, Disney's aim was to capture the mood and atmosphere he had experienced in the European picture books. Walt Disney Studios sought people who could bring the characters to life, move the audience and deliver the sought after mood.

In order to contract the large number of cartoonists required, a recruitment office was set up in New York in early 1936. The response was enormous and hundreds of cartoonists underwent tests and training at the studio. However, Gustaf Tenggren did not apply, he was headhunted and offered a position as Art Director, tasked with creating an atmosphere and an overall style for the film. As a successor to Bauer, he was expected to contribute a touch of the European art tradition experienced by Disney on his journey in 1935 and which he now wanted to bring to his film productions.

In addition to *Snow White*, Gustaf Tenggren was involved in all the films currently under production, which included a number of short films as well as the feature films *Fantasia*, *Pinocchio*, *Dumbo* and *Bambi*. The first film he worked on was the Oscar-winning short film *The Old Mill*, a so-called *Silly Symphony* about a mill that comes to life in an autumn storm. It today holds number 17 on the Internet Movie Database's list of best short films. The material he produced for *Snow White* was primarily used for marketing, resulting in the iconic film poster for the 1937 Christmas premiere.

### PINOCCHIO

His work in 1938 on the film *Pinocchio*, shown in the exhibition, was significantly more influential. Tenggren created numerous paintings that were designed to set the mood of the film and to support the work of the layout artists and background painters. The film's South German Tyrolean imagery and the protagonist's Tyrolean outfit were Tenggren's idea and he contributed greatly to the magical and somewhat eerie tone of the film. The design of the carpenter Geppetto's village was inspired by the small medieval South German town of Rothenburg ob der Tauber. Tenggren's grandfather, Johan Teng, was a carpenter and a painter which probably inspired his design of Geppetto's carpentry workshop, where *Pinocchio* was created.

## FANTASIA

In *Fantasia*, Tenggren was responsible for the sequence *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, where Mickey Mouse borrows his master's wand without permission with disastrous results. *Fantasia* was the first commercial film with stereo sound and comprises 500 animated characters.

## BAMBI

While working on *Bambi*, Tenggren travelled to national parks in Northern California and set up his easel in the middle of the woods, surrounded by sequoia trees, to capture the wild forest scenes that would make up the environment in the film. *Bambi* was modelled on a roe deer Walt Disney saw in Maine. The elaborate sketches Tenggren prepared for *Bambi* were, in the end, not used, and in connection with the relocation of the Bambi department, he chose not to renew his contract.

In January 1939, after almost three years at the film factory, Gustaf Tenggren left the studio. He had gained much knowledge and acquired new working methods, but working collectively was not for him, which is also evident from the fact that he broke with convention and was one of the few who signed his works at Walt Disney Studios.

## 1940-1960

### TENGGREN'S GOLDEN BOOKS

#### LITTLE GOLDEN BOOKS

After the abrupt break with Hollywood, Gustaf and Mollie Tenggren returned to the East Coast. In New York, the Artists and Writers Guild publishing agency hired writers and illustrators to produce books that were sold to book publishers. Tenggren was engaged for a new version of *Mother Goose*. To take advantage of the fact that Tenggren had worked for an established brand such as Disney, the book was prefixed "The Tenggren" so that the title read *The Tenggren Mother Goose*. It was an instant success and once again Tenggren was a name to be reckoned with in children's book illustration.

The Artists and Writers Guild was also intent on producing the cheapest children's book on the market. In 1942, the 12-volume *Little Golden Books* series was launched, two of which were illustrated by Tenggren. By printing large volumes, simplifying the production process and expanding sales to supermarkets and convenience stores the price could be lowered to 25 cents which ensured a huge success and 600,000 books immediately sold out!

During the 1940s and the 1950s, Gustaf Tenggren illustrated 13 *Little Golden Books*, in addition to some ten *Big-* and *Giant Golden Books*, most of them bearing the prefix "The Tenggren" in the title.

#### THE POKY LITTLE PUPPY

As of 2000, one of Tenggren's titles, *The Poky Little Puppy*, was the all-time best-selling children's book in the United States. To date it has sold more than 15 million copies.

It was not a given that Tenggren would illustrate the book. As it had not been assigned to any other designer, Tenggren was asked if he could recommend someone and he replied that he could attempt it himself. And so he did. The book established a concept that proved to be successful for his career in subsequent years: *cute*. Once again, he could give thanks for his ability to adapt to new styles.

1960-1970

## MAINE

During a sailing trip in the Maine archipelago, Gustaf and Mollie Tenggren discovered a coastal house on Southport Island. Both realised the potential of the place as it could provide privacy and be suitable for concentrated work.

In 1945, they moved in. Here they housed their newly acquired collection of Swedish antiques: cupboards, paintings and chairs in the Dalecarlian kurbits style. Furnished with Swedish folk art objects, the American sailor's house thus combined the two cultures in the home where the couple would live out their lives.

During his final years, Gustaf Tenggren became more introverted and melancholic. In the 1960s, he created a series of paintings with a pessimistic keynote partly influenced by Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, an early documentation of the effects of environmental destruction.

He was reluctant to receive visitors and participate in exhibitions. Mollie Tenggren maintained contact with clients while her husband isolated himself in the studio. After the successful *Little Golden Books* series, with their cute animal tales, he wished to return to more serious material. His final book illustrations were the Anglo-Saxon classics the *Canterbury Tales* and *King Arthur and the Knights around the Round Table*.

Several planned, ambitious projects were never realised and remained as sketches. One of them was *Tenggren's Fairy Book*, a collection of fairy tales intended to provide a pension for his wife.

Gustaf Tenggren died of lung cancer on April 6, 1970 and although Mollie Tenggren had known about the disease for some time, in agreement with the doctor, she decided not to tell her husband.

Mollie Tenggren remained in the house until her death of a brain tumour in 1984. The couple did not have children, and before her death Mollie bequeathed Gustaf's art to the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. She donated his large collection of Swedish folk art antiques to Dalarna Museum.

Gustaf and Mollie Tenggren lie beside each other at the Spruce Lawn Cemetery in Southport, Maine.

# SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS

## THE POSTER

For the screen adaptation of the Brothers Grimm's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Walt Disney wanted to hire Arthur Rackham, who declined due to his age. According to a studio employee, number two on Disney's list would have been John Bauer had he been alive.

The Walt Disney Studios hired Gustaf Tenggren on a well-paid three-year contract to ensure that Tenggren, who was already a major name in American illustration art, would be available in the studio. When he took up employment, *Snow White* was already underway and the design of characters and environments was almost completed. Tenggren's numerous paintings and sketches, with the European touch that Disney desired, inspired the layout designers in the studio.

A major contribution to the film was the work Tenggren undertook prior to its premiere, which resulted in one of film history's most famous posters. Before the Christmas 1937 premiere, *Good Housekeeping* magazine published the story of *Snow White* in two issues. The studio had promised to provide illustrations but as the publication deadline approached the background painting department could not spare anyone so Gustaf Tenggren was given the assignment; he produced some 20 illustrations for the magazine. This series of paintings, which summarised the entire content of the film, formed the basis for almost all the marketing of the film.

First, the illustrations were edited into a collage to create the first version of the film poster. Later, the poster was redrawn: the motif was refined, details clarified and the poster was given its well-known, triangular shape. And for some unknown reason, the motif was mirrored. Despite the formal manipulations, the author's hand is clearly discernible.

Tenggren's illustrations were also used for invitation cards, advertisements, record and magazine covers and children's books. Although Tenggren's contribution to the design of the film itself was insignificant, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is the only film to feature his name in the credit titles.

The poster, however, is an icon of film history.

## THE BROTHERS GRIMM

A constant underlying theme in Tenggren's art are the Brothers Grimm's folk tales. Passed down from generation to generation, the tales were compiled and recorded in 1812–1822 by the philologists Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. These tales have served as foundation for both *Among Gnomes and Trolls* and the Disney classics.

Germany was divided into some 200 small principalities and there was a desire to unify the country and capture the German national soul by, among other things, linguistic research and by compiling original stories from different parts of the country. There was a yearning for the past, for German medieval folk tales and songs. The more than 200 folk tales have subsequently been traced to Italian, Scandinavian and Arabic narrative culture.

The folk tales the Brothers Grimm recorded were nasty and today they would not have been categorised as fairy tales for children. The reactions to the first volume came quickly. Readers were shocked by the brutal content, which included violence, sex and incest. Snow White, who was lured into the woods to be murdered by her wicked stepmother, got her revenge by forcing her stepmother to dance to her death in red hot shoes. In their eagerness to fit in Cinderella's shoe, her sisters cut off their toes and heels.

In subsequent editions, the sexuality was toned down and, to some extent, also the violence. The stories were adapted to prevailing norms and illustrations were added to make the tales more suitable for children. This is where illustrators such as Jenny Nyström and Gustaf Tenggren came in.

The tales have been translated into more than 170 languages and today it is the Walt Disney versions that most people are familiar with. *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Rapunzel* are examples of Disney films that originated from the tales of the Brothers Grimm.

## AMONG GNOMES AND TROLLS

At the turn of the 20th century, children's literature made great advances. Previously, hardly any fairy tale collections had been published for children. The publication of H. C. Andersen's and the German Brothers Grimm's tales had reached Sweden spurring an interest in documenting the oral storytelling tradition. Myths and folktales that had been passed down from generation to generation were compiled in printed editions. Children were believed to be allied with nature and uncorrupted by adult society. Fairy tales and nursery rhymes with roots in an oral storytelling tradition were genres that suited children and could help to develop their imagination and emotional life.

During the first ten years of the 20th century, illustrated children's books enjoyed wide success. In the songbooks *Mors lilla Olle* (by Alice Tegnér) and *Blommornas Bok* (by Jeanna Oterdahl), illustrated by Elsa Beskow, children of 1905 could sing about a small, sleeping pussy willow and curtsying blue anemones. Ivar Arosenius' *Kattresan*, about his daughter Lillan's adventures, was published in 1909 and has since become a classic. Children's aesthetic education was deemed important during these years, thanks in great part to Ellen Key, who emphasised the importance of introducing young children from all walks of life to good art and literature. Books were regarded as an educational way of levelling out class differences.

In 1907, Åhlén & Åkerlund AB issued the first edition of *Among Gnomes and Trolls*, a collection of tales that everyone could afford. It is still published every year at Christmas. The early editions were characterised by a national romantic idea of Sweden's countryside. Untouched primeval forests with moss-covered stones and snowy spruces were the perfect scenario for the characters in the fairy tales. The illustrations for *Among Gnomes and Trolls* were carefully selected. In 1907–1910 and 1912–1915, the illustrations were provided by John Bauer who became Sweden's most popular fairy tale artist. He populated the primeval forests with ethereal princesses and trolls with kind, peering eyes. To help school children create their own magical environments, he published a drawing course for children in 1913. When Bauer tired of illustrating the annual, Gustaf Tenggren was best suited to take over the commission. His adaptability and, not least, his sense of the atmospheric and enchanting environments resulted in him being employed as an illustrator for ten years – longer than John Bauer. In addition to Bauer and Tenggren, Aina Stenberg-MasOlle, Einar Norelius and Hans Arnold have been credited as illustrators in editions of *Among Gnomes and Trolls*. The 2019 edition features four newly-written and three classic tales, illustrated by Bauer and Norelius.

## ANIMATION

When Gustaf Tenggren was employed by the Walt Disney Studios in Los Angeles in 1936, animated film had largely found its form – and it would remain in place for half a century. The method was tried and tested and the studio hierarchy had been established in the early 1920s. Even though the working process had been perfected in the production of short films, it was now employed for the first ever animated feature film, and it is still used today in certain places.

After the script had been approved, the entire sequence of the film was laid out in a series of frames, a so-called *storyboard*. The characters were developed by specialist drawers at the Character Model Department, as the unit was called at Disney's, and this was Gustaf Tenggren's workplace. The department developed detailed drawings describing the appearance of the characters from different angles, a so-called *model sheet*. They also created paintings that established the film's settings and moods, and, finally, the layout of each scene. Tenggren's paintings were used as templates by the layout and background artists.

While the visual material was being developed, all speech and music was recorded and time analysed down to a split second. Now the actual animation could begin. Each second of film was divided into 24 frames and required 16–24 drawings. Based on the analysed soundtrack, the principal animator sketched the movement with pencil on paper. The animation, which may be composed of every second or third drawing, was then assigned to an assistant who made a clean drawing of the scene, before handing it over to the middle animator who completed the omitted drawings.

After the scenes had been drawn, they were transferred for *tracing*, that is, the pencil lines were drawn with a felt-tip pen on a celluloid sheet – a cel. Lastly, the scenes were passed on to the cel painters to be painted on the reverse.

When the scene was completed, each cel was placed on the painted background under the animation camera, which photographed one frame at a time. Finally, the scenes were edited together and synchronised with the sound – and the film was completed.