

Classic Swedish Interiors



LARS SJÖBERG

PHOTOGRAPHS BY INGALILL SNITT

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藏书章



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PAGE 1 A mid 18th-century tureen manufactured by Rörstrand, the first factory to produce faience in Stockholm. It is decorated with the Northern Star, the symbol for Sweden that was created in response to that of the Sun in France.

PAGES 2 AND 3 Several different Swedish 18th-century dining chairs with carved decorations, mostly of shells.

ABOVE One of the bakery kitchens at Dylta Bruk.
RIGHT A view from the window of the bakery.

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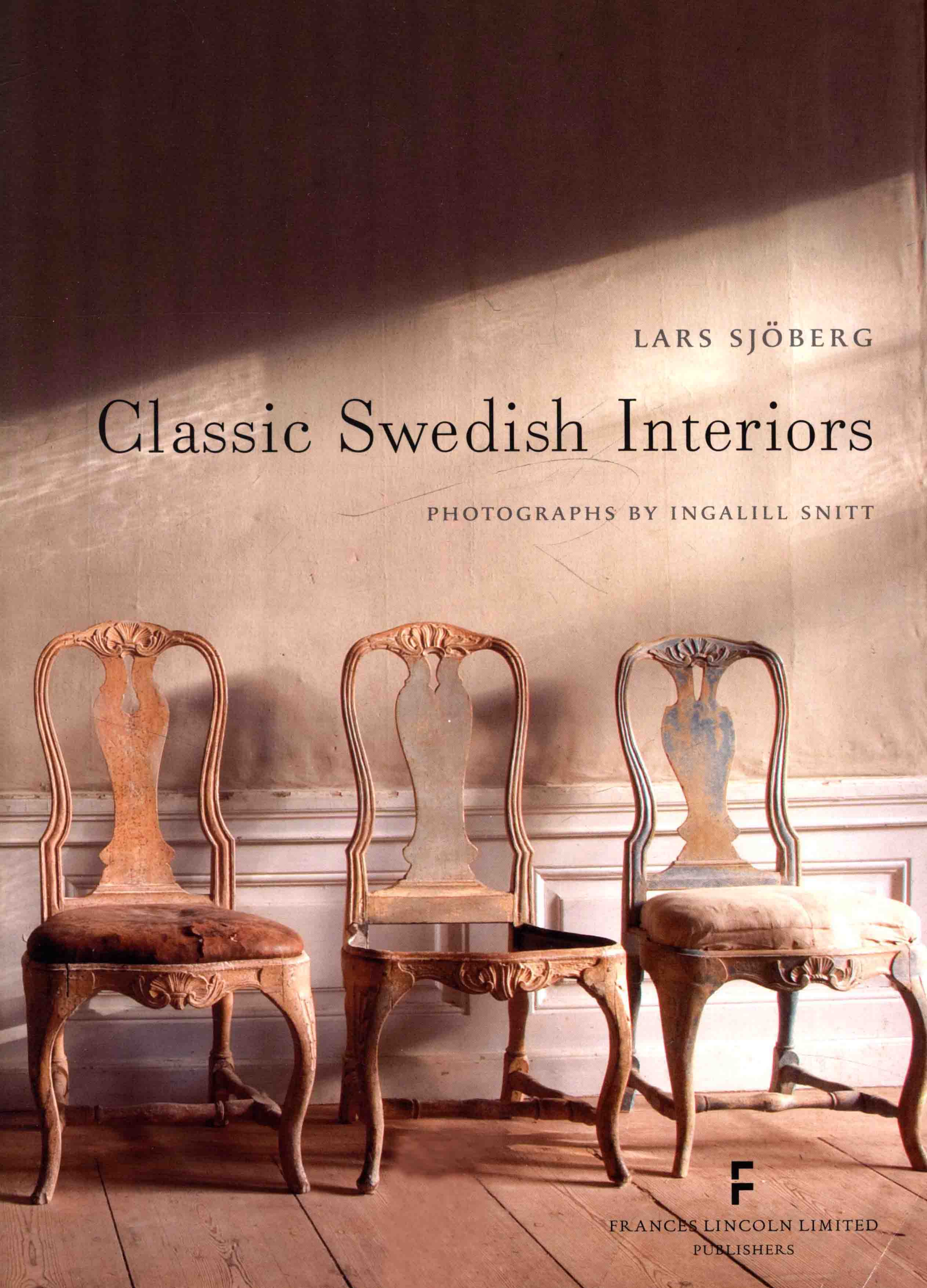
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The image shows three ornate wooden chairs with curved backs and decorative carvings, arranged in a row against a textured, light-colored wall. The floor is made of dark wood. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows cast across the wall and floor. The chairs have different finishes: the left one is dark wood with a brown seat, the middle one is light wood with a light seat, and the right one is dark wood with a blue seat. The overall mood is classic and elegant.

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Foreword

BY INGALILL SNITT

WHEN I FIRST MET LARS SJÖBERG, the revered figure from the National Museum, he was standing next to an old Volvo estate full of furniture, scraping layers of paint from a Gustavian chair with his trusty penknife in order to reveal its original colour. We were about to set off to document the eighteenth-century manor of Ekensberg, one of his 'hobby houses'. This was in 1986, almost quarter of a century ago.

Lars travels relentlessly through the seasons and provinces to visit his houses, students and collaborators, from the far north to the deep south of Sweden. He spends hundreds of hours each year in one of his old estate cars, towing trailers full of chairs, cupboards and tables from the past. He is constantly in motion between the enclosed, silent worlds of these old houses, giving them, as he says, 'extended life', trying to 'save them from extinction and help them to survive a little longer'.

To understand Lars you have to see him as an artist, a talented craftsman, a scenographer, a teacher and a sage. His houses, furniture and textiles are documented and exhibited, and used to spread knowledge. He also dreams of newly-built wooden houses, constructed traditionally and ecologically using materials from the Swedish forests, but with modern comforts and enduring values.

How did Lars manage to convince IKEA to produce a collection of furniture and household items that would be spread across the world? In the *sahl* at Regnholm stands the furniture that his father copied from eighteenth-century originals. These pieces went on to become the models for the IKEA collection, their durability guaranteed for two hundred years.

Lars Sjöberg facing the debris in the EFS church at Bollsta Bruk when he first acquired it.

After the IKEA project came the launch of what today is called Träakademien in Kramfors, far to the north of Sweden. The Wood Academy provides training in traditional carpentry, carving and upholstery. Lars lectures, inspires, shows off his original items of furniture, and encourages his students to go into business. One former student from Kramfors has supplied furniture to Sweden's Royal Court. Another runs his own workshop in Leufstabruk, where he now trains his own apprentices. The old skills are being passed on.

I have spent many years endeavouring to capture time and space in my viewfinder. I have lived in many different places. Hotel rooms have often provided a temporary home, and rootlessness runs like a thread through my life. After twenty-five years spent in France I have acquired an inquisitive, foreign perspective on my Swedish background. Not nostalgia exactly: I want to document skills that have been handed down the centuries, skills that are at risk of disappearing.

What is it that attracts people to old buildings and objects? What makes people like Lars Sjöberg so obsessed with them that they are prepared to sacrifice most of what constitutes a so-called normal life to preserve and protect them? Perhaps it is that people come and go, but solid, sturdy walls, and traditions that go back hundreds of years convey a positive, reassuring sense of human creativity, craftsmanship, and our astonishing capacity to adapt, for good or ill. It seems to me vital that we celebrate people who recognize this and are prepared to go against the flow.

I believe, as many people do, that if we are not to be swallowed up in mere consumerism we must develop an awareness of our inheritance. We must not be so concerned with getting more for our money that we pay no attention to enduring value. But perhaps it is the imperfection – the evidence of time's passage – which makes things beautiful, which speaks to us, moves us. If we don't know where we've come from, we can't know where we're going.

Introduction

A PLEA FOR THE PAST

I CAN'T REMEMBER A TIME when I was not interested in the past. Even before I could read, I loved to listen to my mother reading aloud to me from *Fältskärrns Berättelser*, a history of Finland and Sweden between 1600 and 1792, told as a family saga. For my tenth birthday I was given my grandfather's 19th-century edition of *Svecia Antiqua et Hodierna*, a magnificent book filled with exquisite copper prints, made from drawings by Erik Dahlberg between 1660 and 1710, of Sweden's palaces and manor houses. The illustrations had me enthralled: I began to dream of having houses like those, and I have been dreaming ever since.

At the time, we lived in a house designed and built by my father close to the boarding school where he taught carpentry and metalwork. He believed that there was almost nothing that couldn't be made by one's hands. He even built a caravan in which we travelled all over Europe during the holidays. I inherited this practical outlook, as well as my mother's love of family and Swedish history, and at the end of my schooldays I was torn between going to art school and reading art history at Stockholm University. In the end I compromised by doing my first degree specializing in architectural history while also taking life drawing classes.

After graduation I joined the Swedish National Art Museums (Nationalmuseum) in Stockholm as a curator in the Royal Castles Collection; I was to remain with the Nationalmuseum for the next 36 years, specializing in the 18th century. Meanwhile, as a student I had met Ursula, who was also studying art history; we married in 1965 and began our life together in a small timber house on my parents' property near Stockholm while we searched for a house of our own. In 1966 I heard about the Rococo manor at Regnholm (see page 14). It was a substantial plastered house on the waterfront of a large lake, with beautiful views and, best of all for me, it was almost completely unmodernized. My imagination was set on fire, and my enthusiasm was matched by my father's when we bought it as a joint venture and started to revive it. However, apart from the fact that there were no facilities in the house, I could see that driving 200 km/130 miles to Stockholm and back every day was not practical, so it became a holiday home for our extended family rather than a home for my immediate family.

I suspect that my idea of an ideal house did not coincide with Ursula's, and it was almost another decade before we found a house that we could both contemplate living in: Odenslunda (see page 98). It was old – again, 18th century, but compact, made chiefly of timber, within easy reach of Stockholm and, best of all for Ursula, had a 19th-century addition that provided space

RIGHT One of the large windows in the great *sahl*, or dining room, at Regnholm. The woodwork and the painted linen wall panel to the right of the window date from the time that the house was built in the 1760s.



for a modern kitchen and bathroom. In some ways it was the house of my childhood dreams in that it was a small manor house dating back to the 18th century, but it did not quench my longing for a more substantial stone or brick house of my own that I could restore in a truly authentic way. This is perhaps why I fell in love at first sight with Ekensberg (see page 134). Not only was this an imposing brick house with a Neo-classical façade set superbly in landscaped surroundings, but its architectural planning was also masterly and it had exquisite late 18th- and early 19th-century decorations – though they were buried under layers of later 19th- and 20th-century paint and wallpaper.

I had by then, in the mid 1970s, started to teach in a programme on architectural restoration at Stockholm University. When I had studied architectural history at university, I had found that we were never urged to learn about the practical side of the buildings that we were studying – it seemed that having the drawings and the documentation was enough. For me, theory is not enough: I believe that there is nothing like handling the actual materials, seeing how they were put together, to teach us about the past. My students in the programme learned how to plaster inside and outside houses, to take to pieces and then reconstruct ceramic stoves, and to make oil paint, calcium paint and limewash using old ingredients and methods; and they learned to strip away unwanted layers of paint or wallpaper and to recognize what lay beneath. This last skill is crucial in preserving the past: it is not the raw wood but the first layer of paint that is important. Worn as it may be, it is the evidence of what was in the creator's mind, which to me is invaluable in conveying the essence of the place. Occasionally my students visited Ekensberg to see and, just as importantly, to feel with their hands the original 18th-century building materials. This concern with the practicalities of historical construction has become one of my passionate interests.

I have hated seeing historic old buildings torn down since my schooldays when I witnessed marvellous Baroque buildings in central Stockholm being bulldozed. I knew that they could never be replaced and that with each lorryload of rubble we were losing some knowledge of the techniques – and thus some understanding – of the past. Over the years I became increasingly aware that old buildings and their interiors

are an inherent part of our Swedish heritage. Together with some other people, I tried, unsuccessfully, to get some sort of organization akin to Britain's National Trust off the ground, whereby historic houses might be saved for the future for Sweden. In the end it seemed to me that my best means of preventing venerable buildings from being demolished was to purchase them. This is essentially why I bought Sörby (see page 120), and then the buildings at Bratteberg (see page 162), the Hyttan at Dylta Bruk (see page 84), and the church at Bollsta Bruk (see page 194). Unlike Regnaholm or Ekensberg, there was no question of sleeping in any of these, even for a night. But each had its own special qualities that I did not want to see disappear for ever: each expresses important aspects of Swedish identity.

Sörby and Bratteberg represent instalments in the fascinating story of how architectural concepts percolated through society from the 17th to the 19th centuries. From the illustrations in *Svecia Antiqua* we can see how in the 17th century the aristocracy expressed their ideals and ambitions in their houses. A hundred years later, in the 1780s, when a priest acquired a similar but much smaller manor house in the tiny hamlet of Sörby, he acquired something of the status of the noble family who had possessed it earlier. (He then redecorated the interiors in the latest fashion, which he brought from Stockholm, where he had been employed at Court.) Fifty years after that, similar upwardly mobile desires caused a farmer to commission a house at Bratteberg based on the classic pattern of a 17th-century manor house with two wings. Bratteberg has the extra dimension of interest in being more than one house: it is a group of five architecturally integrated buildings laid out on a geometric grid that tells us a good deal about rural life at the turn of the 19th century. The two main wings are exactly the same size as Sörby and one has the same floor plan – a plan that can be traced back almost 200 years to its debut in *Svecia Antiqua*.

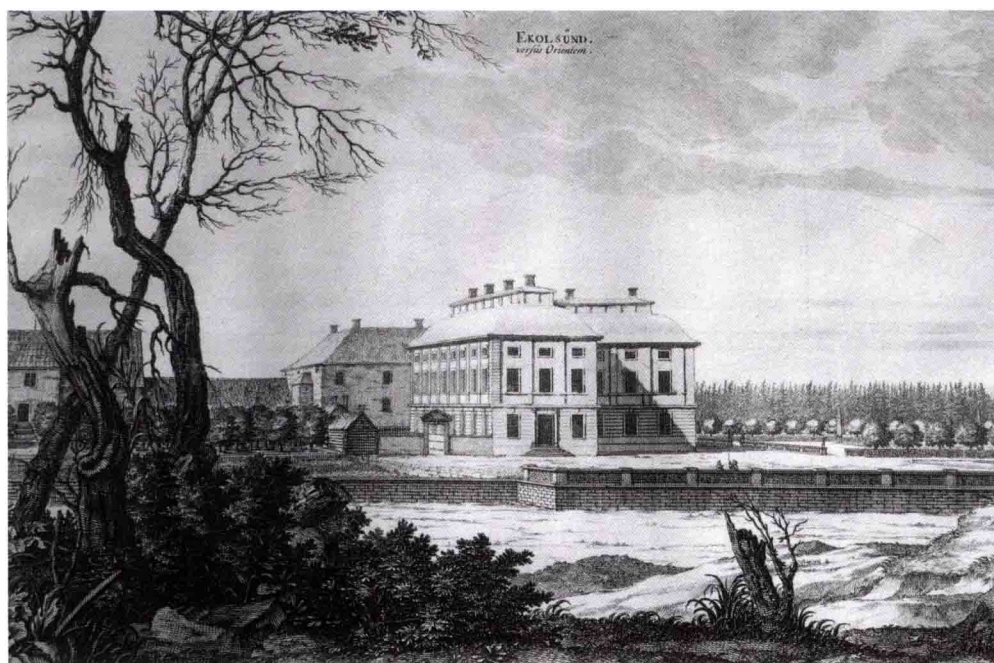
Dylta Bruk and Bollsta Bruk have different heritages, but each is again a telling example of the ideals and ambitions of their builders, which in turn tell us more about Sweden at the time that they were built. When Dylta Bruk was built in c.1800, to accommodate eight families of smelting workers, it was a very impressive building, and almost as large as the timber manor house that belonged to the same family. Placed at the

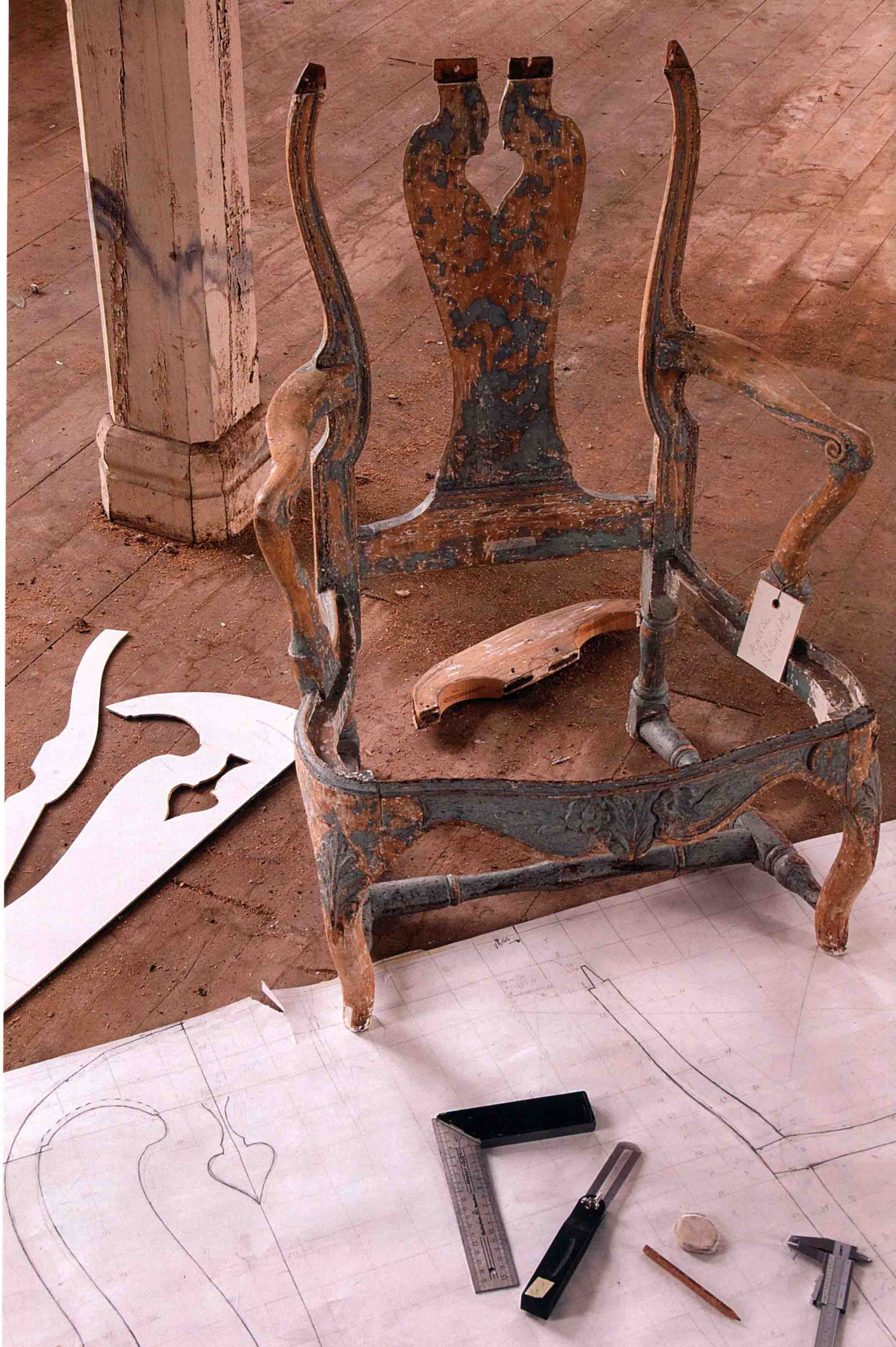
entrance to the works complex, it was designed to show off both the prestige of the works and the prosperity of the owners. The interior details that survive are also of high quality: Baroque doors, masonry-contained cast-iron stoves, and limestone floors in the two bakeries. The wooden church at Bollsta Bruk, built for the Swedish Evangelical Mission in c.1900, is a showpiece of a different kind. It is a testament to the timber industry on which the village of Bollsta Bruk depended, as well as to its era – a splendid amalgam of turn-of-the-century styles. Though all these buildings speak of their time and place, it is the unique character of each that I want to preserve.

In the case of my houses at Salaholm (see page 62) and at Leufsta Bruk (see page 174), it was not that they were threatened with demolition but rather my abiding respect for their historical qualities that led me to acquire them. The fact that my father's family had its roots in the neighbourhood of Salaholm had a strong influence on my feelings when I saw the house; I was also seduced by its age – it was older than any of my other properties – and its charming position in the midst of the remnants of a Baroque garden and close to a small stream. As for Leufsta Bruk, it was pure admiration for the house's superb architectural qualities that inspired me to purchase it; I consider it to be one of the best examples of a Gustavian brick building in Sweden.

In the mid 1960s, when my parents bought Regnaholm, it was regarded as a little cranky to restore a large 18th-century house: this was partly because the intrinsic value of preserving the past had not been widely considered, and partly because doing so went against the prevailing grain, which was directed in a search for low-cost, low-maintenance housing. By the end of the 1980s, when I acquired Sörby, attitudes were changing and there was a growing interest in historic architecture and interiors in Sweden, paralleled with a new interest in sustainability. Both these strands were reflected in the success of the reconstruction of Sörby in the park next to the Nationalmuseum in 1994, and in IKEA's decision to manufacture a range of 18th-century-style furniture at almost the same time. I had seen how the simplicity and functionalism of Sörby's 18th-century design could make it an exemplary model for new-build houses, using time-honoured, sustainable materials, and how the quality of its interior decoration would have an immediate appeal. I think that IKEA was first inspired by seeing an exhibition in which I was involved in Kotka in 1990 when the wall panels from Sörby were displayed with 18th-century furniture and with fabrics that I had had re-woven and printed from 18th-century samples. From this germ of an idea, IKEA's project eventually evolved as a co-operative deal between them and the Swedish Board of National Antiquities. The latter appointed

RIGHT An engraving of Ekolsund Manor, one of the illustrations that so gripped my imagination when I was a child, from *Svecia Antiqua et Hodierna*.





me in 1990 to advise and assist IKEA and, in a close collaboration that lasted five years, we produced faithful copies of original furnishings ranging from chairs, sofas and beds, through tables and chests of drawers to fabric, tableware and chandeliers. Though extremely popular, these ultimately proved too difficult to make and ship in the numbers that IKEA needed. However, it showed that it was possible to make affordable reproductions of high quality, and it is satisfying to find that these pieces are still much sought after when they come up for sale.

At about the same time, in the mid 1990s, I became involved with setting up a school that teaches the traditional skills entailed in the process of building and furnishing a wooden house. The idea was sparked by a carpentry teacher who had heard me lecturing at a symposium at Sundsvall and asked me to present my thoughts on the possibilities of reproducing 18th-century furniture at Kramfors, Västernorrland. One thing led to another and the end result was the establishment of the Träakademien (Wood Academy) in Kramfors which teaches not only woodworking and cabinet-making but upholstery and blacksmithing, carving and gilding. The guiding principle of this venture is to keep these centuries-old skills alive and thereby to foster recognition of the contribution of the past. This is not just for its own sake. In an era when everything in the Western world appears to be mass-produced – often with built-in obsolescence – at the lowest possible price, it seems that we are in danger of losing the ability to value or maintain things that are of time-honoured quality. We throw away our household possessions after a decade or so, as though they were trash, often because they are cheaply made of inferior materials. A skilled craftsman, however, can make the same objects – a window frame, a chair or a door catch – and they will last 100 or 200 years. Even in those parts of the world where the art of wood carving is still flourishing, the knowledge of the different ways in which particular types of wood expand and contract,

which is crucial to the life of a piece of furniture, seems to have been lost. This knowledge goes back over hundreds of years of timber house-building and cabinet-making and is part of what we try to teach at Kramfors. I feel very strongly that it is ultimately damaging to our humanity if we surround ourselves with things that are not worth maintaining or restoring. It must affect our psyches to know that we live in an ephemeral world, bequeathing little of lasting value to the coming generations.

In a similar way, I feel that if we bulldoze or strip away the past we are depriving the next generation of an essential part of their cultural heritage. My goals have always been to salvage and to reveal hidden qualities wherever possible. While the preservation of artistic heritage and the duplication of it are not, of course, the same thing, it seems to me that they are two sides of the same coin. If we can learn how things were made in the past, we may come to understand the past better and in so doing come to value it more.

LEFT An 18th-century chair being used by students at the Träakademien, in Kramfors, as a model to copy.

RIGHT Two reproduction Gustavian wall sconces in the process of being made by students at Kramfors. They will eventually be gilded and carry mirrors as well as candles.

