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Old Norse motifs in art between neoromantic, national and Nordic. The case of *Midwinter Sacrifice* by Carl Larsson¹

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Między neoromantycznym, narodowym a nordyckim. Motywy staronordyckie na przykładzie *Ofiary w przesilenie zimowe* (*Midvinterblot*) Carla Larssona Streszczenie

Przełom XIX i XX w. był okresem kulminacji romantyzmu narodowego w sztuce. W Skandynawii poszukiwania artystyczne koncentrowały się na budowaniu tożsamości narodowej na podstawie motywów historycznych i dziedzictwa kulturowego, co często prowadziło do odwołań do wspólnych, nordyckich źródeł. Mitologia nordycka była kluczowym źródłem inspiracji, dostarczając archetypów i narracji wykorzystywanych zarówno w konstrukcji tożsamości narodowych, jak i pan-skandynawskich.

Ofiara w przesilenie zimowe (*Midvinterblot*, 1915) Carla Larssona stanowi ważny przykład napięcia pomiędzy tym co narodowe a nordyckie. Monumentalny obraz, odwołując się do staronordyckich rytuałów i mitycznej przeszłości Szwecji, przedstawia legendarną ofiarę króla Domaldeggo, który oddał życie, by

¹ This article was written thanks to UGrant-start 2021 for research in Gothenburg, Stockholm and Falun (Dalarna). The following information was also included in a chapter "*Pranordyckie*" *motywy jako źródła dla sztuki narodowej na przykładzie obrazu Ofiara w przesilenie zimowe (1915) Carla Larssona* in my PhD dissertation: Emiliana Konopka, *Malarstwo nordyckie XIX i początku XX wieku między nacjonalizmem a skandynawizmem* defended at Gdańsk University. See: https://bip.ug.edu.pl/sites/default/files/postepowania_naukowe/118594/praca/emiliana_konopka_praca_doktorska.pdf [accessed: 23.10.2025].

ocalić swój lud. Kompozycja łączy w sobie narrację narodowo-romantyczną poprzez odniesienia do szwedzkiego dziedzictwa i wyobrażeń o wydarzeniach historycznych oraz indywidualną interpretację mitologii nordyckiej. Odrzucenie obrazu przez Muzeum Narodowe w Sztokholmie z powodu kontrowersyjnego tematu i nagości wywołało gorącą debatę o tym, jak historia powinna być przedstawiana w sztuce.

W niniejszym tekście analizuję obraz, wykorzystując szerszy korpus źródeł i artefaktów niż zazwyczaj stosowany w badaniach nad twórczością Larssona. Dążenie artysty do stworzenia „prawdziwie szwedzkiego” dzieła na podstawie mitów nordyckich, mającego podkreślić starożytne początki Szwecji, zestawiam z ówczesną krytyką i współczesnym stanem badań. Przypadek *Midwinterblot* ukazuje, że mitologia nordycka była wykorzystywana nie tylko do gloryfikacji heroicznej przeszłości wikingów, lecz także do negocjowania kwestii tożsamości narodowej, tradycji i nowoczesności. Ponowna analiza dzieła pozwala dostrzec jego znaczenie w zdolności do odzwierciedlenia ewoluującego obrazu Szwecji i uchwycenia szerszego nordyckiego dyskursu o przeszłości w okresie głębokich przemian kulturowych.

Abstract

The turn of the twentieth century observed the culmination of National Romanticism in art. In Scandinavia, the artistic search of national identity grounded in historical motifs and cultural heritage, which often led to common, Nordic sources. Norse mythology remained a crucial inspiration, providing archetypes and narratives used to construct both national and pan-Scandinavian identities.

Carl Larsson's *Midwinter Sacrifice* (1915) epitomizes this tension. The monumental painting depicts the legendary sacrifice of King Domald to save his people, referencing Old Norse ritual and Sweden's mythical past. The composition represents National romantic narrative of the past, as it refers to Sweden's heritage and imagination of the historical events, and individual understanding of Norse mythology. Rejection of the painting by the National Museum's committee due to the controversial subject matter and nudity provoked heated debate on how history should be represented in art.

I examine the painting, using more texts and artefacts than it is usually assumed by researches of his *oeuvre*. Larsson's will to create a 'truly Swedish' artwork based on Norse myths to underline the ancient genesis of Sweden is juxtaposed with critique and recent scholarship. The case of *Midwinterblot* illustrates how Norse mythology was mobilized not only to glorify heroic Viking times but also to negotiate questions of national identity, tradition, and modernity. In re-examining Larsson's work, I argue that its significance lies in its ability to reflect the evolving Swedish self-image and to capture a broader Nordic discourse on the past during a period of profound cultural transformation.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Nordic artists were torn between their allegiance to national romanticism, still pertinent, yet slowly becoming old-fashioned, and modernism, popular among younger artists and received sceptically by older painters. While the former focused on creating art closely linked to national identity and cultural heritage, the other adopted a more universal, supranational perspective. Nevertheless, both addressed the past by either presenting and glorifying or reinterpreting and contradicting. The past, history, was understood and depicted in many ways, but its mainstay in the Nordic narrative – heroic Viking times described in Old Norse sources – remained popular well into the twentieth century.

Norse mythology functioned as a reservoir of motifs, archetypes, and narratives used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in attempts to create a Nordic/Pan-Scandinavian union, but also – and more importantly – considered a vital part of individual national heritages.² The case of Carl Larsson's painting *Midwinter Sacrifice* (Swedish: *Midvinterblot*, Figure 1), in both its symbolic content and the critique directed towards it by Swedish contemporaries, exemplify how Norse mythology was presented and interpreted at the turn of the twentieth century, a period straddling neoromantic points of view.

In this paper, I aim to interpret the *Midwinter Sacrifice* as Carl Larsson's crowning achievement to create a truly Swedish artwork. Such analysis is based on diversified material: historical sources (the artist's own writings juxtaposed with the contemporary critique of the painting from 1911–1916), recent scholarship on the subject, as well as broader discussions about the role of Norse mythology and art in shaping national and/or Nordic identity. My approach results from interdisciplinary studies within art history, cultural history, anthropology (including studies on mythology) and Scandinavian literary studies. I refer to already adopted conclusions on national art in Scandinavia as well as new ideas, comprising modern attitude to representation of indigenous people in Norden.³

² The revival of Norse myths in Nordic art occurred in the late eighteenth century, while they became a vital theme for in the nineteenth-century romanticism, see: Johnni Langer, *Imagining national belief through art: Old Norse Religion and the Vikings in J. L. Lund's painting "Nordisk offerscene fra den Odinske periode" (Nordic sacrificial scene from the period of Odin, 1831)*, "Revista de História da Arte e da Cultura" 2012, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 6–26. The national/Nordic identity in Norse mythology is discussed in Thomas Spray, *Northern Antiquities and Nationalism*, "eSharp Vault: Myth and Nation" 2015, issue 23, pp. 1–17; and *Northern Myth, Modern Identities. The Nationalisation of Northern Mythologies since 1800*, ed. Simon Halink, Leiden 2019.

³ National art in Nordic countries has been thoroughly studied by many scholars. I refer mostly to American/Anglosaxon and Scandinavian scholarship, such as studies by: Kirk Varnedoe, Neil Kent, Liv Valmestad, Gertrud Oelsner, Michelle Facos, Patricia G. Berman, David Jackson, Kasper Monrad, Randi Solheim, and more recent: by Nicholas Parkinson, Thor Mednick, Bart Pushaw and Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud.



Figure 1. Carl Larsson, *Midwinter Sacrifice*, final version, 1915, oil on canvas, 640 × 1360 cm, National Museum, Stockholm. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

My reflections on neoromantic, national and Nordic concern the turn of the twentieth century, thus the period when Carl Larsson lived. I delineate ‘neoromantic’ and ‘National Romantic’ after scholars specializing on Scandinavian art and for the purpose of this article, I use both terms interchangeably.⁴ To characterize ‘national’, as in ‘national art’ or ‘national artists’ referring to Larsson, I apply traditional definitions of ‘nations’ and ‘national identity’ and understand them as they were formed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe.⁵ Considering the geopolitical situation in Scandinavia of that period, I also include terms: ‘Nordic’ which refer to historical cultures

⁴ Barbara Miller Lane dates National Romanticism to 1885–1920 and she proposes terms ‘New/Neo Romanticism’ instead. Barbara Miller Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries*, New York 2000, p. 2. Most scholars, however, consistently use the term National Romanticism to describe the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries: “Scholars have deployed the term National Romanticism to encapsulate this idea of a pulsating patriotic primitivism informing the works of Nordic artists at the turn of the twentieth century. Since the 1980s, National Romanticism has been the dominant mode of interpretation for the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of Nordic art, with a focus on delineating the cultural specificities of art in each country.” Bart Pushaw, *Sámi, Indigeneity, and the Boundaries of Nordic National Romanticism* [in:] *The Idea of North: Myth-Making and Identities*, eds. Frances Fowle, Marja Lahelma, Helsinki 2019, pp. 21–22.

⁵ Basing on definitions of ‘nations’ and ‘nationalism’ in: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983; and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism*, Oxford 1983. I refer also to reflections on national art given by: Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Création des identités nationales. Europe, XVIIIe–XXe siècle*, Paris 1999; *Art, culture, and national identity in fin-de-siècle Europe*, eds. Michelle Facos, Sharon L. Hirsh, New York 2003; and Anthony D. Smith, *The nation made real: art and national identity in Western Europe, 1600–1850*, Oxford 2013.

of five countries: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland, and ‘Nordism’/ ‘Pan-Scandinavism’ that describes a nineteenth-century project of constructing a supranational community based on five Nordic countries with common history, culture, language and ethnicity.⁶

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1. *Midwinter Sacrifice*: Introduction

Midwinter Sacrifice was Carl Larsson’s final mural commission for the National Museum in Stockholm. Earlier, he painted frescoes for the museum’s stairwell after winning a competition over Gustaf Cederström, one of Sweden’s most respected history painters. Larsson executed six frescoes depicting important moments in Swedish art and museum history. After finishing a scene depicting *Gustav Vasa’s Entrance in Stockholm* on one of the upper staircase walls, Larsson developed the urge to fill the remaining empty wall with another subject from Swedish history.⁷

It is often said that *Midwinter Sacrifice* was undertaken at the artist’s own initiative because the museum did not announce any competition for it. However, the most recent studies by Per I. Gedin and Hans-Olof Boström show that the Museum Committee had already thought of filling the remaining empty wall and proposed an “older subject, either from the pagan antiquity or the Catholic Middle Ages”.⁸ According to both scholars, Larsson first considered a subject associated with Gustav II Adolf, presumably the king’s landing on Rügen in 1630.⁹ They emphasize that this choice would have been received positively. Gedin adds that: “it was obvious that Carl Larsson would get the assignment”.¹⁰ However, it is uncertain when Larsson changed his mind to depict a pagan Old Norse scene instead, and why the midwinter sacrifice motif was not accepted despite fitting with the committee’s proposal.

Larsson executed the motif in several versions. The first known is a feasibility study showing outline for the entire composition (Figure 2). The first sketch in a scale of 1:5 was published in the National Museum in 1911 and faced severe criticism (Figure 3). Consequently, Larsson presented two new

⁶ As defined in: Bernard Piotrowski, *Tradycje jedności Skandynawii: od mitu wikińskiego do idei nordyckiej*, Poznań 2006; and Hemstad Ruth, Møller Jes Fabricius, Thorkildsen Dag, *Skandinavismen som visjon og påvirkningskraft* [in:] *Skandinavismen: Vision og virkning*, eds. Ruth Hemstad, Jes Fabricius Møller, Dag Thorkildsen, Odense 2018, pp. 9–20; Tim van Gerven, *Scandinavism: Overlapping and Competing Identities in the Nordic World, 1770–1919*, Leiden–Boston 2022.

⁷ Georg Nordensvan, *Carl Larsson. Andra delen. 1890–1919*, Stockholm 1921, pp. 145–148.

⁸ Hans-Olof Böstrom, *Carl Larsson. Monumentalmålaren*, Uppsala 2016, p. 191.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 191.

¹⁰ Per I. Gedin, *Med blottad strupe* [in:] *Jag. Carl Larsson. En biografi av Per I. Gedin, Idem*, Stockholm 2011, p. 453.



Figure 2. Carl Larsson, *Midwinter Sacrifice*, feasibility study, 1910, pencil, 29 × 59 cm, Carl Larssons-gården, Sundborn. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 3. Carl Larsson, *Uppsala Temple – Midwinter Sacrifice*, 1910–1911, partly repainted 1913, oil on canvas, 202 × 341 cm, Dalarna Museum, Falun. Source: Dalarna Museum.

sketches in 1913 (number 237, and number 238: pencil, gouache, squared in pencil, 44.5 × 78 cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm). Because this version was disparaged, the painter completed another sketch the following year (1914–1915, oil on canvas, 123 × 199 cm, private collection). This developed into the final version (Figure 1) suitable for the wall for which the artist intended it.

The final version of *Midwinter Sacrifice* shows a naked man standing on a gold sleigh pulled by four men. He wears a fox fur coat and awaits a fatal blow from an executioner in red holding a knife behind his back. At center, a man in white with a hammer – the sacrificial priest who represents the will of the gods – stands in front of a pagan temple with a statue of a figure resembling Thor. Three main characters are flanked by two opposing groups: Viking soldiers on the right and dancing women with musicians on the left. The scene takes place in winter: snow covers the temple roof and the ground. The lone green tree is the sacred tree displaying former sacrifices on its branches (animal and human skulls). Under the tree, an old man appears in a fur coat.

2. In the shade of *Edda*. Carl Larsson's Old Norse illustrations before *Midwinter Sacrifice*

When Carl Larsson (1853–1919) started work on what he considered his *magnum opus*, he was a well-established artist. Widely known for albums containing watercolor illustrations of rustic life in Sundborn, Dalarna, and frescoes in several public buildings, Larsson decided to focus on a subject taken from Old Norse history. *Midwinter Sacrifice* happened to be his final painting, the visual idea he probably struggled with most during his career.

However, it was not his first project related to the ancient and medieval past. Between 1890–1891 Larsson executed paintings on the walls in The New Girls' School (Swedish: Nya Elementarläroverket för flickor) in Gothenburg. Here, female heroines represent ages of Sweden's past: from the Stone Age, through Viking times, to the present. These compositions evidence Larsson's great interest in both archeology and history, as he paid careful attention to historical accuracy in costumes, settings, and objects. Here, for the first time "Larsson's composition conveyed the sense of historical continuity so important to National Romantics".¹¹

Midwinter Sacrifice was based on a story from *Heimskringla* (c. 1225) by Snorri Sturluson, a medieval Icelandic poet who also authored *Prose Edda*. Larsson illustrated at least two editions of the latter, beginning with that published by Nils Fredrik Sander in 1893. Along with 25 other illustrators, among

¹¹ Michelle Facos, *Nationalism and Nordic imagination. Swedish Art of the 1890s*, Berkeley 1998, p. 38.

them Jenny Nyström, Mårten Eskil Winge, and Anders Zorn, Larsson presented his visions of the Völva, Fenja and Menja, as well as Thor dressed as Freja.¹² He also illustrated the first edition of Erik Brate's translation of the *Poetic Edda* in 1913.¹³

3. Old Norse sources in *Midwinter Sacrifice*

The subject of a *midwinter sacrifice* is based on *Ynglinga Saga* from Snorri's *Heimskringla*, which describes the Swedish Yngling dynasty established by Freyr. The midwinter sacrifice and the central figure come from the story about King Domald Yngling who was sacrificed in order to end famine in the country. According to the Icelandic chronicler:

Domald took the heritage after his father Visbur, and ruled over the land. As in his time there was great famine and distress, the Swedes made great offerings of sacrifice at Upsal. The first autumn they sacrificed oxen, but the succeeding season was not improved thereby. The following autumn they sacrificed men, but the succeeding year was rather worse. The third autumn, when the offer of sacrifices should begin, a great multitude of Swedes came to Upsal; and now the chiefs held consultations with each other, and all agreed that the times of scarcity were on account of their king Domald, and they resolved to offer him for good seasons, and to assault and kill him, and sprinkle the stalle of the gods with his blood. And they did so.

Thjodolf tells of this: –

“It has happened oft ere now,/ That foeman's weapon has laid low/ The crowned head,
where battle plain,/ Was miry red with the blood-rain./ But Domald dies by bloody
arms,/ Raised not by foes in war's alarms –/ Raised by his Swedish liegemen's hand,/
bring good seasons to the land”.¹⁴

Although the scene with the death of Domald comes directly from Snorri Sturluson, the Icelandic writer was not Larsson's only source. In the note attached to the second sketch, sent to the National Museum in 1911 with the title *Uppsala Temple – Midwinter Sacrifice*, he clarified the subject:

Christmas. In Uppsala temple stood the depictions of Thor, Odin and Frö. The temple (partially) gilded. In front of the temple stood a tree, which was green all year round

¹² Anna Wallesta, *Sagens svenskar. Synen på vikingatiden och de isländska sagorna under 1300 år*, Malmö 2004, p. 109.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 371.

¹⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla or The Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Samuel Laing, London: 1844. On-line: Sacred Texts: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/heim/index.htm> [accessed: 30.06.2025].

(all according to Adam of Bremen). Here a king sacrifices for the good of the people (for the achievement of good annual growth). He is lowered into the sacred spring at the foot of the tree. County kings (motifs from the Vendelgraf helmet). The king's young son on the father's black horse (the horse is to be sacrificed). The king's wife (the only one overwhelmed by despair). Accompanied by two bridesmaids. Sacrifice dance. In the background the sacred grove, where the bodies of human and horse sacrifices were hung in the branches.¹⁵

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The painter mentioned at least two other sources of inspiration: archeological finds from Vendel and a text by Adam of Bremen. The latter was the eleventh-century author of *Deeds of the Bishops of Hamburg* (Latin: *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*). There, he portrayed the North of Europe with its pagan customs. He described a temple in Old Uppsala, one of the most important centers of worship in pagan Scandinavia.¹⁶

In this temple, covered entirely with gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such a way that the most powerful of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber. Wotan (Odin) and Frikko (Frey) have places on either side. Near the temple is a large tree with wide extending branches, always green in the winter and in summer. There is also a spring at which the pagans make their sacrifices, and into it immerse a live man. And if he is not found, the people's wish will be granted.¹⁷

When it comes to *Vendelgrafhjelmén* (Vendel count's helmet) Larsson meant a helmet from Vendel, which along with other objects from the eighth century was discovered in 1881 in a boat grave next to Vendel church in Sweden. Larsson's enthusiasm for archaeological finds is also evidenced by his trip to Copenhagen's Museum of Nordic Antiquities (Old Norse Museum) in 1910. There, he was inspired by Viking, and older, art that influenced his details on armor and shield ornaments. Given his recent visit to the Copenhagen Museum it is hardly surprising that Larsson's last large composition was inspired by various Nordic antiquity.¹⁸

4. Larsson's reinterpretation of the sources

As evident from the evolution of sketches, Larsson altered his depiction of what he had taken from Old Norse sources. Besides numerous details, three motifs remained the biggest obstacle for the painter: the building, the main

¹⁵ Carl Larsson, quoted in: Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 195.

¹⁶ Gedin, *Med blottad strupe...* p. 454.

¹⁷ Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, p. 26, as cited in: Görel Cavalli-Björkman, Georg Sessler, *Midvinterblot*, Stockholm 2007, p. 4.

¹⁸ Gedin, *Med blottad strupe...* p. 454.

group of three figures, and the tree. All three played a decisive role in each of Larsson's vision of the midwinter sacrifice and show his changing approach to his sources.

4.1. The Uppsala Temple

In 1908, Larsson published an article entitled *A Swedish Pantheon* (Swedish: *Ett Svenskt Pantheon*) in the cultural magazine "Ord och Bild". In the text, Larsson declared his interest in antiquity and proposed "a Swedish Pantheon" inspired by Old Uppsala Temple. In Larsson's proposal (visualized by an architectural plan), the new building could store the relics of Swedish kings and become a new important place of assembly for Swedes. Everyone could gather in the Pantheon, a building that shall preserve not only the remains of Swedish nobles but also the "cult of the motherland".¹⁹

Adam of Bremen's descriptions of the temple had already inspired Larsson in his feasibility study from 1910, where the painter fantasized about how the architecture described by the German chronicler might look. In this study, the building is lightly sketched in the background along with other Old Norse details such as a Viking ship. This idea was developed in the first sketch (Figure 3), showing a wooden building with a portico, both covered by a towering roof topped with head-like ornaments. Larsson elaborated on decoration by adding bigger statues on both sides of the portico in the third sketch (1913, Figure 3), so that they took shape of two gilded lion-like creatures.

Larsson read about statues of Thor, Odin and Frey which, as stated by Adam of Bremen, stood in front of the Uppsala Temple. He wanted to depict these golden statues, however, according to his *A Swedish Pantheon*, in proposed reconstruction of the temple Larsson preferred to use statues by Bengt Erland Fogelberg, a Swedish sculptor of his time.²⁰ Fogelberg's three sculptures of Odin, Thor, and Balder had been presented at the bottom of the staircase of the National Museum since the first decorations by Larsson were executed.²¹ The final version of the painting, however, contains only a statue of Thor with his attributes: the hammer Mjölnir and two goats.

Larsson's figure is far from Fogelberg's classical vision of the god but is similar to the Rällinge statuette from circa 1000, found in 1904 in the province of Södermanland and since then stored in the Swedish History Museum. The figurine is traditionally linked with the god Frey, as his erect penis fits with his function (god of fertility). The small bronze statuette was believed to be a copy

¹⁹ Carl Larsson, *Det svenska Pantheonet*, "Ord och Bild" 1908, vol. 17, p. 28. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

²¹ Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 192.

of the phallic statue of Frey described by Adam of Bremen.²² Larsson's depiction of Thor is similar: the triangular head and spread legs suggests the possibility that the artist combined two gods in one statue,²³ replacing the visible phallus with the hammer held by the priest. This is likely the figurine to which Larsson referred in his autobiography: "a newly found small bronze statue of the god Frey who just carried these attributes",²⁴ shown to him by "antiquarian Sahlin", Bernhard Salin, later director of the Swedish History Museum.

4.2. The group of main figures

In the center of his composition Larsson placed a prominent group of three men: the king, the priest, and the executioner (Figure 4). Despite many changes traceable in his sketches, all three were always depicted together, forming a group in the shape of a triangle. All maintained the same poses in the final painting: the priest stands on a platform with his hands raised, the executioner turns away with his head and hands facing downward, and the king stands erect with his head high.

The only character taken directly from historical sources was King Domald, although the depiction of his death is far different than Snorri's description in *Ynglinga Saga*. According to the words of a poem included in the saga: "The crowned head, where battle plain,/ Was miry red with the blood-rain." Boström and Danielsson refer to previous illustrations of the motif, citing *Domald's Death* by Erik Werenskiöld from 1899.²⁵ The Norwegian painter depicted the exact moment when the king is being assassinated on a bare stone by his subjects. Larsson, however, chose to not show the execution and depicted Domald being transported to the place of execution on a gold sleigh. His ideas changed as he sketched, since the blot stone first occurs in the final study for *Midwinter Sacrifice*.²⁶

²² Olof Sundqvist, *On Freyr – the 'Lord' or 'the fertile one'? Some comments on the discussion of etymology from the historian of religions' point of view*, "Onoma" 2013, vol. 48, p. 43.

²³ Moreover, Richard Perkins assumes that the figurine represents Thor blowing the wind from his beard: Richard Perkins, *Thor the Wind-raiser and the Eyrarland Image*. London 2001; whereas Kristján Eldjárn links the statuette with The Eyrarland Statue (National Museum of Iceland, Reykjavík) and suggests they were pieces of hnefatafl (tafl game): Kristján Eldjárn, *The Bronze Image from Eyrarland* [in:] *Speculum Norroenum. Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, eds. Ursula Dronke, Gudrun P. Helgadóttir, Gerd Wolfgang Weber, Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Odense 1981, p. 75.

²⁴ Carl Larsson, *Jag*, Stockholm 1969, p. 235.

²⁵ Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 200; Arne Danielsson, *Midvinterblot – mer samtida än forntida drama*, Kåreholm 2011, p. 11.

²⁶ Danielsson, *Midvinterblot...*, p. 11.



Figure 4. Carl Larsson, *Midwinter Sacrifice* (a detail), 1915, oil on canvas, 640 × 1360 cm, National Museum, Stockholm. Source: <http://collection.nationalmuseum.se>.

In addition, the painter misinterpreted Snorri's text and depicted a midwinter blot instead of a spring sacrifice.²⁷ Some would even judge that he "has manipulated Snorri's text".²⁸ Boström notes, however, that the painter drew additional inspiration from later works, such as: *Svea Kingdom* by Olof von Dalin (1747),²⁹ whereas Bo Lagercrantz suggests that he might have known *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer (1890), which inspired him to depict a midwinter scene.³⁰

Although other characters were fully invented by the painter, the executioner can refer to the old sources. Snorri's *Hemskringla* mentions a "foeman's weapon" which clearly refers to an executioner, whereas the *Ynglinga saga's* words: "the weapon has laid low"; "was miry red with the blood-rain" can be interpreted as illustrated directly by the red gown of the executioner, the dagger behind his back and his head bowed.

As for the priest, many have noticed his resemblance to Odin. With his prop – the hammer similar in shape to Thor's Mjölknir – he transforms into a compilation of two gods and bear elements taken from earlier times: a triske lion and a sun wheel, found often in Nordic rock-carvings and interpreted as a solar symbol.³¹

²⁷ Arkeolog, *Midvintersblot*, "Dagens Nyheter" 20.02.1911.

²⁸ Per Bjurström, *Midvinterblot och Tidsandan*, "Res Publica" 1995, no. 29, p. 152.

²⁹ Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 201.

³⁰ Bo Lagercrantz, *Att lära av skandaler*, "Svenska Museer", no. 2, 1987, p. 6.

³¹ Cavalli-Björkman, Sessler, *Midvinterblot*, p. 11.

4.3. The sacrificial tree

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Although Snorri Sturluson did not mention a tree, Carl Larsson became inspired by Adam of Bremen's description of: "a large tree with wide extending branches, always green in the winter and in summer". Thus, he depicted a tree, yet in various shapes and positions.

From the beginning, the tree was situated on the left side of the temple. In the feasibility study from 1910 (Figure 2) it was designed as a conifer, while in the first sketch from 1911 (Figure 3) the painter transformed it into a barren trunk covered in snow, but this time it had features of a leafy tree, probably a chestnut tree.³² Repainted in 1913, the trunk was replaced by a slim leafy tree with a conical crown (Figure 5). In the third sketch, the upper branches got a more elliptical shape, and the leaves became more visible (Figure 6). Towering over the roof in the final version (Figure 1), the tree was given even more symmetrical crown consisting of luxuriant leaves that have more decorative, serpent tongue-like shape.

In my opinion, the shape of both the crown and the leaves evokes a well-known illustration of Yggdrasil in *Edda oblongata* (AM 738 4to), a seventeenth-century Icelandic manuscript containing the *Prose Edda* and 23 drawings by an anonymous illuminator.³³ Whether Larsson copied the illumination remains unknown, but he may well have seen during his 1910 visit in Copenhagen, as the manuscript had been kept in the Library of the University of Copenhagen since 1730.³⁴

Might Larsson have juxtaposed a sacrificial tree with the *axis mundi* of Nordic mythology? Olof Sundqvist indicates that three motifs mentioned by Adam of Bremen – the temple, the tree and the well or spring – "are actually descriptions of a mythical landscape, i.e., a literary *topos* found in Old Norse traditions", and suggests that they "may deliberately have been arranged [by Larsson] as a reminder of the mythical landscape".³⁵

The evidence of previous sacrifices: animal and human skulls, visual symbols of death, make a contrast with the intense green of the living leaves. The

³² Arkeolog, *Midvintersblot...*

³³ The manuscript was signed G S S, which was identified with Sigurður Gíslason (1655–1688), however officially the author remains anonymous: "Langa Edda; AM 738 4to". On-line: Árnastofnun, <https://www.arnastofnun.is/is/greinar/langa-edda-am-738-4tom> [accessed: 23.09.2025]. A page from AM 738 4to, (43r) depicting the tree Yggdrasil demonstrating the manuscript's distinct oblong format can be seen here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AM_738_4to#/media/File:AM_738_4to_Yggdrasill.png [accessed: 19.10.2025].

³⁴ "AM 738 4to. Edda, Eddukvæði, ýmis önnur kvæði o.fl., Ísland, 1680". On-line: Handrit, <https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/is/AM04-0738/0#mode/2up> [accessed: 23.10.2025].

³⁵ Olof Sundqvist, *The Temple, the Tree, and the Well: A Topos or Cosmic Symbolism at Cultic Sites in Pre-Christian Northern Europe?* [in:] *Old Norse Mythology – Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell, Jens Peter Schjødt, Cambridge 2017, p. 264.

evergreen tree from the sacred grove, discussed so enthusiastically in Larsson's *A Swedish Pantheon* ("the grove we are going to revive we shall call *The Grove of Life*"³⁶), thus approaches in its symbolic significance Yggdrassil, the mythical Tree of Life, representing the order of the universe, and thus the sovereignty of the gods.

5. Critical voices about historical inaccuracy

In *Midwinter Sacrifice* Carl Larsson created a work that reinterpreted Norse mythology. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this led to harsh criticism of all versions exhibited publicly. The painting ignited a debate in press, which can be divided into three stages: the first rejection (1911–1916, during Larsson's life), the second rejection (in the 1980s, when the then museum director refused it again), and the 1992 exhibition that led to the final purchase in 1997. For the purpose of this article, I will focus mostly on the first stage of this debate, referring to some voices from the later stages and comments by contemporary scholars.

The first article on the painting, written by an anonymous 'Arkeolog' (English: 'Archaeologist'), appeared in Sweden's largest daily newspaper, "Dagens Nyheter", a week after Larsson presented his first sketch in the National Museum. This critic questioned the historical value of Larsson's work. 'Arkeolog' accused the artist of excessive use of his imagination and misinterpretation of Iron Age motifs. He felt that Larsson violated the principles of historical consistency by intermingling objects from different eras – the Viking Age and the Iron Age. Although Larsson claimed that he relied on Adam of Bremen and Snorri Sturluson for his interpretation of the midwinter sacrifice, Sturluson stated that Domald was sacrificed in autumn, while Adam of Bremen described spring sacrifices. 'Arkeolog' also criticized Larsson's rendition of the temple, which felt to him more "an airy summer restaurant, adorned with motifs from the Biological Museum or Norwegian stave churches".³⁷ In addition, the evergreen tree was also depicted incorrectly since the writer interpreted it as a chestnut tree, first introduced to Northern Europe in the seventeenth century. He summed up Larsson's numerous mistakes by saying that "someone paints a Swedish farm with camels strolling around the manure pile and a barn with milkmaids dressed in triangular lumbar skirts",³⁸ a sentence repeated in almost every article about the painting's reception.

Due to these concerns, Larsson modified the subject and presented a new version in 1913 as a watercolor sketch (Figure 5). Art historian August

³⁶ Larsson, *Det svenska Pantheonet...*, p. 28.

³⁷ Arkeolog, *Midvintersblot...*

³⁸ *Ibidem.*



Figure 5. Carl Larsson, Midwinter Sacrifice, second sketch, number 237. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

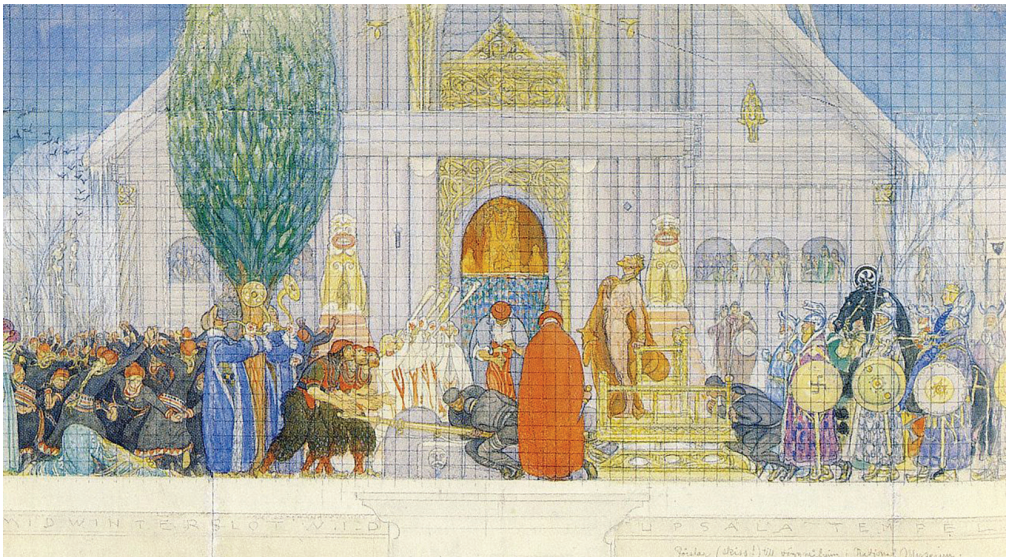


Figure 6. Carl Larsson, Midwinter Sacrifice, third sketch, number 238. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Brunius, who also had criticized the first sketch³⁹ attacked again, comparing the new version with an opera: “one does not believe in what is happening and one does not feel what is happening” and pointed out its “doubtful historical truth”.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, he noticed changes in color and detail that made the priests (most probably he meant the priest and the executor) seem more authentic and the temple “has become more reasonable with its clearly emphasized timber construction, though perhaps more Norwegian than Swedish”.⁴¹ Axel Gauffin, curator at the National Museum, wrote ten days later in “Stockholms Dagblad” that the scene was too theatrical. He also considered the subject inappropriate for the Swedish people: “Carl Larsson could win, not only more artistic fame but also more hearts, if instead of a painting that is logical and meaningful only from his point of view, he executed one that would be for the people”.⁴²

Other journalists and critics pointed out imperfections and lack of historical credibility. Despite several rejections and harsh critique, Larsson executed the final, oil on canvas, version in 1915 (Figure 1). The preliminary sketch for it was rejected in January 1914 by a museum committee consisting of the director Ludvig Looström, the curator Georg Göthe, the painter Richard Bergh, and architect Carl Möller.⁴³ Their reason was the motif. According to Bergh, the work was harmoniously composed but it did not suit the museum’s staircase,⁴⁴ a point emphasized by Harald Brising, an art historian and assistant professor at the National Museum. In an article in the daily newspaper “Svenska Dagbladet” he suggested that the artist executed his fresco (as the oil version was still planned to be a fresco like other decorations in the Museum), but not for the museum but rather for Stockholm City Hall. He justified his recommendation by his opinion that Larsson’s painting would not harmonize well with the museum’s architecture.⁴⁵ The main problem was the sacrifice scene itself; Brising describes it as “unhistorical and non-Swedish”. The museum committee noted that the subject could be changed or perhaps the figure of King Domald replaced by an animal. It was asserted that the scene looks more like “an ordinary pig slaughter” than the death of a Swedish king.⁴⁶

³⁹ August Brunius, *Midvinterblot. Carl Larssons skiss till freskomålning*, “Svenska Dagbladet” 13.02.1911, p. 5.

⁴⁰ August Brunius, *Carl Larssons omarbetade “Midvinterblot”*, “Svenska Dagbladet” 6.11.1913, p. 7.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Axel Gauffin, *Midvinterblot*, “Stockholm Dagblad” 16.11.1913.

⁴³ Per Bjurström, *Nationalmuseum 1792–1992*, Stockholm 1992, p. 203.

⁴⁴ Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 203.

⁴⁵ Harald Brising, *Midvinterblot*, “Svenska Dagbladet” 23.02.1914, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 201.

As seen from the viewpoints quoted above, the main problem critics identified was the composition's historical incorrectness. Many considered the scene inappropriate for a national museum⁴⁷ because of its violent, pagan subject. While the main critics were historians, art historians and archeologists, others defended *Midwinter Sacrifice*. Fellow painters Prince Eugen, Bruno Liljefors, and Anders Zorn questioned the committee's decision, while the art historian Axel Gauffin wrote an article praising Larsson; they considered it important to defend Larsson's independent judgement regardless of the controversy it provoked. Carl G. Laurin, an art historian and friend of many artists of Larsson's generation, called *Midwinter Sacrifice* "the most valuable thing in Swedish art, and one should therefore let that artist [...] complete it all".⁴⁸ The *Midwinter Sacrifice* controversy reached Central Europe, where Austrian art historian Joseph Strzygowski praised Larsson's composition, comparing the Swedish painter to the modernist pioneer Gustav Klimt.⁴⁹

6. Between National Romanticism and international modernity

That Carl Larsson represented Swedish National Romanticism in art is without doubt. He was a member of the Artists' Union (*Konstnärsförbundet*), of which Alexandra Herlitz writes that they "saw themselves as the first ones to paint *authentic* Swedish motifs and to create a *genuine* national style, the so-called National Romanticism".⁵⁰ His choice of subject for *Midwinter Sacrifice* – an episode taken from Viking times – suited the nineteenth-century romanticism nostalgic for Nordic sagas and other Old Norse stories. In the late 1880s and 1890s, Swedish Symbolists applied Norse motifs into contemporary mood painting (*stämningsmåleri*), yet eagerly medievalized it.⁵¹ Although this art was rather understood as a continuation of romanticism, and therefore called "new" or "neo" Romanticism,⁵² Swedish painters and art critics usually used the term National Romanticism (*nationalromantik*), to underline their intention to articulate and reify their national identity.

⁴⁷ As Emma Jönsson explains: "The public museum not only reflected the nation-state and its ideological values, but also served as an educational institution that communicated the idea of nationhood to the general public", Emma Jönsson, *History Painting and National Identity in the 19th century* [in:] *Swedish Art History. A Selection of Introductory Texts*, ed. Ludwig Qvarnström, Lund 2018, p. 199.

⁴⁸ Carl G. Laurin, *Larsson, Liljefors och Zorn*, "Ord och Bild" 1916, vol. 25, p. 293.

⁴⁹ As mentioned in Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 221.

⁵⁰ Alexandra Herlitz, *From 'The Paris Boys' to the Artists' Union. A Swedish secession in the late 19th century and its art history* [in:] *Swedish Art History. A Selection of Introductory Texts*, ed. Ludwig Qvarnström, Lund 2018, p. 237. Italics comes from the original text.

⁵¹ Facos, *Nationalism and Nordic imagination...* pp. 31–33.

⁵² Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture...*, p. 2.

Larsson intended *Midwinter Sacrifice* to emphasize 'Swedishness'. It was the crowning achievement of a project Larsson first envisioned in 1908. *Midwinter Sacrifice* functioned as a pendant to *Gustav Vasa's Entry into Stockholm in 1523* which Larsson completed in 1908 as part of his wall decorations for the staircase of the National Museum. The painter decided to contrast between a midwinter mood with a summer scene. As Boström: explains "Gustav Vasa's triumphant entry into Stockholm is set against a heathen king's sacrificial death in Old Uppsala".⁵³

Larsson published *A Swedish Pantheon* the same year he completed the *Gustav Vasa* painting. *Midwinter Sacrifice*, expanding on the ideas presented in his text, highlighted the heroism of the main character in the composition, King Domald. Opponents of the painting accused Larsson of undermining the king's status because he was to be sacrificed, but Larsson's aim was the exact opposite. While one might interpret Domald as a secondary character, because he submits to the law of the gods embodied in the centrally positioned priest. However, by putting the Odin-like figure at the center of the composition, Larsson presumably sought to strengthen the dramatic atmosphere of the sacrifice and to juxtapose the judiciary/legislative representative with the executor of the directive, the executioner dressed in red. In this triangle, the king-victim symbolizes the ideal king. Domald proudly holds his head up, and – contrary to the opinion of Larsson's critics – is not stripped of his dignity. His sacrifice is fully voluntary, a situation recognized by Lars Lönnroth, who observes that the painter "portrayed Domald's death as a voluntary sacrifice to save his people from famine".⁵⁴ As evident from the *Ynglinga Saga*, Domald's execution inaugurated a time of happiness and fertility.

Under these circumstances, *Midwinter Sacrifice* is a neoromantic historical painting. Larsson relied on historical sources in order to give his work historical authenticity. As an artist, rather than a chronicler, he gave himself permission to reinterpret the facts in order to express his message more clearly. As noted in his autobiography *I* (Swedish: *Jag*), Larsson considered his choice to mix objects from different times not as anachronic, but as an artistic and more subjective vision of the past, one needed in order to underline the historic value of both the story and the objects he included.⁵⁵

Elisabeth Piltz emphasized in *Midwinter Blot and Art Criticism* that the painting can be characterized with "falsification of history and the sentimentalization of the past".⁵⁶ Moreover, Boström states that the somewhat old-fashioned interpretation of midwinter sacrifice might have been intended to evoke

⁵³ Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 192.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 203.

⁵⁵ Larsson, *Jag*, p. 235.

⁵⁶ Elisabeth Piltz, *Midvinterblot och konstkritiken* [in:] *Kairos (Studies in Mediterranean archaeology and literature)*, eds. Elisabeth Piltz, Paul Åström, Jonsered 1998, p. 130.

neo-Gothicism, a movement that revived interest in Nordic antiquity during the 1860s and 1870s.⁵⁷ Although enthusiasm for National Romanticism had cooled by the time Larsson completed the painting, he still subscribed to its ideals and continued his program of history painting begun in the 1880s (the heyday of National Romanticism). The fact that colleagues such as Prince Eugen, Liljefors, and Zorn, supported Larsson and his painting, can be interpreted as an attempt to keep National Romanticism at the center of attention, since they all belonged to the older generation of painters who would soon be replaced by younger, modernist artists.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Larsson was in his 60s. He was considered as a relic of the past, a representative of the 'old school' of painting; presumably that was why his work was harshly criticized during first decades of its first display in the National Museum.⁵⁸ However, his final painting was also subjective and symbolic, and executed from a modern perspective. In his paintings of two royal scenes taking place on the solstices and his bold reinterpretation of historical sources Larsson not only depicted the past but also retold it. Paradoxically, it is not the narrative that stays in focus when viewing the painting but the emotions conjured by his dramatization of the sacrificial scene.

The vision of naked Domald standing proudly alone is both expressive and symbolic. Because of the loneliness induced by his voluntary sacrifice, the king was interpreted as Christ, an association first pointed out by 'Arkeolog' and reappearing in later interpretations. Arvidsson wrote: "there is no doubt that the king is now also the King of Kings, Christ as Carl Larsson wanted to see him – strong, masculine, proud, humble".⁵⁹ Gedin even referred to a traditional *ecce homo* motif, in order to point out Larsson's personal relationship to the theme at the end of the process, when he was betrayed by old friends, portraying them as the king's foes.⁶⁰ Several years later, Lars Lönnroth claimed that the name 'Domald' derives from the 'the doomed' (Swedish: *den dömde*) and pointed to a tale according to which the king was cursed by his stepmother, a Sámi (or Finnish) woman.⁶¹ However, 'the doomed' can be interpreted in both ways: as condemned by the adversaries or cursed.

Such an interpretation is reinforced by Larsson's reminiscence in *I*, where he confessed: "*Midwinter Sacrifice's* fate broke me!".⁶² In addition, Larsson's last self-portrait shows the elderly painter with Domald's sketch displayed in

⁵⁷ Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 191.

⁵⁸ Lagercrantz, *Att lära av skandaler...*, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Karl A. Arvidsson, *Midvinterblot* [in:] *Carl Larsson och Nationalmuseum*, ed. Bo Lindwall, Stockholm 1969, p. 154.

⁶⁰ Gedin, *Med blottad strupe...*, p. 465.

⁶¹ Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 23.

⁶² Larsson, *Jag*, p. 236.

the background (*Self-portrait with King Domald as Background*, 1916, oil on canvas, 125 × 100 cm, Carl Larssons-gården, Sundborn), which raises further questions. Most scholars agree that Larsson wanted to strengthen his connection with the king who was sacrificed by his opponents.⁶³ This personal drama was itself modern: to identify himself with the legendary king as a victim of societal customs, Larsson underlined a subjective, symbolic vision of mythology, therefore it was much more than just a straightforward illustration of an Old Norse theme.

Even though the painting's subject is neoromantic, its form is modernist. He adopted the Secessionist style, with its bright colors and symmetric compositions, which recall architectural decorations such as friezes and tympana,⁶⁴ an approach criticized over the years. What at first seemed inappropriate for a monumental composition situated in Old Norse times – bright colors and visible outlines (the painting was sarcastically dubbed “Tintin among Vikings”⁶⁵) was later described as Larsson's characteristic style. While *Midwinter Sacrifice* evades simple classification – it is at once old-fashioned, National Romantic, and modern – it reflected an original vision of mythological themes.

7. Nationalism and Nordicism in Larsson's last masterpiece

The first stage of the debate about *Midwinter Sacrifice* focused on the historical shortcomings committed by Larsson but also resounded with opinions about the subject's appropriateness for Swedes and their national museum. For both opponents and supporters of the painting, its value as ‘truly Swedish’ remained a central point of contention. For Larsson, *Midwinter Sacrifice* was unequivocally Swedish, as he stated in *A Swedish Pantheon*, which, together with his autobiography *I*, can be understood as the artist's manifesto. There he underlined the ‘Swedishness’ of the painting, distilled in its two main ‘truly Swedish’ components: 1) the ancient genesis of the Swedish people (the legendary dynasty of Swedish kings represented by Domald) and 2) the Old Norse material heritage of Sweden (Old Uppsala temple, archeological finds, Viking art).

The artist emphasized the Swedish origins of the temple's gilded decorations. As he explained in the autobiography:

In addition, it is now known that especially the Swedes at that time stretched their tentacles all the way to Byzantium and had strong family ties with the gold-swimming Kyiv.⁶⁶

⁶³ Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, p. 202; Danielsson identifies figures from the painting as friends and opponents of Larsson: Danielsson, *Midwinterblot...*

⁶⁴ Boström, *Carl Larsson...*, pp. 221–231; Arvidsson, *Midwinterblot...*, pp. 167–169.

⁶⁵ Bjurström, *Midwinterblot och Tidsandan...*, p. 153.

⁶⁶ Larsson, *Jag*, p. 235.

Moreover, Sessler suggested that overseas travels of Swedish Vikings are evidenced by several exotic-looking figures among the crowd. He states that they must have been slaves or newcomers from Eastern countries and concludes that the temple is “a mixture of Dalecarlian log cabins and stave churches”, thereby suggesting that Larsson was inspired by the architecture of the whole Nordic region but also needed to include a regional, Swedish element taken from Dalarna, the province regarded as the epicenter of ‘Swedishness’.⁶⁷

As stated before, Larsson belonged to the generation of artists who wanted to represent genuinely Swedish art, traditionally linked with National Romanticism. As Bart Pushaw puts it, “since the 1980s National Romanticism has been the dominant mode of interpretation for the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of Nordic art, with a focus on delineating the cultural specificities of art in each country”.⁶⁸ In my point of view, many Swedish artists traditionally linked with National Romanticism created not only national art based on what had been interpreted as visually characteristic for each nation, but also contributed to shaping an artistic version of Nordicism, representing values and symbols significant for a whole Nordic region.

It is therefore necessary to remind that in order to design the Uppsala temple, Larsson was mostly inspired by the tenth century Jellinge and Urnes styles,⁶⁹ both of which originated in Denmark. What he wanted to present as ‘truly Swedish’ was in fact linked with heritage of other Scandinavian countries. Larsson’s vision, based on Icelandic sagas, Danish archeological finds and Norwegian stave churches, remains more pan-Scandinavian than purely Swedish. Therefore, I would like to argue that Larsson’s interest in Norse mythology exceeds his endeavors to create a national artwork, and *Midwinter Sacrifice* can also prove his sentiments to recreate a story important not only for Swedes, but also for other Nordic people. As Gedin, Sessler and Boström have noticed, many elements used by the painter are Pan-Scandinavian: from Norse mythology and sagas, through archeological finds to architectural inspirations. Larsson, regardless his official statements, was unable to create an exclusively Swedish artwork, as most of the elements chosen by him were common for the Nordic region, based on cultural and ethnic affinities in Scandinavia. Although Vikings and Norse mythological motifs were since late eighteenth century used for shaping divisive national images,⁷⁰ the nineteenth-century project of Nordicism was based specifically on sharing the same cultural heritage, which started already in the seventeenth century

⁶⁷ Cavalli-Björkman, Sessler, *Midwinterblot*, p. 10.

⁶⁸ Pushaw, *Sámi, Indigeneity, and the Boundaries...*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Arvidsson, *Midwinterblot...*, p. 201.

⁷⁰ Spray, *Northern Antiquities and Nationalism...*, p. 2.

by Danish and Icelandic scholars of Icelandic manuscripts, whose work shed light on the common past of the Nordic region.⁷¹

Still, in a more modern reading of Nordicism and even Scandinavian nationalism, a remark on a new vision of national and regional identity is needed. In the second and third stage of debate considering *Midwinter Sacrifice*, the idea of what is typically Swedish has changed, and later critics and scholars contributed with their new perspectives of Larsson's nationalism, understanding his National Romanticism no longer as "the idea of a pulsating patriotic primitivism"⁷² but as a more radical and politically involved version of nationalism. For instance, Per Bjurström, the then director of the National Museum in Stockholm, explained why he decided on rejecting to buy the painting from a foreign collector by pointing out Larsson's racist attitude to Sámi and Jews. He claimed that in Larsson's interpretation of the *ecce-homo* motif, where Christ was replaced by a Swedish king, the people who betrayed him are Sámi instead of Jews, which only perpetuates harmful stereotypes of both minorities.⁷³ Such reading was commented by Pushaw, who presented a broader analysis of how indigenous people were imagined in Swedish National Romanticism as to prove that Sámi were usually misrepresented in art.⁷⁴ This means that *Midwinter Sacrifice* can also serve as an example to show that visual art of the turn of twentieth century contributed in creating an iniquitous notion that 'Swedish' is equal to 'white' and 'Nordic' means 'Scandinavian'.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, I would like to propose that instead of excluding the indigenous people of the North, Larsson actually included them in the story of the great Swedish/Nordic past. In the painting, there is a man in fur coat standing just in front of the group pulling the golden sleigh with the king. He was interpreted by Bjurström as a Noaidi, a Sámi shaman, whereas a group of female dancers on the left were also deciphered as "Sámi girls".⁷⁶ Even if for Bjurström it was a symbol of Larsson's racism against the minorities, to me the

⁷¹ Piotrowski, *Tradycje jedności Skandynawii...*, p. 46.

⁷² Pushaw, *Sámi, Indigeneity, and the Boundaries...*, p. 22.

⁷³ He presented this idea in: Per Bjurström, *Rasism bakom storsvenska planer*, "Dagens Nyheter" 18.12.1994; Per Bjurström, *Vad berättar Midvinterblot?*, "Konsthistorisk tidskrift" 1995, vol. 64, issue 1, p. 8.

⁷⁴ "Boström's problematic text reveals that Sámi people continue to occupy a precarious place in the construction of regional and national identities in the Nordic countries today as much as a century ago": Pushaw, *Sámi, Indigeneity, and the Boundaries...*, p. 30.

⁷⁵ This topic has been recently undertaken by many scholars, such as: Jeff Werner, Tomas Björk, *Blond och blåögd: Vithet, svenskhet och visuell kultur/ Blond and Blue-Eyed: Whiteness, Swedishness and Visual Culture*, "Skiascope" 2014, vol. 6; Magdalena Naum, Jonas M. Nordin, *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity: Small Time Agents in a Global Arena*, Berlin 2013.

⁷⁶ Bjurström, *Midvinterblot och Tidsandan...*, p. 152.

shaman appears as a representation of the spiritual and with the ritual dancers they can symbolize the golden era of the Nordic past: the pagan world, where the Vikings and Sámi lived side by side in peace and harmony with nature. However, I would like to disagree that these characters are Sámi or wear Sámi costumes. As far as I can understand that some elements of the man's clothing can refer to the Sámi culture, for instance his hat looks like a Gáhpri,⁷⁷ I do not agree that the girls wear Sámi dresses, as they look more like traditional Swedish/Nordic costumes. In my understanding, the man in a wolf fur (as Danielsson identifies it⁷⁸), is a berserk, therefore another figure from Norse mythology and Icelandic sagas.⁷⁹ Regardless, in both possible interpretations of this figure, the presence of representatives of diversified groups is to me an argument, that for Larsson the 'Swedishness' was strongly related to 'Nordic' and was not necessarily linked to one ethnic group.

8. Conclusions

Nowadays *Midwinter Sacrifice* is among Carl Larsson's most recognizable works and a highlight of the National Museum in Stockholm. Called "Sweden's most monumental painting"⁸⁰ but also "Sweden's most refused work",⁸¹ or "most discussed work",⁸² it owns its fame to a scandal emerging from a misinterpretation – or a modern reinterpretation – of an Old Norse subject. Although widely criticized for decades, the painting gained popularity in the 1980s due to its mythological content. In 1983, the painting was displayed at the Swedish History Museum as part of an exhibition entitled *Myths* (Swedish:

⁷⁷ The hat imagined by Larsson can be compared with an illustration by Knud Leem from 1767, printed by O. H. von Lode: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noaidi#/media/File:Shaman.jpg> [accessed: 19.10.2025].

⁷⁸ Danielsson interprets the man in fur as Ludvig Looström, claiming that 'wolf' (in French: *loup*) makes a pun with his name: Danielsson, *Midvinterblot...*, pp. 14–16.

⁷⁹ Berserks were Viking soldiers in bear/wolf skin, attacking with a fury-like trance, probably caused by hallucinogenic substances. In Icelandic sagas, such as *Grettis saga* or *Egil's saga*, we read about Úlfheðnar – wolfskin warriors. See: Andreas Nordberg, Frederik Wallenstein, "Laughing I Shall Die!": *The total transformations of berserkers and úlfheðnar in Old Norse society* [in:] *Transforming Warriors. The ritual organization of military force*, eds. Peter Haldén, Peter Jackson, New York 2016, pp. 49–65.

⁸⁰ In her master thesis Tintin Hodén presents how the painting became important for Swedish cultural heritage: Tintin Hodén, *Sveriges mest monumentala målning? – Mediala praktikers betydelse för formeringen av kulturarv. En undersökning av 1987 års debatt om Carl Larssons Midvinterblot*, master thesis, Södertörns Högskola 2011.

⁸¹ Bjurström, *Midvinterblot och Tidsandan...*, p. 146.

⁸² Olof Isaksson, Birgitta Koch, Inger Kåberg, *Midvinterblot*, Stockholm 1983, p. 50.

Myter) and, as reported by Bjurström, it was the public's favorite object in this show.⁸³

The synthesis of neoromantic and modern visions of Norse mythology in *Midwinter Sacrifice* constitutes a key to understanding its special place in the Swedish imagination. It was even perceived as "originally Swedish" by Britt Mogård, a Swedish politician, who claimed that it had become a vital part of Swedish cultural heritage and therefore should be treated as such.⁸⁴ Authorities at the time also recognized a touristic potential in displaying the painting in Old Uppsala in order to arouse international interest in Sweden's ancient history.⁸⁵

The long-term debate on whether *Midwinter Sacrifice* should be shown in the National Museum in Stockholm was put to an end in 1997, when the painting was hung on its original place after being bought by the museum (with the help of many donations) for 14.7 million SEK, which was the highest price the museum had ever paid for a work of art.⁸⁶ Nowadays, it remains one of the museum's highlights, being for instance chosen to be discussed in the museum's podcast *Verket – en podd om klassiker*, along with other highlights such as Hanna Pauli's *Breakfast time* and Gustaf Cederström's *Bringing Home the Body of King Charles XII*.⁸⁷

It is without doubt that Larsson's monumental painting is regarded as national heritage also due to the artist's great fame in Sweden, although it is not his most well-known artwork. The general popularity of Larsson's paintings is explained by Jeff Werner:

The impact of the Opponents' generation's approach to art could probably be measured in the degree of recognition that their paintings meet with a Swedish audience. This is not only because so many of these works have become national treasures, but also because the settings and moods they chose to portray are perceived by many to be genuinely Swedish.⁸⁸

Interpreted in several possible ways, analyzed with different methods, criticized and debated, Larsson's *Midwinter Sacrifice* is nevertheless the most discussed but also the least explained among his paintings. The jeopardy with such well-described paintings is that scholars might repeat the same ideas, at times with mistakes. Regardless, I believe that *Midwinter Sacrifice* can now

⁸³ Bjurström, *Midvinterblot och Tidsandan...*, p. 147.

⁸⁴ Britt Mogård, *Om Carl Larssons målning Midvinterblot*, "Kulturutskottets betänkande" 1982/83:9, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Hodén, *Sveriges mest monumentala målning?...*, pp. 52–54.

⁸⁶ Cavalli-Björkman, Sessler, *Midvinterblot*, p. 13.

⁸⁷ The painting is discussed in the fourth episode. On-line: <https://soundcloud.com/verketpodcast> [accessed: 14.09.2025].

⁸⁸ Jeff Werner, Tomas Björk, *Blond och blåögd...*, p. 145.

function mainly as a fantasized illustration of an Old Norse tale and pagan beliefs, without any strong nationalist sentiments. As I attempted to show, it can also be interpreted in a broader, Nordic context, as the mature artist had gathered various sources and inspirations for his monumental composition.

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