



Nordic Women Sculptors at the Turn of the 20th Century

Formation, Visibility,
Self-Creation

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Fig. 1 Ida Matton and Anna Rudbeck. Ida Matton's archive, Uppsala University Library.

“A spiritual interplay and faithful companionship”

Studying the Romantic Friendships of Swedish Women Sculptors at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

The romantic friendships of Swedish women sculptors at the turn of the twentieth century reached long beyond the social norms of the day. Women friends, companions and lovers provided both emotional and professional support that facilitated numerous artistic careers. These relationships were integral to artistic success and visibility at a time when women artists were structurally discriminated against and marginalised. This article seeks to explore the romantic friendships of Swedish women sculptors, studying how these relationships affected the artists' careers and found expression in their work. It focuses on the sculptors Ida Matton (1863–1940), Sigrid Blomberg (1863–1941) and Sigrid Fridman (1879–1963), studying their intimate relationships with other women. It will ask how romantic friendships can be approached from a scholarly perspective despite the historical distance and lack of sources, and it will study which impact the relationships had on the professionalisation and careers of the sculptors as well as the reception of their work.

FROM WHISPER TO TOUCH – THE SLIDING SCALE OF FEELINGS

In 1902, Swedish sculptor and art deco artist Ida Matton worked on a double bust, which she initially entitled *Le Secret* (Fig. 2).¹ The double bust depicts an intimate encounter between two women: The younger woman to the left, whose long hair is floating down the base of the sculpture, is whispering into the ear of her slightly older friend, who in turn listens carefully. The plaster version of the group from 1902 was displayed in the exhibition of the Union of Women Painters and



Fig. 2 Ida Matton, *Le Secret/La Confidence*, 1901, clay. Läns museet Gävleborg.

Sculptors (*Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs* – UFPS) in Paris in 1903 under the title *Confidence*, where it was awarded the *Prix de sculpture* for the best sculpture.² The critic Edvard Stjernström, who reviewed the piece in the women's journal *Idun*, called it “a lovely group, as truthful and lively in the composition as complete in its execution”, adding that it had received “the most profuse praise by the Parisian critics”.³ Matton regularly exhibited the double bust in

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the coming years, which indicates that it had a central position in her oeuvre.⁴

During the years in which Matton explored the theme of *Confidence*, she developed an intimate friendship with the Australian singer Elyda Russell. The relationship was particularly intensive between 1902 and 1904. Russell's preserved letters from this period, in which the singer expressed her affection and love for the sculptor in a passionate manner, indicate that the women, at least periodically, engaged in an intimate friendship, which today would be termed lesbian.⁵ Matton's letters appear to be lost, but in 1909 she completed a portrait bust of Russell in the Neoclassical style (Fig. 3). The sculptor and the singer remained friends until the 1930s, long after Russell had married. Matton herself remained unmarried, leading an independent life shaped by long-term friendships with other women. During her sojourn in Paris in the 1890s, Matton was close friends with the physical therapist Anna Rudbeck and the preserved letters and a photograph showing the two women together speak of a strong affection (Fig. 1).⁶ In the photograph, Matton is wearing her hair short, which was a coiffure fashionable among emancipated women and members of the women's movement.⁷

Studying the three existing versions of *Confidence* in clay (1901 with the title "Le Secret"), plaster, plaster (1902) and marble (1906) more closely, it appears as if the gesture of the woman to the left oscillates between a whisper and a kiss, between a word and a touch.⁸ The work's ambiguity stimulates the beholder's imagination, wondering what kind of secret these women share. The younger woman's confidential gesture can be interpreted as an act of inspiration, taking on the role of a muse whose whisper guides the artist by her side. The facial features of the woman to the right show some resemblance to contemporary portrait photographs of Matton. From a biographical perspective, the double bust alludes to the artist's intimate friendship with Russell. Even though the women's relationship seems to materialise in *Confidence*, the work's ambiguity hints at the difficulties in categorising it, especially from a historical distance. Even though Russell in her letters

wrote about her desire to kiss Matton, can we know for sure if she actually engaged in a physical relationship with the sculptor, and if so, how would this knowledge change our interpretation of the work? The ambiguity of the sculpture between whisper and kiss, word and action, mirrors our insecurity.

As feminist and literary scholar Sharon Marcus has remarked with regards to intimate female friendships in the Victorian period, it is no simple task to distinguish female friends from female lovers or female couples and the seemingly inevitable question "Did they have sex?" often remains unanswerable. Therefore, Marcus argues: "We can best understand what kind of relationships women had with each other not by hunting for evidence of sex, which even if we find it will not explain much, but rather by anchoring women's own statements about their relationships in a larger context."⁹ If we read Matton's *Confidence* as one such statement and if we want to make sense of it, it is necessary to place her work in the larger context



Fig. 3 Ida Matton, *Elyda Russell*, 1909, marble. Photo from Ida Matton's archive. Uppsala University Library.

of intimate friendships between women and their expression in art.

Conceptions of friendship and love between women changed dramatically during the period that sets the timeframe for this volume. Long into the nineteenth century, deeply felt friendships between women were accepted by society, which, as the American historian Lillian Faderman has argued, considered women friends “kindred spirits who inhabited a world of interests and sensibilities alien to men.”¹⁰ Emotionally intimate and physically expressive relationships between women were not only tolerated but actively encouraged by society, because they were believed to cultivate “feminine virtues” such as sympathy and altruism, which would eventually turn girls into good wives, mothers or helpmates.¹¹ This cultural climate opened up a free zone for romantic friendships between women.¹²

What often strikes the modern reader of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century correspondences are the excessive statements of affection and desire in the letters exchanged between women friends.¹³ As historian Eva Helen Ulvros has pointed out, utterances of love or a desire to kiss and caress one another, were commonplace expressions of many same-sex friendships in the period, even among those who never engaged in any sexual intimacy.¹⁴ Not only did conventions of letter writing differ from today’s rituals of politeness, but even understandings of friendship and love were more fluid than they are today. When studying women’s partnerships, one should therefore conceive of these relationships along a continuum that stretched from platonic to sexual and from hetero- to homosexual, rather than trying to categorise them in a simplifying manner or applying an anachronistic terminology.¹⁵ Studying the intimate friendships of Nordic women writers in the 1890s, literary historian Birgitta Holm has suggested to speak of a “sliding scale” of feelings along which these relationships evolved freely.¹⁶ If there has ever existed an absolute border between erotic relationships and other forms of friendship, the historical distance tends to render it unclear.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when sexuality began to be categorised and medicalised, tolerant or positive attitudes towards intimate female friendship began to be challenged. Even though sexual relations between women had already been legally criminalised in Sweden in 1865, it was only at the turn of the century that “lesbianism” as a term came more widely in use and was defined as “unnatural fornication between women”.¹⁷ By the time unmarried working women became a rapidly growing group in society, romantic friendships between women began to be seen as a challenge to patriarchal structures and conservative norms in society. Unmarried working women began to be criticised as abnormal, even in biological terms, and independent and well-educated female professionals who lived together were conceived as a threat to the social order, while their relationships were vilified as pathological and morbid.¹⁸ Against this backdrop, one has to assume that the surviving sources on women’s romantic friendship are structured by silences, omissions or even destruction brought about by this increasingly hostile cultural climate.¹⁹

When studying the intimate relationships of Swedish women sculptors, it becomes clear that it is almost impossible to conceptualise them by using one unifying term. When employing romantic friendship as an umbrella term, I refer to long-term partnerships that involved co-habitation as well as more short-lived, independent and open relationships. All of these relationships were emotionally intimate, some of them involved physical intimacy and would today be considered lesbian, while others might have been platonic. However, the women’s privileged middle- or upper-class background and intellectual capital appear as unifying factors and were central preconditions for these relationships to evolve. Further, all these diverse relationships provided, in one way or another, emotional support and social safety, in some cases not unlike the institution of marriage – but with the decisive advantage of allowing the personal freedom to pursue a professional career.

Quite often, romantic friendships developed a subversive and liberating potential, because they licensed forms of agency women normally were discouraged from using. According to Sharon Marcus, in their relationships with female friends, “women were able to exercise a prerogative otherwise associated with men: taking an active stance towards the object of their affections”.²⁰ The paradox of friendship in the period was that it could both reinforce or consolidate gender roles and class affiliation and at the same time allow women to transgress the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable for women. As more and more women began to claim gender equality and campaign for women’s rights, feminism and philanthropy, the reasons for them to bond and organise themselves increased. As literary scholar Eva Borgström and historian Hanna Markusson Winkvist have recently demonstrated, romantic friendships were a widespread phenomenon among members of the Swedish women’s movement.²¹ Art historian Katarina Wadstein MacLeod has likewise explored the case of the intimate companionship of the sculptor Ida Thoresen (1863–1937) and the painter Elisabeth Barnekow (1874–1942), who were key figures in establishing the Association of Swedish Women Artists (*Föreningen Svenska Konstnärinnor*) in 1910.²²

BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND EXCEPTIONALITY

Women who aimed to pursue a professional career were reliant on the support of like-minded friends and colleagues in order to build their own professional networks. Women artists were still structurally discriminated against on many levels, such as education, exhibition opportunities, public commissions or acquisitions. At the private academies in Paris, for instance, women were often provided minimum tuition and improved mainly by watching one another and criticising one another’s work.²³ Weekly competitions, so-called *concours*, fuelled a constant rivalry among the students. It is important not to romanticise the

communities of women artists and female art students as harmonious sisterhoods. In fact, these relationships were not seldom shaped by conflict, envy and competition.²⁴ The ambivalence in such collegial relationships also shows in the letters by the French sculptor Camille Claudel (1864–1943), who worked in self-imposed distance from her female peers and found herself in constant rivalry with the fellow students in the studio of Auguste Rodin (1840–1917).²⁵

Practical necessities facilitated solidarity among women artists and rendered them interdependent: women of middle- or upper-class background could not travel unchaperoned if they wanted to make a decent impression. Therefore, two or three women often united as travel companions when conducting study trips abroad. Unmarried women used to lodge together to lower their living expenses. Women artists shared studios and hired teachers together, partly also because it was considered inappropriate to receive single tuition by a male artist. In personal accounts, travel writings and guide books, women artists highlighted the importance of mutual support for their professional progress.²⁶ In her memoir, the Finnish painter and writer Helena Westermarck (1857–1938) recalled the lively discussions on artistic matters with her female peers during study trips to Paris in the 1880s:

It was exciting for us to meet in a surrounding that was brimful with artistic interests. I cannot remember that, when some of us were together, we talked about anything else but art – with enthusiasm – or in desperation – but always with a youthful, profound trust in the power, honour and splendour of art.²⁷

As literary scholar Alexandra K. Wettlaufer has observed in a study on Anglo-American women artists’ travel writing, the artists tend to portray themselves as members of a community of like-minded friends and central to their accounts “is a sense of community: women travel together; paint and sculpt together;



meet, observe, and depict other women; discover women painters of the past, [...] actively encouraging their sisters in art”.²⁸ The preserved correspondence of Nordic women artists, such as Anna Nordlander (1843–1879) and Hildegard Thorell (1850–1930) likewise demonstrate that mutual emotional and practical support, joint study trips, collaborative painting practices and exchange on artistic matters were vital to their professional success.²⁹

Whereas art historical scholarship in recent years has repeatedly highlighted the importance of all-female networks for the professionalisation of women painters, only a handful of anglophone studies have explored the communities of sculptors: Melissa Dabakis and Martha Vicinus have studied the expatriate community of American women sculptors in mid-nineteenth-century Rome and Harriet Hosmer’s (1830–1908) romantic friendship with her widowed patron Louisa Baring, Lady Ashburton (1827–1903). Shannon Hunter Hurtado has analysed the careers of women sculptors in Victorian Britain, postulating a “conspicuous absence” of professional networks among them.³⁰ She suggested that a possible explanation for the artists’ relative indifference to one another was “that each enjoyed her almost unique status and used it as a means of interesting potential clients. Being one of several unusual women might detract from the

individual’s novelty, even identity, or it could imply a sort of Amazonian threat.”³¹ This observation can be applied to the Nordic context. While painting had by the late 1870s turned into an acceptable field of work for women, women sculptors were still a peculiar minority, mastering a profession that was considered inappropriate for the female sex.³² Whereas Nordic women painters in the late nineteenth century began to conceive of themselves as a conspicuous occupational group and staged their relationships and group affiliation in friendship images, it seems that women sculptors rather continued to draw on the idea of the “exceptional woman”, celebrating their individual uniqueness.³³ Rather than bonding with their peers, Swedish women sculptors engaged in intimate relationships with independent, cultivated and intellectual women working in fields other than their own. However, as the following cases will show, also these relationships had a lasting impact on the sculptors’ work and its critical reception.

INTIMATE FRIENDS AND PUBLIC DEFENDERS

The Swedish sculptor Sigrig Blomberg met her long-term companion, the historian and writer Sigrig Leijonhufvud (1862–1937) at a meeting of Nya Idun, a cultural association for educated women founded in 1885 in Stockholm. (Fig. 4) Here, women intellectuals socialised and built networks of private and professional significance. Both Blomberg and Leijonhufvud were pioneers in their respective fields: Blomberg as a sculptor of religious subjects and public monuments and Leijonhufvud as an academic.³⁴ They owned a summer cottage located in Upplands Väsby, called Sista Styvern, which in the 1910s turned into a popular meeting place for the members of Nya Idun and other female intellectuals from Stockholm, among them other female couples, such as the writers and women’s rights activists Ellen Kleman (1867–1943) and Klara Johanson (1875–1948).³⁵ Sista Styvern offered these women a liberating environment in the countryside,



Fig. 5 Sigrid Blomberg, *Madonna del Fuoco*, 1912, wood. Gotlands museum.

where they could interact, collaborate and work side by side in an informal setting.³⁶ During the summer of 1912, Blomberg created the wooden sculpture *Madonna del Fuoco* (Fig. 5), which shows the crowned Mary dressed in a long drapery, holding up baby Jesus like a trophy – a forceful gesture that corresponds to the sculpture’s reduced and concentrated form. On the occasion of Blomberg’s fiftieth birthday in 1913, Leijonhufvud described the making of the work in an article in the women’s rights journal *Dagny*: At Pentecost, the couple had been sitting in front of an open fire together with two female friends, when inspiration suddenly struck them all and a figure appeared in the dying embers that prompted Blomberg to create the sculpture.³⁷ Leijonhufvud argued that the conceptual idea of the sculpture originated in a collective experience, but at the same time, she celebrated the intuitive artistic genius of her companion. Further, she commented on the artist’s unwillingness to exhibit her sculptures, which kept her relatively unknown to larger audiences. Against this backdrop, the article can thus be understood as a deliberate attempt by Leijonhufvud to promote Blomberg’s work, popularising an anecdote that fashioned the sculptor as struck by transcendental inspiration.

In their own ways, both Leijonhufvud and Blomberg sought to preserve the memory of their companion for posterity. Leijonhufvud wrote the entry on Blomberg in *Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon* [Swedish Biographical Encyclopaedia] and thereby made sure that her companion’s artistic achievements were not forgotten.³⁸ In turn, Blomberg portrayed Leijonhufvud in 1912 in a bronze relief, depicting her companion in profile with elegant features and arched eyebrows (Fig. 4). The pinned-up hairdo and high collar further underline the respectability of the sitter, which also resonates in the chosen format of the relief. The eyes of the sitter are directed downwards as if she is reading. The stylistic execution of the portrait points to Blomberg’s interest in the art of the Early Renaissance. While the portrayal is rather formal, the inscription reveals the work to be a token to

friendship: “To Eva Leijonhufvud in friendship from Blomman” (“Till Eva Leijonhufvud vänskapsfullt af Blomman”). The relief was a gift to Leijonhufvud’s sister by the artist, who signed it with her nickname “Blomman”, “the Flower”, by which she was known among her closest friends.³⁹ The relief portrait of Leijonhufvud is among the last works that Blomberg completed before she had to terminate her career as a sculptor due to an eye disease. In 1937, in the aftermath of Leijonhufvud’s death, Blomberg expressed her feelings in a letter to her friend Beth Hennings: “For me, my friend has been and remains the greatest gift that life has given me.”⁴⁰ This comment points to the enormous importance that the relationship with Leijonhufvud had in Blomberg’s life.

The literary critic Klara Johanson, who belonged to the couple’s close circle of friends, met the sculptor Sigrid Fridman in 1924, and immediately fell in love with her. By that time, Johanson had lived for more than ten years in a partnership with the writer and editor Ellen Kleman, whereas Fridman had shared a household with the gymnastics teacher Ragnhild Barkman. The comprehensive correspondence between Johanson and Fridman is preserved in the National Library of Sweden, spanning the time from their first acquaintance in 1924 to Johanson’s death in 1948.⁴¹ The first preserved letter from Johanson to Fridman from March 1924 already reveals the critic’s passionate desire for the sculptor:

It was very difficult to leave you today. Inside myself, I have been enjoying this morning, as I always longingly enjoy our “sittings”. Come to me tomorrow evening if “friendship is not over” on your side. In me, it persists. Of course, you have the power to hurt me. But I will not fail. Oh, I desire your smile, which I have not once been blessed with today. You have no idea how seductively beautiful it is.⁴²

The letter indicates that Johanson had immediately after their first encounter begun to sit for Fridman for a portrait bust.⁴³ The work on the bust seems to have

coincided with the beginning of their romantic engagement. While Johanson's early letters to Fridman are filled with passionate expressions of physical desire and emotional longing, Fridman used to express her affection by repeatedly calling herself Johanson's own sculptor ("Jag är din stenhuggare").⁴⁴ Neither Johanson nor Fridman gave up on their previous partnerships, and after some initial friction, both Kleman and Barkman tolerated the relationship and eventually the four women became friends.⁴⁵ In the aftermath of Johanson's death, Fridman came to summarise their intimate connection as follows: "Our relationship was a spiritual interplay and faithful companionship. Such relationships do exist between women."⁴⁶ Johanson's bust in the Nationalmuseum collection is a lasting monument to the romantic friendship between the sculptor and the writer (Fig. 6). It is remarkable in its expressive simplification of Johanson's androgynous facial features framed by her short hair. Johanson was known for her boyish appearance and her interest in cross-dressing.⁴⁷ The calmness and austerity of the sitter's expression recalls the ancient portrait busts of philosophers and statesmen and bestows her with a certain intellectual air and remote dignity. The bust of Johanson seems to display the "audacious and characterful simplification", which according to the depicted constituted the essence of Fridman's work as a sculptor.⁴⁸

Johanson was fascinated by Fridman's modernist work right from the start and she particularly admired the sculptor's proposal for the statue of the writer and feminist reformer Fredrika Bremer (1801–1865). In collaboration with Kleman, Johanson had edited and published Bremer's letters in four volumes between 1915 and 1920.⁴⁹ Literary scholar Carina Burman has suggested that Johanson's advocacy was essential to the realisation of Fridman's controversial sculpture of the slowly wandering Bremer in the park of Humlegården in central Stockholm in 1927 (Fig. 7).⁵⁰ As a writer and critic, Johanson soon rose to become Fridman's most outspoken advocate in the public debate. In June 1927, Johanson published an apologia in the newspaper

Stockholms Dagblad, in which she combined her notorious sharp-tongued irony directed at Fridman's critics with glowing praise for her artist-friend.⁵¹ The critics of the Bremer monument were appalled by the sculpture's supposed lack of stateliness and elegance, its roughness of execution, the lifeless drapery and the affected and unnatural pose.⁵² In her letters to Johanson, Fridman repeatedly expressed how deeply she felt offended by the "toxic" campaigns against her work, which in her view tried to "kill" both herself and her art.⁵³

According to Burman, Johanson's fascination for Fridman's Bremer sculpture was intimately intertwined with her affection for the artist and she treated the friend's artistic representation as equal to her own scholarly work on the admired writer and pioneering women's rights activist.⁵⁴ In Johanson's view, both Fridman and herself had become interpreters of Bremer's legacy in their respective fields.⁵⁵ Already in a letter from 1924, Johanson had expressed her deep fascination for Fridman's sculptural proposal, concluding that her own vision of Bremer had materialised in the friend's work: "Only now do I realise how literally miraculous it is that you with your own free hands have created this figure which I have built up slowly in many years of philosophical toil."⁵⁶ This comparison is a telling example of the "spiritual interplay" that, according to Fridman, characterised their relationship. Johanson identified a close kinship between her own research and writing on Bremer and Fridman's artistic interpretation.

In the years to come, Johanson repeatedly came to defend Fridman's controversial sculpture projects in polemic opinion pieces, most notably among them the *Centaur* (See p. 33) (which the artist presented as a plaster model in the fall of 1928). The expressive work, which in its display of physical strength and powerful movement reveals the influence of Fridman's French teacher Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929), was eventually realised in bronze and raised at the Observatory Hill in Stockholm in 1939, after more than ten years of heated controversy. The installation of the sculpture was accompanied by ridiculing and hostile comments



Fig. 6 Sigrid Fridman, *Klara Johanson*, 1942, bronze. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

in the Swedish press, which prompted Fridman to remark in a letter to Johanson: “Sometimes I believe you do not exist, and I am left totally alone in all this evil. [...] Sculpture, which used to be my home, nauseates me.”⁵⁷ Upon Fridman’s request, Johanson wrote an article in the newspaper *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*, in which she ironically and with strong wording summarised the “opinion terror” (“opinions-terrorism”) against Fridman’s *Centaur*, stating:

None of the city’s other 69 sculptures had to go through such a long-lasting, organised and angry persecution as the latest one. My far from complete collection of newspaper clippings regarding the *Centaur*, the first one eleven years old, comprises 147 pieces, had I kept the whole lot, the number would probably rise to 200 or more.⁵⁸

For those readers who wondered why Fridman’s work was subjected to such hostility, Johanson offered the following explanation:

When it comes to chasing away an audacious woman from a professional field which by tradition is believed to be a masculine monopoly, you can always find parties that happily participate in the stone-throwing. This is how the baroque spectacle arose about a woman artist and her work being opposed like a danger to society.⁵⁹

Indeed, Fridman’s work provoked conservative critics on two levels: not only were her sculptures “unnaturally masculine” in their stylistic execution, but so was also her decision to compete for public commissions and create monumental sculpture.⁶⁰ Both in terms of the style and content of her work, Fridman entered into an artistic sphere that was considered a masculine preserve.

In 1948, Klara Johanson published her last book *Sigrid Fridman och andra konstnärer – En krigskrönika* [Sigrid Fridman and other artists – A war chronicle], which can be regarded as the conclusion of a long-time



collaboration between Fridman and Johanson, as well as the end point of the latter’s career as a writer and journalist.⁶¹ Here, Johanson both presented Fridman’s oeuvre and provided a polemical historiography of the cultural debates surrounding her friend’s public sculpture projects. The book reads like a heroic story with Fridman at its centre, who realised her visionary work despite the “organised war of annihilation” that was waged against her.⁶² In his review of the book in the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, the critic Torsten Bergman acknowledged Johanson’s vital importance for Fridman’s career, calling her the sculptor’s “most accomplished defender” and irony her “most elegant weapon”.⁶³

The correspondence from 1947 reveals that Fridman was involved in the making of Johanson’s book, answering questions about her biography or her view on art and commenting on the manuscript.⁶⁴

In June, Johanson wrote to Fridman: “I long dreadfully to finally get the section about you into shape and to fearfully submit it to your pre-censorship. No, not censorship, but correction of errata or stupidities or errors.”⁶⁵ In another letter, she summarised her intentions as follows: “I have expressed the impressions of my eyes and the thoughts of my heart. May I have interpreted your sculptural intentions so that you will approve of them. Every word is most carefully chosen and examined. Even writing requires composition and selection of details.”⁶⁶ Johanson repeatedly reflected on the similarities and differences between the processes of writing and sculpting, the “interplay” between her own and her friend’s form of expression.

The correspondence indicates that author and artist collaboratively developed a shared image of Fridman and her sculptural production. Ultimately, Johanson turned into the central spokesperson for Fridman’s art. Fridman’s involvement in the drafting of the manuscript turned the book into a hybrid (auto)biography, in which Fridman presented herself through Johanson’s writing.⁶⁷ In her correspondence with her friend, the writer Margit Abenius (1899–1970), Fridman remarked in retrospect about her relationship with Johanson, saying that “K. J. and I had a mutual exchange (not one-sided as one might think) and an inner recognition of one another and growing into one another, which was natural (the Siamese twins, as K. J. used to say).”⁶⁸ Against this backdrop, their professional collaboration on the book might have felt to them like a natural continuation of their romantic friendship. Following Johanson’s death in 1948, Fridman was involved in the publication of her friend’s collected writings, including the letters, which were published in a strongly edited and censored version.⁶⁹ Johanson played a vital role in promoting Fridman’s career as a sculptor and shaping her reputation, acting as the public defender of her work, whereas Fridman secured Johanson’s legacy as a writer, journalist and critic. In a letter from June 1947, Fridman commented on the destructive effect of the critical campaigns against her art:

There was a time where I was about to explode with eruptive force – when I could have become whatever I wanted, and just like Michelangelo I wanted to sculpt rocks. But I have been hampered everywhere and knocked about and grinded into a bleeding mass in the mill of torture. But still the flame has returned, and again and again it has controlled and consumed me.⁷⁰

After Johanson had completed the final revisions on the book, Fridman remarked: “My beloved heart, I am so touched by all the trouble you have taken to drag me out of the tangle of misunderstanding that has almost drowned me.”⁷¹ As a writer and critic, Johanson turned into the saviour of Fridman’s reputation. Johanson verbalised with her pen what Fridman aimed to express in her art. The case of Johanson and Fridman demonstrates that the romantic friendships of Swedish women sculptors could exert a decisive impact on the artists’ careers, critical reception and artistic legacy. Eventually one cannot help but wonder: If Johanson had not acted as Fridman’s intimate friend and public defender, would any of her public monuments stand in Stockholm today and bear vivid testimony to her exceptional artistic career? At a time when women sculptors like Sigrid Fridman were discriminated against, ridiculed and attacked by a misogynist public opinion, their intimate women friends developed into an effective protective force that lives on to this day.

Romantic friendships with other women were significant aspects in the lives of Swedish women sculptors at the turn of the twentieth century. These were queer partnerships in the sense that they challenged prevalent gender norms and allowed the artists to conquer professional spheres that were the preserve of men and to build independent lives and artistic careers.⁷² While these multifaceted and complex relationships remain difficult to categorise using our contemporary sexual terminology, they tend to materialise in plaster, marble or bronze, in the portrait busts and reliefs of sculptors like Ida Matton, Sigrid Blomberg and Sigrid Fridman, inviting the beholder to unveil their meanings.

Endnotes

- 1 Karin Melin, "Ida Matton och art nouveau", in *Från Gästrikland: Gästriklands kulturhistoriska förenings meddelanden*, Gävle 1966, pp. 27–41, here p. 30.
- 2 Melin 1966, p. 30.
- 3 Edvard Stjernström, "Ida Matton. En dekorerad svensk konstnärinna", *Idun*, no. 14 (4 April 1903).
- 4 Barbro Norbelie, *Ida Matton (1863–1940): Kvinna och skulptör på det franska och svenska konstfältet* (master's thesis), Uppsala University 2012, p. 84.
- 5 Letters from Elyda Russell to Ida Matton, Ida Matton's correspondence, Carolina Rediviva, Uppsala University Library. See also: <http://www.odysse.lesbiskmakt.nu/platser/ida-matton/> (accessed: 12-02-2021).
- 6 At the time, Anna Rudbeck was running an office in Paris with her sister Malla, who was also a close friend of Matton. Norbelie 2012, p. 74–75.
- 7 Prominent examples are Rosa Bonheur, George Sand, Klara Johanson, Selma Lagerlöf and Matton's Norwegian colleague Ambrosia Tønnesen.
- 8 The clay is in the collection of Länsmuseum Gävleborg, the plaster is in the collection of Hälsinglands museum and the marble is in private ownership.
- 9 Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England*, Princeton 2007, p. 44.
- 10 Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, New York 1998, pp. 157–158.
- 11 Faderman 1998, pp. 159–160.
- 12 Faderman 1998; Eva Borgström and Hanna Markusson Winkvist, "Om kärlek, kamratskap och kamp", in *Den kvinnliga tvåsamhetens frirum: Kvinnopar i kvinnorörelsen 1890–1960*, Stockholm 2018, pp. 14–17.
- 13 In a pioneering contribution, Smith-Rosenberg has explored the ways in which intimate and romantic friendships were articulated in the letters of American women, studying their language of affection. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in the Nineteenth Century", in *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975): pp. 1–29. Similar observations have been made regarding women from the Nordic countries: Eva Helen Ulvros, "Vi lutade hufvuden och hjertan till varann: Om kvinnors kärlek och vänskap på 1800-talet", in *Finsk Tidskrift* 2–3 (2004): pp. 157–168.
- 14 Eva Helen Ulvros, *Sophie Elkan: Hennes liv och vänskapen med Selma Lagerlöf*, Lund 2001, p. 87.
- 15 Marc Brodie and Barbara Caine, "Class, Sex and Friendship: The Long Nineteenth Century", in *Friendship: A History*, Barbara Caine (ed.), London 2009, p. 243. See also: Ulvros 2001, p. 92; Borgström and Markusson Winkvist 2018, pp. 18–19.
- 16 Birgitta Holm, "Det tredje könet", in *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria III: Vida Världen 1900–1960*, Elisabeth Møller Jensen (ed.), Höganäs 1996, pp. 276–291, here 280.
- 17 The first use of the term "lesbisk" according to today's meaning as female homosexuality can be found in a dictionary from 1904, which provides the definition "onaturlig otukt mellan kvinnor". Ulvros 2001, p. 89.
- 18 Brodie and Caine 2009, p. 244; Hanna Markusson Winkvist, *Som isolerade öar: De lagerkransade kvinnorna och akademien under 1900-talets första hälft*, Stockholm 2003, pp. 194–198 and 202–203. See further: Carina Rech, "Women's Friendships in the Nineteenth Century", in *Becoming Artists: Self-Portraits, Friendship Images and Studio Scenes by Nordic Women Painters in the 1880s*, Gothenburg 2021, pp. 106–110.
- 19 Ulla Manns, "Om synlighet och läsbarhet – samkönad sexualitet och kvinnorörelsens historieskrivning", in *Den kvinnliga tvåsamhetens frirum: Kvinnopar i kvinnorörelsen 1890–1960*, Eva Borgström and Hanna Markusson Winkvist (eds.), Stockholm 2018, pp. 297–317.
- 20 Marcus 2007, p. 56.
- 21 Borgström and Markusson Winkvist 2018.
- 22 Katarina Wadstein MacLeod, "Collaboration and Co-Habitation: Swedish Women Artists at the Turn of the Century", in *Modern Women Artists in the Nordic Countries, 1900–1960*, Kerry Greaves (ed.), London 2021, pp. 111–121.
- 23 Rech 2021, 110–116.
- 24 Jane R. Becker, "Nothing Like a Rival to Spur One On: Marie Bashkirtseff and Louise Breslau at the Académie Julian," in *Overcoming All Obstacles: The Women of the Académie Julian* (exh. cat.), Dahesh Museum, New York 1999, pp. 69–113.
- 25 Susannah Wilson, "Gender, Genius, and the Artist's Double Bind: The Letters of Camille Claudel, 1880–1910", in *The Modern Language Review* 112, no. 2 (2017): pp. 362–380.
- 26 Alexandra Wettlaufer, "The Poetics and Politics of Sisterhood. Anna Mary Howitt's 'The Sisters in Art'", in *Victorian Review* 36, no. 1 (2010): pp. 129–146; Julia K. Debbs, "Empowering American Women Artists: The Travel Writings of Mary Alcott Nieriker", in *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 15, no. 3 (2016): np.
- 27 Helena Westermark, *Mina levnadsminnen*, Åbo 1941, p. 125.
- 28 Alexandra K. Wettlaufer, "Artistic Representation: Travel Narrative and the Construction of Female Artistic Identity in the Nineteenth Century", in *A Cultural History of Women in the Age of Empire*, Teresa Mangum (ed.), London 2013, pp. 177–199, here pp. 179–180.
- 29 Carina Rech, "Att skriva om allt man känner, tänker och ser! Anna Nordlanders korrespondens i kontext", in *Skrif om vad du målar: Brev från Anna Nordlander till Kerstin Cardon 1869–1879*, Anna Jörgensdotter (ed.), Skellefteå 2019, pp. 33–52; Rech 2021.
- 30 Melissa Dabakis, *A Sisterhood of Sculptors: American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome*, University Park 2014; Martha Vicinus, "Laocoöning in Rome: Harriet Hosmer and Romantic Friendship", *Women's Writing* 10, no. 2 (2003): pp. 353–366; Shannon Hunter Hurtado, *Genteel Mavericks: Professional Women Sculptors in Victorian Britain*, Oxford 2012, p. 158. On the life and work of Harriet Hosmer see further: Kate Culkin, *Harriet Hosmer: A Cultural Biography*,

- Amherst and Boston 2010.
- 31 Hunter Hurtado 2012, p. 158.
- 32 See Linda Hinner's essay in this volume.
- 33 On Nordic women painters and their friendship images: Rech 2021. Mary D. Sheriff has coined the term exceptional woman in a study of Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, in which she analysed how the painter's professional identity was informed by ideas of feminine creativity and achievement conceived as matters of exception. Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art*, Chicago 1996.
- 34 Irja Bergström, *Skulptriserna: Alice Nordin och hennes samtida, 1890–1940*, Gothenburg 2012, p. 194. Leijonhufvud worked as a librarian at the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities (*Vitterhetsakademien*) and became an honorary doctor at the University in Lund in 1937.
- 35 Carina Burman, *K. J. En biografi över Klara Johanson*, Stockholm 2007, p. 231.
- 36 Burman 2007, p. 231; Gurli Linder, "Skulptris – Byggmästare, Bokbindare och Husmor: Sigrid Blomberg intime", *Veckojournalen*, no. 50 (1923).
- 37 Sigrid Leijonhufvud, "Sigrid Blomberg – femtio år", *Dagny* (16 October 1913).
- 38 Sigrid Leijonhufvud, "Sigrid Blomberg", in *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*. Online: <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/Sbl/Mobil/Artikel/17806> (accessed 24-08-2020)
- 39 Gurli Linder, "Sigrid Blomberg", *Idun* (8 March 1906).
- 40 Sigrid Blomberg, letter to Beth Hennings, 4 December 1937, Gothenburg University Library, cit. after Marie Eriksson, "Sigrid Blomberg – den okända skulptrisen bakom kända verk" (bachelor's thesis), University of Gothenburg 1996, unpublished manuscript, p. 31.
- 41 Sigrid Fridmans brevsamling, National Library of Sweden, Ep. F 12:1–10.
- 42 Klara Johanson, letter to Sigrid Fridman, 7 March 1924.
- 43 This is further supported by a diary entry from February 1927, in which Johanson commented on the third anniversary of the day that Fridman had begun to work on her bust. Burman 2007, p. 303.
- 44 Sigrid Fridman, letter to Klara Johanson, 5 June 1925.
- 45 Burman 2007, pp. 305–306; Greger Eman, *Nya himlar över en ny jord – om Klara Johanson, Lydia Wahlström och den feministiska vänskapskärleken*, Stockholm 1993, pp. 64–68.
- 46 Sigrid Fridman, letter to Margit Abenius, 4 September 1951, Uppsala University Library, G11 n:5, cit. after Burman 2007, p. 304.
- 47 Eman 1993, p. 37.
- 48 Klara Johanson, *Sigrid Fridman och andra konstnärer – En krigskrönika*, Stockholm 1948, p. 16.
- 49 Klara Johanson and Ellen Kleman (eds.), *Fredrika Bremers brev*, 4 vol., Stockholm 1915–1920.
- 50 Burman 2007, pp. 307–311. See further: Elle-Kari Gustafsson, "Skulptören Sigrid Fridman och samtiden. Porträttstatyer i Stockholms publika miljö 1900–1960" (bachelor's thesis), Stockholm University 2004, unpublished manuscript.
- 51 Klara Johanson, "Vänlig kritik över Fredrika Bremers staty", in *Stockholms Dagblad* (19 June 1927).
- 52 Johanson 1948, p. 36. See further Eva-Lena Karlsson's essay in this volume.
- 53 Sigrid Fridman, letter to Klara Johanson, 20 July 1939. See also letter from 15 August 1927.
- 54 Burman 2007, pp. 306–307.
- 55 Burman 2007, p. 308.
- 56 Klara Johanson, letter to Sigrid Fridman, 16 June 1924.
- 57 Sigrid Fridman, letter to Klara Johanson, 27 July 1939.
- 58 Klara Johanson, "Epilog till en statyhistoria", in *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* (28 August 1939). A few weeks prior, Fridman had asked Johanson to use her pen and "kill" the critics of her work. Sigrid Fridman, letter to Klara Johanson, 2 August 1939.
- 59 Johanson 1939.
- 60 On women sculptors and public monuments see: Marjan Sterckx, "The Invisible 'Sculpteuse': Sculptures by Women in the Nineteenth-century Urban Public Space – London, Paris, Brussels", in *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 7, no. 2 (2008): np. For instance, the critic Erik Blomberg identified an "enforced manliness" in Fridman's work. Erik Blomberg, *Stockholms-Tidningen* (10 April 1921).
- 61 Johanson 1948.
- 62 Johanson 1948, p. 17.
- 63 Torsten Bergman, "Geni eller diletant?", *Dagens Nyheter* (25 October 1948).
- 64 Klara Johanson, letter to Sigrid Fridman, 7 June 1947. During the editing process, the friends also engaged in a lively discussion on Bourdelle's art theory and its influence on Fridman. Klara Johanson, letter to Sigrid Fridman, 13 June 1947.
- 65 Klara Johanson, letter to Sigrid Fridman, 13 June 1947.
- 66 Klara Johanson, letter to Sigrid Fridman, 10 July 1947.
- 67 The creation process of the book on Fridman bears some resemblance to the (auto) biography that the American painter Anna Klumpke wrote about her companion, the French animal painter Rosa Bonheur. Both were collaborative projects that were integral in shaping the depicted artist's reputation. Anna Klumpke, *Rosa Bonheur: The Artist's (Auto)Biography*, Gretchen van Slyke (trans.), Ann Arbor 2001. On (auto)biography see: Maria Tamboukou, "Relational Narratives: Auto/Biography and the Portrait", in *Women's Studies International Forum* 33 (2010): pp. 170–179.
- 68 Sigrid Fridman, letter to Margit Abenius, 19 February 1956, Uppsala University Library, G11 n:5, cit. after Eman 1993, p. 68.
- 69 Burman 2007, p. 458. Klara Johanson, *Brev*, Stockholm 1953.
- 70 Sigrid Fridman, letter to Klara Johanson, 18 June 1947.
- 71 Sigrid Fridman, letter to Klara Johanson, 11 July 1947.
- 72 Here, I follow Sjästad's definition of queerness understood as a challenge of society's gender expectations and the willingness to build lives independent of these constraints. Øystein Sjästad, "Kitty Kielland as a 'New Woman'," in *Scandinavian Studies* 92, no. 4 (2020): pp. 492–520.