

Visit the 1870s or the 1970s in Stockholm

Djurgården's museums send visitors back in time, from pre-industrial society to ABBA's pop

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I recently stepped back in time by visiting two museums on the island of Djurgården near Stockholm's center.

At Skansen, the world's first open-air museum founded in 1891, historic buildings from different eras teach the social history and geography of the entire country. But from my perspective, the museum best highlights how the perseverance and dedication of one person, namely Artur Hazelius, can truly make a difference and a lasting contribution that resonates to this day.

After graduation from Uppsala University in 1860, Hazelius taught Swedish language and literature. He would later become known for spelling reforms in the early 1900s. But his passion for the past was ultimately more powerful than his passion for language. While traveling in the province of Dalarna in 1872, Hazelius was distressed as he witnessed the disappearance of the lifestyle that he had known as a boy. In his opinion, the Industrial Revolution was producing tasteless uniformity and threatening the region's natural beauty and rich cultural life. A booming grain market meant monetary short-term prosperity for farmers, but it was



Photos: (above & right) Cynthia Elyce Rubin,
(top right) Åke E:son Lindman / ABBA The Museum

rapidly changing Swedish folk culture. Was the price too high?

Though not a trained ethnologist, he and his wife started collecting textiles, furniture, tools, and oral histories—in a big way. Why stop with two examples of knitted country bonnets when you could have ten? Collecting objects belonging to the upper class was not new, but collecting the works of commoners was certainly a novel idea.

The couple was not wealthy, but their enthusiasm made them popular with people they met, and donations flowed their way. As costumed tour guide Amelie Rosengren explained, “Hazelius charmed people, particularly people who could help him.” Soon their little house was piled high with the trappings of traditional life. In Hazelius’ view, the knowledge of folk design and craft techniques should never be lost. If a person understood the past, then he would be able to express himself in the future—perhaps with more modern materials but always in a distinctively Swedish way.

In 1873 he opened his Museum of Scandinavian Ethnography with historical period rooms in downtown Stockholm. He later reorganized these displays as the Nordiska Museet and then in 1891 after his father’s death, Hazelius took his small inheritance to start a new kind of museum. He bought and kept acquiring land; even the king donated acres. Soon the landscape was filled with rocky hills, ponds, woods, fields, and a spectacular view of Stockholm and its harbor.

The first house placed on the property was a 16th-century log dwelling from Mora in Dalarna. Soon a Hackstugan, or chipping house, used by stonecutters at Orsa followed and then a farmhouse with sod-covered roof from Kyrkhult in Bleckinge. In the early 1920s, a number of town buildings from Södermalm in Stockholm were acquired. Today people in period clothing interpret some 50 buildings. There are restaurants, a children’s zoo, a stage used for live concerts and folk dance displays, midsummer celebra-

Above: A living history demonstrator at Skansen prepares flatbread.

Top right: The costumes ABBA wore when they won Eurovision in 1974, propelling them to stardom, are on display in the ABBA museum.

Right: Demonstrators at Skansen show onlookers how rope was made.

tions when the traditional maypole is raised, and a Christmas market. St. Lucia’s Day is celebrated on December 13, a festivity that has been celebrated at Skansen since 1892.

This museum provided inspiration for early open-air museums in Norway including Lillehammer’s Maihaugen Museum founded by Anders Sandvig, who similarly collected old houses and farms, and Oslo’s Norsk Folkemuseum, established in 1894 by historian Hans Aall, whose singular leadership greatly expanded the collections, including the 1907 donation of King Oscar II.

Practically across the street from the main entrance to Skansen near Gröner Lund amusement park is a new museum, opened in 2013, devoted to the musical phenomenon ABBA. The Swedish platform-shoed super singers that stormed the pop world after winning the 1974 Eurovision song contest with “Waterloo” come alive. It’s a journey down musical memory lane, a fitting tribute to Sweden’s most popular musical export of the 1970s and early 1980s.

Before ABBA (an acronym from the first letters of each group member’s first name) was born, Agnetha Fältskog, Benny Andersson, Björn Ulvaeus, and Anni-Frid (known as Frida) Lyngstad were already celebrities in Sweden. The ABBA saga began in 1966 when Benny of the Hep Stars and Björn of

the Hootenanny Singers crossed paths by chance. After a late-night party, both ended up playing Beatles songs together and soon penned their first song, “Isn’t it Easy to Say.”

In the museum’s audio guide, the four singers explain the evolution of their careers. These personal memories relate to the exhibits, including a replica of the cottage on the island of Viggso, where the group wrote many songs, and the backstage dressing rooms at Edmonton Ice Hockey Arena, where they performed their final world tour. The museum showcases not only the band’s music with concert footage and interviews but also its stage clothes, gold records, and artifacts.

The museum director, Ingmarie Halling, who is particularly proud of the technical bells and whistles, explained, “We have done a very interactive museum, the most interactive musical museum today.” Holograms of the band invite visitors to participate on stage and sing along in their own private jam with the group. After scanning the museum’s entrance ticket, visitors can view this private show at home and share it on Facebook and other social media.

At the end of the museum installations, I found myself in the Swedish Music Hall of Fame where ABBA’s musical achievements and influences are put into historical context



with 400 additional Swedish artists. But ABBA’s music is not a relic of the past.

In 1999 *MAMMA MIA!*—the musical based on the songs of ABBA—opened with long runs in London’s West End and on Broadway and hundreds of spin-off touring companies around the world. A film of the same name came out in 2008. The latest reincarnation is Björn Ulvaeus’ business venture in Stockholm, *MAMMA MIA! THE PARTY*, a Greek taverna nightclub modeled on the Mamma Mia universe. Rumor has it that a clone is headed to New York City. I’m already dusting off my ABBA CDs in gleeful anticipation.



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