

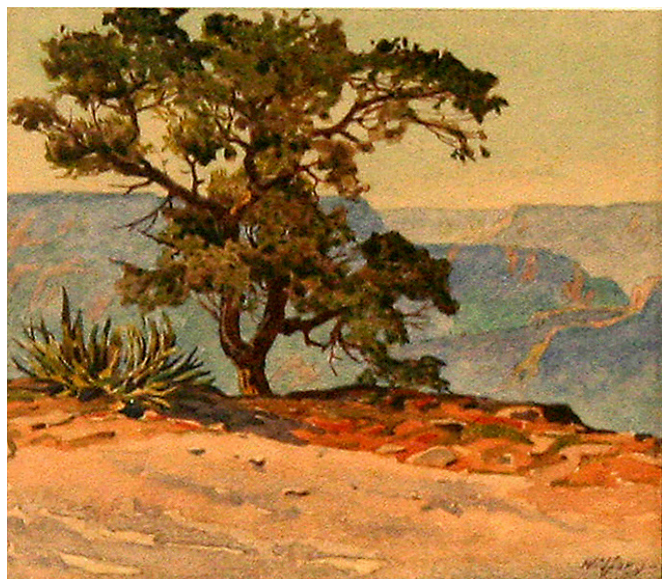
# The Gunnar Widforss Catalogue Raisonné Project

October 2016

In the United States it is the centennial anniversary of the National Park Service. By the mid-1920s Gunnar Widforss had become known as “The Painter of the National Parks.” He was given this distinction as a result of his relationship with Director Stephen Mather and other key Park Service personnel. In Sweden, eleven national parks had been established by the time that Gunnar came to the United States in 1921, nine of these prior to 1909. Could his visits to some of these parks in northwestern Sweden inspired his interest in America’s national parks? Perhaps. There is little question though, that in his many paintings of national parks in the western United States Gunnar helped disseminate Mather’s vision.

## Gunnar’s Love for Trees

While Gunnar Widforss is best-known for his paintings of the majestic views of Grand Canyon and Yosemite, trees were always his favorite subject. The more windblown and sculptural, the better. He frequently placed trees in the foreground of his Grand Canyon paintings, on occasion perhaps a bit too much so.



*Grand Canyon Rim*, watercolor on paper, 13 x 13 inches (33 x 33 cm). The Museum of Northern Arizona,

In a June 1931 letter to his friend Mike Harrison, a Park Service ranger at Grand Canyon and western historian, Gunnar wrote from the North Rim, “It certainly is a fine place U.P. has put up [referring to the

new lodge built by the Union Pacific Railroad on the North Rim]. I am having one of the old Wylie Camp cabins. Eat breakfast and lunch at the cafeteria and have dinner and spend the evening at the lodge. Today I expect to finish my first picture from here. However, one or two more canyon pictures will probably be all – until I see that they sell. Because there are the most wonderful groups of aspens here. And they fascinate me much more than the Canyon.”



This is a photograph of Gunnar painting on Utö, a southern island in the Swedish archipelago, in 1917. Note the tree behind him, as well as his easel and water container hanging from it below the painting. He used this easel and water container throughout his whole career.



*The Rock Wall*, 1917, watercolor on board, 17 x 24 inches (43 x 61 cm).



The above painting is of the tree seen behind Gunnar in the photo. This is the painting referred to by Fredrik Sjöberg in the opening of his book on Gunnar, *Flyktkonsten* (The Art of Flight), which, by-the-way, is now available in an English translation.

Following the 1969 exhibition of Gunnar's work at the Museum of Northern Arizona this painting of cypresses near Point Lobos was donated to the Museum by Harry Parker, a former manager at El Tovar Hotel and a friend of Gunnar's. This is without question one of Gunnar's masterpieces. The painting radiates the late afternoon light of the coast.



*Monterey Cypresses*, 1923, watercolor on board, 20 x 23 inches (51 x 58 cm). The Museum of Northern Arizona, C2087.



*Monterey Cypresses*, 1923, watercolor on board, 20 x 24 inches (51 x 61 cm). Courtesy private collector.



Imagine my surprise when I was contacted two years ago by a collector who had recently purchased a painting of the exact same trees from a slightly different angle! The composition is almost identical, though painted a little earlier in the afternoon. Clearly his interest was the central tree with its dramatic form and the way in which it seems to dance with its neighbor.

## A Very Large Mystery

As my research progresses there remain a few mysteries yet to be solved. A big one is – when did Gunnar visit Mount Rainier?

Last fall I had the great pleasure of giving a slide talk on Gunnar for the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle. I also visited the Seattle Swedish Club and I appreciated the warm welcome at both institutions. I had the pleasure of meeting collector Maggie Walker who has the only painting of Mount Rainier that I currently know of. And what a painting it is!

At 29 x 45 inches (74 x 114 cm) it's one of the largest paintings that Gunnar ever did, perhaps the largest. The painting is unusual, too, in that it's painted in gouache, or opaque watercolor; not a media that Gunnar used very often.

Gunnar may have visited the Pacific Northwest twice. But when? After about 1920 Gunnar became erratic in dating his paintings and many aren't dated, as this one isn't. What to do? Last fall I spent a lot of time in the Seattle Public Library reading Swedish social newspapers looking for a reference to his visit to the area. No luck. In the National Archives in Seattle, I read through the Mount Rainier Superintendent's reports from 1922 through 1934. Gunnar's stature was such that when he visited a park outside of Grand Canyon or Yosemite (two parks where he primarily lived) the superintendent would mention the visit in his monthly report. But - no luck! What to do?







*Mount Rainier and the Nisqually Glacier*, gouache on paper, 29 x 45 inches (74 x 114 cm).  
Courtesy Maggie Walker.

In a letter to his friend Francis Farquhar, Sierra Club and Sierra Nevada historian, written following the visit of Swedish Crown Prince Gustavus to Yosemite in July 1926 (an event that Gunnar participated in as a translator) Gunnar describes plans to travel north to paint redwood trees, Crater Lake, and Mount Rainier. So far I haven't located paintings of Crater Lake or Mount Rainier dated 1926. And in letters sent over the next couple of months he doesn't refer to visiting either of the two parks. Given his prolific correspondence these are locations and adventures that he certainly would have mentioned, had he undertaken them. So maybe 1926 wasn't the year of his visit to the Pacific Northwest.

In 1932 Gunnar did visit Crater Lake. He produced six paintings, one of which is in the collection of Crater Lake National Park. Two others were part of his estate when he passed away, and one those is in the collection of the Museum of Northern Arizona. In this case he did mention his trip to Crater Lake to his mother. But no mention of Mount Rainier...

In 1926 Widforss painted another unusual painting, one that he did date. It's a painting of Half Dome, unusual in that it, too, was painted in gouache and is one of his largest paintings at 47 inches (119 cm) tall and it's painted on what appears to be heavy weight drawing paper.

Another aspect of *Half Dome in Winter* that is unusual, and linking it with the painting of Mount Rainier, is the fact that it's also painted very broadly, unlike Gunnar's typical small carefully placed brushstrokes. This painting has always reminded me of some of the decorative paintings of French painter Edouard Vuillard and to some extent of the paintings and woodblock prints made by Japanese artist Hiroshi Yoshida who, like Gunnar, was working in Yosemite and other national parks like Mount Rainier in the 1920s. Because of their similar unusual characteristics, I can imagine that Gunnar's Mount Rainier was painted in 1926. Additionally, in 1932 when I know that he was at Crater Lake, Gunnar was typically painting smaller, more conservative works because of the Depression. The largest of his 1932 Crater Lake paintings is 27 x 20 inches (69 x 51cm) and it went unsold.





*Half Dome in Winter*, 1926, gouache on paper, 47 x 36½ inches (119 x 93 cm). Courtesy private collector.

Who else was visiting Mount Rainier in the late summer of 1926? In early September, Dr. Carl Anrick of the Swedish Touring Service visited Mount Rainier to see how Americans use national parks and on September 13 & 14 Director Stephen Mather visited Mount Rainier to inspect road work being completed. Based on letters to his mother Blenda Gunnar would have to have made his visit to Rainier between mid-August and the end of September. It's possible that Widforss may have timed his visit to correspond with that of either of these two men. His depiction of extensive patches of blooming Lupine in the Rainier painting would reflect this timing, which is also the same time of year that he visited Crater Lake in 1932.

The painting and Gunnar's visit to the Mount Rainier remains a mystery. What I would like to find are some letters that I may not yet know of or hotel registers from the area around Mount Rainier. As the painting seems to have been made between Pinnacle Peak and Castle Rock in the Tatoosh Range it seems likely that he may have stayed at the old hotel at Longmire, though I have yet to locate those guest registers. I plan to spend some time in the Northwest this coming summer so we'll see what turns up.

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## Upcoming Events

### November 16, 1:00 PM

*Gunnar Widforss: Painter of the National Parks*

Western Spirit: Scottsdale's Museum of the West  
[scottsdalemuseumwest.org](http://scottsdalemuseumwest.org)

In this slide talk I'll focus on Gunnar's time in Arizona.

### December 11, 3:00 PM

*Gunnar Widforss: Painter of the National Parks*

Museum of Northern Arizona. [musnaz.org](http://musnaz.org)

In celebration of the centennial year of the National Park Service, this slide talk, presented in conjunction with our upcoming exhibition *Grand Muse*, will focus on Gunnar's relationship with Stephen Mather, Ansel Hall, and other Park Service friends and some of the adventures that Gunnar shared with them.

### July 12

*Gunnar Widforss Painter of the National Parks*

Swedish Cultural Center of Seattle.

[swedishclubnw.org](http://swedishclubnw.org)

