BERLIN AND THE SWEDISH AVANT-GARDE –
GAN, NELL WALDEN, VIKING EGGELING,
AXEL OLSON AND BENGT ÖSTERBLOM

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In the 1910s Berlin was the fastest-growing major city in Europe. From the unification of Germany in 1871 until 1910 the population of Berlin grew from 827,000 to 2,076,000. It was no wonder the capital of the German Reich acquired the reputation of being “the biggest tenement city in the world”. Berlin also became the most important railway node in Europe, with no less than 22 railway stations. Before 1914, around 100 daily newspapers and a wealth of periodicals were published in Berlin. The world of theatre, entertainment and the cafés flourished, and film was making rapid strides. During the Wilhelmine era Berlin was a great city with growing pains, typified by huge, growing political differences. Not even the Great War of 1914-1918 was able to stall its expansion – production was kept going by the war. During the 1920s Berlin, alongside Paris, became a European centre of the continued development of modernism in various arts. But while Paris, with interruptions caused by the world war, attracted a never-ending flow of Swedish artists during these years, only five Swedish modernist artists of major significance went to Berlin in the years 1910-1925.

Gösta Adrian-Nilsson. GAN (1884-1965) was the only Swedish modernist artist of importance who studied in Berlin before the World War of 1914-1918. He was born in Lund in 1884 and grew up in a new workers’ neighbourhood where his parents had a market stall. In 1907 he made his debut both as a poet and an artist. The
dual debut was in the spirit of Romantic, decadent turn-of-the-
century Symbolism with the Jugend/Art Nouveau style as its artistic
idiom. Having written three books and following two exhibitions, a
career as a journalist and studies at Zahrtmann’s independent school
in Copenhagen, he travelled to Berlin, the continental city that was
within closest reach of the Lund academics. GAN’s mentor in Lund,
the radical botanist and publicist Bengt Lidforss, was a prominent
habitué of the German capital. Lidforss was able to tell him about
the Zum schwarzen Ferkel circle of the 1890s in Berlin that he had
frequented along with August Strindberg and Edvard Munch among
others. GAN’s friends in Lund also included the art historian Gregor
Paulsson and the medical student Knut Ljunggren, both related to
the parson’s daughter Nelly Roslund from Landskrona, who in
November 1912 married Herwarth Walden in Berlin and became
known as Nell Walden. In 1910 Herwarth Walden had founded the
artistically radical journal Der Sturm, and two years later he opened
a gallery with the same name. Der Sturm quickly became one of
Europe’s leading avant-garde galleries, with exhibitions by the group
Der blaue Reiter, Kokoschka, Chagall, Italian futurism and French
cubism.

At the beginning of 1913 GAN arrived in Berlin by train. On 13
February the Swedish legation in Berlin issued a certificate of his
Swedish citizenship in which he is described as Schriftsteller (author).
Through his friends in Lund GAN had a dual introduction to
Herwarth Walden, who received him at the beginning of spring at
his regular haunt, Café Josty on Potsdamer Platz. The Walden
couple had been travelling during March-April 1913, and in May-
June they moved to Der Sturm’s new premises at Potsdamer Strasse
134 A. The first exhibitor in the new gallery was Gino Severini, who
had already been on the Italian futurist group’s scandalous tour
during the spring of 1912 to a number of cities, including Paris and
Berlin, where they exhibited at Der Sturm.

His encounter with city life in Berlin and the avant-garde art at
Der Sturm was a turning-point in GAN’s life. In the Sturm-Archiv
in the Berlin City Library there is a large collection of letters and
postcards from GAN to Herwarth Walden from the years 1913-1922.
In his first letter, dated 10th October 1913 and written in Swedish
(all the subsequent letters are in German), GAN thanks Walden in
humble terms for the Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon, which was shown