

Carolina Brown Ahlund, *Den bekväma vardagen. Kvinnor kring bord på 1700-talets Näs* (Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag, 2020). 344 pp.

Beverly Tjerngren, *Uppsala universitet*

In this study—titled in the English summary *Women at tables: comfortable everyday life at the Swedish eighteenth-century Näs Manor*—Carolina Brown explores the emergence and evolution of a “culture of comfort” in the upper strata of Swedish society, contending that these developments created and nurtured sensibilities that remain with us to this day. An art historian herself, Brown describes her overarching objective to be the employment of an art-history perspective to examine contemporary views of these cultural changes and, further, to explore the ways that said changes were expressed in the material and social cultures of the Swedish country house environment.

As the book’s title suggests, this is a case study set in Näs, a country estate some fifty kilometres north of Stockholm that was owned in the late eighteenth century by Carl Eric Wadenstierna, a Swedish nobleman and parliamentary under-secretary. The women of Näs—Wadenstierna’s two wives, Jacobina Sophia Psilanderhielm von Seulenberg and Fredrica Carleson, and his two daughters, Sophia and Carolina—are the study’s principal characters, with close scrutiny of their portraits, personal effects, and home environments serving as the means by which Brown is able to present a picture of the early modern Swedish culture of comfort. As is usual for social and cultural historians, Brown employs a wide variety of source material, from legal documents such as insurance policies and probate inventories to art and object collections to twentieth-century photo documentation of the estate. In weaving together information and evidence from these disparate

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sources, she is able to present a fuller picture than might be allowed by a reliance on fewer types of sources.

The book's central conceit is that the comfortable life in eighteenth-century Sweden depended on the movement between different types of tables. Apart from the two introductory chapters and the conclusion, each chapter focuses on a different category of table (sewing table, writing table, vanity table, card table, and coffee table), and delves into the various uses and implications for comfort and material culture associated with them, particularly as concerned the women of the house. This framework is perhaps a bit precious – it is surely no coincidence that both the book and the comfortable life as envisioned by Brown flow more or less neatly from table to table – and might seem cleverer were this focus on tables not so thoroughly examined in previous research (see, for example, Jon Stobart, Amanda Vickery, Gudrun Andersson).

Lack of originality, in fact, is this study's greatest fault. *Den bekväma vardagen* is an eminently readable book, well-written and competently researched. Brown's conclusion that eighteenth-century Sweden saw the emergence of a culture of comfort, with attendant social behaviours and material culture, is indubitably convincing. But it offers nothing new. Any scholar who is even moderately familiar with research on early modern cultural history in the past twenty or thirty years will feel instantly at home in the pages of this study. Brown herself comes close to explicitly acknowledging this in the introductory discussions of her theoretical framework and the state of research, which read like a *Who's Who* of international as well as Swedish scholars. The final pages offer a brief, almost perfunctory musing over whether there was anything particularly *Swedish* about the observed phenomena, and somewhat weakly suggest that there was (or might have been). And it is these few paragraphs that reveal a missed opportunity.