

Wall texts for *Enchanted Daily Life. Elsa Beskow*

Entrance hall

Enchanted Daily Life. Elsa Beskow

14 February – 24 May 2026

Elsa Beskow (1874–1953) is one of Sweden's most highly loved children's book writers and illustrators. Her magical storybook world, which interweaves everyday life and fantasy, has enchanted children and adults for generations. Following her debut in 1897 with *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman*, she wrote and illustrated some forty books of her own, as well as illustrating stories and texts by others.

Elsa Beskow was born and raised in Stockholm as the second-oldest of six children. Her parents were the Norwegian businessman Berndt Maartman, and Augusta Maartman, a schoolteacher. When Elsa was 15, her father died, and her mother sent her only son to live with her brother. Augusta and her five daughters moved in with her other brother and two unmarried sisters. This unusual family collective inspired the characters Aunt Green, Aunt Brown, Aunt Lavender and Uncle Blue. The household was hardly wealthy, but it was intellectual and liberal. Elsa and her sisters attended a private school run by their aunts. Later, she went on to Whitlockska samskolan, with the feminist writer and suffragist Ellen Key as her teacher.

In 1890–95, Elsa Beskow studied to be an art teacher at Tekniska skolan, which is now the Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design. That is when she met Natanael Beskow (1865–1953), a theology student and artist-to-be. They married in 1897 and moved to Villa Ekeliden in Djursholm, the former home of the author Viktor Rydberg. Natanael worked as a preacher, writer, artist and headmaster, and Elsa wrote stories and created picture books with their six sons playing at her feet – “a boy one year, a book the next”. Their marriage was lifelong.

The Beskows died in Djursholm in 1953, but Elsa's works live on, giving joy to new generations. Today, Elsa Beskow's *Children of the Forest* (1910) is included in Sweden's cultural canon.

This exhibition was produced by the Zorn Museum in Mora. It is curated by Gitten Skiöld and Fia Lindholm, with added material from the Thiel Gallery.

Room 1

Elsa Beskow's debut and breakthrough

In autumn 1890, at sixteen, Elsa Maartman began studying drawing at Tekniska skolan in Stockholm (now Konstfack). Teknis, as it was called, was a school for craftspersons, illustrators and art teachers. Elsa would have preferred to study art at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, but a three-year scholarship prompted her to remain at Teknis. A few of her fellow-students became friends for life, including Gerda Sprinchorn, a sculptor, and the textile students Annie Frykholm and Märta (Måås) Fjetterström.

Elsa Beskow drew pictures for children even when she was a student. The first time a work of hers was published was in 1894, a black-and-white drawing for the song "Lilla vedhuggaren" (The Little Woodcutter) in the children's Christmas magazine *Jultomten*. This was followed by other illustrations for the magazine. In 1897, she made her debut with a book, *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman*, a nursery rhyme her grandmother had told her when she was a child. Her second book, *Barnen på Solbacka* (The Kids at Solbacka) was published the year after, and when the Barnbiblioteket Saga began publishing in 1899, she illustrated their first booklet, *Svenska folksagor* (Swedish Folk Tales).

Elsa Beskow's major breakthrough came in 1901, with a story in rhyme, *Peter in Blueberry Land*. This classic established her as a picture book artist and illustrator.

The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman, 1897

Elsa Beskow's first own picture book is based on a tradition of vernacular rhymes. She said the story about the little old lady had been told to her by her maternal grandmother. Later in life, she described how the discovery of the British designer and illustrator Walter Crane's works inspired her book. Crane, a pioneer of the Arts & Crafts movement, was adamant that word and image should be integrated in the design, and Elsa also applied this throughout *The Tale of the Little, Little Old Woman*. The garlands of geraniums and clover that frame the scenes are like windows through which the reader glimpses the old woman's world and, ultimately, the childhood world.

The first edition from 1897 ends abruptly when the woman says "Scat, you cat!". In the next edition, the publisher at Wahlström & Widstrand suggested the book should end with "and the cat jumped off, ran into the woods and never came back again", because that was how he recalled that the rhyme ended. Fifty years later, Elsa Beskow added a line so children would not be upset: "But maybe she came home in the end."

Peter in Blueberry Land, 1901

In the summer of 1900, Elsa and Natanael Beskow and their two-year-old son Stig rented a cottage on Husarö in the Stockholm archipelago. This was where Elsa first started using Stig as her model. She drew pictures for a book about Peter, who turns into a lilliput. In the story, he is helped by the Blueberry King, Mrs Cranberry and their kids to fill his baskets with berries for his mother.

The book was inspired by Ellen Key's theories on education from the child's perspective, with room for play and imagination in nature.

The year *Peter in Blueberry Land* was published, the Beskow's had their second son, Gunnar. Elsa was now receiving many assignments for illustrations for magazines, books and cards. She also made a series of colouring books for children. Stig and Gunnar modelled for many of her pictures.

Room 2

Working with Alice Tegnér

Elsa Beskow preferred to work on her own ideas. Over the years, however, she also illustrated a handful of books written by other authors. Her collaboration with Alice Tegnér (1864–1943) was the most important of these.

Alice Tegnér volunteered as an organist and music teacher in Djursholm where Natanael Beskow was a preacher. Like Elsa Beskow, she had lost her supportive father when she was 15, and she had never had the means to study music at a higher level, which had been her dream. Instead, she went to a teacher training college in Stockholm, where one of her fellow students was the author and Nobel laureate Selma Lagerlöf.

When Alice Tegnér met Elsa Beskow, this led to a unique collaboration in Swedish children's culture. It resulted in several works, including the classic songbook *Mors lilla Olle och andra visor* (1903) and the famous edition of Tegnér's songs from 1922, *Borgmästar Munte* (in Room 4). The songbook *Nu ska vi sjunga!* (1943) was created for elementary school, giving all younger children the opportunity to enjoy the cultural heritage that these songs represent.

Room 3

Elsa Beskow's storybook world

The years around 1900 were a golden era for stories and legends in Sweden. Folklore was all the rage, and schoolbooks expressed the national romantic version of the Swedish countryside and “Swedishness”. Storybooks were appreciated both for children and in more highbrow cultural contexts.

In the efforts to make good literature and art available to all children, magazines and calendars were published, such as *Jultomten* and the fairytale anthology series *Bland tomtar och troll*. In 1899, The children's library Barnbiblioteket Saga launched a series of books that were distributed in large editions and provided the main body of books for many school libraries.

Elsa Beskow was far from the only one who created stories and picture books for kids, but she dominated the field for several decades. In her stories, the trees and flowers come to life, and the forest is full of gnomes and trolls – all these creatures were her friends. And so were the children, of course:

“Children are a blessing in some way, in that they always meet us half-way. Were it not for knowing that, we would never dare to show what we have. They have seen glimpses of the fairytale creatures here and there, and therefore they immediately recognise them, however imperfectly they are portrayed.”

Children of the Forest, 1910

Children of the Forest was created one year when Natanael Beskow was on leave due to exhaustion, and the family was staying at Liljendal farm in Bergslagen. Here, Elsa could study her four sons as they tumbled around in the deep snow or soft moss.

The book, written in verse, is about a tiny family – a mother, a father, and their four kids – who live deep in the forest. We get to see them at their chores and seasonal activities of the year.

In the detailed illustrations, Elsa Beskow temporarily leaves her usual style with distinct outlines and bright, clear watercolours. Her paintings create illusions and depth. To portray the colours of the deep forest, she uses murkier nuances of green and grey for moss, brushwood and stone, brown and violet for bark, mushrooms and lichen. The children's red-and white caps are the only few vivid accents. The textures of the woods – the damp moss, the shiny bark of pines, the slimy fungus – are all expertly captured.

In one of the pictures, an old cave troll peaks out from the mountain and scares the children by shouting “Boo-o-o!”. The troll sparked a major debate in the arts pages at the time: “Why frighten the children with such foolery?”

Room 4

Aunt Green, Aunt Brown and Aunt Lavender, 1918

Elsa Beskow's stories about Aunt Green, Aunt Brown and Aunt Lavender are set in a small Swedish town in the mid-1800s. They also feature Uncle Blue and the children Peter and Lotta, their poodle Dot and the cat Esmeralda.

These characters were based on Elsa Beskow's unmarried aunts and uncle, who lived together in Stockholm. Elsa and her mother and sisters moved in with them when her father died.

The three ladies have different interests: Aunt Green tends the garden, Aunt Brown makes bread and sweet things in the kitchens, and Aunt Lavender stays in the parlour playing the piano, reading and embroidering.

Five books about this family were published: *Aunt Green, Aunt Brown and Aunt Lavender* (1918), *Aunt Brown's Birthday* (1925), *Peter and Lotta's Adventure* (1929), *Uncle Blue's New Boat* (1942) and *Peter and Lotta's Christmas* (1947).

Borgmästar Munte, 1922

“Borgmästar Munte” is an old nursery rhyme that was first published by Otilia Adelborg in *Ängsblommor* (Flowers of the Meadow) in 1890. But it was Alice Tegnér's revised version, set to music, that made the rhyme more well-known. Together with “Bä, bär, vita lamm” and “Ekorr'n satt i granen”, “Borgmästar Munte” was in the first volume of *Sjung med oss, Mamma!* (Sing With Us, Mama, 1892), which was published in many editions.

1922 saw the publishing of *Borgmästar Munte*, a collection of Alice Tegnér's popular songs with illustrations by Elsa Beskow. The boy on the cover was Elsa's nephew Jan Güettler.

Borgmästare means mayor, and the title song could be part of a satire on an actual historic person, believed to be Johan Lorentz Munthe, who was the mayor of Eksjö, a town in southern Sweden, in the 18th century and had a son named Carl.

Room 5

Books in the 1930s

The Stockholm Exhibition took place on Djurgården in 1930. This was a major exposition of modern design, crafts and architecture. The new, convenient housing was to be light, airy and simple.

This was the breakthrough of Functionalism, the International Style, in Sweden.

Elsa Beskow's picture book *The Children of Hat Cottage* was published that year. Her intricate pictures of plants and animals now gave way to a terser scenery. Only the most relevant story elements are portrayed on the sparsely-illustrated pages. Even the hat cottage looks functionalist.

In the decade that followed, Elsa Beskow alternated between detailed realism and simplification in the settings of her story books. The children for whom Elsa created her books always guided her choice of content and design.

In the 1930s, Elsa Beskow created the books *The Sun Egg* (1932), *Landet Långthärifrån* (The Land of Faraway, 1932), *The Curious Fish* (1933), *Princess Sylvie* (1934), *Woody, Hazel and Little Pip* (1939), and a series of easy-readers for primary school pupils, *Vill du läsa?* (Do You Want to Read?, 1935–1937). Illustrations from these books are shown here, in the adjacent room and on the next floor.

The Söderberg Room

The new educational movement

When printing technology improved around 1900, it became cheaper to produce schoolbooks in colour on high-quality paper, and these colourful editions became accessible to a larger circle of readers. Aesthetically pleasing books of good quality were no longer reserved for middle-class children.

The educational methods concerning children and reading were also a hot topic, in Sweden and abroad. The author Ellen Key (1849–1926) insisted that children's schoolbooks should not only be educational but also appeal to their imagination and aesthetic sense. As a result of the "reading debate" at the time, a number of new schoolbooks by famous Swedish writers were published, including Selma Lagerlöf's narrative geography book *Nils Holgersson's Wonderful Journey Through Sweden* (1906–07).

Elsa Beskow supported the new educational movement's focus on children's imagination and creativity. Together with the psychologist Herman Siegvald, she published *Vill du läsa?* (Do You Want to Read? 1935–37), a schoolbook in three volumes aimed at playfully encouraging children to read.

Woody, Hazel and Little Pip, 1939

In *Woody, Hazel and Little Pip*, Elsa Beskow demonstrates her profound understanding of children in yet another story set in nature. But this narrative features both an aeroplane and a telephone.

The acorn children Woody and Little Pip fly away on an oak-leaf plane in the wind and accidentally land where the gnomes are washing beards. To punish them, the angry gnomes order the children to deliver all the clean washing to the gnomes of the forest.

Little Hazel hides in Mr Squirrel's tail to search for his friends. She eventually finds them with help from a lizard.

Now, the flying machine turns into a raft. But some chestnut boys break the mast by pelting it with a "prickly ball" to get the attention of Woody, Hazel and Little Pip and get them to come and play. While the mast is being mended, Mr Squirrel finds the children and carries them home. And then the tiny people and animals have a big party, where everyone brings their special treats.

"They danced around the foot of the giant oak tree.
While the silvery moon shone high above the forest
And lit up the happy feast.
And so, our story ends, just when everything is at its best."