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Olof Jonas Grafström
Sami in the Kvikkjokk Valley, 1882

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OLOF JONAS GRAFSTRÖM
(Attmar 1855 – 1933 Stockholm)

Sami in the Kvikkjokk Valley, 1882

Oil on canvas
105 x 179 cm
41 1/3 x 70 1/2 in.
Signed lower right: Olof Grafström 1882

Provenance

King Oscar II of Sweden, acquired from the artist in 1882

Private collection

Literature

Carr, Dawson. "Daily Art Moment: Olof Grafström." *Portland Art Museum*, April 20, 2020.

Lexikonett Amanda. "Olof Södermark (Olof Johan)."

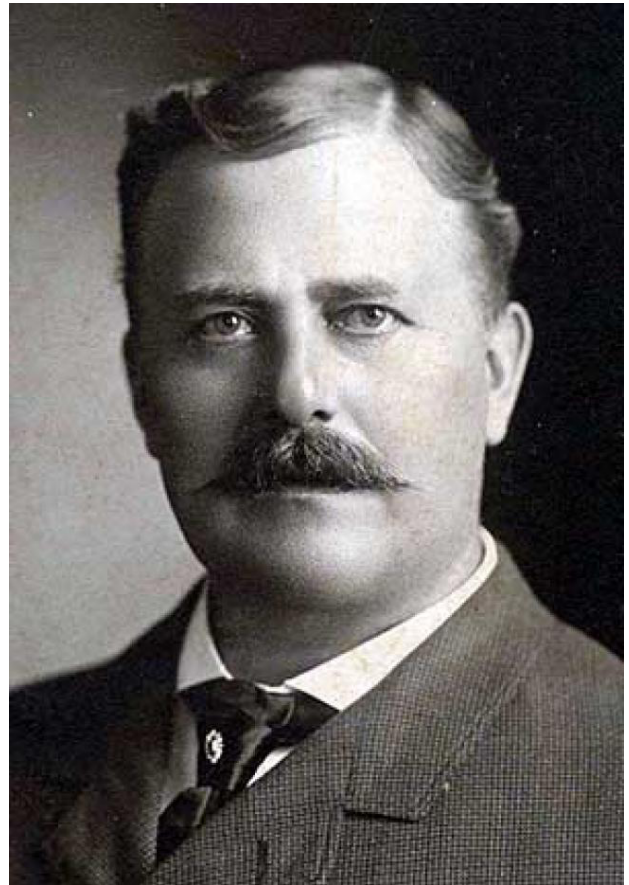
Magnusson, Brian. "Olof Grafström: An Immigrant Artist Portrays the Early Pacific Northwest, 1886–1890." *Swedish-American Studies* 37, no. 2 (1986): 42–59.

"SWEDISH ART IN AMERICA." *The American Magazine of Art* 12, no. 6 (1921): 215–215.

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Among the surviving works of Olof Grafström, *Sami in the Kvikkjokk Valley* ranks as one of the most important and historically significant. Painted in 1882 and acquired shortly thereafter by King Oscar II of Sweden, the monumental canvas represents a pivotal moment in the artist's early career, before his emigration to the United States and subsequent transformation into one of the most unusual figures within Scandinavian-American art.

Born in Attmar in southern Norrland in 1855, Grafström studied at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts alongside friends and artists such as Anders Zorn, Richard Bergh, and Bruno Liljefors. Under the guidance of the landscape painter Per Daniel Holm, he developed a profound attachment to the northern Swedish wilderness. The present work derives from sketches executed during a journey through Lapland in 1881 with fellow student Johan Tirén. Travelling through the remote regions of Kvikkjokk, Torneträsk, and Karesuando, the young artists followed routes previously explored by Holm, immersing themselves in landscapes that were already becoming symbols of a vanishing northern frontier.¹



Olof Jonas Grafström, Augustana College

The painting depicts a Sami encampment within an expansive mountain valley. Reindeer graze across open terrain while the immense landscape dominates the composition, emphasizing both the scale of nature and the traditional rhythms of Sami life. Unlike later ethnographic depictions that focused on social conflict,

¹ Brian Magnusson, "Olof Grafström: An Immigrant Artist Portrays the Early Pacific Northwest, 1886–1890," *Swedish-American Studies* 37, no. 2 (1986), 53.

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Grafström's vision remains idealised and romantic, presenting Lapland as a place of harmony and freedom. This quality reflects broader nineteenth-century Nordic fascination with the Northern reaches, a cultural phenomenon that coincided with growing public interest in Sami culture and Arctic exploration.

Grafström had caught a rising wave of public fascination with the Sami and the far North, a phenomenon that would culminate in the popular travelogue *The Land of the Midnight Sun* (1882) and, in 1884, the first official long-distance skiing race from Jokkmokk to Kvikkjokk. King Oscar II (1829 – 1907), an enthusiastic patron of the region, had himself awarded medals to the Sami skiers Pavva Lars Nilsson Tuorda and Anders Rassa, whose feats of endurance had become national news. It was very likely through Holm, by then a curator at the National Museum, that the canvas was brought to the King's attention and acquired for his private collection in 1882.²

The acquisition of the painting by King Oscar II confirmed Grafström's rising reputation. Yet despite this success, he chose to leave Sweden in 1886 for Oregon, where he would spend decades teaching art and producing church commissions. As a result, major landscapes from his early Scandinavian period remain comparatively rare. Works by Grafström are today preserved in institutions including Portland Art Museum, Sundsvall Museum and Augustana College, while his reputation continues to be reassessed by scholars of Nordic and Scandinavian-American art.

Grafström gave much of his American career to teaching, first at Bethany College in Kansas and then at Augustana College in Illinois, while producing over two hundred altar paintings for Swedish-Lutheran congregations across the country. *Sami in the Kvikkjokk Valley* remains a defining achievement: a powerful expression of national landscape painting that captures both the grandeur of Lapland and the romantic imagination of nineteenth-century Nordic art.

² Augustana Observer, 1914, recording that among the canvases resulting from Grafström's sketching tours in Lapland was "a landscape from the Qvickjock valley, purchased by King Oscar II."

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The following works place *Sami in the Kvikkjokk Valley* within its immediate artistic lineage, beginning with his teacher who first opened the Kvikkjokk valley as a subject. Per Daniel Holm's (1835–1903) celebrated view of the valley, *Saggat-träsk, Kvikkjokk* (1861) was painted from studies gathered from Carl Anton Petterson's scientific expedition into Lapland in 1861 and was rewarded with a royal medal the following year (fig. 1). When Grafström and fellow student, Johan Tirén (1853 – 1911), set out on their own expedition in 1881, the region had therefore already been established as a subject for Swedish landscape painting.



Fig. 1. Per Daniel Holm, *Saggat-träsk, Kvikkjokk*, 1861, oil on canvas, 40 x 56 cm (15 3/4 x 22 in.), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, inv. 6729

Grafström would later rework the motif for an American audience after his arrival in Oregon. *A Reindeer Scene in Lapland* (1886-87) was awarded a Grand Silver Medal at Portland's Mechanics' Fair in 1887. This rendition features enlarged mountains, a heightened palette, and peaks that edge toward the volcanic summits of the Pacific Northwest (fig. 2). Placed alongside one another, the present work emerges as an

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earlier and “purer” statement of the theme as a Swedish-period original from which the American version is derived.



Fig. 2. Olof Jonas Grafström, *A Reindeer Scene in Lapland*, 1886–87, oil on canvas, 244 x 155 cm (96 1/8 in x 61 in.), Augustana College Art Museum, Rock Island, Illinois

Meanwhile, where Grafström depicts an undisturbed wilderness through which the Sami move freely with their herds, his companion on the 1881 journey, Johan Tirén, fills the foreground with conflict. *Samer tillvaratar skjutna renar* (1892) presents an imagined scene in Tirén’s native Jämtland, where the state had been selling large areas of land to the sedentary population (fig. 3). Separated from their pastures, the Sami were often forced to sell their reindeer, indexing a pointed intervention in contemporary debates over Sami land rights. On one occasion, William Farup the owner of Ljusnedals Sawmill, had organised the illegal shooting of reindeer who had wandered onto his land. He had been a member of the 1882 committee on herding, advocating that the ownership rights of the settlers must be unrestricted and that the Sami had no right to let their reindeer graze on developed land. Together, the two paintings mark the divergence of a romantic and political vision of Lapland from a shared point of departure.

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Fig. 3. Johan Tirén, *Samer tillvaratar skjutna renar*, 1892, oil on canvas, 150 x 241 cm (59 x 94 7/8 in.), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, inv. NM 1437

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