

Nääs

Placing the hands at the center of education

BY DOUG STOWE

Going west as it enters the outskirts of Gothenburg, the E20 highway from Stockholm is one of the busiest in 21st century Sweden. It is easy to be consumed by the rapid pace of traffic, small cars and large trucks, but if you were to look to your right as you approached the village of Floda, you would get a very brief glimpse way back into the 19th century. If you are a woodworker, a teacher, or have a fascination with history, you will want to take the Floda exit, or turn around at Lerum and go back. Then follow the signs that say Nääs Slott.

When I became aware of the history of educational Sloyd in America, its early days with Gustaf Larsson at North Bennet Street School in Boston and its eclipse by the “Russian System” as I described in an earlier article in this magazine [*Woodwork* #88, August 2004], I also became interested in Otto Salomon and the school he founded in a place called Nääs. The word *nääs* [rhymes with mess] means “peninsula” in Swedish; in this case, land surrounded on three sides by a large lake. The *slott* (palace) at Nääs was built on the foundations of a much earlier castle, on a huge dome of earth at the center of the peninsula with a commanding view over an important passageway into the heart of central Sweden. While the word *nääs* has a very specific meaning in Swedish, for educators throughout the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Nääs was synonymous with a system of woodworking Sloyd.

Back in 1866, Uno Cygnaeus was chosen by the Russian Czar to create Folk Schools in Finland. It was his original idea to place handcrafts at the center of children’s education and today he is credited with the invention of Sloyd. In Swedish, *slöjd* meant “skilled” or “handy,” and the term *hemslöjd* was used to describe tradi-

tional crafts. Cygnaeus believed that crafts were the best way to build on the educational foundation provided by Freidrich Froebel, who in the early half of the 19th century had invented kindergarten. While most of us are familiar with the notion that industrial arts and manual training programs have the purpose of preparing men and women for industrial occupations,



Above—Students split their time between the bench and the lecture hall. Opposite—Doug Stowe on the steps of the sloyd building in Nääs.

Sloyd was a system of general education in which woodworking was believed to be central to the education of all children and not merely an alternative for children incapable of academic pursuits. While most woodworking education both here and abroad drew its purpose from the economic and industrial concerns of the time, Sloyd had general educational concerns having to do with the character and intelligence of the child.

Otto Salomon’s uncle, August Abrahamson, was a wealthy Swedish businessman and a Jew who, despite the close alliance in Sweden between the Lutheran Church and the state, won the respect of the Swedish

King through his support of the Royal Music Academy in Stockholm. Abrahamson was married to one of the most popular opera singers of the day. Together, they purchased the palace at Nääs and its surrounding lands, and when she died at a young age (37 in 1869), leaving Abrahamson childless, he acted upon a dream they held in common—starting a school for the children from the area.

In 1872 he asked his nephew Otto to become director of that school. Salomon had little experience to offer his new position. After the equivalent of high school graduation in 1868, he attended a technological institute for four months and an agricultural institute for eight, but did not complete either course of study. As a teacher and educator, Salomon was largely self-taught. But he did find a role model for his new school in the folk schools of neighboring Finland. In Uno Cygnaeus’s folk schools and

Sloyd he found the idea that became the driving force in an international movement centered at Nääs.

At first it was difficult getting children to attend Salomon’s new school. Parents in the area were suspicious of sending their children to school to be educated by a Jew, so August Abrahamson set an unusual policy: children’s parents were to be paid to compensate for the loss of the children’s labor on the family farms. After a time, parents realized that there was nothing to fear and began to see the benefits of their children’s education, and the payment scheme was brought to an end.



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Clockwise from left—Sampling of sloyd models plus instruction sheets; one of the original workbenches still in place in the sloyd classroom; August Abrahamson's desk in the slot, complete with wooden accessories made in the workshops.

As the school became successful, Salomon and Abrahamson became aware of the need for training teachers in the Sloyd method. There were many teachers in Sweden, but few trained in the use of crafts as the core of the school experience. They started the Sloyd teacher training school (*Slöjdlärareseminarium*) in 1875. While Cygnaeus is credited with first inventing Sloyd and applying it in Finnish schools, Otto Salomon and August Abrahamson were largely responsible for taking the idea, building it into a clear educational system and then widely promoting it throughout the world. In 1876, Abrahamson and Salomon began their international promotion of Sloyd by sending models to the 1876 Philadelphia World Exhibition and through the publication of Salomon's first book, *Slöjdskolan and Folkskolan (Handicraft School and Elementary School)*. The book was sent to a large number of handicraft teachers throughout the Nordic countries, and in 1878, Abrahamson sent letters through various Swedish ambassadors inviting representatives from all the major nations to visit the Nääs display at the Paris World Exhibition.

Through the effort of Salomon and with the financial support of Abrahamson, Nääs became the center of an international movement using woodworking as the central point of an education that sought to break down class barriers, use the hands in the development of the intellect, nurture the development of craftsmanship, build citizenship, and foster respect at all levels of society for those who work with the skill, diligence and artistry of their hands.

Teachers came from all over the world to learn Sloyd woodworking and feel connected in an idealistic and progressive educational system designed to foster the capabilities of each and every individual. Abrahamson's generosity made it easy to attend. Like those first children in Salomon's school, teachers from all over the world would attend free. Their only costs were transportation to Nääs and lodging with residents of the surrounding area. Those students and teachers who answered the call were well rewarded. The idyllic and romantic lakeside setting created lifelong friendships, connecting fellow Sloyders throughout the world. There were students

from Europe, the Americas (North, South, Central and Caribbean), Japan and India.

In addition to the international students who came to study at Nääs, many young Swedish graduates were sent out to begin Sloyd programs in various countries in response to requests for teachers from around the world. One such graduate was Gustaf Larsson, who started a Sloyd teacher training school at the location of the current North Bennet Street School in Boston, Massachusetts in 1891. He also wrote numerous Sloyd books that were published in America.

Students and visitors carried the work on in their home nations. Benjamin B. Hoffman, superintendent of the Baron De Hirsch Fund Trade Schools in New York City, visited Nääs and published *The Sloyd System of Wood Working* (1892). Ednah Anne Rich, author of the book *Paper Sloyd* (1905), first studied with Gustaf Larsson in Boston and then at Nääs. She began a Sloyd teacher training school in Santa Barbara, California. John Ordway from MIT visited Nääs and extolled its method. Pioneering psychologist William James published a glowing assessment of Sloyd. Through the



Sloyd, and at one time Carl Malmsten, Swedish architect-designer-craftsman and James Krenov's teacher, was on the teaching staff—one more way that American woodworking is woven into the legacy of the school.

Näås continued to be a Sloyd teacher training school until the 1950s, when the school was moved to Linköping, about 200 kilometers south of Stockholm, and Näås classrooms were left idle.

After learning about Näås from Hans Thorbjörnsson, curator of Otto Salomon's library, and author of books and articles on the subject, I began plotting an opportunity to visit. I finally made it in May 2006, when I was invited to make a presentation at the first International Conference on Sloyd at Umeå University, on the northeast coast of Sweden.

The most amazing thing is that Näås is so well preserved today. Each of the buildings at Näås—the dining hall, the gymnasium where American students first introduced basketball to Europe, (1897) the Sloyd woodworking building complete with work benches and some original tools in place, the homes of Otto Salomon and August Abrahamson and much more—are maintained in perfect order just as they were at the close of the 19th century. August Abrahamson's palace has all its original contents in place, ready should Abrahamson just now arrive home.

There are few Sloyd-related activities now at Näås. There are studio spaces in the original Sloyd building shared by local artists, and on occasion Näås serves as a meeting place for Home Sloyders, keeping the Swedish tradition of handcrafts alive in our age of manufactured products. One can wonder if the preservation of Näås was intended to secure something for the future of Sloyd...a resurgence of sorts. Maybe so. It certainly awakened something for me.

As I began my own experiment in woodworking education at Clear Spring School, woodworking was regarded as a backwater, largely irrelevant to the rest of school curricula. As a self-employed craftsman, and in my own life, I viewed woodworking as connected to everything—physics, math, biology, history, literature and art. Sloyd offered a vision in which woodworking was at the core, and I found it to be the ideal point of integration for an educational system burdened by the artificial isolation and disconnection of disci-

plines. As stated on the gravesite of Otto Salomon and August Abrahamson, "*Den gode är en makt även i graven*," or in English, "Good can be done even from the grave."

The E20 highway or something like it runs through each of our lives and we wonder, what is the value of history? Can it be that it repeats itself? Do things run in cycles? Otto Salomon, August Abrahamson and Uno Cygnaeus based Educational Sloyd on theories shared by Rousseau, Comenius, Pestalozzi and Froebel—that the development of the hands is essential to the development of the intellect. Those are thoughts that have long been abandoned in American education, and yet, there is a rapidly growing body of 21st century research that indicates that the early educational theorists were right. Some of that research involves the study of gesture, and what researchers have found is that the movement of the hands helps in the movement of thought and the creation of ideas. Through gesture we explore new, creative thoughts that our brains are not yet able to express in language.

Finland, original home of Cygnaeus' Folk Schools, has a nearly 150-year tradition of Sloyd and is widely recognized as leading the world in the effective education of children. Could that have something to do with Sloyd and the education of their children's hands? Many are convinced. In the meantime, Sloyd continues to be a compulsory school subject in Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries.

If the simple movement of the hands in gesture can be so significant, then what about the acts of making real, beautiful and useful things from wood? For some of us, the knowledge that intelligence and wisdom arise from the use of our hands is a given. You will find it proved and preserved at Näås.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to Hans Thorbjörnsson, Swedish historian and curator of Otto Salomon's library at Näås. He has been a constant and steady guide through my own exploration of Educational Sloyd. His deep familiarity with the history of Näås shared with me through his published materials, by email, and private conversation has, at least for me, brought Saloman, Abrahamson and Näås to life again in the 21st century.

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promotional efforts of Gustav Larsson, American educator John Dewey became intrigued with the Sloyd system and invited Salomon to visit him in Chicago, though this American trip never did happen, due to Salomon's busy schedule at Näås.

In addition to his many other duties as director of the school, Otto Salomon was a prolific writer. He wrote books, a regular newsletter, and he kept up regular correspondence in three languages with graduates throughout the world. The small peninsula in a Swedish lake with the vision and financial support of August Abrahamson became a major force in woodworking education.

But in just a few decades all this had changed. Following the deaths of August Abrahamson in 1898 and Otto Salomon in 1907, the effort to promote Sloyd and Näås to an international community began to subside. Between the 1880s and Salomon's death, thousands of articles about Näås had appeared in newspapers world-wide, but without Salomon's sustained efforts at promotion, international interest started to wane. Following Otto Salomon's time as director, training was broadened to metal and textile