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# Gustaf Tenggren

*This Swedish-American artist had a long and prolific career in the United States and left a legacy as one of the outstanding visual interpreters of fantasy literature in the 20th century.*

By Kristine Mortensen

**G**USTAF TENGGREN'S success has been variously attributed to his rare combination of originality, uncommon versatility, brilliant sense of composition and mastery of many genres. What is more, he had an entrepreneurial spirit that would serve him well when he immigrated to the United States in 1920 at the age of 24. It was a time when commercial art and book publishing were on the verge of new and unprecedented growth. For a visual artist equally adept at painting portraits and illustrating fairy tales the timing couldn't have been better.

**Tenggren and Malin (Mollie) Fröberg** in New York in the early 1920s. She became his second wife.





“Tenggren is in a class with geniuses of a high order, his fellow artists say.”

Together with his wife Anna Petersson he landed at Ellis Island in New York and immediately journeyed on to Cleveland where two of his older sisters had already settled. Less than a year later, a Tenggren illustration (*The Crescent Moon*) was featured in full color on the cover of *Life* magazine.

“It was a high-profile entry into the competitive world of magazine cover illustration,” American anthropologist JoAnn Conrad noted in a recent article summarizing her study of Tenggren’s career.

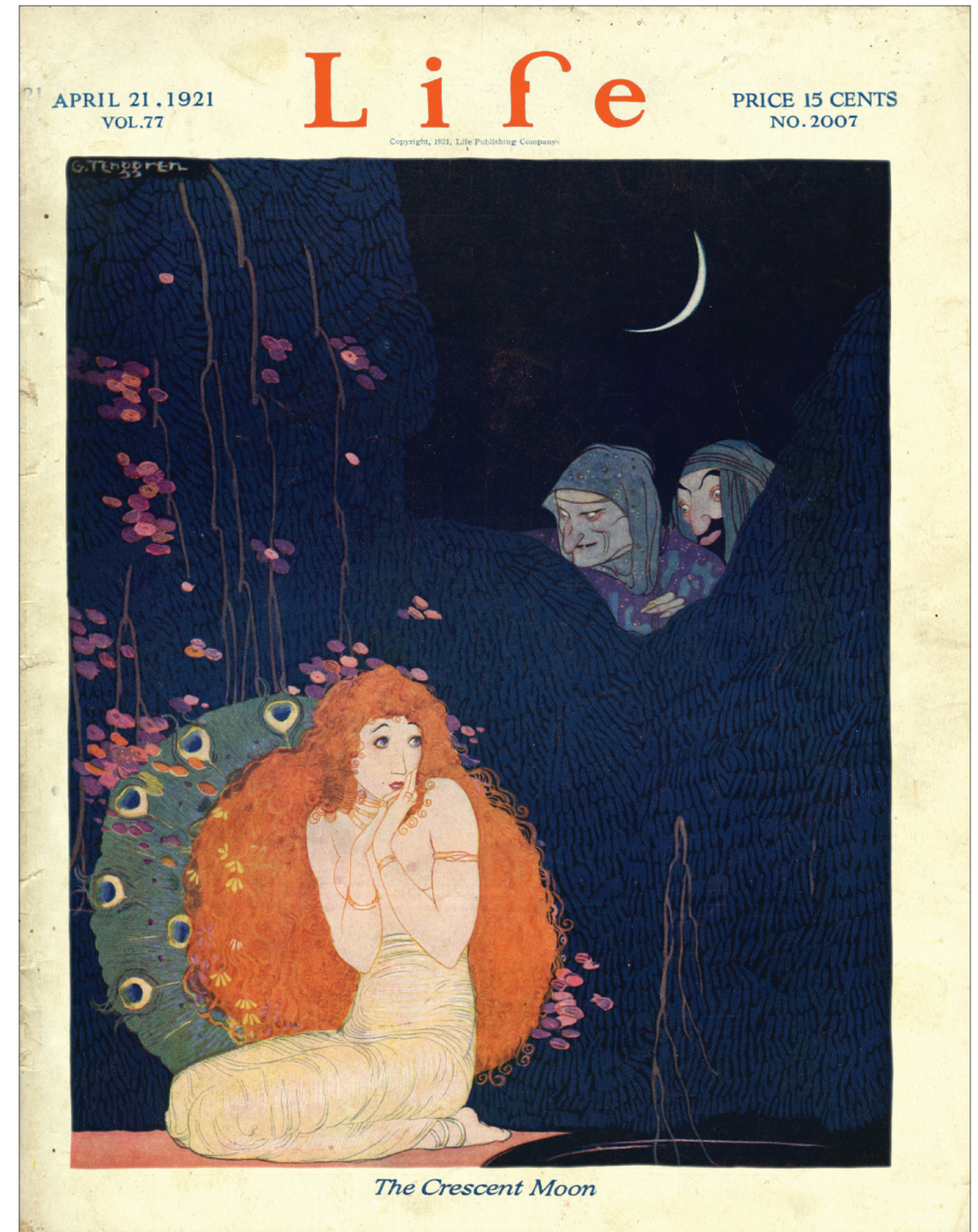


A self portrait by the 17-year-old Tenggren

Propelled by his industrious nature and adaptability, born out of necessity during his early years in Sweden, Tenggren soon found more than enough work. He created illustrations for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and show posters for a vaudeville theater, made fashion drawings and window displays for a department store, and worked for a commercial art studio, producing magazine and advertising art. In 1922, a small exhibition of his watercolors, including some he created for the annual Swedish Christmas publication *Bland Tomtar och Troll (Among Elves and Trolls)*, attracted unusual attention. “Hardly anyone can resist the grotesque and fantastic appeal of these strange images,” one reviewer wrote. “Tenggren is in a class with geniuses of a high order, his fellow artists say.”

IN 1923, TENGGREN AND HIS WIFE MOVED TO NEW YORK accompanied, oddly, by Malin Fröberg, known as Mali or Mollie, an American-born woman of Swedish descent with whom he was having an affair. His artistic talents were soon in high demand. “Tenggren’s versatility as an illustrator established his solid reputation in commercial art soon after he moved to New York,” art historian Mary Swanson wrote in the catalog for an important exhibition of his work she curated in the 1980s.

“Between 1923 and 1939, Tenggren illustrated 22 books for American publishing companies, including such children’s classics as *Mother Goose*, *Heidi*, and *Hans Christian Andersen’s Fairy Tales*,” Swanson wrote. “In the same productive period, he created advertising images for products ranging from Rogers Brothers silver to Vanity Fair Lingerie and painted romantic scenes to accompany stories in a variety of women’s magazines, including *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, and *Ladies’ Home Journal*. . . . His ink and wash cartoons for *Life*, *World* and *Today* magazines depicted the ennui of upper crust American society in the late 20s and early 30s.” Tenggren was well on his way to becoming famous—and infamous. He had what would become a



This early work appeared on the cover of *Life* only a year after Tenggren’s arrival in the U.S.

All photographs and illustrations courtesy of Lars Emanuelsson and the Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota.



Perhaps the most memorable is the “Heigh-Ho” scene featuring the dwarfs.

lifelong penchant for womanizing and heavy drinking. “The playboy painter” is how Walter Winchell, the syndicated *New York Daily Mirror* gossip columnist, described him in a 1932 column.

Tenggren’s work for Walt Disney and, later, Golden Books would eventually catapult his art into widespread public consciousness. At a glance, there appears to be little resemblance among the characters populating Disney’s—and the world’s—first feature-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which premiered in 1937, and *The Poky Little Puppy*, the beloved children’s classic first published as one of the Little Golden Books in 1942. But all of them share the same lineage. It was Gustaf Tenggren who brought the characters to life.

WALT DISNEY RECRUITED TENGGREN IN 1936 TO WORK AS a concept artist on *Snow White*. Preliminary work on the film had stalled because Disney felt it needed new direction. He had become convinced that the success of the film, and other stories the studio planned to produce, “depended heavily on the design of the old European fairy-tale tradition,” author Lars Emanuelsson wrote in *Gustaf Tenggren—en biografi*, a meticulously researched and beautifully illustrated book, published in Sweden by Kartago in 2014.

Tenggren’s assignment was to inspire the Disney animators by creating drawings and paintings to suggest the settings and characters of the story. Tenggren’s illustrations for *Snow White* inspired everything from the forest scenes, trees and clothing, to the Evil Queen, the benevolent dwarfs and Snow White herself. Perhaps the most memorable is the “Heigh-Ho” scene featuring the dwarfs, cheerfully singing their way home from work.

*Snow White* was a big gamble for Disney and a huge success, bigger than any previous film. In addition, it spawned the merchandising of related toys, coloring books, sheet music, shows, records, costumes and other paraphernalia. Tenggren played a major role in this promotional enterprise, too. He was called upon by Disney to create the movie poster of *Snow White* and to illustrate the version of the story that appeared in the November and December 1937 editions of the widely circulated magazine *Good Housekeeping* in advance of the film’s release.

“Tenggren’s images saturated the visual realm in multiple formats,” noted the anthropologist Conrad, who has argued that Disney’s choice of Tenggren was due more to his success as a commercial artist than “his European fairy-tale credentials and own personal experience.” Her idea is thought-provoking. But who among us, in our later years, hasn’t recalled with special clarity certain impressions gained and lessons learned in early childhood? Surely,



**Above:** A bewildered Snow White in one of Tenggren’s sketches.

**Below:** Tenggren spent many weeks in Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks doing studies for *Bambi*.



“Summers were happily spent in the countryside, tagging along with my grandfather.”

Tenggren’s memories of tramping through the Swedish forest in the company of his grandfather, an artist himself, and spending time together with him in his woodworking shop, stayed with Tenggren forever.

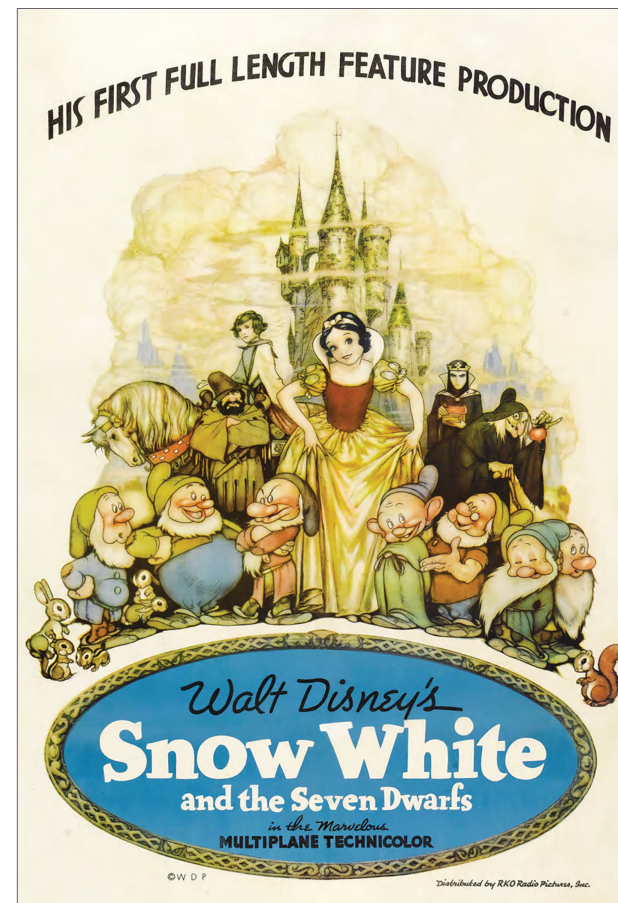
Tenggren was born into poverty in southwestern Sweden in 1896, in the village of Magra. Work there was scarce for his father, Aron, a painter and decorator. So, two years later, the family of eight relocated to Gothenburg, moving into a one-room apartment. Another child was born in 1899. The following year, Aron left his family to go to Boston. Gustaf never saw his father again. His paternal grandfather, Johan Teng, assumed the parental role. “Summers were happily spent in the countryside, tagging along with my grandfather, who was a woodcarver and painter and also a fine companion for a small boy,” Tenggren later wrote in a short autobiography for the book *More Junior Authors*. “I never tired of watching him carve or mix the colors he used when commissioned to decorate, with typical primitive designs, churches and public buildings in the community.”

**T**ENGGREN’S APTITUDE FOR ART SOON BECAME APPARENT. HE was apprenticed to a lithographer at the age of 12, started taking evening art classes at the age of 13 and the following year was awarded a full, three-year scholarship to the highly regarded Valand School of Fine Art in Gothenburg. During vacations and in his free time, he painted portraits and created newspaper illustrations to earn support for himself and his family. He discovered an affinity for set design, too, and, when possible, traveled to Copenhagen to soak up the city’s cosmopolitan atmosphere and hobnob with other artists. His first solo art exhibition was held in a small bookstore in Gothenburg in 1916. The following year, he was recruited to illustrate *Bland Tomtar och Troll* as a substitute for the renowned John Bauer, who had grown tired of the assignment. Tenggren’s work was so well received he was asked to continue the following year. After Bauer died tragically in a ferry accident in 1918, Tenggren went on to illustrate the popular annual children’s publication for a total of 10 years—a tenure actually two years longer than Bauer’s.

“Strains of Swedish folk art, folklore and fine arts remained in Tenggren’s work and strongly influenced illustrations during his years with Disney and Golden Books,” wrote art historian Swanson. “His earliest childhood memories were of dense, coniferous forests bordering his grandparents’ farm where sunlight barely reached the forest floor, producing in reality the supernatural forests the artist created years later as a background for the Disney feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and in numerous illustrations for children’s books.” It has been assumed, and understandably so, that it was his grandfather Teng who inspired the concept Tenggren developed for the endearing



**Above:** Inspired by Tenggren’s work as a Disney concept artist, the “Heigh-Ho” scene is one of the most memorable from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.



**Below:** Tenggren’s poster introducing the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.



**T**enggren left Disney in January 1939. Speculation varies as to what prompted his departure.

old woodcarver Geppetto in Disney's *Pinocchio*.

Tenggren contributed to the making of many of Disney's best shorts, including *The Old Mill*, and by 1938 was hard at work on *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia* and *Bambi*, "three projects on which his impact was much greater than on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. . . . On *Pinocchio*, every element of the movie was in one way or another influenced by his style, starting with the story itself," according to Didier Ghez, a Disney historian. For *Bambi*, Tenggren traveled to Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks and spent weeks and weeks doing forest studies to create the concept for the opening scene, where *Bambi* gets up on his wobbly legs to take his first tentative steps.

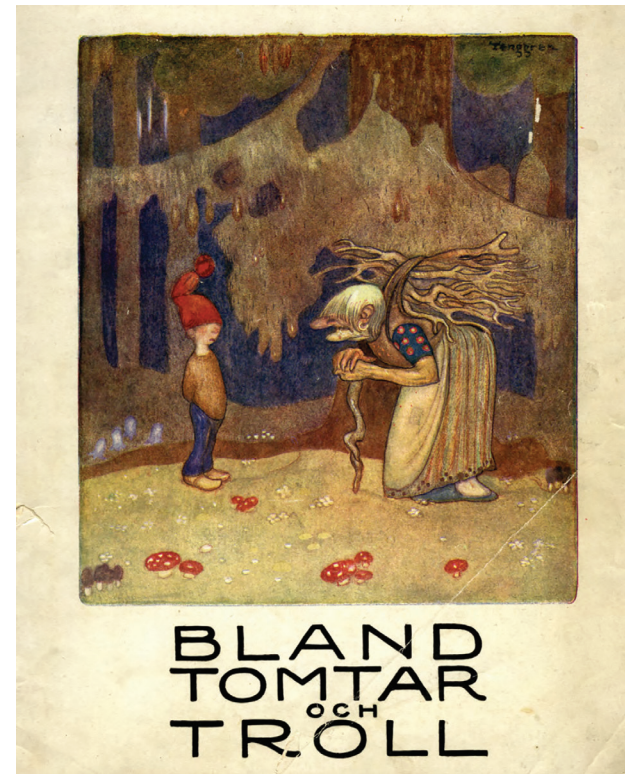
**G**USTAF AND MOLLIE, NOW HIS SECOND WIFE, APPEARED TO enjoy their time together in Los Angeles, at least initially. But Tenggren left Disney in January 1939. Speculation varies as to what prompted his departure. Perhaps it was the lack of recognition Disney afforded his artists; despite the legions of top-notch creative people who worked for Disney, the Disney brand was all about Disney. Perhaps the studio had become weary of Tenggren's increasingly exacting approach to work. Perhaps it was the indiscreet affair he had with a studio intern. Whatever the case, Tenggren returned to New York and soon assumed a prominent role in what was to become a revolution in children's book publishing.

The Little Golden Books made their debut on October 1, 1942. Everything about them, from the design and content to the marketing, was intended to appeal to young children and their parents. The upstart New York publishing house Simon and Schuster together with the innovative printer Western Publishing of Racine, Wisconsin, and its subsidiary The Artists and Writers Guild, had sensed a burgeoning market for children's literature. "Underlying this idea was the populist conviction . . . that a large unserved portion of the public—consisting of Americans who, though less educated and less prosperous than traditional book buyers, were eager to better themselves and their children—could be reached only if good books were manufactured and sold far more cheaply than in the past," wrote children's book historian Leonard Marcus, author of *Golden Legacy: How Golden Books Won Children's Hearts, Changed Publishing Forever, and Became an American Icon Along the Way*.

The Little Golden Books "encouraged the 'baby boom' children to read early and often," said Swanson. They were small and sturdy in format and, according to a promotional insert in *Publishers Weekly* announcing their debut, "the high quality of the books would in every respect—art, text, printing, paper—set them worlds apart from all other books in their



**Above:** "It was hard to make *Pinocchio* convincing and alive, because, of course, he had a wooden soul. Yet here I have contrived to frighten him. He's hung in a birdcage in Stromboli's wagon," Tenggren recalled in a rare interview.



**Below:** Tenggren's cover illustration for the 1918 edition of the Swedish Christmas publication *Bland Tomtar och Tröll*.

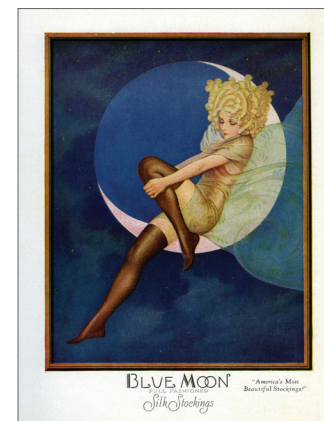
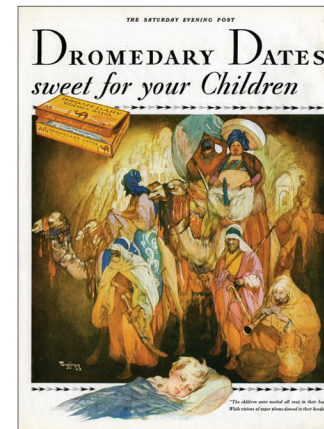




Sixteen of the Little Golden Books illustrated by Tenggren.

price category.” Unlike the typical children’s books of the day, which retailed for \$2-\$3 and were sold almost exclusively in bookstores, the Little Golden Books sold for 25¢ and were readily available through hundreds of stores nationwide, including department stores and the new supermarkets, drugstores and dime stores cropping up across the country. The books were ubiquitous and flew off the shelves. “The first printing of 600,000 books sold out so rapidly that Simon and Schuster canceled a planned first wave of advertisements for fear of frustrating its bookseller friends by stoking greater demand for the books than the company could satisfy,” Marcus wrote. “Even so, within five months, a third printing had nearly been exhausted, for a total of 1.5 million copies sold.” Tenggren was “the star” among the distinguished artists chosen to illustrate the first round of Little Golden Books and the only one to illustrate two: *Bedtime Stories* and *The Poky Little Puppy*.

A remarkable story in its own right, *The Poky Little Puppy* was a runaway success. By 2001, *Publishers Weekly* declared it the best-selling children’s book of all time, with nearly 15 million copies sold worldwide in many languages.



A Tenggren cover for *The Household Magazine* (top right) surrounded by advertisements for Dromedary Dates, Blue Moon Hosiery and Rogers Brothers silver.

And as of this year, its 75th anniversary, *The Poky Little Puppy* remains one of the most popular children’s books. On the occasion of the book’s 25th anniversary, Tenggren told his wife “he particularly enjoyed the distinction of having illustrated one of the few books in history to have given the Holy Bible a run for its money,” according to Marcus. Over a span of 20 years, Tenggren illustrated more than two dozen Little, Big and Giant Golden Books for Simon and Schuster, including a number of timeless classics: *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* and *Tenggren’s Golden Tales from the Arabian Nights*, the latter considered by some to include his most beautiful illustrations.

A KEY FIGURE IN THIS TALE ABOUT TENGGREN IS A SOFT-spoken University of Minnesota librarian. Professor Karen Nelson Hoyle, now retired, was planning a trip to Maine in 1971, the year after Tenggren died from lung cancer, when she decided to reach out to his widow. As curator of the University of Minnesota Children’s Literature





**Rapunzel** was the inspiration for several of Tenggren's illustrations.



**A scene from Tenggren's Golden Tales from the Arabian Nights**, a work some contend contains some of his most beautiful illustrations.





At the age of 23, Tenggren was commissioned by Danish publisher E. Jespersens Forlag to illustrate a two-volume edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, including, here, *The Six Swans*.



The doves help Cinderella sort lentils from stones. One of 32 illustrations created by Tenggren in 1919 for a two-volume edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, published by E. Jespersens Forlag.



“He was a magnificent painter when he was sober and she was the one who got him out of trouble.”

Research Collections, which includes the internationally renowned Kerlan Collection of children’s books, illustrations and manuscripts, Hoyle was well aware of Tenggren’s importance. Also, on a personal level, she had fond memories of reading the Little Golden Books as a child, especially *The Poky Little Puppy*, *The Saggy Baggy Elephant*, *The Night Before Christmas* and other books he illustrated. “I thought, wouldn’t it be wonderful if I could meet Mollie and just tell her about the Kerlan Collection,” Hoyle recalled recently in an interview. And so she wrote to Mollie, who promptly invited Hoyle to Dogfish Head, Maine, the Tenggren home, and welcomed her to stay overnight.

“She was a delightful person,” said Hoyle, “very pretty, very warm. She told me that she was the business manager for her husband, and she was very proud of her role in that. She stood up for his rights when she felt there should be some more money coming, or a better contract. She kept an eye on everything. But her recollection of Gustaf was that he was often drunk, and so it wasn’t always pleasant to be around him. He was a magnificent painter when he was sober and she was the one who got him out of trouble.”

**M**OLLIE CONFIDED THAT IT WAS HER DREAM FOR DOGFISH Head to become a university retreat center that would include a Tenggren museum. The sprawling, coastal property—which included a lobster pond, six-car garage, guest house and studio in addition to a large house—was jam-packed full of books, paintings, other artwork and a seemingly endless collection of rustic Swedish artifacts, which the Tenggrens had purchased from an antique dealer in Portland. Mollie was unsure whether the university she had in mind for the retreat center would be in a position to embrace her idea, and said if it did not come to pass she would remember the Kerlan Collection.

It soon became clear to Mollie that her dream for Dogfish Head was not to be, and so on October 26, 1971, she called Hoyle and followed up the next day with a typewritten letter to say, “I wanted to know if the University of Minnesota would be interested in acquiring Gustaf Tenggren’s book illustrations, paintings etc.; also the royalties from his contracts to help maintain the collection with a certain amount of money added for handling, shipping of the material. Also your approval to be named in my will as editor of art and possibly Lucille Ogle (one of the creators of the Little Golden Books) as co-editor.”

Hoyle said yes, she would gladly accept the gift on behalf of the Kerlan Collection and assume the special role. It was another 12 years before she was notified to return to Maine. It was 1983 and William Bradford, the executor of the Tenggren estate, called and said it was time to come. Mollie



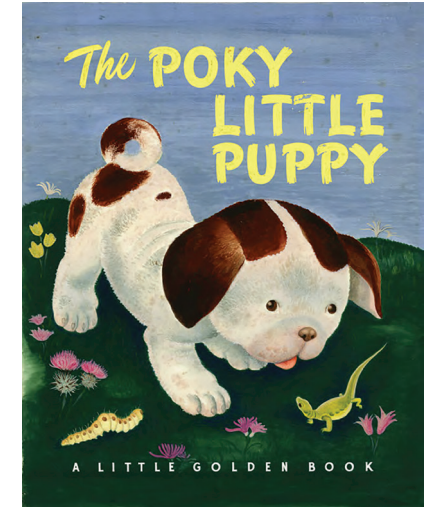
Tenggren painted this portrait of his wife Mollie in 1935.





A painting created in the 1960s for the *Tenggren Fairy Book*, an unpublished work now archived with Tenggren's other private papers, illustrations and published works within the Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota.

was in declining health (she died in 1985), and Bradford had gone to her lawyer and found out that all the books and art should go to the Kerlan Collection and the Swedish artifacts were to be sent back to Sweden as a gift to Dalarnas museum in Falun, a museum of Swedish folk art. Hoyle and her husband inventoried and packed up more than 50 large boxes of children's books, illustrations and personal papers that went to the Kerlan Collection. In addition, they crated more than 1,300 items of Tenggren's other art that went to the University of Minnesota Art Museum. "There was treasure everywhere," said Hoyle.



*The Poky Little Puppy* continues to be one of the world's most popular children's books.

THE TENGGREN COLLECTION DREW PEOPLE TO THE University, including Mary Swanson, a professor of art history at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. With support from a Thord-Gray Memorial Fund grant from the American-Scandinavian Foundation, Swanson was researching the connections between Swedish-American painters and their native land. This work eventually led Swanson to serve as curator for the exhibition *From Swedish Fairy Tales to American Fantasy: Gustaf Tenggren's Illustrations 1920-1970*, which toured the U.S. in the late 1980s before traveling to the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm and three other museums in Sweden in 1990-1991.

Among the people who saw the exhibition in Stockholm was Lars Emanuelsson, a banker by profession and former art student. He was stunned, both by Tenggren's artistry and to realize that the only other exhibit of his work ever held in Sweden was the one in the small bookshop in Gothenburg 74 years earlier. Furthermore, despite Tenggren's highly successful career in the U.S., no one had written a biography. So, Emanuelsson decided to do so himself. The project became a passion and wound up taking 24 years. *Gustaf Tenggren—en biografi*, is a fascinating read and a gorgeous tribute to its namesake who, one imagines, would be pleased to know that his success has finally been so well recognized.

*As we go to press, we learn that Gustaf Tenggren was inducted into the Society of Illustrators' Hall of Fame on June 22, 2017.*

**Kristine Mortensen** is an American writer and editor who has lived and worked as a journalist in Stockholm. An occasional contributor to *Scandinavian Review*, she now lives in Minneapolis.