

Jim Dine in Sweden

Few artists of international reputation have had such an apparent presence in Sweden as the American artist Jim Dine. For more than half a century we have been able to enjoy the fruits of his remarkable career as an artist. He made his Swedish debut at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1964 in a legendary exhibition entitled *106 former av kärlek och förtvivlan* [106 forms of love and despair] in which, together with Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, George Segal, Andy Warhol and Tom Wesselman he presented one of the most important exhibitions to be held at the museum since its inception in 1958.

Aged only 29, Jim Dine was the youngest of this group of New York artists who had already formed themselves into the American branch of Pop Art. In Jim Dine's case, his art was not so much a critique of the commercial spirit of the period as a reflection on his personal experience of growing up in Cincinnati.

As a young newspaper photographer with dreams of America, the exhibition – and its catalogue – provided me with a source of inspiration that extended my understanding of art and opened me up to new ideas about what could be described using photography as my tool.

In spite of the importance of the exhibition at Moderna Museet, nowhere in Sweden has Jim Dine's art been as important locally as in the textile-manufacturing town of Borås. For it was in Borås that Jim Dine's work assumed a meaning over and above its purely artistic aspect. For a number of years in the 1990s, the then director of Borås Art Museum Tomas Lindh struggled with a cancer diagnosis. When he reached the stage where he sensed that he was losing the fight, he had one final wish: to curate an exhibition featuring his favourite artist, Jim Dine.

"On a personal level I was very moved by Tomas Lindh's last wish", Jim Dine explained in an interview in his studio in the German town of Göttingen in 2008. "I had no idea of where Borås might be, but I felt that the offer of an exhibition was something that I could not say no to. I even painted some works on site in Borås to complete the exhibition and I was very pleased with the result."

The magnificent exhibition at the Borås Art Museum in 1993 – which would have been a feather in the cap of any museum in the world – was Tomas Lindh's last major undertaking. In the case of Jim Dine it created an emotional tie to Borås; at some time in the future, he promised, he would return to the town and organize a workshop for local artists. And so he did. Some ten years later Jim Dine returned to Borås to fulfill his promise.

One summer's day in 2004 Jim Dine – whom I did not know personally at the time – called me at the Hasselblad Center in Gothenburg, where I was working as the artistic director, during a coffee break at the workshop he was giving in Borås. With his wife, the photographer Diana Michener, he wanted a personal tour of the exhibition that I had curated featuring the first 25 Hasselblad prize-winners.

After the guided tour was ended I suggested to Jim Dine that he should have his own photographic exhibition at the Hasselblad Center. His first reaction was "No!" which, after a while, changed to "Perhaps" and, a few weeks later, a positive promise of an exhibition to be called *The Photographs, so far* – with a modest, 1100-page catalogue of Jim Dine's own photographs. The exhibition then embarked on a successful tour to Cologne, Paris and Middleton, USA.

When, in 2005, I had the honour of showing my American photographs at the Borås Art Museum in an exhibition entitled *Real/Unreal*, Jim Dine and his wife turned up unexpectedly at the opening. At the time they were in Germany and they thought that it would be appropriate to honour me by coming to Borås. It was at the dinner after the opening that the idea originated that Jim Dine – a megastar among contemporary artists now on his third visit to Borås – should create a permanent work in celebration of the town.

“I’m working on plans for my biggest sculpture ever – a nine-metre tall Pinocchio. Could that be something for Borås?” Bengt Swegmark, owner of the Focus Borås Foundation, immediately latched onto the idea and countered with a question of his own: If his foundation could find financiers to provide the 1 million US dollars needed for the project, would Jim Dine promise that the Pinocchio sculpture would be placed in Borås?

“If you can finance a project on this scale it is surely the intention that Pinocchio should become a native of Borås”, was Jim Dine’s answer.

But when the financial issues had been resolved and the news of a nine-metre sculpture of Pinocchio to be placed on a central site in Borås began to take wings, this led to the biggest artistic conflict in the town’s history. There were almost 400 letters published in the local newspaper, *Borås Tidning*, most of them on the following lines:

1. What has Pinocchio to do with Borås?
2. When are we going to halt American cultural imperialism?
3. Why should a gang of capitalists decide what is to be shown on the streets and public places?

In 2008, following three years of discussion – sometimes vitriolic – Pinocchio was positioned on the town’s main thoroughfare, Allégatan, with his long nose and his giant steps directed towards Borås University College at the other end of the street. *Walking to Borås*, as the sculpture is known, has since come to be loved by all and sundry. And Pinocchio is the best and most popular ambassador that the town has ever had. Pinocchio deserves much of the credit for Borås being chosen as the 2011 Swedish Town-Centre of the Year. And thanks to the Pinocchio bronze sculpture, the town has been able to attract works by world-famous artists like Tony Cragg, Sean Henry and Jaume Plensa. Today, Borås is generally regarded as Sweden’s leading sculpture town.

Jim Dine has also been very important to Björn Wetterling; from the first exhibition in 1982 at the little Thordén-Wetterling Gallery in Gothenburg to the 2015 exhibition at the Wetterling Gallery in Stockholm. More than 30 years of collaboration and ten solo exhibitions have strengthened the links and cemented a friendship that goes far beyond mere commercial concerns.

The latest exhibition, *Hearts of Stone*, focuses on two of Jim Dine’s best-known subjects: PINOCCHIO and the HEART. For Jim Dine, these subjects have recurred regularly together with, for example, TOOLS – Jim’s paternal grandfather was an ironmonger in Ohio – SKULLS, VENUS DE MILOS and BATH ROBES.

Pinocchio has been part of Jim’s world ever since his childhood – or more exactly from the age of six when, in 1941, with his mother he saw Walt Disney’s animated film in a cinema, at home in Cincinnati.

“Pinocchio has probably hidden under my bed ever since then”, Jim Dine explains, “because when I was a child I always knew that I had to lie in order to keep the

peace at home." (Though the terror that Jim Dine felt in the face of Pinocchio's fate he only became conscious of during psychotherapy in his adult years.)

In Jim Dine's exhibition of paintings and sculpture, *Hearts of Stone*, it is no longer the Disney figure that is the inspiration but, rather, the Italian writer Carlo Collodi's original tale from 1881.

"Many of my other motifs such as the heart, are like landscapes, but Pinocchio is a trashcan full of human emotions! Each painting or sculpture comes out differently – and I can never predict what the outcome will be. Pinocchio is always with me."

Jim Dine sees Pinocchio as a metaphor for art itself: the fact that, with a piece of wood, one can create something that has fascinated generations of people all over the world.

The heart, which is an element in Jim Dine's iconography, has served the artist since the mid 1960s with the sculpture/object *Nancy and I at Ithaca* (1966-69). But memories of Valentine cards in his youth, with hearts portrayed in warm, red, romantic colours, have presumably also been present in the artist's store of memories.

"When I first made use of a heart as a motif I did not realize that it would come to be a recurrent theme. Typical for me is that I always go where romance takes me since it is a subject that I return to with great affection."

Jim Dine's hearts – because nowadays it feels as though he owns the subject – have an abstract expression within the heart-shaped contours that clearly signals bodily form and sexual attraction. It is also in his hearts that one can see that Jim Dine should not be read as a Pop Artist, but that he really has his roots in the abstract expressionism that he grew up with and that was evident even in his early painting *Green Suit* (1959).

"All my life I have thought about abstract expressionism", Jim Dine affirms today. It has never left me. While I was still a youngster I chose to believe that de Kooning and Kline were where the (art)world was going after Picasso and Matisse.

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