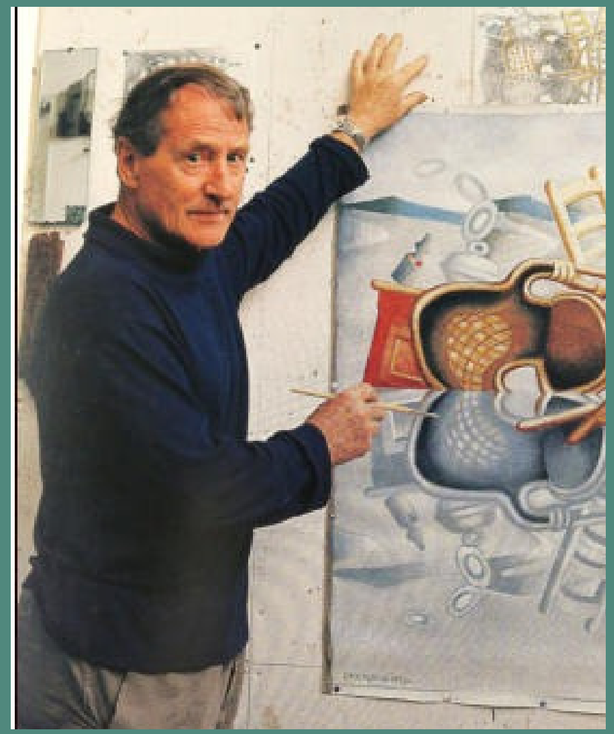






ERIK OLSON



INTRODUCTION

Erik Olson (1901–1986)



Muren, 1939–1939, Oil on Panel, 24.5 x 30 cm.

Erik Olson was born in Halmstad, Sweden, in 1901 and became one of the central figures of Swedish Surrealism. Together with his brothers Axel and Torsten Olson, he grew up in a creative environment that encouraged both artistic ambition and intellectual curiosity. In the 1920s he became part of the circle that would later form the Halmstad Group, alongside Sven Jonson, Waldemar Lorentzon, Esaias Thorén, and Stellan Mörner.

Like several members of the group, Olson travelled abroad to study modern art. Time spent in Germany and France brought him into contact with Cubism, Expressionism, and later Surrealism. These influences helped him move away from naturalism and toward a more symbolic and dreamlike style. During the 1930s he developed some of his most distinctive works: mysterious landscapes, solitary figures, and carefully arranged objects that seem suspended between reality and dream.



Sommarferie, 1947, oil on panel, 60 x 75 cm.

What sets Erik Olson apart is the spiritual and philosophical dimension of his art. His paintings often explore questions of faith, mortality, and human existence. After converting to Catholicism in 1950, these concerns became even more pronounced, and religious symbolism entered his work more directly. At the same time, he remained deeply connected to the visual language of Surrealism, using strange juxtapositions and symbolic imagery to express inner states rather than external reality.

Throughout his career, Olson worked not only as a painter but also on public commissions, including stained-glass windows and church decorations. His art combines the quiet atmosphere of Scandinavian painting with the symbolic richness of Surrealism, giving his work a distinctive place within Swedish modernism.

ERIK OLSON

BIOGRAPHY



Erik Olson född 1901

1901

1. Erik Olson was born in Halmstad, Sweden, into an artistic family alongside his brothers Axel and Torsten Olson.

Early 1920s –

2. Became involved with the progressive artist circle that later became the Halmstad Group, developing an early interest in Cubism and modernist painting.

Late 1920s –

3. Travelled to Europe, especially Germany and France, where he encountered modern art movements and began moving toward a more symbolic and Surrealist style.

1930s –

4. Developed his distinctive Surrealist language, creating dreamlike landscapes, mysterious figures, and symbolic scenes that made him one of Sweden's leading Surrealist painters.

1950s –

5. After converting to Catholicism, his work took on a stronger spiritual and religious dimension. He also created stained-glass windows and church commissions, including works for churches in Halmstad.

1986 –

6. Died in Sweden, leaving behind a major body of work that helped define both the Halmstad Group and the spiritual side of Scandinavian Surrealism.

HALMSTAD GROUP



Foto: Halmstadgruppen, 1934. Foto: Zenta



The Halmstad Group painted by group member Stellan Mörner

The Halmstad Group was a collective of six young Swedish artists who, beginning in the late 1920s, played a central role in bringing European modernism and Surrealist ideas into Sweden. Their work challenged the traditional, conservative Swedish art environment of the time.

Their Role in Modern Swedish Art

• They introduced new visual languages—Cubism, Surrealism, geometric abstraction—at a time when these movements were still unfamiliar to Swedish audiences.
• The group emphasized international exchange, traveling to Europe to study modernist trends and exhibiting with progressive artists abroad.
• They became one of the most influential forces in Scandinavian modern art of the 20th century.

Erik Olson's Contribution

• His paintings developed a distinctive symbolic and spiritual quality, often combining dreamlike landscapes, mysterious figures, and themes of faith, time, and human existence.
• More than any other member of the group, Olson brought a philosophical and religious dimension to Swedish Surrealism. After his conversion to Catholicism in 1950, this became even more pronounced, and his work increasingly explored inner experience and spiritual symbolism.
• Olson contributed a sense of emotional depth and metaphysical reflection to the Halmstad Group, helping define a more contemplative and visionary strand of Scandinavian modernism.

EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC STYLE AND THEMES

Early Period — Cubism and Modernist Structure (1920s–early 1930s)

In his early work, Erik Olson was strongly influenced by Cubism and the broader European modernism he encountered during his study in Germany and France. His paintings from the 1920s are built from simplified forms, strong outlines, and carefully balanced compositions. Like other members of the Halmstad Group, he's interested in structure and clarity, using geometry to organize space and form. During this period, his work remains tied to visible reality—figures, still lifes, and landscapes. At the same time, he began to move beyond pure formal experiment, introducing a sense of mystery and symbolic suggestion that would later become central to his art.



Komposition, 1928, gouache heightened w/white on paper, 12.5 x 7.5 cm.



Bild i två element, 1929, painting on canvas, 61 x 38 cm.

EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC STYLE AND THEMES

Middle Period — Surrealism and Existential Symbolism (mid-1930s–1940s)

During the 1930s and 1940s, Olson developed the symbolic and dreamlike language for which he is best known. Turning toward Surrealism, he created enigmatic scenes filled with solitary figures, empty landscapes, architectural fragments, and strange juxtapositions. Unlike the more provocative or irrational strain of French Surrealism, Olson's work is quiet and contemplative. His paintings often suggest themes of time, mortality, isolation, and the search for meaning. Space becomes ambiguous, objects take on symbolic weight, and the mood is one of stillness and uncertainty. Works from this period reveal his ability to combine the formal clarity of modernism with a deeply personal and philosophical form of Surrealism.



Komedianterna - Danse macabre, 1939, oil on canvas, 90 x 61 cm.



Gryning II, 1935, oil on canvas, 130 x 81 cm.

EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC STYLE AND THEMES

Late Period — Spiritual Vision and Religious Imagery (1950s–1980s)

After converting to Catholicism in 1950, Olson's art increasingly took on a spiritual and religious character. In his later work, biblical themes, saints, angels, and symbolic references to faith appear more directly, yet they remain filtered through his Surrealist imagination. His compositions become calmer and more simplified, with clearer forms and a greater sense of monumentality.



"Hesekiels syn", 1974, painting on canvas, 43.5 x 69.5 cm.



"Den heliga fiskaren", 1977, Canvas, 53 x 71 cm.

He used painting to explore inner experience and spiritual questions. During these years he also created stained-glass windows, mosaics, and church decorations, extending his visual language into public and sacred spaces. His late work represents a synthesis of modernism, Surrealism, and religious reflection, giving his art a distinctive place within Scandinavian painting.

PUBLIC ART & VISIBILITY

From the 1930s onwards, Erik Olson's work was exhibited internationally in cities such as Copenhagen, London, Paris, and New York, situating him within a wider network of modern and Surrealist artists.

Beyond exhibitions, Olson's public visibility was significantly shaped by his work in architectural and religious contexts. Following his conversion to Catholicism in 1950, he increasingly devoted himself to sacred art, creating stained-glass windows and decorations for churches. Notable examples include works for Sofia Albertina Church in Landskrona and St. Maria Catholic Church in Halmstad, where his symbolic and dreamlike imagery was translated into a spiritual and liturgical setting.



St. Clement's Church in Laholm - Korfönster with God's name YHWH in Hebrew at the top



Black stain with tetra program YHWH in an upper circular medallion Husie church, Malmo

These commissions allowed him to expand his Surrealist language into public space, merging modernist form with religious meaning.

Olson's work is represented in major museum collections, including the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, ensuring continued institutional visibility. His long career and varied output were formally recognized in 1971 when he was awarded the Prince Eugen Medal, one of Sweden's most important artistic honors. Together, his exhibitions, public commissions, and museum presence confirm his lasting role as a visible and influential figure in both Swedish and international modern art.

NOTABLE AUCTION RESULTS

Erik Olson — Carré Rouge

Art Historical Context

“Carré Rouge” (1930) belongs to a pivotal moment in Concrete Art and early abstraction within Scandinavian modernism. Created during Erik Olson’s time in Paris, the work reflects his engagement with international avant-garde circles such as Cercle et Carré and Abstraction-Création. The composition—built around geometric clarity and reduced form—demonstrates Olson’s shift from Cubist influence toward a more conceptual and symbolic abstraction. The painting asserts the autonomy of form, aligning with the idea that shapes like the square function as concrete visual ideas.

Auction Result

“Carré Rouge” was sold at Bukowskis (Modern Art + Design sale 632) for a hammer price of **6,800,000 SEK** (approx. **$650,000–$670,000 USD**), significantly exceeding its estimate of **800,000–1,000,000 SEK**. This result marks one of Erik Olson’s strongest auction performances to date.

Exhibition History

The work was exhibited in key early modernist contexts, including the landmark exhibitions “Cercle et Carré” (Paris, 1930) and “Abstraction-Création” (Paris, 1931), placing it within the core network of international abstract art between the wars. In later decades, it appeared in exhibitions such as “Halmstadgruppen 60 år” at Liljevalchs konsthall, Stockholm (1989), and subsequent presentations in Halmstad, Helsinki, and Valencia. The painting has also been widely reproduced in major publications on Erik Olson and the Halmstad Group, reinforcing its importance within both his oeuvre and the broader history of Scandinavian modernism.



”Carré Rouge"
Signed Erik Olson and dated 1930. Oil on panel 38 x 46 cm.

NOTABLE AUCTION RESULTS

Erik Olson — Fisher men by Seine

Art Historical Context

Fisher men by Seine (1928) belongs to Erik Olson's formative Paris period, when he was studying at the Académie Moderne under Fernand Léger. The work reflects his early engagement with geometric abstraction and neoplastic ideas, where simplified forms and shifting planes create a tension between flatness and depth. Rather than depicting fishermen naturalistically, Olson constructs the scene through fragmented, almost "impossible" spatial relationships, suggesting both architecture and movement at once. This painting marks a key moment in his transition from structured modernism toward the more symbolic and surreal language that would later define his practice.

Auction Result

Fisher men by Seine was sold at Bukowskis, Stockholm, on 11 May 2021, achieving a hammer price of **2,750,000 SEK** (approx. **$270,000 USD**). The result significantly exceeded its estimate of **1,500,000–2,000,000 SEK**.

Exhibition History

The painting has been widely exhibited and frequently discussed in relation to Olson's early career. It was shown as early as 1928 at Göteborgs Konstförening and appeared in the 1929 Halmstad exhibition. Later, it featured in major presentations of the Halmstad Group, including exhibitions at Liljevalchs konsthall (1939) and subsequent touring shows. In the postwar period and beyond, it continued to appear in institutional contexts such as Lunds konsthall, Malmö museum, Thielska galleriet, and Mjellby konstmuseum, as well as retrospectives dedicated to Olson. Its consistent presence in exhibitions and literature underscores its status as a key work within his oeuvre.



"Fisher men by Seine"
Signed Erik Olson and dated 1928. Canvas 81 x 65 cm.

MARKET & COLLECTING



"Korsväg - pilgrim till Montserrat". 69 x 114 cm.

HOW COLLECTORS VIEW ERIL OLSON'S WORKS

Characteristics Valued by Collectors

Erik Olson's paintings balance clear, often geometric compositions with dreamlike and symbolic imagery, creating works that feel both controlled and quietly surreal. Early works reflect a strong grounding in Cubism, while later compositions introduce enigmatic spaces, subtle distortions, and a sense of stillness. Recurring motifs—architectural forms, landscapes, and suspended objects—give his work a reflective, almost metaphysical quality that rewards sustained attention.

Position in the Nordic Modernist Market

Erik Olson holds a stable position within Scandinavian Surrealism as a core member of the Halmstad Group and an early figure in Swedish Surrealism. His work is represented in major public collections, including the Nationalmuseum and Moderna Museet in Stockholm, reinforcing his institutional standing. A notable auction result is Carré Rouge, sold at Bukowskis for a hammer price of **6,800,000 SEK** (approx. **$650,000–$670,000 USD**)—far exceeding its estimate of 800,000–1,000,000 SEK and marking one of his strongest performances to date.

Appeal for New Collectors

Olson's work appeals to collectors interested in Surrealism that is more restrained and atmospheric rather than theatrical. His paintings suggest inner states and psychological tension without relying on overt narrative, making them feel both timeless and contemplative. Although major works can reach high prices, smaller paintings and works on paper can still be acquired in the four-figure range, offering accessible entry points for newer collectors while retaining strong art historical significance.



ERIK OLSON