







AXEL OLSON





INTRODUCTION



"Woman figure in gray and black"
Signed Ax. Ohlson and dated Berlin 1923. Canvas laid down on panel 88 x 58 cm.

Axel Olson (1899–1986)

Axel Olson was born in Halmstad, Sweden, in 1899 and grew up in a family closely tied to the sea—his father initially worked as a seaman before becoming a machinist. From an early age, Olson showed a strong artistic drive. In 1915 he and his brother Erik Olson, together with their cousin Waldemar Lorentzon, formed the young art collective Gnistan, laying the groundwork for what would become a lifelong dedication to modern art. His first public showing came in 1919 at an amateur exhibition in Halmstad, where his work caught the attention of local art advocate Egon Östlund, who introduced him to the influential painter Gösta Adrian Nilsson.

Thanks to the support of a private patron, Olson travelled to Italy and Germany in 1922 to paint, and in 1923 he moved to Berlin to study with avant-garde sculptor and painter Alexander Archipenko. There he encountered a wide spectrum of cutting-edge work—from Futurism and Constructivism to Cubism—deeply affecting his emerging artistic language.



Sol över klippan, 1944, oil on panel, 41 x 33 cm.

Upon returning to Halmstad in 1924, Olson became a teacher within the local painting circle De Unga (“The Young Ones”), mentoring fellow artists like Sven Jonson and Esaias Thorén, while also supporting himself with commercial art projects. In 1929 he joined with Erik Olson, Lorentzon, Jonson, Thorén, and Stellan Mörner to form the Halmstad Group, a collective that would become pivotal in bringing modernist currents such as Cubism and Surrealism to Swedish art.

Throughout the 1930s, Olson’s work evolved from post-Cubist approaches toward a more personal engagement with Surrealism. He drew fantastical motifs from everyday life—anchors, ploughs, and other familiar symbols—infusing them with quiet symbolic resonance. During World War II, his paintings, such as Hamn (1939), reflected the somber mood of the times.

In the post-war decades, travel to Paris and Provence enriched his palette and broadened his stylistic range. In the 1960s he revisited Surrealist themes with renewed depth, and into the 1970s and early 1980s, the Halland coastline—its boats, shells, and fishing implements—remained central to his inspired visual vocabulary. Axel Olson continued to paint with clarity, imagination, and quiet intensity until his death in 1986, leaving a legacy as one of Sweden’s most thoughtful modernists.

BIOGRAPHY



Axel Olson fodd 1989

1899

1 Born in Halmstad, Sweden. Raised in a coastal, working-class environment that would later influence his visual language and recurring motifs.

1915–1919

2 Early artistic activity alongside his brother Erik Olson and cousin Waldemar Lorentzon. Participated in local exhibitions and became involved in progressive art circles in Halmstad.

1922–1924

3 Travelled to Italy and Germany with patron support. Studied in Berlin under Alexander Archipenko, encountering Cubism, Constructivism, and early avant-garde movements that reshaped his approach.

1929

4 Co-founded the Halmstad Group with Erik Olson, Sven Jonson, Waldemar Lorentzon, Esaias Thorén, and Stellan Mörner, helping introduce modernism and Surrealist ideas to Sweden.

1930s–1960s

5 Developed a distinctive personal style combining structured composition with symbolic and Surrealist elements, often drawing on everyday objects and coastal imagery.

1986

6 Passed away in Halmstad. Left behind a significant legacy within Swedish modernism, with works represented in major Nordic public collections.

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.

Axel Olson's Contribution

• As a co-founder of the Halmstad Group, Axel Olson played a key role in shaping the group's early modernist direction and its engagement with international artistic developments.
• His studies and experience in Berlin exposed him directly to Cubism, Constructivism, and avant-garde thinking, bringing a strong sense of structure, discipline, and clarity into the group's visual language.
• Olson's work helped establish a distinctly Swedish interpretation of modernism, combining European influences with a restrained, contemplative approach rooted in everyday forms and coastal imagery.

ARTISTIC STYLE & THEMES

Main Characteristics of Style

- Modernist synthesis combining Cubism, Surrealism, and Nordic symbolism
- Strong emphasis on geometric structure and architectural clarity
- Simplified, solid forms with monumental presence
- Frequent use of symbolic motifs—boats, towers, figures, horizons
- Calm, restrained compositions suggesting introspection and timelessness



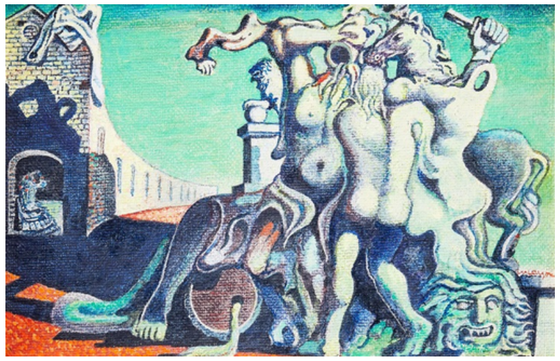
Förankring i verkligheten, 1935, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 123 cm.

Recurring Motifs

- Stylized human figures, often isolated or contemplative
- Architectural elements such as walls, stairs, arches, and columns
- Maritime imagery reflecting the Swedish coastal landscape
- Balanced juxtapositions of figurative and abstract forms
- Dreamlike spatial relationships without overt narrative action



Kvinna och luktärtor, 1942, oil on canvas, 52.5 x 40 cm.



Monumentet, 1937, oil on canvas, 22 x 33 cm.

Evolution of Artistic Approach

Early period:

- Influenced by Paris modernism, particularly Cubism
- Fragmented forms and structured compositions
- Exploration of rhythm, proportion, and spatial tension
- Early interest in symbolic meaning beneath formal design



Nature Morte, 1922, Oil on canvas, 48 x 42.5 cm

Mature period:

- Increasing clarity and structural calm
- Reduced color palettes with subtle tonal harmonies
- More monumental figures and simplified environments
- Strong sense of balance, stillness, and controlled space
- Paintings convey a quiet psychological depth



Drabbad av rymden, 1977, Oil on Canvas, 116 x 89 cm.

Connection to European Modernism

- Member of the Halmstad Group, introducing international modernism to Sweden
- Cubism: geometric order and simplified volumes
- Surrealism: symbolic imagery and metaphysical atmosphere
- Nordic modernism: emotional restraint, clarity, and connection to landscape
- Emphasis on formal discipline over expressive excess

WORKS



Spader Kung, 1930, oil on paperboard, 26.7 x 19 cm.



Komposition med musikinstrument, 1923, oil, sand, and collage on canvas,47.5 x 40 cm



Nature morte, oil on canvas, 24.5 x 33 cm.



Fågelburarna, 1951, tempera on paper, 22 x 27 cm.

WORKS



Surrealistisk komposition, 1943, oil on canvas, 110 x 86 cm.



Ankare och rep, 1943, oil on panel, 27 x 22 cm.



Strand med fiskar och snäckor, 1943, oil on canvas, 44.5 x 59.5 cm.



Strandens triumfbåge, oil on canvas, 16.5 x 35 cm.

WORKS



Surrealistisk komposition med kvinna och blomster i landskap, 1942, Oil and tempera on canvas, 36 x 27 cm.



Arbetsdagen börjar, 1940, oil on canvas, 41 x 33 cm.



Surrealistic landscape, 1934, Oil on panel, 55 x 65 cm.



End of the work day, 1943, painting on canvas, 48 x 61.5 cm.

NOTES

Axel Olson’s Place in Modern Art

A Key Figure in Swedish Modernism

Axel Olson occupies an important position within Swedish modernism, particularly through his role in introducing and shaping international modernist ideas in a Nordic context. His exposure to Cubism, Constructivism, and early Surrealism—especially during his years in Berlin—helped bring a sense of clarity, structure, and quiet intensity to modern Swedish painting.

Influence within the Halmstad Group

As a co-founder of the Halmstad Group, Olson was instrumental in establishing a platform for modernist experimentation in Sweden. His work offered a more measured and reflective counterpart within the group, balancing Surrealist tendencies with disciplined composition and carefully constructed space. This approach helped broaden the group’s artistic range and depth.

Exhibitions and Recognition

Olson participated in key modernist exhibitions in Sweden and abroad from the late 1920s onward, exhibiting regularly with the Halmstad Group. Over time, his work has been featured in numerous exhibitions that highlight the development of Scandinavian modernism and the group’s lasting influence.

Presence in Public Collections

Axel Olson’s works are held in major Swedish public collections, including:

- Hallands Konstmuseum
- Nationalmuseum, Stockholm
- Several regional and municipal museums across Sweden



I ditt anletes svett (Exhaustion after hard labor), 1938, Painting on canvas, 125 x 176 cm.



Den röda vasen, oil on canvas, 25 x 34 cm.

MARKET & COLLECTING



Sphinx (Sphinx)
Signed and dated Axel Olson -34. Oil on canvas, 70 x 80 cm.

HOW COLLECTORS VIEW AXEL OLSON'S WORK

Characteristics Valued by Collectors

Collectors value Olson's disciplined approach to form, space, and surface. His work often features carefully balanced compositions, muted color harmonies, and symbolic elements drawn from everyday life. This combination of formal rigor and subtle poetic nuance appeals to buyers who appreciate intelligent, well-crafted modernist painting with psychological depth.

Position in the Nordic Modernist Market

Axel Olson's position in the Nordic modernist market is supported by strong institutional recognition, with works held in major Swedish public collections including the Nationalmuseum, Moderna Museet, Hallands Konstmuseum, and Mjellby Konstmuseum. Internationally, Olson's work was also included in Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism at MoMA in 1937.

From a market perspective, Olson's work shows steady demand. His highest recorded auction price is USD 163,004, achieved in 2021 for *Sfinx (Sphinx)*, while recent results, including *Woman Figure in Gray and Black* reaching approximately USD 150,000–160,000 in 2023, confirm continued strength. At the same time, smaller works remain accessible, offering entry points at lower price levels.

Appeal for New Collectors

Olson's paintings integrate beautifully with contemporary and minimalist interiors, making them appealing choices for new buyers and younger collectors. For those seeking a combination of historical significance and aesthetic appeal, Olson offers a compelling bridge between tradition and modernity.