

# Summary

## A Peasant Painter and His World Johannes Nilsson of Breared

### A Medieval Tradition

The southern Swedish painter Johannes Nilsson and his wall hangings are the main topic of this book. Different methods are tested in order to find out how meaning was created in the southern Swedish tradition of painting wall hangings, which occupied about a hundred painters from around 1750 and the following hundred years. Wall hangings are very similar in style, structure, and motifs. As a rule each wall hanging depicts several motifs, mostly biblical. There appears to have been a set pattern for the earliest motifs, “The Journey and Adoration of the Magi”, “The Ten Virgins”, and “The Marriage at Cana”. Other motifs were added more or less freely. The resemblance between different hangings is a striking feature of this art in the eighteenth century. Their use was highly ritualized. Painted wall hangings were used to adorn farmhouses in south-west Sweden and were produced by painters who were not professionals but merely had painting as a sideline, to eke out the small income they derived

from the land and the forest. Johannes Nilsson (1757–1827), from the village of Gyltige in Breared Parish, was one of these painters. His art has many distinctive features compared with that of other painters of wall hangings: the density of the images, the strong colours, and the clear structures. This raises questions about why he painted the way he did (Fig. 1).

Previous research has examined the origin, motifs, and painters of wall hangings. Finds and archival records show that painted wall hangings were used from the Middle Ages onwards on festive occasions all over Scandinavia to adorn peasant houses, vicarages, noblemen’s houses, castles, and churches. For various reasons the tradition survived in south-west Sweden up to the latter part of the nineteenth century (Fig. 3). Up to the eighteenth century an older type of house had generally been preserved, and the tradition of lining the walls with textiles on feast days had persisted for various reasons. The house was of such a type that the wall hangings fitted well: it was a ridge-pole house (*ryggåstuga*), meaning that it lacked a ceiling; the timber walls were normally bare, and through time they became dark from the smoke and the cooking. On festive occasions the walls were brightened by the hanging fabrics.

The high seat and the table that was used only on ceremonial occasions played a key role in the use of the wall hangings. At first only the walls beside the high seat were adorned with painted hangings (Fig. 2). Two types of hanging were common. One of them, which I call the *Christmas hanging*, was attached to the gable wall behind the table. The Christmas hanging was about three metres long and covered the entire wall apart from the tip of the gable. At set places on the eighteenth-century hanging there were as a rule two eye-catching motifs of medieval origin: "The Journey and Adoration of the Magi" and "The Ten Virgins". On the long wall behind the high seat, yet another hanging was often put up, depicting "The Marriage at Cana" and a hunting suite. I call this the *wedding hanging*. On both the wedding hanging and the Christmas one, smaller motifs from the Old and the New Testament were also painted.

In the eighteenth century a house had few painted wall hangings, and there were only a few motifs added to those mentioned above. From the eighteenth century onwards, the number of motifs and wall hangings grew, so that the interior was almost entirely covered on festive occasions, both the walls and the inside of the sloping roof. As the demand increased, there were other changes to wall hangings. From having been painted on fabric, more and more paper hangings became common. This was partly due to a new form of distribution. Previously the hangings had been commissioned, and the customer provided the painter with the fabric. This was normally composed of pieces of different quality sewn together. These wall hangings were generally of large format – between one and ten metres in length and between 30 cm and a couple of metres high – and were not easy to transport from the painter to the customer. The painter therefore worked in the home of the customer. Paper wall hangings, whose format was limited by the size of a sheet of paper, could be sold at markets and by pedlars. Paper also allowed faster production

rates, to the extent that it almost developed into mass production. A number of female painters were also involved in this.

In southern Norway, Dalarna, Värmland, and the surrounding provinces, the same types of motifs were painted in the same period. Outside Scandinavia, a similar form of painting is known from Eastern Europe in the shape of "Hinterglasmalerei" – paintings on the back of panes of glass – and from Slovenia, where the peasantry decorated beehives with painted scenes from biblical history. Farms in Russia were decorated with biblical motifs in the form of simple, colourful prints, "Lubok". In Holland one can instead find complete cycles of motifs on the tiles with which many farmhouses were decorated from the eighteenth century onwards.

### Like the Phoenix

Wall hangings are relics of a European ornamental tradition. I am nevertheless primarily interested in them as the *innovations* they became during the latter part of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. Out of a medieval tradition, something new was created to suit the people of a new age, like the Phoenix rising from the ashes. By analysing the wall hangings of a single person who produced a great many and whose paintings were as different as Johannes Nilsson's, and by comparing these hangings with those of the traditional genre, I want to shed light on the *new meanings* of wall hangings. A central question is how the biblical wall hangings expressed the thoughts and ideas that existed around them, how the paintings represented the world where they were used.

There is one overall objective: to find associations between a mental and a physical world and the world of the wall hangings. Other objectives are subordinate to this: for example, to illuminate Johannes Nilsson as a painter and a person, and to examine how his circumstances, religiosity, and professional background can be

related to his painting. Another purpose is to investigate how changes in Johannes Nilsson's life and world are represented in the wall hangings. A third aim is to explore how far and in what way Johannes Nilsson's painting can be related to his clientele, the local community, and to wall hangings as a genre. Finally, I want to elevate this individual-centred account to a more general level. I want to find such meanings as painted wall hangings may have communicated to their contemporaries and which are not immediately given, instead emerging from a confrontation with different interpretative contexts; the intention here is to understand to what extent the wall hangings were shaped as an expression of a pre-industrial peasant population's self-perception and religious conceptions.

### The Material

The empirical focus of the dissertation is on two narratives which I have constructed about Johannes Nilsson and his Breared. They are to a great extent based on archival material, on parish registers and taxation records centred on the period 1806–1816. This material is rather flimsy, but by being able to combine it with the wall hangings I have been given good insight into the life of Johannes Nilsson and the Breared in which he lived.

The parish registers, with their scrupulous control of the parishioners' lives, their literacy, their knowledge of the catechism, and their attendance at communion, give us an opportunity to acquire some idea about a person and a parish. Many of Johannes Nilsson's extant wall hangings were intended for households in Breared. Questions that I ask include: What was the economy like, what did people live off, and how can the history of the parish be linked with the painting of wall hangings and with Johannes Nilsson's hangings? Estate inventories from the period 1806–16 have given me data on the

possessions, debts, and assets of the households. Very little of the land in Breared was owned by freeholders. Almost all the farms were in the hands of the state or outside owners (nobles and other persons of rank). My interest has therefore also been focused on different categories of peasants and differences in their living circumstances.

The number of extant wall hangings painted by Johannes Nilsson reaches more than two hundred, but only between twenty and thirty have been found in Breared. Others are scattered throughout the region where wall hangings occurred. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that Johannes Nilsson himself moved over a wide area. He was in demand as a painter in other places than Breared.

### Methodological Problems

My interpretative perspective is hermeneutic, which means that my questions have to do with what people in the past thought and believed. According to hermeneutic tradition, a basis for all interpretation activity, there is no absolutely accessible reality. All we perceive are interpretations. A great deal of what we think we know about peasant society is based on observations by people who often did not originate there, such as clergy, people in authority, authors, depictees of folklife, and recorders of traditions. What they have in common is that they belonged to the educated upper class. The statements they have left us are therefore interpreted, culturally coloured, and bearing the stamp of values other than those of the peasant populace. Painted wall hangings, on the other hand, are just as virgin today as when they left the painter's hands. The use of statements about peasant society to interpret wall hangings is therefore problematic. The dissertation can thus be regarded as a study in the method of analysing meanings in images and associations between the world of ideas and the configuration of images.

The material consists in principle of four categories: data on Johannes Nilsson as a person, his wall hangings, and his geographical market, mostly Breared. The fourth category is the wall hangings themselves. The dissertation also focuses on four problem areas. One is how *Johannes Nilsson* is to be described so that conditions in his personal life and work seem clear, reasonable, and significant for the interpretation of his wall hangings. The second is how to make visible the circumstances in *Breared* that shaped him, his work, and his customers. The third is how to interpret his *wall hangings* and how to discover and describe the threads between them, himself, and the parish. The fourth problem concerns how Johannes Nilsson's wall hangings can be related to the *genre* of wall hangings.

Johannes Nilsson is illuminated as a person and a painter, and simultaneously I relate his life and experiences to his wall hangings. I thus take an interior path, searching for the individual, recounting his life story, collecting data about things, people, and ideas with which he may have come into contact. I follow Carlo Ginzburg's paradigm of the clue, which means that every detail is of importance. A biographical perspective is natural in research into the present day and can also be used in this case, since Johannes Nilsson's wall hangings represent the person I am investigating.

The theoretical framework allows room for thinkers and scholars in various fields. To interpret the wall hangings I use genre theory, narrative models for storytelling, and the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's ideas on text and language. In the good ethnological tradition I use the thoughts of other people when they can bring clarity. On a general level, Ricoeur has inspired me most by means of his attitude to the past. He talks about "traces". Traces are left behind and interpreted; they represent the past. This does not mean that the past appears in our representation, but that the traces appear instead of the absent past, the historical discourse. My material can be described as traces in Ricoeur's

sense. The traces must be separated from what surrounded them in the form of thoughts, associations, and memories. They are really just testimony to a past, a "historical discourse". Their most important role in this context is that they are connected in various ways to the mental world that I want to reach. With this perspective it does not become easier to reach the mental world, but the relation between mental world and traces is made more precise.

This outlook allows me to work with the material in a way that eliminates its stamp of "facts" and makes it possible to fit in the different categories of material into my selected perspective, where I view Johannes Nilsson as an independently creating individual rather than as a person tied to a peasant society characterized by collectivism and inertia. I see the wall hangings as *images* or *texts* with a mainly narrative content. They are also *folk art* produced in close collaboration between the painter and his surroundings – in a *context* – and used in a culturally determined situation.

Another general problem is the interpretation of the wall hangings. They are historical documents originating in a different time, in different circumstances from our own, which causes problems in the interpretation of their linguistic aspect or as texts or narratives. Some guidance is offered by Paul Ricoeur, who points out the special relationship that arises between a reader and a text. Ricoeur points out that the text is read when the author is absent but that the text is written when the reader is absent. By putting his finger on this self-evident state of affairs, Ricoeur makes it clear that the reader's and the author's mental worlds cannot meet. The text is closed in the sense that one cannot get back into the author's mind, but it is open towards the reader's mind. Therefore, according to Ricoeur, it is the reader who creates the text in the process of reading and thus produces a completely new narrative. The task of interpretation involves making the narrative reasonable.

## Johannes Nilsson and His Wall Hangings

It might be thought that such a distinctive painter lived on the periphery of the district where wall hangings were produced, where the opportunities for deviation were greater than at the centre. This was not the case. In geographical terms, Johannes Nilsson lived at the very centre of the district, where a vigorous tradition of hangings existed before him. During his life he also received orders from virtually the whole western half of the district. Despite this, his wall hangings express something different from the other hangings in the genre. What exactly is this difference? Is there something in his life that can give an explanation?

Johannes Nilsson's works are mainly from the time after 1790, when he also began to transform decorative elements and produce denser pictures. At that time he was between thirty and forty years old and still living at home with his parents. His wall hangings are characterized by pious motifs and a distinctive style. He was not a farmer, a parish clerk, or engaged in some other pursuit, as other painters of hangings were. He was one of the few who worked exclusively as a painter. He was thus able to devote more time and energy to developing his painting. His life story contains explanations as to why he ended up devoting himself exclusively to painting. He was unmarried, and in his later years he suffered from epileptic attacks, which at times made him unable to work. I have been able to show that his epilepsy was probably lifelong. This rendered him incapable of strenuous physical labour and prevented him from marrying.

Johannes Nilsson learned how to paint at home on the farm in Gyltige, taught by his father, who also painted wall hangings. They moved from the farm in the 1790s to a house in Gyltige where they could both dedicate themselves to painting hangings. Johannes Nilsson's production can best be analysed along a timeline and in a comparative perspective. He was skilful, used a lot of colour, and evidently structured his motifs according to an idea (Fig. 39). In his earliest wall

hangings the motifs and configuration agree with the eighteenth-century genre, where there were few motifs, many of them taken from the Old Testament. In the 1790s there was a great increase in the repertoire of motifs used by both his father and himself. Together they introduced about twenty motifs which had not previously been found in the genre of wall hangings, copying models in an illustrated bible and from simple prints which could be bought at markets – the *kistebrev* which were pasted inside the lids of chests. Furthermore, there was a rapid stylistic development in his own painting. The two painters must have travelled together, since Johannes Nilsson as an epileptic could scarcely travel entirely on his own. They painted wall hangings, visited markets and customers. In southernmost Halland in particular, they could come into contact with books and simple prints to use as models. There were also chances to meet church painters. In my opinion, the stylistic changes undergone by Johannes Nilsson show that he was influenced by craft painters and by the different forms of production in his models, but I would maintain that they are also due to his worsening epilepsy. He had visions towards the end of his life, and his wall hangings from 1795 onwards have a style that could at least in part be a reflection of his visions. The large fields of colour and the circles are examples.

By the time his father died in 1802, Johannes had developed his special style. After his father's death, however, his range of motifs grew at a slower pace, as did his stylistic changes. My interpretation of this is that during that time he did not have the same opportunity to come into contact with others. He had apprentices, but they were farmers who could only help him during certain periods. When he travelled around the farms, he must have had company. He usually travelled on the main roads, where he could probably get lifts. Around 1810 his illness worsened and he was forced to move from the house in Gyltige to another village. After 1810 he appears to have relied on his own ability to

depict new motifs after an idea rather than copying a picture. The new motifs that can be derived from models are few in number from 1810 until his death in 1827.

In the 1790s Johannes Nilsson displays a slightly different repertoire of motifs from his father's. The motifs that attracted him were from the New Testament, whereas his father, like many other painters of hangings, tended to stick to narrative motifs from the Old Testament. Examples of such favourite motifs are "Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac", "Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law", "Joseph and his Brothers", "Samson Slaying the Lion", "David and Goliath", and "The Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace". Constantly recurring motifs in the genre – apart from the ones associated with Christmas and wedding hangings – are those which illustrate dramatic events in which God intervenes in people's lives. Among those from the New Testament, narrative motifs about the life of Jesus, the passion story, and the miracles of Jesus are the most important in the genre. Johannes Nilsson often chose a more spiritual category, occasionally even motifs that can be described as sermonizing. For instance, he painted the moralizing motif "On the Correct Use of the Holy Communion" (Fig. 6), just as often as the narrative picture "Jesus Instituting the Holy Communion" (Fig. 65). It is only with the aid of the biblical references that we can determine which motif Johannes Nilsson really intended, since the configuration is similar. "On the Correct Use of the Holy Communion" comes from the First Epistle to the Corinthians, where Paul warns of the consequences of using the communion wine as an intoxicant. This tendency to choose admonitory, moralizing, or preaching motifs persisted throughout his productive life.

In the pre-industrial period people's thoughts were frequently directed towards the afterlife. An example is the wall hanging "The Holy Communion", where the entire hanging with its lines thrusting upward expresses a longing to get away (Fig. 39). Many motifs in Johannes Nilsson's work express this aspiration. In his case it

sometimes seems also to have developed into a longing to get "home" to a celestial Father. Motifs like these are very common in his repertoire. An example is "The Prodigal Son". In earlier versions of the wall-hanging, the genre shines through in the description of dissipation with wanton women, alcohol, and dancing in full-bodied scenes (Fig. 40). Later the motif was developed to be more about returning to the father, about repentance and penance. The last image in the sequence of scenes depicts precisely this encounter. In the early wall hanging this scene is the least prominent, but later it grew to become wholly predominant, Fig. 71.

Johannes Nilsson's desire to preach through his pictures increases with the years. He preaches about the narrow road that leads to Heaven and the broad road leading to Hell, and he does so in many different ways. One such motif is "The Last Judgement" (Fig. 70), where Jesus is seated on a throne separating the sheep from the goats; another is "The Wedding Garment" (Fig. 52); a third is "God and Noah" (Fig. 26). I interpret his choice of motifs as a consequence of a life of hardships, with epilepsy and solitude. The life awaiting him on the other side was a better one.

## The Community

What kind of community was Breared, where wall hangings like those of Johannes Nilsson could be created and be in such demand? Like so many other parishes in the forest area at this time, it was difficult for Breared to provide a livelihood for people solely from the soil and the forest. Moreover, since the peasants did not own their land, they were forced to make their services available to the landowners. They spent many days of the year on the road, driving timber, boards, and charcoal, thus having fewer opportunities to look after their own farms. Casual income in the form of work in bigger agricultural areas gave young men a chance to contribute to their support. The young women

could make a little money from serving as maids in the town. The agricultural economy was not particularly healthy in the second half of the eighteenth century, but towards the end of the century there was an upturn. Herring catches off the coast increased dramatically, and young men and women could go to Bohuslän and Gothenburg to earn money by boiling fish-oil.

Estate inventories show that Breared was not a parish of readers. Few books are recorded, fewer than in the neighbouring parishes. Generally speaking, most of the books found in Swedish homes were religious. There was usually a hymn book and a prayer book or collection of sermons. In Breared there were many homes that did not even have a hymn book. The reason for the shortage of books was that Breared, unlike the neighbouring parishes, had a very low level of literacy. At that time the proportion of literate people should have been between 50 and 90 per cent. In Breared it was less than 10 per cent. Not even Johannes Nilsson, who worked with pictures which used textual messages, was regarded by the clergy as being sufficiently literate. There were of course reasons for this. Parishes with low literacy usually had poor control on the part of the clergy, or a parish clerk who did not look after tuition properly. It is difficult to say what the reason was in the case of Breared. The lack of experience of reading meant that the oral tradition was crucial for the parishioners' understanding of biblical stories.

The shortage of books in the estate inventories came as a surprise to me. Even more astonishing was the fact that almost every peasant household in this poor community owned silver in some form, whether a small beaker or several different silver objects of quite a high value. Generally speaking, more silver was owned in the poor Breared than in the more favoured neighbouring parishes on the plain. I would interpret this as showing that the people of Breared were more interested in manifesting status with the aid of valuable possessions than the inhabitants of nearby parishes. In this

respect the wall hangings are even more convincing. The motifs in demand in Breared were festive ones: "Ahasuerus' Feast" (Figs 17, 24, 51), "The Four Estates Travelling to a Feast" (showing people in costumes and wagons appropriate to their status), and "The Marriage at Cana" (Fig. 49). There are festive motifs on half of the 26 wall hangings from Breared, a distinctly higher proportion than the average in Johannes Nilsson's total production. The preaching and cautionary motifs are correspondingly less common in the wall hangings from Breared.

The people of Breared thus appear to have been anxious to manifest status. Surprisingly, Johannes Nilsson seems to have complied with the wishes of his fellow parishioners. The reason is that for Johannes Nilsson too it was natural to manifest status. This was a part of his context. In his wall hangings, manifestations of this kind are very striking. With unfailing precision he pulled off the achievement of creating a world in which the hierarchical order of society was clearly demonstrated in everything from the king to the smallest serving girl. This is not just a reflection of a wished-for world but also a sign that social upheavals were taking place in the Breared community, where status symbols were important for marking that one belonged to the right social group. It is also evident that these upheavals had been going on for some time, and that Johannes Nilsson's status manifestations were not just associated with the improved economy at the start of the nineteenth century. Johannes Nilsson's father likewise portrayed his figures with more obvious status markings than other painters of hangings at the same time. The models for headdresses and costumes were taken from the upper class already in the 1770s. It seems to have been a natural way to express oneself for both Johannes Nilsson's father and himself. This suggests that Breared as a community shaped its inhabitants to mark clearly the specific groups to which they belonged.

## Pious and Popular

Johannes Nilsson's festive wall hangings completely agree in their aesthetic with the characteristics of folk art: the tendencies to stylization, a fondness for symmetry, rhythm, and the repetition of figures and ornaments, the filling of vacuums with elements unconnected with the main motif, simple, full-bodied hues and a delight in colour in the floral background ornamentation. The rotund, well-fed figures and the gaudy variety represent the taste and sensuousness of folk art. Wall hangings depicting people in various working situations are another category. It is not exactly hard-toiling, sweaty people in working clothes that Johannes Nilsson portrays, but fashion-conscious men and women temporarily acting the part of peasant folk and farm hands (Fig. 5). This lies far from the reality of the people, just as far as Ahasuerus' banquet is from the peasants' own feasts. The work pictures are therefore also demonstrations of status. A farmer who could keep such well-dressed servant folk had to be rich and important.

Johannes Nilsson's preaching or pious wall hangings are more restrained. They have simpler decoration and above all much less showy figures, and thus seem to tell us that spiritual people need less of the good things of this worldly life. They completely follow the Lutheran Christian's world-view. On the other hand, the conceptual world of folk religiosity is not expressed in his wall hangings, which seems remarkable. Judging by the records, the world-view of peasant society was built up of ideas about uncontrollable beings, ever present in all spheres of everyday life, but mostly invisible. Evil (or rather misfortune) lay outside people's control and could also be found in objects and dangerous encounters. Good (or rather "good fortune") was an elusive entity. The supply of good fortune was limited. However, Johannes Nilsson painted his festive motifs as if it was always available.

Folk religiosity is not easy to diagnose. Perhaps the Swedish ecclesiastical historian Hilding Pleijel comes closest to the truth when he says that

people in peasant society were unable to distinguish between the official Lutheranism, their traditional conceptions – what he calls primitive folk piety – and the relics of Catholicism. Recent research indicates that this may have been the case. The fact that the motifs of the wall hangings have a biblical origin makes them into potential objects for a transformation from official Lutheranism to "primitive folk piety." Painted wall hangings can thus in some way also be expressions of the mixed religion that Pleijel and others with him believe to have existed.

The church's influence on people's conceptual world proceeded slowly, and moreover at an uneven rate. The historian Eva Kärfve says that the two opposite poles in life, which in the popular conception were good fortune and bad fortune, were quite easily transformed under church influence into a notion of good and evil. The evil beings were thus amalgamated into a single figure: Satan. This idea of Satan played a major role in the witch trials.

Johannes Nilsson probably began to paint some time in the early 1770s. When he finally put down his brush twenty-five years into the eighteenth century, times had changed significantly. In terms of material circumstances, the position of the peasant class, and people's world-view, a great deal had changed. In his wall hangings can we follow a development from an Old Testament world to a New Testament one, from folk religiosity to a purer Lutheran Christianity. It is possible to follow in Johannes Nilsson's work a development towards a materially oriented peasant society, where it has become more important to manifest the individual's social position. Johannes Nilsson's nineteenth-century wall hangings can be interpreted as either religious or secular. In that respect they are not evidence of any pre-modern mentality. Pre-modernity is said to have been characterized by the union of the spiritual and the secular, with the whole of society pervaded by a religious world-view. At the start of the nineteenth century there was an ongoing process

which was to separate the spiritual and the secular. Is it possibly this tendency, this split into two worlds that we can observe in Johannes Nilsson's wall hangings? The motifs that seem to have been most important in the eighteenth century decorated the walls around the high seat. If the processes in the surrounding world are represented in the changes in wall hangings, it is precisely in these hangings that we have the greatest chance of seeing this. In these wall hangings we can also observe a distinct shift from a popular religious world during the eighteenth century to a pious Christian world in Johannes Nilsson's wall hangings.

### The Genre

Johannes Nilsson's wall hangings developed as part of the genre of wall hangings. In earlier research the recurrent features of wall hangings have been taken as evidence for the peasant painter's lack of independence and slavish faithfulness to his models. I would claim that genre-bound resemblances in wall hangings had more to do with the production of meaning in peasant society. My view is that similarity was necessary in the eighteenth century primarily because the hangings were used as ritualistic elements in the celebration of Christmas. Even if it is possible to discern change, the similarities persist on an overall structural level. The structure of Christmas wall hangings – the evil and the good side – was of crucial significance for their positioning in the room. This position in turn gave the wall hangings meanings which could admittedly change, but which depended on the structure for their perception. The binary opposites thus functioned as the grammar in a language system in which the position of the words in a clause is important for how the meaning is construed. The good side with the picture of Jesus was always placed nearest to the high seat and the evil side at the opposite end, furthest away from the seat of honour. This gave the wall hanging different meanings which no

doubt changed through time and in different contexts: misfortune/fortune, evil/good, death/life, hell/heaven. In this series of opposites one can also read a change from folk religiosity to Christian piety. In Johannes Nilsson's wall hanging from 1820 (cover) we find Jesus like a celestial figure and hell depicted on the opposite side. Here the pious Christian discourse reigns supreme.

In the wall hangings there are a great many such structures which functioned as a system of linguistic rules associated with the genre. For this language to have been used for communication about new conditions, any changes had to take place in other parts of the hanging than in the structure. If the structure can be compared to syntax, then the style is morphology. Through different paradigms in the style of the wall hangings, they could be about anything between heaven and earth.

Johannes Nilsson is not only the man who used the linguistic system of the wall hangings to express his own faith. Through his paintings he also communicated his knowledge of a society in change: a society which had gone from superstition via folk religiosity to Christian belief, from an older religiously coloured world-view to one divided up into secular and pious, and from a strictly ritualized and collective manifestation to an individualized one. We can discern the modern age approaching. Johannes Nilsson thus used a decorative tradition originating in the Middle Ages to build a new world-view.

*Translated by Alan Crozier, Lund*