To coincide with the 100th anniversary of the birth of Tove Jansson (1914 – 2001), the ICA will host an exhibition in the Fox Reading Room presenting original unseen photographs and material relating to her life and work, illustrated books and early first editions. Tove Jansson, an accomplished Finnish author and artist, had a life every bit as fascinating as her famous creations, The Moomins. Tove Jansson: Tales From the Archipelago draws an intimate portrait of the artist’s life on her private island in the archipelago of Finland, where she regularly spent the summer months with her female companion Tuulikki Pietilä and at her artist studio in Helsinki. Shot over a period of 60 years by her dear friend, renowned Finnish photographer C-G Hagström (b 1940) and her brother, photographer, Per Olov Jansson (b 1920), rare family photographs reveal a story of an extraordinary life. The exhibition will be curated by Susanna Pettersson, Director, and Animaya Grant, Head of Events at the Finnish Institute in London, with the ICA.
Listings information:
Tove Jansson: Tales from the Nordic Archipelago, exhibition: 15 July – 24 August 2014
Opening Times: Friday 6 June 11am – 8pm; Saturday 7 June 11am - 8 pm; Sunday 8 June 11am – 6 pm
Day Membership priced at £1 now applies during gallery opening hours Wed-Sun, 11am-6pm, until 9pm on Thursdays. No Day Membership is charged on Tuesdays.
Ticket prices for day time films, talks, music events and performances include Day Membership.
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Editor’s notes:
Tove Jansson was born on 9 August 1914 in the Katjanokka district of Helsinki and grew up in an artist family. Her father Viktor Jansson was a sculptor and her mother Signe Hammarsten-Jansson was a graphic designer and illustrator. Jansson studied art in Stockholm and Helsinki, and she also sought inspiration from Paris and Italy. In the late summer of 1944, Jansson rented an attic studio in the centre of the Helsinki at Ullanlinnankatu 1. The studio became her cherished home where she lived and worked in the autumn and winter. Summers were spent on the tiny island of Klovharu in the Gulf of Finland. Jansson loved the sea and the archipelago, which can be seen in her multifaceted art. Back in her studio in the heart of Helsinki she created her most renowned paintings and texts. It was here that Jansson finished her first book featuring Moomintroll. The studio would serve as her cherished home, a source of power and a haven for almost 60 years. Jansson is best known as the author of the Moomin books for children. The first such book, The Moomins and the Great Flood, appeared in 1945, though it was the next two books, Comet in Moominland and Finn Family Moomintroll, published in 1946 and 1948 respectively, that brought her fame.

Susanna Pettersson, Director of the Finnish Institute in London, discusses Tove Jansson: Tales from the Nordic Archipelago

Tove Jansson’s (1914–2001) life was just as exciting as her most famous character’s, the Moomins. Her multifaceted artistic career as a writer, visual artist and a cartoonist spanned more than seventy years – and she was loved the world over. Bold, fearless and pioneering, Tove believed in not compromising on her art. Jansson grew up in an artist family, amid beautiful Jugendstil (Art Nouveau) blocks of flats in Helsinki’s Katajanokka. Her father was the sculptor Viktor Jansson and her mother the Swedish artist Signe Hammarsten. Their home was filled with sculptures and drawings. The family had three children: Lars, Tove and Per Olov. Per Olov became a photographer and Lars a Moomin drawer. Her father Viktor once said: “Our Tove will be a great artist one day. Really great!” From the start of the 1920s onwards, Tove Jansson spent her summers in the Pellinki archipelago. She wrote and drew, chopped wood, sculpted, built dens, and thought about things. “Work and Love” was her most important motto, which she also had inscribed on the Ex-Libris bookplates she drew as a girl (1947).
Work and dreams took the young Tove Jansson to art schools in Stockholm and Helsinki, and on study trips to Germany and Paris. She painted landscapes, still lifes and portraits, and in doing so found her own mode of expression. Jansson was at her very best when painting self-portraits, in which the young artist takes the measure of the surrounding world. She also made drawings and did illustration work to earn her own living. She published her first illustrations when she was only 14.

It was on the drawing board that the first little Moomintrolls appeared, too, their life in Moominvalley developing into comic strips, books, plays, and later also animated films. Apart from the lovable Moomin family, the characters include Little My, Snufkin, Sniff, and that master of taunts and mischief, Stinky.

**Tove Jansson and the Moomins in London**

It soon became clear that there was a demand for the Moomins outside of Finland, including in England. Painting now took a back seat. Tove Jansson signed her first long-term contract with London’s Evening News in 1952. The circumstances were unusual: Charles Sutton, syndication manager for Associated Newspapers, actually travelled to meet Jansson on Finland’s biggest and wildest spring celebration, May Day Eve.

“In the evening, May Day festivities at her studio, 20 people, a guitar and Finnish jallu brandy, an angry building manager, balloons and drinks and dancing and morning coffee, the whole works. And on top of that, on May 1st, a business lunch at Kämp – somewhat disrupted by the fact that the restaurant was full of singing high-school graduates dancing and shinng up the pillars, children playing, and the presence of a large contingent of the nocturnal guests. Mr. Sutton may have got a somewhat misleading impression of a merry Finland, but he did have fun.” (Westin 2008, 250)

The first Moomin comic strip appeared in the Evening News in September 1954. By this stage, several translations of Jansson’s books had already appeared in English (Finn Family Moomintroll 1950, The Happy Moomins 1951, Comet in Moominland 1951). The strip was published six days a week. She became an international star who was sought after everywhere. At its most prolific the strip appeared in some 120 daily papers in different parts of the world.


Fame also had its other side. Business correspondence ate up time and energy. Rights to the Moomin figures were very much in demand, especially in the United States. Jansson, nevertheless, kept the reins in her own hands and chose her business partners carefully. For example, she politely declined an offer from Walt Disney.

**An island of her own**

A counterbalance to Jansson’s work-filled life was found in the beloved landscape of her childhood, in the archipelago. “Surprisingly many people dream of an island,” she wrote in 1961. She read D. H. Lawrence’s short story The Man Who Loved Islands, and considered being an islander as a way of life. Memories of childhood family excursions in the Pellinki archipelago reinforced the idea that Tove, too, wanted her very own island. At her side was her life partner, the artist Tuulikki Pietilä.

In 1964, Jansson began building a cottage on Klovharu Island with local builders. She often called Klovharu an “angry island” – it was barren, windy, and the firewood and fresh water crucial for existence had to be brought from the mainland. On stormy nights, they had to take turns guarding the boat, so that it would not head off out to the open sea. Despite its resistance the island was much loved.
“I suppose I have rarely been as happy as I was during those weeks when the timbers were being put up, we hammered as if our lives depended on it! We slept in the Bredskär cottage (I, discretely in the loft) and early each morning we went over to Haru […] it was a stormy autumn, a constant 6 7 on the Beaufort scale. Gradually snow began to arrive. I made food for us on Haru, under a tarpaulin, mostly fish.” (Westin 2008, 331)

The cottage was completed and Tove Jansson and Tuulikki Pietilä’s hiding place became a much loved spot to visit for all their friends and relatives – including gatecrashers! Occasionally, there were too many visitors, and it was impossible to do any work. At such times, Tove fled to be among the rocks. She rolled and carried rocks to build stone benches and a stone shelter. She wrote about the rocks and painted them. This calmed her down.

“I love rock: the cliff that descends vertically to the sea and the high rock that you can’t climb, and the flint in my pocket, levering rocks out of the ground and rolling them out of the way, and when I let the biggest boulders bowl down from the high rock into the sea! When they rumble on their way, they leave a pungent smell of sulphur in the air.” Tove Jansson and Tuulikki Pietilä wrote about and drew their island experiences for a book, Haru, eräs saari (Haru – an island), 1996. The island and the closeness of the sea were also a powerful living presence in Tove Jansson’s literary production.

Klovharu Island was a firm fixed point in Jansson and Pietilä’s life, the place where they spent their summers, to which they always returned after long journeys. These journeys varied from a round-the-world trip lasting eight months to spending a few months working in Paris, plus numerous work trips to different parts of the world.

In September 1991, Tove Jansson and Tuulikki Pietilä left Klovharu Island for the last time. As Jansson had written half a century earlier: “That night, we went up onto the highest rock and saw the sea sparkling in the white moonlight. It was barely real – the island was like a moonscape or a dream.” (Westin 2008, 441)

Sources:

Tove’s photographers

C-G Hagström

C-G Hagström’s (1940-) career as a photographer took off in the fashion world. He photographed Finnish fashion for American clients in Porvoo and on the islands of Suomenlinna, and as a result ended up in New York. This was in 1968 and 1969.

“My portfolio included fashion, still lifes and design, including Marimekko clothes and glass objects by Timo Sarpaneva and Tapio Wirkkala. The Americans liked my product photos a lot. I personally thought I was at my best as a photographer of people.”

Hagström photographed objects for the New York Times’ Christmas supplement and did album covers for country-music records. Alongside this, he photographed people: artists, thinkers and influential figures.

“I took photos for the Finnish papers, for example, Louis Armstrong, Marlon Brando and Susan Sontag. Dustin Hoffman I got to photograph in Central Park on the very day that I arrived in the city!”

Hagström’s work as a photographer also took him to the other side of the world. He did fashion shoots in Moscow and Leningrad, photographed opera at the Bolshoi, and made reportage photos of the Kremlin. In Africa his subjects were health care, and road and water projects. In the 1970s, his destinations included Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda.
“Sometimes I lived in the bush, sometimes in a mud hut. My most important item of clothing was a mosquito net.”

Tove Jansson came into C-G Hagström’s life at the Independence Day Reception at the Finnish Presidential Palace in 1966. There, Hagström took his first pictures of Jansson and her close friend, the theatre director and manager Vivica Bandler (1917-2004).

“After that, I began photographing Tove in a variety of places. In her studio and in the landscapes of her childhood in Helsinki’s Katajanokka. On one occasion, we went to look at her childhood home on Luotsikatu Street, but that was not a particularly good idea. The spirit had gone. Only the staircase was the same. But the park still had the right feeling!”

Tove Jansson told Hagström colourful tales about her childhood in Katajanokka. Sometimes they shouted at the police patrolling the streets, sometimes they found other things to do.

“On one occasion, Tove had been sent by her father to buy Työmies (working man) cigarettes. The old shopkeeper had said to the 4-year-old Tove: ‘Oh, so you’ve started smoking, Tove.’”

Hagström and Jansson not only developed a good working relationship, but also a friendship. C-G Hagström got to know Per Olov Jansson – Tove’s brother – when she was just 80. Since then, they have shared their enthusiasm for photography and visited photography exhibitions together.

“Tove did not like being photographed. She was shy and even scared, especially when I took out the camera. We generally met without a journalist present. Occasionally, we didn’t take any pictures at all.”

Per Olov Jansson

Per Olov Jansson (1920-) travelled to London for the first time as a young exchange student. He particularly remembers a visit to St Paul’s Cathedral, where the magnificent dome made an indelible impression on the young man. From home there came pressure to try to get into the arts.

“I decided to start writing. I published a short-story collection, Ung man vandrar allena (a young man wanders alone, 1945) and one novel, Bok med lycklig slut (book with a happy ending, 1946).

After the war, Per Olov married, and children soon followed. He had to work to earn a living, and so writing had to take second place.

“Writing could indeed make you famous, but not rich. I decided to get a decent camera and to start making exciting journeys. I took pictures in the romantic style of the time and participated in competitions in Sweden. In 1946, I won first prize in a picture-of-the-month competition.”

Success in the competition helped the young Per Olov to get started as a photographer. He admired Ansel Adams and Henri Cartier-Bresson, while also shooting adverts and doing work for industry.

Sometimes, he travelled to the other side of the world to take pictures: to New York, California and Nevada. Advertising photography, nevertheless, began to feel meaningless – between client and commissioner there was little room for creativity.

He found his true focus of interest not just in free photography, but also in the underwater world. Per Olov was an amateur diver and this led him to shipwrecks. He dived in the Baltic with his son and his brother Lasse. Most of the wrecks that he explored had been carrying cargoes of bricks or salt. Tove occasionally dived with them, too.

“We also made our own diving suits. Lasse took the measurements and drew the patterns. I did the cutting and gluing!”

Per Olov increasingly began taking photographs in his spare time, “aus Liebe zur Kunst”. He took part in group exhibitions and was active in several camera clubs. At the end of the 1970s, he had his first solo exhibition, which was held by a sports divers’ association. In 2006, he published the book Valolla piirtäjä – teckna, men med ljus (drawing with light), in which he sets out his ideas about photography.

“I started off with romantic landscapes, but soon swapped styles and became a modernist. Black-and-white photographs, semi-abstracts, multiple exposures and self-portraits. My trips to Africa spawned an entire exhibition. I also took a lot of pictures of Tove.”
Her brother’s skills were also needed for photographing her studio and her works. Their collaboration resulted in a book of photographs, Outo vieras muumitalossa (a strange visitor in the Moomin house, 1980).

"Tove was happy to come and help, if I needed a model. The best picture I ever took of Tove shows her amid glittering waves."

The exhibition is supported by the Finnish Institute in London