

The Swedish Lucia and her Dress

Ann Resare

Abstract:

Every year on the 13th of December, we have the tradition of celebrating Lucia in Sweden. The celebration is a heritage from the time of the Catholic Church in Sweden, which ended during the 16th century. Yet, the Lucia Day is still a very special day and it is recognized in all social groups, at schools, workplaces, offices and in private homes.

Content: The tradition of Lucia in Sweden / The history of the Swedish Lucia / St. Lucia in Sicily

The tradition of Lucia in Sweden

Early in the morning a young girl serves an early breakfast, dressed in a white gown, with a red ribbon as a belt and carrying a crown with burning candles on her head. She is nowadays singing a very special song that is known by everybody from kindergarten to old people's homes.

In the 1920's a newspaper in Stockholm started a beauty-contest, to find the most representative young girl to collect money for beneficiary goals. It was a great honor to be appointed the Lucia of the year. Many local newspapers have followed this tradition and today there are celebrations on the Lucia Day everywhere. A traditional Lucia has to be blond and have long hair, but in today's schools and kindergartens this is no longer a rule.

The history of Swedish Lucia

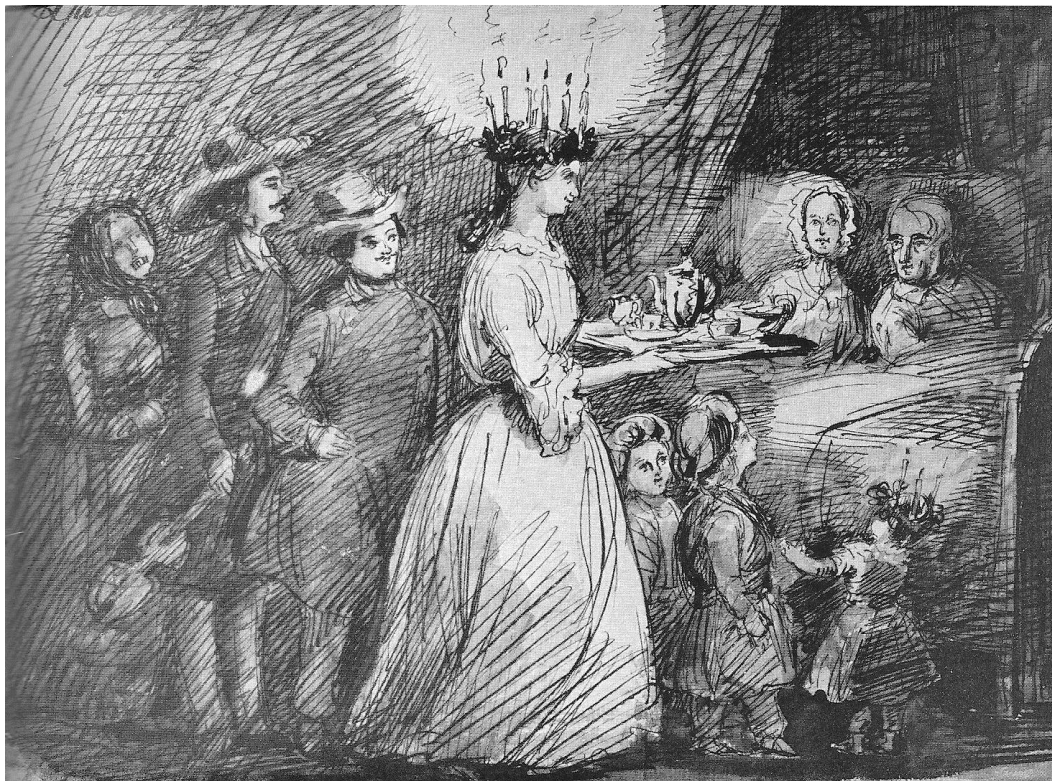


Fig. 1: The first picture of Lucia from 1848.

The first time a Lucia was mentioned in the Swedish literature was in 1764. The picture is from 1848, by Fritz von Dardel (fig. 1). It shows an early morning in a manor house. The tradition probably spread from Germany through German miners and appears first in the Western part of Sweden. According to the older calendar, up to 1753 the 13th of December was the darkest and longest night of year and therefore you had to have an early breakfast. Both people and animals were served meals this morning by the Lucia. This traditions spread to the universities where male students continued the tradition of serving an early breakfast, dressed in white nightdresses.



Fig. 2: The first Lucia at Skansen 1893.

Artur Hazelius, the founder of Skansen in Stockholm, was a student in the 1860's when he was first introduced to the Lucia celebration in Uppsala. It made a great impression on him. In 1893, Artur Hazelius showed the first Lucia to the public at Skansen. He had to explain to the public what kind of tradition this was. Nobody in Stockholm knew about Lucia at this time. The Lucia wears a simple nightdress with a red belt and wears a crown with candles on her head (fig. 2). The crown is tied with green leaves from lingonberry.

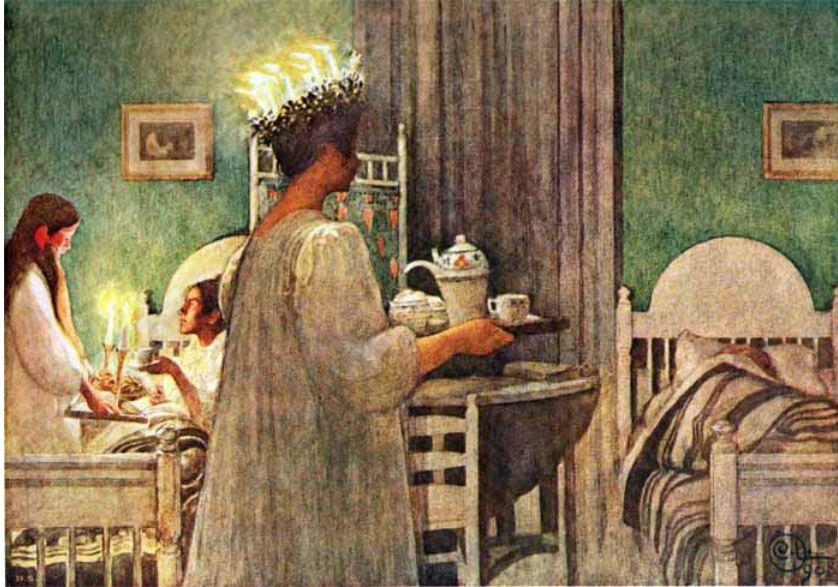


Fig. 3: From the home of Carl Larsson 1908.

The tradition spread slowly and in 1908 we can see a scene from the home of Carl Larsson in Sundborn (fig. 3). He was a well-known artist at the time and he always found his motives within his family.

In 1927, the newspaper Stockholms Dagblad arranged a beauty-contest to find the prettiest Lucia. The Lucia had nine maids of honors with her when she went on horseback through the streets of Stockholm. Lucia and her maids collected money for poor and sick children.

In 1952, this blond girl, Kerstin Ornö, became the Stockholm Lucia (fig. 4, 5). After the 13th December, she went to participate in the celebration of Saint Lucia in Syracuse in Sicily. Kerstin Ornö donated her Lucia dress to Skansens Klädkammare, where I used to work.



Fig. 4: The Stockholm Lucia of 1952.



Fig. 5: The Lucia and François Mauriac 1952.

The Lucia of 1952 was crowned in the town hall by the Nobel Prize laureate in literature François Mauriac and was given a necklace as a memory of the day. The Lucia crown belonged to the newspaper which had arranged the contest.



Fig. 6: The Lucia dress from NK Fashion House 1952.

This dress was made by the most elegant fashion house in Stockholm at the time. It was made by the French section of Nordiska Kompaniet and was made of shiny artificial silk. The collar is of silver brocade and embroidered with glittering stones. Her maids of honors wore similar dresses, but of simpler materials. The dress from 1952 was donated to Skansens Klädkammare (fig. 6). It has been copied and the copies are still used by Lucia's today.

St. Lucia in Sicily

The Saint Lucia is celebrated every year in Syracuse with a procession when the Lucia statue is carried through the streets of Syracuse. The statue is made of silver and weighs 1000 kilos (fig. 7). It is made by the 16th-century artist Pietro Rizzo.



Fig. 7: The silver statue in Syracuse, Sicily.

The legend of St. Lucia tells that she was killed because she was a Christian in a Roman society. She gave away all her belongings to the poor people. She took out her eyes when she was sentenced to death and she is the patron of blind people. She is always depicted with her eyes in her hand. Every year, the Swedish Lucia and two of her maids walk for eight hours in this procession.



Fig. 8: A Swedish Lucia and her maids in Syracuse.

There is a very vague connection between the Swedish Lucia and the Sicilian Saint Lucia. Nevertheless, the tradition continues and the Swedish Lucia still travels to Sicily in December every year (fig. 8). The dress she wears has drastically changed over the years, from a simple nightdress to an haute-couture creation. Yet, it is still white with a red ribbon and she still wears a crown with burning candles on her head.