

Ecclesiastical furniture  
as  
a challenge for heritage  
preservation

by

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# Ecclesiastical furniture

In Sweden there are more than 3400 churches.

About 2900 of them are classified by the heritage law (SFS 1988:950) as heritage.

That means that all churches built before 1939 are automatically protected heritage by the heritage law.

There is also a separate list of churches built after 1939 that also are classified as protected heritage by the National Board of Heritage.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

This also means that all cemeteries built before 1939 are also automatically protected heritage.

There are also some cementaries built after 1939 that are also classified as protected heritage by the National board of heritage.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

It is mentioned that the estimated number of protected ecclesiastical sites are about 2.900.

But the fact is that nobody seems to know how many these are?

The number of sites differs depending from whom you ask.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

In 2000 the Swedish church was separated from the Swedish state.

Before that where all church buildings built before 1817 in the countryside and before 1843 in the cities self owning foundations. These where finished when the relation between the state and the church changed and became a part of the ownership of the Swedish church.

When the heritage protection in Sweden was established in 1666 the churches and the ecclesiastical furniture were mentioned as important parts of the heritage.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

Also the ecclesiastical furniture in all the protected churches are protected by the law, there is no age limit for these, so even modern pieces of arts, textiles etc are protected.

But how many protected churches are there?

And how many pieces of protected ecclesiastical furniture are there?

# Ecclesiastical furniture

The problem is that nobody knows even how many protected churches there are.

The numbers differs between the central office of the Swedish church and the the state county administration boards. These are as mentoined about 2900.

But there seems to be more!!!

# Ecclesiastical furniture

Churches owned by the Swedish church (Swedish church 2007)

| <b>Diocese</b> | <b>protected</b> | <b>not protected</b> | <b>total number</b> |
|----------------|------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Uppsala        | 255              | 33                   | 288                 |
| Linköping      | 230              | 28                   | 258                 |
| Skara          | 352              | 35                   | 387                 |
| Strängnäs      | 174              | 20                   | 194                 |
| Västerås       | 158              | 15                   | 173                 |
| Växjö          | 282              | 42                   | 324                 |
| Lund           | 474              | 31                   | 505                 |
| Göteborg       | 323              | 57                   | 380                 |
| Karlstad       | 152              | 18                   | 170                 |
| Härnösand      | 180              | 34                   | 214                 |
| Luleå          | 127              | 70                   | 197                 |
| Visby          | 94               | 3                    | 97                  |
| Stockholm      | 107              | 43                   | 150                 |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>2908</b>      | <b>429</b>           | <b>3337</b>         |



# Ecclesiastical furniture

Just an example in Visby diocese, Gotland are the numbers:

- 92 protected parish churches
- 1 protected modern church
- 3 protected chapels (Hallshuk, Gnisvård, Olofsholm)
- 3 protected cemeteries (Visby)
- 1 chapel owned by a foundation (Hjorter's chapel)
- 4 ruins used for services in the countryside

TOTAL 104 OBJECTS

But the official number from the Swedish church is 94.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

But how many pieces of ecclesiastical furniture are there?

Nobody knows except the Diocese of Visby.

There was an inventory made in this diocese 1994-2010.

In these 104 heritage objects there are over 23.000 protected pieces of ecclesiastical furniture.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

But how many pieces of ecclesiastical furniture are there in all the protected Swedish churches?

**A careful estimate is 600.000 – 700.000 pieces!**

# Ecclesiastical furniture

THE FACT IS THAT  
THE SWEDISH STATE IN 2000  
LET OVER  
THE OWNERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY  
OF A LARGE AMOUNT OF PROPERTIES AND ART  
PIECES  
TO  
THE SWEDISH CHURCH

# Ecclesiastical furniture

What to do with all the churches?

Where are the problems?

The problems for the churches are both in the cities and in the countryside.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

There are general problems with the churches:

More and more churches are not open for public in the same way as before. Open churches for the public were a demand for getting the state subsidies.

The churches do not have updated registers for moveables, knowledge about the churches etc

There is almost no communication with the groups not belonging to the Swedish church about the cultural heritage. This could be one way to find solutions for the left over churches.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

Problems for the churches in the cities:

- The congregations in the hearts of the big cities have shrunk, because there are fewer people living here.
- In many city centres the building structures are dominated by office- and businessbuildings.
- The living standard differs from historical times. Fewer and fewer people are living in the flats.
- The city population is more secularised than the countryside people.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

What to do with the big city churches?

- There are usually needs for concert halls, conference centres etc. A church is easily changed for these purposes, not destroying important cultural values.
- Other Christian societies could take over.
- Churches with less cultural values could be changed for purposes as supermarkets, gyms or offices.
- It is not to recommend to sell of churches to other religious (not Christian believers) activities.
- Here we have good examples from Denmark.



# Ecclesiastical furniture

The countryside churches are more problematic.

- People are moving from the countryside to the cities.
- The population is dominated by elderly people.
- There are not enough members to keep up a congregation with a church.
- The highest cultural valued churches are many times situated in the churches in the middle of nowhere.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

What to do in the countryside churches?

In many cases countryside areas are also places for summerhouses, resorts etc. Good examples are Gotland, Öland, parts of Scania, the coast zone in many places.

But there will be areas without interest from summerliving. These will be the most problematic.

There will be churches with very high cultural values where nobody is living any more.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

There are some good examples of changes from church to other use:

Örgryte new church in Gothenburg, a part of the International Organ center at Gothenburg University.

Östra Nöbbelöv church in Scania will be an cultural centre owned by the congregation. A Nordic architectural competition is held in 2013.

In Sweden hundreds of free churches and chapels have been rebuild for other purposes. The Methodist church in Visby still owned and used as a church is also used for conferences and conserts.

But the fact is that the three most important architectural monuments of free churches in Stockholm were pulled down.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

## CONCLUSION

There will be a great number of abandoned churches in the countryside with great cultural values, that nobody likes to take care of.

But on the other side there is a strong public opinion not to torn these down.

What is the future for these churches? Museums?; Just standing abandoned? Or what? This the real problem!

# Ecclesiastical furniture

Perhaps the solution would be to make a foundation in every diocese for the most valuable abandoned churches. These will still be churches, but mostly used as museums and other purposes as concert halls.

The fact is that the Diocese of Visby is more a church Skansen than a group of properly functioning congregations. But the organisation of taking care of the maintenance of the churches is very rational.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

What will happen with the protected ecclesiastical furniture in the Swedish churches?

Today are almost all pieces protected!

But the system is leaking?

# Ecclesiastical furniture

There have been some cases in Sweden during the last years where you clearly can see that the system is not functioning:

- Söderfors congregation (Uppland) tried to get promise to sell two pieces by Lucas Cranach the elder (deposited in the Swedish Nationalmuseum)
- There have been thefts in the medieval churches in North of Sweden. Medieval sculptures have been illegally exported. Several of the congregations did not even have photos of the pieces and in some cases these did not even know that something was stolen.
- In the yearly Swedish International Antique fair in Stockholm you can find pieces of ecclesiastical furniture for ex. bricks from Ystad monastery, medieval tile floors, epitaphs, chalices etc. There are no reaction neither from the Swedish national board of heritage nor from the Swedish church. These have been informed.
- There have been pieces in Blocket, Auction sites and Local auctions with clearly identified pieces from churches but neither the County administration boards nor the dioceses are reacting. These have been informed.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

Why?

- Lack of knowledge and interest.
- No proper inventories and photos.
- No proper controls.
- No interest in what is happening around.



# Ecclesiastical furniture

There are also other problems. In some private museums there are a lot of really high quality pieces of ecclesiastical furniture. These are bought and donated from the congregations. These societies had not had the permission from the Swedish state to buy nor to get donations from the congregations. These pieces must be seen as depositories from the congregations. This question is an interesting topic still open.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

What shall we do with all these pieces when the churches are closing?

There are churches closed and the ecclesiastical furniture have been and stored.

But is it really worth to put all the pieces into storages?

# Ecclesiastical furniture

Perhaps the law is too rigid?

Should we have new rules and laws?

What shall be preserved in the ownership of the Swedish church?

Who will decide what should be preserved in the ownership of the Swedish church?

# Ecclesiastical furniture

There are good and bad examples how to solve these questions.

A good example is Netherlands where the laws were changed and system for dealing with the problems was established.

A bad example is Portugal where this process happened after the revolution 1974.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

The antique market is waiting with great interested what will happen.  
Some comments:

- There are no preconception thoughts to have Christian symbols in private collections.
- There are no preconception thoughts to use chalics and other silver pieces for other purposes.
- There will also be a market for epitafs, funeral coats of arms, church textilies etc.

**BUT REMEMBER WHAT IS SOLD IS VERY DIFFUCULT TO GET BACK!!!**

# Ecclesiastical furniture

In Sweden we have had bad experiences of breaking up the entailed estates.

In Sweden the social democratic government decided by the law SFS 1963:583 to finish the entailed estates.

The entailed estates could be land properties but also art collections etc.

In 1978 the Wanås collection with over 78 pieces was sold off, among them two Rembrants. The state could have bought the whole collection for 2 million SEK, but did not take the opportunity. It was sold on the private market.

The Nationalmuseum have during the years bought on the free market 4 paintings from the collection on the free market for more than 2 million SEK.

The next collection of this type to be sold is the Biby collection.

# Ecclesiastical furniture

There is an obvious risk that ecclesiastical furniture will be sold on the free market.

The pieces of art will survive, but in new owners' hands these will not be exposed to the great public.

Once sold and splitted up, it is almost impossible to get back the pieces in common ownership.

The idea of the reform between the Swedish state and the Swedish church was to keep the churches and the ecclesiastical furniture open to all the Swedish people.

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**Thanks for your attention!**

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