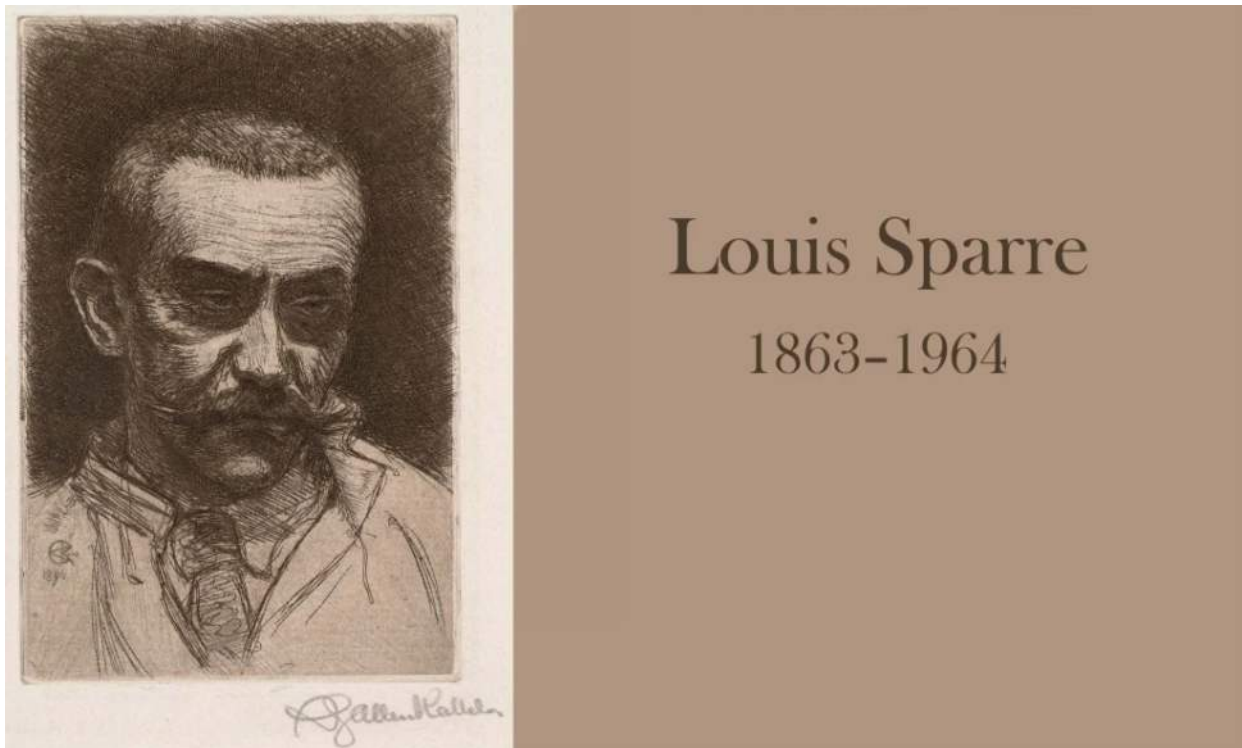


Tales From The Brazier's Grotto

by Katriina Etholén

Louis Sparre – a Swedish Count, Who Fell in Love with Porvoo



Louis Sparre was born on 3 August 1863. He lived over hundred years and eight of them in my hometown, Porvoo. His legacy is still seen here. He is known as a painter, but in Porvoo he is remembered from the furniture factory that he founded, Aktiebolaget Iris (the Iris Co. Ltd.). Now there is an exhibition about the factory and its products in Porvoo Museum, but I will write a special article about the factory later. In this post I concentrate on Louis Sparre and on his eighteen years in Finland of which he spent eight years in Porvoo with his family.

My main source for this article is the book that Louis Sparre's wife, Eva Mannerheim-Sparre wrote. The book is called *Taiteilijaelämä* that can be translated as "Artist life" (not artist's life). That's a good title as she had her own career, too. She is particularly famous for her book arts, also known beyond the border of Finland and Sweden (where the couple moved in 1908). She was also a writer.

Pehr Louis Sparre af Söfdeborg (written as “Pietro Luigi” in the Italian baptismal certificate) was born on 3 August 1863 in Gravellona Lomellina, near Milan, to Pehr Ambjörn Sparre af Söfdeborg, a Swedish inventor, and Italian Teresita Adèle Josefa Gaëtana Barbavara di Gravellona, who died in 1867, when Louis was only four years old. Two years later little Louis, nicknamed “Bibi”, travelled first time to Sweden, where he spent the winter with his mother and grandparents. Ambjörn Sparre travelled back to continent with big plans and messy business matters. That’s how he was until the end of his live, big plans, new inventions, money problems, patent applications, lawsuits. He was sure that one day he will be rich. He was thinking in that way still in his nineties, according to Eva Mannerheim-Sparre’s book. Most of the time he was living away from his family, travelling around Europe on business trips.

Ambjörn’s young family travelled back to Italy for summer with nanny Hilda Rosendahl. After Teresita’s death Louis lived with his father in Paris. But when Franco-Brussian war started in 1870, he was sent to live with his uncle in Italy. In his early teens, he was sent to school in Stockholm. During his teenage years he become interested in seafaring life and that interest seems to have stayed – that’s my own thought. He liked to paint sea views (he made a trip to St. Ives to paint sea and fishing views, and he also rented a hut on the islet where the Söderskär lighthouse stands in front of Porvoo to be close to sea) and during the summers the family loved to sail at their summer location, at least during their time in Porvoo.



Louis had showed interest on art already at an early age. In Sweden he started his first art classes in the evening school. He spent the summer 1879 with his father in Paris, where he had a chance for many artistic experiences in museums and exhibitions. He also took early steps in fencing. (In 1912 he competed in épée fencing at the Summer Olympics.)

After school Louis had his own dreams about his future, but Ambjörn Sparre had plans for his son: Louis would start working as a drawer (draughtsman) in Ambjörn’s workshop in Paris. Louis was dreaming about art studies, but his father was strongly against that kind of nonsense. But after some stormy times with his father, Louis was able to start studying in Académie Julian. Here he met Finnish artists: sculptor Emil Wikström and painters Eero Järnefelt and Axel Gallén (later Akseli Gallén-Kallela). Louis and Axel made at once great friends. Louis was finally spending an artist’s life in Montmartre.

**Ambjörn and Louis Sparre, Paris.
Photographed between 1884 and 89. Finnish**

Sparre comes to Finland

Axel Gallén invited Louis Sparre to Finland. Louis came to Finland first time in the beginning of June in 1889 and stayed until November. With Gallén he familiarized himself with Finland's wilderness, the forests, where they could hunt and fish. This kind of life had been his dream since the boyhood. After a winter in Paris, he was back in Finland in June 1890. According to Eva Mannerheim-Sparre, he had decided to paint diligently this time as in the previous visit he didn't paint as much as he probably had planned to paint.



Louis Sparre (left) and Axel Gallén (right) photographed in the wilderness scenery by Daniel Nyblin in Helsinki, 1890. Aalto University, archives of Department of Architecture. CC BY-NC 4.0. (Source)

In the autumn he travelled back to Paris and continued his art studies. Louis was fascinated by the Finnish forest life. In the summer 1891 he travelled again to Finland, but this time to stay. Together with Gallén they "found" the Russian Karelia and in the following summer Sparre travelled there with Emil Wikström.

Sparre had to get money for living in one way or another. In the autumn 1891 he contacted Tilgmann's printing company to offer his services. He started doing all kinds of drawing works for the company, from book covers to labels. One company logo must be familiar at least to the older generation of Porvoo residents, the BB logo for a local brewery, Borgå Bryggeri.

Sparre met his future wife, Eva Mannerheim (whose older brother was C. G. E. Mannerheim,



The BB label of Borgå Bryggeri (Porvoo brewery). From author's collection.

to paint a tar burning scene. He was also capturing the different scenes and phases of tar burning with a camera.

a future Marshal and President of Finland), in the autumn 1891. They planned to get married in the summer 1893. The only problem was to get the needed papers for banns of marriage from Stockholm. They were not coming in time for the first planned dates. Finally the cause for the delay was solved: Louis' name was deleted from the parish register, because he was so much abroad that he was considered as a vagrant. Family needed to find two trustworthy persons to vouch for Louis' reliability. That happened and finally he could marry Eva.

And what was the destination of the honeymoon? Paris? No, the destination was Kajaani and from there they did a short trip to Russian Karelia. Eva was fascinated by the Finnish wilderness just like her husband. They travelled by ship, on two-wheeled cart and rowing boat and the last leg was done by foot. Back to Kajaani the newlyweds travelled on a tar boat. In the following year they were again in the north. Louis wanted



Tar boats are overhauled for a journey in the Kajaani region in 1894.
 Photograph by Louis Sparre. Finnish Heritage Agency, Press Photo Archive
 JOKA. CC BY 4.0. (Source)

Soon their first child was born. Eva worked on her book covers, taught in Ateneum's art school and besides that she had private students, too. Louis started to find his place in the Finnish art world. He was working on the altarpiece for the Vaasa Church. There are in fact three altarpieces. The middle one is painted by Albert Edelfelt, the one on the left is painted by R. W. Ekman and on the right there is Louis Sparre's work *The Deposition of Christ*. It was finished in 1897. On the parish's website it's said that Sparre's work is emotionally strongest (source).

Louis worked on the altarpiece in Paris. In 1896 the Sparres made a short Europe tour, and that included a trip to London as well. It didn't go as well as they would have wished, because Louis was suffering from a "cat fever", a mysterious illness that appeared, if there were cats around. Hay fever was a known nuisance, but no one had heard about cat fever. But here in London Louis finally met a doctor, who had seen this kind of allergy before. The only advice he could give was that Louis should avoid cats. Louis and Eva Sparre visited also Charles Holme's home at Red House, a former home of William Morris. Charles Holme was a founding editor of *The Studio* magazine and he was very interested in the Scandinavian art. During this visit the Sparres were asked to scratch their names with a diamond on a pane of glass. I am curious to know if the signatures of all the visitors have survived. The house was sold to National Trust two decades ago. It is open for visitors. They also visited the famous and still existing Liberty store, where they saw modern furniture and fabrics.

There is a reason, why I wrote about this trip to London and not about the other places they visited: It made Louis start to think about what he could do in the field of applied arts of Finland. That was the start for Aktiebolaget Iris (the Iris Co. Ltd.). But as I mentioned already in the intro, there will be a special article about the factory later here on my blog. (Update: you can read it [here](#).)

Moving to Porvoo

Louis Sparre had visited Porvoo first time in 1893. He had fallen in love with this small town already back then. But there were more practical reasons to start this new venture, a furniture factory, in Porvoo rather than in Helsinki: it would be cheaper and the atmosphere would be more peaceful for artistic work. Louis was also confident that he had got enough practical experience during the days working as a drawer for his father.

The family bought a villa (Villa Wilhelmsberg) about two kilometres from town centre. The villa that they named "Orrela" still exists. Here is an article (in Finnish) about it, including current images and an old photo of the building. The short lived (1897–1902) factory itself was located in the town.

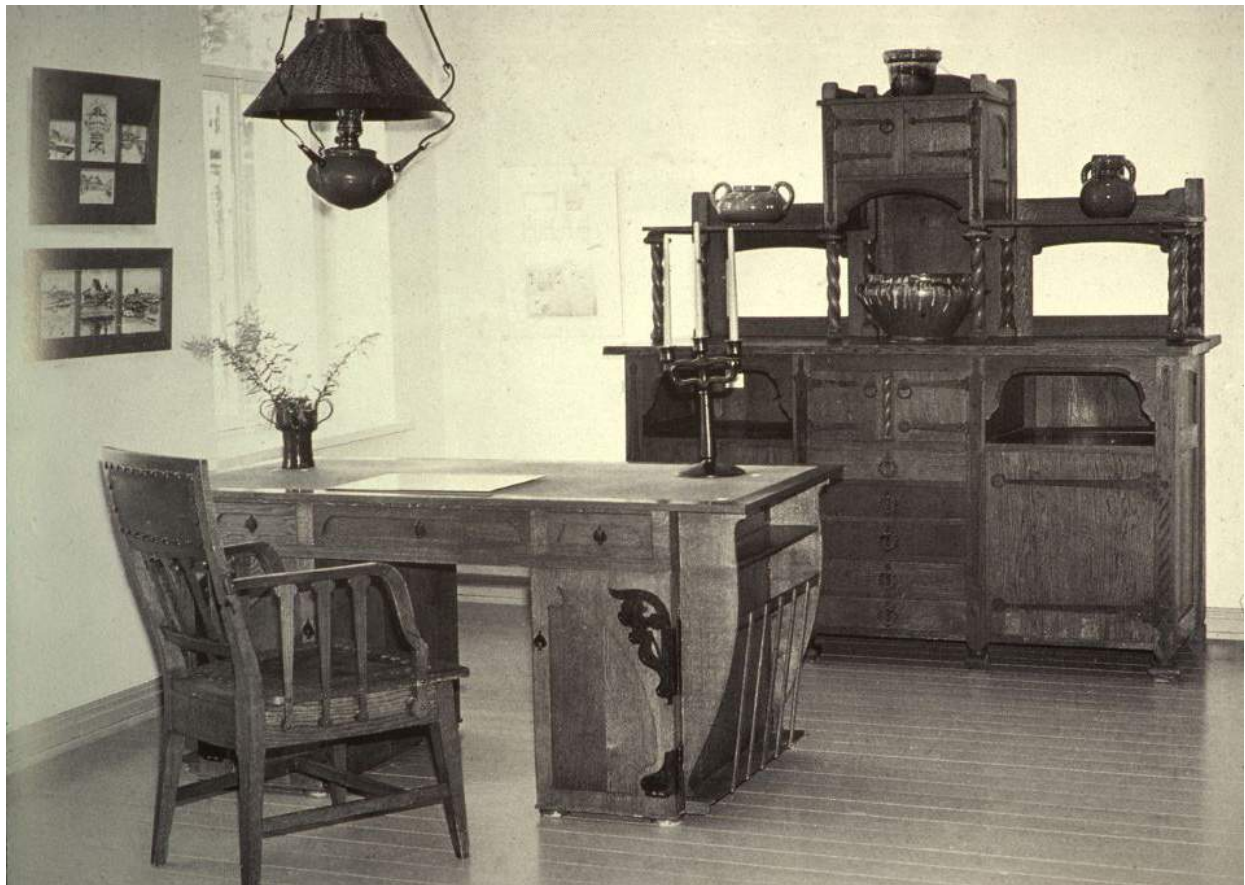
Photo © Katrina Etholén



The WSOY building photographed on 22 October 1997.

In fact the old Iris factory building is still under the modern exterior of former premises of the WSOY printing and publishing company (see the photo above).

Even though I will come back with Iris factory later, I want to include one photo that shows products manufactured in the factory. It shows furniture from the home of mineralogist and chemist, Walter Wahl, including a dining room cabinet, writing desk and an armchair. The oil lamp is also designed by Louis Sparre.



Louis Sparre: writing desk, chair, and a dining room cabinet, 1898. Porvoo Museum collections. A teaching slide from the Department of Architecture, archives of Aalto University. CC BY-NC 4.0. (Source, please note that the dust particles have been removed before used in this article.)

During the years of the factory's existence also l'Exposition universelle de 1900, or as the event was known in English, 1900 Paris Exposition, took place. In Finland's pavilion there was also so called Iris-room. The furnishings of the room as well as the tiles of the tile stoves and sinks were made by the Iris factory. Louis had asked Axel Gallén to make all the drawings. Louis was asked to come to Paris as well, but he couldn't go because of his other commitments.

The Iris factory was not the only legacy for which we Porvoo residents have to be grateful to Louis Sparre. It was very much up to him that we still have the oldest part of the town almost intact. He had found out quite soon after moving to the town that the new town plan would destroy the old part of the town, its old town plan with picturesque, winding streets. Louis Sparre was not alone fighting against these plans, but the thing he did, certainly opened the eyes. He gave a speech, 'Det Gamla Borgå – Vanha Porvoo' (The Old Porvoo) on 3 April 1898 and in that speech he pressed the value of the old part of Porvoo, not only from the perspective of Porvoo or Finland, but from wider perspective.

The association Borgå museiförening (Porvoo museoyhdistys) that was founded two years earlier was one of the organizers of the event. Louis loved Porvoo museum as well and

during his time in Porvoo he was also the chairman of the association and also curator of the museum for a short period of time, 1902–03 (source, a Finnish language article about the speech). In 1903 an art historical autotypy collection of world famous art works (plus plaster casts) was opened in the museum thanks to him, to spread the knowledge about art. Louis got also an “Edelfelt room” in the museum with original drawings, etchings and paintings.

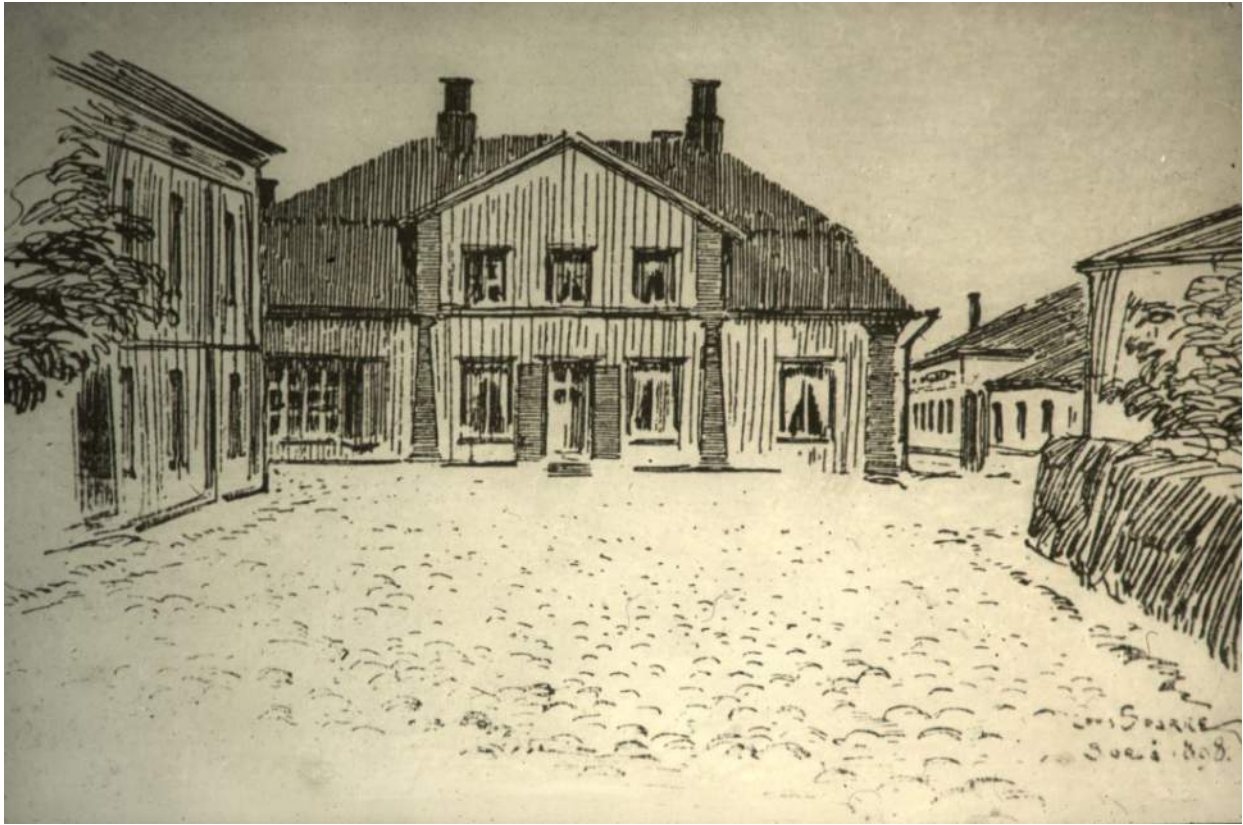
The above-mentioned speech was published in a book form on that same year by Werner Söderström. The second edition was released in 1919 by Holger Schildts Förlagsaktiebolag. These copies are from my collection.



It took another ten years, until the changes for the town plan was finally accepted. The plan (accepted also by Louis Sparre) would still have destroyed a lot of the cultural values as it demanded to widen the streets and new constructions were allowed to be built. But the main thing was that it stopped the destruction of the old town. It was left in peace and in the 1930s a new, better plan was made and the basement for the preservation was created. (Paaso, p. 52)

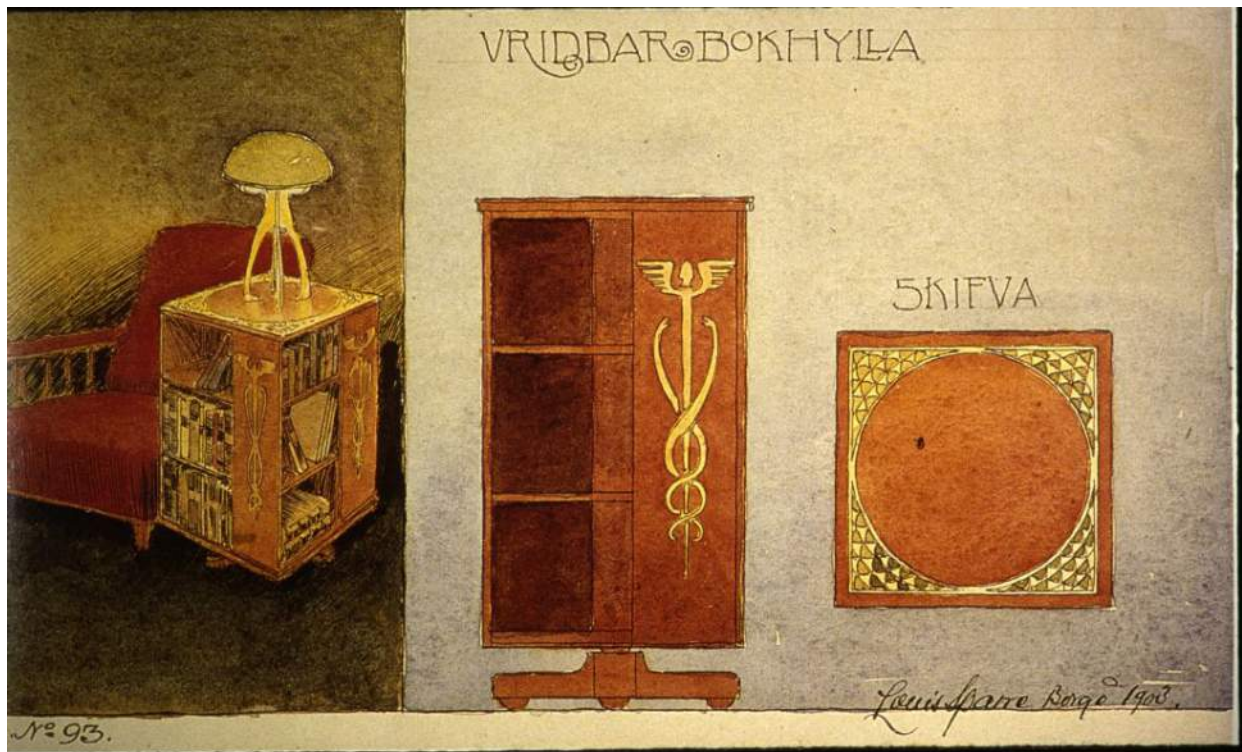
In the book dedicated to Louis Sparre’s furniture designs (*Louis Sparre. Huonekalutaidetta*), published by Porvoon Museoyhdistys, it is said that the far-reaching consequence of the speech was that the town plan was renewed and thus Sparre’s speech about the importance of saving Old Porvoo is one of the most significant cultural acts in Finland. I wrote a short prologue-kind-of-story about that speech on my blog with an idea that I would have written a larger story in this spring, but because of many reasons, I couldn’t do that. Maybe I will try again in 2028!)

For the pamphlet Louis made 32 (including the cover) pen and ink drawings of the old part of Porvoo. Below is one of them.



Louis Sparre, one of the drawings for 'Det Gamla Borgå' pamphlet, 1898. A teaching slide from the Department of Architecture, archives of Aalto University. CC BY-NC 4.0. (Source, please note that the dust particles are removed before used in this article.)

The story of Aktiebolaget Iris was over in 1902. Because of the factory related financial problems, the Sparre family had already sold Orrela and moved to a smaller house in the town, in an address 17, Rauhankatu Street. Louis had already left the leading position in the factory, but he was still the leader as for the artistic matters. His wage was quite low, so to be able to bring milk and butter to the family's dinner table, Louis and Eva founded a drawing office that was located in their home called (in Swedish) Konstindustriell Ritbyrå Eva o. Louis Sparre (the Design Studio Eva & Louis Sparre). Marketta Tamminen writes in the summary of the earlier mentioned book *Louis Sparre. Huonekalutaidetta*: "This was the first of its kind in Finland and its objective was to produce quality model drawings for use by manufacturers and craftsmen." (p. 89)



Louis Sparre, rotating bookshelf, water colour sketch 1903. A teaching slide from the Department of Architecture, archives of Aalto University. CC BY-NC 4.0. (Source) Location of the original drawing: Design Museum.

After Iris went bankrupt in 1902, Sparre founded with "three leading master joiners established their own company employing a considerable number of craftsmen". These joiners were J.H. Wilenius, Albert Willberg and Hugo Boström. Each of them had borrowed 1000 marks to Louis Sparre for founding the joinery and they themselves got a workplace. Tamminen writes that in Porvoo it was known as "Count Sparre's Joinery". (ibid.) Other source (Supinen, 1993) tells that it was known as Little Iris. Probably both names were in use! The address was 14, Iso Jokikatu Street.

The joinery manufactured furniture for Finnish customers. One of them was Mårten Ekblom, the owner of Borgå Bryggeri and Louis' good friend. Among other customers there was for example a local pharmacy (Porvoo Uusi Apteekki). But even though they got orders from Finnish customers, both individuals and companies, the biggest part of orders were coming from St. Petersburg aristocracy including Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich of Russia.

The orders from St. Petersburg ended because of the war between Russia and Japan. In the beginning of 1905 Louis Sparre sold his share of the joinery to his partners. Supinen writes that Boström and Willberg founded together a company that continued to manufacture furniture in the old premises until the First World War, following more or less the original designs. (Supinen, p. 113)

During those years when Louis Sparre was involved in applied arts, he had left painting behind. But he was doing etchings. Below is a beautiful scenery from Porvoo.



Louis Sparre, *Ranta-aitat (Warehouses)*, 1904, etching. Stiftelsens för Åbo Akademi konstsamling (Art Collection of Åbo Akademi University Foundation). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. (Source)

Louis left for St. Ives (Cornwall) to paint. During the trip, he visited also Camborne (when I hear the name "Camborne", it reminds me of certain Richard Trevithick and his adventures with a road wagon there, see) and went down to a lead mine.

The years in Porvoo were over. The family moved to Helsinki to an apartment, where there was space for the drawing office as well as for the Liberty agency.

The Sparre family spent still three years in Finland, but the move to Sweden has been in their mind for some time. Their drawing office closed its doors forever in April 1908. There must have been several reasons, political situation in Finland, the children's educations (they had two sons) and, as the Wikipedia article about Eva Mannerheim-Sparre writes, "some sources suggest that the motivation was Count Sparre's disappointment at not having received public honours in Finland." (Source)

Louis Sparre was painter, but during the years when he was involved in applied arts, he seemed to have lost the contact with Finnish art world, with Finnish artists and he was, according to the book written by his wife, disappointed that his works were not in the important collections in Finland. Sparre was a man of big mood swings. He could be a funny

socializer and then again he was suffering from depressions. And so often he also lost his trust on his capability to produce good paintings.

Louis Sparre was spending an active life as you could see. I still want to mention two other things: In 1907 he directed a film called *Salaviinanpolttajat* (that could be translated as “Moonshiners”). It was the first fictive film made in Russian Empire. In Porvoo he was also involved in the activities of local fire brigade.

Louis wanted to be a painter again. He wanted to *become* a painter again. I stop my story about Louis Sparre here. Simply, because I haven’t learned about his life in Sweden. But what I know is that he became a painter. He was particularly a portrait painter, but he painted other themes, too.

He and his wife, Eva Sparre, were known outside of Scandinavia, in Europe and obviously even beyond that as when Louis died on 26 October 1964, it was mentioned even in the *New York Times* (source).

Text © Katriina Etholén

The cover image credit: Portrait of Louis Sparre. Axel Gallén (Akseli Gallen-Kallela), etching, 1896. Finnish National Gallery/Ateneum. Public Domain. (Source)

The main source:

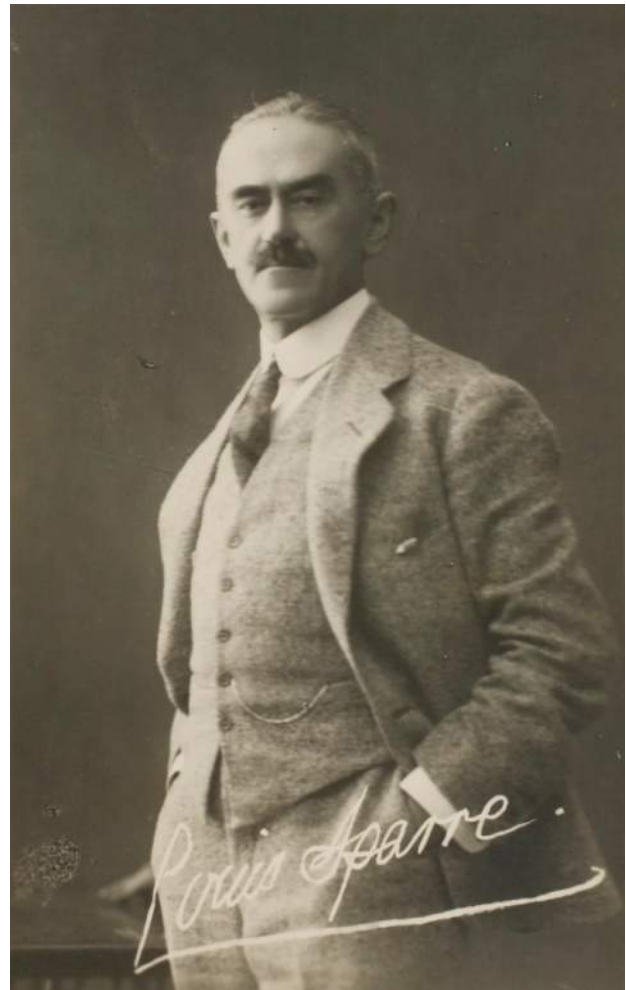
Eva Mannerheim-Sparre: *Taiteilijaelämää*. Otava 1994 (2nd edition)

Additional sources:

Merja Herranen (ed.): *Louis Sparre. Huonekalutaidetta*. Porvoon Museoyhdistyksen julkaisu nro 9, 2013.

Jukka Paaso: *Porvoon kuva*. Oy Uusimaa 1980.

Marja Supinen: *A.B. Iris. Suuri Yritys*. Kustannusyhtiö Taide, 1993.



Count Louis Sparre, painter. Photographed sometimes between 1900 and 1910. Finnish Heritage Agency, Historical Picture Collection. CC BY 4.0. (Source)

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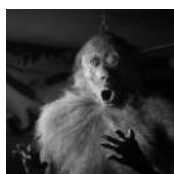
Related article: 'Aktiebolaget Iris (the Iris Co. Ltd.) – Furniture and Ceramics from Porvoo'.




Eva and Louis Sparre, photographed sometimes in the 1950s. Finnish Heritage Agency, Historical Picture Collection. CC BY 4.0. (Source)




The first volume of *Tietosanakirja* that was published between 1909 and 1922. The cover image is drawn by Louis Sparre. Author's collection.



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