

Portrait of an Artist: *Ellen Fjermedal*

BY NILS CASPERSSON

*I*t was in my fingers!” Ellen Fjermedal explained. Ellen, a demure, but determined and spry elder, started drawing when she was a child in Arendal, on the south coast of Norway. Now living in Victor, New York, she has a studio and display area at home where she paints *rosemaling* (Norwegian) or *kurbits* (Swedish) decorations. “The Swedish curves are bolder than the Norwegian, sometimes with animals,” she explained, “and I am self-taught. Sometimes I see fjords, valleys, and water in what I paint. Other times, vintage flowers.”

Ellen noticed a unique visual comparison between centuries-old Norwegian *rosemaling* designs, antique southwestern Mexican furniture designs, and then, more contemporary chip carving done by her late husband, Syvert. While separated by time and miles, the various native patterns are all remarkably similar with distinctive flourishes, scrolls, and s-curves, done more often by itinerant craftsmen and furniture makers. Beyond just function, the designs show a crossover of decorative desire using indigenous materials, also called folk art. These are contemporary

elements combined with traditional needs for embellishment and character.

Using strictly oil paints, traditional colors, and then a varnish finish, Ellen paints delicate asymmetrical roses, petals, and scrolls that decorate functional items, including wood and tin plates, shelves, cradles, wooden shoes, and a wide variety of boxes, other furniture, and Jul ornaments (for the Christmas holiday season as observed in Scandinavia). “My ancestors introduced *rosemaling* as a way to decorate walls, ceilings, and handmade furniture.”



Ellen’s paints are of traditional colors—reds, blues, oranges, pale white—often reflecting unique combinations of available organic materials to originally produce the paint. Household items and long Scandinavian winters gave the painters plenty of time to practice, experiment, and perfect their art. *All photos courtesy of the author.*





A most characteristic painting technique of dual complimentary colors on the brush at the same time has been perfected by Ellen. Close inspection of her most delicate work reveals no brush overs and instinctive, but calculated single floral strokes and curves where two to three colors interact.

Early 17th–18th-century Swedish *kurbit* (gourd) decorations reflect symbols of hardy vegetables, sometimes of Biblical legend, including flowering pumpkins and squash. *Rosemaling* (flower painting) was also popular in agrarian southern Norway during the 1700s to the late 1800s. In central Sweden, it developed around Lake Siljan, Dalarna. Traditional colors came

from local raw materials. For example, rust red, also called Falu red, was a by-product of copper mining in Falun, Sweden. Linseed oil from flax, a popular herb found in southern Scandinavia, mixed with a variety of natural pigments created a paint that would not trap moisture that caused flaking and decay.

As an artist, Ellen is very prolific. She had a successful fine arts career in New York City, eventually moving to Victor to be closer to family. Her home is very carefully utilized to show her fine art paintings from the American Southwest, New York City, and her Norwegian home, as well as a steady group of *rosemaling*/*kurbits* items.

She shows her work at Scandinavian holiday events in Jamestown, New York, and Rochester, New York, and at the Vasa Scandinavian Festival in Budd Lake, New Jersey. ▼

Nils R. Caspersson is a retired New York State teacher with a background in folk arts studies, particularly Swedish/Scandinavian. He also writes for *Nordstjernen*, a Swedish-American newsmagazine from New York City. Photo courtesy of the author.

