

Bror Anders Wikstrom: Bringing Fantasy to Carnival

On view through April 1, 2018

Bror Anders Wikstrom made a name for himself in New Orleans by engaging with the most festive expression of the city's creative culture: Mardi Gras. This turn-of-the-century artist was the chief designer with the Krewe of Rex from 1885 to 1910 and with the Krewe of Proteus from 1900 to 1910. This exhibition shows Wikstrom's endless imagination for costumed characters and fantastical floats that appeared in the street pageants of Carnival season. Wikstrom's designs are shown in his conceptual sketches, presentation plates, and in the ten-cent parade bulletins published by local newspapers. Vintage street photography shows how Wikstrom's fantastical designs appeared in three-dimension, rolling through the familiar sight of awestruck crowds on Mardi Gras day. As a young man, Wikstrom (1854–1909) went to sea and later studied art at the Royal Academy of Stockholm and in Paris. By the time of the Cotton Centennial Exposition of 1884, Wikstrom, a Swedish émigré, was active in the New Orleans artistic community, first working as an assistant to fellow Swede Charles Briton, a well-known Mardi Gras designer. Until his death in 1909, Wikstrom's talent found him success as a landscape painter, portraitist, cartoonist, and organizer of the arts community. Wikstrom was among the founders of the New Orleans Artists Association in 1885, one of the civic groups that sparked the organization of the Delgado Museum of Art (today's NOMA) in 1910. The artist was so beloved among his contemporaries that his name was carved into the stone on the architectural frieze on this building, visible from the courtyard outside the Museum Shop.

Bror Anders Wikstrom (American, b. 1854 Sweden, active New Orleans, 1884–1909) , ***Cabinet***, c. 1900–1905 Mahogany, 67 x 47 x 13 in. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. G. R. Westfeldt, 14.98

NOMA's permanent collection includes the only known example of Wikstrom's furniture design, a superb mahogany cabinet carved with a twin-tailed mermaid, dolphins, iris, and calla lily. The whole reflects the fashionable turn-of-the-century Art Nouveau style, but the design also evokes Scandinavian wood-carving traditions. This cabinet was gifted to the museum in 1914 by Mr. and Mrs. Gustave R. Westfeldt. (He was president of the museum from 1913 to 1915). The coffee-importing Westfeldt family shared Wikstrom's Swedish ancestry and supported the artist's endeavors.

Bror Anders Wikstrom, ***Mexican Landscape [possibly Oaxaca]***, 1898 Watercolor on paper, original frame Loan from the Collection of Henri Schindler

Wikstrom arrived in New Orleans a well-traveled man, and continued his explorations even after he had settled in this city for twenty-five years. He took annual trips to Europe, and traveled widely across Mexico, recording what he saw through his brushwork. These trips provided material for Wikstrom's large oil-painting landscape and marine scenes, artworks that were celebrated in the artist's 1912 memorial exhibition at the Isaac Delgado Museum of Art (what is now NOMA).

John N. Teunisson, photographer (American, 1869–1959), F.F. Hansell & Brother, publisher (New Orleans, Louisiana) ***View of Canal Street showing Krewe of Rex “In the Realm of Imagination” Parade***, 1904 Photographic print Loan from the Collection of Henri Schindler

This sweeping panoramic photograph shows Wikstrom designed floats for the 1904 Rex parade rolling through the crowds on Canal Street on February 16 of that year. The order of floats shown, however, is distorted because this image is composed from several different photographs pieced together.

Harper’s Weekly, publisher, New York, 1857–1916, John Durkin, delineator (American, 1868–1903), ***The Rex Parade at Canal Street [King’s Float, Krewe of Rex “Ivanhoe” Parade]***, 1885, Woodblock engraving print Loan from the Louisiana Image Collection, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University

Harper’s Weekly was a popular nineteenth-century publication based in New York that covered cultural and political events of national interest through illustrations and essays. Harper’s ran this view of the Rex parade in their March 7, 1885, issue, along with an article that begins “the spirit necessary to the proper conduct of a carnival can be found only under a Southern sky.” The float pictured shows Rex, the King of Carnival, riding down Canal Street. The same float is shown on the nearby large newspaper bulletin as “No. 1 King of Industries,” a reference to the 1884–1885 World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition that was held in New Orleans.

Bror Anders Wikstrom, ***Sketch for Float #3 “Cloud Land,” Krewe of Rex “Fantasies” Parade***, 1893, Crayon and pencil on thin waxed paper Loan from the School of Design/Collection of Dr. Stephen Hales

This partial sketch on tissue paper shows Wikstrom’s initial concept for a cloud “fantasy” float for the 1893 Rex parade. You can see the final design for “No. 3 Cloud Land” illustrated in the upper right of the nearby Picayune newspaper parade bulletin from 1893.

John N. Teunisson, photographer (American, 1869–1959), ***Street view showing Float #11 “The Devil’s Basket,” Krewe of Proteus “A Trip to Wonderland” Parade***, 1898, Photographic print Loan from the Louisiana Image Collection, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University

This rare image captures a nighttime Mardi Gras parade, thought to be the first recorded on film. The image shows a float titled “The Devil’s Basket” from the 1898 Krewe of Proteus parade, also depicted in nearby design drawings of the float and costumes. The image also records how early New Orleans night parades were illuminated by a combination of electric light strings and the traditional torchlit “flambeaux.”

Bror Anders Wikstrom, ***Twenty Float Designs for Krewe of Rex “The Freaks of Fable” Parade***, 1910, Bound set of drawings: watercolor, gouache, pencil, and metallic paint on paper
Loan from Philip and Phyllis Biondillo

This is the only known bound book showing a full parade of float drawings for the Krewe of Rex. Designed before Wikstrom’s death in 1909, the “Freaks of Fable” parade from 1910 featured monsters of world fables and legend. The twenty floats were topped with enormous frightening “freaks” including an ogre, centaur, dragon, the Norse mythological Jörmungandr (or Midgard Serpent), the Roc bird of prey from Middle Eastern myths, and Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the underworld in Greek mythology. Float #4 shows a group of men in a boat trapped between two monsters, Scylla and Charybdis, a Greek legend that gives us the idiom “between Scylla and Charybdis,” or “between a rock and a hard place.”

Bror Anders Wikstrom, ***Costume designs for Krewe of Rex “The Freaks of Fable” Parade***, 1910, Watercolor, gouache, pencil, and metallic paint on paper, Loan from the Carnival Collection, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University

Costume Design for Float #4 “Scylla & Charybdis,” 1910, Loan from the Carnival Collection, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University

Costume Design for Float #14 “The Ogre,” 1910, Loan from the Carnival Collection, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University

Costume Design for Float #17 “The Dragon,” 1910, Loan from the Carnival Collection, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University

Costume Design for Float #3 “The Griffin,” 1910, Loan from the School of Design/Collection of Dr. Stephen Hales

Costume Design for Float #12 “The Midgard Serpent,” 1910, Loan from the School of Design/Collection of Dr. Stephen Hales

Costume Design for Float #18 “The Roc,” 1910 , Loan from the School of Design/Collection of Dr. Stephen Hales

These six costume designs are but a few of the hundreds created for float and horseback riders that were part of the Krewe of Rex “Freaks of Fable” parade in 1910, illustrated in the bound book at the center of the room.

Bror Anders Wikstrom, ***Twenty Float Designs for Krewe of Proteus “The Alphabet” Parade***, 1904

Float #1 “ABC Title Car”

Float #2 “D - Dragon”

Float #3 “E - Elegance”

Float #4 “F - Flora”

Float #5 “G - Gem”

Float #6 “I - Industry”

Float #7 “J - Jupiter”

Float #8 “K - Knighthood”

Float #9 “L - Lucifer”

Float #10 “M - Marine”

Float #11 “N - Nymphs”

Float #12 “O - Oriental”

Float #13 “P - Proteus”

Float #14 “R - Royalty”

Float #15 “S - Snow”

Float #16 “T - Triumph”

Float #17 “U - Unicorn”

Float #18 “V - Vulcan”

Float #19 “W - Worship”

Float #20 “XYZ - The End”

Watercolor, gouache, pencil, and metallic paint on paper Loan from the Carnival Collection, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University

This is a full set of Wikstrom’s float designs for the Krewe of Proteus 1904 parade themed “The Alphabet.” Each Carnival parade traditionally featured twenty main floats, along with bands, marchers, and horseback riders. The twenty floats were accompanied by coordinating designs for more than one hundred costumed riders, including their outfits, jewelry, and accessories. Wikstrom’s spirited flourishes are evident in the designs, but pragmatic details, such as measurements or the aerial plan, written in pencil along the margins, are also visible. “The Alphabet” parade featured float titles derived from each letter of the alphabet— from the fierce battle scene on the “D for Dragon” float to the glorious rainbow arching across the “U for Unicorn” design. The notes on the edges of the margins tell us that the missing letters H and Q were represented by horseback riders acting as Heralds and Don Quixote.