

Sweden The remarkable life of royal court's Black insider



Badin worked for the Queen of Sweden

'He is free but he isn't part of the royal family. He has a different relationship to them than others'

Åsa Bharathi Larsson
Exhibition curator

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In 1760, a Black child around 10 years old arrived at the Swedish royal court as a “gift” to the queen. Adolf Ludvig Gustav Fredrik Albrecht Couschi, who became known as Badin (derived from the French for joker or prankster), later held titles including chamberlain, court secretary, ballet master and civil servant.

He is thought to have been born into slavery between 1747 and 1750 in the former Danish colony of St Croix (now part of the US Virgin Islands), where he was “owned” by Christian Lebrecht von Pröck, who took him to Denmark. He was “received” by Gustaf de Brunck, a Swedish councillor of commerce, who later “donated” Badin to Queen Louisa Ulrika.

When Badin died, he left behind diaries, a vast book collection, private letters and an autobiography offering a window into his life in 18th- and 19th-century Stockholm.

Yet he remains vastly under-researched and in many ways overlooked by the public, despite featuring in fictionalised form in multiple works, including a racist depiction in August Strindberg's 1902 play *Gustav III* and, more recently, a ballet, *Gustavia*, at the Royal Swedish Opera.

A landmark exhibition at the National Museum in Stockholm aims to change that by offering a fuller understanding of his life and the role he played in society.

The exhibition, *Badin - Beyond Surface and Mask*, includes his writings, which are on display together for the first time, and a specially commissioned film by Salad Hilowle, an artist who has dedicated much of his career to Badin. Hilowle said the commission felt like a significant moment for Swedish art history to give



recognition to Badin, and also for himself as an African-Swedish artist: “I’m always talking about how he [Badin] was an image and he was the other and now the other is also an artist. Time has changed in Sweden. It’s a super strong moment.”

His film, *Maroonen* (The Marooned), is based on Badin’s own

words and imagines Badin giving a lecture to current students at Uppsala in which he reflects on his life and how he has been portrayed over time. He said it had come out of his frustration that interest in Badin was often limited to his image rather than his words.

“He pops up everywhere, from August Strindberg plays about

▲ The exhibition features a film, left, about Badin and his writings

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Gustav III and then also other projects,” Hilowle said. “The image of him is everywhere but no one seems to hear or read his own voice.” He also uses opera in his film to explore Badin’s writing. In one of his texts, Badin wrote in Swedish: “Me as one of the Blacks.”

In the film, these words are sung by an opera singer walking around the museum. “I took it into the opera singing because I wanted to hear that. How does it feel when you hear that?” Hilowle said.

According to Swedish population records, there were about 20 people of African origin in Sweden between the early 18th and 19th centuries. Very little is known about their experiences because there are no records. Badin is a significant exception, although

given his status, his experiences are not thought to be representative.

“He has an in-between position in the court,” said Åsa Bharathi Larsson, the exhibition’s curator and an art and media historian at Södertörn University. “He is free but he isn’t part of the royal family. We don’t know anything about his real family, but he has a status and a different relationship with the royal family than perhaps other court servants had.”

The queen raised Badin in accordance with the ideals of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed boys should be allowed to develop freely and think independently. He had a Christian education and learned to write, which was very unusual for the time, and later became involved in dance and theatre.

Using Badin’s diary as a starting point, Hilowle’s key concept was to give Badin recognition and dignity, but also to show him as “very sensitive and fragile”. He said: “That tenderness is not what we are seeing when we think about the Black subject in relation to culture.”

Hilowle believes Badin’s assumed name as the joker could have been a means of survival. “Meaning that he couldn’t manifest how well-educated he was because then he would be a threat to people and therefore he is playing the trickster,” he said. “But at the same time he writes his own diary.” Through his diary, Hilowle added, Badin “writes himself into history”.

Hilowle, who previously made another film about Badin and plans to make a third, still has many unanswered questions. “I am very curious about - how did you survive? What ways did you survive? Because there is also a lot of grief. It’s very interesting because it had to cost him a lot. And being in those spaces and being almost like a cameo, shapeshifting.”