



## Gustav III, King of Sweden (1746-1792)

by Alex Hunnicutt

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A portrait of King Gustav III.

In a glittering time of Enlightened despots, when learning, culture, and sophistication were prized throughout the courts of Europe, Gustav III managed to glitter more brightly than the rest. During his reign, Swedish culture competed head to head with the brilliant courts of Versailles, Berlin, Vienna, and St. Petersburg. Literature, music, theater, and opera blossomed and Gustav himself took an active role in their success.

Gustav surrounded himself with clever and talented men; he showed no romantic interest in women, including his wife. He was generally believed to be homosexual; his own mother clearly assumed he was. Although his inclinations lay in cultural matters, Gustav never slighted his political duties. Unfortunately for him, his politics as well as his sexuality were seriously at odds with those of the Swedish nobility, a state of affairs that eventually cost him his life.

Gustav was born in Stockholm on January 13, 1746 Old Style (January 24, 1746 New Style), to King Adolf Frederick and Queen Louisa Ulrika, sister of Frederick the Great of Prussia. Since 1718, the nobility had controlled the Swedish government and the monarch served as a mere figurehead. While Gustav's weak father meekly accepted his role as a cipher, Louisa Ulrika continuously plotted to loosen the aristocrats' grip on power and seize it for her husband and herself.

Gustav grew up in an atmosphere seething with political intrigue among strong-willed, intelligent people. His flair for and interest in music and theater became apparent when he was a boy and, unlike his uncle Frederick, he was allowed to indulge it. He wrote, produced, and performed plays in French to entertain his mother and her entourage; he even designed sets and costumes.

For political reasons Gustav was betrothed to Sophia Magdalena of Denmark when he was only five. In 1766, when he was twenty, the two married, though the marriage never proved satisfying to either Gustav or Sophia.

While touring France in 1771, Gustav heard the news of his father's sudden death on February 12. With methodical calculation Gustav sent word to the Riksdag, Sweden's legislative assembly, that he counted on their support and assured them of his intention to follow his father's policies. Thus allaying any suspicions the nobility may have harbored, Gustav slowly returned to Sweden only after continuing his visit at Versailles and stopping in Prussia to confer with his uncle Frederick.

Contemporaries and historians alike agree that he dissimulated. Every account of his life speaks of his habit of deceit, lies, and pretence. Some suggest that his love of theater led him to live his life as a perpetual actor. Perhaps as a homosexual, he learned early on to mask his true feelings. In any case, Gustav successfully lulled the Swedish aristocracy into a sense of false security at the onset of his reign.

With the help of a few trusted friends and his younger brothers, Gustav managed to seize control of all key fortresses and to secure the support of the military. By August, only six months after ascending the throne,

Gustav reigned as absolute monarch like his counterparts in Prussia and Russia, Frederick the Great and Catherine the Great.

Although he alienated the nobility, the bourgeoisie and lower classes welcomed the change. Despite embroiling Sweden in a series of conflicts with Denmark and Russia, Gustav managed to steer Sweden through these turbulent times and emerge with Europe's respect.

Theater, literature, art, music, and opera all flourished under Gustav's encouragement and patronage. Indeed, the period known as the Gustavian Age did not receive that name based on Swedish military or political achievements; rather it was the flowering of the arts that caused the king's name to become associated with the period.

The Swedish Academy for Language, the Academy for Literature, History and Antiquities, the Academy of Music, and the Academy of Art all originated during Gustav's reign. Although he extended religious toleration to Roman Catholics and Jews, he rigorously censored the press. Gustav loved freedom, as long as it suited his purposes.

Surprisingly, Queen Sophia Magdalena gave birth to a son in 1778. Although not conclusively proved, contemporaries believed that Gustav and Sophia Magdalena secretly divorced, whereupon the Queen secretly married Count Adolph Fredric Munck of Fulkila, who impregnated her.

Similarly, when the wife of Gustav's younger brother, who was also homosexual, announced her pregnancy, rumor spread that it was merely a complicated ruse designed to substitute and cover for Gustav's sister, who was also rumored to be pregnant although she was not married. In both instances, the Dowager Queen Louisa Ulrika clearly expressed her surprise and disbelief that either of her two older sons could possibly father a child.

Fittingly enough, operatic tragedy and politics converged to end Gustav's life. On March 16, 1792, a malcontented nobleman, Johan Jaboc Anckarström, shot Gustav in the back at a midnight masquerade at the Royal Opera in Stockholm. Gustav died on March 29th.

Considering how much Gustav loved opera, perhaps it is appropriate that his assassination inspired Verdi's 1859 opera, *Un Ballo in Maschera* (The Masked Ball).

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**Alex Hunnicutt** received a B.A. in English in 1991 and an M.A. in History in 2003, both from the University of Texas, Arlington. He is currently a doctoral candidate in the transatlantic History program at U.T.A., focusing on the status of executioners in England, France, and America. In addition, he is actively researching aspects of gay and lesbian history in modern Europe and America.