



Västerås town hall

– in keeping with the times



VÄSTERÅS STAD

Where Swedish Protestantism was born

The land by the Svartån river has been important to the Swedish city of Västerås since the Middle Ages. In the 1200s, it was the site of a Dominican monastery, which consisted of a church, a monastery garden and dwellings for the friars who belonged to the Catholic Dominican order. They missionised among highly educated people and had a keen interest in science and art.

It was in this Dominican monastery in Västerås that it was decided, in 1527, during the so-called 'Reformation Riksdag', that Sweden should abolish Catholicism and become a Protestant country, pushed through by Gustav Vasa, King of Sweden. Ironically enough, this proved to be the kiss of death for the monastery, which closed that same year.

Just over 400 years later, the town hall had become too small for the Västerås civic authorities' purposes, so new premises were needed. This led to a competition being advertised, and former town architect Sven Ahlbom presenting how the new town hall would look at the start of the 1950s. It was known that there had been a monastery at the Fiskartorget site and people were fairly certain that it was situated in Vasaparken, in around the same area as where the bust of Gustav Vasa can be found.

After the excavation work began, it emerged that the monastery had been situated exactly where the new town hall was due to be built. Around 2000 or so graves were found. The bones from these graves are now stored in a room in the town hall's basement.



▲ The black slabs outside of the town hall mark the location of the entrance to the old abbey. ◀ A plan of the Dominican monastery, which can be found at the site of the ruins in Vasaparken.

The building as a symbol of togetherness

The discovery that there once stood a Dominican monastery on the site designated for the new town hall was not lost on town architect Sven Ahlbom, who decided to reconstruct some of the foundation walls in the section facing Vasaparken. The paving outside of the Fiskartorget entrance marks the location of the former abbey's doorway, while inside the town hall, there are black markings in the marble floor indicating where there used to be pillars in the monastery.

Sven Ahlbom wanted to bring together different types of art – architecture, painting, sculpture, music and poetry – in this one building and create a grand overall look. It was hoped that “the building would speak to the people of Västerås and increase their sense of community and their connection to the city, and arouse and stimulate the joy that can be found in work and arouse their desire for beauty”.



▲ Artwork adorns both sides of the City Council Assembly hall wing, front and back, with gilded bronze by Lennart Källström (1920–2007) hanging on the facade facing Fiskartorget. This piece of art was created between 1962 and 1966. ▲ On the other side of the wing is the enamel painting ‘Föremål och former från stranden’ (Objects and shapes from the beach’) by Lage Lindell (1920–1980), created at Gustavberg’s factories between 1958 and 1959.

A stronghold of democracy and a seat of power

The section of the town hall containing the assembly hall and the Red room was officially opened just in time for the City Council Assembly's one-hundred year anniversary in 1963.

To determine which pieces of art would adorn the City Council Assembly hall, a competition was held, and won by textile artist Kaisa Melanton's entry 'Det fria ordet' ('The free word'). This woven piece consists of three parts, each describing the political work and different ingredients that make up a democracy.

Erik Idar meanwhile has illustrated the City Executive Committee's meeting room with the pigs of the former Dominican monastery to remind those currently in power of the assets and tax revenue that the city needs to protect and manage.

▼ *The City Council Assembly hall, where politicians make decisions about the city's future. Regular members of the Assembly sit on the brown chairs in the U-formation. Out of shot are the black chairs for the deputy members, as is the public gallery in the hall. The assembly wing is one of the most decorated parts of the town hall in terms of artwork. The pattern of its oak parquet flooring was so intricate that a team of skilled craftsmen were needed to lay it.*





◀ ‘Pecunier’ by Erik Idar (1911–1972), intarsia from 1960 in the City Executive Committee’s meeting room. Thirty different types of wood were used to depict this Medieval motif.



◀ The door into the City Executive Committee’s meeting room is decorated with intarsia by Tadeusz M Sempinski (1927–1998).

◀ This Mingera (1368–1644) sculpture of Buddha can be found in the City Executive Committee’s meeting room and symbolises ‘give and take’. The sculpture was procured for the city by Harry Martinsson.



◀ It took two years for Handarbetets Vänner’s studio in Stockholm to produce ‘Det fria ordet’ (‘The free word’), a woven design by Kaisa Melanton (1920–2012) from 1967. The left-hand section emphasises how thoughts and ideas are born, the middle section how discussions are held and the right-hand section how decisions are made and how ideas become reality.

The largest carillon in the Nordic countries

There are no indications that the former monastery had a bell-tower, but city architect Sven Ahlbom wanted to have a campanile, an Italian-style tower with a carillon and a clock. In other words, a grand monument that enables the onlooker to understand the might of the city and its confidence about the future.

The bells were cast in the Netherlands, a country known as the cradle of bell culture. The carillon is the largest in the Nordic countries, consisting of 47 bells that together weigh around 15 tonnes. The smallest of these, 'Tummetott', is 21 cm in diameter and weighs 11 kg. The largest, 'Stor-dum', is 155 cm in diameter and weighs 2410 kg. All of the bells have their own name and poem, the latter specially written by poet Bo Setterlind.

Both classical and modern pieces are played from the bell tower, and not just by a machine either – professional bell ringers take it in turns to play concerts from this tower at the town hall.



▲ City architect Sven Ahlbom and son Pär Ahlbom at the carillon. Pär wrote one of the melodies being played. ◀ The carillon was inaugurated in 1960, with the bells heard throughout the city, morning to evening, ever since. The letters S and A can be seen high up on the building – perhaps Ahlbom's calling card for his own work? Another Ahlbom signature was his modest blue-bell, a trademark feature left on all his buildings. In the town hall, this can be found at the fireplace in the lobby outside of the City Council Assembly hall.



Photo: Pia Nordlander

▲ A wedding ceremony in the Red room. The room is decorated with candelabras from Skultuna Messingsbruk, chandeliers from Bohemia in the Czech Republic and curtains from Italy, which have the same pattern as the room's silk wallpaper.

The 'Red' room – a unique venue for your wedding

Many of the non-church weddings that take place in Västerås take place in the town hall's 'Red' room. The room's walls are decorated with the red silk wallpaper that gave the room its name, while the ceiling is decorated with stucco and crystal chandeliers. It is a unique space similar to the Oval room in the White House in terms of its 1950s classicism. Every year, architecture students travel here to experience the room in reality.

▼ The stucco in the ceiling and the Bohemian crystal chandeliers are the crowning pieces of the room, which has also held many official dinners. The chairs were originally used in the old town hall. The table is made from Finnish silver birch.





Artistry and solid craftsmanship

Many of the artists who have helped to embellish the town hall and its surroundings are connected to Västerås in some shape or form.

Texts by poet Bo Setterlind, who studied in Västerås and is buried at the Wallinska cemetery in the city, can be found in several parts of the town hall building, for example. Birger Halling, who designed the banisters at the town hall and railings for a bridge over the Svartån, lived in the city for a period too. He also painted the background wall at Västerås city library.

With its grey Bohus granite, copper roof and marble flooring, the town hall building is also a work of art in itself. The little details found everywhere are testament to the solid craftsmanship that created the building and give you a real sense of quality.



▲ *'Vindarnas grotta'* by Erik Grate (1896–1983), made of bronze and granite, is a popular meeting place and one of Erik Grate's most important public works of art. It was officially unveiled in 1969 and is designed to resemble a cavern or a boat with a large sail. The sail captures sound from the Svartån river and reflects the chimes from the bells in the town hall's campanile.

◀ *'Tjuren'* ('The bull') by Allan Runefelt (1922–2005) dates from 1963 and is made from gilded bronze – not to be confused with a golden calf. A symbol of strength.



◀ 'I samklang med tiden' ('In keeping with the times') – Birger Halling (1907–1996) designed both the banisters and created a design for the building's motto by poet Bo Setterlind (1923–1991) in one of the windows at the entrance.

▼ A tapestry by Sten Kauþppi (1922–2002), 'Dansen i Västra Aros', woven by Handarbetets Vänner between 1959 and 1961, can be found in the building's entrance hall.





▲ 'Ljuset' ('The light'), the name for the glass partition between the entrance and the lobby in front of the City Council Assembly hall, was completed in 1965. It was made by artist Edvin Öhrström (1906–1994), who also created the 'Kristallvertikalaccent' glass obelisk at Sergels torg in Stockholm.



▲ 'Borgarna', a bronze sculpture by Olle Adrin (1918–1988), produced between 1957 and 1961, shows a 'pensioner', who is playing saxophone, a 'crown bride', the woman who is the unifying and essential factor in life, 'the atomic machine', on which the sphere symbolises both the atom and the earth, and the 'spaceship', on which Pythagorean theorem is engraved. ▲ Some of the ruins from the former monastery have been preserved or reconstructed in the section of the town hall facing Vasaparken, and there is a memorial room in one of the building's wings. 'Kopparportarna' ('The copper doors') is a 1978 design by K G Lindholm (1919–1979) made from sheet copper. On the wall inside the room you will find bronze reliefs by Sven Lundquist (1918–2010).



▲ ‘Religionssamtal mellan Olaus Petri och Peder Galle’ (‘Olaus Petri and Peder Galle discuss religion’), during the ‘Reformation Riksdag’ of 1527. An 1883 painting by Carl Gustaf Hellquist (1851–1890) from Kungsör, received from Nationalmuseum. During the ‘Reformation Riksdag’ in Västerås, King Gustav Vasa pushed through his decision that Sweden should be the first country in the world to become protestant and abolish Catholicism, which had been the state religion since the 1000s. This is also spelt the end for the Dominican monastery in the city.

▼ There is a text in Swedish written by Bo Setterlind (1923–1991) on the floor of the memorial room inside the ‘Copper doors’. This translates roughly as: “In memory of those who were buried within the confines of the Medieval monastery here. How quickly the light of our lives is consumed; remember what our ancestors gave us and give in love to others and therefore to life. So that beyond the depths, beyond the light, you reach the unreachable.”



A few short facts about the town hall:

- Planning began in 1930s, first section completed in 1954, last section in 1988. The premises are adapted on an ongoing basis to meet current needs, but always retain the same architectural values.
- Architect: Sven Ahlbom (1901–1990).
- The facade is made from grey Bohus granite.
- The town hall's tower is 65 metres high.
- The carillon consists of 47 bells and can be operated manually, but also programmed to play automatically.
- Costs for the building itself were estimated at SEK 35 million in the 1960s – around SEK 379 million in 2016. This does not include the cost of rebuilding, furniture or artwork.
- The total floor space of 40,000 m² (including the basement) is the equivalent of around seven football pitches.
- There are around 2,500 windows in the building.
- In autumn 2016, around 824 of the city's roughly 10,000-strong workforce worked at the town hall.

The silhouette of the town hall can be seen from different areas of the city centre and was and remains a familiar sight to locals. Along similar lines, the carillon can be heard across the city from morning to evening. Sven Ahlbom's work is continuing to leave its mark even today.

Welcome to Västerås town hall!



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