



## A museum to enlighten the curious

*Karl Grandin*

◀ ANDERS SPARRMAN,  
portrait by Niklas  
Lafrensen the  
Younger.

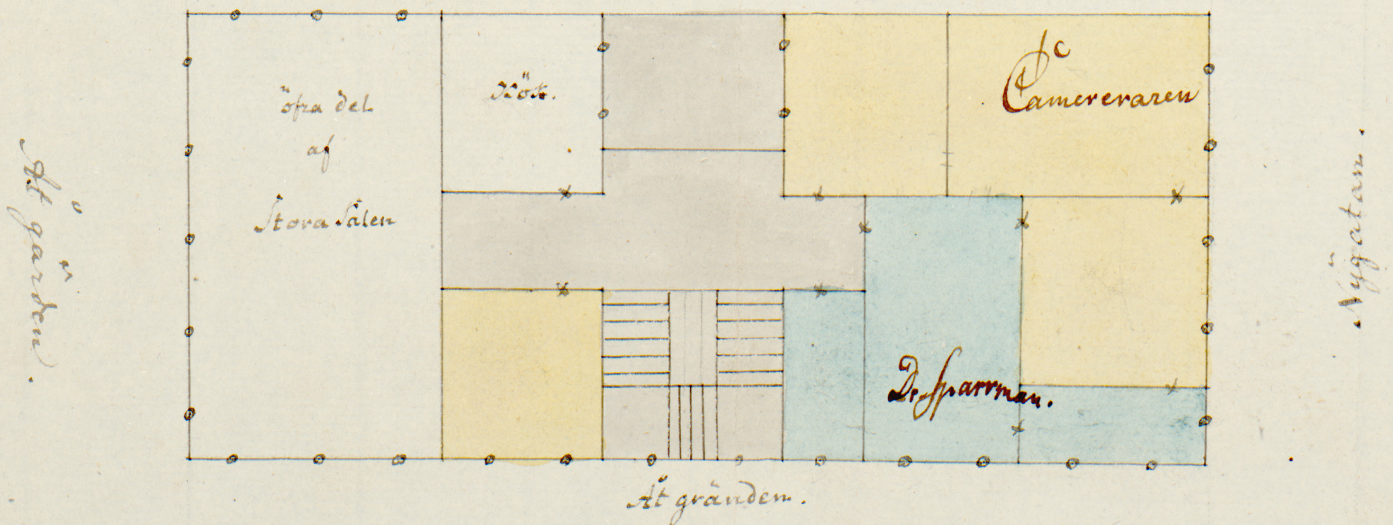
In 1784, the curator of the Academy of Sciences' natural history cabinet, Anders Sparrman, received an instruction from the Academy. One historical account therefore states that Sparrman was provided "with veritable instruction, [...] in a firm and rigorous tone", that he had "not really met expectations" and he "aroused displeasure due to his care of the museum, [which] is apparent from his pathetic plea". There had previously been no written guidelines for the position, so this has, in the writing of this history, apparently been regarded as a reprimand for the wilful curator. The belief has been that he had not fulfilled his obligations in the manner the Academy wished. This is certainly not an entirely mistaken interpretation, but the instruction must be understood in its context, after which it no longer appears to be an expression of displeasure.

In 1778, following a generous donation from member Carl Albert Rosenadler, and the addition of its own resources, the Academy of Sciences was able to purchase the stone building known as the Lefeburska building (or Schönfeldt Palace) on Stora Nygatan in Stockholm's Gamla stan. The vital sales of almanacs and the Academy's *Handlingar* [*Transactions*] took place on the ground floor. In 1779, the Academy's natural history collections and a newly-elected member – and the collection's curator – Sparrman, moved into the first floor. Maintaining a natural history collection was a given for the Academy of Sciences.

During Sparrman's travels, he had sent specimens home to Sweden and, on returning, the idea was for him to harvest the fruits of his efforts. The Academy of Sciences had elected him a member on Linnaeus' proposal. On 26 February 1777, it was decided that he would receive annual remuneration of 2,400 daler in copper coin for three years, allowing him to organise his

Utkast af Nuvarande Afdelning, uti Lefeburska Huset.

Tre Trappor up.



**PLANS FOR THE BUILDING** on Stora Nygatan that housed the Academy of Sciences, prior to reorganisation in 1784.

collections and oversee those of the Academy, to which he had already donated huge numbers of specimens.

How the rooms in the Lefeburska building were to be allocated was decided in June 1779, but in haste this had not been recorded in the minutes. Johan Carl Wilcke, the Thamic lecturer, was housed up the stairs to the left, with parts of the “Apparatus Physicus” and, to the right on the same floor, the natural history specimens had three rooms, with another room given to “Doctor Sparrman”.

In a presidium speech in 1778, Sparrman described his intentions for the natural history cabinet. He was delighted by donations that expanded the

collection and promised to carefully note the donors' names, "to bring them lasting honour and recognition". We are also informed that Sparrman's ambition was to display the collections to the public and visitors to, in some way, popularise knowledge. And he described the educational principle of the proposed museum: in the natural history cabinet one could see for oneself curiosities that had been gathered with great effort, which "elevated the Soul and multiplied the gift of thought". The speech can thus be interpreted as a kind of statement of intent.

So far, this is an example of how research activities in far-off places could be successfully converted into membership and employment. However, the story's continuation is less favourable; Sparrman's description of his travels was delayed and the natural history collection was incompletely ordered. It was at this point that the abovementioned instruction arrived. Additionally, a few years later, when Sparrman was away, the collection was organised and annotated by his substitute. And, after a little longer, he was given notice. The usual explanation is that Sparrman was not compatible with, or interested in, his curatorship. It is sometimes implied that his interest in Swedenborg's teachings and in mesmerism – although this arose later – were the reason for his unsuitability as curator.

So why did Sparrman receive that instruction in 1784? One reason becomes apparent if we look at the context in which it was given. By the time Pehr Wargentin died, he had been a dominant figure and permanent secretary for 34 years and, after his demise, a new generation wanted to review and modernise the Academy's activities. When Sparrman's first three years as curator were over in 1780, the Academy granted him continued remuneration of 133 1/3 riksdaler for further work with the collections as *custos musaei*. The issue of whether "an Instruction should be drawn up for Him" was raised, but was not carried out. Early in 1784, the Academy's new leadership proposed a long list of savings, greater control of the entire activities of the Academy and, as a final point, there was the question of Sparrman's remuneration (pension). Should it be paid for a specified period or was it a permanent wage, "for the trouble the Professor takes in maintaining the Cabinet"? However, the answer to this had to wait, as they were forced to investigate the matter in the minutes of previous meetings.

What occurred appears to have been a large and general review, even a revision, of all the Academy's activities. If we are to understand Sparrman's instruction, it must be considered in this context. Nor was this all; the next problem was attending to the best allocation of the rooms in the building on Stora Nygatan, which had never been clarified. A couple of members were therefore tasked with investigating how the premises could be best used. After this, a memorandum was read, including instructions for editorial work on the Academy's *Transactions*, as well as a proposal that the library should

be open to the public “once a week”, and that the Academy’s “[m]useum should be moved from its present gloomy room up to the top floor, and there displayed and similarly opened for the enlightenment of the curious one day a week [...]”. The Academy wanted to share its collections with the public more than had previously been the case.

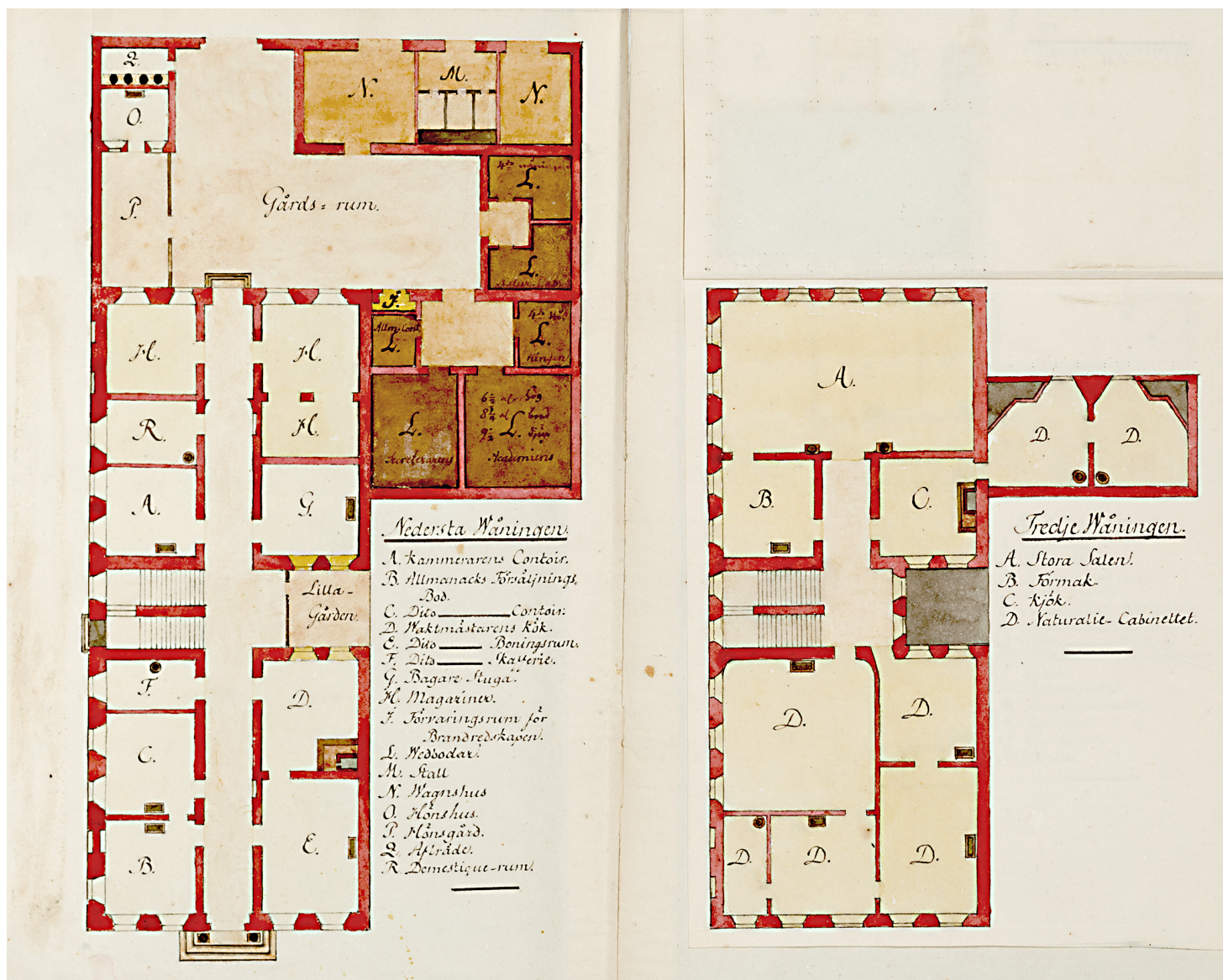
Two weeks later, it was time for the members’ inspection report. They stated that the Academy had only moderate rental income. It was reasonable that the first secretary should live without paying rent, but it was up to the Academy to judge whether the accountant and Sparrman should continue to have free accommodation. Also, they agreed with the memorandum on the necessity for a complete inventory of the library, instruments and natural history collections. The Academy’s management concurred, adding that the inventory of books and natural history specimens should be completed before the end of the year. To analyse the material, the collections must be described and classified, which entailed a bureaucratisation of knowledge.

Sparrman had understood that his benefits were threatened and therefore authored his own memorandum, which was read out. He provided a list of the specimens and described how he had tried to expand the collection via exchanges. This defence was commented upon with praise for his works and donations. However, because finances were the concern, the important point was the Academy’s ability to pay him. The Academy was now only able to offer a wage of 100 riksdaler per year and two free rooms. Its assets were shrinking and Sparrman’s personal terms were less generous. Meanwhile, however, the natural history cabinet itself received better conditions – greater space, more and lighter rooms. Nor was it *only* Sparrman’s terms that were reviewed and degraded. It was even worse for the accountant, to whom it was said he must sell more almanacs and pay rent.

In 1784, four years after the issue was first raised, it was time for the instruction authored by Peter Jonas Bergius. The “Instruction for the Curator of the Royal Academy of Sciences’ Natural History Cabinet” begins politely, with the words:

As the Royal Academy of Sciences has been fortunate enough to amass a considerable Natural History Collection, and the Academy has appointed a man of expertise to care for them, the Academy wishes to use the below Instruction to bind them together with the objective that these Collections now and hereafter shall be of benefit to the Public.

The instruction states that the curator should “open the Museum to the Public” on Wednesdays or Saturdays, 10 am–1 pm. Stockholm thus had its first public museum and an institution through which scientific knowledge could be communicated to a wider public. Nothing new was presented here,



PLANS FOR THE BUILDING on Stora Nygatan that housed the Academy of Sciences, after reorganisation in 1784.

compared to Sparrman's presidium speech of six years previously, but there was now a formal instruction, not simply an expressed intention to disseminate knowledge to the public. And with this, the *position* of curator was formally established.

Ten years now remained of Sparrman's curatorship of the Academy's collections, which passed more peacefully. In 1798, he finally resigned from

the position after Olof Peter Swartz and Gustaf von Paykull inventoried the condition of the natural history collection and made criticisms. Once again, the issue was not only Sparrman's stewardship, they had also reviewed the condition of the library. Swartz and Paykull wished to modernise the collection to make it more compatible with "contemporary discoveries". They continued by stating that, on the small salary that Sparrman received, he could not be expected to provide demonstrations, which was what was now asked for. The Academy agreed and Conrad Quensel was appointed demonstrator, while Sparrman was generously allowed to keep his salary and accommodation until 1805.

Sparrman's instruction from 1784, and the new terms and conditions shaped during his time as curator and director of the Academy of Sciences' collections, must thus be regarded in relation to the more general changes that the Academy underwent during this period. It also coincides with the power struggle that played out in the Academy after Wargentin's death and which was expressed in the double secretaryship, among other things. It has been said that this was a relatively quiet period of the Academy's history, when activities were consolidated and science assumed more modern forms. If Sparrman had been a different person, perhaps his actions would have harmonised better with these changes. However, it is clear that the optimism in Sparrman's 1778 presidium speech gradually altered to become a modest interest in the matter. Perhaps this was because of his personality, his financial worries, or something else.

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More detailed reasoning around these issues is found in my essay "Anders Sparrman och Vetenskapsakademien", in Gunnar Broberg, David Dunér & Roland Moberg (eds.), *Anders Sparrman: Linnean, världsresenär, fattigläkare* (Uppsala 2012). Sparrman is written about in Kenneth Nyberg's "Anders Sparrman", *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, Vol. 33 (Stockholm, 2007); Einar Lönnberg's "Kungl. Vetenskapsakademiens Naturaliekabinett 1739–1819", *Naturhistoriska Riksmuseets historia: Dess uppkomst och utveckling* (Uppsala, 1916); Yngve Löwegren's *Naturaliekabinett i Sverige under 1700-talet: Ett bidrag till zoologiens historia* (Uppsala, 1952); Sten Lindroth's *Kungl. Svenska Vetenskapsakademiens historia 1739–1818* (Uppsala, 1967); Tore Frängsmyr's *Svensk idéhistoria: Bildning och vetenskap under tusen år, vol. 1: 1000–1809* (Stockholm, 2000), and Sverker Sörlin & Otto Fagerstedt's *Linné och hans apostlar* (Stockholm, 2004). Sparrman's essays in *Vetenskapsakademiens handlingar* are available at [hosting.devo.se/kvah](http://hosting.devo.se/kvah). Archive documentation of the case is found in the Academy of Sciences' series of minutes.