



HÄLSINGE
GÅRDAR

The Swedish Farmhouses of Hälsingland

Many farmhouses had a large, ornate room for gatherings and special occasions. However, the Hälsingland farmers also liked to impress prominent visitors who stayed overnight with an elegant guest room – such as this one, for example, with its grand volume and decorative paintwork.



Large, beautiful farmsteads
from the 1700s-1800s

Richly decorated wooden houses in an exceptional state of preservation

In the heart of Sweden, about 300 km (190 miles) north of Stockholm, lie the farmhouses of Hälsingland – large, beautiful farmsteads from the 1700s-1800s.

Among the things that make the farmhouses of Hälsingland unique are their superb condition and their ornate painted interiors and woodwork features.

Another characteristic is their large size, despite their proprietors being ordinary farming folk. Nowhere else in the world but Hälsingland is there such a concentration of farmsteads with large buildings and well-preserved interiors.

Hälsingland farmhouses often had a large, ornate room for special occasions, festivities and gatherings – sometimes inspired by the nobility's mansions. Colour schemes and decorative techniques were often used to create a well-considered whole. This room was decorated somewhere around 1850.





The farmers of Hälsingland were freeholders – which gave them a unique opportunity

A Hälsingland farm often consists of up to some 20 wooden houses, built in an undulating landscape of long valleys, extensive pine forests, lakes and water-courses and fields.

The farmhouses of Hälsingland were built in an area of Scandinavia where farmers were freeholders and not controlled and taxed by the nobility. This gave them the opportunity to build considerably larger and more ornate houses than other farmers could, despite their lands not always being as extensive and productive. It was the work done by the men and women on the farms that created the grandeur of the farmhouses of Hälsingland.

The large houses on the Hälsingland farms are characterized by stylish architecture with unique interiors, skilfully executed carvings and richly detailed decorative painting. The majority of the preserved houses were built in the 1700s and 1800s, but the oldest surviving buildings are several centuries older.

Lush open valleys surrounded by pine forest characterise the landscape of Hälsingland. Here, even owners of smaller farms could afford to build large and beautifully decorated homes.



Farmers way of life since ancient times

Farmers established themselves along the coast of Hälsingland about 2400 years ago. Towards the later part of the Iron Age, ca. AD 600 – 1100, farmers also inhabited the interior of Hälsingland. There are about 3000 Iron Age burials across the region. These people's dwellings have not survived, but many of today's farmhouses of Hälsingland are sited on hills, near watercourses, that were already inhabited in the Iron Age. There are preserved documents in existence indicating that several of the farmhouses still surviving today have been owned by the same families since at least the 1500s.

The oldest surviving Hälsingland farm building is a raised log storehouse built in 1299, and there are well-preserved, complete farm complexes dating from the 1700s.



The notched-corner timber farmhouses of Hälsingland are mainly built in the 1700s and 1800s, but follow a tradition that has its roots in the middle ages. This farmhouse is the largest in Hälsingland. It was built in 1852 for two brothers and their families, hence the two doors. In this old farming community, farmhouses were often occupied by several generations at the same time.

The pine forests offered grazing for the animals, building materials and firewood

The climate in Hälsingland is one of long, cold and dark winters, a lot of snow – and always a short growing season. It meant those long-ago Hälsingland farmers had to concentrate every year on building up stocks of food, animal feed and firewood for the winter.

The farming folk got their food from what the animals and land produced. Many Hälsingland farms had only a small area of arable land near the house, but had their hay meadows and summer farms in the extensive pine forests. The forest pastures and forage land supported many cows and goats. These animals, which were the women's responsibility, produced sufficient meat and dairy products in normal years both to feed the farm folk and to be sold. The horses, which were looked after by the men, made it possible to undertake profitable trips to sell goods including home-produced flax and flax products, butter, cheese, game birds, furs and tar.

In the old farming community, farm-houses were often occupied by several generations. The work of men, women, old people and children was very important in supporting the farm, and all were expected to contribute to the work according to their abilities. The farms also employed live-in maids and farmhands.



Local painters were frequently hired to co-ordinate colours and designs in a room, sometimes the whole house. They were often inspired by patterns from expensive French wallpapers, but they designed and printed their own.



Winter temperatures down to -40°C influenced the way the houses were used

The farmhouses of Hälsingland are unique examples of a northern European vernacular building tradition based entirely on wood. They are today one of the world's strongest and most magnificent expressions of the kinds of farm complexes and house interiors that a freeholder farming class could create between the 1500s and late 1800s.

Common to all the farmhouses of Hälsingland is the sense of style that characterizes them both internally and externally, with an eye for proportion, decorative paintwork, detailing, functionality, materials and quality.

A long period of peace

Wooden houses are easy to burn down and destroy at times of armed conflict. An important reason for the survival of so many superb wooden houses is that since 1722 Hälsingland has been spared from war on its own soil. Many of them have exceptionally well preserved and ornate interiors. The exteriors of the majority of the farmhouses of Hälsingland are painted in traditional Swedish red. This paint has been used for centuries, and gets its pigment from the Falu Koppargruva copper mine in Sweden.

The buildings are typically constructed from logs notched together at the corners, and often have two or even three storeys. The dwelling houses had many rooms. However, only a few of the rooms were used during the winter months, because the severe cold meant that not every room could be heated. In really cold winters, the outdoor temperature could fall to -30°C, and in extreme cases all the way down to -40°C.

Particularly beautiful rooms for special occasions and entertaining

The annual festivals and life's special occasions demanded a distinguished setting. Many farmhouses therefore had a large, ornate room for special occasions, where people ate and drank, played music and danced, celebrated weddings and held clerical surveys and other gatherings. It was also important to have grand guest rooms for prominent visitors who stayed overnight. These rooms for special occasions and guests were often on the first floor of the house, but sometimes a separate building, intended only for special occasions, was constructed. Common to many of these additional rooms is the substantial investment in profuse and impressive ornamentation in the form of detailed woodwork, beautiful furnishings and various kinds of decorative paint-work.

The survival of many of the rooms and buildings for special occasions, unchanged today since the 1700s and 1800s, is due among other things to their being additional rooms that were not intended for living in. When the Hälsingland farmers modernized their homes, they restricted themselves to their everyday rooms and often left the rooms for special occasions untouched.

The folk painters of Hälsingland were inspired by upper-class culture. A skilled artist executed the painting in the centre of this room, probably after a French lithograph. The winged couple at the top is intended to resemble English Wedgwood porcelain.





Early interior decoration using colour schemes and ornamentation

The home has always been important for the Hälsingland farmers, and the art of interior decoration in the farmhouses of Hälsingland is a major contributor to their fame. This has been commented on since the 1600s in travel books describing the beautiful exteriors and interiors of the farmhouses of Hälsingland, filled with works created by artists from the rural and farming communities.

The interior decoration in the farmhouses of Hälsingland was developed very early. Various techniques were used to create a theme in which not only the wall surfaces but also the carpentry, fireplace walls, tiled stoves and furniture were used to produce a well-considered impression, often with co-ordinating colours and designs. The colour schemes and decorative techniques used vary from room to room, which together create a well-considered whole. A single storey may be involved, but sometimes an entire house was intended for entertaining.

Today, the farmhouses of Hälsingland represent a globally unique concentration of decorated original interiors within a specific geographical area. Most of the houses are still privately owned and occupied.

LEFT The stencilled wall paintings of Hälsingland differ from those found in other regions. Patterns are more complicated here, with shading that makes the painted wall resemble silk brocade or other expensive wall-hanging fabric.

TOP This painting shows Sweden's capital city Stockholm and the Royal Palace. It was done by a painter from Dalarna – a neighbouring province that also boasts many folk artists.

ABOVE The mill by the river was painted by an even more skilled hand. This artist was born in Hälsingland and received some years' training in Stockholm.



Hälsingland farmers often invested in decorative free-hand paintwork in their home interiors. In several farmhouses, the original paintwork is still preserved on walls, carpentry and the fireplace, as well as on window blinds and furniture. These wall paintings were done in 1862.

Colourful folk art on walls and furniture

In large parts of the world, it was common for the wealthy to adorn their homes with decorated and painted wall coverings, but it was unusual in folk culture. In Norway and Sweden, farmers often had painted interiors, but elsewhere in Europe painted folk art was mainly restricted to the furniture.

The Hälsingland farmers had decorative paintwork in their home interiors as well as on their furniture. During the 1500s, they acquired a particular preference for painted decorations on loose linen hangings, which soon became fixed to the wall. Many of the artists employed were keenly aware of new influences, but liked to combine new trends with old, traditional designs. These folk artists nearly always came from the same social class as the farmers themselves, and shared their values. In this way, art contributed to the creation of solidarity and group membership within the regional farming community.

Folk painters working in the farmhouses of Hälsingland hardly ever signed their art. Most of their fee was usually in the form of food and lodging, and no receipts ever changed hands. Many of these painters can be identified by their personal style, yet they still remain anonymous.

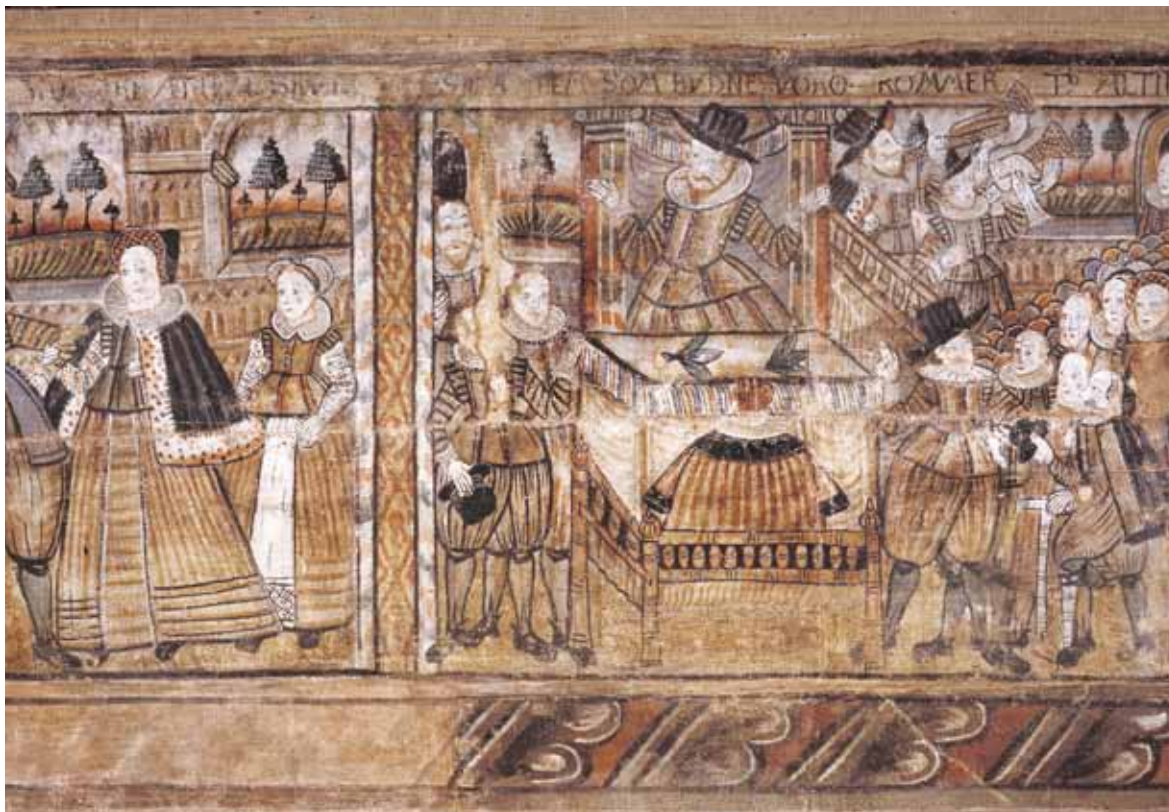


The richest Nordic find of painted wall hangings

In the 1500s and 1600s, painted wall hangings with biblical subjects were to be found across the whole Nordic region, chiefly in the homes of the nobility, clergy and burghers. They were less common in the farming community. Yet the Hälsingland farmhouses are where the greatest Nordic finds of these early painted wall hangings have been made. A total of 84 painted wall hangings dating from before 1650 have been found in the Nordic region. Of these, 49 come from Hälsingland.

In the 1900s, hand-painted wall-hangings on linen from the 1600s were often found when old Hälsingland farmhouses were modernized. The largest ever Nordic find of 1400s-1600s paintings was made in a Hälsingland farmhouse in Alfta in 1964. When a floor was taken up, 80 square metres (860 square feet) of old painted wall hangings were discovered. The wall hangings had been put there during the 1800s to provide insulation.

This wall painting from the 1640s shows a biblical scene. A rich man is giving a banquet and invites the poor people to dine with him. Even though the event is set in biblical times, everybody is wearing the European fashion of the day.



Hälsingland farmers liked to use paint to imitate expensive materials they could not afford. Here a wooden staircase hand-painted in the 1850s to resemble stone.

Creative, considered painting

Interiors have been much more extensively preserved in Hälsingland than elsewhere in the Nordic region. The Hälsingland farmers liked to use paint to imitate expensive materials they could not afford. Stencilling resembles silk wall hangings, spattering imitates porphyry or granite and marbling looks like the real thing. Softwood detailing is grained to look like mahogany. Tiled stoves and printed wallpapers are nearly always colour coordinated. The precise colour for the locally made tiled stoves was probably determined by the wallpaper colours, instead of the reverse.

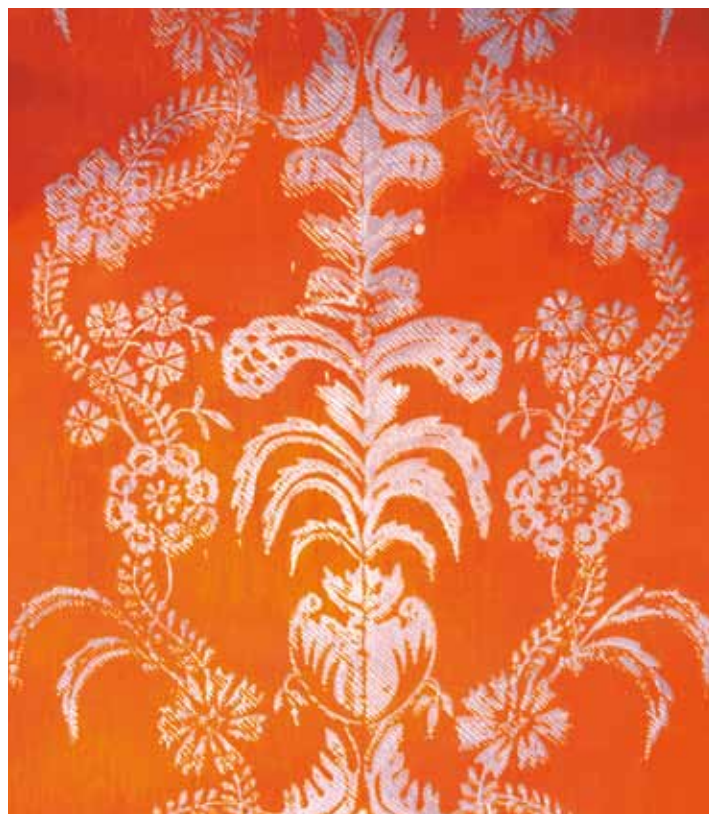
In several farmhouses, the original paintwork is preserved on walls, ceilings, floors and the fireplace, as well as on window blinds and furniture.

A unique historical wallpaper treasure

In the 1700s, the Hälsingland farmers also began to combine painting with printed wallpaper from the towns. Wallpaper quality was further improved in the 1800s, with hand printing in multiple colours on superior paper. Much of the wallpaper was imported from elsewhere in Europe, such as France.

The wallpaper patterns are sometimes exact imitations of the silk wall hangings of the manor houses, but today the Hälsingland farmers' wallpaper is often far better preserved than the papered walls of the manor houses. The Hälsingland farmers' wallpapers remain untouched on their walls, whilst the wallpapers found elsewhere remain only as fragments. In its historical context, the farmhouse wallpaper treasure might be globally unique.

Hälsingland farmers used decorative free-hand paintwork in their home interiors as well as on their furniture. Sometimes wall paintings were made to resemble silk wall-hangings – this flower pattern has been made by stencilling.



Carved woodwork and decorative painting for an impressive entrance

The typically ornate entrances to the houses are also fine examples of the folk art of the time, and differ substantially from parish to parish. Although you could draw inspiration from other people, it was important to put your individual stamp on the entrance to the farmhouse. Some were constructed to replicate expensive stone entrances and convey higher status, but if so, they were nearly always combined with a very individualistic style and character. Fine woodwork, decorative paintwork and small windows were much used to create a prominent, welcoming and attractive entrance. Many doors were elegantly carved and painted, and often had porches. Many entrances had a strong local character, and most parishes had their own style. For many Swedes today, these beautiful farmhouse entrance porches symbolize the whole of Hälsingland.



Hälsingland farmers often used carved woodwork and decorative painting to create an impressive entrance to their farmhouses. Though inspiration was sometimes drawn from other houses, it was important to put an individual stamp on your own entrance. For many Swedes today, these beautiful entrance porches symbolize the whole of Hälsingland. This porch was built in the 1850s.



Use of marbling in hallways and staircases can be traced back to the palaces of the Italian renaissance. In the 1800s, it was also common practice among the folk painters of Hälsingland.



Built by the farmers themselves,
 and shaped by their picturesque
 countryside, stand the farmhouses
 of Hälsingland – in the heart of
 Sweden. The impressive farmhouses
 are exceptionally well preserved, and
 replete with uninterrupted traditions
 and living stories about pride, luxury
 and hard work.

The cultural heritage embodied
 by the farmhouses of Hälsingland
 includes unique architecture,
 building heritage, creativity, choice
 of materials, design and the farmers’
 way of life since the Middle Ages.

For more information about the
 farmhouses of Hälsingland, please
 visit **www.halsingegardar.se**

