

At Home with the FT House & Home**Marianne Andresen on art, Norway and life with late husband Johan**

At 83, the widow of the industrialist is preparing for an exhibition of her paintings and curating the family's wealth of art



© Ilja C Hendel

James Lamont in Oslo 11 HOURS AGO

For the custodian of one of the finest private libraries in Scandinavia and the treasures of one of Norway's leading industrialists, Marianne Andresen is remarkably carefree about ownership.

We are sitting in the evening light in the 4,000-volume library surrounded by portraits and landscape paintings, porcelain, cut glass and sculpture. First-edition Henrik Ibsen plays are within arm's reach. Outside, the linden-lined approach is blanketed with snow; inside is lit immaculately with shaded lamps and candles. Clocks chime soothingly.

For Andresen, at 83 years old, recounting comes more readily than showing off the curated wonders of her family house, Smedbraaten. "I try not to get too attached to things," she says. "Things will disappear. Human beings are far more important. It has to do with the way they are connected."

Certainly, the warm welcome is striking at the secluded house on Oslo's Bygdøy peninsula on a winter's night. To make the point, a large number of family photographs are displayed on writing desks and a grand piano.

"Do you want to go straight to work, or sit and relax? Please have a glass of sherry or wine, and smoked salmon," she invites, brightly. I opt for work and we sift through unframed pen and ink drawings laid out on the 10-person dining-room table for an exhibition in Stockholm in the autumn.



The sitting room at Smedbraaten, the Andresen family home © Ilja C Hendel

A careful observer with time on her hands, Andresen travelled the world with her industrialist husband Johan, sketchbook in hand. While he diversified the family's investments beyond tobacco into packaging company Elopak and ski-equipment maker Swix Sport, she painted ceaselessly. Her drawings, accumulating for decades in an attic studio, range from studies of her own Bielke family home in southern Sweden, the grand 70-room [Sturefors Castle](#), figures, animals and plants, to Samarkand, Jeddah, Dakar and bullfights in Portugal.

Ever the itinerant artist, she has just returned from Jordan and the Bahamas. Last year, she held the first exhibition of her lifetime in Oslo, selling nearly 90 paintings to fund scholarships at an international school on Norway's west coast, [UWC Red Cross Nordic](#). Norway's Queen Sonja bought four.

Originally a Swiss-style cottage on a tree-lined rocky outcrop on the far outskirts of Oslo, a stone's throw from [the royal summer palace](#), Smedbraaten was transformed into a more substantial two-storey ochre-coloured Mediterranean villa in 1935 by local architect Arnstein Arneberg.



'Bjornunger', by Marianne Andresen, 1956

It was intended as a show house for the Andresen family, which made its fortune from cigarette production after buying J.L. Tiedemanns Tobaksfabrik in 1849. Its interiors were to be filled with Norwegian furniture, paintings and literature. Some of it had an industrial theme. In the library is a chest with two drawers missing. These house silver engraved snuff boxes too valuable to be on display, and behind lock and key elsewhere.

Not long after it was built, the second world war overtook Smedbraaten. During the German occupation her father-in-law, a businessman-cum-conservative politician, was imprisoned, before fleeing in 1944 with son Johan. They escaped via the house's cellar, through a tunnel in the garden, and on to neutral Sweden. "There are so many things in the walls here," says Andresen.

Flight was not before precautions were taken with the collectibles. Fearing the Nazis would loot them, valuable possessions were wrapped and distributed to workers of the tobacco factory to conceal in their homes until hostilities ended. Remarkably, all were returned.



Smedbraaten's exterior © Ilja C Hendel

The house, she says, served as a “camouflage” for leaders of the Norwegian resistance, Milorg, and was the site of secret meetings with mutinous German officers waking up to Berlin’s defeat.

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After all that, welcome was not guaranteed at Smedbraaten. Distrust ran high. Though daughter of a count and educated in Ramsgate, Brussels, Stockholm and Munich, Andresen’s own acceptance was not assured. She met her Harvard Business School-educated husband in 1956 on a visit to Oslo. It took four years, however, for them to get engaged. One reason was her Roman Catholicism in

mainly Protestant Norway.

“There was a reluctance here because I was a Catholic,” she recalls. “I sent [Johan] to a Dominican father. He explained that it wasn’t that dangerous to marry a Catholic girl. We were engaged quickly and married.”

Although her friends have “accepted her religion”, she has remained an outsider, mostly as a self-identifying Swede in a country where Danish and then Swedish dominance over the ages rankles. A corner of the library is dedicated to Swedish artefacts including an 18th-century mirror from the workshop of Burchard Precht. In a parlour off the sitting room, she stacks copies of the Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet to give her, in her words, a wider view of world affairs.



The small dining room with a view towards Oslo © Ilja C Hendel

Oslo was a gloomy place when she first visited in 1947. “Norway was so poor, and very grey. There was nothing. There was no colour, there were no restaurants. It was far behind Stockholm and Copenhagen. It only began to change in the 1950s,” she says.

One of the catalysts was the shipping industry. This boomed from the 1950s to the 1970s making several families, such as the Olsens and Skaugens, rich and brightening the social and cultural scenes for a heady couple of decades. These fortunes were followed by new money from oil and salmon farming.



'Sittende araber', 1985

“I christened two ships,” she remembers. “Many of our friends were shipping people. They had a marvellous time. They purchased yachts, travelled everywhere and they had great collections, especially of Impressionist painters. Then it all collapsed at the beginning of the 1970s [when Norwegian owners were upended in the tanker business during the oil crisis].”

The house has hosted its own share of christenings, confirmations, weddings and dinners, and remains a focal point for her family. Andresen’s second son Nils was left paralysed from the neck down 20 years ago after a motor accident in a storm in Malaysia. She speaks movingly of how a Houston-based physician helped him defy the odds, walk again and lead an independent life. She repeats several times a childhood question of his: “What are mothers for?” No answer is needed.



'Mother with Child' by Norwegian artist Gustav Vigeland in the library © Ilja C Hendel

Fittingly, we have arrived at a sculpture in the library of a mother and child by Norwegian artist [Gustav Vigeland](#). Along with a small, fiery landscape by French painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir nearby, it is one of Andresen's favourite things. The Carrara marble is full-moon white and revolves on a pedestal so the viewer can see all angles. The child stands between his mother's crouched legs, looking bashful, almost resentful, as if not quite sorry for some terrible deed. Forgiveness lies in her embrace and the texture of the marble.

“Run your hands over the arms,” Andresen instructs. “It is like silk.” Indeed, it is.

The tobacco business was merged with the Denmark-based Scandinavian Tobacco Group in 1998 and later sold on to British American Tobacco. Andresen admits that she shed a tear when the last cigarette-making machine was taken out of the now demolished factory. She had married into a family where smoking was de rigueur. But she recalls how compensation claims and bad publicity took a heavy toll on her husband as awareness grew of tobacco's health risks. He died in 2011.



Andresen's painter's palette, in her studio in the attic © Ilja C Hendel

Now she is preparing the family's possessions for inheritance among her four children — Johan, Eva, Nils and Birgitte, and six grandchildren, all girls.

“We sold a beautiful Munch painting, ‘[Starry Night](#)’, that is now in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. It belonged to Fridtjof Nansen [the explorer and diplomat]. It was always travelling to exhibitions, always somewhere. The proceeds I split among smaller, valuable, first-class pictures.” These works will be easier to divide and pass on.

One is the Renoir landscape of a river bank in summer, to which she was attracted by a quality of her own as an artist — spontaneity. “It's a little jewel. I could see that he made it there in that place; it's not an atelier piece. We see it because he liked it. This is something that he [just] had to paint.”



Left: 'Fiskehandler, Kenya'. Right: 'Bater, Madeira', 1989

Smedbraaten is notable for its animal motifs, more rarefied hunting lodge than learned metropolitan space. Hunting, if not smoking, remains popular for the family. Foxes scamper out from murals, tigers are moulded on ceramic plates and stags escape pursuers in the threads of elaborate Persian carpets.

I prepare to leave, as Andresen tells me what a pity it is we cannot see the garden, her favourite possession of all. The seasons remind her of childhood on the Swedish estate where a timeless farming calendar held sway and pheasants, moose and reindeer abounded.



Left: 'Nils tar pause', 1974. Right: 'Tyrefektore i Portugal', 1957

“Many people ask: ‘Don’t you want to go to an apartment?’ she says of the upkeep of Smedbraaten and five other family properties. “I have so much to be grateful for. I won’t leave my garden or my house. Thank you!”

Favourite thing





© Ilja C Hendel

Teaching six grand-daughters to value small, fragile things is no easy task. Andresen has enlisted the aid of a porcelain dining-table decoration, a Bavarian take on the virtues of Diana, the goddess of hunting. In an illuminated cabinet alongside a largely 18th-century Chinese collection, are mirthful hunting figurines of white [Nymphenburg porcelain](#) from Munich. A dog “points” at its prey, a wild boar charges, a man holds out a hare at arms-length and a woman trains a shotgun at her target. “I like the fact that it’s the woman holding the shotgun,” says Andresen.

James Lamont is the FT’s managing editor

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