

SISTERS



■ The photography of Birgitta Ralston



Top: sisters, Stora Essingen, Sweden, 1978. Bottom, left to right: Stockholm University professor with her sister, 1982; three sisters from Freney-Voltaire, France, 1986; the teacher's daughters, 1978.

Birgitta Ralston (GGP '78) remembers the moment she heard the calling of what would become her life's work. It was 1972—she was a thirty-something mother of two, a former fashion model, full-time photography student, Swedish immigrant to the United States—and she was strolling through the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

She came to a long corridor hung with "portrait after portrait after portrait" of the patriarchs of old New England families—Peabody, Coolidge and the like. She stood looking at one of the portraits, an image of the governor of Massachusetts, and she wondered, "Does this man have a sister?"

This innocent question sparked a fire in Birgitta—a desire to chronicle the lives of sisters as so many men's lives had been chronicled. "It was as if nothing else existed for me," she said. "I thought I would like to do a project good enough to hang on a museum's walls."

I spoke with Birgitta by telephone to learn more about her work and, in particular, her passion for sisters.

What began as a simple photograph of her daughter, Johanna, and two sisters from their neighborhood grew into a collection of 94 photographs taken over more than 30 years—images of sisters from as far away as France, India, Spain, Mexico and Sweden, and as close to home as Boston and Cambridge, where Birgitta lives today.

Her work has been exhibited in Stockholm, Paris,

BY KELLY COLLAR London and around the United States. "Two Sisters from Freney-Voltaire" (see page 10) was included in an exhibition and book, *150 Years of Children in Photography*, alongside work from masters like Edouard Boubat, Julia Margaret Cameron and André Kertész.

Each photo offers up a compelling story of the delicate relationship that exists between sisters: the closeness and separateness, dependence and rivalry, love and ambivalence described in the introduction to her exhibition book, *Sisters*.

It is interesting to note that Birgitta, herself, has no sisters. She has said that her pictures are about "not being alone in your generation. I wanted to know what it was like to have a sister." Indeed, when I mention during our conversation that I have four sisters, her enthusiasm noticeably quickens.

Now, more than three decades after beginning the project, and after recently donating the collection to the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, she is still interested in sisters. "I can sit on a bus and see two sisters—I don't have a camera, I don't need to

Photos: left, four gospel-singing sisters, Dorchester, Mass.; right, Swedish sisters, 1973.





Above, two sisters from Freney-Voltaire, France, 1976 (an earlier photo of two on pg. 8). Bottom, seven sisters from Madrid, Spain, 1975.

photograph them—but there is something in there, it speaks to me.”

When I mention that her subjects appear to have not just a relationship between themselves, but also an affectionate relationship with her as the photographer, Birgitta draws on her experience as a model to explain. She modeled on and off for 12 years in her twenties and thirties, working with the Eileen Ford Agency for Martin Munkacsi, Richard Avedon, Erwin Blumenfeld and other fashion luminaries in New York, Paris and Stockholm.

“I wanted to break away from fashion—the artificial—and have more interaction,” she said. She worked hard on “working naturally” with her subjects and they, as a result, are more relaxed and more “real.”

Her time in front of the camera also introduced her to some outstanding photographers and, most interesting for Birgitta, photographers who printed the images themselves. “They loved the darkroom work also,” she said. “They were not just shooting the pictures.” While she waited for her photo shoots to begin, she would watch the photographers set up their equipment. “I was soaking it up.”

This interest led her to study photography at MIT in the early '70s, under master photographer Minor White. After three years at MIT, she continued her education through

Goddard’s off-campus program and earned her master’s in 1978. Though she and her husband drove to Plainfield when she initially registered for classes, this was her only time on campus, something she still regrets today. “I would have loved to live there,” she said.

While she was working on her thesis, she set aside the sisters photos and focused instead on a series called “Masks,” a project that emerged as she was trying to describe the change from model to photographer. The photos depict women in various poses whose faces are hidden by masks. The images are housed today at the Museum of Modern Art in Sweden and in the collection of Bibliotech Nationale in Paris.

Birgitta later used her passion for photography to fulfill a childhood dream—to become a teacher. She has taught at the Rhode Island School of Design, DeCordova Museum School, Tufts University and the Showa University of Tokyo’s Boston branch. This semester, she is back teaching at Showa and plans to do workshops on organizing all the film and photos that people collect over a lifetime.

After spending her own lifetime moving back and forth between the United States and locations abroad, Birgitta has come home to roost in Cambridge. On the day we spoke—an election day—she had just returned from voting for the first time as an American citizen. Though her ballot weighed in on local issues—the Cambridge school committee and school council—it had clearly made an impression on her and perhaps opened another chapter of what she describes as “a full life.”

“I feel that it’s a new beginning for me,” she said. ■

Birgitta misses all of her classmates, “the best part” of her studies at Goddard. Contact her at Gitara1ston@earthlink.net.

