



One of Umeå's many birch-lined streets



Green Fire sculpture by Umeå Central Station, July 2017. Photo: Jimmy Granström

From the City of Birches rises Northern Sweden's intellectual capital - How creative arts and technology from Umeå took Sweden and the world by storm (By Jimmy Granström)

Umeå is often considered to be the capital of northern Sweden. It is popularly known as the City of Birches, which dates from 1888 when an enormous fire devastated large areas of the city. When Umeå was rebuilt, wide avenues with birches planted along them were used as fire breaks to prevent fires from spreading. Today, Umeå is Sweden's 12th most populated city and one of the fastest growing ones in the country. A major reason for Umeå's growth is its university, which was founded in 1965. It is the 5th oldest one within Sweden's present borders, and has around 38,000 registered students. Internationally, the university is known for research relating to the genome of the poplar tree and the Norway Spruce as well as its highly ranked Institute of Design. Art is an important part of Umeå's identity, and the "Green Fire" sculpture immediately greets if you arrive by train at Umeå Central station. "Green Fire" is a nine meter high glass sculpture by the late Vicke Lindstrand, who also designed the Monumental Fountain for the 1939 New York World's Fair. Green Fire was the largest glass sculpture in the world when it was erected in 1970. Other prominent art installations in Umeå are the Smiley Heart Sculptures, which was a symbol for Umeå's year as a European Capital of Culture in 2014. The depiction of Umeå with a heart can be related to its geographical location, roughly equivalent to that of the heart in a human, but also to the rich cultural life in Umeå which has played an important role in the well-being of its citizens.



Umeå University, July 2017. Photo: J. Granström



2014 Culture Capital Smiley Heart Sculpture

The Museum of Image

A lot of Umeå's art and design can be found in Bildmuseet (The Museum of Image). Over the years it has established itself as one of Sweden's most interesting places for international contemporary art. It features art exhibitions and events for the whole family. The museum is situated at Umeå Arts Campus, which brings together the university's art colleges by the banks of the river Umeälven: Umeå School of Architecture, Institute of Design and Academy of Fine Arts. Current exhibitions at Bildmuseet includes Mats Jonsson's "Still Sámi", which runs until February 12th 2023. It was not until after the death of Mats Jonsson's grandfather that his children and grandchildren discovered that they were Sámi. This secret remained hidden in a bentwood box filled with documents from the grandfather's time as a reindeer herder. Jonsson has drawn the story behind the family secret in black ink on white card as he uncovered it in the archives and memories of old people. In his exhibition, he compiles the traces of Sámi culture and places them side by side with his drawings in an attempt to fill the space that silence hollows out in those who grow up assimilated. There are also several art installations located outside by Ume River where the Museum of Image is located. One of the most popular ones is "the clothespin", which "pinches" in the thin "skin" of the ground. It is thereby showing how shallow the underlying layer is, hence sensitive to environmental impacts.



Bildmuseet (The Museum of Image)



"Still Sámi" exhibit inside the Museum of Image



View from The Museum of Image in July 2017.

Photo: Jimmy Granström



The clothespin art installation by Ume River near the Museum of Image



“Listen” by Umeå’s old town hall, Rådhusorget



A Station Of Being (experimental bus stop)

Art from the city to the coast and mountains

Other prominent art installations around Umeå include “Listen” outside of the old town hall on Rådhusorget. The artwork was created by artist Camilla Akraka and is 4.3 meters high. The red-colored cougar with powerful muscles and a golden gap marks the municipality’s position on sexual harassment - a manifestation dedicated to those who together broke the silence as part of the “metoo” movement.

“A Station of Being” is a new, experimental bus station for the Arctic Region. The station transforms the uncomfortable experience of waiting into a transitional one, a moment to “just be” and “change your state of being” before heading for a new place and new activities. The first prototype of the bus stop was inaugurated on 2 October 2019 during the EU Arctic Forum in Umeå. A video of the bus stop is seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPxx-9Bydvw>

Also in Umeå is “Standing Man”, a bronze sculpture painted with oil paint, created by British artist Sean Henry and located near “Listen”. Finally, “The Seven Rivers Art Route” is probably the world’s longest permanent art exhibition, stretching for 350 kilometers from the coast to the mountains. One of the more famous works along the route is “Hägring (Mirage)” by Kent Karlsson - a glass church standing in the middle of a bog between Vännäs and Bjurholm.



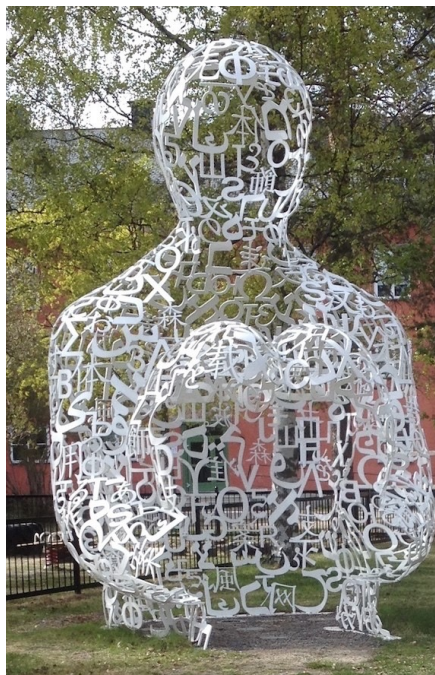
Standing Man



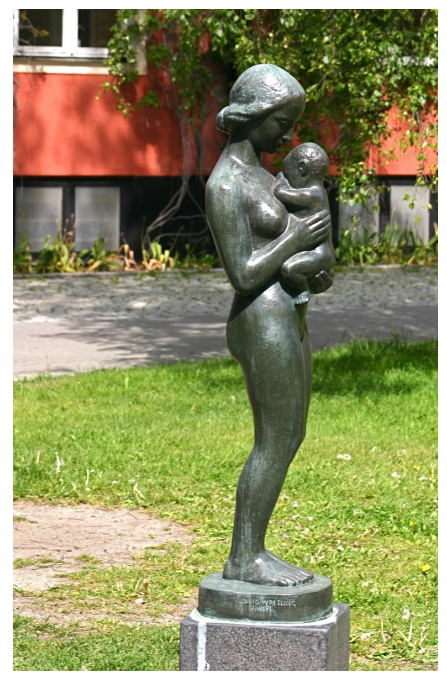
The Seven Rivers Art Route



“Heart of Trees”



“Nosotros”



“Mother And Child”

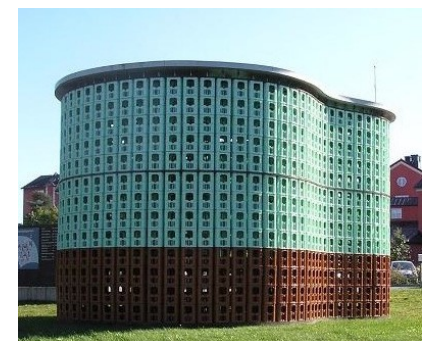
Umedalen Sculpture Park

Located about 5 kilometers west of Umeå Town Centre is Umedalen Sculpture Park, which is one of Northern Europe’s foremost sculpture collections with some 40 works. One of Umedalen’s most well-known installations is ”Heart Of Trees”, which depicts people with their arms and trees wrapped around a tree trunk. This type of art is very common throughout Umeå, where the culture is strongly influenced by both the surrounding natural beauty and its art, providing an environment where reflections of the soul of nature and the spirit of human creativity resonate and dominate the senses. Like in many other Swedish towns, the sounds of nature, conversation, laughter and music are louder than traffic and noise throughout most of the town and surrounding area.

”Heart of Trees” is made by Jaume Plensa, whose sculpture ”Nosotros” can also be found in the park. In “Nosotros”, Plensa is using letters from eight different alphabets, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Cyrillic, Hindi, Arabic, Japanese and Chinese. They are multiplied into a continuous random network over the total surface area of the body; these letters again represent, in their own way, the exploration of the “human container”. Two other prominent sculptures include David Wretling’s “Mother And Child” and Louise Bourgeois “Eye Benches II”, where the backside of the latter are benches. Bourgeois eye bench sculptures can also be found in Seattle and Pittsburgh. Finally, “Kastenhouse 1164.14” and “Stevenson, 1999” add further dimensions to Umedalen’s sculptures, where the former is made out of plastic crates while the latter has flowing water which creates a “moving sculpture”.



“Eye Benches II”



“Kastenhouse 1164.14”



”Stevenson, 1999”



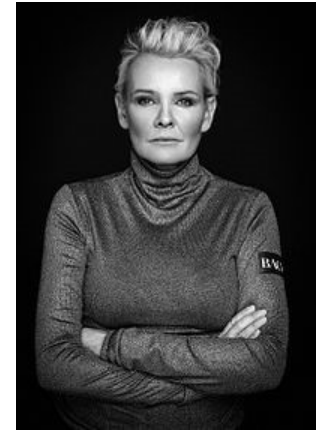
Stieg Larsson



Lars Berge



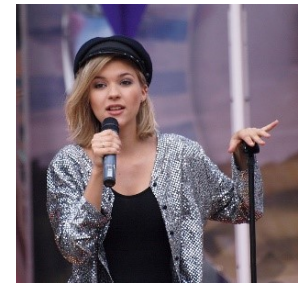
Lisa Miskovsky



Eva Dahlgren

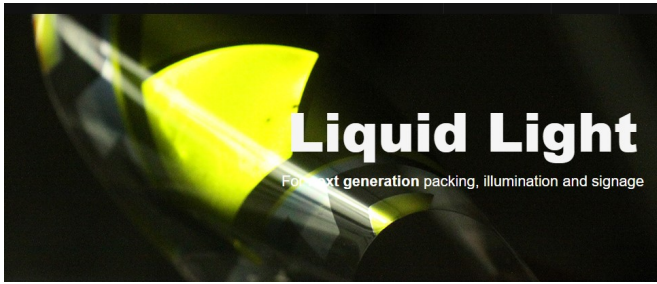
Music and literature

Umeå was the home town of Stieg Larsson, the late author of the Millennium trilogy. The books were published after his death in 2004, and have sold over 80 million copies worldwide. All three books have been adapted into motion pictures in Sweden, and a Hollywood version of "The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo" (the first book in the series), featuring Daniel Craig and Rooney Mara, was released in 2011. Another prominent author originating from Umeå is Lars Berge, whose book "Monstervågen (Rogue Wave)" was covered in the article "Oregon's First City" in Nordstjernen 2109. He is mostly known for the critically acclaimed best-seller "Vargattacken (Project: Wolf)", about the fatal wolf attack of a worker at the Kolmården Wildlife Park in southern Sweden. Two of Sweden's largest newspapers, Expressen and Svenska Dagbladet, reviewed the book with the words 'A page-turner that shakes the ground under your feet.' and 'A relentlessly thrilling reportage of a horrifying and breathtaking event.' The book has been translated into several languages, with the Polish version short-listed for the Ryszard Kapuscinski Award for Literary Reportage 2020. His Svenska Dagbladet pod "Medicinmannen (The Medicine Man)", together with Hugo Lavett and Adam Svane, was awarded with a bronze in the category "Best Serialized Podcast" at the international prize New York Festival Radio Awards in late April. "The Medicine Man" is a documentary in five parts about a sect in Sweden and Finland in the 1990's. The sect tried to build a sustainable society in the forest, but was led by a con man called "The Man" suspected for eco crimes and sexual abuse.



Tove Styrke

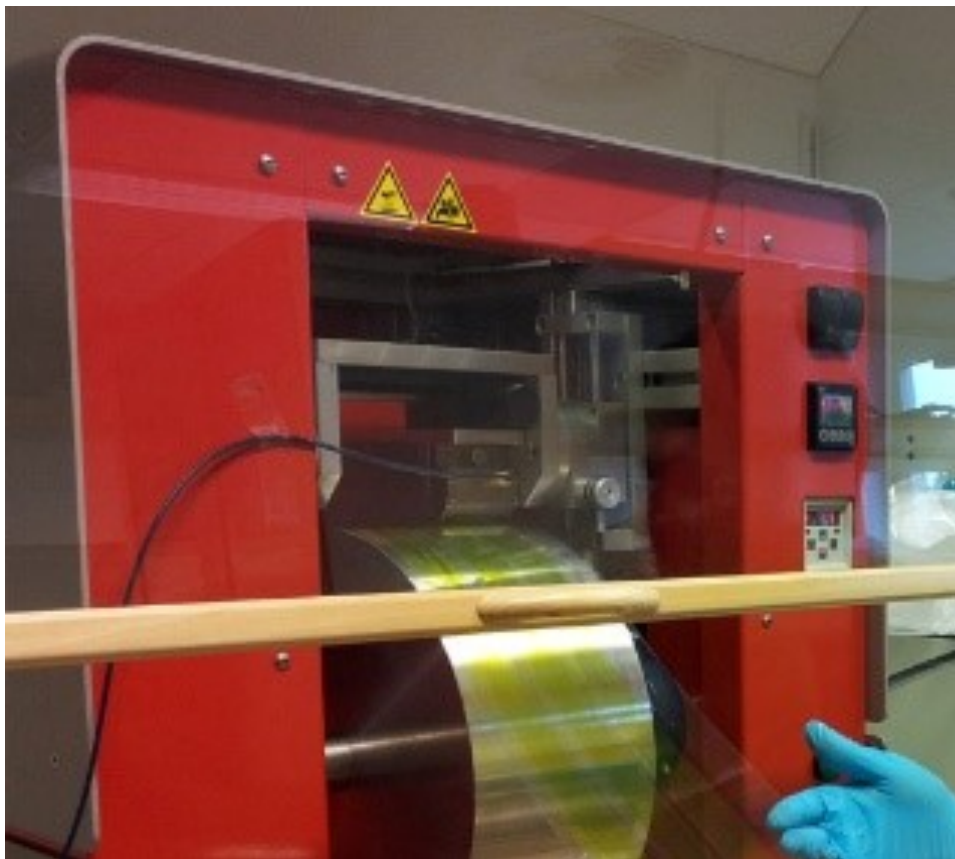
Umeå is also well represented in the world of music, with artists such as Lisa Miskovsky, Eva Dahlgren and Tove Styrke. Miskovsky co-wrote "Shape Of My Heart" for The Backstreet Boys, which topped the sales charts in Canada, New Zealand, Sweden and several other countries in Europe in the autumn of 2000. As a solo artist, she has released six albums, with her most recent releases "Umeå" and "Bottenviken" ("Bothnian Bay" referring to the northernmost part of the Gulf of Bothnia where Umeå is located) released in 2013 and 2019, respectively. Eva Dahlgren has one of Sweden's most recognizable and beloved voices, with her 1991 album "En blekt blondins hjärta (A Bleached Blonde's Heart)" having sold over half a million copies, making it one of the best-selling albums in Sweden's music history. One of Dahlgren's most famous songs, "Ängeln i rummet", was translated into English and included on her English language album "Eva Dahlgren" in 1992. Completing the trio of successful female artists from Umeå is Tove Styrke, who ended up in 3rd place in Swedish Idol in 2009. Since then, she has released several albums in Sweden as well as toured the United States and Europe as warm-up acts for international artists Lorde and Katy Perry, respectively. Her new album "Hard" has received a clutch of four-star reviews in the United Kingdom and been featured on BBC News.



From left to right: LunaLEC technology, co-founder Professor Ludvig Edman and CTO Christian Larsen

Start-up companies

Umeå is also home to several prominent tech start-ups, many of which are based at Umeå University or funded through Uminova Innovation, which is part of Umeå and the surrounding region's successful innovation ecosystem. Uminova Innovation's alumni include LunaLEC and Prediktera, which have paved the way for revolutionary lighting technology and hyperspectral imaging software, respectively. LunaLEC was co-founded by Umeå University professor Ludvig Edman, who was a post-doctoral fellow in the research group of 2000 Chemistry Nobel Laureate Professor Alan J. Heeger at University of California, Santa Barbara. Prof. Edman's research focuses on the development of light-emitting electrochemical cells (LECs), which are seemingly very similar to the organic light-emitting diodes (OLEDs) commercialized for TVs and cell phones. However, LECs offer many potential advantages over OLEDs, including low cost by fully printing these devices without the expensive cleanroom equipment required for OLEDs. The company is currently working on commercializing its technology under the direction of Prof. Edman and recently appointed CTO Christian Larsen.



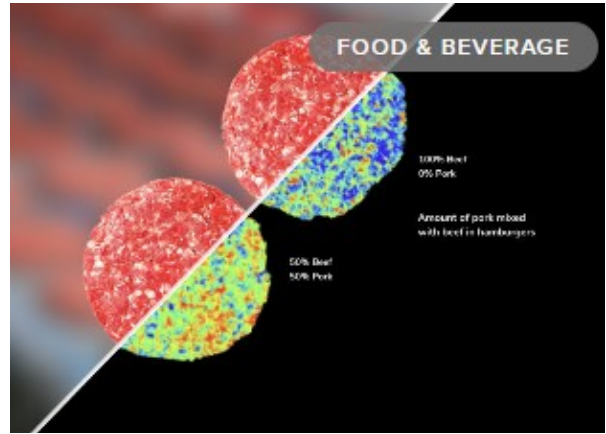
LECs fabricated at Umeå University, from the printer to potential devices for applications ranging from medical devices to illumination and signage. References: lunalec.com and Christian Larsen



Oskar Jonsson and Andreas Vidman, Prediktera

Prediktera, led by CTO Oskar Jonsson and CEO Andreas Vidman, recently won a big collaboration with ABB Growth Hub Synerleap, with global markets opening up for the Umeå-based company. Prediktera has its roots in multivariate data analysis research, which involves analysis of more than one type of measurement or observation, at Umeå University and a spin-off named Umbio. That work eventually led to the current user-friendly software for chemical imaging, which can provide critical information in a wide range of applications, from analysis of food products for quality control to identification and analysis of narcotics in customs. Hyperspectral technology works by analyzing the chemical content of samples in real-time, even through packaging, enabling applications from identification of counterfeit medication to automated quality inspection of fish. Using Prediktera's software, fish can be classified by species and quality graded according to specific chemical parameters. The world of agriculture can also benefit from Prediktera's software, which can scan large quantities of crop for early discovery of defects and infections, which can lead to increased yields and less wasted products. Prior to joining Prediktera, Vidman moved from his native Umeå to New Jersey where he spent seven years selling the Umeå-based software Umetrics to customers in the United States. Uminova Innovation's current companies include Hero Imaging, led by CEO Simon Lindgren, offering a software for medical research which is currently launched globally.

From art, music and literature to science and technology, Umeå has proven to be an intellectual powerhouse to be reckoned with in Sweden and around the world.



Examples of applications with Prediktera's software for chemical imaging. Reference: www.prediktera.com



Simon Lindgren, Hero Imaging