

Tyko Sallinen and the Marginalisation of the Russian Avant-garde in his Art

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There was an interesting network of connections among artists and art gallerists in the area surrounding the Baltic Sea at the time of the First World War. Since travel to continental Europe was very limited, artists concentrated more on what was happening in neighbouring areas. An important starting point for shedding light on this kind of networking was the activity of Herwarth Walden and his Berlin-based gallery, Der Sturm, which toured its exhibitions in Scandinavia and Finland from 1912 onwards. As is well known, his work led to the dissemination of knowledge about German Expressionism and Russian avant-garde art. Finnish artists visited St Petersburg and the neutrality of Scandinavia in the First World War meant that Russian artists were able to travel to the region. Just before the War broke out, there was a huge exhibition of Baltic art in Malmö, where one could see German, Russian, Danish and Swedish art. At that time Finnish art belonged to the Russian section.

One of the artists who took part and visited the Baltic art exhibition was the Finnish artist Tyko Sallinen (1879–1955). It is clear that Sallinen became interested in Cubism and Cézanne at this time – his gallerist Gösta Stenman even managed to organise an exhibition of French Cubism in Helsinki in 1915 – but it is less well known, and even less acknowledged, that he was also interested in the Russian avant-garde. There had been Der Sturm gallery's exhibitions of works by both Der Blaue Reiter and Die Brücke groups in Helsinki at the beginning of 1914, and in 1916 there was an exhibition of Russian art in the city produced by Madame Dobychnina's Art Salon from St Petersburg. Works by Russian cubo-futurists could be seen in those exhibitions and signs of cubo-futurist and primitivistic elements started to show in Sallinen's paintings as well.

Another artist who was influenced by the Russian avant-garde at the same time was Marcus Collin. Sallinen's gallerist Stenman was keen to open another gallery, in St Petersburg, and there was an exhibition of Finnish Art in Dobychnina's Art Salon in 1917, just before the October Revolution. Sallinen was one of the curators of that exhibition.

At this time, connections with Russia were publicly eschewed for historical and political reasons and soon forgotten. Finland gained independence in 1917 and it became important to emphasise that it belonged to the Western art tradition and therefore must have a Western identity. However, there was a phase, especially around 1917, when part of Finnish Modernism has to be seen outside the canon, as art historian James Elkins puts it, and where its context would deserve to be redefined.

The aim of my presentation is to shed light on this narrative of diverse forms of Modernism around the Baltic Sea. An essential part of my research is to find out information on Madame Dobychnina's Art Salon's links between St Petersburg and the Finnish art world.