

19th Century and Modern Art: Collecting for the Ateneum Art Museum

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The Ateneum Art Museum of the Finnish National Gallery has the longest history of acquiring works for the public art collection in Finland. While the history of the Ateneum Art Museum collection and its formation has been the topic of my previous research, this article discusses the collecting strategy of the 21st century. What is the responsibility of the Ateneum as part of the Finnish National Gallery? What kinds of acquisitions are made and why? And what possibilities might there be for alternative ways of building the cultural heritage?

One of the most important assets of the Finnish National Gallery is its collection of 40,000 works of art – from medieval icons to the latest names in contemporary art – and a sizeable archive collection of visual arts spanning the history and memory of Finnish visual arts. As one of the three museums of the Finnish National Gallery, Ateneum Art Museum is responsible for 19th-century and modern art, whereas Kiasma covers contemporary art and Sinebrychoff Art Museum old masters mainly from Europe.

The role of the Finnish National Gallery as the compiler of the national cultural heritage calls for a clear collections policy. Although the national responsibility was recognised very early on i.e. after the opening of the Ateneum building in October 1888, it was not until 1991 and then 2006 that the first proper collection policies were drawn up, with the latest update being launched in 2016. This tells us about the development of collections management and the increased need to articulate the acquisitions. Prior to this, even when the direction was clear, it was not customary to use a policy format – but merely a sheet of A4 describing the collections and needs related to them at a very general level and ‘filling the gaps’ being the buzz-word for decades.

Early stages

In the early stages, i.e. the mid-19th century, the Finnish Art Society – the forerunner of the Finnish National Gallery – had been established in 1846 according to the model of the *Kunstvereins* in Germany. Its mission was to build as complete a picture of the developments in the history of the arts as possible. Examples of old European art created a narrative framework for emerging national art. Works were acquired for the sake of representing the story, sometimes even at the cost of artistic value. Finnish art became increasingly important towards the end of 1860s when the first larger acquisitions of the works by Düsseldorf-based painter Werner Holmberg and sculptor Carl Eneas Sjöstrand had been made. (Pettersson 2008; 2010e.)

Towards the end of the 19th century the collection grew increasingly national in character. Large representations of landscapes, people, portraits of historically important figures, visualisations of the *Kalevala*, as well as history painting were highly valued. (Pettersson & Utriainen 2016.)



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-Portrait*, 1912, oil on canvas, 43,5cm x 42cm,
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis

At this early stage the acquisitions committee consisted of a larger number of board members and artist members nominated for the task. Decision-making was at times slow, members didn't necessarily agree and it was even possible to buy art from the artist members of the committee.

The acquisitions made in the 20th century can, in turn, be described with the expression 'filling the gaps'. The 19th-century Hegelian concept of a 'complete' collection was taken for granted without further analysis or criticism. The collection was expected to tell the entire story of art but notably this story was regarded to be one and only – rather than a set of multiple stories. (Pettersson 2010a.) Gaps in the collection were revealed, and individual artists were added to the story. This was not a problem with Finnish art, which was affordable, but there were serious limitations when it came to international ambitions. It was easy to acquire prints and drawings but only a few examples of international paintings or key pieces of sculpture, such as Gauguin, van Gogh, Cézanne, Modigliani, Le Corbusier and Degas were added to the collection, while the backbone was constructed around Finnish art, thus reinforcing its predominantly national character. Archive material, such as artists' letters, completed the selection and provided important empirical material for researchers.

Towards the turn of the millennium, the new art history, re-reading and re-coding the story of art, started to affect the formation of the collection. Canonical choices were evaluated and the emerging neglected stories were given more attention. To mention one concrete example, a number of female artists were placed in the limelight, to take pride of place in the broader narrative. Some new artist names from the past were introduced and included in the collection. One of these was Elga Sesemann (1922–2007), whose works interested museum director Soili Sinisalo, and this resulted in a series of acquisitions: altogether 17 works were added to the collection after 1994. (Vihanta 2010a.)

Dependency on donations

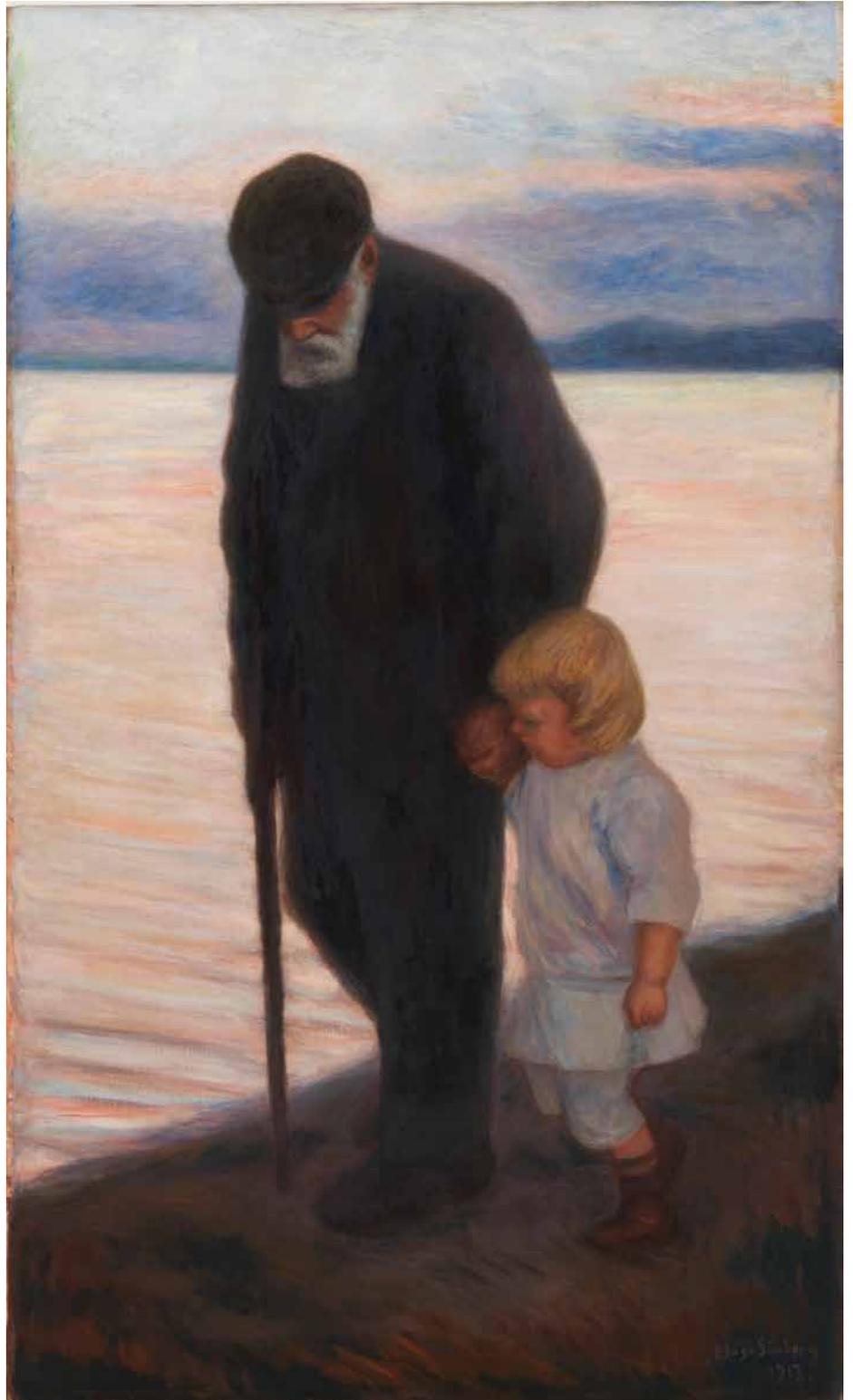
Many collections would do better with a greater amount of acquisition funds and the Finnish National Gallery is no exception. The collection has always been heavily dependent on donations. The donors have been nation builders and collectors who have set themselves a bigger goal in life: to contribute to the building of the national cultural heritage. Artists and their families have also made valuable donations to the museum. (Pettersson 2008.)

Donations have been especially important in terms of international art. I'll mention two examples of the many: Hermann Frithiof Antell's bequest to the Finnish state in 1893 and Siv and Rolando Pieraccini's donation in 2008. Antell was the first Finnish professional collector who spent his life in Paris. When he died, the art collection consisted of 48 paintings, 28 sculptures, as well as drawings and prints. The original core collection included works by Auguste Rodin, Swedish painter Anders Zorn and Finnish painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela, to mention a few.

Work to develop the collection continued after Antell's death. The interest on Antell's bequest of a million Finnish marks allowed the collection to be augmented on an annual basis. The Antell Delegation, a panel of experts in art, science and culture, made decisions regarding the acquisitions. These acquisitions built on Antell's original interests. The collection grew through purchases such as the above mentioned artists Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne. (Talvio 1993.)

Siv and Rolando Pieraccini have in their turn donated to the Ateneum Art Museum possibly the largest collection of Italian 20th-century graphic art outside Italy. The collection comprises more than 1,300 works by 50 artists. All key figures are represented, from Giorgio de Chirico to Giorgio Morandi, Massimo Campigli and Marino Marini. The collection was compiled over four decades and provides a unique opportunity to study Italian graphic art.

Both examples showcase how private collectors can make a change: Antell's bequest laid the foundation for a fair selection of international art. Some of the key pieces were already in his original core collection and the rest were acquired using the funds carrying his name. Pieraccini's collection, in turn, has written a completely new chapter for the Ateneum's collection history by making 20th-century Italian graphic art one of its strengths.



Hugo Simberg, *Old Man and Child*, 1913,
oil on canvas, 162cm x 95cm, Finnish
National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis

Ateneum's current policy

Many things have changed from the earliest stages of the collecting history. In the following, I've chosen a set of headlines that are helpful when analysing the collection.

When collecting activities began, almost everything was considered of interest. There were not very clear criteria for accepting donations, for example, and therefore peculiar items, such as copies of the wall paintings in Pompeii, were included. Today all the acquisitions decisions are made carefully. Quantity is no longer important, but quality is.

The decision making process The current decision-making process is fast and efficient. The Museum Director can decide on an acquisition after consulting a team of experts that varies according to the case. Earlier, the acquisition committees were large in number and often disagreed about proposed acquisitions. From now on, the reasoning behind new acquisitions will be published on the FNG Collections web service.

Funding The amount of the annual acquisition funds comes from the state budget and is very limited compared to art market prices. This means that the Ateneum can purchase art mainly from private sources because prices can be negotiated. Limited funding affects the choices one can make. At the general level it can be said that it's more sustainable to cover modern art than to keep on piling up Golden Age works that swallow up the funds at one go. Having said that, we have made two excellent purchases that did just that: Hugo Simberg's *Old Man and Child* (1913) was acquired in 2015 and Helene Schjerfbeck's *Self Portrait* (1912) in 2016. Simberg's work was paid for by combining funds from two budget years, whereas Schjerfbeck's painting was acquired with the aid of the Yrjö and Nanny Kaunisto Fund.

National versus international art Ateneum Art Museum no longer wishes to actively acquire international art that would create the frame and context for the Finnish collection. There are many reasons for this: first, the museum doesn't have the means to compete at international auctions. Secondly, the international examples that we might need to enrich the collection display can be procured through long-term loans, according to the ideas of Collections Mobility. (Pettersson, Jyrkkiö, Hagedorn-Saupe & Weij 2010.) Thirdly, we have a good core selection already in the collection that we use in the best possible way. Therefore, the priorities lay in the Finnish 19th century and especially modern art.

The art market When looking at the different layers of the collection's history and analysing what purchases were made, one should also be aware of what was available at the time. From today's perspective the most important contacts are artists or their families (debut show in the 1960s or earlier) as well as private collectors and owners. Art galleries and auction houses provide an excellent window of opportunity as well.

Donations In terms of donations Ateneum Art Museum is very open to suggestions. Having said that, the criteria for donations are the same as for the acquisitions: the interest is in great pieces of art, works that touch us, and future audiences. We're interested in works that are relevant for research and building our cultural heritage. Sometimes we have to turn down donations. The causes relate most often to conditions set with the donation, such as the requirement to keep the piece on permanent display. Understandably, the museum can't make these kinds of promises for the future.

Acquisitions and criteria We have to be able to justify clearly why a work has been purchased. What is its relevance to the artist's production? How does it interact with the rest of the collection? What is its value from the point of view of research? Analysing the collection and its strengths and weaknesses, we're also able to point out areas that require developing. For the Ateneum, one of these areas is sculpture – especially works by 20th-century female sculptors.

Looking to the future

The trends of the 21st century urge the museum field to share collection resources and to make better and more effective use of collections. (Pettersson, Jyrkiö, Hagedorn-Saupe & Weij 2010.) Therefore, the Finnish National Gallery is committed to strengthen the national and international use of the collection.

It means more loans to and from the collection, but it also means growing input into collections research and the mobility of professionals. We want to increase the accessibility of our collections and make sure that there will be more and more national and international experts who dive into its material. The current strong emphasis on collections mobility, digital availability, and the use of expertise, will reinforce all of this.

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