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Akseli Gallen-Kallela: Beyond a National Icon

Interview by Gill Crabbe, FNG Research

As a new book on Akseli Gallen-Kallela is published, its author Dr. Marja Lahelma describes the challenges of finding fresh interpretations of an artist who earned his reputation as a national hero in his home country

When Marja Lahelma's book on Hugo Simberg was published last year as part of the *Artists of the Ateneum* series, it enjoyed such a positive reception that she was asked by the then Director of Ateneum Art Museum Susanna Petterson to write another book – this time on the great national hero of Finland's Golden Age painters, Akseli Gallen-Kallela. This series of books initiated by the Finnish National Gallery aims to shed new light on the classics of Finnish art. For Lahelma, researching this second book presented different kinds of challenges to the one she wrote on Simberg.

The first challenge was a practical one: whereas with Simberg she had been able to comb through almost all of the material available relating to him during her research period, with Gallen-Kallela there was an overwhelming wealth of source material, and she had just eight months to produce her manuscript. This time frame meant that Lahelma would need to be selective with the materials she used and that selection process would need to be driven by a strong thematic approach.

The second challenge – and by far the greater of the two – was for Lahelma to find a way to look beyond the prevailing views and interpretations of an artist who, in terms of Finnish culture, achieved an iconic status, not only within Finnish art history but within Finnish society as a whole. Here was a man, credited as a national hero, whose art was a touchstone of Finland's quest for its independent nationhood through the depiction of a national landscape and through an exploration of the mythic dimension of Finnishness in his narrative paintings of the epic poem *The Kalevala*. A man whose funeral in 1931 was attended by the great and the good of the country, and where 'vast crowds lined the streets of Helsinki to pay their respects to an artist whose work had become the shared heritage of the entire Finnish nation'.¹

To meet these challenges Lahelma decided to introduce a firmly international theme in studying Gallen-Kallela's career, thus looking beyond his iconic status in Finnish art history to find a wider viewpoint on him. 'It's quite a new perspective because Gallen-Kallela has always been considered a national hero and everything he has done has been viewed from this nationalist perspective. So it was interesting to find out what happened when I tried

1 Susanna Petterson, 'Vision, Curiosity, and Thirst for Adventure (Introduction).' In *Artists of the Ateneum: Akseli Gallen-Kallela*, by Marja Lahelma. Ateneum Publications Vol. 110. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, 2018, 6.



**Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Aino Myth, Triptych*, 1891,
 oil on canvas, middle panel 154cm x 154cm, side panels 154cm x 77cm,
 dimensions complete with frame 200cm x 413cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



to track down the artist abroad; his views, what art and artists he liked, and the work he himself exhibited and how it was received outside Finland.' Lahelma also tried to gain her own impression of Gallen-Kallela's personality through researching his correspondence. 'I wanted to read some of his letters to get a sense of him talking to me – because he is such an iconic figure that it's quite difficult to get past that and see him as a person.'

She decided to concentrate on the primary and secondary sources held in the FNG Archive Collections, which were easy to access as they had a good collection of letters, some of them digitised. 'Letters to close friends such as Louis Sparre and Robert Kajanus were the most fascinating,' says Lahelma, 'particularly when Gallen-Kallela writes about his painting process. His letters to the Norwegian artist Carl Dørnberger are available online. The two met in Paris in the 1880s, and the letters are a great source of information on Gallen-Kallela's early years. Through them I could also gain insight into the artist before he became such an icon.'

Lahelma continued her research at the Gallen-Kallela Museum in Tarvaspää, the house museum where the artist lived and worked, in Espoo, on the outskirts of Helsinki. There she became aware of a wealth of material, including international exhibition reviews in the foreign press, the archives and unpublished notes of the Finnish critic Onni Okkonen, who knew Gallen-Kallela personally and who had written the first biography of the artist in 1948; and graphic illustrations the artist made towards the end of his life for his unfinished project, *The Complete Kalevala*. Some of the material in the Gallen-Kallela Museum remains uncatalogued due to resource constraints and while staff there gave her ample access to this material, her deadline did not permit Lahelma to take full advantage of it, and her intention is to return to undertake further research. 'For example, there are uncatalogued letters relating to the women in his social circle during the time he spent in Paris and I knew I wanted to write about his student years in Paris in 1884–87,' says Lahelma. 'It might reveal more about his personality and his lifestyle and about his life in Paris – to imagine him as a young man before

he became the artist that we know. He himself wrote about how he wanted to develop an international career, so he was quite ambitious.'

Indeed Gallen-Kallela made his debut in Paris at the Salon d'Automne in 1886 with *Old Woman and Cat*, painted in the Naturalist style of the period. In Paris painting was on the cusp of Naturalism and Symbolism and this is demonstrated, says Lahelma, when he showed the first version of his *Aino Triptych* (1889). 'It was clearly meant for a Parisian salon because of its large triptych format and its mythological content (although Parisian circles were not familiar with its *Kalevala* mythology – they thought of the nude figure of Aino more as Ophelia). It wasn't a huge success – the critics were a bit confused, but that was because Gallen-Kallela had decided to use a Naturalist style with a mythological theme.' However, few Finnish artists of the time had their work accepted into the salons, so his strategy of exhibiting first in Paris would have enhanced his reputation at home – indeed it led to his first solo show at the Ateneum at the end of that year.

Lahelma says that in highlighting Gallen-Kallela's pursuit of an international career, she also wanted to look beyond his time in Paris. 'Finnish art history has very much focused on the importance of Paris to Finnish artists of the period, it being the birthplace of Modernism – although Munich also played an important role in the emergence of Modernism.'

'I wanted to highlight his connections with Germany,' she continues, 'because this was written out of art history on a more general level following the Second World War.' In Germany, he was in some instances reviewed more favourably than at home. When he showed *Symposion* (1894) in Finland it was not well received, explains Lahelma. Gallen-Kallela's friend Eric O. W. Ehrström described the first version of the painting: 'Three noble souls and exalted spirits have convened for a banquet marking the beginning of their journey beyond the everyday plane of reality...'² It was the first time Gallen-Kallela had painted in a Symbolist style, yet in Berlin the work was a huge success, she adds, suggesting that perhaps Finnish audiences were more conservative. 'If you compare it to his *Aino Triptych*, he has left Naturalism behind. The background, with its stylised forest seemingly growing out of Sibelius' head, a planet floating in the sky, the wings clipping the edge of the canvas – all these elements had an esoteric meaning that was deliberately mysterious.'

Gallen-Kallela returned to Germany, after scooping medals in Paris, as a new century dawned. 'I knew he had exhibited in Munich in 1902 but I didn't realise he had been such a resounding success there,' says Lahelma. Gallen-Kallela had been invited by Kandinsky to exhibit with the Phalanx Group after he had seen his works, probably in 1898 at the Munich Secession. 'There are documents that confirm that Kandinsky was very interested in Gallen-Kallela's work,' says Lahelma, and Kandinsky would have understood his work's mythical dimension. The Phalanx Group was one among many avant-garde groups in Europe around 1900; they were opposed to conservative art, and promoted a new form of art in the spirit of Art Nouveau and Symbolism that drew from vernacular traditions. Interestingly, at the Phalanx group exhibition Gallen-Kallela showed his painting under the title *Altes Volklied* (Old Folk Song) instead of *The Fratricide* (1897).

Lahelma's book also charts Gallen-Kallela's time in Italy learning fresco painting, ahead of his ceilings for the Finnish Pavilion of the Paris World's Fair in 1900; his two prolific years in Kenya, and his later sojourns in America where he enjoyed a solo exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1924. Yet despite exhibiting to favourable reviews in the key cultural centres of Europe, Lahelma argues that Gallen-Kallela didn't quite make it as an international artist, so why was that?

'I think it was partly to do with him becoming such a national hero at home,' she says, 'where people were expecting certain things from Gallen-Kallela. He perhaps even knew himself that he couldn't be both. Finnish art historians have portrayed him as a strong and charismatic person who was so sure of where he was going. Yet in the correspondence I read I saw him as sensitive and often uncertain about his direction and also quite impressionable.'

Lahelma also points out that he was not consistently successful in Paris, which is what would have secured him truly international acclaim. 'Paris was where you had to have

2 Quoted in Lahelma's book p. 34.



Akseli Gallen-Kallela,
Lemminkäinen's Mother, 1897,
 tempera on canvas,
 85.5cm x 108.5cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Pirje Mykkänen



a breakthrough. When he went to Paris in later life he was not so interested in his own international reputation.' He was also not so impressed with the direction Parisian art had taken, she adds. In 1909, before travelling on to Africa, he wrote from Paris that all artists were imitating Gauguin without understanding the deeper meaning of his art, and they 'see the whole world as nothing but confetti – a jumping, screaming, raw hell'.³

Such findings prompt questions about the pressure on art historians to present a coherent narrative in biographical approaches to an artist's life and work. Lahelma points out that while her brief was to present Gallen-Kallela's life story in some form, she wanted to produce a multi-faceted story. 'My book actually presents more questions than answers,' she adds, 'thus opening up more opportunities for fresh interpretations.'

One area of Gallen-Kallela's life and work where Lahelma suggests more research could be carried out is in the artist's relationship to the spiritual. 'Because he was portrayed as a national hero, his spiritual, sensitive side has been played down,' she points out. While his depictions of myths from *The Kalevala* played a key role in establishing a Finnish national visual culture, questions remain about how much the artist was interested in exploring Finnish roots in Karelian folklore and how much he was seeking more universal origins of the spiritual dimension, given that in the art circles of the time there was much interest in the universalist ideas of Theosophy. 'I think at the start of Gallen-Kallela's career he was interested in both,' says Lahelma. 'He was not the only artist at that time who was interested in Karelianism. There was also a nationalist motivation but it was only a part of the story. With his first *Kalevala*-themed paintings, such as *Aino Triptych*, he was interested in the ethnographic side but that faded away. Later on, when he started to make Symbolist paintings from *Kalevala*, he was interested in the universal aspect.'

Lahelma points out that Gallen-Kallela was a spiritual seeker, yet never committed himself to one belief system, which was typical among these kinds of artists of the period.

³ Letter to Pekka Halonen dated 3 March 1909. See Lahelma's book p. 64.



Akseli Gallen-Kallela,
In a Café in Paris, 1886,
 oil on wood, 32.5cm x 25cm
 The Gösta Serlachius Fine
 Arts Foundation, Serlachius
 Museums, Mänttä

Instead Gallen-Kallela's path took him towards a religious syncretism, she argues, and her book touches new perspectives on key Symbolist works, such as *Lemminkäinen's Mother* (1897). 'If he didn't commit, this left him free to tap into universal aspects of mythology worldwide. So, for example, *Lemminkäinen's Mother* can be read as a Christian Piëta, it's also the myth of Osiris, as well as being the story from *The Kalevala*, where Lemminkäinen's body is resurrected from the River of Death by his mother.'

Despite taking on the challenge of writing about an artist of such iconic status, Lahelma has remained close to her aim of creating a broader perspective on Gallen-Kallela's work and it is hoped this book will stimulate further research. 'I wanted to present new perspectives for the Finnish reader,' she explains, 'but I also wanted to stimulate international audiences because I knew the book was being published in English, as well as Finnish and Swedish.'

In the current zeitgeist of museology, the international dimension is becoming increasingly important. 'When Gallen-Kallela's work is presented in an international context then it becomes more familiar to foreign audiences and that's why I wanted to include his connections with Munch and with Kandinsky,' explains Lahelma. 'Also the paintings of his early work in Paris (*In a Café in Paris, 1886*) which depict Parisian life in a similar vein to Toulouse-Lautrec, for example, provide a doorway to the Finnish aspects of his work through the familiarity of the international dimension.' Audiences need that doorway so they can discover Finnish artists anew, or perhaps even for the first time.