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Rooted in New Research

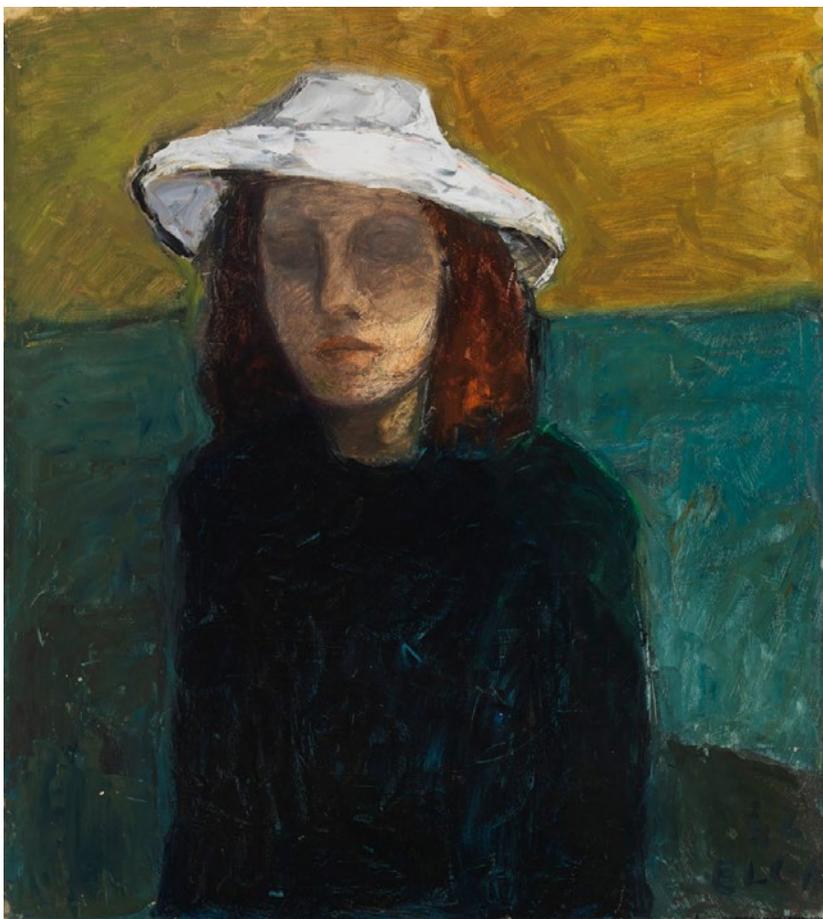
Interview by Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

The new Director of the Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, Marja Sakari, discusses the importance of research in taking the museum forward both as an international player and at home

When Marja Sakari heard she had been selected to be Director of the Ateneum Art Museum, last Autumn, her response was unequivocal: 'It's great to be appointed as the Museum Director of Finland's most well-known museum. I will follow the road paved by my predecessors, with a firm confidence in the experts at the Ateneum.' The Ateneum is one of the three museums that together constitute the Finnish National Gallery, which is responsible

for expanding and maintaining the largest art museum collection in Finland, owned by the state of Finland. The other two are the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma and the Sinebrychoff Art Museum.

In an age where globalisation is speeding up the trajectories of change exponentially, it is heartening to hear a major player in the international art museum field place her trust in the considerable benefits that have already been built up through dedicated practice and patiently won skills developed at the museum now entrusted to her care. In her opening post for her blog on the Ateneum website, she wrote: 'I recently came across a quote by Hundertwasser when I was visiting the Kunst Haus Wien Museum: "If we do not respect our past, we will lose our future; if we destroy our roots, we cannot grow." This idea also supports my own perception of the importance of the Ateneum's art.'



Elga Sesemann, *Self-Portrait*, 1946,
oil on cardboard, 77cm x 68cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis

Sakari's own long career has seen her develop and deepen her skills, planting seeds both at home and internationally. These include major roles across both academia and the museum world, ranging from lecturer and acting Professor of Art History at the University of Helsinki, to becoming Director of the Finnish Institute in Paris, and Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, where she presided over innovative projects that placed the museum at the forefront of presenting and collecting online and digital art. Now she has returned to the Ateneum building, where she started out in the 1990s working in the Central Art Archives as a researcher with a project on ephemeral art. This research formed the basis for her PhD thesis on conceptual art in Finland from the 1970s until the postmodern 1990s, with reference to international conceptual art.

'My background is quite weighted towards research,' says Sakari, 'and has included teaching at the Department of Art History in Helsinki University and the Open University, as well as the Academy of Fine Arts, lecturing on the period from the 19th century to today. It's good to have that background in art-historical research because I can understand the processes at work here in the Ateneum, whose holdings cover the period from the end of the 18th century until 1970.' She points out that almost all of its exhibition projects are somehow linked with research. 'Without research, you can't find new ways of seeing art or new artists – it is also about the knowledge that we continue processing. And really to rethink and to explore new ways of finding meaning in art.'

The role of research within museums has indeed been a growing discipline and institutions like the Finnish National Gallery are in a privileged position as guardians of the state's art treasures and archives. 'I think we are fortunate that we have a fantastic art archive of Finnish art that is in our care so there is much still to discover close at hand,' Sakari points out. She welcomes the increasing digitalization of its collections and archives that has made it possible for researchers and the public alike to access photographs and information about its holdings from anywhere in the world. 'However,' she continues, 'electronic access to works of art does not replace the experience of them as original works and the documents encountered directly in museums.'

So how does the new Director envisage the museum's future role in the field of art-historical research? 'I think in general if you are dealing with older art, of course there is the canon and its masterpieces, but every generation has its own questions to ask about whether those canons are applicable in our contemporary world,' says Sakari. 'For instance, if we think about the modernist era, the narrative is quite simplified and I think there are phenomena that are more complex that need looking at again because the narrative of modern art starts with symbolism and moves towards abstraction, but there are many other paths to be considered, such as figurative modernism and its references to medieval times.'

'Internationally, I think these questions are leading to research that is currently focused on artists who haven't been exhibited. One example would be to find new women artists, who have not been included by the decision-makers historically, and redressing that through showing their work.'

Sakari explains how she was recently in Paris and came across an association set up in 2014, called AWARE: the Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions, which aims to restore the presence of 20th-century women artists who are not yet acknowledged within the art-historical canon. 'Many museum professionals are also involved with this association and I think it is the focus for museum research generally too.'

To this effect, one of the Ateneum's ongoing research projects is shining a light on women sculptors from the mid-19th century until the Second World War, including Finnish artists such as Hilda Flodin, Sigrid af Forselles and Eva Gyldén, but also others from the Nordic region. 'It is a grey area as many people don't know about these women. But when you turn your mind to one subject, then so many things start to emerge. We can be quite blind if we choose not to focus on something – when you start to do the research you start to see what has happened, so this is a key part of the role of museums – to show these new discoveries.'

Another case in point was the recent 'Urban Encounters' exhibition of Finnish art, which showcased works from the Ateneum's collection by 80 artists, many previously unseen by the public, on the theme of changes to the Finnish way of life in cities during the 20th century. The show included paintings by Elga Sesemann (1922–2007) that stimulated a lot

of interest, yet she is still largely unknown, even in Finland, and Sakari would like to see her singled out further afield. 'I think an exploration of her artistic career could be of interest both here and abroad too, as her works have an international-level quality,' says Sakari. 'In the 1940s and 50s she was working in a way that was continuing the modernist tradition, she didn't move into total abstraction but she was really renewing the way of seeing and painting and using colour in an original way. Also she is somehow very expressive and yet conveys mystery in her works.'

The contexts in which research is carried out also leads to considerations of the contexts in which it is presented, giving increased visibility to Finnish art in more distant parts of the world, another important strand that Sakari wishes to continue to promote. 'Our emphasis on international research projects is still a fairly recent phenomenon,' says Sakari, 'especially over the past ten years – we have put in a lot of effort with our networking and I can already see that the Ateneum is now far more on the international map. Our colleagues abroad want to work with us and museums want to collaborate with us.'

So, for example, while the painter Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946) is virtually a household name in Finland and her reputation as a key player in the canon of Finnish art is now established, she has been far less well known abroad – although that is changing. A solo show of her work is now set to introduce her to the British public, with an exhibition at London's Royal Academy of Arts this Summer. The timing of this show reflects one current in art-historical research circles that, according to Sakari, 'emphasises the importance of place and social situation to an artist's development, and also the place of artists' communities'. The research for the RA show included the period when Schjerfbeck painted in Cornwall, in St Ives – a haven for emerging modernist art – and took the curators to the seaside resort as they followed in her footsteps. While showing an artist unknown to British audiences might seem a risk for an institution like the RA, it is nevertheless a calculated risk, not least because of the quality of her work, but also the St Ives connection. Schjerfbeck also painted

in Pont-Aven, a hub for artists from across Europe, and the British public has a particular fondness for the art produced by its artist communities. From the Finnish perspective, the show offers an opportunity for international quality Finnish art to enter into the consciousness of UK audiences. 'This is exactly the kind of new discovery that museums at an international level are looking for,' says Sakari. 'It's also good to work reciprocally so that we can show our art and then receive something in return.'

Just as there is a current trend for exploring themes of place in artists' lives, there is also a shift towards shining the spotlight on countries whose art has had less exposure internationally, again through collaborative research. 'Many museums



**Helene Schjerfbeck, *Street, St. Ives*,
 c. 1887, monographic scraperboard on paper,
 22.5cm x 21cm
 Wäinö Walli Collection, Finnish National
 Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



are looking towards Eastern Europe because we haven't known so much about their art,' Sakari points out. Continuing collaboration with other museums both at home and abroad is an important part of Sakari's vision and in this context the Ateneum has joined forces with the Grand Palais in Paris and the National Gallery in Prague, to mount its current show of the career of the Czech artist František Kupka. 'He was from Prague, studied in Vienna and then went to Paris. He was not known in Finland but still we have had a large footfall for this show and this tells us that it is not necessarily a hindrance to our museum if the artist is not known. Kupka is not nowadays so well known in Paris either, and while in the 1910s he was a pioneer of abstract expression, raising a lot of interest, and took part in the Salon D'Automne in 1912, subsequently his popularity waned, he didn't have a gallery representing him, and his art wasn't so well appreciated for much of his career,' she explains.

'So in a way this exhibition was also a revelation for Parisian audiences. It is good to shake up the art-historical perspective like this, sometimes,' she adds, with a glint in her eye.

The current interest in researching themes of place and of community in artists' lives is also reflected in the Ateneum's upcoming projects closer to home. 'Together with the Helene Schjerfbeck exhibition, which is to be shown in the Ateneum after the Royal Academy, we also have a project researching into artists working in the Ruovesi area. There were many artists who were inspired by the landscape of Ruovesi, from Werner Holmberg to Akseli Gallen-Kallela, from Hugo Simberg to Ellen Thesleff. There are some places that really attract artists – and there is a reason why they go there.' Sakari says projects of this kind, especially thematic projects, 'require researchers to go deeper into the subject matter to find new knowledge, to re-read and to keep going back to the sources from the perspective of the current framework.'

Also close to home, Sakari is embarking on research to re-present the museum's permanent collection. 'Our current permanent display has been reworked in an innovative way by my predecessor – the master works were presented in a new light – but it has to be renewed to keep pace with new interpretations, so we will be preparing the new collection display in the next two or three years.'

Sakari plans to address issues of gaps in the Ateneum's collection. 'As our society changes, our ways of understanding the connection of art with society changes, as well as how the institutions themselves have been formed and what kind of decisions have been made regarding the purchasing of artworks,' she continues. 'Themes that are linked to minorities and the post-colonial gaze are so important, so we have also to be aware of the gaps in our collection and they need to be researched – why, for example, there haven't been any Sámi artists in the collection before this discussion about minorities. Today we can pose these questions because there is a common discourse which is very sensitive and I think it leads us to new ways of looking at art and the collection.'

Sakari and her team are now benchmarking other museums' permanent collections, as well as looking for inspiration in innovative exhibition designs. For example, she was struck by the presentation of Fernand Knopff's works at the Petit Palais recently: 'It was so concise and logical and the whole concept was arranged as a reimagining of the palace Knopff constructed for himself at the beginning of the 20th century. It was really like entering into another world.'

Thinking about collection exhibitions she has seen recently, Sakari notes that in Madrid's Reina Sofia Museum for example, 'the collection display has been very carefully thematised according to different sections in the exhibition, such as "Is the War Over? Art in a Divided World (1945-1968)". The artworks themselves are really important but at the same time it's good to construct a logical whole and to create a complete and concise experience.'

Coming from the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Sakari has been aware of the differences in approach required in taking up her post at the Ateneum. One might think she would seek to bring contemporary art with her, and indeed for some time now her predecessors at the Ateneum have not been averse to including contemporary responses in presenting its historical art. 'I think it's a fascinating area, and it can enrich our ideas and understanding of older art. However, there should be a very coherent link between the contemporary artists and the historic artists,' she adds. 'We are actually planning an exhibition of contemporary artists who have been inspired by masterpieces of the past and at the same time the show is also a narrative of the founding of museums in the mid-19th century, when

the museums in Europe were set up and creating their canonical works – and how these have influenced the later generations.’

It is clear that Sakari not only places a high value on research-based activities in her vision for the future of the Ateneum, but her long and wide-ranging experience in the field also makes her well equipped to take the museum forward in an increasingly competitive international museum market, while continuing to develop its profile within the Finnish context. The museum’s catalogues and publications, as well as *FNG Research*, also bear the fruit of its research projects, as do the conferences it holds in continuing to disseminate its findings. Steering a course between tradition and innovation in the research at the root of its exhibitions programme will certainly be a key factor in the museum’s continuing success.