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Hidden Influences

Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

The esoteric interests of Finland's fin-de-siècle artists have been brought out of the darkness by two researchers, as Gill Crabbe discovered at a recent conference at the University of Turku

The Finnish painter Pekka Halonen stares intensely out from the canvas in his *Self-Portrait* of 1906, his face glowing with light; in sketches for the Jusélius Mausoleum near Pori, built by his friend the industrialist F.A. Jusélius to lay his young daughter to rest, Akseli Gallen-Kallela designs frescoes featuring vibrational waves in vivid orange and blue; Hugo Simberg paints a child enchanted by strange forms emerging from the darkness in *Boy from Säkkijärvi* (1897); Ellen Thesleff materialises herself from a deep sepia chiaroscuro resembling the spirit photography of her day. All highly regarded, even revered, artists from Finland's Golden Age, all interested in esoteric influences that were part of a wider fascination in fashionable *fin-de-siècle* society across Europe.



Hugo Simberg, *Boy from Säkkijärvi*, 1897, oil on canvas, 31.3cm x 43.5cm
Ester and Jalo Sihtola Fine Arts Foundation Donation,
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Janne Mäkinen





Ellen Thesleff,
Self-Portrait, 1894–95,
 pencil and sepia ink
 on paper,
 31.50cm x 23.50cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Aaltonen

Art-historical research has sometimes had an uneasy relationship with the theme of occultism in art. Esoteric influences on many artists in the art-historical canon have remained largely at the margins of academic research, or at worst ridiculed as flights of fancy. Now, however, with recent successful exhibitions such as that of the Swedish artist and medium Hilma af Klimt (1862–1944) at the Guggenheim Museum New York – the museum’s most popular exhibition to date – and with the current resurgence in interest in esoteric subjects by contemporary artists, as seen in some of the works in the Kiasma exhibition ‘Coexistence’ (until 1 March 2020), the presence of occulture in artistic output is something that researchers are starting to take more seriously.

It is therefore timely that an international conference in June at the University of Turku, ‘Approaching Esotericism and Mysticism: Cultural Influences’, included several papers from art historians in a gathering of around 80 academics and experts in their own field, who were considering topics ranging from ‘The visual culture of Christian spiritualism in Scotland’ and ‘A clairvoyant Pictorialism: Gertrude Kasebier’s photography’ to ‘Esotericism in Black Metal music’. The conference was initiated by The Seekers of the New, a research-based project spearheaded by Dr Maarit Leskela-Kärki, adjunct professor at the University of Turku’s Department of Cultural History, and arranged in association with the nearby Donner Institute for Research into Religion and Culture, a private research institute connected to the Åbo Akademi University Foundation. Two of the papers on

Finnish art history raised significant issues relating to research into art and esotericism. Dr Marja Lahelma’s paper ‘Artists as Producers and Mediators of Esoteric Knowledge’ focused on specific works by selected artists working during the *fin-de siècle* period; and Dr Nina Kokkinen’s paper ‘The Eyes of My Soul Have Opened: Clairvoyance in Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s Art’ gave a snapshot of her recent doctoral thesis at the University of Turku, here spotlighting Finland’s national hero of Golden Age art from the more unusual angle of his occult interests as an artist. The conference also included a visit to the exhibition ‘The Inner Eye’, at the Gallen-Kallela Museum, Tarvaspää, Espoo (until 8 September 2019), curated by Kokkinen, which features works by several of Finland’s visionary *fin-de-siècle* artists, and including significant loans from the Finnish National Gallery.

Marja Lahelma’s paper highlighted the difficulties of gaining broad acceptance by art historians of the impact that artists’ involvement in esoteric practices had on their work. Furthermore, she contended that ‘it has become obvious that esotericism was an essential element in the development of modern art and this is a point that needs repeating – it was not marginal’.

Lahelma drew on a series of seminars she led at the university in which she asked students to select two or three artists and compare their artworks in the context of modern Western esotericism. From these Lahelma chose three artists to illustrate her point that such artists have been interpreted very differently by the art-historical world.

First, Ellen Thesleff (1869–1954) who, Lahelma pointed out, was highly regarded in Finland as a modern artist but whose interest in esotericism, she says, was ‘an issue that can be and often has been completely ignored. It is possible to discuss her work and career without making any reference to esotericism’. Lahelma, however, had chosen to focus on this aspect of her work. She has been especially interested in Thesleff’s *Self Portrait* of 1894–95, a copy of which is on show in ‘The Inner Eye’ exhibition (the original being too fragile to be displayed in the exhibition), as an example of a work that she claims is clearly influenced by esotericism without it making any direct references as such through the use of occult subjects,

signs or symbols. The conference heard Lahelma touch on the issue of interpretation versus empirical evidence in art-historical research circles, an issue which she says has challenged researchers when they encounter this kind of material. 'Esoteric material by definition is something that is hidden, occluded and intended only to be understood by those in small circles of like-minded individuals,' she said. 'So in order to uncover this kind of content it is necessary to interpret subtle elements and to read between the lines. This issue is especially acute when dealing with visual material, such as Thesleff's self-portrait, which has an indirect suggestive manner of expression.'

In supporting her claim that Thesleff's self-portrait is an esoteric work, Lahelma told the conference: 'The drawing technique suggests that it started out as a sketch or study and only gradually developed into a completed self-portrait.' Thesleff was known to have practised automatic drawing and when the work was first shown in 1894 the reviews reveal it was well received. Thesleff continued working on the piece however, and when it was shown again – she dated it twice – the artist had worked on it further in sepia ink, giving it a deeper chiaroscuro, a technique resembling the sepia-toned spirit photographs that were popular among esoteric circles at the time. 'The way the head emerges from the dark background makes it seem like an immaterial spirit in the process of materialisation,' said Lahelma. 'This processual method resembles the surrealists' quest to liberate the creative imagination by using experimental methods based on psychic automatism and trance states. Before the surrealists turned this into a conscious artistic method, this kind of technique was used in mediumistic art.'

In Thesleff's piece, Lahelma continued, 'the introspective attitude is manifest both in technique and in the facial expression and the artist appears to be in some kind of creative trance. And this is a significant point, here it is not only the content or the subject matter that is connected to esoteric ideas but also the technique – not only what has been represented but how it has been represented. Perhaps here we can think of art as an esoteric practice.'

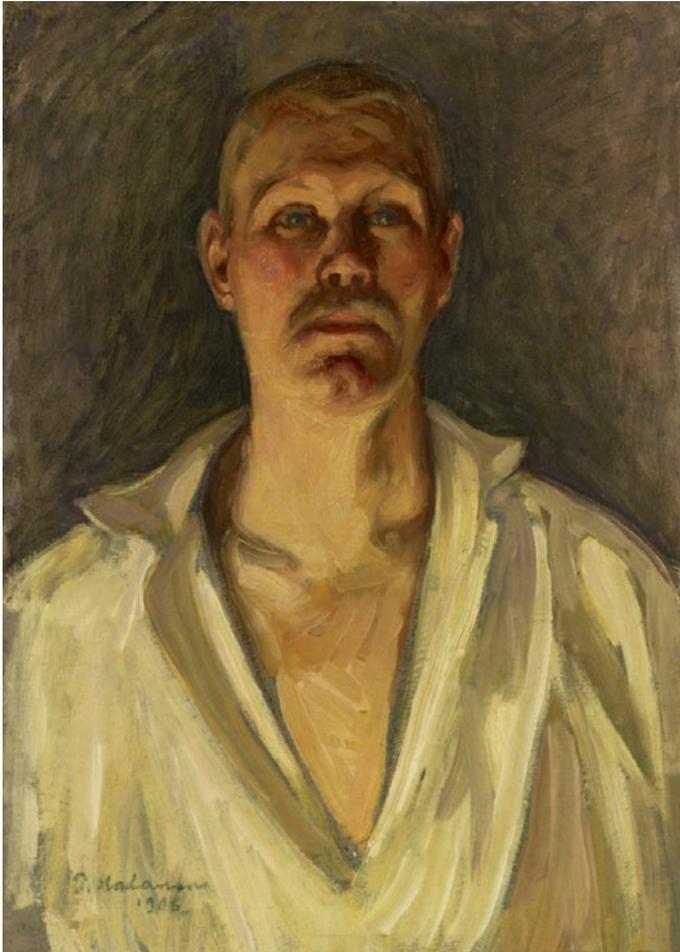
The second artist selected by Lahelma's students for analysis was British artist and cult writer Austin Osman Spare (1886–1956), whose artworks are not generally considered as part of the art-historical canon and are typically owned by rock stars and occultists rather than by art institutions. Lahelma told the conference that Spare's work had been pushed outside the category of fine art, 'not because of the quality of his art but rather his personal life and his writings'. The third artist was Hilma af Klimt, recently branded as a forgotten pioneer of abstract art who had a public career as a respected painter of conventional portraits and landscapes but, says Lahelma, 'it is the esoteric part of her production that has earned her a place in the canon of modern art. This was the work she kept hidden during her life. She was both a practising medium and an original modern artist. We can find her a place alongside Kandinsky and Kupka or Strindberg – all were pioneering modernists with a deep interest in the occult.'

'If the work of artists like af Klimt is taken seriously,' she continued, 'then it is no longer possible to keep pushing artists into these different categories based on the level of intensity of their involvement in esoteric practices,' she told the conference.

So why has there been resistance to acknowledging the influence of the occult on artists? And why does Lahelma believe so firmly that esotericism was an essential element in the development of modern art? 'One factor,' she says, 'is that, historically, the narrative of modernist art has largely been written from a formalist perspective. Now at least there is a broad acceptance of the impact of esotericism on the birth of abstract art and in recent years there has been more research into its impact on Symbolist art and later on Surrealism.'

Lahelma pointed out that Nina Kokkinen has underlined the significance of *fin-de-siecle* 'occulture' and 'seekership' of artists since 2012 in her articles and also in her recent doctoral dissertation (2019). Lahelma touched on similar ideas in her presentation, arguing that occulture played a central role in the evolution of modern art 'as exemplified in the esoteric attitude of the artist as "seeker", always looking for new things, testing their limits, finding deeper understanding through letting go of the rational conscious mind'.

This 'seeker's' attitude was shared by many of the artists in *fin-de-siecle* Finland and can be seen manifesting both directly and indirectly in works by Hugo Simberg (1873–1917), Pekka Halonen (1865–1933) and Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), all of whom are



Pekka Halonen,
Self-Portrait, 1906,
 oil on canvas,
 57cm x 41.5cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Aaltonen



represented in 'The Inner Eye' exhibition. Halonen's self-portrait in the exhibition shows him staring with fixed gaze directly out of the canvas, his face glowing with ethereal light that seems to be almost directly in front of him, endowing him with a mystical aura. In *Boy from Säkkijärvi*, Hugo Simberg paints a child's head in profile, his face lit up by an unknown light source, with the gaze of a clairvoyant mesmerised by the vaguely discernible forms before him looming out of the darkness. 'It's a great visual example of strange phenomena that emerge from the etheric plane,' says Nina Kokkinen. 'Simberg would have painted this, knowing about the ideas circulating at the time of peasants and children in a primitive state of perception akin to extra-sensory perception.'

Kokkinen's paper for the Turku conference focused on Simberg's artistic mentor and fellow 'seeker', Akseli Gallen-Kallela and his wide-ranging interest in many aspects of occulture as sources of inspiration for his art. In a fascinating sample from her recent doctoral thesis, Kokkinen presented an unconventional view of this national hero as a mystic 'who like many of his artist friends did not necessarily engage in any movement or society but was still keenly interested in a variety of esoteric currents and discourse'. In Gallen-Kallela's case these included studying the writings of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, Theosophists H.P. Blavatsky and A.P. Sinnet, as well as scientists with esoteric leanings, such as the German biologist Ernst Haeckel. Gallen-Kallela also conducted his own experiments into psychic phenomena, engaging in séances with his mother Mathilda, and writing about his experiences of

clairvoyance and telepathy, for example, in his *Kallela-kirja* of 1924.

'There was widespread enthusiasm in occult circles for the development of the senses and the possibility of finding alternative ways of seeing,' Kokkinen told the conference. 'For Theosophists extra-sensory perception was a means of becoming initiated into the ancient wisdom tradition and they believed that through the development of senses one could experience much that remained hidden for ordinary people,' she continued. 'There are several references from 1894 to Gallen-Kallela's extra-sensory perception exercises, as at the time he believed "there was yet a great deal of unknown things still to be found in nature"'. He wrote that he had sought contact with the element water while paddling a canoe and fell into a hypnotic state of mind. With continued intensive exercises, Gallen-Kallela had to admit that developing the senses was hard work and by May 1894, in a letter to the composer Robert Kajanus, he wrote that they had become completely numb: 'I'm not really surprised by this, for some time ago I spent every waking hour devouring and intensely scrutinizing all that I saw, heard and felt (with my sixth sense).'¹

1 Akseli Gallen-Kallela's letter to Robert Kajanus, Ruovesi, 16 May 1894. Collection of artists' letters. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery. English translation by Silja Kudel in Juha Ilvas, *Sanan ja tunteen voimalla – Akseli Gallen-Kallelan kirjeitä / A Self-Portrait in Words – The Letters of Akseli Gallen-Kallela*. The Central Art Archives 3. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Central Art Archives, 124.



Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Lemminkäinen's Mother*, 1897,
tempera on canvas, 85.5cm x 108.5cm
Antell Collections, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen



In his unpublished memoirs Gallen-Kallela also explained how he received extraordinary abilities in the Finnish forest. 'And when one then leaves the wilderness, one notices one has clairvoyance – sometimes it lasts a few hours, sometimes a day. One can speak to people, seeing through them – one can see their thoughts.'

Kokkinen pointed out that Gallen-Kallela's conception of clairvoyance was closely related to nature. 'He believed that for nature to reveal its secrets one must observe it in an unconventional way. He complained of how blind we are when wandering in the forest. "Our eyes are blind and our senses are dull – if we were open we could see how exemplary nature is in all her aspects."'

Kokkinen told the conference that such ideas related to neo-Romanticism, monism and vitalism, notions that were made known to the artist through works such as Haeckel's *Riddle of the Universe* (1899), which espoused a romantic philosophy of nature in which nature worship could be combined with contemporary science. 'Haeckel believed one all-pervading life-force moved and steered people and animals, plants and the entire universe.'

'Some researchers believed that underlying the psychic phenomena were laws of nature and invisible forces that were not yet known,' she told the conference. 'A combination of science and occultism led to the notion of ethereal or astral planes of reality, in which not only energetic fluidums but also emotions and thoughts flowed. Individuals with extra-sensory perception could perceive and guide them. Various flows and forms seemingly coming from nowhere began to appear in the artworks. Seen with the inner eye, nature also seemed to vibrate. A force flowing from the more spiritual levels of reality invigorated and controlled the growth of all things.'



**Hugo Simberg, *Orb-Weaver Spider*, a sketch for Tampere Cathedral, undated.
 Watercolour and pencil on paper, 14.5cm x 23cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

Such ideas percolated through to Gallen-Kallela's art, Kokkinen told the conference. 'A similar life-force is visualised in different kinds of rays, vibrations and fluidums, most notably in one of his most famous paintings, *Lemminkäinen's Mother* (1897), where the rays of life-force are seen by the hero's mother coming to her son who is about to rise from the dead,' Kokkinen continued. Rays are also depicted in the designs for the frescoes for the Jusélius Mausoleum (1903) in Pori, built by the industrialist F.A. Jusélius as a final resting place for his daughter Sigrid, who had died at a young age. Gallen-Kallela drew sketches for the choir vaulting, depicting vivid blue and orange vibrations. Rays and vibrations also filtered through into Hugo Simberg's frescoes for Tampere Cathedral. Kokkinen explains that his two sketches, *Orb-Weaver Spider*, came out of his experience of an Orb Weaver landing on his paper while he was drawing. The fresco's cross-like pattern resembles the markings on the spider's back. 'This relates to the idea that nature has the wisdom,' says Kokkinen. 'Visually the pattern vibrates and these kinds of vibrations relate to the *élan vitale* and other invisible forces which vitalise nature and the entire universe,' Kokkinen pointed out.

'The rays and fluidum in Gallen-Kallela's works take part in these esoteric discourses,' Kokkinen told the conference. 'His depictions of etheric vibrations are closely related to divine life-force and Gallen-Kallela's art suggests that artists could perceive and control these invisible forces. In several of his works Gallen-Kallela represents artists he admires as being sensitive to such vibrations. One of the most striking examples is *Portrait of Robert Kajanus* (1906, Gallen-Kallela Museum), in which the composer Robert Kajanus is staring into space while rays are flowing around him. Different kinds of fluidic thought-forms are also appearing above the artists depicted in *Problem (Symposium)* of 1894,' she continued, 'blood-red vibrations seem to come from Gallen-Kallela's own head. The dark woods are growing above the composer Jean Sibelius and some cosmic visions of the astral body are hovering around Kajanus.'

From these two papers presented at the Turku conference it seems clear that esoteric ideas were far more than a passing fancy for Finland's *fin-de-siècle* artists. Their interests reflect the kinds of topics of conversation taking place in the art salons across Europe, from Paris to Berlin and to Helsinki. Close examination by these two researchers of these artists' works and the written materials in the archives, is casting a fresh perspective on their artistic processes and the influences they absorbed. Of course, as Lahelma pointed out in her paper, 'There is always the danger of over-interpretation but at the same time the requirement to provide direct evidence to prove that an artwork is connected to esotericism can easily lead to avoidance of material that is perhaps difficult to interpret, material that can potentially have great significance.'

Nina Kokkinen, *Totuudenetsijät. Vuosisadanvaihteen okkulttuuri ja moderni henkisyys Akseli Gallen-Kallelan, Pekka Halosen ja Hugo Simbergin taiteessa* (Truth seekers: the twentieth century occult culture and modern spirit in the art of Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Pekka Halonen and Hugo Simberg), Turun yliopiston julkaisuja tom. 469. Turku: University of Turku, 2019, PhD thesis, <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-29-7607-2>

'Approaching Esotericism and Mysticism: Cultural Influences', 5–7 June, Seminar organised by Seekers of the New Research Project, University of Turku, and The Donner Institute for Research into Religion and Culture, Turku

'The Inner Eye', Gallen-Kallela Museum, Tarvaspää, Espoo, until 8 September 2019