

# Foreword

## European Revivals: From Dreams of a Nation to Places of Transnational Exchange

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When the Finnish National Gallery established a research project titled ‘European Revivals’ in 2009, the idea was to stimulate debate and reflect upon the phenomena surrounding European national revivals, by bringing together and analysing the connections and correspondences that have helped to shape the identities of modern European nations. The question of national revivalist discourses in art and art-historical research was most current at the project’s outset at the Finnish National Gallery, which had just opened a comprehensive exhibition of Finnish art past and present, based on motifs from Finland’s national epic poem, *The Kalevala*.

It was clear that an art-historical scholarship on the subject of European Revivals had been broadly established, but the Finnish National Gallery’s initiative aimed at examining parallel phenomena from a more wide-scale international perspective. It seemed obvious that one of the defining traits of cultural revivalist rhetoric in art and art history had been an exclusiveness linked to local current cultural or social objectives. Our key interest, however, was to look at the similarities of these narratives, instead of their differences.

The project’s intention was to foster and provide international scholarly networking between museum professionals and academia and to bring together art-historical scholarship on the subject. In our view, this was needed in order to nourish museum projects, exhibitions and university research with an emphasis on national art and its collections on a wider scale. This was to be realised through organising or supporting affiliated international conferences, all of which would explore different aspects of the European Revivals phenomena. Moreover, it was important that the European Revivals project was not distinctly connected with any exhibition programme, but that from the outset its field was open to connecting optional initiatives, including international exhibitions and publications. From the start, the project aimed to culminate in a scientific peer-reviewed publication, which would cover the most interesting topics to have emerged during the period 2009–18.

At the heart of the European Revivals project has been a series of international conferences organised in several countries since the inaugural conference held in Helsinki in 2009. Each 'European Revivals' conference has had its specific theme, title and organising team. The topics have arisen out of the different aspects of the ideas of a cultural revivalist phenomena, linking with other key questions being asked within art history and cultural history.

### **Conferences:**

- 2009 'Myths, Legends and Dreams of a Nation', Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, Finland
- 2012 'Modern Identities', Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, Finland
- 2014 'Aesthetic Values in the National Context', National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, Norway
- 2015 'Artists' Colonies and Nature in Art, Architecture and Design around 1900', Zakopane and Krakow, Poland
- 2017 'Cultural Mythologies around 1900', Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, United Kingdom
- 2020 'Art, Life and Place: Looking at European Transnational Exchange in the Long 19th Century', Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, Finland

### **The transnational way of looking for the unique and authentic around the turn of the 20th century**

Towards the end of the 19th century, European artists began to express a new and profound interest in their unique local pasts and cultural inheritances. This growing sense of national identity prompted a major flowering of nationalist debate concerning the rapidly disappearing regional cultures throughout Europe. This was a debate that was largely shaped by the desire within several countries for cultural and artistic, and ultimately social and economic, independence.

As the new century dawned, national mythological literature and national epics, such as *The Kalevala* in Finland or the Cuchulainn legend in Ireland and Scotland, became major vehicles for cultural expression and inspired some of the most important art of the age. Several of the most significant artists of the period were also key figures in this movement. They worked across all artistic media, from small-scale traditional domestic crafts and large-scale design, to major schemes of architecture. Often, rather than producing easel-paintings, artists undertook monumental programmes of mural decoration or



**Joseph Alanen, *Lemminkäinen and the Cowherd*, 1919–20, tempera on canvas, 50cm x 64cm. Collection Maine Wartiovaara née Alanen, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen

stained-glass projects, because of the social implications of such public art. For those countries that had not yet achieved their dream of self-sovereignty, it became imperative to promote their unique distinctive cultural present as unbroken with the past. This became particularly important for those small nations on the northern, eastern and western fringes of Europe and especially those that had been conquered and divided by powerful neighbours.

Many of the important topics concerning national revivals in European art around 1900 also examined issues around the search for authenticity, and the 'rewriting', reinterpretation and assimilation of

national styles, symbols and cultural narratives in late 19th-century European art and literature. Interestingly, it has become clear that these aspects were considered on a wider geographical scale: from Finland, Norway, Estonia and Germany to Poland, France, Spain, Ireland and Scotland. Many revival movements were forging powerful cultural interests which focused on Spiritualism and Theosophy, which themselves were often based on folk traditions and the new scholarship that was being created at that time.

Although it has been well known that the countries on Europe's outer borders have had unique and far-reaching cultural renaissances in the form of 'national revivals', what seems to have been less well understood is that while each was distinctive, they also had much in common. And although direct connections existed, for example between Finnish and Hungarian artists or between Irish and Scottish artists, several other factors have contributed to a largely undocumented system of interaction and exchange. These ranged from educational and exhibiting opportunities in Paris, London, Berlin and Vienna, to the foundation of national collections of museums and research into vernacular and folk cultures; from the rise of mythology and legendary history in literature and music, to the multitude of localised 'national' exhibitions of contemporary art and new forms of integrated art and architecture in various local manifestations of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. There was also the major role played by national displays at the International Exhibitions and World Fairs of the period.

It is within this Europe-wide 'national revival' movement that ideas of a renewal of art, and art as a cornerstone of modern society, were forged. The influence of unique local artistic traditions found fullest expression in forms of indigenous folk art and, although the globalising Industrial Revolution threatened many such folk traditions with extinction, nevertheless at the heart of the 'national revivals' movement was a desire to refine art and society for the modern age.

## **Towards nature and spiritual regeneration**

One of the key themes that has been investigated in many of the European Revivals conferences is the link between the spiritual and nature which inspired artists to create powerful works and even transformed people's ways of living. This important development was especially explored in the conference in Krakow, where the leading theme was the return to nature, which manifested itself in visual arts, architecture and design, literature and music, philosophy and lifestyles around 1900. Rooted in the ideas

of 19th-century thinkers and writers such as John Ruskin, it informed the Arts and Crafts and Back-to-the-Land movements, as well as parallel ideas understood as national revivals in central and northern Europe, all of which tapped into Romantic philosophy and imagination.

The return to nature took place both in art and in life, triggering the rise of the colonies of artists who believed that the rural life was the only happy, healthy and human one. In their search for the simple life and physical and spiritual regeneration, painters, writers and composers settled down in the areas of natural beauty, such as the countryside around Lake Tuusula in Finland, the seaside village of Skagen in Denmark or the village of Zakopane in the Polish Tatras. This development manifested in the realisation of numerous individual artists' houses in different parts of Europe. The rise of these artists' communities and colonies in the countryside was part of the search for alternative ways of living; and this created new examples of *Gesamtkunstwerk* combining the arts, architecture and interior design of the time. There the struggle to forge new modern identities in the material world was realised in a yearning for a holistic aesthetic 'order'.

In the arts, this turn towards nature translated into the representations of the world and order, not infrequently endowed with symbolic and metaphysical qualities. Nature was carefully studied by artists and the representations of life, growth, germination and cycles of seasons made their way into painting and sculpture. In design and applied arts nature was stylised and increasingly abstracted into decorative forms and patterns. Some plants and trees, such as the rowan tree or chestnut, gained widespread significance and the motif of the Tree of Life stood out as a powerful symbol. This, again, underlines the manifold potential and variation of traditional myths and stories. The revivalist cultural approaches to these traditions have been utilised both in forming national identities through exclusion, but also in the search for universalist conceptions of meaning in art, life and nature.

## Looking forward

The themes drawn from the key ideas supporting the European Revivals project are still powerfully resonant in the early 21st century. People's lifestyles, indigenous material culture, national myths, forming personal or collective identities and the meaning of native landscape or nature in general still have an enduring significance today. The 10-year cycle of European Revivals conferences, professional exchange and accumulated research have shown that the issue of cultural revivals, whether national,



**Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Illustration for the novel, *Seven Brothers*, by Aleksis Kivi, 1907, watercolour and pencil, 23.5cm x 31.5cm. Ahlström Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**  
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

universal or local, is far more wide-reaching, multidimensional and complex than we could possibly have imagined at the beginning of this journey.

The discourses connected to cultural revivals do not seem to subside. On the contrary, interest in these topics across the fields of art-historical research, the arts and cultural history remains very much alive. It seems evident that analytical and critical historiographic surveys of national historical narratives are more important than ever. Therefore we hope that the input of the European Revivals research project will extend over a widening range of scholars and research communities. We hope we are right in believing that interaction between individuals and institutions, both in museums and in academia, has grown deeper and more wide-ranging than was the case ten years ago.

The authors of this foreword, as well as the Finnish National Gallery, wish to extend the warmest thanks to all those individuals and organisations who have participated in and are committed to making the project plan of European Revivals come true. The collaboration with all of you, on both an intellectual and practical level, has been most rewarding and inspiring.