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## European Revivals in 2020 and beyond

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Following the recent concluding conference of the Finnish National Gallery's European Revivals research project, Gill Crabbe asks its keynote speakers, art historians Professor Murdo Macdonald and Professor Patricia Berman, to assess the impact of the ten-year initiative as they look to the future

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In 2009, when the Finnish National Gallery initiated its European Revivals research project the main aim was to examine the phenomena surrounding European national revivals from a more wide-scale international perspective. This included looking for parallel processes and similarities in the cultural constructions of nationhood within the European region, at a time when national art-historical discourses had emphasised a specific local uniqueness of each cultural revivalist narrative. As one of the prime movers in the Project, Director of Collections Management at the FNG Riitta Ojanperä, pointed out: 'We didn't want to name the project "National Revivals" but rather "European Revivals" to emphasise the transnational aspect.' The FNG thus set out to generate a series of international conferences organised by both themselves and by institutions in other countries, that would bring together both museum and academic scholarship, fostering and broadening international networks, stimulating and publishing new research, inspiring affiliated exhibitions, and encouraging a reassessment of existing art-historical narratives.

Ten years on, and six international conferences, scores of published papers and a number of exhibitions later, the scope of European revivals has evolved substantially, as could be seen in the wide-ranging presentations at the concluding conference organised by the Finnish National Gallery in January 2020 at the Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki. During this period, the cultural revivalist discourse in art and art history has been re-examined and recontextualised, so that even the concept of a Golden Age in the long 19th century has come under scrutiny. As Patricia Berman, Theodora L. and Stanley H. Feldberg Professor of Art, Wellesley College, Massachusetts, noted in her keynote speech at the conference: 'The idea of a Golden Age is always equivocal. When pictured in paint, it's a perfect past in the midst of a tense present. That perfect past, in European Golden Ages was almost always an ethnic discourse, erasing or marginalising certain populations. What we increasingly and collectively see is how profoundly shaped by stereotypes our discipline has been and how to shape the tools to defuse and move beyond them.'

Indeed, in the collection of peer-reviewed papers by those who had contributed over the years which was published by the FNG to coincide with the 2020 conference, Riitta Ojanperä and Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, Chief Curator at the Ateneum Art Museum, who were both initiators of the project, wrote: 'The issue of cultural revivals, whether national, universal or local, is far more wide-reaching, multidimensional and complex than we could possibly have imagined at the beginning of this journey.' It is a journey that has centred around a series of conferences that has taken those involved on a round trip from Helsinki to Oslo, Krakow, Edinburgh and back to Helsinki, with institutions from these cities hosting them in an impressive example of international collaboration. Themes ranged from 'Myths, Legends



Finland's so-called national epic poem, *The Kalevala*, has been a springboard for much Finnish art production in the construction of a national cultural heritage, such as Joseph Alanen's painting *The Wild Duck and the Celestial Bodies*, 1919–20, tempera on canvas, 40.5cm x 55.5cm  
 Collection Maine Wartiovaara née Alanen, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



and Dreams of a Nation' (2009) to 'Artists' Colonies and Nature' (2015), 'Aesthetic Values in the National Context' (2014), 'Modern Identities' (2012) and 'Cultural Mythologies around 1900' (2017).

This year, the concluding conference theme 'Art, Life and Place: Looking at European Transnational Exchange in the Long 19th century' chose to focus on the importance of place in the context of artistic life and practice, including artists' communities, geographical environments, social spaces and studio contexts in the period from the 1870s to 1930s. The papers presented covered geographies as diverse as the European Arts and Crafts in the US, Byzantine architectural style in Balkan historiographies, Scandinavian-Romanian connections in national art, feminine abstraction in the work of Swedish artist Hilma af Klint, and European artists and the East, to name a few. Ideas of place were challenged, as new knowledge and wider perspectives gained over the past ten years have prompted a reassessment of notions of the status of nations, challenging assumptions made in the use of terms such as 'peripheral nations' in the European context. In fact the Project as a whole has re-shaped thinking in this area. 'I think that the mining of political and art history at the European Revivals conferences problematises the notion of a "periphery"', says Prof Berman. 'As we increasingly acknowledge

that French, British, and German history writing was part of imperial enterprise, we can recalibrate our sense of a periphery. The conferences have been invaluable in this effort.'

Indeed there are many ways in which the European Revivals project has had a significant impact both on the knowledge base of art historians and their approaches to the discipline. Professor Berman, points out that 'those who have participated in the conferences have offered very specific regional or local case studies, dense in primary documentation, that consider historical memory and narration as critical components of modernism and modernity. The intervention of experts in a variety of area studies highlights both regional specificity and normative processes of cultural retrieval. It is this important mixture of voices and areas of focus, shared through papers and discussion, that enables us to revise our individual work. The conferences are important in that they have built on these networked and intersecting ideas over many years, resulting in careful and sustained discussions of cultural production.'

For Murdo Macdonald, Emeritus Professor of the History of Scottish Art, University of Dundee, who presented the final keynote speech of the 2020 conference, 'European Revivals has done a great deal to enhance a pluralistic vision of the realities of art. Since 2009, the world has become less politically predictable, but the basic dynamics that revivalist thinking addresses – taking cultural heritage seriously and challenging the destruction of the environment – remain the same. The difference from 2009 is that the relevance of that thinking is now more obvious than it was.'

Indeed, in enhancing such pluralistic visions one of the hopes for the Project that both Riitta Ojanperä and Ateneum Art Museum Director Marja Sakari foregrounded in their addresses to the 2020 conference, was to stimulate forums for challenging the art-historical canon. This is something that Prof Macdonald underlines. 'Simply by insisting on the recognition of revivalist themes alongside more established approaches, has paved the way for a re-assessment of "canonical" artists,' he says. 'The European Revivals project became an extended part of my thinking, for example as a point of international reference in my 2017 chapter "James Macpherson's *Ossian* and European Art". It continues to inform my work,' he explains.

'In my research into the roots of the Celtic revival of the 1890s in James Macpherson's *Ossian*, written in the 1760s, I had for years been intrigued by the *Ossian* work J. M. W. Turner painted in 1802, which had been lost. It was of clear importance to Turner as it was one of the paintings he exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in the year he was appointed an Academician. In 2013, I had the good fortune to identify it with the help of Eric Shanes, who was at that time completing his book, *Young Mr Turner*, for Yale University Press. The painting is in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and has now had its original title restored.<sup>1</sup> It is such painstaking research into areas hidden from history that has opened up the art-historical canon to far more diversity. As Prof Berman points out: 'Once the older national canons begin to be interrogated as narratives that were shaped at particular moments for specific political purposes, the larger, more robust, more diverse community of producers and types of production enter into the museum conversation. Of course, feminist interventions have also slowly broken open older canons of genius and mastery over the last five decades.'

The Project has shown particular initiative in how it has brought scholars and museum professionals together and developed networks for the evolution and sharing of knowledge. 'The fact that European Revivals was an academic research project led from the Finnish National Gallery has also been exemplary in breaking down the bureaucratically-erected

1 Since being acquired by the Fitzwilliam Museum in 1925, the painting has existed under various speculative titles, including *The Trossachs* and *Welsh Mountain Landscape*. The correct title, *Ben Lomond Mountains, Scotland: The Traveller – Vide Ossian's War of Caros*, has now been restored. For the identification see Murdo Macdonald and Eric Shanes 'Turner and Ossian's The Traveller', *Turner Society News*, Autumn 2013, 4–7. See also Murdo Macdonald, 'Ossian and Visual Art – Mislaid and Rediscovered', *Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol 39, no 2, June 2016, 235–48, in particular 237–40, (section II, 'J. M. W. Turner's interest in Ossian').



**A number of Finnish artists explored esoteric themes in their work, reflecting a common interest among many cultures of the European revivalist period. Hugo Simberg, *Fantasy*, 1896, watercolour and gold on paper, 16cm x 15cm Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



barriers between “art historians” and “museum or gallery professionals”,’ Macdonald points out.

Prof Berman agrees. ‘All too often, museum-based scholars and academic-based scholars share ideas within separate arenas and do not always honour the institutional frames into which we introduce our scholarship. The fact that as a community, the European Revivals scholars can think together about how to analyse history as embedded in art history enriches us all. The presence of a network of experts who are enthusiastic about sharing information and perspectives, and who have both the possibility and track record of collaboration, is really precious. Dissertations have been launched and supported, articles shared, critiques offered, and everyone has been enriched, both in the conference hall and in unfolding dialogues. As such, the communities of museum and academic scholars – who are sometimes not as sympathetic to the other’s functional mandates as we would all like – are important intellectual partners.’

Prof Berman also drew attention to the significance for the research community of the FNG's compilation of peer-reviewed articles in *European Revivals: From Dreams of a Nation to Transnational Exchange*. 'The publication as both a print and an online resource contributes to the endless rethinking of art-historical reconsiderations of the roots and practices of modernism.'

One particular theme that has gained traction through the cycle of conferences is the importance of distinguishing between nation-building and nationalist expansionism. 'The European Revivals project has had little to say about the imperial nations, except in so far as they have attempted to incorporate smaller nations into their empires. So it is important to distinguish the nationalisms of large and small nations,' says Prof Macdonald. 'That raises interesting research issues. For example, Theosophy in particular has been explored throughout the project. That movement has often been closely linked to radical political change (e.g. Annie Besant in India). It intrigues me that it can also be found in art circles at the heart of the very empires that may be resisting that radical change. The symbolist painter George Frederic Watts in England is an example. Along with his Scottish wife Mary Fraser Tytler he took a strong interest in Theosophy. Mary Watts is important both from that spiritual perspective and also as a remarkable Celtic revivalist.'

'Furthermore, the imperial nations are by no means monolithic and have within them movements which can be considered cognate with the small-nation revivals explored in the European Revivals project,' he continues. 'It would be interesting to explore further the connections with such analogous movements, for example the Arts and Crafts movement in England.'

It is natural that the increased knowledge and wider perspectives gained from the project has and will continue to stimulate further research questions, and some of these were pointed up in Prof Macdonald's address to the 2020 conference, as he pondered the future. One research issue he highlighted that could be addressed is the relationship between revivals and environmental thinking. 'Revivals are reactions to cultural loss, and cultural loss in the modern period is almost invariably accompanied by environmental loss, both in the sense of loss of place to populations forced to migrate, and in the sense of the actual destruction of place. Such environmental loss is consequent on several centuries of developing industrialisation and "rationalisation" of land use. Thus cultural revivals always have the potential to draw attention to environmental issues. This is becoming more and more evident today as global warming takes hold and indigenous cultural knowledge is seen to be based on models of environmental sustainability that industrial models lack. It is no accident that one of the leaders of the Celtic revival, Patrick Geddes, was also a pioneer of the discipline of Ecology,' he points out.

The relevance of this issue for contemporary artists has been seen in the growing number of exhibitions on ecological themes and Prof Macdonald also pointed to the wider potential for future research into contemporary artists' responses to revival movements. 'Contemporary art and cultural revivals is certainly a direction that could be developed from an international research perspective,' he says. 'That gets back to challenging the canon. Very few people think of contemporary art and revival art as even compatible, yet one finds both Finnish and Scottish artists uniting the two – the Finns in re-imagining themes from the *Kalevala*, and the Scots in responding to *Ossian*. But one can go further and note that much contemporary art has a revivalist quality. Joseph Beuys's Scottish travels with Richard Demarco in the Scottish Highlands are a case in point. As Lucy Lippard demonstrated in her book *Overlay* (1983), one also finds land artists from the 1960s onwards intrigued by prehistoric work from an aesthetic rather than an antiquarian point of view, an approach in common with the revivalists around 1900. Such links enable a much wider research appreciation of what artists are actually picking up on in their work.'

The 2020 conference also gave time to consider how to move forward collectively and practically, now that the European Revivals project has drawn to a conclusion. Prof Macdonald suggests that a successor project to European Revivals could pursue wider local-and-global connectivity to good effect, whether through cognate revivals in India and Japan, or through the work of early American feminists. 'I think it would, for example, be fruitful to study revivals around 1900 in India (Tagore, Coomaraswamy) and Japan (Okakura), and their close connections with European and American revivals.'

When the question of how to move forward was opened to the floor at the conference, participants discussed the idea of looking at the Paris World Fair of 1900 and re-imagining it in terms of cultural specificity and cultural fluidity in the context of revivalist themes. 'If we were to begin to expand the purview of the last 10 years of the project to consider the twentieth century, it seems to me that the Universal Exposition of 1900 would be a great platform,' says Prof Berman. 'I think that the idea of a conference reassessing the networks, exchanges, and national self-advertising in Paris in 1900, with papers that enable a fresh look at national pavilions, the scientific conferences, hygiene, the metro, colonial display, technology, religious and spiritual transmission, the tourism, would offer direction to the construction of global networks of exchange that may not be so present in our thinking. How great would it be, as some of the speakers offered, to look critically at the ways in which Indian, Mexican, and Romanian tourists, diplomats, and intellectuals, intersecting with the Finnish pavilion, the display of African-Americans by W. E. B. DuBois, and the Great Wheel, created heretofore invisible threads of modernity?'

It is heartening to note that the concluding conference of the European Revivals project was characterised by an atmosphere not only of goodwill and appreciation towards those who have contributed, but also a sense of intellectual frisson, as paper after paper opened up new dimensions of knowledge and fresh perspectives to this unique research community. It is a community that has been engendered by the momentum that has built up steadily over the ten years of the European Revivals project, a momentum that seems not to show any signs of subsiding, as it looks to future.

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