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## When a Passionate Collector Meets a Museum

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Teemu Mäenpää, *Aimless*, 2013,  
ink and acrylic on canvas,  
121 cm x 105.4 cm x 2.1 cm  
The Seppo Fränti Collection, Finnish National Gallery /  
Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma  
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Kirsi Halkola

### The curators' look at the Seppo Fränti Collection

In 2017, Christmas came early for Kiasma. The museum received an extraordinary donation from the Helsinki-based collector and art-lover Seppo Fränti. The donation was preceded by a long dialogue between the collector and the museum's director Leevi Haapala, and the final seal was placed on the agreement just before Christmas.

For nearly four decades, Fränti has been collecting mostly Finnish visual artists. The main emphasis of his collection, which comprises around 650 works, is on Finnish paintings. As art historian Juha-Heikki Tihinen has said, 'as a collector, Fränti is a patron who reacts quickly and relies on his gut feeling'.<sup>1</sup> Fränti wants to become friends with the people behind the artworks because, for him, collecting is a passion and a way of life. In recent years, this passion filled up his home.

Generally speaking, Fränti's collection is a grand gift for the Finnish National Gallery; at the same time, it hides behind it a large amount of work. The museum dived into the project through the processes of transportation, examination, documentation, maintenance, conservation, and restoration. This article looks at the reception of the Fränti Collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma. It considers how the character of this private collection might have altered when it became a part of a large public contemporary art collection, and describes the process that the works underwent on arrival and during exhibition planning.

1 Tihinen, Juha-Heikki, 2016. *Häpeämättömästi taiteen puolesta – Seppo Fräntin kokoelma*. Helsinki: Lapinlahden Lähde project & Mental Health Finland, 9.



Kim Somervuori,  
*Portrait of the Artist  
 as a Young Derelict*, 2014,  
 collage: textile, spray paint,  
 rusted spray cans, frame,  
 broken glass, metallic net,  
 166.5cm x 110.5cm x 15cm  
 The Seppo Fränti Collection,  
 Finnish National Gallery /  
 Museum of Contemporary  
 Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
 Petri Virtanen

## Private and public collection

Private collectors are not usually regarded as prominent figures on the Finnish art scene, in the way that they are, for example, in the United States. However, they are significant influencers, even in Finland.<sup>2</sup> Scratching beneath the surface of the museum institution, it is possible to find individuals behind collection donations and purchase decisions. In 1998, on the museum's opening, Kiasma received the Pentti Kouri Collection as a donation from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. That collection contains significant Finnish and foreign artworks.<sup>3</sup> Another crucial donation from Kiasma's early years was Maj-Lis Pitkänen's

2 Cf. e.g. Selkokari, Hanne, 2008. *Kalleuksia isänmaalle: Eliel Aspelin-Haapkylä taiteen keräilijänä ja taidehistorioitsijana*. Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja. Helsinki: Finnish Antiquarian Society, 28.

3 Dr Pentti Kouri's collection incorporated some 250 works, of which 61 ended up at Kiasma via the ministry's donation. This was originally called the Kiasma Collection and Museum Director Tuula Arkio played a central role in the process of choosing the works. The collection was renamed the Kouri Collection during Berndt Arell's time as Museum Director. Cf. e.g. Tuovinen, Kari, 2018. 'Art Collections Born through Division – Kouri Collection Case Study'. In *FNG Research* 5/2018, [https://fngresearch.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/fngr\\_2018-5\\_tuovinen\\_kari\\_article1.pdf](https://fngresearch.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/fngr_2018-5_tuovinen_kari_article1.pdf) and Aarnio, Eija, 2008. 'Kansallisesta kansainväliseksi. Kouri-kokoelma Kiasman peruskokoelman muotoutumisessa'. In Eija Aarnio (ed.), *Kouri-kokoelma Nykytaiteen museo Kiasmassa*. Nykytaiteen museon julkaisuja 114/2008. Helsinki: Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, 66–83.



**Lotta Määttä, *New Fish*,  
 oil on canvas,  
 190.7cm x 158.3cm x 2.7cm  
 The Seppo Fränti Collection,  
 Finnish National Gallery /  
 Museum of Contemporary  
 Art Kiasma**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
 Kirsi Halkola

collection of works by Kalervo Palsa (1947–87), which still makes up nearly one-third of the museum's entire holdings.<sup>4</sup>

Individuals with their own opinions and tastes also lie behind public art acquisitions. Kiasma's Acquisitions Committee includes experts from within and outside the museum, who actively discuss both new acquisitions and proposed donations.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, acquisitions are approved by the museum director, and hence each of Kiasma's directors has left their individual mark on the collection.<sup>6</sup> Thus the boundary between private and public is not so sharply drawn: 'Even though private collectors amass their collections according to their

4 Cf. e.g. Aarnio, Eija, 2002 (ed.). *Kalervo Palsa: Toinen tuleminen*. Jyväskylä: Like Kustannus & Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma.

5 Cf. e.g. Jyrkkiö, Teijamari, 2008. 'Miten teoksia ostettiin: Kokoelman kartuttaminen hankintamäärärahoilla 1991–2006'. In Päivi Rajakari (ed.), *Mitä meillä oli ennen Kiasmaa? Kokoelmatoiminnan vaikuttavuus*. Valtion taidemuseon julkaisusarja, Museologia 2. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery (57–80), 61. Also Tuula Arkio in interview, Pettersson, Susanna, 1999. 'Haastateltavina nykyaiteen yksityiset ja julkiset keräilijät: Tuula Arkio'. In Helka Ketonen (ed.), *Nykyaiteen keräämisestä*. Valtion taidemuseon julkaisusarja, Museologia 1. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery, 110–14.

6 According to art historian Susanna Pettersson, '[t]hose who add to a public collection must be able to navigate through the crossfire of their own tastes, the institution's operating environment, the collection's profile, and external factors, finding a balance in how much each of these weighs in the scale. The acquirer is like an orchestra conductor, tasked with making the whole ensemble play together in the best possible way. In deciding on acquisitions, they place their taste and expertise within the institution's context and thereby become a part of it. In other words, the acquirer loans their identity to the museum, whose collection grows in line with the acquirer's decisions.' Pettersson, Susanna, 1998. 'Julkinen taidekokoelma – julkinen maku?' *Synteesi* 3/1998 (32–41), 36–37.

personal desires and opportunities, and the professionals of the public collection have to act within the bounds of the museum institution and its collection policy, both are influenced by their personal tastes and knowledge,' says museum director and collection researcher Susanna Pettersson.<sup>7</sup>

So what happens when these two worlds meet? In describing the transfer of a private art collection to a public museum and the related difficulties, Pettersson states that the main critiques are usually aimed at how the museum environment differs from the collection's original context (often the collector's home). It is also commonly thought that a work of art loses some of its freedom in the process of entering the controlled and regulated museum environment – whether it is going into storage or on display. According to Pettersson, the way in which works are observed in the museum's exhibition space is a concrete embodiment of the disciplined conditions that a previously private work has entered. It is no longer a cohabitee in a private house, nor can it be enjoyed sitting down with a glass of wine and a cigarette.<sup>8</sup>

## The composition and future of the collection

The Seppo Fränti Collection comprises around 250 paintings, more than 350 works on paper, some small objects and sculptures, and one installation. It made an excellent addition to Kiasma's existing collection of Finnish paintings from the 2010s with its extensive selections of work by artists such as Olli Marttila (b. 1948), Henry Wuorila-Stenberg (b. 1949), Jussi Goman (b. 1980) and Kim Somervuori (b. 1975). With regard to graphic art, Eeva Tiisala (b. 1952) is among the artists with a strong representation in the collection. As for international art, the collection has work by the Estonian artist Alexei Gordin (b. 1989) and the Swedish-born Robin Lindqvist (b. 1979), among others.

While the Fränti Collection complements the museum's collection, it also alters it. The donation comprises works by 90 artists, of whom more than 50 are new to the museum. It also adds weight to the proportion of Finnish paintings from the 2010s in the museum's collection. As many as 60 per cent of the artists in the Fränti Collection were born in the 1970s and 1980s. Another significant aspect of the donation, besides the emphasis on paintings, is a strong focus on men: the collection contains work by 64 presumed male artists and only 26 presumed female artists.<sup>9</sup>

For a private collector, donating a collection to a museum can simultaneously present itself as the climax of a lifetime's effort and also as its destruction. The collection comes under the institution's protective wing and is promoted to be a part of a public collection and a shared cultural heritage cared for by professionals.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the collector's expertise, choices and possessions are 'raised' to professional status, as their personal tastes 'gain the approval of art experts and institutions'.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, individual pieces lovingly acquired are merged into a larger entity and the collector may worry whether the original

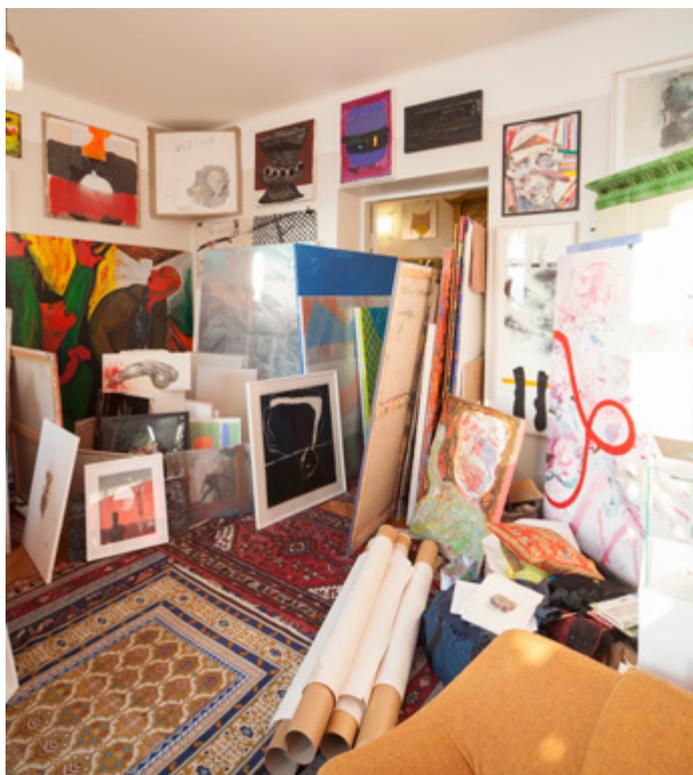
7 Pettersson, 'Julkinen taidekokoelma – julkinen maku?', 33.

8 Pettersson, 'Julkinen taidekokoelma – julkinen maku?', 43.

9 The British art historian Helen Gørrill examines the gender distribution of works in European art museums in her book *Women Can't Paint* (2020). Looking at the representations of male-assumed and female-assumed artists in collections, she found Nordic art museums to have a more equal gender balance than those in the rest of Europe. For more detailed investigation she chose the Kiasma Collection, which she found to have an almost gender-equal profile, compared for instance to major Central European institutions, such as London's Tate Modern. See Gørrill, Helen, 2020. *Women Can't Paint: Gender, the Glass Ceiling and Values in Contemporary Art*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 91–98.

10 Tali, Margaret, 2018. *Absence and Difficult Knowledge in Contemporary Art Museums*. New York & Oxon: Routledge, 3.

11 Hyvönen, Paula, 2018. 'Harakat, haalijat ja 'aito' keräilijä – taiteen keräily ilmiönä'. In Paula Hyvönen (ed.), *Taide on minun matkani: Martti Airion taidekokoelma*. Mikkeli: Mikkeli Art Museum, 13.



The interior of  
 Seppo Fränti's apartment,  
 23 February 2018

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
 Pirje Mykkänen

collection will be entirely assimilated, erasing their handprint.<sup>12</sup>

The transfer of a collection into a museum also involves a lot of practical work. The physical move of the Fränti Collection to Kiasma during 2018 required nine pick-up occasions, during which works were catalogued, documented and given condition evaluations. As, like many art collectors, Fränti had not kept a detailed written list of the works he owned – the list existed only in his head – it was important immediately to make an inventory of the collection's contents. During the process of cataloguing and packing, the museum's staff heard fascinating stories about the artworks, their authors and their purchase situations, all told by the collector. At the same time, they formed a more complete understanding of the collector and his motivations in collecting. Museum staff carried the works from the collector's apartment to a car waiting outside. At the museum, the works were inspected by conservators, photographed, then entered into a database by collection interns. The museum has been able to supplement the information it received on the history and backgrounds of the collection and its works, based on exhibition catalogues and additional documentation and photography on the artworks and artists. Still, it has taken a long time to form a complete picture of the Fränti Collection.

Building an exhibition based on the donated works was challenging. How does a collection change when it is displayed in museum galleries instead of a home?<sup>13</sup> Despite not having reconstructed the collector's art-filled home, we have done our best to exemplify the collector's approach and his passion for the collected art with our choices and juxtapositions.

## When is a collection complete?

The Finnish word for collector is *keräilijä*. The social scientist Ari Pöyhtäri has pointed out that *keräilijä* derives from the word *kerä*, which means coil, bundle or pack.<sup>14</sup> In English, some of the synonyms of 'collecting' include 'piling', 'stacking' or 'stockpiling'. As many of those who have visited the collector's home can attest, Fränti's collection was a genuine bundle or pile: a labyrinthine coil. Can a stack or coil ever be finished?

The philosopher Jean Baudrillard said that 'what you really collect is always *yourself*'. The collector is the collection's ultimate determining condition. Similarly, a collection is not started with the aim of it one day being complete; collecting is defined by what is lacking.<sup>15</sup> By the same token, art historian Mieke Bal writes that completing a collection can become a frightening prospect for a collector.<sup>16</sup> Undoubtedly, Seppo Fränti's collection is still not

12 Cf. e.g. Hyvönen, 'Harakat, haalijat ja 'aito' keräilijä – taiteen keräily ilmiönä', 21.

13 Selected works from the Seppo Fränti Collection were first displayed in an exhibition entitled 'The Wound', at Lapinlahden Lähde in Helsinki in 2016.

14 Pöyhtäri, Ari, 1996. *Keräilystä kokoelmaan. Sosiologia ja filosofia näkökulmia keräilyyn*. SoPhi Yhteiskuntatieteiden, valtio-opin ja filosofian julkaisuja 8. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 13.

15 Baudrillard, Jean, 1994. 'The System of Collecting.' In John Elsner & Roger Cardinal (eds.), *The Cultures of Collecting*. London: Reaktion Books (7–24), 12–13.

16 Bal, Mieke, 1994. 'Telling objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting.' In John Elsner & Roger Cardinal (eds.), *The Cultures of Collecting*. London: Reaktion Books (97–115), 113.

complete. As he himself says, his children – the artworks – may have flown the nest, but collecting has not left the collector.

The Fränti Collection has been handed over to Kiasma and has started a new life. There is more on the events and feelings related to the collection in the interview conducted by Leevi Haapala with Seppo Fränti. Art historian and curator Juha-Heikki Tihinen's article on the history of the Seppo Fränti Collection and on Fränti's identity as a collector also sheds further light on his efforts. Meanwhile, art historian Riikka Stewen examines the works in the collection and, particularly, the collection's parallel and contrasting trends of abstract minimalism and powerful expressionism. On behalf of the museum's entire personnel and all of our visitors, we can only say: Thank you, Seppo, for sharing your mad love with us!