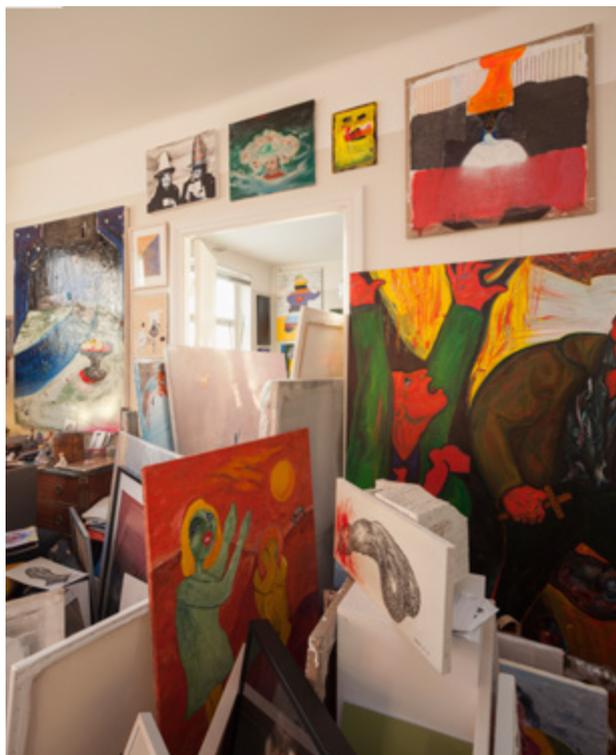


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Moomin-like Joy and the Seppo Fränti Art Collection

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The interior of Seppo Fränti's apartment, 23 February 2018
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

‘Suddenly he felt so happy that he had to be alone. He strolled off towards the woodshed. And when nobody could see him any longer he broke into a run. He ran through the melting snow, with the sun warming his back. He ran simply because he was happy, with nothing at all to think about.’¹

Art collections and the act of collecting often bear a significant emotional content, for with the collection the collector builds their own little cosmos, through which they can express intense feelings. In 2016, the art collector Seppo Fränti described the emotions he felt in his home when surrounded in every direction by art: ‘It is wonderful; I am like the Moomintroll, imbibing a Moomin-like atmosphere. I love to be surrounded by all this. Sometimes I might shriek a bit like Little My if I feel like it.’² This quote can best be understood by looking at pictures of Fränti’s home when it had been taken over by art and one could only move along narrow corridors between artworks. The collector’s home was literally covered in art, which took up every surface. The apartment was somewhat reminiscent of the *Merzbau*, a sculptural structure by German artist Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) that filled five of the eight rooms in the artist’s home in Hannover and grew organically as Schwitters picked up objects and materials around the city to add to the installation. Seppo Fränti’s collection started off as pictures hung on walls but later grew organically to fill the whole space.

Fränti’s collection is fascinating because it presents a compilation of the art he has chosen according to his preferences and that he experienced as being significant.

- 1 Jansson, Tove, 1988. *Taikatalvi*. Translated into Finnish by Laila Järvinen. Helsinki: WSOY, 132. Excerpt in English from *Moominland Midwinter*, transl. Thomas Warburton.
- 2 Tihinen, Juha-Heikki, 2016. *Häpeämättömästi taiteen puolesta – Seppo Fräntin kokoelma*. Helsinki: The Lapinlahden Lähde Project & Mental Health Finland, 20.



Jussi Goman, *Forensics*, 2012,
 acrylic on canvas,
 170.5cm x 130.8cm x 7cm
 The Seppo Fränti Collection,
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Kirsi Halkola

The collection donated to Kiasma comprises some 650 works³, the earliest of which Fränti acquired at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s.⁴ The collection is not intended as an all-encompassing historical portrayal of the art of the period; instead, it is an experiential interpretation of some of the phenomena in contemporary art. The central aspects of the Fränti Collection are a fascination with contemporary art and the collector's personal relationship with almost all of the artists. The Seppo Fränti Collection is not homogeneous; in fact, it is startlingly heterogeneous and it is not always easy for an outsider to follow the collector's logic.

How should one approach a very eclectic collection? Does heterogeneity necessarily mean incoherence?⁵ Knowledge of the history of collecting helps us to understand why we place so much significance on collections being representative and coherent. The art historian Hans Belting discusses in his book, *The Invisible Masterpiece* (2001), how the founders of the Louvre Museum considered whether the museum should be a collection of individual masterpieces or whether it should present as comprehensive a representation of art history as possible.⁶ Similar considerations might come into play for private collectors as they seek a balance between 'completeness' and the acquisition of masterpieces. It is also fairly common to assume that collectors have a specific plan or protocol to which they adhere more or less closely. A good example of a comprehensive and logically planned collection is the Hallwyl

3 The collection's growth rate has been startling, as at the time of the first exhibition in Lapinlahden Lähde in 2016, the collection as a whole comprised around 500 works.

4 Tihinen, *Häpeämättömästi taiteen puolesta*, 11.

5 A classic example of the fate of very eclectic collections is that of the collection of the surrealist author André Breton (1896–1966), which was auctioned off in 2003 after 36 years spent trying to form a museum around it. Some blame the collection's heterogeneity for this. Gibbons, Fiachara, 2003. 'I don't have any cash. Do you take mackerel?' *The Guardian*, Monday 14 April 2003. (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2003/apr/14/art.artsfeatures>).

6 Belting, Hans, 2001. *The Invisible Masterpiece*. Transl. Helen Atkins. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 27.



Henna Jula, *Roots*, 2015,
oil on canvas,
200cm x 145cm x 4cm
The Seppo Fränti Collection,
Finnish National Gallery /
Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Kirsi Halkola

Museum in Stockholm, Sweden, created by Wilhelmina von Hallwyl (1844–1930). Countess von Hallwyl had her entire house built with a view to making it into a museum at a later stage.

Making his initial art purchases did not constitute Seppo Fränti's first contact with collecting, because prior to that he closely followed the activities of the art patron Juhani Kirpilä (1932–88) from the 1970s onwards.⁷ The Kirpilä Collection, which was later turned into a house museum, is more traditional in nature than Fränti's, but can by no means be seen as its antithesis, as both share common factors such as abundance and pervasiveness. The Kirpilä Collection is more historically inclined, and its artists had mostly found their place in the canon of art history by the time Juhani Kirpilä acquired their works. The Fränti Collection is characterised by young artists whose works were acquired at an early stage. As the artists were not yet recognised as masters, the collector himself played a role in their potential entry into the canon.

The processes are similar to those of the American collector and curator Sam Wagstaff (1921–87), which suggests some ways of understanding the birth of the Fränti Collection. In practice, Wagstaff amassed three collections, of which the first comprised contemporary art of his time. This was extensively influenced by the collector's work as a curator and position as a patron of young artists.⁸ Wagstaff's second collection focused on photography and was sparked by his encounter with Robert Mapplethorpe. The collector often said he had shifted to photography because he felt that painting had lost its meaning through minimalism.⁹ A large proportion of his photographic collection – around 6,500 items – ended up with the

7 Hyttinen, Pia, 2017. 'Juhani Kirpilän vuosikymmenet. Juhani Kirpilä Decade by Decade'. In Johanna Ruohonen (ed.), *Taiteen koti. A Home for Art. Juhani Kirpilän taidekokoelma. The Juhani Kirpilä Art Collection*. Helsinki: SKS, 210.

8 Gefter, Philip, 2015. *Wagstaff: Before and After Mapplethorpe*. New York & London: Liverlight Publishing Company, 53.

9 Gefter, *Wagstaff: Before and After Mapplethorpe*, 311.



Petri Hytönen, *Narcissus*, 2011, watercolour on primed canvas, epoxy resin varnish, 30.5cm x 61cm x 2.5cm

The Seppo Fränti Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Kirsi Halkola

J. Paul Getty Trust for the price of USD 4.6 million.¹⁰ Wagstaff's third collection comprised American 19th-century silverware. This startled people somewhat because the objects were regarded as less significant and of lesser artistic value than his two prior areas of focus. Similarly, 19th-century silver was further removed from the present day than contemporary art or photography,¹¹ although Wagstaff had, admittedly, also collected a lot of historical photographs. In Fränti's case, the emphasis on young artists and the collector's own opinions and passions is reminiscent of Wagstaff's collectorship.

The collector as storyteller

Art historian Donald Preziosi calls museums the greatest achievements of modern literature¹², from which we may infer that an art collection could be seen as a narrative. The diversity of the Fränti Collection has created some confusion because it mixes together styles such as expressionism and minimalism in a combination that can seem cacophonous. The overall collection can better be understood by interpreting it as a set of stories. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) considered the loss of storytelling as a grave historical transition related to the weakening of the oral tradition and the predominance of information.¹³ According to Benjamin, storytelling implies the ability to share experiences and to narrate.¹⁴

As a collector, Seppo Fränti can be seen to have narrated his own story. The works in his collection form a narrative that does not follow general rules. In this context, Benjamin's differentiation between the novel and the epic forms a good introduction to relating the Fränti Collection to more common practices in art collecting. Benjamin writes as follows: '[The Muse]

10 Geffer, *Wagstaff: Before and After Mapplethorpe*, 337.

11 Geffer, *Wagstaff: Before and After Mapplethorpe*, 339–62.

12 Preziosi, Donald, 1996. 'Collecting/Museums'. In Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shift (eds.), *Critical Terms for Art History*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 281.

13 Benjamin, Walter, 2014. 'Tarinankertoja. Huomioita Nikolai Leskovin tuotannosta'. In *Keskuspuisto. Kirjoituksia kapitalismista, suurkaupungeista ja taiteesta*. Translated into Finnish by Taneli Viitahuhta and Eetu Viren. Helsinki: Tutkijaliitto, 113.

14 Benjamin, 'Tarinankertoja. Huomioita Nikolai Leskovin tuotannosta', 107.

starts the web which all stories together form in the end. One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have always readily shown. In each of them, there is a Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop. This is *epic remembrance* and the Muse-inspired element of the narrative.¹⁵ Fränti's polyphonic collection is consistent in its narrativity, even though it can travel in many directions instead of providing straightforward information.

Benjamin also writes the following about storytelling: 'Seen in this way, the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel – not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his *entire* life.'¹⁶ From this point of view, Fränti's collection is a kind of anthology of stories concerning encounters within art, as well as a record kept by the collector, of events of significance for him; works that have touched him to the extent that he has invited them to share his life.

Could an art collection be interpreted as one great work of art, or as a social sculpture? Something in between? It could be seen as a kind of memorandum of meetings and introductions related to life and art. Fränti's collection is a holistic entity in which people and artworks stand on the same continuum. The social sculpture is one of the most famous inventions by the German artist Joseph Beuys (1921–86), and it is based on the idea of the ability of art to transform society. Society in itself could be regarded as one great work of art and every person in it, an artist. Despite being an abridged version of the concept, this communicates the significance of art as something that upholds society and life. In Fränti's case, his collection is an entity that weaves together life and art, with the collector living his life among all of his collected artworks, like some sort of Moomintroll. The collection is also a memorandum of social encounters and comprises a number of internal lines of progression, in which the collector's initial meeting with one artist has led to further contacts, and so on.

The Fränti Collection can also be seen as a concrete installation, in which the growing number of artworks formed diverse strata in the collector's home. In this way, his home became more reminiscent of an artist's studio or a storeroom than a gallery or a place for receiving visitors. This, too, makes the Collection exceptional.

The attraction of oddity

The archetype of the singular and ever-consistent collector is exemplified by Jean des Esseintes, a character in the novel *Against Nature* by Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), whose home and collection form a complete and perfect work of art. His house is a creation that attests to his exceptional taste and uniqueness. It is a carefully considered and meticulously planned entity with no exceptions, in which every small element serves a common purpose. In other words, his collection is a cohesive aesthetic manifesto that raises its collector above the ordinary while also affecting his everyday life: 'For the nourishment of his soul and the gratification of his eyes he had accumulated on his walls certain suggestive works that were intended to fly him into strange worlds, to open doors to new mental associations, to inflame his nervous system and to generate erudite attacks of hysterics, unexplained nightmares and terrifying, distant visions.'¹⁷

A collector's endeavours are often difficult or impossible for outsiders to understand. The owner of an extensive home library might have people wondering what is the point of buying more books if they do not fit on the shelves and cannot all be read. The collector, in turn, balks at the concepts of *Konmari* or decluttering, because their collection always

15 Benjamin, 'Tarinankertoja. Huomioita Nikolai Leskovin tuotannosta', 122.

16 Benjamin, 'Tarinankertoja. Huomioita Nikolai Leskovin tuotannosta', 133.

17 Huysmans, Joris-Karl, 2005. *Vastahankaan*. Translated into Finnish with notes by Antti Nylén. Helsinki: Desura, 112.



Elina Merenmies, *Ghost*, 2006, acrylic and oil on canvas, 80cm x 60cm x 3.5cm
The Seppo Fränti Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Kirsi Halkola

sparks joy. When filled with art, Fränti's home challenged the ordinary understanding of homeliness and the purpose of a home. In *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia* (2003), Esther Sánchez-Pardo writes about how the modernist identity is determined on the axis of the self *versus* otherness, upon which identities are formed.¹⁸ If we read a work of art as a reminder of otherness, we come to notice that objects in the home that continuously bear witness to otherness also alter our understanding of ourselves. By collecting, people form a kind of image of themselves.

A popular psychologising reading is to see art collections as striving for immortality, or the artworks therein as the collector's child surrogates. In my view, this is simply an attempt to tame the untameable complexity of collecting because it is not as simple as a desire for immortality or control over the world: it also opens doors in many other directions. Collecting can be passionate, materialistic, manic or addictive, and it does not really fit in within the fantasy of omnipotence demanded by the wish for immortality. It is a far cry from omnipotence, in fact, when a collector yearns for more walls – like the French critic Albert Aurier (1865–92) who in a text from 1890 on Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), called for more walls for the artist to create his monumental paintings. For Aurier and Gauguin, empty walls were full of potential for future art. For a collector, an empty wall is a space to be filled and something both to appreciate and fear as the collection grows.

If we regard a work of art as something with a complex identity – human-like if not quite a legally capable person – we gain new perspectives from which to understand collections and their authors. Perhaps a work of art is a kind of dead soul. In his novel

¹⁸ Sánchez-Pardo, Esther, 2003. *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modern Melancholia*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 202.



**Peetu Liesinen, *Beware of the Snake*, 2017, oil on canvas,
 172.5cm x 148cm x 3.5cm
 The Seppo Fränti Collection, Finnish National Gallery /
 Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Kirsi Halkola**

Dead Souls (1842), Nikolai Gogol (1809–52) writes about the mysterious Chichikov, who goes about buying dead souls (dead serfs who have not yet been removed from the census). The main character's ability to see something interesting in creatures that are worthless for others causes a wide range of reactions as he travels around the province on his mission. Perhaps a collector is a bit like Chichikov, seeing value in things that are of no interest to others. This ability may arouse confusion, ridicule or repudiation. In acquiring works, the collector sees something unusual – something divine or otherworldly. It is very apt that Seppo Fränti's narrative should end up in a museum, i.e., a house of muses.

The most renowned project by art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) was the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a huge endeavour that he never completed. In it, Warburg strove to create a map following the emergence of *Pathosformel*, images of great emotional power, in one work of art after another. Warburg describes *Pathosformel* as 'the primitive words of passionate gesture language'.¹⁹ The same gestures and visual tropes recur from one artwork

¹⁹ Didi-Huberman, Georges, 2017. *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of the Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*. Transl. Harvey L. Mendelsohn. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 130.

to another, and they could be compared using an extensive collection of imagery that would form the Mnemosyne Atlas. Warburg's speculative and hermeneutical way of thinking did not gain him many followers, although the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, for example, thanks Warburg for having understood the complexity of objects and the fact that their ultimate nature lies in survival, memory, and remnants.²⁰ Fränti's collection is a fine example of a single collector's creation that was never intended as an all-encompassing presentation of the latest phenomena in contemporary art, nor to comprehend all possible phenomena or all living artists. It is more of a passionate verbalisation of the opportunities and boundlessness of art. Painting lives on, despite Douglas Crimp (1944–2019), for example, writing about its demise in his article 'The End of Painting' in his classic 1981 institutional critique *On the Museum's Ruins*.²¹ Painting is at the forefront of Fränti's collection as it is an art form that appeals to the collector.

The Fränti Collection teaches us a great deal about painting and about viewing it; its endless interpretations of the genre make it perfectly evident that it is very much alive in a wide variety of forms. Paintings can be expressive, minimalist, abstract, representational, comic or tragic. They are also very much tangible, as manifested by pictures of the collector's apartment at its fullest. Paintings are not just pictures: they have a physical being that allows for their visual nature. They seem to inhabit their own world, whose mysterious siren call attracts us although we can never break their integrity. In paintings, the presence of Otherness is palpable and concrete. What we cannot put into words, what escapes us, is present there. Paintings teach us to look closely and carefully, to desire and to perceive. Paintings have their own lives, and this opens new doors into our lives and worlds.

In my mind, I associate Fränti's collectorship with Georges Didi-Huberman's idea of Aby Warburg as a researcher who not only wanted to investigate the meanings of works of art but was also pursuing the impossible in seeking the truth of the kind of life (*Leben*) that had generated the works.²² Seppo Fränti has not sought to decorate his home, nor has he cared only for the works of art: he has pursued the impossible in creating a continuum on which the artworks, their authors and the collector are fused into the same entity and can carry out their wonderful Moomin-like existence together.

20 Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 176.

21 Crimp, Douglas, 1990. 'Maalaustaiteen loppu'. In *Museon raunioilla*. Translated into Finnish by Tauno Saarela. Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Taide, 103–21.

22 Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 332–38.