A Changing Landscape

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Many of the most significant transformations in European art between the 1870s and the First World War occurred in the field of landscape painting. Although landscape painting as a genre was initially a relatively small part of the visual arts field, it offered opportunities for improvisation and self-expression, and a deeper relationship with nature as an artist, writer or traveller. Landscapes were associated with poetry, purification and heightened emotional states. Many artists eschewed the materialistic view of an industrialising Europe, and instead sought an understanding of landscape painting and a deployment of colour within it that would evoke parallels with more intangible forms of expression, such as music and spiritual life. In the era of Symbolist art in the 1890s, an image of the world based on sensory perception encountered an image fuelled by the imagination. New styles and compositions replaced the objectivity of *plein air* landscapes; there was no differentiation between the way the foreground and background was treated, and the traditional concept of perspective was broken.¹

Nordic artists’ ways of portraying the landscape changed radically at the end of the 19th century. One of the major reasons for this was a growing familiarity with Japanese and

Chinese art and its visual culture. Characteristics of Japonisme began to appear in Nordic landscape art from the late 1870s. From an international perspective, this was already the second wave. Nordic artists’ perception of the landscape expanded and focused on new kinds of subject matter. Gabriel P. Weisberg summarised the new visual features of European art when he said that they came from Japanese imagery that featured numerous references to Mount Fuji, rugged beach cliffs, dense lines of trees and the rhythmic formation of waves.


that Japanese art encapsulates everything essential through its understated simplicity took precedence over visual art that imitated and commented on reality. The small subjects and bare, austere landscapes found in Asian art, such as simple forest tree trunks, rocks, or the grass and reeds of the coastal areas, led Nordic artists to approach local landscapes and their details from a new perspective. A modern version of the subject is Ulla Rantanen’s *Stone in the Water* (1980), which once again casts its eye over rocks on the shore.

European artists who worked in different countries and who represent a variety of styles, increasingly began to abandon depictions of the physical world. Instead, they made creative use of colours and forms to explore states of mind beyond the material world and focused on studying the spiritual side of life. The landscape aroused complex feelings and states of mind and represented a continuous process that included otherworldly, perhaps divine, powers. All of this provided the artist with the basic materials that, through colour, could be used to conjure up feelings, ideals and a yearning for something invisible, profound and essential. The most important and lasting changes were the focus on new kinds of natural subjects and, more precisely, on the relationship with the way that nature was portrayed. Individual trees, such as crooked pines, as well as waterfalls, and close-up focussing on individual plants became popular subjects. Among these new themes were also unnamed nocturnal landscapes, different weather conditions, and rhythmic rows of trees. These introduced variation into landscape art, which had become one of the most prominent genres in Nordic art.

Familiarising themselves with Japanese art, many artists were inspired to experiment with new techniques and subject matter, and they also became interested in the wider use of new materials and supports in their works. Artists began to experiment with different paper supports and the use of watercolours, ink pens and gouache paints that were much

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5 Thomson, ‘In to the Mystic’, 151, 177.
better suited to the new expression than oil on primed canvas, which had previously been considered the only correct method. The strict requirements for making ‘suitable’ works were permanently changed in the early 20th century, and these new techniques, previously considered to be modest outlines of unfinished works, were now accepted for exhibitions. For example, Maria Wiik’s delicate and simplified *Thistles* was created using only a thin black watercolour that teases out the beauty of a modest subject through the technique. Aimo Kanerva’s delicate watercolours of nature, *Heather* and *Marsh Tea* (1970 and 1989), continue this tradition and underline the ruggedness of Lappish landscapes and the simple beauty of plants.

Innovations also occurred in graphic art. The woodcut technique from Japan became popular with many artists – Akseli Gallen-Kallela making them in 1895 and Edvard Munch slightly later in 1896. The woodcut was suitable for working in a black-and-white graphic style, as well as working with larger, colourful pieces. The technique used in a landscape consisting of rows of trees, as featured in Katsushika Hokusai’s *Stations of the Tokaido* (1834) woodcut series, was used by Nordic artists more than once. Mauri Favén’s *Edge of the Forest* (1956)...

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7 Katsushika Hokusai, *Stations of the Tokaido, Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji*, woodcut series c. 1830–33.
follows the Hokusai-inspired tradition in subject, technique and composition. The graphic expression of the colour woodcut is highlighted by the dark, oblique geometric forms of tree trunks set against a light background. The same type of landscape may also be seen in Lea Ignatius’s simplified graphic works, *Evening Forest* and *Frosty Woods* (1973 and 1976), both of which follow the same barred composition to depict a stand of trees. Eero Nelimarkka’s painting *Winter Landscape* (1943) and Eino Ruutsalo’s *Forest* (1958) can also be seen to be repeating the same type of Japonist landscape.

**Simplification – an East Asian tradition**

When Nordic art was attracting international attention in the 20th century, there was a desire in the art world to emphasise originality, pure nature and primal forces. East Asian art was also described in the same manner. It was observed that Nordic art resonated strongly with the principles and aesthetics of Japanese art. In this respect, it diverged greatly from the relationship between ‘old’ European cradles of culture and Japonisme. In Western art, the ideal of simplification became dominant in the late 19th century through the influence of popular Japanese woodcuts: these were sold and collected, and many Nordic artists acquired them for their homes. Katagamis, Japanese stencils used for fabric printing, were hung on walls. Alfred William Finch, a Belgian-born Englishman who moved to Finland in 1897, advocated a simplistic style. As an internationally influential artist, he introduced Finns to the new theories of Neo-Impressionism and structural, pointillist painting. Finch was a pioneer in ceramic art, and the Iris factory he founded with Louis Sparre in Porvoo in 1897 operated until 1904. Finch continued as a ceramics teacher at the School of Applied Arts in the Ateneum building, and thus passed his knowledge of ceramics on to his students. His highly simplified, unique pottery

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was heavily linked to Japanese ceramics, with which he was well acquainted. Finch wanted to tap into a simple, timeless design language. His influence on the Finnish art world in the 20th century was significant as a ceramic artist, teacher and artist.

One of the great questions of the 1890s was how far the artist could break away from imitating nature. In general, Japonisme was predominantly rich in woodwork, Chinese-style porcelain items and ornamental lacquered Edo art, which encouraged luxurious ornamentation and the saturation of colour. It is important to note, however, that the same phenomenon of Japonisme also brought about the exact opposite trend in works reflecting the bare ascetic and spontaneity of the Zen Buddhist tradition.

Another important factor in breaking free of the tradition of imitating nature was the development and diversification of Finnish art. The new ideals of the era of early Modernism led many artists to experiment with the applied arts, in addition to painting. The ideal of the total artwork, combined with Nordic Japonisme, created a unique situation where artists embraced a new, holistic, simplified aesthetic more avidly than in other Western countries and developed it in relation to visual art and design. Everyday aesthetics and increasingly simplified interiors with light colours and natural materials, as well as paintings, graphics and wall tapestries, created a tranquil and simple environment to work in. According to the example set by artists, this new kind of environment also started to find favour among the middle classes. Everyday aesthetics and utility and practicality reached their peak in the Nordic countries in the 1950s. The ideal of simplification, which can be seen as a manifestation of the similarity between Nordic and Japanese art, found a permanent home in Scandinavia, and fruitful interaction has continued to this day with regards to both visual arts and design.

The deep acceptance of Japonisme in the visual arts led to new artistic experiments, processes and technical innovations. Through an older-generation artist like Helene Schjerfbeck, we can see how the process of becoming acquainted with Japanese art and aesthetics was enduring and profound. Schjerfbeck was one of many who was deeply affected by Japanese art. She found Kitagawa Utamaro’s woodcuts of geishas and graphic katagamis particularly interesting, and returned to them many times during her long career. Her artistic process, oriented towards a modernist style which began in the 1890s and which she called ‘a path to synthesis’, coincided with her years as a teacher at the Ateneum’s drawing and

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Her early-20th-century works were largely built upon the ideal of simplification; sophisticated composition; the variance between the opacity of layers of colour and a thicker impasto; and a muted colour scale. Emphasising emptiness and space represented the ideal of simplicity that began to appear in Western visual culture, especially from the 20th century onwards. This ideal of simplicity was highlighted in certain ascetic paintings and, in the Nordic countries, especially in the works Schjerfbeck painted from 1902 onwards in Hyvinkää. Although Schjerfbeck is best known for her portraits, she often worked on landscapes, especially when she was seeking new inspiration and a change of direction. During her greatest artistic crisis, in 1894, Schjerfbeck painted many landscapes on her last overseas trip to Italy, and she continued to return to landscapes every now and then throughout her career. This was true of the time when she lived in Ekenäs (Tammisaari), where she was inspired by the trees and the local scenery. Schjerfbeck’s first observations in Ekenäs were the trunks of luxuriant trees: ‘...the tall leafy woods with firm, soft contours rest above the city...’

Her bright, structural landscapes are also reminiscent of Paul Cézanne’s works, which she admired throughout the 20th century. Cézanne was also deeply influenced by Japanese aesthetics and used Japonist references in many of his landscapes, for instance in the composition of the Mont Sainte-Victoire series. Schjerfbeck’s influence on the next generation of artists can perhaps be most clearly seen in paintings by Einar Ilmoni, one of her many students at the Ateneum. Simplified, harmonious works, such as The Island (1910–11) and Pine (undated), are constructed with soft, sweeping brushstrokes, and his broken brown-grey palette exudes the same Modernist

Einar Ilmoni, Pine, undated, oil on canvas, 26cm x 35.1cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

12 Helene Schjerfbeck’s letter to Einar Reuter, 3 July 1918. Collection Helene Schjerfbeck. Archive Collections, Åbo Akademi University, Turku.
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Style as his teacher’s paintings. The aesthetic solutions in the works can also be linked to Zen Buddhism. The composition of the surface of the image is based on clear areas, such as the rock and the pine tree in the foreground, or the obliquely leaning, single tree on the rocky shore in The Island, which refer to Japonist means of expression. This emphasis on empty space, individual trees and the overarching aesthetics of silence and simplification are particularly characteristic of Ilmoni’s works. The stark beauty of the landscape was re-interpreted many times throughout the 20th century. Previously popular lush lake views were joined by rugged and barren rocky landscapes. Anitra Lucander’s Stony Moor (1957) reveals a new kind of landscape in which the entire foreground is dominated by a rocky slope with just a few trees. An interest in the form and nature of stones in Abstract art fascinated many artists. Japanese artist Key Sato’s Birth of Stones (1958) and Erkki Heikkilä’s Northern Marshland (1962) and Moraine (1961) take the subject further and dedicate themselves to the surface and appearance of the stones.
The power and silence of winter landscapes

At the end of the 19th century, a typical subject of Nordic art, the winter landscape, was perceived internationally as a new and more ‘original’ and significant topic than before. Inspired by Japanese woodcuts, French artists such as Claude Monet and Paul Gauguin also began to paint winter themes. Both artists had strong connections to the Nordic region: Monet visited Norway in the winter of 1895 to paint the Kolsås mountain and the surrounding winter village landscape, while Gauguin was married to a Danish woman, Mette Gad, and lived for some time in Denmark. While he was there he painted many winter-themed works. It is known that, on his return from Tahiti in 1893, Gauguin inspired the Finnish artists Väinö Blomstedt and Pekka Halonen to work with winter subjects when they were his students in Paris.14

Nordic artists’ strong contribution to the international art field was the result of diligent and deliberate action. Studying and working with artists in Paris was a very important factor in the Nordic art world. Highlighting the specific nature of different countries’ national culture had become a central goal for many artists in Europe and, especially in the Nordic countries, world exhibitions that focused on the culture of exotic countries led artists to reflect more deeply on their own country’s cultural roots. Raising the profile of the identity and culture of one’s own nation, and differentiating it from other countries, was a clear mission for politically-conscious artists. In Finland and Norway in particular, as Nordic countries that had not yet achieved independence, an emphasis on personal art was especially important. Nordic countries emphasised originality and primacy, as well as the art born of the purity of nature, and this narrative also ran through the way that art from East Asia was portrayed. Here, too, Nordic art resonates strongly with the principles and aesthetics of Japonisme. Pekka Halonen,

for instance, was a conscious admirer of Japanese art, and if he thought he was successful in his work, he was happy to say that it had a ‘Japanese vision’.15

The uniqueness of Lapland’s spacious landscapes and the admiration of its nature, a phenomenon known as Lapponism, prevailed from the 1920s through to the 1940s.16 The depiction of empty, spacious scenes became a new landscape theme, and Lapland’s nature provided the silence and space that many artists sought. Aimo Kanerva made his first trips to Vuokatti in the Sotkamo region of Lapland after the Second World War, in 1948. Kanerva said that he needed ‘something’ for his works, and that everything that had bottled up inside him burst out in an eruption of ‘colour works’. Einar Reuter, a forester and artist, and Schjerfbeck’s biographer, heard about Kanerva’s plans to travel to Vuokatti via Kajaani and invited him to visit his home. Kanerva thus became acquainted with Reuter’s remarkable collection. With works by Schjerfbeck and Tyko Sallinen in his mind, he then headed for Lapland, where he painted his landscapes mostly in watercolour.17 Many of Per Stenius’s interpretations of the snowy landscape are also from Lapland. His Trees in Lapland (1959), like Gunnar Pohjola’s Arctic Landscape (1964), shows the landscape in all its rugged simplicity.

Winter scenery and views were an important topic for many modern artists, and they were significant for 20th-century Japanese artists too. The concept of the ‘valuation of emptiness’ in Japanese art is largely based on the meditative state encouraged by Buddhism and Taoism and is especially manifested in nature, and the goal was to incorporate this

into landscape art. Perhaps the most famous painting in Japan which expresses this concept of emptiness is Sesshu’s (1420–1506) Landscape of Broken Ink. The use of empty space invokes silence and concentration – as if the image has removed all movement and disorder, and abandoned everything unnecessary. Many Finnish artists sought to do the same with their winter landscapes. Eero Nelimarkka’s Winter Landscape, from 1943, emphasises empty space as an effective device in the painting, while the horizontal shape and frosted colour scheme highlight the same sense of silence and lack of movement.

Winter landscapes have always been an integral part of East Asian art. Japanese art emphasised the change brought about by the snowy landscape and the experience of silence. Kotaro Migishi’s decorative Garden with Snow (1928) and Seiichi Yuno’s Landscape (1960) are based on intimate, snowy close-ups of natural forms. The silence of the snow, the softness of the shapes and the dim light are concepts that Nordic artists understand and incorporate into their paintings, as with Swedish painter Tom Krestesen’s Hommage à la nature (1959) and Per Stenius’s Slope of the Lake Inarinjärvi (1962). Kanerva was also fond of the more traditional winter forest, and his Winter Spruce Trees (1969) adopts the same kind of close-up view in featuring the rhythmic patterns in a spruce tree. Many landscape paintings by Kanerva, who travelled in China, can also be seen as

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compositions. He wanted to see landscapes as a theme that contained everything, and this informed his thinking when he constructed them:

_‘A wide wooded view opens up before me. I want to make an unbounded painting that contains the whole view, reaching beyond what I’m able to see. I compose the work, move bundles of wood, catch a cloud from behind my back and remove the distracting factors. I want to infuse my work with the atmosphere of the whole locality.’_ 19

Winter landscapes also include many paintings that focus on the particularities and details of winter. Erkki Heikkilä’s _Ice Flowers_ (1961), even though it confronts the viewer with a completely abstract ‘icy blue permafrost’ surface, can still be considered a winter landscape. Landscapes covered with white snow attract extreme simplification, where the works depict almost intangible views of a snowy landscape. Reino Hietanen’s _Winter Landscape_ (1984) creates a starkly beautiful snowy experience with a roughly textured surface and a palette of delicate cold blue, white and grey. Snowy landscapes are also the base for completely abstract

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19 Kanerva, _Omakuva_, cover.
works, such as Kimmo Kaivanto’s *View to the South-East* (1962) and Maija Lavonen’s rug *Frosty Morning* (1978). The winter landscape is not therefore a uniform group of works: rather, winter views in modern art include a variety of approaches. Thus one of the most famous themes in landscape art continues to be renewed, especially in Nordic and Japanese works.