Making Art’s Milestones

Gill Crabbe, FNG Research

Reimagining iconic artworks from the past has been a continuous thread in creating the story of art. Director General of the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, Susanna Pettersson, discusses with Gill Crabbe the vision for the exhibition on iconic artworks she has curated, which travels from Stockholm to Helsinki this summer, and how this wide-ranging thematic show was put together.

What turns an artwork into an iconic artwork? Who defines a work as iconic, and how does such status evolve, endure or dissolve over time? These are questions that have distilled in the mind of Susanna Pettersson since she started out as a doctoral student in the 1990s studying the history of museums and their collections; questions that matured over the decades as her career path took her from curator to Director of the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki, and now Director General of Sweden’s Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, to bear fruit in the exhibition ‘Inspiration – Contemporary Art & Classics’.

Nowadays it is acknowledged that these are questions that can only be partly answered, through offering perspectives made conscious in a given place and time. But when the era of establishing museums began in Europe in the 19th century the (his)story of art was instilled with definite parameters, parameters that determined the art-historical canon and persisted in such a way that it is only relatively recently that they are being challenged, reinterpreted, and augmented.

‘It really started all those years ago in London when I sat in the National Art Library of the V&A, reading old publications describing what was appreciated in early 19th-century art, with their clear detailed recommendations as what to keep in mind when travelling in Dresden, Berlin, Munich etc. So this research laid the ground for the conception of this exhibition,’ says Pettersson.

In putting together an exhibition on such a vast theme, the task facing the curators of presenting material that can be approached on many levels by a diverse audience, from the interested ‘general public’ to the artistic and academic community, was a complex one. ‘Inspiration – Contemporary Art & Classics’ achieves this in a number of ways: through mapping the key museums emerging in Europe in the 19th century, analysing their collections and the criteria for acquisitions, and tracing their influences on other museums, such as the Ateneum Art Museum itself; through pairing iconic art-historical works with contemporary artists’ reinterpretations of their themes; and through commissioning new works by contemporary artists to underline key ideas in the exhibition. An accompanying catalogue broadens out the contextual research, with essays by a range of international experts, and focus interviews spotlight specific contemporary artists in the show.

With such a wide research remit, the curatorial team was necessarily international, with Pettersson expanding the show to include the Stockholm edition (February to May 2020) following her move to the Nationalmuseum in 2018, as well as continuing to work with her successor in Helsinki Marja Sakari and her former colleague Sointu Fritze at the Ateneum Art Museum among others. In addition, early on in her research, she invited the independent curator James Putnam, author of Art and Artifact (2001), a key book on the museum as
medium, to research and develop the theme alongside her, as well as help select works by contemporary artists to match with the historical material – an approach he pioneered in the 1990s when he was curator at the British Museum.

Pettersson started out by researching the emergence of the concept of the museum as a container for presenting Europe’s art-historical canon and those three key centres that were particularly influential in the development from the Nordic perspective. ‘In Berlin, we had the Altes Museum and the art historian Gustav Waagen, a leading figure in the field in the 19th century,’ she explains. ‘In Munich – which was known then as the Athens on the Isar – thanks to the hunger for culture and the ambition to establish museums and collections, the Glyptothek and Pinakothek were grand examples. As a third centre I chose to focus on London: the V&A and the link from German museum culture to London was, of course, through Prince Albert. With the South Kensington Museum (the V&A’s original name) the plan was to use a German museum architect Gottfried Semper but this proved too expensive. It highlights why Germany was a hotspot for museums in 19th century because they had the building knowledge, the architects and the encyclopaedic art histories. Leo von Klenze, who designed the Glyptothek, was even invited from Munich to St Petersburg to help with the interior design of the Hermitage. So there was a tiny network of specialists, then others attached themselves to this network,’ she continues. Among these was the Finnish Art Society, whose Chair Carl Gustav Estlander initiated the building of the Ateneum Art Museum, which opened in 1888 – prior to that their collection had been spread across six private apartments in Helsinki.

‘In the Helsinki exhibition, the biggest item in the show is in fact the museum building itself,’ Pettersson points out, ‘as the canon of art history can be seen sculpted within its façade, with three portraits above the main entrance (Bramante, Phidias and Raphael), and smaller sculptures telling the story of the arts, from painting, architecture, and sculpture – one of these is a portrait of the German architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel.’ This strategy follows many museums, such as London’s V&A, the Louvre in Paris and Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. ‘So we should be aware when looking at the stories of art history that they are a mix of what the buildings tell us, what the collections reveal and how the histories of art histories have been written, who are highlighted, who have served as icons.’

So what was Pettersson’s strategy for selecting historic iconic artworks to show in conjunction with contemporary responses to them?

‘First, I drafted the skeleton for the art-historical material, based on the appreciation and ideals of the 19th-century museum world: who were the key artists of the period, which were the important collections to look at. Then we could create the base for the rest of the show through those milestones, from Laocoön through to Rodin’s The Thinker.’

Having chosen three key centres of 19th-century museum history as her focus, Pettersson was then faced with a problem – how to highlight their buildings within the exhibition as important physical spaces that were telling the story of European art? A particularly innovative approach she took was in commissioning new artworks from the Berlin-based Finnish photographic artist Ola Kolehmainen.
‘Ola’s role as an artist was pivotal,’ says Pettersson. ‘He agreed to join the team, working with James and I. Initially the three of us travelled together to the sites and explored them in depth, then, based on our discussions on site, Ola revisited them, working independently to create his interpretations.’

The result is a series of nine photographic polyptychs, that are threaded throughout the entire floorplan of the exhibition. ‘When walking through the Munich Glyptothek for example and thinking about the history of the building and the sculptures in it, you might think of making an illustrative image of the site,’ says Pettersson, ‘but Ola chose to focus on the dreamlike quality of the interior space with its clean white walls housing works on mythical themes. In Museum VIII (Barberini Faun and Kouros) you see just part of one of the iconic Kouros sculptures on the right-hand edge of the image, because instead Ola chose to focus on a general view that conveyed this dreamlike quality. This ethereal atmosphere of the space itself is not something one would have associated with the site before the building was bombed in the Second World War, when the walls had been colourfully painted. In Ola’s picture he shows for me a representation of the different layers of the history of the building.’

The photographer’s images play different roles in the show, Pettersson explains.

‘Museum XII (Altes Museum) reminds us of one of the key centres, Berlin, and Gustav Waagen’s ambition of creating complete collections, from the antique to the present. Then Museum IX (Sir John Soane Staircase) is represented because early on in our research it became obvious that private collectors played an important role in the history of museums, so Soane’s story is a good example.’ Kolehmainen’s image of the London house museum created by the 19th-century architect, collector and educator, is of an in-between space that marks it out as somebody’s home with its patterned stair carpet and the portrait busts in niches. ‘Soane wanted to create a complete comprehensive collection by acquiring both copies and originals. He used his collection as teaching aids for the students at the Royal Academy of Arts,’ Pettersson explains.

Besides Kolehmainen’s contemporary reinterpretations of key museum spaces, perhaps the most striking element in the show is the range of contemporary artists who have reimagined specific iconic themes of the art-historical canon, including biblical motifs such as the Pieta, The Last Supper, the Madonna; the allure of ancient ruins; death, still-life vanitas, to name a few. Here the curators have created stimulating dialogues, which offered the Finnish National Gallery a wonderful opportunity to showcase some of its own iconic treasures alongside the responses by contemporary artists from around the world. (The Stockholm version included reference works from the Stockholm collections – from the plaster casts to Perugino, Pieter Brueghel the Younger, Fragonard, Goya and others.) So in Helsinki we find the Sinebrychoff Art Museum’s prized Lucretia, by Lucas Cranach, paired with British artist Nancy Fouts’ witty comment on gender in creating two alternative diptychs of Cranach’s Adam and Eve (Adam and Adam, and Eve and Eve, 2014) painted in a style that is meticulously faithful to the Northern Renaissance master. We find an original set of Goya’s etching series, Disasters of War, from 1892 – again from the Sinebrychoff Art Museum – on a wall
facing Jake & Dinos Chapmans’ treatment of another original edition of Goya’s series, with their own hand-coloured overdrawings added (Disasters of War IV, 2001), that offers a chilling and multidimensional comment on our attitudes to brutality today. In another room, the Ateneum’s copies of antique classical sculptures donated by Finnish collector Hermann Antell, and the Sinebrychoff’s Capricci of Ruins, by the 18th-century landscape artist Nicola Viso, are juxtaposed with Alexander Mihailovich’s Et in Arcadia Ego (2019), which, borrowing its title and composition from Poussin, updates the interest in the classical antique, showing modern archaeologists using cellphones and laptops to document a sculpture resurrected from an ancient tomb.

Elsewhere there are several takes on the Madonna, including Marina Abramović’s self-portrait with her former partner Ulay in their restaging of the Pieta (Pieta, Anima Mundi, 1983–2002), and Jenny Saville’s Black Mass (after Leonardo), from 2008. In the same room, Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper is reconfigured digitally and then rendered in charcoal in Hugo Wilson’s drawing (Last Supper, 2017). The same subject is gracefully implied in Susanne Gottberg’s Folded White (2012) in oil and pencil on wood. Here the work touches the viewer subliminally, the dimensions of the work echoing Leonardo’s, the emphasis on the solidity of the thick plank of wood as the support creating a haptic resonance with the table in the subject matter, and the depiction of the table without any of the figures in the drama but just simply the white tablecloth, providing an understated yet immediate stimulus for the imagination. ‘For me it is one of the most important works in the show,’ says Pettersson, ‘because it is so simple and so strong and the combination of the materiality of the wood and the subtle use of paint is fantastic.’

This brings us on to a question that Pettersson asked from the very beginning: does one need to know all about art history in order to enjoy the exhibition? Her answer is an emphatic No. ‘We are exposed to so many thousands of iconic historical images in our everyday lives, through advertising media and the internet. Images such as the Mona Lisa for example, which have very clear resonances for everyone.’ Here Pettersson is referring to Jeff Koons’ Gazing Ball (da Vinci Mona Lisa), from 2015, where the artist has placed a reflective sphere onto a reproduction of Leonardo’s celebrated portrait so that the viewers are seen projected from the gallery space into the picture, reminding us just how much of a role audience popularity plays in the iconic status of a work.

‘At one end we have strong emotionally confronting works, such as Matt Collishaw’s photographic series from 2011, depicting in traditional vanitas style the last meals of convicted prisoners (Last Supper on Death Row), and on the other hand we have the Russian artist duo Recycle Group, whose rubbish bin plays with reliefs from the antique and was an audience favourite in the Stockholm show,’ Pettersson continues. ‘It is important the exhibition has components that one can easily relate to, that perhaps have a lower threshold but then again works that require a lot from the viewer. Recycle Group’s work is easily
approachable because we recognise the form and we become curious – asking what’s the story, what does the bin do here? And the more we look, the deeper the work takes us.’

Given that pairing art-historical works with contemporary artworks formed the basic structure for the theme, for the Helsinki show the role of the FNG’s Archive Collections and Library material proved crucial in filling the gaps where historical works were not available. The library itself had already created the context for the collection at its early stages – the books and portfolios etc that were acquired belonged to the bigger story, the story of art. There was an acute awareness from the start of the exhibition project of the need to tell the story of how Finland constructed the art-historical canon when it set out to create its own museum, the Ateneum. ‘Carl Gustav Estlander, who was Chair of the Finnish Art Society from 1878–96, was following Gustav Waagen’s ideas on how to tell the story of art,’ Pettersson explains. ‘He too wanted to tell the “complete story” and Estlander knew there would not be the funds to purchase Europe’s grand master works.’

‘So we planned to show how Europe’s iconic pieces were reproduced in the 19th-century literature; which images were shown, which art-historical publications circulated at the time, such as De bildande konsternas historia (1867), written by Estlander himself.’ Archival material presented in vitrines throughout the exhibition thus plays a key role. For example, the vitrine in the room with contemporary works referencing the Last Supper contains documents from the FNG Archive Collections and Library, such as a period photograph of Leonardo’s fresco in Milan and a 1906 copy of Rembrandt’s version.

Another solution to the lack of iconic material in creating its art-historical collection was to commission Finnish artists to paint copies of must-have works. ‘The Finnish Art Society and its Drawing School had started to award travel grants for students and they drew up a list of 1,200 works to be copied from the most important European collections,’ Pettersson explains. ‘So it’s interesting to see where the focus areas were.’ In fact, she adds, they were ‘singing the melody of the time’, as can be seen in the last room in the Helsinki exhibition, which includes works from the State Copy Collection 1890–1912 painted by Finland’s artists of the period, such as Magnus Enckell’s 1895 Angel (copy after Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper fresco, 1495–97, in the Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan. Photographer unknown.

Donation collection of the Department of Art History at the University of Helsinki. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery
Magnus Enckell, Angel (detail copy after Leonardo da Vinci’s painting Annunciation), 1895, oil on canvas, 100cm x 100cm
State Copy Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

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In tracing the trajectory of the first museums and collections, and the immense impact they have had on visual culture, a vital element in the show was to include contemporary works that challenge the art-historical canon to tell a wider story. ‘In the 19th century they wanted desperately to tell the one definitive story of the history of art,’ says Pettersson, ‘and today we know definitely it is not the story of white Western men as it was told back

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Helene Schjerfbeck, John Chambers (copy after Hans Holbein the Younger), 1894, oil on wood, 65cm x 47.5cm
State Copy Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

Helene Schjerfbeck’s suggestion to the Finnish Art Society, dated 3 March 1893, regarding copies to be painted in St Petersburg and Vienna.
Archives of the Finnish Art Society 1846–1939. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery

da Vinci’s Annunciation), and the young Helene Schjerfbeck’s 1892 Pope Innocent X (copy after Velázquez), as well as her 1894 copy of Holbein’s portrait of John Chambers, painted during her travels in Vienna. These are shown together with archival documentation, such as Schjerfbeck’s letter to the Finnish Art Society in 1893 regarding works to be copied in St Petersburg and Vienna. Today these copies have accrued a valuable and poignant status, as many of them were dispersed across the country in the early 20th century when copies had gone out of fashion, to be used as educational tools in schools, then the ensuing Civil War saw them destroyed, slashed or lost.

"In the 19th century they wanted desperately to tell the one definitive story of the history of art," says Pettersson, "and today we know definitely it is not the story of white Western men as it was told back..."
Yinka Shonibare CBE, *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001, mannequin, cotton costume, slippers, swing seat, ropes and oak, 330cm x 350cm x 220cm
Tate, London
Photo: ©Tate

Antoine Watteau, *The Swing*, 1712, oil on canvas, 95cm x 73cm
Hjalmar Under Donation, Finnish National Gallery / Sinebrychoff Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

© Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen
then.’ Here the inclusion of British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare’s deeply ironic take on Fragonard’s *The Swing* – a quintessential example of French colonial hedonism – is paired with the Sinebrychoff Art Museum’s earlier version on the same traditional romantic theme by Antoine Watteau. In his arresting reinterpretation Shonibare’s mannequin is dark-skinned, headless, her Rococo-style dress made of African Dutch wax fabric. As the artist’s interview in the catalogue points out, ‘In his art Shonibare is constantly undermining and exploring the structures of power’. And Shonibare himself adds: ‘Unfortunately the legacy of the colonial era means that discrimination has not gone away entirely, movements like Black Lives Matter and other forms of activism mean it’s absolutely necessary for those issues to manifest in cultural productions.’

Thus the exhibition brings a timely and urgent call to keep challenging the established canon of art, to open up perspectives and enrich it, especially through the diversity of culture that exists today. ‘It is really important that we collect and document a multifaceted culture,’ says Pettersson. ‘Me and my colleagues are striving to make the collections shine in a more diverse and richer way.’

So what about her thoughts on the iconic museums of today? ‘The grand museums are in their own league and there is always a lot to explore and learn. But I would possibly be looking for answers from the point of view of museum experiences,’ she muses, ‘let’s say the intimate experience of house museums, such as the Mingeikan Folk Crafts Museum – a pocket size museum in Tokyo’s suburbs – with handwritten labels in the displays. It’s not one of those exhibition-machine museums producing audience-drawing blockbusters. It’s a silent place, where you can really contemplate the pieces.’ She pauses. ‘And then there is Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright’s fantastic building that is now a house museum in Pennsylvania. The world is not the same after you leave it.’
