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From Delectation to Degeneration: Splashes of Chromophobia in Enckelliana

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Society speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say, denounces the powers it exercises...

– Michel Foucault

‘What on earth? Are we really at an exhibition of the artist Magnus Enckell?’, exclaimed Kasimir Leino, critic for *Uusi Suometar*, in May 1909. For a few years now, the painter had delved into colour, and reactions were ambiguous. One of the main works exhibited was a portrait of veteran artist Albert Edelfelt. ‘Its mottled background disturbs us’, the critic pondered, ‘why splash greens and reds onto Edelfelt’s familiarly somber features, and add violet, even green onto his greying hair? We consider such folly a trivial nod to recent fashions [...]’¹

Some four years later ‘R-o.’ of *Pohjalainen* berated the ‘excessive refinement and delectation which risks becoming rather sugary. Thus a work like *Parisian variety show* is downright sickly sweet [*äitelä* in Finnish].’² The colourful depiction might well be seen as capturing the essence of modernity in all its fleeting fancy, yet the verdict was grim.

The reception of Enckell’s colour paintings seems particularly harsh when expressed by the era’s most respected connoisseurs. Edvard Richter of *Helsingin Sanomat* praised, in a 1917 article, Enckell’s earlier oeuvre as ‘peerless products of linear strength and plastic feeling’, but he continued: ‘What is there to say about Enckell’s paintings in this new exhibition? In all honesty, they are good. However – they are good because Mrs. H’s portrait is finely drafted and the portrait of Mrs. C with son is masterfully composed. Were I to say anything more, it would not be in earnest.’³

Even so, Richter could not refrain from adding: ‘Their colours don’t delight my eyes, they express nothing but a rather excessively bright red, an immoderate working of colours, which have lost their sense of freshness.’

1 Kasimir Leino. ‘Magnus Enckellin näyttely’, *Uusi Suometar*, No. 120, 29 May 1909.

2 R-o. ‘Ryhmänäyttely Ateneumissa’, *Pohjalainen*, 14 April 1913.

3 Edvard Richter [E. R-r.]. ‘Septemin näyttely’, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 11 February 1917.



Magnus Enckell, *The Variety Theatre in Paris*, 1912, oil on canvas, 100.5cm x 66.5cm

Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



Men of colour

You are no longer of the ancients, there quivers in you the soft bliss of degeneration. But how lovely you are.

– Elsa Soini, *Uni* ('Dream', 1930)

Colour seems to have been particularly unfathomable when linked with representations of the male body. The critic for *Björneborgstidningen* deemed Enckell's works a disappointment; he described *Awakening Faun* (1914) as 'an undeniably faultless study of body form'⁴ – that is all he had to say about this highly sensual work. The critic for *Åbo Underrättelser* reproached the 'strong tendency toward a mannerism that strikes one as sugary sweet'.⁵ Richter detected 'a smell of perfume'; *Awakening Faun* was for him 'sickly sweet', while the skin tone of *The Dying Adonis* (1915) suggested a 'pathological glow'.⁶

It is symptomatic that the faults of the works are localised at the senses of taste and smell – and skin surface. Sickly sweet (*äitelä*) is an interesting term: while denoting sappy sweetness, it also connotes a process of decomposition. Perhaps the real stumbling block was not

colour *per se*, but its metonymical relation with corporeality, gender and sexuality? In Finland, these were imbued with a robust ethos of nationalism.

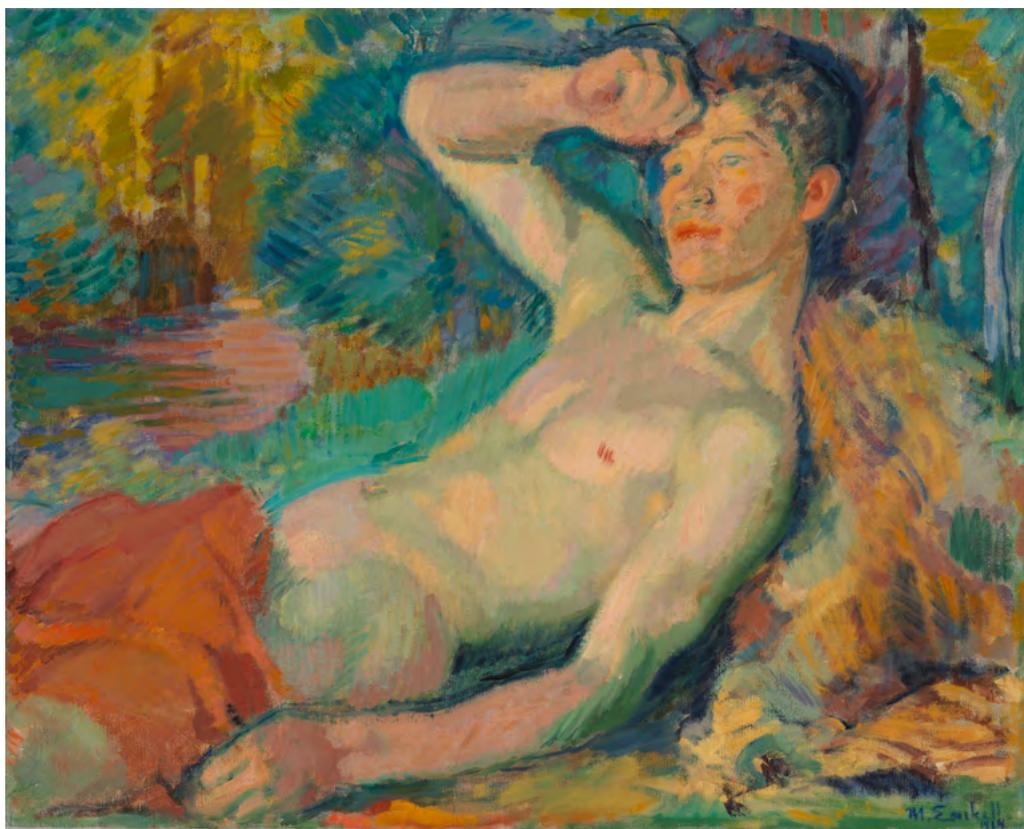
Through depicting the male body as 'coloured' – as a delectably sensual, desirable and passive (vulnerable) object – Enckell placed masculinity in a dubious light. At the same time, women were at least potentially afforded the dubious role of active gazer. Even worse was the suggestion of homoeroticism during an era of strict criminalisation and/or pathologising of desire between men. Indeed, the situation must have been exacerbated by the ambiguous nature of a 'cover story', which – not unlike the patch covering/revealing the loins of the *Awakening Faun* – had many critics seeing red.

Although Enckell's art can hardly be accused of or lauded for its primitivism, there was in these sensuous male musings something atavistic, yearning for ambivalent alterity, which would have troubled contemporaries – unlike the classical heritage in whose name the bodies

4 'Septem', *Björneborgstidningen*, 14 May 1915. An interesting parallel is provided by *The Awakening* (1894), which when first presented, was also discussed in a belittling manner as 'a mere study'. Harri Kalha. "Siellä on taas poika!" Magnus Enckellin varhaistöiden aikalaisreseptiosta', in Juha-Heikki Tihinen (ed.), *Keskellä marginaalia – Riitta Konttisen juhlakirja*. Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia 33. Helsinki: Taidehistorian seura, 2006, (185–98) 188–89.

5 Lalage. 'Konstföreningens 25 årsexposition', *Åbo Underrättelser*, 1 April 1915.

6 An in-depth reading of the transgressive nature of colour in *The Dying Adonis* is provided by Harri Kalha in *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*. Historiallisia tutkimuksia 227. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2005, 80, 171–200.



Magnus Enckell, *Awakening Faun*, 1914, oil on canvas, 65.5cm x 81cm
Hoving Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



were posing. The locus of these men of colour is the intimate sphere: from the embrace of the forest and fantastic landscapes of the mind to the more prosaic bathrooms and bedrooms... While this type of intimacy was part and parcel of the representation of femininity, it was at odds with masculinity. Thus most critics waxed platonic, lauding the 'spiritual' nature of his earlier depictions of male bodies – those self-enclosed youths who seem to avoid the gaze and with it any sensual associations. The early works provided for an apt moral narrative, as will soon become evident.

Distaste to delight – and back

Are we dealing with pathology, or joy of colour – who can say.
– Edvard Richter, 1921

There were, to be sure, some sympathetic accounts. Nils Wasastjerna's view of *Awakening Faun* in 1915 is exceptionally abundant: 'The glow of colours and fairytale atmosphere the artist has given this painting, wherein a reclining faun, taking a rest in a verdant forest, straightens his limbs, is fabulous. [...] Marked by a high level of colouristic beauty, it displays the secure determination and excellent technical execution of a mature artist.'⁷

Even more generous was 'J.L.'s praise, in 1918, of *Man and Swan*, for its 'indisputable painterly values', 'strong and fluid beauty of form', 'manly vigour of colour', and 'masculine *joie de vivre*'. The review culminated in sentiments that are rarely used in the Finnish context:

⁷ Nils Wasastjerna. 'Septem utställning', *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 28 March 1915.



**Magnus Enckell, *Bacchantis*, 1919,
 oil on canvas, 118.5cm x 84cm
 Private Collection**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Janne Mäkinen



'I doubt the male body has ever been painted in a lovelier manner here in Finland.'⁸ Masculinity and loveliness – they just were not compatible terms in those days.

Another painting, *Torso*, inspired in J.L. further enthusiasm: 'Here, too, the depiction of a youthful body invokes a rare dose of dreamy strength and steel, while the body's noble form seems to fade into faint, wondrously beautiful reflections of light, with the painting as a whole rather suggesting sublime, highly idiosyncratic colour poetics [...]. In the artist's generous oeuvre, sophisticated taste and civilisation have now merged with a strong sense of fresh vitality, achieving a noble and individual, immediate art that revels in the joys of creativity.'

Such overflowing praise was indeed scarce. Richter, for example, reacted bleakly: '*Man and Swan*, if anything, boasts a beautiful design, but the colour tends to gaudy flashes, which leave the undersigned indifferent. It doesn't speak to my emotions, or strike that fresh, manly chord that I desire.'⁹

It seems odd, in the case of this particular painting – brimming as it is with a vitality that

verges on athleticism – to bemoan a lack of freshness or manliness. Tellingly enough, Richter stresses subjectivity: *his* emotions, in an era where critics tended to consider their objectivity a given.

Colour could be a conundrum even when devoid of direct corporeal reference. 'In his landscapes', Richter ruminated in 1913, Enckell 'seems in exorbitant pursuit of a graceful charm that strikes one as excessively soft, and all this seems odd in light of the masculine impact of the artist's earlier work.'¹⁰ Onni Okkonen detected in the landscapes 'something sweet and frail of mind'; the Paris views were marked by an 'excessive, well-nigh effeminate grace'.¹¹

Interestingly, in 1912 Signe Tandefelt – a Finnish-Swede and a woman – commended the very works shunned by Richter and Okkonen: 'How charming these small landscapes are! [...] One can hardly imagine a more apt representation of the lighthearted atmosphere

8 J. L., 'Magnus Enckell. Taidenäyttelyt', *Uusi Päivä*, 25 September 1918. Architect and critic Sigurd Frosterus, known as a spokesman for post-Impressionistic colour painting, wrote abundantly about the painting (though not extolling its sensuality) in an essay whose ambivalent tones I have analysed elsewhere. Kalha, *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*, 151–65.

9 Richter, Edvard [E. R-r.]. 'M. Enckellin näyttely', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 6 October 1918.

10 Edvard Richter [E. R-r.]. 'Septemin näyttely', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 16 March 1913.

11 Cit. Olli Valkonen. *Maalaustaiteen murros Suomessa 1908–1914. Uudet suuntaukset maalaustaiteessa, taidearvostelussa ja taidekirjoittelussa*. Jyväskylä Studies in the Arts 6. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 1973, 93. The Finnish term for grace (*sulo* or *sulokkuus*) implies femininity; it derives from German *Anmut*, a term with distinct gender ideological connotations.

of Paris in the spring.¹² In 1917, she went on to muse: 'His colours are born as an expression of artistic inspiration, sprouting in an unforced manner from highly personal soil.'¹³ Special mention was given to a group of small, sketchy works: 'The small paintings exude a peculiar charm, a natural grace that artistically carries them to the level of Enckell's best paintings. How intelligently and quickly he has managed, with just a stroke or two, to give form to an artistic vision.'¹⁴

Two years later, Tandefelt marvelled at *Bacchantes*: 'I don't think it possible to extract any more of the momentary blink of life than that which the artist has achieved with these boys. The large figure, too, is succulently, vividly and firmly rendered.'¹⁵ She continued her review later, praising 'a painterly vigour and succulence that has rarely, if ever before, been seen in Finland. [...] The canvas bursts with a vitality and lushness that is rare in Nordic art. Brushwork is both sturdy and casual. One is left with a strong sense that the artist *felt* the colour he applied on the canvas.'¹⁶ Enckell's sensual investment is here seen as his *forté*, and his colourism, far from being a problem, comes off as the mark of an international master.¹⁷

The contrast with the humming and hawing of Finnish-speaking male critics is striking. In his review of 1918, Okkonen attempts to remain objective – to a point where he takes literal distance from the paintings, advising viewers 'to stop at the other end of the room and there, from a necessary distance, to inspect the works. I think that this way we may better access those painterly visions that become oddly frail, pale and mushy up close. From a distance, the effect is markedly more sturdy and strong, even somewhat masculine.'¹⁸

It seems symptomatic that Okkonen wishes to view the works from a safe distance – the logic of 'Impressionist' viewing notwithstanding. In contrast to the virilising distance is a host of effeminising attributes: '[T]he painter is enthralled by the beauty of colour, its lightness and grace, even, I might add, its prettiness. Colour is more detached, loose and light, hazy, whereas form seems sensitised, abruptly tense or nervously quivering.'

This gush of descriptive terms is striking; it is as if the tension of the art had been transposed onto the critic – at the same time, the anxious references to nervousness qualify the haziness of the art.

Towards degeneration?

It was Enckell's impact that ripped asunder our art.
– Painter Eero Järnefelt

It is, of course, possible to perceive qualitative differences within Enckell's oeuvre. One should, however, be wary of how tightly – albeit furtively – contemporary assessments intertwined

12 Tandefelt did make a qualification, in passing: 'This is not to say that one wouldn't miss the manly, almost austere element that is so solidly linked with the image we have of Mr. Enckell's art.' Signe Tandefelt. 'Konstutställning i Ateneum', *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 24 March 1912.

13 Signe Tandefelt. 'Konstutställning. Y. Ollila, M. Oinonen, M. Enckell', *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 4 November 1917.

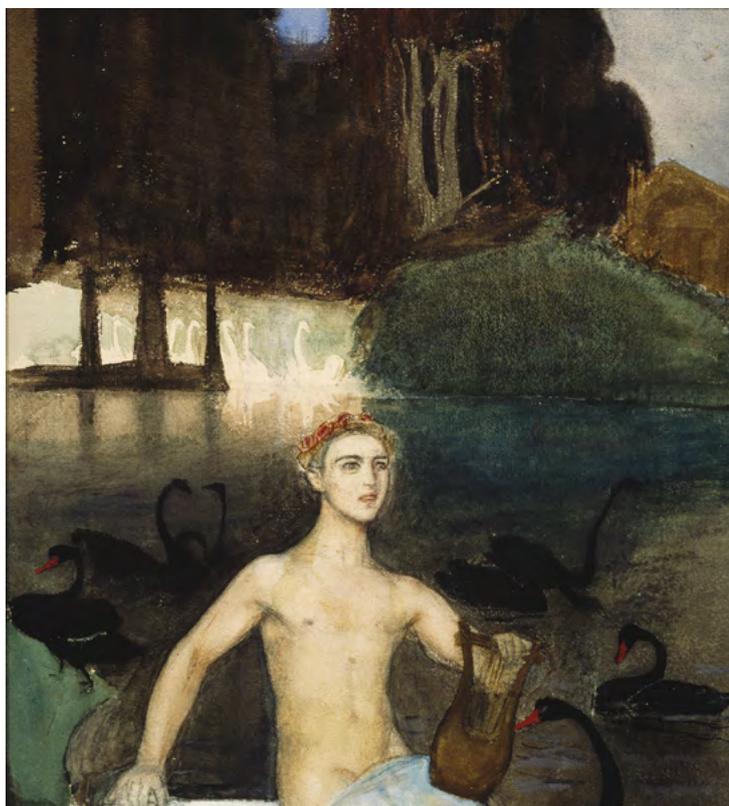
14 Tandefelt, 'Konstutställning. Y. Ollila, M. Oinonen, M. Enckell'. As an illustration, Tandefelt chose the watercolour *Seated Man*, depicting a naked man pictured from behind.

15 Signe Tandefelt. 'Höstsalongerna I', *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 21 September 1919.

16 Signe Tandefelt. 'Höstsalongerna II', *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 26 September 1919.

17 Tandefelt did note, in 1917, 'a sugary shine that isn't flattering', which shows that her stance was not unambiguous. Likewise, it should be noted that Richter and Okkonen's views on the 1919 collection were positive, albeit lacking the enthusiasm of Tandefelt. Their softened opinion may have been aided by a work called *Decorative panneau*, depicting a naked man and woman. An image of the painting was even published in *Uusi Suomi* (probably thanks to Okkonen), alongside a self-portrait by Gallen-Kallela. Interestingly enough, Tandefelt (21 September 1919) was not impressed by the said work; she detected in it the artificiality of 'stage lighting', although she recognised its 'healthy and natural [!] atmosphere'.

18 Onni Okkonen. 'Magnus Enckellin näyttely', *Uusi Suomi*, 15 September 1918.



Magnus Enckell, *Fantasy*, 1895, gouache, crayon and pencil on paper, 47cm x 44cm
Herman and Elisabeth Hallonblad Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



with gender and sexual norms, as well as nationalist ideology. Behind the uneasy wordings, hidden within a dialectic derived from classical aesthetics, there lurks a protectionist tendency and an almost degenerationist fear of the corruption of Finnish art. Since Enckell's art represented a dual perversion – with respect to both the nature of Man and the nature of Nation – it provided opportune soil for fantasies of degeneration.¹⁹

Among the most influential propagators of the narrative of decay was the aforementioned Okkonen – now in the role of professor of art history. In his important book *Suomen taiteen historia* (History of Finnish Art, 1945), he describes how Enckell 'after some manly and serious early works [...] seems to have fallen, after a trip to Italy, into the thralls of romanticism and sentimental symbolism. An example of classicist-tinged youth-reverie [*nuorukaishaaveilu*] is *Fantasy* [...]. A large painting named *Melancholy* shows a bizarre technical decline.'²⁰

The suggestion that an artist might be corrupted into a 'youth dreamer' is curious: is he a dreamy youth, or a man dreaming of youths? Still, the idea took root in art history; in Jaakko Puokka's book on Enckell (1949) corruption is caused not by Italy, but Paris, where the artist, caught in the clutches of 'decadent aestheticism', 'becomes

estranged from a fresh *joie de vivre*'.²¹ The dichotomy between the early, ascetic, and later, hedonistic Enckell is established with his colour works from the 1910s. This was fuelled by a nationalist paradigm as modernism was divided into the 'authentic' art of the November Group and the 'affectatious'²² art of the Septem Group.²³

What is striking about dichotomising of Enckell's oeuvre in hindsight is that the original reception of his early works was ambiguous enough. That the public were at odds with them is no surprise, but even professional accounts were rife with discord. *The Awakening* (1894) could be dismissed as an 'inappropriate study' and accounts abound with terms like obscurity, perversion, even disgust and depravation.²⁴ With the next generation, all this was forgotten: the oddness of symbolism was sublimated into a noble asceticism, a mirror image of later corruption. As seen above, Okkonen had already slated the colour paintings in his newspaper reviews, whereas he lauded the earlier works for carrying 'stylistic virtues of the

19 Prototypical narratives of decadence are found in Max Nordau, the 'father' of degeneration theory, but they also figure more temperately in Hippolyte Taine's *Philosophy of Art*, which was translated into Finnish by the modernist author L. Onerva in 1915. Kalha, *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*, 267–83.

20 Onni Okkonen. *Suomen taiteen historia*. Porvoo: WSOY, 1945, 180, 186.

21 'Beauty painting' (*kaunomaalaus*) is a peculiar reference to *beaux-arts*, i.e. Frenchness. Jaakko Puokka. *Magnus Enckell: Ihminen ja taiteilija*. Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia & Otava, 1949, 82; Kalha, *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*, 118–19, 272.

22 'Affectation' (lat. *afficere*, to affect or influence) was a negative term used to structure Finnish modernity, suggesting falseness and self-consciousness, as well as effeminate mannerisms.

23 Kalha, 'Siellä on taas poika!', 195; Harri Kalha. 'Kuvataide (epä)siveellisyysden käsitesfäärissä: kaksi tapausta', in T. Pulkkinen and A. Sorainen (eds.), *Siveellisyydestä seksuaalisuuteen: Poliittisen käsitteen historia*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2011, (240–77) 274. The dichotomy Sallinen/Enckell is a reflection of the Gallen-Kallela/Edelfelt prototype; on the Enckell canon as a product of national (re)construction, see Kalha, *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*, 261–66, 274–88.

24 For a more extensive analysis of the reception of Enckell's early work, see Kalha, 'Siellä on taas poika!', 185–98; Kalha, 'Kuvataide (epä)siveellisyysden käsitesfäärissä', 240–48, 252–60, 262–68, 270–76.



**Magnus Enckell,
 The Awakening, 1894,
 oil on canvas,
 113cm x 85.5cm
 Antell Collections, Finnish National
 Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Yehia Eweis



early Renaissance', as he put it in a 1916 piece, adding: 'How sparse and yet more telling was Enckell's use of colour back then [...]. The design was muscular, more bony and intact than today.'²⁵

A few months later, Okkonen berated Enckell's use of colours for their 'dulcet affection and foppishly decorative grace', and an effective counterpart is again provided by the strength of his early oeuvre: 'All in all, there is something unstable, enervated, weak and nervous about the artist's modern works, particularly when compared with the strong, solid and beautiful works of his youth.'²⁶

Another artistic authority, Einari J. Vehmas, described in 1955 Enckell's colour paintings as 'colourist aberrations [*harharetki*]'.²⁷ The notion is odd, for as we know, this supposed deviation lasted until the end. Other writings by Vehmas reveal what kinds of values lurked behind this perception. He explained how the breakthrough of colour had resulted in 'a colouristic decorativeness and dainty play with colour that may momentarily dazzle, but are at bottom just a conceited means in itself. [...] It cannot move anyone thoroughly, because it lacks the truth of colour. I wouldn't say that this trend has no advocates on the Finnish side,

25 The odd term, 'bony' (*luiseva*), refers here to structural *disegno*. Onni Okkonen. 'Magnus Enckellin maalausten näyttely', *Uusi Suomi*, 30 November 1916. Ludwig Wennervirta also praised in 1927 Enckell's early works for being 'completely free of coquetry'; 'renouncing all secondary things – like an ascetic would renounce all worldly follies – the young artist pursued passionately only soulful expression', see Ludvig Wennervirta. *Suomen taide*. Porvoo: WSOY, 1927, 516, 518, 521. On asceticism in Enckelliana, see Kalha, *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*, 249, 259.

26 Onni Okkonen. 'Septemin näyttely', *Uusi Suomi*, 18 February 1917. When Stenman's Gallery presented Enckell's early works in 1919, Okkonen was brought face to face with 'true flashes of genius'; 'his line and form have a pulsating, sparkling vitality combined with a decorative monumentality, the colour imbued with intuitive simplicity and upright strength, as well as freshness, truth and beauty.'

27 Einari J. Vehmas. 'Erään sivusäikeen vaiheita Enckellin taiteessa', in K. Koroma, Aukusti Tuhka and Jouko Tolvanen (eds.), *Suomen taide, vuosikirja 1953–54*, Helsinki: Suomen taitelijaseura, 1955, 48.

but surely it is most favoured by our linguistic minority. [...] It grows rampant [eutrophicates] like some glowingly seductive parasitic flower of the tropics, with no roots or stem, ignorant of the very soil from which it too draws its vitality.²⁸

When characteristics that could as such be positive – decorativeness, glowing play of colours – are saturated with negative qualifiers like conceit, lack of truth, even eutrophication, a lovely flower becomes a disgusting parasite. Colour is treacherous illusion, falsity.

A similar instance of aesthetic eugenics²⁹ is detectable in Okkonen: 'It looks like foreign tenets, e.g. the autotelic artistry and colour theories of the Septem Group, have not managed to feed the Finnish spirit which has been most powerful when drawing on its own deep national sources.'³⁰

While reviews of Enckell's art rely on a dialectic of purity and excess, they also implement a gender dichotomy: masculinity siding with the virtue of Finnishness, femininity with foreign influence (including that of the Swedish-speaking culture). This was a revamping of the ancient *disegno-colori* divide, wherein drawing stood for art's masculinity and colour represented alterity, fickle femininity and exoticism. In classical art theories colour suggested chaos, while linear design provided the necessary control thereof. This dichotomy, harking back to Plato and Aristotle via Renaissance aesthetics, ossified into doctrine in the 17th century.³¹

Thus was built a strong discursive foundation for the colour complex of Finnish modernism, at once propping up the inhering gender and sexual norms and blurring their contingency. The verbose tautology of critical language betrays a dialectics: disturbing and intriguing, the repressed returns. Today we cherish the ambivalent effects of colour – its subversive, sensual-corporeal potential. To paraphrase feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray: *Colour obliges us to see.*³²

28 Einari J. Vehmas. 'Kevätkauden näyttelyitä', *Suomalainen Suomi*, 5/1942, 263–64; Vehmas's views on Enckell are elaborated on in Kalha, *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*, 166–70.

29 In the context of culture and the arts, eugenics (the 'science' of racial hygiene through selective breeding) manifested discursively, through covert protectionist tendencies: warding off undesirable influences to thus allow art to flourish in a supposedly pure form.

30 Onni Okkonen. 'Mihin suuntaan?' in L. Wennervirta and Y.A. Jänntti (eds.), *Suomen taiteen vuosikirja*. Porvoo: WSOY, 1944, 7. Septem was the artists' group headed by Enckell.

31 Kalha, *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*, 73, 245–49.

32 Luce Irigaray. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Ed. by C. Burke & G. C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993 (1984), 156; Kalha, *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*, 250–56.