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Magnus Enckell on the Islands in the Gulf of Finland

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Finnish artists began to find visual themes for their works on the islands of the eastern Gulf of Finland in the 19th century. In particular, Suursaari (known as Hogland in Swedish and Gogland in Russian) attracted many artists and became a popular place to visit and paint each summer. The island was also referred to as Paratiisisaari ('Paradise Island') and 'the pearl of the Gulf of Finland'.

Magnus Enckell visited Suursaari nearly every summer between 1901 and 1912. In his day, the island had not yet become the tourist destination it would be in the 1920s. Many artists depicted the island, which is now part of Russia, until the war years of the 1940s. It was handed over to the Soviet Union as part of the Moscow Armistice of 1944.¹ Besides Suursaari, Enckell also visited another island that now belongs to Russia, Pitkäpaasi, as well as Kuorsalo, which is closer to the mainland and part of the Finnish city of Hamina. During his summers on these islands, Enckell created many works portraying the sea, as well as life on the islands and their inhabitants.

Enckell was attracted to maritime life and sailing, in particular from the early 20th century onwards, enjoying the fresh air during long boating jaunts with friends. In this period, health officials were propagating new information about the role of the sun and light, particularly in combatting infectious diseases. Artists too were interested in the fashionable trends of the day, such as naturism and neovitalism. According to naturist ideals, natural nudity without restrictive clothing or shoes, as well as sunbathing and swimming, helped the body to free itself from the shackles of civilisation. Neovitalist thought, on the other hand, saw the individual as part of a life force that governs nature. It aimed to improve a person's wellbeing through physical culture, while at the same time warding off the ills brought on by modern urban life.² These new movements were entwined with the popularity of Suursaari, where the rocky shore hid sheltered inlets with sandy beaches, which later became dotted

1 Leena Rätty. *Paratiisisaari. Menetetty Suursaari taiteilijoiden kuvaamana*. Lappeenranta: Etelä-Karjalan taidemuseo, 2002, 5.

2 Riitta Ojanperä. 'Vitality', in Timo Huusko (ed.), *Surface and Depth. Early Modernism in Finland 1890–1920*. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, 2001, (94–112) 96–97; Riitta Ojanperä. 'Keho, vauhti ja voima', in *Pinx. Maalaustaide Suomessa. Maalta kaupunkiin*. Porvoo: Weilin & Göös, 2002, (252–55) 254–55; Riitta Ojanperä. *Taidekriitikko Einari J. Vehmas ja moderni taide*. Helsinki: Valtion taidemuseo / Kuvataiteen keskusarkisto, 2010, 233–36. See also Marja Lahelma. 'Colour Revolution, Vitalism and the Ambivalence of Modern Arcadia', in Hanne Selkokari (ed.), *Magnus Enckell 1870–1925*. Ateneum Publications Vol. 141. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, 2020, 143–55; also published in *FNG Research* 6/2020.



Magnus Enckell,
Girl Straightening Her Hair,
 1902, tempera on canvas,
 69cm x 50.5cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Pakarinen



with colourful changing huts and where the island's summer residents swam and basked in the sun.³

In the summer of 1901, Enckell embarked on his first sailing trip with Wentzel Hagelstam. The two friends headed from Hamina via Helsinki to Hanko, stopping off at Rilax to see Hagelstam's sister, then Lövholmen near the Porkkala peninsula to visit the author Juhani Aho. That same year Enckell also spent his first summer on Suursaari. According to the Enckell biographer Jaakko Puokka, he first visited Suursaari in 1885, serving as an illustrator on a Finnish Antiquarian Society expedition.⁴ In the summer of 1902, Enckell continued his nautical expeditions, this time sailing with Hugo Simberg from Pyhtää to Fagerö and on to Jurmo and then Porkkala, where he stayed for a while in a fisherman's hut. During this voyage, Enckell painted a number of archipelago landscapes in watercolour, as well as works such

as *Girl Straightening Her Hair*⁵ and *Woman on a Cliff*.⁶ His summer in Porkkala was also significant, as it was here that he met and had an affair with Anna Emilia Holmlund. The following year she gave birth to their son Jorgen. Enckell's eldest sister Aina Allén and her husband adopted the child six years later. During that summer in Porkkala, Enckell painted many portraits of Anna, who shared the hut with him.⁷ He depicted the shelter in the painting *Artist's Abode in Porkkala* (1902), with Anna sitting in the doorway.

Rough pearl of the Gulf of Finland

Suursaari is located close to the middle of the Gulf of Finland, and while its name means 'Great Island' it is not in fact particularly large. The island is surrounded by open but shoaly sea. Suursaari's nature is majestic and in places resembles wilderness, which led to it being compared to Koli in eastern Finland, another area of natural beauty that attracted artists. The inland areas of Suursaari feature small lakes and lush forest meadows, which stand in contrast to the island's dramatic geological features such as giant's kettles, glacial erratic boulders, blockfields and cliffs. The island is also criss-crossed with longitudinal and transverse cracks in its bedrock. Suursaari's silhouette juts out of the sea with three conspicuous hilltops: Lounatkorkia, Haukkavuori and Pohjoiskorkia. The rugged, varied shapes of the island's surface attracted geologists and other naturalists in the 19th century. In 1896, the geologist

3 See J. W. Mattila and Jorma Mattila. *Suursaari*. Helsinki: WSOY, 1941.

4 Jaakko Puokka. *Magnus Enckell: Ihminen ja taiteilija*. Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia & Otava, 1949, 32; Marjatta Räsänen. *Magnus Enckellin yhteydet kotiseutuun Haminaan*. Hamina: Etelä-Karjalan taidemuseo – Kaakkois-Suomen aluetaidemuseo, 1999, 21. See Enckell's biography, Hanne Selkokari. 'Chronology and Key Exhibitions', in Hanne Selkokari (ed.), *Magnus Enckell 1870–1925*. Ateneum Publications Vol. 141. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, 2020, 217–26.

5 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum collection A II 1027.

6 Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 118–19, 120–21.

7 Räsänen, *Magnus Enckellin yhteydet kotiseutuun Haminaan*, 39.

Wilhelm Ramsay and his brother, state counselor August Ramsay, organised a research expedition to the island.⁸

The Finnish Tourist Association was established in 1887 and the following year published its first guidebook. It recommended travel routes, including one running from Kotka to Suursaari. An updated guidebook from 1890 described the island in more detail, including its nature, surface formations and sights.⁹ Well before this, in 1882, the linguist Volmari Porkka, a native of the island, published an article entitled 'Kuvaelmia Suursaarelta' ('Scenes of Suursaari').¹⁰ Around the turn of the century, Suursaari had 800–900 permanent residents, clustered on its eastern shore in two villages – Suurkylä and Kiiskinkylä. The islanders made their living from the sea, primarily by fishing. This was complemented by shipbuilding, seafaring, piloting and lighthouse operations. In winter, they also hunted seals, and sold cobblestones hewn from the island's stony ground.¹¹

Artists discovered Suursaari in the early 19th century as interest in the natural sciences began to blossom. One of the first artists to visit was August Matthias Hagen (1794–1878), the director of the drawing department at the University of Tartu, who was born in Lithuania. He was particularly interested in the island's majestic rocky outcrops and mountainous vistas, which he drew and painted in 1835–36. Although Hagen was primarily a graphic artist, his oeuvre includes pen-and-ink wash drawings and paintings showing Suursaari's craggy landscapes.¹² One of the first Finnish artists to visit was Victoria Åberg (1824–92), who painted sketches of the island's rocks and seascapes in July and August, 1868.¹³ She was followed by Thorsten Waenerberg (1846–1917), who visited almost every year, beginning in the early 1870s, painting its hilly landscapes over the course of three decades. A significant proportion of Waenerberg's output consists of works that present the island's hills and their forested slopes with an almost topographical precision.

Enckell's Suursaari

A number of Enckell's works are set on Suursaari. In some, he focused on the island's stony shores and the surrounding sea. *Seaside Landscape from Suursaari Island* (1905) shows an expanse of red granite, worn smooth by the sea, filling nearly the entire foreground of the painting. Looking at this work, one can imagine standing on the stony shore, looking out over the blue-grey sea to the distant horizon, above which looms a reddish sky with cumulus clouds. Enckell's work also includes a highly simplified colour graphic print, which conveys the same spirit, dating from 1907.¹⁴ Three years earlier, Enckell had portrayed the island's shore and buildings in *From the Shore of Suursaari Island* (1904), in which his interest in Neo-Impressionism can already be clearly seen. In this work, Enckell studied the warm afternoon sunlight, as well as the interplay of shadows and colours on the ground and walls. In *Boats on Suursaari* (1907), Enckell used a cool colour palette to show an entirely different kind of rocky

8 Rätty, *Paratiisisaari*, 5, 12–13. August Ramsay, a pioneer of Finnish tourism, described Suursaari in a guidebook he published in 1889. Wilhelm Ramsay published a travelogue after the 1896 expedition entitled 'Några upplysningar om Hogland' ('Some Details of Suursaari') in the Swedish-language journal *Geografiska Föreningens Tidskrift*.

9 Risto Anttila. *Elämää Suursaarella – tapahtumia sadan vuoden takaa*. Huittinen: Lauttapaino Oy, 2003, 81–82.

10 Rätty, *Paratiisisaari*, 14; Anttila, *Elämää Suursaarella*, 25–51.

11 Rätty, *Paratiisisaari*, 7–9.

12 'Hagen, August Matthias', in Ulrich Thieme and Fred. C. Willis (eds.), *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler, 'Thieme – Becker'*. Fünftehnter Band. Leipzig: E.A. Seemann Verlag, 1922, 460; Anu Allas. 'Hagen, August Matthias', in *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon*. Berlin, Boston: K. G. Saur, 2019, <https://db.degruyter.com/view/AKL/00078480> (accessed 13 May 2020); Rätty, *Paratiisisaari*, 15. Previously Hagen had created images of the majestic Alpine mountain landscapes during a trip to Munich and Switzerland in 1821.

13 Victoria Åberg's letter, Suursaari, 21 August 1868. Private Collection.

14 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum collection C III B1 270:9 and C III B1 553.



Magnus Enckell, Seaside View, 1907, soft-ground etching on paper, 25cm x 32.4cm
August and Lydia Keirkner Fine Arts Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



island shore, complete with boats and boys playing in one of them. The painting depicts either Suurskylä or Kiiskenkylä, with grey boat-sheds along the water.

Regarding Enckell's work from the early 1900s, attention has primarily been focused on the dramatic change in his colour world. The most frequently mentioned examples are two rainbow-coloured paintings from his Suursaari years of 1907–11: *Suursaari Shore* (1910) and *Boys on the Beach* (1910), in which he again portrayed the island's rocky coast in Neo-Impressionist-styled light and complementary colours.

Bright sunlight, open sea in the background, the sky high above and stones of various shapes along the strip of coastline offered inspiring subject matter for both Enckell and Verner Thomé (1878–1953), who also painted the same subjects. In the rainbow-hued sketch *From Suursaari* (1910), Enckell also portrayed the island's curly pines leaning over the water, with warm yellow sunlight sparkling on the sea's surface in the foreground.

According to Puokka, Enckell's third trip to Italy in 1905 had a significant impact on his conception of colour. On that visit, the artist spent time around Naples and painted on Capri. He also visited Pompeii, where he was fascinated by the murals, whose colours were at that time still vivid. Based on the watercolours that Enckell painted in Italy, Puokka concludes that the shift toward colourism in his work occurred at that time.¹⁵

However, Enckell's shift from Symbolist asceticism to his colour painting period can already be seen in his 1902 painting *Boy and Sail*. In this work, Enckell particularly studied the depiction of water, in the middle of which he placed a small sailboat, which the young boy guides by pushing it with an oar. Its yellowish sail flaps in the wind and is partly illuminated by the afternoon sun. In the upper part of the work, the artist shows part of a dark dock with a barrel, and pale and dark rocks on the shore. Above them is a yellow strip of land, bright in the sunlight. Most of the canvas, though, is devoted to the glinting light blue water, which forms an effective complementary colour pair with the flapping sail and the land above. The viewer's attention is also drawn to the boy's glowing violet shirt, its hue recurring in the interior of the



Magnus Enckell, Seaside Landscape from Suursaari Island, 1905, oil on canvas, 51cm x 69cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen





Magnus Enckell, *Boy and Sail*, 1902, oil on canvas, 90cm x 80.5cm
 August and Lydia Keirkner Fine Arts Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



Magnus Enckell, *From Suursaari Island*, 1902, gouache and pencil on paper, 46.8cm x 66.4cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



boat. Dating from the same year as *Boy and Sail* is another work in the Ateneum Art Museum collection, *From Suursaari Island* (1902), where we can see Enckell studying the depiction of light and shadow. Soft light falling from the right emphasises the reddish rocks in the foreground and casts a pale glimmer on the waves undulating in the background and washing onto the shore. Between the rocks and the greyish building in the upper right corner, the artist has drawn a brighter greenish line, repeating the same colour atop the bluish grey in the background, suggesting a copse.

While on Suursaari, Enckell did not, however, necessarily concentrate only on painting, but may have also spent time discussing art-related issues with artist friends who were also there at the time.¹⁶ Besides Thomé, Enckell's circle of artistic friends who spent summers on the island included Alfred William Finch and Werner Åström. Others who visited included the

¹⁶ Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 121.



Magnus Enckell, *Girls on the Shore*, 1910, watercolour on paper, 30cm x 47cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



architect Sigurd Frosterus and the Ateneum curator Torsten Stjernschantz. Especially during the summers of 1910–11, Enckell and Thomé both painted vibrant works featuring bright complementary colours and they discussed colour art with Finch and Frosterus.¹⁷ After 1912, Enckell no longer apparently painted on Suursaari, instead spending summers on Kuorsalo, closer to the mainland.

Kuorsalo's idyllic fishing village

When Enckell was a child, his father, Carl Wilhelm Enckell, who was a vicar, bought a summer place, the Koivuniemi estate, for the family in the village of Pyhäntö in Vehkalahti (now Hamina), but the family had to give it up when his father died in 1883. After his death, Enckell's younger sister Helmi became a grammar school teacher and was able to acquire a new summer place on Kuorsalo. The island belongs to the city of Hamina, which lies 17km away. In Enckell's day there was still an old fishing village on the island, as well as a pilot station. Kuorsalo was lush, compared to Suursaari. Besides fishing, its residents were agricultural and cattle farmers. Enckell's family had previously spent summers on Kuorsalo, and Helmi had fallen in love with the place. In 1900, she bought a plot on the Nätouri peninsula on the eastern shore of the island. Helmi began to build a villa there, staying in a barn on the property before the house was completed. The main building was finished eight years later and named Villa Mäntylä. It was a yellow two-storey wooden house, which apparently had a porch that was later converted into a glassed-in veranda. The building stood on a rocky point surrounded by pine trees.¹⁸

Enckell visited Kuorsalo as a child and made his first works there in the late 1890s, but he did not actually begin to spend his summers there with his sister until the 1910s, when Villa

¹⁷ Magnus Enckell's letters to his mother, 25 March and 29 July 1910. Magnus Enckell Collection, Coll. 471. The National Library of Finland.

¹⁸ Räsänen, *Magnus Enckellin yhteydet kotiseutuun Haminaan*, 23, 29; Tuomo Silenti. *Saarelaiselämää Kuorsalossa*. Nurmijärvi: Nurmiprint Oy, 2016, 91.



Magnus Enckell, *Lempi (from Kuorsalo)*, 1914,
 oil on canvas, 62cm x 42cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Aaltonen



Mäntylä was completed. The locals began to refer to the peninsula as 'Enckell's point'.¹⁹ As on Suursaari, Enckell was often accompanied by artist friends, most frequently Verner Thomé. Enckell also designed and built his own studio on Kuorsalo, buying a plot for it in 1919. Since he was fascinated by ancient mythology, he named it Colchis, after the Argonauts' destination on the Black Sea coast.²⁰

During his Kuorsalo summers, Enckell painted many landscapes, as well as some portraits. Works that date back to this period include the landscapes *Villa Porch on Kuorsalo Island* and *Villa in the Forest* (both 1918), which show how the artist's colour world and brush technique changed. *Villa Porch on Kuorsalo Island* shows a yard and a yellowish building with a porch on the right. A female figure stands, bent over, on the porch. Opening up to the left of the porch is a view of a forest with tall dark spruces and bright green deciduous trees. The building is Villa Mäntylä and the woman is Helmi. The other work from the same year shows a forest of various shades of green, in which one can distinguish reddish pine trunks topped by twisted branches with dark green needles. Dimly visible beyond the trees is once again a yellowish building, its wall lit by the reddish light of the setting sun. Besides these paintings of the villa, Enckell completed many watercolour landscapes on the island's sandy beach at Seiväsperinpohja, where he was often seen standing before his easel.²¹

Besides landscapes, Enckell painted pictures of the island's children. These included Meeri and Lempi, daughters of a neighbouring family named Lommi. In 1914 Enckell painted a portrait of the blonde Lempi (*Lempi, from Kuorsalo*), using complementary colours. In the

19 Silenti, *Saarelaiselämää Kuorsalossa*, 88.

20 Silenti, *Saarelaiselämää Kuorsalossa*, 91; Paavo Castrén and Leena Pietilä-Castrén. *Antiikin käsikirja*. Helsinki: Otava, 2000, 52–53, 269.

21 Silenti, *Saarelaiselämää Kuorsalossa*, 96.

picture, Lempi leans on a porch railing, possibly at Villa Mäntylä. She was described as lively, but slightly hot-headed and boyish. Enckell is said to have seen her as defiant, with a healthy primeval force.²² The painting however gives a calm, trusting impression of her.

Enckell is generally seen as an artist who travelled abroad frequently and enjoyed the international atmosphere. It is, however, quite clear that, from time to time, he felt the need to withdraw and therefore sought out peaceful, idyllic places in Finland beyond Helsinki.²³ For this reason he visited his mother in Hamina and spent many summers on Suursaari and later with his sister Helmi on Kuorsalo. These were places where he could spend leisurely days, relaxing with friends and relatives, as well as painting.

22 Silenti, *Saarelaiselämää Kuorsalossa*, 94.

23 Enckell's letter to his mother, 23 July 1909, in 'Magnus Enckell, Kirjeitä äidille' [edited by Jaakko Puokka, translation into Finnish by Lauri Hirvensalo], in E.J. Vehmas and Y.A. Jäntti (eds.), *Suomen taiteen vuosikirja 1947*. Helsinki: WSOY, 1947, (103–11) 109.