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From Chaos to the Security of Home: the Late Work of Magnus Enckell

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Magnus Enckell, *Diana and Endymion I*, 1921, oil on canvas, 84cm x 91cm
Finnish National Gallery /
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Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Jenni Nurminen



We have become accustomed to thinking of modernism in art as a continuous process of renewal and regeneration. In this light, art history has been written as a sort of *bildungsroman*, from the art movements of the late 19th century to the triumphal march towards Abstract Expressionism in the 20th century. The careers of individual artists are also examined according to this narrative, which aims at ever-improving results and emphasises the artist's path towards stylistic purity and clarity.¹ Jaakko Puokka, author of a monograph on Magnus Enckell, sought to see increasing clarity and consistency through the phases of the artist's career. In his view, Enckell's late phase brought a mellowness and 'a return to the Classical-Hellenic style, the birthplace of the crystal-sharp young male figures that he created three decades earlier'.² Puokka continues his analysis of Enckell's late period, writing that, in his painting of *Diana and Endymion*, Enckell broke free from the imbalance that had led to his 'aestheticising gourmandism'.³

Puokka's interpretation of Enckell's development of new content and sustainable form seems, however, to be wishful thinking based on the writer's own artistic ideals and valuations of Enckell's work from his own era.⁴ During his final decade, Magnus Enckell's art seems heterogenous and even hesitant: his gaze became retrospective, repeating similar mythological motifs from his younger years, turning inward to his home environment and nostalgic park scenes, or seeking a lost paradise and the support of religion. The style of his paintings also varied between cubist-like structuralism and *Nabis*-style symbolism. Enckell was undeniably problematic to

- 1 See e.g. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (eds.). *Modern Art and Modernism. A Critical Anthology*, 2018 (1982). New York: Routledge.
- 2 Puokka, *Magnus Enckell: Ihminen ja taiteilija*. Helsinki, Suomalainen tiedeakatemia & Otava, 1949, 210.
- 3 Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 212.
- 4 Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 208.

his contemporaries, but Puokka's text emphasises a need to develop a narrative around the artist's career and life that would satisfy them.⁵

How then should we approach Enckell's late period? How should we interpret his tentative art, which at times looked towards something new and at other times harked back to the past?

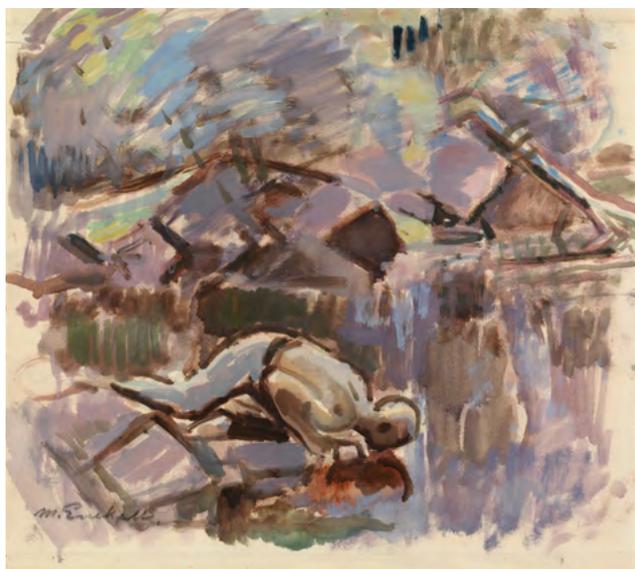
In a book published in 2007, Edward Said pondered the question of how to interpret the late output of well-known composers and writers. Said was particularly interested in the traits that emerge in 'a nonharmonious, nonserene tension' in the final phase of an artist's output. He was fascinated by 'a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness, a going against'.⁶ He refers to artists' oeuvre at this stage as *Late Style*. Art is of course always tied to its own time, but as Said sees it, artists' late-stage work is marked by a kind of timelessness.⁷ The late style that Said discusses is anachronistic and an anomaly that somehow deviates from the general concepts of art.⁸ Rather than clarity, late style is characterised by intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradictions. He suggests that age and ill health do not after all lead to an all-encompassing, mature serenity.⁹

For Said, lateness is a form of 'exile', but even an exile must live somewhere. Thus the late style is internalised, yet strangely detached from the present.¹⁰ It is precisely this kind of existence, oddly separate from one's own time and present that distinguishes Enckell's late work. 'Lateness has to do with surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal (...); lateness also contains the notion that it is impossible to transcend.'¹¹ One cannot forecast one's own death, or therefore necessarily be aware that one is in one's late stage. Enckell died at an age which by today's standards is considered to be the prime of middle age.

In the light of Said's concept of late style, could Enckell's late output be seen as a kind of searching and deliberate groping between the past and the future, contrary to Puokka's vision of growing serenity and clarification? In this light, his late style – a sort of hybrid stage – would mean the period of Enckell's art that began gradually as the Septem influence faded and a variety of different themes and styles recurred in his works.

In the late 1910s and early '20s, Enckell paints Arcadian landscapes in the style of Maurice Denis (*Diana and Endymion I*, 1921) and follows the faceted painting principles of Cézanne (*Boy Angling*, 1921; *At the Spring*, 1921 and the undated *Narcissus*), as well as more broadly a manner of painting that emphasises structuralism (*Birch Forest*, 1919; *Birches in Vääksy*, 1919; *Fir in the Middle of a Birch Forest*, 1919). He also paints portrait commissions in a realist style (*Johanna and Clara*, 1918), floral arrangements (*Amaryllis and Cineraria*, 1918;

- 5 Harri Kalha and Juha-Heikki Tihinen, whose studies have focused on Magnus Enckell's homosexuality, emphasise how difficult it was for his contemporaries (and later researchers) to approach Enckell's art that features strongly homoerotic characteristics. See e.g. Harri Kalha. *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*. Historiallisia tutkimuksia 227. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2005; Juha-Heikki Tihinen. *Halun häilyvät rajat: Magnus Enckellin teosten maskuliinisuuksien ja feminiinisyysien representaatioista ja itsen luomisesta*. Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia 37. Helsinki: Taidehistorian seura, 2008.
- 6 Edward W. Said. *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017 (2007), 4: 'I'd like to explore the experience of late style that involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against* [...].'
- 7 Said, *On Late Style*, 95: 'Any style involves first of all the artist's connection to his or her own time, or historical period, society, and antecedents; the aesthetic work, for all its irreducible individuality, is nevertheless a part – or, paradoxically, not a part – of the era in which it was produced and appeared.'
- 8 As Michael Wood writes in the 'Introduction' to Said's book *On Late Style*, 2017 (2007), X: "'Late style" can't be a direct result of aging or death, because style is not a mortal creature, and works of art have no organic life to lose. But the approaching of death of the artist gets into the works all the same, and in many different ways; the privileged forms, as Said wrote are "anachronism and anomaly".'
- 9 Said, *On Late Style*, 3.
- 10 Wood, 'Introduction', XI: 'Lateness for Said is a form of exile, but even exiles live somewhere, and "late style is *in*, but oddly *apart* from, the present.'
- 11 Said, *On Late Style*, 16.



Magnus Enckell, *At the Spring*, 1921, watercolour on paper, 35cm x 43.5cm
Herman and Elisabeth Hallonblad Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



Orchids, undated) and park landscapes (*View from Kaisaniemi Park*, 1915; *View from Kaivopuisto*, 1919). In his romantic park landscapes, which are not bound to any particular location, one can make out human figures, which seem curiously detached (*Large Oak in Moonlight*, early 1920s; *Spring Night*, 1922). Enckell also takes on Christian subjects, themes related to purgatory, comforting or salvation (*Purgatory*, 1923; the stained-glass windows in Pori Church, 1925). A mood of yearning and wistfulness recurs in many paintings (*By the Window*, 1919; *Lost in Thoughts*, 1922/23; *Studio Window in Kilo*, 1923). He also 'lapses' into tackling a political subject in his chaos-themed paintings, which are nevertheless basically a return to his individualist contemplation of universal humanity (1918–19).



Magnus Enckell, *Birches in Vääksy*, 1919, oil on canvas, 60.5cm x 74cm
Ester and Jalo Sihtola Fine Arts Foundation Donation, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



Chaos

The criticism during Enckell's lifetime was largely based on various virtues and dichotomies that emphasised masculinity. Enckell was seen as struggling between sense and feelings, line and colour, body and mind.¹² Puokka's notion of Enckell becoming whole and returning to the ideals of his early period after his colour period is also linked to the triumph of the line. It was considered by his contemporaries as if manliness had won out over a vague femininity in his late works.¹³

Some of the pathos of manliness can be found in Enckell's *Chaos* series, a set of works born in the wake of the Finnish Civil War. Studies of Enckell's *Chaos* subjects have

focused on issues such as what spurred Enckell to take on such political topics. Were they based on an interest in the politics of the age and a new willingness to take a stand, or are the works rather related to Enckell's earlier output and a personal reckoning of his own life? Did this dramatic period of history offer the artist an opportunity to return to the conflicted feelings of his youth, melancholy, angst, detachment and loneliness? Did the dramatic threat of history give him an opportunity to revisit these feelings and sublimate his own personal contradictory feelings into a communal anxiety?¹⁴

By the time the Civil War broke out in January 1918, Magnus Enckell was a renowned, established artist in Finland. In 1915 he had been elected Chair of the Artists' Association of Finland and served in this post until the autumn of 1918. The Septem group had already

- 12 See e.g. Harri Kalha, 2000. 'Magnus Enckell and the Mystery of the Lost Sexuality', in Juha-Heikki Tihinen and Jari Björklöv (eds.), *Magnus Enckell 1870–1925*. Helsinki: Helsinki City Art Museum, 104–111.
- 13 Tihinen, Juha-Heikki. 'Thinly Veiled Desire – Magnus Enckell's Portrayal of Men', in Juha-Heikki Tihinen and Jari Björklöv (eds.), *Magnus Enckell 1870–1925*. Helsinki: Helsinki City Art Museum, 124–28.
- 14 Mirja Ramstedt pondered the same questions in her master's thesis in 1996, see Mirja Ramstedt. *Magnus Enckellin Kaaos-aiheiset maalaukset vuosilta 1918–1919 – Kansalaissodan vaikutus ajan suomalaiseseen kuvataiteeseen*. Master's thesis in art history, University of Jyväskylä, 1996.



Magnus Enckell, View from Kaivopuisto, 1919, oil on canvas, 59cm x 68cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Pakarinen



staged six joint exhibitions. In 1917 Enckell planned a trip to the Caucasus, but had to abandon it due to the unrest in Russia.¹⁵

Artists were by no means indifferent to the Civil War. Many were socially vulnerable due to the difficult wartime conditions and some, including Enckell, took part in charity events, including one arranged by Elli Tompuri.¹⁶ The war does not however seem to have hampered the artist's work. In September and October of 1918, just a few months after it ended, Enckell held a private exhibition at Galerie Hörhammer in Helsinki. On display were 75 works from the 1912–18 period. One of his most significant works from that time, *Man and Swan*, was completed specifically for this exhibition.¹⁷

Although Enckell's life seems ostensibly to have continued normally in spite of the war, the turbulent feelings of this restless time clearly weighed on his mind. At a 1919 Hörhammer exhibition (with Helene Schjerfbeck) he presented

the *Chaos* and *Agony* paintings, along with mythical subjects.¹⁸

The *Chaos* paintings share some of the same traits as his earlier mythological paintings, but they are also marked by a new kind of realism and pathos. There is a certain indecision and oscillation between realism and symbolism in these works.

In two sketches from 1918, Enckell shows a male figure in the foreground with another person, whose hand he seems to be holding. In the background are crowds of people and ruins, suggesting a more realistic approach and a conceptually collective depiction of the horrors of war. In the sketch at Pori Art Museum, the male figure in the foreground is depicted realistically, wearing trousers, with his upper body bare. One can also discern a mother and child in the lower left corner. In the Tampere Art Museum sketch, the male figure is a degree more symbolic, shown nude, with his hand lifted to his forehead.

Kemi Art Museum's painting, *Year of the Rebellion* (1918),¹⁹ foreshadows the final version of this exploration. Throngs of people can still be seen in this work. Featured in the foreground is a young male figure, this time with only his upper body shown. He is wrapped in a red cloak and his hand is raised to his forehead in a gesture of horror. Adding to the drama is a skull-and-crossbones flag that flaps right behind the young man's head.

In Turku Art Museum's 'final' *Chaos* painting (1919), the architectonic elements have been left out altogether. The crowds can only be discerned in the background as a suggestive mass of colour. Pori Art Museum's second *Chaos* sketch (1919) is clearly a preliminary work for this final painting. The main emphasis is on the youth and the background is simply colour surfaces without representational elements. The young man is, however, shown turned to the

¹⁵ Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 212.

¹⁶ See <https://yle.fi/aihe/article/2018/04/22/nayttelija-elli-tompuri-saa-idean-saveltaja-jean-sibeliuksen-paivakirja-1918>. Enckell's friend, the then-celebrated actor Elli Tompuri, wrote in her diary on 20 April 1918 of her idea of arranging a charity gala with Jean Sibelius. The event was held at the National Theatre on 2 May, with one of Enckell's paintings as a lottery prize. *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 22 April 1918. Enckell also took part in social life during the Civil War and was

for instance a member of the board of the Free Stage Theatre, established by Tompuri in 1919.
¹⁷ 'Biography' in Juha-Heikki Tihinen and Jari Björklöv (eds.), *Magnus Enckell 1870–1925*. Helsinki: Helsinki City Art Museum, 134.

¹⁸ 'Biography', 135.

¹⁹ The work at Kemi Art Museum is also interesting in that few artists had so directly titled their works as being related to the Civil War.

left, whereas the individual in the final version looks toward the right. With its simplified form, *Chaos* is comparable to the solitary male figures of Enckell's symbolist period.

Agony (1919, private collection) differs from the other chaos-themed paintings in that the model is a woman. There is also a female figure in Vaasa Art Museum's *Chaos* work, which could be dated back to the autumn of 1917, before the Civil War broke out. Visible in the foreground is a woman in white, who has fallen to the ground and is looking up with a pleading expression on her face. Behind her to the right, a skeleton-like figure looks directly at the viewer as it walks 'offstage'. To the left is a group of anguished figures, one of whom has collapsed and is sprawled on the ground, the others still standing and supporting each other. Above this scene there seems to be a starry sky. The event takes place in a mythical valley, bordered by two hills. This individual painting also supports the idea that Enckell aimed more at a general depiction of restless times and a symbolic presentation of agony, rather than a narrative linked to a particular historical event. The dramatic events of the time are distanced so as to become a universal portrayal of human suffering. Tampere Art Museum's sketch from 1917 also more generally shows a chaotic, dramatic situation, in which a mass of people have turned their gaze up to the rays descending diagonally from the sky.

Enckell's *Purgatory* painting from 1923 repeats the composition and subject matter of the previous works.²⁰ One may conclude that the trajectory of *Chaos* works was also primarily motivated by spiritual rather than societal concerns.²¹ *Purgatory* features both a man and a woman as the main protagonists, bringing together the two main figures in the various 'chaos' works.

Enckell's starting point for the *Chaos* series can be interpreted as a personal settling of scores rather than a sense of social responsibility or of taking a stance. Puokka sees 'spiritual overload' in them, comparing the *Chaos* and *Agony* works to Tyko Sallinen's paintings *The Barn Dance* and *The Fanatics* (1918).²² With Said's thoughts in mind, it is precisely this kind of tension that is typical of Enckell's late style. The *Chaos* works can be interpreted as representing the artist's conflicted feelings, in both their manner of execution and subject matter. They feature drama, which spurs more restlessness and angst and 'leaves the audience more perplexed and unsettled than before'.²³

It is interesting that the stained-glass windows for the Pori Church were among Enckell's last works. One of their themes is specifically *Purgatory*, in which the artist draws together the universal agony of the *Chaos* theme. Harri Kalha sees purgatory as referring more generally to the artistic identity; in Enckell's case it is associated with creativity and the struggle and sublimation related to sexuality. *Purgatory* becomes a complex metaphor for the fall and striving.²⁴

It is interesting that the subject preoccupied Enckell for two years, perhaps even longer, if the early dating of the Pori and Tampere sketches are correct. In these works, one can see the 'intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradiction' referred to in Said's thoughts on late style.²⁵

Intimate domesticity

Throughout his career, Enckell seems to have pondered some kind of a theme of suffering and atonement. In contrast to suffering, his depictions of domestic interiors focus on harmony, security and homeliness, revealing Enckell as a *bon viveur* and a dreamer. Despite

20 Another version of the same theme, *Purgatory* (1923) is in the Ateneum Art Museum collection. It was a preliminary work for stained-glass windows at Turku Cathedral, which were never realised.

21 Dan Holm also refers to the *Chaos* works as being more linked to the religio-mystical questions that preoccupied Enckell rather than with political activism. Dan Holm. 'Magnus Enckells "Kaos", dess bakgrund och innebörd', *Finsk Tidskrift: kultur, ekonomi, politik*, 2/1973, 15–22.

22 Puokka, *Magnus Enckell: Ihminen ja taiteilija*, 200.

23 Said, *On Late Style*, 4.

24 Kalha, 'Magnus Enckell and the Mystery of the Lost Sexuality', 110.

25 Said, *On Late Style*, 4.

Magnus Enckell, *Villa of the Artist in Kilo*, 1921, gouache and pencil on paper, 22.5cm x 31cm
 Ester and Jalo Sihtola Fine Arts Foundation Donation, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



his international and public persona, Enckell was also a homebody who enjoyed his privacy, living in aesthetic surroundings. As Puokka put it, ‘throughout his life, pleasant immediate surroundings and the right to be alone were his unconditional requirements’.²⁶

According to Said, enjoyment, pleasure and privacy do not require accommodation to the *status quo* or the governing system, and it is specifically this sort of freedom that unites all the expressions of late style.²⁷ Enjoyment and privacy appear in many of the small-scale interiors, park scenes, still-lives and forest scenes depicted in Enckell’s late period.

In 1920 Enckell bought a villa in Kilo, Espoo, designed by the architect Eliel Saarinen for Ellan Edelfelt. There he painted a number of interiors, still-lives and garden scenes (*Large Oak in Moonlight*; *An Old Tree (Kilo)*, 1921; *Villa of the Artist in Kilo*, 1921; *The Artist’s Studio in Kilo*, 1920). Before he bought the house, the artist spent many summers on the island of Kuorsalo, at his sister Helmi’s villa (*Villa Porch on Kuorsalo Island*, 1918). For a time, Helmi moved in with her brother in Kilo, underlining her significance as an element of domesticity. Eventually though, Enckell lost interest in rural living and in 1924 he bought a flat on Urheilukatu in Helsinki, in a newly-completed building designed by his friend Sigurd Frosterus. Enckell’s many home interiors and park scenes from this period seem to be a return to something safe and intimate, his innermost self.

Enckell’s pictures of home interiors, parks and tennis courts all represent areas of intimacy, which, after Said, becomes possible when an artist has come to terms with the world’s demands on his or her art: what is left is pleasure and privacy.²⁸ Wellbeing and domesticity are also particularly associated with his holiday-themed painting from the Kilo period (*Christmas Tree in the Salon of Kilo Manor*, c. 1919). The Christmas theme had

²⁶ Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 90.

²⁷ Wood, ‘Introduction’, XI: ‘Amusement, pleasure and privacy does not require reconciliation with a status quo or a dominant regime, and it is this version of freedom that unites all the instances of lateness in Said.’

²⁸ Wood, ‘Introduction’, XI.



Magnus Enckell, Christmas Tree, 1908, lithograph, 48cm x 62.3cm

Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen

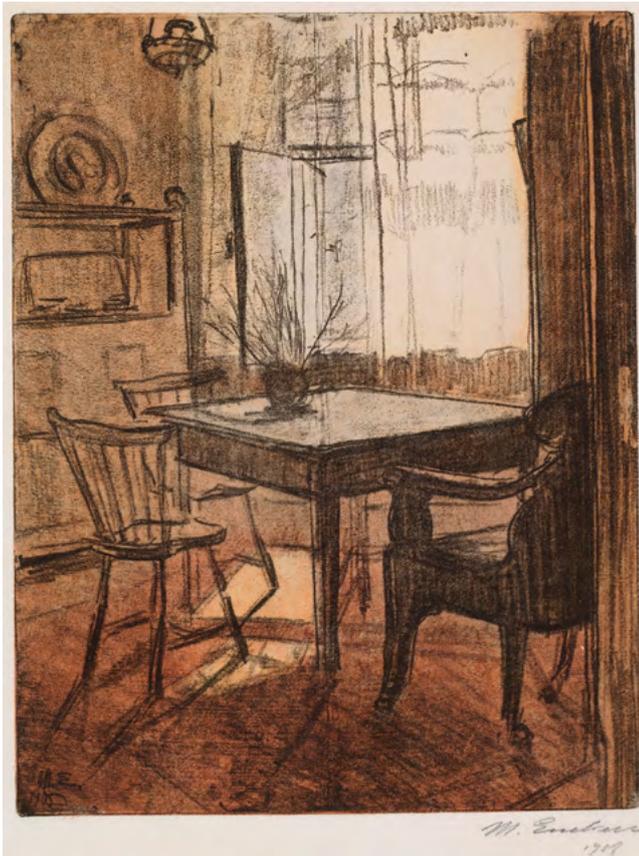


interested Enckell earlier, too. In 1908 he made a lithograph showing a classroom with an armchair and a Christmas tree.

There were several areas of intimacy in Enckell's life. Christian undercurrents and sexuality seem to have been the engines of his creative work. A longing for home and pastoral peace won out over his public life and urban socialising. This intimacy is strongly apparent in Enckell's paintings. In his symbolist mythological pictures, he was able to fuse sexuality and the longing for spirituality into a neoplatonic notion of over-arching love. Late works such as *Man and Swan* and *Wings (Daedalus and Icarus, 1923)* continue his depictions of sublimated love. In these paintings, mythology takes on a highly carnal form, with the individuals portrayed realistically, even though the narratives are based on myths. Intimacy is also directly represented by the small-scale studies of nude men from Enckell's late period. Indeed, his late output is characterised by an open sensuality.

Home may also be considered a symbol of love, a place of safety and intimacy. These depictions of domesticity exhibit a somewhat dreamy, poetic and even naive side of Enckell. In Puokka's words:

One must admit that descriptions of Enckell's essence and the development of his character in middle age, in other words precisely in the early 1920s, are not completely consistent – even a period of less than a quarter of a century can cast a mythology over the life of a well-known person. It is however certain that the paintings made in these years clearly convey their creator's spiritual state. To an increasing degree, isolation, a kind of noble solitude, brought with it simplification in art, whose form began in a way to hatch into muscularity and clarity out of the intermittent obscurity of the 'Septem' period. One cannot deny that in the art of his final years, Enckell appears more independent probably than ever before.²⁹



Magnus Enckell, Interior, 1905, soft-ground etching, 32cm x 25cm

Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



Puokka is correct in observing that Enckell no longer seemed to be bound by the demands or conventions of the time. It is as if he painted the great problem of his life, the utopia of love, over and over again. In this light, the interiors of Enckell's home and other intimate images can be interpreted, like the symbolist mythological works of the late 19th century, as being linked to his selfhood and his search for it. As a sort of euphemism, perhaps they also speak of love and matters related to it.

It is characteristic of Enckell's interiors that they are often empty. In those that do include a person (*By the Window, Lost in Thoughts, Studio Window in Kilo*), they are often



Magnus Enckell, *By the Window*, 1919, oil on paper, 63cm x 48cm
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Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



Magnus Enckell, *Lost in Thoughts*, 1922/23, oil on canvas, 48.5cm x 40.5cm
 Ester and Jalo Sihtola Fine Arts Foundation
 Donation, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum
 Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



shown to be lost in thought, looking out in a kind of wistful or contemplative state. According to Gaston Bachelard, it is precisely an awareness of being inside that particularly creates a feeling of security. For Bachelard, a house permits one 'to recall flashes of daydreams that illuminate the synthesis of immemorial and recollected'.³⁰ In Bachelard's words, Enckell's pictures of houses 'become the topography of our intimate being'. The house is 'a tool for analysis of the human soul' and 'by remembering "houses" and "rooms", we learn to "abide" within ourselves', he writes.³¹ 'The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace,' Bachelard adds.³² The significance of Enckell's pictures of houses and their interiors can be interpreted in the spirit of Bachelard as some sort of opportunity to return to childhood feelings of innocence and security. Bachelard's key words – 'imagination', 'picture', 'soul' and 'dreaming' – are well suited to describe the intimate paintings of Enckell's late period. The painting of the hearth at Kilo Manor, complete with bearskin rug (*Interior from Kilo*, undated), is comparable to Bachelard's vision of a nest and security. The image of telling tales by a fireplace does not bother Bachelard – or Enckell – as after all, it is permissible for one's dreams to be naive.

30 Gaston Bachelard. *Tilan poetiikka*. Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Nemo, (1957) 2003, 77–78.

31 Bachelard, *Tilan poetiikka*, 67–68.

32 Bachelard, *Tilan poetiikka*, 79.