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Tones of Black – Magnus Enckell's Early Work

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Magnus Enckell may not be a household name but some of his works are very well known. *Boy with Skull* (1892) and *The Awakening* (1894) are paintings that have retained their fascination for generations in Finnish art history. But what was Enckell like, as a man and an artist? How did his career begin and how did it progress from the late 19th to the early 20th century?

Enckell was already an influential person from a young age, and his interests and bold artistic experiments were the subject of much attention. His artistic career differed from others of his generation, not least because from the start, he received support from Finland's most prominent artist, Albert Edelfelt, who also later served as his mentor, yet he was also very international in his artistic taste. When many of his fellow artists were involved with the transnational ideas of national revival, Enckell's interests were focussed on international art and especially on Symbolism.

Enckell's life as an artist is intriguingly contradictory, and on a personal level he was apparently complex and often divided opinion.¹ Yet he had many supporters, and he influenced ideas and perceptions about art among his close artist friends. Enckell was also good at networking and he forged his own international connections with artists in Paris. Unlike his contemporaries, he worked and socialised closely with women artists, making no distinction between the sexes, which was very unusual in the late 19th century. In his youth he enjoyed deep mutual appreciation and friendships with Ellen Thesleff, Beda Stjernschantz, and the sculptors Sigrid af Forselles and Madeleine Jouvray, although these relationships changed with the times. As we will see, Enckell was able to move smoothly between the Finnish and international art scenes, private and public, between a wide variety of worlds, both at home and abroad.²

Magnus Enckell's early output, from 1884 to 1896, was prolific but also full of experimentation and ambitious exploration. As with many other artists, it is also fragmented, and not just because he is known to have destroyed some of his work from this time: this

1 Johannes Öhqvist. *Suomen taiteen historia*. Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Kirja, 1912, 453–57.

2 See Marja Lahelma. 'Beda Stjernschantz', 70–71; Anu Utriainen. 'Sigrid af Forselles', 94–95 and Hanna-Reetta Schreck. "'The you of my youth' – Magnus Enckell and Ellen Thesleff', 35–37, in Hanne Selkokari (ed.), *Magnus Enckell 1870–1925*. Ateneum Publications Vol. 141. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, 2020.



Magnus Enckell, Reclining Boy, 1892, charcoal and watercolour on paper, 54cm x 57cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis



makes it rather difficult to compile a coherent picture of the early stages of his career.³ Jaakko Puokka's 1949 monograph on Enckell provides a comprehensive, chronological list of works but, since many are undated, my research has led me to form slightly different conclusions.⁴

Another thing that has fascinated me ever since I started researching for my master's thesis in art history is the originality of the choices that Enckell made regarding technique, as these differed from the prevailing techniques and practices in Finland at that time, making him avant-garde in the art world. His contribution to early modernism and Symbolist art in Finland was significant.⁵ Enckell was one of the first artists, alongside Thesleff,⁶ to switch from the traditional (and at that time only) technique acceptable for exhibitions – oil painting on

3 Enckell is known to have destroyed works that he was unhappy with in the 1890s in particular. Jaakko Puokka. *Magnus Enckell: Ihminen ja taiteilija*. Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia & Otava, 1949, 83; Salme Sarajas-Korte. *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*. Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Otava, 1966, 197.

4 See the new *Illustrated Catalogue* compiled for the 'Magnus Enckell' exhibition at the Ateneum Art Museum, 23 October 2020 to 14 February 2021, <https://research.fng.fi/2021/01/23/magnus-enckell-illustrated-catalogue>.

5 Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff. *Väriasketismi suomalaisessa vuosisadanvaihteen taiteessa*. Master's thesis in art history, University of Helsinki, 2000.

6 Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff. 2019, 'Picturing the Immaterial: Ascetic Palette, Tonalist Musicality and Formal Indistinctness in Ellen Thesleff's Early and Late Works', *Tahiti* 9 (3) 2019, <https://doi.org/10.23995/tht.88662> (accessed 30 June 2020), 5–21.

canvas – to experimenting with watercolour, charcoal and mixed-media on paper. Works such as *Reclining Boy* (1892) and *Portrait of Toini von Rehausen* (1893) were considered controversial at the time, and critics regarded the works as studies, but quite soon they began to be regarded as ‘masterful’.⁷ These intense, monochromatic mixed-media paintings form an interesting body of work in their own right within Enckell’s production, and I have examined their properties with specific regard to their ascetic colour and innovative technique. In the past, these early works have been discussed in terms of their subject matter – mythological paintings, paintings of boyhood and portraits. However, Enckell presented these ascetic and concentrated works in exhibitions together.⁸



Gunnar Berndtson, *Portrait of Magnus Enckell*, undated, charcoal on paper, 61cm x 46cm

Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



Art studies in Finland and Paris at the end of the 19th century

Magnus Enckell was born in south-eastern Finland in the coastal town of Hamina, but his artistic career began while he was still at school in Porvoo with his first teacher, Johan Knutson, an elderly landscape artist who taught drawing at Borgå (Porvoo) Lyceum.⁹ The young Enckell was interested in music and languages, and was inspired by his teacher’s praise to contact Finland’s most prominent artist Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905), who spent some of his time at his home in Haikko, Porvoo, in between his years living in Paris. In 1887, Enckell had made some small pastel works that he decided to show to Edelfelt. The 17-year-old Enckell was encouraged by Edelfelt’s positive comments, and he visited him several times to receive personal tuition and guidance.¹⁰ The small-scale works *Dark-haired Girl* and *Gypsy* (both c. 1888), precocious oil paintings executed in Edelfelt’s academic realistic style, have survived from these times. Comparing them to one of his earliest works, *Aunt* (1884), it is clear that his progress was rapid. It was when Enckell began his art studies under Edelfelt that his mission in life began to fully take shape.¹¹

In September 1889, Enckell arrived in Helsinki, where he was allowed to ‘work and be free’ and dedicate himself to his art. He began his studies at the Finnish Art Society’s Drawing School, but he immediately expressed his dissatisfaction with the level of teaching, which he described as ‘so extremely, so incredibly miserable’,

and wanted to switch to private education.¹² The Drawing School only taught drawing, and although it had already progressed a little to using live models, it failed to satisfy Enckell or his

7 Puokka constructs Enckell’s genius myth explicitly through these works on youth. Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 64–84; On the reception of the ‘boy paintings’, see Harri Kalha. “‘Siellä on taas poika!’ Magnus Enckellin varhaistöiden aikalaisreseptiosta”, in Juha-Heikki Tihinen (ed.), *Keskellä marginaalia – Riitta Konttisen juhkakirja. Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia* 33. Helsinki: Taidehistorian seura, 2006, (185–98) 185–89.

8 At the same time, there are other types of early works in Enckell’s oeuvre, such as *Narcissus* (1896/97), *Fantasy* (1895) and *Life* (1895), which would be better called Symbolist, precisely because of their subject matter.

9 Landscape painter Johan Knutson (1816–99) worked as a drawing teacher in Porvoo 1844–90.

10 *Portrait of Mayoress Fanny Lilius*, pastel (c. 1886–87) is from his Porvoo period.

11 Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 34–36; *Magnus Enckell. Illustrated Catalogue*, <https://research.fng.fi/2021/01/23/magnus-enckell-illustrated-catalogue>.

12 Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 44–45.



Magnus Enckell, *The Princess and the Swineherd*, 1890, oil on canvas, 26.8cm x 36cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



fellow students.¹³ The idea of leaving quickly took hold, and a few of them decided to turn to the artist Gunnar Berndtson (1854–95), who gave private lessons in oil painting.¹⁴

Thus, from the beginning of 1890, a group of young artists began regular studies 'according to the French method' under the guidance of Berndtson. Eight art students, including Helmi Ahlman (Biese), Väinö Blomstedt, Sigrid Granfelt, Beda Stjernschantz, Ellen Thesleff and Anna Bremer (von Bonsdorff), continued their studies privately. Like his friend Edelfelt, Berndtson had pursued a French academic training in Paris under the tutelage of Jean-Léon Gérôme. However, the main focus of the teaching was on learning the basic technical skill of oil painting and creating shades and tones with a wide brush, as opposed to academic painting, as we can see in both Enckell and Thesleff's works from 1890.¹⁵ Enckell's

13 Of those who started in the same year, only Pekka Halonen remained a student at the Drawing School, probably due to lack of money and because he was a non-fee paying student. Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff. 'Biography', in *Pekka Halonen*. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, 2008, (164–67), 164–65.

14 Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 40–44; Salme Sarajas-Korte. 'Ellen Thesleffin vuodet 1890–1915', in Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse (ed.), *Ellen Thesleff*. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, 1998, (22–74) 24.

15 I have dated all of Enckell's early small-scale oil paintings made with a shading technique to the period he was taught by Berndtson, i.e. 1890–91. There is also a great change in Thesleff's technique in 1890 and although her works are more brightly coloured, the painting technique is the same as in Enckell's works. E.g. *Self-portrait* (1890) and *Girl and Flower Meadow* (1890). See 'Teosluettelo' (Catalogue) in Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse (ed.), *Ellen Thesleff*. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, 1998, (126–219) 128–29.

dreams were filled with hopes of getting to Paris, and fortunately a scholarship was able to be arranged – he travelled there via St Petersburg in early March 1891.¹⁶

Just when the Naturalism that favoured the portrayal of everyday life and reality had established itself in Finland, a new international art movement, Symbolism, began to emerge.¹⁷ The nationalist aspirations in Finland that had awakened in the 1880s gave art a new meaning and social impact with regard to Finnish cultural life.¹⁸ A general enthusiasm had taken root, and when an individual, urban, universal artist who plumbed the mystical depths of his or her self-reflection appeared alongside the artist who roamed the woods and wilderness in anticipation of the nationalist wave, the conditions for an active artistic debate had been established. At a time when many artists became interested in occult movements such as Theosophy, nationalist enthusiasm turned to a search for spirituality in line with international currents – many artists believed that art would continue where religion had left off.¹⁹ Clearly, as we can witness, the importance of the visual arts in cultural life rose to a new level and Enckell was well aware of this, as is evident in the seriousness and passion with which he threw himself into realising his great goals.

From the outset, the new Parisian individualist perception of Symbolist art and its more refreshingly spiritual and holistic world view interested Enckell. When he arrived in Paris in March 1891, Enckell enrolled at the international Académie Julian. Interestingly, the Academy's 'head student' (*massier*) was Paul Sérusier who, when Enckell started, belonged to the *Les Nabis* group.²⁰ Sérusier had previously spent time with Paul Gauguin in Brittany and painted his extraordinary work *Talisman* (1888), so Symbolist ideals were one of the discussion topics in the Julian. *Les Nabis'* artistic inspiration came mainly from Gauguin, but their ideology was influenced by the theosophical ideas of Édouard Schuré, whose popular book, *Les Grands Initiés*, served as Sérusier's guidebook in the early 1890s. This combination of philosophical and esoteric knowledge and a new conception of the meaning of the arts was important at the time.²¹ The study programme at Académie Julian was intense and initially consisted mainly of painting live models, which Enckell especially liked. Even before the end of the year, his perception of art and its meaning had completely changed.²²

For the young Enckell, the flood of new impressions was so great that he began to doubt his own abilities. It was around this time that he painted his small *Self-Portrait* (1891) in tones of brown, which clearly shows his new painting style.²³ One inspiration may have been Eugène Carrière, a now-forgotten artist whose solo exhibition in 1891 made him one of the Salon's most talked about painters at the time – 'analogous with new directions in music

16 Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 44–46.

17 Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 8.

18 Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff and Riitta Ojanperä. 'Foreword. European Revivals: From Dreams of a Nation to Places of Transnational Exchange' in Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, Riitta Ojanperä and Hanna-Leena Paloposki (eds.), *European Revivals – From Dreams of a Nation to Places of Transnational Exchange*. FNG Research 1/2020. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery, 2020, https://research.fng.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/fngr_2020-1_er_screen.pdf (accessed 12 January 2021), VII–XII.

19 Nina Kokkinen. *Totuudenetsijät. Vuosisadanvaihteen okkulttuuri ja moderni henkisyys Akseli Gallen-Kallelan, Pekka Halosen ja Hugo Simbergin taiteessa*. Turku: Turun yliopisto, 2019, 15–19.

20 *Les Nabis* were a Symbolist group of artists from the Académie Julian (1888–89). Paul Sérusier was their main figure. Catherine Fehrer. 'New Light on the Académie Julian and its Founder (Rodolphe Julian)', *Gazette des Beaux-arts*, Mai–Juin 1984, 213–14.

21 In his theosophical doctrine, Schuré sought a synthesis of the great religions, their secret connection, and the holy sages – *initiés* – e.g. Krishna, Buddha, Zarathustra, Hermes, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato and Jesus. History, fantasy, mysticism, and written testimonies were combined in this esoteric book. Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 52–54.

22 Enckell is known to have read e.g. Dante, Goethe, de Musset, Hugo, Poe and Baudelaire. Of the composers, he particularly appreciated Beethoven and Wagner. Enckell played the piano and also considered a career as a musician. Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 28–31, 50–52; Enckell's unpublished paper by Sigurd Frosterus, see Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 63.

23 Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 64–65.

and poetry, he had created a new form of expression: total harmony and dream'.²⁴ These enigmatic works – softly tinted using only black, brown and white – were certainly a focus in Paris and I believe also attracted Enckell's attention as Carrière's exhibition was on show in the immediate vicinity of the Académie Julian.²⁵

As summer approached, Enckell decided to head for Brittany as it had gained an almost magical reputation among the Nordic artists. It was there that the Gauguin-led Pont-Aven school, to which Sérusier belonged, originated.²⁶ *Les Nabis* artists continued their summer gatherings in Brittany and stayed near where Enckell had taken up residence in the small village of Briec with the American Fred Sass and two Norwegian artists. The religious nature of the region and its dark mystique held a great fascination, and Enckell wrote to his mother about its ancient stone crosses, churches, and the Breton religious ceremonies. A work he produced that summer, *Woman from Brittany* (1891), is stylistically consistent with *Self-portrait* (1891). These simplified paintings with their dark contours differed from the portraits he had previously made in Finland.²⁷

Of Enckell's fellow students, Väinö Blomstedt wrote home in the autumn of 1891, describing a new trend that looked to the splendour of ancient archaic art. Its protagonists were Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Edouard Manet. Blomstedt has written that, in Enckell, the movement had found its first Finnish representative.²⁸ Enckell's paintings from this period mark the starting point of a new ascetic conception of colour and a simplified form. They contain all the influences of the 'new art': two-dimensionality, holistic reduction, matte surfaces, emphasis on contour, and especially a limited palette. In particular, colour was no longer deployed as an imitator of nature, but as a creator of unified harmony.

When Enckell returned from Brittany to Paris in the autumn of 1891, his close friends Anna Bremer, Ellen Thesleff and Beda Stjernschantz immediately understood his new ascetic art. Blomstedt observes, however, that there was insufficient understanding from others: 'It's now called the art of the future, and it starts to bring tears to the eye. It's unfortunate that Enckell has become a supporter of it; his drawings are excellent, but his paintings are strange. He has painted an old Breton woman in just three colours, and nowadays he says that there are really no colours in nature at all.'²⁹ For Blomstedt, understanding this new, radical colour asceticism was perhaps the most difficult thing to digest.

Albert Edelfelt also made an interesting comment on the subject after seeing the paintings in Helsinki: 'The works that you sent here were well drawn, but far too monotonous. I liked your self-portrait most [...]. You should, as has been said, beware of too much monochrome in your works that have a red-purple undertone. You should work that out.'³⁰ Apparently, Edelfelt did not like the Puvis de Chavannes-style use of the purple-red hue in *Woman from Brittany*, which appears in the shades of grey and brown next to black and white. Edelfelt's criticism was understandable; the 'monochrome', and that intentional

24 Charles Morice. *La Littérature de tout à l'heure*. Paris: Perrin et Cio, Libraires-éditeurs, 1889, 280–85; Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 80–82.

25 Eugène Carrière was a major influence on many Finnish pioneers. See Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff. *Colour Asceticism and Synthetist Colour: Colour Concepts in Turn-of-the-20th-century Finnish and European Art*. PhD thesis in art history. University of Helsinki, 2012, <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-10-8047-0> (accessed 30 June 2020), 151–55.

26 Pont-Aven school and Bretagne, see Belinda Thomson. *Gauguin's Vision*. Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2005, 57–62.

27 Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 59; Sarajas-Korte considers these two paintings to be singular, but dependent, exploratory transitional works, see Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 175.

28 However, Sarajas-Korte also mentions Albert Gebhard as being a supporter of the new trend. Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 8.

29 Väinö Blomstedt's letter to his parents Alfred and Hanna Blomstedt, Paris 9 November 1891. Collection of Artists' Letters. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery; Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 67.

30 Albert Edelfelt's letter to Magnus Enckell, 15 December 1891. Magnus Enckell's Archive, Coll. 471. The National Library of Finland; Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 176.

harmony of colour, distinguished these paintings from the conventional painting traditions of the time.

The fascinating colour black

*One must respect black. Nothing prostitutes it. It does not please the eye or awaken another sense. It is the agent of the mind even more than the beautiful colour of the palette or prism.*³¹

– Odilon Redon

After returning home, Magnus Enckell began working on even more ascetic portraits. An interesting period began,³² during which he created dozens of works using reduced, pared-down form and an ascetic palette, with the grey-brown tones of previous works being replaced by increasing colour contrasts of mainly black and white. These works included *Reclining Boy* (1892) – which in his letters Enckell referred to as ‘*Boy in black*’ – *Two Boys* (1892), *Naked Boy* (1892), *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1896), *Portrait of Toini von Rehausen* (1893), *Boy with a Skull* (1893), *Portrait of Sculptor Madeleine Jouvray* and *The Awakening* (1894).³³ While the reduced palettes for *Self-portrait* and *Woman from Brittany* were inspired by Carrière and Puvis de Chavannes, these new works used the clear outlines and strong contrasts of black and white that can be seen in Edouard Manet's paintings. Manet was now regarded as a master by the younger generation of Symbolists, and his more bold and modern works from the 1860s, such as *The Fifer* and *Olympia*, were deeply admired by young artists.³⁴ Odilon Redon's enigmatic ‘black’ works may also have been on Enckell's mind.

‘Fine art is now at a turning point; the ambassadors of the new art are Puvis de Chavannes and Manet, and it looks absolutely awful, all working on forms of infinitely simple, Assyrianesquely ascetic black, accented outlines of a single colour [...].’³⁵ Blomstedt's startled utterance highlights how these different elements were perceived to belong together. The colour black was an important factor in creating simplified, spiritually-infused works. As Redon's quote shows, black might not be pleasing to the eye, but in particular it was considered not to raise any sensory sensitivity (as bright colours were thought to do); rather, it represents the connection between thought, harmony, and matter. Even Edelfelt, who had seen a lot of art in his time, was captivated by the bold black and white shades that Enckell used in these works. Viewing *Portrait of Toini von Rehausen*, he said, enchanted: ‘Once seen, it can never be forgotten.’³⁶

31 John Gage. *Colour in Art. Thames & Hudson World of Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2006, 201.

32 This is known as Enckell's ‘master period’. Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 65–71; Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 179–181.

33 Enckell removed another boy from *Boy with Skull* on Edelfelt's instruction. Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 66, 184–85; Puokka has dated *The Awakening* to 1893. Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 67, 71.

34 For example, many of Édouard Manet's Spanish period works were also popular, *Monk at Prayer* (c. 1864–65), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Juliet Wilson-Bareau. *Manet/Velázquez. The French Taste for Spanish Painting*. Ed. by Gary Tinterrow & Geneviève Lacambre. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art / New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003, 493; von Bonsdorff, *Colour Ascetism and Synthetist Colour*, 110–14.

35 Väinö Blomstedt's letter to his parents Alfred and Hanna Blomstedt, Paris 1 November 1891. Collection of Artists' Letters. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery; Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 66, 117.

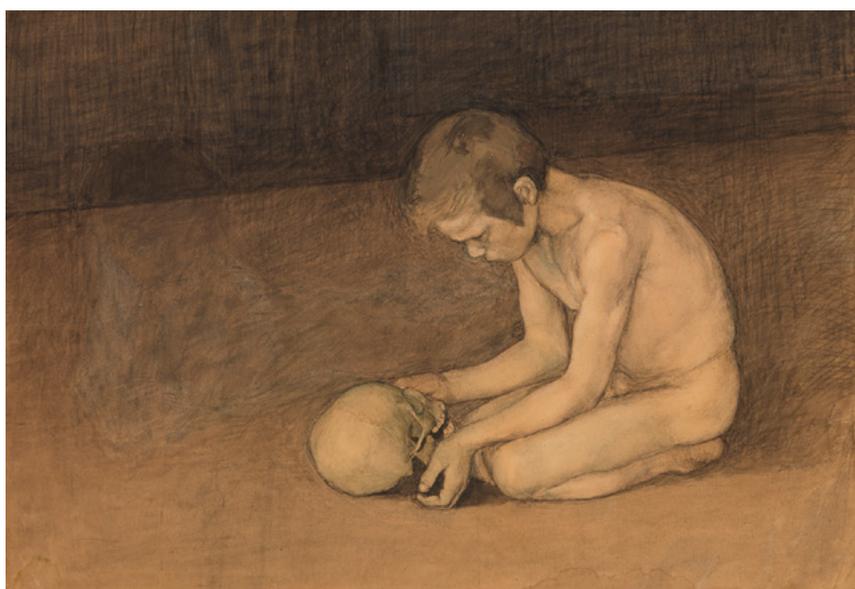
36 Magnus Enckell's letter to his mother, s.d. Magnus Enckell's Archive, Coll. 471. The National Library of Finland; Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 180, 209.



This archive image shows the first version of *Boy with Skull*, from 1892. At Albert Edelfelt's suggestion Enckell removed the figure of the recumbent boy. Photographer unknown. Collection of Archived Photo Prints. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery



Moreover, in his quest for intensity and simplification Enckell had ended up making the *Portrait of Toini von Rehausen* in just *one* colour by skilfully using translucent black watercolour and soft intense charcoal to create a sophisticated matte shade of black, with a light-coloured cardboard acting as the 'second light colour'. This method was used by Carrière but with oil on canvas. Only in the figure's eyes and the brooch she wears does Enckell use a hint of white for correction. Enckell also partly used this 'primer technique' in *Portrait of Sculptor Madeleine Jouvray* (1893–94). Here, the model's pale skin on her face is the light colour of the background paper. However, in *Portrait of Sculptor Madeleine Jouvray* Enckell has painted the background in a warm brown that frames and emphasises the intangible, soulful face of the subject. Again he has perfectly combined watercolour, gouache and charcoal. The outlines soften with the translucent residue of the brush. It is known that Enckell had been greatly impressed by both sitters: the teacher von Rehausen, a sternly religious and enchanting woman from his childhood home, and Jouvray, who in Enckell's view, was a sublime personification of intelligence and grace.³⁷



Magnus Enckell, *Boy with Skull*, 1893, charcoal and watercolour on paper, 66cm x 95cm

Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis



The same theme of portraying an intense mental state is represented by Enckell's oil painting *The Awakening* (1894). The pubescent boy has woken up and is emerging from the white sheets on his bed naked, with a serious, absent-minded downward gaze. The anxious mood, and tense stooping position of his body communicates the subject's ambiguity – puberty and sexual awakening, and the melancholic loss of childhood innocence, were topical issues at the time.³⁸ The work can be compared to, for instance, Edvard Munch's *Puberty* (1894–95), in which the central character is an anxious young girl. Enckell's painting and its more 'black-and-white' colour scheme creates a strong melancholic, charged atmosphere

37 Magnus Enckell's letter to Yrjö Hirn, 23 September 1893. Yrjö Hirn's Collection, Coll. 75. The National Library of Finland; Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 186–88.

38 Like other Finns, he had grown tired of the decadent Parisian atmosphere during the winter season of 1893–94. Sarajas-Korte, 'Ellen Thesleffin vuodet 1890–1915', 32. See also on the subject Riikka Stewen. 'Circles of Love: The Mythologies of Magnus Enckell', in Juha-Heikki Tihinen and Jari Björklöv (eds.), *Magnus Enckell 1870–1925*. Helsinki: Helsingin kaupungin taidemuseo, 2000, (X–XX) 46, 48.



Magnus Enckell, Portrait of Sculptor Madeleine Jouvray, 1893–94, charcoal, watercolour and gouache on paper, 66cm x 49cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Jenni Nurminen



as the troubled young man wakes up to the world, staring into a void.³⁹ This irreversible transition to adulthood is enhanced by his tense pose with clenched fists and twisted foot barely touching the deep, solid black below. The influence of Manet's *Olympia* (1863) can be seen, both in the treatment of the naked figure, which is contrasted against white sheets, but also in the reduced palette and emphasis on form. The minimal colour scheme is constructed through strong contrasts of white and black; the pale skin-colour enhanced by a solid white background. The diagonal composition of the work is accentuated by an abstract block of black at the bottom of the canvas and a vertical reddish-brown column on the right-hand side was a bold choice. The painting is now one of the Ateneum Art Museum's highlights.

These 'sculptural themes' and the overall simplification have their roots in the modern admiration of ancient times and their art. Blomstedt's comment in his letter to his parents reveals that a general interest in ancient history had been aroused. In the Press, the term that was used for this was 'archaic'.⁴⁰ As Blomstedt continues: 'There's something completely new in the air here. Assyrian and Egyptian art has been elevated to become the ideal. Their lines hold a great power, and their decorativeness has a magnificent intensity [...].'⁴¹ As we know, both Enckell's and Thesleff's sketchbooks reveal their shared enthusiasm for ancient art.⁴² The glorification of archaic art also encouraged

artists to emphasise strong contours and forms, and the reduction of forms, the so-called 'primitiveness' and the use of only a few colours, all went hand in hand. For example, Enckell's gouache *The Net Weaver* (1894) was a direct application of archaic art to the Finnish folk type; the Louvre's Egyptian statue *The Seated Scribe* became a Finnish fisherman in Enckell's painting. This was also noted by the Finnish art critics, who referred to the work as 'archaic'.

Enckell's colour asceticism continued after his time in Paris in *Death's Walk* (1896), although during his travels in Italy (1895–96), and through copying Early Renaissance frescoes,

39 Both Aimo Reitala and Sarajas-Korte have presented a different interpretation of the young man waking up to a bright future and spirituality (white background), see Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 190–92; Aimo Reitala. 'Magnus Enckellin varhaisten poikakuviien lähtökohdista ja sisällöstä', *Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia* 3. Helsinki: Taidehistorian seura, 1977, (115–32) 124.

40 Archaic art, or Archaistic art, is art that mimics and imitates the art of Ancient Greece (c. 620–500 BCE), or art that looks old-fashioned for its time, see Edward Lucie-Smith. *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1984, 19. Archaicism is an imitation of ancient, usually prehistoric art styles, or their surviving remnants in tradition, see *Taiteen pikkujättiläinen*. Porvoo: WSOY, 1991, 37. For example, the characters of the archaic Greek *Kouros* were schematically stylised and had a so-called enigmatic smile. The human-like godhood of the characters certainly fitted the neo-Platonist thinking favoured by Symbolism. They represented the more mystical, non-naturalistic art in Greek art. Hugh Honour and John Fleming. *A World History of Art*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 1984, 96–102.

41 Väinö Blomstedt's letter to his parents Alfred and Hanna Blomstedt, Paris 1 November 1891. Collection of Artists' Letters. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery.

42 Traditional academy teaching was supplemented in the museum by studying and sketching human figures and, for example, the ornamentation of columns. Magnus Enckell's Sketchbook, A II 1608:2 (c. 1891). Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum. Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 67–68, 117; Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 83–84.



Magnus Enckell,
The Awakening, 1892,
 oil on canvas,
 113cm x 85.5cm
 Antell Collections,
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Yehia Eweis



his works took on a more sophisticated approach and his mind dwelt more on mythological themes.⁴³ With the approach of a new century, he clearly began to distance himself from strict colour asceticism, but his trip to Spain in 1900 still inspired a return to a darker, reduced palette.⁴⁴ There Enckell fell in love with the 'robust honesty and self-conscious power' of Spanish artists such as Morales, Zurbáran, and Velázquez.⁴⁵

To conclude, Enckell's notable early works were, from the perspective of colour asceticism, an innovative group of mixed-media works, such as *Reclining Boy* (1892), *Portrait of Toini von Rehausen* (1893), and the slightly later *Death's Walk* (1896). Here the black-and-white palettes he used mark the peak of his colour asceticism, a technique that Enckell pushed to its limits. These radical works on paper constitute a major tranche of paintings from Enckell's experimental early period.

43 According to Sarajas-Korte, Enckell's symbolist art had already reached an impasse, see Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaisymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 205–06. For Enckell, Symbolism did not mean purely colour asceticism. His oeuvre had consistently included works made in richer colours, alongside which he painted colour-ascetic works.

44 In the St Petersburg Hermitage, Enckell had greatly admired e.g. Zurbáran's praying monk, the *Saint Francis* painting (c. 1630), and he had always been interested in learning about Spanish culture. Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 104, 107–108.

45 *Ateneum* journal number 3, 1901; Puokka, *Magnus Enckell*, 108. See also Juha-Heikki Tihinen. 'Magnus Enckell's Dreams of Monumental Works', in Hanne Selkokari (ed.), *Magnus Enckell 1870–1925*. Ateneum Publications Vol. 141. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, 2020 and *FNG Research* 1/2021.



**Magnus Enckell, *Death's Walk*, 1896, watercolour and pencil on paper, 50.5cm x 67.5cm
Ahlström Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



Moreover, it is clear that as an artist with an experimental nature, Enckell consciously chose an ascetic palette to paint works that were already in themselves quite abstract with regard to their subject matter. The Symbolists were of the opinion that true mystical harmony was not to be found in an imitation of nature, but was a deeper beauty freely created by the imagination. Enckell's ascetic and harmonious paintings convey a stillness that is deeply meditative and depicts focused thoughts and states of mind in an intense, concentrated way, in which all unnecessary sensory or momentary clutter has been removed. As Edelfelt said, once seen, these works can never be forgotten.

Key words: Archaic art; Colour asceticism; Symbolism; Edouard Manet; Väinö Blomstedt