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Magnus Enckell – Decoding an Enigma

Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

Following a major exhibition of the Finnish painter Magnus Enckell (1870–1925) at the Ateneum Art Museum, Gill Crabbe asks art historian and author, Dr Harri Kalha about how the artist's work has been received over the years, and what issues have surrounded Enckell's placement in the canon of Finnish art



Magnus Enckell photographed in the 1890s. Photograph: Uusi Valokuvaamo, Hamina. Historical Picture Collection, The Finnish Heritage Agency
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Gill Crabbe: The Ateneum exhibition is the first full-scale survey of Magnus Enckell's output, covering a wide range of his production, from intimate portraits to landscapes, from monumental public commissions for churches, to explorations of archetypal themes, such as *Fantasy* and *Melancholy*. Harri, you have contributed two essays in the accompanying catalogue. Can you say a little about your background and how you came to be interested in Enckell's art?

Harri Kalha: I began my scholarly career in the 1990s, deconstructing the idea of 'Finnishness' in and around the post-war Golden Age of Finnish Design and Crafts, and gained a PhD in 1997. So questions of reception, textual analysis and discourse were already second nature to me when I wrote my first study on Enckell in 1999. I have since worked on several 'problematic' cases relating particularly to scandals concerning (in)decency, such as the public debate around Ville Vallgren's *Havis Amanda*, a fountain and a statue in Helsinki, on which I published a book in 2008.

As for Enckell, what initially inspired me – and baffled me – had to do with a sense of frustration, going all the way back to my first years as an art history student. At that time Enckell was certainly presented as part of the canon, but with qualifications. What is worse, Enckell the person, as well as any concrete meanings that might have been attributed to his art, eluded me. Even the lecturers seemed ill at ease, awkwardly regurgitating acquired terms and attitudes. There was much use of *sanahelinä*, as we say in Finnish – lofty words with little substance. Sexuality was of course not even an issue, God forbid.

GC: Looking at the role played by art historians in evolving the canon of art, on what basis has Enckell been placed in the canon of Finnish art and what place does he occupy internationally?

HK: Enckell's canonic status derives mainly from his role as a turn-of-the-century Symbolist and the 'modernist' starkness of his early works, which have for long held a central place at the Ateneum Art Museum, for example. On the other hand, art history recognises his later

role as a spokesman for Post-Impressionist ideals. Internationally Enckell is little known, and quite understandably so. His oeuvre is not vast, particularly when it comes to the Symbolist period. It lacks the nationalist subtext that has traditionally intrigued foreign critics and curators – Post-Impressionist painting has not been considered as sexy for foreign audiences as National Romanticism has. However, Enckell does enjoy a certain ‘underground’ status deriving from a tradition of gay sensibility; that is to say that certain works have always resonated with queer viewers. More recently, international gay histories and encyclopedias have included Enckell in the global catalogue of ‘gay art’, although truth be told, we know precious little about his sexuality.

GC: If art-historical research involves a process of revealing the factors influencing the construction of the art-historical canon, what methods have you used in evolving this process in relation to understanding Enckell’s art?

HK: In my book *Tapaus Magnus Enckell* (2005) and a group of related articles, I analysed both the contemporary reception of the artist’s work and later art-historical accounts, in order to deconstruct ‘Enckelliana’ as a textual corpus. Unlike traditional studies of how various artists have been received, my take was informed by post-structuralist conceptualisations of *discourse* (Foucault) and *mythology* (Barthes). Whereas a text itself is, as it were, innocent, discourse is what we arrive at through close-reading: this can be rife with chauvinistic attitudes, ideological presences or mythologising narratives – various ‘regimes of truth’ that art history thrives on. There are often hidden agendas, if you like, since the meanings are not necessarily explicit, but lurking between the lines or embedded deep within metaphorical language. So it is really an exercise in reading, and in subtle contextualising.

On the other hand, back then I was in the process of discovering myself as writer, so I wanted to give my pen some leeway as well, not least in order to modify the sense of scholarly scrutiny, of ruthless dissection of the work done by my peers and predecessors. So I devoted a couple of chapters in *Tapaus Magnus Enckell* to reading, not just texts, but chosen artworks, thus positioning my writing as an object of scrutiny for contemporaries and future scholars. I named these chapters *lukuhäiriöitä* (‘reading disturbances’; unfortunately the pun doesn’t translate) and they are a tad more essayistic than the rest of the book. Come to think of it, my work from that period thrives on puns and palimpsest, reflecting my natural investment in writing, and particularly in metaphoric language, which is a declining art in academia today.

GC: Is it an impossible goal to try to view an artist’s work through the lens of their contemporary audience and why would historians wish to attempt it?

HK: I don’t think so, because the point is not to arrive at a ‘truth’ about the artist in question, or even any particular critic, but about historical attitudes and ideologies. The discipline of art history and the inherent traditions of aesthetic language are what is at stake here, alongside a critical awareness of how cultural mythology works. I think I have been quite successful in resisting temptation to write about Enckell himself. [Laughs]

GC: Can you say something about how Enckell’s works were reviewed in his own time and what this tells us about the discourses of that period?

HK: The timespan in question is quite wide, involving a couple of historical upheavals, hence the discourses are not that easy to summarise. One focal point is provided by discussions on Enckell’s use of colour, and this is also the topic of my main essay in the catalogue of the 2020 exhibition held at the Ateneum Art Museum. Again, the agendas that figure here are not necessarily explicated in the reviews themselves, but become evident through a context-sensitive reading, depending on the scholar’s intellectual framework. In my book, I devoted more space to contextualising the ‘colour trauma’ in gender ideology and cultural theory on the one hand, and national identity on the other.



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



Certain ambiguities are particularly intriguing. The basic assumption for a long time – even among specialist scholars – has been that, while colour may have been an issue for the Finnish art world, Enckell’s early work at least enjoyed solid canonical status. In an article published in 2008, I revisited in detail the reception of his first exhibitions, a theme I had only alluded to in my book. As it happens there was much confusion when it came to the artistic value of his early paintings – they were hardly even afforded the status of completed works. To cut a long story short, far from being lauded for its ascetic purity, Enckell’s 1890s style was deemed bizarre and unnatural. While much of this had to do with the ‘oddness’ of Symbolist art in general and the issue of nudity, the othering tendency remains striking. A genre that thrived back then but has since disappeared from art journalism is the *pakina* (humorous essay); this light-hearted and often sarcastic genre, overlooked by scholars, can be highly revealing when it comes to unveiling contemporary attitudes.

In any case, it wasn’t until the 1910s that the idealised notion of ‘early Enckell’ was constructed. This mirror-effect was needed as his art, but also the nation around, went through crucial changes: colour now represented a wayward sensualism and foreign artifice, an unfortunate perversion of the purity that had once been evident in the artist.

Why, then, did colour become such an issue? First, it represented, for a nation in the making, the troublesome issue of foreign influence. Finnish culture in the nineteen-teens was

fraught with ‘identity-political’ insecurities, and quite understandably so. Secondly, colour was gendered as feminine, and had been so since the 18th century and harking back all the way to Antiquity, hence a male artist ‘succumbing to colour’ ran the risk of compromising his, and hence ‘our’ (collective) masculinity. If he depicted males – particularly as sensual objects rather than, say, sturdy workmen – the risk was many-fold.

Interestingly enough, the critic Signe Tandefelt, writing in the 1910s and 1920s, was much more gracious than her male colleagues. Is this because she was a woman, or perhaps because she – like Enckell – represented the Swedish-speaking ‘minority’? (I place minority in quotes because the cultural elite was still to a large extent Swedish-speaking.) A bit of both, I think. For some critics, to ward off colour was perhaps also to put Swedishness in its rightful place. Both Enckell and Tandefelt would have been aware of such covert dynamics. One should, however, be wary of stock interpretations here. Analysing art criticism is a tricky business, a far cry from today’s unreflective cultural critique with its pre-determined good guys and bad guys, rights and wrongs.

Scholars should remain cautious of both casual interpretations and demonising attitudes – they can easily become just another simplistic mythology to supplant the old mythology. My work, an analytical exercise that is already itself a part of history, had a certain focus, informed by personal sensitivity and a specific academic context. Others will read Enckelliana and related textual archives to other ends, depending on their particular variables. Instead of employing effective but truistic catchphrases like homophobia, misogyny – or, in Enckell’s case, Swedophobia – I would stress the historical logic tending towards the dynamic of othering: an identity-politically motivated straightening out, ‘compulsory heterosexualisation’ and de-feminisation of art.

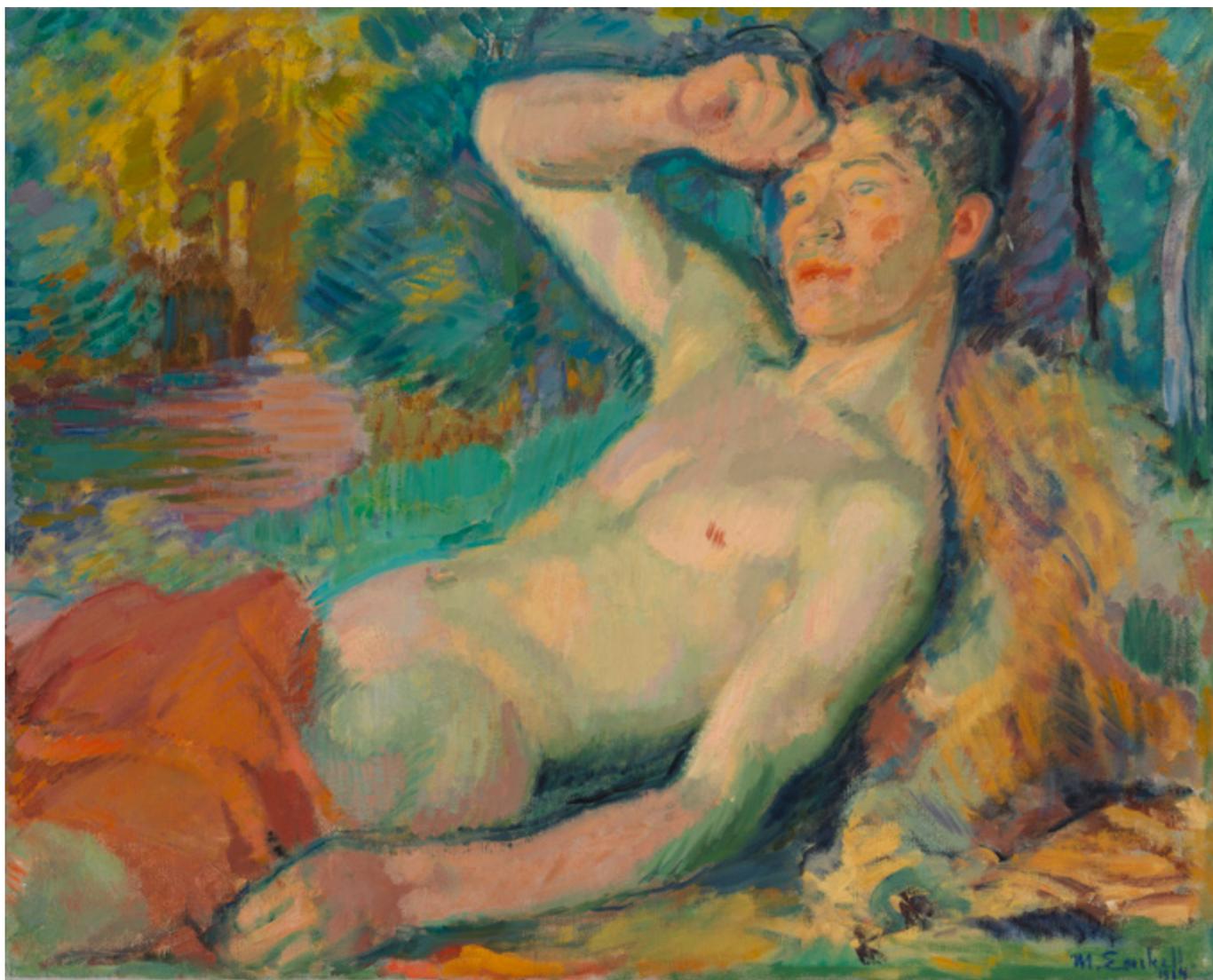
As ruthlessly ‘phobic’ as yesterday’s attitudes might seem, they *make sense*, historically speaking. Enckelliana was largely about an obstinate attempt to construct beauty ideals upon purity and national distinction. This entailed shedding light on elements or traits imagined as potentially foreign or eroding, such as colour and sensuality. Thanks to a handful of art critics, we have a body of writing that shamelessly addresses these ideological agendas and will, at the end of the day, help us and future generations understand the very complex workings of Nation, gender and sexuality.

GC: There has been some debate in the Finnish Press about the decision not to draw out any specific themes around sexual orientation in Enckell’s work in the recent show at the Ateneum Art Museum. What kinds of issues does this raise for the research community and does such an approach reflect an integration of perspectives on sexuality into the art world, as some say, or does this reflect a continuing unease or ambivalence towards this theme?

HK: One can hardly speak of a ‘debate’, I’m afraid! You may be referring to a particular headline, in *Hufvudstadsbladet*, Finland’s Swedish-language daily, noting that Enckell’s gayness is still a problem for the art world. Some trepidation seems indeed to have hovered around the topic at the Press launch, and this was tapped in to by at least one journalist. The curators may have been caught off guard when confronted about Enckell’s gayness.

The crucial question of course is not, ‘Was Enckell gay?’, but rather: ‘How is gayness – that of the artist or that of the viewers – dealt with in the exhibition programme?’ Is such a viewpoint deemed worthy of taking into account, and if not, why not? From a marketing perspective, I was actually surprised the museum didn’t use the ‘queer card’, considering the centrality of so-called minority perspectives today. The fact that the theme of homosexuality had already been overtly embraced once – 20 years ago, in a somewhat smaller Enckell exhibition organised by the Helsinki Art Museum (HAM) – hardly gives it grounds to dismiss it today. Not because of Enckell’s sexuality *per se*, but because of the gay aura that in any case surrounds his art. A lack of explication represents a missed opportunity. What was enough of a suggestion for someone who is already in the know like myself, will not satisfy a younger audience yearning for empowering affirmation.

Still, I understand the curators’ unease. ‘Sexual orientation’ is a tricky topic today: what does the term even signify to people? On the one hand, we are expected to revere such ‘orientations’, on the other hand there is a general polite wariness with respect to any given



**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



identity group. Ironically, at the same time, gender and sexuality are seen as fluid, dynamic categories. At the end of the day, homophobia survives, alongside sexism and racism – hence the ongoing relevance of ‘queering Enckell’.

GC: Would you say there are any parallels with women artists in the way that Enckell’s work was critiqued in terms of the use of colour?

HK: Enckell’s use of colour was certainly feminised, so the question does make sense. An obvious parallel would be Ellen Thesleff. Her wondrous colourism, far more expressive than Enckell’s, was treated amply in the Press with general enthusiasm, even awe, but the texts are laced with subtle qualifications, intriguing word choices and gendering devices. I have always wanted to write about her reception, but was happy to pass the torch to my student, Asta Kihlman of Turku University. In her 2018 dissertation, she applied the analytical framework

that I had introduced in *Tapaus Magnus Enckell* – quite successfully, I might add. Textual Thesleffiana is rife with metaphor, hence fruitful soil for intellectual scrutiny.

GC: Would you say Enckell was marginalised by the art world in his day? His work seemed to be under scrutiny and a certain kind of criticism, unlike Thesleff, for example.

HK: I wouldn't say so. Enckell is and was always considered a central figure in the Finnish art world and a champion of modernist ideas, particularly on the Swedish-speaking side, but also more generally. It is certainly a problem if complex analyses of historical attitudes and oversights result in such a perception. Now we might say that Enckell's *sexuality* was marginalised, but even that is a tricky claim, for it was not even an issue. One might rather claim that the 2020 exhibition marginalised his sexuality, but that was a conscious curatorial decision, motivated by an 'holistic' take on the artist's oeuvre.

While Enckell's embrace of colour was questioned by a host of leading critics, this was done in such a forceful and wordy manner that it cannot help but suggest that his art mattered. As we say in Finnish, critics circled his colourism 'like a cat around hot porridge'. Here one might recall Foucault's ironic notion of an 'immense verbosity' that surfaces around seemingly taboo topics.

But to return to your question, all relevant or interesting artists were scrutinised, Thesleff too. There were artists – including some women – whose work was left more or less unscrutinised, because they were not deemed worthy. Now *they* were marginalised, and this dynamic is still at play today, with the difference that the art world and the power exercised was more singular in the first half of the 1900s. Today even outsiders are likely to find some kind of a context. The very idea of 'being marginalised' calls for fine-tuning in a situation where culture no longer relies upon a distinct centre/margin bias.

GC: How much has art-historical research sought to establish truths and how much has it established perspectives that accumulate into truths about Enckell's oeuvre?

HK: Art history is a *discipline*, and much energy was spent on constructing 'disciplinary' canons and mythologies. Enckell is just one prime example. Today the value of canons is centred on them as objects of deconstruction – an invigorating intellectual exercise as such – and also as a healthy reminder of how societal values and humanistic ideals change over time. However, textual analysis without proper contextualisation is dangerous. Writers of the past can and should be criticised for their hidden or not-so-hidden ideological agendas, but they should not be ostracised. After all, even our critiques tend to be ideologically driven, not just theirs. Our truth is just as relative as theirs was.

Considering how rich our historical archive on art is, it is rather sad to note how little the 2020 Enckell exhibition amounted to in terms of writing. There is nothing much for future scholars to get their teeth into. The sad truth is that no-one seems to care, really. At least the critics from the past, such as Onni Okkonen, E.J. Vehmas and Edvard Richter¹, to name a few pet culprits, cared. Their engagement is really quite admirable. [Laughs]

GC: What new themes do you think should or could be studied about Enckell's art?

HK: I am not aware of any new themes – 'nothing new under the sun', as we say! But there is plenty left to be done; history is endless territory and there are lesser-known works in the Enckell catalogue that would merit revisiting. His Symbolist phase continues to be much of a mystery. What I would personally like to see is a more intense, writerly engagement with

¹ The gentlemen in question were among Finland's leading arbiters of taste in the first half of the 20th century. Okkonen worked as art critic for *Uusi Suomi* for over 20 years, and was Professor of Art History at the University of Helsinki 1927–48, publishing several book-length studies on a variety of topics. Vehmas followed Okkonen as critic for *Uusi Suomi* and also worked as curator at the Ateneum Art Museum for 15 years. Richter was a long-time critic for *Helsingin Sanomat*, which survives till today as Finland's leading daily newspaper.

artworks. This goes for all art scholarship – writing about art and visual culture at its best is itself an art form, albeit one that seems to be sinking into some sort of limbo right now. If you ask me, all ‘Wiki’-style should be banned, those bland facts and figures valuing crude statement over subtle argument.

At the end of the day, I hope that my work has not helped create a monster. Sensitivity to the cultural subtexts, which I – and other scholars of the ‘paranoid’ bent – helped unveil can easily lead to ideological speed-reading, reductionist interpretations, dismissal and even censorship. Like shooting fish in a barrel. It bears repeating that the analysis of historical texts and concepts is tricky, and should by no means lead to a rejection of metaphorical language, which is at the core of all good, inspired and inspiring art writing. It is the grey zone between black and white that represents humanity, as unfathomable as this may be to those who like to dwell on extremes.

Keywords: Magnus Enckell, arthistorical canons, art criticism, art writing, sexuality, cultural mythology, gender ideology

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