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A New Research Project: 'Pioneering Women Artists in the 19th Century'

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**Ida Silfverberg, *Self-Portrait*,
1868, oil on canvas,
56.5cm x 46cm
Finnish National Gallery /
Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Kari Soinio



In Europe, the 19th century was a dynamic period that saw great economic, social, political and cultural changes that had an impact on women and their situation, including their education and their career choices. In the field of the arts, however, there still seems to be relatively little information concerning Nordic women artists at the beginning of the century, and yet we know that several men artists instructed women in their studios. During the first half of the century, painting and drawing were mostly regarded as merely suitable hobbies for women, and nothing more. Women could not attend art academies officially, and only a few worked as professional artists.

'The Pioneering Women Artists' research project was launched at the Ateneum Art Museum in September 2020, and now an international research group is to be assembled for the project. The aim is to stimulate research and debate, re-introduce forgotten or neglected women artists, and to present completely new names. The results of the project will be released in the form of a publication and an exhibition at the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki. The dates of the exhibition will be announced later.

The focus of this research project is on pioneering women artists who were active in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Baltic countries and Germany in the 19th century.

There were big differences between the first and the second half of the century however, so a more precise time frame for the project will be defined later. The starting point of the project is to examine the opportunities for Nordic and Baltic women artists to study and work in their home countries and in Germany. The principal German cities in this respect are Düsseldorf, Dresden, Berlin, Munich, Karlsruhe and Weimar. At the same time, the project also aims to bring forward those women, for instance, from the US, Great Britain, France and Italy who had connections with Germany and possibly also with Nordic and Baltic women artists.



**Fanny Churberg, *Self-Portrait*, 1870–79,
 pencil on paper, 21cm x 12.5cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Kirsi Halkola



Besides gender, it is also essential to consider the aspect of centre and periphery in the field of arts, culture and science. In the 19th century, Germany constituted a centre in this respect, whereas the Nordic countries, especially Finland and Norway, were regarded as peripheral. Here the concept of periphery is understood as a geographical spatial element that is outside the centre. It is also worth noting that there were centres and peripheries within each Nordic country, and the juxtaposition also concerned their mutual relationships. Thus, Denmark and Sweden acted as centres, as they were politically independent kingdoms with long traditions of university education and their own art academies that had been established in the 18th century. In comparison, Finland and Norway were ruled by Russia and Sweden, and at the beginning of the century, they were only starting to organise their local artistic life and art education. To receive better training, one had to travel abroad.

The approach of this project is mainly art-historical but also cultural-historical, and the topic is examined from the perspectives of education, networks, travel, and movement. In most of these countries women were barred from gaining university degrees or attending art academies. Travelling as such constituted a challenge for them, as they could not travel by themselves as easily as men and they also needed an escort.

Finland as an example of women artists' situation

In Finland, the situation changed in the mid-19th century when, following examples from Germany, the Finnish Art Society was founded in Helsinki in 1846 and the Society's Drawing School two years later. Although a traditional drawing school had already been set up in Turku in 1830, it mostly served as an institute for pupils and apprentices for professional painters, and no women were admitted until 1852. The Drawing School of the Finnish Art Society was noteworthy in that it admitted women from the start. As its name suggests, the school mainly focused on drawing, and no nude models were used, which was probably the condition that enabled women to study there. If a student wanted to be instructed in oil painting, they would either have to enlist the services of an artist privately or travel abroad.

A great deal of art-historical writing on the 19th century has discussed the importance of Paris and France. This has also been the case in Finland where artists, including women, discovered Paris and France, especially in the 1880s. This period has been described as the heyday of Finnish women artists. At the same time, the career choices of women artists from earlier times has gained less attention, and the role of Düsseldorf and other German cities has largely been ignored or undervalued. As for Düsseldorf, a considerable amount of research into its Art Academy has been carried out in connection with different exhibitions, and yet women artists' studies and networks in the city have largely escaped closer examination.



Victoria Åberg, *Landscape in Moonlight*, 1872, oil on canvas, 76.5cm x 123cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



However, the city played an important role in the art education of several Nordic women artists before Paris. The first women travelled from Norway and Sweden in the 1840s. They were followed by the Finns in the 1850s. To name a few, there was Amalia Lindegren (1814–91) from Sweden, Aasta Hansteen (1824–1908) from Norway, and Fanny Churberg (1845–92) and Victoria Åberg (1824–92) from Finland. Prior to this, for instance, Dresden had attracted women artists during the first decades of the century. We also know that there were several women studying art in Munich and in Karlsruhe.

Previous academic research and exhibitions on women artists

It was still the accepted truth in the 1940s in Finland that the status of women artists had been exceptionally good, although, as late as the early 1980s writers and exhibitors were interested only in the work of a few women artists. However, the situation started to change in the 1980s when a group of researchers studied women artists at the University of Helsinki. The research was funded by the Academy of Finland and the group was active in 1985–86. This work was followed by the Kristiina Institute, which was founded at the University of Helsinki in 1991 and focused on gender studies. In addition, several museums in Finland, including the Ateneum Art Museum, have organised a wide range of exhibitions on Finnish women artists. Consequently, a considerable amount of research has been carried out to bring more and more forgotten or neglected women artists into the limelight.

Internationally, the volume of research on women artists has increased considerably, since Linda Nochlin published her groundbreaking article in *ArtNews* 'Why there have been no great women artists', in 1971. It was followed by the exhibition 'Women Artists 1550–1950' at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1976, which inspired museums to search their collections for forgotten women artists and their works. Interestingly, a year before that, in 1975, the Nationalgalerie in East Berlin had organised an exhibition on German women artists under the title '*Deutsche bildende Künstlerinnen von der Goethezeit bis zur Gegenwart*' (German Women Artists from the Age of Goethe to the Present), which remained unnoticed in the West due

to the political situation at the time. Moreover, in 1982, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock introduced a more radical approach in their groundbreaking book *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. At the same time women's studies in France focussed more closely on language and literature. Recently, the exhibition 'Fighting for Visibility. Women Artists of the Nationalgalerie before 1919', organised in Berlin in 2019, shed light on how women's artworks made it into the museum's collections. At the same time, the exhibition also celebrated the centenary of women's right to start regular studies at the Berlin Art Academy and elsewhere in Germany.

How to participate

We now invite international scholars and museum professionals to participate in the research group. To begin with, the objective is to chart the artists of the period, their works and networks, and to present new, lesser-known artists and their works. Another aim is to compare the education and status of women artists in different countries in the period being studied. We are planning to hold the first international Knowledge Sharing Workshop in the autumn of 2021. The research project is led by Ateneum Art Museum Curator, Dr Anne-Maria Pennonen. For more information, please contact her, anne-maria.pennonen@ateneum.fi.

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