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Finnish Landscapes on Tour

As the Finnish National Gallery takes an exhibition of Finnish landscape to the United States, Anu Utriainen and Hanne Selkokari from the Ateneum Art Museum discuss its themes with Leslie Anderson of the National Nordic Museum in Seattle to gain a deeper insight and context for the show.

This interview was originally made for and published in **Nordic Kultur** 2021/22, the Magazine of the National Nordic Museum, Seattle

The exhibition 'Among Forests and Lakes: Landscape Masterpieces from the Finnish National Gallery', which opens at the National Nordic Museum in May 2021¹, examines on a wide scale how Finnish artists have depicted the landscape of their native country. The show spans a period of over 100 years from the 1850s to the 1970s, and includes Finnish landscapes from the coast and archipelago in the south to the fells of Lapland and the Arctic Ocean in the north. It celebrates the sophistication of the Finnish art establishment and the concurrent development of the landscape genre through more than 50 paintings, prints, and video art.

The exhibition includes a range of landscape depictions, from idealised views completed in the artist's studio to realistic scenes painted *en plein air* and visual expressions of the landscape in a modern artistic language. Organised into four themes, the exhibition also considers the role that landscapes played in the creation of a nation and a national identity.

International research projects and exhibitions form a significant part of the Finnish National Gallery's operations, both in Europe and overseas. The Ateneum Art Museum has previously worked with Scandinavia House in New York, which served as the first venue of the FNG's *Modern Woman* project in 2017. Since then, the show has been exhibited in several cities in Europe, as well as further afield in Tokyo.

In the same manner, the 'Landscape Masterpieces' were destined to tour in the US, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic the more extensive exhibition tour had to be cancelled and works from the FNG collection will now be presented only in Seattle. As the National Nordic Museum's mission is to share Nordic culture, values and ideas, it is the perfect venue to exhibit these works.

NNM: National Nordic Museum Director of Collections, Exhibitions and Programmes,
Leslie Anderson

AU: Anu Utriainen, Senior researcher, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

HS: Hanne Selkokari, Curator, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

NNM: Why has landscape been a significant genre in Finnish art?

AU: In Finland, the era of building a national identity is closely linked to the birth of the concept of 'Finnishness'. This concept took form mainly in the literature and poetry of the

¹ <https://www.nordicmuseum.org/exhibition/forestsandlakes>.



Fanny Churberg, *Finnish Landscape*, 1879, pencil and opaque paint on paper, 28cm x 34.5cm
 Gösta and Bertha Stenman Donation, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



first decades of the 19th century – at that time, Finland was a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. Landscape painting emerged as a category of European art at the same time and it has its roots in the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Alongside this emerged the ideal of nationalism, national self-rule, and the desire to create a unified national culture. The idea of an independent nation created a strong need to depict the country and its people in visual form.

One of the most significant landscape painters of the first half of the century was Werner Holmberg (1830–60), who studied in Germany in Düsseldorf. Holmberg adapted the themes and ideas of Romantic landscape painting to the Finnish environment. This was a pioneering project as there were no professional Finnish artists or public art museums in Finland until the Finnish Art Society (established in 1846) founded the Drawing School in the mid-19th century and began to collect artworks through donations, commissions and purchases. The aim was to amass a collection of Finnish art for public display. This momentous campaign culminated in the inauguration of the Ateneum building in 1887, consisting of two art schools, the Art Society's offices, and an art museum for the collections. By that time, landscape painting had achieved a key role in the newly established art scene.

Even today, landscapes are greatly loved by Finnish museum visitors; and landscape painting as a genre and means of artistic expression is popular among contemporary visual artists.

NNM: This exhibition shares 130 years of artwork. How has the depiction of the Finnish landscape changed during this time?

HS: The ways of experiencing and expressing the landscape and nature vary, but many of the ideas conveyed through landscape remain the same. Evoking the sublime in the viewer, which was the aim of the early artists, progressed into showing the details of nature through careful studies executed in nature, as in Holmberg's sketches; or depicting snow and ice in a variety of ways with different techniques used by artists such as Fanny Churberg (1845–92),



Aimo Kanerva,
***Rippling Wheatfields*, 1946,**
oil on canvas, 58cm x 65cm
Finnish National Gallery /
Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Jenni Nurminen

Väinö Blomstedt (1871–1947) and H. Ahtela (1881–1968). Lea Ignatius (1913–90) and Aimo Kanerva (1909–91) are both masters of expressing the warm sun and heat in their works (*Heat and Hot Day*) by using just one radiant colour.

A bird's eye view of an untouched lake landscape was, for a long time, regarded as an ideal type of Finnish landscape. Symbolist landscape painting began in the 1890s, and as a style is still strongly present in contemporary art. The Finnish landscape is not just countryside and pure nature. It is present in built environments and cities. The idea that built environments could be landscapes originally came from the writer and historian Zachris Topelius (1818–98), who saw nature, people, and culture as a single entity. An opposing view was held by the poet J.L. Runeberg (1804–77), whose Romantic idea was that untamed nature and pristine wilderness represent the very opposite of culture and were important for that very reason.

NNM: The exhibition is divided into four themes – Seasons, Inside the Landscape, Symbolist Landscape, and Lapland. Why did you decide to organise this exhibition thematically rather than chronologically? How did you identify these four themes?

AU: There are certain recurring types and forms of landscapes, out of which the most canonical one is the view over a lake seen from a high vantage point, as Hanne points out above. Another popular theme is the four seasons, and here winter landscapes can be mentioned as typically Finnish, especially at the turn of the 20th century. At the same time, Symbolism in general – and Symbolist landscape painting in particular – were significant stylistic and philosophical movements and genres in Finnish art and cultural life, so it was



Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Sunshine on Snow*, 1906, oil on canvas, 98cm x 68cm

Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



obvious they would play a role in this show as well. Later in the 20th century, artists have implemented the ideas of the Symbolist painters in their work using many different techniques and forms of artistic expression. The discussion between figurative and non-figurative has also been relevant in this genre of painting.

Lapland in the north, on the other hand, is both a vast geographical and cultural region (the latter is referred to as Sápmi). It has enthralled explorers and artists for centuries but it was not until the 1920s that Lapland became more accessible by train and car. The 'magic' north was thus an evident theme we could not ignore, and which has since become a very current topic within the discourse of decolonisation and the rights of indigenous people.

In terms of motifs, forests, open fields, and lakes occur over and over again. After the Second World War, Finnish society changed radically. Urbanisation and industrialisation were rapid and sweeping. Finland changed from an agrarian country into a modern industrial society in a couple of decades. This had an effect on art and landscape painting too, and cityscapes became a popular motif.

The curatorial process and organisation of the show with these themes was actually

pretty easy when we realised that the above mentioned are the most common motifs and topics, supplemented with urban landscapes from the modern era.

Interestingly enough, the core concept of the 'Finnish landscape', created in the mid-19th century, has survived over time. It has transformed many times in terms of style, technique, and form, but the initial idea of a pristine and intact landscape, or an image of it with a hint of human intervention, has never disappeared.

NNM: Many of the works included in the exhibition were created by canonical artists, while others are by less well-known artists. What was the process for selecting works of art for the show?

AU: The Ateneum Art Museum is the biggest and best-known art museum in Finland. The permanent collection exhibition, 'The Stories of Finnish Art', shows many of the most significant works from the late 19th to early 20th centuries. In recent years, the collection's timeline has been extended until 1970, the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma being responsible for the collection from that time on. Today, the Ateneum is not only a museum of older art, it also holds the biggest collection of modern art in Finland. We have been working on this part of the collection intensely very recently, making the modern collection more accessible to our visitors, at home and abroad.



Anton Lindfors, *Autumn*, 1941, oil on canvas, 60cm x 92cm
Hoving Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



Another important factor in choosing the works was the emerging areas in art-historical research. This has had a ground-breaking effect in the way we analyse and study those parts of the collection that may have fallen off our radar in recent decades. Concepts of taste or style have changed and, for example, climate change, the increasing interest in environmental issues, and processes and concepts like decolonisation or posthumanism are examples of new ways of seeing. Landscapes and cityscapes are at the very centre of these issues.

In addition, we cannot talk about Finnish art and not mention the role of Finnish women artists. They have always played a significant part in the Finnish art scene. Women artists have embraced new trends and ideologies in a pioneering way, and shaped the way modernism and modernistic styles were adopted in Finnish art at the turn of the 20th century and beyond. They also have an essential role in this display as well. Women might not yet be as canonical and acknowledged internationally as they are in Finland, but we are making continued effort towards effecting change. As an example, our 'Modern Woman' project, with four modern women artists, has been shown in New York City, Tokyo, Stockholm, and Copenhagen. Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946), one of the best-known Finnish artists, was the subject of a solo exhibition at London's Royal Academy of Arts in 2019.

These are just examples of how art history, general opinions, and objects of interest are changing as the world also rapidly changes around us. We think museums and curators have an essential role in addressing these issues.



Lea Ignatius, *November, 1977*, relief printing, soft-ground etching, 35cm x 43cm
 Collection Tuomo Seppo, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen

NNM: Can you explain the collecting history of the Ateneum Art Museum, and the efforts made in this exhibition to include works by Sámi artists from the collection of the Finnish National Gallery's Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma?

HS: The Ateneum's collection started in the mid-19th century with acquisitions by the Finnish Art Society. Landscape painting in its different phases and themes was and still is one of the major interests in the collection, not least because Finnish artists have always been keen to study and paint nature.

Works by both Sámi artists and contemporary artists are fairly new acquisitions for the Finnish National Gallery and are part of Kiasma's collection. Our aim as curators was to show work by artists from all parts of Finland. We wanted to represent landscapes from all over the country with as wide a range of artists as possible.

NNM: This is a major travelling exhibition. How often do works such as Hugo Simberg's (1873–1917) *Spring Evening*, *Ice Break* (1897) travel to institutions outside Helsinki, Finland, or Europe?

HS: Actually, Simberg's painting has been on the move for the past 20 years and displayed in at least 18 exhibitions! The Ateneum Art Museum arranged an extensive exhibition on Hugo Simberg with several accompanying publications in 2000. Before this solo exhibition, Simberg was known and loved in Finland, but over the past 20 years, his paintings and drawings have played an important role in showing turn-of-the-century Finnish art abroad. *Spring Evening*, *Ice Break* is one of the small treasures of the Symbolist period in Finnish landscape art. The last time this piece was shown in North America was in 2007 in Minnesota.

Hugo Simberg, *Spring Evening, Ice Break*, 1897,
 oil on canvas, 27cm x 37cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Aaltonen



NNM: What have you discovered in researching this exhibition that surprised, challenged, or expanded your understanding of Finnish art?

AU: I find myself in a continuous state of astonishment when working with our collection. I really enjoy studying it and try to find new ways of putting our works of art in a context that gives museum visitors new perspectives, experiences, and ways of thinking. Having worked with the collection for many years, the most interesting part for me at the moment is the modern collection. It has not been studied or exhibited as much as the older art, and it gives me great joy to make new discoveries.

Women artists are one of my special interests – painters, printmakers, and sculptors – and how they were able to build their careers as professional artists.

It was not surprising to find that there are many images of lakes, forests, and fields, but it was a bit of a surprise to realise there are relatively few seascapes and images of the archipelago, even though these are an essential and huge part of the Finnish landscape. One answer to this is political: artists were interested in the more unknown and untouched hinterlands, the original and unspoiled ‘Finnish’ inland, as they were commissioned to give it a visual form as a national landscape. Seashore was considered more civilised. Language was an important factor too – the coastline was largely inhabited by the Swedish-speaking population, including most of the artists themselves who came from the Swedish-speaking upper classes until the early decades of the 20th century. Therefore, coastal areas might not have been considered as a genuinely Finnish landscape.

In general, this project has only strengthened our view of the landscape as one of the most essential and widespread themes in Finnish art of all times.

Keywords: landscapes, landscape painting, Symbolist landscape, nationalism, Finnish art, Werner Holmberg, Hugo Simberg, Lapland, Sápmi, forest, Finnish archipelago

‘Among Forests and Lakes: Landscape Masterpieces from the Finnish National Gallery’, the National Nordic Museum, Seattle, until 17 October 2021