

# Finland um 1900 – Kunst als Wegbereiter

Internationales Symposium im Rahmen der Sonderausstellung  
„Das Licht kommt jetzt von Norden“ – Jugendstil in Finnland  
8. bis 9. November 2002  
im Bröhan-Museum, Berlin

## **Finland – Russia and their artistic exchange approx. 1900 in relation to Sergei Diaghilev's "World of Art Movement"**

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As my title suggests, I am going to talk about the relationships in the visual arts between Russian and Finnish artists around 1900. The well-known name in the world's dance history, Sergei Diaghilev started his impresario career by arranging art exhibitions in St. Petersburg, where Finnish artists played an important role. They also had a significant part in the formation of the *World of Art* (*Mir iskusstva*) magazine (1898–1904). Finland and its visual arts had a much greater and more decisive part to play in the relationship to Russian art than earlier believed. The iron curtain prevented research, which art historians are only now beginning to study. In this paper my main focus is on Diaghilev's relationship to Finnish art, design and architecture.

Furthermore, I hope that the complex history of Finland and Russia during those 108 years when we had the same head of state, the Czar, will somehow be reflected in the relationships of visual artists.

Basically my talk derives from the studies of Aimo Reitala and those by Marit Werenskiöld, Janet Kennedy, Serge Lifar and Richard Buckle. And of course I include my own observations.

After the Napoleonic wars Finland was annexed to Russia in 1809 to become the autonomous Grand-Duchy of Finland with a personal relationship to the Czar. Simultaneously the bond to Sweden ended, which had lasted hundreds of years. However, the Swedish Finnish tradition continued well during this autonomous period, as Finland could keep its own religion, legislation, and form of society unchanged.

Finland became a nation among nations and the new head of state wanted to create a capital for Finland close to St. Petersburg. Earlier it had been Stockholm, and the most important town in Finland was Turku (Åbo). Disastrous fires in Helsinki 1808, at the university and in the bishopal town of Turku in 1827 helped to move the future capital to Helsinki. The result was a new Empire style Helsinki created by the fortification engineer and town planner J. A. Ehrenström and the architect Carl Ludwig Engel, who was German by origin and came via Reval and St. Petersburg.

The Finnish Art Society was founded in 1846 and the future Czar Alexander III, then a little boy, was chosen as its patron. Thus the first institution especially to support the fine arts had a high- aristocratic patronage from the Czars. Finland's own art life really began at that date.

The reign of Alexander II (1855–1881), particularly the 1860s, was a period of considerable liberalization in Finland. The Finns were grateful for the Czar and even erected a commemorative monument in his honour on the Senate square as late as in the 1890s.

I will now, however, concentrate on the Russian and Finnish contacts in the visual arts at the turn of the century and especially Diaghilev's position. Politically the end of the nineteenth

century was for Finnish autonomy a difficult time as the panslavist, national ideologies were advancing and threatened the rights of other nations in the vast imperial Russia. In 1898 the determined General Nikolai Ivanovich Bobrikov became Governor-General of Finland. The February manifesto, 1899, which was rather general in nature, represented his attempts to bring Finland to the Russian fold.

In the 1890s Finland already had an internationally well honoured group of artists who had gained success at home and abroad. France was still the most important centre for artists, although other centres were forming. If one thinks of Russian and Finnish artists together at that time, I do not believe that it is overestimated to say that internationally the Finnish artist Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905) was the best known of all of them. He had gained many medals and honorary titles (1880 third class medal at the Paris Salon; 1881 member of the Russian Art Academy, Louis Pasteur's portrait 1886 etc.) and knew personally many influential French artists. For example Ilya Repin was not so well-known internationally. Albert Edelfelt did not only paint well, he had also remarkable social talents. He easily made friends in the highest social strata including the Russian Czars, princes and princesses, dukes and duchesses but he also knew how to approach ordinary men and women. It seems that he was one of those rare people who did not seem to have enemies, indeed he was a harmonising artist wherever he circulated. After his death in 1905 the artistic scene changed radically in Finland and people deplored the end of an era.

Sergei Diaghilev (1872–1929), whom we know best from the Russian Ballets, came from the Russian provinces to St. Petersburg in 1890 and started to study law, but he also began to study music, singing and composition. His cousin Dima Filosofov introduced him to the metropolitan life and to his circle of friends who almost all came from the so called May Gymnasium. These young energetic men formed a coterie and called themselves playfully *Nevsky Pickwickians*. The group included two foreigners who did not have to care for the strict censorship prevailing in Russia. For example Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and Huysmans' *A Rebours* were forbidden in Czarist Russia. They gathered together and kept themselves informed about the latest trends of Europe's music, literature and art.

Diaghilev made European trips with his cousin Dima Filosofov, in 1890 for the first time to Nice. After the third trip in 1895 when he made his Grand European tour, he made for himself a reputation of being an important Russian collector. He had bought many works of art in France and Germany. For example he had bought some sketches by Dagnan-Bouveret who was a close friend of Albert Edelfelt. It seems most likely that Edelfelt met Diaghilev for the first time in February 1896 in St. Petersburg. For Edelfelt mentions in his letter to his mother dated February 1896: "Tomorrow I am going to the artists' lunch given by the young Diaghilev, the friend of Dagnan." Edelfelt himself had just opened his one-man exhibition at the Imperial Art Academy's Premises in St. Petersburg and he received a most warm welcome then by the new heads of the Academy, Ilya Repin and Wladimir Makovsky and by the press. He was to paint several portraits of the new Czar Nikolai II for Finland and also a personal one for the Czar. He had already established warm relations with the former ruler, Alexander III and his family. In particular the widowed empress Dagmar (Alexander III was her husband and he was also the protector of the Finnish Art Society, chosen for the role while still being a baby) was his supporter and likewise the Grand-Duke Vladimir.

We know from Sergei Diaghilev's history that he sought the company of influential people and most likely he considered Albert Edelfelt to be one of those. Edelfelt was also most likely one of the first artists who made Diaghilev aware of the potential of Nordic artists. In 1897 Sergei Diaghilev organized his first exhibitions in St. Petersburg. It was the watercolour exhibition by British and German artists at the newly founded Stieglitz Museum in January 1897. Moreover, he made a great journey to Scandinavia in July 1897 visiting Stockholm and in particular watching the *General International Industry and Art Exhibition* there. He saw for example Akseli Gallen-Kallela's *Lemminkäinen's Mother*, which was exhibited there for the first time. He met Prince Eugen, visited Anders Zorn's Mora and admired him tremendously. Asking himself:

"How was it possible that such an aristocratic man of the world and artistic virtuoso was born among poor peasants in a far-away village in Sweden?"

Diaghilev also travelled in Norway to Christiania and Telemark and met Eric Werenskiöld. He travelled to Copenhagen, Paris, Brittany and Dieppe and returned in the middle of August to Russia. In October he opened the second exhibition he had planned at Bolshaja Morskaja 38 in St. Petersburg. The exhibition was big, 289 artworks from Swedish, Norwegian and Danish artists. Anders Zorn was one of the exhibition's heroes. Diaghilev organized a big banquet for him in St. Petersburg and even Albert Edelfelt was invited. It is likely that Edelfelt played an important part in this exhibition as a background figure judging by the letter sent by Zorn to Edelfelt in which he thanks him warmly and mentions that the trip to Russia was an event like a happy dream. He also mentioned a dinner in Turku given by Mr. Rettig and wrote about the professorship offered to Edelfelt at the St. Petersburg Academy. However, Edelfelt did not accept it because he was afraid of losing his freedom and of stifling his own artistic development if he remained in St. Petersburg, which was considered being a backwater in the arts.

The next plans of Sergei Diaghilev had strong connections to Finland. In autumn 1897 he wrote to Alexander Benois (one of the Nevsky Pickwickians) about his plans to establish a magazine: "I am full of projects – each more grandiose than the last. At present I am planning a magazine which would embrace all our artistic life – drawings and paintings would be shown in the illustrations. The articles would be outspoken and, finally, it would be linked with the new brand of industrial art which is developing in Moscow and in Finland."

The idea of the magazine might be connected with the Finnish plans, because in January 1898 the first number of the *Ateneum* magazine was published in Helsinki and Albert Edelfelt had designed the cover and was largely responsible for its layout. Diaghilev's *Mir iskusstva* magazine was published for the first time in November 1898. Admittedly *Mir iskusstva* had been more luxurious even from the beginning, but the *Ateneum* also represented a high quality of printing and superceded in quality the Swedish equivalent *Ord och Bild*. Sergei Diaghilev's reference to the new brand of industrial art in Finland probably refers to the Iris factory and to the artist and count Louis Sparre and to the artist and potter Alfred William Finch who had just moved to Porvoo (Borgå). Their studio-factory designed and produced art nouveau furniture, ceramic tile stoves and colourful pots and plates largely for the Russian market.

However, before the first issue of the *Mir iskusstva* magazine was published, Diaghilev organized a Russian and Finnish artists' exhibition at the Stieglitz Museum in St. Petersburg in January and February 1898, which is considered to be the igniting spark for the whole *Mir iskusstva* (*World of Art*) movement. Besides Albert Edelfelt Diaghilev had chosen many works by Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Eero Järnefelt, Ville Vallgren and Magnus Enckell and others. The exhibition comprised altogether around 300 works of art, one third from Finland, one third from Moscow and one third from St. Petersburg. Konstantin Somov had designed the poster for the exhibition in the art nouveau style relying on the decorative line composition. Mihail Wroubel, Valentin Serov, Isaac Levitan, Leon Bakst and Alexander Benois took part in this exhibition, the core group of the future World of Art movement.

From Finland Albert Edelfelt, Eero Järnefelt and Väinö Blomstedt participated in the opening ceremonies. The mutual relationship was very good and warm. Sergei Diaghilev even donated a pastel by Constantin Somov which he owned himself for the Finnish Art Society's collection. His hero of the Finnish artists at this time seems to have been the most radical painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela with his imaginative *Kalevala* subjects: *The Defence of the Sampo* and *Lemminkäinen's Mother*. Two years earlier at the Nizhni-Novgorod Fair the Russians had made an acquaintance with Gallen-Kallela's *Aino-myth*. Gallen-Kallela's synthetic style and fantasy subjects were against the established Russian canon of realistic art. The peredvizniks (The Wanderers) were the heroes then and the standard setters for the visual arts.

Gallen-Kallela's approach inspired, besides written criticism some satiric drawings in the papers. But for Diaghilev Gallen-Kallela represented just the type of artist he was looking for. He had individual power, energy and imagination that he appreciated, and Gallen-Kallela's works were much reproduced on the pages of the *Mir iskusstva* magazine. It was not only his paintings, but also his home-studio *Kalela* in the wilderness, furniture design, frescoes, stained glass, graphic art and book art which were appreciated. The woodcut *The Defence of the Sampo* was even printed as a special original leaf in the magazine.

Sergei Diaghilev aimed at having the whole exhibition displayed in the Munich secession the same year, but that only succeeded partially. The same reduced Russian Finnish exhibition was also exhibited in late summer at the Salon Schulte in Berlin (*Nya Pressen* 02.09.1898).

The next step was to publish the magazine *Mir iskusstva* in November 1898. Besides the good coverage of Finnish art events and works of art in the *World of Art* magazine, the special sign of close contacts with Finnish artists was the fact that Sergei Diaghilev's opening manifesto article was published simultaneously in the *Ateneum* in a Swedish translation in the issue of the 15th of November 1898. In the 28 pages article Diaghilev reveals his excellent knowledge of what was happening in the art world just then and which trends were rivalling. In particular he emphasizes his artistic view of utmost individuality. Magnus Enckell's four Symbolist Indian-ink drawings with the Christian and Greek mythology subjects preceded Diaghilev's article in the *Ateneum* magazine. The Nietzschean background is obvious for both of these contributions.

Sergei Diaghilev's next big exhibition venture was an international *Mir iskusstva* exhibition in St. Petersburg which opened in February 1899. Besides Puvis de Chavannes, Monet, Degas and Böcklin etc., Edelfelt, Gallen-Kallela, Järnefelt, Blomstedt and Enckell also took part. Later, the Finnish artists did not participate in Diaghilev's *Mir iskusstva* exhibitions. Sergei Diaghilev remained their friend and supporter, but the political circumstances changed so radically between Finland and Russia that the Finnish artists felt they had to abstain from all official Russian invitations in order to demonstrate that the Finnish nation did not agree with the impeachment of their constitutional rights which the pan-slavist movement was attempting to carry out. The February manifesto 1899 delivered by the Russian Governor-General Bobrikov forced the Finns to show their strong opposition to Russian nationalistic aims. Even in 1902 the situation was still highly sensitive which can be read from Akseli Gallen-Kallela's letter to Albert Edelfelt (Tammerfors 26.02.1902): "Diaghilew asks me on behalf of the Russian artists to take part in an exhibition in St. Petersburg. Isn't it so that under present circumstances that cannot be considered?"

As I have already mentioned earlier, Sergei Diaghilev continued to support Finnish artists and publish their works in his magazine. He also reproduced many photographs from buildings and interiors by the Finnish art nouveau or Jugendstil architects including most often those by the architect trio Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen. He was most cosmopolitan in his thinking and he kept on stressing the exemplary nature of Finnish art for Russian artists. The *Mir iskusstva* magazines reproduced during 1898 to 1904 altogether 137 illustrations by the Finnish artists and architects besides anonymous vignettes by them. Gallen-Kallela was the king among them altogether with 36 illustrations, next in line Magnus Enckell with 16, Eero Järnefelt with 15 and the architect-trio Gesellius-Lindgren-Saarinen with 13 illustrations.

Diaghilev visited the Finnish Artists' exhibitions at least in 1897, 1898, and 1903 and he followed Finnish artists' work in Russia and abroad. In October 1898, he even wished that Finnish and Russian artists would form a common union. He honoured Finnish artists by publishing all the prizes they received at the World Fair in Paris 1900. In the first issue of the year 1904, which was the final year for the magazine, he illustrated the magazine with 28 works of art by different Finnish artists, all photographed in the Finnish Artists' exhibition in October 1903. In November 1903 he had again expressed his love of Finnish art in his article of the *Mir iskusstva* chronicle on the exhibition *Blanc et Noir*. I take this quotation directly in English from Serge Lifar's book *Serge Diaghilew. His Life, his Work, his Legend. An intimate Biography*.

London 1940, p. 59: "Here is a country which has no artistic past, no kind of art-history at all: everything it has is in the present, or rather in the future, a near future rich with promise... But though a great love of their country, and its people, shines in their works, it is something totally different from the German adoration of his 'Fatherland' or the Frenchman's devotion to his 'co-citizens'. What the Finnish painters have discovered and learnt to love in their country, is its beauty as seen through the astonishing charm of each individual artistic temperament... that is where their chief merit lies."

Lifar writes that Diaghilev's same positive attitude to the future only found complete expression afterwards when the Russian Ballet was in full swing.

It seems that Sergei Diaghilev willingly helped his Finnish artist friends whenever possible. For example Magnus Enckell said that Diaghilev's assistance was decisive in negotiations with the French officials when the Finnish artists wanted to have their own section in the Salon d'automne in Paris in 1908.

Diaghilev's good attitude also contributed to the warm welcome which Finnish artists received in St. Petersburg in 1917 when the political situation was totally changed. The Finnish artists had a big exhibition then in the Dobytsina Gallery and Alexander Benois was one of the main hosts welcoming the large group of Finnish artists in a most heartfelt fashion.

The love of Finnish art, architecture and design expressed by Sergei Diaghilev in his early career is not so well-known in international circles as it deserves to be. First of all, it seems that he was impressed by the man of the world, the artist Albert Edelfelt, perhaps even more by his character and his connections than by his art. However, it seems that Albert Edelfelt shared his connections with Diaghilev and led him to appreciate Nordic art, architecture and design.

Secondly it is obvious that Akseli Gallen-Kallela's type of an artist appealed to him strongly. He was a powerful artist creating his own world and was able to fulfill the ideal of an omnipotent artist. He was the creator of a total work of art. He designed his own studio-home, made his own furniture, infiltrated his character even to the most minute vignette of the book illustration. (Incidentally, Diaghilev continually printed Gallén's vignettes in his magazine. They were also printed in the *Ateneum* magazine from 1901 onwards. Some *Mir iskusstva* magazines were also printed in Helsinki at the Tilgmann's printing shop). Gallen-Kallela seemed to do whatever he wished, frescoes, illustrations etc. He clearly paved the way for Diaghilev's idea of a total work of art where mythological, fantastic stories have an important part to play.

Thirdly, Diaghilev was impressed by the results of the small nation in the artistic field. Finnish artists and architects had taken the challenge of symbolism and the art nouveau style strongly. It was the area where one could rely on one's own surroundings as for material, subject matter, nature. The artistic approach aiming at individuality was very malleable and did not demand a glorious past.

Indeed, it seems that he gained self-assurance by looking at the results of Finnish artists. If they can do that much with so little, why can't we.