

Finnland um 1900 – Kunst als Wegbereiter

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Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Europe

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In Finland, Axel Gallén is generally, though unofficially, known as the country's national artist. This accolade is derived from the title of "national poet", which was given in the 19th century to J. L. Runeberg (1804–1877). The Finnish people became accustomed to "national artist" titles, which later came to be associated not only with Gallén but also with the author Aleksis Kivi (1834–1872) and the composer Jean Sibelius (1865–1957). Axel Gallén was born in 1865 and he died in 1931. In 1907 he officially changed his name into the Finnish form of Akseli Gallen-Kallela.

Approaches to Axel Gallén's art present a path alluringly branching off into many different directions. The versatility of his oeuvre was noted already in his lifetime. Sparing no effort, he devoted his interests to various areas of the arts, to different styles and materials, such as painting, prints and graphics, applied art, architecture, photography and illustration. In its richness, Gallén's artistic legacy offers a wide range of starting points and interpretations in the arts. This versatility has also been regarded as a weakness. Already in his lifetime, Gallén was a cause of annoyance in testing the ability of critics and the public to receive the experiments of an artist with a temperament reaching out into many different areas.

Even today, Gallén's art inspires new interpretations. Even contemporary art addressing the problem of Finnish identity cannot bypass Gallén and his intuitive images of what it means to be Finnish. Each new generation of Finnish artists establishes its own relationship with Axel Gallén.

Gallén is known as a "national cosmopolitan", in reference to his lifestyle, in which the artist's varying temperament found an outlet in his many travels in Europe, Africa and America. He combined in a special way a deep affection for his homeland with a continuing yearning to be abroad and a need for international contacts. Europe finally became a field so familiar to Gallén that his attitudes to it reflected the same dichotomies as his views regarding Finland: it was either endearing and inspiring, or detestable, false and boring.

Europe

The best years of Gallen-Kallela's life coincided with the *Belle Époque*, a long period of peace in Europe that began with the end of the war between Russia and Turkey in 1878 and lasted until the outbreak of the First World War. To some degree, the goals and objectives of today's European Union appear to seek a reconstruction of the Belle Époque, when Europe was open, without boundaries, and full of confidence in the future, fuelled by the evolution of technology and industries that grew along with it. One example of the attitudes of the era was the possibility to travel from one country to another without a passport. The most grandiose manifesto and tour-de-force of Europe and the European way of life was the Paris World's Fair of 1900, in which Finland participated with impressive results.

For Finland, the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was not just a belle époque. The incorporation of the country as part of the Russian Empire in 1809 had spelt a great deal of progress based on Finland's autonomous political role within the Empire, but the attitudes of Russia towards Finnish self-government began to take a sharply negative turn during the reigns of Emperors Alexander III and Nicholas II in the 1880s and 1890s. Finland began to struggle for its constitutional and national rights, and in this process Europe became an important base of support to which recourse was taken and against which the country's own problems were reflected. Of prime importance for Finland were the way in which the European communities understood the role of Finland and their views and opinions of the country. Support was sought from heads of state, intellectuals, scholars, scientists and artists.

As Finland had no concrete opportunities to leave the Russian Empire, art became a weapon against Russification policies. Artists – painters, writers, composers and architects – played an important role in this struggle. By creating a unique national culture, Finland wanted to prove that it met the requirements of a sovereign nation. It had its own special and long history, of which the most important piece of evidence was the *Kalevala* epic of folk poems gathered and published in the first half of the 19th century. On the other hand, Finland was a developed and modern Grand Duchy with a cultural scene that was almost on a par with Europe in general. Finland looked west and negated the Russian and Byzantine influence in its culture – and this attitude is still evident in Finnish society today. Axel Gallén took part in this conflicting struggle from the very beginning – to raise Finland to the status of a European nation, with the aid of elements of Finnishness that he had sought partly from the Russian side of the border.

Because the Finnish press worked under censorship, anti-Russian sentiments began to be expressed metaphorically in the arts while national self-esteem was bolstered. Gallén's choice to depict and represent mythological material served both purposes. The conflicts and

juxtapositions of the characters and elements of the *Kalevala* epic personified the good and evil forces of the period in ways that were understandable to the Finns. Mythological art was also communal, serving the needs of the community while sanctifying the history of the Finns. Although the ultimate purpose of the myths might have remained alien, the primal strength and exotic nature of the paintings appealed to the European public. For Gallén, the *Kalevala* themes proved to be a visiting card opening doors in Europe.

France

Axel Gallén's connections with Central Europe already began in 1884, when he set out to study art in Paris. Study abroad was a necessity for Finnish artists wanting to have professional instruction and to see the masterpieces of world art at first hand. For Gallén, Paris, and later London and Berlin among other places, gave opportunities not only to study art but also to see the collections of various museums, from which the artist also drew impulses. Alongside art museums, Gallén was particularly interested in ethnographic museums and collections. Nor should we ignore the importance of new personal contacts at the international level.

Paris became a young man's Odyssey for Gallén, living the frugal and industrious yet bohemian life of an art student, enjoying the intense pleasures of Paris and feeling the remorse that followed. He also went back to Finland on painting expeditions of several months' duration, and there was also his first love Mary Slöör, a relationship that began on a long-distance basis and led to marriage. Having studied in the 1880s, Gallén primarily became a realist, a radical in the arts of the day. The following is an excerpt from a letter sent by the Finnish artist Albert Edelfelt to his mother on April 18, 1885: "Gallén is living in quite poor conditions but little does it matter when one is nineteen and absolutely convinced one will become the leading painter in all the world. He is living with a Norwegian, just as wild as he is. They're radicals, brave and bold. It's a shame, though, that they spend more time philosophizing than on painting".

The years in Paris fuelled Gallén's yearning for home and strengthened his conviction of the importance of Finnish themes and subjects. There were two motives for this: Gallén's personal desire to reform Finnish art with new, honest representations of the country on the one hand, and interest among the French public in exotic themes, on the other. During his years in Paris, from 1884 to 1889, Gallén produced many of his most important realistic representations of the common people, such as *Old Woman and the Cat* from 1885, *Frying Whitefish* 1885, *Beggar Boy* 1887, *Peasant Life* 1887 and *First Lesson* 1889.

An opposite pole to the paintings of the common people was provided by scenes from the streets of Paris and paintings of Parisian models, in which bright colours and brush strokes replaced the academy works with their restrained techniques and colours. Unlike his Finnish

artist colleagues Albert Edelfelt and Ville Vallgren, among others, Gallén was only visiting Paris. He had established solid contacts with the European art world, but he was drawn back to Finland. The following excerpt is from a letter written by Axel Gallén to Aina Slöör, dated January 14, 1888: "When I was nineteen, I loved life; I was inquisitive. I didn't want to die before I had seen and enjoyed everything. – I travelled to Paris. I didn't know anything at the time, but I had decided to live a full life, to know everything, to enjoy everything, to live like other young men. And I lived like everyone else. And why shouldn't I have done so? I felt like a leaf fallen from a tree, blown by the wind without any goal and no home. Who would have cared about me? - Very soon I was bored with it all. There was no longer anything that could have amused me. I felt a great void within me, and everything seemed empty and without any purpose to it".

Germany

The next important European location of importance for Gallén was the Berlin of the Symbolists in the 1890s – a city of both hope and despair for Gallén. The trip to Berlin had been preceded by various events in the art world in which Gallén had been instrumental. His painting expeditions to East Finland both in 1892 had fostered the unique multidisciplinary phenomenon in Finnish art that came to be known as Karelianism. It signified a search for authenticity, the ancient Finnish spirit, the Finland of the *Kalevala* in the primal forests of the border regions of Karelia. Upon their return to the capital from the forests, the young artists formed the Young Finland group, which took as one of its main tasks to bring about a renaissance of Finnish art. Axel Gallén was one of the leading figures of this group.

The early 1890s were a period of fundamental change in Gallén's art. His realistic *Aino* triptych (1891), a *Kalevala* theme, was received very well in Finland but in quite the opposite terms in Paris at the Salon du Champ-de-Mars in May 1892. Disappointed with Paris, Gallén sensed change in the atmosphere of the arts and withdrew to the peace and quiet of the wilderness to develop a new and more simplified language of form. His work towards a more spiritual expression was evident in his symbolist paintings of 1892–1895, in which he combined classical elements, Christianity and Egyptian mythology, among other features. Gallén had begun to design a studio-home, for which he found a site at Ruovesi in the inland regions of Finland, in almost pristine wilderness conditions.

Work on the studio-home, known as *Kalela*, had already come under way when Gallén suddenly decided to leave for Berlin in January 1895. Berlin had become the centre of European art in the 1890s, and it was there that also Nordic artists found their way. Among others, the Swedish author August Strindberg and the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch had already left their mark on the art scene in Berlin. Gallén was induced to come to Berlin by his Swedish-German author friend Adolf Paul, who was totally convinced that Gallén's genius could

come to its own and achieve full recognition only in Berlin. Upon arriving in the metropolis, Gallén immediately found himself in an intensive circle of artists, including Munch, Paul, Otto Julius Bierbaum, Ferruccio Busoni, Richard Dehmel, Henrik Ibsen, Walter Leistikow, Julius Meier-Graefe, Sigbjörn Obstfeldt, Emil Orlik, Stanislaw Przybyzszewski, Josef Sattler, Paul Sceerbart, Fritz Thaulow, Jens Thiis, Gustav Vigeland, J. F. Willumsen, and Anders Zorn, among others. Most of these artists were already familiar to Gallén from his years in Paris, which made it easy for him to acclimatize. The circle of friends met regularly at each other's studios and in a Weinstube to which Strindberg had given the name *Zum Schwarzen Ferkel*. (Gallén's studio was at the address Bismarckstrasse 2 am Königsplatz.) The following is an excerpt from Jens Thiis's recollections of the period: "They were unforgettable times – Munch's exhibition, Gallén's art and his charming personality, time spent with Vigeland, who right then was composing one genial group of sculptures after another in his small hotel room, and also the symposiums led by Przybyzszewski or Dehmel, Dagny Przybyzszewski's glowing enthusiasm for the arts, and Obstfelder's soulful presence and comments, like a finely resonating string sounding with restraint after the noise has died down. And around the same time at the other end of Berlin, Meier-Graefe was working incessantly with his boundless ability and willpower to establish what was to become the European organ and spokesman for us all – Pan, a grand journal devoted to new art and literature. We all worked in the whirl of this advent of things to come, and we were filled with a great enthusiasm."

In February 1895, Gallén participated in the Berlin exhibition of the *Münchner Freie Vereinigung* with three works, marking his first showing in Germany. In March, he staged a major joint exhibition with Edvard Munch in Ugo Barroccio's gallery at Unter den Linden 16. In this connection, Munch gained the admiration of the more radical art circles, while Gallén's art appealed to a broader and more diverse public.

Gallén's comment about the exhibition: "We decided to hold an exhibition. Both of us had a large number of works. In the night I went to a lithographic printing house, where I drew and arranged the printing of a poster, which was on every lamp-post by 7 in the morning, real American advertising. Munch wouldn't have had the energy for it. The exhibition aroused a great deal of attention in Berlin. – It was a great mistake for me to exhibit at the same time as Munch, but we were good friends and nothing was broken between us. – He had a different public than I had, and the exhibition did not make any total comprehensive impression."

Gallén's artwork went on to be displayed in Dresden, at the Lichtenbergis Kunstsalon and at the Viktoria Haus.

The *Pan art association* had been established in the spring of 1894 for the purpose of publishing *Pan*, a richly illustrated international art magazine, which also featured literature and poetry. While in Berlin, Gallén was commissioned to prepare two drawings for the magazine's

first pilot issue, which came out in April 1895. The full-page illustration and closing vignette for Paul Scheebart's poem *Königslied* made Gallén a widely known artist. Gallén commented about his illustration: "Edvard Munch and Meier-Grafe, the other director of Pan said to me yesterday that my contribution to Pan was the best that they had hitherto seen."

Gallén's stay in Berlin came to a tragic end when his daughter Marjatta died in March 1895. Ultimately, the whole trip seemed incomprehensible: work on his studio-home, *Kalela*, was unfinished and his wife was left in the wilderness with their young daughter to supervise the work. In the background was Gallén's restless mind, which felt that it had remained unnourished amidst the tiring house-building project and the worries of everyday life. His restlessness was also fanned by the process of artistic transformation that was in progress, the move from realism to a symbolism that was still seeking its specific forms, and Adolf Paul's tempting descriptions of the glitter of Berlin and the speed at which its art scene was evolving. The stay in Berlin also marked the end of Gallén's so-called period of international symbolism. Back home grief awaited him, casting its shadow over his works of the following years, his early prints and his major *Kalevala* canvases. In the peace and quiet of the wilderness, the language of form offered by nature and impulses from Central Europe – symbolism and the arts and crafts movement – were shaped and polished to become an unprecedentedly integrated style which was refined not only in painting and prints, but also in the applied arts.

Although Gallén left Berlin in tragic circumstances, he would return to the city on many occasions, for the second time already in the same year. On this occasion he studied the secrets of print-making under Josef Stättler. At the end of 1895 he produced the first work of Finnish graphic arts, *Flower of Death*, dedicated to the memory of his daughter Marjatta.

During the years that followed Gallén's works were to be seen in several exhibitions in different parts of Germany, almost 20 in all between 1895 and 1913. He was also invited to become a member of the *Phalanx* and *Brücke* groups. It is interesting to see how Gallén interested the earliest groupings of modern art, even though he could not be regarded as a modernist in the same sense as, for instance, Vassily Kandinsky or Emil Nolde who were active in these groups of artists. It is nonetheless obvious that German art world played a very important role in making Gallén's art known in Europe.

Italy, Hungary and others

Gallén's Europe did not consist solely of Germany and France, despite their role as the most important countries for his artistic output. Axel Gallén had many contacts, with England, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Italy and Hungary, among other countries. A period spent in Italy in 1898 introduced Gallén to the fresco technique, and the results could be seen at the Paris

World's Fair of 1900, where Gallén won the Prix d'Or for the *Kalevala* frescoes that he painted for the Finland pavilion. He also designed the furniture and textiles of the pavilion's Iris room, an exhibition of contemporary Finnish design. The acutely topical political cause of Finland and the struggle against Russian oppression united Finnish artists in an immense undertaking that succeeded: the Finnish pavilion was regarded as one of the elegant and modern pavilions of the whole World's Fair.

The decades of internationalization and professionalization that the Finnish art world had undergone had now led to results – Finnish artists had created nationally unique and distinctive works within a European framework. Within this chain of events, the development of individual artists is a central aspect, with Axel Gallén as a case in point. His personal objectives and his wide range of contacts, both domestic and international, resulted in an œuvre which is immense both in quantity and in its variety and which gives the history of Finnish art natural connections with the European art world of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, its reformers and its various areas and fields. Gallén and his contemporary artists are also a bridge linking the various aspects of the European art world and extending to the present day.

Otherness

The history of the visual arts in Europe has always included an international aspect, the transfer of influences and the changing of geographical focus. In view of this background it can be said that Gallén had taken possession of Europe at an early stage, moving fluidly from one centre of the arts to another. In his art the adoption of European impulses could be seen in techniques, styles and even themes. The role of the Finland of Gallén's day - and accordingly that of Finnish art – in the European context is nonetheless interesting. Owing to its geographical location alone, Finland represented the margins of the continent, an unknown and exotic periphery. On the other hand, this could also be an advantage, as there is always interest in the unknown. Where the people of Finland and its heritage were transferred into the contemporary language of art, foreign interest was also aroused.

Interestingly, Finnish artists often appeared to share this view. Also for them, their own country was partly unknown, and the subject an explorer's interest. In the 1880s, Finnish artists presented to the European art public a people that they had depicted honestly: the poor, the sick and the indigent – with the severe reality of the wilderness forests as their background.

Gallén and most of his fellow artists came from the Swedish-speaking urban educated classes of Finland, and they did not share the realities of the life experienced by the vast majority of the population in the country. Anti-Russian sentiment, however, united different sectors of the population in the common national cause. Axel Gallén had spent his youth in the Finnish

countryside, at Tyrvää, where the life – and language – of the Finnish-speaking population, the labourers of their property as well as the local peasants and tenant farmers became familiar to him. Despite this, he confessed to having a split attitude to his country and he continually laid down boundaries between urban and rural life, himself moving in either direction from time to time. A hermit's existence in the deep woods smoothly gave way to mingling in international society, but Gallén did not feel that he belonged purely in either caste. Living in an interstice permitted a romanticizing attitude to nature and the people, while also facilitating a continuous re-estimation and evaluation of national elements. Gallén no doubt enjoyed his numerous roles; in the Central European art communities he liked to present himself as a wild, original Finn, a feature providing an interesting addition to his personality and art.

The distinctiveness of the North – its ways of life, mythology and nature with their special features – began to arouse a new kind of interest in Europe in the 1890s, and particularly in Berlin. The objective external view of matters that was typical of realism was now matched by the deep representation of the northern psyche through symbolism. Finnish art became part of a course of development that led it from external alterity towards the spiritual core of Finnishness, its own language. *"The light comes from the North"* was an expression that was heard in the European art world. In broader terms, this meant that also Finland had been granted a new, independent role as the origin and starting-point of ideas; it was no longer a distant destination, onto which the ideas and concepts of others were projected. Artistic and intellectual independence was finally followed by political independence in 1917.