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Grey Matters

Interview by **Gill Crabbe**

For many years, Dr **Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff**, Chief Curator of the Ateneum Art Museum, has taken part in the Association of Art Historians' conferences. Here, she discusses the paper she gave at this year's conference in Norwich, in the session on Shades of Grey

Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff is something of a pioneer in Finnish art-historical circles. Since 2007 she has been a keen participant in the conferences of the Association of Art Historians which are a platform for art historians to present their research to colleagues from all over the world. 'I first took part when I was a postgraduate student, giving a paper on Finnish Mural Art at the turn of the 20th century. At some of the conferences, I was the only Finnish delegate', she says.

Over the years she has been promoting these annual conferences to her Finnish colleagues and within the Finnish National Gallery. Now every year people from different departments at FNG are beating a path to it. The conferences, which take place in Britain, are usually attended by around 300 professionals worldwide, and offer several sessions on different themes, with four or five papers presented within each session. Von Bonsdorff's enthusiasm for the benefits of taking part is palpable. 'It's an amazing chance to get a 20-minute glimpse of someone's life's work. Often the surprises come when you attend a session that is outside of your own field.'

At this year's AAH conference in Norwich, Von Bonsdorff brought her own area of interest in the use of colour in late 19th-century Nordic and European art to the session on 'Shades of Grey: Painting Without Colour'. Given the title of the session, why did she choose to title her paper 'Picturing the Immaterial With Colour: Symbolist Ideal'? Was she making a point about how grey has been regarded as a non-colour?

In her doctoral thesis from 2012, she coined the term 'colour asceticism', referring to artists who, from the 1860s onwards, started painting using a reduced colour palette. 'At that point there were two strands of interest in colour itself – there were the Impressionists, who wanted to capture a moment in full colour, and conversely those like Manet who emphasised black, and also Whistler who used a reduced colour palette of harmonious colours. Nowadays most people know about the Impressionists, but the achromatic side of painting has been forgotten.'

'I think calling the colour grey a non-colour was a big discussion. In the 1890s it wasn't viewed so negatively but of course my title is a paradox because at that time some of the Nordic Symbolist artists like Ellen Thesleff and Magnus Enckell were painting that way because they were wanting to go beyond naturalism, to paint the immaterial.'

Artists at the end of the 19th century, she says, saw their role as mediators of a higher consciousness, reflected in the new interests in Theosophy and Neoplatonism. Some of them also made references to religious frescoes of the Italian Early Renaissance. 'When you painted a fresco, you became more attuned to the sacred. It

was considered as a spiritual process – and the main colour or ‘mother tone’ in frescoes is pale grey. Grey is a silent, calm and peaceful colour – it’s about contemplation, hearing an inner voice that is not disturbed by bright, “loud” colour.’

However, not all Nordic artists who explored colour asceticism were Symbolists. Von Bonsdorff points to Finnish artists of that time who at some point in their careers explored a reduced colour palette, for example Helene Schjerfbeck (*Cypresses*, *Fiesole*, 1894, *Churchgoers*, 1895–1900). The Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi never strayed from a reduced palette in the poetic evocations of his townhouse interiors (*Interior from the Home of the Artist*, c. 1900).

Von Bonsdorff believes that because art historians traditionally have been more preoccupied with analysing form as the highest aspect of painting, they have underplayed the role of colour. Yet artists themselves were analysing the role of colour before they started to question the role of form on the path to abstraction, and this she says goes back to the 1860s. ‘Clement Greenberg wrote about abstraction in terms of form rather than colour, but this interest in using colour in an abstract way was happening much earlier, with artists like Eugène Carrière, for example, who used a monochromatic palette, painting with one colour only.’

This area of debate opens up discussions on different approaches to art history and dovetailed well with Anthea Callen’s paper on ‘Gris clair and Coloured Greys’, which emphasised her approach to art history through the methods and practical materials of Impressionist artists. ‘Her deep knowledge of the materials and pigments used by artists at the end of the 19th century is overwhelming. There is an increasing interest nowadays in researching or emphasising the use of colour in painting in general – perhaps also because the concept of ‘materiality’ is now topical in art history and in contemporary art.’

In this regard the session included papers on the politics of grey in Luc Tuymans art, and Gerhard Richter’s grey glass. ‘Taisuke Edamura pointed out that Richter has used the glass and the mirror in his work, which relates to Neoplatonic ideas of the world as a reflection. Richter was playing more with the negative side of grey, however, to emphasise the dullness and angst ridden aspects of post-war modern society.’

And what of future plans for Von Bonsdorff at the AAH? Having co-chaired a session with Charlotte Ashby on ‘Dream Spaces around 1900’ at last year’s conference in London, she now plans to submit a paper for a session by Frances Fowle and Marja Lahelma from Edinburgh University on ‘The Idea of North: Myth-making and Identities’ in 2016. ‘Following on from the Symbolist Landscape exhibition in 2012, Nordic art, especially Symbolist art, is a hot topic among art historians,’ she says ‘so it will be interesting to see what comes up in the submissions for next year’s conference.’