

Ålandian Landscape – There's Always a Meaning in a Seemingly Meaningless Landscape

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This paper discusses the diversity and complexity of the Ålandian landscape that emerged in the art produced at the Önnungeby Artists' Colony at the end of 19th century. It argues that the interpretation of this landscape was far more complex than a simple landscape of sun, sea and birches. It also points out that the once so meaningful landscape became somewhat meaningless at the end of the heyday of the colony.

I support my argument with a case study, comparing three different Ålandian landscapes painted during three different time periods by three artists: two Finnish artists – Victor Westerholm (1860–1919) and Elin Danielson (1861–1919) and a Swedish artist Edvard Westman (1865–1917).

According to Prof. Rob Shields from the University of Alberta, landscapes or sites are never simply locations. Instead, they are sites for someone and of something. Historically, the Ålandian landscape was fairly unknown to the common people living in the Grand Duchy of Finland, which was a part of Russia. Nor did ordinary people have the opportunity to travel to the Åland islands.

The artists who came to the Åland islands were searching for authenticity. One member of the artists' colony, Hanna Rönneberg (1860–1946) wrote in her memoirs: 'Åland was a region that hadn't yet been spoiled by tourists and where genuine people, a genuine way of life and genuine landscape could still be found.' The Åland islands could be seen as a marginal place, a region that, according to Shields' theory of places on the margin, had been left behind in the modern race for progress. This evoked both fascination and nostalgia.

People from the elite sector of society, who could spend their summers sailing in the archipelago, knew the Åland islands and the Önnungeby Artists' Colony via their social networks. The colony was founded in 1886, when the young but already well-known landscape painter Victor Westerholm found inspiration for his paintings on the Åland islands and gathered his artist friends to form the colony in Önnungeby. Through these artists' social networks, the colony soon expanded. It was divided into three groups: the inner circle that consisted of the artists who painted in Önnungeby nearly every summer, who were professional artists and influential in developing the colony; and two subgroups, which consisted of artists who visited Önnungeby less often.

The seemingly frivolous landscape paintings that the artists created often focused on different kinds of seascape. Westerholm focused on sea, sun, birches and cows, a landscape that later became a connotation of the Åland islands. These landscapes could be interpreted

partly as national romantic landscapes, and partly as a reaction against industrialisation – an escape from it. These landscape paintings won prizes in several competitions and strengthened the idea of a meaningful landscape.

The location of the Åland islands also had a political dimension. The Grand Duchy of Finland was about to enter a new political era from 1889–1916 and at the same time nationalistic ideas were growing stronger. The Emperor and Empress of Russia, Alexander III and Maria Feodorovna, sailed their yacht *Zarewna* around the Ålandian archipelago and they even made contact with two of the Önningeby artists, Westerholm and Westman. In this context the landscape had a twofold meaning: it could be interpreted both as an example of the rise of the nationalistic era and also as a strategically important landscape from the Russian point of view. The Emperor's visits could be seen as an attempt to calm the political situation.

The case study shows that the seemingly meaningless Ålandian landscape could first be interpreted as an instrument of nationalism. However, I show that the landscape in the context of artists' colonies went through quite dramatic change. The authenticity that these artists had been searching for – and captured on canvas – attracted tourists who wanted to come and see these places for themselves. Once the artists noticed this, they abandoned the once so meaningful landscape and started searching for a new site.

Although these landscapes were meaningful in the beginning, they became meaningless after they were discovered by tourists. This phenomenon was typical in the context of European artists' colonies at the end of the 19th century, and perhaps still is.