Towards the end of the 19th century, European artists began to express a new and profound interest in their unique local pasts and cultural inheritances. This growing sense of national identity prompted a major flowering of nationalist debate concerning the fast disappearing regional cultures throughout Europe. This was a debate that was largely shaped by the desire within several countries for cultural and artistic, and ultimately social and economic, independence.

As the new century dawned, national mythological literature and national epics, such as the Kalevala in Finland or the Cuchulainn legend in Ireland and Scotland, became major vehicles for cultural expression and inspired some of the most important art of the age. Several of the most important artists of the period were also key figures in this movement. They worked across all artistic media, from small-scale traditional domestic crafts and large-scale design, to major schemes of architecture. Often, rather than producing easel-paintings, artists undertook monumental programmes of mural decoration or stained-glass projects because of the social implications of such public art. For those countries that had not yet achieved their dream of self-sovereignty, it became imperative to promote their unique distinctive cultural present as unbroken with the past. This became particularly important for those small nations on the northern, eastern and western fringes of Europe and especially those that had been conquered and divided by powerful neighbours.

Although it is well known that countries on Europe’s outer borders, such as Finland, Norway, Scotland, Ireland, Poland and Hungary, had unique and far-reaching cultural renaissances in the form of ‘national revivals’, it is less well known that while each was distinctive, they also had much in common. And although direct connections existed, between Finnish and Hungarian artists or Irish and Scottish artists, several other factors contributed to a largely undocumented system of interaction and exchange. These ranged from educational and exhibiting opportunities in Paris, London, Berlin and Vienna, to the foundation of national collections of museums and research into vernacular and folk cultures; from the rise of mythology and legendary history in literature and music, to the multitude of localised ‘national’ exhibitions of contemporary art and new forms of integrated art and architecture in various local manifestations of the ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’. There was also the major role played by national displays at the International Exhibitions and World Fairs of the period.

It is within this Europe-wide ‘national revival’ movement that ideas of a renewal of art, and art as a cornerstone of modern society, were forged. The influence of unique local artistic traditions found fullest expression in forms of indigenous folk art and, although the globalising Industrial Revolution threatened many such folk traditions with extinction, at the heart of the ‘national revivals’ movement was a desire to refine art and society for the modern age. Thus, the focus on themes drawn from the life of the people, indigenous material
culture, national myths, and the native landscape has an enduring significance that is still powerfully resonant even in the 21st century.

The ‘European Revivals’ research project aims to reflect upon these national revivals in the six countries of Norway, Scotland, Ireland, Poland, Hungary and Finland, where art-historical scholarship on the subject has already been broadly established. However, there has never been a joint project that looks at this phenomenon on a wider scale and that has sought to analyse the multifarious connections and correspondences that helped shape the identities of each of these modern nations. The ‘European Revivals’ project, therefore, aims to study and show the similarities and differences of these countries for the first time on a European scale.

A comprehensive exhibition of the Kalevala’s impact on Finnish art history was on display concurrently with the conference in the Ateneum Art Museum.

2009 Conference Programme

Thursday 7 May, Ateneum Hall

Morning Session

Opening of the European Revivals Workshop. Maija Tanninen-Mattila, Director, Ateneum Art Museum

Plenary lecture. Professor Murdo Macdonald, University of Dundee: The Celtic Revival in Scotland, from James Macpherson to Patrick Geddes

Katalin Gellér, University of Budapest: The Influence of the Pre-Raphaelites in Hungary

Edyta Barucka, University of Warsaw: Stanislaw Wyspianski and the Dream of a Polish Acropolis

Sandra McElroy, National Museum of Ireland: Revival and Revolution: The Neo-Celtic style in Ireland

Roundtable Discussion. Chair: Joseph McBrinn

Afternoon Session

Plenary lecture. Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, Ateneum Art Museum: Inspiration from the Kalevala

Juliette MacDonald, Edinburgh College of Art: Northern Lights: Scottish Stained Glass and the Celtic Revival

Anna-Lisa Amberg, Independent art historian: Suur-Merijoki Manor – A Total Work of Art

Stella Bottai, University of Rome: The Question of National Style – Murals in Italy and in Finland at the turn of the 20th Century

Roundtable Discussion. Chair: Riitta Ojanperä

Plenary lecture. Joseph McBrinn, University of Ulster: The Interpretation of Dreams: The National Revival from Repression to Expression

Derek Fewster, University of Helsinki: Inventing your Ancestors – The Finnish Case

Katalin Keserü, University Eötvös Loránd, Budapest: Regionalism Then and Now

Laura Gutman-Hanhiivaa, independent art historian: Symbolist Artists’ Houses in Europe


Roundtable Discussion. Chair: Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff