



## Retelling the Stories of Finnish Art

Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

A year on from the opening of 'Stories of Finnish Art', the collections exhibition at the Ateneum Art Museum, Director Susanna Pettersson reflects on how her team went about reinterpreting an art-historical narrative by means of collections display, while designer Marcel Schmalgemeijer explains his innovative approach to the visual presentation of the show

In 2014, when Susanna Pettersson became Director of Helsinki's Ateneum Art Museum – one of the three museums of the Finnish National Gallery – the elegant Neo-Renaissance building was in the throes of renovation, with its permanent collections squeezed into just three rooms on the ground floor. Pettersson's appointment was not only timely, but she was also well placed to effect a radical change in reworking the collections display, not only as someone with tailormade academic credentials – she did her PhD on the museum's collections history – but also as a joint professor of museology with her finger sensitively on the pulse of trends in the field.

'The building and how it works was very familiar to me,' says Pettersson, 'from the time that it started out in October 1888, as well as how the spaces have been used at different times. The collection, which covers the period 1809–1970, is the heart of the Ateneum, so for me it was clear that we needed to move the collections to the ground and first floors and temporary exhibitions to the second floor and I started the process of collecting a core team to discuss this.' The team Pettersson was working with were looking for new ways to interpret the collection and new approaches to the collections research.

From the vision that resulted in the 'Stories of Finnish Art' exhibition that opened in 2016 (continuing through to 2020), two things stand out in the way that Pettersson marshalled these resources. First, she set about cultivating an environment of thinking outside the box, or as she puts it, 'curiosity as a driver', and secondly she inspired an unusually wide range of expertise to participate fully in the process.

The usual scenario for an exhibitions team would include a curator or two, designer, someone taking care of the educational side, another handling texts and catalogue, plus core technicians. Pettersson decided instead to gather the 'largest possible team around the table' comprising staff from all departments, including front-of-house staff, guides, gallery attendants, technicians, educational staff, research expertise, curators – 'everyone who had in-house experience, such as visitor experience and how people use the collections and what they do and don't appreciate.'



**Portraits of Finnish Artists. 'Stories of Finnish Art' collections exhibition at the Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

The range of expertise Pettersson has drawn on reveals much about her human values. 'I wanted to discuss how we set up the story with the entire team and that was a wonderful process because it also created a sense of ownership by everyone, and we could show each other how much we know about the collection from various perspectives which are not taken for granted. For example, the lived-in experience of someone who has been working as a gallery attendant for the past 20 years is so valuable – they have information that none of us on the curatorial side could ever dream of possessing in the same way.'

Such wide consultation did indeed bring with it some surprises. 'Creating the story included lots of ideas that needed to be tested and at the end of the day we really had to kill lots of darlings,' says Pettersson. 'For example, originally we had the idea of building an entire wall celebrating the history of Finnish female painters and sculptors, but then our guides said that's not a good idea. One of the arguments was that if we separate the Finnish female painters from the rest of the story it can be regarded as some sort of arrogant gesture. We then decided not to go in that direction and instead we integrated the women artists into the entire exhibition in order to reflect how things were in society at the time.'

Conversely, and unusually, it was decided not to integrate archive material to contextualise the collection works throughout the exhibition. 'Instead we realised we needed to trust the artworks and communicate the context using different means,' says Pettersson. That led to the creation of the 'Artists' Practice' gallery. Having such a room dedicated to the archival material not only reflects its importance as a contextual support for the art but also demonstrates the value of art-historical research as a story in itself. This story utilises a wide

range of material from the FNG Archive Collections, showing how Finnish artists learned their trade (photos of the Finnish Art Society's drawing school, artists' sketchbooks, women working from life in clay), the importance of travel (metro tickets and other mementoes from Paris, the heart of the *fin de siècle* art scene in Europe), how they exhibited (reproductions of posters advertising key art shows such as the first ARS exhibition in 1961) and what they learned from each other. The visual presentation of this material, which is something of an artwork in itself, was the brainchild of Mariëlle Tolenaar, a graphic designer in Holland, who has created a themed storyboard around three walls with a strong emphasis on collaged graphics using enlarged text and image facsimiles to enable easy reading. On the fourth wall a different featured artist is presented each season, with archival material in a vitrine relating to the artist. Close by, two more vitrines showcase aspects of the archive collections with themes changing every three months, while an interactive touch screen in the centre of the room unfolds the story of painter Helene Schjerfbeck's sketches.

Another surprise was the decision to include works by non-Finnish artists in the exhibition, such as Chagall, Munch, Van Gogh and even Andy Warhol. 'Even though the collection is called "Stories of Finnish Art" we wanted to show that art actually does not recognise any geographical borders,' says Pettersson. 'Inspirations and ideas have always travelled across countries and boundaries. So from the start you see, for example, Finnish and Nordic and European art presented in the same frame of our story.' Thus you will find Chagall's *The Mandolin Player* (1914) placed below Greta Hällfors-Sipilä's painting *St. John's Church* (c. 1918).

#### Artists' Practice Room. 'Stories of Finnish Art' collections exhibition at the Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



Initial decision-making was established through a core curatorial team that included the Ateneum's collections curator Anu Utriainen, who worked with the artists' portraits, senior researcher Erkki Anttonen, who specialises in works on paper, Riitta Ojanperä, Director of FNG Collections Management, Hanna-Leena Paloposki, FNG Archive and Library Manager, plus three educational professionals. Benchmarking of comparable exhibitions internationally was carried out to research current trends. 'The chief curator of the collections, Timo Huusko and I discussed the outlines for the galleries with this core team,' Pettersson explains, 'as well as the key messages, the role of the arts at any given time in the timeline and art's relation to the rest of society.' However, it would have been too unwieldy to have the entire curatorial team making the final decisions on the long list of works to go forward to the designer – that was in Pettersson's hands, along with Huusko. This is a key factor that has contributed to a sense of coherence to the overall exhibition, while at the same time drawing on extensive curatorial expertise. With the bulk of the research done, and the long list finalised, the focus turned to the visual coherence for the show, which was tasked to the Dutch designer, Marcel Schmalgemeijer.

'At this stage being a team of three meant we could make decisions quickly and easily, an important consideration as there was a tight deadline of just six months,' says Schmalgemeijer. 'In most projects the team is larger but for me this was the best way of working – Susanna and Timo could keep in contact with their colleagues, leaving the three of us to work closely together round the table and I think it led to more creative thinking.'

Schmalgemeijer, who originally worked as a scenographer in theatre, had built an excellent track record designing exhibitions for leading museums in his native Netherlands. In 2014 he reworked the Van Gogh Museum's permanent collection and prior to that had worked with the Hermitage at Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum and the Stedelijk. But it is through his work on 'Arjen Sankarit (Illusions of Reality)' at the Van Gogh Museum – which travelled to Helsinki in 2011 – that he arrived on the Nordic scene. Pettersson had deliberately chosen a non-Finnish designer. 'A Finnish designer would have known the significant works so well that the works would have already had a place of their own and I wanted to challenge that,' she explains.

Schmalgemeijer rose to that challenge. 'Susanna and Timo have a lot of knowledge about the artworks, the artists and their time. So for them a specific painting can represent a whole world. Because I am not an art historian, I like to "judge" a work for what I can see in it. I always try to be on the side of the visitor, who doesn't spend their life in museums. That fresh approach sometimes led them to rethink things.'

'What we also encountered,' he continues, 'was that while working around certain themes (or eras), you get these "mixed bags" of all kinds of artworks that don't have a lot in common visually. In the final selection of the artworks I took the role of visual curator, in order to get more visual coherence in a room. I think for a visitor's experience it works better to bring together artworks that are related in style or depiction, than to have the whole range of many different artworks in order to tell the complete story.'

Conceptually, the exhibition is organised according to discreet themes in each room that invite the visitor to enter at any point of the exhibition, hence the absence of a grand fanfare of an entrance. 'Each and every gallery should work as an entity and also so that it can be looked at in chapters that can be either worked back in time or started with the early 19th century,' Pettersson explains. Orientation was made easier for the viewer by unblocking several windows that had been previously covered to create wall space, thus helping the visitor to sense where they are in within the building. The themed concept also meant that some significant works that had traditionally occupied pride-of-place locations in the galleries have been hung in less prominent spots, but among the best of their kind. Thus in the 'People' section of the exhibition you will find Albert Edelfelt's *Luxembourg Gardens* (1887), and Akseli Gallen-Kallela's *Démasquée* (1888).

The educational input into the show brings appropriate pauses in the journey through the rooms, with the creation of 'family walls'. 'The first is about the *Kalevala*, Finland's national epic,' Pettersson explains, 'a collection of sung poems, so there is music and a copy of one of the oldest kanteles, a Finnish stringed instrument. We also borrowed the jawbone of a pike from the Natural History Museum, which is missing some teeth – that's indicated in the



**The Giant Pike family wall with *Kalevala* theme.**  
**'Stories of Finnish Art' collections exhibition at the Ateneum Art Museum**  
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

loan contract – and it's all related to the *Aino Triptych* by Gallen-Kallela, where Väinämöinen has captured the pike and from the jawbone he creates the first kantele.' On the family wall by the 'Urban Life' room, the construction theme is supported with a cylindrical plug of building materials excavated from the Ateneum during renovation in the 1980s. 'Here we are showing the mix of tiles, concrete, and wood that tells the history of this building.' Then there's a corner space supporting the 'Artists' Portraits' theme, where young viewers can look into a mirror and take a selfie, as well as a partly painted canvas, set at low level with the invitation, 'Please Touch'.

The visual coherence created in Schmalgemeijer's design is achieved through creating rhythm to the narrative of the show by presenting unusual juxtapositions of works, using bold colours and dramatic lighting. 'I am interested in seducing the visitor,' he says. 'You have to compete with visual input everywhere in the world, so that's why I want to introduce surprising presentations or elements.' There were indeed some exciting design solutions that he had not used before. 'What was really new was to combine the portrait busts on the 'Artists' Portraits' wall with the paintings,' he says. Thus the hall of fame, an extensive wall displaying portraits of Finnish painters represented in the exhibition, is hung salon-style with pictures jostling for position almost up to the ceiling, but then at intervals portrait busts by their sculptor colleagues punctuate the rhythm of the canvases like key chords in a musical score. Elsewhere, he employs this innovation in other rooms, where an occasional large-scale sculpture looms out of the wall, set between two paintings.

'It is important to create rhythm so the rooms are not all the same,' he points out. 'One of the worst things you see in some museums is when you enter a room and the works are placed together in the same configuration for six rooms in a row, so it becomes an effort



**Classics Gallery. 'Stories of Finnish Art' collections exhibition at the Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

to go through them.' The rhythm he has created is achieved partly by hanging some walls salon-style and others more spaciouly by foregrounding individual works with careful spotlighting to enhance the presence of the work in the room. 'We played with the whole plan of the first floor, so the themes were moved around, creating intensity then peace, working with contrasts.'

The contrasts are also evident in Schmalgemeijer's use of wall colours that respond to the theme of each room: deep maroon red, deep blue, and a rich dark brown. 'But,' he adds, 'I also realised that we needed a neutral colour that would appear in several rooms across the exhibition to hold the continuity, and that was a specially mixed blue-green grey – not a dull office grey.'

'The choices were very much an intuitive thing for me,' he continues. 'The deep turquoise blue in the 'People' section is a vibrant colour but because there were a lot of works there, many with golden frames, we could go to this extreme.'

A highlight of the design is the central gallery at the heart of the building with its huge floor space and original glass panel roof. Here, under the theme 'Classics', you find paintings from the Golden Age of Finnish art, as well as works showing the Nordic and French influences of the period, all placed in discreet groupings on the walls, while four figure sculptures are set on a generous plinth at low level in the centre of the room. 'There was an idea to show some intimate drawings in this gallery too,' says Schmalgemeijer, 'but I said if we skip the drawings then we can use the natural light coming through the glass roof.' The dark umber walls activate the architraving and roof, bringing ambient light and spaciousness into the entire

room. The design here creates an overall aesthetic that opens up the viewer's own aesthetic sensibility, preparing them for a fuller, richer encounter with the artworks.

Elsewhere, that aesthetic sensitivity is maintained as the moods change from themed room to themed room. In contrast to the airiness and natural light of the 'Classics' gallery, the 'Hope and Misgivings' room featuring two sculptures by Wäinö Aaltonen, has more intimate lighting. 'I wanted to create something really different, with an atmosphere of film noir, so walls are again dark and the focus is on the works. For another sculpture by Aaltonen, in the 'Urban Life' room, the *Granite Boy I* (1917–20), we used dramatic lighting from the back of the sculpture, which creates strong shadows on the floor, where the boy is looking, so here is where my theatrical background is evident.'

On the ground floor there is more risk-taking with the collection's post-war art. 'The typical way of presenting art during that period was the Greenbergian way, with white walls, just a few works and minimal information,' says Petterson, 'but we decided to continue with the colour palette of the first-floor galleries and also celebrate the possibility of showing more works.' Hence the room themed 'Form and Colour' presents its geometric abstract paintings, not in a white-cube space, but by grouping them into an overall rectangular block on a blue-grey wall, the bold shapes and colours of the works reflecting the zeitgeist yet retaining their individuality. 'We wondered if it would work, then curiosity won. We experimented with the different alternatives and conversations, then Marcel came up with lots of variations and then finally we were happy with how it looked on paper. On the day when the works were actually hung I was really nervous but when I saw the result I was super happy,' says Petterson.

The use of electronic media is restrained throughout the show, in keeping with the design aesthetic and the timeline of the collection. Where it is used it is used creatively, as in the black-and-white slide show of artists at work in their studios projected onto the 'Artists' Portraits' gallery's vista, which is a set of double doors that do not open for the visitor but that nevertheless invite them to step into the artists' world.

From a research perspective, Petterson has documented the process of creating this exhibition meticulously, from preserving models of proposed room designs with their dollhouse-like moveable elements, to photographs of early round-table discussions, to paint colour test swatches. In 'Stories of Finnish Art', the combined effort of so many museum professionals has given new life to the collection, and is contributing to innovation in the museum field as a whole. Further afield, other art museums, including the National Gallery in London, are benchmarking the exhibition as they prepare to rework their own collections. 'Stories of Finnish Art' is certainly on trend and on the map.