

New Perspectives on Hugo Simberg's Contribution to Symbolism

Interview by Gill Crabbe, FNG Research

One of Finland's great fin-de siècle artists, Hugo Simberg, is less well known abroad, yet his travels in Europe, argues Marja Lahelma in her new book on the artist, had a more extensive impact on his work than had been previously thought

The shared goal of the Finnish National Gallery with its three museums – Ateneum Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma and Sinebrychoff Art Museum – is to facilitate and actively generate new approaches to the body of research on the most well-known artists in Finnish art history and in the museum's collections. The book series *Artists of the Ateneum* invites some of the best experts in the field to contribute in this work. The second book in the series focuses on Hugo Simberg (1873–1917).

When art historian Dr Marja Lahelma was invited to write the book on Simberg for this series, she was given six months to research and turn in her manuscript. This might seem a tight deadline, particularly as Lahelma concedes she did not consider herself an expert on the artist. However, the result is a concise, comprehensive book that takes a fresh look at one of Finland's most unusual and highly regarded artists of the *fin-de-siècle* period.

Lahelma is no stranger to this period in Nordic art history and her credentials show she was well placed to undertake this project. 'My PhD thesis was on the dynamics of self and art in the *fin de siècle* – I had also delivered a conference paper on the connections between the work of Hans Holbein and Hugo Simberg, and the Ateneum Art Museum wanted a book that offered a fresh perspective on Simberg.'

For some of the time during this project Lahelma was also working in Edinburgh, so being far away from Helsinki the digital availability of research materials proved vital. 'I wanted to read all of his letters. Most of the material I needed is in the FNG and fortunately the letters are stored digitally online.' The remaining research was carried out in and around Helsinki, ranging from studying sketchbooks held in the FNG Collections, notebooks from Simberg's first biographer Sakari Saarikivi, and gathering oral testimony from the artist's descendants.

The Ateneum Art Museum holds around 800 artworks by Hugo Simberg in its collection, yet Lahelma says, 'It's surprising how little research has been done, considering how highly regarded the artist is in Finland. So often we see the same small number of artworks reproduced in publications on Simberg and I hope the Ateneum publication will change that.'

The book is indeed richly illustrated and gives a broad-ranging introduction to the artist, who was a key exponent of Finnish Symbolism and who produced a wide-ranging body of works, including visionary paintings, portraits and landscapes. It also reveals fresh insights



Hugo Simberg, *The Garden of Death*, 1896, watercolour and gouache on paper, mounted on etching paper, 15.8 x 17.5cm, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jouko Könönen

into the influence of his travels in Europe on his work, as well as new perspectives on the impact of key events in his personal life on his art.

So what kind of approach did Lahelma take in undertaking her research for the book? 'I wanted to put his work more into an art-historical context because many scholars have emphasised that, as an artist, his work was so original and unique. That may be true, but he was also a part of the time. Although he was definitely an original artist, it's interesting to know what he was looking at and what he may have found inspiring. And yet this doesn't detract from his originality.'

This point also has to do with the way art history has been written in Finland from various nationalist perspectives, Lahelma explains. 'Many art historians haven't even wanted to look at the international context. Finnish art around 1900 has been so closely tied up with the struggle for independence and the project of building a national identity. The whole period has been labelled as National Romanticism in order to emphasise the political aspect. Of course there are exceptions – in the 1960s Finnish art historian Salme Sarajas-Korte was a pioneer in looking at the international field. I have very much followed in her footsteps.' Sarajas-Korte's studies on Symbolism in its international context, published in the 1960s, are still valid and very much referred to in Finnish research.

Indeed, in the past 10–15 years, there has been a new wave of Symbolism research internationally that is redefining the Symbolist movement, Lahelma continues. 'Instead of viewing it as a movement that imitated French Symbolism, it has become clear with new research that, right from the beginning, it was an international art movement, with art students in Paris from all over the world. Without them there wouldn't have been a Symbolist movement as we know it.'



Hugo Simberg, *Boy from Säkkijärvi*, 1897, oil on canvas, 31.3 x 43.4cm, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Janne Mäkinen

There are new research trends on Simberg's interest in art history, Lahelma points out, and having followed these up, her book sheds new light on the influences of his first trip abroad, to London in 1896, encouraged by his mentor Akseli Gallen-Kallela. 'There were hints about his interest in Holbein in earlier research,' says Lahelma. 'The figure of death that appears in key works by Simberg clearly relates to Holbein's imagery of death and we know that he went to the British Museum to see Holbein's prints.' There, Simberg would have seen the suite of woodcut prints *Dance of Death* (c. 1523–25), where the allegorical figure of Death is presented as a character who adopts many guises as he sweeps up those in his clutches. Simberg's personification of death in one of his best-known works, *The Garden of Death* (1896), is here translated into a strangely kindly figure, sympathetic even, as he tends the plants with care and attention. 'The stance of the figure is human and poignant. There is tenderness in the way the skeleton holds the withering flowers. And we know it was an important work for him as he included it in one of his biggest projects, the Tampere Cathedral commission.'

What hadn't been researched before Lahelma came to write her book, is the wider influence of Holbein's art on the young Simberg. 'He also went to the National Gallery when he was in London, where he would have seen Holbein's portraits and I think there is a clear resonance between some of these and Simberg's portraits.' Lahelma suggests that making this kind of connection is fostered by the new wave of Symbolism research: 'Previously, Holbein would not have fitted in to the idea of what Symbolist influence could be. That has meant earlier researchers saw two completely separate fields in Simberg's work; his Symbolist work and then his portraiture,' she points out. 'But I think the portraits have a Symbolist aspect too. For example, in the portrait of his cousin, *Poppy* (1896), the poppies in the background are definitely a Symbolist element and there is something mysterious about this work – it is timeless, there is nothing to indicate that we are looking at a modern woman. Moreover, the fact that she is painted in profile could also have come from Simberg seeing Holbein's profile portrait of Erasmus. This is a new way of looking at these kinds of work.'



Hugo Simberg, *The Wounded Angel*, 1903, oil on canvas, 127 x 154cm, Ahlström Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

Reviewing the contextual backdrop to Simberg's life opens up the question of the role of interpretation. In her book Lahelma states that dual meanings and complex allusions are a feature of Simberg's art, citing *The Wounded Angel* (1903) as a painting that 'places the sublime and the commonplace in dynamic juxtaposition'.

So given that there is little written evidence of the artist's thoughts about his work, what is the role of the researcher in interpreting meaning in his work? 'I would say it's a challenge because it gives us the freedom to reflect on our own responses because his works are so rich. The knowledge of the background to a subject provides a platform for a more personal response to an artwork. What I try to do is to offer ideas, the inspiration that I find in the works.'

Lahelma illustrates her point: 'Simberg's works have such a rich network of ideas which is precisely what makes them so timeless, you can always read new things into them. When you look at *The Wounded Angel*, you are left wondering – the work is not literal, it has more of a felt sense, precisely because I think he was unable to put these things into words.'

One of several areas in which her book ascribes fresh meaning to Simberg's art is the suggestion that the artist was aware as a young man that he had an incurable disease and would probably face an untimely death. In the Sakari Saarikivi papers in the FNG Archive Collections Lahelma found details of his illness in the margins of Saarikivi's notes for his 1948 biography of the artist and this was confirmed by one of Simberg's descendants when Lahelma visited them. Lahelma suggests this evidence would cast the images of death in his work in a new light. 'Of course death was a favourite subject in Symbolist art, but it would perhaps resonate more for Simberg, knowing he had a serious illness. Perhaps he was trying to become more familiar with the idea of death and that would explain why his portrayal of death is very different from that of other artists. It could well explain his more personal



Hugo Simberg, *Death Asks for Pictures on his Scythe*, 1897, etching, posthumous proof, 12 x17cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

relationship to death because he knew it was coming perhaps sooner than expected.' So in his etching, *Death Asks for Pictures on his Scythe* (1897), the figure of Death sits patiently with his legs crossed, while the artist paints two lovers on his scythe. 'For Simberg, death is not strange and not even frightening but is more a part of life and he seems on friendly terms with it. And that would make sense if we know he had an illness that had no cure.'

Having completed her commission for Ateneum Art Museum, Lahelma says there is still much research to be done into Simberg's life and art. 'I think there is more to discuss about the art-historical context and also the cultural history surrounding his work.' One area she would like to delve into further is the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, something she touched on in her book.

'The Pre-Raphaelite influence needs more research. I also want to look into the cultural exchange between the Nordic countries and British culture because the research so far has been very much centred on French influences. When Simberg was in London he also went to see contemporary art by Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Edward Burne-Jones, who influenced many other Finnish artists.'

Lahelma is also keen to investigate Simberg's working processes. 'When I looked at his sketchbooks, for example, I could see that his process was not a spontaneous thing – he planned the details carefully before he made his work. The whole thinking process behind his works is much more sophisticated than we have been previously led to believe. He kept refining his ideas through the sketches until they were distilled. Those details in his paintings are precise and very charged, having been meticulously honed.'

Meanwhile, Lahelma is carrying out a new research project into the relationship between Decadence and an idealised notion of the North in *fin-de siècle* art. As she says, 'It will be interesting to see how Hugo Simberg's work looks like from that perspective.'