

Tapping in to Europe's Digital Cultural Heritage

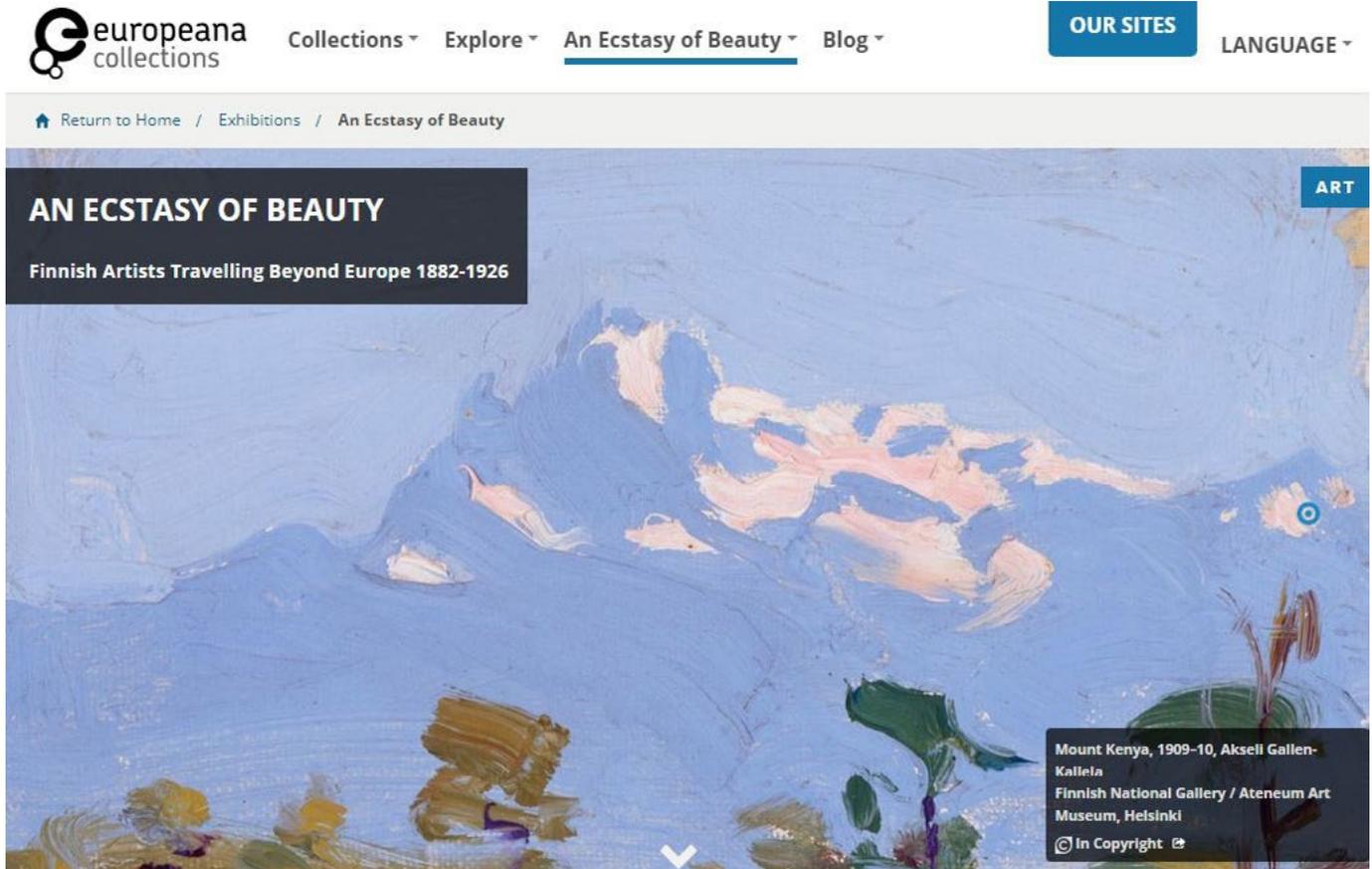
Interview by Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

'We transform the world with culture' – this is the motto of the Europeana Foundation, Europe's largest digital platform for cultural heritage, where FNG's Archive and Library Manager / Chief Curator Hanna-Leena Paloposki spent two months on a unique residency at its headquarters in The Hague

As art experiences for the general public expand increasingly beyond the walls of art museums, online collections and online art exhibitions are offering a new kind of accessibility to artworks in the 21st century. Now, not only can you access a vast array of curated cultural material such as image galleries, podcasts and exhibition tasters through art museums' own web pages, but international cultural organisations are also offering portals and platforms for important cultural material that are proving invaluable, not only for the art-loving public, but also for researchers and art professionals. One such organisation is the Europeana Foundation, and if you visit the Europeana Collections homepage, you will find an online exhibition, 'An Ecstasy of Beauty', which explores the travels made by Finnish artists from 1882 to 1926 and how their journeys influenced their art. Thus visitors from across the world can discover, perhaps for the first time, Finland's key artists of the period, such as Akseli Gallen-Kallela, who travelled in Africa, and Hugo Simberg, who journeyed to the Caucasus to visit his engineer brother.

The EU's commitment to creating a digital European library to make Europe's cultural heritage available to all, led to the creation of the Europeana Foundation and website in 2008, which in 2010 provided access to around 10 million digital objects – today that figure has risen to 51 million – through the contributions of more than 3,000 cultural institutions mostly from across Europe. Besides being a portal, it is a platform and publishes curated online exhibitions and thematic collections, as well as raising awareness of its content through active engagement with social media. The Finnish National Gallery joined Europeana many years ago, sharing a large amount of its art collections online.

As part of its continuing commitment to international co-operation and networking, in 2016 the Finnish National Gallery launched a work exchange residency scheme for its employees to fund them for periods of up to two months to work in organisations abroad. So when Hanna-Leena Paloposki, Archives and Library Manager / Chief Curator at the Finnish National Gallery, was awarded a residency, her manager Riitta Ojanperä, Director of FNG Collections Management, made an inspired suggestion that she apply to work at Europeana, because the development of the collections online is one of the main tasks of the department. Having successfully arranged a work exchange, Paloposki found herself working last autumn at Europeana's headquarters in The Hague. The online exhibition 'An Ecstasy of Beauty', which is part of Europeana's dedicated online exhibitions platform, is just one result of the time she spent there.



Screen capture of the front page of 'An Ecstasy of Beauty. Finnish Artists Travelling Beyond Europe 1882-1926', the online exhibition that Hanna-Leena Paloposki created for the Europeana Collections website

'My aim was to find a residency where I could learn more about the online availability of different kinds of cultural heritage collections, opening data and international collaboration,' says Paloposki. 'Not being a museum and not having its own collections, I thought that Europeana could give me new perspectives on the accessibility of collections on a European scale.'

During her time in The Hague Paloposki worked closely with her assigned 'tutor' Europeana's Art and Photography Collections Manager Douglas McCarthy. 'Hanna-Leena is the first senior museum professional that Europeana has had in residence,' he explains. 'She was based within Europeana's Collections Team which focuses on showcasing and sharing high-quality and diverse cultural heritage content through editorial features such as galleries, blogs and exhibitions. We discussed various ideas together whereby the artworks and the archive collections of the Finnish National Gallery could be combined with other material available in Europeana.'

Both organisations saw the residency as an ideal opportunity to upgrade the Finnish National Gallery's collections data in Europeana, especially in terms of image quality. Paloposki could then use the improved images as the basis of the 'An Ecstasy of Beauty' online exhibition. 'When FNG joined Europeana we only had low-resolution photos accessible,' she says, 'but when I was in The Hague we updated our data set at Europeana with higher resolution photos which enables larger images to be viewed online. Nowadays Europeana, being both a platform for exhibitions as well as a portal, is focusing on material with high quality images. The Finnish National Gallery has published the images of its art collections both on its own collections website and in Europeana with no reuse rights statement. FNG has

Kikuyu Moran Bantu, 1896–97,
 Max Schoeller,
 The Austrian Museum of Folk Life
 and Folk Art, Vienna,
 Photo Collection,
 Museum of Ethnology, Vienna



Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Dancing Kikuyu Warriors*, 1909,
 oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 19.5cm x 16.5cm.
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

importance of creating carefully thought out keywords for the subject matter of FNG material, so that the metadata can be more easily linked in with metadata from other organisations. 'I really noticed that when I was making the online exhibition for Europeana,' she says. 'When I am working at FNG, of course I am doing research but I am very much looking at it from the museum professional's point of view, but at Europeana I was using a system that I was less familiar with than our own systems and so in that situation I became the user.'

'When I was making the online exhibition, I knew which artists I wanted to use but I wanted to find something in Europeana that I could connect to the material I had already selected from the FNG collections, so I was doing research in their collections. For example, I knew that the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela had been to Kenya,' she says, 'and was staying in the Kikuyu tribe area so, using the keyword "Kikuyu", I found a photograph of a Kikuyu soldier on the Europeana Collections website, which was great because there is a painting by Gallen-Kallela, *Dancing Kikuyu Warriors* (1909). The photograph was from a museum in Vienna so there was a link to their website where I could find a higher resolution image.'

The Europeana Collections website has a featured image each month from the collections on its home page, and McCarthy suggested Europeana set up a competition to coincide with the celebration of 100 years of Finnish Independence in December 2017, publishing a selection of pictures of the FNG artworks so that users of Europeana social media could vote for their favourites. 'I chose four images together with Europeana exhibition

producer Małgorzata Szykielewska from those that had already been published as open data and could be used as large images,' Paloposki explains. 'From these, Hugo Simberg's *The Wounded Angel* won the most "likes" and the image was published on the home page. Europeana is very active in social media, with its own communications team co-ordinating material generated by all of the staff. Of course it's also a very easy way to reach those people who are interested in digital heritage.'

'That is one of the benefits of Europeana – it is one more way to make your collections accessible and to present them in the European context as part of the European cultural heritage. Even for FNG it is still another way to display your collections at a European level and to connect our collections with other collections and to connect with audiences who wouldn't find us otherwise.'

There are also many art, museum, education and cultural institution professionals who connect with Europeana through the Europeana Network Association, which brings together experts working in the field of digital heritage, united by a shared mission to expand and improve access to Europe's digital cultural heritage and who want to research, share and create new projects. The Europeana Pro website offers a lot of information. 'Europeana is about connecting European cultural heritage and about linking people, institutions and professionals, not about giving a platform for one institution but about connecting them,' says Paloposki.

Europeana Collections offer a huge possibility for researchers, too. Europeana is thus aiming to help and promote the use of the material in academic research, and Europeana Research started its own grants programme in 2016. The second round of applications was organised in the autumn of 2017 with the three winners announced just before Christmas.

During the two months she spent at Europeana's offices Paloposki says she also benefited from the intercultural working environment. 'I was working with people from different backgrounds and expertise from many countries. It was interesting to see a foundation with a staff of about 50 people – how they co-operate, collaborate, how they find new project partners, how they are enhancing the accessibility of the European cultural heritage through networking and how they were establishing and organising international projects. For example, I attended the kickoff meeting for the project BYZART, which is creating one of the widest online collections of Byzantine art and archaeology and led by the BYZART consortium. The project aims to digitise new material, as well as cataloguing and making available existing rich archive collections about Byzantine cultural heritage in Europe. I also saw how to curate content to the platform like this exhibition and photo galleries, how to think about what interests people at the pan-European level. I also saw in a more concrete way how Finnish artists are just one part of the wider phenomenon of artists travelling.

'Putting yourself in a totally new situation changes your mindset,' she continues. 'It's a different kind of framework because my job at FNG is so totally different – and my position at Europeana was more fluid, because I didn't have the responsibilities of my usual job. Not having a common history with that workforce can be challenging but it also makes you think creatively.'

The benefits of Paloposki's residency were by no means a one-way process, as McCarthy points out. 'As the author and editor of several Europeana exhibitions, I was really interested to see how Hanna-Leena developed the narrative of 'An Ecstasy of Beauty', tailoring the structure of the exhibition to the content. I learned a lot from her about the lives of the featured artists and about Finnish cultural heritage. Having Hanna-Leena in residence was a hugely positive experience for Europeana and we are immensely grateful to her and the Finnish National Gallery. We would be very open to similar ventures in the future, from Finland and beyond.'

To view Hanna-Leena Paloposki's online exhibition, 'An Ecstasy of Beauty', visit Europeana Collections <https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/exhibitions/an-ecstasy-of-beauty>

To read Hanna-Leena Paloposki's interview by Camille Tenneson, 'Museums in the digital age: insights from the Finnish National Gallery', on the Europeana Pro Blog, visit <https://pro.europeana.eu/post/museums-in-the-digital-age-insights-from-the-finnish-national-gallery>