Unstill Life – Mikko Carlstedt’s Correspondence and Art, 1911–1921

Max Fritze, MA student, University of Helsinki

This article is published as a result of a three-month research internship at the Finnish National Gallery, during which Max Fritze studied material in the Archive Collections of the Finnish National Gallery.

Foreword

When I applied for a position as a research intern at the Finnish National Gallery, I submitted a plan to research the November Group, a loosely described group of expressionist artists active from 1916 to 1924.¹ I wanted to approach the group through some of its lesser known members and affiliates, namely the artists Mikko Carlstedt (1892–1964) and Arvo Makkonen (1894–1956). The archive collections of both artists – comprising letters, notes, exhibition catalogues, photographs etc. – have been donated to the Finnish National Gallery. I was especially curious to see how Carlstedt saw his own position in the group as he was a member, whereas Makkonen exhibited with them as a guest artist. Were some inner workings of the November network detailed in Carlstedt’s notes or correspondence?

As I soon found out, the material I was working with did not contribute much to the discourse surrounding the November Group as such. However, the abundant archive material focused my attention on Carlstedt himself. Not much has been written about him – just some short biographical texts² and mentions of his name as a side note on the November Group in most broad treatises of Finnish art. In 1955, Onni Okkonen (1886–1962) wrote in his History of Finnish Art: ‘Around 1912 Mikko Carlstedt represented the new outlook on landscape painting, ¹ In 1916 the core members had their first group exhibition. During their exhibition in November 1917 the group got its name and exhibited for the first time under the November Group title in 1918. It is a question of nomenclature whether one sees the group’s first exhibition taking place in 1916, 1917 or 1918.
later on he has been known as a more conventional still-life painter.’ A seemingly innocuous statement, but ‘conventional’ could be easily read as a slight. All of the artist’s toil and trouble, a career spanning decades neatly compressed in a single word, effectively saying, ‘Nothing new here’. A quick image search, however, produces results that seem to mirror Okkonen’s statement; row after row of more or less classically painted still-lifes depicting colourful flowers in vases and vegetables on tables, most of them painted after the 1930s. Technically excellent and pleasing to the eye, but exactly the sort of imagery art historians rarely concern themselves with.

This article is not intended to be a comprehensive monograph. Instead I will try to bridge the gap in Okkonen’s description; to understand the first steps of a young modernist who idolised Cézanne, Munch and Van Gogh but who ended up painting more like Chardin. The case of Mikko Carlstedt may also further our understanding of broader phenomena at work during the period, for example, the nature of patronage contracts between artists and their dealers. The focus will be on the first decade of his career, starting from 1911. The crux of this article will be the years 1917–21: his contract with the art dealer Leonard Bäcksbacka, his first solo exhibitions in Helsinki, involvement in the November Group, experiments with graphic arts, his struggle with anxiety and the development of an idiosyncratic, expressionist style of painting. The final section will briefly touch on his shift towards specialising in classical still-life.

My main sources are Carlstedt’s correspondence found in the archives of Mikko and Kerstin Carlstedt, Arvo Makkonen, Ludvig Wennervirta and Hertta Tirranen, as well as his correspondence with his art dealer and patron Leonard Bäcksbacka. The archive of Mikko and Kerstin Carlstedt served as a perfect starting point, but the artist’s own archive also proved not to be an innocent assortment of randomly preserved material. Carlstedt had sorted through his correspondence, sometimes making notes in the documents clarifying things left vague by the lack of context. One can imagine he also destroyed a number of letters that he thought might not conform to the image he was trying to project. For example, of his vast – and often heated – correspondence with Bäcksbacka during the contract in 1917–21, only two letters have made it into the archive. His letters found in the other aforementioned collections, however, help to round out the material. I will also track Carlstedt’s contemporary reception via the microfilmed press cutting collections of the Finnish National Gallery.

Of note, Carlstedt wrote a short, unpublished autobiography. This 26-page document, found in his archive, has been an important source for most of the previous texts on him, but I think that some critical reflection is needed when using it as source material. He wrote the autobiography in 1947, at a time when he was concerned about his legacy and about the fact that at that time his name was omitted from the art-historical writings of the 1910s and 20s. Carlstedt was not even mentioned as a member of the November Group in the first edition of Okkonen’s book in 1945; instead, his brother Kalle Carlstedt (1891–1952) was falsely posited as a fully-fledged member. Mikko Carlstedt then wrote a long, apologetic letter to Okkonen asking for a correction, leading the author to add in the reference to him into the second edition of the book in 1955. In his autobiography Carlstedt addresses the incident, as well as other perceived faults in art-historical writings about matters concerning him. As such, the text can be seen as an attempt to influence future discourse in a direction he deemed suitable.

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3 ‘V:n 1921 tienoilla esiintyi uuden maisemanäkemyksen edustajana myös Mikko Carlstedt (s.1892), myöhemmin tunnettu asetelmamaalarina sovinnaisempaan henkeen.’ Okkonen, Onni, 1955. Suomen Taiteen Historia. Helsinki: WSOY, 709. All translations in this article are by the author.

4 I would like to thank Helena Hätönen from the Finnish National Gallery for her help with finding the relevant archive collections. I would also like to extend my thanks to my tutors at the Finnish National Gallery, PhD. Riitta Ojanperä and PhD. Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff for all of their expert advice on the article.

5 Almost all previous texts on Carlstedt have leaned heavily on Hertta Tirranen’s article from 1955, which in turn was largely based on the information presented in the autobiography.

Bohemian hubris and melancholy

After matriculating in Hämeenlinna, Mikael Wilhelm Zakarias Carlstedt started his art studies in 1911 at the school of the Finnish Art Society in the Ateneum, Helsinki. In his class were, among others, his brother Kalle Carlstedt, Arvo Makkonen and future November Group colleague Ragnar Ekelund (1892–1960). Prior to entering the Ateneum, his contacts with the arts were minimal; he was born in Lieto, the son of a station agent, but was raised in Sääksmäki, western Finland. The nearest larger city, Hämeenlinna, suffice to say, was not exactly a hub of artistic influence at the time. He had dabbled in painting and drawing, but according to his autobiography, his passion for the arts was truly ignited in 1910 by a visit to sculptor Emil Wikström’s studio, where he saw paintings by Anders Zorn, Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Pekka Halonen among others. For Carlstedt, the reign of these paragons of art would prove to be short.

In 1911, the field of Finnish arts was in flux. Old ideals were in crisis due to increasing societal tensions, the fear of socialism and what some art historians have branded as the rising artist proletariat with their dismissal of national culture. ‘The artist proletariat’ refers to a young guard of artists which started to form in the beginning of the 20th century as the

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7 Autobiography, Helsinki, 27 December 1947. MKCA, 7. Archive Collections, FNG, p. 4–5. Sculptor Emil Wikström (1864–1942) and the painters Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931) and Pekka Halonen (1865–1933) were renowned Finnish artists. Anders Zorn (1860–1920) was one of the most famous Swedish painters of the period.

school of the Finnish Art Society amended its entrance requirements to ease the inclusion of the Finnish-speaking working classes. They represented a significant demographic change within Finnish art circles, as their ranks were filled with the offspring of Finnish-speaking craftsmen and farmers, a large part of them hailing from the countryside.9

Carlstedt’s first letters home from Helsinki marvelled at the grandeur of the capital, and specifically the Ateneum, which in 1910 he described as ‘heavenly’.10 Many of his generation of artists quickly became disillusioned, though, by the quality of teaching at the Ateneum and started to form networks independent of the older generation’s influence.11 I found traces of this disappointment in Carlstedt’s letter home from the second week of his studies, where he describes not seeing much of his teachers, but already making acquaintance with Jalmari Ruokokoski (1886–1936), whom he described as one of the leading young artists in the country.12 Ruokokoski and his friends had made the Upper-Brondin café in Helsinki their headquarters – a place to mingle, drink, complain and share knowledge not imparted at school.13 According to Carlstedt’s contemporary Viljo Kojo (1891–1966), the influence of the older ‘Knights of Bronda’, such as Ruokokoski and Tyko Sallinen (1879–1955) was so strong that most started to try to look, act and paint like them without even noticing.14

In the company of the boisterous ‘bohemians’ of the Bronda-circle, Carlstedt must have at first felt like an outsider. He was reserved, educated and his family was middle class, so in order to fit in, some revision of character was necessary. The Mikko Carlstedt one gets to know from letters from the start of his career could be brash and cocky, sure of his imminent success and openly dismissive of his predecessors.15 His transformation from the blue-eyed country boy filled with wonder and awe in the capital to the character of a cynical bohemian rebel becomes evident from his letter home in 1913:

Axeli Gallén Kallela [sic., whom we used to admire a bit, has a solo exhibition in Ateneum. A pitiful painter, for this exhibition has without a doubt demonstrated how silly and empty his art really is. Needless showing off with banal colours and brilliant technique. Nowadays when I even hear the mention of his name, I nearly become nauseous. The critics and public all give the highest praise to his trivial handiness. People are so dumb, so utterly incapable of understanding art, that I feel ashamed for them.16

It was a period of choosing sides and his was with the young modernists who were seeking change. Gallen-Kallela had fallen from being an idol to ‘pitiful’; Carlstedt posited him here almost as a personification of the rigidness and conservatism he perceived in the Finnish art world. The common art-historical narrative of the pursuits of this generation of Finnish modernists has seen its ethos built on a spirit of opposition, and after all, what would

10 Postcard from Mikko Carlstedt to Carl Carlstedt, Helsinki, 22 May 1910. MKCA, 6. Archive Collections, FNG.
12 Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to the Carlstedt family, Helsinki, 24 September 1911. MKCA, 6. Archive Collections, FNG.
15 Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Arvo Makkonen, Sääksmäki, 27 August 1913. Arvo Makkonen Archive (AMA), file 2. Archive Collections, FNG.
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a rebellion be without an image of a tyrant to rebel against. Gallen-Kallela was the country’s leading painter in the national Romantic genre, a genre that many modernists criticised. As President of the Artists’ Association of Finland, Gallen-Kallela was also an authority figure, and I presume his fall from grace had to do with events from the previous year, when the most controversial – and subsequently the most highly regarded – artist of the younger generation, Tyko Sallinen, openly lashed out at him during an official meeting.

The frustration expressed towards critics and the paying public might derive from rude awakenings to the harsh realities of the artist’s life that Carlstedt encountered earlier the same year. His first solo exhibition in Hanko in the summer of 1913 had abysmal results; just before closing, it had been visited by just 19 adults and 4 children. On the other hand one could argue that failures like this were indispensable for the construction of a believable bohemian identity; every misunderstood genius is dependent on his naysayers. Even though most of his peers were not especially well read or cosmopolitan – Carlstedt’s matriculation

18 Carlstedt called Gallen-Kallela’s paintings ‘a caricature of culture’. Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to the Carlstedt family, Helsinki, 26 November 1913. MKCA, 1. Archive Collections, FNG.
20 Postcard from Mikko Carlstedt to Carl Carlstedt, Hanko, 20 July 1913. MKCA, 6. Archive Collections, FNG.
was a rare exception\(^2\) – the tragic life stories of great artists were well known and had become the stuff of legends. Tales of Van Gogh’s ear and Munch’s depression led to the notion of having to struggle and suffer in order to create.\(^2\)

The bohemian spirit in his letters from the beginning of the decade opens some avenues of interpretation regarding his art, and I would argue that Carlstedt’s self-portrait from 1913 illustrates this newly embraced identity. Painted non finito using loose and long brushstrokes with dull tones of grey, brown and black on un-primed cardboard, he depicted himself in the unofficial uniform of the bohemian; walking a tightrope between dandy and hobo, he sports the dishevelled look designed to show just how little he cares about the judgmental gaze of bourgeois society.\(^2\) The character of the impoverished übermensch, suffering cognitive dissonance between unbridled hubris and the blame and alienation borne of low social standing, is also present in the literature Carlstedt immersed himself in at the time. He mentions Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Strindberg and Nietzsche as the quintessential literary influences of his youth.\(^2\) Although the name-dropping may be retroactive posturing, it is not hard to see a shade of Raskolnikov in the portrait. Cardboard was a poor man’s substitute for canvas when painting with oils, and as such it carries with it connotations that the expected and neutral canvas does not: one could argue, that by leaving the cardboard bare, Carlstedt did not try to hide his poverty, instead he embraced it as a part of bohemian class consciousness.

Despite the handling of form evidently inspired by Cézanne, especially noticeable in the folds of the jacket, the painting feels close in spirit to the ennui that is characteristic of fin de siècle portraiture. This all-consuming world-weariness could be a performance of sorts, a way to distinguish oneself as exceptional in seeing the triviality of everyday life. It could also function as a built-in self-defence mechanism against poor reviews; being bored of – and thus above – the uninformed opinions of the mindless masses and out-of-touch critics made rejection easier to swallow. The boredom expressed by Carlstedt’s heavy-lidded eyes, complete with the dark bags under them, could be directed to its probable cause: us, the art-viewing public.

Additionally, his letters in the Arvo Makkonen archive show that Carlstedt also suffered from a broken heart in 1913. His brief romance in Helsinki with a young Russian woman had ended after her family pushed her into marrying an officer, a phenomenon Carlstedt deemed barbaric and which brought to light the hypocrisy of so-called ‘refined’ society.\(^2\) The sorrows of young love seemed to inspire his art though, as in the same letter he wrote, as dramatically as only a 21-year old can, of how his first love would be his last and how he had been under almost divine inspiration for weeks and ascended to new heights in portraiture.\(^2\)

Carlstedt seemed to view himself, as an artist, as increasingly more detached from society and even harboured Nietzschean notions of a slave-morality with its meaningless

\(^{21}\) However, the claim by Juha Ilvas that Carlstedt was the only November Group member to matriculate is false. At least Ragnar Ekelund had finished his matriculation examination.


\(^{22}\) Karjalainen 2016, 50.


\(^{25}\) Undated letter in 1913 from Mikko Carlstedt to Arvo Makkonen. AMA, 2. Archive Collections, FNG.

\(^{26}\) Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Arvo Makkonen in Sääksmäki, 27 August 1913. AMA, 2. Archive Collections, FNG. The portrait in question, which Carlstedt refers to as ‘The Smoker’, is in the Collections of The Hämeenlinna Art Museum under the name *Pekkalan Kalle*. It is an obvious homage to Cézanne’s ‘The Smoker’ from 1890. Cézanne’s version, with its explicit depiction of boredom, could have been the main inspiration for Carlstedt’s portraiture of the period.
customs that bound people to mediocrity. After spending an evening with old family friends in 1913, he wrote to Arvo Makkonen:

I haven’t even been to the parsonage during the entire summer, though others have, and these poor slaves of conventional manners think I am a damn scoundrel, which I probably am. I do not envy their hollow socialising skills – what a boring night yesterday was!\(^\text{27}\)

Being bored could have been a way to process and express these sentiments of alienation. According to Patricia Meyer Spacks, who has written about the history of boredom in literature: ‘In its existential early twentieth-century representations, boredom provided a point of reference for the cultural and psychic condition for those feeling the emptiness implicit in a life lacking powerful community or effective tradition’\(^\text{28}\). Existential boredom has been described as a sort of emptiness, resulting from the sufferer seeing themselves as isolated from others.\(^\text{29}\) With their explicit rejections of tradition and customs, existential melancholy and boredom might have been essential parts of the early modern experience for many artists. Especially so for Carlstedt, as he had already started to suffer from debilitating social anxiety in 1899 when he started school away from home in Hämeenlinna.\(^\text{30}\) To follow on, I would argue that boredom and melancholy are the most distinguishing features of his portraiture.

In the machismo culture of the young modernists in Helsinki, Carlstedt felt the pressure of conforming to the expected ideals of a man he could not be. In 1913, Arvo Makkonen felt the same:

I often ponder what is the purpose of a man like me, sentimentally unmanly up to every nerve. It pains me unspeakably that I cannot conceal my sentimentality, as for example in this letter I reveal my worthlessness and womanliness to you.\(^\text{31}\)

Carlstedt may have tried to create a more masculine public image through his art. In a few of his self-portraits the melancholy and boredom give way to a more confident stoicism. Critics later considered his style manly, as they saw vital energy in the sturdiness and even the lack of emotion in his paintings.\(^\text{32}\) Carlstedt was not the only one struggling to live up to the image of a masculine creative force. For example, the young Tyko Sallinen was small and frail with a cherub-like face and long locks, and had to compensate for his looks and dandyism with brutish behaviour.\(^\text{33}\) I would imagine that this excessive masculine posturing also led to the November Group, and canonised Finnish expressionism to an extent, to become an all-boys club.
club. The only woman to ever take part in a November Group exhibition was Ragnar Ekelund’s wife Inni Siegberg (1892–1965) in 1924. Siegberg was not even mentioned in the exhibition catalogue and some newspaper critics hoped that she would have been excluded from the exhibition as well.\(^{34}\)

**The church of Cézanne**

In the letter where Carlstedt berated Gallen-Kallela, he also made it clear where his artistic allegiances lay:

> We [Carlstedt and Arvo Makkonen] need to get to Paris very soon, and we have set out to raise the sum forthwith. The Norwegian consul there, Pellerin, has the best Cézanne collection; there you can find paintings by Delacroix, Van Gogh and Gauguin. I think seeing them would be more educational than 10 years of school. Cézanne is said to be so marvellous in his colours that no other painter in the world can beat him.\(^{35}\)

The problem for young, penniless artists idolising Cézanne and French art was actually getting to France. Carlstedt and Makkonen dreamed of a joint trip to Paris, but it was never to be. Instead they saw French exhibitions, first in St. Petersburg in 1912 and then in Copenhagen in 1914. The two artists were best friends during their studies and for a few years afterwards, but as life often has it, they went their separate ways. In 1920, in his first letter after five years, Makkonen invited Carlstedt to come to Paris with him. Carlstedt declined the offer because of his nerves and financial situation.\(^{36}\) It was not until 1923 that he would finally get to see the City of Lights, and even then, the trip was cut short due to his anxiety.\(^{37}\) From what I have gathered, his impressions of Cézanne for the first decade of his career were limited to the exhibitions in Russia and Denmark, and art literature, which was usually printed in black and white and thus had limited information on colour and brushwork. Carlstedt credited Ilmari Aalto (1891–1934), one of the only Finnish modernists to have a cubist period during the 1910s, for opening his eyes to Cézanne’s greatness.\(^{38}\) Lectures in 1911 and 1913 held by the Director of the National Museum of Norway, Jens Thiis, were equally groundbreaking. Thiis familiarised Finnish artists with the concepts of cubism, post-impressionism and expressionism, and Carlstedt likened the impact of Thiis to ‘the word of god’.\(^{39}\)

At the time, Finnish artists were only able to study Cézanne directly through a single painting in public collections in the country; *The Road Bridge at L’Estaque* which was acquired for the collections of The Finnish Art Society and put on display in the Ateneum in 1911, the same year that Carlstedt started his studies. Looking at the painting, along with the Van Gogh,
Bonnard, Munch and Gauguin works in the collections, was almost a daily ritual for Carlstedt. I would argue, that *The Road Bridge at L’Estaque* is probably the most influential painting for the development of Finnish modernism in the 1910s and 20s. Artist Erkki Koponen (1899–1996) described the sight of pale, young novice artists staring longingly into the painting for hours on end during his time studying in the Ateneum beginning in 1916. The seclusion from actually seeing more of Cézanne’s works also made it possible for him to be elevated to an almost mythical status as seen in the letter above. The ideal of Cézanne felt more modern than national Romantics like Gallen-Kallela, but not too dangerously modern, as the Finnish art world was by and large not prepared for the latest European developments in painting.

The influence of Cézanne on Finnish modernists is often mentioned, but it is another thing how it actually manifested in painting. Apparently, it was not always that clear even to the artists themselves. For example, Viljo Kojo wrote in his autobiography that impressionism, influenced by Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin, was the battle cry of the young guard, but he could not remember how they actually ended up influencing his work. In *The Road Bridge at L’Estaque* we can see certain elements of Cézanne’s technique that Carlstedt would employ in his works during the 1910s and early 20s; for example highlighting geometric forms and most importantly painting in ‘patches’. The foundation of Cézanne’s technique was built on viewing objects as harmonies of smaller patches, ‘taches’, ‘tons’ or ‘plans’ of colour. The way...
he created a sense of volume from the heavy, intangible mass of clouds to the solidness of the houses and stone bridge, relied on layered, short diagonal and vertical brushstrokes of almost uniform length arranged in rows. The technique is dependent on layering, and as such does not translate directly into watercolour. It would take time for Carlstedt to mature the ideas that started to brew in the beginning of the 1910s, for he could afford to paint continuously with oil on canvas only from 1917 onwards.

As a way to differentiate themselves from the literally and symbolically loaded subjects of previous generations, the motives of modernists were mostly plain. Early on, Carlstedt focussed predominantly on modest urban and village landscapes, often painting with watercolours. Almost none of his landscapes, even the urban ones, have human figures in them. According to newspaper reviews, and as is evident from his Landscape from 1915, his palette leaned on darker tones of green, blue and grey. Painting in patches is visible in these early works, but still subdued. He used the technique to accentuate colours, not to structure the entire picture plane. Influences taken from Cézanne are there though, especially in underlining the basic geometric forms of the houses. What still differentiated him from most European expressionists at this stage was his loyalty towards local colour, which started to fade visibly around the turn of the decade. It is telling of the novelty of terms like expressionism in Finland, that Carlstedt was one of the first domestic artists to be labelled an expressionist in a review from 1915.45

44 E.g. S.T.-lt. [Signe Tandefelt]. Höstutställningen II. Dagens Press 18 October 1914; T. [Heikki Tandefelt]. Syysnäyttely II. Uusi Suometar 18 October 1914.
45 Kallio 1991, 72.
Looking at the press cutting collections of the Finnish National Gallery, critics had treated Carlstedt’s work with optimism from 1913.46 However, the tone grew colder in the following years as he was blamed for repetition in subject matter and for mimicking Cézanne.47 The decline in the reception of his work was also proportional to his financial situation. From 1914 to 1917, he had to leave his artistic ideals by the wayside, as after finishing school the small but steady shipments of cash he had been receiving from his father stopped, and he had to start making ends meet as an artist.48 This often meant painting quick, uninspired watercolours in a more traditional style sold for the price of a hot meal and signed with a pseudonym to avoid the embarrassment of owning up to having painted them later.49 The painting and selling of ‘humbug’, as the artists themselves referred to it, was seen as a necessary evil, which came with the very real threat of losing inspiration.50 Carlstedt was able to break the cycle with various prizes and awards, for example the Finnish Art Society’s Ducat prize in 1914 (additional prize 100 Finnish marks) and 1915 (second prize 240 mk) and 600 mk from the Hoving Grant in 1914.51

### The contract with Leonard Bäckström

As the demographics of Finnish art circles broadened in the beginning of the 20th century, there were now more would-be artists than ever. This resulted in an overheated art market with more galleries and newspaper reviews but shorter exhibitions and fewer sales per exhibition than before. Artists were heavily dependent on gallerists, as there was no state-owned, public exhibition space available in Helsinki before 1928.52 The times could be tough for both parties, especially during the early 1920s, as artists could often not even cover the rent of the gallery space from the exhibitions sales.53 An arrangement that in theory could profit both the artist and the art dealer was a patronage contract, where the dealer would pay a monthly wage and supply the artist with materials in exchange for exclusive rights on their works. The contract between Gösta Stenman (1888–1947) and Tyko Sallinen was a trendsetter. When Sallinen returned to Finland in 1914 after two years spent in America, he contacted Stenman and offered a deal: Sallinen would receive 300 Finnish marks a month and Stenman would take the paintings.54 This kind of contract was previously unheard of and raised protests of exploitation, whereas Sallinen seemed to be more complacent, pointing out that ‘At least I won’t have to paint crap.’55

In 1915, a new player had emerged in this tumultuous field, as young art dealer Carl Leonard Johansson Bäckström (1892–1963) founded his Art Salon in Kasarmikatu 48, Helsinki.56 The specifics of how the contract between Leonard Bäckström and Mikko Carlstedt came to be remain unclear. In 1916, Kalle Carlstedt wrote to Mikko, that he had tried to sell woodcuts to Bäckström, and pondered how he could secure a contract with him.57
Therefore it is conceivable that the initiative came from the artist. In a letter to art historian Ludvig Wennervirta (1882–1959) Carlstedt mentioned that his contract with Bäcksbacka, his own artistic revolution, started in the first week of the first Russian revolution at the end of February 1917.\(^{58}\) With the contract – at least proverbially – in his pocket, he left the capital behind for the following 23 years as he returned home to Sääksmäki to live with his aunt, where under the patronage of Bäcksbacka he could properly concentrate on his art in the way that he wanted for the first time in his career.

In retrospect, it seems surprising for Bäcksbacka to agree to the contract at the time, for Carlstedt’s reputation was rapidly declining. In a letter to his aunt from 1916, Carlstedt describes painting four pictures a day and holding an auction of 54 of these works, some being copies of famous paintings and all signed with pseudonyms.\(^{59}\) As most of his time went into painting and selling ‘humbug’, his name had all but disappeared from the headlines in 1916. In the press cutting collections of the Finnish National Gallery there are 34 articles from 1915 referencing him; in 1916 the number plummets to just three.\(^{60}\)

From the letters, it is difficult to piece together information regarding wages, but the nature of the contract seems to have been at first that Carlstedt got the materials he wanted, and sometimes goods such as clothes and tobacco, plus a monthly wage of 200 Finnish marks in return for the paintings.\(^{61}\) In 1919 he seems to have been paid 700 mk per month.\(^{62}\) At least later in the contract, Carlstedt received payments for individual paintings. These usually ranged from 100 to 150 mk, with some exceptions netting him up to 400 and one notable exception in 1921 bringing in 800 mk.\(^{63}\) However, these figures should be approached with caution, as they are based upon fragmentary mentions and only on Carlstedt’s point of view, and according to Carlstedt’s correspondence with Ludvig Wennervirta, Bäcksbacka claimed the payments were higher.\(^{64}\)

Already in the first months of the contract, the tone of Carlstedt’s writing changed. The bravado vanished and the elaborate mask of the impervious bohemian was removed for good. The character traits that steered his life and career choices until the day he died were laid bare; anxiety and shyness, extreme self-criticism and fear of the opinions of his peers and critics. Combined with a latent pride in his abilities and a certain absoluteness concerning his art, it made for a volatile temperament to do business with. Carlstedt started to paint furiously in 1917 and judging by his letters to Bäcksbacka, he seemed to be always out of materials. The contract did not start out as smoothly as both parties had perhaps hoped. Carlstedt claimed that the shipments and answers from Helsinki were delayed, causing him to vent his frustration and anger over not being able to work uninterrupted.\(^{65}\) He was always quick to apologize or plead for forgiveness though.\(^{66}\)

As Bäcksbacka paid for the canvases and colours, Carlstedt started to revamp his style and entire approach to painting from the ground up. The sudden change in materials and

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\(^{59}\) Undated letter in 1916 from Mikko Carlstedt to Tette [Mikko Carlstedt’s aunt Carolina Carlstedt]. MKCA, 2. Archive Collections, FNG.

\(^{60}\) Index cards for Carlstedt, Mikko. Press cutting collection. Archive Collections, FNG.

\(^{61}\) Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 10 May 1919. Private collection. For comparison, in 1917 the average hourly wage of a worker was around 1.17 mk. Currency calculator of The Bank of Finland Museum (Accessed 29 November 2017).

\(^{62}\) Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 12 September 1919. Private collection.


\(^{64}\) Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Ludvig Wennervirta, Lempäälä, 10 April 1921. Coll.256.1. National Library of Finland.

\(^{65}\) E.g. Letters from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 31 May 1917, 22 August 1917. Private collection.

artistic freedom presented the largest challenge of his career. In May of 1917 he wrote to his new employer:

>You cannot believe how hard it is to let go of the shit I have painted in the last few years. I have to start from scratch— I'm so goddamn ashamed right now.67

He lamented that he had to paint over a dozen pictures and hoped that Bäcksbacka would send cheaper colours to cut his financial losses. He did see improvement though, as he said five or six of the works he finished were better than anything he had previously accomplished.68

A Finnish Village Landscape, from 1917, is an example of his new approach to painting inspired by Cézanne. The new-found freedom of expression makes itself seen; the maxim of Carlstedt’s art had gone from ‘modeler’ to ‘moduler’69 as he started to perceive forms in organised patches of colour, very much in the way of Cézanne in The Road Bridge at L’Estaque. His modules break rank much more often than Cézanne’s though, as we see him adopt distinct, fast and uninterrupted zig-zag brushstrokes. These spiralling wave-like strokes and rows of patches applied in thick impasto layers would become a hallmark of his style up until about

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69 Boehm 2000, 32.
1928. In his own words, his goal was to make every inch of the canvas come to life, giving the surface a rough plaster-like feel and an overall aesthetic that he compared to ornate brocades. The technique draws parallels to postimpressionism, and more specifically pointillism, but differs from it in the sense that the patches are larger and form longer sequences of similar colours. A planimetric approach to organising surfaces and viewing objects not as uniform wholes, but as sums of autonomous modules, placed Carlstedt in proximity with Cubism, but apart from at least one Cubist woodcut, he never explored it further.

Judging by the heathers in full bloom, Carlstedt painted A Finnish Village Landscape in early autumn. The time of year would explain the unusually light palette; it was just at the start of the season when he was most inspired by nature. His landscape ideal at the time was firmly rooted in gloomy autumnal views as weather-beaten and desolate sceneries inspired him to paint year after year. He developed a love-hate relationship with the autumn, for he dreaded the long and lonely darkness it brought with it, but found himself uninspired by the beauty and light of summer. Still in 1929 he wrote how he got depressed every time autumn came, but adding:

I really like these late autumn views, even though I manage to transfer nothing of their impact on the canvas. Either way, I immensely enjoy standing there midst the fog and rain, in the ‘shadows’ cast by naked trees.

In a way, Carlstedt’s relationship with Sääksmäki is comparable with Cézanne’s connection to Provence. Both returned to their childhood surroundings and painted them assiduously, experimenting with new stylistic solutions to depicting familiar surroundings. Carlstedt lived and painted almost exclusively in Sääksmäki from 1917 to 1940 with a four-year period in 1920–24 spent nearby in Lempäälä. After 1940 he spent his winters in Helsinki. The Church of Sääksmäki became his own Montagne Sainte-Victoire. Often visible in the background, it can also be seen in A Finnish Village Landscape. Judging by his letters, Sääksmäki was not a place of pure inspiration. Life in the countryside gave him the peace and quiet he needed to paint, but also isolated him from the art world and his friends. He said he felt the need to go out and find inspiration from new sights, but was bound to the countryside due to finances and his social anxiety.

Experiments with graphic art

The Finnish Civil War ravaged the country in 1918 and the situation made preparing for an exhibition difficult. Exhibitions had also steadily become more and more daunting for Carlstedt, mainly due to his fear of getting a critical reception. Even though he had 21 private exhibitions in Finland during the years 1913–38, he almost never attended the openings.

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70 Undated letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Hertta Tirranen [most likely in 1954]. HTC, 4. Archive Collections, FNG.
71 Undated letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Hertta Tirranen [most likely in 1954]. HTC, 4. Archive Collections, FNG.
75 Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäckscala, Sääksmäki, 18 May 1917. Private collection; Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Arvo Makken, Sääksmäki, 9 February 1920. AMA, 2. Archive Collections, FNG.
76 Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäckscala, Sääksmäki, 22 May 1918. Private collection
When he came to the capital to bring paintings or to set up his exhibitions, he often wanted to spend the night alone in Bäcksbacka’s Salon, once pleading that even his own brother should not be told he was staying there. Bäcksbacka tried to get Carlstedt to exhibit in the autumn of 1918, but to no avail:

*When you come in threatening with an exhibition and the shame that will follow, I feel like quitting for good. Do as you like. You have sacrificed too much for me and need to make your money back.*

In the winter of 1918, when the war prevented the shipment of materials to Sääksmäki, Carlstedt resorted to trying his hand at woodcut printing under the guidance of his brother Kalle, who had specialised in this technique early on in his career. Both brothers made a woodcut of a still-life composition with the focal point being a hare hung from its feet. It is an intriguing thought that this was Carlstedt’s initiation into the art of woodcut. They may have taken turns at the subject, Kalle at first demonstrating the process, and Mikko then making his adjustments to the composition, for example, altering the placement of the cloth and bringing in one of the large glass bottles, which were a feature of his still-lifes. The differences in approach between the painter and the woodcut artist are clear. Mikko apparently carved as he painted, filling blank spaces of the plate with patch-like short incisions, whereas Kalle’s version is done in a more restrained synthetic style. The contours that Mikko used to give shape to the background are an unambiguous reference to Munch, whom he later explicitly mentioned as the main inspiration for his woodcuts.

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**Mikko Carlstedt, *Still Life*, 1918, woodcut, 51 cm x 33 cm. Private collection**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Erkki Anttonen

**Kalle Carlstedt, *Still Life*, 1918, woodcut, 42.2 cm x 29.5 cm, Alfred Kordelin Foundation Deposition, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Nina Pätilä

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Other known works from 1918 and particularly 1919 use a more clear-cut style, like the portrait of a man, from the collections of the Finnish National Gallery. Instead of what looks like *horror vacui*, Carlstedt cut larger segments in the wood, resulting in a more composed overall effect. In its expressionist stylisation, it is a good example of his portraits of common, working-class people he often depicted in his woodcuts. It looks like Carlstedt considered the woodcut technique to be especially suitable for portraiture, as in 1919 the number of portraits he painted was diminishing, and most of his woodcuts are closely cropped studies of the weatherworn faces of his Sääksmäki neighbours.

Maybe he considered the coarseness of expressionist woodcuts to reflect the mental states he was interested in exploring; after the war, his anxiety was starting to get the better of him. In 1918 he refused Bäcksbacka’s invitation to come and visit his family:

_I have to confess to you once and for all, that I would like nothing more than to be like everyone else, come wherever you’d invite me, but I can not! -- I suffer so immensely you would not believe it, and I envy all the happy people I meet-- Helping me is a poor affair for you._  

Carlstedt was enthusiastic about woodcut at first, and even made coloured prints. Nevertheless, perhaps because he didn’t want to step on his brother’s toes, he stopped working in this medium after 1919, the only exceptions being his four last woodcuts made in 1930.

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and 1931 for a fundraising raffle for Tampere Art Museum.\textsuperscript{84} Maybe for the same reason, he dreamed of finding an avenue of graphic expression that felt his own. After experimenting with woodcuts he tried to persuade Bäcksbacka to send materials for etching and lithography.\textsuperscript{85} To my knowledge, he never actually explored those mediums. In addition to the new materials he also asked for more literature on Rembrandt, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin and the cubists.\textsuperscript{86} Inspiration did not come easily in the long, dark loneliness of the Sääksmäki autumn and winter, and art literature was one of his only avenues of searching for new ideas.

**Breakthrough exhibitions**

In the summer of 1919 Carlstedt befriended Mikko Oinonen (1883–1956), a member of the postimpressionist Septem group, who came to stay for the summer in Sääksmäki in Carlstedt’s old studio building.\textsuperscript{87} The company of the older, more established Oinonen had a positive effect:

\textit{He has given me much inspiration as we paint ‘competitively’. He flatters me (!), and as I am so childish and dependent on flattery, I have begun to trust myself more.}\textsuperscript{88}

The pair even had plans to find adjacent studio buildings, like Tyko Sallinen and Jalmari Ruokokoski with their ateliers aptly named Drunkenness and Hangover, in Hyvinkää.\textsuperscript{89} Working with Oinonen, he learned how to prime a canvas properly with gelatin – previously he had used harder glue that started to crack more easily – and to paint on rough sackcloth-like canvases.\textsuperscript{90} Carlstedt began asking Bäcksbacka about the materials, and when the responses did not come in time, and he claimed that Bäcksbacka was behind on his salary, he threatened to turn to rival gallerist Ivar Hörhammer (1884–1953), who Oinonen had told him 2,000 mk per month with no obligations.\textsuperscript{91} In the next letter Carlstedt then apologised for his tone and promised never to become ‘Hörhammer’s slave’.\textsuperscript{92} The exchange here was not exceptional as Carlstedt’s relationship with Bäcksbacka was a curious blend of warm camaraderie and an intensive professional tie. Carlstedt valued the contract as it guaranteed him a steady income, but not everyone viewed matters in the same light. When he asked his brother Kalle to show with him in an exhibition that Bäcksbacka was organising in Tampere in 1920, Kalle expressed his skepticism towards Bäcksbacka’s business practices and blamed him for underpaying artists.\textsuperscript{93}

Carlstedt had two major shows in November 1919: the exhibition of Finnish art in Copenhagen with the November Group and his second solo exhibition in Helsinki at Bäcksbacka’s. For the first show, he had been invited, alongside eight other promising artists, by Tyko Sallinen, Juho Rissanan, Marcus Collin, Juho Mäkelä, Gabriel Engberg and Alwar

\textsuperscript{84} Autobiography 1947, 10–11. MKCA, 7. Archive Collections, FNG.
\textsuperscript{85} Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, winter of 1919. Private collection.
\textsuperscript{86} Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 22 September 1918. Private collection.
\textsuperscript{87} Autobiography 1947, 12. MKCA, 7. Archive Collections, FNG.
\textsuperscript{88} ‘Hän on antanut minulle paljon inspiraatioonia, me kun maalaamme "kilpaa". Hän kehuu minua (!) ja minä joka olen hyvin lapsedillinen ja kehumisesta riippuvainen, rupean taas luottamaan itseen enemmän.’ Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 30 June 1919. Private collection.
\textsuperscript{89} Letter from Mikko Oinonen to Mikko Carlstedt, Helsinki, 17 March 1920. MKCA, 4. Archive Collections, FNG.
\textsuperscript{90} Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 20 June 1919. Private collection.
\textsuperscript{91} Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 26 June 1919. Private collection.
\textsuperscript{92} Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 30 June 1919. Private collection.
\textsuperscript{93} Letter from Kalle Carlstedt to Mikko Carlstedt, Sääksmäki, 3 December 1920. MKCA, 1. Archive Collections, FNG.
Cawén to join the November Group in 1917. The November Group was a loosely organised exhibition group, without a programme or officially documented meetings. The lack of organisation also led to Carlstedt not being sure of his standing within the group. After missing its inaugural exhibition in 1918 due to contracting Spanish flu, he wrote in a fit of self-loathing to Bäcksbacka and declared himself unworthy of exhibiting with the group in the subsequent exhibition in Copenhagen:

I don’t understand the joke when Ekelund, Nelimarkka, Aalto and you – everybody – claim I am a member of the November Group. It is an outrageous lie. If I had been naive enough to exhibit with them last autumn, I could have dealt with the shame only by hanging myself. - - Now Kalle has told me Collin announced I am not and never was a part of that ensemble of great artists. And rightly so, what the hell would I bring to the group?

The Copenhagen exhibition was the grandest stage yet in his career, and it became a fixation for him for months. He asked Bäcksbacka whether they should only exhibit watercolours or perhaps not attend at all. Just under two months before the opening he was still adamant that he would not participate with oil paintings and admitted that the exhibition had gotten in his head. Five of Carlstedt’s paintings were turned down by the Finnish exhibition committee because of their frames, and as a result he almost pulled out entirely. In the end, Bäcksbacka had to go behind the artist’s back and send a collection of six oil paintings and four watercolours to Denmark. Carlstedt was of course furious, and he believed Bäcksbacka sent his worst oil paintings out of spite.

The Copenhagen exhibition was a major breakthrough for the November Group, and cemented its place in Finnish art history. While Danish critics singled out specific artists, such as Sallinen, for praise, the Finnish newspaper articles took this to mean a triumph for the artists of the whole group. Carlstedt did not enjoy any spoils of victory though. Danish reviews were published in Finnish newspapers; one of the most in-depth articles was written

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96 Despite his melancholic predisposition, Carlstedt did have a wicked sense of humour. For example during the illness, he sent letters ‘From Spain’. Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 15 November 1918. Private collection.
97 Painters Ragnar Ekelund, Ilmari Aalto and Eero Nelimarkka (1891–1977) were new members invited in 1917.
100 Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 12 September 1919. Private collection.
by Sigurd Schultz and published in Finland in *Nya Argus*. Schultz did not pull his punches as he praised all those in the November Group, except Carlstedt, Nelimarkka and Ekelund:

*we exempt only Mikko Carlstedt, whose still-lifes in a Germanized Cézanne-mannerism were quite repulsive...*  

For someone as vulnerable to criticism as Carlstedt, this review cut deep. Schultz’s comments about his Germanic style must have been especially hurtful as he considered himself vehemently a follower of French arts, and even got angry earlier the same year when Oinonen suggested that Munch’s art had German influences. Sentiments opposing German art were commonplace in the Nordic countries, and by reading newspaper articles from the 1910s it becomes evident that there was a binary division between elegant French and unrefined German art. For example, one of the Copenhagen reviews dismissed Magnus Enckell as a third-rate German boudoir artist. In Finland, these views on German art had been adopted in the early 1910s especially among Swedish-speaking critics through Swedish influences, and most likely augmented by the First World War.

Altogether, Carlstedt exhibited with the November Group in 1919 in Copenhagen and in 1920 and 1921 in Helsinki. His correspondence with Bäcksbacka and with other members of the November Group sheds light on just how unorganised the group was. For example, Carlstedt felt insulted when he learned of the exact timing of the 1921 exhibition from Ragnar Ekelund just nine days prior to its opening. He seemed to fear he had been dropped from the group and Schultz’s review was to blame. Ekelund said he too had heard of the exhibition by accident and tried to assure Carlstedt that he was not being targeted by other members. When Tyko Sallinen himself wrote to him that no invitations to attend had been sent to anyone and that he should stop moping and come to Helsinki, he packed his paintings and hurried to exhibit.

When it comes to reviews and public opinion, Carlstedt’s solo exhibition at Bäcksbacka’s Art Salon in November 1919 can be perceived as a breakthrough. The reviews were almost unanimously positive, as the critics could see that the two years Carlstedt had spent in the countryside had had a beneficial effect on his work. Signe Tandefelt wrote: ‘Carlstedt steps forth from among our young artists as one of the most charactephy, honest and personal talents.’ A critical approach to some of the reviews is necessary however, as artists often knew critics personally. For example, the positive review of Carlstedt’s 1919 exhibition published in *Stenman’s Konstrevy* under the pen name R.E., was written by his close friend Ragnar Ekelund. Success with critics did not amount to much when it came to sales though. Four days before closing, only a few small paintings had been sold from the 1919 exhibition.
The exhibition was a huge effort as it consisted of 71 paintings, most of them oils. 16 of which were still-lifes, three interiors, two portraits, one self-portrait and the rest landscapes. Exhibition catalogues from this period do not show the measurements of paintings, so it could be that the previously undated small self-portrait found in the Finnish National Gallery’s collections was exhibited in 1919. There is an Art Salon stamp on the back of the painting and it was a donation from collector Arvid Sourander (1873–1945) who reportedly associated with Bäcksva. 

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Unusually, the portrait was painted on the lid of a wooden box of cigars. Carlstedt allowed the wooden surface of the lid to show and function as an autonomous stylistic device. Leaving large parts of the canvas — or in this case the cigar box — bare, or allowing thick layers of primer to show was common among painters of the November Group. In Carlstedt’s self-portrait it resulted in a compelling, eroded, fragmentary and — even though he would have hated the description — dreamlike impression. Regarding the dating, Carlstedt had mentioned having to paint on alternative materials during 1917, when Bäcksva fell behind with sending him supplies. There is smudged text, likely a dedication or signature, in the upper left-hand corner. With some effort and a microscope, a painted over date resembling 1917 becomes visible.

117 Carlstedt considered a review by Sigrid Schauman, where she wrote of the dreamlike qualities in his works, to be detestable garbage. Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksva, Sääksmäki, 3 March 1930. Private collection.
A monumental effort

Carlstedt’s last exhibition from his time contracted to Bäcksvaka was in February 1921 at Bäcksvaka’s Salon. The collection he sent included *The Market Stall*, his only known ‘monumental’ genre painting. Measuring 114cm x 129cm, it is by far the largest painting by him I have found, and the only one that is not strictly a portrait, an interior, a still-life or a landscape. Now in the collection of the Kuntsi Museum of Modern Art in Vaasa, it depicts an older woman and a young boy selling game: hares, duck and black grouse. The woman looks downhearted and the boy, typical for Carlstedt, looks totally bored. They are waiting for buyers who will perhaps never show, and thus the painting carries with it a narrative element that is completely absent in the rest of his output. The painting was a significant effort from him and the exhibition catalogue lists three studies for the final work.


121 Mikko Carlstedt. *Art Salon, Helsinki* 1.–16.11.1921.
The subject of *The Market Stall* is similar to the first Dutch ‘still-life’ paintings from 16th-century Antwerp, in which a market setting allowed the artist to study vegetables, game and all other sorts of items on sale.\(^{122}\) Even if Carlstedt was not familiar with the imagery, the comparison feels apt as the focus of the painting is as much on the still-life-like game, as it is on the human subjects. The moralistic and religious aspects and symbolism of Dutch market scenes are missing from Carlstedt’s composition; his interest was more focused on the hardships, poverty and apathy of everyday life in post-war rural Finland.

The most striking features of *The Market Stall* are the colours and brushwork. Carlstedt had detached his palette more and more from local colour. The tones in just the woman’s apron include a wide range of greens, blues, purples and browns. He had also matured his overlapping zigzag brushstrokes. On closer inspection, the solid and sturdy forms evaporate and the self-sufficient world of lively detail opens itself; clear and bright waves of paint layered on darker backgrounds. His frantic use of the brush and colouristic detail during his November Group period hardly ever left space empty, as he filled every part of the canvas with restless diagonal patchwork, resulting in an almost claustrophobic effect.

*The Market Stall* is exceptional for him in yet another way, as it is highly unlikely that Carlstedt could have set up and painted the entire composition at once. Most of the game depicted here must have been based on previous studies, making *The Market Stall* perhaps his only painting not borne out of visual immediacy. As a painter, he was entirely dependent on direct observation and modelling. He never painted a scene from his imagination and his landscapes were usually painted *en plein air*. When he tried to retouch landscapes back at the studio, he felt they became dry and dispersed products of mannerisms.\(^{123}\) He could not find inspiration for still-lifes without fresh new objects to paint from and often requested Bäcksbacka, who also dealt in antiques, to buy or lend him new vases, pots, pitchers, pans and beautiful cloths.\(^{124}\)

But why did he step out of his comfort zone and take on such a laborious task? Unfortunately, the preserved correspondence between Carlstedt and Bäcksbacka stops abruptly in 1920. The initiative for the painting might have come from Bäcksbacka, who was worried about poor sales and wanted to try something new. I presume though, that Carlstedt was cognizant of the weight that monumental depictions of ordinary people carried in the eyes of the art world. By 1921 Tyko Salininen had solidified his status as the leading artist of his generation. He had achieved this partly on the back of his large-scale paintings of working-class people. No wonder then, that Carlstedt might have felt that such paintings were required, if he was to stand out as an artist. The critics noted *The Market Stall* and the reception was cautiously positive, even though a couple of reviews claimed that the studies were superior to the finished work.\(^{125}\)

The records of the Kuntsi Collection state that the work was commissioned by Bäcksbacka, and was exchanged with Wäinö Aaltonen (1894–1966) for one of his sculptures. They indicate that it was a direct exchange between Carlstedt and Aaltonen, which is doubtful as the painting belonged to Bäcksbacka; he had already given Carlstedt the grand sum of 800 mk for the work, the largest single payment of his contract.\(^{126}\) The painting was priced high at 6,000 mk, for comparison the second most expensive painting from the exhibition cost 3,000 mk, which would make it all the more plausible that it was not sold during the show.\(^{127}\)

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127 *Mikko Carlstedt.* Helsinki, Art Salon 1.–16.11.1921.
Perhaps Bäcksbacka’s best chance of getting a return on his investment was to accept a trade offered by Aaltonen, as his sculptures commanded prices of over 10,000 mk at that time.128 In addition to explicitly named studies for The Market Stall, at least three of the still-lifes in the 1921 collection, two of hares and one of a black grouse, were either studies for, or closely connected with the larger painting. The smaller of the hares was bought for the Ateneum Art Museum by the Alfred Kordelin Foundation. The hare hung from its feet was a common subject in 17th-century Dutch still-lifes. Later in his career Carlstedt denied influences from Dutch still-life painters, but readily admitted the effect that Courbet and Chardin had had on him.129 A comparison with Chardin does not seem out of question, as he painted hares hanging from their feet and introduced a knife in the foreground as a tool for constructing depth in the composition.130 In Carlstedt’s painting the knife is also a compositional focal point, creating an abrupt acute angle together with the hare’s head.

The contract with Carlstedt must not have been the most profitable venture for Bäcksbacka. The early 1920s were hard on the art market, and he was by his own account on the verge of bankruptcy in 1921.131 It is easy to view the 1921 exhibition, especially with

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128 The November Group 22.10.–10.11.1921. Stenman’s Art Palace, Helsinki.
129 Hertta Tirranen’s notes. HTC, 4. Archive Collections, FNG.
131 Letter from Kalle Carlstedt to Mikko Carlstedt, Vohlsaari, 25 April 1921. MKCA, 1. Archive Collections, FNG.
The Market Stall, as a last effort to achieve a commercial breakthrough. Moreover, as thick skinned as Bäcksbacka must have been, acting simultaneously as an employer, friend and therapist and taking the brunt of Carlstedt’s emotional outbursts must have been taxing. Carlstedt was in Helsinki with his wife, Zaida, and newborn daughter, Kerstin, at the time of the exhibition. Mikko and Zaida had met on a train and married in 1920 in Carlstedt’s new, remote and ramshackle villa in Lempäälä, with only the chauffeur of the priest as their witness.\footnote{132} He often emphasised how married life had saved him, presumably the loving presence of Zaida and Kerstin eased his loneliness and anxiety.\footnote{133} However, a few weeks after the exhibition, he returned home to bad news. On the 3rd of March, 1921 he wrote to his aunt:

> My prospects are looking grim, I got a letter from Jussi [Leonard Bäcksbacka]; the contract is now over.\footnote{134}

His correspondence shows that he considered the circumstances in which the contract was terminated to be especially difficult. He had just handed over 61 paintings to Bäcksbacka for the exhibition, and claimed to have no paintings left to sell or exhibit. He was wounded by Bäcksbacka not speaking of the matter to him face-to-face in Helsinki, nor giving at least a few months’ notice so that he could have arranged his affairs in advance.\footnote{135} Judging by incoming letters, Carlstedt wrote to everyone of note he knew, trying to inquire of potential buyers, as he did not know who had bought his paintings during the previous four years. Based on the responses, his tone towards Bäcksbacka had been harsh.\footnote{136} Carlstedt’s and Bäcksbacka’s relationship was exacerbated for a while, but they made amends as is evident from a letter to Ludvig Wennervirta in November of 1922:

> I implore you to forget my ‘whining’ in the spring of 1921, if possible. I was naïve enough to moan about my distress, now after tougher times I understand the improbability of my conduct. I have come so far that of course I will open an exhibition at Mr. Johansson’s [Bäcksbacka’s] Salon!\footnote{137}

The pair in fact remained lifelong friends. The Bäcksbackas were frequent visitors to Sääksmäki during the summer, especially during the 1930s. Their friendship was put on hold when they did business with each other though, as they had their quarrels, for example, during Carlstedt’s last solo exhibition in Helsinki in 1930 at the Art Salon.\footnote{138} Bäcksbacka continued to give emotional support and encouragement to the artist, who never really overcome his self-doubt. Their cat and mouse game of Bäcksbacka trying to get Carlstedt to gather up courage to exhibit in Helsinki continued right up to 1960.\footnote{139}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[133] E.g. Undated letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Hertta Tirranen [most likely from 1954]. HTC, 4. Archive Collections, FNG.
\item[134] ‘Toimeentulo näyttää pimeältä, Jussilta tuli kirje; kontrahti on nyt ioppu.’ Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Tette, Lempäälä, 3 March 1921. MKCA, 6. Archive Collections, FNG.
\item[135] Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Ludvig Wennervirta, Lempäälä, 16 March 1921. Coll.256.1. National Library of Finland.
\item[138] Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 2 May 1930. Private collection.
\item[139] Letter from Mikko Carlstedt to Leonard Bäcksbacka, Sääksmäki, 10 September 1960. Private collection.
\end{footnotes}
Specialisation in classical still-life painting

Looking at Carlstedt’s exhibition catalogues, the number of still-lifes he painted increased from 1919, and after 1921 they started to outnumber landscapes. According to the reviews, the 1922 exhibition at Bäcksbacka’s consisted almost entirely of still-lifes. The reviews for the 1921 exhibition were again mostly positive, even glowing, especially when it came to the 16 still-lifes from the 61 paintings shown in the exhibition. For example, Edvard Richter called Carlstedt one of the most notable still-life painters in the country and one review written under the pen name Hj. D. remarked that he was becoming a true master of still-life. Critics undoubtedly read each other’s reviews and sometimes borrowed from – or even plagiarised – one another’s writing, and a notion started to circulate that Carlstedt’s landscapes were inferior or subordinate to his still-life painting. The kinds of sentiments being echoed were for example that his compositional sense and cold and harsh colours were perfectly suited for still-life but made him unable to achieve immediacy in landscapes, or that he painted all other subjects as if they were still-lifes. As Carlstedt was so sensitive to criticism, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that reviews affected his work to some degree. It is plausible that he embraced the role of a still-life painter because critical reception steered him towards it. He also perceived his monumental painting, The Market Stall, as a failure and dropped portraiture almost entirely after 1922. Another reason for eschewing portraiture was the fact that during the years he spent in his remote villa in Lempäälä in 1920–24, models were hard to come by.

The November Group dissolved after its final exhibition in 1924. After the breakthrough of many of its members, it simply ran out of steam and ceased to exist. As the 1920s progressed, the styles of many former November Group members moved towards classicism. Subsequently the 1920s and 30s have often been seen as a conservative interlude in the history of Finnish modernism. In 1924 the critic Antero Rinne remarked that Carlstedt had created his own brand of neo-realism in his still-lifes. According to Carlstedt himself, he started to let go of his patch-style some time before 1928. He gradually replaced it with broader, blended fields of colour and compact forms. Many of his still-lifes from the late 1920s to mid-1930s approach baroque opulence with their game birds, rustic furniture, large glass bottles and exotic pots and pans bought and borrowed from Bäcksbacka.
During the 1930s Carlstedt’s palette became noticeably lighter, and he started to paint more and more floral still-lifes. He found great enjoyment in painting flowers: the asters, peonies and sunflowers that bloomed in his garden in Sääksmäki gave him the inspiration he was previously lacking during summertime. Painting them was most likely a business decision as much as it was one of vocation though. Flower paintings may historically have been at the bottom of academic genre hierarchies, but they enjoyed a new-found appreciation in the hands of modernists, and more importantly, they have always sold well. As Carlstedt was heavily in debt in the 1930s, he had to try to cater to the whims of the buying public. His daughter Kerstin explained that his father’s move towards lighter and more garish colours


was influenced by art historian Göran Schildt’s notion of Cézanne not painting with earth tones, as well as the fact that lighter pictures simply sold better.152

When Carlstedt was younger, he had preferred the solitude of the countryside because he needed peace and quiet to work.153 As he grew older, judging by his correspondence, the time spent away from his peers and fresh artistic influences had started to weigh him down, and he could not bear the loneliness of Sääksmäki winters anymore. The art world: gallerists, critics, art historians, institutions and styles had gradually moved on when he stayed put, and he dreamed of a fresh start. In 1940, when he heard that his application for a studio apartment in the Lallukka artist home in Helsinki – where the Carlstedt family would spend their winters – was accepted, he wrote to Bäckbacka:

*It really has been over 23 years when, after signing the contract with you, I fled the evils of the world to the countryside. Now it’s the opposite. I flee back to the city in the hope that I can still reach what my excessive seclusion might have cost me.*154

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