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A Show of Emotion

Interview by Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

As the Sinebrychoff Art Museum prepares to stage an exhibition on painting and the theatre, Gill Crabbe meets the show's curator Laura Gutman, to discuss the research she carried out in order to bring this topic to life

Meeting the independent curator Laura Gutman is like meeting a detective. As curator of several shows in Finland, where she moved from Paris 17 years ago, including the recent acclaimed 'Air de Paris' exhibition at Helsinki Art Museum (HAM), she has used her research skills and background studying art history under Guy Cogeval at the Ecole du Louvre in Paris in the 1990s to impressive effect in Finland. Not only has she been making intriguing connections between Finnish artists and their European counterparts, but also deepening understanding of European artworks in Finnish collections. It is a busy year for Gutman as she is now in the final stages of preparing a show on theatre and painting from the 17th to early 20th centuries titled 'Moved to Tears: Staging Emotions' at the Sinebrychoff Art Museum in Helsinki.

The museum is an appropriate setting for such a subject as it is the house of the collector Paul Sinebrychoff, whose wife Fanny Grahn was herself an actress, and their rooms on the first floor are laid out almost as a series of theatrical sets, each reflecting a period from his collection. The theme of the Sinebrychoff exhibition which is held in the galleries on the ground floor, is also a subject close to Gutman's heart, since at the Ecole du Louvre she studied the theoretical and philosophical background to painting and theatre 'from David to Degas'. After having attended a performance in Helsinki with Finnish singer Minna Nyberg, she has developed a particular interest in the use of Baroque gesture in the fine arts.

'With Baroque gesture, you are not supposed to have emotions or show them. You are a vehicle for emotions, the *bienséance* (correct behaviour) means you keep emotions inside and use instead this "mute eloquence". Racine's theatre deals with human passions, and still you express emotion using codified gestures,' Gutman explains. An important philosophical backdrop to the theme is Descartes 1649 treatise *Passions of the*



Louis Lagrenée the Elder, *Pygmalion and His Statue*, 1777,
oil on canvas, 104cm x 86cm
Antell Collections, Finnish National Gallery /
Sinebrychoff Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Antti Kuivalainen

Soul which defined and categorised the emotions. Then Charles Le Brun, the great art theorist and Court Painter to Louis XIV, created a series of facial features expressing different passions, or emotions. ‘These models (*Les Expressions des passions de l’âme*, published in 1727) were used in all European art academies during the 18th and 19th centuries,’ says Gutman. ‘The codes were used in singing, theatre, painting, even by lawyers and in the priesthood. This rhetoric would have been familiar to the audiences throughout these periods.’

Gutman’s approach to curating this show is widely research based, and her method emphasises a narrative approach that emerges from following visual clues in the artworks she encounters. ‘I began my research looking at Finnish collections and then in the process noticing what was resonating with the great models. I have been working visually and then I conducted research, reading biographies and articles on painting and theatre history to find connections with the clues from the paintings. I also keep updated with the state-of-the-art research in France, listening to *France Culture* podcasts. I ordered two books after hearing about them on the radio, *Les Figures du ravissement*, by Marianne Massin, and *Représenter la vision*, by Guillaume Cassegrain, when preparing the exhibition.’

‘When I had just moved to Finland and first saw Albert Edelfeldt’s *The Burnt Village* (1879), I realised that the same themes that I had studied in Paris were to be found among artists here in Finland,’ she continues. ‘So my research for this show has used the theoretical frame I had studied in Paris to explore what works were following the same patterns.’

The Burnt Village, which will be shown in the exhibition, depicts villagers hiding behind a rock, with an empty expanse of snow receding to the background, where you see their village burning and soldiers. ‘The composition of this painting is typical of an introduction to something that would have been happening on the stage,’ says Gutman. ‘The space in the painting tells you that time is an element. It has similarities to a painting by Léon Cogniet *The Massacre of the Innocents* (1824), which shows a biblical scene with a woman and her baby behind a wall, hiding from the terrible action. You fear for them, and this emotional aspect is exactly what Cogniet had been drawing from theatre, the melodramatic feeling that the audience will be experiencing.’

On Stage

The exhibition presents works from the Finnish National Gallery from the European canon, as well as loans from other Finnish museums, and groups them into rooms with sub-themes, such as ‘Apparitions’, ‘Delight’, ‘Glory and Death’ and ‘Terror and Fury’. Here Gutman has opted for works demonstrating a strong porosity between theatre and painting. One of the advantages of staging theme-based shows is the chance it offers to restore lesser-known artworks that might not otherwise be selected for display. Several works have been conserved specially for the exhibition, among them Charles Benazech’s *Poacher released* (1778), chosen to show the invention of the ‘fourth wall’ in the late 18th century.

The themed approach also allows intriguing juxtapositions, says Gutman, that encourage the visitor to see paintings they think they might already know, in a fresh light. ‘What I like to do is to create a strong narrative – I want to take the audience by the hand and let them discover by themselves certain developments. Extended labels come second, to open up the context. So in the room with the theme “Apparitions”, when you see a painting with sky opening and a Greek goddess descending (*Pygmalion and his Statue*, 1777, by Louis Lagrenée), next to a painting with sky opening and the god Ukko appearing (*Lemminkäinen at the Fiery Lake*, c. 1867, by Robert Wilhelm Ekman), and a biblical scene (*Elijah Carried off in the Chariot of Fire*, turn of the 16th century, by Jacopo Palma il Giovane) then you start to see the development of the *Deus ex machina*, a traditional theatrical spectacle where the gods come on stage through the sky, leading to an unforeseen ending to the story. The audience can understand the theme visually and look at the works individually and see how a surprise is created by actors on a stage and how this is conveyed in the painting. This exhibition is about how we learn about theatre from looking at paintings, and how paintings were influenced by theatre.’



Anton Raphael Mengs,
Joseph's Dream, undated,
oil on canvas,
120cm x 85cm
The Göhle Collection,
Finnish National Gallery /
Sinebrychoff Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Henri Tuomi



Gutman's investigations into the Finnish collections have uncovered their own surprises too. Researching the theme in the late 18th century around the time of the French Revolution, she was looking for works signalling the influences of key thinkers of the period such as Diderot and artists such as David. 'When I came across *Joseph's Dream* I thought this is so similar to David's *Brutus* (1789). But then I realised it was painted by Mengs *before* David's *Brutus*. David had met with Mengs in Rome and might have seen his Joseph plunged into the darkness before creating his own Brutus.'

Brutus is such a key moment in the meeting between theatre and painting because the theme of the tragic hero who carries out his duty at the cost of sacrificing his own sons, was also performed on stage during the Revolution era. 'David was close to the French actor Talma, who played Brutus on stage, and advised him on his costume. Talma rejected the court wig and played dressed as a Roman, which was a great move towards the use of historical costume. David's painting was so popular that the actors used it to recreate the composition on stage, and they froze in the same position for a moment, to much acclaim. David's tutor was Sedaine, a dramatist whose salon was popular among actors, so David is pivotal between theatre and art.'

A key work in the show is Lagrenée's *Pygmalion and his Statue* (1777) and Gutman had chosen it initially to illustrate the development of the theme of *Deus ex machina*. 'I could not imagine Diderot was behind it,' she explains. 'Through reading Victor I. Stoichita's *The Pygmalion Effect. From Ovid to Hitchcock* (2008), I discovered that Pygmalion and Galatea was a theme favoured by the Enlightenment. The depiction of all the variety of emotions brought by a sudden turn of events was what Diderot promoted. Figures turn towards each other



Robert Wilhelm Ekman, *Lemminkäinen at the Fiery Lake*, c. 1867,
 oil on canvas, 76cm x 89.5cm

Tampere Art Museum, from the Collection of The Emil Aaltonen Foundation on permanent loan

Photo: Tampere Art Museum / Jari Kuusenaho

and don't face the king any longer. So it is part of a discourse marking the end of the *Ancien Régime* and the dawn of modern times.'

Gutman also learned from Stoichita that Lagrenée had painted several versions of this theme. 'There had been ongoing discussion about this moment of the myth,' she continues. 'Diderot, who was also an art critic, had made a detailed description of a sculpture by Falconet which depicts the moment when Pygmalion realises that his Galatea has changed from a sculpture into real life, but he was not totally satisfied with the sculpture, and he outlined how it should be depicted with the characters involved ignoring the audience (Diderot, *Essays on painting*, 1795). The audience is meant to share Pygmalion's surprise as if the metamorphosis was played before their eyes.'

'Lagrenée had received Diderot's new viewpoints, although he remained very academic in style. The goddess descending from a cloud and *putti* opening the curtain, are like theatrical props. Yet the different figures communicate through eye contact. Venus, who has prompted this miracle, is also falling in love with her creation. You have a sculpture made woman who is even more beautiful than a goddess. The foot is still grey, so Galatea is still



Albert Edelfelt, *Aino Ackté as Alceste on the Banks of the Styx (role portrait)*, 1902, oil on canvas, 101cm x 60cm

Antell Collections, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jaakko Holm



in the process of emerging from the stone. Lagrenée shows he has understood Diderot. The new development lies in the way they look at each other – they are not looking out of the painting at the viewer and that is what Diderot wants.’ Lagrenée, who had criticised Greuze for his supposed inability to paint, is using the same source to renew his art – Diderot.

Among the materials Gutman was thrilled to find in Finnish collections are several etchings from the Shakespeare Gallery, founded in London by John Boydell in 1786, which distributed images of paintings inspired by Shakespeare’s plays, across Europe. ‘As we already knew, the distribution of these prints was a pivotal moment in the start of Romanticism,’ explains Gutman. ‘So I was pleased when I found several of them in the collections of the Ostrobothnian Museum in Vaasa. Shakespeare brought to the stage enchantment, witches, fairies and ghosts, things that would not be presented in the classical mindframe. These etchings would have been familiar to French artists like Delaroche, who taught Ekman, and Gérôme, who taught Edelfelt.

Several works by Ekman are in the show. ‘I discovered that Ekman’s teachers in France suggested he paint the *Kalevala* (Bertel Hintze, *Robert Wilhelm Ekman, 1808–1873: en konsthistorisk studie*, 1926). Why don’t you paint this fantastic myth of yours? Ekman is a romantic artist and I hadn’t understood that before. He paints as Delaroche would have painted themes from the plays he selected.’ So in his composition for *Gustav II Adolf and his War Council at Würzburg* (1856), history is staged. A theatrical red curtain separates the victorious Gustav II Adolf and the gloomy city of Würzburg, where dreadful witch persecutions were taking place. The blue background colour is clearly drawn from the stage gaslights. Ekman was the first Finnish painter who was both an artist and a theatre painter, designing stage sets but also decorating theatres which have since burned down. The show includes sketches for a series of muses he painted on the ceiling of the original Turku theatre.

This exhibition would not be complete without including stage artists. The first stars of the stage emerged from theatre troupes during the 19th century, drawing crowds in their own right. As actresses, dancers and singers built their individual careers they arranged to be painted or photographed in the roles that made them famous. ‘They were making solo careers and were not part of a troupe and so they had to sell themselves,’ explains Gutman. ‘I was keen to find out about the divas in Finland,’ she continues, and at an international symposium

on 'Wagner and the North' organised in Helsinki (2013), she heard a voice recording of the Finnish singer Aino Ackté. 'It was such a pure voice that I understood immediately her renown.' The painting *Aino Ackté as Alceste on the Banks of the Styx* (1902) by Albert Edelfelt was not the first portrait that the artist had made of an actress. He had already painted a role portrait of Sophie Croizette in *The Princess of Bagdad*, as the result of a request made by a French newspaper (*Le Monde Illustré*, 26 March 1881).

'Both Aino Ackté and Albert Edelfelt were in Paris at the time – Edelfelt's nickname was Porte Saint-Martin, after the Paris theatre district – and this combination of two Finnish celebrities was of course essential for this exhibition,' says Gutman. Researching Edelfelt's letters, which are now accessible online, she found that the painter wanted to portray Ackté on stage. 'She was working in Paris at the Opera, singing four main roles per week and he didn't know which of the productions to choose. When he saw her on stage he decided to portray her as Alceste from Gluck's 18th-century opera, and pose her in the plain white Greek tunic dress that reflects the new trend of staging dramas using period costume rather than the contemporary dress of the time the author was writing.'

In the painting Alceste is shown alone on a Greek island, at the climax of the opera, singing an aria in which she prepares to sacrifice herself to save her husband. 'Edelfelt portrays the artificial light of the gas footlights and it is clear the painter is in the audience – he is a fascinated fan. She is elevated on the stage which emphasises this fascination. We no longer have the traditional rhetoric of Baroque hand gestures. She is moving freely. Here Edelfelt is painting the singer who is actually living the emotions and this is what created the emotions among the audience – suddenly she is Alceste, not a singer.' The illusion is emphasised by the fact she is wearing Greek costume not contemporary clothes and the fact her facial expression is transfigured by emotion. This is the start of divas' representation. 'A major discovery in the exhibition,' says Gutman, 'is a real size triptych photograph of Aino Ackté by Reutlinger from 1901 (Theatre Museum, Helsinki) wearing the same Alceste costume. And please allow me to keep another surprise in the exhibition, to create some theatrical effect for the visitor.'

'Moved to Tears: Staging Emotions', Sinebrychoff Art Museum, Helsinki, 13 September 2018 – 3 March 2019