Revisiting the Collection Display at the Ateneum Art Museum in 1959

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When the 1952 Olympic Games were organised in Helsinki, the city’s cultural institutions were also preparing themselves for a large number of visitors. The Ateneum Art Museum repainted some of its exhibition galleries, extended its opening hours, hired more staff and ordered new uniforms for the guards. However, the most significant changes were to do with the arrangement of the collection display. Only a few months earlier, on 21 January 1952, Dr Aune Lindström (1901–84) had been appointed temporary Chief Curator – the position equivalent to the museum director’s post – after her predecessor Torsten Stjernschantz had retired. The changes that Lindström initiated in the collection display before the Olympic Games were implemented in full during the following years. The updated display was eventually documented seven years later. The period 1952–59 consequently forms the timeframe of this article.

When looking at the 12 black-and-white photographs by an unknown photographer documenting the Ateneum Art Museum in 1959, I was prompted to revisit the collection display carried out by Lindström. In this article I provide a descriptive overview of the display based on the mentioned images. I also outline the Chief Curator’s initial aspirations in changing the arrangement of the collection. By looking at the images, I aim to reveal whether Lindström’s ambitions were in accord with the eventual collection display. Using the

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3 The images belong to Finnish National Gallery’s Picture Collections.
photographic documentation as a source also sets this article apart from the previous studies on the history of the Ateneum Art Museum’s collection display.

When the collection display was photographed in 1959, the Ateneum Art Museum (it was called the Ateneum Art Collection up until 1958), was situated on the third floor of the Ateneum building. Besides these rooms, the museum also spread into the main hall – now connected to the second floor – linked to the third floor of the building through stairs on either sides of the hall. The museum also used the main staircase of the building to display sculptures and monumental paintings. Along with the exhibition rooms, the 1,800m² area used by the Ateneum Art Museum included offices and storage space. The rest of the building was used by the School of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland (today the Uniarts Helsinki, Academy of Fine Arts) and the Institute of Industrial Art (today the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture) where more than 1,000 students studied at that time.4

Besides the above mentioned photographic documentation from the Finnish National Gallery’s Picture Collections, I have studied the collection catalogue from 1957 that was edited by Aune Lindström. I have also studied the minutes and the annual reports of the Foundation

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4 Statement about the use of the Ateneum building and its plot as well as the future placement of the Ateneum Art Museum. Minutes of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland 1954–1955 (STA / C 12). AFAAF, FNG.
of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland5 in the Archive of the Academy at the Finnish National Gallery. For further information, I have turned to the newspaper clippings and the Archive of Aune Lindström that belong to the Archive Collections of the Finnish National Gallery. In particular, the notes for the presentation Lindström gave at the first National Museum Days organised in January 1953 has been a significant source. In addition, I have relied on Aune Lindström’s centennial publication, Ateneumin taidemuseo 1863–1963, published in 1963.

Prior to this, the history of the collection display at the Ateneum Art Museum has been discussed by Tuula Arkio in her essay ‘One hundred years in the Ateneum: the history of the museum’s display arrangements’ (1991).6 Marja-Liisa Rönkkö’s dissertation Suomalainen taidemuseo: Louvren ja Louisianan perilli (Finnish art museums: heirs of the Louvre and the Louisiana, published in 1999) sheds light on the different phases of the collection display in the Ateneum Art Museum throughout its history.

A museum for a wider audience

Marjatta Levanto writes that, although after the Second World War the amount of people living in the Helsinki region had almost doubled, the number of visitors to the Ateneum Art Museum remained close to the figures already achieved twenty years earlier.7 To attract more visitors, the Chief Curator Aune Lindström was confronting the general suspicions towards museums. She was determined to overturn the stereotype that saw art museums as a ‘grave of the arts’, safeguarding dusty and damp storehouses of artefacts. Instead of holding onto this idea of a monolith, Lindström wanted the public to reimagine art museums as palaces for ‘live’ experiences of beauty.8 Although it is difficult to know what Lindström means by ‘live’, I am inclined to think that she uses it as a synonym for ‘contemporary’.9

The preconceptions that Lindström was up against had long roots in history. Until the end of the 19th century, some museums could undoubtedly be said to correlate with storage spaces, since everything in the collection was often on display simultaneously. In the Ateneum building that was inaugurated in 1887, the collection display was hindered from the start by the lack of space. Hence, parts of the collection were stored away and kept in the attic right from the early days. The collection displays were still very tight, ranging from floor to the ceiling. As late as 1920, a newspaper article by Finnish art critic Ludvig Wennervirta benevolently called the Ateneum the ‘picture storage’.10

This attitude towards art museums as storehouses was hard to shake off, despite the efforts by Chief Curator Gustaf Strengell (1878–1937) to contest the idea of a ‘quantity museum’ by rearranging the collection display of the Ateneum Art Museum in 1914 according to ‘aesthetic principles’. Strengell thought that the salon-style display caused museum fatigue

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5 The Foundation of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland is the successor to the Finnish Art Society that was established in 1846 to organise art education as its main function. Secondary to the predominant task the Finnish Art Society also established the art collection that later became the Ateneum Art Museum. Today the Ateneum Art Museum is one of the three museums managed by the Finnish National Gallery.


9 In several archive documents the work of living contemporary artists was referred to as ‘live art’ at the time.

which he considered the sickness of the 19th century. Strengell’s ideas were possibly partly dismantled by Torsten Stjernschantz (1882–1953), who held the position of the Chief Curator in 1919–52. According to Wennervirta, Stjernschantz returned to the chronologically arranged display that grouped together works by one artist.

Lindström’s ambitions for the collection display were best expressed in the speech she gave at the first National Museum Days in 1953 held in Helsinki. Lindström began by saying that a modern art museum differs from the collections of the previous centuries – which were reserved only for the joy of their owners and their closest circles – because it exists for a wide audience. In order to make any museum more welcoming to visitors, Lindström suggested making the exhibition halls lighter and more spacious. Through ample arrangements, the collection display avoids excessive abundance that weighs on the visitor. Instead, the loose hanging inspires visitors, since it allows them to absorb the aesthetic qualities of the works with less effort. Hence, a clear and coherent display can have an enlivening effect. Through ‘happy’ arrangements, the collection display also draws in the audience and awakens their interest in expanding their minds. According to Lindström, museum visitors might not pay much attention to how artworks are hung, but the overall impression determines whether or not they would want to return.

These ideas presumably also influenced Lindström when she changed the collection display at the Ateneum Art Museum. The annual reports of the museum state that the collection was rearranged to achieve airier, roomier, livelier and clearer displays that would be more flexible, as well as welcoming, when compared to the previous years.

While planning this new light and airy collection display, Lindström was following internationally predominant trends. During the first half of the 20th century, museum spaces had started to resemble ‘white cubes’ and this quickly became standard everywhere. Alfred Barr, the first Director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (opened on 7 November 1929), was the pioneering curator to experiment with this innovative exhibition design. He used light natural-colour monk’s cloth to cover the walls, and hung paintings at an approximate eye-level in spacious arrangements. Two paintings were never exhibited above one another. The art historian Elena Filipovic describes in an article published in OnCurating that over the years, Barr’s idea of the ‘white cube’ was perfected. She says that: ‘Windows were banished so that the semblance of an outside world – daily life, the passage of time, in short, “context” – disappeared; overhead lights were recessed and emitted a uniform, any-given-moment-in-the-middle-of-the-day glow; noise and clutter were suppressed.’ The ‘white cube’ was turned into an abstract space that appeared to be a neutral container for art and not infected by time or geographical location.

13 ‘Taideteosten näytteillepanosta. Alustus, esittely Taidemuseopäivillä Helsingissä tammik. 1953’, Aune Lindström Archive 3 (III, 1/1). Archive Collections, FNG.
14 ‘Taideteosten näytteillepanosta. Alustus, esittely Taidemuseopäivillä Helsingissä tammik. 1953’, Aune Lindström Archive 3 (III, 1/1). Archive Collections, FNG.
16 While the ‘modern’ hang was developed and disseminated by MoMa, it consisted of elements that had manifested earlier in some of the European museums that Alfred Barr and the MoMa Director Philip Johnson had visited. Mary Anne Staniszewski, The power of display: a history of exhibition installations at the Museum of Modern Art (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 61–65.
At the Ateneum Art Museum the collection display became lighter after the Second World War. During the years 1939–45 the collection had been evacuated. Once it was returned after the end of the war, the Chief Curator Torsten Stjernschantz aimed for a calmer and clearer display. Aune Lindström was, however, the first Chief Curator to implement one-line hanging systematically throughout the museum.18

As shown above, Lindström renewed the hanging of the collection in order to serve better the visitors. For her, audience engagement19 was one of the supporting pillars of museum work, together with preserving and researching art. To bridge the gap between the audience and the artworks, Lindström started the series called ‘The Artwork of the Week’ in 1952, where the museum guides presented one artwork to the audience each week.20 In addition to developing and adding guided tours at the museum, Lindström wanted to provide an overview of the collection in the form of printed materials that visitors could continue to study at home. In 1951, a guidebook was printed in Finnish and Swedish and, in 1952, also in English. In 1957, a new collection catalogue was released and, in 1958 and 1959, illustrated

18 Partial one-line hanging at the Ateneum Art Museum was introduced by Gustaf Strengell in 1914. Arkio, ‘One hundred years in the Ateneum: the history of the museum’s display arrangements’, 107. Based on photographic documentation (from 1915), different rooms in Strengell’s collection display had different characters, and therefore the ‘white cube’ hang was present only in some rooms.

19 At the time ‘audience engagement’ was named ‘art enlightenment’, which is ‘taidevalistus’ in Finnish.

editions of a small selection of works were made in Finnish and English. In addition, Lindström gave many ‘easy-to-understand’ presentations to the wider public on television and radio.

Lindström, who gained a permanent position as Chief Curator in April 1953, did not undertake these activities alone. The increased contribution to audience engagement, together with the growing volume of other activities, required more staff. The Foundation of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland appointed Einari Johannes Vehmas as the Assistant Chief Curator, and two Curators Salme Sarajas-Korte and Leena Savolainen (later Peltola) were also hired. In addition, the museum started to employ students who studied museum subjects as interns. At the beginning of the 1950s the museum staff consisted of 19–20 people, which also included a conservator, security staff and museum attendants.

The tour of the collection display at the Ateneum Art Museum in 1959

According to the chronology of the collection display, visitors would start a tour at the Ateneum Art Museum from the East side of the building on the third floor. The first room was divided with partition walls into two sections: one half contained Dutch and Flemish art from the 17th century, and other half contained Rococo art, including Antoine Watteau’s The Swing (from 1712). Finnish artists from the 18th century, such as Isak Wacklin (1720–58) and Nils Schillmark (1745–1804), were also exhibited here. The second room contained international Baroque art, including Cornelis de Vos’s painting, Two Sisters (from 1610–15) and Rembrandt’s painting Monk Reading (from 1661). All of the old European masters in these two rooms are now at the Sinebrychoff Art Museum in Helsinki.

The first two rooms, containing paintings in prestigious golden frames, were mounted according to the same principles that the more recent art followed in the rooms to come. The works were arranged in a single line with ample space around them. However, the rooms containing Rococo and Baroque art differed from the rest of the collection display because of the chairs, tables and chests that were exhibited alongside the artworks. The furniture was not used for creating entire interiors. Lindström thought that these occasional objects brought warmth to the exhibition halls and conveyed the atmosphere of the period during which the artworks were made. She also pointed out that, in some cases, the sculptural ornaments on

22 ’helppotajuisia’.
24 The painting received attention in the media during 1953 because of the suspicions that it was not authentic.
26 The Sinebrychoff Collection was gifted to the Finnish state by Fanny and Paul Sinebrychoff on 21 January 1921. The state entrusted the collection into the care of the Ateneum Art Museum, and because the collection was lacking permanent space until 1958, many of the artworks were exhibited in the building of the Ateneum. Also after 1958 some works remained in the Ateneum since the Sinebrychoff Art Museum did not have space for all of them. The hang in the Sinebrychoff Art Museum initially followed a similar ‘white cube’ display, to that which could be seen in the Ateneum building. Lindström, Ateneumin taidemuseo 1863–1963, 99, 153.
the furniture might suggest that they could belong to a collection of an art museum. In reality, the furniture was borrowed from the National Museum of Finland.  

The Baroque room was followed by old Italian art, mostly depicting religious subjects. The collection display continued with a room that was dedicated to Finnish artists from the 19th century. This room was not photographed. However, based on a newspaper review from 1954, we can deduce that works by Fanny Churberg (1845–92) and Werner Holmberg (1830–60) could have been exhibited here.

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29 Ateneum Art Collections in 1954, Minutes of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland 1954–1955 (STA / C 12). AFAAF, FNG.

After the earlier Finnish art, visitors walked down the stairs into the main hall that was the culmination of the whole collection display. This spacious room, with its high ceiling, was dedicated to the most iconic masters of the history of Finnish art. To add more hanging space, the enormous hall was broken up by partition walls on either side of the double doors that led from there to the main staircase (these doors are also in use today).

The North-east side of the main hall was dedicated to Eero Järnefelt (1863–1937) and Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905). In a photograph of that corner we see Järnefelt’s *Portrait of Baron Johan Philip Palmén* (1890) and *Lake Shore with Reeds* (1905). Albert Edelfelt’s *Portrait of the Singer Aino Ackté* (1901), *Christ and Mary Magdalena* (1890) and *In the Luxembourg Gardens* (1887) stand out because of their size. Between these large works, smaller paintings were displayed. It is interesting to see a sketch by Edelfelt for *In the Luxembourg Gardens* close to the original painting, since there were no other sketches exhibited.

The North-west corner of the room was dedicated to Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931). All walls visible in the photograph showcased well-known paintings. Some of his works depict subject matter from the Finnish national epic *The Kalevala* (such as *Lemminkäinen’s Mother*, *Kullervo Rides to War*), others portray the daily life of ordinary folk with *By the River of Tuonela* exhibited between them. The bust, *Me Neither!* (1905), by Emil Wikström (1864–1942) was also exhibited in this corner. This bust of an athletic young working man almost underlines the heroic status of Akseli Gallen-Kallela in the history of Finnish art.

The South wall of the main hall showed works by Magnus Enckell (1870–1925), Juho Rissanen (1873–1950), and Pekka Halonen (1865–1933). In particular, the decision to situate Rissanen in this section of the museum is interesting. According to the newspaper articles, this was the first time Rissanen’s works enjoyed such a favourable location at the Ateneum Art Museum. At the same time, Pekka Halonen, about whom Lindström had studied and written, seemed to have only a small number of works, hung in a less favourable corner. It is, of course, possible that Halonen’s works were exhibited in another part of the museum too.

After taking the stairs up to the West side of the museum, the display continued with a room dominated by the works by Tyko Sallinen (1879–1955). Of these *The Washermen* (1911) had been in the Venice Biennale in 1954. The ‘Ducat’ Girl (1914), on the other hand,
was a new acquisition, from 1957. The room also contained works by Alvar Cawén, Marcus Collin, Yrjö Ollila, Verner Thomé and Magnus Enckell, who was already familiar to visitors from the main hall.

I was not able to find any documentation of the next room. The only work we can see from this space through a doorway is Helene Schjerfbeck’s *Self-portrait with Black Background* (1915). The annual report of the Ateneum Art Museum from 1958 notes that this hall contained Schjerfbeck’s works. Previously, these works had been in the exhibition room that was dominated by the stairs that connected the West side of the museum to the main hall.

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33 Ateneum Art Collections in 1957, in *Ateneum Art Collections – Annual Reports 1940–1974*. Archive Collections, FNG.
Once Schjerfbeck’s works were moved, the room with stairs had more space for the works by Ellen Thesleff (1869–1954). Other artists who had worked during the first decade of the 20th century were exhibited in the room with stairs too.34

The latest Finnish art was displayed in the next room, which was not photographed. The younger artists, whose works the Ateneum Art Museum had acquired during the 1950s, included Erik Enroth, Unto Koistinen, Aimo Kanerva, Mikko Laasio, Gösta Diehl, Yngve Bäck, 

34 Ateneum Art Collections in 1958, in Ateneum Art Collections – Annual Reports 1940–1974. Archive Collections, FNG.
Unto Pusa, Birger Carlstedt, Sam Vanni, Rafael Wardi, Velkko Vionoja, Vilho Lampi, Otto Mäkiä, Ole Kandelin, Rolf Sandqvist, Jaakko Somersalo, Per Stenius, Erik Granfelt, Anita Lucander, Tapani Raittila, Tuomas von Boeheim, Helge Dahlman and Åke Mattas. It is likely that the room dedicated to most recent Finnish art contained works by some of these artists.  

Lindström, *Ateneumin taidehistoria 1863–1963*, 138, 141, 142. Finnish art historian Tuula Karjalainen wrote in 1990 that after the Second World War, the values and the world view of society had been shaken, yet the Finnish art world was still holding onto the old aspirations. However, younger artists were curious about the international modernist movements and, gradually, non-figurative art appeared in group exhibitions and galleries. International touring exhibitions also played a role in overturning the attitudes against modern art. In 1952, Kunsthalle Helsinki held the first abstract art exhibition 'Klar Form', which was vigorously discussed amongst the wider public. These influences, but perhaps even more so the criticism that Finnish art received abroad, gradually softened the approach that the Foundation of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland had taken towards modern nonfigurative art. Tuula Karjalainen, *Uuden kuvan rakentajat*, (Porvo: WSOY, 1990), 47–78. This changed attitude is also apparent in Aune Lindström’s acquisitions.
The tour ended with a room that contained modern French art on one side and modern Nordic art on the other. Here were Vincent van Gogh’s *Street in Auvers-sur-Oise* (1890), Paul Cézanne’s *The Road Bridge at L’Estaque* (1903), Edward Munch’s *Gustav Schiefler* (1908), Fernand Léger’s *Musical Instruments* (1926) (gifted to the Ateneum Art Collection after an exhibition ‘Léger-Calder’ held in Artek by the associates of the gallery), Ivan Aguéli’s *Landscape* (1917), and Karl Isakson’s *Seated Woman in Black* (1919). There were also sculptures by Edgar Degas (*Woman Caught Unawares*, 1911), and Auguste Rodin (*Danaïd*, 1889).

A large amount of sculpture was exhibited in the room on the opposite side of the main staircase. This room, with windows facing out onto the railway square, had been used for exhibiting sculptures from the beginning of the 20th century. Lindström was most pleased with the display in this sculpture room. A photograph of the space shows average-size sculptures from different periods and geographical locations, placed on plinths that differ in height, making the display dynamic. The sculpture room contained Felix Nylund’s *A Mother of the Roads* (1927), Ben Renvall’s *Maternitá*, and Wäinö Aaltonen’s *Nude Female Figure* (1920–24). The wall behind the sculptures does not look completely white, though the black-and-white photograph does not reveal its tone.

Nationalist art is bad, good art is national

Based on different statements, one can assume that the selection of artworks was formed by Lindström’s strict criteria of the quality of the art. Art historian Hanna-Leena Paloposki has studied art reviews and introductions that Lindström wrote prior to being promoted to Chief Curator at the Ateneum Art Museum. According to Paloposki, the writings reveal that Lindström’s taste was conservative and in line with prevailing opinions. At least in her art writing, Lindström did not introduce radical or new ideas. Paloposki also says that Lindström was not advocating the benefits of any particular art movement or group. Rather than having clear darlings, she tried to understand all artists and art movements.

The undertone of Lindström’s writings suggests, however, that she appreciated tradition, spirituality, and national values — as was the general trend at the time. Lindström wrote, for example, in an undated handwritten note, that she considered it interesting how all the best artists clearly had a national character. Their ethnic traits were expressed in the artworks instinctively, without compulsion or any other special stimulation. Here she referred

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38 Ateneum Art Collections in 1954, Minutes of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland 1954–1955 (STA / C 12). AFAAF, FNG


40 Lindström describes the collection catalogue (published in 1957) by saying that the list of artworks has been lightened by leaving out the weight of the less significant works. Lindström, *Ateneumin taidemuseo 1863–1963*, 149. At the Museum Days, Lindström also said that ‘our’ art museums contain old storage stuff that cannot be displayed even for study purposes. ‘Taideteosten näytteilipanosta. Alustus, esitelly Taidemuseopäivillä Helsingissä tammik. 1953’, Aune Lindström Archive 3 (III, 1/1). Archive Collections, FNG. The annual report of the Academy, in 1952, also expresses concern over the corrupted taste of art hobbyists. ‘Katsaus Suomen taide-elämän v. 1952’, in *Suomen taideakatemian vuosikilpailu 1951–53* (Helsinki: Keskuskirjapaino, 1954), 81, 82.

41 For Aune Lindström the most important element of an artwork was the emotion that it transferred to the viewer. Hanna-Leena Paloposki, ‘“Taiteen pitää olla sanoma ihmiseltä toiselle.” Aune Lindströmin lehtikirjoitukset taitteesta’ in Ulla Vihanta and Hanna-Leena Paloposki (eds.), *Kirjoituksia taitteesta 2: kuvataidekritiikkoja, taide-elämän vaikutajia ja valistajia* (Helsinki: Valtion taidemuseo / Kuvataiteen keskusarkisto, 1998), 45–58.

42 Paloposki, ‘“Taiteen pitää olla sanoma ihmiseltä toiselle.” Aune Lindströmin lehtikirjoitukset taitteesta’, 54.
to Wacklin, the von Wright brothers, Holmberg, Churberg, Gallen-Kallela and Sallinen. At the same time Lindström thought that artists whose works were weaker in terms of artistic quality were characterised by a vague universal or cosmopolitan nature. She was not against international art movements – such as non-figurative art – but she did expect national character to express itself also in contemporary works.

Lindström’s ideas about the uniqueness of each nation’s art is expressed well in the speech she gave at the National Museum Days in 1953. Here, she referred to Gothenburg Art Museum, which had exhibited artworks from four Nordic countries together in the same rooms, divided according to art movements. She considered this experiment successful. Yet Lindström emphasised that even this solution – which the museum had been compelled to make because of limited space – made the differences and similarities between individual countries particularly apparent.

The collection display at the Ateneum Art Museum in 1959 also included international artists. Based on the collection catalogue from 1957, that also listed the nationality of the artists, foreign artists mostly came from neighbouring countries of Finland such as Russia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Estonia. Yet the most significant amount of artists were from continental Europe: France, Italy, Netherlands and Belgium were represented with highest amount of artists while Germany, Spain, England, and Ukraine had one to four artists. In addition to double citizenship, no other nationalities were mentioned.
international art, the two were kept separate. Finnish artworks – which formed the backbone of the collection display – were exhibited chronologically, covering the length of the national history of art. The works by international artists on the other hand were shown either in the sections of older art or of more modern art. Although the international collection was considered modest, these works still played an important role. This arrangement suggests to me that the national history of art – which covers a short period – was annexed to the universal history of art. As I perceive it, through the collection display it was implied that Finnish art grew out of older European art movements, while modern art by French or Nordic artists was the direction Finnish art should head towards.

The chronological order that the collection display followed in 1959 had been (re)introduced by Torsten Stjernschantz after becoming Chief Curator in 1919. He grouped together works by one artist, so that the artists that were considered the most significant covered entire walls. The collection hang by Lindström continued to pay homage to the great masters, all of whom were men. Taking into account the fact that, according to Lindström, the quality was determined by national traits, it might come as no surprise that women artists did not occupy such visible places in the collection display as did the men. After all women had been perceived as the ‘bearers of the collective’ with no active political role in the formation of the states.47

It’s a man’s world48

Based on Aune Lindström’s earlier activities, one might assume that she was interested in changing the gender inequality of the collection display. Many of the art reviews and introductions written by Lindström from the period before being appointed the Chief Curator were dedicated to women artists, possibly because they were published in magazines intended for women (such as Suomen Nainen, Lotta Svärd). Moreover, in 1938, she published a book about the Finnish artist Fanny Churberg. In addition, during the Second World War, in 1943, Lindström organised a touring sales exhibition in Germany that contained works by 49 Finnish women artists.49

47 Men artists took an active part in forming the national identity of Finland. For example, in a speech Lindström gave about the Karelian influences on Finnish art, she describes trips that Finnish artists took to Karelia during the later part of 19th century. Lindström also refers to the writer Juhani Aho, who travelled to Karelia with his wife. Aho was married to Venny Soldan Brofeldt, who is a well-known Finnish artist but Lindström does not mention her name. It seems that her identity was not important in the speech that focused on the ways artists depict Finland. Women were often assigned subject matter that related to the home sphere, which on the other hand was not politicised. ‘Karjalan osuus Suomen kuvataiteissa’, Aune Lindström Archive 3 (III, 1/4). Archive Collections, FNG.

48 With this headline I refer to the chapter ‘The modern art museum – It’s a man’s world’ in Carol Duncan’s book Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums (London & New York: Routledge, 1995). In the chapter Duncan describes the modern art museum as a place scripted for the male subject in terms of both the immediate space as well as the museum programme.

49 According to Hanne Selkokari, the exhibition was organised by Lindström independently from her tasks at the Ateneum Art Museum. Instead of using artworks from the Ateneum Art Museum’s collection, the exhibition consisted of living artists’ works. Lindström did not include artworks that could be perceived as politically sensitive. Rather, the works depicted subject matter that was considered appropriate for women, such as children, flowers, landscapes, city views, still-lifes or interiors. Lindström travelled to Berlin for the opening of the exhibition. The influential author of the national socialist ideology – Alfred Rosenberg – whom Lindström had translated into Finnish language, also took part in the opening ceremony. Besides Berlin, the exhibition toured in Munich, Vienna and Poznań. Hanne Selkokari, ‘Naiset pääosassa, taiteenrakastajien voimannäytteitä Helsingissä ja Berliiässä’, in Anna Kortelainen, Marika Honkaniem, Maija Koskinen, Hanne Selkokari and Tuomas Tepora, Mieliala – Helsinki 1939–1945 (Helsinki: Tammi, 2019), 223–57.
After Lindström became Chief Curator, the number of acquisitions from women artists did increase, but only by 1.5 per cent, when compared to the period 1919–52.\textsuperscript{50} When looking at the photographs of the collection display from 1959 (these do not give a full overview of what was exhibited), works by women artists are missing altogether, with the exception of Helene Schjerfbeck's \textit{Self-portrait with Black Background}, peeking from one doorway. From the Ateneum Art Museum's annual report and newspaper articles, we can deduce that, in addition to Schjerfbeck's works, the collection display included Ellen Thesleff and Fanny Churberg. This is still a very small amount compared to the number of works that were displayed by men artists.

After all, the most prominent locations of the collection display (these that were displayed were also photographed) were given to already well-established men, while women artists seemed to have been given less favourable spots. The annual reports of the Ateneum Art Museum pointed out, for example, that the room containing works by Schjerbeck was dark because it did not receive enough daylight.\textsuperscript{51} I also consider the location of Ellen Thesleff’s works unfortunate, since they were exhibited in a room dominated by the stairs that connected the West side of the museum to the main hall.

In addition, when comparing the collection catalogues by Gustaf Strengell (published in 1915), Torsten Stjernschantz (published in 1930) and Aune Lindström (published in 1957), I noticed that the number of women artists in the earliest catalogue was 40, in 1930 it was 19 and in 1957 it was 32 – an actual decrease over time. But at the same time more women were included in the catalogue edited by Lindström compared to the one edited by Torsten Stjernschantz. In 1915, the collection catalogue contained 89 artworks by women artists, while in 1957 it contained 94 works. It must be added though, that the collection catalogues do not include every work that was owned by the Ateneum Art Museum. However, they do give an overview of the selection that each Chief Curator considered significant.

According to Mirka Kiianmies, more women started to work in the museum field in the 1950s and 1960s. She writes in her masters thesis that employment opportunities for women increased as a result of better chances in education. Along with other humanist fields, museums started to hire women because their small budgets did not allow salary increases to the ‘museum men’ who had previously dominated the field. Despite the rising number of women working in museums, the field was still operating according to the rules and attitudes set by men.\textsuperscript{52}

This begs the question of whether the choices that Lindström made in rearranging the collection display were also influenced by the men who sat on the board of the Foundation of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland. Hanne Selkokari has pointed out that it is difficult to pinpoint Aune Lindström, since we cannot know which decisions were made by her and which she was pressed into by the board.\textsuperscript{53} Kristina Linnovaara has studied the power dynamics of the art field in Finland during the 1940s and 1950s, including the Foundation of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland. Linnovaara’s study concentrates on who had the right to determine the aesthetic values in (contemporary) art and the role that gender, language, region and economic capital played in the dynamics.\textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{53} In conversation with Hanne Selkokari on 12 September 2019 at the Ateneum Art Museum.

\textsuperscript{54} Kristina Linnovaara, \textit{Makt, konst, elit – konstfällets positioner, relationer och resurser i 1940- och 1950-talens Helsingfors} (Helsingfors: Statens konstmuseum, 2008). Since Linnovaara’s dissertation is written in Swedish, I was not able to take it into account when writing this article because of the language barrier.
A lighter, brighter and breezier display

The lack of diversity that was reflected in the unequal gender balance of the artists exhibited in the collection display, was reinforced by the internationally favoured exhibition design that Aune Lindström introduced at the Ateneum Art Museum. When compared to the previous collection displays, the features of the ‘white cube’ enhanced the status of only a limited number of artworks.  

When writing in 1998 about the ‘white cube’, which was introduced and disseminated by MoMa in New York, cultural historian Mary Anne Staniszewski has said that the main argument in favour of the minimal display was the idea that it ‘facilitated appreciation of a singular artwork’. Staniszewski adds that the ‘modern’ installation showed artworks in a way that allowed their aesthetic dimensions to take precedence over the architectural surroundings. In agreement, Lindström said in 1953 that decorative tapestries had lost their appeal over the past years. Instead of the textured wall treatments, Lindström recommended applying light grey or yellow-toned paint. She thought that these colours made even the smallest rooms appear spacious, while also lifting the spirit of the visitor. Furthermore, brighter walls reflected light, therefore adding an extra benefit during darker periods of the year. Repainted walls, floors and ceilings helped viewers to focus on the exhibited works more easily rather than paying attention to the environment.

Another requirement of the white cube was to place paintings further away from each other, so that the viewer could focus on one artwork at a time. According to the modern standard, works needed space around them to make sure that the artworks did not ‘eat each other’. Individual works had to have room to ‘speak for themselves’. It was important to ensure that there was no art next to the work one was looking at that would ‘ruin the effect’ of the piece. According to art critic and writer Brian O’Doherty – whose book, Inside the White Cube – The ideology of the Gallery Space, is still considered one of the more important writings on the ‘white cube’ – the question about how much room an artwork needed to ‘breathe’ was asked in many museums or galleries throughout the 1950s and ‘60s. He writes that the ‘aggressive muttering’ between the artworks had become harder to ignore, and therefore it was important to pay more attention to what went together and what did not. 

Lindström was clearly aware of this discussion. She thought that ‘the old Dutch “tolerated” each other’s proximity better than the modern paintings’. According to Lindström, however, the balance and the rhythm could only be achieved through the emotional sensibility of the curator. There was no rule of thumb to follow about how to hang the artworks.

As anticipated, the desire to give each artwork the space that it was thought to need, manifested in the one-line hang. At the Ateneum Art Museum only a few smaller works were displayed above one another, especially when they were mounted between two large paintings. Fewer and further apart, the artworks were aligned according to their lower edge. While there was no rule of thumb about which height to mount the paintings, in the Ateneum

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55 Based on the documentation images of the display from 1915, a greater number of artists was shown. Over the years, the number of masters decreased, while the photographs from 1931 reveal that the artists that were displayed had many of their works exhibited.

56 Staniszewski, The power of display: a history of exhibition installations at the Museum of Modern Art, 66.

57 ‘Taideteosten näytteliepanosta. Alustus, esittely Taidemuseopäivillä Helsingissä tammik. 1953’, Aune Lindström Archive 3 (III, 1/1). Archive Collections FNG.


60 ‘Taideteosten näytteliepanosta. Alustus, esittely Taidemuseopäivillä Helsingissä tammik. 1953’, Aune Lindström Archive 3 (III, 1/1). Archive Collections FNG.
the lower edge was generally 70cm from the ground, and paintings were preferably mounted a little lower than eye-level.61

On the downside, increasing the amount of space around each work to achieve a calmer hang meant that the number of exhibited artworks had to be decreased. As a solution, Lindström proposed changing the display as often as possible. Her goal was to make sure that artworks did not stay in storage for too long. Lindström said: ‘The viewer that today might miss a work that is in storage, can find it on the wall in a few weeks when returning to the museum.’62 Lindström wanted to make sure that even recurring visitors had a chance of encountering works they had not seen before. She said that almost every week some works were put into storage and others were brought out and mounted on the walls.63 It is impossible to prove if the works were really changed as often as the Chief Curator had hoped.

61 ‘Taideteosten näytteillepanosta. Alustus, esittely Taidemuseopäivillä Helsingissä tammik. 1953’, Aune Lindström Archive 3 (III, 1/1). Archive Collections, FNG.


63 ‘Kaksi suurta näyttelyä ensi syysynä Ateneumissa’, Uusi Suomi, 10 April 1953.

However, the annual reports of the Ateneum Art Museum do indicate that the display was at least partly rearranged almost every year. 64

When asked in an interview about the biggest curses at the Ateneum Art Museum, Lindström answered that in addition to the lack of space, the glass ceiling was a problem. Because of continuous leaks, buckets had to be moved from one room to the other. ‘This isn’t exactly an aesthetic view.’ 65

One of the central initiatives during the 1950s was renewing the lighting conditions and this included repairing the glass ceiling. 66 Lindström thought that in an art museum nothing was as important as natural light. She considered all other light sources emergency solutions that not only strained the eyes, but also changed the colours of the artworks. 67 Nevertheless, the amount of artificial light was increased in order to compensate for the lack of daylight during darker periods of the year. Since the old electrical system did not allow for the required amount of light sources, the wiring had to be renewed too. 68 Once the works were finished in 1957, the annual report of the Ateneum Art Museum stated that the outcome was much better in most rooms and in some of them even satisfying and beautiful, especially during daytime. 69

Despite all the efforts that went into making the exhibition rooms in the Ateneum Art Museum appear airy and light, reality still caught up. The illusion of spaciousness ended right after the door from the exhibition rooms to the offices was closed. The hallways and storage spaces of the Ateneum building were filled with art that did not have proper storage space. The tight placement of the objects and the lack of room were even regarded as a safety issue. In case of fire, it could have been difficult to save works from spaces where it was almost impossible to move. 70

Although the Ateneum had been too small for its purposes from the start, the situation grew urgent in the 1950s. To improve the situation Lindström was involved in trying to secure a plot from Helsinki city for a new purpose-built building. During the second half of the 1950s, Hesperianpuisto near Töölönlahti, was considered the most suitable location because the art

64 In 1952, the first three rooms on the East side of the building were repainted and the collection was rearranged in the entire museum. Renovating the exhibition halls continued in 1953 when the main hall (and presumably the West side of the museum) were repainted and also the collection display was renewed in every room. In 1954, the annual report of the Ateneum Art Collections notes that the renovation works were finished (after the last rooms in the East wing were renovated) and the collection was once again rearranged. In 1955, the rooms with newer Finnish art were rearranged. The glass ceiling was renewed during the years 1956–57. In 1958, the rooms for newer Finnish art were renovated again, and also the collection in these rooms was once more rearranged. During that year, the museum also acquired new chairs. In 1959, the collection of the Sinebrychoff Art Museum was opened in a separate museum. As a result the rooms with older art were renewed. Ateneum Art Collections in 1952, Ateneum Art Collections in 1953, Ateneum Art Collections in 1954, Ateneum Art Collections in 1955, Ateneum Art Collections in 1956, Ateneum Art Collections in 1957, Ateneum Art Collections in 1958, Ateneum Art Collections in 1959, in Ateneum Art Collections – Annual Reports 1940–1974. Archive Collections, FNG.


66 In addition to the aesthetic value that the better lighting conditions added, the glass ceiling, heating system, and the air conditioning that were all old and below the required standard were seen as an accident waiting to happen, that could become detrimental to the artworks at any given moment. Statement about the use of the Ateneum building and its plot as well as the future placement of the Ateneum Art Museum. Minutes of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland 1954–1955 (STA / C 12). AFAAF, FNG.


70 ‘E.J. Vehmas: Miksi museo ei voi kehittää Ateneumissa.’ Aune Lindström’s documents about the Ateneum’s new building 1944–1968. (STA N1). AFAAF, FNG.
museum would have been close to the National Museum of Finland as well as the Helsinki City Museum, then located in Hakasalmi Villa. If this dream of a new building had been realised, the ‘white cube’ would have been taken even further. A newspaper article from 1954 stated that when the Ateneum Art Museum was to gain a new building, the colour of the walls or the decorations of the main staircase were not going to take the attention away from the artworks any longer. At the time, functionalist architecture had become the standard for building art museums.

In any case, the new collection display had the purpose of appealing to more visitors. Yet Lindström acknowledged that the contemporary displays might not serve everyone. In an undated note for a speech ‘Significance of the Museum’, she said that visitors from rural areas, as well as those who are interested in a specific artist or a movement, did not get a good overview of the collection, since the minimal design meant that many artworks remained in storage. According to Lindström, this minimal display catered to visitors who were already knowledgeable in the arts as well as visitors who could return time and time again. One of the central ideas in Inside the White Cube – The ideology of the Gallery Space is precisely the thought that many visitors experience negative vibrations when they wander into the ‘white cube’. According to O’Doherty, surrounding artworks with space encourages visitors to spend time in front of each work and concentrate. As a result, the pressure to ponder the meaning of each work over a long period takes part in creating the impression that art is difficult to comprehend. In line with this idea, Lindström said in an opening speech at Lahti Art Museum, that appreciation of art requires effort from its audience. Art is not necessarily digested as easily as a sugary sweet that does not require chewing. The audience had to take their time to understand what they were looking at. O’Doherty suggests that the presupposition that art cannot be enjoyed without reaching the profound meanings behind the surface, turns aesthetics into social elitism. The gallery, which is engraved with the prerequisite that to understand art requires effort, becomes an exclusive space. Visitors who do not have prior knowledge of the arts might experience that understanding art is out of their reach. This means that the ‘white cube’ could even be seen as opposing Lindström’s goals when she was renewing the collection display in order to make it more welcoming to the wider audience.

Finally

When Aune Lindström became the Chief Curator she was determined to demonstrate that museums not only safeguarded artefacts of the past but could be an active part of the contemporary world too. Renovating and rearranging the collection display was one initiative Lindström undertook to make the Ateneum Art Museum more welcoming to its visitors.

71 Aune Lindström said that the art museum would benefit from close proximity to other museums, so that together they would form a museum complex, a city quarter. ‘Aune Lindström: Etsittäessä maan keskeiselle taidemuseolle, Ateneumin Taidekokonmalle, uutta tonnttia...’ Aune Lindström’s documents about the Ateneum’s new building 1944–1968. (STA N1). AFAAF, FNG.
73 ‘Museoiden merkitys’, Aune Lindström Archive 3 (III, 1/1). Archive Collections, FNG. Understanding the artworks was also hindered by the fact that at the time, there were no texts in the exhibition spaces about the specific artworks. It looks like the works had a registration number that the visitor could look up from the collection catalogue for more information.
74 ‘Taiteen ymmärtämisestä – Lahden taidemuseon avajaisesitelmä’, Aune Lindström Archive 3 (III, 1/1). Archive Collections, FNG.
75 Brian O’Doherty, Inside the White Cube – The ideology of the Gallery Space, 76.
The documentation photographs76 from 1959 show that Aune Lindström’s desire to modernise the display led to rearranging the collection according to the trends in museum design and architecture. As followed, the new collection display took the form of a ‘white cube’. The artworks were exhibited in an undecorated space with light walls and polished wooden floors, in a single row, with ample space around them.

While Lindström’s aim was to bring the audience closer to art, thinning out the works carried connotations that art is difficult and exclusive. In order to understand what one is looking at, the visitors were urged to spend time in front of the artworks. As a result meanings and values were assigned to the artworks that were necessarily not intrinsically in them. In this way most of the exhibited works became ‘iconic’ examples of the history of Finnish art. In the ‘white cube’ this glorifying limelight was turned onto a very small number of ‘great artists’. The modern display, introduced by Lindström, took part in further idolising these masters.

Although the minimal collection display seemingly served the purpose of creating ‘neutral’ surroundings for the artworks so that the audience could take in their aesthetic qualities, it was not so ‘neutral’ after all. By focusing on a small number of artists, the collection hang upheld and reproduced specific values. For example, the collection display became one mechanism amongst others that Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock refer to when they say that women artists were not allowed to partake in determining differently the qualities described as ‘high’, ‘great’, or ‘significant’.77

That being said, as well as renewing the collection display at the Ateneum Art Museum, Aune Lindström also initiated other ways of engaging the audience. As a result the museum underwent long-awaited changes. Because of Lindström’s close relationship with the Press, many of these initiatives also received public attention. Subsequently, visitor numbers at the Ateneum Art Museum grew gradually during the period 1952–59, peaking in 1958, when 58,001 visitors stepped over the threshold of the museum.78 Lindström’s genuine efforts to bring the audience closer to the art were considered important steps in developing audience engagement in Finnish art museums.

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76 After studying the images, I learned that they provide only a fractured overview of the entire display. Despite the fact that seven out of ten main exhibition rooms were photographed at least from one angle, the images only show one-third of the entire collection display. Still the images do provide an almost complete overview of the main exhibition hall. Therefore I believe that, together with other archive materials, they have been sufficient for this analysis.


78 Ateneum Art Collections in 1958, in Ateneum Art Collections – Annual Reports 1940–1974. Archive Collections, FNG. The visitor numbers were at their lowest in 1953 when 31,655 people visited the Ateneum Art Museum.