From Nostalgia to Where…?
National Romanticism, Esotericism, and the ‘Golden Age of Finnish Art’

Marja Lahelma

In Finnish art history, the period encompassing the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the 20th century up until the outbreak of the First World War has come to be known as the ‘Golden Age of Finnish art’. This article looks into the background of this notion, connecting it with a sense of nostalgic longing. Once the fantastical nature of this concept has been identified, it is possible to recognise the building blocks on which it has been founded. We can then also become more aware of the various cultural dimensions and ideological currents that have been ‘abjected’ in the process of constructing the narrative of ‘National Romantic’ art. I will explore these issues first on a more general level and then through two case studies, the first of which focuses on the myth of Akseli Gallen-Kallela (Axel Gallén, 1865–1931) as a national hero and patriotic-minded artist, while the second one explores a national monument, the Lönnrot Memorial (1902) by Emil Wikström (1864–1942). In Finnish art historiography both artists have been placed within the category of National Romanticism, which has encouraged interpretations that emphasise nationalistic content. However, my analysis will focus on esotericism, which constitutes a marginalised cultural dimension in the art of the ‘Golden Age’. In Finnish art history, the nationalistic theme has typically been separated from a more internationally oriented Symbolist current, and esotericism has been connected with the latter.\(^1\) The aim of this article is to demonstrate that nationalism and esotericism were, in fact, deeply intertwined in the artistic discourses of the period. Both contain an element of nostalgia that manifests itself as a feeling

---

1 See, for instance, Markku Valkonen, ‘Hedelmät kypsyvät’, in Eija Kämäräinen and Sirpa Westerholm (eds.), Suomen ja maailman taide 3: Kultakausi (Porvoo: WSOY, 1984), 6–35. A similar tendency continues to be reflected in the Pinx-series, which otherwise sought an outlook that was more inclusive and multidimensional than those that emerge in previous general accounts of Finnish art history. The editor in chief, Helena Sederholm, writes in the introduction to part one that the five parts of the series will take the reader from the ‘grand narratives’ connected to the building of a national identity to an individualist and pluralist contemporary art. Helena Sederholm, ‘Esipuhe’, in Helena Sederholm (ed.), Pinx: maalaustaide Suomessa (Espoo: Weilin + Göös, 2004), 5.
of discontent with modernity and a longing for a more authentic existence that may be bound up with the past but also with a utopian future.

The approach that I am following is based on the understanding that, in order to create a more multidimensional view of the past that makes room for the complexity of historical works of art, it is necessary to assess even those aspects of history that make us uncomfortable and to take seriously the kind of cultural phenomena that from our intellectual point of view might seem irrational, eccentric, or even immoral. In the quest to broaden the ideological framework of Finnish art history, I am following Michael Ann Holly’s insight and calling for a sense of awe and astonishment, and of curiosity as a driving force behind historical approaches to works of art.² It seems that the mythologised notions embedded within the established art-historical narratives have also made us partly blind to the incredible richness of meaning contained in works of art.

The reason that I have chosen esotericism as the main focus for exploration is that it constitutes one of the most obviously rejected fields in Western culture in general, and within the nostalgically motivated National Romantic historiography of Finnish art in particular. It must be pointed out that nationalism, which is a complex and multifaceted conception with entire fields of study centred on it, is here approached within the framework of National Romanticism. This definition emphasises its function as a cultural rather than a political concept. The notion of National Romanticism (or the partly synonymous Romantic Nationalism) is defined a little differently in various contexts. As a broader European literary and cultural phenomenon it usually refers to an earlier stage, beginning at the end of the 18th century, but as an artistic current in Finland, National Romanticism (kansallisromantiikka) is most typically employed in the context of the late 19th and early 20th century, referring to both fine art and architecture.³ It is, as I will argue, one of the most central ideological edifices that has supported a unified vision of social harmony and progress. It is a notion that, on the one hand, has had the effect of accentuating political dimensions of art. Yet, at the same time, it has served to neutralise the potentially dangerous elements inherent in the combination of nostalgia and politics.

Of course, Finnish art history has never spoken with just one voice. Ever since its beginnings as an academic field it has been motivated by different ideologies and has held a variety of critical perspectives. When it comes to the subject of the present article, the pioneering scholarship on the Symbolist current in Finnish art by Salme Sarajas-Korte holds a central place. Sarajas-Korte approached Finnish Symbolism as part of the international phenomenon and paid attention to the interconnectedness of national and international aspirations. Nina Kokkinen’s recently published doctoral dissertation, which places Gallen-Kallela, Pekka Halonen and Hugo Simberg’s art within an esoteric context, has provided a highly significant new opening for the kind of research that I am also promoting here. Even though Kokkinen’s focus is elsewhere and she refers to nationalism only in passing, her research clearly demonstrates that nationalism and esotericism are deeply intertwined and that it can be very fruitful to focus on the esoteric dimension of works previously categorised as National Romantic. Other critical voices that have gnawed at the foundations of the monolithic construction of Finnish art have been heard over the years, but one incredibly persistent story in the popular consciousness has been that of ‘little Finland’, which fought its way to independence with the help of patriotic-minded artists. This has both directed our attention towards phenomena that best fit within the nationalist framework, and also encouraged us to look for interpretations that conform to these preconceptions.

Nostalgia for a lost Golden Age

Nostalgic longing for an idealised and mythologised past was a characteristic feature of late 19th-century art and culture. Nostalgia is intertwined with both the modern idea of progress and the anti-modern notion of a revival of national pasts and vernacular
traditions, and it accompanied the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation. Although literally referring to homesickness, nostalgia is here understood as a longing for a lost time rather than a place. As Svetlana Boym has noted, nostalgia in a broader sense denotes a rejection of the modern idea of time as history and progress. It is about turning history into private or collective mythology.8

In the Finnish context, the dream of a mythical past was embodied in The Kalevala, the so-called ‘national epic’ published as a literary work composed by Elias Lönnrot (1802–84) in the first half of the 19th century but based on oral traditions believed to be of very ancient origin. Towards the end of the century, artists dissatisfied with the modern world became fascinated with the myths and legends that reflected an earlier, more authentic existence. They embarked on travels to the Karelian forests and villages where the main corpus of the poems for The Kalevala had been collected and where the last remnants of Kalevalian culture were believed still to survive. The allegory of a lost paradise that could be revisited held the promise of both personal and national artistic redemption.9 However, the motivation behind this article has been the realisation that the attitude of nostalgia is not only a historical phenomenon, but also constitutes an ideological structure embedded within the narratives of art history. It appears that many of the scholars who have contributed to the established view of the ‘Golden Age of Finnish art’ have also been infected with nostalgia.

Hence, I am using the notion of nostalgia here as a conceptual tool with which to unravel some of the mythical constructions that have guided both scholarly approaches and popular views on the genesis of modern art in Finland from the late 19th century onwards. The acknowledgment of this element of nostalgia within the historical narrative creates an opening that makes room for alternative interpretations. Boym describes nostalgia as ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed’.10 Nostalgic longing has a utopian dimension that connects it with both the past and the future; it projects a fantasy of a past that never was into a future that might still be. It is ‘a sentiment of loss and displacement’, but at the same time it also reflects ‘a romance with one’s own fantasy’.11 Nostalgia, which originated as a medical diagnosis, is closely connected to the psychological

---

8 I am mainly referring here to Boym’s conceptualisation of the term, which I find most relevant for my purposes. Svetlana Boym, The Future of Nostalgia (New York: Basic books, 2001).


10 Boym, The Future of Nostalgia, xi.

11 Boym, The Future of Nostalgia; See also Wilson, Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning, 27. Wilson points out that while there is no antonym for nostalgia as such, we might consider ‘dystopia’ as a term to use, even when referring to the past as ‘a hypothetical, imaginary place or state of total misery’.
state of melancholia – and as Holly has so persuasively shown, the task of the art historian is inherently melancholic. The objects of our interest, the material remnants of the past, stand before us, but their contexts, the ‘noisy and busy’ worlds from which they come, have long since disappeared. In the persistent effort to construct an ever-growing corpus of visual and cultural knowledge, the scholar of art history strives for detached objectivity. Yet something more is at work. The narratives of art history, like any written histories, are ‘narratives of desire, full of latent and manifest needs that exceed the professional mandate to find out what happened and when’.

The notion of the ‘Golden Age of Finnish art’ quite perfectly captures a sense of nostalgia and melancholic longing, and it is a notion that has come to be so well-established that its origins have rarely been pondered and its full implications have never been addressed. One of the very first (if not the first) instances of the usage of this term in connection to Finnish art around 1900 originates from the highly influential art historian Onni Okkonen (1886–1962), who in 1927 wrote that, despite all the political disputes at the end of the 19th century, artists had a shared patriotic mission that had a beneficial effect on all artistic production. He therefore suggested that this period should be labelled as the first ‘Golden Age’ of Finnish national art. Okkonen’s treatment of the term was unmistakably nostalgic and had a strong patriotic motivation. He was trying to encourage contemporary artists to create a new Golden Age.

In addition to these art-historical debates, recent approaches in social and cultural history have emphasised that the processes that created the ‘identities’ of modern nation states were much more complex than the national myth-builders...
have been willing to admit. The 19th-century idea of ‘Volk’, the people, for instance, embraced a general reaction to modernity, and it had spiritual connotations that linked it with notions of individuality and creativity, rather than with the idea of a nation as a political entity – although, of course, the notion of Volk later became a foundation for more political aspirations. Both völkisch ideologies and esoteric notions about the spiritual development of mankind were fuelled by racial theorisations of human evolution that found support in Darwin’s publications.

Late 19th-century culture in Finland and elsewhere in Northern Europe, was fuelled by an idealised notion of the North that carried associations of purity, authenticity, and vitality. It was reflected in (pseudo-)scientific theorisations of the ‘Nordic race’, as well as in the popular esoteric notion of different world periods, which identified the Nordic region as a site of spiritual renewal. The artist Väinö Blomstedt, who belonged to both Gallen-Kallela and Wikström’s circles of friends, reflected on this issue in a very illustrative manner in a letter sent home from Paris in 1894. Blomstedt wrote about a new era that was about to begin that would succeed the current period of decadence. This, according to him, follows from the cyclical law that is present in everything. Decadence is equated with materialism and with Naturalism as an artistic direction, and the Nordic region is identified as the site of spiritual renewal, indicating that humanity will once again achieve knowledge of the mysteries of nature. Blomstedt is echoing ideas that were widespread in late 19th-century European culture. The prevalent notion that civilisation had come to an end, that it had reached a point of decadence and degeneration, gave birth to the idea that a Northern influence had the potential to invigorate and revitalise the cultural ambience of Europe.

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the idea of national unification embedded within the National Romantic paradigm never extended to certain marginalised groups, such as the Sámi or Roma people. The treatment of these groups presents the most blatant cases of historical abuse in the Nordic context, but there were also more subtle mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, such as those separating different religious or linguistic groups, which could be articulated in terms of ‘racial’ as well as cultural difference. In addition, the scholarship presented
by Joep Leerssen and Anne-Marie Thiesse, among others, has emphasised the transnationality of the phenomena of national cultural revivals and the historical construction of national identities. Yet, despite these kinds of new openings, which have both problematised the historical phenomena related to modernism and tied Finland more closely with the international scene and with the colonial histories of Europe, there has been a reluctance in the art-historical field to let go of the mythical constructions that have maintained the illusion of social harmony and unity.

Unravelling a national icon: Akseli Gallen-Kallela

After this introductory section analysing the element of nostalgia within art-historical narratives, it is now time to move on to the first case study that assesses the myth of Akseli Gallen-Kallela as a national hero and a patriotic-minded artist. Focusing on some of the building blocks of this myth, the aim is to show how a critical attitude can reveal hidden ideologies and contribute towards interpretations that diverge from the established narrative, making room for the complexity of Gallen-Kallela’s artistic production. I will, moreover, look briefly into the possibilities of reading his Kalevala-themed art from a more esoterically informed perspective.

In 1891, the first issue of the Nuori Suomi (Young Finland) album appeared as a supplement to the Finnish language newspaper Päivälehti. The critic Kasimir Leino (Kasimir Agathon Lönnbohm), one of the most central figures among the group of artists, writers, and intellectuals who gathered around the publication, wrote about an artistic awakening that indicated the creation of a truly Finnish art, rooted in the unspoilt soil of the homeland. As a central representative of this new artistic current he mentioned Gallen-Kallela, who in that same year had his first big breakthrough with the painting Aino Myth (1891) that depicted a legend from The Kalevala. The Young Finland group with its patriotic mission has gained an iconic status in Finnish cultural history, and it has often been perceived as a unanimous and cohesive brotherhood. However, in more critical scholarship this group emerges as a rather discordant conglomeration of individuals who generally believed in the same cause but were

---

26 Konttinen, Sammon takojat, 61.
not necessarily in agreement about the finer details. Moreover, only a relatively small number of artists (mostly men) can be counted as members of the Young Finland group. Gallen-Kallela, in fact, was never among its most central adherents.27

Nevertheless, the early reception of Gallen-Kallela’s art set the tone for later interpretations and, already during his lifetime, writers of Finnish art history began pigeonholing him into the role of a national hero. In the beginning of the 20th century, in 1904, the writer and publisher Wentzel Hagelstam, a personal acquaintance of the artist, published a short study of Gallen-Kallela’s art in which he described him as ‘a pioneer of Finnish art, who captured the innately national undercurrents of Finnish culture with greater originality and intensity than any other Finnish artist’.28 A few years later came Johannes Öhquist’s comprehensive overview of the history of Finnish art (1912), which contained a separate chapter on Gallen-Kallela. Notably, apart from the national hero Gallen-Kallela and the most internationally acclaimed artist of the period, Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905), all other late 19th- and early 20th-century artists were grouped together under a chapter on contemporary art. Gallen-Kallela and Edelfelt were thus lifted above the rest of the art world and presented as heroic artists.

Öhquist is a controversial and very much under-researched figure in Finnish cultural history. His case deserves to be examined a little further because it is connected to the central themes of this article in a fascinating and somewhat alarming manner. Öhquist’s importance for establishing Gallen-Kallela’s reputation cannot be denied, but the specific content of his approach has been surpassed by later myth-builders – most importantly by Okkonen, whose substantial biography of the artist was published after the Second World War in 1949. Okkonen’s work solidified the image of Gallen-Kallela as a patriotic artist who actively and consciously contributed towards the creation of a Finnish national identity.29

Öhquist was a prolific and influential art critic in the 1890s and the early 20th century, as well as a personal friend of many Finnish artists, including Gallen-Kallela. He was a cosmopolitan personality, born in Ingria, the area around the city of Saint Petersburg in Russia, formerly a province of Sweden, where a large group of people from present-day Finland had emigrated in the 17th century. His mother came from a German background, and German was hence his native language, but he also spoke

perfect Swedish and Russian, as well as some Finnish. In addition to his role as an art historian and critic, Öhquist was also a lecturer in German, a public officer, and an aspiring poet. Due to his knowledge of German, he had a significant role in promoting Finnish art in Germany. In the 1890s, he introduced the Symbolist current to Finnish audiences in a series of unusually well-informed articles. Later, however, he became infamous for his role as a propagandist of National Socialism. His book on the Third Reich, published in 1938, was an instant and international success. Öhquist’s radicalisation did not, however, take place until around the mid-1930s. In 1933, when Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, Öhquist was still very much opposed to National Socialism, describing it as an ‘ominous phenomenon’, but a couple of years later he had completely changed his mind. He had come to believe that National Socialism contained a unique and unprecedented potential for determining the fate of a nation, and that its effects should not be confined to the German people alone. More research would be needed to grasp fully how the democratic and liberal thoughts that Öhquist apparently shared with many of his artistic acquaintances around the turn of the century transformed into uncritical Nazi support in the 1930s and 1940s. However, he was by no means the only important figure in the Finnish art world around the turn of the 20th century who later came to develop sympathies towards the far Right.

Öhquist’s description of Gallen-Kallela in 1912 is quite interesting and it gives some insight into his broader intellectual and ideological pursuits around that time. Indeed, there is nothing there that suggests any kind of politically radicalised nationalism. Like many of his contemporaries, he was affected by fashionable theories of racial origins, but it should be emphasised that racial theories were at the time considered to be perfectly acceptable from a scientific perspective and represented mainstream ideologies of the period. There was a well-established belief that the Finnish-speaking population living within the borders of present-day Finland belonged to an Oriental race, while the Swedish-speaking inhabitants of coastal areas were Germanic. According to Öhquist, Edelfelt was a pure German whose art can be described as national in the outward, patriotic sense. Gallen-Kallela, on the other hand, belonged to the other racial category;
the one that ‘leans towards Asia, which in the procession of humanity is still several positions closer to the origin than Europeans, who are over-saturated with historical traditions’. Öhquist described Gallen-Kallela and Edelfelt as opposites in almost every way: Edelfelt was ‘cold and objective’, while Gallen-Kallela was a ‘Romantic’, always searching for the ‘inner essence’ of things.

Öhquist’s view of Gallen-Kallela as an artist who was in some racially determined manner connected to the Finnish soul is certainly mystified, but unlike Okkonen, Öhquist did not see Gallen-Kallela as a patriotic or political artist. Rather, he was someone who was in touch with both the ancient roots of humanity and the most recent scientific discoveries. He compared Gallen-Kallela to August Strindberg, an author and artist known to have both scientific and esoteric interests, in that, for Gallen-Kallela, astrology and alchemy meant more than humbug not because he did not understand modern astronomy or chemistry, but because he had the capacity to use his instinct and intuition to see beyond the visible world.

In the light of more recent approaches to Gallen-Kallela’s art that have emphasised the international attitude of the artist and the multiple layers of meaning contained in his finest artistic achievements, Öhquist’s views appear in some ways quite insightful. They also correspond to the artist’s own claims that he was not at all political in nature, but rather ‘a hermit of the backwoods’.

Gallen-Kallela was among the young artists in the beginning of the 1890s, who set out on an expedition into the wildernesses of Eastern Finland and onwards to Russian Karelia, but there is no need to assume an overtly patriotic motivation behind his enthusiasm for the ancient myths of The Kalevala. Rather, it can be seen as part of a universal quest for origins that was common among his contemporaries all over Europe. The world of Finnish folklore represented the complete opposite of the modern Parisian decadence that he had encountered during his student years. Undoubtedly, in the beginning he was fuelled by a nationally motivated ethnographic interest. He assembled an extensive collection of material that he used as a source of inspiration and as ethnographic props for creating an effect of ‘authenticity’ in his Kalevala-themed works. But tellingly, he never returned to Russian Karelia after his first trip,
and over the years his fictive Kalevalian world drifted further away from reality, as he gradually refined his vision to match his ideals.39

Gallen-Kallela’s relationship with Karelian culture can be described in Boym’s terms as ‘a romance with one’s own fantasy’.40 From a Finnish perspective, the so-called ‘Karelianist’ movement tends to be viewed as an inherently national effort, but the background to the phenomenon is more complex – as is also evidenced by the fact that Gallen-Kallela’s thirst for exoticism and cultural authenticity later drove him to the remotest outposts of British East Africa (present-day Kenya) and New Mexico.41 He explained that in Africa he felt truly connected with the great wilderness, which was an experience he no longer believed to be possible in the commercially exploited forests of his homeland. Deep in the heartlands of Africa he hoped to encounter the origin of all mankind, the true ‘Kalevalian people’ who had become extinct in the Finnish wilderness.42

Based on inspiration drawn from his Karelian travels, Gallen-Kallela gradually developed a visual rendition of The Kalevala that has become so deeply etched in the popular imagination as to be deemed the ‘true’ image of authentic Kalevalian reality. This idea has become firmly entrenched in Finnish culture, even though Gallen-Kallela soon abandoned the Naturalism of his early Kalevalian motifs in favour of a growing degree of stylisation influenced by international Symbolism, which accentuated not the national, but the universal aspects of Kalevalian mythology.43 Already in the 1960s, Sarajas-Korte suggested that Gallen-Kallela’s Kalevala-themed paintings should not be regarded as a separate thematic field within his production, which in the 1890s had become intensely engaged with Symbolism and the religious and esoteric ideas connected with this artistic current.44 It has become quite clear within the context of recent research that with his esoteric interests Gallen-Kallela was not an exception, but rather a typical representative of his generation of artists. His work should not be interpreted in the context of any particular belief system – he was interested in Theosophy, for instance, but he was not a devoted Theosophist. Kokkinen describes him as a ‘seeker’ who moved freely between different ideologies without ever committing to any of them but always searching for his
Towards the end of his life he summarised this searching attitude in the following way:

> Curiosity has often driven me, like many others, to seek an answer, or a personal conviction, as to what lies on the other side, after death. As a young man I read as many Swedish translations of Swedenborg as I could lay my hands on, and I even waded through the murky marshes of Theosophy, but Madame Blavatsky was revealed to me early on. I am also well-versed in the teachings of our own church, but no road has taken me far enough to build a lasting personal conviction as regards the ultimate truth.

Gallen-Kallela understood his creative role in a manner that was very similar to Öhquist’s description of him as a subjective and intuitive artist. For him, the true artist was a visionary who could see beyond the everyday plane of reality. He believed that he could develop his senses like an ancient sage by achieving a deep mystical connection with Finnish nature. This was also in line with the Theosophical teachings of Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society, whom Gallen-Kallela mentioned in the quote cited above. Gallen-Kallela’s words are a little ambiguous in regard to how he feels about Blavatsky, but it seems clear enough that in the 1890s he had a strong interest in Theosophy. There are many parallels in his writings from the period and those of Blavatsky and other Theosophists. Blavatsky, for instance, encouraged the study of the mysteries of nature, which, according to her, corresponded to the latent spiritual powers of man.

Moreover, like the Theosophists, Gallen-Kallela believed that the mythical tradition of *The Kalevala* contained ancient sacred wisdom, and it was a notion that was probably fuelled by esoteric interpretations. The poet and Theosophist William Butler Yeats, for instance, thought the poems of *The Kalevala* to reflect a tradition that was even more ancient and less occupied with the material world than Scandinavian or Celtic mythology. Blavatsky, likewise, appreciated the ancient origin of Kalevalian mythology, stating that it must be at least 3,000 years old. She described the Finns, whom she believed to be of Asian origin, as ‘a wonderfully simple nation, still untouched by civilisation’s varnish’.
living ‘close to Nature, in perfect touch and harmony with all her living powers and forces’. These kinds of ideas evidently would have appealed to Gallen-Kallela’s sensibilities, and it is more than likely that he was familiar with them. Gallen-Kallela’s personal library contains a range of material connected to esotericism, such as Blavatsky’s *The Key to Theosophy* and *The Secret Doctrine*, in Swedish translations published in the 1890s, *Spiritistiska fenomen och spiritualistiska vyer* (1900), by the Swedish-born spiritualist medium and author Mary Karadja, as well as Camille Flammarion’s peculiar science fiction novel *Lumen* (1872), which combines astronomical theorisations with speculations about the immortality of the soul, vibrations of the ether, and the limitations of the earthly senses.

For Gallen-Kallela, the world of myth contained ancient wisdom and provided a release from decadent modernity. He was aware of the universal dimensions contained in myth, and the imagery that he drew from *The Kalevala* allowed him to give a timeless and symbolic expression to psychological and philosophical issues that even in modern times continued to rule over human existence. He created a pictorial language that was both primitive and modern in a manner that forward-looking artists all over Europe aspired to create. The over-emphasis on content in general, and nationalistic content in particular, has left this very rich dimension of Gallen-Kallela’s art under its shadow. Moreover, it has left very little room for examination of the innovative visual strategies employed by Gallen-Kallela. Sixten Ringbom, the pioneering Finnish scholar of modern art and occultism, is among the very few writers who have paid attention to this aspect of Gallen-Kallela’s production. He has drawn attention to the manner in which Gallen-Kallela used highly abstracted visual effects to emphasise the psychological and emotional content of his paintings, noting the synthesis of form and meaning in his artistic approach.

For instance, in the *Kalevala*-themed work *Joukahainen’s Vengeance* (1897, Fig. 1), the grim fogginess of the landscape reflects the protagonists’ psychological state, while various compositional effects emphasise the emotional tension in the image: the large boulder in front of Joukahainen gives the viewer a sense of the painfully difficult task that awaits the hero, while the line of the horizon that is exactly on the level of his eye shows
Fig. 1. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Joukahainen’s Vengeance*, 1897, tempera on canvas, 130cm × 125cm. Turku Art Museum
Photo: Turku Art Museum
the direction of his gaze; his mother is desperately grasping the hero’s arm, trying to hold him back, while her fingers point to the opposite direction on the horizon line.\textsuperscript{52} These effects operate in a subtle way that appeal to the unconscious mind of the viewer, introducing a more profound level of meaning to the images and transporting them from narrative content towards the field of abstraction.

The issue of externalising thoughts and inner sentiments was a central element of late 19th-century esoteric thought. For Kandinsky, an artist who at the beginning of his career greatly admired Gallen-Kallela’s work, Theosophical imagery representing invisible thought forms became an important element in his quest for an artistic language that could give a visual form to spiritual reality.\textsuperscript{53} Kandinsky has given a written account of this idea and method in \textit{Über das Geistige in der Kunst}, published in 1911 – there is a copy of the book in Gallen-Kallela’s personal library. Gallen-Kallela’s interest in esotericism and the kind of visual experimentation that it fuelled was not a passing phase in his career but a fundamental artistic strategy that he developed as he transitioned from Naturalism towards a more fantastical and abstract expression that reflects a tension between inner and outer realities. For instance, in the illustration project for the so-called \textit{Suur-Kalevala} (The Complete Kalevala), which was never brought to completion, he once again returned to the idea of universally and directly expressive form. The dream-like illustrations and surrounding ornamentation were to represent a philosophical and artistic synthesis of all the creative ingredients collected by the artist on his life’s travels.\textsuperscript{54}

Ringbom compares these visual strategies employed by Gallen-Kallela to those of Edvard Munch, who was a master of creating visual links between inner and outer realities. Munch, indeed, presents an interesting comparison to Gallen-Kallela on various levels. The two artists were almost the same age (Munch was born in 1863), their artistic careers had many parallels and their paths crossed a couple of times – most significantly in 1895, when they exhibited together in Berlin. For a brief moment in the mid-1890s these two artists were considered by many European critics to be members of an ultra-modernist avant-garde. But whereas Munch is one of the few Nordic artists whose work has been included in the international canon of modernism,
Gallen-Kallela is nowadays little-known outside his native country. Munch has achieved the kind of universal status whereby he has been lifted beyond his cultural, geographical, and temporal context, while Gallen-Kallela’s role as a national hero has meant he has been over-determined by his context. This is clearly an effect of the nostalgically motivated approach that has dominated Finnish art history. But as we have seen, Gallen-Kallela’s own highly fantastical and esoterically informed views about the ancient history of Finland also contained elements of nostalgia. Gallen-Kallela’s own approach may be characterised in Boym’s terms as ‘reflective nostalgia’ – that is, the kind of nostalgic attitude that ‘dwells on the ambivalence of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity’. The writers of Finnish art history, however, have tended to translate this wistful, ironic and utopian attitude into ‘restorative nostalgia’ that attempts to reconstruct the lost home and protects the absolute truth about past events.55

**Emil Wikström’s Lönnrot Memorial: unravelling a national monument**

The second case study focuses on a specific work of art, the *Lönnrot Memorial*, by Emil Wikström, which, as I shall demonstrate, represents a fascinating example of esoteric content ‘hiding in plain sight’. It is a public monument located in a park in the very centre of Helsinki. The monument was erected in 1902 to mark the centenary of the birth of Elias Lönnrot, the physician, philologist and collector of traditional Finnish oral poetry, best known as the composer of the *The Kalevala*. By the time Wikström won the competition for Lönnrot’s memorial in 1899, he had already established himself a reputation as a sculptor of national monuments. In 1893 he had received his first public commission when he had been chosen to execute a grand sculptural frieze for the pediment of the newly-erected House of the Estates in Helsinki. The completion of the frieze describing the development of the Finnish nation until the era of autonomy was delayed, however, due to a fire that completely destroyed Wikström’s studio home. It was still incomplete in 1899, and in order to carry out both commissions, Wikström decided to rent a large studio in Paris where he stayed permanently from 1899 to 1902 (Fig. 2).
Considering Wikström’s role as a national celebrity during his lifetime, literature on his artistic production is surprisingly scarce. A biography by Mari Tossavainen published in 2016 has brought out a range of previously unknown material and insight, but there are still many questions that remain unanswered. Certainly, this is to some extent due to the fact that in the National Romantic project sculpture was never elevated to the same status as painting. Another possible reason why Wikström has perhaps been deemed somewhat uninteresting from an art-historical point

---

56 On Wikström’s reputation and role as a national sculptor, see Mari Tossavainen, Kuvanveistotyö: Emil Wikström ja kuvanveiston rakennu 1890–1920 (Helsinki: Suomen Tiede- deseura, 2012), 203.

of view stems from his resistance of the modernist idiom. From a purely formalist perspective, his work seems quite traditional and unproblematic. Hence, intellectually reflective and contextually grounded interpretations of his artistic production are virtually non-existent. Also, quite little is known of his aesthetic, literary, or philosophical pursuits, although Tossavainen does shed some light on this aspect, and I shall reflect on this in more detail below. Moreover, Wikström himself has reminisced about spiritualist séances held with Gallen-Kallela, suggesting that these two artists had a shared interest in esoteric phenomena and that they would frequently discuss these issues together.\textsuperscript{58}

Wikström, like Gallen-Kallela, developed an early interest in \textit{The Kalevala} and he also embarked on expeditions into the Karelian forests in the early 1890s. However, by the time he received the commission for Lönnrot's memorial, the initial ethnographic interest had probably developed into a more profound fascination with mythology and the origins of all humanity – as had also been the case with Gallen-Kallela. Yet, even more so than with Gallen-Kallela, there appears to be an art-historical blind spot regarding potential dimensions of meaning in Wikström’s artistic production. The dominant interpretations have connected the \textit{Lönnrot Memorial} very closely to nationalism and the political situation in Finland during the period of Russification. The whole meaning of this sculptural work has been to a large extent determined by the fact that due to increased control and censorship, no official ceremony could be arranged to celebrate its inauguration.\textsuperscript{59} My aim here is not so much to question the nationalistic interpretations as such, but to create space for a more multidimensional view of this extremely intriguing sculptural work. It is clear that a monument like the \textit{Lönnrot Memorial} will also have a nationalistic motivation. However, as I have shown in the discussion above, nationalism does not in fact offer a simple, all-encompassing framework for interpreting works of art. In the interpretations of the \textit{Lönnrot Memorial} in Finnish art historiography we may see another example of restorative nostalgia at work. After Finnish Independence, and particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War, it became important to place all kinds of artworks by the artists of the Golden Age within the context of the national project. The purpose of my analysis is to bring forth some alternative or parallel dimensions of meaning.

\textsuperscript{58} Emil Wikström, ‘Muutamia muistelmia’, \textit{A. Gallen-Kallelan muisto, Kalevalaseuran vuosikirja 12} (Porvoo: WSOY, 1932), 72–74; see also Kokkinen, \textit{Totuudenetsijät}, 120.

\textsuperscript{59} Liisa Lindgren, \textit{Monumentum: Muistomerkkien aatteita ja aikaa} (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2000), 34, 43–44.
in order to demonstrate the limitations of a purely nationalistic interpretation – or perhaps rather, an interpretation that is based on an overly simplified view of nationalism. As we saw above in the previous case study, the kind of fin-de-siècle nationalism that was promoted by Öhquist, for instance, and that probably corresponded to Gallen-Kallela’s own views, has a very different tone to the patriotic and politically motivated nationalism reflected in Okkonen’s conceptualisation of Gallen-Kallela as a national hero. A similar kind of dynamic between restorative and reflective nostalgia can also be identified in this second case.

Wikström had won the competition for Lönnrot’s memorial with a proposal that was quite different from the monument that now stands in the small leafy square tucked away just behind the busiest thoroughfares of central Helsinki. The first version was a rather conventional monumental sculpture in which the great man is placed on a decorative granite pedestal. The mythical figures were situated on both sides of the pedestal: on the right-hand side was the Kalevalian Maiden and on the left stood Väinämöinen gesturing theatrically towards Lönnrot. The original plan was quite harshly criticised in the Press and also by fellow artists, and a lengthy thought process followed before Wikström was happy with the idea and ready to begin the actual work. In the final sculpture the figures of Lönnrot and Väinämöinen appear to inhabit the same reality, sitting side by side on top of the sculptural composition, both appearing equally realistic and tangible, so that there seems to be no distinction between the worlds of myth and reality. The figure of Väinämöinen with his long hair and beard brings to mind Gallen-Kallela’s depictions of this mythical bard, but in Wikström’s execution the appearance of the old man is more contemplative and poetic and less active and demonic.

The composition of the monument is quite interesting: the bronze sculpture of Väinämöinen and Lönnrot together with the four-sided granite base build into a triangular form resembling the shape of a pyramid. This is the first clue that might open the way towards an esoteric reading, because Egypt held a central symbolic place in many esoteric traditions. For the Theosophists, for instance, Egypt was the home of the ancient mystery schools that preserved and passed on to the initiates secret traditions believed to be as old as humanity itself. Gallen-Kallela’s interest...
in esoteric ideas has been known and at least to a certain extent accepted since Sarajas-Korte’s first publications in the 1960s, but Wikström’s possible esoteric activities have received very little scholarly attention. As was noted above, Wikström was residing in Paris during the time that he executed the Lönnrot Memorial, which took about three years in total. Tossavainen shares a few significant details about his social life and interests during these years. Apparently, in the mid-1890s, Wikström had already had some contact with the Swedish branch of the Theosophical Society, and in Paris he seems to have socialised with a number of local Theosophists and spiritualists, including the Swedish medium Mary Karadja, who was in the habit of spending winters in either Paris or London.63

The granite base of the Lönnrot Memorial bears an inscription ‘Sain sanat salasta ilmi!’, which roughly translates as ‘I retrieved the words from secrecy!’ (Fig. 3). It is a direct quote from The Kalevala, and in the context of the sculpture it can easily be connected to Lönnrot’s project of collecting oral material and representing it to the Finnish people. But I would argue that in the light of what has been discussed above, it may also be interpreted as reference to an esoteric tradition of secret knowledge contained within the Kalevalian myths. It seems, therefore, that there is substantial evidence to support an esoteric reading of Wikström’s sculpture. Let us therefore ponder a little further on the pyramidal composition and its connection to Ancient Egypt. In esoteric symbolism the square base of the pyramid is typically seen to represent matter, while the triangular shape is a symbol of theory and ideas, so that as a whole the pyramid is an emblem of the spirit’s triumph over matter. This notion is also found in Blavatsky’s writings, which contain numerous references to Ancient Egyptian cosmologies and religious rituals. She also speculates on the geometrical proportions of pyramids and their links with numerological and astrological symbolism.64

The triangle, of course, is a well-established symbol of deity in Christianity and many other religions. Blavatsky also connects the three sides in a metaphysical sense to ‘the descent of Spirit into matter, of the Logos falling as a ray into the Spirit, then into the Soul, and finally into the human physical form of man, in which it becomes Life.’65 The shape of the pyramid presents a symbol of the cycle of initiation, which corresponds, to the cosmic cycles


of the heavenly bodies, and at the close of the cycle of initiation man will have regained the original state of ‘divine purity and knowledge from which he set out on his cycle of terrestrial incarnation’. The pyramid is hence a very potent symbol relating to the development of the cosmos and the spiritual initiation of man.

The true revelation arrives when one walks around the sculpture. The left-hand side of the monument constitutes a hidden image of a face carved upside-down. It is an image of Antero Vipunen, an ancient giant sage in Kalevalian mythology who lies buried under ground. Vipunen is the only character presented as more powerful than Väinämöinen, and it is to him that Väinämöinen goes to uncover words that he has lost. He ends up in Vipunen’s stomach where he manages to capture the lost

words and is then eventually regurgitated by the irritated giant. In Wikström’s sculpture Väinämöinen appears to emerge from Vipunen’s mouth (Fig. 4). Wikström has explained that this detail carries the most important ideological message of the work and that the biggest flaw in the first sketch that he had submitted to the competition was that it did not make it clear enough that Väinämöinen emerges from the ground and at the same time from Vipunen’s mouth.67

Hence, in the composition of the sculpture, the figures of Vipunen, Väinämöinen, and Lönnrot can be seen to form a chain of initiation where Väinämöinen gets the secret words from Vipunen and passes them on to Lönnrot, who then in the form of The Kalevala, gives the words to the entire Finnish nation. This kind of succession of initiates who pass on the secret knowledge from generation to generation is a central feature of the esoteric tradition. In the fin-de-siècle context it was most famously expressed by Edouard Schuré in his book Les Grands Initiés (1889), which was very popular among Finnish artists of the period.68

This interpretation also finds support in Pekka Ervast’s esoteric reading of The Kalevala. Ervast presents Vipunen as a symbol of the mysteries of life and death that are passed on to the sage Väinämöinen.69

The most perplexing detail of the sculpture is, however, the pentagram placed within a circle on Vipunen’s forehead (Fig. 4). It is a strikingly powerful symbol that immediately brings to mind associations of Freemasonry and even Satanism. In the context of Wikström’s sculpture it can have a range of potential meanings. One possible hint towards its interpretation can perhaps be found in Gallen-Kallela’s writing – bearing in mind that these two artists were close friends. In 1919 Gallen-Kallela was commissioned to design an emblematic brooch for the Kalevala Society. He used a design with a pentagon enclosed within a triangle, explaining the geometrical and numerical symbolism behind these shapes in the context of mythical syncretism. The pentagon, according to him, can be seen as a reference to the five founding members of the Kalevala Society but at the same time it also symbolises the ancient magical power of the pentagram. The triangle, on the other hand, is an emblem of organised activity, and in it can be seen the outline of a traditional hut or tent (kota), as well as that of a pyramid. Gallen-Kallela notes that the triangle should

68 See Kokkinen. Totuudenetsijät, 121–22.
69 Pekka Ervast, Kalevalan avain (Hämeenlinna: Karisto, 1985). The book was first published in 1916.
not be seen as a specific reference to Freemasonry even though it appears often in masonic imagery. He emphasises that the triangle is one of the most ancient and universal pictorial and ideological symbols.\textsuperscript{70}

Interestingly enough, in previous literature on Wikström and the Lönrott Memorial, this little detail is barely even mentioned. The public sculpture database maintained by the Helsinki Art Museum (HAM) does, however, tell us that the pentagram probably has some kind of cosmic or mystical meanings connected to The Kalevala and its description of the origin of the world.\textsuperscript{71}
Yet, without an esoteric contextualisation based on the notion of a shared origin of all myths and religions, this explanation makes very little sense. The pentagram as such has no place in Kalevalian symbolism. It is, however, quite possible to connect it with Finnish folk tradition in which it often appeared as a protective sign. In a publication from 1895 describing the nature, culture, and customs of the Karelian borderlands, written by the historian and *Kalevala*-enthusiast Oskar Hainari (Oskar Adolf Forsström) it is mentioned that the pentagram was still commonly used as a magical sign, often seen inscribed on doorposts, household objects, and on the traditional Kalevalian instrument, the kantele. A magical interpretation of the pentagram also appears in the popular novel *Panu* (1897), by Finnish writer Juhani Aho, which describes the battle between paganism and emerging Christianity in Finland. Notably, its author was also a member of Wikström’s social circles. Panu, the main character of the novel and a personification of old pagan beliefs, uses the image of the pentagram in one of his magical rituals. However, while these links all seem relevant, the fact that the pentagram is placed on the forehead of the upside-down figure of Vipunen also awakens different kinds of associations related specifically to 19th-century esoteric imagery.

The pentagram was widely used in late 19th-century visual culture of esotericism, for instance in the emblem of the Ordre kabalistique de la Rose-Croix, the occult society founded in 1888 by Joséphin Péladan and Stanislas de Guaita. Péladan soon left the Order and established his own Ordre de la Rose-Croix catholique du Temple et du Graal, which held annual art salons in Paris in the 1890s and promoted a highly esoteric form of Symbolism. It is very likely that Wikström visited some of these salons or at least was aware of them. Allusions to Egypt and other ancient cultures were also very common in the artworks and other visual material connected to the Rosicrucian salons. The influential French occultist and magician Éliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant), whose writings had a huge impact on *fin-de-siècle* esotericism, wrote extensively on the symbolism of the pentagram in his *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (1855). In a widely disseminated image drawn by Lévi himself and published as an illustration to the book, a pentagram appears on the forehead of the Sabbatic Goat, Baphomet. Versions of this image have been reproduced endlessly in the context of new religious movements.

---

72 O.A. Forsström, *Kuvia Raja-Karjala-sta*, Kansanvalistusseuran toimitukset 91 (Helsinki: Kansanvalistusseura, 1895), 75. Numerous examples of household objects inscribed with pentagrams can be found in the collections of the National Museum of Finland. See also Toivo Vuorela, *Kansanperinteen sanakirja* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1979).


75 On Lévi’s impact, see Christopher McIntosh, *Éliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival* (London: Rider and Company). There is no need to assume a direct connection between Wikström’s sculpture and Lévi’s publication, but it is possible that Wikström’s visualisation of the figure of Vipunen was affected by popularisations of Lévi’s occult imagery.
and subcultures, most notably within the various heavy metal and gothic scenes. The most famous visual continuation of this image can be seen in the figure of the Devil in tarot cards. Hence, in popular imagination Baphomet is often perceived as an image of Satan and a symbol of evil.

Yet, for Lévi the meaning of this symbol was neither Satanic nor anti-Christian. Baphomet was a symbol that represented balance between binary opposites. Lévi, however, introduced the notion of the inverted pentagram (two points directed upwards) as the symbol of Satan. He also mentions that a human figure, head downwards, represents a demon. According to him, depending on the direction of its points, the pentagram can represent order or confusion, initiation or profanation, day or night, victory or death, Satan or the Saviour. The pentagram symbolises human intelligence, the domination of the mind over the elements, and by means of the pentagram, spirits can be made to appear in vision. The pentagram on the base of the Lönrot Memorial is pointing upwards, but if we consider it from the perspective of the upside-down head, then two points are in the ascendant. There hence appears to be a reference to demonic forces of the past and order emerging from chaos. This kind of interpretation corresponds to esoteric views of the more profound meaning of The Kalevala as a battle between light and darkness, good and evil. Blavatsky mentions the section of The Kalevala that is depicted in the Lönrot Memorial, the ‘Finding of the Lost-word’, stating that like many other parts of the epic, it is ‘full of occultism’.

Within the Finnish context, The Kalevala and Egypt were brought together in the theories of the artist, poet, linguist, inventor, and social activist Sigurd Asp, who later adopted the name Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa. He presents an example of someone who has been almost entirely written out of history, presumably because his ambivalent figure does not fit the nostalgic view of history embedded in the National Romantic narrative. Wettenhovi-Aspa was undoubtedly an influential personality in his lifetime, and someone who was closely acquainted with the most famous artists and cultural figures of his day – including Gallen-Kallela, Wikström, and Öhquist, as well as the great composer Jean Sibelius. In his publications, Wettenhovi-Aspa set out to establish linguistic and cultural connections from the Kalevalian

78 Blavatsky, ‘The Kalevala, the Epic Poem of Finland’, 146.
79 Blavatsky, ‘The Kalevala, the Epic Poem of Finland’, 148.
80 Ervast also speculates on ancient connections between Finnish and Egyptian culture, suggesting even that the mythical and mysterious object called ‘Sampo’ in The Kalevala could actually be a reference to the pyramid where secret wisdom was being taught. Ervast, Kalevalan avain, 279, n1.
81 Very little serious scholarly work has been devoted to Wettenhovi-Aspa. The best and most reliable source of information is Pekka Pitkälä’s master’s thesis Pyramidit, pyhät raamat: Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspan (1870–1946) näkemykset suomen kielestä ja suomalaisen historiasta, University of Turku, 2010. Pitkälä is currently carrying out doctoral research on the same subject. Another important work, but one that unfortunately contains quite few references and does not always mention its sources, is Harry Halén and Tauno Tukkinnen, Elämän ja kuoleman kello: Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspan elämä ja teot (Helsinki: Otava, 1984).
myths to Egypt and other ancient civilisations in a manner that reflects Theosophical interpretations of *The Kalevala* as a ‘holy book’ that contained ancient wisdom.

Wettenhovi-Aspa had resided in Paris in the early 1890s, exhibiting at the Salon de la Rose+Croix and socialising with Strindberg, who was going through his ‘Inferno’ period during which he was intensely occupied with occultist experimentation. It was within this context that Wettenhovi-Aspa first developed an interest for both Egypt and linguistics. However, when in 1915 he finally published his first longer study on the ancient roots of the Finnish language and people, *Finland’s Gyllene Bok I = Suomen kultainen kirja I* (‘The Golden Book of Finland’), he was also commenting on current and ongoing linguistic and racial debates. His book appeared as a reaction against a publication that had defended the privilege of the Swedish-speaking minority, arguing for their racial superiority in a Pan-Germanic spirit. Wettenhovi-Aspa defended the eastern and very ancient origin of the Finns, arguing that *The Kalevala* was the product of a culture that was more advanced and civilised than that of the Germanic people. He rejected the notion of ‘race’ in favour of a belief in the shared ancestry of all existing groups of people.

To add another level of intrigue to the story, it should be mentioned that at least according to Wettenhovi-Aspa’s own account, the initiative to erect a public memorial for Lönnrot had actually originated from none other than himself. He mentions this in a caption placed under a photograph of his sculpture of Lönnrot printed on one of the opening pages of *Kalevala ja Egypti*. On the page next to it is a drawing of a sculpture of Väinämöinen, said to reside in a private collection in Copenhagen, in which the mythical bard has a notably Oriental appearance. In all likelihood these were the two sculptures that were exhibited together in Helsinki in 1895 as a proposal for Lönnrot’s monument. One critic mentioned that the figure of Väinämöinen looked like ‘a Chinese Mandarin’, which probably should not be seen as an artistic faux pas but rather as a conscious reference to the ancient Eastern origin of the Finns. He also notes that that the pedestal was shaped like a pyramid – a detail that is not really visible in the drawing,
but perhaps the two sculptures originally constituted a whole and therefore may have appeared different.\textsuperscript{86} It is not possible to go deeper into this issue here, but certainly the potential connection between Wettenhovi-Aspa’s theories and Wikström’s \textit{Lönnrot Memorial} would present an interesting case for further research.

As some kind of a conclusion to this brief esoteric analysis of the \textit{Lönnrot Memorial}, it is interesting to note that while the esoteric content of this national monument has been completely ignored in official narratives of Finnish art history, it has not escaped the attention of conspiracy theorists on the internet. The conclusions that they have drawn, perceiving it as a symbol of the power of the Illuminati or some other secret elite, are certainly extreme and very much incorrect, but it bears to emphasise that the conspiracy theorists have paid attention to something that official art history has decided to leave outside of its narratives.

\textbf{Conclusion: onwards from nostalgia}

The practice of art history, as Holly has pointed out, has an element of mystery and the unknown: ‘Something has gotten lost, someone has gone missing, a visual clue remains unseen.’\textsuperscript{87} But the story never arrives at a full conclusion, no matter how vigilantly you observe and how eloquently you turn your observations to literary descriptions. There is always something that remains unresolved in the compelling visuality of a work of art.\textsuperscript{88} In the case-studies presented above, I have endeavoured to see things that others have ignored and to follow even those clues that at first sight may have appeared incomprehensible. My aim has been to show how the National Romantic approach to Finnish art history has left potential meanings and important ideological tensions under its shadow. Perhaps even more significantly, it has offered an overly convenient, yet clearly quite limiting, template for interpreting all kinds of artworks. But nationalism, of course, was one among many intellectual currents that affected the Finnish art world during the politically restless and culturally vibrant decades around the year 1900. Hence, there was unquestionably a range of artistic phenomena that in no way engaged with nationalistic ideologies. In addition to this, the examples presented here demonstrate that even works of art that on one level manifest links with nationalistic or patriotic belief systems, may at the same time reflect other kinds of aesthetic,

\textsuperscript{86} Halén and Tukkinen, \textit{Elämän ja kuoleman kello}, 65–66.
\textsuperscript{87} Holly, \textit{The Melancholy Art}, 97.
\textsuperscript{88} Holly, \textit{The Melancholy Art}, 97.
religious, philosophical, ideological, or political phenomena that intersected the cultural world of the period.

Gallen-Kallela’s paintings inspired by the Kalevalian myths and Wikström’s Lönrot Memorial both present cases that traditionally have been interpreted more or less as expressions of patriotic sentiment and as examples of the National Romantic direction in Finnish art. Yet, in the light of more recent critical scholarship, their links with international artistic phenomena like Symbolism and the popular interest in esoteric currents have become apparent, which has significantly expanded their aesthetic and intellectual potential. These *Kalevala*-inspired works find a place within the broad European cultural current of reflective nostalgia that turned towards mythical pasts to find a release from a modern world that was believed to be in a state of decadence and degeneration. The world of myth and fairy-tale became a symbol for personal artistic freedom as much as it was to be understood as a site of national redemption.

I chose esotericism as the focus of my analysis, as it appears to be the most obvious ‘abjected’ dimension in relation to the case studies. Certainly, there are many other issues that have been rejected in the process of constructing a convincing narrative of national art. For instance, I have briefly referred to the notion of decadence without giving a full account or even a definition of this cultural concept. Decadence presents another problematic issue that has been very much marginalised in the context of Finnish art. Yet, it is also related to nationalism via the notion of nostalgia and through a process of abjection. As Matei Călinescu has famously demonstrated, fascination with decadence and the apparently contradictory fascination with origins and primitivism are actually two sides of the same phenomenon. Both attach themselves to the modern notion of progress; they construct a critical perspective towards this notion and offer alternative solutions to the problem. A juxtaposition of the notions of nationalism and decadence hence creates an intriguing ideological construction, where each appears to block the other one out of view.

Another highly significant aspect that I have not even touched upon here is gender. The National Romantic paradigm has an inherent masculinity embedded within its ideological structure. At least in the Finnish context, the heroes of national...
art have without exception been men, although the decades around the turn of the 20th century were also a period during which an unprecedentedly large number of women embarked on a professional artistic career. One of the most internationally acclaimed Finnish artists, Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946), has typically been viewed as an isolated loner rather than as an active member of the art world. Being both a woman and a member of the Swedish-speaking population, she has been marginalised on many levels, but this marginalisation has also indicated that it has been possible to evaluate her work outside of the tightly-framed nationalistic paradigm. Yet, as the case of Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa so poignantly demonstrates, there are many complex mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Wettenhovi-Aspa certainly had nationalistic motivation but it seems that he has been considered too eccentric to fit the role of a national hero or, indeed, to even deserve a place in Finnish art history. I have merely mentioned these examples here in passing in order to point out some possible directions forward, and to demonstrate how the kind of critical analysis that has been initiated here can generate entirely new perspectives into an art-historical field we think we know so well.

In the light of recent scholarship, the phenomena that previously appeared reactionary and irrational have started to emerge as central currents in Western modernism. It has, moreover, become apparent that nationalism and esotericism are not unrelated. Both are connected to nostalgia and to a sense of discontent with the contemporary world. For those suffering from perpetual discontent with modernity, nationalism and esotericism, either separately or in various combinations, could offer a way out that was appealingly founded on tradition but also presented itself as a modern solution. Therefore, the most central issue that I have attempted to bring forward in this article, and that has motivated the case studies presented here, is the fact that the story of the ‘Golden Age of Finnish art’ has been built on a foundation of nostalgic fantasy, and such fantastical constructions are always haunted by what has been ‘abjected’ – ignored, overlooked, forgotten, disregarded, concealed, rejected – in the process.90 The main aspect that I have focused on here is the centrality of popular esoteric currents, such as spiritualism and Theosophy. In addition, among these rejected phenomena

are issues relating to ethnicity, racial theories, and degeneration – all of which attach themselves to the notion of nationalism in a highly complex manner. After the Second World War, both racial theories and esotericism have come to be associated with the kind of irrationalism that gave birth to National Socialism in Germany and related phenomena elsewhere.91 Hence, there has been a strong desire to push these cultural features into the margins. However, within the past decade or so, research into the cultural history of esotericism has increased both internationally and within Finland. At the same time, art-historical scholarship has become more aware of the impact of esoteric and occult ideas on the development of modern art.92

Dr Marja Lahelma is an art historian with a special interest in Nordic art and in the intersections of art, science, and esotericism. She is currently a member of the multidisciplinary research project Seekers of the New, which explores the cultural history of Finnish esotericism from the 1880s to the 1940s. The project is based in the University of Turku and is funded by the Kone Foundation.

91 See, for example, Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Peter Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Treitel, *A Science for the Soul*. Treitel’s approach is particularly fruitful for my purposes, because while clearly acknowledging the links between occultism and Nazism, she also treats the esoteric dimension as a broader ingredient in the genesis of modernism.

92 As Kokkinen has pointed out, there has been an uncritical tendency to separate the secular from the spiritual and to define the spiritual side as irrational and therefore potentially dangerous. Kokkinen, *Tutuudenetsijät*, 36; for my examination of this subject, see Marja Lahelma, ‘The Symbolist Aesthetic and the Impact of Occult and Esoteric Ideologies on Modern Art’, *Approaching Religion* 8, no. 1 (2018): 32–47.