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## SESSION 5

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# Modern *Disegno*: The Embodied Splendour of Lines

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The topic of my presentation is the role of drawing and script-like notation of dramatic poses and gestures in the service of monumental painting in modern figurative art. My two examples, equal in their emotional intensity and cosmic sense of scale, come from the Western Hemisphere, but from different contextual settings, the interlinkages of which are only now being discovered in their full complexity. These contexts include modern dance and theatre reforms, women's liberation, and esoteric spiritualities.

My two comparative cases, the Swiss artist Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918) and Finnish painter Eva Törnwall-Collin (1896-1982), represent different generations of artists. Both, however, incorporate an amalgamation of symbolist and expressionist interests in their monumental works.

## Hodler

In the case of Hodler, my focus lies on his use of contour, with his idea of 'Splendour of Lines' (*Linienherrlichkeit*) expressed in the title of a cycle of paintings from ca. 1908-1909 depicting a female figure in intense dance-like attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Eva Törnwall saw examples of Hodler's work for the first time in 1908, when she, as a 12-year-old tourist, visited Switzerland with her parents (both of them architects), and re-encountered his works later on, as a young artist returning to continental Europe on study stays or with her spouse Marcus Collin (1882-1966), an artist himself, in part also to improve her fragile health.<sup>2</sup> In her concise autobiographical notes, written down in preparation for a volume of Finnish artist biographies published in 1950 by Hertta Tirranen, she retrospectively underlined the name of Hodler in her manuscript when referring to the art that she saw on her travels through Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland. She added that she felt very grateful for this early encounter with Hodler's work.<sup>3</sup>

One may wonder what might have so greatly impressed this young girl about the violent rhetoric of a male painter 43 years her senior whose imagery of women, characterized by strong allegorizing and aesthetizing impulses, might have felt as something external and other to femininity.<sup>4</sup> Hodler's public murals from the 1890s, on the other hand, depict gruesome and tragic episodes from the Swiss military history, such as the defeat to the French in the Battle of Marignano of 1515. Wounded or dying soldiers in various positions appear in the preparatory studies and sketches of this fresco cycle executed in 1897-1900 in the form of three lunettes at the Swiss National Museum in Zurich.<sup>5</sup>

Noteworthy formal features in Hodler's compositions include upright vertical lines meeting horizontal ones in a full angle, full profiles, and an overall impression of frontality, which, coupled with the clear contours, constitutes an homage to Hans Holbein. As Verena Senti-Schmidlin has pointed out, for Hodler, the contours of a human figure both expressed the individuality of the body and bore its decorative potential. The contour became articulated in the movements of the figure. The artist's task was to isolate the figure from its environment and bring out its characteristic outlines and rhythmic essence, something that had been instinctively grasped by the great masters.<sup>6</sup> Hodler's conscious aim was to arrest the constant flux of forms at moments when nature appeared optimally in its "most felicitous contours",<sup>7</sup> and he guided his students in capturing the outlines of such movements "as authentically as possible".<sup>8</sup>

The arrested, static positions invite the viewer to give them specific yet intuitive meanings in terms of a constantly evolving gestural vocabulary of emotions and passions. From 1905 on, a parallel interest in emotive formulas, or the morphology of *pathos*, was articulated and theorized by the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-

1929) through his concept of *Pathosformel*. Warburg's emphasis was on the afterlife of motifs and gestural patterns of antiquity in the pictorial heritage of the West rather than on discoveries made through the observation of contemporary, live models. What is shared by Warburg and Hodler, however, is the Nietzschean idea that the symbolic order must be understood in relation to affective, obscure forces: the Dionysian undertone of ecstasy and terror. As Georges Didi-Huberman puts it in his monograph on Warburg, ancient tragedy can in the same vein be seen as both the central matrix and the central vortex of Western culture.<sup>9</sup> Another shared emphasis of theirs is the organic, non-schematic nature of this gestural language.

### Törnwall-Collin

Regarding Eva Törnwall-Collin's art, my contextual framing is largely based on the works themselves, as there is no wealth of biographical material available (her spouse and both their children died before her). The main part of her production comprises half-length portraits or figures and landscapes. In a half-length self-portrait signed in 1916, the 20-year-old artist, who had just finished her studies, still presents her-



**Fig. 1.** Eva Törnwall-Collin, Sketch for a ceiling painting planned for the Finnish National Theatre, 1932. Oil on wood, 122x122 cm. Helsinki, Gerda and Salomo Wuorio Collection, Finnish National Gallery/Ateneum Art Museum. (Photo by Hannu Aaltonen/Finnish National Gallery).

self wearing braids, just as a girl.<sup>10</sup> The portrait is characterized by a relatively large scale for a half-length format (65x54 cm) and a stern and somewhat rigid frontality, implying an inclination towards monumentality. Moreover, she chose to present herself in the act of sketching on a canvas, that is, drawing.

It is in Törnwall-Collin's studies for a pair of commissioned – and realized – monumental paintings that her fascination with Hodler's expression becomes evident. These were in fact painted as late as the 1930s. In 1932, she participated in the competition for the ceiling painting of the auditorium of the Finnish National Theatre (Suomen Kansallisteatteri) in Helsinki, submitting a compositional sketch (fig. 1) and a sketch of a selected detail. Her entry came fourth, but the donator commissioned two of the four scenes to be realized five years later as lunette paintings mounted above door openings in the foyer of another theatre in the city, the Swedish Theatre (Svenska Teatern). They were realized as oil paintings on canvas and glued to the concrete wall in the niches.<sup>11</sup>

In 1917, Finland had gained independence as a bilingual state with a large Finnish majority and a small but influential Swedish minority, which explains the two respective national theatres in the capital. The anonymous benefactor, who was later revealed to be the owner of an architectural decoration company, the entrepreneur Salomo Wuorio (1857-1938), later donated the original competition entries, including the two sketches by Eva Törnwall-Collin, to the Finnish National Gallery.

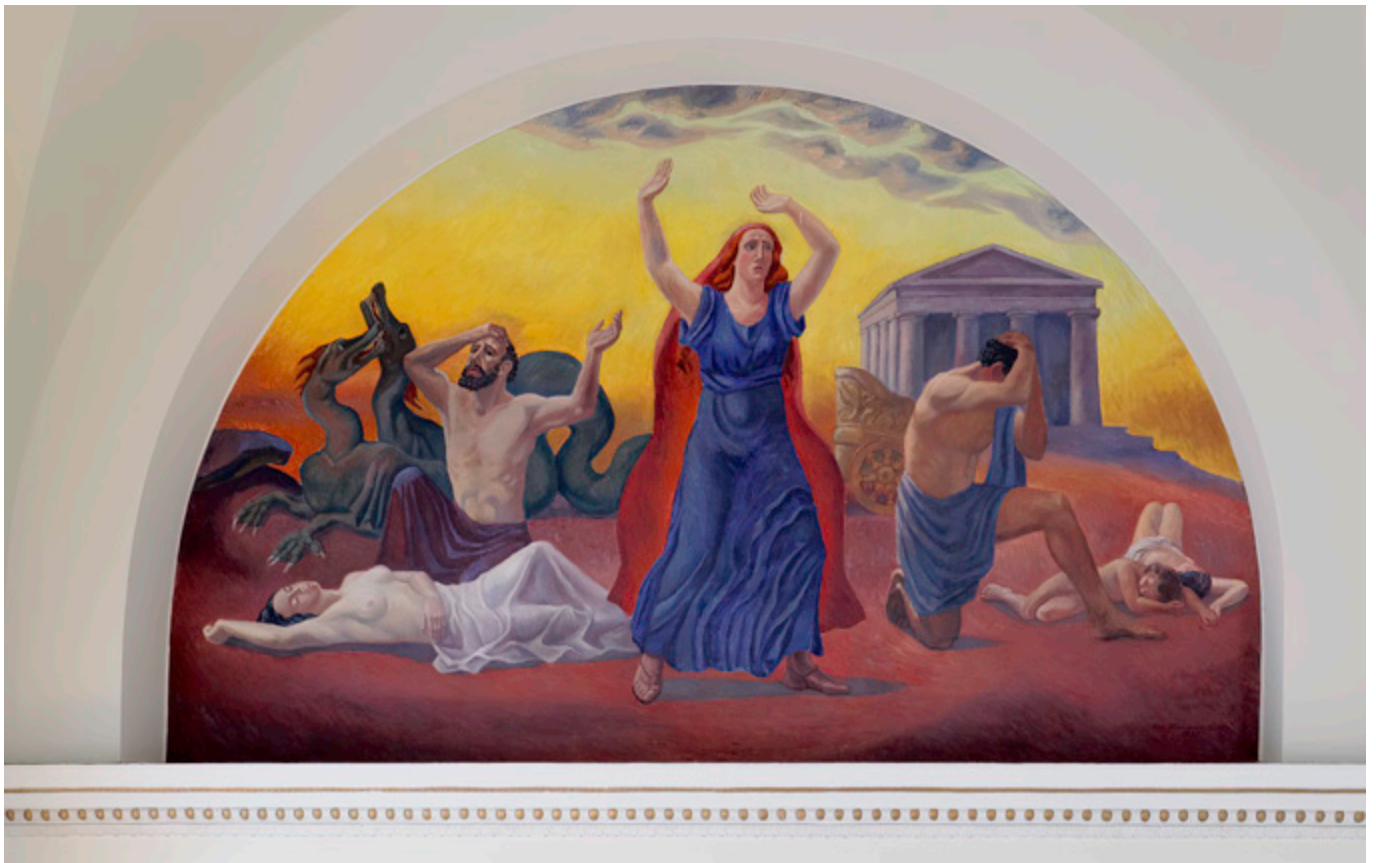
Törnwall-Collin's composition comprises four scenes from an international repertoire – thus completely omitting Finnish plays in the face of the nationalist fervour and the language feud dividing the young nation. The playwrights have been identified as being Euripides, Shakespeare, Molière, and August Strindberg (1849-1912), the modern Swedish author of naturalist and symbolist drama. Interestingly enough, three of the scenes represent topics related to violence against or by women. The most well known among these depicts Othello slaying Desdemona. My interpretation is that the two main scenes, on opposite sides, representing classical and modern tragedy, both depict a child murderer: Euripides' *Medea* and Kersti from Strindberg's play *The Crown Bride* (1901).<sup>12</sup> Medea kills

her husband's new bride, Glauce (or Creüsa), for whom he had deserted her, and her own two sons born to the treacherous husband. Kersti, on the other hand, murders her illegitimate newborn in order to be allowed to bear the crown of the honourable bride, as the unexpected possibility to marry the father of her child is presented to her thanks to the settlement of a feud between their families.

The choice is quite striking, as public art usually supported normative family values and an image of feminine motherliness and frailty.<sup>13</sup> Here, the theatre setting of course partly legitimizes and naturalizes the choice. Even so, the iteration of such a heavily taboo-laden thematic remains remarkable. Furthermore, the lighter Molière scene, a selection of types from different plays, quite bitingly ironizes the foolishness of the feminine woman, underlining the role of the theatre as a site for problematizing conventional gender dynamics and bourgeois values. In the scene, the folly and vanity of the social establishment is unveiled by a clever maidservant.

The realized pair of lunettes was chosen to represent comedy and tragedy through Molière and Euripides. The artist revealed in an interview that she was far more deeply engaged in the *Medea* scene.<sup>14</sup> In this scene (fig. 2), the figures' angularly wavering contours are integral to rendering a monumentalized pathos to the painfully static 'attitudes' and warped gestures that function as metonymic loci of the dramatic storyline.

A dance-like quality indeed characterizes the movements of the anguished characters of *Medea*, the heroine's husband Jason mourning the children, and King Creon, the devastated father of the slain bride – but especially those of Medea. Her hand gestures can be interpreted as a plea to the gods in the face of her terrible fate; and alas, the dragon-drawn chariot of Helios, the sun god and Medea's grandfather, is waiting in the background to carry her and her sons away in a *deus ex machina* manner. Medea's figure can be compared to Hodler's *Joyous Woman* (*Fröhliches Weib*) from ca. 1911 (fig. 3), a sequel to the *Splendour of Lines*, in the way both figures are united



**Fig. 2.** Eva Törnwall-Collin, *Medea*, 1937. Oil on canvas glued to cement wall, 203x340 cm. Helsinki, Svenska Teatern. (Photo by Kia Orama/Pro Artibus Foundation).



**Fig. 3.** Ferdinand Hodler, *Fröhliches Weib*, c. 1911. Lg 2390, oil on canvas, 166x118.5 cm. Kunstmuseum Bern, on loan from a private owner (Obj\_ID: 58297, Ref. No.: Bättschmann/Müller 3/2: 1444 [SIK 81037]). (Photo by Kunstmuseum Bern).

with the surrounding universe through their bodily motions.

Törnwall-Collin's sketches are preserved in the collection of the art-historically experimentative 'Museum of Sketches' (Skissernas Museum – Museum of Artistic Process and Public Art), founded in 1934 as part of the University of Lund, Sweden, on the initiative of the local professor of art history Ragnar Josephson (1891-1966). The idea was to document and highlight the creative processes behind projects of public art. A large set of Törnwall-Collin's sketches, both drawings and pastels, was acquired for the museum directly from the artist in 1937. They illuminate the thoughtful consideration behind the message conveyed by the final lunette.

The focus lies on the wrongs done to women and children by men, who also eventually suffer the terrifying consequences of the imbalanced power dynamics and the intertwining of sexuality and state affairs. Medea, princess of Colchis,

is a foreigner in Corinth, and when Jason decides to improve his position by deserting her and marrying Glauce, the local ruler's daughter, she loses all her citizenship rights, having fled Colchis on account of having helped Jason take the Golden Fleece from her father. Through her acts of violence, she is taking her life back into her own hands, albeit in the grimmest possible way. Yet, Euripides lets the sons be saved in the end, thus not really condemning her.<sup>15</sup>

The focal points of the sketches are the flaming figure of Medea and the victimhood of the blonde and pale Glauce. Medea's swirling red headscarf is easily mistaken for part of her loose hair, further underlining her fierceness. While playing with the fin de siècle aesthetic of the red-haired *femme fatale*, Törnwall-Collin focuses de facto on Medea's alarmed and distressed psychological state. She concentrated on the pleading gesture by which Medea claims justice from the cosmic forces instead of the gesture of holding the corpse of her baby in her hands, showing it to Jason.

The studies show a keen interest in the character of Glauce, who lies dead on the ground, only partially covered by the poisoned cloak, as sternly horizontal as Hodler's warriors. The sketches also include careful studies of Medea's head and hands, highlighting the centrality of the gestural language to the artist (fig. 4). One drawing in particular seems to contemplate the female characters in relation to each other.

One may ask how the kind of primal visual experience in her youth, which I assume in my argumentation, translates into a public commission as late as 30 years later. Certain interdisciplinary, transnational interlinkages are conceivable as the combining context, the most obvious of them being the early 20th-century interest in rhythmic movement and free dance as part of a vitalist reform culture (*Lebensreform*). Hodler was friends with the Swiss pedagogue Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), who set as his goal to develop kinesthetics into an autonomous art form. Dalcroze's pedagogic institutes in the German-speaking world, especially the one in Hellerau-Dresden between 1910 and 1914, were frequently visited and reported on in articles and essays by Finnish gymnastics teachers and dance critics, and his students included the Finnish pioneer of modern dance and dance pedagogy Maggie Gripenberg (1881-1976).<sup>16</sup> Another student, the internation-



**Fig. 4.** Eva Törnwall-Collin, Sketch for the *Medea* lunette in Svenska Teatern, Helsinki, 1937. Pastel on paper, 64.7x47.8 cm. Lund, Museum of Artistic Process and Public Art. (Photo by Kim Westerström/Museum of Artistic Process and Public Art).

ally acclaimed German dancer Mary Wigman (née Marie Wiegmann, 1886-1973), gave a solo performance in Helsinki in October 1926.<sup>17</sup> While the Hellerau institute had made its reputation on the application of *la rythmique* to theatre,<sup>18</sup> Wigman

belonged to the pioneers of modernism believed by contemporary critics to embody the *demonic* dimension of ‘feminine dance’ and to articulate the metaphysical connection between the human being and her universe.<sup>19</sup> It has been argued that in her early work, Wigman redefined the Woman as the Demonic without denigrating her otherness.<sup>20</sup>

Eva Törnwall-Collin gradually became a committed member of the anthroposophic circles in Finland and incidentally visited Rudolf Steiner’s Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, for the first time in 1937, right after finalizing the lunettes in Helsinki.<sup>21</sup> Steiner famously developed eurhythm, another form of rhythmic pedagogy expressive of his esoteric conviction, which seems to have directly informed some of Törnwall-Collin’s later compositions. We may here detect both general and personal connections to the occult roots of modernism.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Through her monumental project in Helsinki, the Finnish female artist produced an homage to Hodler’s idiosyncratic linear expression, thereby transforming the figurative imagery of the manic sexuality of the *femme fatale* into a eurhythmic vehicle of spiritual renewal. Törnwall-Collin’s 1937 *Medea* lunette may be seen as an expression of a persisting interest in the development of an emotive language of gestures outlined in movement. Hodler’s visual formulas proved to be applicable to new contexts, while at the same time, the modern interest in line drawing, or *disegno*, retained its intimate connection with topoi of female corporeality in figurative art.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> E.g., oil versions of 1908 (private collection), and of ca. 1909 (Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Dr. Max Kuhn-Stiftung).

<sup>2</sup> For the artist’s biography, see R. Konttinen, “Eva Törnwall-Collin - taidemaalari naamion takana”, in J.-H. Tihinen, ed., *Eva Törnwall-Collin* (Ekenäs: Pro Artibus, 2017), pp. 35-57.

<sup>3</sup> Undated manuscript, Hertta Tirranen Collection (Donation collection of the Department of Art History at the University of Helsinki), Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki. The published volume by Tirranen is: *Suomen Taiteilijoita Juho Rissasesta Jussi Mäntyseen. Elämäkertoja* (Porvoo and Helsinki: WSOY, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. E. Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 51-52.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., dying warriors in the second cartoon for *The Return from Marignano* (1897-1898, pastel on cardboard, private collection).

<sup>6</sup> V. Senti-Schmidlin, *Rhythmus und Tanz in der Malerei. Zur Bewegungsästhetik im Werk von Ferdinand Hodler und Ludwig von Hoffmann* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2007), p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> “[I]n den angenehmsten Linien”. Cited in C.A. Loosli, *Ferdinand Hodler. Leben, Werk und Nachlass 1: Das Leben Ferdinand Hodlers* (Bern: R. Suter, 1921), p. 137; V. Senti-Schmidlin, *Rhythmus und Tanz in der Malerei*, cit., p. 98.

<sup>8</sup> “[S]o treu als möglich”. *Ivi*.

<sup>9</sup> G. Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg’s History of Art*, tr. H. Mendelsohn (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017/2002), p. 90. See also D. Fässler, “Körperausdrucksformen zwischen Tradition und modernen Ausdruckstanz”, *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte* 51, no. 4 (1994): p. 335. The art historian’s spouse, Mary Warburg (née Hertz), was an artist close to the German symbolist circles.



<sup>10</sup> For a reproduction of the oil painting in the collections of the Pro Artibus Foundation, see J.-H. Tihinen, ed., *Eva Törnwall-Collin* (Ekenäs: Pro Artibus, 2017), p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> For this information, I thank the conservator of the Pro Artibus Foundation, Kaj Nylund, who restored the lunette paintings in 2011. I also wish to thank the Foundation for inviting me to participate in an exhibition and catalogue project on the artist (exhibited in Helsinki and Tammisaari-Ekenäs in 2017-2018), as well as for Kia Orama's photos.

<sup>12</sup> See T. Palin, "Ihmiskuvauksen monumentaalinen draama Eva Törnwall-Collinin tuotannossa", in J.-H. Tihinen, ed., *Eva Törnwall-Collin*, cit., pp. 94-97.

<sup>13</sup> For Finland, see e.g., J. Ruohonen, *Imagining a New Society: Public Painting as Politics in Postwar Finland* (Turku: University of Turku, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> S. T-It. [S. Tandefelt], "Eva Collins lunetter för Svenska teatern", *Hufvudstadsbladet* (September 1, 1937).

<sup>15</sup> C.E. Luschnig, *Granddaughter of the Sun: A Study of Euripides' Medea* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. xi, 1-4, 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> See J. Laakkonen, *Tanssia yli rajojen. Modernin tanssin transnationaaliset verkostot* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2018), pp. 50-59.

<sup>17</sup> Wigman gave this solo performance on 7 October at the Opera House (today known as the Alexander Theatre) in Helsinki, accompanied by the Dresden-based pianist Will Goetze. See e.g., Anon., "Mary Wigman tänään Oopperatalolla", *Helsingin Sanomat* (October 7, 1926).

<sup>18</sup> I. Spector, *Rhythm and Life: The Work of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze* (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1990), p. 197.

<sup>19</sup> J. Laakkonen, *Tanssia yli rajojen*, cit., pp. 65, 166.

<sup>20</sup> S.A. Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 130 (republished as *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman*, with a new introduction, by the University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Undated manuscript, Hertta Tirranen Collection (Donation collection of the Department of Art History at the University of Helsinki), Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki.

<sup>22</sup> See J.-H. Tihinen, "Eva Törnwall-Collin ja mystiikka taiteellisena työtapana", in J.-H. Tihinen, ed., *Eva Törnwall-Collin*, cit., pp. 125-139. For Hodler's links with Rosicrucianism, see W.H.L. Ogrinc, "Boys in Art. The Artist and His Model: Ferdinand and Hector Hodler. A New Approach", *Journal of Homosexuality* 20, no. 1/2 (1991): pp. 71-102.