

Timo Huusko

Art Criticism and Finland's Road to Independence

Finland is one of the countries which gained Independence in the aftermath of the First World War. This was mostly due to collapse of both Russian and German Empire. Strive for Independence and nationalism in Finnish art world can be traced back to the period of the late 1800s and early 1900s when the nationalist movement emerged primarily as a response to the Russification imposed upon the country by Tsar Nicholas II. Nationalist sentiments were expressed and accepted in contemporary realist, naturalist, impressionist and symbolist styles. Later in early 1900s there was a shift from painting to architecture as the preferred medium for the promotion of national identity. In painting one can see a shift of focus from the figurative representation towards an emphasis on form and colour. Formal experiment replaced illusionistic renderings of reality using central perspective.

One of the famous examples of those experiments is Finnish painter Tyko Sallinen's *The Washerwomen* (1911), which caused a scandal when it was first exhibited in 1912 in Helsinki (KUVA 1) Sallinen had visited France and Fauvists made an impact to his early period, but one of the main influence towards formal experiments in Finland were exhibitions of Edvard Munch and Norwegian art which were seen in Helsinki in 1909 and 1911. Munch's painting the Bathing men was bought from 1911 exhibition to Finnish Art Society's collection and to be exhibited in Ateneum art museum. There were many young painters who imitated Munch's new painting method. One of them was Yrjö Ollila, whose *Self-Portrait* from 1912 is an example of it.

Those with the new experiments in art had strong support from Finnish art criticism at the beginning of 1910's. There were critics like Sigurd Frosterus and Gustaf Strengell one the one hand, who supported neoimpressionism and Heikki Tandefelt and Gösta Stenman on the other hand, who supported postimpressionism and its consequences. Between 1912 to 1914 one can say that there was an emphasis on aesthetic modernism in art criticism. It means that the prevailing thing and dominant discourse in art was consider to be the idea of self-sufficiency of art, where colours and forms created their own world. This kind of modernist interpretation could be a norm in art criticism as far as one believed in the issues which are typical for expressionist art theory, stating that artists are allowed to distort the forms of the visible world in order to be able to paint their personal impression of reality more truthfully and faithfully. Gösta Stenman started his career as an art critic but later on in 1910's he became an influential art dealer.

Formal experiments and nationalism were nevertheless combined in Finnish art world. The leading nationalist critic of 1910s, Ludwig Wennervirta, developed a concept of Finnish painting based on Hippolyte Taine's theories in which art was called upon to reflect a correlation of race, time and milieu. Wennervirta postulated that Albert Edelfelt (1854-1905) and Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931) had laid the foundation of a national tradition of Finnish art in which the "heartbeat of an entire nation" could be felt, applying the contemporary German theory of *Einfühlung* (empathy), which stressed the importance of

emotional identification with art and its subject. In light of his nationalist views, Wennervirta demanded that a nationalist art should fuse emotional empathy with national values. Moreover, he posited an inseparable relation between nation and landscape. Wennervirta's primary points of reference were Paul Fechter's *Der Expressionismus* (1914) and Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1908), and, to a lesser extent, Lev Tolstói's views on art.

Among the younger artists that fulfilled his nationalist criteria, Wennervirta singled out the expressionist Tyko Sallinen (1879-1954). The thematic emphasis on the Finnish landscape and the portrayal of ordinary Finnish peasantry could be found in his works as well. Sallinen was the artist who generated the essential art debate during the years of First World War. In 1916 Sallinen and some of his friends formed the so-called November Group. Marcus Collin (1882-1966) and Ilmari Aalto (1891-1934) became members of the group as well. Sallinen and a number of other members of the group had studied in Paris and adopted a fauvist-expressionist idiom. However, a significant difference existed between the French and the Finnish approach to colour. Instead of bright colours of French fauvism, the *November Group* turned to dark brownish earth-like colours in their visualization of Finnish nature and people. "Austere greyness" was combined with an emphasis on structural features informed by not only French fauvism, but cubism and Russian cubo-futurism too.

Finns were able to see French Cubism in Helsinki in 1915 in Gösta Stenman's art salon and works of *Der Blaue Reiter* and *Die Brücke* Group in Salon Strindberg in 1914. In Salon Strindberg there were also exhibitions of Russian avant-garde art and Wassily Kandinsky in 1916. The Kandinsky exhibition and the preceding Russian art exhibition are known to have had a direct influence on the works of Greta Hällfors-Sipilä (1899-1974) and Marcus Collin. Ilmari Aalto for his part familiarized himself with Cubist ideas by studying Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* and *Du Cubisme* by Gleizes and Metzinger after seeing *Der Blaue Reiter* exhibition in Salon Strindberg.

Tyko Sallinen's working method also incorporated the primitivist features common to international expressionist and cubist art. In Sallinen's case it carried a private as well as a political dimension. Sallinen was of humble working-class origins, his father having been a master tailor – a family profession which the painter continued in order to make a living. His family belonged to the Laestadian movement, a conservative revivalist strand within the Lutheran church that rejected materialism, luxury and worldly pleasure and joy. His painting *The Fanatics*, 1918, is a depiction of these people, but it can be seen as an allegory of pain and redemption caused by the bloody civil war in 1918. Henry Ericsson's (1898-1933) painting the *Prison Camp*, 1919, is an eye-witness' document of this tragedy.

Sallinen's portraits were seen by many contemporaries as striking representations of the Finnish peasant population, which was regarded by many as underdeveloped and primitive, often assuming – according to a widespread racist pattern of thought – that these Finnish peasants even belonged to a different, lower race of Mongolian provenance. In Finland, this racist doctrine was strongly propagated among the circle of so-called Svecomans, representatives of the Swedish-speaking elite on Finland, who believed that they belonged to the superior Germanic race and were destined to lead the country. It has to be remembered that educated people in Helsinki had mostly Swedish as their mother tongue at the beginning of 20th century. Majority of them were not Svecomans, though. Elements of this racial bias, which acted largely as the counterpart of the Fennoman nationalism, were also circulating in other parts of Scandinavia.

This becomes obvious in reviews of the Finnish contribution to the 1919 *Exhibition of Nordic Art*, held in Charlottenburg in Copenhagen. For several critics, the work of Sallinen and the *November Group* provided striking depictions of the model of Finnish national identity that had taken hold in the preceding years. Scandinavian reviewers identified the primitivism of Sallinen and other painters of the *November Group* as authentic representations of the primitive Finn, often in a negative, disparaging way. Even according to the Danish social-liberal newspaper *Politiken*, the primitive Finn was marked by “Mongolian” and “Asian” features – and these were accurately re-presented in the work of Sallinen and other Novembrists.

It is hardly surprising that the association of Finnish identity with racial inferiority and primitivism provoked serious doubts over the kind of international image which the work of the *November Group* apparently presented. The question of which art forms and styles best represented Finnishness became a central issue for the art community in the wake of Finnish independence in 1917 and the victory of nationalist forces in the civil war that followed in 1918. With other voices excluded or marginalized, Finland’s nationalist conservative political and cultural elite concentrated on fostering a national art capable of expressing and strengthening their ethos.

In response to the widespread association of Finnish identity with primitivism, including racist speculations, several Finnish art critics voiced their skepticism towards the primitivist stance of Sallinen. One of them was Gösta Enckell, who argued that it was not primitivism, but refinement, grace, sophistication and cultivation that should be essential traits of national art. He was not alone in his opinions. Onni Okkonen, the leading Finnish-speaking art historian after the independence, rejected all kind of avant-garde art. He believed that it was created with the “wrong kind of ethos and intention”, and was thus inappropriate as national art. His views of art were based on the ideas of the Finnish philosopher Johan Wilhelm Snellman, who was the founding father of both Finnish Hegelianism and Fennomania. According to Snellman and Okkonen, national art had to be magnificent and sublime and to both represent and guide the nation in the best possible way, according to the highest ethical standards. For Okkonen, these criterias were best met by monumental, conventional works of art in the classical style, like those made by Akseli Gallen-Kallela or the sculptor Wäinö Aaltonen (1894-1966).

Okkonen apparently overlooked or consciously ignored the cubist element in Sallinen’s painting. Others did not, and within the conservative-nationalist establishment, avant-garde art was rejected right from the start, since the avant-garde, and expressionism in particular, was regarded as a degenerate artistic practice. Besides, in line with the campaigns against degenerate avant-garde art by German conservative and radical nationalists, voices could be heard in Finland rejecting avant-garde as artistic bolshevism. This happened in particular after the “White” victory in the Finnish Civil War between, on one side, social democrat and bolshevik “Reds” and, on the other, conservative-nationalist “Whites” in the spring of 1918. “Whites” were helped by right-wing German military forces and *Freikorps*. The “White” conservative government and cultural elite combined an anti-Russian attitude with a clear rejection of anything communist, whether socio-political or cultural. This resulted in deep scars that divided Finnish society for many decades, and one of the consequences was that many nationalists considered avant-garde art to be intrinsically Russian and, more specifically, bolshevist.