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ST. PETERSBURG AND FINNISH ART AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

At the end of 1888, the Finnish painter Axel Gallén wrote a letter from Paris to his painter friend Eero Järnefelt, stating in his outspoken way,

Imagine bothering to go to St. Petersburg; come here, you madman!
You yourself say you want to come here. Come and see the 1889
exposition and then go back home for the summer.¹

Gallén's words were a typical comment from the period of *Plein-airism* and Impressionism. Only Paris and its art were fitting models and the flagship of regeneration. We know that Järnefelt himself had said that working at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg was "wasted time".² On the other hand, Järnefelt's studies there must have had their satisfying aspects, since his uncle Mihail Clodt von Jürgensburg was a professor of landscape painting at the Academy.

For decades, Finnish art history scholarship adopted a depreciating, or rather evasive, attitude to the relations between Russian and Finnish art, and no effort was made to create an overall picture of them before the 1970s. We could view Professor Aimo Reitala's lecture given at a symposium of Finnish and Soviet historians in 1979 as the turning point.³

The reasons for this repression were naturally political. From the Finnish point of view, the policy of Russification supported by Russian ultranationalists at the end of the 1890s was fused with the Soviet Union's imperialistic policies in the 1930s into one frightening historical continuum. Russia and the Soviet Union have, in fact, provided Finnish art history scholarship with a kind of background landscape on which to superimpose the battle of a little country solicitous of its western culture

¹Wennervirta, 1950, p. 62.

²Kallio-Visapää, 1945, p. 27.

³Reitala, 1979, pp. 4-11.

first to preserve the inviolability of its autonomy and then its national independence.

St. Petersburg was fairly important for Finland's budding art life in the latter half of the 19th century, especially as an area where it could sell its paintings, decorative art,⁴ and architectural planning services. Hjalmar Munsterhjelm painted some of his many landscapes expressly for the St. Petersburg market,⁵ and some Finnish architects even opened offices in St. Petersburg.

The large metropolis was on the receiving end in more than just a commercial sense since the art of Albert Edelfelt and Axel Gallén, for example, had clear influences on Russian painting. Edelfelt's Parisian realism inspired Konstantin Makovsky⁶ and Gallén's *Kalevala* romanticism, infused with the spirit of *Art Nouveau*, had Slavic counterparts in work by Nikolai Roerich.⁷ His paintings *Guests from Overseas* (1902) and *The Slavs on the Dniepr* (1905)⁸ immediately bring to mind Gallén's *The Defense of the Sampo* (1896). Roerich's many stage sets follow the same style, favoring the bold lines and synthetic surfaces of color. The best examples are Roerich's sets for Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, from 1912.⁹

Contacts between Russian and Finnish artists were very close in the latter half of the 1890s, and at first not even Russia's increasingly repressive unification policy was able to disrupt them. This situation seems logical from St. Petersburg's point of view. Russia's liberal art circles sought ideological and aesthetic support from western art, which also included Finnish art. Many artists felt they belonged to a democratic opposition, regardless of their nationality.

St. Petersburg's Academy of Fine Arts was reorganized in 1893. One result was the rise of *Peredvizhniki* (members of the Society for Traveling Art Exhibitions), including Ilya Repin and Vladimir Makovsky, to key positions. Edelfelt's old status as member of the Academy was confirmed and he had a room of his own at the Academy's exhibition in 1896.

⁴Kruskopf, 1989, pp. 74, 92, 101.

⁵Reitala, 1979, p. 4.

⁶Hintze, 1953, p. 146.

⁷Bondarenko, 1978, p. 13; Reitala, 1979, p. 7.

⁸See Kamensky, 1979, figs. 93 and 230.

⁹See Kamensky, 1991, fig. 92.

The most intensive period of collaboration between Finnish and Russian artists began when Sergei Diaghilev, his partner Alexander Benois, and Dmitry Vladimirovich Filosofov began to regenerate Russian art. Diaghilev made a study of Scandinavian art on his travels and made friends with such artists as Edelfelt, Gallén, and Magnus Enckell.¹⁰

Diaghilev's first major exhibition plans were implemented in January 1898, with the opening of a joint showing of ten Russian and three Finnish artists. This event is viewed as the beginning of the *Mir Iskusstva*, or *World of Art*, group.¹¹

The leading Finnish symbolists appeared at a broader and more international exhibition the following year: Magnus Enckell, Väinö Blomstedt, Axel Gallén, and Ville Vallgren. Also featured were Eero Järnefelt, Albert Edelfelt, and Pekka Halonen, who all took a more cautious approach to new trends.

Diaghilev presented Finnish art in his magazine *Mir Iskusstva* even when Russia's policies towards Finland were harshest (1899-1905). In doing so, Diaghilev emphasized his group's political and artistic opposition, since some of the Finnish artists had already received scathing criticism in Russia in 1896. The most outspoken judgements came from the writer Maxim Gorky and the leading critic V. Stasov.¹² The discussion about Gallén's 'decadent' paintings, in particular, marked an important stage in the transformation of the paradigm of Russian art.

Ilya Repin inadvertently highlighted Gallén's position as he justified his resignation from the World of Art group: "Their genius is the Finn Gallén. He is the perfect example of how an artist can turn wild".¹³

Close links had other consequences as well. Edelfelt was among the portraitists favored by the imperial family, and through his contacts, he negotiated special permission for Finland to have its own pavilion at the World Exposition in Paris in 1900. Russian circles who opposed Finland's autonomous status condemned the Finnish pavilion's separatism, for this was what the pavilion in essence signified.¹⁴

¹⁰Reitala, 1979, p. 4; Puokka, 1949, p. 99.

¹¹Petrov, 1991, p. 30.

¹²Bondarenko, 1978, p. 10.

¹³Bondarenko, 1978, p. 13.

¹⁴See: Valkonen, 1992, p. 90.

The activation of St. Petersburg's art world was linked with an economic boom that reinforced westernization and required more liberal policies. James H. Billington summarizes the results of the growth of Russian industry, energy production, and transportation during the ministry of Sergei Witten from 1892 to 1903 as follows:

The logic of modernization created the need for uniform laws, for greater rights for suppressed minorities and nationalities - particularly those with badly needed technical and administrative skills, such as Finns, Baltic Germans, and Jews.¹⁵

The need for cooperation in art followed the same pattern in the areas that were under Russia's direct domination. Developed Finland and its art were an ideological threat to Russian reactionaries, but a valuable source of cultural resources to its reformers.

¹⁵Billington, 1970, p. 448.

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