FINNISH NATIONALISM AND THE AVANT-GARDE

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Pictorial Art as a Symbol of National Identity
The major significance of the visual arts to the Finnish nationalist movement may 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. Work of this sort frequently depicted what was considered authentic Finnish rural life. Another popular theme of nationalist art was the inclusion of scenes from the Kalevala: constructed by Elias Lönnrot in the 1830s and 40s from traditional Finnish oral poetry, the Kalevala was received as an authentic national epos of Homeric quality and became the key work of Finnish literature. Under the banner of national romanticism, the visual arts established a pictorial imagination of Finnishness that contributed to the nationalist effort to achieve autonomy and independence from Russia.

The importance of Finnish visual art in the nationalist movement was strengthened by the fact that several Finnish artists had achieved international success since the late 1870s via such platforms as the Salon de Paris. The painter Albert Edelfelt’s Paris breakthrough, for example, was extensively covered by the Finnish press. The success of artists such as Edelfelt and Akseli Gallén-Kallela boosted Finnish cultural self-confidence at a time when the Russian rulers of the Grand Duchy of Finland were trying hard to compromise Finnish social and cultural identity.

During the so-called first era of oppressive Russification (1899-1905), Finnish administrative and legislative autonomy was drasti-
cally reduced, Russian was imposed as the official administrative language, and compulsory conscription into the Russian army was introduced. In this political situation, visual art became a symbol of national opposition.

A number of the Finnish paintings exhibited at the 1900 Paris World Fair carried an unequivocally political message. For example, Edvard Isto’s painting *Hyökkäys* (The Attack, 1899, now in the National Museum in Helsinki) presented Suometar, the Maid of Finland, on a rocky shoreline with a stormy sea, anxiously defending the Finnish legal code against an attack of the double-headed Russian eagle attempting to retrieve and destroy the book with its claws.

During the second era of Russification (1908-1914), the political role of visual art in the Finnish nationalist movement diminished. Architecture became the primary artistic mode of articulating nationalist sentiments. Among several monumental buildings in the national romantic style erected in Helsinki at this time is the building of the fire insurance company Pohjola (1899-1901), designed by the architects Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen, who were also responsible for the Finnish pavilion at the Paris World Fair, and the city’s central railway station (1904-1919), designed by Saarinen.

While the architecture of Saarinen and others was popular among Finnish nationalists, it did not escape native criticism. The architect, art theoretician and critic Sigurd Frosterus (1876-1956) voiced objections over what he saw as national romanticism’s indulgence and traditionalism. He pleaded for a modern “järn och hjärn stil” (“style of steel and brains”, cit. Valkonen 1973; 5-20). Frosterus had participated in the architecture competition to design the Helsinki railway station, contributing a rationalistic *art nouveau* style proposal. His design met with opposition from the Finnish cultural elite, who preferred Saarinen’s nationalist monumentalism (Sarje 2000: 9). The debate over the design of the Helsinki central railway station initiated a dual conflict – between nationalists and internationalists (largely orientated toward the avant-garde), and between various factions within the Finnish nationalist movement who advocated competing ideas as to which styles best promoted Finnishness and the Finnish cause.