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AKSELI GALLEN-KALLELA PICTURING FINLAND

Lower Belvedere
27 September 2024 to 2 February 2025



Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Lake View*, 1901
Photo: Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki / Hannu Pakarinen

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Akseli Gallen-Kallela's art was shaped by a lifelong dialogue between Finnish and transnational sources of inspiration. The exhibition in the Orangery of the Lower Belvedere invites visitors to explore the fascinating interplays in Gallen-Kallela's art as he engaged with the land and people of his native Finland, the Finnish national epic Kalevala, the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art), and the Nordic landscape. Furthermore, the international dimension of his art is showcased by shining a spotlight on Gallen-Kallela's contributions to the Vienna Secession exhibitions of 1901/02 and 1904.

General Director Stella Rollig: Akseli Gallen-Kallela was part of the international network of the Vienna Secession and his work was admired by the avant-garde of "Vienna 1900." This exhibition represents an in-depth rediscovery of Finland's now most famous artist in the city of his early triumphs.

Akseli Gallen-Kallela was one of Nordic Modernism's most important artists from the period around 1900. The artist moved between contrasting worlds—from the snowy forests and vast lakes of his native Finland to the bustling cities of Paris, London, Berlin, and Vienna. He found his subjects mainly in Finland's nature, people, and myths. In so doing he was responding to an inner need as well as to an international trend that stemmed from movements seeking artistic realism and political independence, which found expression in Naturalism, Symbolism, and National Romanticism. Finland, an autonomous grand duchy under Russian rule from 1809 to 1917, was also striving for state sovereignty at the time and the Finnish population's desire for complete political independence found expression in art. Through his paintings, prints, and designs for furniture and textiles, Gallen-Kallela created a visual image of Finland.

Curator Arnika Groenewald-Schmidt: Gallen-Kallela's art played a significant role in the formation of a new Finnish identity in the period around 1900. But his works are also an expression of inner worlds and address universal themes like love and death—subjects that moved artists regardless of national borders. Surveying his main sources of inspiration—Finnish motifs, transmedia artworks, international exchange—the exhibition draws attention to this multifaceted character of his art.

This show features some sixty works including many of Gallen-Kallela's masterpieces. Fourteen of the paintings on display were shown around the turn of the century in Vienna and met with popular acclaim. The artist's cultural encounter with Vienna provides both

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the occasion and the chronological focus of the exhibition, which has been organized in collaboration with the Ateneum Art Museum, the Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki.

BIOGRAPHY AKSELI GALLEN-KALLELA

1865

Axel Waldemar Gallén is born into a well-off family on April 26 in Pori in southwest Finland. In 1907 he changes his name to Akseli Gallen-Kallela as an expression of his Finnish identity.

1878–84

Studies art in Helsinki at the Drawing School of the Finnish Society of Fine Arts; also receives private tuition.

1884–89

Continues his artistic education in Paris at the Académie Julian and the Atelier Cormon. On several occasions, he exhibits his work at the Paris Salon. He usually spends the summers in the Finnish countryside.

1890–91

Marries Mary Slöör. The couple travels to Russian Karelia, the region where the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* originated. In 1891 their daughter Impi Marjatta is born.

1894–95

The studio home Kalela is built on Lake Ruovesi in central Finland.

1895

Travels to Berlin. Gallen-Kallela exhibits with Edvard Munch and learns the art of printmaking. He returns to Finland after the death of his daughter. In May, Akseli and Mary travel via Berlin to London.

1896–99

Birth of their children Aino Kirsti (1896) and Kaius Jorma (1898). Stays in Florence in 1898. Contributes to various

exhibitions, including shows in St. Petersburg and at the Munich Secession.

1900

Gallen-Kallela is awarded medals for his frescoes (scenes from the *Kalevala*) and textile and furniture designs for the Finnish Pavilion at the Exposition Universelle in Paris.

1901–03

Fresco series for the Jusélius Mausoleum in Pori. Contributes to exhibitions of the Vienna Secession (1901/02) and Wassily Kandinsky's Phalanx group in Munich (1902).

1904

Participates in the 19th exhibition of the Vienna Secession. Travels to Vienna, Italy, the French Riviera, and Spain.

1907

Invited to become a member of the German group of avant-garde artists Die Brücke.

1908

Exhibitions and long sojourns in Budapest and Paris.

1909–10

Lives with his family in British East Africa (present-day Kenya).

1911–13

His studio home Tarvaspää is built near Helsinki.

1914

Has his own section at the Venice Biennale. The same works are shown,

and awarded prizes, at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, USA, in 1915.

1917–19

After Finland becomes independent in 1917, Gallen-Kallela fights in the Finnish Civil War. He is appointed aide-de-camp by Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, the regent of Finland, and designs flags, banknotes, uniforms, insignia, and medals.

1923–26

Gallen-Kallela travels in the United States and exhibits in Chicago and other locations. Stays at the artist colony in

Taos, New Mexico. He is joined there by Mary and Kirsti. The family returns to Finland in 1926. Designs first pages for an elaborate illuminated edition of the *Kalevala*, which he would never finish.

1927–28

Paints the dome of the Finnish National Museum with scenes from the *Kalevala*.

1931

Akseli Gallen-Kallela dies on March 7, 1931. He is given a state funeral in Helsinki.

EXHIBITION TEXTS

Akseli Gallen-Kallela was a major figure in modern art around 1900. The artist moved between contrasting worlds—the snowy forests and vast lakes of his native Finland and bustling cities such as Paris, London, Berlin, and Vienna. This varied experience is reflected in his art that reveals a constant dialogue between Finnish and international sources of inspiration.

Gallen-Kallela found his subjects mainly in Finland's nature, people, and myths; through these motifs he explored his inner world, universal themes of love and death, and also national identity. In the period between 1809 and 1917, Finland was an autonomous grand duchy under Russian rule. Around 1900 the desire for full political independence was growing among the Finnish population, which also found expression in art. Through his paintings, prints, and designs for furniture and textiles, Gallen-Kallela created a visual image of Finland.

In 1901 and 1904 the artist accepted invitations to exhibit at the Vienna Secession. The Belvedere is now joining forces with the Ateneum Art Museum / Finnish National Gallery in Helsinki to stage Austria's first-ever monographic exhibition dedicated to Gallen-Kallela's multifaceted art from the turn of the century.

(Fin)Land and People

At the start of his career, Akseli Gallen-Kallela focused on the nature and rural population of central Finland. He spent weeks living with village communities. This world was a complete contrast to his life in Paris, where he continued his studies at private institutions from 1884 to 1889. Here, in the world's greatest art center of the day, many painters were devoting themselves to the realistic depiction of nature and people from poor social backgrounds. Gallen-Kallela thus gained both confirmation and inspiration for his chosen artistic path. In Paris he also had opportunities to engage with Japanese prints. These international influences gave the artist vital inspiration, encouraging him to present Finnish subjects in a new visual language.

Kalela: A Creative Haven

In 1894/95, on Lake Ruovesi in central Finland, Akseli Gallen-Kallela realized his dream of a studio home surrounded by his beloved nature. Over the next six years, Kalela was at the heart of his life and work. It was here that he and his wife, Mary, started a family, here that he grieved the untimely death of his first-born daughter.

Inspiration for the house and its interior came from Finland's folk art and its traditional architecture as well as from contemporary international trends, such as the Arts and Crafts Movement. Gallen-Kallela created the interior design and decoration together with Mary. It was in Kalela that working in different media became standard practice for the artist. He went on to create prints and prize-winning textile and furniture designs for the Finnish Pavilion at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris.

Finland's National Myth *Kalevala*

During the period of Russian rule (1809–1917), Finland looked to its own culture for a sense of national identity. Comparable to the *Ossian* legend in Scotland or the *Song of the Nibelungs* in the German-speaking world, the foundation myth of the Finnish people is the *Kalevala* epic. Passed down the generations as oral tales about the world's creation and heroic sagas, the *Kalevala* deals with universal themes such as love, revenge, and death. The cantos had been collected and edited by doctor and philologist Elias Lönnrot, who published them as a book for the first time in 1835. For Akseli Gallen-Kallela, the *Kalevala* was a lifelong source of inspiration. Following his first paintings in the style of French Naturalism, he developed a new visual language for this subject in the manner of Art Nouveau. His images continue to shape how many Finns visualize the myths to this day and have also gained international recognition.

The Jusélius Mausoleum

In late 1899, industrialist Fritz Arthur Jusélius commissioned Akseli Gallen-Kallela to paint a series of frescoes for a mausoleum in Pori. The mausoleum was for Jusélius's daughter Sigrid, who had died at a young age. As Gallen-Kallela had also lost his own daughter a few years earlier, he probably brought great empathy to this project. He created eight images symbolizing the victory of death over matter and the triumph of the soul over death. Nature, Finland's people and myths, theosophy, and Art Nouveau provided him with sources of inspiration. The original frescoes were destroyed by a fire in 1931, but the large-scale designs have survived. Repeatedly exhibited, even during Gallen-Kallela's lifetime, these were displayed at the Vienna Secession in 1904.

Inspiring Vienna

In 1901 Akseli Gallen-Kallela was invited to exhibit at the Vienna Secession. Founded in 1897 by Gustav Klimt and others, the aim of this union of artists was to create a platform outside the conservative art world where new artistic developments could be presented and international exchange promoted. The 1901/02 exhibition showcasing "Nordic" artists

included fourteen paintings by Gallen-Kallela. *Ver Sacrum*, the Secession's magazine, also devoted an issue to the artist. His painting *Spring* was acquired for the Modern Gallery, the predecessor institution of today's Belvedere. Press reviews enthused about Gallen-Kallela's development toward stylization and monumentality. This prompted a second invitation from the Secession: in 1904 the exhibition on monumental painting featured three landscapes and the eight designs for the Jusélius Mausoleum by the Finnish artist. For the occasion he traveled to Vienna, where he was given a rapturous welcome by the Secession and its circle.

Back to the Roots

All through his life, Akseli Gallen-Kallela drew strength and inspiration from Finland's nature. He painted characteristic Finnish landscapes with lakes, pines, and birches—initially realistically, but from the 1890s he moved with the trend to Symbolism. Landscape painting around 1900 went beyond a mere record of nature and became an expression of inner worlds, universal themes of human existence, and national identity. In the absence of its own national historiography, nature—like the *Kalevala* epic—became the primary vehicle of Finnish identity in the period of Russian rule (1809–1917). Gallen-Kallela saw nature, humanity, and myth as one. His untouched landscapes often include echoes of Finland's foundation myth.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Akseli Gallen-Kallela



Picturing
Finland

Akseli Gallen-Kallela
Picturing Finland

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GENERAL INFORMATION

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