

A Pause in Peripheral Perspectives: Sergei Diaghilev's 1898 Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art

KSENIYA PAVLENKO

Cambridge University

This paper examines three years of monumental change in Finnish-Russian cultural relations at the *fin de siècle*. The territory of Finland had enjoyed autonomy and economic development for the greater part of the nineteenth century as a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. Sergei Diaghilev's 1898 *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* exemplifies how this positive dynamic began to manifest itself in transcultural exchange. Diaghilev sought for Russia's creative circles to follow the Finnish example of engaging with Western European artistic developments while refining a distinct national vision. Such a dynamic would have appeased imperial interests in promoting its Russian heritage while allowing Finns to continue to express their distinct culture. The Russification Programme, initiated in 1899, changed an amicable relationship between the Russian Empire and its Finnish territory to one of oppression. The rich cultural heritage Finnish intellectuals had developed throughout the nineteenth century was quickly mobilised to resist imperial oppression, exemplified in the Finnish Pavilion at the 1900 *Paris Exposition Universelle*. The collaborative potential of Diaghilev's 1898 exhibition was replaced by a resounding call for Finnish autonomy at the 1900 Finnish Pavilion. The period of 1898-1900 demonstrates how quickly Finland's embrace of nineteenth-century nationalism transformed from a cultural blossoming to a politicised quest for autonomy.

The passports of Finns from 1809 to 1917 read "Finnish Citizen, Russian Subject," reflecting the intricate balance of imperial identity that blossomed in the nineteenth century.¹ The artistic relationship between the Russian Empire and Grand Duchy of Finland underwent rapid changes at the *fin de siècle* as a consequence of wider social-political concerns. Sergei Diaghilev's (1872-1929) early career goal of fusing Russian and Finnish artistic cultures suffered due to the political instability caused by oppressive imperial measures such as the February Manifesto. The *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* in 1898, organised by Diaghilev, sought to create rich, transcultural exchange within the Russian Empire. Diaghilev presented Finland as a distinct and

¹ Keith W. Olson, "Between East and West," *The Wilson Quarterly* 10, No. 4 (1986): 51.

cosmopolitan national school circumscribed by imperial boundaries. Unfortunately, the February Manifesto and ensuing Russification Programme shifted Finnish-Russian relations drastically in 1899. Diaghilev had presented a range of artists, from symbolists to impressionists, who had made commendable progress in establishing a unique Finnish school in the previous two decades.² Diaghilev's exhibition united progressive developments in Russia and Finland in the hope of cross-pollination and mutual reinforcement. Finnish artists' distinct nationalism and engagement with Western Europe was intended to set an example for Russian artists. The political events of 1899 transformed Finnish artists into cultural leaders battling imperial oppression before Diaghilev's ambitions could be fully realised.

The exertion of Finnish Nationalist Romanticism as a reaction to the February Manifesto and the Russification Programme has been examined as a defining moment in the golden age of Finnish Art by historians such as David Jackson, Stephan Koja, and Adriaan E. Waiboer.³ Diaghilev's *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* in 1898 and the Finnish Pavilion at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* in 1900 are critical to expanding the examinations of this rapid cultural transformation. The exhibitions are emblematic of fluctuating attitudes in three transformative years for Russian and Finnish art. Finnish modernism was mobilised to rebel the change from a favorable imperial relationship to one of oppression. The examination of these two exhibitions highlights a moment of rich potential created by Diaghilev's notable insight into Finnish art during the late nineteenth century. What may have been the first chapter in the development of a transnational imperial school became yet another moment of oppression and conflict.

Diaghilev's dreams of a potential unity between Russia's and Finland's national schools were initially feasible due to the political climate that prevailed in Finland until the Russification period. The territory of Finland was transferred from Swedish to Russian control in 1809, following a military conflict incited by the King of Sweden's refusal to uphold the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit.⁴ Tsar Alexander I (1777-1825) established a precedent of Finnish autonomy unrivaled by any other population within the Russian Empire, which endured the majority of the nineteenth century.⁵ Finland's constitutional and religious autonomy was stressed outright. Alexander I delivered his

² For a detailed analysis of academic debates relating to the direction of Finnish cultural development in the nineteenth century, see *The Shaping of Art History in Finland*, edited by Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, 2007.

³ See Adriaan E. Waiboer's *Northern Stars and Southern Lights: The Golden Age of Finnish Art, 1870-1920* (2008); Stephan Koja's *Nordic Dawn: Modernism's Awakening in Finland 1890-1920* (2005); and David Jackson's *Nordic Art: The Modern Breakthrough 1860-1920* (2008).

⁴ D. G. Kirby, ed., *Finland and Russia 1808-1920: From Autonomy to Independence* (Plymouth: The Bowering Press LTD., 1975) 11.

⁵ Olson, "Between East and West," 50.

Charter at the Diet of Porvoo on March 27, 1809, stating, “We have hereby seen fit once more to confirm and ratify the religion, basic laws, rights and privileges which each estate of the said Duchy in particular and all subjects therein resident, both low and high, have hitherto enjoyed according to its constitutions.”⁶ The Russian Empire maintained the tradition of Swedish aristocratic constitutionalism in the Grand Duchy of Finland, while loosely applying an influence that has been interpreted as “absolutist paternalism.”⁷

Stability and economic growth in the Grand Duchy of Finland supported the favorable impression of imperial control. Russia’s developing railway system catalysed Finnish industrial growth and exposure to the empire’s vast markets.⁸ In 1812, ‘Old Finland’, an area west of St. Petersburg through the Karelian Isthmus, was reincorporated into the Grand Duchy.⁹ Many wealthy Finns assimilated to Russian culture and moved to St. Petersburg.¹⁰ The Russian Empire minimised Finnish investment in its autonomous military and navy by providing military support for the Grand Duchy’s borders. The military backing was a stark contrast to an imposing system of Swedish military conscription, in which Finns had constituted a quarter of the Swedish army despite being its most impoverished territory in the last century of Swedish rule.¹¹ By the mid-nineteenth century a stable Finland began to lift itself out of centuries of stagnation with newly acquired economic and institutional resources.

Nineteenth-century Finland was internally divided despite the rigor of its culturally-oriented nationalist movement. Finnish intellectuals inspired by Nationalist Romanticism studied and propagated their Finno-Ugrian language.¹² In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson describes how language was critical in mobilising the concept of nationhood in the nineteenth century, when populations sought to liberate themselves from the empires, monarchies, and autocracies of Europe.¹³ The *Kalevala* (1835) was a national epic derived from oral traditions before Finland fell to

⁶ Kirby, *Finland and Russia 1808-1920*, 14-15.

⁷ Kirby, *Finland and Russia 1808-1920*, 2.

⁸ Ilma Massa, "The Opening of the Finnish North: Resource-Based Development and Agrarian Change in Northern Finland," in *Social Implications of Agrarian Change in Northern and Eastern Finland*, ed. Tim Ingold (Helsinki: The Finnish Anthropological Society, 1988), 30.

⁹ Jari Ojala, Jari Eloranta, and Jukka Jalava, eds., *The Road to Prosperity: An Economic History of Finland* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2006) 67.

¹⁰ Ville Lukkapiiren, “Native Land, Art and Landscape in Finland in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries,” in *Nordic Dawn: Modernism's Awakening in Finland 1890-1920*, ed. Stephan Koja, (London: Prestel, 2005), 31.

¹¹ Olson, "Between East and West," 48-51.

¹² Charlotte Ashby, "Nation Building and Design: Finnish Textiles and the Work of the Friends of Finnish Handicrafts," *Journal of Design History* 23, No. 4 (2010): 353.

¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions, 1983), 41-103.

foreign powers in the thirteenth century.¹⁴ It was popularised as the emblem of a growing preoccupation with Finnish language and culture.¹⁵ However, the growth of nationalism was insufficient in uniting the Grand Duchy’s internal political factions, as the movement caused a debate over the future of the Finnish language. The Svenomen movement was led by a Swedish-speaking elite who believed that Finland consisted of two cultures and two languages.¹⁶ The Fennomen movement and Young Finland Group believed that Swedish cultural dominance was a greater obstacle to Finland’s national development than the Russian Empire.¹⁷ The division between Svenomen and Fennomen delayed nationalism’s potential to unify Finland. The Tsar sought to appease Finns and extinguish residual Swedish influence with motions such as certifying Finnish as an official language in 1863.¹⁸ The Grand Duchy was internally divided prior to 1899, while the empire strategically supported the development of a distinct Finnish heritage through language.

Finland’s geographic position as a buffer between Russia and Western Europe became increasingly important in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The Russian Empire’s Ministry of War increased its budget by fifty percent between 1893 and 1899. Nikolai I. Borbikov (1839-1904) was a military commander who argued that Finnish cultural assimilation was crucial to the defence of the Baltic-Finnish coast. The Tsar marked a new era of relations between the Russian Empire and the Grand Duchy of Finland by appointing Borbikov Governor General of Helsinki in August 1898.¹⁹ Borbikov’s Russification Programme challenged the parliamentary system, the separation of administrative branches, and the linguistic cultural



Figure 1. Edvard Isto, *The Attack*, 1899.

development which Finns had treasured for ninety years.²⁰ The February Manifesto of 1899 required the Finnish parliament’s subordination to Russian national laws and the Tsar’s approval.²¹ The

¹⁴ Finland was incorporated into Sweden in 1362.

¹⁵ Ville Lukkarinen, “Finland at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Northern Stars and Southern Lights: The Golden Age of Finnish Art, 1870-1920*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 2008), 13.

¹⁶ Twelve percent of the Finnish population spoke Swedish in 1860.

¹⁷ Kirby, *Finland and Russia 1808-1920*, 35.

¹⁸ Olson, “Between East and West,” 52.

¹⁹ Janne Gallen-Kallela-Siren, “Axel Gallen and the Constructed Nation: Art and Nationalism in Young Finland 1880-1900,” (PhD diss., New York University, 2001): 531-532.

²⁰ Alice Teichova et al, *Economic Change and the National Question in 20th Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 400.

Grand Duchy had never been a sovereign state judicially because its autonomy had been granted by each tsar’s goodwill.²² Edvard Isto’s *The Attack* of 1899 (Figure 1) is exemplary of Finnish sentiment during this transformative year. The double-headed eagle of the Russian Empire tears the book of law from a maiden representing Finland, her body shaped like the territory. A Fennomen leader wrote that Finnish culture “Will have a dismal end as soon as the country no longer fully enjoys its autonomous institutions and especially if the Russian language is imposed on us as a vehicle of superior culture.”²³ The February Manifesto and its oppressive measures were immediately portrayed as a threat by Finnish visual culture.

The Russification Programme united Finnish political groups in the pursuit of constitutionalism and attracted international attention. Nicholas II (1868-1918) refused to receive a delegation delivering 523,000 Finnish signatures in protest of the February Manifesto in March 1899, stating, “of course I cannot receive them, although I am not angry with them, either, because they are not guilty.” The Tsar prioritised military concerns over his empathy to the Finnish cause. Nicholas II’s position became even more uncomfortable in June 1899, when a six-member international delegation headed by France’s former Minister of Justice brought to St. Petersburg a “Pro Finlandia” petition. The Tsar ignored the signatures of 1,063 European scientists, writers, and artists. The international community’s involvement in Finland’s struggles set the stage for the Finnish Pavilion at the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* to become an emblem of national autonomy. The attention of foreign intellectuals meant that a political statement through Finland’s developed national culture would have an empathetic audience. On June 16, 1904 a Finnish nationalist assassinated Borbikov on the steps of the Finnish Senate, the choice of setting symbolic of the nationalist movement’s constitutionalist aims.²⁴ The Russification Programme of 1899-1905 transformed a quest for cultural identity into a fierce battle for national rights on an international stage.

Prior to this escalation of hostilities, *fin-de-siècle* Finnish society invested an unprecedented amount in its cultural life, leading to promising engagements with both Eastern and Western Europe.²⁵ Finnish artists were competing for honors from the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts

²¹ Gallen-Kallela-Siren, “Axel Gallen and the Constructed Nation,” 533.

²² Ville Lukkapiren, “Native Land, Art and Landscape in Finland in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries,” 26.

²³ Edward C. Thaden, *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 392.

²⁴ Gallen-Kallela-Siren, “Axel Gallen and the Constructed Nation,” 535-563.

²⁵ Kerrtu Karvonen-Kannas, “Akseli Gallen Kallela - The Creator of Finnish Design,” *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850 - the Present*, No. 11 (1987): 1.

and participating in Russian displays at international exhibitions.²⁶ Finns joined a community of Scandinavians immersed in the rich cultural resources and institutional support found in Paris following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871.²⁷ Finnish artists compensated for the lack of a domestic national academy by stressing their national identity and embracing the label of being “fashionably international.”²⁸ French critics valued the distinctly Nordic qualities of Scandinavian art, demonstrating how expatriation contributed to the development of Finland’s national identity.²⁹

The fruitful balance of Finnish involvement in Russian and French artistic communities evaporated following the February Manifesto of 1899. Visual culture became the primary conduit of nationalism with the imperial termination of four Finnish newspapers in 1899, and seven more in 1900.³⁰ The renowned Finnish painter Albert Edelfelt (1854-1905) refused offers of a professorship at the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts and the role of commissioner of the entire artistic Russian section at the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in protest of imperial oppression.³¹ The fact that Edelfelt was offered such prestigious opportunities speaks to the existing artistic ties between Finland and the Russian Empire. Diaghilev had noticed this connection early on, and maneuvered nuances such as Finnish symbolism and Edelfelt’s unique status as the most established Finnish artist in Russia to make the 1898 *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* the most expressive emblem of this complicated moment.

The first issue of the progressive artistic journal *Mir Iskusstva*, published in November 1898, promoted the pluralism and transculturalism embraced by Finnish artists. Diaghilev’s article “Complicated Questions” argued for artistic autonomy in public life.³² The article challenged the bias and increasingly dogmatic cultural outlook of established Russian artists and critics who came to prominence in the 1860s and stressed nationalist content in art over stylistic developments.³³ Many intellectuals saw Russia as a young country due to Peter the Great’s fairly recent westernisation

²⁶ Aimo Peutala, “Mir Iskusstva and Finnish Artists,” in *Mir Iskusstva: On the Centenary of the Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Artists 1898*, ed. Yevgenia Petrova (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 1998), 217.

²⁷ Per Hedstrom, “Internationalism and Nationalism- Nordic Painters on the European Stage,” in *Nordic Art: The Modern Breakthrough 1860-1920*, ed. David Jackson (Munich: Hirmer, 2012), 188.

²⁸ David Jackson, “Nordic Art. The Modern Breakthrough,” in *Nordic Art: The Modern Breakthrough 1860-1920*, ed. David Jackson (Munich: Hirmer, 2012), 12.

²⁹ Kirk Varnedoe, *Northern Light: Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 15.

³⁰ Gallen-Kallela-Siren, “Axel Gallen and the Constructed Nation,” 545.

³¹ Gallen-Kallela-Siren, “Axel Gallen and the Constructed Nation,” 571-572.

³² Anna Poznanskaya, “Scandinavian Art at the End of the Nineteenth Century: From Paris to Russia,” in *Strana Zhivitelnoy Prokhlady, Iskusstvo stran Severnoy Evropy. XVIII- nachala XX veka iz sobraniy museev Rossii*, S. Shukina et al. (St. Petersburg: Red Square, 2001), 30.

³³ Vladimir Krilov, “The Centenary of Mir Iskusstva,” in *Mir Iskusstva: On the Centenary of the Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Artists 1898*, 49.

programme in the early eighteenth century, and were threatened by foreign influences.³⁴ *Mir Iskusstva*’s first issue also included Richard Wagner’s “Views on Art”, a component of Diaghilev’s *Drang nach Westen* (Urge to the West) programme that would be repeated in future issues. Alexander Benois (1870-1960), a founding member of *Mir Iskusstva*, wrote in the first issue of *Art Treasures of Russia* that, “To cease being a European now, to shelter from the West behind a wall would be very strange, even absurd,” arguing for the presentation of Russian art alongside that of foreigners.³⁵ Diaghilev challenged xenophobic views due to his indignation over events such as the exclusion of foreign participants in St. Petersburg’s *Seventeenth Watercolor Exhibition*. Diaghilev and Benois sought a more inclusive approach in the pursuit of a distinct national school.³⁶

As the concept of *Mir Iskusstva* incubated, Diaghilev wrote in a letter to Benois on the 20 October 1897, “I am now working on a magazine in which I hope to unite the whole of our artistic life, that is, as illustrations I shall use real painting, the articles will be outspoken, and then in the name of the magazine, I propose to organize a series of annual exhibitions, and finally, to attract to the magazine the new industrial art which is developing in Moscow and Finland.”³⁷ Diaghilev saw the potential of incorporating Finnish Nationalist Romanticism’s distinct cultural aims into his own programme of innovative exchange. He praised the Finnish artists in the 1898 exhibition for having a unified national outlook despite stylistic divisions between naturalists and symbolists.³⁸ According to Benois, “The joining together of us with the Finns was the means of expressing that ‘cosmopolitanism’ in art which is our group.”³⁹ *Mir Iskusstva*’s exhibition programme and magazine would serve as a unified enterprise encouraging the development of multiple artistic philosophies.

Diaghilev’s 1897 *Exhibition of Scandinavian Art* in St. Petersburg reveals the unique role he envisioned for Finland in the context of imperial artistic culture. Finnish artists were excluded from the exhibition despite centuries of Swedish control and cultural influence. Diaghilev had written that, “Finnish painting is not like Scandinavian painting: in it there is not the naivety of Norway, nor

³⁴ Iliia Dorontchenkov, “Between Isolation and *Drang nach Westen*: Russian Criticism and Modern Art around 1900,” in *Critical exchange: Art criticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Russia and Western Europe*, ed. Carol Adlam and Juliet Simpson (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 291.

³⁵ John E. Bowlt, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the “World of Art” Group* (Austin: Oriental Research Partners, 1979), 186.

³⁶ Yevgenia Petrova, “Introduction,” in *Mir Iskusstva: On the Centenary of the Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Artists 1898*, ed. Yevgenia Petrova (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 1998), 16.

³⁷ Felix Lur’e, *Mir iskusstva: Khronologicheskai□a□ rospis’ soderezhaniü□a□, 1899-1904* (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel’skii dom “Kolo”, 2012), 12-13.

³⁸ John Boulton Smith, *The Golden Age of Finnish art: Art Nouveau and the National Spirit*, (Helsinki: Otava Publishing Co., 1975), 27.

³⁹ Dorontchenkov, “Between Isolation and *Drang nach Westen*,” 299-300.

the affected simplicity of Denmark, nor the European lustre of Sweden. Neither is it like Russian art, but I think the unity of these two arts could lead to results desired both by them, and by us.” Finland’s utility in developing *Mir Iskusstva*’s cultural programme coincided with the Grand Duchy of Finland’s unique position within the empire.⁴⁰ Diaghilev positioned the Grand Duchy as a unique culture since a Scandinavian identity would reunite Finland with a Swedish legacy.

The coordination of the *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* hints at imperial political influence. Diaghilev stressed his ownership of the Russian and Finnish exhibition project in his correspondence, proclaiming that he would be exclusively selecting the work and covering all expenses.⁴¹ However, the exhibition was organised with the support of the Imperial Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, sponsored by Princess Eugenie of Oldenburg, a close relation to the Tsar. Nicholas II attended the exhibition’s opening on January 16 1898. The Tsar supported *Mir Iskusstva* for three years when the journal experienced financial trouble several years later.⁴² The *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* is considered to be one of two founding exhibitions of the *Mir Iskusstva* group. It is likely that imperial patronage had some effect on the political outlook on the 1898 exhibition.⁴³

The ephemera of the *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* confirms Diaghilev’s aims to encompass Finland with imperial artistic boundaries. Russian artists’ names were printed in Russian and French, while names of Finnish artists were printed in Finnish and Russian in the exhibition catalogue. Diaghilev’s translation presents Finnish culture as circumscribed by the Russian Empire, reflecting his aims for Finnish artists to be more exposed to Russia, and for Russian artists to be exposed to the west.⁴⁴ The trajectories of Russian art being pushed west and Finnish art moving east would be seen again in Diaghilev’s organisation of artworks. However, the potential imperialist influence found in these components of the exhibition did not detract from Diaghilev’s accurate representation of Finnish art, as demonstrated by the similarities between selections for the *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art in 1898 and the Finnish pavilion at the Exposition Universelle in 1900*.

⁴⁰ Werenskiold, “Sergej Djagilev and Scandinavia 1895–1904,” 43-50.

⁴¹ Bowlt, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the “World of Art” Group*, 90.

⁴² Lur’e, *Mir Iskusstva : Khronologicheskai□a□ rospis' sodержanii□a□*, 13.

⁴³ Werenskiold, “Sergej Djagilev and Scandinavia 1895–1904,” 47-53.

⁴⁴ Petrova, “Introduction,” 6.

Albert Edelfelt’s participation in the *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* served as a



Figure 2. Albert Edelfelt, *A Child's Funeral*, 1879.

foundational body of Finnish work meant to please St. Petersburg’s elite. Edelfelt was the most represented and well-known Finnish painter at the exhibition, with sixteen paintings.⁴⁵

The artist was established in the imperial capital by 1898, having been elected to the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts in 1881 and commissioned to paint two portraits of Nicholas II. Edelfelt was also known in Western Europe as the first Finnish artist to receive a medal at

the Paris *Salon*.⁴⁶ Edelfelt’s painting *A Child's Funeral* of 1879 (Figure 2) had been previously purchased by a private Russian collector and was included in Diaghilev’s 1898 exhibition. The artist occupied a diplomatic Finnish identity as a nationalist artist and member of the declining Swedish-speaking aristocracy.⁴⁷ Edelfelt’s oeuvre had *Svenomen* undertones, with portrayals of Swedish-speaking communities in Finland, Viking themes, and landscapes from the archipelago between Sweden and Finland. Some *Fennomen* artists expressed distrust of Edelfelt’s leadership of the Finnish national school due to these components of his artistic identity and biography. Works such as *A Child's Funeral* could be easily digested by St. Petersburg’s artistic circles while quietly conveying some of the Grand Duchy’s contemporary complexities. Edelfelt’s participation in the 1898 exhibition provided a subtle representation of *fin-de-siècle* Finnish identities. Diaghilev consciously subdued the accelerating pulse of Finnish art before St. Petersburg’s public by highlighting Edelfelt.

⁴⁵ Krilov, “The Centenary of Mir Iksusstva,” 39.

⁴⁶ Smith, *The Golden Age of Finnish Art: Art Nouveau and the National Spirit*, 27.

⁴⁷ Peutala, “Mir Iksusstva and Finnish Artists,” 217.

Finnish art in the 1890s is represented by artists maintaining naturalist themes as well as those embracing the expressive potential of Symbolism. Literary scholar Pertti Lassila has argued that Finnish depictions of nature were an inherently patriotic act even in the absence of metaphor.⁴⁸ The celebration of Finnish nature dovetailed with the potential for expressing a civilized and independent nation through indigenous folklore such as the *Kalevala*.⁴⁹ This maintained the relevance of naturalists such as Edelfelt when a new generation emerged in the 1890s with more daring and



Figure 3. Magnus Enckell, *Death's Walk*, 1896.

political work. While Europe was concerned with the degenerative effects of societal progress, Finland looked ahead to the generation of its national identity. Diaghilev hung *A Child's Funeral* and similar canvases alongside Magnus Enckell's (1870-1925) Symbolist works such as *Death's Walk* of 1896 (Figure 3) to convey these trends.⁵⁰ Edelfelt was a Finnish artist whom both the imperial family and intellectual circles of St. Petersburg were comfortable with, mitigating reactions to Enckell's contemplative scenes. Diaghilev had an enduring appreciation of Finnish Symbolism. Diaghilev helped Enckell organise an exhibition of Finnish artists at the *Salon d'Automne* in Paris in 1908 despite Finnish artists' rejection of Diaghilev's vision of imperial unity during the Russification era.⁵¹ Symbolism is a recurring theme in the *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* since both Russian and Finnish artists applied its outlook to their own confrontations with modernity and nationalism. Diaghilev sought to maximise the potential of Enckell and similar artists' more provocative methods of artistic expression by diluting their impact next to accepted naturalist motifs.⁵² The fact that conservative critics still found the *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* controversial reflects the insightfulness of Diaghilev's curatorial license.

⁴⁸ Timo Huusko, "National Art and the Nation of Artists in the Nordic Countries," in *Nordic Art: The Modern Breakthrough 1860-1920*, ed. David Jackson (Munich: Hirmer, 2012), 197.

⁴⁹ Timo Huusko, "Legends and Myths," in *Northern Stars and Southern Lights: The Golden Age of Finnish Art, 1870-1920*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer, (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 2008), 74.

⁵⁰ Krilov, "The Centenary of Mir Iksusstva," 45.

⁵¹ Timo Huusko, "Early Modernism," in *Northern Stars and Southern Lights: The Golden Age of Finnish Art, 1870-1920*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer, (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 2008), 100.

⁵² Petrova, "Introduction," 6.

Diaghilev challenged St. Petersburg’s limiting centralisation of artistic practice by including more experimental work developing in Moscow and the provinces. Out of thirty participants, ten artists represented both St. Petersburg and Moscow, with the final ten comprised of Finns.⁵³ Mikhail Vrubel (1856-1910) was an active participant in the Slavophile movements incubating on the Russian country estates of Abramstevo and Talashkino, which revived Slavic culture through traditional methods of production and a unity of different media. Vrubel was also an ardent Symbolist whose mystical canvases found little favor with Russia’s established naturalist school and St. Petersburg’s artistic establishment. However, Vrubel’s fusion of western motifs with Slavophile tendencies mirrored what Diaghilev found so exciting in Finnish art. His ceramic *Head of a Demon* of 1890 exemplified the duality of his role in the 1898 exhibition. *Head of a Demon* fused an alternative production method with Vrubel’s career-long exploration of the Symbolist poem *Demon* (1842).⁵⁴ Vrubel’s crystalline forms and symbolist approach made it difficult for him to be widely accepted by St. Petersburg’s traditional institutions, but were welcome in Diaghilev’s transcultural future.



Figure 4. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Lemminkäinen's Mother*, 1897.



Figure 5. Mikhail Vrubel, *Morning*, 1897.

Vrubel and the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931) demonstrated how European artistic developments could become critical tools for their respective distinct national schools and artistic visions.⁵⁵ Diaghilev sought to connect Russian and Finnish symbolist departures from Realism by hanging Gallen-Kallela’s *Lemminkäinen's Mother* (Figure 4) next to Vrubel’s *Morning* (Figure 5), both works having been completed in 1897. Prior to the 1890s Gallen-Kallela’s work positioned him closely to the naturalism of Edelfelt, such as the painting *Imatra in Wintertime* of 1893

⁵³ Bowlt, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the "World of Art" Group*, 90.

⁵⁴ Krilov, "The Centenary of Mir Iksusstva," 39.

⁵⁵ Krilov, "The Centenary of Mir Iksusstva," 48.

(Figure 6), which was also included in the exhibition. Gallen-Kallela developed a more expressive approach in the 1890s. *The Great Black Woodpecker* of 1893 (Figure 7) reveals Gallen-Kallela’s diversion from naturalist scenes through the influence of Japanese printmaking.⁵⁶ *The Defense of the Sampo* of 1896 (Figure 8), among others, demonstrated Gallen-Kallela’s politically-charged work promoting subjects from the national epic *Kalevala*.⁵⁷ Gallen-Kallela embraced the spiritual and all-encompassing outlooks of Symbolism to develop the impact of such nationalist works. Diaghilev cleverly positioned artists such as Vrubel and Gallen-Kallela among a wide range of artistic perspectives. This not only contextualised and decompressed any controversies, but continued to reinforce the notion of an artistically diverse imperial culture.



Figure 4. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Imatra in Wintertime*, 1896.

of 1887 was considered a jewel of Russian Impressionism, pleasing crowds while representing another fruitful engagement with western trends despite having been painted over a decade before the exhibition. *Portrait of Grand Duke Pavel Alexandrovich* of 1897, also by Serov, reinforced the imperial impact on the iconography and production of art at that time. The exhibition successfully demonstrated a broader vision of the Russian Empire while retaining a specific narrative for its future.

The Russian nationalist movement that had been revolutionary in the 1860s became conservative and oppressive by 1898. Diaghilev’s 1898 *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* encountered fierce opposition from the existing Russian nationalist school led by the critic Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906). Stasov believed that the nationalist content of art was more important than style

⁵⁶ Timo Huusko, Riitta Ojanpera, Soili Sinisalo, “Tracing the Sources,” in *Nordic Dawn: Modernism’s Awakening in Finland 1890-1920*, ed. Stephan Kojala, (London: Prestel, 2005): 50.

⁵⁷ Lukkarinen, “Finland at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” 12.

⁵⁸ Lukkarinen, “Finland at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” 15.

or execution.⁵⁹ He called the 1898 exhibition an “orgy of debauchery and madness.” The critic was particularly upset with Gallen-Kallela’s *Lemminkäinen’s Mother* and Vrubel’s *Morning* and *Head of a Demon*, but pleased with Edelfelt.⁶⁰ However, to follow Stasov’s rhetoric would have been regressive, and Diaghilev was successful in organising the exhibition to be digestible and debatable for the empire’s progressive intellectuals.



Figure 7. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *The Great Black Woodpecker*, 1893.



Figure 8. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *The Defense of Sampo*, 1893.

The *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* subverted singular approaches to Nationalism. Russian conservatives insisted on the strict adherence to nationalist content over execution, while Finnish progressives fused foreign artistic developments into the nationalist cause. Beyond the opposition of Stasov and his followers, Finnish art critic Eliel Aspelin described how, “The critical reception was everything but homogenous. Some rebuked it, others praised it, always depending on the critic’s artistic and national-political stance.”⁶¹ A review by a Finnish critic in the Russian magazine *Iskusstvo i Khudozhestvennaia promyshelnost* stated, “only [Finns] can understand [Gallen-Kallela’s] scenes from the *Kalevala*, and far from everyone,” while praising Edelfelt as the opposite of

⁵⁹ Alexey Makhrov, “Defining Art Criticism in 19th Century Russia: Vladimir Stasov as Independent Critic,” in *Critical Exchange: Art Criticism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Russia and Western Europe*, ed. Carol Adlam and Juliet Simpson (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 209-211.

⁶⁰ Krilov, “The Centenary of Mir Iksusstva,” 39.

⁶¹ Gallen-Kallela-Siren. “Axel Gallen and the Constructed Nation,” 516.

Gallen-Kallela.⁶² Diaghilev’s success lies in inciting such debates between Russian and Finnish intellectuals, influencing artists to broaden dominant nationalist approaches to artistic production. *Mir Iskusstva* members Benois and Filosofov said that “to bring a tale into plastic creativity is only possible in the methods of Gallen-Kallela.”⁶³ The expansion of approaches to style was critical to Diaghilev’s vision of the future of Russian art.

St. Petersburg’s *Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Art* led directly to enthusiastic transcultural exchanges. An abridged version of the 1898 exhibition traveled to Munich, Dusseldorf, Cologne, and Berlin. The Komitee of the Munich Secession accepted all the works without jury approval and covered all costs associated with the exhibition’s realisation.⁶⁴ The level of generosity was remarkable given the nascent stage of Diaghilev’s career and the vision that his exhibition sought to promote. In autumn 1898, Diaghilev and several members of *Mir Iskusstva* attended a Finnish artists’ exhibition in Helsinki. The Russians were greeted warmly and received welcoming toasts at the opening dinner.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the negative effects of the February Manifesto curtailed such victories, rendering this glittering moment of transculturalism short-lived.

Diaghilev’s early passion for Finnish modernism and the success of the 1898 exhibition were unable to endure the cultural changes of the Russification period. Finnish artists participated in the 1899 *Mir Iskusstva International Exhibition* and a survey of Finnish art with forty-seven reproductions was published in the magazine later that year. Nevertheless, Finns began to avoid the empire’s artistic circles.⁶⁶ The Finnish identity developed in the 1880s and 1890s became conscripted to the national cause against Russification. Finnish artists separated themselves from *Mir Iskusstva* and St. Petersburg’s artistic culture due to the prevailing view of art’s critical role in national identity and mounting political pressure.

The Finnish rejection of any notion of belonging to the Russian Empire became particularly evident at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900. The Finnish Pavilion proclaimed Finland’s potential to positively impact European artistic culture, once again eliciting the attention of foreign intellectuals similar to those who had participated in the “Pro-Finlandia” petition the previous year.⁶⁷ Edelfelt was on the exhibition’s international jury, and secured Finland its own section despite the fact that

⁶²J. A. “Exhibition of Finnish Artists in 1898, Helsinki,” *Iskusstvo I khudozhestven-nnaia promyshlennost*, No. 7 (1899): 576-8.

⁶³Poznanskaya, “Scandinavian Art at the End of the Nineteenth Century: From Paris to Russia,” 41.

⁶⁴Dmitrii Severiukhin, *Staryi khudozhestvennyi Peterburg: Rynok i samoorganizatsiia khudozbnikov (ot nachala XVIII veka do 1932 goda)* (Sankt-Peterburg: Mir, 2008), 197.

⁶⁵Peutala, “Mir Iskusstva and Finnish Artists,” 224.

⁶⁶Petrova, “Introduction,” 6.

⁶⁷Poznanskaya, “Scandinavian Art at the End of the Nineteenth Century: From Paris to Russia,” 39.

Finland had previously always participated in the Russian sections of world exhibitions.⁶⁸ Russia required the Finnish Pavilion to bear the official Romanov coat of arms and for the north entrance to be inscribed with “Section Russe.”⁶⁹ Certain photos of the pavilion were later doctored to omit these additions, reflecting the discontent over imperial meddling. The pavilion of the 1900 Paris *Exposition Universelle* is emblematic of the fracture between Finnish and Russian artistic exchange following the February Manifesto.



Figure 9. Finnish Pavilion, Paris Exposition Universelle, 1900.

Architects Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren, and Eliel Saarinen designed a medieval interpretation of Nationalist Romanticism for the Finnish Pavilion in 1900 (Figure 9). The stone look of the exterior deviates from the round-log construction typical of Russian pavilions and architectural structures associated with the contested area of Karelia.⁷⁰ The porous border of Karelia, the region between Helsinki and St. Petersburg that had been the source of songs for the *Kalevala*, was now seen as an impermeable one dividing distinct nations. Finnish artists began to avoid any cultural reference that could hint at a connection to Russia. The Finnish Pavilion stood as a formidable rejection of the Russification Programme.

Though the Finnish Pavilion had been imbued with meaning by the political resistance to imperial oppression, its contents stress the lost impact of Diaghilev’s ambitions two years prior. Gallen-Kallela painted fourteen dome frescoes of scenes from the *Kalevala*, which arrived a month late due to Russian intervention, though the precise nature of this obstruction remains unclear.⁷¹ Diaghilev praised the frescoes and Gallen-Kallela’s unique talent, showing his enduring support of Finnish artists despite their anti-imperial direction.⁷² The presence of naturalist works such as Pekka Halonen’s *Washing on the Ice* (1900) mirrored the stylistic range of the *Exhibition of Russian Art and*

⁶⁸ Timo Huusko, “The 1900 World Fair,” in *Northern Stars and Southern Lights: The Golden Age of Finnish Art, 1870-1920*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer, (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 2008), 95.

⁶⁹ Gallen-Kallela-Siren. “Axel Gallen and the Constructed Nation,” 572.

⁷⁰ Ashby, “Nation Building and Design: Finnish Textiles and the Work of the Friends of Finnish Handicrafts,” 358.

⁷¹ Gallen-Kallela-Siren. “Axel Gallen and the Constructed Nation,” 575.

⁷² Poznanskaya, “Skandinavian Art at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” 42.

Finnish Art of 1898, revealing Diaghilev’s sensibility to how the Finns continued to present themselves in such tense circumstances two years following his exhibition.⁷³ The Finnish Pavilion at the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* exemplified how the Finnish cultural program divorced itself from the potential collaboration Diaghilev envisioned in 1898. However, the artists and motifs represented point to a continuum of Diaghilev’s conception of Finnish art. While the political significance of the Finnish Pavilion became magnified on an international stage, its artistic vision retained the distinct aesthetic approach to nationalism that Diaghilev had identified and sought to promote.

The Tsar reinforced the autonomy of the Finnish Parliament in the November Manifesto of 1905, assuaging the constitutionalist interests of the nationalist movement. The February Manifesto was suspended.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, the potential to unify Finnish and Russian artistic circles in 1898 had been lost in the political strife of the Russification era. Diaghilev, a resourceful and ambitious figure whose personal goals endured much political instability, had moved on to more fruitful endeavors. Perhaps if dissidents in both Finland and Russia had united during this period, the art produced by each nation may have reinforced the other, and Art History would regularly account for a vibrant school representing the diversity of Russian imperialism. Mikhail Vrubel and Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s unique applications of Symbolism, career-long engagement with literary forms, and ability to resound with contemporary nationalist trends on either side of increasingly hostile borders are a sad echo of the paradoxical fissure that broke Diaghilev’s 1898 vision. Unfortunately, 1899-1905 is yet another period of fragmentation and oppression, which leaves us to reconstruct these histories piece by piece.

⁷³ Lukkarinen, “Finland at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” 16.

⁷⁴ Kirby, *Finland and Russia 1808-1920: From Autonomy to Independence*, 115.

REFERENCES

- A., J. "Exhibition of Finnish Artists in 1898, Helsinki." *Iskusstvo I khudozhestven-naia promyshlennost*, No. 7 (1899): 570-580.
- Adlam, Carol and Juliet Simpson. *Critical exchange : Art Criticism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Russia and Western Europe*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009.
- Ashby, Charlotte. "Nation Building and Design: Finnish Textiles and the Work of the Friends of Finnish Handicrafts," *Journal of Design History* 23, No. 4 (2010): 351-365.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso Editions, 1983.
- Bowlt, John E. *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the "World of Art" Group*. Austin: Oriental Research Partners, 1979.
- Gallen-Kallela-Siren, Janne. "Axel Gallen and the Constructed Nation: Art and Nationalism in Young Finland 1880-1900." PhD dissertation, New York University, 2001.
- Ingold, Tim. *Social Implications of Agrarian Change in Northern and Eastern Finland*. Helsinki: The Finnish Anthropological Society, 1988.
- Jackson, David. *Nordic Art : The Modern Breakthrough 1860-1920*. Munich: Hirmer, 2012.
- Karvonen-Kannas, Kerri. "Akseli Gallen Kallela - The Creator of Finnish Design," *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850 - the Present*, No. 11 (1987): 1-4.
- Kirby, D. G. *Finland and Russia 1808-1920: From Autonomy to Independence*. Plymouth: The Bowering Press LTD., 1975.
- Koja, Stephan. *Nordic Dawn: Modernism's Awakening in Finland 1890-1920*. London: Prestel, 2005.
- Lur'e, Felix. *Mir iskusstva: Khronologicheskaiia rospis soderzhaniiia, 1899-1904*. Saint Petersburg: Izdatel'skii dom "Kolo", 2012.
- Ojala, Jari, Jari Eloranta, and Jukka Jalava. *The Road to Prosperity : An Economic History of Finland*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2006.

- Olson, Keith W. "Between East and West," *The Wilson Quarterly* 10, No. 4 (1986): 44-58.
- Patek, Jaroslav, Herbert Matis, and Alice Teichova. *Economic Change and the National Question in 20th Century Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Petrova, Yevgenia. *Mir Iskusstva: On the Centenary of the Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Artists 1898*. St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 1998.
- Severiukhin, Dimitrii. *Stariy khudozhestvennyy Peterburg : Rynok i samoorganizatsiia khudozhenikov (ot nachala XVIII veka do 1932 goda)*. Sankt-Peterburg: Mir, 2008.
- Smith, John Boulton. *The Golden Age of Finnish Art: Art Nouveau and the National Spirit*. Helsinki: Otava Publishing Co., 1975.
- Thaden, Edward C. *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Varnedoe, Kirk. *Northern Light: Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- Waiboer, Adriaan E. *Northern Stars and Southern Lights : The Golden Age of Finnish Art, 1870-1920*. Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 2008.
- Werenskiold, Marit. "Sergej Djagilev and Scandinavia 1895–1904," *Scando-Slavica* 38, No. 1 (1992): 43-50.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box: 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.