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'Rooted in the Native Soil'—Cultural Amnesia and the Myth of the 'Golden Age' in Finnish Art History

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Abstract: In Finnish art history, the period around the turn of the 20th century has been considered to be particularly significant for the formation of a national identity, and it has therefore come to be known as the 'Golden Age' of Finnish art. According to the commonly held historical narrative, artists in late nineteenth-century Finland, which at the time was an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, shared a patriotic mission that led to a blossoming of the arts. This narrative construction has become so well-established that its origins in the cultural debates of newly independent Finland in the 1920s and 1930s have faded out of sight. This article identifies some of the mechanisms of active and passive remembering and forgetting that have generated the myth of the 'Golden Age'. The analysis is guided by perspectives created in the field of cultural memory studies that emphasize the role of remembering and forgetting in the construction of historical narratives. A brief overview of the vibrant cultural exchange between Finnish and Russian artists of the period is given in order to exemplify the richness of historical phenomena that has largely remained under the shadow of the powerful myth of the 'Golden Age'.

Keywords: art history; Finland; cultural transfer; cultural memory; cultural amnesia; the Golden Age; nationalism; national identity; Russia

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1. Introduction

One of the paradoxes of collective remembrance', writes cultural historian Ann Rigney (2008, p. 346), 'may be that consensus (. . .) is ultimately the road to amnesia'. That is, if we all remember exactly the same way, we actually begin to forget; when past events become monolithic, they cease to be relevant for our understanding of the present as well as for our ability to imagine the future (Rigney 2008, p. 346; Rigney 2011; Fortunati and Lamberti 2008, p. 129). It may be argued that something like this has happened to the collective remembrance of Finnish art history around the turn of the twentieth century. This period has been considered particularly significant for the formation of a national identity, and it has therefore come to be known as the 'Golden Age' of Finnish art (c. 1880–1910). According to the commonly held historical narrative, artists in late nineteenth-century Finland, which at the time was an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, shared a patriotic mission that led to a blossoming of the arts. This narrative construction has become so well-established that its origins in the cultural debates of newly independent Finland in the 1920s and 1930s have faded out of sight. It was introduced by nationalistically oriented art historians and critics who, in their efforts to create an artistic tradition for the nation, idealized the art produced a couple of decades earlier by artists such as Akseli Gallen-Kallela (Axel Gallén, 1865–1931) and Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905).

In 1917, as the revolution raged in Russia, Finland took a decisive step and declared independence. However, the transition from a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire to an independent state was not a smooth one. A bloody civil war was fought between 'The Finnish Socialist Workers' Republic', better known as the 'Reds', and the 'Whites', who had no shared ideology apart from that they wanted to stop the revolutionary efforts of the 'Reds'—at which they succeeded. The war left the newly independent nation divided

and deeply traumatized. Serious efforts were needed in order to unite the nation; naturally, these processes were instigated and controlled by the winning side (Hentilä 2018; Tommila 1989, pp. 177–78). Fear of communism played an important role in the reactionary cultural politics of the period, and Russia was increasingly seen as an uncivilized nation inhabited by a barbaric 'race'. Hence, the promising artistic exchange that had been established with Russia, particularly during the last decades of the nineteenth century, was discontinued in independent Finland. Moreover, in the efforts to establish historical roots for Finland as an independent nation, the centuries that Finland had been a part of the Swedish kingdom also started to appear in a more negative light. The idea arose among far-right nationalist groups that Sweden had held an oppressive colonial power over Finland, and that all that remained of this period of occupation, including the Swedish language, should be eliminated in the independent nation. This also complicated Finland's relationship with Sweden and caused friction in the previously active cultural networks, even though among Swedish-speaking cultural circles in particular, contacts with Sweden and Scandinavia remained strong. (Hentilä 2018; Meinander 2016b, pp. 38–58; Reitala 1973, p. 3; Tommila 1989, pp. 177–78, 190).

This politically unstable period gave birth to the disruptions of memory that lay at the foundations of the myth of a 'Golden Age'. It was shaped by the interwar mentality that was much more insular than the cosmopolitan 1880s and 1890s had been. The one-sided nationalistic emphasis has represented Finland as more or less an isolated entity with a history and culture that are largely detached from broad international currents. In the writings of influential art historical myth-builders of the first half of the twentieth century, Ludvig Wennervirta (1882–1959) and Onni Okkonen (1886–1962), the relative isolation of the Finnish art world was presented as both a fact and an ideal. The metaphor of art that is 'rooted in the native soil' appeared repeatedly in their writings.

Even though a broader and more multifaceted picture has emerged since Wennervirta's and Okkonen's times, artistic networks and contacts between Finland and its neighboring areas have continued to be under-explored. Emphasis has been placed either on the center–periphery axis, most importantly on Paris as the center of the art world, or on the uniqueness of the Finnish situation. Art historians have been particularly unwilling to consider any possible links with Russian art, even though St. Petersburg was the nearest metropole to Helsinki, and its Imperial Academy of Art and museums and galleries with extensive art collections attracted many Finnish artists and art students to the city. Estonian and Baltic connections have also remained virtually unrecognized, and even connections with other Nordic countries have not been examined fully. Despite that, especially since the Second World War, there has been a strong tendency to justify Finland's cultural and political position as a Nordic nation.

This article identifies some of the mechanisms of active and passive remembering and forgetting that have generated the myth of the 'Golden Age'. The analysis is guided by perspectives created in the field of cultural memory studies that emphasize the role of remembering and forgetting in the construction of historical narratives (e.g., Erll et al. 2008; Halbwachs 1950; Rigney 2011; White 1973, 1987). The term 'amnesia' indicates that the disruptions of memory within the cultural narrative of the 'Golden Age' are not a function of mere forgetfulness. Something more rudimentary, perhaps even pathological appears to be at work. In medical terminology, amnesia refers to disturbances of memory resulting from rejection or some kind of structural damage (Campbell 2004, p. 49). At various times there have been both purposeful and (at least partly) unconscious efforts to 'purify' Finnish art history from aspects that have appeared foreign and/or contradictory to the national romantic ideal, or simply outdated or uninteresting from the current perspective. Recently, the politicization of history has emerged as a matter of both public and scholarly debate in Finland, as elsewhere in the world (Blåfield 2016). However, for the most part these discussions have tended to focus on significant cases of international politics, and only very few historians have explored the issue in the context of Finnish historiography. So far, art

and culture have played only a marginal role in the efforts of understanding the use and abuse of history for ideological purposes.

2. Myth-Builders—Okkonen and Wennervirta

In 1927, the newly appointed professor of art history at the University of Helsinki, Onni Okkonen, published an article in the periodical 'Independent Finland' (*Itsenäinen Suomi*, 1926–1946) in which he offered a brief analysis of the history and development of Finnish national art and its current state, which he considered to be that of a crisis. Okkonen suggested that the decades around the turn of the twentieth century should be designated as the 'first Golden Age of Finnish national art'. This was one of the first instances (if not the very first) when the notion of a 'Golden Age' appeared in this nostalgic and patriotically charged sense, one that would gradually become entrenched into the common consciousness. Okkonen explained that during this period, artists abandoned their political and linguistic disputes in order to advance a shared patriotic ideal. Yet, even though the dream of Finnish independence had become a reality in 1917, Okkonen felt that the nation's artistic endeavors had fallen into decline. The main reason for this was that artists had succumbed to foreign influence. While Okkonen understood the importance of cultural exchange, he was highly suspicious of urban modernity and particularly opposed the more radical directions of modern art. He thought art should be timeless and 'rooted in the native soil' (Okkonen 1927; Kallio 1998).

Okkonen was an influential art historian and critic, and an active member of several important cultural organizations. He wanted to encourage contemporary artists to join their forces in the creation of a second 'Golden Age'. He also wished that a patriotic message would justify the importance of art in society, which would then help to direct more funds to support the artists and art institutions that had lost the generous support they had enjoyed under Imperial Russia (Reitala 1973, p. 3; Tuomikoski-Leskelä 1977, pp. 123–27). Perhaps partly against his own intentions, Okkonen played a central role in creating the atmosphere of isolation and anti-modernism that dominated the Finnish art world in the interwar period (Kallio 1998). Okkonen's views reflected the Romantic nationalist ideology that had become established during the previous century, according to which the nation had an unchanging essence or soul from which its creative power and sense of community arose. His dream was a truly Finnish art based on the mythological traditions collected in the 'national epic', *The Kalevala.* (Kallio 1998; Reitala 1973, pp. 4–5; Tommila 1989, pp. 85–86, 177, 198) It is no surprise, then, that his favorite artist was Gallen-Kallela, whose role as a 'national hero' he consolidated with his extensive biography of the artist (Okkonen 1936). Gallen-Kallela's *Kalevala*-themed paintings still represent to many Finns the greatest achievements of the 'Golden Age', and they are regularly analyzed in a rather simplistic nationalistic context. Recent approaches (Lahelma 2018; Kokkinen 2019; Lahelma 2020), however, have broadened the picture by paying attention to Gallen-Kallela's international connections and aspirations and on the variety of aesthetic and ideological currents that he drew from in his artistic production.

The other significant authority who contributed to the creation of the nationalistic myth of a 'Golden Age', the art historian and critic Ludvig Wennervirta, shared Okkonen's patriotic vision on many levels. For him also, Gallen-Kallela represented the epitome of Finnish national art, and in 1912 he published the first monograph on the artist. Wennervirta's book on Finnish art history from prehistoric times to the present (*Suomen taide esihistoriallisista ajoista meidän päiviimme*) came out in 1927, the same year as Okkonen's polemical article in *Independent Finland*. Wennervirta was the editor of the extensive volume that constituted the first full account of the history of Finnish art to be published in Finland after the 1917 independence. Each part was written by an expert on that particular topic, and Wennervirta himself authored the final section, which focused on art since the mid nineteenth century, which he described as a period of 'national awakening'.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the 'national awakening' had begun to bear fruit, and two artists appeared that Wennervirta elevated above the others: Edelfelt

and Gallen-Kallela. Edelfelt's importance stemmed from his central role in initiating contact with the French art world. Despite the patriotic sentiments that were manifested in subjects from Finnish history and peasant life, Wennervirta (1927, pp. 457–58) sensed a 'certain indefinable international stain' in the Swedish-speaking and aristocratic Edelfelt. He lacked the kind of originality that was manifested in the 'electrifying personality' and 'restless and passionate' spirit of Gallen-Kallela, who due to his own peasant background and upbringing was able to delve deep into the soul of the Finnish people (Wennervirta 1927, p. 462). Gallen-Kallela was the son of a civilized and relatively wealthy Swedish-speaking family, but he had grown up in the countryside among Finnish-speaking folk and had learned the language. Edelfelt, on the other hand, belonged to Swedish nobility from his father's side. This difference in the 'racial' background of the two leading artist had appeared already in Johannes Öhquist's history of Finnish art from 1910 (*Suomen taiteen historia*), in which Edelfelt had been presented as a 'pure German', and therefore attached to Western European culture and history, while Gallen-Kallela, according to Öhquist, belonged to the other 'racial' category that originated from Asia and that 'on the highway of humanity still remains many stations closer to its starting point than the Europeans who are over-saturated by historical traditions' (Öhquist 1910, p. 407; Lahelma 2020, pp. 185–86).

In his short preface to the book, Wennervirta wrote that while a more comprehensive and coherent presentation of Finnish art history would be desirable, systematic work would have to be carried out by art historians of the young nation before such a contribution was possible. Yet, he then went on to explain that the book was founded on the notion of Finnish art history as a consistent and unified development since prehistorical times, and that an attentive reader would probably be able to grasp it:

> . . . from the peculiar animal head weaponry of prehistoric times (the Elk's Head of Huittinen), the robust medieval greystone churches with atmospheric paintings and sculptures, folk art, e.g., the rya rugs with their wonderful color harmonies, to the more conscious artistic endeavors of the nineteenth century, one finds features that, despite foreign influences, are characteristic of Finnish art, forming a harsher and truer, but still harmonious essence compared to our Western neighbor (Sweden). (Wennervirta 1927, pp. v–vi)[1]

Wennervirta thus established a uniquely Finnish art historical lineage, beginning with the so-called Elk's Head of Huittinen, the mesolitic stone sculpture discovered in Huittinen in south-western Finland in 1903. The implication was that the simple archaic beauty of this ancient sculpture was somehow essentially Finnish—never mind that such an entity did not exist at the time of its creation—and that even modern artists of the twentieth century should be identified as part of this long-standing tradition.

Okkonen's two-part history of Finnish art (*Suomen taiteen historia I–II*) appeared in 1945 as an answer to Wennervirta's call for a more comprehensive presentation of the development of Finnish national art. Quite tellingly, the opening image of its first volume was the Elk's Head of Huittinen. Okkonen wrote his book during the critical years of the Second World War when Finland very nearly lost its independence to the Soviet Union, and at the time it came out in 1945, there was once again a great need to justify the vitality and originality of Finnish art. In his foreword, Okkonen argued that Finnish culture was a rare example of a very favorable conglomeration of archaic elements emerging from the soul of the nation and those created by modern education. Even more so than Wennervirta, he aimed to generate a view of Finnish art as an organic system that grows and evolves and strives forward, flourishing in auspicious circumstances and falling into decline at unfavorable times. In Okkonen's view, Finnish art had evolved throughout the centuries in relative isolation. At the end of the nineteenth century, an artistic renaissance had taken place, and the masters of the 'Golden Age' had created art that was comparable to the greatest achievements of major European artistic periods, such as the Italian Renaissance or the Dutch 'Golden Age'.

The entire second volume was devoted to art since 1880, divided into three sections: national realism of the 1880s, national romanticism and the 'synthesis of the Golden Age'

at the turn of the century, and recent developments. Okkonen solidified the formulation that had already been implied by Öhquist and Wennervirta, according to which it was not just a question of two opposing artistic temperaments, but that Edelfelt and Gallen-Kallela personified two separate currents in Finnish art: the international and the national. Edelfelt was the initiator of the new stylistic direction, but he lacked the kind of true originality that could only stem from passion and boldness of imagination. Okkonen described him as 'Hellenic' and 'Apollonic'. Like Wennervirta, Okkonen also suggested that Edelfelt's noble Swedish blood prevented him from feeling a true connection to the Finnish soul; hence, in his peasant imagery he drew from the 'Runebergian ideal' (Okkonen 1945, pp. 7–8, 42). Okkonen was referring to the poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804–1877), whose idealized descriptions of the Finnish people had a central role in the nineteenth-century identity project particularly among the Swedish-speaking population. Edelfelt's patriotism hence appeared as something external and literary instead of being an Integral part of his personality. Okkonen noted that, unlike the cosmopolitan Edelfelt, Gallen-Kallela had true peasant heritage from his father's side, and this explained the essence of his being that was 'masculine and healthy', and full of 'Finnish beauty and character'. Okkonen also followed Wennervirta in his portrayal of the restless and searching side of Gallen-Kallela's personality, which he described as 'demonic'. (Okkonen 1945, pp. 42–43, 53).

In both Wennervirta's and Okkonen's account's, Edelfelt's internationality appeared to be mainly French, and his significant connections with Russia, for example, were barely even mentioned. Edelfelt was given a role as 'herald' of the 'Golden Age', who elevated Finnish art to an international level. It was then possible for the somewhat younger Gallen-Kallela to create a national art of high quality that could compete with the greatest achievements of European art, but that was also something completely original and 'national'. Based on their writings, it would seem that after his student years in Paris in the 1880s, Gallen-Kallela more or less isolated himself from the international scene. This is of course not true, Gallen-Kallela continued to travel and exhibit extensively in different parts of Europe, and he also spent long periods of time in Africa and America. His art was fundamentally modern and international (Lahelma 2018). However, during his later years, when he had become such an icon that the younger generation felt the need to turn against him, Gallen-Kallela expressed some very questionable opinions that in no way reflect the open-minded attitude that previously had been characteristic of him. From the late 1920s onwards he actively participated in the efforts to condemn the aspiration for 'European salon art', and in 1930 he made the following statement: 'Arguably there is a fair amount of potential among our artists, as long as they throw away the foreign and artificial shell, which is a reflection of the Judaism of the Bolshevik world' (Reitala 1973, p. 4). Gallen-Kallela's comment may seem shocking but it quite perfectly captures some of the more extreme currents that existed in the art world of the period that was torn by intense political and ideological conflicts.

In a brief but highly informative article published in 1973, art historian Aimo Reitala analyzed the impact of the political situation on the artistic debates of interwar Finland. Reitala explained that the national ideology aimed at stabilizing the society and safeguarding the independence of the Finnish state soon emerged as one of the most influential ideologies of the period. The aim of this nationalist art policy, which admired the peasant traditions that were seen as the carriers of 'Finnishness', was from the outset to condemn foreign modernism. In this context, the notion of 'degenerate art' was also introduced. Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918 and 1922) found many readers in Finnish cultural circles. Some of the artistic currents of the previous century, such as the internationalism of the Symbolist movement, now appeared as signs of decadence and degeneration that had to be erased to maintain the national purity of the 'Golden Age' phenomenon. Suspicion towards modern art was further enforced by its associations with Bolshevism, as can be seen in Gallen-Kallela's comment. The wave of nationalist ideology that swept over the Finnish art world gave older artists including Gallen-Kallela an opportunity to reclaim their power over younger generations, which also boosted the conservative trend.

Competition for the diminished resources was fierce, and the older generation directed the boards and foundations that controlled financial support (Reitala 1973, pp. 2–3).

Okkonen, who contributed to the Finnish language newspaper *New Finland* (*Uusi Suomi*), achieved the most influential position as an art critic. His views were dominated by cautious conservatism and nostalgic admiration for the period he had designated as the 'Golden Age'. He was influenced by Spenglerian notions of degeneration, and over the years he gradually became more and more a supporter of national isolation. Instead of French art, Okkonen recommended ancient Greece and other periods of past greatness as models for contemporary artists; in addition, he continued to encourage artists to follow Gallen-Kallela's lead and find inspiration in *Kalevalian* subjects. (Reitala 1973, p. 5).

Unlike Okkonen, who kept at a distance from the most intense political debates, Wennervirta became increasingly radicalized in the 1930s. From 1932 onwards, he wrote art criticism for the newspaper *Ajan Sana* and its follower *Ajan Suunta,* published by the far-right political party 'Patriotic People's Movement' (Isänmaallinen kansanliike, IKL) which continued the anti-communist efforts of the previously banned 'Lapua Movement' (Lapuan Liike). The notions of decadence and degeneration were also central to Wennervirta's politically motivated artistic ideology, and he condemned cubism as a sign of the Jewish blood that he assumed to be flowing in Picasso's veins. He attacked what he saw as a dangerous 'l'art pour l'art' attitude that was advanced by the art critic Sigurd Frosterus. (Reitala 1973, p. 4). Wennervirta (1927, pp. 609–10) felt that the Finnish art world had dodged a bullet when it had rapidly rejected the French-inspired colorful Neo-Impressionist style that had made its entry around the year 1910. In the moderately cubistic style, the peasant imagery, and the muted color scheme of the so-called November Group (Marraskuun ryhmä, c. 1917–1924) he saw a direct continuation of the national realism of the 1880s, which again reflected a more ancient 'Finnish' tradition. It is notable, of course, that the French influence that Wennervirta found so foreign and dangerous had been mediated by Swedish-speaking artists and critics such as Frosterus and Magnus Enckell. The liberal and internationally oriented Swedish-speaking cultural circles constituted the most significant counterforce to the nationalist ideology in the 1920s and 1930s, but the opposing side largely condemned their efforts as signs of degeneration (Huusko 2007, pp. 138–73; Reitala 1973, p. 5).

3. The 'Golden Age' Revisited

The term 'Golden Age', *Aurea Aetas*, derives from the classical tradition, and it carries within it an evolutionary view of cultures that are born, blossom, and then die. This inherent idea is reflected in the rhetoric of 'degeneration' and 'renaissance' employed by both Okkonen and Wennervirta. This kind of formulation constitutes a useful tool for national myth-making because it aids periodization and the construction of official narratives about the past. In many national contexts certain art historical periods have been termed the 'Golden Age'—for instance, The Spanish 'Golden Age', c. 1580–1610, The Danish 'Golden Age' at the first half of the nineteenth century, and the Dutch 'Golden Age', roughly covering the seventeenth century, which in recent years has been subjected to criticism due to its obvious ties with the colonial past of the country. (Edwards 2016; van der Molen 2019). While it should be noted that the Finnish 'Golden Age' is not problematic in quite the same way as the Dutch 'Golden Age' that has very direct connections to slavery and the exploitation of colonized areas, it is nevertheless a unifying narrative based on the concept of history as a source of pride. As such, it is founded on a complex system of inclusion and exclusion on the basis of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or religious differentiation.

The linguistic disputes between the Swedish- and Finnish-speaking cultural circles had a great effect on the historical interpretations produced by Okkonen and Wennervirta, who both identified as Finnish-speakers. As was seen above, they perceived Gallen-Kallela as more authentically 'Finnish' than Edelfelt with his noble Swedish blood. It is important to stress in this context that at the end of the nineteenth century nearly all Finnish artists came from Swedish-speaking backgrounds and had been educated in Swedish, even if

some of them (such as Gallen-Kallela) identified as Finnish-speakers. Proficiency in the Swedish language was a matter of course in civilized circles, and Nordic networks were extensive. Finland's long shared history with Sweden and the well-established minority status of the Swedish language meant that cultural exchange with Sweden was vibrant throughout the nineteenth century—it did not end when Finland was annexed to Russia in 1809. Literature and cultural periodicals circulated widely in the Nordic sphere, and also in continental artistic centers such as Paris and Berlin, it was natural for Finnish artists to socialize in Scandinavian circles with shared language and culture. Even though linguistic disputes existed in the late nineteenth-century context, artists were generally liberal when it came to these issues, and most supported the idea of one nation with two languages (Engman 2016, pp. 95–96; Konttinen 2001, p. 21; Meinander 2006, pp. 141, 164). This, however, was not the case with Wennervirta who aggressively reinforced the position of Finnish as the only national language. He criticized Swedish-speaking cultural circles for favoring their own and alienating Finnish-speaking Finns (Levanto 1991, pp. 32–33).

It is interesting to note, moreover, that in the 1910s Wennervirta had been quite positive about Russian art and encouraged a closer cultural exchange between Finland and Russia. He felt that the soulful and emotional character and the powerful use of color that he sensed in the works of contemporary Russian artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Aleksei Jawlensky constituted a more favorable model for Finnish art than the latest developments in Sweden or France. Yet, after the Russian Revolution his perception completely changed. He was extremely opposed to all cultural contacts with the Soviet Union and saw only decadence in the more recent artistic developments of Finland's Eastern neighbor (Levanto 1991, pp. 8–9, 37–39). Naturally, this also had an impact on how he perceived historical ties with Russia, and which aspects he saw best to emphasize in his art history writing.

The construction of a 'Golden Age' that emerged through the writings of Okkonen, Wennervirta, and other myth-builders of the first half of the twentieth century, continued its life in later accounts of Finnish art history, but the political and ideological tensions that it was built on were soon forgotten. Gradually, the 'Golden Age' came to be understood as a 'poetic concept' that characterizes the beneficial synthesis of national and international directions in Finnish art around the turn of the twentieth century (Valkonen 1989, p. 7). At the same time, the patriotic associations were retained, but as they became detached from their original historical context in the politically charged atmosphere of interwar Finland, they transformed into a kind of neutralized national pride.

In the six-part history of Finnish art by art historian Markku Valkonen and chief curator of the Ateneum Art Museum, Olli Valkonen, that came out in the 1980s, part three was titled 'The Golden Age' (*Kultakausi*). In the introductory essay, Markku Valkonen stated that it was not without good reason that the period around the year 1900 had come to be known as the 'Golden Age', because it was the time when 'our own national style finally emerged'. It was 'forged' by Gallen-Kallela as a combination of *Kalevalian* romanticism and European stylistic currents—the word 'forge' is significant because it immediately arouses associations of the forging of the magical wealth-producing Sampo in *The Kalevala*, which was also the subject of one of Gallen-Kallela's famous paintings. Like Okkonen and Wennervirta, Valkonen also found an international and a national current in the art of the period, and the national direction, of course, was personified by Gallen-Kallela. The international direction was now labelled as Symbolism, described as a decadent French style with associations of artificiality, alcoholism, and homosexuality. This somewhat suspicious cosmopolitan trend then reached a more favorable nationalistic synthesis in Gallen-Kallela's *Kalevala*-themed imagery. (Valkonen 1984a, pp. 14–21).

During the first half of the twentieth century, when Okkonen and Wennervirta produced their contributions to the 'Golden Age' myth, it was probably too early to reflect too much on the political situation of Finland at the turn of the twentieth century. By the 1980s, however, the teleological model of Finnish art history had emerged, according to which the patriotic efforts of the artists of the 'Golden Age' contributed towards the struggle for independence which became a reality in 1917. Valkonen wrote about the

'period of oppression' (sortokausi) which had become a well-established notion by then (Valkonen 1984a, pp. 27–28; Jussila 2007, pp. 244–63). The 'period of oppression' refers to the intensified Russification campaign directed at the non-Russian peoples of the empire, which in Finland begun with the February Manifesto issued by Tsar Nicholas II in 1899 that weakened Finland's autonomous position. The great significance that Finnish (art) historiography has tended to give to these political events, has greatly affected the picture of the 'Golden Age', intensifying its patriotic undertones.

The section on Edelfelt, written by Olli Valkonen, placed great emphasis on Edelfelt's political role. According to Valkonen, since the first blows directed against the Finnish autonomy at the beginning of the 1890s, Edelfelt devoted all his talent to the service of the resistance, the purpose of which was to demonstrate the cultural power of the Finnish nation and to justify its independent existence. Edelfelt's connections to Russia were only mentioned in the context of his refusal in 1898 to accept the offer to become a professor of the Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg. Travels to France, Italy, Sweden, and Denmark were noted, but there was nothing about the long periods of time Edelfelt spent in Russia and the cultural contacts that he initiated. (Valkonen 1984b, pp. 40–48). Probably at the time of the book's publication very little was actually known about Edelefelt's role in the Russian art world. This remains a largely unwritten chapter in Finnish art history, but more recently some significant contributions have emerged that reveal the extent of this cultural exchange. Edelfelt was a well-known and highly respected figure in St. Petersburg, both within the Academy of Art and among the imperial family. (Knapas and Vainio 2004; Lopatkina and Korte 2020; Mejias-Ojajärvi 2006, pp. 200–15).

Art and cultural historian Rainer Knapas, who previously had published (together with Maria Vainio) an edited collection of Edelfelt's letters from St. Petersburg, wrote in a recent publication that there is still relatively little research regarding Edelfelt's Russian contacts and knowledge about this part of his life remains limited (Knapas 2020, p. 7). The essay written by Knapas appeared in a publication that accompanied the exhibition 'Albert Edelfelt and the Romanovs' (St. Petersburg and Helsinki, 2019–2020). Knapas noted that the cultural and political conflict between Finland and Russia that became increasingly acute during the 'period of oppression' at the turn of the century and, again, between 1917 and 1918, continued to be reflected in the attitudes of independent Finland. Russia was most often seen only as a 'threat from the East'—and that threat would then become a reality in the Winter and Continuation Wars of 1939–1940 and 1941–1944. This has had long-lasting effects on Finnish art history, and in the case of Edelfelt it has meant that research has emphasized his Parisian (and to some extent also his Scandinavian) contacts rather than his Russian ones. (Knapas 2020, pp. 9–10). A fair amount of attention has also been paid to Edelfelt's role as the commissary of the Finnish department at the Paris World Fair of 1900. Finland's own exhibition pavilion and the success of Finnish artists in Paris has been seen as a significant expression of the independence of Finnish culture during the 'period of oppression'. It is rarely mentioned that none of this would have been possible without Edelfelt's Russian contacts.

Therefore, it is important to take a brief look at what is currently known about Edelfelt's affairs in Russia to make what has been expressed above more tangible. Edelfelt had come into contact with Russian painters such as Alexei Harlamov, Vasily Vereshchagin, and Aleksei Bogoljubov, already in the 1870s in Paris, where he had joined an association of Russian artists (Mejias-Ojajärvi 2006, p. 208; Knapas 2020, pp. 18–34). As was the case with most Finnish artists of the period, Edelfelt did not speak Russian, but this was not a problem since members of the educated and cultural classes of St. Petersburg were typically fluent in French. From the late 1870s onwards Edelfelt exhibited regularly at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, and several paintings were commissioned or purchased by members of the Imperial court. Alexander III's wife Empress Maria Fyodorovna, born Princess Dagmar of Denmark, was particularly fond of the 'Scandinavian' Edelfelt and his art, and Edelfelt painted a well-known portrait of her in 1882. In 1896, he completed three official portraits of Alexander's follower, the young Tsar Nicholas II. One of the portraits

was intended for the Imperial Alexander University (renamed University of Helsinki in 1919), one for the Senate House (Government Palace) and a third one, which showed the emperor on horseback, for the Governor General's residence in Helsinki. Edelfelt was also present at the coronation ceremony of Nicholas II in Moscow in May 1896 as an official representative of the Art Academy. (Reitala 1998, p. 217).

In St. Petersburg, Edelfelt became friends with Sergei Diaghilev, who later gained great fame as the founder and impresario of the Ballets Russes. At the end of the nineteenth century, Diaghilev was one of the most active members of the artistic group *Mir iskusstva* ('World of Art'), founded in St. Petersburg in 1898; the magazine with the same name started to appear the next year. The group's aim was to reform Russian art according to modern European standards. In addition to Diaghilev, Edelfelt was in close contact with the artists Albert Benois and Ilya Repin, and with Vice President of the Imperial Academy, Count Ivan Tolstoy. However, it was particularly easy for the cosmopolitan and Parisian-educated Edelfelt to relate to the young artists of the Mir iskusstva group who were oriented towards French art and culture. With Edelfelt's help, Diaghilev arranged a Finnish–Russian exhibition at Stieglitz Museum in St. Petersburg in 1898, in which many central artists of the 'Golden Age' took part—including Edelfelt himself, of course, and Gallen-Kallela. Reitala (1998, p. 217) noted in connection to the *Mir iskusstva* exhibition that Gallen-Kallela had been enthusiastic to take part and ready to conquer the Russian art world. In general, Finnish artists were sympathetic towards the young Russians and were happy to establish closer cooperation.

In the autumn of 1898, Diaghilev was present at the opening of the Finnish Artists' Exhibition in Helsinki with his close friends, the author Dmitri Filosofov, the artist Lev Bakst, and other members of the *Mir Iskusstva* group. The Russians were warmly welcomed and celebrated at the opening dinner. Diaghilev held a speech in which he emphasized that the Russians had much to learn from Finnish artists. The first issue of the *Mir iskusstva* magazine contained an extensive and richly illustrated article on Finnish art authored by Diaghilev, in which he showcased Edelfelt and Gallen-Kallela as representatives of a 'new renaissance of the north'. Several Finnish artists exhibited at the second *Mir iskusstva* exhibition in the beginning of the year 1899, but after that official cooperation came to an end due to the increasingly tense political situation. The young Russian artists, however, continued to have warm feelings towards their Finnish colleagues, and the Finns were saddened and reluctant to end the cooperation that had begun so well (Reitala 1998, pp. 224–28).

The 1898 exhibition was a significant breakthrough for the *Mir iskusstva* group, and its success also served to further consolidate Edelfelt's position in the Russian art world. Edelfelt and Repin were offered the opportunity to serve together as commissaries for the Russian art department at the Paris World Fair of 1900. However, Edelfelt used his contacts within the Imperial Academy to secure a separate pavilion and exhibition department for Finland. (Knapas and Vainio 2004, pp. 449–50). After the Paris World Fair, Edelfelt's active contacts with Russia and the Imperial Academy came to an end. When he passed away a few years later in 1905, obituaries written by his closest friends, such as Diaghilev and Repin, and published in the Russian press, emphasized his role in advancing Finnish art and establishing connections with the reformers of Russian art. Knapas notes that although Edelfelt was adopted as a central artist of the nationalistically defined 'Golden Age' soon after his death, he had felt detached from all kinds of nationalism and said that Paris was his only artistic homeland. While Edelfelt was a republican in France, in Finland and Russia he remained a loyal supporter of the Imperial Court up until 1899–1900 (Knapas 2020, pp. 39, 42).

4. Conclusions: The 'Golden Age' and Its Discontents

This brief summary of the extensive and significant cultural links that Edelfelt established in St. Petersburg exemplifies the richness of historical phenomena that has largely remained under the shadow of the mythical construction of the 'Golden Age'. While there

have been attempts to create a more complex picture, the myth has proven to be particularly persistent. There seems to be a reluctance in the art history field as well as in the minds of the broader public to let go of the narrative constructions that have maintained the illusion of uniqueness and social harmony. The idea still persists that at the end of the nineteenth century, the external threat of Russification united Finns across class and language boundaries and the nation-state was advanced through art.

After the Second World War, openly nationalistic historical interpretations soon lost their credibility, but this did not mean an end to patriotic visions of the past. Historian Henrik Meinander has argued that in some ways this attitude even intensified in academic research, education, and in the public mind during the Cold War era when Finland was focused on building a welfare state. It was important to emphasize the uniformity of Finnish culture, and in historical research this was reflected in the need to present social phenomena in a conciliatory manner. This way, issues that had previously appeared conflicting could be smoothly incorporated into the national narrative. Hence, even though the construction of national history became more flexible, the tendency to focus on Finnish history as a separate field remained strong. The history of both the Russian period and the period of independence provided many dramatic topics that could be studied with the help of national source data and the results could be published in the domestic languages. Meinander notes that this is by no means a particularly Finnish trend; in international contexts it is often referred to as 'methodological nationalism', which means that the selection of information and the questions that are directed at it continue to support the nationalist emphasis, even if researchers no longer have such passions (Meinander 2016a, pp. 69–70).

In Finnish art historiography, this 'methodological nationalism' has directed attention towards phenomena that best fit within the nationalist framework of the 'Golden Age' myth, which has also encouraged interpretations that conform to these preconceptions. What makes the myth of a 'Golden Age' of Finnish art particularly problematic is that it is fundamentally a nostalgic conceptualization, and one that is founded on fantasy rather than on real understanding of past societies. It therefore produces and maintains a distorted image of both the past and the present. It can be understood as an expression of what Bakhtin (1981, p. 147) has termed 'historical inversion'. By this he means that something that could actually only be realized in the future is portrayed as belonging to the past. Things that are located in the future are always uncertain and wavering, lacking the persuasiveness of real life, but via this inversion, everything that is considered ideal or obligatory is shifted into the past, thus creating an appearance of authenticity. Okkonen and Wennervirta glorified the artistic developments that had taken place only a couple of decades earlier, portraying the end of the nineteenth century as a mythical 'Golden Age' in order to encourage artists of their own period to embrace a similarly patriotic ideal and to advance art that would be truly 'Finnish'.

Recent decades have witnessed a growing current of international scholarship, emphasizing the transnationality of national cultural revivals and the historical construction of national identities (e.g., von Bonsdorff et al. 2020; Howard 1996; Leerssen 2010; Thiesse 2013). These kinds of new openings have tied Finland more closely with the international arena and with the political and colonial histories of Europe. They have also accentuated the fact that the political scene was complicated and shifting in many parts of Europe, and the situation of Finland with its struggle for independence was not unique. In several European countries, political tensions were reflected in artistic revivals that resulted in surprisingly similar stylistic phenomena that combined international trends with elements drawn from national traditions.

It cannot be denied, of course, that connections between the arts and nationalist politics existed in late nineteenth-century Finnish culture, but these links were more complex and varied than the hegemonic narrative would suggest. The most active promoters of national art were the artists gathered around the so-called Young Finland group, but they were not a united and unanimous brotherhood, as the heroic story of national art has tended to present

them; the group was a gathering of individuals who shared a common cause but did not necessarily agree on the finer details. Moreover, despite their nationalistic ideal they also had strong European networks. (Konttinen 2001, pp. 7, 295–97). The end of the nineteenth century was generally a period of vibrant internationalism and cultural exchange, and in many European countries national and international elements were brought together in an artistic synthesis. Alongside nationalistically inspired artists, there were also those who were in no way involved in the national project, and who created their art in a broader European or international context.

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