

Article

Exhibiting for Purpose: Finnish Art in Moscow in 1934

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Abstract: This article is a case study that illustrates the complex intersection of art, politics, and diplomacy in the interwar period. Based on Finnish and Soviet archival documents and press publications, it examines the entire process of organising a Finnish art show abroad. The exhibition, held from 28 November to 24 December 1934, in Moscow, was seen as a landmark event, drawing significant attendance and fostering Finnish–Soviet cultural exchange. By analysing various factors contributing to its success, we provide a detailed picture of both artistic and political influences, demonstrating how cultural events can transcend aesthetic appreciation to become significant diplomatic tools.

Keywords: art diplomacy; Finland; Soviet Union; 1930s; interwar diplomacy



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1. Introduction

Throughout the interwar period, culture played a pivotal role in advancing national interests across Europe. Art exhibitions, in particular, became indispensable instruments for cultural promotion and for cultivating political and cultural ties between nations. In this article, we discuss an exhibition of Finnish art, held in Moscow in 1934, which, as we will argue, exemplifies this dynamic, demonstrating both the strategic organisation behind such events and their profound significance for both Finland and the Soviet Union.

Our hypothesis is that the 1934 exhibition stands out as a prime example of how cultural diplomacy often prioritised political and ideological goals over artistic considerations. Studying this show enlightens the public and administrative debates surrounding international cultural projects of this time. What were the motives behind the exhibition, who were its key figures, and how was the project argued for and validated in both countries? A central theme is the opposition to the exhibition in Finland, with intense debates in the Finnish press. We also follow the various stages of the project, including its opening in Moscow and Soviet reports on Finnish visitors. The reception of the exhibition in Moscow will be examined.

This article is methodologically based on thorough archival research. This is the first time that Soviet and Finnish archival sources have been brought together to analyse this exhibition. The integration of these sources and press publications contributed to a comprehensive understanding and opened up new perspectives on this event.

The primary sources consist of various archival materials, particularly belonging to the Archives of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvenniy Arhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, abbreviated as GARF). Correspondence, records, and minutes of meetings from the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and organisations in both Finland and the Soviet Union shed light on the background of international exhibitions during this period. These archival materials are crucial for reconstructing the different perspectives and approaches used by the arrangers.

In the 1930s, both Finland and the Soviet Union exchanged exhibitions with other countries. Finland, for example, sent two major exhibitions abroad in the following years, one to Germany in 1935 and the other to Italy in 1937, and foreign exhibitions were shown in Finland. The same applies for the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, art from the Netherlands

(1932), Poland (1933), Latvia (1934), Estonia (1935), Belgium (1937), the Czech Republic (1937), and Spain (1939) was displayed in the USSR, and Soviet art was regularly shown abroad. In this essay we, however, concentrate on the 1934 exhibition of Finnish art in Moscow.

The authors of this article focused on international cultural relations in their previous individual research projects, including Finnish–Italian contacts and Finnish art exchanges from the 1920s to the 1940s and Soviet art contacts in the first half of the 20th century. For this essay, we found inspiration in the academic works of Michael David-Fox ([David-Fox 2012](#)), Aleksandr Golubev ([Golubev 2004](#)), and Maija Koskinen ([Koskinen 2019](#)) on the cultural exchange system, as well as research on cultural diplomacy ([Clerc and Glover 2015](#); [Melgin 2014](#); [Mitchell 1986](#); [Nye 2004](#)).

2. Finnish–Russian Relations and Art Exchanges: 1930s

From 1918 to 1939, the relations between Finland—which had gained its independence in 1917 after having been an autonomous Grand Duchy under the Russian empire since 1809—and the Soviet Union were characterised by mutual distrust. During the 1930s, cultural exchange between the two countries was limited. The Finnish public opinion towards the Soviet Union was largely negative, driven by the widespread apprehension of communism. Conversely, the USSR viewed cultural interactions with Finland as largely unsuccessful diplomatically, perceiving the Finnish cultural discourse to be dominated by the German Nordische Gesellschaft (Nordic Society)¹. In the autumn of 1933, Finnish envoy Aarno Yrjö-Koskinen engaged in significant discussions with officials at the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs in Moscow. Soviet diplomats noted the following: "Finland applies to the USSR the same concepts and attitudes as towards Tsarist Russia that existed before the Revolution. Our neighbour Finland seems less knowledgeable about us compared to more distant countries. . . . Finland appears to be separated from the USSR by an impenetrable wall." ([Baryshnikov 2008](#), p. 389).

The Finnish art exhibition in Moscow, therefore, was not only a cultural event; it was a strategic effort to breach this metaphorical wall, promoting understanding and improving the strained relations between the two nations. Notably, a non-aggression pact was signed between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1932, and its term was extended in 1934 until the end of 1945. By the 1930s, no exhibition exchanges had taken place between independent Finland and the Soviet Union. In 1921, a prominent Finnish art dealer and gallerist, Gösta Stenman, planned to host a Russian exhibition in his Helsinki gallery. However, this plan fell through due to onerous demands from the Russian side ([Hjelm 2009](#), p. 313). In 1928, the Soviet Union requested a Finnish art exhibition, but opposition from the Finnish artists' organisations prevented it from being realised ([Paloposki 2012](#), pp. 143–44).

In 1934, Helsinki hosted an exhibition of Soviet prints. Following this event, the Soviet envoy in Finland, Boris Stein², proposed that Soviet authorities adhere to the principle of reciprocity by organising a Finnish art exhibition in the Soviet Union. This suggestion led to an official invitation, which Stein conveyed to the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The 1934 exhibition exchange was viewed by the Foreign Ministries of both countries as a significant step towards enhancing bilateral communication. In this context, the exchange was deemed crucial for fostering improved diplomatic relations between Finland and the Soviet Union ([Koskinen 2019](#), pp. 216–27; [Paloposki 2012](#), pp. 151–53).

For the Finnish government, the exhibition represented a significant opportunity on multiple fronts. It would provide a chance to forge stronger relations in the realm of visual arts and would allow Finnish artists to visit Leningrad and Moscow, thus gaining insights into the vibrant art life there ([FNG AC 1934c](#), § 3; [AMFA 1934j](#)). Aarno Yrjö-Koskinen stressed that the exhibition would signal Finland's desire to cultivate friendly relations with its eastern neighbour, and the Foreign Ministry exceptionally took on the assignment to organise it ([AMFA 1934f](#)).

In the Soviet Union, the All-Union Society of Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) served as the host and co-organiser for the project. Established in 1925, VOKS

played a crucial role from the mid-1920s to the 1950s in facilitating the Soviet Union's international cultural engagements. VOKS's responsibilities included maintaining connections with various institutions, the press, and international friendship societies, as well as managing exhibitions and trips by key Soviet specialists abroad ([Anatsheva 1994](#)).

3. Sending Finnish Art to the Soviet Union: A Heated Discussion

Initially intended for the spring of 1934, the Finnish art exhibition was first announced as a display of prints during the opening of the Soviet exhibition at Kunsthalle Helsinki in February. In the spring, the Finnish Foreign Ministry invited the Fine Arts Academy of Finland and other artists' organisations—the Artists' Association of Finland, the Association of Finnish Sculptors, and the Association of Finnish Printmakers—to participate in the preparatory committee. The Association of Finnish Sculptors declined to appoint a member, citing unsuitable timing ([AMFA 1934b](#)). Conversely, the Finnish Printmakers embraced the idea enthusiastically ([AMFA 1934c](#), [1934d](#), [1934e](#)),³ while the Fine Arts Academy—the board of the Finnish Art Society—suggested postponing the exhibition due to time constraints ([AMFA 1934k](#)).

The Finnish Foreign Ministry confronted financial challenges and logistical hurdles, prompting the postponement of the exhibition until autumn. Despite an initial projection of expenses totalling FIM 150,000, consultations with Boris Stein hinted at a more cost-effective approach. However, lingering uncertainties regarding actual expenditures fuelled concerns about potential political repercussions if the project encountered setbacks. In September, Aarno Yrjö-Koskinen revisited the topic in his correspondence with the Ministry upon learning of the news coverage in Finnish newspapers regarding the imminent Soviet Union exhibition project. The reports indicated plans to open the exhibition in Moscow in November, followed by a transfer to Leningrad. Yrjö-Koskinen returned to the financial aspect, underscoring Finland's unprecedented opportunity to enjoy favourable terms from a foreign country, with all expenses covered from the border and back. While acknowledging higher insurance fees for transporting artworks to the Soviet Union compared to other destinations, he accentuated the overall reduced expenses. He stressed the potential difficulty in justifying any project setbacks solely on financial grounds, as such lapses might be construed as politically motivated by the Soviets ([AMFA 1934h](#)).⁴ Conversations persisted, resulting in a revised budget of FIM 80,500.

On November 1, the Finnish Foreign Ministry convened a meeting with representatives from artists' organisations to finalise the arrangements. Despite some scepticism, the exhibition moved forward. Following the meeting's agreement, a notice was issued in Finnish newspapers on November 3, inviting Finnish artists to contribute to a contemporary art exhibition in Moscow and Riga. Each artist was permitted to submit a maximum of five artworks, excluding prints. The timeframe was narrow: artworks were required to be dispatched by November 9 to Kunsthalle Helsinki ([Uusi Suomi 1934c](#)). The artists' organisations criticised the Ministry because of the tight deadline ([Uusi Suomi 1934d](#)). Nevertheless, the schedule was partly attributed to constraints imposed by the Russian party. Ultimately, only the Association of Finnish Printmakers participated as an association, although individual artists still contributed. The decisions not to participate were influenced by concerns over the Ministry's conduct, seen as too authoritative; scheduling conflicts; and broader political apprehensions, including anti-communist sentiments and mistrust towards the Soviet Union. The Soviets were well aware of these challenges.

The Finnish envoy Yrjö-Koskinen kept on stressing in his letters that the Soviet Union was very sensitive to international politeness, and a withdrawal from the project would be interpreted in any case as political ([AMFA 1934h](#)). Despite the rumours circulating in Finland which suggested that it was impossible to carry out the project, the Foreign Ministry swiftly dispelled them by announcing via the Finnish News Agency STT on November 8 that a sufficient number of artworks had been submitted, securing the exhibition's implementation ([Helsingin Sanomat 1934a](#); [Uusi Suomi 1934a](#)).

4. Finnish Views on the Moscow Exhibition

The dispatch of the Finnish art exhibition to the USSR sparked debates among Finnish political factions and intellectuals. The social democratic paper *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* defended arranging the exhibition in Moscow, claiming that the decisions of the artists' organisations not to participate were of bad publicity for a small country like Finland and that they were obstructing the promotion of Finnish art in a country well known for its art. The exhibition could still be realised, as there were, in Finland, "artists with tact and broadmindedness" (*Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* 1934c). The paper also blamed those opposing the exhibition for building a barrier around Finland and cutting the relations both to the east and the west (*Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* 1934a). The Swedish-language working-class newspaper *Arbetarbladet* called the decision not to participate an act of sabotage and wrote that the artists tried to act politically (*Arbetarbladet* 1934). *Kansan Työ*, a social democratic newspaper, published in Vyborg, in Karelia, wondered "What is there to oppose?" in its piece of news, saying that the artists' organisations were hindering the arrangement of the exhibition in Moscow and that it would be carried out despite this and would even be very presentable (*Kansan Työ* 1934).

On the other hand, Ludvig Wennervirta, an art critic with right-wing political views, spoke out at a meeting of the Artists' Association of Finland and stated that the exhibition was advancing Soviet political aims (*NAF* 1934). Wennervirta promoted art that he considered national and opposed arranging too many foreign exhibitions in Finland. He took a very strong stand against the Soviet exhibition in Helsinki in 1934, as well as against an exhibition of the Swedish Halmstad group of surrealists the same year (*Wennervirta* 1934a, 1934b). Some writers saw opposing the exhibition as a sign of patriotic attitude, as the pseudonym Santeri wrote in the newspaper *Sisä-Suomi* that came out in Jyväskylä, in Central Finland. The paper published the opinion of the artist Carl Bengts, announced on his deathbed, that it was an insult towards the great national artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela (who died in 1931) to include his works in the exhibition; he would never have participated himself. According to "Santeri", Bengts's words were inspired by his patriotism (*Sisä-Suomi* 1934).

The columnist in *Karjala* (Vyborg newspaper) was referring to the publicity that the exhibition project attracted and the opposition against it when he wrote that "the tug of war" between the Foreign Ministry and the artists' organisations was followed with a certain attention, even outside "Finnish-Russian circles" (*Karjala* 1934).

Before the exhibition was opened in Moscow, a written question regarding it was posed to the Finnish Foreign Minister by the Members of Parliament of the extreme right party the Patriotic People's Movement. Besides criticising the way in which the Ministry had directed the project, they asked why Finland had not sent exhibitions to some other countries, which had arranged their exhibitions in Finland earlier. These arguments hid the political motives of the whole question behind them. With respect to those other countries, the party meant Poland, Hungary, Germany, Italy, and France, which they called 'civilised countries', i.e., Western countries. According to them, these reciprocal exhibition visits, demanded by diplomatic courtesy, had not been possible, because the Finnish government had refused to support them financially. The artists' organisations had actually acted more respectfully than the Ministry by refusing to join the Moscow show when they had expected those other exhibitions to be arranged first. The Ministry, with its, in many respects, 'odd' behaviour, had given the civilised countries the impression that Finnish artists disrespectfully turned their back to them in order to show an even more considerate attitude towards the Soviet Union (*AMFA* 1934g; *Ajan Suunta* 1934; *Helsingin Sanomat* 1934c; *Hufvudstadsbladet* 1934).

The foreign minister, Antti Hackzell, gave his rather long written answer on December 15, when the exhibition was on display in Moscow. He went through all the exhibitions for which either the Finnish Foreign Ministry or the Ministry of Education had granted an appropriation in the 1920s and in the beginning of the 1930s. He also added that official invitations—at least not to the Foreign Ministry's knowledge—had not been delivered

for six years from countries other than the Soviet Union. He also assured that the two artists' organisations did not withdraw from the exhibition project because of "international politeness" but because of the time shortage. This was indeed one reason, but the Minister deliberately wanted to disregard the political views behind the decision. Hackzell asserted that given all the facts, the Ministry could not be blamed for deliberately neglecting arranging exhibitions abroad ([AMFA 1934I](#)).

5. Curatorial Diplomacy: Art at the Exhibition

The Finnish Foreign Ministry appointed Dr. Bertel Hintze as the curator for the 1934 art exhibition in Moscow, a role of significant importance that was given to him because of his extensive experience in the field. As an art historian and the first director of Kunsthalle Helsinki, which opened in 1928, Hintze was well-versed in the intricacies of managing art exhibitions.⁵ His personal interest in Russian icons had led him to the Soviet Union multiple times in the late 1920s and 1930s, and he had visited cities such as Odessa and Novgorod, in addition to Moscow and Leningrad. These trips were part of his efforts to compile a monograph on the Finnish artist Albert Edelfelt and to expand his collection of Russian icons ([Koskinen 2019](#), pp. 216–21; [Kruskopf 1998](#), pp. 27–31).

For the Finnish organisers, a priority in Moscow was to showcase works by 19th-century Finnish painters, a task that proved challenging, especially due to the loan policy of the Finnish Art Society. During the early 20th century, the Art Society and its governing board, the Fine Arts Academy of Finland, managed the Ateneum Art Museum, the largest and most prominent art museum in the country. The Society had a stringent loan policy, particularly regarding works by deceased artists, which made curating representative Finnish exhibitions abroad challenging. For the Moscow exhibition, the Finnish Art Society was asked to loan only six artworks by deceased artists, including two paintings by Valle Rosenberg and four prints by Magnus Enckell. The Fine Arts Academy refused, citing its policy. The representative of the Foreign Ministry in the organising committee, head of the press department, Kaarle Nestor Rantakari, had expressed earlier his desire to include works by Finnish Golden Age Masters, like Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Albert Edelfelt, as well as examples of Finnish sculpture in the show. Hintze succeeded to fulfil this request, borrowing artworks from private owners ([FNG AC 1934d](#)). Eventually, being under pressure of the Ministry of Education, the Academy had to loan two paintings by Edelfelt, *Women Outside the Church at Ruokolahti* (1887) and *Portrait of Mrs. John Gallatly* (1897), as they were actually owned by the State ([FNG AC 1934a](#); [1934b](#), § 2–3; [Stjernschantz 1935](#), p. 26). Dr. Torsten Stjernschantz, director of the Art Society art collections at the Ateneum,⁶ had opposed sending older Finnish art to Moscow from the start, a stance influenced by political mistrust towards the Soviet Union ([AMFA 1934a](#)).⁷ This opinion was echoed by Emil Wikström, a prominent sculptor and president of the Association of Finnish Sculptors, who initially feared sending his works to the Soviet Union. However, after visiting his daughter in Moscow, he relented and contributed two sculptures to the exhibition ([Helsingin Sanomat 1934b](#); [Suomen Sosialidemokraatti 1934d](#)).

Despite all the difficulties, Hintze assembled a substantial exhibition, mitigating the impact of these "sad absences". According to him, the exhibition featured 220 paintings, 19 sculptures, and 262 prints by 93 artists, including contributions from textile artists, which Hintze believed would pique Soviet interest due to the lack of equivalent textile art in the country. The artworks were borrowed from private collectors, belonged to the collection of the Association of Finnish Printmakers, or were submitted by individual contemporary artists.

One particularly noteworthy artwork from a private collection was Albert Edelfelt's *Copenhagen Quay*. This painting, part of a series titled "At Anchor in Copenhagen", was commissioned in 1890 by the Russian imperial couple, Emperor Alexander III and Maria Feodorovna (née Marie Sophie Frederikke Dagmar, Danish princess) during their family visit to Copenhagen. Edelfelt created numerous sketches and three paintings depicting the Holmen port from the deck of the frigate *Sjælland*. Of the three completed works, two

were acquired for the imperial collection: the large-scale *At Anchor in Copenhagen III* (now housed in the Presidential Palace in Helsinki) and the smaller *At Anchor in Copenhagen II*, which Empress Maria Feodorovna placed in her favourite residence, the Anichkov Palace in Saint Petersburg.

In February 1917, the Anichkov Palace came under the administration of the municipal government, then the Ministry of Food Supply of the Provisional Government, followed by the Commissariat of Public Property, and in October 1918, it became the City Museum. The palace's assets were nationalised, and during the 1920s, some of its contents were sold. *At Anchor in Copenhagen II* was purchased by Antti Hackzell, then the Finnish envoy to the USSR, becoming a prized piece in his small collection of Edelfelt's works acquired in Soviet Russia.⁸ And from Hackzell's collection in Helsinki, *Copenhagen Quay (At Anchor in Copenhagen II)*, a painting that once belonged to the Russian imperial family, made its way back to the Soviet country ten years after its sale.

6. The Soviet Perspective: The Political Undertone of Practical Arrangements

From the outset of its planning, the exhibition of Finnish art was regarded in the Soviet Union as a political event, irrespective of its content, simply by virtue of its existence. The content of the exhibition was significant only to the extent that it satisfied the Finnish party. This was partly due to the fact that 1934 represented a pivotal moment in shaping the artistic content framework in the Soviet Union. Following the revolution, avant-garde art was viewed as the primary expression of the young Soviet Republic's artistic ideas. From 1928 to 1934, the primary criterion was that art should be proletarian, reflecting the life and worldview of the proletariat. However, beginning in 1934, the creative method of realism gained prominence. These criteria applied to both internal and external exhibitions, and in accordance with them, Soviet cultural authorities aimed to send works by Soviet artists abroad and to welcome international artworks to the Soviet Union.

The primary concern for Soviet cultural authorities was the information that indicated a lack of consensus among Finns. These challenges—such as divisions among artists and the reluctance of the art organisations to send works to the USSR—were well-known in Moscow. Viewing the international exhibition exchange through a political lens, VOKS ultimately had two significant worries: ensuring that the exhibition would take place and managing its coverage in the international press. Consequently, any delays or communication issues were perceived as threats to the exhibition's success and potential triggers for negative exposure in the foreign press about the Soviet Union.

Throughout the entire year of 1934, the opposition of Finnish artists against the exhibition was frequently discussed in the VOKS's internal correspondence. For instance, Mikhail Apletin, then its deputy chairman, remarked in his letter that “the question of participation in the exhibition in Moscow caused a storm of indignation in the most reactionary circles of artists ... the discussion ended in a knife fight, one of them had his stomach ripped open” (GARF 1934b, p. 15). Apletin was referring to an obscure altercation linked to a heated meeting of the Artists' Association of Finland, in which the association decided not to participate in the exhibition. An artist who attended the meeting returned home with a stab wound in his back and his suit slashed with a knife. The Finnish newspaper *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* reported this incident but provided no further details, as the police were not notified of the stabbing. The motive for the attack remained unclear, though this leftist paper suspected right-wing supporters were responsible (Suomen Sosialidemokraatti 1934b).

From the outset, the Soviets utilised such information strategically to further their own objectives—publicly employing it as counterpropaganda and internally addressing it as what they perceived as ideological setbacks in their efforts. For instance, a TASS report published in November pointed to a new wave of anti-Soviet sentiment following recent criticism in the Finnish press, particularly in response to the opposition to the Moscow exhibition. The report noted that while the associations of Finnish Sculptors and Finnish Artists had declined participation citing financial concerns—claiming artworks would be

unsellable in Moscow—a significant number of artists, including the Finnish Printmakers, still intended to participate (AMFA 1934f).

Furthermore, these challenges and controversies served as valuable communication tools for VOKS in its interactions with the Soviet government. The disagreements among Finnish artists were regularly raised whenever practical or political issues needed a resolution within the project. As a case in point, Aleksandr Arosev, the VOKS chairman in his letter to Andrei Bubnov, the People's Commissar of Enlightenment, highlighted the dissent among Finnish artists and its coverage in the Soviet press while proposing a list of exhibition committee members and requesting exhibition space at the State Museum of Fine Arts (now the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts) (GARF 1934b, p. 27).

Mikhail Apletin, the VOKS deputy chairman, adopted a similar strategy while addressing Isidor Lubimov, the People's Commissar of the Light Industry: first, in briefly presenting a story of “a real storm in the most reactionary circles of Finnish artists”, he stressed that regarding this situation, “this imposes a heavy responsibility on us to provide the best conditions for the participants” and “at least to put the Finnish exhibition in such conditions as were created for the recently held exhibition of Soviet art in Helsinki”. In order to not give rise to any “discussion among artists” during the exhibition, Apletin asked for the fulfilment of “one of the elementary conditions for the exhibition”—to provide 400 sheets of glass. The strategy of presenting the project to the top management in a manner reminiscent of blackmail by a possible political failure was a successful one—all the numerous prints in the exhibition were displayed with glass coverings (GARF 1934b, pp. 25–26).

Political tension was repeatedly brought to light by Apletin while coordinating the acquisition of artworks from the exhibition. On November 25, he wrote the following to Osip Beskin, chief inspector for visual art affairs for the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment: “On November 28, an exhibition featuring Finnish artists will debut at the Museum of Fine Arts. As known, the preparation for this exhibition was marked by intense debates and divisions among Finnish artists. Some artists vehemently opposed sending their works to the USSR, citing doubts about the prospects of selling paintings in our country. However, artists more aligned with the USSR emerged victorious, leading to the successful implementation of the exhibition.” (GARF 1934b, p. 29). And he concluded with the following: “The exhibition showcases a diverse collection of Finnish art, offering a retrospective survey of its evolution since the late 19th century. We believe that certain pieces from the exhibition could enrich the collections of Soviet art museums. The very fact of the acquisition would leave a favourable impression on Finnish artists.” (GARF 1934b, p. 29). Consequently, a total of 5 paintings and 43 prints were purchased for FIM 54,750 to enhance Soviet museums (GARF 1934b).

7. Soviet Reality Displayed and Guests Questioned

In November 1934, Bertel Hintze travelled to Moscow to mount the exhibition at the State Museum of Fine Arts, where the Finnish collection barely fit the allotted space (AMFA 1934i; Uusi Suomi 1934b). Besides Hintze, some other Finns visited the Soviet capital to attend the exhibition's inauguration: artists Birger Carlstedt and Ilmari Vuori; and Hans Kutter, a journalist, literature critic, and later, theatre and film reviewer; as well as Nils-Gustav Hahl, art historian and the co-founder of Artek. As mentioned, Emil Wikström attended the opening while staying at his daughter's in the Finnish legation in Moscow.

Foreigners' visits to the Soviet Union, meticulously orchestrated along designated routes and accompanied by guides prepared to chaperone them, played a pivotal role in Soviet cultural diplomacy. Paul Hollander, one of the pioneering scholars in the study of Western “pilgrims” to communist countries, introduced the concept of the Soviet hospitality industry (Hollander 1981). Hollander emphasised that foreign guests in the USSR could anticipate a high level of service, a pronounced eagerness from their hosts to underscore the visitor's significance, and a deliberate insulation from direct interactions with ordinary Soviet citizens.

The itineraries, destinations, and “objects of display” were carefully curated to showcase the most favourable aspects of Soviet life. Every foreigner crossing the Soviet border was targeted for conversion to the new ideological faith, to be “conquered” intellectually, or at the very least, to be educated in the perceived merits of the Soviet system. This strategy proved effective: many foreign visitors were genuinely convinced of the objectivity of the information presented and the authenticity of their observations (David-Fox 2012). Needless to say, all their encounters, speeches, and visits were meticulously documented by Soviet guides.

From the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s, VOKS was tasked with organising the accompaniment for foreign guests, particularly those visiting for cultural exchange. Finnish visitors were no exception. The activities of Carlstedt, Vuori, and Kutter in Moscow were chronicled by VOKS guide Kvachadze and the head of VOKS Exhibition Department, Franz Laslo. Additionally, a detailed account of the time spent with Hintze was provided by the art historian and VOKS employee Lev Rozental (GARF 1934b, pp. 3, 5, 16–17).

On 27 November 1934, Carlstedt, Vuori, and Kutter visited the Museum of Modern Western Art and attended a performance of Gogol’s *Dead Souls* at the Moscow Art Theatre (MHAT). Franz Laslo noted his conversation with Carlstedt, who was cautious in his remarks. Carlstedt expressed his admiration for Moscow and its architecture, though Laslo felt he “lacked genuine understanding”. Carlstedt mentioned the difficulties that Finnish artists were facing, such as a lack of sales and the ongoing economic crisis. He clarified that his visit was motivated by a desire to see Moscow rather than political convictions, as he believed artists should remain apolitical. Laslo disagreed, asserting that such a viewpoint eliminated the social element from art. Carlstedt did not respond to this critique, leaving Laslo to conclude that Carlstedt was either limited in his perspective or unwilling to reveal his true views (GARF 1934a, p. 17).

In the following days, December 1 and 2, the Finnish guests toured the Museum of Oriental Cultures, where they were particularly impressed by contemporary paintings from Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. They visited Igor Grabar’s studio, where “the Finnish artists were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about works by comrade Grabar”. Their itinerary also included the Museum of the Revolution and the children’s play *We Are the Power* at the Moscow Children’s Theater. Soviet attention to children’s upbringing and development was a notable aspect of the cultural display for distinguished foreign visitors. This theme came up in subsequent conversations. For instance, over dinner, Vuori inquired whether it was mandatory to send children to state care immediately after their birth and received an answer stating that it was a common misconception. The Soviet guide clarified that parents could keep their children, but many opted for day nurseries and kindergartens to ensure the best care and development (GARF 1934a, p. 5).

Kutter recounted an effort in Helsinki to establish a large playground, which was ultimately thwarted by the state’s decision to build a church on the site. He criticised the recent Finnish trend to construct churches at the expense of other public amenities, noting the paradox that progressive individuals supported church building despite their personal disinterest in religious services, valuing church traditions instead (GARF 1934a, p. 7).

In Grabar’s studio, the conversation turned to Eero Järnefelt, a Finnish artist appreciated in Finland and known to Grabar in their youth. Carlstedt remarked that Järnefelt’s current work would deeply disappoint Grabar, as it had strayed far from true art, earning substantial sums from what Carlstedt derisively termed “barber shop paintings”. Vuori wryly added that Järnefelt had made millions from such works (GARF 1934a, p. 5).

Lev Rozental’s report to VOKS on his Finnish colleague Bertel Hintze stands apart. At first glance, it is very long and informative, but after careful reading, it turns out that the whole document praises Hintze’s professional qualities. Although he gives such details as “The conversation was conducted in German”, “He plans to author a book on Russian icons soon”, or “In the summer of this year, together with the Finnish envoy he went to the Crimea”, the main part of it concerns art and Rozental’s admiration of Hintze. He states that “The subject of the conversation was the selection of exhibition material, its

grouping and placement techniques” and continues by writing that “Work on the exhibition requires considerable effort, it is always possible to clash with different opinions, in any case, it should be noted that with Dr. Hintze, this work was carried out extremely amicably, without any misunderstandings and disagreements. Dr. Hintze showed himself to be very experienced in the exhibition business and adapted to teamwork”. Also, he writes that “Dr. Hintze proved to be a connoisseur of old Western European painting, endowed with good taste, especially attracted to the French portrait of the 18th century and rare examples of Italian primitives. He focused his attention on the artistic and formal virtues of a painting. He especially appreciated the collection of French paintings”. At the end, Rozental sums up with the following: “In general, during my entire working period with him, Dr. Hintze made a positive impression on me as a very energetic and knowledgeable person. He is particularly businesslike and tactful” (GARF 1934a, pp. 2–3). It seems that, obviously forced to write such reports, Lev Rozental resisted this practice in his own way—by making the report something interesting to write (while recalling the good time spent).

8. The Vernissage, the Finissage, and “Favourable Impression”

The exhibition, which ran from 28 November to 24 December 1934—a month’s duration was common for an exhibition at that time—was a significant cultural event marked by its official and governmental stature: it was, besides being the first to be held in the Soviet Union, the largest Finnish art exhibition organised both domestically and internationally so far. The opening ceremony was attended by an array of high-ranking Soviet officials, foreign diplomats, and prominent figures from Soviet culture and science. The presence of such distinguished guests was compelling proof of the exhibition’s importance in fostering cultural exchange between Finland and the Soviet Union. The opening featured numerous speeches, reflecting the exhibition’s diplomatic and cultural significance. Andrei Bubnov, the Soviet Commissar for Education, and Mikhail Apletin, VOKS deputy chairman, delivered addresses pointing out the importance of the event. The Finnish envoy, Aarno Yrjö-Koskinen, also spoke, emphasising the role of the exhibition in strengthening Finnish–Soviet relations.

A notable moment was the reading of a greeting from Russian artists, expressing solidarity and appreciation for Finnish art. Bertel Hintze, representing the Finnish organisers, had prepared a speech, translated in Russian and read on his behalf (Nya Pressen 1934; Suomen Sosialidemokraatti 1934d).⁹ According to it, the Finnish organisers aimed to convey the evolution of Finnish art over the past fifty years, encompassing both the historical context and contemporary trends. Hintze noted that understanding the current state of Finnish art necessitated an appreciation of its historical roots, particularly highlighting the period when Finnish art gained its independence in Paris. He acknowledged that, despite the challenge of concurrent exhibitions, which limited the availability of certain works, the organisers had succeeded in presenting a comprehensive overview. This reference to other exhibitions served as a polite excuse, though underlying political and organisational tensions were the real factors. Hintze extended special thanks to the Finnish private collectors and museums that had generously loaned their pieces. This gesture underlined the collaborative effort and dedication involved in bringing the exhibition to fruition, despite the obstacles faced (FNG AC 1934d).

In connection with the exhibition, a catalogue was published in Russian. It featured articles by the Finnish art historian and critic Edvard Richter, who explored contemporary painting and sculpture in Finland, and Bertel Hintze, who discussed Finnish graphic art. These articles provided brief overviews of the leading artistic schools in Finland and listed the names of prominent Finnish artists. A majority of the catalogue’s pages were dedicated to the listing of 216 paintings, 283 graphic works, and 19 sculptures. It concluded with 16 illustrations, the first being a portrait of Maxim Gorky, painted by Akseli Gallen-Kallela. From a political perspective, commencing with Gorky’s portrait was a highly judicious choice. The work of Gallen-Kallela had already achieved the status of a classic in Finnish

art, while Gorky, who had returned to the USSR in May 1933 after living and working in Italy for 18 years, was the most influential Soviet writer of the 1930s.

In contrast to Finland, the exhibition in the USSR received media coverage only at the time of its opening. A few reviews and reports from the exhibition opening were published in newspapers, including the “Exhibition of Finnish Art” by Lev Rozental in *The Soviet Art* (*Sovetskoje iskusstvo* 1934), the “Exhibition of Finnish Art in Moscow” by Olga Bubnova in *Izvestia* (*Bubnova* 1934), and an untitled article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (*Literaturnaya Gazeta* 1934).

These three major articles discussed the 1934 exhibition of Finnish art in Moscow, highlighting its significance and content. Lev Rozental emphasised the novelty of the exhibition for the Soviet audience, noting that Finnish artists historically avoided showing their work in Russia due to political tensions. He praised the retrospective nature of the exhibition, which spanned 50 years of Finnish art, showcasing key artists such as Albert Edelfelt, Akseli Gallen-Kallela, and Magnus Enckell. Rozental underlined the distinct national characteristics of Finnish art, particularly in painting, while also noting the exhibition’s comprehensive representation of various art forms, including prints and sculptures.

Olga Bubnova provided a detailed overview of the exhibition, noting that it featured “about 500 works” carefully curated to reflect modern Finnish art trends as well as earlier works from the late 19th century. Bubnova discussed the influence of French art on Finnish artists, while accentuating the nationalistic elements in the works of Edelfelt and Gallen-Kallela. She also noted the strong presence of women artists and the excellence of Finnish graphic art, though she expressed regret that book illustrations were not on display.

The anonymous author of an article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* placed the exhibition in the context of cultural exchange, framing it as a response to a Soviet graphic art exhibition held in Helsinki earlier that year. The article drew attention to the breadth of the exhibition, featuring “over 350 works from 80 Finnish artists across four generations”. It highlighted the prominence of Edelfelt and Gallen-Kallela, while also noting the exhibition’s focus on graphic art and the notable representation of Finnish sculpture. The article underscored the exhibition’s role in fostering cultural ties between the Soviet Union and Finland.

Overall, the exhibition was depicted as a landmark event that introduced Soviet audiences to the rich and diverse traditions of Finnish art, emphasising its national character, technical mastery, and the influence of European trends.

Three oil paintings, a gouache, a watercolour drawing, and 43 prints were bought by the Soviet government. It was the largest purchase of Finnish art abroad so far. Hintze announced this with a touch of schadenfreude, as one of the arguments of those artists who opposed the exhibition was that there was no reason to send artworks to the Soviet Union, since no one would buy them anyway.¹⁰ Hintze stated in a newspaper interview that the price received for the prints—which he announced was FIM 60,000—was not good, because Finnish graphic art, as is known, is not expensive, and with the Soviet museum, an agreement was made to impose a 20% reduction in the price with the condition that the Soviets would later buy more etchings with the spared money. Hintze commented that the print acquisitions had been made with such a good view of Finnish art that prints would be well-presented in Russian museums (*AMFA* 1934i; *Hufvudstadsbladet* 1935).¹¹

This approach marked the dual purpose of the acquisition: enriching Soviet art collections and making a diplomatic statement. By incorporating Finnish artworks into Soviet museums, the USSR aimed to foster goodwill and cultural ties with Finnish artists, thereby extending its influence and underlining the political significance of the project. For the Soviet authorities, the acquisitions from the Finnish exhibition were, besides an artistic endeavour, a significant political act. Mikhail Apletin sought to notify the People’s Commissariat of Education, which oversaw state art acquisitions, and its Chief Inspector of Fine Arts, Osip Beskin, in advance. In his communication, Apletin emphasised that “the very fact of the acquisition would leave a favourable impression on Finnish artists” (*GARF* 1934b, pp. 28–29).

In Moscow, the exhibition was well-received, with a footfall of around 10,000 visitors—a significant number for that period. In Finland, the exhibition was seen as a political success. According to Hintze, it fostered respect among the Russians towards the Finns, extending beyond the artistic realm, and facilitated ongoing trade negotiations, although the coverage in the Soviet press was limited.¹² The Finnish mission expressed its great satisfaction with Hintze and how he organised the exhibition ([AMFA 1934i](#)).

In December, Hintze returned to Moscow to pack up the exhibition. Except for the artworks purchased for the Soviet collections, the pieces travelled with him directly to Riga, Latvia, where the exhibition, increased with new artists and artworks, opened in January 1935 ([FNG AC 1935b](#); [Svenska Pressen 1935](#)).¹³

9. Conclusions

Our archival research shows that the 1934 Finnish art exhibition in Moscow is a compelling case study in the complexities of interwar cultural diplomacy. In addition to being an artistic endeavour, the event was a multifaceted project influenced by a number of factors. It was the first and only art exhibition that the newly independent Finland sent to the Soviet Union in the interwar period, and it was undertaken at a time of cautious rapprochement between the two countries, marked by the extension of their bilateral non-aggression pact and ongoing trade negotiations. This backdrop of political manoeuvring added a layer of complexity to the organisation and reception of the exhibition.

Due to the general mistrust towards the Soviet Union and the widespread fear of communism, the project aroused opposition in Finland, as evidenced by the refusal of a majority of artists' organisations to participate and the lively discussion in the Finnish press. These debates provide valuable insights into the contemporary cultural and political climate and reveal the diverse opinions and reactions that influenced the impact of the event. It is worth noting that the other exhibitions organised abroad by Finland in the 1930s did not encounter any opposition because of the countries they were sent to.

The governments of both Finland and the Soviet Union considered it politically vital that the exhibition should be held, as the minutes and reports reveal. The Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs exceptionally took on the task of organising the exhibition and appointed the experienced Dr. Bertel Hintze as its curator. He had the ability to navigate the difficult political landscape. In the Soviet Union, the organiser, VOKS, used the political significance of the project as a tool to get the project realised and to facilitate its smooth mounting. Both countries wanted to make a favourable impression. For Finland, it was important to give a good and diverse picture of Finnish art with 93 artists and, ca., 500 artworks. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, wanted to show that it was capable of organising exhibitions professionally.

The public response in the Soviet Union, as evidenced by the large number of visitors, demonstrated, at least in part, a genuine interest in Finnish art and culture. This was understood as fostering a degree of mutual respect and understanding between the Soviet Union and Finland. Soviet officials made a large purchase at the exhibition. Although this was motivated by political reasons on the Soviet side, in Finland, it was received as proof of the good reception of both Finnish art and the exhibition. All in all, both countries saw the exhibition project as a success from their point of view.

In essence, the 1934 Finnish art exhibition in Moscow was a product of both artistic and political influences, illustrating how cultural events can transcend aesthetic appreciation and can become important diplomatic tools. This case reinforces the importance of considering multiple perspectives when studying cultural exchanges and highlights the nuanced interplay between art and politics in shaping historical narratives.

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Notes

- ¹ The Nordische Gesellschaft (“Nordic Society”) was an association founded in 1921 and based in Lübeck, Germany, dedicated to strengthening German–Nordic cultural and political cooperation.
- ² Boris Efimovich Stein (1892–1961) was a Soviet diplomat who served as the plenipotentiary representative of the Soviet Union to Finland from 6 January 1933 to 25 November 1934.
- ³ The representatives of the organisations were: the chair of the Printmakers, Lennart Segerstråle; the chair of the Artists’ Association, Alvar Cawén; and the chair of the Fine Arts Academy, Emil Wikström.
- ⁴ This letter is the only mention of Leningrad as a possible exhibition venue.
- ⁵ Hintze worked as the Director of Kunsthalle Helsinki until 1968.
- ⁶ Torsten Stjernschantz (1882–1953) was the chief curator of the Ateneum Art Collections in 1919–1952 and the chief curator of the Sinebrychoff art collections in 1924–1952.
- ⁷ Further evidence of the political mistrust surrounding the Soviet Union can be seen in the positive reception towards relocating the exhibition to Riga.
- ⁸ Anders (Antti) Werner Hackzell (1881–1946) was appointed the acting chargé d’affaires of Finland in Moscow in 1922 and later, as the first envoy of Finland to the USSR, a position he held until 1927. During the 1920s, his collection came to include several works by Edelfelt, all of which had a “Russian trace”. He acquired the pastel *Girl with Flowers II* (1895) and two oil paintings, *Parisian Nanny* (1887) and *At Anchor in Copenhagen II* (1890). He also received a sketch by Edelfelt for a portrait of Danish Princess Maria as a gift from Agathon Faberge. (See [Hintze 1953](#), pp. 555, 566, 592; [Häikiö 2020](#), p. 103)
- ⁹ The Russian State Archive holds a typewritten copy of this speech with stress over each word—possibly the very copy that was read at the opening.
- ¹⁰ Paintings by Karl Eriksson, *Children*; Hugo Simberg, *Finnish Peasant*; and Väinö Kunnas, *The Tailor-Philosopher*; nowadays are in the collection of The State Hermitage Museum, as well as *Sunset* by Yrjö Ollila and *Landscape* by Tyko Sallinen and all the prints in the collection of The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts.
- ¹¹ There is also information that a watercolour painting by Oskari Hirvikallio, *The Cathedral of Tallinn*, and some etchings were bought by private buyers, but who these private buyers were is not known. (See [Suomen Sosialidemokraatti 1935](#); [Hufvudstadsbladet 1935](#)).
- ¹² Around the time of the vernissage, four articles appeared in Soviet newspapers. Finnish newspapers, however, only cited article by the art historian Olga Bubnova (published in *Izvestia*) ([Bubnova 1934](#), p. 6).
- ¹³ A total of 40 artworks were sold from the exhibition in Riga (see [FNG AC 1935a](#)). The digitalized catalogue of the exhibition in the Riga City Museum (16.01–17.02.1935) is available at <https://gramatas.lndb.lv/periodika2-viewer/?lang=fr#panel:pi%7Cissue:664939> (accessed 29 September 2024).

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