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## The Finnish Art Society's 180th Anniversary Symposium 'Constructed Nationality: Transitions and Forces of Change in Visual Arts' – The History of the Finnish Art Field

Anna Luhtala, MA, Curator, Finnish National Gallery



The Finnish Art Society's 180th Anniversary Symposium was held on 22 April, 2026, at the Ateneum Art Museum. In the opening speech, Outi Raatikainen, the Society's chairperson, described how the founding document of the Finnish Art Society was signed in 1846, and two years later, the art school was founded and a grants system and the Ducat Prize established to support Finnish artists. 'The Finnish Art Society gathered artists, collectors, networkers, and influencers – all for the arts', Raatikainen stated. Each year, the Finnish Art Society awards grants to artists, buys artworks to be donated to the members for the

**Outi Raatikainen, chairperson of the Finnish Art Society, opens the symposium**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

annual lottery event and guarantees access to art for the members by offering free entrance to its exhibitions. 'In future', Raatikainen said, 'the society wants to do even more, and this year, a fundraising campaign will be launched and a gala event for donors is to be held in October.'

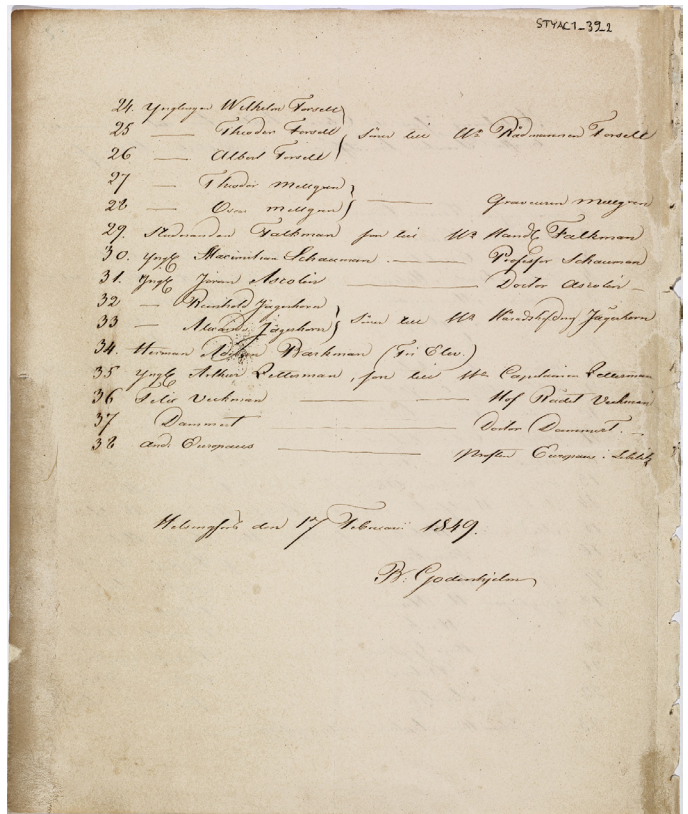
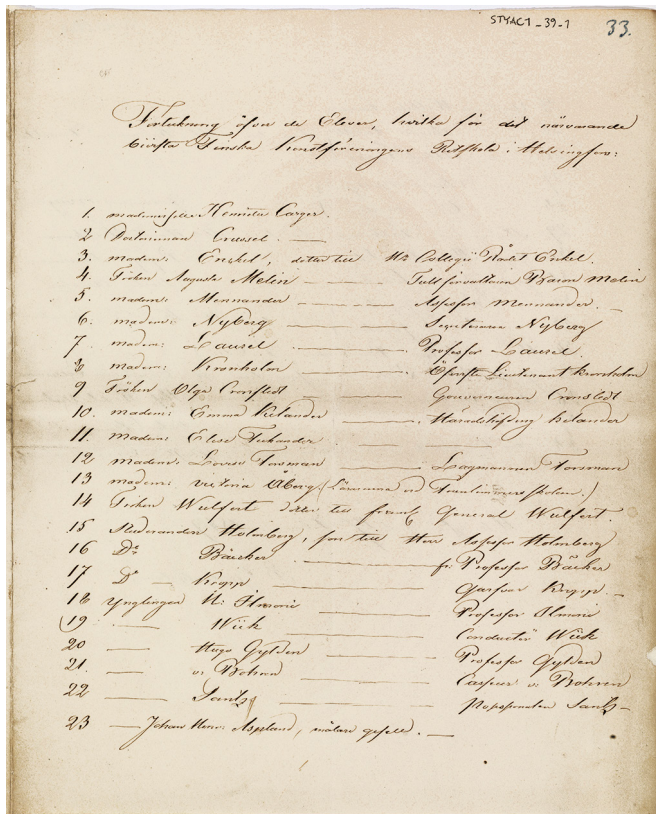
Tapio Mäkelä and Eero Karjalainen, from the Finnish Art Society, gave a short introduction to the symposium. Mäkelä pointed out the great significance of the Art Society. He reminded us that it really founded the art life of Finland in the 19th century, and even the Finnish word for art, *taide*, was coined during that time, deriving from the word *taito* (skill). Karjalainen noted that the symposium explores how national identities are articulated in relation to the visual arts and institutions. Art collections, exhibitions, and education involve choices – but who has made them? These are inherently political questions. Mäkelä continued that the concept of nations has recently been put in a critical framework and reframed, and research has focused on concepts of colonialism, postcolonialism, and ambicolonialism. The last of these was also the subject of one of the symposium's keynote speakers, art historian, artist and curator Svitlana Biedarieva.

The Finnish Art Society has a long history of activity and has a sustained, long-term approach. The Ateneum Art Museum shares a long history as well. The next speaker was

the Director of the Ateneum Art Museum, Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, who spoke about the museum's research and exhibition activities. Among the most recent examples of its success stories are the Helene Schjerfbeck exhibition shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the Pekka Halonen exhibition held at the Petit Palais, in Paris. Both of these artists received crucial support from the Finnish Art Society at the outset of their careers. The Ateneum Art Museum's research strategy has placed a particular emphasis on renewing views on art history, encouraging new questions and viewpoints on the collection of the Finnish National Gallery – with an ambition of international outreach. There are still Finnish artists who are not well known internationally. Von Bonsdorff gave the example of Elga Sesemann, whose monographic exhibition opens at the Ateneum later this year. Furthermore, von Bonsdorff named our journal *FNG Research* as a key platform and channel through which researchers can present and disseminate their work concerning the collections and exhibition activities of the Finnish National Gallery.

Riikka Stewen, professor of art history and theory at the Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, pointed out the Finnish Art Society's long history and pioneering role in the development of art education in Finland. The Academy of Fine Arts traces its roots back to the drawing school established by the Finnish Art Society in 1848.

Stewen noted that the association had been tasked with creating a Finnish art scene almost virtually from the ground up. Stewen said that the early stages of developing a national Finnish art were closely connected to the natural landscape. In this sense, the idea of art emerging from one's own soil can be understood quite literally. Creating history paintings that addressed Finland's own past was considered difficult, as Finland had formerly been part of Sweden and Russia; for this reason, drawing on themes from nature seems to have been a common approach.



Drawing school teacher B. A. Godenhjelm's list of pupils from 17 February, 1849. The list belongs to the Finnish Art Society's Minutes with appendices from the Board and Annual Meetings of the Finnish Art Society, which have been digitised for the years 1846–1901 and published online in the Finnish National Gallery's Collection search website (<https://kokoelma.kansallisgalleria.fi/en/object/504>) Finnish National Gallery Collection, Archive of the Finnish Art Society I: 1846–1939

In its early years, the Finnish Art Society included many influential figures in Finnish society, such as Zachris Topelius and Fredrik Cygnaeus. Cygnaeus famously stirred national sentiment in Finland with his speech in May 1848, delivered at the students' spring semester celebration known as Flora Day in Helsinki. Cygnaeus was the Society's chair at the time. The same year, an art education programme was initiated by the Society. Artist Berndt Abraham Godenhjelm was the first teacher. The Turku Drawing School (founded in 1830) is actually the oldest art educational institution in Finland, but it came under the administrative authority of the Finnish Art Society in 1849. Perhaps surprisingly, the number of women students was significant in the early years of art education, Stewen noted. Some students, like Elin Danielson and Helene Schjerfbeck, worked later on as Drawing School teachers.

The first keynote speech of the day was given by Susanna Pettersson, CEO of the Finnish Cultural Foundation (and also, the former Director of the Ateneum Art Museum and the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm). In her presentation 'The Finnish Art Society and the Need to Construct Narratives', Pettersson discussed the early phases of the Society's collection and its development into what is now the Finnish National Gallery Collection. The association's earliest acquisitions laid the foundation for the appreciation of Finnish art, as well as for classification practices – core elements of museums' fundamental collection work. It is notable, that the first acquisitions were made from Swedish artists, in addition to Finnish artists, and not from Russia, which was then the parent state of Finland. Women artists were well represented too, in the early years of collection formation. The Society presented its newly acquired collection in several apartments in Helsinki, before the construction of the Ateneum building in 1888. As the collection grew, the idea of an actual museum building emerged, and later on, the Ateneum became the home of the collection, as well as the art school. As the collection expanded to museum scale, its management called for more professional methods. Classification practices were developed (the first inventory catalogue dates from 1873), and principles for display were established.

Next, we heard from Maija Koskinen, academy research fellow (University of Helsinki), about the politicised art field of the 1960s and 70s, concerning the activities of the Finnish Art Society and the Helsinki Kunsthalle. The Society operated mainly from the Helsinki Kunsthalle, established in 1928. Kunsthalle's long-term Chief Curator Bertel Hintze was also the secretary of the Finnish Art Society's Trust Council and of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. His wife Lilli



**Installation view of the Finnish Art Society's 50th anniversary exhibition, 1896. Photographer Daniel Nyblin, 1896. Finnish National Gallery Collection, Archived Photo Prints**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery



**Students from the Finnish Art Society's Drawing School in the painting studio at the Ateneum in 1899.**  
**Photographer Jakob Ljungqvist.**

**Finnish National Gallery Collection, Väinö Hämäläinen Archive**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery

Hintze worked as the exhibition secretary – without payment. In addition to art exhibitions, the Kunsthalle hosted a number of ethnographic exhibitions and produced high-quality exhibition catalogues.

Professor Tutta Palin, from the University of Turku, introduced us to women artists from the early years of the Finnish Art Society. As already mentioned, women were represented quite well among pupils of the Society's art school and also among the supported artists. When the Society embarked on commissioning portraits for the newly established collection, Helene Schjerfbeck, Maria Wiik and Ellen Thesleff were among the artists selected. The ducat prizes were granted to promising artists. The first prize was handed out to Maria Wiik in 1888. But somehow, between 1904 and 1936, only two prizes were granted to women artists – Lyyli Moisio (third prize in 1918) and Annie Andrée (third prize in 1932). By the early 20th century, artistic ideals had changed. Technical skill based on formal training lost importance, while vitality, primitivism, and expressiveness became valued. Women were often perceived as weak, fragile, and diligent – more as followers than pioneers – which made them ill-suited to embody these new ideals, said Palin concluding her outline of the historical context.

Maaretta Jaukkuri, who worked as a curator in the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, shared her memories in compiling the 'Ars 95' and 'Ars 01' exhibitions. Founded in 1990, the Museum of Contemporary Art initially operated in the Ateneum building until the Kiasma building opened to the public in 1998. The economic recession in Finland at the time affected the realisation of the exhibitions, but in 1995 the first Ars exhibition nevertheless opened. It subsequently became a regular event presenting contemporary art. The concept for the first Ars exhibition was developed by Tuula Arkio, Asko Mäkelä and Maaretta Jaukkuri, who also made the artist selections. In connection with the exhibition, theme-related seminars were organised, and discussion guides circulated in the exhibition spaces. 'Ars 95' received considerable media attention, attracting both praise and criticism. The theme of the following

VITO ACCONCI · IDA APPLEBROOG · MIROSLAW BALKA · LEWIS BALTZ · MATTHEW BARNEY · BÉRIOU · PER INGE BJØRLO · BARBARA BLOOM · LOUISE BOURGE OIS · GENEVIEVE CADIEUX · HELEN CHADWICK · JOHN COPLANS · RICHARD DEACON · WIM DELVOYE · MARLENE DUMAS · TOSHIKATSU ENDO · LUCIANO FABRO · STEFAN GEC · KRISTAPS GELZIS · ROBERT GOBER · FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES · ANTONY GORMLEY · DAN GERAHAM · ASTA GRÖTING · MONA HATOUM · HULDA HAKON · OUTI HEISKANEN · GARY HILL · TROY INNOCENT · ALFREDO JAAR · LOUIS JAMMES · ANISH KAPOOR · YOHJI KAWAGUCHI · MIKE KELLEY · KOMAR & MELAMID · KUPRIANOV & FISHKIN · YAYOI KUSAMA · MARIE-JO LAFONTAINE · JONATHAN LASKER · WILLIAM LATHAM · ANGE LECCIA · SARAH LUCAS · EVA LÖFDAHL · BRUCE MARDEN · BRAD MILLER · RAND & ROBYN MILLER · CATHY DE MONCHAUX · JUAN MUÑOZ · PORTIA MUNSON · ANTONIO MUNTADAS · ESKO MÄNNIKKÖ · BRUCE NAUMAN · PEKKA NISKANEN · JUSSI NIVA · MASAYOSHI OBATA · MARCEL ODENBACH · TONY OURSLER · FINNBOGI PETURSSON · ADRIAN PIPER · HENRIK PLENGE JAKOBSEN · SIGMAR POLKE · MARKUS RAETZ · CHARLES RAY · GERHARD RICHTER · ULF ROLLOF · NINA ROOS · RUDOLF SCHÄFER · ANDRES SERRANO · HARUHIKO SHONO · KARL SIMS · HIROSHI SUGIMOTO · PHILIP TAAFFE · CHRISTINE TAMBLYN · JAAN TONK · ROSEMARIE TROCKEL · LUC TUYMANS · GEDIMINAS URBONAS · MARIANNA UUTINEN · MEYER VAISMAN · LAWRENCE WEINER · RACHEL WHITEREAD · STEPHEN WILLATS · VNS-MATRIX · KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

### The cover of the 'Ars 95' exhibition publication

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen

Ars exhibition in 2001 was 'Unfolding Perspectives', focusing on cultural encounters. The aim of the exhibition was to position art within its time and within society, for example by evoking feelings of recognition and familiarity, Jaukkuri stated. She continued, that the purpose of art is to offer concrete objects through which to examine one's own thinking, and thereby also to connect with a broader societal context.

The last speaker of the symposium was Ukrainian Svitlana Biedarieva, who presented her newly published book *Ambicoloniality and War*. Her book introduces *ambicoloniality* to describe the paradoxical relationship in which Russia's attempt to dominate Ukraine has also subjected it to Ukraine's symbolic influence. Departing from existing models and theories of colonialism, the concept of ambicoloniality highlights a long history of mutual, border-based influence rather than distant colonial rule. '[Ambicolonialism] sees power as a symbolic exchange rooted in the cultural strengths of the parties involved', Biedarieva explained.

The symposium day, which included numerous presentations and reflections on 200 years of history as well as perspectives on the future, concluded with a panel discussion featuring Biedarieva, Koskinen, Jaukkuri and Palin, moderated by Mäkelä and Karjalainen. The *180th Anniversary Yearbook of the Finnish Art Society* was also launched during the event. The evening continued with lively discussions at a reception held at the nearby Swedish Embassy. This building had served as the Finnish Art Society's first exhibition venue in its early years (1847–48). It was also likely one of Finland's earliest artist residences, as one of the Society's talented art school students, Nikander, lived in a room in the apartment.



Svitlana Biedarieva speaking on ambicolonialism at the symposium

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen