



Bank of Finland

Akseli Gallen-Kallela
THE AINO TRIPTYCH



EUROJÄRJESTELMÄ
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Akseli Gallen-Kallela painted the first version of his *Aino triptych* in Paris in 1888 and 1889. In this brochure, Tuija Wahlroos, Director of the Gallen-Kallela Museum, discusses the birth of *the Aino Myth, Triptych* in Paris, sketches the background to the Aino myth and explains the differences between *the Aino triptych* in the Bank of Finland and the second version included in the collections of the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki.



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THE AINO TRIPTYCH BY AKSELI GALLEN-KALLELA

The artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931, until 1907 Axel Gallén) is one of the central figures of Finnish art. In addition to depictions of nature and the common people, he is known as the illustrator of themes taken from the Kalevala, the Finnish national epic. In addition to painting, he also made a contribution to graphic art, applied art and architecture in Finland. Also central to the artist's production are the works created in Paris in the 1880s, model studies, streetscapes and portraits, and later on the symbolist period of the 1890s. National themes and Gallen-Kallela's desire to develop Finland's art and cultural life merged with international influences and contacts.

Participation in European art life was a matter of course for Gallen-Kallela and his contemporaries. Gallen-Kallela studied art in Paris. Moreover, he took part in exhibitions – particularly in France, Germany and Hungary – not to mention having his own stand at both the Venice biennale in 1914 and the Panama-Pacific international exposition in San Francisco in 1915. His willingness to try new things and his impulsiveness found an outlet not only in experimentation in different fields of art, but also in his hunger for the exotic and long journeys in Africa (1909–1910) and the United States (1923–1926).

Akseli Gallen-Kallela's first major painting with a Kalevala motif represents the Aino myth,

the legend of Aino and Väinämöinen. The tragic poem at the start of the Kalevala epic starts with a singing competition between the old and wise Väinämöinen and the young Joukahainen, in which Väinämöinen comes out as the winner. Having lost the singing match and threatened with death, Joukahainen, in his despair, promises his sister Aino in marriage to Väinämöinen in exchange for his life. Aino's mother, too, takes a favourable attitude towards this promise, but it is a shock to Aino. Driven to desperation, she runs to the lake shore and takes off her clothes to go swimming with the maids of Vellamo. She sits on a stone, which sinks, and she drowns. She does not die, however, but continues her life as a maid of

Vellamo – a mermaid. Later, when fishing, Väinämöinen catches Aino – landing her as a perch in his boat. When Väinämöinen does not recognise his dead fiancée, she escapes from the boat in the form of a woman, mocking the old man.

Gallen-Kallela ended up painting the multi-layered poem as a three-part triptych. Two final versions of the work are known to exist, of which the first reached completion in Paris in 1889 and currently belongs to the Bank of Finland collections. The second version, completed in Finland in 1891, constitutes part of the Ateneum Art Museum collections. *The Aino triptych*, finalised in Paris, was the young Axel Gallén's main work, his artistic manifesto of the time, reflecting the aims matured during his studies in

France, and combining topical international trends and painting techniques with Finnish themes. A devoted realist, Gallen-Kallela was also a romantic interested in ancient times, myths and fairy tales who wanted to interpret the *Kalevala* through Finnish everyday life. The artist, planning his return to Finland, was near achieving his aim of courageously raising the level and content of art in our country: 'I can always reach the point where my country will be content with my achievements, but my ambition reaches much farther. Everything or nothing, first or last. That is the motto I want to keep for the rest of my life.'

The illustration of *the Kalevala* became a key objective for Gallen-Kallela at an early stage. The sketch books of the 16–17-year-

old art student already displayed outlines of familiar Kalevala characters and events. The adventurers who appealed to a young man's imagination, Lemminkäinen and Kullervo, were accompanied by depictions of Aino, whom the artist sometimes sketched as a maid falling into the water with a splash or wrenching jewels from her bosom, sometimes in a posture where she is taken aback by the courting of an unexpected suitor. Simultaneously, we witness the presence of other sentimental topics, with mermaids and fairy-tale creatures. A parallel can be easily drawn between the myths in the folk poetry of the Kalevala and the fantasy world of legends and fairy tales.

A COMBINATION OF FINNISH IDENTITY AND BOHEMIAN LIFESTYLE

Having commenced his art studies in Paris in 1884, the 19-year-old artist was caught up in the events of big city life and new influences. Alongside his studies at the Académie Julian and his depictions of bohemian lifestyle, which reflected the animation of café and street life, he showed an increasing interest in, and desire to focus on, national subjects, of which the illustration of Aino became one of his most central aims. During his holidays Gallen-Kallela painted the Finnish landscape and its inhabitants, while at the same time practising for a major illusory work. In line with the doctrines of realism, Gallen-Kallela made observations of the everyday environment: dwellings,

utility articles and clothing. He saw the venues of the Aino legend as real, genuine landscapes that could be localised in terms of natural history and ethnographic detail. For this purpose, the artist even took perch skins with him to Paris in order to achieve a truly realistic depiction.

Determined realisation of the theme began in 1888, continuing until spring 1889. Secretly engaged to Mary Slöör in Finland in summer 1887, Gallen-Kallela did not allow himself a return to his homeland until the main work of his artistic career to date was ready. He reckoned that, with the attention attracted by the Aino triptych, he could prove to Mary's

father, who had taken a less than favourable attitude towards the marriage, that he was an artist who should be taken seriously.

*The Aino triptych in Kuparikanta hall,
Bank of Finland.
© Bank of Finland.
Photo: Peter Mickelsson.*



WHY AINO?

There is no straightforward answer to the question why Gallen-Kallela chose the tragic story of Aino as the opening work of his Kalevala themes. However, the contents of his art studies, the prevailing spirit of the times and his personal preferences make it possible to identify reasons for the implementation of this motif. Depiction of the human body took centre stage in his studies at the Académie Julian. The aim was to learn to master anatomic depiction by practising painting with live models. The Central European art life of that time, in the heart of which Gallen-Kallela studied, knew a number of examples of mythic and fatal women from antiquity, the Bible

and various folk legends. Throughout the 1880s, dramatic paintings based on such motifs reflected a stronger interest in a romanticising approach towards the past and a greater idealisation of early Christianity and the Middle Ages.

The Aino triptych enabled Gallen-Kallela to draw on what he had learnt and to take account of the topical currents of the art world. The three-part triptych form borrowed from medieval church art provided the setting for scenes where Aino's body language combined with realistic outdoor painting. The middle part of the triptych in particular can be compared to the scenic, illusory and even sensational salon art of the time.

Gallen-Kallela's mother, Mathilda Gallén, residing in Finland, predicted success for her son and Aino: 'The Aino legend will be his great success, but the forests and lakes of his home country will inspire him to correctly understand the legend. The Aino in the legend must be the Finnish Juno of art.' In comparing Aino with the mythic protectress of women in antiquity, Mathilda Gallén came to refer to the classical origins of our Kalevala art and to parallels between the Kalevala epic and global mythological traditions. What was new compared with the previous way of presenting Kalevala themes in our country, mainly based on illustrations from antiquity, was

the portrayal of mythological scenes through the methods of realism in a homely, even modest landscape.



Aino going to swim with the maids of Vellamo.
Photo: Reijo Kokko.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE AINO MYTH

Aino can, with good reason, be called the creation of Elias Lönnrot, the compiler of *the Kalevala*. Lönnrot actually invented the name Aino, which is an adaptation of the word ‘ainoa’ (only, sole). The legend of Aino is not known as such in folklore, but world epics and mythologies provide variations on the main theme – the fate of a young woman married off against her will.

The Aino legends in the old (1835) and new (1849) *Kalevala* reveal an interesting difference concerning the negotiation over Aino between Joukahainen and Väinämöinen. In the older version, Väinämöinen dictates the terms and conditions of his victory,

including the surrender of Aino, to the defeated Joukahainen.

According to the newer version, Joukahainen takes the initiative and offers his sister. Accordingly, the new *Kalevala* softens the role of Väinämöinen in the fate of Aino.

Compared with the artist’s later pictures of a strong masculine Väinämöinen, the wise man of the Aino triptych is more like a frail old man, which highlights the contradiction between him and the young Aino. Aino is a mythical creature, a flash-like, beautiful and distant vision, an illusion for Väinämöinen. Her desperate act fades away in the beautiful scenery of a summer morning. The contradictory element typical of

myth emerges from the presence of death, hidden in the exuberance of summer. The laws of epic poetry drama find their fulfilment in Gallen-Kallela’s illustration where two counterforces meet ‘on the stage’, as complementary and mutually reinforcing tendencies. Here, we witness elements that divide and explain the feminine and masculine spheres and the worlds of adolescence and old age.



*Aino escapes from
Väinämöinen's boat.
Photo: Peter Mickelsson.*

AINO, ILLUSTRATED

'What difficulties I am having with my great painting! It looks like the whole thing will be a flop, but I just go on working, scrape and repaint again. But this is an expensive business, as models cost a lot of money. Perhaps nothing will come of it, but this will have been useful for me if I repaint it there at home.'

The two versions of the same theme afford an interesting opportunity for comparison, considering in particular that the differences between the actual composition of the scene, the characters and the landscape are small. The latter Aino of 1891 represents the highest degree of realism and has a tangible, true touch of nature. By contrast, the

earlier triptych appears more naive, lighter and even more primitive. Of the characters, Väinämöinen in the 1889 triptych rather brings to mind a gnome-like figure familiar in folktales. Aino has a certain naive innocence, manifest even in her expressions and gestures. The artist himself referred to his earlier version as a sketch – a fact that has undoubtedly influenced the later assessment of the work, particularly when the original passed on to private ownership at an early stage and across Finnish borders. Even so, both versions have their own status as independent works of art and share the opportunity, opened up by a poem, of glorifying the beauty of Finnish

nature. The forest in the pictures also speaks to us in a symbolic language. Young birches provide the frame for Aino, whereas old pine trees form the background for Väinämöinen.

The three pictorial motifs of the triptych are *Aino encounters Väinämöinen in the forest* (left panel), *Aino goes swimming with the maids of Vellamo* (right panel) and *Aino escapes from Väinämöinen's boat* (middle panel). The larger middle panel underlines the dramatic climax of the myth, Aino, who has managed to escape from the inattentive Väinämöinen. Aino's grief and ensuing death have been replaced by an Aino moved to a supernatural reality, but exhibited as a fully realistic



Aino encounters Väinämöinen in the forest.



Aino escapes from Väinämöinen's boat.



Aino going to swim with the maids of Vellamo.

Photo: Peter Mickelsson.

representation in the painting. The maiden, who in earlier sketches disappeared into the waves in many different ways, is portrayed as a pronouncedly fair and bright figure, unfolding to the viewer as an integrated whole, as coherent as possible. The artist added further intensity to Aino's dramatic spiral pose in the 1891 version by changing the position of her hands.

A striking difference between the two different versions resides in the decoration of the frames. The 1889 version frames, designed by Gallen-Kallela himself, are dominated by gold-plated swastikas rising from a dark foundation. Before the ornament was adopted by the Nazis, this

ancient symbol was regarded as a sign of eternity and good luck, and it has been linked with, among others, the wheel, the movement of rotation and the halo of the sun. Against the backdrop of these significances, the course of the tale from evening to morning and, as a more latent thought, the rotation of the theme – 'the myth of the eternal return' – receives symbolic backing from the decoration of the frame. The paddle wheel motif of the tripartite surfaces between the panels also highlights the multidimensional significances of the myth related to the cycle of life. The fully gold-plated frame in the 1891 painting represents, in turn, a more intact and delicate Finnish version, expanded by

Karelian-style decorative themes and textual extracts from *the Kalevala*.

The frame ornaments of both triptych versions originate from medieval church art, in which such decoration was used in altar screens. Religious elements merge with the world of folklore, like in *the Kalevala*, emphasising the artist's view of the aspect of sacredness, which is hidden in the theme: 'The poems of *the Kalevala* are so sacred for me that, when singing them, I feel like laying down my weary head to rest on a strong, solid foundation.'

The difference between the paintings also emerges from changes in details related to ethnology, costumes and the boat,

dimensions between persons and the landscape, and lighting. In Paris, Aino was painted in an atelier, which made the artist long for other types of working conditions: 'Imagine what a difference it makes when I can have 'natural models' there at home in plain air.' Gallen-Kallela was not satisfied with the professional models he used in Paris and noted in a letter to his fiancée: 'In Finland there are undoubtedly suitable models, but it is impossible to make them pose nude in a standing position.'

In the end, the most suitable Aino model was found near at hand. Parisian models were swapped for the artist's own wife in Finland, who was not, however,

captured as a particularly recognisable figure in the portrait. In depicting his own young wife as the mythic Aino, Gallen-Kallela left an interesting clue to the viewer. In the right panel, Aino is seen to wear a silver bracelet around her wrist, the artist's morning gift to his new bride. Aino has not taken off this jewel – the artist could not bear the idea of his wife going away, not even in the painting.

AINO IN THE BANK OF FINLAND COLLECTIONS

Brought to Finland in 1889, *the Aino triptych* aroused great enthusiasm. When Gallen-Kallela's friend Professor Edvard Neovius, who had commissioned him to paint several portraits, bought the picture, the Finnish Senate decided to commission a duplicate. *The Aino triptych* completed in 1891 was exhibited at the 1892 Paris Salon, where the reception was a great disappointment to the artist. New winds were blowing in European art life, and there was no understanding for a bright and naturalistic representation of a myth. In subsequent years, Gallen-Kallela looked for a new direction for his Kalevala art, which he found in the dramatic, simplified Kalevala illustrations of the late 1890s.

Professor Neovius moved to Copenhagen in 1905, taking the first Aino version with him. A later evaluation of the work was influenced by the artist's own statements, and occasionally understatement, and subsequently on the notes of Professor Onni Okkonen, writer of an extensive biography of Gallen-Kallela, which were in line with the artist's views: 'The first Aino painting is indeed only a vague outline that cannot be called a finished work of art.' In writing his Gallen-Kallela study, Okkonen was not in a position to examine the original, as the work did not come back to Finland until 1950, in connection with the auction of the estate of Neovius' daughter, Saima Neovin.

Purchase of the work at the auction was prepared by Edvard Preisler, head of the Copenhagen office of the Pohjola Insurance Company, and Tauno Angervo, Pohjola's managing director. In arranging payment for the work, Angervo was in contact with Sakari Tuomioja, Governor of the Bank of Finland, asking for permission to use foreign exchange for the purchase of the painting. Permission was granted, but Tuomioja told Angervo that the Board's dining room at the Bank would provide a more elegant and public place for the Aino painting than Pohjola's premises. Angervo was slightly reluctant to agree to Tuomioja's proposal, but did so, and the Bank bought the picture.

Pohjola also sold Tuomioja Albert Edelfelt's painting *A Parisian model*, purchased for Finland at the same auction.

The return to Finland of the earlier Aino triptych has made it possible for researchers to obtain a more accurate view of it. It is no longer referred to as a sketch, its value as an independent work of art now being understood. In addition, wider audiences have had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the young Gallén's first major work and share the understanding of the efforts and artistic work processes behind such an achievement.



Aino encounters Väinämöinen in the forest.
Photo: Reijo Kokko.

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Akseli Gallen-Kallela:
The Aino triptych, 1888–1889
Canvas, 210 x 371 cm
Middle part 158 x 158 cm, sides 158 x 78 cm
Bank of Finland art collections

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