

*PIA VOURIKOSKI*

University of Helsinki

## *Galleria Academica: the Portrait Collection of the University of Helsinki*

### *ABSTRACT*

Galleria Academica, owned by University of Helsinki, is the largest portrait collection in Finland containing around 1000 pieces of work. The history of the collection dates from the 1650s, when the first portrait was donated to the Royal Academy of Turku, the predecessor to the University of Helsinki. All types of Finnish portrait art is represented in the collection, as well as a large number of famous Finnish artists. Modern approaches towards portraiture have slowly broken through because of their representational status of the portraits.

**Key words:** Galleria Academica, portrait of professor, exhibition

### **Roots of the University of Helsinki**

The history of the University of Helsinki begins with the founding of the Royal Academy of Turku in 1640, when Finland was part of the Swedish Empire. Turku is a city on the south-western coast of Finland which used to be the largest city in the country. Although it had no official status as a capital, dukes and governor-generals maintained their residences there and the bishop's seat was situated in the city. The academy in Turku was founded because Finland suffered from having too few educated officials and clergymen.

In 1809, at the beginning of Finland's period of autonomy as a Grand Duchy of Russia, Alexander I, Emperor of Russia and Grand Duke of Finland, significantly improved the economic conditions of the University. For his efforts, he has been called the second founder of the University. The Great Fire of Turku in which began on 4 September 1827, destroyed about 75 per cent of the town, including most of the university buildings. On

21 October 1827, Emperor Nicholas I issued an edict instructing the University to relocate to Helsinki which became the nation's capital in 1812. In the autumn of 1828, the University began its operation in Helsinki and changed its name to the Imperial Alexander University of Finland. A new main building was completed in 1832 on the Senate Square in the heart of the City of Helsinki. Finland declared its independence in 1917, and the official name of the University became the University of Helsinki.

## **History and the oldest portraits in Galleria Academica**

The University of Helsinki houses Finland's largest collection of portraits, comprising some 1000 works. Among those portrayed in the collection are chancellors and vice-chancellors, rectors and professors, as well as rulers of the realm. The majority of the works – 658 are from the last century – date from the period of Finland's independence. About 130 works date from the period of Finnish autonomy (1809-1917), although only 16 works date from the period of the Royal Academy of Turku, as the Great Fire of Turku (4 September 1827) destroyed a large number of these works.

The portrait collection of the University of Helsinki, called Galleria Academica was founded by Count Per Brahe (1602-1680), Governor-General of Finland (1637-40 and 1646-54) and the first chancellor of the Royal Academy of Turku. He is also considered the founder of the Royal Academy of Turku, although the official founder was Queen Christina (in 1840, she was only 14 years old). Brahe was born into one of the most aristocratic families of Sweden. He toured in Europe (1618-26) during his studies at the universities of Giessen and Strasbourg. Upon his return, he became a close assistant and confidant of King Gustavus Adolphus II while serving as his chamberlain.

Per Brahe donated his portrait to the academy in 1652 and encouraged all professors to do the same. His portrait was a replica of the original by David Beck (1621-56), Queen Christina's court painter. Beck's original painting belongs to the collection of Skokloster Castle in Sweden. The replica that Brahe donated was destroyed in a fire of the Library of Turku Academy in 1738, as were most of the portraits of early professors. A new replica of Brahe's portrait was painted in 1846 by Swedish painter Carl Wilhelm Nordgren (1804-1857). As was typical of the 18th and 19th centuries, destroyed portraits were copied and either given to or purchased by the University, while the original portrait was housed elsewhere in another collection in Finland or Sweden.

For example, the portrait of Isak Rothovius (1572-1652), the first vice-chancellor of the Royal Academy of Turku and the bishop of Turku was painted in 1652 by Finnish painter Joachim Neiman (1600-73), a journeyman in Stockholm. The original portrait belongs to the collection of Gripsholm Castle in Sweden. Neiman was a member of the Turku guild of cabinet-makers, painters and glaziers, and was actually Finland's first painter of portraits. Neimann's portrait of Rothovius for the Academy of Turku was a copy of a portrait by Swedish painter Gustaf Lundberg (1695-1786) in 1764.

Some sculptures survived in the Great Fire of Turku including marble or bronze busts of Queen Christina, Emperor Alexander I and Professor Carl von Linné. Count Rum-

janchev donated the busts to the new main building (completed in 1815) of the Imperial Academy of Turku.

The oldest work of art to survive the fire in Galleria Academica is a portrait of Johan Browallius (1707-1755), professor and bishop of Turku, painted by Margareta Capsia (1682-1759) in (ca) 1750 (fig. 1). Capsia is perhaps the first female painter in Finland to support herself through painting. Born into a Dutch family in Stockholm, she studied there at the studio of Dutch painter Martin van Mijtens (1648-1736). She married a Finnish clergyman in 1719 and built her career in Finland by painting portraits as well as altar pieces. Only a few of her works have survived to this day.

## Features of Galleria Academica

Most of the portrait artists in Galleria Academica are Finnish and male (689); women artists number 250. The works, however, portray 929 male and 71 female figures. The most common medium featured in the collection is oil on canvas. The first female professor at the University of Helsinki was Laimi Leidenius (1877-1938), a Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology between 1930-1938. Consequently, the oldest portrait of a female professor in Galleria Academica is Laimi Leidenius painted in 1937 by Vilho Sjöström (1873-1944), one of the most productive portrait painters in Finland in the first half of the 20th century. The portrait collection also owns 153 sculptures, including busts and reliefs, which are often sketched for medals. Only four of the sculptures portray a woman!

Photographic portraits number between 30 to 40. They first appeared in the collection in 1976 often as studio photos by Kuvasiskot, a studio which reformed the process of making photographic portraits in Finland by rendering them in colour and printing them on canvas; and in this way, Kuvasiskot challenged traditional portrait painting. Over the past decade photographic portraits have become a more popular type of portrait in the collection, partly due to the high number of professional photographers which have emerged in Finland during the past 20 years.

The portraits at Galleria Academica are housed in over 50 buildings including eight hospitals, two teacher-training schools and a few provincial properties of the University. Because departments as well as faculties occasionally move to new locations and because some building are always under renovation or construction, the portraits are also relocated and are sometimes difficult to keep track of. Many of them have incurred slight damage, especially the frames, as they have not been properly packed for the move. Also, portraits are sometimes “forgotten” in the storage rooms of departments or faculties, because the personnel can’t agree on how to display them.

## Acquisition of portraits

Traditionally, most portraits in Galleria Academica have been donations. The University more often purchased portraits in the 18th and 19th centuries, and still does, but mainly only of chancellors and rectors.

The collection contains five enormous portraits of Russian Crown Princes, which the University has purchased. Crown Princes used to serve as chancellors of the Imperial Alexander University before becoming emperors. The first imperial portrait (Nicholas I at George Dawe's studio) in the collection was purchased in 1828. Secondly, a portrait of Alexander I at Francois Gerárd's studio was purchased in 1861. Emperor Alexander II donated his portrait by G. Bothmann's studio to the University in 1850 during his visit to Finland. In 1895, the University ordered a portrait of Nicholas II from Albert Edelfelt (1854-1905), one of the most famous Finnish artists. Edelfelt travelled to the palace of the emperor and sketched him face to face along with other members of the royal family. He finished his portrait of Nicholas in Helsinki in 1896. In 1897, the University ordered a copy of a portrait of Alexander III by Fredrik Ahlstedt (1839-1901), a Finnish painter and teacher of the University Art Room. The original was painted by Estonian artist Johann Köhler.

It became common practice in the 20th century for the community of the professor – colleagues, students, former students and friends – to collect money for the portrait as a gift for the professor's 60th birthday. The professor selects the artist him/herself, and thus the choice of artist depends on the financial resources available, as well as the professor's personal interests and opinions. The rector, vice-rector or chancellor then accept the portrait for the University art collection. The professor's department later organises a ceremony to unveil the donated portrait. Sometimes, the descendants or widow of the professor donate the portrait to the University. If the work of art is in a poor condition (as is often the case) the donation means extra expenses for the University because the work of art must be restored. Today, the University seldom buys portraits.

## **Conventional, representational portraits**

The University's portrait collection appears to have established its typological structure as early as the 17th century. Works identified as official or representative portraits aimed to portray a person as the bearer or holder of a certain status; private portraits, in contrast, concentrated on an individual personality. Of course, portraits in the University collection were intended for public display. Today, about 90 per cent of the works of art in Galleria Academica are on display in public or semi-public locations such as corridors, hallways, seminar halls, working rooms of professors, meeting rooms, offices and University lecture rooms.

The portraits retained their official and representative style well into the 20th century despite changes in artistic styles and techniques, as well as in society itself. Conventions in these portraits have become stable; the subject sits in a chair, with three-quarters of the figure shown. Sometimes the subject holds a book in their hand or a book shelf can be seen in the background. The face of the subject is painted with great care (seemingly the most important thing for the community of the professor), some attributes might be added (e.g., a medical instrument), and the subject is dressed in smart casual attire. Such portraits make up about 30 per cent of the collection and remain popular even today (fig. 2).

Traditions in three-dimensional sculptures remain strong. Sculptures are essentially copies of the subject's head cast in bronze. Galleria Academica features only one sculpture that portrays more than one interpretation. It is a relief of Markku Kaste, Professor of Neurology, cast in bronze by sculptor and professor, Laila Pullinen (b. 1933). The portrait was first exhibited in 2006 and is on display in Meilahti Hospital. Pullinen is known first and foremost as an informalist with a tendency to abstract her motifs. She is the first sculptor in Finland to combine bronze and stone.

## Modern portraits, milieu portraits

A new approach to portraiture arose in Paris during the 1880s that seeks to portray a person in his or her typical environment, which was often a working room or home (e.g. the person's "milieu"). The pioneer of this approach was Albert Edelfelt, who mainly worked in Paris in the late 1870s. In 1885 he painted a portrait of Louis Pasteur in a modern, natural way. Pasteur appears in his laboratory, in the midst of his experimental apparatus. He is holding a jar containing the spinal cord of a rabbit infected with rabies, which he used to develop a vaccine against the disease. This painting radically revolutionised portrait painting of the day and a number of similar portraits of people in their working environment followed this work. Typical of the modern portrait is to portray the subject as in his or her environment, in as truthful a way as possible, portraying certain items that reveal the subject's interests, career, studies, hobbies or family.

One of the most famous milieu portraits in Galleria Academica was painted by Edelfelt in 1890 of the professor of History, writer and journalist Zachris Topelius (1818-1898). In this portrait, Topelius sits in his chair at home in front of a window framed by a lace curtain with a snowy landscape in the background. Topelius is holding a book in his right hand, on his desk lie a pencil, books and an inkwell, and to his left side there is a book case. On the wall behind him hangs a relief of the Finnish national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804-1877), an idol and teacher of Topelius.

In Finland, famous artists such as Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931) and Eero Järnefelt (1863-1937) began to imitate Edelfelt's portrait art. The modern portrait carried over in their art for many decades afterwards, and some examples of their production can be found in Galleria Academica. In 1911 Gallen-Kallela painted Matti Äyräpää (1852-1928) (fig. 3), a docent of odontology and teacher of dentistry. The portrait of Äyräpää concentrates on studying the skull with some dental casts and half-smoked cigars on the desk beside him. The composition is untraditional, and the painting features an unrestrained brush technique and the bold use of colour. The portrait, donated to Galleria Academica in 1912 by students of Äyräpää, is an official one, however, and was intended to hang on the walls of the University. Several portraits of Eero Järnefelt belong to Galleria Academica partly because he was a teacher at the University Art Room. He painted ten portraits for the collection, some of which represent the traditional style, although some are fine examples of milieu portraits.

The tradition of the milieu portrait has continued through the second half of the 20th century, although perhaps not so strongly. The style is faintly evident in the self-portraits

by various professors. Professor of Genetics Veikko Sorsa (b. 1928) (fig. 4), for example, engaged in painting as a hobby. Today, one can see his beautiful landscapes in the corridors and working rooms of the Department of Genetics. He also painted a portrait of himself for Galleria Academica, in which he sits behind his desk in the light of a table lamp and microscope. Strong, yellow light reflects off his coat and glasses. Beside him is an enlarged banana-fly, his main object of research. On the other side is a green plant and behind him stands an easel supporting a landscape painting. In the background of the portrait one can see a diagram of DNA.

## **New approaches after WWII**

After the Second World War, traditions in portrait painting – with some exceptions – strengthened. The atmosphere in Finland’s art life stagnated for some years due to lack of materials, available studios and funding. Only a few artists were able to travel abroad or maintain their own studios. Some exceptional portraits appeared in Galleria Academica as early as the 1950s. A good example of this is a portrait of Professor of Neurological Surgery Aarno Snellman (1893-1964) by Tuomas von Boehm (1916-2000), a famous and all-round productive painter after the Second World War (fig. 5). He was one of the lucky ones who had a studio, where his artist friends used to gather. Professor Snellman was painted *in situ* seeming to emerge from the surgery in his green, antiseptic attire. His white mask rests on his chest and he is removing the glove from his right hand, glancing thoughtfully downwards. The right half of the background features brown tones and depicts an operating room complete with nurses and lamps. On the left side of the background, the grey shadow of the figure appears in the lower part of the canvas. The whole colour scale is harmonious, a typical feature of Boehm’s work from the 1950s. Boehm’s is a portrait which actually tells a story as well as the profession and character of the subject, yet still succeeds in showing the professor’s likeness.

## **Contemporary art in portraits**

Modern approaches towards portraiture have slowly broken through. During the 1960s, portrait art mainly adhered to conventional rules with few exceptions. Galleria Academica’s annual influx during past decade has been between 5 to 10 portraits, about half of which still adhere to conservative styles. The professor often feels that portraits must adhere to a certain, conventional style because of their representational status, and seldom appreciate or desire alternative portrait styles. Fortunately, some professors are willing to break the mould, are aware of new art, and look to support young, up-and-coming artists.

One of the first portraits to incorporate an unconventional style is that of Professor of Paediatrics Ole Wasz-Höckert (b. 1918) by Anitra Lucander (1918-2000) in 1979 (fig. 6). She became known as one of the post-war reformers of Finnish art and a pioneer of

abstract art. Through cubism and the collage technique, she developed a lyrical abstract expressionism, which is also revealed in the portrait of Wasz-Höckert.

Now and then, contemporary art appears in Galleria Academica. A delightful exception in the collection is the portrait of Eero Saksela (b. 1937), Professor of Pathological Anatomy, painted in pastel colours by Kuutti Lavonen (b. 1960) in 1997. Saksela's reason for choosing such a young, up-and-coming artist for his portrait is his personal taste and interest as a collector of art.

In recent years, the University has received some portraits of exceptional quality. The year 2010 saw the unveiling of a portrait of Professor of Forensic Medicine Erkki Vuori (b.1943) (fig. 7). Initially, whilst turning 60, Professor Vuori refused the portrait. Some years later, however, he saw the work of a young and talented artist called Topi Ruotsalainen (b. 1979). After seeing Ruotsalainen's work at an exhibition, Vuori changed his mind and commissioned the artist to paint a portrait of him. The portrait is unusual, in that Professor Vuori is painted in action, lecturing in the auditorium in very typical clothes before a screen displaying words from his slide show – they are the keywords of his studies and research. The colour tones of the portrait vary from brown to grey to white; and the style and colour of the portrait are in fact quite typical of the artist. The portrait of Vuori was Ruotsalainen's first portrait painting.

## Recent portraits in the collection

In 2012 the collection grew by five portraits, two of which feature a fresh and unconventional style. The first portrait depicts Pekka Kauppi (b. 1952), Professor of Environment Science and Policy, painted by Robert Lucander (b. 1962) (fig. 8). Lucander paints on wood and creatively incorporates the pale wooden surface (e.g. to depict the skin). His use of wood in art fascinated Kauppi, particularly being a forest researcher. Lucander is a renowned artist in Finland as well as abroad, and currently works as a professor at the Berlin University of the Arts. Lucander drew and painted Professor Kauppi from a close and intimate perspective portraying him as a laughing, happy man dressed in a checked shirt.

The second portrait is of Leif C. Andersson (b. 1943), Professor of Pathological Anatomy, painted by Tatjana Bergelt (b. 1966). She executed the portrait with a collage of digital photos, which she collected from Andersson's memory stick, printed out and cut into suitable pieces and arranged together. In the middle of the portrait is Andersson's figure, surrounded by microscopic details of different cancer tissues and a picture of a trumpet, alluding to Andersson's hobby as a jazz musician. The whole entity looks as though the professor were seated before a tapestry. Bergelt is a German-Russian artist working in Finland, and collage is one of her most interesting techniques.

## Future scenarios

Portraits will continue to trickle into the collection, but perhaps less frequently. Few professors want portraits of themselves when they turn 60 or retire. In some cases, professors have acquired a piece of contemporary art with money collected by their community. The administrator of the University has recently founded an art commission for the University, one of the tasks of which is to encourage professors to choose other works of art to commemorate their career besides the traditional portrait.

## Literature and sources

Aartomaa, Ulla (red.), *Naisten salonki, 1700-luvun eurooppalaisia naistaiteilijoita*, Sinebrychhoff Art Museum, Helsinki 2007.

Ahtola-Moorhouse, Leena (red.), *Albert Edelfelt 1854-1905*, Ateneum Art Museum, Espoo 2004.

Heinäemies, Kati (red.), *Ars Universitaria 1640-1990. Portraits from the collections of the University of Helsinki*, Espoo 1990.

Okkonen, Onni (red.), *Galleria Academica. Yliopistomiesten muotokuvia*, Porvoo 1961.

Palin, Tutta, *Oireileva miljöömuotokuva*, Helsinki 2004.

<http://www.museo.helsinki.fi/english/>

<http://www.galleriaheino.fi>

<http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/>















