

Inside the Mirror

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Finland is a place of pristine forests and lakes, a natural environment suffused with a national legend of heroes and spirits. Its evocative aura distills a love of all that is natural with an aesthetic sophistication.

Finland strode into the modern era with goals for economic development and international influence shaped by the aesthetic and ethic of the arts and crafts movement. We know the purity of Scandinavian design and the dictum that form follows function, yet in Finland there is a particular sensibility for the human element in relationship to scale and materials. This aesthetic is globally understood and admired for its warmth and livability, and it has produced an enviable quality of life in Finland.

In the graphic arts, this natural aesthetic has developed from the environment that surrounds life in Finland: a visual influence of stark contrasts of pattern and light – dark silhouettes of trees outlined against snow, reflected light, or open skies; and an abstract awareness – massed shapes created in the landscape of forest clearings and fields, the simple geometry of human encroachment.

The printmaking medium of woodcut carries the inescapable content of the material itself – evidence of the pattern of growth, a sense of the fiber and cellular structure

of the wood grain. Wood is strong and assertive. It endures the assault and energy of the carver who leaves a residual pattern from tools in the once-living matter, making a readily understood mark of the hand for impression into the print as a “mirror” of the wood.

Wood, the abundant resource in this forested land, has animated Finland’s houses, saunas, and folk crafts with the life cycles held in this living material. The history and use of wood as shelter and fuel – for construction and consumption – is a timeless cycle. Throughout civilization, wood has been revered as the substance of our images of god and as the carrier of our narrative records that endure, worm-eaten, through the ages. In our times, wood carries connotations of the endangered wilderness. The acidic properties of wood-pulp paper manifest both literal and figurative reference to the degenerative form and content of today’s newspapers and “pulp” culture.

In this exhibition, these issues are a subtext to the graphic power so readily apparent in works from the earliest Finnish printmakers to the innovative and challenging works of contemporary artists who have become influential in Finland and around the world.

The people of Finland have an ethic of self-reliance and a serious concern for knowledge and accomplishment. Yet deep within the collective character is an appreciation for

the poignancy of transient beauty balanced with humorous release from ironic observation. This mystique about the intrinsic character of the Finnish people has enabled these artists to remain attuned to their heritage and nature while allowing their art to speak universally for us all.

I have a long-held interest in Finland stemming from my first trip in 1986, when I served as an art specialist for the Arts America Program of the U.S. Information Agency. I was invited to go to Finland in conjunction with a seminal exhibition, *American Woodcuts: Revival and Innovation*, in which three of my woodcut prints were included. This show by the USIA was touring Europe in 1984-86 and was created by Leslie Luebbbers of the World Print Council (now defunct).

During my visit I lectured and taught a woodcut print-making workshop at the Jyväskylä Graphic Workshop for a group of Finnish artists. The creative potential was ripe for a number of the young artists in the group (and for myself, equally young) who have since become some of Finland's most important artists. These artists acknowledge the significance of a confluence of forces and individuals at that teachable moment, the influence of the open process and approach to concept and material that I taught, and the importance of their own strong graphic traditions. As a result, the woodcut has gained numerous practitioners in Finland, has sparked creative research, and has garnered important recognition for the artists.

This growth was a phenomenon that I had observed from afar and was the basis for my return in 1996 for research as a Fulbright Fellow to Finland. My intent during this extended trip was to research the history of woodcut printmaking prior to my workshop in 1986 and to see as much current work as possible by artists throughout the country. The woodcut print in Finland has proved to be a rich area for investigation. I continue to learn of additional artists and important historical figures working in this medium and have taught additional workshops, initiating the cycle again. Needless to say, my ongoing experiences and interests in Finland have also greatly affected my own art.

This exhibition explores the past with the present, the influence of place, and the Finnish cultural affinity towards nature and design.



Death and the Flower
Akseli Gallen

I have just returned from Finland – midsummer 2004 – with my mind's eye full of lush green forests, lakes and marshes, mosses, wildflowers, and white nights. I went to experience firsthand again the sense of inspiration and creative life for Finnish artists – and for myself. I needed to be immersed as an artist in this special place, to feel equally the space and spirit, the nature and culture of Finland.

I seek to understand the lineage of consistent ideas and processes of these artists by “looking into the Mirror,” just as the dream muse urged the first Finnish author, Jöns Budde, 500 years ago as he translated various biblical and religious texts. The exhibition *Mirror of the Wood* invites these examinations and contextual relationships for the first time.

The first lineage I see is the “mythical narrative” seen in the work of Akseli Gallen-Kallela and others over 100 years ago who created a Finnish national identity through an oral tradition of collective stories and legends. This sense of “Finnishness” became a national ethos of endurance, oneness with nature, and storytelling, with images of imaginative spiritual powers of man in nature and nature in man. Ina Colliander finds a spirit/angel within the block of rough-edged wood. Voitto Vikainen carves a spiritually all-encompassing city. The hero/destroyer of Taisto Toivonen is shaping the wilderness. Outi Heiskanen prints a conclave of animals who seem to commune with transparent abilities. Hannu Ojala's all-seeing creatures are transformed, becoming harbingers of our destiny. Eeva Tiisala's work personifies spiritual transportation with a journey of the mind and by wing. I see that these narrative links convey the closeness of death and miracle of life.

A second lineage reflects on social life – the life of the artist and the daily cares and concerns of human nature. Erkki Tantturi portrays the hard times of exiles from Karelia seeking a place in Finland in the 1930s. Seppo Mattinen conveys the loves and losses of an everyman, as does the first kiss and macabre circus of Anneli Klemola. The intensity of social pressure has dramatic impact through the scale of Antti Holma's prints, while domestic relations are examined and staged in the work of Tuija Arminen.

Isolation and alienation between partners is expressed through the distance between speakers in Eija Piironen's work. These works reflect the Finns' anxiety about social context and their inability to express themselves in our time of alienation.

A third and fundamental lineage – a major expectation for the Finnish prints – is the importance of nature in art and culture. In these works, there is a sense of an intimate scale, of subtle textures and color variations derived from limitless patterns of forest growth, ambiguous water and reflection – nature as the vast unknown. The Finns express a deep desire for escape into nature, for its calmness, for emptiness and space – to be at the only summer cottage on a lake. In these prints the empty bird house of Erkki Talari has a nostalgia for seasons passing. The rugged terrain and old forest snag trees are majestically captured in the work of Tapio Haili. The details of mosses and lichens that grow stories on stone are the inspiration for Leena Jarva. Forest spaces become alive and witness sacred rituals yet are untouched by human presence in the prints of Outi Kirves. Jaana Paulus creates a nature-woman whose mesmerized movements allow her to become entwined in vines as a midsummer's ghost walks.

The fourth lineage is the “elemental,” a reflection on how the artist sees into the material and content of the wood itself, an analytical formalism and dialogue about space – what to cut and what to leave. Within the clear light of the drawing room, Tuomas von Boehm turns an analytical eye to the shapes and cubist-like structures of planes in space. Through the image of the dead log, Olavi Vihlerlehto creates a personification of the natural sacrifice of the woodblock. Gunnar Pohjola goes further with the depiction and use of the decaying wood itself. Frans Toikkanen rhythmically carved the essence of movements and reflections on water and of the woodgrain itself. In the small prints of Marke-Riitta Martsola, iconic shapes stand for the element of water and for the wooden cottage. Finally, Kari Laitinen's interest in essentialist issues of time and space is reflected in his color fields, negative spaces, color reactions, and spatial illusions that require contemplation.

The woodblock has for centuries served as a message carrier, where the carving conveys a dramatic and



Uusjärvi National Park

graphically readable impression. Details are held and defined by straightforward clear printing – a lineage straight from medieval block prints to the symbolist storytelling of Hugo Simberg as he represents the bite of the advancing autumn cold on the growing tree. Also, this graphic link is clearly seen in the devotional dramas portrayed by Armas Hursti. The inescapable sense of the hand in the carving of marks into wood is an attraction for these woodcut artists. This evidence is seen in the cutting of patterns and tones within the storm-tossed spaces of Matti Petäjä and in the rendering of weathered woodgrained walls by Juhani Vikainen.

Hallmarks of the Finnish woodcuts are the great tonal ranges achieved and the embrace of color printing to increase the possibilities of expression. I know these discoveries happen as artists evolve processes through studio actions. Vilho Askola developed a unique method using bristle brushes to apply light pressure to print tones of delicate gray to contrast with full-pressure key information. Onni Mansnerus achieved clear shards of modernist color with multiple corresponding blocks. Tuukka Peltonen creates whorls of intricate details from his reduction carving methods using one block as he identifies with the troubled psyche of a Van Gogh-type self. The expressive domestic interiors of Minna Sarvanne are aggressively colored and charged with energy. Maija Kumpulainen-Sokka keeps a carved “library” of blocks that offers her a repertory for reuse and limitless color variations in her life’s work of print variations.

All woodcut artists know of the lure of the Ukiyo-e prints from Japan that sparked “japonisme” in the Impressionist movement. Japan has been a century-long Finnish obsession too, due to a similar aesthetic regard and respect for nature and design. Early work by Kalle Carlstedt captured the essence and purity of a landscape as he emulated a Japanese block print in his commitment to flat space and simplicity. Equally important was Erkki Hervo’s attraction and research into the use of multiple colors and delicate “bukashi” gradations in the Japanese printing methods. An equally dedicated researcher is Tuula Moilanen, who has become immersed in the culture and uses Japanese watercolor woodblock printing methods for her richly colored graphic stories.



Bridge, 2002
Lotta Pyykkönen

Finnish artists have developed innovations in color printing that allow for poetic irregularities and a painterly abandon. For some, the cutting of the block is not primary, but they rather use the relief surface of the block as a staging ground for variable and creative ink applications, using linear cutting to define the area separations. Ellen Thesleff was historically such an innovator, setting this influential precedent with her delicate play and mixing of multiple colors on one block. Ulla Virta's earthy muse sings, and a monumental cake signifies life unions as she works on the relief surface of the woodblock virtually as a painter, using opaque layers of inks, reductive linear carving, and rolls of color not tied to separations or multiple blocks. This freedom in printing is also seen in the works of Riitta Uusitalo with her gesturally expressive hand burnishing and color intermixing. Annu Vertanen employs similar printing innovations by carving hollows on the reverse of the block which leave ghostly light areas and soft edges. These challenges to the expectations for woodcuts bring to issue the limits of what can be printed and the ambiguity of what can be seen.

Another notable strategy by the Finnish artists is the unabashed grandeur of the scale of their contemporary prints. Finnish printmakers have taken up a strategy to challenge the gallery walls and to stand up to painting and

installations. They have proved what is possible with their woodcuts, using the "green gold" of Finland's major resource. The literal presentation of iconic Finnish landscape today is a physical slice of expansive space in Lotte Pyykkönen's prints. Monumental mechanistic shapes suggest homemade/handmade hybrid implements in Antti Tanttú's prints mounted on canvas support. Heli Kurunsaari creates her life size portraits to offer us winter gifts over the transformed water.

As I see it, the impulse to work a woodblock and to print it comes with many individual approaches, but a core of considerations form the building blocks for rich variety and innovation. These considerations can be simple dichotomies: the use of one block or several corresponding blocks; either heavy, opaque ink in layers, or transparent, thinly applied ink; either simple, linear-based, gestural cutting or detailed cutting that makes patterns and describes form; either white lines in solid ground or black lines in white ground.

Within these parameters of choices – and inevitable complex thinking that comes with time and experience – are the creative essence of a language. This expansion of the woodcut language by the Finnish artists is reflective of a close inheritance of studio involvement and a choice of a significant meaningful material.

Finland, a small country of five million people, hosts by some accounts, at least one hundred successful and influential graphic artists. Their art world is interconnected through friendships, teacher/student relations, and through the well organized 75-year-old Finnish Graphic Artists Association. Finland's size and location also makes for an insular world that enables direct and fast sharing that has built a common reservoir of creative resources. I believe this insularity does not make for competitive imitation but rather a commonality of identity and influences, as if ideas flowed in the ground water of Finland like the interconnected waterways of the thousands of lakes and coastal islands.

When I look into the mirror of these impressive and multi-faceted woodcut prints I see restrained elegant design and personal awareness – an artistic response to nature, to the receptive and expansive surface of the wood, to the daily lives of creative artists in an environment of interactions. I recognize the time spent to unlock discoveries in the studio and to follow threads of personal inquiry. I see my friends and their openness, warmth and hospitality, the sharing of ideas and choices as we all distilled emotions and concepts into a common language. This refinement of expression is a marked characteristic of the elegance and decision-making required to make prints.

This major exhibition is dedicated to these many Finnish artists who have trusted me to collect and interpret their artistic development in the contexts of place, time, medium.

This evocative exhibition, quite literally, is the direct impression of the wood of Finland. I invite your look into the *Mirror of the Wood*.



near Keuruu