

Akseli Gallen Kallela

Paris Art Studies - Akseli Gallen Kallela 1865-1931

1865 – Born in Pori, small port on west coast of Finland. The grand duchy of Finland, formerly a Swedish possession, is part of the Russian Empire since 1809. The major linguistic conflict is between the partisans of Swedish, the old official language, and nativists who favor Finnish.

1867 – Peter Wilhem Gallen, Akseli's father quits his position at a bank to become a farmer. The family settles inland in Tyrvää. Akseli discovers the Finnish language and old Finnish folk tales from the local country people.

mid 1870's - Akseli studies in Swedish language lyceum in Helsinki where he is made fun of as a country yokel. He'd rather draw caricatures than study. Studies drawing at the Finnish Fine Art Society.

1880 – Death of his father.

1881 – Quits school to concentrate on his art studies with the support of his mother. Executes at 16 his first oil painting, a moonlit landscape. He is drawn to the idea of an ancient Finnish identity to be found in old folk tales and the mythical universe of the Kalevala.

1884-86 – Two stays in Paris where he studies at the Académie Julian under William Bouguereau and Tony Robert-Fleury.

1887-89 – Third and longest Paris stay, studies at the studio of Salon painter Fernand Cormon. Despite his interest in his art studies Akseli is extremely homesick. Exhibits Finnish country scenes in Paris Salon and at the 1889 World's fair. In the spring of 1887, on a visit back home, meets and falls in love with Mary Slöör the sister of a childhood friend.

1889 – Tired of big city life he moves with his colleague the count Louis Sparre to a cottage in the central Finnish countryside.

1890 – Marries Mary. For their honeymoon they travel to Karelia the northern homeland of the Kalevala myths.

1891 – Wins national competition for Kalevala illustrations. Birth of a daughter, Marjatta.

1892 – Artist and family travel further north to Paanajärvi where he paints grandiose landscapes. The wild nature of northern Finland come to represent a sense of nascent national identity.

1893 – Spends summer in Savonia where he concentrates on Kalevala paintings. He is close to the cultural movement of the “Young Finns” (Nuori Suomi) among whom are the composers Jean Sibelius and Walter Kajanus whom he paints in “Symposium”.

1895 – Visits and exhibits in Berlin along with the famous Norwegian painter Edvard Munch. The art critic Julius Meier-Graefe commissions illustrations for the first edition of the avant garde art review Pan. Rushes home when he suddenly learns of the death from diphtheria of his 4-year old daughter. His wife is devastated. Couple with their younger children, Jorma and Kristi, travel to London in an attempt to overcome their grief. In the summer the family moves to an isolated peninsula on a lake in Ruovesi in northern Tavastia. There Akseli will build his dream house out of wood and granite with a vast studio and 29 windows. He will call it Kalela. In the winter he concentrates on his Kalevala cycle. Inspired by Munch he experiments with woodblock prints.

1898 – Travels with family to Italy where they settle in Florence and also visit Venice, Orvieto, Rome Naples, Sorrento, Capri and Pompei. In Pompei strikes up a friendship with the Danish artist Oskar Matthiesen with whom he has long discussions on the art of fresco painting. On his return to Finland begins working on the great mural paintings destined for the Finnish pavilion of the Paris World’s Fair of 1900. He will also create the furniture, textiles and wall décor for one of the pavilion rooms. The pavilion designed by 3 young architects Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen is a statement of Finnish national identity in defiance to the official Russian policy of Russification of Finnish culture and administration of the late 1890’s.

1900 – Leaves for Paris for the World’s Fair. The Finnish pavilion and the concerts organized by Sibelius will meet with a great success with the Paris public.

1901 – Paints two great official mural commissions, one for the Student House in Helsinki and another for the Juselius mausoleum in Pori. Exhibits abroad, notably at the Vienna Secession (from 1901 to 1904) where the Wittgensteins buy one of his works.

1902 – Receives the French Legion of Honor. Is invited to exhibit with the Phalanx group in Munich by Vassily Kandinsky.

1905 – Exhibits at the Emil Richter gallery in Dresden where the Brücke group of German Expressionists was founded the same year. They invite him to show with them the next year in 1906.

1907 – Accepts invitation by Erich Heckel to join officially the Brücke group. Changes his name from Gallen (a Swedish name) to Gallen-Kallela to reinforce his Finnish identity.

1909 – Undertakes long trip to East Africa with family via

Paris. The Gallens settle in a house in the bush outside of Nairobi for 18 months from where they will undertake several safaris to Tsavo and Makindu. In Africa Akseli will paint hundreds of small oils of animals, landscapes and locals with energetic brushwork and in vivid colors.

1913 – Builds new house and studio on land owned by his wife’s family in Tarvaspää. In the end he decides to return to the calm and isolation of his old house in Ruovesi. There he begins his second Kalela cycle which will last until 1921.

1915 – His paintings are shown at the Pacific World’s Fair in San Francisco.

1917 – Finland declares its independence from Russia on 6 December. Outbreak of civil war between “Whites” and “Reds”. Akseli participates in White campaign with his son Jorma under the leadership of general Mannerheim, first Finnish chief of state. He designs the medals, flags and banknotes of new state. After the war he returns to his beloved house in the middle of the forest rather than take on state functions.

1923 – Leaves for the USA to repatriate his works shown in San Francisco 7 years before. Organizes several exhibitions of his art and works for 12 months in Taos, the artistic colony in New Mexico.

Late 1920’s – Executes his most important official commission, the painting for the dome of the National Museum in Helsinki, with four scenes taken from the Kalevala.

1931 – Travels to Copenhagen to deliver a series of lectures. Dies of pneumonia in Stockholm on his way home.