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Different Generations, Differing Strategies: Finnish Women Artists of the Interwar Years

The interwar years in Finland, following the declaration of independence (1917) and an internal war (1918), were characterized by stagnant official art institutions and recessive economy, a situation which by no means enhanced the careers of women artists. Some of them, however, found alternative support networks in the art market, the rapidly expanding illustrated press, and the emerging private foundations. They were, so to speak, forced into more modern authorial strategies. In addition to this, many of them manifested modernity in their geographical mobility. Ester Helenius (1875–1955), for example, who had launched her career as a painter already in the 1890s but only made her final breakthrough in the late 1920s with her “Spanish Bridal Bouquet” (1929), now included Parisian café types, church interiors and urban landscapes in her production, satisfying thus the desires of a touristic eye. While appearing as an independent woman, a *femme seule*, with boldly masculine authorial gestures she, however, took distance from the women’s movement which had been a common identity factor among many women artists of the pioneering generation. On the other hand, some of the members of an even younger generation appearing in the 1930s, such as the German-Russian-Finnish graphic artist and painter Ina Behrsen (1905–1985), later known as Colliander, turned, somewhat surprisingly in fact, to Vitalistic discourses and elaborated themes of vegetative growth and nurturing motherhood. In Colliander’s case, the mobility endemic to the modern condition had meant immigration which lends a specific edge to her apparently naturalized notions of human relations. This young generation, increasingly well received towards the late 1930s, was unassumingly traditionalist in the choice of subject matter, yet versatile in their publicity strategies. Varying responses to modernity can thus be discerned among interwar women artists in Finland.

Dr. Tutta Palin, a short CV

Dr. Tutta Palin is an Adjunct Professor (Docent) in Art History at the University of Turku, where she currently works as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow of the Academy of Finland. Her doctoral dissertation *Oireileva miljömuotokuva. Yksityiskohdat sukupuoli- ja säätyhierarkian haastajina* (The Symptomatology of the *Milieu Portrait*: Detail in the Service of the Challenging of Gender and Class Hierarchies, Helsinki: Taide 2004) dealt with portrait painting in late 19th-century Finland. Her ongoing work is focused on Finnish women artists of the 1920s through the 1950s from the point of view of Authorship Studies and Modernist Studies. She has also published articles and chapters on photography and on art and gender theory.