

**Professor Riitta Konttinen:**

### **Finnish women artists on their way to professionalism**

My aim here is to tell in which way women in Finland became professionals in art, where their history begins, who took the first steps, and what kind of possibilities women had, when they tried to go further on their way. This is so to say a very brief history of Finnish women artists before 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Actually, the first woman artist in Finland was not Finnish at all. In the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century Finland had to live through two great wars between Sweden and Russia, and the country was badly destroyed. Many art works vanished, perhaps they were burned, and we have not got very much archive materials left either. So we know very little about artists of earlier centuries.

First woman artist we know something about, *Margareta Capsia* (1682-1759), came from Sweden after war. She was born to a wealthy Dutch family of merchants and trained in Stockholm. She married a Finnish priest and came to live in Finland with her husband. Capsia made mostly portraits and altar paintings.

About other women artists we do not know much, only that there were some of them in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At that time painters were usually seen as artisans, not artists, and they had to join the guild of painters. That was made impossible for women.

Situation was quite different during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The guilds lost their power, and art was elevated to the sphere of aesthetics. This made it suitable for an upper class person to become a painter. Mostly they were still men, but the education of upper class girls made it possible also for them to be some kind artists, though usually not yet professionals.

Finland was under Swedish rule until so called Finnish war in the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in the end of that war country became autonomous part of Russia. Finland was now thought as a nation, and in the making of own nationality literature and arts were seen as influential. This meant that also artists were needed to tell what was typical of Finland. Because there were not so many able men, educated women got their opportunity. Some drawing and painting was usually taught to them, and this was the reason why women so easily seem to slip to art professions in Finland. They began to send their paintings and drawings to the yearly exhibitions as soon as there were any.

A very good example of these early women painters is *Mathilda Rotkirch* (1813-1842); she came from an upper class family, was educated in Stockholm, and made a grand tour to Central Europe. She was just in the beginning of her career of a portrait painter when she died of tuberculosis.

Anyway, Rotkirch soon got several followers, who were trained in Germany. From the 1850s onward German art centres such as Düsseldorf, Dresden and Weimar were favoured by Finnish artists, and many of them were women. I should like to mention especially *Victoria Åberg* (1824-1892) and *Alexandra Frosterus*, later *Frosterus-Såltin* (1837-1916). These two painters can be seen as the first real professionals among Finnish women artists. Both of them had a long career, though it was not possible for *Åberg* to stay in Finland. She lived most part of her life in Germany and criticized Finnish art world very severely. *Frosterus* married, but her husband died and she was left alone with four small children. She began to teach painting, but she was later also famous of her great altar paintings.

As I already mentioned, Finland's autonomy meant that artists got a new great task: they were needed to tell who are the Finns, what kind of the country they live in. This became a great task also for some women painters such as *Åberg* and *Frosterus* but especially for *Fanny Churberg* (1845-1892). She got her art education in Düsseldorf, and became one of the most extraordinary Finnish painters. She herself called her taste of nature "wild" and painted very expressive, dramatic landscapes, which later were seen to be much ahead of her own time. She was very unfavourably criticized, and stopped painting altogether in 1880.

*Churberg* was an important role model for those women artists who came to the field of Finnish art just at that time. They were not trained in Germany anymore but in France. This is the time when a whole generation of women artists came to the field of art in Finland. The best known of them are *Maria Wiik* (1853-1928) and *Helene Schjerfbeck* (1862-1946). Their Parisian training was seen as radical in Finland, where German idealistic late-romanticism was much in favour. Especially young *Schjerfbeck* was thought as a radical naturalist, whose paintings were difficult to understand. She was, though, the one who made a specially long and important career as a painter.

Most of these Finnish women artists were unmarried. It was thought impossible to be both a professional painter and a wife and mother. In the 1890s, though, came the first artist-wives, such as *Venny Soldan-Brofeldt* (1863-1945), who was married to a well known writer Juhani Aho. She painted all her life, but it is understandable that the quality of her works is not always the same. She had two sons and many responsibilities because Juhani Aho soon became a kind of national hero. Anyway, she was something we might call a bohème, which was not so unusual anymore at this time.

So was also *Elin Danielson-Gambogi* (1861-1919), who was married to an Italian painter in 1898 and later lived in Italy. Nowadays she is especially known of paintings depicting women. These paintings were thought to be very radical in her days, because they were seen as pictures of new independent women. She herself lived and acted like a man, and we may think of her as a kind of forerunner of the new kind of professional women painters in Finland.

As a painter Danielson-Gambogi was never a modernist, though, but some other Finnish women artists of her age came to be in the front of new art in Finland. I should like to mention especially two of them, *Helene Schjerfbeck* and *Ellen Thesleff* (1869-1954). There was some kind of new independence in their work also, not only in their way of life.