

Finland's National Painter: Akseli Gallen-Kallela



*As Finland celebrates 90 years as a free nation it seems appropriate to consider the role played by one of the country's leading cultural figures in the struggle for independence—the great painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela. In a conversation with Scandinavian Review, the artist's granddaughter, **Aivi Gallen-Kallela-Sirén**, provides an exclusive glimpse at the life and contributions of a Finn who is a national treasure to his countrymen but perhaps under-appreciated abroad.*

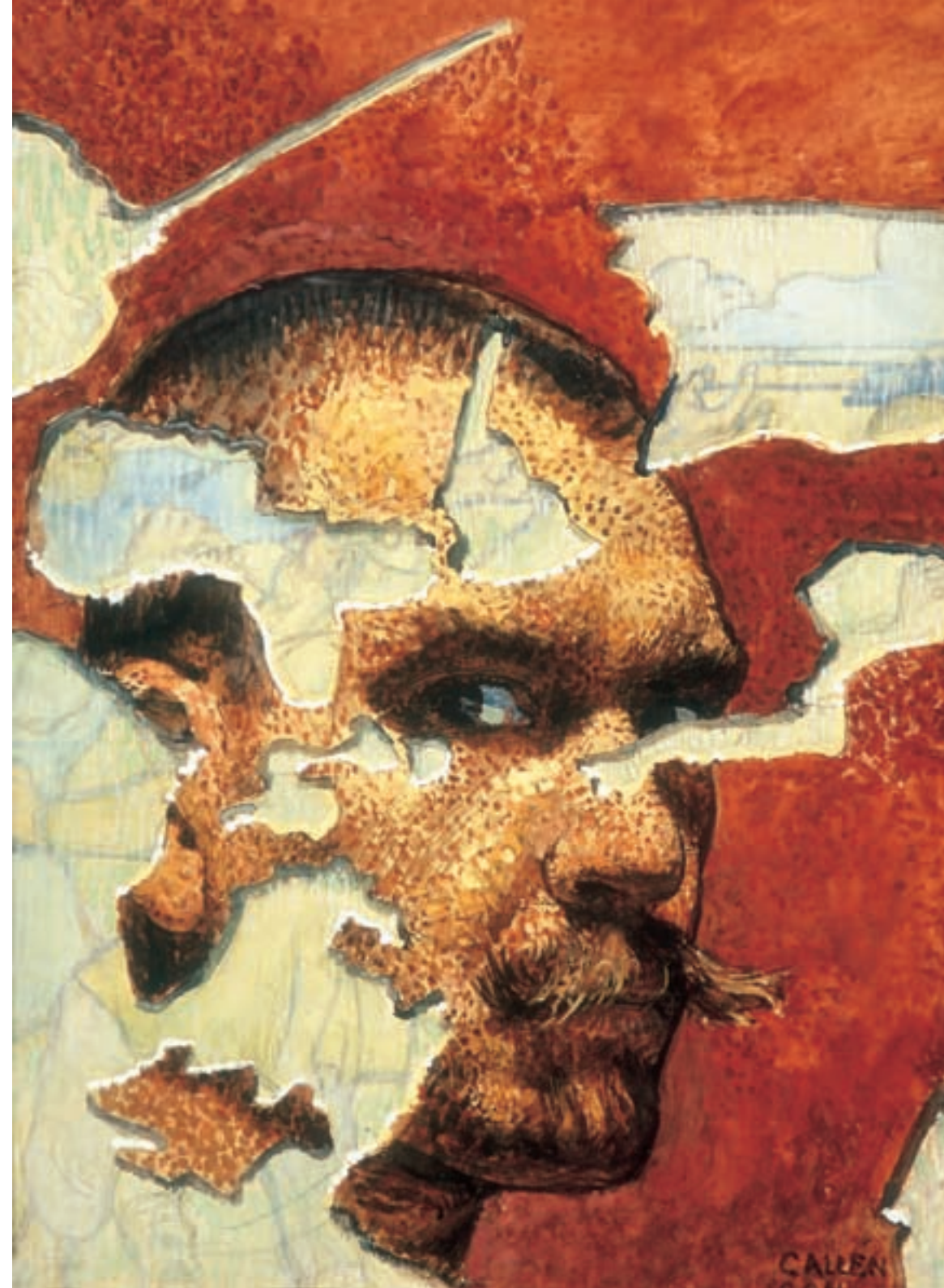
Scandinavian Review: Tell us something about who your grandfather really was.

Aivi Sirén: Akseli Gallen-Kallela (AGK) was born in the coastal city of Pori in 1865, just after those dramatic days following the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. That year could be called the “year of the blessed babies” in Finnish art. The year also marked the birth of another well-known painter, Pekka Halonen, a pupil of Gauguin; the revolutionary landscape photographer, I.K. Inha, and, youngest of them all, Jean Sibelius. In other words, two painters, a master photographer and a genius composer.

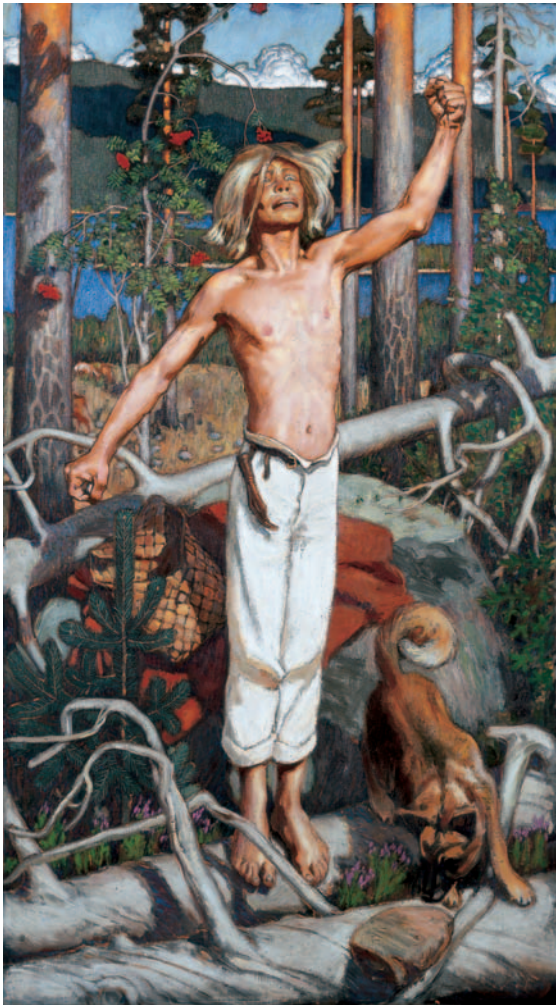
In spite of being very Finnish, AGK was an exotic phenomenon in the Finnish art scene more than 100 years ago. Although a connoisseur of the Finnish soul, he was at the same time a cosmopolitan personality. He was at home with international celebrities, nobility and royalty. He was the Finnish visual artist who more than most promoted the Finnish cause and helped lead his nation toward liberation from the Russian Imperial oppression that had lasted almost 100 years.

He started out as a full-blooded painter in the realist tradition. This was

Spring, 1937-1938, fresco, 147 x 287 cm (above)



Quand Même!, Self-portrait in fresco, 1891, watercolor on paper, 31 x 23 cm



Kullervo's Curse, 1899, oil on canvas, 184 x 103 cm (left)

Defense of the Sampo, 1896, tempera on canvas, 122 x 125 cm (right)



during the five years of art studies in Paris (1884-1889), first at the Académie Julian (where most Scandinavians studied) and later at the studio of F. Corman. He spent summers deep in the Finnish countryside acquainting himself with rural people and painting them. In 1907 he changed his original Swedish name, Axel Gallén, to its Finnish version, Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Kallela being the name of the estate from where his forefathers had originated.

SR: I understand AGK was a friend of Strindberg and Gorki. Was he friends with other literary and artistic notables of his day?

AS: He had known all the famous Scandinavians during his years in Paris—Ernst Josephson, Anders Zorn, Prince Eugen, Albert Engström, Ferdinand Villumsen, etc. In Berlin, in 1895, he had a joint exhibit with Edvard Munch, and at the turn of the century Kandinsky invited him to the Munich Phalanx exhibitions.

In Vienna in 1904 he became good friends with Gustav Mahler. Also in Austria at that time, my grandfather befriended Mathias Zdarski, a pioneer in downhill skiing. I believe my grandfather became Finland's first slalom skier. During a sojourn in the United States in 1923-1926 he also struck up a friendship (in Taos, New Mexico) with the English writer D.H. Lawrence.

SR: The Finnish national epic, the Kalevala, apparently meant a lot to AGK, and many of his most famous paintings depict specific episodes in this deeply Finnish saga. Was his fascination with it relatively short and concentrated or prolonged and sporadic?

AS: The Kalevala is the most important book of the Finnish people and inspired AGK throughout his life. Even as an 18-year-old he would depict scenes from the epic. Even his last thoughts dealt with ideas for a Great Kalevala, intended to be a Finnish Codex, an illustrated book in folio size



Lake Keitele, 1905, where Gallen-Kallela had rented a summer house, oil on canvas, 53 x 67 cm

Symposion, 1894, oil on canvas, 74 x 99 cm (left to right) Axel Gallén, Oskar Merikanto, Robert Kajanus and Jean Sibelius.



that he wanted to leave as a legacy for future generations. Death interrupted this dream and only the first five poems were completed. He said of the Kalevala: “It was like a shoulder against which one could rest one’s tired head.” For a time it was like a race between my grandfather and Sibelius to interpret the Kalevala each in his own artistic medium. Kalevala, of course, was compiled by Elias Lönnrot, who journeyed by foot hundreds of miles collecting poetry and folksongs from among the rural people of eastern Karelia.

SR: What are some other highlights of his artistic career?

AS: In 1902-03 he produced his most famous frescoes decorating the Juselius Mausoleum in Pori. They depicted the mystery of Life and Death. The mausoleum was dedicated to a girl, Sigrid, who died of tuberculosis at the age of 11. Her rich, but desolate, father wanted to raise a Finnish Taj Mahal in her memory. AGK himself considered the Juselius frescoes his main artistic achievement. There were eight large frescoes, wall decorations and stained glass windows.

AGK fell victim to malaria in Malaga, Spain in 1904 and a new outbreak

of the disease occurred on his East African safari. Nevertheless, his African paintings remain a very important part of his artistic production. While there he completed about 150 works, and the scenes of Mount Kilimanjaro and the Kenyan mountains are especially notable. AGK met President Theodore Roosevelt near Nairobi and was invited to have a drink and chat with him.

SR: Why do you think it took so long for AGK to become an internationally well-known artist?

AS: I think it was largely due to the series of crucial wars during the first half of the 20th century.

SR: Can you tell us something about his and your family? Do you have any special memories of him?

AS: I never met my grandfather. He died in 1931, but I have been researching his life for 40 years. I have read everything to be found in the Helsinki University Library and other libraries and studied all his correspondence. I am married to a biochemist, Matti J. Sirén, who is involved in cancer research. We have two sons—Jorma Janne, who earned his Ph.D. from New



Vengeance of Joukahainen,
1897, tempera, 125 x 130
cm (left)

Lemminkäinen's Mother,
1897, tempera on canvas,
86 x 109 cm

York University and is currently Director of Helsinki Art Museums, and Pontus Max Abel, who has M.A.s from Glasgow and Cambridge and an M.B.A from Helsinki. AGK married his longtime fiancée, Mary Slöör, in 1890. She was a concert pianist and was a pupil of the Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni. She served as model and inspiration for her husband's paintings of the Aino saga. They traveled to Karelia together on a joint honeymoon and work trip, which later served as inspiration for other artists, writers, painters and composer, a practice that was to become known as Karelianism.

This period was followed in 1894 by the intense so-called Symposion years when AGK visited Helsinki regularly conferring with his composer/conductor friends Sibelius and Robert Kajanus. During their prolonged table discussions at the Kämp restaurant they dreamt of Finland's glorious future as a

free and independent country. AGK was the fiery central figure in the so-called Young Finland Movement.

This was also the time when he started planning his future home as his own architect, having found a suitable location for a Wilderness Studio in Ruovesi, near Tampere and about 125 miles north of Helsinki. The famous Finnish-American architect Eliel Saarinen has spoken of his debt to AGK. Alvar Aalto has also voiced his appreciation.

SR: What is your role at the Wilderness Studio in Ruovesi? And do you have special exhibitions planned commemorating the 76th anniversary of your grandfather's death?

AS: I have curated summer exhibitions at the Kalela Wilderness Studio for several decades. They attract about 10,000 visitors annually. I have also created four audio-visual programs concerned with various aspects and periods



Paris Boulevard, 1885,
oil on mahogany board,
53 x 41 cm (left)



Waterfall at Mäntykoski,
1892-1894, oil on canvas,
270 x 158 cm

in AGK's life. Last year I was the speaker for the Dutch documentary film made by Tineke de Groot for the Groninger Art Museum in Holland. This summer's Kalela exhibition will be called "Southern Light—Northern Shadows," featuring a collection of AGK's Kenya paintings and a collection of his paraphernalia from a 1909-1911 trip to East Africa with his family.

SR: Was AGK productive into late life or did his creativity wane as was the case with Sibelius?

AS: He was creative until his death in 1931 at the age of 66. He painted four large Kalevala frescoes for the National Museum in Helsinki in 1927-28 with the help of his son Jorma (my father). As mentioned, his Great Kalevala project, remained unfinished at his death.

SR: What of AGK's legacy?

AS: His fame is twofold. Naturally, his life work was dedicated to breaking

new ground for all aspects of the visual arts in Finland. Secondly, there was his work as a freedom fighter who sparked the enthusiasm among the intelligencia at turn-of-the-century Finland and toured a sovereign country. He was aide-de-camp to his good friend General Carl Gustaf Mannerheim after our Liberation War. Mannerheim wanted Akseli on his side in 1919 to aid him through the difficulties of the newborn state. He also commissioned him to design the flags, coats-of-arms, standards, military and civilian medals and chains of honor, officer swords and even the uniforms for different military ranks.

SR: Do you have a special favorite from among all your grandfather's works?

AS: My favorite painting is the largest of his landscape paintings: *Waterfall at Mäntykoski* from 1892-1894 with the golden strings in the middle depicting the music of nature. It is considered to be the uniting link between realism and symbolism in 19th-century art .