

Spiritual transcendence and androgyny
within Swedish and Finnish
transnational Symbolism

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Abstract

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This Doctoral thesis is an examination of a group of Swedish and Finnish artists and their role as important and active participants in a transnational Symbolist movement. It deals with the depiction of the spiritually enhanced human body in the work of the Swedish artists Olof Sager-Nelson and Tyra Kleen, and the Finnish artists Magnus Enckell, Ellen Thesleff and Beda Stjernschantz, as one central topic within the European Symbolist art movement. During their different Parisian sojourns at the turn of the twentieth century, these artists came in contact with the Symbolist and occult *Rose+Croix*-order, its *Salons de la Rose+Croix* and its transnational and androgynous art programme, which revolved around the exploration of the human being's immateriality and spirituality. This study makes an investigation of the interrelations between the art by these five artists and, primarily, the Parisian *Salons de la Rose+Croix*, but also their interrelationship with other sources for a transnational Symbolist visual language.

Thematically structured into three analyses chapters on portraiture, classical Greco-Roman themes and scenes of interpersonal intimate encounters, this research considers how the total of the fifteen studied artworks can be understood not only thematically, but also theoretically, aesthetically, and stylistically as active contributions to the transnational Symbolist movement. It makes use of the theoretical frame of a horizontal European art history and conducts art historical hermeneutical analyses. The project examines how the selected artists positioned themselves towards the Symbolist conception of spiritual transcendence as something exclusively male-defined, which both comprised the neo-platonic and theosophical notion of a powerful androgynous mental state of the male and an androgynous, i.e. feminised, 'fashioning' of the male human body. Particular focus is laid on the performance of gender and sexuality within the selected works, as well as on the role of transgressions of gender binary norms.

Thereby, this project sheds light on a relatively unexplored and important Symbolist strand in contrast to the dominating art historical accounts of Swedish and Finnish National Romanticist art as the Swedish and Finnish variety of Symbolism, and generates also important knowledge on the role of Swedish and Finnish Symbolist art within the overall European art history.

Keywords: turn of the twentieth-century art, Symbolist art, transnational art movement, Swedish historiography, Finnish historiography, spiritual transcendence, androgyny, Magnus Enckell, Olof Sager-Nelson, Ellen Thesleff, Beda Stjernschantz, Tyra Kleen