

# The Energetic Women Artists at the Finnish Artists' Colonies: Focusing on Art and Well-being

Anna-Maria Wiljanen

My essay focuses on women artists at the Finnish Artists' Colonies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. First I will present the phenomenon of the artists' colonies. Then I will tell you what is the difference between an artists' community and an artists' colony. I will give a glimpse of two beautiful spots of lake Tuusula and Önnungeby on the Åland Islands. After that I will focus on the different roles of the women artists and discuss the way they created well-being for their families and themselves and still found the time to create art.

## **1. Artists' colonies – a significant phenomenon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century European art field**

Artists' colonies were a significant phenomenon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century art history in Europe. They were established most often in the rural villages where the artists chose to live and work for a certain period of time. Some of the artists came year after year to the same location, some even lived in the same village for the rest of their lives while others stayed only one short period of time. Still, we're talking about a significant phenomenon, since according to Nina Lübbren's study *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe, 1870-1910* (2001) at least 3000 artists worked in the colonies at some point during their careers. The figure is most likely to be much higher depending on the definition of the membership of the artists' colony. The spread of plein-airisme, the breakthrough of naturalism and the young artists' revolt against the old academian traditions have been pointed out as important factors for the spread of this phenomenon.

The history of the artists' colonies started around 1820s when certain French landscape painters 'discovered' the Forest of Fontainebleau near the village Barbizon. The unspoiled nature with its trees, dark wood and a cliff area surrounded by trees, the simple life of the local peasantry were appealing to the artists. Soon the phenomenon was spread all over Europe to Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands and to the Nordic countries where the largest artists' community was Skagen in Denmark. Other colonies were Varberg in Sweden, Fleskum in Norway and Önnungeby and Tuusula in Finland. The heyday of the colonies was fairly short: it had started in 1870's but came to an end by the end of 1900's.

## 2. Definitions

According to the definition that I presented in my doctoral dissertation an artists' colony:

*The artists' colonies were most often gathered at the initiative of one artist who was not permanent resident of the village. The artists' colony consisted of a group of artists (the majority of whom were visual artists) who lived and worked at the same place or in the same village for a certain time, usually in the summer. The colony functioned for at least three consecutive months per year, every year. Most of the artists were young, 20-30 years of age, and they represented different nationalities. The colony could consist of different groups, a key group consisting of the most loyal visiting artists, whose actions developed the colony, and of different kinds of subgroups. An invisible hierarchy could be found and the colony's leadership was often complex.*

An artist community is a place where artists from various disciplines (not merely visual artists) live permanently. Artist communities could consist of representatives of various genres, not merely visual artists. According to these definitions the Önningeby Artists' Colony fills in to the category of an artists' colony whereas Tuusula could be categorized as an artists' community.

The young artists' opposition to the art academies' conventional education and exhibition activities appeared at the same time as the golden age of the artist colony phenomenon. The opposition movement was due to the old conventional art education that the young

artists wanted to reform and the obsolete support system for artists they wanted to renew. The dissatisfaction created a favorable basis for the artist colonies and the rise of the community. But it was also the bohemian lifestyle far away from all the strict regulations of the society as well as the friendly atmosphere that attracted artists to the colonies. Here you can see an artists' party in Skagen artists' colony (fig.1).



fig.1  
P. S. Krøyer  
*Hip, hip, hurrah! Artists' Party at Skagen*  
1888  
Gothenburg Museum of Art  
Photo: en.wikipedia.org

## 3. The magic of Lake Tuusula

Lake Tuusula is a magical place. In the summer when you look at the blue water surface, the lake seems like a little oasis in the middle of the lush nature. Towards late autumn, the lake changes its character. At autumn storms, it seems like a big, open sea! Lake Tuusula is located 34 km northeast of Helsinki and was elected by voting for a landscape

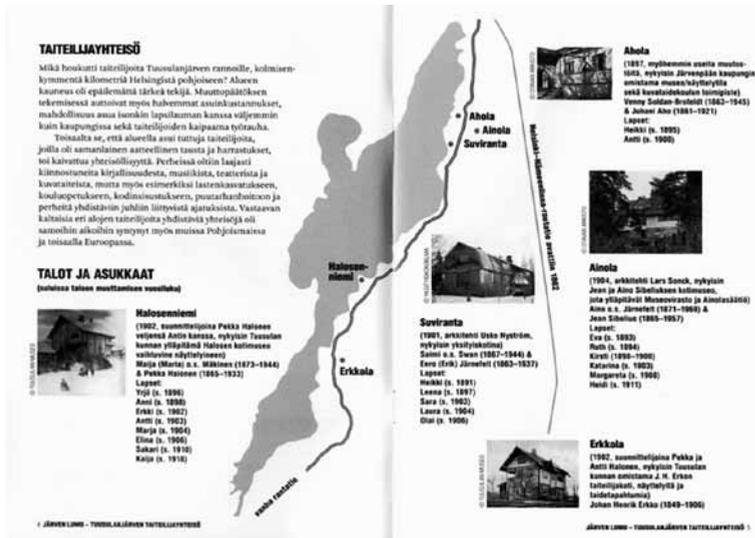


fig.2  
The map of the Lake Tuusula  
artists' community.  
Photo: Private archive

lake in 2011. The lake's magic also attracted 100 years earlier, in the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when several artist homes were built to the eastern part of the lake. The beautiful landscape and the atmosphere around it attracted the artists who, on one hand, wanted peaceful environment for their creative work, on the other hand wanted to socialize with like-minded artists during the time when Finnishness and Finnish identity were created.

You can see all the artists' villas in this map (fig.2). The first artists to arrive were Juhani Aho (1861-1921) and his wife artist Venny Soldan-Brofeldt (1863-1945) who in the fall 1897 rented Villa Vårbacka which later changed its name to Ahola. The famous artist couple wanted to move away from the hectic environment of Helsinki. They thought that their creativity could flourish in the countryside. The newspaper *Uusimaa* published on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1902 an article *Pilgrimage trip to Tuusula* (Toiwioretki Tuusulaan) in which they portrayed in detail the lovable host couple's home in Tuusula, the tasty fish soup prepared of the fish that the host Juhani Aho himself had fished. At the same time, it was pointed out that Ahola's walls were adorned by Mrs Soldan-Brofeldt's picturesque paintings! The editor also visited Eero Järnefelt's (1863-1937) home Suviranta, which was completed in 1901 and considered by the writer to resemble an English mansion. These kind of articles attracted even more artists to Tuusula. Artist Pekka Halonen (1865-1933) and his wife Maija's (1873-1944) home Halosenniemi was completed in 1902.

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) who married Eero Järnefelt's sister Aino (1871-1969) and their home Ainola was the last artists' villa to be built in Tuusula. Sibelius had been looking for a quiet residence where he could work undisturbed and the family's daughters could grow up in a safe environment. The family hired Sibelius's friend, architect Lars Sonck (1870-1956), who was given the task of planning their home. Sibelius had only two wishes: that there should be a green fireplace in the dining room and that one could have a view of Lake

Tuusula swamp. His wishes were met and the house was completed in the autumn of 1904 when the family moved in.

Life in the artist community was characterized by harmony, togetherness and above all art in various forms. The artists' families often visited each other: sometimes common sauna nights were arranged, sometimes it was time for matinees or theatrical performances that the many children of the families (all in all 21) arranged. Life was also filled with music. Pekka Halonen's wife Maija was a trained pianist. Sometimes Pekka Halonen could ask his wife to play background music while he painted in his studio. Thousand hiding places and the nature also offered a safe playground for the children and gave rise to various kinds of exciting adventures.

#### **4. The breathtakingly beautiful Åland Islands – the best painting spot in the world**

*On the western side of the village, the mountain ridge, planted by dry pine trees and shrubs, fell to the forest from the glimpse of the bay with Saltholmarna and Lemböteberget, where the sea route went to Mariehamn. When I stood up there, the sun was going down and glowing on the Lemböte mountain peaks - it was beautiful! A wonderful peace rested over the village and the colors blended together, and I was absolutely thrilled!*

This is how the artist Hanna Rönning (1862-1946) described her feelings when she in 1886 arrived in Önningeby, a village located on the Åland Islands. She had been invited by her teacher Fredrik Ahlstedt (1839-1901) to come to Åland to paint. Ahlstedt had also invited his other students Elin Danielson (1861-1919) and Ada Thilén (1852-1933) to Åland. Ahlstedt himself had received a letter from Victor Westerholm (1860-1919) who described Åland as “the best painting spot on the earth”. He had visited the island group for the first time in the spring of 1880 and was thrilled by the nature and the numerous exciting painting motifs that he had found in the archipelago. The word about the new, exciting painting spot Åland was spread and its beauty was described by Rönning:

*Yes, a fairyland was Åland that time. You knew a little about it. The people were kind and forthcoming and unusually talkative, I was warmly welcomed to all the houses and cottages, drinking coffee and answering to the endless amount of questions. They were curious like children, the deluge of tourism hadn't touched them yet, they were so happy to hear about the outside world and told about themselves, their life and some villagegossip.....*

Fredrik and Nina Ahlstedt (1853-1907) came to Åland in June 1886. Ahlstedts and Rönnsberg gathered at Victor and his wife Hilma Westerholm's (1863-1952) home Tomtebo's porch for a coffee break. There talked about the surrounding motifs and the beautiful Åland nature. The artists' colony was eventually expanded thanks to the members' extensive social networks from the past. Later, Elin Danielson, Alexander Federley (1864-1932) and Swedish artists J. A. G. Acke (1859-1924) and Edvard Westman (1865-1917) joined the artist colony. Zachris Topelius (1818-1898) had sent her daughter Eva (1855-1929) to Åland in 1887. She was taken by everything she saw:

*Yes and now I am here, now I understand why you are all so fond of Åland. I have seen so many beautiful and interesting spots and Captain Andsten has been an excellent guide. Now I just want to paint and work without all the hosting and social duties. Dad knew exactly what I needed.*

Life in the artists' colony was free even though some routines could soon be noticed. After breakfast, the artists usually went to their respective places, some of them knew where to paint, while others were looking for a suitable painting spots. In the midst of the creation process, time could go fast and often the artists returned to their lodging only in the evening. They often gathered at Tomtebo, at Westerholm's home at Lemström's channel, where the artists discussed the art and various exhibitions. The artists showed to each other what they accomplished during the day. The art works were then discussed.

Indeed, the artists lived a bohemian life filled with both welcome and farewell parties, masquerades and dance nights (fig.3). The relationship ties between the artists were strong and no one was left alone if not explicitly wanted. The artists also participated in important events, e.g. in 1894 when Victor Westerholm and Edvard Westman were presented to H. M. Emperor Tsar Alexander III of Russia (1845-1894) and Empress Maria Feodorovna (1847-1928) aboard the imperial squadron Zarewna that sailed in the archipelago and anchored in Färjsundet in Åland. Excursions were also made to Eckerö, but also to Signilskär and even to the lighthouse of Märket. The fellowship between the key members of the artists' colony was strengthened further, even when travelling for example in Paris. The artists sent a letter to the artist that stayed in Finland:



fig.3  
Önningeby Artists' Colony in  
1886.  
Photo: en.wikipedia.org

*Here are the "Ålandians" drinking bad coffee and listening to bad Hungarian music when the spirit came over us to tell you a "Westerholmian gor'moron". Here you feel yourself like a princess ... pity that you are not here too! Soon more!*

From the letter dated 1888, it appears that although the artists' colony had emerged only two years earlier, the artists had already developed an close sense of belonging that held together when far away from Åland.

## **5. Different roles of the women artists**

The last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the years for women's empowerment. The women were given more opportunities to educate themselves and engage in a completely different way than before. The women artists challenged the boundaries of the gender contract as they emerged as professional artists. However, they were warned of the destructiveness that the new opportunities could cause.

Based on the women artists' correspondence four different roles could be found: 1) Muse and matriarch, 2) independent and determined to succeed as an artist, 3) there can only be one artist in the family and 4) the almost equal artist. Let us study these roles more in detail.

Maija Halonen, Aino Sibelius and Hilma Westerholm could be regarded as their husbands' muses. They took care of the home and children and their education. They also posed as models for their artist husbands. The wives supported their husbands in the midst of their creative crisis and listened to their sorrows. These three artists' wives could also be regarded as matriarchs who were not only holding their families but also the artists' community together.

Maija Halonen was a trained pianist but she didn't work as one. Instead she took care of the Halonen's eight children and created a beautiful artists' home for her family. When the family had financial difficulties, Maija Halonen took translation work in order to earn extra money.

Family was everything also to Aino Sibelius. She always put her family's, her husband's and daughters' well-being first. She designed furniture for their home and took care of the family's economy. Aino Sibelius was also a compassionate wife who could listen and comfort her composer husband.

Venny Soldan-Brofeldt, Elin Danielson and Hanna Rönnerberg were all determined to succeed with their careers as artists. Venny Soldan-Brofeldt was an artist and illustrator, a multitalented artist who was equally determined to have a family. Family was sacred to her even when her sister gave birth to a son that she had together with Juhani Aho, Venny Soldan-Brofeldt's husband, a possible divorce was out of a

question. Instead, Venny Soldan-Brofeldt raised her sister's and Juhani Aho's son like her own son.

Hanna Rönnerberg was also determined to succeed. Not only was she a visual artist but she was also a writer. She was the daughter of a maid and was raised in humble circumstances but that didn't stop her. She studied in Finland, in Sweden and also in Paris and made more than 30 trips in Europe without a chaperon. Her favorite paintings were landscapes or genre paintings, like *A Girl on the Grass* (fig.4), where you see a young girl sitting in the grass at Signilskär in the archipelago. Rönnerberg really managed to capture the warm afternoon light. Rönnerberg was briefly engaged to Edvard Westman who also painted in Önningeby but the engagement didn't last.

Elin Danielson focused on women's empowerment in her art like for example in a painting *Aunt Balda's Leisure Time* (1886) where a woman is playing cards and smoking cigarette – something that was inappropriate at that time. Danielson painted several self portraits that channeled her determination. In *Self-portrait* (fig.5), she painted herself with the attributes of an artist: a color palette and paint brushes. The determination can be seen in her eyes, whereas the composition and the light reveal her talent.

Danielson was unconventional also in her personal life. She met an Italian artist Raffaello Gambogi (1874-1943) who was 13 years her junior and married him. They moved to Italy where she pursued her career. Family was sacred also for Elin Danielson. When her husband had an extramarital relationship, Danielson still wanted the couple to stay together.

The role of Eva Topelius-Acke (1855-1929) was more complex. Her husband J. A. G. Acke wanted her to continue painting as he wrote in his letter:

fig.4  
Hanna Rönnerberg  
*A Girl on the Grass*  
1890  
Private collection  
Photo: Private archive

fig.5  
Elin Danielson-Gambogi  
*Self-portrait*  
1900  
Finnish National Gallery /  
Ateneum Art Museum, Antell  
Collections  
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
Kari Soinio



*Do you paint my friend, I want you to and I also can have to look at it?*

But when he was sinking in his work, the tone was completely different:

*Don't write to me. Now let me have my own art for myself this winter. Maybe it's the best that way? I do not want to be disturbed, shared, weakened. I still can't think of you.*

Eva Topelius's role was later to support her husband's artistic work and take care of the home. She painted, but her main role remained within the home's intimate sphere.

Nina Ahlstedt's role could be described as an almost equal artist. She painted landscapes and portraits of children. Her artist husband Fredrik Ahlstedt allowed her to paint even after they got married. However, if they attended the same exhibition her husband's paintings were on best cimaise, on better location than hers. So in reality Nina Ahlstedt's role was close to that of Eva Topelius-Acke.

There are letters between artists that suggest that women artists were almost equal to their men, as Hanna Rönnerberg wrote in 1888 in her letter to Eva Topelius:

*Do you know, it's really a blessed thing that we are so good friends, we have the same interests, talk or discuss so it's almost like we both were a couple of boys both.*

## **6. Different ways to create well-being for their families and themselves**

Art creates well-being and well-being creates art – already during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women artists lived through art and for making art but at the same time they created well-being not only for their families but also to themselves.

The artist families lived close to nature, which was also an important source of inspiration for the artists. Economic worries were often a reality but the situation was alleviated by the home gardens and the harvest they provided. Not only did the gardens give potatoes, carrots, cabbage, beans and onions to the dinner table or flowers to decorate the home with but they also contributed to the well-being. The gardens were havens, places that you could admire and places where you could find peace and quiet. They offered silent therapy and a place for meditation, as Aino Sibelius wrote:

*When in the spring I sow the seeds in the soil, so at the same time I bury my sorrows there. The plants rise from the soil, but the sorrows remain in the earth.*

In Halosenniemi there were also extensive crops and tomatoes, which later appeared in Pekka Halonen's paintings. Maija Halonen was just like Aino Sibelius, Saimi Järnefelt and Venny Soldan-Brofeldt, a handy housewife who sewed the family's clothes and textiles to the home. She also colored with yarns with flowers and plants picked from nature. Hilma Westerholm managed her garden, apple trees and berry bushes that spread on Tomtebo's land at the beautiful Lemström Channel. Hanna Rönnberg had no garden during her stay in Önningeby but she had a very large one later when she settled down in Kulosaari, in Helsinki. The women artists could keep accurate records of seeds that they had bought and of the cultivations.

The artists had vast social networks but how were the networks established? There is a clear pattern. First the artists studied in the art academies in their home countries where they got acquainted. It was rather a rule than exception that the artists then completed their studies abroad, most often in Paris. These friendship ties grew stronger so that when it came to the artists' colonies, the word about these enchanting painting spots was spread fast.

How can social network of the artists be analysed? Let's take Önningeby artists' colony's beginning and the social networks of the artists when entering the colony. The network consists of 15 nodes (artists). The following parameters can be used: five different cities where the artists studied, the artists' relations to one another and if they knew each other, how strong or weak was the tie of their friendship. Here variable 0 has been given if the artist hasn't studied in one of the mentioned cities and 1 if he has. Variable 0 if the artist hadn't any relations with the others and 1 if he had and finally variable 0 if the ties between the artists were weak and 1, if they were strong. After this Gephi, an interactive visualization and exploration platform for networks and complex systems, calculates the betweenness centrality and the closeness centrality values. A node with high betweenness centrality has a large influence on the transfer of items through the network, whereas closeness centrality emphasizes the distance of an actor to all others in the network by focusing on the distance from each actor to all others. As a result the sociogram will show that Victor Westerholm and Hanna Rönnberg had the largest networks when entering the colony.

These kind of sociograms can be done of every artists' colony (given that biographies of the key members are at hand). Social network analysis can reveal more about the artists' colonies and their establishment, about art movements and their spread but also about the mobility of the artists. The theoretical background is based on the Jacob Moreno's research published in his book *Who Shall Survive?* (1953) and a research by Ylva Hasselberg, Leos Muller & Niklas Stenlås:



## フィンランドの芸術家コロニーで活躍した女性芸術家たち：その芸術活動と幸福を中心に

アンナ=マリア・ウィルヤネン

芸術家コロニーは、19世紀の西洋美術史において顕著な現象であった。その多くは片田舎に形成され、様々な国籍の芸術家が集い、一定期間生活して制作に励んだ。戸外制作の流行と自然主義の隆盛、伝統的な美術教育に対する若い芸術家の反発などが、この現象の国際的な広がり的重要因素とみなされる。芸術家たちは、手付かずの自然と農村の素朴な生活、芸術家同士の打ち解けたボヘミアンな雰囲気魅了された。芸術家コロニーの黄金期は1870年代から1900年頃とされ、フィンランドではトゥースラとオーニングベリに形成された。

コロニーを構成する芸術家のほとんどは、画家をはじめとする造形作家であった。彼らは20～30歳と若く、毎年夏の間3か月ほど滞在する場合が多かった。一方、より様々な分野の芸術家が恒久的に生活する村は、芸術家コミュニティと呼ばれる。こうした定義によって、トゥースラは芸術家コミュニティ、オーニングベリは芸術家コロニーに分類される。

ヘルシンキの北東34 kmに位置するトゥースラ湖には、幾人かの芸術家が湖畔に自邸兼アトリエを建て、居を構えた。小説家ユハニ・アホと妻で画家のヴェニー・ゾルタン=プロフェルトが1897年に最初に同地に移住し、画家エーロ・ヤルネフェルト夫妻、画家ペッカ・ハロネンと妻マイヤ、そして作曲家ジャン・シベリウスと妻アイノがそれに続いた。彼らは美しい風景に囲まれた平和な制作環境を望み、他の芸術家たちと家族ぐるみで交流する、調和に満ちた生活を送った。一方オーニングベリは、オーランド諸島に位置し、画家ヴィクトル・ヴェステルホルムと妻ヒルマを中心に発展した芸術家コロニーである。1886年以降、画家のフレデリク・アールステットと妻で画家のニーナ、女性画家ハンナ・ロンベリとエーリン・ダニエルソン、スウェーデン人画家のJ.A.G. アッケと妻でフィンランド人画家のエーヴァ・トベリウス=アッケらが同地を集った。彼らは互いの作品を見せ合ったり、芸術論議に花を咲かせたりして、芸術家同士の強い絆を育んでいった。

これらの芸術家コロニーの女性芸術家は、主に4つのパターンに分類される。まず、芸術家である夫のミューズとなり、家庭を全面的に支える女家長としての役割も担った女性たちで、マイヤ・ハロネン、アイノ・シベリウス、ヒルマ・ヴェステルホルムが当てはまる。次に、自立した芸術家としてのキャリアを追求した女性たちであり、ヴェニー・ゾルタン=プロフェルト、ハンナ・ロンベリ、エーリン・ダニエルソンが挙げられる。続く女性は、自身も絵を描きながらも、夫の方が芸術家として活躍し、後に夫や家族を支える役割を担ったエーヴァ・トベリウス=アッケである。最後に、夫婦がほとんど平等な芸術家として活動したニーナ・アールステットが挙げられる。

芸術家コロニーの女性たちは、創作活動に従事するだけでなく、家族の幸福のために働き、また自分自身にとっての様々な幸福の形を見出していた。彼女たちにとっての幸福とは、豊かな自然に寄り添った生活や、収穫物をもたらす、安らぎや瞑想の場となる家庭菜園や庭で過ごすひと時、そして女性芸術家同士の交流であった。

[抄訳：久保田有寿]