

# The Great Kalevala Project – An Unfulfilled Dream

*The illustrated Kalevala is to become the Book of the Nation, not only portraying the main events of the Kalevala epic with pictures but also forming an artistic entity presenting the folk life and nature of Finland.* (Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Valvoja 1909)

The so-called Great Kalevala – a completely illustrated version of the Kalevala epic, which was also known as the Illustrated Book of the Nation – can with due cause be regarded as the most long-term project of Akseli Gallen-Kallela's career in the arts. It was launched through his public statement in the journal Valvoja in 1909, after which the illustration work lived on in his thoughts, conversations, correspondence, negotiations and finally in sketches and studies until the artist's death in 1931. According to Gallen-Kallela, this was a task for which he had prepared all his life. Gallen-Kallela understood the scope of the task from the very outset, and accordingly the available time was one of his main concerns. This was followed by considerations of personal finances, the funding of work that was estimated to last two decades. The plan ultimately foundered for reasons of time and money. No financial support was provided by the state or private institutions, and the sudden death of the artist at the age of only 65 robbed the scheme of its prime mover. It was buried along with its author. "Should I die before the work is finished it could be left to artists of the following generation".<sup>1</sup>

In the background of the illustrated Kalevala project was the proposal of Eliel Aspelin-Haapkylä for a luxury edition of the Kalevala which was to have been commissioned from Gallen-Kallela. This plan led to the above-mentioned illustration programme drawn up by Gallen-Kallela in 1909, in which a sumptuous one-off work was planned, which was to be placed in a special room in the National Museum of Finland, in addition to the publication of less-costly facsimile editions for the public. The Finnish Parliament, however, rejected Gallen-Kallela's application for a state grant in 1909. Despite this setback, Gallen-Kallela resumed work on the illustrations from time to time and continued to campaign for the project, especially within the Kalevala Society.<sup>2</sup>

The significance of the Great Kalevala for Gallen-Kallela is interestingly revealed by the many means with which he tried to implement the plan. These were partly related to discussion in the early 20th-century on a new edition of the Kalevala: the publication of

the runes, or poems, that Lönnrot had left out of his original compiled version, and their rearrangement.<sup>3</sup> Gallen-Kallela closely followed the discussion and began to develop his own thoughts on the artist interpretations of the epic. His correspondence with Professor E. N. Setälä and the folklorist Väinö Salminen sheds light on the overall situation, in which the artist regarded the new – and more condensed – version of the Kalevala that was to appear in the near future as an opportunity to combine it with his own idea of a completely illustrated version of the national epic.<sup>4</sup> The idea of a comprehensively illustrated Kalevala found support in the Kalevala Society. Salminen, for example, felt that it was a loss that Gallen-Kallela's significant body of Kalevala-related work had not been combined with the publication of the epic. The results of this included illustrations of foreign translations of the Kalevala that did not provide the correct visual image of the Finnish roots of the Kalevala – the folklore, people and natural environment.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of an illustrated edition of the Kalevala was actively pursued in the early 1920s, when Gallen-Kallela presented a plan to WSOY publishers outlining four types of editions of the work: a popular edition, an edition for schools, a general edition and a luxury edition. The artist and the publishers agreed on a popular edition, and the Illustrated Kalevala appeared in 1922. This project kept Gallen-Kallela occupied with Kalevala themes for a couple of years. This edition, with vignettes at the beginning and end of the runes, was Gallen-Kallela's first comprehensive work of illustration of the Kalevala, and one in which he was also able to experiment with new visual motifs. The printed illustrations, imitating woodblock prints, and the relatively small format reserved for them led to a condensed, stylized and ornamental language of form. Many of the motifs are references to the artist's earlier works and easily recognized by those who are familiar with Gallen-Kallela's art. Rhythm and decoration were achieved with emphasized line ornament and a restricted colour scale. The illustrations also drew upon archaeological and ethnographic material. As a whole, they emphasize primitiveness, primal energy and the communion of man and nature.<sup>6</sup> It was Gallen-Kallela's plan to proceed from this work towards the deeper, more colourful and more multidimensional illustrations of the Great Kalevala, but ultimately the Illustrated Kalevala was to remain the artist's main achievement in book illustration.

### **Financing the new Kalevala with the painting Lemminkäinen at the Fiery River**

An interesting feature of efforts to achieve a new version of the Kalevala was the process leading to Gallen-Kallela's Kalevala-related painting *Lemminkäinen at the Fiery River* (1920). A. O. Väisänen, the first secretary of the Kalevala Society, later recalled the events from the mid-1910s partly as told to him by Gallen-Kallela, and partly from his

own experiences. According to him, he had been asked by Gallen-Kallela to edit a new edition of the Kalevala. Salminen had agreed to do so, but said that the work would cost 15,000 marks. Gallen-Kallela had contacted Eduard Polón, the director of Suomen Gummitehdas (The Finnish Rubber Factory, present-day Nokia Plc), and asked him for funds for preparing a new version of the epic. In return, the artist had promised Polón a painting, which turned out to be *Lemminkäinen at the Fiery River*. He gave the fee received for the painting to Salminen for the editorial work.<sup>7</sup>

This special anecdote gains more depth through correspondence, partly answering the question why Gallen-Kallela specifically contacted Polón. According to the Gallen-Kallela Museum's archives of correspondence, they began to write to each other in May 1920. In a letter to Gallen-Kallela dated 22 May, 1920, Polón writes that he is looking for a gift for a chief engineer who had worked for many years at his factory and suggests a landscape painting. "Should you agree to this, it is my intention, before travelling to the factory at Nokia, to stop at Ruovesi to discuss the matter further."<sup>8</sup> In his next letter to Gallen-Kallela, of 11 June 1920, a note of exchange is already mentioned, and its forwarding to Salminen. In the same letter Polón says that he is expecting the paintings of which they had negotiated.<sup>9</sup>

The available correspondence does not make completely clear whether Gallen-Kallela and Polón knew one another previously. A letter from Väinö Salminen to Gallen-Kallela from around the same time discusses the new edition of the Kalevala: "You mention at the end of your letter the new edition of the Kalevala (which you already mentioned years ago). It is an idea already commented on by Castrén and Europaeus in 1854. Castrén felt that the runes should be compiled in such a manner that no one could have added anything to them. Porthan already spoke in strong terms against additions and insertions in folk poetry. I, however, am no longer so modest as to say that I could not compose a collection as meant by Castrén and Europaeus." Salminen estimated that the work would take about a year, with artistic assistance in selecting the runes and omitting text from the poets Eino Leino and Otto Manninen. The problem, however, was money, for Salminen could not get a salary from anywhere for this work.<sup>10</sup>

On 25 October 1920 Polón sent Gallen-Kallela 5,000 marks as part payment to be forwarded to Salminen for his new version of the Kalevala. In the draft of his reply, written on the back of the letter, Gallen-Kallela promises to send Polón a receipt for the money and goes on to state: "The painting meant for you, with rune 26-443-448 of the Kalevala as its subject, is not yet completed, but I would like to send it you by Christmas." At the end of the letter Gallen-Kallela promises Polón pre-emptory right to pur-

chase the painting, for which he has considered a price of 25,000 marks.<sup>11</sup> In his reply Polón says that he will be glad to exercise this right to purchase the Kalevala painting.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, in a letter dated 2 December 1920, Polón states that he has ordered frames in accordance with the artist's suggestions for the future painting, "of which I shall soon be the happy owner".<sup>13</sup> The various stages of arrangements ended with Salminen's letter of 10 February 1921, in which he estimated that he would finish the commissioned work during 1921: "Namely the draft, and then the selection will follow. --- Attached are receipts for Judge Polón. I have not gone to thank him in person before having something to show him."<sup>14</sup>

According to Väisänen the whole episode ended embarrassingly. Despite Gallen-Kallela's urging, the new version of the epic did not approach completion, and the abridged *Kalevala sankarirunoelmana* (The Kalevala as a heroic poem) did not appear until 1940, when the artist could no longer see the results of the funding that he had obtained – nor Polón, who died in the autumn of 1930.<sup>15</sup>

### **A fiery river across in front of the horse**

The subject of *Lemminkäinen at the River of Fire* is in rune 26 of the Kalevala, in which the hero Lemminkäinen is warned by his mother as he is leaving to go uninvited to a wedding feast in the legendary Northland. During his journey Lemminkäinen comes across many dangerous obstacles, including a river of fire that has to be crossed. This motif was also realized in the Illustrated Kalevala as a vignette emphasizing the opposition of the eagle and the horse, which were shown in profile in an adaptation of heraldic convention.<sup>16</sup>

The sketches in the collections of the Gallen-Kallela Museum that are related to this theme are intense in terms of treatment, colour and composition in comparison with the large completed canvas, in which the forms of the bird, Lemminkäinen and the horse are more rigid and the tone of the colours has a higher pitch. In the sketches, the leading role is given to the fiery stream, the hot furnace, while the heraldically stylized eagle was moved further away into the middle of the river. Pastel chalk twists along the surface of the river like a snake, the mythical birth words of which are uttered by Lemminkäinen slightly later in the same poem. In the painting as completed Lemminkäinen decided to reject the nocturnal hellish mood of the sketches, moving the events into daylight – albeit in a landscape of fantasy.

In the actual work of illustrating the Great Kalevala, Gallen-Kallela never came as far as the runes describing Lemminkäinen. He proceeded in consecutive order, reaching

the fifth rune, but the sketches and studies also contain subjects and themes from the later sections of the epic, so-called themes of mental imagery and association inspired by the Kalevala. While many of them point to the artist's earlier work, as in the Illustrated Kalevala, there are also hitherto unseen subjects, such as *The Hunter at the Spring/At the Offering Spring*, which also appeared as a small painting in oils (1925).

### **At the sources of the birth of the world**

The Kalevala begins with the myth of the birth of the world and it was this thematic that Gallen-Kallela also addressed first when he started the more systematic work of illustration while staying in Taos, New Mexico in 1924. Gallen-Kallela created several beautiful variations of Ilmatar, the spirit of the air, floating on the waves and the world being hatched from the egg of a pochard. The freshness of the subject and the enthusiasm of beginning new work are markedly present. The universal thematic of the story of creation is evident in the blending of ethnographic and Biblical visual motifs. The figure of the hero Väinämöinen varies from divine to folkish. There are also cosmic elements, visions of space, alluding to the heavenly visions of Gallen-Kallela's symbolism of the turn of the century.

In the illustration at the start of the second rune of the epic, the Great Oak is of outright apocalyptic appearance with its branches covering all living things. Later, the artist made several colour and light versions of the felled oak that bring to mind lightning or the residual image produced on the retina by bright effects of light. The felling of the oak marked the beginning of farming. The hero Väinämöinen is portrayed as passing on this new skill, which started a new era for the members of the hunter-gatherer culture.<sup>17</sup> Gallen-Kallela portrayed the miracle of growth, described in the terms of the Kalevala, taking as his motifs thunderbolts, germinated seeds, rain, the face of the supreme god Ukko who sent rain, delicate sprouts, and Old Woman Mannu living underground, who is given the form of Artemis of Ephesus, the multi-breasted goddess of fertility.

### **Väinämöinen and Joukahainen – a war of generations**

Väinämöinen becomes a great and renowned seer, singer of deep matters, already at the beginning of the Kalevala. His skills are tested in the third rune, where he is challenged by the young Joukahainen. Contests of singing or recital are generally speaking an integral part of the tradition of the oral performance of the Kalevala runes, telling about the situations in which they were presented, with performers competing in the skills of singing and knowledge. The competition between Joukahainen and Väinämöinen is also marked by the encounter of youth and old age, of different generations. Väinämöinen proves to be unbeatable in his singing skills and defeats Joukahainen with his attempt at

“patricide”, although Joukahainen’s singing tells in a fascinating way about the traditional knowledge of nature and animals in Finnish culture and is a reminder of the complexity and detailed nature of information embedded in the Kalevala.

In his depictions of Väinämöinen and Joukahainen, Gallen-Kallela made a thorough study of the collision of their sledges, their horses running in opposite directions, and the confrontational poses of the old seer and his young challenger. The heads of horses looking in different directions are an old symbol in Finno-Ugrian cultures, used to depict opposing forces that divide the world. In these broader terms, the story of Väinämöinen and Joukahainen can be interpreted as a myth associated with the organization of the world.<sup>18</sup> Opposition is the bearing theme in the illustrations of the third rune, either in more realistic or more stylized execution. The contrast of the figures is underscored by framing Väinämöinen with pine branches and Joukahainen with birch branches. Gallen-Kallela employed a similar symbolism of trees in works such as the Aino triptych (1891), in which Väinämöinen was identified with a stand of pines and the maiden Aino with young birches.

### **The story of Aino**

Gallen-Kallela made his impressive debut in Kalevala subjects and themes with his Aino triptych, of which there are versions from 1889 and 1891. Three decades later, the treatment of the story of Aino had changed from a bright vision to more sensitive fragments of atmosphere interweaving details and moods of nature. Details of beauty are a birch-leaf sauna bath whisk, a water lily and the trunks of the birches. The work of illustrating the Great Kalevala ended at the beginning of the fifth rune, which would have continued the story of Aino.

### **All that I have learned of the people and nature of Finland**

According to Gallen-Kallela’s own agenda, the illustrations of the Great Kalevala were to express scenes from the runes, associated themes and motifs, Finnish flora, fauna and ethnographic motifs following from the content of the runes.<sup>19</sup> The first four runes give an indication of the overall appearance of the epic, its style, colours and treatment of motifs, as well as the demanding nature of the work. The Great Kalevala was to be the artist’s *grande finale*, the summation of his long career, and an attempt to crystallize, with the Kalevala as its lead, a Finnish style, or the starting points of such a style. The sketches and studies of the Great Kalevala fascinate the viewer with their varied expressions, distinguishing this work from the controlled and comprehensively striking style of the Illustrated Kalevala. The Great Kalevala is softer, more wistful and less restricted, while also more problematic, as shown by some of the sketches with regard to the changing of

styles. Alongside realistic, romantic and cosmic manners of depiction the studies contain more conceptual motifs, a reminder that the artist's relationship with illustrating the Kalevala was more complex than is readily assumed.

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- 2 Kuusela 2004, 68-69.
- 3 Knuuttila 2008, 392-393.
- 4 Letters from Akseli Gallen-Kallela to E. N. Setälä 1914-1915. KA.
- 5 Väinö Salminen / Suomen kuvalehti 1917. Julk. Raivio 2005, 257.
- 6 Kuusela 2004, 69-73.
- 7 A. O. Väisänen 13.3.1968. Archives of the Kalevala Society. Knuuttila 2008, 393-394.
- 8 Eduard Polón – Akseli Gallen-Kallela 22.5.1920. GKM.
- 9 Eduard Polón – Akseli Gallen-Kallela 11.6.1920. GKM.
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- 16 Kuusela 2004, 70.
- 17 Knuuttila 1978, 71.
- 18 Möttönen 2000, s. 45.
- 19 Valvoja-lehti/ Gallen-Kallela 1909, 218.