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# Locality, nation and the 'primitive' - notions about the identities of late medieval non-professional wall painters in Finnish historiography from 1880 to 1940

Katja Fält



Figure 1 Unknown painter, c. 1450s. Wall paintings, central aisle. Maaria church, Finland. Photo: Katja Fält.

In 1937 the Finnish art historian Ludvig Wennervirta suggested in his book *Suomen keskiaikainen kirkkomaalaus* (*Medieval wall paintings in Finland*) that the painters of the enigmatic and uncanny medieval murals in Maaria church were 'naturally made by local men'.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this evaluation seems to have been the 'magical' feel of the paintings that seemed to combine Christian and 'pagan' motifs, and have similarities with patterns found in local handicrafts (Fig. 1). Paintings similar to those in Maaria found in various other churches were grouped together and

<sup>1</sup> 'Nämä maalaukset ovat luonnollisesti kotimaisten miesten tekemät'. Ludvig Wennervirta, *Suomen keskiaikainen kirkkomaalaus*, Helsinki: WSOY, 1937, 201.

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considered to be executed by 'local' artisans.<sup>2</sup> In other parts of his book, Wennervirta went into great lengths to establish connections to Sweden and Northern Germany. According to him, the majority of wall paintings were made by painters who came to medieval Finland, to the Diocese of Turku, from abroad.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2 Unknown painter, c. 1450s. Wall paintings on the north wall. Maaria church, Finland. Photo: Katja Fält.

At first glance, there seems to be nothing strange in this speculation concerning the identification and attribution of medieval artisans. What is interesting is the apparent duality: the majority of paintings were believed to be made by painters who travelled and moved from one place to another, but one group of paintings was made by local painters. Wennervirta also seems to be fairly certain about this, establishing his evaluation on the form and content of the paintings. Admittedly, the paintings in Maaria stand out when compared with medieval wall paintings in general. They are mainly single images and motifs, placed all over the vaults and on the walls. The motifs represent various humans and animals, some of which are difficult to identify and to interpret, ships and labyrinths, and different ornamental motifs and patterns. (Fig. 2). Some of the motifs

<sup>2</sup> Wennervirta, *Suomen*, 200-201.

<sup>3</sup> Wennervirta, *Suomen*, 168-196.

are clearly Christian, such as crosses, the face of Christ, an image of St. Lawrence and so on, but the traditional narrative scenes from the Bible, from the Passion cycle or from the lives of saints are absent.<sup>4</sup>

Finnish research history has occasionally found it hard to interpret and analyse these paintings that can be found not just in Maaria, but in approximately thirty other medieval churches in Finland. For a long time the paintings were considered to be 'primitive paintings' and their defining feature was the notion of local or 'native' artistry. During the past few decades this notion has, however, paradigmatically changed and other perspectives on attribution have been considered. Currently the paintings are regarded as the work of medieval non-professional painters, probably artisan church builders who travelled to the Diocese of Turku possibly from Northern Germany or the Baltic countries. This hypothesis is based on one that has gained support in Danish research after the art historian Ulla Haastrup proposed in 1991 that certain types of simple Danish medieval murals were executed mainly by masons and never by professionally trained painters.<sup>5</sup> This hypothesis gained ground among Finnish scholars and art historians Helena Edgren<sup>6</sup> and especially Markus Hiekkänen begun to analyse the Finnish group of paintings from this perspective. According to Hiekkänen the paintings in the Diocese of Turku were commissioned from the church builders as a bargain along with the actual building work. In many cases the paintings are clearly a continuation for the actual building work for they were executed directly on fresh plaster after the completion of masonry and vaulting.<sup>7</sup> Hiekkänen's analysis of the paintings and their execution has been mainly based on the close examination of actual church buildings, building history, and the relationship between different constructional elements.

Historiographically the notion of above-mentioned artistic mobility during the Middle Ages and in the Diocese of Turku is fairly recent. The 'primitive' paintings as the work of local, 'Finnish' men thus seems to be a notion somewhat contradicting the idea of medieval artisanship and its relatively free mobility. In this

<sup>4</sup> Katja Fält, *Wall Paintings, Workshops, and Visual Production in the Medieval Diocese of Turku from 1430 to 1540*. Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja, 2012, 120.

<sup>5</sup> These paintings were given the name "master mason paintings", *murermesterbemalinger*. According to Haastrup the paintings were almost undoubtedly connected to the same construction phase as the vaulting of a church. They were intended for the first decorative need and their nature was thus temporary. If the parish had an opportunity to acquire "proper" professionally made paintings, the *murermesterbemalinger* were replaced. Ulla Haastrup, 'Danske kalkmalerier 1475-1500', *Danske kalkmalerier. Sengotik 1475-1500*, Ulla Haastrup (ed.), Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet, 1991, 26-28, 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> Helena Edgren, 'Primitive' paintings: the visual world of *populus rusticus*', *History and Images. Towards a New Iconology*, Axel Bolvig and Philip Lindley (eds.), Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 5, Turnhout: Brepols, 2003, 301-322.

<sup>7</sup> Markus Hiekkänen, *Suomen kivikirkot keskiajalla*, Helsinki: Otava, 2003, 80; Markus Hiekkänen, *Suomen keskiajan kivikirkot*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran toimituksia 1117. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2007, 34-35

article I attempt to analyse how the locality and native origin of the makers was emphasised in the concepts of identity and origin in the late nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth century. I argue that the interpretation of the paintings has been connected to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century history-writing that aimed to establish and validate a shared national past for Finland. Forms that did not fit the canon of Western medieval art had to be explained and considered to have unapparent innate value. In this type of history-writing, the monuments of the past were used to reveal something essential and original about Finland and the Finnish people. Thus, creating a notion of the 'primitive paintings' as something essentially local or even 'native', was an endeavour of cultural construction that aimed to recreate a continuous, plausible narrative as a part of 'writing the nation'.<sup>8</sup>

### **Late nineteenth century (1880-1900) research on medieval wall paintings in the context of a nation**



Figure 3 Unknown painter, c. 1510s. Wall paintings in the central aisle. Hattula church, Finland.

Photo: Katja Fält.

In 1869 an art historian-to-be Emil Nervander (1840-1914) and a group of friends visited the medieval church of Hattula, the medieval paintings of which piqued his interest (Fig. 3).<sup>9</sup> Nervander and his friends had already made excursions to

<sup>8</sup> Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz, 'Introduction'. *Nationalizing the Past. Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe*. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (eds.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 1-25.

<sup>9</sup> Nervander was given the degree of Master of Arts in 1873. Leena Valkeapää, 'Emil Nervander as a pioneer of Finnish art history and antiquarian interests in Finland during the last decades of the 19th



historical sites but the trip to Hattula seems to have been the first with a serious intent in documenting and studying art-historical material.<sup>10</sup> This expedition partly resulted to an antiquarian interest in medieval stone churches and their furnishings from the 1870s onwards which coincided with the founding of the Finnish Archaeological Society in 1870 to fulfil and promote the tasks of preservation and research of antiquities. One of the carrying forces of the Society was patriotism mixed with Christian idealism. The scientific research, knowledge and preservation of the remains of the past were considered to be a holy mission on which to base the future of the nation.<sup>11</sup>

In the late nineteenth century the preservation, documentation and restoration of cultural heritage was connected to the construction of a shared past of a nation. In Finland the nationalistic self-awareness of the wider circles of society was born in the 1860s. Finland was a 'new nation' without prior political independence and for such nations the writing of history was especially important.<sup>12</sup> In the public discourse, the concept of nation often had positive associations. The imagined 'nationhood' in Finland was based on the identification of the nation with the 'ordinary' people.<sup>13</sup> The concept of a nation contained a notion of the historical identity of a subject consisting of a set of distinct characteristics. Chris Lorenz has argued that historical identity is conceptually linked to the notions of origins and continuity. It was thus important for history-writing to detect the origin of the people/nation and show how this was connected to later forms of development by showing lines of continuity.<sup>14</sup> One of the means to construct a nation by using a set of specific characteristics was to use the remains of the past in order to define and validate the modern nation, one with a long and characteristic history. Historical remains were transformed into valuable cultural heritage that represented a line of continuity from ancient times to the present.<sup>15</sup> Respect towards the past was

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century', *The Shaping of Art History in Finland*, Renja Suominen-Kokkonen (ed.), Helsinki: Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia, 2007, 42, 51. The paintings in Hattula date approximately back to the beginning of the sixteenth century.

<sup>10</sup> Valkeapää, 'Emil Nervander', 41-42.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Ripatti, *Jac. Ahrenberg ja historian perintö. Restaurointisuunnitelmat Viipurin ja Turun linnoihin 1800-luvun lopussa*. Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja 118, 2011, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Ilona Pikkanen, *Casting the Ideal Past. A Narratological Close Reading of Eliel Aspelin-Haapkylä's History of the Finnish Theatre Company (1906-1910)*. Tampere: Tampereen Yliopistopaino, 2012, 64; Peter Aronsson, Narve Fulsås, Pertti Haapala and Bernard Eric Jensen, 'Nordic National Histories'. *The Contested Nation. Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (eds.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 256.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Aronsson, Narve Fulsås, Pertti Haapala and Bernard Eric Jensen, 'Nordic National Histories'. *The Contested Nation. Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (eds.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 259, 266-267.

<sup>14</sup> Chris Lorenz, 'Representations of Identity: Ethnicity, Race, Class, Gender and Religion. An Introduction to Conceptual History'. *The Contested Nation. Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (eds.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 27-28.

<sup>15</sup> Ripatti *Jac. Ahrenberg*, 20-23.

especially important and the remains of the past conditioned the sovereignty of a nation where the people had a shared history, a shared sense of solidarity and affinity, shared experiences and a shared heritage.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the notion of a nation was used in an instrumental manner where medieval churches and their furnishings helped to establish and imagine the collective story of the Finnish nation.

The preservation and documentation of antiquities was thus connected to the building of a nation, and the Society aimed at carrying out the documentation of medieval material in art historical excursions it organised between 1871 and 1902.<sup>17</sup> At first, the participants had very little knowledge of old ecclesiastic art, and the limited degree of training was reflected in the difficulties encountered in the making of analyses.<sup>18</sup> The research was based on describing and illustrating the compiled material and then systematising, typologising and comparing it to other existing works. One of the problems the researchers soon faced with Finnish medieval art was that it revealed itself as a kind of an anomaly among the European material. Finnish medieval art seemed completely different compared with the works in other European and even Nordic countries. This difference was negative, alienating and peripheral. In the attempts to harness historical remains as valuable relics that propagated the sovereignty of the Finnish people, this difference had to be transformed into something positive.<sup>19</sup> It was vital to show that Finnish material was no less valuable than its European equivalents, while at the same time there was something characteristically 'Finnish' to be found and to pride upon. Parish churches were useful in this respect because they were perceived as 'Finnish'. They had been closely connected to the ordinary lives of ordinary people as continual, ritualistic spaces where the ancestors had congregated.<sup>20</sup> They became valuable sources for antiquarian and cultural-historical endeavours that were in close connection with the prevalent concept of a nation.

The Society also organised the restoration of wall paintings and tended to regard them as the most important elements of medieval churches, even to the extent that the lack of them made a particular church uninteresting and even

<sup>16</sup> Leena Valkeapää, *Pitäjänkirkosta kansallismonumentiksi. Suomen keskiaikaisten kivikirkkojen restaurointi ja sen tausta vuosina 1870-1920*, Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja 108, Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 2000, 158-159.

<sup>17</sup> Present-day Finnish Antiquarian Society. Valkeapää *Pitäjänkirkosta*, 132-138. See also Emil Nervander, *Kesämatkoja Suomessa, Ahvenanmaalla ja Turun seudulla*, Markus Hiekkanen (transl.), introduction by Leena Valkeapää, Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1872 (2010).

<sup>18</sup> Valkeapää, *Pitäjänkirkosta*, 132-138.

<sup>19</sup> Valkeapää, *Pitäjänkirkosta*, 151-152.

<sup>20</sup> Ripatti *Jac. Ahrenberg*, 52.

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problematic.<sup>21</sup> In 1880 wall paintings that differed from those in Hattula were revealed under the white-wash of the church of Nousiainen under the direction of



Figure 4 Unknown painter, c. 1440s. Wall paintings, central and south aisles. Nousiainen church, Finland.  
Photo: Katja Fält.

Emil Nervander (Fig. 4).<sup>22</sup> He freshly described the paintings in his booklet *Kirkollisesta taiteesta Suomessa keski-aikana II* (*Of Ecclesiastic Art in Finland in the Middle Ages II*) and regarded them as highly unique, although somewhat barbaric.<sup>23</sup> He tried to interpret some of the motifs by connecting them to historical events or Christian allegories, but he regarded the majority as mere ornaments, often representing animals, designed to 'please the eye'. He concluded the description by suggesting that the paintings dated back to the thirteenth century and had their roots in 'ancient Nordic artistic expression' that originated from Ireland and Scotland and arrived in Finland via the island of Gotland.<sup>24</sup> Nervander returned to

<sup>21</sup> Eliel Aspelin considered paintings as art historically more important than sculptures. Eliel Aspelin, *Suomalaisen taiteen historia pääpiirteissään*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran toimituksia 80, Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1891, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Nervander had already visited the church in 1871 during an art historical expedition and noted that although there were no paintings in the vaults, the ribs and pillars had been painted. Emil Nervander, *Sommarresor i Finland, på Åland och i Åbo-Trakten*. Helsingfors: J.W. Frenckell & Son. 1872, 221.

<sup>23</sup> The first part of the booklet was titled *Kirkollisesta taiteesta Suomessa keski-aikana*, published in 1887.

<sup>24</sup> 'Syistä, joita tässä ei voi esittää, pidän minä näitä omituisia koristuksia ja näitä eläinkuivien wertauksia jonkunlaisina jälki-ilmiöinä eräästä hywin vanhasta, parhaasta päästä Irlannista ja Skotlannista aikoinaan kukoistaneesta taiteesta, joka täällä on ilmestynyt kristilliseen kirkkoon, ja joka on tänne tullut Gotlannin kautta (...)' Emil Nervander. *Kirkollisesta taiteesta Suomessa keski-aikana II*.



the paintings in Nousiainen in 1903 when he published a collection of correspondence between him and the Danish archaeologist Sophus Müller (1846-1934). Müller had compiled his dissertation, *Dyreornamentiken i Norden*, the massive style-historical study about the two main 'styles' in Scandinavian Viking era ornamentation, in 1880. One of the styles was the so-called Jelling-style, a tenth-century phase of animal art that Müller connected to Irish heritage.<sup>25</sup> This was without a doubt the reason Nervander consulted him. The correspondence reveals how Nervander sought to back up his theory. In Müller's opinion, the paintings in Nousiainen were not completely lacking in interest but they were coarse and done in a superficial manner. Their artistic level was all in all so low that they had no specific archaeological value. The paintings in Nousiainen were thus evaluated as being Christian and medieval in origin.<sup>26</sup> Despite Müller's completely opposite evaluation, Nervander still published the correspondence. He was thus ready to publically admit that his bold interpretation had gone wrong. This could also be seen as a sign of his willingness to pursue scientific transparency.

Nervander's main interest was medieval art in Finland, including its examination and preservation.<sup>27</sup> His ideas about respecting the monuments of the past were shaped by Romantic and Christian ideals. *Kristillisestä taiteesta Suomessa keski-aikana I* and *II* were specifically aimed to make medieval art known and appreciated, while showing that it was connected to 'the art forms of the civilised world'.<sup>28</sup> The value of wall paintings was in their spiritual content that comprised the meanings ascribed to them during the era they were made and used. Nervander thus emphasised the functionality of images.<sup>29</sup> He did not analyse the paintings in Nousiainen first and foremost as products of local artisans, of specifically native men; the meaning of wall paintings for the Finnish people in general was that they formed a link to the world. For the contemporary viewer, the paintings operated as a source of history.<sup>30</sup>

This romantic, Christian idealistic notion that paintings primarily had cultural historical importance can be seen in the writings of Eliel Aspelin (1847-1917, from 1906 onwards Eliel Aspelin-Haapkylä). Aspelin was a professor, a Councillor

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Helsinki: Suomen Kansainvalistusseura, 1887-1888, 33-34, 37; Emil Nervander, 'Uttalande af Sophus Müller om kalkmålningarna i Nousis kyrka', *Suomen Museo – Finskt Museum 1903*, Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1903, 91- 94.

<sup>25</sup> Sophus Müller, *Dyreornamentik i Norden - Dens Oprindelse, Udvikling Og Forhold Til Samtidige Stilarter. En Arcaologisk Undersøgelse*. Kjøbenhavn: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1880.

<sup>26</sup> Nervander, 'Uttalande', 91- 94.

<sup>27</sup> Valkeapää 'Emil Nervander', 40.

<sup>28</sup> '(...) mutta tämän teoksen tarkoituksena onkin osoittaa, että keski-ajan taide Suomessa koki uskollisesti liittyä sivistyneen maailman taidemuotoihin.' Nervander *Kirkollisesta I*, 15; Valkeapää *Pitäjänkirkosta*, 138.

<sup>29</sup> Nervander *Kirkollisesta I*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Valkeapää *Pitäjänkirkosta*, 139; Nervander *Kirkollisesta II*, 48.

of State, and an art historian with main interest in medieval art.<sup>31</sup> He had also participated with Nervander in the first art historical expedition in 1871. Aspelin acknowledged the cultural historical value of wall paintings and regarded them as the most important medieval relics both artistically and educationally.<sup>32</sup> In his book *Suomalaisen taiteen historia pääpiirteissään (Art of Finland in Outline)*, published in 1891 and aimed at an academic audience, he briefly dealt with the paintings in Nousiainen, although he seems to have based the paragraph on Nervander's account of 1888 with reference to Nervander's speculation of the Irish, Scottish and Swedish influences. Aspelin concluded that the paintings had no artistic value whatsoever.<sup>33</sup>

Both Nervander and Aspelin emphasised how the paintings in Nousiainen were an expression of an unspecified ancient art form that was nevertheless connected to broader European and especially Nordic context. The status or the identities of the painters was not speculated because it was more important to emphasise the overall 'national', collective character of art than seek for the individual makers. Although it was important to emphasise the national character of medieval art, it was equally important to make connections to the rest of Europe. Showing connections or artistic and stylistic influences between Finland and other parts of Europe, mainly Sweden and Northern Germany, helped to justify the idea that Finnish cultural heritage was nevertheless part of a broader European culture. For Nervander, Swedish or even Irish influences were not a problem, whereas for Aspelin ecclesiastic art could not have been even 'national' because it was brought to Finland from elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> For him, ecclesiastic art originated from Sweden and Finnish wall paintings were thus import. The painters were also most likely to have arrived from Sweden.<sup>35</sup> His notion may have been influenced by his brother J.R. Aspelin. He had studied artists from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century and according to his archival records the majority had come from abroad.<sup>36</sup> In spite of that, Eliel did emphasise certain 'Finnishness' in art and the wall paintings could be regarded as 'native' because 'Finnish bishops' had promoted the decoration of churches as a sign of wealth.<sup>37</sup> Medieval art was also directed at Finnish people and it was thus possible to consider it national art.<sup>38</sup> Thus the question of what was 'national' or 'native' in medieval art was connected to the role of the paintings in general, not to their form or 'artistic quality'. Medieval art could be deemed

<sup>31</sup> His doctoral thesis of 1878 *Siipialttarit (The Polyptychs)* dealt with medieval sculpture. Sixten Ringbom. *Art History in Finland before 1920*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1986, 56-61.

<sup>32</sup> Eliel Aspelin. *Suomalaisen taiteen historia pääpiirteissään*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1891, 21; Valkeapää *Pitäjänsirkosta*, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Aspelin *Suomalaisen*, 13-14.

<sup>34</sup> Aspelin *Suomalaisen*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Aspelin *Suomalaisen*, 13, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ripatti *Jac. Ahrenberg*, 55.

<sup>37</sup> Aspelin *Suomalaisen*, 15; Ripatti *Jac. Ahrenberg*, 55.

<sup>38</sup> Aspelin *Suomalaisen*, 21.

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'national' since it had been made for the Finnish 'people' so they could use and enjoy it while learning from it.

### **The researchers of the first half of the twentieth century (1900-1940) and the national identity of 'primitive' painters**

The different renovation and restoration works multiplied in medieval churches in the beginning of the twentieth century resulting in an increasing amount of wall paintings being revealed and documented. More and more simple and ambiguous wall paintings, sharing similarities with those in Nousiainen, were revealed under the layers of white-wash. Medieval wall paintings from Maaria church were uncovered and restored in 1908 and 1909 under the direction of architect Carl Frankenhaeuser (1878-1962) who was working for the Archaeological Commission.<sup>39</sup> Frankenhaeuser gave an account on the paintings in an article about the church with a brief description of the uncovered paintings. The work of the architects had been partially connected to antiquarian interests and the extension of restoration works, especially in the late nineteenth century, and Frankenhaeuser's article clearly reflects this highlighted interest in the preservation of and importance of historical remains in Finland.<sup>40</sup> For Frankenhaeuser the paintings in Maaria were 'of low artistic quality', although this was slightly alleviated by their historical value. Frankenhaeuser was able to date the paintings via a painted coat of arms of Bishop Olaus Magni (1450-1460) which clearly showed that the paintings had been executed in the mid-fifteenth century. Whereas Nervander had thought that the paintings in Nousiainen were possibly from the thirteenth century, Frankenhaeuser proposed that all the previous hypotheses concerning the dating of these 'simple' wall paintings in Finland needed re-examination.<sup>41</sup>

Already a few years earlier, in 1908, the art historian K.K. Meinander (1872–1933) had written a short passage about the newly uncovered paintings in Maaria church in his article 'Konsten' ('Art') about medieval art in Finland. The article was included in a book about the cultural history of Finland, *Finlands kulturhistoria*.<sup>42</sup> According to Meinander, these 'realistic' paintings were 'naïve representations of reality and fantasies of the oddest kind'.<sup>43</sup> Some of the figures in Maaria resembled 'South-American graven images' and the paintings in Nousiainen resembled 'ancient Nordic petroglyphs'. In this connection, Meinander did

<sup>39</sup> Carl Frankenhaeuser, 'Räntämäen kirkko II, Maalaukset', *Suomen Museo – Finskt Museum* 1910, Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1910, 9-15; Ringbom 1986, 44-45.

<sup>40</sup> Ringbom *Art History*, 44-45.

<sup>41</sup> Frankenhaeuser, 'Räntämäen', 9.

<sup>42</sup> K.K. Meinander. 'Konsten', *Finlands kulturhistoria: Medeltiden*. P. Nordmann och M.G. Schybergson (eds.), Helsinki: Söderström, 1908, 145-187.

<sup>43</sup> '(--) i stället har en alldeles oöfvad hand haft fritt spelt att utföra än naiva verklighetsskildringar än de vidunderligaste fantasier.' Meinander 'Konsten' 167.

emphasise that this similarity did not necessarily mean a direct connection; rather 'primitive art' 'travels to individuals and communities with forms that often share remarkable similarities'.<sup>44</sup>



Figure 5 Unknown painter, c. 1440s. Wall paintings in the third vault of the south aisle. Pernaja church, Finland.  
Photo: Katja Fält.

Meinander also dealt with similar paintings uncovered in the churches of Karjaa, Pernaja, Porvoo and Sipoo (Fig. 5).<sup>45</sup> Meinander referred to these paintings as 'primitive'. According to him, a shared feature of the paintings (in Maaria, Nousiainen, Karjaa, Pernaja, Porvoo and Sipoo) was their 'primitive character' that resembled the 'first drawings of children or the fantasies of the wild'.<sup>46</sup> The paintings had been executed with such 'lively interest and perky mind' towards everything but at the same time, in such 'weak-skilled manner and deeply unaware of the ecclesiastic idea-world of the time' that they undoubtedly were native.<sup>47</sup> In other parts, Meinander drew connections especially to Sweden.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> 'En sådan likhet behöfver dock icke betyda något sammanhang med en främmande konst; den primitiva konsten rör sig både hos individer och folk med former, som ofta visa en förbluffande öfverensstämmelse.' Meinander 'Konsten' 168.

<sup>45</sup> Meinander 'Konsten', 168-169.

<sup>46</sup> '(--) påminner om ett barns första teckningar eller en vilders fantasier (--).' Meinander 'Konsten', 168.

<sup>47</sup> Meinander 'Konsten', 175.

<sup>48</sup> 'Dessa målningar, gjorda med så liflig intresse för allt möjligt och så kåt mod, men på samma gång med den skralaste förmåga och djup okunnighet om tidens kyrkliga idevärld, de äro bedräfligt att säga de enda som med säkerhet kunna anses vara inhemska.' Meinander 'Konsten', 169-170.



Figure 6 Unknown painter, c. 1450s. Wall paintings in the second vault of the north aisle. Sipoo church, Finland.  
Photo: Katja Fält.

Although Meinander relied on earlier research to a degree, his use of the term 'primitive' seems to have been clearly connected to the broader contemporary interest in primitivism, the art movement that borrowed forms from non-Western or prehistoric people and cultures.<sup>49</sup> This nominative concoction is also significant in the historiographical sense that the term 'primitive' was swiftly adopted by other researchers and the paintings, until now properly unnamed, became known as the 'primitive paintings'. 'Primitive' had been used by Frankenhaeuser in his 1910 article and he undoubtedly got the term from Meinander, although he used it without reference.<sup>50</sup> Neither did Johannes Öhquist explain when he used the term 'primitive' in connection with the paintings of Nousiainen, Mynämäki, Helsinki parish, Sipoo (Fig. 6) and Porvoo in his book *Suomen taiteen historia (The History of Finnish Art, 1912)*.<sup>51</sup> Meinander also specifically referred to 'primitive paintings' when he dealt with the paintings in the churches of Karjaa, Sipoo, Pernaja and Porvoo.<sup>52</sup> Öhquist also used this combination and it is thus fairly obvious that he was heavily relying on Meinander's text.

For Öhquist, wall paintings offered aesthetic pleasure and cultural-historical value. In his opinion, they were not 'national art' per se, as the makers were local

<sup>49</sup> See Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989; Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive. Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990; Susan Hiller, *The Myth of Primitivism. Perspectives on Art*, London: Routledge, 1991.

<sup>50</sup> Frankenhaeuser, 'Räntämäen', 9.

<sup>51</sup> Johannes Öhquist, *Suomen taiteen historia*, Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Kirja, 1912, 35.

<sup>52</sup> Meinander 'Konsten' 168.



only in exceptional cases, but part of a long artistic development that grew directly from the art of Western Europe.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the book Öhquist aims to emphasise the bond between national awareness and the origin of a specific 'Finnish' art. Originality and characteristics of art made it 'national'.<sup>54</sup> Although Öhquist did not make any speculations or suggestions regarding the origins or makers of the 'primitive paintings' in Nousiainen and Maaria, it seems clear that they represented some characteristic originality in Finnish medieval art that made them acceptable as 'national' art. Öhquist's evaluations of the paintings are more focused on form: they were seen as 'clumsy'.<sup>55</sup> This, along with the note on the aesthetic pleasure the paintings provided and Meinander's modernistic use of the term 'primitive', implies that the medieval church and all its furnishings had gradually changed from mere historical and cultural documents to 'art'. While in the late nineteenth century Nervander and Aspelin were interested in the functional analysis of images, the researchers in the beginning of the twentieth century were more interested in form.<sup>56</sup>

Meinander returned to wall paintings in 1927 in an article 'Vanhempi kuvaamataide' ('Older visual arts').<sup>57</sup> He seems to have somewhat expanded the treatment of wall paintings from his article of 1912. Meinander now connects the paintings in Nousiainen to the Gothic, although he still makes a remark on their 'old-fashioned' form.<sup>58</sup> He connects the paintings in Nousiainen and Maaria to a tendency that was not so dependent on ecclesiastic tradition. The paintings were an expression of an artist who wished to freely depict his surroundings and the imaginary world.<sup>59</sup> Although wall paintings in general were connected especially to Sweden, the paintings in Karjaa, Sipoo, Porvoo and Pernaja were again 'closer to the ordinary people' and thus 'native'.<sup>60</sup> In this respect, Meinander's opinion had not changed from the article of 1912 in which he suggested the same.

Art historian and art critic Ludvig Wennervirta's two books on medieval wall paintings in Finland are by far the most extensive ones written. The first book, his dissertation *Goottilaista monumentaalimaalausta Länsi-Suomen ja Uudenmaan kirkoissa* (*Gothic Monumental Paintings in the Churches of Western Finland and the Åland Islands*) was published in 1930 and the book *Suomen keskiaikainen kirkkomaalaus* (*Finnish Medieval Art*) in 1937. In the dissertation he aimed at directing the

<sup>53</sup> Öhquist *Suomen*, 35-36.

<sup>54</sup> Teppo Jokinen, 'Johannes Öhquist im Spannungsfeld von Kunst und Nation'. *The Shaping of Art History in Finland*, Renja Suominen-Kokkonen (ed.), Helsinki: Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia, 2007, 188-190.

<sup>55</sup> Öhquist *Suomen*, 38.

<sup>56</sup> Valkeapää *Pitäjänkirkosta*, 148.

<sup>57</sup> The article was part of a book *Suomen taide esihistoriallisesta ajasta meidän päiviimme*. K.K. Meinander, 'Vanhempi kuvaamataide'. *Suomen taide esihistoriallisesta ajasta meidän päiviimme*. Ludvig Wennervirta (ed.). Helsinki: Otava 1927, 53-140.

<sup>58</sup> Meinander 'Vanhempi', 57.

<sup>59</sup> Meinander 'Vanhempi', 56-57.

<sup>60</sup> Meinander 'Vanhempi', 58.

examination of the evolution of Finnish art from Sweden towards the Baltic area and Germany. This was broadened further in *Suomen keskiaikainen kirkkomaalaus*. The interest towards Germany was undoubtedly influenced by Wennervirta's sympathies towards Hitler's Germany.<sup>61</sup> He had also travelled in Northern Germany for his research.<sup>62</sup> Other than that, the dissertation reveals a deep ideological background in which religious values, Christian ethics, morality, politics of art and nationalism come together. For Wennervirta, medieval was connected to the soul, spirit and feeling of art.<sup>63</sup>

Wennervirta's aim was to compile a uniform study and present all those wall paintings that were visible at the time, although he did limit his area of research geographically to Varsinais-Suomi (the south-west coast of Finland) and Uusimaa (the south coast).<sup>64</sup> He emphasised the speciality of wall paintings in Finland. He also dealt with the 'primitive paintings' in the churches of Finström, Maaria, Nousiainen, Mynämäki and Vehmaa. His account of the paintings was relatively neutral and he regarded the paintings in Nousiainen, for example, as a result of a Christian world view. Their position among the Finnish medieval wall paintings was also prominent.<sup>65</sup> Wennervirta's attitude towards the paintings in Maaria was clearly more complex and he did not see any 'artistic value' in them. For Wennervirta, the paintings were almost anachronistic and he tried to reason why such paintings, for him clearly connected to magic, superstition, and the fear of the devil, had been executed during the era of Bishop Olaus Magni. He connected the paintings directly to 'popular beliefs' but at the same time made stylistic connections to similar, at least in his eyes, medieval wall paintings in the Karja church in Estonia and the Västerlofstå church in Sweden.<sup>66</sup>

Wennervirta's dissertation was, according to the author's own words, an introduction to his other book, *Suomen keskiaikainen kirkkomaalaus*, published in 1937.<sup>67</sup> Here he expanded the examination of medieval wall paintings to cover all the paintings that were visible at the time. The churches with 'primitive paintings' examined were Finström, Maaria, Nousiainen, Mynämäki, Vehmaa, Sipoo, Pernaja, the Helsinki parish church (also known as the church of St. Lawrence), Porvoo, Karjaa, Pyhtää, Pohja and Huittinen. Unlike in his dissertation, Wennervirta now discussed the ethnicity of the painters, although he was still keen to emphasise influences from mainly Germany and Sweden. The 'primitive' or 'simple' paintings

<sup>61</sup> Yrjänä Levanto, 'Kriitikon ristiretki. Ludvig Wennervirtan ideologinen taidekritiikki'. *Kirjoituksia taiteesta: Suomalaista kuvataidekritiikkiä*. Helsinki: Valtion taidemuseo 1997, 50-52.

<sup>62</sup> Ludvig Wennervirta. *Suomen keskiaikainen kirkkomaalaus*. Helsinki: WSOY, 1937, 8.

<sup>63</sup> Levanto 'Kriitikon', 29.

<sup>64</sup> Ludvig Wennervirta. *Goottilaista monumentaalimaalausta Länsi-Suomen ja Uudenmaan kirkoissa*. Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja 38:1, 1930, 3.

<sup>65</sup> Wennervirta *Goottilaista*, 54-55.

<sup>66</sup> Wennervirta *Goottilaista*, 78-79, 211.

<sup>67</sup> Wennervirta. *Suomen*, 8.

were, in his opinion, made by local men who had not wanted to adopt 'new influences' instead of sticking to 'old, customary patterns' in image-production.<sup>68</sup> The patterns they used referred to an older, destroyed form of ecclesiastic art of which the 'primitive paintings' revealed traces.<sup>69</sup> This was precisely what gave the paintings their value.<sup>70</sup> Although Wennervirta was fairly adamant in his conclusion about the native origin of the painters, he was still trying to establish connections especially to the Baltic countries and Northern Germany. In several occasions he made comparisons to the church of Karja in Estonia and its wall paintings and concluded that, even though the paintings were similar to those in Maaria and in few other churches, this did not necessarily mean that a direct link existed between them. This similarity more likely revealed that this simple style had been common in the areas around the Baltic Sea.<sup>71</sup> It seems that for Wennervirta it was not necessary to cut history into distinct periods; rather for him, artistic and stylistic influences flew in and between each other.<sup>72</sup>

For Wennervirta, the notion of the native origin of the painters of the 'primitive paintings' was clearly based on form. In the case of the Finström church and its paintings, he concluded that their 'primitive' *modus operandi* substantiated their native origin.<sup>73</sup> The paintings became acceptable because of this origin. Wennervirta's attempt to detect traces of an older layer of ecclesiastic art in the paintings increased their value. This partially reflects the similar aspirations of Nervander and Aspelin to trace something of the original 'Finnishness' under the prevailing cultural layers - although for Wennervirta this underlying layer was connected to the Christian cultural heritage. Wennervirta was also a nationalist and thus his emphasis on nationalistic features in art became pronounced.<sup>74</sup>

By the late 1910s medieval churches and their furnishings were treated as 'art'.<sup>75</sup> Notions about the primarily aesthetic function of medieval products and artefacts did not put focus on the meaning and functionality of images in the ecclesiastic context as had been the case with Nervander in the late nineteenth century. The ideals of modernism clearly influenced the way form became the primary feature with which to evaluate wall paintings. Öhquist, however, was still stressing the cultural-historical value of paintings together with the aesthetic pleasure they were able to provide. Frankenhaeuser was more closely connected to antiquarian and restoration interests. One of the dominant conceptual changes in

<sup>68</sup> 'Luulen, että kansanomaiset maalarit, jotka ovat koristaneet Uudenmaan kirkkoja kuvillaan, ovat olleet siksi vanhoillisia, etteivät ole halunneet jäljitellä vallalle pääsystä uutta suuntaa, vaan ovat pitäytyneet vanhoihin totuttuihin kaavoihin.' Wennervirta *Suomen*, 178.

<sup>69</sup> Wennervirta *Suomen*, 68, 200-201.

<sup>70</sup> Wennervirta *Suomen*, 179.

<sup>71</sup> Wennervirta *Suomen*, 179.

<sup>72</sup> Levanto 'Kriitikon', 34.

<sup>73</sup> Wennervirta *Suomen*, 40-42.

<sup>74</sup> Levanto 'Kriitikon', 46-52.

<sup>75</sup> Valkeapää *Pitäjänsäntä* 148.

the beginning of the twentieth century was the admiration of simplicity as a sign of authenticity. 'Primitive paintings' were not acceptable artistic products via formal analysis and they made the Finnish material look peculiar. Researchers tried to transform the simplicity and oddity of the paintings into a positive feature. Simplicity and 'primitivism' equalled 'Finnishness'. Along with modernism came primitivism, which helped to give a name to the uncanny murals, to explain them, and to make them acceptable. It fitted with the tendency to emphasise the original, essentially 'primitive' character of Finnish medieval art.

During the first half of the twentieth century it became important to emphasise the local or 'native' origin of the paintings. Since all writers during this period acknowledged that ecclesiastic art was connected to other Nordic countries, Northern Germany and to the Baltic region, it became important to emphasise what was definitely 'Finnish' rather than what was not. It was easy to interpret simple paintings as the work of local artists and thus implement them with value that could be acceptable. Because the 'primitive paintings' were thought to have been made by local men, they were also closer to the ordinary people. Again, this increased their value. The concept of local artistic expression was also tied together with another modernist movement, expressionism. This was partially reflected in Meinander's writings, where he fostered the idea of independent 'primitive' artists executing paintings freely. His expressionist view seems to have excluded intentionality and consideration and emphasised spontaneity and freedom in painting. Even later, this spontaneity and arbitrariness was seen as one of the defining features of 'primitive paintings'.<sup>76</sup> Although expressionism and non-European art influenced the use of the concept 'primitive', it was nevertheless closely connected to the notion of 'Finnishness', something that was essentially of a native character. Thus, 'Finnishness' was understood as automatically something original or elemental, 'primitive'.<sup>77</sup> At the same time it was still vital to build up notions of the long temporal continuity of the 'primitive paintings' to an earlier cultural layer and by this, to substantiate the longevity and sovereignty of Finnish cultural and artistic capital.

### **Concluding remarks**

The discursive treatment of the 'primitive' paintings in the period from 1880 to 1940 has been closely connected to ideas about continuity and 'primitivism' as part of art history writing in the context of nation-building. During this period, the emphasis on the native origin of the 'primitive' paintings was closely connected to the notion of nation and to the construction of the collective history and identity of a nation. In

<sup>76</sup> Tove Riska, 'Keskiajan maalaustaide', *ARS Suomen taide 1*. Helsinki: Otava, 1987, 137-144.

<sup>77</sup> Timo Huusko, *Maalauksellisuus ja tunne. Modernistiset tulkinnat kuvataidekritiikissä 1908-1924*. Kirjoituksia taiteesta 4. Helsinki: Valtion taidemuseo, 2007, 128-129.

the late-nineteenth century this 'national project' begun to consider medieval churches and their furnishings as important parts of cultural heritage that expressed something essential about the nation. Scientific research was a part of the construction of national past for the Finnish nation. What comes to wall paintings, there is a clear duality in how they were treated. Wall paintings were the most important feature of medieval churches, but whether they were influenced by West-European cultural heritage or native, 'Finnish' heritage was somewhat ambiguous. Of the late nineteenth century art historians both Nervander and Aspelin admitted the European influence, in which they tried to see traces of something that could be deemed 'native'. For Aspelin the fact that wall paintings had been intended for and directed at Finnish people helped define them as national art. Consequently, the paintings in Nousiainen were rather seen as part of an older artistic style than as native. The simple form and ambiguous subject-matter of the paintings was explained historically. The paintings, otherwise unexplainable, became acceptable and almost relic-like when they were considered to reflect an ancient but already disappeared cultural layer.

During the late nineteenth century the identity or the ethnicity of the painters was not a focus of interest; rather a notion about the 'people' that had collectively created art seems to have been dominant. National interest was clearly more important than individual aspirations. In the beginning of the twentieth century a more individualistic approach set in with notions about medieval form and artistry. Now the paintings in Nousiainen, together with other similar ones referred to as 'primitive', were regarded as the products of 'native' artisans. New aesthetic ideals of modernism clearly influenced the evaluations based mainly on form. It was the simple form that made a painting 'primitive' and thus native. There were still fundamental obstacles in the identification of the painters. A profound problem was that there was no literary (or visual) information revealing the identities of the makers. The situation in Finland was challenging in this respect since the remaining material, both visual and textual, was fragmented. The textual source evidence was indirect and did not deal with the paintings or their makers. It was nevertheless important to demonstrate that there had been men from the native population executing paintings and that the 'primitive' paintings could easily be seen as such because of the simplicity of their form. The anonymity of medieval painters did not correspond with the romantic notion of independent creative *artists* who used imagination, intellect, talent, or skill in order to execute works of *art* with aesthetic value. Using the name 'artist' in connection with 'primitive' painters aimed to establish notions of individual creativity as added value for the paintings. Regardless of this, 'primitive painters' were not considered as sovereign artists in the modern sense of the word.<sup>78</sup> The researchers thus simultaneously attempted to emphasise native artistic geniuses who could be considered equal to their European

<sup>78</sup> Meinander, 'Konsten', 167.



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counterparts and the 'artistic sense' of the people.<sup>79</sup> In this respect, emphasising the native origins of the makers was vital.

From 1880 to 1940 wall paintings in general were examined in a broader Nordic context but the examination and analysis of medieval 'primitive' wall paintings was not speculated in the same context. Rather, they were examined in the context of 'people' and of nation. The notion of 'Finnish' or 'native' origin of the makers was prevalent to the extent that other possible ethnic origins or identifications were not really even considered until the 1990s. In an era when art history writing was bound to the nation, other things were on the agenda. The visual material of the past was used to justify Finnish cultural identity and its significance by creating a narrative structure in which all the pieces would fit nicely. This was largely based on projection and idealisation, and on the willingness to see greatness and dignity even in the simplest things. It was also vital to transform the 'primitive' character of medieval art and its products into an expression of positive originality of the nation. Such actions created symbolic images that primarily defined the people and the nation, not the 'primitive paintings' or the men who made them.

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<sup>79</sup> Ville Lukkarinen, 'Taiteen tarina', *Katseen rajat. Taidehistorian metodologiaa*, Arja Elovirta and Ville Lukkarinen, (eds.), Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston Lahden tutkimus- ja koulutuskeskus, 1998, 24-25.