

"Lemminkainen's Mother"

.....Akseli Gallen-Kallela
(1865-1931)

Akseli Gallen-Kallela, was one of the foremost Finnish painters of his generation. Many of his most famous works were directly influenced by the Finnish saga known as "The Kalevala".

The word KALEVALA is derived from the ancient folklore hero known as Kaleva, a mythical giant forefather of the legendary figures from "The Kalevala", Vainamoinen, Ilmarinen, Joukahainen, Kullervo, and of course Lemminkainen, himself. Elias Lonnrot, who in the 19th scoured the country for the tales which afterwards became known as "The Kalevala" (through his translation from Swedish, the language of the educated class, to Finnish, the language of the people), has said that Kaleva is the supposed forefather of all Finns.

In 1862, from the original version version of 22,796 stanzas, Elias Lonnrot published a 'shorter' version, of "The Kalevala", a

mere 9732 verses. As in Norse, Celtic, and Classical traditions the stories had been handed down as much in song as by word: between the 11th and the 15th cantos we find the 'Lemminkainen's story':

Lemminkainen, a jovial ladies man, had set his sights on the uppety Kyllikki "flower-of-the-island" who preferred to go dancing with the village girls, all of whom thought him unworthy allowing him to tag along only if he preformed tasks for them first. Persistent as he was, and deaf to his mother's advice to the contrary he nevertheless succeeded in having his way with all of them, save the beautiful Kyllikki, until one day he saddled his horse, and literally swept her up.

Suprised by his boldness, she agreed to be his if he swore off ever going to war, he, in turn made her swear off dancing or going to the village; the pact been swore to God, they went to his mother's where she in turn thanked God for sending her a daughter to help her. Lemminkainen then went off fishing. When he had been away some days, Kyllikki grew tired of waiting and went to the village. When Lemminkainen returned and heard from his sister the whereabouts of Kyllikki, He tells his mother to "wash his shirt in snake-venom" as he is off to war -he intends to travel to 'Pohjola': his mother entreats him neither to leave for war, nor 'Pohjola' without the help of magic, but he says he is bewitched already, and flinging a hairbrush against the

fireplace, leaves with the words, "I, Lemminkainen will be in trouble ,when the hairs of this brush turn to blood": with that he saddles his horse to a sleigh, and after three days approaches Pohjola. Louhi, sorceress of Pohjola, wonders how he has managed to get past her hound, but he has hypnotized it; He tells her he has come for the best of her daughters, intrigued, she tells him, she will not give them up to just anyone. He is surrounded by sorcerers whom he hypnotizes or turns into stones, all except one old cow-hand, who is vile beyond contempt.

Unfortunately for Lemminkainen, he tells him so, and the old man goes off towards the river in a rage, cursing Lemminkainen. Louhi, meanwhile, coyly promises Lemminkainen a daughter, if he can find the Great Elk of Tuonela. He has special skis made in order to look for it, while she commands the evil spirits to create an elk, which is made from amongst other things water-lily leaves, a tree branch, and part of a fence, the 'elk' is very noisy and creates

a lot of noise and havoc, but because Lemminkainen had forgotten to appease the good spirits of the forest before setting out, he falls prey to the evil spirits, who thwart his task.

He turns then to the good spirits, and after a series of magic chants gets his elk. He returns to collect his prize, but Louhi, isn't ready to give up a daughter yet, and sends him on a second mission, this time to shoot "Swan of Tuonela", from the sacred river of Tuonela. Taking bow and arrow, he leaves for the river.

Already, a few days ahead of him, the embittered old cow-hand sees him stalking the swan, and stalks him in turn. As both men

approach a treacherous stretch of rapids, the old man seizes a sea-snake and flings it at Lemminkainen, it enters his left armpit travels through his heart and emerges from his right shoulder, he falls into the river and is carried along by the current; not content with this the old man follows the body and for good measure cuts it into five pieces with his sword:

Kyllikki, meanwhile, who has kept vigil over the hair-brush, notices that it has started to bleed, and tells Lemminkainen's mother; both women become despondent, the mother going out to look for him, searching high and low, like a mad woman in her despair. She asks her God has He seen her son, He replies that he has been lost, killed, cast into the swirling waters of Manala (another name for

Tuonela, where the dead reside)

She takes a rake and goes there. She rakes the sacred river, and to her dismay she finds, parts of his clothing, then, parts of his body. She assembles together the body, but not the life, she begins her chant...

"Bee, in the sky, my favourite bird
King of the flowers in the forest,
Fetch now for me nectar from high' heaven
From the residence of the eternal God."

"The bee flew over the moon, under the day, into the basement of the creator"...and came back with enough balsam, and nectar, which was mixed with water, and with which she covered the deceased, waxing him thoroughly. She then intoned him to -"rise up from his dream, from the evil place where he lay, from his bed of hard luck."

And so the man rose up ,and said "for a long time I lay through a sweet dream",but she chided him that without her,humble though she was,he would have lain a week longer,and she questioned why he still looked so forlorn,and he told her that his mind was still dwelling on the Pohjolan maidens,whom Louhi was loathe to give up without him killing the Swan of Tuonela.

Then his mother told him to forget the swan ,and give public thanks to his God ,who gave true help,by bringing him back to life.And so the good Lemminkainen went home with his respected mother:

~~The artists thoughts on the painting~~

One of the first things to strike a viewer new to Gallen-Kallela, is the "snapshot" quality of his work, which conveys stillness-in-time whether the stillness of a Finnish forest, or as in "Lemminkainen's mother" the inevitable leaden stillness of death.

To achieve the dynamically strong contrasts of colour and shade he constructed a "setting" in his studio - painting the walls black, and where light could only fall from a sky-light directly onto the model - in this case his own mother, whom he regaled with macabre tales, until she was reduced to tears. Reportedly, a strong-minded woman, she had been chosen, because through her he was able to reach the facial-expressions he wanted, but felt he could not get from the local village-women.

This point is of interest, because he loathed to paint portraits, in the commercial-sense, but when he could combine the two, painting someone he cared for, such as his wife Mary, Sibelius,

Edvard Munch, or as in this case, his mother, in the guise of a role he'd created for them, he plunged in wholeheartedly; and so we have the curious situation of a mother and son being painted and modelled by a mother and son. G-K's mother was as much a support as an inspiration, during the three years he laboured over the work. A taciturn woman, given to introspection, she provided the character with which to build a concrete foundation for his vision, and in a letter to his fellow artist, G. Aspelin, he mentions, how the painting is also a 'poem of thanks' to his mother, while in another letter speaking about his painting he says, "the essence of the mother is stability, wisdom, benevolence, she is self-sacrificing, tenacious, the representative

(corrections made to final print)

~~of measured maternal love". The Kalevala-painting has dignified her belief on a human level.~~

Immediately, we are drawn into the painting; we notice that the canvas is split spatially into three. The black river, the deep route to the underworld. The solid surface of the harsh 'mineral soil' upon which the remains of Lemminkainen are collected. The blood-red, moss-covered stones, from where his mother supplicates Divine help.

As viewers, we are as parallel to the two figures as they are to one another, we become part of an empathetic mourning process.

There is more than a passing resemblance to a Pieta. Christian elements were often detectable in G-K's work; directly after finishing this painting, he left for Italy to study religious fresco-painting. What separates it from a traditional Pieta is it's disunity of style. The mother is portrayed in warm life-tones, in a 15th Dutch-Italianate style, the son, an off-green colour, a very contrasting figure, out-lined, a lead-glass Jesus, his hair and beard ornamentally stylized, his hand poised in the air, though lifeless. The difference in style creates a contrast, which distances son from mother; this could have been designed or may

have been by chance-whichever way, it can be said to have worked.

While paying respect to what may or may not be Christian elements in his painting, it's only fair to point out that G-K. despised 'forced-dogma'. In the liberating bohemian world of turn-of-the-century-Paris, Munch, Strindberg and himself were freed from Scandinavian puritanism, to follow whatever philosophy was

in fashion, be it questioning Christianity or idolizing Nietzschean free-morals.

The rays in the painting could be interpreted either as spirits, or as radiating from spirits, or gods..the gods of "The Kalevala" being personalized ones as in ancient Greece; or they might be an index of the sanctity of the mother, radiating from her, or at any rate connecting her to the gods or God. The fluctuation between 'christian' and 'pagan' symbolism, only heightens the contrast between mother and son.

The 'pagan' element can best be explained by "The Karelian movement". Karelia, (or Karjala) was the area, in eastern Finland from where most of the material for "The Kalevala" was

gathered. Coinciding with the newly emerging independent Finland (that had been under either Sweden or Russia for centuries) the movement-which included Sibelius-helped create a new identity, a mythical recognition for Finland.

'The Kalevala', with its wealth of legends, served to uplift the spirit, to revitalize traditions, restore self-confidence, and national pride; without this last, it might have stayed on the level of the pre-raphaelite movement, with which it has much in common. What came to be known as "National Romanticism" in Finland, echoed much of the 'Jugend', pre-Jugend and post-Jugend styles.

Over a three year period, from the first beautiful sketches in

water-colour, G-K. stripped the painting to the bare necessities. The colours became more subtle, the style of painting more simplified and sterile, illustrating a boundary, between the coldness and distance of death, and the closeness of humanity and love. The face of the mother, rather more beautiful in the early versions, became more anguished and distraught, yet in the final version while obviously desperate she is confident of help, something a Finnish public groping with its new identity could relate to, as people were meant in the pre-and early renaissance periods -the left-hand side of the Isenheim altar for example -

It is interesting to note that the river, was at first, a wintery,

frozen river. However, what G-K. called 'freezing the idea'- reducing the composition to tight lines and tones, is what gives it the stamp of the timelessness of eternity. These tight lines give what we could call dynamic-tension and I should say there are four of them. The first is the harsh pebbled ground; one could call it the 'stage', it provides us with a base to present the

characters, as in a play (not to mention that G-K. did "stage-set" it). It directs the energy from the lower left corner to the upper right.

The second 'tight-line', is the river; the sacred Tuonela-river, no longer white as in earlier sketches, nevertheless frozen in time, it is murky and deep as befits something flowing to the underworld, frozen but flowing, yet another contradiction to

provide contrast. The third, is the line of blood-coloured, moss-covered stones, this is the strongest psychologically, as it is a target-line to the viewer pulling him, if-you-will, into the painting. Lastly, there are the 'Divine rays', between the mother and the source of the healing-spirit not only a line of contradiction, soft, 'yin', wavy, perpendicular, against the sterile, horizontal lines below, of rocks, and river... but a line used as much to emphasize as to contrast the other three 'lines'.

Finally, mention must be made of the symbols. Earlier it was noted how National Romanticism showed much similarity with contemporary Art-nouveau, no-where is this more evident than in

G-K's handling of the flowers in the painting, known as the 'Death-flowers' - though there might just be a passing reference to the 'Japonism' prevalent at this time. Gallen-Kallela used the flowers in other works, where he wished to pay his respect to his recently deceased daughter Marjatta (a name from "The Kalevala" meaning 'little berry'.)

Although the flowers seem rigid and metallic, one has bent under the weight of the dead body, they sprout up through stones, which show little evidence of soil, symbols of life in death, of equilibrium, eternity.

To quote G-K. on the painting:

"He lies as a green corpse by the blackest river, where the Swan

(of Tuonela) -with a sly expression- swims further away. Golden streams of light give the kneeling mother hope, and she sends the bee to fetch balsam from the source of the magical rays. Herbs, green of death and flowers the darkest of blue, raised amid the remains of human corpses. A large frog watches silently, at it all."

In later sketches, the swan -highly valued by Sibelius- has greatly diminished in size, and is faint in appearance -the frog (a symbol of eternity) deleted as were other reptiles, the bee still there though so small, one has to look for it....

Water, is a vital symbol in Finnish painting which is not surprising

from the so-called 'Land of a thousand lakes'. It is an important element in "The Kalevala", a link from the natural world to the one of myth and mysticism. The water of the sacred Tuonela-river is still, it does not give up its secrets, one will only see one's own reflection, if one looks into it, one could walk away, but for the swan, a common symbol in many of G-K's paintings, the ugly feet of the swan are out of sight. We see only the grace and the beauty, we are lured in for a closer inspection, blind to danger, to reality, into the unknown: