

# Picturing the Immaterial – Ascetic Palette, Tonalist Musicality and Formal Indistinctness in Ellen Thesleff’s Early and Late Works



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The purpose of this article is to explore a significant trait in Ellen Thesleff’s art. Her artistic practices were deeply embedded in the development of European artistic circles at the end of the nineteenth century. I will focus specifically on Thesleff’s shift towards colour and meaning – when material colour became part of the content – which was one of the main manifestations of Early Modernism in Finnish art. Her paintings from the 1890s reflect the ideals of correspondence, musicality and atmospheric tonality, a technique which she used in many of her works. Alongside European artists, such as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898), James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), Eugène Carrière (1849–1906) and Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921), I will also discuss her

art with reference to her colleagues Magnus Enckell (1870–1925) and Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946), all of whom used a similar approach in their work in the 1890s.<sup>1</sup> However, I will also propose that Thesleff’s take on the strict achromatic colour scheme, as well as the specific ascetic and tonalist technique which she used during the 1890s until the early-1900s, gave her subdued paintings and drawings new meaning and possibilities beyond the symbolist credo.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, I would like to discuss Thesleff’s art and the technique of her achromatic works of the 1890s and compare them to some of her late works, all which I have studied closely.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, I wish to explore the interconnectedness between music and art using the nineteenth-century

concepts of *musicality* and *indistinctness*.<sup>3</sup> In her book *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society* (2004) Sharon Hirsh demonstrates that the difficult goal of using tangible form to reference intangible ideas was accomplished through careful manipulation of both style and subject. Such heavy manipulation, moving away from the glossy thin and detailed application of oil paints favoured by the academic painters of the nineteenth century, characterises the symbolist artist’s work, a form of non-compliance with traditional rules of representational art. By introducing extreme manipulation of form, colour, and technique, these artists announced to the viewer that their art was not an illusion of reality but rather a jumping-off image into the realm of ideas.<sup>4</sup> However, these highly valued as-



pects of symbolist painting continued to be explored by artists also during the twentieth century in, for example, abstract art.<sup>5</sup> With this notion in mind I wish to extend this continuation also to Thesleff. The method of tonality – one unifying colour to tone the whole painting – has its deep relationship with musicality.<sup>6</sup> And surprisingly, she returned back to this tonalist method in the 1930s. One could therefore argue that labelling Thesleff as a turn-of-the-twentieth century symbolist artist could be too restrictive. Also, to be more precise, I will concentrate on Thesleff's experimentation with subdued, shadowless surfaces with translucent and tonal layers of paint, ink and pencil which emphasise the clear break from the long mimetic tradition when colour was used only to imitate reality, with shadow and light. This is a very different view if we compare with another study by Monica Schalin (2004), who considers Thesleff's early period 1890–1905 as “natural” in their technique.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Thesleff's drawings and mixed media works are a significant part of her early oeuvre, works which, at the end of the nineteenth century, were not even considered as final works or works to be exhibited. Thesleff boldly exhibit-

ed her *Self-Portrait* (1894–95) twice, and this too is a remarkable turn in the 1890s. Thus, Thesleff's formulation of her innovative manner of using medium and colour paved the way for her more expressionistic mode later in life. Colour, subdued or bold, was always her greatest source.

### **The Time of Correspondence, Musicality and Technical Experimentation**

Ellen Thesleff's formative years at the end of the 19th century were a time of great upheaval: escalating urbanisation and industrialisation, and giant leaps in science and technology. The population of Europe grew rapidly and socialist ideas began to spread. The ascendancy of the conscious mind was also called into question: the Frenchman Jean-Martin Charcot experimented with hypnosis and his pupil, Sigmund Freud, developed new directions in psychoanalysis. At the turn of the century, it became increasingly difficult to see the world as something controlled by humanity; instead it had to be understood as part of a universe in flux.<sup>8</sup>

This time of change also nourished spiritual movements and many artists developed

an interest in new visions such as theosophy, Tolstoyism and esoteric sects. Revivalist movements and reinterpretations of the Bible were also popular among the public and artists alike.<sup>9</sup> The circle of young artists around Thesleff in Finland was inspired by the fashionable study of the spiritual world, spiritism, hypnotism as well as the increasingly popular theosophy.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in the 1880s naturalist art had sought to depict the raw side and finiteness of human life, highlighting social inequality and double standards, artists of the following decade wished to open the gates of the unconscious and depict a world beyond the visible one.

In a presentation of French symbolist literature in 1892, the Finnish art critic Kasimir Leino made an observation on visual art: “What future art will be like is difficult to say. But that it will indeed take into account the symbolist demand for spirituality and content, of that we may, I think, be certain.”<sup>11</sup> In Finland the awareness of new directions in art became more pronounced when contacts with Europe were opened up and information circulated, mostly through French periodicals.<sup>12</sup> Leino formulated the symbolist idea of art: “objectivity will disappear and be re-



placed by subjectivity, and the value of a work of art will depend on how we are able to enjoy it with our eyes, our nerves and our imagination.” According to him, the aspiration to move away from materiality towards spirituality was a unifying trend. Although Leino was discussing French symbolism, he traced its roots to Germany, to the music of Wagner and to the philosophy of Nietzsche.<sup>13</sup>

Another major starting point for the new theory of art was the theory of correspondence advocated by the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire in his poems. Baudelaire transposed Plato’s theory of ideas and Swedenborg’s correspondences into aesthetics, opening up to the next generation the possibilities they created for poetic expression. In Baudelaire’s writings Plato’s theory of ideas and Plotinus’s ecstasy were accompanied by the ideas of the 18th century Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) whose texts had a powerful influence on late-19th century mysticism, and through Baudelaire, also on the development of the symbolist theory.<sup>14</sup> Thesleff’s own interests during 1891–95 more or less follow these currents and are the ideological basis from which she creates her works in the 1890s.

One should, however, point out that she too returns to Swedenborg later in life.<sup>15</sup>

The artist’s creation of harmonious as well as expressive effects by line and colour, comparable to what the composer creates with rhythm and notes and the poet with prosody.<sup>16</sup>

In a general note the spiritual culture, such as theosophy, which flourished in Europe and beyond, were key in broadening the minds of artists, but even more importantly they also had a profound impact on the renewal of the arts.<sup>17</sup> As Rodolphe Rapetti points out, two overriding new ideas were to form the cornerstones of Symbolism. First were Baudelaire’s theories of *Correspondence* and *synaesthesia*. Second was the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), created by Richard Wagner, which inspired artists to shatter the boundaries of the arts.<sup>18</sup> To show detachment from the “slice of life” of Naturalism and from the water and sunlight reflections of Impressionism, the poet Stephane Mallarmé sets *the allusion* against the description. The symbol, according to Maurice Maeterlinck, could “be unconscious, be brought forth unbeknown to the poet and often in spite of him, and nearly always reach far beyond his thoughts”. In this it differs from

allegory, which addresses itself to reason.<sup>19</sup>

In particular, there was active collaboration between the visual arts and music. Initially painters began to show an interest in musical titles, colour tonalities and musical structures, and interestingly too, composers associated with artists and surrounded themselves with art and design which inspired their music and which, in some cases, such as the composer Claude Debussy (1862–1918), or Jean Sibelius, formed a vital part of their creative environment.<sup>20</sup> This special interconnectedness occurred at the same time as interest increased in general esotericism and spiritualism, a cultural phenomenon which is today known as *occulture*.<sup>21</sup> And, as we move into the 20th century, I would argue that the spiritual aims of many artists did not end within the symbolist movement as is sometimes claimed. In fact, at the beginning of the 20th century, the spiritual environment was growing and, as we know, artists involved in the theosophical movement began producing abstract art.<sup>22</sup> These artists included the Dutchman Piet Mondrian, the Russian Wassily Kandinsky, the Swede Hilma af Klint, whose art has begun to attract international interest, as well



as a lesser-known Lithuanian artist-composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis who managed to combine both art forms, and the Czech František Kupka.<sup>23</sup> However, with the exception of Čiurlionis, these artists did not use tonalist harmonies in their works but very different painting techniques with bold colours and contrasts. Thus, we can see that musicality and spirituality were created by different means of expression. As the elevating effect of music was seen as being part of spiritual aspiration, visual artists sought to express musicality and lyricism in their own work. Ellen Thesleff's many works from the 1890s depict both playing or listening to music as she was herself from a very musical family,<sup>24</sup> but more important, her tonalist technique can be seen as 'musical'. One of the earliest works is representing a musical theme *Girl with Guitar* (1891), a monochromatic ink painting.

So, going back to this process, one of the first triggers was the aim of conveying *musicality* in painting. From the 1860s onwards Baudelaire's writings on the arts powerfully influenced the aesthetic theories of many artists and critics, in much the same way as his poetics and poetry were at the root

of Symbolism in literature. Newspaper clippings of his Salon reviews circulated among the symbolists;<sup>25</sup> the poet Paul Verlaine reportedly carried one in his coat pocket and quoted from Baudelaire's 1859 Salon review, praising the older poet's imaginative play of associations.<sup>26</sup> After Baudelaire's death in 1867, following the publication of much of his literary and artistic criticism as well as of his poetry, his aesthetics became even more widely known.<sup>27</sup>

The appropriate way to determine whether a painting is melodious is to look at it from a distance so as to be unable to comprehend its subjects or its lines. If it is melodious, it already has a meaning and has taken its place in the repertory of memories.<sup>28</sup>

According to Baudelaire, the deliberate abridgements and distortions of form in the art of archaic cultures – form in this instance encompassing line and colour – were essential to the successful expression of abstract thought. Although Baudelaire never quite said so, a corollary also holds: that the simplifications and abridgements of archaic traditions for the purpose of expression or harmony are, in fact, examples of musicality.<sup>29</sup> Artists of archaic periods, Primitives and Old Masters, were thus viewed as guiding spirits by

the nineteenth-century artists who harked back to earlier art and interpreted tradition through a revival of decorative, mural painting.<sup>30</sup>

For this reason, in symbolist theorist Gabriel-Albert Aurier's view, the unconditional task of the artist was to *choose* between the multiplicity of Nature; to *simplify*, to utilise only general and significant lines, forms and colour. The artist had the right to *exaggerate*, to muffle and *deform*, not only in accordance with his or her own viewpoint, but also in order to *clarify the idea* the artist sought.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, formal means should bear universal content rather than just depict human situations. This was of profound interest and needed a new visual language. Thus many artists were interested in chromatic and tonal compositions. Although various views emerged regarding musicality in art, the treatment of the subject of a painting began moving towards a simplified idiom.<sup>32</sup> In music, as Charles Riley states, the daring orchestral colour experiments of Wagner, Berlioz, and Scriabin exploded in the late-nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> Thus immaterial music and musicality or musical elements in art were considered the route to an immersive and sensory art. At the same time the



idea grew that colour and sound had a direct impact on the senses and emotions, which made them uncontrollable, even dangerous, since line was traditionally associated with reason, and colour with emotion.

This musical and harmonious art was of particular interest to European artists in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In his famous sonnet Baudelaire postulates a universal harmony; he implies that the gifted poet perceives this through the bare hints provided by nature, stressing the evocative and expressive power on the senses of such stimulants as perfumes, colours, and sounds.<sup>34</sup> Baudelaire's poem emphasises the blending of the senses and the intense experience of sensory correspondences in which all enhance one another. This ideology is already visible in the 1860s in the works of, for example, Whistler and Puvis de Chavannes. As some art historians have stated,<sup>35</sup> this musical tendency in art presented itself in the elaborate titles and artworks of Whistler. However, as we have seen, Whistler was not alone with his musical analogies.

The idea of Baudelairean musicality challenged artists to produce artworks with “mu-

sical elements”, using visual devices such as the simplified palette, called by Whistler his ‘one note’ colour harmony. In the 1860s Whistler began giving musical titles to his paintings after the critic Paul Mantz (in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*) had dubbed one of his works a *Symphony in White*.<sup>36</sup> Another critic Fernand Desnoyers thought *La Dame Blanche* the most original painting in the Salon des Refusés, ‘the portrait of a spirit, a medium’<sup>37</sup>. From this point of view, *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl* (1862) is Whistler's key work, which initiated him to colour and meaning, an attempt to combine content with what he saw as the ethereal component, white on white – the colour of a spirit.<sup>38</sup> *White Girl* was followed by other paintings, series such as *Symphonies*, *Arrangements* and *Nocturnes*. Interestingly one of his series began to inspire others.<sup>39</sup> Whistler's *Nocturnes*, such as the *Nocturne in Grey and Gold*, Chelsea (1876), suggest dusk or darkness but also the compositions of Frédéric Chopin, and later too of Debussy, who, in turn, composed nocturnes “as pictures in Music”. So here, for example, the idea of nocturnal landscapes was to focus on a moment when all the senses were at-

tuned to listening to one another. And to attain musical harmonies, many artists began harmonising and reducing their palette, to express spirituality and immateriality visually. All the new elements of harmony created by colour, as well as mist and indistinctness of form, can be seen in many of Thesleff's works but *Spring Night* (1894) in particular is a fine example of this conceptualised vision of the *nocturne* in Finnish art.

### The Painters of Tones

As my dissertation (2012) shows, the pioneers of the colour ascetic tonalist palettes were the Frenchman Puvis de Chavannes, who created a technique which he called “mother tones” with which he aimed to imitate the greyish fresco surface *couleur crayeuse*,<sup>40</sup> as well as the Englishman Burne-Jones and the American-born Whistler, whose tonal technique inspired many younger generation artists in Europe.<sup>41</sup> Another Frenchman, Eugène Carrière, nowadays unknown but in his day a celebrated artist, was a true inventor of the use of a single colour on a pale background. Of all these artists, Carrière, in the 1890s, explored the limits of total monochromatism, tonalism using only one colour,



black or brown.<sup>42</sup> Thesleff's contemporary, the Belgian Khnopff also created his enigmatic paintings, mixed media and drawings of Bruges and his adored sister using a tonalist technique.<sup>43</sup>

The method of tonality is based on the use of one unifying colour to tone the whole painting. Whistler used grey as what he called his 'key tone'. Puvis de Chavannes mixed either pale grey or white to get the 'mother tone' in his easel and mural works. This tonal technique was widely adopted by many artists of the 1890s who, captured by "puvinisme chavannisme",<sup>44</sup> flocked to the Pantheon, Sorbonne or the Musée de Luxembourg to see his murals. One such enthusiast was Ellen Thesleff who was passionately fascinated by the monumental, tonal art of Puvis de Chavannes.<sup>45</sup> She specifically changed her palette and the small, poetic landscapes such as *Aspens* (1893) for the reduction of light and shadow to a decorative surface and a silent, meditative mood. Thesleff's brush technique is also fine and thin. The small painting is a small kakemono, tall and narrow in shape, whose colour world glows in different shades of pale grey, with blue, violet and white tones. The winter landscape is

like an intangible image of tree trunks, water and snow in vertical and horizontal form in different shades of white. The tonal palette was recognised by Edelfelt when *Aspens* was exhibited in autumn 1893. He wrote to Enckell that it was "elated and fine à la Puvis de Chavannes".<sup>46</sup> Thesleff's delicate, poetic landscapes were appreciated also abroad; *Spring Night* (1894) won the bronze medal at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1894.<sup>47</sup>

During his studies in Paris at the beginning of the 1890s Thesleff's friend Magnus Enckell enrolled at the Académie Julian. It was around this time that he painted the small, grey-brown-toned *Self-portrait* (1891) which became the first example of his new symbolist art<sup>48</sup> and also his first colour ascetic painting<sup>49</sup>. The portrait shows a young, serious, perhaps shy artist looking into the distance. The palette is sparse; only white, brown and black are used. This radical re-

**Image 1. Ellen Thesleff, *Haapoja / Aspens*, 1893. Ateneum Art Museum / Finnish National Gallery. Photo: Hannu Pakarinen / Finnish National Gallery.**



duction caught Enckell's teacher Albert Edel-felt's notice and he warned against going too far. *I think that your new works are slightly too monochrome. As I said, you should be careful of being too monochromatic.*<sup>50</sup> Enckell's young artist colleagues living in Finland also found his works strange. The most interesting comment is from Väinö Blomstedt, who commented: "[--] his drawings are excellent but his paintings strange. He has painted an old Breton woman using only two or three colours; he says nowadays that there are no colours in Nature!".<sup>51</sup>

It is interesting how, for Blomstedt, it was the colour ascetic palette, not the simplification or composition, that was the most difficult element to accept. The same year Thesleff created her *Self-Portrait* (1891), a bold drawing with charcoal and crayon, a very similar approach but even more reduced than Enckell's painting. This almost black and white *Self-Portrait* is more reminiscent of Khnopff's eerie portraits of his beloved sister. It also shows us a determined and self-assured artist with a halo created with repeated lines which enhances the indistinctness of the form. The same technique is used later in her even more immaterial *Self-Portrait* of 1894–95.

There is also another reason why the ascetic palette became so pivotal. Modern times needed a new language for the 'new art'. Even though these artists all looked to the past for inspiration for what they created with their specific palettes, they included inter-textuality in their paintings; a contemporary subject with a reference to gesture to the Old Masters or suggesting timelessness with subject with a reference to ancient fresco art. These subjects can be found in Thesleff's sketchbooks from her years in Paris 1891–95. This well reflects the ongoing dualism and discourse of the time. On the one hand, Baudelaire had stressed that without the gaze to history man loses himself to 'superficial' progress, whereas the critic Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote in 1893 that the very notion of Modernism was the concurrent conflict between two opposite responses to the hectic fin-de-siècle existence. Here you can see this wonderful citation from von Hoffmansthal: "Today, two things seem to be modern: the analysis of life and the flight from life [--]. Reflection or fantasy, mirror image or dream image".<sup>52</sup> I would extend von Hofmannsthal's idea and claim that colour ascetic art can, in fact, be seen as art

which grew from (self)reflection, as a dream image and from the analysis of life.

It is clear from Thesleff's sketchbook and the discourse of the 1890s that almost all artists admired the Early Renaissance frescoes which were to be found in Paris in the Louvre. In the international ambience of Paris artists also found the Louvre's archaic art treasures. From this melting pot came their enthusiasm for the "primal sources of western art" as it was then seen, in other words, Assyrian, Egyptian and later Early Renaissance fresco painting. All this was reflected in the change in understanding colour in a new way.

Furthermore, this ideology of going back into 'another realm' was expressed also through synaesthetic remembering; a correspondence of the senses or induced nostalgia was, as Hirsh (2004) suggests, enacted by hearing music, smelling or meditating with an image of the past, all of which were considered in the vein of Baudelaire's method of correspondences. This notion of an *induced nostalgia* held immediate appeal for symbolist artists and was made more visual by them. In its image of a woman completely caught up in the reverie of music, an early work by Fernand Khnopff, *Listening to Schumann* (1883),<sup>53</sup> puts compo-





**Image 2.** Ellen Thesleff, *Pojan pää / Head of a boy*, 1894. Ateneum Art Museum / Kansallisgalleria. Photo: Joel Rosenberg / Finnish National Gallery.

sitional emphasis not on the performer of the music but rather on the listener, who seems able to transport herself beyond the confines of her Victorian interior. Later Khnopff works are much more explicit in summoning nostalgia and in forming organic links with the past as a place to which one might actually connect: *With Grégoire Le Roy. My Heart Weeps for Other Times* (1889),<sup>54</sup> the title of which is taken from a Le Roy poem about nostalgia, shows a woman attempting to create an attachment with a veiled or mirrored image of a past city (probably Bruges) with her kiss.<sup>55</sup> Particularly for symbolists, hearing one's *inner voice* in deep contemplation was the aim. This we can witness in the tonalist works of Khnopff, Carrière and Thesleff.

Ellen Thesleff's delicate tonalist paintings with oils such as *Thyra Elisabeth* (1892), *Aspens* (1893), *Winter* (1893), *Spring Night* (1894) and *Violinist* (1896) as well as her haunting drawing *Self-Portrait* (1895–96) are all ingrained with these connotations such as spirituality, harmony, melancholy – and immateriality. Interestingly, these abstract elements, such as musicality and spirituality, were not first introduced through form, composition or even subject, but through the





idea of *colour asceticisms* tonal harmonies.<sup>56</sup> Irrespective of whether the painting was created with oils, ink, gouache or tempera, colour itself became highly important – signifying deeper meaning and abstract thought in painting. Although artists were able to access more varied colours, for some reason they chose to limit their palettes to two or three main colours.

### **The Importance of Tonalist ‘Non-Colour’ with Hazy Form**

At the turn of the 20th century an artwork created with only a few “non-colours” was a bold move: imagine a landscape painted with only black, brown and white. To produce a painting without colour must have been as shocking as Gauguin’s use of deep purple, bright vermillion and chrome yellow. For example, the achromatic scale inspired artists to explore greyish tonality in works imitating fresco, landscapes appearing from the mist and innovative portraits. Interestingly, artists did not imitate Puvis de Chavannes’ allegorical murals or his Christian subject matter. However, they adapted his tonal grey scale technique to small sized paintings.



**Image 3. Ellen Thesleff, *Kevätyö / Spring Night*, 1894. Collection Herman ja Elisabeth Hallonblad / Ateneum Art Museum. Photo: Hannu Pakarinen / Finnish National Gallery.**



As we have seen here, the adoption of *colour asceticism* brought innovations into turn-of-the century painting techniques. I would argue that the anti-colourist muted, restrained, ascetic colours were a key element in depicting the inner world. However, in most art-historical writing ascetic colour serves only to emphasise line and form, which, of course, is not the case. In fact, in many paintings the exact line and form are blurred and vague. Especially in his soft, intimate and monochromatic art, Eugène Carrière pushed his colour asceticism to total monochromatism, painting with only one colour.<sup>57</sup> His technique with its soft mass of swept colour produced his *fantômes synthétiques*.<sup>58</sup> This new handling of the surface was also the reason why young artists followed his rubbing and sweeping technique.<sup>59</sup> In Finland, Helene Schjerfbeck and Einar Ilmoni in particular used this technique in their paintings in the early 20th century.

This colour-conscious turn was an essential part of the new movement when, as all their theories affirmed, the Symbolists began first with the idea or ideal and then sought to find in nature some correspondence or 'equivalence' that might be used

in such a way as to announce that this art object was not a replication of that object in nature but rather a vehicle for the recognition and contemplation of a higher reality. Thus, the symbolist credo would be called upon to adopt, in the name of the dematerialisation of painting.<sup>60</sup> This dematerialisation, I would argue, was achieved specifically with the non-mimetic palette, the reduction of colour towards an achromatic palette. This method of painting, recreated with the artists' vision, reproduced, for example, something from nature such as a landscape. This led to certain objects needing to be presented in an iconic way to realise this transformation from object to art, from "thing" to "evocation".

A typical method of this was the *estompe*, or atmospheric conditions such as mist or permeating rain, used especially in landscapes, which blurred lines and enveloped objects in a haze that made them less material, more evocative. Also the pursuit of this method was *attente*, or arrested time, shown by means of frozen poses in portraits, stilled water and air, or uninhabited spaces, which could also reinforce the iconic nature of the scene in visual as well as literary terms. By these means, it was possible for

the artist, as it was for the writer, to turn not to traditional romantic images of nature but to contemporary cities; any object, whether country or urban, which held the potential for evocation. As Hirsh (2004) points out, *indistinctness* – the most obvious effect created by a blurred or vague line – is common in European symbolist art. It is also employed in the landscape that provides an almost abstracted background for Khnopff's *Memories* (1889), allowing the viewer to realise the unreality of the game of lawn-tennis that, at first glance, the women seem to be preparing to play.<sup>61</sup> The use of few colours, usually restricted to black, brown and white, or more exactly, concentration on the contrast of dark and light colour. It is clear that dark, muted colours refer to a silenced melancholy state. The manipulated and reduced palette which these artists used created a meditative stillness and contemplative mood while other pursuits, for example, referred to a different worldliness and spirituality.

A typical method of these colour ascetic works was the imagery of the *estompe*, or atmospheric conditions such as mist used especially in landscapes, which blurred lines and enveloped objects in a haze that made



them less material, more evocative and *immaterial*. The pursuit of this method, known as *attente*, or arrested time, shown by means of frozen poses, stilled water and air, could also reinforce the iconic nature of the scene in visual terms.<sup>62</sup> As Charles Riley notes, at the turn of the century grey was considered a true opposite of colour, a “non-colour”<sup>63</sup>. The colour grey, which is, in fact, white containing black to a greater or lesser degree,<sup>64</sup> was perhaps the most-frequently used prime colour in the innovative tonalism of both Puvvis de Chavannes and Whistler. John Gage’s definition ‘the notorious greying, the suppression of colour, was the most sincere of the tributes paid by nineteenth-century painters to the work of Chevreul’<sup>65</sup> ably describes the sources associated with this colour harmony.

A British artist discovered by the French Symbolists later at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889 and who then enjoyed a wave of public interest was Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898). Although the name of Burne-Jones is synonymous with the history and achievements of the Pre-Raphaelites, he was a relative latecomer to the movement and in many respects transcended its aspirations, becoming regarded as the lead-

er of the Aesthetic movement, a precursor of Symbolism.<sup>66</sup> Also, it should be noted that his palette is very different from that of other Pre-Raphaelites who preferred the shine of almost jewellery-like bright colours. Burne-Jones’s sombre palette was mainly created with soft tones of grey and brown and other subdued colours.<sup>67</sup> Burne-Jones’s enigmatic and allegorical paintings greatly interested artists in Europe and his art was widely known through prints and illustrations, artworks which circulated widely as reproductions.<sup>68</sup> It should be noted that Burne-Jones’s art met with genuine international success and became a reference point for younger artists, who saw it as an art stylistically rooted in the past while raising intriguing issues of the relationship between literature and the fine arts. For example, Rapetti points out that Rossetti, Burne-Jones’s teacher, had forged his style progressively imbuing the quattrocento Pre-Raphaelitism with a Renaissance spirit. It was that Renaissance feel that would seep into the Symbolism of the 1890s via Burne-Jones. In addition Rapetti sees that Fernand Khnopff’s paintings that first earned him fame display a strong Burne-Jones’ influence.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Khnopff’s palette of

soft browns and greys which create a static, dreamlike ‘unreal’ atmosphere owes much to Burne-Jones’ metallic palette of brown-greys and black.<sup>70</sup>

### **Thesleff’s Tonalism as Inspiration**

There were also other Finnish artists such as Helene Schjerfbeck who was not part of the young Symbolist group of artists of the 1890s but who, from 1894 onwards, used an ascetic palette in her works. Especially works such as *Cypresses*, *Fiesole* (1894) and *Going to Church* (1895–1900) show clearly her turn from French Naturalism to hazy, vaporous scenes and a very subdued palette. She herself called it “a path to the synthetic”.<sup>71</sup> Schjerfbeck was clearly part of the colour-conscious group of artists who explored the possibilities of manipulating the palette as a means of modern art. Her art took a turn towards even more simplified form after the 1890s when she also began to experiment with different mediums.

What is interesting is that Thesleff and Schjerfbeck spent time working together in San Marco and working later with a Danish colleague, Anna Petersen. Thesleff writes





**Image 4. Ellen Thesleff, *Sade / Rain*, 1933. Private collection. Photo: Janne Tuominen / Finnish National Gallery.**

home telling how “we were all in our own cells working intensively”.<sup>72</sup> I would propose that even though Schjerfbeck was an older and more accomplished artist, her art from that trip onwards changes towards a non-mimetic approach with an ascetic palette and new subjects. It was, I would argue, perhaps due not merely to the Fra Angelico frescoes but also to her relationship with a younger fellow artist Thesleff, who, from 1892 had already converted to greyish tonalism in her paintings. Alongside Schjerfbeck’s *Cypresses* her *Self-Portrait* (1895) and its greyish tone and shimmering background are related to the new technique of tonalism. This might even have been the push Schjerfbeck needed to reach the “path to the synthetic” after which she was able find her own unique modernist mode.

It is quite evident that the move towards colour – when material became a part of the content – was a major manifestation of what



was modern in Nordic art. An artwork created with only a few “non-colours” was a bold move: a landscape painted with shades of grey took landscape art into a new era. The pioneers of the colour ascetic palette of tonalism were Puvis de Chavannes and Whistler who, in their lifetime, inspired many Nordic artists to explore greyish tonality in works imitating fresco, landscapes appearing from the mist and innovative portraits. Both artists were admired and followed by the Symbolists, but also by artists who did not belong to this movement such as Helene Schjerfbeck. Many artists also broke the long tradition of working with oil on canvas, experimenting instead with watercolour, charcoal, crayons, pencil, gouache and tempera. Moreover, these artists created new palette practices, becoming an essential part of tradition in their attendant simplification and manipulation of the palette which were vital to the breakaway from the mimetic ideal of colour and its role in the practice of painting. Thus the idea of simplification, colour harmony and abstraction in painting goes back considerably further than, for example, Kandinsky, Mondrian or Malevich.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, the artists’ aspiration to spiritualism, to the *dematerialisation* of the real became the ideal;<sup>74</sup> the neo-platonic awareness inspired artists to work on the basis of *true art*. These aspirations, towards a mysterious and immaterial art of poetic qualities, indistinctness and suggestion, manifested itself in the 1890s. The dualistic Baudelairean quest was also for something eternal and spiritual which was contained in colour and given central importance in art which strove to depict the modern world and the world beyond the visible. Muted, restrained ascetic colours were the key element in depicting such connotations as melancholy, spirituality, mirror image, inner world, isolation, musicality and intimacy, forming an essential part of the *dematerialisation* in modern painting.

Moreover, what is interesting is that she returns to this technique with the same subjects from the 1920s onwards, as in her *Italian Girl* (1925) to *Self-Portrait in a hat* (1935). It is interesting that from 1920s onwards Thesleff produces both self-portraits and the same hazy landscapes of Murole like the *Rain* 1933 and *Lakeside Landscape* (1937) with tonalist technique that she used

in the 1890s. It must therefore be remarked that the turn to tonalism, which precedes her strong contrasted colourism from 1906–1925, makes her return to what has been considered her symbolist mode. She is using the same technique of tonalism, but these late works differ in their more translucent layers of tonal colour.

To conclude, it is clear that it was specifically the ascetic colour scheme that brought innovation to pictorial practice with a paradoxical shared goal: the achievement of spiritual ends through the plastic means of pencil, watercolour on paper or pigment, canvas, and primer. Artists sought to efface the distance between a deficient material world and the ineffable world of dreams and the divine.<sup>75</sup> This “dissolution from the real world” towards an immaterial work of art by technique of indistinctness was one of the goals of certain artists. The colour-conscious art was clearly created for presenting a new content. Here Thesleff’s musical art offered new readings to the wider resonances of artistic discourse on technique, matter, and medium just as these tested the limits of painting or drawing as a new “language of colour”.





Image 5. Ellen Thesleff, *Omakuva / Self-Portrait with Hat*, 1935. Ateneum Art Museum / Finnish National Gallery. Photo: Jenni Nurminen / Finnish National Gallery.

In Thesleff's works from the 1890s two distinct colour techniques can be seen; one is a palette based mainly on brown, black and white, the other the harmonisation of a tonal palette of white and grey. The first technique points to Carrière, the second to Puvis de Chavannes and Whistler. Mostly Thesleff painted using the second technique, an ascetic tonal palette which is toned by one colour (white or grey),<sup>76</sup> derived from the mural art technique developed by Puvis de Chavannes. The harmony achieved with gentle shades softened with white or light grey was unusual and personal. In *Aspens* (1893) and *Spring Night* (1894) the artist has, with a light tonal palette, created the colour scale of the entire work. Particularly in the opaline grey painting *Spring Night* she has concentrated solely on different shades of grey to create the mystical atmosphere of the shimmering evening dusk. The painting



which is built on tones, is purely musical, immaterial, colour ascetic art in which form, light and shade have almost vanished, surrendering totally to colour and texture.

Furthermore, the extreme restraint in her paintings created an almost matterless, music-like experience. The dissolution of form or modern vaporousness is evident in her landscapes which seem to live in a world of their own. Contrary to those of other artists, Thesleff's paintings were full of gentleness and harmony, which many critics saw to be feminine art. From the outset, Thesleff's concept of Symbolism was an original one. Even though she was influenced by the movement and used themes which can be seen as being symbolist, Thesleff adopted such elements as musicality, spirituality and introspection quite freely in her portraits, never even mentioning "Symbolism" in her letters.<sup>77</sup> Thus Thesleff's colour ascetic work is individualist and in its immaterialness unique. In the end colour formed the frame for her painting. and as we have seen here, for Thesleff both tonalism and indistinctness certainly lived further than her symbolistic period.



**Image 6. Ellen Thesleff, *Järvimaisema / Lakeside Landscape*, 1937. Ateneum Art Museum / Finnish National Gallery. Photo: Jenni Nurminen / Finnish National Gallery.**



## Notes

1 This article is based on my research for my doctoral dissertation. Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, 'Colour Ascetism and Synthetist Colour: Colour Concepts in Turn-of-the-20th-century Finnish and European Art' (University of Helsinki, 2012). <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-10-8047-0> and a later conference paper in the Association for Art Historians Annual Conference 2015, Norwich: "Picturing the immaterial with colour – Symbolist ideal"

2 During my research, I have been in dialogue with conservators and studied these works and their technique in close hand.

3 This concept of 'indistinctness' is by Sharon Hirsh in her study of Symbolist Art: Sharon L. Hirsh, *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). However, my approach is wider and considers this technique and method also with artists who are not listed as Symbolists.

4 Hirsh 2004, 3–4.

5 Artists such as Frantisek Kupka, Wassily Kandinsky and Konstantinas Ciurlionis

6 von Bonsdorff, *Colour Ascetism and Synthetist Colour*, 284–285.

7 Monica Schalin, *Målarpoeten Ellen Thesleff. Teknik och konstnärligt uttryck* (Åbo Akademi, Turku, 2004). Schalin's dissertation on Ellen Thesleff's technique considers the artist's 1890s works as "natural". For Schalin the next period is "The Colour Period 1906–1927". Schalin 2004, 295.

8 Many scientific disciplines saw significant progress: even earlier in the 19th century, the work of Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley had led to disputes on the origin and development of man, biologists such as Louis Pasteur and Ernst Haeckel had spoken about the new and threatening world of micro-organisms, and physicians such as Lord Kelvin had awakened uncertainty regarding the immutability of the universe. Bonsdorff et al., *Van Gogh to Kandinsky: Symbolist Landscape in Europe 1880–1910* (Helsinki: Ateneum

Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery, 2012), 12–15.

9 Exhibitions and catalogues such as *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*. (1986), *L'Origines des abstraction* (2003), *Traces du Sacré* (2008) have all widely presented and discussed the spiritual currents and environments of the 19th- and 20th-century artists. On spiritualism in Finland, see Nina Kokkinen. "Taitelijä vihittynä mestarina. Vuosisadanvaihteen okkulttuurin teemoja Akseli Gallen-Kallelan taiteessa", in *Ota sielusi täyteen! Tutkimuksellisia polkuja Akseli Gallen-Kallelan taiteeseen* (Espoo: Gallen-Kallelan museo, 2011), 46–59; internationally see Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment. British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

10 Ritva Haavikko. "Minna Canthin salonki", in *Realismista symbolismiin. Kuopio suomalaisen kulttuurin polttopisteenä 1890-luvun taiteessa*. toim. Tellervo Krogerus (Publications of the Snellman Institute no. A 14. Kuopio: Snellman Institute. Haavikko 1994), 58–60.

11 "Uusia suuntia Ranskan kaunokirjallisuudessa." *Valvoja* 1892: 25–41.

12 Many Finnish artists read French papers, such as *Revue des Deux Mondes*, *Journal des Débats*, *Le Figaro Littéraire*, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. Salme Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaisymbolismi ja sen lähteet. Tutkielma suomen taiteesta*. (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 1966)., 22–23.

13 The Finnish press also presented writer Joséphin Péladan as the foremost representative of the movement. See, e.g., "Från den nyaste franska litteraturen". *Finsk Tidskrift* 1891/1, 205–213; Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaisymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 25.

14 The late-19th century Swedenborg renaissance was made possible by reprints of translations of his texts originally written in Latin. Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaisymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 31–34, 60.

15 Marja Lahelma, *Ideal and Disintegration. Dynamics of the Self and Art at the Fin-de-siècle*

(University of Helsinki, Helsinki, 2014), 148–151; Hanna-Reetta Schreck, *Mina maalaan kuin jumala. Ellen Thesleffin elämä ja taide*. Helsinki: Teos, 2017), 70–75.

16 The Theosophical Society was especially active in North America. Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1988), 29–35.

17 The Theosophical Society was especially active in North America. Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1988), 29–35.

18 Émile Hennequin, "L'Esthétique de Wagner et la doctrine spencérienne", *Revue wagnérienne*. November 1885, 282; Rodolphe Rapetti, *Symbolism* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), 8.

19 José Pierre, "Symbolism in France", in *Näkyjä ja haaveita. Ranskalainen symbolismi 1886–1908* (Helsinki: Ateneum Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery, 1994), 151.

20 Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, "Correspondences – Jean Sibelius in a Forest of Image and Myth". *Sibelius and the World of Art*. (Helsinki: Ateneum Art Museum, Finnish National gallery, 2014), 81–91.

21 The term 'occulture' was coined by Christophe Partridge in 2004; Nowadays some scholars use this term also to refer to a wide spectrum of esoteric currents which were highly popular especially in artistic circles from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Kokkinen, "Taitelijä vihittynä mestarina", 46–47.

22 Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (Turku: Åbo akademi, 1970); Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art", in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Abbeville Press, 1986). 34.

23 Meda Mladek, "Central European Influences", *Frank Kupka: a Retrospective* (New York Guggenheim Museum, 1975), 15, 17, 28–37;





Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art", 35–36; Rodolphe Rapetti, "Kupka symboliste", *Frantisek Kupka*, (Paris, Grand Palais, 2018), 29–34.

24 Schreck, *Minä maalaan kuin Jumala*, 70–75.

25 The Salons were vast juried exhibitions of works by living French and foreign artists held annually or biennially in Paris. Although the juries were shielded from governmental pressure by a series of reforms, they reflected official taste through most of the nineteenth century. Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, 1, 315.

26 Paul Verlaine, "Baudelaire," *L'Art I*, no. 5 (1865), 4. The passage can be found from Charles Baudelaire's "Salon de 1859".

27 Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques* (Paris : Lévy, 1868), *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris : Lévy, 1868), *L'Art romantique* (Paris : Lévy, 1869). Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, 1.

28 Baudelaire's writings were known to Finnish artists who followed the French press and periodicals. Almost all of them read French, German and some English. Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaisymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 22–25.

29 Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, 3–4.

30 Rapetti, *Symbolism*, 15.

31 Italics by the author. Rémy de Gourmont, ed., "Les Peintres Symbolistes". *Oeuvres posthumes*, (Paris : Mercure de France, 1893), 303.

32 von Bonsdorff et al., *Van Gogh to Kandinsky*, 14–15.

33 Charles A. Riley, *Color Codes. Modern theories of color in philosophy, painting and architecture, literature, music and psychology* (University Press of New England), 1995, 2

34 Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, 1.

35 Catherine Carter Goebel, "The Brush and the Baton: Influences on Whistler's choice of musical terms for his titles", *Whistler Review: Studies on James McNeill Whistler and Nineteenth-Century Art*, 1999.

36 Mantz considered it the most important picture

in the exhibition and described it as *Symphonie en Blanc*.

37 John Walker, *James Abbott McNeill Whistler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 37.

38 von Bonsdorff, *Colour Ascetism and Synthetist Colour*, 135–136.

39 Whistler had made a deliberate strategy of exhibiting and publishing his ideas on art extensively in Europe in the 1880s, his ideas had wide currency in European art circles, and especially later with the symbolists.

40 The term is used in Maurice Denis's criticism of the Champ de Mars Salon of 1892. Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaisymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 178.

41 von Bonsdorff, *Colour Ascetism and Synthetist Colour*, 268–269.

42 von Bonsdorff, *Colour Ascetism and Synthetist Colour*, xx.

43 See for example Khnopff's *Le masque au rideau noir*, 1892, crayon et pastel sur papier, 17,5 x 9 cm, private collection. Michel Draguet, *Fernand Khnopff* (Bruxelles: Fonds Mercator, 2018), 244–245.

44 Beda Stjernschantz's letter home 18.12.1891. Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaisymbolismi ja sen lähteet*, 247.

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