



ILONA HARIMA

Valtion taidemuseo ♦ Kuvataiteen keskusarkisto 23

VALAISTUMISEN
TIELLÄ

SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

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THE ART PRODUCED in Finland during the inter-war period has not been fully studied as yet. In particular, the women artists of the period have been given little attention, and some who worked on the fringes of the art world may even have been forgotten. One such is Ilona Harima, who produced highly personal work diverging greatly from the dominant trends of the time.

Ilona Harima (married name Rautiala as of 1939) was born in 1911 in Vaasa on Finland's west coast. Her parents Samuli and Anna originally had the surname Hohenthal, but changed this to Harima in 1936. Samuli Harima (1879–1962) was a successful Ostrobothnian business man influential in economic circles, and the wealth he accumulated allowed his daughter Ilona to pursue a career as a professional artist. In early 1918 the father's work prompted a family move to Helsinki, and it was there that Ilona went to school, gaining her middle-school leaving certificate in 1927. The following year she began to study art in the graphics department of the Central School of Applied Arts, though she stayed there only a couple of years at most.

Harima drew and wrote a great deal. Her earliest surviving drawings date from the late 1920s, but most of her paintings, mainly works in gouache and watercolour, are from the 30s to 50s period, and. A few of her last works are dated as late as the early 60s, but after that she did hardly any drawing or painting at all. She also produced some small sculptures and ceramics. Many of her paintings are on paper and a few – unusually – on parchment, sometimes mounted on coloured brocade.

From an early age Harima was very interested in oriental art forms and cultures, as the subject matter and overall approach of her works reflect. She was particularly fascinated by the visual world of Indian and Tibetan art, and at an early stage studied esoteric religions and occultism. In 1936 she became a member of the Theosophical Society, and via theosophy learned about the Esoteric Freemasons movement, which she shortly joined.

Harima rarely exhibited her work. She had three modest solo exhibitions at the Salon Strindberg, in 1934, 1946 and 1960, and also took part in the Ostrobothnian artists' spring exhibition in Vaasa in 1944. The works shown there attracted considerable praise, as did the first of her solo shows. This prompted positive comment from reviewers, including the prominent art critic Onni Okkonen. Subsequently, there were also a number of illustrated articles about Harima and her work in women's magazines in the Nordic countries, while the letters she received demonstrate that her paintings also aroused attention more widely. Of particular interest is a letter dated September 6, 1934, from the prominent Swedish

abstract painter Hilma af Klint, which begins: “I have in front of me the Danish periodical *Women of Our Time*, which has some illustrations of your paintings.” Af Klint urges Harima to study the writings of Rudolf Steiner and tells her that in 1907 and ’08 she had herself produced some large paintings under similar influences.

Ilona Harima’s works mainly depict figures, but she also produced some landscape drawings, especially of scenes around the family’s summer villa on Iso Villasaari island. She also commonly includes various forms of animal life, especially birds and fish, and a few of her works portray solely animals. The figures are usually radiant, godlike forms, or children, young girls and angels. These are mostly surrounded by animals or various imaginary plants, as well as symbolic elements such as flames, sun disks and beams of light, huge eyes and lotus flowers, with heavenly bodies and symbols suggestive of water.

Harima’s figures are usually somewhat stereotyped, probably because she tended to restrict herself to the Indian and Tibetan artistic tradition. The eyes, specifically, are often unnaturally large, especially in the earlier paintings. Large eyes are meant to suggest the spiritual quality and level of enlightenment achieved by the persons or beings concerned. Generally speaking, faces have a distant, inward-looking expression. The figures’ poses are often borrowed from the Buddhist/Hindu pictorial tradition, as are their gestures and the postures, or *mudras*, of their hands and fingers.

The work *Enlightened* (Kirkastunut, 1939, see page 18) is a good example of Harima’s working method. It does not illustrate any particular story as such, rather drawing on accounts of enlightenment within Buddhism more generally. A wretched and melancholy-looking girl is lifting a dying bird up to a figure glowing with light, probably an angel or enlightened divine spirit such as the Buddha. This figure is extending its right hand, from which rays spread towards the kneeling girl and the bird, while also raising its left hand, releasing a healthy, vibrant bird up into the light. In the background we can see a glittering blue ocean.

What is happening in the painting can be interpreted as depicting various steps towards spiritual enlightenment. The bird represents two states of the girl’s soul: first dying, then bright and transfigured. The latter stage is also expressed by the flame motifs rising above her. Blue sea is a common symbol in Buddhist art. It depicts *samsara*, the “sea of suffering” that forms part of the endless cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth – that is, a world from which it is possible to rise through enlightenment, or *bodhi*, to *nirvana*, the state of absolute blessedness.

In some cases, Harima commented on her works and their meaning both in conversation and in writing. Such explanations also tell us something about her working method, a process marked by spontaneity and improvisation throughout, sometimes under the influence of almost unconscious phenomenal experiences. She does not seem to have planned her works very exactly in advance, allowing them to take shape

spontaneously during the working process. Her starting point would be some source of inspiration that prompted a creative torrent of images, often resulting in a whole series of paintings.

For instance, a brief comment made by Harima on another painting in the Gyllenberg Collection, *Northern Road* (Pohjoinen tie, 1948, see page 26) helps us to interpret its meaning. She writes that the work shows a spiritual power raising a human soul up to the light and crowning it with a garland, while its material substance falls away like a butterfly's pupa. She also refers in the name of the work to the philosophical and religious source of her subject, the eighth discourse in the Hindu holy book *Bhagavad Gita*.

Here, the Lord Krishna (i.e. divinity in man) tells Arjuna (i.e. mankind) how to achieve "inner light (that is, spiritual enlightenment) with the aid of the divine spirit". Based on Harima's explanation and the *Bhagavad Gita* text, it seems obvious that the large figure in the picture is the Lord Krishna, or "Spiritual Strength" and that the small female figure in his lap is Arjuna, the human soul. Just how much Harima's works express her own feelings and inner self is hard to say. In any case, the garlands bestowed on Arjuna can be interpreted as representing profound teachings and divine guidance intended for a human soul experiencing enlightenment. The little winged figure has already emerged from its pupa, symbolizing its rejection of its material substance. Interpreted in this way, the name of the painting indicates that the human soul in the painting is uniting with the "supreme spirit" and thus achieving the eternal bliss of nirvana.

Ilona Harima was far from being the only artist interested in theosophy and esoteric matters at this time. Many other artists discussed and studied such matters. However, Harima's work was unique in the Finnish art world in drawing directly and openly on her personal thinking, which was not only pantheistic or theosophical, but greatly influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism. Very little was known about Buddhism in Finland generally in the 1930s.

Ilona Harima died in Helsinki's Laakso Hospital on June 9, 1986. Her husband Erkki died six months later.

JULKAISUTIEDOT

Kuvatietojen selitys

Ilona Hariman arkisto /
Kuvataiteen keskusarkisto
on lyhenteenä ИНА/ККА.

Taideteokset, joille ei
tiedetä taiteilijan antamaa
alkuperäistä nimeä, on
nimetty julkaisua varten
ja varustettu hakasuluin.

Kuvanumerojen mukaiset
kuvaajatiedot ovat
julkaisun lopussa.

Julkaisija

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Julkaisusarja

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Hannu Pakarinen

Kannet ja nimiö

Etukansi Ilona Harima
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Graafinen suunnittelu

Nimiö / Mikko Luotonen
ja Emma Laiho

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