



# Bank of Finland

Juho Rissanen  
STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS



EUROJÄRJESTELMÄ  
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Juho Rissanen's stained-glass windows were completed on the Bank of Finland staircase in 1933. In this brochure, art historian Marjo-Riitta Simpanen presents an analysis of the paintings in the windows and, together with Seija Parviainen, an economist at the Bank of Finland, explores Rissanen's career and describes the circumstances that led to the installation of this series of work at the Bank of Finland.

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*Herring Market*

*Juho Rissanen*

*Works in Brochure © Kuvasto 2010*

*Photos: Peter Mickelsson.*



## THE MAIN WORK OF THE ARTIST'S LATER CAREER GIVES COLOUR TO THE HEAD OFFICE STAIRCASE

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The series of stained-glass paintings (1933) on the Bank of Finland staircase is the main work of Juho Rissanen's later career. The artist's best period is considered to include the aquarelle and gouache paintings completed in 1897–1902 and pictures in oil with work-related motifs from 1908. In the 1910s, Rissanen finished a major series of work on canvas, and in the 1920s, oil or fresco paintings consisting of several parts; these do not, however, reach the level of his earlier work in terms of artistic merit.

The later work of Rissanen, who is known for his illustrations of ordinary country folk, is not representative of realism. The series of work in the Bank of Finland serves as a decorative and ornamental space and colour

element in the main entrance hall of the Bank's head office. At the time of completion of the stained-glass paintings, the frescoes of Segerstråle were not yet in place on the side walls of the staircase.

Juho Rissanen was known to be good at designing compositions. Stained-glass painting suited Rissanen as a technique, because during his career as craftsman-painter he had learnt to use the 'contour line', with which he drew the outlines of the portraits of his earlier period. The contour line to distinguish between colour surfaces was also used by Maurice Denis, a French colleague admired by the Finnish artist. In stained-glass paintings, strips of lead, on which fired and often patterned pieces of glass were fixed, acted as black contour

lines. In the 1910s, in France, the artist had familiarised himself with modernist colour theories, according to which he imagined a painting in terms of clean colour surfaces. This was of assistance in the execution of stained-glass paintings. Multi-coloured glass surfaces had to be in perfect harmony, but still arranged so that the visual representation of the stories could be understood. In the Bank of Finland paintings, Rissanen has used rich, warm red only to produce an ornamental effect. It can be found in the cock's wattle, the market seller's apples and the lumberjack's heart-shaped money pouch.

Marjo-Riitta Simpanen  
Art historian





## JUHO RISSANEN — AN ILLUSTRATOR OF ORDINARY FOLK

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Juho Rissanen came from common stock, being raised in poverty in the heartlands of Savo. Accordingly, in his art, he focused on depicting ordinary Finns at work and in their home environment, considering himself in the first place an illustrator of people and shunning landscape painting.

Rissanen was born in the rural commune of Kuopio in 1873. He spent most of his life abroad and died in the United States in 1950. He embodied, on one hand, a combination of robustness and regional patriotism, and, on the other hand, a significant degree of international orientation by the Finnish standards of the time.

Rissanen's childhood was overshadowed by the death of his father and poverty. His father

froze to death in 1884 when, returning home from the market, he was drunk and got lost on the ice of a lake. This was a traumatic experience for the 11-year-old boy. He later captured the scene in his painting *Childhood Memory*, which depicts him standing by and looking on as the body of his father is carried away.

After his father's death, Rissanen had to help his mother support the family by, among other things, begging and performing various odd jobs. Finally, at the age of 15, he was able to secure a position as apprentice to a craftsman-painter and gradually also learned decorative painting. As a qualified craftsman, he travelled around Finland, meeting many colourful men and women, who later

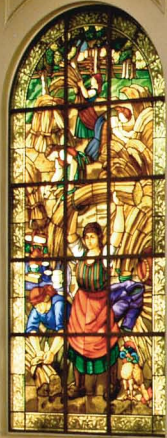
inspired him in his depiction of the life and manners of ordinary country folk.

### **Rising from humble origins to international art circles**

Along with his craftsman's work, Rissanen gradually began to engage in art painting. However, he could not begin formal art studies until the age of 23. During his career, he was tutored by artists such as Albert Gebhard, Helene Schjerfbeck and Ilja Repin. His important mentor was Albert Edelfelt, who encouraged him to go abroad.

Rissanen made his breakthrough as an artist at the World's Fair in Paris in 1900, like many other Finnish painters of the Golden Age of Finnish art. In 1908, he





participated in an extensive exhibition of Finnish art in Paris, which also helped strengthen his position in his homeland. His choice of themes had not always met with understanding and appreciation at home, but in Paris his motifs were perceived as interesting and captivating.

Rissanen was constantly worried about his health, and according to his own words he could not withstand the Finnish winter. However, in summer, he returned to Finland, particularly to Savo, where he had painted many of his outstanding works. After the turn of the century, he travelled in Italy, where he familiarised himself with the old masters. During his travels, he was able to view the frescoes of the Early Renaissance and the Renaissance from which

the artists of the turn of the century sought to draw inspiration. In the early 1910s, he acquainted himself with the decorative art of Maurice Denis in France. Denis's art also inspired Rissanen later, at the end of the 1920s, when he studied stained-glass painting in Paris. He visited Rouen, Chartres, Reims and Quimper in Bretagne in order to examine the stained-glass windows of medieval Gothic cathedrals. The artist was fascinated by the mystique of colours present in stained-glass windows and the illustrated narratives drawn from the Bible.

### **Rissanen's offer for the stained-glass paintings**

Following independence, the young Finnish state wanted to commission its artists to paint frescoes, wall

and stained-glass paintings in its most important buildings. Decorative, monumental works for interior premises were considered more valuable in the late 1920s than single, movable paintings or sculptures. Rissanen's new artistic approach well suited to the spirit of the times.

In the 1920s, Rissanen had settled in France, from where he actively sought to obtain commissions to paint works of art for his homeland. As earning his living abroad was difficult, a big order guaranteed him continuity of work and income. Rissanen was very spontaneous and active in obtaining commissioned work.

In 1928, the artist sent a letter from Paris to 'Messrs Parliamentary Trustees', offering to decorate the windows in the Bank of Finland's



staircase. 'The undersigned most respectfully requests to suggest that the large window in the entrance hall of the Bank of Parliament and the two smaller windows on both its sides be decorated with stained-glass paintings representing different themes suitable for the site.' The themes would relate to the activities of the Bank in one way or another. The artist had in mind various alternatives, such as 'The beneficial effect of money' or 'The curse of money'.

The Parliamentary Trustees decided to accept Rissanen's offer. They decided to pay a total of 400,000 Finnish markka for the work, while Rissanen himself was to cover costs arising from the



*Harvesting*



*Log Driving*



*Herring Market*

glass firing and lead work. The paintings were to be completed in 1933.

### **The birth of the stained-glass paintings**

Rissanen sent sketches to his clients for inspection as the work progressed. The Parliamentary Trustees commented on them eagerly. They went into minute detail, making many specific proposals for change and improvement which the artist tried to accommodate to the best of his ability. New sketches were finally approved, and Rissanen could commence the practical implementation of the work in 1931. He had already gained experience of this type of work, as his stained-glass paintings for the office of the SOK cooperative retail society had

reached completion the previous year.

The execution of the stained-glass windows required the employment of assistants and specialised craftsmen. Rissanen designed and drew the sketches for the paintings on the required scale, oversaw the project and verified, among other things, the shades of colour in the fired glass. The paintings commissioned by the Bank of Finland were prepared in his Paris atelier located on Rue du St Gothard by the artists Edwin Lydén and Paavo Leinonen, who were in charge of enlarging and finalising the sketches for the glassworkers. The glass was cut to size, the colours fused to the glass and the pieces of glass fixed by strips of lead on a big iron frame, which was lifted into an upright position as a window.

The world economy presented problems to Rissanen, as the international currency regime based on the gold standard collapsed in 1931 as a consequence of the Great Depression. The Finnish markka lost value relative to the French franc, putting a strain on the artist's finances. His income was denominated in the Finnish currency, but his expenses in French money. He turned to his clients on several occasions, asking for an increase in his remuneration, but without result. Despite the difficulties, the work was completed on time and installed in the windows of the Bank of Finland staircase in autumn 1933.

### **A series of work on Finland's sources of wealth**

The completed, three-part stained-glass painting is a symbolic





representation of the sources of Finland's wealth, of which the most important was 'green gold' or log driving, followed by cultivation of rye and the fish trade in the port of Helsinki. The parts are called Harvesting, Log Driving and Herring Market. At the request of the Parliamentary Trustees, the female figure in the harvesting scene on the left was made more beautiful than in the original. The log driving picture in the middle was changed, for example in respect of the people's clothing and the appearance of the logs, to make them 'better match reality', while the background of the herring market image on the right was supplemented with the city's Lutheran cathedral, in order to make it recognisable as Helsinki.

At the time the stained-glass windows were completed, real natural light filtered through them into the entrance hall. At the planning phase, however, the artist had already been requested to take account of the fairly limited amount of light in Finland in winter, necessitating the use of electric light as an extra source of lighting. The building extension later added obscured the windows from the other side, and the lighting is now entirely drawn from electric lights.





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Juho Rissanen:

Harvesting, Log Driving and Herring Market, 1933

Stained-glass window, middle part 636 x 258 cm,

sides 312 x 153 cm

*Bank of Finland art collections*

Bank of Finland

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