



Bank of Finland

Lennart Segerstråle
FINLANDIA-FRESCOS



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The Finlandia frescos painted by Lennart Segerstråle on the staircase walls of the Bank of Finland's main building were unveiled on 4 May 1943. In this brochure, art historian Helmiriitta Sariola discusses the frescos' origins and Segerstråle's career.

Segerstråle himself described the content of the frescos in a leaflet published in 1943. A full translation of this leaflet is included in this brochure.



Contents

HELMIRIITTA SARIOLA: WAR OVERSHADOWED THE ARTIST'S WORK 4

LENNART SEGERSTRÅLE: FINLANDIA FRESCO PAINTINGS
IN THE BANK OF FINLAND 10

The Finlandia frescos 10

The Bank of Finland staircase 10

Technique 11

The motifs 14

VICTORY: *Gratitude and faith*

Lennart Segerstråle

Works in Brochure © Kuwasto 2010

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WAR OVERSHADOWED THE ARTIST'S WORK

The unveiling of Lennart Segerstråle's (1892–1975) *Finlandia* frescos on 4 May 1943 was considered one of the most significant art events of the wartime years. However, the frescos – ‘Finland Awakens’ and ‘Finland Builds’ – painted on the staircase walls of the Bank of Finland's main building (completed in the 1880s) had their origins in the years preceding the Winter War of 1939–40.

In spring 1937, a large art exhibition featuring modern Norwegian monumental art was held in the Helsinki Kunsthalle, a leading venue for art exhibitions in the Finnish capital. The exhibition, which presented the strong profane monumental art movement that had arisen in

Norway, attracted a great deal of attention. In addition to the national romantic spirit, the expressive tendency in Norwegian fresco art culminated in societal affirmation. As the achievements of Norwegian monumental painting became better known in Finland towards the end of the 1930s, discussion arose on the need to support the genre.

The exhibition raised hopes that Finland's own artists could have more opportunities to create their own monumental art. The wish to increase the proportion of monumental and public art was made concrete in an appeal published in the newspapers in November 1938. According to the

appeal, art should be incorporated in the current social programme: ‘in implementing building works’ the most skilled artists should be assigned tasks ‘that would guarantee full decoration of buildings and, at the same time, give Finnish art the possibility to fulfil its greatest social task’. The appeal stated that it was ‘a waste to allow the human capital that the country has in its art community to go to waste and not let the artists participate in the patriotic creation of Finland. We are convinced that only swift and vigorous action will lead to the goal encapsulated in the motto: Finland's art belongs to the whole nation.’ The appeal was signed by the

President of the Republic and leading political and economic figures of the 1930s.

Signatories connected with the Bank of Finland included Governor Risto Ryti and Väinö Tanner, Chairman of the Parliamentary Supervisory Board. The Bank of Finland showed the way and, at the end of 1938, Governor Ryti commissioned sketches from artist Lennart Segerstråle for two fresco paintings planned for the Bank's main staircase.

Lennart Segerstråle was one of the Finnish artists in the 1930s with a clear orientation towards monumental art. He held the post of public artist and was highly esteemed. His parents were Knut Albert Segerstråle, theology teacher and a lecturer at the Borgå Lyceum



*BATTLE
Mother Finland
Sacrifice to freedom*

in Porvoo, and painter Hanna Frosterus-Segerstråle. Lennart was the second oldest child of a large family. He lived in Porvoo from his childhood years onwards. His mother's art, life and child-rearing principles were guided by a deep religious conviction. Lennart's youngest sister, Solveig von Schoultz, grew up to become a prominent, profound and sensitive poet and short-story writer.

Lennart Segerstråle completed a forester's degree at the University of Helsinki in 1915 and studied arts under Eero Järnefelt at the university drawing school. In the 1920s and 1930s, Segerstråle was Finland's most famous bird and

animal painter. His objective was to harmoniously combine nature, animals, birds and landscapes, which were all close to his heart. He also worked as a graphic artist and was the first chairman of the pan-Nordic artists' association, Nordisk Grafik Union (NGU), established in 1937.

Segerstråle already began to turn increasingly towards monumental art in the 1920s. In the '20s and '30s, he made several stained-glass windows for churches. In 1929, he studied classic mosaic and fresco techniques at the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen under Joachim Skovgaard, who revived Danish and Nordic monumental painting.





FINLAND AWAKENS

Segerstråle had assisted this famous artist in 1927 on a mosaic fresco (*Yttersta dagen, 1924–1927*) painted in the apse of Lund Cathedral.

Segerstråle could not paint the frescos commissioned for the Bank of Finland until late winter 1943. He was assisted in this work by the painters Hilkkka Toivola and Aale Hakava. Before beginning the actual work of painting the frescos, Segerstråle spent five years on preliminary work that was interrupted by the war and other tasks it brought.

The war strongly overshadowed the development of the frescos from the original sketches of 1938 into the final paintings 'Finland Awakens' and 'Finland Builds'. Segerstråle has described the origins of the frescos and his experiences of the time in

the book *Finlandiafreskernas år – Bilder av ett folk i kamp* ('The years of the Finlandia frescos – Pictures of a people at war'), published in 1944. In this book, the artist also discusses the connection between the frescos and Sibelius' symphonic poem of the same name.

The frescos crystallised into a multi-layered dramatic monumental artwork portraying these fateful years in the life of the Finnish nation. Segerstråle's expression follows the model of the new Norwegian monumental art. Such a method of realisation was new for him. The frescos are narrative, and their immensely abundant and diversified subject matter has been rendered in a realistic and simple way. The pictorial stories form a

horizontal element in the paintings, while the monumental expression is born out of the effect of the massive vertical wedges of light and colour. The viewer finds himself in front of a monumental stage where the historical narration not only embraces time and place but also attains a strong symbolic character. Compared with the bright colours of Juho Rissanen's stained-glass windows also found on the staircase, the colour scheme of the Finlandia frescos is relatively sober. The colours are rendered in hues of blue turning into red and green, and partly into white, brown and black. The unifying colour is grey. The colour scale is typical of several frescos painted during the Norwegian fresco epoch.

Through the years of making the Finlandia frescos, Segerstråle became an idealistic painter. The war-time motifs in the frescos can be understood as a crisis-time patriotic affirmation. Segerstråle's production was in many respects exceptional in Finnish art. In the latter part of his life, his art was characterised by a strong Christian humanist conviction, and he later worked almost exclusively on monumental church art.

According to the contract Segerstråle signed with the Bank of Finland, the frescos were supposed to be ready before June 1942. No decision was taken on whether they should be painted on separable plates or directly on the wall. The fact that the staircase already in-

cluded Juho Rissanen's bright stained-glass windows from 1933 portraying harvest, log driving and the herring market spoke for separable plates. Segerstråle himself recounted that, when he received the assignment, Juho Rissanen's stained-glass windows were to be transferred to a new office building then being designed. During the preliminary stage of work on the frescos, there was discussion of painting them on separable plates and transferring them to the new offices instead. When, in spring 1941, Segerstråle announced that he was ready to begin work, it was decided that the frescos be painted directly on the wall in al fresco style 'because they will then be executed in the

technically best and a lasting manner; because they will then be created and coloured taking into consideration the lighting conditions on the staircase in question, and cannot then be transferred to a place where the lighting conditions are not the same; and because in the current Bank of Finland building they will be in an historically appropriate place, taking into account for example the fact that, during the war of 1939–1940, the building served as the government headquarters and place of assembly' (minutes of the Parliamentary Supervisory Board in 1941).

Helmiiriitta Sariola
Art historian

FINLANDIA FRESCO PAINTINGS IN THE BANK OF FINLAND

The Finlandia frescos

In 1938, the then governor of the Bank of Finland, Risto Ryti, commissioned artist Lennart Segerstråle to draw sketches for two fresco paintings to be placed on the walls of the Bank's main staircase, on surfaces measuring 7.50 x 3.70 metres.

The artist was given full freedom regarding choice of motifs. The first indicative sketches already conveyed the basic ideas of 'Finland Awakens' and 'Finland Builds', which became the starting point for the final artwork.

The Parliamentary Supervisory Board approved the sketches in 1941 and gave a commission of experts appointed by the Bank –

consisting of Professor Onni Okkonen (Professor of art history), Professor Yrjö Hirn and Edvard Richter MA – the task of monitoring the development of the frescos.

After five years of preliminary work, interrupted by war and other duties related thereto, the artist was finally able to paint the frescos in late winter 1943. In April of the same year, an exhibition was held in the Helsinki Kunsthalle featuring the above-mentioned preliminary work and also life-size cartoons of the final frescos.

The Bank of Finland staircase

already contained Juho Rissanen's stained-glass paintings. Because of

the range of colours in the stained glass, the frescos were kept relatively moderate in colouring, putting more emphasis on light and its shadows and depths. The frescos' contents open up for the viewer so that the eye is led from the right up along the rising stairs through the fresco on the left, with the fresco on the other wall continuing the motif in the opposite direction, downwards. This way the narrative begins and ends at the windows. The frescos are constantly illuminated with electric light, for which they were designed. Since this light dominates, there is no fear of any disturbing effects from other light sources.

Technique

Fresco is a particular language of its own. It is painting on plaster on a wall. 'Al fresco' means that the paint is applied on fresh plaster, and it is the purest technique. Fresco painting is not free like painting on canvas. A surface that takes such a large share of a room's walls, as fresco usually does, must be comprehended and treated in strict consistency with the room's overall requirements. Colour choices are restricted; only a certain scale can be used.

Frescos are painted on a wall that has been prepared in a specific manner. The wall itself is isolated with pitch to keep moisture away. A fine wire mesh is fastened on top of the pitch layer to fix the first



AWAKENING

plaster coat laid on it. After the first coat has dried, three additional layers of plaster are added, consisting of a mixture of sand of differing coarseness and lime. The top layer for these Finlandia frescos consists of an equal amount of granite powder and lime. The painting has been carried out on this layer 'al fresco'.

The plaster layers are laid all at once after a short drying phase between each layer cast. This way a thick layer of fresh plaster is created, which allows about 8–12 hours for painting on the surface. When the surface has dried and does not absorb colour anymore, no changes can be made. Sections that could not be painted when the plaster was still wet must be re-

moved and a new layer of plaster added. The painting thus advances partly in small sections day by day. If a larger area goes wrong, the plaster can be removed afterwards. New plaster is then laid and the section painted again. However, this can be quite problematic, since the surrounding areas will have already dried and the intensity of the colours faded.

A fresco is begun by pricking the contours of the picture to be painted into the wet plaster with a sharp object based on the cartoon. The colours can be blended with lime, in which case they will lighten unpredictably. This is a very solid method, although it requires a lot of work and careful advance testing to know how the





colours will fade. This does, however, enhance the beauty of the material and its durability. Glazes are applied over the under-painting. All colours are blended and painted with lime water.

The motifs

The frescos have been given the collective name 'Finlandia'. The motif of the first section, the left wall, is 'Finland awakens'. The motif of the second fresco is 'Finland builds'.

'FINLAND AWAKENS' refers to the dark unknown, the pagan night from which the generations come forward century after century, listening to something that begins to stir within them, the awareness of a particular calling that converges

to form a nation – just a larger form of a single man. The whole presentation is based on the analogy 'nation's path – path of light'. The faintest form of light, the nocturnal polar lights, have awakened the nation from its unawareness, its lethargy. The individuals who have advanced furthest are reaching towards the light, towards development. The urge to move forward has been awakened. This can, from an historical perspective, denote crusades, but it can also symbolise the individual of the present day, as the whole presentation refers to a timeless course of events.

And so begins the struggle against darkness in all its forms, against external as well as internal enemies. The nation – a man – pre-

pares to fight and pushes towards the light under constant sacrifice. The intensity of the battle scatters the darkness – the evil – and makes way for light around Mother Finland, symbolised by a woman with her fallen son, a sacrifice for freedom, in her arms. Whether the sacrifice is sufficient remains a constant question of balance: light and progress or darkness and regression. The climax of the struggle – individual battlefields, the Winter War in general and the daily positive input of individuals moment by moment – blows away the last remainders of darkness. Victory, the spring, has been achieved. A woman dressed in black – the poor tested land – stands at dawn under a blossoming tree, with hands

crossed, thanking the One who grants light and strength.

Everything has now changed. The peace of a spring morning follows the icy darkness of winter. Children are playing free from worry about death and destruction, carefree among blooming anemones and willow. A soldier's wife welcomes home her returning husband, a front-line soldier who still wears the tension of the fight in his features. Two young men are standing in the farthest corner on the left in down-flowing light, the curtain of the future, and plough a new field for the country. They represent shared mental and physical work and could, independent of their types, also represent mutual understanding between classes and



RECONSTRUCTION
Home and society

language groups – on the whole, the entire positive brotherhood of arms. Each has his own tools, his own specific skills for cultivating the common strip of land. They are united by their shared experiences.

‘FINLAND BUILDS’ continues the motif on the other wall. Our nation is faced with new ordeals. This is how it has always been. A group of Karelian refugees shrouded in white cloths are standing beside a shattered tree and look one more time towards their homes. Two women glance up at airmen, one pressing a child to her chest. This is the silent accusation of the innocent against violence. Above, a lone figure dressed in black stands in ruins that are a charred remnant

of the past. This is the war’s material destruction in general, or a single human being who, without understanding why one period of his life has been wiped away like an insignificant phase, still tries to continue fruitlessly the path chosen in the past.

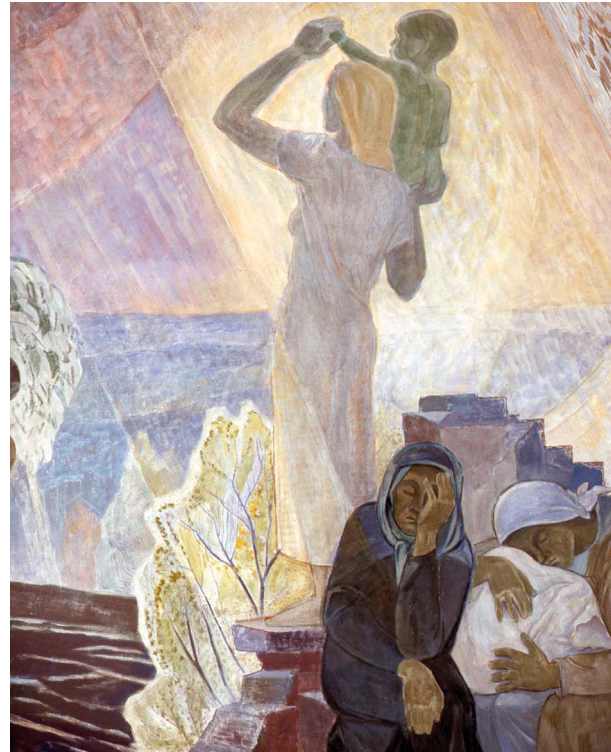
War evacuees are referred to with a group of women who, over a borderline of light and darkness, are moving away drawing an ill woman on a sledge. The central group portrays hope for the future that sprouts inexorably from the ruins of the past. Spring is bursting out, new life is budding, hope grows from hopelessness, and the unselfish will to self-sacrifice turns its back on self-absorbed dwelling in one’s own sorrows. Darkness

has once again been defeated by faith in the light and its concrete power. In relation to the magnitude of the ordeals suffered, the light of the future now expands further than ever before, manifested by the will to reconstruct and act. Home, the nucleus of society, is being built anew. Foundations are laid down for a new era with both new external and internal building material. Above a domestic hearth, scaffolds are rising towards the sky for the new developing Finland. And should darkness come again over our land, a rainbow arches above it as a symbolic promise of the light’s perpetual return when the storm has passed.

'FINLAND AWAKENS' was a motif for one of the walls from the very start. Despite big changes, it developed all the time around this theme in close association with impressions from Sibelius' Finlandia.

'FINLAND BUILDS', the motif of the opposite wall, on the other hand, revolved around several proposals relating to the economy and the general idea of recovery – industry, agriculture, road construction etc. The more proposals were made and rejected, the clearer it was for me that such a solution for the right wall would be unrelated to the left, 'Finland Awakens'. At this stage of preliminary work, external events interrupted developments. The Winter War began,

*FUTURE HOPE
Hopelessness*




followed by the evacuations of refugees from Karelia. The spirit of comradeship in the armed forces influenced basic social attitudes. 'Finland Awakens' began to take shape increasingly as something more than merely material renewal and external reconstruction. And so, through these experiences, the solution emerged by itself as a direct continuation of the motif series 'Finland Awakens' – it was the nation's continued push through new ordeals towards even more real light, towards greater determination. The country's future rise portrayed above a scene of domestic reconstruction has its foundations and is reflected in a

little boy's work in erecting a beam. Even the slightest positive task is thus counted in building the future, bringing light into people's lives.

Lennart Segerstråle

*TRANSITION AND WINTER WAR
A charred past
Towards the future*





Lennart Segerstråle:
The Finlandia frescos 'Finland Awakens' and 'Finland Builds', 1943
Fresco, 390 x 773 cm, both
Bank of Finland art collection

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