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Fig. 1 Fanny Churberg (1845–1892), *A Forest Stream. Study*, c. 1871. Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 39 × 60 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund 2020. Nationalmuseum, NM 7558.
Fanny Churberg (1845–1892) and Maria Wiik (1853–1928) are examples of Finnish 19th-century women artists with strong and promising careers. Churberg was known for her dramatic landscapes, painted according to the best Düsseldorf tradition, and Wiik specialised in intimate portraits and genre paintings. The Nationalmuseum’s latest acquisitions, Churberg’s *A Forest Stream, Study* (c. 1871) and Wiik’s *Self-Portrait* (c. 1886) strengthen the collection of Nordic women artists.

The Drawing School of the Finnish Art Society, established in 1848, had a great ambition to nurture and raise talented artists in a country that had fallen into the geo-political gap between Sweden and Russia after the Finnish War (1808–09). The system of artistic training encouraged the intake of both genders: all artists of talent were important. They were expected to contribute to the construction of the nation by painting its landscapes, people, historical events, and mythology. The emerging art world needed teachers for art classes, members for society boards and acquisitions committees, judges for juries and art critics to verbalise artists’ achievements. It is noteworthy that almost all these roles were open to both men and women.

Looking at Churberg’s and Wiik’s careers, we can see that Fanny Churberg, apart from being a painter, wrote art criticism in *Finland*, *Morgonbladet* and *Wasabladet* and later established a society called the Friends of Finnish Handicraft. She was an outspoken Fennoman, supporting Finnish-speaking schools, admiring peasants and publishing articles in Finnish. Wiik, in turn, was a substitute board member of the Artists’ Association of Finland, a member of the jury that awarded the state prizes for the arts, a member of the Antell Delegation and a teacher at the Finnish Art Society Drawing School. She was also interested in the women’s emancipation movement and women’s rights in society and was one of the organisers of the women artists’ exhibition at the Ateneum Art Museum in 1905.

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Fig. 2 Fanny Churberg (1845–1892), *Rapakivi Rocks*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 29.5 × 34 cm. Edvard Richter and Mandi Karnakoski-Richter Bequest. Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery, A V 4712.

Fig. 3 Fanny Churberg (1845–1892), *Forest, Study*, 1872. Oil on canvas mounted on plywood, 23 × 37.5 cm. Gift of Arvid Sourander. Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery, A III 2343.
Wiik came from a family with solid cultural and socio-economic capital that ensured her a secure start to an artist’s career. Her father was a well-respected architect, and the family had strong networks in the capital Helsinki, the capital of the country. Churberg, in turn, spent her early years in a west-coast city of Vaasa, where her father had a doctor’s practice. She had lost her mother at the age of 12 and, unlike Wiik who spent all her youth in Helsinki surrounded by her family, Churberg went to school in different cities, grew to be independent and challenged the adults around her. Both chose not to marry.³

Churberg’s landscapes
Fanny Churberg began her studies in Helsinki in 1865 under the supervision of Alexandra Frosterus, followed by Emma Gyldén and Berndt Lindholm as her teachers. In 1867 she travelled for the first time to Düsseldorf to study and later, in 1875, to Paris.⁴ She was interested in painting still-lifes and, in particular, landscapes, many of them rather small. As an art critic she wanted to lift women artists into the limelight. Most importantly, she wanted to paint “like no other woman”, and admired Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899) for her career as an artist and her strength as a “new woman”. Other artists who appealed to Churberg’s curious mind were the French painters Gustave Courbet, Théodore Rousseau, Camille Corot and Charles François Daubigny.⁵

The Nationalmuseum’s acquisition
A Forest Stream, Study (Fig. 1) represents a typical Churberg subject, a forest landscape with an element of water. It was painted when Churberg spent her summers in Finland and studied and worked in Düsseldorf during the autumn and winter. She developed her motifs while taking walks in the natural or cultural landscape, and painted rocks and trees, water, and light with a strong hand. Her studies encouraged her to invest in contrasts in which light and shadow play a significant role.

Fig. 4 Fanny Churberg (1845–1892), Finnish Landscape, 1879. Pencil, white cover colour, 28 × 34,5 cm. Gösta and Bertha Stenman Donation. Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery, A II 1347.

Mossy rocks, reminders of the ice age, and the flowing water crossing the canvas make a vibrant composition. She was known to compare nature and human life, and to find similarities between the human temperament and the acts of Mother Nature. Rapakivi Rocks and Forest, Study, which offer comparisons from the same period, show more of Churberg’s way of painting forest landscapes (Figs. 2 and 3). A sketch from 1879, Finnish Landscape, donated by Gösta and Bertha Stenman to the Finnish Art Society in 1919 and now in the collections of the Finnish National Gallery, also makes a good comparison with the Nationalmuseum’s acquisition (Fig. 4).

Churberg became a model for future generations of women artists in Finland, not least painters like Helene Schjerfbeck and Helena Westermarck. She developed a new way of painting the landscape: daringly, expressively, almost explosively (Fig. 5). This was too much for the critics, and finally, tired of the criticism and the narrow-minded gatekeepers, in the late 1870s Churberg abandoned her career as an artist and devoted her time to establishing the Friends of Finnish Handicraft (est. 1879). This career turn might seem a great disappointment from today’s perspective, but clearly reflected the difficulties of the late 19th century art world.

Churberg’s contemporaries regarded her works as “harsh” and “raw”. She was said to lack talent and an artistic eye. In 1892, the year of her death, painter Fredrik Ahlstedt published an article in which he accused her of using “screaming colour contrasts” and said that many of her paintings represented “raw and preliminary sketches”. He wished that Churberg had brought more of nature’s sensitive colours
to her canvases. This attitude, mirroring a gendered view of what was to be expected of women painters, changed, however, and Churberg’s works were later, from the early 20th century onwards, praised for the same qualities that had previously attracted criticism. The language changed: what had been harsh and raw was now seen as original and vigorous – far removed from sweet, middle-of-the-road taste. Maikki Friberg (1861–1927), a well-known suffragist of her time, stated in 1919 that had Churberg been a man, she would have been celebrated as the creator of a new style with her expressionistic paintings.

**Wiik’s self-portraits**

Maria Wiik participated in her first art classes at school, guided by Elizabeth Blomqvist (1827–1901). Encouraged by her teacher the young Maria began her art studies at Adolf von Becker’s private art academy in Helsinki, followed by training at the Finnish Art Society’s Drawing School. She studied together with Helene Schjerfbeck, Helena Westermarck, Ellen Favorin, Elin Danielson and Fanny Lundahl, among others. Like so many other artists of her time, Wiik packed her bags, moved to Paris in 1875 and embarked on studies at the Académie Julian. She was also a private student of Puvis de Chavannes. She was deeply interested in music, literature and theatre – topics that she commented on her letters back to her friends and family. Watching Sarah Bernhardt perform in *Sphinx* in December 1878 was one of the unforgettable experiences she shared with them.

Wiik travelled back and forth between Helsinki and Paris, exhibited at the Finnish Art Society’s annual exhibitions, had an entry at the Salon in Paris and taught at the Finnish Art Society’s Drawing School. Later, her travels took her to Italy. The sisterhood provided by the community of women painters gave her strength and energy and helped her to survive, as professor emerita Riitta Konttinen has pointed out.

Wiik was at her best painting portraits and genre paintings. It might be assumed that she would have painted a good number of self-portraits as well, but the catalogue of her works from 1954 shows that there were only nine of these out of a total of 619 entries. One explanation can be found in her way of working which according to herself, was rather slow.

The Nationalmuseum’s *Self-Portrait* was painted in around 1886, i.e. in the late 1880s, which has been regarded as Wiik’s strongest period as an artist (Fig. 6). At the time she was working in Helsinki and shared a studio with Helene Schjerfbeck and later with Ada Thilén.

The portrait was never sold to anyone, but kept instead in the family, with Maria Wiik’s sister Gustava Emilia Wiik and her husband, Carl Johan Lindberg, the leader of an orchestra in Stockholm.

*Self-Portrait* shows Wiik against a dark background, looking calmly at us. The posture was typical of her portraits, with a half-turned face, the other side remaining in shadow. Wiik favoured dresses and blouses with high collars, as seen in portraits and
painted from the other side. The white coat, dark blouse and red, greyish and brownish colours of the background make an effective combination, creating space for her sharp gaze that looks tired and annoyed (Fig. 9). At this point she was losing her eyesight and knew that this would mean an end to her life-long passion, painting.

photographs of her (Figs. 7 and 8). In this self-portrait the white collar creates a diagonal element, reflecting light and highlighting her face. The focus is on her eyebrow, eye and straight nose. She chose to paint with dark colours, reflecting her admiration of older French and Dutch art. In her later self-portrait from 1917, the angle of the face remains the same, but is

Fig. 6 Maria Wiik (1853–1928), Self-Portrait, c. 1886. Oil on canvas, 41.1 × 33.3 cm. Purchase: the Friends of the Nationalmuseum 2020. Nationalmuseum, NM 7559.

Fig. 7 Maria Wiik (1853–1928), Self-Portrait. Chalk, 47 × 33.7 cm. Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery. A III 2753:35.

Fig. 8 Unknown Photographer, Maria Wiik. Photography, 10.0 × 6.0 cm. Finnish Heritage Agency, Helsinki, HK10000:1194.
The reception of Churberg and Wiik

Fanny Churberg and Maria Wiik participated in the annual art exhibitions organised by the Finnish Art Society. They received grants and held positions in the art world. Yet their works were not widely acknowledged, and criticism of them was mostly harshly phrased. The Finnish Art Society bought its first painting by Churberg in 1880: A Winter Landscape, After Sunset (Fig. 11). Wiik’s work, in turn, was acquired in 1883, when Elsa (Fig. 10) was added to the collections.15 Outside Finland, representation of the two artists’ works is much more sporadic. As an example, the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm had no painting by Wiik before the recent acquisition. Fanny Churberg had been represented in its collections by four drawings, donated by Gösta Stenman via the Friends of the Nationalmuseum in 1934.

Both artists started to establish a reputation during the first decades of the 20th century. For Churberg this happened well after her death, whereas Wiik was able to experience the growing interest herself. One of the key figures in promoting these artists was Gösta Stenman (1888–1947), a gallerist and an art collector in the making, who was interested in young and emerging artists, but also those who had been slightly marginalised. He not only organised exhibitions in Helsinki and from 1934 onwards in Stockholm, but also bought everything he possibly could. As an example, in 1916 Stenman approached Maria Wiik several times before she agreed to meet him. “In just two hours the whole stock was sold out and I just sat there, exhausted, with money in my hand”, Wiik wrote to her niece Elsa Lindberg.16 Stenman’s role was central in rediscovering Churberg: when he organised her exhibition in October 1919 it caused a small sensation. It was stated that Finnish art history needed to be rewritten, giving Churberg a more prominent place than before.17

Churberg and Wiik were included in the earliest Finnish art history publications, written by art historians Johannes Öhquist (1912), Ludvig Wennervirta (1926) and Onni Okkonen (1945, 1946 and 1955). Johannes Öhquist named Churberg as “one of the most original and independent women artists” and characterised her works as “masculine and strong”. He referred to a commonly known characterisation, according to which Churberg had had “more devil in her than any other woman artist”, and was sorry that she had given up painting. Writing about Wiik, Öhquist mentioned her technique and use of colour.18 Wennervirta saw real value in Churberg’s paintings, described her as a true colourist,
were expected to fit into a format and to paint softly and according to conventions. If they did not, their works were classified as masculine, radical or even devilish. Words and expressions varied, but the idea was the same: testing the limits of expression meant testing the limits of gender, too.

All the major names of Finnish art history were gradually given monographs of their own. Fanny Churberg and Maria Wiik, too, were explored in greater depth. Helena Westermarck, who had a background as an artist, studied Churberg in an article published in 1935 in the journal *Finsk Tidsskrift*, with a fuller version appearing in a publication *Tre konstnärinnor* (Three artists) in 1937.\(^2\) Aune Lindström, curator and later director of the Ateneum Art Museum, wrote a monograph on Churberg’s art in 1938.\(^2\) In these texts, she was analysed from the vantage point of her being a woman. Wiik, in turn, was the subject of Pia Katerma’s doctoral dissertation in 1954. Riitta Konttinen, the leading scholar on Finnish women artists since the 1980s, continued the analysis and wrote a book about Maria Wiik in 2000 and one on Churberg in 2012, showing that there is still much to discover from today’s perspective, not least from the standpoint of gender.

Notes:

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and mentioned that the early critics had treated her unjustly. He wrote about Maria Wiik’s career, too, but showed significantly less interest.\(^19\) Okkonen, a professor of art history at Helsinki University, was in favour of Wiik. He complimented her art from the 1880s and compared her portraits of children to the works of Frans Hals. Regarding Churberg, Okkonen had many serious reservations. In his eyes, she lacked talent and was uneven. He had to concede, though, that Churberg had developed “independently”, had shown “bold temperament” and had been a radical artist in her own time, even a forerunner of Finnish expressionism.\(^20\)

These early analyses interestingly demonstrate the issues involved: women were expected to fit into a format and to paint softly and according to conventions. If they did not, their works were classified as masculine, radical or even devilish. Words and expressions varied, but the idea was the same: testing the limits of expression meant testing the limits of gender, too.

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Notes:
15. Pettersson 2008, pp. 324 and 326. Today the Finnish National Gallery has 64 Fanny Churberg paintings and drawings and an extensive collection of 909 works by Maria Wiik. Most of Wiik’s works are sketches and drawings, 84 being paintings. Sylvie Bonneau donated many of the sketches to the Ateneum Art Museum in 1948 (see Katerma 1954, p. 238).

Fig. 11 Fanny Churberg (1845–1892), Winter Landscape, 1880. Oil on canvas, 73.5 × 105 cm. Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery, A I 189.