19th-Century Finnish Landscape Painting
From Romantic Views to Colour Experiments

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Fig. 1 Magnus von Wright (1805–1868), *Landscape in Lielax*, 1861. Oil on canvas, 37.5 × 53.5 cm. Purchase: Sara and Johan Emil Graumann Fund 2020 (accession 2021). Nationalmuseum, NM 7602.
Finnish landscape paintings are known mostly for their bright and sharp Nordic light, images of snow and dense woodlands. Dramatic views in the best Düsseldorf tradition or examples of symbolistic landscapes have been discussed frequently, but less attention has been paid to romantic landscapes and some of the first free colour experiments. This article looks at the latter category using the recently acquired paintings by Magnus von Wright, Emma Gyldén and Maria Wiik as examples.

How to portray a nation? How can it be illustrated? These were the questions that Finnish professors, politicians, authors, and artists pondered after Sweden had lost Finland to Russia in 1809. In this geopolitical situation, landscapes became a symbolic way of picturing the Finnish nation, and the first Finnish landscape painters were tasked with painting the country from the south to the north.

The most ambitious undertaking was a publication named Finland framställdt i teckningar (1845–52), written by Zacharias Topelius and illustrated by artists such as Johan Knutson, P. A. Kruskopf and Magnus von Wright, who contributed 17 works. The publication had a clear mission: it was expected to create a picture of a country with both pristine and built-up landscapes: lake views, rapids, and forests, as well as lighthouses, churches, and cities. It can be claimed that this created a framework for Finnish landscape painting for years to come.

**Romantic ideals**

Magnus von Wright (1805–1868), painter, board member of the Finnish Art Society and skillful conservator of birds, was the oldest of three artist brothers, with the two younger ones being Wilhelm (1810–1887) and Ferdinand (1822–1906). He specialised in painting landscapes and birds and kept a comprehensive journal of his works.

When looking more closely at the Nationalmuseum’s acquisition Landscape in Lielax (1861), we can see a carefully painted image of a manor house, beautifully located in a...
romantic landscape (fig. 1). The building is seen from a hill, bathed in sunlight, whereas the forests are in shadow. The lake reflects the clouds passing by. Von Wright’s detailed diaries reveal that he visited Lielax, which is situated close to Tampere in Finland, several times in 1861. At the time, the building was owned by Major General Clas Alfred Stjernvall (1893–1869). It was customary for the Finnish upper class to commission portraits of their possessions, manor houses included. This painting was, however, sold for 50 rubles to Referendary-Secretary Oscar Norrmén, who had married Stjernvall’s daughter Selma Emelie in 1855.

According to art historian Aune Lindström, who conducted the first academic research on the von Wright brothers in 1932, Magnus von Wright’s landscape portraits were slightly mechanical, and she argued that commissions like these limited his artistic creativity. On the other hand, when looking at von Wright’s production, he always chose subjects that were true to nature and he seemed to enjoy painting landscapes, with or without buildings. Manor houses were typically painted as a delicate centrepiece in a landscape (figs. 2 and 3).

His landscapes were not only popular but also well-received by his contemporaries and many of them were quickly purchased for the collection of the Finnish Art Society. His greatest admirer, professor and poet Fredrik Cygnaeus, praised the paintings in Morgonbladet, saying that Magnus and his brother Ferdinand use colours like the national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg uses words. That was perhaps the highest compliment one could possibly receive.

Peasant life
Emma Gyldén-von Schantz (1835–1874) began her studies under the supervision of Berndt Abraham Godenhjelm in the Finnish Art Society, continued them in Stockholm in 1863–64 with Johan Edvard Bergh and later with Hans Gude in Düsseldorf and Karlsruhe. She made her debut in 1854, and her work was included in the collection of the Finnish Art Society in 1867 (fig. 4).
Experimental approach

Maria Wiik (1853–1928) was known as a skilled portrait painter, but she devoted time to some landscapes too, either in oils or watercolours, especially during her trips in France, Italy, and Norway. Her portraits were realistic, capturing the personality of the sitter, whereas her landscapes are freer.

Some details differ in this version, such as the costume of the woman. She is bareheaded and carries only one oar in her hand. Also, the wooden fence behind her is more rustic in style.

Landscape near Björneborg (fig. 6) is a typically idealistic landscape painting that features a little boy with a fishing rod, a girl peeking into a barrel and a woman carrying two oars on her right shoulder. The landscape was painted close to the city of Pori (Björneborg) on western coast of Finland, the birthplace of her husband Fabian Wilhelm von Schantz.

Gyldén painted another version of the same subject in 1865 (fig. 5).12 This painting was acquired by Fredrik Cygnaeus, who had the ambitious idea of purchasing at least one painting from all living Finnish artists.13

Gyldén took part in the annual exhibitions in Helsinki and was frequently mentioned in the exhibition reviews.9 One, published in July 1868, commented that she had “listened to nature with a warm heart” and suggested that some years in France would help her to the next level – but there was no doubt of her talent.10 However, her career ended all too soon when she died just 38 years old. Newspaper Sanomia Turusta (News from Turku) reported her death, praising her poetically spirited paintings that were pleasing to the spectator’s eye.11


Fig. 6 Emma Gyldén (1835–1874), Landscape near Björneborg. Oil on canvas, 52 × 73 cm. Purchase: Lars Vogel Fund 2021. Nationalmuseum, NM 7630.
and more experimental in character, mirroring the plain air painting. *Landscape by a Lake* was painted wet on wet on a thin cloth that was then glued to a cardboard (fig. 7). The brushwork was swift, and Wiik has elegantly captured the reflections of the sky on the surface of the water. Conservator Fernando Caceres, at the Nationalmuseum, has shown how the work was pinned on a wall before it was later framed.

In 1879, Wiik painted a work similar in style, *Landscape in St. Cloud*, when she spent the summer months in Normandie (fig. 8). This painting suggests that Wiik experimented with a new painting technique and palette, whereas her portraits are more detailed and have a darker colour scale. It is worth noting that there are some similarities with a painting by Wiik’s artist friend and colleague Julia Stigzelius-de Cock, who painted *Summer Day in Normandy* (1879) the same summer (fig. 9).

**Space for change**

These three acquisitions feature the different ways of approaching the landscape in 19th-century Finnish painting. Von Wright’s paintings closely follow the tradition he created in *Finland framställdt i teckningar*. Buildings sit in the landscape, they catch the eye but do not dominate the painting. Also, Emma Gyldén’s landscape, showing peasants in their daily environment, on their way to the fishing trip perhaps, focuses more on the scenery than people in it. Both paintings are typical of their time and present buildings and people in harmony with nature. Maria Wiik, on the other hand, is interested in colour and new painting techniques, leaving behind the 19th-century tradition represented by the former generations.

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**Fig. 7** Maria Wiik (1853–1928), *Landscape by a Lake*.
Oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 32 × 18 cm.
Nationalmuseum, NM 7631.
All the above-mentioned artists studied outside the Finnish borders and had the opportunity to travel. Von Wright, who stayed closest to Finland, chose to work mostly with Finnish landscapes. Gyldén’s gentle interpretations of nature were given names rooted to the Finnish soil. In contrast to this, Maria Wiik did not paint landscapes as depictions of a nation, rather focused on a landscape as such.

Notes:
9. See for example *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 13 May 1867; Wiborgs Tidning, 13 April 1870; Helsingfors Dagblad, 11 May 1870; Finland’s Allmänna Tidning, 2 July 1870; Helsingfors Dagblad, 3 May 1873; Vikingen, 11 July 1874. 10. *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 6 July 1868.

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**Fig. 8** Maria Wiik (1853–1928), *Landscape in St. Cloud*, 1879. Private collection.

**Fig. 9** Julia Stigzelius-de Cock (1840–1923), *Summer Day in Normandy*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 53.5 × 71.5 cm. Purchase 1880. Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, A I 163.