



Akseli Gallen-Kallela's Nude Studies

Susanna Pettersson
Director General

Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm
Volume 26:1

Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, is published with generous support from the Friends of the Nationalmuseum.

Nationalmuseum collaborates with Svenska Dagbladet, Bank of America Merrill Lynch, Grand Hôtel Stockholm, The Wineagency and the Friends of the Nationalmuseum.

Cover Illustration

Daniel Seghers (1590–1661) and Erasmus Quellinus the Younger (1607–1678), *Flower Garland with the Standing Virgin and Child*, c. 1645–50. Oil on copper, 85.5 x 61.5 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7505.

Publisher

Susanna Pettersson, Director General.

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Ludvig Florén, Magnus Olausson and Martin Olin.

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Graphic Design

BIGG

Layout

Agneta Bervokk

Translation and Language Editing

Clare Barnes and Martin Naylor

Publishing

Ludvig Florén, Magnus Olausson, and Martin Olin (Editors) and Ingrid Lindell (Publications Manager) *Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum* is published annually and contains articles on the history and theory of art relating to the collections of the Nationalmuseum.

Nationalmuseum

Box 16176

SE-103 24 Stockholm, Sweden

www.nationalmuseum.se

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ISSN 2001-9238



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Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931) is one of Finland's most famous artists and commonly referred to as a master of Realism and Symbolism. He was also a courageous interpreter of the Finnish national epic Kalevala, and worked in a variety of art forms, including painting, graphics, illustrations, textiles and architecture, and even designs for military uniforms. This article explores Gallen-Kallela's early work, *Nude Study* (1885), suggesting that his early nude studies, which have been excluded from the master narrative of Gallen-Kallela's art, created a solid basis for his understanding of the human body, later central to many of his works.

The Nationalmuseum's acquisition, *Nude Study*, was painted in 1885, while Akseli Gallen-Kallela was studying at the Académie Julian, a private art school in Paris. He had moved to the city in the autumn of 1884 to continue his art studies, following his graduation from the Finnish Art Society's Drawing School in Helsinki, Finland, and private training from the artists Adolf von Becker (1831–1909) and Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905).

Académie Julian was a meeting place for foreign students, many of them from the Nordic countries. Gallen-Kallela's teachers were the French artists Tony Robert-Fleury (1837–1911) and William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905). A normal day at school began at 8 am and the students worked until 5 pm, as described by Gallen-Kallela in his letters to his mother.¹ He was



Fig. 1 Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), *Nude Study*, 1885. Oil on canvas, 54 x 35 cm. Purchase: Sara and Johan Emil Graumann Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7512.



Fig. 2 Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), *Boy with a Crow*, 1884. Oil on canvas, 86 x 72 cm. Finnish National Gallery/Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, A II 912.

motivated to study but had difficulties with the teachers' traditional way of looking at and appreciating art.²

The young Gallen-Kallela had already taken his first steps as a painter before moving to Paris. One of his first radical paintings, *Boy with a Crow* (Fig. 2), now in a collection of the Finnish National Gallery/Ateneum Art Museum, shows a little boy standing on grass, looking intensely at a crow that he aims to tame by putting salt on its tail (Fig. 2).³ The background in the painting is minimalistic, just green grass. The lack of farmhouses, trees or other references that could connect the boy to a place, makes the painting very special; even the horizon has been removed as unnecessary. Bouguereau judged Gallen-Kallela's *Boy with a Crow* as being too "harsh".⁴

Looking at the Body

Before coming to Paris, Gallen-Kallela had studied anatomy by drawing from plaster casts and making regular visits to the hall of anatomy at the University of Helsinki, where he had an opportunity to study the human bodies close up.⁵ In Paris, all of this changed, with live models replacing plaster casts and dead bodies.

As the early photographs from Académie Julian demonstrate, the models stood on a small stage and the aspiring artists positioned themselves close to their subject. Some even placed their palettes on the model's feet. In a photo taken the same year that the Nationalmuseum's *Nude Study* was completed, Gallen-Kallela can be seen sitting in one of the first rows, close to the model (Fig. 3).

In his *Nude Study*, Gallen-Kallela was able to capture every detail of the female body, as well as the almost timeless atmosphere (Fig. 1). The model's face is calm and her gaze is directed towards the wall behind the students. The fine daylight from the study hall's skylights emphasises her unveiled body. Despite the intimacy and closeness between the artists and the model, it is worth noting that Gallen-



Fig. 3 Unknown photographer, *Group Portrait of Akseli Gallen-Kallela (Close to the Model's Knee) with his Colleagues at Académie Julian in Paris, 1880's*. Akseli Gallen-Kallela's photo collection, Gallen-Kallela Museum, Espoo, Kot. 1.a/9.

Kallela was among more than 40 other art students in the same room, painting the same subject from different perspectives.

Gallen-Kallela himself was pleased with his painting and even signed it twice – on the top left and the bottom right. In January 1886, in a letter to his mother,

he wrote that his studies at the academy were going very well and claimed the other students thought he was the best of them all, while Gallen-Kallela's older colleague and teacher Albert Edelfelt disagreed. He found the young artist to have plenty of ambition, but thought that he spent more time “philosophising” with his Norwegian

colleague Carl Johannes Dørnberger than he did painting.⁶ Indeed, there are indications that after the first weeks and months at Académie Julian, Gallen-Kallela became increasingly disinterested in painting from live models.⁷ His desire was to be part of a renewal, rather than repeating everything his teachers had already done before.

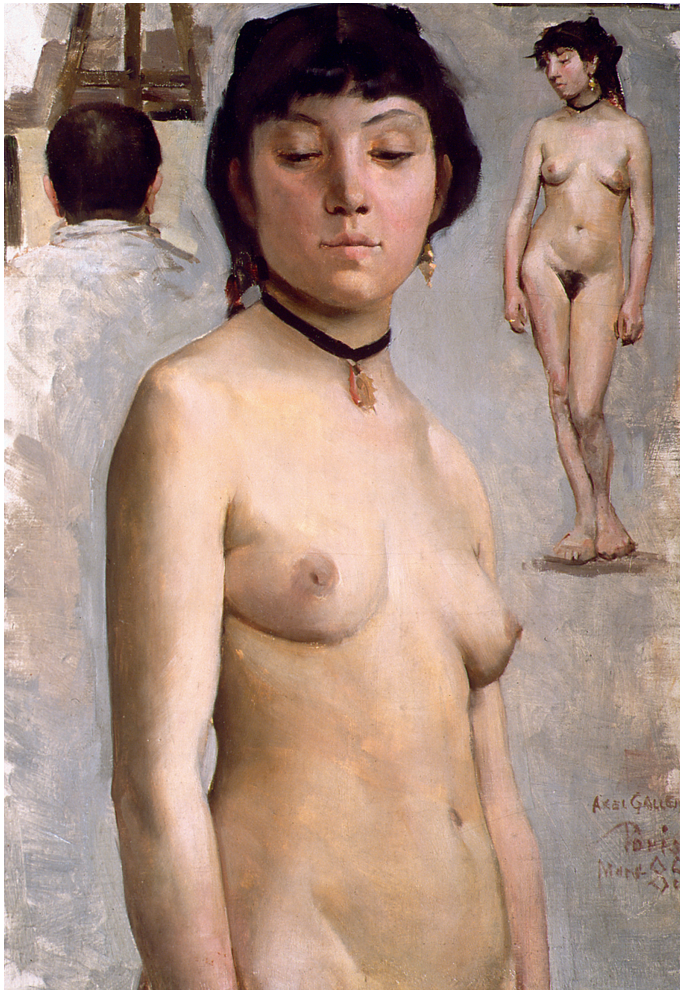


Fig. 4 Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), *Nude Study* 1885. Oil on canvas, 55.5 x 38 cm. Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation, Mänttä.



Fig. 5 Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), *Demasquée*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 65.5 x 54.5 cm. Finnish National Gallery/Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, A I 562.

Gallen-Kallela's nude studies from 1885–87 include several examples painted in earthy colours, with some in collections like the Gösta Serlachius Art Foundation in Mänttä, Finland, the Finnish National Gallery/Ateneum Art Museum and now also the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.⁸ Typically, Gallen-Kallela's nude studies interested private collectors who already had some of his work in their collections and wished to supplement the collections with exceptional choices (Fig. 4).

Nude Studies and Career History

Gallen-Kallela quickly became a dream topic for art historians in Finland: talented, active and responsive to national needs. As Marja Lahelma has indicated, even early on, there was a need to pigeonhole Gallen-Kallela as a “national” artist.⁹

It is worth looking at how Gallen-Kallela's nude studies were presented in the most important early research into his artistic career. In 1936, Professor Onni

Okkonen (1886–1962) claimed that studying in Paris was no more than “technical training” for Gallen-Kallela, with the real Gallen-Kallela being rooted in the Finnish culture, landscape and people,¹⁰ thus nurturing the idea of a national artist with national motives. In 1961, Okkonen published even a more extensive art historical analysis of Gallen-Kallela's art, which developed his arguments and suggested that the time spent in Paris was important for Gallen-Kallela's artistic development, but

he did not see much quality in the model studies from that period (Fig. 6).¹¹

Okkonen's neglect of academic nude studies becomes clear in close examination of Okkonen's richly illustrated books about Gallen-Kallela. The first one, published in 1936, had images of 191 paintings, drawings and graphic works, but included none of the nude studies from the academy.¹² The same was true in 1961, when Okkonen published a book with 946 pages and 477 images about Gallen-Kallela's life and art. Sketches and drawings of nudes as preparation for other works were incorporated, but works from the academy were eliminated from the narrative.¹³

Okkonen's assessment reflects how works of art were classified at the time; the focus was on the core production of an artist. Works showing how the artist developed during his years at the academy belonged to the margins. However, from today's perspective it is fruitful to analyse the early nude studies in relation to the later works, such as Gallen-Kallela's *Demasquée* from 1888 (Fig. 5). It is legitimate to claim that painting live models was more than exploring just the bodies, skin and muscles. It was, tedious or not, a way to learn to see people, to confront the nakedness of the sitter.

The Use of the Nude Body

Gallen-Kallela painted female nudes in various roles, from that of innocence to mysterious and seductive characters. *Sauna* (1889), for example, presents us with a realistic view from Keuruu, Finland, where a young girl is taking a sauna together with the rest of her family. *Aino Myth* (1891) depicts the mythological figure of Aino from the Kalevala, painted in a realistic manner, the naked body belonging to Gallen-Kallela's new wife, Aino Slöör. Naked female bodies carry a strong symbolic meaning in *Ad Astra* (1894 and 1907) and the frescoes for the Juselius mausoleum (1903), which were later destroyed in a fire, to mention just a few examples.

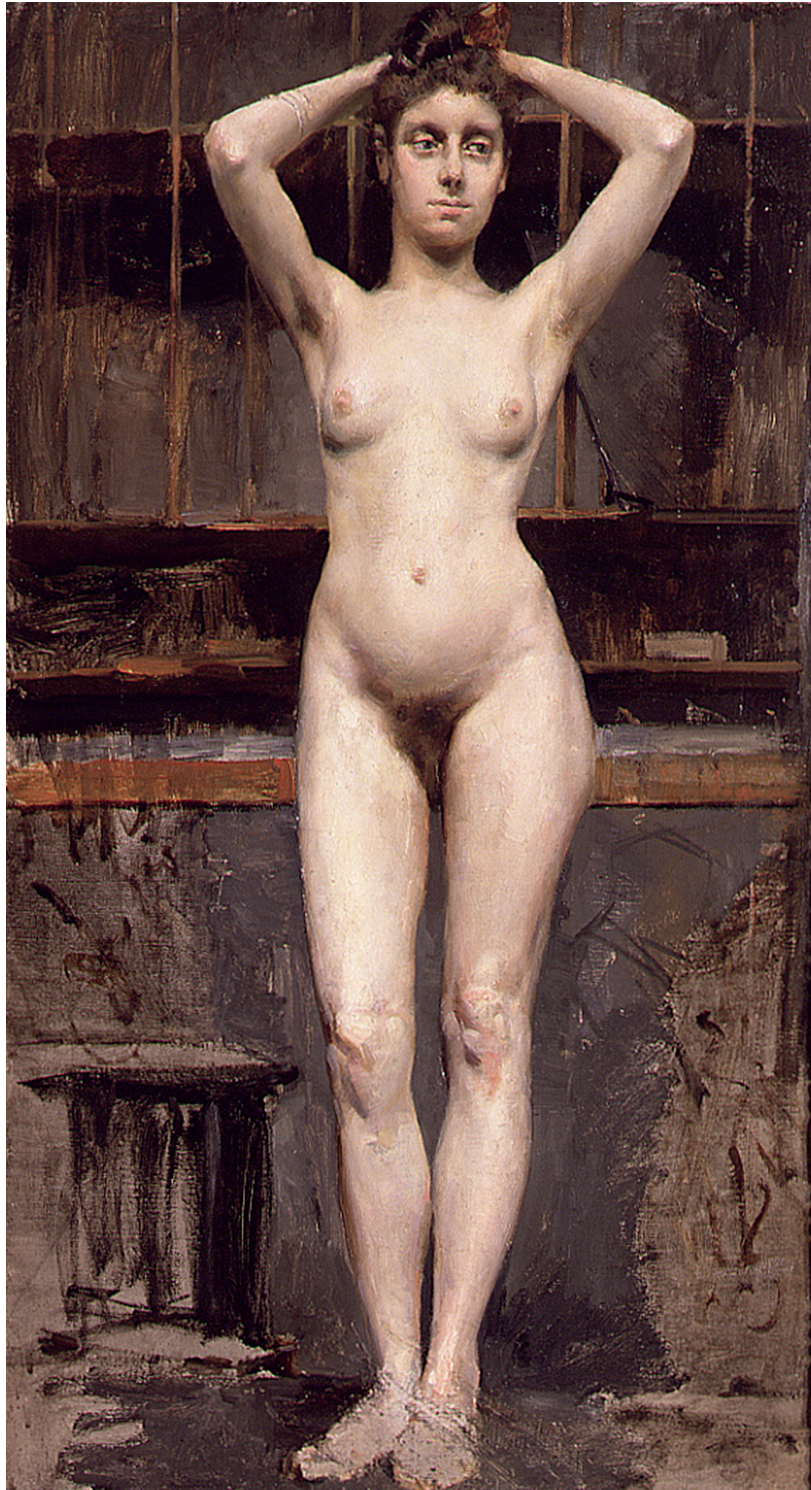


Fig. 6 Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), *Nude Standing Model*, c. 1886–87. Oil on canvas, 80.5 x 44.5 cm. Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation, Mänttä.

However, one kind of a culmination of model studies can be seen in Gallen-Kallela's painting *Demasquée* (1888), which he painted while he lived in Paris.¹⁴ It was commissioned by Herman Frithiof Antell, a Paris-based Finnish collector, who had insisted on a painting of a naked woman, strong and seductive, and got one.¹⁵ However, the painting is not just a wealthy collector's erotic daydream for, as Marja Lahelma reminds us, "the woman is portrayed as a fringe member of society, yet not as a passive victim".¹⁶ The painting is, indeed, far from presenting weakness. As Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén points out in his 2001 study of Gallen-Kallela, many earlier interpretations focused solely on the nudity of the model (whose name was Carmen), and thus missed the model's confident and fearless gaze.¹⁷ The painting challenges the viewer to meet the eyes that have been unmasked.

Gaze is also vital when looking at Gallen-Kallela's nude studies. Despite their academic nature, the works are highly intimate and show us the models close up. They are portraits of the process of looking and observing, as well as depictions of modelling as a profession. They capture the moments of contemplation, the ritual of painting and repetition – and becoming confident with one of the artist's key tools, the human body.

Notes:

1. Onni Okkonen, *A. Gallen-Kallela, elämä ja taide*, Porvoo & Helsinki 1961, p. 85; Kirsti Gallen-Kallela, *Isäni Akseli Gallen-Kallela, I osa*. Porvoo 1964, pp. 68–69.
2. Okkonen 1961, pp. 84–85.
3. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Kallela-kirja I. Iltapuhdejutelmia*, Porvoo 1924, pp. 169–171.
4. Gallen-Kallela 1924, p. 171.
5. Timo Martin & Douglas Sívén, *Akseli Gallen-Kallela, elämäkerrallinen rapsodia*, Sulkava 1984, pp. 16–17.
6. Marja Lahelma, *Artists of the Ateneum. Akseli Gallen-Kallela*. Finnish National Gallery/Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki 2018, pp. 14–15. Gallen-Kallela's closest circle of friends also included Louis Sparre, the Frenchman Henri de Vallombreuse, the American Victor Wilbour and the Finnish artists Eero Järnefelt and Emil Vikström.
7. Martin & Sívén 1984, p. 25.
8. Maritta Pitkänen, *Kultaisen polun kulkijat. Akseli Gallen-Kallelan, G. A. Serlachiuksen ja Gösta Serlachiuksen yhteisiä vaiheita*, Gösta Serlachiuksen taidesäätiö, Mänttä 2008: [https://www.kansallisgalleria.fi/fi/search?authors\[\]=Akseli%20Gallen-Kallela&category=artwork](https://www.kansallisgalleria.fi/fi/search?authors[]=Akseli%20Gallen-Kallela&category=artwork) (accessed 19 August 2020).
9. Lahelma 2018, p. 9.
10. Onni Okkonen, *Akseli Gallen-Kallelan taidetta*, Porvoo & Helsinki 1936, pp. 12–14.
11. Okkonen 1961, pp. 84–85.
12. Okkonen 1936.
13. Okkonen 1961.
14. Okkonen 1961, pp. 153–154; Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén, *Minä palaan jalanjäljilleni. Akseli Gallen-Kallelan elämä ja taide*, Keuruu & Helsinki 2001, pp. 88–92.
15. Susanna Pettersson, "Keräilijä Herman Frithiof Antell. Koti Pariisissa, matkalla Japanissa", in *Japanomania pohjoismaisessa taiteessa 1875–1918*, Gabriel P. Wesberg, Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff & Hanne Selkokari (eds.), Ateneumin taidemuseo, Kansallisgalleria, Nasjonalmuseet for Kunst, arkitektur og design, Statens Museum for Kunst & Mercatorfonds Helsinki, Oslo & Copenhagen 2016, pp. 112–119 [114].
16. Lahelma 2018, p. 23.
17. Gallen-Kallela-Sirén 2001, pp. 88–92.