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SECRET HELSINKI



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

CEILING OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE

④

When actors represent Greek muses

Läntinen Teatterikuja 1

Painted in 1932, *The Mirror of Thalia* above the main stage of the Finnish National Theatre was the last work by artist Yrjö Ollila before he died of paint-related poisoning that year.

Few people know that of the 30+ people represented on the ceiling, many are in fact the theatre's actors of the time: Elli Tompuri can be seen as Thalia (the Greek Muse of Comedy), holding a mirror and a theatrical mask; Heidi Blåfield, who had recently died tragically young, is the



personification of Destiny, with the thread and spindle; Lilli Tulenheimo is the mourning mother figure, reminiscent of Lemminkäinen's mother from *Kalevala*; and Aarne Ollila is seen as the father carrying a baby. The painting even includes the artist himself as the mason, and his wife Lyyli as the weaver next to him. Lyyli Ollila was also an artist and actively involved in painting the ceiling. However, the most notable historical person is Ida Ahlberg, represented as Ophelia, dressed in white with her hands held high. Aalberg was among the founders of the theatre and her death in 1915 at the age of just 57 was greatly mourned.



Famed for its architecture, the National Theatre was built in National Romantic style in 1902 by architect Onni Tarjann.

The Mirror of Thalia is not actually a fresco, but painted on canvas. A fresco was considered too slow to produce, keeping the main stage out of use for too long.

The Greek muses number nine in total, and all of them have their own attributes: besides the aforementioned Thalia, Calliope, the Muse of Epic Poetry, is represented by a writing tablet, a stylus or a lyre; Clio, the Muse of History, has scrolls and books, or a cornet; Euterpe represents Music and Elegiac Poetry and carries panpipes; Urania is the protector of Astronomy, with a globe or compass; Erato is the Muse of Lyric Poetry, with a cithara; Melpomene is the Muse of Tragedy, with a tragic mask or a sword; Polyhymnia is the Muse of Hymns, with a veil or grapes; and Terpsichore is the Muse of Dance, with a lyre or plectrum.

A haunted theatre?

Well known for his heroic roles, veteran actor Yrjö Somersalmi (1888-1961) retired from the theatre world in the late 1950s. Apparently he went mad and murdered his actress wife Aili Somersalmi (1891-1961) with an axe given to him by the Actors' Union. He then hanged himself. His ominous spectre has been sighted several times by the staff.

THE SECRETS OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY HALL ②

The forgotten symbols of the finest hall in the whole Finland

Fabianinkatu 35

02 9412 3196 — www.kansalliskirjasto.fi

Monday–Friday 9am–8pm, Saturday 9am–4pm

Free entry



Designed by C.L. Engel and finished posthumously in 1844, the grandiose empire hall of the National Library offers many surprises for the attentive observer: there are numerous symbolic statues and paintings around the building, which are mostly ignored by casual users of the library. These figures are a secret sight at its finest — beautiful and intriguing art hidden in plain sight.

The main hall with its wonderful vaults and decorative paintings is sometimes described as the finest hall in all Finland, yet few Finns have seen it. The 26 Corinthian pillars and trompe l'œil frescoes give a fantastic impression of space and depth. The main dome is decorated with four allegorical birds: the owl of Minerva (for wisdom), the rooster (for vigilance), the swan of Apollo (for poetry), and the eagle (for strength and vision). The bird motifs were painted by C.H. Larsson in 1880 during a renovation of the old library.

Four lunettes portray the different fields of science in the main hall: Law (the goddess Justitia with her sword and scales) in the north lunette; Linguistics (classical characters representing Latin and Ancient Greek, a runestone, a Turkish gravestone, a Sphinx, and German, Norse, Chinese and African figures) in the southern lunette; Poetry (the goddess of song with a lyre, elegy with a starry diadem, epic poetry with a sword, fables with a swan, erotic poetry with Cupid, and the masks of Tragedy and Comedy) in the western lunette; and Philosophy (characters of arts and pedagogy) in the eastern lunette.



The exterior of the library has more science-themed figures in the pilaster heads of the façade: Art (symbolised by laurels), Astronomy (with a diadem of sun and stars); History (with parchment and an oil lamp); Natural History (scallop); Law (a Roman headpiece with the word “Lex”, a sword and scales); Medicine (the Snake of Asclepius); Philosophy (an Egyptian figure with two torches, a book and a butterfly, the symbol of Psyche, or the soul); and Physics (a triangle and a gearwheel.)

On each side of the main hall, don't miss the two stunning reading rooms as well as the beautiful rotunda and its dome where the books are kept on several floors around the rotunda.



STATUE OF THE WISE MOUSE

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The smallest public statue in Helsinki

Rauhankatu 17

Monday–Tuesday and Thursday–Friday, 9am–4pm: Wednesday 9am–8pm

On the handrail of the main outer staircase of the Finnish National Archives there is a tiny statue. Many visitors will simply pass it by, and for good reason: it is the smallest public statue in Helsinki, depicting a mouse holding a pen. Notice the small ladder the mouse has climbed down.

At the top of the stairs is a second statue depicting the book into which the mouse is scribbling. In the book, one can read a text in Latin, *Verba volant, scripta manent* – a proverb meaning “Spoken words fly

away, written words remain”. An appropriate sentence for the entrance to the National Archives.

The *Viisas Hirri* (*Wise Mouse*) statue was created by sculptor Jyrki Siukonen in 2000. Being fragile, it is sometimes vandalised; if you don’t see it during your visit, it’s probably being repaired.

NEARBY

Marks of war in Snellmaninaukio

23

Snellmaninaukio, near Senate Square

The statue of 19th century Finnish statesman J.W. Snellman in front of the Bank of Finland was sculpted in 1923 by the famous artist Emil Wikström. Note the severe damage on the pedestal of the statue caused by Soviet bombing in the Second World War.

Snellman was known as “the father of Finnish markka”, the currency in use between 1860 and 2002 before it was replaced by the euro.



BULLET HOLE ON THE DOOR OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM ⑥

A battle fought in the heart of Helsinki

National Museum, Mannerheimintie 34

kansallismuseo@kansallismuseo.fi

Tuesday–Sunday 11am–6pm, closed Monday

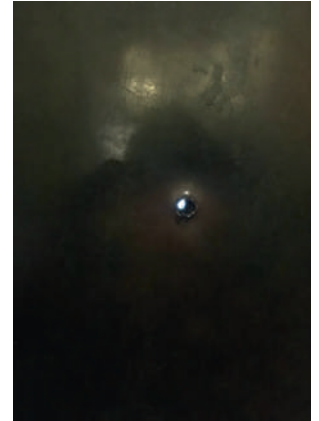
Free entry every Friday 4pm–6pm



Up the stairs of the National Museum of Finland, the main entrance door features beautifully carved representations of several traditional Finnish trades. The carving of the blacksmith includes a bizarre detail: a hole in the head of the craftsman. The hole is in fact the result of a bullet fired during the Finnish Civil War by the Reds from the old Russian barracks (Turun kasarmi) located on the site that now houses Lasipalatsi. If you look at the other side of the door, you will notice that the bullet went through the door ...

The area had been used for military training even back in the Swedish era, which is how it acquired its name, Kamppi (Campementsplats). These barracks, which saw heavy fighting, eventually burned down; the ruins were demolished after the war.

The only remaining building is the barracks' yellow economic building, which now houses restaurants and pubs. It served as the city's bus terminal between 1935 and 2005.



NEARBY

A rare underground cemetery ⑦

In the basement of the museum are a group of reddish human skulls, originating from the so-called sacrificial spring of Levänluhta in Isokyrö, Ostrobothnia. Folk tales recount that human skulls and bones were harvested there for centuries. The mystical atmosphere was further enhanced by the gruesome blood-red ferrous water (containing iron). The skulls from the museum, some of the 98 found in total, still bear much of this colouring. For a long time the skulls were thought to have been from ancient victims of violence, drowned in a swamp like many famous “bog bodies” in Germanic and Celtic lands. More sound guesses linked them to a relatively modern massacre, the burial place of 16th-century Cudgel War (Nuijasota) victims. Recently, historians have come to believe that Levänluhta was actually an underwater cemetery, and a completely unique one: the site was originally a small lake used as a burial place between the fourth and eighth centuries. Underwater burial is extremely rare, almost unheard of in the Old World, and similar methods have been used by only a few ancient Native Americans in the Everglades, Florida.

THE MYSTERY OF THE TRANSFORMERS LOGOS

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Alien symbols on the tram tracks of Helsinki

Various tram tracks in Helsinki



If you look carefully at the tram tracks at the corner of Urho Kekkosen katu and Fredrikinkatu, you'll see an engraving that looks like the logo of the Transformers toy brand that became popular in the 1980s, and even more popular when director Michael Bay released his movies based on the toys. The films are about two robotic alien races, the good Autobots and the evil Decepticons, who fight for dominance of the universe – Helsinki has the symbols of both races.

Nobody knows for sure when the engraving first appeared, but there are claims and photos dating back to at least 2008. Other theories suggest that the logo was etched in 2010 when major maintenance work was done on the tram intersection.

According to Helsinki City Transport rail unit director Pekka Sirviö, the logos were either etched secretly at Helsinki City Transport's own repair shop or they were already there when the rails arrived in Finland. As it would be too expensive to replace the rails, the symbols will probably remain for some time ...



Other Transformers symbols in Helsinki

A Decepticon symbol is at an intersection grid on a tram rail at the crossing of Frederikinkatu and Urho Kekkosen katu in Kamppi district. Beside the logo is etched the year 2011 – the year the tracks were renovated, but also the year the movie *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* was released.

Another Autobot symbol is engraved on a tram rail in Kluuvi district at the intersection of Aleksanterinkatu and Mikonkatu.

VILLA GYLLENBERG

15

A very charming little-known museum

Kuusisaarenpolku 11

www.gyllenbergs.fi

Wednesday 4pm–8pm, Sunday 12pm–4pm or by request

Closed in July



Formerly the home of Signe and Ane Gyllenberg, Villa Gyllenberg is a very charming little-known museum that now houses their remarkable art collection.

The pale orange villa dates from 1938 and was expanded in 1955; the Gyllenbergs wanted very early on to open their art treasures to the public. After the connoisseur couple passed away, the family home was opened as a museum in 1980.

Commercial counsellor Ane Gyllenberg had a profound relationship with art. He was an active Freemason and later became the grand master of his lodge. He was also a supporter of the esoteric anthroposophy movement of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925): true to the anthroposophic principles, Ane Gyllenberg considered art to be a tool for inner development and spiritual growth. His personal favourites were often portraits of people from different walks of life, which is apparent when viewing the collection.

Aside from art by Finnish painters and Old Masters, the collection includes rare musical instruments, such as the 1732 Bergonzi violin. The violin was built in Cremona, Italy, by Carlo Bergonzi (1683–1747), a student of the famous craftsman Antonio Stradivari. The precious violin is occasionally loaned to outstanding Finnish violinists for a period of three years.

The museum's collection is growing all the time, and the exhibition is arranged chronologically. Parts of the museum are maintained as they were during the Gyllenberg's time and retain the atmosphere of bourgeois domestic bliss. Villa Gyllenberg also has a pleasant café with views of the Laajalahti bay.

The most famous painting in this museum is *Ad Astra*, an intriguing symbolist work by Akseli Gallén-Kallela. The painting dates from 1894 and features a striking image of a young woman with arms raised, naked and standing in the water, framed by the full moon and her own fiery hair. A very special painting for the artist, it was used as an altarpiece in the baptisms of his children. Gallén-Kallela never sold the original version, considering it to be a sort of artistic manifesto. He claimed it was about Resurrection and the Saviour; the girl in the picture has stigmata, which he painted over in another version of the painting.



The name “ad astra” means “towards the stars” in Latin, from the proverb “per aspera ad astra”, which means “through hardships to the stars”.

SOMPASAUNA

17

A fantastic free sauna open 24 hours a day

Sompasaaren laitur
sompasauna@sompasauna.fi
Open 24/7
Free entry



Sompasauna is a free, public sauna in a shanty cottage in an isolated harbour area of Sompasaari, south of the Kalasatama district. It is also close to the Korkeasaari Zoo, and the sound of roaring lions can sometimes be heard over the sea.

Sompasauna was set up in 2011 when a group of men found a small wood-burning sauna stove and decided to put it to use. They built a shack sauna (without permits) in the depths of an old harbour. The sauna was free to all, and in the first year, Sompasauna attracted hundreds of people. Its reputation spread quickly. The sauna was an underground hit, though its original creators soon moved on.

Some of the people who attended Sompasauna in the first summer went on to upgrade it further. In the summer of 2012 they redesigned and rebuilt the sauna while still upholding the original vision of its creators. They used only discarded materials and stuff they had found while dumpster diving. Other interested parties also contributed donations.

In 2013 the city of Helsinki tore down the sauna due to its lack of a permit. But in the fall of the same year, the people behind the new Sompasauna project registered an official association to promote the culture of public saunas and Sompasauna was built again.

From its early beginnings, Sompasauna has promoted the ideals of free, mixed-sex public sauna for everyone. The only restrictions are that children can't use the sauna without adults, and you can't go to the sauna when severely drunk. The sauna is open 24 hours a day, free of charge and cannot be reserved.



YLISKYLÄ'S PINE TREE

A sacred tree near a shopping mall

Muurahaisenpolku Street

Next to the Saari shopping centre

Metro: Herttoniemi

Buses: 84, 85, 86 and 88 towards Laajasalo

⑥



Shopping malls are hardly the places to find ancient relics. Yet the commercial centre of Yliskylä offers a surprise: the majestic umbrella-shaped pine tree is an authentic example of Finnish tree worship, rooted in paganism.

Known as “haltiamänty”, the elf pine used to belong to nearby Uppby manor house (its Swedish name, although nowadays it is mostly known by its Finnish name, Yliskylä). The distinctive old tree was held as the sacred protector of the manor family.

In the glory days of the house, the pine was honoured with offerings of various foodstuffs on important annual occasions, such as harvest, when the first grains were sacrificed to it. These traditions ended when the fields and meadows of Uppby were sold off to make way for the growing capital's needs. Dense urban cityscape has long since replaced the agrarian landscape in which the pine tree sprouted.

The manor of Uppby owned vast lands in Laajasalo. Many agricultural buildings were pulled down during the construction of the mall in the 1960s and only a small cottage survived: the yellow Ylistalo communal centre near the pine. Fortunately, the sacred tree was saved and has been a symbol for Yliskylä ever since.

Ancient tree worship was practised in Finland for millennia. Trees were believed to be linked to a supernatural landlord, known by various terms such as *haltia* (elf) and *tonttu* (gnome). The Finnish *tonttu* and the Swedish *tomte* are related to the words *tontti* (Finnish) and *tomt* (Swedish), both meaning “building sites”.

If the elf was treated with respect, the house had good fortune in crops, cattle and employees. It was taboo to harm a sacred tree; cutting a branch was forbidden and felling was considered mortally dangerous for the associated household. Some folk also believed their sacred tree worked as a kind of astral portal, through which they could contact their ancestors.

Sometimes the trees were used in traditional healing rites, when a sick person was directed to touch the bark, or newborn babies were blessed at the tree. A mother might make an offering of her first drops of milk.

Despite the nation's supposed Christianity, tree worship was common until the 1800s; the two were intangibly intermingled, with sacrifices made during Christian holy days. But with urbanisation in the 1900s, tree worship fell gradually from favour, though it can still be found in modern form when commemorative trees are planted for births, betrothals and marriages.

OIL SILO 468

11

A stunning light installation

Koirasaarentie

Open certain weekends in September and October: check www.facebook.com/Kruunuvuorenranta/ or websites such as www.myhelsinki.com for dates

Free entry

Bus: 84, 88 from Herttoniemi metro station

In the middle of the growing Kruunuvuorenranta suburb, a strange round building surprises visitors, curious about the numerous holes punched through its grey walls. Formerly an oil silo, “Oil silo 468” is a stunning art installation from local artist group Lightning Design Collective. Led by light artist Tapio Rosenius, the group has transformed the building into an urban light installation incorporating a total of 2,012 holes. The piece was created as part of the World Design Capital Helsinki 2012 project, hence the number of holes.

When the sun is high and daylight shines through the circular holes, a fantastic flicker of shadows is created on the interior walls. After sunset, lights are activated and turn on and off in reaction to the wind. The lights are white during the early evening and turn progressively red at night.

Kruunuvuori was a working oil harbour for almost a century. In 1914 German businessman Albert Goldbeck-Löwe bought the area in order to establish a base for his Finnish shipping business (Kissinge, later Algol). Goldbeck-Löwe also owned a prominent part of the nearby eponymous villa community, of which some vestiges remain.

In 1990 the city council of Helsinki decided to demolish the old oil harbour and create a municipal district. Most of the old industrial buildings have been torn down, but the silo still remains within the growing cityscape.

