

MILLA LESKINEN AND JIRI KERONEN

# SECRET HELSINKI



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

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## CEILING OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE

④

### *When actors represent Greek muses*

Läntinen Teatterikuja 1 – 10 7331331 – kansallisteatteri.fi/en  
Access to the interior is mainly for attending a play or an event  
Metro M1/M2 Rautatientori

**P**ainted 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 <sup>(21)</sup>

*The forgotten symbols of the finest hall in the whole Finland*

Fabianinkatu 35

02 9412 3196 – kansalliskirjasto.fi

Free entry

Metro M1/M2 Helsingin yliopisto



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

22

*The smallest public statue in Helsinki*

Rauhankatu 17

Tram 7 Kansallisarkisto

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 Senaatintori (Senate Square)*

The statue of 19<sup>th</sup> 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.



# YRJÖNKATU NATURIST SWIMMING HALL

⑩

*The oldest swimming pool in the country, open for naturists*

Yrjönkatu 21 B

09 310 87401

[liikunta.hel.fi/en/venues/tprek:41102](http://liikunta.hel.fi/en/venues/tprek:41102)

Tram 1/3/6/10 Ylioppilastalo



© Konsta Linkola

**B**uilt in 1928, the Yrjönkatu swimming hall is the oldest pool in the country. Inspired by Stockholm's Centralbadet, its interior is a good example of then popular classicism.

Swimwear has always been optional at the hall and this tradition prevails today, hence this is a popular place for naturists. Swimwear has actually only been permitted at all since 2001: before that, this was strictly a naturist place.

Men and women swim on different days: Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are reserved solely for women, while Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays are for men. The staff on any day can be of either gender.

One of the specialities of the Yrjönkatu swimming hall is its exclusive and unique mead. You can also reserve a VIP ticket to get to the upper floor, where you can take a nap in one of the private rooms.

Despite its history and beauty, Yrjönkadun uimahalli is a regular city-administrated swimming hall, which keeps the prices low compared to actual spas.

The swimming hall was designed by the architect Väinö Vähäkallio, whose name rings a sinister bell in the minds of many older Finns: in 1928 Vähäkallio bought Kytäjä Manor in nearby Hyvinkää, which is said to be cursed. The manor's recent history includes numerous suicides, deadly diseases and accidental deaths by gunfire. The most famous dark deed is the 1972 murder of three teenage boys camping in the grounds. The lord of the manor, Kai Kustaa Vähäkallio (the architect's grandson), committed suicide after serving his sentence for the crime. At the time of research, the historic mansion has fallen into disrepair and is set to be pulled down for rebuilding.





# THE MYSTERY OF THE TRANSFORMERS LOGOS

12

## *Alien symbols on the tram tracks of Helsinki*

Various tram tracks in Helsinki  
Metro M1/M2 Kamppi



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

gyllenbergs.fi

Check website for opening hours; closed in July

Bus 34/52/202N/510/510N Kuusisaarenkuja



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 bourgeoisie 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.fi – [sompasauna@sompasauna.fi](mailto:sompasauna@sompasauna.fi).

Open 24/7

Free entry

Tram 13/13H Sompasaari



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

⑥

### *A sacred tree near a shopping mall*

Muurahaispolku Street

Next to the Saari shopping centre

Metro M1/M2 Herttoniemi – Bus 84/85/86/88 towards Laajasalo



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.

MILLA LESKINEN AND JIRI KERONEN



# SECRET HELSINKI

A dog that managed to catch 108 criminals without human help, a statue of a homeless alcoholic, the anti-aircraft defences where Tom of Finland became a war hero, a plaque in honour of somebody who never existed, a chance to swim naked in the country's oldest swimming pool, the only church in the world that doubles as a lighthouse, a free sauna open 24 hours a day, a walk through the water to a secret island, a hidden Kalevala-scene fresco inside the Old Student House, a natural waterfall within the city, the location of Star Wars' Princess Leia's necklace, 'Short Island' – the antithesis of New York's Long Island, a church turned nightclub turned church again, the only statue of a Russian tsar outside Russia ...

Far from the crowds and the usual clichés, Helsinki offers countless off-beat experiences and is home to any number of well-hidden treasures that are only revealed to residents and travellers who find their way off the beaten track.

An indispensable guide for those who thought they knew Helsinki well or would like to discover the other side of the city.

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