



Enckell, Magnus Knut (1870-1925)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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The painter Magnus Knut Enckell, whose works exhibit strong homoerotic overtones, was one of the leading figures in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Finnish art circles.

While Enckell's sexual relationships with men have not been denied by art scholars and biographers, they have been routinely downplayed and considered irrelevant to an understanding and appreciation of his art. Nonetheless, his works often celebrate male beauty, in which naked young men and boys are posed uninhibitedly, in an openly erotic and sensual style.

He worked in a variety of genres, such as still lifes, landscapes, and murals, and in a range of styles. Enckell was one of the first Finnish artists to break away from Naturalism, which then dominated the art world, and went on to embrace Symbolism; he ended his career under the influence of Post-Impressionism.

Enckell was born the sixth and youngest son to Carl Enckell, a vicar, and his wife Alexandra, on November 9, 1870, in Hamina, a small domestic trade port, on the coast of the Baltic Sea, in southern Finland.

He began his formal art training in 1889, at the age of 19, at the Drawing School of the Art Society of Finland (today known as the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts) in Helsinki. However, he left school after one year to study privately under the painter Gunnar Fredrik Berndtson, who is known primarily for his naturalistic depictions of everyday life among Finland's wealthy and sophisticated upper classes.

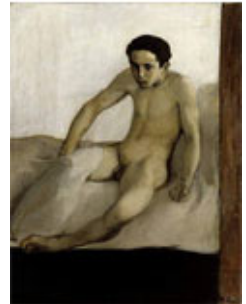
In 1891, Enckell moved to Paris and studied at the art school Académie Julian, under the tutelage of the well-respected French realist portrait painters Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant and Jules-Joseph Lefebvre.

It was while studying in Paris that Enckell broke away from Naturalism, the dominant mode of art at the time, and instead was drawn to Symbolism, an artistic movement with origins in literature and the visual arts, which utilized indirect suggestions and images to express allegorical ideas, emotions, and states of mind.

His Symbolist works share a restrained, nearly monochromatic, use of color, and enigmatic settings. Significant paintings by Enckell of this period include *Young Boy and Skull* (1893), in which a naked youth crouches on the ground contemplating a human skull, and *The Awakening* (1893), where a young man is perched naked on a bed, evoking a peculiar mood of both ennui and eroticism.

In 1894 and 1895, Enckell travelled extensively throughout Italy, studying art and architecture in Milan, Ravenna, Sienna, Florence, and Venice.

He returned to Florence in 1898 and taught himself fresco and tempera techniques, mainly through an



Magnus Knut Enckell (top) and his painting *The Awakening*. Images are in the public domain in the United States.

immersion in the works of the early Italian Renaissance masters Masaccio and Fra Angelico. As a result, Enckell's paintings began to utilize a greater range of color and a more optimistic sentiment than in his previous works.

In 1907, Enckell received perhaps his most notable commission—to paint a fresco for the central altar of the new cathedral in Tampere, the third largest city in Finland. The altarpiece Enckell created celebrates the Resurrection of people of all nations and races. In the center of the fresco, among all the souls rising from the dead, two men walk hand in hand. Art scholars and critics have generally overlooked this detail.

Enckell later became captivated by Post-Impressionist art, especially the works of the French artists Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin. Consequently, his palette became even brighter and more colorful.

His paintings during this period in his career often feature vibrant, brightly colored fauns, the pastoral gods typically represented as a man with a goat's horns, ears, legs, and tail. These works, exemplified by *The Faun* (1914), deploy an innovative combination of classical mythology and the modern avant-garde, in which Enckell's young men and boys, in the guise of fauns, are openly lustful and sybaritic.

Enckell found inspiration for these paintings in the powerful and sexually suggestive ballet *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, choreographed and first performed by one of the most provocative modern ballet dancers, Vaslav Nijinsky. Enckell saw the historic premiere of the ballet on May 29, 1912 at the invitation of Sergei Diaghilev, who produced the ballet for his legendary troupe Ballets Russes, and who was also Nijinsky's lover at the time.

Enckell had met Diaghilev some four years earlier when the Russian impresario helped secure a commission for Enckell to arrange a selection of Finnish art for the 1908 Salon d'Automne, an annual (since 1903) exhibition held in Paris showcasing the most original and groundbreaking works in painting and sculpture.

Enckell had also organized an exhibition of Finnish art in Berlin in 1903, and one of French and Belgian art in Helsinki in 1904.

He chaired the Finnish Arts Association from 1915 to 1918, and was elected a member of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts in 1922.

Enckell died at the age of 55 on November 27, 1925 in Stockholm, Sweden; his body was interred in his native town of Hamina, Finland.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.