Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of North was becoming worryingly enmeshed with issues of race and national character, and these ideological debates affected the art world on many levels. The surge of cultural revivals that swept across Europe in the 1890s brought questions of national identity to the foreground, while in the field of social anthropology debates were raging about the superiority of one ethnic group over another. This phenomenon, which was fuelled at least in part by the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), is reflected in Joseph Deniker’s 1899 map of the races of Europe showing a patchwork of “principal” and “secondary” racial groups (fig. 1). The French anthropologist and naturalist was one among many fin-de-siècle scientists who attempted to create a system of racial classification based on physical characteristics. By 1916 social ethnologists such as Madison Grant would identify a northern, specifically “Nordic” type that encompassed much of Scandinavia, the Balkans, the Netherlands, Britain, Ireland and northern France. However, in the mid- to late nineteenth-century, the Nordic and Germanic or “Teutonic” races were regarded as quite distinct from another northern race, the Celts. The “mysterious Finns,” considered to be partly Nordic and partly Oriental, represent a further case that can be examined in comparison with the Celts. As an introduction to this volume on the idea of North in art and culture of the fin-de-siècle and beyond, we focus on these two examples in order to shed light on the complexity of the notion of northernness in this context. The analysis that is presented here sets the tone for the whole publication, revealing that there existed several parallel and sometimes even contradictory conceptualisations of the North and its inhabitants, and that the art world of the period was deeply affected by these debates. The remaining essays in this special volume expand and develop this analysis of northernness from a multitude of perspectives, focusing in particular on Nordic, Scottish, and Canadian visual culture.

**RE-INSTATING THE CELTS**

In 1858 the Reverend Duncan McCallum observed: “That the ancient Scots were of Celtic origin is past all doubt,” adding that “the Celtae, the great and mighty people [were] altogether distinct from the Goths and Teutones.” Celticism was associated with specific parts of Britain, Ireland and northern France. The Irish ethnologist Augustus Henry Keane (1833–1912), for example, defined the “Keltic fringe” as “the strips of territory on the skirts of the Teutonic and neo-Latin domains in the extreme west – Brittany, Wales, parts of Ireland, the Scotch Highlands and the Isle of Man,” as well as Cornwall and Cumberland. However, it was the Highlands of Scotland, the area north of the Highland fault, that was said to be most purely Celtic. In the nineteenth century religious difference, as much as racial prejudice, complicated the issue and led British historians to cast the Celts in a dubious light. The predominantly Catholic north was invariably contrasted unfavourably with the Teutonic, Protestant Lowlands of Scotland. Antiquarians such as John Pinkerton (1758–1826) went so far as to observe that “Scotland was held back by its degenerate Celtic population,” and the Jacobite Risings were interpreted by some as “Celtic intrusions into the Germanic lowlands.” In *The Origin of Aryans* (1889) the Reverend Isaac Taylor boasted that the Lowland Scot was intellectually superior to
his northern neighbour, being “more purely Teutonic than the English”. The “Gothic” Anglo-Saxon was portrayed as the natural master to his Celtic neighbour: “what a lion is to an ass, a Goth is to a Celt,” wrote Pinkerton. The “Kelts” were occasionally portrayed as instinctive and creative – but also feckless, irrational and ill-tempered – as opposed to the more rational and disciplined Teutons. This perception endured well into the nineteenth century: in 1870 Scottish historian John Hill Burton (1809–1881) asserted that that the Teutonic or Germanic races were more noble, rational and in every way superior to their Celtic neighbours. In his seven-volume History of Scotland, Hill Burton described the Celts (whether Gauls, Welsh, Irish or Scottish Gaels) as a degenerate race, lazy and improvident. The Celts were also associated with pagan rather than Christian practices, and this contributed further to the anxiety and suspicion expressed by certain nineteenth-century historians.

The Celts were frequently dismissed as socially inferior by the English press. As Thomas Huxley noted in an address to the Anthropological Society in 1870:

> If the writer means to be civil, the Celt is taken to be a charming person, full of wit and vivacity and kindliness, but [also] thoughtless, impetuous and unstable, and having standards of right and wrong so different from the Anglo-Saxon that it would be absurd, not to say cruel, to treat him in the same way; or if the instructor of the public is angry he talks of the Celt as if he were a kind of savage, out of whom no good ever has come or ever will come, and whose proper fate is to be kept as a hewer of wood and a drawer of water for his Anglo-Saxon master.

In 1870 Huxley – biologist, evolutionist and Darwin’s “bulldog” – published several articles in Nature and the Pall Mall Gazette objecting to the narrow and bigoted attitudes towards the Celtic race that were then prevalent. As Huxley and others pointed out such divisiveness was too simplistic and limiting, since parts of England and Lowland Scotland (the so-called “Teutonic” areas) were colonized by Celtic tribes and the Celts themselves were ethnically diverse, originating from different parts of Europe and Asia.

The Celtic Revival saw the gradual reinstatement of the Celt as instinctive, creative, heroic and even intellectual. Sir Walter Scott in his Waverley novels encouraged the notion of the Celt as representing the emotional side of the Scottish temperament, as opposed to the rational, Teutonic side. McCallum insisted on their wisdom, writing: “We must not … imagine the Celtae to have been altogether a gross and rude nation … The Druids [for example] lived together in colleges and societies … philosophising upon the highest subjects.” Meanwhile, Ernest Renan in his 1854 La Poésie des Races Celtiques and Matthew Arnold in his 1867 On the Study of Celtic Literature defined the Celts as a sensitive and imaginative race. By 1907 they were perceived as an antidote to the materialism of the previous century: “In a prosaic and utilitarian age,” wrote one commentator, “the idealism of the Celt is an ennobling and uplifting influence both on literature and life.”

THE EVERGREEN – A NORTHERN SEASONAL: A CASE OF SPLIT IDENTITY?

The high point of this Celtic revival was Patrick Geddes’s four-volume journal the Evergreen – a Northern Seasonal, published in Spring and Autumn 1895 and Summer and Winter 1896. Geddes spearheaded a veritable northern renaissance in Edinburgh – or as he termed it, a Celtic “renascence,” with the Evergreen as its main voice piece. On the face of it the Evergreen was a profoundly Celtic publication, edited by two ardent Revivalists, the writer William Sharp, and the artist John Duncan. Its aims were blatantly propagandist, designed to promote Celticism in particular – and northernness more generally – as health-giving, regenerative and anti-decadent, associated with...
cultural revival and evolution; for Geddes, like Huxley, was a biologist and evolutionist.\textsuperscript{17}

As Robin Nicholson has argued the journal was established in opposition to the decadent London-based \textit{Yellow Book}.\textsuperscript{18} The opening essay or “Proem” by W. Macdonald and J. Arthur Thomson demanded a return to the purity of nature “from urban to rural, from fever to fresh air.” Everything about the design of the Northern Seasonal was supposedly inspired by purer northern and apparently Celtic sources and a large number of the illustrations, including the frontispieces and some of the head- and tailpieces in the \textit{Evergreen}, draw on Celtic designs loosely inspired by insular manuscripts such as the \textit{Book of Kells}. However, the choice of woodcut as a technique undoubtedly finds its source in German Renaissance woodcuts and, much to Sharp’s consternation, the journal that materialised was a hybrid, combining not only Celtic but also Germanic and even more decadent influences. In this way, as this essay will argue, it reflected the contradictory forces at play within the Scottish Celtic revival.

The journal had obvious contemporary German links, since Duncan trained in Düsseldorf alongside artists such as Robert Engels and Thomas Heine, both of whom went on to produce illustrations for the avant-garde journal \textit{Pan}, published in Berlin between 1895 and 1900, and \textit{Jugend}, the Munich-based journal which was launched in 1896.\textsuperscript{19} Just as Duncan produced images of Celtic heroes such as Arthur and Cuchulain for Geddes, Heine and Engels illustrated Germanic legends popularised by Wagnerian opera. Here of course is where Celtic and Germanic legend overlap, for Lohengrin is a character in German Arthurian literature. The son of Parzival (Percival), he is a knight of the Holy Grail sent in a boat pulled by swans to rescue a maiden who can never ask his identity. Perhaps more importantly, Heine and Engels were among those artists at the forefront of the German print revival of the late nineteenth century.

In particular they embraced the “primitive” forms and rough finish of the woodcut, a technique associated with late Medieval Germany. This was also the technique that Duncan, Mackie and others adopted for \textit{The Evergreen}, ensuring a deliberately unsophisticated and hand-crafted appearance in contrast to the mechanically reproduced illustrations of the London-based \textit{Yellow Book}.\textsuperscript{20}

Many of the \textit{Evergreen} illustrations for the first volume (the \textit{Book of Spring}) have a naïve quality, evident in works such as Paul Sérusier’s \textit{Pastorale Bretonne} (fig. 2) which, although partly indebted to Breton popular prints, the \textit{images d’Epinal}, also shares some of the characteristics of Northern Renaissance woodcuts. Other illustrations appear to have been loosely inspired by Germanic or at least Flemish originals; an example is the somewhat austere illustration \textit{Maria Regina Scotorum} by Pittendrigh Macgillivray.\textsuperscript{21} However, the \textit{Evergreen} draws on a diverse range of sources and some of the more avant-garde illustrations are closer to the art nouveau illustrations in \textit{Pan} and \textit{Jugend}. This was a source of huge chagrin to Sharp, who objected to works such as Duncan’s apparently Celtic-inspired headpiece for his own poem “The Norland Wind” (fig. 3) and Robert Burns’s Beardlsey-esque \textit{Natura Naturans} (fig. 4). Burns’s illustration is dated 1891 and yet was not published until 1895, contemporaneously with closely comparable works by Heine and the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela, reproduced that year in \textit{Pan},\textsuperscript{22} and Lovis Corinth’s 1896 illustration of a nude for \textit{Jugend}.

The cover chosen for all four volumes of the \textit{Evergreen} was also, arguably, Celto-Teutonic. Consciously different from the \textit{Yellow Book} and other avant-garde journals of the period, it appears to have been Celtic-inspired, possibly finding its source in early psalters such as the seventh-century Stoneyhurst Gospel. In fact there are more numerous Germanic sources for this type of embossed leather cover, including sixteenth-century Flemish calf

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Fig 4. Robert Burns, Natura Naturans, Evergreen, Book of Spring, 1895, National Galleries of Scotland.
binding for early psalters and German cameo binding, which includes embossed painted vellum cameos, rather like the coloured design on the *Evergreen*.

All four *Evergreen* covers are illustrated with a Celtic Tree of Life motif, designed by Charles Hodge Mackie (fig. 5). The tree has spreading roots and branches: it draws energy from the earth and reaches up to the spiritual realm in a continuous cycle of birth and rebirth. Again the source of this strange palmate tree can be found in German Renaissance woodcuts of the Arbor Scientiae, the tree of Knowledge, connecting heaven and the underworld; but it is also the world tree or cosmic tree, portrayed in various religions and mythologies, from the ancient Assyrian tree of life (the Celts were said to have journeyed from Assyria) to the Nordic Yggdrasil, an immense mythical tree that connects the nine worlds in Norse cosmology.23

To Geddes the tree of life was also the evolutionary tree, a metaphor for Darwin’s phylogenetic tree of common descent. Within the pages of the *Evergreen* Duncan illustrated Geddes’s Arbor Saeculorum (fig. 6), the Tree of the centuries, where the Renaissance is symbolised by the blazons of noblemen and the hat of the Puritan movement.24 On the other hand the tree’s strange palmate forms appear to have originated in Egypt; both Duncan and Sharp were theosophists and, while the *Evergreen* was profoundly anti-decadent, it also possessed a strong spiritual and esoteric dimension, which reveals itself in other Duncan illustrations such as *Anima Celtica* (fig. 7) also in the *Book of Spring*. In this much-debated image, Duncan visualizes the Celtic spirit or “soul” as a female sorceress or psychic medium, conjuring up scenes from Celtic mythology, inspired by James Macpherson’s *Poems of Ossian*.25 These include the “Birth of Ossian,” the “Awakening of Cuculain,” “Blind Ossian and Malvina” and a reference to the swine of the Celtic Tuath[a] de Danaan who continually renew themselves. In keeping with Geddes’s plea for cultural creativity and national revival, Duncan chose pan-Celtic tales on universal themes involving metamorphosis and reincarnation or regeneration.

In addition to Celtic mythology, however, Duncan was inspired by other, more decadent sources, notably the esoteric writings of Sâr Péladan, creator of the Salon de La Rose + Croix. In his artistic doctrine *L’art idéaliste et mystique* (1894) Péladan stated that “Art has never been able to translate beauty beheld by the eye because beauty derives from dreams, desires and visions.”26 The images in *Anima Celtica* exist in the Celtic woman’s imagination or, I would suggest, have been summoned up through her psychic powers. The legends emerge from a curious incense burner, the smoke from which divides the various elements of the picture and ends in a swirl of Celtic interlace. The woman’s psychic episode has been prompted by the smell and intoxication of the incense. The sense of smell was promoted by theosophists such as Cristoph Cranch as early as 1856 but, after the publication of Huysmans’s *A Rebours* in 1884, was denounced by the likes of Max Nordau as profoundly decadent. Since they ran contrary to the *Evergreen’s* anti-decadent agenda, such sources were downplayed at the time and have been subsequently overlooked by modern art historians.

Nevertheless, as follower and later friend of the Irish writer on mysticism George William Russell (1867-1935), or “Æ,” William Sharp was steeped in theosophy and was interested in psychic phenomena.27 He believed in the deeply mystical aspects of Celticism and even evoked a spiritualist source for the poems of Fiona MacLeod. In 1898 he claimed that, when writing *Muisme Chriosd* or *Mary of the Gael*, published in the second volume of the *Evergreen*, he had “in some measure become interpretative of the spirit of ‘Colum the White.’”28 In other words, by taking on the female persona of Fiona Macleod he was able to act as a...
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Fig 6. John Duncan, *Arbor Saeculorum*, Evergreen, Book of Spring, 1895, National Galleries of Scotland.

Fig 7. John Duncan, *Anima Celtica*, Book of Spring, 1895, National Galleries of Scotland.
“medium” through which the spirit of Saint Columba was able to communicate.

Murray Pittock has observed that Sharp’s personal notion of Celtic Revival, as illustrated by the poems and novels of Fiona Macleod, involved a lethal “fin de siècle cocktail of tragic gloom and old romance,” rather than a firm conviction of what constituted Celtic identity. Sharp was unconcerned with archaeological accuracy and was later attacked by Russell for his unsound ideas and pseudo-Celticism.29 Nevertheless, Sharp was highly critical of what he deemed the crude and decadent images in the Evergreen. In particular, he delivered a scathing attack on Duncan’s Anima Celtica:

With the exception of Duncan’s “Apollo’s School Days” & some of the head-pieces, there is not a drawing […] which is not crude in draughtsmanship and in design — or in one or two instances frankly meaningless! […] in particular, a really deplorable plate, “Anima Celtica,” by Duncan. It is weakly imitative to start with, & in my judgment has no redeeming quality. Aubrey Beardsley may be a depraved & decadent artist — but at least he is an artist & original: but work of this kind is the mere dross and débris of the “fin-de Siècle” ebb. I am afraid that even the most casual critic will notice the bad drawing throughout […].

Despite his own theosophical leanings, Sharp was at pains to distance himself from the decadence of fin-de-siècle art, and to emphasise the purity of the Celtic revival. His only nod to European symbolism in the Evergreen was his translation of Les Flaireurs (The Nightcomers) by the Belgian friend and contemporary of Maurice Maeterlinck, Charles van Leerbergh. The design used to illustrate this particular piece was a curious hybrid of heraldic grotesques with suggestions of Celtic interlace. Indeed, many of the head- and tailpieces in the first edition are hybrids, rather than straightforward Celtic designs; while the designs for Fiona Macleod’s own poems could well be described as “un-Celtic” – above all James Cadenhead’s somewhat flimsy head- and tailpieces for Day and Night. And while some of the Celtic content in the first edition of the Evergreen has decidedly un-Celtic imagery associated with it, the opposite can be said of some of the material supplied by French intellectuals in the second volume. Both Abbé Félix Klein’s Le Diletantisme and Elisée Reclus’s La Cité du Bon Accord (in the Book of Autumn), for example, are accompanied by Celtic ornament.

Such contradictions arise throughout the Evergreen, for, as the first half of this essay has shown, many of the Celtic revival artists associated with the journal drew not only on Celtic design, but also on early Germanic sources, suggestive of a broader, pan-Northern identity than has previously been acknowledged. Nevertheless, these “Teutonic” sources, as well as art nouveau and more esoteric influences were underplayed by Geddes or disapproved of by Sharp, in order to place the Celts at the forefront of the Scottish cultural revival of the 1890s, and in the process to align the Scottish north with notions of purity, regeneration and creativity.

THE GERMANIC SCANDINAVIANS AND THE MYSTERIOUS FINNS

The ambiguous ethnic status of the Celts and the multiplicity of sources for the Celtic Revival reveals the complexity of the notion of northerness. The Finns seem to hold a similarly ambivalent position within the racial and cultural maps of Europe. Geographically Finland is situated between Scandinavian to the west and Russia to the east. After a long period of Swedish rule, the area had been lost to Russia in the Napoleonic wars, and between 1809 and 1917 it constituted an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. In Deniker’s attempt to construct a racial map of Europe, the Scandinavian peninsula is home to the “Nordic race,” but the situation with Finland is more complicated; it is considered to be partly Nordic and partly Oriental.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racial theories had established the conception that the Finnish people belonged to the Oriental or “Mongoloid” race.”31 It was promoted by such prominent figures as the French anthropologists A. de Quatrefages and the elitist and aristocratic novelist Arthur de Gobineau. In his influential book Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines (1853–55), Gobineau described the mysterious Finns as ugly, lazy, completely primitive, and belonging to the “yellow race.” For Gobineau, “les finnois” were among the original and primitive groups of people that had once populated large parts of the world but had in many places been superseded by more developed racial groups.12 Gobineau’s theory was highly imaginary, based on myths and legends, and had very little scientific foundation. His interest in racial classifications was motivated by a pessimistic view of human civilisations, and he employed racial mixing as an explanation for cultural degeneration.33 Yet, the idea of the eastern origin of Finnish people entered nineteenth-century textbooks, encyclopaedias, and reference books, which described the physical and mental characteristics of the Finns in a manner that corresponded to the assumed features typical for “Mongolians.”

The notion that the Finns as a racial group originated from Asia became so well established that it was reiterated also in Finnish publications well into the twentieth-century, even though it was also often disputed. For instance, in 1924, Professor J. J. Karvonen, in an article discussing the racial question, felt it necessary to contest this longstanding belief. He argued on the basis of common physical characteristics that the Finns had to be classified among the Europeans, referring to the by then well-established view that the “Mongoloid” features that were occasionally encountered among Finns resulted from being mixed with the Sámi.44 Karvonen’s reasoning reflects a broader shift in racial
ideologies that had started to take place towards the end of the nineteenth century. Certain ethnic groups were increasingly being perceived as superior to others, and these arguments were gaining amplified political significance. It hence became more urgent for Finns to establish that they did not belong to a racially inferior group. At the same time, with the rise of nationalism and the hopes of establishing an independent nation state, which in Finland became a reality in 1917 after the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, came the need to emphasise the originality of Finnish culture as distinct from both its eastern and western neighbours.

These ideological debates also entered the Finnish art world that around the year 1900 was going through a particularly vibrant period, later to be branded as a “national” artist – a role that he was himself somewhat reluctant to take on. In reality, Gallen-Kallela was an internationally minded artist and a cosmopolitan who was among the major artists of the period, Albert Edelfelt, whom Öhquist described as a pure-blooded “German” steeped in European sophistication, Gallen-Kallela retained the ability to plumb the raw depths of the Finnish soul that remained untouched by civilisation. From the 1890s onwards, Öhquist had been actively involved in the Finnish art world and he was a personal friend of Gallen-Kallela and Edelfelt. However, he has gained a notorious reputation due to his connections with the National Socialists in Germany in the 1930 and 40s.

Yet, the art historian, German lecturer, and cultural mediator between Finland and the Germanic world, Johannes Öhquist, who wrote the first broad presentation of Finnish art history (1912), saw in Gallen-Kallela’s art a manifestation of the archaic, primal vigour of the Finnish “race” and its eastern roots. Unlike the other leading Finnish artist of the period, Albert Edelfelt, whom Öhquist described as a pure-blooded “German” steeped in European sophistication, Gallen-Kallela retained the ability to plumb the raw depths of the Finnish soul that remained untouched by civilisation.

From the 1890s onwards, Öhquist had been actively involved in the Finnish art world and he was a personal friend of Gallen-Kallela and Edelfelt. However, he has gained a notorious reputation due to his connections with the National Socialists in Germany in the 1930 and 40s.

As we can see, even his earlier art criticism sometimes contained hints of racial theorisations, but these were very different from the Nazi ideologies that he was later to adopt and promote.

How, then, are we to understand Öhquist’s comments regarding Gallen-Kallela and Edelfelt belonging to different racial groups? At least partly these kinds of ideas stem from the division between the Swedish and Finnish speaking Finns. Edelfelt was a member of the Swedish speaking upper class while Gallen-Kallela came from a more modest background and learned to speak both languages at an early age. Öhquist grouped him with the Finnish speaking population not only in the linguistic sense but also racially. These two aspects were commonly confused in racial debates of the day. Yet, for Öhquist, Gallen-Kallela was the more original and authentic artist than the over-civilised “Germanic” Edelfelt. Here the idea of North seems to extend towards east in order to construct a more archaic and primitive northernness separated from the Germanic/Nordic north.

In a way, these kinds of theorisations took the pejorative views presented by Gobineau and other earlier theorists and reversed them. The archaic origin of the Finns and their culture now appeared as a positive thing in comparison with Central European decadence and degeneration.

**KALEVALIAN MYTHOLOGIES**

For late nineteenth-century Finns, *The Kalevala* (1835/1849) became an important national symbol and also a crucial component in racial and cultural debates of the period. The *Kalevala* is an epic poem composed by Elias Lönnrot, based on oral traditions but modelled after the great European epics such as the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, and the *Nibelunglied*, as well as James Macpherson’s *Ossian.* For Gallen-Kallela and many other artists of his generation, *The Kalevala* was a “holy book” that contained ancient wisdom. This conception was fuelled by theosophical interpretations of *The Kalevala* that were attached to the conception that a new renaissance of the human spirit would originate in Finland and Scandinavia. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky referred to the Finnish epic in *The Secret Doctrine* and wrote a praising review of the English translation in 1888, while William Butler Yeats thought the poems to reflect a tradition that was even more ancient – and less occupied with the material world – than Scandinavian or Celtic mythology.

These kinds of claims also contributed towards the view of the Finnish culture as highly spiritual, and this idea became integrated into the theosophical formulation of different world periods, according to which it was now time for the “northern race” to lead the advancement of humanity. Some theosophists were of the opinion that their views were decidedly anti-nationalist and anti-racists, but there were others who believed in a kind of “spiritual racism.” They considered race to be an embodiment of spirit and thought that different races and peoples reflected different degrees of spiritual development.

Väinö Blomstedt, one of the many Finnish artists who in
the 1890s developed an interest in both theosophy and *The Kalevala*, wrote in 1894 in a letter from Paris about a new movement that was being born: “Those who cannot follow will be led to a period of decadence, which has already begun. According to the cyclical law, it is now the Nordic region’s turn to have their say.” A similar sense of Nordic superiority had been expressed by his close friend, the artist Pekka Halonen, already a couple of years earlier when he complained about the poor quality of the Paris salons of 1892:

*There is no point for us Nordics to send anything here; we are too good for that […] You would not believe how badly the Frenchmen are starting to paint. They are going backwards with a rumble. They are so tired already that one feels sleepy just looking at their paintings.*

The views expressed by Blomstedt and Halonen speak of a common Nordic identity – “us Nordics.” This feeling of superiority was to a great extent a result of the increased internationality of the art world at the end of the nineteenth century. The generation of Nordic artists that emerged in the 1880s and 1890s was the first for whom their “northern” heritage was no longer a burden to be shaken off through education but rather something to be cherished. When artists from the Nordic countries went to study and work in the artistic centres of continental Europe, it was natural for them to seek each other’s company. In the foreign environment, the similarities in their shared Nordic background were emphasized rather than the differences. It is important to bear in mind that although the Finnish language is not related to Nordic languages, majority of Finnish artist at the end of the nineteenth-century came from Swedish speaking bourgeois or upper-class families. Halonen, who came from a Finnish-speaking peasant background, is an exception but he learned to speak Swedish during his student years in Helsinki.

While in the 1880s Paris had been the unquestionable “Mecca” of the art world, towards the end of the century, Nordic artists were increasingly beginning to see it as decadent and degenerate. This was a direct consequence of their newly found Nordic (or northern) pride. In Halonen’s words Paris was “fit only for animals, the bourgeoisie, and bureaucrats; not for anyone who has even a slightly higher understanding of art.” The northern background had the potential to give Nordic artists and their works a certain outsider quality that they could integrate as part of their artistic identities. In the European environment that valued all things that were considered “primitive” and “exotic,” it was possible to turn the stereotypical role that Paris was “fit only for animals, the bourgeoisie, and bureaucrats; not for anyone who has even a slightly higher understanding of art.” into an advantage.

However, alongside this Nordic identification among Finnish artists, there also existed the notion that was reflected in Öhquist’s comments, according to which the Finns – and particularly those coming from Finnish speaking backgrounds – were both racially and culturally different from the Nordics. One central figure in support of this line of thought was the artist, poet, linguist, inventor, and social activist Sigurd Asp (1870–1946), who later adopted the name Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa. Although, he in fact rejected the notion of “race” in favour of a belief in the shared ancestry of all existing groups of people. He further argued that a culture and language that were closest to the ancient origin had been preserved in the depths of Finnish forests. In 1915, Wettenhovi-Aspa gave out a publication titled “The Golden Book of Finland” (*Finland’s Gyllene Bok I / Suomen kultainen kirja I*), which appeared at once in the original Swedish and in Finnish translation. Despite being a fierce defender of the language, Wettenhovi-Aspa’s own knowledge of Finnish was meagre. The book had been in the making for a few years, and already in 1911 it had been discussed at an artist’ gathering in a restaurant in Helsinki. On this occasion pre-orders had been placed by Gallen-Kallela, Blomstedt, and Öhquist, among others. However, the subject gained more immediate urgency in 1914 when the University of Helsinki’s Swedish-speaking students’ party delegation had published a collection of essays defending the privilege of the Swedish-speaking minority and arguing for their racial superiority in a Pan-Germanic spirit. Wettenhovi-Aspa’s book appeared as an aggressive and polemic reaction against this publication.

To support his rather fanciful linguistic theoriations, Wettenhovi-Aspa referred to European scholars, such as the Viennese professor Heinrich Winkler, who had argued that Finnish and Japanese languages belonged to the same linguistic group, and Jules Martha, professor of Latin at Sorbonne, who had recently claimed that the Etruscans had spoken a Fenno-Ugrian language. Wettenhovi-Aspa argued that *The Kalevala* was the product of a culture that was more advanced and civilised than that of the Germanic people. Although he did not specifically mention theosophy in his argumentation, his readings that emphasised the spiritual and non-violent essence of Kalevalian poetry were very similar to theosophical interpretations of the Finnish epic. Within the context of the present article, it is particularly interesting to note that according to Wettenhovi-Aspa, the original people of northern Europe had been “Fenno-Celtic.” From the name of the Celtic hero Fingal he derived the name for a Fenno-Celtic language and people, “Finngallian” (fingalliska).

Wettenhovi-Aspa developed his theories even further in part two of “Finland’s Golden Book” that appeared in 1935 and was titled “The Kalevala and Egypt.” Once again, in a manner that reflects the theosophical readings of the “national epic,” he set about to establish linguistic and cultural connections from the Kalevalian myths to Egypt and other ancient civilisations. Wettenhovi-Aspa himself noted that his interest in Egypt was first awakened during his early years as an artist in Paris where he socialised with August Strindberg and exhibited at the Salon de la
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Rose+Croix, and was very likely to have been exposed to theosophical ideas. For the theosophist, Egypt held a central place as the home of ancient mystery schools that preserved and passed on to the initiates secret traditions believed to be as old as humanity itself. Hence, Wettenhovi-Aspa’s theories can shed light on the Finnish artists’ interest in Egyptian themes that was awakened with the Symbolist movement in the 1890s. Particularly interesting, from this perspective, are those art works in which an apparently “national” content is combined with Egyptian elements. Perhaps the most intriguing example of this is The Elias Lönnrot Memorial (1902; fig. 8) – a public monument in Helsinki steeped in esoteric content.

The Elias Lönnrot Memorial, sculpted by Emil Wikström, presents Lönnrot, the collector of Kalevalian poetry, sitting next to the mythical hero Väinämöinen, both appearing equally corporeal and tangible. There seems to be no distinction between the worlds of myth and reality. On the left-hand side of the monument, carved upside-down in the granite base, is a hidden image of Antero Vipunen with a pentagram on his forehead (fig. 9). In Kalevalian mythology, Vipunen – a giant who lies buried under ground – is the only character who is more powerful than Väinämöinen. Väinämöinen goes to him to uncover words that he has lost and is swallowed by the giant, who in the end reluctantly spits him out and, in the process, Väinämöinen manages to capture the lost words. The granite base together with the triangular composition of the bronze sculpture gives the monument a pyramidal shape. As a whole it embodies the idea of secret knowledge being passed on from generation to generation, and the Egyptian pyramid shape frames the composition, connecting Finnish mythology with ancient Egypt. To underline this message, the base contains a sentence from the 17th poem of The Kalevala “Sain sanat salasta ilmi,” which roughly translates to “I retrieved the words from secrecy.”
Egyptian themes and motifs also started to appear in Gallen-Kallela’s art in the 1890s, around the same time when he was developing a new, more Symbolist style for his Kalevala imagery. His first Kalevala paintings were executed in a French naturalist manner, but he soon came to the conclusion that this “foreign” style was not suitable for representing Finnish mythology. Synthetist stylisation and eclectic combination of cultural impulses from a variety of sources, including Egyptian, Japanese, and Christian components as well as Finnish Folk traditions, resulted in a pictorial language that appeared more “authentic” and has come to be viewed by Finnish audiences as the “true” image of the Kalevalian world. Of course, this new style was deeply affected by international artistic currents, and the Kalevala paintings should not be perceived as something completely detached from the artist’s other production. Paintings like Conceptio artis (1894–95, later cut into pieces) in which the mystery of art chased by the virile male artist is embodied by an Egyptian sphinx, and the Kalevala-themed painting Lemminkäinen’s Mother (1896; fig. 10) both belong to the same mythical universe. The dead Lemminkäinen laying defeated on the ground is the artist who had gone too far in his search for the mystery – the sphinx – here embodied in the swan swimming in the dark water of the river of death. The swan has a more northern association than the Egyptian sphinx, but both appear as symbols of the mysterious, elusive ideal that remains forever out of reach. Moreover, as a mythical hero who can defeat death, Lemminkäinen is both Christ and Orpheus. Like Orpheus, he is cut into pieces, and in the painting’s composition that follows the model of a Christian pietà, his dead body bears a close resemblance to the body of dead Christ – particularly the famous one painted by Hans Holbein the Younger (The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb, 1520–1522, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel).55

Another Kalevala-themed painting by Gallen-Kallela that is particularly interesting to consider within the context of this article, is The Defence of the Sampo from 1896 (fig. 11). The painting presents a scene in which Väinämöinen defends the mysterious Sampo, a symbol of prosperity, from Louhi, the evil witch who rules over the northern realm. The artist has taken quite a few liberties in relation to the original story. For instance, in the painting, Väinämöinen has several men in the boat with him, whereas in the poem he is accompanied by only two men, Lemminkäinen and the smith Ilmarinen, the divine creator of the Sampo. This image is clearly not to be seen as a straightforward illustration of the poem. Väinämöinen’s men are depicted as Nordic blondes, whereas the men lurking behind Louhi’s back have darker skin and more “Oriental” characteristics. Hence, the North represented by Louhi seems to be associated with the East as something foreign and dangerous, and racially inferior. According to the standard interpretation, which has a strong nationalistic emphasis relating to the political situation of the period, the defence of the Sampo is perceived as a symbolic defence of the Finnish soul and the Finnish nation. Louhi becomes a personification of the foreign ruler, the usurper of power, and her ugliness is that of the enemy. However, these kinds of interpretations did not really emerge until a couple of years after the painting was made, when a period of intense Russification began in the Grand Duchy of Finland.

Ville Lukkarinen, who has analysed the rich network of intertextual references in The Defence of the Sampo, has noted that Väinämöinen’s blazing fury appears simultaneously as a shamanistic trance state and the ecstatic rage of a Berserk warrior. The raised arm holding a sword, a detail that does not appear in the original text, brings to mind King Arthur’s Excalibur rising from the lake. These multiple allusions connect Väinämöinen’s heroic struggle with a range of legendary material: he is a Japanese samurai, a Viking warrior, Odysseus, Jason, and a knight in pursuit of the Holy Grail.56 Gallen-Kallela’s interpretation of the Kalevalian episode can hence be seen to emphasize
the universal level of meaning that is carried within this mythological material.

The Defence of the Sampo with its flattened composition and clearly defined colour fields was obviously inspired by Japanese woodcuts, and the figure of Väinämöinen closely resembles an image of a Japanese samurai. In fact, Gallen-Kallela also executed this work as a woodcut – one of his first attempts in this technique. At the same time, the painting also has a decidedly “Gothic” appearance. The figure of Louhi was probably modelled after a witch in a Medieval German woodcut.57 She is a hybrid creature, between human and animal. The healthy masculinity and racial “purity” of Väinämöinen’s troops is opposed with the monstrous woman with the cowardly “Mongoloids” lurking behind her back. This juxtaposition can be examined in terms of the system of abjection and nationalism presented by Robert Miles. Abjection, as Miles points out, is interconnected with projection: what has become culturally abject is projected onto a convenient other. Only through this process of ideological forgery does it become possible to construct an authentic – or pure – national identity. The effort to construct a usable past is haunted by what has been abjected in the process.58

However, if we look more closely at the figure of Väinämöinen, his features seem to have a slightly oriental appearance and his skin is not Nordic pale but slightly darker. This is also something that is repeated in other representations of Väinämöinen by the artist, such as in the much later painting The Departure of Väinämöinen (1906). This fact can perhaps partly be explained by the visual connection of the figure to a Japanese samurai. But I also believe that Gallen-Kallela may indeed have been inspired by similar theories that were reflected in Wettenhovi-Aspa’s writings about the ancient eastern origins of Finnish culture. After all, the two men moved in the same circles already in the 1890s and later established a life-long friendship.

Gallen-Kallela, as was noted above, was among those who pre-ordered Wettenhovi-Aspa’s “Golden Book of Finland,” published in 1914, in which his theories were expressed in a pseudo-scientific format. But as Wettenhovi-Aspa himself claimed, he had been developing these ideas since the 1890s. In 1895 he had exhibited a sculptural work representing Lönnrot and Väinämöinen that was intended as a proposal for Lönnrot’s monument – a task that was a few years later given to Wikström. Wettenhovi-Aspa’s sculpture was praised by many critics for its ideal content but criticised for the clumsy execution. One critic specifically noted the appearance of Väinämöinen, describing the figure as resembling a “Chinese Mandarin” rather than a Finnish sage.59 However, based on what has been presented above, this was probably not a mistake made by the artist due to a lack of proper skill but rather a conscious choice. Väinämöinen appeared as an embodiment of the ancient eastern roots of the Finnish nation.

The examples discussed here demonstrate that the racial issues reflected in Finnish fin-de-siècle art and culture are far more complex than what the standard interpretations have acknowledged. The notion that Finns belonged to the Nordic race did not become fully established until the mid-twentieth century. This is an issue that needs to be taken into consideration when analysing artworks that seem to take part in debates about race and northernness. Moreover, it becomes clear in the light of this discussion that conceptualisations of the Finnish North were sometimes leaning towards the East in search of more ancient origins that would prove that the Finnish people were separate from their Scandinavian neighbours, and also that their eastern roots had nothing to do with the Russians.

APPROACHING THE IDEA OF NORTH

In this introductory essay we have explored various conceptualisations of the North that existed in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture, juxtaposing...
the dominant Germanic north with Celtic and Finnish norths. As a cultural concept, the North is related to the notion of the “Orient” as it was famously analysed by Edward Said. Yet, while Orientalism establishes a strange and exotic “other” as opposed to what is familiar, the conceptualisations of Celtic and Finnish norths are also modes of self-understanding. Inevitably these perspectives were created in interaction with an outsider view. It was precisely the encounters with mythologised and stereotypical views of the North developed in Central European contexts that created the need for the kind of self-reflection that is examined here. This in no way indicates that these conceptualisations of the North were less artificial than concepts like the Orient that are more directly connected with issues of power and based on an “us-them” binary relation. As the articles collected in this volume clearly demonstrate, the idea of North is always ideologically charged, oppressive towards certain groups of people, and selective about the phenomena that is included. It is not to be understood as some kind of “natural” feature of northern culture or an innate characteristic of the northern people; it is an imaginary and mythical construction that reflects an interplay of various artistic, scientific, political, religious, and esoteric ideologies. Moreover, as Peter Davidson has pointed out, North is always relative, always a shifting concept that “moves […] out of reach, receding towards the polar night, which is equally the midnight dawn in the summer sky.” Yet, despite its unstable and largely fictional character, the different interpretations of North unquestionably had a very real impact on how artists were received both at home and abroad, and on the choices that they made.

The essays that follow approach the idea of North from different perspectives, critically examining the ways in which artists have both taken advantage of and been subjected to various mythological and stereotypical constructs. They examine different interpretations of the North in conjunction with such rubrics as primitivism, authenticity, myth, identity politics, colonialism, and esotericism, reflecting on the fluctuations between insider and outsider perspectives, and revealing hidden ideological structures that have supported stereotypical notions of northernness. The idea of North emerges here as an ambiguous and politically sensitive issue that encapsulates complex Romantic assumptions about nature and society. While northernness could be associated with racial inferiority and lack of civilisation, the increasing discontent with modernity also fuelled an interest in origins and primitivism, vernacular traditions, folklore and myth. From this perspective, the North could appear as a source of revival and invigoration – it could provide an antidote to decadence and degeneration.

Bart Pushaw, Charlotte Ashby and Jadranka Ryle connect the idea of North with debates about National Romanticism; a central notion within histories of Nordic art. Discussing artistic representations of Sámi people, Pushaw’s essay examines the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that have served to erase colonialism and indigeneity from these narratives. The period between 1880 and 1920 has generally been understood as an era of social harmony and “shared values” in the Nordic region, but the process of unification never extended to certain marginalised groups, such as the indigenous Sámi. Well-known artists like Carl Larsson created exoticising imagery of Sámi people and Sámi landscapes, while also taking part in the organisation of exhibitions showcasing “racial types” and popularising hierarchical constructions of race. Larsson’s painting Breakfast in the Open (1913) “creates a ‘false idyll’ of communal joy among Sweden’s haves and have-nots,” revealing “not only a divide between social classes but also between who is and who is not Swedish.” Yet, Pushaw reminds us that there were also artists like Johan Tirén, who employed their works to advocate for indigenous rights. Nevertheless, Tirén’s paintings that presented Sámi people in a sympathetic and dignified manner resisted the emerging avant-garde idiom and have hence been marginalised in the established histories of Swedish art.

In Charlotte Ashby’s essay that discusses Nordic landscape painting, the notion of National Romanticism is contested through a critical reading of images that are incompatible with the established national visions: “landscapes in which the lurking threat of the untamed North remains too strong.” Ashby’s analysis centres on the concept of the Gothic as a cultural turn towards North, and as an alternative approach to northern nature that can also give voice to unwellcome and uncomfortable truths about life in the North. Ashby describes Johan Christian Dahl’s View from Stalheim (1842) as a work that “fuses the modern, Gothic appetite for the terrible drama of wild places with a rugged, northern arcadia.”

Jadranka Ryle tackles the inherent masculinity of National Romanticism in her essay that analyses Hilma af Klint’s subversive and androgynous use of Nordic mythology. Like National Romanticism, af Klint’s art has a utopian element that is founded in myth – but hers is a “feminine androgy nous utopia.” The esoteric and scientific elements in af Klint’s oeuvre have been discussed relatively widely in recent scholarship but much less attention has been paid to the manner in which she drew on Nordic mythical traditions. Her series of swan paintings, which Ryle analyses at length, presents a particularly interesting case since its mythical content is rendered in the form of diagrammatic abstraction, reconfiguring the swans as balanced cuboid forms. Ryle maintains that these abstractions of the swan figure “make a radical and politically charged feminine intervention into the gender inequalities obscured and naturalised by the National Romantic Norse revivals of her day.”

Danielle Siemens addresses the role of photography in constructing and disseminating ideas of North, continuing...
the colonial perspective that was introduced in Pushaw’s essay. Her essay looks at the Canadian North through Rosemary Gilliat Eaton’s photojournalism of the eastern Canadian arctic. She discusses the narrative agency of photographs in colonial discourses, revealing how late nineteenth-century formulas of using photography as “an extension of the colonizer’s gaze” continued on into the twentieth century but were also transformed in the process. Siemens notes that, while in her published work Gilliat appears to follow the established primitivist discourse that defined Inuit as part of Canadian identity but maintained a cultural and geographical distance, archival research reveals a more multivalent picture. Gilliat was aware of the potential violence of the camera and the imbalance of power in her encounters with the indigenous subjects. She felt an ethical responsibility to avoid stereotypical representations of the North and strove to represent it as she saw and experienced it. The next step, as Siemens suggest, would be to return the photographs to their source communities to be recognised and described.

John Morrison examines nationalism and northernness within the Scottish context, analysing the role of myth as a “highly selective memory of the past used to stimulate collective purpose in the present.” Scottish nationalism drew from mythical Highlandism as a paradigm that presented Scotland as an ancient land with continuing traditions. Morrison argues that the northern identity of the Scots was consciously manufactured outside of the North for the benefit of the majority lowland culture. Echoing the Canadian situation described by Siemens, in Scotland visual representations of northern culture were largely based on stereotypical, often entirely false presuppositions and hence this kind of imagery did nothing to empower the inhabitants of these exoticized regions.

Our aim with this publication has been to reveal and analyse hidden ideological structures within cultural debates circulating around the idea of North. The different approaches to the question of northernness that are presented here all, in their own ways, reach beyond the traditional disciplinary field of art history, taking into account social and political debates, spiritual and religious aspects, and scientific advances, unravelling mythical constructions and questioning dominant narratives. Moreover, they demonstrate that the North can be employed as a highly useful conceptual tool for challenging established canons and contributing towards more multifaceted and inclusive approaches in art historical research.
Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author.


4 Cited in Murray G. H. Pittock, Celtic Identity and the British Image (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 56.


7 For example, “Professor Huxley on Celts and Teutons,” Pall Mall Gazette (21 January 1870); Thomas Huxley, “The Forefathers of the English People,” Nature (March 1870).


9 McCulm The History of the Ancient Scots, 25.


11 Anon, ‘Pan-Celtic Congress’, The Advertiser (9 November 1907), 8 (reporting on the Edinburgh Pan-Celtic Congress).


17 This technique was embraced elsewhere in Britain, notably by William Morris for the Kelmscott Press. Morris himself amassed a large personal collection of fifteenth-century German woodcuts, which he published in 1898.

18 The Evergreen, Spring 1895: 141.

19 See, for example, Gallen-Kallela’s illustration to Paul Scheerbart’s poem Königsfeld, created for Pan in 1895.

20 Yggdrasil is attested in the Poetic Edda, compiled in the thirteenth century from earlier traditional sources, and the Prose Edda, written in the thirteenth century by Snorri Sturluson.


23 “Je ne parlerai pas de la beauté de l’oeil que l’art n’a jamais pu traduire, car cette beauté se compose de rêve, de désir ou de vision, inconnus aux mondays.” Sär Peland., L’Art idéale et mystique: Doctrine de l’ordre et du Salon annuel des Rose + Croix (Paris: Chamuel, 1894), 62


26 “Je ne parlerai pas de la beauté de l’oeil que l’art n’a jamais pu traduire, car cette beauté se compose de rêve, de désir ou de vision, inconnus aux mondays.” Sär Peland., L’Art idéale et mystique: Doctrine de l’ordre et du Salon annuel des Rose + Croix (Paris: Chamuel, 1894), 62


29 On this see Volker Welter Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the City of Life (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

30 Pittock, Celtic Identity, 72.


32 See Kemiläinen, Suomalainen, 139–144; and Aira Kemiläinen, Finns in the Shadow of the “Aryans”: Race Theories and Racism (Helsinki: SSH, 1998), 69.

33 J.J. Karvonen, “Jättjukas suomalaisen rotukysymyksestä,” Duodecim (1942): 550. Karvonen uses the term “Lapps” (lappalaiset) which is nowadays considered derogatory. I have translated it to “Sámi.” See Bart Puschaw’s article in this volume.


37 “Je ne parlerai pas de la beauté de l’oeil que l’art n’a jamais pu traduire, car cette beauté se compose de rêve, de désir ou de vision, inconnus aux mondays.” Sär Peland., L’Art idéale et mystique: Doctrine de l’ordre et du Salon annuel des Rose + Croix (Paris: Chamuel, 1894), 62


42 Väinö Blomstedt to Yrjö Oskar Blomstedt 6 March 1894, cited in Sarajas-Korte Suomen varhaissymbolismi, 114.
44 Pekka Halonen to Akseli Gallen-Kallel 23 May 1894, cited in Ilvas, Pekka Halonen, 46.
45 Pekka Pitkälä, Pyramidit, pyhält raamit: Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspan (1870–1946) näkemykset suomen kielestä ja suomalaisten historiasta (MA diss., University of Turku, 2010), 65. Wettenhovi-Aspa has been labelled as an eccentric and therefore very little serious scholarly work has been devoted to him. The best and most reliable source of information is Pekka Pitkälä’s master’s thesis from 2010. Pitkälä is currently carrying out doctoral research on the same subject. Another important work, but one that unfortunately contains quite few references and does not always mention its sources, is Harry Halén and Tauno Tukkinen, Elämän ja kuoleman kello: Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspan elämä ja teot (Helsinki: Otava, 1984).
46 Wettenhovi-Aspa grew up in a Swedish-speaking family in Helsinki and was at the age of twelve sent to a boarding school in Northern Schleswig, which now belongs to Denmark but was until 1918 a part of the state of Prussia. Halén and Tukkinen, Elämän ja kuoleman kello, 20–36.
47 Pitkälä Pyramidit, 59
48 Svenskt i Finland: Ställning och strävanden (Helsingfors: Söderström 1914). See also Pitkälä Pyramidit, 60.
49 Ibid., Pyramidit, 68–69.
50 Ibid., 64–65
51 Ibid., 35–36.
52 Suomen Kultainen kirja II: Kalevala ja Egypti; also published on German as Fenno-ägyptischer Kulturursprung der alten Welt: Kommentare zu den vorhistorischen Völkerwanderungen (1935). See Pitkälä, Pyramidit, 89–97.
55 See Sarajas-Korte, Suomen varhaissymbolismi, 337; Lahelma Marja, Ideal and Disintegration: Dynamics of the Self and Art at the Fin-de-Siècle (PhD dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2014), 115–117.
56 Ville Lukkarinen, Pois mieliset ei se päivä jää: Albert Edelfelt ja Vänrikki Stoolin tarinan (Helsinki: Ateneum 1996), 9–11.
57 Ibid., Albert Edelfelt, 10.
59 Halén and Tukkinen, Elämän ja kuoleman kello, 67.