

PORTFOLIO\_ENN KUNILA's COLLECTION

Colours of the Golden Age



**Herbert Lukk** ( 1892-1919) „Street, Boards and Houses“ | 22.5 x 34.5 | oil on canvas, 1918



**Endel Kõks** (1912-1983) „View of Tartu“ | 90 x 100 | oil on canvas, 1938





**Konrad Mägi** (1878-1925) „Venice“ | 45 x 53 | oil on cardboard, 1922-1923



**August Jansen** (1881-1957) „Red House“ | 69 x 70 | Oil on cardboard, 1910s





**Nikolai Triik** (1884-1940) „Portrait of Aino Suits“ | 91 x 74 | oil on canvas, 1914



**Ants Laikmaa** (1866-1942) „View from Capri“ | 46 x 56 | pastel on paper, 1911-1912





**Eerik Haamer** (1908-1994) „Harbour“ | 41 x 33 | oil on cardboard, 1945



**Andrei Jegorov** (1878-1954) „Winter Suburb“ | 73.5 x 89.5 | oil on canvas, 1928-1930





**Aleksander Vardi** (1901-1983) „Notre Dame de Paris“ | 46 x 61 | oil on canvas, 1937

# Colours Of The Golden Age

By EERO EPNER

The exhibition that opened in Tallinn's Mikkeli Museum is entitled "Colours of the Golden Age" and consists of paintings from Enn Kunila's collection. The exhibition is best summed up by Enn Kunila when he says "Often people talk about motifs or literary content in paintings, but for me those are not the most important aspects. Everything to do with composition and colour is much more significant, especially the strokes of the paintbrush." It is according to this principle that Kunila has selected works for his collection, the majority of which are paintings by Estonian artists from the first half of the 20th century.

The exhibition has arranged the works into three sections: works completed in Estonia, works created abroad, and portraits and figural compositions, along with two paintings which are united by a certain Olympian view of the world.

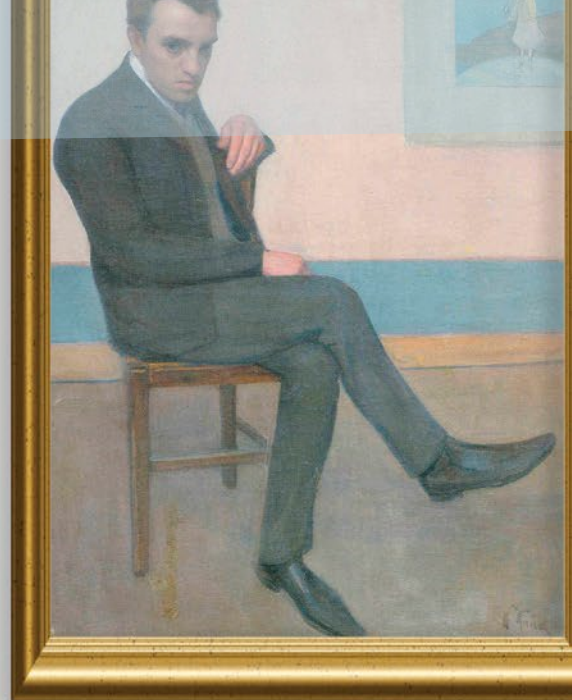
In the first hall, we see the portraits and figural compositions which are united by a certain sense of melancholy. The figures in these paintings never look the viewer in the eye, but have turned away, staring into the distance, cutting themselves off from the audience: lost in loneliness. When there are multiple figures in the paintings, they do not establish contact with each other, remaining separate, divorced from other figures. Sometimes faces are hidden behind hair, and sometimes figures have turned their backs or reveal only pensive profiles.

Some people consider melancholy to be one of the core characteristics

of Nordic people. Inexplicable sadness is created by living in darkness, sensing the different seasons, which tells us that everything will pass, everything is ephemeral.

On the first floor, there are landscape views painted in Estonia, as well as travel works by Estonian artists. We often associate the paintings which have been created at home with national identity. However, today we can view those works separately from nationalism and, if desired, from the opposite angle: for the authors those paintings were rarely linked to a personal or national identity: their main focus was on landscape.

The second group includes paintings created by Estonian painters abroad. In the first half of the 20th century, living abroad was very common for Estonian artists (as it was totally impossible during the Soviet occupation in the second half of the 20th century). Going abroad was "normal" and accessible to anyone, especially since often no visas were needed, the train connections were great and the travel times not particularly long (the train journey from Berlin to Paris lasted 17 hours for example). It was possible to live even if one lived in poverty. Some have recalled that it was possible to find a roof over one's head for two nights in Italy for the money received from selling one postage stamp and there was still some cash left over for food. One could drink from many of the public fountains. There was no clearly sensed differentiation between the abroad and Estonia; one melted into the other and travelling was organic, fast and ordinary.



# Enn Kunila: Estonian Art Is Estonia's Business Card

By EERO EPNER / Photos by MEELI KÜTTIM

Enn Kunila with the portrait of his favourite painter Konrad Mägi by the master of modernism Nikolai Triik. The portrait is often referred to as "The Portrait of A Freezing Artist" (1908).



Enn Kunila is a true gentleman with faultless manners. He is an entrepreneur, art collector and opera lover who donates significantly to both art and opera. Art needs support and Enn Kunila is a patron in the best sense of the word, not a sponsor. He does not expect anything in return. For him, art patronage is not a business project.

### ***Life in Estonia* asked one of the most well-known art collectors in Estonia where and how it is possible to buy Estonian art.**

Enn Kunila owns a large painting collection, which mainly includes Estonian traditional paintings from the early 20th century on, starting with **Konrad Mägi** (1878–1925). Kunila admits that it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when his interest in art became more serious, although he began to collect art in a more studied way after Estonia regained independence. “Being involved in art exhilarates me and it is like a holiday. I like talking to artists in the evenings, as they have an entirely different attitude to life, and I love to live in the same space with paintings.” When asked about the size of his painting collection and how much he has invested in it, Enn Kunila remains diplomatically vague: “An art collection cannot be valued in terms of the number of pieces. If my collection included just five significant paintings by van Gogh, I would have a considerable art collection by world standards. I buy paintings on the basis of their artistic value and when I like them. I invest in art according to my means.”

### **You have organised several exhibitions on the basis of your collection and you never exhibit the same works. Your collection continues to grow. How does art in Estonia reach the art collector?**

I believe that we have something in common with the experience abroad but there are also differences. Similarly to other countries, there is a functioning gallery system in Estonia and art auctions are held on a regular basis. There is quite a long tradition of art auctions in Estonia, dating back more than 15 years. A decade ago, during the height of auctions, there might be twenty a year, organised by five or six galleries and offering more than 400 paintings, mainly from the period which interests me: 1900–1945. This is considerable for a small country. Today, the number of auctions has really decreased, but they do take place on a regular basis, and they are reliable and proper in every way.

Unlike in larger countries, pieces of art in Estonia also move around from hand to hand. As there are about ten larger collectors and their names are publicly known, people often make direct contact. I have never hidden my contacts or remained under cover; this is why I have had the pleasure of meeting many interesting and nice people. By the way, the people who call me are not intermediaries but people who have either inherited paintings or have owned them for dozens of years and have now decided to sell them. The background stories are part of the paintings and therefore I really enjoy talking to people who have personal connections to their pieces. Collecting art is a very personal thing for me, many works hang on the walls of my home and, when I choose a piece for my collection, the main principle of selection is that I personally like the work.

### **Can Estonian art be found at foreign auctions?**

Yes it can. For example, Baltic German art, but also works by the first professional painter **Johann Köler** (1826–2899), the landscape painter Konrad Mägi, who was one of the most colour-sensitive Estonian painters of the first decades of the 20th century, and others. Estonian artists fare well in comparison with European art of those days and therefore those paintings are also included in foreign auctions.

### **To what extent is buying art an investment for you?**

Of course it is an investment, and perhaps the most important investment of all. First and foremost, I invest my time and I receive a great feeling as interest, as well as the aesthetic experience and an inexplicable feeling of joy. I do not invest in art for financial profit, but in the name of spiritual growth. I do not sell the pieces I have bought. I have them restored, ask art historians to compile thorough background information and exhibit them to everyone interested. This is my investment.



### **Does it make any sense to invest in Estonian art?**

I wouldn't recommend doing it for financial profit. There are easier and faster ways to make money. But if one looks for art which emphasises the aesthetic experience which grows out of the unbelievable use of colour, then older Estonian art is a valuable investment indeed. This has been increasingly noticed in the art history writings on older European art and, for example, an exhibition I organised in the Finnish art hall Taidehalli in Helsinki was extremely successful and received many great reviews. When thousands of people in Helsinki or Brussels come to see Estonian art, the investment has been worth it for me; I even consider it "profitable", but not in terms of money. I consider Estonian art to be Estonia's business card and when thousands accept this card there is hope that they will develop as people and as friends of Estonia. If that is not a dividend of my art collection, I don't know what a dividend is.

### **Is it difficult to find new works for your collection?**

It is indeed increasingly so. On the one hand, there are not that many valuable pieces of art available. The Estonian art scene is quite thin in terms of numbers. Very many works of art have been destroyed or perished in wars and difficult times. A large percentage of remaining works are exhibited by national museums. Therefore, building up

a distinguished collection is something which takes time. It would be easy to go to an auction, buy 40 pieces of art and call it a collection. It has taken me two decades to build up my collection. You need time, patience, determination and no tolerance for mediocrity. Every work in my collection has arrived there after thorough research and sometimes consultations. I have to consider not only whether I like the piece, but increasingly whether and how the new painting adds some new shades to my existing collection.

A work of art may be excellent and show the painter in a good light, but not add anything new in the context of the collection.

### **What would you recommend to someone who is interested in buying Estonian art?**

Buy one painting. I consider it to be a unique characteristic of Estonian art that each painting is a small collection. The mainstream of Estonian art between 1900-1945 was very diverse, but also so harmonious that one great colour-centred painting may contain the entire period. But more specifically, I would of course recommend Konrad Mägi. He was our most famous artist and he is by far my favourite. His works sell for around 65,000 euros. If you are lucky enough to find a painting by Konrad Mägi, by all means buy it, even sight unseen. Well, before you buy you could call me, because perhaps that painting is still missing from my collection...