Finnishness and Colonization in Akseli Gallen-Kallela's Representations of Africa

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Finnishness and Colonization in Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s
Representations of Africa

Camille Kathryn Richey

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Finnishness and Colonization in Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s
Representations of Africa

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Akseli Gallen-Kallela is often discussed as the national painter of Finland, as one who helped define Finnishness when Finland was still a colonized area of Russia. However, his trip to Africa from 1909-1911 shows where Gallen-Kallela acts as a pictorial colonizer himself, not only sympathizing with the Africans but representing them through a European cosmopolitan lens, as purer and closer to nature, but still inferior. The assumptions inherent in his representations of Africa reveal that Gallen-Kallela is not only a colonized subject but a colonizer of his own country.

Keywords: Finland, Africa, Kalevala, nationalism, colonialism, cosmopolitanism, ecocriticism
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I want to experience the effects of the climate, I want to get to know its living wilderness as well as its infinite lifelessness. Of course over there they have a formal ending point, but I want to wander past it, to get to the unnamed lands, the intriguing unknown.

[Tahdon kokea sen ilmaston vaikutukset, tahdon tutustua sen elollismaailmaan ja myöskin sen äärettömään elottomuuteen. Joku nimellinen lähtöpiste sielläkin tietysti on, mutta tahdon vaeltaa sen ohi, kunnes tulen nimettömille maille, joiden takaa kiehtovana kutsuu itse tuntematon.]

--Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Africa Journal 5*

**Introduction**

Akseli Gallen-Kallela is not known for his paintings of Africa; if people have heard of the artist at all, they know him for his nationalistic representations of Finland and *Kalevala*—deservedly so. He played a major role in the independence of Finland when its identity as a nation was undefined and constantly debated. Since the area was owned by Sweden for hundreds of years and then under Russian rule for almost all of the 19th century, people living in Finland during the 1800s wondered about their collective identity, how they were different from Sweden and from Russia, and if they should fight for their own independent country. Not everyone agreed on what Finland was or what its future should be. Those who wanted a Finnish nation felt the answers to their identity crisis were in their past. Enthusiastic artists, musicians, and authors sought to rediscover what Finland was before Sweden and Christianity forcefully

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1 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted

2 The most notable oppositional groups were the Svecomans and the Fennomans. The Fennomans thought the low-class Finnish language was the key to a Finnish identity and ultimately a Finnish nation. The Svecomans opposed the Fennomans, wanting to keep Swedish as the official language of education, law, and business, which would keep Finland tied to Sweden.
arrived and diluted the original culture\(^3\). One of the first texts to present the people their raw, pagan ancestors was *Kalevala*, a collection of folk stories and mythology which Elias Lönnrot gathered from different rural parts of Finland and undoubtedly embellished upon a great deal, which was published in 1835. In this mythological epic, the Finnish people saw themselves and their most basic characteristics: the supposed essence of Finnishness.

Akseli Gallen-Kallela, born years later in 1865 to a rich Swedish-speaking family, was well acquainted with *Kalevala*, feeling intensely connected to its themes and fantastic heroes. Since he was a young boy he yearned to illustrate the stories on canvas (Wahlroos 29). Beginning in 1891 with his painting *Aino Triptych* (*Aino-taru*), depicting the young woman Aino rejecting the old wizard Väinämöinen, Gallen-Kallela eventually became known as the illustrator of *Kalevala*. Seeking to represent the landscape, clothing, and attitudes of the Kalevala people as recognizably Finnish—of course, “Finnish” according to Gallen-Kallela’s perspective, informed by his experiences with peasants and the land especially—the images ultimately struck a familiar chord with his contemporaries. Today his paintings are thought of as displaying a uniquely Finnish style, a characteristic most people now willingly accept but which has been thoroughly deconstructed in academia within the last 30 years (Ashby 352)\(^4\). Still, the label of the national painter of Finland has been, and will probably continue to be, firmly affixed to his name. He helped discover—or perhaps better said, helped invent—Finnishness.

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\(^3\) Besides Elias Lönnrot and Akseli Gallen-Kallela, these enthusiastic artists also included Jean Sibelius, the composer; the author and playwright Aleksis Kivi; and the author Juhani Aho, among others.

\(^4\) In “Nation Building and Design: Finnish Textiles and the Work of the Friends of Finnish Handicrafts” Charlotte Ashby makes the case that the national style is deeply rooted in textile designs. While Gallen-Kallela’s experimentations in style are similar to those in other countries—the aesthetics of Art Nouveau and Mir Istusstva, for example—the textiles of Karelian peasants were, in fact, different. By using these designs in his paintings, he was then producing a unique style.
But in 1909, almost thirty years after his first public Kalevala painting, Gallen-Kallela told his wife and two young children to buy some safari clothes and pack up their things, while he grabbed his paints, canvases, easels, a camera, and the passports, to leave their Parisian home-at-the-time and sail across the Mediterranean Sea, through the Suez Canal, down to Mombasa, and finally to Nairobi on a Ugandan railway line (*Africa Journal* 7). Just getting there was long and uncomfortable, but not even as painful as some of the insect stings, physical sicknesses, and homesickness they would later endure while in the British colony. Why make the daunting, overwhelming, and dangerous excursion? And why Africa?

The trip seems tangential to the nationalistic narrative about Gallen-Kallela—an obscure fact about an obscure artist—but it may not be as peripheral as it initially appears. Gallen-Kallela believed in some kind of relationship between Finland and Africa—a distant, imagined relationship, but a relationship nonetheless. To him, the Africans shared a characteristic ruggedness with the primitive Finns, the Kalevala people. However, though the relationship seems relatively straightforward, understood fairly easily in a mere sentence, it is surprisingly complicated with implications that are both appealing and damaging. Informed by pan-European beliefs about the essence of nations, relationships between land and people, the origins of mankind, and even colonialism, the connection is layered and paradoxical. His reasons for seeking out primitive peoples in the first place and his visual representations of those people reveal where he sees them as a familiar “self” and as an “other,” as colonized subjects he is sympathetic towards, and as subjects he is also in fact visually colonizing. Instead of explaining the trip with one simple statement or dismissing it as an escape from Gallen-Kallela’s normal routine, this study seeks to understand the connection he saw between Africa and Finland more fully as it relates to the artist’s nationalistic endeavors as well as the broader cosmopolitan
European discussion about non-European peoples at the turn of the century. The Africa trip is not tangential, but a key to understanding more of Gallen-Kallela’s worldview.

So far only a few Gallen-Kallela scholars have written about this trip in particular, often without fully explaining its complexities. Rather than critiquing or drawing out the implications of his reasons for going to Africa, they paraphrase his beliefs, concluding that he was interested in the origins of people and this interest led him to a place he thought contained origins: Africa. For example, Onni Okkonen, the Finnish art historian whose mid-20th century books laid the foundation for scholarship on the painter, discusses the trip in this way:

To Gallen, Paris was, as he said himself, only a stopping point on the trip into ‘darker Africa,’ which he had secretly been longing for for quite some time. The idea loomed large in his mind, as a kind of natural paradise, an endless wilderness where he could simply absorb and forget all of the fatigue and debate the last few years had brought, where he wouldn’t need to worry about the future of his art, where he could just sense the beautiful nature around him and represent it as such, immediately, without any deeper goals. There he would meet people still in their pristine original state.

[Pariisi tuli tällä kertaa Gallenille, kuten hän itse sanoi, vain pysähdyspaikaksi matkalla ‘mustimpaan Afrikkaan,’ jonne hän oli salassa kauan jo kaivannut. Se alko vääkkyä hänen mielessään yhä enemmän jonkinlaisena luonnontilan paratiisina, jonka rannattomiin erämaihin voisi uppoutua ja upotta kaiken sen väsymyksen ja stelunpiinan, minkä viimeiset vuodet olivat mukanaan tuoneet, missä ei tarvitsisi vaivata mieltään pohtimalla taiteen tulevaisuutta, missä voisi vain aistia luonnon ihanuutta ympärillä ja kuvata sitä sellaisenaan, valittömästi, ilman mitään syvällisempiä päämääriä. Siellä
Okkonen essentially summarizes Gallen-Kallela’s professed attitude that the artist was rejecting urbanization and the moral decay it caused. He was trying to find people who were in a more “pristine original state,” to come into contact with an unspoiled wilderness that he could “represent as such,” as if the people of Kenya really were purer, as if nature could be depicted as itself. Gallen-Kallela was seeking origins, starting with Finland and then moving onto Africa. That’s where Okkonen leaves it.

Other writings that discuss the Africa trip follow a similar pattern of relaying Gallen-Kallela’s attitudes, but with a slight addition, generally alluding to an ambiguous connection between Finland and Africa. Kai Mikkonen’s “The Modernist Traveller in Africa: Africanism and the European Author’s Self-Fashioning” discusses Africa as a liminal space, which stripped Gallen-Kallela of his superficial urban lifestyle, allowing him to reevaluate his identity, his origins, and to even see connections between ancient Finns and Africans, specifically through the metaphor of the sauna as an unrefined, primal, and pagan cultural artifact. Similarly, Tuija Wahlroos’s “Devoted to the Kalevala: Perspectives on Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s Kalevala Art” explains that the Africa trip was a search for origins, for “mythological symbols” (Wahlroos 28), and the “birth-words of the world” (37). Once again, this talks about Gallen-Kallela’s attitude toward Africa, that he desired authenticity and Africa was the place to find it, but it does not critique that attitude or show where it may be problematic. Furthermore, while phrases like “birth-words” shows an interest in general origins rather than specific Finnish origins, Wahlroos briefly mentions that the Africa trip helped Gallen-Kallela with Finnish nationalism, particularly in his final Kalevala project. After Africa and before he died, Gallen-Kallela was working on an
illuminated manuscript-like version of *Kalevala* which he called *The Great Kalevala* [*Suur-kalevala*]. While his illustrations had been printed in other versions of the *Kalevala*, *The Great Kalevala* was to be a book completely designed and decorated by him, an exhaustingly detailed project with bright, colorful embellishments on each page, influenced by his experiences with Africans and, as it turns out, Native Americans\(^5\). Wahlroos mentions that *The Great Kalevala* was both “art for the [Finnish] community” (36) as well as a project that showed “myths’ universal unifying power between different cultures” (37). So while the book was supposed to communicate to the people of Finland about themselves, it was also supposed to transcend that culture to speak to humanity as a whole, in large part due to Gallen-Kallela’s experiences in Africa. However, she doesn’t explain exactly how that trip could accomplish these goals, how Africa could help with Finland in particular, and if the two were connected in any way other than through some general, universal ideas about mythology.

Wahlroos does mention that Gallen-Kallela found a “Kalevala people” in Africa (36), an intriguing phrase that is also not explained. Though the original quotation is not cited, it seems its first utterance in regards to Africa comes from Okkonen who quotes it in a letter written by a friend of Gallen-Kallela recalling the painter’s attitude toward Africa, saying, “They probably still have a branch of the Kalevala people, which has died from extinction here in Finland” [“Siellä on vielä varmaankin jokin haara Kalevalankansaa jäljellä, joskin se on kuollut sukupuuttoon Suomessa”] (Okkonen 715). Of course, using this quotation to prove Gallen-Kallela recorded the phrase is questionable since it trickles down through multiple sources and isn’t exactly from the artist himself. Leila Koivunen’s “Under the African Stars: Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s Travel into Stopped Time” [“Afrikan Tähtien Alla: Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s Travel into Stopped Time”]

\(^5\) Gallen-Kallela spent time in New Mexico from 1923-1926. Wahlroos talks about this trip and the Africa trip as part of that same search for origins.
Maalausmatka Menneeseen, Pysähtyneeseen Aikaan” uses the phrase with a bit more promise. She writes “Kalevala people” as a title within the article, but still she refers to the phrase instead of directly quoting from Gallen-Kallela (Koivunen 156), though the Finno-Swedish political magazine *Fyren*, which she includes in her writing, does say Gallen-Kallela went to Africa “to search for Kalevala heroes at the equator” [“för att söka Kalevala-hjältarne vid ekvatorn”] (see fig. 1). Whether the phrase was actually written or said by Gallen-Kallela is unclear, but from this issue of *Fyren* and the other scholarly articles, it seems Gallen-Kallela was thinking of Africa in Kalevalian terms.

Even though the origins of this reference to the Africans as “Kalevala people” are vague, the real complication comes from trying to understand what Gallen-Kallela is in fact saying. Surely, he was not going to meet an ancient people or an ancient Finnish people in Africa, though that is what a “Kalevala people” would theoretically mean. Did he really think a handful of Kalevalians left Finland thousands of years ago to set up a colony in Kenya? Perhaps Koivunen explains its definition best when she says, “According to Gallen-Kallela, Finland had lost the original Kalevalian people, but he believed that he could still find a similar authenticity and naturalness in Africa.” [“alkuperäinen, kalevalainen kansa oli Gallen-Kallelan mukaan kadonnut Suomesta, mutta hän uskoi vielä voivansa löytää vastaavaa alkuperäisyyttä ja luonnollisuutta Afrikasta”] (153). Instead of taking the phrase literally, she recognizes it as a metaphor. That lost authenticity is what characterized the ancient Finnish people, and Gallen-Kallela felt there was a similar authenticity in Africa. Earlier in the article she expresses it this way: “[he] hoped to find Kalevala’s atmosphere in Africa” [“Gallen-Kallelan toiveelle löytää Kalevalan tunnelma Afrikasta”] (152). She does not make the blunt, confusing statement “he hoped to find the actual Kalevala people in Africa,” but rather rephrases the declaration as an “atmosphere,” a mood, a
Figure 1 Cover of the May 5, 1909 publication of Fyren.
feeling, maybe even a lifestyle. For her Gallen-Kallela wasn’t going to Africa to find characters from the Kalevala; he was going there to find Kalevalian characteristics, especially this mysterious authenticity. Defining that particular kind of authenticity, whatever Finns seemed to have ancienly which characterized Finnishness and what the Africans still seemed to have at the turn of the century, is part of the purpose of this study. Like Koivunen subtly points out, the connection between Finland and Africa is an imagined one, a similarity, a metaphor, a belief, rather than a rigid, straight, biological or political line between the two. Gallen-Kallela’s ability to imagine a connection is only made possible through layers of other imaginings, through selective ways of thinking about Finland, ancient Finland, and Africa, which are shaped by discussions on nationalism, urbanization, the origins of mankind, and colonialism. Since Gallen-Kallela was quite cosmopolitan himself, he certainly would have been influenced by all of these conversations.6

The word “imagining” here is used to prove a certain point about Gallen-Kallela’s views regarding Finland, Africa, and the relationship between the two. That is, his views are not reality; they are subjective—assumptions and biases that are created and propagated through discourse. More specifically, this word “imagine” carries with it a theoretical background laid out in Benedict Anderson’s critical work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*. Here Anderson explains that nations are imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members…yet in the minds of each lives the images of their communion” (6). Instead of being bound to the community through some necessary tie or

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6 Although Gallen-Kallela’s most famous paintings revolve around the rural Finnish folk, he cannot be thought of as a rural painter who was isolated in Finland his whole career. This will be explained further in subsequent sections. For more information on some of the art movements he participated in, see Jeremy Howard’s *Art Nouveau: International and National Styles in Europe* for his Art Nouveau influence and Kirsi Kaisla’s “Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Germany” for his involvement in Symbolism and Die Brücke Expressionism.
inherent characteristic, Anderson demonstrates that those characteristics are only believed to be present and therefore proclaimed to be present. Indeed, the members of the community believe they share those essential characteristics with every other member of the community when in reality they are only the creations of people, expressed through things like novels, newspapers, and the standardization of language. Lönnrot, the author of *Kalevala*, is a perfect example of someone who engaged in this kind of nationalist imagining. He was not simply recording the way things really were in ancient Finland, but coming to peasants of Finland believing that their stories contained the essence of Finland, and then retelling those stories through his own biased perspective. He was creating and publishing what he thought defined Finnishness. Gallen-Kallela’s subsequent Kalevala paintings were similar fabrications. Again, Gallen-Kallela wasn’t transferring some metaphysical, divine vision he received about the actual Kalevala people into paint and onto canvas; he was envisioning who those people were and portraying them according to what he believed about them.

Anderson also explains that the community imagines itself to be limited. “It is imagined as limited because even the largest of them…has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” (7). The boundaries of the nation must stop at some point, signifying that one nation is clearly separate from the next, but interestingly Gallen-Kallela also imagines the essence of Finland outside of Finnish boundaries. This paradox implies a couple different possibilities. On one hand, by going to Africa in order to find a “Kalevala people,” Gallen-Kallela could be contradicting the original Finnishness he expressed in his Kalevala paintings. In those representations, the Kalevalians were supposed to contain something one could only get from living exclusively in Finland. But finding Kalevala-ness in Africa could be Gallen-Kallela’s agreement with Anderson, showing he sees through declarations about essential characteristics,
recognizing that they are arbitrary and not necessarily bound to a specific people or a specific place. On the other hand, the trip could still be wholly Finno-centric. He is not throwing out the notion that there is and can be something uniquely Finnish about the Finnish community, but fitting the rest of the world into a Finnish frame of reference. Finnishness then is still a trait that the country possesses. Any outsider who appears to have that trait is not understood as acting according to her own independent subjectivity, but as a Finn. Although Gallen-Kallela was probably radical in some ways, it doesn’t seem likely he would have aligned with the former implication. Rather he seems to have been projecting his own understanding of Finnishness onto the people of Africa and defining their characteristics according to his Finnish vocabulary.

Now, having introduced the popular narrative about Gallen-Kallela’s nationalistic contributions, the literature on the Africa trip, and Gallen-Kallela’s likely ethnocentric perspective of Africa, I can now address the specific contributions this study makes to the scholarship on Akseli Gallen-Kallela and his trip to Africa. Essentially, there are two major objectives. The first is to determine what exactly this Finnish—and apparently African—authenticity is. I argue that, briefly stated, Gallen-Kallela thought more authentic meant more connected to the land. It meant working the land and changing the land as well as being physically changed by that hard work. This relationship between land and people was what made the Kalevala people rugged, the true characteristic of Finnishness, and a trait that the Africans had even into the 20th century. The second objective is more pressing, to reveal Gallen-Kallela’s assumptions about origins, relationships between land and people, and nations, and to address problems in all three that have not been discussed, mainly the fact that his imagining of national characteristics outside of Finland is rather imperialistic. While these other scholarly writings almost celebrate Gallen-Kallela for sympathizing with the distant African people, as if he were
ethically ahead of his time, in reality Gallen-Kallela did not escape from the colonizing discourse of Europe. He was participating in it. If colonization is essentially the invasion and domination of an area stemming from the wishes and desires of a European, then Gallen-Kallela was a pictorial colonizer in Africa. These colonial aspects of Gallen-Kallela’s writings and representations of Africa are abundant, and yet they have been ignored. Ultimately these two objectives serve to complicate the original narrative of Gallen-Kallela. Often he is remembered and praised as the national painter of Finland, as a colonized subject who revolted against Russian and Swedish oppressors to define his marginalized, fledgling country. But despite his familiarity with this miserable and persecuted condition, he was also a colonizer himself, participating in the visual colonization of Africa by representing Kenya and its people only in relation to Europe and more specifically Finland, either as its extension, its reflection, or its opposite.

Since this argument revolves around themes of nationalism, primitivism (a scientific and artistic fascination with primitive peoples), and colonialism, the paper is organized around these three themes. The first section addresses Gallen-Kallela’s nationalist work as a colonized subject, or his imaginings of Finland in the 1880s, the part of Gallen-Kallela’s narrative that is more traditionally recognized. It discusses where his initial inspiration for beliefs about Finnishness come from, taking into account that his cosmopolitanism largely influences these beliefs. The paintings from this period characterize the Finnish land and people as rugged and resilient. Gallen-Kallela’s search for this ruggedness takes him to the rural areas of Finland, first near his home in Western Finland, then to its opposite in Paris, and finally to the cultural heart of Finland, Karelia. Like the European nationalistic impulses of the day, Gallen-Kallela follows his contemporaries to his own non-urban folk, finding inspiration in their traditional culture.
Building off of this cosmopolitan longing for the authentic lifestyle of the folk, the second part of the paper discusses Gallen-Kallela’s desire for authenticity in Africa which is influenced by European discussions on primitivism. However, instead of simply paraphrasing his attitude like the scholarship often does or accepting it as reality, this section discusses where these assumptions are inherently colonial and problematic. Imagining Africa as primitive and stuck back in time facilitated the sense of entitlement colonizers felt in exploiting African peoples and lands. Recognizing this colonialist thinking in Gallen-Kallela complicates the popular narrative about Gallen-Kallela as himself a colonized subject.

These conflicting stances, Gallen-Kallela as both colonized subject and colonizer, make their strongest appearances in the third section of the paper, which explores the Africa drawings and paintings that were published in his autobiographical Africa Journal [Afrikka-kirja]. Here, he admiringly yet ethnocentrically depicts Finnish resilience in the Africans. Similar to his paintings of the Finnish peasants, he shows a resilient people working hard in a rugged land. Though these representations of Africans are celebratory and even in some ways sympathetic, they also deny the Africans their own subjectivity and appropriate them for Finnish nationalistic purposes. Once again, Gallen-Kallela is not only colonized subject, but pictorial colonizer.

I. Cosmopolitanism and the Finnish Rural

Before discussing Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s imagining of the African people as a “Kalevala people,” we have to first determine what in fact characterizes a “Kalevala people.” Wahlroos and Koivunen argue that according to Gallen-Kallela the Kalevala people are authentic. However, he seems to be more specific than that. The Kalevala people and their 19th century descendants are resilient, and this resilience is the product of living in and working with a rough, bleak
environment. Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén argues in his *Axel Gallén and the Constructed Nation: Art and Nationalism in Young Finland from 1880-1900*, that Gallen-Kallela was imagining and painting perseverance and ruggedness even at the beginning of his career with his peasant portraits and landscapes.

For the first twenty or so years of Gallen-Kallela’s life, popular views of the Finnish landscape are seen from the hilltops, panoramas of numerous lakes and dense forests, which represent Finland as an unspoiled wilderness. Finland is seen as an idealized, inviting wilderness without human exploitation. However, this is not how Gallen-Kallela sees it. For him, the Finnish landscape is only complete with a human presence, with something to indicate that people are in fact living here. That indication of a human presence is able to highlight how coarse the land actually is and how difficult it is for someone to work that land, which speaks to the character of the people who can endure that kind of struggle. Stepping down from the hilltops, he narrowed in on individual old rowboats and small battered barns built in (what was considered) traditional styles (Axel 47-8). He was consumed by images of weathered human footprints in the craggy Finnish environment, of man-made constructions in the process of decay, ground up from the daily chores of working in that environment, dirtied, and flawed.

That step from envisioning Finland as a wilderness to seeing it as a home for people is an important one. Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* sheds some light on these different types of relationships between nature and people, what these representations communicate to the viewer, and what they imply about the creator. He explains wilderness as nature with no human trace, “in

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7 Though this is the dissertation of one of Gallen-Kallela’s direct descendants, it is quite important to the discussion on Gallen-Kallela’s nationalist role, making an appearance in other works such as *Akseli Gallen-Kallela: The Spirit of Finland* and *A Mirror of Nature: Nordic Landscape Painting 1840-1910*. Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén himself is one of the major contributors to Gallen-Kallela scholarship at the moment.
a state uncontaminated by civilization” (59). Wilderness is seen as uncultivated and dangerous but also pure and plentiful. Sometimes these representations even imply a need for humans to come in and organize the area, as if it were waiting or inviting people to do so. The earlier images of Finnish nature are certainly depicting it as an overwhelming wilderness, a land that seems uninhabited, pristine, and also available for human consumption. It’s as if Finland is still undiscovered, a budding, young land on the periphery of Europe.

Though that representation of Finland may sound appealing especially to a community that was trying to imagine themselves as a new country, Gallen-Kallela’s images reject this vision, emphasizing that the land is populated by people with a long-standing relationship to that place. Of course there are multiple kinds of relationships between land and people, but it seems Gallen-Kallela’s depictions fit somewhere in between two types: the pastoral and dwelling. According to Garrard, the pastoral is “country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” that is also usually “an idealization of rural life that obscures the realities of labour and hardship” (33). In other words, the people in pastoral scenes live in rural areas, having tamed the wilderness themselves and organized the land. Their work is connected to nature yet they ultimately rule over it as pleasant, idyllic shepherds and farmers. Like Garrard says, the realities of that rather difficult and dirty labor are largely hidden. Though Gallen-Kallela does show these boats and barns as rather charmingly rustic, he certainly does not want to hide the hardships of working the Finnish land. Rather, he accentuates them. David Jackson explains the unadorned Finnish rural barns and boats this way: “Unprivileged motifs such as The Ekola Farmyard or Log Raft indicate that this is not a rural idyll but a working environment, a land where farming was often at a subsistence level… It is a land populated with the accouterments of labour, a land that has been fished, farmed, settled, developed, exploited and nurtured by its inhabitants” (Jackson
28). Here Jackson points out that Gallen-Kallela depicts Finland as the home of hard-working people instead of idealized peasants.

Because of this, his portrayed relationship between land and people is closer to dwelling. This term borrowed from Heidegger remains a bit ambiguous for Garrard as he continuously deconstructs it, but Garrard does explain that “dwelling is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry, and death, of ritual, life and work” (Garrard 117). These people are dedicated to a specific place, sometimes as if there really were a connection between the actual soil and the people, the soil affecting the type of person that comes from it (111). He points out that the most idealized version of a dweller is the “ecological Indian.” Though this image of the ecological Indian isn’t completely accurate, nevertheless “since the sixteenth century at least these ‘primitive’ peoples have been represented as dwelling in harmony with nature” (120). They supposedly understand it, belong to it, and live peacefully with it. Although Gallen-Kallela’s Finnish peasants may not go so far as to truly dwell in harmony with nature, there is an interdependent relationship between them and their land. In Gallen-Kallela’s paintings, both the environment and the man-made constructions are flawed. The land is changed because of the people working on it and the people’s houses and boats are changed because of the environment working on them. In the end, both the environment and these constructions are rugged, coarse, and dirty, as well as resilient, and inextricably connected. In his own summary of these paintings, Gallen-Kallela-Sirén writes, “This affirmation of the continuity of nature’s biological processes even in seemingly inhospitable milieu is typical of Gallen-Kallela’s vision of Finland. This land is rugged and its climate harsh, his paintings declare” (Spirit 118). By repeatedly painting the Finnish landscape with these features, Gallen-Kallela is promoting the uniqueness of the relationship to place. Resisting picturesque wilderness
scenes from the hilltops and pleasant pastoral images, Gallen-Kallela chooses to represent the working relationship between this rough land and its persevering people.

Gallen-Kallela shows the interrelationship between people and place even more directly through his paintings of the peasants themselves. Unsurprisingly, like the rowboats and the barns, the peasants are also worn down, yet resilient. Fortunately, Gallen-Kallela-Sirén’s dissertation presents us with countless unpublished journal entries and letters, one of which describes Gallen-Kallela’s attitude towards his rural neighbors: “It often feels as if the best were left out when I talk about [Finnish] yeomen. I cannot find the right form for my enchantment and love… Of course, [I like] the rugged shapes of the buildings and the hard, yet to me so beautiful faces of the people. And what is especially delightful is their laconic speech” (Axel 54)⁸. By connecting the “rugged shapes of the buildings” to the “hard, yet…beautiful faces of the people” he is not only characterizing the people through weathered boats and barns, but through their own appearance. They are also rough and perhaps even crude. Their language is “laconic”—not glamorous, decorative, or eloquent, but curt, concise, and pragmatic. Two of his most famous paintings of these rugged peasants are Boy and Crow [Poika ja varis] (see fig. 2) and Old Woman and Cat [Akka ja kissa] (see fig. 3). Boy and Crow shows a young boy standing outside, staring towards the right side of the painting, with tattered pants and a shirt that doesn’t quite fit, no shoes, “ragged and tanned with his head shaved as a precaution against lice” (Jackson 24). Greens and tans blend into grey, white, and brown. The painting highlights the dullness and the hardships of peasant life instead of erasing them in a pastoral scene. Likewise, Old Woman and Cat shows a woman with a wrinkled face set into a frown, a dark spot on her right cheek, thin

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⁸ Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén’s translation is the only one available, since this passage comes from unpublished memoirs.
Figure 2 *Boy and Crow* [*Poika ja varis*]. 1884. Oil on Canvas. Ateneum Museum, Helsinki.

Figure 3 *Old Woman and Cat* [*Akka ja kissa*]. 1885. Oil on Canvas. Turku Art Museum, Turku.
hair, a bulging stomach, and abnormally large hands and feet (25). The ground is textured with pebbles, dirt, and pointed weeds; a wooden and worn fence stands behind the woman and continues into the top left portion of the painting. Like the roughness of the land and the fence, this woman is flawed and unrefined. Her daily labor in the harsh environment has carved her face and body into a slightly distorted figure. Yet she is not overwhelmed or overcome by her situation. She still stands on both feet and is even able to care for a cat. She is resilient, as well as the boy who also stands tall, strong. Once again, like the land, like the barns, these peasants persevere despite their environment, the very characteristic Gallen-Kallela would later project onto Africa.

This rural, working relationship between the land and the people was, as Okkonen and Koivunen claim, longed for precisely because Gallen-Kallela was cosmopolitan. Living most of the year in Paris from 1884 to 1889 and traveling to Finland only during the summers, he certainly would have been aware of trending conversations in Europe, including ones about origins and authenticity. Art Nouveau and Symbolism, movements that Gallen-Kallela experimented with later in the 1890s, were forming and gaining popularity during his studies in Paris in the 1880s. And both movements demonstrated the belief that urban life was superficial. Art historian Jeremy Howard explains that while Art Nouveau manifested itself through various aesthetic choices and subject matters, there was an overall reaction against western materialism, “an aversion to the Europeanization of the world and its emphasis on mercantilist capitalism,” which “led to reversion to lost traditions and forgotten cultures” (Howard 3). Since Art Nouveau

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9 Thinking about authenticity being found in rural areas wasn’t new in the late 1800s. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about the decay of humanity in his “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” published in 1755. He argued that the primitive was purer and more ethical than the modern human. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) added that the authenticity of the nation was in their own primitive people, or the folk. They were the “creative source of a nation’s culture” (Barnard 233).
artists believed a purer way of living happened before capitalism emerged, they believed that resurrecting those old world symbols and stories would infuse modern life with the truths it had lost.

Additionally, beliefs about authenticity outside of urban life were also seen in nationalist discourse. Gallen-Kallela was not the first to search for the essence of his country by looking to the peasants. Just about every other nationalist figure throughout Europe during the 1800s was doing the same thing. Clearly this was a Europe-wide trend with the folk and their traditions being thought of as keys to the country’s distant past. For example, the Grimm Brothers in the early 1800s gathered traditional German folktales that were thought to have been generations-old; William Dyce painted his King Arthur frescoes in the Palace of Westminster from 1848-1864; Friedrich Kreutzwald compiled traditional Estonian tales into their national epic, *Kalevipoeg*, which was published in 1853; and of course Elias Lönnrot gathered Finnish folk stories to create the celebrated *Kalevala*. Seeing the modern city as corrupted and less authentic was a nationalist belief as well as an artistic one. It’s not surprising, then, that Gallen-Kallela would have expressed some of the same desires to find authenticity, not just because he disliked cities, but because he was actively participating in these cosmopolitan discussions, which claimed the rural was purer, truer, more authentic, and less concerned with money, status, and appearances.

Gallen-Kallela’s conflicting disgust and fascination with the city can be seen in his letters and paintings, beginning with these years as a student in Paris. Sometimes he seems to quite enjoy being part of the city, being exposed to some of the great artists of western history, and participating in exhibitions himself. He adopts an Impressionistic style in his representations of Parisian life with quick unblended brushstrokes and a feathery Eduard Manet-like texture. In
1887 while painting in Central-Finland he even wishes to come back to France saying, “I’m not comfortable here, I have been overtaken by a yearning to return to incessant work in Paris” (Axel 82). Gallen-Kallela is no stranger to the urban lifestyle, going on to live in Berlin during the 1890s and Paris again right before the Africa trip in 1909. But at other times, he does seem to resist that lifestyle. Gallen-Kallela-Sirén goes so far to say that these same Impressionist-like paintings that look charmingly French are really the result of Gallen-Kallela massacring the faces of the crowds, rendering them unrecognizable and indistinguishable from one another.

In images of Paris he resorted to impressionistic brushstrokes and patches of bright color not because he wanted to be affiliated with Manet and his followers, but because he experienced Paris as a superficial surface. …In his urban scenes Gallen attacked this plane with caricatured violence [and] covered an underlying composition with streaks of paint that vaguely resemble but hardly mirror the impressionist practice of perceiving light and space as color.” (79)

According to this passage, the paintings may look Impressionistic, but that is hardly because Gallen-Kallela is after the same goals. Rather, he is showing his disgust for the city. Though Gallen-Kallela-Sirén’s interpretation may be a bit extreme, at times Gallen-Kallela does express feeling like an outsider. In one letter from 1888 to his future wife, he writes about the constant commotion of Paris, “It is warm outside; even though the windows are closed I hear noise, shouts, and laughter from the streets. All these sounds melt into one single pandemonium… How lonely I feel, I can’t partake in their joy” (Axel 81)¹⁰. Here he is not interested in the busyness and the ongoing chatter of the streets; he feels alienated.

¹⁰ Again, I’m using Gallen-Kallela-Sirén’s translation but this time because the letter is in the National Archive in Helsinki.
This psychological isolation from the city shows up even more in his café scenes. *After the Masked Ball at the Opera* (see fig. 4), for example, depicts a group of friends, dressed in formal evening wear, sitting at some tables for appetizers and drinks. The main focus of the painting, a woman wearing a bright peach dress, turns away from us to look at the rest of the black and white clad crowd. Her separation from the group becomes the theme of this image, which in turn emphasizes the viewer’s distance from the social circle. We don’t find ourselves among these individuals, taking part in their conversation, filled in on their action, but observing longingly from afar. Gallen-Kallela “invariably juxtaposes the sounds of others with his silence, and through his silence he brings his conflict with modernity to a head. While he does not refuse the manners and patterns of modern life and painting, he positions himself oppositionally against both” (*Axel* 94). His position as an outsider, as a silent observer, is exactly the sentiment these paintings express.

Figure 4 *After the Masked Ball at the Opera*. 1888. Oil on Canvas. Collection Wulff, Finland.
But once again, that yearning for authenticity seems to be an environmental concern. It’s a longing for the relationship humans once had with nature, and it’s longed for by the cosmopolitans. Garrard explains that in general the modern poet (in the West) saw himself as distinct from nature. Where ancient poets saw nature as an extension of themselves, the modern poet saw it as completely separate (Garrard 44-5). In other words, the separation causes a desire for reconnection. Even though Gallen-Kallela at times despised city life, he is coming to this assumption about authenticity from the city itself. His urban mentality creates nostalgia for and desire to find people who are living with nature. So when he goes to the Finnish folk and later the Africa tribes, he is already seeing through a lens of cosmopolitan expectations, projecting his ideas about a close connection with nature onto them.

After his studies in Paris and the accompanying works of boats, barns, and peasants, Gallen-Kallela honeymoons with his wife in Karelia, the Eastern region of Finland in 1890 for just a few weeks, spurred on by this search for Finnish origins. Karelia was thought to be the home of *Kalevala* and the cultural heart of the country. Because of the rune singers and kantele musicians, ethnographers were first interested in the area, motivated by “scientific interests” to gather data and gain a better understanding of a place they already believed held keys to their past (*Axel* 224; Fingeroos 33). Gallen-Kallela gathers pieces of Karelia as well. Even though he feels Russian influence had covered some of the authentic Kalevalian culture of the area, he still records feeling impressed by the “soul of the people” (*Axel* 231). As Gallen-Kallen-Sirén puts it, “Gallén’s recollections of Russian-Karelia, his references to the power of words and the character of the people, point to the artist’s attempt to cull from the life of the people and their environment elements that matched his image of Finland’s heroic prehistory” (231). Once again, Gallen-Kallela imagines the essence of Finland into this place. Rather than painting Karelia as a
Karelian, he comes to the area with an outsider’s biased perspective, through nationalistic as well
as cosmopolitan lenses, believing that he will find Kalevala remnants in the folk, believing that
one can go into this area of Finland and in a way come into contact with the ancient Finn. Over
those few weeks, he manages to harvest patterns, textiles, objects, clothing, and notes on the
architecture. He also paints portraits of his wife in Karelian clothing, a mixture of traditional and
Greek Orthodox styles, some of his first efforts to mythologize Karelia specifically, to use
Karelia as the historical Finland (241). He later uses Karelian textile patterns in his Kalevala
paintings as well, treating contemporary folk clothing as though it were the same clothing worn
by pre-Christian pagans thousands of years before (Ashby 358). For him as well as other artists,
Karelia is a place of memory, a way of physically and temporally experiencing the roots of the
Finnish people. Years later in 1909 Gallen-Kallela would search for Finnishness paradoxically
outside of its own borders, ethnocentrically imagining a people rooted to place in Africa.

II. Longing for Authenticity in Africa

As the introduction briefly addressed, Gallen-Kallela’s ideas about Africa, his imagined
connection between Finland and Kenya, is not just sympathetic (as it is often celebrated to be),
but it often seems rather colonial, aligning with European assumptions about Africa at the end of
the 1800s and early 1900s that enabled people to colonize the continent. Even though the
Russian duchy of Finland never participated in the political colonization of Africa, it only seems
natural that Gallen-Kallela would pick up on European beliefs about Africa, especially since he
had already accepted other trending ideas about authenticity, rural life, and nationalism.

One of the most attractive colonial beliefs from the period that Gallen-Kallela certainly
buys into is the idea that Africa is premodern. As Anne McClintock, a scholar who writes
extensively on colonialism, says in her critique of the 1885 British adventure novel *King Solomon’s Mines*, “The journey into the interior is, like almost all colonial journeys, figured as a journey forward in space but backward in time. As the men progress, they enter the dangerous zones of racial degeneration” (242). Even though the men in these novels are coming into contact with contemporary individuals, they claim these other people’s present states as their own distant pasts, as if they were going back in time themselves. Similar to the ethnographers, folklorists, and artists like Gallen-Kallela who went to Karelia to discover the same thing, these colonial adventures believe the people have maintained ancient characteristics or even ancient lifestyles for thousands of years. Not only does Gallen-Kallela see Karelia as a step back in time, but he also views Africa this way, as if the people were earlier on a line of human progression, a line that begins with a close primitive connection to nature and ends up with the urban separation between humans and nature. In fact, at the beginning of Gallen-Kallela’s own book *Africa Journal* [Afrikka-kirja], which was recorded by him after his trip to Africa and published a few months after he died in 1931, he recalls being in the sauna and telling a masseuse in the process of scrubbing down the men’s bodies, about his childhood desire to visit Africa. He says in Africa the air “is always as warm as the sauna” [“niin kuuma kuin sauna löyly”], where people are “heathen and walk around naked” [“pakanoita ja käyvät ilkialastomina alvaria”] (*Journal* 4).

Relating Africa to the sauna fits Africa within a Finnish frame of reference. Africans are not just simply naked and left at that, but they’re naked like the Finns in a sauna. Furthermore, the sauna is thought of as a mystical or spiritual place. As Kai Mikkonen explains, for the Finns, “the sauna is the navel of the earth. There is not much surprise in this comparison between the sauna and navels as many Finns, perhaps most of them at the time, were born in a sauna” (Mikkonen 120). In calling the sauna “the navel of the earth,” Mikkonen alludes to primal roots of Finnish culture.
Connecting Africa to the sauna conjures up images of pre-Christian paganism as well as a closer, even exposed relationship to nature. This nakedness, warmth, and paganism are not so much an urban dweller’s ongoing experience with the world, though Gallen-Kallela may have visited the sauna a few times a week; but it is what an urban dweller would think the primitive dweller’s ongoing experience to be. Gallen-Kallela sees these so-called primitive Africans as maintaining an ancient pagan lifestyle, a lifestyle that is stuck back in time and closer to nature.

This is not the only time Gallen-Kallela talks about Africans being stuck back in time. In fact, there are multiple instances of him speaking about Africans as if they were ancient Finns. Even the letter quoted by Okkonen, which gives us the phrase a “Kalevala people” in Africa, shows this mentality. As the letter says, “They probably still have a branch of the Kalevala people [in Africa], which has died from extinction here in Finland” [“Siellä on vielä varmaankin jokin haara Kalevalankansaa jäljellä, joskin se on kuollut sukupuuttoon Suomessa”] (Okkonen 715). Though Gallen-Kallela probably did not really believe ancient Finns were still in Africa, he was longing to find a similar people and projecting this desire onto the Africans. It is important that he compares them to the Kalevalians instead of the Karelians. The Kalevala people had lived thousands of years before; the Karelians were still living in Finland, and even though they provided a crucial peek back into Kalevala times, it seems that for Gallen-Kallela it was not the full authentic experience. By giving Africans the name of the ancient Finns, he places them both at the same moment, far behind the advanced turn-of-the-century European. Gallen-Kallela’s daughter Kirsti also compares the Africans to the ancient Kalevalans in her book My Father Gallen-Kallela [Isäni Gallen-Kallela]. When hearing the music of Kikuyu people, she says their music comes straight from the Kalevala people themselves (Father 250). And on the next page
she thinks she hears a Kalevala melody (251). Certainly this is unlikely to be a sentiment that Kirsti invented herself—she was only twelve years old when they began their trip—but a comparison perhaps discussed within the Gallen-Kallela family. Lastly, in the *Africa Journal* itself Gallen-Kallela writes, that in Africa “there are no worries about finances because of debt, no bills waiting, [and] no sorrow because of the political situation” [“ei ollut taloudellista huolta entisten velkojen takia, ei vekselien lankeamisen kammoisaa odotusta,…ei[ä] poliittisten olojen suremista” (*Africa* 152). Clearly this statement does not extend to Africans who certainly would have exchanged goods, found themselves indebted to one another, and worried about their leaders; he sees Africa as an escape from European living, which in many ways it is, but it does not really move past that, as a place with its own purposes, problems, and history unrelated to Europe and Finland. For Gallen-Kallela, Africa is still connected to European modernity, as its opposite and the roots of Europe’s past, all very typical European imaginings of Africa at the time.

These beliefs about Africans being stuck in time would have also come from the artistic movement of primitivism, a movement that deeply influenced Gallen-Kallela philosophically although not necessarily stylistically. Primitivism is now discussed as an artistic movement during the early 1900s that was characterized by flattened planes, simplified representations, childishly distorted figures, and other supposed naïve aesthetic choices meant to look like as if they were painted by primitive peoples instead of modern Europeans. While Paul Gauguin and Henri Rousseau, two of the most influential artists of the movement, seemed to celebrate non-

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11 Music is often talked about as a major part of the Kalevala world. For example, Väinämöinen is arguably the main character of the *Kalevala* and is an ancient wizard who casts magic spells by singing. The beginning of the epic begins with him singing a spell and ends with him singing as he drifts away on a boat. To say the African people are singing a Kalevala melody is to connect their mythology, to claim that they share an ancient, pagan gnosis.
Europeans by mimicking their styles, primitivism still acts on colonial assumptions, the main one being that Europeans have progressed beyond a natural state and can make aesthetic decisions (such as reverting to a “primitive” style) based on choice and not necessity.

Since primitivism is important to Gallen-Kallela’s trip to Africa—the literature often refers to Gallen-Kallela’s interest in primitivism as a reason for going—a bit of the history and its connections to colonialism will be addressed here. First of all, the fascination with primitivism does not begin with artists but with scientists, with ethnographers and anthropologists, the same types of people who were making trips to Karelia in Finland. Coinciding with the “Scramble for Africa” in the late 1800s when various European powers carved up the larger parts of Africa that had not been colonized yet and subsequently invaded them, ethnological museums were invented and grew in popularity in cities such as Berlin, London, Rome, Dresden, and even Stockholm (Goldwater 7). The museums displayed extra-European objects in order to learn more about humanity’s chain of progression. Like Darwin who could imagine a chain of animals emerging into the modern day human being, or Hegel who argued that humanity was progressing and improving from one time period to the next, these museums offered clues about the fully cultured European’s distant ancestors, similar to Gallen-Kallela’s thinking about the characteristics of ancient Finns still being present in Africa. Non-European items, such as harpoons, necklaces, and weapons, were presented as ancient artifacts. Even though they were not centuries old objects, they were originally labeled as “antiquities” (5). These contemporary objects of non-European cultures were thought of as the remnants of a long-forgotten past.

Because Africa was thought of as a continent stuck in time, the people were seen as inferior, barbaric, and childish. As one museum owner described, the artifacts were not on
display “out of regard for the great perfection of the technical arts which had been found among these barbarians” (5). Alfred Haddon’s *Evolution of Art* of 1895 sought to track that Darwinian chain of progression specifically through art. He explains that primitive art implies a lower intelligence that comes from a lesser-evolved human mind. He asks, “For is not art necessarily associated with intelligence? Is not intelligence a function of the brain?” (Goldwater 20). Using these rhetorical questions, he concludes all too simply that this less developed art proves that primitives have less developed brains. V. Y. Mudimbe, who discusses the Western vision of Africa as an invention stemming from Western epistemology, also mentions that these works of art “were viewed as primitive, simple, childish, and nonsensical” (10). He adds, “They are ‘savage’ in terms of the evolutionary chain of being and culture, which establishes a correspondence between advancement in the civilizing process and artistic creativity, as well as intellectual achievements” (11). Because African art did not correspond with modern aesthetic goals, Africans were therefore labeled as less developed, which Haddon concludes, allowed people to link artistic capabilities with intellectual ones. This is certainly how art critics like Robert Frye described the art as well, as if non-Europeans were to be commended for what they surprisingly could do without knowledge from advanced scientific discoveries. In fact, Frye’s view is so ingrained that even when he finds art that contradicts this perspective (specifically naturalistic rock paintings of the bushmen) he says it is “of a most curious form of primitive art” (334). The word “curious” implies an anomaly, as if Frye amusingly noticed a discrepancy in his theories but it wasn’t enough to redefine them. The finding may have disproved Frye’s assertions that primitives were struggling, childish artists, but he readily dismisses the results as outliers.

All of these beliefs about the primitive are entirely in line with what Gallen-Kallela admires about Africa. In some ways Gallen-Kallela seems to be on a similar path as Paul
Gauguin, the exemplar of primitivist art. First painting his French folk in the 1880s, Gauguin then went in search of a more authentic people in Tahiti, ultimately living there himself. Jean-François Staszak’s “Primitivism and the Other: History of Art and Cultural Geography” discusses Paul Gauguin’s work specifically explaining, “It’s the Savage, the Primitive who constitutes the main alternative and source of inspiration. His Otherness is inscribed in time (he belongs to the dawn of Humanity), but also in space (he is exotic)” (354). This “belonging to the dawn of Humanity” strongly resonates with Gallen-Kallela’s assumptions about Africa’s ability to reveal humanity’s original words and symbols. Gauguin also viewed Western culture as inauthentic and non-Western as authentic, or “truer because [it was] simpler and freer” (353), a belief that Gallen-Kallela agrees with in his ongoing search for origins. Gauguin too felt disgusted with European culture and all its unnecessary conventions, its “materialistic and hypocritical…civilization. He aspired to a lost authenticity” (354). Again, this artistic interest in primitivism at first seems to celebrate the non-Europeans for living more purely, but it also propagates a way of thinking about the “other” as inferior. Ethnological museums were founded on the assumption that the earlier stages of modern man could simply be found in going to a non-European culture, and art critics saw non-European art as the result of people with less-developed brains. So while Gauguin thought of the Tahitians as living purely, he also assumed they were living in a less developed, childish state. So too did colonialists see Africa as a continent of inferior people that could not stand up to the Europeans and maybe even needed the Europeans to advance their civilizations. In many ways Gallen-Kallela takes part in this colonial discourse about people outside of Europe. Gallen-Kallela’s statements about Africans perpetually living in a pagan sauna-like state, not worrying about debt, showing characteristics of a Kalevala people, and living more authentically initially elevate the non-European people but
ultimately demote them to a status lesser than his own. In the next section, this conflicting attitude will be present, not just in his reasons for going to Africa, but in the actual visual representations of Africa as well.

III. The Artwork of the *Africa Journal*

The first section of this study considered Gallen-Kallela’s rural paintings as portrayals of what he imagined Finnishness to be; the second section revealed Gallen-Kallela’s rather colonial assumptions about Africa and how they enable him to make a connection between Africa and Finland. This section discusses how Gallen-Kallela represents a Finnish interrelatedness to place in Africa and the subsequent colonial implications of those representations. Overall, the qualities that defined Gallen-Kallela’s Finnish paintings—the emphasis on the harshness of the environment as well as the people’s resilience because of it—are certainly present in the Africa images. The most dominant recurring patterns which seem to emphasize that Finnish relationship with nature are: 1) the sparseness or emptiness of the landscapes, both as subject matter and as background; 2) memento mori motifs, which demonstrate that the land is rough and dangerous; 3) images of people working in this sparse environment; and 4) his individual portraits, which focus on the people’s resilience, often as warriors. Of course, there are other images, which lie outside of these categories, but an overwhelming majority of Gallen-Kallela’s African artwork repeats these themes, showing altogether the Africans’ resilience in a bleak environment.

In the first two-thirds of the *Africa Journal*, Gallen-Kallela continually portrays a sparse Kenyan landscape. The first time we see landscape is above the chapter title “Nairobi: In Maasai Land” [“Nairobi: Massai Maassa”] (see fig. 5). The drawing shows four Maasai warriors looking off into the distance somewhere outside the left of the frame. Clearly they are the subjects of the
image, but the landscape in the background is interesting: there is hardly anything in it. Gallen-
Kallela draws one line across the top, about four-fifths up from the bottom of the frame—one
flat, straight, horizontal edge—then another simple line above the horizon on the left to represent
mountain peaks in the far distance, and some twisting horizontal clouds floating overhead. That

![Figure 5 Nairobi: In Maasai Land [Nairobi: Massai Maassa] from África Journal 7.](image)

concludes any details he has for the landscape. There are no trees, no bushes, no patches of grass,
not even ripples in the sand. And though this does seem to be a simple study instead of a finished
work, this same set up gets repeated multiple times in the África Journal.

For example, this same layout—the very high, flat horizon line that indicates a large
expanse of space without actually filling in that space—is shown in other portraits as well. 
*Kikuyu Woman With Her Lavish Pearl Necklace* (see fig. 6) contains once again a straight,
streamlined horizontal line very nearly at the top of the image. There are a few horizontal clouds
as well as a small quickly painted tree at the top left corner, but once again the landscape is large and expansive, yet empty. The ground shows almost no variation in texture, no cracks, no mud, no hills, no sticks, just color. Both landscapes in these portraits are large blank areas serving primarily as “background.”

![Figure 6 Kikuyu Woman with Her Lavish Pearl Necklace](image)

Figure 6 Kikuyu Woman with Her Lavish Pearl Necklace [Kikuiju-nainen runsaine helmikoristeineen], Journal 33.

Clearly Gallen-Kallela was mostly interested in representing the people—their faces and bodies are more detailed than the rest of the image, and they occupy the entire foreground—but from an ecocritical standpoint, once again, including a landscape at all speaks to the painter’s intentional and unintentional attitudes towards the land itself. Some of the theory on landscape as the background for human drama comes from developments in painting composition in the
fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Malcolm Andrews discusses various paintings of St. Jerome where the landscape is not just a setting but a symbol of his ascetic narrative (Andrews 44). Cliffs, trees, and stormy weather do not only provide a backdrop for Jerome but they express his spiritual turmoil and the struggles of living in the wild as a recluse. Similarly, Gallen-Kallela does not simply include an empty landscape because he lost interest in filling in the land or because the person was the main subject anyway; he was working from the assumption that Africa is rugged, exposed, and primitive, which translates into a desolate landscape. It is empty because it hasn’t been filled up with civilization. It’s bleak, which speaks to the character of the people living there, that they must be impressively resilient to handle that harsh environment.

Furthermore, not only does the empty, expansive landscape show up as the background to his portraits of people, but it’s also the setting for non-human subjects. A Zebra Leg Attached to a Tree Branch (see fig. 7) shows once again the subject of the painting at the forefront—in this case, a severed zebra leg straddling two small trees—and an extremely high horizon with minimal changes to the flat horizontal line. On the Acacia Tree Plains (see fig. 8) shows an acacia tree as the main subject of the painting, quickly drawn with minimal shading and details, but set up with that same unadorned, uniform landscape as the background, which places the acacia tree in a sparse environment. This same pattern is shown in a multitude of other works, such as, but not limited to: Skeleton in the Desert [Luuranko aavikolla] (see fig. 11), Fallen Wildebeest or Gnu [Kaadettu wildebeest tai gnu] (73), Old Kikuyu [Vana kikuiju] (77), Homo

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12 In Andrews’ chapter entitled “Subject or Setting,” he repeats the idea that even though nature seems to be the background, it serves as an allegorical tool, and that allegory really is the subject of the painting after all.
Figure 7 A Zebra Leg Attached to a Tree Branch [Seebran jalka puunhaaran kiinnitetynä], Journal 49.

Figure 8 On the Acacia Tree Plains [Akasia-puu arolla], Journal 79.
Victor (see fig. 21), Acacia Bush in the Desert [Akaasia pensas aavikolla] (97), Dancing Kikuyus [Tanssivia kikijuja] (112), Gazella Thomsonii (121), an unnamed image of a skeleton in the desert (127), Hippotigris Boehmi (135), and Goia Kidogo, Maasai Soldier [Goia Kidoga, Massai-sotilas] (see fig. 20). Indeed, about half of Gallen-Kallela’s representations follow this set up, placing the main subject large and clearly in the foreground, incorporating a fairly strict, simple, straight horizontal line almost at the top of the frame to indicate the vast space of the area, and then not filling in that space with any (at the most with minimal) textures, vegetation, or animals.

At the expense of believing the land really looked like that, the photographs, as well as the drawings in the Africa Journal of Gallen-Kellala’s son Jorma, contradict Gallen-Kallela’s simplified representations. Instead of seeing a vast expanse of nothing, these images fill in the space with various kinds of vegetation and textures even while showing the same general locations as Gallen-Kallela’s paintings. The photograph Cheetah Being Carried to Camp [Cheetah kannetaan leirille] (104) for example captures two Kikuyu men working together to carry a dead cheetah bound to two strong sticks. The horizon line is low here, even below the middle of the picture, placing the cheetah’s full body against the sky. Instead of a flat, ever-expanding landscape, a small hill cuts off the horizon early, and the rest of the image is simply blue sky. The photograph Kikuyu Women Selling Firewood [Kikuiju-naisia polttopuita myymässä] (see fig. 9) shows two Kikuyu women hauling wood and bags back to their homes. The horizon line is about two-thirds of the way up, high but not extremely, exaggeratedly so. We see different variations of grass, a bush, individual rocks, a change in the horizon line with indications of fuzzy trees and bushes, and there is even a line in the grass caused by different plant species converging with each other, which is seen behind the two women.
Jorma, who actually ended up being an artist himself, has a different take on the empty landscape as well. He (see fig. 10) fills in his scene with people, trees, and animals. A group of people clusters on the right side, four dark figures climb in the trees, wooden seats surround a campfire, a rhinoceros stands in the middle of the picture, a small hill appears on the left, and trees are freely interspersed throughout the page. The horizon lines up at about two-thirds from the bottom of the page, which is fairly high but not as high as his father’s horizons that just barely provide the images with a horizon at all. While this is a child’s representation of the landscape, it still shows that Africa does not have to be portrayed as bald, empty, and bleak, the way Gallen-Kallela continually presents it. He wants to see it not as a land of plenty, but as a land of desolation, the background to a people who have developed rugged resilience.
Evidently variations in the landscape are there. In every photograph that Gallen-Kallela takes and in the drawings of his son, there are multiple options for portraying the land, and yet the artist himself chooses consistently a specific version. He chooses to include and chooses to erase aspects of the landscape that don’t further his artistic vision of the area. Indeed, depicting landscape at all is going to involve a great deal of picking and choosing. On one hand, this is simply the human condition, and we cannot help but be biased when painting landscape. W. J. T. Mitchell, author of *Landscape and Power*, explains, “Landscape is best understood as a medium of cultural expression, not a genre of painting or fine art… This ‘subject matter’ is not simply raw material to be represented in paint but is always already a symbolic form in its own right.” (14). Contrary to Onni Okkonen’s quotation about Gallen-Kallela portraying the land “immediately,” no painter can portray landscape “as it really is” because they are always imposing on the land their own ideological framework, which prioritizes, includes, and erases portions of the land. Landscape paintings reveal more than anything the painter’s values and
wishes regarding nature. On the other hand, this manipulation of landscape has historically been used for political means. Mitchell explains that landscape may “exert a subtle power over people” (vii), but he also sees it as “intimately bound up with the discourses of imperialism” (9) because landscapes of the colonies often communicate back to the main land the elastic nature of their nation’s boundaries. Painting New Zealand in a European style, as part of England, for example, gives British colonizers the right to invade and control that land, seeing it as their own. Though Finland never colonized Africa, Gallen-Kallela imposes his own European-informed colonial attitude on the land, both making the rugged land connection to Finnish landscape, and also by emptying out these African landscapes.

The emptiness that he expresses frequently within his images is troubling, as it participates in an accepted colonial discourse about the blankness of Africa. Before the 1800s maps of Africa were actually filled in with a great deal of detail, “a crazy quilt of political and ethnic units, their boundaries delineated by distinct lines and their territories colored in separate hues” (Kennedy 11). Early explorers and cartographers showed they valued the local tribes and local boundaries, and they understood that the continent’s political situation was quite complex, portraying those complexities in their maps. During the 19th century, however, at the same time that ethnographic museums were becoming popular, “Africa was transformed by British map makers into something resembling Lewis Carrol’s ‘perfect and absolute blank’…an approach that emptied African space of prior political and ethnic identifications” (Kennedy 12). Instead of continuing to map out Africa as a complex area, this sudden switch in representation shows a deliberate move to empty out Africa, to make it seem as if Africa really was a “blank” without

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13 The word “elastic” hearkens back to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, where he explains that the nation must be limited but those boundaries can still be elastic. For imperialism, the boundaries are definitely stretched to include other areas on the map.
the kinds of political distresses that would deter Europeans from settling the area. This emptying out in a very real sense paved the way for colonizers to fill Africa up again.

The colonizing urge stemming from blank spaces on maps can also be seen in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Towards the beginning of the novella, Marlow says he wishes to explore the “many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there.’ …But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after” (Conrad). The fact that an area is empty is precisely why Marlow is drawn to it. When seeing a map in a Belgian officer’s building, he describes it as: “marked with all the colors of a rainbow. There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer” (Conrad). Like a blank color-by-number illustration, the empty map of Africa invites colonizers to fill it in. As Marlow expresses, by coming into the land, the Europeans can start to get “real work” done, implying the natives have not been working hard, tending the land, and making a living from it themselves. Gallen-Kallela expresses these same urges in *Africa Journal*, especially with the quotation given at the beginning of this paper: “Of course over there they have a formal ending point, but I want to wander past it, to get to the unnamed lands, the intriguing unknown” [“Joku nimellinen lähtöpiste sielläkin tietysti on, mutta tahdon vaeltaa sen ohi, kunnes tulen nimettömille maille, joiden takaa kiehtovana kutsuu itse tuntematon”] (*Journal 5*). That promise of the unmarked spaces on the map, the parts that Europeans had decided not to acknowledge, draws Gallen-Kallela like other European colonizers to Africa.
Though the emtiness of maps, or the silences, may seem accidental or unintentional, J. B. Harley argues that silences on maps, even unintentional ones, speak just as loudly as the written symbols on the page. As he explains in *The New Nature of Maps*, maps communicate power. What goes on the map and what stays off the map for political, geographical reasons express which parts of a kingdom a ruler values, or which people of the country he does not want to consider. Sometimes silences are intentional, a direct and deliberate act of censoring (67). Sometimes silences are unintentional, and yet they still stem from a bias; like landscapes, they reveal the perspective and context of the mapmaker. When speaking about American maps that depicted the nature of the West as virgin, unsettled, and even European, he concludes, “Through these silences, the map becomes a license for the appropriation of the territory depicted. It is yet another means by which to insist upon the inherent superiority of European technologies and European way of life” (105). By showing “few obstacles that are insurmountable,” these silences once again powerfully invite colonizers to their “empty” vistas.

Landscape paintings, of course, have a different purpose than maps. Maps are often overtly political and transparent about their purposes in organizing and using land, but landscape paintings still do something similar. The power in landscapes is not comparable “to that of armies, police forces, governments, and corporations,” but landscapes do “elicit…a broad range of emotions and meanings” (Mitchell vii). Landscapes similarly organize land according to a certain perspective, portraying it according to the artist’s understanding, and even more so express an emotion about land. Perhaps Akseli Gallen-Kallela was not intentionally advertising Africa’s emptiness to colonizers, but he still chooses to portray it as a sparse environment, a choice that aligns all too well with the colonial narrative of Africa as a ‘blank.’” Like Marlow,
Gallen-Kallela feels called to the wild, desolate places of the world, as if Europeans have a right or need to go there, especially because those places are portrayed as empty.

Another way Gallen-Kallela portrays the African landscape as the backdrop, or even the creator, of a people is through his frequent images of death in the land. The unnamed figure of an animal skull (49), *Skeleton in the Desert [Luuranko aavikolla]* (see fig. 11), *Fallen Wildebeest [Kannattu wildebeest]* (73), *Gazella Thomsonii* (see fig. 13), another image of a skeleton in the desert (127), and *Hippotigras Boehmi* (see fig. 12), among other paintings of human contact with animal remains, and numerous photographs of carcasses, all show a real focus on death in this empty, unforgiving environment. Like most of Gallen-Kallela’s skeleton images, *Skeleton in the Desert* is the exemplar of the two themes merging together, both showing an empty landscape as well as a dead subject. Once again we see the obvious subject of the painting, a full completely bare skeleton of a large animal (perhaps a kind of deer or zebra), at the center of the foreground. Gallen-Kallela spends a great deal of energy fleshing out the colors, most importantly the colors of the shadows made by the position of the skeleton and the sun’s brightness. In fact, the shadows of the ground are a dark blue, creating a striking contrast with the yellowish orange of the rest of the surroundings. Not only are the shadows distinctive from the bone, but they are complimentary, communicating more of the sun’s harshness, the way the sun continually beats down on this environment. It is clear that his vibrant colors, colors that are foreign to his Finnish paintings, portray intense heat. Here it’s certainly not calming, not an oasis from the cold, but a real force, an energy that shines on the living and the dead alike. There are a few other objects in the painting, about six trees and their blue shadows (more than most images with the high horizon line), and another partial animal skeleton in the distance. The trees surround the skeletons, not shading them, but emphasizing the subject, pointing our eyes toward the center,
and also mimicking the distinct shadows of the main skeleton. Once again, the land is barren, and these skeletons don’t decompose quickly. They simply lie, completely naked, under the burning, drying energy of the sun without an escape, since the trees hardly provide a refuge either. Similar to the discussion on the sparseness of the landscape, these uncomfortably hot images of death communicate the harshness of this environment as well. This is a rugged country, where death is frequently seen and lived with. These people are not shaded from the sick and the dying; they are not like the modern, urban man who lives in two separate spheres, the public and the private. Even the most terrifying, the most private experiences like dying, remain public. The land wears no mask, lives no superficiality, but lays its bones bare, expressing an authenticity, that Gallen-Kallela of course believed the ancient Finnish Kalevalians would have shown themselves.

Not only does he repeatedly show skeletons, but there are also a few drawings of animal corpses. *Hippotigras Boehmi* (see fig. 11) is an example of just that. It shows a very similar composition to the other works with the main subject large, front, and center; close attention is given to distinct shadows; and there is a high horizon line with almost no other details of the land. That small amount of other detail we get is one separate animal skeleton at the top right of the image surrounded by menacing black birds. Once again, Gallen-Kallela brings together the sparseness of this African landscape with a memento mori. By showing a skeleton in the background, he emphasizes the bleakness of this situation, that death is always near, always sending out reminders. It is never covered or kept inside artificial constructions. The bones are raw, unmistakable, and blatant. This is a land where one confronts death over and over again.

*Gazella Thomsonii* (see fig. 12) is another drawing that works within this theme, though it is a bit less obvious since the main subject is a pack of living gazelles. Yet Gallen-Kallela still
Figure 11 *Hippotigras Boehmi*, Journal 135.

Figure 12 *Gazella Thomsonii*, Journal 121.
pays particular attention to death here as well. The composition of the illustration once again
gives us the clear subject in the center foreground, and then places the horizon line extremely
high with relatively little detail of the actual natural landscape. In a bit of a twist, Gallen-Kallela
does fill in the space more here: there are two main gazelles in the front, and then a whole pack
of gazelles, standing, eating, and butting heads up into the top right corner of the distant horizon
line. Apart from the gazelles though, the only other real details he portrays in the landscape are
bones: one human skull, perhaps surrounded by a broken beaded necklace, and then the remains
of an animal skeleton. While Gallen-Kallela usually leaves the landscape quite bare, this time he
adds two similar objects to the otherwise familiarly sparse background. And not only are they
skeletons, but the head is clearly a human skull. The landscape is certainly threatening to
humans.

That element of danger seems especially important to Gallen-Kallela’s vision of
primitives and their authentic relationship to the land. The fact that this was a hunting trip where
he could come face-to-face with large, exotic beasts fits in with his desire to experience the
threat of a harsh environment, an environment that would force someone to live off of bare
essentials, learn to survive tactically, and to prove they can endure dangerous situations.
Certainly, for Gallen-Kallela this was not just a hunting trip, but a mythological experience. It is
important to note that while his photographs do an excellent job of documenting his hunting
victories, he still feels compelled to represent some carcasses artistically. The way Gallen-
Kallela presents the skeletons, as the main object of study and observation, against a backdrop of
practically nothing, elevates the images to symbolic status. This is not, in fact, just a dead
animal, but a message about place. This place in particular is threatening. Though he does not
show dead animals in his Finnish landscapes, the rugged nature of the land is reminiscent of his
rural paintings. Instead of presenting the nature as ideal, beautiful, sublime, or picturesque, he shows both places as rough and inhospitable, though Africa is an even emptier, deadlier place than 19th century Finland. Of course, this is what Gallen-Kallela desired, a peek into a supposedly ancient view of nature. And he assumes this is more of the environment the Kalevalians would have dealt with, what they would have developed resilience from living in.

The third pattern within Gallen-Kallela’s Africa representations is the Africans working with this bleak and threatening land. Like his studies of the Finnish folk and landscape in the 1880s, here Gallen-Kallela is interested in how the common people work with their environment, how they dwell in Africa. Pieces like Black Prisoners at Work [Mustat vangit töissä] (11), the figure of a man hammering a peg into the ground (23), A Group Squats Around a Campfire [Seuru istuu kyykkysillään nuotion ääressä] (see fig. 14), Zebra Leg Attached to a Tree Branch (see fig. 6), Shepherd Sleeping on the Back of a Zebu [Nukkuvu paimen kyhmyselkäisen sebunsa kyljellä] (55), Blacks Cooking Food [Mustat ruuan keitossa] (see fig. 15), A Cheetah, the Leopard’s Longlegged Relative in Front of a Tent [Cheetah, pitkäjalkainen leopardin sukulainen teltan edessä] (see fig. 13), Homo Victor (see fig. 21), Skins Dried in the Sun [Nahat kuivattiin auringossa] (see fig. 16), and Blacks With Their Campfire [Mustat nuotioillaan] (259), not to mention countless photographs of Kikuyu and Maasai people tying up hunted animals, carrying them, carving up the meat, bringing sticks for fire, and so forth, give us a glimpse into the working livings of the African people.

Like Gallen-Kallela’s Finnish boats, a couple of these paintings allude to a human presence by showing the people’s work, without actually containing a person in them. Cheetah, the Leopard’s Longlegged Relative in Front of a Tent (fig. 13) is a painting of a dead cheetah with its legs tied together to a sturdy tree branch, the familiar mechanism for carrying animals as
seen in the photographs. There are no people in the frame, only remnants of people. The fact that the cheetah has been tied up and the presence of the tent with boxes and supplies next to it allude to the presence of humans. Making this bound cheetah the subject of the image not only focuses in on death once again as a major theme in these Africa paintings, but it comments on the expertise of the native people. The individuals who tied up the animal and placed it on a sturdy stick understand how to work in their particular part of the world, a land that contains exotic animals (to a Westerner’s eyes), even quick and deadly predators.

Again, the painting *Zebra Leg Attached to a Tree* (fig. 7) also shows the human footprint on the environment without actually showing a human. The zebra leg alludes to a human
presence because it is the result of organized, previously planned labor that no animal could accomplish; someone hunted this zebra, brought it back home, cleanly cut one leg away from the rest of the body, and positioned it safely in the tree to let it dry in the sun. The clever arrangement of the leg seems to be the main focus of the painting with the lines of the trees moving upward, and the line of the leg spanning both trees, forcing our eyes to follow circularly and continuously back to the leg itself. Instead of a side note, instead of showing the locals’ techniques in the background somewhere in an otherwise landscape-driven painting, this drying technique is the subject. The natives understand how to live in this environment, understand how to butcher these unfamiliar (to us) animals, know which trees can hold the weight of the meat, and make the harsh sun work for them. Like the human footprints of Gallen-Kallela’s Finnish landscapes, the human footprints of the African images emphasize their work, that these are not people who live in an idyllic state, but workers.

Other images also show the Africans in the process of working. Gallen-Kallela had a special interest in scenes of men cooking around a campfire. Both *A Group Squats Around a Campfire* (fig. 14) and *Blacks with their Campfire* (fig. 15) show just this, a group of men unceremoniously gathered together around a communal fire. The men rest with their legs folded up, hold onto their necks and heads, looking worn down and in need of rest. Like the shadows of the skeletons, here the unrelenting light and heat of the sun also create strong contrasts, causing bright reflections and dark shadows off the black bodies. The men don’t exactly seem delighted by the sun’s beating; they brace themselves, holding onto their bent legs and necks, but they are familiar with it. Perhaps this is Gallen-Kallela’s visual realization of the connections made earlier between Africa and the Finnish sauna. The people are sitting around naked, or practically
Figure 14 *A Group Squats Around a Campire* [Seuru istuu kyykysillään nuotion ääressä], *Journal* 31.

Figure 15 *Blacks Cooking Food* [Mustat ruuan keitossa], *Journal* 76.
naked, in the heat. This is also similar to Gallen-Kallela’s average, everyday scenes of the Finnish folk. *Peasant Life* [*Talonpoikaiselämä*] (see fig. 16) from 1888, for example, shows three figures in the same room working on their own tasks, concentrated with quiet resolution. They are aware of each other, but nothing dramatic happens. It is the documentation of a simple, familiar, realistic, daily activity for the common folk, just like the men sitting in the sun. There are also three figures in the drawing *Blacks Cooking Food* (see fig. 15) in the process of working. One rests his chin against his folded knees staring into the flames, another seems to be in the middle of planning something with another person outside the frame, while the last man looks on listening to the conversation. Strangely, this is one of the only images where we actually see a dwelling, the tent—which is only a temporary kind of dwelling—in the
background, and yet no one is shown inside the tent. In this and in all of the other images of Africans, the people are always outdoors. On the same page as *Blacks Cooking Food* in the *Africa Journal*, Gallen-Kallela writes about coming to a bungalow and sitting down to eat, but we never get any images of bungalows. Work takes place outside with the ground in the sun.

In fact, working in and with the sun is how all of these people work. They regularly work with the ground, on the ground, and exposed to the sun. *Skins Dried in the Sun* (see fig. 17) also shows a man squatting just above the ground in the heat of the day. The man has pegged an animal skin to the ground with carefully placed stakes. The skin has been scraped and cleaned. Importantly the man doesn’t stand away from the skin, but on top of it still holding a tool and in the process of working. He is also once again working out in the open, not under any kind of man-made structures or shelters, but very aware of and in tune with his surrounding environment.

![Figure 17 Skins Dried in the Sun](image)

*Figure 17 Skins Dried in the Sun [Nahat kuivattiin auringossa], Journal 134.*
The implications for this observation are varied. In one sense, Gallen-Kallela is again emphasizing that dwelling relationship, that unmasked, authentic tie to the land that these people have. And yet, while Gallen-Kallela feels the rural Finnish folk have a close, rugged tie to nature as well, he finds no problem in painting them indoors. Their relationship can be shown both through the human work seen on the land and their roughened human physical features. So why not paint the Africans indoors as well? As Gallen-Kallela observes, the Africans seemingly go further back in time than even these Finnish peasants; they reach a historical Kalevala moment. And Gallen-Kallela’s Kalevala paintings are noticeably all outdoors. The *Aino Triptych* [*Ainotaru*] (1891), *Forging of the Sampo* [*Sammon taonta*] (1893), *The Defense of the Sampo* [*Sammon puolustus*] (1896), and *Kullervo’s Curse* [*Kullervon Kirous*] (1899) are just some of the scenes that take place outside. *Forging of the Sampo* (see fig. 18) seems especially deliberate in this way, since half of the image does contain a man-made post and lintel structure. This construction houses the blacksmith’s fire for creating the mythological object of wealth, the Sampo, which *Kalevala* itself never fully physically describes. Instead of creating the Sampo completely within doors, within that structure given to us in the painting, Gallen-Kallela still situates the people in the woods with trees springing from the left side and moving towards the hill above them, the smoky sky visible above the fiery furnace. The men stand on bare earth, working around and with tree stumps and local rocks. They don’t seek shelter from the outdoors. Rather, Gallen-Kallela makes them fit within the surrounding wilderness, like he does with all of his Kalevala characters. Unlike his urban Parisian scenes where he highlights social superficiality, where people are often indoors and wearing luxuriant clothes and drinking luxuriant wine, and unlike some of his rural scenes where peasants are also indoors but living a
plain, even ugly lifestyle, the African people and the Kalevala people are never inside. Hardly depicting any human dwellings at all in these two different collections of images, it is as if Gallen-Kallela sees little separation between these people and their environment. Even the peasant has a permanent house, but the primal Finn, the “primitive” African, have no such rigid boundaries.

The fourth and final theme of Gallen-Kallela’s Africa Journal images is representing resilience in the faces and stances of individual portraits. Like the bent but resilient woman in Old Woman and Cat, he focuses in on African faces and bodies, which are weathered by their surroundings but ultimately undefeated. One of the first portraits in the Africa Journal comes with the label In Their Eyes Glows Strange, Untamed Mystery [Heidän silmissää hehkuu
kummallista, kesytöntä salaperäisyyttä] (16) and focuses our attention on the man’s face with the greatest amount of details centered around his eyes. The eyes themselves are indeed mysterious. As the darkest part of the image, there is no real difference between the pupils and the irises; instead, they blend into one solid black orb, save one tiny speck of white in the man’s left eye. His lips are pursed, his eyebrows are furrowed, his eyes look past the viewer into the distance as if he had finally located some kind of target, and his head is tilted slightly downwards, fixed, and resolute. The numerous wrinkles underneath his eyes suggest he is rather old and experienced, as well as the result of squinting his eyes from years of living in the bright sun. Lastly he holds an undefined object towards his chin, perhaps a domestic tool like a spoon, or something more menacing: a weapon, a bludgeon. The man is certainly not a failure. He may have wrinkles under his eyes before his time, but he is a determined and strong warrior.

As the painter of the Kalevala heroes, naturally Gallen-Kallela takes special interest in warrior figures for his portraits. *Kikuyu Warrior in his Attire* (see fig. 19) is in many ways similar to the man with the mysterious eyes. He has the same darkness around his eyes, two circles caused by furrowed eyebrows and cheekbones, which pull our own eyes into his. He stares off into the distance outside of the frame in the same direction as the other man’s, to the left; his lips are also brought together, resigned for action; and he too holds a weapon. The style of this portrait is different than the previous one with messier, wider and unmixed brushstrokes. It is much more abstract, Expressionistic, perhaps even savage, showing the influence of groups such as the German Die Brücke, which Gallen-Kallela joined only two years before the Africa excursion. Instead of emphasizing the dirt and flaws of Realism, this abstraction points us to a new end goal, to emphasize the emotions this man stands for and foreignness of his lifestyle. The style shows he doesn’t fit in within Western, naturalistic representation.
This stylistic representation of the “other,” whether he is representing them sympathetically or exotically, is exactly one of the colonial problems Gallen-Kallela presents us with in his *Africa Journal*. Like his symbolic uses of landscape, by representing this “other” people, he speaks for them, captures and controls them, not allowing them to speak for themselves. Except for these few Expressionistic-like images, Gallen-Kallela makes little attempt to move away from naturalistic art. He never seeks to learn African aesthetics or African visual cues, which in some ways could be seen as a less colonial, less controlling move. In most of his drawings and paintings, he represents the natives using his Renaissance-informed visual language, an acute mathematical awareness of how objects spatially appear to the eye and the assumption that the artistic scene should take place from one vantage point at one moment in time. Though that moment may be allegorical, it differs from medieval paintings, which would
sometimes present three different parts of a story in one single image. The more recognized primitivistic painters, like Paul Gauguin, Henri Rousseau, and Pablo Picasso attempted to at least pay homage to the beauty of non-European art, often paintings masks, showing multiple perspectives, and flattening their images. Though he had never traveled to Africa himself, Picasso had just presented his famous *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) a few years prior to Gallen-Kallela leaving for Africa, in which he distorted the women’s bodies, elongated their noses, enlarged their eyes, and even shaded their faces to look like African masks. The women are recognized as women, with their narrow waists and breasts, but they are certainly abstracted. Seeing non-European art as more authentic, primitivist painters once again tried to celebrate that expression through imitation, even though that celebration, as discussed, also demoted non-Europeans to a primitive status.

Gallen-Kallela, however, never strays from his traditionally European sense of perspective. In *Skeleton in the Desert* (fig. 11) the skeleton in the foreground is much bigger than the trees in the background signaling that it is closer to the viewer than the trees are. As the painting travels upward, the trees get smaller, indicating that their location is closer to a vanishing point. The shadows of the trees and the skeleton also demonstrate that these objects have depth, that the scene as a whole represents a three-dimensional reality. *Mount Kenya* [*Kenja-vuori*] (61) shows three-dimensional space quite clearly as well. The blue of the mountain in the back indicates that it is farther away, a technique discovered in the Renaissance, and the white puffy clouds overlap the mountain, representing once again a layered space. The trees also follow Western perspective with the trees in front showing greater detail than the trees in the back. Unlike Gauguin who layers multiple flattened scenes on top of each other, Gallen-Kallela is very much still rooted in the traditional three-dimensional representation of space. For those
mimicking the art of primitives, which according to Frye does not usually indicate three
dimensions, this flattening is an important development. But Gallen-Kallela does not play around
with perspective, nor does he really try to mimic any African art he sees. Looking at sketches
such as *Old Kikuyu [Vanha kikuiju]* (77) and *Blacks Cooking Food* (fig. 15), Gallen-Kallela does
not take the kinds of leaps into abstraction that his contemporaries did. The figures are not very
distorted, and not simplified to strong geometric shapes; on the contrary, they are very
naturalistic. Once again, Gallen-Kallela always presents these people through his unwaveringly
Western eyes. The viewer is always located in a certain space, almost always on the ground, and
always looking towards a vanishing point, following traditional, accepted European visual cues.

In this way, once again Gallen-Kallela looks very much like a colonizer, coming as an
outsider to another place, culture, and people, and using his visual symbolism to represent them.
Instead of allowing them to speak their own language, and instead of learning their language
himself (something that the Primitivists *presume* to be doing, even though they never actually
learn the native symbolism at all), he controls their discourse with his own. But like Mitchell’s
explanations of landscapes, that they will always be a biased representation because humans
organize nature even just through gazing at it, V. Y. Mudimbe goes so far as to say that no
foreigner, even if they tried, could take on the perspective of the “other.” Europeans simply can
never escape their epistemic ideology. He states, “Explorers do not reveal otherness. They
comment upon ‘anthropology,’ that is, the distance separating savagery from civilization on the
diachronic life of progress” (15). The Western epistemic is revealed, rather than the actual
“other’s” way of thinking. Though colonizers and Gallen-Kallela see themselves in these
Africans, they still keep themselves distinct from the native people, especially when approaching
the situation through an anthropological and ethnographical lens. Mudimbe continues:
Some thinkers, such as Lévi-Strauss, thought that studying a diversity of cultures reduced the weight of ideology... But so far it seems impossible to imagine any anthropology without a Western epistemological link. For on the one hand, it cannot be completely cut off from the field of its epistemological genesis and from its roots; and, on the other hand, as a science, it depends upon a precise frame without which there is no science at all, nor any anthropology. (19)

In other words, this type of observation is inescapably ethnocentric, which means they cannot learn to subjectively view the other culture within that culture. They still use “the same type of signs and symbols” to consistently “reduc[e] differences into a Western historicity” (22). Explorers, scientists, travel writers still write Africa using their own language. Gallen-Kallela likewise paints it with his own European-trained system of signs. As the Helsinki Museum of Cultures’ 2011 exhibit title “Akseli’s Africa” suggests, this is an experience not of Africa as such, but Gallen-Kallela’s take on Africa, a perspective that is colored by ethnographic museums and Darwinian theories of art. Staszak comes to a similar conclusion about Gauguin’s paintings:

Need one add that works of art… realistic as they may aim to be, do not inform us about the world as it is but as it is represented? The many paintings of paradise do not inform us about the landscapes of the place but on the expectations of a society and on its view of Eden. Thus Gauguin did not paint Tahiti, but his Tahitian dream. (353)

So even while Gauguin seems (to the Western eye) to take on a native style, to represent the “other” using their own language, he does not actually speak their language, nor as Staszak implies does any other primitivistic painter. They are still directing their art towards a Western audience, communicating in a way a Western audience would understand. If by rejecting Renaissance visual cues they paint in a way that confounds Westerners, that is exactly what the
painting is meant to do: to be unfamiliar, to appear exotic. They simply give to Westerners the Western vision of the “other,” that is, a people and a culture that the West does not quite understand.

So while Gallen-Kallela is guilty of representing the “other” through his biased lens, controlling their voice using his own language, in other ways his representations actually come across as more sympathetic than the Primitivists’. It seems he was striking a more intermediary balance between the extremely exotic and the recognizable. Because Gauguin represented Tahiti as an exotic paradise and tried to show its foreignness through his rejection of Western conventions, Staszak argues that Gauguin furthered Tahiti’s otherness in the eyes of Europeans, to the Tahitians’ detriment. He concludes his article saying Gauguin’s art helped begin the exploitation of Tahiti as a tourist destination for Westerners, a land full of white sandy beaches and plentiful resources, not to mention available and half-naked women. When asked what native Tahitians thought about his paintings, they responded that they did not appreciate his work. It “reproduces and affirms colonial stereotypes, and it is used without difficulty by colonial propaganda” (358). In other words, primitivism and painting in a primitivistic style actually invited and propelled misunderstandings about the culture, more than it celebrated a non-European culture. Gallen-Kallela, on the other hand, doesn’t make a foreign, stylistic leap and presents his figures often as people who contain the same anatomy as Westerners, in a way that Westerners could perhaps relate to better. So while he does seem to agree with many colonial assumptions—that Africans were stuck back in time, that they were more authentic, that they understood the land better, that Africa was in a sense empty, and that it wasn’t a problem to represent these people using a seemingly superior European ideology, to name a few—perhaps
his close adherence to Western artistic tradition actually encouraged more understanding for the people back home in Europe, at least more so than what Gauguin did for Tahiti.

But once again, Gallen-Kallela’s reasons for representing Africa in this way differ from Gauguin’s. As one looking for Finnish perseverance in Africa, he was in a sense using Africa, its people’s traditions and lifestyles, to strengthen the Finnish people’s vision of themselves. Imagining a Finnish essence in Africa allowed Gallen-Kallela to reap the benefits of such a connection, to claim a lineage for Finland which went back to savage, primitive, ancient times. In this way, Gallen-Kallela seems no less imperialistic than his Primitivist contemporaries, exploiting the non-Europeans, even while he stylistically separates himself from that artistic group.

Going back to the Africa Journal portraits, like the Kikuyu Warrior in his Attire, the Maasai Soldier (see fig. 20) is also somewhat painterly and Expressionistic with its broad, choppy brushstrokes. Though this does in some ways seek to show the exoticness of the “other,” it is one of only three paintings that could really be described as Expressionistic. Like the other portraits, which are more realistic, the Maasai soldier looks out into the distances with his eyes furrowed, holding a weapon. Similar to other depictions of the landscape, this background is also stark with a high horizon line, placing him again in a land that is empty and unforgiving. Finally, one of the most finished portraits seems to be Goia Kidogo, Maasai Soldier (see fig. 21), which gives us the chest, shoulders, and head of a young soldier. He does not look out at the viewer, but again towards the far off distance outside of the frame. His eyebrows are, unsurprisingly, furrowed; his eyes are dark; his head is tilted slightly downward; he doesn’t smile, but looks concentrated, focused; and he holds a spear in his right hand. The background again contains no
Figure 20 Maasai Soldier [Massai-sotilas], Journal 241.

Figure 21 Goia Kidogo, Maasai Soldier [Goia kidogo, massai-sotilas], Journal 176.
vegetation, no specific details, just brushstrokes. The horizon is a simple straight line across the
top of the page, fully above Goia Kidogo’s head, with some abstracted mountains and shadows
above it. The red of both his hair, his face, and his shirt all give the painting a warm glow, and
the contrast of dark skin with the yellow background reflect the heat of the area. Here is a
determined soldier with his resilient stance and expression similar to the other warriors, placed in
a tough environment, toughened by its sparseness, alluding to the Finns who are made rugged
from their land as well.

While Goig Kidogo, Maasai Soldier speaks to all of the Africa Journal’s major themes—
emptiness death, dwelling, and resilience—Gallen-Kallela best compiles all four ideas into one
impressive painting, Homo Victor, the Triumphant Kamba Man [Homo victor, voitonriemuinen
Uakama-mies] (see fig.22), which he could have just as easily referred to as the triumphant
“Kalevala man.” Here the main subject is the full figure of a nude male. Unlike the other
portraits, this is the only painting where the individual wears no clothes, and unlike the other
portraits, we see his entire body. Instead of squatting over a skin that is drying in the sun, he
stands above it, having just finished some of the cleaning and scraping, still holding a bloody
knife in his hand, while the rest of his body unrealistically shows no blood. The background is
expansive. Gallen-Kallela paints quick, thick brushstrokes to fill the background, perhaps
indicating yellowish grass, but there is no other vegetation, no small bumps or rocks or other
kinds of vegetation in the landscape. The horizon is high with mountains floating just above it.
But unlike the other high horizons, the Kamba man’s head is placed fully above the horizon. So
while we notice the fairly sparse environment and see the blood of the recently butchered animal,
communicating that he has been working hard in his daily task, he rises above the harshness of
his situation. He wears no clothes to protect him from the land or the sun, and yet he stands, not
sits; like the label of the painting, he triumphs over the horizon, rather than being defeated by it. The style is also telling. Somewhere in between Impressionism and Realism, we get suggestions of forms, suggestions of shapes on his face and whatever the bloody skin of the animal contains, but they are not completely clear. It is more a window into this scene, a slightly fogged or slightly dirtied glass, which suggests this is not simply a realistic image. Like the title proclaims, this isn’t simply a painting of one individual, it is not a Maasai warrior or Goia Kidogo. This is a mythologized man, the African man. In fact, the title is not even in Finnish; it’s Latin, perhaps suggesting that it is not just one Finnish man’s interpretation of these people, but a timeless, universal representation. The similarities to the Kalevala figures are many. Not only is this man comfortable in his environment, so much so that he works naked, and not only is this man triumphant even against bleak odds, he is a myth—like the Kalevala characters. He is even like
the Finnish peasants themselves, mythological, in the sense that their image is fabricated. Though the individuals were real, or could have been real, their individuality is replaced with a symbol, with a generality. These people no longer stand for themselves, but for a nation, for its characteristics and its hopes.

Conclusion

As I have tried to discuss in this study, the *Africa Journal* artworks both fit in with Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s nation-building project, but also expand beyond the nation in problematic ways. While Gallen-Kallela does seem to go to Africa to learn about universal mythology, which could then be applied to his particular mythology, he sees Finnishness permeating through the rest of the world in a way that adheres closely to the colonial discourse of the day. Like the figures expressed in British literature’s *King Solomon’s Mines* and *Heart of Darkness*, Africans were thought of as distant ancestors to the Europeans. This imagined connection to Africa, which sees Africans as needing to be organized and developed, is exactly what allowed Europeans to manipulate, control, exploit, and do vast amounts of harm to African land and people. So instead of readily agreeing with Gallen-Kallela that a “Kalevala people” existed within Africa in the early 1900s, as if the thought were welcome, insightful, and ahead of its time, postcolonial criticism shows us where these assumptions are suspect and not benign.

Additionally, Gallen-Kallela was not simply musing about a connection that was already somehow present between the Africans and Finns, but creating that connection himself, visually. The fact that these connections, between land and people, and Finns and Africans, are imagined and constructed is ultimately how any of these artworks relate to each other at all. Gallen-Kallela-Sirén makes it a point to show how Gallen-Kallela envisioned Finnish landscape
differently from previous artists, focusing in on one boat, on one barn, on one set of trees, instead of hill-top panoramas. Gallen-Kallela invented a new vision of his country’s landscape, and in the end it embodied for the people a unique flavor of what their country really was at its core. In Africa, his visions of the land are also inventions. Coming from a cosmopolitan background, he paints Africa as a blank slate, a place where public and private life are not separate, and where life is intimately connected with the natural world—the exact opposites of urban life with its populated areas, superficiality in the public sphere, and separation from nature. He does not paint Africa as itself, but as the negative reflection of his European lifestyle.

Lastly, Gallen-Kallela’s trip to Africa reveals another dimension of his work as a whole. Broader postcolonial criticism points out the problems of European assumptions about time travel, border expansion, and controlling the “other” with the colonizer’s language, in many ways these same kinds of impositions can be seen in Gallen-Kallela’s representations of his own country. While the trip to Karelia was fundamentally different and Gallen-Kallela was Finnish after all, he was not a native to Karelia, nor did he ever become a resident. In fact, he only stayed there for two weeks total. Like his goals in going to Africa, he went to Karelia seeking to go back in time, seeking for a more authentic people, already believing that non-urban folk were connected to ancient folk, and believing that these contemporary people would hold keys to his own past. In appropriating their lifestyle, he came back to his cosmopolitan life with glimpses into the “other,” which he both displayed as foreign, painting his wife as a Karelian mother for example, and as familiar, a people with which they had an ancestral mythology in common even if they did not look or think or feel similarly now.

So while the trip to Africa at first seems tangential and then seems to be a celebrated part of his nationalist project after all, it ultimately gives us a new way of seeing Gallen-Kallela’s
work in Finland. His assumptions about Karelia are in many ways just as flawed as his assumptions about Africa. He sees and promotes similarities between ancient Finns and contemporary people in a way that in the end controls the discourse about the “other.” One wonders if the Karelians saw themselves so closely related to the Kalevalians, or if they would have been confused about their own textiles appearing on the figures of ancient mythological heroes in the *Kalevala* illustrations. Just as he uses landscape, he uses the Karelian culture as a medium, the building blocks to an imagined community, instead of a culture to be respected in its own right. Noting Gallen-Kallela’s tendencies to see authenticity in the Africans reminds us that he utilized the same assumptions about Finland.

In other words, the Africa trip reveals Gallen-Kallela’s colonizing side. Though people often talk about him as the colonized subject rallying his people to reject their oppressive colonizers, he himself visually colonizes his own country. Yes, he was more sympathetic to the peculiarities of Finland and Karelia, as Gallen-Kallela-Sirén frequently points out, but one still wonders how much he really understood his rural folk, coming from his own cosmopolitan, colonial perspective. In some ways Gallen-Kallela was probably the best man for the job, one who got along with peasants well and remained interested in their lives, but yet as the Africa trip shows, those sympathetic connections are often colored strongly by colonial impulses, which in the end hardly speak the subjectivity of the “other” at all.


