

Artists as truth-seekers

Focusing on agency and seekership in the study of art and occulture

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.98310>

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This article focuses on the concept of the *seeker* and considers how the analytical tool of seekership, defined and developed in the sociology of religion, could be applied to the study of art and esotericism. The theoretical argument is made more tangible with the example of the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), whose life story, art and writings resonate with the concept of seekership. The ways in which Gallen-Kallela writes about his interest in esotericism and the dawn of the new age appear in a new light; as part of the processes of a spiritualisation of modern art and religiosity. In addition, the article points out that the concept of *seekership* can offer new possibilities more generally for the study of art and esotericism. Utilising the analytical tool of seekership may be especially helpful regarding those artists who did not subscribe to any esoteric movement or doctrine, but stressed a more individual relationship with the *occulture* of their time. It will also provide an opportunity to outline how the connections between art and esotericism have changed over different times and places.¹

The Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom (1966) was one of the first scholars to study

1 The article is based on my doctoral dissertation, written in Finnish (Kokkinen 2019). I would like to thank Maija and Albion Butters for translating the first version of this article at very short notice. I also warmly thank Signe & Ane Gyllenberg's foundation for the funding of the translation.

more deeply the connections between modern art and esotericism. He noticed, for example, how the seemingly abstract forms Wassily Kandinsky used in his art had similarities with the ideas and visual culture of Theosophy. The analogies between Symbolist art theory and esoteric worldviews were also discovered early on (see e.g. Sarajas-Korte 1966; Burhan 1979). Although such connections between art and esotericism were noted already in the latter half of the twentieth century, the breadth and depth of these relations have been understood only in recent years. Many of the avant-garde artists, from Symbolists to Surrealists and Futurists, are now known to have utilised multifaceted possibilities of esoteric ideas and practices in their art.

The wider public has learned about the important role esotericism has played in the history of modern art, especially through the work of the Swedish artist and Theosophist-Anthroposophist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944). In recent years, her large-scale paintings, produced under the guidance of the spirit world, have been elevated into the modernist canon of abstract art (see e.g. Müller-Westermann and Widoff 2013). Interest in the subject is reflected in the fact that the exhibition *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, which ended in

spring 2019 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, became the most popular exhibition in the history of the Guggenheim museums (Guggenheim press release 2019).

When studying the connections between art and esotericism, references are often made to different esoteric currents and movements, such as The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or Joséphin Péladan's Ordre du Temple de la Rose+Croix and the related art salons. Hilma af Klint, for example, is known to have been a member of the Theosophical Society and Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical Society. Although certain currents quite rightly constitute a kind of anchor for the study of art and esotericism, one must also be able to contemplate such an approach from a critical point of view. How do we conceptualise esotericism when we focus our attention firstly on such currents as Theosophy, Spiritualism, or Anthroposophy? Would it be possible to approach esotericism in some other way? And what does esotericism refer to if it is not understood primarily in connection with these currents?

The research focusing on different esoteric currents or movements often relies on the historical definitions which have played a significant role in the study of esotericism since the 1990s. Historical approaches tend to work on the basis of different intuitive prototypical definitions, and esotericism is often seen to cover a variety of alternative currents including, for example, alchemy, Hermetic philosophy, Rosicrucianism and Theosophy. One of the problems of such definitions is the fact, that there are diverging intuitions on what esotericism consists of (Asprem 2014: 7–14; Hanegraaff 2013: 3–14).

When studying art and esotericism, focusing on different currents and movements is problematic also because many

artists interested in esotericism were not committed to them whole-heartedly or in any official manner. However, the comprehension of the relations between art and esotericism remains too narrow if the research takes account only of the artists officially committed to certain esoteric currents, such as Hilma af Klint. When the focus is extended to artists who are known to be interested in esotericism in one way or another, several new questions arise. When exactly can references to esotericism be considered sufficient? Is it enough to own or read a book that is classified as esoteric or to exploit alchemical iconography in art works? And how to react to ambivalent statements in which artists on the one hand express their interest in, for example, Theosophy and, on the other hand, criticise it?

In order to study an unofficial or looser relationship with esotericism, a more systematic methodology needs to be developed. Utilising the concepts of *seeker* and *seeking* offer an opportunity to do this. It is an approach that shifts the emphasis away from esoteric movements and brings forth a particular kind of religious or spiritual agency, determined by certain types of social practices and discourses, as well as an ethos emphasising independence from esoteric currents or any other 'isms'.

The analytical concept of the seeker is used in the sociology of religion to refer to a socially-learned behavioural model or *habitus* typical of modern (and subsequent) religiosity. Seekers are usually described as people who stress individuality and personal experience. Instead of committing themselves permanently to any religious or esoteric communities, seekers are dedicated to a search for spiritual truths they can feel to be their own. Sociologists have written about seekers and seeking at least since the 1950s. In the early descriptions,



Akseli Gallen-Kallela in a monk's robe, 1928, photograph by Kirsti Gallen-Kallela, 56 x 85 mm. Gallen-Kallela Museum, Espoo.

these intellectuals, critical of the Church and in search of a new perspective on religion were called 'metaphysical wanderers' and 'occult seekers.' They were depicted as individuals drifting between religious alternatives, remaining open to the various views (often connected with esotericism) but ultimately not subscribing to any of them.²

In this article, I will concentrate on the concept of the seeker and consider how the analytical tool of seekership, defined and developed in the sociology of religion, could be applied to the study of art and esotericism. Such an approach is distanced from the historical definitions of esotericism and attached more closely to the manner in which Kocku von Stuckrad has studied historical phenomena related to *the esoteric*. Von Stuckrad (2005: 9–11;

2010: ix–xii, 54–64) observes the esoteric as being part of the broader social and cultural processes in which knowledge and identities are constructed. Instead of focusing on different esoteric currents, von Stuckrad pays attention to esoteric elements of discourse in European history. Such elements relate to the idea of perfect knowledge that can be revealed in a specific manner. In other words, esoteric discourses are likened to 'claims to "real" or absolute knowledge and the means of making this knowledge available' (von Stuckrad 2005: 10). The esoteric is also closely related to the idea of secrecy or to the dialectic of the hidden and revealed; the rhetoric of a hidden truth seems to hint that there exists a higher wisdom which can be unveiled in a specific way. Secrecy thus becomes a strategy that guarantees social capital for those who have heard about or have access to the hidden knowledge.

The esoteric thus defined has a close connection with the sociological

2 On the history of the concepts, see Sutcliffe 2017.

understanding of seekership. Seekers are often searching for such a hidden, absolute knowledge avoiding commitment to any currents, communities or dogmas. They may also be critical of some (esoteric) doctrines or currents – even the same ones they are clearly enthusiastic about. In many studies, seekership is associated with esotericism or occultism in either one way or another (see, e.g. Lofland and Stark 1965: 867–70; Campbell 2002: 15–17).

In order to make my argument more tangible, I will use Akseli Gallen-Kallela³ (1865–1931) as an example, as his life story, art and writings resonate intriguingly with the habitus of seekership. Gallen-Kallela is one of the most well-known and appreciated of Finnish artists. He worked during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time period which has become known as the ‘Golden Age of Finnish Art’. As this era coincided with a Finnish national awakening, Gallen-Kallela’s art has often been seen as significant for the country’s national identity. Many of his most appreciated paintings illustrate scenes from *The Kalevala*, Finland’s national epic. However, Gallen-Kallela was also interested in the heterodox esoteric milieu of his time, and he had many interesting connections to Scandinavian and European artistic circles. In 1884, he moved to Paris and studied at the Académie Julian, which later became an important meeting point for a group of young French artists called Les Nabis. During the 1890s, he became friends with some of the artists and writers who gathered at the Zum schwarzen Ferkel tavern in Berlin. Gallen-Kallela also personally knew such influential writers and artists

3 In 1907 the artist formerly known as Axel Gallén changed his name officially to Akseli Gallen-Kallela.

as Edward Munch, August Strindberg, Nicholas Roerich, and D. H. Lawrence, all of whom were interested in esoteric and mystical ideas in one way or another (see, e.g. Lahelma 2014: 184–202; Stasulane 2013; Ballin 1978).

Occulture, spirituality and the popularisation of seekership

Seekership is closely related to two concepts that have been utilised in the study of art and esotericism. The first is *occulture*. Christopher Partridge (2004) introduced the term as an academic concept in his research on emergent spirituality in the late twentieth century and contemporary West. According to Partridge, the Western world is going through a process where the institutional religions are being forced to make room for alternative spiritualities and a culture of re-enchantment, which consists of ‘those often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices...’ (Partridge 2004: 68). According to Partridge, occulture, which emerged from the countercultural phenomena of the 1960s, has nowadays become so common and popular that it transcends subcultures. In other words, occulture has become a common part of the mainstream culture.

Partridge’s concept can be traced back to the influential ideas of a cultic milieu, presented in the 1970s by the sociologist Colin Campbell. Campbell suggested that sociologists of religion interested in ‘mystical religion’ should pay more attention to the heterodox milieu forming around less permanent religious groups and communities. Whereas these unstable groups are constantly disintegrating, the cultic milieu around them continues to flourish. It includes all deviant belief systems,

unorthodox science, 'the worlds of the occult and the magical', and the institutions and individuals associated with these beliefs. In addition, different communication structures have an important role in the (oc)cultic milieu. It is kept alive by magazines, literature, lectures, and informal meetings in which the beliefs are discussed and disseminated (Campbell 2002: 12–15). Campbell's ideas have made a significant contribution to the study of modern spirituality. They have, for example, formed the basis for the 'holistic milieu' defined by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005).

In my previous writings (Kokkinen 2013, 2019), I have suggested the concept of occulture could be used as an analytical tool while exploring how esotericism and spirituality have intertwined with modern art since the nineteenth century. One of the advantages of the concept is that it directs the focus from individual (esoteric) currents towards a broader milieu of heterogeneous spirituality, and highlights, among other things, the importance of (popular) cultural phenomena as mediators of esoteric discourses. It has been used, among other things, to outline the dialogue between art and visual culture associated with Spiritualism (Keshavjee 2013), and in demonstrating how originally secular Renaissance art works were absorbed into late nineteenth-century esotericism (Faxneld 2016). In addition, the concept of occulture emphasises the popularity of esoteric discourses and phenomena in different contexts, time periods and places. Whereas nineteenth-century artists became acquainted with them, for example, through newspapers, literature, theatre, and art exhibitions, contemporary artists may encounter them in movies and TV series, among other things. In other words, when 'popular culture becomes suffused with occult imagery and ideas, a

smorgasbord will have been provided for modernist authors and artists to make use of' (Bauduin and Johnsson 2018: 22.)

Although occulture has proved useful in the study of art and esotericism, little attention has been paid to the concept of the seeker, closely related to it (cf. Parente-Čapková 2019 and in this volume). When re-defining the concept of occulture, I stressed the important role of seekers (Kokkinen 2013; 2019: 52–66). In this way, I wanted to bring the concept back to Campbell's original idea of the (oc)cultic milieu. According to Campbell (2002: 15), one of the forces that keeps the heterodox milieu alive and together is 'the ideology of seekership'. It refers to an established social field of action that transcends the individual seeker and draws attention to certain habitual models of social activity and recurring discursive patterns, which I believe have an important role in the esoteric and spiritual dimensions of modern (and subsequent) art. Different occultures are formed on the basis of these internalised patterns of action and speech, which I will discuss in what follows.

The second concept closely related to seekership is *spirituality*. My understanding of seekers and seeking derives primarily from Steven Sutcliffe (2003, 2008, 2017), who has focused on developing these concepts further in recent years. According to Sutcliffe seekership is a habitus that has become increasingly common during the twentieth century. In this process of popularisation, seekership has merged into the heterogeneous landscape nowadays known as spirituality. Especially since the 1990s, researchers have started to pay more attention to this phenomenon, which has variously been referred to as the rise of new, alternative, or New Age spirituality (see, e.g. Partridge 2004; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Lynch 2007).

According to Sutcliffe, early twentieth-century occultism offered a breeding ground for the popularisation of seekership and the alternative spirituality related to it. The behaviour typical of seekers had been depicted beforehand in the biographies of such religious authorities as, for example, the Church Father Augustine or Siddhartha Gautama. At the beginning of the twentieth century, seeking became more common, although seekers were still associated with exceptional life stories, and they typically belonged to the higher social classes. Many of them were also members of such esoteric communities as the Theosophical Society or the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The habitual ways of these early seekers of thinking, acting and speaking offered models for later generations of seekers. By the turn of the twenty first century, seekership had democratised into a commonly accessible and well-known habitus of religious agency. Nowadays spiritual seeking seems to be a quite ordinary and common way of expressing one's own religiosity – or, better yet, one's own spirituality (Sutcliffe 2003: 29–30, 35–7, 201–3, 223–34; 2017).

A somewhat similar view of modern esotericism as an important breeding ground for later alternative spiritualities, and more specifically New Age spirituality has been brought forth by Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1998). However, Hanegraaff's and Sutcliffe's approaches to New Age spirituality differ from one another. Whereas Hanegraaff studies it as a historical phenomenon, Sutcliffe wants to deconstruct the idea of New Age as a movement. He examines New Age as a discursive element, and traces its changing meanings from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. At the same time, he identifies the connections between seekers, the heterodox (oc)cultic milieu surrounding them and the loosely defined

phenomena nowadays referred to as spirituality. According to Sutcliffe (2003: 29–30), seekers have played an important role in the formation of the heterogeneous spiritualities so popular today. The idea of the 'New Age' or 'Age of Aquarius' became current in the early twentieth century at the latest, and reflected a growing constituency of seekers who were hungry for new spiritual syncretisms. Later on, in the post-war period, 'New Age' was understood as a more limited, apocalyptic term. From the 1970s onwards, it started to become intertwined with more general discussions about spirituality. In this way, 'New Age' gradually became a code word for modern, alternative religiosity.

Artists have played their own significant role in the popularisation of such discourses of new age. Akseli Gallen-Kallela was already dreaming of a new, spiritual era in the 1890s when he travelled to Italy. He found the keys to this dawning era in the art of the old churches and monasteries of Venice and Florence. Gallen-Kallela wrote at length about his experiences in *Kallela-kirja*, published in 1924. He thought of his own era as dark and degenerate, marked by signs of sick and nervous agitation, an overflowing production of art, and an 'advertising hell'. The Italian Renaissance, and especially the 'eternal' frescoes painted on the walls of sacred buildings, signified the opposite of this decay. They represented a 'noble art period' when 'the artist, greatly at peace but with a flaming soul, gave form to his imaginary visions and thoughts about life and death, and practised his work as a sanctified profession, and thus correspondingly great were the achievements, creations of art of everlasting beauty!' (Gallen-Kallela 1924: 210). Gallen-Kallela admired, among others, Rembrandt, whose self-portraits he saw as radiating enormous peace of mind. For him, Rembrandt was a 'great

sage' who still had the ability to see visions and paint them with his 'witch brush'. Gallen-Kallela wanted to believe that such spiritual art would give rise to a new age: 'Although we are standing in the middle of the night ... we cannot be without sensing the signs of a new dawn ... A new renaissance shall come!' (*ibid.* p. 221).

The same kind of renaissance of more spiritual art was advocated also in the 1890s in Paris by Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), who hosted the Salon de la Rose+Croix and had an important role to play in the *fin-de-siècle* occulture (on Péladan, see Chaitow 2012). In the early twentieth century, the idea of a new age was raised by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, who proclaimed in the foreword of the publication *Der Blaue Reiter* in 1912: 'A great era has begun: the spiritual 'awakening'...' (cited in Caws 2000: 273). The urge to revitalise art was entangled with the idea of the beginning of a new, more spiritual era. As these examples clearly show, artists have been involved in exploiting and shaping the discourse of New Age. In addition, they also seem to suggest that the spiritualisation of modern art and the growth of alternative spiritualities should be seen as parallel processes. Hence, the artist-seekers should not be seen only as individuals interested in esotericism and relating heterogeneous spiritualities, but also as active agents who take part in reworking the meanings of religion anew. In other words, their activities can be interpreted as part of the broader processes by which modern religiosity is changing.

Seeking as social practices

Seekership can be considered on one hand as a certain kind of social behaviour, and on the other as discursive patterns and expressions, or habitual ways, of speaking (cf. Warburg 2001: 94–5). When

studying the connections between art and esotericism, it is important to note that seekership can also be expressed visually, for example, in sketches and works of art. In this section, I focus primarily on the seeker's social behaviour and return to discursive elements in the next section.

The behaviour and practices of seekers are often described as syncretistic and relatively independent. Seekers are seen as religious individualists who are committed only to the search for their own spiritual truths. During the seeking process they mix and match different religious and cultural resources and eventually construct their own collage, consisting of elements from various esoteric or religious traditions and other cultural sources, such as science, politics and art. Becoming inspired by a particular resource does not usually lead to wholehearted commitment to it. When seekers get excited by Buddhism, for instance, they typically do not adopt all of its beliefs and practices, but cherish only some of them. The selected parts of the particular source are then combined with some other elements that the seeker feels are fascinating (Lofland and Stark 1965: 868–9; Campbell 1977: 382–3; 2002: 14–19; Sutcliffe 2000: 17–25; 2003: 200–2).

In some cases, such seeking may seem as a playful act, because the description of the seeker's journey has a light and colloquial register. On the other hand, seekers may also take their quest very seriously and emphasise their own disappointments, disillusionments and disenchantments (Sutcliffe 2017). In *fin-de-siècle* occulture inspiring sources were often sought from the local folk-belief traditions. Gallen-Kallela, for example, was fascinated by the nature spirits that were described in *The Kalevala*. As the historian of religions Per Faxneld has noted, for many artists the belief in such spirits or fairies is an ambiguous, half

playful and half serious act. It 'could function as a way of balancing the (perceived) disenchanted ontological state without having to commit fully to an enchanted worldview' (Faxneld 2018: 100–1). Even if the seeking is narrated with a playful or light tone, it should not be mistaken for an insignificant activity.

Although seekers seem to act quite independently, it is important to note that seekership denotes collective and social rather than individual behaviour. Such a definition can be traced back to Campbell's concept of the cultic milieu. According to Campbell (1977: 383–6; 2002: 14–15, 23–4), individuals seeking their own personal truths share a particular *ideology of seekership*, which also keeps their heterodox host milieu together. Ideology inevitably refers to something that is shared, commonly understood and social. Sutcliffe (2006: 298–9; 2008; 2017) has developed Campbell's idea further and suggests that seeker should be defined as a social role or model that is learned in relation to the ideology and institutions of seekership. According to him, seekership can be examined as a sort of habitus; it refers to a tendency to act, think and feel in certain ways presumed to be natural or apparent. It offers individuals certain styles of actions and discursive strategies rather than clearly inherited beliefs or customs. In addition, the habitus of seekership and its host milieu should be seen as mutually constitutive; although seekers have learned the habitus in their contemporary occulture, they are also constantly reshaping and making the milieu anew (Sutcliffe 2003: 200–1; 2017).

One socially-learned characteristic of seekership is – somewhat paradoxically – the emphasis on individuality and the self.⁴

4 According to Sutcliffe (2006, 2008), seekership offers a concept by means of which it

The seeker represents a sort of antithesis to the traditional participatory role of institutional religions (e.g. member, parishioner, convert); they do not appreciate attachment to any institutions or dogmas. Instead, seekers claim the right to define their own religiosity by themselves. The individual self thus becomes the highest authority of its religiosity, a kind of filter through which all the potential religious and cultural material are cycled, to become either accepted or rejected, depending on how well they fit into the seeker's own personal experiences. One does not need priests or any guiding authorities to practise this type of religiosity. The self is highly appreciated in another sense as well: it is understood as an important source of deep inner truths. In other words, the sanctified self becomes the epistemic cornerstone of spiritual wisdom (Sutcliffe 2003: 200–3; Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000: 8–10; Campbell 1977: 379–86; Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 2–11; Partridge 2004: 71–7). Hence the often-repeated invitation to 'look within' can, in fact, be considered 'a formative cognitive activity of seekership' and part of the routinised activity of seekers (Sutcliffe 2017). Sanctifying the self as the most important authority and source of spiritual wisdom is an important part of the socially-learned ideology of seekership.

When focusing on the social activity of seekers, attention should be paid to the relationships between the individual and various groups. According to Campbell (2002: 18–19), some seekers are more active in different esoteric or religious communities, whereas others seem to migrate between

is sensible to perceive the larger grounds of spirituality referred to, for example, by the terms 'New Age' and 'holistic milieu'. For this reason, when writing about seekers I also profit from studies that discuss these phenomena.

them and take part in their activities only occasionally. While the former positively affect the formation of new groups and organisations, the latter are important for the survival of the (oc)cultic milieu in general. The seeker's interest is typically directed simultaneously towards a number of different movements and trends, all of which are seen as potential sources of personal answers. The search can also proceed from one movement or group to another. Some seekers continue their wandering without settling on anything, whereas others eventually end up as members of a particular movement (Sutcliffe 2003: 204–6; see also Lofland and Stark 1965).

Gallen-Kallela offers an example of the ethos of independence, the emphasis on one's own, personal experiences and the diverse and multi-directional journey typical of seekers. He was strongly critical of the Christian Church, especially priests, whom he believed had adulterated the original teachings of Jesus. In the 1890s, Gallen-Kallela took part in several Spiritualist séances with his friends and his mother, Mathilda Gallén. In the mid-1890s, Gallen-Kallela became interested in Theosophy and psychic phenomena such as clairvoyance and telepathy, and he tried to develop his own extrasensory abilities (Kokkinen 2011: 49–55; Puustinen 2020: 17–20). Later, in the 1920s, the artist socialised with representatives of the Theosophically-oriented Liberal Catholic Church in Chicago, and in May 1923 he became a Freemason. Gallen-Kallela received his Entered Apprentice degree in the lodge S:t Johannes Logen S:t Augustin, which belongs to the Swedish Rite and is found in Helsinki. He never became, however, an active Freemason or member of any other esoteric society (Raivio 2005: 168–213; Matikkala 2017).

Gallen-Kallela wandered on the fringes of various esoteric movements and currents

in a manner typical of seekers. The questions of life and death interested him greatly and he sought to find personal answers to them:

Curiosity has led me, like most others, to try to gain knowledge and some kind of conviction about what lies beyond death. When I was young, I read a great deal of what had been translated of Swedenborg [sic], and after that I wandered the foggy swamps of Theosophy, too, but I saw through Madame Blavatsky early on. I am also aware of the teachings of our Church, but I have not advanced so far on any path that I could develop a personal conviction about these things. (Gallen-Kallela 1924: 137)

Gallen-Kallela's seeking led him to the very heart of the *fin-de-siècle* occulture, where he read the books of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and H. P. Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society. He wished, however, to keep his distance from these key figures of the *fin-de-siècle* occulture in a manner typical of seekers. In his other statements, too, Gallen-Kallela often emphasised his independence and the importance of critical evaluations.

In *fin-de-siècle* occulture the importance of seeking and personal answers was highlighted simultaneously in the fields of religion and art, as shown by the Swedish artist Olof Sager-Nelson's depiction of the Parisian art world in 1894: 'Here are so many directions, the kind of searching that I don't think has ever existed before ... The only true symbolism that exists is in ourselves...' (cited and translated by Lahelma 2014: 21).⁵ The significance of this kind of

5 The quote originates from Olof Sager-Nelson's letter to Albert Engström on 23 April 1894.

seeking has recently been noted in discussions on Symbolist art – albeit not in the same theoretical and conceptual manner as I refer in this article. The art historian Marja Lahelma has noted that in the recent studies, Symbolist art has increasingly been understood as ‘referring to an artistic search for meaning in the world without necessarily committing to any particular belief system’ (Lahelma 2014: 19, 21). *Fin-de-siècle* artists had their quest for individuality and originality, which meant that they did not wish to be identified with any groups or ‘isms’. In addition, Riikka Stewen has noted how the Finnish and Scandinavian artists who worked in Paris during the 1890s preferred the verb ‘to seek’ when writing about their art. She also aptly states that seeking connects the *fin-de-siècle* artist with ‘spiritualists, mystics and occultists, but also scientific circles and the pioneers of psychic research’ (Stewen 2014: 125).

According to Sutcliffe, such transpositions between different social or cultural fields are typical of seekership. Seeking does not ‘operate only within the ‘religious’ field, but may function within other fields in modern society’ (Sutcliffe 2017). In *fin-de-siècle* occulture, the transpositions between the fields of esoteric/religiosity and art were obvious. For Gallen-Kallela and many of his contemporaries, the seeking was targeted in two closely intertwined directions: the artists were eager to find both ‘spiritual truths’ and ‘eternal, sacred art’. In other words, spiritual seeking was equated with artistic exploration and experimentation (Kokkinen 2019: 148–53).

When a seeker moves from one group or movement to another, they do not necessarily need to join them in any official manner. Participation and interest can be expressed loosely, for instance, by reading, writing, watching, listening and discussing. Campbell (2002: 15, 18–19) has

noted that various cultural products play a key role when the social dimensions of seekership are considered. Seekers’ commonly shared and habitual ways of thinking and acting are distributed and recycled via various media, such as literary and visual materials, or different sorts of performances and presentations. These offer information for seekers and an opportunity to enhance their affiliation to a larger community, for instance, via writing for interesting publications. Sutcliffe (2000: 23–5; 2003: 37–41), in turn, has pointed out the significance of *armchair spiritualities* and reading, particularly for the early twentieth-century seekers. In the absence of communities that demanded commitment, the literary culture (newspapers, magazines, factual and fictional literature) offered inspiration, reflection and answers. To examine and interpret texts from a personal point of view is typical of the seeker. Furthermore, seekership could also be expressed via everyday routines, such as following a special diet or meditating.

Literature offered an important source for Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s seeking. He owned several books written by theosophists such as H. P. Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Gallen-Kallela was also fascinated by the works of a well-known astronomer Camille Flammarion and the biologist Ernst Haeckel, whom both utilised esoteric elements in their publications. In addition, Gallen-Kallela’s library included literature on psychic research. He considered it important to transcend an unnecessarily narrow-minded, materialistic view of science (Kokkinen 2019: 373). In Gallen-Kallela’s (1924: 77) opinion, the essence of fire, for instance, could not be fully apprehended ‘before the step from physics to metaphysics has been found’. The artist was successful in getting his views published, too. In 1916, for example,

he wrote two pieces for the Theosophically-oriented weekly magazine *Sunnuntai*. One of these was an artist's letter, addressed to 'the great master Rembrandt' residing in the other world (Lema 1916).

Although Gallen-Kallela encountered Theosophists, Spiritualists and Freemasons during his journey as a seeker, he also had connections with many interesting artistic circles. He visited Joséphin Péladan's first Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris in April 1892 and found ideas closely resembling his own in Alexandre Séon's *Finis Latinorum* (illustration for Péladan's *Le Vice Suprême*, 1884): Western, and especially French, culture had come to its miserable end and was now squirming in its last cadaveric spasms. In the 1890s, Gallen-Kallela took part in two artistic circles with esoteric tendencies: the group of Finnish painters, musicians and writers known as the Symposium and the Zum schwarzen Ferkel circle in Berlin. The first group met more or less regularly during 1892–4 at Hotel Kämp in Helsinki. The eclectic evenings were imprinted by contemporary occulture and they sometimes lasted several days. Discussions were inspired by, among other things, Spiritualism, Theosophy, the ancient Nordic religions and the anticipation of a new era, a new renaissance (Sarajas-Korte 1966: 247–61).

In 1895, Gallen-Kallela visited Berlin for three months and became acquainted with the Zum schwarzen Ferkel circle, which included, for example, Edward Munch and the Polish writer Stanisław Przybyszewski. The artists and writers who gathered at the local tavern were excited to talk about psychology, Satanism, Theosophy, witchcraft, sex and animal magnetism, among other things.⁶ Even though Gallen-Kallela was

not appreciative of the state of contemporary German art, and he was perpetually worried about his own finances, the trip to Berlin and especially his long-lasting friendship with the author Adolf Paul left a mark on his work (Turtiainen 2011; Sarajas-Korte 1966: 304–25). Later on, in the mid-1920s, Gallen-Kallela spent seven months in Mabel Dodge Luhan's artist colony in Taos, New Mexico, situated on the border of a Native American reservation. There he made the acquaintance of the writer D. H. Lawrence, among others, and sought connections between the Finnish national epic *The Kalevala* and the beliefs of the local Pueblo tribe (Raivio 2005: 168–213; Lahelma 2018: 74–7).

In the case of artist-seekers, these kinds of circles closely intertwined with occulture are at least as important as participation in the actual esoteric societies. They offer a community where seekers can absorb new influences and exchange their ideas about art and esotericism. In fact, the seeker's journey can sometimes be as much cultural/artistic as religious in nature. The heterodox milieu of occulture offers a rewarding environment for such seeking, as it can also be seen as a continuous cycle in which various cultural resources are not only exploited, but continuously moulded into new constellations (see Partridge 2004: 4–5, 119–84).

In the *fin-de-siècle* occulture, the artists often sought inspiration from theatres, concerts and art exhibitions. As the art historian Edmund B. Lingan (2010) has pointed out, theatre at the end of the nineteenth century functioned as the mouthpiece for certain kinds of Theosophically-oriented spirituality. At the same time, it also shaped that spirituality into new directions. Hence, the relationship between art and esotericism needs to be correspondingly examined as nourishing both: elements are drawn from

6 On the ZSF circle, see Lathe 1972: 21–39; Faxneld 2012: 55–9.

esotericism to art but, on the other hand, art also produces a new kind of religiosity, including esotericism. The art historian Serena Keshavjee (2013), among others, has highlighted the way in which Symbolist artists utilised Spiritualism-related imagery in their art. The influences flowed the other way around, however, when Spiritualists sought inspiration and support for their own ideas from Eugène Carrière's 'spiritualistic paintings' – regardless of whether Carrière's works had any religious dimension. Therefore, it is important to note that seekers and other religious agents should also be understood as active producers of religiosity and esotericism, not only as representatives of them.

Discursive and visual expressions of seeking

Seekership can be expressed in a discursive manner – by means of repetitive themes and motifs, or habitual ways of thinking and speaking. In the earlier sections, I have already dealt with the emphasis on the self and the anticipation of a new era. In addition, seekers often express their wish to deepen their relationship with the sacred, and on the other hand to distance themselves from institutional religions that cannot offer satisfactory answers to their questions. They are keenly interested in seeking personal development and answers to the great mysteries of life and death. The meaning of life puzzles them (Glock and Stark 1965: 27; Lofland and Stark 1965: 867–9; Sutcliffe 2000: 17–23). Answers are sought after broadly. The historian, writer and Theosophist G. R. S. Mead, who in 1909 founded the Quest Society, expressed the issue in this way: 'We are not in search of knowledge only ... our seeking is also for a deeper and more intense life' (Sutcliffe 2000: 20–1).

In the case of artists, seeking can also imply a pursuit of a more spiritual artistic practice. In 1908, writer and art historian Johannes Öhquist⁷ (1861–1949) wrote an article on Gallen-Kallela as a truth-seeker. Öhquist describes his friend the artist as looking for answers in order to create 'sacred art', and reaching with his senses toward a more spiritual reality:

... he seeks and asks and feels around continuously. Feeling and pursuing beyond the borders of the visible world. On the other side of beings is something that attracts him, something that can be grasped only with the sixth sense. Attracts him and scares him at the same time: the uncanny question of life. The moon that transforms the cold water into yellowish flame, the wind that cuts through the air, the snow that piles up on the rock as if in geological layers, the pale red flower that reaches up from the edge of the swampy forest pond, ... all those are not only to be perceived with the senses, touched with the hands, visible to the eyes, but at the same time they are messages from the invisible world, interpreters and messengers from that world which exists beyond the visible, and the revealing of which is the sacred task and secret of great art.

This is the axis around which Gallén's art spirals: this is the key that alone unlocks the door to understand his works. (Öhquist 1908: 653–4)

7 Like Gallen-Kallela, Öhquist was a first-degree Freemason. He received his degree on 12 June 1918 in Bonn, in the lodge of Friedrich Wilhelm zum eisernen Kreuz (Matikkala 2017). Öhquist dedicated his poetry oeuvre *Der Pilger*, published in 1908, to Gallen-Kallela.

Seekers often refer to their searching process as some kind of journey or path. This journey can take many forms, by either traversing different (religious/esoteric) movements and social groups or fathoming exotic geographical landscapes (Balch 1998: 6; Sutcliffe 2000: 23; 2003: 200–3; 2011). Often the two overlap. Such is the case in Eino Leino's (1878–1926) poem, 'The Seeker of Truth' ('Totuuden etsijä'), published in 1912. Leino was Gallen-Kallela's like-minded friend and writer. The poem describes how the seeker wanders in various religious landscapes, such as the ancient groves of India, Jewish synagogues and Egyptian tombs, in order to find his answers (Leino 1912: 124–6). His path passes through some of the most typical places (Egypt and India) included in the imaginative history and sacred geography of modern esotericism (see, e.g. Hammer 2003: 85–9). Leino's truth-seeker, however, finds the only true answer from his own soul.

In the Finnish journals and newspapers, the term *truth-seeker* (*totuudenetsijä*) seems to have become common after the turn of the twentieth century, although it was clearly known already in the 1890s. In these writings, truth-seekers were often identified with spiritual seekers; the term appears, for example, in articles dealing with future religiosity, more authentic forms of Christianity, and the need to bridge the gap between science and religion. The term was used not only when speaking about Theosophy and Tolstoyanism, but also in the context of Christianity. Truth-seeking was also mentioned frequently in relation to well-known artists and writers. In addition to Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Leo Tolstoy, August Strindberg and Søren Kierkegaard were described as 'truth-seekers' (Kokkinen 2019: 54–5). In Eino Leino's confessional novel *Alla kasvon Kaikkivallan*

(1917) the writer describes himself as a truth-seeker: 'I swore to be, strength permitting, only an impartial, incorruptible truth-seeker, who would not acknowledge anything other than what has been perceived through one's own inner or outer consciousness...' (Leino 1917/58: 19).⁸ Although only male seekers are mentioned here, many female artists and writers can also be interpreted as seekers. However, as the case of author L. Onerva shows, at least in the early twentieth century, the stories of female seekers usually ended in tragedy, perhaps more often than the journeys of their male counterparts (Parente-Čapková, in this issue).⁹

Fin-de-siècle discourses on truth-seekers and seeking seem to accord so effortlessly with the sociological conceptualisation of seekership that they may easily be mistaken as identical. From these discourses, the term has also been adopted in researches without the meaning of 'the seeker' having been thought out or defined in any specific manner. This fusion of the theoretical concepts (etic) and contemporary discourses (emic) is one of the challenges to be aware of when utilising seekership in the study of art and esotericism.¹⁰ One ought to pay attention, for example, to different ways of approaching individuality and independence in the seekers' own statements and from a theoretically-orientated point of view. Even though

8 On Leino as a seeker, see Parente-Čapková 2019 and in this issue.

9 On other female seekers, see, e.g. Lahelma's, Rynnänen's and Ström Lehander's contributions in this issue.

10 Emic and etic are concepts used in cultural studies. Emic refers to the manner in which people themselves describe their actions, while etic refers to the description of the same action by an outside observer or by researchers.

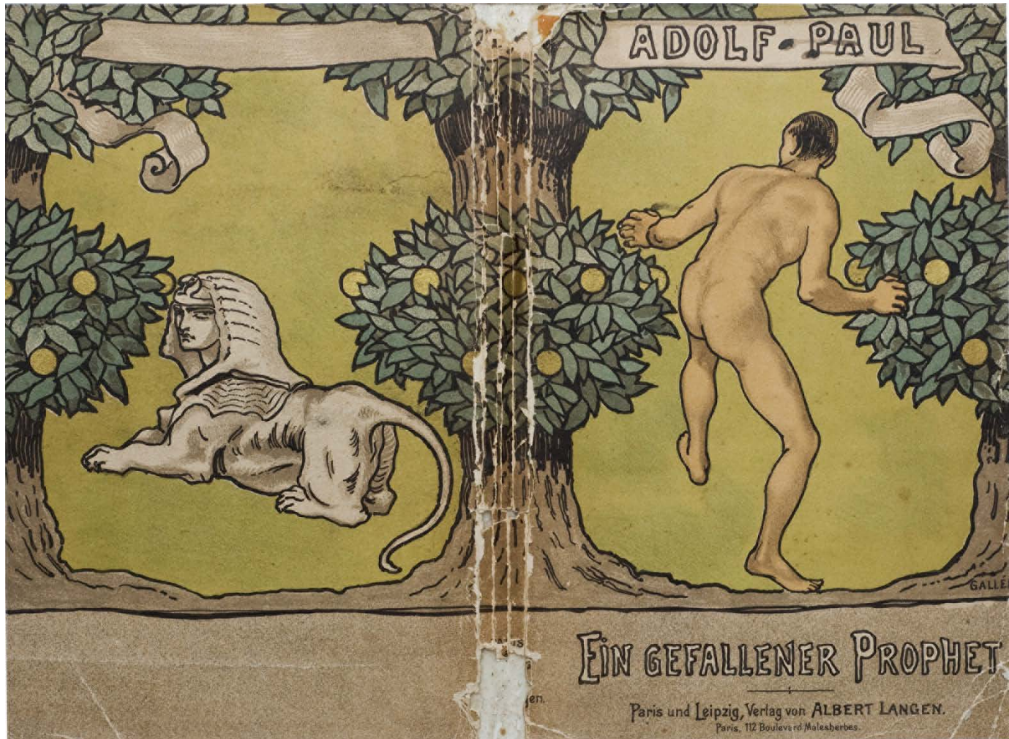
emphasising personal experiences and independence is an essential element in (emic) discourses related to seeking, the activities of the seeker should not be mistaken for being particularly individual (from the sociological, etic point of view). Instead, the highlighting of one's own individuality should rather be seen as a discursive strategy typical of seekers. As an analytical concept (etic), seekership refers to socially-distributed, learned and habitual ways of acting and thinking, which the seekers themselves (emic) do not necessarily recognise or admit (Sutcliffe 2008). In the case of *fin-de-siècle* occulture, making such a distinction is important, so that the artists who emphasise their individuality do not end up being studied as extraordinary individuals or heroic hermits. Symbolist artists with esoteric tendencies have too often been labelled as antisocial and isolated individuals and eccentrics (see Hirsh 2004: xiii–xiv).

The seeker's journey can be expressed both literarily and visually. In Gallen-Kallela's art seeking is referred to through different kinds of themes and motifs, which recur in many of his works. Most typically, the idea of truth-seeking is related to the figure of a solitary wanderer travelling alone. The figure is a sort of pilgrim of art, whose most important attributes are often a cloak and a staff. In Gallen-Kallela's study (1902, Sigrid Jusélius Foundation, Helsinki) for the *Paradise* fresco of the Jusélius mausoleum, the truth-seeker wanders in an otherworldly landscape towards a temple high above. Gallen-Kallela understood the shrine as a kind of sanctuary of both hidden eternal wisdom and spiritual art.

Similar conceptions can be found, for example, in the writings of Arman Point (1861–1932), a regular artist at Péladan's Salon de la Rose+Croix. In 1896, Point



Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Gate of Paradise*, 1902, water-colour and pencil, 26 x 10.5 cm (sketch 98-M55). Sigrid Jusélius Foundation, Helsinki. Photo: Sigrid Jusélius Foundation, Mats Vuorenjuuri.



Akseli Gallen-Kallela made a variation of *Conceptio Artis* for the cover of Adolf Paul's book *Ein Gefallener Prophet* (1894). Gallen-Kallela Museum, Espoo. Photo: Gallen-Kallela Museum / Saana Kytömäki.

wrote an article to the magazine *Mercur de France* and suggested that artists should build a temple dedicated to spiritual art, in which the 'Guardians of Truths' can bow on their knees to 'the Goddess of Beauty', in order to guard the secret laws which govern the whole universe (Point 1995). In this way, *fin-de-siècle* artists embraced the notion of *philosophia perennis*, typical of esoteric discourses. The tradition of the eternal wisdom and its line of masters they constructed usually consists of artists and writers who were seen as like-minded bearers of a spiritually-orientated *ars perennis* (Kokkinen 2019: 143–61).¹¹

Another slightly different visual example of the seeker motif can be found

in Gallen-Kallela's *Conceptio Artis* (1894, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki). In the painting, the naked man is pursuing a sphinx, which is fleeing into the shadows of the forest. In Symbolist art the sphinx often represents the great mysteries of life and art. Gallen-Kallela developed the theme together with his friend the writer Adolf Paul (1863–1943). Paul's short story *A Dream (Uni, 1894)* tells of an attractive sphinx that 'reflected all the light in the world, singing itself forth in warm waves of sound, light and colour...'¹² There is an obvious sexual charge in chasing the sphinx – both in Paul's short story and in Gallen-Kallela's painting. The mythical beast represents the great mystery of

11 On *philosophia perennis* see, e.g. Hanegraaff 2005.

12 The citation of Paul's short story is from Turtiainen 2011: 72.

art, which is fertilised by the combination of its (masculine) seeker and the (feminine) sphinx. Such ideas are clearly linked with the art theories of the Zum schwarzen Ferkel circle, which both Gallen-Kallela and Paul were familiar with. In these theories, inspired by *fin-de-siècle* occulture, the sex drive was seen as a dark gateway to the secrets of life and artistic creation (Turtaainen 2011; Kokkinen 2020: 42–8). In this and many other of Gallen-Kallela's works the visualisations of the truth-seeker can be interpreted as self-portraits. As artist's writings and works related to seeking were frequently very personal, it is likely that Gallen-Kallela identified himself as a kind of a seeker, too (Kokkinen 2019: 56, 131–3).

The seeker's journey is often directed towards the depths of one's own soul and the self. In order to reveal the spiritual truths hidden within, seekers have to know themselves. At the same time, the aim is to develop one's own spiritual potential, for instance, by practising the skill of clairvoyance. Such goals are often related to the idea of spiritual growth, which blends into the seeker's journey. Traversing various sorts of paths is a precursor for growth, and one of its important goals is to find inner, personal truth. Answers can be sought from almost any walk of life, as long as the chosen path seems to work from the seeker's own perspective. When it starts losing its meaning, the seeker moves on to the next path, and thus the journey continues (Balch 1998: 6; Sutcliffe 2003: 200–3). The theme of spiritual development brings the concept of seekership close to esotericism, in which making spiritual progress has been an elemental part. Such development can be expressed, among other things, through initiatory rituals (see e.g. Hanegraaff 2013: 112–33).

When seekership is approached as

specific kinds of discursive elements and strategies, it seems to resemble von Stuckrad's conception of esoteric discourses, in which claims about higher truth play a significant role. If one wishes to stress the conceptual differences between seekership and esoteric discourses, the former stresses the importance of independence, individual inquiry and the closely-related goal of spiritual development. The seeking process is often described as a journey proceeding through various cultural and religious places and sources. Discourses related to seekership emphasise the need to find individual answers by combining heterogeneous elements, rather than making claims about absolute knowledge. In practice, however, the self-constructed religiosity of seekers often appears to themselves as a higher spiritual wisdom, which the oft-repeated *fin-de-siècle* term 'truth-seeker' refers to. Furthermore, seekership involves an ethos of doubt and detachment. Seekers often distance themselves not only from the dogmatism of religions but also the scientific worldview, which is criticised as unnecessarily narrow-minded. The principles of independence, suspicion, curiosity and critical thinking are frequently emphasised.

Partridge (2004: 75–7) has made a similar point in writing about a *hermeneutics of suspicion*, which he sees as an essential part of late twentieth-century and contemporary occulture. Seekers do not usually accept as given the truth of any text or source of information; rather, they examine interesting materials critically and from a personal point of view. In other words, their manner of reading and interpreting is impressed by the hermeneutics of suspicion. The value of any information or knowledge can be accepted only insofar as it feels authentic and right to oneself, being in accord with one's personal experiences.

This sort of personal examination and validation of knowledge is closely associated with the idea of the hidden code, or message, typical of esotericism. Such secret meanings are believed to be found, for example, from natural phenomena or different religious texts. Kocku von Stuckrad (2010: 89–113) has referred to these phenomena as *esoteric hermeneutics*. Kabbalists, for example, have contributed to this tradition by believing they could unlock the secrets of absolute knowledge by (re-)reading biblical texts.¹³ The idea of the hidden secret is bound to raise doubt about the real essence and meaning of the nature/cosmos and an individual text.

In *fin-de-siècle* occulture, Theosophy, Tolstoyanism, and in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, among others, the seeker is encouraged to engage in reading that aims at revealing the hidden meanings of a text (on these interpretation methods, see, e.g. McLean 1994: 111–21; Bergquist 2005: 223–35, 245–65). Such a method of reading characterised by the hermeneutics of suspicion became an important part of Gallen-Kallela's seeking, too.¹⁴ In the summer of 1894, he studied the New Testament in a way that departed from the teachings of the Church. He discovered new, hidden meanings within the text. In his case, the suspicious reading was Theosophically-oriented. Just a few days before, Gallen-Kallela had read Theosophical literature and found the perspectives of those oeuvres to be significant. He utilised the same kind of method

of reading while interpreting *The Kalevala*. Gallen-Kallela's understanding of the Finnish national epic paralleled that of his friend, the artist Pekka Halonen (1865–1933) (Kokkinen 2019: 236–42). Halonen believed that one could find universal wisdom in *The Kalevala*, if one knew how to read it in the correct way:

From the *Kalevala* we can see our own inner essence, insofar as we are capable of seeing. The Indo-Germanic worldview and the teachings of the Church have weakened in us the right understanding of the *Kalevala*. ... The *Kalevala* cannot be comprehensively explained through an intellectual route; there needs to also be a view that is arising from intuition. There is hidden, deep wisdom in the *Kalevala*, just like in all of the spiritual treasures of ancient peoples. (Halonen 1916: 3)

Gallen-Kallela wanted to find similarities between different religions. He equated *The Kalevala* with Christian manuscripts and called it the 'Codex Aureus Fenorum', the golden book of Finns. In his illustrations for *The Kalevala* he sought inspiration from 'the primitives' including, for example, the indigenous peoples in Africa and America. After Blavatsky had praised *The Kalevala* as one of the sacred books of hidden wisdom during the 1880s and 1890s, artists and Theosophists alike were eager to study the national epic – in Finland and abroad. *The Kalevala* was now seen as an opus revealing hidden wisdom, comparable to the Bible, the Mahabharata and the Vedic literature (Sarajas-Korte 1972; Kokkinen 2020: 24–34).

Gallen-Kallela's perception of *The Kalevala's* universal wisdom is evident, for example, in *Lemminkäinen's Mother* (*Lemminkäisen äiti*, 1897, Finnish National

13 On double messages in esotericism, see also Bauduin and Johnsson 2018: 20.

14 Of course, this was a more general mode of operation shared by many of the *fin-de-siècle* artists. For instance, August Strindberg compares 'sacred books' and their messages with each other in his work *Inferno*. See Strindberg 1911: 28.



Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Lemminkäinen's Mother*, 1896, tempera on canvas, 85.5 × 108.5 cm. Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki. Photo: Finnish National Gallery.

Gallery, Helsinki). The painting provides yet another example of how Gallen-Kallela dealt with the theme of spiritual seeking in his art. It depicts a dead Lemminkäinen, a young sage or truth-seeker, who has failed in his initiatory mission to steal a feather from the otherworldly swan of Tuonela. His more advanced shaman mother (capable of turning into a wolf, among other things) has come to the rescue. In Gallen-Kallela's own words, the painting represents a Nordic Pietà. Due to the composition of the lamenting mother and the deceased son, Lemminkäinen can be associated with Jesus and his mother with the Virgin Mary. In *Lemminkäinen's Mother*, Christian and Kalevalic narrations are paralleled in a manner typical of Theosophical thinking (Kokkinen 2020: 24–34, 48–56).

Gallen-Kallela read and interpreted *The Kalevala* with a hermeneutics of suspicion and ended up depicting it in a way that emphasises the hidden, universal wisdom at the heart of all religions. In addition to *The Kalevala* and Christianity, Gallen-Kallela tried to find this *philosophia perennis* from several other cultures, myths and religions as well.

Conclusions and suggestions

The notion of seekership offers an analytical tool that opens up new perspectives onto Akseli Gallen-Kallela's art, life and religiosity. The habitual ways in which the seeker thinks, acts and speaks recur in his art, practices and writings. Gallen-Kallela is seeking for personal answers to the enigmas of life and death from many directions

and he anticipates a new era marked by more spiritually-focused art and pursuits to develop his senses towards clairvoyance. His actions and interpretations are largely guided by the hermeneutics of suspicion as he tries to discover his own truths about religion and art.

Although the behavioural and discursive patterns of seekers remain relatively similar due to the ideology of seekership, the sources referred to, and the topics of interest, vary between different contexts (times and places) and individuals. Like seekers in general, artists approach their contemporary esoteric discourses from their own personal standpoints and interests. In Gallen-Kallela's case, a significant factor was the wish to seek some sort of synthesis between art, religion and science. The artist likened himself to a scientist who actively observed the nature surrounding him and the myths and beliefs of various 'primitive' cultures. He was also keenly interested in scientific discussions on electricity and magnetism, among other things. Gallen-Kallela wished to make a leap from science toward metaphysics.

Gallen-Kallela probably understood his seeking to be an individual and independent activity. However, similar questions, answers and sources fascinated other seekers of the *fin-de-siècle* occulture. In the 1960s, Sixten Ringbom actually described Kandinsky's relation to heterogeneous spirituality in very similar terms. Although Ringbom's primary goal was to highlight Kandinsky's interest in Theosophy, he also wrote that the artist never became 'an orthodox Theosophist' and that he had reservations about it: 'on the whole it appears as if he had at first accepted Theosophical teachings only so far as they coincided with his own beliefs, finding in Theosophy a peg on which to hang his convictions'. According to Ringbom, Kandinsky had

'an attitude of picking and choosing'. As for Gallen-Kallela, it was important for Kandinsky, too, to find a synthesis between art, science and religion. In addition, both artists were interested in invisible forces and vibrations, clairvoyance, and the 'laws of nature' that were believed to underlie the cosmic unity. The task of spiritual art was to express these universal truths (Ringbom 1966, quotes on pp. 396–7).¹⁵ Such similarities show that the practices and discourses of the artist-seekers had at least some continuity from the late nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century.

By inquiring into what kinds of sources such artist-seekers as Gallen-Kallela and Kandinsky have used in order to find their own spiritual truths – how they have expressed their seeking and what kinds of contemporary discourses their art and writings have participated in – we can study how seekership has been actualised in different contexts, time periods and places. In addition, such comparisons between seekers eventually provide an opportunity to say something more general about continuums and breaks in the modern practice of seeking. At the same time, it also offers a chance to outline how the connections between art and esotericism have changed over time.

When focusing on the practices of seeking, the somewhat obscure debates concerning whether an individual should be seen primarily as an artist or as an occultist, become less relevant. Hilma af Klint offers a case in point (cf. Bauduin 2018). In recent years there has been a widely-accepted desire to see af Klint as a pioneer of abstract avant-garde art, preceding Kandinsky and other male artists. However, not everyone

15 On Gallen-Kallela, see Kokkinen 2019: 148–61, 175–92.

has accepted this view. For the critics, af Klint's art often seems to be primarily concerned with spiritual aims, and her artworks function mostly as mediators of the Theosophical-Anthroposophical worldview. From such a point of view, the artistic value of af Klint's works can easily become questionable. Although distinguishing 'novels written by an occultist' from 'occult novels written by a modernist' may in some cases be helpful (see Bauduin and Johnsson 2018: 20), when the connections between art (or literature) and esotericism are analysed, the division is also a bit problematic. Such distinctions are symptomatic of the divided narratives about modernity and the wish to keep avant-garde art separate from the history of esotericism – which for some, still represents a history of psychologically questionable fools and eccentrics, in opposition to 'secular' and 'rational' modernity.

When studying seekership, it is not necessary to evaluate if an individual artist is most interested in esotericism, art or even science. In the process of seeking, these are anyhow entangled with each other and form a heterodox collage in which one cannot be fully understood without considering the other. Rather, the attention should be paid to what sorts of elements the artist-seeker uses and how they are woven into their art and writings. Such sources may include some material that does not appear to be esoteric in any obvious way, but which, due to the seeker's activity, becomes absorbed as part of the occulture of the time. In *fin-de-siècle* occulture, Tolstoyism, for example, became intertwined with Theosophical worldviews, although Leo Tolstoy's ideas in themselves were not especially esoteric in nature (Kokkinen 2010).

One of the benefits of exploiting the concept of the seeker is that it connects the study of art and esotericism to the ongoing

scholarly discussions about the changing religiosity of modern Western societies. Viewed from such a perspective, artist-seekers can be seen as active agents in constructing spirituality, in which individuality and the meaning of self is often emphasised. In addition, the heterogeneous spirituality seems to form its own intriguing layer in the history of modern and subsequent art. The sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow (2001: esp. 266–74) has paid attention in recent years to the spiritual journey that guides the work of contemporary American artists who are seeking something sacred, a deeper meaning of life. According to Wuthnow, artists have increasingly become the 'spiritual leaders of our time.' In their work, they dive into questions of spirituality and formulate new, creative solutions to them.

The concepts of seeker and seekership, developed by sociologists of religion, can offer new possibilities more generally for the study of art and esotericism. My aim is not, of course, to claim that it is sensible to examine all art from the nineteenth century onwards from perspectives that focus on seekership. I do believe, however, that the concept of seekership can help us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the role esotericism and spirituality has played in the lives and works of some modern and subsequent artists. The concept could be especially helpful regarding those artists who do not subscribe to any esoteric movement or doctrine but stress a relatively individual and independent relationship with the heterogeneous spiritual milieu of their time – the contemporary occulture.

In addition, utilisation of the concept supports a better understanding of the important role that artist-seekers such as Gallen-Kallela have had in the construction of the discourses of spiritual art, as well as in

the process through which modern religiosity has changed since the nineteenth century. Focusing on seekers draws attention also to the circles of artists, writers, critics, patrons and esotericists alike, who have shared the desire to find deeper knowledge and more spiritual art. In Gallen-Kallela's case such communities of seekers were formed, for example, in Helsinki, Berlin and Taos. When studying art and esotericism, such trans-national seeker communities should be given at least as much attention as the actual esoteric societies or other organisations with which the artist-seeker often has a more complex relationship.¹⁶ By examining the behaviour and expressions of seekers, it is possible to trace various esoteric discourses flourishing in specific times and places. In other words, the concepts of seekers and seeking provide an opportunity to study different occultures and open up a more comprehensive – and theoretically justified – perspective on art and esotericism. ■

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16 On Tyra Kleen's ambivalent relationship with esotericism, see Faxneld in this issue.

articles on the subject and brought the results of her research to the attention of the wider public in the art exhibitions she has curated.

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