

A PANORAMA OF ESTONIAN CULTURAL MEMORY

Linda Kaljundi and Tiina-Mall Kreem's
History in Images – Image in History.
National and transnational past in Estonian art

Detta är en recension av Linda Kaljundis och Tiina-Mall Kreems nya monografi "History in Images - Image in History. National and Transnational Past in Estonian Art". Boken, som publicerats i samband med en utställning i estniska KUMU, belyser illustrationer av det estniska kulturminnet från tidiga moderna perioden till nutiden utgående ifrån politiska och konstnärliga sammanhang. Recensenten kopplar Kalundis och Kreems studie till aktuell kulturminnesforskning och jämför verket med färska analyser av hur finsk historia gestaltats i bildkonst.

Historian Linda Kaljundi and art historian Tiina-Mall Kreem's *History in Images – Image in History. National and Transnational Past in Estonian Art* (KUMU, 2018, 368p) is a thoroughly researched and richly illustrated survey of Finland's neighbour state's historical imagery. The survey shares its title with an exhibition curated by the authors and published in conjunction at KUMU Art Museum; nevertheless, the book is no mere exhibition catalogue but a full-scale research monograph in its own right. As the first overall study of visualisations of Estonian history, the book fills a research gap in Estonian cultural memory studies where most previous research has focused on textual materials.¹ For a Finnish readership the monograph gains additional interest from the fact that Estonian art and cultural memory are not widely known in Finland despite the close linguistic ties and geographical proximity between the two nations. Therefore it is somewhat disappointing that the main body of the monograph is only available to international audiences as an English summary. Although not likely to capture all the finer nuances of the text itself, the summary is furnished with footnotes and sufficiently detailed to familiarise the reader with the authors' main arguments.

Despite Kaljundi and Kreem's stress that the monograph is not a complete survey of all visualisations of the past, the book offers a panorama of illustrations of Estonian history and an insightful analysis of themes and subjects that have been central to Estonian cultural memory and historical imagery in different time periods and political climates. Following an introduction to the aims and the theoretical background of the book, the research is presented in two parts.² The first part contains a chronological study of illustrations of Estonian history from the early modern period to the 21st century. The analysis contextualises the development of historical imagery both in terms of artistic practice and the changing national and political power dynamics in the area now known as Estonia. The authors discuss Estonia's different political regimes in separate chapters and thereby emphasise how important state and political history is to their analysis. The first chapter is dedicated to cultural memory from the early modern period until the end of the Russian imperial era in 1917. It is followed by chapters on the period of Estonian independence from 1918 until the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 and the wartime and Soviet periods from 1939 to 1991. Only a small section is dedicated to images of the past published in post-Soviet and contemporary Estonia.

The second part of the book consists of a thematic analysis of what the authors name "visual realms of memory" in reference to the French historian Pierre Nora's famous concept. By this Kaljundi and Kreem mean recurring themes in illustrations of Estonian cultural memory. These canonised subjects have been arranged chronologically according to the time period represented. The two-part structure allows the authors to discuss the ways in which historical developments and ruptures have governed Estonian discourses about memory. In the first part of the book they discuss how the changing interests of ruling groups and regimes in Estonia have affected the nation's cultural memory. They show how the rulers have selected and created new historical subjects to be remembered and shaped existing memories to suit their needs. The authors effectively juxtapose thematically identical visualisations produced in different periods; the juxtaposition underlines the effect that changing conditions in artistic production and Estonia's various political situations have had on the nation's historical illustration. The authors' analysis proceeds through examples of how cultural memory has been manipulated by different interest groups. A particularly apt case study is the treatment of St. George's Night Uprising, a peasant revolt taking place in 14th century Estonia. According to Kaljundi and Kreem it was a minor theme in Baltic German historical discourse in which one that preferred to think of German crusaders as civilisers christening the Baltic pagan populations. The uprising only became an important subject for cultural memory at the

time of Estonian national awakening at end of the 19th century when it was transformed as into an example of the Estonian people's fight for freedom from foreign rule, a view highlighted after Estonia gained its independence. During the Soviet occupation the theme did not, however, disappear from Estonian discourses of memory but was instead recast as a narrative of class warfare with the Estonian peasants fighting the German feudal rulers.³

The theoretical background of Kaljundi and Kreem's research lies within the interdisciplinary paradigm of cultural memory studies. Following Jan and Aleida Assmann's and Ann Rigney's insights, the authors see cultural memory as the body of texts, images, and rituals whose repetition in society stabilises the society's self-image and collective understanding of the past. As a result the authors reach into areas of visual culture beyond the canonised tradition of art history. Instead of limiting their research material to only artworks praised for their aesthetic merits or to the genre of academic history painting, Kaljundi and Kreem include drawings, sketches and book illustrations that have often been considered secondary in art historical analysis but have had a major role in popularising ideas of the past.⁴ In a similarly inclusive spirit the authors adopt a broad definition of what counts as history. In addition to depictions of documented historical events their material contains images of allegorical, mythological and folkloristic subjects, topographic images of ruins and nearly anthropological illustrations of Estonian peasant life. The inclusiveness allows the reader to see the variety of uses of the past in visual culture but also at times comes close to conflating historical imagery with visualisations of "Estoniannes" – and highlighting the nationalism at play in constructing cultural memory.

In its inclusive selection of artistic materials and its focus on national memory, Kaljundi and Kreem's study is comparable to professor Derek Fewster's dissertation *Visions of Past Glory. Nationalism and the construction of early Finnish history* (SKS, 2006). Fewster analyses both high cultural and popular representations of Finnish antiquity and their connections to a nationalist ideology in a manner similar to Kaljundi and Kreem's. Fewster's selection of source material, however, covers a range of representations of the past across media from textual to filmic to scenic and pictorial depictions of Finnish antiquity and is temporally limited to the period before the Second World War.⁵ Kaljundi and Kreem on the other hand have chosen to study a wider timeline both in terms of the images' production and the periods represented but limit their study strictly to the visual arts.⁶ Comparison of the two studies is, however, particularly tempting because the visual realms of memory and styles of representing the past studied by Kaljundi and Kreem in Estonia and Fewster in Finland are strikingly similar. In both countries cul-

tural memory before the Second World War favoured idealised representations of an ancient past and of national mythology, and had an interest for medieval peasants' uprisings (St. George's Night Uprising in Estonia and the Club War in Finland). In addition, Kaljundi and Kreem also note that Estonian artists' illustrations of the national epos *Kalevipoeg* for example were influenced by Finnish *Kalevala*-themed art.⁷

A great strength in Kaljundi and Kreem's study is their close attention to transnational influences and the internal conflicts which underline the national narrative. Although the main focus is the visual construction of Estonian national history, Kaljundi and Kreem trace the transnational historical contexts for the formation of Estonian identity and illustrate the Estonian past by emphasising the specificities of the Baltic German, imperial Russian and later the Soviet regime's influence on the politics of memory. Moreover, they stress that Estonian artists operated in both Baltic German and Russian artistic and cultural milieus and were affected by the discourses and ideologies circulating in these social and intellectual environments as well as by Scandinavian and transnational trends in representing the past. In Finland, visual representations of the past have thus far been studied from a similarly transnational point of view in only a few recent exhibitions.⁸ Together with these exhibitions Kaljundi and Kreem's study clearly show that a comparative study of historical representations in Scandinavian and Baltic nations would be a worthwhile future endeavour.

Besides transnational elements another area of particular interest in Kaljundi and Kreem's study is its temporal focus on representations of the past in the 20th century. Most studies of historical representation concentrate on either 19th century history painting or on the reinvention of history in contemporary art in the wake of the so called "memory boom" which has developed during the last couple of decades; as such, visualizations of the past during the 20th century remain almost an uncharted territory. Kaljundi and Kreem's study offers an interesting case study of how Estonian artists continued to deal with the past in the midst of modernist influence and changing political regimes, drawing a pattern of continuities and ruptures from the 19th century to the contemporary era.

NOTES

¹ According to the authors the dominant view in Estonian research on cultural memory is that Estonian cultural memory has been mainly shaped by texts. Kaljundi & Kreem 2018, pp. 22–23, 303.

- ² In the English summary the two parts have been combined into a single chronological narrative.
- ³ Kaljundi & Kreem 2018, pp. 183–185. For the treatment of the St. George's Night Uprising in Estonian cultural memory see also Laanes 2015, passim.
- ⁴ The authors do however comment that they included only a few posters "as direct pictorial propaganda is not a part of the main focus of this book". Kaljundi & Kreem 2018, pp. 306.
- ⁵ Fewster 2006, pp. 38.
- ⁶ Kaljundi and Kreem do however stress the occurrence of intermedial transposition of subjects in cultural memory. Kaljundi & Kreem 2018, pp. 22, 302. Kaljundi has also previously contributed to and participated in editing the anthology *Novels, Histories, Novel Nations. Historical Fiction and Cultural Memory in Finland and Estonia* (SKS, 2015) that focused on the role of historical fiction in Estonian and Finnish cultural memory.
- ⁷ Nikolai Triik, Aleksander Uurits and Oskar Kallis were for example all inspired by Akseli Gallen-Kallela's Kalevala-paintings. Other influences include Scandinavian and Russian artists like Gerhard Munthe and Nikolai Roerich. Kaljundi & Kreem 2018, pp. 315–317.
- ⁸ Most important recent examples are *The Marquise and the Baron - Neo-rococo and the North*, an exhibition on the afterlives of the 18th century in art at the Serlachius Museum Gösta and *The Magic North* in Ateneum dealing with myths and fairy tales in Finnish and Norwegian *fin-de-siècle art*, both in 2015.

SOURCES

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