



Ilona Harima – On the Road to Enlightenment

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In 2011, the Finnish National Gallery published a book on the Finnish artist Ilona Harima, whose distinctive art was strongly influenced by Theosophy, Esotericism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. A small exhibition was mounted at the Ateneum Art Museum then, too. Due to the international interest in the history of Theosophy and its relationship to the visual arts *FNG Research* is republishing an English summary on Harima and her art, which was first published in the above mentioned book

The art produced in Finland during the inter-war period has not yet been fully studied. In particular, the women artists of the period have been given little attention, and some who worked on the fringes of the art world may even have been forgotten. One such is Ilona Harima, who produced highly personal work diverging greatly from the dominant trends of the time.

Ilona Harima (married name Rautiala as of 1939) was born in 1911 in Vaasa on Finland's west coast. Her parents Samuli and Anna originally had the surname Hohenthal, but changed this to Harima in 1936. Samuli Harima (1879–1962) was a successful Ostrobothnian businessman, influential in economic circles, and the wealth he accumulated allowed his daughter Ilona to pursue a career as a professional artist. In early 1918 her father's work prompted a family move to Helsinki, and it was here that Ilona went to school, gaining her middle-school leaving certificate in 1927. The following year she began to study art in the graphics department of the Central School of Applied Arts, though she stayed there for only for a couple of years at most.

Harima drew and wrote a great deal. Her earliest surviving drawings date from the late 1920s, but most of her paintings, mainly works in gouache and watercolour, were made from the '30s to '50s. Some of her last works are dated as late as the early '60s, but after that she made few drawings or paintings. Harima also produced some small sculptures and ceramics. Many of her paintings are on paper and a few – unusually – are on parchment, sometimes mounted on coloured brocade.



Ilona Harima c. 1930
 photograph, autochrome
 Ilona Harima Archive.
 Archive Collections,
 Finnish National Gallery
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Aaltonen

From an early age Harima was very interested in Oriental art forms and cultures, as the subject matter and overall approach of her works reflect. She was particularly fascinated by the visual world of Indian and Tibetan art, and at an early stage she studied esoteric religions and occultism. In 1936 she became a member of the Theosophical Society, and via Theosophy, learned about the Esoteric Freemasons movement, which she briefly joined.

Harima rarely exhibited her work. She had three modest solo exhibitions at the Salon Strindberg in Helsinki, in 1934, 1946 and 1960, and also took part in the Ostrobothnian artists' spring exhibition in Vaasa in 1944. The works shown there attracted considerable praise, as did the first of her solo shows. This prompted positive comments from reviewers, including the prominent art critic Onni Okkonen. Subsequently, there were also a number of illustrated articles about Harima and her work in Nordic women's magazines, while the letters she received demonstrate that her paintings also aroused attention more widely. Of particular interest is a letter dated 6 September, 1934, from the prominent Swedish abstract painter Hilma af Klint, which begins: 'I have in front of me the Danish periodical *Women of Our Time*, which has some illustrations of your paintings.' Af Klint urges Harima to study the writings of Rudolf Steiner and tells her that in 1907 and 1908 she had herself produced some large paintings under similar influences.

Ilona Harima's works mainly depict figures, but she also produced some landscape drawings, especially scenes around the family's summer villa on Iso Villasaari island. She also often included various forms of animal life, especially birds and fish, and a few of her works portray solely animals. The figures she painted were usually radiant, god-like forms, or children, young girls and angels. These are mostly surrounded by animals or various imaginary plants, as well as symbolic elements such as flames, sun discs and beams of light, huge eyes and lotus flowers, with heavenly bodies and symbols suggestive of water.



Ilona Harima, *Oriental Landscape by Moonlight*, 1926

gouache

Ilona Harima Archive. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen

Contemporary photograph of Ilona Harima's *Creation*, 1934

Ilona Harima Archive. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



Ilona Harima, *Enlightened*, 1939

oil on canvas, 75 x 95cm

Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



Harima's figures are usually somewhat stereotypical, probably because she tended to restrict herself to the Indian and Tibetan artistic tradition. The eyes, specifically, are often unnaturally large, especially in the earlier paintings. Large eyes are meant to suggest the spiritual quality and level of enlightenment achieved by the persons or beings concerned. Generally speaking, the faces have a distant, inward-looking expression. The figures are in poses that are often borrowed from the Buddhist/Hindu pictorial tradition, as are their gestures and the postures – or *mudras* – of their hands and fingers.

The work *Enlightened* (1939) is a good example of Harima's working method. It does not illustrate any particular story as such, drawing instead on accounts of enlightenment within Buddhism more generally. A wretched and melancholy-looking girl is lifting a dying bird up to a figure glowing with light, probably an angel or enlightened divine spirit such as the Buddha. This figure is extending its right hand – from which rays of light spread towards the kneeling girl and the bird – while also raising its left hand, releasing a healthy, vibrant bird up into the light. In the background we can see a glittering blue ocean.

Ilona Harima, *Buddha and Two Bodhisattvas*, 1947
 gouache, 24.5 x 20.5cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



What is happening in the painting can be interpreted as depicting various steps towards spiritual enlightenment. The bird represents two states of the girl's soul: first dying, then bright and transfigured. The latter stage is also expressed by the flame motifs rising above her. Blue sea is a common symbol in Buddhist art. It depicts *samsara*, the 'sea of suffering' that forms part of the endless cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth – that is, a world from which it is possible to rise through enlightenment, or *bodhi*, to *Nirvana*, the state of absolute blessedness.

In some cases, Harima commented on her works and their meaning both in conversation and in writing. Such explanations also tell us something about her working method, a process marked by spontaneity and improvisation throughout, sometimes under the influence of almost unconscious phenomenal experiences. She does not seem to have planned her works very exactly in advance, allowing them to take shape spontaneously during the working process. Her starting point would be some source of inspiration that prompted a torrent of creative images, often resulting in a whole series of paintings.

Ilona Harima, *An Angel and the Planets*, date unknown

Indian ink

Ilona Harima Archive. Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



For instance, a brief comment made by Harima on another painting, *Northern Road* (1948, now in the Gyllenberg Collection), helps us to interpret its meaning. She writes that the work shows a spiritual power raising a human soul up to the light and crowning it with a garland, while its material substance falls away like a butterfly's pupa. She also refers in the name of the work to the philosophical and religious source of her subject, the eighth discourse in the Hindu holy book *Bhagavad Gita*.

Here, the Lord Krishna (i.e. divinity in man) tells Arjuna (i.e. mankind) how to achieve 'inner light (that is, spiritual enlightenment) with the aid of the divine spirit'. Based on Harima's explanation and the *Bhagavad Gita* text, it seems obvious that the large figure in the picture is the Lord Krishna, or 'Spiritual Strength' and that the small female figure in his lap is Arjuna, the human soul. Just how much Harima's works express her own feelings and inner self is hard to say. In any case, the garlands bestowed on Arjuna can be interpreted as representing profound teachings and divine guidance intended for a human soul experiencing enlightenment. The little winged figure has already emerged from its pupa, symbolising its rejection of its material substance. Interpreted in this way, the title indicates that the human soul in the painting is uniting with the 'supreme spirit' and thus achieving the eternal bliss of *Nirvana*.

Ilona Harima was far from being the only artist interested in Theosophy and esoteric matters at that time. Many other artists discussed and studied such matters. However, Harima's work was unique in the Finnish art world in drawing directly and openly on her personal thinking, which was not only pantheistic or Theosophical, but greatly influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism. Very little was known about Buddhism in Finland generally in the 1930s.

Ilona Harima died in Helsinki's Laakso Hospital on June 9, 1986. Her husband Erkki died six months later.

The sources and bibliography for this article can be found in the notes of the original, longer article in Finnish, published in Hätönen, Helena & Ojanperä, Riitta (eds.), *Ilona Harima. Valaistumisen tiellä*. Kuvataiteen keskusarkisto (Central Art Archives) 23. Finnish National Gallery / Central Art Archives, 2011 http://www.suomenkansallisgalleria.fi/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/17451_ilonaharima-web.pdf.