Norway’s Mysterious Modernist: Konrad Mägi and the Micro-Ecological, 1908–1910

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a group of Norwegian landscapes by the Estonian artist Konrad Mägi (1878–1925), analyzing them through the lens of ecocritical art history in order to emphasize the environmental realities of the region. In doing so, the study challenges normative narratives of National Romanticism within Nordic and Norwegian landscape traditions by opening up conversations about the non-native artist’s engagement with place and the critical contribution of Baltic modernists.

Keywords

Konrad Mägi, ecocritical art history, modernism, landscape

SAMMENDRAG


Nøkkelord

Konrad Mägi, økokritisk kunsthistorie, modernisme, landskap
Between 1908 and 1910, one of the most experimental artists in Norway was an artist who spoke not a single word of Norwegian. He lived in relative isolation and seemed to have barely scraped by, as if consistently on the brink of death. When he first ran out of money—as he often did—he survived by eating blueberries in the woods surrounding Kristiania (today’s Oslo) for five days in July 1908 until he found free lodging by happenstance.1 By January 1909, he admitted “It is hard to know whether or not I am dead, since I certainly am not alive.”2 In between starvation and devouring blueberries, he worked on some of the most aesthetically daring paintings of his career, painting searing oranges and acidic greens with the odd dot of pastel pink thrown in for good measure. No single style can describe the series of Norwegian landscapes created over these tumultuous two years, but together the works earned the artist a breakthrough. In May 1910, none other than Christian Krohg himself arranged for this bohemian artist *par excellence* to display twenty-two

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canvases at Blomqvist Kunsthandel in Kristiania. A reviewer in Aftenposten commended the artist’s “plastic power” pulsating within his landscapes (ill. 1). By October later that year, he had left Norway for good, as if to take with him any trace of his existence there. Upon his return home, he would become one of the most important modernists of his generation for his ever-evolving visions of nature bursting with radiant colors. And it is for this reason that he remains one of the most important artists in his native Estonia. Although he painted some of his most iconic images in Norway, the annals of Norwegian art history reveal practically nothing about this painter, the mysterious Konrad Mägi (1878–1925).

The reason for this lacuna may be deceptively simple. During the Soviet occupation of Estonia, contacts with the Nordic countries were almost completely severed. Moreover, Stalinism had denounced Mägi’s modernism on the ideologically taboo charges of “formalism.” Although curators and art historians slowly rehabilitated his reputation as early as the 1960s, Mägi had barely been a topic in local art history courses as late as the 1980s, despite Evi Pihlak’s magisterial monograph on the artist published in 1978. With the 1991 restoration of independence for the Republic of Estonia, and the rebuilding of civil society, emphasis on the international contacts within the state’s cultural heritage was key to rebranding the country as part and parcel of Europe. Precisely at that moment in the 1990s when turn-of-the-century Scandinavian art had come to the forefront of art historical inquiry, it was clear that the rugged nature of soaring fjords and towering pines had also influenced lesser-known yet equally compelling Baltic contemporaries at the fin-de-siècle. Tallinn’s Adamson-Eric Museum took charge, with curator Kersti Koll opening an exhibition on the influence of Norway in Estonian art already in 1996. But the Cold War binaries of East and West and their attendant stereotypes still lingered, and despite the geographical and cultural similarities, Nordic art historians appeared to have little interest in unknown artists from an equally unknown place. Nevertheless, Koll revealed that Norwegian nature and culture had captivated the minds of the most prominent artists of the era, including Jaan Koort, Roman Nyman, Gerhard von Rosen, Aleksander Tassa, Nikolai Triik, and Carl von Winkler. Koll even suggested the possibility of an Estonian “artists’ colony” in Norway between 1907 and 1910, given their tight-knit circle and mutual influences, which sometimes included direct interactions with Christian Krohg, Edvard Munch, and Frits Thaulow.

What Baltic artists admired about Norway was that it achieved international acclaim specifically through its high culture. Not only did such Norwegians as Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Erik Werenskiold, and Edvard Munch create popular culture, but

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5. Here I am referring specifically to the resonance of Kirk Varnedoe’s pioneering 1982 exhibition “Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880–1910” at the Brooklyn Museum. For more on this historiographical shift and the specific international impact of the show, see Michelle Facos, “The Dawning of Northern Light: An Exhibition and Its Influence,” in A Fine Disregard: Essays in Memory of Kirk Varnedoe, eds. Patricia G. Berman and Gertje Utley (London: Ashgate, 2008), 58–67.
they exported it to Europe rather than absorbing it from the continent. It was clear that Norway offered a successful model of developing a distinctive and recognizable culture, prompting critic Bernhard Linde to argue in the journal *Eesti Kodu* in 1910 that “We [Estonians] must curiously examine the successful cultural developments of this small people.” The Estonian press frequently reproduced images of contemporary Norwegian art, especially works by Gerhard Munthe, and published lengthy, analytical essays about Norwegian history and culture, which in themselves deserve further art historical scrutiny.

In 2014, Kersti Koll updated her pathbreaking 1996 show with “The Enchantment of the North: Estonian Artists in the Nordic Countries” at Tallinn’s Adamson-Eric Art Museum. She placed Estonian and Baltic German artists in a larger temporal and geographical framework, including Norway, Sweden and Finland, from the early nineteenth century through the 1980s. Norwegian interest in Baltic art manifested itself strongly that same year, although not, as one might expect, in Koll’s exhibition, but in the travelling show “Electromagnetic: Modern Art in Northern Europe, 1918–1931,” which began at the Henie Onstad Kunstsentet. In its focus on geometrical abstraction of the 1920s and 1930s in the Baltic and Nordic countries, “Electromagnetic” was undoubtedly a landmark show, but its temporal frames necessarily excluded turn-of-the-century Baltic modernists, and thus the significant earlier cultural contacts between artists in these places.

It seems the time is finally right to bring Konrad Mägi, and Baltic modernism at large, to the attention of art historians on a global level. A retrospective on the artist opened at Rome’s Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in October 2017, and many of his works will feature in the Musée d’Orsay’s Baltic Symbolism show in April 2018. These international displays highlight what Estonians have known for a long time: Konrad Mägi’s modernism is outstanding because it communicates the pulsating vitality of nature through brilliant colors inventively combined in ways which appear stylistically familiar, yet distinctively individual. Nowhere is his striking confluence of styles more apparent than in his Norwegian landscape paintings. In this article, I examine a group of Konrad Mägi’s Norwegian landscapes in a long overdue effort to address these enduring lacunae. I engage these landscapes here because they challenge normative narratives of Nordic and Norwegian art, most prominently by questioning how landscapes of Norway by an Estonian painter can be considered part of Norwegian art history. Since Mägi was not Norwegian, these questions also help temper readings of nationalism in landscape imagery in a period when National Romanticism endures as the most common lens of interpretation. Highlighting Mägi’s Norwegian paintings further demonstrates the international significance of Nordic and Norwegian art at the turn of the century.

I argue that Konrad Mägi’s position in Norwegian art history should be determined by what his landscapes reveal about place. I do so by analyzing his landscapes through the lens of ecocritical art history, moving beyond the representation of land as merely emblematic of nature as nation. American art historian Alan Braddock has briefly defined

ecocriticism as a methodological tool which emphasizes “ecological interconnectedness, sustainability, and environmental justice in cultural interpretation.”

Braddock also suggests that since it develops from the concern about present ecological crises, an environmental focus attempts to make scholarly work more relevant to the issues of our day. As an environmentally-conscious art history is deeply intertwined with the specificities of place, I also see an ecological view of Mägi’s landscapes as in dialogue with recent developments in scholarship on other Norwegian modernists, most notably Tove Kårstad Haugbø’s work on Nikolai Astrup.

Before my analysis of Mägi’s paintings, I briefly contextualize the impetus for Mägi’s arrival in Norway and the so-called colony of Baltic artists which had mushroomed in and around Christiania, revealing the tip of the iceberg of a community of international artists in Norway and the Nordic countries.

IN SEARCH OF SOLACE AND SOLITUDE

Konrad Mägi never thought he would become a painter. His experience as a furniture carver in his youth in Tartu would nourish a more tactile interest in sculpture, and thus it was this latter field in which he trained at the Stieglitz School of Applied Arts and Design in St. Petersburg. But Mägi’s participation in the empire-wide Revolution of 1905 ousted him from the school, and he had to complete his studies elsewhere. The political turmoil of 1905 in the Russian Empire was an important catalyst in facilitating the travels of young Estonians aspiring to become artists, with many finding temporary refuge in Finland, which avoided the blunt violence elsewhere in the Russian Empire because of its special status as an Autonomous Grand Duchy. Although the Estonian community in Helsinki was blossoming, Mägi felt it was claustrophobic. In search of escape, he travelled with his fellow artist and companion Aleksander Tassa to Åland, where the Estonian artists Nikolai Triik and Valentina Grekova had been living since spring 1906.

The following summers spent in Åland would be transformative for the artists, since, as the writer Friedbert Tuglas declared, “it was truly the first time that the pure primitivism of nature possessed all of us, where we were taught to see its monumental forms and intimate shades […] only here did we understand what a lyrical landscape was.”

Connecting the wilderness of the Nordic natural environment to a “pure primitivism” recalled the nation-building efforts of many Nordic artists at the turn of the twentieth century, especially in Norway and Finland, where


panoramic landscapes of native nature became imbued with national and ideological significance. The allure of Scandinavia was not merely historical and cultural connections, but the Nordic landscape itself, teeming with birches, firs, spruces, and pines, and subject to a distinct mystical, ethereal light in the summers and winters. It was nature that was similar, if not strangely familiar to Baltic artists. And, indeed, it was among this nature both foreign and familiar in which Mägi painted his first landscape, a view of a pine forest in Åland with pine needles rendered in thick dabs of greens coagulating on the surface of the canvas—a far cry from the overt stylization he would begin two years later in Norway, but also the first time Konrad Mägi had ever painted a canvas in his life.

By the autumn of 1907, Mägi’s restlessness would take him to Paris, where the Estonian “colony” had seemingly relocated. But the city was overwhelming in its vastness. Already by January 1908, he confessed to a friend: “I can’t work at all now. I need to leave Paris temporarily to make sense of what I’ve seen and experienced here. If I can somehow manage it, I’ll go to Norway in the spring with my friends. There one can focus on dealing with oneself. Yet thus far this is all just a dream.” Mägi was close to Nikolai Triik, who had just returned to Paris from Norway, where the archaeological discovery of the Oseberg ship had captivated his imagination, and would fuel a later iconic work of Estonian art, his tempera painting *Lennuk, Kalevipoeg’s Ship* (1908–1910, Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn). Triik’s enthusiasm must have been infectious because Mägi and Tassa would indeed join their friends in Norway by the summer of 1908. If it was Norwegian National Romanticism which had initially entranced Triik (and likewise the Estonian artist Roman Nyman), it certainly was not so for Mägi, whose landscapes and writings evince no explicit interest in the national elements of Norwegian culture, nor even interest in growing Estonian nationalism at home, for that matter. As Eero Epner presciently notes, the more paintings Mägi created, the less evidence we have of his activities. This is no more certain than in his Norwegian period between 1908 and 1910, arguably his most productive period in his life. Thus, in order to understand his experiences in Norway, we must turn to the landscapes themselves.

**KONRAD MÄGI’S MICROECOLOGIES**

Norway is where Mägi became a full-fledged artist. Despite what he might have discussed with his friends and patrons in his letters, this two-year sojourn in Norway was also one of Mägi’s most creatively productive periods, where he variously experimented with Neo-impressionist brushwork, the sinuous curves of Art Nouveau stylization, Symbolist evocation, and brilliant color palettes. Mägi’s *Norwegian Landscape with Pine* (ill. 1) is the artist’s most famous work from this period. With blazing colors, a bold sense of stylization and ornamental—almost “cellular”—structures, Mägi radically individualized his approach to

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the landscape. His pines are not towering stoic trees of eternity. Instead, they possess a
degree of sinuous elasticity, with one tree snaking diagonally across the foreground. Yet
even more striking is Mägi’s color palette—here with saturated blue lakes, hunter green
clusters of pine needles against a searing orange background, and streams of lavender dis-
persed among stylized orange, yellow, pink and white clouds—a palette that until then
was hardly associated with Nordic landscapes. Mägi cultivated a distinctive and individual
style in his Norwegian paintings, but scholars often talk about his painterly practice in this
period as being “ornamental,” likely indebted to the original 1910 reviews from Norwegian
critics in Aftenposten, who commented on the “plastic power” of the artist’s landscapes, and
how the works’ “stylized forms evoked a decorative feeling.”16 However, what Mägi accom-
plished with his decoration was more than an adherence to stylistic trends.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Mägi’s early landscapes is his grid of intercon-
nected spherical shapes and multicolored cellular structures, all characterized by three
colored sections: a bold color outline, a secondary, more muted layer, and a small ovoid
dot in the center. These shapes also appear in another painting produced around the same
time, Norwegian Landscape (Bog Landscape) (ill. 2).

Closer inspection of this second landscape reveals that even elements of water in
Norwegian Landscape (Bog Landscape) are full of these colorful, circular forms. Indeed, in
both paintings, Mägi imbues all of his clouds, mountains, stones, trees, and leaves with these
repetitive multicolored ovoid cellular shapes, suggesting an interconnectivity between the
different elements of the natural world. But what are these forms, why do they look like cells,
and where could Mägi have drawn his inspiration to depict nature in this manner?

The sinuous lines and otherworldly array of kaleidoscopic colors, ranging from dark
olive greens to pastel pinks, have led some to believe that his paintings are more likely to
be a mystical mirage or an evocation of an emotional experience rather than a stylized
reworking of reality.17 By contrast, an ecocritical reading of these paintings encourages us
to consider how Mägi’s brazen colors and bold stylization are indebted to the environmen-
tal realities of the region. This understanding will in turn reveal—in a departure from all
other scholarship on the artist—that these canvases were created from deep engagement
with and observation of the natural world.

Mägi bathed his rugged landscapes in a searing orange light, eternalizing the ephemeral
and evanescent nature of Nordic dusk, perhaps even recalling Edvard Munch’s acidic com-
binations of swirling reds and oranges. Yet Munch’s iconic color schemes heighten a sense
of melancholy, apprehension, and personal detachment. Munch deployed color to high-
light human emotion, while Mägi’s colors embolden the grandiose, albeit strange, nature
of his landscape, often devoid of human life. One of the most attractive aspects of Nordic
landscape painting for foreign viewers at the turn of the twentieth century was a sense of
luminosity pervading the canvases. But this sense of Nordic luminosity was not exotic to

16. “Eesti kunst Norra näitusel,” Postimees, 5 May 1910. This article in Estonian ostensibly cites a review in
Aftenposten—referred to as the paper’s “correspondent in Christiania”—yet my own perusal of Aftenposten in
May 1910 has revealed no such review.
17. Pihlak, Konrad Mägi, 55.
Balts living at the same latitudes, and critics on the Eastern shores of the Baltic Sea found this similarity puzzling and compelling. For instance, after seeing an exhibition of contemporary Swedish art in the Estonian town of Tartu in 1909, the critic Eduard Willmann remarked:

The Baltic Sea connects us with the Scandinavian peoples around a hearth of common culture and our relation with Finland demonstrates to us even more right to take part in this brotherhood. Should our own cultural tendencies not also be like Scandinavia? Why not? It seems, after all, that an exhibition of Swedish artists vividly shows that their ‘Scandinavian’ air and light is the same kind that we have.18

It is tempting to connect Mägi’s burning oranges and brilliant color contrasts to this idea of luminosity, but these kaleidoscopic colors are far from fantastical; they have a specific ecological origin in the northern climes of Norway: lichen. One of the most abundant life forms in the high altitudes of the Norway’s desolate rocky outcrops, cliffs, and mountains is lichen, leading some to declare Norway as a “land of lichen” as it is home to 2,000 of the world’s 16,000 different species.19 There is an incredible diversity of colors within these

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two thousand species, and one of the most visually striking variants in the mountainous forests of Scandinavia is the glowing orange microalga known locally as *fiolstein*, in Latin as *trentopohlia*, a threadlike alga which has evolved from an aqueous existence to subsist on the humidity in the air (ill. 3). Although it is most common in tropical areas, it also appears especially on stones across Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Biologists believe this specific alga derives its orange or burnt red glow from carotenoids in fatty cells, which function as a storage of nutrients—the color disappears when the alga dies.20 Upon closer inspection, stones covered in *fiolstein* also house smaller, grayish specks. Zoomed-in photographs of these stones reveal faint gray circular forms ensconced in another white circle in a sea of blazing orange—the same multicolored ovoid cellular shapes Mägi painted in his landscapes (ill. 4). These three colors represent the symbiosis of fungi and algae which create lichen.

![Image of Sör-Stormyrliden *fiolstein* in Sweden, 2015. Source: Wikimedia Commons.](image)

**Ill. 3**

In their miniscule size, lichen require close examination in order to be understood properly. The artist’s fascination with lichen evinces a deeper interest in micro-ecologies, and the persistence of life on rugged, inhospitable terrain. What is remarkable about these landscapes is that Mägi creates an intimate snapshot of these micro-ecologies, rejecting the otherwise predominant panoramic views of nature in the Nordic countries. His tendency to paint close-up views of the region’s colorful topography in the foreground evokes subtle mysteries of local moss, fungi, and lichen. Mägi highlights miniature details by placing them in the immediate foreground for our scrutiny, as if to echo the function of a magnifying glass to reveal pulsating life forces beyond our line of vision.

Mägi may have derived an artistic interest in the possibilities of microscopy from Ernst Haeckel’s *Kunstformen der Natur*. Published in parts between 1899 and 1904 and widely read in artistic circles, Haeckel’s study was comprised of images directly indebted to the discovery of microbes through microscopy in the 1870s. One image in *Kunstformen der Natur* specifically features lichen, where Haeckel focuses his attention on lichen’s spores and stems appearing at once both botanical and coral-like (ill. 5). Although these images do not approximate the lichen types Mägi painted, they do evince alluring artistic elements of these fungal microorganisms. A life-long champion of Charles Darwin, Haeckel created his illustrations as a testament to his own evolutionary theories, especially his theory of monism, which stated that a single common substance connected all life forms, with no distinction between plant and animal life. In Mägi’s paintings, we see a reflection of this essential interconnectedness of natural forces in the repetition of his cellular ovoid forms not only on stones, but also in the clouds, trees, and leaves, as well as in the focus on lichen as symbiotic organisms.

Mägi’s multicolored lichen-covered stones could also be evidence of sedimentary layers of the earth; the diversity of colors would then signify multiple tectonic shifts in the planet across millennia. The earthen layers of Mägi’s paintings might reveal what one scholar has called “layers of the drama of planetary history long before humans stepped onto the stage.”

Contemporary critics invoked comparisons to such theories when viewing the artist’s images at an exhibition in Tallinn. Hanno Kompus remarked in 1916, “Take, for instance, Mägi’s stones, these famous ‘orange stones,’ which are no longer even stones, [but] soft and weightless, like lazily lounging mollusks.” For Kompus, orange-colored stones—in what he perceived to be a non-naturalistic color—evoked a sense of vitality as well as ancient, geological time. Kompus’s comparison of orange stones to mollusks reveals the ways in which stones were a first step in extending lifelike microcosm qualities to other elements of the natural world, such as the sky and clouds.

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Beyond representing the earth, Mägi alluded to slow time through the utter absence of people. When psychiatrist Dr. Juhan Luiga saw these paintings in 1911, he declared them to be “metaphysical, ‘otherworldly’ in the complete sense. To me they seem like cutouts of the cosmos, the edge of the world, as a more joyously colorful world of the future, where humankind lives only as spirits.”24 For Luiga, the paintings existed as visions of metaphysical realms of intertwined ontologies. In such a space, we can see how the tree on the right in Norwegian Landscape (Bog Landscape) has branches and leaves that clump together to form lungs, empowered by the effervescent orange forms pulsating through botanical capillaries like blood cells enriched with oxygen. The repeated boldly outlined cellular form which Mägi employed in every aspect of the landscape do indeed imbue both Norwegian scenes with a sense of harmonious unity. For Mägi, this unity reflected a greater awareness of ecological interconnectivity.

One critic seemed to grasp Mägi’s intentions immediately, noting that “his colors bring forth an inanimate nature teeming with a sort of life which will never extinguish.”25 In almost all his early landscapes, the artist’s exuberant colors were not only a choice to render these works stylistically relevant. For Mägi, color was a liberating tool through which he could reveal his discoveries of the secrets of the earth, such as in the surprising tenacity of the micro-ecologies of glowing orange lichen in the Norwegian mountains. Mägi illuminated these minute microcosms in order to visualize greater forces of the natural world and draw attention to our own connectivity with the powerful forms of nature.

**MAKING ROOM FOR MÄGI**

Mägi was but one of many international artists working in Norway in the early twentieth century, and the interactions between this community and local Norwegian artists are undoubtedly a fruitful field of inquiry. Yet even as we attempt to understand Mägi’s psychedelic pines of the North, his works, just as his persona generally, remain ensconced in mystery. The extent to which the artist will remain one of Norway’s “mysterious” or unknown modernists depends on the receptivity of the Norwegian art world, as further research is necessary to determine how Norwegian modernism inspired the young artist. Mägi was certainly not the only lonely painter in the Norwegian wilderness who considered it pivotal “to observe the woods, sky, and land a lot before you understand it all.”26 Who else might also have been close by, similarly captivated by glowing orange algae and the deep history of the earth among the fjords, remains to be discovered.

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