

Some Thoughts on Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's Visual Art

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Sámi art history is barely more than a century old; the first Sámi visual artists were Johan Turi, Nils Nilsson Skum and John Andreas Savio. But that was just a beginning. It was only in the 1970s that Sámi artistic activity became so widespread that one needed to develop a separate term for visual art: the word *dáidda*. Sámi visual art has undergone massive growth and development since then. In 1979 Nils-Aslak Valkeapää took the initiative to establish Sámi Dáiddačehpiid Searvi (The Sámi Artists Union), of which he also became an honorary member. Today this organization has more than 70 members in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. In Karasjok the museum RDM-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (The Sámi Collections) has a collection of more than 1000 works that comprise a representative selection of Sámi art. Today it is difficult, as well as improper, to look for common traits in the work of all Sámi artists. They comprise a very diverse group in which the only commonality is, actually, that they are all artists who identify themselves as Sámi. Some work in contemporary art, orienting themselves towards global trends and approaches, while others work with materials, techniques, thematics and symbols that have a clearer origin in their Sámi background. In this latter group we find Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, grounded firmly in his own culture in his artistic production.

Even if institutional Sámi art history cannot be said to be very long, Sámi art can be viewed as having existed for hundreds, or perhaps thousands of years, and when that tradition is brought into visual art we recognize it immediately.

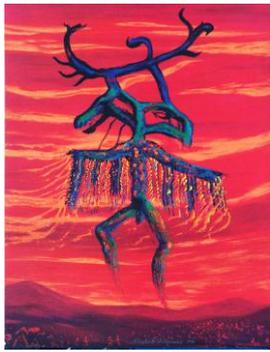
Rock carvings as inspiration in Sámi Art

The oldest visual traces we can find in the Nordic region are the rock carvings. These have existed for thousands of years, and they have helped set their stamp on the landscape where people have lived. Their mystical nature keeps secrets for which it is difficult to find answers in our modern world. To assert an artistic connection to the rock carvings can feel problematic for some Sámi artists. It can be interpreted as an argument for a Sámi national romanticism, or give the impression of a long line of development in Sámi art, from a distant, mythical past to today. In spite of these frustrations for some individual artists, though, there are also many who have created interpretations of these figures that closely resemble the originals, something we can, for instance, see in the work of Valkeapää. Still others have abstracted symbols and figures and inserted them into contemporary artistic expressions. Just as important as the symbols and figures from the rock carvings, however, are the various



interpretations of the iconography from the Sámi sacred drums¹. It is obvious that many more artists have also taken their inspiration from these very old sources.

Art's ability to transcend time



Here we will look at one of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's paintings, in order to investigate a possible access point for understanding this work. This is only one way of interpreting the work, and it does not exclude other approaches or interpretations (Painting of the dancing *noaidi*)².

The red landscape burns in the background, hot and intense. Way down towards the bottom of the picture we see the contours of mountains and figures that resemble small people, animals and *lavvos* (Sámi tents). Over all of this hovers a dancing *noaidi* (Sámi shaman), in the picture's center. We understand that this must be a mythical figure because of his flame-like feather costume and the fact that he has two animal heads on his human body. The strokes are simple and daring. The colors are warm and intense; fiery red and intense green, complimentary colors that drive the picture towards the viewer and make it difficult to maintain an indifferent relationship towards what is happening.

Why does this figure have a human body and animal heads?

In art history the combination of human and animal is especially tied to the centaurs and minotaurs in Greek mythology. The ancient Egyptians' *khnum* was a similar being, which was considered a fertility god, and which is described as "human-builder" in a pyramid text³.



We don't need to go all the way to Greece or Egypt, though, to find a figure with animal heads and human body. A similar being also appears in recent Sámi visual art, for example in Gjert Rognli's "Transparent Animal," which shares several similarities with Valkeapää's painting. A human body with two reindeer heads that give rise to curiosity and wonder over our existence in both time and space.

In the old Sámi religion some *noaidit* could go into a deep trance in which they transformed into animal form in order to be able to travel into the spirit world. Perhaps this motif is a picture of such a journey?

¹ The sacred drums are also referred to as *Runebommer* and *Trolltrommer* in Norwegian and Swedish. The term *Runebomme* is controversial since it is difficult to see any clear connections between the Old Norse runes and the sacred drums. *Trolltromme* is often used in Sweden, and also refers to the drums' status and area of usage in a less than satisfactory way.

² The painting has no official title.

³ <http://snl.no/Khnum>



In the rock carvings in Alta we find the original figure (picture of figure), which very likely inspired Valkeapää to create this motif. The figure was carved into the rock during the early metal age, approximately 1800 B.C. Author and artist Arvid Sveen has pointed out that this rock carving, among others, could be our first picture of a dawning understanding of Sámi identity. At this time metal was introduced to Finnmark, something that suggests contact with distant metal-producing societies to the southeast. At the same time the motifs in rock carvings changed, and human figures began to dominate. Hunting and boat motifs more or less disappeared, something which perhaps is a sign of a distancing from earlier social or ritual activities. According to Sveen, increased contact with distant cultures may have caused the population of Finnmark to develop a consciousness of themselves as a coherent group in relationship to the world beyond, a sign of cultural life and social coherence⁴.

As a symbol of Sámi identity and awakening this motif provides an interesting starting point for further pondering, especially regarding the Sámi struggle for the right to preserve and develop their own culture. In this light the picture takes on an actuality, showing the power of art to reach across historical time, and the picture is tied to something that still has relevance for people.

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's world of imagery is full of figures and symbols with strong connections to Sámi mythology. With inspiration from ancient rock carvings and sacred drums he re-shaped a visual universe in which figures from a distant past are conjured up and brought to life. Flying above his canvases are shamans and goddesses, birds and mystical signs. The colors are strong, the choice of motifs often controversial. With obvious reference to old Sámi mythology the effects of Christianity seem remote. Here the world of the ancestors is presented with eroticism, fertility and the power of the sun, itself the primal force. Valkeapää teases it out, just as he hypnotizes and seduces in his yoiking. He erases the trivialities of everyday stress, and conjures up what we thought we had forgotten. The old gods re-emerge as powerful and meaningful, rather than as old historical artifacts. And it's all underscored by a strong and simple choice of colors: blue, red, yellow and sometimes green. The colors we recognize from the Sámi flag.

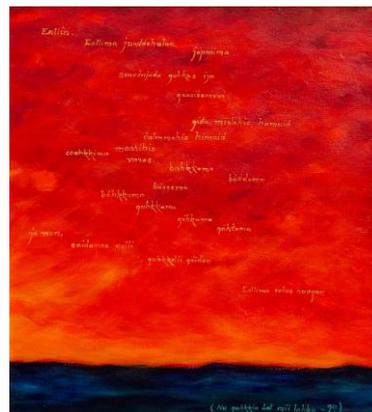
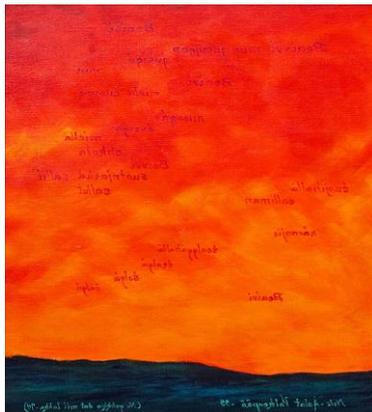
Valkeapää felt a connection to nature, with which he was in close contact. Just as yoik could lead people into a trance, so too this world of imagery can be seen as something that emerged from a multi-artistic approach combined with a holistic/animistic way of thinking. As a connection between people and the spirit world. His motifs are concrete and open, at the same time as they are heavy with symbolism. A symbolism that is not always so easy to interpret, since it is so closely tied to old taboos and an oral tradition.

⁴ Sveen, Arvid: *Helleristninger: Jiepmaluokta/Hjemmeluft*, Alta Museum, 1996.

In his artistic work Nils-Aslak Valkeapää demonstrated a great pleasure in creating, and he created pictures that were powerful, suggestive and at times impressive in their expression. With his clear allusions to the old gods and the spirit-power in nature, his pictures can give us viewers a feeling of awe, where we can easily be drawn into the picture's universe. Even if the use of symbolic colors and mythical figures can be interpreted as belong to a Sámi cultural sphere, the artistic techniques are largely universal. People from all cultures can understand and allow themselves to be enticed and entranced by strong colors and mythical figures. Being able to escape from a colorless reality into such a world of imagery is something that has appealed to many.

A multi-artist

In Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's pictures a burning engagement on behalf of Sámi culture is reflected, but there is also a passion for the possibilities of expressing himself as an artist. His visual strength shows itself perhaps most clearly in his poetic works. Many of his poems are unique graphic performances where the words can look like a reindeer herd moving across the tundra, or like important elements in landscape paintings (pictures), as we can see in the paintings *Beaivvi*, which were published in the book *Nu guhkkín dat mii lahka* in 1994. These poems are not only written for the ear and the mind, but also for the eye.



Nils-Aslak Valkeapää was a multi-artist. He was not concerned with the boundaries between genres; on the contrary, he wiped them away. He was preoccupied with developing Sámi culture in our modern times, in which the peculiar and multifaceted could also be an important voice, not just the standardized and the specialized. Words, pictures and music worked together. In this he demonstrated a unique will to mediate and disseminate. This performance aspect can, at the same time, be interpreted as a continuation of a holistic worldview, but also as a part of modern art in his own era, in which impulses from the outside were just as important as the content. Valkeapää viewed everything as a great unity or commonality, and this boundary-shattering attitude towards art has given him a very special status in Sámi and Nordic cultural life.

Sources:

Sveen, Arvid. *Helleristninger: Jiepmaluokta/Hjemmeluft*. Alta Museum, 1996.

Mathisen, Hans Ragnar and Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. *Elle Hånsa, Kevisele*. Guovdageaidnu, Norway: DAT, 1989.