



COLNAGHI

Askelin Gallen-Kallela  
*View North of Kalela, 1923*

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AKSELI GALLEN-KALLELA  
(Pori 1865 – 1931 Stockholm)

*View North of Kalela*, 1923  
Oil on canvas  
53 x 69 cm  
20 7/8 x 27 3/16 in.  
Signed and dated lower left

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## Provenance

Private collection, Finland.

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## Literature

Nasgaard, Roald. *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America, 1890–1940*. Toronto: Published in association with the Art Gallery of Ontario by University of Toronto Press, 1984.

Stougaard-Nielsen, Jakob. "Nordic Nature: From Romantic Nationalism to the Anthropocene." In *Introduction to Nordic Cultures*, edited by Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen and Annika Lindskog. UCL Press, 2020.

Wilson, William A. "Sibelius, the Kalevala, and Karelianism." In *Marrow of Human Experience, The: Essays on Folklore by William A. Wilson*, edited by Jill Terry Rudy and Diane Call. University Press of Colorado, 2006.

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Few artists have ever been so completely identified with their nation as Akseli Gallen-Kallela was with Finland. The pre-eminent artist of the Nordic Golden Age, he did not so much depict his country as spearheaded its visual language through which the Grand Duchy still under Russian rule could both recognise itself and be recognised abroad. Yet, what he makes his national project so remarkable is the extent to which it arose from and relied upon a more understated contemplation of universal forms. For Gallen-Kallela, the Finnish wilderness was more than mere scenery, but rather a sacred precinct; and the *Kalevala*—the national epic he mined throughout his life—was less a quarry of subjects than a living mythology through which the visible world opened onto older and unseen elements.<sup>1</sup>

He was, in many ways, a total artist. Painter, draughtsman, printmaker, frescoist and designer, he pursued the symbolist dream of the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) in a steady commitment toward a singular vision. This breadth fed directly back into his painting, before which one senses an artist equally at home with the monumental and the intimate, the mythic and the observed. True to that nature, his artistic itinerary is marked by constant evolution. He spent much of 1884-1889 in Paris, where he was first gripped by Naturalism, owing to both the Swedish writer and painter August Strindberg and his mentors at the Académie Julian, before the febrile Symbolist circles of the 1890s drew him toward myth and the inner life of the spirit. From this came the mysticism already visible in the *Aino* triptych of 1891, now held at the Finnish National Gallery, where observed nature begins to dissolve into something incantatory. In Symbolism, he found a vehicle for National Romanticism.<sup>2</sup> From the 1910s, he pressed further still, turning to a vivid Expressionism emboldened by the resplendent colours of the shifting Finnish seasons. Few of his contemporaries can be said to have travelled so far stylistically, and fewer still carried an unmistakable sensibility intact through every transformation.

No place anchored that sensibility more firmly than Kalela, the wilderness studio he raised on a rocky promontory above Lake Ruovesi. So profound was its impact on him, that Gallen-Kallela would integrate it into his proper name. In 1906-07, when some seventy thousand Finns altered their surnames as a show of national commitment, Axel Waldemar Gallén dropped the accent from his own and added “Kallela” in homage to his creative and spiritual haven. *View North of Kalela* was painted there in 1923 from that very vantage, a farewell before he would embark to New Mexico in December of that year. The painting is, in effect, his last act of devotion to the landscape that had made him.

Technically, it is a masterclass in controlled contrast. Gallen-Kallela plays two opposed languages of paint off one other. The expansive spaces of the lake and sky are laid in with broad and loaded sculptural strokes. The pigment is dragged and swept until the water seems to stir and the air to thicken with light. Meanwhile, the foreground pine and its saplings are drawn in fine, calligraphic lines; the thin branches

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Wilson, "Sibelius, the Kalevala, and Karelianism," in *The Marrow of Human Experience: Essays on Folklore* by William A. Wilson, ed. Jill Terry Rudy and Diane Call (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 127.

<sup>2</sup> Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, "Nordic Nature: From Romantic Nationalism to the Anthropocene," in *Introduction to Nordic Cultures*, ed. Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen and Annika Lindskog (London: UCL Press, 2020), 166.

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and sparse needles flicked on with an almost graphic precision. The two registers meet across a low band of evergreen forest, so that mass and filigree hold one another in a solemn embrace. The brushwork is unrestrained, the work of a mature artist no longer burdened by the need to portray every detail. Warm yellows pass from sky to water and seem to hang suspended in the air between, enveloping the pines as if reeled in by the trees. Taken as a whole, one gleans an ineffable aura that only the most assured handling could conjure without sliding into sentiment. Autumn, the painting's true subject, becomes here a threshold between death and rebirth. The solemn, fading central pine, a motif Gallen-Kallela repeatedly returned to from this same promontory, relinquishes its needles above the water while around it, vivacious young saplings press upward to claim the cliff.

Whether or not an intentional allegory for his journey, which would turn out to be his last outside of the Nordics, the perennial Symbolist would likely not have been unaware of the parallel. What Gallen-Kallela captures here, then, is the sensation of standing before the Nordic landscape at the threshold of autumn, when the light begins to soften, colours deepen almost imperceptibly, and nature pauses between the fullness of summer and the approach of winter. The result is a landscape of remarkable lyricism, imbued with both immediacy and tranquil introspection. The scene is hushed and meditative yet animated with the anticipation of the changing season depicted in the vivacious atmosphere, preventing it from becoming fully static. It is thus a painting of remarkable lyricism in which stillness itself seems to move.

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