The Study and Treatment of Works by Ahti Levonen

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Introduction

An energetic artist and writer, Finland's Ahti Lavonen (1928-1970) forms an exponent of the movement that has been called Informalism, Art informel and Tachism. His work featured in numerous domestic and international exhibitions, the most notable being the Biennales of São Paulo (1965) and Venice (1962 and 1968). His unique artistic vision was strongly influenced by the historical and contemporary art seen in France and Italy at that time. This he expressed through his paintings and sculpture as well as numerous articles that appeared in the Finnish press and elsewhere.

Lavonen arrived at his mature work after quickly passing through several phases in the 1950s. Although he was not accepted into the Fine Arts Academy, he took evening classes, became involved with various artist groups and exhibited his work on a regular basis. In 1960 he began making black abstract paintings in which the potential of materials as a means for visual expression formed the prime focus of his art. Seeing the work of Alberto Burri and Antoni Tàpies in 1960 and 1961[1] reinforced the value of this approach and this interest in the expressiveness of materials underscored his work until the end of his life.

His abilities enabled him to be active as a draughtsman, printmaker, painter, and sculptor, and, in some of his work, he has synthesized elements from all of these disciplines. Lavonen, like many artists, sought to create a new set of visual relationships that not only challenged current artistic sensibilities, but also drew from what earlier artists had produced. Seeing himself as a man in step with his times, Lavonen had no reservations about experimenting with non-traditional media and readily available commercial products, such as house paints, were enlisted to help realize particular aesthetic goals.

Fig. 1. Maalaus (Painting) 1966, acrylic on canvas, 130 x 130 cm
Credit: Museum og Contepporatry Art Kisama

The paintings

With a large survey exhibition of Ahti Lavonen's work scheduled for the early autumn of 2004 at Kunsthalle Helsinki just a few months away, a condition survey of the artist's works in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma's collection was undertaken. This survey found that the condition of Maalaus and Plastinen Reliefi (fig. 1 & 2), both dating from 1966, to be unsatisfactory. Disfigured by the presence of grime and degrading components, the two works also exhibited numerous small paint losses. It was believed that these paintings were affected by active flaking or that the damages were the result of physical impact or environmental conditions. Moreover, time constraints dictated that detailed examination and treatment of the works

Fig. 2. Plastinen Reliefi (Plastic Relief) 1966, painted relief
Credit: Museum og Contepporatry Art Kisama

would have to be postponed until a later date.

When Maalaus and Plastinen Reliefi arrived in the conservation studio some months later it soon became obvious that the appearance of these works derived from several factors. While grime was present on the surface of these images, it became clear that the artist's choice of materials and technique, as well as the possibility of active chemistry within the paint layers played a much more important role in their appearance. After examining Maalaus the primary concern with regard to its condition centered on the paint layers. Though it was unvarnished, yellowing had occurred in various sections. Additional factors modifying the painting's appearance included the presence of numerous pinpoint losses in the large black area in the upper half of the work. It was also discovered that an incident of reverse topography, visible on the front of the painting, had been caused by the presence of an abandoned composition on the back of the painting. Sections of this abandoned composition had been executed in layers of thick, brown material. A large crack in the abandoned composition confirmed its brittle character and provided access to a material component that could, otherwise, not easily be seen. Further inspection revealed that the same brown material had been used to create areas of texture on the front of the canvas.

In contrast to Maalaus, the aspect of Plastinen Reliefi which initially drew the most attention was its support. The support had been assembled from several wooden panels, all of which suggested that the artist had decided to recycle pieces of cabinetry. This was most evident from the internal structure of the panel that is visible along the sides of the work. This evidence was also reinforced by the character of the some of the paint layers. Several wear and tear marks obviously predate the art work, but determining exactly which materials had been applied by the artist was difficult to say.

The fact that Lavonen made use of a wide range of materials is commonly known. But, given the condition of Maalaus and Plastinen Reliefi, it became imperative to learn more about the technical features of his work. With time now on the conservator's side, Mustaa ja valkoista (fig. 3), another of Lavonen's works in Kiasma's collection was brought to the conservation studio for comparative purposes and various avenues of research were begun.

Fig. 3. Mustaa ja valkoista (Black and Whute), mixed media on canvas, 130 x 130 cm.

Credit: Museum og Contepporatry Art Kisama

Fig. 4. The verso of Maalaus 1966 revealed on abandoned composition taht includes thick layer of media into which lines have beedn incribed.

Credit: Museum og Contepporatry Art Kisama

Materials and Methods

Research into Lavonen's materials and methods was collected from a range of sources that include written sources, oral history, and photographic records.

Written Sources

Though its technical scope is limited, Ahti Lavonen's essay "Thoughts about my art"[2] provides an excellent account of the evolution of the artist's work through the 1960s. Despite his intense interest in the expressive qualities of materials, he typically refers to his media in only the most general terms. Only those details relevant to his painting practice are noted here.

Lavonen reached an important threshold at the beginning of the 1960s. While working with collage and various types of black paint, he suddenly realized the potential for visual expression through materials and this, in turn, inspired him to experiment with a wider variety of media. At first his focus rested on the application of thick layers of paint into which marks could be made, but mixing various kinds of glue, paste and sand to obtain a material with the desirable working properties did not produce a satisfying result (fig. 4). Then, with the discovery of pumice powder, a turning point was reached. Appreciative of the medium's versatility, Lavonen remarked that it could be mixed with any binder. The best combination was achieved when the powder was mixed with 'plastic.' This resulted in a pasty material that was suitably porous and translucent.

The interrelated desires of working with thick layers of medium, modulating the transmission of light and using various types of painting supports paste were realized in several ways. Lavonen's next evolutionary step involved the use of silver, paste under silver and the making of dots and letters. Having cited the translucency of the paste, Lavonen also refers to his limited interest in using fluorescent colors. By over painting these intense hues, a range of subtle tonal variations could be achieved. Another aspect of his evolution involved a move away from the use of traditional painting supports. For example, by taking sheets of aluminum and bending them into various configurations, his work acquired a sculptural quality. And paintings projecting out from walls or that could be hung from the ceiling were also envisioned by the artist.

Missing from his text are references to the relief paintings on wood supports. His use of the word 'silver' fails to give a clear indication of the type of material and leaves the reader guessing as to whether the term refers to silver leaf, metallic paint or something else. His frequent use of the term 'plastic' also causes confusion since it seems to refer to the sculptural qualities of materials, acrylic sheeting and acrylic paint.

More recent essays discussing Lavonen's life and work contribute some additional information. For example, white paintings incorporating sand were produced in 1961, Japanese paper and synthetic paints were utilized in 1962, and the use of recycled materials began in 1963.[3] Another author notes that the raised dots in some of the paintings are coated with silver paint and that the pattern of pressed corrugated cardboard marks the surface.[4] And an interest in the aesthetics of industrial modes of production also marks a shift in his work.[5]

Interview with Maija Lavonen

Additional information about Lavonen's materials and techniques were provided by the artist's wife.[6] The presence of the paintings in Kiasma's conservation studio facilitared a discussion which noted several aspects of Ahti Lavonen's working methods. With regard to the work

Maalaus, she recalled the brown material used to impart texture and mentioned that it could be found in many of her husband's works. He had also scraped the black section of the painting with a fine toothed saw blade of the type used to cut metal. The reason for this was to allow the painting to breathe. She also stated that she remembers the light parts of the painting being white; no parts of it were discolored. Noting that Lavonen would collect all kinds of material for his work, she mentioned that a kitchen renovation supplied a number of cabinet doors. The artist had these cut down in size and used them in a number of relief pieces.

She also made several comments about other paintings in Kiasma's collection and his work in

Fig. 5. Detail of materials in studio photograph.
Credit: T. Nousiainen, Yhtyneitten kuvatoimisto, 3. 8. 1964

general. Lavonen, she said, used a number of tools to push paint across his supports. These included his hands as well as "lastoja," a Finnish word that may be translated as spatula, trowel, putty knife, squeegee, and so on. He also used stone mason's tools to build the paint structure. In relation to Valkoinen pinta (White Surface) 1961 she suggested that the sculptor Heiki

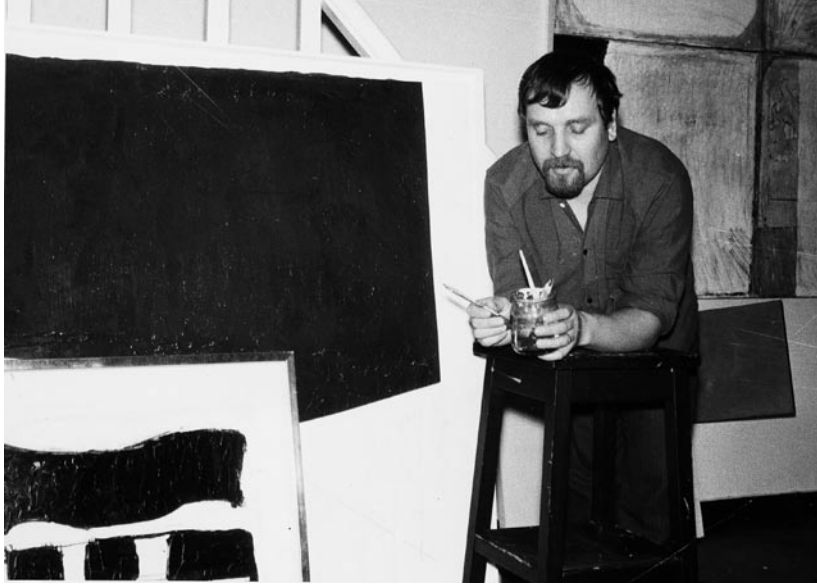

Fig. 6. Maalaus in the studio: forming parts of its original appearance are numerous pin.point losses and scratch marks.

Credit: Central Art Archives of the Finnish National Gallery, photo by onknown.

Fig. 7. Plasinen Relieffi in the studio: situated behind the step stool, the uneven surface of the dark curved elements at top and bottom resembles the work's current appearance.

Credit: Central Art Archives of the Finnish National Gallery, photo by onknown.

Häiväoja may have suggested using a contact adhesive to attach "sand" (ground pumice stone) to the surface. In this work Lavonen also applied areas of red and yellow paint that were later hidden beneath layers of white paint. To reveal the colour again, the artist warmed the back of the painting with a clothes iron. With the heat softening the paint he was able to peel off the white paint in two areas to expose the red and yellow

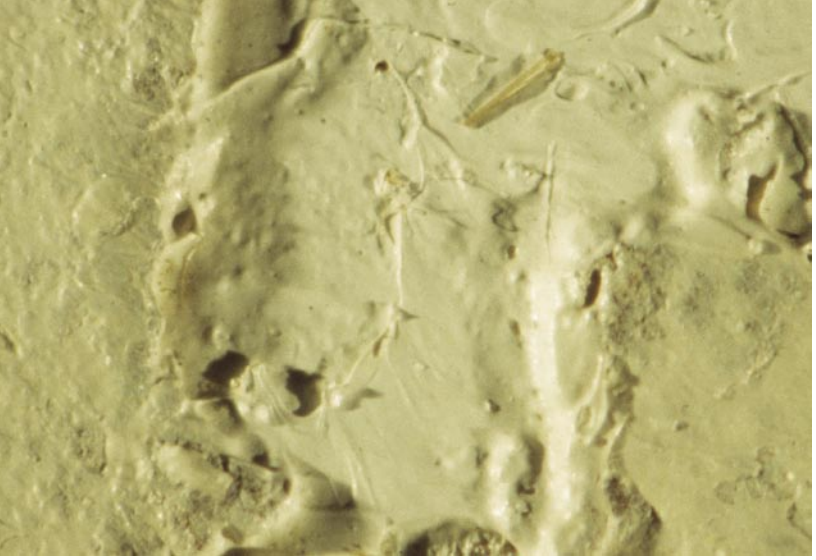

Fig. 8. Macro photograph (25x): example of varying tonalities in the white areas of Maalaus 1966 after treatment.

Credit: Museum og Contepporatry Art Kisama

again. Aluminum leaf was used on Mercurio III, 1965 and the abandoned composition found on the back of Maalaus.

It was not unusual for her and their son to act as studio assistants and that almost any household item could find its way into his work. He had house paints available, and Araldite and Eri-Keeper were two of the adhesives she remembered him using.[7] Any materials that Lavonen was not able to find in Finland he brought from Paris.

Fig. 9. Detail: Surface characterictics of top/black regions in Maalaus, 1966.

Credit: Museum og Contepporatry Art Kisama

Photographic records

Holdings in the Central Art Archives of the Finnish National Gallery include several images that feature materials he may have used or which are set in the studio. For example, a one liter bottle of Pelikan ink and a one liter can of 'Jokeri' latex paint can be clearly identified in one of the photographs.[8] In the second image (fig. 5), a broader range of materials and tools can be seen.[9] On the table is a box of artist paints bearing the Talens logo that likely holds tubes of oil paint.[10] The markings on the label of a small metal can suggest that it may contain Miranol enamel paint. Below the table are many more cans of commercially produced paint, but only one appears identifiable as Spred Satin, a brand of latex house paint. Of the tools, a sprocket wheel to which some kind fittings have been attached stands out as a possible mark making implement.

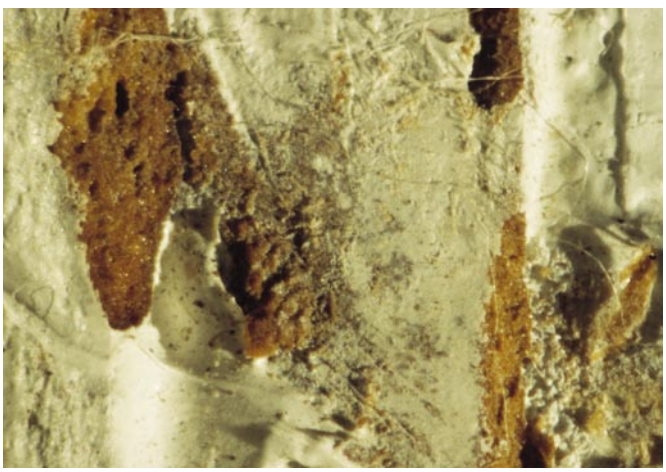

Fig. 10. Macro photograph (25x): line cutting through paint and textuer layers of Maalaus reveals porous brown layer below.

Credit: Museum og Contepporatry Art Kisama

And a contact print taken in France shows a series of images in which the artist and his family pose with a can of Comus Pâte Idéale, an aqueous based product used as a fill material and for producing decorative finishes.[11]

Photos documenting Maalaus (fig. 6) and Plastinen Reliefi (fig. 7) in the studio were also found in the holdings. Comparison of the readily visible parts of these images to the current condition of the paintings suggested that these areas had not significantly been altered.

Images of Maalaus in the Helsingin Taidehalli exhibition catalogue seem to support Maija Lavonen's assertion about the initial whiteness of the artist's paintings. Two images of the work from the 'Bubble' exhibition of 1967 [12] show the painting from an oblique angle and it does look quite white. A third image from the1971 commemorative exhibition at Gallery Artek[13] reveals increased tonal variations. Finally, the image produced for the 2004 exhibition catalogue[14] documents a work that appears to contain more pale yellow browns than white.

Visua Examination, Treatment and Scientific Analysis

Maalaus 1966

This work was made by layering media with a flat edged tool such as a large palette knife or trowel. Variation in the surface appearance was created by the selective and incomplete coverage of surfaces, the use of a variety of media, paint handling methods and dramatic differences in film thickness. The media, identifiable as discrete layers, was applied inconsistently and in a manner that abraded part of the surface and left some areas exposed. The lower or white half of the painting is affected by tonalities that do not obviously correspond to paint thickness or the presence of the underlying brown paste layer (fig. 8). Tonal variations in the top or black half of the image derive, in part, from the application of a mat black over a darker, glossier black (fig.9). Both white and black paint lying over the brown texture layer was affected by a yellow cast, possibly the result of something migrating to the surface from the paint or texture layers. Considering the amount of material on its surfaces, the canvas was surprisingly light in weight.

Examination under UV light revealed a bright white fluorescence emanating from areas of exposed gesso. In contrast, most areas of white paint were dark purple, thus signifying the presence of acrylic paint.[15] The remaining areas of white paint were a dull yellow, generally occurring where the underlying brown layer was cov-

Fig. 11. Detail: general character of surface coating om Plastinene Reliefi, 1966.

Credit: Museum og Contepporatry Art Kisama

ered by only a thin film of white paint.

Treatment of Maalaus included surface cleaning using cotton swabs wetted with a 2% (weight/volume) solution of tri-ammonium citrate followed by a water rinse. Judging from the appearance of the swabs, areas of white paint covering the brown paste layer gave up the most grime and/or discolored material. In areas where Lavonen's working methods revealed the brown paste layer (fig. 10), the material proved to be sensitive to water when swabbed a second or third time. Minor damages caused by the original, tight fitting metal frame at the corners of the painting were filled with a mixture of chalk powder and a

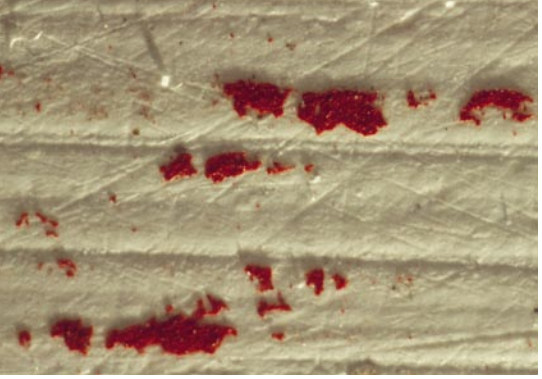

Fig. 12. Macro photograph (25x): red paint fragments on the surface o.

Credit: Museum og Contepporatry Art Kisama

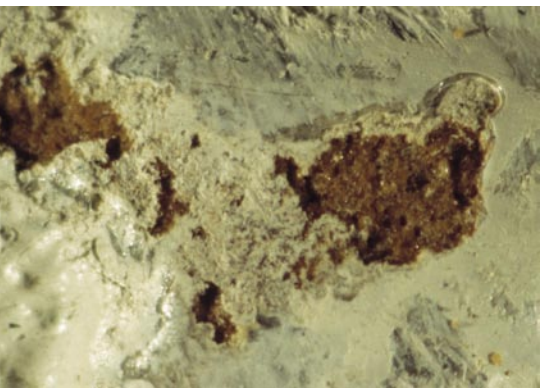

Fig. 13. Macro photograph (25x): detail showing cross/sectional structure of Mustaa ja valkoista

Credit: Museum og Contepporatry Art Kisama

Mowiol solution. Inpainting was done using watercolors. The painting was then left in the conservation studio for several months in order to see whether light bleaching would reverse any of the apparent discolored areas of the design,[16] but no perceptible changes were observed.

Plastinen Reliefi 1966

Compared to Maalaus evidence of the artist's working methods seem quite restrained in this painted relief. The support, which was constructed from a half dozen pieces of wood panel (wood slats veneered on both sides), was assembled in three distinct layers. On the first two layers white oil or alkyd paint covers a very pale grey material and gaps between sections have been painted a matte black. The two horizontal cross pieces that form the third or final layer appear to have been painted with an acrylic medium. Although they are a dark purple colour, abrasions and thin areas of paint reveal the presence of an intenser violet colour beneath the dark one. An unevenly applied clear resin that seems to have yellowed slightly covers both dark and light sections (fig. 11). Examination of the work revealed that some of the abrasions could not have resulted from poor storage or handling, but had occurred before assembly of the work had been completed. And exposed areas of red paint, once thought to be the result of abrasion or active flaking, proved to be embedded in or attached to the resin coating (fig. 12). Since their placement correlates with brush marks left on the surface, they were likely transferred from the brush used to apply this coating.

The resin coating fluoresced a greenish white colour under UV light. Uncoated areas of white paint did not fluoresce, but produced the purple light indicative of an acrylic medium. The small areas of violet paint within the dark purple elements apppeared very intense under UV suggesting an incidence of the artist overpainting fluorescent colours as was noted above.

Treatment consisted of surface cleaning the work with a 2% tri-ammonium citrate solution that was followed by a water rinse. A second cleaning made use of saliva followed by a water rinse. A small shaped piece of wood and a PVA adhesive (Eri-Keeper) were used to fill a loss in the top right corner of the support. A mixture of chalk powder and Mowiol were used to texture the filled area and inpainting was done using watercolours. Areas of loose paint on the side of the support were consolidated with the same PVA adhesive.

Mustaa ja valkoista 1968

This painting exhibited many of the same qualities as Maalaus. The presence of the underlying brown layer, white paint that appears to have yellowed in areas, and the dull yellow visible under UV light were all present. The only feature synonymous with Plastinen Reliefi was a resinous coating that fluoresced a white to greenish white color wherever it had not been overpainted.

A damage likely resulting from the artist's working method revealed several of the layers applied by the artist to form this painting (fig. 13). The lowest layer consists of the porous, brown paste layer that resembles old, dry bread. Directly above it is white paint. The granular appearance likely derives from the presence of sand. A slightly yellow layer of a resin layer comes next. Although it is not obvious here, this material also contains fine black particles that are quite unevenly dispersed. Their splintery shape suggests charcoal powder. The final layer consists of a thin, medium rich layer of white paint.

Scientific analysis

Sample taking for the purpose of analyzing media occurred on two occasions. Samples taken

from the front and back of Maalaus as well as from Mustaa ja Valkoista in October of 2004 and analyzed by scanning electron microscopy - energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (SEM-EDS) showed that the brown material was a fine grained sand primarily consisting of quartz. A sample of white paint taken from Maalaus and analysed by Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) produced a spectrum in which the main IR-absorption peaks indicated the presence of an ethyl acrylate/methyl methacrylate copolymer. A minor peak also indicated the presence of a styrene-acrylic co-polymer.

With a growing body of information about Lavonen's materials and techniques a second and more extensive round of sampling was done in June of 2005. In order to obtain a clearer picture of the binding media, six samples were taken from Maalaus, four samples from Plastinen Reliefi and five samples from Mustaa ja valkoista . Despite apparent visual differences between the ground, whites, black and purple paint areas, the FTIR spectra for all fifteen samples indicated the binding media to be an methyl methacrylate/ethyl acrylate (MMA/EA) co-polymer.

When the second round of samples were taken, the pliability of the white paint in Maalaus and the softness of the dark purple paint in Plastinen Reliefi were both noted. The upper part of the brown layer in Maalaus also appeared as if it had been impregnated with a glue-like material. The lower portion was much more porous.[17]

Conclusion

The results of this study have helped to clarify several aspects regarding Lavonen's work. Visual examination, backed up by photographic evidence, showed that the paintings' appearance results primarily from the artist's technique. Oral and photographic evidence suggesting the artist potentially used a wide variety of commercially available media in addition to artists' paints was not supported by media analysis. There was also no indication of oil based media, as one might expect with the recycling of kitchen cabinetry. MMA/EA copolymer emulsions were being used in artists' paints as early as the late 1950s,[18] and although the artist may have layered or mixed various types of binders, only one sample provided evidence of it. The presence of pumice powder[19] in the studied works was also disproved. It could be that the material was improperly labeled or not readily available at times. The brown texture layer's moisture sensitivity derives from the effects of mechanical action on a poorly bound substrate. Friction on the 'gluey' surface exposed the porous strata beneath it, thus facilitating its removal. None of the results confirmed the possibility of active chemistry within the paint layers. The evolving appearance of Maalaus, as documented in the Kunsthalle Helsinki exhibition catalogue, may be heavily influenced by the use of different types of film stock and lighting conditions. Another factor affecting the appearance of this painting in the two earliest pictures is the oblique angle through which the work has been depicted.

Although there are certain stylistic affinities between the work of Ahti Lavonen and Antoni Tàpies, the latter artist's use of coarsely ground marble dust and a commercial alkyd coating have caused unintentional cracking in the paint layers, deformations, warped stretchers and other problems.[20] Lavonen's work exhibits none of these traits. Sound in structure and generally light in weight, the soft surfaces of these paintings are susceptible to being abraded, imbibing grime and negatively affected by overly aggressive treatments. Given the range of Lavonen's output and his choice of materials and techniques, one cannot assume that these three works truly represent his oeuvre. Dust free storage, close scrutiny and careful interpretation of each painting's features, further sampling and analysis, and regular monitoring for changes in appearance are all warranted, not only for preserving the work's physical characteristics and planning conservation treatments, but also for understanding the artist's intentions and the broader historical context in which the work was created.

Notes

1. Turtiainen, M., p. 92.
2. Lavonen, A., 1986. This article was based on an interview with the artist shortly before his death. The interview was titled *On my Paintings and Collages* and appeared in

vol 4, 1971. Abridged and complete versions of this interview have also appeared in other publications

3. Op.cit., p. 92.

4. Lindgren, L., p. 89. The reference to cardboard primarily refers to the texture's appearance, not the technique. Corrugated cardboard is not normally strong enough to mark thick, wet surfaces in this way.

5. Ibid, p. 90. Though this primarily refers to Lavonen's sculpture, this idea also seems to relate to his painted reliefs.

6. Lavonen, M., 2004.

7. Lavonen, M., 2004. I believe the adhesives were primarily used to assemble the relief paintings. Araldite is a registered trademark (Ciba-Geigy) for a series of tough structural adhesives based on epoxy, polyurethane or acrylic polymers. Eri-Keeper is an all-purpose PVA dispersion adhesive produced by Akzo Nobel Coatings Oy, 01301 Vantaa, Finland.

8. AHL 40291, Central Art Archives, photo by unknown.

9. AHL 40247, Central Art Archives, T. Nousiainen, Yhtyneitten kuvatoimisto, 3.8.1964.

10. Learner, T., 2005. Royal Talens first produced an acrylic emulsion paint in 1965 with a paletter of 26 colours. Since the date of this photo is March 1964, the possibility of these being Talens acrylics is eliminated.

11. AHL 40243, Central Art Archives, photo by unknown. Produced by Comus-Sepv, Fabricant de peintures et vernis, 91180 Saint-Germain-lès-Arpajon, France, the binder for Pâte Idéale consists of synthetic resins.

12. Pages 48 (b&w) and 51 (color) of the Helsinki Kunsthalle exhibition catalogue.

13. Page 77 (b&w) of the Helsinki Kunsthalle exhibition catalogue.

14. Page 26 (color) of the Helsinki Kunsthalle exhibition catalogue.

15. Stringari, et al, p. 416.

16. Whitmore et al, p. 228.

17. Sample taking, scientific analyses and observations of material characteristics made by Seppo Hornytzkyj, Special Researcher, Finnish National Gallery.

18. In his overview of commercial varnishes presented at the Hedlley Forum, Kingston, Canada, April 1992, Scott Williams of the Canadian Conservation Institute noted many examples including Liquitex acrylic medium (USA 1958) and Daler-Rowney Cryla acrylic medium (UK 1962) both of which were identified by Naoka Sonada and Jean-Paul Rioux.

19. The Conservation and Materials Encyclopedia Online (CAMEO) established by Boston's Museum of Fine Arts lists pumice as a pale grey, porous variety of the volcanic stone rhyolite that is composed of potassium aluminum and small amounts of iron and alkalis.

20. Civil et al, pp. 407-8.

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Materials

Mowiol 4-98: 15% in distilled water, Supplier: Deffner & Johann, 97520 Röthlein, Germany.

Tri-ammonium citrate: BDH Laboratory Supplies, Poole, BH15 1TD England.

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Abstract

A condition survey of works by Ahti Lavonen in the collection of Helsinki's Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma done in preparation for a 2004 retrospective exhibition found two works which exhibited flaking paint as well as other damages. Detailed examination of these

two paintings in the conservation studio some months later produced quite another picture. Though the appearance of the works was affected by some disfiguration, it became obvious that the application of remedial treatment would, for the most part, have been inappropriate. This realization shifted the focus to initiating a study of Lavonen's work. As a result of this study, this paper summarizes what has been learned about the two paintings and includes details regarding the artist's materials and techniques, the conservation treatment of the two works and the implications with regard to the preservation of his work in the future.

Lyhennelmä

Nykytaiteen museon Kiasman kokoelmissa olevien Ahti Lavosen töitten retrospektiivistä näyttelyä valmisteltiin vuonna 2004. Kuntotarkastuksen yhteydessä tuli esiin kaksi työtä, joiden maalipinta irtoili. Tauluissa oli myös muita vaurioita. Konservointistudiossa tehtyjen yksityiskohtaisten tutkimusten perusteella näkemys muuttui täysin. Maalaukset olivat lievästi epämuodostuneet, mutta selvää oli, että korjaava käsittely olisi suurimmaksi osaksi mahdotonta. Tämän tosiasian selviäminen muutti tutkimussuuntaa niin, että näiden maalausten perusteella keskityttiin Lavosen työskentelyyn. Kirjoitus sisältää tietoja taiteilijan käyttämistä materiaaleista, tekniikoista ja näiden kahden työn konservoinnista johtopäätöksineen, ajatellen hänen töittensä säilyttämistä tulevaisuudessa.

Resumé

I Museet för Nutidskonst Kiasma ordnades Ahti Lavonens retrospektiva utställning år 2004. I samband med konditionskontrollen kom fram två målningar vars målfärg lossnade. Tavlorna hade också andra skador. Åsikterna ändrades då man granskade målningarna i konserveringsstudion. Målningarna var en aning defekta, men klart var, att det var omöjligt att göra något stort med dem. Då detta blev klart, ändrades forskningens fokus till att undersöka Lavonens arbetsmetoder. Denna skrift innehåller uppgifter om konstnärens material, metoder och konserveringen av dessa två målningar och också slutsats med tanke på hans arbeten i framtida bemärkelse.