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Genesis tells of the origin of Finnish paper industry community in a new way

The exhibition *Genesis* offers an alternative perspective on the origin of Mänttä's paper industry. Artists Minna Henriksson and Ahmed Al-Nawas highlight the role of the workers as well as the financial and foreign policy motives that guided the actions of the leaders of the Serlachius Company. The exhibition opens at the Serlachius Museums on 4 February.

The starting point of the *Genesis* exhibition is the wall and ceiling paintings of the Finnish artist Lennart Segerstråle (1892-1975) in the Serlachius Museums. Segerstråle, a trusted artist of Gösta Serlachius, painted the frieze *Genesis of Mänttä* (1937) in the entrance hall of the Serlachius company's former head office. In the painting, Segerstråle strongly depicts the history of Mänttä's origin as the result of the actions of one man, G. A. Serlachius.

Minna Henriksson (b. 1976) and Ahmed Al-Nawas (b. 1980) wanted to present an alternative to this well-honed heroic tale of Serlachius. "In our view, the development of the mill community was more a process that included battles and negotiations. Through conflicts and contrasts, compromises emerged," say the artists, who curated the exhibition.

Genesis rug provides a parallel story

The central work of the exhibition is the *Genesis* tufted rug, which is influenced by Segerstråle's works. The rug, displayed horizontally, is 8.60 metres long and 2.40 metres wide, and it tells the story of the Mänttä mill community from the perspective of the workers. In the rug, groups of workers have gathered and red flags are flying. The rug, which represents traditional women's handicraft, also acts through its material as a counterweight to Segerstråle's works, which draw on high culture

The exhibition boldly and critically addresses the financial and foreign policy motivations of the leaders of the Serlachius company. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, unspoiled national landscapes were admired in art but, at the same time, forest companies – Serlachius among others – competed for wood and wilfully cut down forests for their industrial needs. The destruction of Finland's forests was a genuine fear.

In the exhibition, this is referenced by forest-themed works of different periods from the Serlachius art collection. Alongside them are displayed texts related to the same periods: statements supporting the preservation of forests and against felling.

Critical view of the geological justifications for Greater Finland

At the beginning of the 20th century, nationalism gave birth to the idea of Greater Finland, in which Finland's borders were drawn on maps far into Eastern Karelia. This suited the leaders of the paper industry well, as they hoped to be able to exploit Eastern Karelia's limitless forest resources.

In the exhibition, the theme is addressed through the Fennoscandia concept, coined by the geologist Wilhelm Ramsay (1865–1928). He defined the geological boundaries of Fennoscandia, which extended to Eastern Karelia and also served as grounds for the ideas of a Greater Finland. Parts of his rock collection have been loaned to the exhibition.

The exhibition also features a series of linocuts by Minna Henriksson, *Works on Paper* (2015–22), whose central theme is the paper industry in Finland and the political efforts of a number of industrial leaders to oppose the left-wing organisation of workers. At the same time, the leaders promoted non-leftist activities among workers. Finland also supplied significant quantities of paper to, for example, South Africa, which practised the policy of apartheid.

The *Genesis* exhibition is open at Serlachius Museum Gustaf from 4 February to 19 November 2023.

Photo: Minna Henriksson and Ahmed Al-Nawas, *Genesis*, 2022, rug, detail of work. Photo: Katja Tähjä

Press releases and photographs: <https://serlachius.fi/en/for-media>

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The Serlachius Museums are open:

in the winter season, 1 September–31 May, from Tuesday to Sunday, 11 am–6 pm.

in the summer season, 1 June–31 August, every day 10 am–6 pm

Visiting addresses:

Serlachius Museum Gustaf, R. Erik Serlachiuksen katu 2, Mänttä

Serlachius Museum Gösta, Joenniementie 47, Mänttä

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