

A Parallel Collection

Astronomers study phenomena in deep space by measuring their effects, rather than the events themselves. The sheer distances involved make any other approach impossible. Closer to home we have the opposite problem, where events are so crowded out by unrelated 'noise' that their effects are difficult to distinguish. To get around that problem investigators devise methods of isolating phenomenon, whether in the laboratory or in the social sphere.

The Serlachius collection is unique in that offers a ready-made opportunity for this kind of approach. Although a collection of international standing, it was developed in relative isolation, geographically and socially, but with a singular vision and funding source that remain at the centre of the foundation that maintains its legacy. It may therefore be possible to ask and see what the effects of this collection and its legacy are on the communities that share its history and continue to engage with it today.

Grounded initially on Gustaf Serlachius' sponsorship of Finnish artists in the last decades of the 19th Century, the collection has an unlikely beginning. Unlikely, because at the time he was also establishing a papermill and town (to house and support the workforce) in sparsely habited forest, not connected by any transport infrastructure and 100 kilometres from the nearest city. The papermill marked its 150th anniversary in 2018. The collection grew with the papermill as did the town of Mänttä, Gustaf's nephew Gösta taking over both the management of the business and patronage of the arts from 1913 until his death in 1942.

The collection today is displayed across two sites, one the former home of Gösta Serlachius, the other the former headquarters of the business. This dual siting embodies not only the unique historical legacy of the collection, but also the twin themes of labour and of daily life that predominate in the core collection, alongside and often incorporated into representations of mainly Finnish landscape and nature. Gustaf Serlachius' concern was to support an art that promoted an expression of Finnish identity, and it is from this that these main themes spring.

It is clear from the archives that both Gustaf and Gösta Serlachius valued their interaction with artists as an important adjunct to their industrialist vocations, and, as mentioned above, also looked to those artists to articulate shared ideals. The foundation continues the Serlachius' patronage of the arts through a residency programme and exhibitions of contemporary art. In addition, both museums represent the Serlachius story through themed exhibitions from the collection as well as introductory audio-visual displays. Despite their comparatively out-of-the-way location, the museums attract a large number of visitors. What makes the museums so popular, what place do they hold in the consciousness of their public today, and how do these ideas compare to the motivating ideals of the founders?

The 'Parallel Collection' aims to find some answers to these questions simply by asking participants to nominate an object from their everyday life that represents the Serlachius collections for them and to tell us why. In this way the project picks up on one of the core themes of the collection, daily life, as a means of exploring the continuing relevance of this theme to peoples understanding of the collection; and in the process, also the currency of other emerging themes (e.g. labour, the landscape and national identity). The project identifies four main constituencies of engagement: firstly, visitors to the museum; then, the civic infrastructure represented by the mill, the town of Mänttä as well as providers of services to the museums; thirdly, arts professionals working with the museums as exhibitors, curators, on residency (etc.); finally, the museums' own staff and other related arts management professionals have been invited to participate.

In this stage of the project, a diagrammatic grid format has been used to collate and display the initial findings, taken from research in the collection and participant responses. The grid helps to reveal, test and establish relationships between different groups of data in a nonlinear way, therefore allowing a number of connections to be demonstrated at once. In this case, the information is both geographically sited, around the two museums, while also organised into the respondent constituencies. Inferred lines of interchange between these groups of data have been drawn out, using as conduits, key themes from the collection. From the contributions so far, it can be deduced that what amounts to a faithful, if modernised, translation pertains of many of the core founding values of the collection; particularly among the visitors to the museum, its employees and some of the civic institutions of the town. In other cases, the link is weaker or has severed. What is repeatedly demonstrated is the capacity for a collection to sustain a set of ideas and approaches, albeit in a way that will develop in response to changing times.

At a point of overcoming one of numerous financial and existential crisis in the history of the paper-mill, Gustaf Serlachius was carried to Mänttä mountain to look down at the town, which he saw as his life's work. This diagram imagines him in this position, surveying the future destiny of his plans. Gösta, meanwhile, is presented as Hannes Autere depicted him, in a bitter-sweet monument to patronage. Like mind and heart in the body of the collection, their central role continues to be upheld by the museums. When I came to Mänttä, I wondered what could attract these two industrialists to engage so intensively with the lives of artists and their art, when they surely had to expend so much energy on establishing a business from scratch in difficult circumstances. On the face of it, there couldn't be a more unlikely coming together of worlds. The sustaining durability of the collection offers an unequivocal answer to that conundrum.

NEW CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PARALLEL COLLECTION

If you have a contribution to make along the lines of those shown above, please send it to

serlachiusparallel@gmail.com

Please include a photograph of the object, preferably taken against a plain background and a short text explaining why it makes you think of the Serlachius collection. Please also indicate your connection to the museum, for example as visitor, employee, exhibitor, service provider etc. Lastly, don't forget to leave your name and contact details and to let us know if you are willing for your name to be used in public presentations of the project.

Thank you to all those who participated in the project. I am also grateful to the Serlachius Foundation, the staff of the museums and the residency programme for their support and for the support of University of Greenwich.

All photographs are by courtesy of the named participant unless otherwise shown (* D. Waterworth; † Serlachius Fdn.)

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