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From Plaster and Marble to Lost-wax Bronze: The Materiality of Sculpture from the Helsinki Exhibition of 1876 to Early 20th-century Finland

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This article examines sculptors' material practices and major shifts in sculptural materials in Finland from the late 19th to the early 20th century, with particular attention to marble, plaster, and the lost-wax (*cire perdue*) method.[1] It contributes to ongoing discussions on sculptural materials and methods. Although materiality has long been central to the fields of conservation and restoration, a material perspective on sculpture has been largely neglected in studies of Finnish 19th- and early 20th-century sculpture.[2]

Research has traditionally focused on artist biographies and the analysis of public monuments.[3] In art-historical narratives, some sculptors have remained more prominent due to their involvement in public sculpture projects, even though monumental commissions were beyond the reach of many sculptors. Instead, sculptures had a public life through exhibitions, although opportunities for sculptors to exhibit their work in 19th-century Finland were limited, and large-scale solo exhibitions were rare. The important arenas of annual

1 Lost-wax casting (French, *cire perdue*) is a common method of making cast metal sculpture. Its simplest form is like this: 'The original model is made in wax and is then encased in a clay mould known as the investment. This is heated up and the wax poured away leaving a hollow interior, the inside surface of which carries a negative impression of the original wax model. Molten alloy, such as bronze, is then poured into the mould and allowed to cool. The clay mould is broken and removed, leaving an alloy replica of the original wax model'. Michael Clarke, 2010, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Francesca G. Bewer, 'Lost-Wax Casting', in Sharon Hecker (ed.), *Finding Lost Wax. The Disappearance and Recovery of an Ancient Casting Technique and the Experiments of Medardo Rosso*, Studies in Art and Materiality Series 3. Leiden: Brill, 2021, 11–17.

2 Jyrki Siukonen, *Ensimmäinen. Carl Eneas Sjöstrandin istuva Porthan.* Tietolipas 281. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2023, chapter IV. https://doi.org/10.21435/tl.281; Mari Tossavainen, *Kuvanveistotyö. Emil Wikström ja kuvanveiston rakenne 1890–1920*. Bidrag till kännedom av Finlands natur och folk 190. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 2012. https://doi.org/10.54572/ssc.1592; Mari Tossavainen, 'Veistosten valmistus Suomessa. Kuvanveistotaiteen tekniikan ja materiaalien historiaa 1890–1920'. *Tekniikan Waiheita* 33. No. 3, 2015, 39–52. https://journal.fi/tekniikanwaiheita/article/view/82268 (accessed 1 June 2026).

3 The recent publications on Finnish women sculptors focus on their biographies: Liisa Lindgren, 'Women on sculpture's rocky road. Alina Forsman, Evelina Särkelä and Ida Meller'. *FNG Research*, No 2, 2025. https://fngresearch.wpcomstaging.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/fngr_2025-2_lindgren_article1.pdf (accessed 1 June 2026); Liisa Lindgren, 'Pioneering Women in Finnish Sculpture', in Linda Hinners (ed.), *Nordic Women Sculptors at the Turn of the 20th Century. Formation, Visibility, Self-Creation*. Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2022, 70–89.

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exhibitions for artists were the exhibitions organised by the Finnish Art Society and the Artists' Association of Finland. The Finnish Art Society's first exhibition was organised in Helsinki as early as 1847 and the exhibitions of the Artists' Association of Finland were started in 1891.[4] The first large-scale solo exhibition of a living sculptor was held at the Ateneum in 1890, and Ville Vallgren's (1855–1940) exhibition was regarded as a significant event in Finnish art history.[5]

Focusing on the period between 1876 and 1905, this article explores the use of materials in Finnish sculpture prior to the institutional consolidation of sculpture marked by the establishment of bronze foundries and the Association of Finnish Sculptors in the 1910s.[6] The article examines the use and the choice of sculptural materials within the context of the Finnish exhibition history, paying particular attention to the Finnish Art and Industry Exhibition of 1876 and the exhibitions organised by the Finnish Art Society and the Artists' Association of Finland. The case studies have been selected to provide a brief overview of the materiality of sculpture in Finland during this period.

The first Finnish art and industry exhibition in 1876 – also known among sculptors as the Helsinki Exhibition – can be considered a reasonable starting point for the article, as it was one of the earliest exhibitions to include a sculpture section. Second, the article examines some examples of the materials used by the first women sculptors in the Finnish annual exhibitions of the late 19th century. Third, it focuses on the growing enthusiasm for bronze and the idea of sculpture as craft from the 1880s to 1905. Following an analysis of three case studies, the article concludes with a discussion of the key contributions.

Some decades ago, the art historian James Hall wrote about a shift in ways of seeing sculpture; from images toward objects.[7] Recently, there has been a shift towards a broader conception of sculpture, blurring boundaries through a fusion of art history, the material cultural field, and material studies.[8] In recent years, more research has been carried out in sculpture studies in an international context, and scholars have published revised ideas about 19th-century European sculpture and materiality. The materials used in sculpture have only recently begun to be thoroughly researched and analysed by art historians. In fact, materiality has become one of the new research perspectives in the field. The renewed interest in material within art history generally has provided several new perspectives on sculpture, such as plaster cast research. Recent studies on materials in art have concentrated on the use of bronze and marble.[9] The publication *Finding Lost Wax* (2021) is the first scholarly account of the late 19th-century rediscovery of lost-wax casting worldwide, but it does not address Finland or the other Nordic countries. Like the exhibition catalogue *Edgar Degas Sculpture* (2010), it combines technical and art-historical approaches.[10]

Rather than adopting the methods of technical art history, such as conservation-based analysis and technical examination, this article draws on archival research to situate sculptural materials within a broader historical context, highlighting the collaborative nature of sculptural production. For sculpture studies, the new interest in materiality implies

4 The Finnish Art Society´s exhibitions were organised twice a year. Tossavainen 2012, 329–39.
5 Tossavainen 2012, 338.
6 Tossavainen 2012.
7 James Hall, *The World as Sculpture. The Changing Status of Sculpture from the Renaissance to the Present Day.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1999, 1–2, 348–49.
8 Eg. Michael Hatt, Martina Droth & Jason Edwards, 'Sculpture Victorious', in Martina Droth *et al.* (eds.), *Sculpture Victorious. Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, 15–55; Michael Yonan, 'Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies'. *A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18. No. 2, 2011, 232–48, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/662520.
9 In 2021, the special issue of *Sculpture Journal* concentrated on the role of marble in sculpture during the 18th and 19th centuries.
10 *Sculpture Journal* 28, No. 3, 2019; *Sculpture Journal* 30, No. 2, 2021; *Sculpture Journal* 32, No. 4, 2023; Sharon Hecker (ed.), *Finding Lost Wax. The Disappearance and Recovery of an Ancient Casting Technique and the Experiments of Medardo Rosso*, Studies in Art and Materiality Series 3. Leiden: Brill, 2021; Suzanne Lindsay *et al.* (eds.), *Edgar Degas Sculpture.* Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2010.

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The 1876 art and industry exhibition, Helsinki. Photographer Charles Riis. Finnish Heritage Agency, Historical Picture Collection
Photo: Finnish Heritage Agency (CC BY 4.0)

that – in addition to materials such as bronze, plaster, and marble – the artistic and social contexts play an important role in constructing new knowledge. For instance, what were the material confines and options available for the technical and physical making of objects? The materials used in sculptures raise many questions about the practice and making of sculpture, training, exhibiting, trade, businesses, and studios. This article also explores the strategies that sculptors used to navigate in the art world. According to the art historian David Getsy, sculptural practice also means the range of negotiations navigated by sculptors.[11] Another art historian, Michael Cole, has stated that the history of materials is a social history of art, and the cost of things can be an important topic in research.[12] One of the key concepts in this approach is art's infrastructure, which is materially orientated.[13] Recently, infrastructural studies and cultural infrastructure have become of great importance in the study of cultural history, sculpture, and art. Art worlds are dependent on infrastructures.[14] This so-called infrastructural turn has introduced infrastructure as a framework for understanding historical change and analysing interconnections, enabling, for instance, the examination of

11 David J. Getsy, *Rodin. Sex and the Making of Modern Sculpture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, 6–7.

12 Michael Cole, 'The Cult of Materials', in Sébastien Clerbois and Martina Droth (eds.), *Revival and Invention. Sculpture through its Material Histories*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011 (1–15), 4. https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0353-0135-9.

13 'Infrastructure is a term encompassing the networks and businesses that form the context in which art is practised. It may also be seen as the interface between the studio and the wider world or the means by which art is made public.' Ann Compton, 'Infrastructures. Formation and networks 1900–1925', in Penelope Curtis *et al.* (eds.) *Sculpture in 20th-century Britain. Identity, Infrastructures, Aesthetics, Display, Reception. Vol. I*. Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2003 (21–32), 21.

14 Tom Verschaffel, Marjan Sterckx, 'The Nationality of Sculpture. International Mobility of Nineteenth-Century Sculptors and Their Work', in Marjan Sterckx and Tom Verschaffel (eds.), *Sculpting Abroad. Nationality and Mobility of Sculptors in the Nineteenth Century,* XIX Studies in Nineteenth-century Art and Visual Culture. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2020, 3–16. Tossavainen, 2012, 31–35; Solveig Daugaard et al. (eds.), *Infrastructure Aesthetics.* Berlin: De Gruyeter, 2024.

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the materiality of phenomena.[15] Infrastructure aesthetics looks at art as a social sphere of practices framed by historical institutions.[16]

In this article preserved letters, exhibition catalogues, and digitised historical newspapers are major sources for learning about the choice and use of materials. The letters provide us with a look at sculptors' daily work, struggles, and attempts to expand the practice of sculpture. Artists often wrote letters at much the same time that the works they discuss were made.[17] They kept up this written communication when they went abroad. For this study, I have used, for example, the artists' letters of Johannes Takanen (1849–85), Robert Stigell (1852–1907), Erland Stenberg (1838–96) and Alina Forsman (1845–95). Working with the early artists' letters means that the material is often incomplete. Correspondence is supposed to be dialogical by nature, but the correspondence of the early sculptors has not been totally preserved. In Finland as well as elsewhere, one of the obstacles to researching the first women sculptors has been the lack of archival documents. The written material is uneven.[18]

One of the methodological problems of this study is how to read the use of the materials and the gradual material shifts in sculpture. How the sculptors shared the material technical information on sculpture methods in the art field is an interesting question. We may consider artists' letters as essentially private correspondence, and assume that they reveal something authentic that was not intended for public viewing. Correspondence from sculptors in the 19th century does not record all the technical methods and material finesse involved in the process, as tacit knowledge was typical of the practice and profession of sculpture. However, some artists from the 1870s and 1880s used their letters as elements in their self-promotion. That is why the art historian John House has called artists' letters semi-public documents.[19] In addition to providing evidence, letters can be seen as a form of self-narration.[20] Sculptors' letters also had professional purposes – for example, activities such as writing letters or applications to the Finnish Art Society. Professional correspondence often followed different conventions, but not all of it was formal. In the late 19th century, the separation of private and public spheres was not so clear-cut. Letters shared within a family, such as the correspondence between the sculptor Robert Stigell and his stepfather, the stonemason H. J. Stigell (1832–1904), reveal that even family letters can discuss professional issues.

The examination of exhibition catalogues can shed only some light on the material aspects of sculpture. By comparing descriptions of materials in the exhibition catalogues with other sources and archive documents, it is possible to understand the choice and use of sculpture materials. Exhibition catalogues were originally lists of artists and works, but over time they included more content.[21] In this period, in addition to the sculptor's name, they might also include, for example, the title of the work, the material, the date and the place, and the owner, or the collection it was held in. However, in the catalogues of this period, the amount of information about the materials used varies greatly.

15 Mary Bridges, 'The Infrastructural Turn in Historical Scholarship', *Modern American History* 6 2023, 103–04, https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.2.

16 Solveig Daugaard, Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt and Frederik Tygstrup, 'Introduction. Surfacing Infrastructures in the Arts', in Solveig Daugaard *et al* (eds.), *Infrastructure Aesthetics.* Berlin: De Gruyeter, 2024 (1–29), 8. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111349961.

17 John House, 'Working with artists' letters'. *Word & Image* 28, No. 4, 2012 (335–39), 335. https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2012.740182.

18 Pauline Rose, *Working Against the Grain. Women Sculptors in Britain c.1880–1950.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020, 5–6, 11. See also Lindgren 2025.

19 House 2012, 336–37.

20 Reetta Eiranen, 'The Narrative self. Letters and experience in historical research', in Karin Koehler and Kathryn McDonald-Miranda (eds.), *Private and Public Voices. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Letters and Letter Writing.* Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press 2015 (77–99), 78, 82.

21 Gustavo Grandal Montero, 'Art documentation: exhibition catalogues and beyond', in Paul Glassman & Judy Dyki (eds.), *Handbook of Art and Design Librarianship.* London: Facet Publishing, 2017 (109–18), 110.

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Throughout this article, the analysis extends beyond Finland's national borders; however, it does not consider sculptors' travels or their participation in international exhibitions. The research perspective of materiality has led to the consideration of international transfers and exchanges, and the category of 'national' has been challenged. Recent scholarship pays growing attention to the cross-border contact of sculptors and their international mobility in the 19th century.[22] The centres of European art, such as Copenhagen, Rome, Florence, and Paris, were some of the most crucial destinations for sculptors active in Finland in the period.

Marble dreams in the 1876 Helsinki exhibition

As great exhibitions became popular in the mid-19th century, exhibitions of art and industry brought marble art works into dialogue with raw materials and manufacturing.[23] The first Finnish art and industry exhibition, organised in Helsinki in 1876 by a group of private businessmen, included a sculpture section that introduced visitors to sculpture as a 'new' art form in Finland. Twelve years earlier, in 1864, Finland's first public statue of a historical figure, Henrik Gabriel Porthan, by Swedish-born Carl Eneas Sjöstrand (1828–1906), had been unveiled in the city of Turku.[24] Later, the sculptor, Ville Vallgren, considered the 1876 exhibition to have been a remarkable landmark in the history of Finnish sculpture. The exhibition was seen as one of the starting points for the growth of the sculpture field in Finland in the 1870s. Although there were many more paintings than sculptures in the exhibition, some contemporaries thought that the small group of sculptures, totalling 44 works from six artists, reflected the growing status of sculpture.[25] In general, the sculptors encountered the greatest problems in exhibiting.[26] In the hierarchy of the visual arts, sculpture was not a highly valued art form and the position of sculptors was inferior to painters.[27]

Walter Runeberg, *Dancing Boy with a Tambourine in his Hand*, 1875–76, marble
Photographer Daniel Nyblin, *c.*1889–99
Finnish National Gallery Collection,
Picture Collection of Werner Söderström Ltd
Photo: Finnish National Gallery

According to an artist list that was included in the catalogue for the exhibition, the participating sculptors were Robert Stigell, Johannes Takanen, Walter Runeberg (1838–1920), Carl Lenngren (1842–1903), C. E. Sjöstrand, and Erland Stenberg. Walter Runeberg exhibited eight marble works, but a couple of his works were made of cement or plaster. The number of his marbles was exceptional in comparison with the other sculptors, as plaster was the dominant material used in this exhibition. None of the sculptors exhibited bronzes.[28] The newspapers celebrated the lure of Runeberg's marbles, which captured the interest of the public. He had worked for years in

22 Verschaffel, Sterckx 2020, 7.
23 Tatiana Kontou, Victoria Mills, Kate Nichols, 'Introduction to Volume VI. Victorian Arts,' in: *Victorian Material Culture*, Victoria Mills, Kate Nichols (eds.). London: Routledge, 2022, 1–16.
24 Siukonen 2023.
25 Tossavainen 2012, 55–56.
26 Patricia Mainardi, 'Show and Tell. Exhibition Practice in the Nineteenth Century', in Michelle Facos (ed.), *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Art*, Blackwell Companions to Art History. Hoboken: Wiley-Backwell, 2018, 74.
27 Hall 1999, 2; Rose 2020, 73.
28 The catalogue for the Finnish art and industry exhibition 1876, 16–17.

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Rome, the sculpture capital of the early 19th century,[29] but he settled in Paris in the autumn of 1876.

On 11 July 1876, the newspaper *Suomalainen Wirallinen Lehti* described how the group of the large-scale marbles *Psykhe and Zephyr* became a focal point of the 1876 art and industry exhibition. The newspaper article indicates that the great 'star' of the exhibition was Walter Runeberg:

> *The marble group* Psykhe and Zephyr*, by Walter Runeberg is now displayed in the art section of the Finnish art and industry exhibition, and it always gathers plenty of spectators who look at the artwork with admiration and astonishment.*[30]

The national exhibition was the largest ever single event to have been organised in Finland, attracting visitors from all over the country. Runeberg's brother Robert Runeberg (1846–1919), an engineer, was the commissioner of the Helsinki exhibition.[31] During the latter half of the 19th century, Walter Runeberg became probably one of the most successful sculptors of his time in Finland. From the 1870s onwards he received numerous public commissions, including a statue of his father, the poet J. L. Runeberg (1885), as well as one of Swedish Count Per Brahe (1888). After the death of Johannes Takanen in 1885, he was solely responsible for the sculptural part of the monument to Alexander II (1894) in Helsinki.[32]

Marble had become a popular material for sculptural expression in Europe.[33] The awards that were given to marble works indicates that marble was the most highly valued material in the sculpture section of the Helsinki exhibition. *Psykhe and Zephyr* was awarded first prize on July 23, 1876. Sjöstrand also exhibited three marbles, and one of them, *Herd Girl*, was likewise awarded the first prize, the silver medal.[34] The materials of the rest of Sjöstrand's works, 13 sculptures including the Italy-inspired *The Boccia Players*, are not included in the exhibition catalogue. *Herd Girl* (1874) was made during Sjöstrand's visit to Italy in 1873, when he spent a couple of months in Carrara. The marble material of *Herd Girl* was probably a major reason for the admiration it received in the exhibition of the Finnish Art Society in 1874, as marble works had seldom before been displayed in the Society's exhibitions.[35] When it had arrived late from Carrara for the art exhibition in 1874, it was stated in the newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet* that 'C. E. Sjöstrand's work *Herd Girl,* in the finest marble […] is now to be seen and admired on the premises of the Art Society'.[36]

Robert Stigell's marble work *Amor,* or *Seated Amor,* also known as *Amor with Rose,* was apparently his major work in the Helsinki exhibition.[37] He exhibited one marble alongside his plaster sculptures. It seems that Stigell, who had been studying and working in Rome since

29 Tomas Macsotay (ed.), *Rome, Travel and the Sculpture Capital, c.1770–1825*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2017.

30 English translation by the author. 'Walter Runebergin marmoriryhmä Psykhe ja sefyyrit on nyt asetettu yleisen näyttelön taideosastoon ja aina oleksii sen ympärillä suuri joukko katselijoita, jotka ilon ja ihastuksen ihmetyksellä katselevat taideteosta.' 'Taidetta', *Suomalainen Wirallinen Lehti*, 11 July 1876.

31 Taina Syrjämaa, 'At Intersections of Technology and a Modern Mass Medium. The Engineer Robert Runeberg and Exhibitions, 1867–1900'. *Scandinavian Journal of History* 42, No. 1, 2017, 71–95. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2016.1204679.

32 Liisa Lindgren, *Monumentum. Muistomerkkien aatteita ja aikaa*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000, 21.

33 Penelope Curtis, *Sculpture 1900–1945. After Rodin*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 75.

34 The catalogue for the Finnish art and industry exhibition 1876, 16–17; The prizes of the Finnish art and industry exhibition 1876, 1; The prize awarded to Walter Runeberg in the Finnish art and industry exhibition, 23 July 1876, Walter Runeberg archive, SLS Archive; *Hufvudstadsbladet* (*Hbl)* 27 August 1876; *Tapio* 26 August 1876.

35 The catalogue for the Finnish art and industry exhibition 1876, 16–17; Jouko Tolvanen, *Carl Eneas Sjöstrand. Suomen uudemman kuvanveistotaiteen uranuurtaja*. Helsinki: WSOY, 1952, 158–59.

36 English translation by the author. 'C. Sjöstrands arbete', *Hufvudstadsbladet (Hbl)*, 23 May 1874.

37 The catalogue for the Finnish art and industry exhibition 1876, 17.

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Robert Stigell, *Amor,* 1874–76, marble. Unknown photographer. Finnish Heritage Agency, Historical Picture Collection
Photo: Finnish Heritage Agency

the spring of 1872, had his own schedule and strategic long-term work plans. His stepfather H. J. Stigell owned a stone masonry in Helsinki and thanks to this sculpture-related family business Robert Stigell had access to good material knowledge. As early as May 1875, H. J. Stigell had advised him in a letter to craft *Amor* in marble for the coming exhibition the following summer.[38] One year later, in May 1876, he told him to hurry up with *Amor*. He then reminded him of the fact that the work should arrive in Helsinki by the 1 July, when the Helsinki exhibition was to be opened. [39] In his letter of early January 1876, Robert Stigell had explained his plans for the following year. He had been sure that *Amor* would be in Helsinki at the end of May.[40] The photograph of the clay work *Amor* was displayed in the exhibition of the Finnish Art Society in the spring of 1876. It was stated in the catalogue that the work had now been executed in marble and it had been entered for a great exhibition in the summer.[41] The advance information on the great exhibition and its marble work suggests that the sculptor had high expectations for the Helsinki exhibition. Some works were included after the opening of the Helsinki exhibition, among them Stigell's *Amor*. The press reported in July 1876 that this 'masterpiece' of sculpture had been on the way from Rome to Helsinki, and finally, late in the month, it had gone on display.[42]

In the exhibition, Stigell attracted attention as a promising young sculptor who was studying at the Academy of San Luca in Rome. His *Amor* was enthusiastically praised by the newspaper art critics and reporters. One critic wrote about *Amor* as a material object with these admiring words:

> Amor with Rose *is a debut work, and as such a work it must be appreciated highly. Mr Stigell himself, as opposed to most sculptors, works well with marble, has already overcome many technical problems, and his small sculpture is extremely well executed.*[43]

38 H. J. Stigell to Robert Stigell, Helsinki 4 May 1875. Finnish National Gallery Collection, Robert Stigell Archive, folder 4.

39 H. J. Stigell to Robert Stigell, Helsinki 8 May 1876. Finnish National Gallery Collection, Robert Stigell Archive, folder 4.

40 Robert Stigell to B. O. Schauman, Rome 6 Jan 1876. Finnish National Gallery Collection, Collection of Artists' Letters.

41 The exhibition catalogue of the Finnish Art Society 1876, 10.

42 'Till expositionen', *Helsingfors Dagblad* (*HD*), 17 July 1876; 'Konstverk', *Finlands Allmänna Tidning* (*FAT*), 28.7.1876.

43 English translation by author. '*Amor med blomman* är ett förstlingsarbete, och bör som sådant ställas högt. Herr Stigell som sjelf, i motsats till de flesta bildhuggare, arbetar väl i marmor, har redan öfvervunnit en massa tekniska svårigheter och hans lilla staty är särdeles väl utförd.' 'Blickar på utställningen. Konstafdelningen', *HD,* 24 August 1876; 'Utställningen', *Hbl,* 25 August 1876.

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The biographer and son Jarl Stigell has noted that Robert Stigell's breakthrough came with *Amor with Rose* (1874–76).[44]

If the sculptors exhibited marbles or bronzes, the works were usually funded by the client or the patron.[45] In the 19th century most sculptors worked in clay, which was then cast in plaster. The sculptors mostly exhibited these plasters. Usually, it is assumed that they hoped to find a patron or a buyer who would be willing to pay either to have the work cast in bronze or carved in marble. This sculptural practice was based on the idea of the process, and a clear distinction was made between the working material and the material of the finished product.[46] However, in the Finnish art and industry exhibition of 1876 some artists exhibited marbles that belonged to the artists themselves. For example, Stigell and Runeberg also sold marble works owned by themselves, though many of Runeberg's exhibited marble works belonged to private collectors.[47]

According to the catalogue of 1876, Johannes Takanen was represented by four works. The catalogue mentioned the prices of three works, of which one was a marble bust, a study. Furthermore, his explicit target was to have two other works, *Aino* and another bust, carved in marble, since the catalogue announced that they 'will be executed in marble' for the listed price.[48] In April 1876 Takanen had written that he was in financial difficulties and did not have enough money for the execution of marble works.[49] He faced challenges in getting everything ready on time for the Helsinki exhibition, and sent his plaster work *Aino* earlier than his other works.[50] In 1873 he had gone to work in Rome, where he worked as a sculptor and a marble carver. On 24 July, 1876, he wrote:

> *Today I sent three portraits two plaster and one marble, but I doubt whether they will arrive in time at the exhibition* […].[51]

One month after writing this letter, the newspaper *Helsingfors Dagblad* reported that some works by Takanen had not yet arrived from Rome. Takanen's ability to handle material in *Aino* was praised.[52] In October, after the closing of the Helsinki exhibition, Takanen wrote that his works had been lying at the Finnish customs in Helsinki, and he would have needed the new orders they could have generated:

> *It bothers me that they did not come to the exhibition* […].[53]

As in the case of the renowned Neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova (1757–1822), the plaster casts by Takanen were original models for his marble sculpture.[54]

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44 Jarl Stigell, *Finländska gestalter: Robert Stigell*. Ekenäs: Ekenäs Tryckeri, 1977, 25, 142. The work belongs to a private collection.
45 Mainardi 2018, 73.
46 Mainardi 2018, 73; Curtis 1999*,* 75.
47 The catalogue for the Finnish art and industry exhibition 1876, 16–17.
48 Ibid., 17. 'Aino, staty i gips, tillhören konstnären. Utföres in marmor för 4,000 m. […] Porträttbyst i gips. Utföres i marmor för 600 mark. '
49 '[…] nyt se on punkteerattu vaan ei ole rahoja sitä valmistaa vaan toivon jollain tavalla saavani Helsingin näyttelöön'. Johannes Takanen to Wilhelm Hackman Rome, 10 April 1876. The Finnish Literature Society, Archives, Johannes Takanen archive.
50 'Till expositionen', *HD,* 17 July 1876; 'Konstverk', *FAT,* 28 July 1876.
51 English translation by author. 'Tänään lähetin 3 potrettipustia 2 kipsistä ja 1 marmorista vaan epäilen niiden ehtivän näyttelöön.' Johannes Takanen to Robert Lydecken Rome, 24 July, 1876. Finnish Literature Society, Archives, Johannes Takanen archive.
52 'Blickar på utställningen', *HD,* 24 August 1876.
53 English translation by author. 'Se minua harmittaa että ne eivät tulleet näyttelöön […]' Takanen to Robert Lydecken, Rome, 12 Oct 1876. Finnish Literature Society, Archives, Johannes Takanen archive.
54 Sarah Beltzer, 'Canova, 1816, marble, plaster, surface', *Sculpture Journal* 28, Issue 3, 2019, 315–30. https://doi.org/10.3828/sj.2019.28.3.4.

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Johannes Takanen, *Sitting Cat*, 1860s, wood, h. 7.5cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Henri Tuomi

The separation of art and craft was evident in the 1876 Helsinki exhibition. Wood had been traditionally used to create works of sculpture in Finland, but wood had lost its position as the primary material for high-status sculpture. Still, some young sculptors who came from rural or artisan backgrounds continued to use wood for their early works, and Takanen made carvings of animals for his early wooden works in the 1860s.

Although Erland Stenberg exhibited six works altogether, the catalogue included prices for only his first two, *Orestes Pursued by the Eumenides* and *Venus*.[55] The photograph of *Orestes,* a plaster work, was shown displayed in the exhibition of the Finnish Art Society in the spring of 1876.[56] In a letter from 11 September, 1876, Stenberg called *Orestes* and *Venus* his greatest works of art,[57] so they were probably his major works in the Helsinki exhibition. He wrote in his letter of 21 September, 1876, that he prepared his work *Orestes* during his stay in Rome in 1875 under the guidance of the German sculptor Emil Wolff (1802–79):

> *Right after the New Year I got a studio of my own, and then we started making* Orestes*. After the work of five months, it was made in plaster.*[58]

Marble loomed large in his mind, and thus, in September 1876 he wrote in a letter that he had had to consider marble the future material for his work *Orestes* (1875) in his sculptural practice. These marble dreams had an effect on his working process. Due to the desired material, he had been forced to leave some details in his sculptural expression more vague, and favour sketchiness in the fingers. '[…] It was my wish to execute it [*Orestes*] in marble,' he wrote.[59]

The art critics did not seem to value the hands and the arms of the figure from the material point of view, as the proportions of his work were criticised in the art reviews. One anonymous critic stated in *Helsingfors Dagblad*:

> *This statue does not, as said before, hold together; the proportions are not good.*[60]

55 The catalogue for the Finnish art and industry exhibition 1876, 16.
56 The exhibition catalogue of the Finnish Art Society 1876, 9.
57 '[…] molemmat suuret teokset Oresten ja Venusen kuvapatsaat, jotka nykyään ovat Helsinki näyttelössä […]. 'Erland Stenberg to Zacharias Cajander Munich, 11 Sep 1876. National Library of Finland (NLF), The Manuscript Collection, Varia
58 English translation by author. 'Heti uudenvuoden jälkeen sain oman studion (työhuoneen) ja nyt sitä käytiin oikein miehissä Orestea valmistamaan. Wiiden kuukauden kuluttua oli se valmis gipsistä.' Erland Stenberg to Zacharias Cajander, Munich 21 Sep 1876. Finnish National Gallery Collections, Collection of Artists' Letters.
59 Ibid.
60 English translation by author. 'Denna staty hänger, som sagdt, ej ihop proportionerna äro icke goda […]', 'Blickar på utställningen. Konstafdelningen', *HD,* 24 August 1876; 'Utställningen', *Hbl,* 25 August 1876.

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Stenberg had noticed that this art review was critical in tone. He wrote from Munich in 10 September, 1876:

> *If you read* Hfors Dagblad No 229 *there was a criticism of my works.*[61]

One participating sculptor, Alina Forsman (1845–95), was not even mentioned in the exhibition catalogue, though according to the art reviews her works were part of the sculpture section of the 1876 exhibition.[62] Women sculptors faced a lack of visibility at this time and the reasons for this remain obscure in some cases.[63] In the 19th century, the discussion of women's participation in the arts was linked to the material specificities of special media. It was a deeply held belief that women artists were naturally attracted to painting, and therefore their physical and technical capabilities to pursue careers as professional sculptors were questioned. Sculpture had a reputation for being dusty and damp,[64] but women sculptors were willing to overcome the material challenges.

Alina Forsman was one of the first active women sculptors in Finland, and she was also the only woman sculptor who participated in the Helsinki exhibition. When she debuted at the exhibition of the Finnish Art Society in 1873, the press described her as the very first Finnish woman sculptor.[65] There may be various reasons for Forsman's omission from the exhibition catalogue. She left Finland in 1875 and continued her career mainly abroad. Therefore, there could be practical reasons for her omission; perhaps she did not send her works to the organisers herself. She wrote to the chairman of the board of the Finnish Art Society, Fredrik Cygnaeus (1807–81), from Copenhagen on 15 June, 1876:

> *I have asked to get my two works from the Art Society to enter the exhibition* […]. *I would like to have* Flora *there, too, but it will surely come at the end of the exhibition because it will be executed in another mass* […].[66]

Three works by Forsman, *The Whispering of Amor* (plaster, 1874), *Checco* and *Medallion Portrait of Walter Runeberg* (marble, 1875) had been displayed in the exhibition of the Finnish Art Society in the spring of 1876, but according to the art reviews only one of these works, *Checco,* was displayed in the Helsinki exhibition.[67]

This marble work, depicting an Italian peasant boy from Abruzzo, was Alina Forsman's major contribution to the exhibition, while her portrait medallion of Aline Antell did not attract as much media attention as *Checco*.[68] The Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* praised *Checco* and noted Forsman's Swedish background in the craft:

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61 English translation by author. 'Jos luet Hfors Dagblad No 229, siinä on kritiikki teoksistani.' Erland Stenberg to Zacharias Cajander, Munich 10 Sep 1876. NLF, The Manuscript Collection, Varia.

62 The catalogue for the Finnish art and industry exhibition 1876; 'Blickar på utställningen', *HD,* 24 August 1876; 'Utställningen', *Hbl,* 25 August 1876; *Helsingfors Annonsblad,* 24 August 1878; 'Expositionsbesök', *Morgonbladet,* 25 August 1876.

63 Tabitha Barber, 'Faint Footprints in the Sand', in Tabitha Barber (ed.), *Now You See Us. Women Artists in Britain 1520–1920.* London: Tate Publishing, 2024, 11.

64 Rose 2020*,* 1; Ann Compton, 'Plastic Pleasures. Reconsidering the Practice of Modelling through Manuals of Sculpture Technique, *c.*1880–1933'. *The Journal of Modern Craft* 3, 3 (2010), 309–24. https://doi.org/10.2752/174967810X12868890612286; Kontou, Mills & Nichols 2022, 11.

65 'Konstföreningens exposition och dess katalog', *Hbl*, 27 April 1873; 'Konstföreningens exposition', *HD,* 3 May 1873. See also Lindgren 2025.

66 English translation by author. '[…] emellertid har jag bedt om att få mina 2 arbeten från Konstföreningen anmälda till utställningen […]. […] *Flora* ville jag gerna hafva dit också, men det blir vist först i slutet av expositionen då den skall utföras uti en annan massa i […].' Alina Forsman to Fredrik Cygnaeus Copenhagen, 15 June 1876. Finnish National Gallery Collection, Collection of Artists' Letters.

67 The exhibition catalogue of the Finnish Art Society 1876, 9.

68 'Blickar på utställningen', *HD,* 24 August 1876; 'Utställningen', *Hbl,* 25 August 1876; *Helsingfors Annonsblad,* 24 August 1878; 'Expositionsbesök', *Morgonbladet*, 25 August 1876.

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> […] *it has been executed with great talent by Miss Aline Forsman, who some years ago studied at the Handicraft School in Stockholm.*[69]

Forsman had been on a study trip to Rome from 1873 to 1875. Some women sculptors travelled to Rome for access to materials, as well as customers.[70] Forsman's marble *Checco* suggests that she did not lack ambition in material matters. In 1877 it was mentioned in the press that works by Alina Forsman were made in a range of materials: plaster, metal and marble.[71] A year later, Forsman was struggling because she was short of money, according to a letter written by another pioneering Finnish woman sculptor, Eveliina Särkelä (1847–1939), to the curator of the Finnish Art Society, B. O. Schauman.[72] Forsman herself also complained about her financial situation in a letter to Schauman in 1879. She wrote that because of her shortage of money she could not finish the work, much as she would have liked to. She had to make it only in plaster, and she was herself a caster.[73]

The practice of sculpture demanded various resources; to produce the work in durable sculpture materials such as marble and bronze was expensive, and a studio suitable for making works on a large scale was hard to find.[74] Sculptural production was a collaborative process, and very few sculptors could afford the assistance of skilled professionals and workmen, as was often necessary.[75] Many of the sculptors suffered from a lack of resources. The perceived material importance of the Helsinki exhibition is evident in the sculptors' letters. Many of the participating sculptors had connections to Italy, Carrara or Rome, the city of marble, where they were planning and dreaming of high status marble masterpieces for the exhibition – or at least an order for marble work after the exhibition was over.

The potential of plaster: insights into women's sculpture materials at the end of the 19th century

A new generation of women artists emerged in the 1880s, with the number of women painters exhibiting increasing.[76] However, the proportion of women sculptors remained small in Finland. In 1881, women artists were well represented in the exhibition of the Finnish Art Society, but they were all painters.[77] In 1882, Eveliina Särkelä, the daughter of a clockmaker Anders (Antti) Särkelä (1804–75), was the only woman sculptor, showing one plaster work.[78] In the following year, there were two women; Särkelä and Ida Meller (1856–96), who exhibited two plaster works[79] and became a regular exhibitor in Finland until her early death. Unlike Alina Forsman, Meller showed almost exclusively plaster works. According to her list of works which she had drawn up for her grant application to the Finnish Art Society in 1888, her entire oeuvre, amounting to 14 sculptures dating from 1883 to 1888, was composed in plaster.[80] In

69 English translation by author. '[…] den är med stor talang utförd af fröken Aline Forsman, som för några år sedan åtnjöt undervisning vid Stockholms slöjdskola.' 'Småprat från Finland', *Dagens Nyheter*, 11 August 1876; *Helsingfors Annonsblad,* 24 August 1876.

70 Melissa L. Gustin, 'Edmonia Lewis in Rome', in Tabitha Barber (eds.), *Now You See Us. Women Artists in Britain 1520–1920.* London: Tate Publishing, 2024, 121–22.

71 'Qvinlig sculptor', *FAT,* 7 Feb 1877.

72 Eveliina Särkelä to B. O. Schauman, Copenhagen 24 March, 1878. Finnish National Gallery Collection, Collection of Artists' Letters.

73 Alina Forsman to B. O. Schauman, Bergen 20 Sep 1879. Finnish National Gallery Collection, Collection of Artists' Letters.

74 Tossavainen 2012, 54; Rose 2020*,* 6.

75 Mainardi 2018, 73.

76 Riitta Konttinen, *Totuus enemmän kuin kauneus. Naistaiteilija, realismi ja naturalismi 1880-luvulla.* Helsinki: Otava, 1991, Tables A, B.

77 The exhibition catalogue of the Artists' Association of Finland 1881, 9–10.

78 The exhibition catalogue of the Artists' Association of Finland 1882, 10.

79 The exhibition catalogue of the Artists' Association of Finland 1883,11.

80 Ida Meller to the Finnish Art Society, 30 Nov 1888. Finnish National Gallery Collection, Archive of the Finnish Art Society I: 1846–1939, C Minutes.

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Ida Meller, *Young Girl*, 1890, plaster, 40cm x 18cm x 15cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

the 1880s she was usually the only woman sculptor exhibiting works in the exhibitions of the Finnish Art Society and the Artists' Association of Finland.

It is uncertain what kinds of works or which sculptors were excluded from the exhibitions. In November of 1886, Ida Meller applied to the exhibition by offering two plaster works and a small oil painting.[81] Her two plaster portrait medallions were accepted for the exhibition, but the painting was not. Sigrid af Forselles (1860–1935), then based in Paris, exhibited one bronzed plaster and one bronze work that had been exhibited at the Paris Salon, so various materials were accessible to her.[82]

The recent non-hierarchical approach to materials can reveal a more nuanced picture of the material practice of these sculptors. It is perhaps an oversimplification to assume that all of the sculptors shared the same material ideals and goals. The exhibition catalogues nearly always announced the prices of Meller's plaster works, so her works were for sale. Later, her catalogue texts started to resemble advertisements, and the targets of these texts became more explicit. She wanted to sell, and plaster casts were a business for her. In 1890, in the catalogue for the exhibition of the Finnish Art Society, she advertised that the number of orders could lower the price: the more orders that were made, the lower the price would be.[83] Her pricing strategy was to offer quantity discounts. During the second half of the 19th century plaster casts were displayed in exhibitions for varied purposes. Plaster was an art material that occupied an uneasy position between the unique and the multiple.[84] At the end of her career, Ida Meller made use of this potential for editions. Her plaster work *Young Girl* (1890) is one example.[85] Figures of children were subjects that were considered to be suited to women's talents,[86] and in some cases they could also bring an artist a degree of financial stability.[87] In 1889, the art critic and the pioneering painter Fanny Churberg (1845–92), who wrote under the pseudonym

81 Ida Meller to B. O. Schauman Helsinki, 2 Nov 1886. Finnish National Gallery Collection, Collection of Artists' Letters.
82 The exhibition catalogue of the Artists' Association of Finland 1884, 11; The exhibition catalogue of the Artists' Association of Finland 1886, 5–10, 13.
83 The exhibition catalogue of the Finnish Art Society 1890, 10. The reproduction rights of plaster sculptures by Johannes Takanen eg. Tossavainen 2012, 185–86.
84 Beltzer 2019, 322.
85 'I. Meller, *En liten tös*, 30 mk; I. Meller, *En liten tös*, 30 mk', 'Konstnärsgillets insköpsnämd', *Nya Pressen,* 13 March 1891.
86 Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, *American Women Sculptors. A History of Women Working in Three Dimensions*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990, 99.
87 Melissa L. Gustin, 'Harriet Hosmer's Puck', in Tabitha Barber (ed.)*, Now You See Us. Women Artists in Britain 1520–1920.* London: Tate Publishing, 2024, 120–21.

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of -y, described the nature of one of Meller's sculptures as commercial in her art review.[88] In the 19th century, developments in art materials opened up new possibilities for women to participate in making and exhibiting sculpture.[89] Clay and plaster works such as Meller's were fragile, and therefore many of the works have disappeared, which has influenced the picture of the sculpture of the era, even though small plaster works were fundamental to the sculpture of the time. In addition, Meller's teacher at the Polytechnic Institute in Helsinki, C. E. Sjöstrand, prepared plaster works that were purchased by the lotteries.[90]

In search of the modern: craft and lost-wax bronze

There was a global revival of lost-wax casting in the late 19th century; it was only in Italy that the technique had continued since antiquity, and was regularly practised. In many other European countries, including France, lost-wax casting had long been forgotten. During the 18th century, sand casting became increasingly common for bronze, and between approximately 1850 and 1880 it was the predominant method of bronze casting in Europe. Transnational exchange of knowledge about the lost-wax technique, as well as the influence of Italian immigrants, helped France, for instance, develop its bronze-casting industry.[91] In Finland, it was particularly the sculptors working abroad, or who had international contacts, who became interested in the modern revival of lost-wax casting. In the late 19th century, bronze was considered to be superior to other materials.[92] Scandinavian sculptors and founders were eager to travel to Italy, Florence, and Naples, and then at end of the 19th century to France. During their journeys to Italy, they were interested in seeing for themselves how to cast in bronze *cire perdue*.[93]

Johan Erland Stenberg, *Portrait Medallion of J. J. Nervander*, 1878, bronze, 47.5cm x 41cm Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

The two aspects of the sculptural process are the idea and the execution. As stated by Marthina Droth, by the 1880s the question of how sculpture was made had become more relevant.[94] Although the geographical context of her article is Britain, some sculptors active in Finland were also pondering the practice of sculpture around 1880. Even though the number of sculptors active in Finland was closer to 10 at that time, the first sculptors were materially orientated and valued the execution. As early as 1881, Erland Stenberg announced in an exhibition catalogue that he had cast a portrait medallion of J. J. Nervander in bronze, in Oulu, in 1878.[95] Stenberg also showed interest in bronze casting in his application to the Finnish Art Society for a travel grant in September 1886. He had set himself the goal of studying bronze casting as well as Renaissance sculpture in Florence. In his application, he argued that there was a work in the collection of the Finnish Art Society that he had cast in bronze himself;[96] he was referring once again to the portrait medallion of J. J. Nervander (1878),

88 -y, 'De i Ateneum utställda konstverken', *Finland* 29 May 1889.
89 Kontou, Miller & Nichols 2022, 3.
90 Tolvanen 1952, 151.
91 Sharon Hecker, 'Introduction', in Sharon Hecker (ed.), *Finding Lost Wax. The Disappearance and Recovery of an Ancient Casting Technique and the Experiments of Medardo Rosso*, Studies in Art and Materiality Series 3. Leiden: Brill, 2021, 254–55.
92 Veronika Wiegartz, 'The Subtlety of Surface. Thoughts on the Revival of the Lost Wax Technique in Late Nineteenth-Century Germany', in Sharon Hecker (ed.), *Finding Lost Wax. The Disappearance and Recovery of an Ancient Casting Technique and the Experiments of Medardo Rosso*. Leiden: Brill, 2021, 93–114.
93 Tossavainen 2012, 160–82.
94 Martina Droth, 'The Ethics of Making. Craft and English Sculptural Aesthetics *c*.1851–1900'. *Journal of Design History* 17 No. 3, 2004 (221–35), 229. https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/17.3.221.
95 The exhibition catalogue of the Finnish Art Society in 1881, 10.
96 Erland Stenberg to the Finnish Art Society, Jyväskylä, 27 Sep 1886. Finnish National Gallery Collection, Archive of the Finnish Art Society I: 1846–1939, C Minutes.

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Emil Wikström, *Mother and Child*, 1900, marble, 87cm x 53cm x 40cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum, Antell Collections
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Matti Janas

which was purchased for the collection in 1881.[97] Despite this, the absence of any consideration of Stenberg's early interest in bronze casting is evident in the research literature on the history of sculpture.

One of the well-known pioneers of Finnish bronze casting was the sculptor Emil Wikström. His persistent curiosity about bronze casting throughout his career led him from experiments to co-operation with manufacturers. He became familiar with the lost-wax process in Italy in 1889–90. Wikström was convinced that it would be possible for him to cast in bronze using this method. He began experimenting during his time in Paris, when he was preparing monument commissions. However, bronze casting was often a well-kept professional secret; those working in the bronze foundries were not willing to disclose any details of their methods to others. In addition, Wikström did not intend to buy the bronze casting patent of the Swedish sculptor Hugo Elmqvist (1862–1930), who tried to sell his patent in Finland. Therefore, for Wikström experimenting with bronze himself seemed to be the only possible way to learn. As early as 1884, during his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, he thought of the artist as a craftsman.[98]

At the end of the 19th century, Paris became the centre for sculpture and the leader in the industry of bronze casting.[99] The large-scale sculptures were the most demanding; before the turn of the century sculptors and the other sculpture-related practitioners who were active in Finland did not possess the technology to execute such large-scale bronze sculptures and monuments. For instance, the Parisian foundry E. Gruet Jeune was responsible for casting the tympanum group for the House of the Estates (1903), by Wikström.[100] Wikström worked in Paris from 1897–1902 and lived in the artist colony at Boulevard Arago 65. His circle of Scandinavians included, for instance, the Swedish artist Carolina Benedicks-Bruce (1856–1935), the Danish artist Niels Hansen Jacobsen (1861–1941), and the Swede Carl Eldh (1873–1954). Eldh also worked as Wikström's assistant on the monument projects for the tympanum group and the monument of Elias Lönnrot.[101] Most 19th-century sculptures were made in either bronze or marble,[102] and Wikström also executed marble works, such as *Mother and Child* (1900), alongside his monument works and bronze experiments. When Eldh began working with marble he could therefore ask for advice from Wikström.[103]

97 See the Collection Search website of the Finnish National Gallery: https://kokoelma.kansallisgalleria.fi/en/object/552462 (accessed 2 June 2026).
98 Tossavainen 2012, 91–95, 147–52, 155.
99 Hecker 2021, 1–8; Elisabeth Lebon, 'Sculptor-Founders in Late Nineteenth-Century France. The Role of Lost-Wax Casting', in Sharon Hecker (ed.), *Finding Lost Wax. The Disappearance and Recovery of an Ancient Casting Technique and the Experiments of Medardo Rosso*, Studies in Art and Materiality Series 3. Leiden: Brill, 2021, 18–65.
100 Tossavainen 2012, 160–82.
101 Ibid., 124–38; Mari Tossavainen, *Emil Wikström. Kuvien veistäjä*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2016, 86–109.
102 Curtis 1999, 75.
103 Tossavainen 2012, 134.

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Most sources suggest that the Finnish sculptor Hilda Flodin (1877–1958) had aspirations to cast a work in bronze. She inquired about techniques and materials, showing interest especially in bronze casting. In her letter of September 1901, written before her journey to Italy, she asked Wikström for advice about the lost-wax method, enquiring 'What is the easiest way to cast in bronze?'.[104] From her point of view, bronze casting seemed to be a secret, or a huge task that was hard to tackle. She had no confidence in her own abilities to cast bronze. In addition, she had found it difficult to find a proper bronze caster in Helsinki.[105] She showed one bronze bust of Gustaf Adolf Fast in the exhibition of the Artists' Association of Finland in 1900.[106] As the use of natural stone became more popular in architecture, Flodin designed the decorative stone sculptures for the Pohjola company building (1901) in Helsinki.[107] Flodin was a pupil and an assistant to Auguste Rodin in Paris, and in her letters to Rodin in June 1906, written after returning to Finland, she expressed her admiration and gratitude for his guidance.[108]

Emil Wikström, *My Only Comfort*, 1904, bronze
Photographer Daniel Nyblin, *c.*1904.
A positive image of a glass plate negative.
Finnish National Gallery Collection, Picture Collection of Werner Söderström Ltd
Photo: Finnish National Gallery

It was a new development that so many sculptors wished to make their works themselves and be involved with the process. Another aspect of this development was that, from the late 19th century, wood sculpture became highly esteemed in Finland, although earlier it had been an undervalued material, being used mainly in a sculptors' formative years. In 1900, wood reliefs by Eemil Halonen (1875–1950) were exhibited at the Paris World Exhibition. In the second half of the 19th century, a deeper interest in methods of production and materials emerged. The craft of sculpture making, that is to say, the diverse practical skills involved in the process, became more vital to sculptural practice because of the multitude of materials other than marble and bronze that were at the forefront of sculpture. Before this, neoclassical sculptors did not place a high value on the manual 'labour' of sculpting, and they generally kept some distance from the real activities of sculpture-making. The 'labour' of sculpture-making was a task for others, such as workmen, assistants, or pupils.[109]

Emil Wikström established a small foundry in his Visavuori studio in 1903. That same year, at the exhibition of the Artists' Association of Finland, plaster sculpture was very much in the minority, used in only eight out of a total of 30 works. Wikström exhibited seven works, of which four were in bronze. In this exhibition he also exhibited a couple of works of bronze casting experiments, which were marks of originality. The next year, in 1904, there was an important step forward in bronze casting, as Wikström exhibited two bronzes that he had cast himself, *My Only Comfort* and *Poor Children*.[110] Similarly, in an exhibition catalogue from 1881 Erland Stenberg deliberately underlined the fact that he had cast a work in bronze and carried out the work himself.[111]

In 1905, Wikström did not participate in the exhibition of the Artists' Association of Finland, but it can be easily seen that bronze had become a more popular material. Seventeen out of 37 exhibited sculptures were bronzes.[112] Wikström became more and more interested in art foundries and serial production. In December 1918 he became one of the founders of the Taito company, which owned a foundry. In those years, it also became possible to cast large-scale bronze monuments in Finland.[113]

104 Hilda Flodin to Emil Wikström Helsinki, 19 Sep 1901. The Manuscript Collection, Archive of Emil Wikström, NLF; Tossavainen 2012, 153.
105 Tossavainen 2012, 153–55, 163–64.
106 The exhibition catalogue of the Artists' Association of Finland in 1900, 29.
107 Tossavainen 2012, 294–95; Sixten Ringbom, *Stone, Style and Truth. The Vogue for Natural Stone in Nordic Architecture 1880–1910.* Helsinki: The Finnish Antiquarian Society, 1987, 169–73.
108 Tossavainen 2012, 120–23.
109 Curtis 1999, 79; Droth 2004, 221–35.
110 Tossavainen 2012, 155–60.
111 The exhibition catalogue of the Finnish Art Society 1881, 10.
112 The exhibition catalogue of the Artists' Association of Finland 1905, 24–27.
113 Tossavainen 2012, 172–82.

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Conclusion

This article has examined the materiality of sculpture from the point of view of art infrastructures and the participation of the sculptors in public exhibitions. The case study of the first Finnish art and industry exhibition in this article shows that both material limits and possibilities were evident and complicated in the practices of sculptors in the late 19th century and early 20th century. In Britain, new possibilities for sculptural production went hand in hand with new arenas for display.[114] Likewise in Finland, new arenas for display encouraged sculptors to make new material efforts.

There were major changes in sculpture during this time, and the material world of sculpture was multifaceted. Nineteenth-century sculpture is characterised by both new materials and technologies and older craft traditions.[115] The durable materials of sculpture and artistic originality were both of great importance in the exhibition context. In 1876, marble held the position as the most valued material for high-status sculpture in the Helsinki exhibition, while plaster was common to all sculptors in the exhibition context. However, since the end of the 19th century bronze casting had become an international phenomenon, reaching Finland too. From the 1880s until the 1910s, sculptors expressed a continuing interest in bronze casting. This article has shown that Erland Stenberg also had a keen interest in bronze casting. The development of bronze casting led to serial production in Finland. However, there were also other parallel material phenomena, such as the popularity of wood sculpture and natural stone, which underpinned, eg., representing the values of nation building. Marble continued to be highly esteemed, although it was less visible than earlier. The sculptors considered how to attract attention when they selected their works of art to display; the self-made bronze sculptures could spread knowledge of their skills and demonstrate their originality.

There was a dynamic between the national and the global in the sculptor's work. Over the course of the long 19th century, sculptors obtained access to many more material options than they had before. Especially for those who lived or worked abroad for a longer period, such as Walter Runeberg, usually they had access to many choices of materials. They could show their whole material cavalcade in the annual exhibitions organised in Finland. Furthermore, this article indicates that Rome had an impact on the sculpture section of the Helsinki exhibition of 1876, as some of the major works of the participants, such as marbles by Walter Runeberg, *Checco* by Alina Forsman, and *Amor* by Robert Stigell, emerged as a result of them working in Rome. The artists made long-term plans for the Helsinki exhibition, and their ultimate goal was to exhibit marble works. Another marble dream, that of Johannes Takanen and Erland Stenberg, was to find a patron or a buyer who would be willing to pay for a work to be carved in marble. There was a close connection between crafts and sculpture in Finland. By examining the materiality of sculpture, this article suggests directions for future research that would benefit greatly from a combination of technical examination and art-historical analysis, as recently explored in studies of Finnish 19th-century painting.[116]

Art history has put great emphasis on the linear trajectory of sculptural development, at the expense of rich material interest.[117] Material opportunities for women sculptors were sometimes scant, but some realised the potential of plaster. Plaster was not just for sketch plans or one phase in the process of making; it could be used for a small work itself. Moreover, the plaster casts provided sculptors with an income due to their reproducibility. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, sculptors were in search of the 'new', and the use of various materials in different forms served this dream of the modern.

114 Hatt, Droth & Edwards 2014, 15–55.
115 Ibid., 30–31.
116 Eg. Katariina Johde, Anne-Maria Pennonen & Hanne Tikkala, 'Power of Paint. Fanny Churberg's Technique in Context'. *FNG Research*, No 3, 2025. https://fngresearch.wpcomstaging.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/fngr_2025-3_johde_pennonen_tikkala_article1_fixed.pdf (accessed 1 June 2026).
117 Hatt, Droth & Edwards 2014, 30.