



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 9, Issue 1

Summer 2026

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 May 2026

Date of Publication: 22 July 2026

Citation: Timo Huusko, 'Finnish Journeys Through Vitality and Depression: Uuno Eskola's Self-Perception as an Artist and Social Climber', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 9.1 (2026), pp. 53-69.

volupte.gold.ac.uk



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Finnish Journeys Through Vitality and Depression: Uuno Eskola's Self-Perception as an Artist and Social Climber¹

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Alhaiso minua irvailee. Porvarit pitävät tyhjätoimittajana, loiseläjänä. Sivistyneistö on suosiollinen, mutta ei voi tukea, koska on köyhää. Heidänkään piirissä en viihdy: en voi olla sovinainen.

[The lower classes mock me. The bourgeoisie see me as an idle, a loafer. The educated class is sympathetic but cannot support me because they are poor. I do not feel at home even among them: I cannot be conciliatory.]²

– Uuno Eskola to Ludvig Wennervirta, undated letter (c. 1920)

Uuno Eskola (1889–1958) was a young Finnish artist and writer who saw himself as a misfit, not belonging to any fixed community or social class. As an artist, he was certainly an outsider. Like many other young male artists who started their careers in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Eskola came from a rural background and was the child of uneducated parents. However, he was an aesthete and a dandy who was aware of his good looks and often posed for photographs. His writings, which reveal a sense of insecurity and a desire for life, fluctuate between confidence and despair. His paintings, on the other hand, are characterized by imagery associated with agrarian nationalism. He painted both rural landscapes and works inspired by the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*.³

At first glance, Eskola is difficult to classify within the framework of decadence, especially if the archetype of a decadent artist is considered to be an urbane upper-class aesthete like Jean Floressas des Esseintes in J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884), disillusioned with the superficiality of an industrialized and materialistic society and seeking refuge in themes and pleasures deemed degenerative in petty bourgeois circles. However, this quintessential decadent figure appears somewhat different when the analysis is expanded to the Nordic context, particularly given the progressive thinking that influenced Finland, Norway, and Estonia.⁴ In these cultural frameworks,

material progress was regarded as a sacred mission, an ideal national task which could not be tainted by extreme naturalism or societal, decay-driven pessimism. Inner weakness or unsuitability for such a national endeavour may then have appeared as decadent and anti-modern traits.⁵ Although decadence is traditionally associated with the *fin de siècle*, it can be observed that industrialization and societal materialization arrived belatedly in countries such as Finland, and the belief in progress and the decay it caused extended into the interwar period.⁶

A notable feature of Finnish history is the bloody Civil War that followed the collapse of the German and Russian empires. Combined with a new Nietzschean vision of humanity, this brought the Spenglerian visions of Western decline and the vitality of young nations to the forefront. Feelings of degeneration and regeneration played a significant role in Finnish cultural life after the First World War and the Civil War between January-May 1918.⁷ These sentiments are evident not only in the work of Eskola, but also in the work of another painter, Mikko Carlstedt

(1892–1964), a bohemian who admired Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne in his youth. However, in 1924, he moved from Helsinki back to the countryside in Sääksmäki, where he was born, and thereafter focused on themes depicting rural landscapes and rural ways of life.⁸ Nevertheless, his writings reveal a sense of artistic inferiority and an inability to adapt to the duties of a model citizen or to promote the national good, connecting him to the concept of decadence.

In this article, I analyse Eskola's artistic identity as well as Carlstedt's identity formation, to some extent, and their possible connection to Finland's late and marginal decadence. I will also explore how their reflection on degeneration and regeneration relates to the agrarian-centric nationalist ideas of the period. My main sources include Eskola's unpublished autobiography and his biographical novel *Veren viettelyksestä* [The Allure of Blood] (1923), as well as Carlstedt's correspondence with the art historian Ludvig Wennervirta.

Eskola's upstart profile

Eskola was born near the market town of Salo in south-west Finland. His father was a merchant who had failed in business and his mother came from a peasant family. His volatile father did not allow him to attend school, instead encouraging him to become a tailor. The boy moved away from home to live in Salo, where he attended elementary school privately. He later returned to his childhood home, where he and his father bonded over making clothes and caricatures. According to Uuno Eskola, they were both ridiculed for this.⁹ After his father was stabbed to death, Eskola's childhood home was auctioned off and the family moved to a rented house in Salo. Uuno took over the shop that his brother had started, but he was more interested in organizing theatre evenings and learning the basics of the visual arts. He took lessons in poetry recitation and painting in Turku, where his painting teacher was the artist Edvin Lydén. Located about 50 kilometres from Salo, Turku was the former capital of Finland and, alongside Helsinki, the second Finnish city to offer art education. In 1912, Eskola had a cover illustration accepted for the *Karisto* Christmas magazine, and his poems were published in local newspapers. In Salo, he had befriended Erkki Karu, a future pioneer of Finnish cinema, and together they founded their own theatre company. Among the visual artists in Salo, Matti Warén became a close friend of Eskola's. However, according to Eskola's family members, it was time for him to stop fooling around with the arts. Karu told him to decide quickly whether he wanted to be a businessman, a writer, or a painter., and in August 1914, aged 25, Eskola was accepted to study at the Finnish Art Society's drawing school in Helsinki.¹⁰ When his friend Warén left for a study trip to Paris at the same time, Eskola found it almost incomprehensible that anyone could go there 'full of faith in the future, certain of his purpose in life and skilled in his profession'.¹¹ Eskola's uncertainty gradually eased towards the end of 1914 when he started to paint with Warén, who had just returned from Paris. Even before then, Eskola had received special permission to attend the opening of the autumn salon exhibition at the Ateneum in Helsinki, where he was impressed by Tyko Sallinen's paintings. He was inspired by the fact that the work had 'a new vision and a burst of primal energy'.¹² The following year, Eskola participated in a joint exhibition of artists from Salo, and, confident in his artistic abilities,

he gave up his merchant business in 1916. However, his artworks did not sell well, and he began to doubt his artistic talent again. To support himself, he made covers for hospital stretchers required during the war.¹³

This brief biography highlights the many challenges faced by emerging artists during a transitional period following the dissolution of the estate society.¹⁴ Firstly, they had no inherited wealth from their families and their income relied solely on the sale of their art. Secondly, beyond their immediate circle of fellow artists, the profession of an artist was generally not understood by their wider community. Thirdly, their life was characterized by uncertainty about their own skills and, more broadly, about their identity as an artist and the importance of their profession. Eskola's situation was also typical in Finland at the time, where artistic pursuits were less about gaining financial wealth and more about rising from the lower classes to join the educated elite.¹⁵

Ideals of the Young Republic

Social events also shaped Eskola's identity. The labour movement's strike that began in spring 1917, which foreshadowed civil war, food shortages, and high inflation, caused him great distress.¹⁶ During the brief period of revolutionary rule by the Reds – the revolutionary socialists in Finland – some of Eskola's friends were detained and he himself felt persecuted as though he was a criminal. After the Whites – those who supported the bourgeois senate in the country – took control of Turku and organized a parade there in April 1918, Eskola wrote the poem 'Vapaudelle' [To Freedom].¹⁷ The Finnish Senate had actually declared the country independent on 6 December 1917. However, it was not until the end of the Civil War in April 1918 that the institutions necessary for public administration could be established. Additionally, the threat of falling under the influence of the German Empire meant that the United States and Britain did not recognize Finland's independence until spring 1919. The nation-building project of the young republic truly commenced only in July that year.¹⁸

The way Eskola and Carlstedt saw themselves was similar to the ideas that were most common in Finland during the 1920s and 1930s. In this context, Oswald Spengler's idea of the vitality of Finland's emerging culture in relation to a mature Europe and its old cultures is worth highlighting. The idealization of physical sports culture that developed in Finland, and the successes of Finnish athletes at the Olympic Games in the 1920s and 1930s, symbolized and reinforced the idea of the vitality of young Finland. Another ideological undercurrent was the agrarian-nationalist and Protestant interpretation of civic virtues. This was linked to emphasizing the Finnish language, sanctifying one's own country, maintaining a strict work ethic, and upholding *Sittlichkeit* [high moral standards] in family life. In Finland, there is a tradition of referring to a period of national consolidation which aimed specifically to ensure that the perception of the people by the educated and cultural elite would once again emphasize their virtue, hard work, and eagerness to learn. At the same time, there was a desire to forget the fear of the people's primitiveness that had been created by the activities of the Reds during the Civil War.¹⁹ In terms of cultural policy, this also meant that certain groups sought to make Finnish culture more accessible to the peasantry.²⁰ The period of national consolidation in Finland (*Kansallinen eheytyminen*) is a unique phenomenon within the European context, shaped by a fear of the urban proletariat, on the one hand, and an emphasis on agrarian community and high moral standards, on the other. Traces of this kind of idealization of work and fatherland can be seen in countries such as France during the interwar period, but Finnish development is closer to that of countries which, like Finland, had recently gained independence, such as like Norway, Estonia, and Latvia, and where the majority of citizens were able to receive an education in their native language.²¹ There are also examples of agrarian nationalism in Eskola's paintings, as in *Perunannosto* [Potato Harvesting] (1936), held in the Finnish National Gallery.

Perhaps one manifestation of Finland's peripheral and temporarily delayed decadence can be seen in the experience of personal weakness and decline in relation to the normative, masculine ethics of the young republic described above. In the summer of 1918, after the Civil War, Eskola

invited Sallinen to paint at his home in Salo. According to Eskola, Sallinen had been in military uniform, ‘niinkuin yleensä miehet siihen aikaan’ [as men usually were at that time].²² Under Sallinen’s leadership, they began to work diligently. Eskola describes Sallinen’s temperament as strikingly turbulent and expressive, while portraying himself as a melancholic and quiet mystic at heart. Eskola notes that Sallinen’s primal energy, revolutionary manner, and fierce enthusiasm for creating something new gave him clarity and courage to assert his own means of expression. They also discussed art extensively, even though Sallinen was generally of the opinion that one should not get stuck on talking nonsense but just paint.²³

The primeval power and rawness evident in Sallinen’s art are connected to the popularity of Expressionist art, which was enabled by the widespread interest in Wilhelm Worringer’s ideas in Finland during the late 1910s. Influenced by life philosophy, Worringer played a vital role in this movement. In 1915, art critic Ludvig Wennervirta introduced Finnish newspaper readers to Paul Fechter’s book *Der Expressionismus* (1914), which highlighted the inner expression and primitivism of form in Expressionism. This was based on Worringer’s ideas about the drive towards abstraction in the art of northern peoples, contrasting with the ‘empathy’ or *Einfühlung* of the Mediterranean peoples, meaning their ability to relate confidently to the surrounding world. Fechter’s book traces the tendency towards abstraction from ancient times through the Gothic and Baroque periods to Expressionism, reflecting the psyche or national spirit of northern peoples. In 1922, in the first biography written about Sallinen, Aaro Hellaakoski discussed Sallinen’s painting *Hibbulit* [Fanatics] (1919). Many believed that Sallinen conveyed ancient Finnish instincts through his art, which was deeply rooted in Finnish soil.²⁴ Eskola was often accused of imitating Sallinen’s painting style, which, as he stated, embittered him and led to physical illness.²⁵ There are indeed similarities in their modes of painting, which can be seen, for instance, in Eskola’s painting *Maisema Salosta* [Landscape from Salo] (1917).

From today’s perspective, the notion of national character and the idea that art could embody the spirit of a nation seems odd, to say the least. However, in the early years of the

twentieth century, it was commonplace. The Swedish-language art critic Signe Tandefelt, for example, might mention national traits as a standard reference point, but she did not disapprove of incorporating foreign influences. She also accepted the idea that northern artists were less advanced than those in the south, who were associated with colour, sensuality, and rationality. Like Worringer, she believed that wildness, lack of control, and the unconscious belonged to the more irrational north, particularly German culture. In contrast, art critic and painter Sigrid Schauman stated at the Artists' Association's anniversary exhibition in 1924 that '[d]et är inte svårt att förstå huru nära kubism i förening med expressionism står för oss, ty tyngd och uttryck är väl egentligen vår väsen' [it is easy to understand that Cubism and Expressionism are well suited to us when combined, as there is a heaviness and expressiveness in our very essence]'.²⁶

The individuality and collectivity of vitalism

The vitalist philosophy of life emphasized primal energy and introduced the ideas of a spiritual connection between humans and nature, presenting it as an immediate experience and a source of empathy. In *L'Évolution créatrice* [*Creative Evolution*] (1907), Henri Bergson contrasted reason and intuition, with the latter emerging victorious as it leads to the truth and essence of life through its instinctiveness.²⁷ The ideas of the German philosopher Ludvig Klages were also known in Finland. His philosophy of life emphasized the distinction between the soul and the rational mind, favouring the former. Soulfulness expressed a rediscovered connection to the roots of the earth. Klages' work *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* [The Spirit as the Adversary of the Soul], published between 1929 and 1932, in which *der Geist*, means 'the spirit', was opposed to the vitalist 'soul', *die Seele*, and was also linked to the ideology of the German National Socialists.²⁸ This way of thinking, or a more or less superficial adoption of it, is clearly evident in the views of Carlstedt's acquaintance, the painter Väinö Kamppuri, who said:

Vuonna 1924-1925 tein syvän ja tiukan päätöksen ruveta ilmentämään töissäni suomalaista luontoa. Hartain toiveeni on ollut, osaltani Suomen kansalaisena saavuttaa ammattialallani parhainta, sellaista minkä rehellisellä mielellä voin tälle kansalle jättää. Maalaustaiteenkin

tulisi olla kansansa kasvattaja ja kasvattaja siten, että rehellinen kansalainen löytää ja näkee siinä syvästi kaipaamaansa sielun ja hengen väijäämätöntä totuutta. Eikö niin? Suomen kansallahan on erikoisen voimakas rehellisyyden jano. Kyllä sielullinen ilmaisu täytyy näyttäytyä työstä. Luonnostahan on turvallista lähteä.

[In 1924-1925, I made a deep and firm decision to begin expressing Finnish nature in my work. My heartfelt wish has been, as a Finnish citizen, to achieve the best in my profession, something that I can leave to this nation with a clear conscience. Painting, too, should be an educator of the people, so that honest citizens can find and see in it the inevitable truth of the soul and spirit that they deeply long for. Is that not so? The Finnish people have a particularly strong thirst for honesty. Yes, soulful expression must be evident in one's work. It is safe to start from nature.]²⁹

Liisa Lindgren has observed that the emphasis on individuality typical of vitalism has resulted in an imprecise, unanalytical doctrine that highlights personal character and the simplicity and innocence of impulses. This is presumably connected to Kamppuri's discussion of honesty. After viewing the works of Finnish artist Marcus Collin in Copenhagen in 1919, Eskola remarked that an artist who uses honest means of expression reveals their roots unintentionally.³⁰

The vitalistic ethos aligned effortlessly with the era's depictions of nature, particularly when influenced by Nietzsche. However, it conflicted with national interests to a certain extent. The agrarian-nationalist image of the people at that time was also shaped by the neo-humanist and bourgeois ethics of nineteenth-century Finnish social thinkers J. W. Snellman and Zacharias Topelius, who both significantly influenced Finnish upper-class culture. According to this ideal, people should be educated to understand what benefits the nation and, in the spirit of Hegel, they should become part of the national spirit under divine providence – first as members of their families and then as members of their work communities.³¹ In the 1910s, this idealism was replaced by many younger artists with Nietzsche's concept of the superhuman. In 1907 Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*] (1883-1885) was published in Finnish. In this context, a key feature of Finnish decadence emerges: a somewhat vague emphasis on individuality rather than the collective good of the nation, inspired by Nietzsche. Kamppuri, a close friend of Carlstedt, noted that they knew the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Nietzsche, and Spengler by heart.³² Tagore's inclusion here may seem surprising, but he is remembered for saying that people express

themselves through art, not objects. In the Finnish context of the 1910s, self-expression in art often meant creating unrestrained, emotionally powerful works. Nietzsche's view aligned well with the emotionalist aesthetics of that era. His perspective was partly based on the idea that life is governed by instincts and desires, which he considered to be animalistic and primitive. According to Nietzsche, the deepest core of beings, the *Ur-Ein*, which art aims to reach, can be attained through instinctive immediacy. The purpose of art is not to depict reality as it is, but to actively enhance life, transferring vitality from the artist to the receiver.³³ Adopting these philosophical doctrines in a non-analytical, seemingly straightforward manner and relying on hearsay or second-hand information from artist friends, reduces these artists' fundamental principles to a kind of vulgar philosophy. This makes it difficult to trace their thinking back to its primary sources and undermines their intellectual validity. Conversely, it could be argued that this kind of 'vulgar thinking' is precisely what makes peripheral art forms unique and that they should be studied in light of their specific characteristics in, as Piotr Piotrowski, who introduced the concept of horizontal art history, has noted.³⁴

However, in 1920s Finland, there was a desire to restrain passions because popular movements, particularly mass gatherings associated with the labour movement and the desire for change they expressed, tended to increase suspicion between the upper classes and the first-generation educated intelligentsia descended from the lower classes. These gatherings also took on characteristics of mass hysteria. Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* [*The Crowd*] (1895) was translated into Finnish in 1912 and emphasized how crowd behaviour and propaganda can cloud the individual's consciousness and impair their ability to reason. Judgement and emotional control, or the ability to regulate one's passions and instincts, were considered hallmarks of the educated Westerner. In contemporary Finland, ideas about racial heritage were connected to class distinctions and one's native language. These ideas also led to the first generation of educated artists being regarded as too primitive and weak to be civilized because the 'veren ääni' [voice of the blood] – a metaphor widely used in Finland to describe the psyche of the social climbers – was

still too strong and the wild, primitive instincts remained dangerously close.³⁵ Artists like Eskola faced the challenge of rising social status, where the desire to become civilized conflicted with the need to unleash what was deemed to be primitive, atavistic life energy.

The allure of blood

Eskola's novel *Veren viettelyksestä* [The Allure of Blood], published in 1923 and regarded as a coming-of-age story, exemplifies his vitalistic worldview but also reveals his inferiority complexes and unstable artistic identity. Initially, the main character, Eskola's alter ego Esko Haapala, is pessimistic, asserting that one should not pursue art because it does not provide a livelihood and fails to make one a wealthy gentleman. Conversely, he considers school knowledge useless and believes one should not see oneself as special but rather be content with one's lot.³⁶ He thought self-study was a waste of time when there was no solid foundation to build upon.³⁷ Yet, he possessed an innate need for rigorous self-improvement and recognized that his striving was not for reputation but to become a good person and broaden his mind. His fellow artist Antti Vares (Matti Warén), who had gone to Paris, directed him to focus his intellect on capturing the spirit of the modern age in art.³⁸ His view of art thereafter emphasized indomitable will and healthy vitality, as the materialistic petty bourgeoisie had scorned him and seen him as a useless beggar living on charity.³⁹ In his view, freedom in art was always attained through suffering and pain. Eskola's perspectives were also influenced by the renowned German painter Oskar Kokoschka, to whom the narrator of the book refers, and who was a professor at the Dresden Art Academy from 1919 to 1920, during which time Eskola attended the private art school *Der Weg – Schule für Gestaltung*, founded by Edmund Kesting.⁴⁰ The book suggests that the ideas about the inner life of painting and fighting for artistic freedom through the power of love originated from Kokoschka himself: 'Maailman tahraiset kädet puristavat sitä, joka uskaltaa tallata auki vapauden tietä – kohti valoa ja totuutta.' [The world's dirty hands squeeze those who dare to tread the path of freedom – towards light and truth.]⁴¹ At the end of the book, there is a dreamlike scene in which the ill Esko

Haapala imagines people in his Finnish homeland accusing him of wastefulness and debauchery because he rejected his fiancée, who belonged to an estate family. In his dream, he watches the lifeblood of the earth drying up until a light or a love comes from the sky, and the earth begins to melt. However, hatred, envy, and the devil prevail, and Haapala dies. At his funeral, a friend emphasizes that people like Haapala, who have succeeded through their own efforts, need understanding, compassion, and forgiveness, even if they sometimes go too far due to the allure of their blood because they cannot be conciliatory by nature.⁴² This view unties Eskola's vitalistic artistic ethos, which yearns for new creation, with its opposite: a bourgeois, conciliatory world that has been corrupted by materialism. In this sense, Eskola is truly decadent, albeit peripheral.

The relationship between Eskola, who was seeking spiritual enlightenment, and Sallinen was not always smooth. Eskola recalls that when they were in Salo in 1925, he had agreed to read poems to the local gentry. While he was doing so, however, Sallinen shouted, 'Älä helvetissä! Lopeta jo!' [For God's sake, stop!]⁴³ When Eskola continued, Sallinen pushed him so forcefully that Eskola's jacket was torn. In other words, Sallinen, who embodied the traditional male ideal, found Eskola's behaviour too effeminate. Eskola was something of a dandy and probably did not want to conform to prevailing masculine norms.⁴⁴ Carlstedt, however, seems to have had a complex relationship with his own masculinity. As early as 1913, he wrote to his fellow student Arvo Makkonen that 'Usein ajattelen mikäköhän tällaisella miehellä on tarkoituksena elää, sentimentaalisen epämiehekäs kun olen joka hermoani myöten ja harmittaa niin sanattomasti se, etten voi peittää sentimentalisuuttani.' [I often wonder what the purpose of life is for a man like me, who is sentimental and unmanly to the core, and it annoys me so much that I cannot hide my sentimentality.]⁴⁵ Later, in 1928, Carlstedt envied Ludvig Wennervirta for being a Snellmanian nation-builder who devoted his time to public service and moved the world forward. He felt like an invalid because he could not build anything himself.⁴⁶ Still, he valued rural life, perhaps as a necessary form of self-affirmation, as evidenced in his 1930 assertion that human life is at least worth something in the country. He did not want to travel abroad because if, as he wrote, '[j]os on

tyhjät sisusvärkit, niin ei hyödytä mennä sisuksia täyttämään kaikenmaailman ihanuuksilla, sillä kyllä se niin on ettei kannettu vesi kaivossa pysy' [you are empty inside, there is no point in going to fill yourself with all the wonders of the world, because it is true that water carried in a bucket will not stay in the well].⁴⁷ The previous year, he had been invited to participate in an exhibition of Finnish art in Stockholm, but he felt he had nothing to send there. It would have taken a great deal of self-overestimation for him to send his scribbles all the way there, as he put it. In any case, he did not understand why the Finns would have anything to show in the field of art at that time. In his opinion, Stockholm was still acceptable, but he could not comprehend the idea of exhibiting Finnish art in Paris.⁴⁸ It is worth noting here that Carlstedt's feelings of inferiority align with the sentiments of backwardness common among artists in Northern countries and are indicative of decadent pessimism.⁴⁹ Like Eskola, Carlstedt also painted agrarian landscapes and motifs, of which one example is a Cézanne-like *Jänis, asetelma* [Still-life with Hare] (1921).

Carlstedt's fear of primitivism

During their painting trips in the summers of the 1920s and 1930s, many artists visited Carlstedt in Sääksmäki and writers also enjoyed staying there with his brother Kalle. The location's popularity can be seen as one of the less-explored aspects of the appeal of the agrarian community and anti-modern centres in Finnish art history. In Carlstedt's case, instinct and the countryside seem to be interconnected principles guiding his art. In 1932, he wrote to Wennervirta that they shared a very similar approach to painting, which he indicated was largely based on instinct. He added that he felt instinct, 'if not overly restricted, could serve as a sensitive and reliable guide [...] pointing you in the right direction when you listen to it – otherwise, I am not very keen on discussing "art matters"'.⁵⁰ This comment also perfectly illustrates how hesitant people were to discuss the deeper aspects of intuitive experience. Carlstedt's view aligns with Bergson's idea that there is a sort of veil between truth and humans, which only some exceptional individuals can lift

through the power of intuition.⁵¹ However, I have found no evidence that the artists discussed here have directly mentioned Bergson in their speeches or writings.

Carlstedt was a close friend of Ilmari Vuori, whose painting style was closer to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* than Carlstedt's. Vuori attempted to persuade Carlstedt to move to Helsinki. The Carlstedt family often spent the winter months (probably because Carlstedt's wife was born) in Helsinki. In October 1929, Vuori wrote from Porvoo about wintering in Helsinki:

eläähän siellä muutkin. Työntekomahdollisuudet täällä ovat yhtä hyvät, stilleben mahdollisuudet paremmat – ajattele H:gin toria! Laitakaupunkiaiheita ym! Keväällä voit matkata maalle...

[move to Helsinki for the winter, others live there too. The job opportunities are just as good here. The opportunities for still life painting are better – just think of Helsinki Market Square! Suburban themes, etc.! In spring, you can travel to the countryside...] ⁵²

It is reasonable to suppose that Carlstedt was partly delaying his move to the city because he feared losing his natural instincts amid urban culture. In 1914, Carlstedt, who described himself as being in a state of decline, moved away from Helsinki and worldly temptations but he could not always maintain his ideals.⁵³ This was particularly evident in his remorse regarding his alcohol consumption during the summer of 1937. They had promised not to drink with Sallinen during his visit, but, according to Carlstedt, they drank heavily on Midsummer's Eve. This led to Carlstedt making embarrassing mistakes while he was intoxicated.⁵⁴ In the 1930s, Carlstedt's political role model was actually English liberal democracy. It is precisely this idea of the English gentleman that is strongly associated with emotional self-control in all situations.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the primal instincts characteristic of Finnish folk culture were associated with Russian influence, at least since the Civil War.⁵⁶ Put bluntly, Carlstedt wanted to be Western but perhaps feared his Eastern side.

In the 1920s, Finnish aesthetic ideals shifted towards a distinction between the concepts of 'soul' and 'spirit', with the latter gradually gaining prominence. This ideological divide stemmed from the Civil War in which the soul represented the unformed, natural, emotional, and instinctive core of the individual and nation, rooted in national romanticism. In contrast, the spirit was viewed as a more conscious and developed form of thought, considered to be rational and ethical. It was

believed to be capable of organizing life and the world according to humane and civilized principles. It was also believed that the actions of the Reds during the civil war reflected the influence of foreign Slavic blood on Finland's healthy, uncorrupted soul. According to Juhani Ihanus, by the 1930s at the latest, science, art, education, politics, and religion had been reclaimed for the realm of the spirit, escaping primitivism, cosmopolitanism, and the 'viettien evankeliumi' [gospel of passion].⁵⁷ However, the emergence of German National Socialism with its anti-modern *Blut und Boden* [Blood and Soil] rhetoric heralded the arrival of a new type of vitalism.⁵⁸ As early as 1932, Carlstedt told Wennervirta, a supporter of the Finnish far-right movement, that lasting change could not be achieved through violence and that education should promote morality.⁵⁹ Later that year, Carlstedt warned Wennervirta, who had received a research grant to visit Germany, not to fall under Hitler's spell, having already detected such tendencies in him.⁶⁰ Subsequently, Wennervirta publicly supported National Socialist Germany, which strained his relationship with Carlstedt.⁶¹ It is interesting to note that Carlstedt's high morals and admiration for democracy collided with Wennervirta's Nazi sympathies and made Carlstedt seem less decadent than Wennervirta.⁶²

Conclusion

An examination of the confessional images of Eskola and Carlstedt reveals that they both engage with certain ideological currents that were common in the Finnish-language culture of their time, expressing ideas of social progress. On the one hand, there was a vitalistic ethos that emphasized intuitive understanding and downplayed the importance of academic training. On the other hand, there was a strong pursuit of spiritual growth, linked to the German-influenced bourgeois ideal of education that had long been dominant in Finland. The focus was on spiritual development and the expression of the nation's spirit or *Geist* through art. Eskola's vitalistic view of art was an intriguing blend of an ethical focus on the life force. This is clearly communicated through his various metaphors involving liquids, such as blood and the deep waters of life. However, Eskola

also expressed an idealistic desire for goodness and love in his work. The core of an artwork needed to be uncovered – to show its inner life – which would reflect the spirit of the era and society. This aim was inspired more by Bergson's *élan vital*, the universal creative force driving life forward, than by nationalism, which reflects the spirit of the people. A common theme in Eskola's self-perception as an artist, hinting at decadence and personal fragility, was his uncertainty about his capacity to endure the suffering inherent in the creative process. Related to this were an inferiority complex caused by social ambition, the metaphor of the 'voice of blood', and a perceived lack of education in previous generations. All these were seen as barriers to achieving a higher civilization. In this context, the vitalistic disdain for academic education served as a somewhat vague protective mechanism aimed at counteracting the perceived lack of cultural background.

Carlstedt's self-perception as an artist, however, highlights the perceived tension between rural and urban lifestyles. Having moved from Helsinki to his home region, Carlstedt expressed agrarian-nationalist values through his artwork. Nevertheless, he maintained a complex relationship with, and a somewhat self-deprecating view of, his inability to promote the culture of emerging Finland or attain world-class recognition. In this sense, he was a typical decadent: he recognized greatness, but was himself unable to achieve great deeds due to his weaknesses or apathy. He felt undermined by his inability to control his primitive side, which was evident in his excessive alcohol consumption with Sallinen. An intriguing aspect of Carlstedt's stance on social progress is his attitude towards German National Socialism, as reflected in his correspondence with Wennervirta. While Wennervirta embraced National Socialism with its vitalistic blood-and-soil rhetoric, which many contemporaries also found tempting and progressive, Carlstedt rejected it and instead aligned himself with British culture and democracy. In a certain sense, defending democracy in that context, which emphasized irrationality and power, might have been seen as a weakness. Nevertheless, judging by his letters, Carlstedt himself did not view it as such.

¹ This article was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant PRG1667, ‘Tsiviliseeritud rahvuse teke: Dekadents kui üleminek 1905-1940’ [The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as Transitionality, 1905-1940], www.decadence.ee.

² Uno Eskola to Ludvig Wennervirta, undated letter (c. 1920). Ludvig Wennervirta’s private archive, National Library, Helsinki. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

³ *Uno Eskola. Taiteellisen veren viettelys*, ed. by Pirjo Juusela-Sarasmo, Tatu Jännäri, and Laura Luostarinen (Salo taidemuseo Publications 26, 2016).

⁴ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, ‘Decadence in Nordic Literature: An Overview’, in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Taylor & Francis, 2020), p. 8; Pirjo Lyytikäinen, ‘Nordic Cultures: From Wilderness to Metropolitan Decadence’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 209-12.

⁵ On decadence and its connection to anti-modern traits, which resist social progress, see Antti Ahmala, ‘Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on?’ *Autenttisuus ja itsestä vieraantuminen Joel Lehtosen varbaistuotannossa* (Helsingin yliopisto, 2016), pp. 7 & 144-46.

⁶ For more about the interconnection of the fin-de-siècle and decadence, see Lola Annabel Kass, *Inetuse ilu. Eesti dekadentsikunst, 20. Sajandi esimesel poolel* (Tallinna Ülikool, 2024), pp. 53-54.

⁷ See, for example, Lea Rojola, ‘Vastakohtien sekasortoinen maailma. Järkiuskosta vaistojen kapinaan’, in *Suomen kirjallisuushistoria*, 2, ed. by Lea Rojola (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999), pp. 108-35.

⁸ About Carlstedt’s youth, see Max Fritze, *Unstill Life – Mikko Carlstedt’s Correspondence and Art, 1911–1921*. FNG Research, Issue 1/2018. <<https://research.fng.fi/2018/01/25/unstill-life-mikko-carlstedts-correspondence-and-art-1911-1921/>> [accessed 28 January 2026].

⁹ Uno Eskola’s unpublished autobiography *Routainen tie*. Salon taidemuseo manuscript collection, p. 37.

¹⁰ Eskola, p. 59.

¹¹ Eskola, p. 58.

¹² Eskola, p. 63.

¹³ Eskola, pp. 76-78.

¹⁴ This refers to the society, where your position and life was determined by your estate or profession. There were four estates in Finland: nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie, and the land-owning peasantry. The majority of the people did not belong to these estates.

¹⁵ V. Parente-Čapková, ‘Gendering seekers and upstarts in early twentieth-century Finnish literature’, in *Approaching Religion*, 11, pp. 30-31, doi:10.30664/ar.98282.

¹⁶ In the spring of 1917, imports of bread grain from Russia to Finland almost ceased, causing food shortages.

¹⁷ Eskola, p. 80.

¹⁸ Risto Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland* (Brill, 2018).

¹⁹ Riikka Rossi, *Alkukantaisuus ja tunteet. Primitivismi 1900-luvun alun suomalaisessa kirjallisuudessa*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 1456 (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2020); Timo Huusko, *Alkuperäisyyden kaipuu ja alkukantaisuuden pelko. Kansa, luonto ja rodullistaminen Suomen modernissa taiteessa vuosina 1915–1930* (Turun yliopisto, 2025).

²⁰ Erkki Sevänen, ‘Ensimmäisen tasavallan poliittinen tilanne ja kirjallisen älymystön toimintastrategia’, in *Älymystön jäljillä. Kirjoituksia suomalaisesta sivistyneistöstä ja älymystöstä*, Tietolipas 151, ed. by Pertti Karkama & Hanne Koivisto (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1997), pp. 33-63.

²¹ I refer especially to the Parti social français (PSF), which gained popularity in the 1930s.

²² Eskola, pp. 80-81.

²³ Eskola, pp. 80-83.

²⁴ Timo Huusko & Tutta Palin, ‘Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Discourses on Expressionism in Finland. From the November Group to Ina Behrsen-Colliander’, in *The Routledge Companion to Expressionism in a Transnational Context*, ed. by Isabel Wünsche (Taylor & Francis, 2019), pp. 222-42.

While the models in the painting were interpreted as representing the uneducated and primitivist Finns, the painting actually depicts a religious sect, the Fanatics, who were known for their uncontrolled ecstasy.

²⁵ Eskola, pp. 96 & 109-10.

²⁶ Timo Huusko, ‘Alkuperäisyyden kaipuu ja avantgarde. Piirteitä suomalaisesta taideajattelusta 1920–1930-luvuilla’, in *Avantgarde Suomessa*, Tietolipas 267, ed. by Irmeli Hautamäki, Laura Piippo, & Helena Sederholm (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2021), pp. 171-75. The original quote is from newspaper article ‘Jubileumsutställning II.’, *Svenska Pressen* 30.9.1924.

²⁷ Bergson’s thinking spread to Finland in the 1910s: see Katariina Lipsanen & Lauri Myllymaa, ‘Bergson, Henri’, *Ensyklopedia Logos*, 30 June 2023. <<https://filosofia.fi/fi/ensyklopedia/bergson-henri#Bergson%20Suomessa>> [accessed 17 January 2026]. On the manifestation of Bergson’s vitalist philosophy in the art of Finnish Magnus Enckell and on the emphasis on colour as a Bergsonian mediator between matter and one’s own consciousness, see Marja Lahelma, ‘Colour Revolution, Vitalism and the Ambivalence of Modern Arcadia’. *FNG Research*, Issue 6/2020,

- 1-7. <<https://research.fng.fi/2020/11/27/colour-revolution-vitalism-and-the-ambivalence-of-modern-arcadia/>> [accessed 18 January 2026].
- ²⁸ On Klages in this connection, see Kari Sallamaa, 'Madonna infructuosa – T. Vaaskivi ja moderni ruumiillisuus', in *Ajan paineessa. Kirjoituksia 1930-luvun suomalaisesta aatemaailmasta*, ed. by Pertti Karkama & Hanne Koivisto (Suomalainen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999), p. 423.
- ²⁹ Väinö Kamppuri's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 14 June 1943. National Library, Helsinki.
- ³⁰ Eskola, p. 86.
- ³¹ Heli Rantala, *Sivistyksestä sivilisaatioon. Kulttuurikäsite J. V. Snellmanin historiallisessa ajattelussa* (Turun yliopisto, 2013), pp. 85-89.
- ³² Hertta Tirranen, *Suomen taiteilijoita Alvar Cavénista Väinö Aaltoseen* (WSOY, 1955), p. 306.
- ³³ On Nietzsche in this context, see Timo Huusko, 'Boheemlastest kunstnikud üleminekuseisundis. Klassiühiskonna murenemisest ja noorte kunsnike dekadentsist Soomes', in *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 2025, kd 34 / 1-2. Eriteema: Dekadents, pp. 77-79.
- ³⁴ See Edit Andrés, 'Provincializing the West: Interview with Piotr Piotrowski', *ARTMargins Online*, 10 September 2012. <<https://artmargins.com/provincializing-the-west/>> [accessed 22 January 2026].
- ³⁵ Rojola 1999; Rossi 2020.
- ³⁶ Uno Eskola, *Veren vietteleksestä* (WSOY, 1923), pp. 28-31.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 81.
- ³⁸ Ibid., pp. 82-91.
- ³⁹ Ibid., pp. 115-17.
- ⁴⁰ Some sources, like Eskola's unpublished autobiography, suggest that Kokoschka may even have been Eskola's teacher in Dresden. However, there is no certainty about this.
- ⁴¹ Eskola, *Veren vietteleksestä*, p. 160.
- ⁴² Ibid., pp. 160-63 & 176.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 114.
- ⁴⁴ About gender norms inherited from peasant culture in Finland, see Jan Löfström, *Sukupuoliero agraarikulttuurissa* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999), pp. 160-83.
- ⁴⁵ Fritze, *Unstill Life*, p. 7; Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Arvo Makkonen, 27 August 1913. Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki.
- ⁴⁶ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 18 September 1928. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁴⁷ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 3 April 1930. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁴⁸ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 6-7 January 1929. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁴⁹ Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Theoretically European and/or Upstart? Decadence in an Estonian Key', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 179-80.
- ⁵⁰ 'ellei sitä liaksi 'karsinoi', voi olla herkempi ja varmempi mittapuu [...] joka kääntää nokan oikeaan suuntaan kun sitä vähän koputtelee – muuten en kovin mielelläni 'taite-asioista' keskustelekaan.' Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 6 May 1932. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁵¹ Riitta Ojanperä, *Taidekriitikko Einari J. Wehmas ja moderni taide* (Valtion taidemuseo, 2010), p. 234. Bergson's statement comes from his 1900 publication *Le Rire [Laughter]*.
- ⁵² Ilmari Vuori's letter to Mikko Carlstedt, 7 October 1929. Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki.
- ⁵³ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 17 June 1943. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁵⁴ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 23 June 1937. National Library, Helsinki. Carlstedt also refers to his drunken rage in his letter to Wennervirta, 3 December 1933. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁵⁵ See Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 27 January 1934. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁵⁶ For example, Lasse Koskela, 'Kansa taisteli – valkoiset kertoivat', in *Järkiuskosta vaistojen kapinaan. Suomen kirjallisuushistoria* 2, ed. by Lea Rojola (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999), pp. 222-36.
- ⁵⁷ Juhani Ihanus, 'Jos sinä likaat ja turmelet, niin minä puhdistan, kirkastan ja jalostan' eli viettien teologinen puhdistus ja kulttuuritaistelu 1930-luvun Suomessa', in *Ajan paineessa. Kirjoituksia 1930-luvun suomalaisesta aatemaailmasta*, ed. by Pertti Karkama and Hanne Koivisto (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999), pp. 394-96.
- ⁵⁸ On Nazism and masculinity in decadence, see Ahmala, 'Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on?', pp. 75-76 & 142-46.
- ⁵⁹ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 6 May 1932. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁶⁰ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 12-13 November 1932. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁶¹ On Wennervirta's Nazi sympathies, see Mikko Carlstedt's letters to Ludvig Wennervirta, 3 December 1933, 27 January 1934, and 30 August 1935. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁶² Wennervirta was actually anti-modern in many respects. He was Tolstoyan, Catholic, and Populist, but in the light of Carlstedt's correspondence he considered Wennervirta as more progressive and superior and himself as more primitive and decadent until Wennervirta showed admiration for Hitler's regime. On Wennervirta's thinking, see Yrjänä Levanto, *Kirjoitetut kuvat. Ludvig Wennervirran taidekäsite* (Taideteollinen korkeakoulu, 1997).