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The Rational Modernism of Sigurd Frosterus. A Nordic Interpretation

The ways that modernism, which today represents to many people the models of modern society, was developed and conceptualized in the Nordic countries, remains a relatively little known chapter in the history of modernism. Neither are the names of the major Nordic theorists familiar. The “Modernism Revisited” issue of *Filozofski vestnik*, which invites “new reflection on the notion of modernism as a historicizing, periodizing, and/or geographical-historical framework,” could be an appropriate context in which to introduce Sigurd Frosterus (1876–1956), one of the leading Scandinavian theorists of the modernism of the first half of the 20th century. His impact in Finland was crucial and as he wrote in Swedish he was influential throughout the Nordic countries. Alvar Aalto thought that he was one of the few to have intellectualized architectural discourse in Finland, and important aspects of Frosterus’s reflections on technology and Western civilization continued later also in the cultural criticism of Georg Henrik von Wright. Frosterus had two different concepts of modernism. In his early texts from the beginning of the 20th century he admired technology and technical rationality which he believed ruled nature. During the First World War he gradually abandoned his narrow idea of the modern and became a pluralist and a critic of technology. Also his architectural style changed from rational art nouveau towards values of craftsmanship, historicism and classicism.

My article is biographical and points to Frosterus’s personal links with influential European architects, writers and critics such as Henry van de Velde, Eliel Saarinen, Roger Fry and Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. Frosterus’s essays and critiques can be interestingly compared with the texts of many of his contemporaries, including H. G. Wells, Adolf Loos, Oswald Spengler, Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Frosterus’s architecture and writing proves how organically 20th-century modernism in Finland was rooted in Scandinavian, Continental and Anglo-American discourses. Bauhaus Universitätsverlag in Weimar will publish a collection of Frosterus’s writings in 2015.

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A photograph of Sigurd Frosterus in Weimar in 1903. Museum of Finnish Architecture.

The architect, critic, essayist and art collector Sigurd Frosterus was a significant influential figure in Finnish and Scandinavian modernism during the first five decades of the 20th century.¹ He designed multi-storey apartment buildings, villas, manor houses, commercial buildings and power plants. In Helsinki alone, his office designed dozens of buildings, the best-known being the Stockmann department store, his main work. One of the leading architects of his generation in Finland, Frosterus was also a prolific critic and philosophical essayist, who published some ten books on the problems of painting, literature, architecture, philosophy and modern life.²

¹ An early version of this essay formed a part of my PhD thesis. Kimmo Sarje, *Sigurd Frosteruksen modernin käsité. Maailmankatsomus ja arkkitehtuuri*, Dimensio 3, Valtion taidemuseon tieteilinen sarja, Helsinki: Valtion taidemuseo, 2000.

² Books by Sigurd Frosterus: *Arkitektur en stridskrift våra motståndare tillägnad af Gustaf Strengell och Sigurd Frosterus*, Helsingfors: Euterpes Förlag, 1904; *H. G. Wells*, Helsingfors: Förlagsaktiebolaget Helios, 1906; *Olikartade skönhetsvärden*, Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag & Helsingfors: Holger Schildts Förlag, 1915; *Moderna vapen*, Borgå: Holger Schildts Förlag, 1915; *Regnbågfärgernas segertåg*, Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag & Helsingfors: Holger Schildts Förlag, 1917; *Solljus och slagskugga*, Helsingfors: Söderström & C:o För-

Weimar, where Frosterus studied and worked in the office of the architect Henry van de Velde from 1903 to 1904, was a special city in his development as a young architect and intellectual. Frosterus's friends and acquaintances included van de Velde and his family, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, Count Harry Kessler, the painters Ludwig von Hofmann and Max Libermann, theatre director Gordon Craig, the actress Louise Dumont and the ceramist Erica von Scheel, all of whom he mentions in his correspondence.³

In the early 20th century, Weimar played an important role in reforming cultural life in Germany. Frosterus's contacts with Weimar were also important impulses for Finnish modernism, the significance of which may not yet have been evaluated in all respects.⁴ His collaboration with van de Velde was fruitful. During his stay in Weimar, Frosterus formulated the starting points of his rationalist aesthetic—his so-called Steel and Reason style—in practical and theoretical terms.

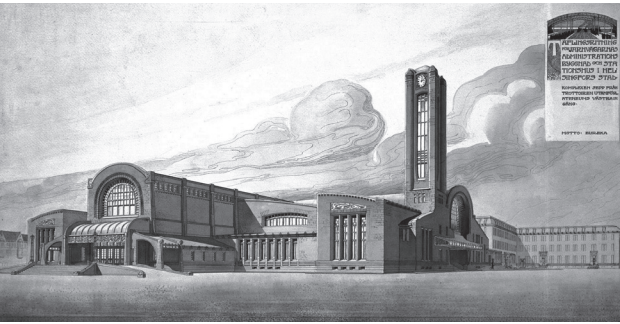
Frosterus sent radical entries in a machine-aesthetic spirit from Weimar to the architectural competitions for the railway stations of Helsinki and Viipuri (present-day Vyborg) in 1904, but with no success. The design for the railway station in Helsinki was defined in terms of reinforced concrete, glass and applying the shapes of railway locomotives in a rational *art nouveau* spirit. Eliel Saarinen and his colleagues won both competitions and were given the commissions for the projects.

In a defence of his artistic and theoretical views, Frosterus and his colleague Gustaf Strengell published also in 1904 a manifesto of rationalist modernism entitled *Arkitektur, en stridskrift* (Architecture. A Challenge) which helped break down the dominant status of national romanticism in Finnish architecture and

lagsaktiebolag, 1917; *Färgproblemet i måleriet*, Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag & Helsingfors: Holger Schildts Förlag, 1920 (Dissertation); *Jorden krymper, jorden växer*, Helsingfors: Holger Schildts Förlag, 1930; *AB Stockmann OY*, Helsingfors, 1931; *AB Stockmann OY*, Helsingfors, 1939 (auf Deutsch & in English); *Stålålderns janusansikte*, Stockholm: Holger Schildts Förlag, 1935. (Original version Helsingfors: Söderström & C:o Förlagsaktiebolag, 1935); *Nordiskt i dur och moll*, Helsingfors: Söderström & C:o Förlagsaktiebolag, 1946.

³ Kimmo Sarje, "Ein neuer Stiel für ein neues Weimar. Mitteleuropäische Impulse im frühen finnischen Modernismus," trans. Tiina Solda, *Jahrbuch für finnisch-deutsche Literaturbeziehungen*, Nr. 30, 1998.

⁴ Kimmo Sarje, "Sigurd Frosterus in der Kulturgeschichte Finnlands," trans. Tiina Solda, *Jahrbuch für finnisch-deutsche Literaturbeziehungen*, Nr. 300, 1998.



Sigurd Frosterus's entry in the Helsinki railway station competition, 1904. Museum of Finnish Architecture.

design.⁵ These critics underlined the structural starting points of architecture and called for a scientific, international and honest attitude. They supported contemporary technology and new materials such as steel and concrete as the basis for construct. The Steel and Reason style (in Swedish en järn- och hjärnstil) was their slogan for replacing national, archaeological and mythological ideals.⁶

Eliel Saarinen also took the critique and Frosterus's competition entry seriously. The result of this was that when completed in 1919, the Helsinki Railway Station by Saarinen finally resembled Frosterus's entry more than Saarinen's prize-winning national-romantic design.

In Finnish art history, early 20th-century Weimar thus represented rationalism and a new interpretation of the art nouveau style that was more abstract than before. In an article "Henry van de Velde. Tänkaren och teoretikern" (Henry van de Velde as a thinker and theorist) from 1905, Frosterus presented van de Velde's conception of art and his role in developing and spreading the *arts and crafts* movement. Also in his work as a designer and architect, Frosterus applied and developed the ideas and motifs that he had adopted from van de Velde. His art nouveau-style entries for the railway station competitions in the spirit of van de Velde, however, were original works. The influence of van de Velde may be even too obvious in Frosterus's designs for interiors and desks, but in the design of armchairs the structural approach of this young architect can be seen.

⁵ Kimmo Sarje: "Gustaf Strengell and Nordic Modernism," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 35, 2008.

⁶ Kimmo Sarje, "Sigurd Frosterus: From Progressive to Critic of Technology," trans. Timothy Binham and Kimmo Sarje, *Thesis*, Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Heft 1/2, 1997.

Two armchairs and a table designed by Sigurd Frosterus ca. 1908 in his studio. Museum of Finnish Architecture.



The architect Gustaf Nyström, Frosterus's teacher in architecture in Finland, had studied in Vienna in 1878-1879 and admired the work of Otto Wagner. Perhaps this is why Frosterus's first theoretical article, from 1901, was on Wagner's conceptions of architecture. He supported the constructional and analytical attitude of Wagner, and the latter's conception of metropolitan architecture. It appears that Wagner was almost as important as van de Velde in shaping Frosterus's notions of architecture. On the other hand, Frosterus and van de Velde had a personal and long-term interactive relationship.

While Frosterus's decision to train in van de Velde's office was partly based on fortuitousness, I would claim that a decisive motive was his own professional ambition, the desire to develop as an architect in the most challenging setting possible. This was also in keeping with the programmatic aims of the *Euterpe* group of young Swedish-speaking intellectuals in Helsinki, of which Frosterus was a key member. The aim was to develop the culture of one's own country in the spirit of Western internationalism.

The Belgian-English painter and ceramist Alfred William Finch moved to Finland in 1897 and achieved a prominent position in the Finnish art world. Van de Velde and Finch were fellow painters and old friends in Belgium. They were also members of the artist group known as *Les XX (Vingt)*. Finch served as an intermediary and confidentially recommended Frosterus as an assistant to van de Velde.

Van de Velde and Frosterus

When he began work at van de Velde's office in Weimar, Frosterus was a 27-year-old architect who also had a Master of Arts degree and was already known as sharp critic. He had studied art history, literature and philosophy at the University of Helsinki under the renowned professors of these respective disciplines: J. J. Tikkanen, Carl Gustaf Estlander and Edvard Westermarck. The university was followed by two years of studying architecture at the Polytechnic Institute of Finland in Helsinki, where he was taught by the architect Gustaf Nyström, who had established his career with public buildings in the Neo-Renaissance style and was a member of the Academy of Arts of St. Petersburg. He was also taught by the national-romantic architect Usko Nyström. Frosterus had travelled extensively in Europe and published his impressionistic and analytical letters from his visits to Siena and London. He spoke several languages, being more fluent in English than German or French.

Frosterus was no longer a lump of clay to be shaped and moulded when he began his collaboration with van de Velde. Despite his great and sincere admiration for his master, Frosterus's letters from Weimar soon began to include critical remarks. In a letter to his mother (18.11.1903), he noted, "Van de Velde is incredibly skilled in ornamentation and 'interior decoration', but he is clearly no architect". There was also an obvious difference of temperament between the mentor and his pupil, who was analytical rather than the spontaneous, intuitive artist that van de Velde was.

In the early 1900s, Frosterus was a proponent of strict, scientifically argued rationalism, for which rapidly developing machine technology was pointing the way. In a travel essay entitled "London-Rhapsodi" (London Rhapsody) from 1903 he was intoxicated by the fast tempo of the metropolis. Railway stations, railway yards, locomotives and the London underground were modern works of art for him. This masculine emphasis on the importance of technology and science also contained a rejection of the feminine and decorative. To Frosterus, they were something decadent that threatened to paralyse creativity. In this respect, he shared the attitudes of H. G. Wells, an author whom he followed throughout his life and of whose works he published his first book in 1906.

Frosterus's uncompromising rationalism also made him critical towards excessively painterly, archaeological and mythological national romanticism and unduly decorative Secession architecture and design. Therefore, Eliel Saarinen of Finland and Joseph Maria Olbrich of Austria, even with their considerable merits, were also cautionary examples, for the same reason he was also wary of van de Velde's decorative mannerisms. Nonetheless, Frosterus adopted many influences from all these leading contemporary architects.

Villa Nissen, designed by Frosterus and Strengell and built at Meilahti in Helsinki in 1904, owes its roof design and external appearance to villa architecture by Olbrich—although the rendered façades do not have ornaments as in the villas by the Austrian architect. Frosterus's published essay from the same year on Olbrich's architecture was of a critical tone: "Joseph M. Olbrich is not one of those who will steer architecture in a new direction and open broad perspectives. He is a leading name among those who have attacked old values in a lighter and more random fashion but not too harshly."⁷

Van de Velde had great confidence in Frosterus's skills and discernment and their cooperation was based on mutual respect and friendship. It was only Frosterus's entry in the Viipuri Railway Station competition that led to an argument that both parties sincerely regretted. Defending his entry in a letter to his mother on 1 August 1904 Frosterus wrote: "I proceed from constructional requirements [...] while v.d.V. wants, from the very beginning, to juggle abstract lines and surfaces, for which so-called assured gaze and taste can give a permanent justification." Regardless of the criticism, Frosterus admired and respected van de Velde and was grateful for the opportunity to work with him. On New Year's Eve 1903, Frosterus described his feelings as follows:

I can speak with him about everything, and for the time being he is the only person, who has really been able to help me, not just as a paragon, but also with his words. He has a wonderful enchantment about him when he looks within you with his large, dark black greenish-brown eyes, and speaks with his resonant assured and self-confident voice of his own, hard and good experiences; his unswerving enthusiasm, his strong will to be victorious has something melting

⁷ Sigurd Frosterus, "Josef M. Olbrich. En arkitektonisk orientering," *Euterpe* 34, 1904, 402.

and inspiring to it that will not die and be extinguished once it is beyond his enchanted circle.

While working Weimar, Frosterus assisted van de Velde in the design of at least seven projects.⁸ Furthermore, as noted above, he prepared his entries for the Helsinki and Viipuri railway station, while a villa jointly designed by him and Strengell was being built in Helsinki. Frosterus was in the midst of an intense and productive period.

Van de Velde's satisfaction with Frosterus's work and their mutual feeling of trust are evinced by the fact that van de Velde proposed the founding of a joint architectural practice under both names. As partners collaborating in work, they complemented each other in many ways. Van de Velde was a European celebrity and one of the leading architects and ideologists of the *art nouveau* style; he was a painter by training and self-taught as an architect. Frosterus was still a talented novice in the field but with the benefit of a professional degree.

"An almost dizzying perspective for the future" was Frosterus's opinion of the offer in a letter sent to his mother on 4 January 1904. After serious reflection, however, he declined the offer, maintaining that it would be easier for him to start his career in Helsinki where he already had a joint office with Strengell. In addition, van de Velde's authority and sovereign role made him feel cautious. He also suspected that Mrs. Maria van de Velde would not accept the shared professional distinction.

Van de Velde was naturally disappointed by Frosterus's negative decision, but in retrospect, he felt it was a wise choice. As a result he did not embroil his colleague in the difficulties that he would soon encounter in Weimar.⁹

⁸ Leon Ploegaerts & Pierre Puttemans, *L'œuvre architecturale de Henry van de Velde*, Atelier Vokaer—Bruxelles, Les Presses de l'Université Laval—Québec, 1987, 285, 287–288, 294, 297–298. The projects were Haus Herbert Esche in Chemnitz (1902–1903), Haus in Chicago (Fassade) (1904), Entwurf für einen Neubau des Grossherzoglichen Museums für Kunst und Gewerbe in Weimar (1903–1904), Entwurf für das Dumont-Theater in Weimar (Fassade) (1903–04), Immeuble le 'Secession' in Berlin (1903–1904), Kunstschule in Weimar (1904–1911) and Der Grossherzogliche Sächsische Kunstgewerbschule in Weimar (1905–1906).

⁹ Henry van de Velde, *Geschichte meines Lebens*, ed. H. Curjel, Munich: R. Piper & Co Verlag, 1962, 260.

Frosterus's decision to operate on his own did not lead to any falling out. Even much later, in his article "Arkitektonisk antinomi" (Architectural antinomy) from 1914, Frosterus defended his friend's copyright in the Théâtre des Champs Elysées project, in which architect August Perret and his engineer brother Gustave Perret had taken the initiative. Frosterus wrote: "Eternal antagonisms between sketch and realization, genius and routine and theory and practice have once again let forth their cruel play [...] and above all this is the spirit of van de Velde, although his name is not mentioned."¹⁰

In 1909, correspondence between Frosterus and van de Velde was interrupted for decades, and was not resumed until after the Second World War. The architects had a last meeting in 1953 at van de Velde's home in Oberäger in Switzerland.

Nietzsche and Wagner

The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche was markedly reflected in Frosterus's intellectual setting in Helsinki in the late 19th and early 20th century. Nietzsche's works were translated into Swedish and Finnish at an early stage and they were discussed. The author Georg Brandes of Denmark, who interpreted Nietzsche's philosophy, often visited Helsinki, where he had a large circle of friends and acquaintances. Brandes's aristocratic radicalism emphasizing the culturally reforming power of talented men found support among intellectuals.

Nietzsche was worshipped as an intellectual example in the Euterpe circle and there were pilgrimages to Sils-Maria in the Engaden region in the Swiss Alps where Nietzsche's chalet was located. Frosterus also visited Sils-Maria and enjoyed the fresh outdoors. "Not a trace of southern vegetation, everything is cold, severe and serious. It is grand and moving rather than painterly and 'beautiful', i.e. just what I wanted to see," wrote Frosterus in a letter from Sils-Maria on 7 August 1900.

Frosterus was also drawn to the Alps by Giovanni Segantini, the great painter of Engaden, whom Frosterus regarded to be an important reformer of painting and a herald of the new century, like Nietzsche. In an essay on this painter from 1903, Frosterus wrote:

¹⁰ Sigurd Frosterus, "Arkitektonisk antinomi," *Nya Argus* 14, 1914, 121.

And so on the stage are almost simultaneously both of them, who with their iron grip pressed the Alpine air within the boundaries of culture and from their solitary heights forced fresher, cool winds into the dust and stuffiness of the valleys; Segantini and the poet of Zarathustra. That two so excellent individuals [...] in almost the same place [...] independently of each other achieved their development is wonderful proof of the dismembering feeling of liberation that a person of the plains feels when standing up at the snow line, trembling with happiness and a thirst for action, facing nature alone in all its law-bound, free grandeur.¹¹

While studying and working in Henry van de Velde's office in Weimar, Frosterus met Nietzsche's sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, a leading personage in the city. He received personal invitations from the philosopher's sister—"Zarathustra's Sancho Panza" as she was called by Theodor Adorno¹²—to visit or dine at her home. In his letters, Frosterus described these meetings and considered Förster-Nietzsche's activities and personality. While critical, Frosterus also felt sympathy for her.

Van de Velde received many commissions and plans related to Nietzsche, from graphic design for books to a memorial. One of his achievements was the interior design of the Nietzsche Archive, which Frosterus presented passionately and analytically in the magazine *Euterpe* in 1904. According to him, van de Velde was one of the greatest interior architects of all time. In a letter to his mother on 6 November 1903, he described the gifted and energetic van de Velde as "a prototype of the superman".

Nietzsche was one of Frosterus's intellectual guiding figures. "Nietzsche is great, as an example, a personality, a symbol," wrote Frosterus in an essay in 1905 with as much conviction as Adorno wrote four decades later: "Nietzsche, one of the most advanced enlighteners of all [...]."¹³ At the Nietzsche Archive, the Finn had the opportunity to study the correspondence of Nietzsche and his friend, the philologist Erwin Rohde. Frosterus sought to respond to the problems ethics

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¹¹ Sigurd Frosterus, "Giovanni Segantini," *Euterpe* 8, 1903, 105.

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, "Wagner, Nietzsche and Hitler," (original 1947), *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 19, Musikalische Schriften VI, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984, 408.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 410.

aroused by Nietzsche; he was preoccupied by the human character, rhetoric and psychology of this misanthrope.¹⁴

Richard Wagner was well-known as a composer in late 19th-century Finland, and Frosterus, who loved music, had no doubt heard Wagner's music already in Helsinki. During his stay in Weimar he had many opportunities to deepen his views of the composer.

Frosterus had reservations about Wagner, whose art he regarded as magnificent, but the culmination of a long course of development rather than anything new as such. Analysing a performance of *Tannhäuser* in a letter to his mother on 21 December 1903 he wrote: "He is still completely on the old basis with Germanic mythology, Schopenhauer and Christianity as his supports." In a review from 1947, Adorno criticized Wagner in the same spirit for "his bombastic Germanic *Weltanschauung*."¹⁵ Frosterus found authoritarianism to be the composer's problem, in addition to underestimating his audience. Writing to his father Theodor Frosterus on 28 November 1904, he summarized the thoughts aroused by a performance of *Lohengrin*: "He speaks 'von oben herab'. He preaches. He gives orders and wants to be obeyed. He does not permit any discussion, not interjections; he loves to hear only his own voice resound over the heads of the masses... But Wagner is nonetheless a unique genius, whose work is not diminished by justified counter-arguments."

Back to Finland

After returning to Helsinki, Frosterus continued his collaboration with Strengell. A steam power plant for the town of Kokkola in 1905 was the largest project of their joint office. The office, however, closed in 1906, but in the same year the architects established an agency for design products. Frosterus continued on his own, designing interiors and villas and as a critic and editor of the journal *Arkitekten* (The Architect) from 1908 to 1911. He married Emmy von Kraemer, the daughter of Admiral Oscar von Kraemer who had served three Tsars – in 1907.

¹⁴ Sigurd Frosterus, "Friedrich Nietzsches brevväxling med Erwin Rohde," *Euterpe* 39–40, 1905.

¹⁵ Adorno, *op. cit.*, 411.



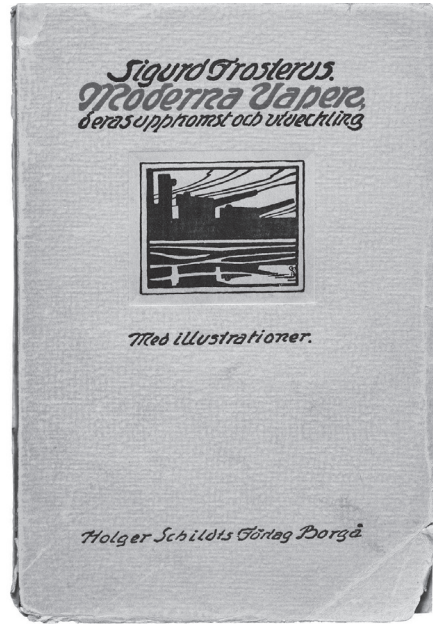
Sigurd Frosterus's first apartment building, at no. 7 Töölönkatu street in Helsinki, was built in 1910. Museum of Finnish Architecture.

Several apartment buildings designed by Frosterus were built in Helsinki in the early 1910s. His first building of this type, at no. 7 Töölönkatu Street, was built in 1910. The rendered façade of this building is decorated with greenish ceramic tiles and carefully considered details carved in natural stone; the verticality of the design is emphasized by the pillar structures at the street corner of the house, roofed balconies and window bays. The building drew more upon the starting points of Otto Wagner of Vienna than the work of van de Velde.

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A culmination of Frosterus's architectural designs from before the First World War was the Taos residential and commercial building constructed in 1912 at the corner of Bulevardi and Yrjönkatu streets in Helsinki. This building displays connections with the architecture of van de Velde, for example in the arch motif of the façade hewn from natural stone. The building is a total work of art of plasticity with a large number of finished details. The dynamic design of the courtyard side is also impressive.

Sigurd Frosterus's book *Moderna vapen*
(Modern weapons) 1915.



In his project, Frosterus followed modern principles quite consistently, but he had only limited opportunities to work with reinforced concrete, the use of which he propagated. He regarded ornamentation and the façade decorations of 19th-century revived styles in the same terms as Adolf Loos in the latter's essay "Die potemkische Stadt" (The Potemkin Town) from 1898. "We cannot, however, sufficiently underline that the *emphasis is not on ornament*," wrote Frosterus in 1904.¹⁶

In his review of palatial commercial buildings by his Finnish colleagues Armas Lindgren and Lars Sonck in 1911, Frosterus, however, no longer called for the correspondence of the façade and the interior as required by the modernist norm, but instead accepted the display value of a monumental façade as a commercial necessity. Only seven years previously, in 1904, he had severely condemned the carnivalistic façade of the Pohjola Insurance building by the Gesellius, Lindgren, Saarinen office as archaeological and anachronistic.¹⁷

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¹⁶ Sigurd Frosterus, Gustaf Strengell, *Arkitektur en stridskrift våra motståndare tillägnad af Gustaf Strengell och Sigurd Frosterus*, Helsingfors: Euterpes Förlag, 1904, 44.

¹⁷ Kimmo Sarje, "Facades and Functions. Sigurd Frosterus as a Critic of Architecture," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, nos. 40–41, 2010–2011.

“Det moderna slagskeppet” (The Modern Battleship), an aestheticizing analysis of the dreadnought published by Frosterus in 1907, two years before Marinetti’s futurist manifesto was the culmination of his machine aesthetics in terms of a cynical notion of a functional machine of war as a modern work of art. His interest in issues of machine aesthetics, from military technology to painting, was, however, permanent. His book *Moderna vapen* (Modern Weapons) presenting new military technology from both technical and aesthetic perspectives appeared in 1915, and in his book *Regnbågsfärgernas segertåg* (The Triumph of the Colours of the Rainbow) on new painting in 1917 he admired the way in which Italian Futurist painters depicted movement.

Frosterus’s aesthetic appreciation, however, was changing in a more pluralistic direction. Strict rationalism was no longer enough for him. In 1915 at the latest, through his enthusiastic presentation of Westminster Cathedral in London, designed by John Francis Bentley and built in 1895–1902, he spoke in favour of art-historical curiosity and creative traditionalism instead of a narrow view of modernism. Frosterus was impressed and convinced by the cathedral’s Byzantine points of departure, drawing upon Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, its dimensions and craftsmanship. He regarded the cathedral to be the “greatest victory that church architecture can display since the High Renaissance.”¹⁸

In his article “Järnet och teglet” (Iron and Brick) from 1917 Frosterus rejected bare steel structures¹⁹ and the machine ideal as a starting point for immobile buildings for aesthetic and technical reasons, the latter included fire safety. According to him, the force of gravitation on a firm foundation called for simple rectangular forms instead of s-curves—especially in the Nordic countries where the effects of ice and snow had to be minimized in structures and façades. The Finnish architect felt that van de Velde’s mistake had been to apply the forms of moving constructions, such as trains and steamships, in static structures.

The essay “Järnet och teglet” was a well-argued reassessment of Frosterus’s and Strengell’s early polemic manifesto on architecture (“Arkitektur, en stridskrift”), now to the benefit of traditionalism. Also in Frosterus’s own architecture, brick-

¹⁸ Sigurd Frosterus, “Den katolska katedralen i Westminster,” *Arkitekten* II, 1915, 13.

¹⁹ Frosterus already severely criticized the bare steel structures of the Amsterdam Stock Exchange designed by a Hendrik Berlage in a letter to Henry van de Velde dated 17.2.1904. This issue does not seem to involve a changing of opinion but rather a public statement of it.

work and craftsmanship gained importance, with Swedish national-romanticists, such as Ragnar Östberg, and the British architect Edwin Lutyens as his examples. Red brick was a material close to Frosterus, who applied it in various works, from apartment buildings to power plants.

Soon after the Finnish Civil War in 1918, Frosterus and Ole Gripenberg (1892–1979) founded a joint architectural office. The practice was highly prolific, designing apartment and commercial buildings, power plants, factories, bridges, manor houses and auxiliary facilities for rural conditions. Vanaja Manor is an opulent rural residence of red brick designed by Frosterus in the spirit of Lutyens and Östberg in the early 1920s. Bridge projects were an opportunity for him to experiment with simplified functional reinforced concrete structures.

Wertheim and Stockmann

In 1905, Frosterus published “Berlin-Rhapsodie” (Berlin Rhapsody), a travel essay of far-reaching vision in which he analyses his impressions of the Wertheim department store designed by Alfred Messel. The building stood in the centre of Berlin, but was destroyed in the Second World War. With its thirst for the new and worship of the metropolis, Frosterus’s essay is almost the diametrical opposite of Walter Benjamin’s nostalgic recollections of his childhood in Berlin, which the latter published in the 1930s. Benjamin writes of loggias in backyards, the mazes of the city and its mysterious life, while Frosterus focuses on the innovations of department store design. “Berlin Rhapsody” finds more of a parallel in the manner of analysing a modern metropolis followed by Benjamin in his essay “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” from 1939.

On the outside, Wertheim was quite a conservative Neo-Gothic building, but its interior revealed the new design of space permitted by reinforced concrete technology. Frosterus was particularly fascinated by the atrium as a central element organizing the building. He also pointed to the flexible and efficient flow of customers within the building. The department store had two visages; in daytime its windows reflected sunlight and in the evening it was a lantern lighting the surrounding urban space.

Wertheim was a source of important impulses when Frosterus participated in 1916 in the architectural competition for the Stockmann department store in



Sigurd Frosterus's major architectural project was the Stockmann department store in Helsinki built in 1916–1930. Photo: N. Wasastjerna. Museum of Finnish Architecture.



The atrium of the Stockmann department store. Photo: Roos. Museum of Finnish Architecture.

Helsinki. The atrium of the building and its surrounding balconies were the central starting point of the design, along with transparency and distinct routes of access. Frosterus drew upon his experiences of the Wertheim department store in these principles. Wertheim and Frosterus's entry also had external similarities, such as vertical structures of the façade, a steep-pitched roof and skylights.

Frosterus's entry was given second place, but was chosen to be realized instead of the winning design by Valter & Ivar Thomé. On this occasion, Eliel Saarinen, who had won the competitions for both the Helsinki and Viipuri railway stations, was given third place.

Sigurd Frosterus's dream was to erect a skyscraper at the south corner of the Stockmann department store in Helsinki. Museum of Finnish Architecture.



The Stockmann department store was completed in 1930, although designs for its south end still remained to be realized. During the years of construction of this project, Frosterus's architecture and world-view, however, continued to undergo profound changes as this admirer of technology grew to become its critic. The final architectural result was thus a symbiosis of rationalism, classicism and Swedish national romanticism.²⁰

Frosterus dreamed of a skyscraper at the south end of the Stockmann building. To expedite these plans he published in 1922 a pamphlet entitled *Skyskrapan hägrar* (A Dream of a Skyscraper) which also appeared as an article in the journal *Arkkitehti/Arkitekten*. With reference to the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena he argued that the department store in its valley setting needed a tower. He also felt that a skyscraper was suited to the city centre and silhouette of Helsinki. The tower was never built, but an option for it remained in the plans of the department store and the architect until the 1950s.

²⁰ Kimmo Sarje, "The Stockmann department store as an emblem of the modern metropolis," trans. Michael Garner, *Arkkitehti* 5–6, 1995.

Eliel Saarinen was inspired at the same time by ideas for skyscrapers. In 1922, he participated successfully in the competition for the Chicago Tribune Tower with an entry which he had prepared in Finland. His conception of a modern skyscraper received second prize and it was praised in American reviews of the competition. No less a figure than Louis Sullivan regarded Saarinen's tower design of staggered tapering form to be revolutionary. Saarinen's project, however, was never built, but it had a great effect on American skyscraper architecture.

A couple of years later, in 1924, Frosterus applied the skyscraper theme in his design for an administrative centre for Helsinki. This project displays echoes of Saarinen's staggered tapering skyscraper shape. Frosterus's designs for skyscrapers also remained on paper.²¹

Frosterus's collection of essays *Jorden krymper, jorden växer* (A Shrinking and Growing World) appeared in 1930, the same year when the major part of the Stockmann department store was completed. The ethical criticism voiced in the title essay of the collection took aim at machine culture, class struggle, imperialism and policies of war, while also drawing upon impulses from Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West). Frosterus considered the crisis of Occidental culture in the following terms: "Like a child who has suddenly received an incomprehensible mechanical toy, mankind in its curiosity fiddles with its sharp tools. Machines are outgrowing their users. A uniform, impersonal world economy is taking grip of ever larger parts of the globe."²²

Frosterus continued his assessment of modern Western culture in the essay "Nuts facit" (The Results of the Present) in his main philosophical work *Ståldålderns janusansikte* (The Janus Face of the Steel Era). He also returned—from new perspectives—to many of the philosophical and moral issues of his earlier writings "Arkitektur. En stridskrift", "Järnet och teglet" and *Jorden krymper, jorden växer*". Frosterus also considered the concepts of socialism and Darwinism and compared Marx, Lenin and the British socialists, such as H. G. Wells and Bernard

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²¹ Elina Standertskjöld, *The Dream of the New World. American Influence on Finnish Architecture from the Turn of the 20th Century to the Second World War*, Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 2010, 6–7 & 31–33.

²² Sigurd Frosterus, "Jorden krymper, jorden växer," in Sigurd Frosterus, *Jorden krymper, jorden växer*, Helsingfors: Holger Schildts Förlag, 1930, 22.

Shaw. According to him, *Capital* by Marx and Darwin's *Origin of Species* had fundamentally changed Western thinking in religious, social and political issues.

According to Frosterus, *Capital* was a "suggestive" work though drawing upon an old philosophical tradition, and he could not believe in class struggle as a patent solution to the problems of society. As a Nietzschean, he underlined the importance of the individual for progress in society and culture, but he regarded social Darwinism—the *survival of the fittest*—as an ideology to be a distasteful defence of might. Frosterus also condemned anti-Semitism and nationalism and was particularly averse to National Socialism.²³

Frosterus regarded Lenin's personal contribution to have been decisive for the Russian Revolution and he was critically curious about the new Soviet state. He appreciated Shaw, in turn, as a sharp critic of society. H. G. Wells's British socialism calling for responsibility and initiative from the upper and lower classes alike was closest to Frosterus's own views. Henri Bergson's vitalism – *l'élan vital* – fascinated Frosterus as the metaphysical basis of a modern world-view. "The revolutionary aspect of considering the human condition is that we have suddenly seen the species itself to be live and happy, while the individuals of the same generation, who by their numbers and as bearers of various traits ensure forced adaptation to the future, descend to become the tools of the spark of life from one generation to another."²⁴

"Nuets facit" was Frosterus's statement of contemporary diagnosis in which he sought his place among the prevailing intellectual and ideological currents. He addressed some philosophical issues only by way of reference and others in an

²³ As an avant-gardist, modernist or even as a traditionalist, Frosterus was not drawn to totalitarianism. He cannot be regarded in terms of "reactionary modernism" as defined by Jeffrey Herf in *Reactionary modernism. Technology, culture, and politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, whereby the industrial revolution is associated with national traditions and nationalism. In her article "Avantgarde und Faschismus," Lia Lindner presents a wide-ranging discussion of avant-garde and modernist connections with totalitarianism with regard to art theory: Lindner, "Avantgarde und Faschismus. Anmerkungen zum Für und Wider einer fragwürdigen Gleichsetzung in der westeuropäischen kunstwissenschaftlichen Literatur zu Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts," *Acta Historiae Artium* XLVIII (2007): 203-62.

²⁴ Sigurd Frosterus, "Nuets facit," in Sigurd Frosterus, *Stållålderns janusansikte*, Stockholm: Holger Schildts Förlag, 1935 (original version Helsingfors: Söderström & Co, 1935), 161–62.

argued manner. Frosterus was concerned about the future of the human race on Earth under the pressures of egotism, class struggle, propaganda and imperialism. According to this philosopher, the “mechanically controllable splitting of the nucleus of the atom,” to which he already referred in his book *Moderna vapen* in 1915 and of which Wells also wrote at an early stage, offered mankind fantastical opportunities for both good and evil. Frosterus’s political utopia was a world state that could arbitrate the conflicts for the benefit of the future of mankind. He understood at the time of writing his essay, in the mid-1930s, that a world state, “a goal so necessary as an orientation still remains far from the path of achieving it.”²⁵ The United Nations founded after the Second World War was a more solid step than the League of Nations in the direction desired by Frosterus.

The Liberation of Painting

Of the liberal arts, painting was of particular importance for Frosterus. As a young architect, he painted water colours, especially on his travels in Italy and at his Villa Fridhem near Helsinki. Frosterus was one of the leading critics and theorists of art in Finland and Scandinavia before and after the First World War. He was fascinated by the problem of colour both experientially and theoretically. Frosterus’s considerable art collection, mainly containing works of French Post-Impressionism from Paul Signac to Louis Valtat and Finnish early 20th-century painting from A. W. Finch to Magnus Enckell is deposited in the Amos Anderson Art Museum in Helsinki.

Frosterus’s programmatic writings of the early 1900s show that he had a wide knowledge of contemporary aims in the visual arts, from naturalism to symbolism. In the article “James McNeill Whistler. In memoriam” from 1903 Frosterus admitted that he regarded Whistler to be one of the leading painters of the age and was particularly moved by Whistler’s portrait of his mother: “The wonderful picture of Mrs Whistler appeals straight to the heart – it is the most beautiful painting that I have ever seen.”²⁶ Whistler was also one of Frosterus’s ideals as an art critic and polemicist. The critic found the artist’s tendency to develop abstraction towards pure visuality and to argue in writing for his conception of art to be fascinating.

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²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁶ Sigurd Frosterus, “James McNeill Whistler. In memoriam,” *Euterpe* 27, 1903, 344.

In the article “Framtidskonst” (Art of the Future) published in 1905, Frosterus believed that the evolution of art was based on continuity instead of upheaval. “The modern is thus not the opposite of the old or the traditional, but instead an imprecise expression of certain properties that gradually, developed through the exact sciences and their practical applications achieve more permanent forms day by day,” he proposed.²⁷ Frosterus maintained that modernity itself was “a worn-out, jaded term, a common pasture grazed bare by the whole world.”²⁸ It was thus necessary to define its meaning in its specific contexts of use.

According to Frosterus, the art of the future would not be the expression of arbitrary fantasy, but the product, as it were, of mature imagination conscious of the laws of existence. A locomotive or a railway station could be art, and also furniture design could achieve the status of an independent art: “*pure line, intelligent ornament, an intact new world*—when the eye evolves in time to understand the law-like regularities of the play of line as sensitively as it has understood colours for a long while, and as sensitively as the ear hears the wrong note or incorrect playing in an orchestra.”²⁹

According to Frosterus’s vision the art of the future would be pluralistic, since he found a uniform modern style to be restrictive. As an elitist, he believed that the development of art would be carried out by a small circle of people devoted to it, while also welcoming the middle class and proletariat of the visual arts—the various forms of printmaking. Frosterus believed that art would gradually evolve towards restrained appropriateness: “The art of the future will be passive, ascetic and restrained—leaving freedom for those who enjoy it.”³⁰

Frosterus’s focus as a critic and theorist gradually began to shift towards the evolution of painting and problems of colour theory. He published his theoretical essays in *Regnbågsfärgernas segertåg* (The Triumph of the Colours of the Rainbow) in 1917. *Solljus och Slagskugga* (Sunlight and Umbra) a collection of reviews by Frosterus, also appeared in 1917. *Regnbågsfärgernas segertåg* was influential in the region of the Scandinavian languages and it was based on Frosterus’s talks and writings from 1908–1916. An essay in the book on the

²⁷ Sigurd Frosterus, “Framtidskonst,” *Euterpe* 43–46, 1905, 441.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 441.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 444.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Young-Helmholtz colour hypothesis and its reflections in painting focused on visual perception in the light of modern science, physics and the psychology of perception. The first version of this text already appeared in 1909. The other four essays in the book were on the orientations, autonomy and self-reflective nature of modern painting. Frosterus aimed at demonstrating the evolutionary logic of pure painting with his analytical discussion.

In 1920, Frosterus deepened his studies of colour theory in his doctoral dissertation *Färgproblemet i måleriet* (The Problem of Colour in Painting), in which he discusses the development of pigments and notions of colour from Ancient Egypt to the Middle Ages. Together, this dissertation and *Regnbågsfärgernas segertåg* form an attempt at a universal theory of colour from the Ancient Egyptians to Post-Impressionism.

The essays “Självändamålsprincipen” (The Principle of the End-in-Itself) and “Linjen” (The Line) of *Regnbågsfärgernas segertåg* focus on the tendencies of liberation in painting. Frosterus was convinced that art evolved towards ever-greater specialization. This process, however, was not straightforward but was realized either consciously or through trial and error. It coincided with the opposite aim of creating new artistic synthesis. According to Frosterus, the logic of differentiation was based on both positive and negative attempts at solutions:

[...] positive: animated by the desire to expand explicitly painterly means of expression and to seek forms unattainable with the technical resources of fellow arts.
 [...] negative: avoiding themes or ideas that literature, music or sculpture can express just as well or better.³¹

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Frosterus noted that “the most recent painting sought effects that are grasped in a purely visual manner” and that its aim was to create “a painterly world of form distinct from the purely plastic one that has predominated thus far”³² Expression with colour and immediate reception provided the starting point: “[...] a movement towards purely painterly painting, towards greater depth of painting in the areas where visual perception colours and mediates the emotional impres-

³¹ Sigurd Frosterus, “Självändamålsprincipen och måleriets ställning till övriga konstarten,” in Sigurd Frosterus, *Regnbågsfärgernas segertåg*, Stockholm: Albert Bonnier & Borgå: Holger Schildt, 1917, 153.

³² *Ibid.*, 153–54.

sions that we receive.”³³ While the new “purely abstract aesthetic values” of new painting brought it closer to music, Frosterus did not consider as very successful attempts to paint with tones or to make music with colours. Nonetheless, he dreamed of a completely new genre of art; “an independent, mobile art of colour and light with a time dimension like that of music.”³⁴

“Purely painterly painting”, however, was not just the art of the pure palette. That would have been dogmatic to Frosterus. “As in music where only fraction of things can be expressed in C Major or A Minor, also in painting; the expressive possibilities of pure colours are limited,” wrote Frosterus. A further essential aspect was the two-dimensional starting point of “purely painterly painting”—“the property of the painting canvas as a plane.”³⁵

The principle of Kant’s conception of beauty i.e. “Zweckmässigkeit [...] ohne Vorstellung eines Zweckes” (purposiveness without the notion of purpose), is analogous to the idea of painting as an end in itself.³⁶ The essays “Självändamålsprincipen” and “Linjen” can be compared to the contemporary British critic Roger Fry’s study “An Essay in Aesthetics”—from 1909 and partly to Clive Bell’s book *Art* from 1914. Both Fry and Bell drew upon Kant in their writing. They were known to Frosterus and may have influenced his views. Frosterus also had the opportunity to meet Fry, possibly on a visit to London in 1914. The British critic and artist had given Frosterus his painting *Guildford* (1912), which is included in Frosterus’s art collection.

Fry stressed the emotional origins of artistic experience. Artistic emotions were end in themselves and they could be considered conceptually by analysing the formal properties of an artwork, such as rhythm, mass, space, light, shadow and colour. According to Bell, Fry’s “An Essay in Aesthetics” was “the most helpful contribution to science since the days of Kant.”³⁷ Bell continued to develop his colleagues’ notions of emotionalism and formalism in his theory of *Signifi-*

³³ *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. G. Lehmann, Stuttgart: Philip Reclam Jun., 1966 (original version 1790), § 17, 120.

³⁷ Clive Bell, *Art*, New York: Capricorn Books, 1958 (original version 1914), 8.

cant Form. This is a factor common to all works of art that we recognize with the aid of aesthetic emotion.

Frosterus's role as an art critic in Finland—and perhaps also in the other Nordic countries—and as a theorist and protagonist of French painting, and Post-Impressionism in particular – matched the roles of Fry and Bell in Great Britain. Compared with Fry, Frosterus was more analytical in writing, while Bell was more innovative and acute as a philosopher of art. In his essay “Linjen” Frosterus refers critically to the theories of Fry and Bell, noting that Bell's *Significant Form* was a fashionable slogan rather than an insight as such. Frosterus maintained that the German aestheticist Konrad Fiedler had already detailed the starting points of artistic perception in his concept of *reine Sichtbarkeit* presented in his article “Über die Beurteilung von Werken der bildenden Künste” from 1876.

But one of the first who with manly forthrightness and clear thinking formulated art as something high above the concept of beauty was Fiedler, a friend of Marées and Hildebrand, when he declared that only in artistic perception do we lay claim to the external world as a visual impression (*Sichtbarkeit*) and that this visibility as such does not exist at all without artistic form.”³⁸

This reference to Fiedler, a Neo-Kantian art theorist, indicates Frosterus's versatility. Skilled in languages, he followed Continental European, British and Nordic discourse and had a privileged position for drawing conclusions. In his text about Whistler, he expressed regret that contemporary nationalism had led “French, English and German critics in their narrow-minded self-sufficiency“ to assess the development of art solely from perspectives of their respective countries.³⁹ Fry's critical remark that “after the usual twenty years of delay, provincial England had become aware of the impressionist movement in France” was along the same lines.⁴⁰

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³⁸ Sigurd Frosterus, “Den dragna linjen och de skilda perspektiven,” in Sigurd Frosterus: *Regnbågsfärgernas segertåg*, Stockholm: Albert Bonnier & Helsingfors: Holger Schildt, 1917, 229.

³⁹ Sigurd Frosterus, “James McNeill Whistler. In Memoriam,” *Euterpe*, 27, 1903, 341.

⁴⁰ Roger Fry, “Retrospect” (original version 1920), in Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1923, 287.

Chronologically and in their attitudes, Fiedler's writings paralleled Whistler's elitism and aestheticism, which in turn provided Fry's and Bell's immediate art-philosophical background. Fiedler, however, was a theorist arguing in the German manner and Whistler was a polemicist. According to the German, art was neither the imitation of nature nor the presentation of ideas. He also wrote that "spiritual art activity leads to no results, for it itself is the result."⁴¹ Painting had its own independent visual world, in which formal quality was decisive. He regarded art to be ultimately a "code" accessible to few people and therefore he did not consider art education to be necessary.

Frosterus's commendable argument for the autonomy of painting in the essay "Självändamålsprincipen" can be compared not only to the texts of Fry and Bell but also to the much later essay "Modernist Painting" by Clement Greenberg from 1960. The Finnish and American critics shared a similar scientific ethic and the belief in genre-specificity of the arts. "That visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in any other order of experience, is a notion whose only justification lies in scientific consistency," Greenberg writes.⁴²

Compared with Frosterus, Greenberg had the benefit of over four decades of later experience in the development of modern painting, but he does not introduce much that is new to the theory of painting as an autonomous medium. His merits are more along the lines of a good formulation of theory. Arthur C. Danto considers Greenberg's great achievement to be his clear exposition of the self-critical principle of modernism, the fact that like other genres of art painting unswervingly seeks to "discover its own philosophical essence". In this regard, Danto appears to overrate Greenberg's merits as a theorist of modernism at the expense of European writers.⁴³

⁴¹ Konrad Fiedler, "Über die Beurteilung von Werken der bildende Künste," in Konrad Fiedler, *Schriften über Kunst I*, ed. H. Konnerth, Munich, 1913, 56.

⁴² Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," (original version 1960), in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance 1957–1969*, ed. J. O'Brian, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, 91.

⁴³ Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1997, 68. See also 67–70.

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