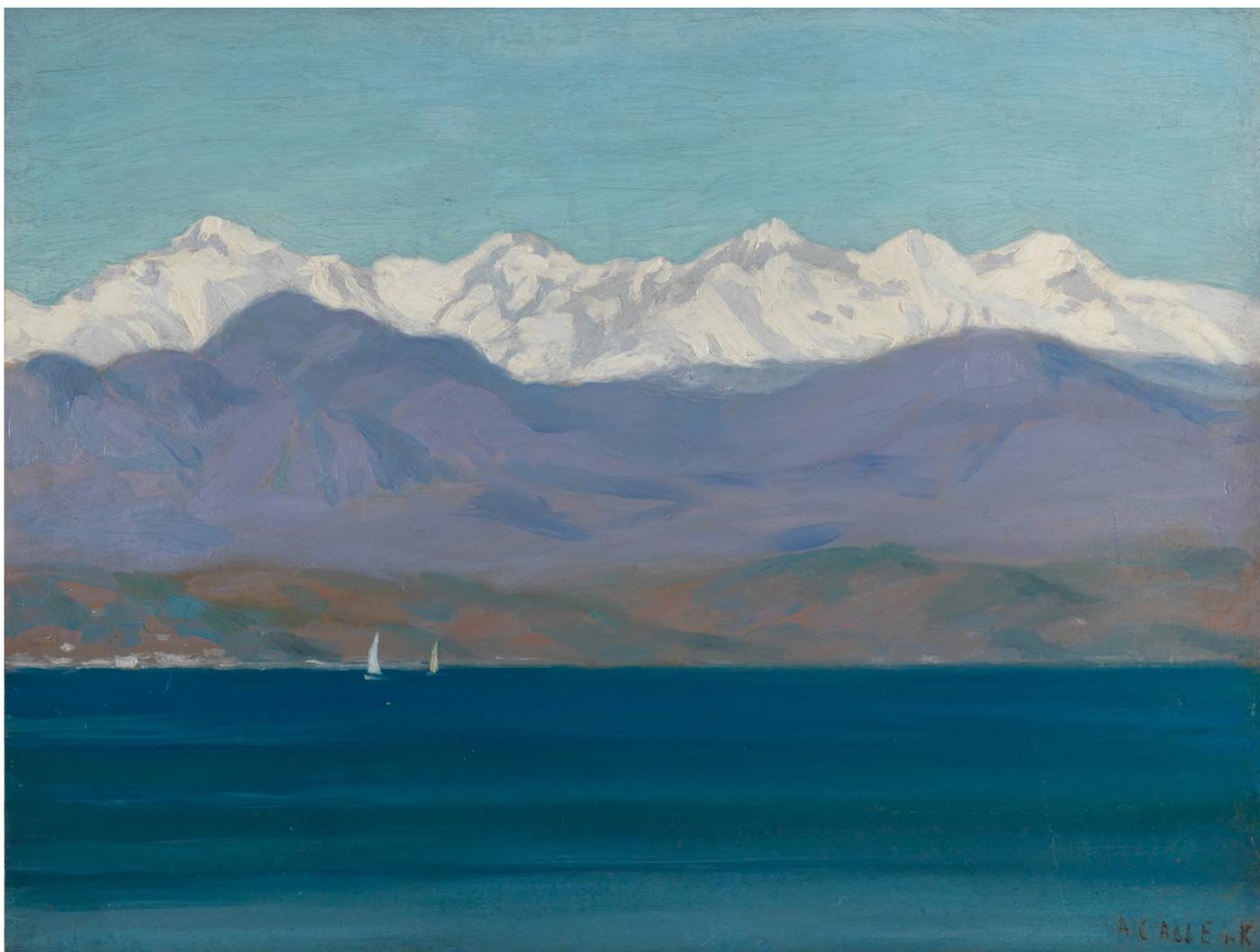




AKSELI GALLEN KALLELA

Pori, 1865 – 1931, Stockholm

View across the Gulf of Suez



May, 1909

Oil on board, 27 x 35 cm, signed lower right: 'A GALLEN K'

Provenance

Possibly purchased directly from the artist by Gustave Lowe (b.1872);
Collection of Gustave Lowe (b.1872), Brussels, Belgium;
Thence by descent until 2024

AKSELI GALLEN-KALLELA AND THE GULF OF SUEZ

On 12th May 1909, Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela took a train to Marseille from Paris with his wife Mary and their children, Kirsti and Jorma. There they boarded the German passenger ship Adolph Woermann to start their voyage to East Africa. Among the earliest works produced during this transformative journey was *View across the Gulf of Suez*, a luminous depiction of the distant snow-capped mountains along the East bank of the Gulf of Suez, most likely the Sinai mountains. Painted from the ship during the family's passage South, this work reflects the crossing of both a geographical and artistic threshold. The composition, with its vast horizontal space, simplified forms, and radiant palette, presages a radical stylistic evolution in Gallen-Kallela's work.

When Gallen-Kallela arrived in Paris in December 1908, on the first leg of his trip, he did so as the most famous Finnish artist in Europe. He had achieved international acclaim through his celebrated contribution to the Finnish Pavilion at the 1900 Paris World Fair, was well connected in continental art circles and frequently included in international exhibitions. Despite this, by early 1909 he had become deeply disillusioned with the Parisian art scene. In a candid letter to his friend and fellow artist Pekka Halonen, written in March 1909 prior to his departure, Gallen-Kallela vented his frustrations:

“Gauguin has driven people crazy because they don't understand his art—they just gawp at it and imitate it. There are hundreds of such imitators, and appalling... You can paint any which way now, as long as you stay within the bounds of the 'fashionable style'. In the eyes of these artists, the whole world is confetti, a jumping, screaming, brutal hell.”¹

Overleaf: View of Sinai Mountains seen
from the Gulf of Suez today



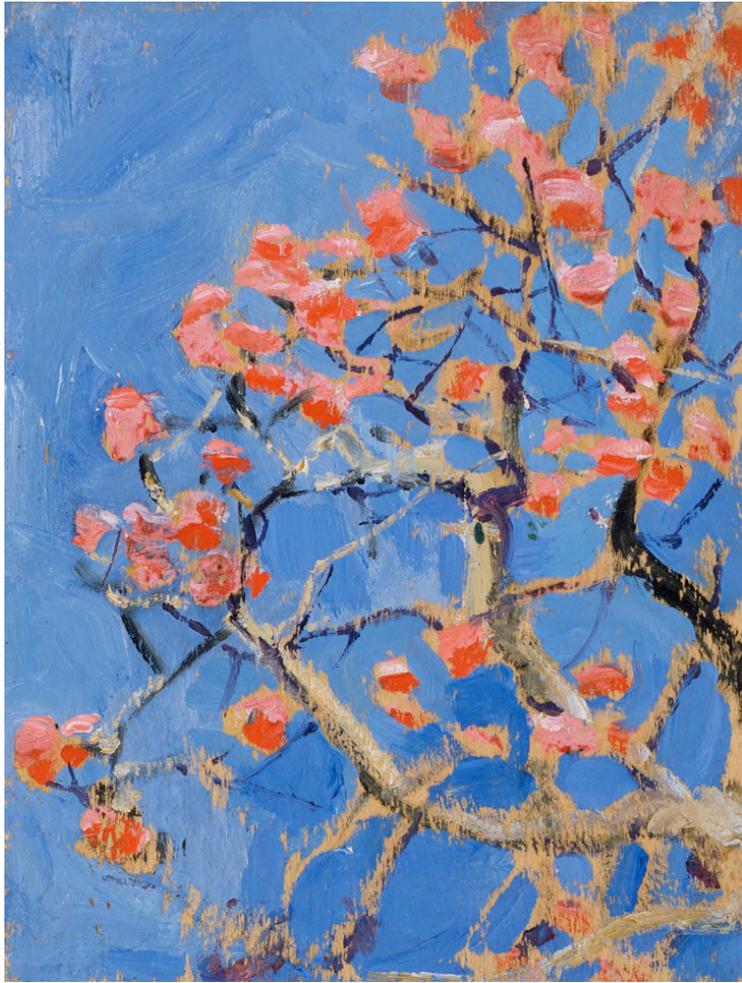


Fig.1 Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Coral tree in blossom*, 1910, Helsinki, Finnish National Gallery

This discontent coincided with what art historian Anne Pelin has described as a “professional crisis,” one that intensified during Gallen-Kallela’s sojourn in Paris.² The city that had once nurtured his early career now felt hollow and stifling. Reflecting on this period, he wrote:

“This time, Paris was for me just a stop on the way to darkest Africa, where there’s sun and genuine joy of life and words of creation but no language that hides thought ... There you can be your own person and reject the ‘modern.’”³

Yet, despite his harsh critique of contemporary art trends, Gallen-Kallela's African period would see him adopt some of the very innovations he scorned, applying a new visual language to his awe-inspiring surroundings.⁴ Residing in British East Africa, modern-day Kenya, with his family for over nineteen months, he rediscovered his creative vitality, producing more than 170 works. These paintings, as Pelin states stand as “small, intense landscape fragments whose broad painterliness liberates the form and colours, allowing them to live on the canvas like expressive imprints of memory”.⁵ This is evident in the painting presented here, as well as works like *Coral tree in blossom* from 1910 (Fig.1), illustrating the impact on his work, both in colour and composition.



Fig.2 Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *A Kikuyu woman*, 1909, private collection

However, the motivations for the journey were not simply artistic. In East Africa Gallen-Kallala sought a refuge for his family to escape the encroaching and corrupting influence of modern industrial Europe. As he wrote before his departure:

*“I shall go there to the wilderness to where the natives, lions, ostriches and rhinos dwell. Perhaps there still dwells some branch of the Kalevalian people that has become extinct in Finland. There one can live as oneself and ignore all things modern. I must go there to feel at least for once that I am living!”*⁶

Africa represented for him a primordial space where the spiritual depth he associated with Finland’s past might still survive. A place where he could become at one with the “ancient soul of the people”.⁷ This is exemplified by his interest and fascination with the different peoples and tribes he encountered in British East Africa, taking over 300 photographs, and portraying in many of his paintings the men and women of the Kikuyu tribe, in particular, from the surrounding plains of Nairobi (see Fig.2). The Kikuyu are thought to have settled in central Kenya, around Mt. Kenya, as early as the 13th Century.



Fig.3 Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Red Sea*, 1909, oil on canvas, Helsinki, Finnish National Gallery

As the first Finnish artist to journey South of the Sahara, the impact of these new visual landscapes Gallen-Kallela encountered should not be underestimated. Writing on his journey down the Suez in *Afrika-kirja*, the memoir he would later pen, the impression of these desert landscapes are made clear:

“The desert is nothing but a line between heaven and earth. The desert is nothing but an endless horizontal surface. The desert is nothing but grey-yellow ground under a blue vault. The desert is nothing but monotonous and boring. – Most people think so, but the desert is an entire world for anyone who uses their sense organs”.⁸

The immediate impact of this new type of landscape is also recorded in two famous surviving sketches from his travel down the Suez and the Red Sea (see Figs.3 and 4), now in the Finnish National Gallery.



Fig.4 Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Red Sea, Suez*, 1909, oil on canvas, Helsinki, Finnish National Gallery

Much smaller in size and less finished than *View across the Gulf of Suez*, they show an evolution from his earlier Finnish landscapes, maintaining the high waterline composition reminiscent of his Lake Keitele series and influenced by his interest in Japanese art, yet transforming his palette with vibrant hues of pinks, purples, turquoise and white of his new landscape. With *View across the Gulf of Suez*, Gallen-Kallela goes further than these initial quick sketches, presenting not just a topographical scene but a deeply meditative one. The silent interplay of sky, mountain, and sea rendered in sweeping, assured strokes, through which we glimpse his unmistakable dialogue with new modernist tendencies. The spiritual and aesthetic reawakening vividly expressed in this painting, was later translated in his own words:

*“When I arrived, time stood still. Like an ever-evolving Fata Morgana, the visions around us change; everything is just days and nights that merge with the sun, the moon and the stars, in an air so gentle that one forgets one’s own existence”.*⁹

In this way *View Across the Gulf of Suez* can be seen as a personal portrayal of the artist grappling with his first encounters of this mirage of colour that so astonished him.





Fig.5 Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Mt. Kenya 20.V 1910*, private collection

However, these works were not just mementoes of this life-affirming trip, right from the outset of his time in East Africa Gallen-Kallela envisioned exhibiting his new works internationally. He proposed shows in Paris and the United States, even discussing this with President Theodore Roosevelt, who invited the artist to his residence during his time in Nairobi in 1909.¹⁰ His ambition was not just to display African-themed works but to present to the world his new, revitalised artistic vision born from experiences in the colour filled landscapes of British East Africa, such as *Mt. Kenya* (Fig.5) or more radical compositions like *Coral tree in blossom*. This new direction of his work, was pre-empted and promoted back in Finland by Gallen-Kallela himself as early as 1909, regularly updating the newspapers back home with commentary on his odyssey:

“Here should all the artists of the world be! I walk in a mere ecstasy of beauty”.¹¹



Despite these intentions, the exhibition of these works en masse in Paris or America would never take place and therefore are not well known outside of Finland today, left aside from many of the recent international exhibitions on the artist. In the years that followed his trip, Gallen-Kallela would reflect on the enduring emotional resonance of his East African paintings, remarking in 1914:

“It’s funny, I’ve always had a certain reluctance to let go of my Africa pieces... For my part, I am always most attached to my most recent works”.¹²

Our landscape would enter the collection and inventory of a Belgian artist come art dealer Gustave Lowe (b.1872), who had an exhibition space in Brussels in the early 1900s, which focussed more on works by other painters than his own, including Anna Boch, Roger Fry, Mathilde Tardif, Georges Lemmen and Dorothea Sharp, as well as at least two works by Gallen-Kallela. These two works remained with his descendants until 2024.

View across the Gulf of Suez therefore stands as a powerful inception point in Akseli Gallen-Kallela's artistic and personal life — a departure from his national romantic style of the late 19th century, that had built his fame, and an arrival to his own unique modern language. More than a landscape, it marks the crossing from the familiar traditions into a new, liberated vision shaped by the raw clarity and emotional intensity of Africa. Painted with speed at the edge of two continents, it reflects the artist's yearning for authenticity, his rejection of fashionable superficiality, and his pursuit of a more elemental expression. The East African journey reinvigorated Gallen-Kallela's creative spirit, propelling him towards a bold modernist direction he had previously resisted, that would continue to influence his work long after his return. In this painting, we witness the moment of transformation: a serene, expansive vision that captures not only the vastness of a new geography but the opening of a new direction for the most famous Finnish artist.

NOTES

¹ Akseli Gallen-Kallela to Pekka Halonen, 3 March 1909, in Okkonen, *Akseli Gallen-Kallela*, 1949, p. 713.

² Anne Pelin, *Kenya Revisited: New Dreams of Gallen-Kallela's Africa*, p. 48.

³ Akseli Gallen-Kallela to Pekka Halonen, 3 March 1909, in Okkonen, *Akseli Gallen-Kallela*, 1949, p. 715

⁴ Anne Pelin, *Kenya Revisited: New Dreams of Gallen-Kallela's Africa*, p. 49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶ Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Afriikka-kirja*, 1931, p. 59.

⁷ Anne Pelin, p.48

⁸ Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Afriikka-kirja*, 1931, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁰ Erja Pusa, *Akseli Gallen-Kallela's African Period* (Master's Thesis, 1988), p. 25.

¹¹ Akseli Gallen-Kallela, quoted in *Axel Gallen-Kallela i Afrika*, *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 29 October 1909.

¹² Akseli Gallen-Kallela interviewed by Stockholm's *Dagbladet* on 8th January 1914.