

Alexander Reichstein: Rudolf Koivu's fairytale world at Retretti in summer 2012

Rudolf Koivu (1890-1946) is one of Finland's best known illustrators. He illustrated a diverse range of publications, from ABC books to children's periodicals, but his skills and style stand out at their finest in his fairytale illustrations. Koivu illustrated so many fairytales – both classics and ones written by his contemporaries – that one can rightfully speak of a whole fairytale world of its own. Reflected in this world are however also Koivu's personal character and fate.

Retretti invited me to plan an exhibition on Rudolf Koivu's fairytale world. I decided to let the exhibition design grow into a whole installation, where all the elements come from Koivu's illustrations. The idea of turning the exhibition into an installation is significant because small illustrations can be difficult to view in a large exhibition space. The featured illustrations were mostly made for books, so a large exhibition space seemed to call for a whole new approach. On the other hand, I feel that Koivu's fairytale world will come across clearer if the viewers – especially children – are not left to just stand aside as viewers but are able to participate – look at it, explore it, play in it.

As I've studied Koivu's world of fairytales, I have come to realize that it is composed of various distinct parts. An important source of inspiration for Koivu was the mystical Finnish forest, which also has an important role in the exhibition. Koivu knew his forests well. When he moved to live in the countryside with his grandmother as a 13-year old orphan, it was the forest that caught his deepest interest. At the exhibition Koivu's forest-themed illustrations grow to the size of a forest, as the pictures of trees have been printed out on large stretches of fabric. An entity of its own is the realm of winter, the thrall of ice and snow. Otherwise the forest is summery but also dark and gloomy; it is teeming with trolls and witches trying to attack the visitors. There is a small, humble cabin in the forest, the home of a sweet old lady or perhaps an evil witch, which visitors can enter to face the unknown. As Maria Laukka remarks in her study on Koivu: "In Koivu's fairytale world everything is possible and nothing is safe".

Through the trees in the forest we can see in the distance a wondrous castle on a mountaintop. This topic is often repeated in Koivu's illustrations. Thus the exhibition, too, offers a journey through the forest towards the castle. It is not however an easy place to reach because the forest ends at the shores of a sea. It could also be a lake, or even the mythical Tuoni river of death – a real wooden boat floats on the water at the exhibition. Koivu's imageries of the underwater world appear (as

video projections) on the water surface: amazing fish, mermaids, water fey. Flying fairytale characters float about in the air, from a sandman to a flying carpet. A traveler can also take a break at the exhibition and rest by a riverbank, listening to the stories told by large seashells or the music that echoes from inside them.

On the shore we get to see that the castle across the river is in fact a theatre with a set and curtain. Koivu's works often have something notably theatrical about them, but it is his castles and palaces where the effect is most strongly felt. When we make it behind the curtain we see more elements from the world of palaces which are often present in Koivu's illustrations: curtains, pillars, princesses, kings and, of course, a throne where a visitor can also take a seat. It is the kind of world that Koivu never got to know in his own life – it is pure imagination. It may reflect the influences Rudolf, a poor Finnish boy, got from the palaces and nobility in St Petersburg – he was actually born and lived his whole childhood there. It is also known that he was very fond of theatre and especially Russian ballet. Koivu also drew influences from other illustrators and artists as he created his own fairytale world where the West and the East blend together.

This aspect of theatricality also characterizes the Koivu exhibition at Retretti. One could say that the exhibition design serves as staging where visitors can enter and assume the role of a fairytale character. They can decide for themselves whether they wish to be a poor, lonely orphan child or a fat king, a cheerful fairy or a valiant knight, a beautiful princess or an ugly witch.

Welcome to Rudolf Koivu's fairytale world – on the other side of reality.