

A photograph of a museum interior. In the center, a golden Buddha statue sits on a dark, ornate pedestal. The statue is positioned on a dark, rectangular plinth. To the left, a stanchion with a dark rope is visible. The background consists of large windows with vertical frames, looking out onto a landscape with trees and water. A dark, patterned rug lies on the floor in the foreground. The entire image has a blue tint. Two white, organic-shaped text boxes are overlaid on the image.

Eastern Spirituality

Villa Gyllenberg, Helsinki, 2023

Tikanoja Art Museum, Vaasa, 2024



Eastern Spirituality

Villa Gyllenberg, Helsinki, 26 April – 13 August 2023

Tikanoja Art Museum, Vaasa, 18 May – 28 October 2024

Curated by Nina Kokkinen

Throughout the modern era, Asia, and India in particular, has frequently been imagined in Europe as a source of ancient wisdom, spirituality, and mystery. Such culturally constructed notions, often encapsulated in concepts such as the “mystical East” and “Eastern spirituality,” have been continuously produced, circulated, and reimagined across different historical contexts. Their influence remains visible today, shaping practices ranging from yoga and meditation to spiritual tourism and the consumption of Asian-inspired imagery and material culture.

*research-based exhibition • Asian religious traditions • ‘mystic east’ • imaginaries
• esotericism • Finnish art 1890–1990 •*

The research-based exhibition Eastern Spirituality explored the history of these imaginaries in Finnish art from the late nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. It examined Finnish artists' engagements with Asian religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, while paying particular attention to the idea of the "East" as a spiritually charged Other. The exhibition highlighted the role of Theosophy and other esoteric movements in shaping these interpretations and facilitating the circulation of religious, philosophical, and artistic ideas across cultural boundaries.

Presented at Villa Gyllenberg in Helsinki (26.4.–13.8.2023) and Tikanoja Art Museum in Vaasa (18.5.–28.10.2024), the exhibition brought together works by more than twenty artists, including Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Eemu Myntti, Eva Bremer, Ilona Harima, Anitra Lucander, Outi Heiskanen and J. O. Mallander. Through artworks, archival materials, personal narratives, and religious objects, it traced the diverse ways in which ideas of Eastern spirituality became embedded in Finnish art and visual culture.

"The exhibition is art historically significant in revealing how Eastern spirituality was absorbed into Finnish art and cultural pursuits from the late nineteenth century onwards."

Pessi Rautio, art critic and Editor-in-Chief of *Taide*





“Villa Gyllenberg’s new exhibition on Eastern spirituality spans everything from Buddha statuettes to abstract art. It does not shy away from controversial issues.”

Tove Djupsjöbacka, cultural journalist and critic, *Hufvudstadsbladet*

For many artists, the “mystical East” served as a source of inspiration, encouraging travel, collecting, contemplation, and artistic experimentation. At the same time, such imaginaries were shaped not only by artists but also by individuals of Persian, Indian, and other Asian backgrounds who contributed to the circulation and transformation of these ideas in Finland.

The exhibition formed part of a broader research project examining Eastern spirituality in twentieth-century Finnish art. It also addressed the more problematic dimensions of these imaginaries, including their connections to

colonial power relations, racialized thinking, and orientalist representations of the “East.” Two public panel discussions brought together scholars and specialists in Asian religions, colonial history, and cultural exchange to foster critical dialogue around the exhibition’s themes.

Kokkinen is currently completing a scholarly monograph on Eastern spirituality in Finnish art and culture based on the findings of the research project. The manuscript is scheduled for completion in 2026.

