



ICONOGRAPHISK POST
NORDISK TIDSKRIFT FÖR BILDTOLKNING
NORDIC REVIEW OF ICONOGRAPHY

NR 2, 2021

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ICONOGRAPHISK POST • NORDISK TIDSKRIFT FÖR BILDTOLKNING
NORDIC REVIEW OF ICONOGRAPHY NR 2, 2021. ISSN 2323-5586
PP. 7–19.

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LABOR. A Statue Group in the Monument to Alexander II in Helsinki

Abstract: The statue group *LABOR* that forms part of the monument to Alexander II of Russia, Grand Duke of Finland, in Senate Square in Helsinki (inaugurated 1894) is discussed in the context of labour movement iconography by Fred Andersson in an article in *Iconographisk Post* 3/4 2020. The proposals of the sculptor Walter Runeberg (1838–1920) for *LABOR* paired Agriculture, a mature woman harvester, and a youthful Industry with tools and machinery. The latter figure was rejected and replaced by a farmer with an axe to indicate his role as a rural worker felling timber, the raw material of the forestry industries. The harvesting woman and the farmer-logger form a couple, and the arrangement of Agriculture's garments intimates that she might be pregnant. The surmise is affirmed in sculptor Emil Wikström's (1864–1942) tympanum frieze on the façade of the House of the Estates (erected in 1902), in which he has placed the farming couple of *LABOR*, the man turning earth with a spade and his seated wife teaching their small son to read. The *tableau* can be read as a comment on the contemporary drive for compulsory elementary education in Finland.

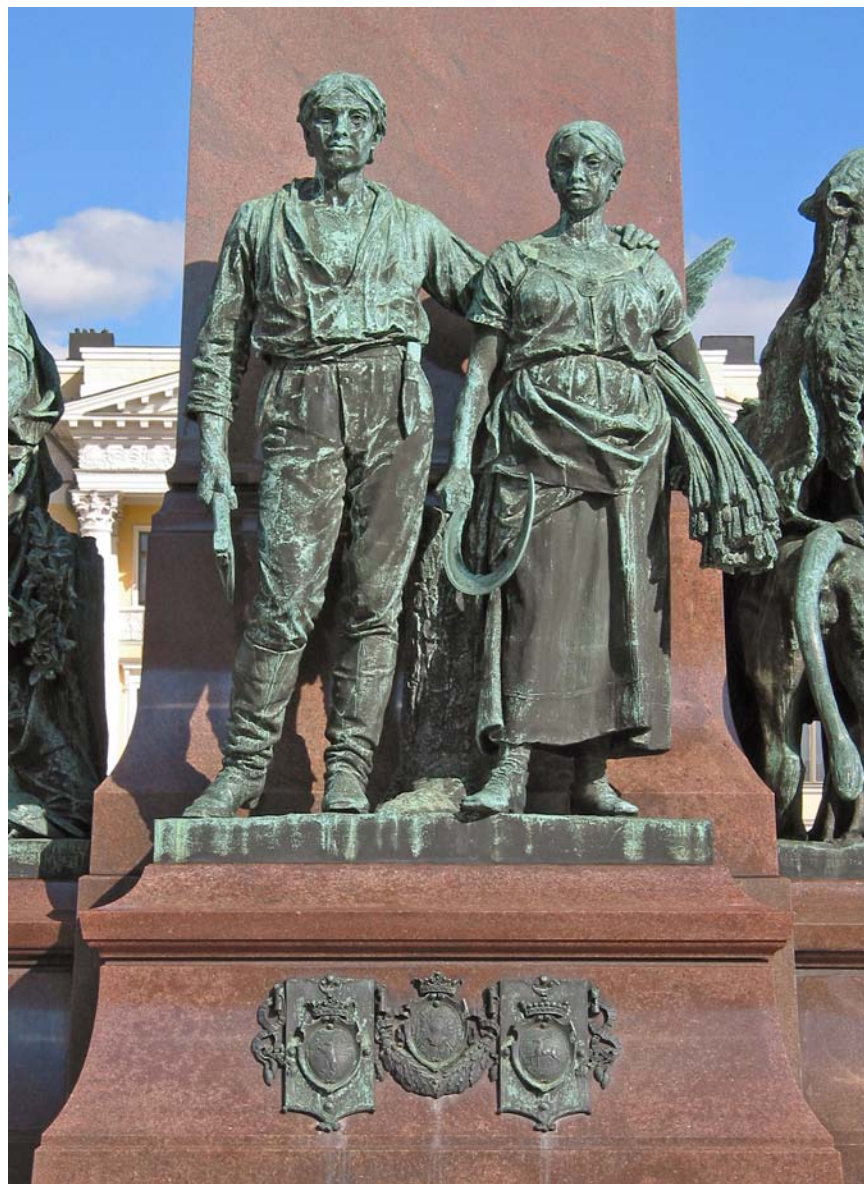
LABOR and the tympanum frieze, which has as its central figure Alexander I in 1809 giving his ruler's affirmation to the Estates assembled to swear their pledge of loyalty to the new ruler, are to be understood in the context of Finnish nationalist politics rather than the imagery of the international workers' movement. The figures of *LABOR* are, however, indebted to the art of French Realism, which favoured agricultural workers as motifs around the middle of the 19th century and which was linked to socialist movements.

Keywords: Labour Movement Iconography, Monument, Helsinki, Alexander II of Russia, Walter Runeberg, Emil Wikström

LABOR

A Statue Group in the Monument to Alexander II in Helsinki

Eeva Maija Viljo



*Fig. 1. Walter Runeberg (1839–1921), Labor, the western pedestal group of Czar Alexander II's monument in Helsinki. Inaugurated on 29 April 1894. Bronze, height 2,3 m.
Photo Lars Berggren.*

In his study of labour movement iconography (*Iconographisk Post* nr 3/4, 2020), Fred Andersson has tapped the vast pictorial resources of 19th century allegory and symbolic attributes available to workers' associations for use as emblems of identity and socialist ideology. Heavy industry offered imagery coupled with the drama of technical advance, and this was open both to workers' associations and industrial enterprises and their proponents. Andersson discusses the sculptural group named, in Latin, *LABOR* on the monument to Emperor Alexander II of Russia, Grand Duke of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland, in the Senate Square in Helsinki, inaugurated in 1894 (fig. 1). The statue group was to combine representations of agricultural and industrial work, but difficulties in creating a convincing personification of industry compelled a change of scheme to a gender-based depiction of farming with a pointer to its connection with forestry industries.

I shall discuss *LABOR* in the context of the Alexander II monument and another sculptural work motivated by the same national politics in 1890s Finland. Andersson's inclusion of the group in a survey of emblems created for the labour movement, or having a close relationship to it, needs some clarification. How pertinent is his classification in view of the fact that *LABOR* is part

of a monument honouring an autocratic ruler? What, if any, link to the international labour movement could *LABOR* possibly have?

In his competition sketch for *LABOR*, the sculptor of the monument, Walter Runeberg (1838–1920), personified agriculture as a peasant woman carrying a sickle and a sheaf of corn, and for the personification of industrial work he proposed a juvenile *genius* surrounded with attributes chosen from the paraphernalia of the metal manufacturing industry. His plaster model was executed along these lines, but it was met with general disapproval. Eventually, the boy worker and his machinery were discarded and replaced by an adult farmer or farm worker carrying an axe. In the end, then, both representations of labour came to refer to the world of rural economy combining agriculture and forestry. This could, in fact, be seen as appropriate in Finland where farmers and agricultural labourers made up the workforce that felled and transported the timber as raw material for the forestry industries.

As Andersson explains, the decision to erect a monument to Alexander was made immediately after his assassination in 1881. The disconcerting event was all the more disturbing for Alexander's Finnish subjects as they viewed him as the consolidator of the autonomous status of the grand duchy. A decisive act of the ruler had been to allow the reinstatement of the political functions of the four Estates, and by opening their first assembly in 1863 in person he had made his liberal intentions manifest. The Emperor was, moreover, looked on as a check on the growing signs of hostility to Finnish autonomy in Russia. Uncertainty about the new ruler's position on this question raised anxieties. The monument was meant, specifically, to honour and commemorate Emperor Alexander II as the founder of the system of political representation, and, as such, it was also a message to his successor.

A committee of delegates elected by the Estates administered the work on the monument, and to assist in the evaluation of the artistic merit of the plaster models sent to Helsinki for inspection by Walter Runeberg from Paris, where he worked, a group of artists and other art experts were called in as consultants.¹

The monument with a portrait statue of Alexander II surrounded on four sides by secondary sculptural groups followed a familiar formula for 19th-century monuments to rulers. It can be compared, for instance, with the monument to Maximilian II of Bavaria in Munich sculpted by Caspar von Zumbusch

1866–1875.² The allegorical sculpture groups of the Alexander monument enumerated by Andersson are, it seems, even more intricate and convoluted in their allusions to the benefits of Alexander's reign than those of the Maximilian monument.

As Andersson points out, the statue group symbolizing labour differs from the other groups in that it refers directly to the sphere of work and workers while the allegorical personifications of the other groups represent their particular subjects on a conventionally symbolic plane. The two agricultural workers in *LABOR* are both adults of equal stature. Runeberg's first model of the group with the harvesting woman and a youthful industrial worker would have matched the theme of adult woman and young boy in the group *LUX* (Enlightenment), where a feminine personification of science is accompanied by a juvenile *genius* of art. In *LABOR* the implication would have been that the growing industry recruited its workers from a new generation sprung from workers on the land.

In October 1886 the delegation and its experts inspected the plaster models of Runeberg's first presentation for *LABOR*. The woman was found acceptable, but the young industrial worker aroused a lot of criticism, and it was recommended that he be replaced by some other figure. The whole idea of a boy standing with legs wide apart on a piece of machinery was considered odd and the formal execution unsatisfactory. Runeberg's attempt to assimilate realism with allegory was a failure.³

There are no drawings or casts preserved of this figure, but one of the members of the delegation, an engineer by profession, provides in his critique a detailed description that expounded on its numerous faults. The proportions of the machine, a centrifugal regulator, we are told, were outsized, and no circumstance could be foreseen in which a worker with smith's tongs in his hand was likely to clamber up on to its cylinder. It was evident from other details as well that combining this particular machine with the stance that the worker had assumed was a mistake.⁴ Instead of referring to heavy industry with some generally recognized attribute, such as a cogwheel or a sledgehammer, Runeberg had tried his hand at machinery of which he evidently had a very superficial understanding. Nor could the arrangement, it was thought, be expected to enlighten the general public as to the significance of *LABOR*.

Andersson mentions "Harvest" (*La Moisson*), a harvesting feminine figure



Fig. 2. Henri Chapu, La Moisson, 1883. Plaster version in Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris. <https://www.pinterest.fr/pin/351491945908308360/>

by Henri Chapu (1833–1891) for the decorations of the rebuilt city hall of Paris. As is generally known, work and workers, among them agricultural workers, became a favoured motif in French art around the middle of the 19th century. This movement was well known to Finnish artists studying or working in Paris, and the painter Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905), who was one of the delegation’s consultants, is known to have been enthusiastic about Jules Bastien-Lepage’s



Fig. 3. Henri Chapu, detail of the monument to the French industrialist and politician Eugène Schneider (1805–1875), Le Creusot (Saône-et-Loire, France), inaugurated in 1879. Wikimedia commons.

naturalistic treatment of peasant subjects. Chapu is also said to have produced what has been considered the first realistic representation of a worker in French sculpture. In his monument to the founder of the Creusot iron works (Eugène Schneider), Chapu has placed, on the statue’s pedestal, a group comprising a mother pointing out the industrialist to a son who is not quite old enough to enlist as apprentice to a smith, but is already accoutred in anticipation of a career at the forge with heavy boots and a smith’s tongs in his little hand (fig. 3). The statue was shown, before its inauguration, at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1878. In 1883 Chapu showed “Harvest” personified by a robust peasant woman in heavy skirts (fig. 2), evidently the sculpture that was meant for the Paris city hall.⁵

Walter Runeberg too seems to have been attracted by the realistic agricultural worker motif. His preoccupation with it comes up in a letter to the chairman of the delegation. It was written while Johannes Takanen (1849–1885),

with whom Runeberg, as Andersson relates, was to have jointly executed the Alexander monument, was still alive. Runeberg informs the chairman that he intends to suggest that the task of sculpting “the smith” and “work” [the harvester of *LABOR*] should be given to Takanen, although “the latter figure is a dear child of mine, and it is only with certain difficulty that I leave it in the hands of another.”⁶

While work on the Alexander II monument progressed slowly, the House of the Estates (Sw. *Ständerhuset*) in Helsinki was completed for the Estates’ assembly in 1891, except for the intended frieze in the tympanum of its main façade. As the Alexander monument neared completion, a competition for this frieze was arranged, and in 1893 it closed with the sculptor Emil Wikström (1864–1942) as winner of the first prize (fig. 4). The central group of his frieze features the meeting of the Estates summoned by Alexander I when Finland,



Fig. 4. Emil Wikström, the tympanum frieze of the House of Estates (designed by Gustaf Nyström and built in 1888–1890), Helsinki (1893–1903). Photo Wikimedia Commons, *Alvesgaspar* 2013 (CC BY-SA 3.0).



Fig. 5. Emil Wikström, detail of the tympanum frieze in fig. 4.

formerly part of the Swedish realm, was incorporated with Russia in 1809. In the frieze, the central figure is Alexander I in the act of giving his ruler’s assurance to the representatives of the Estates, who pledge their loyalty to the new ruler. Flanking the central group and extending into the corners of the tympanum are figures symbolic of the economic and cultural life of the nation. The frieze was erected with a minimum of ceremony in 1903, ostensibly as a piece of architectural decoration while its monumental aspect was downplayed.⁷ Relations between the grand duchy and Emperor Nicholas II had deteriorated to the point where it was inadvisable to draw the attention of the Russian authorities to expressions of national sentiment.

In the *LABOR* of the Alexander II monument, a detail that attracts attention is the harvesting woman’s apron draped to one side emphasizing the stomach region. This could be a discrete sign that the woman is pregnant, thus introducing the notion of a future. As it happens, in the left-hand corner of Wikström’s tympanum sculpture we find the farmer from *LABOR* turning the earth with a spade while the harvester wife is teaching the couple’s small boy to read (fig. 6). They are preceded further in the corner by a bearded male figure suggestive of primitive tradition in the guise of a Karelian peasant. The man has



Fig. 6. Emil Wikström, detail of the tympanum frieze of the House of Estates, Helsinki (cf. figs. 4 and 5).

left his axe on a tree stub and is singing runes to accompaniment of his *kantele* (to the left in fig. 5).⁸

These figures, remote from the centre of interest of the frieze in their very restricted surroundings under the sloping cornice of the tympanum, signify in the briefest possible way a history of Finnish cultural life as it had alternated in the workaday world with peasant toil. The mother teaching her son invokes an out-of-date conservative standpoint on education that elementary schools for the peasantry were unnecessary as it was up to the parents to teach their children to read. The background to the lesson depicted in the work are the endeavours in the 1890's to institute compulsory elementary education, which would have affected mostly the people in rural areas, that is, the agricultural population closest to the Estate of Farmers. (The Estate actually represented

only a fraction of those engaged in working the land, the landowning farmers.) The three young people to the right of the farmer's family, a seated boy with no clear occupational attributes, an apprentice – his attributes and youth suggest this identity – and a journeyman with a staff in his hand, are entering into a new era. This era, still in the making, suggests the promise, at least to the more active protagonists in the group, of an expanding economy and widening mental horizons.

As a project *LABOR* and its two workers in the Alexander II monument have nothing to do with the international labour movement, but, although parochial in nature as part of a nationalist political statement, the statues were produced under the influence of labour imagery in French realistic art, which did have connections to socialist movements. Runeberg's harvesting woman is, as Andersson has suggested, dependent on French sources. Her timber-felling husband seems a more original creation. So far, no material has been found on how the Gordian knot of the harvester's companion was solved, or how original or imitative the statue of the farmer is, but it fitted convincingly into the Finnish reality of its time.

Notes

- 1 The monument was cast in bronze in Paris at the foundry of Thiébaud frères. I have stated previously that *LABOR* was cast in Copenhagen, but this is a mistake. The documents show conclusively that Runeberg was compelled to cancel his summer vacation in Finland because of pressure from the delegation to complete the work in time before the unveiling scheduled for spring 1894. His Danish friend and colleague, Vilhelm Bissen (1836–1913), offered him the use of his professor's studio at the academy of art in Copenhagen, where Runeberg could also engage qualified assistance in preparing the plaster models. These were sent from Copenhagen to Thiébaud frères to be cast in bronze. Archives of the Swedish Literature Society (Svenska Litteratursällskapetets arkiv), Papers of Walter Runeberg, letter of Vilhelm Bissen to WR June 6, 1893; letter of Gustaf Nyström to WR (in "Köpenhamn"), March 10, 1894; Copenhagen plaster caster's bills and letters April 2, 1894, Aug 12, 1894; letter from Thiébaud frères Sept 7, 1893 [sic! should be 1894] informing WR that Agriculture has been cast and that the firm is doing finishing work (*ciselure*) on it. Meetings of the art experts see Library of Parliament, Helsinki, Papers of the Delegation...for...a monument to... Alexander II, minutes Oct. 16, 1886, March 27, 1889, Oct. 10, 1889, Oct. 1, 1893.
– My warmest thanks to Annette and Lars Berggren for locating the net images that illustrate this article and for letting me use Lars's photo of *LABOR*.
- 2 For a description of the Maximilian monument, see Ziegler 1972.
- 3 Library of Parliament, Helsinki, Papers of the Delegation... for... a monument to... Alexander II, minutes Oct. 16–17, 1886.
- 4 See note 3: statement of delegation member K. Nordman.
- 5 *La Sculpture française au XIXe siècle*, 362–363.
- 6 Library of Parliament, Helsinki, Papers of the Delegation... for... a monument to... Alexander II, letter from WR to J. Pippingskiöld, July 16, 1885: "...att Johannes Takanen utför Alexander II och 'smeden' och 'arbetet' denna sednare, en figure som är mig ett kärt barn hvars bildande jag endast med en viss svårighet öfverlämnar i en annans händer."
- 7 Aav 1990, 80–81.
- 8 A traditional stringed instrument resembling a zither.

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Library of Parliament, Helsinki
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