

June meeting

On June 1st David Martin gave a presentation on “Two artists from 1900”. From opposite ends of Europe, Akseli Gallen-Kallela (Finland) and Joaquin Sorolla (Spain) were almost exact contemporaries. Both won gold medals at the Paris Exposition of 1900. Both spent time in Paris in the 1880s, and were influenced in different ways by the Impressionists. Both were internationally celebrated during their lifetime – on the Continent and in North America, but not, for some reason, in England. In recent years their reputations have grown to the point where both have had substantial exhibitions in France and Germany.

Gallen-Kallela worked in a great variety of genres and media. He participated in the Finnish independence movement of the late nineteenth century, and was a friend of the composer Sibelius, much of whose music was explicitly inspired by the nationalist myth known as the *Kalevala*; and this was also a recurring theme in Gallen-Kallela’s paintings throughout his life. But perhaps his most rewarding works are his landscapes showing the forests, lakes and clouds of his native Finland. One of these – *Lake Keitele* – was purchased by the National Gallery in 1999, as the only picture by this painter in a UK public collection. Within a very short time of its acquisition, it had become one of the most popular pictures in the Gallery, as measured by the sales of postcard reproductions. But the best place to see Gallen-Kallela’s work is in Helsinki, in the Finnish national gallery known as the Ateneum, and in the house and studio which the artist designed and built beside another lake on the outskirts of the city.

Joaquin Sorolla was born in Valencia. After both his parents died in a cholera epidemic when he was two, he was brought up by his aunt and her husband, a locksmith, to whom he was apprenticed at the same time as he pursued early studies in drawing and painting. From these humble beginnings, and after more studies in Madrid, Rome and Paris, he became a hugely prolific and admired artist, exhibiting his work in France, Germany and the USA, but only once in London (apparently without comparable success). He was a fashionable portrait painter, and he spent several years on a major commission to paint a series of large-scale canvases of Spanish life for the Hispanic Society of America. But almost every summer he returned with his family to his native Valencia. The beach scenes that he painted there – often in *plein air* – depicting fishing boats, local people and his wife and children in the brilliant Mediterranean sunlight are his most attractive and personal works. They show his mastery of light, wind and water. Many of them can be seen today in the magnificent house and studio that he built in Madrid, and to which his family bequeathed his personal collection. It is well worth a visit.