# The Only Lady Artist in History

## The Only Female Gold Medalist in the Olympic Art Competitions of the 20th Century

*By Richard Stanton*

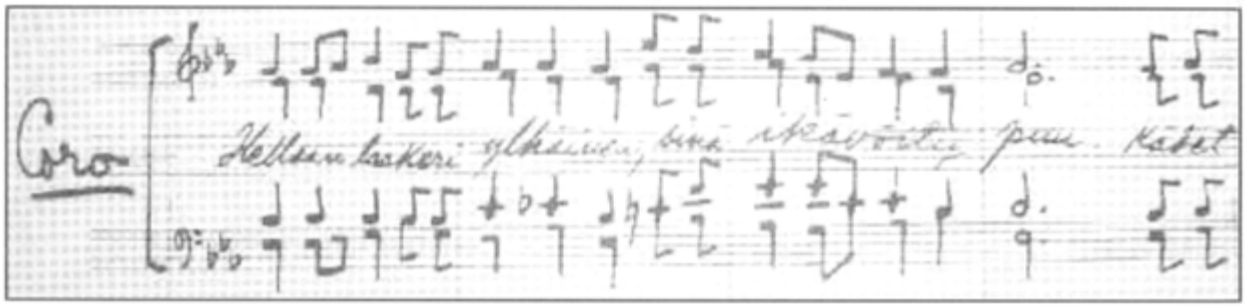
**Aale Tynni circa 1948**
(courtesy of WSOY)

Aale Maria Tynni (*3 Oct. 1913 †21 Oct. 1997) is one of Finland's most honored poets. Among her many awards and honors came one at the 1948 Olympic Games in London when she became the only woman to ever win a Gold Medal in the art competition for literature. For many people it is a surprise that from 1912 through 1948 the Olympic Games included art competitions. Who was this heroine of the arts and what is the story behind her unparalleled position in Olympic history?

Aale was born in Kolppana, Inkeri. Ingermanland, Inkeri in Finnish, is an historic region on the Gulf of Finland. The Inkeri, a Finnic people, had lived in the area for over a thousand years. The region was conquered by Sweden in 1617 and later lost by the Swedes to Czar Peter the Great of Russia in 1708 where he subsequently built his capitol, now known as St. Petersburg.

Her father, Kaapre Tynni, received his Master's degree at the University of Helsinki and was Headmaster of Kolppana Institute, the highest Finnish educational facility in Ingermanland. He was also a well-known journalist and speaker and during the Russian revolution was one of the leaders of the nationalist movement. His brother was a Commander in the White Regiment of Ingrians against the Red Communists and was killed in battle. As Bolshevik victory approached, Kaapre was compelled to flee with his wife and children with nothing more than the clothes on their backs or face certain execution. Thus, they fled their native homeland, stamping a lifelong sense of disinheritance on Aale's young mind. The Bolsheviks later began a systematic persecution of the remaining Inkeri, banishing or executing them as "Finnish Nationalists." Taking refuge in Helsinki with nothing but their name, her father was able to obtain several teaching positions with various educational institutions and provide for his family of seven children (Aale was in the middle). True to that famous Finnish attribute, "sisu" (best described as an indomitable strength of will), her parents went on to see all of their children ultimately obtained university educations.

Aale, on one of the rare occasions she spoke about herself said, "Myself, I am a native of the poetry of my Inkeri homeland." Recalling her early days she continued, "We came to Helsinki first. In the winter we lived in Mosabacka (now called Tapanila). Then we moved from there to Pukinmäki, which at the time had the Swedish name; Boxbacka. When there was not enough money there was no opportunity for me to go to the public school, I then studied at home in the winter with my father and mother (Lilja Piipponen-Tynni) as my teachers. Nonetheless, I had plenty of time. I wrote little poems daily and read them out loud to my sisters when they came home from school. My childhood memories are of the Pukinmäki area, the school and my school friends. It was a beautiful and happy community. It was almost possible to still be an idealist in the rural countryside. Currently it is Helsinki's federal-district of lofty high-rises. The beautiful old



**Musical score of Merikanto's "Helaan Laakeri"** (courtesy of The Finnish Music Information Center)

summer homes have disappeared, there is nothing left of my childhood home but a grove of woods wrapped in blue smoke in my mind..."

Aale began publishing her poetry while still in secondary school, in the school magazine. She then went on to study at the University of Helsinki, receiving her M.A. in 1936. Her first poetry collection, Kynttilä ydä (Candles of the Heart), appeared in 1938.

In 1940 she married Kauko Pirinen, historian and later a Professor at the University of Helsinki. During their marriage they had three children, a son, Matti and two daughters, Riitta and Annikka. The main themes in her poems of the 1940's were love and motherhood, touching upon the polarity between the ravages of war and the life force of motherhood. She worked as a teacher and poet and started her renowned career as a translator of poems by translating Henrik Ibsen's verse-play "Brand" in 1947.

During this same year, just as she was finishing her fifth collection of poems called Soiva Metsä (Ringing Woods), a colleague from the Finnish Writers Guild, Huugo Jalkanen, asked if she would submit an entry for the poetry competitions being set up for the Suomen Suurkisat (Finnish Sports Games) of 1947. He explained that the competition was drawing near and they had received virtually no worthy submissions. So, fearing they would find themselves with a catastrophe on their hands, he and the other judges decided to call as many professional poets as possible and ask them to participate. He explained the theme of the poem must relate to sports and then did all he could to convince her to enter the competition. She was not particularly interested in sports but she was in the mood for something new and different and since they went to the trouble to call her, she quickly composed an entry. As the poetry collection she was just finishing had to do with the forests and trees her entry for the competition, not surprisingly, also had to do with a tree, "Hellaan Laakeri " the laurel tree of Hellas.

There were three categories in the poetry competition, lyrics for hymns, marches and poems. Aale's entry received first prize in the section for hymns. Concurrent with these poetry events were competitions for music composers in the categories of hymns, marches and fanfares. Their compositions had to be inspired by the texts from the various prize winning poetry entries which were confidentially passed to them before the awards were announced. Aarre Merikanto (1893-1958), a noted Finnish composer, then won first prize for his composition "Hellaan Laakeri" based on Aale's poem and with her text as the lyrics for his hymn. There were approximately ten different musical compositions by other composers also inspired by her poem.

Tynni's publisher, Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö Helsinki (WSOY), was aware of the forthcoming literature competitions in the Olympic Games in London the next year. Thus, based on the success of the poem in the Finnish games, they asked her if they could submit it to the Olympic competitions in her behalf. She had little expectation of winning anything in those events but nonetheless gave her permission. Ironically, given her gift as a translator of poetry, she did not personally translate her poem into English for submission but left that to others.

She was in Rovaniemi, Lapland (Northern

portion of Finland), when she received the news she had won the Olympic Gold Medal for her poem "Hellaan Laakeri" in the 1948 Olympic Games. She was in Rovaniemi to participate with three other young women in a poetry tourné e. In her next appearances in the matinee, she was celebrated as an Olympic Gold Medal heroine as though she had won an athletic event. She was amazed and excited by the way the audience received her. She dutifully completed the events in Rovaniemi and then rushed for the trip to London and the Olympics. She traveled on the boat together with the athletes, both men and women. There was excitement, and happiness and long, late talks. She had a wonderful time. She said it was like being a child all over again. Aale had fond memories of London and meeting some of the other art medallists and honorees and talking with them. When she flew home to Finland from London she also had the thrill of her first airplane flight.

In 1950 she visited Ireland where she fell victim to the enchantment of the Emerald Isle. Tynni was well known for her translations of some of Ireland's greatest writers such as William Butler Yeats. In 1954, together with the Consul of Ireland and the Finnish folklorist Kustaa Vilkuna, she was a founding member of the Finnish-Irish Society to help bring a knowledge and understanding of Ireland to Finland. It is not difficult to appreciate her empathy for the Irish with their love of myth, legend and lore and their struggle to regain their homeland from British control when you consider her own Inkeri origins. During this period her marriage to Kauko Pirinen begain to deteriorate, ultimately leading to their separation.

In 1960 their divorce was finally complete and soon thereafter she married Martti Haavio (known under the pen name of P. Mustapää a Finnish poet, folklorist and a respected Professor at the University of Helsinki. They had known each other since the 1940's and worked on joint projects such as ABC books and readers for use in schools throughout Finland since the 1950's. Somewhere along the intertwined path of their friendship, they fell in love. After their marriage they continued to be an inspiration for each other and beyond their numerous individual pursuits, continued to undertake many mutual endeavors.

In the early 1970's she lost her son Matti at the young age of 29. His death was devasting to Aale and her two remaining daughters. In her poems from this time you can sense the impact it dealt her. And then, her husband Martti passed away in 1973.

She threw herself into her work and her success continued. In 1977 the University of Helsinki awarded her an Honorary Doctorate and she was made an Honorary member of the Finnish Writers Union. In 1980 and 1982 her renowned translation of the Icelandic epic "Edda" appeared. Also in 1982 the President of Finland awarded her the status of Academician of the Academy of Finland, a lifetime honor bestowed only upon a maximum of 12 scientists and 12 artists. Aale was the first woman in any field and the first poet to be so honored in the history of Finland.

Her favorite themes throughout her career were the cherished ballads of the people, their myths, legends, and history. In an interview in her home in 1983, the interviewer wrote, "Her

Baron Pierre de Coubertin's vision of the re-born Olympic Games demanded the arts be included among the events. Thus, a conference initiated by the Baron in 1906 mandated art competitions become part of the Games. For one reason or another they did not begin until the Games of the Vth Olympiad in 1912 Stockholm. The Pentathlon of the Muses encountered problems from the onset with Stockholm only grudgingly including them among the competitions. Despite their recurrent difficulties, criticisms and interruptions by two world wars, the events nonetheless slowly took root and began to flourish. However, for reasons only now coming under the scrutiny of historians, the last to include these events were the Games in 1948 London. Ironically these Games also had the largest number of nations participating in the art events in their history. Yet, by a series of near Machiavellian maneuvers the art competitions became exhibitions for the Games of 1952 in Helsinki. Then the competitions officially came to an end in an IOC session in Athens, 1954. Will the Pentathlon of the Muses reappear in the Games one day? Only time will tell.

house is like a knights castle from the middle-ages: heavily walled, with mock window casings in corner towers. 'This is Eliel Saarinen's design', Aale Tynni says, guiding visitors inside. Books: leather-bound, fading, completely embellished manuscripts. Book shelves filling the walls from floor to ceiling. Inside, the first impression is of a writer or poet's home. Her alert eyes watching over a series of works on the ancient roots of the Finnish people." In looking back upon her years she said, "A beautiful life. I am happy with it."

In 1984 the Finnish Writers Union issued a commemorative, limited edition, bronze medal designed by Eila Hiltunen (designer of the Sibelius monument in Helsinki) in her honor, bearing her likeness on one side and the motto "Magna Fides Avium" on the other. Less than 20 Finnish women in any field have ever been honored with a commemorative medal. In addition to the Oympic Gold Medal she was also awarded Italy's Giacomo Leopardi medal and Germany's Henrik Steffens' prize. In 1990 a large volume of her selected poems were translated into German by Ulrike Karger under the title "Meine schöne Schwester" and published in Berlin by Oberbaum.

Aale Tynni lived a full and passionate life, she tasted the sweetest and bitterest fruits it has to offer. She never spoke of the tragedies and sorrows in her life to anyone; they are only to be found wrapped delicately in the legends and myths of her poetry. In 1997, after having published 15 of her poetry collections, several childrens' books, two theatre plays, a biography of her husband Martti Haavio, her last book, a biography of her parents called "Inkeri, my Inkeri," the poems of 21 Nobel Laureates and one of her most significant works, "Tuhat Laulujen Vuotta" (A Thousand Years of Poems), this great lady of 20th Century Finnish literature passed away.

It is paradoxical to note she never held her Olympic Gold Medal in overly high esteem. She said, "it is so occasional who happens to participate in an art competition like that. If it had been the best poets of the time it would have been different. It is different with the sporting events, only the best compete in the Olympics." Aale Tynni probably never knew she was the only woman in recorded history to receive the honor of an Olympic Gold Medal in the Art Compeititons. Currently her gold medal remains with her family.

I am deeply indebted to Tynni's only surviving child, her daughter Riita Seppälä for sharing these untold stories along with some of her own and her mothers joys, sorrows and memories.

## GOLD MEDALISTS IN THE ARTS – 1948 LONDON

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| Architecture | Architecture | Adolf Hoch | Austria |
| Architecture | Town Planning | Yrjö Lindegren | Finland |
| Literature | Lyric | Aale Tynni | Finland |
| Literature | Epic | Gianni Stuparich | Italy |
| Music | Choral & Orchestral | Zbigniew Turski | Poland |
| Paintings | Oils, Water Colours | Alfred R. Thomson, RA. | England |
| Sculpture | Engravings & Etchings | Albert Decaris | France |
| Sculpture | Statues | Gustaf Nordahl | Sweden |

# TYNNI'S GOLD MEDAL POEM

## LAUREL OF HELLAS

Laurel of Hellas noble-born
you tree of honoured name,
reaching over unnumbered years
your leaves extend their fame
and branches high proclaim the pride
of one who never bowed
except to place your crown upon
the victors brow.

O stately laurel noble-born
O tree severely grand
that in the soil of heroes grows,
sacred, defended land.
Let faint of heart, unmanly soul
your hard won fortune shun:
your home was at Thermopylae
and Marathon.

Laurel of Hellas noble-born,
most celebrated tree,
gazing to your lofty crown
the mind must dazzled be.
Up to the blue your head is raised,
to earth your strong root strains,
and under your shining leaves are played
the noble, timeless games.

English translation by Philip Binham.

## HELLAAN LAAKERI

Oi Hellaan laakeri ylhäinen,
sinä ikäänoity puu!
Kätet ylitse vuosituhanten
sinun lehviis kurkottuu.
Miten ylhäätä hohtaen kruunaavat
ne varttasi korkeaa!
Olet ylpeä puu: sinä kumarrat
vain voittajaa.

Oi kauneuttasi, ylhäinen,
oi loistoas ankaraa!
Sinut kasvatti tanner sankarien,
pyhä puolustettu maa.
Sydä veltto ja tahto miehuuton
sinun kalpaasi karttakoon:
sinun kotisi Termopylai on
ja Maraton.

Oi Hellaan laakeri ylhäinen,
sinä ylistetty puu!
Sinun korkeuttasi katsoen
sydä alati huikaistuu.
Ylö sineen, loistava nostat pä,
vaan juuresi maassa on,
ja lehvies alla leikitä
kisa uljas, ajaton.

(courtesy of The Finnish National Olympic Committee)

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