

## **Decanonizing art historical canon. Distinctions between fine and applied arts canon based on Elo-Reet Järv's work**

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In the art world, a distinction has historically been made between the fine arts (painting, sculpture) and the decorative and applied arts. Nowadays this categorisation is often reflected in museum and exhibition practice as well as in the art education. In the 1970s and 1980s, Soviet Estonian applied art underwent a process of development that gradually began to redefine its new identity, thereby moving conceptually closer to fine arts.

One of the best examples is Elo Reet Järv's work. **Elo-Reet Järv** (1939–2018) was a renowned Estonian artist whose creative practice encompasses both applied and fine arts. Järv's work reflects noticeable changes and shifts in the relationship between Estonian applied and fine arts. Although Järv began her career primarily as an applied artist, her



Artist Elo-Reet Järv (EKM j 61886 FK 4956); Eesti Kunstimuuseum SA

work has tended to be in the field of fine art, which has led to challenges and interpretative tensions in the art circles of the time. The following presentation is an attempt to make sense of the power of classifications and categories in the art canon. This presentation problematises the understanding of the work of the artist Elo-Reet Järv's as being strictly part of applied art in the 1970s and 1980s, but not as part of the fine art although her leather sculpting practice would have allowed this. Through the reception of her exhibitions, I explore how categorisation (broadly applied art, more narrowly leatherwork and materialism) was expressed in the exhibition practices and policies of different museums. Also, how Järv's works became part of a particular genre canon that defined them as merely applied art. The reception of the exhibition reflected the general art policy and organisation, which also inspired the critics. The broader entrenchment of divisions can be understood, for example, through **Michel Foucault's** *The Order of Things*, in which the French philosopher argues that people accept the taxonomic divisions of the age without questioning their arbitrariness or arbitrary nature. In a similar vein, one could think of the classifications of the Estonian Artists' Union (EKL) or the Estonian National Art Institute (ERKI) of the time, which organised artistic life according to specific disciplines and which endured, if not to say partly survived. Such classifications concerned disciplines, material focus, functionality, techniques, exhibition reception.

In the art world – as in Järv's time – systems, structures, canons, alliances, disciplines, are all different versions of classification and categorisation that assess the importance of one or another phenomenon in a wider social system. In the emergence of such classifications, it is important to see the wider epistemological field – the episteme in which such knowledge emerges, spreads, asserts and reproduces itself. Such derivations are not only structural and formal, but also suggest that art categories are inherently historical, imbued with long traces of political, economic, philosophical and social meanings, creating an epistemic space that acts as a neutral pre-given truth. However, contemporary approaches and exhibition activity allow for more open interpretations, which see Järv's works as belonging to the fine art and thematically to the realm of posthumanism and environmental humanities.