

HELINÄ RAUTAVAARA
(1928-1998)

Globetrotter and collector

HELINÄ RAUTAVAARA BIOGRAPHY

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Backpack traveller Helinä Rautavaara
in Iran. 1956

MA Helinä Rautavaara made a career of documenting foreign cultures and religions. After graduating from the university, she travelled outside Europe as a reporter during the 1950s. Her travels to the Middle East and South Asia made these areas familiar to Finns through a series of colourful articles written for the Seura magazine. She also made her first radio and television programmes out of the material collected during these travels. Her subsequent travels added to her ever-increasing amount of photographs, super-8 films, audio recordings and videos.

Collecting material for a doctoral thesis, Helinä Rautavaara spent long periods of time in South America and North Africa. The thesis never got written, but Rautavaara did learn a lot about the places. In Finland, she became known for her personal knowledge of South America, the Caribbean and Africa; during her last years, also for a museum project under preparation. Rautavaara created a wide international network of contacts through her good public skills, all-round education and with the help of Finland's politically neutral reputation. Artistic creativity was as important a tool for her as her knowledge of written sources.



Young Helinä Rautavaara

I. To the world

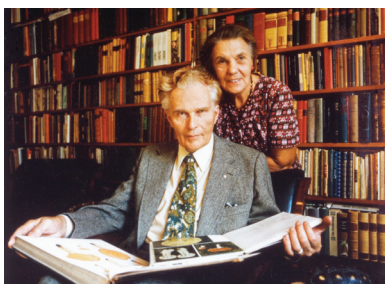
The professor's daughter

Father: Toivo Rautavaara, born 27.2.1905 in Vyborg, died 4.3.1987 in Helsinki. A versatile Doctor of Agriculture and Forestry as well as a professor and high-ranking official of the Ministry of Agriculture, Toivo Rautavaara became a Finnish household name due to his popular plant and mushroom guides published during the wars. He took part in founding a number of journals as well as Finnish and international organisations dedicated to the advance of health and well-being.

In a number of interviews, Helinä Rautavaara recalls her father being absent during her adolescence. Toivo Rautavaara worked in Turku, was on continuous work-related trips and the wartime kept him away at the front. Yet the father and daughter corresponded regularly. In one of their letters, the father promised his 20-year old daughter: "I am willing

to assist you even with your study trips, all the way to the world's end, as long as you know the necessary languages and make sensible plans before you go."

Mother: Karin Alina (form. Kajava) Rautavaara, born 21.10.1901 in Lemu, died 1981 in Helsinki. Helinä Rautavaara's mother, Kaarina Rautavaara, was a professional translator and typist. At the ages of 23 and 27 Toivo and Kaarina got a daughter, whom they named Helinä but who was known to them as "Tuitu" and "Tuija". During the war years, Kaarina Rautavaara worked as a typist for the Parliament and with the father away at the front, their daughter became an independent young woman. She was sometimes sent to stay with relatives in Vantaa, other times sent away by train for longer periods. At the same time, Kaarina Rautavaara tried fervently to give her daughter a conventional upbringing for a civilised life. Her



Parents Toivo and Kaarina Rautavaara



Helinä alias "Heikki" with a gun

letters followed Helinä to various continents, giving very precise admonitions on the choices she made.

Helinä Rautavaara's early years were spent in the garden district of Arabia at the edge of the city. She went to school at Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu ("Helsinki Finnish coeducational school") during the 1930s and 40s. She had singing and piano playing for hobbies, which she studied as a youth student at the Sibelius Academy for six years. During her teenage years, Helinä and her parents moved to Töölö in central Helsinki.

Helinä suffered from the wartime ordeals like most of her compatriots. Her school, Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu, was bombed; the Rautavaaras' house was also hit by a bomb. In the spring 1944 Helinä was sent away from the bombings to a farm in Polvijärvi, near Ilomantsi. There she enlisted, in disguise and under the name of Heikki Rautavaara, with a group of young men whose task was, among other things, to hunt out parachutists who had been sent to destroy civilian targets behind the lines. Back at school, Helinä was known as "the terror of the parachutists".



Class photo from Alli Nissinen's preschool



Class photo from SYK

Drawings and texts of young Helinä

Helinä Rautavaara corresponded regularly with her friend Kaija under the assumed names McGregor and Stone. Thus the friends channelled their wartime fears and expressed their ideals in the form of a literary fantasy. They would have wanted

to do more for their country than was possible for girls. During the war, school children were obliged to work for their country and Helinä, too, took part in work camps. During secondary school, she had summer jobs all over Finland, for example as a log driver in Kainuu and as swimming instructor in Ostrobothnia.



Illustration for Gohst rider novel, the meeting of a man and a woman. Pencil drawing on paper



Portrait of a lady. Pencil drawing on paper. 1941



Portrait of a man. Charcoal drawing on paper. 4.4.1950

The young reporter

In the summer 1948 Helinä Rautavaara participated in an international peace camp in Hässelby, near Stockholm in Sweden. She took a two-and-a-half week leave from her 16-hour dish washing days in a Stockholm restaurant to spend time with young people from as far as Brazil, USA and Vietnam. For the first part of the 1950s she continued to work as a dishwasher in Stockholm, where the newly-wed Rautavaara-Pelander couple resided together. That is where they also took off together to their travels in Europe, whether to an international teachers' meeting in England or to hitchhike through France to Spain.

In the early 1950s, Helinä Rautavaara also worked as an airport hostess at the Malmi and Seutula airports. Later,



Participants of the international peace camp in Sweden. 1948



The shadows of the travellers on a Spanish village road. 1953

when recalling her early days as a reporter, her foremost recollections were of the price and awkwardness of the 1950s camera equipment.



Helinä Rautavaara on a bicycling tour in Finland. 1940's

Becoming “Thumbelina”

Helinä's decision to travel to India through the Near East was an independent one: “I just thought that if the Silk Road has been around for thousands of years, there has to be some way through. - - They had a great respect for individuals, I wouldn't be afraid of anything there; I just

wondered at the practical issues.” Her parents, on the other hand, considered the journey dangerous and did not understand their daughter's attempt to understand non-European cultures: “You should always remember Kipling's truth: East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”, the father wrote her daughter to Irak in January 1956.

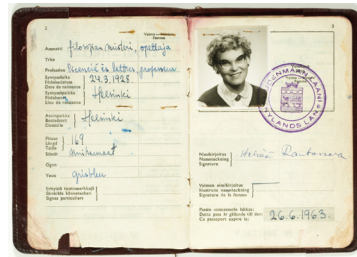


A collage of articles Becoming “Thumbelina”. A clip from Dagens Nyheter -newspaper 23.12.1954
Thumbelina travels on caravan routes -article. 1955

A collection of passports



Swedish and Tunisian passport stamps. 1954



Identification pages of a passport. 1963

II. Round the world

“I stopped asking questions”

As “Thumbelina, the hitchhiking reporter”, Helinä Rautavaara travelled in Central and South Asia. She was highly impressed by the way in which the religious imagery familiar from temple art came alive during religious festivals. She commented her travels later on: “Only once I’d reached Ceylon did I start to immerse myself into culture and really see it. India was difficult; with all those amazing things, the conditions were still a shock to me.”

In 1991 Helinä Rautavaara made a short collection trip to Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. She had never visited this part of Asia before.



Street theatre on Maledives. 1956



Street theatre on Maledives. 1956



Street theatre on Maledives. 1956

“I am working on my doctoral thesis”

Cycling to South America

In 1958 Helinä Rautavaara received an ASLA-Fulbright stipend for postgraduate studies in psychology at Ann Arbor, Michigan. She began long-distance cycling in the United States. She also started dating Larry, a medical student from Chicago, but her desire to see the world overcame her intentions to settle down in another country.

Helinä Rautavaara decided to make a cycling tour through Mexico and Central America to South America. She got to know several artists and was invited by archaeologists to visit the famous Maya ruins. In southern Mexico she got to know Frans Blom, a Danish-born researcher who studied the Maya, whose home, known as Na Bolom, was already an international base for researchers in the field.

Once Rautavaara had reached South America, she had seen both the rituals of the native population living in the mountains and the folk dances of the



Helinä Rautavaara in Colombia. 1960

coastal European-derived population. In Bolivia she heard heroic songs in praise of the guerrilla leader Chispas. She worked hard to reach this evasive hero, whom she finally caught up in the mountains of Tolima. She wrote her father an excited letter in which she told him that she had decided to write her thesis on guerrilla psyche. The article that Helinä Rautavaara finally wrote for Finnish newspaper publication brought down harsh criticism from her parents.

In Bolivia, Rautavaara got to make a program for the Bolivian national

radio. What particularly impressed her in Bolivia were the saints' days: "Every village has a different saint. You first find out where a catholic saint's celebration is going to be held. They start the thing nine days in advance, so you've got to go there well in advance to see the full richness of the event. I went from one festival to the next, always trying to borrow recording equipment from someone."

Helinä Rautavaara briefly re-visited Mexico and Central America in the early 1990s.



Helinä Rautavaara and Frans Blom, San Cristóbal de Las Casas. 1960

Brazil: dance and religion

On her first journey to Brazil in 1963-1964 (Rio de Janeiro, Bahía, Recife) Helinä Rautavaara was captivated by Candomblé rituals and the capoeira martial art. She started to collect material on Afro-Brazilian religions for her doctoral thesis in order to analyse them from the standpoint of individual psychology. During her second stay in Brazil

(Sao Paulo, Bahía, Rio de Janeiro, Manaus), funded by a scholarship in 1970-1971, Rautavaara furthered her knowledge by taping ritual explanations on location and by filming various initiations with her new super-8 camera. She got access to places where the uninitiated were usually not allowed. A familiarity with Afro-Brazilian religions also awakened her interest towards Africa.



Helinä Rautavaara and Cabocla Pena Dorada with a snake around her waist Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 1963

South of Sahara

In 1966 Helinä Rautavaara made her first trip to Africa, participating in the UNESCO cultural colloquium for Africa and Latin America. Afterwards,

she continued her travels in the Republic of Benin (former Dahomey) and participated in the Premier Festival des Artes Nègres in Senegal. The festival was a meeting between various representatives and scholars of



Helinä Rautavaara in Ghana. 1986

Latin America and Brazil, too, as well as artists promoting black consciousness, and Rautavaara told later that she learnt more about African culture than during her entire life up to that point. That is also where Rautavaara got to meet His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie.

Rautavaara visited Eastern Africa in 1973-1974. She took a cheap tourist flight to Kenya in 1973, at the time of the nation's 10-year anniversary, and returned through Uganda in February 1974. During her trip she met Idi Amin, for example, to whom she expressed her wish to learn about the country's ancient kingdoms. Rautavaara got to travel among various tribes in Uganda, and to make recordings in various temples.

Rautavaara travelled to Ghana in 1976 and 1986. She travelled around the country, documenting the various rituals and festivals of various ethnic groups. During her travels, Rautavaara got the name Nana Akua Okomfo. "Nana" can signify either a mother, grandparent or even a chief. Okomfo refers to a priest or priestess.

In 1976 Helinä Rautavaara returned to Nigeria to study

the origins of Brazilian religious influences. She had problems with getting interviews, but she photographed Nigerian material culture and made a number of purchases. In conjunction with the FESTAC77 festival held in Lagos, she also toured Nigeria's Islamic north. Rautavaara held a photo exhibition in the Benin City University in 1988 and acquired several objects during her stay.

After 1984 Helinä Rautavaara returned to Senegal closer to a dozen times. She got acquainted with Senegalese Bayefallism well enough to make a pilgrimage to several sacred places of the Bayefall in 1991, whilst she was busy with a number of other projects. In 1989-90 Rautavaara made three brief visits to Egypt. On the first time she was introduced to a female sheikh in a Luxor temple, whose funeral she attended during her second visit.

Rautavaara was born short-sighted, but her eyesight deteriorated dramatically in 1974. She had just decided to continue her studies at the department of comparative religion, but could not go through with her book examinations. She did, however, continue to apply funds for her research, first on Brazilian and later Jamaican religion.

With the Rastafarians

Helinä Rautavaara was first introduced to the Rastafarian movement during her trips to London and New York in 1980. She later stated that she had been dragged into the movement because of her African interests. Her ability to move naturally amongst a variety of ethnic groups also brought her closer to the representatives of the black consciousness movement. In 1981, Rautavaara spent six months in Jamaica in order to familiarise herself with Jamaican syncretistic religions. She got to know a number

of local Rasta communities and reggae musicians. She photographed and taped Rastafarian rituals, such as the ceremonies held in honour of Haile Selassie's 50th birthday. She participated in Bob Marley's funeral on May 21st 1981 at the National Arena. Rautavaara was initiated into the Rastafarian religion, and she sought to make herself known as Ras Benjamin.

In 1991 Helinä Rautavaara made a short but consequential visit to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The objects acquired during that visit formed the core of her first museum.



Prince Emmanuel I. Jamaica, 1981

III. From the world

The collection

Helinä Rautavaara named her 400-volume library on Brazil as her first true collection. She often attached exotic stories to the objects she later acquired, even though the collection includes several antique objects bought from public auctions.

Rautavaara's style of dressing in ethnic clothes and decorating her home in exotic styles was a reflection of both styles adopted from the 1960s to the 1990s and of her taste as a collector.



Helinä Rautavaara in her salon in front of her East-African wall



Helinä Rautavaara with three-pronged forks after returning from India. 1957

Rautavaara herself summed up her relationship to the collection with the following words: "I have never understood an object's

significance as an object, rather it has always been part of an entire culture, not to mention being part of a ritual associated with it."



Helinä Rautavaara and drum. 1960s to 1970s

Activities in Finland

As a journalist, Helinä Rautavaara participated with a reporter from the Finnish Broadcasting Company to make one of the first television programmes

produced in Finland. In the 1970s she received part of her income from making radio programmes. In addition, she gave numerous public lectures on Brazilian religions and Rastafarianism.



Helinä Rautavaara with participants of the World Games contest in Helsinki Senate Square

Life in Helsinki

Helinä Rautavaara's home turned into a small meeting place for cultures. Since the 1960s, Rautavaara got to know several African diplomats, who also visited her home. She was introduced to researchers for example in the international summer conferences held at the

University of Jyväskylä. In the 1970s Helinä Rautavaara's home was also visited by a group of Kenyan athletes who participated in an international sports event held in Helsinki. Rautavaara was, furthermore, a member in twenty or so Finnish friendship societies, to which she often borrowed her photographic materials during various fairs and other events.



Nigerian professor Mabogunje and Helinä Rautavaara in Jyväskylä Summer Festival. 1968

From collection to museum

In 1991 Helinä Rautavaara rented a former shop at Ruusulankatu 8, Helsinki, where she opened her first private museum. The collections she held at home had been accessible to visitors, but visiting groups had also access to the new exhibition rooms. The Baga-Zombie Museum displayed ritual objects that Rautavaara had brought back from her short trip to Haiti in 1990. In addition, there were Buddhist, Mexican and West African objects, and a wall-size

glass painting made in 1885 by the Belgian glass artist Jean-Baptiste Capronnier.

The cataloguing of the objects began in 1991.

In 1995, Rautavaara rented more rooms for the Baga Zombie Museum from Ruusulankatu 11. Her aim was to guarantee the future of her collection, and after a drawn-out negotiation process, a foundation was founded in 1997 with representatives from the City of Espoo, the Finnish Anthropological Society, the University of Helsinki and the Finnish Museums Association. In 1998 the collection was relocated from Helinä Rautavaara's private museums and home museums to Tapiola, where they found a new home in the newly-renovated WeeGee building. The organisation of the museum's permanent collection reflects its founder's vision, though the interior design was made by the architect Jouni Kaipia. The Helinä Rautavaara Museum was opened on June 16th 1998. The museum has been professionally managed from the beginning and receives part of its funding from the state.

It needs to be said that not everyone was pleased with the guidelines of Helinä Rautavaara's



Helinä Rautavaara in her livingroom, in the background her aquarelle paintings and souvenirs. 1960s to 1970s

collecting activities and their success. For example, the public display of cult and Voodoo objects made a well-known Espoo artist publicly accuse the Helinä Rautavaara object collection of connections to Satanic worship.

Rautavaara herself thought that art inspired by the numerous religions of the world should be respected. The current, renewed permanent exhibition of the Helinä Rautavaara Museum was opened in October 2006.



Helinä Rautavaara in front of the hall mirror and objects from Brazil. 1960s to 1970s

HELINÄ RAUTAVAARA'S EXHIBITIONS

Exhibition of her own paintings	1971	Sao Paolo National University, Brazil
Images from Jamaica	2.11.1980– 2.11.1981	Black Star record shop, Helsinki
Roots-rasta-reggae	3.8.–13.8.1982 1.9.–15.9.1982 10/1982 1.11.–30.11.1982 17.2.1983	Verso, Turku Hotelli Hesperia, Helsinki Tampere Pinachoteca, Jyväskylä Tornio
Africa–Jamaica	15.1.–15.3.1984 3.2.–15.3.1985	SIDA, Stockholm Itäkeskus Multifunction House, Helsinki
Sincretismo afro-brasileiro	18.1.–30.1.1985	Studio Julius, Helsinki
Senegal–Gambia, Ethnic versus Islam	12.5–31.5.1987	Itäkeskus Multifunction House, Helsinki
India–Nepal, Holy places	12.5–31.5.1987	Itäkeskus Multifunction House, Helsinki
Exhibition 1988 at University of Benin	1988	University of Benin, Benin city, Nigeria University of Lagos, Nigeria
Africa, ritual art; Sculpture from West Africa–Souweres from Senegal	7.4.–14.5.1989	Galleria Otso, Espoo

Egypt, Life by the River Nile	1.12–31.12.1989	Itäkeskus Multifunction House, Helsinki
Ghana–Nigeria, From Kingdoms to Skyscrapers	7.5.–3.6.1990	Itäkeskus Multifunction House, Helsinki
Baga-Zombie Ethnographical Museum	9.9.1991–1998	Ruusulankatu 9, Helsinki
Ghana–Nigeria, From Kingdoms to Skyscrapers	1991	Stockholm
Yemen, The Land of the Queen of Sheba	14.5.–7.6.1992	Galleria Finnfoto
Mystical visions, laser copies	14.5.–7.6.1992	Galleria Finnfoto
Iris. Finnish female photographers 1910s to 1960s. Group exhibition	5.6.–9.8.1992 22.9.–23.10.1994	The Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki Turku Cultural Centre
Mexico, Lindo y Querideo, 3000 years of culture	12.5.–23.6.1993	STOA gallery, Helsinki
Guatemala, Dioses, templos y costumbres de Conquista hasta hoy del Caribe y Centro America	12.5.–23.6.1993	STOA gallery, Helsinki
From Himalaya to Malaysia, Meeting place of religions	17.5.–20.6.1995	STOA gallery, Helsinki
Visioita mystiikasta. Elektrografiikkaa	12.9–28.9.1996	Galleria Marian portti, Lahti
The Sun, an exhibition of sun art, Group exhibition	05/1997	Rauma Art Museum

HELINÄ RAUTAVAARA (1928-1998)

Born March 24th 1928 in Helsinki

Died February 19th 1998 in Helsinki

1930s childhood in Helsinki

1937 student in SYK ("Helsinki coeducational school")

1939–40, 1942–44 wartime, schools closed for periods of time

1940s piano lessons at the Sibelius Academy. Summer jobs all around Finland and in Stockholm, Sweden

1946 graduates secondary school, enters the University of Helsinki

28.6.1950 marriage to arts and technology student Alex Leopold Pelander (changes name to Gelhar 16.5.1951)

30.5.1952 BA degree in philosophy and teacher education, University of Helsinki. Master's thesis on the typological applicability of Szond's e-factor to the inhabitants of southern Ostrobothnia

1952–53 student at the Helsinki School of Teacher Education

1953–54 mathematics teacher at Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu

1954–57 travels in the Middle East and South Asia. Writes two series of articles for the Seura magazine. Starts photography for documentary purposes.

3.2.1955 divorce, changes name back to Rautavaara

31.5.1957 promotion for Masters Degree in psychology

1957–58 substitute teacher in different schools in Helsinki

1958–59 post-graduate studies in psychology at Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, on an ASLA Fulbright scholarship

1960–62 travels the Pan American Highway on a bicycle from Mexico to Chile. Starts making open reel tape recordings. Makes her first radio programmes for the Bolivian national radio

1963–64 travels to Brazil, gets acquainted with the Candomblé and Umbanda religions

1966 UNESCO invitation to the African and Latin American cultural colloquium followed by an independent journey to the Republic of Benin (former Dahomey); participates in the Premier Festival des Artes Negres in Senegal (1.4–24.4.1966)

1967 first radio programmes for the Finnish Broadcasting Company

1968 a long trip to Paris to prepare for post-graduate studies

1969–71 research in Brazil on a Sao Paulo University scholarship; begins filming on super-8

1972–80 studies in comparative religion at the University of Helsinki

1973–74 a six-month fieldwork and learning period in Kenya and Uganda

1974 eyesight deteriorates, reading becomes difficult

1976 first short visit to Ghana

1977 FESTAC '77 festival at Lagos followed by a long material collecting period around Nigeria

1980–81 getting acquainted with Rastafarianism in New York, London and on a longer visit to Jamaica, participates in Bob Marley's funeral

1980–95 active period of exhibition organising, starting with the Africa–Jamaica touring exhibition

1984 introduction to Bayefallism, a branch of Sufism, in Gambia and Senegal

1986 tour in India and Nepal; a long material-acquisition journey to Ghana

1987–88 collecting material in Senegal and Nigeria

1989 two short trips to Egypt

1990 a short collection trip to Haiti

1991 a short collection trip to Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. A trip to Yemen. A pilgrimage to sacred Bayefall sights in Senegal. Opening of the Baga-Zombie Museum. Cataloguing of objects begins

1992–93 short trip to South India. A tour in Mexico and Central America

1994–95 trips to Sri Lanka, India and Nepal

1995 diagnosis of severe cancer

1996–97 short collection trips to Tunisia and Morocco

1997 Helinä Rautavaara ethnographic museum Foundation founded in Espoo

1998 Helinä Rautavaara Museum opened, four months after Helinä Rautavaara's death

EMMA | KAMU | KELLOMUSEO | LELUMUSEO
HELINÄ RAUTAVAARAN MUSEO | GALLERIA AARNI

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