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# LOOKING BACK AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

We may say that art history in Tartu goes back as far as the university itself. Although no independent discipline had been developed by the 17th century, the need to create and talk about beauty was present in Tartu. The beginning of the teaching of art history at the University of Tartu takes us back to Johann Karl Simon Morgenstern (1770–1852) who had mainly studied in the University of Halle under the renowned researcher of ancient history Friedrich August Wolf (1759–1824) and the celebrated professor of philosophy Johann August Eberhard (1739–1809). Morgenstern was the first professor of classical philology, literature, aesthetics and art history at the University of Tartu and therefore the formation and development of these research fields in Estonia was initiated by him.

The soul and spirit of the *Baltic Journal of Art History* has been sustained by the development of art history as an independent discipline in Tartu and the traditions of the Department of Art History at the University of Tartu. An important date on the timeline of the university was 1 December 1919, when teaching first started in Estonian and the University of Tartu became the university of Estonians. Reshaping the system of education for the national

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<sup>1</sup> University of Tartu was founded under the name of  $Academia\ Gustaviana$  in 1632 by Baron Johan Skytte (1577–1645).

<sup>2</sup> Juhan Maiste, "Milleks eestlasele kunstiajalugu?", *Rahvusvahelised rahvusteadused* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, 2014), 169.

university of Estonia followed the example of the Nordic countries. Due to the absence of a suitable professor, the Department of Art History started operating only in 1922 when the Swede Helge Kjellin (1885–1984) took up the position.

During the period in question, the most notable development was the introduction of the study of Estonia's local cultural space and the distinctive features of local tradition, especially its architecture, as well as the teaching of the arts of Middle Ages, which had thus far dominated. Kjellin's innovative approach, for example, was to look at Estonia's medieval sacral architecture in the context of the North European cultural space, not merely as German colonial art.

Although the professorships of numerous other humanistic disciplines at the University of Tartu were by then filled by Estonians, a strong school of Estonian art historians hadn't developed in these uncertain conditions. This is exemplified by the arrival, in 1933, of the young Swede Sten Karling (1906–1987) to teach art history. His selection and invitation to teach mainly attests to two actualities: First, there was a shortage of local art historians in the national university. And second a clear decision had been made to dislodge the field from the influence of the Baltic-German cultural space and to connect Estonian culture more strongly with Nordic countries. After a long pause, the arrival of Sten Karling marked the restoration of research into the north Baltic regional art history and the creation of stronger contacts between Estonia and Sweden. A potent and youthful circle of art historians gathered around Karling, including Armin Tuulse (1907– 1977)<sup>3</sup>, Villem Raam (1910–1996)<sup>4</sup> and Helmi Üprus (1911–1978)<sup>5</sup>. This also marked the first true success story of art history at the University of Tartu when both female and male scientists who were young and inquisitive were allowed to shine. They hungered for the opportunity to see the world and to use these experiences to better understand their own cultural space. What was it about Karling that enabled him to greatly improve the level of art history at the University of Tartu in such a short time, and to have such a great effect on his students? Perhaps it was Karling's ability to learn new languages very quickly, for example, by 1938 he was lecturing in Estonian. It is important to note that this attitude was not typical of all faculty members.

Professor Karling and one of his brightest students Professor Armin Tuulse also started to stock the library of University of Tartu systematically with literature about art history<sup>6</sup> as well as publishing art commentaries directed at wider audiences. For example, the journal *Tartu* Ülikooli *Kunstiajaloo Kabineti väljaanded (Publications of the Department of Art History of the University of Tartu = Publications du Cabinet d'Histoire de l'Art de l'Université de Tartu)* was published under the guidance and initiative of Karling between 1937 and 1940. An attempt was made to start a new journal during the Soviet era but only one volume was printed, under the title *Töid kunstiajaloo alalt I* (1969).

To sustain these values and traditions, the *Baltic Journal of Art History* was established in 2009. Our desire has been the preservation of long-term Estonian continuity as well as building bridges between Baltic art histories, and with the European and Western cultural space in general. We have striven to offer an in-depth look at the cultural heritage of the Baltics, investigating its problems across broad cultural-geographical and temporal spectre (from remote antiquity and the Middle Ages to the present day) and disseminating knowledge about it around the world.

The *Baltic Journal of Art History* has reached its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue. To celebrate this respectable number, we have created an open-themed issue that collects together articles written by members of the editorial team and teachers, former students and current research colleagues from the Department of Art History at the University of Tartu. We are grateful from the bottom of our hearts to all our authors, readers, supporters and editorial staff for their long-term collaboration!

Juhan Maiste, Kadri Asmer

<sup>3</sup> See more: Kadri Asmer "Letters from the Past: Armin Tuulse's Archive in Tartu", *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 13 (2017), 219–246.

<sup>4</sup> The second volume of the *Baltic Journal of Art History* was dedicated to Villem Raam's 100th birthday. See more: *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 2 (2010).

<sup>5</sup> The third volume of the *Baltic Journal of Art History* was dedicated to Helmi Üprus, the Grand Lady of Estonian art history, and her 100th birthday. See more: *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 3 (2011).

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Sten Karling, Narva: eine baugeschichtliche Untersuchung (Tartu: K. Mattiesen, 1936); Sten Karling, Holzschnitzerei und Tischlerkunst der Renaissance und des Barocks in Estland (Tartu: Õpetatud Eesti Selts, 1943); Armin Tuulse, Die Burgen in Estland und Lettland (Dorpat: Dorpater Estnischer Verlag, 1942), etc.