

HELMİ ÜPRUS 100



Fig. 1. Helmi Üprus and Villem Raam in 1965.
Photo by Boris Mäemets from the Museum of Estonian Architecture.

The Baltic Journal of Art History vol 2 (Spring 2010) was devoted to the centenary of one of the great medievalists in Estonian art history, Villem Raam (1910–1996). This volume is dedicated to the centenary of Helmi Üprus (1911–1978), the Grand Lady of Estonian art history.

Raam and Üprus¹ were not only contemporaries, but also colleagues who thought along the same lines. They both studied art history at the University of Tartu in the 1930s under Professor Sten Karling and were educated in the liberal Scandinavian line of art historical thought, combining thorough fieldwork with written sources and stylistic analysis. Üprus read Roman languages and ethnography, in addition to art history – this provided her with a much broader background for her future research. Both Raam and Üprus had the opportunity to travel and study in Europe before the Iron Curtain fell. Their education in the ‘free world’ gave them the necessary foundation on which they could base their research, even in the most stagnant Soviet times.

After graduation in 1936, Üprus became the academic secretary and later head of the Department of Cultural History in the Estonian National Museum, mainly working on different topics of folk art. However, in 1942 she defended her MA dissertation on Neo-Classical architecture in Tartu, thus demonstrating a high level of proficiency in architectural history.

But times changed: Villem Raam was arrested by the Soviet authorities in 1941 and spent the following fifteen years in Siberian prison camps. Helmi Üprus was not imprisoned or deported to Siberia, but she lost her academic job in 1950 and even her degree was annulled as a result of Stalinist repressions; she had to work in a factory for three years.

After Stalin’s death in 1953, Üprus was allowed to join the Scientific Restoration Workshop (*Teaduslik Restaureerimise Töökoda*; later re-organised into the National Restoration Board: *Vabariiklik Restaureerimisvalitsus*), where she worked until her pre-mature death. After his release in 1956, Villem Raam became her colleague. From the late 1950s onwards, both were leading specialists in their respective fields.

The Restoration Workshop and the field of conservation more generally offered a rare opportunity to study history without the otherwise obligatory ideological pressure characteristic of the universities and other academic institutions. At a time when mainstream historiography dealt with questions of class struggle, Raam studied ecclesiastical

¹ The biographical data on Helmi Üprus is based on Voldemar Vaga’s “Helmi Üprus 1911–1978”, *Kunst*, 58, 1 (1981), 40–42, Jevgeni Kaljundi’s “Üprus, Helmi”, *Eesti kunsti ja arhitektuuri biograafiline leksikon*, peatoim Mart-Ivo Eller (Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, 1996), 613–614 and the *biographica* section in the personal archive of Helmi Üprus (items 1 to 11 in the archives of the National Heritage Board).

architecture and Üprus wrote about the aesthetics of Neo-Classicism. Certainly, this field provided a sort of escape from the everyday Soviet reality, but also a path of resistance against the absurdity of the regime. Gradually, the distant past became both an object of nostalgia and something to build a healthier future on.²

The legacy of Üprus is vast and varied. Her interests ranged from folk art to medieval and early modern architecture, from the conservation and renewal of historical cities to the care of parks and gardens. She published nine books and around one hundred articles. Her almost 150 completed, but unpublished research reports, along with her personal archive containing even more manuscripts, are kept in the archives of the National Heritage Board.

Üprus wrote in 1977: "I have had three grand projects in my life: the *History of Estonian Architecture* [‘Eesti arhitektuuri ajalugu’]³, the regeneration of Tallinn’s Old Town and now the architecture of the manors. If I can complete the latter, my life work is done."⁴ Although she did not live to see the completion of her last work, it had advanced far enough that she is now best known for her study of Neo-Classical architecture, the work on the historical centre of Tallinn and the systematic survey of the manor houses. These three fields of her work are discussed in this volume by Juhan Maiste, Lilian Hansar and Olev Suuder.

Her tribute to Estonian art history was appreciated both in her lifetime and after her death, at home and abroad. On the official level, she was awarded the Estonian State prize in arts and sciences twice – as an author of the *History of Estonian Architecture* (1965) and the *History of Estonian Art* (1975). But far more important was her undisputed authority and respect among her colleagues and other art historians. For instance, in 1966 Armin Tuulse mentioned Üprus and Raam as those of Sten Karling’s students who, in spite of difficult and even fatal years, led the research and protection of historical monuments in Estonia.⁵ By the 1960s, both of them had managed to re-establish links with the

² On the ambivalent role of the Old Town of Tallinn in Soviet Estonia, see for instance Eva Näripea, "Medieval socialist realism. Representations of Tallinn Old Town in Soviet Estonian feature films, 1969–1972", *Koht ja paik / Place and Location. Studies in Environmental Aesthetics and Semiotics IV*, ed. by Virve Sarapik, Eva Näripea and Kadri Tüür (Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, 2004), 121–144.

³ Üprus was the main editor and one of the contributors to this book published in 1965.

⁴ Helmi Üprus, "Mineviku tulevikust: Eesti mõisaarhitektuurist", *Sirp ja Vasar*, 21. I 1977.

⁵ Armin Tuulse, "Sten Karling och Estlands konsthistoria", *Annales Societatis Litterarum Estonicae in Svecia IV (1960 – 1964)* (Stockholm, 1966), 16.



Fig. 2. Voldemar Vaga, Armin Tuulse and Helmi Üprus in Tallinn in 1970. Photo from the collection of Kaur Alttoa.

Western academic world and it is no accident that Raam and Üprus were among the very few art historians from Soviet Estonia who were listed among the congratulators in the *Festschriften* for Sten Karling and Armin Tuulse.⁶

⁶ See: *Konsthistoriska studier tillägnade Sten Karling*, redaktionen Erik Forssmann, Brita Linde, Armin Tuulse (Stockholm: Kunsthistoriska Institutionen, Kungliga Univesitetet, 1966); *Nordisk medeltid. Konsthistoriska studier tillägnade Armin Tuulse*, redaktion Sten Karling, Erland Lagerlöf, Jan Svanberg (Stockholm, Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967).

It is significant that in 1984, only six years after the death of Üprus, Marika Valk wrote a dissertation at Tartu University on Helmi Üprus, discussing her writings on ethnography, art and architecture.⁷ No other Estonian art historian received such attention.⁸

Üprus has been remembered on the anniversaries of her birth. Several articles on her were published in 1981 in the journal *Kunst* and in a conference publication.⁹ Another conference in her honour was held in 1986 and the papers were published in a volume of *Vana Tallinn* dedicated to Üprus some years later, including Mart Eller's comprehensive article on Üprus as an art historian.¹⁰ In 1991, her bibliography comprising both published works and research reports in manuscript was published and again a conference was held.¹¹

Üprus's work on folk art also received later appreciation¹² and is still methodologically unsurpassed in the field of the cultural analysis of ethnographic material.¹³ In 2001, an exhibition on the reflections of high art in folk art was organised to commemorate the 90th anniversary of her birth in the Estonian History Museum, and there was another exhibition in the Estonian National Museum.¹⁴ Even the President of Estonia, Lennart Meri, mentioned a result of Helmi Üprus's study of folk art in his speech given at the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, at the University of London.¹⁵

⁷ Marika Valk, *Helmi Üprus (1911–1978) – Eesti arhitektuuri, rahvakunsti ja kunstiajaloo uurijana*. Diploma work. Department of the History of the USSR at Tartu University (Tartu, 1984, manuscript at the Institute of History and Archaeology of Tartu University).

⁸ Only recently has a biography of Professor Voldemar Vaga been published: Mari Nõmmela, *Voldemar Vaga (1899 – 1999) ja Eesti kunsti ajalugu* (Tartu: EKM Teaduskirjastus, 2008).

⁹ *Kunst* 58, 1 (1981), 40–45; *Eesti arhitektuuri ajaloo küsimusi. Arhitektuuriajaloo sektsooni I sügisseminar* (Tallinn: KRPI, 1981), 8–27.

¹⁰ Mart Eller, “Helmi Üprus kunstiteadlasena”, *Vana Tallinn VI (X)*, toim Juhan Maiste (Tallinn: Estopol, 1996), 11–15.

¹¹ *Helmi Üprus. Bibliograafia*, koost Jevgeni Kaljundi ja Anne Lass (Tallinn: Instituut “Eesti Ehitusmälestised”, 1991).

¹² Ants Viires, “Helmi Üprus ja eesti rahvakunst”, *Kunst*, 58, 1 (1981), 42–43; Jüri Linnus, “Helmi Üprus kui muuseumitöötaja ja rahvakunsti uurija”, *Eesti arhitektuuri ajaloo küsimusi. Arhitektuuriajaloo sektsooni I sügisseminar* (Tallinn: KRPI, 1981), 15–27.

¹³ See Anu Kannike, “Rahvakunstist kaasaegse kultuurianalüüsini”, *Eesti Rahva Muuseumi aasta- raamat XLIV* (Tartu, 2000), 47–59.

¹⁴ Epp Kangilaski, Juta Saron, “Ei ole üksi ükski maa... Näitus Helmi Üpruse (1911–1978) 90. sünniaastapäeva tähistamiseks”, *Muuseum*, 12, 1 (2002), 23–25.

¹⁵ *The President of the Republic of Estonia at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies University of London March 8, 2000*, <http://vp1992-2001.president.ee/eng/k6ned/K6ne.asp?ID=3816> (last retrieved on 1 August 2011).

Five years ago, in 2006, the 95th anniversary of Üprus's birth was celebrated with two conferences dedicated to her. The first was organised in Tartu by the Society of Art Historians and Tartu University, which dealt with different approaches to Neo-Classicism.¹⁶ The second one, in Viljandi by the Estonian Academy of Arts, concentrated on manor architecture and parks. It was followed by a tour of the manors around Viljandi and of the Tarvastu cemetery, where Üprus is buried.

What is it about Üprus which makes her research still relevant today? Firstly, it's the scope of her studies. She started several new topics in art and architectural history, as well as in conservation. When she wrote her MA dissertation on Neo-Classical architecture in Tartu, this was a nearly untouched area of research. Likewise, parks and manors had only briefly entered the academic discussion before her studies. She made a significant contribution to the study of medieval dwellings (briefly discussed in this volume by Kaur Altoa and Aivar Kriiska), and urban structures more generally. In all these fields, Üprus managed to write specific articles and reports, as well as comprehensive syntheses for general histories.¹⁷ There are many other areas in which she was a pioneer: the already mentioned folk art, early modern secular art and contemporary art.¹⁸

Secondly, she introduced new methodologies and concepts. For instance, in architectural study not only did she use construction history and stylistic analysis based on thorough archival and building archaeological field work, but she also included much wider cultural, ecological and economic aspects. Her role, together with the architect Rein Zobel, in creating the methodology of regeneration of the historic centre of Tallinn in the early 1960s was significant even on the international level.

¹⁶ Most of the papers were published in the special issue on Neo-Classicism (edited by Juhan Maiste) of *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 17, 1–2 (2008), including Juhan Maiste's "Classicism and truth" ["Klassitsism ja tõde"] (7–11).

¹⁷ To list just a few not mentioned in the articles of this volume: the chapters on medieval dwellings, art and architecture in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries in *Tallinna ajalugu 1860-ndate aastateni*, koost Raimo Pullat (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1976), 159–166, 294–300, 381–390; the chapters on Estonian art in *История искусства народов СССР* (Москва: Изобразительное искусство, 1971–1984), том 4, 329–356, том 5, 301–322.

¹⁸ For instance: Helmi Üprus, Irina Solomõkova, *Kalevipoeg kunstis* (Tallinn: Eesti NSV Kunst, 1962); Helmi Üprus, *Tallinna etikukivid* (Tallinn: Valgus, 1971); Helmi Üprus, *Päikesemängud* (Tallinn: Kunst 1976); Helmi Üprus, *Raidkivikunst Eestis XIII–XVII sajandini*, toim Voldemar Vaga (Tallinn: Kunst, 1987); Helmi Üprus, "Tallinna vanalinna elamute välisarhitektuuri juurde kuulunud raidkividest Tallinna Linnamuuseumi kogude põhjal", *Kunstist Eestis läbi aegade. Uurimusi ja artikleid* (Tallinn: Kunst 1990), 69–105.

Thirdly, the erudition, charm and intelligence of Helmi Üprus, which her colleagues experienced, can still be felt in her writings.

The articles in this volume are dedicated to the topics related to the interests of, or research by, Helmi Üprus. The first section discusses the role of Üprus in her main fields of study. The second section on the Renaissance contains two articles: Kerttu Palginõmm deals with the essentially still medieval altarpiece by the master of St Lucy's legend from the standpoints of art and commercial history; Ojars Spārītis presents a thorough iconographic study of early Protestant art in the Riga Cathedral.

The third section, entitled 'Pompeii and its reception', contains five articles, ranging from an extensive overview of the legacy of Pompeii from Antiquity to 20th century literature and film, written by Anne Lill. The rest of the articles in the section deal with the visual reception of Pompeian murals in 18th and 19th century art: Inge Kukk discusses the intentions behind the interior decoration of the Art Museum of Tartu University, Tiina-Mall Kreem introduces some previously unknown oil sketches by Otto Friedrich von Moeller, Hilikka Hiiop writes about the Neo-Classical murals in Estonian manors and Vija Strupule about the same in Latvian urban and rural architecture. The latter two bring several new finds from recent conservation works to the notice of the wider academic public.

The section on collecting art in the 19th century contains two papers on Karl Eduard von Liphart. Sergei Androsov focuses on the role of Liphart in the formation of the art collection of the Russian Grand Duchess Maria Nicolaevna in Florence. Ingrid Sahk looks at Liphart's activities in presenting his own art collection to learned circles. The third article, by Jaanika Anderson, follows the same line of education, analysing the collection of casts acquired by Karl Morgenstern for the University of Tartu.

The following section 'Alma Mater' is dedicated to the first architect of Tartu University, Johann Wilhelm Krause. Gerd-Helge Vogel examines the designs for the bathing house of the university in the light of Plato's ideal Republic. Anu Ormisson-Lahe focuses on an important topic in Neo-Classical architecture – colour – in the first buildings of the university.

Customarily, the last section is devoted to documentation and sources. Georgi Smirnov has investigated the Russian State Archives of Ancient

Acts in Moscow for new material on architecture and urban planning in the territory of Estonia in the 18th century. His discoveries are exceptional and provide a lot of material still to be interpreted by art historians. Kaur Altoa and Aivar Kriiska present the results of the archaeological excavations in Narva, which have significantly changed the current concept of medieval housing in the smaller towns of Livonia.

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