

Villem Raam as an Art Critic

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Summary

Abstract: The article discusses the emergence of Villem Raam (1910–1996) as an art historian in 1938–1941, observing his remarkable activities as an art critic and reviewer of art exhibitions, and his work in the field of art history, primarily in developing further and specifying the treatment of Ants Laikmaa's and Jaan Koort's works.

Villem Raam (30 May 1910 – 21 May 1996) was an art historian whose significance and meaning in Estonian cultural history go beyond his well-known achievements in researching earlier architecture in Estonia. He was also involved in figurative arts, both as an art critic and historian. Unfortunately, this aspect of Villem Raam's work has so far been rather neglected.

Villem Raam's creative period can be divided into two unequal parts. The first was quite short, covering the years from 1938 to 1941 (and only the first half of the last year). This fruitful work began enthusiastically and produced innovative research results, but was interrupted by his arrest and subsequent long suffering in forced-labour camps and in exile. The current article attempts to give an overview of Villem Raam's work as an art historian in the field of art criticism and figurative art during this first period of Raam's activities.

He started publishing art-related articles in 1938, having reached the end of his art history studies (at Tartu University from autumn 1932 until January 1940). The young

historian successfully published enlightening introductory articles, although more important and essential was Raam's topical criticism and art historical research.

Villem Raam made his debut as an art critic in 1938. The same year saw the publication in Sweden of his first treatise on medieval Estonian architecture.¹ In both publications, the twenty-seven-year-old art historian demonstrated remarkable maturity, and skills of observation and generalisation. The starting points of these writings were different: his architecture research was directly connected with his university studies, whereas his art criticism was inspired by his interest in the surrounding art environment and the daily issues of art.

As an art critic, Villem Raam wrote four exhibition reviews, published in 1938–1940. Two of the reviews tackled exhibitions by the graduates of the Tartu Art School Pallas, in 1938 and 1939.² In 1938, seven artists graduated. The young art critic's attitude towards his somewhat older contemporaries (only one exhibitor was younger) was understanding and benevolent. Critical undertones are present, but they do not prevail. The young critic's views of the beginning artists were expressed clearly, but tactfully.

There were two more graduating artists displaying their work at the Pallas exhibition the following year. This was one of the most interesting groups of artists at Pallas, among whom Raam clearly considered Lepo Mikko, Elmar Kits and Salome Trei to be the most mature and promising. However, this opinion was not forcibly presented, but gen-

1 V. Raam, *Die Architektur der Zisterzienser in Eesti*. – *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 1938, Bd. 7, pp. 106–107.

2 V. Raam, *Kunstikool "Pallase" lõpetajate tööde näitus*. – *Postimees* 5 Oct 1938, p. 5; V. Raam, K. K. *"Pallase" lõpetajate tööde näitus*. – *Postimees* 15 Oct 1939, p. 6.

tly argued in a convincing manner. The overview of the graduating graphic artists' exhibition was different, because here the reviewer pointed out certain mannerisms in the works employing relief print technique. This term is actually mentioned only in connection with the work of Erich Pehap, but Raam clearly noted how it influenced the prevailing woodcuts. Woodcut was taught by Arkadio Laigo, one of the most prominent artists in that field.

Before reviewing the Pallas graduates of 1939, Villem Raam turned his attention to a significant phenomenon of the time, which had quite a long tradition, the Pallas art exhibition.³ Here, the writer was much harsher than in his writing about the graduates. He focused on paintings, regarding the work of Andrus Johani, Nikolai Kummits and Eerik Haamer as the most original.

Raam was demanding, but tried to be just. An observation should be made here which is relevant in the light of today's treatment of our art heritage. In 2003, a monograph on the Estonian painter Karl Pärsimägi was published, and in 2004 a doctoral thesis was defended at the Estonian Academy of Arts.⁴ The thesis was largely based on an analysis of Pärsimägi. Both seemingly thorough research papers neglect to mention Villem Raam, who examined the work of Karl Pärsimägi during his lifetime. Mention of Raam would have certainly been appropriate, because the research projects emphasised Hanno Kompus and Armin Tuulse as the ones who had helped to dispel the myth that Karl Pärsimägi was no more than an imitator of Henry Matisse. I have no wish to diminish the role of these outstanding art historians in tackling the work of Karl Pärsimägi, but I would nevertheless like to clarify Raam's contribution. Armin Tuulse's article appeared on 13 September 1939, and Hanno Kompus's on 27 January

1940.⁵ Villem Raam's article was published on 5 April 1939, and it is obvious that the later writings contained similar ideas.

Among other things, the fourth topical review by Villem Raam also dealt with the work of Karl Pärsimägi, although the review is mainly devoted to the exhibition of six artists (Karl Pärsimägi, Aleksander Bergman (Vardi), Kaarel Liimand, Kristjan Teder and Adamson-Eric).⁶ Villem Raam strove for greater generalisation, and tried to avoid repeating what he himself or other reviewers had said about the same exhibition. Praising the display as a whole and demonstrating his understanding of the aspirations of the individual artists, the critic concluded that various alternatives in art were not only possible but also necessary.

It was obvious that a gifted and erudite art critic had emerged, and Raam soon also proved his worth as an art historian and researcher. In 1941, Villem Raam's first book, *Iconography of Kr. J. Peterson and Fr. R. Faehlmann*, appeared as the fifteenth volume of the Academic Literary Society series, published by the state publishing house Scientific Literature.⁷ Raam used the material of

3 V. Raam, K.-ü. "Pallase" 21. kunstinäitus. – Päeva-leht 5 Apr 1939, p. 9.

4 H. Treier, Pärsimägi. Võrumaa – Tartu – Pariis. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, Kunstiteaduse Instituut, 2003; H. Treier, Kohalik modernsus kunstis. Eesti varamodernistliku kunsti teoreetiline ja ajalooline kontseptualiseerimine ning Karl Pärsimägi paradigmaleidmise perioodil. Dissertationes Academiae Artium Estoniae I. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, Kunstiteaduse Instituut, 2004.

5 A. Tuulse, Kuus maalijat esineb I. – Päeva-leht 13 Sept 1939, p. 8; H. Kompus, Kuue kunstniku maalide näitus K.-K. "Pallases" 21. I – 5. II, II. – Postimees 27 Jan 1940, p. 8

6 R. [V. Raam], Pilk Tartu pealejõulustele kunstinäitustele. – Tänapäev 1940, no. 2/3, pp. 64–65.

7 V. Raam, Kr. J. Petersoni ja Fr. R. Faehlmanni ikonograafia. Tartu: RK Teaduslik Kirjandus, 1941.

his own work from his student years: he had produced a piece titled 'Fr. R. Faehlmann and Fr. R. Kreutzwald'.

The author naturally focused on Fr. R. Faehlmann's portraits, as there exists only one portrait of Kristian Jaak Peterson, painted by Franz Burchard Dörbeck (1799–1835), who lived his entire life in Viljandi. In the early 1820s, Dörbeck worked as an engraver in Riga and in the early 1830s he became famous in Berlin for his caricatures and humorous scenes. His full-figure portrait of Kr. J. Peterson was completed in Riga, presumably in 1822, and is in aqua-tint technique. Most of the work is therefore dedicated to Fr. R. Faehlmann (1798–1850). The two works produced during Fr. R. Faehlmann's lifetime, by August Georg Wilhelm Pezold and Eduard Hau, were described and analysed in separate chapters; the rest of the pictures were tackled in a subsection. The portraits, completed after the writer-doctor died, were also carefully registered. Villem Raam presented data on a total of twenty-five portraits of Fr. R. Faehlmann, completed in 1826–1938. The list of the portraits and their reproductions presented at the end of Raam's work is chronological-typological and gives a clear overview of which older works had inspired other artists, and where and when these portraits had been reproduced.

Villem Raam's general opinion of Fr. R. Faehlmann's portraits was quite critical but, despite that, he regarded the artists' effort in depicting the founders of Estonian culture as invaluable.

A major landmark in researching and interpreting Estonian figurative art was Villem Raam's articles on the work of Jaan Koort and Ants Laikmaa. The article 'Jaan Koort' was published in 1940 in the third issue of the magazine *Viisnurk*.⁸ Five years had passed since the artist's death – a sufficient tem-

poral distance to cast a sensible and balanced glance at the work of this great Estonian artist. During Koort's lifetime, his behaviour and outspoken ideas had influenced both buyers and critics. The main accomplishment of the author is that he was the first to show and emphasise the fact that Jaan Koort's artistic development was continuous and even. This simple claim, which seems so obvious today, was not accepted back then, or in the decades that followed. Raam presented another innovative view: that the artist's work in sculpture and painting developed hand-in-hand, based on the same creative force. Comparing and equating Koort's painting with his sculpture also evidenced a much higher regard of Jaan Koort's painting. In the first decades of the century, various people writing about art (Nikolai Triik, Friedrich Torsten Stryk et al.) considered Koort's paintings to be highly significant but, beginning in the early 1920s, the opinion changed. It was now generally thought that the sculptor Jaan Koort's paintings were second-rate. Such an opinion was largely due to the leading Estonian art critics Alfred Vaga and Hanno Kompus. Against such widespread beliefs, Villem Raam's article marked a total change. Raam's conviction that Koort's paintings were, in fact, remarkable was generally accepted only in 1977, when Lehti Viiraja, in her overview of Estonian painting from the turn of the century until 1917 (published in the relevant volume of the history of Estonian art), regarded Koort to be equal to the other leading painters of the period.

The above shows that the reception of Villem Raam's ideas was rather complicated. It is perhaps even more evident in the reception by Estonian art historians of Raam's fi-

⁸ V. Raam, Jaan Koort. – *Viisnurk* 1940, no. 3, pp. 272–276.

nal, and best, work of the period, his article on Ants Laikmaa. The double May-June 1941 issue of the magazine *Looming* published Villem Raam's article 'The Development of Ants Laikmaa's Work, with a promising subtitle, On the occasion of the artist's 75th birthday'.⁹ The jubilee atmosphere made the writing of the article rather complicated; in addition, the magazine planned to publish Ants Laikmaa's memoirs in the same issue. This did not actually happen, although the editor waited for the memoirs until the very last minute. As it was not known what part of his life Laikmaa planned to describe, Villem Raam could not focus on any biographical details of the artist. This was, of course, not the only reason why Raam preferred to analyse Laikmaa's work, where biography served as a background. The reasons for producing a sensible treatment that did not suit the jubilee atmosphere were partly Villem Raam's convictions as a scholar and his personal qualities; in addition, Raam felt a need to add something different from the extolling picture of Ants Laikmaa which had been presented by Alfred Vaga in his monograph three years previously. Villem Raam's overview thus contained quite a few novel observations, some of them critical, thus representing a more objective approach to the artist's work. Raam also claimed that the high point of Laikmaa's art was 1913, in terms of its influence and the topicality of the means of expression the artist used, i.e. the whole significance to national art. According to Villem Raam, the subsequent period could largely be considered to be a kind of crisis.

Villem Raam published this innovative article at a tragic time, when Estonia had lost its independence, and the new Soviet regime was carrying out the first wave of deportations. One of the victims was Raam. It is therefore not surprising that his remarkable

achievement went unnoticed for over two decades. In the late 1950s, it was possible to gradually reintroduce earlier research work, including that of deported scholars, but Villem Raam's treatment of Laikmaa was still not fully appreciated. A change occurred in connection with Ants Laikmaa's 100th anniversary, when a conference was organised in Tallinn (7 May 1966) and in Tartu (8 May). One of the speakers, Irina Solomykova, suggested that Villem Raam's pre-war superb work should be included in all treatments of Estonian art history. Her paper was published, although the collection *Kristjan Raud. Ants Laikmaa*, with a new introduction in April 1967, was published only in 1970.¹⁰

Villem Raam's ascent to the top of Estonian art history was rapid and, although he was also keen on medieval architecture, it seemed only natural that the main interest of his professional activity lay in figurative art. This was especially obvious beginning on 17 July 1940, when Villem Raam became the director of the State Art Museum of Soviet Estonia. In that capacity, he managed to publish five articles the same year, demonstrating his skill in organising the museum's work and in setting new goals. Alas, these could not be realised, as Raam's promising work was interrupted and his achievements forgotten. His arrest in June 1941 led to extreme suffering and a forced absence from his home for fifteen long years.

*Translated by Tiina Randviir
proof-read by Richard Adang*

⁹ V. Raam, Ants Laikmaa loomingu arenguhooni. Kunstniku 75. sünnipäeva puhul. – *Looming* 1941, no. 5/6, pp. 562–576.

¹⁰ I. Solomõkova, Ants Laikmaa looming ja kunstikriitika. – *Kristjan Raud. Ants Laikmaa*. Tallinn: Kunst, 1970, pp. 98–126.