

Villem Raam – the Keeper of Continuity of Art Culture

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The article discusses Villem Raam's (1910–1996) activities as the author of writings on modern Estonian art in 1957–1986. The author examines Raam's remarkable contribution to the continuity of Estonian art culture and his emphasis on national identity during a time when such activity meant resistance to the oppression of a totalitarian regime. He did this, primarily, by analysing the works of the artists of his own generation (Lepo Mikko, Valdemar Väli, Olga Terri and others).¹

Summary

After fifteen years of imprisonment and exile, Villem Raam was able to return to Estonia in 1956. He found employment at an institution dealing with the registration of architectural monuments. It was much more difficult to resume his work as an art critic, as such activities required certain institutional support, a social standing – a kind of 'status' – and his earlier achievements in the field did not count in the new bureaucracy; rather, they hindered his advancement. Fortunately, the support for Raam's abilities and for the art historical quality of his earlier

writings had not been forgotten, and this support quite soon helped to break down bureaucratic barriers. He was admitted to the Artists' Union of the ESSR on 7 May 1957 and, during the same month, he was elected a member of the board of the Union. Having acquired membership in the Artists' Union, publication became possible, but not certain.

During the following thirty years, Raam found the strength and will to publish, in addition to his work on medieval architecture, writings on modern art. The common main line of all these writings can be seen in the way the author, from his central position in the present, displayed the characteristic features that bind together the past and the present, explained their present importance and offered an optimistic vision of the future, stressing the unity of national culture that reaches back through the ages.

In such a way, art writing that promoted an art orientation based on national tradition and the experience of the past worked against the oppression of the totalitarian regime and opposed the doctrine of socialist realism. However, the public could be addressed only by acting within the limits set by the regime, and by consciously and boldly using the scarce opportunities available (which unavoidably led to certain re-phrasings and re-wordings, euphemisms characteristic of the time, and often the presentation of the main idea of a piece of writing had to appear to be its subtheme). The social dimension opening in Raam's writings, which primarily stressed and rendered significance to the function of art as the carrier of national identity, was clearly understandable and appreciated by contemporary progressive readers.

¹ About Villem Raam's earlier activities as an art theorist and critic, see: J. Hain, Villem Raam kunstist kirjutajana. – Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies on Art and Architecture 2008, Vol. 17 (3), pp. 83–95.

The new beginning was not easy but, fortunately, the Artists' Union engaged Raam to write a foreword for the catalogue of the exhibition to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Karl Burman (senior). This resulted in a faultless overview of Burman's work as a painter in water-colours and gouache. At the beginning of 1958, Raam published his own programmatic opinion on the requirements and possibilities for the development of Estonian art culture. His short, concentrated, but well-argued essay was published in the newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar*. In the foreword to the catalogue of the exhibition of Voldemar (Valdemar) Väli's works, held in October 1959, Raam steadfastly emphasised two aspects: first, that the years 1949–1953, and maybe a year before or after, were the most oppressive and darkest years for Estonian art and secondly, that, starting in the second half of the 1950s, artists were much freer in deciding their creative paths. We can unconditionally agree with his first argument even now but, from today's perspective, the freedom mentioned might seem to be overly optimistic. We should still try to understand Raam's position: the second half of the 1950s was a time when Estonian art, after many hard years, was again enriched with a number of new works whose artistic force and meaning are still admirable; and Villem Raam, the former convict and exile, was able to express his opinion in print. Although the situation was still far from real freedom, it was possible to write without praising the officially approved ideology and to write in such a way that readers could correctly understand the message of the scholar. In such a situation, Raam believed that there was a future for Estonian art and he tried to instil this hope in his readers.

By the end of the 1950s, Raam had already affirmed and established his reputation as an art critic. Still, there were setbacks in his progressive work. The artists he wrote about mostly belonged to his own generation. The fact that he had an excellent integrated view of the art situation of the time and its possible ways of changing can be seen in his answers to questions posed by the almanac *Kunst* in 1965. The questions 'Has anything changed in our art in the previous five years? What was it?' received the following answer: 'While the first half of this decade passed by in relatively hesitant acts of getting rid of the darkness of the personality cult of Stalin in art, of getting rid of the thriving of non-art unprecedented in previous art history, and in getting rid of the lack of independence of the artist as a creative personality, the second half of the same decade seems, despite some setbacks, to display quite a characteristic gaining of independence by artists in their choice of means of artistic expression, their total liberation from their persecution complexes and their courageous approach to the happiness that is created by expressing life's truth, experienced in one's own heart (not in the minds of others!), and the development of a relevant artistic language for this process. In connection with this, the previous bureaucratically dull depiction of life at art exhibitions has more and more often been replaced by poetic and imaginative expression of feelings, ideas and experiences that dominate life. This is a very important shift. The development of art cannot be imagined without it.'

In one of the most unique articles on a single artist in the 1960s, Raam discussed the paintings of Olga Terri. As a key to the paintings, Raam used some poems

written by Terri that were previously unknown to the public. Using poetry, he conditioned his readers to notice the relations between the subjects of Terri's paintings and the time they were created in, and Raam had no need to explain his point, (he could not do so explicitly) but, having simply stated the facts, he could be sure that his message would find its target.

In the 1970s, Raam was more and more engaged in his study of medieval architecture and had less and less time for writing about representative art. The beginning of the decade, the year 1971, was still quite prolific: he wrote a foreword for the catalogue of the exhibition of Richard Sagrits's works, published a review of this exhibition and an article for Ott Kangilaski's jubilee in *Sirp ja Vasar*, and an overview of Lepo Mikko's work in the almanac *Kunst*.

Another decade passed, and Raam published a monograph on Evald Okas. We could ask why the independent art historian Villem Raam paid so much attention to an artist who had painstakingly furthered the officially required subjects in his work and received numerous important state awards for his diligence. An answer to this question can be found in the book itself. An attentive reader will understand that Evald Okas was so active, produced and exhibited to such a large extent, that he was for several decades at the forefront of the Estonian art scene. And what is most important, during several productive periods (but not in all of them!), he achieved high-quality results in his varied artistic activities. Raam showed that the work of an artist should be evaluated on the basis of his/her best works, not failures, and that a real art historian can overcome prejudicial opinions.

Raam approached Okas's work in an understanding way, avoiding too much praise, but still giving a positive evaluation of a number of his works. We can agree with many of his opinions even now, despite the temporal distance and our strongly critical attitude towards the works created under the oppressive Soviet regime. In a new monograph on Evald Okas, published in 2009, the art historian Ants Juske extensively quotes Raam's opinions and evaluations concerning Okas's work.

When reading Raam's art historical articles written in 1956–1986, we could even forget about the ideologically oppressive conditions prevailing at the time of their publication. Raam wrote honestly and straightforwardly, clearly stressing a direct connection between the present achievements and possible future of Estonian art and the continuity of national culture, which was not an easy task in the context of the period. The rigid preliminary censorship and the somewhat subtle, but definite post-censorship had a severe impact. Most probably, Raam, too, had to submit to official requirements. We cannot know with certainty, but probably everyone who wrote, especially in the 1950s–1970s and even later, had to face these problems. Raam was honest and unafraid and, overall, was able to achieve more than others. His straightforwardness was a model for his colleagues and other authors. We should note here that the almanac *Kunst* was freed of preliminary censorship on 30 September 1987, and the cultural newspaper (at that time *Reede*, earlier *Sirp ja Vasar*) achieved this freedom only in the early 1990s; censorship was finally liquidated on 1 October 1990.

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