

## Armin Tuulse and the Study of Churches

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Summary

**Abstract:** This article analyses Armin Tuulse's evolution into a scientist in Estonia in the 1930s and his post-war scholarly activities in Sweden. The important problems of the article include disputes of German and Swedish art historians on different cultural regions, searches for originality in Estonian art and a study of the methods of medieval sacral art.

A remarkably large number of prominent figures can be found among Estonian art historians, who had an effect, either through their own work or through that of their students, on the study of Estonian art history throughout the 20th century. Without a doubt, Armin Tuulse is one of these key figures and his activities have inspired several generations of art historians in Estonia and in Sweden. Although at the beginning of his scientific career he studied castles and was continuously interested in modern Estonian art, he soon focussed on medieval sacral architecture and this remained his research area until the end of his life.

Tuulse entered the University of Tartu in 1927, but due to a lack of funds he was able to begin his study only two years later, striving to get his diploma as an art historian. After the resignation of Helge Kjellin, the professorship of art history became vacant. Under these conditions, Tuulse was first able to take only the subjects necessary to qualify for the profession of history teacher. However, he benefited a great deal from these

subjects, because he considered deep knowledge of history essential for an art historian. The election of Sten Karling to the position of full-time professor in 1933 determined the development of art history for the following decades, including the further path of Armin Tuulse. Now, he was able to choose art history as his main subject.

By that time, the opinions of researchers of the art of the Baltic countries had become totally polarised – Germans versus Swedes. The former saw Estonia as a colony of Germany, the latter saw it as a part of a unique northern Baltic region. This art geographical notion was propounded by a professor of Stockholm University, Johnny Roosval, in his paper delivered in Lübeck in 1921. Roosval saw the area as an 'art realm', existing in the 11th-16th centuries and geographically covering the whole region of the Baltic Sea, including the Scandinavian countries, the Baltic countries and northern Germany. This realm had no borders and no single centre; one area was dominant in one period, then another gained prominence. His idea was in direct opposition to the views of German scholars, who believed in Lübeck's leading role all through the Middle Ages. This opposition of views reached a peak at an international congress of art historians in Stockholm in 1933, where, among others, Helge Kjellin and the newly elected professor of the University of Tartu Sten Karling gave presentations. It is remarkable that Karling's presentation dealt with an Estonian subject – Baroque art in Narva.

In this politically heated atmosphere, there existed a clear danger that Karling, who was a Swede by nationality, could swing the pendulum to its other extreme and replace the previous German influence in the study of older Estonian art with that of Scandinavia. Karling's first papers on Estonian subjects

were centred on Sweden but, in his book on Narva (*Narva. Eine baugeschichtliche Untersuchung*, 1936), he made visible, to the chagrin of Baltic-Germans, the role of Estonians, who integrated foreign models into a unity (an architectural language developed in the Middle Ages, with local building masters and materials).

This was the context of the time when Tuulse started to write his first art historical study, *Estonian Castles. Chronology and Types of Plans*. Tuulse led the archaeological excavations of the eastern façade of the Pirita Convent church in the summers of 1934 and 1935. While Tuulse was enhancing his education in Sweden in the summer of 1935, and at the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the Pirita Convent in August 1936, he met outstanding Swedish scholars. In his first written works, however, we do not see any marked Scandinavian influence. Rather, he retained the balanced and analytical style characteristic of Karling. His time spent on a scholarship in Germany probably also helped to maintain this balance. In the summer semester of 1937, Tuulse attended lectures and seminars given by Professor Wilhelm Worringer at Königsberg University and, supervised by Dr. Karl Heinz Clasen, Tuulse became familiar with the German Order castles of Prussia. Clasen was one of the speakers for the Lübeck-centred development. As Tuulse's doctoral thesis dealt with castles, he was not much involved with Roosval's art realm, because the discussions were focussed on sacral art. Clasen was one of the best scholars of the art of the German Order and he helped his young colleague to discover the essence of the Order's defensive buildings.

In 1940, Tuulse published his only article on sacral architecture written in Estonia, 'Die Kirche zu Karja und die Wehrkirchen Saa-

remaas'. Twelve years earlier, Helge Kjellin had published a monograph on the Karja Church; now, Tuulse examined all the medieval churches of Saaremaa. His approach – comparative analysis of architectural and sculptural forms – mostly remained the same. This approach was quite widespread in the art history of the time; in Scandinavia, its most inspired representative was Johnny Roosval. Roosval's direct influence can be seen in the emphasis on the importance of single masters, often evident in Kjellin's monograph, as well as in Tuulse's article. This article on the churches of Saaremaa plainly shows Tuulse as a scholar of castles as well; otherwise he would not have paid attention to the castle-like defensive functions of these churches. The archaeology of buildings was Tuulse's strong suit, unlike his teacher. He also paid more attention to political history than Karling did. This aspect clearly demonstrates the ethnic origins of the teacher and the student – although Karling was as well informed about social conditions as Tuulse, he still was more of a bystander in Estonia compared to him.

In 1939 and 1940, Tuulse was mainly engaged in putting the final touches on his dissertation (*Die Burgen in Estland und Lettland*); however, the defence of his dissertation was postponed for two years due to the changed political conditions. In the spring of 1940, he started to work at the university as an assistant teacher and his first course of lectures, 'Medieval profane architecture', was based on his previous research on castles. His other lectures were on paintings of the 20th century (including Estonian art) and general art history. As Karling had left Estonia in 1941, Tuulse became a professor of art history in December 1942, but instead of giving lectures he had to deal with the evacuation of artistic monuments.

To sum up Tuulse's Estonian period, we

can say that in Estonia he mostly studied castles, but in Sweden this was a minor activity.

Tuulse's departure from Estonia in August 1944 was possible due to the active help of a key figure in Swedish heritage protection, the state antiquarian Sigurd Curman. Exile did not curb Tuulse's scientific productivity, and Estonian art still remained his subject matter.

The second half of the 1940s seems to have been a period of experiments for Tuulse, when he tried out different approaches to medieval art. In addition to formal analysis and a search for function, he started to pay more and more attention to the iconography of Christian art.

In 1948, Tuulse got a position in an institution called Swedish Churches (*Sveriges Kyrkor*), which worked on the inventory of churches. This was an independent institution and was included in *Riksantikvarieämbetet* only in 1976. Support from a humanitarian foundation made it possible for the editorial office of this institution to enlarge its staff and raise the number of its publications. Tuulse published his first book in the series *Sveriges kyrkor* in 1952 and, by the end of his life, he had published about fifty.

Of his works published in 1950, we should mention the monograph on the Hossmo church (*Hossmo: enförsvarskyrka med östtorn*, 1955). In relation to the renovation of the church, Tuulse's task was to carry out an archaeological study of the building, the results of which revealed that the original church, with an eastern tower, had been rebuilt to give a defensive function to the church. As both types of churches were unique in Sweden, the task of placing the Hossmo church into a wider context, searching for reasons why it had been necessary to build such a church in the Kalmar region and discovering who had ordered such a construction was an inviting

challenge. It is interesting to observe how Tuulse solved the task and which questions he asked. In the context of post-war medieval studies, Tuulse's approach was astonishingly diverse: in addition to stylistic analysis, he considered the symbolic and liturgical meanings of the church with an eastern tower and, studying the land ownership records of the area, he attempted to determine the building master. Looking for the reasons why the church had been rebuilt to be a defensive church, he included an overview of the political situation of the whole Baltic region in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, paying special attention to the churches on the islands of Öland and Gotland. His interest in the functions of different constructions, starting with his study of the churches of the island of Saaremaa, remained strong throughout his life, linking together his two research areas – castles and sacral art.

In 1962, Tuulse took over Roosval's place in the management of *Swedish Churches*. A year earlier, he had become a professor of comparative art history and the art history of the Nordic countries at the University of Stockholm, where he had worked as a lecturer since 1952. The 1960s can be considered the peak of Tuulse's research work. A solid foundation for this, which allowed him to draw conclusions, had been laid during his work on the inventory of churches.

One of his best works of the period is his study of the Strängnäs Dome (*Der Kernbau des Doms zu Strängnäs und sein Umkreis*, 1964). Similarly to his work on the Hossmo church, he again started with a meticulous analysis based on the archaeology of the building and then placed the construction into a wider context. Here we can see Tuulse's real depth and scope. He elegantly demonstrated the genesis of a rectangular hall-church without a choir, being the first to relate it to the

Dominicans and to show the important role of the Dominicans in Sweden and Finland. He was very familiar with both the Scandinavian and German materials on the subject. Regarding the latter, his close friendship with a key figure in the study of German medieval architecture, Hans Thümler in Münster, was surely of considerable help. In his book on Strängnäs, Tuulse for the first time introduced the importance of liturgy in the design of churches. We should also mention that, being a historian, he exhaustingly used archival materials. The analysis of churches in Blekinge County, which followed the completion of inventory books, also showed the high level of his scholarship.

Besides the study of architecture, Tuulse was also involved in pictorial analysis. His attitude towards pictorial analysis can best be seen in his article 'Den ikonografiska forskningsens historia i Sverige', dealing with the history of iconographic research in Sweden and published in 1972. In this article, Tuulse evaluated the work of the previous generation and pointed out future perspectives. The object of his polite but unmerciful criticism was Johnny Roosval, who, having been an eager student of Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegel, had been limited to formal analysis and attributing. In this article, Tuulse summed up the previous work and specified new directions, emphasising two aspects – art and cult. He believed that it was not possible to understand medieval art without understanding the piety of the time. Regarding this, he pointed out Finnish and Swedish researcher Sixten Ringbom's studies of devotional paintings. It should be mentioned that Ringbom's English-language doctoral dissertation 'Icon to narrative: the rise of the dramatic close-up in fifteenth-century devotional painting' (1965) was not noticed in Europe. Only in 1981 did Hans Belting publish the mono-

graph *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter*, which focussed on the problem. Thus, both Ringbom and Tuulse were ahead of their time by a couple of decades.

Tuulse achieved international renown in the field of sacral art with his monograph on Romanesque art in the Scandinavian countries, published by outstanding publishers in the Swedish and German languages, and later translated into Polish and Spanish. A book on Gothic art in the Scandinavian countries, however, remained in manuscript. In 1972, Tuulse's health deteriorated and, after a long and serious illness, he died in 1977.

In conclusion, we can say that Tuulse represented the highest level studies of the medieval sacral art of his time. Considering his last articles and presentations, it is clear that he still had not reached his peak.

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