

## **Kursi School and Ilmar Kruusamäe, A Driving Force in Estonian Art**

By Joseph Enge



Almost twelve years ago, four artists came together in Tartu to form the Kursi School. They started clean in not having compromised with the Soviet system or using it as a crutch. As Alexander the Great cut through the Gordian Knot, they cut through the idiocracy and nonsense that was Soviet art and its system. Neither did they have any family tradition in art to rely upon, simply pure talent.

They believed then, and now that you do not become an artist by going to the university and getting a degree. Rather it is a God given gift to be nurtured and developed. The original four artists: Ilmar Kruusamäe, Priit Pangsepp, Peter Allik, and Albert Gulk with the addition of Marko Mäetamm and Reiu Tüür in 1993 have been proving their point while defining modern Estonian painting at home and across the globe.

They have had one-man and group exhibits in Finland, Korea, Germany, Norway, Hungary, Australia, Japan, U.S.A., Brazil, Denmark, Holland, Uruguay, Ghana, Italy, Canada, Mexico, Egypt, Argentina, Ireland, and Panama to name a few.

The Kursi School artist studios are located on the top floor of the Tartu Artists' House by the Tartu University Library. The visual images in the studio amidst the paintings stimulate both mind and emotion, as does conversing with one of the original members of the group, Ilmar Kruusamäe.

Tall, modest, and thoughtful, Ilmar is proud of the fact that the Kursi School has been together 12 years this upcoming spring, a record in Estonian art history. The individual nature of painters has made such long-term cooperation rare in any country.

Ilmar reflected on the great changes that have transpired in society and art since he started painting in 1976. He remembered how hard it was for new artists to exhibit or display their work. They had to get a stamp of approval by Soviet officials to meet ideological and technical standards.

Ilmar's work immediately ran him afoul of the guardians of Soviet "art." One of his first exhibited works entitled "Olympia" for the then upcoming 1980 Olympics has faces of three young women. The woman in the foreground is smoking a cigarette that

has a faint symbol of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. The uppermost star of the symbol has turned to ash.

Ilmar subtly worked in the Estonian national colors of Blue, Black, and White in his work to the irritation of the keepers of ideology. His 1981 painting entitled “Contact” conveys the intimate warmth of two lovers kissing and was in direct contrast to the cold, impersonal nature of Soviet art and life.

The hardest personal and professional times for him were in the 1980’s when he avoided the draft into the Soviet Army and continued to paint. He used the pseudonyms of Viljar Valdi and Valdo Vägi and tried to keep a low profile. It was particularly difficult in having a family to support. For years he never knew which way it could go until the cloud over his head was finally removed when he turned 30, no longer of draft age.

Kruusamäe’s art reflects the events and emotions of Estonia’s recent history. Examples of this can be seen in his “Wonder” trilogy and in his painting on the Estonia ferry disaster.

In January of 1989 Ilmar painted a series of three paintings under the title of IME, which means “wonder” in Estonian, but is also the Estonian initials for “Self Governing Estonia.” The first painting has in the center the red Soviet star formed by the red hood of executioners. The background is frozen and their eyes are wide open. They have a firm grasp of the hammer and sickle. The second painting has their eyes closed with the snow in the background thawing and the colors of blue, black, and white emerging. In the third painting the executioners’ hoods have changed to fools’ hats with their symbols of power falling down.

In September of 1994 Ilmar was in Tallinn and saw a boy throwing an object away that caught his interest. He retrieved it, and discovered it to be a metal mermaid. That was the same day as the sinking of the Estonia. He incorporated the mermaid into his painting of the tragedy. The somber emotions beyond articulation leave one quietly viewing this painting without comment.

When painting people, Ilmar uses external realism. For internal expressions he utilizes animals, an additional direction his work has taken. He feels that people should look as they do in real life. His animal style allows him the freedom to look at the internal elements without the concern for lighting to convey his message.

When asked if he feels frustrated when people misunderstand his style or ideas, he replied that he is happy with making the connection with even one person who understands the thought behind his art.

Regarding the direction Estonia has taken since reestablishing independence, Ilmar said that he had just been contemplating it that very morning. He felt, “Estonia was now going through a period of lying and hiding, a period that may last several generations. For 50 plus years people did evil things, now they lie and try to hide it.”

He believes, “that his generation will not see this period’s end, we will stay in this type of desert before a totally free and spotless society develops. It is as if we all were in a Soviet marinade in which poison was added drop by drop, with very few of us being absolutely clean.” With his art, he is trying to neutralize that poison.

Ilmar Kruusamäe’s work can be viewed in the collections of the Estonian Art Museum and the Tallinn Art Hall in the capital. In Tartu his paintings can be seen in the

Tartu Art Museum, Estonian Literature Museum, Estonian National Museum, Tartu Town Hall, and Tartu University.

His paintings also hang in the collections of the Henie-Onstad Art Center in Oslo, the House of Humor and Satire in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, the Osaka Contemporary Art's Center, and the National Gallery of Fine Arts, Egypt.

Three of his works will be at the upcoming Millennium Exhibition in Tallinn. One of his first paintings, "Contact" will be shown as part of the Baltic Art Exhibition in three cities of the United States: New York, Washington D.C., and Chicago.