

Martin Blindheim 1916 – 2008

When Martin Blindheim left us, we lost somebody who for half a century had been central in the field of Norwegian medieval art history. His life was devoted to this, and he has left a trace behind of research results, museal activity, and a series of younger colleagues who find themselves inspired by his life and work.

He started with his thesis in 1949 (published 1952), in those days when a “Magistergrad” was rather more of a challenge than today. It dealt with Early Gothic figure sculpture in East Norway, which he categorized and dated, leaving earlier writers like Harry Fett and Anders Bugge far behind. But the groundbreaking part was his discussion of technical aspects: constructions and polychromy. He referred to medieval sources for this, and suggested connections and workshops on the basis of technical points, not on “style”. Commonly acknowledged today, this was a new approach at the time.

After some years of working in Norsk Folkemuseum, he was appointed curator of the Medieval Art Collection in Universitetets Oldsaksamling (today Museum of Cultural History). His first effort here was to improve the documentation side: a systematic card index with references, a slide gallery, and a vast collection of photographs of general medieval art from Norway and other European countries, inspired by the Conway Library. He acquired for the Department a professional art-technical conservator, and also a chemist, who would analyze the polychromy of the sculptures and paintings. His general interest in museums led him to a position in Norsk Museumsforbund, and he was for years the editor of the periodical *Museumsnytt*, and also leader of the Norwegian section of the Society of Scandinavian Museums. He produced a series of minor and major exhibitions, the most important of which was “Middelalderkunst fra Norge i andre land” (“Norwegian Medieval Art abroad”), showing Norwegian objects which had long been secluded in other countries; this was an event which excited great public interest.

The sixties and seventies was a also great period for international medieval exhibitions, and Martin gripped the chances to make Norwegian objects better known, lending them, travelling and producing catalogue texts in several languages. In this process he found himself over the years at home in a large international circle of colleagues. Specially beneficial to the Scandinavian milieu was his efforts with the bi-annual “Iconographic conferences”, where young art historians were initiated into this branch of their subject, one which was gaining greatly in interest internationally during these years.

In his research, he was very variegated. Figure sculpture remained his most important interest, and many are the papers he produced on the subject.¹ Towards the end of his life, he produced two large books on the subject: “Painted Wooden Sculpture in Norway 1100-1250”, and “Gothic. Painted wooden sculpture in Norway 1220-1350”. In these, he covered two-thirds of the circa 300 sculptures from before the Black Death still existing in museums and churches, discussing interrelated groups, and European influences. These books reveal his thorough work, and follow up his early interest in technical problems.

But there are other books: “Norwegian Romanesque Decorative Sculpture” (1965) reveals his enthusiasm for the ornament in the stave churches. And the exotic “Graffiti in Norwegian Stave Churches”, which gave him a surprisingly belated dr.philos. degree in 1985, carries this interest further. Continuous travels round the country, kneeling in the chancels of dark and icy stave churches, gave him a lot of very interesting material here, relating to craft praxis and popular culture.

Another of his efforts was to get two large research projects going with the aid of Norsk Forskningsråd (The Norwegian Research Council): one on the country’s painted altar frontals, the other on the decorative sculpture of the stave churches. Particularly the first would eventually involve a large number of younger scholars: art historians and technical conservators of various kinds, and generating several international conferences. Both these projects, with the results published in respectively three and two volumes, took more than twenty years to finish, during which time Martin Blindheim stood solidly by with aid and encouragement.

And this is another of his achievements. Friendship among scholars is based on recognition of other people’s work and intellect, and a wish to see others succeed. This was one of his important lines in life. Medieval art studies in Norway thrived under his gentle mentorship, and he is sorely missed.

Erla Bergendahl Hohler

¹ The bibliography before 1985 can be found in his *Festschrift*, *Universitetets Oldsaksamlings Skrifter* 7, 1986