



## Lars Pettersson

Lars Pettersson, Research Member of the Finnish Antiquarian Society and Professor Emeritus of Art History at Helsinki University, died in Helsinki on the 4th of April, 1993. He was born at Ruovesi, Southern Finland, on August 12th, 1918.

Pettersson's professional career was in the service of the Archaeological Commission of Finland (present-day National Board of Antiquities) and Helsinki University. In 1944 and 1945 and from 1949 to 1951 he was Keeper of the Fortress of Suomenlinna and from 1945 to 1949 Keeper of the Commission's Section for History. In 1951 Pettersson, then only thirty-three, was appointed Professor of Art History at Helsinki University, serving in this capacity until his retirement in 1981.

During the Second World War, Pettersson was authorized to carry out a detailed survey of the ecclesiastical art and architecture of the Äänisniemi area on the shore of Lake Onega in East Karelia. This material was the basis for his doctoral dissertation in 1950 on the religious architecture of this area.

Pettersson's dissertation made significant corrections to earlier views on the basic character of vernacular architecture in the eastern and border regions of Karelia, including the claimed origins of the so-called Karelian house. He was able to show how certain basic structural solutions of this building type derived from the old Byzantine tradition, but he also pointed out that the rich ornament of Karelian vernacular architecture by no means exemplified a Finnish 'primeval architecture' with roots in the world of the Kalevala epic. Instead, it derived from a style mainly adopted from villas in the environs of St. Petersburg.

This dissertation laid the guidelines for Pettersson's later studies and for his methodological approach, of which an essential feature was to investigate the origins of phenomena in the arts, their variations and the interaction of centres and peripheries.

A further and lasting methodological aspect of Pettersson's work was that he based his analyses of architecture on the detailed on-site study of works, presenting them in skilfully drafted measured drawings and reconstructions.

Pettersson's own field of expertise was already outlined in his graduate thesis: the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century architecture of wooden churches in Finland. This introduced a third tenet of his methodology: the exhaustive study of historical source material.

Pettersson's output was considerable, including a great number of monographs on individual churches and broad works of synthesis on the main aspects and phenomena of ecclesiastical architecture in Finland. These contributions provided a great deal of new information on the wooden churches of Finland, but above all Pettersson focused on the content of this area of architecture. One of his perhaps most significant results was that the architecture of wooden churches was not – as still claimed in the 1940s – an isolated and nationally defined course of development, but, on the contrary, had been in pace with the leading currents of architecture in the Swedish Realm, albeit simplified and adapted to peripheral conditions. He also pointed out that many of the features of Finland's wooden churches were, in fact, adaptations of stone-built models and prototypes in wooden corner-joining technique.

Pettersson also discovered many new phenomena in the architecture of the wooden churches. One of the most interesting of these is the so-called Bothnian 'block-pillar' church, involving a method of construction in which corner-joined pillars freed the design from the limitations of log dimensions. In other words, the length of the buildings could be defined regardless of the length of the available timber, while the pillars served as vertical reinforcements of the walls.

Pettersson's explanation of the origin of the block-pillar system reveals a fourth methodological principle in his work: bold hypotheses and their unbiased discussion. He convincingly demonstrated, for example, how the block-pillars were an adaptation of the buttresses of Finland's Late Gothic grey stone churches in wooden corner-timbering techniques. Further examples of Pettersson's bold hypotheses are his interpretations of the origins of the East-Finnish cruciform-plan churches with tapering cross-arms and the *kahtamoinen* church type. He suggested as a background feature the false perspective of Renaissance architecture, with the Church of Empress Elizabeth built in Hamina, South-East Finland, in the 1740s as a Center of influence. The boldness of this hypothesis lies in the fact that a measured drawing of the church prepared in the 1790s shows the cross-arms as straight; Pettersson, however, convincingly argued that the drawing was incorrectly measured and that the church in fact had narrowing cross-arms.

Lars Pettersson was also a pioneering figure in launching the study of the architectural history of the Fortress of Suomenlinna (Sveaborg) and in demonstrating the overall art-historical significance of this monument. He was one of the first art-historians in Finland to conduct analyses of what has come to be known as the cultural landscape. The visual arts also figured in his scholarly writings.

Pettersson was a skilled writer, able to structure his studies in coherent form. I still remember his instructions to undergraduates that a work of scientific research should be constructed like a detective story. First comes the 'crime' or the problems. The plot is then developed in different directions by pointing to new problems and their partial solutions to keep the reader interested, but the final 'disclosures' must be saved for the last pages. This teaching is masterfully followed in one of his later works, the over 500-page *Templum Saloensis* published in 1989.

Lars Pettersson made a significant contribution as an academic teacher. He was responsible for training practically all of Finland's presently active middle generation of art-historians. He was demanding in the positive sense of the term; his students

were required to learn the bases of scientific research. But he was also tolerant in the sense that themes and subject could be freely chosen so long as their relevance could be demonstrated. Although primarily an architectural historian, most of the studies supervised by him were – contrary to claims – in the visual arts.

Pettersson was also a practical art-historian who actively participated in discussion and debate on building protection and conservation, and served as chairman of the restoration boards of Hämeenlinna and Olavinlinna castles.

Lars Pettersson was chairman and board member of several learned societies and received many official honours. He was a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters (1959) and the Finnish Society for Science (1978), and an honorary member of the Ehrensvärd Society and the Finnish Antiquarian Society. In 1981 Professor Pettersson received the State Prize for Architecture and Community Planning. In 1990 he was conferred the degree of Doctor of Theology h.c. at Helsinki University and was also awarded the Publication Prize of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland.

Lars Pettersson made a sizeable contribution to the work of the Finnish Antiquarian Society (former Archaeological Society of Finland). He became a Working Member in 1951, and served on the Society's board from 1952 to 1973 and as Chairman from 1968 to 1973. For over 30 years, from 1954 to 1987, Lars Pettersson was the editor of the Society's Journal, to which he directed a great deal of effort and expertise. All of us who have had the honour of publishing their studies in this series gratefully remember 'Lasse's' expert editorial advice.

In 1988 the Society wished to honour Lars Pettersson and express its gratitude for his contributions to its work by appointing him Honorary Member. In honour of Pettersson's 60th birthday in 1978, the Society commissioned a medal of him designed by the sculptor Essi Renvall. The reverse of the medal was made according to a sketch by 'Lasse' himself.

*Henrik Lilius*