

## Obituary

### *Howard Saalman (1928-1995)*

HOWARD SAALMAN died on 19th October 1995, almost exactly a year after the death of his beloved teacher, Richard Krautheimer. After chairing the Alberti colloquium in Mantua in November 1994, he suffered a stroke from which he never recovered. So ended a life of passionate research, over forty years of intensive engagement with the history of architecture and above all with the buildings of one city in one period – Florence in the early renaissance.

Saalman was born in 1928 in Stettin, in what is now Poland, and fled Nazi Germany as a ten-year-old with his parents and twin brother – at too late an age for him ever to get over the loss of his homeland. His parents settled in New York, and Saalman found his true new home in the Institute of Fine Arts, with emigrant scholars such as Richard Krautheimer, Walter Friedlaender and Karl Lehmann – teachers who were bound with a thousand threads to the old world and knew how to transfer this bond to their students. So, as early as 1953-54, Saalman spent two semesters on a fellowship from the Bavarian Government at the University of Munich. He knew which lectures to avoid, and helped me as a largely unlightened fellow-student to look more critically into the past of university professors who had remained in Germany. There was so much to be learned then from one little older than I, who had experienced our past from such a different perspective, yet wished Germany well.

Krautheimer, who was then working on his Ghiberti monograph, had already guided Saalman's interest towards Brunelleschi during a New York seminar of 1952-53, and this first extended sojourn since his emigration also gave him the opportunity to make

a prolonged visit to Florence. Thenceforth he came to Europe for several months each year and Florence became his principal base of operations. The published conclusions of his M.A. thesis on Brunelleschi's capitals, which appeared in the *Art Bulletin* in 1958, brought him instant recognition, and remains among his most important achievements. He applied to the analysis of Brunelleschi a kind of detailed research and methodological rigour that had up to then been employed only for the study of the middle ages, an approach ratified by the emerging proof of an absolutely striking development in Brunelleschi's formal language. That such ideas were then in the air is shown by Martin Gosebruch's contemporary work published in the *Hertziana Jahrbuch*.

The success of this article caused Rudolf Wittkower to commission from Saalman that same year a monograph on Brunelleschi for the newly founded Zwemmer series, and with the final appearance of the second part of the monograph thirty-five years later (the volume on the Cupola of Florence Cathedral was published in 1981), Brunelleschi remained the main subject of his research. Saalman's decades-long reflections on Brunelleschi's personality, his attempts to define the architect's *œuvre* more precisely, to uncover its roots and development and to evaluate its influence, required diversions into a long series of individual studies, dedicated not only to the works of Brunelleschi himself, but also to the Florentine Trecento and to Brunelleschi's immediate contemporaries such as Michelozzo and the Rossellino brothers. In these, he combined precise observation of individual buildings – which he inspected meticulously along with his architect collaborators from cellar to roof – with the most exhaustive archival research. Almost all his studies are based on new documents, which he exploited for art-historical insights, whether he was dealing with attribution, re-



construction, the process of design and execution or urbanistic problems. In this way he succeeded for instance in completely reassessing the figure of Michelozzo. Never shall I forget our walks together in the summer of 1980 when he introduced me to buildings I had believed to be of the Trecento, which he could confidently ascribe to Michelozzo – most notably, the Palazzo Communale in Montepulciano. The boundaries between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries became ever more fluid and, as a result, our traditional ideas about the beginning of the renaissance began to crumble.

Saalman came to see Brunelleschi less and less as a revolutionary or the founder of a new style but rather as a figure at the cusp of the Tre- and Quattrocento, in whom all threads came together and in whom Florentine art achieved a high point. His 1993 monograph (which, it may be noted, cites Vitruvius only once, and then in passing) ends with the conclusion that it was not Brunelleschi but Alberti who was the ‘truly revolutionary thinker’. Saalman was not alone in his reaction against the one-sided interpretation current since Burckhardt of Brunelleschi as the founder of the renaissance; but, in its turn, his own view is unlikely to remain unchallenged.

His complementary interpretation of Alberti’s buildings, which he began investigating systematically and with growing intensity after retiring in 1993 from his teaching duties at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, became all the more important to research. He had already attributed the Badia Fiesolana to Alberti: now he made detailed investigations of the building of Alberti’s two Mantuan churches, supported by the architect responsible for the conservation of S. Andrea, Livio Volpi Gherardini. Saalman’s observations on the putative reliquary tribune above the narthex of S. Andrea and his reconstruction of the portico of S. Sebastiano were tested in discussion in a number of places, most recently during the Mantuan symposium.

Krautheimer had already awakened Saalman’s historical consciousness. Since then, the many studies of family and economic history, above all by Anglo-Saxon scholars – thanks to which late medieval and renaissance Florence has become better understood than almost any other city of the period – became of decisive importance for Saalman’s understanding of Florentine architec-

ture. Though he began with pure formal analysis in his early studies of capitals, also drawing on his teacher’s archaeological methods, his later work laid great stress on patronage and its financial background, on functions and technical problems, and on the urbanistic context. At the same time, his decades of contact with young architects at the Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh sharpened his awareness of architectonic issues, his sense for construction and technique, for the modernity specific to the architecture of the early Quattrocento. By the same token, he found it easy to make himself at home in other areas of research, such as medieval and modern architecture, Michelangelo’s St Peter’s or Haussmann’s Paris, and to make substantial contributions to them.

Although his activities at the Carnegie-Mellon University were fruitful, it is to be regretted that he never had the opportunity to develop a school of his own at an art-historical institute – a loss which is painfully reflected today in the dwindling interest of the young in renaissance architecture. During his many semesters visiting at German universities, he succeeded over and over again in kindling the enthusiasm of students for his aims and approaches. His career-long ‘exile’ at an architectural school was not least the consequence of his controversial character, which did not always make things easy for his friends and colleagues, while he had to suffer all his life from the reserve of his teacher. And yet how passionately and with what conviction he argued his point of view! It was the issues he cared about, and he understood them better than most of his opponents.

Howard Saalman loved life. Every year he surfed on the Lago di Bracciano. He knew and appreciated literature and music, and he was anything but a denizen of the ivory tower. Thanks to his great talent and perseverance, his skills as a communicator and, above all, his concentration on one of the key figures of European architecture, Saalman’s legacy is of unusual unity and density – constituting an *œuvre* that, in my view, remains unequalled in the historiography of Quattrocento architecture.

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