FOR NEARLY 60 YEARS, REIDAR DITTMANN '47

HAS PROVIDED A LIVING LINK TO NORWAY

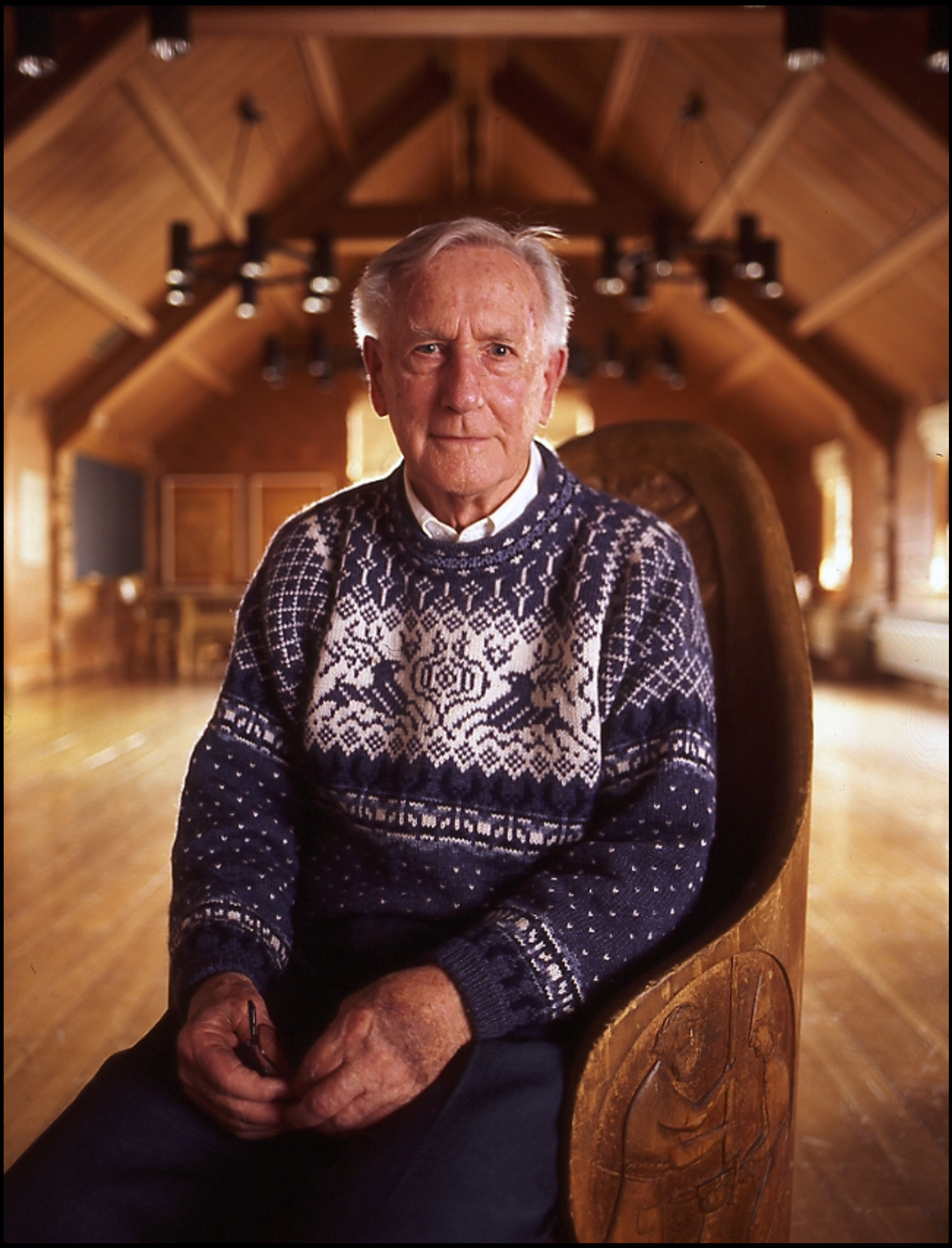
Renaissance man

AND BROUGHT THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE TO LIFE

FOR GENERATIONS OF ST. OLAF STUDENTS.

BY MARC HEQUET

· PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL KELLEY ·



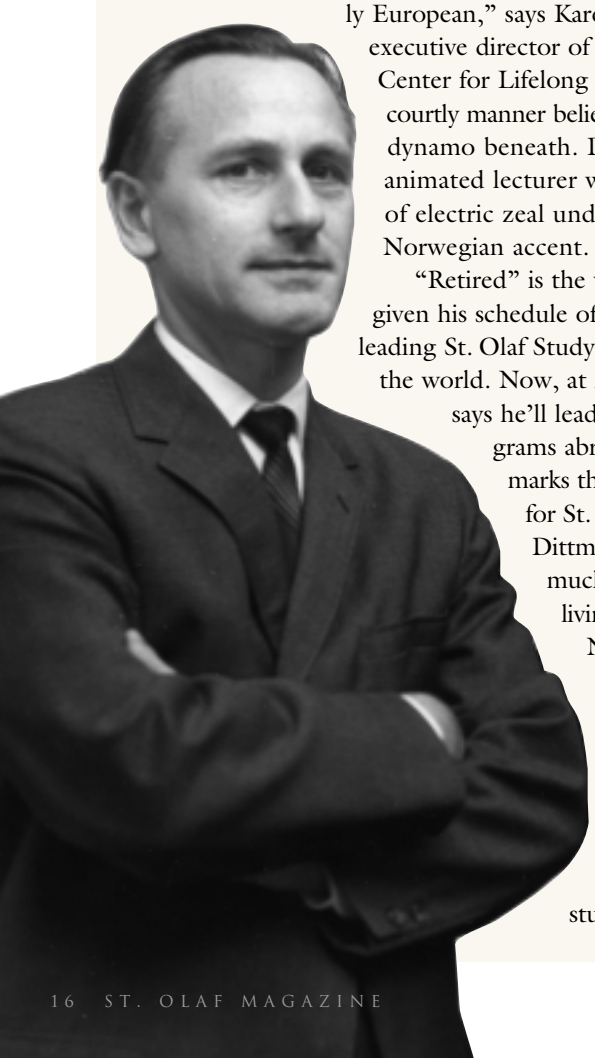
"Let's talk about something else," says Reidar Dittmann.

He's been telling about what happened during World War II. And this is his core contradiction: He doesn't want to talk about the war much. Yet it was the war that brought him to St. Olaf College and shaped him as a zealous, restless, inspiring teacher. "Let's talk about St. Olaf," he says.

Was the transition jarring — from devastated Europe to the tranquility of a Minnesota college campus? No, he says quietly. "Everything came easily to me after I got out of Buchenwald."

People who know Reidar Dittmann '47 know that he was in the war, but they remember him better for the passion of his teaching and his brisk pace on campus and on his international programs. At 83, Dittmann walks more deliberately now. The Arizona breeze tousles his straight white hair, carefully parted. He and his wife, Chris, have wintered in Scottsdale since she retired from her job as a catalog librarian at St. Olaf in 1992 and he retired a year later as a professor of art and Norwegian after nearly 50 years of teaching.

Dittmann is pale and slight, unassuming but dignified. "I've always thought of him as a very gentlemanly European," says Karen Hansen '77, executive director of the St. Olaf Center for Lifelong Learning. His courtly manner belies the Norwegian dynamo beneath. Dittmann is an animated lecturer with a current of electric zeal under the lilting Norwegian accent.



"Retired" is the wrong word, given his schedule of teaching and leading St. Olaf Study Travelers around the world. Now, at last, Dittmann says he'll lead no more programs abroad. And that marks the end of an epoch for St. Olaf College. Dittmann has been much more than a living link with Norway, where he was born in 1922. He was a catalyst, along with Ansgar Sovik, for St. Olaf's international studies program.

To be sure, the college had international roots when he arrived in 1945. St. Olaf had enabled Norwegian-speaking immigrants' children to obtain an excellent education and make their way in the new land. Missionaries from Asia joined the faculty and tinged their lectures with stories of strange lands. Lars Boe, college president from 1918–42, spent most summers in Germany. In the late 1940s, a few students and graduates studied at the Oslo Summer School — for which Dittmann served as a consultant.

Dittmann, however, took internationalism to another level at St. Olaf. Starting in the 1950s, he and a few others pushed international studies as an institutional expectation for students. In the mid-1960s, the college pioneered programs that last from one month to a year. By the 1990s, St. Olaf had become an exemplar for other schools, sending a higher percentage of its students abroad than any other liberal arts college in the nation.

It all began in the summer of 1952. Some students asked Dittmann's advice on traveling to Europe, and someone suggested he come along. He led a 78-day tour, some days better than others.

The crossing from Newport in England to Dieppe in France was awful — three hours of heavy seas, thunder, lightning, rain and wind. As the disconsolate Oles huddled seasick on deck, one young woman read from a little book of phrases called *French for the Auto Tourist.* Reaching Dieppe at last, the seasick coed leaned over the rail and cried out in passable French to mystified longshoremen: "Where can I have my battery recharged?" Dittmann tells the story with glee. "One of the reasons for travel," he says, "is to have your battery recharged."

'REIDAR MOMENTS'

Alumni know Reidar Dittmann, the inveterate traveler, as an art historian, a superb teacher in those European galleries frequented by students as part of the college's international study programs.

Reidar moments, as his students came to call them, are indelible — like the time he *didn't* get to describe a

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP: *Dittmann with art history students from the 1978 Scandinavian Interim, in the Munch Room at the National Gallery, Oslo.* PHOTO BY FRED GONNERMAN.

"Recharging his battery" while leading a 78-day tour of Europe in 1952. DITTMANN COLLECTION.

In his Northfield home, April 2005, with paintings by Norwegian artists. PHOTO BY BILL KELLEY.

OPPOSITE: *Early in his academic career, as a St. Olaf professor of Norwegian.* ST. OLAF ARCHIVES.

painting. At the fabled Uffizi, in Florence, it might have been a Madonna or Botticelli's spring flowers. You could see him wind up for a real gullywasher of a lecture. "Reidar's eyes lit up," recalls Jon Rondestvedt '61, a retired English and humanities teacher in Robbinsdale, Minn. An Italian museum guide stalked up, tapped Dittmann on the shoulder and sternly reminded him that museum docents alone were allowed to declaim on the wonders of the Uffizi. Dittmann, full to bursting with his unbegun oration, deflated like a hot-air balloon going limp.

Rondestvedt, a 34-year veteran of teaching, still remembers the moment, a rare one. "The undergirding of Reidar Dittmann is his firm — no, passionate — belief in the transforming power of travel and study abroad," says Rondestvedt. "Reidar is a treasure, and St. Olaf has had many treasures."

In particular, Dittmann is an expert on the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863–1944), the forerunner of the Expressionist movement and best known for his painting "The Scream." Dittmann found Munch early, as a youngster in the late 1920s and early 1930s. His family summered in the same resort town — Åsgårdstrand, on Oslo Fjord — as the artist. The famous man lived in a tiny cabin

on the outskirts of the village. "I used to see Munch walking along the streets or down on the beach," says Dittmann, "always very detached, his glance always upward, not paying attention to what was happening all about him. Once in a while he would come down to the beach and ask us, 'How's the water today?' This was a big moment for us. Even though we were second and third graders, we knew that this was a very important artist. And I would always run home to my mother and say, 'We talked to Munch today.' And she would say, 'Are you sure he talked first?'"

Villagers and vacationers made a point of leaving Munch alone. "If he happened to be in Oslo or Berlin or Paris, he was surrounded by admirers," says Dittmann. "But in Åsgårdstrand, nobody paid attention, and this is what he liked."

"Girls on the Bridge" is one of Munch's relaxed Åsgårdstrand paintings. Look carefully, however, says Dittmann: The pier setting in "Girls" is the same as that for "The Scream."

Despite wartime memories that will never go away, Europe has become a happy place for Dittmann again. He longs to go back: to the English Midlands of Jane Austen, to the medieval villages of Tuscany, to Norway with his grandchildren. Yet Europe also has a sharply different emotional context for Dittmann. His first travel was as a prisoner of the Nazis. "I could hear the important names of places being called out," he says. "Then I couldn't see them because I was always in a boxcar. And I must have decided at that time that if I survived I want to see where I have been."

Despite Dittmann's wartime experiences, Europe holds many happy memories, and he longs to return to Tuscany (ABOVE) and to his hometown of Tønsberg, Norway (OPPOSITE), with his grandchildren. DITTMANN COLLECTION.

IRONIC SURVIVOR

At 8 p.m. Nov. 27, 1944, 22-year-old Reidar Dittmann was locked in a boxcar by Nazis at the railway station in Freiburg, just a few miles from the French border, when Allied bombers struck the city. Half a year earlier, he had been sent in a group of 50 young Norwegian men to St. André in Alsace, occupied France, to dig trenches for German soldiers anticipating the Allied invasion. When the Allies broke through, the prisoners were evacuated on foot to the shore of the Rhine and across to Breisach and on to Freiburg.

Locked in that boxcar, Dittmann recalls 10 minutes of Allied bombing as a long, long time — especially since he thought the rail yard was the target. Released at last from the boxcar to scuttle for cover, Dittmann saw that the planes had bombed the city instead, dropping flares around the cathedral spire to mark the building for preservation. In 1952, when Dittmann returned to Freiburg with St. Olaf students, the cathedral still stood among devastation.

The world was rife with irony in the war years. The Nazis sent Dittmann to Buchenwald for the "crime" of singing, essentially. He was only 18 when Germany invaded Norway on April 9, 1940. After two months of fighting, King Haakon VII and his cabinet fled to London on June 7 and formed a government in exile. The Germans appointed Vidkun Quisling as premier; his name became a bitter synonym for "traitor." Many Norwegians joined or aided the resistance, Dittmann among them. Norwegians fought an ongoing guerilla war against the Germans or fled to train in Sweden or the United Kingdom, hoping for an eventual Allied invasion of Norway. Some exiles joined in British commando raids. After such raids, in retaliation, the Germans shot, tortured or imprisoned Norwegians.

Early in the occupation, in October 1940, in Tønsberg, Dittmann's hometown, the Nazis broke up a demonstration. Someone had asked Dittmann to lead the demonstrators in singing patriotic Norwegian songs. Dittmann climbed onto a building ledge to do so. From his vantage, as the lusty singing echoed along the street, Dittmann saw German soldiers approaching with bayonets fixed. He rejects any suggestion of heroism. "I jumped off the ledge and ran away as fast as I could," he says. The Germans caught him anyway and charged him with organizing the demonstration, though Dittmann says he was just a participant. He got a few weeks' forced labor at a camp in Norway — and a place on the German blacklist.

Released, he later went to work as a clerk in the Tønsberg shipyard. When a ship sank upon launch — the Norwegian resistance had sabotaged it — he was arrested again and given a life sentence, but was released under an amnesty in February 1942.

Dittmann was a 21-year-old student at Oslo University — 60 miles from his home in Tønsberg — when the Germans closed the school in November 1943, suspecting it was a center of the resistance. They arrested thousands, including Dittmann. Most of those detained were interned in Norway. Dittmann, on the blacklist, went to Buchenwald, a concentration camp near Weimar in southern Germany.

Buchenwald held political prisoners as well as ethnic detainees. Dittmann remembers the grating of clogs on frozen gravel as Jews from Hungary marched toward the gas chambers. Some 57,000 people died at Buchenwald, murdered by Nazis, dead from starvation or disease or worked to death in factories nearby.

When the U.S. Army liberated the camp in April 1945, Dittmann was already gone. In March, the Germans let Count Folke Bernadotte — nephew of the Swedish king and international vice president of the Red Cross — evacuate Scandinavian concentration camp inmates for internment in Sweden until the war ended. Dittmann was among them, arriving in Sweden on May 1, 1945.

Germany fell May 7, and 350,000 German troops in Norway surrendered. King Haakon VII returned June 7, 1945, the 40th anniversary of Norwegian independence. The same month, Norway became a charter member of the United Nations. Its first secretary-general would be Norwegian statesman Trygve Lie.

Dittmann no longer was in the thick of things. Instead, on Oct. 23, 1945 — the day before the United Nations came into being — he was on a night train in the American Midwest. The conductor tapped his shoulder: "This is Northfield, sir." Dittmann got off the train and lowered his two suitcases to the platform. It was midnight. He stood alone in the darkness of a strange new life.

Dittmann came to St. Olaf on a scholarship the school began offering to Norwegian students whose education had been interrupted by the war. Norway, stripped of resources, couldn't provide higher education for its youth, so American colleges and universities opened their doors to hundreds of Norwegian students. Later, in thanks, the University of Oslo established its summer school for American students in 1947. St. Olaf became the North American center for what is now called the International Summer School. The young Dittmann acted as a consultant in helping establish the school, and taught there for years.

In 1945, the Norwegian music student was merely glad for an opportunity to study with "the grand man of St. Olaf," the renowned composer-conductor F. Melius Christiansen, himself a Norwegian immigrant and founder of the St. Olaf Band, St. Olaf Choir and St. Olaf Orchestra. Dittmann took a ship to New York and a train to Minneapolis. Norwegian consulate staff assisted him in both cities.

In Northfield, however, he got off the train alone; the station was deserted, pitch black. "What do I do now," Dittmann thought. Then a squat figure, a man, loomed out of the darkness. In good Norwegian, he said, "Are you Reidar Dittmann? Welcome to Northfield." It was Theodore Jorgenson, a senior member of the St. Olaf Norwegian Department. "He had come out in the middle of the night to meet me," says Dittmann, "and it was like a burden fell off of my shoulder. And from that moment I felt at home."

A LIFELONG LOVE

With many GIs still in the service in the autumn of 1945, the St. Olaf student enrollment of 789 included 682 women and just 107 men. "It was a grand time for a man, you know," Dittmann quips. He had a smooth move with a coed: sit across from her in the library. Glance at the name written on her books. Say: "And where in Norway did your folks come from?" "That," Dittmann says, "was my introduction."

"Where in Norway did your parents come from?" Reidar asked classmate Chrisma Skoien in 1945. They married in 1947, the year he graduated.
PHOTO BY BILL KELLEY.

It worked on Chrisma Skoien '48, a pretty sophomore from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. She already knew a little about Reidar Dittmann. She had seen the library display case with his mementos of Buchenwald. "I stared at that name as if I knew it was going to mean something special," says Chris, whose short white hair frames a delicate face.

"I was going to become a composer. I had no talent, but a lot of hair."

Chris had seen Dittmann in line at the registrar's office, wearing somber clothes from the Norwegian Red Cross, his hair hanging to his neck in an era when crew cuts were stylish. "Who is that queer duck?" Chris thought. Dittmann grins at the memory. "I was going to become a composer," he explains. "I had no talent, but a lot of hair."

After Dittmann pulled his smooth move at the library, he and Chris went to The Den, a cozy place in the lower part of the building where students took breaks. They married in 1947, the year Dittmann graduated. He was already a St. Olaf Norwegian instructor. Chris, still a student, took his course. She stood up ably to the inevitable teasing. "Who's your favorite teacher," someone asked her at a faculty gathering. "Howard Hong," said Chris, who had taken philosophy from the eminent St. Olaf Kierkegaard scholar and 1934 St. Olaf graduate.

Dittmann felt comfortable teaching Norwegian from the start. Later he taught German as well. Like all Norwegians, he had learned English, German and French in school.

Travel came quickly. In 1948 he and Chris went to Ethiopia to teach high school, journeying en route to France, Switzerland and Egypt. In 1949, they returned via Norway. In 1952 he set up his own travel agency in Northfield and learned the art of booking a group at a discount — a key reason students approached him for advice prior to their big trip in 1952.

St. Olaf didn't endorse or condone that 1952 jaunt. No one got academic credit — but Dittmann still assigned readings and lectured. Along the way, he noted the travelers' piqued interest in history and language and heard their resolve to study more about what they encountered. Dittmann saw great potential in international studies as part of the St. Olaf curriculum.

By 1954, he was leading such tours annually, still mulling the logistics of building such travel into the St. Olaf curriculum. In those days, students could study abroad, but it usually meant enrolling in another university for a term, with the accompanying logistical burden of transferring credits. Dittmann now points to others whom he says were equally important in those years. Ansgar Sovik '34, a professor of religion who had been born in China to missionary parents and served in World War II as a Navy chaplain, was, with Dittmann, an eventual cofounder of St. Olaf's International Studies program. Other important contributing faculty in those days included St. Olaf professors of philosophy Walter Stromseth '50 and William Narum '43.

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES BLOOMS

In 1964, Dittmann led a multicollege program in Thailand — which furthered his conviction that international studies must include developing nations. The next year, emergence of the 4-1-4 semester schedule helped solve the puzzle of how to allow travel and study during the academic year. The new four-week January term was well suited to international study. In January 1965, St. Olaf offered four such courses, and 78 students signed up. In 1966 Dittmann became part-time director of international studies. St. Olaf established programs in Thailand, France, Germany, England and Scandinavia, as well as an "around-the-world" program featuring travel to Ethiopia, India, Thailand, Taiwan and Japan. In 1975, St. Olaf's full International and Off-Campus Studies program came into being under Dittmann's direction.

DITTMANN [CONTINUED ON PAGE 53]

In 1976, Dittmann helped launch St. Olaf's Continuing Education (CE) department (now the Center for Lifelong Learning). Continuing Education at St. Olaf started when a survey of St. Olaf alumni during the school's centennial year of 1974–75 showed that many respondents wanted a defined program for adult learners. A faculty advisory committee hired a director. Dittmann was on hand to help, leading study tours for adults and teaching CE courses at St. Olaf.

In these busy times Dittmann was "constantly on the run," says Patrick Quade '65, who retired in February as professor of theater and director of International and Off-Campus Studies. "I've never seen the man move at a slow pace, ever." Quade's meetings with Dittmann were always "hurried in a hallway or leaving another meeting or before a lecture."

The inevitable misadventures resulting from going fast and going global always met with Dittmann's imperturbable good nature. Kathy Tuma, who worked for Dittmann in the mid-1970s, once used a travel guide to book what looked like a well-located hotel in Amsterdam. "Reidar and his group of 25 students arrived one evening," says Tuma, now associate director of International and Off-Campus Studies, "and discovered that it was a brothel. They had no choice. It was evening. So they stayed." When Dittmann came back, he told her: "The manager seemed delighted to have a group that stayed the whole night."

Dittmann and a few other faculty "realized the importance of teaching our little Midwest student body about the big, wide world out there," says Tuma. "Reidar's contribution just cannot be stressed enough in terms of helping to make St. Olaf what it is today."

In retirement, Dittmann continued leading Study Travel groups for alumni and the public — and St. Olaf never had to market one of his programs. Word spread, and people signed up. Karen Hansen was on the 2001 "Scandinavian Arts in Spring" Study Travel with him when Dittmann mentioned an upcoming program. Right away, participants furtively approached her to sign up. Hansen called her office in the evening and left voicemail messages, carefully mentioning the time each person "registered" because arrangements would be first come, first served.

His stories both intrigued and inspired people. On the same program in 2001, Dittmann told his group they were near the spot where the king hid from the Nazis. That led to Dittmann's own hiding-out story. After the singing demonstration in Tønsberg, he stayed in the woods until he felt it was safe to go home — but the Gestapo was there and arrested him. Years later, the wheel of fate turned. After the war Dittmann was asked to help interrogate German officers. "It was remarkable how simply he just told the story," Hansen recalls. "I consider him a genuine hero and star educator who simply tells it: Here are the facts."

FINDING HIMSELF AT MIDLIFE

Dittmann found his fullest calling relatively late in life, after years of teaching language courses and leading international studies and Study Travel programs. "I felt at home doing that," says Dittmann, "but there was always a striving within me for something else."

All those years of treading past masterpieces in European museums pulled the real Dittmann to the surface. He wanted to teach art history. He returned to the University of Washington, where he had received his master's degree in 1955, and completed his doctorate in art history in 1975, at age 52. At St. Olaf, John Maakestaad '50, a professor of art and chair of a department filled with iconic art faculty that included Arnold Flaten '22 and Dorothy Divers '46, brought Dittmann on board. Together they formed a team of art historians and began the art history major. "I finally felt I had arrived where I was supposed to be," says Dittmann.

Hansen attended a lecture in the 1980s in which Dittmann described how the English painters Constable and Turner used light. "To this day I can still walk into a room in an art gallery and spot a Constable or Turner work, because of that lecture he gave years ago," Hansen says.

Dittmann's art history lectures for alumni drew standing-room-only crowds. Katy Smith Abbott '87, assistant professor in art history and architecture at Middlebury College in Vermont, met Dittmann in the autumn of 1984 when she transferred to St. Olaf as a sophomore to study art history. His darkened lecture room was a sanctuary with a slide show and Dittmann's quiet but commanding voice. "That room," she says, "was on fire."

Dittmann's life is now centered on his extended family. He and Chris have five children: Reidar Jr. '71 in Seattle, Solveig '78 in Hudson, Wis., and the others in Minnesota: Rolf '77 in Stillwater, Kristin '82 in Maple Grove and Lisa in Minneapolis. The latest of six grandchildren, Gustav, was born in November 2004. He's named for Reidar's father. "That is a hard name to carry with you in your childhood," Dittmann says fondly, "but that shows my children are interested in retaining connection with the past."

Dittmann's mission is getting his grandchildren to Norway, one by one, to build appreciation for their background. What do we owe the young? "We owe them loyalty," says Dittmann. "We owe them knowledge of the past. We owe them freedom and independence." And, he says, at St. Olaf "we owe them a meaningful education."

Meaningful? "You can go to a school and learn to become an engineer without learning much about the world," says Dittmann. "But at St. Olaf it isn't possible. You can't survive at St. Olaf unless you happen to know a fairly wide spectrum of human experiences."

That, in sum, is the Reidar Dittmann legacy. ■

Art Department faculty Arch Leean (left), John Maakestad '50 and Reidar Dittmann, c. 1983. Maakestad and Dittmann formed a team of art historians and began the art history major. ST. OLAF ARCHIVES.

Marc Hequet's January 2004 St. Olaf Magazine *story about St. Olaf alumni living in Israel and Palestine won first place for best feature article in the 2004 Minnesota Publishing Excellence Awards. Reach him at* mhequet@sprintmail.com.