

Krista Andreson

ART AND RELIGION

On October 10th and 11th, the annual Autumn School took place at the Department of Art History of the University of Tartu. The main topic of this year's event was "Art and Religion". For two days, art historians, theologians and philosophers from the University of Tartu, Tallinn University, the Estonian Academy of Arts and the Art Museum of Estonia discussed topics that ranged from the Early Christian period to the present day, with the aim of mapping the relations between art and religion and their fields of meaning throughout history. The focus of the first day, with the subtitle of "Images and the Church", was on ecclesiastical art – the artefacts in the service of Christianity, their various functions and possibilities for interpretation in the context of medieval Catholicism, post-Reformation Lutheranism and Orthodoxy. On the second day, with the subtitle "Art and/as Religion", religious topics were dealt with in the context of contemporary "autonomous" art, and as an adjunct to "mainstream" art. The opposite ends of the axis were examined. This included the alienation between art and religion and the reinterpretation of their relationship on new bases, including the impact of the different religions of the 20th century and the various forms of religious expression on the art world.

The opening presentation at the Autumn School, on the topic "Art and truth", was given by Professor **Juhan Maiste**, the head of the Department of Art History at the University of Tartu. He reflected on the relations between art philosophy and religion in connection with various forms of expressing the truth and the research methods related thereto.



Fig. 1. Jüri Arrak, *The Three at the Table*, 1981, oil, canvas, Art Museum of Estonia

Krista Andreson, research fellow in the Department of Art History, introduced the ideas behind the organisation of the Autumn School and its structure. She acknowledged that the general designation of “art” and “religion” can, and does, include diametrically opposed phenomena, and that the issue of “art” and “religion” is actually a topic that primarily emerged in the modern Western world. Therefore, when speaking about these categories, we should keep in mind that their meanings and utilisation practices correspond to the time and place under discussion.

The relations between art and religion can be observed through conflict, autonomy, dialogue, and integration – the point of view depends on the examiner’s own position, but is also related to the time period under examination, or, in other words, changes with the course of history. Thus, in the Christian Church, right from the beginning, but also in subsequent centuries, there have been two sides to the relationship between art and religion – the deification of images, and the hostility toward images. The second of the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai admonished the Israelites “not to make for yourself a carved

image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20: 4). Therefore, the production of primarily three-dimensional figures of God the Father or of Christ was unthinkable for the early Christians; the risk of confusing the image with the one being depicted was too great. An important impulse in the development of imagery was provided by the various theological teachings of early Christianity. At synods and church councils, it was determined how certain topics could, and could not, be depicted. However, the role of the images continued to be a problem for a long time, primarily, in the form of cult images and icons in both the Western and Eastern branches of Christianity.

In his presentation titled "The understanding of images in medieval Western theology and philosophy", **Dr Meelis Friedenthal**, from the University of Tartu, primarily focused on the issues related to the depiction of Christ in the Early Christian period. He introduced the theological disputes related to the two distinct natures of Christ in the 5th century, as a background for the "image problem". The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) established that Christ has two natures in one person and hypostasis – he is divine and also human, similar to us, but without sin. And therefore, it is possible to create images of him. There were also arguments about the permissibility of the images in the Eastern branch of Christianity, during the 8th century. In the context of the Eastern Church, the lecturer referred to the two main arguments favouring pictures. Firstly, not the images themselves, but what is on the picture should be venerated (distinguishing between *proskynesis* and *latreia*). And, secondly, pictures make invisible things visible, and guide us to hidden things. At the Second Council of Nicaea (787 AD), it was decided that pictures perform an important function by helping people to remember, and by arousing a sense of yearning. And that the meditative observing, embracing and reverent worshipping of holy pictures is transferred, from the holy image to the initial image, or prototype. Friedenthal illustrated the reaction by Western Christianity to the "deification" of images by Eastern Christianity with texts from Bede Venerabilis (*De templo libri*), St Augustin (*De doctrina Christiana*) and Theodulf (*Opus Caroli regis*).

In the second half of the first day, it was also possible to learn about the pictorial imagery of the Eastern Orthodox Church from the presentation of **Mari-Liis Paaver**, who is dedicated to researching the icon

paintings of the Old Believers at the Art Museum of Estonia, and is a research fellow at the Institute of the Lithuanian Language in Vilnius. In her presentation on the occurrence of *hierro topos* in the sacred space of the Orthodox Church, Paaver examined the creation and presentation, as well as re-presentation, of the sacred space in the Orthodox Church. She focused on the relationship between the image and the viewer-receiver in the sacred space. The presentation was based on the concept and methodology of *hierro topos*, which was presented in 2001, in order to explain many of the phenomena of the world of Eastern Christianity, including the approach to images.

Meelis Friedenthal's presentation was followed by a presentation by **Helen Bome**, a research fellow at Tallinn University, which was called "The Holy Face of Jesus, in the Late Gothic Art of Tallinn". Since, for a long time, Bome's main area of research has been Christian iconography, the researcher provided an enjoyable survey of the images of Christ's face, including the iconographic sources related to the Veil of Veronica, and the development of various types of imagery through the Middle Ages. In addition to their cult-related and didactic objectives, pictures in the medieval Church also helped to remind people of the past – be it events or persons – i.e. to preserve *memoria*. The aim could be to share the emotions associated with the sufferings of Christ (*compassio*) or personal experiences (*imitatio*). The role of pictures became especially important in the context of personal and collective piety in the Late Middle Ages. The second half of the presentation focused on specific examples from the Late Middle Ages, in Tallinn, by exploring the possible fields of meaning of the Holy Face of Jesus in the keystone, illuminated manuscripts and signet ring of St Olav's Church in Tallinn. The most intriguing of the selected objects is perhaps the relief, dating back to the 1460s, which is displayed today in the Tallinn City Hall, in an ancillary position, as a decorative detail on the side support of the burgomasters' bench. Bome assumes that the original location of the relief was in Tallinn's Church of the Holy Spirit, which also functioned as the Town Council's chapel, in the Middle Ages. Presumably, this is how the relief ended up in the Council Hall. It is clear, that to get a better understanding of the work of art, it is necessary to explore the functions and meaning of the image in its original environment. However, what position the relief initially had in the Church of the Holy Spirit, and what role it played in person-

al or collective devotional practices, unfortunately, remains conjectural, considering the state of the current research.

If the cult of the pictorial image had reached its zenith in the early 16th century, the Reformation very sharply criticised the existing practices related to images, primarily their cult-like veneration. In this context, Martin Luther (1483–1546) actually represented a moderate approach – according to his interpretation, images were not good or bad, as such – the problem was how the viewers-receivers used them. Luther thought that the belief in the miraculous powers of images was reprehensible, as was the donation of pictures to achieve salvation. But, for educational purposes, pictures were permitted for the witnessing and proclaiming of belief.

In her presentation titled “From the altarpieces of the Last Supper, to devotional images of the Crucifixion: The design of altars in Estonia’s Lutheran Churches, from the 16th to the 19th century”, **Reet Rast**, a researcher of post-Reformation ecclesiastical art, and PhD student in the Department of Art History of the University of Tartu, explored the changes that could be observed in post-Reformation ecclesiastical art, and what themes and ideas related to Lutheranism are reflected in the pictorial world of the church of words. An interesting example that Rast focused on is the tradition of pulpit altars at the turn of the 19th century, of which few examples have survived.

The fact that, in Europe, the citizenry started to commission art during the Early Modern period, along with the Church and the nobility, left its mark on both the content and function of the works of art. One such expression was in the form of the epitaph paintings of the Early Modern period. These works of art were placed in churches to commemorate specific individuals and groups of individuals, to confirm religious belief and to honour God. In addition, more and more pictures started to be commissioned just to be enjoyed, or to indicate one’s status.

A presentation titled “Religion and ritual: 17th-century portraiture in the field of religious meaning”, which dealt with 17th-century portraiture theory in Livonia, was given by **Ivar-Kristjan Hein**, a PhD student at the Estonian Academy of Arts. The recurrent theme in the presentation was ritual, which united religion and art in the Early Modern period. If the painting of a portrait can be considered to be a creative process on the part of the artist, then the use of portraits in various social situations can be related to ritual power and the representation of status. Therefore,

rituals united religion and society in the Early Modern period, and one important (ritual) function is fulfilled by portraiture.

The first day's programme was completed by this year's special guest – Roman Catholic Bishop **Philippe Jourdan**, who expounded on the topic "Beauty will save the world – the Christian approach to art". Examining the arguments for and against the depiction of God starting with the Early Christian period, the bishop showed that this is primarily a philosophical question. The iconoclasm of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Reformation-era pillaging of images are both extremely puritan expressions of this; yet Christian art primarily presumes Christian humanism. However, art should not become a goal, in and of itself, for Christians. "For Christians, art is beauty and beauty is, in turn, the key that opens the door to divine mysteries," the bishop said, summarising his position.

The Enlightenment, and the development of science and technology that followed, which peaked with the Industrial Revolution, fundamentally changed the Christian worldview – individualism and the freedom of religion replaced Christianity and its dogmatic beliefs in authorities. The reforms affected all the spheres of public and social life, including the art world. The subtitle for the second day of the Autumn School was "Art and/as Religion", and focused on the relations between religious themes and "autonomous" art. A kind of bridge between the two days was created by **Tiina-Erika Friedenthal**, a PhD student of theology, in her presentation "Art and religion – possibilities for differentiation and identification based on the example of 18th-century Germany and Estonia-Livonia, with a focus on theatre art". In the 18th century, when orthodox Lutheranism still held a strong position, a discussion was underway in the German cultural space, including Estonia and Livonia, about how to comprehend religion and art in the broader sense, and, thereby, how do theatrical art and Christianity fit together. In this context, the key question that arose was the comprehension of man's perceptive process – whether and how much people, but primarily young people, were affected by objects outside the soul. In this situation, art became a sort of pedagogical problem; guidelines appeared concerning which topics and characters could be depicted and which could not, with the goal of avoiding depravity, double meanings, empty chatter and other human

weaknesses the watching and experiencing of which could damage a person's soul. Secondly, in connection with the spread of Cartesian Platonism, understandings also took hold, which clearly differentiated between the soul and matter – “an ugly appearance did not automatically mean an ugly soul”. In addition to developing good taste, fine language and intelligence, the theatre arts also had the advantage of having an entertaining and social gathering function.

Although the relations between art and the church split in the Modern era, Christian art and religious themes did not disappear. However, a significant change did generally occur in the basis of this art and within the framework of certain works. The opening speaker on the second day was Professor of Theology **Anne Kull**, with a presentation titled “How to ask questions in art and theology based on the example of Paul Tillich”. In it, she introduced the religious interpretation of culture by German-American philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965). According to Tillich, one and the same dimension of depth forms the basis for both religion and culture. His definition of religion enables almost unlimited associations to be formed with various cultural phenomena – with art, science as well as technology. In order to analyse works of art from a religious perspective, Tillich, in his day, suggested a theory of typology, according to which, a religious theme does not make the art itself religious – Christianity in works of art is not related to iconography, but to style. It is the style of a work of art that expresses its Christian content, and therefore, a secular theme can turn out to be religious.

In his presentation titled “Jüri Arrak and Olav Maran – two paths of Christian art”, **Tõnis Tatar**, a member of the Department of Art History faculty at the University of Tartu, introduced the theme of religiosity in today's art, by noting the positions of two different artists. Jüri Arrak consciously contrasts himself with modern art, and prefers “content to form, finding to searching, spiritual to vulgar, and, shortly, art to provocation”. The “sign-people” in Arrak's pictures are often the intermediaries between people and God, even when the themes of the paintings are not based on “the Bible”. The artist has also introduced his mythological-religious worldview to the wider public in his writings. The post-avant-garde Olav Maran, however, is a different kind of religious artist adjacent to the autonomous mainstream. His aim is not to create pictures with religious propaganda or religious content. Clearly differentiating himself from the Lutheran artists, Maran's later work

is filled with traditional still-lives and landscapes – pictures that speak to ordinary people, but are of little interest to the canonical writing of art history. The examples of Arrak and Maran provided the attendees of the Autumn School with a good opportunity to apply Paul Tillich's typological theory, which was introduced in Anne Kull's presentation. When implemented in practice, the theory prompted many contrary positions. Thus, one can agree that many abstract works of art may have spiritual roots (but not always in the Christian sense) – in this context, art and religion meet on a common spiritual and transcendental field of thought. However, whether a work, which enables a numinous experience, is received by people religiously or aesthetically depends on many factors, including the prior knowledge of the viewer. Being familiar with the background of Maran's and Arrak's work makes it easier for us, as the audience, to place them in the scale of Tillich's typology.

When speaking about religion in the context of modern art, mention is usually made of the alienation of the two fields of activity, which got its start with the Enlightenment. In today's "mainstream" art, themes related to religion are usually approached with a distorted mirror, or even critically. Therefore, an opinion has resounded that modern art, with its aspirations for autonomy, has been and is reactionary toward traditional creeds. However, one of the goals of this Autumn School session was to reflect on the trends that have developed inside the "mainstream" and adjacent to it – with the artist's personality having become the central figure and art having become the new religion. However, another goal was to direct attention to the fact that these trends are not free of the impact of modern "substitute religions" or new forms of religions. Rather, one can notice a certain analogue in these contrasts, including between the operational mechanisms of art and religion.

Dr Sirje Helme, the Director - General of the Art Museum of Estonia, used the following quote by Athanasius Kircher, as the motto of her presentation – "Nothing is more divine than to know all" (*Ars magna sciendi*, 1669). Helme confirmed the position that religion has not lost its role even in modern society; but rather, church religion has been replaced by other forms of religion. Nature does not like a void, and therefore, as Christianity abated, its place in the souls of artists was replaced with secret sciences – mysticism, occultism, spiritualism and theosophy. The presentation was framed by the main question – whether, and to what

extent, has the avant-garde actually been created by these secret sciences, as opposed to having emerged from modernist teleological theories?

Many of the early modernist projects – futurism, neo-plasticism, and constructivism – aspired to reshape the world based on their special aesthetic-philosophical concepts. **Elnara Taidre**, from the Art Museum of Estonia and the Estonian Academy of Arts, introduced the very speaking case of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism, and examined the appearance of a religious and mythological discourse in the theories and practices of Suprematism. According to Taidre, Suprematism was a cosmic system created by the artist-prophet, charged with various mythogenic motifs. The universality of the system allows it to function as a world model, at both the visual and spiritual level, bringing various aspects into mutual harmony. In this situation, the speaker dealt with Malevich's private mythology as a phenomenon of a singular quasi-religion, in which the artist's "I" has emerged as the central character in the new spiritual core narrative, occupying the place that had previously been reserved for God.

Continuing in the same vein, **Dr Heie Treier**, from Tallinn University, introduced the phenomenon called "pure geometry", by searching for connections between centuries-old philosophical and theological systems, and the work of Louis Kahn. The speaker sought answers to the following questions, using abundant pictorial material, in which Kuressaare Castle played a central role: When does a building with a square or round "floor plan" represent "mystical mathematics", and when are we dealing with plain school mathematics or geometry?; How can we differentiate between the contrasting religious ideologies, including "mystical mathematics," which are implemented in architecture and the fine arts?

This year's Autumn School was completed by **Eva-Maria Maiste**, who graduated from the University of Tartu in 2013 with a master's degree in philosophy. In her presentation, she focused on the religious philosophies of the 20th century, and on the work of Jacques Derrida. In her presentation titled "The association of Derrida's constructive worldview with mystical experience and religion", Maiste introduced a possible way of thinking – deconstruction – or more precisely the alternative approaches to religiosity that it opens. Maiste explained the nature of deconstruction itself to the audience, as well as the role of mystical texts from the viewpoint of deconstruction. She also introduced an alternative approach to religion, i.e. "religion without religion" and, finally, provided a short summary of Derrida's attitude toward art.

One of the goals of this year's Autumn School was to travel through history, stopping at different cases and thereby turning attention to the fact that the fields of meaning of "art" and "religion" possess diverse and complicated bases and require critical reflection in today's open cultural space. A contribution to this topic will also be made by a collection of articles based on the presentations made at the "Art and Religion" Autumn School, which is scheduled to appear as a special issue of the *Baltic Journal of Art History* in 2014.

KRISTA ANDRESON: *ART AND RELIGION*

KEYWORDS: SACRAL ART; ART AND RELIGION; „ART AS RELIGION“

SUMMARY:

On October 10th and 11th, the Autumn School "Art and Religion" took place in the Department of Art History at the University of Tartu, in the course of which, art historians, theologians and philosophers spoke about the relations between art and religion, as well as their fields of meaning from the Early Christian period to the present day. The focus of the first day, with the subtitle of "Images and the Church", was on sacral art. The presentations dealt with the "picture question" in the Western and Eastern branches of Christianity, the various functions and possibilities for the interpretation of the works of art in the service of medieval Catholicism and post-Reformation Lutheranism, as well as the contacts between ritual and religion in the Early Modern period, based on the example of 17th-century portraiture.

On the second day of the Autumn School, with the subtitle "Art and/as Religion", the focus was on religious themes in connection with contemporary "autonomous" art. The opposite ends of the axis were examined – the alienation between art and religion, as well as the reinterpretation of the relationship on new bases, including the impact of different religions of the 20th century and the various forms of expressing religiosity on the art world. The presentations showed that Christian art and religious themes have not disappeared, however a significant change has generally occurred in the bases of this art and within the framework of certain works. As one of the main topics of the second day, the trends that have developed inside and adjacent to "mainstream" art emerged. These are on the one hand characterised by the emergence of the artist's

“me” – art has become the new religion and the artist has become God. Thus, along with the contrasting, one can also notice a certain analogy, including between the operational mechanisms of art and religion. However, these trends are often marked with the impact of modern “substitute” religions or new forms of religion, including various “secret sciences” with a spiritual background.

CV:

Krista Andreson is a research fellow in the Department of Art History at the University of Tartu. She has studied in Germany at the University of Kiel, as well as held shorter academic residencies in Leipzig and Greifswald. From 2003 to 2010, Andreson was a research fellow at the Niguliste Museum (branch of the Art Museum of Estonia). Her main area of research is medieval ecclesiastical art and iconography and she has published several research papers on the medieval wooden sculptures and altarpieces in the Baltic Sea Region. The topic of Krista Andreson’s doctoral thesis is “The Relations between Art and Culture in Old Livonia Based on the Example of Ecclesiastical Art: Wooden Sculptures from the 13th Century to the First Half of the 15th Century”.

