

Hilkka Hiio

THE GLITTERING GOLD OF THE PAINTINGS IN THE GREAT HALL OF ÕISU MANOR'S MAIN BUILDING

Fragments of paintings were found on earlier plaster layers in the great hall in the course of field investigations conducted in the Õisu Manor in 2007.¹ No great attention was paid to the findings at that time since the little fragment discovered on the upper edge of the wall did not have any particularly promising décor. The manor building's external architectural appearance and the stately nature of the entire ensemble of buildings nevertheless spurred researchers to continue their examinations in the hope of obtaining some idea of what the interiors formerly looked like. Over the course of the practical research training of students in the speciality of conservation in the summer of 2016, the murals in the manor's hall were revealed to the full extent to which they have survived.²

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1 *Õisu mõisa peahoone värviuuringute aruanne = Report on Paint Analysis in the Õisu Manor Main Building* (Tallinn: Vana Tallinn OÜ, 2007). Archive of the National Heritage Board, A-7019.

2 The analyses were carried out within the framework of practical training for students from the Estonian Academy of Arts, the Latvian Academy of Arts and the Riga Building College supervised by Hilkka Hiio and Merike Kallas. See the report *Õisu mõisa peahoone suure saali maalingute uuringud ja osaline avamine – konserveerimine*. Aruanne (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, H&M Restuudio, 2016). Archive of the National Heritage Board, A-13144.

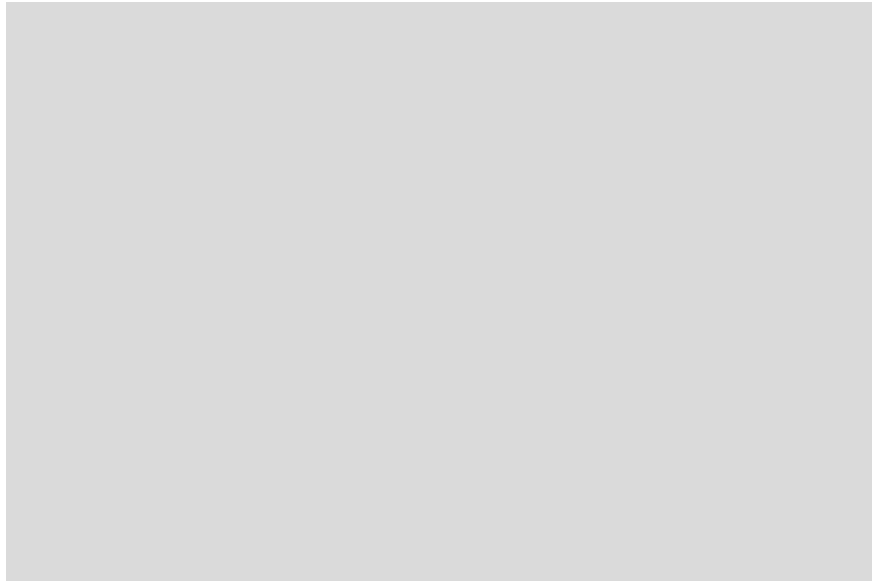


Fig. 1. View of the great hall of Õisu Manor after revealing the fragmentary 18th century paintings on the walls and the well-preserved ceiling painting from a later period. Photo: Peeter Säre.

The paintings were admittedly found in ruined condition as fragments preserved only in the upper part of the walls and densely covered by holes chipped into the walls to help the covering coat of plaster to stick, yet even this provides some idea of the original completeness of the composition, and of the mastery of the paintings corresponding to the manor's architecture.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE MANOR BUILDING'S CONSTRUCTION

The period of the Õisu Manor's splendour began in 1744, when Tsarina Yelizaveta Petrovna gave the Õisu and Heimtali (which bore the name Kurvitsa or Agende at that time) manors as a gift to the widow and descendants of Peter von Sivers, who had a successful career in the navy of Peter I, ultimately rose to the position of President of the Admiralty, and died in 1740. The title of both manors was transferred to Peter von Sivers's only surviving son, Frederick

Wilhelm von Sivers, who served as a major in the Russian Army. Under his direction, the construction of one of the most splendid and tasteful manor ensembles in Livland of that time began in the 1760s. Unfortunately, nothing is known about the master builders connected to the construction work, yet the evident influence of St. Petersburg and the fine taste with which the work was done make this one of the grandest manor complexes in these parts. On the basis of letters from August Wilhelm Hupel, the pastor of Põltsamaa at that time, Ants Hein argues that the author of the construction plans could have been the lord of the manor himself.³ According to Hupel, under Sivers the manor was reborn in a completely new form over the course of twenty years, and he places it among the most elegant of holdings in Livland belonging to the nobility, "In terms of its newly completed buildings and remarkably lovely garden, Õisu is one of the most superb manors in the entire land that is worth seeing."⁴

August Friederich von Sivers, one of Friederich Wilhelm's younger sons, who later became a representative of the nobility for Pärnu County and a member of the University of Tartu Board of Curators, became the owner of Õisu in 1790. Watercolour drawings by Johann Christoph Brotze that depict views of the ensemble from the east and the west establish the elegant front area of the manor complex of that time as being surrounded by curved outbuildings, an imposing terrace park at the rear side of the manor house, and an abundance of outbuildings.⁵

The most comprehensive reconstruction of the manor also took place during this period. A broad granite staircase was added to the front side of the building at the outset of the 19th century and the former central projection, covered by a segmental arch, was converted into a portico with Ionic order columns.⁶ An important event was the visit by the tsar in the summer of 1809, when Alexander I stopped at Õisu during his tour of Livland.

³ Ants Hein, *Õisu. Ühe Liivimaa mõisa ajalugu ja arhitektuur = The History and Architecture of a Livonian Country Manor* (Tallinn: Hattorpe, 2013), 59.

⁴ August Wilhelm Hupel, *Topographische Nachrichten von Lief- und Estland*, Bd. I (Riga: J. F. Hartknoch, 1774), 292.

⁵ The drawings date from 1794 and 1800. See Johann Christoph Brotze, *Estonica*, comp. by Ants Hein, Ivar Leimus, Raimo Pullat, Ants Viires (Tallinn: Estopol OÜ, 2006), 568.

⁶ Juhan Maiste, *Eestimaa mõisad = Manorial Architecture in Estonia* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1996), 118.

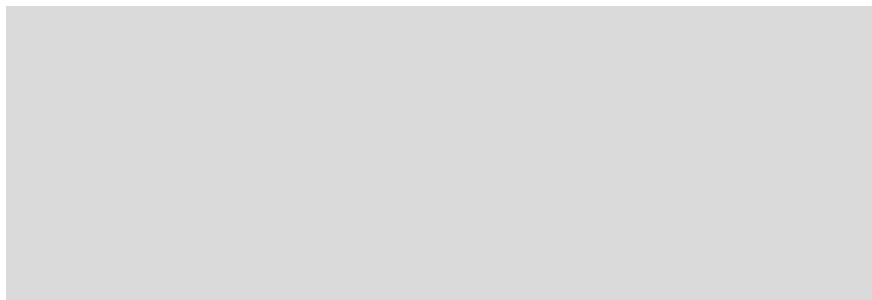


Fig. 2. Revealed painting fragment on the south wall. Photo: Peeter Säre.

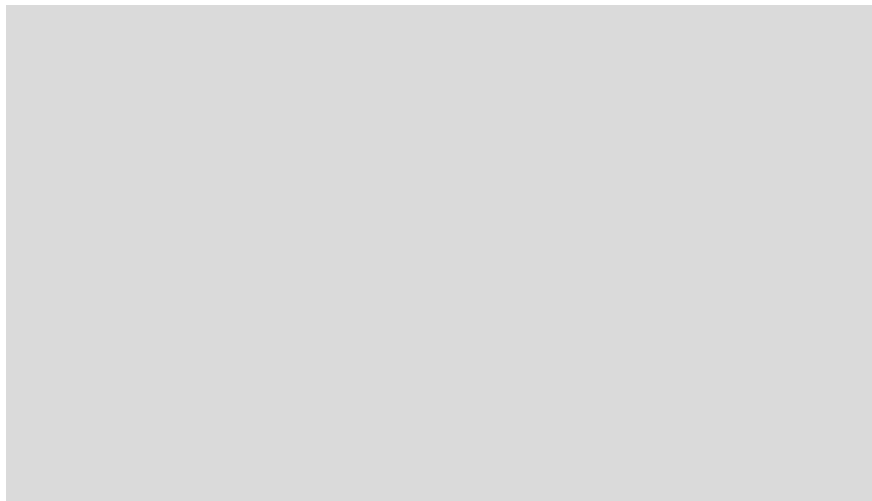


Fig. 3. Detail of the painting above the south door. Photo: Peeter Säre.

The manor remained the property of the Sivers family until the land reform of the early 20th century. It was also reconstructed to some extent later on, yet Õisu's exterior and architectural ensemble have retained much of their original appearance. On the other hand, later strata of the manor's history and the school that began operating in Õisu after its expropriation have left a strong imprint on the interiors.⁷ Not much is known about the splendour of the rooms from the time of their construction. In this light, there is reason to greatly value the finding of the paintings in the great hall and to display what has been preserved even in fragmentary form.

⁷ Several educational institutions operated in the Õisu Manor in 1922–1997, including the Dairy Farming School, and later the Food Industry Technical School.

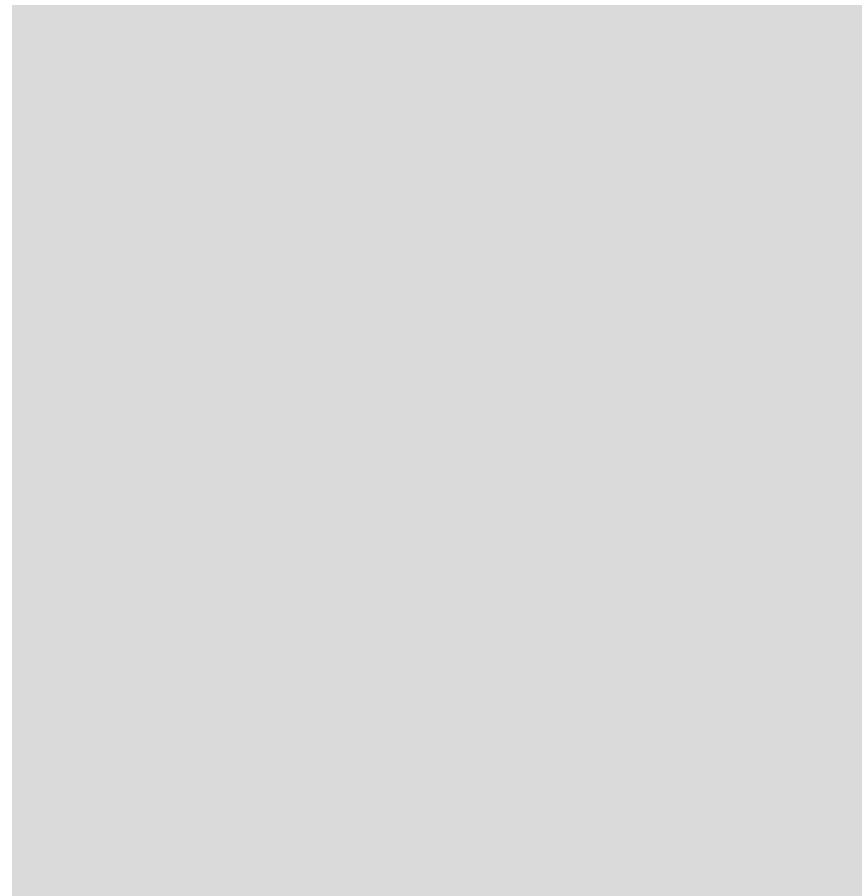


Fig. 4. Revealed painting fragment on the east wall. Photo: Peeter Säre.

THE SITUATION OF THE PAINTINGS AT THE TIME OF THEIR DISCOVERY

In the course of the conservation work of 2016, the random removal of the plaster layer that covered the wall to a thickness of a few centimetres began in order to gain an understanding of what type of décor the plaster was hiding beneath it, and to what extent the painting had been preserved. It quickly became apparent that these were not chance fragments of finishing but rather that the lustre of gold and extraordinarily fine brushwork glitter from the surface. It also quickly became evident that the historical stratigraphy of the construction, and the style and quality of the

paintings provide reasons to connect them to the period of the manor's construction in 1760–1767. This spurred conservators to expose the paintings to the full extent possible.

The finishing with paintings was found as an approximately 1.5 metre strip only in the upper areas of the walls (at a height of about 2 m above the floor). On the other hand, plaster from the time when the manor was built was missing in the lower zones of the walls. The preserved layer does not form a uniform "ribbon" surrounding the entire room; rather, it consists of several larger and smaller fragments on the room's north, south and east walls. While the plaster's lower horizontal line of intersection is relatively straight, the plaster fragments are more random and non-uniform in the vertical direction. Unfortunately the lower layer with the paintings is densely covered with little holes diligently chipped into it in order to affix the plaster. On the other hand, the coat of paint that is not marred by holes has as a rule been preserved as an extraordinarily complete whole and provides a clear idea of the virtuoso execution of the painting.

The uncovering and conservation of paintings in such a situation is an extremely fascinating and complicated challenge: a new world emerges with each piece of covering plaster that is removed. At the same time, one must immediately react to affixing every piece of paint that may be lost. When the mishmash of preserved fragments has finally been exposed, a way must be found to make the ruined picture layer readable.

Why and when the paintings perished are not known. In any case, this also brought a new design for the décor and the room gained its current cavetto vault and stuccos. The only plausible hypothesis is connected with the important visit of the tsar in 1809, when the refurbishment of the rooms could have been included on the agenda. No traces of décor other than a single bronze-coloured stripe beneath the cavetto vault have survived on the new coat of plaster. It remains unclear why the original plaster was systematically removed in the lower zones of the walls while, on the contrary, the builders of that time had reason to preserve the plaster with the paintings on the upper portion and to systematically cover it with hundreds of holes made by a hammer.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PAINTINGS

Although only the upper third of the paintings have been partially preserved, they provide an idea of the original whole of the composition. The paintings are on the first layer of plaster, evidently from the time of construction, and the historical context, motifs, stylistic treatment and chromatic scale are indicative of the rococo style.

Golden vase motifs repeat throughout the room, dividing up the wall surface, and in between them figurative and architectural scenes appear to have been placed in panels with round arcading. The arched painting fields probably extended down to floor level and currently only their upper third have survived. Their complete image has admittedly perished, yet the painting appears to depict an idyllic view of nature on the south wall, which has best survived. A view of the crowns of trees and foliage can be seen opening up between curtains in the surviving upper part of the scene. An idyllic figurative scene, for instance, could be expected to be placed in the lower portion of the composition. A detail of a pergola-type garden and grapevines that is cut through by the new door design can be made out above the door in that same wall.

An architectural landscape can be seen on the east wall: a mighty portico is vaguely discernible on the basis of the surviving fragments. Only the arched design element of the painting field can be made out on the northern part of that same wall, but what is depicted in the picture is imperceptible.

While we must rely on our imaginations alone in the case of the complete picture of large figurative scenes, the repeating element that divides up the wall surface throughout the room provides a clearer picture of the quality and the motif of the painting: the vase motif with a golden brown tonality on a light-coloured background resembling faience that is framed by purplish-red marbled vertical bands. Golden ornamented frames that seal off the upper edges of the painting fields with an arched line are placed between the vase motifs.

The painting was executed extraordinarily masterfully. While the image of the repeating ornamental elements was most likely transferred to the surface with the aid of a template, the figurative

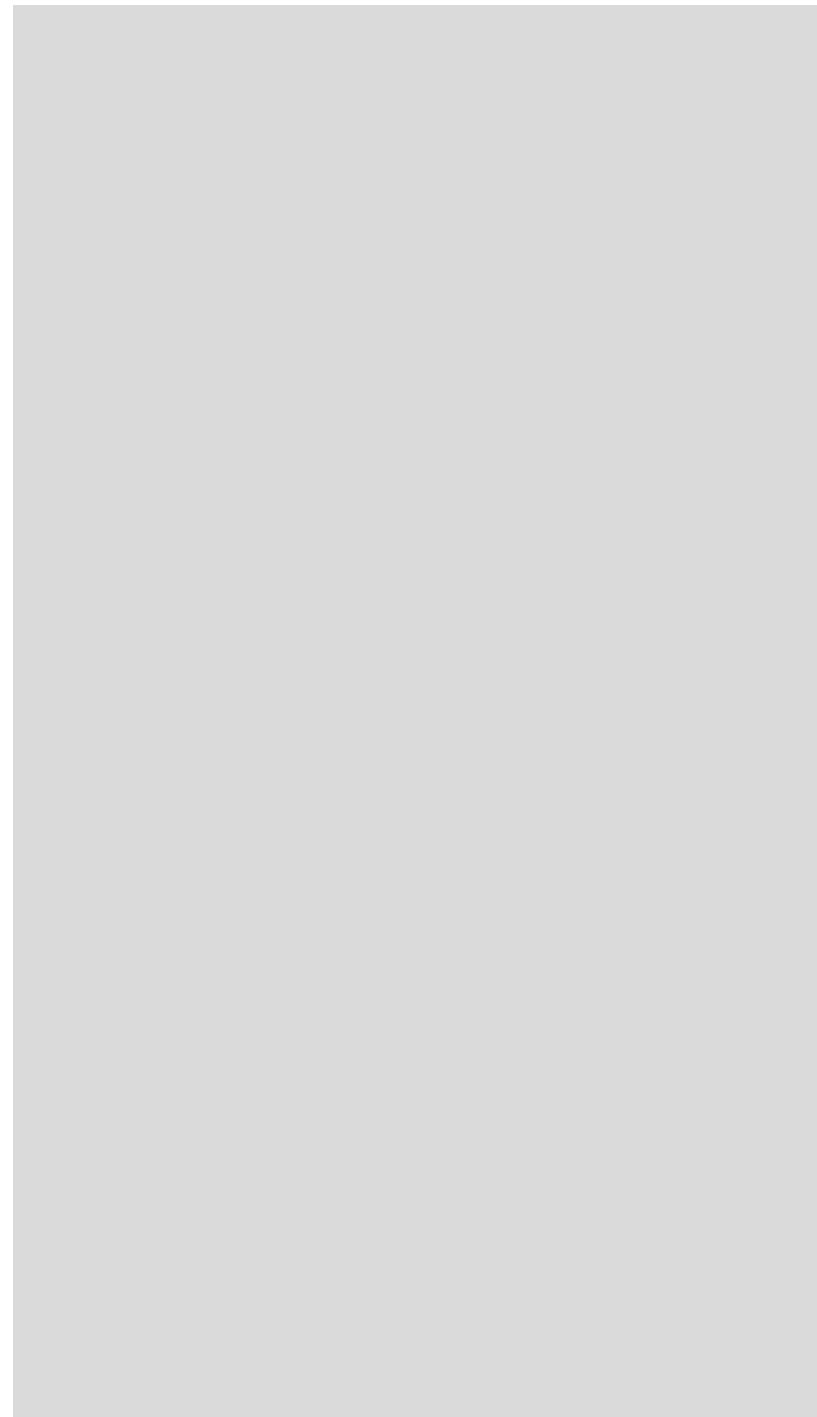
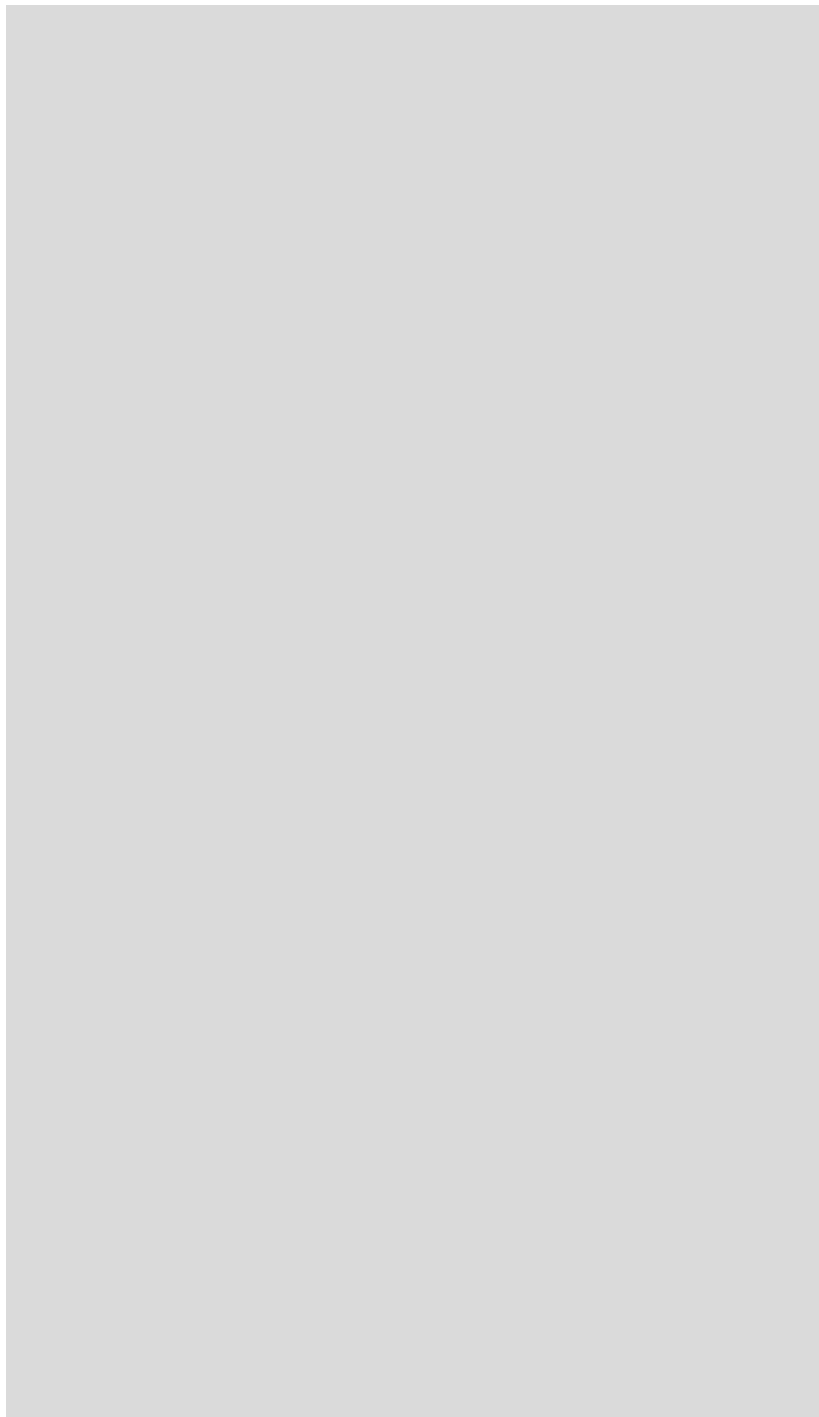


Fig. 5. A and B. Golden vase motif and its digital reconstruction. Photo: Peeter Säre, reconstruction: Kristjan Müil.

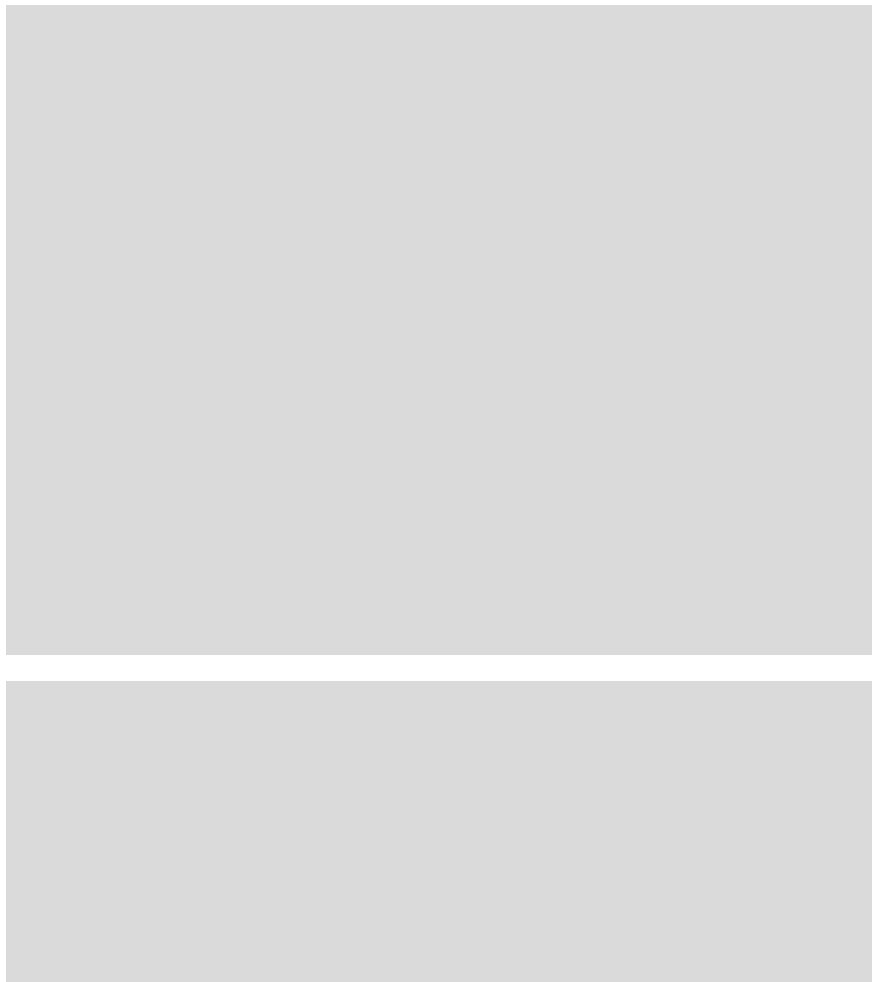


Fig. 6. A and B. Microscopic photo of a paint sample and the results of SEM-EDS analyses, which show a high concentration of Au (gold). Photos: Signe Vahur.

parts were produced with a free hand and with true virtuosity. The high content of gold in the golden tones, showing that real gold was used as pigment and not imitation materials, is another indication of the painting's high quality.⁸

⁸ XRF analyses (Dr. Riin Rebane, Estonian Environmental Research Centre) and SEM-EDS analysis (Dr. Signe Vahur, Chemistry Institute, University of Tartu) were used to identify the composition of the paint layer.

THE ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PAINTINGS

As has been repeatedly mentioned, only remnants of the original paintings have survived, and so it is difficult to imagine the complete image of the finishing. In any case, this is a very exceptional example of painting in the local Estonian context. While the authors of the manor's architectural design are not known, a splendid sense of style is at least discernible from the body of the structure itself. On the other hand, very little of the original interiors has survived, to say nothing of the products of the master builders.

Examples of comparable paintings from this period in Estonia are the paintings of a rather rustic nature on board walls or beams found in the Albu, Loodi and Esna manors. The nearest known interior in rococo style is at the Põltsamaa Castle, which has perished and where we can only rely on a few historical photographs. One of the finest ensembles was completed under the supervision of Major Woldemar Johann von Lauw in parallel with Õisu, and the best master craftsmen were recruited to build it. Additionally, the owners of both manors were related by marriage.⁹ The stucco master Johann Michael Graff¹⁰, who had previously worked in Rundale and Jelgava (Mitau) in the service of the Duke of Courland Ernst Johann Biron and worked together with Biron's court painter Friedrich Hartmann Barisien, who was mostly known as a portraitist, was invited to do the interior work at Põltsamaa.¹¹ While the early 1770s were the period when Graff and Barisien worked at Põltsamaa,¹² Gottlieb Welté, who became one of the most outstanding rococo and early classicist masters in the cultural space of the Baltic region, also arrived at Põltsamaa as a court painter in 1781. It is believed that at Põltsamaa, in addition to designing décor for porcelain, he also worked in large formats: some of the Põltsamaa Castle murals are thought to have been the work

⁹ Hein, *Õisu. Ühe Liivimaa mõisa ajalugu ja arhitektuur*, 50.

¹⁰ For more about Johann Michael Graff, see Imants Lancmanis, "Stukimeister Johann Michael Graff", *Eesti Kunstiajalugu 3* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2017), 52–57.

¹¹ Woldemar Vaga, "Das Schloss Põltsamaa, ein Denkmal der Kunst des 18. Jahrhunderts in Estland", *Sitzungsberichte der Gelehrten Estnischen Gesellschaft* (Tartu: K. Mattiesen, 1931); Ants Hein, "Mõisaarhitektuur 18. sajandi algul ja keskpaigas", *Eesti Kunstiajalugu 2*, (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2005), 249.

¹² Both artists worked in Põltsamaa in 1772–1774. See Anne Untera, *Maarjamaa rokokoo = Rokoko in Estland. Gottlieb Welté (1745/49–1792)* (Tallinn: Priton, 2007), 32.

of Welté.¹³ In 1791, his hall with *grisaille* composition was completed at the Lohu Manor. Additionally, Welté was closely associated with Hupel, the pastor at Põltsamaa, and Pistohlkors, the administrator of Rutikvere Manor, both of whom also had close ties to the Siverts family and Õisu Manor.¹⁴

Even though the parallels are only hypothetical, it is quite likely that the organisers of work being done at the same time at Põltsamaa and Õisu were very well informed of each other's actions and it is feasible that, in addition to their experiences, they also exchanged master builders. Stylistically and stratigraphically speaking, the paintings at Õisu appear to belong to the period immediately following the construction of the manor house, but considering the paucity of first-rate master artists who operated in Livland at that time, there are reasons to consider other possibilities.

The nearest surviving rococo interior, however, is located in Latvia in the Courland region, at Rundale, and perhaps there is reason to seek parallels in the construction history there as well. This is even more the case since the nearest visual analogies to the Õisu vase motif that have been found to date originate precisely from Rundale. Rundale Castle was completed in two stages under the supervision of Ernst Johann Biron, the Duke of Courland, who was a favourite of Russia's Tsarina Anna Ivanovna: the planning of a luxurious residence started in 1735 and extended into the 1740s according to drawings by Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli, and after the death of Anna Ivanovna, when Biron returned from his exile in Siberia from 1763 until his own death in 1772.¹⁵ It is the latter period in particular that interests us in the context of Õisu. This is when the stucco virtuoso J. M. Graff, who had studied in Berlin, worked at Rundale (and in Jelgava). This is also when the Italians Francesco Martini and Carlo Zucchi, who worked in St. Petersburg, were specially invited to cover Rundale's walls and ceilings with paintings, and Biron's court artist, the portraitist F. H. Barisien, worked there as a painter.¹⁶

13 Villem Raam associates them with Welté's name. See Anne Untera, *Maarjamaa rokokoo*, 30–32.

14 Hein, *Õisu. Ühe Liivimaa mõisa ajalugu ja arhitektuur*, 60.

15 Imants Lancmanis, *Rundāles pils. Vēsture I / Rundāle Palace. History I* (Riga: Rundāles pils muzejs, 2015), 87, 159.

16 *Ibidem*, 15; Rundales Palace, see: <http://rundale.net/en/the-palace/construction-history/> [viewed 26.10.2017].

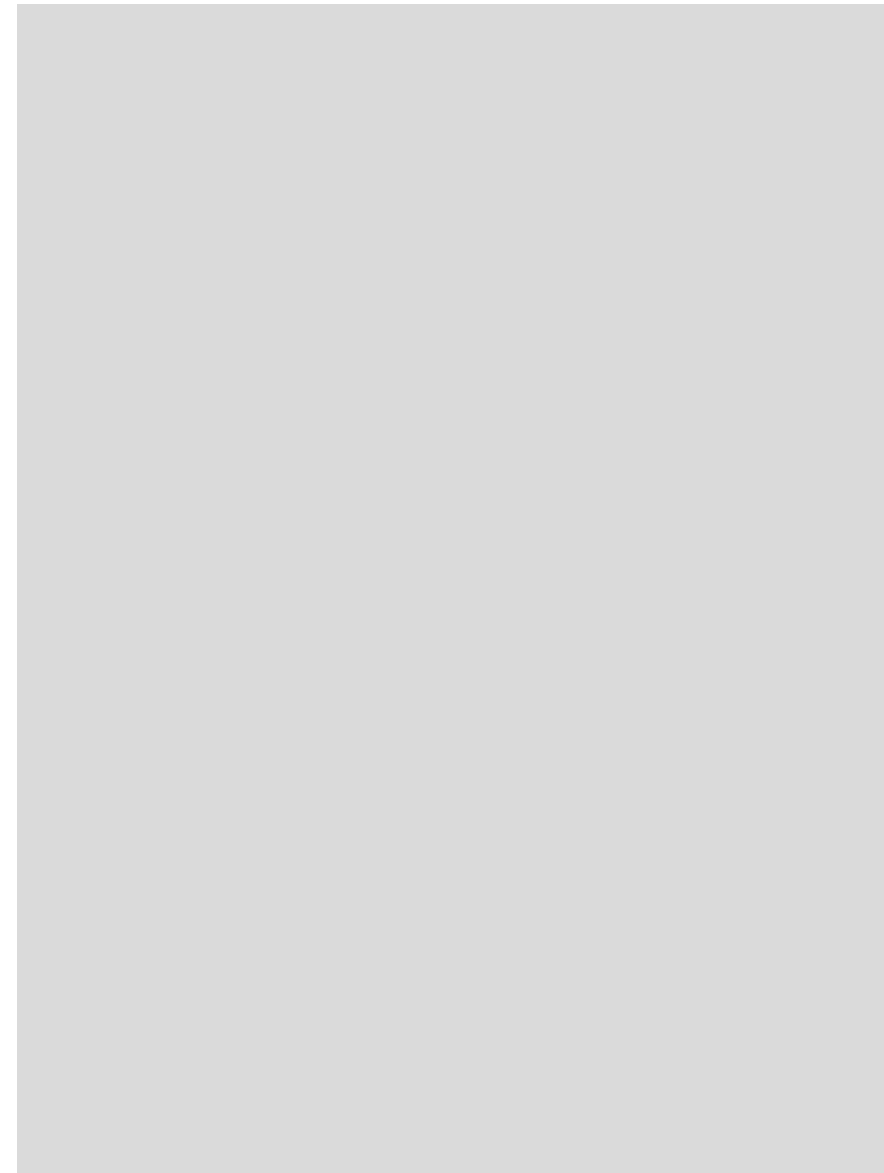


Fig. 7. Detail from the wall painting in the Grand Gallery (room 75) in Rundale Palace. Photo: Rundāles pils muzejs.

The nearest analogous detail to the Õisu vase motif executed as a painting originates from the Great Gallery at Rundale, and its *auteur* was Francesco Martini. The interior finishing of the gallery



Fig. 8. Golden Hall of Rundale Castle. Photo: Rundāles pils muzejs.

was completed in 1765–1768.¹⁷ As a complete composition, however, the image that can be discerned from the Õisu fragments resembles the Golden Hall of Rundale Castle. Here, as well, the wall surface is divided up into large panels extending from floor to ceiling and ending with rounded arches. The panels, in turn, are divided up by strips decorated with hanging garlands. The analogy in form between the vase motifs depicted within the panel fields in the Golden Hall at Rundale and the framing of the panels is obvious, the difference being that what is formulated here as three-dimensional gilded stucco is conveyed in Õisu as an illusory painting.

Rococo and an analogy with Rundale can also be seen in the pergola motif with grapevines that is preserved above the door on the south wall. Its preserved details were masterfully executed and implicitly bring to mind the ceiling decoration in the duchess's dressing room.

The dominant form of finishing in both Põltsamaa and Rundale is luxuriant three-dimensional stucco. There are no traces of the

¹⁷ Correspondence with Dr. Laura Lüse, Head of the Art Research Department at the Rundale Palace Museum (notes in the possession of the author).

existence of this at Õisu. The surviving fragments of the paintings speak more of the fact that the three-dimensional elements of the wall surfaces were achieved by way of illusory painting, not through actual three-dimensional stucco. It is no longer possible to identify how the original ceiling of the hall was formulated. The current ceiling design with paintings originates from an altogether later period, either the end of the 19th century or the outset of the 20th century.¹⁸

SUMMARY

Regardless of its fragmentary and ruined condition, the painting find described in this article provides a small reference to what existed in the interiors of the Õisu Manor and affirmation of the fact that, as expected, the interior design corresponds to the splendour of the manor's exterior form. The complete design of the room admittedly cannot be reconstructed on the basis of what has survived, yet the work of conservators has made it possible to read that which has survived. The analogies provided in the article and the imagination of the spectator make it possible for each individual to create his/her own picture of what the original whole of the spatial design once looked like.

¹⁸ A later ceiling painting was also uncovered beneath later covering layers during the conservation of the original murals. See the report *Õisu mõisa peahoone suure saali maalingute uuringud ja osaline avamine – konserveerimine*. Archive of the National Heritage Board, A-13144.

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KEYWORDS: MANOR HOUSE; WALL PAINTINGS; FRAGMENTS; ROCOCO
STYLE; CONSERVATION

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