

Hilkka Hiip, Anneli Randla

MEDIEVAL PAINTED SAINTS MEETING
MODERN MEDIA. PROJECT:
“RODE ALTARPIECE IN CLOSE-UP”

BACKGROUND

The retable of the high altar of St Nicholas' Church in Tallinn was made between 1478 and 1481 in Hermen Rode's workshop in Lübeck. It is one of the most magnificent and best preserved late medieval northern German altarpieces in Europe and one of the greatest masterpieces in the collection of the Art Museum of Estonia. The double-winged retable has painted outer wings and more than 40 polychrome sculptures in the interior.¹ It has been exhibited in its historical location since the Niguliste Museum was opened in 1984.

From 1975 to 1992, the retable was restored by the Research Institute of Restoration (ВНИИР) under the supervision of the then young but rapidly rising Russian conservator Nikolai Bregman.² Some of the work was carried out in Estonia (at first in St Olaf's Church, and later in St Nicholas'

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12697/BJAH.2014.7.08>

1 For the vast historiography on the retable, see e. g. Anu Mänd, “Symbols that bind communities: the Tallinn altarpieces of Rode and Notke as expressions of the local saints' cult”, *Art, Cult and Patronage. Die visuelle Kultur im Ostseeraum zur Zeit Bernt Notkes*, hrsg. von Anu Mänd und Uwe Albrecht (Kiel: Ludwig, 2013), 136–137; Anja Rasche, *Studien zu Hermen Rode* (Petersberg: Imhof, 2014), 19–27.

2 Николай Г. Брегман, “Подслонный рисунок в алтаре Хермена Родэ”, *Художественное наследие*, 8/38 (1983), 87–97; Николай Г. Брегман, “Исследование и реставрация алтаря Хермена Родэ”, *Художественное наследие. Сборник научных трудов*, ред. В. В. Зверев (Москва: ВНИИР, 1989), 104–125; Ольга В. Лелекова, “Полихромная скульптура. Реставрация позднеготических алтарей из Таллина”, *Сохранить для потомков. К 55-летию ГосНИИР 1957–2012*, сост. М. М. Красилин (Москва: Индрик, 2012), 58–63.

Church) but many details of the retable were taken to Moscow for restoration in the workshops of the institute. The long-lasting work could not be completed because of political changes in Estonia and Russia. The main body of the retable was finished; however, about half of the polychrome sculptures of the altarpiece remained unconserved. After more than twenty years, a new grand initiative was launched in 2013 to continue with the halted work. The first task was, and still is, to evaluate the methodology of the past work and to develop a concept for the present conservation. The conservation work goes hand in hand with a major research project in technical art history, with the aim of positioning the retable within the oeuvre of Hermen Rode's workshop, as well as within the wider framework of late medieval German art and culture.

The kick-off event of the project was a five-day intensive workshop on topics related to wooden polychrome objects.

WORKSHOP: "QUESTIONS OF CONSERVATION.
POLYCHROME WOODEN SCULPTURES OF THE HIGH
ALTAR RETABLE OF ST NICHOLAS' IN TALLINN"

An Estonian Graduate School of Culture Studies and Arts intensive workshop was organised by the Department of Conservation and Cultural Heritage of the Estonian Academy of Arts, and the Niguliste Museum of the Art Museum of Estonia in Tallinn, in November 2013.

The need to organise the intensive workshop stemmed from the intended continuation of the conservation work on the high altar retable of St Nicholas', and from the necessity of discussing contemporary conservation principles among wider academic and professional audiences.

The main course was led by Dr Arnulf von Ulmann, the former director of the Institute of Art Techniques and Conservation of the German National Museum. Dr von Ulmann has long-standing connections with Estonia, having been the scientific head of the international project for



Fig. 1. Workshop “Questions of Conservation. Polychrome wooden sculptures of the high altar retable of St Nicholas’ in Tallinn” in November 2013. Dr Arnulf von Ulmann, the eminent German conservator of polychrome sculpture, assessing the state of conservation of the retable sculptures with students. Photo Villu Plink.

the conservation of the coat of arms epitaphs in the Tallinn Cathedral from 1992 to 2008.³

Dr von Ulmann’s lectures during the morning sessions were dedicated to the different aspects of polychrome wooden object conservation. His first lectures dealt with technical art history, a discipline in which conservators play a crucial role. He discussed the methods and tools used for woodcarving, based on the evidence from written sources, surviving historical tools and marks on the sculptures. He introduced a recent study of the polychrome finishes on the late medieval figure of St George from Nuremberg, examining the different gilding, silvering and glazing techniques used, as well as more traditional paints. This study was supplemented by a careful 3D modelling of the sculpture and

3 On this conservation project, see Arnulf von Ulmann, “Denn sie sind Gotte ein Gräuel... Die Wappen der Tallinner Domkirche. Ein Erfahrungsbericht zur Konservierung”, *Spannungsfeld Restaurierung: Jubiläumsschrift zum 40jährigen Bestehen der AdR*, hrsg. von Rolf Wihr (Kirchzarten-Zarten: Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Restauratoren, 1996), 147–162; Ene Tromp, “Conservation of the coat-of-arms epitaphs at Tallinn Cathedral”, *Estonian Cultural Heritage: Preservation and Conservation*, 1 (2013), 84–86.

its polychrome layers, which exemplify the possibilities of both the research and the articulation of the results of this research.⁴

The second major topic of the course was the use of mixed media in medieval sculpture. Drawing on a vast corpus of sculptures from all over Europe, Dr von Ulmann demonstrated the different functions of secondary materials used in connection with wooden and stone sculptures, ranging from the application of real precious stones and metal ornaments to aids for better rendering of such fine details as the hair or veins on Christ's legs. He also presented a special case study on works from Bernt Notke's workshop in regard to the use of mixed media.⁵

The third strand of the lectures was dedicated to the exposition and lighting conditions of the medieval museum objects on permanent display, paying attention to the hidden sources of damage, as well as to the enormous opportunities and drawbacks of modern technology in this field. Dr von Ulmann also led a lengthy discussion on the use of LED light in museums.⁶

The practical workshops in the afternoons were dedicated to the study of the high altar retable of St Nicholas'. The theoretical discussions of these sessions concentrated on the question of how past conservation decisions influence present and future decisions ethically, aesthetically and methodologically.

The importance of continuity in conservation processes is obvious, so Nikolai Bregman was invited to share his knowledge and experience in the work with the retable, as well as his more recent conservation work in Russia.

4 On St George's project, see Arnulf von Ulmann, "The Virtual Reconstruction of Mediaeval Polychromy", *Circumlitio: The Polychromy of Antique and Medieval Sculpture*. Proceedings of the Johann David Passavant Colloquium, 10–12 December 2008, ed. by Vinzenz Brinkmann, Oliver Primavesi, Max Hollein (Frankfurt am Main: Liebighaus Skulpturensammlung, 2010), 382–392.

5 Arnulf von Ulmann, "Das Repertoire der Fremdmaterialien in Notkes Werkstatt", *Art, Cult and Patronage*, 208–215. On the use of mixed media, see also Grazia Maria Fachechi, "Varietas delectat: towards a classification of mixed-media sculpture in the Middle Ages", *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art & Architecture*, 3 (2011), 2, 162–177.

6 For general topics, see *Anti-Aging für die Kunst: Restaurieren - Umgang mit den Spuren der Zeit*. Eine Lesebuch anlässlich der Ausstellung vom 1. April – 1. August 2004, hrsg. von Arnulf von Ulmann (Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2004). On LED light, see Steven Weintraub, "Comments regarding LEDs and the risk to light sensitive materials" (April 28, 2010) http://www.connectingtocollections.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/LEDanalysis_SteveWeintraub.pdf (retrieved on 14 March 2014); Arnulf von Ulmann, "Neues Licht im Museum: Licht als Schadensquelle", *Restauro* 117 (2011), 8, 48–53; Tina Naumović, "Verwendung von LED-Technik in der BSV" (Februar 2012) http://www.schloesser.bayern.de/deutsch/ueberuns/rz/download/LED_BSV.pdf (retrieved on 14 March 2014).

It became apparent from the discussions of the practical workshops between Arnulf von Ulmann, Nikolai Bregman and the participants that the work done in the 1970s and 1980s was at an extremely high professional level but, considering the changes in conservation tools, materials and methodological opportunities, it also became clear that the past work had to be supplemented by new technical studies, as well as by contemporary conservation methodology.

More than fifty participants from the Estonian Academy of Arts, Tartu University, the Art Museum of Estonia, the Conservation Centre Kanut, and the Estonian National Museum contributed to the workshop.

PROJECT: "RODE ALTARPIECE IN CLOSE-UP"⁷

Focussing on the Rode altarpiece from the aspect of conservation was the starting point for a major research project with the aim of contextualising the retable in the wider circle of 15th-century art and getting closer to the creative working methods of Hermen Rode's workshop.

The wider goal of the project is to map, test and develop the capacity and resources in Estonia for scientific (instrumental) investigation of art works through the combination of technical and more conventional art historical research.

In addition to the conservation and research aims, the project is intended to popularise this field and to find ways of presenting to the wider public activities which are mainly hidden behind the closed doors of museums.

Each of the three fields of action – conservation, technical investigation and documentation – have specific (research) activities, didactic output for professionals in the form of workshops led by international specialists and awareness-raising events for the general public.

CONSERVATION

The conceptual conservation principles worked out by the team of Nikolai Bregman in the 1970s and 1980s – the preserving of a thin layer of patina when cleaning the details of the retable and excluding any reconstructions – are still valid in contemporary conservation thought. However,

⁷ See <http://www.nigulistemuuseum.ee/en/niguliste-exhibitions/on-view/rode-altarpiece-in-close-up> (retrieved on 14 February 2014).

the conservation methods and materials used for these works need to be revised. The aggressive and carcinogenic solvents have been replaced by less harmful ones. To intensify their impact, solvent-based gels have been developed recently whereby stronger contact with the surface to be cleaned is achieved but the solvent cannot penetrate into the original paint and ground layers. Thus the unwanted effect of the solvent on the interior structure of the object is eliminated, and the desired effect of intensified impact on the secondary layers on the surface is achieved.

The above-mentioned workshop provided the necessary input for starting the long process of completing the halted conservation work, and provided the opportunity to open up this specific field to the general public. Since late 2013 visitors to the Niguliste Museum have been able to observe the active conservation workshop behind the main altar, the workshop being structured as an interactive exhibition, providing the context of the retable and explaining the work carried out on it. The visitor can follow the actions of the conservators in close-up via cameras and through texts.

TECHNICAL INVESTIGATION

The conservation work also provides the starting point for large-scale investigations of the materials and techniques used in producing and conserving the retable. The aim is to carry out spot and surface analyses of the object using the broadest possible range of methods available in contemporary technical art history. The aim of these studies is to better understand the working methods used for producing art in late fifteenth century Germany and in particular in the workshop of Hermen Rode. This information can be compared with data available on other works attributed to the same workshop.

The wider goal of these investigations is to map, bring together and test the Estonian research capacity in this field through the study of one art work. Both academic research centres and institutions whose activities involve the technological instruments that can be used for conservation are included. For example, in co-operation with the Estonian Environmental Research Centre the pigment component analysis was carried out by the XRF method. About 500 tests have provided a fair overview of the chemical elements present in all the paint layers all over the



Fig. 2. Technical investigation of the altar retable. Hembo Pagi, an expert in imaging technology, carrying out UV studies of the painted panels with a multispectral camera in April 2014. Photo Villu Plink.

retable. In co-operation with the Estonian Tax and Customs Board, the x-ray analysis of the retable has been started: a prerequisite for these investigations was a portable x-ray device large enough to cover the object.

Bearing in mind the aim of raising awareness as one goal of the project, all such actions are recorded on video and presented as short films with explanations. These can be viewed both on site in the museum and on the project's webpage.

METHODS OF DOCUMENTATION

Today, in the field of cultural heritage contemporary IT solutions play an increasing role in the preservation, research and popularising of heritage assets. In Estonia, this field is relatively young and underdeveloped; the few cases in which IT has been used are inconsistent and mainly known to the small circle of specialists in archaeology or building conservation. In connection with this project, wide-ranging activity has been launched, where through a single museum object the different IT solutions are analysed and tested which in the future could be applied more broadly in museums and heritage preservation.



Fig. 3. The conservation studio is set up in the Niguliste Museum behind the altar and is open to the public. The research and conservation team led by Hilkka Hiiop investigating the sculptures in April 2014. Photo Villu Plink.

To contextualise, visualise and add value to the technical and art historical research, it is planned to assemble the data gathered during the technical studies of the Hermen Rode retable into a unified documentation format, using ever-evolving imaging techniques. The huge retable (approx. 6 x 3.5 m) combines two- and three-dimensional art (painted wings and polychrome sculptures) and can be exhibited in different positions, thus offering an exemplary case study for wider analysis of documenting and mapping this type of object through different 3D modelling methods and imaging techniques.

CONCLUSION

The project “Rode Altarpiece in Close-Up” combines a wide range of activities involving three interrelated fields – conservation, technical investigation and documentation – which are aimed at different target levels and groups: the study and conservation of the retable, the dissemination of professional know-how to specialists through workshops, and awareness-raising activities for the general public.

HILKKA HIIOP, ANNELI RANDLA: MEDIEVAL PAINTED SAINTS MEETING MODERN MEDIA. PROJECT: "RODE ALTARPIECE IN CLOSE-UP"

KEYWORDS: HERMEN RODE'S ALTAR RETABEL, POLYCHROME WOODEN SCULPTURE, TECHNICAL ART HISTORY, CONSERVATION, DOCUMENTATION

SUMMARY:

The retable of the high altar of St Nicholas' Church in Tallinn was made between 1478 and 1481 in Hermen Rode's workshop in Lübeck. It is one of the most magnificent and best preserved late medieval northern German altarpieces in Europe and one of the greatest masterpieces in the collection of the Art Museum of Estonia. From 1975 to 1992, the retable was restored by the Research Institute of Restoration, but the work was not completed.

In 2013, the works were continued and the project "Rode Altarpiece in Close-Up" was launched. The conservation work coincides with a major research project in technical art history, with the aim of positioning the retable within the oeuvre of Hermen Rode's workshop, as well as within the wider framework of late medieval German art and culture.

The wider goal of the project is to map, test and develop the capacity and resources in Estonia for scientific (instrumental) investigation of art works through the combination of technical and more conventional art historical research.

The kick-off event of the project was a five-day intensive workshop on topics related to wooden polychrome objects. The need to organise the intensive workshop stemmed from the intended continuation of the conservation work on the high altar retable of St Nicholas', and from the necessity of discussing contemporary conservation principles among wider academic and professional audiences. The course was led by Dr Arnulf von Ulmann, the former director of the Institute of Art Techniques and Conservation of the German National Museum. Dr von Ulmann's lectures were dedicated to the different aspects of polychrome wooden object conservation from the manufacturing and decorating to the decay and preservation of the art works. The practical workshops were dedicated to the study of the high altar retable of St Nicholas'. The discussions of these sessions concentrated on the question of how past conservation decisions influence present and future decisions ethically, aesthetically and methodologically.

CV:

Hilkka Hiiop (PhD) is head of the Conservation Department in the Art Museum of Estonia as well as being responsible for the contemporary art conservation in Kumu Art Museum. She is also assistant professor at the Estonian Academy of Arts, Department of Conservation. Her PhD thesis (2012) treated the conservation management of contemporary art. She has worked as a conservator of mural paintings in Rome 2003–2009, supervised a number of conservation and technical investigation projects in Estonia, curated exhibitions on topics of conservation and technical art history. Her current research, conservation and exhibition project is titled “Rode Altarpiece in Close-Up”.

Anneli Randla earned her PhD in art history at the University of Cambridge in 1999. She has worked for the National Heritage Board of Estonia for ten years. Since 2008 Randla has been an associate professor in the Department of Conservation at the Estonian Academy of Arts and currently she serves as the dean of the Faculty of Art and Culture at the academy. Her main research interests are: medieval ecclesiastical architecture, medieval murals, technical studies of art and the history of conservation.