

Merike Kurisoo, Krista Andreson

BOOK REVIEW

*IMAGES AND OBJECTS IN RITUAL PRACTICES IN MEDIEVAL
AND EARLY MODERN NORTHERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE.*

EDITORS KRISTA KODRES, ANU MÄND.
CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHERS, 2013.

A little more than a year ago, in October 2013, *Images and Objects in Ritual Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Northern and Central Europe*, a collection of articles edited by Krista Kodres and Anu Mänd, was published by Cambridge Scholars Press. The collection is comprised of the material presented at the fourth conference dedicated to art historian Sten Karling that took place in Tallinn in autumn 2012.

The conferences in memory of Sten Karling, who was Professor of Art History at the University of Tartu before World War II and at Stockholm University after the war, have been held every four years starting in 1999. This is the only regular international conference initiated by Estonian (and Baltic) researchers that focuses on the legacy of medieval and early modern art.¹ The conferences, which have taken place at the initiative of Professor Krista Kodres from the Estonian Academy of Arts, have focused on Sten Karling and the reception of his research topics. If the first conference was dedicated to Karling himself and the subjects related to the examination of medieval and early modern art in the Baltic

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1 In addition, one could also mention the Böckler-Mare-Balticum-Stiftung's *Homburger Gespräche* with its very strong network (<http://www.boeckler-mare-balticum-stiftung.de/index.php/de/homburger-gespraech>, viewed 10.11.2014) and the Scandinavian iconography symposiums (*Nordiska Ikonografiska Symposiet*) that have taken place since 1968, the last of which, the 24th in the series, took place in Tallinn in August 2014.



Fig. 1. Sculpture of Sten Karling's head (Ernst Jõesaar, 1960s), Department of History, University of Tartu. Photo: Juhan Maiste.

Sea region at that time, then at the second and third meetings, the focus was Classicism and ecclesiastical art respectively. The fourth conference, which is summed up by this collection, focuses on rituals in the medieval and early modern period and the images and objects related thereto.

In connection with the Karling conferences, one should definitely mention that a collection of articles in English or German has been published each time within a year and a half of the conference.² The three

2 *Art and the Church: Religious Art and Architecture in the Baltic Region in the 13th–18th Centuries*, ed. Krista Kodres and Merike Kurisoo (Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2008); *The Problem of Classical Ideal in the Art and Architecture of the Countries around the Baltic Sea*, ed. Krista Kodres, Piret Lindpere, and Eva Näripea (Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2003); *Sten Karling and Baltic Art History*, ed. Krista Kodres, Juhan Maiste, and Vappu Vabar (Tallinn: Academy of Sciences Publishers, 1999).

earlier books have been published as a series by the Estonian Academy of Arts, with Krista Kodres as the editor-in-chief with excellent book design by Andres Tali. Apparently, something had to be compromised in order to be published by a foreign publisher, since the format and design of the fourth book is more modest. Being publicised outside of Estonia has many advantages: wider distribution in the diaspora of art historians and historians, a better known foreign publisher and higher value in the system of scientific publishing. On the other hand, there is a risk that the publication will disappear among all the other collections of articles related to history and art history, and at the same time, not reach the consciousness of specialised readers in Estonia³. Thinking about the tradition and excellent reputation of the Karling conferences, it is a shame that, in addition to the change in format, the only reference to the fact that the publication is part of a series related to the Karling conferences is a footnote in the introduction written by the editors.

If, in addition to Sten Karling, the art and cultural space around the Baltic Sea is the theme that links the first three conferences and collections, then in the fourth collection, we see a broader geographical dimension along with more theoretical and summarising approaches. If on the first two occasions, Baltic (primarily Estonian and Latvian) and Scandinavian (Swedish, Finnish) authors predominated among the circle of writers for the Karling conference compendiums, at the past two conferences, more and more Central and Western European researchers have been included. If the stars of the 2006 conference were Thomas DaCosta Kauffman, Professor of Art History at Princeton University and Professor Sergiusz Michalski, from the University of Tübingen, then the fourth conference, and also the collection, is characterised by a strong even quality.

The "Introduction" to the collection of articles under examination provides a thorough and theoretical framework, which directs attention to the topical nature and meaning of the subject matter in today's research landscape. The recurring theme of the collection is "ritual action"; theorizing on ritual as a performative act is not the goal in any of the articles, but priority is given to the examination of the function, meaning and use of images and objects in ritual practices in both the private and public

³ This is confirmed by the fact that there are only a few copies in Estonian libraries, which are mostly intended for reading on site.

sphere. The depiction of certain ceremonies in works of art is also dealt with, thereby shedding light on the ritual nature of the works. In this context, ritual is a so-called “behavioural” act (human and metaphysical, pre-planned or improvised), which, in addition to the visual, often has a verbal component (song, prayer, speech, hagiographic or other text). “Rituals speak with many voices”, which is why aspects that cannot be interpreted unequivocally can still be considered to be a part of rituals (for instance, private devotional practices). Therefore, the reader is inevitably faced with the question of what criteria should be applied in order to interpret visual objects as alluding to rituals. The information that is stored in visual objects (in both the direct and indirect sense) in combination with textual sources can provide us with new knowledge or references to the image, which were valid in society. However in some cases, when some aspects are lacking, this may unavoidably be left hanging in the air and disconnected from the complete picture.

Although the topics under consideration are divided by three subtitles, the division is conditional in the theoretical sense – an amalgamation of the various categories and blurring of boundaries appears first in the categorisation of the items as sacral and secular, and their meaning in the both the ecclesiastical and secular space. On the other hand, the instruments for examining the objects and topics are also intermingled; these studies are multidisciplinary, which is typical of contemporary science, or as the editors say transdisciplinary – “it is difficult to draw a boundary between pictorial and visual culture studies and performativity studies”.

However, the question arises why the editors call this positioning and approach to the subject an experiment, “even a provocation”.⁴ Both the introductory text, as well as the bibliographies supplied by the co-authors, demonstrate throughout that the idea of objects and images as “co-actors” is not new – ritual studies appeared unannounced in various domains starting in the 1970s, and as of the 1990s, such “performative turns” can be increasingly encountered in the context of the relationships of ritualism and visual objects that interest us. Before and after the Karling conference took place and the collection was published, collections or individual research papers on the topic of “art and ritual”

4 Krista Kodres, Anu Mänd, “Introduction”, *Images and Objects in Ritual Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Northern and Central Europe*, 1.

have been produced by Scandinavian, Eastern and Central European authors or been created with their participation.⁵ Thus, it could be said that in the 21st century, “ritual studies” in combination with “visual culture studies” have become one of the most popular research trends in the Humanities for the researchers of the Middle Ages and the early modern period, among others.⁶

On the publisher’s website it is emphasised that a complex study of these phenomena in Northern and Central Europe is being undertaken, which also includes regions that “due to linguistic or cultural barriers, have thus far received comparatively little attention in Anglo-American scholarship, including Scandinavia, Poland and the Baltic states”. Perhaps, in order to understand the editors’ experiment, we should primarily keep in mind the dearth of similar treatises for the aforementioned regions. Although there is really no reason to talk about a research boom based on a conscious analysis of the relationships between ritual practices and medieval and early modern period visual objects, one cannot

5 For example, there is the series initiated by Brepols Publishers called *Ritus et Artes: Traditions and Transformations*. The Centre for the Study of the Cultural Heritage of Medieval Rituals, based at the University of Copenhagen, publishes this series. Before the Karling conference, the following had already appeared in this series: *Creations: Medieval Rituals, the Arts, and the Concept of Creation*. Ed. By Sven Rune Havsteen, Nils Holger Petersen, Heinrich W. Schwab. *Ritus et Artes: Traditions and Transformations*, vol. 2. (Brepols, Turnhout, 2007); *The Medieval Cathedral of Trondheim: Architectural and Ritual Constructions in Their European Context*. Ed. by Syrstad Andås, Margrete, Øystein Ekroll, Andreas Haug, and Nils Holger Petersen. *Ritus et Artes: Traditions and Transformation*, vol. 3. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007). For a survey of the book, see: Charlotte A. Stanford, *The Medieval Review*, 08.04.12 (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/3631> , viewed 10.11.2014);

In 2000, a joint conference on an analogous topic took place in Poland with the participation of Polish and British researchers, where the individual presentations also dealt with the medieval and early modern period: *Art, Ritual, Religion: Proceedings of the Fifth Joint Conference of Art Historians from Britain and Poland, Warsaw, 7th to 9th June 2000* (Warsaw: Institute of Art of the Polish Academy, 2003); Also, the following edited by Gerhard Jaritz one of the authors of this collection: *Ritual, Images and Daily Life: The Medieval Perspective*. Ed. By Gerhard Jaritz (Münster: Lit, 2012).

6 Of the East European researchers, special mention should be made of the publications by Monika Jakubek-Raczkowska, Professor of Art History at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń during the last few years: Monika Jakubek-Raczkowska, “Between the Ideology of Power and Lay Piety. Visual Arts in the State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia (from the Late Thirteenth to the Middle Fifteenth Century)”, *Sacred Space in the State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia*, ed. by Jarosław Wentka, Magdalena Kopczyńska. *Sacra Bella Septentrionalia II* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013), 181-208; Monika Jakubek-Raczkowska, “*Tu ergo flecte genua tua*”. *Sztuka a praktyka religijna świeckich w diecezjach pruskich państwa zakonu krzyżackiego do połowy XV wieku* (Pelpin 2014).

Another example of a scientific event on this topic is the conference that took place in May of 2014 in London called “The Art and Ritual. Object, Image and Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe”, which also had the goal bringing material and ceremonial research (see: <http://arthist.net/archive/7614>, viewed 10.11.2014).

deny the existence of such approaches in research practices to date.⁷ However, the collection under discussion should be recognised as the first comprehensive and groundbreaking endeavour on the east coast of the Baltic Sea.

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She studied art history at the Estonian Academy of Arts and University of Tartu. She is currently writing her PhD thesis at the Institute of History of the Tallinn University. Merike Kurisoo's research focuses on medieval and early modern church art.

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Krista Andreson is a research fellow in the Department of Art History at the University of Tartu. She has studied art history at the University of Tartu, at the University of Kiel (Germany), as well as held shorter academic residencies in Leipzig and Greifswald. From 2003 to 2010,

⁷ Helen Bome, Kersti Markus, "Karja kirik – kõige väiksem "katedraal"", *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi=Studies on Art and Architecture* 4 (14), 2005, 9–46 (Summary: Karja Church – the smallest "cathedral", 47–51); Anu Mänd, *Kirikute hõbevara. Altaririistad keskaegsel Liivimaal*. Eesti kirikute sisustus I (Tallinn: Muinsuskaitseamet, 2008) (Summary: Church Silver: Liturgical Vessels in Medieval Livonia); Merike Kurisoo, *Ristimise läte. Ristimiskivid keskaegsel Liivimaal*. Eesti kirikute sisustus II (Tallinn, 2009) (Summary: Medieval Baptismal Fonts in Livonia).

Andreson was a research fellow at the Niguliste Museum (Art Museum of Estonia). Her main area of research is medieval ecclesiastical art and she has published several research papers on the medieval wooden sculptures 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".