

Hilkka Hiio, Reet Pius

THE STORY OF THE ALTARPIECE OF ST PETER'S CHURCH IN KÕPU

When you are travelling from Pärnu, St Peter's Church in Kõpu parish comes into view about twenty kilometres before Viljandi. The first chapel in Kõpu was built under the orders from the Swedish government in 1674, in 1780 it was replaced by a new wooden building. In forty years it became so dilapidated that in 1821 construction started on the stone church, in February 1825 a decision was made to finish the doors, windows and tower in the summer.¹ In that fatal year, the lord of the manor Alexander Gottlieb von Stryk (1787–1845) became widowed and his Suure-Kõpu manor burnt down, after which the family moved to Viljandi, and it is not known whether any progress was made on the Kõpu church. In 1836, he married Amalie Helene Auguste von Maydell (1814–1843) in Viljandi and started building a new house in Suure-Kõpu. Unfortunately, marital bliss only lasted for seven years and the second-time widower Alexander Georg Gottlieb himself died in 1845. His son Heinrich Otto Alexander von Stryk (1839–1903) went to live in Suure-Kõpu in 1864 and began designing the interiors of the manor.² As the Head of Kõpu Parish Church Government, he started busying himself at the church as

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1 Johann Tischler, 'Kõpu kirik 100 a. vana', *Oma Maa* (September 1925), 2.

2 Juhan Maiste, 'Balti mõisapanteon', *Eesti kunsti ajalugu*, 3: 1770–1840 (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2017), 3, 285–286.



FIG. 1. KÕPU CHURCH. PHOTO: PEETER SÄRE



FIG. 2. ALTARPIECE OF KÕPU CHURCH *LET THE CHILDREN COME TO ME* AND THE ALTAR WALL AFTER CONSERVATION. PHOTO: HILKKA HIIOP, 2022.

well.³ Just as Suure-Kõpu Manor surprises with its Pompeii-style murals, the church also has something in store.

The smallish east wing of the Kõpu Church is adorned by a magnificent altar wall, designed like a temple, in the centre of which there is the painting *Let the Children Come to Me*, or alternatively *Jesus is Blessing the Children* (Mt 19, 13–15; Mk 10, 13–16; Lk 18, 15–17). The subject of the painting, illustrating the Holy Scripture, is one of the central images of the Protestant artistic language, which was created by a friend of the reformist Martin Luther, artist Lucas Cranach the elder who produced over twenty paintings on the topic. The Enlightenment idea of Jesus as a teacher again brings this subject

³ National Archive of Estonia [Rahvusarhiiv, RA], EAA.1289.1.6, 2–3; in 1867 he signed a deal with organ builder Friedrich Knauff for building the organ for Kõpu Church.



FIG. 3. HENRY MOSES, *CHRIST SHOWING A LITTLE CHILD AS THE EMBLEM OF HEAVEN*. AFTER BENJAMIN WEST (1811). THE BRITISH MUSEUM, [HTTPS://WWW.BRITISHMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTION/IMAGE/1229269001](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1229269001) [ACCESSED 15/12/2022].

into focus at the end of the 18th century and it also interests female artists, a trailblazer amongst whom is Angelika Kauffmann.

The author of the Kõpu painting has recognisably used as an example an engraving made after the British artist Benjamin West's original painting *Christ Showing a Little Child as the Emblem of Heaven* (1790).⁴ West's composition was reproduced in thousands of copies, both as single prints and as book illustrations. Art historian Sirje Simson has dated the Kõpu painting to the end of the 19th century,⁵ based on the information collected during fieldwork by theology student Johann Ekbaum, where the first mentions of the altarpiece are from 1890.⁶

To some degree that dating was also supported by the fact that the altarpiece and altar wall are not planned as a unified whole. The painting is like a foreign body that has been planted on the wall by accident but does not quite fit there. It seems that the picture that was acquired later has been hung on the wall, which is why their scales do not harmonise.

The colour gamma of the Kõpu painting is bright, the brushwork glazing, contours of the figures sharp and mode of depiction idealising. The piece has a clear-skyed aerial perspective, which was invented by the Renaissance painters. That Raphael-inspired Nazarene mode of depiction characterises the Kõpu Church altarpiece.⁷

On the other hand, Jesus is depicted generically here and his facial features lack character. In addition to West's central image, the artist has also cited *Madonna della Tenda*⁸ from Raphael's oeuvre and *Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* (1833)⁹ by Friedrich Overbeck. Side figures, especially the women on the left are depicted in the classicistic

4 *Christ Showing a Little Child as the Emblem of Heaven* (1790, oil, canvas, 70 × 50.5 cm, private collection), <https://www.wikiart.org/en/benjamin-west/christ-showing-a-little-child-as-the-emblem-of-heaven-1790> [accessed 15/12/2022].

5 *National Registry of Cultural Monuments*, <https://register.muinas.ee/public.php?menuID=monument&action=view&id=19828> [accessed 15/12/2022].

6 University of Tartu Library [Tartu Ülikooli raamatukogu], TÜR.55.3.48, Johann Ekbaum, *Ülevaade Kõpu koguduse elust (Overview of the life of the Kõpu congregation)* (1668, 1680, 1693, 1713, 1728, 1731, 1937, and based on the 1925 Kõpu Church Chronicle), 25.

7 The Nazarene painters are German artists who were practising in Rome; out of this circle of friends grew the Brotherhood of Saint Luke. Their sources of inspiration were the artists of the Italian Renaissance, and they mainly depicted the life of Jesus and Bible legends, but also tales from the German folk tradition. Their ideas and manner of depiction spread across Europe in the first half of the 19th century.

8 Ferdinand Piloty, *The Holy Family / Madonna della Tenda...* (ca 1820–1844, lithography), <https://www.muis.ee/museaalview/106892> [accessed 15/12/2022].

9 Art Collection of the University of Tartu Library [Tartu Ülikooli raamatukogu kunstikogu], ÜR 2715, Otto Speckter after J. F. Overbeck, *Christi Einzug in Jerusalem*.

idealising manner, but there is also evidence of attempts at portraiture in there.

In Estonian, Latvian and Finnish Lutheran churches this was a rather rare subject for an altarpiece, and the artworks may be counted on two hands: in Estonia¹⁰ a painting on the altar of Esku chapel (1845), bought from Johann Carl Koch in Germany; in Kärđla a painting by Johann Behse (1858), who mainly worked in St Petersburg but had family ties in Estonia; in Latvia in Talsi Church (1823)¹¹ by Johann Samuel Benedict Grune; painting in Ērberģe Church (1855)¹² by one of the most prolific authors of Latvian altarpieces Julius Döring, and the altarpiece of Liepupe Church, finished in 1783, which is undated and anonymous, similarly to the Kõpu painting. From Finnish churches we know of four altarpieces, three of which are by Robert Wilhelm Ekman in Helsinki Old Church (1848), Uusikaupunki (1863), Räsäla Church (1873) in Karjala,¹³ and by Berndt Godenhjelm in Vyborg Church (1850), and also a panel painting by an unknown artist in Kiuruvesi Church (1837).

On the east shore of the Baltic Sea, this subject dates to the 1840s–1860s. The dating of the Kõpu painting to the turn of the 20th century did not fit in at all with the connoisseur's intuition nor with the family legend accompanying the painting, according to which next to Jesus on the painting there is the second wife of the lord of the Kõpu manor Alexander Georg Gottlieb von Stryk – Amalie Helene (Nelly) von Maydell, and their three daughters and son and Alexander Georg's two adult daughters from his first marriage. The legend is accompanied by the conviction about the painting's authorship, which is attributed to artist Friedrich Ludwig von Maydell (1795–1846), based on familial relations.

10 The list does not contain paintings that were in the possession of the Russian Orthodox Church or public institutions, but it is worth mentioning that at the end of the 19th century Theodor Albert Sprengel made one painting (1891) for the Orthodox Church of Estonia in Tallinn and another for the Nicholas I Reval Gymnasium (currently Gustav Adolf Grammar School), which is located in the Tallinn City Museum [Tallinna Linnamuuseum], TLM 14060 G 1621.

11 The painting is located in the parsonage of Talsi Church. *Latvijas luterāņu baznīcas: vēsture, arhitektūra, māksla un memoriālā kultūra: enciklopēdija četros sējumos = The Lutheran churches of Latvia: history, architecture, art and memorial culture*, vol 4 (Rīga: Due, 2007), 163.

12 According to a letter dated 12th December 2022 from Baiba Vanaga, head of the Art Research Department at Rundāle Palace Museum, the altar painting from Ērberģe Church is not in their collection.

13 It is currently located in Kokemäki Church, <http://www.raisala.fi/raisalainen/2011/raisju11.html> [accessed 15/12/2022].

Would a creator such as Maydell painstakingly copy an author he is unfamiliar with?

We know of five altarpieces by Maydell, four of which have survived: *Jesus on the Mount of Olives* (1835) in Saarde Church; *Calvary* (1836–1837) in Rūjiena (Ruhja) Church;¹⁴ *Resurrection* (1845) in Põlva Church and *Christ Blessing* (1846), which was made for Vastseliina Church¹⁵. The panels made for St John's Church in Tartu in 1833–1837, *The Crucified with Mary, John and Two Women* and *Kiss of Judas*, were destroyed in World War II. All of his altarpieces are on a wooden panel and unsigned.¹⁶ This may be explained by Maydell's conviction as an earnest Herrnhuter that God does not dwell in a man-made house.¹⁷ Leaving his works unsigned, he was simply a tool in God's hands. The board he chose as a base for his painting is also explained by this way of thinking, as it symbolises a firm ground under God's feet.

The Kõpu painting is on canvas, which separates it from Maydell's altarpieces, with the lack of signature being the only common feature.

In autumn 2021, restorations started on the Kõpu Church altarpiece, which afforded a rare opportunity to obtain answers to questions through technical studies.

The central question of the technical research on the unsigned and questionably dated painting was its temporal position and possible author. As an initial hypothesis, both the beginning, middle and end of the 19th century were considered as possibilities.

Consequently, the research questions and methodology were set as follows:

- is it possible to identify dateable pigments?
- could the underdrawing provide clues to the author or era?

To obtain answers to the research questions, in order to identify pigments and binders, pXRF analyses¹⁸ were undertaken (17

14 Jānis Kalnačs, *The Heritage of Religious Architecture and Art in Valmiera District* (Rīga: Neputns, 2010), 95.

15 Currently located in the EELC Jõgeva Congregation building in Aia st 7, Jõgeva (Estonia).

16 Yet Maydell has obviously signed 'L.v.MAYDELL Fec 1838.' *Portrait of Virgil* (1838). Art Museum of Estonia [Eesti Kunstimuuseum], M 678, <https://www.muis.ee/museaalview/249209> [accessed 15.12.2022].

17 Voldemar Ilja, *Vennastekoguduse (herrnhutluse) ajalugu Eestimaal (Põhja-Eesti)* (Tallinn: Allika, 2010), 9.

18 p-XRF or portable X-ray fluorescence analyser, which helps to identify the elemental consistency of materials. Research was conducted by Riin Rebane, PhD (Estonian Environmental Research Centre).



FIG. 4. THE PAINTING IN THE PROCESS OF REMOVING A LAYER OF DARKENED VARNISH. DETAIL OF PAINTING (JOHN'S HEAD). PHOTO: HILKKA HIIOP, 2022.

measurements) and three samples were taken from the painting for instrumental studies, which were analysed by the SEM-EDS and ATR-FT-IR¹⁹ methods. In addition, canvas fibres were analysed. Of imaging studies, photographs in visible, infrared and ultraviolet light were taken (the aim of the latter was to obtain supporting information for the conservation process).²⁰

19 SEM-EDS – scanning electron microscopy-energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy; ATR-FT-IR – attenuated total reflectance - Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy. Research was conducted by Signe Vahur, PhD (Institute of Chemistry at the University of Tartu).

20 Research was conducted by Andres Uueni (Estonian Academy of Arts).

Based on the results, we can say that the artwork was painted on linen canvas, which is the classical support of paintings till the end of the 19th century. In the ground layer of the painting the main components were identified as lead white, barium sulphate and oil. Barium sulphate is a white pigment²¹ that was widespread from the end of the 1820s, which was used as a classical component of pre-primed canvases. The makeup of the identified primer corresponds to the 19th century tradition.²²

The bright colours of the painting have been achieved by the layered stratigraphy of different shades. To achieve a yellow final hue, the surface has been first covered by green, then pink and finally a thin layer of yellow paint. The use of different blue pigments is curious: layered combination of Prussian blue, cobalt blue and artificial ultramarine. Evidently the artist's goal was to achieve a sensitive and nuanced finish by the combination of these pigments, which also indicates the artist's skilful knowledge of the technique.

From the point of view of the posed research question (the temporal position of the painting), the most interesting results stemmed from the discovery of two pigments in the paint layer: artificial ultramarine and Naples yellow.

The invention of artificial ultramarine is dated to 1827/28, after which France and Germany promptly started producing it. As early as in the 1830s it made its way into the product lists of art supplies manufacturers and from there to the artists' palettes.²³ However, it entered mass production only in the middle of the 19th century, conquering the blue colour market particularly as a house paint colour.²⁴ From that time, we can already see blue building façades and interiors. It is a cheap blue pigment of superb colour properties, which solved the centuries-long problem of blue tones – until then the artists had had access to either very expensive (lapis lazuli or natural ultramarine, but also a slightly cheaper azurite) or problematic (smalt,

21 *Artists' Pigments. A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol 1, comp. by Robert L. Feller (Washington: National Gallery of Art, Archetype, 1986), 50, 61.

22 David Bomford, Jo Kirby, John Leighton, Ashok Roy, *Art in the Making. Impressionism* (London: The National Gallery, 1990), 48.

23 E.g. Winsor & Newton in 1832 (both as watercolour and oil paint), Roberson & Co in 1835. See *Artists' Pigments. A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol 2, comp. by Ashok Roy (Washington, D.C.; New York: National Gallery of Art; Oxford University Press, 1993), 57.

24 Francois Delamare, *Blue Pigments. 5000 Years of Art and Industry* (London: Archetype: 2013), 233–234.



FIG. 5. MICROSTRATIGRAPHY OF THE LAYERED STRUCTURE OF THE PAINTING: NAPLES YELLOW OR ANTIMONY YELLOW APPLIED ON TO GREEN AND PINK UNDERPAINTING (CROSS-SECTION OF THE YELLOW GARB OF THE WOMAN CENTRE ON THE LEFT). PHOTO: SIGNE VAHUR, 2022.

Prussian blue) blue pigments, which is why the artificial ultramarine spread like wildfire among both painters and decorators.

The use of Naples yellow or antimony (Sb) based yellow pigment, found in Jesus's nimbus, ends with the discovery of new yellow pigments (chrome yellow in the second decade of the 19th century, cadmium yellow in the 1840s). New, cheaper pigments with better colour properties quickly push the fussy Naples yellow aside and its usage ends in the middle of the 19th century, although singular uses of it can be found later, too.²⁵

The finding of those two pigments gives us ground to assume that the painting could date from the third or fourth decade of the 19th century. We can assert that the painting cannot belong to a period earlier than the 1830s, which is indicated by the occurrence of artificial ultramarine and barium sulphate.

Based on the art historical and technical analysis, we venture to date the painting to the first half of the 19th century, which is

25 Bomford, Kirby, Leighton, Roy, *Art in the Making. Impressionism*, 69; Roy, *Artists' Pigments*, vol 1, 219.

supported by the family story that has reached us. It is likely that the painting was commissioned by Alexander Georg Gottlieb von Stryk, but it was installed in Kõpu Church by his son Heinrich Otto Alexander von Stryk. However, we had to erase the other half of the story and refute Maydell's authorship.

Even more importantly, the history of Estonian church art is now enriched by another artwork created in the first half of the 19th century, and the results of the pigment and other analyses carried out are the fingerprints for new associations.

HILKKA HIIOP, REET PIUS: THE STORY OF THE ALTARPIECE OF ST PETER'S CHURCH IN KÕPU.

KEYWORDS: ALTARPIECE; LUTHERAN CHURCH; FAMILY LEGEND; CONSERVATION; TECHNICAL STUDIES; 1840s

CV

Hilkka Hiiop (PhD) is Professor at the Estonian Academy of Art, Department of Cultural Heritage and Conservation and Dean of the Faculty of Art and Culture. Her PhD thesis treated the conservation management of contemporary art. She has studied and worked as a conservator in Berlin, Amsterdam and Rome, supervised a number of conservation and technical investigation projects in Estonia, curated exhibitions, and conducted scientific research on conservation and technical art history.

Reet Pius (née Rast, b. 1964). Her current research subject is the Lutheran ecclesiastical art of the Enlightenment in Estonia and Livonia. Previously, she studied the church art of the Early Modern period. From 1987 to 1995, Pius was head of the Painting and Polychromy Department at the Conservation Centre Kanut; from 1995 to 2009, the Coordinator of Research Work at the Art Museum of Estonia. Pius is a co-author of *History of Estonian Art 2* (2005) with the topic 'Altarpiece – Lord's Table and object of prestige. Altar Art in Estonia during the Early Modern Period'. Pius has curated exhibitions, edited monographs and exhibition catalogues, and collaborated on ICOM's dictionary of museology.

