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Editorial address:

Baltic Journal of Art History
Institute of History and Archaeology
University of Tartu
Ülikooli 18
Tartu 50090
Estonia

e-mail: kunstiajakiri@ut.ee

webpage: <http://ojs.utlib.ee/index.php/bjah/>

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FOREWORD

This special issue of the *Baltic Journal of Art History* delves into medieval art, with a particular focus on the interconnected realms of artists, objects, and places. This thematic choice reflects two key developments. First, it highlights the recent publication of volumes on medieval art as part of the multi-volume series *History of Estonian Art* and *Art History of Latvia*, released in 2023 and 2024 respectively. Second, it acknowledges the ongoing shifts in how medieval art is defined and studied, emphasizing the potential of international and multidisciplinary approaches to enrich our understanding of this dynamic field.

The necessity of international scholarly collaboration in medieval and Renaissance art research can be clearly illustrated through the case of Michel Sittow (c. 1469–1525). Born and buried in Tallinn (formerly Reval), Sittow pursued an illustrious career across European courts, serving in Castile, Denmark, and the Habsburg Low Countries. While his life and activities in Tallinn have been well-documented – leaving little expectation of uncovering new evidence in the city archives – his engagements abroad, particularly in Spain and Denmark, remain underexplored and ripe for further investigation. Sittow’s cross-border career highlights the inherently international nature of his life, a trait mirrored in the scholarship dedicated to uncovering his legacy.

In this issue, a joint article by Oskar J. Rojewski (Poland) and Mette Birkedal Bruun (Denmark) breaks new ground by addressing the concept of privacy in the life of a court painter, a largely neglected subject in art history. Through their study, the authors shed light on Sittow’s professional movements between courts and his responsibilities as a court painter. They pose compelling questions regarding the nature of his access to rulers, particularly whether proximity to power extended to sensitive or confidential information. This nuanced exploration of Sittow’s role not only enriches our understanding of his artistic career but also opens broader discussions on the intersections of art, politics, and personal agency in the medieval period.

In recent decades, the definition of medieval art and visual culture has expanded significantly. The recently published volumes on Estonian and Latvian medieval art histories reflect this broader understanding,

incorporating chapters that draw extensively on archaeological finds, including jewellery, coins, textiles, various artefacts, and remains of buildings. The Estonian volume, for instance, includes a notable chapter on boundary stones adorned with images or inscriptions. Objects such as these, often considered ‘marginal’ in earlier times, would not have been included in traditional art historical studies of the 20th century. Today, however, the interconnectedness of medieval art and material culture studies is widely recognized, alongside the imperative for collaboration between art historians, archaeologists, historians, theologians, numismatists, and experts from other academic fields.

Two exemplary studies included in this issue, authored by Kaspar Kolk and Ivar Leimus, demonstrate the value of multidisciplinary approaches. Kaspar Kolk’s research focuses on Gothic bookbinding, a topic that has received scant attention in Estonia, particularly regarding the existence of local workshops. Kolk analyzed a corpus of approximately two hundred decorated Gothic bindings housed in Tallinn and identified at least twenty five that were likely produced locally. Through his meticulous study of motifs, patterns, and techniques, he uncovered evidence pointing to the presence of several distinct bookbinding masters. Kolk’s work contributes not only to a deeper understanding of manuscript and book production but also highlights the significance of book covers as both functional objects and works of art.

Ivar Leimus, a distinguished Estonian numismatist, investigates the visual and symbolic design of late medieval coins, emphasizing their role as instruments of political propaganda. He focuses particularly on the largest and most visually striking type of coin – the double thaler – minted for Bishop of Tartu, Jodokus von der Recke. By examining minute marks on the coins, Leimus identifies the mint masters and demonstrates how the coins’ designs were intricately tied to the bishop’s lofty position and political ambitions. His study underscores the dual role of coins as currency and as a medium for communicating authority and intent through visual means.

These studies exemplify the enriched perspectives that arise when medieval art is examined through the lens of interdisciplinary research, blending aesthetic, material, and socio-political dimensions. By expanding the focus to include diverse objects and contexts, they underline the evolving scope of medieval art history and its engagement with material culture studies.

Prof. Anu Mänd, guest editor

Articles

