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FIRST COMPREHENSIVE SURVEY OF MEDIEVAL ESTONIAN VISUAL CULTURE

Eesti kunsti ajalugu 1, 1100–1520 [History of Estonian Art 1, 1100–1520], ed. by Kersti Markus. Authors: Arvi Haak, Ants Hein, Indrek Jets, Villu Kadakas, Eero Kotli, Merike Kurisoo, Ivar Leimus, Kersti Markus, Marika Mägi, Anu Mänd, Riina Rammo, Anneli Randla, Erki Russow, Kaire Tooming, Heiki Valk. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2023, 544 pp. With an English summary, pp. 501–536.

Large syntheses serve as milestones of collective knowledge, ideally summarising the best available expertise in a given field at a specific point in time. As such, they offer, on the one hand, the broader educated readership an accessible way to engage with accumulated specialist knowledge. On the other hand, large syntheses present a valuable opportunity to assess the development of knowledge within the field over a more extended period.

The first volume of the new *History of Estonian Art*, covering the period from c. 1100 to c. 1520, convincingly demonstrates the significant advancements made in the study of Estonia's late prehistoric and medieval art in recent decades. When we open the previous analogous collection, the first volume of the *History of Estonian Art*, published in 1975¹, it quickly becomes evident that

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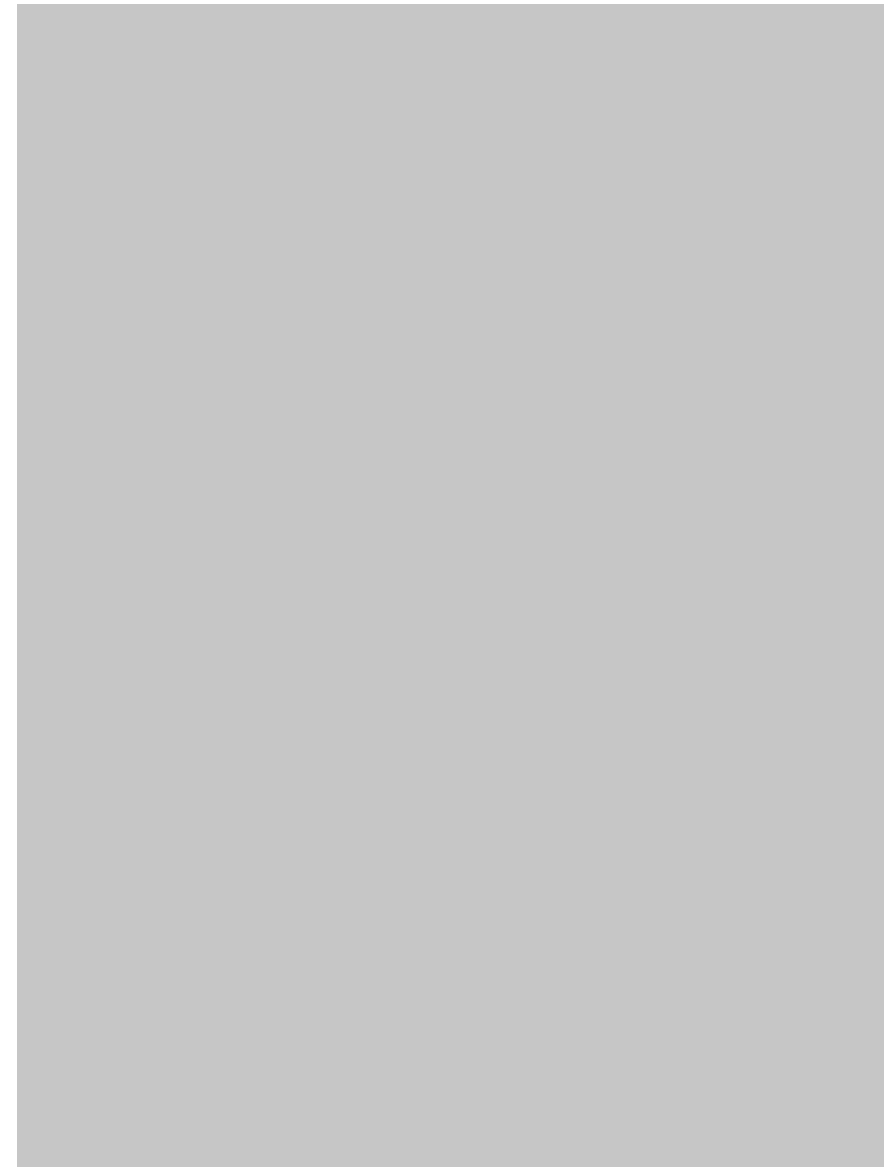
¹ *Eesti kunst kõige varasemast ajast kuni 19. saj. keskpaigani*, vol. 1, ed. by Irina Solomõkova (Tallinn: Kunst, 1975).

the overlap between the two books is minimal. Whereas the earlier volume is style-centric, encompassing the entire medieval period under the general concept of Gothic (with distinctions made between transitional styles with Romanesque influences, High Gothic, and Late Gothic), the new volume adopts a functional categorisation, examining in turn the main environments of artistic creation (the country and village, the castle and manor, the town, the church, and the monastery). In this regard, the new volume has been modelled on the second, early modern volume of the same series, published in 2005, and edited by Krista Kodres.

The most apparent difference lies in the scope and depth of the treatment. While the 1975 volume managed to cover prehistoric and medieval art within 72 pages (with an equivalent amount dedicated to illustrations), the new volume spans over 500 pages. In light of this new comprehensive work, the previous one appears almost like a brief sketch, where numerous topics are merely touched upon without reaching any substantial analysis. Notably, while the earlier volume, in the spirit of classical art history, focused only on architecture, painting, and sculpture (with an emphasis on the first), along with a slight nod to so-called applied arts, the new book explicitly positions itself within the broad field of visual culture studies. It covers a range of artefacts including jewellery, weapons, burial grounds, clothing, everyday objects, boundary stones, coats of arms, seals, coins, and more.

The greatest distinction, however, lies in the methodological approach: the Soviet-era volume was distinctly formalist and descriptive, focusing on stylistic developments with the primary aim of identifying external influences on local art. In contrast, the collective volume edited by Kersti Markus presents itself as a study of medieval visual and material culture, emphasizing a multifaceted reconstruction of the historical visual environments. Buildings, images, and objects are examined within their original socio-cultural context; local material is interpreted within a broader international comparison, but not merely through the lens of borrowing. Bold new interpretations are proposed, and different disciplinary perspectives are interwoven.

This new work is the result of collaboration among 15 co-authors, which significantly differentiates it from its predecessor, where three authors covered the same historical period. It is telling that in the new project, art historians are in a slight minority, with six contributing



members compared to seven archaeologists, complemented by a ceramist and a numismatist. Nevertheless, the bulk of the volume was still written by art historians; Kersti Markus's contribution is the most extensive, including the introduction, an overview of conventual castles, a substantial portion of the chapter on churches, and insights

into Cistercian and Brigittine monastic architecture (some co-authored). She is followed by Anu Mänd, who wrote overviews on stone sculpture, masters and the art market, church furnishings, liturgical vessels and utensils, church bells, commemorative art, coats of arms, and boundary stones. Together, they have authored over a third of the entire volume. Villu Kadakas is another principal author, responsible for part of the overview of manor architecture, as well as subchapters on the formation of towns, urban defences, townhouses, and rural churches. The overview of late prehistoric visual culture is primarily written by Marika Mägi, with additional contributions by Indrek Jets on late prehistoric craftsmanship, jewellery, and ornamental styles, and by Riina Rammo on late prehistoric clothing. Other contributors include Heiki Valk, who wrote subchapters on medieval village architecture and sacrality in rural space, and the jewellery and clothing of village folk; Arvi Haak, who covered medieval castles; Anneli Randla, who contributed overviews of church wall and vault paintings and mendicant architecture; Merike Kurisoo, who contributed overviews of wooden sculptures and baptismal fonts; and Ivar Leimus, who wrote chapters on seals and coins.

Despite the large number of contributors, the book forms a cohesive whole. Transitions between chapters are relatively smooth, with minimal content overlap (although a few examples are repeated two or three times). Each author speaks with their own voice, making it easy to distinguish them (for instance, some are more speculative, like Kersti Markus or Marika Mägi, while others are more matter-of-fact and descriptive, like Villu Kadakas or Erki Russow, some rely more on scholarly language, like Anu Mänd, while others use more figurative speech, like Ants Hein). Nevertheless, the overall impression is one of a reasonably unified group of voices. The cohesion of the work is likely aided by the long-standing collaborative experience of most authors, but the editor's role in unifying the texts should not be underestimated. The volume is generally well-edited, though there are occasional inconsistencies in terminology (e.g., *kerjusordud* vs *kerjasmungaordud*, *Saksa ordu Liivimaa haru* vs *Liivimaa ordu*, *Vene-Liivimaa sõda* vs *Liivimaa sõda*, *Olavi gild* vs *Oleviste gild*, etc.).

The book is based on fundamental research conducted over the past few decades, drawing on a substantial body of dissertations, monographs, and articles authored by both the contributors to this volume and many of their colleagues. It is fair to assert that many

of the topics addressed in this volume could not have been explored with such depth fifteen or even ten years ago. In this regard, it must be acknowledged that the long gestation period has only benefited the quality of the outcome.

The book is illustrated with a large number of high-quality colour photographs. As these are unnumbered and no separate list of illustrations is provided, I am unable to give an exact figure, though it likely approaches a thousand. While reading, I regretted the missing references to the illustrations within the text, which would have facilitated their association. I also expected more detailed captions; very often, for instance, the dates of the artworks are missing, and in some cases, it would have been relevant to include the time of photographing. The current locations of the artworks are mentioned rather haphazardly. On a positive note, the volume is equipped with relatively extensive references (pp. 465–500), which is rather exceptional for such large syntheses.

Let it be said immediately that I do not consider myself competent to discuss the specific interpretations of the authors or to correct any potential errors. Therefore, I will focus mainly on broader, particularly methodological and conceptual issues in what follows.

I will start with the issue of periodisation. Based on the book, one might ask: when does the history of Estonian art actually begin? Is the chosen time boundary of 1100 of significant relevance, or merely an arbitrary choice? It seems to be more of the latter, as one could easily argue for covering the entire visual and material culture of the Iron Age, i.e., from the 6th century BC to the early 13th century AD, and then proceeding from there. The Iron Age offers ample material for study, including jewellery and clothing (such as brooches, pins, breast chains, beads, pendants, neck rings, bracelets, finger rings), as well as household utensils and everyday objects (such as pottery, metal, wooden and bark vessels, knives, combs).² Similarly, it would not be impossible to trace the history of Estonian art back to the Stone Age (c. 9000–1800 BC), as recently suggested by Aivar Kriiska and Irina Hrustaljova in their article on Estonian Stone Age ceramic figurines.³

² For an overview, see Andres Tvaari, *The Migration Period, Pre-Viking Age and Viking Age in Estonia*. Estonian archaeology, 4 (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2011).

³ Aivar Kriiska, Irina Hrustaljova, 'Eesti kunsti lätetel: kiviaegne keraamiline pisiplastika', *Horisont*, 3 (2022), 20–23.

The book under review begins with a promising full-page image of the most famous archaeological find of recent years: the gold bracelet from the 3rd century AD discovered in 2019 in Saaremaa. However, this find is not discussed separately in the book; the accompanying caption explains, “The find shows that there are treasures underneath the ground that were not known to be associated with Estonia. Much is yet to be discovered about prehistoric visual culture.” (p. 14). Indeed, once the broad concept of visual culture is accepted, it allows one to step outside the normative framework of classical art history and include in the research those traces of the past’s visual and material environment that usually do not make it into art history. However, it is clear that any large synthesis must be based on the existing state of research, and it is reasonable to agree with the editor that, until recently, Estonian archaeologists have been rather sluggish in studying prehistoric visual culture. Thus, a more daring chronological approach to Estonian art history must await better times.

Nonetheless, one of the greatest achievements of this book is the thoughtful integration of the work of archaeologists and art historians, thereby boldly expanding the range of sources considered. This is certainly not easy, given the disciplinary habits in terms of writing style, terminology, and research methods. Furthermore, there are differences in periodisation, considering that Estonia has developed a relatively clear division of labour, where all pre-written past has been left to archaeologists to research and periodize, while historians, including art historians, begin their research with the early 13th century, i.e., the period of conquest and Christianisation, which also marks the birth of local written culture. This different disciplinary tradition of periodising the past is also evident in the volume in question, where some authors, led by the editor, prefer to speak in more figurative language of “muinasaeg” (prehistory) in general or “hilismuinasaeg” (late prehistory) more specifically, usually without specifying its chronological boundaries. In contrast, the chapters written by archaeologists feature often their usual period names such as the Iron Age (including the Middle and Late Iron Age), the Viking Age (including the Pre-Viking Age), the Migration Period, and so on. Thus, in archaeological terms, the first part of the book deals with the period that the most recent synthesis of Estonian prehistory calls the “Late Iron Age” (1050–1200/1250 AD).⁴

4 *Eesti ajalugu I, Eesti esiaeg*, ed. by Valter Lang (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Ajaloo ja Arheoloogia Instituut, 2020), 15–17. See also Valter Lang, Aivar Kriiska, ‘Eesti esiaja periodiseering ja kronoloogia’, *Eesti Arheoloogia Ajakiri*, 5 (2) (2001), 83–109.

However, I would encourage historians to propose a historical periodisation to complement the archaeological one, following international models. For instance, the period from around 500 to around 1000 could be called the Early Middle Ages in Estonia, the period from around 1000 to around 1300 the High Middle Ages, and the period from around 1300 to around 1500 the Late Middle Ages. Therefore, the next overview of the early history of Estonian art could cover the period from around 500 to around 1500, and this could be called the history of Estonian medieval art (or visual culture). I believe that such a periodisation would have a stimulating effect on Estonian historiography, including art historiography.⁵

Given that the volume aims to bridge the gap between “prehistoric” and “medieval” periods, one of its central themes is the question of discontinuity and continuity. Traditionally, the crusades of the late 12th and early 13th centuries are regarded in the region as a major socio-cultural rupture, marking the beginning of a new era – the Middle Ages. However, recent work by both historians and archaeologists increasingly demonstrates that rupture is only one side of the coin, and we must not underestimate the other side – continuity, traces of which can be found in many spheres of life, from everyday culture to power structures. It is also worth emphasising that many changes commonly associated with the conquest are in fact part of a broader process of transformation that all European societies underwent in various ways from the 13th century onwards.⁶ The first volume of the *History of Estonian Art* rightly underscores the importance of continuity in early Estonian visual culture, showing that many developments we usually associate with the conquest had their origins earlier, such as contacts with Christianity and relations with neighbouring peoples. Similarly, pre-conquest traditions persisted well into the Middle Ages, particularly in rural society. As a side note, if we are to emphasise continuity and cultural entanglements (see pp. 19–36), it might be an overstatement to draw a clear distinction between our “ancestors” (*esivanemad*) and “colonists” (*kolonistid*) as is done in the book’s introduction (p. 15), since from a 21st-century perspective it is quite difficult to determine

5 I thank my colleague, Professor Anti Selart (University of Tartu), with whom I came to this idea during a joint discussion.

6 This point is nicely emphasised and demonstrated by a recent edited volume, *Baltic Crusades and Societal Innovation in Medieval Livonia, 1200–1350*, ed. by Anti Selart. The Northern World, 93 (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

how much of our ancestry is rooted in ancient forebears versus post-conquest colonists and settlers.

Kersti Markus rightly notes that although the title of the book refers to art history, the concepts of “art” and “artist” were unknown in prehistoric and medieval times (p. 16). Therefore, she has chosen to use the umbrella term “visual culture”, encompassing all the objects, images, and buildings from the past that are discussed in the book. When the first volume of the new *History of Estonian Art*, edited by Krista Kodres and covering Early Modern art, was published in 2005, I commented in my review that, while the book was otherwise excellent, it could have benefited from focusing more on visual culture than on art. I also suggested that, in the future, a new and comprehensive synthesis could be written with the title *The History of Estonian Visual Culture*.⁷ Nearly twenty years later, the first volume in the series, released as the most recent instalment, largely fulfils those hopes, as it seeks indeed to move beyond the conceptual framework of modern art history and draws on the broader terminology of visual culture studies. The book clearly explains the relationship between art and craft in the Middle Ages, as well as the key role of patrons and sponsors in shaping the iconographic message of artworks and in disseminating new visual ideas. Images and objects in the book are not analysed in isolation or solely from aesthetic criteria, but within their original functional contexts and practical or performative uses. As previously mentioned, the discussion moves from one living environment to another, from villages to castles, manors, and towns, and then on to churches and monasteries. This approach is well justified and works effectively; however, it does steer the focus primarily towards architectural history, resulting in buildings receiving the most attention in the book. It also does not favour a comprehensive treatment of visual environments, as, for example, churches and monasteries are considered separately from the urban environment, despite playing a key role in the urban landscape of the time. The chosen book structure compels the consideration of church architecture apart from its furnishings – altars, altarpieces, sculptures, and liturgical vessels – which does not support a better understanding of the church as an integrated visual environment. Personally, I would have liked to see more attention paid to image culture, such as the wall and vault paintings of churches, which are

7 Marek Tamm, ‘Kuidas kirjutada kunsti ajalugu?’, *Vikerkaar*, 9 (2005), 105–108.

currently compressed into just six pages (pp. 376–381), even though we know that the interiors of churches were likely among the most visually rich environments in medieval times. The current structure also does not favour a comprehensive treatment of the visual culture of specific organisations; for example, it would have been fascinating to read a comprehensive overview of the visual culture of the Teutonic Order in Livonia. However, the material is now divided among the architectural analysis of the conventual buildings, the discussion of the stone capitals of Viljandi Castle, and the short presentation of the material culture of castles.

The relationship between visual and material culture would have deserved more attention in the introduction, as it is not always easy to grasp how this relationship is understood in the book. Although the concept of visual culture is emphasised from the first pages, a large part of the chapters is actually devoted to the analysis of material culture.⁸ It is true that distinguishing between these two is difficult because visual culture is generally also material, but they should not be conflated, as this would diminish the heuristic value of these concepts. The editor emphasises to the point that visuality was important in the Middle Ages because sight was highly valued, and considering that the majority of the population was illiterate, visual communication was generally much more effective than written communication. But how should we assess the importance of materiality in medieval society? In what ways did objects shape the life-world and values of that time? This is a topic that has received much attention in recent medieval studies and would have been welcome in the study of medieval Estonian art as well.⁹

Although the book brings a wealth of new information into circulation and is by far the most comprehensive and systematic overview of early Estonian art, I will conclude with some observations on what a demanding reader might still wish to find in the book. I was surprised that there is no mention of medieval manuscript culture, or what

8 This fact was also pointed out by the previous reviewer of the book, see Elina Räsänen, ‘Wide Horizons of Medieval Art’, *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi*, 33/1–2 (2024), 261–265.

9 Let me mention here just a few of the most important and popular studies: Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011); Elina Gertsman, Barbara H. Rosenwein, *The Middle Ages in 50 Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Deborah Deliyannis, Hendrik Dey, Paolo Squatriti, *Fifty Early Medieval Things: Materials of Culture in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2019).

might be loosely termed medieval book art. If one opens any general history of European medieval art, illuminated manuscripts usually hold a significant place. These are virtually absent from this book (the only brief mention is a miniature from the front page of the St. Canute Guild's copy of the statutes, p. 171, dated to c. 1486, yet even this image is not discussed at length). It must be acknowledged that very few illuminated medieval manuscripts have survived in Estonia, but this makes the few remaining examples all the more worthy of attention. For instance, the 1975 volume of the *History of Estonian Art* included a colour reproduction of a miniature from the opening page of a 1282 parchment codex of Lübeck law¹⁰, whereas the new book omits this image. While the two royal figures depicted in the miniature have traditionally been considered the donors of the codex, Queen Margaret Sambiria of Denmark and her son, Eric Klipping, Tiina Kala has rightly suggested that they are more likely allegorical figures symbolising the administration of justice.¹¹ Among the codices and manuscript fragments in the Tallinn City Archives, there are several other visually intriguing finds, even though most of these drawings or decorations were not made in Estonia. For example, there is a miniature of a scribe with a quill and penknife from the manuscript fragment of the *Book of Baruch* from the Old Testament (c. 14th century, TLA f. 230, n. 1, s. BO 27 I). Or the miniatures from the late 14th or early 15th century fragment of an antiphonary (TLA, f. 230, n. 1, s. BO 27II).¹² In one 13th–14th century parchment codex, there is a drawing of the genealogical tree of Jesus (TLA, CM 4, fol. 71v). The grammar and logic notebook of a Tallinn Dominican, David Sliper, from the early 16th century is an intriguing visual work in itself, containing various drawings and scribbles, including the so-called Porphyrian Tree, a hierarchical diagram attributed to the Greek philosopher Porphyry (TLA, Cm 11, fol. 155v).¹³ In addition, the Estonian History Museum holds a collection of medical and astrological texts from the 14th–16th

10 *Eesti kunst kõige varasemast ajast kuni 19. saj. keskpaigani*, fig. 165.

11 Tiina Kala, *Käsitöökirjaline raamat Eestis* (Tallinn: Tallinna Linnaarhiiv, 2008), 120.

12 Anu Mänd, 'Loomad kunstis', Juhan Kreem, Ivar Leimus, Anu Mänd, Inna Põltsam-Jürjo, *Loomad keskaegse Liivimaa ühiskonnas ja kunstis* (Tallinn: Tallinna Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2022), 123–124, fig. 6.4.

13 A thorough analysis of Sliper's notebook is offered by Tiina Kala, *Euroopa kirjakuultuur hiliskeskaegsetes õppetektides: Tallinna dominiiklase David Sliperi taskuraamat*. Tallinna Linnaarhiivi Toimetised, 5 (Tallinn: Tallinna Linnaarhiiv, 2001).

centuries, which includes, among other things, a depiction of the human body with marked bloodletting points (EAM, 237.1.205, fol. 13r).¹⁴ The decorated initials and marginal drawings of several manuscripts would also merit more systematic art-historical attention.

Next to decorated parchment codices, a study of medieval Estonian visual culture should also pay attention to the drawings and doodles of town clerks and secretaries in official documents. For example, Juhan Kreem has studied the sketches on the margins of medieval Tallinn town council account books and identified nearly 400 drawings of various kinds related to the text.¹⁵ More recently, Inna Põltsam-Jürjo has delved into the diverse collection of drawings by a 16th-century Tallinn city official, Cordt Dellingshusen, which are mainly found in town council protocols.¹⁶ Related to books, it would have been appropriate to discuss also medieval bookbinding art, a topic that has recently been explored by Kaspar Kolk. He has shown how the second half of the 15th century saw a significant spread and increase in the volume of bookbinding art. The first clear evidence of bookbinders operating in Tallinn dates from the late 15th and early 16th centuries.¹⁷

The volume commendably includes an overview of coats of arms, boundary stones, coins, and seals, although this final chapter of the volume, titled "Symbols of Power" (pp. 437–464), feels somewhat disconnected from the overall composition. In the future, however, this path could be followed even more boldly, incorporating other surviving medieval signs and symbols into the discussion, such

14 Short descriptions and selected reproductions of the mentioned manuscripts can be found in the previously cited book by Tiina Kala, *Käsitöökirjaline raamat Eestis*.

15 Juhan Kreem, *Sketches of a Clerk: Pen-and-ink Drawings in the Margins of the Medieval Account Books of Reval (Tallinn)*, Medium Aevum Quotidianum, Sonderband 18 (Krems: Gesellschaft zur Erforschung der materiellen Kultur des Mittelalters, 2006); Juhan Kreem, *Linnaametnik joonistab: Sulejoonistused Tallinna rae keskaegsetes arveraamatutes = A Drawing Clerk: Pen Drawings in Medieval Accounting Books in Tallinn* (Tallinn: Tallinna Linnaarhiiv, 2009).

16 Inna Põltsam-Jürjo, 'Sündik ja narr: Pildikesi 16. sajandi teise poole Tallinna raeprotokollidest', *Tuna*, 3 (2022), 16–32. Põltsam-Jürjo also organised a separate exhibition of these drawings at Tallinn City Archives, titled "The Drawn World of Conrad Dellingshusen", which was open from 6 October to 31 December 2023; the exhibition catalogue is forthcoming.

17 See the article by Kaspar Kolk in this volume: 'Late Gothic Bookbinding in Tallinn', *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 27 (2024). See also about the bookbinders in 16th-century Tartu: Jürgen Geiß, 'Einbände für den Barther Reformator Johannes Block (1470/80 – 1544/45). Teil 3: Werkstätten aus Dorpat', *Einbandforschung*, 14 (2004), 12–19.

as family and merchant's marks on buildings, art pieces, etc., mill marks in books, poor's tokens, and even embroideries on tablecloths.

Moving forward, different materials used in medieval Estonian visual culture, from pigments and wood to gold and silver, will undoubtedly warrant systematic attention. I would also read with interest an overview of the most important artistic techniques; even now, some information on these can be found scattered throughout the book, though not as a standalone discussion.

Finally, the book as a whole would have benefited from a separate concluding chapter summarising the most important findings. This would have also been a suitable place to briefly outline the later reception of medieval visual culture, how the medieval heritage has been treated in subsequent times – from deliberate destruction to imitation, preservation, renovation, and exhibition.

Needless to say, this rather long list of desiderata was not intended to diminish the scope and thoughtfulness of the book under review. I believe this is one of the most successful volumes in the *History of Estonian Art* series, offering both a wealth of new empirical information and fresh conceptual perspectives. Rather, I wanted to point out that the work of researching early Estonian visual and material culture is far from over, and new areas still await the attention of scholars. The first volume of the *History of Estonian Art* has laid a solid foundation for this collective research endeavour, providing a convenient milestone by which future art-historical synthesis in Estonia will be judged.

CV

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