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## COLOUR IN CHURCH INTERIORS, MEDIEVAL AND BEYOND

### INTRODUCTION

The popular perception of any church interior in Estonia is that it should be plain and white, regardless of the age or style of the building. Indeed, most Lutheran places of worship today have white walls and ceilings and often have monochrome church furnishings. But how old is this tradition? Were churches more colourful in earlier times?

Recent studies of churches of medieval origin have shown that these edifices have long histories of polychrome decoration both before and after the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we will discuss some aspects of these colour schemes. Firstly, the question of the decoration and redecoration of interiors during the Middle Ages will be addressed, secondly the authorship and technique of vernacular-looking murals will be discussed, and thirdly the geographical spread of these decorations will be analysed. In addition, post-medieval murals will be briefly examined.

This article is based on fieldwork in Estonian medieval churches conducted over a period of fifteen years by the staff and students of

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12607/BJAH.2021.21.03>

1 See for example Anneli Randla, Hilikka Hiiop, 'Mõningaid uusi andmeid vanast dekoratiivsest seinamaalist', *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies on Art and Architecture*, 25/1–2 (2016), 139–183.

the Department of Conservation and Cultural Heritage at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Both investigation and conservation have been carried out in several churches. Here mainly the results of work in the churches at Koeru, Keila and Järva-Jaani will be presented. For comparison, some other churches will also be discussed.

### HOW MANY LAYERS?

The first stone churches were built on the territory of present-day Estonia in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This means that these buildings were in constant use for around 300 years before the Reformation (most are still in use today). Even their medieval history is long enough to raise the question of whether their interiors were decorated more than once during this period. However, only occasionally have several layers of wall and vault paintings been discovered in any particular church.

St Mary Magdalene's in **Koeru** is one of these churches and sheds some light on the reasons for both redecorating and not redecorating church interiors. Here medieval murals were combined from two different periods. The church was built and decorated for the first time in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century: the transverse arches, wall arches and window openings were adorned with alternating grey and red painted ashlar, and the joints were coloured white. There is no data on the colour scheme of the decoration of the vaults. It is possible that all extruding corners of the interior (the portals, triumphal arch, tower arch, etc.) received their faux ashlar decoration at the same time.

The second layer of decoration, from around 1500 (for dating see below), was the most elaborate in the history of the church. The groined vaults, which have no ribs or key stones, received ornate painted bosses and ribs. Each vault has a slightly different decoration in red, white, black and grey, consisting of a faux ashlar roundel with spirals and bends resembling wrought iron motifs in the upper part of the 'ribs'. The wall arches were painted over using the same pattern as the 'ribs'.

The earlier decoration of the window openings and triumphal arch was changed to a more modern one. An ornament consisting of stylised four-petal flowers or crosses in red and bordered with black lines was used to frame the windows. The same ornament but in reversed colours – black flowers and red lines – surrounded the triumphal arch (Fig. 1).



FIG. 1. ST MARY MAGDALENE'S IN KOERU. LATE MEDIEVAL COLOUR SCHEME. PHOTO: PEETER SÄRE.

However, possibly the most dominant feature of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century interior was retained. The transverse arches and their corbels covered in painted masonry motifs were integrated into the new scheme by partly repainting them while keeping the same pattern as before (Fig. 2). The reasons for this are not known but one might argue that the strong visual impression of this feature in an otherwise somewhat sombre interior with only a few carved elements was regarded as worth preserving even two centuries later.

Another even more striking case of pattern 'reuse' can be seen in Holy Cross in **Harju-Risti**.<sup>2</sup> The medieval church was damaged in the wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and lost most of its interior plaster together with any remaining decoration. When the church was repaired over a century later the groined vaults were painted to resemble clearly medieval-looking stellar vaults with herringbone pattern ribs and

2 Kaire Tooming, '17. sajandi lisandusi keskaegse Risti kiriku ehitusloole', *Muinsuskaitseraamat 2010* (Tallinn: MKA, TKVA, EKA, 2011), 93–96; Villu Kadakas, 'Madise ja Risti kirikud', *Padise pärand*, ed. by Heli Nurger (Padise: s.n., 2015), 39.



FIG. 2. ST MARY MAGDALENE'S IN KOERU. INTEGRATION OF THE 13<sup>TH</sup>- AND 15<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY DECORATION. PHOTO: PEETER SÄRE.

circular bosses. In Harju-Risti it can be assumed that the parish congregation wanted to restore the church to the same appearance as before.

Two different medieval layers of decoration have been found in St Martin's in **Martna**.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for redecoration must have been different in this case. The time between the executions of the two layers was rather short and the variation in the artistic quality rather points towards the congregation's desire for greater professionalism.

In St John's in **Järva-Jaani**, only one medieval colour scheme was revealed. As in Koeru, here the architecture of the church was 'enhanced' by painting with ribs, corbels and bosses added to the simple groined vaults. In the centre of the vault is a roundel divided into uneven wedges; the 'ribs' spring from this in four directions and end in wrought iron-like motifs. Similar wedged roundels adorn the

<sup>3</sup> Kaire Tooming, 'Late Medieval Decor at St Martin's Church in Martna', *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 1 (2009), 31–47.



FIG. 3. ST JOHN'S IN JÄRVA-JAANI. LATE MEDIEVAL COLOUR SCHEME. PHOTO: PEETER SÄRE.

side walls and transverse arches. The window openings and wall arches are decorated with faux ashlar. The murals are mainly red with some grey details (Fig. 3).

In all of these cases, the desire for the elaboration of the existing architectural setting can be felt, and colour played an important role in achieving this goal.

#### BY WHOM AND HOW?

Most medieval art is anonymous and the interior decoration of these churches is no exception. However, at least for late-medieval Livonia (consisting of present-day Estonia and the northern part of Latvia), there are written sources about painters in the towns, as well as one surviving account book of a rural parish church recording the construction of the building. As elsewhere in Europe, only in very few cases can written evidence be linked to surviving artwork.

One of these cases might be in St Michael's in **Keila**. Ornamental decoration very similar to that in Koeru was discovered in Keila.<sup>4</sup> Here a black frieze of stylised flowers or crosses bordered all windows and the chancel arch (Fig. 4). This is a rare instance where the decoration can be cautiously linked to a written source: the medieval account book of this church, the only surviving one of its kind from a medieval rural parish church in the territory of present-day Estonia, mentions a certain painter, the master Mychel, who had been paid for his work in the church in 1499.<sup>5</sup> Since no other painted decoration has been found in the church, this entry might indicate the artist and date of these simple ornaments.

Master Mychel was active in Tallinn from 1488, and is mentioned for the last time in 1518 as *olde Mychel*. During his long career, he worked for the city council, the Dominican friary and St Nicholas' in Tallinn, as well as the parish church in Keila, doing various gilding and painting work. He was a member of St Nicholas' parish, in 1508 lived very close to the town hall and in 1516 was the alderman of the painters' and cabinetmakers' guild.<sup>6</sup>

So far this is the only instance where surviving painted decoration can be linked by written sources to a master. Because of the close similarity of the wall paintings in Keila and Koeru, the latter could also be attributed to Master Mychel. This would also provide the dating of the second colour scheme in Koeru around 1500.

Another aspect of the 'by whom' question is the vernacular character of the decoration. Traditionally, in Scandinavia church interior decorations from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries were divided into vernacular master mason paintings and those by professional painters. The former provided both plaster and the first, usually 'rustic'-looking, decoration of the church walls (the building was

4 Anneli Randla, 'Keila kiriku maaling – kas esimene dateeritud ja atribueeritud keskaegne seinamaaling Eestis?', *Järelevastamine. Kaur Altoale*, ed. by Anneli Randla (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2017), 263–272.

5 *Keila kiriku wöörmündrite arweraamat 1472–1553*, ed. by Paul Johansen (Tallinn: Wassermann, 1926), 20.

6 *Ibid.*, 50–51; Rasmus Kangropool, Mai Lumiste, 'Tallinna maalijad ja puunikerdajad 14. ja 15. sajandil', *Kunstiteadus. Kunstikriitika 4* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1981), 167–168.

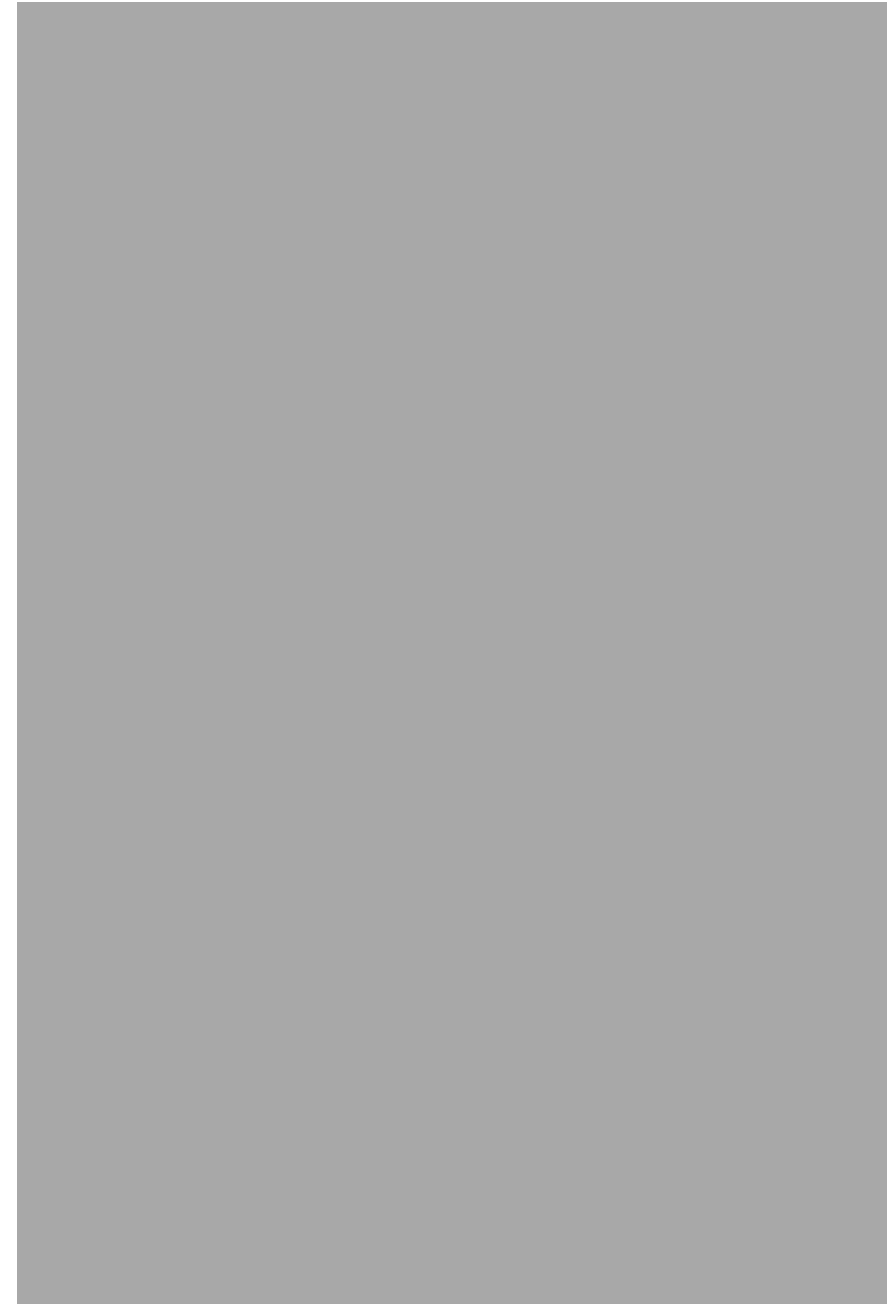


FIG. 4. ST MICHAEL'S IN KEILA. LATE MEDIEVAL ORNAMENT AROUND WINDOW OPENINGS. PHOTO: PEETER SÄRE.

not considered complete without colour). Later, professional painters were called in to provide 'proper' murals for church interiors.<sup>7</sup>

In one case, such a sequence seems to hold true for church decoration in Estonia as well. In Martna, the first layer of painting in the chancel forms a crude freehand herringbone pattern. Around a decade later the chancel was redecorated with a carefully composed and skilfully executed faux stellar vault.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that the first layer was rapidly made by the builders to 'complete' the church interior, and the second layer was by a more experienced 'proper' painter.

In our other cases, drawing the line between the vernacular and professional paintings is more difficult. For instance, the paintings in Koeru are clearly vernacular-looking (see below) but were probably made by the alderman of the painters' and cabinetmakers' guild. It should be borne in mind that in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries there were only two or three master painters active in Tallinn at any given time and they had to paint interiors, furniture, sculptures, tomb stones, etc., as well as do all sorts of gilding work.<sup>9</sup> There is no information about painters' guilds in smaller towns.

Thus there were only a few professionals available and they had to complete a large range of tasks. However, for practical reasons the paintings on the vaults had to be done immediately after plastering: before the mortar had dried and the scaffolding was taken down. Whether the few masters and their two or three apprentices could manage to reach every church which needed decorating is doubtful.

Therefore, it must be concluded that in the present state of research the identity of the painters must remain uncertain. However, their skills can be detected from the surviving wall paintings. No records have been found of the execution process of the murals. Only the study of the wall paintings themselves can reveal their techniques and what materials were used.

Most of the preparatory drawings of the murals were pressed into the still moist plaster, which clearly indicates the use of some kind

7 Ulla Hastrup, 'Danske kalkmalerier 1475–1500', *Danske kalkmalerier. Sengotik 1475–1500*, ed. by Ulla Hastrup (København: Nationalmuseet, 1991), 12–49; Helena Edgren, "'Primitive' Paintings: The Visual World of Populus Rusticus", *History and Images: Towards a New Iconology*, ed. by Axel Bolvig and Phillip Lindley (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 301–322; Katja Fält, *Wall Paintings, Workshops, and Visual Production in the Medieval Diocese of Turku from 1430 to 1540*. Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja 120 (Helsinki, 2012).

8 Tooming, 'Late Medieval Decor at St Martin's Church in Martna', 40–44.

9 Anu Mänd, 'Tsunfikäsitöö', *Tallinna ajalugu I. 1561. aastani* (Tallinn: TLA, 2019), 244–245.



FIG. 5. ST MARY MAGDALENE'S IN KOERU. PREPARATORY DRAWING OF THE KEY STONE IN RAKING LIGHT. PHOTO: PEETER SÄRE.

of fresco technique. This means that the paintings were made at the time of plastering the walls and vaults. Compasses, rulers and sharp tools were used to outline the compositions. For instance, in Koeru and Järva-Jaani, the concentric circles of the painted key stones are still visible in raking light (Fig. 5).

Generally, for classical *buon fresco* painting no extra binder is needed, the calcium carbonate of the mortar binds the pigments into the plaster and provides an extremely durable paint layer. In some cases the addition of binders cannot be ruled out. There are areas of redecoration which were not re-plastered: on the transverse arches in Koeru the 13<sup>th</sup>-century paint layers were 'retouched' around 1500 with a paint medium which required either lime or some organic binder. The intensity of the colours would rather suggest the latter. So far the binders have not been chemically analysed and therefore this issue cannot be conclusively resolved.

The repetitive ornament around the window openings and on the triumphal arch in Koeru and the decoration in Keila were made with

the aid of a stencil. Stencil paintings<sup>10</sup> do not require preparatory drawing and therefore it is hard to tell whether they were made as frescos, as lime paintings or by using some organic binder. What is clear is that the stencil used in both churches was the same, providing further evidence for a common date and painter.

In Koeru and Järva-Jaani, the painter obviously had little skill or experience in using the compass and brush on the uneven surface of the vaults. The result is somewhat clumsy but definitely charming and unique. At St Michael's in **Mihkli**, similar paintings cover the vault tops, which were erected around 1500.<sup>11</sup> Here the vernacular look of the murals even corresponds to the rustic quality of vault masonry.

### THE SPREAD OF MEDIEVAL MURALS

So far, medieval painted decoration has been found in around 25 church interiors on the territory of present-day Estonia, i.e. in roughly a quarter of the medieval churches. Most of these finds have come to light over the last two decades. Considering the wear and tear due to their age, and damage caused by weather, wars and lack of maintenance, one might expect an even lower survival rate of such murals. Although the number is not large, the finds allow us to draw some conclusions regarding the spread of and networks behind these paintings.

It can be claimed that as elsewhere in medieval (northern) Europe, medieval church interiors included at least some kind of painted decoration. It seems likely that the first (and possibly in many cases the only) colour scheme was provided by the builders. Especially in the rural parishes, where no specialised guilds existed, it might have been difficult to employ professional painters, although not impossible. Almost certainly the decoration was applied at the time of plastering, when the mortar had not yet set and the scaffolding was still available.

<sup>10</sup> Although stencils were widely used in medieval murals, the survival of these stencils is rare. One example of a lead pear-shaped stencil with a central cut-out rosette of six lobes was found in archaeological excavations at the Meaux Cistercian Abbey (now in the British Museum, item no. 1994,1012.42). See David Park, 'Cistercian Wall Painting and Panel Painting', *Cistercian Art and Architecture in the British Isles*, ed. by Christopher Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 194, plate 82.

<sup>11</sup> Anneli Randla, 'Medieval Painted Decoration in St Michael's Church in Mihkli, Estonia', *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 6 (2013), 179–183.

It can be deduced from the cases of Keila, Koeru and Järva-Jaani that networks for church decoration operated at different levels. Most probably the painter Mychel from Tallinn was employed both by the parishes of Keila and Koeru, in spite of these being located quite far apart. In the case of Järva-Jaani, clearly Koeru (which is only 14 km away) served as a model for decorating the late medieval church. Although there is no written evidence, the surviving geographic and temporal proximity and stylistic similarities suggest that the same painter or workshop was active in Koeru and Järva-Jaani.

### BEYOND THE REFORMATION

All of the wall paintings described so far (with the exception of Harju-Risti) date from the Middle Ages, i.e. the Catholic period. But did colour disappear with the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century? Historical records, surviving artworks and investigated interiors demonstrate that the Lutherans were less radical in transforming churches than were other Protestants: several Catholic altar retables and statues were preserved, side altars were not removed, etc.<sup>12</sup> The churches were usually decorated with new, more modern murals and only whitewashed in many cases several centuries later.

For instance, after the Reformation, in both Koeru and Järva-Jaani parts of the walls were covered in multi-coloured marbling to highlight certain parts of the space, for example around the Baroque pulpit. The chancel vault in Järva-Jaani has two post-medieval layers of decoration, one in bright blue (the motif could not be determined) and the other in yellow depicting the sun and the Lord's name in Hebrew letters. The latter corresponds to the design of the Baroque altar retable. The window openings were highlighted by a lush blue ornament in the sacristy of Järva-Jaani and the walls by grey foliage, etc., in Koeru.

The red and black murals at St Lawrence's in **Nõo** date from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Every vault has a slightly different composition, emphasising the (partly lost) ribs of the eight-partite vault. Like the medieval ones, these paintings were executed by an inexperienced painter who had learnt his job along the way. Baroque figurative

<sup>12</sup> See Merike Kurisoo, *Vahepealsed asjad ja vahepealsed ajad. Kirikuruumi ja pildikultuuri muutumisest katoliiklikust luterlikuks varauusaegse Eesti aladel* (Tallinn: Tallinna Ülikool, 2019).



FIG. 6. ST LAWRENCE'S IN KUUSALU. GOTHIC REVIVAL DECORATION. PHOTO: PEETER SÄRE.

paintings have also been found in Martna and St Catherine's in **Kadrina**.<sup>13</sup>

Gradually, church interiors became more monochrome, although not necessarily white, something that has been associated with the spread of Pietistic ideas in the Lutheran church. However, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century brought a revival of colour to at least some churches.

<sup>13</sup> For Kadrina, see Randla, Hiiop, 'Mõningaid uusi andmeid vanast dekoratiivsest seinamaalist', 170–173.



FIG. 6A. ST LAWRENCE'S IN KUUSALU. GOTHIC REVIVAL DECORATION. PHOTO: PEETER SÄRE.

These colourful, mainly Gothic revival interiors survived for only a short time and disappeared again when they were painted over everywhere.

Today, these murals are being rediscovered and rehabilitated. In St Michael's in **Kihelkonna**, the whole church has regained its early 20<sup>th</sup>-century ornaments. Bold Gothic Revival/Art Nouveau decoration can be seen in the historical photographs<sup>14</sup> of St Nicholas' in **Pärnu** (the church was damaged by fire during WWII and was demolished in the 1950s).

In St Lawrence's in **Kuusalu**, wall paintings dating from the period of the Gothic revival renovation of the medieval church were found and uncovered in 2021 (Fig. 6). The church chronicle records the decoration of the chancel by 'master painter Masing and his workmen from Tallinn' in 1899 using oil paint: the vault was designed to depict a blue sky with gilded metal stars, the walls were yellow and their

<sup>14</sup> See for instance <https://www.bildindex.de/document/obj20432019/?medium=fm152243> [accessed 19.07.2021].



FIG. 6B. ST LAWRENCE'S IN KUUSALU. GOTHIC REVIVAL DECORATION. PHOTO: PEETER SÄRE.

lower parts brown.<sup>15</sup> All of these features were discovered in the chancel. In addition, the ribs of the vault and the chancel arch had been covered in two different patterns of stencilled green foliage and yellow buds against a dark reddish brown background. The use of oil made the colours of these murals especially intense. According to records, due to high costs and problems with moisture the nave of the church was painted using distemper. The colour scheme was the same as in the chancel.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the church probably had the most colourful interior in its whole history as late as 1899.

In conclusion, these examples show that the churches were colourful not only in the Middle Ages but continued to be colourful up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The customary white interiors are a relatively recent feature and have more to do with the difficult post-WWII period and with the perceptions of architectural historians and architects in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century regarding these spaces. The discussion of these topics lies outside the scope of the present overview and will be dealt with in another article.

<sup>15</sup> *Kuusalu kiriku kroonika / Die Kirchenchronik von Kusal 1837–1914*, ed. by Toomas Mäeväli (Kuusalu: EELK Kuusalu Laurentiuse kogudus, 2014), 252–253.

<sup>16</sup> See the report of the investigations *Kuusalu kiriku kooriruumi ajalooline siseviimistlus. Üringu aruanne* (Tallinn, 2021); MS in the archive of the National Heritage Board.



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**KEYWORDS:** MEDIEVAL WALL PAINTINGS; CHURCH INTERIORS; POST-REFORMATION CHURCH DECORATION; MEDIEVAL LIVONIA

### SUMMARY

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This article is based on fieldwork in Estonian medieval churches conducted over a period of fifteen years by the staff and students of the Department of Conservation and Cultural Heritage at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Here mainly the results of work in the churches at Koeru, Keila and Järva-Jaani is presented. Some other churches are also discussed for comparison.

So far, medieval painted decoration has been found in around 25 church interiors on the territory of present-day Estonia, i.e. in roughly a quarter of the medieval churches. Although the number is not large, the finds allow us to draw some conclusions regarding the spread of and networks behind these paintings.

We can claim that as elsewhere in medieval (northern) Europe, medieval church interiors included at least some kind of painted decoration. It seems likely that the first (and possibly in many cases the only) colour scheme was provided by the builders. Especially in rural parishes, where no specialised guilds existed, it might have been difficult to employ professional painters, although not impossible. Almost certainly the decoration was applied at the time of plastering, when the mortar had not yet set and the scaffolding was still available.

Historical records, surviving artworks and investigated interiors demonstrate that after the Reformation the Lutherans were less

radical in transforming churches than were other Protestants: several Catholic altar retables and statues were preserved, side altars were not removed, etc. The churches were usually decorated with new, more modern murals and only whitewashed in many cases several centuries later.

Gradually, church interiors became more monochrome, although not necessarily white, something that has been associated with the spread of Pietistic ideas in the Lutheran church. However, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century brought a revival of colour to at least some churches. These colourful, mainly Gothic revival interiors survived for only a short time and disappeared again when they were painted over everywhere. For example, in St Lawrence's in Kuusalu, wall paintings dating from the period of the Gothic revival renovation of the medieval church (1899) were found and uncovered in 2021.

### CV

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