Medieval Painting in Northern Europe: Techniques, Analysis, Art History: Studies in Commemoration of the 70th Birthday of Unn Plahter
Jilleen Nadolny, editor; with Kaja Kollandsrud, Marie Louise Sauerberg and Tine Frøysaker

Reviewed by Mark Clarke

This book was conceived as a festschrift for Unn Plahter, a one-woman Norwegian ‘National Centre of Excellence’ for conservation science and the technical history of art as well as a self-described museum chemist. Plahter’s speciality has been medieval painting and polychromy, and her pioneering interdisciplinary work, notably concentrating on thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Norwegian painted altar frontals, has been very influential in making it abundantly clear that oil painting was well established in the centuries before the van Eycks and not only for crude decorators’ work but also for skilled and painterly productions. The festschrift complements the comprehensive three-volume Painted Altar Frontals of Norway 1250–1350 by Plahter et al., published by Archetype in 2004.

All papers in this book have been written in, or translated into, English, providing a welcome introduction to the scholarship on Scandinavian painting. Each paper is a rich and concentrated digest of material, with salient illustrations (beautifully reproduced), and many will doubtless become permanent works of reference.

The volume begins with an appreciation of the impact of Plahter’s work and continues with 21 papers by conservators, conservation scientists and art historians, including some justly famous names. The emphasis is on Scandinavia, but with plentiful examples from elsewhere, in particular England (considered as comparative material and in its own right). Polychrome sculptures are the most discussed objects, then panels, but wall paintings and manuscripts are not neglected. Eleven papers concentrate on technical examinations of individual or groups of painted artefacts (including updated versions of important published analyses by Plahter), seven papers provide overviews of an aspect of materials and technique and three papers are art historical. Plahter’s own work incorporates technical analysis, art history, documentary source research and trade history, and each of these disciplines is represented (in varying proportions) in each paper in the book.

The scene is set by two slightly revised pairs of papers from 1979 and 1984, with Plahter contributing a technical essay to each set. The first pair examines a twelfth-century statue (a Crucifix from Hemse on Gotland) and the second, two thirteenth-century statues (St Olav from Fresvik and St Paul from Gauda in Norway). Plahter’s conclusions exemplify concisely the burden of the festschrift: that from at least the twelfth century in Northern Europe the components of what was to become oil painting pur sang were in place, including oil media, lead pigment driers, wet-in-wet blending and complex layered modelling (transparent and opaque, in systems utterly different from those of the southerner Cennini, often inappropriately cited elsewhere). Plahter observes: ‘To sum up, most paint structures identified on the Hemse crucifix agree with those described in the written sources known to deal with the oil-based medium for solid pigments… This examination, however, shows that some methods based on the properties of the oil medium were in use although in the contemporary literature known to us, they were not described.’

Turning to the new papers, those principally treating technical examination of artefacts present such exciting items as one of the earliest known uses of oil paint in Scandinavia (eleventh century), a tremendous variety of gilding techniques and tin relief, two studies that examine the implications of the practice of remodelling medieval sculpture (by reworking the support and by repainting), fragments of what seems to have been an original oil (possibly oil-resin) varnish preserved on a thirteenth-century English mural (!) and numerous examples of sophisticated modelling through oil glazes from the earliest times (the most impressive being the Westminster sedilia or stall panels, c.
These technical examinations are not confined to the painted layers. Detailed descriptions are provided of the supports, e.g., the construction, carpentry and tool marks for the wooden objects; and non-paint decorative elements (gilding, tin relief, imitation gems) are treated especially fully. Several descriptions are complemented by reconstructions, recreated physically or by computer image manipulation. The careful art-historical essays establishing influence, provenance and date also give due evaluation of the impact of earlier conservation interventions.

The synthetic reviews are particularly valuable: Jilleen Nadolny on medieval water-gilding and Erling Skaug on parchment and textile reinforcements as structural components of panels (each proposing useful typologies). Since transparent glazes are frequently cited as a defining feature of ‘true’ oil painting, it is gratifying that the book includes observations on their employment in these early paintings by no less than Raymond White and Jo Kirby. The National Gallery London also supplies cautionary tales of how pigment content may influence medium analyses misleadingly, e.g., resinous components of lac, proteinaceous components of lakes prepared from shearnings and changes consequent on pigment–medium interaction – issues reaching beyond the medieval period.

Throughout the volume authors employ satisfyingly diverse and convincing textual sources (treatises on technique, contracts, guild ordinances), including some relatively unfamiliar until now. Inès Villela-Petit usefully highlights the mechanisms of text reworking in medieval recipe compilations (often incorrectly dismissed as mere copies, but in fact purposefully altered for specific users). Two unexpected treats are Patricia Stirnemann on orpiment damaging silver in manuscripts and a corpus of shell palettes by Helen Howard.

The art-technological study of early oil paint is burdened by the often prejudiced nineteenth-century pioneers, and the festschrift authors have taken pains – wisely and necessarily – to thoroughly redress, refute and replace a number of obsolete yet entrenched interpretations and models.

This book fulfils and exceeds the promise of its title, and it should be drawn to the attention of any conservator or art historian concerned with any European painting before around 1500. The paintings presented here represent what has been lost elsewhere in Europe, unusual only in that they have survived.

The book leaves us eager for more publications on this topic of such widespread interest and relevance. May Unn Plahler have many more years of producing them.

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