

**Archaeology of the Object:
Conservation, Material Culture and the Creation of Historical
Knowledge for Pre-Reformation Church Inventories**

Abstracts



University of Oslo
15–17 October 2014

After the Black Death: Painting and Polychrome Sculpture in Norway. Conservation and its contemporary contexts

Noëlle Streeton

Associate Professor for Conservation

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History (IAKH)

University of Oslo

Abstract

This presentation offers an opportunity to introduce the project, 'After the Black Death: Painting and Polychrome Sculpture in Norway, 1350–1550'. The project centres on c. 65 objects that include folding altarpieces, shrines, sculptures and crucifixes, which are owned by the Museum of Cultural History (KHM) University of Oslo (UiO). The majority is thought to have been imported to Norway from northern Germany and the Low Countries after 1350, and possibly as late as the 1550s – between the first wave of Bubonic Plague and the early years of the Reformation. Through the efforts of an international network, researchers are devoted to creating intellectual access to earlier perceptions of objects that were once central to late-medieval church culture across Scandinavia. The objective of the project is to publish new narratives for the KHM collection, drawing on the interdisciplinary practices common to conservation.

Writing histories from late-medieval things: the engagement of conservation with theoretical perspectives on material culture

Noëlle Streeton

Associate Professor for Conservation

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History (IAKH)

University of Oslo

Abstract

Discussions surrounding the 'After the Black Death' project inevitably highlight the strengths of conservation research and its contemporary implications. Given the celebratory mood generated by a symposium, it might seem somewhat counterintuitive to offer up an Achilles' heel for inspection and scrutiny. Nevertheless this is important for the success of the project and progression of the discipline of conservation.

An open discussion of the disciplinary shortcomings that are particular to conservation is one means to develop a stronger theoretical and methodological framework for the ABD project. This paper focusses on a number of problems that are bound up in the positivist tradition, as well as ongoing misunderstandings between conservators and art historians. Among possible solutions is a critical framework for conservation research that is closely aligned with archaeology and material culture studies. The research themes that have been selected set this research at the cross-roads with studies of material culture, directing investigations toward phases in the 'lives' of individual late-medieval objects.

Non-invasive dendrochronology: an experimental method for the analysis of Baltic oak in late-medieval multi-component altarpieces

Aoife Daly

Research Fellow

Centre for Art Technological Studies and Conservation (CATS)

Statens Museum for Kunst

Abstract

For any dendrochronological analysis an uninterrupted series of measurements of the tree-rings of a timber is needed. An evaluation as to how best to go about this is taken with every new object, always taking into consideration its cultural/historical value. Cutting implements in the dendrochronologist's toolkit range from the fine razor blade to the chainsaw. In recent years, a project 'DendroCT' was established, to investigate the possibilities for using CT scanning of timber to allow access to the tree-rings, completely non-invasively. The project is a collaboration between Jan Bill, University of Oslo, Øistein Johnsen, Norwegian Geotechnical Institute, Knut Dalen, Norwegian University of Life Sciences and me.

Through a range of experiments, we developed a method of X-ray scanning oak objects from the Oseberg and Gokstad Viking ship burials allowing purely non-destructive dendrochronological analysis. This allowed a large number of timbers to be dated and their region of origin to be identified. Concentrating on the Gokstad burial, timbers from the ship, the smaller boats, grave inventory and spades from a later plundering of the mound were all analysed with absolutely no damage to these valued artefacts.

Since the CT method has some limitations, particularly in terms of the size of object that can be scanned, I have recently been examining other ways of attaining tree-ring measurements non-invasively. In the After the Black Death project, and in collaboration with the Centre for Art Technological Studies and Conservation (CATS) at the Danish Statens Museum for Kunst (SMK) where I am currently based, non-invasive dendrochronological analysis of selected church inventory from Norway is currently underway. The timber elements of altarpieces and tabernacles are generally too large to allow CT scanning. Instead, tree-ring measurement is proving possible wherever the rings are exposed, purely non-invasively. This challenging work is bearing fruit.

Alteration of copper pigments

Hartmut Kutzke

Associate Professor, Chemist and Conservation Scientist
Museum of Cultural History
University of Oslo

Abstract

Copper is one of the most present chemical elements in cultural heritage objects. It was used as pure metal or as component in alloys, we encounter copper minerals in jewellery, copper add colour to glass and glazes, copper compounds are formed by corrosion processes, and copper compounds were widely used as pigments in different types of paints. However, its reactivity makes copper also prone to alterations caused by environmental influences or by interactions with other materials used on an art work. Copper compounds are an important source for damaging processes on historical objects.

Copper compounds are used as pigments since ancient times. Pigments were made from natural minerals like malachite, azurite, or atacamite, or produced by corrosion processes, like verdigris. There exist a wide range of recipes on production and preparation of copper pigments, and it is an interesting question whether by-products formed during the production process could influence later alteration of the pigment. More evident are alterations caused by environmental factors. A prominent example is the conversion of the copper carbonates malachite and azurite into copper chlorides under the influence of chloride-containing air. In a basic environment blue azurite may transform to the black copper oxide tenorite. Black copper sulphides may be formed if sulphur is present in the environment.

The most interesting alteration processes are those that are caused by reactions between different components in a paint layer. Reactions between copper pigments and binding media may lead to formation of metal soaps and colour changes. Reactions between copper pigments and media components may, however, also be intended. Many contemporary recipes describe the production of various types of glazes which are chemically copper resinates or proteinate. In practice, it can be hard to distinguish between intended and unintended formed copper organic compounds.

Very few studied are possible alterations of copper pigments which may be caused by the various methods to deepen the colour. Written sources describe treatments with ammonium chloride, for example, or recommend mixtures of copper pigments with plant dyestuffs to achieve a deeper green or blue. The present contribution will give an overview on known alteration processes of copper pigments and discuss possible research topics within the framework of the After Black Death project.

Interpreting the surface in light of re-painting, treatments and repair

Tine Frøysaker

Professor in Conservation Studies

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History (IAKH)

University of Oslo

Abstract

Since their production, the polychrome liturgical objects in the KHM late-medieval collection have transformed dramatically in appearance. The objects themselves are perhaps the most significant primary source for understanding these transformations, but are there any written sources on the altering 'life' of these and similar works of art? What can be said about the circumstances, patrons and painters (including the materials used by the latter) responsible for their past and present polychromies? Are there comparative narratives drawn from other objects and historic events? This paper will present some examples of medieval texts, some early publications on changes of Norwegian church art and some severely altered objects from/in Norwegian churches.

Notes from the field: challenges for PhD research

Kristin Kausland

PhD fellow in Conservation Studies

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History (IAKH)

University of Oslo

Abstract

The first PhD in conservation as part of the project *After the Black Death: painting and polychrome sculpture in Norway, 1350-1550* at the University in Oslo in many ways reflects the coming age for the profession as a substantial part of the Faculty of Humanities. The lack of tradition of a specific research model for the doctoral degree within Conservation Studies at UiO presents both a challenge and an opportunity to define the individual PhD framework.

Technical art history is a term often used in conservation PhDs within the Humanities, separating it from strict science-based experiments, using an interdisciplinary approach combining natural sciences with documentary source research and reconstruction-making to give historical accounts of objects. Having reached the last stage of the PhD in conservation with focus on late medieval winged altarpieces at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, the methodology and shape of the thesis illustrate the (challenging) balance between different sciences. In addition to the experiences with finding a place in the academic field, the actual field work, travelling to different locations where factors such as access, equipment and study facilities often cannot be predicted, has given directions onto unknown roads where improvisation and compromising have been handy resources to bring along in the tool box.

Understanding the cult of saints in the century before the Reformation

Jón Viðar Sigurðsson

Professor in History

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History (IAKH)

University of Oslo

Abstract

This paper addresses two different aspects of cult of saints in Norway. The first one deals with the role the cult played in the local community; saints not only worked miracles, but they were also landowners. The second focuses on attitudes toward the images of saints. These were often thought to represent the saints in a real way. Saints were the eternally living, and the social elite often tried to establish friendship with them, thus becoming their clients.

What about devotion? Devotional and liturgical practices in late medieval Norwegian churches

Ragnhild Bø

Research adviser

Diakonhjemmet University College

Abstract

In the later Middle Ages, people did not only look at their devotional objects. They interacted with them. Altar frontals, statues, illuminated manuscripts and carved altarpieces were all used to promote spiritual exercises, to open one's heart for God. For liturgical symbols in the Norwegian-Icelandic Church, the *Messuskyringar* does give some information, as does the *Manuale Norvegicum*. The actual interaction with the artefacts is less documented, but we do know that e.g., the statue of St Nicholas in the mountainous parish church Eidsborg was highly venerated, and apparently carried in a procession across the neighbouring fields all the time until 1837, when it passed into the collection of the Museum of Cultural Heritage in Oslo.

In this paper, I will focus more narrowly on devotional and liturgical practices regarding altarpieces imported from the Low Countries, of which there are nine: Austevoll, Grip, Hadsel, Kinn, Leka, Ringsaker, Rissa, Røst and Ørsta. Although the relation between iconography, liturgy and devotion is not univocally established, decorating the Lord's Table, the carved altarpieces were convenient means to elucidate the meaning of the liturgical rites, and the narrative scenes had both procedural and situational functions in the celebration of mass and the re-enactment of the events of Christ's life and death.

In particular, I will address the nine, asking whether the founding of the *Devotio Moderna* and the establishment of the community of the Brethren of the Common Life around 1374, as well as the widely disseminated *Imitation of Christ*, written by the community member Thomas à Kempis c.1440, did affect their motifs and their 'devotional messages.' I will also ask whether the altarpieces themselves may have been catalysts for actively or incidentally designing devotion through their displayed imagery regardless of orders and rules, and as such add to the often claimed power of medieval images.

What counts as heritage? Archaeology, history and recent pasts

Per Ditlef Fredriksen

Associate Professor in Archaeology

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History (IAKH)

University of Oslo

Abstract

This paper outlines key issues in recent debates on intimate human/thing and human/material webs within archaeology, material culture studies and the heritage discourse. The aim is to provide an entry into a discussion about critical theoretical approaches to heritage and various politicised versions of the past, one which is potentially useful to the project *After the Black Death*. From an archaeological departure point I will address certain aspects within the field of critical heritage studies, with a particular emphasis on a curious paradox which has emerged. Specifically, using relevant examples from archaeology, the discussion will centre on concepts such as material/immaterial, intentionality, value and beauty.

COLLAPSE and the renewal of the first floor of KHM

Peter Bjerregaard

Senior Adviser

Museum of Cultural History

University of Oslo

Abstract

The application for ABD includes an exhibition project at Museum of Cultural History. Most probably we will not venture into making an individual exhibition on ABD, but rather include this material and research in the plans for an overall renewal of the permanent displays at the Museum of Cultural History (KHM). In this presentation I will introduce our plans so far for changing our exhibitions in the first floor of the museum. While the existing displays account for Norwegian history from Ice Age to the Middle Ages, we want the new exhibitions to break with this linear approach and establish three thematic exhibitions that each transgress temporal and geographical divides. In particular I will focus on the first of these exhibitions, *COLLAPSE*, and try to argue why it makes sense to make an exhibition combining Norwegian pioneer settlement, Polynesian cosmology, urban gardening, and – possibly – late-medieval Norwegian church art. The presentation will invite all the participants at the seminar to consider how the material developed through ABD can be placed in the overall renewal of the exhibitions at KHM – and how engaging in an exhibition project might be profitable to the research taking place within ABD.

'The material turn'. A dispatch from the frontlines of medievalist art history

Lena Liepe

Professor in History of Art

Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas (IFIKK)

University of Oslo

Abstract

Drawing on the papers presented at a recent conference entitled 'Medieval art history after the interdisciplinary turn' (Notre Dame University, March 2014), and a number of recent publications by leading names on the field (Bynum, Hahn, Kessler), I will ask to what degree the current 'material turn' of medievalist art history includes considerations of material findings in the sense of the ADB project, or if, rather, 'materiality' as it is currently being explored is in fact more about transcendence than manifest physicality.

The Champion of the North. History, religion and prophecy in Olaus Magnus' *Carta Marina* (1539)

Erling Sandmo

Professor in History

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History (IAKH)

University of Oslo

Abstract

Olaus Magnus' map of northwestern Europe, *Carta Marina*, is famous for its exactitude, its wealth of detail, and its spectacular sea monsters. It is also laden with religious polemic and images of the imminent dangers of Lutheranism, which was quickly emerging as dominant in the Scandinavian countries. I will discuss one particular group of images on the map: in Lapland, on the northern periphery of Sweden, the legendary giant Starkader can be seen carrying two stone tablets, accompanied by a snarling lion. To their west, two others groups or tableaux show members of the local population performing heathen rituals.

The group can be interpreted as a dramatic staging of Olaus' view of the dangers of Lutheranism, hostile and apocalyptic. It also links the Reformation to an acute sense of historicity and to Renaissance antiquarianism, with its fascination with the material past and its presence in the contemporary world.

Do books on conservation practice still have value? Information dissemination in an accelerating context

Michele Marincola

Professor of Conservation

Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts

New York University

Abstract

'How-to' books about conservation treatment materials and procedures have played a critical role in the transition of conservation/restoration from a secretive studio practice to a professional discipline and academic pursuit. Particularly significant has been the shift from detailed recitations of formulaic approaches, to an increased emphasis on treatment methodology and decision-making. Since the start of graduate-level education in conservation in the United States in the 1960s, when literature in the field was relatively scarce, numerous substantive publications have contributed to our corporate "body of knowledge." A second and equally important change is now underway. The high cost of print publication, in particular for image-rich books, the easy access to information on the World Wide Web, and new formats for information presentation such as video now threaten the book as the preferred means of information transmission and dissemination. What value does a book still have in this new world? A review of recent pedagogical history and contemporary challenges will lead to some thoughts on why a book – either printed or electronic– still has a place as a repository of knowledge and effective teaching tool.