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# From Sainly Shrines to Cabinets of Curiosity – The Fate of Medieval Altarpieces in Post-Reformation Norway

Kristin Kausland\*

## Introduction

Altarpieces exercise a powerful presence in Christian church communities. From being the prime artistic form that promoted the Catholic cult image in the late medieval church, the altarpiece was given different meanings, values and associations in the Lutheran churches of early modern Scandinavia.<sup>1</sup> Comprehensive research has been dedicated to the winged altarpieces of the medieval times, filled with imagery of Catholic saints and Christological and Marian imagery.<sup>2</sup> Other studies have concentrated on iconographical, stylistic and functional analysis of the Post-Reformation altarpieces which adorned altars in Lutheran settings from the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries.<sup>3</sup> Less easily defined are so-called “re-purposed” altarpieces, objects which escape the constructed boundaries of Gothic *or* Baroque, medieval *or* early modern, Catholic *or* Lutheran. As representations of surviving “relics” of religious shifts, wars, and societal and political changes, such altarpieces form part of the fascinating narrative of society in the *longue durée*.

In 1931 and 1965, fragments of what appeared to be devotional church art came into the conservation studios of the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage (*Riksantikvaren*). Two panels, originally housed in the church of Gløshaug in Grong (Trøndelag county), which were to be treated at the *Riksantikvaren*'s Oslo office in the 1930s, were evidently wings from an old medieval altarpiece (Fig. 1). The original context of the painted wooden fragments from a west coast farm in Fjell (Vestland county), which in 1965 entered *Riksantikvaren*'s Bergen studio in the Historical Museum, represented more of a mystery (Fig. 2). During the restoration, however, the conservator concluded that these fragments had also originally been parts of a medieval altarpiece. The common trait between these two objects was that they had both been in private ownership in profane locations since the year 1874.

This article will explore the ways in which shifting religious and political landscapes effected the continuous evaluation and physical state of historic devotional art. With its

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**Fig. 1.** Exterior side of the wings of *Gløshaug altarpiece* (121 × 49 × 3 cm, Northern German, c. 1520, *Gløshaug church, Trøndelag*) depicting *St. Sunniva* and *St. Catherine of Alexandria*, photographed sometime between 1923 and 1929 in *Riksantikvaren's* studio. Photo © Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage (*Riksantikvaren*).

point of departure in the fragments from *Gløshaug* and *Fjell*, it will explore how the original sacred nature of these objects either withstood – or surrendered to – the various pressures imposed by their circumstances. After years of movement between various “identities,” should we perceive them as objects of worship, historical artifacts, esthetic commodities, or even merely curiosities in our encounters with them? The theoretical framework known as “the object biography” approach, adapted from anthropological studies to enhance a holistic understanding of often fragmentary, decontextualized material, has previously been used in a small number of case studies on comparable Norwegian medieval art.<sup>4</sup> However, this is the

first attempt to investigate Norwegian medieval objects in light of a complete chain of known historical events with a complementary analysis of cause and effect. Through archival studies of the churches’ history and the objects’ conservation records, combined with more recent technical examinations, this article will explore how a knowledge of acts related to different applications of an object – use, re-use, altered use, or non-use – throughout time, can enlighten present and future decision-making related to conservation within material culture.

### The medieval period

On the sites of *Gløshaug* and *Fjell* in Norway, stave churches have existed since the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, housing liturgical furnishings which probably were updated according to trends during the whole span of the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> In the first decades of the Middle Ages, altar adornments such as frontals, painted and carved panels and tabernacle shrines were usual, while during the late medieval period, retables became the norm. There are very few surviving documents dealing with the commissioning of such altarpieces, however stylistic and art technological investigations show that the majority of the surviving altarpieces in Norway were imported from Northern Germany.<sup>6</sup> These were mainly placed in small churches connected to fishing villages along the extensive north-western coast line with trading links to Hanseatic towns. The iconographical content of the altarpieces reflects the popularity of certain saints in the late medieval period. Saint Olav, patron saint of Norway and an important international figure, alongside the Virgin and Child were the most re-occurring single saints. However, also more



Fig. 2. *Fjell altarpiece* (115 × 107 × 16, 5 cm, Northern German, c. 1500, Fjell church, Vestland) as it appeared when entering Riksantikvaren's Bergen studio in 1965. Photo © Rolf E. Johannesen/the Historical Museum/University Museum of Bergen

local saints gained popularity in the visual imagery, exemplified by Saint Sunniva, the protectress of the port town of Bergen and west coast of Norway, who often was paired with Saint Olav on the altarpieces' wings.<sup>7</sup> This visual partnership might reflect their importance for the North German sea-faring merchants called *Bergenfahrers*, who acted as intermediaries in the mercantile trade with Norway, which included the facilitation of altarpiece orders.<sup>8</sup>

Like elsewhere in Scandinavia, representatives from both Gløshaug and Fjell turned to artistic centers in Northern Germany for their altarpiece requirements. This marks the important first step in the object biographies of the two altarpieces, namely their "births."

In both cases, the unknown patrons commissioned a type frequently used all over Scandinavia at the turn of the fifteenth century: a winged altarpiece, containing a central shrine (*corpus*) filled with three polychromed figures standing under a baldachin, attached to movable shutters with depictions of popular saints (Fig. 3).

### "The preserving power of Lutheranism"<sup>9</sup>

Imagery displaying holy kings, martyrs, apostles and other saints was instrumental in the medieval churches of Denmark-Norway. After the shift to Lutheran Protestantism, the first Danish-Church Ordinance of 1537,



Fig. 3. *Norddal altarpiece* (125 × 92 × 17 cm, Northern German, c. 1520, Norddal church, Møre og Romsdal). Photo © Birger Lindstad/Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research (NIKU).

accepted in Norway two years later, stated that objects of “idolatry” were to be removed.<sup>10</sup> However, it is only some hundred years after the introduction of Lutheranism we are first made aware of the fully functioning Catholic pictorial universe that once adorned the altars in Gløshaug and Fjell, due to its continuous presence in the church.

#### *Continued use*

The oldest known mention of the *Gløshaug altarpiece* is in an account from 1679 to 1683, stating that an insane man tore the Crucifix out of the altarpiece.<sup>11</sup> The sculpture was replaced with a new carved and polychromed Christ. However, the figure seems to yet again have been removed, which might appear as

something a paradox, since the Crucified Christ was the least problematic figure to retain in a new Lutheran setting. In any event, it was absent in the first thorough description of the altarpiece, a registry from the 1860s stating that the gilded shrine only contained sculptures of Mary and St John.<sup>12</sup> In the registry, the archeologist and antiquarian Nicolay Nicolaysen noted that the altarpiece was still in function upon the altar. He continued to describe the painted doors with images of several non-Biblical saints: on the left interior, a bishop and left exterior, the local saint Sunniva with a cliff in her hands. The right door depicts, on the interior side, St Olav in full armory stepping on “a crowned dragon,” and on the exterior, St Catherina of Alexandria with a sword in her hands and a wheel at her feet. The

architectural features of the altarpiece included two wrought pillars alternating with gilding, red, and green colors, placed to the left and right in the shrine, and a preserved crest decorating the shrine. The altarpiece had a painted predella, depicting the *Veil of Veronica* held up by two sleeping angels. Of information regarding the condition, we understand that both images and colors were well executed and preserved, but the shrine lacked the baldachin originally placed over the sculpture, uniting the two pillars. The two written sources give a good description of the complete original appearance of the altarpiece. In fact, there is one other altarpiece in Norway with the same iconography and luster-colored wrought pillars in the opened state, namely *Norddal altarpiece*, dated to 1520 (Fig. 3).<sup>13</sup> Its recent treatment at the studio of the Norwegian Institute of Cultural Heritage Research (NIKU) revealed that under the overpaint of the wrought pillars, intact original gilding with alternating red luster and azurite blue remains intact. The shared features in the polychromy, which do not represent the standard of the time, together with stylistic similarities, offer the first inclination that there might be a workshop connection between *Norddal* and the *Gløshaug* fragments.<sup>14</sup>

There is less knowledge to be gained from the written historical sources on the *Fjell altarpiece*. As with *Gløshaug*, it was still in ecclesiastical use with its original features into the mid-1800s. The *Visitas* protocol from 1843 describes it simply as “very old and not decent in a God’s house,”<sup>15</sup> which can be interpreted as a clear critique of the imagery and its ties to the Catholic period. The church was in a poor state at that time, despite efforts to re-build and renovate it twice in the previous centuries (1686 and

1795). Most likely, it was renovated by re-using large parts of the old stave church structure. Upon his visit in 1842, the author, poet and critic Johan Sebastian Welhaven stated that the church was “hideous and weak with equipment of a plump and poor character,” and had uneven walls painted with “gigantic images of holy men,”<sup>16</sup> again a reference to the old Catholic imagery which probably were byproducts from the recycling of old structural parts.

Several aspects might explain why altarpieces displaying non-biblical imagery such as in *Gløshaug* and *Fjell* were allowed in the church interiors after the Reformation and the ban on objects of idolatry. Naturally, there were both local and regional variations and negotiations on the rules, and local shifts to the new religion were protracted.<sup>17</sup> People felt related to the objects that formed part of a larger cultural memory. Another important aspect was the general Lutheran trend – in Norway as elsewhere – of a continuation of traditional rituals, furnishings and images, as opposed to the Calvinists in the Netherlands and the Puritans in England.<sup>18</sup> The medieval interior ensembles taken over by the Lutheran Protestants were simply in many cases preserved. The altars continued to serve in the Protestant cult, where the Lutherans accepted the altarpieces as focuses for worship.<sup>19</sup> Although a comparative study of Lutheran Germany and Scandinavia conclude that non-biblical iconography such as that of certain saints were more frequently removed in the Nordic countries,<sup>20</sup> *Fjell* and *Gløshaug* are testaments of a practice where even altarpieces where the iconography did not accord with the Lutheran ideals were nevertheless accepted.

Moreover, in those cases where actions against the old Catholic imagery were

committed, due to “damaging” symbolism or perhaps even ongoing veneration of potent objects, it was in another form than iconoclasm as such. Instead of brutal destruction, terminating in the “death” of the object in an object biographical approach, in some cases, partial mutilation seems to have been undertaken. Examples of this were the removing the nose or hands of sculptures, or the putting of two scratch-marks across the face, and/or poking the eyes of the painted saints with a sharp tool. Upon the later restoration of the *Fjell altarpiece*, it became clear that the painting of St Barbara’s face had marks of such cross-hatching on the surface, where a sharp tool had been used to scratch the paint across her eyes, forehead and nose.<sup>21</sup> These measures might appear gentle compared to the brutal defacing or stripping of altars executed in other parts of Europe, but they were strong signifiers of disempowerment and dishonor, ultimately preventing the congregation’s temptation to engage with the cult images through physically touching them.<sup>22</sup> From being valued members with agency within the church community, this act in the objects’ biographies turned them into things of indifference.<sup>23</sup> No such signs of disfigurement were found on the painted saints of *Gløshaug* upon their later appearance in the restoration studios, which could mean that old traditions of veneration had been dismissed at an early stage, or not regarded as significantly problematic.

#### *Re-use: the catechism altarpiece and the Last Supper motif*

The altarpiece that arrived at *Riksantikvaren*’s studio from Fjell in the 1960s retained little of its “indecent” appearance noted in the

Visitation protocol of 1843. In fact, the only thing that resembled an altarpiece at all was its cabinet shape and movable shutters with ornate religious texts. All images and colors had been eroded over the last hundred years. From written documents, it appears that the alarming conditions that were reported in the *Visitas* protocol of 1843 instigated immediate maintenance of Fjell church, including purchasing what the priest in his protocols described as a “new small and simple altarpiece.”<sup>24</sup> However, the new altar decoration actually was a mixture of old and new, more specifically – an adaption, or re-use, of the old altarpiece, to give it a new and proper meaning within a Lutheran setting. The three saint sculptures were probably discarded at this stage in the object’s biography. Thereafter, all traces of the gilding, stenciled decorative patterns, and figurative paintings were “neutralised” by concealing them with an overall base layer of brown in the interior of the shrine and a white layer on all the frames and the paintings.

A new canvas painting depicting *the Last Supper* was ordered from the interior and landscape painter Ole Berenthardus (1805–1846), custom-sized to be fitted into the shrine in the place where the cult statues previously stood.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the exterior of the wings was painted in a monochrome brown, while the interior sides of the wings received a layer of light blue paint before ornate scriptures were applied in black, referencing the biblical Communion narrative as a complement to the painted Last Supper motif: On the left door, the words from John: 6: 56 and from 1 Cor. 11: 27–28, and on the right door: Matt. 11: 28 and Mark 14: 22–24 (Fig. 4).

To understand this turning point in the altarpiece’s biography, where it was



**Fig. 4.** *Fjell altarpiece*: a digital reconstruction of its appearance in the period 1844–1966 with a *Last Supper* motif in the corpus and accompanying Biblical texts on the right wing. The reconstruction has obscured the nineteenth-century campaign on the left wing, since there exists no photograph documenting the historical overpaint on this side.

transformed to serve a new purpose, one has to look at the general reinterpretation of iconography in Lutheran churches after the Reformation. Next to the *Crucifixion*, the *Last Supper* became the most frequent motif displayed on the altarpieces of evangelical communities when iconography had to be reinterpreted.<sup>26</sup> Luther himself preached that this motif was the correct one, if one absolutely needed to have an altarpiece. However the written word was a necessary, if not *the* most important, element if the altarpiece was to function properly in the new text-based religion.<sup>27</sup> Initially, this sparked the tradition of text retables, so-called catechism altarpieces, where pure texts were ornately presented, and the visual qualities of the written word became the primary expression of the altar decorations.<sup>28</sup> An early transformation of late medieval altarpieces to fit this new purpose can be found in the church of Sømna, where both the medieval corpus and

wings, filled with saint sculptures were emptied, and the gilded background overpainted with scriptures (Fig. 5). The use of catechism altarpieces was authorized in the Bergen synod declaration of 1589, and it is in this west coast region of Norway that the majority of this type of early Lutheran altarpieces are found, the oldest ones dating from the same period.<sup>29</sup>

While the catechism altarpieces were quite common in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth century, the emphasis on the text diminished in the following centuries and was replaced by the use of the *Last Supper* motif as the key representation, with or without the accompanying textual Biblical narrative.<sup>30</sup> The *Fjell altarpiece* is a rather late example of this practice, where the parishioners could experience an immediate link between the image and the Communion rite. The painter had followed the Lutheran mediations of supplying accompanying





**Fig. 5.** *Sømna altarpiece* (132 × 115 × 29 cm, Northern German, ca 1520, *Sømna church*, Nordland). The gilded and carved altarpiece, originally containing twelve standing sculptures (46 cm) in the wings, three (104 cm) in the corpus, was stripped of carvings and underwent a total overpaint in the early seventeenth century to fill a function as a catechism altarpiece. Photo © Magne Pedersen/Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage (*Riksantikvaren*).

Biblical scriptures to the motif, possibly instructed by the parish priest. Although late, a shift to the Lutheran Protestant iconography had finally caught up with the small island community.

### The altarpieces in private ownership and separated from the church, 1874–1920/1963

After the Great Northern War, the financial state of Denmark–Norway was in ruins, and as an aid in the economy, in 1721 King Fredrik IV decided to sell many of the churches of Norway.<sup>31</sup> The churches of Fjell and Gløshaug fell into private ownership for approximately 150 years.<sup>32</sup> In this period, the churches had five and eight owners respectively, who were all, apart from a cooperative of farmers who bought Gløshaug in

the 1820s, individual persons. While the *Gløshaug* and *Fjell* altarpieces seem to have been in continuous, respectively altered use, from their installation throughout decades of various ownerships, the defining year of 1874 represented for both an abruption to this practice. This critical point in their object biographies was directly related to a new church law from 1851 which put requirements on the church building's size, and which resulted in a major demolition and rebuilding campaign over the next decades.

#### *Transformed to a curiosity – the fate of the Gløshaug altarpiece in an English mansion*

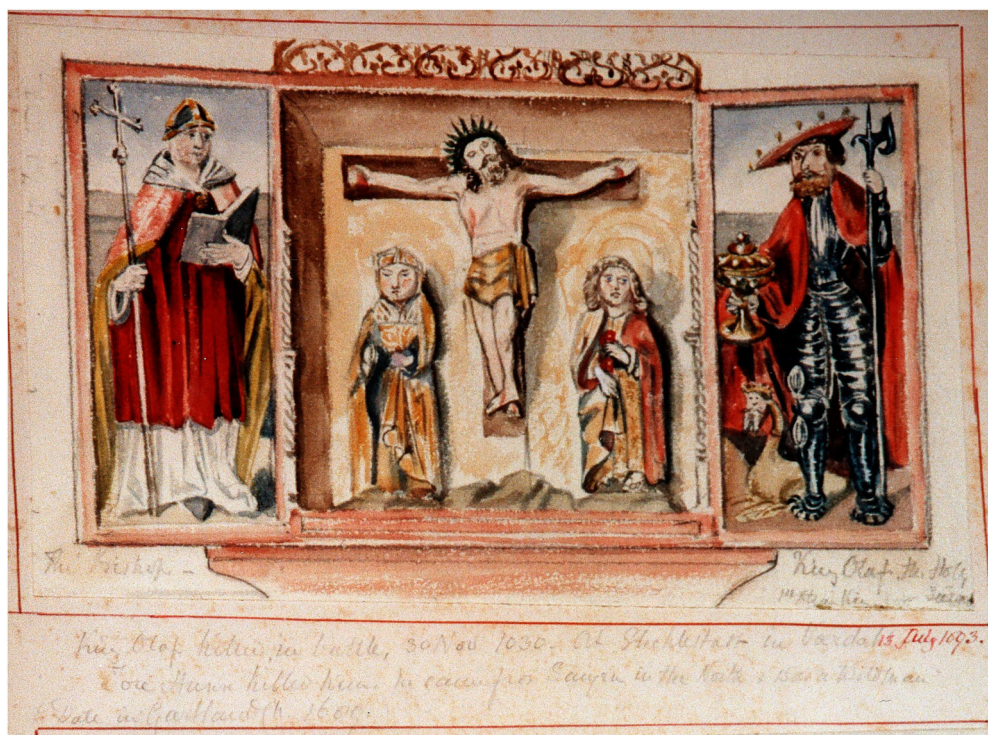
In 1874, a new church had been built in a nearby location, and Gløshaug church stood in danger of being demolished. The village in which it was situated, Gartland, was a

prime location for river fishing, an attraction that turned out to be a salvation for the old church. The wealthy English industrial magnate Thomas Merthyr Guest (1838–1904) had for more than 10 years spent his summer seasons in the village, where he caught large salmon in the prosperous Gartland – Rosset stretch of the river Namsen (Fig. 6 ab).<sup>33</sup> He owned two farms in the village and had built the *Gartland Borg* mansion overlooking the river. Upon hearing of the demolition plans, he simply bought the church. This act saved the church but presented an uncertain future for the altar decoration contained within.

In the first image we have of the altarpiece – a watercolor of the *Gløshaug altarpiece* in the early years of Guest’s ownership, from 1893 – it appears to be in the same state as Nicolay-sen had described it 30 years earlier, which again was more or less unchanged since its original installment in Catholic times. The watercolor reveals that a new Christ had been placed in the shrine, and the motif of *Veronica’s veil* on the predella had been over-painted in red (Fig. 7). What is noteworthy with the image is not only its similar look to three centuries earlier, but perhaps even more surprising, how different it looks from the fragmented state it arrived in when it



**Fig. 6. Thomas Merthyr Guest (1838–1904).** (a) Caricature by Sir Francis Carruthers Gould, chromolithograph published in *Vanity Fair* November 11 1897, as “Men of the Day” Number 695. Caption reads “Blackmore Vale.” Photo © National Portrait Gallery, London. (b) Historical photo with Guest posing with a famous catch of a 64 Lb./29 kg salmon caught on “Guest rock” as the location famously was named.



**Fig. 7.** Watercolor painted by Lady Theodora in 1893. It is the only existing image of *Gløshaug altarpiece* revealing the original corpus housing the crucified Christ flanked by the Virgin and St John the Evangelist, framed by two wrought columns. The polychromy of the sculptures and shrine seems to follow a conventional medieval Northern German pattern.

entered *Riksantikvaren's* studio three decades later (Fig. 1). What had happened to the piece in the period of its biography that it was under Guest's ownership?

The watercolor was painted by Thomas's wife, the author Lady Theodora Grosvenor Guest (1840–1924) (Fig. 8). Thomas Guest died in 1904, which led to an end to the couple's recreational holidays in Norway. Lady Theodora spent most of her time on her estate Inwood House in Somerset, a grand mansion filled with an impressive art collection. Being an eager art collector, in 1908, Lady Theodora arranged for the *Gløshaug altarpiece* to be shipped to Inwood. The setting in which the *Gløshaug altarpiece*

was to be displayed contrasted greatly to the modest village church in Norway. From her father, the 2nd Marquess and Duke of Westminster, Richard Grosvenor, Lady Theodora had inherited a masterpiece by Roger van der Weyden, *The Braque Triptych*, which she kept on the wall of her drawing room, until it was sold to the Louvre in 1913 for 130,000 dollars, was said to be their most important purchase for decades and created a record price for the artist. It was in this high-end art context, in the wealthy collection of upper-class Britain, the *Gløshaug altarpiece* was to be displayed, however only as a mere curiosity with a newly acquired exotic value substituting its previous religious function in the church.



**Fig. 8. Lady Theodora Grosvenor Guest (1840–1924), wife of Thomas Merthyr Guest and a British author, anti-suffragist, collector and benefactor. Her parents were Richard Grosvenor, 2nd Marquess of Westminster and Lady Elizabeth (born Levenson-Gower).**

Upon the time of removal of the altarpiece, the church, whose ownership Lady Theodora had transferred to the local farm-owner, was in occasional use for services. The local community's engagement and awareness of its cultural heritage had grown immensely in the years that had passed since the church had risked demolition. They strongly opposed the altarpiece's removal from the church and departure to England. A local board engaged *Riksantikvaren* who in turn, in a letter of November 6th 1922, contacted the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in an effort to repatriate the altarpiece, setting off a diplomatic chain of correspondence between England and Norway.<sup>34</sup>

Benjamin Vogt, the Norwegian ambassador to the United Kingdom, discussed the request in person with Lady Theodora. Shortly after, the Norwegian Legation in London received

the altarpiece, or the fragmentary pieces left of it, from Lady Theodora. Her utterances on what had happened appear somewhat contradictory. In letters to friends, she did not give the impression that it had been in a poor state upon arrival to England, but rather the opposite, expressing that it was the most precious memorabilia from her time in Norway, and that she would not let it go.<sup>35</sup> However, later, when asked to donate it to the church, she stated that the altarpiece was in such a poor state upon arrival to England that it had caused her great disappointment.<sup>36</sup> The poor state was, according to her, caused by years of neglect in the church. Another version was presented by the person who had last handled the altarpiece in the church before shipment to England: the altarpiece had not at all been fragile, and furthermore, all precautions for a smooth transit had been taken, by packing it carefully and dispatching it as special/fragile art transport.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of the cause of its fragile state, Lady Theodora stated that the only part surviving of altarpiece were its two doors, which she had been "prepared to keep as a curiosity."<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, by mid-April 1923, the altarpiece wings found themselves on a cargo ship, returning to Norway after 15 years in the UK.<sup>39</sup>

*Recycled as a utility cabinet – the fate of the Fjell altarpiece at a farm in west coast Norway*

In the 1870s, work began to build a new church in the village of Fjell. As in Gløshaug, the campaign threatened the preservation of the old church. A great difference was that the new church at Fjell was erected more or less on the same site as the old building, so

that demolishing the old unstable structure was inevitable, and reasonable. More controversial to the modern eye – although completely normal at the time – was the decision made regarding the inventory. Instead of transferring the furnishing from the old church to the new building, it was decided to sell them off at an auction. Thus, the very same year as the *Gløshaug altarpiece* shifted hands, the *Fjell altarpiece* continued its life outside its original church setting.

It was the policeman in the village, Peder Christoffersen Lie (1832–1912), who bought the altarpiece at the 1874-auction.<sup>40</sup> While the “Guest saga” gives us much information on the owners, however little on the actual possession, the opposite is true in the case of the *Fjell altarpiece*. When Lie bought the altarpiece, the loose *Last Supper* painting had been removed from the interior of the shrine. Despite its empty and dark appearance, the altarpiece must have been appealing for its high-quality wainscot oak boards and solid joinery. The policeman took advantage of these material qualities. By enlarging the depth of the shrine, rotating it 90 degrees and inserting 3 shelves, the altarpiece was completely transformed into a kitchen cabinet (Fig. 2). It served on the farm in Liaskjæret for the next 90 years, its perceived value declining for each year. From a prominent place in the kitchen it was first moved to the basement, before it was eventually exiled to the barn where it was used to store paint and fishing equipment.<sup>41</sup> During this time, paint was spilled onto both sides of the doors in drips of green, yellow and brown. This might have initiated the decision to refresh the outer panels, by applying a paint layer in a technique meant to give the effect of “oak-imitation,” executed by a decorative painter who had painted the house in 1912 (Fig. 9).<sup>42</sup>



**Fig. 9. *Fjell altarpiece*, exterior side: overpaint in an oak-imitation technique, conducted by a decoration painter in connection with the house renovation in 1912. Photo © Rolf E. Johannesen/the Historical Museum/University Museum of Bergen**

The policeman and his descendants had always called the cabinet “the altarpiece,” however they had no conception of its medieval provenance.<sup>43</sup> After all, the only sign of its former function was the nineteenth-century scriptures on the interior side of the shutters. Its wider historical significance also went under the radar of the first antiquarians who traveled the country to document medieval art in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hiding in the barn on the farm, transformed into a worn utility cabinet, the altarpiece unfortunately escaped the attention of the author of the first and only overview of late medieval art in Norway from 1936, Eivind Engelstad.<sup>44</sup> Its potential value was first taken notice of by the district doctor, Arnljot Gjellestein, in 1962, who took interest in the piece due to its nineteenth-century scriptures.<sup>45</sup> He immediately arranged for it to be examined in *Riksantikvaren’s* studio. It was here that the altarpiece’s true origin was unveiled.

### The altarpieces in the restoration studios: testaments of historical continuity

At this point in their biographies, the restorers became active agents in the objects' "life histories." The decisions made in the studios of *Riksantikvaren* on how to treat Fjell and Gløshaug became paramount for their future functions: were they to be regarded as art, curiosities, or liturgical pieces, and in that case, which period of the objects' biographies should be preserved? Historic continuity was to play a role, however, in both cases unforeseen events occurred that shifted the decisions made by the restorers.

#### *The sudden re-appearance of an old crucifix: Gløshaug altarpiece and its restoration 1923–1935*

After a pit stop at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Oslo, the Gløshaug wings were sent to *Riksantikvaren* to be restored. In a letter of July 26 1923, *Riksantikvaren* confirms that they have received the wings and would provide suggestions on how to best restore the fragments.<sup>46</sup> It was agreed upon to revive its original function, acting as an altarpiece in the church. However, it would take another seven years before Gløshaug received its altarpiece back, a delay that seems to have been caused by hesitation around which restoration option to go for. While it was agreed that the wings should be attached to a new corpus, three alternatives for sculptural content were discussed: fully equipped with three new Calvary figures; reconstructing only the *Crucified Christ*; or leaving it empty. *Riksantikvaren* seems to have been most satisfied with the second option, and the restorer Domenico Erdman provided a sketch of the altarpiece with a Crucified

Christ, painted onto an interior photograph of Gløshaug's chancel (Fig. 10).<sup>47</sup>

During the whole process, the local community had not given up their hopes of retrieving the original corpus and sculptures. Lady Theodora died on March 24 1924, and shortly after, another request was sent to the Norwegian Legation in London to act on the matter of retrieving the remaining parts of the altarpiece.<sup>48</sup> Despite considering it somewhat inappropriate, the ambassador approached Theodora and Thomas' only child and heiress, Lady Elizabeth Augusta Grosvenor Guest (1879–1960). She replied in November 1924, stating that the centerpiece, which she believed had been a crucifix, had been badly damaged and not preserved.<sup>49</sup> Intriguingly, Lady Elizabeth did not mention the two medieval sculptures of Mary and John.

Financing the restoration, however, was an issue and eventually the church representatives decided to settle for the third alternative: a new, gilded, corpus with no sculptural content. The plan was to complement it with figures and punched ornamentation at a later date, using the *Norddal altarpiece* (Fig. 3) as a model.<sup>50</sup> In 1929, after raising the necessary funds, the altarpiece was restored with the wings attached to an empty gilded corpus (Fig. 11).<sup>51</sup> No information on the cleaning or retouching of the wings was reported. In 1931, the altarpiece was finally back in Gløshaug church.

The decision to refrain from reconstructing the Crucified Christ turned out to be a fortunate one. As it happened, the congregation found fragments of a thirteenth-century Crucified Christ in the church.<sup>52</sup> This was sent to *Riksantikvaren* in 1933.<sup>53</sup> Although of an earlier date, it was decided to mount the Christ in the altarpiece; the corpus looked conspicuously empty and plain, and raising



**Fig. 10.** *Riksantikvaren's* restorer Domenico Erdman's 1927 – suggestion of a new corpus and sculptural program to complement the Gløshaug wing-fragments: his reconstruction in paint on a photograph of the chancel of Gløshaug. Photo © *Riksantikvaren's* Archive.

money for a new sculptural Calvary turned out to be a challenge.<sup>54</sup> In July 1935, Gløshaug received the restored *Crucified Christ* mounted onto a new cross from *Riksantikvaren*, to be placed into the altarpiece and take the appearance it carries to this day (Fig. 12). In fact, still today the altarpiece has yet to be completed with the intended decorative punchwork, and sculptures of Mary and John. Lady Elizabeth Augusta died in 1960, and her Inwood estate was inherited by Comte Guy Pierre Marie Albert de Pelet. It is still in his family's possession, and the fate of Mary and John still an unsolved mystery. Thus, hundred years after it was initiated, the conservation treatment still forms part of a series of ongoing processes in the object's biography, of which end we have yet to conclude.

#### *The sudden re-appearance of the Last Supper: Fjell altarpiece and its restoration 1966*

When the *Fjell altarpiece* came into *Riksantikvaren's* Bergen studio in the 1960s, the lost *Last Supper* painting was still absent, and the head conservator interpreted the biblical verse numbers as references to erroneous verses with no relation to this particular motif.<sup>55</sup> These circumstances seem to have guided a decision-making process in the subsequent restoration of the piece, which to modern eyes may appear somewhat unfortunate. When the restorer Turi Kooter Wilson started the examination of the piece she was working under the theory that it was a liturgical artifact from the nineteenth century. It soon became apparent that there was much more beneath the surface. The three shelves



**Fig. 11.** *Gløshaug altarpiece* after *Riksantikvaren's* restoration in 1931. The wings were attached to a new empty and gilded corpus. Photo © *Riksantikvaren's* Archive.

were removed from the cabinet, and the brown overpaint cleaned, revealing fragments of real gold leaf on the back panel. Upon turning it to its original position, the restorers detected traces of its original content: indentations in the shape of three haloes with decorative punching above the contours of its three previous sculptures.<sup>56</sup> It became clear that the cabinet had originally been a gilded Catholic shrine, housing three standing saints.

By tactile examination and close scrutiny in raking light, the restorer could detect level differences on the painted surfaces of the exterior sides of the doors: a clear sign of fragments of paint beneath the upper layers.<sup>57</sup> X-ray examination gave no further clues on the motif or the preservation state of the

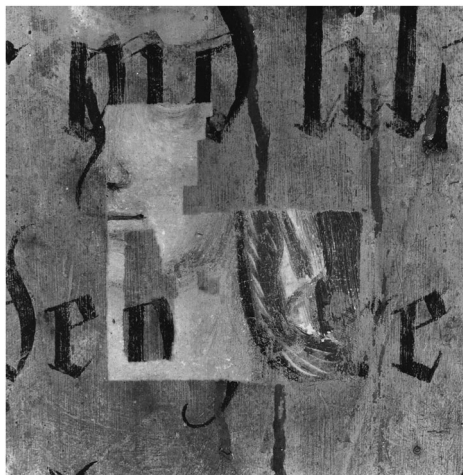
underlying paint schemes. Cross-sections extracted from both sides of the wings showed that beneath the nineteenth- and twentieth-century paint layers, there were residues of an even older layer, with the different samples varying in colors from pink and red, to blue. Small windows in the secondary paint were thereafter removed by mechanical scraping and a paint stripper.<sup>58</sup> The details that were revealed in the test strips must have been a decisive factor in the decision to pursue a complete removal of all layers of overpaint, including the nineteenth-century scriptures (Fig. 13). Of the two stages in the object's biography, the medieval got the upper hand, regardless of uncertainties connected to its original state, the loss of the





**Fig. 12.** *Gløshaug altarpiece's* present appearance with a thirteenth-century Christ mounted in the corpus. Photo © Olve Utne.

accompanying sculptures, and the fact that its revelation would happen at the expense of the nineteenth-century campaign. Although the



**Fig. 13.** Overpaint removal, revealing the face of St. Sunniva under the nineteenth-century repaint. Photo © Historical Museum/University Museum of Bergen.

initial cleaning method was regarded as a slow and unsatisfactory method to deal with the resilient secondary paint, the restorer pursued with the cleaning, using slightly different approaches on the different areas of the paintings, and a repertoire of rather hazardous solvents (Fig. 14).<sup>59</sup>

It transpired that the altarpiece wings featured depictions of standing medieval saints on all four panels, and that its frames were red, with gilded rosette stencils. The paintings on the exterior side were fragmented, with large losses of the background and the garments of the female saints. Still, the saints that appeared could be identified as St Barbara with the tower (right) and St Catherine of Alexandria with the sword and wheel (left) (Fig. 15 ab). The paintings on the doors' interior turned out to be more preserved. On the left, the image of St Olav was revealed beneath the nineteenth-century

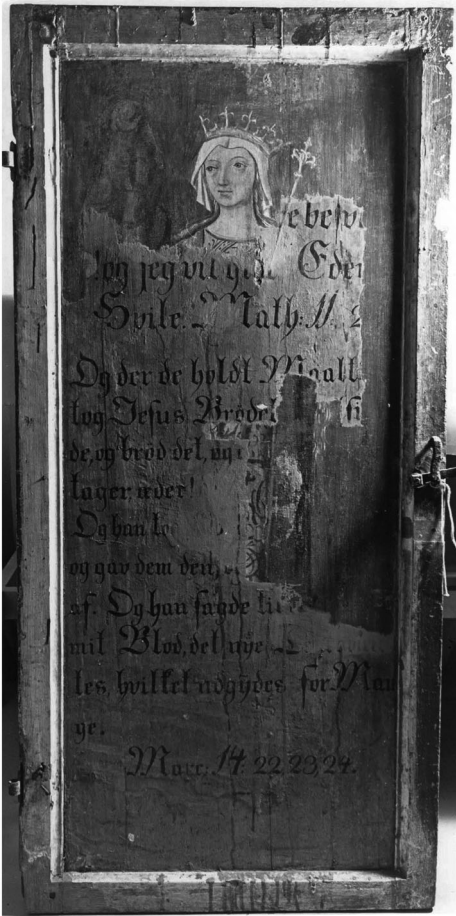


Fig. 14. Partial overpaint removal of the right wing, revealing St Sunniva beneath nineteenth-century repaint. Photo © Historical Museum/University Museum of Bergen.

scriptures, and on the right, St Sunniva with the cliff. The iconography thus displayed the typical motifs of the altarpieces in Norwegian west coast churches in the medieval period.

However, as in Gløshaug, the sculptures never emerged, but something unexpected happened during the restoration process which influenced the further decisions, and was to have a final effect on our perception of the altarpiece. Suddenly, the lost *Last*

*Supper* from 1843, which had been gone for almost a century, re-emerged. It turned out that it had not been sold in the auction but stored in the church tower before it was framed and hung in the new sacristy.<sup>60</sup> Although not part of the original structure, this painting indeed had been a crucial part of the altarpiece. And although the restorer had just removed the scripts that had accompanied the painting, the decision was made to put the painting back into the shrine. After all, as in Gløshaug, the corpus at the time remained an empty shell. The end result was a mixture of Catholic and Lutheran imagery, where the Norwegian saints Sunniva and Olav hover over the last meal Jesus enjoys with his disciples (Fig. 16). Instead of returning to the farm, the altarpiece was placed in its original setting in the church. However, this time it was not to adorn the altar but to be displayed as an artwork on the western wall in the nave (Fig. 17). The head of the restoration studio admitted that the result of the conservation treatment was an “art historical mishmash,” but perhaps most importantly, a joyous one, as so, for the congregation.<sup>61</sup>

### Modern perspectives and concluding remarks

As earlier stated, resemblances in iconography, architecture and polychromy, tie the *Gløshaug* wings to another altarpiece in Norway, the *Norddal altarpiece* (Fig. 3). Both medieval objects have undergone modern conservation treatments; the *Gløshaug* wings were re-treated by the National Museum of Denmark in 2003, and the *Norddal altarpiece* at NIKU’s conservation studio in Oslo.<sup>62</sup> The technical examinations undertaken in connection with these



**Fig. 15.** Cleaning of the exterior side of the wings, removing two overpaint layers. (a) Panel with St. Catherine of Alexandria halfway cleaned. (b) Windows in overpaint revealing the face of St. Barbara beneath the nineteenth- and twentieth-century campaigns. Photo © Historical Museum/University Museum of Bergen.

treatments reaffirm the connection between the two: both paint techniques (from underdrawing to upper layers) and modeling, stylistic features and dimensions, are remarkably similar. From this we might deduce that not only did the two altarpieces share the same shrine maker, but also the same carver and the same painter, operating in one of the Northern German art centers, ca 1520.<sup>63</sup> The *Fjell altarpiece* has not been restored

since 1968. The most recent effort to place the painted wings in the context of their origins, puts them stylistically, alongside eight other late medieval works located in Germany, Sweden and Denmark, as outputs of a “work group” connected to the so-called “Meister der Marienbestattung,” operating in Lübeck in ca. 1490–1510.<sup>64</sup>

This insight into the first steps of the objects’ biographies and their North German



Fig. 16. *Fjell altarpiece* after the restoration in 1965. Photo © Rolf E. Johannesen/the Historical Museum/University Museum of Bergen.

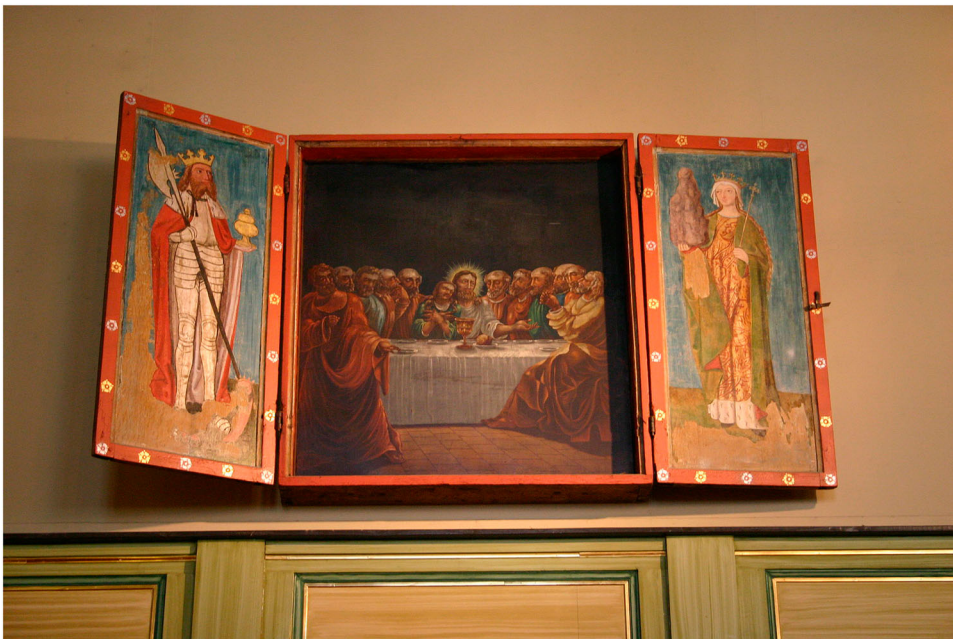


Fig. 17. The present installment of *Fjell altarpiece*, where it is displayed an artwork on the wall over the door of the western wall of the nave in church building from 1874.

medieval origins would not have been possible without seeing beyond the rich afterlives of the objects, and through archival and technical research peel away marks from their church and private provenances. However, in this article, the focus has been on the fate of the two altarpieces, facilitating access to the various stages in their narratives throughout their 500 year histories. It has been an aim to note how the different custodians – from church to state to private individuals and restorers – treated the objects according to their varying interests and evaluations.

Interestingly, it was not the tumultuous religious shifts which posed the greatest risk to the material aspects in the objects' biographies, nor the church renovations in the era before awareness of the importance of cultural heritage. Rather, it was their removal from the church setting which became the most compromising factor to their material value and function as religious agents, when they were re-purposed to decorative artworks and utilitarian objects in secular locations. Especially the function as a simple cupboard posed a great threat to the survival of the *Fjell altarpiece*, where, in contrast to the increasing value with age of cultural artifacts, was devalued over time. Thought provoking is the conservator's active engagement in shaping the object's narrative by erasing the parts of its biography considered less significant to reach a more "authentic" level. The appreciation of "all things medieval" combined with unawareness of other contexts in the object's life, led, in the case of the *Fjell altarpiece*, to the creation of something completely new. More than anything, the illustration encourages future conservators to actively seek to understand all stages of the objects' long lives prior to undertaking conservation, and to have in mind that

"there is no such thing as a single truth about an object."<sup>65</sup>

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## Notes

1. Although the separation from the Roman Catholic church was a protracted process, some defining years are said to have initiated the Protestant Reformation: 1527 in Sweden (during the reign of King Gustav I), 1536 in Denmark (under King Christian III), and 1537 in Norway, a country which had been in different types of unions with Denmark since 1380.
2. For a general introduction and an overview of medieval altarpieces in Scandinavia: Aron Andersson, *Medieval Wooden Sculpture in Sweden Vol. III: Late Medieval Sculpture*, Stockholm, 1980; Sissel F. Plathe and Jens Bruun, *Danmarks Middelalderlige Altertavler I–II*, Odense, 2010 and Eivind Engelstad, *Senmiddelalderens kunst i Norge ca. 1400–1536*, Oslo, 1936.
3. See, for example Sigrd Christie, *Den lutherske ikonografi i Norge inntil 1800, volume I–II*, Oslo, 1973; Inga Lena Ångström, *Altartavlor i Sverige under renässans och barock – Studier i deras ikonografi och stil 1527–1686*, Stockholm, 1992; Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen, *Ritual*

- and *Art Across the Danish Reformation – Changing Interiors of Village Churches, 1450–1600*, Belgium, 2018.
4. See for example, Bettina Ebert, “Biographies Carved in Wood: Turning Points in the Lives of Two Medieval Virgin Sculptures”, *Journal of Material Culture*, 2018, pp. 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183518811355>. For the theoretical framework of object biographies, especially in relation to conservation, the author recommends Bettina Ebert, *Biographies Carved in Wood. Reconstructing Narratives for Medieval Polychrome Sculptures*, PhD Thesis, University of Oslo, 2019, pp. 17–22.
  5. A stave church with towers dates to before 1338 at Fjell, while the stave church at Gloschaug was erected around 1170. Fragmentary information and objects of older date indicate that a practice of decorative renewal took place in both churches, see for example Arne Kvam, *Gloschaug kirke 300 år*, Grong, 1989 and Ragnvald Fjell (ed.), *Fjell kyrkje 1874–1974. Jubileumsskrift*, Fjell, 1974.
  6. Eivind Engelstad, *Senmiddelalderens kunst i Norge ca. 1400–1535*, Oslo, 1936; Kristin Kausland, *Late Medieval Altarpieces in Norway – Domestic, Imported, or a Mixed Enterprise? An Art Technological Study of Northern German and Norwegian Altarpiece Production in the Period 1460–1530*, PhD Thesis, University of Oslo, 2017.
  7. For the most recent publication on Saint Sunniva, see A.T. Hommedal, Å. Osmundsen, and A. O’Hara (eds.), *St. Sunniva. Irsk droning, norsk vernehelgen. Irish Queen, Norwegian Patron Saint*, Bergen, 2021.
  8. In the surviving wills of the *Bergensfahrs*, it is demonstrated that next to their patron saint Olav, Sunniva was their main saint, to whom they also dedicated an altar in their chapel in Saint Mary’s church in Lübeck (Max Hasse, “Die Lübecker und ihre Heiligen und die Stellung des Heiligen Olav in dieser Schar. Die Heiligenverehrung in Lübeck während des Mittelalters”, in *St. Olav, seine Zeit und sein Kult*, ed. Gunnar Svahnström, Visby, 1981, pp. 171–188, esp. 183).
  9. The expression is taken from a conference with the title *Die bewahrende Kraft des Luthertums*, organized by the Catholic Görres Gesellschaft in Dresden, 1995, and the following publication Johann Michael Fritz (ed.), *Die bewahrende Kraft des Luthertums. Mittelalterliche Kunstwerke in evangelischen Kirchen*, Regensburg, 1997.
  10. Martin Schwarz Lausten, *Kirkeordinansen 1537/39*, København, 1989, p. 193. For different attitudes to the re-ordering of Catholic church art in Norway, Christie, *I*, 1973, pp. 12–18.
  11. Kvam, 1989, p. 34.
  12. Nicolay Nicolaysen, *Norske fornlevninger: en oplysende fortegnelse over Norges fortidslevninger, ældre en reformationen og henførte til hver sit sted*, Kristiania, 1862–1866, pp. 667–668.
  13. Tone Olstad, Christina Spaarschuh, and Christine Løvdal, *A 317 Norddal kirke. Undersøkelser av middelalder-alterskapet med tilhørende 1600-tallsramme. Hovedrapport. NIKU oppdragsrapport 87*, Oslo, 2017, p. 41.
  14. On similar altarpieces in Scandinavia, only occasionally red or green lusters are applied to the gilded pillars, most often the burnished gold is left bare (see for example, Kausland, 2017, p. 282 and Peter Tångeberg, *Mittelalterliche Holzskulpturen und Altarschreine in Schweden, Studien zu Form, Material und Technik*, Stockholm, 1986, p. 225).
  15. Fjell, 1974, p. 18.
  16. Johan Sebastian Welhaven, “Billeder fra Bergenskysten (1842)”, *Reisebilleder og Digte*, Christiania, 1851, p. 155.
  17. Arne Bugge Amundsen, “Reformed Church Interiors in Southern Norway, 1537–1700”, in *The Protracted Reformation in Northern Norway. Introductory Studies*, ed. Lars Ivar Hansen, R. Heisedal Bergesen, and I. Hage, Stamsund, 2014, pp. 73–92. See also, Christie, *I*, 1973, pp. 12–18.
  18. For a comparative analysis of the survival rates of medieval church furnishing in Lutheran Germany and the European North, see Justin Kroesen, “The Survival of Medieval Furnishings in Lutheran Churches. Notes towards a Comparison Between Germany and Scandinavia”, *Iconographisk Post. Nordisk Tidsskrift för Bildtolkning/Nordic Review of Iconography*, No. 3–4, 2018, pp. 4–39.
  19. Kroesen, 2018, p. 8.
  20. Kroesen, 2018, p. 8.
  21. Turid Kooter Wilson, *Restaureringsrapport, Riksantikvarens Vestlandsatelier*, Bergen, 1968, p. 9.
  22. For iconoclastic damages and meaning, see C. Pamela Graves, “From an Archeology of Iconoclasm to an Anthropology of the Body”, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 2008, pp. 35–60.
  23. For a discussion around preservation of medieval art in regards to the concept of “non-essential” religious objects, cultural memory, and the slowness of cultural and religious change in Lutheran Europe, see Caroline Walker Bynum, “Are Things ‘Indifferent’? How Objects Change Our Understanding of Religious History”, *German History*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2016, pp. 88–112.
  24. The vicar/priest Claus Reimers’ protocol from 1844 in Fjell, 1974, p. 19.
  25. Eva Lotsberg, *Fjell kyrkje 125 år: 1874–1999: jubileumsskrift*, Bergen, 1999, p. 15.
  26. Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen, “Image, Time and Ritual: The Motif of the Last Supper in Lutheran Churches”, in *Images and Objects in Ritual Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Northern and Central Europe*, ed. Krista Kodres and Anu Mänd, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 68–88.
  27. Wangsgaard Jürgensen, 2013, p. 70.
  28. Wangsgaard Jürgensen, 2013, p. 70.

29. Amundsen, 2014, p. 84. Amundsen also mentions 10 catechism altarpieces in churches in Østfold county from the early 1700s. In the north, nine catechism altarpieces dating from the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century were reported in 1933 (Anders Bugge, "Kunsten langs leden i Nord", *Foreningen til Norske Fortidsmerkere Bevaring Årsberetning* 1932, Oslo, 1933, pp. 1–53, pp. 37, 50).
30. Wangsgaard Jürgensen, 2013, p. 70. For the use of the *Last Supper* motif in Norwegian churches, Christie, *II*, 1973, pp. 84–105, and its combination with scriptures on Norwegian altarpieces, Christie, *I*, pp. 108–113.
31. For a general introduction to the church history of Norway, see Bernt T. Oftestad, Tarald Rasmussen, and Jan Schumacher (eds.), *Norsk kirkehistorie*, Oslo, 2007.
32. Kvam, 1989, pp. 19–23 and Fjell, 1974, pp. 12–15.
33. Kvam, 1989, p. 22.
34. Kvam, 1989, p. 32. Several of the letters are kept in the Riksantikvaren Archive, under *Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
35. Letter of March 1922, from a third-party person to Riksantikvaren, Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
36. Kvam, 1989, p. 32.
37. Letter of March 23 2022 in Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
38. Kvam, 1989, p. 32.
39. Letter from Benjamin Vogt, April 2023 in Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
40. Fjell, 1974, p. 41.
41. Arnljot Gjelstein, "Det gamle altarskåpet i Fjell kyrkje", in *Frå Fjon til Fusa 1980. Årbok for Nord- og Midthordaland Sogelag*, ed. Conrad Clausen, Vol. 33, Bergen, S 65–75, 1980, pp. 70–71.
42. Kooter Wilson, 1968, p. 9 (Gjelstein, 1980, p. 71 writes that the repaint took place in the 1920s).
43. Kooter Wilson, 1968, p. 3. Gjelstein, 1980, p. 71.
44. Engelstad, 1936.
45. Fjell, 1974, p. 41. Gjelstein, 1980, p. 65.
46. Letter of July 26 1923, Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
47. Letter from Riksantikvaren 1927, Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
48. Letter of October 1924, Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
49. Letter of November 1924, Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
50. Letter from the priest from the years 1924, 1926, 1928, in Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
51. Letter in Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
52. The figure is missing arms, crucifix, and polychromy. Its high-quality carving, together with elements such as a slightly tilted head adorned with a crown of thorns, crossed feet, and broad loincloth with a roll over the hip and parallel folds, places it as a product from the second half of the thirteenth century. For reference material, see Martin Blindheim, *Gothic Painted Wooden Sculpture in Norway 1220–1350*, Oslo, 2004, pp. 37–41.
53. Kvam, 1989, p. 34. Shipment letter from priest Oluf Jensen, May 12th 1933 in Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
54. Letters from Riksantikvaren 1933, and letter from Erdmann, July 1935 in Riksantikvaren Archive/*Gartland (Gløshaug) kirke*. Snr. 22/323-00/1729.
55. The head of the conservation studio later recaptured the conservation treatment in an essay, where he interpreted and cited the Mattheus verses on the panels wrong, the correct verses are Matt. 11: 28 (not Matt: 11: 2–8) and John 6: 56 (and not John 6: 6–6). Bjørn Kaland, "Kriterier for konservering, restaurering og undersøkelser av middelalderkunst", in *Kirkekunsten Leder – Hvordan bevare middelalderkunsten i de norske kirker*, Seminar arrangert av Riksantikvarens restaureringsatelier 1984, ed. Stein et al., Oslo, 1987, pp. 51–65. See also the original report: Turi Kooter Wilson, *Restaureringsrapport*, Bergen, 1968.
56. Kooter Wilson, 1968, p. 4
57. Kooter Wilson, 1968, p. 6
58. The brand "Bums farve- og lakkfjerner," produced by Dyrup.
59. Kooter Wilson, 1968, pp. 8–11.
60. Gjelstein, 1980, p. 70.
61. Kaland, 1987, p. 53.
62. The Gløshaug wings were treated by the National Museum in Copenhagen in 2003 (Lis Sejr Eriksen, *Gløshaug kirke, Nord-Trøndelag Fylke, Norge. Istandsettelse av middelalderlig bemaling på to alterfløje*, rapport Nationalmuseet Bevaringsavdelingen, Brede, 2003) and the Norddal altarpiece was treated by NIKU in 2019 (T. Olstad, C. Spaarschuh, and C. Løvdal, A 317 Norddal kirke. Undersøkelser av middelalder-alterskapet med tilhørende 1600-tallsramme. Hovedrapport. NIKU oppdragsrapport 87/2017).
63. For the origin and date of the *Norddal altarpiece*, see Kausland, 2017, pp. 30, 43–99.
64. Mirjam Hoffmann, *Studien zur Lübecker Tafelmalerei von 1450 bis 1520*, Kiel, 2015, pp. 241–243.
65. Elisabeth Pye, *Past: Issues in Conservation for Archeology and Museums*, London, 2001, p. 65. For further references to contemporary theories incorporating temporally distinct elements into conservation methodologies, see Ebert, 2019, pp. 19–21.

## Summary

This article follows the afterlife of two fragmented late medieval altarpieces in Norway, whose original function was for a long time obscured after years of private ownership. The study takes an object biography approach, where sections of documentary evidence are pieced together with technical findings and historical context to explore the altarpieces' shifting functions during long, eventful lifespans. The Reformation and shift to Lutheran Protestantism did not pose any immediate threat to the Catholic objects, despite featuring non-biblical imagery. Instead, church renovation and subsequent transfers from ecclesiastic to profane locations became critical factors in decisions to alter their original appearances. The *Fjell altarpiece* was first transformed into a Lutheran altarpiece in the nineteenth century, before ending up as a piece of utilitarian furniture in a private house. *Gløshaug* was transposed from its life

as an altarpiece in a modest village church to an object of art and curiosa in a rich art collection housed in an upper-class mansion in England. This article shows how serendipity not only plays a role in the re-emergence of repurposed medieval liturgical art but also in their conservation treatments. Pages from the objects' chronologies stand unfilled, only to be revealed after treatment has begun and decisions cannot be reversed. From this, we might deduce that reaching the state of original appearance may not always be the best objective during a restoration, and that perhaps chance will never cease to play a role, regardless of how comprehensively we think we have documented an object's life.

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