Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in Tallinn and the conservation of its carved-wood iconostasis

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Abstract:
Originally belonging to St. Michael's Convent of the Cistercian Order, the Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in Tallinn was given to an Orthodox congregation in 1716. The treasured so-called Slavic Baroque iconostasis, made in the 1720s by the adept Russian craftsman Ivan Zarudny, is one of the most impressive of its kind. It is over 15 metres long; carved of wood, gilded and painted. It also contains 34 icons on wooden supports. The iconostasis has a long and complex history of conservation. The last major conservation works began in 2000, and are soon to be completed in 2010. The aim of the conservation is to prepare a detailed documentation of the iconostasis, to clean all the surfaces, to consolidate the gilding and the polychrome layers, to conserve the icons and homogenize the view of all details.

Keywords: conservation, iconostasis, icon, polychrome wood, Slavic Baroque, gilding, bronze paint, Carbopol/Ethomeen gel.

Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in Tallinn

The Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, Suur-Kloostri 14, Tallinn, was originally built in the first half of the 13th century. It then belonged to St. Michael's Convent of the Cistercian Order. During the “Swedish times” in Estonia, in the 17th century, it was used by the Swedish garrison but after the Russian victory over Sweden in the Great Northern War (1709), became the Russian garrison church and was given to an Orthodox congregation in 1716. At the moment it is an Estonian Orthodox church [Tamm, 2002].

The Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord has for the most part retained its original medieval form, save for the addition of a Baroque spire in the 18th century and early 19th century exterior renovations. In the 14th century the Church was expanded to accommodate both the growing population of the city as well as the growing number of nuns in the adjacent convent. The Church at this time was rebuilt in the late Gothic style, and gained the measurements one can see today.

In 1776, the roof of the Church was reconstructed and a Baroque spire was added. The modern view of the Church dates from the years 1827-1830. The interior of the Church had by then undergone some major repairs.

Keywords: conservation, iconostasis, icon, polychrome wood, Slavic Baroque, gilding, bronze paint, Carbopol/Ethomeen gel.
A cupola was added to the roof. Inside, a new floor was laid, raising the ground level 142 cm from the original surface. The original floor had been covered with gravestones, which were probably taken away from the Church during the laying of the new flooring. The windows were enlarged in the Classicist style. The main entrance was also enlarged and a small annex was added. During these renovations, the old balconies and nuns' lodges on the inside walls were demolished. As a result the space inside the church was extended. The walls were then painted white [Mäeväli, 1994].

In 1895, the wall-paintings were completed. They depict the four evangelists and different old Orthodox priests of higher ranks. The wall-paintings are quite unusual, and today seem somewhat scary and expressionist. Even without knowing the date, one can say that they are clearly quite recent additions to the interior decorative scheme. The facade of the church shows the exposed traces of the Medieval windows which were situated a little higher in the wall than the current ones. Also, one can see a part of the original (13th century) southern portal. The current application of paint on the facade dates from the year 2003 when the exterior walls were repainted in yellow.

Interior of the church
The interior of the church is very eclectic. It evolved over the course of 300 years and bears the traditional features of the Orthodox Church together with Lutheran and Catholic features. In addition to the aforementioned expressionist wall-paintings, there are very many different objects in the church. There are icons painted strictly according to the Byzantine rules; religious paintings in the Romantic style both on wood panels and canvas; photo-reproductions of the well-known icons and framed reproductions of religious paintings. The icons could be of any age – it is difficult to date them without an expert opinion. Romantic paintings depicting the Virgin Mary with Child could be 100 years old or may be more recent. Photo-reproductions of the icons and paintings, which look like posters, are clearly contemporary. The Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord additionally houses the tomb of Bishop Platon, the first Estonian to be proclaimed a saint, who died in 1919 and was buried in the middle of the Church.

Iconostasis
Since the Church became Orthodox in the first half of the 18th century, its interior was changed to serve the needs of the Orthodox liturgics. Inside, you can still see a large iconostasis donated by Peter the Great before his death (Figure 1). The carved-wood gilded iconostasis of so-called Slavic Baroque style is one of the most impressive of its kind in Estonia. It was constructed and decorated in 1720s by the adept Russian craftsman Ivan Zarudny [Kaljundi, 2000]. Iconostasis is a purely Orthodox detail of the interior, but this particular one in the Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord is very unusual. It is quite Western in style and is decorated with a mantled pulpit in the centre. The inclusion of a pulpit is both unconventional and interesting within the context of an Orthodox church as traditionally the priest preaches from floor level in front of the iconostasis.

Conservation work on the iconostasis was previously carried out several times in the 19th and 20th centuries [Kaljundi, 2000]. The current conservation process of the iconostasis is an ongoing project, which started in 2000 and is due to reach its conclusion within the year 2010. Various conservators from different Estonian institutions are working on the project. The iconostasis is over 15 metres long, consisting of carved wood which was subsequently gilded and painted. It also contains 34 icons, painted on wooden supports and mounted within frames. Therefore, there is work for a multi-disciplinary team of wood, polychrome wood, painting and metal conservators.
Condition before conservation
When the conservation process started in 2000, the condition of the iconostasis was very poor. The constructional elements of the iconostasis were damaged by cracks, augmented by the damage caused by previous consolidation with wax. Most of the metal joints holding the individual constructional elements together were rusted. The water gilding, consisting of various gold types, such as gold leaf on red bole and silver leafing, was in a rather inhomogeneous deteriorated state derived not only by the passage of time but also the active usage of the iconostasis. As a result the gilding was partly missing in some areas and the more preserved parts showed signs of wear, abrasion or peeling (Figure 2). The main reason for most of the cracks and flaking gilding was that several decades ago central heating had been installed in the Church, causing a massive drying-out of the wood. The majority of the gilded parts were also covered with bronze repaint in the middle of 20th century in order to “renovate the gold”. This non original surface layer had later changed in colour almost to black. The paint layers of the icons had also been damaged and old varnish layers had darkened. The whole iconostasis was quite dirty, and its upper parts were thickly covered with dust [Sibul, 2000]. The oil lamps, hanging in front of the iconostasis made the gilded surfaces somewhat oily, thus attracting more dust to these areas.

Target of conservation and problems arising
The aim of conservation was to prepare detailed documentation of the iconostasis, clean all the surfaces, consolidate the gilding and the polychrome layers, restore the icons and homogenize the view of all details.
The process has been very problematic due to the considerable damage and its complexity. The larger question at issue was how to maintain such an important object, causing minimum harm to the original material and bringing maximum benefit for the church members and the priests. Attention was also given to conservation ethics. As it happens with any important object, certain central issues were raised which needed to be addressed before work began. These included: To conserve or to restore? To reconstruct the missing parts of sculptural decorations or to leave the damaged areas visible? Where are and what should the limits be? The Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, where the iconostasis is situated, is an active church. Masses are held regularly on Sundays and other religious holidays. This means that conservators had not only to care for the preservation of the iconostasis, but also of the restoration of its functionality and its aesthetic beauty. The priests use the iconostasis daily; the two big imperial gates and most of the side-doors being opened and closed numerous times during worship.

Conservation

The decision making process has been difficult. The structure of the iconostasis has been strengthened, but no lost sculptural details have been reconstructed in order so as not to introduce too much new material into the original. The grounding and gilding layers have been consolidated using a product of Russian origin called VA-2EHA. This material is obtained by the copolymerization of vinyl acetate with 2-Ethylhexyl acrylate, and possesses the good qualities of an acrylate adhesive. VA-2EHA is transparent, stable and elastic even in colder conditions [Sibul, 2004].
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Figure 3: Detail photo: cleaning test © Kanut Conservation Centre

Figure 4: Detail photo: cleaning test © Kanut Conservation Centre
Unfortunately, during the chemical and mechanical cleaning of the gilded surface, some gilding has inevitably been destroyed together with all the dust and bronze paint. In order to remove the latter, a solvent gel consisting of Carbopol EZ2, Ethomeen C-25, acetone and benzyl alcohol was used (Figures 3 and 4). The lacunae in the gilt surfaces have been filled with a ground layer, which gave additional consolidation to the flaking gilding (Figures 5 and 6). At this stage the application of replacement gold leaf was considered. This is the usual procedure in Russia when restoring gilded ecclesiastical objects. However, it was decided to follow the idea of minimal intervention and the reversibility principle that is predominant in Northern Europe. The newly ground surfaces have not been re-gilded instead only minimal retouches with watercolours were carried out (Figure 7). Retouching did help the iconostasis to look somewhat more homogeneous, but the result was still not satisfactory. Since there different types of gold and silver (underneath the gold) had originally been used on the iconostasis, the watercolour retouch did not look equally “good” on all surfaces. Thus, in some places (for example, on imperial gates) retouching with Mica gold powder in dammar varnish was also allowed (Figure 8).

Figure 5: Detail photo: ground layers © Kanut Conservation Centre

Conservation materials used on gilded surfaces of the iconostasis:

- Consolidation: VA-2EHA (15-20% water solutions),
- General cleaning: acetone, White Spirit, ethanol, distilled water,
- Removing the bronze paint: a solvent gel consisting of Carbopol EZ2, Ethomen C-25, acetone and benzyl alcohol,
- Ground application: chalk, VA-2HA (10-15% water solutions),
- Retouching: watercolours, Mica gold powder (“Mica Powder”, Majestic Gold),
Figure 6: Detail photo: ground layers © Kanut Conservation Centre

Figure 7: Detail photo: watercolour retouching © Kanut Conservation Centre
The cleaning and conservation of the iconostasis finished in 2009, but those working on the project understand that there is still much to do:

1. Since the conservation process has lasted for nearly 10 years, the details that were first cleaned of dust have already collected new dust layers, and now look somewhat darker than the parts of the iconostasis which were cleaned later.

2. During the long conservation process, many different people worked on the iconostasis, and every single one of them has his or her individual working method, differing slightly from their co-workers. Undoubtedly, each and every conservator had tried to suppress their individuality as much as possible, and follow the general concept and protocols agreed upon before the project began. However, the results of practical applications still inevitably differ.

3. Differences also arose from the chosen retouching techniques and materials. The watercolour retouches were preferred because these would be easy to remove if deemed necessary. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to achieve a good imitation of a golden surface with watercolours. Additionally, it appeared that different retouched parts of the iconostasis have different colour tones and require a certain alignment. Besides, watercolours fade over time and may need monitoring and possibly a repeated application in the future.

Thus, although the conservation project has for the majority come to an end, the conservators are now returning to the gilded surfaces of the iconostasis to provide a more comprehensive homogeneous look for the whole object.

**Conclusion**

The iconostasis from the Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in Tallinn is definitely a precious gem in the Estonian ecclesiastical heritage. After the extensive conservation process is completed, the iconostasis will be no more in danger of losing its golden glory. Gilding has been fixed and the darkened surfaces have been cleaned of dirt and dust while still preserving their patina. The conservation project has gone hand-in-hand with a detailed research into the history of the Ivan Zarudny iconostasis and its previous conservation treatment. While giving more information to the conservators, this will hopefully be used to help to raise the
public awareness of the value of the iconostasis and the needs of the Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in Tallinn. This is not only an important Medieval building in its own right and a symbol of its time, but is also a unique ark for this unique iconostasis – a piece of art that the whole Estonian nation is proud of.

Acknowledgements
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References


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<td>Hauptstr. 41 – 47, Aichstetten D-88317, Germany Tel: +49 756 591 120, Fax: +49 756 516 06, E-mail: <a href="mailto:info@kremer-pigmente.de">info@kremer-pigmente.de</a></td>
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Biographies
Maria Lillepruun (Polychrome Objects Conservator, author for correspondence) has studied painting conservation in the Estonian Academy of Arts, at the Faculty of Conservation and Heritage Protection (2002-2006). Nowadays, she continues her MA education in the same institution, as well as works for the Conservation Centre Kanut, which is a state conservation centre based in Tallinn. Maria Lillepruun specializes in conservation of various polychrome objects. (Conservation Centre Kanut, Pikk 2, Tallinn 10123, Estonia, www.kanut.ee. maria.lillepruun@kanut.ee.)

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