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Refectories in the Castle of the Teutonic Order in Malbork - Discussion on the permissible range of conservation and restoration works.

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Abstract

The work of the outstanding German conservator Conrad Steinbrecht (1849-1923) is the basis for discussion on the permissible extent of recent conservation and restoration treatment of the Convent and the Great Refectories at Malbork Castle. Steinbrecht propagated the rule of homogeneity of style, removed modern overlays, but in decorative layer his contribution was heterogeneous. Steinbrecht's project fulfilled an ideological function for Hohenzollerns and for the propaganda of the Third Reich against Poland. War damage in 1945, a fire in the roof in 1959, and the threat of structural damage due to the political climate after the 2nd World War sealed the fate of Steinbrecht's decorations. In the 1960s and 1970s all the decoration glorifying the power of the Deutsche Orden was removed. Overcoming old animosities and prejudices was essential for the decision to return to Steinbrecht's aesthetically coherent, though historically controversial vision. Perfect archive materials enabled a large programme of restoration works that has brought that vision back to life.

Keywords

Conservation-restoration, reconstruction, Malbork Castle, Conrad Steinbrecht,

Historical background

The Teutonic Order castle in Malbork (Marienburg), erected between 1274 and 1457, is one of the largest mediaeval fortresses in Europe and a splendid example of the military architecture of that period. From 1309 to 1457 it was the headquarters of the Deutsche Orden, or the Teutonic Knights. It was bought by Polish King Casimir IV Jagiellon and for 300 years remained a royal property. After the first partition of Poland (1772) Malbork became part of Prussia. Free of historical sentiment, Prussian king Frederick the Great used the castle as a military depot and granary. At the end of the 18th century, there were even discussions whether the castle should be torn down and the building materials recycled in the construction of new army barracks.

The castle, however, aroused the interest of a new generation of German Romantics. Public opinion was stirred by an article entitled "Examples of a desire for destruction in Prussia" published in 1803 in Berlin by a young poet, Max von Schenkendorf. The Germans were clearly looking for historical symbolism adequate to their new national aspirations. In 1816, when the Napoleonic wars were over, the Board of the Reconstruction of Marienburg Castle (Schlossbauverwaltung Marienburg) was set up, and up to the second half of the 19th century, a 'romantic' restoration of the castle took place, in line with the neo-Gothic trend in national and religious art. However, Karin Friedrich, a prominent German specialist on the subject, stresses that it was Prussian patriotism and not German nationalism that the Teutonic Knights' legend referred to.

Restoration works accelerated in 1882, when Conrad Steinbrecht took charge of the Castle Renovation Board. Until 1922 he conducted a very intensive rebuilding and restoration project with strong ideological overtones. The works were financed mainly by the Prussian state. The imperial family took a keen interest in the castle and Kaiser Wilhelm II visited it over 30 times during his reign, helping it to become a bulwark of Bismarckian propaganda for the alleged superiority of the German civilisation over that of the Slavs. Steinbrecht's pupil and successor, Bernard Schmidt, in charge of the Castle until the end of the 2nd World War, turned out to be much more conservative in his approach.

In 1933 the Swastika appeared over the castle. Malbork became a symbol of the German 'Drang nach Osten' and a frequent venue for Nazi pageants. For Hitler's 47th birthday on April 20th, 1936, a massive ceremony was held at the castle, where Germany's "Hitlerjugend" swore an oath of allegiance to the Führer. In November 1939, the Danzig Gauleiter Albert Forster announced the restoration of the province of West Prussia in its old boundaries. May 1940 saw another ceremony: 'the welcoming' of Banderia Prutenorum – the copies of Teutonic banners taken from the Royal Castle of Wawel in Cracow, the former capital of the Kingdom of Poland. In September 1941, the Führer himself paid a visit.

In 1945, the castle suffered serious damage caused by Soviet military operations, during which the east wing was particularly devastated. Further destruction followed in 1959 in a serious fire in the roof of the west and north wings of the Middle Castle. Progressive cracking of the West Wing walls threatened a major structural disaster. In May 1959, a committee was set up to prepare a detailed plan of rebuilding and restoration works and to supervise their progress. In 1961 the Castle Museum was established. Also in that period the walls and ceilings of the representational rooms started to be painted white. Since the refectories were used for various exhibitions, restoration work reflected that aim. In the Great Refectory, 'the effects of Steinbrecht's negative work were removed and the wooden wall panelling along with chandeliers and wall lamps taken down. The paintings from the beginning of 20th century, showing scenes from the Order's history and coats of arms, were plastered over and the walls whitewashed. On the wall previously showing battle scenes of "the Teutonic Knights eager to stop the insolent pagan



Prussians”, one could now see an iconic Polish painting - “The Battle of Grunwald” by Jan Matejko, showing the famous 1410 battle in which the Order suffered a fateful defeat (Figure 1).

All the elements associated with the Teutonic Order and its glorification were either hidden or removed and the same fate befell other “German souvenirs”, such as the ‘Last Supper’ painting in the Convent Refectory. In judging those actions one must take into account the trauma of the war and earlier anti-Polish policies in 19th century Prussia, when it occupied part of Poland after the partitions that removed the country from the European political map. In that vein, the perception of the Order’s role was negatively told both by historians and the works of numerous Polish novelists and artists. This general anti-German sentiment was exploited and fueled by Poland’s Communist regime (fortunately much less radical than the Kremlin that ordered, for example, complete demolition of the burnt-out Teutonic castle in Königsberg, regarded as a jarring symbol of Prussian militarism).



Figure 1: The exhibition of “The Battle of Grunwald” by Jan Matejko in The Great Refectory in 1977. Photography from the archive of The Malbork Castle Museum.

In the 1970s, after West Germany had given up all territorial claims against Poland, the political corset was becoming looser. In 1997, Malbork Castle was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list as an outstanding example of the evolution of philosophy and practice of conservation and restoration.

Conrad Steinbrecht

With old animosities and prejudices growing weaker, it became possible to interpret anew the achievements of Conrad Steinbrecht (1884-1923), a prominent figure of the German school of restoration. Using a method called ‘scientific restoration, Steinbrecht developed a vision of a ‘model’ 15th century Teutonic Order fortress. To realise it, he employed a wide range of means: archaeological and architectural research, field trips, archival sources and old building techniques. He stripped off modern architectural additions to achieve homogeneity of style.

Beside restoration work par excellence, such as that on the medieval paintings representing religious scenes, Steinbrecht did not hesitate to resort to historicism. Examples are the paintings of scenes from the life of the Teutonic Order and the almost theatrical display invoking the character of particular rooms at the medieval period, complete with copies of Gothic furniture, stained-glass windows, mannequins of the knights and monks. A type of Gesamtkunstwerk emerged, characterised by a certain elegance and sophisticated forms.

Generally, Steinbrecht's attitude to the Middle Castle (e.g. the Great Refectory) is different from the earlier, more scientific approach during his work on the High Castle (e.g. the Convent Refectory). A more artistic, free restoration was allowed, which - nevertheless - still retained some faithfulness to the original. That work fitted well the historicist trend characteristic of the fin de siècle, encouraging modernistic transposition of the object in the historic or even nationalist spirit. Ideology was therefore combined in the project with the historical and analytical approach.

Therefore, Steinbrecht's work at Malbork had in fact syncretised these two approaches. Interestingly, the etymology of the verb to syncretize is 'an alliance against a common enemy', and in this case the Castle was to be an ideological weapon used by the Hohenzollerns aimed first of all at Poland and then at Russian pan-Slavism. Despite all this, Steinbrecht's contribution still remains a benchmark in scientific research, craftsmanship and artistry.

Worth noting is the iconographic plan of the refectory in the late 19th century. Five long tables feature in the general design of the room in such a way that the sixth one was the table of The Last Supper, painted on the wall in 1896 by Hermann Schaper. The message was that diners were God's guest and thus they were invited to his table. The painting itself is a compilation of various references to Tuscan refectories and were the main decorative element of the Convent Refectory.

In 1894 the east wall of the Refectory was decorated with the coats of arms of the Kaiser, his consort and the king of Wirttemberg (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The Convent Refectory at the turn of the 19th century.
Postcard from the archive of The Malbork Castle Museum.

The Great Refectory, built most probably between 1335 and 1341, is the largest room of the castle (15m x 30m x 9m). It has retained its splendid original Gothic architecture, although its function kept changing. Since 1457, commemorating the homage paid here by the Order's master to the Polish king Casimir IV Jagiellon, the room was known as the Royal Hall; after the partitions of Poland, it served for military parades, a storeroom and during the Napoleonic wars – a military hospital. After the 'romantic' restoration, it was turned into a Gothic "curiosité". Steinbrecht's creativity made it into a representative throne hall of the German Kaiser. Finally, the after-war 'purification' adopted it as an exhibition venue.

Steinbrecht's work in the Great Refectory is particularly interesting because of its wide scope. The paintings he commissioned corresponded with earlier Gothic decoration, the remainder of which he found in the middle arcade of the north wall. It was a three-part composition depicting the Order's raids into the Old Prussia. Style-wise, the new scenes were in line with the former Gothic paintings, but showed the conquest of the pagan Old Prussia by the Order as a national war. Steinbrecht's creation, realised after the outburst of the 1st World War, was an apotheosis of mission and conquest. The imperial ideology and its drive to impose German civilisation on the people of Vistula Lagoon area, was at the heart of Steinbrecht's decoration design in the Great Refectory (Figure 3).



Figure 3: The Great Refectory in 1916, after the end of the Steinbrecht's works.
Photography from the archive of The Malbork Castle Museum.

Restoration 100 years after Steinbrecht

Malbork was inscribed in the World Heritage list not only for its architecture and role in European, and especially Polish-Teutonic history, but also because of its significance as an outstanding example of the art of conservation. Overcoming the historical 'burden' was crucial for the decision by the directors of the Castle Museum to restore Steinbrecht's vision. An additional economic incentive was its aesthetic appeal to tourists, an essential ingredient of a sustainable future for the castle. Son et lumière spectacles are a very important source of income and, in a way, a continuation of the historical shows that Steinbrecht introduced to the castle. After a hundred years credible "restoration of restoration" was possible thanks to the very good documentation kept by German restorers and diligently continued by their Polish successors.

The Convent Refectory, 2005/2006

Fortunately the Convent Refectory escaped major damage during WWII. Its furniture survived intact after the war, however the windows were destroyed by shelling and render within the window niches was damaged too. The bronze plaque with the Kaiser's speech was taken by the Russians as scrap metal for

the military industry. The short period when the Soviet Red Army stayed at the castle resulted in surprisingly little damage with only some ‘graffiti’ and holes from handgun fire.

In 1960, as a part of the adaptation of the Refectory into an exhibition room, the walls were painted white. Long tables, with their tops made of single 8 metre long boards, were removed from the room. They were cut into smaller pieces and used to make other furniture. Some fragments ended up in the castle’s storerooms, but many simply disappeared.

Until 2005 the whole decoration of the walls and ceiling of the Refectory was covered by white paint (Figure 4). The main damage was caused during the preparation process prior to overpainting in the 1960s. The paintwork became discoloured all over and the highlight modelling was lost. Recent treatment included removal of white overpaint, the restoration and partial reconstruction of Steinbrecht’s plasters and paint layers of the ribs. The ‘Last Supper’, painted in 1896 by Hermann Schaper, was gradually reintegrated and the main scene of Christ and the Apostles highlighted by setting it out against a darker background. The restoration of nearly completely indistinguishable parts of the painting, such as the faces of a few Disciples, their hands or the items on the table posed a particular difficulty. Detailed photographs were not available and a sketch by Schaper for the ‘Grand Masters’ Homage’ was used to paint the faces and hands of the Disciples. The techniques of transformation and imposition of photographs were used here.

Crucial for the reconstruction of the furniture, especially the tables from the Refectory, were Steinbrecht’s original design, saved fragments, which underwent dendrochronological tests, and pre- and post-war photographs. Experts examined similar medieval tables that served as models for Steinbrecht’s design, located in Lueneburg, Lower Saxony.



Figure 4: The Convent Refectory before the beginning of conservation and restoration works in 2005.

The Great Refectory, 2006/2007

The foundation of the castle's west wing rests on pine beams set in the muddy soil along the river Nogat. With the passage of time, the ground water level has lowered and the timber began to rot. This has resulted in cracking of the walls and ceilings, first observed in the 16th century.

Through the initiative of Alexander Ferdinand von Quast, the first State Conservator of Prussia and until 1876, the director of works at the castle. The sinking west wall of the Refectory was reinforced with iron anchors. The situation became critical in the last century, when in 1959 a fire in the roof made a structural disaster more likely, despite having had a new steel roof structure fitted. In the early 1980s, the Refectory was closed while exhaustive geological and structural tests were carried out. In 1998, as part of remedial works, the western wall was supported by a new footing and the walls were held together with steel anchors, which made it possible to start the conservation work to the interior.

The walls and ceilings of the Great Refectory, as mentioned earlier, were regularly painted white from the 1960s (Figures 5-6). An important exception was the painting of the Coronation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.



Figure 5: The Convent Refectory in 2006, after the end of conservation and restoration works.



Figure 6: The Great Refectory before the beginning of conservation and restoration works in 2005.

The floor in the room was made of concrete with under-floor heating. It replaced a marble floor, removed during the foundation reinforcement works.

All the windows had their pre-war glazing removed prior to the structural stabilisation. The window tracery was cracked in many places due to tensions and wall movement, as was the door and window joinery.

Oak wall panels, fitted in Steinbrecht's time all around the room and into which the Kaiser's throne was integrated, were mostly destroyed or lost. Only the throne itself, along with a few dozen panels survived in the store rooms of the Castle Museum.

The Malbork Castle Museum specified clearly the aim of the works were to highlight the original architectural elements of the Great Refectory, incorporating the restoration vision of Conrad Steinbrecht. This also acknowledges and partly accepts the effects of the passage of time and irreparable changes caused by damage during the war as well as in the post-war years.

Archival documentation was gathered and re-filed. Old photographs provided valuable material for comparative research and restoration work. Old coats of white paint were removed from the Refectory's walls and ceiling. Figurative paintings, coats of arms, polychromes on the vault ribs, render, in fact all the effects of Steinbrecht's programme were exposed and restored or reconstructed.

The Gothic painting of the Coronation of the Blessed Virgin Mary received special treatment. In 1916 it was restored and partly re-painted by F. Schwarting (under Steinbrecht's direction) and the effects of that work were recognised as equal to the value of the original medieval layer. Original (gothic) architectural elements such as corbels, keystones, column bases and capitals were cleaned and stabilized, without the reconstruction of the paint layer. The glazing, fitted after the war, was fully restored, as well as the joinery of the doors and windows from the Steinbrecht's period - including the parchment lining of the main door.

The ceramic floor was reconstructed in line with the pre-war design. An interesting aspect of the work was the restoration of the remainder of the paintwork outside the entrance to the Refectory, showing Hindenburg's defeat of the Russian army in the First World War.

The mosaic above the threshold was destroyed earlier, and rendered over in the 1960s. The surviving negative of the mosaic was exposed along with a few dozen tesserae. An unusual reconstruction procedure was undertaken. The holes remaining from the missing pieces of the mosaic were filled with paint in colours corresponding to the tesserae. The mosaic effect was achieved through the use of painting techniques exclusively.

All the work carried out was precisely documented with photographs and drawings. Additionally, tests were done on the historical mortar and historic paint layers. Six figurative paintings executed by Hermann Schaper and August Oetken on the northern and southern walls were exposed, cleaned and consolidated. Based on archival records, gilded relief elements and missing parts of the composition were reconstructed (Figure 7). When the paintwork on the north wall was being restored, the effects of wall movement were taken into account, as they affected the composition.

Again, thanks to archival photographic records, the adjacent kitchen could be reconstructed to Steibrecht's design. In the granite Gothic columns, supporting the eaves, the fillers used in the 'romantic conservation', were kept as evidence of old conservation techniques.

The Kitchen Master's chamber along with the toilet chamber (gdanisko, dansker) are especially interesting examples of Steinbrecht's philosophy. He decided to keep in this small interior, fragments of medieval painted decorations, and combine them with other elements of the room that were restored in the neo-Gothic style. Just as with other rooms, the post-war coats of white paint were stripped off and the missing or damaged areas of the old decoration restored. The painting of the Crucifixion was cleaned and restored, leaving unchanged Steinbrecht's reconstruction of one half of the scene.



Figure 7: Detail of Hermann Schaper's painting on the north wall of The Great Refectory. From the left – in 1916 (photography from the archive of The Malbork Castle Museum), after the cleaning, after the end of the reconstruction works.

Conclusion

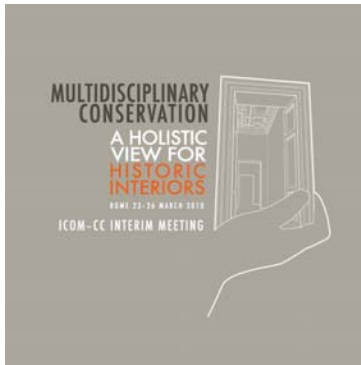
Consultation on the various aspects of the restoration work were continuously maintained with the Museum Board and external experts. Different opinions and sometimes strong sentiments had to be reconciled during the decision-making process, particularly regarding the historicist paintings in the Great Refectory. Incidentally, Steinbrecht himself when negotiating with his superiors and sponsors, was often forced to disregard his motto: 'No step in any other spirit than historical'.

To conclude, the recent programme of works carried out at Malbork Castle aimed to return to more aesthetically appealing forms, although still not completely free from historical controversy. To arrange a compatible marriage between history and aesthetics was the main ambition of the Conservation Board and the conservators. It was also agreed to revive Steinbrecht's vision.

The work in both Refectories of Malbork Castle should be perceived first of all as the restorers' creation. Out of Steinbrecht's project, those elements were preserved or restored that were deemed artistically valuable and playing a crucial role in the whole room concept. Stereotypical approaches to the monument was abandoned. The crucial aim was to achieve a delicate balance between historical and aesthetical aspects. The restoration process itself imposed many solutions. Techniques were used and decisions taken that respected the rule that properly done restoration work should be inconspicuous or, in the broad sense of the word, 'transparent'.

Acknowledgements

Dir. M. Mierzwiński, dr. J. Trupinda, B. Jesionowski, R. Rząd, A. Dobry; Prof. M. Arsyński, dr. K. Pospieszny



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