
HIDDEN PAINTINGS

A POSSIBLE LINK BETWEEN TWO LATE MEDIAEVAL TRIPTYCHS IN NORWAY

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Abstract

This paper describes the process of searching for a possible connection between two late mediaeval triptychs imported from northern Germany to the north of Norway in the 15th century: the Vardø triptych in the NTNU University Museum in Trondheim and the Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes church. Both are attributed to the hanseatic town of Lübeck. Underlying paintings, detected with infrared reflectography, link the two triptychs, through the paintings' similarities in iconography, style and painting technique. A question of reuse for one of the triptychs posed by an art historian in 1936 is discussed. The motives of the four underlying paintings are common, but just the four visible together are seldom found in the surviving material. The Trondenes triptych is the only of the three triptychs having the four motives and originating from Lübeck, or the Lübeck area, which has the motives painted on the outside of the wings. The wings might have been reused.

Keywords: church, art, triptych, late mediaeval, infrared reflectography

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to see if new information may connect two triptychs imported from the northern part of Germany, probably Lübeck, to the north of Norway in the 15th century. In addition, the observations and theories of an art historian from 1936 on the triptych from Trondenes will be discussed in the light of new information gained on the occasion of a conservation project in 2007.

The primary object for this paper is the Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes church, which is a parish church at Harstad in Troms County, Norway. It is Norway's northernmost mediaeval stone church, and one of the largest mediaeval churches of rural Norway. Though frequently referred to as a 13th century church, dating based on dendrochronology places its completion shortly after 1434 [1]. Trondenes served as the main church centre of northern Norway

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in the late mediaeval period. The church was a significant landowner, and the stockfish trade provided a large income. In the late Middle Ages, a large priesthood lived and worked here [1]. Trondenes church is rather well preserved. Six original altars as well as four late mediaeval triptychs, which originally were seven, still exist. Three of them are in the church [1].



Figure 1. The triptych from Trondenes. Wings open. The conservator's examination shows that the sculptures in the upper and lower row most probably are made at the same time. This was questioned by the art historian E. Engelstad in 1936. Photo:©Birger Lindstad,Riksantikvaren, 2007.



Figure 2. The triptych from Vardø. Wings open. Note the sequence of four motives on the wings. On the left wing: The Annunciation, the Adoration, - on the right wing: the Visitation and the Adoration of the magi. Photo © Per E. Fredriksen / NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet

The Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes measures 134 cm (height) x 234 cm (width) x 12 cm (depth), in open position (Figure 1). The theme, visible in open position, is that of the Holy Family: the female family of Saint Mary, along with their children and men. Mary holding Christ is the central and dominating

sculpture in the main upper part of the open shrine. Saint Mary is flanked by female sculptures. In the lower row, there are male half-sculptures. All the sculptures are placed in niches crowned with carved arcades. Gold totally dominates the interior of the triptych. The Annunciation is the painted motive on the outside of the two wings, Gabriel to the left and Saint Mary to the right. The frame shows repeating stencilled decorations of silver flowers with five petals on a red and black background. The wood was identified as oak by visual examination made by the authors. The triptych has been dated back to about 1460 [2]. The Trondenes altarpiece has been documented through conservation treatments and examinations [T.M. Olstad, *A432 Trondenes kirke, Harstad. Rensing og konsolidering av tre senmiddelalder alterskap, to middelalderskulpturer og et krusifiks*, NIKU, Unpublished report, 72/2007, Oslo, 2007; T.M. Olstad and E.Verweij, *Trondenes kirke. Midtre alterskap i koret. Undersøkelser av de underliggende maleriene på dørene*, NIKU, Unpublished report, 58/2011, Oslo, 2011].

The Vardø triptych [Object ID: NTNU University Museum Trondheim T 858] was originally in Vardø church, then an important church, as it was consecrated by the archbishop himself in Trondheim in 1307 [3] (Figures 2 and 3). Vardø is as far north and east as you may come in Norway and was of such importance that a fortress was built there in the 14th century to protect the country from intruders from the east. The triptych was moved to the university museum in Trondheim in 1860 [4]. In the open position, the Vardø altarpiece measures 129 cm (height) x 230 cm (width) x 18 cm (depth). The corpus holds three sculptures, each in a niche. In the centre, the Virgin holding the Christ Child, flanked by Saint Catherine to the right and a male saint to the left, can be observed. Gold dominates the interior of the triptych. The inside panels of the two altar wings are divided into four pictures: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Adoration and the Adoration of the Magi. The motive on the outer doors shows two standing saints. The frame shows repeating stencilled decorations of four-petaled silver flowers on a red background. The wood is oak, and the triptych is dated back to around 1460 [4]. The Vardø altarpiece has been the subject for research by art historians and conservators [4-6].

2. The art historian's observations and theories on the Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes church

The Norwegian art historian Eivind Engelstad was, in 1936, the first to publish a catalogue on the mediaeval art in Norway [2]. Although there has been research on mediaeval church art in Norway after Engelstad, no art historian has repeated the comprehensive work he did. Engelstad gives the main triptych in Trondenes provenance to Lübeck and attributes the triptych to Bernt Notke, primarily due to the male half-sculptures. Bernt Notke's workshop was active in Lübeck during the second half of the 15th century [4]. Engelstad argues that there is a difference in style between the standing female sculptures in the upper row

and the male half-sculptures in the lower row in the triptych. In his opinion, the female sculptures are less typical for Notke's style.



Figure 3. The Vardø triptych. The paintings on the inside of the wings. Photo ©Daniela Pawel, NTNU, 2015.

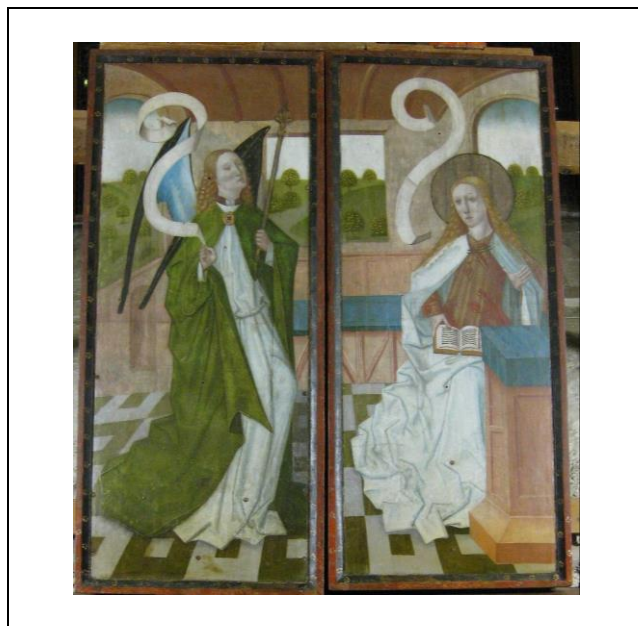


Figure 4. The Trondenes triptych. The secondary paintings visible today on the outside of the wings. Photo: © Edwin Verweij NIKU 2009.

Engelstad observes that, underneath today's visible paintings on the wings, each of the paintings is divided horizontally in two parts by a painted frame, making two paintings with a golden background on each of the two wings. He describes a halo on the lower part of the right door (viewer's right) and a font ribbon on the upper part to the left. Engelstad says that either the piece is one of Notke's early works – which would explain the expression of the female sculptures – or it is an older unfinished triptych upon which Notke added the male half-sculptures, painted the predella and repainted the paintings on the wings. Engelstad adds that if the half-sculptures were added later, the background in the lower row must have been gilded at the same time, as the incision lines for the gold perfectly match the sculptures. Having given his theory, Engelstad adds that, due to the condition of the paintings, it is not certain whether today's paintings are by Notke. However, details in the draperies seem to date the paintings back to Notke's period, according to Engelstad (Figure 4). Engelstad estimates the production period of the Trondenes triptych to be late in the 1450s or in the early 1460s, and possibly ended about 1465.

3. Method

Information from the conservators' examination of the two triptychs, as well as published information on them, along with the study of late mediaeval triptychs from Lübeck in general, are the main information sources for this paper, and they are used to compare triptychs and paintings to satisfy the aims of the paper.

4. Examinations and results

4.1. The conservator's assessment based on the art historian's theory

Numerous objects have earlier been attributed to Notke, but today only a few are still attributed to him or his workshop [7]. No art historian after Engelstad has supported the attribution of the Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes to Notke. The art historian von Bonsdorff gives Lüneburg in Germany as the provenance for the Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes [8], while the art historian Miriam Hoffmann agrees with Engelstad and argued for Lübeck as the provenance in her PhD thesis, *Studien zur Lübecker Tafelmalerei von 1450 bis 1520*, in 2013 [7].

During the conservation process in 2007, NIKU's conservators did not find any information that supported Engelstad's idea of a later added golden background behind the lower row of sculptures. Four of the half-sculptures were taken out and remounted. They fitted perfectly with the incisions on the back, as Engelstad stated in 1936. The haloes are incised and punched on the golden background in the same modality as for the upper female sculptures and the lower half-sculptures.



Figure 5. The Trondenes triptych. Result of the IRR examination of the right door.
Photo: © Edwin Verweij NIKU 2009.

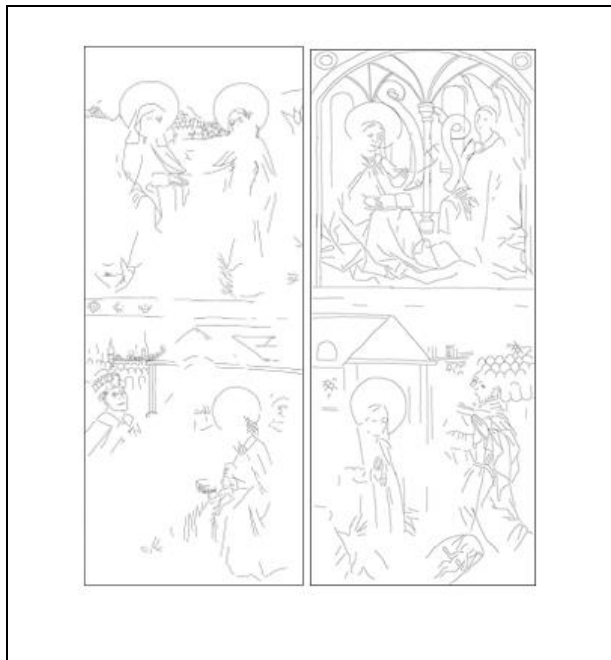


Figure 6. The Trondenes triptych. The traced lines of the infrared reflectography show the underdrawing and dark lines for the hidden Trondenes Paintings. Foto: © Tone M. Olstad NIKU 2009.

In 2009, an infrared reflectography (IRR) examination was executed on the paintings on the doors of the Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes (Figure 5). Infrared reflectography is described as a non-invasive method for studying a painting by looking beneath the visible layers of paint. This allows an examination of the underdrawing as well as changes or pentimenti present in the work.

The IRR examination revealed four underlying paintings recognized as: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Adoration and the Adoration of the Magi (Figure 6). Since underlying paint in various colours is shown in lacunae of the present paintings, it can be deduced that these are not underdrawings for paintings but real paintings. The painted frame horizontally dividing the underlying paintings on each door shows repeating stencilled decorations of silver flowers with four petals. The same four-petal silver flower is found in the lower part of the interior of the corpus. These identical flowers most probably date that part of the interior of the shrine to the first paintings on the doors, not visible today. Engelstad's theory of the lower part as to the male sculptures being added later is thus questioned.

The underlying paintings were immediately connected to the paintings in the Vardø triptych, which depict the same four scenes, visible in Figure 3. However, several questions emerge: Is it significant that these two triptychs share the same four motives? Are these four scenes common in a triptych dated back to the last part of the 15th century and made in Lübeck or the northern part of Germany? The now-hidden paintings in the Trondenes triptych used to be visible when the wings were closed; how likely is it to find those motives on wings visible in a closed position in other triptychs from the same period? Were the wings originally painted to be seen in an open position and later reused for the Trondenes triptych? Will the detected paintings influence the provenance of the triptych, and would it be possible to find out when the doors were repainted? For this paper, the search for these combined four motives is restricted to triptychs with provenance to northern Germany during the 15th century, focussing on the last half of the century. Today, just fractions of the total number of produced altarpieces have survived from the late mediaeval period, so, based on the remaining material, some of the answers to the questions above will remain with question marks.

4.2. Are the four motives revealed in the Trondenes paintings commonly found as the only four motives on the wings?

In the surviving artefacts, it is not common to find the four motives (the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Adoration/Birgittas vision and the Adoration of the Magi) used as the only four paintings visible together. Engelstad made an overview of the motives found in the surviving late mediaeval artworks in Norway and found these motives on eight altarpieces, but only Trondenes and Vardø show exclusively those four motives together. The motives are found in several triptychs said to originate from Lübeck, but as a rule only one or two of

the four motives on each triptych, or all four as part of larger painting circle, can be found. Using Hoffmann's PhD thesis as a main source together with Engelstad's overview, only three triptychs with provenance to Lübeck have all the four motives: Trondenes and Vardø in Norway, and the Stecknitzfahrer triptych in the Dom of Lübeck, Germany, this last one dated back to 1422 (Figure 7) [7]. However, Lübeck had a growing population during the 14th century, and new craftsmen came also from Westphalia, Germany. The historian Lütgendorff mentions that painters from Soest became citizens in Lübeck, and these craftsmen most probably continued the traditions from their former town [9]. The iconographic motives might thus have been more common during the period of the Stecknitzfahrer triptych. They are found on one additional triptych originating from Köln: the triptych of the Holy Family, dated back to around 1420, now in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne [Object ID, Older Master of the Holy Family, Kölner Wallraf-Richartz-Museum no. 59; 10].



Figure 7. The Stecknitzfahrer triptych in the Dom of Lübeck. Wings open. Note that the sequence of the four motives on the wings does not correspond with Vardø. On the left wing: The Annunciation, the Visitation - on the right wing: the Adoration and the Adoration of the magi. Photo ©Daniela Pawel, NTNU, 2015.

4.3. *How likely is it to find the four iconographic motives visible in a closed position?*

In the Vardø and Stecknitzfahrer triptychs, the scenes are visible in open position; only in the Trondenes triptych are they observable in closed position. In the triptych from Västra Ryd, Sweden, only the two motives of the Visitation and the Adoration are visible on the outside of the doors in the closed position. This triptych had an additional outer pair of doors, of which only one is surviving. On the inside part of the surviving door, painting fragments can be interpreted as the Adoration of the Magi [7], visible together with the Visitation

and the Adoration when the inner doors are closed and the outer open. The scenes were originally hidden when the outer doors were closed.

4.4. Were the wings in the Trondenenes triptych reused and replaced?

Trondenenes might possibly have been planned with an additional pair of wings, in the same way as Västra Ryd, so that the four scenes were hidden when the two pair of wings were closed. The sequence of the four motives in the Trondenenes triptych also suggests that the doors originally were planned for the opposite sides from where they are today. There are no marks on the doors that suggest a replacement of the hinges. This does not rule out the possibility of a change in the planned position of the wings, as the hinges probably were mounted when the wings were painted and should be connected to the central part of the triptych. This might indicate that a reuse of the wings was done in the workshop.



Figure 8. The Trondenenes triptych. Right wing, lower half. Damages in today's paintlayer show Saint Mary's yellow and red dress. Foto: © Tone M. Olstad NIKU 2009.

4.5. Will the detected paintings influence the provenance of the triptych?

An examination and comparison of the hidden paintings in the Trondenenes triptych and the visible paintings in the Vardø triptych has been executed by the authors of this article to see if paint technique and style could interrelate the paintings. The comparison is based on the IRR images of the Trondenenes and Vardø paintings, a thorough examination of the visible Vardø paintings and a more restricted examination of the Trondenenes paintings, including examination of the surface of the hidden paintings (Figure 8) visible in lacunas in today's

paintings. Examination of the visible surface by using raking light made it possible also to see incisions and brushstrokes in the hidden paintings.

The paint and gilding techniques seem to be similar for the paintings. The four scenes in the two triptychs have common features and might have been based on the same model or concept. The motives are painted within architectural structures, in a landscape or in a combination of the two. Both triptychs' paintings have scenes with a burnished golden background. In the Vardø triptych, parts of the clothing have gold or silver as decorative elements. We do not know if that is the case for the clothing in the Trondenes paintings. Mary's dress, however, is yellow and red and has no gold. The composition of the motives is incised or painted on a white, chalk-based ground layer. Architectural details and lines that define the outline of the metal surface were drawn by using a pointed tool, often aided by a compass or ruler. In the case of the Vardø paintings, the underdrawing techniques are visible to the naked eye.

The paintings in the two triptychs share the painting technique common for the period and the geographical area, and even if the general style of the figures and the clothing is assessed to be close, it is not possible to find benchmarks that would link them to the same hand or the same workshop. Still, the result of the examinations of the Vardø paintings and the hidden paintings in Trondenes strengthens the link between the triptychs and the provenance of the Trondenes triptych to Lübeck.

No underdrawing is found for the secondary painting, suggesting that red chalk was probably used for the underdrawing, which the IRR examination does not detect. Incisions are almost never used, the tiles in the floors and the haloes being exceptions. The paintings visible today were created directly on the original paintings without an intermediate layer between the original and secondary paintings. The craquelure in the visible painting is typical for an oil siccative binder applied on a low- or non-absorbing surface. The use of siccative oil, probably linseed oil, is confirmed by analysis [Analysis by Kidane Fanta Gebremariam, ass. professor, Arkeologisk museum, Universitetet i Stavanger, 4036 Stavanger, Norway]. The paint layer is thin and has become more transparent with time. The various colours of the underlying painting can thus be detected through the uppermost one. The secondary paintings were made after the frames were painted and stencilled. The general impression is that the secondary paintings were made in a hurry but still by a trained hand, and not many years after the original paintings were created. (The blue pigment in the secondary paint layer is a copper-based material, most probably azurite, the most commonly used blue pigment in the late mediaeval period. Analysis by K.F. Gebremariam)

4.6. The Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes: dating of the paintings

Several of the Lübeck triptychs from the late mediaeval period have the annunciation painted on the two wings so that the motive is visible in the closed position: Gabriel on one door and Mary on the other, often on a red background

with gold or silver stars. The annunciation motive seems to continue in the early 16th century Lübeck triptychs. In these later paintings, the starred background is in general replaced by an interior or a landscape, as in the Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes.

Hoffmann has examined a large number of paintings in altarpieces originating from Lübeck in the period 1450 to 1520, and she grouped them according to stylistic criteria. She compares the painted annunciation visible today on the wings of the Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes with that in the Möja triptych in Sweden. She also groups the Saint Mary in Trondenes with the triptychs from Huddinge, Litslena and Sigtuna in Sweden, all originating from Lübeck and dated by Hoffmann to around 1470, as well as the later Jungfrauen retable in Wismar, Germany. The result of her comparison for Trondenes is supported by von Bonsdorff in 2015 [7, 11]. Provided Hoffmann's grouping of triptychs and dating of the group are correct, today's paintings on the Trondenes wings are dated about 1470. This implies that the underlying paintings on the wings must have been painted earlier, and it is interesting that the paintings on the Vardø triptych are dated around 1460.

The no-longer-existing mediaeval chairs in the chancel in Trondenes church are said to have been made and placed there in 1465 by the order of Svein Erikson, vicar and dean in Trondenes. Is it a possibility that he also ordered the triptych and asked that the annunciation should be painted on the wings? [1, 12]

5. Conclusions

The conservators' examination of the Trondenes triptych confirms the art historian's observation in 1936 of paintings underneath the paintings visible today. The four motives – the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Adoration and the Adoration of the Magi – were made visible by using IRR examination. The conservators reject the art historian's theory of the lower part of the interior of the triptych, with the male sculptures being added later. However, the conservators give some support to the art historian's idea of the remaking of an already existing triptych, since they believe the wings could have been reused and replaced. This is based on the now unusual sequence of the scenes in the original paintings. The conservators' theory is that the wings changed place and were repainted before the triptych left the workshop in Lübeck. The general impression is that the secondary paintings were made in a hurry but still by a trained hand. They were probably painted not many years after the original paintings were created, since loss or damage in the underlying paint layer was not observed during the examination of the Trondenes paintings.

In the surviving artworks, it is not common to find the four motives – the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Adoration and the Adoration of the Magi – used as the only four paintings visible together. The present authors have detected only three triptychs with provenance from Lübeck that have exclusively these four motives visible at the same time: the Trondenes and Vardø triptychs

in Norway and the Stecknitzfahrer triptych in Dom Lübeck, Germany. In the Vardø and Stecknitzfahrer triptychs, the scenes are visible in open position. The four iconographic motives in closed position are found only on the triptych in Trondenes. The triptych from Västra Ryd, Sweden, has a double set of painted wings. This triptych probably had the four motives visible when the outermost wings were open and the inner closed. Trondenes might possibly have been planned with an additional pair of wings, in the same way as Västra Ryd, so that the four scenes were hidden when the two pairs of wings were closed.

Hoffmann, in her doctoral thesis, interrelates the Saint Mary triptych in Trondenes to triptychs in Sweden and Germany. Provided Hoffmann's grouping of triptychs and dating of the group are correct, today's paintings on the Trondenes wings are dated about 1470. This implies that the underlying paintings on the wings must have been painted earlier, and it is interesting to note that the paintings on the Vardø triptych are dated around 1460.

The paintings in the two triptychs from Trondenes and Vardø share the painting technique common for the period and area. The general style and techniques of the paintings are assessed to be close, but it is not possible to find benchmarks that would link them to the same hand or the same workshop. Still, the result of the examinations of the Vardø paintings and the hidden paintings on the Trondenes wings strengthens the link between the triptychs as well as the provenance of the Trondenes triptych from the same site as the Vardø triptych, probably Lübeck.

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