

Four Painted wall hangings from the island of Lopud, Croatia

By Jana Eich 2011

The parish church Gospa od Šunja on the island of Lopud, Croatia holds four painted wall hangings. During the International Conservation Workshop on Lopud (ICWL)¹ in 2007 an active mould attack on one of the objects was detected. Immediate actions including surface cleaning with a vacuum cleaner² were carried out.

The hangings used to be placed in the side chapels of the church. They correspond with the iconographic programme of the altars of the chapels and are part of the ensemble of the church. The objects were most likely made in the 16th or 17th century and are painted in a rare technique called 'Tüchleinmalerei' in German.

In a diploma thesis³ at the University of Applied Sciences Cologne, Germany the objects were studied.⁴ The aim was to gain information about the historical background and the rare technology as well as to develop a concept for conservation treatment and a new way of presentation to preserve the objects in the church. Some results are summarised in the following article.

¹ The workshop on the island of Lopud near Dubrovnik, Croatia takes place annually for two weeks to work on different conservation projects. Participants: Cologne University of Applied Sciences, Artesis University College Antwerp, La Cambre Bruxelles and University of Split. Attendance of the author in 2007 and 2009.

² The dirt and spores were directed into an ethanol-water solution to prevent them from spreading in the air (Woulff bottle).

³ Die Tüchleinmalereien der Kirche Maria Šunj auf Lopud, Kroatien. Möglichkeiten zur Erhaltung und erneuten Präsentation. Diploma Thesis at Cologne University of Applied Sciences 2010.

⁴ Three of the objects were studied on Lopud in 2009. In 2010 the fourth wall hanging with Isaiah and Solomon was discovered in the sacristy during the workshop. It was removed from the wall in former times most probably because of damages. This object has not been examined yet. It is described by photos.



Fig.1: painted wall hanging with depiction of Moses and David



Fig.2: painted wall hanging with depiction of Isaiah and Solomon



Fig.3: painted wall hanging with depiction of Daniel



Fig.4: painted wall hanging with depiction of Jeremiah

The painted textiles are used as wall hangings in the side chapels of the church Maria Šunj. They depict six prophets from the Old Testament who can be identified by inscriptions as: Moses, King David, Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaiah and King Solomon. The paintings show the full figures of the prophets in front of a black niche (Fig.1-4). Each figure holds an inscription in stone or scroll with a verse from the Old Testament in the Latin language. The inscriptions contain indications of the belonging bible passage. Two of the hangings consist of two paintings on top of each other (Moses and David, Isaiah and Solomon). The two smaller hangings show only one figure each. There is some indication that presumably they originally used to be six single hangings. The bigger hangings were sewn together out of two pieces in a later alteration.

All left and right edges are bordered with a small yellow ribbon that is certainly a later addition. The hangings are fixed between two wooden rods.

The dimensions of the small hangings are about 154 cm x 65 cm whereas the big hanging with Moses and King David has a total length of 268 cm and a width between 59 and 66 cm.

Placed in the Annunciation Chapel the big hangings with Moses and King David and Isaiah and King Solomon reflect the ancestry of Christ. Daniel and Jeremiah were located in the Holy Cross Chapel and are depicted as witnesses of the Passion of Christ. Some of the inscriptions of the prophets refer to the passion as well. It is not clear if there used to be more hangings in the church and if they are still placed at their original locations. They were possibly relocated after alterations.

Information gained by the material examination of the objects confirms a dating before 1800. Stylistic features, such as the dark background of the images, the orientalising elements in the clothing, like turbans and some characteristic details in the clothing of the figures, suggest a fabrication in the 17th century or even earlier. The iconographic relation to the Holy Cross Altar that was built during the 17th century sustains this dating.

Technical details

Each hanging consists of two pieces of a tabby linen fabric⁵ that are sewn together with a vertical seam. The hangings are probably all made of the same hand loomed fabric.

⁵ Warp/ weft: bast fibre, Linen?, white, z; weave count: warp 12-14 threads/cm, weft: 14-18 threads/cm

The later yellow border on the left and right edges is made of cotton (warp) and silk (weft).

The wooden rods that are used for the hanging of the objects are made of pinewood.

Painted in the technique of 'Tüchleinmalerei' the colours are applied directly on the textile without priming. An underdrawing carried out with a pencil in thin red lines (red ochre) is visible in unpainted areas or under bright colours for example in the inscriptions (Fig.5) or in the pleats.

The realisation is not exactly following the underdrawing. Typical for 'Tüchlein' paintings some areas are completely without paint. In these spaces the probably bleached textile is used as bright colour. The colours are applied thinly in a watery system (binder: glutin glue⁶). Following pigments were used: yellow and red ochre, copper pigments (component of the black colour), carbon black, lead white, cobalt blue(?). All pigments except lead white were mixed with an addition of chalk.⁷ The paint layer is thin and has soaked into the canvas so it has kept its flexibility and the textile structure of the fabric is well seen. Only in the incarnate the colour is applied thicker and in diverse layers (Fig.6). Several traces show that the painting was done with brushes in different sizes.

The depiction is partially seen on the reverse side (Fig.7). There is no varnish applied.



Fig.5: Detail Jeremiah, visible red underdrawing in the inscriptions



Fig.6: Detail incarnate Daniel, the colour is applied in diverse layers

⁶ The binding was determined with Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy.

⁷ The pigment analyses were carried out with the scanning electron microscope (SEM).

The fabric was stretched while it was painted. It was probably fixed with nails on a frame or a board. Traces of stretching can be found along the edges of the picture with Moses. It is the widest of all objects. Along the edges of the painting undulating unpainted areas that are not covered by the black background colour can be seen (Fig.8). In the tensile center of these areas there are small holes from the stretching of the fabric. The distance of the holes varies from 8 to 15 cm. After the end of the painting process the fabric was detached from the strain and the textile went back into its grain direction. This is how the undulating outline occurred.⁸ The relaxation into the straight grain is only possible for a flexible textile which is not stiffened by the application of priming or colours. The contrary is frequently visible as so called cusping with stretched canvas paintings.



Fig.7: wall hanging Daniel, the painting is partially seen on the reverse side

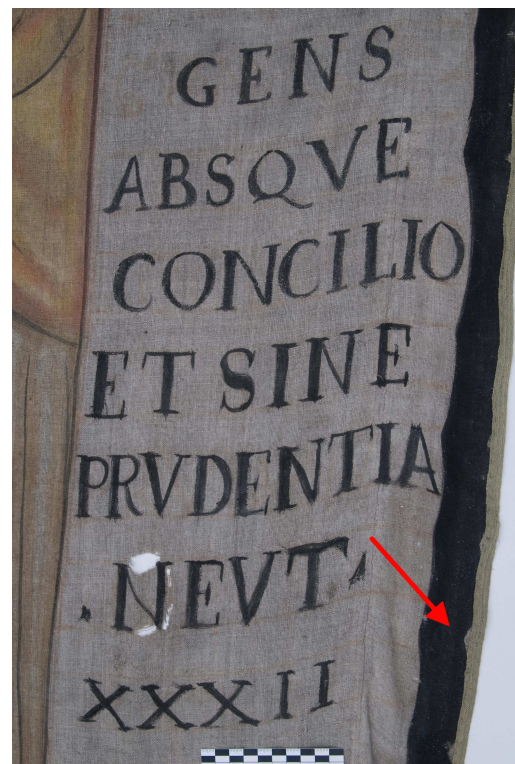


Fig.8: Detail Moses, along the right edge unpainted areas can be seen (red arrow).

The technique of Tüchleinmalerei

The observed painting technique is the rare technique called 'Tüchleinmalerei' in German. This historic term was used for paintings without priming and is today

⁸ A similar phenomenon is described for a painted hanging from the 4th century A.D. from the Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg. SCHIESSL 2004, p. 40-45.

accepted as a technical term. Colours in a watery system are applied directly on the textile⁹ and there is no varnish applied resulting in a matt surface with the characteristic structure of the supporting textile visible¹⁰. The textile keeps its flexible nature.

The so called ‚Tüchleinmalerei‘ arises during the development of panel paintings to painting on canvas. From 1400 to 1600 the textile support became the most commonly used support in Western Europe.¹¹ Advantages of the change were the cheaper production of big sizes and easier transport, because the paintings were rollable and lightweight.¹²

High quality pieces were made in 15th and 16th century¹³ when artists like Dirk Bouts, Pieter Bruegel and Albrecht Dürer used this technique.¹⁴ In Italy almost all preserved ‚Tüchlein‘ are made by Andrea Mantegna.¹⁵ Unlike our hangings these examples have a distinct painting character as they do not hang loose but are stretched on frames like canvas paintings.

The technique was frequently used for all types of ephemeral decoration objects, for example on banners. These kind of objects were often not made to last or were certainly used until they were damaged and are therefore rarely preserved until today. In the late middle ages ‚Tüchleinmalerei‘ was very common for the figuration of Lenten veils.¹⁶

Condition and conservation concept

During history the hangings have gone through major changes resulting in the actual condition. Four of the single hangings were arranged in vertical combined pairs and all elements have been cut in height and width. This change in presentation, the addition of a modern yellow seam border and several repairs of tears and the mounting system testify the changeful material history and a frequent maintenance. In spite of these facts the overall appearance is still fresh and vivid presenting a quite authentic and well preserved impression of these rare objects.

⁹ NICOLAUS 2003, p. 82.

¹⁰ HENNING, KRÜGER 2008, p. 7.

¹¹ VILLERS 2000, p. vii.

¹² BOSSHARD 1982, p. 31.

¹³ HENNING, KRÜGER, 2008, p. 7.

¹⁴ RANACHER 1980, p. 143.

¹⁵ BOSSHARD 1982, p. 36.

¹⁶ See SÖRRIES 1988 and SÖRRIES 2000.

Because of their important position in the ensemble of Maria Šunj the objects should be preserved and presented in the church again. To allow the preservation in situ a concept for conservation and new presentation is necessary. The climate condition in the church and the hanging presentation of the objects are the major issues. The storage situation has already caused immense damages namely microbiological attack (mould) and mechanical damages resulting in an urgent need of a conservation treatment before a new presentation in the church is possible.

A proposed conservation treatment includes: removing the wooden rods, surface cleaning with a vacuum cleaner, straightening wrinkles and folds, consolidation of the textile with conservation stitches on a support fabric and retouching of stains caused by the mould attack.

Another kind of mounting system has to be developed to prevent further damages. To avoid contact with humid walls the objects should not be mounted directly on the walls anymore. It is proposed to mount the objects on boards that can be installed with a distance to the wall. A slanted position of these boards can reduce stress for the objects. A dust protection by a removable cover is desirable.

Conclusion

The painted textiles from Lopud made in the rare technique of ‚Tüchleinmalerei‘ are unique objects. Although simple the sketchy and very spontaneous illustrations of prophets in a non-scenic depiction are very exceptional and no other similar wall hangings with such motifs known in Croatia or Europe yet.

The hangings with the depiction of the Prophets fulfil a decorative function inside the side chapels of the church and can be seen in the context of the iconography of the altars and as an important element of the room decoration and of the ensemble of the church. The four hangings form an associated group that is kept in its original context. The high value of the objects is based on their rarity and their importance for research. Further investigations on the objects and a conservation treatment are intended by the Croatian Conservation Institute.

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