

## **IIC Keck Award Winner: Rode Altarpiece In Focus**

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**By Rachel C. Sabino**

This massive, multi-year project centers around the conservation and technical analysis of the altarpiece of the high altar of St. Nicholas' Church in Tallinn (1478–1481). The double-winged retable, completed in the workshop of the famous Lübeck master Hermen Rode, is one of the most grand and best preserved examples of late medieval Hanseatic art in Europe. More than forty saints and biblical figures are depicted, and its dimensions (approximately 6 x 3.5 meters) place it among the largest of its type.

From 1975 to 1992 a campaign of restoration was carried out under the supervision of the Soviet Union's Institute for the Scientific Research of Restoration in Moscow (BH???). Upon Estonia's declaration of re-independence in 1991, the ensuing political changes in the Soviet Union prevented completion of the work, leaving most of the sculptures only partially cleaned. In 2013, after more than 20 years, a renewed initiative to continue treatment was launched.

The project represents a significant milestone in the conservation history of the country as well as the wider region and is noteworthy for its interdisciplinary and collaborative approach. The breadth of the examinations and investigations undertaken on the altarpiece brought innumerable specialists to Estonia. But the public-facing components were among the project's greatest achievements, and the deliberate prioritization of outreach activities was indeed successful in capturing popular attention.

## **VISIBLE CONSERVATION**

All phases of the technical investigation and hands-on treatment were carried out on site in full view of the museum's visitors. A conservation studio was configured in the choir of St. Nicholas' Church alongside an ever-evolving exhibition detailing the progress of the work. In addition, the daily activities of the team were transmitted via website, video channel and blog. With an average annual visitorship of 100,000, this component of the outreach easily impacted hundreds of thousands of people.

## **POPULAR MEDIA**

The project participated in the nationwide Scientists' Night program, and a scientific broadcast of the project was completed for a series entitled, Science Fever: Outside the Laboratory, produced by Estonian Public Broadcasting TV (ETV2).

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION**

Multiple educational programs based on the scientific concepts underpinning the examination and treatment of the Rode altarpiece have been developed for different age groups in line with national education directives and objectives. The intended didactic aims across all age groups are: to make science more accessible and relatable; to integrate the humanities and sciences; and to popularize heritage more broadly.

The Art Researchers learning program, intended for secondary-school pupils, brings future scientists together with heritage. They learn organic and inorganic chemistry - as mandated by the national school curriculum - through the lens of the research data obtained from the Rode altarpiece. The lessons help pupils to more easily make connections between chemistry, physics and cultural heritage through a medium that is infinitely more engaging than ordinary classroom lessons.

The program entitled The Treasure Chest Opens Up, so named because opening the altarpiece is akin to opening a treasure chest, is aimed at younger children. It gives them the foundational skills to observe and appreciate historic works and exposes them to art research and technical study via age-appropriate content and explanation. At the end of the lesson, the pupils become "restorers" and clean a part of a "work of art."

As one of only five E-Space demonstrators, the Rode Project (reflecting Estonia's reputation as Europe's leading e-nation) has charted new ground in the delivery of educational materials and opportunities. E-Space, or Europeana Space, is an EU-funded project focused on the creative re-use of digital cultural content in service to cultural heritage. The Rode Demonstrator was put to use in another school-based educational program called Young Art Detectives. The program can be tailored creatively in an infinite number of ways for students from first to twelfth grade.

## **COMPARATIVE EXHIBITION**

The only known altarpiece bearing Rode's signature is housed at St. Annen-Museum in Lübeck, and it had never been the subject of any formal study or technical investigation. The Tallinn project therefore provided an excellent opportunity to build relationships with experts and counterparts in Germany to examine and research both altarpieces. Those results have been

brought together in a web-based media portal that allows the user to interact with, juxtapose and compare the two works. The portal was launched at the opening of a major international exhibition of Hanseatic art entitled, Lübeck 1500: Kunstmetropole im Ostseeraum/Lübeck 1500: Art Metropolis in the Baltic Region. Within the exhibition a Rode room was designed with the Lübeck altarpiece on one side and a wall-sized projection opposite. Using a touch screen visitors were able to: open the wings of both altarpieces; read the hagiography of the saints; view the paint layers and underdrawings; and view the works with a level of detail that is customarily visible only with magnification. According to the curators, the Estonian multimedia interactive was the highlight of the entire exhibition. The museum recorded 35,000 visitors during the exhibition's four-month run, a figure nearly 10 times the museum's usual numbers.

This immense project is deserving on its own merits. But the Keck Award is further acknowledgement of the tremendous modernizing achievements and successes that this small nation has achieved in the brief years since gaining its deserved freedom.

## FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Rode Project website:

<http://nigulistemuuseum.ekm.ee/en/on-view/on-view/rode-altarpiece-in-clo...>

Lübeck 1500 website:

<http://rode.ekm.ee>

Blog:

<https://nigulistemuuseum.ekm.ee/rode-ajaveeb-blog/>

Niguliste Museum website:

<https://nigulistemuuseum.ekm.ee/>

Eesti Kunstimuuseum/Art Museum of Estonia website

<https://kunstimuuseum.ekm.ee/>

## RESEARCH TEAM AND COLLABORATION PARTNERS

Prof. Dr. Hilkka Hiiop – project leader, conservator and conservation scientist (Art Museum of Estonia / Estonian Academy of Arts)

Merike Kurisoo – art historian (Art Museum of Estonia)

Andres Uueni – imaging and ICT specialist (Archaeovision R&D / Estonian Academy of Arts)

Hembo Pagi – imaging and ICT specialist (Archaeovision R&D)

Dr. Signe Vahur – conservation chemist (Chair of Analytical Chemistry, University of Tartu)

Dr. Riin Rebane – chemist (Estonian Environmental Research Centre)

Dr. Alar Läänelaid – dendrochronologist (Department of Geography, University of Tartu)

Elle Lepik – educator

Hedi Kard, Grete Nilp, Kaisa-Piia Pedajas – conservators (Art Museum of Estonia)

Tarmo Saaret – director, Niguliste Museum (Art Museum of Estonia)

Villu Plink – designer and film editor (Art Museum of Estonia)  
Marti Laurimaa, Henri Kokk, Marko Lepik – ICT specialists

Nominated by Rachel Sabino  
Associate Conservator of Objects, Art Institute of Chicago