

Some fragments of the church interiors on the island of Saaremaa

The aim of this paper is to analyse the changes in the church interior after the Lutheran Reformation in Estonia. I will concentrate on the altar-pieces on the island of Saaremaa and give a brief look at the changes of the altarpieces' shape from the medieval triptych to the architectonic structure with a point of departure from the Roman triumphal arch motif.

While the changes in the shape were strong, the ideological movements which appear in the iconography of the altarpiece were not so remarkable. The graphic patterns used in the Estonian ecclesiastical art, originated mainly from the Netherlands where they were made by Roman Catholic artists. Our local artists used the prints from the Bible of Piscator and the Bible of Merian (after Matthaeus Merian's engravings). The preserved paintings reveal that the prints by Hendrich Goltzius and his followers like William van Swanenburg, Bartholomeus and Zacharias Dolendo were well known. This is due to the fact that the engravings were more detailed and more suitable as patterns than ideologically correct but with stagnant and empty woodcuts by German artists.

Landrat Otto Buxhoeveden's widow Anna Overläcker donated an altarpiece with typical Gulgatha composition and form in the Early-Dutch tradition to the Karla church in 1591, acting like many Lutheran turned noblewomen remaining faithful to Roman Catholicism in Sweden.

The origin of the altarpieces is unknown. There are no inscriptions in archival sources about the masters and who imported the altarpieces to the island. The stylistical analyses made by Sten Karling and Mai Lumiste are questionable. Unfortunately the lack of comparison gives few possibilities to add new information.

The second altarpiece with a medieval triptych shape is located in Kihelkonna. Despite being the wing-altarpiece, it is the first that was made following the Renaissance tradition. We can see there a favourite subject of Martin Luther, the Last Supper in the central part. The wings are covered with Epistles to the Corinthians in Vulgate Latin and in Low German. The altarpieces originate probably from a Low German cultural centre.

The typical baroque altarpieces were in the Pöide and Anseküla churches. They are in a new form; single-level altarpieces with pillars and usually with decorative wings, designed in their main section according to the portal motif. As the painting lacked artistic skills, we may guess that they were made by local masters, probably even by carpenters from the Kuressaare Carpenter Guild.

The motifs with the Fall of Man and the Expulsion are quite rare in the Estonian 17th century art. The altarpiece wings with Adam and Eve in the exposition of the Saaremaa Museum are the only examples in Estonia. They are like monuments to the German humanist artist Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach the Elder in Estonia.

The location of the island of Saaremaa at the crossroads of the Baltic Sea has given its

antiquities a varied look and enriched Estonian art through many centuries.

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