

Attitudes and Discourses in the Historiography of Finnish Medieval *Rakentajamaalaukset* Paintings

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In the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century, a series of Finnish medieval wall paintings known as the *rakentajamaalaukset* were completed in several stone churches in the medieval diocese of Turku. In the 1990s Danish researchers suggested that certain medieval wall paintings, similar to those in Finland, may have been the work of master masons, rather than professionally trained painters. The Finnish researchers took up the hypothesis of church builders as the makers of the paintings and thus the paintings began to be referred to as *rakentajamaalaukset*, or 'the construction worker paintings'.¹ In research history, the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings have commonly been described as 'primitive'. The term 'primitive' with reference to these paintings was introduced in 1912, and has since gained wide acceptance, and its use has continued in recent years.²

The *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings do not conform to past art historical discourses in Finland, and a series of writings emerged which attempted to reconcile the works with existing theories. As these medieval wall paintings have not met the expectations of their researchers in how they should look, their appearance has required some kind of justification. This article deals with this discourse of justification, which was used to explain the particular visual idiom of the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings, and to understand how they were used and understood in the past.

There are two dominant discourses in the literature that aptly describe and crystallise the attitudes, ideas, and notions surrounding the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings. The first I have called the 'discourse of the primitive', and the second the 'discourse of the popular'. In both these cases the formation of the discourse has mainly emerged from the problematic relationship between the researchers and their subject. The notion of discourse can be defined as a group of statements which structure ways of thinking. In this sense both the 'discourse of the primitive' and the 'discourse of the popular' consist of statements composed of ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that have systematically constructed the way the paintings have been observed and interpreted. These statements are socially produced, mainly through textual accounts, and are connected in the ways the subject has been treated in research. In these cases, they are also intertwined, consisting of the same elements that all explicate each other in a causal chain. The discourses shape and mould their object but they also try to understand it.

The 'discourse of the primitive' has mainly focused on form and function/subject matter. When the first paintings were revealed in the church of Nousiainen in 1880, their simple and 'barbaric' form came as a shock to Emil Nervander

(1840-1914), a leading figure in the process of revealing the Nousiainen paintings, and a member of the Finnish Archaeological Society (the present day Finnish Antiquarian Society) and the State Archaeological Commission.³ He suggested that the paintings dated back to the thirteenth century and originated from an ancient Nordic, pagan artistic expression and resembled Swedish rock-carvings, especially those on the island of Gotland. In addition to that, they were considered 'Irish' in style.⁴ For Nervander, the existence of such odd-looking paintings in one of the most prominent medieval churches in the diocese of Turku was a mystery, and he explained the crude and simple appearance of the paintings by their alleged great age. This notion of ancient origin also somewhat explained the devastatingly poor quality of the paintings. However, this concept of old age was reevaluated when paintings were revealed from another important church, Maaria [Fig.1], in 1909 under the direction of architect Carl Frankenhaeuser who was in charge of renovation works in the church. An important feature in this further evaluation of the paintings was connected to the appearance of the coat of arms of bishop Olaus Magni (1405-1460), painted among the images. This indicated to Frankenhaeuser that the paintings were most likely executed around the mid-fifteenth century and thus their clumsy form was not an indicator of their old age, but rather of the "ineptness of the maker".⁵



Fig. 1. Unknown painter, 'A crowned human, a ship, a labyrinth, a face of Christ, a small face, a shield and a rosette', 1440s-1450s. Wall painting, Maaria church, Finland. Photo: Katja Fält.

When the explanation of age failed, the simple and crude appearance ('ugliness') of the paintings had to be explained in another way, for they did not fit into the canon of European medieval art. They definitely did not fill the preconditions of 'art' and were mainly regarded as doodles or childlike imitations of what the painter had seen; unpretentious pieces of work by an untrained hand. These forms did not match with ideas at the turn of the twentieth century, which heavily stressed the primarily aesthetic function of medieval products and artefacts. As Leena Valkeapää has noted, the late nineteenth-century study of Finnish medieval ecclesiastical art elevated the objects, paintings and monuments as art objects that were observed through a modernist viewpoint.⁶ The meaning and function of these images and objects in the medieval context was not considered, perhaps not even understood. So, when researchers in Finland first encountered these paintings they were faced with an idiosyncratic pictorial world of anonymous painters that seemed to make little sense in the continuum of the established (but also restricted) genealogy, i.e. the canon of Western medieval Christian art.

In the art historical study of the late nineteenth and the twentieth century the periodical division of styles was the foundation for academic research, and was used to structure the material. Thus, these primitive-looking paintings were accordingly put in their 'proper' place; almost by force, for the seeming stylistic discontinuity between the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings and the contemporary Gothic style seemed to create a rupture in the chronology of styles because of their aesthetic mismatch. However, these categorisations by period were sometimes unsuccessful due to evaluation criteria which put excessive weight on the aesthetic and stylistic features of the paintings. As a result, the researchers were perplexed by the simple forms of the clumsy-looking paintings which did not seem to easily yield to interpretation, or even to identification. The researchers considered these paintings to be as obscure and primitive as the whole medieval era, flaunting its alien nature through these images before their baffled eyes. Here the past truly seemed to reveal itself as the 'other'.

Another problem was connected to the enigmatic subject matter of the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings and thus to difficulties in contextualisation. This problematic feature was the perceived lack of conventional forms and subject matter of Christian iconography which generally dominated the visual idiom of medieval wall paintings. A comparison of subject matter reveals that the schemes in the medieval wall paintings made by professionally trained painters were generally based on traditional and slowly evolving imagery, which formed part of a continuous lineage of Christian iconography. In a sense, the imagery was standardised but simultaneously went through subtle changes over time; every image was nevertheless unique in terms of composition, detailing, size and colour. The majority of the medieval wall paintings were visual narratives representing stories and events from the Bible, moralising stories or folk tales, and scenes from saints' lives, etc. Their



Fig. 2. Unknown painter, 'A monk, a devil, and a cross', 1440s-1450s. Wall painting, Maaria church, Finland. Photo: Katja Fält.

reference base was thus primarily textual, in many cases scriptural, but some of the subject matter was founded on oral tradition. In general, religious images can be easily interpreted with the help of Christian iconography but the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings, where there seemed to be hardly any clear religious motifs, were treated as some kind of iconographic anomaly. Conventional Christian religious subject matter can be found among many of the *rakentajamaalaukset* motifs but for some reason their religious content was ignored. The religious images that were detected among the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings (mainly a few images of saints, faces of Christ and crosses) were clearly treated as exceptions and the paintings were much more eagerly connected to medieval magical practices, paganism and folklore; in other words, to everything that was understood as outside the norms and forms of general medieval wall paintings made by professionally trained painters with the conventions of Christian image-making in mind [Fig. 2].

The difficulties experienced by scholars in contextualisation and aesthetic evaluation made the paintings seem almost anachronistic.⁷ One way to explain the paintings was to treat them as corollaries of archaic tendencies in medieval image-making, or as evidence of gradual regression towards 'older' styles. Bo Lindberg suggested as late as 1998 that after the Black Death there appeared 'Contra Gothic'

or ‘Neo-Romanesque’ influenced art forms. In Finland this allegedly began after 1400 when, for example, the paintings in Nousiainen and Korppoo were executed. Lindberg thus presumed that the paintings in these churches were the embodiment of some sort of medieval retro — or old-fashioned archaic ideal that governed art at that time.⁸ The concept of taste was also used in these explanatory attempts. Tove Riska suspected that the reason for the existence of the paintings may have been that they better corresponded to the taste and religious beliefs of people still living between religion and superstition than the international early Gothic paintings did, which were better suited to the upper class.⁹ The paintings in the Pernaja church, for example, were regarded to be in poor taste [Fig. 3]. These explanatory models reflect attempts to mediate, unsuccessfully I would argue, between the images of the past and the theories of the present.



Fig. 3. Unknown painter, ‘Humans, a mermaid, plants and garlands’, 1440s. Wall painting, Pernaja church, Finland. Photo: Katja Fält.

During the twentieth century, more and more wall paintings were uncovered under the white-wash, and overall knowledge concerning the material was augmented piece by piece. The visual peculiarity of the paintings continued to evoke puzzlement and they were still regarded as shockingly ugly, naïve, and primitive, but they also began to be slightly appreciated in a new way. Their greatest value was

that they were considered the works of native, ‘Finnish’ men. Hence, the ‘discourse of the popular’ was introduced. The new discourse attempted to explain the odd features and contents of the images. It defined the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings as firstly, works of local men and secondly, as visual expressions connected to popular culture and popular beliefs of the country people. The (anachronistic) concept of nationality as state-bound was connected to the idea of the maker of images, and the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings in particular were regarded as the work of domestic painters, for obvious stylistic and artistic reasons. Because of this stress on their domestic origin, the ‘Finnishness’ of the paintings and their makers became the dominant paradigm in their research for years to come. The paintings have been quite systematically treated as embodying the world view and visual world of the country folk, the *populus rusticus*.¹⁰ However, this idea of the makers as ‘incompetent’ local men without any painting skill is unsubstantiated.

Traditional Christian iconography had been a key element in the interpretation of medieval objects and images, but in the case of the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings it seemed to fail to complete the interpretative task. The paintings were treated by scholars as enigmatic visual markers without clear connections to Christianity. The difficulties in finding narrative coherency between the visual idiom of the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings and general medieval visibility led to rationalisations. Images began to be interpreted from a nationalistic point of view which emphasised ‘Finnish’ features, forms, and objects in paintings. In particular, the paintings in the church of Maaria were considered to directly portray popular beliefs due to their alleged ‘connection’ with medieval magical practices and superstition. In 1930 Ludvig Wennervirta described the paintings in Maaria thusly:

it is difficult to comprehend that the paintings in the church of Maaria, where the peculiarities, superstition, fear of the devil, magic of medieval religious life so plainly appear, have been completed during the era of Olav Magnusson, one of our most enlightened bishops, and even in the vicinity of his main church. Regular ecclesiastical subjects can almost not be found at all in the church of Maaria, the paintings seem by contrast directly to depict popular notions and beliefs.¹¹

The two discourses of the ‘primitive’ and of the ‘popular’ arose out of a need to explain why these unusual images were made. This medieval image-making that otherwise created a disruption among the general body of medieval art, was somehow put in its place, although not without difficulty. Neither the ‘discourse of the primitive’ nor of the ‘popular’ offered a satisfactory explanatory model for the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings, and the images have continued to provoke researchers to the present day. The ‘discourse of the primitive’ reflects period valorisation that has been continuously enhanced. The single, highly charged word ‘primitive’ in the context of these paintings encapsulates the historicity, mentality

and attitude towards this particular group of medieval images. I would further argue that the scholarly perspective of the past concerning the 'discourse of the popular' was endowed with nationalistic and ethnic assumptions related to the ideological tendency to mythologise 'the common man', or Finnish peasant. Historically, we can detect in this 'discourse of the popular' the dichotomy between 'religious' and 'secular' which alludes to contradiction and conflict. But, the 'popular' can be popular even if it incorporates elements of the sacred. As a result, the 'discourse of the primitive' and the 'discourse of the popular' have become fixed contexts which the paintings continue to be squeezed into and interpreted from without any effort being made to look for other ways of interpreting the images. In a sense the images — these expressions of wild, almost uncontrolled visuality — are being 'pacified'; instead of trying to decode the images, these discourses reduce them.

This type of 'discourse-construction' is a part of a process of cultural fabrication (implying both the creation and construction of something but also the making up of something) in which various discourses about the past are created, constructed, and reconstructed.¹² These discourses do not in reality reveal much about the past, but rather end up telling us more about ourselves. Michael Ann Holly quite axiomatically notes that the interest in the past is often provoked by an encounter with the visual artefacts the past has left behind.¹³ The visual can work as point of entry to the past, but questions remain about how the past is constructed and construed. According to Rudolph Wittkower, successful interpretation of visual symbols is based upon knowledge and experience of the conventional or conventionalised formulas used in the composing of visual images. The interpretation is made difficult or even impossible if unconventional formulas are used instead.¹⁴ But questions arise about what 'unconventional' means in this context, and how it can be defined. While the images in the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings appear to be unconventional to us, were they unconventional to their medieval viewers? One would think not. My research reveals a discontinuity between the modern understanding and the medieval understanding of this particular medieval visual idiom: these paintings have long evoked puzzlement and their visual language is not yet completely legible. One wonders whether the detachment from the past is definite, and whether it is possible to renew the connection with the mentality and visuality of the past that understood medieval visual language. It is equally a matter of consideration whether it is possible to make historical reconstruction congruent with the age it tries to describe — and with images only.

There seem to be two possible approaches adopted by academic research in relation to the consideration of images and objects of the past and their historical context in the case of the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings. The first possibility is to cling to the traditional approach and continue the text-driven iconographical quest for the key to unlock the doors of understanding to the past enigma; the second is to detach oneself from this tradition. The biggest problem with the first option is that

the only feasible frame of reference in the case of the *rakentajamaalakset* paintings is not based on literary texts or systems of textuality, nor can their meaning thus be totally concealed within a text. The relatively inflexible adherence to iconographical interpretation and observation of images through formal and aesthetic points of view has resulted in a situation where the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings have been treated as a somehow separate phenomenon. One of the profound problems may have been that these images tend to offer various possibilities for interpretation rather than embodying just one, all-inclusive meaning. Within the limits set by conventional iconography this is a problematic feature. Rather than embracing the multifaceted visual imagery and abundant possibilities for analyses, researchers seem to have been put off this aspect of the *rakentajamaalaukset* paintings. Curiously enough, even when images are interpreted with traditional art historical methods it is often taken for granted that visual narratives themselves possess an inherent creative indecipherability.¹⁵

Although traditional art historical methods can offer interpretative tools, and also represent the easier way out of 'seeing through' images, they still show a methodological incompleteness. The other option is thus discontinuity, or at least gradual detachment from the methodological safe haven (of iconography and others) for the sake of deconstruction. As Holly suggests, this could include taking the images and objects as they are and using their visible deconstruction as the occasion to remap our own disciplinary universe.¹⁶ This is, indeed, exactly what this particular image-making seems to be doing — it challenges us to step outside conventional art historical thinking and to reorganise our understanding of what medieval wall paintings really were. Of course, it could be argued that the images merely camouflage themselves as the agents of reassessment and in reality end up being just the same old thing. Whatever the reality, it seems clear that the mode of thinking or understanding that produced the church builders' image-world is visual rather than based on language.¹⁷ With this in mind, one must take the images as they are and examine them as complex imagery with tensions and contradictions, with varied practices and articulations that make up the visual system of church builders with its social, cultural and material practices.¹⁸

- 1 U. Haastrup, 'Danske kalkmalerier 1475-1500', in U. Haastrup, ed., *Danske kalkmalerier. Sengotik 1475-1500* (København: Nationalmuseet, Christian Ejlers' Forlag, 1991) 26-32; M. Hiekkanen, *Suomen keskiajan kivikirkot* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2007).
- 2 J. Öhquist, *Suomen taiteen historia* (Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Kirja, 1912) 35.
- 3 L. Valkeapää, *Pitäjänkirkosta kansallismonumentiksi. Suomen keskiaikaisten kivikirkkojen restaurointi ja sen tausta vuosina 1870-1920* (Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen aikakauskirja, 2000) 42.
- 4 E. Nervander, 'Uttalande af Sophus Müller om kalkmålningarna i Nousis kyrka', in *Suomen Kirkot — Finlands kyrkor 1903* (Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1903) 91-93.
- 5 C. Frankenhaeuser, 'Räntämäen kirkko II. Maalaukset', in *Suomen Museo — Finskt Museum 1910* (Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1910) 9-15; also Öhquist, *Suomen taiteen*, 38.
- 6 Valkeapää, *Pitäjänkirkosta*, 155.
- 7 Especially the paintings in Maaria church. L. Wennervirta, *Goottilaista monumentaalimaalausta Länsi-Suomen ja Ahvenanmaan kirkoissa* (Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen aikakauskirja, 1930) 211.
- 8 B. Lindberg, 'Kuvataide ja käsityö', in B. Von Bonsdorff et al., eds., *Suomen taiteen historia. Keskiajalta nykyaikaan* (Helsinki: Schildts Kustannus, 1998) 38, 41. For a reciprocal treatment, see M. Trachtenberg, 'Sugar's Miracles, Branner's Bourges: Reflections on "Gothic Architecture" as Medieval Modernism', in *Gesta*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2000, 184.
- 9 T. Riska, 'Keskiajan maalauksia', in S. Sarajas-Korte, ed., *ARS Suomen taide 1* (Espoo: Weilin + Göös, 1987) 144.
- 10 H. Edgren, "'Primitive" paintings: the visual world of populus rusticus', in A. Bolvig and P. Lindley (ed.), *History and Images: Towards a New Iconology* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 301-322.
- 11 Wennervirta, *Goottilaista*, 78-79. The quote has been translated from Finnish by the writer.
- 12 The term 'cultural fabrication' has been taken from M. A. Holly. M. A. Holly, *Past Looking. Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996) 57.
- 13 Holly, *Past Looking*, 56.
- 14 R. Wittkower, 'Interpretation of Visual Symbols', in R. Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977) 174-177.
- 15 Holly, *Past Looking*, 165.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 17 E. van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 1.
- 18 This formulation has been taken from Patrick Geary. P. J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) 4.