

Where do the religious objects belong?

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My topic this morning concerns the question of *where the religious objects belong*. At first sight, this seems a straightforward question, but life is far more complex than this. If you had asked me a few years ago, when I was with the Directorate for Cultural Heritage in Norway, I would have known the answer. However, the last few years of professional and personal experience, not the least, from what I learnt from working with EH and FRH, have shown me the complexity of the topic.

I see that the answer also will depend on both the geographical and religious context as well as a range of ethical and philosophical considerations. In Holland, with apparently the highest number of places of worship closing in Europe at the moment, the reflections on this will have to be different from those in my own country, Norway, where only a very handful of churches, so far, has been closed. Having said this, the situation will alter also there, probably very soon.

My talk is only a starting point and a personal reflexion, indeed based upon experience from 20 years in the field of religious heritage, but still my own. I hope it will open up for a discussion at this conference so we can explore this subject together.

- **Understanding is a prerequisite for doing a good job.**

We need to understand the history of the building, why it was built and what went on in it, to make the right decisions, be it a restoration, a presentation of the story to a wider public, or opening up for extended use, as we talked about in Venice last year.

The first encounter often makes the strongest impressions. Love at first sight! What I remember best from the first term of my studies in Art History, is a lecture on Byzantine Art. The senior lecturer spoke about the church mosaics found in Hagia Sophia and other remaining churches of that period. He did not simply explain the tesserae technique and the colour schemes but he preached the Christian gospel as seen through the eyes of a priest of that period. It was as if we, the students, were listening to his sermon. I remember talk about the apocalypse, the Book of Revelation. He seemingly wanted to convert us to this interpretation of the Christian faith. After the lecture, I found that the professor was an atheist and not a member of any faith or church at all.

During the course, I learnt two things:

I learnt a lot about Byzantine art and architecture. I learnt about the theoretical and theological background. This made the message comprehensible, and I also understood why

the pictures looked like they did, the iconography, the material, the way they were used in worship and why the buildings had to be just like they were built.

As important, I learnt that to understand history, to understand the societies we study and not the least the history we are a part of, the European, we must at least *try* to put ourselves in the position of our ancestors, and explore the sources of our culture and not distance ourselves from them.

The movables are all sources of information, and often information we initially did not ask for. As scientists, we need to be humble and open to the fact that there are things still to be explored and learnt.

- **Storytelling is the gate to people's attention,**

to people's involvement and often also to their purse. The story we tell must be based on facts. Understanding the places of worship means knowing how they functioned, what was important and what was not. When discussing the question of where the movables belong, we need to understand their importance for the intended use of the building, for the cult but also for the people using it.

I remember my astonishment a long time ago, when in a Lutheran church from the 19th century found a box containing spittoons. In telling the story about the life in this church, the first decades of its use, it is not without significance to know that many churches actually had these receptacles, or saucers, placed on the floors on the men's side, so they could spit their snuff or tobacco in them before sitting down in the pews.

This also tells about people's understanding of and concept of the holy room, or perhaps they would not call it holy at all.

- **The building and its contents**

For a historian, there seems to be a painful division in the philosophy of heritage management between the building and the content. The building was built for the cult, so there is a clear connection between the building - and what goes on or what went on in it. However, I have often come across colleagues who regard the architecture as something apart from the building's content. The interest for architecture does not necessarily go with the interest for what happened inside. The work with the religious built heritage led me into useful and interesting studies of the liturgies of the various churches, the history of the Quakers, the study of the Muslim as well as the Jewish rites. To really get a grip on this, the movables are vital.

I will not so much reflect on the obvious, but dive into more specific objects and topics.

- **Some of the objects belong to a different part of the history of the cult, and may not be in use any more.**

The second Vatican, which 50th anniversary we are now celebrating in the Catholic Church, made many objects superfluous. New altars were not only put in, but others were removed,

railings taken out, and so on. Some of these can remain in the building with the new use. Some are obstacles.

- **Other objects may belong to a vernacular cult, which is not regarded as fully compatible to the current theology.**

There is currently an exhibition in the Museo Diocesano di Venezia called “Madonne”, covering the dressed Madonna sculptures, which for centuries was a part of the popular faith culture. These are wooden sculptures with textile vestments, changed for different occasions. For a long time this phenomenon was not “come il faut” and probably still is not quite. The sculptures are, however, important to explain and understand this part of the worship or popular devotion going on in the churches. Vernacular culture will always be important for understanding history.

- **Historical objects are not necessarily neutral, but some are more loaded than others are.**

We must show due respect for them, their integrity, significance and history, even if we as individuals and scientists have a neutral relationship to them. The respect goes for the meaning they have, or had, to others.

Case: The Gorton Monastery was founded by Franciscans who arrived in Gorton, east Manchester, in the 1860s. They built what Wikipedia calls “*one of the finest examples of High Victorian Gothic architecture in the world*”.

The church and the monastery were designed by Edward Welby Pugin, the son of the more famous father. The Franciscans served the Catholic community of the industrial city of Manchester.

The brothers left the monastery in the 1970s, and the fabric declined rapidly. In 1997, the Gorton Monastery was placed on the World Monuments Fund Watch list of the 100 Most Endangered Sites in the world, alongside Pompeii, the Taj Mahal and the Valley of the Kings. Thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage and European Regional Development Fund the place was saved and restored; and the buildings are now in good shape and a popular conference venue.

Many of the qualities of the original buildings are present, and much of the original interior is still in place. But the change from a monastery church into a conference venue makes a long leap.

Any Catholic knows that the sacred room asks for a certain reverence, and this sticks even after the liturgical elements have been removed and the building is not a church any more.

The main hall in the conference centre is naturally the biggest room in the monastery, which is the nave. This is where the conference participants gather, listen to speeches, look at the entertainment and have their dinners.

An ideal heritage principle is that the object, the pieces of art should remain where they are, i.e. in their original context, also after the change of use. However, there must have been

more than one with a Catholic upbringing who has felt the unease when putting his or her teeth in the beef and drinking their wine listening to a jazz musician in front of the altar and underneath the crucified Lord who still soars over the transept.

The presence of a full size crucifix makes an impression, and speaks out wherever it is, but in its original place the original message is still too present.

- **An object made for devotion has a history and is significant for the owner.**

Case: National Gallery in London set, in 2009 – 2010, up an exhibition about Spanish devotional wooden sculptures, called “The Sacred Made Real”. Seeing these painted sculptures opened the eyes of a lot of people. For ages, the paintings of Zurbaran, Velasquez and other Spanish artists had been seen in the galleries all over Europe and admired as the treasures they truly are.

Painted, extremely lifelike, sculptures were in the sphere of vernacular, and therefore not highly regarded as art objects. The sculptures gave new understanding to the great masters' works on canvas. It also turned out that many a master on canvas had also painted the sculptures and learnt from that.

While many of the paintings in the exhibition had lost their original use, many a sculpture was still in use as devotional objects. For the owners and users removing them from the chapel or church where they usually were did not come easy. When what has been the focus of your devotion or rite for the local community for centuries are moved to a gallery in London, the owner will know that the object now will come under scrutiny of thousands, most likely not interested in the religious significance but their aesthetic value, or by people who are not only ignorant of their religious significance, but most likely will not show them due respect.

- **The significance of many objects is also site specific.**

Their importance is linked to the place where they are or were. The renaissance altarpiece from Florence used to be where people knelt, opened their hearts and prayed. When moved to the Uffizi Gallery, no one kneels in front of the painting, even if it did wonders in the past. It has become a piece of art, an object with aesthetic importance.

Case: The Bellini altarpiece in Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice is well known from the art history textbooks. Some of you also had a site visit there last year. The altarpiece is in a chapel in use, but I always find myself in doubt when I am there; and I must have been there at least 50 times by now. It is so famous, fascinating and so often explained that I find it very hard to approach it in devotion. I am constantly side tracked by my background in Art History. It has become an icon of the Venetian art of its time, more than an object for devotion.

- **The owners might have lost contact with the object.**

The respect sometimes must go beyond the present owner of the object. A religious relic may seem like nonsense to someone who do not believe in them, or to the owner who is of

a different faith or practise. We should still not treat this as if we were ignorant for the relic's original significance.

This respect can also be in a wider context. And through showing this respect we can also give new meaning to the present owner. This has happened many times to me, on site visits. Through having been told the history of the object by an expert or an outsider, the value and understanding increase for the incumbent owner.

Case studies:

In the following, I will present three Norwegian cases, to develop the subject of where the movables belong.

Case 1: The Cranach painting in Larvik

Sunday 8 March 2009, the news came out that the only painting in a Norwegian church by the German 16th century artist Lucas Cranach the Elder, was stolen.

The following morning, a Norwegian journalist rang me up in the English Heritage office in London, where I was working at the time: "What could this Cranach be worth, and shouldn't a painting like this hang in a safe, public gallery?"

The possible commercial value of the painting was a hot question in the press. The journalist had probably never heard about the painter Lucas Cranach before she went to work that morning.

I tried to explain what this was about. I told about the tremendous Cranach exhibition in the Royal Academy in London a few months before, his importance for understanding the Lutheran theology. She was just not interested; neither were the other Norwegian journalists, nor the church. The paramount question was the possible value of the painting, in terms of money.

Three years before this theft, I edited a book about Norwegian 17th century churches. The project was particularly interesting because the Reformation was introduced, or rather forced upon the people, by the Danish king in 1537. Only a few churches were built in Norway that century, of which none remains, so the churches from the 17th century were in fact the oldest Lutheran churches in Norway, and what is left of artwork and interiors from this period could explain with a unique freshness, the new theology.

However, the church in Larvik where the painting hung, originally built in 1677, was in 1859-64 transformed into a sort of Neo-Romanesque church. One of the very few items left from the original interior was the Cranach painting.

After deciding to include the Cranach painting in the volume, the author was very reluctant to expose it, because its existence was not well known, and he suspected that the security measures were not quite up to date.

The Cranach painting is as early as 1550, and depicts the story where Jesus welcomes the children and tells the disciples not to prevent them from coming. The story is central to the Lutheran faith, because it emphasises salvation by faith and grace alone.

The earliest record of the painting being in the church is from 1689, 11 years after the building of the church. Count Ulrik Fredrik Gyldenløve financed the church. He married his third wife there, the same year as it was erected. The painting was given to the church on that occasion.

The Cranach painting was found in Oslo 4 days after it vanished, intact except for some scratches. It is now back in the church, which is far better secured than before.

A brief analysis:

The painting is obviously a part of the church and its history. But does it still “belong” to the church? To explore this, I will analyse the case from different angles.

Liturgical value

What value does this painting have for the celebration of the liturgy?

The Lutheran churches are, compared to the Roman Catholics, or the Anglicans for that matter, rather frugal. Compared to a reformed church, they may be well embellished. But the main character of the interior reflects the Lutheran emphasis on the “word alone”.

In an ecumenical spirit this seems to be about to change. In our Norwegian churches, there has been a growing flow of icons the last 20 years. The Norwegian Bishops’ Assembly has said that these icons, of all sorts of quality, are just objects to beautify the churches. They have no liturgical significance and should therefore be considered as purely decorative pictures.

The Cranach painting, a kind of “Lutheran icon”, could be considered being of the same category, with no liturgical significance. This is emphasised by the fact that the painting today hangs rather “hidden”, behind the pulpit, in the choir, hardly visible for even those of the congregation taking part in the Holy Communion.

The heritage value

The concept of “heritage value” can include a lot of things. Some of this could be linked to the understanding of the site, the object as a part of a context or perhaps we could say a part of a historical interior. In the Cranach case, the artwork is an exciting and important part of the history of the church, the town and the region where the church is. The count, who was the most likely donator, was the owner of this church, as well as many other churches and had a great influence on the church art in the county. The painting as an object can be considered alien in the *visual* context where it now is, but it is nevertheless an interesting or even vital link to the past, almost the only one remaining.

The identity value

The identity value of the Cranach painting seems to be rather vague. Some will naturally feel it is a part of their identity, but probably not many. If it had such an importance, it would have hung somewhere more exposed in the church.

The possible educational value of the painting in a museum or collection

The Cranach would have been quite visible exhibited in the National Gallery of Norway, where one of the other two Cranachs in the country already is on display. But in all fairness, the international section from the period is very limited.

For an international audience, this painting would have been much more accessible in the National Gallery. As it is today, it is not even mentioned on the international oeuvre lists.

Value of understanding, or a lost opportunity?

The study of Cranach made for the Royal Academy exhibition revealed many things I did not know about art and faith and practise in the 16th century central Europe.

If this knowledge had been conveyed to the people of the town, it could have added a deeper understanding of values lost in contemporary worship.

Case 2: The Ringsaker baptismal font

In 2009, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London set up the spectacular exhibition “Baroque”, to show the spread of baroque art all over the world. The curator Dr. Michael Snodin also included a baptismal font from the church Ringsaker in Norway, to show that the baroque art, originally Counter Reformation, also spread to the remote and reformed northern European and Lutheran corner.

The font, made in 1704, was reunited with the font house in the V&A, after about 100 years of separation, since the font house normally resides in the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, in Oslo. So here it was, in London, in one of the most prominent museums of its kind in the world, as the only Norwegian object, together with baroque objects and presentations from all over the world. Dr. Snodin even mentioned it specifically in an interview with in The Times, as the exhibition opened.

The complete lack of interest in this case in Norwegian newspapers, even the Christian dailies, is a part of the history. In all fairness, I know that some enthusiastic representatives from the parish council went to see the exhibition.

Five years before the exhibition, I had been to the church in capacity of Senior Adviser for the Directorate for Cultural Heritage. I criticised then the local way of moving, or rather rolling, the heavy wooden font, back and forth every week, to put it in position for the Sunday's baptism. The font was too valuable and vulnerable to risk any damage in this way.

The church warden told me in astonishment how the people from the V&A had come, lifted it wearing white gloves, and carefully packing it in boxes to bring it safely to the exhibition in London.

Liturgical value

The liturgical use of the baptismal font is obvious, even without the font-house. I do not know the discussion which might have gone on in the church leading to the removal of the font house. From similar cases, I guess the importance of visibility and integration of the sacrament in the service today, would make it impossible to have the font house returned to its original use and site.

If returned, the font house would have become a sort of museum piece also in the church, even if it originally was made to put emphasis on the sacrament of the baptism. Today, separating the baptism visually from the congregation is definitely against the contemporary liturgical trends.

The heritage value

The font from 1705 also conveys an important part of the history of the medieval church where it stands, even if the font *house* was removed 100 years ago. With the font house in place the heritage value, the opportunity to see and understand the significance of the sacrament of baptism in the 18th century, would have been much higher.

The present baroque pulpit which dominates the church is from the same period and enhances the value of the font. There is an interesting visible historical sequence from the medieval Romanesque church through the late medieval altarpiece to the baroque font and pulpit to the 19th century restoration, the organ and the chairs.

The identity value

The font has an identity value linked to the fact that everybody in the village since 1705, have been baptised in this font.

The possible educational value of the objects in a museum or collection

So what about putting these objects in what is believed to be a safe and secure place: A modern museum. The fact that the V&A used the font in the Baroque exhibition shows that this, of many seen as a modest object, is of international interest. There are several such fonts in Norway, which could have been used in the exhibition, but not many with the font house intact. And the quality of the craftwork on this font is also higher than of many of the others.

In the V & A show the objects were exhibited in an eye opening context: Next to a Latin American baroque altarpiece.

In the museum where the font house is today, is hardly accessible at all. The so cold "Church collection" is normally not open, since the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, one of the greatest tourist attractions in Oslo, does not have sufficient funding for keeping this part of the museum open. The church collection is mainly open to scholars.

Value of understanding, or a lost opportunity?

The exhibition of the font, together with all the other objects and presentations at the exhibition at the V&A put the object into a wide context, which made it easier to understand the religious and intellectual climate in the 18th century.

Case 3: The Hedal Madonna

My third case is somehow different from the first two, because the artwork is a Madonna sculpture from the 1230s, and therefore a Catholic piece of art, made in a completely different time, for a different creed and a different religious context.

In Hedal, in the mountain district Sør-Aurdal, lays a medieval stave church with the same name. The church was built in the 1160s entirely in wood. The church originally had a traditional, rectangular plan, but in 1699 the choir was demolished, the nave extended and converted into a cruciform plan. The church is still used for its original purpose: a parish church. But only the nave west of the spire is medieval.

The Madonna was originally placed in a tabernacle, which is still in the church, but since at least the 18th century used as a part of an altarpiece. The top of the tabernacle, with the shape of a stave church, is also in the church, as well as a medieval crucifix and a reliquary, which once contained a relic of Thomas Becket.

Until 1957, the Madonna's original colour surface was remarkably intact. As with many Norwegian medieval artworks, it had never been repainted. The tabernacle is a different story.

Hedal, like most places high up and far from the coast, is a very cold place in the winter. That year, 1957, an electrical heating system was installed: ovens under the benches.

Due to the new heating system, installed to make it comfortable for a modern congregation, the interior climate changed dramatically, leading to a drop in relative humidity, with the result that the polychrome sculpture deteriorated fast. The wood dried and shrunk and the paint started to peel off.

It was sent for conservation in 1969, and again in 1984/5. In this period 17,5 % of the medieval colour surface is said to be lost. In 1986, an agreement was stroke between the congregation and the Directorate for Cultural Heritage and the Museum of Cultural History that the Madonna should be exhibited in the museum in Oslo for 15 years. In this period, one should try to change the indoor climate in the church, sufficient to have the sculpture returned without any danger of losing more medieval paint.

In the 1990s, a detailed and accurate copy was made of the Madonna. The sculpture was carved, paint was produced with methods as close to the original as possible. The project resulted in new knowledge about methods and material. The reconstruction shows the Madonna as she originally looked like when she was new, in very bright colours, probably even more astonishing in a time when the church was lit by candles and when people were not much used to strong colours at all.

In 1991, the original sculpture was again conserved before being exhibited in the museum. And the copy was on display in the church.

In 2005 the relative humidity and indoor temperature was under control. The 6 October the Madonna was returned to the church; an occasion which will be remembered by those present.

Liturgical value

Talking about art objects in churches, the most obvious value could be the liturgical value, the significance the artwork can have for the celebration of a service.

The Madonna, on the other hand, cannot be said to have any liturgical significance, since the Lutheran church pays little if any attention to the mother of Christ. A veneration of Mary is even seen by many as close to pagan.

But could the objects have any sort of use linked to the religious practice outside the regular service? I mean yes.

The Madonna could be an object of religious reflections and meditation, even if there is no strong tradition for such in the Lutheran church. There is a new openness for this in a new ecumenical spirit.

The Madonna is one of many links to the medieval past of her church. But no one knows where she originally was placed or how the church looked like at the time she was installed. The only thing we know for sure is that the choir was removed in the 17th century.

The identity value

Does the Madonna have any identity significance to the people living in the town or village today? Yes, the removal of the Madonna was taken very seriously by the congregation and the people living in the village. A colleague present at the return remembers how some people shed tears the day she was reinstalled. People celebrated the event with a short sermon, greetings, a lecture as well as a festive meal.

The possible educational value of the objects in a museum or collection

The Madonna would still have been one of the main showpieces in the Museum of Cultural History, as she was the 15 years she was exhibited there, in the department for medieval sacred art. This collection is fairly unique also in international standards; Norway has a remarkable number of medieval polychrome sculptures and altar frontals.

Value of understanding, or a lost opportunity?

Sacred artworks are carriers of history, and they can be door openers to a deeper understanding of the faith and liturgy.

The reconstruction of the Madonna, gave a much better understanding of the craftsmanship and the aesthetics of the medieval art. The detailed study of surface, sculpting and paint, unveiled secrets and gave new knowledge of how this artwork was made, but it also added to our understanding of how important light, colour and beauty was in the medieval liturgy.

I visited the museum to see the copy of the Madonna. Standing in that solemn, huge hall with all this medieval art, the heretical thought stroke me that the Madonna's impact on me was much stronger in that context than it would have been in a crowded tourist attraction many of the national cathedrals and churches have become.

Where do these artworks belong?

The sociology of churches and congregations is fascinating. The terrible record of church fires in Norway, mostly by arsons, the last 20 years has made it possible to look into this.

When a church burns, the whole local community is affected: Even people who hardly ever go to church express their loss. There is a genuine grieving process which tells a lot about the intangible value of the church and its contents.

It seems as if the loss of the church goes with a sense of loss of identity. The church building is a constant, the carrier of the local identity. It seems likely that the community also has strong feelings for the artworks, the objects of historic value. The church is a place of memory, of identity, of the great events in life, a common space. The local community argues that the objects belong to their community, to their church.

The recent arsons have shown that even with the fire brigade four minutes away, a wooden church might burnt down completely. The church must have a fire system in place, which do not depend entirely on the fire brigade.

In our climate, humidity or the lack of humidity is a great challenge, especially if the church should function as a home for a congregation of our time. The church is a building in use, and not a museum with a regulated, stable climate. The modern use challenges the sensitive objects.

Some of these objects are not only heritage with local importance, but they also have national as well as international value. "Our heritage" often means the heritage of the national or even international community. I would say that an original Cranach and possibly the Madonna are world heritage. Can we compromise the safety of our common international heritage just because we want to see it every Sunday?

At a certain stage the joy and pride of having these original artworks in the midst of the celebrating congregation, may become very expensive for the parish and risky for the artworks and even an obstacle to the contemporary service.

I will still argue that the original artworks belong to the churches and context where they were meant to be.

Through knowledge, appreciation, and active inclusion of the artworks in the worship, their presence almost always add a valuable intangible dimension to the service.

But such valuable artworks can only be in the churches on the condition that they are secured against theft and all sort of damages, respected for their religious and scientific values and available for scholars as well as worshipers of all kinds, also the heritage worshipers.

To sum up some of my main points:

- **Objects are vital for understanding the buildings, their history and their use.**
- **Objects also those not specifically religious can add to the understanding of the buildings and their use.**
- **Religious objects must be handled with respect, for the objects themselves, for the purpose they were made, for the present owners and the previous owners.**

- **Religious objects are most often a part of both the national and international heritage as well as the heritage of the faith and the denomination. As such, they should be accessible to the public and to researchers.**
- **Generally, the objects should follow the building. However, the use of the building will sometimes mean that exposing the religious objects in the building is not compatible with this rule.**
- **Museums like Catharijnconvent is not only able to secure the artworks for the future, but obviously also very competent in presenting them and telling the story. This is, alas, not the case in all other countries, my own included.**