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# ‘PASSION CLOCKS’ IN NORWEGIAN CHURCHES ICONOGRAPHY AND STATE OF CONSERVATION

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## Abstract

The *Passion Clock* is a religious motif that spread during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Scandinavian countries. They were placed in homes and in churches for devotion. Paintings of the Passion Clocks are only known in Denmark and Norway. However, the motif exists in Sweden as woodcuts, but strangely not as paintings. Today approximately 40 paintings are known in museums, churches and private collections, all painted in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Passion Clock depicts Christ on the cross in a semi-circular scroll with Roman numbers. Each number is connected to 13 medallions with scenes from the Passion of Christ. The Passion Clock functioned as an instrument in Lutheran devotion, like a step-by-step meditation of the Passion of Christ, in a way similar to the Catholic devotional practice of the ‘Way of the Cross’. Seven known versions of the Passion Clock are in Norwegian churches today. Condition assessments were undertaken on four of the paintings, all of them situated in the eastern part of Norway. The results show that the state of conservation of the Passion Clocks in Norwegian churches vary a lot, from paintings that is in need of no conservation treatment to paintings that is in need of extensive treatment. The painting technique is quite similar in the four versions, but there are local variations due to the artist’s personal skills.

*Keywords:* religious motif, pietism, art history, condition survey, conservation

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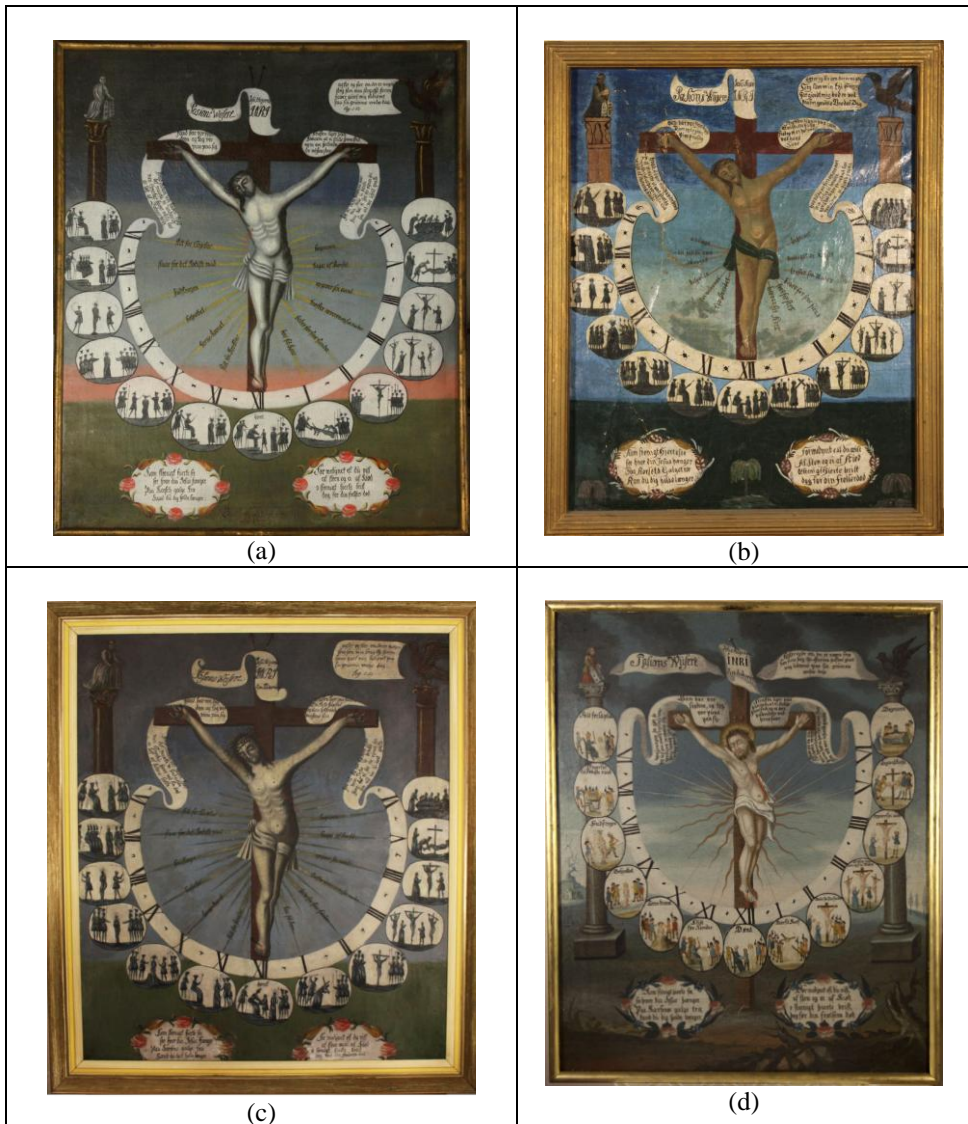
## 1. Introduction

In late medieval piety, the focus on Christ’s suffering was aroused. Passion literature was eagerly copied and translated into vernacular languages. Representations of the Way of the Cross flourished at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. During the late Middle age, participation in the Passion became the principal act of Christian piety. Images of Christ’s Passion occupied the centre of a devotional practice, and the intention was to gain viewers’ compassion through “sufferance with Christ” [1]. The Stations of the Cross originated in pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and it could be a spiritual pilgrimage for those who could not go to the Holy Land, through meditating upon the stations of the Way of the Cross. The Passion Clocks had this function as well. Looking at the scenes and reading

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the text on the painting, the spectator/prayer could contemplate and partake in the suffering of Christ.



**Figure 1.** The 'Passion Clock's' in Norwegian churches: (a) Langestrand church, (b) Drøbak church, (c) Asak church and (d) Tranby church.

The seven known versions of the Passion Clock that are in Norwegian churches today can geographically be divided into two: four versions situated in the eastern part of Norway, and three in the western part of Norway. The former ones are in Langestrand church in Vestfold county (Figure 1a), Drøbak church in Akershus county (Figure 1b), Asak church in Østfold county (Figure 1c) and Tranby church in Buskerud county (Figure 1d), while the latter ones are found in

Strandebarm church in Hardanger county, Skånevik church in Hardanger county, and Vassenden church in Sogn og Fjordane county.

## **2. Operational goals**

This article aimed to examine the iconography of the paintings, the painting technique, and their state of conservation. Not a lot of research has been done on the Passion Clocks [2, 3], especially from a conservator's point of view [4, 5]. Four of the seven known versions of this group of paintings (Figure 1) have been examined in visible light and in ultra violet light. Where needed, cross-sections were taken. The manual skills of the craftsmen were also studied and compared to each other.

## **3. Outcomes**

### ***3.1. Iconography***

The Passion Clock paintings are at a first glance almost identical, and they must have had a common origin, not yet found. Christ is depicted on the cross in a semi-circular scroll with Roman numerals and text fields under and above each arm of the cross. Each Roman numeral is connected to 13 medallions with scenes from the Passion of Christ (Figure 1). The various scenes are often rendered using small, monochrome silhouettes. From the cross, there are beams pointing to each numeral, like a clock, starting at six o'clock in the morning and ending at six o'clock in the evening, with the numerals VI to VI. The 13 beams have a text describing the correspondent scene: VI - *Christ before Caiaphas*, VII - *Jewish tribunal*, VIII - *Flagellation*, IX - *Mocking of Christ*, X - *Crown of Thorns*, XI - *Before Herod*, XII - *Condemned*, I - *Carrying the Cross*, II - *Praying for His enemies*, III - *Comforting the thief and His mother*, IIII - *Breathed His last*, V: *Deposition*, VI - *Entombment*. The hours sequence follows the Jewish day of 12 hours, where the day starts at sunrise six o'clock in the morning and ends at sunset six in the evening, even if the Passion Clocks are not biblically correct from this point of view. In Mark 15.25 it is written: "It was in the third hour when they crucified Him", which mean nine o'clock in the evening, but in the painting it is depicted at seven o'clock. And according to the Passion Clocks Christ died an hour later than in the biblical account: "and at the 9<sup>th</sup> hour... With a loud cry, Jesus breathed His last" (Mark 15.33-38). But the entombment of Christ is presented as in the Bible, at sunset, the 12<sup>th</sup> hour.

The first two medallions represent the two trials Christ had to face before his condemnation; *Christ before Caiaphas* the high priest, and for the *Jewish tribunal*. The Jews had no authority to condemn Christ to death, but they had to lead a unanimous appeal to the Roman procurator, whom could condemn Him with the death penalty for being guilty of blasphemy. After meeting with the Jewish council, Christ was led to Pilate who had Him flagellated - a common prelude to an execution. The *Flagellation* is followed by the *Mocking of Christ*,

and *Crown of Thorns*. The 'coronation'- scene depicts two Roman soldiers twisting a *Crown of Thorns* and placing it on Christ's head with pitchforks. After the 'coronation', Christ is sent *Before Herod*, and then *Condemned* to death by Pilate. To emphasize that it was the Jews who wanted Christ convicted, and not Pilate, Pilate is depicted washing his hands in a basin held by a servant. This symbolical action would appeal to the Jewish sentiment, as it was a mode of asserting innocence prescribed in the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 21.6, Psalm 26.6). The next scene shows Christ *Carrying the Cross*. In most cases Christ was depicted upright with the cross on His shoulder, but in the versions in Asak and Langestrand churches, He drags the cross on His back. The next three medallions show the crucified Christ. In the first one, He is *Praying for His enemies*, surrounded by soldiers on one side and Jews on the other side. Then, in the next scene, He is flanked by the two thieves, Mary and John, while He is *Comforting his mother and the thief*. The following scene displays Christ *Breathed His last* and dies. The last two medallions show the events that took place after the death of Christ: *Deposition* and *Burial*. There is no record of the deposition from the cross in the Gospels, but it is told that a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, asked Pilate's permission to take away the dead body of Jesus, which according to the Bible, was wrapped in a linen cloth and laid in a tomb of stone (John 19.39). This scene is depicted in the last medallion as a sarcophagus.

The central and main motif is the crucified Christ. He hangs heavy on the cross, wearing a small loincloth, and His head leans towards His right arm. Dripping blood is present in the proximity of His wounds and crown of thorns. The side wound is on Christ's left hand in most of the paintings, which is opposite to the common depictions of Crucifixions. There is nothing to suggest the presence of a reversed image, since the rest of the composition is similar in all the other Passion Clocks.

In most versions, this motif is flanked by two Corinthian columns, placed behind the first and last medallion. This may be a simplification of the original prototype, which has presumably shown the whole column. Whole columns can be seen in the Passion Clock in Tranby church, signed by Tunmarck (Figure 1d), another painting made by Tunmarck in a private collection and in two Swedish woodcuts. At the top of the left column (for the viewer), stands or kneels Moses holding the Tablets of the Law. Moses is the law mediator and prefigurator for Christ fulfilling the law. On the right column is a bird with a scroll in its beak (except in Tunmarck's two paintings). The birds' appearances vary from painting to painting, but presumably it is a rooster, which is considered a precursor that approach Peter's denial and grief. The painting of Tunmarck which is in private ownership has no figures on the columns. Another variant, also privately owned, has an angel instead of a bird. The Swedish woodcuts depict an angel on the left column and an obvious rooster on the right. On the top of the cross it is written: 'Jesus Nazareus INRI', and on the left side: 'Passions Wiisere' (Passion Clock).

The Passion Clock is also interesting because it combines pictorial and textual aspects. On the top right side is the text from Lamentation 1.12: "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like

my suffering that was inflicted on me, that the Lord brought on me in the day of his fierce anger?" In most paintings, the text comes out of the beak of the bird sitting on the column. At both ends of the semi-circular scroll there are two fields of text: above and below each arm of the cross. The passage is from Isaiah 53, verses 4 and 5: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" and "upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed". Under the arms of the cross on each side is a verse from an unknown hymn translated to English [3, p. 12]: "What Adam sinned in the garden of Eden / we have had to pay for/But through His death / Christ has released us from the trap of Satan" and "Who will continue to condemn / My Jesus did pay/His death which put an end to all our misery / Here we see before our eyes". The last two verses are placed in two oval font fields encircled by flowers and leaves, placed at the bottom of the painting: "Come, stony heart, behold / See your Jesus hanging / On the wooden gallows of the cross / Are you able to contain yourself any longer?"

### **3.2. Function**

The Passion Clocks probably was used as an instrument for everyday devotional life. Paintings or cheaper woodcuts were probably hanging in people's homes and served as way of devotion. The Passion Clock functioned as a step-by step meditation of the Passion of Christ, in a similar way to the catholic devotional practice of the Way of the Cross. In these paintings, the text and the motif, was intended to renew the remembrance of Christ's suffering and death. This would increase the believer's love, who will strive to become more like Him, by suffering with Him. The pursuit of becoming like Christ has been the fundamental purpose of Christian life throughout the history of Christianity [6]. The Pietism appealed to the believers' guilt and conscience by focusing on Christ's suffering and death for our sins. This path of sufferance without complaining, with patience and obedience, was an example for people to follow. The believers should accept the life they lived, be patient and obedient to the authorities and God, like Christ was to God. These Passion Clocks were in vogue in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and from the 19<sup>th</sup> century we only have some woodcuts preserved.

### **3.3. Conservation state of the examined paintings**

Four of the seven versions situated in Norwegian churches, have been examined by a paintings conservator. They were categorized with arbitrary numbers from 0-3, where 0 refers to 'no need of conservation', whereas category 3 refers to 'in need of extensive conservation treatment'. The state of conservation of the four paintings vary a lot, and all four categories were used (Table 1). Only two of the examined paintings had traceable condition reports, from previously work done on the Passion Clock in Tranby church [T. Nordstedt, *A 50 Tranby church. Condition report*, Unpublished condition report,

Directorate for Cultural Heritage, 1967] and Langestrand church [Haugar Vestfold Art Museum, Unpublished condition report, 2011].

**Table 1.** The conservation state of the Passion's Clocks paintings.

<b>Painting</b>	<b>Repairs and interventions before 2014</b>	<b>State of conservation 2014 (arbitrary score)</b>
<b>Langestrand</b>	- Before 2011: re-stretched. - 2011: canvas strip-lined, loose paint consolidated, dirt removed, tear repaired. Retouched and varnished.	good condition of the painting (0)
<b>Drøbak</b>	- canvas lined and loose-lined. Tears and holes in canvas repaired with bits of canvas and putty. Overpainted. Varnished.	some holes in canvas, buckled canvas, visible earlier repairs, dirty surface, yellowed varnish, loose paint (3)
<b>Asak</b>	- original canvas cut, strip-lined, new stretcher, damage in canvas repaired, possibly cleaned, heavily overpainted	canvas in stable condition. Loose paint, some paint loss (2)
<b>Tranby</b>	- 1920: canvas glue paste lined, retouched. - 1967: glue paste lining removed and canvas wax lined. Varnish removed. Retouched and varnished.	good condition of the painting. Traces of mould growth on the stretcher that touches the back side of canvas. Yellowed varnish (1)

On the front side of the Drøbak version, every tear and hole is filled with a considerable amount of putty, which has cracked. Two of the versions are heavily overpainted (Drøbak and Asak church), whilst two versions more or less have their original surface intact (Langestrand and Tranby church).

The earlier restoration work executed on the Drøbak version may have altered the appearance of the painting. Three palm tree- looking growths are painted in the lower part of the painting, which may not be original. These are details that are not known in other versions. When comparing the painting technique of this area with other original parts in the painting, it may be a reason for believing that this is not original parts of the painting. Further investigation has to be undertaken to be sure of this.

Due to damages on the canvas and old overpaint, loose paint was found on two of the examined paintings (Drøbak and Asak church versions). The Drøbak version has loose paint due to tears, holes and buckling of the canvas, whilst on the Asak version the damages have occurred because of the overpaint. The overpaint has lost adhesion to the underlying original paint, and it has caused delamination of the paint layers.

The versions in Drøbak, Langestrand and Tranby have either one or several varnish layers. The painting in Drøbak church seems to have the most yellowed and degraded varnish, whilst the Tranby version has yellowed a little. The Langestrand version that was conserved three years ago, has a relatively

new varnish. The Asak version was overpainted with a heavy, monochrome, matte paint, and it seems like it does not have a varnish.

### ***3.4. Overpaint***

During the mid-nineteenth century, repainting of undamaged areas were made with little respect for the original in order to satisfy the sensibilities and tastes of that period [7]. The aesthetic concerns tended to focus almost exclusively on the painting as an image. When it comes to treatment today, the conservator must consider the reasons for the alterations undertaken: are they changes in the historical context of the painting, additions to update the image, or attempts to disguise damage? [8]. Alterations may have historical value in itself [9]. Later restorations are not only a part of the painting's history but, they are also a primary source for the study of contemporary human interactions, documenting methods and materials of conservation work in a certain period [9, p. 498].

The overpaint carried out on the painting in Drøbak church seems to have been executed in order to disguise damages, because of the painting's poor condition. However, there is a possibility that alterations were made to make the motif and arrangement look better. In the version in Asak church, one can see that the white paint has been 'freshened up'. No traces of damages were found underneath the overpaint. A painting hanging on the opposite wall in the church has undergone the same type of overpaint with the same colours and materials as the Passion Clock. Based on this observation, there is a possibility that the overpaint on the Passion Clock has been made to match the other painting in the church, or vice versa.

### ***3.5. Painting technique and layer structure***

The examined paintings have more or less the same dimensions, with variations between 73 cm and 86 cm (height) and between 60 cm and 70 cm (width) on visible measurements. They are all painted with oil paint on canvas, and stretched on a stretcher.

When looking at the build-up of the paint layers, the four versions have a lot in common. All of them have a red ground except from the Tranby version where the first ground is dark brown/black with a second red ground. Cross sections from the Drøbak and Asak versions reveal a light imprimatura. The other versions do not seem to have this layer.

All the versions have a layer structure, which indicates a time-efficient, planned and schematic build-up of the rest of the paint layers. In the background colours, a recess has been made for details in the painting, like the cross, columns and text-areas. Cross sections from the Tranby version show that the recess for details has been used more extensively than the other examined versions.

The four examined versions of the Passion Clock showed that they have been executed by craftsmen with different skill levels. Regarding the type of woodcut broadsheet used, it is flagrantly a possibility that some craftsmen have altered the details in the motif. But when it comes to the build up of the painting, there are few elements that differ from one another. Maybe each craftsman has had his method/recipe on how to make the motif, layer by layer. The painting that stands out the most in comparison, is the version in Tranby church. This is one of two known versions with a signature. The craftsman is G.E. Tunmarck, a local interior painter. The layer structure in this painting is slightly different. Tunmarck also painted vegetation and landscape in the lower part that is rare for these paintings. The artist has painted a church on the left side of the painting that may symbolize the old Tranby church. The miniature scenes in the medallions are polychrome, the only one currently known.

#### 4. Conclusions

The paintings differ a lot in terms of their state of conservation. There is a correlation between the earlier kinds of damages to the paintings, the execution of past restoration, and the skills of the restorer, with the actual state of conservation of the paintings. Some paintings have been delicately treated, whilst other paintings probably were overpainted when not even damaged. This is a result of different approaches to the profession's ethical stance.

These Passion Clocks arose in a time of increasing interest in the Passion of Christ, and the important pedagogic and emotional aspects contributed to a personal application of Christ's suffering. Step by step, the viewers/prayers could meditate upon the chief scenes of Christ's sufferings and death. Together with the story-telling medallions, the written text appealed to the heart of each believer, and even a stony heart would break. ("O stony heart, break. Because of the death of your Saviour.")

Norwegian Passion Clocks paintings represent a Lutheran way of presenting the Passion, in a period of time in Norway. They also represent the use of pictures for popular piety. This was not only art, but it was also a way of practising a Pietistic life in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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