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# THE MURALS OF THE OLD CHURCH IN MOSTER A TYPICAL NORWEGIAN POST-REFORMATION WALL DECORATION?

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(Received 15 September 2017, revised 3 October 2017)

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## Abstract

In Norway, 34 of the around 160 medieval stone churches have preserved mural decorations from the post-Reformation period (ca. 1537–1800). The old church of Moster, situated on the west coast of Norway, is one of the best-preserved examples of mural decorations from around 1600. Researchers from the Norwegian Institute of Cultural Heritage Research (NIKU) examined the wall paintings and made comparative studies with the other Norwegian murals from the same period, in terms of materials, techniques and iconographic programme. The old Moster church contains murals with typical post-Reformation decorative elements. The walls are decorated with foliage and fruit ornamentations, painted frames, which initially contained inscriptions, and biblical scenes from the Old and the New Testament. Scenes from the Old Testament are scarce in preserved Norwegian murals. The post-Reformation murals in Moster must have been executed in different and subsequent stages. Closer examinations of the murals suggest that the decorations were more colourful and detailed than they appear today.

*Keywords:* Trinity, Old Testament, New Testament, religious art

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## 1. Introduction

In Norway, only 34 stone churches have traces of post-Reformation (1537-1800) mural decorations. The majority of these churches were painted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries only a few new stone churches were built in Norway, thus the post-Reformation murals are mostly preserved in medieval churches. In Norway today there are about 160 medieval stone churches. Norwegian medieval churches were also built in wood and decorated with paintings, but these are not included in this study. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century a lot of interior decorations were covered over with white paint. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century these decorations were uncovered.

Several medieval stone churches underwent major interior changes during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which included new wall decorations. These 17<sup>th</sup>-century decorations are important cultural heritage. However, no complete survey exists

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of post-Reformation wall paintings in Norway. Research on the post-Reformation mural paintings in Norway is limited to some minor studies, often conducted in connection with descriptions of the church rooms.

One of the best-preserved examples of mural decorations from the early post-Reformation era can be found in Moster Old church, covering the walls in both the chancel and the nave. Although the pictorial programme in Moster Old church has been described previously by several scholars, the paintings need to be scrutinized more thoroughly, and explored in connection with other post-Reformation murals in Norway. Based on new observations and analysis during conservation work in Moster Old church, it was possible to gain a more complete understanding of these murals.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the post-Reformation murals in Moster Old church by answering the following questions: what is the iconographic programme? Did the post-Reformation murals in Moster replace already existing medieval murals? And finally, are these murals representative of post-Reformation murals in Norway?

## 2. Experimental

Traces of post-Reformation murals have been detected in 34 Norwegian churches. The dating, state of preservation and conservation history were registered in each church. The motives and decorations have been organised into eight categories (Table 1). The locations of the murals in the church, the extent of the preserved area and descriptions of the paintings were also registered. All murals were photographically documented. This work allows us to obtain an overview of the Norwegian material and makes it possible to perform various comparative studies.

**Table 1.** How many Norwegian stone churches have preserved a certain decoration type from post-Reformation time so far. The list might be incomplete as not all decors are dated yet, but it gives an indication on the extent of typical post-reformation decors in Norway.

Decoration type	Number of churches
Inscriptions	17
Figures and narrative scenes	17
Foliage decor	14
Architectural decor	11
Drapery	8
Shadow decor	14
Court of arms and monograms	7
Ships	5

The wall paintings in Moster Old church were also examined more thoroughly. During conservation works performed in three periods between 2010 and 2013, we were able to study the decorations close up. The surface structures were studied using raking light and ultraviolet (UV) radiation. The

latter allowed differences to be detected in the surface materials and drawings that were invisible under visible light. Pigment analyses were also performed using cross-section analysis, XRF (X-ray fluorescence analysis), a petrographic microscope and SEM (scanning electron microscopy), carried out by the Nationalmuseet in Denmark. These studies gave us new information regarding colours and techniques.

To provide answers to the main issues of this article, we are going to explore the choice of motives, technique and use of colours, as well as the layer stratigraphy of the paintings.

### **3. Background**

#### ***3.1. Post-Reformation murals in Norway***

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of the Norwegian mural decorations, both medieval and post-Reformation, were painted over with white paint. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a rediscovering of the wall paintings started in Hordaland, specifically in the Eidfjord (1909) and Kinsarvik (1915) churches. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more murals were found and uncovered. Nearly all the wall paintings that we can see today in Norwegian stone churches have at one time been painted over. The uncovered murals are often fragmented. Changes in the building structure, renovations over centuries and the uncovering processes caused extensive losses of decorations. Today we have only six churches with large pictorial programmes from the post-Reformation era. One of these is in the old Moster church, which will be scrutinized in the following pages.

#### ***3.2. Moster Old church***

Moster is a medieval stone church from the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, located at Bømlo, an island between Bergen and Stavanger [1]. The church was built on crown land, where according to tradition Olav Trygvason (king of Norway from 995 to 1000) once built the first church in Norway [2]. Moster Old church was purchased by the Fortidsminneforeningen in 1874 in connection with the construction of a larger parish church [2, p. 26; 3]. Moster Old church is a small church with a rectangular nave and a smaller rectangular chancel, both with saddle roofs (Figure 1). Apart from the roof and enlarged windows from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the medieval architecture is well preserved, and has not been changed much since medieval time. Even the medieval narrow chancel arch is still preserved.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the church interior underwent major changes. The interior is characterized by richly decorated and well-preserved Lutheran assets: the pulpit, the western gallery, the benches, the altarpiece and the murals can all be dated back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 2). But the most striking impression on entering the church today is given by the paintings that entirely cover the walls in the nave and chancel.

The motives have been interpreted and described by several researchers since they were uncovered in 1925 [2-10]. The paintings have been dated for two periods: around 1600 and the time after 1630 [6; D. Erdmann, *Moster gamle kirke. Undersøkelser og maleriavdekninger i 1925. Forslag til delvis restaurering (Moster Old Church. Surveys and painting uncovering in 1925. Proposals for partial restoration)*, unpublished report, Directorate for Cultural Heritage, Oslo, 1-2].



**Figure 1.** Moster Old church viewed from the south-west. It is a typical Norwegian building in Romanesque style with a rectangular nave and a small chancel with saddle roof.



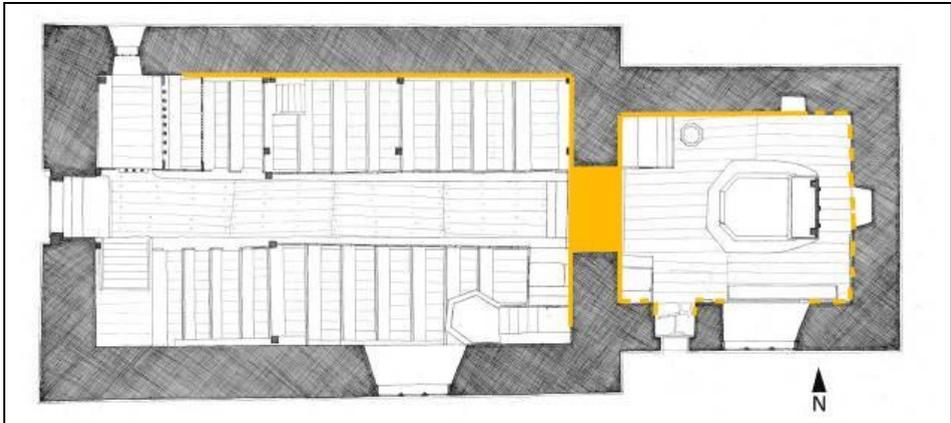
**Figure 2.** Moster Old church: (a) the northern and eastern walls in the nave, (b) the west nave with the western gallery. Photo: B. Lindstad, 2013.

## 4. Results and discussion

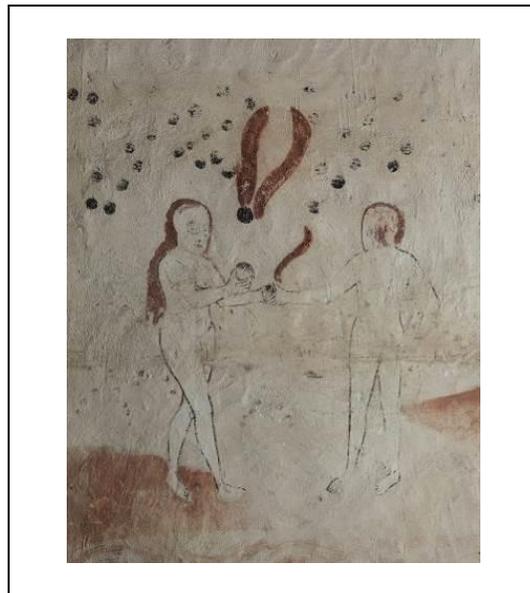
### 4.1. Pictorial programme in Moster Old church

The remaining post-Reformation murals in Moster cover the northern and eastern wall in the nave, and the northern, western and parts of the southern and

eastern wall in the chancel (Figure 3). Traces of painted decor can also be found on other walls, suggesting that the entire interior may have been decorated with murals. These decorations can be dated back to at least two periods: around 1600 and certainly before 1630 when the church got a new gallery that covered parts of the murals.



**Figure 3.** Ground plan of Moster Old church. The yellow marks show the location of the post-Reformation murals. Plan: Johan Lindström, 1926.



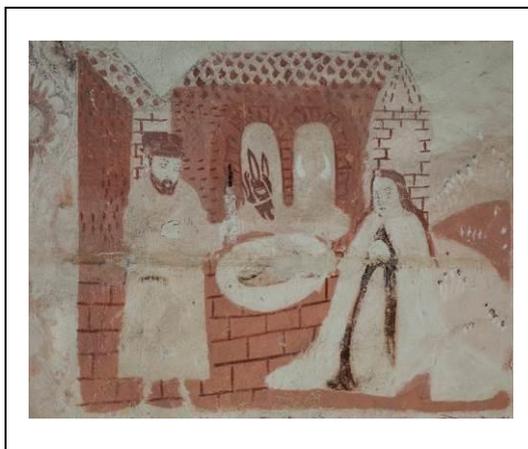
**Figure 4.** *The Fall* on the north wall in the nave. The Wisdom tree has disappeared due to fading of organic pigments. Fruits, now black in colour, originally had a red-orange hue due to the presence of red lead as a pigment. Photo: B. Lindstad, 2013.

The murals are divided into two horizontal parts (Figure 2a). The upper part of the wall in the nave is decorated with foliage and fruit ornamentations and painted frames, originally containing inscriptions now lost. The lower part

of the wall in the nave shows biblical scenes from the Old and New Testament: *Creation*, *The Fall* (Figure 4), *The Annunciation* (Figure 5), *The Nativity* (Figure 6), a painted epitaph and a *Crucifixion* on the east wall. The scenes are supported by biblical texts above the scenes. These texts were almost entirely lost.



**Figure 5.** *The Annunciation*, photo: B. Lindstad, 2013.



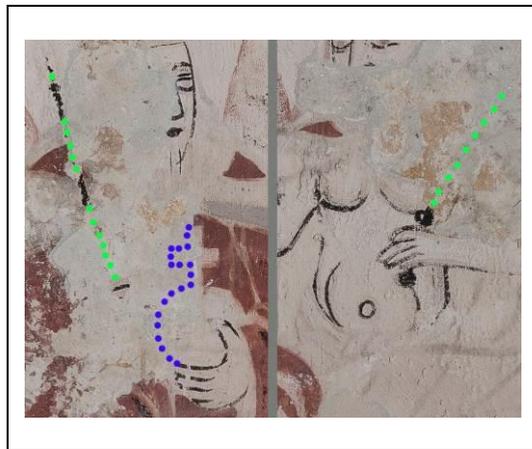
**Figure 6.** *The Nativity*, photo: B. Lindstad, 2013.

The figure group above the chancel arch in the nave has been interpreted by various scholars. But, due to degradation and some major lacunas, the scene is difficult to read and interpretations have often been contradictory and wrong [2, p. 67, 69; 3, p. 161; 4-8]. The scene shows two figures facing each other and an indistinct dove above them (Figure 7). The group is located under a painted arch and ‘Jehovah’ is written in the upper part. The dove is hard to see from distance, and some missing lines provide convincing explanation for the misinterpretations. The motif has been described as *The Trinity* [2, p. 67; 3, p. 161; 5], but also as “... two women with bare breasts” [7] and the latest interpretation, as Mary showing her breast to God in the intercessory prayer [4].

A deeper study confirms the hypothesis of *The Trinity*, with God the Father on the left holding a sceptre in his right hand and a globe in his left.



**Figure 7.** *The Trinity* above the chancel arch in the nave. The motif is hard to read due to major lacunas. Photo: B. Lindstad, 2013.



**Figure 8.** Detail of *The Trinity*. The figure on the left (as we look at it) holds a sceptre in his right hand and an orb in his left. The green and blue marks should help the observer to fill in missing parts of the design. Photo: B. Lindstad, 2013.

On the right-hand side of God is his son, Jesus. He holds a sceptre in his right hand and does the sign of benediction (blessing) with his right hand (Figure 8).

Above the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is positioned in shape of a dove. The group is located under a painted arch and 'Jehovah' is written in the upper part. The murals on the north wall in the chancel represent biblical scenes from the Old and the New Testament. In the upper part of the north wall, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (Figure 9) and *Resurrection* are painted. The lower parts of the

northern and western walls in the chancel exhibit different kinds of foliage decor to that found in the nave.



**Figure 9.** *The Sacrifice of Isaac* on the north wall in the chancel, photo: B. Lindstad, 2013.

## 5. Colours and technique

Paintings appear today mainly in red, grey and black colours. Traces of green can also be observed, suggesting that originally the chromatic range was richer than that visible today. The paintings are applied on a thick lime layer using a *secco* technique, which means pigments mixed with a binding medium and applied on dried plaster. The analysis of pigments showed that iron oxides were used for different shades of red, and carbon black was employed for black. Red lead was also found, which has now turned into black compound (Figure 4).

Due to fading of pigments, some details have almost completely disappeared, such as the ox in the *Nativity* scene (Figure 10). The head is completely lost, and only the white horns are visible. UV radiation helps to make some lost details visible, such as the feathers on Gabriel's wings in the *Annunciation* scene (Figure 11). We do not know the original colours of these details, but it may be supposed that they were painted with organic pigments that have faded over time and are no longer visible. What we see under UV is associated with the organic binder fluorescence. These examples show us that the murals in Moster were once much more colourful and had more details than those we can see today.

### **5.1. From the medieval to the post-Reformation decoration**

Several Norwegian medieval stone churches have some traces of medieval wall decorations. In the old Moster church too there are fragments of medieval decorations. They were uncovered in the 1950s on the southern wall of the nave. The fragments are hard to read, and look like geometrical decorations.



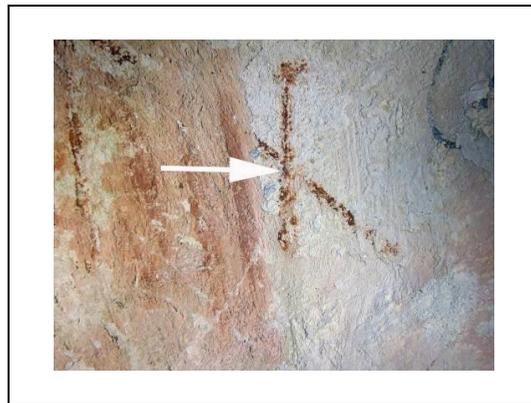
**Figure 10.** Detail from *The Fall*. The ox on the right-hand side is faded, and only its white horns testify to its former presence. Photo: S. Kaun, 2012.



**Figure 11.** Detail from *The Annunciation* in normal light (left) and ultraviolet light (right). UV fluorescence made feathers in the angel's wing visible. Photo: S. Kaun, 2012.

It is obvious that these old decorations were covered when the new paintings in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were created. Rune inscriptions are also visible in several places in the church underneath the post-Reformation decor [O. Seter, *Moster gamle kirke. Kalkmalerier (Moster old church. Murals)*, unpublished report, Directorate for Cultural Heritage, Oslo, 1952, p. 2]. Traces of red paint depicting runes can be seen in missing parts of the post-Reformation paint layer (Figure 12).

The murals in Moster were probably painted in different phases, but we cannot say for certain how many. Differences in the painting technique and the artistic quality indicate that the paintings in the chancel and in the nave were created by different hands. Different pigments were used, e.g. red lead is found only in the nave. Due to the colour typologies and degradation patterns, it is probable that the decorations on the northern wall in the nave can be attributed to the same workshop, in contrast to Erdmann's observations. In fact, he dated the biblical scenes later than the foliage decoration above, and claimed that the biblical scenes are of "lower artistic quality" [6, p. 12].



**Figure 12.** Detail from the chancel wall. The arrow shows runes, painted in red. The runes are painted on a layer underneath the post-Reformation murals, and they can be seen in lacunas. Photo: B. Lindstad, 2013.



**Figure 13.** The foliage and fruit decor on the nave's north wall (left) compared to the apparently similar decor on the east wall (right). The latter appears to be of poorer quality and the fruits are less distinctly painted. Photo: S. Kaun, 2012.

New observations show that the foliage decorations in the nave were also painted in two stages, even though they look similar. The surface study and raking light make it obvious that two different hands executed the foliage decors

on the northern and eastern walls (Figure 13). Plaster stratigraphy showed that the eastern wall was decorated later. The yellowish red colours in the *Calvary* scene on the eastern wall indicate that this motive was also painted at another stage (Figure 14, left).

All these findings lead us to the conclusion that an older decor, probably medieval, was painted over in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This took place in several stages. The oldest decoration in the chancel might have been medieval runes, and in the nave geometrical decorations.



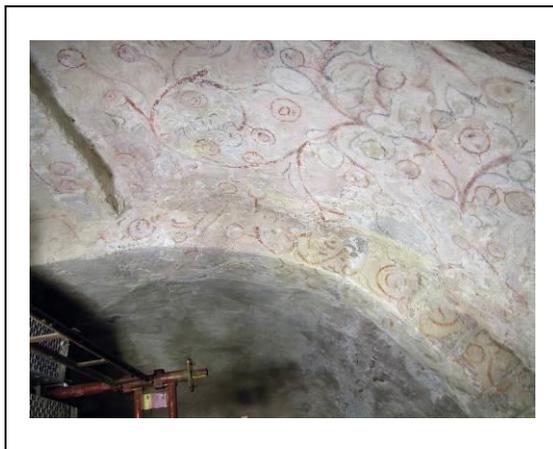
**Figure 14.** Crucifixion scenes are typical of Norwegian post-Reformation decor: Moster Old church (left), Dale church (dated around 1560, right). Photo on the left: B. Lindstad, 2013, photo on the right: S. Kaun, 2016.

## **5.2. Comparative Norwegian studies**

A comparative study showed that more than half of the preserved and uncovered post-Reformation mural paintings in Norway have figurative and biblical scenes (Table 1). Biblical figures such as the apostles and scenes of the Life and Death of Christ (Figure 14) and Judgement Day are the most frequent motifs. Scenes from the Old Testament, on the other hand, are rare. Biblical quotations and inscriptions such as dating and names are common in this period: for example, ‘Apostle Andreas’ under a wooden sculpture in Saint Mary’s church in Bergen, or ‘Superbia’ above a depiction of Pride in Enebakk church. Other typical motifs found during this research, but not in Moster, are the royal monograms, such as that of King Fredrik IV in Røyken, and different remains of coats of arms. Another kind of decoration detected in several churches is shadow paintings. These shadow paintings were popular in the baroque period and were often placed behind epitaphs, pulpits and altarpieces. These are not to be found in Moster either. As in medieval wall decorations, we find foliage decorations, architectural decorations and drapery. These decorative elements developed a new stylistic expression in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: the foliage became more elaborate

and the drapery was painted in other places than in the lower part of the wall, e.g. behind pulpits and altarpieces, and along the upper part of the wall.

To summarize, in Moster Old church we find typical post-Reformation decorative elements: frames with texts, biblical scenes, foliage decorations and architectonic decorations. In the nave we also find fruits and flowers among the foliage, which are rather common in the Norwegian churches (Figure 15). Some of the biblical scenes are from the Old Testament, e.g. *The Fall* and *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Old Testament motives are rare in the preserved Norwegian murals from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, but appear more frequently in painted altarpieces and other church decorations [10]. In the panorama of Norwegian murals, we find *The Trinity* scene only in Moster, although we know that this motive was common in Christian iconography [10, p. 193-195].



**Figure 15.** Foliage and fruit decor in Hvaler church, quite similar to that found in Moster. Photo: NIKU 2012.

## 6. Conclusions

In Moster Old church one of the best-preserved pictorial programmes in Norway from the post-Reformation period can be found. By conducting in-depth studies we have reinterpreted the iconographic programme of the murals and embedded it in a Norwegian context. We have also shown how the interior decoration has undergone changes.

The pictorial programme in Moster Old church represents a typical example of post-Reformation interior decoration in Norway. As we can see in Moster, no saints are depicted; instead there is an emphasis on Christ's Life and Death. There is, moreover, a focus on written text supporting the images. These post-Reformation inscriptions often have a dominant place in the pictorial scheme, which again is seen in Moster Old church, although the text today is missing. We have not found many scenes from the Old Testament in the Norwegian murals, but Moster is one exception. Moster is also the only church where we found murals of *The Trinity*. The post-Reformation murals in Moster

must have been executed at different and subsequent stages. Our examinations show that they were possibly replacing older wall decorations, containing rune inscriptions and geometrical decoration, probably from medieval time. We also reviewed the times that other scholars described earlier for the execution of the different parts of the wall paintings. A completely new observation was that the foliage and fruit decor in the nave was executed in two steps, despite its similarities.

Most of the colours of the murals in Moster have faded or changed their hue. This phenomenon can also be seen in other churches in Norway. Mural paintings can therefore sometimes be difficult to interpret without close examination. The murals in Moster church – as well as in other medieval stone churches in Norway – have been more colourful than what we can see today, and certainly more detailed.

## **Acknowledgment**

This research work is part of NIKU's strategic institute programme funded by the Ministry of Climate and Environment through the Research Council of Norway. We want to thank Dr. Philos Jan Brendalsmo and Fredrik Berg for their encouraging discussions and for proofreading.

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