

# ‘Was einstens Gott gegeben, auch fortan Gott bleiben sole...’

## The Use and Adaptation of Catholic Ecclesiastical Art in Post-Reformation Tallinn

MERIKE KURISOO

The present article seeks to answer questions about the extent of the visual changes in the ecclesiastical space and the attitudes towards Catholic church art in 16th-century Tallinn. Rearrangement of ecclesiastical space and issues in the use of church furnishings have been viewed by concentrating on the changes that took place in St Nicholas' Church in Tallinn during the first post-Reformation century. The article focuses on the analysis of possibilities and practices of further using the church furnishings and income against the background of theological, political and economic changes, as well as developments in commissioning Lutheran church art.

The century of the Reformation was a period of extensive political and religious changes in Livonia. The first evangelical pastors started preaching the new religion in the major Livonian towns at the beginning of the 1520s. Riga, Tallinn and Tartu fell victim to waves of iconoclasm in 1524–1525. Events in Riga in March and April 1524 were followed by iconoclastic events in Tallinn in the early autumn of the same year. On the Feast of the Cross, 14 September, crowds plundered St Catherine's Church of the Tallinn Dominican Convent, followed by the invasion of St Olaf's Church and the Church of the Holy Spirit. According to records, people looted church chests and broke sacred statues and altar retables. Anticipating such a course of events, several associations, including the Brotherhood of the Black Heads and the Brotherhood of St Anthony, had removed their property from the churches. The Town Council of Tallinn was quick to react to the raids. The decree of the Town Council of 15 September demanded that stolen property be returned to the churches. In the case of St Nicholas' Church, which escaped iconoclastic events, it was stressed that owners should claim all their sculptures and paintings from the church in the following two days. The Town Council also threatened to severely punish anyone who plundered the churches of the town that had until then been spared from the raids.

From early on, the Town Councils of Riga, Tallinn and Tartu, together with larger guilds, joined the supporters of the new faith. As early as the last months of 1524, changes were introduced into the religious life of Tallinn. Evangelical pastors proposed changes in ecclesiastical life to the Town Council. Among many other

points, a demand was made to create a common fund (*Gemeine Kasten*) in the two parish churches, St Olaf's and St Nicholas'. In April 1525 the Tallinn Town Council prohibited the attending of Catholic services in the Cistercian St Michael's Nunnery in the lower town and in the Tallinn Cathedral. The latter was located on Toompea and remained Catholic until 1561. In 1526 the three largest Tallinn guilds – the Great Guild, St Olaf's and St Canute's Guild – presented a joint declaration, in which they forbade their members to attend mass and services in Catholic churches, or to receive Communion or Baptism there. A similar declaration was issued by the Brotherhood of the Black Heads.

A need for an integral Lutheran church order arose in Riga, Tallinn and Tartu as early as 1526. In 1530 Johann Briesmann, the evangelical superintendent of Riga, compiled the Church order that came into effect in 1533 in Riga, Tallinn and Tartu. On the recommendation of Martin Luther, Nikolaus Glossenius from Wittenberg became the first Lutheran superintendent of Tallinn in 1533. He was the pastor of St Olaf's Church, the main church of the town. In 1540 Heinrich Bock took the position of the superintendent of Tallinn. In 1555, thirty years after the start of the conversion of the three largest Livonian towns to Lutheranism, the local nobility acknowledged the Peace of Augsburg. Instead of a peaceful transition period and strengthening of Lutheranism, however, complicated times awaited Livonia. During the Livonian War, which started in 1558, Tallinn was besieged by Russian troops a number of times. The state of war also influenced the fate of church furnishings and income. At the same time, Tallinn experienced a reorganisation of ecclesiastical life due

to the change in the political situation. Lutheranism became the only official religion in Tallinn and Estonia, which had accepted the rule of the Swedish crown in 1561. There is no information about the application of the Swedish Church Law of 1571 in Tallinn. It is possible that compiling a Church law in Tallinn was not managed in the 16th century and the texts on Church orders from 1524–1525 and Briesmann's Church Order were used. Seven editions of the latter, with minor alterations, were published in the 16th century, the latest in Riga in 1592. The first Church law of Tallinn was enacted in 1608 and dealt with questions of church furnishings on several points.

In the areas that had already adopted the Lutheran faith, places were needed for conducting the liturgy, and this was done in existing churches. Adapting the Catholic churches was a complicated task in the Lutheran areas. The 16th century was the time of the self-establishment of the new confession and the Lutheran 'pictorial theology' formulated at the beginning of the 17th century. Tallinn, having adopted Lutheranism in the 1520s, faced the same questions. The existing ecclesiastical buildings were being adapted to the new requirements and the question of continuing to use Catholic church furnishings arose. The first issue in the post-Reformation use of Tallinn's Catholic churches is the question of how much the ecclesiastical topography of the town was changed. Which churches remained and maintained their functions and which did not? The evangelical preachers utilised the already existing churches, but their original purpose was often altered. As a rule, the parish churches maintained their status after the Reformation. The two parish churches of Tallinn – St Olaf's and St

Nicholas' – remained the most important ones of the town. Changes took place, however, in the status and use of the other ecclesiastical buildings. This concerned, first and foremost, convent churches. Following the dissolution of the Tallinn Dominican Convent, the church was given to a non-German (Estonian) congregation. After the devastating fire in St Catherine's Church in 1531, the Church of the Holy Spirit, a former hospital church, was given to the non-German congregation. The Cistercian St Michael's nunnery, having been reformed in the 1540s, maintained a special status and was dissolved only in the first half of the 17th century. The convent church was consequently given to the Swedish congregation. The separate chapels of the town, however, started to disappear. Very little is known about them during the post-Reformation decades.

During the first post-Reformation years, the question of the fate of church furnishings became crucial. All the looted property was ordered to be returned to the churches in the days following the iconoclasm. At the same time, the owners of the paintings and statues had to remove them from St Nicholas' Church under the threat of confiscation. Therefore, at first glance, it seems that church furnishings were viewed as private property. A clear exception is the fate of the furnishings of the Dominican Convent. After the dissolution of the convent, their property was left at the disposal of the Town Council. The decree of the Town Council of 1525 handed over the property of the churches of the lower town to the reformed church.

The inventory lists from the late Middle Ages and the post-Reformation period primarily mention church silver and textiles. The majority was either kept

by the churches or the income from their sales went to the common fund. More complicated was the question of altar retables, paintings and sculptures. It is most likely that the pictures on the side altars were treated as private property and their fate was dependent on the decisions of their owners. The retables of the main altars, as the collective property of the congregation, were exceptions and were left in their original positions. The reredos of the high altars of the Church of the Holy Spirit (Bernt Notke's workshop, 1483) and St Nicholas' Church (Hermen Rode's workshop, 1478–1481) are still in their original locations. There is very little information about commissioning Lutheran altarpieces for the Tallinn churches during the 16th–17th centuries.

Making the high altar the only altar in an ecclesiastical building is mentioned in several of the local church orders. This requirement was also brought out in the Church Law of Courland, according to which there could only be one altar in a church. The side altars had to be abolished and churches had to be cleared of pictures depicting 'idolatry'. The importance of Communion being celebrated in a specific place is stressed in the Church Order of Tallinn of 1608. It was also stated that pictures and paintings that were not connected with idolatry and were not misused could remain in the church. One can get the best picture of the altars of the late Middle Ages and their dedications from the list compiled by order of the Town Council in 1525–1527, enumerating the altars in the local churches and the income from the services. According to the accounts, St Olaf's Church had 31 side altars and St Nicholas' Church had the same number. Together with the rest of the churches of the lower town, the churches

had almost a hundred side altars at the beginning of the 16th century. In addition to these, there were altars in the Tallinn Cathedral, the church of the St John's hospital and in the chapels. Despite the scarcity of information about the fate of the side altars in the Tallinn churches, we can assume that their demolition started in the second half of the 16th century. One of the reasons for this was to make room for church pews. The first Lutheran pews for St Nicholas' Church were commissioned in the middle of the 16th century. During the years 1556–1557 pews with a Lutheran pictorial programme for the members of the Town Council and simpler pews for men and women appeared. These were not single pews, but rather seats that covered most of the nave of the church. The fact that the issue of pews had found a solution during the 16th century can be seen in the Church Law of Tallinn of 1608, where it is stressed that the pews should remain where they had been. There is no evidence of the exact location of the pews in St Nicholas' Church in the 16th century. The first visual source is a ground plan by Heinrich Julius Woltemate from 1691, where it is possible to see that the seating in the church was based on class and gender segregation.

Pews were commissioned primarily for the purpose of offering places for the congregation to sit and listen to the sermon. Apparently the oldest known and the oldest existing pulpit in Tallinn is that of the Church of the Holy Spirit, dating back to 1597. St Nicholas' Church received a new pulpit in 1624. It is hard to say whether this pulpit had a 16th century Lutheran predecessor in St Nicholas' Church or whether one of the medieval pulpits (*Predigtstuhl*) was used. It is known that there were at least two pulpits in St Nicholas' Church at the beginning of the

16th century. One of the earliest written records of the existence of a pulpit in the post-Reformation St Nicholas' Church is from 1603. According to an entry in the church's account book, the new pews that had been commissioned for the Small Chapel were located opposite the pulpit. It is not known, however, whether this was a medieval or a post-Reformation pulpit.

In addition to the reredos from Hermen Rode's workshop, the Catholic triumphal crucifix with the Virgin Mary and St John the Apostle, from the beginning of the 15th century, remained in its original location in St Nicholas' Church. The notable fact about the crucifix group is that it is one of the few works where text was added later. During the renovation of 1634, a text was painted on the rood beam, referring to the Exaltation of the Cross and the Worship of the Brass Serpent. Also, the small crucifix of St Nicholas' Church from the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries has survived. Of the pictures from the side altars of St Nicholas' Church, the Passion Altarpiece has been preserved. It came to be used as an epitaph in the 16th century. There is also evidence from the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries of a couple of medieval paintings and details of altar retables being located in the church and parsonage. Of the medieval works of art associated with the St Nicholas' Church, the best known is the initial fragment of *Danse Macabre* by Bernt Notke, first mentioned in St Nicholas' in 1603.

One of the problems connected with the high altar in the post-Reformation church was the existence of the chancel screen. Most often the Lutheran churches kept the medieval screens or had them erected, if needed. In the chancel of St Nicholas' Church, the high altar was separated from the rest of the room in the

late medieval period by a wooden screen made in 1484. In the post-Reformation era, the chancel screen was mentioned in 1625 in connection with the visit of queen Maria Eleonora, the wife of the Swedish king Gustav II Adolf. The queen received Communion at the high altar, after which the gates of the chancel were opened to the congregation. In the ground plan of St Nicholas' Church from 1691, however, the chancel screen no longer exists.

In the middle of the 16th century, the first Lutheran epitaphs started to appear in the churches of Tallinn. There were almost 20 epitaphs in St Nicholas' Church from the 16th and 17th centuries, with at least seven of them having been erected in the 16th century. The Passion Altarpiece from the beginning of the 16th century was turned into an epitaph at the beginning of the 1550s. The portraits of the commemorated people, the Tallinn superintendent Heinrich Bock and the mint master Urban Dene (also Dehn) were painted on the middle panel of the altarpiece. A top panel, presenting the Resurrection of Christ, was added to the epitaph located behind the high altar, at the beginning of the 17th century. The epitaph painting for the pastor of St Nicholas' Church Johann Hobing, who died in 1558, has been preserved. Written sources provide information about three epitaphs, erected from 1548 to 1585, to the wardens of St Nicholas' Church. In the mid-16th century, the town's elite corporations, the Great Guild and the Brotherhood of the Black Heads, commissioned epitaphs for St Nicholas' Church. The Black Heads purchased burial vaults in the churches of the lower town and donated epitaphs for them. The Great Guild of Tallinn had an epitaph with a painting of *Ecce homo* erected in St Nicholas' Church in 1562. The

16th-century epitaphs in the church were mostly dedicated to the wardens of the church and corporations. The beginning of the 17th century saw an increase in the number of epitaphs commemorating wealthy citizens and noblemen.

The ground plans of Tallinn churches from the end of the 17th century reveal that in the two parish churches, St Olaf's and St Nicholas', the baptismal font was situated in the traditional medieval location in the western part of the church. However, in the Church of the Holy Spirit and the Swedish St Michael's Church, it was located either in the eastern part of the nave or in the chancel. While the first two were parish churches in the medieval period, the latter two received this function only after the Reformation. In St Nicholas' Church, the medieval baptismal font was in use until the beginning of the 17th century. In 1535 a metal fence was commissioned for it from Lübeck. In 1624 the church commissioned a metal baptismal bowl from Lübeck.

The Lutheran liturgy stopped using most of the liturgical vessels. The Riga Church Law of 1530, effective also in Tallinn and Tartu, stated that the church needed only three chalices. The Church Law of Courland of 1570 only permitted the use of two. Of the fate of all the Catholic church furnishings from Tallinn churches after the adoption of Lutheranism, the most is known about the church silver and textiles of St Nicholas' Church. Although most of the early church silver was no longer in use, the items were enumerated in inventory lists as late as the 17th century. Relying on the 16th century sources, it is possible to say that, also in other churches of Tallinn, church silver and textiles were largely preserved. The entire church silver of St Nicholas' was weighed in 1526, adding up to 62 kilograms. In addition to

three monstrances and silver statues of St Nicholas and the Virgin Mary, there were also 11 chalices and patens. Most of them were in existence 25 years later. In 1551 the church listed two monstrances, both silver statues and eight chalices with patens. The fate of St Nicholas' church silver became an important issue during the Livonian War in 1560, when the Tallinn Town Council lacked money to pay mercenaries. Two monstrances, statues of St Nicholas and the Virgin Mary and a silver cross were taken to the Town Hall. Only the monstrances escaped being melting down and were returned to the church the next year. The smaller of the two monstrances was melted down in 1576 and the money from it was donated to the common fund. Until the 18th century, the pride of St Nicholas' Church was a 112-centimetre-high silver monstrance, made in 1474 by the local goldsmith Hans Ryssenberch. According to the wishes of the Town Council it was given as a gift to Prince Menshikov in 1711, during the negotiations concerning the privileges of Tallinn after the Russian conquest in the Northern War.

The changes in the use of the ecclesiastical space and the Lutheran liturgy brought about changes in the lighting of the church. The Lutheran liturgy, focusing on the Word, presupposed that the people in the church were able to read the hymn books, as well as see the pastor in the pulpit. Instead of the candles that had lit the side altars, churches received large chandeliers and sconces. There is information about the new chandeliers commissioned from Nuremberg and Lübeck for St Nicholas' Church in the middle and second half of the 16th century. The chandeliers, together with the epitaphs were, therefore,

the first Lutheran objects that were donated to churches and erected there.

The use of the ecclesiastical space and church furnishings in St Nicholas' Church in Tallinn demonstrates the conservatism and tolerance of the Lutherans in their attitudes towards the Catholic legacy, as well as the subjection of church space to the new liturgical requirements. Services were held in already existing churches and the new confession adapted the old legacy to meet the new norms. Besides the adaptation of Catholic church art, the commissioning of new Lutheran church art also clearly reflects the changes.