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*Dance of Death* in St Nicholas' Church in Tallinn.  
Art Museum of Estonia, Niguliste Museum.  
Photo by Stanislav Stepaško.

Tallinna Niguliste kiriku „Surmatants”.  
Eesti Kunstimuuseum, Niguliste muuseum.  
Foto Stanislav Stepaško.

## Research on Tallinn's *Dance of Death* and Mai Lumiste – Questions and Possibilities in the 20th Century\*

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The aim of this article is to focus on the role of Mai Lumiste in the history of researching Tallinn's *Dance of Death*, her points of departure, and those of her predecessors, and their methodological bases. When speaking of Lumiste's contribution, the emphasis has always been on the fact that her positions were based on the technical studies conducted in Moscow between 1962 and 1965, which made the style assessment and iconographic analysis of the work possible for the first time. The literature also reflects the opinion that this research in Moscow confirmed the position that had been accepted until that time, i.e. that the author of the work was Bernt Notke. The following survey focuses on which positions formulated at that time were established on the basis of technical research and which issues still remain unresolved.

Tallinn's *Dance of Death* (*Danse macabre*) is undoubtedly the most famous medieval work of art in Estonia. It is a fragment painted on canvas. It is 7,5 metres high and 1.63 metres wide, and depicts 13 figures: the narrator of the story (a preacher)

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standing in a pulpit, and figures that personify Death, which alternate with representatives of high society. In the background, we see a landscape with buildings and a few genre scenes. A frieze of text runs along the lower part of the painting. During the long and interesting research history of Tallinn's *Dance of Death*, the questions that have been dealt with include the age of the painting, its original location and author, as well as the iconography, analysis of the text, the relationship between the text and the picture, the impact of the work on the 'public' at that time, the history of its reception, etc.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1898, Wilhelm Neumann (1849–1919), the 'father' of Baltic art history, said the following about the work: 'This old and interesting painting has already been written about quite often, and it would be useless to start talking about the same things again if the earlier writings had exhausted the topic. Unfortunately, this is not true.'<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this article is not to provide an exhaustive survey of the very respectable historiography of Tallinn's *Dance of Death*, or of all the problems related to this topic. The main focus is on the role of Mai Lumiste in the history of researching the work, her points of departure, and those of her predecessors, and the methodological bases. The following examination of the researcher's points of departure may not provide any new knowledge about the object itself, but should provide an understanding of the bases for the current knowledge.

According to Lumiste, Tallinn's *Dance of Death* was commissioned in the late 15th or early 16th century from the workshop of the Lübeck master Bernt Notke, as an 'artist's duplicate' for the St Anthony's Chapel in Tallinn's St Nicholas' Church.<sup>3</sup> In Estonia, scholars have remained true to this position up to the present day.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, foreign researchers have offered various opinions regarding the original location, the authorship and dating of the work, starting immediately after the publication of Lumiste's positions. When speaking of Lumiste's contribution, the emphasis has always been on the fact that her positions are based on the technological research conducted in Moscow between 1962 and 1965, which, strictly speaking, made the style assessment and iconographic analysis of the work possible for the first time. The literature also reflects the opinion that this research confirmed the position that had been accepted until that time, i.e. that the author of the work

1 About earlier historiography see K. Petermann, Bernt Notke. Arbeitsweise und Werkstattorganisation im späten Mittelalter. Berlin: Reimer, 2000, pp. 26–41. See also E. Gertsman, The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010, pp. 104–124; about relationships between text and image: S. Warda, Memento mori: Bild und Text in Totentänzen des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit. Köln: Böhlau, 2011, pp. 69–77; S. Warda, Bernt Notke's *Dance of Death*: Word and Image and their Repercussions in Art and Literature. – Art, Cult and Patronage. Die visuelle Kultur im Ostseeraum zur Zeit Bernt Notkes. Hrsg. v. A. Mänd, U. Albrecht. Kiel: Ludwig, 2013, pp. 81–95.

2 'Über dieses alte interessante Gemälde ist schon recht häufig geschrieben worden, und es würde als ein müßiges Unternehmen angesehen werden können, hier noch einmal über dasselbe zu sprechen, wenn die früheren Mittheilungen das Thema erschöpfend behandelt hätten. Das ist aber nicht der Fall.' (W. Neumann, Der Totentanz in der St. Nicolai-Kirche. – Revaler Beobachter, 27. November (9. Dezember), Nr. 267 – 28. November (10. Dezember) 1898, Nr. 268.)

3 M. Lumiste, Tallinna Surmatants. Tallinn: Kunst, 1976.

4 A. Mänd, Bernt Notke – uuenduste ja traditsioonide vahel / Bernt Notke – Between Innovation and Tradition. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuseum, 2010, pp. 21–27; M. Kurisoo, Niguliste Museum. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuseum, 2011, pp. 20–27.

was Bernt Notke.<sup>5</sup> The following survey focuses on which positions formulated at that time were established on the basis of technological research and which are still unresolved.

## The beginning of the history of research on Tallinn's *Dance of Death*

The first one to write about Tallinn's *Dance of Death* was the Baltic German historian Carl Russwurm in 1838<sup>6</sup>; additional information was provided by the archivist of Tallinn City Archives Gotthard von Hansen in the second half of the 19th century<sup>7</sup>. Even at that time, the position was that the work was completed in the late 15th century, and was very similar to Lübeck's *Dance of Death*.<sup>8</sup> A dissenting opinion was offered by the historian Friedrich Amelung, who considered the painting fragment in Tallinn to be a copy of the Lübeck painting, and that it was made around 1600.<sup>9</sup> Neumann believed that Tallinn's *Dance of Death* was an early 16th-century copy of the work in Lübeck.<sup>10</sup> While the first writings were typically itemising descriptions, in which significant attention was also paid to the verses, Neumann's approach was typified by an awareness of contemporary German art writing, and an aspiration to analyse works based on form and style.<sup>11</sup> Among other things, Neumann directed attention to one of the problems that is still unresolved. Namely, based on the written sources, the *Dance of Death* is known to have been located in St Nicholas' Church only as of 1603, and there is no mention of it in the church records that date from

5 M. Lumiste, Mõningaid täpsustusi Tallinna „Surmatantsu” kohta. – Kunst 1964, nr. 1, pp. 47; S. I. Globatschowa, Restaurierung des Tallinner Gemäldes von Bernt Notke „Der Totentanz” (XV. Jh). – Die Kunst Nordeuropas und der Baltenländer. (Homburger Gespräch 7.) Bad Homburg: M. C. A. Böckler Stiftung, 1985, pp. 97–107; K. Kodres, Der Revaler Totentanz. – Die baltischen Lande im Zeitalter der Reformation und Konfessionalisierung. Hrsg. v. M. Asche, W. Buchholz, A. Schindling. Teil 3. Münster: Aschendorff, 2011, pp. 9–13, p. 10: 'Spätestens seit den Restaurierungsarbeiten der Jahre 1962 bis 1965 herrscht jedenfalls ein weitgehender Konsens darüber, dass der Revaler Totentanz ein Originalwerk Bernt Notkes ist'.

6 C. R. Russwurm, Der Todtentanz in der St. Nikolaikirche. – Das Inland 3., 10., 17. August 1838; J. Keevallik, R. Loodus, L. Viirjoja, Tekste kunstist ja arhitektuurist 1. Kunstikirjutus Eestis 1777–1863 / Texte über Kunst und Architektur 1. Kunstschreibung in Estland von 1777 bis 1863. Tallinn: Teaduste Akadeemia Kirjastus, 2000, pp. 151–152.

7 G. v. Hansen, Die Kirchen und ehemalige Klöster Revals. Reval: Franz Kluge, 1873, pp. 20–26 and revised edition: 1885, pp. 39–45.

8 Lübeck's *Dance of Death* was a frieze about 26 metres long and about 1.9 metres high painted on canvas, which, until the bombing raid of March 1942, was located in St Mary's Church in Lübeck. The destroyed frieze was a copy made by Anton Wortmann in 1701, on which the medieval verses were replaced by baroque Alexandrines by Nathael Schlott. The medieval verses were written down at the end of the 17th century by Jacob Melle, who was the pastor of Lübeck's St Mary's Church at the time. The surviving text fragment also included the following date: *Anno Domini MCCCCLXIII in vigilia assumptionis Marie 1463* (H. Freytag, Literatur- und Kulturhistorische Anmerkungen und Untersuchungen zum Lübecker und Revaler Totentanz. – Der Totentanz der Marienkirche in Lübeck und der Nikolaikirche in Reval (Tallinn). Edition, Kommentar, Interpretation, Rezeption. Hrsg. v. H. Freytag. Köln: Böhlau, 1993, pp. 13–58).

9 F. Amelung, Das Todtentanz-Gemälde in der Nikolaikirche zu Reval und sein Verhältniss zu dem gleichen Bilde in Lübeck. – Revaler Alterthümer. Reval: Franz Kluge, 1884, pp. 45–52.

10 W. Neumann, Fragmente eines Todtentanzes in der Nikolaikirche zu Reval. – W. Neumann, Werke mittelalterlicher Holzplastik und Malerei in Livland und Estland. Lübeck: Nöhring, 1892, pp. 13–14; E. v. Nottbeck, W. Neumann, Geschichte und Kunstdenkmäler der Stadt Reval. Bd. 2. Die Kunstdenkmäler der Stadt. Reval: Franz Kluge, 1904, pp. 74–76.

11 J. Keevallik, R. Loodus, L. Viirjoja, Tekste kunstist ja arhitektuurist 2. Kunstikirjutus Eestis 1864–1900 / Texte über Kunst und Architektur 2. Kunstschreibung in Estland von 1864 bis 1900. Tallinn: Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia, 2004, p. 17.

1465 to 1520. It is possible that the work arrived at the church after the Reformation, and was previously located in Tallinn's Dominican friary.<sup>12</sup>

A new opinion regarding the relationship between the Tallinn and Lübeck *Dance of Death* paintings was presented by the art historian and museum director in Lübeck Carl Georg Heise (1890–1979) in 1937. According to Heise, the Tallinn fragment was not a copy or later duplication, but the Lübeck painting itself.<sup>13</sup> Supposedly, a fragment was cut out after it was damaged in 1588, sold to a Tallinn merchant and subsequently placed in St Nicholas's Church. The excision was also supposed to have been the reason why the dimensions of the Tallinn painting are smaller than the one in Lübeck. The arrival of the work at St Nicholas' Church at the end of the 16th century would also explain why the painting was not mentioned in the church records until 1603. Among other things, the author based his position on material research (more about that below) which showed that the textile structures and chemical compositions of the Tallinn and Lübeck paintings were similar.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in Heise's view the Tallinn painting was the original completed in 1463 and a copy made by Anton Wortmann in 1701 was located in the painting's original home – St Mary's Church in Lübeck.

Another range of problems, which cropped up at this time, are related to the question of authorship. Research on Notke started in the late 19th century, and at that time, based on archival sources, his name was connected to altarpieces in Århus and Tallinn.<sup>15</sup> The attributions made in successive decades were based predominately on comparisons of style.<sup>16</sup> This was a time when, as a counterbalance to 'nameless art history', researchers became interested in the artists who had created works, their inherent styles and individuality, and tried to connect surviving works of art to the names of known artists. This approach resulted not only in the discovery of some individual artists but, in some cases, in the 'creation' of master artists.<sup>17</sup> The idea that Bernt Notke might be the author of Lübeck's *Dance of Death* was first proposed by Friedrich Bruns in 1923.<sup>18</sup> And this position was supported by Heise. Heise compared the painting fragment in Tallinn to the altarpiece of the high altar in the Århus Cathedral, which was connected by historical documents to Notke; he

12 E. v. Nottbeck, W. Neumann, *Geschichte und Kunstdenkmäler der Stadt Reval*, p 74. About records from St Nicholas' Church see R. Hausmann, *Der Silberschatz der St. Nikolaikirche zu Reval. – Mittheilungen aus dem Gebiete der Geschichte Liv-, Ehst- und Kurlands*. Hrsg. v. der Gesellschaft für Geschichte und Alterthumskunde der Ostseeprovinzen Russlands. Bd. 17, 1899. Riga, 1900, pp. 213–276.

13 C. G. Heise, *Der Lübecker Totentanz von 1463. Zur Charakteristik der Malerei Bernt Notkes II.* – *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft* 1937, Bd. 4, pp. 187–202; C. G. Heise, *Der Revaler Totentanz.* – *Ostland* 1943, Nr. 7, pp. 16–17.

14 C. G. Heise, *Der Lübecker Totentanz von 1463*, p 191.

15 A. Hagedorn, *Der Maler Bernt Notke.* – *Mitteilungen des Vereins für lübeckische Geschichte und Alterthumskunde.* Lübeck, 1887/1888, pp. 219–220. About historiography see K. Petermann, *Bernt Notke*, pp. 12–16; P. Tängeberg, *Wahrheit und Mythos – Bernt Notke und die Stockholmer St.-Georgs-Gruppe. Studien zu einem Hauptwerk Niederländischer Bildschnitzerei.* (Studia Jagellonica Lipsiensia 5.) Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2009, pp. 17–38.

16 Notke's name was not connected through archival sources to the third work – the Triumphal Cross in Lübeck's Cathedral – until the 1970s. See E. Oellermann, *Das Triumphkreuz von Bernt Notke im Dom zu Lübeck.* – *Kunstchronik* 1973, Nr. 26, pp. 93–96; E. Oellermann, *Das Triumphkreuz von Bernt Notke im Dom zu Lübeck: zweiter Fundbericht.* – *Kunstchronik* 1974, Nr. 27, pp. 419–421.

17 B. Boerner, *Stilgeschichte um 1900 und im 20. Jahrhundert.* – *Stilfragen zur Kunst des Mittelalters.* Bearb. v. B. Klein, B. Boerner. Berlin: Reimer, 2006, pp. 61–78.

18 F. Bruns, *Meister Bernt Notkes Leben.* – *Nordelbingen* 1923, Bd. 2, pp. 37–57.

also included the following attributed works in the critical analysis by making a comparison based on style: the side panels of the altarpiece called the *Schonenfahrer* (merchants trading with Scania) located in Lübeck's St Mary's Church (since 1912 in Lübeck's St Anne's Museum) and the *Mass of St Gregory* (destroyed in 1942). Since Heise thought an original and a copy of the same painting were involved, it was obvious that both were related to the same artist – Bernt Notke.

The 'creation' of Notke's image as northern Germany's most talented master in the second half of the 15th century culminated with Walter Paatz's monograph in 1939, in which, among other things, Heise's positions regarding the *Dance of Death* paintings were supported.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the question of authorship, Paatz also paid more attention than earlier researchers had to the iconography of the subject matter in the paintings, to the connections between the pictorial typology and historical development of the text. Alluding to Heise's research, Paatz stressed the need for technical research which would allow the original painting, which was assumed to be under the overpainting, to be analysed more precisely.<sup>20</sup> An opportunity to conduct this analysis did not arise until the 1960s.

### **Mai Lumiste and the technical research on Tallinn's *Dance of Death***

Between 1962 and 1965, the painting was restored at the I. E. Grabar State Central Artistic and Scientific Restoration Workshop in Moscow under the direction of Veronika Karasyeva.<sup>21</sup> Several layers of paint were identified in the course of the paint research. A strong copal varnish layer was found under the top layer, which turned out to be an extensive 19th-century overpainting; directly under the varnish, another overpainting of a local nature from the 16th or 17th century was also discovered. The original painting, which was revealed by removing the secondary layers, had been executed in a mixed oil and tempera technique applied to a very thin glue undercoating. The research and infrared studies conducted in the course of the work showed that the contours of the painting did not completely coincide with the base drawings. When the top layers of the painting were removed, motifs and details of the original composition that had been hidden were revealed. It also turned out that the selvage edge of the canvas, along with the outer edge of the original layer of paint, had survived on the upper edge of the *Dance of Death*.

Mai Lumiste was able to observe the work process on site and to familiarise herself with the documentation, photos, and results of the X-rays and chemical

19 W. Paatz, *Bernt Notke und sein Kreis*. Bd. 1. Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1939, pp. 172–180.

20 Paatz mistakenly thought that the top layer of overpainting on Tallinn's *Dance of Death* dated from the later 16th century but, contrary to Heise, he believed that this layer totally covered the original painting (W. Paatz, *Bernt Notke und sein Kreis*, pp. 173).

21 M. Lumiste, S. I. Globatschowa, *Der Revaler Totentanz von Bernt Notke*. Forschungsergebnisse im Lichte einer neuen Restaurierung. – Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft 1969, Bd. 23, pp. 122–138; S. I. Globatschowa, *Restaurierung des Tallinner Gemäldes von Bernt Notke „Der Totentanz“ (XV. Jh.)*; С. И. Глобачева, *Реставрация таллинского полотна Бернта Нотке „Пляска Смерти“*. (Вестник реставрации музейных ценностей, специальный выпуск 2008, № 2.) My thanks go to Tarmo Saaret, the Director of the Niguliste Museum, for mediating the Russian-language publications.

analyses. The first research findings were formulated by Lumiste in 1964, when the restoration work in Moscow was still incomplete.<sup>22</sup> A few years later, a special article appeared in Germany, which was written together with Svetlana Globacheva, and a more detailed monograph also dates from the same period.<sup>23</sup>

In these articles, Lumiste established many of the positions that are accepted today. Referring to the selvage edge of the canvas that survived on the upper edge of Tallinn's *Dance of Death*, she rejected the possibility suggested by Heise that it had been cut out of the original Lübeck painting. She also rejected the mechanical duplication version, which contended that the Tallinn painting was a copy. Lumiste showed that there were differences between the base drawing and final composition that indicated that the master had made changes in the course of completing the work. In addition to the arguments based on the technological research, Lumiste used a detailed comparison of the texts and pictorial programme of the Tallinn and Lübeck *Dance of Death* paintings to prove that two separate works were involved. The frieze, which was revealed after the original paint layer was exposed by cleaning, also made it possible to conduct more reliable research on the style and motifs. Based on the updated pictorial programme, Lumiste dealt with the iconography of the work by highlighting the natural and architectural motifs, environmental scenes and the treatment of light, along with the main characters.

Perhaps the most intriguing question is how the technical research on the *Dance of Death* corresponded to the northern European approach to medieval art more generally. On the one hand, such an approach was nothing new. Interest in technical methods which revealed how a work was completed already existed in the late 19th century, when art history became a discipline with its own research objects and methods. At that time, the need to work directly with the object was stressed, and it was understood that the material conditions – tools and techniques, and their actual use based on need – played a role in the specific form and style of a work of art. However, in the early 20th century, the autonomous discourse on art became predominant and less attention was paid to the technical conditions for the creation of works, and their contacts with cultural history.<sup>24</sup>

Technical research was employed for the first time in the studies of Tallinn's *Dance of Death* by Heise in the 1930s. At that time, strips of the painting that had survived under the copy in Lübeck, which was completed at the beginning of the 18th century, were compared to pieces of canvas from the Tallinn painting. Similarities were found in both the textile structures of the paintings and the compositions of the paint layers. Material research, including chemical and microscopic analyses of the paint layers, was conducted by technicians in Berlin and Hamburg.<sup>25</sup> On what basis the given studies were conducted in Heise's time remains unclear, primarily

22 M. Lumiste, Mõningaid täpsustusi Tallinna „Surmatantsu” kohta.

23 M. Lumiste, S. I. Globatschowa, *Der Revaler Totentanz von Bernt Notke*; M. Lumiste, *Tallinna Surmatants*. The book's manuscript was written between 1967 and 1969.

24 B. Boerner, *Stilgeschichte um 1900 und im 20. Jahrhundert*, pp. 66–70; W. E. Kleinbauer, *Introduction*. Part III. *Art History. – Medieval Scholarship. Biographical Studies on the Formation of a Discipline*. Ed. H. Damico. New York, London: Garland, 2000, pp. 215–229; W. Kemp, Alois Riegl. – *Altmeister moderner Kunstgeschichte*. Hrsg. v. H. Dilly. Berlin: Reimer, 1999, pp. 36–60.

25 C. G. Heise, *Der Lübecker Totentanz von 1463*, pp. 191.



in the light of the research conducted in Moscow, in the course of which a considerable amount of overpainting was discovered in the Tallinn work. At this point, Heise's interest in the technical aspects deserves attention, primarily against the background of the trends of the day, in which the preferred research method was history of style as a neo-idealistic trend, along with *Falten-Philosophie*,<sup>26</sup> which described details and modelled itself after earlier positivist approaches. Perhaps the background of Heise's research path provides one explanation.<sup>27</sup> His mentor and friend was Aby Warburg, upon whose recommendation Heise spent the first semester of his university studies with Wilhelm Vöge (1868–1952), the 'father' of medieval German art history in Freiburg.<sup>28</sup> In addition to the individual styles of masters, Vöge was also interested in the technical questions related to execution, because he felt that the artist's creative process could not be separated from the technical base.<sup>29</sup> From Freiburg, Heise went on to Halle, where Adolph Goldschmidt (1863–1944) was teaching at the time.<sup>30</sup> Having acquired a doctoral degree in 1889 for his research on medieval painting and sculpture in Lübeck<sup>31</sup>, Goldschmidt later exerted direct and indirect influences on the Notke research<sup>32</sup>. Goldschmidt's approach to works of art included both material-technical and formal factors, and to a lesser extent iconographic aspects, for the purpose of juxtaposing objects based on these criteria.<sup>33</sup> It is apparent that both Vöge and Goldschmidt exerted methodological influence on the questions that Heise raised and on subsequent research.<sup>34</sup>

It was not until the second half of the 20th century that researchers started dealing with technical issues more broadly, based on new methodologies. The Norwegian art historian Martin Blindheim's dissertation on 13th-century wooden sculpture<sup>35</sup>, which was published in 1952, should be seen as the exception rather than the rule.

26 B. Boerner, *Stilgeschichte um 1900 und im 20. Jahrhundert*, pp. 72.

27 Heise obtained his doctorate in 1916, under the supervision of Count Vitzthum von Eckstädt, with a thesis on North German painting in the Middle Ages; he was the director of the St Anne's Museum from 1920 to 1933 and the director of the Hamburg Kunststahle from 1946 to 1956 (*Metzler Kunsthistoriker Lexikon: zweihundert Porträts deutschsprachiger Autoren aus vier Jahrhunderten*. Hrsg. v. P. Betthausen, P. H. Feist, C. Fork. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1999, pp. 166–169).

28 About Vöge see K. Brush, *The Shaping of Art History: Wilhelm Vöge, Adolph Goldschmidt, and the Study of Medieval Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

29 'No scholar writing on medieval sculpture before Vöge or contemporary with him was – for whatever reasons – so profoundly interested in the intellectual and technical 'nuts and bolts', or artistic processes, as he was. For Vöge these were the essential elements in the making of medieval sculpture and in the definition of its particular artistic character.' (K. Brush, *The Shaping of Art History*, p 72.)

30 About Goldschmidt see K. Brush, *Adolf Goldschmidt (1863–1944)*. – *Medieval Scholarship: Biographical Studies on the Formation of a Discipline*. Vol. 3. New York: Garland, 2000, pp. 245–258; K. Brush, *The Shaping of Art History*.

31 A. Goldschmidt, *Lübecker Malerei und Plastik bis 1530*. Lübeck: Nöhring, 1889.

32 A. Goldschmidt, *Rode und Notke, zwei Lübecker Maler des 15. Jahrhunderts*. – *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst* 1901, Jg. 12, pp. 31–39, 55–60. Walter Paatz, the author of the monograph on Notke, also did his post-doctoral studies with Goldschmidt in Berlin. Goldschmidt's students also included Johnny Roosval, later a professor at the University of Stockholm, who attributed the St George sculptural group in the Stockholm Cathedral to Notke (J. Roosval, *Die St. Georgs-Gruppe der Stockholmer Nikolaikirche im Historischen Museum zu Stockholm*. – *Jahrbuch der Königlichen Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*. Bd. 27, Berlin: Grote, pp. 106–117). On the initiative of Roosval, the sculptural group was restored between 1914 and 1931.

33 W. E. Kleinbauer, *Introduction*, p 220; K. Brush, *Adolf Goldschmidt*, pp. 249–250.

34 Goldschmidt also entrusted his correspondence with Vöge to Heise, when he was forced to flee Nazi Germany in 1939. Heise did not publish Vöge's letters to Goldschmidt until 1968 (C. G. Heise, *Wilhelm Vöge zum Gedächtnis*. Freiburger Universitätsreden N. F.43. Freiburg im Breisgau: Hans Ferdinand Schulz Verlag, 1968).

35 M. Blindheim, *Main trends of East-Norwegian Wooden Figure Sculpture in the Second Half of the Thirteenth Century*. Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1952.

At the same time, the conservation of works of art conducted hand-in-hand with scientific research was gaining momentum in Belgium. The first model case was the collaboration carried out in the restoration of the Ghent altarpiece, which was trendsetter for its time.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, technical questions did not garner any attention in the writings published in Germany until the 1960s; at first these issues were limited to writings by 'art technicians', but later they appeared in collaborations involving the representatives of various disciplines. In the foreword to the anthology of the Notke colloquium that took place in 1976, Gesine Taubert writes that the first meeting between art historians, restorers and natural scientists did not take place until September 1968, in connection with research on the Herlin altarpiece in Rothenburg.<sup>37</sup>

Although technical research as a method of studying works of art was not unusual in the Nordic countries during the 1960s, when Tallinn's *Dance of Death* was restored in Moscow, the trendsetting approaches during the 20th century had created a situation in which this research method was not yet mandatory for art historians, as it is today in interdisciplinary studies.

Both the high-level research on the Tallinn *Dance of Death* and Late Medieval Netherlandish altarpieces<sup>38</sup>, as well as the involvement of technical aspects therein, can be explained by Lumiste's educational path. Having graduated from the I. E. Repin Leningrad Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in art history, Lumiste had strong contacts with Russian specialists. These contacts were useful in her work as an inspector for the protection of art monuments in the Ministry of Culture of the Estonian SSR, and later as a research fellow at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR. From 1955 to 1962, Lumiste organised research and restoration work on medieval works of art, which was initiated by the Ministry of Culture in connection with the decision to organise an exhibition at the State Art Museum of the Estonian SSR in the Kadriorg Palace. In addition to the *Dance of Death*, Russian specialists were involved in the restoration of the altarpiece in Tallinn's Holy Spirit Church, which is also attributed to Notke.<sup>39</sup> The methodology that was the basis for the technical research on the *Dance of Death* was determined by the Moscow restorers, and by the tools and possibilities at their disposal. However, the writings published by Lumiste and Globacheva are a good example of the collaboration in the Soviet Union at that time. In addition, the researchers in Russia (at the State Hermitage Museum in Leningrad and the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, and the restorers at the Restoration Workshop in Moscow) had professional contacts with specialists abroad. One example from the

36 History of IRPA, <http://www.kikirpa.be/EN/112/306/History.htm> (accessed 22 August 2013).

37 G. Taubert, Vorwort. - Internationales Kolloquium zum Werk des Bernt Notke anlässlich der Restaurierung der Triumphkreuzgruppe im Dom Lübeck 22.-24. September 1976 (Vorträge). Lübeck: Das Kolloquium, 1976, pp. 1-3.

38 M. Lumiste, Lucia-legendi meistri teos Tallinnas. Mustpeade altari autori probleemist. - Kunst 1961, nr. 2, pp. 32-42; M. Lumiste, Antoniuse altari algsest maalikihist ja ülemaalingutest. - Kunst 1964, nr. 2, pp. 32-36.

39 The restoration of the altarpiece of Tallinn's Holy Spirit Church was conducted between 1964 and 1986, under the supervision of Vyacheslav Titov and Nikolai Bregman from the Restoration Workshop in Moscow. The sculptures were conserved in Moscow, and the case *in situ* at the Holy Spirit Church (N. Bregman, O. Lelekowa, Die Restaurierung des Altars von Bernt Notke in Tallinn. - Internationales Kolloquium zum Werk des Bernt Notke, pp. 126-133).



1960s that should definitely be mentioned is the international collaborative project called *Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux au quinzième siècle*, which dealt with the Flemish primitives and resulted in an eight-volume series of publications by the Russian specialists Vladimir Levinson-Lessing and Nikolai Nikulin.<sup>40</sup>

### **About Mai Lumiste's positions on the dating, original location and author of Tallinn's *Dance of Death***

Until Lumiste's research, in addition to the copy-original issue, there was confusion about the dating of Tallinn's *Dance of Death*: the dates ranged from 1463, indicated on the Lübeck original, as proposed by Heise, and extended to the early 17th century, as suggested by Amelung. Lumiste's argumentation was based primarily on the architecture and autumnal landscape that divides the backgrounds of the figures, along with the genre scenes that were revealed in the course of the restoration. In addition to the painting itself, Lumiste's dating is based on two other indirect factors. Since 17th-century sources indicate that the *Dance of Death* was located in the St Anthony's Chapel of St Nicholas' Church, Lumiste thought that the work was probably commissioned between 1486 and 1493 specifically for the chapel. Secondly, Lumiste based the dating on Notke's authorship, which meant that the painting must have been completed before the death of the master in 1509.<sup>41</sup> According to Lumiste, the altarpieces in Århus (dated 1479) and Tallinn's Holy Spirit Church (dated 1483), which have archival evidence for Notke's name, could be clearly differentiated from the high standard of the *Dance of Death*, based on both the quality and painting style; the latter shared greater similarities with the *Mass of St Gregory* painting (c. 1500).<sup>42</sup> Therefore, Lumiste determined that Tallinn's fragment was completed at the end of the 15th century or beginning of the 16th century. Thereafter, Tallinn's *Dance of Death* was treated as Notke's 'later author's duplication, which has value as an independent original work'.<sup>43</sup>

In retrospect, the fact that Lumiste glossed over the issue of authorship is somewhat justified,<sup>44</sup> especially since the style assessments and colour range comparisons with the other works attributed to Notke made by previous researchers were based on the overpainting. Globacheva recalls that when they first saw the painting fragment in Tallinn in 1958, it was in such poor condition that it was not possible

40 V. F. Levinson-Lessing, N. Nikulin, *Le Musée de l'Ermitage, Leningrad. Primitifs flamands I. (Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux au quinzième siècle 8.)* Bruxelles: Centre national de recherches „Primitifs flamands”, 1965.

41 For the source data on Notke's life and work see K. Petermann, *Bernt Notke*, pp. 17–25.

42 The most recent dating is between 1497 and 1505 (*Corpus der mittelalterlichen Holzskulptur und Tafelmalerei in Schleswig-Holstein. Bd. 2. Hansestadt Lübeck: Die Werke im Stadtgebiet. Hrsg. v. U. Albrecht. Kiel: Ludwig, 2012, pp. 540–549.*)

43 M. Lumiste, *Tallinna Surmatants*, p. 43.

44 On the other hand, in her approach to Virgin Mary's Altarpiece of the Brotherhood of Black Heads, Lumiste paid great attention to the style-based attribution, and attributed the work to the anonymous Master of St Lucy Legend (M. Lumiste, *Lucia-legendi meistri teos Tallinnas*).

to determine the artistic quality of the work.<sup>45</sup> Great differences between the original and the 19th-century overpainting appeared in tonality, the treatment of light, and the depth of the landscape; the treatment of the forms was also distorted, from the background to the faces. Only after the restoration did many expressive details, figures, animals and entire scenes, which were hidden before, become visible.<sup>46</sup> It's clear that by the 1960s Notke's authorship of the *Dance of Death* and many other works that had been attributed to him based on style assessments was set in stone. In addition, Lumiste lacked the actual evidence for a comparison of the new material and the works with archival connections to Notke, since modern conservation and natural scientific research methods were still unknown.<sup>47</sup> Thus, in 1967–1968, Lumiste summarised the situation as follows: 'With the current level of knowledge, one must agree with Heise's attribution, and consider it possible that Bernt Notke painted Tallinn's *Dance of Death*.'<sup>48</sup>

## Contemporary feedback

In 1967 Erik Moltke, the Danish runologist and chief editor of *Danmarks Kirker* at that time, reacted positively to the research done by Lumiste and the Moscow restorers.<sup>49</sup> Although it was not possible for him to see the *Dance of Death* personally<sup>50</sup>, he did examine the X-rays, intermediated by the Moscow conservator Veronika Karasyeva, and was familiar with the article that Lumiste had published in 1965. Moltke agreed with most of Lumiste's positions, while adding critical observations on the earlier opinions, but did not agree with her assessment of the authorship.<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, the German side remained true to Heise's positions, even after the publication of the new research findings. In an article that appeared in 1970, relying on new arguments, Max Hasse again supported the position that in 1588 a part of the original Lübeck painting was replaced by a copy by Sylvester von Zwolle and the cut-out piece was brought to Tallinn.<sup>52</sup> Between 1967 and 1969, when

45 C. И. Глобачева, Реставрация таллинского полотна Бернта Нотке „Пляска Смерти”, p. 3.

46 M. Lumiste, Tallinna Surmatants, p. 38; S. I. Globatschowa, Restaurierung des Tallinner Gemäldes von Bernt Notke „Der Totentanz” (XV. Jh), pp. 102–103.

47 The restoration work on the altarpiece in Tallinn's Holy Spirit Church took place between 1964 and 1986, on the altarpiece in the Århus Cathedral between 1975 and the 1980s, and on the Triumphal Cross in Lübeck's Cathedral between 1971 and 1977.

48 M. Lumiste, Tallinna Surmatants, p. 38.

49 E. Moltke, Der Totentanz in Tallinn (Reval) und Bernt Notke. – Nordisk medeltid. Konsthistoriska studier tillägnade Armin Tuulsee. (Stockholm Studies in History of Art 13.) Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967, pp. 321–327; E. Moltke, Var Bernt Notke Nordeuropas største middelalderlige billedskærer-maler? – eller er han et produkt af konsthistorisk fantasi? – Meddelelser om konservering 1967, vol. 2 (5), pp. 17–32.

50 When Moltke visited Tallinn in the early 1960s, the painting was being restored in Moscow.

51 Moltke saw Notke primarily as an entrepreneur, and the director of a large workshop; the researcher precluded the *Dance of Death* originating in this workshop based on style assessments (E. Moltke, Der Totentanz in Tallinn (Reval) und Bernt Notke, pp. 321–327; E. Moltke, Var Bernt Notke Nordeuropas største middelalderlige billedskærer-maler?, pp. 17–32; E. Moltke, Bernt Notkes altertavle i Århus domkirke og Tallinntavlen. Bd. I–II. København: Gad, 1970).

52 M. Hasse, Bernt Notke. – Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft 1970, Bd. 24, pp. 19–60. For example, according to Hasse, the height difference between the Tallinn painting and the one in Lübeck is not because it was cut out of the Lübeck painting, but rather because Anton Wortmann added more sky to the painting in the early 18th century, etc.

Lumiste was writing the text for her book that appeared in 1976, she must have been familiar with Moltke's article, and probably also with Hasse's positions, although his special article on Bernt Notke had not appeared yet. Mai Levin recalls that 'He [Hasse - K.A.] visited Tallinn quite soon after the restored *Dance of Death* was put on display at the Kadriorg Palace in 1965 and explained his reasoning to the audience that had gathered in the two halls on the third floor of the palace.'<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, Lumiste never again returned to this discussion.

### **Additions to the research on Tallinn's *Dance of Death* after Mai Lumiste**

In the subsequent decades, Mai Lumiste's publications garnered only limited attention in the specialised circles of northern Europe, and for decades Hasse's positions resounded alongside them. However, the restoration work carried out in Moscow and the related publications were known and, in some cases, there was agreement that the Tallinn and Lübeck paintings were two independent works.<sup>54</sup>

An important moment in the research history of the *Dance of Death* is undoubtedly the publication of a voluminous anthology compiled by Hartmut Freytag in 1993<sup>55</sup>, which significantly broadened the approaches to dating. As a result, the positions formulated by Lumiste almost 30 years earlier regarding the age of the work, the original location and authorship were affirmed.<sup>56</sup> An important addition that should be mentioned is Robert Damme's linguistic research.<sup>57</sup> When Lumiste directed attention to the discrepancies in spelling as one of the differences between the two *Dance of Death* paintings, she based her opinion on Wilhelm Seelmann's research from 1891. According to Seelmann, the Tallinn text was written in pure Low German, which was spoken in Lübeck, but the text of the old *Dance of Death* in St Mary's Church contained Netherlandish linguistic peculiarities. Robert Damme's amendment showed that the texts of both frieze paintings were based on a 'Dance of Death' poem that originated in the Low Countries, but were independent translations that corresponded to the written forms of Middle Low German used in Tallinn and Lübeck. This finding confirmed the idea that the painted frieze was intended for Tallinn when it was being created.

53 M. Levin, Pooldavalt „Surmatantsust” kui märgist. – Sirp 23 August 2002.

54 G. Eimer, Bernt Notke: Das Wirken eines niederdeutschen Künstlers im Ostseeraum. Bonn: Kulturstiftung der deutschen Vertriebenen, 1985.

55 Der Totentanz der Marienkirche in Lübeck und der Nikolaikirche in Reval (Tallinn). Edition, Kommentar, Interpretation, Rezeption. Hrsg. v. H. Freytag. Köln: Böhlau, 1993.

56 H. Vogeler, Zum Gemälde des Lübecker und Revaler Totentanzes. – Der Totentanz der Marienkirche in Lübeck und der Nikolaikirche in Reval (Tallinn), pp. 86–108.

57 R. Damme, Zur Sprache des Lübeck-Revaler Totentanzes. – Der Totentanz der Marienkirche in Lübeck und der Nikolaikirche in Reval (Tallinn), pp. 59–71.

The next to provide some additions to the research history of Tallinn's *Dance of Death* was Kerstin Petermann.<sup>58</sup> An important point of departure for her dissertation was the technical research, combined with the source material on Bernt Notke and the trade guild practices of the time.<sup>59</sup> Since the author also had at her disposal the materials related to the restoration work carried out on the works, as well as archival information on Notke and style assessments, the most interesting part was, as expected, related to the question of authorship. Petermann again pointed out that the works attributed to Notke differed greatly in terms of form, style and quality, and this, in turn, indicated the existence of a large and mobile workshop.<sup>60</sup> The researcher also pointed out the differences in the 'handwriting' of Tallinn's *Dance of Death* and hypothesised that the individual parts of the original frieze painting might have been completed simultaneously by several of the workshop's masters: this would also explain the discrepancies in the treatments of the figures' costumes in the two surviving sections.<sup>61</sup> However, her attribution of the painting frieze to Bernt Notke was based, similarly to her predecessors, on a comparison of the style with that of the other works attributed to the master.<sup>62</sup>

Petermann engaged in polemics with Lumiste's positions in regard to two issues. First, on the topic of the original location of the work, she showed that the view that seemed authoritative at first glance was only one possible version.<sup>63</sup> Secondly, Petermann stated that the *Dance of Death* dated not from the end of the 15th or beginning of the 16th century, as claimed by Lumiste and Vogeler, but from the 1470s or 1480s. The change in the dates was again based on a comparison with the other works attributed to Notke.<sup>64</sup>

58 K. Petermann, Bernt Notke; K. Petermann, Neue Ergebnisse zur Werkstattorganisation Bernt Notkes am Beispiel seiner Werke für Reval/Tallinn. – Die Stadt im Europäischen Nordosten: Kulturbeziehungen von der Ausbreitung des Lübisches Rechts bis zur Aufklärung. Hrsg. v. R. Schweitzer. Helsinki, Lübeck: Aue-Stiftung, 2001, pp. 369–402; K. Petermann, Zwei Aufträge der Werkstatt Bernt Notkes für Reval/Tallinn: das Retabel von 1483 in der Heilig-Geist Kirche und der Totentanz in der Nikolaikirche. – Sakrale Kunst im Baltikum. Zehn Beiträge zum 8. Baltischen Seminar 1996. Hrsg. v. C. A. Meier. Lüneburg: Carl-Schirren-Gesellschaft, 2008, pp. 61–78; K. Petermann, Überlegungen zu den niederländischen Verbindungen der Werkstatt Bernt Notkes. – Malerei und Skulptur des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit in Norddeutschland. Künstlerischer Austausch im Kulturraum zwischen Nordsee und Baltikum. Hrsg. v. H. Krohm, U. Albrecht, M. Weniger. Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004, pp. 249–255.

59 U. Wolff-Thomsen, Rezension. Kerstin Petermann: Bernt Notke. Arbeitsweise und Werkstattorganisation im späten Mittelalter, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag 2000. – Kunstform 2001, Nr. 1, <http://www.arthistoricum.net/kunstform/rezension/ausgabe/2001/1/5606/> (accessed 22 August 2013).

60 K. Petermann, Neue Ergebnisse zur Werkstattorganisation Bernt Notkes am Beispiel seiner Werke für Reval/Tallinn. In 1977, M. Hasse wrote that without sources no art historian would have attributed the altarpieces in Århus and Tallinn to the same master (M. Hasse, International Kolloquium zum Werk des Bernt Notke anlässlich der Restaurierung der Triumphkreuzgruppe im Lübecker Dom. Lübeck, 22.–24. September 1976. Besprechung. – Kunstchronik 1977, Nr. 30, pp. 6–16).

61 K. Petermann, Bernt Notke, p. 41. The nail holes in the canvas and the interruption in the ribbon of text before the king allow one to conclude that, at one time, the first 11 figures comprised the first part of the cycle, and the second part started with the king (M. Lumiste, Tallinna Surmatants, p. 23).

62 K. Petermann, Bernt Notke, p. 38.

63 In earlier historiographies, Wilhelm Neumann (see note 13), Sten Karling and Ernst Murbach pointed out possible connections between the *Dance of Death* and Tallinn Dominican friary (S. Karling, Några Notke-kommentar. – Den ljusa medeltiden. Studier tillägnade Aron Andersson. Stockholm: Statens historiska museum, 1984, pp. 77–94; E. Murbach, Ikonographie und Entwicklung der Totentanzdarstellungen unter Berücksichtigung des Revaler Totentanzes. – Die Kunst Nordeuropas und der Baltenländer, pp. 81–96).

64 K. Petermann, Zwei Aufträge der Werkstatt Bernt Notkes für Reval/Tallinn, pp. 61–78; K. Petermann, Bernt Notke, pp. 33–35. Even earlier date, 1468, was suggested by S. Karling, G. Eimer and E. Murbach (see notes 54 and 63).

Without delving any deeper into Peter Tångeberg's polemic work *Wahrheit und Mythos*, which was published in 2009, let it be said that he also suggested the earlier completion time that had been suggested previously, more precisely the 1460s or 1470s. Arguments for such early dates are based on similarities with the Flemish art of the same decades, which, in turn, makes it possible to assume that the master was at home in that art tradition.<sup>65</sup> The identification of Flemish influences in Notke's work or northern German art from the Late Middle Ages is nothing new.<sup>66</sup> Yet, it is clear that the approach to Notke based on the research that began in the late 19th century and that was employed by both Adolph Goldschmidt and the next generation (Roosval, Heise and Paatz) is comprehensible in the context of their times and today requires critical reflection.<sup>67</sup>

## Epilogue

In the long and complicated history of the research on Tallinn's *Dance of Death*, the Estonian art historian Mai Lumiste has a prominent place. As a result of the restoration work and technical research carried out in Moscow in the 1960s, it was proven that the Lübeck and Tallinn paintings are two separate works. The basis for this research was the fruitful collaboration between Lumiste, who had studied in Leningrad, and the restorers from Moscow. Lumiste treated Tallinn's *Dance of Death* in a remarkably multi-faceted way for the time, by applying a method that included comparative style assessment, iconographic analysis and source assessment, as well as technical research. It's true that previous authors had also considered all these aspects to a greater or lesser degree. However, while the approaches that Lumiste applied to the materials were mostly the same, the research itself and her interpretations were different.

After more than a century of research, it must be recognised that international specialists have not reached a consensus regarding the time the work was completed, its original location (building), or the issue of authorship. These questions, which may seem old-fashioned from the viewpoint of contemporary art history, are important: without knowing when and where a work was completed, why the

65 P. Tångeberg, *Wahrheit und Mythos*, pp. 104–108.

66 U. Wolff-Thomsen, *Bernt Notke in der Kunst des 15. Jahrhunderts*. – Bernt Notke, *Das Triumphkreuz im Dom zu Lübeck: Festwochen im Lübecker Dom*, 5.–21. Mai 2009. Beiträge zum 500. Todesjahr von Bernt Notke. Kiel: Ludwig, 2010, p. 14; K. Petermann, *Überlegungen zu den niederländischen Verbindungen der Werkstatt Bernt Notkes*, pp. 249–250.

67 Many readily given attributions made in the first half of the 20th century have not stood up to subsequent criticism. For example, the list of works connected to Notke included by Kerstin Petermann in her dissertation is significantly reduced compared to Walter Paatz's list. Of the remaining works, Peter Tångeberg also precludes the St George sculptural group in Stockholm's Cathedral (P. Tångeberg, *Wahrheit und Mythos*). See the review of Tångeberg's book K. Endemann, *Neues zum Autor der St. Georgs-Gruppe in Stockholm*. – *Kunstchronik* 2012, Heft 9/10, pp. 474–478.

Since the medieval original of the Lübeck *Dance of Death*, which was destroyed in 1942, had been over-painted several times, and finally entirely replaced by a baroque copy, the history of this painted frieze has also been left out of the newer anthologies of the medieval works of art located in Lübeck's churches (*Corpus der mittelalterlichen Holzskulptur und Tafelmalerei in Schleswig-Holstein*. Bd. 2, p. 28). For the most recent criticism of the early historiography on Bernt Notke see M. W. Jürgensen, *Do We Need Bernt Notke? Some Reflections on Workshops and Masters*. – *Art, Cult and Patronage*, pp. 15–24.

painting was originally created (commissioned), and therefore also the identity of the possible client and user community, only general remarks can be made about this painting fragment in its contemporary context.

Although the scarcity of written sources sets some limitations on research, Tallinn's *Dance of Death* remains a remarkable work of art: a carrier of rich meaning, expressing the norms and concepts of its time, as well as the plans and attitudes of the society (client).<sup>68</sup> During recent decades, style assessments and the concepts related to the masters of the Late Middle Ages and their workshops have changed.<sup>69</sup> Hopefully, new technical research can provide additional answers to the range of questions related to the works connected to Notke's name.<sup>70</sup> It would also be refreshing to reconsider the complicated relationship between the copy, the original and the quote, in the context of the medieval culture more broadly. The similarities between the Lübeck and Tallinn paintings raise several intriguing questions, and explaining them by referring to the artist's development over time is clearly too limited.<sup>71</sup> Only time will tell what knowledge can be gained from a re-analysis of the problems which were posed earlier in connection with Tallinn's *Dance of Death* and which new questions can be generated.

68 E. Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages*; S. Warda, *Bernt Notke's Dance of Death*.

69 R. Suckale, *Stilgeschichte zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts. Probleme und Möglichkeiten. – Stilfragen zur Kunst des Mittelalters*, pp. 271–281.

70 A. Nurkse, *Infrapuna reflektograafia teostatud alusjoonistuste uuringutest Eesti Kunstimuuseumi valitud kunstiteostel. – Renovatum 2010*, pp. 18–27; P. Ehasalu, *Tallinna Püha Vaimu kiriku kappaltari tabernaakli uurimine ja konserveerimine: pilootprojekt altari seisundi ja konserveerimisvajaduse hindamiseks. – Renovatum 2010*, pp. 64–73; P. Ehasalu, S. Vahur, *Establishing a Conservation and Research Project for the Holy Spirit Altarpiece by Bernt Notke. – Art, Cult and Patronage*, pp. 216–228.

71 It is interesting that, while in the case of the figures and composition the direct influence of Lübeck's *Dance of Death* is seen in the Tallinn painting, the same similarity is not mentioned regarding the texts; rather, a relationship is proposed to exist between the two poems, which is based on independent interpretations of the same text (H. Freytag, *Adaptio und imitatio. Gedanken über den Totentanz von St. Marien in Lübeck und St. Nikolai in Reval (Tallinn). – Die Stadt im Europäischen Nordosten*, pp. 219–227).