

SAVING THE SOVIET HERITAGE – DEMOUNTING MURALS FROM BUILDINGS DESTINED FOR DEMOLITION¹

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The Soviet period was a generous time for the development of monumental art in Estonia: large-scale artworks were commissioned for many public buildings. After Estonia regained independence, many of these buildings and the artworks they contained were privatised, demolished, or left to decay. This situation raised a question: could the artworks be preserved separately from their architectural embodiment?

The following paper will discuss three such cases, where the demounting of artworks was the only option for saving murals from the Soviet period: from the building of the Estonian Academy of Arts in 2010, from the Tarvas restaurant in Tartu in 2014, and from the Viljandi Vocational Training Centre before the demolition of the buildings in 2015. The paper will discuss the problems conservators and engineers faced in the process of demounting and remounting, as well as in dealing with municipalities, and will consider how the guiding principles of conservation ethics can be followed in such cases.

KEYWORDS: mural paintings, demounting of murals, remounting of murals, Elmar Kits.

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet era created favourable conditions for the development of monumental art in Estonia: numerous

works of art in various techniques (e.g. fresco, mosaic and sgraffito) were commissioned for the more presentable state buildings, as well as for many public buildings. With the restoration of independence, however, the monumental art of that time often found itself in the way of the construction boom. Many works of art were destroyed together with architecture that was no longer functional or where the buildings were given new functions. The reason for this was economic, but it was also due to the sensitive political background of the Soviet period. A characteristic of

¹ A shorter version of this paper was published in: Hilkka Hiiop and Helen Volber, 'Demounting Murals from Their Architectural Environment – Salvage or Destruction?', in: *Monumental Treasures. Preservation and Conservation. XX NFK Congress, 21–23 October 2015, Helsinki, Finland*, ed. Anna Rajainmaa, Marleena Vihakara, Satu Haapakoski, Stina Björklund, Erika Tiainen and Kaarina Holmqvist, The Nordic Association of Conservators, 2015, pp. 118–125.



1. Mural painting by Elmar Kits in Tartu's old department store, 1965

Elmaro Kitso sienų tapybos kūrinys senajame Tartu prekybos centre

this transition period was the inability to sufficiently appreciate the art born during the Soviet era.

By now, we have sufficiently distanced ourselves from the ideological burden that encumbered the perception of the art of that time and are more capable of appreciating these works without an interference of political memory. If only there were more works to be appreciated.

Elmar Kits, whose works are among the most noteworthy examples of Estonian monumental art,

was undeniably one of the most distinguished artists of Soviet Estonia. His sgraffito-style mural painting located in Tartu's old department store was completed in 1965 and originally adorned the wall of the Tarvas restaurant [ill. 1].

This mural painting is one of the most remarkable examples of Kits's body of creative work, important in the history of Estonian monumental art. In a certain sense, it is also one of the works symbolising the artistic scene of that time. As a recently published monograph

on the history of Estonian monumental art describes it, '<...> a stylish mural painting was located on the end wall of Tartu's most distinguished restaurant of that time. Its pictorial rhythm corresponded to the columns that dominated the room. This work is perhaps the most successful of Elmar Kits's monumental paintings, since his other works are too much like oil paintings, which is unnatural in monumental art. The Tarvas mural painting is monochromatic in style and harmonised in a jazzy way.'²

The other mural by Kits discussed in this paper was created at the beginning of the 1970s for a trade school near Viljandi. The painting depicts three young maidens and, like the Tartu mural, the composition is somewhat abstract: the figures are clearly distinct, but the painting as a whole is lustily stylised.

Elmar Kits was born the son of a bricklayer in Tartu on 27 April 1913. He acquired an education in art at the Pallas Art School in Tartu in 1935–1939. Kits was among the best in his graduating class and asserted himself in the Estonian art scene immediately after graduation.³ The art critic Ants Juske dubbed Kits 'Estonia's Picasso' since, like Picasso, Kits is noted for the use of several different kinds of media in his creative work, artistic rebirths and extreme productivity.

During the Soviet occupation, Kits's realistic style of painting enabled him to quickly adapt to the new conditions. In 1947–1949, Kits worked at the Tartu State Institute of Art as the head of the Faculty of Monumental Painting. He became a freelance artist in 1949, but before that together with the artists Richard Sagrits and Evald Okas he painted Estonia's largest monumental painting – the Estonia Theatre's ceiling painting in Tallinn.

Kits fulfilled several commissions at that time: factories, executive committees, restaurants and hotels

sought paintings from him. Even though in the beginning of the Soviet period Kits had to defend himself against accusations that his work was formalist, his monumental paintings, with their great degree of generalisation, became very popular over time. While the treatment of art was at first severely restricted in the Soviet Union, artists returned to progressive examples in painting from the end of the 1950s onward, though initially rather hesitantly. The distinctive feature of Estonian art of the 1960s and 1970s was the tendency to work through the stages of development of modern art quickly, while the same process took decades elsewhere.⁴

THE HISTORY AND CONTEXT OF THE PAINTING IN TARTU

Kits's mural painting in the sgraffito technique, which was located in the Tarvas restaurant in Tartu's oldest department store, occupies an important place in his creative work. The painting is important for several reasons: in addition to the artistic value of the mural, the Tarvas restaurant was an epochal institution in itself and became a symbol of the history of a particular period in Estonia, its cultural space, and a certain opposition to the prevailing political situation.

This mural painting with an area of almost 20 m² survived the change in the system of government, as well as the demise of the restaurant, and was not seriously endangered until the decision was made to demolish the building.⁵

Almost five years ago, discussions began concerning the Tartu Consumer Cooperative's plan to build a modern business centre on the site of the old department store. By that time all that remained of the once renowned restaurant's authentic interior was Kits's mural painting.

2 Tõnis Saadoja et al., *Konspekteritud ruum. Tõnis Saadoja laemaal Teater NO99s. Eesti monumentaalmaal 1879–2012*, Tallinn: Lugesmik & Teater NO99, 2012, p. 80.

3 Tiiu Talvistu, *Elmar Kitse fenomen*, Tartu: Tartu Kunstimuseum, 1994.

4 Aino Kartna, 'Elmar Kits 1913–1972 in Memoriam', in: *Kunst*, 1972, Nr. 43/3.

5 Kaarel Tarand, 'Kuidas teisedalada freskot?', in: *Horisont*, 2/2014, p. 8.



2. Mural paintings in the demolished building of the Estonian Academy of Arts, photo by Hilikka Hiiop, 2010

Sienų tapyba nugriautame Estijos dailės akademijos pastate

At the end of 2012, Tartu Consumer Cooperative Investments held an architectural competition to find the best architectural and urban construction solution for the entire city block. The conditions of the competition included the requirement to preserve the mural painting in the new building. Thereupon, an emotional discussion flared up in the press on whether and how this could succeed in a new complex that would not contain a single brick of the old building. Since in terms of construction technology, it proved to be impossible to preserve the wall or the room bearing the painting in the course of the building's demolition, or such preservation would have been prohibitively costly, some of Tartu's opinion leaders even stated that

the demolition of the amortised and architecturally worthless building should be brought to a halt. The mural painting by Kits was not subject to cultural heritage protection, and for this reason it was not possible to pressure the building's owners. The owners faced a choice either to get rid of the work of art, which had proved to be a problem legally and otherwise, and thus earn themselves a long-term reputation of being barbarians, or to try to find a way and the necessary technology to preserve the mural painting and to move it to some other place, either temporarily or permanently.⁶

⁶ *Ibid.*

The Viljandi Vocational Training Centre faced a similar situation in the spring of 2015. The trade school was located in a nineteenth-century manor house, but it was decided to restore the building's original appearance and dismantle the extension that was built in the Soviet period. Now a decision had to be made on what to do with the mural painting located in the building.

The preservation of the authentic architectural framework is unquestionably the safest and most ethical way to preserve a work of art, but sometimes this proves to be impossible. The choices are to destroy the artwork together with the surrounding environment, or to save it by demounting and transferring it to a new location. In the event that this proves to be the only possibility of preserving the work, moving the work is justified, even though such cases generally raise further questions, e.g. what is the value of a work of art if its authentic context is destroyed?

A precedent was set in the course of the demolition of the Estonian Academy of Arts building in 2010, when the school's cultural heritage and conservation department successfully demounted the more valuable mural paintings located in the building. From the beginning of the history of the building in the 1960s, the walls of the school had been used as a training space for mural paintings. Many of those paintings were made by artists who now occupy a dignified place in the history of Estonian art, and some of these works have been the symbols of the Academy of Arts for several generations [ills. 2 and 3].

Throughout history, the demounting of murals as a technical solution has been a rather widespread means for preserving paintings. It is only heritage philosophy that has questioned this practice since the latter half of the twentieth century, claiming that the work loses its authentic (spatial) context. The opposite process more often accompanies contemporary conservation work: murals are taken out of museums, brought



3. Conservation students of the Estonian Academy of Arts and the Tartu Art College demounting a mural painting, photo by Hillka Hiiop, 2010

Estijos dailēs akademijos ir Tartu dailēs koleģijos konservavimo studentai išardo sienų tapybos kūrinį

back to their original architectural environments and mounted on walls once again.

Since this kind of complicated and aggressive form of preservation had not been practiced in Estonia before, the walls of the Academy provided an excellent training ground for students of conservation. The work took place while the demolition of the building was already in progress. Some ten of the most valuable mural paintings were successfully removed from the walls in the course of a couple of days. In a way, this salvage operation created a more positive image for the much discussed (and criticised) demolition work of the Academy of Arts. Even the national media channels reported on the work of the students. In addition, this was an excellent chance to work out the process

of this technically engaging method of preservation. Two layers of fabric were affixed to the paintings with strong adhesive made from animal products. After the adhesive had dried, the frescoes were removed in strips from the walls together with the support plaster and placed in a repository.

CONSERVATION PROCESS DEVELOPING THE IDEA

At the end of May 2013, the Tartu Municipal Government issued a permit for demolishing the buildings situated on the property of the old department store under the condition that the nine-meter-long and slightly more than 2.6-meter-tall mural painting be first transferred and preserved. But how? The first plan worked out by engineers entailed cutting out the entire mural painting, and transporting and preserving it as a complete monolith, together with the silica brick wall supporting it. However, this was considered technically too difficult to implement. The nearly ten-metre wall alone would have weighed nearly 40 tons. A second plan worked out by conservators in cooperation with engineers relied purely on tradition and was based on a previously successful methodology for transferring mural paintings, using adhesives of different solubility. In order to prevent damage to the surface layer of the painting, the plan was to demount the mural painting in sections. It took about three months to proceed from the concept to the work, during which time the technique for removing the painting was fine-tuned. Errors were out of the question.

DISTINCT FEATURES OF ELMAR KITS'S PAINTINGS

The mural executed by Kits is a painting in relief and can be referred to as sgraffito only due to its external similarity to classical sgraffito. Sgraffito is traditionally made on lime-based plasters, where the binder of the

various coloured layers is calcium carbonate, which is produced when wet lime comes into contact with carbon dioxide in the air (technically similar to the fresco technique). Even though the composition of the plaster and the binder of the pigments in Kits's mural had not been determined, it was clear on the basis of observation that the relief was cut into plaster containing cement and different surfaces were coloured on the plaster that was already dry. The binder of the paints appeared to originate from an unusual element: it was a relatively strong paint surface resembling plastic that suggested some sort of acrylate medium. Kits presumably used paints left over from the construction of the restaurant (this information was received from the poet and artist Indrek Hirv who participated in the making of the painting as a little boy). The acrylate nature of the painting layer of the mural boded well for the success of the demounting, even though this was an experimental and risky process. Even though previous work with the frescos at the Academy of Arts provided a certain amount of experience, the deep relief of the three-dimensional surface of Kits's mural painting made its removal considerably more complicated. A way had to be found to support each groove.

COVERING THE PAINTING WITH A PROPHYLACTIC ADHESIVE TEXTILE

The mechanical removal of panels of the painting from the wall could have been very dangerous for the painting's surface. Thus, the painting was pre-emptively covered by layers of protective fabric to prevent the cracking and crumbling of the plaster and damage to the pigment layer in the process of demounting.

Tentative experiments were carried out on the lower accessible area of the painting and it was determined that the test surface was resistant to synthetic adhesives. It was provisionally decided to use a 10% solution of the synthetic adhesive Paraloid B 72 to protect the painting. To make sure that the adhesive



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could later be successfully removed, an approximately 20x20 cm test sheet was left on the surface. Some months later, this same protective sheet was successfully removed from the surface by lightly moistening it with acetone.

However, it was unexpectedly discovered that the monochromatic matte beige background colour in the upper portion of the painting reacted with acetone, leaving a whitish film on the surface. For this reason, it was decided to replace the synthetic adhesive with natural glue of animal origin (rabbit skin), which is the traditional medium for applying protective layers. Its drawback is that it requires the use of large quantities of water on the painted surface, but tests on various areas of the artwork indicated that all the paints, including the beige background tone, which differed in nature from the overall material used, were resistant to water.



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4. Application of prophylactic adhesive fabric, photo by Ülke Jukk, 2013

Profilaktinio glotnaus audinio uždėjimas

5. Mural partially covered by a second layer of fabric, photo by Hilkkka Hiiop, 2013

Tapybos kūrinys, iš dalies padengtas antru audinio sluoksniu

6. Mural covered by layers of prophylactic fabric prior to demounting, photo by Peeter Säre, 2013

Tapybos kūrinys, padengtas profilaktinio audinio sluoksniais prieš išardymą

The advantage of natural adhesive is the harmlessness of the process (both prior to demounting and after remounting) to the people implementing it: large amounts of synthetic materials often create major health risks to those carrying out the work [ills. 4, 5 and 6].



7 a, b The demounting process was successfully carried out by Haspo OÜ, photo by Ülle Jukk, 2013
Išardymą sėkmingai įgyvendino „Haspo OÜ“

First, a layer of gauze that could easily fill all the relief grooves of the painting was applied to the surface of the painting using a water solution of about 20–25% rabbit-skin adhesive. This was extremely important in removing the base layer because every piece of plaster without a protective covering most likely would have come off the surface in the course of mechanical removal and would have been lost. As a second layer, a stronger cotton fabric was applied on top of the gauze attached to the painting using the same adhesive to protect the entire surface of the painting as a uniform layer. Due to its stronger weave structure, it was impossible to attach this fabric to every relief depression, but the lower layer of gauze provided the primary mechanical protection for the layer of plaster.

DEMOUNTING THE MURAL PAINTING

In order to demount the mural painting, the edge strips, plaster panels, wall plaster and suspended ceiling panels were first removed to a sufficient extent to afford unrestricted access to the painting and to prepare the places where the hooks for hanging the work were to be affixed. The scenes of the painting were separated from one another using a circular cutter and the demounting began one by one, moving from right to left. A separate protective frame made of iron rods was constructed for each section. After fixing the frame, the panel with its protective layers of fabric was covered with an additional plastic film. A protective surface made of strong plywood was attached to the

front side of the painting and the frame was hung on a hook that had been affixed to the ceiling. The gaps that resulted in the deep grooves of the relief between the plywood and the plastic film were stiffened with stiffening foam in order to prevent cracking in the unsupported parts of the painting. Having dried, the plaster was sawed through, using a cable-cutting system, as close as possible to the brick wall. Then the panels were lowered using hanging cables into a horizontal position and their back sides were covered with reinforcing netting and a mixture of adhesive and reinforcement; having dried, it was covered with an additional layer of plywood to complete its affixing [ills. 7a and 7b].⁷

The uneven brickwork and the thickness of the base layer of plaster made the demounting of the panels complicated. Fortunately, there was little binder in the latter, which made it considerably easier to saw the sections apart. In the end, nine marked 'suitcases' were left in the room, which could be easily stored in a suitable place. As a compromise decision, the owners of the building did not demand that this work of art be displayed in the new building. Instead, they ceremonially donated it to the Estonian National Museum repository at Raadi, i.e. to the Estonian state.

The Tarvas restaurant interior, in which Elmar Kits created his work, disappeared from Tartu fifteen years ago. The department store, the painting's architectural embodiment, was demolished in 2014. The painting itself, however, was successfully extracted from the debris. Well-thought-out methodology and close cooperation between conservators and engineers ensured the success of this experimental and risky project. Trust on the part of the customer was of no less importance.

This was, however, only the first stage in preserving the work of art. There is still no physical environment where the work can be remounted in either the

Estonian Academy of Arts or Tartu's old department store. In technical terms, it is not until the second stage is completed, i.e. when the sections of the painting are once again attached to a wall and displayed in their new environment, that we can speak about the success of this project.

SUCCESSFUL REMOUNTING PROCESS

It is, however, possible to describe a 'stage two' in the case of the mural painting by Kits in Viljandi. The mural in the Viljandi vocational school offered a comparable challenge to conservators and engineers due to its similar relief-like surface. Since the demounting of the Tarvas restaurant painting had proceeded without incidents, it was decided to follow the same procedure. The only difference was that the process of saving the mural went a step further.

To replace the classroom space lost by demolishing the Soviet era building, the school had renovated an old stable and converted it into a new annex. The plan was to transfer all of the artworks that once embellished the old school rooms to the new building. Luckily, there was only one object of art in the old building that was literally part of the architecture.

The same technique for demounting the painting from the wall was used. Here the detaching process was expected to be easier due to the much smaller size of the artwork: the mural in Viljandi only covered an area of about three by two meters. A bit worrisome was its more fragile paint surface and the plaster itself, which appeared not to contain much binder and seemed more brittle than in the painting in Tartu.

An important facet of the conservation concept was also to retain the portability that the artwork gained during the detachment so it could easily be transferred to another location when necessary. Hence, the first step of the remounting process was to prepare a supportive baseplate for the painting to serve as an intermediate layer between the mural and the wall.

7 Hilikka Hiiop, Ülle Jukk, 'Tarvase restorani seinapanoo. Päästmine või pääsemine?', in: *Cultural Heritage Preservation Yearbook*, 2013, pp. 66–68.



8. Conservators working on removing the protective fabrics from the already remounted mural in Viljandi, photo by Mati Valli, 2015

Konservatoriai nuima apsauginį audinį nuo permontuoto sienų tapybos kūrinio Viljandyje



9. As with the mural in Tartu, conservators used gauze as the first protective layer, photo by Helen Volber, 2015

Kaip ir Tartu sienų tapybos kūrinio atveju, konservatoriai naudojo marlę kaip pirmą apsauginį sluoksnį

The baseplate was prepared in a bi-layered form: the layer that was to be in contact with the backside of the mural was made of birch plywood, while the other, reinforcing, layer was made of waterproof plywood. The two layers were attached to one another with screws and wood adhesive was used to additionally strengthen the contact between them. To ensure reliable adhesion between the mural and the baseplate, the latter was first coated with contact primer and then covered with a layer of tile adhesive. The mural, covered in turn with adherence dispersion from the rear, was then placed on the baseplate.

When the tile adhesive was set, the protective plywood panels, attached temporarily to the front side of the painting, were removed, as was the assembly foam used to stabilise the grooves of the relief. The baseplate carrying the artwork was fixed to the wall with eight-millimetre wedge anchors.

Now came the ‘moment of truth’: removing the protective fabrics would reveal the actual level of success of the entire undertaking. It was decided to use hot steam instead of water to reactivate the rabbit-skin glue in order to avoid the excessive use and absorption of water. The conservators breathed a sigh of relief as the layers of fabric and gauze started to peel off the mural easily and revealed the painted surface almost intact. Only a small area in the lower right corner of the painting was somewhat damaged during the re-mounting and needed some consolidation and a little plaster repair [ills. 8 and 9].

Slightly more time-consuming was the removal of glue residues from the painted surface. Again, the best tool proved to be the steamer, as well as a large number of absorbent towels [ills. 10 and 11].

CONCLUSIONS

There are quite many poorly constructed functionless buildings in all post-Soviet countries. Demolishing them is common practice; yet, these buildings are



10, 11. Demounted and remounted painting by Elmar Kits in Viljandi, photo by Joel Leis, 2016

Išardyta ir permontuota Elmaro Kitso tapyba Viljandyje

often adorned with monumental art. These artworks are therefore endangered. In this paper, we have given an overview of how it is possible to save these artworks by removing them from their original supports. However, this conservation process may cause problems. Despite the fact that Soviet art is being more and more objectively evaluated, it is still not universally appreciated. Even when a piece of art is unanimously considered valuable, some disagreements might arise because of the violent nature of the undertaking, and the authenticity of an artwork that has been ripped out of its original setting might be questioned. Furthermore, the complexity and high cost of this type of conservation work may be an obstacle.

We can consider the demounting procedures of Elmar Kits's wall paintings described above a pilot



project, which proved that it is possible to demount even large-scale paintings with engraved surfaces from their original supports and remount them on new supports without significant damage. At the same time, the high risk of this undertaking must be acknowledged. The risk is increased by the diverse artistic practices of the Soviet period, such as varied plaster formulation and painting techniques. In dealing with an artwork painted on dry plaster (as was common in Soviet art), some loss of paint is inevitable. To conclude, we can say that demounting (Soviet-period) wall paintings proved to be a conservation method in which high risks are involved. Nevertheless, we are convinced that in a situation where non-interference leads to certain destruction of an artwork, these risks are worth taking.

Received 22 04 2016

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GELBSTINT SOVIETINĮ PAVELDA – SIENŲ TAPYBOS IŠARDYMAS NUGRIAUTI SKIRTUOSE PASTATUOSE

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SANTRAUKA

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: sienų tapyba, sienų tapybos išardymas, sienų tapybos perkėlimas, Elmaras Kitsas.

Galima teigti, kad straipsnyje aprašytas eksperimentinis metodas pasirodė esantis sėkmingas siekiant išsaugoti reljefinio paviršiaus sienų tapybą. Mažiausiai vienas išardytas sienų tapybos kūrinys šiandien vėl puikuoja ant naujos sienos. Nors sienų tapyba laikoma konkrečiai vietai pritaikytu meno kūriniumi ir istoriškai skirtas tai sienai, ant kurios ji buvo sukurta, galima pastebėti, kad tam tikromis aplinkybėmis sienų tapybos kūrinių išardymas iš jų įprastinės vietos yra pagrįstas.

Tokia situacija išėjo į naudą tris mergeles vaizduojančiam sienų tapybos kūriniui Viljandyje. Elmaras Kitsas sukūrė jį pramonės mokyklos sienai papuošti. Kūrinys liko institucijoje, kuriai buvo skirtas, tik buvo perkeltas ant kitos sienos. Verta paminėti tai, kad mokyklos darbuotojai apibūdino originalią kūrinių vietą kaip gana netinkamą. Jiems buvo malonu matyti kūrinių erdvesnėje ir geriau apšviestoje aplinkoje.

Klausimas, ar kiti išardyti meno kūriniai, apie kuriuos rašoma šiame straipsnyje, ras savo vietą ir kur ji galėtų būti, lieka neatsakytas. Ar galima šiuos meno kūrinius priversti papasakoti svarbių istorinių epochų istoriją, o jei taip, kokių būdu? Viena galimybė – paprasčiausiai pritvirtinti kūrinių ant kilnojamo pagrindo ir eksponuoti jį muziejuje, kaip ir buvo daroma ilgą laiką. Kita išeitis – palikti sienų tapybą saugykloje, uždengtą apsauginiais sluoksniais, ir leisti ateities kartoms nuspręsti, ar ši Estijos istorijos dalis nusipelno būti eksponuojama. Trečia galimybė – tikėtis, kad šiems darbams bus rasta jų verta architektūrinė aplinka dviejose vietose, kurios šiuo metu atgimsta, – Estijos nacionaliniame muziejuje Raadi (Tartu) ir naujajame Estijos menų akademijos pastate Taline. Šiame dešimtmetyje abi institucijos persikels į naujus pastatus, taigi istoriniai sienų tapybos kūriniai, kurie taip pat yra susiję su savo naujais architektūriniais įsikūnijimais, galėtų sukurti vizualinį ryšį su senesne praeitimi, kuri nusipelno būti įvertinta kaip ir kitos epochos.