



# ICMA NEWS

...AND MORE

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## STUDENT COMMITTEE PAGES

*(continued)***Exhibiting Altarpieces: Technical Art Examination in Focus**

During a recent research trip to Estonia, I had the opportunity to visit and engage with the current exhibition entitled, “Rode Altarpiece in Close Up – History, Technical Investigation and Conservation of the Retable of the High Altar of Tallinn’s St. Nicholas Church, 2013-2015” at the Niguliste Museum in Tallinn, home to the medieval collection of the Art Museum of Estonia (K.U.M.U.). The altarpiece in focus, the *Saint Nicholas Altarpiece* (1478-81, oil on panel and polychrome oak sculpture) by Lübeck artist Hermen Rode, has stepped into the limelight with its own, dedicated multi-year (2013-2015), multi-national research and conservation project, aimed at cleaning the polychrome sculptures, and shedding light on the processes and materials of conservation and the history of the altarpiece.

In my conversations with Director Tarmo Saaret, project leader Hilikka Hiiop, and conservator Hedi Kard, I was able to gain insight into the exhibition’s creation, and its technologically oriented approach and goals. Technological developments have changed the nature of exhibitions in art galleries and museums. Interactive computer screens, audio recordings, and even technical art examinations, are often layered into the fabric of exhibitions. I have chosen to focus on the Niguliste exhibition as a way to map different ways in which museums are incorporating technology into their exhibitions - for greater transparency, and for the benefit of both art historical and broader audiences.

Nip around the corner of Tallinn’s old town square, to where the upper and lower old town meet, and one still finds the *Saint Nicholas Altarpiece* in its original home, the once medieval Baltic German parish church of Saint Nicholas, now Niguliste Museum. The *Saint Nicholas Altarpiece*,



Figure 1. Project leader Hilikka Hiiop navigating the interactive screen next to the altarpiece. (Photo credit: Niguliste Museum)

partially restored, resides approximately in its intended location, in the polygonal choir of the church - turned - museum, where the

high altar would have been located (Figure 1). Standing in the apse, it still captures one's attention as the gem of the medieval collection and thus fittingly, once superstructure of the church's locus of the high altar. One of the difficulties in displaying the *Saint Nicholas Altarpiece* to the public is its pentaptych format, which features a double set of wings and three positions. The third position of the altarpiece, featuring polychrome oak sculptures is only opened a few times a year, during the altarpiece's namesake, Saint Nicholas' feast days (Figure 2). The challenge has been how to allow the museum visitor to experience the altarpiece's complete visual program, without having to constantly open and close its wings. With the new exhibition, the solution has been to include an accompanying, large digital screen, adjacent to the altarpiece, where visitors can open and close its wings, in virtual form, thus able to see all of the three positions, and read about the altarpiece's visual program and patronage. From this introduction screen, which acts as a primer, one can move towards the actual altarpiece and view its second position, displayed on a daily basis to the public. But, the engagement with the altarpiece does not end here.



Figure 2. Museum director Tarmo Saaret opening the altarpiece to reveal its third position with polychrome sculpture. (Photo credit: Niguliste Museum)

Directly behind the altarpiece, conservators, led by Hilkka Hiiop, work with segments of the altarpiece in “real time,” cleaning them in the open for interested audiences (Figure 3). Visitors to the museum are thus able to experience, firsthand, the processes of conservation and restoration taking place. Film reels about the altarpiece's x-radiography and reflection imaging are shown to supplement the “live action.” There are also informative films and audio recordings with interviews from conservators and past museum curators, highlighting some of the history behind the altarpiece's display and provenance. Cu-



Figure 3. Conservators working with wooden polychrome fragments directly behind the altarpiece. (Photo credit: Niguliste Museum)

rators, scientists, and art historians are currently in the midst of mapping the altarpiece's condition through 3-dimensional imaging, which can be layered with infrared and x-ray results. Results yielded include confirming pigment composition, illuminating underdrawings and other layers, and also revealing if there have been any cleanings or retouchings. R.T.I. (reflectance transformation imaging) has also been taken of all of the polychrome sculptures, which aids in close analysis of the surfaces.

Complementing the exhibition is the museum's website on a dedicated page with links: [www.nigulistemuuseum.ee/en/niguliste-exhibitions/on-view/rode-altarpiece-in-close-up](http://www.nigulistemuuseum.ee/en/niguliste-exhibitions/on-view/rode-altarpiece-in-close-up). The website allows the visitor to engage with the exhibition before and/or after their visit. The exhibition has an afterlife, a digital imprint that can be accessed even when the museum itself is closed. On the Niguliste Museum's website, one finds brief overviews of the technical art examinations described in the paragraph above, updates on the project's progress, as well as blog entries that touch upon various issues through different perspectives. Technologically oriented and transparent (very literally, in having the conservation take place in the public sphere of the museum), these characteristics of the current exhibition echo the *Saint Nicholas Altarpiece's* original context of religious prominence on the church-turned-museum's high altar, and its own complex, innovative design and construction as a regionally sought-after format from an esteemed workshop. If one finds oneself in Estonia in the next few years, consider visiting the Niguliste Museum's “Rode Altarpiece in Close Up” and engaging with the *Saint Nicholas Altarpiece's* three positions.

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