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Leif Einar PLAHTER, Erling SKAUG, Unn PLAHTER. *Gothic Painted Altar Frontals from the Church of Tingelstad. Materials / Technique / Restoration.* Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1974.4 colour plates, 82 figs., 108 pages. Norw. Kr. 109.50.

This book is the first volume in a series entitled *Medieval Art in Norway* being published by the University of Oslo and the University of Bergen. The series will concentrate on painted altar frontals, painted wooden ceilings and canopies, stave church carvings, and Romanesque, Early Gothic and High Gothic figure sculptures in wood. This first volume presents the results of the technical analysis and conservation of three altar frontals, dating from the second half of the thirteenth century, formerly in the church of Tingelstad and now in the University Museum of National Antiquities, Oslo. The examination and treatment of the three paintings were begun in the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique in Brussels and were carried out by three Norwegian restorers, Leif Einar Plahter, Erling Skaug, and Bjorn Dammann, respectively. The publication of the results of this work was achieved through the collaboration of the three authors, Leif Einar Plahter, the Chief Restorer at the National Gallery in Oslo, his wife Unn, a chemist at the University Museum of National Antiquities in Oslo, and Erling Skaug, the Chief Restorer at the Norwegian Folk Museum in Oslo. The result of their close team work is an exceptional study which integrates scientific, technical and art historical considerations.

The three panels, designated as Tingelstad. I, II and III, are a *Madonna and Child*, a fragment containing scenes from the *Passion of Christ*, and a fragment with scenes from the *Legend of St. Egidius* (St. Gilles). The book contains a formidable amount of information on these panels. The organization of this material reflects the scheme of one of the first great post-World War II conservation reports, Paul Coremans' work on the Ghent Altarpiece (*Les Primitifs Flamands, L'Agneau Mystique au Laboratoire*, Antwerp, 1953). In the first three of the five sections of the book, the authors present a formal description of each of the panels and a detailed analysis of the materials and techniques of execution, including the support, components and structure of the paint layers (ground, incisions, pigments, binding media, structures of the colours). They conclude the discussion of each of the altar frontals with a description of past restoration campaigns and of the conservation work carried out in the 1960's. In Section IV, Leif Einar Plahter and Erling Skaug compare the data on the three panels and discuss the implications of their findings for the history of European painting techniques and for the identification of workshops in medieval Norwegian painting. Finally, Section V includes a report on the results of the various scientific tests made of the binding media and pigments, including a neutron activation analysis, carried out by Eiliv Steinnes, of samples of lead white and chalk taken from the panels.

The authors are to be commended for the completeness and precision with which they present all of this information. The sections on the materials and techniques of each of the paintings, particularly the descriptions of the structures of the colours, are extremely thorough. Throughout the text, the significance of the various phenomena under discussion are noted: the surprising crudeness of the construction and preparation of the supports of Tingelstad I and II; the use of chalk as a pigment in all three panels and of ultramarine in III, both unusual practives in medieval Norwegian painting. Of particular interest is the fact that all three paintings lack underdrawings: the incisions made into the ground are the only extant evidence of the original preparation of the designs. From this, the authors hypothesize that drawings may have been made in charcoal and then brushed away (following the type of system suggested by Cennino Cennini in *Il Libro dell'Arte* but without the further reinforcing of the design in brush and ink suggested by Cennini) or that full scale cartoons may have been used. An example of the thoroughness with which they present their analysis is their notation that the incisions made in the ground appear as white lines in the radiographs because they are filled with white lead from the subsequent paint layer in each of the paintings (fig. 1).

Significant for the excellent format in which the results of the technical examination and conserva-

tion of the Tingelstad altar frontals are published, this book will also be of value to anyone interested in the early history of painting techniques in Europe. In their concise concluding remards, the authors note the significance of such an early and sophisticated use of oil as a binding medium in these three panels, showing that oil technique was well developoped over two centuries before the famous developments by Van Eyck and the Netherlandish painters in the fifteenth century and was practiced contemporancously with tempera technique in the late Middle Ages. With the publication of more studies of this nature, we can look forward to further advancement of our knowledge of the early history of European panel painting technique.

The kind of technical report represented by this book also has a particular significance for art historians who are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of the evidence of the technical and physical properties of works of art for their studies. In the last two decades, notably in the field of medieval Italian painting, technical analyses have contributed fundamentally to studies on problems

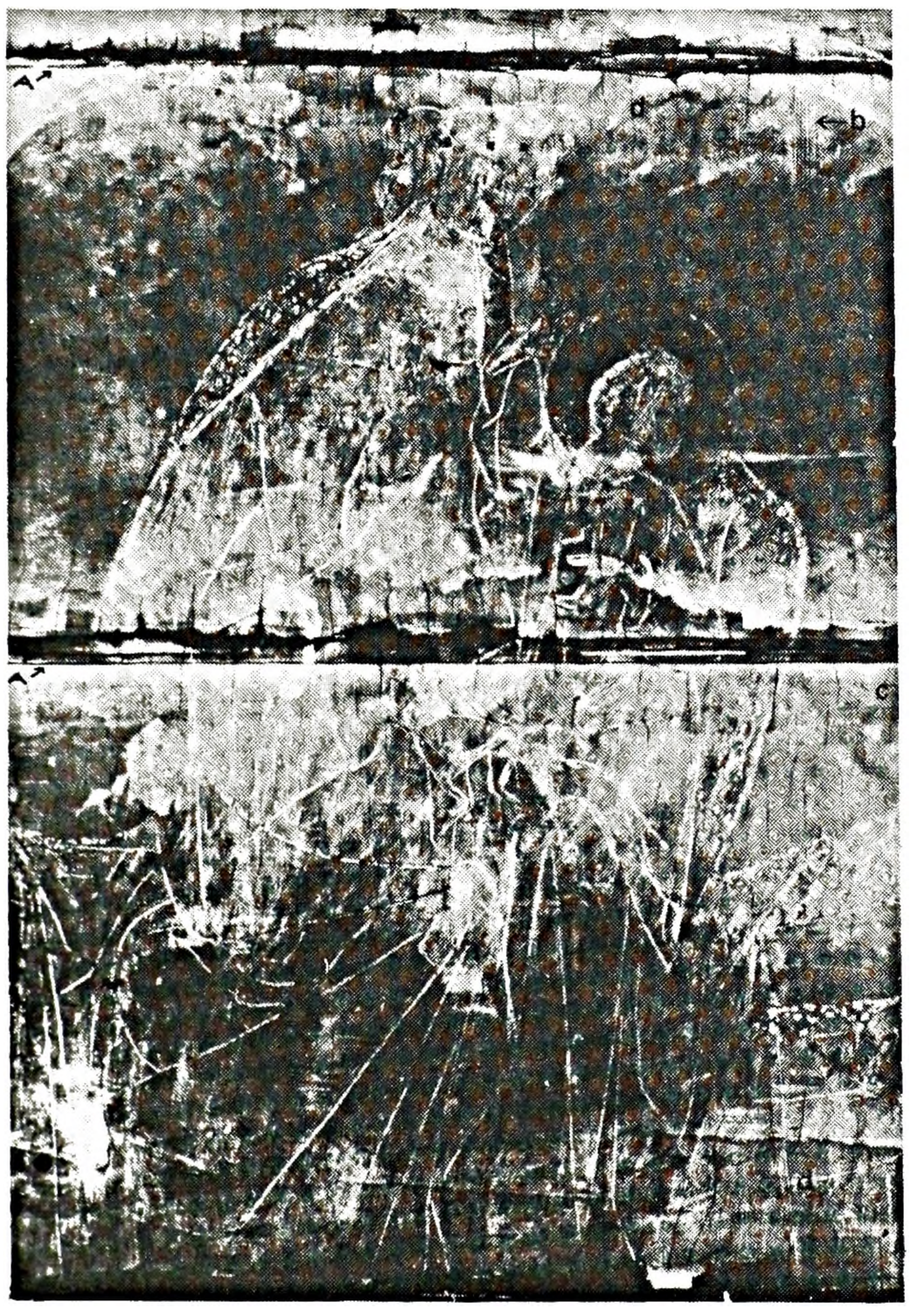

FIGURE 1. The central scene. X-ray Photograph. a. joints in the Panel; b. Wooden dowel in the joint; c. tightly woven Canvas; d. Loosely woven canvas.

in attribution, dating, reconstruction, and workshop practices.

The authors allude to the implications of their study for our knowledge of Norwegian workshops of the late Middle Ages. Our knowledge of medieval workshops in general is still limited, and earlier studies have tended to use exclusively stylistic grounds to distinguish between various ateliers or between the autograph work of a master and that of his assistants or school. The authors of this volume come to the conclusion that while the three Tingelstad panels are closely related as regards technique, the variances in materials and execution among the paintings point to their having originated in two different workshops: Tinglestad III being separated from I and II. This conclusion is in contrast to those of art historians who have done stylistic analyses on the three altar frontals: the authors cite the example of Harry Fett (*Norges malerkunst i middelalderen*, Oslo, 1917), who attributes I and III to the same shop and II to a second atelier.

The problem of the identification of the workshops responsible for the Tinglestad altar frontals must be left open at this time, but it is to be hoped that a new study of the attribution of the panels will be made which will take into account the technical analysis presented in the volume being reviewed, as well as stylistic considerations. This kind of study will add further to our corpus of knowledge on medieval ateliers in general and on their working processes.

A few final notes should be made on several specific features of the book. The text is copiously illustrated with four colour plates and numerous blacks and white photographs. The reader will be grateful especially for the many details of the paintings, taken in both normal and raking light, before and after conservation. One of the most instructive devices used to illustrate the text is the use of a transparency showing the preparatory design incised into the ground which is superimposed on a photograph of the finished painting, giving a precise idea of the relationship of the incised and painted lines of the compositions. In addition, the diagrams drawn by Erling Skaug are excellent, particularly those of the construction of the panels and of the structures of the paint layers. It has to be noted though that may of the black and white pictures lack a crispness and clarity which would have been desireable in such a technical report. An insignificant but annoying problem is to be found in the format of the notes and bibliography: the notes, on pp. 101-2, refer to the source by the author's name and *op. cit.*, but the reader will find

the title of the work cited only in the bibliography which follows on p. 105. These are minor problems though and do not detract from the valuable contribution the book makes to our knowledge of early European panel painting techniques.

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Jean PARIS, *Painting and Linguistics,* Pittsburgh: Carnegie — Mellon University, 1975. 72 p., 12 illus., $4.00.

Ce volume, premier né d'une série *PRAXIS/POETICS* comprend deux essais, "Toward a Visual Syntax" et "The Misfortunes of the Virgin Mary", qui furent présentés l'an dernier sous forme de conférences à l'Université Carnegie—Mellon. Le titre *PRAXIS/POETICS* choisi par les promoteurs de la série montre d'emblée leur intention de privilégier le domaine de l'expression, inséparable de l'investigation des démarches instrumentales de sélection et combinaison qui mettent en évidence le système rhétorique dénoté par l'objet observé aussi bien que l'appartenance idéologique de l'artiste. D'autre part, la bipolarité de type *ET/OU* retenue ici semble bien indiquer un intérêt particulier pour la dialectique de la linguistique structurale. S'il est encore trop tôt pour savoir comment se développera la série, l'ouvrage initial que nous présentons ce jour aux lecteurs de RACAR confirme en tous cas l'orientation suggérée plus haut.

Jean Paris, dont les entretiens avec Roman Jakobson, Morris Halle et Neam Chomsky ont été récemment publiés (*Hypothèse*, Paris, 1972), se fait l'avocat d'une approche critique de l'objet visuel fort différente de celle promues par les trois maîtres-à-penser de l'histoire de l'art contemporaine: Wölfflin, Riegl et Warburg. Tandis que Wölfflin tend à isoler le fait visuel, Riegl valorise les articulations stylistiques; Warburg, quant à lui, valorise le socio-culturel. On trouve donc trois approches distinctes que l'on peut désigner, je pense, comme formaliste, évolutionniste et contextualiste. Or, ce qui lie ces trois approches, c'est le recours à un cadre référentiel unique: le cadre chronologique — celui-là même dont Jean Paris refuse la suprématie. Affirmant l'autonomie des structures de l'imaginaire "[which] owe very little to social conjunctures", il déclare: "It is not because one work follows another that it stems from it... similar works can appear in areas as ditant in time as they are in geography". L'archétype thématique "does precede its applications, its deformations, only for a logical mind: in reality, it often springs from them". *Ergo*, "it is about time to upset the sacrosanct historical categories... and to get rid, by the same token, of the tyranny of *influence*, another obsession of art criticism" (p. 45; italique dans le texte original).

Cette décision d'explorer l'objet visuel "disregarding chronology and schools" n'implique cependant pas pour Jean Paris le rejet global de la perspective historique (rejet auquel aboutit George Kubler dans *The Shape of Time*, par exemple). Il accepte la notion d' "historical dialectics in art", mais se trouve dans l'impossibilité d'utiliser les schèmes évolutifs continus perfectionnés par ses illustres prédécesseurs pour la simple raison qu'il poursuit un but différent des leurs: il ne s'agit pas pour lui de replacer le fait visuel dans telle ou telle séquence au nom d'une grammaire stylistique normative, mais de lui restituer sa dimension ontologique. Dès lors, peu lui importe que tel ou tel objet ait été créé avant ou après tel autre. Ce qui compte, c'est de reconstituer la logique *interne* du développement de l'archétype, donc de rendre compte de permutations qui ne peuvent en aucun cas exclure l'intrusion d'éléments achroniques. Ainsi, dans le modèle transformationnel auquel il aboutit à propos de l'archétype marial, l'artiste ayant exécuté la *Vierge en gloire* de Xenophontes (XVIè siècle) est placé avant celui auquel est due la Vierge de Monreale (XIIè siècle).

Que penser de cette prise de position? Personnellement, elle ne me dérange ni ne m'intimide. Nous savons très bien que l'approche totale du phénomène artistique est impossible; force nous est de nous centrer sur certaines modalités à l'exclusion d'autres, donc de sélectionner des critères analytiques pertinents. Quelque objectif que l'on se fixe, la nécessité demeure de pouvoir identifier et classer une masse d'objects qui méritent le nom d'événements dès l'instant où on les considère comme étant apparus à différents moments. Or, pour nous occidentaux, les objects visuels sont devenus essentiellement des événements — une conséquence, je suppose, du dynamisme particulier de notre culture. À la « tyrannie » des influences, on peut ajouter celle des attributions (dont Frederick Antal disait il y a plus de vingt ans déjà qu'elle tend "to confine art history to attributions almost for attributions' sake"), et celle du découpage du « scenario » en séquences stylistiques, découpage