

Conservation and restoration project at the Kunstmuseum Bern 2014-16

Painting Panels by Niklaus Manuel—currently undergoing restoration



A detail from: Demons Tempting St. Anthony, St. Anthony of the Desert Altar, Antonine Spital Church, Bern; far right-hand side; property of the City of Bern, entrusted to the Kunstmuseum Bern as a permanent loan.

The Kunstmuseum Bern houses the largest series of panels painted by Niklaus Manuel. Some of the panels are in a precarious state of repair. No-longer active old woodworm infestation has structurally weakened the wooden support of the panels, and new cracks and hollows have developed directly under the paint layers. The latter are in danger of breaking through under even very slight mechanical pressure. Old retouchings and the yellowed varnish produce an overall a blotchy and irregular appearance. Especially from a conservation angle, some of the frames and mounts of the panels give rise to concern.

The occasion for undertaking the restoration these panels is the concurrence of different interests and activities zeroing in on the paintings of Niklaus Manuel. Firstly, the conservation and restoration of the altar panels at the Kunstmuseum Bern has been on the agenda for quite a while now. One of the driving forces behind the project is Christoph von Tavel in the context of a Niklaus Manuel catalogue raisonné project, which, since 2006, is being carried at SIK-ISEA in Zurich and is to be completed in 2016. And additionally, the Bernisches Historisches Museum is planning a large Niklaus Manuel exhibition. It will explore the life of this versatile and multifaceted Bernese artist against the historicocultural background of his times.

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The goal of the project is the comprehensive conservation and restoration of the panels of this altarpiece, a major group of works in the Kunstmuseum Bern Collection, taking into account art-technological characteristics of the artworks as well as their fragility due to age and their present condition. The greatly varying state of repair of the panels and their aesthetic appearance (yellowing, sheen, discoloration of the retouching) will be treated individually with the appropriate methods in order to regain the impression of unity within the altarpiece.

The detailed documentation of the total materiality and the conservation/restoration of the panels serves not only their preservation, but likewise brings new scientific findings to light about them. The highly multi-faceted approach in the evaluation of the panels' material authenticity, taking the respective periods into account, can thus be presented anew and supplement earlier documentation and knowledge about the panels.

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