

# SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS OF THE RELIEF "THE LAST SUPPER" OF ELKŠŅI (ELERNE) CHURCH DURING RESTORATION

**AINA BALODE**

Master restorer of polychrome wood  
aina271@inbox.lv  
The Scientific Restoration Department of Rundāle Palace Museum

**VILNIS LĪDAKA**

Senior master conservator - restorer  
The Scientific Restoration Department of Rundāle Palace Museum

## ABOUT

The Last Supper is the last evening meal that Jesus Christ shared with his Apostles in Jerusalem before the anguish-filled walk to Golgotha and crucifixion. The Eucharist is one of the seven holy sacraments in the church, during which the congregation are offered sacramental bread and wine at the communion table.

The Eucharist - a ritual in which a Christian receives the true flesh and blood of Jesus Christ in the form of bread and wine.

The Last Supper is widely depicted in sacred art. The most famous of these works is the late 15th c. (1495 - 1498) mural painting "The Last Supper" by Leonardo da Vinci, located in the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan (Piazzo di Santa Maria delle Grazie); but there are earlier depictions identified in art history.

This theme is often used in altarpiece compositions of Latvian Lutheran churches. During research, 38 churches were found to have depictions of the Last Supper created in different periods, a variety of artistic quality and technique.

The Last Supper and Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane - the themes depicting the final scenes of Christ's life are compositionally placed in the predella of the altarpiece's lower part; this theme of Christ's secular life is rarely depicted in an altar painting and placed in the upper levels, usually ending with the figure of Salvator Mundi (the Saviour of the World).

The relief "The Last Supper" is a salvaged piece of the original retable in Elkšņi church. The woodcarving dates to mid-17th c., when a wooden church was built nearby for the Lutheran congregation.

The relief is a typical Mannerism-style artwork; the characteristic polychrome with gold and silver leaves and painted details are revealed under numerous overlying layers. The unknown woodcarver succeeded in mastering the characters of the Last Supper. Some places show the author's lack of understanding about linear perspective and difficulty creating a compositional layout for the figurative group.



The front before restoration.

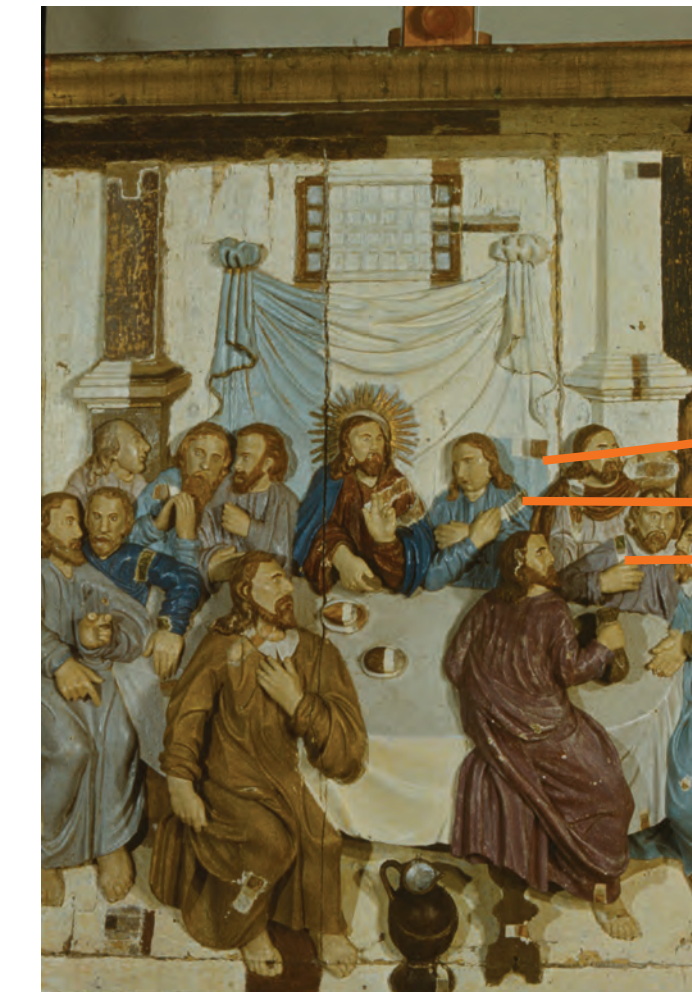


The side before restoration.



The back before restoration.

OWNER (USER): Rundāle Palace Museum, RPM 1015  
ORIGIN, DATE: mid-17th c.  
AUTHOR: Unknown  
DIMENSIONS: 99 cm x 113, depth: 15 cm  
MATERIAL: background base - four vertical oak boards, woodcarving - lime wood, oil colour, gold leaf and silver leaf  
Technique: base, box shape - carpentry, woodcarving, paint, gilding, silver.



In the process of restoration.



In the process of restoration. Color layers research.



The relief after restoration.



In the process of restoration.



Fragment during restoration-removal of over painting.

## THE CONDITION BEFORE RESTORATION

Before restoration, the wooden part of the exhibit is in good condition. It has damages typical to reliefs - the woodcarving has lost some parts (fingers, part of the wrist, small bits of wood), several vertical cracks, newer wood repairs of floor tiles and the background. The woodcarving surfaces have been overpainted 3-4 times with the exception of Christ; his robe was originally gold and was later only twice overpainted with oil paint. The gilding has remained in the deeper folds of the robe and parts of halo. Ground layer: hard, dense, nearly free of losses.

The original polychrome coating: in medium-good condition, 60 % have remained, however, two figures have more losses - 65 % of silver paint layers.



Fragment during restoration-retouching.



Fragment after retouching.



Fragment after retouching.



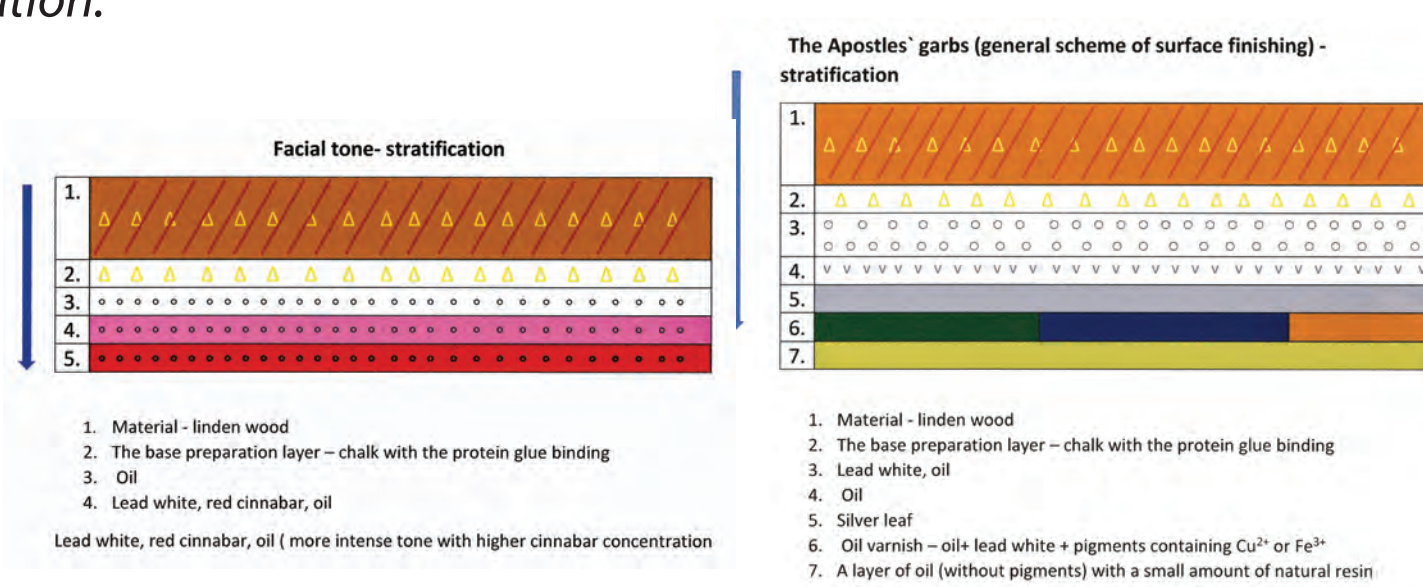
Fragment during restoration-retouching.



Fragment during restoration-retouching.



After restoration displayed in the exposition at the Rundale Palace Museum.



Master conservator A. Balode restoration-silver-plating.



Fragment during restoration silver-plating.



Fragment during restoration silver-plating.

## PROGRESS OF RESTORATION, PROBLEM SOLUTION

The restoration of the exhibit started in the early 1980s, when a partial examination of the relief and its finish was carried out. Stratigraphic exposure is made to determine the number of overpaint layers and to assess the original coating type. Two of the four overpaint layers were removed chemically /restorers I. Galviņa, I. Liepa, A. Balode, I. Inrikova/.

The final restoration was gradually carried out from July 4, 2016 to April 30, 2018 /restorer of polychrome wood A. Balode /. Two oldest overpaint layers were removed mechanically using a UV scalpel and controlling the processes under 10 x 15 magnification. The biggest difficulty is cleaning wood carving recesses from newer overlying layers of oil paint.

Chemical research on surface colour, metal and ground layers was carried out / M.Sc. chem. I. Tuņa/. For the relief finish a traditional ground layer-paint system is used, which is based on treating the wood with egg white type of glue; followed by a thin ground layer of chalk and glue. However, the woodcarving detailing is covered with oil paint and silver or gold leaves. Base tone is lead white (Pb CO<sub>3</sub>), that is mixed with coloured pigments containing iron and copper ions, such as different tones of ochre, green earth and red vermilion used for flesh tones. Various paint tones are mixed based on the ratio of polychromatic pigments to white. The silvered parts are covered with a thick oil paint layer that has protected the silver from natural chemical processes, e.g. Ag<sub>2</sub>S formation. The layer of oil paint causes the silver to have a light shine.

Missing wood fragments were replaced, wood deformation was flattened / furniture restorer V.Lidaka/. Silver losses were restored using silver leaf fragments (a very precise and long process). Gilded parts were retouched but the gilded part of Christ's robe and the halo were restored using gold leaves and preserving the remnants of original gilding. Based on analysis data, new gold and silver leaves were placed on oil varnish. De-oiled Van Deik paint was used to inpaint coloured areas and to cover silver-detail surfaces.