

Greta Koppel, Kadriorg Art Museum

Why approach the theme? Technical art history in Estonian art history practice

This is an introductory lecture for the conference.

The time that divides the origin of the object from the present, and the distancing from the art object that the theory-ridden art historical approach often brings with it, create problems in understanding the object itself. Here, technical art history can function as a translator of a work of art for the contemporary audience.

In the study of historical art (objects), especially in the field of early Netherlandish art, the technical study has become the standard. Technical art history, thus, unites scientific study with art historical knowledge and expertise and uses the art object as its main source of information. The knowledge it provides about how a work of art is made, what materials it consists of and its technical construction not only helps us to preserve artworks in the most efficient way but often provides fruitful material for interpreting them, as well as for understanding artistic intentions.

In Estonian art history practice, there have been numerous examples of including technical investigations in art historical or conservation studies, roughly since the 1960s, but in most of the cases this has been confined to a one-method approach.

In 2002, the School of Conservation was opened as a special department at the Estonian Academy of Arts, and it includes courses on conservation theory and science. When the Kumu Art Museum was opened in 2006, its conservation department was equipped with modern technology and its own chemistry lab. As a result, the conditions were established that would make it possible to promote the technical studies of artworks in Estonia.

Author Biography

Greta Koppel is a curator at the Kadriorg Art Museum (since 2007). Her field of speciality is Netherlandish art, with special attention to 17th century Dutch art. Her special research interest is the question of originality in art history, the interrelation of originals, copies and forgeries, as well as the time specificity of art historical “truths” and “values”. She holds an MA in Art History and Theory (2007) and is currently a PhD candidate at the Estonian Academy of Arts.