

RESTORATION OF THE ALTAR COLUMNS OF SKAISTKALNE CHURCH

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Catalogue information: Baroque altar, end of the 17th century, unknown author, polychrome wood, gilding, altar height 14 m.

This altar is an example of Baroque art in Latvia with Jesuit iconography. It is made of limewood and consists of a table (mensa) and a large two-level retable richly decorated with carvings. The structure is designed in the style of classical architecture, with columns and entablatures, and filled with ornamental detail.

At the center of the second level is a circular medallion containing a sculpture of the Virgin Mary with the Child. Two composite order columns frame the medallion, with a vertical garland between them. On the sides are acanthus leaves, while on the cornice of the first level stand two saints of the Jesuit order: St. Ignatius of Loyola on the left, and St. Francis Xavier on the right. The letters IHS, displayed in a radiant glory, come from Latin *Jesus Hominum Salvator*, meaning "Jesus, Savior of Human," and are a typical emblem of the Jesuit order. The crowning figure of the altar is Christ as King of the World.

The church suffered significant damage in both World Wars and underwent multiple repaintings. After research

conducted in 2023, it was concluded that very little of the original decoration has survived, although enough remains to determine the original.

The ground layer, together with the original painting, has suffered severe damage - most likely due to unsuitable climatic conditions, which caused a loss of adhesion to the substrate and the beginning of detachment - with losses estimated at around 70–80% of the total surface. Under raking light, areas can be seen where the original ground layer has survived.

The wooden surface is covered with a medium-thick, three-layer chalk-and-glue ground on which an oil painting was applied. In the original layer of the Skaistkalne Church altar, gilding on bole was extensively applied, supplemented with a warm grey palette. A thin oil paint layer was used.

During the research of columns, it was believed that the original columns were painted to imitate red marble. During restoration, under five layers of overpainting, fragments of the original decoration were uncovered. Although poorly preserved, the composition can be identified as green leafy garlands with red flowers winding around the light grey columns.



Overview of the altar of Skaistkalne Church before restoration



Upper part of altar after restoration

Restoration processes carried out:

1. Removal of overpainting was performed chemically, layer by layer, using gel compresses, as well as scalpels and small cotton swabs.
2. Consolidation of the paint layers was carried out with Lascaux acrylic-based adhesive Medium for Consolidation at a concentration of 5–10%.
3. Damaged wood areas were impregnated and stabilized with a 5% solution of ethyl methacrylate copolymer Paraloid B72 in ethanol.
4. Areas of paint loss were filled with a ground composed of toned chalk and acrylic binder.
5. Loss areas were toned and reconstructed using Schmincke MUSSINI retouching paints.
6. Gilding was performed using an oil varnish (3-hour mixture) with 23.5-carat fixed gold leaf sheets measuring 8 × 8 cm.



Fragment of the painted columns after restoration



Fragment of the painted columns after overpaint removal