

Sanctuary Paintings in Dalarna's Free Churches, 1850s–2000s

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Swedish nonconformity has received considerable scholarly attention. The emergence in the mid nineteenth century of a cluster of new denominations and religious organisations under the influence of the transatlantic evangelical revival has been widely understood as playing a key role in the democratization of Swedish society.¹ With many of these groups formally leaving the Lutheran state church in the 1880s, the need for premises led to the construction of many chapels (*bönhus*, *missionshus*, *kapell*). While there has been significant interest in the architectural value of these buildings and a sustained effort to catalogue and protect them,² very little attention has been paid to this “free church” interior, at least from a material culture perspective.

While there has been some discussion of free church interior materiality, such as the changing location and meaning of the small table often found in front of the pulpit (Sw. *det lilla bordet*),³ no one has really examined the most prominent feature of the chapel interior: the large, colourful and figurative paintings which can often be found displayed behind the pulpit. Within

1 Sven Lundkvist, *Folkkrörelserna i det svenska samhället 1850–1920*, Stockholm 1977.

2 Torbjörn Almqvist et al., *Vad folket byggde: Ett utkast till folkkrörelsernas byggnadshistoria*, Stockholm 1979; Eva Selling, *Bönhus, missionshus, kapell: Kulturhistorisk dokumentation i Kronobergs län*, Växjö 1995; Carl-Johan Ivarsson & Henrik Olsson, *Väckelsens hus i Värmland*, Karlstad 2021.

3 Sune Fahlgren, “Rum för möten med Jesus och för församlingssamfund i frikyrklig tradition”, in Sven-Åke Selander & Stina Fallberg Sundmark (eds.), *Heliga rum i dagens Sverige, Svenskt Gudstjänstliv* 83, Kristianstad 2008.

Catholic and Lutheran churches, where such decorations are common practice, these artistic works are called “altar paintings” (Sw. *altartavlor*) and are part of a long Christian tradition of altar decoration. Within a Swedish free church context, however, the use of this terminology is more complicated. Free church sources refer to these visual works as simply “paintings” (Sw. *tavlor*), or “background” or “backdrop paintings” (Sw. *fondtavlor*, *fondmålningar*), which seems rather to neglect their religious context. This article, therefore, adopts the descriptive term “sanctuary painting” as a way of bridging these two partial descriptions.

What is not evident from current research is why the free churches in Sweden chose to decorate their interiors with sanctuary paintings. Free church sources have little to say on what, to the movement’s own members, seems to have been a self-evident practice. From an external perspective, however, this decorative practice demands explanation, not least because of its manifestation in *evangelical* interiors, in the buildings of an international religious movement known for its low church theology and its resistance to visual imagery in sacred spaces. Much of the research on free church building practices in Sweden suggests that chapel architects were deeply influenced by the Reformed Protestant building styles of the early modern period and the emerging nineteenth-century fashion for secular auditoriums popularized by English and American revivalists.⁴ Such claims, however, can only be based on a comparison of architectural exteriors and the corresponding design of chapel spaces. An examination of international Protestant (and evangelical) *interiors* shows that they are not decorated with anything like a sanctuary painting. In fact, across four centuries, the Protestant churches of the European, British and American traditions have displayed virtually no figurative decoration of any kind, although there are recent re-evaluations of this portrayal in some national contexts.⁵

This article, therefore, seeks to identify the source of the Swedish free church practice of sanctuary paintings and briefly examine its meaning and importance. In order to root this investigation in a particular context, it has been decided to examine sanctuary paintings as they have appeared, between the 1850s–2000s, within the free churches in Dalarna, a county in central Sweden which has a ready availability of source material, where free church affiliation was spread evenly across the county and whose proportion of adherents, when the movement was at its height, was closely represen-

4 Inger-Britt Holmblad, *Hören Herrens Röst! Svenska Missionsförbundets kyrkobyggande fram till 1915 med tonvikt på Gävle-Daladistriktet*, Värnamo 2002.

5 Jacolien Wubs, “Presenting the Law: Text and Imagery on Dutch Ten Commandment Panels”, *Entangled Religions* 7 (2018), 78–108, <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.v7.2018.78-108>.

tative of the country as a whole (5.22 % compared to 4.79% in 1952).⁶ An investigation of Dalarna's sanctuary paintings, therefore, is likely to have a reasonable comparability to other parts of Sweden.

The evidence which has emerged from this study of Dalarna's sanctuary paintings suggests that, rather than looking to foreign missionary influences, the origins of the practice of sanctuary paintings should be attributed to the more immediate influence of existing Swedish decorative practices: Lutheran attitudes towards church decoration and the strong influence of domestic folk painting traditions. Unlike the relative stability of altar paintings as a decorative feature in Lutheran church interiors, free church sanctuary paintings have been subject to significant movement. Many are still in their original form and location but more have been lost through repair, renovation and, significantly since the 1970s, chapel closures. This article concludes, therefore, by examining the discourses used within the free church movement to articulate the changing value of sanctuary paintings. Sanctuary paintings, if they lose their original purpose, are vulnerable to removal and loss unless they acquire a new identity as "precious heritage".

Sanctuary Paintings in Dalarna

In Dalarna, the main source for the identification of sanctuary paintings has been the Free Church Project (Sw. *Frikyrkoprojektet*) which ran in various forms between 1974–2008.⁷ In its work to record every known chapel in Dalarna, a complete inventory with interior photographs was carried out for every building still in congregational ownership and basic details were recorded for those that had been sold or demolished. Project material suggests that between 1850–2008, 438 buildings had been used for free church worship. In the late 2000s about three-quarters (322) of these buildings were still standing. Of these only 40 per cent (133) were still in congregational possession and thus warranted an interior photograph. And of these interiors about one third (44) had a sanctuary painting. With the addition of paintings discovered in other sources, from buildings in the Project which lacked an interior photograph, or from decorative schemes which had been lost or renovated over time, more than 100 sanctuary paintings have now been identified. It seems reasonable to suggest that approximately 25–30 per cent of Dalarna's chapels may have at one time had a sanctuary painting.

It is important to be aware that there was no single way for a free church to be decorated. Local congregations were at liberty to design and decorate

6 Frikyrkliga Samarbetskommittén, *De fria kristna samfundet i Sverige: en utredning*, Falköping, 1958, 236–237. See also Lundkvist, 72.

7 The Free Church Project collection is part of the wider collection of free church materials located at *Dalarnas folkrörelsearkiv*, Falun.

their chapels any way they liked. Sanctuary paintings, therefore, represent a fairly broad category of artistic works. The free church interiors examined in this study were considered to have a sanctuary painting if a painted figurative representation was affixed to any wall of a sanctuary in a way that was visible in a surviving photograph. Excluded, therefore, was the consistently popular practice of the painted text or motto, because these lacked a figurative or scenic component. Three-dimensional crosses, a decorative practice that became popular in the later twentieth century, were also excluded, because they were not painted. If a text accompanied an image, as it often did, or a cross was placed against a painted background, as it often was, then these were counted as sanctuary paintings. Inclusion was not, therefore, based on size, originality or method of hanging. Small framed prints were included on the same terms as enormous original canvases and wall murals.

The majority of the sanctuary paintings in this Dalarna sample are comprised of a single image depicting a narrative scene in an emotional and colourful style (Figure 1). The majority depict Jesus, often in some kind of an outdoor location, with angels or other onlookers, and displaying some aspect of his divinity, such as his transfiguration or ascension, or acting in his role as a teacher or comforter. These scenes are most frequently displayed on the wall behind the pulpit and face the entrance to the sanctuary, although they can sometimes be found in other locations. Their method of display has been clearly influenced by their size. Smaller works are framed and hang freely while larger canvases are fixed to the wall with wooden battens. There are a number of exceptions to the single framed image norm. In some interiors the figurative depiction is painted directly on to the wall as a mural. In others the decoration incorporates several figurative images into a larger decorative scheme that covers an entire wall or even a whole chapel interior. Some paintings display a non-figurative scene. For example, the interiors associated with the Salvation Army always depict some form of their “Blood and Fire” logo. In other chapels, paintings portray a single cross or, more common in late twentieth century interiors, a neutral abstract design.

Because of the dynamic nature of the free church landscape in Dalarna it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the geographical or denominational distribution of sanctuary paintings. For example, the sanctuary paintings in this study are represented in every one of Dalarna’s fifteen councils (Sw. *kommun*) and in roughly similar proportions to their population density. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a quarter of the sanctuary paintings (24) are located in the county’s most populous councils of Falun and Borlänge. However, locating and identifying sanctuary paintings has been highly dependent on the survival and discovery of a relevant photograph.



Figure 1.1. "Come Unto Me (*Kommen till mig*)", a copy of Carl Bloch's "Christus Consolator", unknown artist, Vika chapel (SMF), Mora, mid-2000s. Photo: Photo 612, Free Church Project, *Dalarnas folkrörelsearkiv*, Falun.



Figure 1.2. Depiction of Jesus teaching the people from a boat (Luke 5:1-3), which hung behind the pulpit of the SMF chapel in Falun from c. 1920s to 1959. Here on display at Dalarnas Museum. Photo: author, 2023.

The high number of sanctuary paintings found in the less heavily populated councils of Mora (10), Leksand (14) and Rättvik (13) could be attributed to a greater tendency to church decoration in these areas, but could also rest on the fact that the online digital photograph collections available for these councils made it particularly easy to find “lost” paintings.

Making claims about any denominational preference for sanctuary paintings should also be approached with caution. Dalarna’s two largest free church denominations are the Baptists, whose history stretches back to the beginnings of the evangelical revival in the 1850s, and the Mission Covenant church (Sw. *Svenska Missionsförbundet*, hereafter SMF), who split from the Lutheran church in the 1880s. As expected, about two-thirds (68) of the sanctuary paintings in this study are located in SMF and Baptist interiors. However, twelve other denominations and a number of independent congregations are known to have operated in Dalarna. Sanctuary paintings have been identified, therefore, in Adventist, Philadelphia and Methodist interiors, in chapels belonging to the Salvation Army and Örebro Mission or operated by unaffiliated or ecumenical groups of local believers. Only two denominations stand out as possibly underrepresented in their display of sanctuary paintings. Of the twenty-nine congregations known to have been affiliated to the *Evangeliska fosterlandsstiftelse* (EFS) only four are known to have displayed a sanctuary painting. Despite its rapid growth in the mid twentieth century to become the third largest denomination in the country, only three out of more than forty Pentecostal chapels have been found with a sanctuary painting.

Sanctuary Paintings in their International Context

In order to understand the origins of sanctuary painting decoration in Dalarna’s free churches, it is necessary to explore the practice of altar decoration within the Christian tradition both before and after the Reformation. From earliest times it has been customary in the Christian tradition to supplement the liturgy with visual aids as a means of instruction. In the Middle Ages this practice was formalised into the voluntary custom of decorating the altar of a Christian church with a “framed artistic representation of a sacred subject”.⁸ This “altarpiece” could be a wooden cabinet that stood on an altar (a “retable” or Sw. *altarskåp*) or a freestanding wooden structure that stood behind it and covered the entire wall right up to the ceiling (a “reredos”).⁹ In countries where Reformed Protestant ideas initi-

⁸ Daniel DeGreve, “Retro Tablum: The Origins and Role of the Altarpiece in the Liturgy”, *Sacred Architecture* 17 (2010), 12–18 [12].

⁹ Ann Catherine Bonnier and Ingrid Sjöström, *Kyrkornas hemligheter*, Stockholm 2013.

ally took hold, such as in France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Scotland, altarpieces were swept away as part of the wider rejection of figurative imagery within Protestant worship spaces. As Nigel Yates' study of European religious interiors shows, reformed Protestants reordered church interiors so that preaching was centralized and the altar was marginalized.¹⁰ Altars became moveable wooden tables while grand, elevated pulpits became the permanent central focus. Without a fixed position within the chancel, there was now no place for an altar decoration. For both principled and practical reasons, then, across much of Protestant Europe, the "plain" style of interior decoration became the norm.¹¹

Similar trends also held sway in the British Isles. At the Reformation English churches were "stripped" of their decoration and altars were moved out of their central position.¹² Altars were later "restored" to a permanent place in the chancel by a "via media" reached in the early 1700s,¹³ but the fashion for altarpieces within Anglicanism never reappeared, although there are some interesting exceptions.¹⁴ Gothic revival churches of the late nineteenth century display, not the single figurative paintings that had become the style in seventeenth-century Swedish Lutheran interiors (Sw. *altartavlor*, *altaruppsats*), but medieval-style reredos with their detailed treatment of smaller images across multiple rising layers. The Protestant plain style can be seen even more clearly in the buildings of early-modern British nonconformity. Early Baptist and Congregational interiors were conspicuously devoid of visual imagery.¹⁵ A similar style was exported to the United States and can be seen in the early colonial meeting houses of Connecticut and the Anglican churches of South Carolina.¹⁶ Even the most aspirational of the neo-gothic British Victorian nonconformist interiors rejected figurative decoration in favour of a central elevated pulpit and organ with surrounding galleries.¹⁷

¹⁰ Nigel Yates, *Liturgical Space: Christian Worship and Church Buildings in Western Europe 1500–2000*, Farnham 2008, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315592749>.

¹¹ Per Gustaf Hamberg, *Temples for Protestants*, Gothenburg 2002.

¹² Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580*, New Haven 1992.

¹³ Kenneth Fincham & Nicholas Tyacke, *Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship, 1547–c.1700*, Oxford 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198207009.001.0001>.

¹⁴ See the Ten Commandment board (attributed to Pompeo Batoni (1708–1787) at Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Weston-on-the-Green, Oxford or the 1840s altarpiece in St. Peter's Church, Leeds.

¹⁵ Martin S. Biggs, *Puritan Architecture and its Future*, London 1946.

¹⁶ Gretchen Townsend Buggeln, *Temples of Grace: The Material Transformation of Connecticut's Churches, 1790–1840*, Hanover 2002; Louis Nelson, *The Beauty of Holiness: Anglicanism and Architecture in Colonial South Carolina*, Chapel Hill 2009.

¹⁷ Christopher Wakeling, *Chapels of England: Buildings of Protestant Nonconformity*, Swindon 2017.

Figurative decoration is also absent from the British and American evangelical interiors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The large revivalist spaces that became popular after the 1850s, like the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, were largely undecorated auditoriums. Small rural chapels in late nineteenth-century Wales may have adopted the secular fashion for Arts and Crafts-style stencilling,¹⁸ but decorative practice in the “tin tabernacles” of Britain¹⁹ and the “gospel halls” of Northern Ireland²⁰ extended to no more than a biblical text or religious motto decorating the back wall of the preaching platform. Within international Protestantism, the one place outside of Sweden where an altar painting could be found was in the church interiors of American Lutheranism. Such mimicry provides practical evidence for what Robert Ostergren suggests, in his study of “transplanted” Dalarna communities in the United States, was a network of shared church decorative practices within Scandinavian communities on both sides of the Atlantic.²¹ International Protestantism may have influenced the external appearance of Swedish chapels, but it certainly cannot take credit for the free church practice of the sanctuary painting. This style of interior decoration was shaped instead by the distinctively local visual and material practices rooted within Swedish Lutheran church and popular domestic decorative traditions.

Distinctive Sanctuary Paintings

At the Reformation, Lutherans adopted a conservative attitude towards church decoration. In Lutheran Germany and Scandinavia, there were almost no acts of iconoclasm and many church interiors were left nearly intact. In Sweden, side altars and statues were removed but *altarskåp* were frequently left in place. It was only in the 1600s that these medieval altar decorations started to fall victim to the growing fashion for *altartavlor*, large figurative paintings with elaborate architectural framing, and *altaruppsats*, a type of reredos imported from the Italian counter-reformation.²² Lutheran altars, therefore, never lost their central position and were always decorated, a continuity clearly noticeable in Dalarna. In the late nineteenth century, for example, medieval *altarskåp* were still on display in the churches

¹⁸ John Harvey, *The Art of Piety: The Visual Culture of Welsh Nonconformity*, Cardiff 1995, 12–17.

¹⁹ Ian Smith, *Tin Tabernacles: Corrugated Iron Mission Halls, Churches & Chapels of Britain*, Salisbury 2004.

²⁰ Judith Cole, *History of Mission Halls throughout Northern Ireland*, Belfast 2017; Tim Grass, *Brethren and their Buildings*, Glasgow 2021.

²¹ Robert C. Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted*, Madison 1988, 302–309.

²² Inga Lena Ångström, *Altartavlor i Sverige under renässans och barock*, Stockholm 1992.

in Gagnef and By, while the one that had decorated the altar in Stora Tuna, Dalarna's ancient diocesan seat, had only been given away in 1757 when a new, more fashionable *altartavla* had been acquired. It was, in fact, in the years after 1700 when the majority of Dalarna's churches acquired their altar paintings and this style of Lutheran decoration was consolidated. The churches around Lake Siljan, in Rättvik, Mora, Leksand and Orsa, for example, acquired their *altartavlor* in 1706, 1750, 1752 and 1757 while those in the south-east, in Stora Skedvi, Hedemora, and Husby, acquired theirs in 1835, 1878 and 1882.²³

By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, altarpieces were a defining feature of Dalarna's Lutheran church interiors. If compared to the free church sanctuary paintings, there seem to be many similar elements. The altar paintings at Bjursås (1646) and Gustafs (1803), for example, exhibit a central figurative image and have the in-built or gilded framing which also characterises many sanctuary paintings. The reredos in Kristine Church in Falun (1669) could be interpreted as a model for the layered wooden construction installed in the SMF church in Borlänge in 1909 (Figure 2). Indeed, the fact that so many SMF interiors have a sanctuary painting may be because of this group's origins within the Swedish Lutheran church. As Göran Lindahl notes in his study of Swedish church architecture, the SMF as a denomination had in principle no objections towards visual decoration and by the 1920s had "started to closely follow artistic developments within the Lutheran church".²⁴

Swedish discussions of free church style often take this imitation of Lutheran artistic practices for granted and suggest that the real decorative distinction between the two groups is merely one of quality and taste. As Lindahl's account implies, Swedish free churches lacked the money and talent to be able to produce the excellent paintings and top-quality craftsmanship that the Lutheran churches could command. In a mocking, yet affectionate, comparison of a fictional Methodist chapel with its Lutheran counterpart across the square, the Swedish writer Martin Koch notes that the chapel was "naturally much smaller" and had not had the same "good advice" about its construction and decoration, but to its advantage was built of stone, had "something that resembled a tower" and had an altar painting that was "almost like a real work of art". It was, in fact, "almost like a real church".²⁵ Koch's account not only reveals the assumption that the free churches were poorer copies of a Lutheran original. It also inadvertently

23 Hakon Ahlberg, *Dalarnas kyrkor i ord och bild*, Falun 1996.

24 Göran Lindahl, *Högkyrkligt, lågkyrkligt, frikyrkligt i svensk arkitektur 1800–1950*, Malung 1955, 140–147. All translations mine.

25 Martin Koch, *Fromma människor*, Stockholm 1941, 193–194.

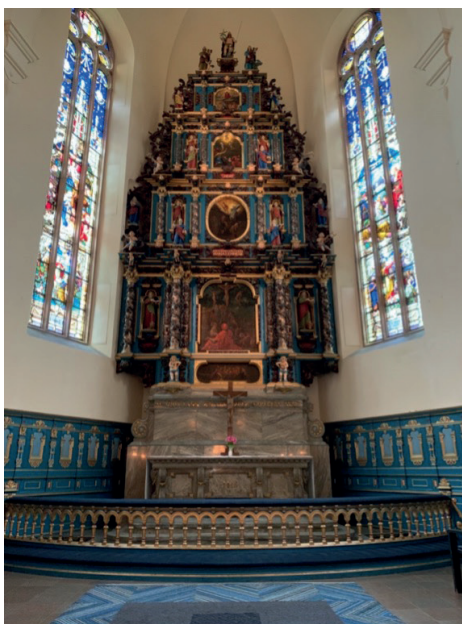


Figure 2. Retable by Ewert Friis (1669), Kristine Church, Falun, 2022. Cf. the sanctuary decoration of Borlänge SMF chapel, Borlänge, 1909. Photo: author, 2022; 1859–1905 *Stora Tuna Missionsförenings 50-års-Jubileum. Minnesskrift*, Borlänge, 1909.

shows that it was not just the SMF who imitated Lutheran decorative practices. Swedish Baptists and Methodists were just as likely to display sanctuary paintings, despite their roots in English Protestantism.²⁶

Koch's impression of the free churches as "not quite" Lutheran is not entirely unfair. The majority of sanctuary paintings, certainly in Dalarna, were simply copies of mass-produced religious images made popular through the growing market in Europe for religious books and magazines.²⁷ Gustave Doré's bible illustrations, which were published in Sweden from the 1870s, proved hugely popular as sanctuary painting subjects, particularly his depiction of Jesus' anguished prayer in Gethsemane "The agony in the garden" (Sw. *Inte min vilja utan din*). Other paintings that proved popular subjects were Heinrich Hofmann's "Christ in Gethsemane" (Sw. *Jesus ber i Getsemane*, 1890) and various interpretations of the "good shepherd" (Sw. *Den gode herden*), such as William Holman Hunt's "The Light of the World" (1854). This fashion for romantic and emotional portrayals of Jesus can be traced to the Danish artist Bertel Thorvaldsen. His 1833 sculpture of Christ in white marble for the Vor Frue Kirke in Copenhagen became an instant success and was extensively reproduced in both print and plaster forms across countless numbers of Lutheran and free church interiors. In Sweden, Thorvaldsen's "Kristus" inspired a short-lived revival in *altartavlor*, notably in the work by the Danish artist Carl Bloch.²⁸ His "Christus Consolator", an altar painting in two versions produced for the Swedish Lutheran church in 1875 and 1884, portrays in bright colours Jesus with arms outstretched comforting the poor and the sick and the sick (Figure 1.1). Bloch's paintings also became very famous and were widely reproduced across Scandinavia and in Lutheran American contexts.

These images were all highly popular as subjects for Dalarna's sanctuary paintings. For example, the SMF churches in Sågmyra, Vika and Gärdsjö each displayed a "Christus Consolator" while Hofmann's "Gethsemane" could be seen in Bälinge, Mattsknuds, Lindans and Djurås. Many chapels displayed a Thorvaldsen: as a framed print, embedded into a pulpit surround or standing on the "little table". While it can be argued that such copying reflects the limited artistic aspirations, funds, and reach of small free church congregations, this practice can also be seen as a rejection of the content of Lutheran altar paintings and a searching instead for a new figurative symbolism that would represent evangelical ideals. It was not until later

26 Göran Alm, *Enkel med värdig: Metodistisk kyrkoarkitektur i Sverige 1869–1910*, Stockholm 1974; Perols Greta Aglert, *Rättviksfolk i rörelse: Om baptisamen i Rättvik 1870–1981*, Uppsala 1985.

27 Hedvig Brander Jonsson, *Bild och fromhetsliv i 1800-talets Sverige*, Uppsala 1994.

28 Bonnier & Sjöström, 208–209.

in the twentieth century that the free churches began to display more “original” sanctuary paintings. This suggests that as congregations expanded their definition of “appropriate” art so also did artists feel freer to draw on their own ideas when fulfilling their commissions, a trend that was noticeable in the Swedish Lutheran church at the same time.²⁹

Dalarna’s sanctuary paintings, however, should be attributed to more than just copying Lutheran altar paintings and magazine illustrations. Free church congregations were also able to draw on a longer tradition of church painting and, in particular, strong local folk art traditions. For example, the “lime” paintings (Sw. *kalkmålningar*) which covered the ceiling vaults and walls of many Swedish medieval churches were widely known.³⁰ Although whitewashed in the 1700s when they were considered to be extremely old-fashioned, in the early twentieth century many *kalkmålningar* were being restored, like the ones at Vika Church outside Falun. In the eighteenth century covering entire church interiors with biblical scenes and folk motifs was a popular practice in certain regions. Although Dalarna lacks the spectacular examples of this practice to be seen in south-west Sweden,³¹ in the 1680s and again in the 1740s–60s the church galleries at Leksand, Mora, Orsa and Rättvik were painted with scenes from the Old and New Testaments by local painters.³² Such practices provide a context in which free church decoration could be rooted.

The gallery paintings in the churches around Lake Siljan point to the coming popularity of *dalmåleri*, a particular form of domestic interior and furniture painting that became especially popular in Dalarna in the years after 1750. Travelling farmer-painters decorated the walls and furniture of “best” rooms and wedding cottages across the county with biblical scenes and religious texts that drew heavily on the imagery from illustrated bibles and the faith-based world in which much local custom and practice was embedded.³³ It seems not too much of a stretch to see the influence of this popular folk style on Dalarna’s chapel interiors, particularly in the work of Kers Lars Larsson (1867–1945), Dalarna’s most creative free church painter. Born into a family of *dalmålare* from Leksand, Larsson trained as an inte-

29 Anna Thorell Stårsta, “Den moderna kyrkokonsten: en undersökning om konstnärlig frihet nu och då”, unpublished C-uppsats, Uppsala University, 2013.

30 Bengt G. Söderberg, *Svenska kyrkomålningar från medeltiden*, Stockholm 1951.

31 Maud Färnström, *Himlens fröjd eller helvetets fasa: Perspektiv på västsvenska kyrkomålningar från 1700-talet*, Lund 2001; Daniel Carlsson, *Habo kyrka*, Habo 2017.

32 Mats Bergman, “Mora Kyrka och Oxbergs Kapell”, in Tapp John-Erik Pettersson (ed.), *Mora: ur Mora, Sollerö, Venjans och Våmbus socknars historia*, 1, Mora 1984, 439; Sune Garmo, *Nådens ordning: Hållams Nils Nilssons målningar i Rättviks kyrka*, Rättvik 2010.

33 Sebastian Selván, “Levd religion på bondens vägg: Åter till Dalmålningarna och deras förlagor”, *RIG* 2 (2020), 83–105.

rior painter (Sw. *dekorumsmålare*) in Söderhamn and worked for a time at Skansen, the open-air folk museum in Stockholm, as their resident folk painter before returning to Dalarna in the 1910s and carrying out commissions for hotel, cinema and domestic interiors.³⁴ He was prolific, painting folk-inspired interiors across central Sweden, including the free church interiors in By (Avesta), Mockfjärd, Nusenäs, Noret (Leksand), Vikarbyn, Åhl, Strängnäs and Mariehamn. Although he rarely deviated from interpretations of Doré, his decoration of the SMF church at Söderås outside Rättvik in 1904 (Figure 3) shows how the free church interior could serve as a bigger canvas for the traditional folk painter and how folk painting in return could be translated into a modern, more public aesthetic.

Free church decoration in this sense can be seen as part of a contemporary fashion for painted interiors. With the democratization of Swedish society in the early twentieth century and the rise of the labour and temperance movements, so grew the need for suitable meeting places.³⁵ The interior decoration of these new temperance halls and workers' clubs was carried out by local painting firms or individual artists. Many of these were also hired to paint chapel interiors. For example, Sven Linnborg (1857–1932), well known for his Lutheran church paintings in Jämtland, was commissioned to paint the SMF chapel interior in Rättvik in 1909. Erik Nylén (1881–1955) from Orsa was best known as a *dalmålare*, but he also decorated several Baptist interiors in the Siljan area in the 1910s. In 1917, the Methodist church in Falun hired Richard Bergman, a Stockholm-based graphic artist, to produce their sanctuary painting. The free church interiors these painters produced, therefore, reflected contemporary “folk movement” fashion: whole interior treatments, *jugend* stencilling and strong bright colours framing a room's central focus. Painted decoration was also associated with much of the socializing that took place within this folk movement. In the 1920s and 1930s it was popular to order a “backdrop” painting as a way to decorate a theatrical production, political meeting or auction. In Falun in 1933, for example, the Salvation Army held their annual winter sale. Themed as an Indian bazaar, the venue featured a large backdrop painting of the Taj Mahal commissioned from a local painter.³⁶ Dalarna's free church sanctuary paintings, therefore, can be seen as a result of distinctively Swedish decorative practices that were embedded within both church and folk traditions.

34 “Kers Lars 60 år”, *Falu Länstidning*, 17 Jan. 1927.

35 Martin Åhrén, *Modernismens mötesplatser: Arkitektur i Bergslagen*, Gävle 2012.

36 *Falu Länstidning*, 9 Mar. 1933.



Figure 3. Interior of the SMF church at Söderås, Rättvik, 2023, with figurative paintings and a whole-interior scheme executed by Kers Lars Larsson (1867-1945), Leksand, in 1909. Photo: author, 2023.

The Survival of Sanctuary Paintings

When a free church congregation decided to decorate their place of worship, this article has so far suggested that they looked to their local Lutheran church or to local folk practices as models for its appearance. But once a decorative scheme was completed and a sanctuary painting was in place, there was no guarantee that it would stay that way. Dalarna's free churches changed their interiors frequently and comprehensively and swapped out, moved or "disappeared" sanctuary paintings on a regular basis. For example, between 1863 and 2022 the SMF congregation in Djurås, outside Gagnef, renovated their interior at least four times. Founded in 1863, in 1893 they tore down their first *missionshus* and built a new, larger chapel. Renovations in 1926 introduced a copy of Hofmann's "Christ in Gethsemane" as a sanctuary painting. In 1953, the Hofmann was replaced by a much older, original work that had always hung in the minor hall.³⁷ By the 2000s this second painting had also been replaced and the pulpit was now decorated with a modern abstract. Even in the short time between 2015 and 2022, the interior has been subject to several style adjustments.³⁸

The need to manage the physical implications of a religious interior was a responsibility which every congregation who owned a building was obliged to consider. The need to respond to physical wear and tear and the costs this involved were weighed against liturgical and theological understandings of a building's purpose and its use. Congregational attitudes towards this responsibility determined the actions they took towards their interior, and by extension, their sanctuary paintings. These can be grouped according to one of three different change narratives: action must be taken to preserve a physical legacy; a place of worship should be comfortable and appealing; and, if a congregation was to fulfil its evangelical mission, its physical space ought to be modern and "relevant".

Historical accounts of Dalarna's free churches, if nothing else, point to the constant attention that a building required. Although an important source of congregational pride, agreeing on chapel repairs was not always easy. Because the Baptist congregation in Rättvik could not decide if they should invest in repairs or not, one of their members, Karin Sköld, is said to have burst out at a meeting in 1949 that "our fathers built this chapel trusting in God's help. In the same way, and with the same faith, we also ought

³⁷ *Falu Länsstidning*, 18 Apr. 1954.

³⁸ "De startar nytt kulturhus i Djurås", *Dala-Demokraten*, 30 May 2015, <https://www.dalademokraten.se/2015-05-30/de-startar-nytt-kulturhus-i-djuras>; "Sofia har blivit blombonde i Djurås by", *Dalabygden*, 9 Aug. 2022, <https://dalabygden.se/2022/08/09/sofia-har-blivit-blombonde-i-djuras-by/>, both accessed 2023-01-18.

to care for and maintain our chapel”.³⁹ Likewise, members of the SMF congregation in Folkärna in 1928 argued that long-overdue repairs to their chapel were essential “to maintain the inheritance we, a younger generation, have received from our fathers”.⁴⁰ After a significant decline in numbers that required a merger with a neighbouring chapel in the early 2000s, the Baptists in Falun were deeply reluctant to part with their sanctuary painting, a depiction of Doré’s “Agony” which they had owned since the 1930s. The painting, which some now found old fashioned and felt should be placed in a museum, was for them a “precious heritage” which they were honour bound to keep.⁴¹ Sanctuary paintings survive, therefore, because they became material representations of an almost sacred trust.

Congregations also justified change by appealing to a narrative of comfort and beauty. Many of Dalarna’s earliest chapels were small, one room constructions which had only the most basic of amenities. Although the result of considerable sacrifice at the time, congregational accounts often adopt a discourse of dissatisfaction when justifying the improvements, renovations, sale or demolition of their physical spaces: the space is too small, the location unsuitable, the necessary repairs too expensive. Congregations in Dalarna, just like those in the Reformed British and American tradition,⁴² wanted worship spaces that were comfortable and attractive. Women’s groups (Sw. *Sy- och mödrarföreningar*) used the proceeds from their sales of work to not only reduce church debt but also to decorate their chapel interiors. In 1896–1897, for example, the women’s group at Salem Baptist Chapel in Falun paid for new heaters, paint and wallpaper for the minor hall and added curtains to the kitchen windows.⁴³ Such improvements always met with public approval. In a 1930 newspaper account of the renovations which had been recently carried out at the SMF chapel in By outside Avesta, the building’s new tower was described as giving it a “church-like appearance”. The newly-painted exterior in traditional Swedish red (Sw. *falun rödfärg*) made it look “warmer and worthier”. The interior, now painted in “light and attractive colours” had given the sanctuary “a worthy and dignified appearance” which was only enhanced by the “exceedingly stylish”

39 Aglert, *Rättviksfolk i rörelse: Om baptismen i Rättvik 1870–1981*.

40 *Minnesskrift Utgiven av Folkärna Missionsförsamling*, Folkärna 1932, 26.

41 Minutes, notes and a lecture relating to the sanctuary painting by David Tägtström, “Inte min vilja utan din”, deposited by Christer Arvidsson, Falun, *Dalarnas folkrörelsearkiv* (FAW/50.2006).

42 Charles Cashdollar, *A Spiritual Home: Life in British and American Reformed Congregations, 1830–1915*, University Park 2000.

43 Annual Report of the Sewing and Mother’s Society, Salem Chapel, Falun, 1896–1897, Falu baptistförsamlings kvinnoörening arkiv, *Dalarnas folkrörelsearkiv* (FAW/43.1988).

sanctuary painting by Kers Lars Larsson.⁴⁴ Sanctuary paintings, then, were part of a broader desire for more aesthetically pleasing interiors.

As groups which had emerged from the evangelical revival and which had a strong evangelistic purpose, materiality needed to be useful. For example, when the congregation in Djurås decided to build a new chapel in 1893:

...[i]t is said that a couple of young girls in the congregation said to Jakobs Olof Ersson, "If we don't get a new mission hall we'll go join the Baptists! They have a new and modern chapel". But when Ersson was still reluctant to build Färj Per Ersson said to him, "C'mon, no one wants to have a dirty floor under their feet." And so they built a new chapel.⁴⁵

This subtle reference to inter-denominational competition points to the wider role of evangelistic outreach, particularly among the young, as the spiritual imperative which drove many free church congregations to "revitalize" their interiors. At the turn of the twentieth century, sanctuary paintings were part of what many free church congregations expected from a space dedicated to conversion and outreach. Kers Lars Larsson's paintings in Söderås, for example, were instigated in part by the desire to provide suitable accommodation for the large number of young people converted in a local revival in 1902.⁴⁶ In 1977 the Lillmo congregation in Malung decided to demolish their existing chapel and replace it with a modern building in fashionable white lime brick and a set of large glass entrance doors. According to the congregational leadership, it was a case of "New church – new life! The new chapel is one way we aspire to function in a new time".⁴⁷ The new building – deliberately designed to be more welcoming, accommodate the disabled, and host community activities – did not include the old sanctuary painting, even though it had been painted by a well-known local artist. As a local newspaper grumbled at the time, "the old altar painting might be put to some use eventually but this seems hardly likely".⁴⁸ What the journalist recognised was that unless prominent visual materiality had something to contribute to a congregation's vision and purpose, it held little value, and thus could be easily replaced.

44 *Falu Länsstidning*, 5 Nov. 1930.

45 *Ett Herrens Verk. Ett Sekel av Djurås Missionsförsamlings Verksamhet 1860–1960*, Djurås 1960, 20.

46 *Minnesskrift Utgiven av Ev. Luth. Missionsföreningen i Söderås till dess 50-årsjubileum*, Söderås 1928, 18–19.

47 *Falu-Kuriren*, 15 Mar. 1978.

48 *Nya Wermlands-tidningen*, 16 Mar. 1978.

Conclusion

Sometime in the late 1990s Lillmo chapel installed a new sanctuary painting. It was a tall, thin, frameless rectangle depicting a cross in a brightly-coloured paint-splash pattern. It is not clear why the congregation decided to return to a visual decoration of their pulpit space. Maybe the 1970s white brickwork needed a bit of colour. Maybe the congregation wanted to confirm their contemporary relevance by the addition of some “modern” art. Regardless, this action suggests that the sanctuary painting continues to be a meaningful if ambiguous decorative motif within Dalarna’s contemporary chapel culture. According to Michael Thompson, objects can have a “transient” existence. Over time they can lose their value until they become “rubbish”. They can also, through changing social contexts, acquire value and become “durable”.⁴⁹ This may be a helpful way to think about sanctuary paintings. As fashions within the free churches changed and the evangelical mission was reformulated for a new generation, paintings lost their value and became “rubbish” to be discarded. Some sanctuary paintings, however, became attached to the more durable values of congregational memory and respect for the past. They have not become sacred objects but many are now a precious heritage. Sanctuary paintings – increasingly only visible in archival photographs or in a steadily declining number of functioning free churches – are a distinctly Swedish religious practice that has the potential to serve as a model for how evangelicalism, surely the least visual branch of the Protestant church, can embrace the figurative image in its religious interiors. ▲

49 Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, London 2017 [1979], 4.

SUMMARY

Nearly 25 years after their founding, in 1903 the Swedish nonconformist congregation in Söderås, a small village outside the town of Rättvik in Dalarna, decided to extend and decorate their wood-framed church. While the builders worked on enlarging the sanctuary, a local painter Kers Lars Larsson was commissioned to decorate the interior. By the time the work was finished, Larsson had covered the walls and ceiling of the entire church with patterned detailing, Christian symbolism and, most spectacularly, a series of brightly-coloured tableaux taken from the life of Christ. While the Söderås interior is now a protected national heritage, many other so-called “free” churches, products of the evangelical revival which had spread across Sweden in the 1850s, also decorated their interiors in this way, not always so elaborately, but always with a colourful figurative painting which was affixed to the wall behind the pulpit. Little scholarly attention, however, has been paid to the Swedish free church interior and in particular to the presence and meaning of this widespread practice of interior painting. This article argues that these images are part of process of revitalization, that they emerge during a moment of “crisis” the turning point when a congregation decides to build something new or to renovate and redecorate the old, to renew their existing cultural system.