

# Shadow Paintings: A Neglected Type of Wall Painting

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*Abstract* The article presents the results of a pilot study focusing on what are called *shadow paintings* in Norwegian church interiors from the 17th and 18th centuries. Among the many Baroque illusionistic wall paintings in churches, painted shadows are probably the least known and considered. Shadow paintings are grey or black paintings that surround church furnishings, such as altarpieces, epitaphs and sculptures, as well as pulpits and stalls. They create an illusion of light by “casting” a shadow behind an object, thus enlarging and accentuating the object. Most of the original shadow paintings were overpainted or removed during the 19th century, but in the 20th century many were rediscovered and successively revealed. Remnants of shadow paintings are found in several northern European countries. In Norway, nineteen visible shadow paintings have been preserved, offering an understanding of how these wall paintings were formed, executed and popularized. Aside from their decorative character, painted shadows can supply greater knowledge about the church furnishings. But above all, shadow paintings are relics of an age when light – both natural and spiritual – created a more dramatic expression within churches.

*Keywords* Shadow paintings, murals, wall paintings, Renaissance art, Baroque art, altarpieces, epitaphs, church furnishing, church interior

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Fig. 1. Ringsaker Church in Hedmark. Shadow painting surrounding an epitaph from 1632.  
Photo Susanne Kaun, NIKU.

## *Introduction*

In the Baroque period, various *trompe l'oeil* effects were employed to achieve an integration of real and fictive space and light. The effect of light, and the sun as the source of universal illumination, was the

subject of innumerable works, in paintings as well as in architectural decoration.<sup>1</sup> One aspect of this Baroque illusionism is represented by painted shadows, here referred to as *shadow paintings*.<sup>2</sup>

Shadow paintings were popular types of church decoration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and are monochrome grey or black paintings surrounding church furnishings — such as altarpieces, epitaphs, sculptures, pulpits and stalls — meant to create the illusion of a shadow thrown by the object (fig. 1). Most of the original shadow paintings have since been overpainted or removed and are seldom mentioned in studies. Even if the extant painted shadows are scarce and often fragmented, there are still sufficient examples preserved to provide an understanding of how these decorations were formed, executed and popularized.

This article aims to raise awareness of this often-neglected type of wall painting in church interiors. Why did they appear in the churches? And how true are they to the shape and character of the objects they reflect? Using Norwegian case studies, we intend to approach the shadow paintings from an interdisciplinary angle, by defining the kind of décor type they represent.

### Research history

Little research has been done on the subject of shadow paintings, and there is no overview of the existing material. In the few cases where shadow paintings are noted, it is in connection with church-interior registrations and restoration reports.<sup>3</sup> In books describing church interiors, e.g. booklets and jubilee publications, shadow paintings are often omitted.<sup>4</sup>

In Norway, shadow paintings were first mentioned in 1940, by Domenico Erd-

mann, in his book *Norsk dekorativ maling fra reformasjonen til romantikken* (Norwegian decorative painting from the Reformation to Romanticism). There, he described “Slagskyggemaling” (shadow painting) as a distinctly Renaissance motif that first appeared in Norway in the 1620s and became common throughout the country in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> He referred to six churches with uncovered shadow paintings.<sup>6</sup> Since Erdmann, no scholars have studied shadow paintings.

In Denmark and Sweden, only one survey of post-Reformation wall paintings treats shadow paintings as a type of wall painting.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise, as in Norway, they are only briefly mentioned in connection with other decorative murals and paintings, if at all.<sup>8</sup> One reason for this could be that there are few preserved examples, or that they have not interested art historians to the same degree as more decorative “artful” elements, such as figures, architectural ornaments and foliage.

### Prevalence

Shadow paintings are not exclusively a Scandinavian phenomenon: they are found in several countries in northern Europe, including England, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Lithuania.<sup>9</sup> Thus far, no examples have been found in southern Europe.

In Denmark, shadow paintings have often been either removed, as part of restoration work to uncover medieval wall paintings or whitewashed after having

Table 1. Shadow paintings in Norway

Church	County	Church type	Inventory with shadow painting	Inventory's dating (and dates of changes)	Possible dating of shadow painting
Aure Church	Møre og Romsdal	Wooden church (rebuilt 1924)	Altarpiece (in situ)	18th century, second half	Repainted 20th century, probably based on a former shadow painting
Bønsnes Church	Buskerud	Medieval stone church	Altarpiece (lost)	Unknown	Before 1700
Bønsnes Church	Buskerud	Medieval stone church	Altarpiece (unknown)	Altarpiece in situ 1700	Unknown
Dale Church	Sogn og Fjordane	Medieval stone church	Epitaph (moved)	1630 (1650s?)	1650s?
Dale Church	Sogn og Fjordane	Medieval stone church	Altarpiece (lost)	Between 1560s-1708	Between 1560s-1708
Dale Church	Sogn og Fjordane	Medieval stone church	Stall (in situ)	1699	1699
Enebakk Church	Akershus	Medieval stone church	Altarpiece (unknown)	Altarpiece in situ 1608 (1667, 1713, 1760)	1667/1713/1760?
Halsa Church	Møre og Romsdal	Wooden church (1734)	Altarpiece (in situ)	1725	1725
Heddal Stave Church	Telemark	Medieval stave church	Altarpiece (in situ)	1667	1667?
Hobøl Church	Østfold	Medieval stone church	Altarpiece (today in the nave)	1761	1761
Hof Church	Vestfold	Medieval stone church	Altarpiece (in situ)	1637 (1763)	1763?
Kaupang Stave Church	Sogn og Fjordane	Medieval stave church	Epitaph (in situ)	17th century	17th century
Ringsaker Church	Hedmark	Medieval stone church	Epitaph (in situ)	1632	1632?
Røldal Stave Church	Hordaland	Medieval stave church	Altarpiece (in situ)	1627	1627?
Skjeberg Church	Østfold	Medieval stone church	Altarpiece (in situ)	1760	Black traces (1760?) New shadow 20th century
Slidredomen	Oppland	Medieval stone church	Altarpiece (in situ)	1797	Black traces (1797?) New "shadow" 1923?
St. Mary's Church (Mariakirken), Bergen	Hordaland	Medieval stone church	Sculptures (in situ)	1634	1634
Svarstad Church	Vestfold	Wooden church (1657)	Altarpiece (in situ)	1664	Unknown
Vøy Church	Møre og Romsdal	Medieval stone church	Epitaph (in situ)	1618-1623	1623

The table lists visible remains of shadow paintings in Norwegian churches. Overpainted and lost shadow paintings as well as shadow paintings belonging to 20th-century furnishings are not included.

been discovered.<sup>10</sup> This may be the case in Sweden as well.<sup>11</sup> In Norway, however, the situation is different. Owing to the relatively small number of preserved wall paintings in general, there has been an effort to conserve as many traces of murals as possible, including a significant number of shadow paintings. Post-Reformation wall decorations in Norway have neither been removed in deference to medieval wall paintings to the extent that this has occurred in Sweden and Denmark.<sup>12</sup>

In Norway, there are nineteen visible shadow paintings in a total of sixteen stone and wooden churches (see Table 1).

In addition, several other churches have had shadow paintings that were later overpainted.<sup>13</sup> Most of these preserved shadow paintings encompass altarpieces and epitaphs; in only one church does the shadow painting accompany a stall, and in another church, a group of sculptures.<sup>14</sup> Dale Church in Luster, Sogn og Fjordane county, is the only church with several shadow paintings connected to different objects.

### Preservation condition

The extant shadow paintings have been subjected to varying preservation conditions and different restoration methods,



Fig. 2. Shadow painting in Ringsaker Church during uncovering in 1959. Photo Ola Seter, 1959, Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Riksantikvaren) Archive, Norway.

and as a result it was crucial for this study to identify original and secondary paint.<sup>15</sup> During the nineteenth century, nearly all of the Norwegian wall paintings, including shadow paintings, were whitewashed or painted over with white paint. It was not until the early twentieth century that older wall paintings were rediscovered and successively uncovered. Often, only fragments of shadow paintings were preserved, and in some cases, new shadows were creatively painted based on traces of black paint found on the wall.<sup>16</sup> In other cases, enough original paint was found to

restore the original form, as in Ringsaker Church, Hedmark (fig. 2).

#### *Wall paintings connected to church furnishings*

Other types of Baroque illusionistic paintings around church furnishings include painted drapery and painted grisaille framings. All of these illusionistic wall paintings are figuratively closely connected to the object they surround.

Framings in grisaille are, like shadow paintings, painted around an object and have often been misinterpreted as shad-



Fig. 3. Efteløt Church in Buskerud. Grisaille framing from the 17th century surrounding an altarpiece (1787) from Komnes church. The original altarpiece once belonging to the grisailles in Efteløt are today lost. Photo Susanne Kaun, NIKU.

ow paintings. As an example, art historians and conservators have often wrongly referred to the grisaille frame in Efteløt Church, Buskerud (fig. 3), as a shadow painting.<sup>17</sup> Grisaille frames are executed in different shades of grey or greyish colours, or, as in Efteløt Church, grey with black contours and gradations of grey colour, giv-

ing an illusion of sculptures and ornaments. A shadow painting, on the other hand, consists of monochrome paint, not painted as a frame, but meant to give an illusion of a shadow thrown by the object. This differentiation is important to remember when examining shadow paintings.



Fig. 4. Dale Church in Luster, Sogn og Fjordane. The abandoned shadow painting on the north wall (left in the photo) belongs to the epitaph from 1630, hanging on the north side of the chancel-screen (top right on the photo). Photo Susanne Kaun, NIKU.

### *The form and effect of shadow paintings*

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Norwegian churches added and enlarged windows to bring more natural light into the church spaces. Light and its effects, particularly the realistic handling of them, was a significant means of expression in Baroque art.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the admittance of natural light through windows served practical purposes too: the congregation and clergy could read and see better. But in church art, natural light was frequently introduced to express divine intervention, and this included the illusion of natural illumination, made through the contrast between light and dark.<sup>19</sup> This effect could be manifested by painting an illusion of a shadow behind an object.

Shadows were usually painted in black or grey without any gradations of colour. During the first half of the seventeenth century, grey was preferred; for the latter half the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth, dark grey or black was favoured. In Bønsnes Church and Dale Church, there are two generations of shadow paintings preserved on top of each other, with, in both cases, the younger shadows painted noticeably darker than the older. This change from lighter to darker shadows follows stylistic shifts from the Renaissance to the Baroque period, where more dramatic and theatrical elements appeared in Norwegian churches.

The painted shadows generally conform to the outline of the object, with a width

of c. 15–20 cm, and were applied after the object was mounted, which, of course, was easier than constructing a shadow without the object. Paint was applied behind the object only as far as the brush could reach, and thus the wall area directly behind the object was left bare. Evidence of this practice is found in Dale Church, where an abandoned shadow painting has been preserved (fig 4). It is interesting to notice that shadow paintings do not fill the wall surface behind altarpieces either, even though these objects usually stand a metre from the chancel wall.

Although shadow paintings repeat the shapes of the objects they complement, as real shadows would do, they are not painted to faithfully imitate real shadows. In natural light, a shadow would normally be cast only to one side of the object. A painted shadow, however, runs around the entire object, creating an illusion of light coming from an undefined source. When a shadow is cast as the result of natural light, decorative elements such as urns or spheres, placed on the edges of altarpieces or epitaphs, are stretched to the sides. This effect also occurs in the painted shadows, which accentuate these decorative elements. The entire form is repeated behind the object, although often slightly distorted in terms of its proportions.

Most of the preserved shadow paintings in Norway were painted on whitewashed walls. However, there are also examples of shadow paintings that were painted on top of existing wall paintings. In Dale Church, for instance, a shadow painting



Fig. 5. Veøy Church in Møre og Romsdal. The shadow decor surrounding an epitaph from 1623. Photo Susanne Kaun, NIKU.

is preserved on the wall behind the altarpiece together with comprehensive figurative murals from the 1560s. The shadow was painted some decades after the murals were finished, and was visible together with the wall paintings, as it lies directly on parts of the figurative motives.<sup>20</sup> It can be concluded that the painted shadow belonged to an earlier and now lost altarpiece, as the outline of the shadow is smaller and has a different silhouette than that of the current altarpiece (fig. 6 a–b).

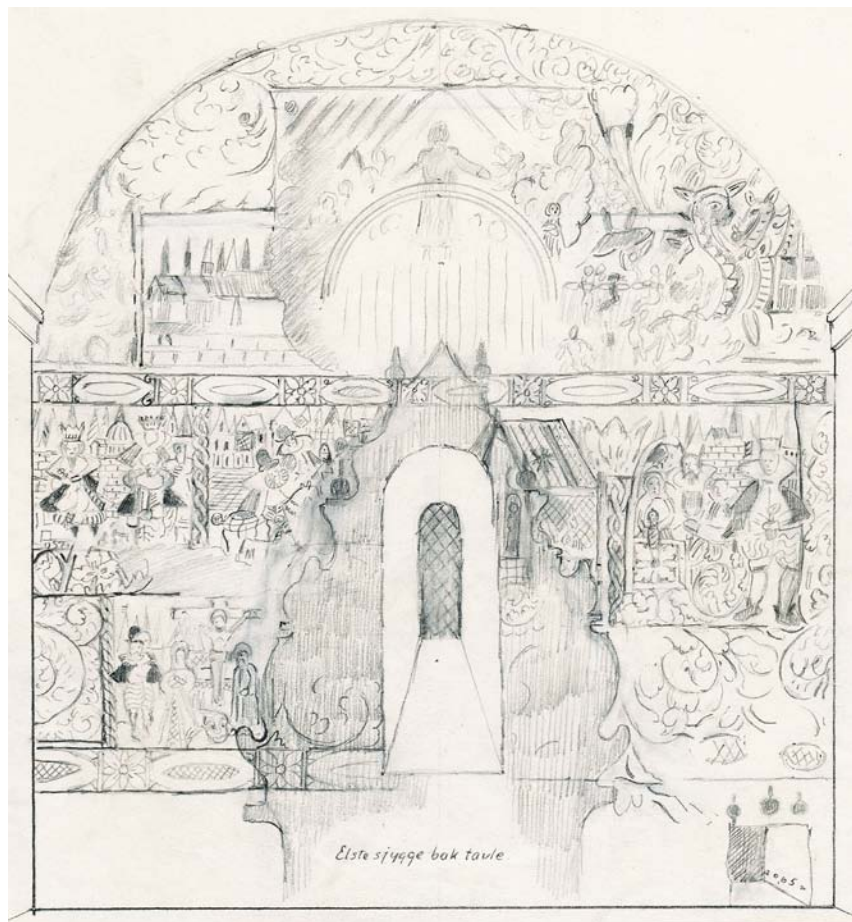
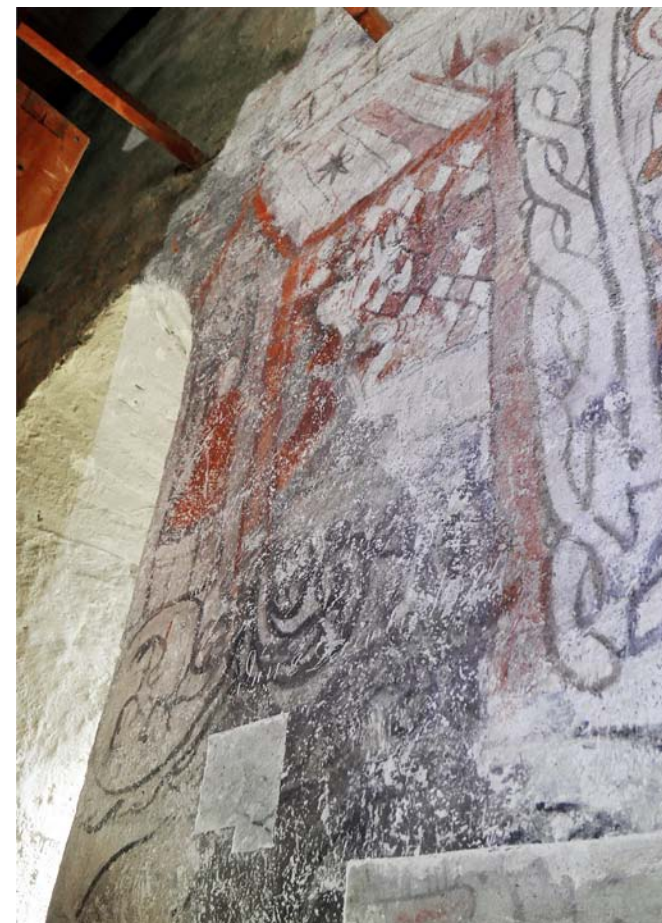


Fig. 6 a–b. Dale Church. To the left (p. 48): A drawing of the murals from the 16th century with the later shadow painting belonging to an unknown altarpiece. Drawing: Seter, 1950, Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Riksantikvaren) Archive, Norway. To the right: The shadow painting behind the altarpiece. Photo Susanne Kaun, NIKU.



### *When did shadow paintings appear in Norwegian churches?*

The earliest object in Norway with a preserved shadow painting is an epitaph from 1623 in Veøy Church (fig. 5); and the last known shadow painting in Norway surrounds an altarpiece in Hof Church, from the mid-eighteenth century. But did an item acquire its shadow when it was new, or could it in some cases be a later supple-

ment? Obviously, a shadow painting could hardly be older than the object it is connected to. However, there are objects where the accompanying painted shadow was created in connection with a remodelling.

In Dale Church, three painted shadows have been preserved; they were paired with an earlier altarpiece (as noted above), a stall and an epitaph since moved. The epitaph is from c. 1630, but the wings were

probably mounted later, around 1650.<sup>21</sup> Given that the shadow follows the shape of the epitaph's wings, the shadow must have been painted in connection with this remodeling.

In 1699, to make room for a stall, the epitaph was moved from its original place, on the north wall of the nave, to the north side of the chancel-screen, where no new shadow was painted (fig 4). However, a shadow

painting was added around the new stall. One possible explanation for these choices is that shadow paintings were commissioned and paid for by the same person who acquired the object. It is interesting to note that the new shadow for the stall was painted directly over portions of the abandoned epitaph shadow, suggesting that the family that purchased the stall and its shadow did not request that origi-

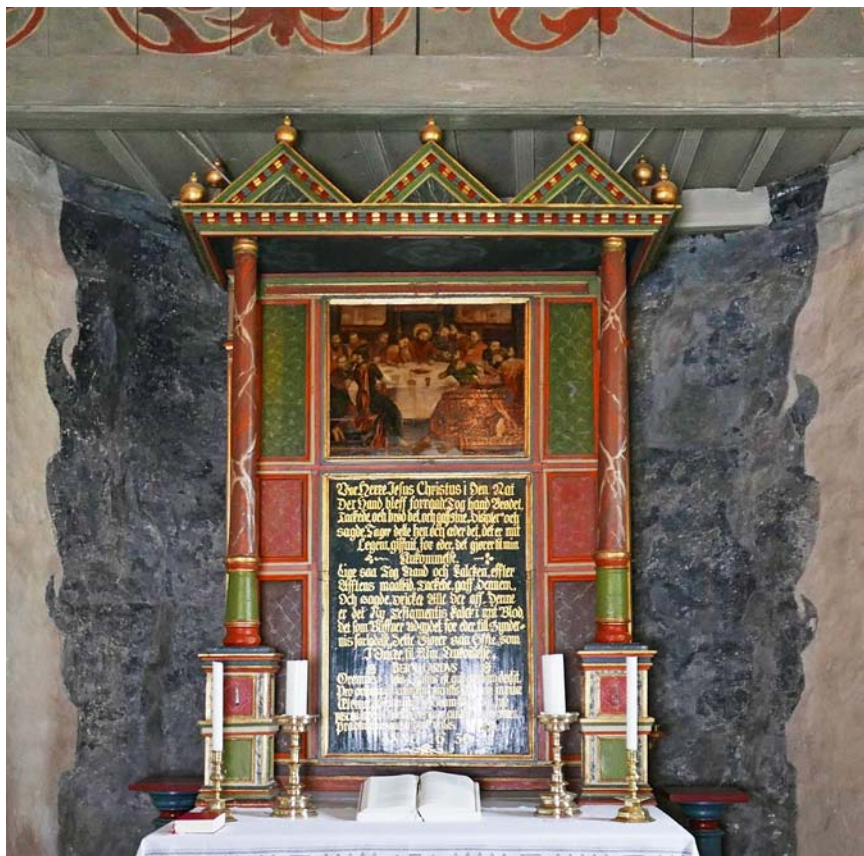


Fig. 7 a–b. Hobøl Church in Østfold. To the left (p. 50): the shadow painting behind today's altarpiece. To the right: the altarpiece from 1761 with rococo wings mounted upside down. Photos Susanne Kaun, NIKU.



inal shadow be covered, but to have both shadows visible.

It seems reasonable to conclude that shadow paintings were directly connected to the objects and were painted when the objects were new or renovated (e.g. the addition of new wings or new polychrome). Shadow paintings were thus not part of an interior wall-painting programme, as were, for example, ornaments. This could explain why not all epitaphs in a church are surrounded by shadow paintings, as in

Dale Church, where only one of three epitaphs has a shadow painting.

#### *Shadow paintings as a source of knowledge*

In Ringsaker Church, Hedmark, a shadow painting was discovered and revealed in 1959. Upon close examination, one can see that the shapes of the shadow and the epitaph, from 1632, do not correspond exactly to one another: the shadow has spheres not present on the epitaph today, and the

two evangelist figures at the top of the object are not seen in the shadow painting (fig. 1).

If a shadow reflects the outline of the object, the epitaph in Ringsaker Church must have undergone several changes, and, indeed, a photo of the epitaph taken before 1955 reveals no evangelists.<sup>22</sup> One theory is that the evangelists were originally part of the old pulpit that was replaced by a new one in 1704, and that the evangelists were mounted on the epitaph lat-

er.<sup>23</sup> The epitaph has also been dismantled and stored at some point, so perhaps the spherical decorations were broken off or removed during storage. Remnants of what appear to be wooden plugs may indicate the earlier presence of spherical decorations as shown in the shadow.

In Hobøl Church the shadow painting covers nearly the entire apse in the chancel (fig. 7 a–b). Even though it has been restored with a “generous hand”, there are still sufficient original details to support a



Fig. 8 a–b. Hof Church in Vestfold. The altarpiece before the restoration in the 1940s (to the left) and the altarpiece in 2018 (to the right, p. 53). The shadow painting nearly disappears behind the altarpiece. Photo to the left by unknown photographer, unknown date, Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Riksantikvaren) Archive, Norway. Photo to the right Susanne Kaun, NIKU.



conclusion that the shadow does not belong to the existing altarpiece, but most likely was painted together with another altarpiece dating from 1761, which today is mounted in the nave. Comparing the shadow with the altarpiece from 1761, one can see that the carved rococo wings have been changed at some point. An archival photo

from before its removal, in 1938, confirms that the altarpiece's wings once had been placed the other way around (that is, today they are "upside down"), correlating with the outline of the shadow.

When standing in front of the altarpiece in Hof Church, Vestfold, the shadow painting appears too small for the altar-

piece, thus indicating that the altarpiece has undergone several changes and that its original form must have been narrower.<sup>24</sup> (fig. 8 a–b). When the painted shadow was found and uncovered in 1941–1942, it revealed the original shape of the lost lower wings.<sup>25</sup> In 1959, the lower wings were reconstructed using the shadow painting

as a model, albeit in a simpler form, without the bird claws and feathers. This restoration did not, however, take into consideration that the altarpiece must have been narrower when the shadow was painted. Careful inspection of the altarpiece indicates that the wings have later been widened with rose-painted panels.<sup>26</sup>

The shadow painting in Hof Church is of high quality and appears to have been more elaborately executed compared with other shadow paintings. The shadow was painted when the altarpiece received its wings, perhaps in the middle of the eighteenth century, at the same time new paintings were mounted.<sup>27</sup> This makes the Hof shadow one of the youngest shadows preserved in Norway. But when compared with the shadow painting in Veøy Church (fig. 6), the one in Hof is less faithful to the shape of the wings, but only in its detailing.

Based on the Norwegian examples explored in this study we can conclude that the shape of a painted shadow essentially followed the contours of the original object. In the cases where the shadow and the object do not correspond to each other, it is a result of the objects having undergone later changes. A shadow painting can thus be a source to detect eventual changes made to an object.

### Conclusions

Shadow paintings appeared in churches in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in northern Europe. Among the many *trompe l'oeil* effects from the Baroque period, shadow paintings are probably the least-known and studied wall paintings. A shadow painting is a monochrome grey or black painting that surrounds a church furnishing to create the illusion of light casting a shadow behind an object. The shadows went from being painted with grey or a more translucent black colour during the

Renaissance to darker grey or black in the Baroque period, lending them a more dramatic appearance. Where natural light often throws a shadow to one side of an object, the painted shadow runs around the entire object – reflecting its outline.

Shadow paintings were not part of a decorative interior program but were probably commissioned by the same persons who paid for the object they accompanied or the renovations of the object.

Aside from their decorative value, the painted shadows can be a source of greater knowledge about church interiors and furnishings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They provide information about an object's original appearance, eventual history of changes and original location. But above all, shadow paintings are remnants from a time when the ambition must have been to create a more dramatic expression in the churches. A painted shadow creates an effect of an undefined source of illumination — or divine light. A shadow thrown by divine light accentuates the object it reflects, both visually and spiritually.

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### Notes

- 1 Martin 1977, 12–17.
- 2 The terminology “shadow painting” is translated from the Norwegian “Skyggemaleri”. In the absence of an established English terminology for this phenomena, in this article we are using “shadow painting” when describing painted black shadows behind church furnishings.
- 3 In England these decorations are sometimes mentioned in conservation reports as “black painted frames”, owing to the lack of an English term for or lack of knowledge about the phenomenon (Skillington workshop limited 2014).
- 4 For example: Erdmann 1938; Hoff 2000, 48–63.
- 5 Erdmann 1940, 29–30.
- 6 Røldal Stave Church, St. Mary's Church in Bergen, Halså Church, Heddal Stave Church, Vestre Slidre Church and Skjeberg Church.
- 7 Lillie 1992, 50–51.
- 8 Churches in Denmark published: <http://danmarkskirker.natmus.dk/danmarks-kirker/> (accessed 15.11.2018).
- 9 Simultan Church in Bechtolsheim (Germany), St. Katharina Church in Brandenburg (Germany), Churches in Rheinsberg and Wusterhausen (Germany), St. Peter's Church, East Carlton, Northamptonshire (England), Inglesham Church (England), Geervliet Church (Netherlands), Dordrecht Church (Netherlands), Breda Church (Netherlands), St. Anne's Church, Vilnius (Lithuania), Groot Begijnhof, Beguinerkerken, Louvain/Leuven (Belgium).
- 10 Hørve Church, Karlslunde Church, Tønning Church. <http://danmarkskirker.natmus.dk/danmarks-kirker/> (accessed 15.11.2018).
- 11 An archive photo at the Regionmuseet Kristianstad, Landsantikvarien in Skåne shows a shadow painting around an epitaph in Finja Church, Lund, Sweden, that was found during the restoration in 1969. Today the shadow is overpainted.
- 12 Removing younger wall decorations to uncover older wall paintings was also practised in Norway, as in Dale (Luster), Nes (Telemark) and Sauherad Church (Telemark).
- 13 We have not reviewed all the church archives systematically, but Hedenstad Church (Buskerud) is one example.
- 14 In St. Mary's Church in Bergen there were shadows painted behind apostle figures from the seventeenth century. In Table 1, we have grouped them as one.
- 15 The originality of the preserved shadow paintings was assessed by examining the wall painting visually and with raking light, supported by old photos from the Archive of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage in Norway (Riksantikvarens arkiv).
- 16 Examples are found in Vestre Slidre Church, Oppland, and Skjeberg Church, Østfold.
- 17 Christie 1986, 411; Seter 1953, 1.
- 18 Martin 1977, 223–249.
- 19 Martin 1977, 223–249.
- 20 Seter 1953, 4.
- 21 Hoff 2000, 71.
- 22 Grieg 1955, 176.
- 23 We are grateful to Kaja Merete Hagen for the information she brought to our attention and her input regarding the epitaph.
- 24 The oldest parts of the altarpiece are from around 1600. In 1637, these parts were turned around and decorated on the back with figurative motifs and built into the Renaissance altarpiece. In 1763, two new painted panels, The Last Supper and The Resurrection, were installed over the paintings from 1637. While the Last Supper was moved in the 1960s to the nave, revealing the 1637 paintings, the Resurrection still covers the upper part of the altarpiece. Graabræk 1997, part I, 81–84; Graabræk 1997, part II, 98; Haugestad 1999, 27–31.
- 25 Tschudi Madsen et al. 1959, 4; Nilsen 1961.
- 26 Both the painted surface and the wood from the rose-painted panels differ from the rest of the altarpiece.
- 27 Graabræk 1997, 26–28.



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