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Processing the Raw:

The Negative Reception of a Late-Medieval Hell Painting in Nineteenth-Century Denmark

Introduction

There is, perhaps, no more negative a subject matter in medieval Christian art than that of hell. A place of ineluctable punishment and removal from the presence of God, where the bodies of sinners are tormented, never to be consumed, by searing fires, hell is a state where nothing good could possibly reside. The sense of urgency surrounding damnation grew during the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, a period during which, as Thomas A. Fudgé puts it, “European mentalities developed an obsession with the end of the World. The terrors of hell predominated, creating (and reflecting) considerable anxiety. Fear of the Devil and demonic entities became an increasing preoccupation” (2016, 120). The story Fudgé tells is a familiar one: with the ravages of the Black Death, frequent wars, and instability within the Church, there was, in many quarters of the medieval world, little comfort to be found in earthly life, and many torments to be feared in the next. Scenes depicting the Last Judgment, their details derived mostly from Matthew 25 and the Book of Revelations, proliferated in various media during this period throughout Europe (Davidson 2017, 1). Picturing Christ as an avenging Judge who returns to sort the blessed from the damned, the scenes would show the dead rising from their graves, either to be whisked away by angels to the heavenly kingdom or to be dragged, ridden or even wheelbarrowed by demons into a gaping mouth of hell. These scenes took on monumental dimensions in the context of church art and architecture: externally carved on the tympana above western entrances of cathedrals, or internally painted on the walls of innumerable parish churches, this imagery, paradoxically

[4] Detail of Jacob Kornerup: *Hell*, drawing of wall painting in Sædinge church, 1883 (see p. 156).

depicting a place of undepictable horrors, became a prominent element of the medieval imagination (Stead 2020).

This article examines what happens when these medieval images depicting Catholic visions of eternal iniquity get temporally transposed into a post-Enlightenment Lutheran cultural and confessional milieu, wherein their original abyssal negativity becomes impossible to countenance. The reception context at hand is nineteenth-century Denmark, and the representative case study is a late fifteenth-century wall painting depicting the Last Judgment, rediscovered under limewash in 1883 in the parish church of Sædinge on the island of Lolland. The polychromatic grotesquerie of images like the Sædinge painting erupted into whitewashed church spaces when archeological investigations uncovered them as part of a concerted attempt to reconnect the Danish nation with its cultural past, but they presented an element of that past that was difficult to integrate into contemporary devotional spaces. The strong reactions they prompted should be understood against the background of contemporary confessional debates about eschatology; a cultural reticence regarding visual depiction of iniquity; and a church aesthetics that instead prized visual art with inspirational subject matter and a general atmosphere of contemplative beauty. In this context, the objectionable nature of certain late medieval wall paintings was inextricably tied to their perceived aesthetic deficiencies, which became, in turn, their prime form of negativity.

Hell and Wall Paintings in Danish Churches: Disappearances and Reappearances

To understand what happened to the painting in Sædinge Church, a brief account of the changing status of hell and its imagery in Danish devotional history is in order. Remains of medieval Last Judgment paintings exist in approximately 130 churches in Denmark; almost half of them date to the period from 1475 to 1550 (National Museum 2006). According to Carsten Bach-Nielsen, hell imagery grew less dominant in Danish church art immediately after the Reformation, but it returned in the forms of pulpit carvings and altarpieces during the seventeenth century's period of Lutheran orthodoxy, which was marked by misfortunes that elicited a strong penitential spirit (2012, 36-41). In the eighteenth century, the influential pietistic movement was equally invested in instilling a healthy fear of hell in its adherents, evinced in bishop Erik Pontoppidan's (1698-1764) assertion, "fear of the devil...is better than no fear at all" (quoted in Lindhardt 1964, 30).¹ Rationalist Enlightenment theology, however, promoted an abstracted notion of the afterlife, referring to hell and heaven as psychological or existential states.



[1] Jacob Kornerup: *The Three Magi*, drawing of wall painting in Sædinge Church, 1883. Watercolor, graphite, and pen on paper, 381x255 mm. The National Museum of Denmark's Antiquarian-Topographical Archive, Copenhagen.

Attempting to stamp out magical beliefs, theologians did away with the use of the terms “devil” (*djævelen*) and “hell” (*helvede*) in liturgical contexts, instead calling them “the evil one” (*det onde*) and “the realm of the dead” (*dødsriget*) (Lindhardt 1964, 32; Thodberg 2000, 121).

In the nineteenth century, however, hell became newly relevant. The rise of competing Lutheran revival movements, the largest of which were the humanistic Grundtvigianism and the later, more conservative, pietistic *Indre Mission*, offered contrasting moral and eschatological visions: the former generally focused on an inclusive potential of salvation and a hopeful view of the heavenly realm; the latter painted a punitive picture of the afterlife of sinners and the unbaptized, with no possibility of conversion after death (Lindhardt 1964, 35-61). The founder



[2] Jacob Kornerup: *Christ as Judge flanked by the Virgin and John the Baptist*, drawing of wall painting in Sædinge Church, 1883. Watercolor, graphite and pen on paper, 258x387 mm. The National Museum of Denmark's Antiquarian-Topographical Archive, Copenhagen.

of Grundtvigianism, N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), aspired to make hell – especially the doctrine of Christ’s harrowing of hell – newly urgent, and advocated for the return of the term *helvede* to church services with the aim of emphasizing Christ’s infinite power in giving redemption even to the damned (Scharling 1950; Rasmussen 2014, 225-227). But as *Indre Mission* gained adherents, the tone of the public conversation around hell sharpened, and in the 1890s, missionary preachers’ threats of eternal torments for the impious drew widespread criticism for their fearmongering. As a result, *Indre Mission* lost its momentum, and gloom-and-doom sermonizing was largely rejected (Lindhardt 1955, 57).

As hell discourse abounded, there appeared to be little appetite for new visual depictions of the subject, due to factors addressed further below. But medieval wall paintings, most of them blanketed under layers of whitewash since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were being regularly uncovered in churches throughout Denmark, bringing to the fore strange hellscape. As in other European countries, the paintings’ rediscovery was part of a national-Romantic campaign of archeological investigations and restorations of medieval heritage sites. In 1855, the Danish Board for the Preservation of Antique Monuments began sending artist-restorers to churches to expose, document and restore the paintings, many of which had initially come to view accidentally (Brajer 2007;



Brajer, Schädler-Saub and Ørum 2013). The question of whether and how the revival movements impacted the reception of the wall paintings has not yet been examined in scholarly literature and can only be gestured at in this article. In the specific case of Sædinge Church's hell painting, there is no evidence that its reception was colored by revivalist rhetoric. The documented response to the painting rather fits within the attitudes of a broad cultural milieu that perceived the depiction of hell as irrelevant at best, and harmful at worst. That milieu is represented, for instance, by the journalist Erik Bøgh (1822-1899), who in his popular column "Dit og Dat" ("This and That"), opined: "the descriptive art – be it writing, preaching or painting – that, in the service of the sublime, goes to hell to seek material for its enterprise is, in our opinion, misguided" (1867, 1). The fraught question was how to handle such depictions, however misguided, that were integral to Denmark's cultural patrimony.

The Sædinge Church Wall Paintings: Investigation and Documentation

The paintings in Sædinge church came to light during the installation of new windows in the northern wall of the nave (Kornerup 1883, 1). Jacob Kornerup (1825–1913), the century's most prolific wall-painting restorer, was called to the

[3] Jacob Kornerup: *Saint Peter welcoming the blessed to the Heavenly Jerusalem*, drawing of wall painting in Sædinge Church, 1883. Watercolor, graphite and pen on paper, 258x382 mm. The National Museum of Denmark's Antiquarian-Topographical Archive, Copenhagen.

church in June of 1883 to investigate, and found a series of paintings subsequently attributed to the Brarup workshop, which was active in the Lolland-Falster area in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (Danmarks Kirker VIII, 787-88, 1250). Kornerup explains in his investigation report that he uncovered a scene representing the Three Magi in the choir [1], and then, in the western-most bay of the nave, the components of a Last Judgment scene spread over three quadrants (2). On the eastern and northern quadrants, respectively, were pictured Christ sitting in Judgment on a rainbow, his feet resting on the earthly globe, surrounded by the supplicating Virgin and John the Baptist; and the heavenly Jerusalem, with Saint Peter leading the blessed towards the gates [2], [3]. On the southern quadrant, a scene materialized depicting the condemned souls being dragged into hell by a team of demons [4]. Kornerup's account of this scene is more detailed than any of the others:

The devil, with a horn, proboscis and tail, as well as bird claws, pulls on a hefty chain that drags the damned into a hellmouth depicted as a monstrous whale-mouth with sharp teeth...in the mouth sits a fantastic figure with a proboscis, antlers and claws. It holds by the waist a figure who has the ears and paws of a cat but a human face, and who helps the devil pull on the chain [towards the open hellmouth]. On the left, a gray hairy demon has grabbed onto a weeping female sinner (1883, 2).

[4] Jacob Kornerup: *Hell*, drawing of wall painting in Sædinge church, 1883. Watercolor, graphite and pen on paper, 263x391 mm. The National Museum of Denmark's Antiquarian-Topographical Archive, Copenhagen.



Because of the paintings' "rather poor quality," Kornerup writes that he found himself "not motivated to continue his investigation," (2), and recommends that all the paintings except for the Three Magi and the Heavenly Realm be re-whitewashed. The case for sparing these from erasure is that, in its representation of period costumes is "not uninteresting" – hence it provides valuable cultural-historical information – and that the composition was aesthetically tolerable – "both naive and pleasing" (3).

When it comes to the hell scene, though, Kornerup deems the execution "raw to the highest degree," so much so that he was unable to imitate it in the documentary watercolor he made in situ to accompany his written report. In a rare commentary on his own graphic performance, he remarks, "notwithstanding all efforts, it could hardly be avoided that the drawings ended up softening this rawness somewhat." (3). This rawness was so extreme that Kornerup feared it would cast a pall on the rest of the paintings found in the church: he considers it "so barbaric and of such a wild fantasy that keeping it hardly benefits the case" (3).

Reading between the lines, the "case" Kornerup alludes to is the preservation of any of the rediscovered paintings, which depended in part on how amenable Sædinge's owner and congregation would be towards their addition to the church's decor. The restorer's concern about having to argue for the paintings' preservation was likely informed by a controversy occasioned by a hell scene uncovered a year before in Sanderum Church in Funen, described in the next section. Kornerup does not explain how the painting of Christ as Judge also complicates the "case" and therefore deserves to be whitewashed as well. A possible reason could be the depiction of the Virgin offering her breast as an intercession for humanity, which might have been seen as inappropriately sexual (Brajer and Ørum 2013, 197). The breast is depicted in Kornerup's drawing of the scene in so abstracted a form that it is easy to mistake it for an article of clothing. Whether the semiotic slipperiness of Kornerup's drawing is the result of an ocular misperception, a misunderstanding of the original iconography, or a purposeful elision of the offensive body part, is also difficult to determine. While this indeterminacy is fascinating and ripe for interpretation, for reasons of scope I have chosen to concentrate my analysis on Kornerup's approach to the hell painting, whose stylistic and spiritual negativity is expressly addressed in his text.

Since their re-whitewashing in 1883, the Last Judgment paintings in Sædinge have not been uncovered, so it is impossible to itemize all the differences between the originals and Kornerup's documentary drawings. But it is possible to deduce from the painterly execution of the still unrestored Three Magi [5] and Heavenly Realm [6] scenes how certain qualities of the original style may have



[5] The Brarup Workshop: *The Three Magi* (detail), ca. 1500-20. Sædinge Church, Lolland (western quadrant of the choir bay). CC-BY-SA, Kirsten Trampedach, The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.

been lost in Kornerup's translation, which has been characterized as pedantic (Brajer, Schädler-Saub and Ørum 2013, 140). Indeed, his graphic execution tames the idiosyncrasies occasioned by the Brarup painter's casual application of paint – as well as its dynamism. This is most visible in the restorer's overly scrupulous rendering of the black contour lines that delineate the figures in the painting, which he assigns also to decorative elements that are consistently left un-contoured by the Brarup workshop, like the stars and rosettes scattered in the background and the foliate ornament emerging from the edges of the ribs. His choice to omit from his documentation the unevenness of the painting's wall substrate, and to render its irregular architectonic boundaries in smooth lines,



[6] The Brarup Workshop: *Saint Peter welcoming the blessed to the Heavenly Jerusalem* (detail), ca. 1500-20. Sædinge Church, Lolland (northern quadrant of the nave's westernmost bay). CC-BY-SA, Kirsten Trampedach, The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.

further disciplines the image. Beyond what is depicted, the absence of the original makes room for speculation about what has, possibly, been left *undepicted*: that despite Kornerup's reputation for meticulousness, he may have omitted the painting's most offensive details from his drawing.

The Shock of Medieval Last Judgment Paintings: The Sanderum Precedent

Kornerup's claim to precise documentation is informed by his awareness that he would be one of very few people to see the paintings. Wall paintings with content considered offensive – for instance, including sexual or scatological content,



[7] Sanderum workshop: *Hell*, ca. 1520-30. Sanderum Church, Funen (southern quadrant of the nave's easternmost bay). CC-BY-SA, Kirsten Trampedach, The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.

which often appeared in or near Last Judgment scenes – were regularly covered up well into the twentieth century, with several congregations insisting that hell scenes be whitewashed (Plathe 20, 235-239; Brajer 2007, 60-62). Reticence in the face of medieval explicitness was common throughout Europe, including among scholars who wished to overlook elements of medieval art and religion perceived as obscene by the modern gaze (see, e.g., Camille 2006, Janes 2007). The dispute occasioned by Sanderum Church's hell painting is a telling precedent for Kornerup's dilemma at Sædinge, all the more so since the Sanderum painting was uncovered again in 2011, allowing for a potent comparison between the original and its nineteenth-century documentary depiction (Brajer and Thillemann 2011).

The painterly program at Sanderum [7] currently covers its two easternmost vaults and dates to ca. 1510-20. Upon its uncovering in 1882, a fierce hell scene, replete with veritable streams of excrement and boldly genitaled devils, was revealed in the nave's easternmost bay, together with an adjacent Heaven whose figures' nudity was also perceived as immodest. Over and against the recommendation of the architect in charge of the paintings' restoration, Julius

Bentley Løffler (1843-1904), the Ministry of Church and Education ruled that the two scenes be whitewashed after complaints from the priest and congregation (2011, 93). Before the whitewashing, Løffler hired a local painter named August Behrends (1829-1904) to produce a watercolor of the painting [8], which resulted in an even more precious and sanitized representation than Kornerup's depiction of the Sædinge Hell. Behrends turns the stiff, thick lines indicating hair on the heads of the damned, the eyebrow of the hellmouth and on the chests of the demons into wispy locks; adds subtle modelling where there is none; and omits the scene's most abject details – possibly whitewashed prior to his seeing the painting – like the ass of one devil defecating directly into the hellmouth, and the genitals of another trampling over a female sinner in the forefront (93).

Processing Medieval Rawness:

Kornerup's drawing as part of an art-historical tradition

In light of the events at Sanderum, Kornerup's decision to whitewash the Sædinge Hell without trying to advocate for its preservation is not surprising. What is remarkable about the Sædinge case is Kornerup's admission, in his written report, that his watercolor documentation of the painting is a failed mimetic attempt: an essential aspect that made the image intolerable is somehow absent from his drawing. The question is why, "notwithstanding all efforts" was Kornerup unable to communicate the image's "rawness" and "barbaric fantasy," and what does this inability mean?

As we have seen, it is Kornerup's precision that not only undoes the original "rawness" of the Brarup painting, but that is also, probably, not a precise rendition of the painting's original painterly *imprecision*. In its careful outlining of forms, the drawing performs a rhetorical rather than empirical precision that participates in what was a longstanding procedure in the reception and documentation of medieval art – that of its "improvement" in reproduction. Besides a possible moralizing desire to clean up a dirty image, this impulse has more subtle art-historical roots. Beginning with the discovery and documentation of the primitive Christian frescoes in the Roman catacombs, and persisting even through growing antiquarian interest in the Middle Ages in the eighteenth century, styles that did not adhere to Classical or Renaissance conventions were considered as ugly and decadent; with a few exceptions that make the rule, little attempt was made to imitate them in reproduction (Haskell 1993, 107 ff.). While interest in some medieval art, such as that of the Italian primitives, grew together with greater reproductive rigor, many still considered imitation of it ill advised. Even Jean-Baptiste Séroux d'Agincourt (1730–1814), whose monu-

mental *Histoire de l'art par les monumens, depuis sa décadence au IVe siècle jusqu'à son renouvellement au XVIe* (1810–1823) was the first work to comprehensively illustrate the development of medieval art, warns young painters to only imitate the positive examples he provides – those of sixteenth-century art – and urges patrons to avoid making commissions that would “bring back the barbarity whose frightful spectacle” his book unfolds in centuries-worth of negative medieval examples (quoted in Mondini 2019, 208-9, my translation).

Even as the nineteenth-century's Romantic movement recast the “darkness” and strangeness of the Middle Ages as worthy of fascination, with the likes of John Ruskin (1819-1900) celebrating the fantastical imagination that created the monsters that ornament Gothic edifices, through the century there also persisted a delicacy of taste that was averse to medieval art's most unrefined instantiations, of which wall paintings provided prime examples. The conservator E. Clive Rouse (1901-1997) characterizes their reception in England in blunt terms that, despite their reductiveness, capture the aesthetic clash the paintings' reappearance occasioned: their “crudeness of line and colour (and sometimes subject!) offended the decorous dullness and precision of the Victorian tradition in painting and Church decoration” (quoted in Edwards 1989, 471). A very similar reception dynamic occurred in Denmark, where classically trained artists like Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844) and C.W. Eckersberg (1783-1853) set the aesthetic tone for harmonious beauty at the beginning of the century, and where the distaste for medieval crudeness was normalized due to the country's near-homogenous Lutheran makeup. In this religious context, the cultural production of the late Middle Ages was perceived as a reflection of the superstition-rife decadence of Catholic hegemony (Laugerud and Ødemark 2020, 355 ff.). This distaste was further exacerbated by the perception of the Gothic as having been imported from Germany, whose cultural influence was increasingly repudiated through the century, especially as a response to Denmark's loss of Schleswig to Prussia in 1864 (Andrén 2013, 145-47).

Kornerup, who dedicated his career to advocating for the preservation of medieval images and to arguing for their relevance in understanding Danish cultural history, thus found himself in a proverbial representational pickle vis-à-vis the Sædinge painting: he was supposed to objectively record his discovery, yet doing so in a way that transmitted its savagery could, in a sense, implicate him in that very savagery. Unspoken in his admission of mimetic failure is, perhaps, a subtle sense of relief that, despite his great efforts, he could not access in himself the kind of crudeness that the original exhibited. His position here is the opposite of Ruskin's, who saw the savagery of medieval art as an aesthetic energy to

be tapped into and harnessed as a way of reviving the arts of his time (Connelly 2015). Ruskin judged academic attempts at imitations that do not channel these energies as inauthentic. As he put it,

...pointed arches do not constitute Gothic, nor vaulted roofs, nor flying buttresses, nor grotesque sculptures...Its elements are certain mental tendencies of the builders, legibly expressed in it....and unless both the elements and the forms are there, we have no right to call the style Gothic. It is not enough that it has the Form, if it have not also the power and life (quoted in Connelly 2015, 7).

For Kornerup, though, the “power and life” of the wild Gothic paintings had to be presented in a processed rather than raw form: it was essential to maintain an academic distance from these images that would allow him to communicate their

[8] August Behrends: *Hell*, drawing of wall painting in Sanderum Church, 1882. Watercolor, graphite, and pen on paper, 678x511 mm. CC-BY-SA Arnold Mikkelsen, The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.





[9] Joachim Skovgaard: *Christ in the Realm of the Dead*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 351,5x489 cm. National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen.

cultural value without endorsing the mentality expressed in them, and to deliver them to the public in a palatable form. That meant, in some cases, aesthetically refining the images on the church walls as part of their restoration (Brajer 2007), and, in others, containing displeasing images – those “that could not be said to possess anything that can claim to be called art,” as he once characterized them – within an archivable format and housing them at the National Museum, where their potential to disturb would be literally minimized (Kornerup 1867-68, 425).

Gothic wall paintings: aesthetic conditions for a fraught reception

Reticence towards medieval wall paintings in Denmark, however, obviously did not amount to a wholesale rejection. This is due to in part to the period’s imperative for religious renewal, which, despite the differences between the revival movements, derived energy from the imagination of a shared past imbued in traditional Danish architecture (Bach-Nielsen 2021, 108 f.). Antiquarian interest in church buildings themselves – their materials, styles, and atmospherics – became a tie between congregations and their “forefathers” (Jürgensen 2020).

Wall paintings thus had the potential to play an important role in creating a meaningful link to the past – and in many churches, they did.

But the historical imaginary of the art historians, archeologists and architects who shaped Denmark's ecclesiastical built heritage could not encompass all the detritus the past threw at it. The atmosphere sought after as suitable for devotion by the national Romanticism was one marked by solemnity, simplicity, and unity, and archeological publications such as *Danske Mindesmærker* (1877), with texts by, among others, Kornerup himself, and the art historian N.L. Høyen (1798-1870), touted these characteristics as essential to authentically Danish devotional spaces. In his account of Viborg Cathedral, for instance, Høyen praises the original Romanesque character of the cathedral, “one of our most venerable monuments,” as “shot through with a sharply defined character, simple and yet grand, and with its solemnity...corresponding to the atmosphere that pervades church life in our times” (50). Through this and other writings, Høyen promulgated the idea that the older Romanesque style was more conducive to serious and focused contemplation than the Gothic, which presented too many visual distractions for a congregation that should be focused on the words of the sermon (1871, 9). His attitude towards late medieval art was widely shared, as evinced by an article by J. Heilman, bell ringer of Sankt Peders Church in Slagelse, published on August 5, 1884 in the newspaper *Sorø Amtstidende*:

...the later wall paintings are much more fantastical than the earlier, since they contain a motley mixture of humans and animals, martyrs and monks, angels and devils, flames of fire and hell – in short, everything that could set the mind in a terrified mood and in that way let the Catholic clergy increase their influence over the more or less superstitious congregations (3).

Romanesque wall paintings, by contrast, were “of a far more deep and Christian content,” and despite their “considerable flaws” they “put many a mind in those days in the mood for devotion and pious feelings” (3).

Devotion and pious feelings versus terror: the works of the most popular religious artists of the nineteenth century – even those prized by the hellfire preaching *Indre Mission* – show how visual art was used for nourishing sentimental piety, eschewing troubling style and content to the degree that even Christ's Passion was a rare subject matter in Danish religious painting of the first half of the century (Kjær and Grinder-Hansen 1988, 124). Properly “Protestant” art, represented by Eckersberg and his school, also avoided repre-

sentations of the supernatural, anchoring the human Christ in a historical framework that made him relatable for the contemporary viewer. The Grundtvigian theologian Karsten Friis Wiborg (1813-1885), whose art criticism proved influential in the first half of the century, praised Eckersberg for “depart[ing] from everything that was rooted in the fantasy of the Catholic Middle Ages.” (Salling 1999, 52-57; quoted in Burmeister 2020, 231). The generation of painters active in the second half of the century, exemplified by the painter Carl Bloch (1843-1890), whose paintings were displayed in *Indre Mission* churches, created more theatrical compositions, in which Christ is often pictured overcoming adversity (Rathje 2012, 173-179; Jürgensen 2020, 397-405). Bloch is praised in the press for the “Danish character” of his paintings: “mild and soft in mood” and, importantly, only willing “to represent Christ as the beautiful Savior of mankind” (*Dannebrog* June 3, 1895, 1). At the century’s end, one of the first paintings to depart from this comforting style, and to visually depict hell, was *Christ in the Realm of the Dead* [9] by Joakim Skovgaard (1856-1933), inspired by Grundtvig’s 1837 hymn of the same subject. Although it had its admirers, the painting was controversial upon its completion in 1894. The critic Julius Lange (1838-1896), using the same critical terms regularly levelled against late medieval wall paintings, disparaged Skovgaard’s rigid delineation of bodies as “ugly and raw,” and deemed the painting’s stylistic primitivism a sign of decadence (1900, 254-258). After briefly serving as an interim altarpiece at the grundtvigian Immanuel Church in Fredriksberg (as the congregation waited for the completion of Joakim’s brother, Niels Skovgaard’s contrastingly light-filled *Baptism on Pentecost* (completed 1905)), *Christ in the Realm of the Dead* was only redeemed from a period of artistic purgatory in 1911, when the National Gallery of Denmark acquired it (Larsen 2001, 110; Bach-Nielsen 2012, 42).

Coda: whitewashed negativity

The Sædinge Last Judgment paintings, together with the rest of the Brarup program, remain to this day in their own purgatorial invisibility, even though discussions have taken place over the years about uncovering them (see for instance in *Lolland-Falsters Folketidende* 28 Sept. 1979, 8). The initial negativity of the paintings’ scandalous presence has thus been transformed into a negativity of absence, in which the whitewashed surface becomes pregnant with creative potentiality. As Elina Gertsman writes in *The Absent Image* about offensive images excised from medieval manuscripts, “Absence—or absenting, in this case—makes meaning, and the act of unrepresentation becomes an act of

creation...An erased devil leaves one to imagine the horrors of its appearance” (116). However, for projection to be possible, a hint or trace of what is absent is necessary. In Sædinge, this was provided by a local newspaper, the *Lolland-Falsters Stifts-Tidende*, which published a detailed description of the paintings before they were whitewashed, focusing on elements such as the whale-like, sharp-teethed hellmouth. The writer uses Kornerup’s language – “wild fantasy and barbaric rawness” – to explain why the paintings are “presumably unlikely to be retained in the church.” The article is dated June 11, three days before Kornerup penned his report: this was, perhaps, an interstitial period during which the paintings had a fleeting visibility, when there may have been a modicum of uncertainty regarding their fate. But in the end, it was the written word that gave these paintings an afterlife in the minds of the members of the Sædinge congregation. Absent an account of their perspectives, we might imagine some of them reading the description in the newspaper and then returning to their church and knowing *just enough* to picture for themselves the strange images hidden underneath the familiar, though newly whitened, surfaces.

ABSTRACT

In 1883, a late-medieval wall painting of the Last Judgment was discovered under white-wash in the vault of Sædinge Church in Lolland, Denmark, and then quickly covered up again. The painting depicted, in part, a hell scene deemed too offensive to display. A documentary drawing executed upon the painting’s uncovering contains within it the conflicted reception that this scandalous image received within the aesthetic and devotional context of the nineteenth century. Through this case of an image’s uncovering, documentation, and concealment, this article examines various understandings of negativity: as damnation, as aesthetic insufficiency, as devotional decadence, and finally, as absence.

NOTES

1 All translations from Danish sources are my own.

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