



**B**ALTIC REGION HERITAGE COMMITTEE



## Good practices on built heritage conservation/restoration

*The south sacristy of the Church of St George the Martyr and the Bernardine Friary, Kaunas.*

### **Main idea/goal of the intervention.**

The aim of the project was to restore the south sacristy, by exposing the original architectural structure, conserving and restoring the discovered late 15th-century to early 20th-century wall paintings, and returning the sacristy to its original representative function.

Over 550 years, fires, wars, damage, and the ups and downs of the city, have left their mark on this building. The history of the construction and reconstruction of the building is especially visible in the south sacristy, the oldest room in the building, in the layers of wall paintings from six different periods that have been discovered.

### **Location.**

Address: Papilio g. 9, Kaunas, Kaunas district.

The Franciscan Observant (Bernardine) Friary of St George the Martyr in Kaunas is located in the Old Town, near the castle, at the confluence of the rivers Nemunas and Neris. For a long time, it was the biggest brick building in Kaunas after the castle.

The restored room of the sacristy is on the ground floor of the east building of the Bernardine friary. Architectural research has shown that it is the oldest room in the friary, from which the construction of the whole building began. In the 15th century, it was a separate, single-storey, two-room, brick house, to which a fortified friary and church were added in the late 15th and early 16th century.

### **Functions.**

It is believed that the original purpose of this two-room brick building could have been residential-representative (as a manor house). The building was built in 1471. After it was given to the Order of Bernardines, they made the south side a chapel, and the north side a sacristy. After the building was integrated into the Bernardine friary in the late 15th and early 16th century, the south premises, right up until the mid-20th century, were the summer sacristy, and the northern premises were the winter sacristy. During Soviet times, after 1950, the former Bernardine friary was transferred to Kaunas Higher Medical School. After the restoration of Lithuania's independence, in 1995, the friary was returned to the Bernardine friars, who began to carry out research and conservation and restoration work on the buildings. The south sacristy now serves as a representative room for the northern sacristy, which is used for its original purpose.

### **Owner/manager.**

St George's Friary of the Order of Lesser Brothers (OFM) of the Lithuanian St Casimir Province in Kaunas.

### **Heritage category.**

The Church of St George the Martyr and the Bernardine Friary (CAR code 824), Kaunas Bernardine Friary (CAR code 22350). Status: monument. Level of importance: national. Part of listed building/national monument (UK 824), (UK 22350).

### Short historical background.

Built in the second half of the 15th century and the early 16th century, the Church of St George the Martyr and the Bernardine Friary in Kaunas form one of the oldest and biggest examples of religious architecture in Lithuania. In 1471, Stanislovas Sudivojaitis, the Grand Marshal of the Grand Duke of Lithuania and the Elder of Grodno, donated an estate in Kaunas near the castle, including the land up to the confluence of the rivers Nemunas and Neris, to the Order of Franciscan Observants (Bernardines). It is believed that the friars made the south room of the brick manor house a chapel, and the northern part a sacristy, and built a second floor over them, in which they lived. In the late 15th and early 16th century, they built a friary and the Church of St George the Martyr beside this building in the Late Gothic style, and from then these premises served as the south and northern sacristy. Throughout its long history, the friary has experienced many ups and downs: the Reformation, three fires (1603, 1624 and 1668), the 1655-1661 Muscovite invasion, and the incursions in 1812 by the French and Russian armies. Finally, in 1850, by order of Tsar Nicholas I of Russia, the Bernardine friary was closed.

In 1864-1865, the friary and the church were transferred to the Samogitian seminary, and the buildings were remodelled. At this time, the Gothic cross vaulting was adapted in the south sacristy, the ceiling was lowered, a niche was cut, a doorway was made into the winter sacristy, the shapes of the windows and doors were changed, and a niche was created for a wall cabinet.

During the Soviet era, in 1950, the premises of the seminary were nationalised and given to Kaunas Higher Medical School. The church was used as a warehouse for drugs. Only in 1995 were the friary, and in 2005 the church buildings, returned to the Order of Lesser Brother.



*Image No. 1, The Church of St George the Martyr in Kaunas.  
The sacristy can be seen on the right, next to the church.  
Photograph: Aurimas Švedas, 2017.*

### **Main issues.**

During exploratory research into polychromy in 1996, parts of some wall paintings from several periods were found in the south and north walls of the south sacristy. In 2014, archaeological research was carried out in the south sacristy (by the archaeologist and associate professor Mindaugas Bertašius). During architectural research carried out between 2013 and 2016, the original shapes of the windows, niches and doorways were determined and uncovered, the ceiling was changed, and the original ceramic floor was relaid according to examples that were found (by the architect and restorer Asta Prikockienė).

In 2016, major conservation and restoration work began on the polychromatic walls of the south sacristy. Until then, the room had not been used or heated for a long time, so it was very humid, and had been damaged by biological contamination. The walls have been repainted many times and replastered two or three times. The plaster caused many holes to be drilled, there are deep cracks, tears and dents, some openings have been bricked-up, and the plaster has come off in places. There is no plaster on the lower

parts of the walls, and the bare masonry of bricks and stones has been exposed. Higher up, the plaster has survived in places, and bits of wall paintings from different periods can be seen on it, laid on top of each other, covered with dirt and crumbling.

## Research.

Prior to the conservation and restoration work, a work schedule was prepared and discussed by the Restoration Council of the Department of Culture under the Ministry of Culture. After the plan was approved, the conservation and restoration of the sacristy began.

Historical, artistic, chemical, polychromatic, photogrammetric and infrared research has been performed.

Chemical and polychromatic studies have shown that the south sacristy was repainted 21 times, which includes plastering and putting. Four of these layers consist of ornamental and figurative paintings, and two consist of decorative stencil painting. All these layers have survived only in parts, none have survived in full. This has led to a restoration concept by which all the layers of polychrome paintings found have been uncovered and preserved. The uncovering was only up to the top surviving layer, in order to preserve as much of the authentic material as possible.

Historical and art research has helped to date and identify layers of polychromy from different eras:

1. A layer of 'horizontal strip' wall painting (late 15th to 16th century, Late Gothic).
2. A layer of Gloria walls (late 16th to 17th century, Renaissance, Mannerism).
3. A layer of 'black' painting (2nd quarter of the 17th century).
4. Layers of 'Angel' wall painting (1669, High Baroque).
5. Stencil painting: imitation marble with edging (1865, Historicism).
6. A layer of the modern national style of stencil painting (first quarter of the 20th century, modern).



*Images No. 2, 3, The south wall of the sacristy before its conservation.*

*On the left, the position of the former fireplace is visible. Slightly to the right of the centre is a bricked-up window with an earlier Gloria, revealed during previous investigations, with a hierogram of the Virgin Mary (late 16th to early 17th century). Photograph: Lina Katinaitė, 2016.*



*Image No. 4, The west and north walls of the sacristy before the conservation work.*

*Photograph: Lina Katinaitė, 2016.*



*Image No. 5, The north wall during the conservation work.*

*On the left is the still-uncovered pointed doorway to the northern sacristy. On the right is a rectangular walled-up space for a wall cabinet. Photograph: Lina Katinaitė, 2016.*



*Image No. 6, The left side of the east wall during conservation work.  
In the lower part of the wall, a horizontal decorative strip (late 15th to 16th century) is visible.  
In the upper part, there is a layer of a High Baroque painting (1669). Photograph: Lina Katinaitė, 2016.*

**Conservation/renewal project (author(s), complexity, duration, institutions involved, other agents or circumstances, disagreements and compromises if there were any, decision making regarding conservation/restoration techniques and materials, budget.**

**Project team:** Lina Katinaitė (polychrome research, conservation and restoration work), Dr Rima Valinčiūtė-Varnė (historical and art research), Asta Grubinskaitė (chemical research), Rapolas Verdickas (infrared research), Dalius Čekanavičius (photogrammetric measurements).

**Duration:** 2016 to 2020.

### **Implementation of the conservation works.**

#### **Contractor.**

The sacristy was restored at the initiative of the St George Friary in Kaunas. Qualified specialists were hired, including archaeologists, architects, wall painting restorers, art critics, chemists, researchers and photographers.

#### **Sources of funding.**

The renovation of the room was carried out at the expense of St George's Friary in Kaunas. When the restoration work began, no public funds were allocated. After the conservation and restoration work, the owners of the premises applied to the Department of Culture for support. State funds covered 50% of the costs incurred.

#### **Main issues.**

The biggest challenge was the conservation work itself. The unveiling was made particularly complicated by the fact that the original painting was very fragile, loose, and surviving only in parts, and the different layers of painting and new coats were mixed with each other. The layer of paint on the original painting was very thin, hard, and extremely strongly adhered to the wall.

The second most difficult task was to match all the layers found, so that they are eloquent and visually 'readable'.

## Discoveries.

The biggest surprise was the discovery of wall paintings from six different periods. Since all the layers were found to have survived only in a very piecemeal way, and none have survived completely, it was decided not to favour one historical period in the restoration, but to show all six stages of the decoration, and the unique artistic features of each. The different layers were unearthed only up to the top surviving ornamental layer, so that the place and the method of exhibiting wall paintings from individual periods were dictated by finding surviving uncovered fragments. The number of surviving and preserved layers is an exceptional feature of architecture in Kaunas.



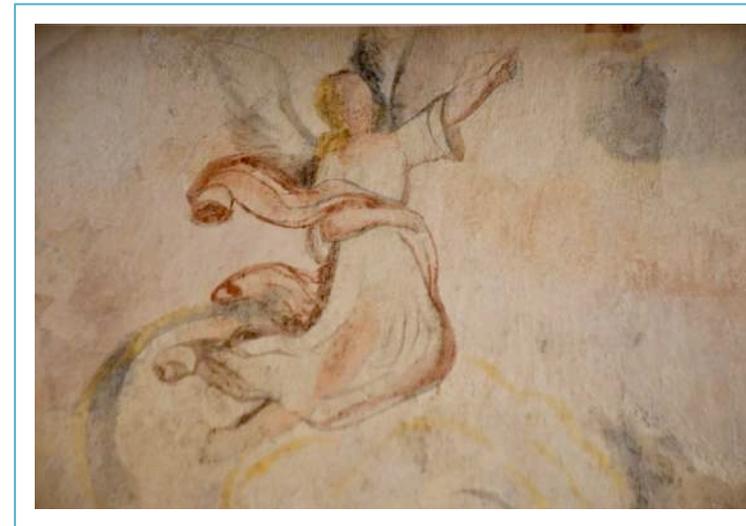
*Image No. 7, The north wall after its restoration.*

*The exposed Gothic portal with a late 16th to early 17th-century wall Crystal painting.*

*On the left is a 'black' layer (second quarter of the 17th century).*

*In the upper part is a Baroque layer of 'angels' (1669).*

*In the top left-hand corner is a layer of stencil decoration (first quarter of the 20th century). Photograph: Tatjana Purienė, 2020.*



*Image No. 8, Part of the north wall after its restoration.*

*A detail from the scene 'The Angel Shows St Francis the Cup' (1669).*

*Photograph: Tatjana Purienė, 2020.*



*Image No. 9, The west wall after its restoration.  
 Below the niche, traces of late 15th-century and early 16th-century paintings have been found. In the centre at the top are angels holding The Gloria with a hierogram of Jesus (late 16th to early 17th century). To the right is the 'black' layer (second quarter of the 17th century). The rest of the wall is the 'Baroque' layer (1669).  
 Photograph: Tatjana Puriénė, 2020.*



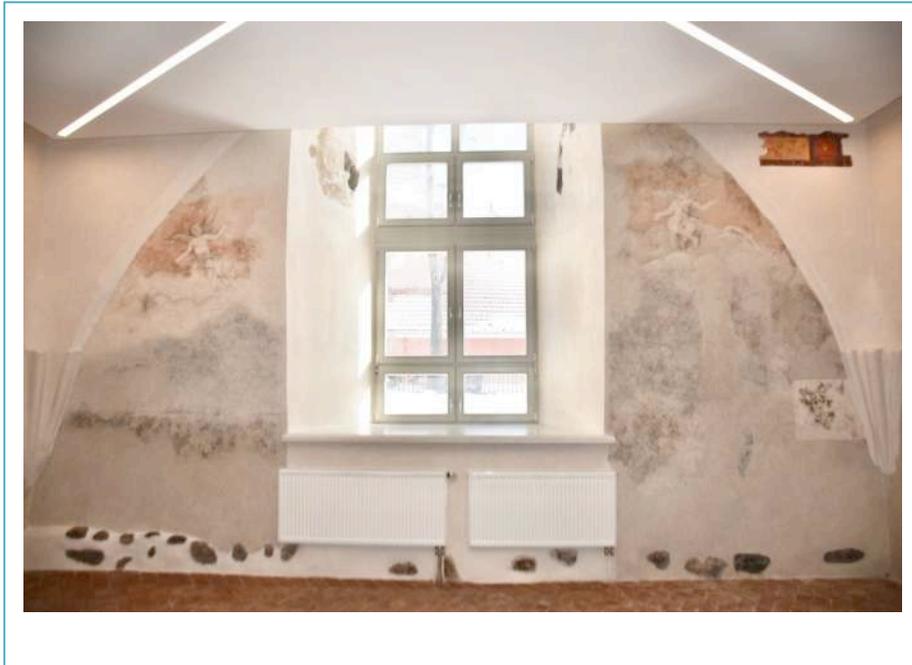
*Image No. 10, Detail of the west wall during its conservation.  
 Scattered photograph and IR photograph (~ 900nm).  
 Photograph: Rapolas Vedrickas, 2019.*



*Image No. 11, Detail of the west wall after its restoration.  
An uncovered niche with a Baroque depiction of the Blessed Sacrament  
(1669).  
Photograph: Tatjana Purienė, 2020.*



*Image No. 12, Detail of the south wall after its restoration.  
The Gloria with a hierogram of Mary (late 16th to early  
17th century). On the right and at the bottom, fragments  
of text from the 'black' layer have been preserved .  
second quarter of the 17th century).  
Photograph: Tatjana Purienė, 2020.*



*Image No. 13, Detail of the east wall after its restoration. The uncovered window opening with the painting and the height of the interrupted vaulting can be seen. At the bottom is a stone wall. Above it is a horizontal strip of painting (late 15th to 16th century). At the top is the Baroque layer of 'angels' (1669). In the top right-hand corner, there is an example of stencil painting (1865). Photograph: Tatjana Purienė, 2020.*



*Image No. 14, Detail of the east wall after restoration. The Baroque 'angel' layer (1669). Photograph: Tatjana Purienė, 2020.*

### **Results/current situation.**

Due to the discovery and restoration of wall paintings of exceptional value, the room is not used for its original purpose as a sacristy. The room has been allocated an official function. The south sacristy is open to visitors by prior arrangement.

### **Plans for the future.**

In the future, with the uncovering, conservation and restoration of the wall paintings in the corridor and the chapter hall leading to the sacristy, these spaces will be open to the public more often. As the oldest room, from which the construction of the whole friary started, the south sacristy reveals very well the history of the city of Kaunas and St George's Friary, as well as the most important stages in its decoration. Therefore, it can be used to present the history of the friary to visitors.

### **Evaluation.**

The conservation and restoration of the sacristy of the Bernardine friary in Kaunas required especially harmonious cooperation, knowledge, and theoretical and practical skills of specialists from different fields. The process would not have taken place without the great determination, desire, patience and efforts of the Kaunas Bernardine friars to preserve, show and pass on to future generations the visual heritage of the friary, and at the same time the history of the city of Kaunas and Lithuania.

This case of conservation and restoration is unique, mainly in that it was initiated by the proprietors themselves, St George's Friary in Kaunas, realising their responsibility and the exceptional value of the object entrusted to them. It is also a case of good practice, as the sacristy has been studied and restored in a consistent and methodical way, starting with exploratory research in polychrome wall painting, archaeology, architecture, history and art research, and then moving on to the conservation and restoration of the wall paintings. The third reason for considering this a good example is that the conservation and restoration of the paintings have not given priority to any one historical period, but all are considered equally important, providing a unique opportunity to review different artistic styles, and the history of the city and the country, in one room.

The restored south sacristy of St George's Church in Kaunas is a unique monument in the city of Kaunas. The preserved paintings on the sacristy walls have an exceptional historical, cultural, artistic and cognitive value, not only in the context of the city of Kaunas, but also in the context of Lithuanian culture and the entire Franciscan heritage.

**More information.**

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