

The Fresco Paintings

The sanctuary is decorated with beautiful 14th-century frescoes, but it has not always been so. After the Reformation, the medieval works of art were covered with limewash and were not rediscovered until 1889. They have now been uncovered and embellish the church once again.

History

Since the frescoes were uncovered, they have undergone several restoration projects to ensure the best possible state of preservation.

- Painted in the first half of the 14th century
- Covered with limewash, presumably around 1600, as part of the church's transition to self-government.
- The existence of the frescoes in Østerlars Church was forgotten over time.
- Rediscovered in 1889 by Jacob Kornerup, who restored them up until 1892.
- Restored by the National Museum of Denmark in 1960, 1995 and 2005–2006.

The Narrative

The load-bearing pillar of the nave is wreathed in a frieze of frescoes that follow a coherent narrative about the life of Jesus. With your back to the altar, you see the first picture of the story: the Annunciation to Mary. The narrative should be read from right to left, ending with a dramatic Judgement Day motif facing north.



Medieval motifs

Today, the old frescoes are not just artistic decorations of Denmark's churches but an indispensable source of insight into medieval society and its mentality. The frescoes can reveal details about clothing and garments, rich and poor, as well as dreams, longings and profound fears. They also attest to how biblical texts and messages – which we still listen to and interpret today – were depicted in the imagery of the time. From this perspective, frescoes are in many ways like looking through a window to times past.

To contemporaries, the purpose of the frescoes was both to decorate the church and to supplement the priest's sermon in Latin, which could rarely be understood by uneducated farmers or fishermen. It is easy to imagine how – then as now – one could contemplate the paintings for hours and delve ever deeper into the story. It is worth remembering that decorative images were not widespread among commoners in the Middle Ages. Rich noblemen may have had wall paintings, but commoners' dwellings were not so richly adorned. In a time with no television or advertising, the frescoes must have been all the more compelling and fascinating.

Listen to the frescoes

With the National Museum's app (in Danish only) "Øret til Væggen" (Ear to the Wall), it is not only possible to look at the frescoes but to hear about them as well. Download the app and listen to the stories about a wide range of frescoes in Denmark, including Østerlars Church. The app is good to have on your smartphone when you are visiting a church in Denmark if you have not been there before. Perhaps you will also be able to learn something new about the decoration of your own parish church?

Several devils are depicted in the Apocalypse scene where they lead lost souls in chains into the Jaws of Hell. In the Middle Ages, devils were often depicted as having faces on their knees and shoulders, for instance. The more faces these creatures had, the more unpredictable they were.

Restoration of frescoes

The task of restoring frescoes is both comprehensive and time-consuming. The National Museum of Denmark inspects Denmark's frescoes on an ongoing basis to stay up to date with needed restoration. The initial steps typically involve cleaning the frescoes. Next, any damage is repaired, fresh mortar is applied to cracking and finally, new pigmentation is applied to the paintings as needed. In this process, it's not a matter of letting your imagination run away with you, but of only repainting the parts of the motif that are indeed original so that the paintings can maintain their authentic character. During the restoration in 2005–2006, the National Museum discovered that, in some areas, Jacob Kornerup had been a bit too creative in his repainting of the church's frescoes.

Documentary film

A documentary film was made as part of the National Museum's restoration of the frescoes in 2005–2006. You can watch the film by scanning this QR code or visiting the church's website where you will find a link to the film. The documentary is in Danish without translation.

