

## THE CHURCH OF THE BEGUINAGE OF ST. TRUIDEN. CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF THE ARCHITECTURE, INTERIOR AND FURNITURE: A CASE-STUDY

When the Province of Limburg acquired the mediaeval church of the Beguinage of St. Truiden with its important series of murals, the building and interior were in a state of dilapidation. The church had not been used as a place of worship for half a century and the maintenance work which was carried out in the 30's, through the intermediary of a special trust set up for the purpose, could only partly forestall the decay; detrimental attempts at restoration on the building, such as removal of cement and inexpert, exaggerated repairs to the murals in 1934 caused a more rapid deterioration and removed the church building even further from its original appearance.

Designating the mediaeval church of the Beguinage of St. Truiden for restoration and the restoration itself clearly posed the problems of integrated conservation and restoration of the interior and furnishings. The building to be dealt with had lost its traditional function and had completely fallen into disuse. On the other hand the structural context with the historical surroundings, which have remained residential on the same scale, has remained confirmed to the present day and the church still possesses in its interior all the components which give a strong indication of its use through the furnishings and hangings still present, which likewise remain preserved as a cohesive entity. It could be seen to be interpreted that the house of prayer was designed to meet the particular needs, material, spiritual and emotional, of this community and that the utilization and decoration of the interior had been an enlightenment and an experience, focussing on the support of the individual and the community life.

The acquisition of the building by the Province of Limburg was carried out with the intention of establishing within it a Provincial Museum for Religious Art. The monument lends itself to the purpose both in form and content. At the same time that the maintenance work on the building began, an investigation was undertaken into whether the building could be used as a museum and in what form<sup>1</sup>.

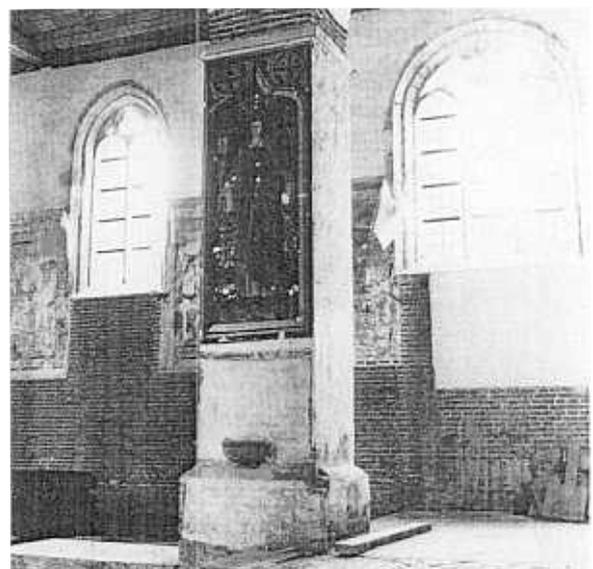
<sup>1</sup> See C.G. DE DIJN, *Het begijnhof te Sint-Truiden en zijn nieuwe bestemming: een menselijke ontmoetingsplaats met kunstpatrimoniale en museologische objectieven*, in *Historische bijdragen opgedragen aan Mgr. Dr. H. Kesters*, published by *Geschiedkundige Kring van Sint-Truiden*, Sint-Truiden, 1971, pages 49-73.

### THE INTERIOR

The architecture, painting and furnishing which give structure to the interior of the church possess a unity. The furniture and the objects present receive their significance from their correlation with the surroundings. This confers the whole with an expressive value which leads it on to a creative way of life and awakes our understanding of its culture.

The pseudo-basilical church with its simple celebrational tower is the result of several building phases, the earliest of which dates back to the last third of the 13th century. The west front and the first four northern bays of the nave date from this period. Some details are late Romanesque, whilst the windows are early Gothic. In a later phase, probably in the 14th century, the choir with its polygonal screen was erected. Not only the tracery in certain choir windows, the style of the door in the south wall and various architectural details, but also principally the murals between the choir windows which date from about 1300 point to this period. The central

Fig. The Beguinage church, interior during restoration.



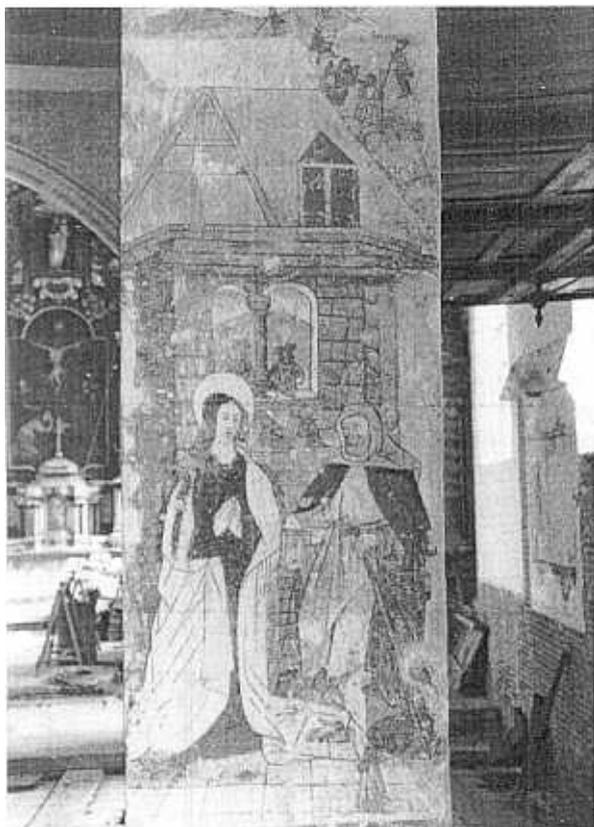


Fig. 2. The Beguinage church, «The Birth of Christ» (mural, 1490-1510).

part of the church, narrower than the western part, dates from the 15th century and is an enlargement of the older nave, of which only a few traces remain. It was probably during the same century or at the beginning of the 16th century that the whole interior was covered with wooden barrel vaulting. This combined with the use of late Romanesque pillars in the different stages of building achieves a certain unity.

Through the centuries the beguinage church has been decorated with figurative paintings most of which, about 38 scenes, have remained to the present day. Three separate periods can be distinguished in the paintings although together they form an iconographic, structural entity. The oldest representations in and near the choir date from the late 13th or early 14th centuries. The second decoration phase, about 1490—1510, dates from after the church alterations. These scenes from the life of the Holy Virgin and other female holy figures were painted mainly on the west side and on the sides of the pillars facing the central part of the nave, which are found in the narrower centre part of the church. A few, namely male holy figures, appear on the wall of the north aisle of the nave. In spite of the two centuries separating the two painting periods and the resulting differences in

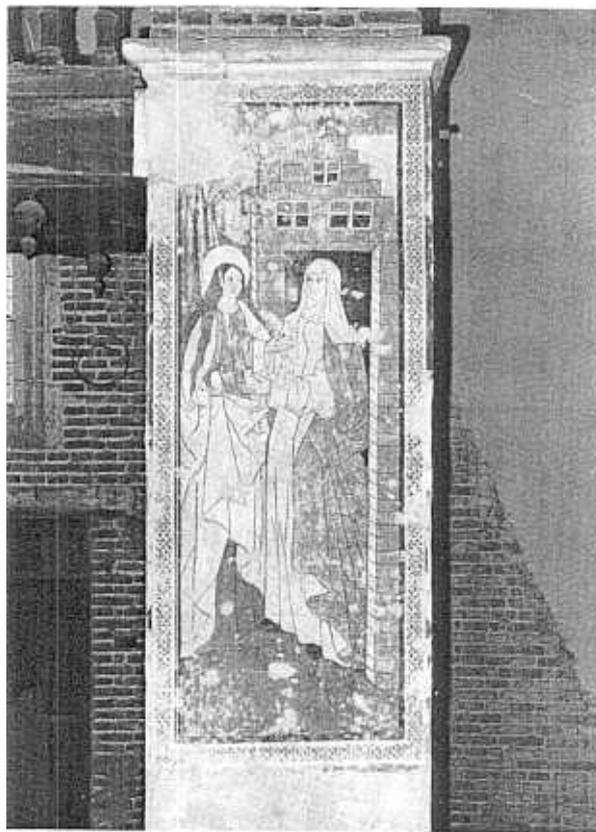


Fig. 3. - The Beguinage church, «Visit of Mary to her cousin Elisabeth» (mural, 1490-1510), during restoration.

style, the furnishing evokes the striving for an expression of temporal and metaphysical hierarchy; this is already given by the architecture. From the historical interior the striving towards a clear and credible structuring of the available space comes to the fore.

The remaining sides of the pillars and parts of walls were painted during the latest period, from 1587 to the beginning of the 17th century, made available for scenes which show less unity.

Towards the end of the 17th century and during the 18th century the baroque furniture, which still remains to the present day, began to be introduced. The new taste and style of church decoration gradually crowded out the old and the use and division of space underwent changes. Murals disappeared behind the new furniture or were completely plastered over until their rediscovery in 1860. Then the interior was once again drastically altered. The white plaster was again partially removed from the pillars and walls and pieces of furniture were moved. Because of this the interior presents a confused and heterogeneous aspect; through the placing together of different styles and materials in painting and decorating, the unorthodox positioning of furniture to safe-

guard the old murals and through the lack of structural cohesion between the pseudo-basilical church interior and its decoration. With the further removal of interior plastering the diversity of materials which had been used in the construction of the church and in its later alterations also came to light; natural stone for the first period of construction and brick for the 15th century construction and later re-building.

Naturally this in no way contributed to the recognition and appreciation of the authentic furnishing of the interior and its power of expression.

### THE RESTORATION

The purpose of conservation and restoration of the building and interior is to retain a live contact with the monument as an expression of culture from a past age. In the first place the conditions essential to this living contact had to be reinstated. Conservation and restoration here are not just limited to the original architecture, the materials, spacial division and traditional functions but are more concerned with the historical, comprehen-

sible and emotionally real context of the monument in its surroundings and the interior hangings and furniture, not only of importance as a significant and valuable relic from the past but as an inseparable entity formed with the surroundings to which it refers. The objects remaining are still real witnesses to the emotional reality of the relationship between the previous user and the space, volume and structure of the building to be restored. They form an integrated part of a whole which is experienced intellectually, emotionally, aesthetically and spiritually. Since the accessible monuments and their interiors never come down to us intact or complete but, as in the case discussed here, have undergone alterations and adaptations and been damaged, it is not easy to identify these living qualities and the conservation and restoration steps to be taken. In real terms then for this interior and its furnishings, restoration means a retrieval of what appears essential, authentic and inseparable, sometimes by the elimination of additions and the results of accidents; a specific choice guided to a certain extent by the remaining historical furniture and furnishing — albeit of a heterogeneous composition — but more by the authentic eloquence to be recognized.

Fig. 4. - The Beguinage church before restoration.

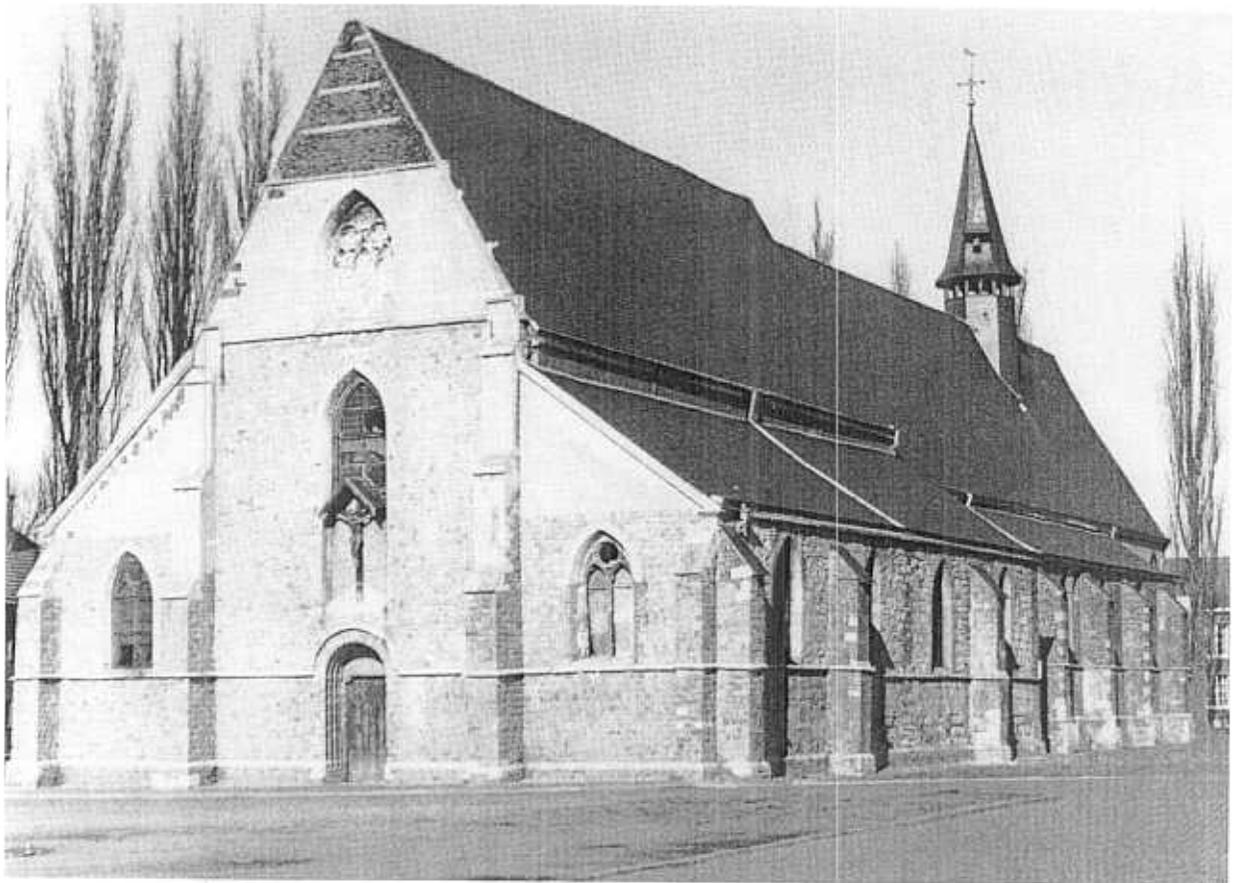




Fig. 5. The Beguinage church, convent buildings and tower building bordering the square.

The starting point of the restoration is the consolidation of what has come down to us, even with the traces of its material deterioration, which can strengthen the feeling of authenticity. The physiognomy of the items still remaining speaks louder than a meticulous reconstruction or a false evocation.

The permanent features of the interior decoration could be tackled in the same way, keeping in mind the preservation of the particular concord in the relationship between architecture and decoration. This was also true both for the sculptural decoration, for example on the heads of columns or in the tracery in the gothic windows, and for the beams under the barrel vaulting. These were taken up as visible constructive elements of the architecture in the total decoration of the interior when in the 16th (?) century they, together with the wooden vaulting, were painted with stencilled lilies. Both the dam-

aged panels from the vaulting and the head beams which had been damaged or had disappeared were renewed during the restoration work, but an imitation of the decorative motifs on the parts inbetween was abandoned. Thus the chromatic image of the whole was not disturbed.

The conservation of the murals posed a more complicated problem. The wall decoration as a whole must be viewed in its context with the interior to be restored. Through the natural aging process, the stripping of the building, the unsuitable restorative attempts and the incidence of alterations, especially the addition of pieces of furniture, the authentic expression of the whole was threatened with extinction. Also the value of each mural had to be repaired individually. A criterion had to be selected so that the historical and documentary value as well as the individual expression of each painting could



Fig. 6. The Beguinage church, restored.

be determined. Above all the emotional quality of the whole and each individual part had to be respected and repaired.

The replastering of the pillars was an attempt to achieve the original aspect of the interior, and more specifically the presence of the murals gave an indication of the composition and shade of the types of plaster. The renewal of the plaster has made for more integration of the painted scenes and figures, which were brought into a lighter situation; it binds them into a coherent entity and brings them out more clearly in the total treatment of the wall, in the interplay between space and volume and in the architecture. The plastering of the wall is fundamentally significant for the support and dispersal of light, which in a pseudo-basilica can only enter through the side aisles and the choir windows. With the exception of such permanent fixtures as the high altar, the

organ loft and the pulpit, the furniture and objects were removed from the church for the duration of the conservation and restoration work. Each item undergoes some conservation treatment and restoration if necessary; this must be decided for each piece individually according to its material damage and damage done to its individual expression and soundness of image. Subsequently they will be replaced gradually in the church according to their historical or indicative cohesion within the whole. Undoubtedly a selection will have to be made, which will no longer be inspired by the significance of the church building as a place of worship, but as a living historical document, which can be made understandable in this capacity and also can retain its emotional power of expression.

SMETS

## RESUME

Les travaux de restauration de l'église du Béguinage de Saint-Trond furent l'occasion d'une remise en état de l'intérieur de l'édifice et de son mobilier. L'église, désaffectée depuis un demi-siècle, a été achetée en 1970 par la Province du Limbourg pour y installer un musée d'art sacré. Construit au milieu du site historique du Béguinage de Saint-Trond, cet édifice avait conservé les aménagements intérieurs et le décor qu'il avait reçu lorsque, d'église de béguinage, il était devenu le siège d'une paroisse. La partie occidentale et le chœur remontent à la fin du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et au début du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle, le centre datant du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle.

L'église a un plan pseudo-basilical, avec une tour sur la croisée du transept. Le chevet reçut un décor de peintures murales, en 1300, dont cinq sont encore conservées. Entre 1490 et 1510 eut lieu une nouvelle campagne de peinture, plus importante, qui porta sur la face intérieure des piliers, à la hauteur du chœur des béguines : figures de saintes et nombreuses scènes de la vie de la Vierge. Puis, d'autres peintures furent exécutées à la fin du XVI<sup>e</sup> et au début du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles, mais ces diverses scènes ne présentent guère d'unité iconographique et

s'intègrent mal à la conception d'origine. Le caractère de l'intérieur de l'édifice fut profondément modifié avec l'installation d'un mobilier baroque tardif : autel, chaire et confessionnaux. A cette époque, la plupart des peintures murales furent enduites de plâtre, elles furent dégagées en 1860.

Une analyse du site du Béguinage, avec une étude historique et la mise au point d'un plan d'ensemble, précéda la restauration de l'église et son aménagement intérieur. On procéda à une étude approfondie de l'église — histoire, architecture, recherches sur l'iconographie et la technique des peintures murales —. Cette démarche préalable permit de dégager les caractéristiques et les qualités de l'édifice, de retracer son évolution au cours des âges et de proposer un aménagement intérieur adapté.

Une très étroite collaboration entre le Maître de l'Œuvre, l'architecte, un historien de l'architecture, un historien d'art et un conservateur de musée ainsi qu'avec les entreprises permit ensuite de mener à bien cette restauration.

Fig. 1. - Eglise du Béguinage, intérieur pendant la restauration.

Fig. 2. - Eglise du Béguinage, intérieur peinture murale, 1490-1510 « La naissance du Christ ».

Fig. 3 - Eglise du Béguinage, intérieur peinture murale, 1490-1510 « Visite de Marie à sa cousine Elisabeth » pendant la restauration.

Fig. 4. - Eglise du Béguinage, avant la restauration.

Fig. 5. - Eglise du Béguinage.

Maisons conventuelles et logis de la tour le long de la place devant l'église.

Fig. 6. - Eglise du Béguinage, après la restauration.

## RESUMEN

Las obras de restauración de la iglesia del Beguinaje de Saint-Trond permitieron la habilitación del interior del edificio y de su mobiliario. La iglesia, secularizada desde medio siglo, fue comprada en 1970 por la Provincia del Limburgo, para instalar allí un museo de Arte sacro. Construido en el sitio histórico del Beguinaje de Saint-Trond, este edificio había conservado las disposiciones interiores y la decoración que había recibido cuando, de iglesia del Beguinaje había sido transformada en iglesia parroquial. La parte occidental y el coro datan de fines del siglo 13, principio del 14, la parte central del siglo 15.

La iglesia tiene una planta de pseudo-basilica, con una torre sobre el crucero. El coro fue decorado con pinturas murales en 1300, de las cuales cinco siguen conservadas ahora. Entre 1490 y 1510, tuvo lugar una campaña de pinturas, más importante, que tocó el lado interior de los pilares, cerca del coro de las beguinas: figuras de santas y numerosas escenas de la vida de la Virgen. Después, más pinturas fueron realizadas a fines del siglo 16 y principio del 17, pero esas diversas escenas no tienen unidad iconográfica y se integran mal en el conjunto más antiguo. El carácter del interior del edificio fue profundamente alterado

con la instalación de un mobiliario barroco tardío: altar, púlpito y confesionarios. La mayor parte de las pinturas murales fueron, a esta fecha, cubiertas con yeso y fueron descubiertas en 1960.

Un análisis del sitio del Beguinaje, con un estudio histórico y un proyecto de habilitación general precedieron la restauración de la iglesia y de su decoración interior. Un estudio detenido de la iglesia — historia, arquitectura, iconografía y técnica de las pinturas mu-

rales — fue realizado. Estas investigaciones previas permitieron de señalar las características y las cualidades del edificio, de recordar su evolución al correr de los siglos y de proponer una habilitación interior adecuada. Una colaboración muy estrecha entre el Maestro de la obra, el arquitecto, un historiador de la arquitectura y un conservador de museo, así que con las empresas, permitió después, de llevar a cabo esta restauración.

Fig. 1. - Iglesia del Beguinaje, interior antes de la restauración.

Fig. 2. - Iglesia del Beguinaje, interior, pintura mural (1490-1510), El Nacimiento de Cristo.

Fig. 3. - Iglesia del Beguinaje, interior, pintura mural, (1490-1510), «Visita de la Virgen a su prima Isabel» durante las obras de restauración.

Fig. 4. - Iglesia del Beguinaje, antes de la restauración.

Fig. 5. - Iglesia del Beguinaje. Casas conventuales y Casa de la Torre, a lo largo de la Plaza de la Iglesia.

Fig. 6. - Iglesia del Beguinaje, después de la restauración.