Burkhard Kunkel, *Die Kunst der lutherischen Kirchen im 16. Jahrhundert. Medien, Mitteldinge, Monumente – eine Geschichte der materiellen Kultur*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2020. 432 pp.

Reviewed by Justin Kroesen
University of Bergen

In 2017, Alexandra Walsham rightly observed a 'lingering fallacy that the Reformation was inherently antagonistic to Christian materiality' («Recycling the Sacred: Material Culture and Cultural Memory after the English Reformation», *Church History* 86.4 (2017): 1121–1154, here p. 1122). In German literature, however, the 'preserving power of Lutheranism', has become something of a motto in (art-)historical scholarship since the late 1990s. The small but programmatic volume entitled *Die bewahrende Kraft des Luthertums. Mittelalterliche Kunstwerke in evangelischen Kirchen* ('The preserving power of Lutheranism. Medieval art works in protestant churches'), edited by Johann Michael Fritz (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 1997), radically changed the narrative about the Protestant Reformation as an age of fundamental change to one of remarkable continuities, at least in art history. Medieval interior ensembles such as those found in Doberan abbey, Halberstadt Cathedral, St Laurence's parish church in Nuremberg and many country churches across Germany (between Franconia and Schleswig-Holstein) are indeed unparalleled in Europe. Outstanding examples outside Germany are found in several other areas that became Lutheran, in Scandinavia (Jutland, Scania, and Gotland) as well as Transylvania (Romania) and the Zips region (Slovakia). In his introduction, Fritz provocatively argued that such ensembles survived not *despite*, but rather *thanks to* the Lutheran Reformation. Frank Schmidt, in his chapter, cogently defined 'continued use', 'altered use' and 'non use' (in German: 'Weiter-', 'Um-' and 'Nichtnutzung') as the three principal factors that made that altarpieces, screens, pulpits, sculptures and fonts could live on in Lutheran churches.

The Lutherans' tolerant approach regarding the inheritance from the Catholic medieval church was a direct consequence of Martin Luther's definition of material objects and images as *adiaphora*, or 'things of the middle', that are only of superficial importance to Christian life. The last decades have seen the publication of several studies on the wealth of such medieval 'middle things' in Lutheran churches, including some from a comparative, interconfessional perspective, such as Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (eds.), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge Uni-

versity Press, 2005). Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen's book *Ritual and Art across the Danish Reformation* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018) provides a careful analysis of the process of continuity and change in Danish country churches between 1450 and 1600. This year, the discussion was given a new impetus by the publication of three major publications, namely Dietrich Diederichs-Gottschalk, *Reformatorische Kirchenumgestaltung* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2020), on church interiors along the German North Sea coast; the collective volume *Indifferent things? Objects and Images in Post-Reformation Churches in the Baltic Sea Region*, ed. by Krista Kodres, Merike Kurisoo and Ulrike Nürnberger (Petersberg: Michael Imhof, 2020); and Burkhard Kunkel, *Die Kunst der lutherischen Kirchen im 16. Jahrhundert: Medien, Mitteldinge, Monumente – eine Geschichte der materiellen Kultur* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2020). The last-mentioned book is a slightly expanded version of a study that was defended as a doctoral thesis at the MF vitenskapelig høyskole in Oslo in 2018.

Although Fritz had already asked if the title of his volume should perhaps be followed by a question mark, Kunkel's study is the first to fundamentally criticize the notion of a 'preserving power of Lutheranism' by combining empirical observations with reflections on topics such as beauty and authenticy, and by offering a new methodology based on the analysis of 'Werkgeschichten' ('working histories', see below). Kunkel coincides with Kodres, Kurisoo and Nürnberger that 'middle things are everything but indifferent' ('Mitteldinge sind damit alles andere als indifferent', p. 14), and wishes to move away from a dichotomy between the traditional narrative of change on the one hand and the 'preserving power-thesis' on the other. Numerous examples of the treatment of medieval elements through the Reformation support the author's aim to paint a more realistic, better-balanced picture of what went on in churches after the transition to Lutheranism. The book discusses a wide spectrum of options ranging from the preservation of things as cherished relics from a glorious past to unglorious removal, and even destruction (cf. Chapter 4: 'Zwischen Bewahrung und Liquidation'), a variety that already by itself reflects Luther's *adagium* of 'adiaphora'. Innovative of Kunkel's approach is that his interest lies more in the process regarding the objects than in the objects *per se*: 'The focus is on the change of their function and purpose that resulted from the introduction of the Lutheran Reformation' ('Es geht um den mit Einführung der lutherischen Reformation einhergehenden Wandel ihrer Funktions- und Zweckverhältnisse', p. 10).

Kunkel's book wishes to deconstruct the myth of the frozen Middle Ages found in Lutheran churches. The author criticizes what he calls the 'spectacular paradigm' ('das spektakuläre Paradigma', p. 62) of Lutheranism's preserving power because it obscures our view of the real 'Werkinformation' ('working evidence', p. 63). Regard-

ing the continued use of things, for example, Kunkel proposes to focus on traces of change, damage and loss found on medieval objects rather than to postulate an inherent Lutheran desire to maintain them in their pristine state. According to Kunkel, 'the notion of use-based preservation can hardly be upheld and is problematic as evidence for any preserving power of Lutheranism already from simply material and technical points of view' ('Ein gebrauchsorientierter Bewahrungsgedanke ist danach kaum denkbar und als Nachweis einer bewahrenden Kraft des Luthertums schon aus materiell-technologischer Perspektive problematisch', p. 64). By moving away from the search for the origins of objects, Kunkel joins the methodology of 'object biographies', the start of which can be traced back to Igor Kopytoff's paper «The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process», in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64–91. In German art history, this approach was adopted several years ago in a thought-provoking book on medieval winged altarpieces by Georg Habenicht, entitled *Die Heilsmaschine: Der Flügelaltar und sein Personal* (Petersberg: Michael Imhof, 2015).

The terms 'Werkgeschichte' ('practical history') and 'Werkinformation' ('practical evidence') are useful. They reflect the author's training as an art restorer besides his profession of art historian, which enables him to carry out a close reading of material objects. According to Kunkel, the (art-)historian should focus on the traces of removals, renewals, recarvings, reframings and repurposings on objects in order to reconstruct their survival through time, sometimes against all odds, in the hands of agents with their specific motivations that are defined by an ever-changing historical context. Centering on these aspects, rather than a 'preserving power', Kunkel observes – quite to the contrary – a 'formative power of Lutheranism' ('gestaltende Kraft des Luthertums', p. 66) with regard to the material culture of medieval churches. The essence of this lies in the creation of something new by adding layers to existing objects. As an illustration, Kunkel presents the so-called Urbanskirche in Schwäbisch Hall (Baden-Württemberg), where the Reformation had little impact on the church interior (pp. 66, 405). A winged altarpiece, wall tabernacle, pulpit, choir stalls, the baptismal font and a wall painting showing the spinning Virgin Mary, all from the fifteenth century, were left intact. During the seventeenth century, the church was further enriched with a Baroque organ and several epitaphs. Interestingly, the biographical approach of medieval art ultimately leads the author to the question, formulated on p. 25, what it is the modern art historian is actually studying: should an altarpiece that was created on the eve of the Reformation around 1520 be regarded

as an object pertaining to the Catholic Middle Ages, or have five centuries of 'working history' rather transformed it into a piece of Protestant material culture?

One strength of Kunkel's study is that the argument is based on numerous eloquent cases, some of which had hitherto remained practically unpublished, from Bavarian Augsburg in the South to Wismar on the Baltic coast in the far North of Germany (although the Lutheran areas in the West, including parts of Westphalia, and the regions along the North Sea coast are remarkably absent). Examples are elaborated using a combination of sources, including the objects themselves and the traces of their treatment over time, as well as written and visual sources that shed light on this process, interpreted in the light of the historical contexts of the agents that handled them. These case studies evoke a vivid picture of what really went on in church interiors during the centuries following the Reformation. Some transformations are remarkable: in Hohenleipisch (Brandenburg), beards were painted on the faces of female saints in order to change their identity into that of apostles and evangelists, and in the church of St Saviour in Schlotheim (Thuringia), a relief of the Family of St Anne set in the predella of the main altarpiece was transformed into a depiction of Jesus blessing the children by carving a beard into the face of the central figure (pp. 255–256, 404). To understand such changes, Kunkel proposes the term 'translations' ('Übersetzungen', p. 330): old matter was translated into something new, which led to hybrid compositions of old and new elements and meanings. As Alexandra Walsham has observed, paradoxically, these forms of adaptation were ultimately modes of preservation («Recycling the Sacred», p. 1125).

The same ambiguity also pervades Kunkel's book: it vehemently criticizes the notion of Lutheranism's preserving effect, and at the same time it confirms it in multiple ways. Although the author is certainly right in his claim that Lutherans did not intendedly or even programmatically maintain medieval elements in their original state, the many, often 'messy' ways in which they have come down to us do explain why the survival rate of medieval elements in Lutheranism is so much higher than in all other confessions. Nowhere else are medieval ensembles of the calibre of Doberan, Halberstadt, and Nuremberg-St Laurence preserved, and the same is true of the country churches of Franconia and Schleswig (as well as in equally Lutheran Jutland and Gotland). The Calvinist-inspired Reformations in France, Switzerland, the Low Countries and Britain had a much more devastating effect, with 'Catholic' elements not only being being removed but their traces erased as well. Surviving altarpieces from the over 10,000 medieval churches in Britain, for example, can be counted on one hand. Perhaps paradoxically, medieval furnishings in churches that remained Roman-Catholic too have disappeared more massively than in Lutheran areas because

most were replaced by new ones, often in the Baroque style. This is why medieval ensembles of the level of the mentioned Doberan and Halberstadt are now even lacking in countries such as Austria or Spain. Thus, rather than denying Lutheranism's preserving effect, Kunkel's book nuances and reinforces it by explainig *how* and *why* so many medieval elements could survive here: often altered and sometimes against all odds, but in much higher numbers than anywhere else.

The wealth of eloquent cases discussed and the depth of its analysis makes Kunkel's book into an essential contribution to the trending field of 'the materiality of the Reformation', bringing the topic to a new level. Partly because of the same density, the book is not an easy read. The author's style is characterized by elaborate sentences and his language is full of neologistic word combinations such as 'Sprache-Text-Gewebe' ('language-text fabric'), 'Person-Ding-Beziehungen' ('person-thing-relationships'), and 'Sachübersetzung' ('thing-translation'). The argument is rich in philosophical reflections inspired by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Edmund Husserl, Umberto Eco, and Paul Ricoeur. The philosophical never loses the empirical out of sight, however, as is exemplified, for example, in Kunkel's affirmation that: 'the only reliable in the historicity of things is their process-character' ('das einzig Verlässliche an der Historizität [der Dinge] ist allein ihre Prozesshaftigkeit', p. 34). The volume is illustrated by fifty-two black-and-white figures and sixteen colour plates; given the visual and material character of the argument, this is a rather limited number. The book contains a wealth of references to secondary literature, mostly in German, but the bibliography at the end only includes titles that are used more than once, which makes finding suggestions for further reading somewhat complicated. The last section (pp. 372–414) consists of a concise catalogue of fifty-eight churches and church furnishings that illustrate and support Kunkel's thesis. An index of places would have even further increased the value of the book as a work of reference.