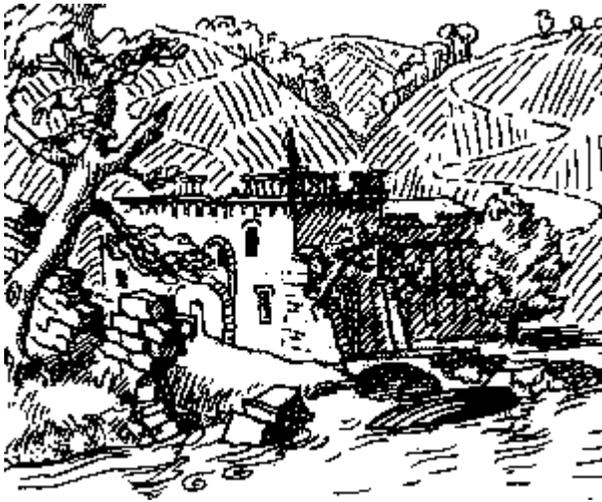


# The Great Art Robbery at Skamkloster

Tim Padfield

A few readers may remember the sense of loss that swept the art world some ten years ago as the news broke of the robbery at the remote castle of Skamkloster, home of the eccentric recluse, Baron



Oscar Valerian von Molevitten.

Among the pictures and treasures that disappeared that night was the only surviving authenticated work of Bent Groggel: the remnant of an altarpiece, known as *The Dismay of Jenshab*. Another terrible loss was the *Griffenburg Crucible* by Heinrich Solomeister.

The robbery, you may recall, was a peculiar mixture of exact planning in evading the security electronics and careless disregard for concealing evidence, in the form of dropped gloves, broken windows, footprints in the muddy flower beds and tyre marks down the drive. In spite of abundant traces, the police lost the trail. There were persistent rumours of an inside job, fuelled by stories of the decline in the family fortune, following years of neglect of the vineyards that were the only remaining source of income. The castle was thoroughly searched and the staff questioned, but no charges were made, the insurance company paid a handsome price for the lost treasure and the affair was slowly forgotten by both police and connoisseurs.

I had certainly forgotten the event but was reminded of it last year when I attended a lecture at the Copenhagen

Conservation School, given by one of the students, Syren K. She had combined a grape picking job in south Germany with her thesis fieldwork, which was a survey of climatic conditions in country house museums. At the grape harvest she made the acquaintance of one of the few remaining employees in the Skamkloster household. As a result of this encounter she was allowed to survey the public rooms of the castle, to measure the climate, lighting and other aspects of the care of the still very rich collection. She also found her way, unauthorised, into the great wine cellar.



She showed slides of the castle and its surroundings. One of them in particular caught my attention. It was a view of part of the extensive wine cellars under the castle. The vaults and walls were white with salt crystals, except for one area of wall, where the stone blocks were quite free of salt. There was sad evidence of the decline of the family energy in the form of leaking and broken casks and bottles. There was also some evidence of the improvements that the insurance money had made possible: new heating pipes under the

vaults and a radiator could be glimpsed in one corner of the picture.

At the end of the lecture I asked about the salt. Everyone concerned with building conservation is familiar with the phenomenon of salts crystallising from rising ground water in the lower levels of old buildings. The subject has indeed enjoyed an efflorescence of interest as a result of the studies by Arnold and Zehnder of Zurich. Syren had, however, no comment to make on the absence of salt. This did not surprise me. In my experience, conservators are not especially curious about those parts of the universe that are not crumbling.

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I enjoyed my grape harvesting holiday this year. The weather was fine and the company refreshing. I managed to arrange a short professional visit to the nearby castle by talking to the castle gardener, who was one of the overseers of the grape picking. He knew something about Denmark, remarking on the charm of its young women. The young man showed me round the cellar. He was normally the only one allowed to enter it, to tend the maturing wine and the central heating

He had not been employed at the castle at the time of the robbery. He got the job after the death of the old gardener. It had been a tragic loss. The gardener had died after the traditional mushroom hunt, where the local landowners entertain the estate workers by organising a mushroom collecting expedition, with bugles and song to scare away the wild boar, who otherwise defend their truffles with energy. The lords then prepare the 'Pilzbollekuchen', a sort of mushroom pie, which they serve to their employees in that reversal of roles which the more advanced societies allow, one day a year.

It was not difficult to locate the mysteriously salt free portion of wall, as we walked through the extensive wine cellar. It filled the space between two granite pillars, each of which was further connected by original, salt covered, walls, one at a right angle, thus forming a projecting corner. Such irregularities abounded in the cellar, which had clearly been altered many times over its 600 year history.

I could not think how to confirm my suspicion that this wall was newly built and blocked off a section of the labyrinth which, maybe, contained the lost treasure. I did not care to examine too closely the stones of the suspect wall in the presence of the gardener. It

resembled, in every other respect than the salt efflorescence, the calcareous sandstone of the other walls.

When I presented my story to the local police chief he was immediately indignant. Did I think he would not have noticed a new wall in the cellar? I answered that the cellar at that time would have been much more humid, because of the lack of heat. The salts in the surrounding walls would have been invisible, lurking as ions in aqueous solution within the pores of the stone, instead of as crystals on the surface. I think the police chief lost interest somewhere around the word 'ions' and did not attend to my next observation, that the presence of a radiator was suspicious in a wine cellar, which should be cool and humid. It would however make sense as an attempt to reduce the relative humidity to somewhere near the museum standard of 55% for great works of art, visible or concealed. The Baron, if he was guilty of the 'theft', would certainly not have suspected that his care for the concealed treasures would itself reveal their hiding place.

The police chief dismissed my suspicions and pointed out that he would have to get permission from the Historic Buildings Inspector to remove even one stone from that wall. The Baron could refuse the request for that reason alone, even if we obtained a search warrant from the magistrate. The Historic Buildings Inspector would certainly demand a detailed survey of the castle from the State Architects Office and by the time all these officials had busied themselves about the place the Baron would have had ample opportunity to move the art, if it was there at all.

The next evening I was sitting gloomily in the local cafe waiting for my train back to Copenhagen. The police chief entered, for his off duty research. He caught sight of me and came over to my table. He had reconsidered his scornful attitude, having seen the possibility of promotion if he could clear up one of the greatest art robberies of recent times. We speculated about how we could break through the ring of bureaucracy that protected the Baron's property from the exploratory crowbar and hammer. Then, suddenly, as I sipped a glass of the mediocre, sullen and acid wine from the castle, I thought of a plan.

I wrote to the Baron, asking for an interview at a certain time and mentioning that I knew that the missing treasures were concealed in his castle. I would keep this information to myself, if a certain sum of money was handed over, in cash. Next, I wrote to the

young gardener, informing him that a certain Miss Syren would be coming to the castle at the Baron's invitation but that I would try to arrange a quiet rendezvous in the cellar at a certain time. Finally, I wrote to Miss Syren in Copenhagen, inviting her to visit the castle again, but at a slightly later time than that which I had suggested to the gardener.

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The Baron received me with perfect, but icy courtesy and ushered me into the library.

"I know you are bluffing, Sir. I have nothing to hide and there is nothing concealed in this castle. What is your evidence?"

I explained that a part of the cellar wall had remained clear of salt while the central heating had dried out the cellar and caused efflorescence on all the other surfaces. I explained that the stone, which was old and weathered, must have been fetched from some place where it would not have accumulated salt. The probable source was the wall of the park, which was crumbling everywhere, so that the removal of relatively few stones from the top would not be noticed. Rain would have leached salts from the uncapped, upper parts of the wall faster than they could accumulate from rising ground water. Such stone could only remain uncontaminated with salt for a few years after installation in the cellar. I hinted strongly that the old gardener had been his accomplice and had been poisoned to keep the secret.

"These are outrageous accusations. I shall sue, naturally. But, first, I challenge you to prove your case by showing me the supposed hiding place, then I will have you thrown out."

We descended to the cellar. I noticed that the Baron carefully locked the door behind us.

We came to the place where I suspected the treasure had been concealed and pointed out the now obvious difference in the appearance of the wall.

"I can easily prove how wrong you are," said the Baron, "Come, I'll take you round the corner and show you what lies behind that wall."

He pushed aside an empty cask and waved me into the narrow space round the corner from the 'new' wall. Here, many tiers of barrels of red wine rose to the vaults, leaving scarcely room for the two of us between them and the salt encrusted side wall of the secret vault.

The Baron's voice took on a bolder tone.

"I think you will not have any opportunity to test your theory further, Mr Jensen, if that is your real name, because these barrels you see here", he waved expansively at the massive slope of teetering, leaking and cobweb covered barrels, "know how to keep a secret".



He backed away swiftly, kicking away a wooden wedge that held the lowest tier of barrels.

The barrels began to move, closing the gap between their massive bellies and the stone wall, with its mocking velvet layer of fragile salt crystals. The upper barrels also began to move, their creaking mixing with the splintering sound of the cellar door being forced, I fervently hoped, by the anxious, jealous lover.

I had no time to lose. The barrels were rolling inexorably towards the wall. There was no escape. "In vino veritas!", I shouted defiantly at the disappearing Baron, as I jumped onto the first barrel, climbing up its

rolling belly, taking care not to slip between the revolving surfaces of the vast collapsing structure.

The first row of barrels struck the wall - and the wall crumbled to dust before it. The rolling mass of barrels came quickly to rest against the wedge of loose rubble, with me atop them, triumphantly gazing through the clearing dust storm at the hidden treasures of the castle collection.

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"How did you know that the wall would crumble and save you from being crushed to death?" asked Miss K as we sat, together with the gardener and the police chief, in the cafe, where I waited to take the train, alone, back to Copenhagen.

"I remembered an article by Norman Tennent and Thomas Baird, in which they described how sea shells that have been washed free of salt residues are not attacked by the acetic acid vapour that is released by wooden cabinet drawers, while unwashed shells disintegrate into a powder of calcium acetate."

"I remember that article", said Miss K. "and an earlier one where you, David Erhardt and Walter Hopwood described lots of different sorts of vapour attack on museum objects by pollutants given off from surrounding materials."

I nodded modestly, not bothering to mention that Norman had proved one of our analyses wrong, and described another experiment in which I had tried to quantify the destructive process by exposing blocks of marble, with and without contamination by hygroscopic salts, to acetic acid vapour mixed into air of moderate relative humidity. The grain boundaries of the contaminated marble were etched away. It looked perfect until handled, when it crumbled to dust.

"I relied on the decadence of the Baron." I said. "He let his casks deteriorate, so that air entered and wine leaked from the barrels. The alcohol would be oxidised by bacteria to acetic acid. The vapour would eat away the calcite matrix of the sandstone walls, without visible evidence." I sipped my wine with affected nonchalance. It was a mild, slightly sweet white with a tickling afterburn.

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We shared a generous reward from the insurance company. The gardener had surprised and overpowered the Baron as he tried to escape in the dust cloud raised

by the collapsing wall. The chief of police came close enough behind to ensure promotion. Miss K and the gardener have bought the vineyard and the gardener's cottage that belonged to the estate. I hope they improve the quality. On the other hand they would not have the opportunity if I had not been inspired by the vile, sour wine from the castle, which the Police Chief and I had sipped in the cafe that evening, as I waited for the train.

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