

# The Baldishol Tapestry

*Displaying objects whose context is lost: a critical  
exhibition analysis*

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*Frode Larsen/ Norwegian National museum*

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# *Abstract*

The new Norwegian National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design in Oslo opened its doors in June 2022. Here, an extensive collection of objects from ancient times to the present is displayed. Among these objects are the Baldishol tapestry, a fragment of a medieval Gobelin dating from before 1200 AD. The Baldishol tapestry is one of the more iconic objects at the museum as it is a very rare find. The provenance of the tapestry is unknown, making its original context a mystery. This tapestry is now displayed in one of the rooms in the exhibition *The Collection*.

This thesis will explore how the museum *contextualises* the Baldishol tapestry within its exhibition and how this context creates a narrative surrounding the object. To understand how the tapestry's context affects how the object is perceived, I turn to Susan Stewart's (1993) and James Clifford's (1988) Collection theory. With a basis in this theoretical framework, a critical exhibition analysis will be done of the exhibition room displaying the Baldishol tapestry.

The context and narrative the museum presents to the visitors portray the Baldishol tapestry in a multifaceted way and relay heavily on research done on the tapestry's history. The tapestry is presented as an object of artistic, religious and historical importance.

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# Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. Choosing the Case Study .....	3
1.2. Research Question .....	4
1.3. Thesis Structure .....	5
<b>2. Background.....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1. How Tapestries are Made.....	6
2.2. How Tapestries Deteriorate.....	8
2.3. The Baldishol Tapestry’s Journey to the Museum.....	10
<b>3. Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1. Collection Theory .....	12
<b>4. Methodology and Material.....</b>	<b>16</b>
4.1. Qualitative Analysis .....	16
4.2. Visual Analysis of Exhibition .....	17
4.3. Possible Shortcomings.....	18
<b>5. The Exhibit .....</b>	<b>20</b>
5.1. The New National Museum.....	20
5.2. The Collection.....	22
5.3. Exhibition Style and Context.....	25
5.4. Design, Colour, and Light.....	28
5.5. Serving the Faith.....	30

<b>6. The Baldishol Tapestry .....</b>	<b>34</b>
6.1. Motifs of Late Spring.....	34
6.2. The Display .....	37
6.3. The Object Label .....	40
6.4. Context and Narrative.....	42
<b>7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>46</b>



# **Illustrations**

Figure 1. The Art-Culture System. Credit: James Clifford (1988).....	14
Figure 2. The National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design in Oslo, Norway. Credit: Iwan Baan .....	21
Fig 3. Layout of the rooms of the Collection exhibition over its two floors. Credit: the National Museum.....	22
Figure 4. Room 3 in The Collection exhibition. Credit: Personal photo 2022.....	24
Figure 5. Room 3 in The Collection exhibition. Credit: Personal photo 2022.....	26
Figure 6. The Baldishol tapestry in its display at the National Museum Credit: Personal photo 2022 .....	35
Figure 7. Display case of the Baldishol Tapestry. Credit: Personal photo 2022 .....	38
Figure 8. The display of the Baldishol Tapestry at Norwegian Museum of Decorative Arts and Design Credit: Beate Ellingsen AS 2003 .....	39

# ***1. Introduction***

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*Late medieval tapestries had more than a whiff of Hollywood about it. These were big budget productions, providing the greatest visual spectacle of the times.*

(Penney et al. 2011:10)

Tapestry is not a type of historical document or art form that has received much attention in today's society. However, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it was not paintings that mattered among the nobility in Europe; it was tapestries. At the new National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design in Oslo, Norway (hereinafter the National Museum), however, we see an extensive display of Norway's historical tapestries, including them as vital artistic expressions of their time.

Tapestries provide invaluable records of the medieval period as they depict the artistic expression of the time with cultural, social, religious, and political relevance. They are documents that provide an overview of the technological capacity and development of the age of their production. The motifs and texts on the tapestries can also chronicle historical events and thus be used as archaeological and historical sources. Alternatively, the tapestries can depict religious motifs used in spiritual practices and as decoration. The wonder of tapestries starts in their making; individual fibres are put together through a series of steps from raw material to yarn and from yarn to tapestry. Every tapestry reflects the aesthetic sense of the time and place they were made, but primarily its manufacturer and this person's knowledge of sourcing, dyeing, and weaving which creates the different colours and motifs.

The Baldishol tapestry is considered one of the most important objects in the National Museum's collection, as it is the only existing tapestry in the Gobelin technique from before 1200 AD in Norway (Nasjonalmuseet 2022a; Sjøvold 1976:11). Only a few such tapestries still exist in Europe from this period (Sjøvold 1976:12). This makes it an extremely rare find and a critical piece of historical documentation, religious artefact and example of medieval textile art.

The tapestry depicts two human figures in interaction with animals that researchers believed to be symbolic of the months of April and May. It is now a fragment that once was part of a larger tapestry. It might have depicted all the months of the year, either in one or several pieces. It is common for archaeological artefacts to be fragmented. Over time the objects deteriorate into various parts to be found and collected by museums and private collectors. Not only is the tapestry physically fragmented from the original, larger tapestry, but it is also fragmented from its original context as its provenance is unidentified. It is not known where or by whom the Baldishol tapestry was created, as the first record of the tapestry is from 1879. There is an important difference in distinguishing between physical fragmentation and *decontextualisation*.

When a part of an object is severed from the rest of the original whole, it is a case of physical fragmentation. This must be distinguished from *decontextualisation* which is the separation of an object from its original context (Chandler and Munday 2020:74). When an object is placed in a new context, such as a museum exhibit, it is *recontextualised* (Chandler and Munday 2020:74). These concepts will be used in the analysis of the Baldishol tapestry, whose original context is unknown.

The Baldishol tapestry is now displayed in its new home in the National Museum. This newly constructed museum opened its doors in the summer of 2022 and is the amalgamation of five previous museums; *the Norwegian Architecture Museum, the Norwegian Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, the Norwegian National Museum of Contemporary Art, the Norwegian National Gallery and Riksutstillinger*.

This thesis aims to explore how the National Museum has *recontextualised* the Baldishol tapestry in its new exhibition, *The Collection*, through an exhibition analysis based on Collection theory. This theoretical framework allows me to analyse how collected objects' new contexts in the museum impact how they are valued and perceived by visitors. Here the Baldishol tapestry will be used as a case study.

## **1.1. Choosing the Case Study**

I have always loved visiting museums and cultural heritage sights to see all the unbelievable things on display, from shiny crystals to the tombs of pharaohs. It was always easier to remember the stories I was told about in museums when seeing the objects right in front of my eyes. The impressions form more easily into memories in the setting of a museums and on cultural heritage sites than when I was reading a book or hearing lectures in a classroom. So there is no wonder I became an archaeologist and then continued to museology. Another passion of mine has been textiles, as I graduated as a women's tailor. Therefore, I wanted to write this dissertation on a historical textile.

I remember in 2013 when I visited New York for the first time and had the pleasure of seeing one of my favourite historical textiles, the medieval tapestry "Unicorn in Captivity," at the MET Cloisters in north Manhattan. At this moment, I decided to combine my love for textiles with archaeology and museums. Over the years, I saw beautiful tapestries in different castles and museums all over Europa and got curious about why I had not seen many of them through the museums I had visited in Norway. So when I learned that Norway's national treasure, the Baldishol tapestry, would be exhibited at the new National Museum, I was ecstatic and knew I wanted to do a study on its new display and explore the exhibition that was now its new home.

I had my concerns with choosing this topic as I did not get to see the exhibition before selecting the material, and this was the first time I had seen the Baldishol tapestry in real life. I had only seen pictures or replicas sold in tourist shops. Also, since this is an entirely new exhibition, it has yet to be analysed beforehand, giving me a blank slate to start my research. However, I was excited to see the iconic tapestry in the flesh for the first time and have the opportunity to explore its new surroundings.

## 1.2. Research Question

All the collections of the five museums previously mentioned have been gathered in the new National Museum. From these collections, the National Museum has created an exhibit called *The Collection*. Through a selection process, the National Museum has made decisions on which objects to exhibit, which not, and in what context the objects are displayed. The National museum refers to this selection in their introduction text of *The Collection* in the museum's guidebook (Nasjonalmuseet 2022c:5). *The Collection* includes around 6 500 objects of iconic works, art, design and architecture from Norwegian history. Further, *The Collection* also has an online presence with access to 49 000 more objects in their database, with more objects continuously added to the base as the museum's entire collection consists of 400 000 objects (Nasjonalmuseet 2022b). However, due to limited pages, I will not further discuss the online database of *The Collection* in this thesis.

The Baldishol tapestry is now a part of *The Collection*. Thus it is recontextualised from its previous display context, the context it was discovered in and its unknown original context. The context is the set of circumstances, such as lighting, colour choices, design element, grouping with other objects and facts communicated through text surrounding the object in its display and exhibition space. As the tapestry is now displayed in a new setting, it is interesting to explore what aspects of the tapestry are in focus in its new display. Therefore, the research question to be answered in this thesis is:

*How does the new exhibition of the Baldishol tapestry at the National Museum contextualise and create a narrative about the medieval textile fragment?*

The Baldishol Tapestry's history is mainly lost, and as the tapestry's provenience is unknown, so is the object's original context. Therefore, the National Museum mostly controls the context in which the tapestry is displayed. The objects displayed in the museum initially had a complex context in which they were objects of use. Displaying an object without the original trappings provides limited insight into its true form and purpose. There is limited space to display objects in a museum, and the information presented needs to be concise to avoid disengaging visitors. Therefore, museums may end up presenting only one angle, minimising

the complexity of the object. To give an impression of the object's true context in a recontextualised setting, conscious choices must be made.

I will be conducting a critical exhibition analysis and utilising the methodological framework accounted for in Chapter 4. The exhibition analysis is based on Collection theory which gives a framework from where the object's context in a museum is the basis of the narrative being put forth in the exhibition. I will use the research question to examine how the exhibit has put the tapestry into a new context creating a new narrative surrounding the object. The aim is to understand how the object's new context shapes the presentation of the object and its perceived authenticity and quality.

### **1.3. Thesis Structure**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters, including this first introductory chapter. In Chapter 2 the background will be presented, including how tapestries are made; how tapestries decay and the challenges with their conservation while on display. Lastly, there will be a summary of the known history of the Baldishol Tapestry. Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework, which consists of Collection Theory by researchers Susan Stewart (1993) and James Clifford (1988). The theory posits that the context in the museum displays an object affects the objects perceived authenticity and quality. The theoretical framework presents a method for analysing the context in a structured manner. Stephanie Moser (2010) created the method, which is explained in Chapter 4. The method is exhibition analysis, consisting of analysing the tools used to create an objects context, such as architecture, space, light, colour, design, text and message. Chapter 4 also includes possible shortcomings, where I select how I could have carried out my research differently. I have divided the analysis into two chapters. Chapter 5 presents the exhibition analysis of the room in *The Collection* where the Baldishol tapestry is displayed. Chapter 6 analyses the display of the Baldishol tapestry and the surrounding context. In Chapter 7 I conclude that the National Museum has overall done a good job in creating a context that shows the complexity of the Baldishol tapestry, however, makes certain statements about the tapestry with more certainty than there is a basis for.

## 2. *Background*

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In order to appreciate the Baldishol tapestry's journey to its new home and context in the National Museum, an understanding of the difficulty and cost in the creation of the tapestry in the late 1100s and the many dangers archaeological textiles face through the passage of time is necessary. These both contribute to understanding why there are so few artefacts like the Baldishol tapestry in existence. This chapter will first give an introduction to how tapestries are made. Secondly, how they deteriorate over time. These are essential aspects to understanding the difficulties when exhibiting the objects and why it is important to display them. Thirdly, the known history of the Baldishol tapestry's journey to the National Museum will be presented. Most of the Baldishol tapestry's history remains a mystery, including its creation and original context.

### 2.1. How Tapestries are Made

The making of a tapestry is a combination of many crafts that, in the end, produces one picture. The knowledge of wool quality and handling, chemistry for dyeing, the expertise of weaving, and an artistic sense, were all fundamental parts of being a tapestry weaver. The Norwegian tapestries are mostly made of wool from the sheep breeds *späelsau* or *stutturvosau*, with some use of linen. Silk and metal thread have rarely been found (Sjøvold 1976:84). Before the tapestry can be woven, the materials must go through many production stages. The wool has to be cut, sorted and cleaned, then carded, and tread spun before one can even start the process of weaving. A weaving pattern is also essential to follow while working on the loom. The making and dyeing of the yarn is also a vital step in the process. In Norway, until the 19th century, dyeing and spinning took place in the home (Engelstad 1955:105; Kielland 1953:32). The women making the tapestries or other textiles used local plants to create the dyes for the wool. The various properties of plants have most likely already been widespread in the Middle Ages. Probably due to their medical use rather than colouring properties, as they were fully aware of different herbs and plants' poisonous, calming, strengthening or driving effects (Engelstad 1955:103).

When making a tapestry, all the steps in the creation process are vital. However, the colours of the tapestries are an essential element in making the motif one sees on the finished product. Without them, there would not be any motif to look at. The colour palette for dyeing in the Middle Ages in Northern Europe was not very extensive. It mostly contained red, yellow, blue, green and black, without much attempt at shades (Haukeland 1989:10). However, it was still possible to create magnificent motifs with striking impact, as we will see later in the analysis of the Baldishol tapestry (Chapter 6).

The colours used for dyeing the Norwegian tapestries are directly linked with what colours have been available in the Norwegian nature (Kielland 1953:107). Synthetic colours were unavailable before the 1850s, so they were limited to what nature had to offer. Plants, fungi, lichen species and some animals were used in the process of making the dyes, usually with some addition of mineral substances, such as mordants alum, copper and iron vitriol allowed for different shades of colour (Haukeland 1989:9). The local flora surrounding the dyer would have much impact on what colours would be used in the tapestry. There have always been few opportunities for red and blue colours, while colours such as yellow, brown and green have been easier to come by (Engelstad 1955:107). However, getting the right shades and tones of colours takes time and effort. The local flora is one of many things limiting the colour palette. Many factors come into play, such as the chemical composition of the water depending on the season and the amount of precipitation. As nature is ever-changing, the flowers will not contain equal amounts of dye at all stages of their growth and must be harvested, preferably before flowering. The wool also had to be soaked in lye before the dyeing process for the colours to appear as clear as possible (Engelstad 1955:107). The uniformity of older colour recipes is astonishing, which suggests that the understanding of the process has been built on centuries-old traditions (Kielland 1953:111). The splendour of the tapestry's colours truly reflects Norway's nature in the truest sense.

In the Baldishol tapestry, considerable amounts of blue colour are used, a colour pigment that did not grow naturally in the Norwegian flora. Traces of the use of blue dye in Norway goes back as far as the year 800. The plant vaid (*Isatis tinctoria*) is a herb from the *cruciferous* family that can now be found in Norwegian nature, as it has been planted for dyeing in the past (Engelstad 1955:103). In the Oseberg grave (years 800-1000), a bowl with vaid seeds



was found among the grave goods, which indicates that blue dyeing with woad was known at this time (Haukeland 1989:10). Therefore, it is likely that the dyers of the Baldishol tapestry had access to this plant if it was produced in Norway. It was not before the 16th and 17th centuries that indigo started to be imported to the country (Engelstad 1955:110). But if the tapestry was produced abroad, indigo might have been used.

After the tread has been coloured and one has chosen a motif, the weaving can proceed. There have been several types of looms in Norway, such as warp-weighted, tapestry loom, horizontal loom and rigid heddle loom. In the early Middle Ages in Norway, the warp-weighted loom was mostly used as the tapestry loom was not imported before the late 1500s. So if the Baldishol tapestry was woven locally, a warp-weighted loom was most likely used.

As demonstrated above, the process of the creation of a complex tapestry demanded expert knowledge in different crafts and was time-consuming. The resulting product was useful for insulation and decoration. These complex art pieces were hung on the walls of windowless rooms like a ribbon. This type of adornment served both an aesthetic and storytelling purpose. However, few have made it through the rigours of time due to the frailty of the organic materials, if they existed at all.

## **2.2. How Tapestries Deteriorate**

Caring for historic textiles presents unique challenges for those who work with conservation, restoration and exhibition. At the same time as preserving the textile for as long as possible, in its most authentic form, one also wants to present the object to the public for learning purposes and aesthetic appreciation. Each textile will have a unique story and specific challenges requiring experienced personnel to display the object safely and still engage visitors.

There are several hazardous encounters textiles can have with the world throughout its life, and each object's story is different. Damage from water, mechanical processes, and pests are all among these hazards. However, light is one of the most common damages that can dramatically change the object's visual appearance. The fading of a tapestry will depend on

how much it has been exposed to the sun. The degree of fading will depend heavily on the quality of the dye used on the textile. On old tapestries, one can experience that parts of the motif that used to be green often turn to blue and that red has turned very weak as this colour absorbs the most UV rays. This can be so severe that the different reds will fade into a light yellow-white colour (Kielland 1953:33). Tapestries will sometimes be exhibited from the back, which has not been exposed to as much sunlight. Here the original colours might still be undamaged. Some colours, however, fade equally on both sides. These are called suicide colours, a sign of colourists who have not mastered their chemistry. The fading of the tapestries can leave the motif looking very different from its original artistic expression. A visitor uninformed of these colour changes can get a different view of the time period's artistic taste and colour palette. In the case of the Baldishol tapestry, we are fortunate in how well-preserved the colours have kept themselves.

It is not only the fading of the colouring of the tread that may alter the appearance of the textile. Also, the deterioration of the wool fibres will determine the preservation of the tapestry. Wool can degrade in contact with light, heat, humidity, and mechanical action. All four of these must be considered, as well as other possible contexts of long-term ageing of the wool in each piece (Weatherall 2001:117). The effect of light has received much attention in the research on the deterioration of wool fibres. The effect of light exposure on wool is especially hazardous, just as with the dyes it can damage the fibres even with exposure over short periods (Weatherall 2001:117-118). For wool textiles in museums, the objects often have had a diverse history where each object has been exposed to different influences (Weatherall 2001:123). This is something that has to be taken into account when displaying the object. One wants the object to take minimal damage but also display it in a way where it is visible and presents the object as true to one's original appearance as possible. This is to let the visitor have an as authentic experience of the object as possible. However, when exhibiting a textile, it is not only its authentic representation that has to be taken into consideration but also its continued fading and deterioration while in its display case.

### 2.3. The Baldishol Tapestry's Journey to the Museum

In 1879, the 17th-century Baldishol church in Nes, Hedemark, was demolished, and an auction was set up to sell some of its objects. Louise Kildal had wondered if there was anything left after the auction and asked if there were any textiles. They brought what looked like an old and dusty rag that had been lying in the attic and used to warm the bell ringers' feet. This "rag" turned out to be the Baldish tapestry (Dedekam 1918:11; Nasjonalmuseet 2022a; Sjøvold 1976:7). As the textile was dirty and fragmented, it was not easy to tell it was a tapestry from the Middle Ages. However, Louise Kildal brought it home to clean and repair it to the best of her ability. When all the dirt had come off, one could finally see the magnificent colours of the tapestry, making up a beautiful motif. She hung up the weaving in her home in Christiania as decor. It was here director H. Grosch first saw the textile and decided that this tapestry was worthy of entering his museum's collection. The Baldishol tapestry had now come into the possession of the Norwegian Museum of Decorative Arts and Design (Sjøvold 1976:8). It has been displayed at the museum until it was moved to the new National Museum that opened its doors this summer.

The National Museum (2022a) considers the Baldish tapestry one of its most important works because of its old age, rarity and artistic radiance. There is little knowledge of the tapestry from before it was used to warm the bell ringers' feet in the Baldishol church. Where it was made and who owned the tapestry can only be guessed as it is decontextualised from its origin. However, we know that these kinds of long and narrow wall textiles were in use in Norway for an extended period, hanging like a horizontal ribbon around the walls in houses without windows. (Nasjonalmuseet 2022a).

The reason the Baldish tapestry is a unique find is that it is one of the few tapestries woven in the Gobelin technique preserved in a Europe context from before 1200 AD. In the Nordic region, it is the only one of its kind (Nasjonalmuseet 2022a; Sjøvold 1976:11). The tapestry is dated to have been produced between 1040 and 1190 AD. However, the *palmette* design at the bottom of the tapestry only became common around 1150, indicating that the tapestry was made towards the end of the period. It has been difficult to place the Baldishol tapestry in a specific context as there is not much material to compare the tapestry too inside of Norway, or outside the country's borders. There are scarcely any tapestries from Northern Europa from

the 1100-1200 AD. They are mainly from the Cologne district or Lower Saxony, which had a highly developed textile industry (Sjøvold 1976:12). The motif and style of the tapestry have been used both in Norway and abroad. But, it is more likely that the textile was made in a monastery in Norway or a less central workshop, for example, in France or England than Germany (Nasjonalmuseet 2022a).

The Baldishol tapestry was created when Norway was Catholic. In 1537 Norway became protestant, and the perception of appropriate adornment of churches changed dramatically. The fate of the missing parts of the tapestry is unknown, we also do not know if the tapestry was complete at the time of the Reformation. However, in the 1800s, it was eventually found in the attic of a protestant church as a fragment, soiled with dirt. A further study of the tapestry's fate in connection to the reformation would have been interesting but will not be further discussed in this thesis.

### ***3. Theoretical Framework***

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This chapter presents the theoretical framework of Collection theory. In this thesis, I use the method of exhibition analysis framed by Collection theory to create a systematic understanding of the context the objects are placed in and the effect of the context upon the object. Collection theory will be the framework used to answer my research question;

*“How does the new exhibition of the Baldishol tapestry at the National Museum contextualise and create a narrative about the medieval textile fragment?”*

In order to answer the research question, I had to find a theoretical framework that allowed me to understand how objects are contextualised and valued in museums, even when they have been severed from their original context. Collection theory provides such a framework. Collection theory originates from Susan Stewart (1993) and James Clifford (1988). Using this theory to answer the research question allows me to assess how the collected objects' contexts matter for how the world perceives the objects.

#### **3.1. Collection Theory**

Museum exhibitions are active actors in creating knowledge and have been increasingly recognised as important historical documents for scientific disciplines and the development of ideas in society. When examining how museum exhibitions create knowledge and meaning, one must consider research in exhibition analysis, collection history, as well as an archaeological and historical representation of objects. Here collection theory and how the context of an object changes when it comes into the museum is a crucial component.

In Susan Stewart's book “On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection”, she presents the collection more as a narrative than a theory. However, for this thesis, it will be perceived as a theory. This makes it possible for me to analyse how the Baldishol tapestry's context influences the narrative about the object. For in any collection, when one is confronted with an object, the context of the object has been

modified to conform to its new narrative created by its collector (Stewart, 1984, pp. 151-152). When an object is taken into a collection, it can either be collected from its original context or be collected out of context. In both instances, the object is decontextualised. Without its original context, it has lost its intended use and meaning and become a blank canvas. Here the collector can apply new contexts and narratives surrounding the object and recontextualise it. This recontextualising will continue to happen as time goes by and new people in an ever-changing society interpret the object. The narrative and context around the objects that the museums display are not a retrospective exercise, but rather a discussion of the many possibilities and interpretations the museums can have about the objects they have collected (Mordhorst 2009:289; Stewart 1993:151-152). The context and narrative the object has been put into will influence how the museum exhibits them, and in turn, the public will perceive them from the setting they are displayed.

For a collection to be just that, a collection it needs classification. If there is an absence of classification, it is just a hoard of what can be considered fetishised objects kept in private surroundings (Clifford 1988:219; Stewart 1993:162-163). Thus without classification, a collection cannot exist. Its classification and medium of the display are the object's new context. This can be anything from professional display cases in a museum to a windowsill in a private home (Clifford 1988:218; Stewart 1993:154, 157).

In the diagram presented by Clifford (1988, p. 224)(see fig. 1), one can see his classification of objects in a collection. This system can only be used to classify objects within art and culture perception, as it excludes contexts such as religion or science. This kind of object can also have cultural or artistic value (Clifford, 1988, p. 226). Clifford's classification system, "The art-culture system", is separated into four sections: 1) authentic masterpiece, 2) authentic artefacts, 3) inauthentic masterpieces, and 4) inauthentic artefacts. Depending on the section the object falls into, they are ascribed to different kinds of value. As the objects can move between sections relative to how rare it is or how people's perceptions of the object may change throughout their existence, their value might also change (Clifford, 1988, pp. 224-225).

Objects can also exist in several sections at once. For example, a cultural or historical object such as the Mona Lisa have a place in the first section. However, as the painting also has great historical value, it fits in section 2 also. This way, one object can be put into sections 1 and 2 or somewhere between.

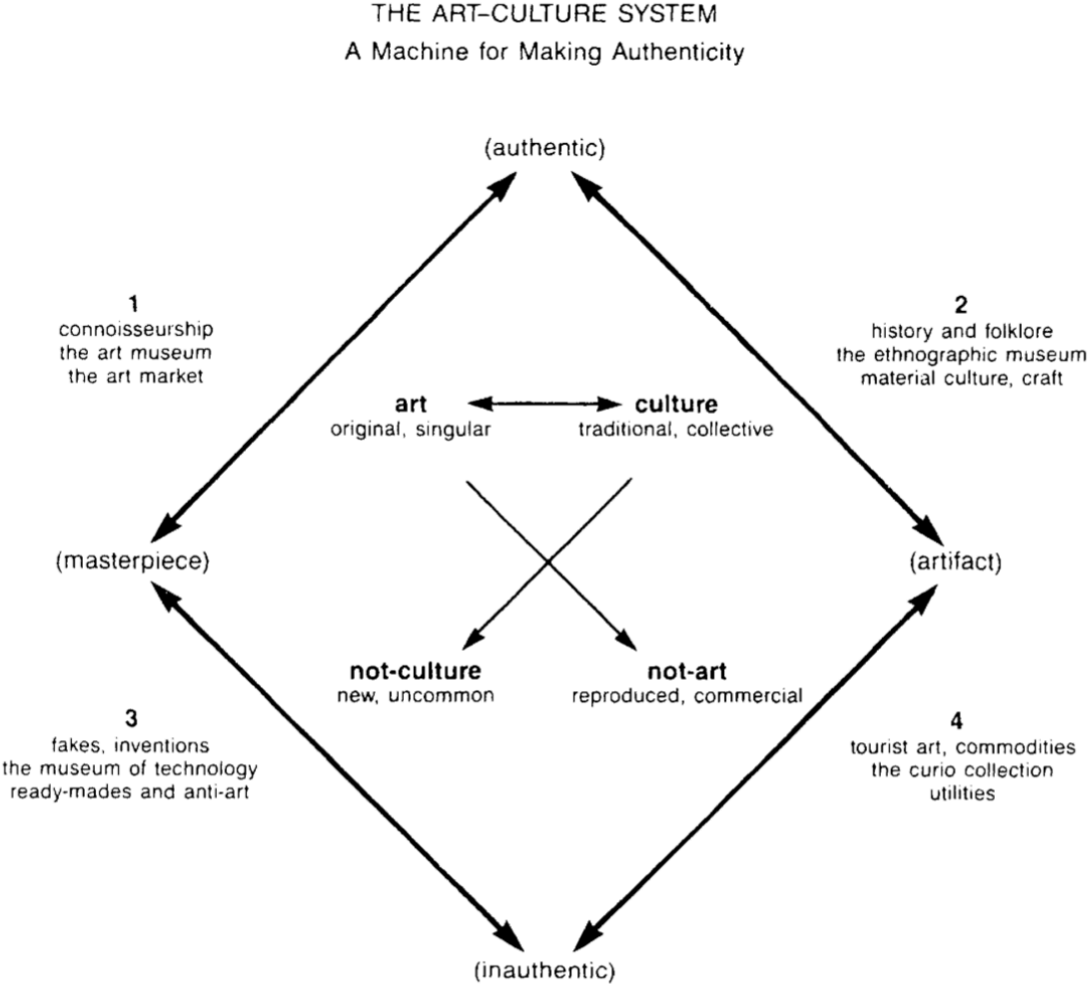


Figure 1. The Art-Culture System. Credit: James Clifford (1988)

However, in section 4, one has objects produced as commercial goods, often mass-produced and sold as copies. They are not considered art themselves but rather an imitation of it. These can, however, be excepted into section 1, having gone through section 3 (Clifford 1988:225). The objects in section 3 can be fakes or anti-art, portraying themselves as objects in section 1. If the fakes are exceptionally flawless, they may steep into section 1 and be sold as authentic masterpieces in their own right (Clifford 1997:226). Thus one can start to understand that

objects are not confined to only one section, as they can travel between the sections over time or exist in two of the sections at the same time.

Iconic medieval tapestries such as the Baldishol tapestry would be placed in both sections 1 and 2, or somewhere in between, as the tapestries would be considered both authentic masterpieces and authentic artefacts. In Chapter 5, an extensive exhibition analysis of the room the Baldishol tapestry is displayed in will be carried out, analysing the tools used to provide the tapestry's context. Further, Chapter 6 will analyse how the tapestry's perceived authenticity and value have been portrayed in its displayed in its given context. The next chapter will explain the methods used to operationalise the theoretical framework of Collection theory.



## ***4. Methodology and Material***

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An exhibition of archaeological material in a museum or elsewhere is usually a collection of handpicked artefacts displayed in a specific context and frame. The narrative the artefacts are given in the exhibition can be changed or altered by the people in charge of displaying them. This will depend on the museum workers' knowledge of the artefact, the information attached to the archaeological material, and the aim of the audience's experience and learning through their visit. The tools that are used to shape an exhibition and the displays in it are many, and through analysing them, one can get a better understanding of how the context given by the museum has shaped the narrative of the objects on display.

This chapter will include the methodological approach used to examine the exhibition and the method for collecting the data for the analysis. It is the Baldishol tapestry in *The Collection* exhibition that is the main case study of this thesis. To analyse the tapestry, a qualitative analysis of the display of the tapestry will be undertaken, first by analysing the exhibition room as a whole and then by analysing the specific display case of the Baldishol tapestry within the exhibition room.

### **4.1. Qualitative Analysis**

The methodology used for this thesis is a critical exhibition analysis or framework analysis based on the empirical data collected in the exhibition room. This type of analysis was preferred as it considers the numerous components that an exhibition is created from and how these components mould how the visitor perceives the exhibition. The different elements are the physical boundaries that frame the objects and, therefore, influence people's perception of a displayed object or an exhibition as a whole (Moser 2010:22-23; Tucker 2014:343). In essence, will the boundaries the museum arranges shape the visitor's experience of what they encounter in the exhibition.

The analysis is based on Stephanie Moser's methodological framework "The Devil is in the Detail: Museum Display and the Creation of Knowledge (2010). Moser has deconstructed

what different components make up an exhibition and what effect they have on how it is perceived by the museum visitors (Moser 2010:23). Therefore, the text gives excellent tools to analyse each component in an organised and comprehensible way. Types of frames within an exhibition can include anything from the exhibition's location to details such as colours and lighting used to present the different objects. When making an exhibition, the museum has to decide what frames to include and which they will exclude. In this way, they intentionally organise the context of the objects they display (Gitlin 1980:6-7). Moser has divided the various components or frames of an exhibit into different categories such as “Architecture, Location and Setting” (24), “Design, Colour, Light” (25), “Subject, Message, Text” (26). I implemented this method to the exhibition room where the Baldishol tapestry is displayed. The analysis of the case study has a general qualitative approach, meaning it is based on my own interpretation and perception of the information available in the exhibition.

## **4.2. Visual Analysis of Exhibition**

The method of collecting data for the analysis was based on personal observations and reflections in the exhibition room. Observation is a bodily experience of the human senses,. This involves using all the senses, such as sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. The use of our perceptual system is central to all learning we do throughout our life. The information we take in of the physical world must in some way be experienced through the senses. It has to be heard, seen, touched, smelled, tasted, or somehow sensed to be registered (Falk and Dierking 2000:17). Thus, the researcher has to observe, feel, and engage with the environment that is to be experienced (Öhlander 1999:74, 77-78). In the Baldishol tapestry display, there are no opportunities to touch and nothing to taste or smell. Therefore, only sight and hearing were utilised during the fieldwork as I entered the exhibition room in the role of a museum visitor.

On several occasions, I visited the museum to observe the exhibition. For the different visits, I decided to focus on different aspects of the exhibition and try to encounter it in different ways. Therefore, on one visit, I would focus on the exhibition as a whole. The next time, be more detailed oriented and focus on the objects and on another visit, only focus on the display of the Baldishol Tapestry. The exhibition room has two entrances one can arrive through. To see if it would have any effect on the visitor's experience of the room, I would enter from the

different entrances during my visits. I also tried to notice if there were any changes to the atmosphere, lighting and exhibition in general on my visits. In structuring my visits to focus on different aspects of the exhibition and encountering it in different ways, I got to experience the room in its entirety in a multitude of ways. This helped me understand the exhibition better and let me see the room from different aspects as a visitor, as not all people would visit the exhibition the same way.

The primary resource used during the visits was a notebook, pen, sound recorder, and camera. The notebook and voice recorder were used to collect observations, and the camera was used to take photos of the exhibition. There are several types of notes one can take, and they are usually distinguished between methodological, reflective, and empirical (Öhlander 1999:82). The primary function of taking notes and recording my thoughts was to remember my impressions, experiences, and reflections when visiting the exhibition room. Using empirical and reflective note-taking I would later have access to descriptions of what I had observed and learned in the exhibition room combined with my own reflections. The sound recording was good to record longer thoughts, however also suitable for recording the sound playing in the exhibition room. This was very helpful when I started writing the thesis, as I had my observations and reflections in my notebook laid the groundwork for the analysis.

In addition to noting and recording observations and reflections while in the exhibition room, photography was also an essential tool. When documenting the room through photography, I started with an overview of the exhibition room from all angles and then moved on to focus on the different details throughout the exhibition room (Kaijser and Öhlander 1999:112). The photos were key to use as a reference for the exhibition and display when writing the analysis. They were helpful as they made it easy to remember exactly what was in the exhibition and how it was placed, even when I could be at the museum while writing.

### **4.3. Possible Shortcomings**

I deliberately decided not to use interviews as a method in this dissertation. Not with any of the people working for the National Museum to produce the exhibition, nor with any visitors. The reason behind my decision is that I wanted to be able to visit the exhibition in the shoes

of an ordinary visitor. I wanted to be free to experience the exhibition as it was, not having my views coloured by their intentions and reflections. In this way, I could make independent and genuine reflections on the displays and meet with the objects authentically. A shortcoming of this method is that I have above-average interest and knowledge of museums and archaeological textiles as a seamstress, archaeologist and student of museology. However, by employing the exhibition analysis methodology, I have a scientific method to categorise my impressions in a way that other visitors can replicate.

Sadly, I had not seen the prior display of the Baldishol Tapestry in the Norwegian Museum of Decorative Arts and Design before it closed. This could have been interesting to see if the narrative and context of the display changed while the object was shown to the public. I have however tried to get an impression of the old display through photos of the exhibition (see fig...) that I will be using as a comparative for some parts of the analysis.

Aware of my shortcomings, using the exhibition analysis methodology, I will now analyse first the room the tapestry is displayed in and then the display of the tapestry itself.

## 5. *The Exhibit*

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This chapter is a study of one of the rooms in the exhibition *The Collection*. Dispersed over 86 rooms on the first and second floor of the National Museum are the permanent display rooms that belong to *The Collection* exhibit. As this thesis has limited space, only a thorough analysis of the room the Baldishol tapestry is displayed in will be undertaken. The rooms are in chronological order, presenting each their point in time. For this analysis, we are entering the Middle Ages. The review is the result of the empirical data I gathered from my notes, observations, recordings, and photographs taken from the exhibition during my visits. First, there will be a general introduction to the exhibition room as a whole. Next, the following headers will each go through a different topic that affects how the object is presented, such as “exhibition style”, “design, colour and light”, and “text and message”. Throughout the chapter the aim is to provide a holistic picture of the Baldishol tapestry’s exhibition room in its entirety. The question that will be examined through the analysis is how the exhibition is creating a context for the Baldishol tapestry and how this context creates a narrative about it.

### 5.1. The New National Museum

The National Museum opened its doors in the summer of 2022 in its new location next to Aker Brygge in urban Oslo, Norway. The museum was designed by architect Klaus Schuwerk and displays Norway's most extensive and valuable collection of art, craftsmanship and architecture. There are displayed several thousand works from ancient times to the present day, covering a historical span of nearly 3,000 years.

The architecture of the building is characterised by simple, horizontal lines, with its main body in grey slate contrasted by a luminous glass box, Lyshallen, resting on the roof (see fig 2). The architect chose durable materials for the building that should last for centuries, such as slate, oak and bronze. With architecture made of such long-lasting materials gives the impression of a significant institution which is solid and never changing. This is an illusion, as museums are constantly changing, at least on the inside. The modern museum collects and

preserves ancient and contemporary objects for the public to appreciate and learn about the contexts and narratives that change with the new needs and interests of society. As time passes, curators and visitors have been actively shaping the memories and narratives around the objects in the museum's collections. So no matter how solid and magnificent the façade of the building, it is an ever-changing institution (Crane 2006:98). The building is quite visible in the cityscape as a monumental building marking the museum as a vital cultural institution in the capital. Museum buildings that are made in the present have a large focus on being built as individual pieces of monumental architecture making high-profile landmarks (MacLeod 2005:12). This makes the buildings an artwork in their own right. Sometimes this is criticised for derailing the focus away from the art and objects which are displayed within the building, as the spatial design of the building may create a vital difference in the museum experience of the visitor (Hillier and Tzortzi 2006:282). The new building is not universally loved by all Norwegians and has been criticised in the media. As the New National Museum has a modern and minimalist “feel” to it, it can present its exhibitions as future-oriented and contemporary, and maybe even challenging tradition.

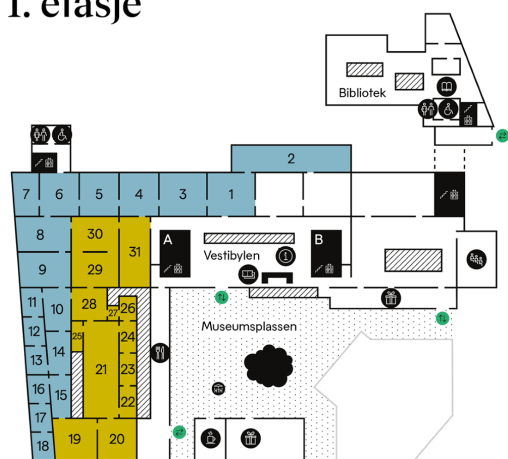


Figure 2. The National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design in Oslo, Norway. Credit: Iwan Baan

## 5.2. The Collection

The main exhibition rooms are on the 1st and 2nd floors of the building (see fig 3), with Lyshallen on the 3rd floor. The rooms are traditionally designed in rectangular and square shapes that follow each other in a row. This type of room flow is called enfilade. This resembles how Italian palaces and French castles had elongated halls to display their collections of sculptures and paintings in the past. This is a traditional layout of exhibition rooms that have been seamlessly incorporated into the modern building. *The Collection* exhibition extends over the two first floors of the building, where the rooms are presented in chronological order showing the big lines through Norwegian art, craft and design history. The first part of *The Collection* includes rooms 1-18 and displays what is considered the main features of Norwegian design history, with some key foreign works from ancient times to the 1900s (see fig 3). It is in this section, we find the exhibition room displaying the Baldishol tapestry.

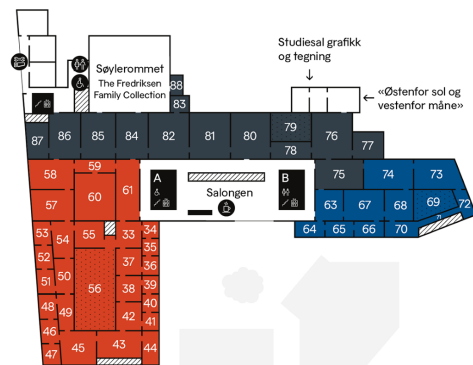
### Samlingen 1. etasje



■ Design før 1900  
Rom 1-18

■ Design og kunsthåndverk  
fra 1900 til i dag  
Rom 19-31

### Samlingen 2. etasje



■ Kunst 1500-1900  
Rom 33-61

■ Kunst 1900-1960  
Rom 63-74

■ Kunst fra 1960 til i dag  
Rom 75-88

Edvard Munch  
Rom 59-60

Fig 3. Layout of the rooms of *the Collection* exhibition over its two floors. Credit: the National Museum

The Baldishol tapestry is placed in one of the first rooms of the 1st floor, room 3 (see fig 3). This is the exhibition room that is the focus of this analysis and is set in the Middle Ages in Norway. As a visitor, it is possible to move around freely and enter the exhibition room from different entrances, either through room 1 or from room 4 through room 31 (see fig 3). This makes the tapestry difficult to miss on your visit to the museum. The enfilade layout lets one walk through the rooms like a hallway where one can stop to explore each room. In one room after another, one can experience the extraordinary and capturing art and design from the museum collection.

When entering the exhibition room, you are met by the sounds of Christian hymns sung by a choir, woven in with Latin sermons and ringing church bells, welcoming you into the soundscape of the Catholic Church. These are the sounds you would associate with a visit to the chapel during the Middle Ages in Norway. The music helps set the scene for these extraordinary objects on display, takes you out of this world and transports you far back in time to when they were all in use. Thus, without even having to read a single word, you know the time and place you are visiting to some extent. From the entrance of the room, you can see straight down into the following rooms, where you can enter a new era and faintly hear the piano playing from the next room as you move closer.

The room is spacious and rectangular, but still feels warm and intimate when one enters. In the room, there are displayed the most extraordinary objects the medieval church and prominent homes of the time had to offer (see fig. 4). There are hand-carved wooden chairs, magnificent stave church portals, icons and paintings shimmering with gold details, drinking horns embellished with precious metal, rare textiles, and much more to catch the visitors eye. The room is also home to the Baldishol tapestry, shown as one of the main attractions in the room.

The entire room is about the Medieval church, but is divided into two parts. The power symbols are displayed in the front of the room, while the many beautiful icons are placed in the back. A display furniture has been placed a little off-centre, in the middle of the exhibition (see fig 4). It acts as a division concealing the back of the room from view when you first enter. This creates a bit of mystery where you have to walk around it to see what more treasures there are to behold. In the back section, the objects come from a slightly later time in



the Middle Ages, but still belong to the Chaotic church. The exhibition has, as contemporary trends, limited the number of items on display. The display cases have much air between them, making it easy to move from one display to the next (see fig 4). This emphasises each object's value and makes them feel like powerful symbols of cultural identity (Moser 2010:27). The object has been carefully selected for display. The exhibition shows far from all the objects the museum has in its collection from this period. The museum communicates one specific narrative presenting the objects as masterpieces of their time. This classification and display are now the object's new context (Clifford 1988:218; Stewart 1993:154,157).



Figure 4. Room 3 in *The Collection* exhibition. Credit: Personal photo 2022

No digital tools have been used in this exhibition besides QR codes for more information on some objects. Using digital tools or new media is becoming more and more common in exhibitions. According to Beth Cohen, museums are pressured to introduce new media and move away from traditional displays to engage visitors and make the exhibits more “exciting”. Even if this can take away the focus from the objects that are displayed (Cohen 2014:22; Henning 2006:302). However, through the museum, at least in the historical parts, the museum has chosen to let the objects speak for themselves.

### 5.3. Exhibition Style and Context

Moser (2010:28-29) explains exhibition style as the communicative role or context given to objects on display. An exhibit can have different styles, such as idea-oriented, object-lead, aesthetically oriented, and fully reconstructed exhibition environments. One exhibition can also be a combination of different styles. In exhibition room 3, the exhibit is idea-oriented as well as aesthetically oriented. An idea-oriented exhibition style makes selective use of their collection in order to create a narrative. It is concerned to communicate key ideas about the chosen theme for the displayed objects rather than showcasing their whole collection. When a museum chooses to use an aesthetically oriented exhibition style the objects are presented as artworks and their visual impact is emphasised. These types of exhibitions tend to lack interpretive aids and have limited text, focusing on the object's beauty rather than using them as tools to educate visitors about their use and significance through history (Moser 2010:29).

Each room within *The Collection* exhibition has an implicit message and context that is conveyed. By giving each room a theme or idea to orient the exhibition, it sets a context for the carefully selected objects. An idea-oriented exhibition style is seen as more interpretive as objects are carefully handpicked, while an object-lead exhibition style is seen as more descriptive. However, object-led and idea-oriented exhibitions are just as selective, making the distinction highly problematic (Moser 2010:29). As *The Collection* exhibition has over 86 rooms with a timeframe of over 3000 years, the themes of the rooms help to follow the timeline the museum has created.

*The Collection* has incorporated various exhibition styles in the different sections. However, in room 3 in *The Collection*, where the Baldishol tapestry is exhibited, visitors are encouraged to see the objects as artworks, and there is much focus on the visual impact of the object. The exhibition room does not use interpretive aids and is limited to its textual descriptions that do acknowledge the object's status as historical and cultural documents. However, there is a vast focus on displaying objects of great beauty, making it clear that the exhibition also is aesthetically-oriented. As the objects were made to awe the mediaeval people through their beauty, and make them feel closer to God, an aesthetically oriented and idea-lead exhibition style is compatible with the subject.

The exhibition room shows objects that symbolise power and wealth from the medieval church and affluent homes at the time. The museum displays what it considers to be the height of art, architecture and craftsmanship from this time period. This might not give an overview, or realistic view, of the Middle Ages as a whole, as most people did not own these types of objects. But some of the objects were still an aspect of their everyday life as the church was an important social institution.

Only some of the objects exhibited in the room are placed inside display furniture. The furniture, paintings and architectural elements on display are not behind glass (see figs 4 and 5). They are displayed against the wall with a grey platform or line beneath them. Only smaller objects and textiles are exhibited inside display cases. The smaller objects made of organic material or metal and textiles all need a special environment inside the display cases



Figure 5. Room 3 in *The Collection* exhibition. Credit: Personal photo 2022

to slow down the rate of deterioration. This is of course also for security reasons. The small object could be easy to grab and the textiles of this old age would take great damage of being touched compared to a sturdier material such as wood.

In this room, the textiles are placed in the heart of the exhibition. The display furniture forms three lines through the room where the textiles are placed along all three. Both the bigger textiles are placed in the centre along the wall where their display cases are placed (see fig 4 and 5), while the two priests' capes are on each side of the bigger textiles in the middle line of the room (see fig 5). I wonder if this was to intentionally show the textiles as crucial objects in the exhibit and give them much attention, or if this was a design choice based on balance and symmetry in the display. In the proceeding rooms, the tapestries have been hung on the walls in combination with the furniture displayed below them. They are still very eye-catching as they are beautiful pieces of craftsmanship, but they are not the focal point of the room, as the textiles in room 3 have become. The textiles are not outshining the other object on display as they are all absolutely stunning pieces of art and design. While my perception may be biased as I am especially interested in historic textiles, the textiles' placement, colour, and size make them draw in a visitor as they explore the room.

The objects without display cases are placed in a way that suggests not going closer to the object than where the platform or line starts. So even if one physically could touch or sit in the chairs, it is quite apparent, at least for experienced museum visitors, that there is a barrier between oneself and the object without it physically having to be there. This gives a feeling of being closer to the objects. Visitors can also study them in detail just a little bit nearer, even though you do not actually get much closer to them. It also gives the impression that the museum trusts the visitors to handle the objects respectfully. However, there is an ever presence of security guards in the exhibition rooms, patrolling the enfilade. So if anyone were to step onto the platform, cross over the line or should try to touch any of the objects, or the glass of the display cases, they would most likely be told off. There are probably more security measures in place. After working at the Cultural History Museum, I know that if you touch the glasses of the displays, there is an alarm that goes off at the security guards' office. Something similar and more is probably at work in the National Museum too.

It would have been interesting to see how a different exhibition style would have changed the context of the objects. For example, an fully reconstructed exhibition environment built within the room could have made a very engaging display. This would allow the visitors to experience the insides of a medieval building. However, since not all the objects originate

from the same type of building this could create a false representation. The MET Cloisters in New York have very successfully built their whole museum as a reconstructed cloister to house their medieval collection and the famous unicorn tapestries. It gives the feeling of visiting a heritage site rather than a museum, which can be misleading as the building never belonged to the church or has been used for religious purposes. It does, however, permit for a very aesthetically pleasing and charming visit.

In this exhibition, the style choices lead the visitor to focus strongly on the aesthetic aspects of the objects and the overarching theme. Further, the exhibition does not invite the visitor to deep dive into the history, symbolism or crafting techniques of any of the objects. But rather paints a broader picture of the time period based on the collection of objects. Thus each individual object only has a superficial text, which will be further discussed below. The combination of the idea- and ascetic-oriented exhibition styles contextualised very well what narrative the museum wants to communicate to the visitor. The narrative being the church's importance as a patron of the arts and through this art connect the people to God and Norway to the rest of Europa.

#### **5.4. Design, Colour, and Light**

When entering the room, only parts of the exhibition are visible. The larger display furniture, slightly off-centre, in the middle of the room, covers most of the back part of the exhibition space (see fig 4). This covers the exhibition's second section, which lies on the other side. This separates the two sections and creates a surprise or mystery of what lies beyond the wall. The design is minimalistic, simplistic and modern, like the rest of the architecture of the building. The display furniture is all rectangular or square with sharp and clean lines. The room does not feel cluttered or overcrowded. The simplistic style of the exhibit pushes the focus on the exhibited objects, as there is nothing else to steal away the visitor's attention. The very modern look stands in contrast to the historical and very much organic and maximalist objects on display. The contrast highlights the opulence of the medieval churches' adornment and style and lets them stand out as priceless pieces of art and design.

The display cases have large windows with black metal corners, giving a good view of the whole object. The glass used in the display cases is very clear, with little light reflection or mirror effect. This makes it more comfortable to look at the objects as no reflections from the lighting in the room or mirroring effects will cover parts of the glass. It is also ideal for taking photos, as one can take pictures from any angle without streaks of white light or something in the room being mirrored in the glass covering parts of the object. You would hope all museums have this type of glass as a standard, but it is not the norm. This can make it hard to take photos, as one may have to work around the light and choose a different angle than is optimal. Sometimes you cannot get a good picture at all. This can be pretty upsetting if one has travelled to a museum and wants to take a photo of an object as a souvenir. However, all you get is the reflection of the display on the opposite wall. There is, of course, some reflection in the glass in the National Museum. But there is less than in most museums I have visited before.

The room has bright red walls, light wooden floors, a white roof, dark grey display furniture, and black framing on the glass display cases (see fig. 4 and 5). The red walls make the room feel warm and vibrant and connect well with the medieval context. Not because the churches used to have red walls, but rather because the colour has strong symbolism in the Catholic Church. The colour red is seen as the blood of Jesus and Christian martyrs and also symbolises the devil in the medieval Catholic Church (Pleij 2004:24, 83). Today in the Catholic Church, red also represents the Holy Spirit. Red was also an expensive colour to produce at that time and was a sign of wealth and power. So the colour does not make the room seem more like a Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, but it has a strong association with it. Not only does this room have red walls, but several of the rooms in the exhibition's first section have the same colour connecting them in style. This gives association with the Victorians who would hang their pictures against deep red walls to enhance their gold frames. Throughout the museum, the different sections of *The Collection* exhibition have different colour coding on the walls. This is to separate the different themes depending on what and when the objects originated. Much reasoning has gone into how each colour relates to the subjects on display. This differs from more recent aesthetics in museums using mostly white walls not to interfere with the colours in the pictures (Falk and Dierking 2000:125). The light floors make the display furniture pop, and the contrast makes it easy to understand where to

focus when moving through the room. The contrast pulls the attention to the displayed objects. It also, combined with the light roof, make the room feel lighter and more spacious.

As this exhibition room has no windows and therefore no natural lighting, all the lights are artificial. There are two different light sources: the main ceiling lighting, and some of the display cases have additional lighting inside of them. The room has dim lighting, ensuring that the focus is on the objects, each with individual lighting. The spotlight defining each object elevates their status and suggests that the objects are important, of high status, and quality (Moser 2010:26). Together, the design of the room, the colours and the lighting all work together to give each object its own space to shine and to be noticed. They offer little distraction and achieve highlight the objects and their beauty.

## **5.5. Serving the Faith**

There are several layers of text in the exhibition, giving different types of information to the visitor. First, when you enter through room 1, there is an introductory text panel to your left. With its title, “*Serving the Faith*”, this panel gives a sense of what lies ahead going into the exhibition, introducing you to the theme of the room and grouping the objects displayed into one context. It is written;

*Sumptuous garments, colourful fabrics and glittering decorations reflect the light and presence of God in the sacred space of the Church. Through the senses, poor and rich alike are brought closer to the divine.*

*In this period, the church is the principal patron of the arts, crafts and architecture. In Norway the most influential centre of church power is the archdiocese of Nidaros (Trondheim). Here there is a large community of international craftsmen, who introduce new forms and decorative styles.*

*Under the Catholic Church, Norway is part of a broader European cultural network. Craftsmen and objects circulate between countries. The inspiration for Norwegian’s stone*

*builds churches come from England, while many other artefacts, both sacramental and personal, derive from Northern Europa.*

1100

---

1530

(Introductory text from *The Collection*, room 3)

The introductory text uses colourful wording to set the tone of the exhibition room. Right from the beginning of the text, they present the objects as valuable, both artistically and spiritually. Further, they are placing the objects within the Catholic Church and categorising the art, crafts and architecture of the church as the authentic masterpieces of the time. The objects are also put in an international context as the church connected Norway with the rest of Europa through artistic inspiration and the exchange of ideas and craftsmanship. After reading this text, one expects to see only the best and most spectacular art, architecture and craftsmanship the Middle Ages had to offer. The text uses some difficult words and is written in a way that is not intended for children to engage with. At the bottom of the panel is a timeline where you can see that the objects in the room are from 1100-1530 BC. All texts are written both in Norwegian and English with a minimalistic non-serif font that fits well with the modern design of the space.

Next, as you continue walking into the room, two specialised texts describe selected features inside the exhibition room. The text is placed directly on the wall over some of the objects displayed along the wall. Therefore there is a bit of space between the reader and the text, and with not much possibility to lean closer to the text, a bigger font would have been preferred. In this way, you can read the text without leaning over the object. The texts describe two different types of status symbols of the time. One of them is about the textiles of the time and refers to the Baldishol tapestry, the priest cloaks and the embroidered textiles displayed in the room. With the text, there is an illustration of the soldier on his horse from the Baldishol tapestry. The other text describes the impressive nature of the chair displayed beneath it and has an illustration of the relief that is carved in the wood of the furniture.



Each object also has there own text, giving the basic information about the object, such as what material it is made of, at what time it was made and what it is. Some of the objects have a brief history, description and interoperation about the objects. These texts are a bit more scholarly, mostly presenting the information as facts, even when there might be uncertainties if the basis of these claims is correct. This will be further discussed in the analysis of the Baldishol tapestry's object text in Chapter 6. The object labels are placed very close to the floor and are written in a small front with white letters on a tray background. This keeps them out of the way when revering the objects but makes it quite hard to read. If one has bad eyesight, is using crutches or has problems bending down to look closer, this might create a barrier for people to be bothered to read the textual information and rather only focus on the visual. For visitor using a wheelchair, the text might be tough to read as one have to bend over to see the small font. This does not make the text very assessable to all visitors.

Lastly, some objects have extra information online that you can scan a QR code on your phone to access. In the digital information, there is an audioguide with additional information about the objects. This is good for visual disabilities. The manuscript to the audio guide is written below the audio link, which is great for people with hearing disabilities.

The texts focus on the bigger picture of the grouping of the objects and their place within the church, inside Norway and abroad. They write that the objects are symbols of wealth, power and the church's connection to Europa. It slightly touches on the artisans who created objects such as those displayed in the exhibition. Also, it is mentioned how these artisans took with them technics and styles from abroad. However, it does not include information on how any of these objects actually were crafted or what amount of work and skill it takes to create such masterpieces. The text gives much credit to the church for the splendours of the objects rather than the workers that created them. Portraying how much work and skill goes into creating objects like these would also help visitors who grew up with mass production as the norm understand why these objects were symbols of wealth and power in their time.

The text and messages within it set the research information-based context for the visitor. As opposed to the colour, lights and designs aid the guiding the visitor's sense. Textual and auditory information places the objects in time and space. The introductory text on the plaque and the text about textile treasures on the wall paint word pictures intended to draw the visitor

back in time. They aim to give an impression of the original context of the objects, trying to convince the visitor that the tapestry and other objects are authentic masterpieces and authentic artefacts, placing them within sections 1 and 2 of Clifford's art-culture system (Clifford 1988:224) (see fig 1). The texts present the objects as having had great societal, artistic and religious significance at the time they were created and used. Their old age only enhances the objects' rarity and importance, making them worthy as objects on display within the museum as objects of national heritage significance.

## ***6. The Baldishol Tapestry***

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In this chapter, the Baldishol tapestry and its display will be analysed in relation to the context of the exhibition room. First, there will be a complete description of the object and its motif. This will be followed by an analysis of how the tapestry has been displayed within the exhibition *The Collection*. Further, an analysis of how the text and audio messages related to the display creates a context for the object. Here it will be explored what context the tapestry has been put into and what narrative the museum has made about the object.

### **6.1. Motifs of Late Spring**

The Baldishol tapestry is only a fragment of a larger motif where the top and bottom are still intact, but both sides have been cut off. The remaining part of the tapestry measures 118 cm in height and 203 cm in length (Digitaltmuseum 2010). Its simple design, rhythmic lines and few but powerful colours put the tapestry within the Romanesque style (see fig. 6). In Northern Europa, during the Middle Ages, the dyeing colours used for textile dyeing were more limited than in later periods, especially colours that would withstand fading in sunlight. The colour available was red, yellow, blue, green and black, with little shading (Haukeland 1989:10). The Baldishol tapestry has a combination of all these colours in it with some variation of colour shades. However, red, green and blue are the dominating colours. To my knowledge, no tests have been done to see what dye was used in its production or if any of them have changed over the years. However, it seems that the dyes have held exceptionally well as for the tapestry's old age. The colours are still clear, so the tapestry has probably not been exposed to much harmful light throughout its life.

The tapestry motif consists of two human figures placed under each their arcade arch in interaction with different animals. The scenes are divided by a green column connecting the two arches. On the tapestry's right edge, one can see parts of another, this time a yellow column that might have been the division for a new scene if the tapestry was not fragmented. At the motif's top and bottom, the tapestry ends in beautifully decorated edging. At the bottom

part, there has been woven a broad multicoloured palmette design that connects to the main motifs with a creme chevron line. The top part has a slimmer edging in green and creme colour decorated with waves or a simplified version of the “running dog” pattern.



Figure 6. The Baldishol tapestry in its display at the National Museum Credit: Personal photo 2022

On the left, the motif shows a bearded man wearing a long-sleeved tunic ending at his ankles. The blue patterned tunic has a split in the front. Four birds surround the man; three sit sideways in a flowering tree between him and the column, and the last one is on his other side. Dedekam (1918:13) argues that the birds sit sideways because the tapestry has been woven from left to right rather than an artistic choice. In the man’s right hand, he holds a green-leaved flower that Sjøvold (1976:9) describes as resembling a palmette and Dedekam (1918:12) describes as a red flower in the shape of a pinecone. His feet reach all the way down to the Palmette edging, and his head and flower go all the way up and cover bits of the arch framing his scene. The background of his scene is mainly red, with patterns in multiple colours decorating it. On the arch there is an inscription, one can read the letters P R and I L I and possibly an S on its side at the end, but it might also be a decor. It is believed that this stands for Aprilis and that the motif represents the month of April.

On the right side of the column, we find a scene of an armed rider on his stallion. He is wearing full armour with a breastplate, a nasal helmet and a kite shield. In his right hand, he holds a lance and in his left, the stallion's bridles. The rider's armour is in the same style as the warriors depicted in the Bayeux tapestry and contemporary texts (1100AD) (Dedekam 1918:11). You can see his left foot placed in the stirrup with a spur on his heel. The horse looks like it is about to bow down with its front legs strait reaching down and into the palmette edging. Its fur is red with dark dots and has a different colour on its mane and tail and on its back and front hoofs. The background of the scene is mainly blue, covered with dots and some decor elements in different colours.

There is also something written along the arcade arch over the rider and horse, but it is much harder to make out the letters. It is believed that it is supposed to say Maius for May, as this is the month after April, but from the letters, this is impossible to make out. However, this does not mean that the motif is not supposed to represent the month of May. Motifs representing May in the middle ages in South and West Europe often are an armoured rider on a horse (Dedekam 1918:20; Sjøvold 1976:10). To represent the months with different personas in art was a widespread design. It would often show the farmer's life through the year, such as someone harvesting cereals in June and threshing in August (Dedekam 1918:13). Therefore, it is possible that the Baldishol tapestry is a part of this tradition.

The tapestry ones may have had representations of all the months, which meant it would have been 12 meters long. As the tapestry has been cut off on both sides, we know it has been longer than it is now. However, It was not technically possible with the looms of the time to produce a tapestry that long (Nasjonalmuseet 2022a). So if all the months were represented, it must have been part of a series of tapestries to make it more manageable. It might also never have been finished, resulting in the tapestry ending up as a rag in the Baldishol church. As we know nothing about the tapestry before it was found in 1879, this can only be left to the imagination.

## 6.2. The Display

The Baldishol tapestry is placed in the middle of the room in one of the larger display cases. When walking through the exhibition, it is almost impossible to miss it as the colours get lit up by the spotlighting inside the display, contrasting the all-black display case. Inside the Baldishol tapestry's display, the tapestry is laid slanted on what looks like a board covered with black cotton canvas. The tapestry has a platform raising it from the floor inside the display case. However, there is still much air between the object and the top of the glass of the display (see fig.7). The slanted position of the tapestry and the large glass display windows give an excellent view of the object. The glass walls stand out from the wall it is connected to and is, as mentioned above, very minimalistic. This makes the display very eye-catching. The two displays on each side of the tapestry also contrast with the tapestry. The objects displayed on each side of the tapestry include drinking horns, crosses and candle holders of remarkable quality and aesthetic appearance. However, the grouping of objects is relatively uniform in colour and much smaller than the Baldishol tapestry. This makes the tapestry stand out as the object surrounding it are inadequate rivals in capturing attention at first glance (Falk and Dierking 2000:127). It would feel natural to view the tapestry first before enjoying the two displays at its sides.

In its original context, the tapestry probably did not lay in a slanted position but rather hung straight up on a wall. In some of the other rooms, they exhibit tapestries from later periods, and several are hanging on the wall as they would have in them were in use. Even as they are hanging on the wall, they have been put in display cases, looking like frames. The Baldishol tapestry is among the older textiles on display in the museum, and it is for concern of its preservation that the tapestry is lying down rather than hanging up. As the tapestry is lying down, it has been allowed to take up more space in the exhibition room. This has also made it possible for the tapestry to be placed closer to the middle of the room, making it a centrepiece rather than being placed against the wall. To further protect the textile, there is a big chance that the environment inside the display case is controlled. It has been hidden discreetly, not disturbing the aesthetics of the display. The lights inside the display case light up the tapestry very well, contrasting with how I have seen tapestries displayed around the world. Here the rooms are often quite dark, and the lighting is dim. At both the Louvre and the MET Cloisters,

the medieval tapestries are hanging freely in rooms with dim lighting not to damage the dyeing of the wool or wool fibres. This is closer to the conditions the tapestries would have had in their original context. However, getting to see the tapestries in good lighting to really appreciate the textile's colours is a nice change. Hopefully, as these lights are not natural sunlight, they will not initiate photodegradation in the object, causing it to lose its colour.



Figure 7. Display case of the Baldishol Tapestry. Credit: Personal photo 2022

As I have never personally visited the Norwegian Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, it is difficult to know the relationship between the textiles on display compared to other object groups. However, to get some perspective, I have used a photo (see fig. 8) of the old display to analyse the difference between its former exhibition and how it is displayed in the National Museum today. When the tapestries were exhibited at the Norwegian Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, many of the tapestries were displayed in the same room. These tapestries have now been separated and placed into a chronological timeline instead of being grouped together with similar types of objects as shown in the photo. This gives them a new context. Before the tapestries were placed in the context of similar objects, in one exhibition, I can only guess concerning tapestries in Norwegian history. They were then carrying the entire

show as the whole exhibition seemed to have been about them. Now they are placed in the context of their time periods surrounded by objects from the same time. Thus they are more supporting characters telling a bigger story of the time they were made rather than presenting the technological and artistic development of tapestries in Norway.



Figure 8. The display of the Baldishol Tapestry at Norwegian Museum of Decorative Arts and Design Credit: Beate Ellingsen AS 2003

When it comes to the display of the Baldishol tapestry, there are some similarities to how the tapestry was displayed at the Norwegian Museum of Decorative Arts and Design before it was moved. They have chosen to display the tapestry in the middle of the room at a slanted angle at both museums. However, the display case's size and colour have drastically changed. The display case before was a white cube where the tapestry lay on a white canvas. The glass would stop only some centimetres over the textile that follows its slanted angle. At the National Museum, the display and canvas are all black. Further, the glass case starts at the floor and ends over one's head. From the photo of the former exhibit, one would stand and look down on the object having the chance to see the tapestry quite close up in detail if one wanted to. It was also possible to stand around the display as a group and see it from several angles (see fig 8). The display looks a bit high for a visitor using a wheelchair to properly see



it from a bird's view. I think they have improved this at the National Museum as the slanted angle here is more upright, so one can look right at the tapestry (see fig.7).

### **6.3. The Object Label**

The Baldishol tapestry, as any other museum object, will be bound by the context provided by the collection it is a part of. For instance, with the Baldishol tapestry, the boundaries are the exhibition it is displayed in and the webpage belonging to it. The National Museum will in this way determine how the public perceives the tapestry. For Stewart and Clifford, the organisation, systematisation, and classification of the objects make a collection (Clifford 1988:220; Stewart 1993:162-163). The information belonging to the object gives us an understanding of how the object has been classified by the National Museum.

One problem with the text is that, as with the rest of the object labels in the exhibition, it is placed very low for anyone who is not a small child to read. The text is not written for children either. As mentioned before, this can make reading difficult for anyone of any abilities. It also creates a little barrier for anyone in a wheelchair to see what is written.

The information given in the different sections frames the context and boundaries set by the museum. This classification shows us how the museum has categorised and organised the information about the object (Clifford 1988:219; Stewart 1993:162-163). The information is organised in different categories such as date, provenance, material, etc., which gives a good overview of the general facts about the tapestry. However, the information is also limited to the categories the museum deemed essential and adequate representation (Clifford 1988:220). For instance, what religion an object belongs to is not included as a category. The museum's description of the tapestry is a little summary of what it is wished for the public to learn and experience about the object. Therefore, the small text written about the object is a big part of how the National Museum has recontextualised the tapestry.

## ***Baldishol tapestry***

*1040-1190*

*Probably Norway*

*Wool, linen, Gobelin Technique*

*Acquired 1887*

*OK-02862*



105

*The Baldishol tapestry is one of the few such woven textiles from before 1200 to have been preserved in Europa. It was found in the 17th century Baldishol Church in Hedemark, but must come from an older church or the home of a prominent figure. The tapestry represent the months of April and May. It is a fragment of a longer work that depicted all twelve months the year. It may have been woven in Norway or imported from a less central, western European workshop.*

(Display text from *The Collection*, room 3)

The Baldishol tapestry is one of the objects in the exhibition that has a bit more information on an object level. The object label has some a brief text about the tapestry. Also, one can listen to more information on headphones from the museum or scan a QR code and hear it on your smartphone. The text written on the object label has one part with basic information about the object, Its name, when it is from, where it is from, what it is made of, when it came to the museum and its identification number. The larger part of the text gives us a bit more details. It informs the visitor that the object is old, rare and highly valuable as it belonged to either the Catholic Church or a prominent societal figure. This starts setting the context for the tapestry. It continues to very briefly explain what the motif of the tapestry depicts, the months April and May and that even though the tapestry is a fragment it used to be a part of something bigger. This makes it easier for the visitor to feel more familiar with the object as the months are something they would know. It also creates an opportunity for the visitor to imagine a bigger tapestry and how this might have looked in its original context. Both these two sentences are written as facts even though researchers do not know them to be true. It is especially not known if all the twelve months were ever finished. However, in the last sentence, they are less confident letting the visitor know they are unsure where the tapestry was made. As we can see in the first section of the text, they think it was produced in Norway; however, leaving room for a bit of mystery. All the facts they present are believed to be

accurate. However, placing the educated guesses as straight facts creates a context that feels more concrete and believable as accurate rather than more speculative, which it should be.

In the audio, they explain a bit more about the motif on the tapestry and how it came into the hands of the museum. They also reflect on what might have been the tapestry's history before it was found in the Baldishol church. In the end, they also explain that the tapestry is a mystery, and even though we know some aspects of the tapestry, we might never know the whole story.

The text paints a picture of a magnificent 12 m long tapestry gracing the walls of a church, in its splendour, connecting the medieval people with God, as was suggested in the introductory panel. At the same time, the only true context that is known of the tapestry is that it was found as a fragment cast aside in an attic of a Protestant church. As the nature of the Baldishol tapestry's origin and context is very speculated it would have been preferable that this was also reflected in the object text. It would have been favourable if the object labels were more assessable to read. However, the additional audio for visitors wanting to know more about the tapestry was an excellent addition.

#### **6.4. Context and Narrative**

The Baldishol tapestry has not only been recontextualised by the National Museum over the years. This textile has been through several sections in Clifford's art-culture four-section system throughout its history (Clifford 1988:224) (see fig 1). Her objects can be either 1) authentic masterpieces, 2) authentic artefacts, 3) inauthentic masterpieces or 4) inauthentic artefacts as explained in the theoretical framework (Chapter 3). We do not know how the tapestry was categorised when it was made or by its first owner or possibly owners. As the Baldishol tapestry provenance has been lost and the object decontextualised, one does not know where the tapestry was made or who owned it before it was found in the Baldishol church. Therefore, one cannot know how the tapestry was perceived or where it would be placed in Clifford's art-culture system. One can however speculate. The National Museum suggests that it would have been woven in Norway or imported from a less central, western

European workshop in their object text of the tapestry. They further suggest on the audio belonging to the display, that if made in Norway, it might have been crafted in a cloister. Both Dedekam (1918:48) and Sjøvold (1976:12) believe that it is most likely made in the north of France, Sjøvold also suggests England, if the tapestry was not made in Norway.

Nevertheless, if it was made in Norway or abroad, one can only imagine in what context it was made. Was this a masterpiece made by an artist? Or perhaps an imitation made of a more significant work? Could it have been a very exclusive commodity someone took home from their travels? Or maybe a commission made by the church or a gift from a prominent family? The tapestry might even never have been finished in the first place. The possibilities are many. The tapestry could have been in any of Clifford's sections except section 2 (authentic artefact), as this is an object of historical significance, and at this point, the tapestry is new. Whatever the context, an art piece, an imitation, a commodity or an unfinished art project, it would have changed how the object would be perceived.

There is no information on how the tapestry was fragmented or how it ended up as a rag in the Baldishol church leading me to believe that this happened quite some time before it was found. Hence, no one working at the church knew how the tapestry had gotten there. The people working in the church must have categorised the tapestry as something inauthentic and of little value without historical, cultural or artistic value. Perhaps this made them have little emotional connection to the tapestry leading to its fate as a dirty rug in the Baldishol church's attic.

After Louise Kildal discovered the tapestry in 1879 it was collected by and displayed at the Norwegian Museum of Decorative Arts and Design. It was now revered as an authentic masterpiece and artefact, and for the first time as we know, it was contextualised within the two first sections of Clifford's art-culture system (Clifford 1988:224). As the tapestry was made before 1200 AD and not found before 1879, it might have been valued as both an authentic masterpiece and artefact before it arrived at the Baldishol church.

A problem occurs when an object has lost its original provenance. Not only is much information missing, but now the museum is in complete control over the object's contexts (Stewart 1993:151-152). Thus, in control of how the public perceives the object, to some

degree. As we have seen above, through its existence, the tapestry has possibly been situated in all the different sections of the art-culture system and has been treated thereafter. This shows that an object can travel through, possibly, all different sections of the art-culture system in its lifetime, depending on the perception and classification of the persons or institutions that possess them (Clifford 1988:224-225).

When the tapestry is now moved to the National Museum of Oslo, it signifies that it has national significance pushing its context closer to a powerful national symbol rather than a historic document and religious artefact. However, I think the museum has done a good job of incorporating different aspects and contexts of the Baldishol tapestry. It is challenging to capture every aspect concerning a multifaceted object only with the tools of an exhibition and a limited amount of text. To communicate with the visitor in an engaging and understandable way through the exhibition, constructing a clear context and narrative help to create focus.

The exhibition has placed the tapestry in a historical period with other objects from a similar time, communicating that the tapestry has historical value. They also mention that the tapestry is a rare find from this period establishing its importance as a historical document. It also communicates that the tapestry is of religious value by setting it in the context of the Catholic Church, mentioning that it was found in a church, grouping it with other religious artefacts and playing chapel ambience. But first and foremost, the feeling one gets when entering the exhibition is that the tapestry has been placed in the context of being an authentic masterpiece of its time. The big display, the lighting and the grouping of equivalently magnificent pieces of craftsmanship accentuate and communicate the high value it also “must” have had in the Middle Ages.

As Stewart (1993:151-152) mentions, the context and narrative surrounding an object in a museum are more of a discussion about the many different interpretations one can have about the object, rather than a complete story about its history. It is not necessarily a problem that the museum presents the tapestry as an authentic masterpiece and artefact. It is also quite likely that the object had this status when it was initially used in the middle ages, but this is only an educated guess. However, the only actual context the museum knows about the Baldishol tapestry is that it was used as a dusty rag warming the bell ringers’ feet in Baldishol church in the 17th century. This context is not mentioned in the object text; only especially

interested visitors who scan the QR code and listen to the audio get this information. Presenting the tapestry as “*Fragmented tapestry used to warm the bell ringers feet*” in its object text would probably give a different emotional response in the visitors reading the label.

The exhibition’s visual tools, audio and text all work together to present the displayed objects as exceptional pieces of art and design from the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. The context and narrative chosen by the museum present the Baldishol tapestry as a multifaceted object. They present the tapestry as an object of artistic, religious and historical importance based on the research done on the tapestry.

The Baldishol tapestry has possibly been placed in several, if not all, of the sections on Clifford’s art-culture system (see fig.1) throughout its existence. In this way, one can argue that humans give objects meaning rather than having an instinct value in itself (Stewart 1993:151-152). As the tapestry has been *decontextualised* from its origin, the National Museum controls its context. The museum has successfully placed the Baldishol tapestry within the 1st and 2nd sections of Clifford’s art-culture system as an authentic masterpiece and artefact (Clifford 1988:224)(see fig.1). This is a hefty *recontextualisation* from the Baldishol tapestry’s find spot as a dusty fragmented textile in the Baldishol church. However, the tapestry is deserving of its new status as an authentic masterpiece as its beautiful craftsmanship and rarity permit visitors to be enchanted by the artistic radiance and learn of its many possible interpretations.

## 7. Conclusion

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In my Thesis, I have analysed the Baldishol tapestry and its new display in the National Museum by focusing on its *contextualisation* within the exhibition, *The Collection*. The research question posed at the beginning of this thesis;

*How does the new exhibition of the Baldishol tapestry at the National Museum contextualise and create a narrative about the medieval textile fragment?*

To answer this, I turned to a critical exhibition analysis of the tapestry's new surroundings. By examining the different tools used by the museum to present the object, one can start to understand the complexity that goes into creating a context. Further, I based my argumentation and analysis on both Stewart's (1993) and Clifford's (1988) Collection theories. This enabled me to explore how the tapestry's *contextualisation* within the museum impacts how the object is perceived and valued. To key terms focused on in the text were *decontextualisation* and *recontextualisation*, as they give an understanding of why the object's context in the museum is a construct of human choice rather than an accurate representation of the past.

Through its existence, the Baldishol tapestry has moved through the different sections of Clifford's art-culture system (see fig.1). This shows that an object does not have an instinct context or value in itself. It is us as humans giving an object meaning depending on our values in our society (Stewart 1993:151-152). The fact that the tapestry has been *decontextualised*, as its original provenance is lost, gives the National Museum extra playroom to explore different contexts through which the tapestry can be presented. The Baldishol tapestry is placed within a context where it is displayed as an authentic masterpiece and artefact of great rarity and importance from the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. The museum *recontextualised* the tapestry through the combination of architecture, exhibition style, colour choices, lighting, design of display cases, selection and placement of objects, ambient sound and text in the exhibition room.

The Baldishol tapestry is displayed within the frames of an idea- and ascetically-oriented exhibition style. The room's exhibition style focuses on an idea or theme that encompasses the

time, place and subject of the exhibit. Visitors are also encouraged to enjoy the raw beauty of the displayed objects. This sets the underlying context for everything that comes after. At the time, as mentioned in the exhibition, the Catholic Church was the patron of the arts, and their aesthetic was opulent. Therefore, every decision made regarding design, display, colour use and lighting has been utilised to enhance the effect of this context.

The museum has painted the walls red, the colour of Jesus' blood and the Holy Ghost. A colour that historically has been known to bring out the shine in gold, a material much used in the medieval church. The lights have been dimmed, only casting spotlights on each individual object to create a singular focus on the objects as individual masterpieces. Only exquisite objects of excellent craftsmanship have been selected to be displayed. They are further communicating that these objects are authentic masterpieces and artefacts of their time. The textiles take up much space in the room as they are big objects. Their size, placement and colour make them eye-catching for visitors when one enters the room. It is marvellous to see the National Museum include so many of Norway's historical tapestries in their exhibition, including them as vital artistic expressions of their time.

The displays have been kept simple with big windows not to disturb the view of the object, but also to stay coherent with the modern and minimalistic architecture of the building. This simplicity and the dark colour of the display furniture contrasts with the organic, maximalist and mostly colourful objects on display. This further enhances the object's lavish appearance. Together, the tools used to create the visual context of the room work well together. They all act to present each object as a masterpiece giving them space to shine and be adored by visitors. In addition, there is played an ambience of Christian hymns, Latin sermons and ringing church bells inside the exhibition room. Through the soundscape the museum has reinforced the context, transporting the visitor back in time.

The texts in the exhibition help categorise the objects within the museum collection. As opposed to the visual tools of colour, lights and designs that guide the visitor's senses and focus, the textual and auditory information communicates the object's place within the theme. The objects are presented as having had great societal, artistic and religious significance in the medieval church. Through the exhibition, the museum has successfully *contextualised* the objects as authentic masterpieces and artefacts (Clifford 1988:224) (see fig 1). The text



focuses much on the object's greatness, but does not go into how these magnificent objects were made and the craft it takes to create such masterpieces. This could have been an interesting angle to see the objects from. Further, the text relates the exhibition's objects to each other as a part of a bigger whole, the narrative of the exhibition.

The *contextualisation* of the objects seamlessly places them into the exhibition's narrative. The story tells of how the Chaotic Church connected the Norwegian people with God through the splendour and glitter of the objects and decorations within the sacred space. Their opulence and shine reflected the light and presence of the divine. Further, the church connected Norway with the bigger Europa through the exchange of artistic ideas and techniques.

The context and narrative they have chosen to display the Baldishol tapestry are multifaceted and are based heavily on the research done on the tapestry. They have managed to present the tapestry as an object of artistic, religious and historical importance within the limited frames of the exhibition room. The object label of the tapestry tells of a magnificent twelve-metre-long tapestry gracing the walls of a church or distinguished medieval building in all its splendour. Here some visualising tools would have been helpful for the visitor to envision the tapestry as a whole. Examples of how the twelve months of the year were represented in the Middle Ages would have been a valuable addition to its textual information. The tapestry has been *decontextualised* from its origin long ago and no one knows its true appearance or use. Still, the museum writes these statements as facts on the object label. The uncertainty around this could have been more apparent in the text. However, through *recontextualising* the tapestry, the museum has made it possible for visitors to enjoy its beauty and imagine how it might have looked and been used once upon a time. The original context of the Baldishol tapestry may have been lost, but this does not stop it from showing its artistic radiance and engaging visitors as a mysterious treasure from the past.

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