Baroque Ceiling Painting in Central Europe

Barocke Deckenmalerei in Mitteleuropa

Proceedings of the Conference

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Baroque Ceiling Painting in Central Europe
Barocke Deckenmalerei in Mitteleuropa

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Mural Paintings in the Cathedral of Nitra: Tradition of Reconstruction or Reconstruction of Tradition?

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The crucial point of my contribution rests on the premise that the phenomenon of the use and abuse of historical memory has a permanent placement in European history, and in my reflections concerning the construction of historical continuity and its interpretation through the visual art of the first half of the 18th century I will stress especially the official political and ecclesiastical attitudes present in the former Habsburg Empire during the Early Modern period.¹

“Primo: Ecclesiam meam Cathedram feram et a fundamentis per me erectam, Altaribus, Choro, Organo, Picturis, elegantii plastico labore, sacris vestitus, omnium necessario, im[m]o & splendido apparatu instruxi, eis[ue] Turrim cum Horologio, & Campanis adjeci.”²

The problem of Medieval reminiscences, retrospectives and revivals is a question reflected from many different points of view and in its various relations, especially in art-historical discussions outside the Slovak cultural milieu.³ In the last two decades attention has been given to this phenomenon: the challenge now is to clarify not only the theoretical background of Post-Tridentine philosophy, but also its visual evocation. For this purpose there was a new placement of Medieval artworks as a tradition of the older Church, a church which was not yet threatened by and suffering from the “Lutheran plague”, and a reconstruction of Medieval tradition in the visual perception of new works in an “old style”, as well as Baroque constructions of historical memory – *genius loci* – reviving the Medieval tradition of political and ecclesiastical power.

At the present time one does not hesitate to say that the normative unity of Baroque style reflects more our feelings then the real situation of the Early Modern society: the plurality of the fine arts is quite as much a characteristic of the old world as it is for the modern world, to paraphrase a comment from German historical anthropology. “Therefore we need not take our point of departure from a closed understanding of culture, in which all people had the same share. Citizens and farmers, workers and nobility cannot be estimated from the same point of view, as they follow rather different interests. The plurality of lifestyles is as much characteristic of the old world as it is for the modern world.”⁴

The interpretation of the Middle Ages during the Baroque period in the sense of *Renovatio Ecclesiae*, from my estimation, represents a very interesting phenomenon that helps the historiography of the fine arts create a more colourful image of period, despite the fact that every interpretation of the art historian has an element of construction, which only in part corresponds to the objective reality of history.

I will attempt to explain and apply a theoretical problem of the reconstruction of tradition, within the context of the first half of the 18th century. My example will be the Cathedral of St. Emeranus at Nitra Castle [Fig. 1, 2], and particularly Erdődy’s reconstruction of the Upper Church between 1711 and 1722 [Pl. XXXI]. Nitra Castle is, I suppose, the place
most symbolic of the first Christians in our territory. Modern historiographical research definitely dates the origin of this easternmost situated bishopric, a part of the (Great) Moravian religious province, to the second half of the 9th century: Nitra's bishopric was founded by the Pope John the 8th in 880 to satisfy the wish of the Great Moravian King Svatopluk. But Baroque historiography leapt over Slavic tradition onwards on the historic axis.

In the first decades of the 18th century, just as in the German and Habsburg domains, close attention was devoted to the old traditional religious administrative units and there was repeated research and clarification of their political and historical legitimacy in our territory also, in the Slovakian case intensified by the strong resistance of the Reformation and the conflicting historical and political situation until the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries. These upheavals verbatim touched Nitra Castle, which was a bishop's residence and cathedral church: firstly, the period 1663–1664 represents the culmination of disasters, when the horses of the Turkish garrison were stabled in the cathedral; secondly, the period 1704–1708, when Nitra Castle was occupied by Rákóczi's follower and adherent Ladislaus Bercsényi, and finally, the

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1. Nitra Castle, bird's-eye view

2. Caspar Bautzus, Nitra Castle, historical view in 1663, published in Hungarica civitates, Antwerpen 1684
definitive state of misery was reached in 1708 as a consequence of bombardment by the imperial soldiery under the command of Joannes Pálffy. The 18th century, in its mind’s eye “Hungaria antiqua versus Hungaria nova”, turned back to the old memories and undertook renovation of Nitra Castle not only in architecture but also in literature: in the case of this famous bishopric Baroque historiography founds itself on audacious claims. According to some sources, quoted here from the monumental five-volume materials, which are actually forgeries from the 17th century: Queen Gisela Bavarian, the wife of the Hungarian King Stephen I, was the founder and donor of the Cathedral Church of St. Emeramus in Nitra, and she brought with her the cult of this saint from Regensburg, her home town.

The main aim of the ceiling-fresco painting in the presbytery of the cathedral [Fig. 3] is to highlight the credit due to St. Stephen’s for the new religious organisation of the Hungarian

work of Josephus Innocentius DesERICIU, De Infitis ac Majoribus Hungarorum... the first priory with a chapter-house or bishopric was founded by the Marcomanni Queen Frigedilda or Fritigilde, who corresponded in 396 with Saint Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. In conflict with modern scientific research, Desericius is able to continue his story thanks to archival Kingdom in the first third of the 11th century. The fresco is by a painter belonging to the Italian colony in Vienna, Gottlob Antonio Galliarti (signed “G. A. Galliarti / invent. 1720”). The general iconography of the fresco is unambiguous: it represents the Assumption of the Holy Virgin, to whom St. Stephen, kneeling on a pedestal, consecrates the Hungarian crown
and sceptre. In the corners of vault the figures of the four Evangelists are depicted, accompanied by the four narrations from the life of the Holy Virgin – the Marriage of the Virgin, the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi and the Circumcision of Christ. Apart from these, which are standard subjects of 18th century composition, there are also three portraits, which represent the main object of our present interest [Fig. 4, Pl. XXXII]: to the right side of St. Stephen is the bishop of Nitra, Ladislaus Adamus Count Erdődy, the oldest of the three brothers and sons of Christopher Erdődy, and in the left part of the orbicular section his younger brothers – George Erdődy, a head of the Hungarian Royal Chamber between 1720–1748, and Gabriel, a head of the bishopric in Eger. Apart from the ceiling-fresco, St. Stephen consecrates the Hungarian crown to the Holy Virgin, only a few of Galliari’s compositions have been preserved until now: the ceiling-fresco, Chorus of Angels [Pl. XXXIII] in the apse, and oil-paintings with the Passion cycle on the lateral walls of the cathedral.

Who was the main commissioner and donor bishop, Ladislaus Adamus Count Erdődy? “Certainly, he emulated the unceasing piety of the Erdődy family in his famed munificence to God: they had filled different bishoprics in the Kingdom of God from the age of their first warrior Thomas Bakócz, giving honour to God through the founding and rebuilding of monasteries and churches. All the time they uplifted the religious ceremonies by their carefulness, watchfulness, as well plentiful and tireless endeavours. A particular feature of the Erdődy’s was this special gift of theirs, that they were able to appreciate that the only real achievements are those which contribute to the magnificence and beauty of the religious ceremonies.” (quotation from the exalted literary work which Josephus Balogh devoted to the three most famous bishops in the Hungarian Kingdom, *Imago Trium Clarissimorum Ecclesiae Luminum…*, published in Košice in 1738). Erdődy’s membership in one of the prestigious noble families of the Hungarian Kingdom in the Early Modern period seems to be a very important, at first glance an easily overlooked feature of the fresco paintings of the Cathedral Church of St. Emeranus in Nitra: here the Erdődy’s family’s attempt at self-representation calls for our closer attention.

4. Gottlob Antonio Galliarii, St. Stephen consecrates the Hungarian crown to the Holy Virgin (detail), Cathedral of St. Emeranus at Nitra Castle, 1720
Retrospective movements back toward the Gothic as an “old style” are understandable and believable in the milieu of Vienna’s Imperial Court and elite high culture in the 18th century, as presented in the contribution of Hellmut Lorenz in 1997. On the basis of his archival research Lorenz was able to recover a personal wish of Maria Theresia, from the summer of 1748, her wish, to successfully reconstruct the Gothic chapel inside Vienna’s Hofburg “in the old style”. One of Lorenz’s arguments in his interpretation of this decree of Maria Theresia is the fact that in 1737, in connection with the statue of Emperor Charles VI, a genealogy of the Habsburg house was drawn, with remarks on the Medieval Royal representation – together with the Babenberg – to express the force of the Habsburg dynastic tradition from the Middle Ages until the age of Baroque: more than primary religious piety, what is presented in this way is dynastic piety, and, finally, the idea of the chapel’s reconstruction could be understood in this context also.

Following this model of Habsburg self-representation, in 1743 the Erdődy family tree was also drawn, to satisfy the personal wish of George Erdődy, the younger of the brothers and son-in-law of Palatinus Count Paulus Esterházy. The Erdődy family tree was developed from materials supplied by Adam Rajcsányi, an archivist of the Chamber. In the opinion of Gábor Endrődő, this family tree is closely related to Matthias Ignatius Fidler’s oil-painting depicting an extraordinary subject – Memories of the piety of the Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus and the Erdődy family, from 1743. The noble clan-members in this painting include, on the one hand, George Erdődy himself, and on the other hand Eger’s bishop and Esztergom’s archbishop, the already-mentioned Thomas Bakócz from Erdőd, a spiritual father of the family and brother of the forefather and family ancestor Nicolaus Erdődy. A very strong expression and reconstruction of historical tradition is materialized in the fragments of Medieval altarpieces, which Matthias Corvinus gave the family: on the right side a relief of the Nativity, preserved in the main altarpiece in the Cathedral of St. Martin in Bratislava, protected and acquired by George Erdődy in 1734 during the famous Donner’s interior reconstruction, on the left side of the painting is the so-called Bakócz altarpiece from Esztergom. This construction of the historical relation and donorship between Matthias Corvinus and the Erdődy family, using the fine arts, becomes a parallel to the construction of historical relation between the Hungarian King Stephen I and the bishop of Nitra, Ladislaus Adamus Count Erdődy, who simply used and abused of the historical memory of Nitra’s bishopric for self-representation of the Erdődy thrones.

“Ecclesiam meam Cathedram fere a fundamentis per me erectam...” – this bishop’s proud declaration has several layers of connotation: Ladislaus Adamus Count Erdődy attributed to himself the credit for the resurrection and revival of Nitra’s bishopric after the age of Reformation and the Hungarian uprisings, and in this mirror the ceiling-fresco evokes the resurrection of the religious administration of the Medieval Hungarian Kingdom by St. Stephen; through the painting he also avowed and declared his Hungarian state allegiance, and he swore faithfulness to his ruler in the age of Pragmatic Sanction (the Emperor’s Pragmatic Sanction was accepted by the Hungarian council in 1722); he represented the history of Nitra’s bishopric through his own family and its Medieval tradition derived from Thomas Bakócz, and he appropriated his authority confirming the legitimacy of his family and his importance in the context of the political and religious history of the country.

The old Central European bishoprics thus became the shop-windows of the noble clans: the famous history of an institution was used as a means of constructing the historical tradition of a family.

Although we could use an Italian modus renovatio to characterise Nitra’s cathedral renovation in the second and third decade of the 18th century, in the sense defined by Meinrad von Engelberg, i.e. the overlaying and covering of the original Medieval tectonic structure by the newer layer, in the interior the Medieval tradition is legible in the ceiling-fresco painting. The exterior of Nitra Castle, on the other hand, is a conglomerate of many layers of architectural development and their renovations. The real
space of the Upper Church is determined by the 14th century.17
An artistic connection between the Cathedral of St. Emeranus at Nitra Castle and Vienna’s cultural milieu is a well-known fact: the interior decoration could be understood as one of the first complex realizations of Vienna’s Baroque style on our territory. In 1983 Klára Garas posed the question of whether it may have Domenico Martinelli’s architectural concept and Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach’s interior design,18 but these up to now these questions remain only speculations, lacking any verification by the archival sources. Similarly, the authorship of the high quality main altar’s sculptural section from 1732 is still unknown, with Lorenzo Mattielli mentioned only in art-historical speculations. My current interest leaves these queries to one side, especially given the fact that in the final analysis everything may end up different from what it seems to be at first sight. For me, the question of historical memory arose: its relation to the renovation of the old historic buildings, as well as family and personal representation, hand in hand with the tradition of the Catholic Church, under which is subscribed commissioner of the renovation and bishop of Nitra, Ladislaus Adamus Count Erdődy, because

“Primo: Ecclesiae meam Cathedralem fere a fundamentis per me erectam, Altaribus, Choro, Organo, Picturis, eleganti plastico labore, sacris vestitus, omnique necessario, im[m]o & splendido apparatu instruxi, c[e][u]c] Turrim cum Horologio, & Campanis adjeci.”

1 My current research project Nr. 2/5047/5 Gothic in Baroque. On the conceptual and formal reception of Gothic art in the first half of the 18th century in Slovakia is supported by the Slovak grant agency VEGA for the period 2005-2007.

2 Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky, Slovenský národný archív v Bratislave, Ústredný archív rodiny Erdődy, Sign. 6-3-6, No. 3: The last will of the bishop of Nitra, Ladislaus Adamus Count Erdődy, from the 18th January 1735.


8 Ibidem.

9 Ibidem.


11 Ibidem, p. 183.


XXXI. Cathedral of St. Emeramus (interior), Nitra Castle
XXXII. Gottlob Antonio Galliari, St. Stephen consecrates the Hungarian crown to the Holy Virgin (detail), Cathedral of St. Emericus at Nitra Castle, 1720

XXXIII. Gottlob Antonio Galliari, Chorus of Angels (detail), Cathedral of St. Emericus at Nitra Castle, 1720