

# JESUITS

YEARBOOK OF THE  
SOCIETY OF JESUS

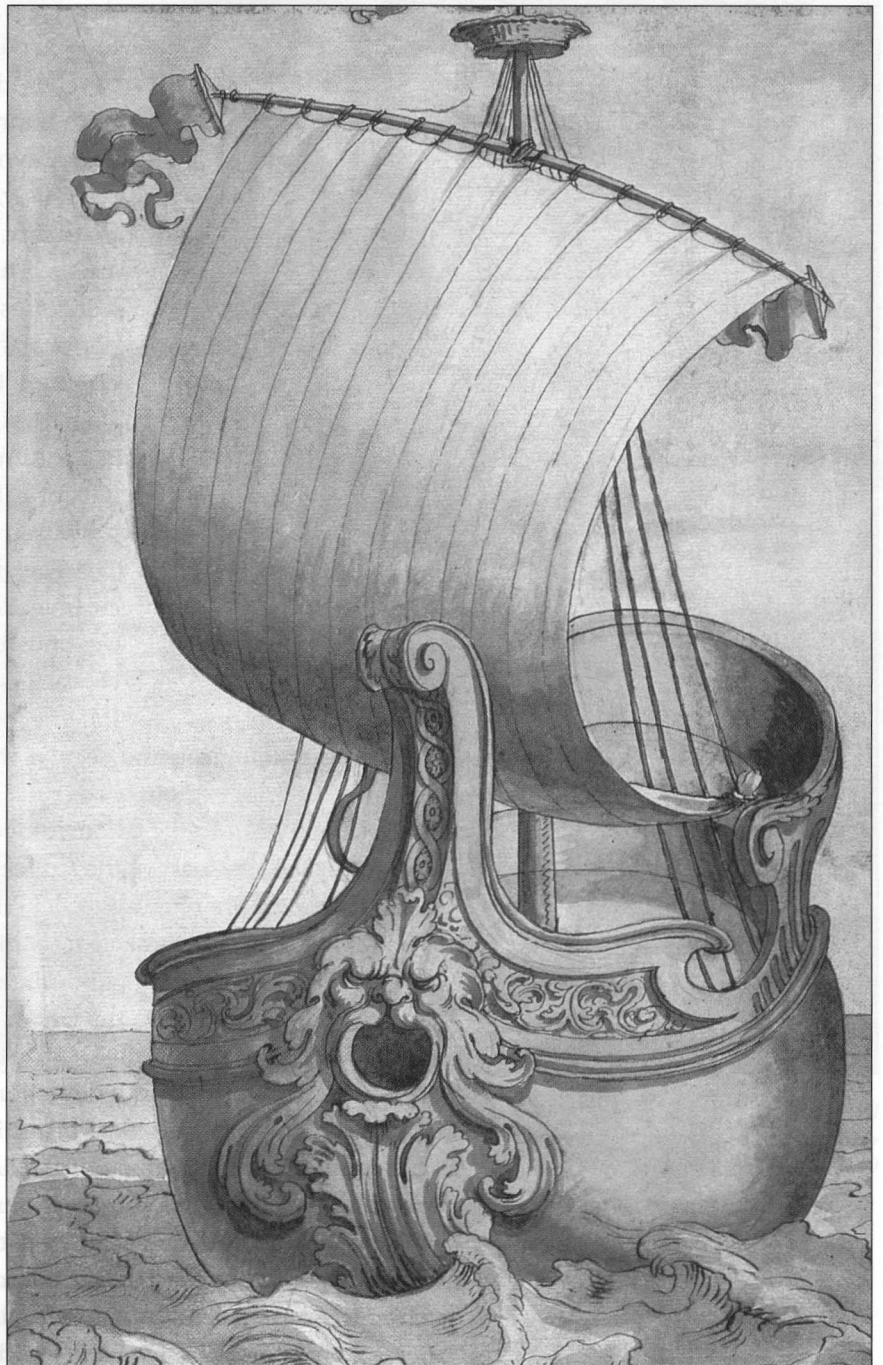
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# The Sopron Collection of Jesuit Stage Designs

HUNGARY

In every Jesuit school in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries, drama was an important subject. In its 1599 edition, the *Ratio studiorum*, devised to regulate and standardize the Jesuit school curriculum, lays down that at least one production should be staged annually in which the pupils of the most senior classes (known as Poetry and Rhetoric) were to take part. They were also to give proof of their academic prowess in declamations held several times a year. As a result of this provision, the plays and declamations became a normal feature of school life in all Jesuit schools and remained so right up until the dissolution of the Society of Jesus by Pope Clement XIV in 1773.

Procuring and making stage-sets was not an easy matter. Schools all strove to design settings that would help to enhance the sense of the plays' reality. The painting of sets called for an artist or, at the very least, someone who could sketch out what was required, and the painter chosen would then take his instructions from the schoolmaster directing the play. There are very few specimens of outstanding Jesuit stage designs from the 17th and 18th centuries. One of the finest example of stage sets is the collection now known as *The Sopron Collection of Jesuit Stage Designs* which can



Stage design for  
**Victory of sacred matrimony over profane love,**  
played in Vienna in 1710



For the play *Shield against the enemies of the Faith* staged in Linz 1684

be found in the Hungarian TheatreMuseum and Institute in Budapest.

In 17th and 18th-century Hungary there were about fifty Jesuit houses, colleges and mission stations. From these we have records of more than 5,500 performances altogether. At the five most prominent schools we have about 260 performances on religious subjects and about 670 plays on secular themes. Several drama texts and stage designs were passed on from one college to another and the Sopron Collection is a typical example of this practice.

Consisting of some 110 colour pen-and-wash drawings and etchings, the Collection was put together and bound between 1710 and 1728. It was purchased by Ferenc Storno the Elder, an art collector from Sopron from a junk dealer in that town in 1890. The drawings were made at different times and, obviously, by more than one person. They also differ in quality, although most are the work of experienced artists. The whole material falls into four main categories: **1.** Designs that were made with the performance of a given story in mind and were uniquely tailored to that story. **2.** Sets and complex stage designs complete with so-called "frame scenes." **3.** Costume designs for specific roles, most of them allegorical. **4.** Etchings, made for a whole variety of purposes.

The anonymous freehand drawings fall into three clear sections: **I.** All the pictures in this section are religious in character. **II.** Drawings of mythological characters and the gods and goddesses of antiquity, together with their traditional attributes. **III.** A mix of

religious, mythological, and secular themes.

Motifs common to the colourful world of baroque churches abound throughout the first part of the Collection: angels, the Virgin Mary, the suffering Christ, the Good Shepherd, the sick, the dying, personified death. Saint Ignatius Loyola, Moses and the brazen serpent, and Jacob's ladder were later added. The allegorical and symbolic stage-designs for the Passion are linked by a group of recurrent motifs (Christ on the Cross, the Glory of the Cross, the *arma Christi*, Christ's five Sacred Wounds, Death and his weapons). Among designs replete with symbolic overtones is a depiction of Death in the boat of Charon, ferrying souls from "this" shore to the "other." Christ's blood as the fount of all salvation is common in various groups of the designs. Christ's victory over Death dominates several of the compositions.

The drawings in section II are Baroque versions of Renaissance and late Renaissance forms of short entertainments between acts. Mythological scenes such as these represent, both in terms of the characters themselves (such as Jupiter, Venus, Hymen, Diana, and Phoebus) and in terms of the places where the

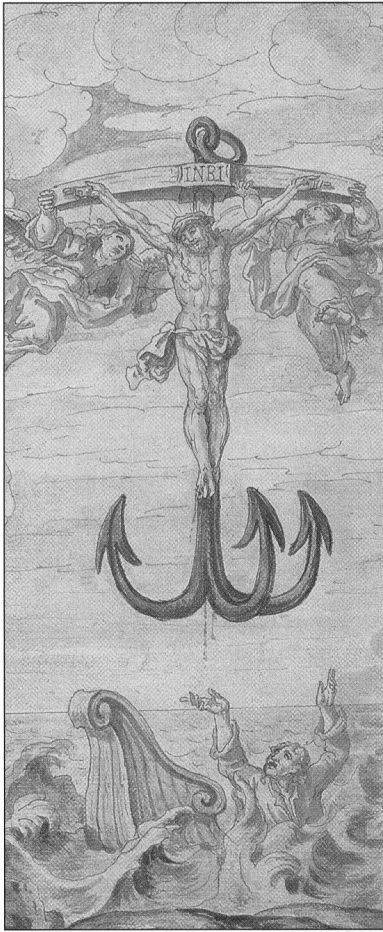
action is set -a town square with triumphal arch and fountain, the home of gods on Mount Olympus, a rocky landscape, an ornamental garden complete with pavilion.

The colour schemes and the high quality of the art of section III make it clear that we are here in a noble and aristocratic milieu. An iconography, whose principal motifs have been taken from the worlds of allegory and classical mythology, is employed to ensure coherence of character and setting. From classical mythology, for instance, come personifications of the winds and also the Furies, the Beast, Europa, Cybele, and Pomona, and from the world of allegory we have personifications of Vesper, the Four Elements, and the dual figure of War and Peace. Personifications such as these bring with them a whole world of symbols: Invidia or Envy leaning against a heart intertwined with serpents; Annus shown wearing a belt on which are depicted the figures of the Zodiac, the inscription of the date, a key, the winds, and a wreath woven from plants associated with the four seasons.

The vast majority of the designs in section I were created for a student production at the Jesuit grammar school in Linz of the play *Armatura fortium contra fidei hostes* (*The armour of the strong against the enemies of the faith*). In 1684, Emperor Leopold I and the court attended several productions by the Linz Jesuits. The allegorical *Armatura fortium* was one of them. The title-page of the libretto tells us of the circumstances of the production, which was staged on Easter Saturday, 1 April 1684. On that day, Emperor Leopold I and Empress Eleonora visited the Easter Sepulchre in the Jesuit church. It is this Easter Sepulchre that is represented in one of the stage designs. In the play, the Soul of Austria, together with her four allied provinces, uses the instruments of Christ's suffering as consecrated arms to defeat the pagan Turk, the enemy of the



**The devil**  
for the setting of a play  
staged in Vienna in 1710



*Allegory of salvation. Linz 1684*

Faith who, for the Christian, was synonymous with Death itself. For the most part, the play consists of texts taken from the Old and New Testaments, linked by poems, rhetorical questions, and so on. The production successfully combines the story of Christ's Passion and Resurrection with the pressing political and military agenda of the Hapsburg Empire.

Sections II and III of the Collection consist entirely of material connected with a production entitled *Sacer Hymeneus de profano amore victor in S. Amalia, Flandriae Patrona* (Victory of holy marriage over profane love), performed on the Jesuit college stage in Vienna on the feast of St. Ignatius Loyola (31 July) in 1710. The play, dealing with the legend of St. Amalia (Aemilia, Emilia), was attended by the Emperor and his entourage. The cast-list suggests that over 180 people were involved in the production. The printed programme and the complete play-text survive in a single copy, along with the music composed by Ferdinand Tobias Richter, the Imperial organist in Vienna. A central character in the legend of Amelia, the daughter of an aristocratic family in 7th-8th century Flanders, is Pepin, the virtual Lord of all of Gaul who decided he would betroth Amelia to his son Charles Martell, a move resisted by Amelia herself.

The author of the drama took Amelia's rejection of Charles Martell as the starting point for his play. In the production several distinguished youths were shown competing for Amelia's hand, yet she refused their overtures. Charles Martell decided to trick Amelia into accepting the betrothal. However, she remained steadfast. The play invited the audience to consider the virtue of faith and purity as exemplified in the figure of Amelia and her insistence on keeping the vow she had made to the Lord. What made this production particularly poignant was the fact that the saint's namesakes, Empress Amelia Wilhelmina and her daughter Amelia, were present in the auditorium. On stage, the play consisted of a Prologue, three acts with six scenes per Act, and two Choruses inserted between the Acts. Act III scene 3 served as an Epilogue in which a glorification of members of the House of Hapsburg was played out in terms of the conventions of religious drama. The Prologue and the Choruses anticipated the "real" events of the play proper by presenting modernized versions of stories from Classical Antiquity.

The designs in the Sopron Collection provide us with clear clues as to their origin, and the iconographical fashions they record. The way they were put together furnishes evidence of their having been shaped at some stage by a single linguistic, pictorial, and choreographical artist. The drawings preserve a number of typical stage designs of the day: designs dictated by the aesthetics of illusion and by the tastes of the rich and privileged. They give us some idea of the visual impact of the Jesuit stage, of its penchant for monumentality developed in imitation of Court theatre, and of its habits of blending high art, dance, music, and the spoken word in order to celebrate religious and secular festivals and, at the same time, glorify the Imperial dynasty. (The Collection was recently published as *The Sopron Collection of Jesuit Stage Designs*, edited by József Jankovics, Budapest: Enciklopédia, 1999).

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(Illustrations by courtesy of "Enciklopédia Publishing House," Hungary, 1999)