

Painted scene and feigned architecture in the ceiling paintings of the late-Baroque

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Abstract

In the workshop practice of the Baroque ceiling painters, when executing large mural compositions, the architectural details were painted by specialists. However, we cannot consider it as a simple craftsman work independent from figural frescoes; it is not just a required contribution but a dominant element of the composition also from the artistic point of view.

This paper illustrates the complex role of architecture-painting through the analysis of the frescoes of Maulbertsch, Kracker and Winterhalder. It shows that the former decorative painting of the cathedral in Vác worked as a tool for accomplishing an architectural concept. The study revealed that in the case of the ceiling painting belonging to the Lyceum of Eger, the reason for choosing a Gothic structure was the specific perspective problem that arose from applying a central focus in the ceiling decoration of the synod meeting room, which is a closed, rectangular interior.

It discusses the representation problems of the painted scenes when arranged in a 'board-painting' way (Székesfehérvár, Carmelite Church), and by analysing the different versions (Pápa, Parish Church; Szombathely, Cathedral) it sketches the typical stages of the late-Baroque metamorphosis of the feigned dome in Pozzò.

Keywords

Baroque ceiling painting · feigned architecture · illusionism · perspective illustration

In the workshop practice of the Baroque ceiling painters, when executing large mural compositions, the decorative and architectural details - mostly from the design to the painting - were the tasks of specialists commissioned for the work. Although the period of the highly respected Italian quadrature painters had passed, and in the second half of the 18th century, the decorators were ranked lower than the figure-painters [13], we cannot consider architecture-painting as a simple craftsman work, which can be easily separated from figural frescoes, functioning only as a required contribution.

The decorative painting of Vác Cathedral as executed in 1770–71 is today only known from archive photographs. It girdled the main altar fresco of Maulbertsch, presenting The Visitation and the dome painting of the All Saints in such a way that it became the dominant element of both the articulation and the artistic impression of the interior. (Figure 1) Specifically, the character of the space was strongly determined by the greenish grey cassettes painted on the vaults and arches, into which large, stucco-looking rosettes were painted with swirling petals. At the end of the 1760s, the fresco decorations of Maulbertsch were decorated with Rococo architecture painting nearly everywhere (Hradiste, Church of the Holy Cross, 1766; Vienna, university, Theologiesaal, 1766; Székesfehérvár, Carmelite Church, 1768). There are compositions painted at the end of the decade where Classicist painted entablatures also appear together with the Rococo ornaments (Kralovo Pole, Carthusian monastery, 1769; Drezda, Hofkirche, 1771). In Maulbertsch's oeuvre, the first clearly Classicist architecture painting was executed in Vác Cathedral. Later, the cassettes filled with rosettes became the typical decorative elements of his late period in the pattern set of both the painted architecture around the fresco panels and the architectural scenes inside the pictures.

Contrary to the disciplined graphics of the painted architecture of subsequent periods, in the case of the decoration in Vác, the stirring impression of the rhombuses placed on their vertices is remarkable, especially the dynamism of the cassettes painted with curved lines on the semi-dome of the sanctuary.

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Fig. 1. Vác, Bishop Cathedral, the interior with the former decorative painting (around 1770-71). Archive photograph, 1944. (Forster Centre, Photo gallery, 4030)

Seemingly, the ceiling painting with cassettes – completing the architecture of a French design – tried to achieve that kind of effect, which can be seen in the church plans of French architects of the time. The artists or the builder may have known the plans of Pierre Contant d'Ivry for the Madeleine Church in Paris, where a very similar decoration of the vaults can be found. (Figure 2)

In 1944, when the restoration works of the cathedral took place, this system of decoration was probably not sympathetic to Bishop József Pétery and his environment as they did not keep it despite the suggestions of the experts. When Béla Kontuly painted a new fresco on the semi-dome of the apse, the decorative painting was also renewed following the plans of Alfréd Bardon and the cassettes were whitewashed. In this way, they disrupted the iconographic system of the late-Baroque space's fresco composition; moreover, such a specific decorative unity that had been a good example illustrating that architecture-painting was not necessarily a sort of forced frippery, but can be the tool for the completion of an architectural idea in the hands of the artists, fell victim to the changes.

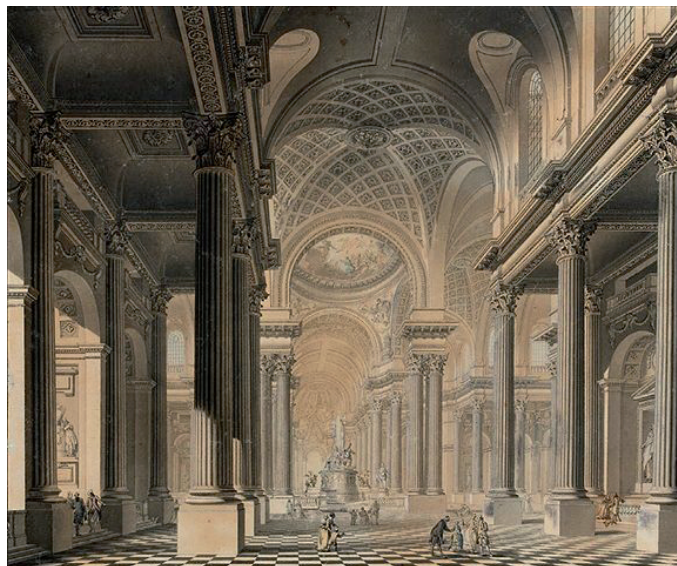


Fig. 2. Firmin Perlin after Contant d'Ivry: The plan of the inner space of Sainte-Madeleine, Paris, 1762 (Source: <http://commons.wikimedia.org>)

Of course, it is an undoubted fact that surviving historic resources sometimes provide quite prosaic reasons in relation to the commission of architecture-painters. For example, in 1793, Maulbertsch held out to the abbot of the Strahov monastery in Prague the promise that the wage would be less if the client agreed with dividing the ceiling into three because this way, the 'Stuckmalerei' (= stucco painter) would get a bigger part of the work. [5, p. 276., no. CXLI.] In the period, rich in commissions, the division of the ceiling into several smaller panels could have been an advantage for the main contractor, that is the figure-painter, because he was able to finish his part faster due to the sharing of the surface. [3, vol. I., p. 100.] Thus, the small-minded, unromantic motives can also be found in the field of high art. In this period before modernity, when it was not the inspiration, 'the authenticity of the experience' (i.e. the notions of the romantic or modernist concepts of art and authenticity) that determined the artistic work, it is not surprising that both in figurative and decorative wall paintings, highly intellectual activity played as much a role as the routine craft; the creation of artistic products was defined by awareness as well as by eventuality arising from the circumstances.

The analysis of the works of art and the resources warns us that the traditional image of the client as inventor and the artist as executor needs to be modified. This is especially the case in compositions with complex content and of high quality; one can see the gradual, step-by-step development of the concept, in which process both the client and the artist have the same dominant role; sometimes even the design of surprisingly significant programme elements and the decision in conceptual issues fell on the painter, although we cannot suggest total independence quite yet. Usually, a high degree of client awareness and the



Fig. 3. Johann Lucas Kracker – Joseph Zach: The Council of Trent, 1778, Eger, Lyceum, the ceiling painting of the library hall

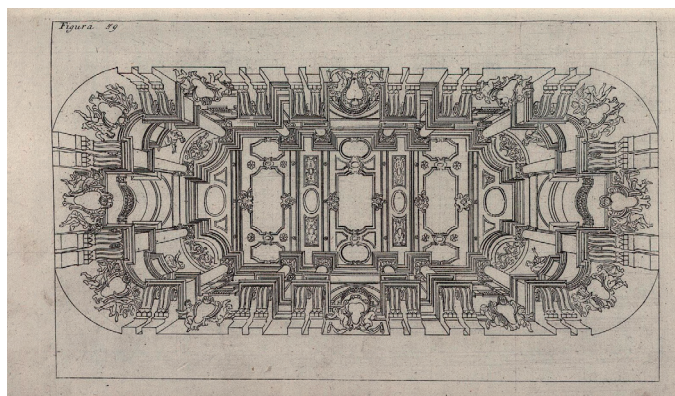


Fig. 4. Andrea Pozzo: *Perspectiva pictorum atque architectorum*, vol. II, fig. 59.

in-depth management of the artists' work commonly describes the role of one of the most important patrons of the period, Károly Eszterházy, Bishop of Eger. [4] This is undoubtedly true, but in case of those large frescoes like the four-faculty illustration of the ceremonial hall in the Lyceum of Eger, or the ceiling fresco cycle of the Parish Church of Pápa, about the origin of which abundant resources have survived, it turned out that his instructions concentrated only on certain points of the programme and the vision, otherwise, he entirely relied on the artists' content and visual invention. [9, 11]

In the late-Baroque period, in another typical work field of the architecture-painters, namely in the painting method of architectural scenes articulating the picture within the ceiling, we notice entirely new solutions. One of the best-known works of Hungarian painting of the era, the fresco illustrating the Council of Trent, in the library hall of the Lyceum of Eger, is an impressive and actually an extreme example in these terms. (Figure 3) Here the usual hierarchy of the figural part and the feigned architecture is almost inverted, and for the figures and scenes painted by Kracker, it is difficult to compete with the highly visual attractiveness of the perspective construction created by Zach. The anecdote, recorded by Ferenc Kazinczy according to which, when seeing the fresco later, even Maulbertsch 'clapped his hands... and admitted he could not do this much' [8, p. 148] may not literally be true, but it clearly illustrates the elementary effect of the optical illusion on the viewer.

In relation to the feigned Gothic architecture of Joseph Zach, the literature primarily questioned the reasons for the choice of style and the possible patterns, denoting the most typical manifestations of 18th century Gothicizing from the fantastic painted vault constructions of Johann Blasius Santini to the medieval architectural scenes that can be found even in the works of Kracker; it generally concludes that the use of Gothic form could be the conscious choice of the client Károly Eszterházy. [14, p. 234, 8, p. 148.] This paper prefers to argue that it was not any architecture-iconographical or style preferences that

led to this solution, but the visual problems of the specific task, being rather unique within European ceiling painting.

It is obvious that while the figure-painter Kracker – for the sake of historical authenticity – could adapt several details of the Zanetti engraving that illustrates the Council [8, p. 144.], Zach could not use the venue of the meeting, the space of the Santa Maria Maggiore Church in Trento, as a model, especially not its unadorned barrel vault, so he had to design some kind of fictive architecture. If we think about it, we hardly find any antecedents of a closed, rectangular interior ceiling presentation designed with a central viewpoint. Though the grand master of the perspective, Andrea Pozzo offers a sample for the construction of a central, bottom-view, oblong quadrature on a flat ceiling in his tractates [17, vol. II., fig. 59.], he was not really followed in practice. (Figure 4) The reason for this could be that the side walls would be drawn in a strong foreshortening (it is enough to glance at the columns!), in this way, it would be hard to present perceptible figures along the edge of the picture, and would even be impossible to do it with the priests sitting on the multi-storey bench rows of the Council.

Otherwise, for the better viewing of the figures, Kracker applied the solution common in the tradition of ceiling painting, namely, the viewpoint of the figures is different from that of the feigned architecture as the artist painted them slightly separated from the background wall, leaning towards the spectator. It would have been very difficult to realize this change of perspective in the orthogonal system of classic architecture as some unfortunate experiments show; see, for example, the work of Wenzel Lorenz Reiner on the ceiling of the library hall in the Carthusian monastery of Gaming [15, p. 118.]. Here, the painter attempted to illustrate both the complete bottom-view of the centre part of the ceiling, and the larger view of the figures' along the edge of the picture against the tilted background; this resulted a strongly foreshortened painting created by applying a classical architectural structure, ultimately a detrimental solution. Nevertheless, the Gothic architecture, discovered in the



Fig. 5. Franz Anton Maulbertsch: The birth of Mary, 1768. Székesfehérvár, former Carmelite church, ceiling painting

second half of the 18th century, offered a relatively suitable solution for bridging these complex perspective problems with its slender and flexible forms. Thus, the feigned architecture of the mentioned fresco can be explained probably not by symbolic contents or the architectural culture of the client, but as a result of the painter's consideration.

Another typical difficulty of late-Baroque fresco painting, related to the perspective representation of the architectural scenes in the picture, can be related to the spread of the 'board-painting-like' ceiling paintings, in which the painting form is not an illusionistic continuation of the real space but presents a framed, independent world above the spectator's head. This means that the picture does not provide the illusion of a dome opening to the sky, where heavenly figures and clouds are floating, but displays earthly stories happening in this world's scenes, landscapes and interiors (of course, in the sky of these scenes the heavenly figures are still flying around). [1, p. 93, 6, p. 49-72, 8, p. 80-82.]

In the second part of Maulbertsch's career, he was often faced with the representation issues arising from this. As an example, we can see an early, somewhat clumsy solution on the ceiling painting of the Carmelite Church in Székesfehérvár, displaying the Birth of Mary; this offers a special solution for the representation problem of the bottom-view interior: spatial units with different levels and viewpoints are placed next to one another, in a way that the scenes are spread out at the bottom, along the curve of the oval, and are strongly foreshortened upwards. (Figure 5) This architecture gives an unrealistic impression as the exterior and interior, the celestial and the earthly scenes are merged, with the spatial units attached inorganically and illogically. The central place, where the scene takes place, gives the impression of an oval hall that opens to other rooms at the sides and upwards to the sky, but the podiums hosting the



Fig. 6. Franz Anton Maulbertsch: The preaching of St. Stephen, 1782. Pápa, Parish Church, the ceiling painting of the longitudinal nave [photo by the author]

figures and the celestial groups penetrating from the top disturb the spatial perception.

The surviving sketches show that the main elements of the picture scene were designed by the painter himself. On these ceiling-painting plans, the architectural scenes are always presented from a front view, in orthogonal projection, as the inclination angle of the walls and columns – giving a foreshortening illusion – were obviously calculated on site, appropriate to the conditions of the given space, and the architecture-painter executed them on the vault.

The additive design solved with breaks, seen on the ceiling painting in Székesfehérvár, is replaced by the gradual and constant transition of the viewpoints within the picture in the later works of Maulbertsch, such as the fresco-series of the vault of the Parish Church in Pápa. In the scene presenting the Preaching of St Stephen (Figure 6), a complex domed interior, extended by side rooms, towers over the viewer's head. The artist displayed the fictitious space from bottom view but in a cross-section manner, the dome – the heir of the feigned dome of Pozzo, which was often supplanted to a scene space on German and Austrian ceiling paintings – was placed to the second spatial layer while the wide foreground with stairs became the scene for the figures. In March 1782, directly before the start of the execution, the artist wrote to the client that he would paint the picture from a 'high viewpoint' [in hohen Augenschein genohmen] [18, p. 299, no. C/VII/7.], by which he might have meant the overall, panoramic view that compressed both the complex architecture divided into several side spaces and the large mass into one single view. On the fresco, we can see a pendentive dome with tambour, decorated



Fig. 7. Franz Anton Maulbertsch: Presentation of Jesus in the church (first version of the sketch painted for the ceiling fresco in the crossing of the Cathedral of Szombathely), 1794 oil, canvas, diameter: 83 cm, Klosterneuburg, Stiftsgalerie, [photo by the author]



Fig. 8. Franz Anton Maulbertsch: Presentation of Mary in the church (second version of the sketch painted for the ceiling fresco in the crossing of the Cathedral of Szombathely), 1795 oil, canvas, diameter: 96 cm, Szombathely, Diocesan Collection [photo by the author]

with rosette-cassettes of a Classical style, crowning a spacious, monumental space. Similar domed spaces, placed on top of the bundle of columns, rising up in a baldachin-like way, also appear in the French architecture of the time, for example, in the already referred to plans of Pierre Contant d'Ivry for the Madeleine Church in Paris (1757). [16]

Some 12 years later, Maulbertsch applied a similar picture scheme when for Bishop János Szily he painted the modellos of the frescos designed for the Cathedral of Szombathely then under construction. On the sketch of the main dome, today preserved in Klosterneuburg, a concave arched high plateau and stairs rise above the parapet with balustrade, leading up to a spacious dome hall. [7. p. 171-172, no. I. 36.] (Figure 7) The white marble architecture shines in the light as a slightly cool, majestic background; it clearly separates from the colourful figures and the shadow veiled motives on the left side. As is typical for this artist, the columns of the scenes stand straight on the modello as the sketch is not the perspective construction plan for the vault projection; nevertheless, it gives an overall impression of the imagined main view of the ceiling painting, approximately showing the way it would be perceived from the direction of the nave, from a diagonal bottom-view. We can find the same on the second oil sketch of the main dome, painted in 1795, where the arrangement of the Church of Jerusalem already followed the instructions of Szily. [7. p. 172-173, Kat. I. 37.] (Figure 8) Specifically, the bishop instructed the artist how to correct the details of the previous composition

in order to better harmonize them to the Jewish liturgical habits. Furthermore, the following suggestion had an important consequence for the concept of the picture: 'Instead of the central large opening, where you painted clear blue sky with angels, perhaps an architecturally decorated church, deepening in perspective, would not seem bad, the big curtain hiding the ark of the covenant would be at the end, and outside this curtain the donation ceremony could be displayed' [12, p. 107-108, no. B/II. 17.] On the new sketch, the artist also presented the triple articulation of the Church of Jerusalem, and instead of the sanctuary, the stepped foreground, separated with groups of columns and arches, became the place of the scene.

These two sketches could not have been the plans of the perspective structure of the ceiling painting because when they were made, Maulbertsch had not yet seen the final architecture; he would not have known the conditions for the fresco of the main dome by the crossing space designed by Hefele. It is clear that the artist thought of trying to revive the system already tested in Pápa, where the correct view of the ceiling paintings can be found at an acute angle, from a viewpoint outside of the vault-panel.

As Maulbertsch died in 1796, the ceiling painting was finished by his successor, his best copier, also in the field of fresco painting, Josef Winterhalder Jr, who would have seen that his master's preliminary concept and well-tried system of ceiling painting could not be applied on the suspended dome of the cathedral. This was because here the rise of the



Fig. 9. Josef Winterhalter Jr.: Presentation of Mary in the church, 1799-1800. Szombathely, Cathedral, the former fresco of the sail vault of the crossing, destroyed in 1945. (Forster Centre, Photo Gallery, 007.523)

dome was much steeper than that of the flat sail vault of the church in Pápa, and their sizes differed too; the surface of the vault provided a fresco panel of almost double the diameter. Thus, he had to reconsider the concept raised in the sketches. According to his solution, the painting panel was articulated by a feigned architecture painted virtuosically. (Figure 9) Its main motif – displayed in a foreshortening for the illustration of dizzying heights – was provided by a huge baldachin raised on top of bundles of columns and four massive pedestals. The stepped plinth, starting behind the balustrade, worked as a scene for the actors and the illustrated liturgical acts. The main view presented the introduction of Mary to a much enlarged and solemn crowd.

The painter chose such a unique picture composition, with which he united the two different principles and procedures of ceiling painting. The perspective point of the building did not coincide with the centre of the vault, but moving towards the nave it gave a better sight of the space facing the sanctuary, namely of the main scene. In this section of the west side, having a wider perspective, one could look through the column bundles of the baldachin to a wide dome space that was similar to the architecture in the sketches of Maulbertsch. In these terms, the work reminds us of the late-Baroque ceiling paintings composed from one main viewpoint, and just like them,

it led to ‘another world’ instead of providing an illusionistic extension of the cathedral’s space.

Nevertheless, it did provide this extension, as the painter continued on the path from which his German ancestors had departed; one that started from the feigned dome, designed with a single viewpoint, in Pozzo. In this way, for the solution in Szombathely, such works of art can present intermediate stages, like the ceiling painting of the Telfes Parish Church of Tyrol, painted by Anton Zoller, [15, p. 374-375, no. 129.] where the figures are placed behind an uninterrupted circumferential parapet with balustrade. The other typical motif is the baldachin towering over the head of the spectator, ‘rising above’ the vault. Its most important prefigure can be found in the fresco of Matthäus Günther in Oberammergau, which presents the parishioners’ pilgrimage to the tomb of St Peter from its original scene in the dome hall of the San Pietro in Rome, under the baldachin of Bernini, adding a stairway leading upwards from the depths. [2, p. 60.]

In the structure of his ceiling painting, Winterhalter made the baldachin the main motif. However he broke from the eccentric perspective of the German antecedents, which had origins from Pozzi and could be seen at Günther as well, by representing it from a total bottom-view. This resulted in a paradox solution: although the bundles of columns stand ‘behind’ the balustrade, on the ‘ground level’ of the painted space, as the building is closed above the head of the viewer, for the spectator standing in the crossing space it gives the illusion of being present in the painted space. The single view that is usually typical for the ceiling paintings of the late-Baroque was completed with other scenes on the surface of the vault; it provided a view that ran around the space as a panoramic painting.

All these features were dictated by a consistent artistic logic, which – as is also clear from the programme-interpretation of the time [12, p. 84–85, no. A/13.] – was aimed at the presentation of the event from the point of view of religious salvation, beside the authentic, narrative-historical representation of the theme. In the interpretation of Winterhalter, not only the one-time congregation of the church of Jerusalem watched Mary’s visit to the church, but the entire community of the church, even the representatives of the period of ante legem, sub lege and sub gratia, as he painted figures in antique and more modern dress. In the painted space of the fresco, behind the main scene, Bishop Szily himself extended the historical theme to the present, inviting the viewer to participate in the sacred event. These thematic references were fulfilled by the specific illusionism of the work as it presented an episode of the life of the Virgin by offering the experience of the common space and time to the viewer.

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