Late Baroque sculptor Joseph Straub and his works for the Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora, Slovenia

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Abstract: This article presents the Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora in Styria, Slovenia. It focuses on baroque sculptor Joseph Straub and his works for the church. I start with the historical circumstances regarding the building of the church and its furnishing, presenting state of research. In the second part, I focus on the façade sculptures and provide their iconographic and stylistic analysis. The latter conforms that their author is indeed late baroque sculptor Joseph Straub. Furthermore, I also analyse the other works in the church attributed to this sculptor – sculptures from the pulpit as well as sculptures on the organ case.

Key words: Joseph Straub, the Church of Saint Mary, Sladka gora, Styria, façade sculptures, baroque sculpture, 18th century, Saint Margaret

The Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora and its historical circumstances

The picturesque late baroque Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora in Slovenia is believed to be the most beautiful gesamtkunstwerk in (Slovenian) Styria. Its bright yellow convex-
concave shaped façade is harmoniously integrated into the surrounding vineyard hills. The true perfection of baroque art is revealed in the interior, where the central architecture with fresco paintings, wooden altars and furniture forms an outstanding synthesis.

The oldest history of Sladka gora is intertwined with the history of Lemberg. Until the 18th century, Sladka gora was a succursal church of the parish in Lemberg. In that time, a small (gothic) Church of Saint Margaret stood on the very same spot where the Church of Saint Mary was later build.

The significance of the church (and the popularity of the place) in Sladka gora was increasing greatly during that period; it was triggered by people coming to worship the Mary statue on the Altar of Mary in 1738 (in the old Church of Saint Margaret). In 1741, the confraternity of Immaculate Conception was established with a seat at the same altar. It was believed that several of Mary’s miracles had happened in that place. That was the main reason and hope for several pilgrims, who visited the place, worshiped Mary and also donated money. There were many pilgrims and thus many donations. Therefore, Janez Mikec, a priest from Lemberg, took the initiative to build a new church. He was so aware of his crucial role in this project that he ordered a painting of himself receiving the permission for building the church from the authorities in Graz (on the fence of the organ loft in the church). The church was built between 1743 and 1754. It is assumed that the architect was renowned Styrian

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1 Lemberg was mentioned for the first time in 1248 and attested in historical records as a market town in 1466. About the history of Lemberg (and Sladka gora) see: P. Strmšek, Lemberg in Sladka gora, Celje, Muzejsko društvo, 1937.
4 Kovačič, pp. 86, 293; Curk, p. 33; Vrišer, Sladka gora, p. 4; Kemperl, ‘Romarske cerkve’, p. 177; Kemperl, Korpus, p. 119; Kemperl, Arhitekturna tipologija, p. 147; Kemperl and Vidmar, Barok na Slovenskem, p. 187.
5 Kemperl and Vidmar, p. 187.
architect Josef Hoffer. In fact, Janez Mikec engaged the best artists of his time to work in the interior – the frescoes were painted by Franc Jelovšek between 1752 and 1754 and several sculptural workshops contributed to making the altars, confessionals and the pulpit. There is a note about the consecration of the church in 1754: the Archbishop of Gorizia, Karel Mihael Attems, consecrated it on the 25 July. In 1786, the parish seat was moved from Lemberg to Sladka gora, which was decided in order to prevent the church from being closed.

State of research

The Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora was mentioned for the first time in topographical lexicon by Josef Andreas Janisch, but was not recognized as a monument of special importance. The first facts about the church and its historical circumstances were presented by Franc Kovačič. A more comprehensive overview about the history of Lemberg and Sladka gora was published a few years later, in 1937. Already in 1940, Stane Mikuž published descriptions and analyses of the frescoes. Next, we have to mention Jože Curk and his topography, which provided detailed descriptions and a list of the then known facts. In that time, Nace Šumi proposed the dating for the Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora at around 1750 and suggested Johann Nepomuk Fuchs as the architect. Sergej Vrišer suggested authorships for the altars and other sculptures in the church as well as for the sculptures on the main façade. His suggestions were based on stylistic analyses. However, the most important item to point out is his short monograph about Sladka gora from 1979, which

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10 Kovačič, pp. 86, 293; Curk, Topografsko gradivo, p. 33
11 In 1784, Joseph II ordered the closing of all churches and chapels in Crain that did not serve as parish or monastery churches. Kemperl, Arhitekturna tipologija, p. 35.
13 Kovačič, Zgodovina, pp. 86, 293.
14 Strmšek, Lemberg, 1937.
16 Curk, Topografsko gradivo, pp. 23–33.
17 He was relying on the dating of the frescoes as being from 1753. N. Šumi, Ljubljanska baročna arhitektura, Ljubljana, Slovenska matica, 1961.
18 N. Šumi, Baročna arhitektura, Ljubljana, Mladinska knjiga, 1969.
is still the only monograph and the most comprehensive source about the church; with good
descriptions, but with some out-of-date facts.\textsuperscript{19} Especially in the case of the architecture, since
Metoda Kemperl convincingly proposed Josef Hofer as an architect. She also found an
archive note about the building of the church, which set the date of the beginning of the
building works as 1743.\textsuperscript{20} There was also a collection of (non-scientific) papers about the
Parish of Sladka gora published in 2004, but only a few of them focused on the church and its
art.\textsuperscript{21} The newest presentation of the church can be found in the latest monography on baroque
monuments in Slovenia.\textsuperscript{22} Consequently, we have to point out that there is a need for a new
monograph of the church as well as for some new research.

The façade sculptures

The whole façade of the Church of the Saint Mary in Sladka gora is convex-concave
shaped and vivid. The main façade is enclosed with two bell towers,\textsuperscript{23} and it is divided into
two storeys and has three axes. All the axes are concave shaped and all have two openings. In
the main axis, there is a portal. The upper part is clearly separated from the lower with a
profiled cornice; it is designed as an aedicule with a profiled pediment and with a semi-
circular niche in the middle. On the top of the pediment, there is a stone statue of Saint Mary
with Jesus and with two kneeling angels on the sides. In the niche, there is a statue of Saint
Margaret with a little dragon beside her legs. On the sides above two volutes – made in stucco
on the façade – there are two saints. The one on the left represents a male in fine dress. He
resumes a special posture: he places his left hand on his chest and holds a bowl in his right
hand. He was identified as Saint Bartholomew. The one on the right edge is pouring water
from a bucket; he is wearing a nice dress with ornaments on his chest and a helmet with a
plume. He is raising his left arm, in which he was probably holding a flag (it is not saved).
There is also a model of a burning house beside his left leg. We can recognise him as Saint
Florian. All statues are of good quality, with convincingly shown postures and carved with
special attention to detail. Below I will focus on each statue individually and describe them

\textsuperscript{19} Vrišer, \textit{Sladka gora}.
\textsuperscript{20} Kemperl, ‘Romarske cerkeve’, pp. 177–178; M. Kemperl, ‘Josef Hoffer: Ein neuer Name unter den steirischen
multidisciplinarna istraživanja}, 7, 2005, pp. 35–36; Kemperl, \textit{Korpus}, pp. 119–120 and there listed bibliography;
Kemperl, \textit{Arhitekturna tipologija}, p. 147.
\textsuperscript{22} Kemperl and Vidmar, \textit{Barok na Slovenskem}, pp. 186–191.
\textsuperscript{23} The lower part of the western bell tower is preserved from the old church. Curk, \textit{Topografsko gradivo}, p. 33;
Kemperl, \textit{Korpus}, p. 119.
more exhaustively. Note that the façade sculptures have not been presented and discussed in art history literature so far.\textsuperscript{24}

**Joseph Straub – a stonemason or not?**

The discussion between Sergej Vrišer and Blaž Resman regarding Joseph Straub’s competence in stonemasonry was triggered by the question about the authorship of the Plague Monument in Maribor.\textsuperscript{25} Even though many arguments and opinions have resulted, the question remains unsettled to this day.

Admittedly, working predominantly in wood does not exclude one’s abilities to work in stone and vice versa. Consider, for example, some other baroque sculptors that were competent both in wood and in stone. As examples, some contemporary Styrian sculptors may be named: a brother of Joseph Straub, Philipp Jakob Straub, Josef Stammel and Franz Christoph Reiss.

But most importantly, certain characteristics in shaping the body, the drapery and the details of façade sculptures seem to reflect the personal style of the artist. In this article, I will show that these details may convincingly be attributed to Joseph Straub when compared to the documented works by this sculptor.

**Stylistic analysis**

First, I will focus on the statue of Saint Margaret, whose identity can be revealed with certainty because of her most familiar attribute – little dragon – and is also confirmed by the history of the place.\textsuperscript{26} The statue of Saint Margaret is also the only statue on the façade of the Church of the Saint Mary in Sladka gora, which is well preserved, thanks to the niche, which provided at least some protection. Other statues were more exposed and are seriously damaged, mostly due to weather conditions.\textsuperscript{27} The statue of Saint Margaret shows a lady in beautiful and luxurious dress with a skin-tight and ornamented corset. The drapery is

\textsuperscript{24} The façade sculptures were only mentioned in: Vrišer, Sladka gora, pp. 7, 24.; S. Vrišer, Baročno kiparstvo na slovenskem Štajerskem, Ljubljana, Slovenska matica, 1992, p. 236.


\textsuperscript{26} See the introduction to this article.

\textsuperscript{27} The latest restoration works were carried out on the sculptures in 2009. The moss and dirt was cleaned from the sculptures, then the hydrophobic asset was applied.
fluttering on the side. Her face, with big, almond shaped eyes, an elegant nose and a round chin, as well as her hairstyle are especially significant. I compare these characteristics with the documented (and most famous) work of Joseph Straub – the statue (personification) of the Faith from the high altar of the Church of Saint Joseph in Studenci (the statues as well as other statues from the altar are kept at the Regional Museum Maribor).²⁸ The statues are not related only with regard to the above listed details but also with respect to the direction of the head lean and the eye gaze. Furthermore, their hair styles (locks of hair that are bound together on the back) as well as headscarves (which are fluttering to the side) actually have the same shaping. Their dresses can also be compared: the statues have similarly shaped skin-tight upper parts of their dresses. Another similarity can also be seen in the shaping of the creases, which appear where the upper and lower parts of the dress meet. The creases in the dress as well as the drapery, which loops around the statues and ends around the knees, are significant and were definitely made by the same sculptor.

Second, the statue of Saint Mary and Jesus is large, frontal and static. But in shaping the faces the characteristics of Joseph Straub may again be traced. Mary’s face is similar to Saint Margaret’s face, which I described above. Moreover, this type of woman’s face matches Joseph Straub’s opus.²⁹ When it comes to the details, we can compare Mary’s face with the face of the statue of (personification) of Love from the high altar of the Church of Saint Joseph in Studenci.³⁰ The shaping of Jesus’s face and his curly hair can be compared with angel heads from the same altar.

Third, two kneeling angels on the sides of the façade can be well compared with two angels, kneeling on the volutes, once at the tabernacle on the high altar of the Church of Saint Joseph in Studenci; today these two statues are also kept at the Regional Museum Maribor. Angel on the left side of the façade have his hands crossed on his nude chest. Even though the posture of this angel is not entirely identical with the posture of the left angel from Studenci (he is holding a sheaf of wheat in his right arm and his head and his eye gaze is turned up), there is still a distinct likeness between both statues – the position and posture of the hand and

²⁹ Compare for example with documented works of Joseph Straub, with statues of Faith, Hope and Love, as well as with Saint Elizabeth from the high altar of the Church of Saint Joseph in Studenci.
³⁰ See note number 28.
especially the unclench fingers, faces with rapt expression with cordial smile, big open eyes and straight-edged noses. Also their long, curly hair is shaped similar. Again, I will focus on the shaping of the drapery; both angels have naked upper parts of their body and the drapery is falling to the knees and is wrapped around their legs. There is a special detail of drapery, stuck on the heel of the statue of the left angel from the façade. Oppositely, draperies of both angels from Studenci, are fluttering to the side. We can explain different shaping of the drapery as well as more closed upper part of the body of the angel from Sladka gora, in terms of handling different materials. Moreover, also the right angel from the façade shows more closed posture. His, upwards turned face – the most exposed part of the statue – suffered serious damages, due to weather conditions. Because of their especial quality, we can point out a skilfully made ‘button’ and to the side open creases on the angel’s left thigh.

Fourth, the statue of Saint Florian can also be convincingly compared with documented work of Joseph Straub, namely with the statue of Saint Roch from the side altar of Saint Roch in the parish church of Saint Vitus in Videm near Ptuj. Both statues have the same posture – head turned to the right (the statue of Saint Florian is looking a bit more upward than Saint Roch, whose eye gaze is turned a bit down), raised left arm and right lowered and directed to the left (according to their iconography, Saint Florian is holding a bucket with water and Saint Roch is showing to his thigh with a wound). Because of the bad preservation of the statue of Saint Florian, only some details can be studied and compared, for example big, almond shaped eyes, open mouths and wide nostrils. As for the drapery, we can see some similar creases, but again in case of wooden statue of Saint Roch, the fluttering effect is more evident than in case of stone statue of Saint Florian. Nevertheless, there is still an elegant crease of the drapery on the right hip of the former. Next, observe the difference in position of the upper parts of the body: the figure of Saint Florian is leaning forward with his right shoulder slightly rotated. Oppositely, the figure of Saint Roch is more upright and even holds back.

The least similarities with the characteristics of Joseph Straub works are seen in the sculpture of Saint Bartholomew. The closest to him would be the statue of a saint from the side altar of Saint Roch in the parish church of Saint Vitus in Videm near Ptuj. The posture of Saint Bartholomew is closed to the inside and is leaning forward, but the face expression and the lean of the head is quite the same as in case of the saint from Videm. Finally, having

32 See note number 31.
in mind the stylistic analysis of the statues as well as comparative analysis with documented work of Joseph Straub, we can conclude that he is also their author.

**The sculptures on the organ case**

Finally, let us take into consideration also other sculptures from the Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora, which were attributed to Joseph Straub by Sergej Vrišer: the sculptures on the organ case and on the pulpit.\(^\text{33}\) The majority of the statues on the pulpit were (after Vrišer opinion) made by Janez Jurij Mersi, only the statue of Holy Mother with child, some angels and ornaments were attributed to Joseph Straub. On this point (from far away and without any detailed photos), I can agree with him about that, but I cannot provide any parallels and comparisons with his other works.

On the other side, I can complement Sergej Vrišer description about two pair of puttos – two violinists and two trumpeters, fixed on sides of the organ case. Their chubby faces as well as chubby child bodies, curly hair and big, almond shaped eyes reveal them as significant works of Joseph Straub. Other statues on the organ case – the statue of King David and six angel heads – are not so well made and were evidently not made by the same sculptor.

**Bibliography:**


Illustrations:

Figure 1: The Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora, Slovenia. (Source: Personal archive)

Figure 2: The Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora, Slovenia, detail of the main façade with façade sculptures. (Source: Personal archive)
Figure 3: Joseph Straub, Saint Margaret, statue on the main façade, Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora and Joseph Straub, Faith, statue from the high altar from the Saint Joseph Church in Studenci (today in Regional Museum Maribor). (Source: The Regional Archives Maribor)

Figure 4: Joseph Straub, Saint Florian, statue on the main façade, Church of Saint Mary (Source: The Regional Archives Maribor)
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Figure 5: Joseph Straub, Saint Bartholomew, statue on the main façade, Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora and Joseph Straub, figure of saint, statue on the side altar in the church of Saint Vitus in Videm near Ptuj. (Source: The Regional Archives Maribor)

Figure 6: Joseph Straub, Putto violinist, statue on the organ case, Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora. (Source: Personal archive)
Summary

Late Baroque sculptor Joseph Straub and his works for the Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora, Slovenia

Valentina Pavlič

A picturesque late baroque Church of Saint Mary in Sladka gora is believed to be the most beautiful gesamtkunstwerk in (Slovenian) Styria. This article focuses on the sculptures from its main façade, but presents the historical circumstances for increasing popularity of the place during the 18th century as well. At that time, there were many pilgrims coming to this miraculous place and giving many donations. Therefore, Janez Mikec, a priest from Lemberg, took the initiative and build a new church between 1743 and 1754 (the architect was renowned Styrian architect Josef Hoffer). The frescoes were painted by Franc Jelovšek between 1752 and 1754, while the altars and other sculptural decoration were made by different sculptors and workshops. Sculptural works were attributed to Janez Jurij Mersi, Ferdinand Gallo and Joseph Straub by Sergej Vrišer. Even though he suggested these authorships on the basis of stylistic analyses, some of them still lack more detailed research. This article takes into consideration stone façade sculptures: the statues of Saint Margaret, Saint Mary and Jesus, two kneeling angels, Saint Florian and Saint Bartholomew. All statues (except for Saint Margaret, which has at least some protection by the niche) are seriously damaged, mostly due to exposure to weather conditions. The characteristics of the statue of Saint Margaret are compared with the documented work of Joseph Straub – statue (personification) of the Faith from the high altar of the Church of Saint Joseph in Studenci (this statue, as well as other statues from the altar, is kept at the Regional Museum in Maribor). The statues can be compared regarding their postures and the direction of the head lean and the eye gaze as well as in the details: faces with big, almond shaped eyes, an elegant nose and a round chin, as well as significant hair style of both statues (locks of hair that are bound together on the back) and their headscarves (which are fluttering to the side). Also, their dresses show similar skin-tight upper parts and comparable shaping of the creases, which appear where the upper and lower parts of the dress meet. The creases in the dress as well as
the drapery, which loops around the statues and ends around the knees, are significant as well. The comparison reveals that the statue of Saint Margaret and the statue (personification) of the Faith were definitely made by the same sculptor – Joseph Straub. For the other sculptures from the façade it is also evident that, with respect to the details, postures and gestures, they are related to the opus of Joseph Straub. Finally, those works in the church, that were attributed to Joseph Straub, are discussed: some sculptures from the pulpit and two pairs of puttos on the organ case – two violinists and two trumpeters. The latter indeed show some main characteristics of personal style of Joseph Straub: chubby faces and chubby child bodies, curly hair and big, almond-shaped eyes.