
Conflict, Tolerance, Representation, and Competition: A Confessional Profile of Bohemian Late Gothic Art

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The period called the Late Gothic comprises the second half of the fifteenth century, augmented without much reflection also with the first quarter of the sixteenth, i.e. the years up to the demise of the Jagiellonians and accession of the Habsburgs to the throne of Bohemia; this last quarter-century would be more correctly called the “Early Renaissance”.¹ While the art created in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia in the third quarter of the fifteenth century still remains to be researched and understood, the period of the Jagiellonian rule has long been well known as the time of a renewal of high culture and corresponding art. The idea that art could flower again, after the allegedly long and profound Hussite interruption, only under the young king from the new, both Catholic and Slavonic dynasty, was ultimately based on the royalist and nationalist concept of Czech historiography of the late nineteenth century generation of Václav Vladivoj Tomek. Correspondingly, art historical research expressed a strong desire to connect as many works of art as possible to the personality of King Wladislaw Jagiello and to his court, although accessible historical data has put many an obstacle in the way of such an approach. In my opinion, art historical research has, so far, omitted from its image of the art of the Jagiellonian period three important aspects: first, the role of the king in the kingdom was strongly modified by both the economical and political power of the estates; second, the period cannot be understood fully only from the vantage point of the developments in Bohemia proper, leaving Silesia, Lusatia and above all Moravia aside; and finally – and most prominently in our context – I believe that we can understand the art of the period properly only if we also take into account that these were the times of an unique arrangement of religious relations in the country, based on the religious peace of Kutná Hora of 1485.

I am going to ask a new question concerning the extant works of art from the Jagiellonian period: which of them were created to serve the Utraquist, or Czech, church?² Do any of them express a mentality open to Luther’s reformation ideas? Is there something in the art of that period that could inform us about mutual relationship between both dominant confessions? As far as we know, the Unity of

¹ The methodological problem of naming the individual periods may seem rather abstruse, but we should be aware of the fact that the name used provides us with a matrix for our understanding. On the definition of the beginnings of the Czech Renaissance see: Jaromír Neumann, “Introduction,” in *Renaissance Art in Bohemia* (Prague – London, 1979) 7-13; Jiří Kropáček, “K výměru termínu česká renesance,” in *Itálie, Čechy a střední Evropa. Sborník z konference v Praze 1983* (Prague, 1986), 182-191; Ivo Hlobil – Eduard Petrů, *Humanism and the Early Renaissance in Moravia* (Olomouc, 1999); Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Court, Cloister and the City* (Chicago, 1995) cc. 1 – 4.

² This question was also suggested for future art historical research by Ivo Hlobil, “Wendepunkt zur Synthese: Ausstellung Von der Gotik zur Renaissance – die bildkünstlerische Kultur in Mähren und Schlesien von 1400-1550,” *Umění* 48 (2000) 315-334.

Brethren stuck firmly with its opposition to the use of the visual arts in a religious context during the whole Jagiellonian period. In fact, the “pikhart” or radical tendencies inside the Utraquist church could always fall back on the tradition of Hussite iconoclasm, useful as an easily visible sign of dissent. This appears both in the results of the Prague insurrection of 1483, when two Catholic monastery churches were plundered, and in the tracts by Václav Koranda the Younger.³

Some of the most prominent artworks of the period were done for the Utraquists. The most obvious case is the Altarpiece from Roudníky, installed most probably in 1486 and painted in a high quality Prague workshop. The same workshop provided one of the altarpieces for the greatest Utraquist artistic undertaking: the architectural completion and inner decoration and furnishing of St. Barbara’s church in Kutná Hora. After 1511, the church was covered with a beautiful vaulting of the most contemporary style by the former court architect Benedikt Ried. The famous wall paintings done for the prominent local family of the Smíšeks were completed about one or two decades earlier by a painter who knew contemporary art well: both Western and Italian. The liturgical books ordered by them around 1490, contain one of the rare extant images of Jan Hus as the holy proto-martyr. The magnificent main altarpiece of the church, erected in 1502, has not come down to us, but we can read an admiring description of it from the eighteenth century: it was made in the form of a large, box-like room complete with windows, inside which the apostles sat with Jesus around the table of the Last Supper. The whole could be closed with the help of two sculpted and painted wings, while the rear of the retable was covered with a large vine tree, with birds, flowers and grapes sculpted in the most natural detail.⁴ As Jaromír Homolka has suggested, the description of the central part closely recalls one well known German artwork, namely the famous main altarpiece in the St. James’ church in Rothenburg ob der Tauber, started by Tilman Riemenschneider in 1501 and completed some years later. The Rothenburg altarpiece is hailed as one of the first “wooden-looking”, i.e. non-polychrome retables, evoking a distanced relationship to the traditional mediaeval religious image current in the atmosphere preceding the advent of Luther. Our Baroque informer on the Kutná Hora altarpiece does not say anything in this respect, so the possible connection remains theoretical. The altarpiece in St. Barbara’s church was made by a team led by the local joiner; carvings were done by Caspar Schick from Brno.⁵

³ On the 1483 insurrection see František Šmahel, “Pražské povstání 1483,” in *Pražský sborník historický* 20 (1986) 35-102; for a reworking of the article see also *idem*, *Husitské Čechy* (Prague, 2001) 124-140; on Koranda see Noemi Rejchrtová, “Obrazoborecké tendence utrakvistické mentality jagellonského období a jejich dosah,” *HT* 8 (1985) 59-68.

⁴ Described in 1675 by Jan Kořínek, *Staré paměti kutnohorské*, ed. Alexandr Stich and Radek Lunga (Prague, 2000) 214-219. On the iconography of the vine in large altarpieces around 1500 see János Vég, “Weinblätter auf der Predelle des Leutschauer Hochaltars und in seinem Umfeld,” in *Podzim středověku – The Waning of the Middle Ages* [Papers from the Conference held in Brno in 2000] (Brno, 2001) 135-144.

⁵ Jaromír Homolka, “Sochařství,” in *Pozdně gotické umění v Čechách* (Prague, 1978) 224-226; on Riemenschneider see Julien Chapuis ed., *Tilman Riemenschneider, Master Sculptor of the Late Middle Ages*, [Catalogue of an exhibition held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York] (Washington – New Haven – London, 2000); on Caspar Schick see Kaliopi Chamonikola, “Kašpar Schick a některé problémy brněnského pozdně gotického řezbářství,” *Umění* 37 (1989) 301-320.

About ten years later, a non-polychrome retable of St. John the Baptist was, however, installed in the prominent Prague Utraquist church of Our Lady before Týn. [Fig. 1] It was ordered from the most contemporary and prestigious artist available in Prague at that time. The sculptor, known only by his initials as the Monogrammist I. P., is on stylistic grounds thought to be an artist visiting Bohemia for about ten years, and coming from and returning back to Passau in Bavaria and being one of the two prominent sculptors of the so-called Danube school.⁶ Just like the previously mentioned Kaspar Schick of Brno, the Passau artist undoubtedly must have been a Roman Catholic. A similar position to that of the Monogrammist I. P. was occupied, in the field of painting, by the anonymous painter called the Master of the Litoměřice Gradual. Active in the second decade of the sixteenth century, he also must have learned his art in the so-called Danube school in Austria and Bavaria, belonging among its high quality representatives. During the same years when he was decorating the undoubtedly Utraquist Litoměřice Gradual [Fig. 2], he also painted the luxury edition of the Czech translation of the “Lives of the Desert Fathers”, this time for the Roman Catholic High Chancellor Ladislav of Sternberg.⁷

Can we conclude that the confessional profile of Late Gothic and Early Renaissance art in our country expressed not a conflict but, rather, a marked lack of opposition? As we have seen, competitive features are, of course, present, but mostly on the level of purely social prestige, i.e. the care taken in selecting the best available artists for commissions by Utraquists of prominent social status. But we must bear in mind that our search for Utraquist artworks is inevitably hampered by the obvious fact that only such images that could be accepted also by Roman Catholics after 1621 were allowed to survive and pass down to us. Such publicly accessible images as would express a decisively Utraquist iconography or which would be aggressively anti-Roman Catholic, would have been destroyed. Let us, therefore, now look at the artworks made for Roman Catholics: were they intended to stress the confessional conflict?

In 1480, a panel of the Mass of St. Gregory was painted, most probably by a local workshop, for Perchta of Boskovice, the Abbess of the Cistercian women’s monastery in Staré Brno. [Fig. 3] As the detailed iconographic analysis of the picture by Jarmila Vacková has shown,⁸ it diverges from the most common type of this typically fifteenth century image in one respect, namely that the centre of the image is dominated by a monstrance for the host. The true presence of Christ’s body in the Eucharist is thus denoted by a depiction of a liturgical object, rather than by a symbolical image, which was marginalized. Now, the monstrance was put in the centre of Utraquist retables in order to assure that Christ himself, not some kind of image, be at the centre of the liturgical prayers. While the use of monstrances was, presumably, general also in Roman Catholicism, the special position given to it in

⁶ On I. P. see the bibliography listed in Jiří Fajt, “Late Gothic Sculpture in Bohemia during the Reign of Wladislaw II (1471-1516),” in *Die Jagiellonen. Kunst und Kultur einer europäischen Dynastie an der Wende zur Neuzeit*, edd. Dietmar Popp and Robert Suckale (Nürnberg, 2002) 251-262 esp. n. 39 on 262.

⁷ Josef Krása, “Knižní malířství,” in *Pozdně gotické umění v Čechách* (Prague, 1978) 448-450.

⁸ Jarmila Vacková, “Mše sv. Řehoře z donace abatyše Perchty z Boskovic,” *Umění* 21 (1983) 159-168; see also *Od gotiky k renesanci*. [Catalogue of an Exhibition held at the Moravian Gallery in Brno] (Brno, 1999) 2:375-378.

Perchta's panel surely does not stress an opposition to Utraquist liturgical practice but, rather, their peaceful overtaking or, if you prefer, reinterpretation.

The presence of St. Adalbert (Vojtěch), the holy patron of the episcopal see of Prague,⁹ could be understood as a sign proclaiming Roman Catholic identity – which it may, in fact, be in the case of the Plzeň panel with the Madonna from Vejprnice from the 1480s or in the case of the wall paintings made in 1479 for Zdeněk Lev of Rožmitál at the Písek castle. But sometime after 1510, a painter deriving from the Danube school made the retable for Vlněves and now at the Nelahozeves castle, in which St. Jan Hus, clad in his martyr's attributes, acts as server/acolyte for St. Adalbert who is celebrating the Eucharist. Hus, however, lacks a halo in contrast to the bishop and his role is clearly secondary. The image has been interpreted by Jan Royt as an expression of the claim of the Czech Utraquists to the Prague archbishopric. The impression of an astonishing lack of clear and definite confessional self-identification or self-pronunciation may be the fault of our modern way of looking at images and understanding their message from a twenty-first century point of view. For any early sixteenth century visitor from abroad the sole fact of the presence of the condemned heretic appearing in the principal visual media of the time, i.e. in monumental church art, must have been a very strong statement about the full participation of the Czech Utraquist church in the Universal (Catholic) Church.

To test our suggestions, let us look at the works ordered by the king himself. Unfortunately, these are surprisingly few.¹⁰ The silver reliquary busts of the patron saints of St. Vitus' cathedral are Roman Catholic by their very nature as receptacles for relics. The only other image which was without any doubt ordered personally by the king is the decoration of the chapel at his personal castle of Křivoklát, realized most probably in the late 1480s.¹¹ The altarpiece of the Virgin is the earliest completely extant Gothic type retable in both Bohemia and Moravia. If it is opened, its centre is occupied by a relief representing the idea of the Assumption of the Virgin with the help of the image of her coronation. [Fig. 4] This theme was very typical for the fifteenth century, because it was understood to express, in addition to its primary meaning, the articulation of the role of the Church, personified symbolically in the generally understood image of the crowned Virgin. If you look closer you will see, that the Virgin here, in fact, lacks a crown; instead, there is a kind of benediction or imposition of hands on her head. That would have struck any contemporary visitor as a deviation from the norm and could, therefore, suggest alternative meanings. I think that the general pronouncement about the Church as ruling on earth and subject only to the Trinity, was here modified to express a more humble, less dominating, understanding of the Church. While this fits with what we

⁹ *Svatý Vojtěch. Tisíc let svatovojtěšské tradice v Čechách*, ed. Milena Bartlova [Catalogue of an Exhibition held at the National Gallery in Prague] (Prague, 1997).

¹⁰ The existence and character of art at the Prague court of Wladislaw Jagiello has been hotly debated by Czech researchers; see the bibliography listed in Jiří Fajt, "Late Gothic Sculpture in Bohemia...", n. 24 on 261, and contributions by Josef Petrání and Jaroslav Pešina in *Umění* 29 (1981) 367-369 and 463-465; a summary was presented by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, "Will the Jagiellonians Again Have their Day?" in: *Die Jagiellonen* (n. 6 above) 207-213.

¹¹ On the dating of the Křivoklát Altarpiece see the data in Josef Macek, *Jagellonský věk v českých zemích. Díl 1. Hospodářská základna a královská moc* (Prague, 1992) 194 and 226-262; also see Klára Benešová, "Několik poznámek k hradu Křivoklátu," *Umění* 33 (1985) 337-344; on sculpture at Křivoklát see Jiří Fajt, "Late Gothic Sculpture in Bohemia..."

may look forward to in the atmosphere of religious tolerance after the agreement at the Diet of Kutná Hora in 1485, it also shows what we might call a pragmatic, socially constructive, or non-antagonistic approach to the confessional question on the part of the ruler himself.

I have already mentioned that a sharp “pikhart” opposition against all religious images was latently present in the more radically oriented streams of Czech Utraquism. This was undoubtedly the reason why the advent of Luther’s ideas was marked, rather strangely for the reformer himself, by iconoclastic acts in the Týn church in 1519-1520.¹² In the region of the Krušné hory (Erzgebirge) we encounter, on the other hand, such features, that may be understood as an expression of the Reformation atmosphere itself. One of the prominent towns of the area with a booming mining and trading economy, Most (Brüx), burnt down in 1515 and the new church of the then Roman Catholic town was begun in that year by Ried’s disciple, Jakob Heilmann of Schweinfurt. [Fig. 5] If compared to the contemporary churches built for Roman Catholic orders (like the monastery church in Kadaň), or to an extensive group of south Bohemian and south Moravian churches, we can recognize in Most features which can be interpreted as expressions of the same Reformation oriented atmosphere that provided a supportive environment for Martin Luther. The hierarchical construction of the space is abandoned in favour of a unified space centred on the pulpit; the thin pillars do not obstruct the view of the main altar; balconies provide enough place for the whole congregation to assemble and listen to the sermon, and the whole is bathed in light flowing in through the windows: the liturgy and sermon are, so to say, taken out into the daylight. While some of these architectural features were known before (i.e. the unified hall space was of Romanesque origin and was promulgated in the thirteenth century for the use of the preaching Dominicans), it is their accumulation that makes the Most church, together with the nearby Utraquist town church at Louny, a witness to the existence, among both the Bohemian Utraquists and Roman Catholics, of the same mentality or “possible consciousness” that gave birth to the German Reformation.

Now, let us try to draw some conclusions from our survey of a confessional profile of Late Gothic and Early Renaissance art from the Jagiellonian era in Bohemia and Moravia. Mediaeval visual art represents, roughly saying, two main levels of social communication: first, the level of public religious pronouncements or, if you will, religious propaganda, and, second, the level of attesting to social prestige and importance of the patron. The level of expression of personal convictions and emotions of the artist was still rather minimal at that time, so that finding that the same painter, sculptor or architect could work for both confessions at the same time has only marginal weight for our argument. It is easily understandable that the function of mediaeval artworks to attest to the social prestige of the donors led to a kind of competition regardless of confessional divides. What may be more interesting is my suggestion that, while both confessions in Jagiellonian Bohemia surely maintained their inner divisions, there existed even on the level of religious content in art some kind of general need for non-antagonistic expressions. It has led to preferences not only for the themes from the rather wide area of common ground, but also for themes containing a certain degree of mutual tolerance. It remains to be

¹² See M. Bartlová, “Chrám Matky Boží před Týnem v 15. století,” in *Marginalia historica* 4 (2001) 111-136.

decided what nourished the tolerant public expression of religious conviction: was it the tradition of a pre-modern decentralized society?, or the forced social equilibrium between the two parties which were unable to destroy each other?, or, perhaps, an early modern model of a humanist-like transcendence of confessions as proposed by Josef Válka?



1. Monogramist I. P.: Altarpiece of St. John the Baptist at the Church of Our Lady before Týn in Prague, ca 1520



2. Master of the Litoměřice Gradual: Jan Hus Disputing with the Cardinals, illumination from the Litoměřice Gradual, 1517 (Graham No. 35).



3. The Mass of St. Gregory. The Votive Panel of the Abbess Perchta, Brno, 1480 (Moravian Gallery in Brno)



4. Assumption of the Virgin, central part of the Altarpiece in the Royal Chapel at Křivoklát, Prague, 1480s



5. Jakob Heilmann of Schweinfurt: Church of Our Lady in Most / Brück, 1515-1534