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In the Society of Gods and Heroes. Myths of the Classical World in Bohemian and Moravian Wall Paintings in Aristocratic Rural Seats over the Years 1650–1690

Abstract

The publication is focused on mapping out mythological wall painting in the Czech Lands in the seventeenth century. The breadth of the issue at hand is huge as practically all of the palace and château grounds, which were decorated over the course of the Baroque period, contain paintings with mythological subjects on their ceilings or walls. The research was consequently limited to several essential criteria, from the time-focus up to the functional-geographical. The publication is primarily aimed at the time period over the years 1650–1690, known as the Early Baroque in terms of the general style categories and a period when the Czech Lands underwent extensive renewal after The Thirty Years' War. This period continues to represent the greatest vacuum in Czech art-history historiography. The aim of this publication is not to necessarily serve as an exhaustive catalogue of all of the mythological paintings of the seventeenth century preserved in the Czech Lands. It should instead demonstrate the representation strategy of the commissioners, the tendencies within painting in the seventeenth century and the interpretative possibilities when evaluating mythological paintings generally making use of a defined and sufficiently large sample which is more or less complete for the defined period and defined category.

The first part of the work is focused on a detailed analysis of the ceiling paintings of fifteen aristocratic rural residences of the second half of the seventeenth century: the châteaux in Nové Město nad Metují, Štěkeň, Náměšť nad Oslavou, Kroměříž, Roudnice nad Labem, Milešov, Lnáře, Libochovice, Děčín, Nový Falkenburk, Plumlov, Holešov, Radíč, Nový Hrad near Jimlín and Doudleby nad Orlicí. The wider cultural-historical aspects of the mythological paintings of the seventeenth century in the Czech Lands are analysed on the foundation of this basic research within the framework of these fifteen château decors. This is carried out as follows: formal inspiration and model residences; representation strategy of the nobility; possibilities in interpreting mythological paintings in connection with the triple interpretation of classical myths in works of mythography and the relationship between wall paintings and the spatial arrangement of the residences.

Formal Inspiration and Model Residences:

One of the most essential parts of the interpretation of paintings has become the formal connection between scenes in prints production as research into château décor has made apparent that all of the production of secular wall paintings in Bohemia and in Moravia attest to a basic direction in the form of a receptive method of work based on the ongoing use of print models. A detailed comparison with prints serves to assist with an iconographic determination of the particular fields of decoration. They help specify in certain cases the dating of the paintings and also expand the network of influential models and trends which the commissioners and artists tried to follow. This means that thanks to a deeper knowledge of the model material, not only does the number of particular prints used for inspiration or more exact imitation increase, but first and foremost it indicates a clear direction toward certain primary inspirational circles. These serve to indicate which of the European residences and European centres played a key role for painting in the seventeenth century. Bohemian and Moravian production manifested a mixture of Italian impulses, the influence of Rudolphine and northern

Mannerism and reflections from Central European printmaking (in particular in the case of mythological themes, the cycle of illustrations for Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from the hand of Johann Wilhelm Baur). The influence of France, as concerns château buildings of the seventeenth century, has remained outside the area of specialised interest. The formal links to French or French focused production has been primarily sought out up until now in the art of the eighteenth century. Each analysed residence, however, testifies to the relevance of this inspiration, and this for an even much older period.

The Representation Strategy of the Aristocracy:

Another essential aspect of the decorative programmes became the personal representation of the particular commissioners. Within the framework of the commissioning background of the fifteen analysed residences, it perfectly reflects the transformations in post-White Mountain society and the aristocracy, which new families found their way into to a much greater extent than in the other Habsburg lands. It is hardly surprising that a significant number of the analysed residential décor from the beginning of the defined period arose out of commissions from newly established families, originally from various regions, whose careers were linked with military service in the Habsburg army. The post-White Mountain confiscation amounted, for many of them, to the possibility to obtain new property, whereby symbolic self-representation confirmed the legitimacy of power. Property transactions linked with confiscations occurred in several waves. A model example of the celebration of an aristocrat linked with the second confiscation wave, the generation of the colonel and the connected patronage, can be seen in the Nové Město paintings executed by Fabián Šebestián Václav Harovník for the originally Scottish diplomat and soldier Walter Leslie. The representative dimension of the multi-layered paint work of the piano nobile not only reflects Leslie's glamorous rise on the social ladder, but also the celebration connected with the linking of Leslie's family with the Dietrichstein family. Both levels confirmed the legitimate connection to the Estates power structures. In a similar fashion as with Walter Leslie, Jan Antonín Losy also chose imperial and ruling iconography for a celebration of his family at the château in Štěkeň, while at the same accenting marital politics. This also markedly influenced the décor of Nový Hrad near Jimlín which was commissioned by the Habsburg officer of Livonian origin Count Gustav Adolf of Varrensbach.

Even those nobility who had converted from a Protestant position to Catholicism attained important posts and prominent careers during the period of religious turmoil of the first half of the seventeenth century. A typical example of this kind of social ascension would be Gundakar of Dietrichstein, the commissioner of the Libochovice paint work, whose father Bartoloměj ranked among the exile figures who remained out of the favour of the Viennese court. Figures who were traditionally in the position of supporters of the Imperial house and Imperial politics, whether from the Catholic nobility or from the circle of converts, were also of course in the group of analysed families (the Lobkowiczs, the Berkas of Dubá, the Czernins and the Liechtensteins).

One should not neglect to make mention in Moravia of the powerful land owner and power authority represented by the diocese of Olomouc along with its important residences. Bishop Karel II von Liechtenstein-Castelkorn became one of the most significant supporters of the arts of the day after the middle of the seventeenth century. This was not only by means of a practical application of its position, but also by raising up the feudal structure of the Olomouc bishopric and the privilege of the Imperial princely title through the ideological sub-text of created art commissions.

Possible Interpretations of Mythological Painting:

One of the main aims of the text is a detailed iconographic interpretation of particular paintings and this on the basis of Early Modern iconographical and mythographical compendia which attained an enormous influence and became an essential part of the libraries of numerous commissioners. The possibility of interpretation of myths can also be seen through the optics of mythography as mythography provides a triple level of interpretation which can be found in every mythical story: moral, historical and natural-allegorical.

The moral level: the basics of the teachings that the stories of classical mythology provided were moral lessons based within a circle of stoics who began to distinguish between literary meaning and hidden (that is truthful) meaning in myths. More systematic attention, with similar approaches, came about at the conclusion of the pre-Christian period, and this concretely in two treatises, *Homer's Allegories* by the Greek rhetorician of the first century AD, Heraclitus and Phornutus *De natura deorum*. The spiritual dimension of classical mythology was consequently strengthened in neo-platonic teachings. This particular tradition found its way into the later period and culminated at the beginning of the sixth century with the mythographic work of Fabius Planciades Fulgentius *Mythologiarum libri tres* which consequently met with enormous popularity, which lasted through the entire Middle Ages.

There are numerous possible examples of the application of moral concepts to classical mythology. With an awareness of the maximum information abbreviation, one can only state that the identification of deities with particular qualities, virtues or vices arises from the given tradition. Another case when allegorical thinking in the form of hidden riddles greatly influenced humanistic production, was the discovery of Horapollo's treatise *Hieroglyphica*. The emblematic, linking a usual mythological sub-text with moral lessons and a pictorial riddle, belonged to one of the products of this esoteric stream. An indicator of the possible moral message of selected mythological paintings can be first and foremost its blending with Biblical exempla or the emblematic element.

As can be seen with the detailed analysis of the château in Radíč, Wolfgang Henneg usually chose Biblical themes for his seat although the paintings were labeled as mythological in the past. The choice of scenes to a certain extent celebrates the virtuous family life and rejects the sinful approach to human existence. The depiction of Noah and Seth was supplemented here by a mythical depiction of Hercules killing the centaur Nessus, the interpretative potential of which is enormous. Mythographic texts emphasized the ideological level of the theme of abductions (here the abduction of Deianira) in the sense of a moral example, the struggle between virtues and vices. Natale Conti, for example, makes mention of the moral sub-text of similar myths in the sense of a struggle between low passions and morality. On the general level, the idea of the triumph of virtues above vices and passions resonates here as in the stories of Noah and Seth, as well as Hercules and Deianira.

The link between mythological stories and the emblematic motifs is most clearly seen in the decorative programs in the châteaux in Doudleby nad Orlicí and Nové Město nad Metují. The emphasis placed on good government and rejection of examples of bad rulers represents one of the essential elements of iconography in the Doudleby paintings. King Lycaon, who received a justified punishment, was chosen as an example of a poor ruler. The haughty King Laomedon, who prayed for the saving of his daughter Hesione, received a similar punishment. In opposition to the negative moral examples are the linking of the cardinal virtues and emblematic fields, which thematize prudence of action, the need for appropriate decision-making or opposition to violence. Walter Leslie also made use of emblems encouraging justice and peace when ruling when emphasizing the representation of the family and their war successes. A female moral example also appears in Nové Město and this in the form of classical heroines who were in all probability supposed to provide a moral mirror for the Countess of Dietrichstein, the wife of Walter Leslie.

Classical heroes appear as model personages as early as in Homer's texts and gradually become *exemplum virtutis*. Certain works, specifically Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, grew in popularity over the course of the seventeenth century. The moral imperative of a virtuous ruler whose life norm became a 'virtus' received a new appreciation during the period of the Renaissance and Humanism influenced to a great extent by the celebrated work of Baldassare Castiglione *The Book of the Courtier*. It is no coincidence that a series of Socratic, respectively Platonic, cardinal virtues ranked among the most frequently published engraving series of the sixteenth century. Large-surface paintings of cardinal virtues or their incorporation into allegorical units in the form of personifications occur in half of the selected château residences (Nové Město nad Metují, Doudleby nad Orlicí, Náměšť nad Oslavou, Kroměříž, Milešov, Lnáře and Libochovice). They fulfill the ideological function on a general level in each of the painting units drawing attention to the seat of virtue and the exemplary nobleman and in the concrete coordinates each of these decorations demonstrates more subtle nuances linked with a specific personal dimension. In the Nové Město context, for example, cardinal virtues participate in the celebration of the family linkage between the Leslies and the Dietrichsteins, while in Náměšť nad Oslavou they in contrast represent the moral credit of the deceased wives of Ferdinand of Verdenberg and the spiritual hardship connected with their loss. Kroměříž mixes the apotheosis of episcopal virtues in opposition to low passions and prepares the soul purified and ready for the path to God.

The historical level: the foundations of the historical and rational interpretation of the classical gods and myths were established by specifically the Greek writer and philosopher Euhemerus at the beginning of the third century BC in his work *Sacred History (Hiera anagrafé)*, in which the border between mortals and gods is blurred. Despite certain critical responses, Euhemerus soon became established as an authority and at the beginning of the Christian era met with an unprecedented response whereby his apologists made use of his work as a weapon against polytheism. This was the reason behind Euhemerus' teachings appearing in ongoing discussions over the course of the entire Middle Ages. The question of the historicity of divine and mythical figures, however, was by no means merely an issue in the sphere of apologetic literature over the course of the Middle Ages. The heritage of antiquity and the deeds of their major figures resonated in courtly romances in many countries, thereby establishing a certain "genetic" right to its heritage. Alongside national genealogies, dynastic genealogies founded on family pride began to emerge. The Imperial line built upon the classical prototype declared by Virgil who traced Augustus' family tree back to mythical Aeneas. All of the forms of the Imperial dynastic tradition were linked up in one contact point, a Trojan origin, after centuries. The allegiance of the Habsburgs to these Roman roots had been proclaimed as of the end of the rule of Rudolf I, the first Roman King of this dynasty.

There are numerous examples of genealogical affinities with heroes from classical times or self-identification of rulers with the ancient gods from the period of the Renaissance. The attempt to identify the personage of the patron with the characteristics of classical heroes gradually became one of the basic strategies of ruling or aristocratic representation throughout Europe. Imperial court commissions were not the only ones, however, to bear marks of Aeneas iconography. Marie Tanner has deftly demonstrated how the program began to turn in this direction when, for example, a member of court was granted a title of nobility or when an Imperial visit was expected. An explicit example of this can be seen in Libochovice where the apotheosis of Aeneas is accompanied by a princely crown and the order of the golden fleece, a symbol of the successful courtly career of Gundakar of Dietrichstein. The Liechtenstein princes, traditional supporters of the Habsburg dynasty, employed Trojan and Aeneas themes throughout all of the piano nobile of their château in Plumlov.

Paintings celebrating the Emperor Leopold I in the role of one of the Olympian gods appeared in various forms in the so-called Imperial halls which generally emphasized the

succession of the Habsburgs, their family virtues and important achievements. Emperor Leopold appears in the position of the ruler of Olympus in the château in Doudleby nad Orlicí, specifically in the scene of the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, adopted from a print according to Burnacini's scenic design for the opera *Il pomo d'oro*.

The decoration of the main hall in the château in Štěkeň also corresponds to a certain extent with the iconography of Imperial halls although here there is no reference to the ongoing ruling line of rulers of the Holy Roman Empire by means of the inclusion of members of the Habsburg dynasty. The medallions of various emperors and the linked paintings of the rulers of the four world monarchies from the vision of Daniel's prophecy in the adjoining rooms correspond with certain decorations from later imperial halls in Germany, specifically with the paintings of Melchior Steidl from the years 1707–1709 created for Lothar Franz von Schönborn on the ceiling of the hall in the princely residence in Bamberg.

The natural-allegorical (astrophysical) level: the naming of the astral bodies according to gods from Greek-Roman mythology was linked with the faith in divine power ruling over the heavenly spheres. The bright objects in the skies represented gods and this gradual process of assigning divine and mythological personages to astral objects culminated in particular with Eratosthenes' work *Catasterismi* where all of the heavenly constellations are assigned mythological parallels and the signs of the zodiac are designated to particular stories and mythical heroes. The given links were completed at the turn of the pre-Christian era with the firm connections between both spheres being attested to the fact that the librarian of Emperor Augustus, Gaius Julius Hyginus, was also an astronomer and mythographer. Certain elements of astrological teachings were preserved at the beginning of the Christian epoch, despite understandable ideological resistance, being linked with science and philosophy to such an extent that it could no longer be completely uprooted. Astrology also dominated all of the natural sciences during the late Middle Ages linking up thus an entire range of disciplines. These categorizations were further developed over the following centuries, fundamentally from the period of Humanism and the Renaissance.

The relationship between the microcosmos and macrocosmos and the operations of the world became consequently a fundamental element of Neo-Platonic theories with these systems penetrating into all knowledge and being applied to numerous branches including medicine. This view argued that sunlight served to guarantee the compactness of the world, the sun was the mover behind the seasons of the year, the planets and the signs of the zodiac. This all comes about thanks to numerical harmony, directing the relationship between the microcosmos and the macrocosmos, where the four seasons of the year correspond to the four elements, the seven planets and the twelve astrological signs. The interpretation of the four seasons of the year is linked with the four elements and to a great extent already arose from pre-socratic Greek science (in particular Empedocles) and the texts of Homer which were the first to link elements of the so-called "roots of things" with the particular Olympian gods.

The natural-allegorical (or the astrophysical) dimension of mythological stories or mythological figures ranks among the commonly used aspects of Early Modern iconographic programmes. This is also the case in both Bohemian and Moravian residences where the depiction of elements, seasons of the year, planets or phases of the day make up an integral part of the overall iconography of their decoration. The allegory of the elements and seasons of the year also appeared in Nové Město nad Metují, Holešov, Kroměříž, Lnáře or Doudleby nad Orlicí. They actually hold one of the leading positions in the last named locale. The seasons of the year are represented in two forms in the piano nobile in Doudleby: once exactly according to the classical Roman model with Flora, Ceres, Bacchus and Adonis, the second with the seasons of the year in correspondence with the views as to the functioning of the world, representing a parallel with the four elements represented by the goddesses Cybele, Iris, Amphitrite and the god Aeolus. The four elements in Doudleby are supplemented by two more

rooms. The natural-allegorical interpretation is undoubtedly also behind the other mythological scenes in Doudleby. The theme of Pomona and Vertumnus celebrates the marriage between the god of plant growth and the seasons and the goddess of gardens and fruits. Faunus' family, which is essential the cult of the god Faunus, represents fertility, the protection of herds, fields and their productivity. And the final theme, Proserpina and Ascalaphus, is a direct embodiment of the cyclical nature of the year in the natural world. The story of Proserpina was related to the division of the year into two halves, the repeating vegetative cycle and the theme of rebirth which was linked with the fate of Prosperina. All of the mythographic texts made reference to the cyclical character of nature including Lilius Gregorius Giraldi, Natale Conti, Vincenzo Cartari, Karel van Mander and Joachim von Sandrart.

Mythological stories also serve as inspiration for the allegories of the seasons of the year in the sala terrena in Kroměříž where they mingle with the signs of the zodiac which they symbolically make reference to. The astro-physical context, connected with the yearly or daily cyclicity, is also present in additional residences: The allegory of the arrival of a new day, arising out of the cult of Apollo and the first early stars (Aurora, Venus) rank among some of the most frequent compositions and can be found in the following residences: Lnáře, Kroměříž, Náměšť nad Oslavou, Plumlov, Děčín and Nový Falkenburk.

Bohemian and Moravian painting in the seventeenth century is characterized by more general allegory making reference to basic astrophysical manifestations which determine the functioning of the world. Specific astrological programs, known first and foremost from the Italian Renaissance and Mannerist art, only have a limited response here or are completely absent. New astronomical systems and discoveries only gradually and occasionally find their way into the artistic commissions of the seventeenth century. An exception which proves the rule is the astrological corridor of Wallenstein Palace in Prague which mirrors the astronomical discoveries of Galileo Galilei. There has not been as yet any discovery in the domestic environment of an artistic commission which mirrored the heavenly bodies at a concrete historical moment or which connected up a decorative program to a concrete horoscope, whether that be in connection with a commissioner or in terms of the laying of the foundation stone.

The zodiac in the main hall of the château in Lnáře consists of one of the few specific iconographic moments out of the analysed residential decor. The zodiac here centres around the story of the sisters of the Hesperides and in all probability reflect the words of the mythographer Natale Conti who made a comparison between the mythical dragon Ladon, guarding the golden apples of the Hesperides, and their legendary garden in his work on mythology. There is also the influence apparent here of the theory concerning the link between the microcosmos and the macrocosmos and the classification of Antiochus of Athens. The stucco female figures in the corners hold in their hands targets with four signs of the zodiac (Gemini, Leo, Pisces and Libra). Each of these signs of the zodiac belongs to one of the four groups with the figures also making reference to the corresponding season of the year and human age. The young woman representing spring has flowers on her head, the second young man as summer has signs of ears of grain, the mature woman has fruit as a sign of autumn and finally winter is depicted as an elderly woman.

The Relationship between Wall Paintings and the Spatial Arrangement of the Residences:

An examination of the connections between the wall paintings and the spatial arrangement in the residences brings with it a number of essential risks and complications. Each château underwent a different construction development. In certain cases, over the course of the seventeenth century, the suites adjusted to older construction phases and the owners did not have enough financial resources or possibilities to completely reconstruct the existing building. Projects were carried out elsewhere with new arrangements of the interiors or with the

construction of completely new structures. The second essential factor hampering research consists of more recent construction adaptations which could markedly impact the original arrangement of the paintings. An analysis of specific château structures, however, indicates a seeming link between painting decoration, the function of the residential space and the consequent interior arrangement.

The iconographic schemes of the main halls were characterized by more “narrative” lines over the course of the seventeenth century and more complicated allegorical programmes began to be created up to the end of the century. The above-mentioned narration, that is stories of an Ovidian or Homeric origin, was only suggested with the added symbolic and heraldic details making it apparent that these stories also contained an allegorical sub-text.

The two halls in the château in Nové Město nad Metují, which make up an epicentre for public representation, have rich décor. The decoration is placed in the same wing, alongside one another, this undoubtedly being a suitable design in light of the original Medieval layout of the building. The highest representation in these halls accents the iconographic program of several spheres linked with the owners: the alliance symbolism of the dynasty, the awarding of Walter Leslie with the order of the golden fleece and his successful career in the Habsburg military. The ideological background differs, however, between the two halls: the dining room, connected with one suite, celebrates the cyclical character of nature with Ovidian poetry while the main reception hall, which is connected to the second suite, makes reference to the deeds of renowned heroes in the form of stories from the Trojan War. The décor in Nové Město thus reflects the military successes of Walter Leslie and by this means demonstrates the legitimacy of his claims to newly acquired estates and social position. This is supported by evidence of the ancientness of his family linked up with the achievements of great men, mythical predecessors, displayed in stories from the Trojan War. The main hall with its stories from Homer accents the military successes and glory of the Leslie family, while at the same time confirming the legitimacy of the rule of his family members and fully corresponding to the iconography recommended by decoration theoreticians for residential spaces.

A similar concept, with a much simpler iconographic concept, can be found in the main hall of the château in Štěkeň where the ceiling is decorated by the alliance coat-of-arms of the commissioner and supplemented on the walls with painted busts of emperors and renowned personages. The social status along with the glorifying of the dynasty was emphasized in the no longer extant décor of the main hall in Libochovice which Prince Gundakar of Dietrichstein had decorated, according to preserved records, with an allegorical scene involving the raising of the Dietrichsteins to a princely status.

The Baroque décor in Doudleby nad Orlicí was transferred to the Renaissance building structure with larger halls in the corners. It is extremely difficult to recognize the original placement of the rooms from the paintings and no inventory has survived which would assist in specifying the sequence in the seventeenth century. The surviving structure does make apparent, however, that the two most important halls adjoined the facade wing. The moral accent is emphasized in the first of these halls with a reference to the punishment of poor rule in a scene involving the suffering of King Lycaon. The theme of the feast of Peleus and Thetis, composed based on a print transcription of the scenery design by Ludovico Ottavio Burnacini for the opera by Marc'Antonio Cesti *Il pomo d'oro*, appears on the ceiling of the second hall. Apart from a reference to the glory of the Habsburgs, the representative dimension of the painting is enhanced by a depiction of Emperor Leopold I as the divine Jupiter. This is the only direct evidence, out of the analyzed château residences, celebrating the Emperor and the Habsburg dynasty.

Although the Habsburgs apologetic line only found its way into the Doudleby cycle, there is the possibility that a certain link with the Imperial court can also be seen in the painting décor of the main hall in Lnáře where the theme of the golden apples of the Hesperides is particularly

prominent. The décor in the hall in Lnáře could also, however, have been a simple reaction to the dynastic tradition of the commissioners, with an epithalamic sub-text linked with the marriage of Count Tomáš Zacheus Černín of Chudenice with Zuzana Renata Bořitová of Martinice.

The public spaces of the large halls move into the first rooms of the suite, the anterooms and the reception halls. It would be hasty to speak of standardized or distinctive iconography in these residential parts, although certain examples would seem to indicate that the representation note of the main halls also linked up with the public spaces of the suite. The bedroom spaces, whose decorative iconographic programs were often clearly linked with the function of the rooms, specifically belonged to the private spheres of the suite. Amorous paintings full of nudity and scenes encouraging passion were highly encouraged for the decoration of bedrooms. The second, equally popular iconographic group of bedroom paintings was related to sleep and the daily cycle. A brilliant example of this kind of iconography from the seventeenth century is once again located in the château in Nové Město nad Metují where Somnus, the god of sleep, binding up the five senses, is depicted in the final room of the suite.

Additional points where the iconography of the daily cycle can be seen are in sala terrenas, garden pavilions or casinos where numerous examples of mythological décor can be found in Bohemian and Moravian residences of the seventeenth century. The selection of the given iconography fully corresponds with the recommendations of decorum theories.

Another factor which could have contributed to the ideological program of the painting décor was the gender distribution of the particular suites. These particular layers and elements, however, usually mingled with one another and it therefore difficult or even impossible to uncover differences between the feminine and masculine program. A certain amount of gender specification can only be deduced in several cases out of the collection of fifteen château residences and this only on a hypothetical level due to the absence of relevant sources. One could find dozens of more interpretations pertinent for each mythological story which could be made use of in the décor of the aristocratic seats. The demonstrated paths and interpretation possibilities for these decorations should hopefully provide sufficient space in the future for wider research interest concerning Bohemian and Moravian painting of the seventeenth century, this having been largely outside the focus of the specialized public up until now.