

Zsuzsanna Korhecz Papp

Sebastian Stettner's (1699-1758) art and painting technique

1. Object and methods of research

Sebastian Stettner (1699, Dorst – 1758, Buda) was one of the leading painters in Buda (today part of Budapest) in the 18th century. In spite of this, the name of once respected but in the 20th century forgotten master was till recently a mere entry in some archives. The enthusiastic research and restoration works of author have resulted in the identification of twelve unsigned works of this forgotten Baroque master. As part of her DLA thesis, the author examined stratigraphy and composition of the painting's ground and paint layers using a number of techniques. UV fluorescence analysis and digital X-ray imaging were conducted with the equipment of the Conservation-Restoration Department of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in Budapest. Paint cross-section samples were examined with some analytical methods and photographed in the laboratory of the same Department with stereo and polarisation microscope. Scanning electron microscopy – energy dispersive X-ray analysis (SEM-EDX) have been done by a physics research Centre for materials at the University of Szeged. The examination gave insight into Stettner's painting technique and revealed the pigments that he used in his colors .

The key to the attribution of the work and life of once respected but in the 20th century (in the course of mysterious changes of the history) forgotten master, was produced by his altar pieces which he painted for the former main altar of Subotica (today Vojvodina, Serbia) Franciscan Church of St. Michael. With the help of this approach, the attributing of more works may be possible, resulting in deeper knowledge and recognition of our cultural heritage.

2. Sebastian Stettner's altarpaintings

The researches have been realised thanks to the restoration of altar pieces from both Subotica and Hungary and international cooperation of restorers and other experts. The author investigated thoroughly Stettner's four paintings from Subotica (Franciscan church of St. Michel): "*St Michael*", "*St George*", "*St Cecilia*", "*St Lucia*", one painting from

Kecskemét (piarist church of Holy Trinity) "*St Barbara*", two paintings from Budapest (franciscan church of St Peter of Alcantara) "*St Ana*" and "*St Joseph*", one painting from Baja (chapel of St.Rochus) "*Holy Virgin with scapular*". Four paintings from Esztergom (franciscan church of St Ana) "*St. George*", "*St. Florian*", "*St. Peter of Alcantara*" and "*St. John of Capistrano*" was restored in the Conservation-Restoration Department of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in Budapest with leadership of Katalin Görbe between 2001-2004, and this altarpieces were presented across the restoration documentation. The painting of "St Didac" from Nagykanizsa (franciscan church of St Joseph) was just photographed detally becuse of the large distance and inaccessibility.

3. The results of the research

Thanks to data from *the House History* of Subotica Franciscans and restoration of certain works, as well as the enthusiasm in the research, the opus of this Hungarian Baroque artist has been detected on the basis of stylistic analysis and the history of painting techniques. The partial display of Stettner's opus enables this forgotten artist to be ranked among the Budim leading masters of that period.

Sebastian Stettner, a painter and gilder of Bavarian origin, moved to Buda in 1727, where he acquired civil rights in 1736. He got married and became the owner of the house in which he ran his workshop. His art of Italian origin can be studied on his altar pieces which do not have his signature. They have good composition and harmony of colors. His charming characters compensate for lesser shortcomings in geometry and anatomy. His work can be found mainly in Franciscan parish churches in smaller towns of the former Kingdom of Hungary: 1739-Szeged, 1741-Subotica (Szabadka), 1743-Pest, 1749-Nagykanizsa, 1756-Esztergom.

Sebastian Stettner used Baroque painting methods and techniques. For his compositions he used graphics templates and when painting he applied traditional Baroque oil method "*maniera lavata-maniera bozzatta-maniera finite*" meaning that he first applied local paints, then roughly modelled dark and light shades and finally he carefully retouched. The altar pieces have mainly light paints, light blue and grey, present with other light effects, his characteristic, oblong and charming characters of graceful build. The surface of their bodies is in pearl shades. Thanks to the harmonious

composition, the warm and brilliant chromatism, Stettner is one of the leading painters of Buda. We hope that by representing the life and works of the forgotten Baroque painter we will enable the identification and attribution of his yet unknown altar paintings.

This research provided valuable insight into Sebastian Stettner's painting technique. Thanks to his expertise, Stettner's works, even in the most vulnerable circumstances, persisted in the most adverse conditions. Here are some technical details which confirmed the attributions: raw canvas -wich was hand woven from flax and stitched together of many pieces- was fixed on blind frames with hand-wrought nails and bolts and soaked in warm glue. After drying he applied toned oily yellowish-red heterogeneous two-layered base, which covered the texture of the canvas. These features could be deduced from the characteristic deformation and carrier edges. Microscopic examination of paint layer cross-sections shows that the ground layer is applied in two coats (red on yellow), the average thickness of 100-350 μm . The preparatory layer is composed of iron oxides with aluminosilicates. Stettner used pigments that were common in the 18th century: lead white, ocher, red ocher, green earth, Madder Lake, vermilion, Prussian blue and sooty black. The average thickness of paint layers are 50-110 μm . Interestingly, he used a somewhat archaic technique in gilding in mordente technique with some decorative details, although this old technique was common in the Catholic Church only in the displays of Our Lady in the 18th century. At that time, many painters accepted to perform gilding due to lack of other painting jobs.

The author of the article organised in the years 2012-13 an international touring exhibition dedicated to Stettner, which showed not only the original altar pieces, but also a photographic documentation about the restoration works. The exhibition and the accompanying monography have been realised thanks to the restoration of altar pieces from both Subotica and Hungary and international cooperation of restorers and other experts, the essential part of which are nine billboards presenting the restoration process. The conservation and restoration works on some altar paintings which was presented in this exhibition contributed to safer attributions, assessment of the artistic value and importance of the work. They also brought to light new facts and enabled the re-established artistic values to be enjoyed.

4. The utilization of the researches

This interdisciplinary approach combining research methods used in art history and those used in the history of technology wishes to address the output of forgotten masters in Pest-Buda, a field not studied hitherto. The study of art techniques enables us to understand the complexity of meaning of an artwork as a unique product of the human spirit, talent and technological level in its historical complexity. The research results in the field of technical art history, which began in the last decades in Western Europe, confirmed the important role, responsibility and varied activities of restorers. The method of technical history of art includes study of individual artists and their workshops, where the works of art were created from certain, historically significant and determined materials and with artistic techniques. "Technical history of art" creates a bridge between the restorers, art historians and natural sciences scholars. The Hungarian restorer has to research his masters' painting techniques, because he can't learn from foreign literature. The Conservation-Restoration Department of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in Budapest launched the first initiative works in this area: for example new master theses about painting techniques of Ferenc Falkoner (1737-1792) and Josef Schöffel (1776-1851).