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Emblematic Regulations of Monastic Spaces

The Decoration of the Refectory of the Pannonhalma Benedictine Archabbey in the Context of eighteenth-century Monastic Emblematics

In my dissertation entitled ‘Applied Emblematics in Hungary’ I aim to analyse the examples of ‘applied emblematics’ – works of fine and decorative arts with a concetto or program based on emblem books – in Hungary during the 16th to 18th centuries through iconological case studies. My goal is to edit a corpus of emblematic fresco-cycles, as well as to analyse the sources and development of emblematics in Hungary in the context of European emblematics. During my research I apply the interdisciplinary approach of Emblem Studies, which emerged during the past two decades in international research. As a result of the unfortunate historical situation during the early modern era – most importantly the Turkish wars – only a few emblematic works of art survived in Hungary. Besides the early 17th-century oeuvre of Christoph Lackner, most of the known emblematic cycles were conceived during Hungary’s Catholic re-colonization in the early 18th century, which fundamentally diverge in character from the par excellence early baroque secular and ecclesiastical applied emblematics.

The proposed presentation draws upon one chapter of my dissertation, analysing the emblematic decorations of the refectories of the Pannonhalma Benedictine Archabbey and the Abbot’s palace in Győr. The Pannonhalma refectory was decorated in 1728 by David Antonio Fossati following the concetto of Abbot Benedek Sajghó, who included the emblems in the program amongst historical and Biblical scenes on repast. The refectory, as a complex and mediated communal space of monastic life plays an important role in the daily liturgical order. During the meals, passages are read out to provide monks, besides food, with spiritual nourishment. In this way, the space of the refectory is a place of contemplation on past and tradition, as well reflection on the monastic life. The source of the Pannonhalma emblems is the 1702 emblem-compendium of the Jesuit monk Jacobus Boschius *Symbolographia sive de Arte Symbolica*. The selection of Sajghó is centred on two ideas: first the emphasis of the necessity and salutary nature of the monastic

regulations, and second the acceptance of the hierarchy of the leader and his subjects. The emblems were intended to compel introspection and moral contemplation within the monks. The refectory of the Abbot's palace in Győr, decorated for Sajghó by Stephan Schaller about thirty years later, utilizes the same emblematic program; however, the context of this cycle generates diverging iconological meaning. The decoration in Győr emphasizes the Christian virtues, the importance of the Benedictine order in the history of the Hungarian kingdom, as well as the major Benedictine rules.

Through a comparative analysis of relevant analogies of Austria – i.e. the emblematic decorations of the Benedictine Abbey of Melk and the emblematic Refectories of the Cistercian Abbeys of Heiligenkreuz and Neuberg an der Mürz, as well as the Library of the Augustine Abbey of Vorau – I argue that the 'emblematic language' had an intensive revival in the Monastic tradition as a device of 'regulation'. The emblematic cycles executed during the rigorous and ascetic Sajghó were intended to initiate contemplation in the subordinated monks on the inevitability of strict laws in the order. Thus, the emblems functioned as a second, pictorial 'Regula' executed to strengthen the position of Sajghó and prevent revolts against him – presented in an elaborate way – quite similarly to the emblematic practices of Abbot Adrian Pliemel in Melk. On the other hand, emblematics were used in the private, meditative devotional practices of the monks as well – most importantly in the Melk Abbey, where extensive emblematic practice unfolded during the early 18th century. Through a comparative analysis of the Melk and Pannonhalma manuscript emblematic works I try as well to shed light to one of the most enigmatic aspect of Monastic tradition: the emblematic practices.