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Felix Anton Scheffler and a new quality of Silesian baroque painting

The almost 100-year period between the end of The Thirty Years` War (1648) and the annexation of Silesia to the Kingdom of Prussia by Frederick the Great in 1741 was the remarkably golden era of Silesian art. After the Treaty of Westphalia the Protestantism`s authority declined evidently for the Catholic Church expansion, which thanks to the support of the House of Habsburg, began the intensive Counter-Reformation in order to regain its former strength. In Silesia this exceptional “alliance between throne and altar” manifested its force especially in the monumental artistic foundations of new monasteries and churches abundant in painting and sculpting splendour interiors. Numerous famous architects, painters and sculptors from Vienna, Prague and Munich were working in Silesia at this time. Felix Anton Scheffler was one of them, who changed entirely the image of Silesian baroque painting. This artist, who was in Silesia for 15 years (1729-1744), belonged undoubtedly to the most outstanding oil and fresco painters from Central Europe at this time and apart from Silesia he left his masterpieces in Bavaria, Moravia and Bohemia.

Scheffler was born in Munich in 1701 as a son of a local painter Johann Wolfgang. He took his first steps in artistic activity together with his one-year older brother Christoph Thomas in the workshop of their father. Later they both studied under Cosmas Damian Asam - one of the best European painters of that time. In 1729 both brothers came to Silesia, probably thanks to the bishop of Wrocław Franz Ludwig von der Pfalz-Neuburg, for whom they worked earlier in Worms. Between 1729 and 1731 they carried out the frescoes in the monastery church of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre in Nysa (Neisse). After that the brothers split up – Christoph Thomas returned to Bavaria, whereas Felix Anton settled in Wrocław and for the next fifteen years he worked for the most powerful, famous and wealthiest Catholic patrons in Silesia, for example the Hochberg family in Książ (Fürstenstein), the Cistercians in Lubiąĝ (Leubus) and Krzeszów (Grüssau), the Jesuits in Breslau.

Before Scheffler came to Silesia, the style developed by the best Silesian painter Michael Willmann (died 1706), called Silesian Apelles or Silesian Rembrandt in the second half of the 17th century, dominated remarkably in Silesian baroque painting. Willmann, his disciples and artistic successors created the dynamic compositions with usually dark use of colour. Their works were painted in an expressive and sketchy way, using fast, and seemingly careless brushstrokes. In the second quarter of the 18th century this artistic style was still dominant and popular in Silesia, and yet far from the new artistic tendencies in Central Europe. Therefore the most sophisticated patrons of the arts looked for an artist from outside Silesia. Felix Anton Scheffler met their benchmarks perfectly and his artistic style appealed to their refined artistic style and expectations since Scheffler belonged to new, younger generation of artists, who didn't bear the imprints of Willmann's style. Thanks to that he introduced a new quality in Silesian art in the 30s of the 18th century. His manner of painting is characteristic for the artistic ideas of Bavaria of the first half of the 18th century. He combined dynamic and complicated compositions with light, luminous, pastel coloring deprived of chiaroscuro contrast, therefore he was called a Silesian Raphael. His style was also connected with both elegance and lightness of rococo. For that reason he was known as a proto rococo painter and had a big influence on Silesian rococo painting in the second half of the 18th century.