

The History of Construction and Decoration of the Pažaislis Monastery

Summary

The Pažaislis ensemble has a complex history. Historically, three periods are usually distinguished according to the monastic orders that occupied its buildings: Camaldolese (1662–32), Russian Orthodox (1832–1915), and the sisters of St. Casimir's Congregation (1920–48, and since 1992). However, the history of the ensemble was interrupted by painful intrusions – World War I and a long period of Soviet rule, when the monastery changed hands quite often and suffered considerable damage.

Among the topics addressed in the present book, the endowers of Pažaislis are discussed, their influence, artistic patronage, and possibilities of funding the construction are compared, the masters who were engaged in the construction, the character of commissions, and the course of works is described. However, the author of the book does not aim to undertake a more detailed analysis of artworks. The architecture of the buildings of the Pažaislis ensemble or the iconographic variety of its paintings deserves a separate research and studies. The keepers of the monastery, different monastic orders, and their life in the monastery may also become the topic of separate books. Thus, in the present book most attention is focused on the beginnings of the ensemble – construction and decoration works, and the relevant historical sources.

Originally built for Camaldolese monks, the ensemble contains quite many features specific to the architecture of this monastic order. First of all, the ensemble itself was built farther from the city, in a remote woody place scarcely visited by people. This was determined by the hermitic lifestyle of the monks. The planning of the ensemble was also determined by the regulations of the monastic order. Several more Camaldolese monasteries were established or endowed in Poland and Lithuania at the same time as Pažaislis. Thus, we can say that the endowment of Pažaislis reflected the general interest in this monastic order that manifested itself in the mid-17th century. All in all, eight monasteries were established in the 17th and 18th centuries in Poland and Lithuania. Along with two novitiates operating in the monasteries of Krakow and Pažaislis, they formed a single province.

In the construction history of Pažaislis, two very different commissioners appear. One of them was the Chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Krzysztof Zygmunt Pac (1621–84). He continuously supervised the work of the artists, was in charge of the construction, pressed the monks and the masters to work, and rightfully bore the name of the patron of the construction. Having received education in universities abroad, he gained fame as an expert in the artistic trends and innovations of that time by his diverse artistic commissions. Pac not only supervised the construction works, but also was occupied with founding a novitiate in Pažaislis, bringing relics from Italy, appointing monks, setting up a pharmacy at the monastery, and accumulating a monastic library in Pažaislis. The overall design of the monastery was undoubtedly coordinated with him; moreover, he also took interest and looked after various details. He is interred in the crypt under the church together with his wife Clara Isabelle de Mailly and their eight-day old son.

The other patron of the construction was far less ambitious and had less will and, obviously, funds. The process of creation and construction apparently depressed him rather than made him happy. However, because of the duties of his inheritance he was obliged to take care of the construction and aim for its successful completion. Certainly, the bearer of the Order of Malta, Michał Kazimierz Pac (died in 1719) would deserve the name of an art patron only in inverted commas. Even the Camaldolese monks themselves did not conceal their disappointment in his patronage several years after his death, as a result of his unfulfilled commissions and promises. The introduction and discussion of these two patrons well serves to show the differences of artistic patronage in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 17th century.

The aim of innovation is the most important in the entire furnishing of the Pažaislis ensemble. However, modernity manifests itself even more distinctly than innovatory architectural forms. How should it be understood? The architectural innovations and exceptionality of the Pažaislis church, often noted by art historians, are a rare hexagonal plan and a concave façade, which was hardly ever used before. These original features of architectural design, distinguishing the Pažaislis church from other buildings of that time, are by no means unique. Quite many examples of an octagonal church plan can be found in the architectural treatises by Sebastiano Serlio from the 16th century. Who knows if the architect of Pažaislis chose this particular church plan inspired by the examples published a century earlier, or if he sought to create extraordinary architecture. The church nave is indeed hexagonal, i.e. quite unusual, but the plan of the church itself is octagonal – a very classical church plan. In Pažaislis this central plan was chosen not for the purpose of becoming distinguished in European architecture, but because it was best suited for a small church with a dome. This kind of church did not need a long nave that could accommodate many people – the Pažaislis church was never crowded in the Camaldolese times. In the meantime, a dome added some sumptuousness to the church architecture. Therefore, it was not by accident that the endower, who sought representativeness, opted for this kind of exceptionality for the church located in the middle of the forest. This kind of church, squeezed among two- or three-storeyed old town houses, would not create such a grand impression that it does today. In Pažaislis the church as if invites us to walk around and take it in from all sides, while the dome makes it look magnificent from all sides. What about the concave façade? It was quite innovatory in the second half of the 17th century, but it is not known if the architect who designed Pažaislis referred to the prototype of St. Agnese's Church in Rome, or if he saw other similar examples elsewhere. In Pažaislis the mild concavity of the middle part of the façade is matched with its general architecture: the stairs leading to the church, the space opening in between the two façade towers, and the majestic dome. Concavity becomes part of the visual expression of the façade, though it does not seek to repeat or convey architectural innovation. E.g., the Vigevano Cathedral (near Milan) was built approximately at the same time, and its main façade was concave from corner to corner. It should also be noted that the concave forms of the Pažaislis façade did not become an object of copying either in Europe, or in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Due to the hermitic nature of the monastery and rare visitors, its architectural forms did not become a standard followed by later architects, or a classical example. Thus, in this case innovativeness should be regarded above all as the aim of originality. The goal was to create something new, original, and suitable for that particular location and, most importantly, modern for its time. In Pažaislis a totally new and unprecedented ensemble was created without repeating some other ensemble or iconography. The patron Krzysztof Zygmunt Pac found it important that the church should not only perform its function, but also be beautiful and modern. Thus, classical architectural solutions are intertwined in a way that must be acknowledged as original, bold, and magnificent. Architectural innovations were followed by other new decoration and iconography motifs, unseen or rarely found in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Marble decoration in the church was not a novelty in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but the church remains the only one in the territory of the Grand Duchy, in which such great quantities of marble were used. Pac was well aware of this exceptionality and considered it one of his aims. The works of decorating the church in marble, which lasted for almost two decades without significant intermissions, were the longest probably in the entire Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. One can notice that iconographic motifs were modern or urgent for that time. Along with the traditional Camaldolese iconographic motifs of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Romuald, or St. Benedict, the painted plots of St. Francis de Sales, St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi, St. Bruno of Querfurt, and the Blessed Bogumil appeared. Here one can notice not only the connection with the endower and the Pac family, but also the aim of keeping up-to-date – at that time the processes of proclaiming the saints or the blessed had just ended (or were coming to an end, as in the case of the Blessed Bogumil). At that time they were new, “fresh” saints, and the tradition of worshipping them was still under formation. It also testifies to the aim of modernity. Today we can state that the plot of the life, martyrdom, and worship of St. Bruno of Querfurt painted in the church corridor is the one most widely represented in mural painting. Moreover, at the time of its creation it was the first of its kind, referring to the tradition of worship of this saint, which had been expanded several years ago (1673). It was modern and contemporary for that time. Therefore, while speaking about innovations in Pažaislis, one should bear in mind not only the exceptionality of individual artistic forms, but also the goal of modernity in general, which can be noticed in the construction and furnishing of the entire ensemble.

Along with other decoration works (mural painting, stucco works, wood carvings), marble and sandstone décor should be distinguished. Both materials were extremely expensive, and therefore found not so often in the architecture of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They were ordered in remote quarries and transported to Pažaislis. The extraction, processing, and transportation of these materials cost a great deal of money. However, this choice was made in order to put into life a rare and ambitious artistic idea. There is no doubt that Pac perfectly imagined the impression which the monastery gate was going to make on a visitor – though it was built according to a traditional design found in Sebastiano Serlio’s architectural books, it was decorated with sandstone brought from the Gotland Islands and rarely found in these parts. Costly materials were not necessarily needed to furnish a magnificent gate: surfaces could have been covered with plaster, and sculptures could have been made from some simpler material. In this case the monastery gate became a perfect “business card” of the entire ensemble, indicating the extraordinary nature of its artistic execution. Having passed through a sumptuous and luxurious gate, emerging as if accidentally (or at least unexpectedly) in the middle of the forest, the visitor is bound to expect other manifestations of sumptuousness, which he or she discovers while approaching the ensemble. It will suffice to remember the almost-two-decade-long project of marble decoration, which has been mentioned above.

Marble decoration of the church was the most ambitious work of the Pažaislis décor, which the patron did not have time to finish. Among the churches of the 17th century in Poland and Lithuania, it was the artistic project of the largest scale, during which the entire church was so lavishly decorated in marble. The most amazing was the fact that marble was brought not from some nearby quarries, but from operations near Krakow, in Dębnik and Paczółtowice. Marble was transported to Pažaislis by a water route – on the Wisła River, the Baltic Sea, and finally, the Nemunas River. The water route alone extended for more than 1.000 kilometres. Some facts about this transportation are revealed in correspondence: it could be done only in spring or autumn, when the level of water in the rivers rose. However, sometimes a shipment of marble would not reach Pažaislis because of early winter frosts. For example, when the Nemunas got frozen at the end of 1672, Pac ordered to bring the marble, which had been stuck in Jurbarkas, on sledges (circa 80 km). Such work required high precision both from the architect who created the design in Pažaislis, and the masters who prepared the marble in the quarries near Krakow. In his letters Pietro Puttini repeatedly complained that the marble details that were brought to him were not made precisely according to his drafts and had to be corrected, which consumed a great deal of time. Having chosen this means of church decoration, the commissioner was well aware of the difficulties of this task and the time it would take. He also understood that it would be difficult to repeat the artistic execution of this design. Thus, there is no doubt that Pac consciously chose difficulties, seeking to make the interior of the Pažaislis church exceptional in the context of architecture of not only the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but also Poland.

It remains unknown who was the first architect of the ensemble, who proposed the design of the church, and who created the plan of the ensemble. However, the contribution of individual architects to the Pažaislis construction is becoming clearer today. The architect Pietro Puttini (1633–99) worked in Pažaislis for the longest time, and his contribution is the most significant. He is mentioned in the historical sources related with the Pažaislis construction in 1673–90; however, as the early documents are extremely scarce, it is quite possible that he had arrived at Pažaislis earlier. He was the first architect mentioned in the letters by the patron Krzysztof Zygmunt Pac. In these letters his name is mentioned much more often than those of other architects. It leaves us no doubt that during the time of his stay he performed the basic works of design and construction management in Pažaislis. It would be difficult to overestimate Puttini’s role in Pažaislis. Not only was he the artist who worked for the longest time in Pažaislis (even longer than the patron Krzysztof Zygmunt Pac, staying there for six more years after the latter’s death), but it was thanks to his efforts that the largest part of the building and decoration works were carried out in the early stage of construction, the works did not get stuck, and the two-decade-long project of marble decoration was quite consistently put into life. A work of this scope would have been impossible without the presence of a designing architect at the construction. It is known that Puttini also worked in Kaunas, where he designed two side chapels of the Dominican church and made the plan of the Church of the Holy Cross. He also collaborated with other Camaldolese monasteries – historical sources from 1692 contain references to the fact that the Vygriai Camaldolese church was built after his designs, and in 1699 permission was given to build six brick houses after his earlier designs in the hermitorium of the Vygriai monastery. It is possible that Puttini might have collaborated with Krzysztof Zygmunt Pac on other constructions in Vilnius and Jieznas. The architect spent his old

age and died in his native town of Albogasi, but his younger brother Carlo Puttini (1644–82) was buried in Pažaislis. The contribution of the latter was smaller – apparently he mostly assisted his brother in supervising the Pažaislis construction and shared his fee. However, he had a dramatic fate. In Lithuania he met a local girl from a noble family and married her, but suddenly died when his wife was pregnant with their first child. His testament revealed that the Italian architect had fully committed his future to this country, had a farm, and bred animals. The arrival of the brothers Puttini to Pažaislis might have been influenced by their older relative, also an architect, Isidoro Affaitati (1622 – ca. 1686), who had come to Poland earlier. His contribution to the Pažaislis construction is unknown, though he is also mentioned in the early documents of Pažaislis. In the letters of Krzysztof Zygmunt Pac from 1673–74, he is mentioned as a consultant and counsellor, although some think that he might have been the first designer of the Pažaislis church (M. Karpowicz). However, it is not fully proved by artistic analogies or archival sources, thus his role in the Pažaislis construction remains to be solved in the future. Following Affaitati, another Italian, colonel and engineer Giovanni Battista Frediani, appears in Pažaislis as a counsellor and assistant to Pac. Though he did not contribute to the design works, it is obvious that he assisted Pac in supervising various construction projects, and not only in Pažaislis.

In Pažaislis, at least several stonemasons worked preparing sandstone and marble, and decorating the buildings of the ensemble. Unfortunately, only one name is known – that of Nicolaus Wolscheid (1634–76), who died in 1676 and was buried at St. George’s Church in Kaunas. It was mentioned in his epitaph that he worked as a stonemason in Pažaislis, though concrete works were not specified. Thus it would be rather too bold to attribute all the works of sandstone decoration in Pažaislis to him, as is often done in historiography. He might have contributed to the sandstone decoration of the monastery gate, which was made in the earliest stage, but he is definitely not the author of all sandstone sculptures in Pažaislis, as is asserted until today. The works of sandstone and marble decoration in Pažaislis were probably carried out by Franciscus Huwiler and Kasparus Szertel mentioned in the sources, and possibly by some other masters.

An unnamed stucco master of German descent worked in Pažaislis; at the end of 1673 he was replaced by an Italian and a neighbour of the Puttini brothers in the town of Albogasi, Giovanni Maria Merli (1631–1707). It was Giovanni Maria rather than Giovanni Battista Merli, erroneously mentioned in historiography, who worked in Pažaislis for three and a half years at the end of 1673 – beginning of 1677. Giovanni Maria Merli himself mentioned in one of his letters that before coming to work in Pažaislis, he had been carrying out other commissions from Pac for a year and a half. There is no doubt that he contributed to the decoration of the Pac palace built in Jieznas at that time. Later Merli worked mainly in Vicenza and Trento along with his brothers, sculptors Federico and Domenico. The comparison of his works in Italy and Lithuania will enable us to get better acquainted with this master.

The activity of the painter from Florence, Michelangelo Palloni (1642 – ca. 1712), has received probably the most research attention among all the artists who worked in Pažaislis. We know about his works in Italy before coming to Pažaislis, and about the commissions, which he carried out in Lithuania and Poland at a later time. Palloni arrived in Lithuania together with his family and committed his life to this country. He worked in the Pažaislis church in 1676–85, and (with one or, at most, two assistants) in 1680–85 painted almost all the frescoes, up to 140 in the church only. Interestingly enough, at first Palloni painted on canvas, but worked so slowly that the patron Krzysztof Zygmunt Pac got enraged, and even started to look for another painter in 1680. Surviving letters from that period show what kind of painter the patron was looking for, and what requirements were set for the candidates. The suggested candidates included the painter Andrea Celesti (1637–1712), quite well known in Venice at that time. However, the painters did not satisfy the patron – one of them needed too many assistants, another charged too much, while the work of the third was not of sufficient quality. Thus Pac stayed with Palloni and, as far as we can see, was not mistaken. In no other place did Palloni paint so many frescoes for the same commissioner as he did for Pac in Pažaislis, and nowhere did he work for so long. Eventually, his work in Pažaislis gave the painter good publicity – later he became highly acclaimed both in Lithuania and Poland, and his fee was one of the highest among the painters of that time.

In his letters Pac mentions that he did not want to invite to Pažaislis some famous painter who was paid a large fee only on account of his name, and needed a large number of assistants to carry out his work. Thus, we can safely assume that Palloni did not have many assistants. Among such, sources mention Alessandro Firovanti, a native of Florence and a close friend of Palloni’s

family in Pažaislis, and Tomasz Stawski, a painter of local descent who worked on the altar decoration and possibly painted the altarpieces in the church. Though Stawski worked in Pažaislis at the same time as Palloni, he carried out other commissions.

The correspondence of the Pažaislis patron Krzysztof Zygmunt Pac reveals some details about how artists were hired and commissions were carried out. Pac controlled the payments, negotiated the prices, and ordered the materials. Considering quality the most important, he usually aimed to hire top artists and obtain the best materials. If several options of construction materials (e.g. iron) of equal quality were available, the patron would ask the construction managers to obtain them at the cheapest price, or to buy the largest quantity for the same amount of money, or himself would help them to do it. Today we may find it difficult to imagine, but several letters of inquiry about the prices in different towns may have considerably reduced the costs of construction materials. Although Pac did not spare money for representation, he also was quite practical and thrifty. He took interest and interfered in every tiny detail of construction, starting with coordination of altar designs, and ending with the colours of stucco mouldings or the floor tiles of the burial crypt.

The correspondence of Michał Kazimierz Pac, who supervised the works of marble decoration for the last seven years, reveals the complexity of this task. This patron of the construction was not able to negotiate cheaper prices, and sometimes the already finished marble details would not reach Pažaislis for the failure of timely payment for the materials and works. Part of the marble meant for Pažaislis was stuck at the quarry in Dębnik, and even burned down. Michał Kazimierz Pac managed to order the balustrades and floor tiles of multicoloured marble for the chapels, but the main nave of the church remained without marble tiles. The correspondence reveals that the marble sarcophagi for the Pac family, which had to be ordered by Michał Kazimierz Pac according to a request from his predecessor Krzysztof Zygmunt Pac, were not produced. The architect Puttini had already prepared the designs of both the flooring and the sarcophagi, but for the lack of funds and, probably, the will, they remained on paper.

The book contains an annex with copies of archival documents related with the construction of the Pažaislis ensemble from 1667 to 1712. They will enable us to get better acquainted with the history of its construction and to interpret any new information related with the ensemble more easily in the future. Archival documents, whose texts are published, are held in various archives of Lithuania and Poland, and the archive of the Camaldolese monastery in Frascati, while some texts are only available from copies made by earlier researchers. The documents held in the archive of the Camaldolese monastery in Bielany in Krakow were not used.