

Vorwort

When we were preparing for the restoration works on the Late Gothic choir stalls in Trogir Cathedral in 1990, I asked that particular attention be paid to two boards that in their kind were different from the rest of the choir, and in addition were painted with a porphyry imitation. Due to their dimensions (length: 210 cm) I thought they might have been some remnants of the wooden sarcophagus of St John Orsini, patron saint of Trogir, and bishop at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth-century, similar to the sarcophagus of his contemporary, St Gaudentius of Osor, on the island of Cres in the Bay of Kvarner.

What we were actually looking at was the back of a duecento panel painting, the face of which had been for centuries wedged in by the partition walls and the construction of the choir stalls, literally half-buried in a deposit of earth, dust and cobwebs in which we found thousands of matchsticks and the remnants of many used candles. During the Baroque rectification of the choir stalls 1737/8 which earlier on enclosed the space of the presbytery in the shape of a double “L”, the panel painting was used as well seasoned and excellent quality wooden construction material. Paradoxically enough, it was this that saved it from the fate of dozens of other works of art that no longer had a liturgical use and were thus abandoned and damaged, and which the Baroque bishops, at the time of their pastoral visitations, condemned to be cast out.

The panel painting was preserved only fragmentarily, but the iconographic reading of the whole was not difficult. In the centre are the Virgin and Child on a throne, shown in an entirely frontal, hieratic stance, as are the archangels Gabriel and Michael who flank her as well as the figures of SS. Cosmas and Damian at the right and St Lawrence at the left.

Unfortunately, the upper central part with the figures of the Madonna and Child are missing, as is the last figure of a saint on the left. It seems after the panels were not being used anymore, and while or before these parts were re-used for the stalls, they may perhaps have been chopped up or used as separate icons.

Iconographically, what we have here is the whole medieval pantheon of Trogiran saints, a picture that could well have stood on the main altar under the ciborium of Trogir's Romanesque cathedral. Due to the pronounced symmetry of the whole composition, we can assume with a fair deal of certainty that the figure of the missing saint would have been Stephen, another of the joint patrons of Trogir. St Stephen was the patron saint of a destroyed church, which was located under the Gothic city council chamber close to the cathedral. On the other hand one should not rule out the possibility that it might have been St John of Trogir himself who was painted near St Lawrence. St John of Trogir, the authentic Trogiran saint canonised in 1192, whose body, after a miraculous revelation, was discovered quite near to the main altar.

We are far from any synthesis of Romanesque painting in Dalmatia, not because of any possible lack of acquaintance with the works, but rather because of the lack of any direct insight into the technology of paintings of this kind. The detailed restorer's analyses and a brilliant art historical interpretation that derives from it provide totally new insights into the painting. We are on the very threshold of some interdisciplinary insights that will certainly cast some doubt on the assertion that Dalmatia is a country of sculptors, and not of painters.

The results of several years of wide-ranging research into the panel painting, within the context of the exceptionally scrupulous conservation operation carried out by Cristina Thieme, under the eye of her mentor, Professor Erwin Emmerling, show that the work was created in a setting in which the practice of painting had a long tradition. Although analyses to date would suggest that this painting has an unusually isolated position within the Dalmatian painting of the second half of the thirteenth-century, it nevertheless shares with this tradition, in spite of marked differences in style. Different are also a number of technical approaches, such as the characteristic palette of pigments (with an exceptional use of verdaccio and azurite), and an extremely refined chrysography technique (of Byzantine origin) – elsewhere in this period more or less forgotten – as used in the triptych and in many other paintings in the Dalmatia of the second half of the thirteenth-century.

The painting must have been created in Trogir itself, probably during the last quarter of the century, during the time the forecourt of the cathedral was being completed and the main portal was being finally assembled, during the bishopric of Fra Columbano, or of Gregory Macchinaturi (a scion of the Lucić family), both of them from Trogir.

The panel painting from Trogir constitutes the only surviving multi-figured thirteenth-century retable in Dalmatia known so far. Its technical characteristics make the panel a mine of information about the painting techniques of this particular time. Traces of cylindrical holes on the two long planks of poplar (first known case of the use of this wood in the Dalmatian painting of the thirteenth-century) make it possible to reconstruct the stabilising elements on the reverse of the painting and the frame with the raised central part, underlining the importance of the Virgin on the Throne in the focal point of the composition. The treatment with a rhythmical expansion of the field towards the central scene (or alternatively with its reduction towards the ends) is original; the only other similar case known is that of a later polyptych of Luca di Tomme.

The width of the panel painting was 255 cm, corresponding precisely to the span of the columns of the ciborium, under which it stood upon the altar. The back side was painted with a porphyry imitation (like the back of the crucifix from the church of St Claire in Split), which shows that the piece was intended to be seen from both sides.

Among the layers of preparation, it is important to mention the fine canvas, all from one piece (the upper and lower ends of it are defined), which completely covered the two planks. This is a novelty for domestic painting of the time. The C14 analysis showed that this re-used canvas is between 150 to 250 years older than the panel itself. The technical examination revealed that the modelling of the figures was done in places with up to 20 paint layers (with a thickness of 10–20 µm each) of finely graded colours and tones aimed at achieving the effect of various precious materials. This complex and unique painting technique has until now not been observed on any other works of this time.

The contours of the surfaces meant to be gilded or painted, as well as the details of international formal treatment of the figures, were not defined by the incision of a metal point, which was typical of the painting of this time, but with brush and charcoal. This indicates the use of preparatory drawings, and perhaps also the experience of a master of fresco painting. Stylistic analysis shows that for example the figures of the two archangels were painted by different hands, using, however, the same drawing.

The examination and restoration of the high altar retable for the Trogir cathedral took place as part of the major restoration campaign of the last ten years in Trogir. This was crowned with the projects for the restoration of the Radovan Portal (started in 1240), the Baptistery (completed in 1467), the Chapel of the Blessed John of Trogir (started 1468), the bell tower of the cathedral (completed 1605) and the organisation of the exhibition “Art Treasures from Croatia” in Venice in 2001 as well as the establishment of the Picture Gallery of the cathedral. In Croatia we tend to refer to “the Trogir Case”, drawing attention to the remarkable fact that this little city became, in just a few years, known on the maps of the European cultural heritage. The accelerated restoration of the Trogir cathedral and its entire inventory was fuelled by very significant financial and professional sponsorship by the Croatian Ministry of Culture and from abroad (the Technische Universität München, the Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien, the Venetian Heritage, and a number of other cultural Funds in the United States, Great Britain and Germany). Conceived as a kind of dialogue, these restoration campaigns also reflected the sincere and friendly exchanges among professionals concerning the splendid artistic patrimony of Trogir, a miniature city chiselled out of stone, permeated for centuries by cosmopolitan influences. All this has set up a new paradigm for the presentation of the Croatian cultural heritage in the world and the new norm for such projects. We are honoured to have been the first to give proof of the effects of such an extraordinary collaboration.

Prof. Dr. Joško Belamarić

Ministarstvo Kulture, Konzervatorski Odjel, Split

Summer 2007