

Portraying The Ptujška Gora Pilgrims

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The pilgrimage church at Ptujška Gora¹ (Maria Neustift in German and Mons Gratiarum in Latin), dedicated to the Virgin of Mercy, is one of most admired medieval monuments in Slovenia. The church is positioned on top of a hillock which lies at the eastern edge of Haloze, a picturesque vine-growing region in the vicinity of Ptuj (Slovenia). The church was built around 1400; in terms of architectural history, it is one of a series of major Styrian pilgrimage churches (Straßengel, Mariazell, Pöllauberg),² while in terms of sculpture, it followed the contemporary Central European stylistic modes. Experts agree that an autonomous sculpture workshop was active there at the beginning of the fifteenth century, producing statuary on commission (Cevc 1978: 444–445, Juran i & Podnar 1995: 165–168; Vidmar 2007a; Höfler 2008).

There are very few preserved documents concerning the foundation of the church and the beginning of the building process. It is presumed that Ulrich IV of Walsee-Drosendorf and/or Bernhard, Lord of Ptuj (at the time a ward of his uncle Ulrich IV of Walsee) commissioned the building,³ but there were many other Styrian noble families who contributed to the construction and furnishing of the church. It is still not known exactly what inspired the commissioners to invite the best craftsmen to South Styria to build not only the church at Ptujška Gora, but also St Martin's church in nearby Hajdina. Traces of their activities are to be found in Ptuj, too. It may have been a votive monument, perhaps connected with the battle at Nikopol (1396), where the army of King Sigismund of Luxemburg was soundly defeated by Sultan Bayazid, although there are no preserved documents to prove such a thesis. A large number of Styrian noblemen participated in the battle; it was Herman II, Count of Cilli (Celje), who rescued Sigismund of Luxemburg from being killed in the most chaotic circumstances of almost certain defeat of the Christian army. There is also a legend which tells of a blind daughter, part of the family of the lords of Wurmberg Castle in the vicinity of Ptuj, who suddenly saw a light on the top of the hill – which is why her grateful parents decided to build a church on that very place.

The craftsmen were most probably hired in Vienna, where Wenceslaus Parler, the son of Peter Parler, and his assistants were engaged at the end of the fourteenth century to continue the construction of St Stephan's cathedral. Both Ulrich IV of Walsee-Drosendorf and Bernhard, Lord of

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Ptuj, had close connections in Vienna; Ulrich was Archduke Wilhelm's chancellor, while the Lords of Ptuj owned two houses in Vienna and were also familiars of the court (Peskar 2007: 782–784; Vidmar 2007b: 828–830). It seems that the construction and furnishing of the church at Ptujška Gora began in the late 1390s and was completed most probably around 1420.

The church consists of a three-aisled nave with elevated apses to the east, with a bell tower incorporated into the body of the church at the western end. The middle aisle is broader and slightly taller than those at the side; it has a double parallel vault, while the side-aisles have ribbed vaults and the vault in the main apse is a stellar one. There are no bosses at the intersections of the ribs, but there are shields with the coats-of-arms of the commissioners positioned in the middle of the vault fields in the main aisle. The spatial proportions are defined by the golden section and by an equilateral triangle. 185 different stonemason marks have been found in the church, which leads us to believe that there were a number of different groups of masons who worked on it.

The number of preserved medieval statues and reliefs is surprisingly large, although there was a great deal of damage caused by the Turkish troops who broke into the church in 1475, as reported by Paolo Santonino (1947: 146). The preserved statues and reliefs in the Ptujška Gora pilgrimage church are in relatively good condition, due to the fact that quite a number of them have been venerated as images of grace. Most probably the whole interior of the church was covered by frescoes – traces have been found even on the outside walls – but these were later painted over and/or lost. In 1948, the paintings of the Holy Cross Chapel dating from 1424–1426 were rediscovered, so that this chapel now presents an iconographically complete component of the church. Some other remnants of paintings in the interior of the church date from the end of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century.

Not many documents remain relating to the era of Protestantism in the region, so it is hard to determine what modifications there may have been to the furnishing of the church in the second half of the sixteenth century. From 1615 until 1773, the Jesuits of Leoben administered the church and changed many of the furnishings; from 1787 on the church has held the status of a parish church, and in 1937 the Franciscans from Ptuj took over its administration. The first initiatives to preserve the architecture and furnishings are recorded in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the 1870s, the pilgrimage church at Ptujška Gora was widely recognized as an important monument.⁴ Although there have been periods when the authorities have not shown enough consideration towards the state of the monument, experts and cultural heritage protection services have always paid special attention to the pilgrimage church.

There are many occasions on which pilgrimages to Ptujška Gora take place, but the main festivities are held on August 15th (known as the Great Mass by locals). Thousands of pilgrims come to Ptujška Gora from all around; in the last hundred years the most regular visitors have been registered from within a range of about 100 km, including the neighbouring region of present-day Croatia. There is no direct evidence of who the pilgrims were during medieval times; but portraits of donors and various graffiti give us an idea as to who was seeking the protection of the Virgin at Ptujška Gora in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The first clear documents date to the era of the Jesuits, who were very much in favour of pilgrimages. But as the archive at Ptujška Gora has been ransacked several times (in 1941 and 1957, for example), much of the proof of pilgrimage practice is missing. If we arrange the portraits of the pilgrims which survive at Ptujška Gora chronologically, it is significant that those from medieval times depict noble people and educated clergy, while the more recent ones depict people of less noble origin. In the late nineteenth and in the twentieth century the pilgrims, recognisable in a range of works of art, belonged to the lowest social classes.



Photo 1. Donors on the *predella* of the altar of Our Lady of the Rosary, 1400–1410. Courtesy of the Umetnostnozgodovinski inštitut Franceta Steleta ZRC SAZU. (Photo: Andrea Furlan.)

The sculpted figures of two donors from the beginning of the fifteenth century are positioned at the *predella* of the altar of Our Lady of the Rosary, which is one of the two preserved altars in the form of stone shrines with three niches; both altars belong to the original furnishings of the church. It is supposed that the donors were members of the noble Stubenberg family, as the inventory of the benefactions from 1683 declares the altar (named in that year “St Andrew’s altar” after the figure of St Andrew in the right niche) to be a benefaction of the Stubenberg family (Stegenšek 1914: 23).

Two possible identities have been suggested for the two young men represented by the sculptures: they may be Otto III (who was married to Anna, the Lady of Ptuj) and his brother Jacob, or Wulfing VIII or Otto IV and Andreas I (who were Anna’s sons) (Vidmar 2007a: 67). They are kneeling with their hands raised in prayer,⁵ looking upwards with serious expressions towards the main figure in the central niche of the stone altar – the seated figure of the Virgin Mary cradling the Christ-Child in her left arm. The folds of the cloaks of the two kneeling figures fall softly towards the floor, shaping both figures into a triangular composition. The outer feet of both figures protrude from beneath their cloaks; their pointed shoes fit their feet gently and tightly. Both figures are very similar in attitude, clothing and coiffure, producing a symmetrical composition, but it is clear that the faces of these two young men differ; there is no doubt about their being portraits of two individual personalities.

The relief of the Virgin of Mercy from the beginning of the fifteenth century is part of the main altar, which was erected around 1760.⁶ It was established that the original position of the relief⁷ was the tympanum over the main portal of the west façade of the church. By the eighteenth century at least, the relief had become the church’s most important image of grace, which is why the Jesuits moved it inside the building. The combination of the Baroque altar architecture, the Gothic image



Photo 2. Relief with the Virgin of Mercy, 1400–1410. Courtesy Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj. (Photo: Boris Farič.)

of the Virgin with the Child in her arms and the crowd of people under her cloak watched over by seven angels, two of whom are holding a crown over the Virgin's head, was most carefully arranged. When pilgrims came into the church, they were at first caught up in the darkness of the lower west section in the space under the organ loft. Then their sight would be directed towards the much brighter sanctuary where the image of grace was placed.

The statue of the Virgin is positioned in the central axis. To fix her position and give an impression of firmness a tabernacle was set above the altar table in order to provide a kind of pedestal. (Originally the pedestal for the statue of Virgin was the *trumeau*, the central pillar which divided the main portal of the church.) The gaze of the observer would then have moved uninterrupted from the altar upwards and along the sides of the tabernacle to the figure of the Virgin. It is a pity that this ingenious composition was recently lost when a number of items were removed from the sanctuary (Vidmar 2008). Under the outspread cloak of the Virgin there are 82 people; on the heraldic left side are secular figures, on the heraldic right side there are mostly ecclesiastical personalities.⁸ Almost all of them are kneeling in prayer and most of them are looking up towards the Virgin. In terms of attitude, many of them are very similar to the donors from the altar of Our Lady of the Rosary. At least five of the figures were completely restored sometime in the past. The unknown restorers changed their characteristics by replacing their attributes and by modelling new heads.⁹

There have been a number of studies which have sought to compare the relief with similar works of Central European Gothic sculpture and other similar works within the church itself (Cevc 1963: 141–142; Podnar & Juran i 1995: 171–172). Avguštin Stegenšek (1875–1920), after extensive research into the subject, was the first to attempt to identify the figures looking for safety under the Virgin's cloak. He tried to compare the relief with the political situation in the region; his hypothesis was that the praying figures represented the relatives of and other people close to

Hermann II of Cilli. He suggested identities for about 30 figures, and was confident he was correct about 20 of them. He focused his research on the great festivities which took place in Budim in 1408, when King Sigismund's victory in Bosnia and the birth of his daughter Elisabeth were celebrated. Stegenšek's study was to remain unfinished. After his death a friend and close colleague, Franc Kova i (1867–1939), published Stegenšek's records (Kova i & Stegenšek 1922). This article was later dismissed as inaccurate; in fact, Stegenšek was not sure of many of the claims, which is why he did not publish the article himself. Yet, in spite of some obvious flaws, his idea was ingenious and today younger researchers have begun to consider his ideas seriously again (Cevc 1978: 448; Vidmar 2007b: 848–853).

As there are two shields for coats of arms in both lower corners of the relief it was clear that the woman on the left (in fact on the heraldic right side) and the man on the right (the heraldic left side) are donors. But the painting on the shields had been lost by the beginning of the twentieth century when Stegenšek was preparing his study. At the time the renovation of the altar was underway and Stegenšek recommended that the coats of arms on the shields be repainted: the coat of arms of the family of the Lords of Ptuj was used for the man and the coat of arms of the Counts of Cilli for the lady. Stegenšek was right about the former; the figure of the kneeling barefoot man represents someone from the family of the Lords of Ptuj, most probably Bernhard, the principal or one of the two principal commissioners of the church, who died in 1420/21. In the case of the lady, however, Stegenšek made an error. Bernhard's wife Wilbirg was not from the family of the Counts of Cilli, but from the family of Maidburg. Polona Vidmar agrees with Stegenšek in that the man and the lady with crowns under the Virgin's left arm could be King Sigismund of Luxemburg¹⁰ and his wife Barbara, Herman II of Cilli's daughter; the figure of the middle-aged man with the aquiline nose and a beard is similar to his known portraits and Barbara is known to have been a fair-haired beauty, just like the lady with the crown on the relief. Vidmar's hypothesis also asserts that the man kneeling in front of Wilbirg of Maidburg could be her brother, Hans of Maidburg,¹¹ as the coat of arms is placed on his mantle, which is spread wide on the ground. There are two figures, both presumed to be self-portraits. Stegenšek's opinion was that the artist placed his portrait just under the right hand of the Lady, with which she is holding her cloak. The figure represents an older man with moustache and beard and with a hood over his head. But Emilijan Cevc (1978: 448) and Eva Pezdi ek (2007: 889–890) are of a different opinion, one which appears more convincing. They suggest that the sculptor of the relief is seen in the figure tucked in close to the Virgin's left leg. The Virgin's left arm, which is supporting the child, is just above his head and offers special protection to this person, who is set apart by being raised slightly higher than the other figures and is looking straight outwards at the admirers of the relief.

The frescos in the Holy Cross Chapel were rediscovered in 1948. On its ribbed vault the symbols of the Four Evangelists and the four Fathers of the Church are depicted, on the north wall is seen the legend of St Nicholas, while on the south wall there are two rows of related scenes. The Resurrection, the Crucifixion with Mary and John the Evangelist and the Mount of Olives are presented in the upper row; in the lower row is a scene with St Catherine and St Dorothea and a Pietà with six saints, while on the right there is a scene with St Andrew and St Christopher. The frescos were attributed to the workshop of Erasmus and Christopher of Bruneck (Brixen) after comparison with paintings of the same workshop in Carinthia (Besold 1995: 257–263). They are dated from between 1424 and 1426. The first chaplain (*capellanus*) at Ptujška Gora, Nicholas, died in 1424, while the oldest graffito in the church is located on the lower edge of the fresco and includes the year 1426. Between the upper and lower row there is a band with a partially preserved inscription which explains the commission of the paintings: ... *p(ro)xima feria post festu(m) s(an)cti Viti m(ar)tyris hoc opus fecit pingi d(omin)us Mathias pleb(an)us ecc(lesi)e s(an)cti Viti i(n) tren ...*



Photo 3. Donors on the fresco in the Holy Cross Chapel, 1424–1426. Workshop of Erasmus and Christopher of Bruneck. Courtesy Umetnostnozgodovinski inštitut Franceta Steleta ZRC SAZU. (Photo: Andrea Furlan.)

There are two donors depicted on the south wall. The chaplain Nicholas (from Ptujška Gora) kneels and prays at the right-hand edge of the scene with St Catherine and St Dorothea; a coat of arms with a basket full of flowers denotes him as a worshipper of St Dorothea. He is turned towards the next field with the depiction of the Pietà and his prayer is written on the band which winds upwards: *Maria cu(m) filio/ Miserere mei i(n) hoc exilio*. Another ecclesiastic (most probably Matthias from Videm/St Veit near Ptuj) is depicted at the left-hand edge of the field with the figures of St Andrew and St Christopher. He too is turned towards the Holy Mother, kneeling and praying – the inscription on his band says: *Esto salutata virgo cum prole beata / me tibi m(ente pi)a com(m)endo v(ir)go maria*. Both ecclesiastics are dressed in white cloaks, they have tonsures, but their faces differ. Nicholas is an older man with grey hair and a beard, while the other is fair-haired and beardless. Their poses are almost exactly the same as the poses of the donors on the *predella* of the altar of Our Lady of the Rosary, although the way the folds of their clothes are depicted expresses essential differences in style.

The chaplain Nicholas is of particular interest; it is somewhat unusual that his patroness St Dorothea is turned away from him, but the edge of her red mantle flutters over Nicholas' head and assures his protection. The motif of a cloak, which offers safety, was perhaps inspired by the relief of the Virgin of Mercy, which was at the time still over the main entrance of the church. It is certain that both churchmen were active at the time the frescos were commissioned. Nicholas, the first chaplain at Ptujška Gora, most probably devised the plan for the frescos, which also include the legend of St Nicholas on the north wall of the chapel. But Nicholas died in 1424 (according to

the inscription on his gravestone, built in the western wall of the chapel) and it was Matthias of St Veit (Videm), who continued and completed the project (Höfler 2004: 171).

The noble donors found a place close to the Virgin of Mercy and other saints venerated in the church. They were self-confident enough to commission portraits of themselves and well-known contemporary personalities, which are still recognizable to some extent. If we wish to look for the traces of the pilgrims from the lower social classes, the oldest is the graffito on the lower section of St Dorothea's red cloak under the image of the chaplain Nicholas: *anno d(omi)ni 1426 Jurij Zuschicz*.¹² The short inscription demonstrates the pilgrim's knowledge of written Latin, while his Slovene name is spelled in German. Up until now his name had not appeared in any of the existing documents, so his knowledge of writing is the only factor which points to his status. Slightly lower down, two other names can be read: *Hic fuit Ludewi ...* and: *hic fuit Vrban de ...* Other graffiti are found in various places in the church. One of them is on the west wall of the Holy Cross Chapel: *1590 Johanes Dolvansekh*. Another inscription from 1539 is preserved on the back of the throne on which the Virgin from the Annunciation group is seated; the stone sculptures representing the Virgin and the Angel, which date from around 1440 and are attributed to a master from the workshop of Jacob Kaschauer of Vienna (Höfler 1995b: 188–191), are today on display in the Regional Museum of Ptuj, but were part of the furnishings of the church until World War II. The inscription says: *Hic fuit petrus detheka.sch huius are capellanus Anno domi Millesimo Quimo trigesimo nono qui supra Manu ppria*.¹³ Under this main inscription on the back of the Virgin's throne there are also others which are not completely legible, but which are presumed to be the names of other chaplains. Quite a lot of graffiti are to be found on the lower part of the right side of the St Sigismund altar, one of two stone shrines with three niches, which has survived in the church from the beginning of the fifteenth century. One of the oldest is the name cut under the coat of arms of the noble family of Neuhaus: *FRANCISCVS MAXIMI // ANVS PETRINSCH* ... The inscription is inscribed in impeccable capitals; part of the year can be seen above the inscription, which can be read as *..03* or perhaps *..63*. Other inscriptions in the same area are less carefully cut into the stone and it is harder to distinguish letters and figures. The newest of them is a very modest one: *B.A.1940*. It is unusual that the left side of the altar remained completely untouched; this fact could help in determining the original position of the altar, which has certainly been relocated at least once.¹⁴ There are more graffiti to be found on the walls of the church and even on the lower inner side of the wooden screen which protects the stairs to the pulpit. The pulpit was made in the middle of the eighteenth century by Peter Marenzeller, a carver from Ptuj; the oldest date incised on the screen is from 1762, giving clear evidence of just how persistently the pilgrims tried to leave proof of their presence in the church.

During the Protestant period the pilgrimages were not sustained, but subsequently the Jesuits were very favourably disposed towards them; quite a significant number of votive paintings were donated to the church during the time of their presence at Ptujška Gora. Unfortunately, only one of these has been preserved, dating from 1879, but evidence of them is found in a copper engraving of 1660 by Wolfgang Kilian representing the relief of the Virgin of Mercy.

There is an approximate copy of the Gothic original in the centre of the composition, while eight miracles are engraved around the image of the Virgin. These eight images are copies of votive paintings from the period 1638–1658. In a row at the top of the composition there are three scenes concerning miracles within noble families. In the first Countess Maria Manrik is depicted. She had had a stroke and was dying, but after a pilgrimage to Ptujška Gora her health miraculously improved (1649). In the second is shown the miracle of the Baroness Margareta of Herberstein who was in poor health and whose daughter had been born handicapped; after she vowed to make a pilgrimage to Ptujška Gora the Baroness recovered much better health and the child began to walk upright



Photo 4. Copper engraving by Wolfgang Kilian with the Virgin of Mercy and eight miracles, 1660, 385 x 483 mm. Courtesy of the Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj. (Photo: Boris Farič.)

(1654). Similarly miraculous was the recovery of the three-year-old Maria Renata from the noble family of Sauer, shown in the third scene, who had a dreadful cough so severe that she was expected to die. Her parents prayed to the Virgin of Mercy and she was saved (1642).

There are two images to each side of the central engraving. On the left, Peter Kova evi is depicted imprisoned in a Turkish jail in Kanizsa, where he spent three years; when he made a vow to the Virgin of Ptujaska Gora, the chains miraculously fell from his legs and arms (1638). On the right, can be seen the Lutheran Nikolaj Fegeš, who could not get out of bed for a year and a half as he had swellings all over his body; he then promised to convert to Catholicism at Ptujaska Gora and recovered at once (1638). In a row at the bottom another three miracles concerning people from the middle and lower classes can be seen. On the left we can see a soldier, Andrej Prešek, and a certain Uršula Kova , who were both insane; after visiting Ptujaska Gora they recovered (1639). In the middle scene more ill people are depicted. A soldier, Elija Kasti from Salzburg, was epileptic, while a citizen from Ptuj and a custodian of Ormož Castle, Rudolf Gallner, had a fever (1639). This was also the ailment of Klapej Ropinski from Slavice (1639) and of Maria Salome Stibich (1658). Andrej Fridrich from Protaslovce could not walk, eat or drink, but he recovered after making a vow to the Virgin at Ptujaska Gora (1639). In the right-hand corner there are blind, deaf, dumb and paralysed people to be seen: Michel Haramin from Koprivnica (1638), a certain Margaret (1639), Katharina Kojlik from Landin (1639), Lucija from the district of Varaždin (1639) and a nameless seven-year-old girl (1638). All of them grew well again after they or their relatives made a vow to the Virgin at Ptujaska Gora.

The only votive painting which has survived until now as an original¹⁵ is from 1897. It shows a gilder, Anton Buth from the village of Kostrivnica, lying in bed. To the left, his wife is crying wretchedly, a boy and a girl are standing sadly on the other side of the bed while a priest is reading from the Bible and blessing the unfortunate man. But the Virgin with her Child, dressed in a cloak which two angels are spreading wide in the upper section of the painting, has heard the prayer. An angel is pursuing death in the guise of a skeleton out of the room; in fact, the angel does not allow Death to enter. The inscription on the lower part of the painting is written in Slovene:

Na udovito vižo ozdravljenja na priprošno / Marije, katera se je zgodila Sušca l. 1879. / u Kostrivnici. Zahvalo in spomin ta pild izro im.

(In the most wonderful way, the recovery took place on Mary's intervention, March 1879 in Kostrivnica. In thanks and to the memory I give this image.)

The painting is not of great quality, but it informs us about the life circumstances of an artisan, who was not poor but certainly of humble origins.

Mention should also be made of two photographers from the end of the nineteenth century – Johann Winkler and Alois Kasimir – who produced two photographs of the church typical of that time. Winkler¹⁶ captured the inside of the church (1895); his main goal was to present the rich furnishings of the sacred place. In doing so, he also managed successfully to enrich the document with a spirit of contemplation. A woman is shown kneeling in front of the sanctuary. We see her from the back, so her face is hidden. Although her identity is unclear, her clothes (a simple long skirt is protected by a dark apron; a white kerchief is covering her head) indicate she is a pilgrim from the lower social classes; in fact she is a peasant woman. Pilgrims from the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century used to come to Ptujška Gora in order to make very particular requests: most often for their own health or that of their cattle. They brought a wax or iron votive offering, a small representation of a particular part of the human body or an image of an animal; each image was intended to help remedy a particular illness.¹⁷ After the Mass, pilgrims laid the wax and iron votive figures beneath the Image of Grace, the Gothic relief of the Virgin of Mercy. Only a few examples of such votive figures survive, in the *Slovenski etnografski muzej* (Slovene Ethnographic Museum) in Ljubljana, in the *Pokrajinski muzej Celje* (Celje Regional Museum) and in the *Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj* (Ptuj Regional Museum), but the same figures were in use in other pilgrimage centres in Styria.

A different image was captured by Alois Kasimir,¹⁸ who focused on the so-called Cilli altar, the most precious element of the medieval furnishing of the church, which was originally positioned ... *in medio ecclesiae*... (Štefanac 1995: 59) but which was moved to the outside in the mid-eighteenth century, placed against the northern wall of the church and transformed into a chapel. Similarly to Winkler's photo, a woman is kneeling in front of the chapel with her left side turned towards the spectator; she looks like a city-dweller and very likely belongs to the middle classes, if we take into account her clothes (a long heavy dress with a pelerine over the shoulders and a hat with ribbons on the back). At the time, the first studies relating to the church had already been written and the experts had declared the Cilli altar to be the most precious of the medieval furnishings, suggesting it should be immediately removed into the church interior for the sake of its survival (Petschnigg 1870: CIX).¹⁹ Kasimir used his photos to make two lithographs, used to illustrate Ptujška Gora in the guide to Ptuj and its surroundings (Felsner 1895: 119). The photo of the Cilli altar and the lithography are almost identical. The figure of a woman deep in prayer helps to show up the refined structure of the medieval altar even more subtly.

After World War I radical social changes took place but the reputation of the pilgrimages to Ptujška Gora did not diminish. On the contrary – the economic crisis in the thirties was another



Photo 5. Johann Winkler, *The Interior of the Pilgrimage Church at Ptujška Gora* (1895). Courtesy of the Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj. (Copy made by Stojan Kerbler.)

reason for the pilgrims to seek mercy, and for large numbers of beggars to solicit alms from the believers. It was the painter France Miheli²⁰ who in 1940 presented Ptujška Gora as the only hope for a crowd of people flowing towards sanctuary – but the sky over the church tower is dark grey and leaden, which negated the hope symbolized by the tower directed towards heaven.²¹ War was inevitable also in South-East Europe; in 1939 the painter's wife died and Miheli had no reason for optimism. The pilgrims are crowded around the stalls on the square beneath the church. Women in shining white clothes are coming out of the sanctuary in a kind of a stream, which defines the centre of the composition and flows away from the church. Miheli studied the situation carefully while preparing for the painting; a few of his preliminary drawings survive in the Ptuj Regional Museum.²² Miheli devoted his attention not only to the pilgrims, who attract our attention with the clothing of the local peasant population,²³ but to the beggars too.

The influence of Pieter Brueghel the Elder is obvious; but this influence is not a direct one. Miheli, who studied in Zagreb (1927–1931), was very well acquainted with the artistic group *Zemlja* (*The Earth*), led by Krsto Hegeduši,²⁴ a Croatian painter who was close to the social movements which had grown stronger in the time of crisis. The city of Zagreb was surrounded by



Photo 6. France Mihelič, *Parish Fair at Ptujška Gora* (1940). Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Moderna galerija, Ljubljana. (Photo: Matija Plavec.)

poor villages and Hegeduši was interested in visiting those areas, where he found not only many touching motifs for his art but also the tradition of painting on glass which was still practised by folk painters. He combined his social interest with knowledge of the paintings of Pieter Brueghel, as did his colleagues in the group *Zemlja*, which was the most influential artistic movement of the time. France Mihelič, who himself lived in extremely modest circumstances, was one of the admirers of Hegeduši's style, which he adopted and persisted with until World War II. The social situation in Ptuj and its surroundings was comparable with the circumstances in Zagreb and its vicinity, so it was not only the style but also the social environment which convinced Mihelič what subjects and what mood he should draw and paint. The sketch of the beggars with handicapped bodies at the parish fair at Ptujška Gora (1938) – a boy laid in a handcart, a barefoot girl with hands spread, two of them holding a cap and a hat – is most characteristic.

After World War II, religion found itself in an awkward position in the then Yugoslavia. The separation of church and state was a new political reality; cooperation with the controlling authorities became a source of reproach to the Roman Catholic institution and the carrying out of church activities became much harder (Fischer et al. 2005: 852–854). In some cases, architecture and furnishings of ecclesiastical monuments were damaged and clergy were often persecuted. But the pilgrimage church at Ptujška Gora was the only one in Slovenia which was actually transformed into a museum for several years. In August 1951 a fight between pilgrims was artificially provoked, which served as the grounds for the police to break into the church. Research was then begun, finishing in September 1951 when the church was closed and pilgrimages strictly forbidden. The authorities



Photo 7. France Mihelič, *Miserables* (1938). Black chalk and gouache, 365 x 433 mm. Courtesy of the Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj. (Photo: Boris Farič.)

were less than enthusiastic about so many religious people gathering at Ptujška Gora every August. The appeals of intellectuals and leading clergy had no effect. A request was even addressed to the Yugoslav president, Josip Broz Tito, but with no response. In March 1952 the church was given the status of a museum; it was not until May 1957, after long negotiations, that it was re-opened as a religious institution.²⁵ The closure of the church was a *faux pas* by the authorities which upset the population, who gathered at the pilgrimages in even greater numbers over the following years.

Since 1960, the photographer Stojan Kerbler²⁶ has been recording the pilgrimages at Ptujška Gora. His photos are exact documents on one hand; on the other they touch the observer with the solemn spirit of the occasion and the mystic atmosphere which has obviously caught up the participants. Characteristic of Kerbler's photography is the wide-angle objective and the ability to gain the confidence of the people portrayed, who are usually looking straight into the camera and are positioned at the centre of the composition. "I photograph what is worth being photographed", is his motto. In fact he has an amazing ability to recognize motifs which comprise relics of something archaic. He takes photos exclusively in Haloze and in Ptuj – these are the places he knows extremely well and he is especially sensitive in recording events and sites where fundamental changes are expected to take place in the near future.

It is astonishing, however, how little has changed in the appearance of the pilgrimage fairs from 1940, when Mihelič produced his painting, compared with the 1960s, before cars became the general means of transport, even in the Haloze region. Until the 1970s most pilgrims came to Ptujška Gora by trains, which stopped at Strnišče, a small railway station about an hour on foot from the church.



Photo 8. Stojan Kerbler, *Alone*, 1971.

Only the most devoted pilgrims who were seeking special grace took a longer route on foot. In the 1960s and 1970s women were still dressed in white blouses and wore white kerchiefs, which was the prevailing image of the crowd of believers moving up and down the stairs leading to the church.

The space in the photograph is divided into two halves: the lower, earthly one with stalls and mostly male protagonists in dark suits, and the celestial one, which begins on the Baroque stairs leading to the sanctuary and is occupied by women in white clothes glowing in the sunshine.

As faith in God was not welcomed by the regime which ruled in the former Yugoslavia, it was to be expected that younger people working in towns would not take part in the pilgrimages because such activities might have ruined their careers. Most of the pilgrims, who did not need to hide their purpose and who did not hesitate to hold rosaries openly in their hands, were older people living in the countryside.

Although the site of Ptujška Gora has always been very crowded on great festive occasions, one most devoted believer found a lonely corner in the shade and sat on a pile of stone deep in prayer, where the photographer disturbed him. A vertical of shining white emphasises the image: the beads on the rosary, the nails on the old man's fingers, his shirt and a light on his suffering, wrinkled yet fine and beautiful face.

The pilgrimages have always been an opportunity for entertainment too. On the market-place beneath the church, stalls used to be and still are set up to sell gingerbread, sweets, cheap plastic toys, rosaries, crosses and candles. Not much has changed in the range of goods on offer in the last decades, although today children no longer yearn for just brightly coloured trinkets and sweets. Everyday needs and wishes have to be satisfied too. Two taverns are generally full of customers, but the pilgrims have always been fond of bringing their own food and drink with them. In another photo, three women have found a place to sit at the back of the church; we can recognize the eastern exterior wall of the sanctuary.

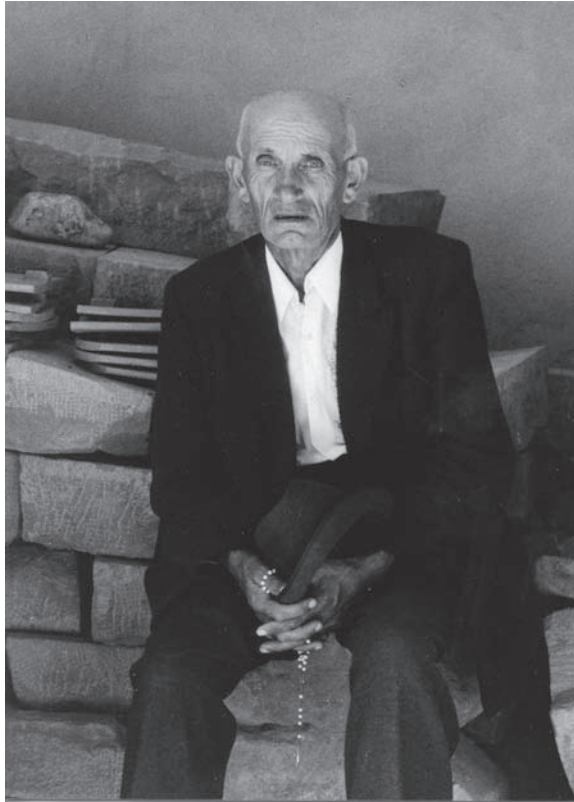


Photo 9. Stojan Kerbler, *Prayer*, 1971.

Two of them are dressed in dark dresses and wear woollen jackets despite the summer heat. Their heads are covered by gaily coloured kerchiefs. The third one on the right is wearing a dress with a tiny pattern and a dark apron. Her kerchief, too, has a kind of dot pattern. All of them are busy peeling and eating peaches. Beside them a plastic, a paper and a straw bag lie on the grass. A cotton napkin is protruding from the straw bag; most probably there is some more food in it. The women are totally absorbed in what they are doing. The one in the centre of the group particularly expresses the tranquillity of the moment. But the way these three women are sitting on the grass fascinates us. Their legs are extended straight out in front of them. The two women on the left have crossed their right leg over their left one, but we can see only the left leg of the woman on the right of the photo; she has obviously bent her right leg under her skirt and the straw bag is hiding it. Such an old-fashioned way of sitting is simply not seen any more in this region, at least not among adults. The figures of the women occupy the narrow space between the back of the composition, closed off by the church wall, and the foreground, determined by the soles of their shoes. Despite their tranquil absorption in a very ordinary activity, the photography gives the impression of strained expectation and there is no doubt of the solemnity of the occasion.

From the mid-1970s on the manner of arrival of the pilgrims at Ptujška Gora has undergone rapid change. Even in Haloze, cars have become the favoured means of transport and nowadays



Photo 10. Stojan Kerbler, *Pilgrim Women*, 1971.

there are scarcely any pilgrims who come to Ptujška Gora on foot. The political situation has eased and there is no more the need to avoid the pilgrimages because of the political environment. From 1991, August 15th has been a national holiday, so most people are free to visit the main Slovene churches devoted to the Mother of God. The mass at Ptujška Gora is celebrated by the Bishop of Maribor (since 2006, an archbishop), an occasion which attracts many visitors. But along with these changes, the present-day pilgrimage to Ptujška Gora has lost many of its local characteristics. The expected solemnity is difficult to find in the bustle of the feast and even Stojan Kerbler has begun to avoid the noisy crowds on the square and around the church.

Notes

This paper has been prepared as part of the research project J6-2238, The Slovene Language in Contact with the Alpine and Danube Areas, financed by the Research Agency of the Republic of Slovenia.

1. Older Slovene names are Gora and rna gora (Mountain and Black Mountain in translation). The name Ptujška Gora (in translation: The Mountain of Ptuj) appeared in the 19th century and is related to the name of the town of Ptuj in the vicinity. The local people still use the old name Gora (Mountain). The name rna gora is related to the legend of how the Virgin Mary veiled the church with dark clouds when Turkish troops were approaching; the enemies became lost in the darkness and the church was saved. In fact the truth was just the opposite: the Turkish troops broke into the church (in 1475) and caused a lot of damage. As the church is constructed partly from grey sandstone, its dark appearance most probably inspired the name (Stegenšek 1914: 20).
2. Štefanac (1995: 50, 57–60), Peskar (2007). Although there is quite some literature about the church in Slovene, not much exists in other languages. One of the oldest professional papers is Petschnigg (1870). Some works of art from Ptujška Gora are incorporated into overviews of Central-European sculpture, as in Garzarolli-Thurnlackh (1941), Kutal (1965, 1972), Clasen (1974), Schmidt (1977, 1978, 1992). The

first paper about Gothic art in Slovenia with special stress on the church at Ptujška Gora, generating a wide international response, was published by Emilijan Cevc (1978). A monograph is available in German (Zadnikar 1995). Important articles are to be found in the miscellany of an international symposium held in Ljubljana in 1995 (Höfler 1995a) along with a large scale exhibition that took place in the Narodna galerija (National Gallery) in Ljubljana. The catalogue of the exhibition was also published in German (Höfler 1995). The pilgrimage church of Ptujška Gora is also an important part of the monograph published by Vidmar (2006: 211–307). Janez Höfler presented the monument in two papers in German (Höfler 2006, 2009).

3. The pope Boniface IX allowed Ulrich IV of Walsee to erect the church; the document, which is presumed to have been written between 1398 and 1400, is not preserved, but is described in an inventory from Wurmberg Castle in the vicinity of Ptuj, where it was kept. Cf. Vidmar (2007b: 822).
4. Carl Haas, who lived and worked in Graz and was responsible for Styria on behalf of the Viennese Central Commission, made a number of drawings presenting the most important elements and details of the church. His legacy, including drawings from Ptujška Gora, is preserved in Landesarchiv in Graz. In 1870 Hans Petschnigg (1870) wrote an article in which he assessed the church from an art historical perspective and suggested measures for preserving the most important parts of it.
5. In fact the hands are broken off, but there is no doubt about the intention of the gesture.
6. The altar is attributed to Veit Königer, but Joseph Holzinger is also discussed as a possible author (Vrišer 2000).
7. The relief is sculpted from a single block of sandstone, 225 x 333 cm.
8. Some changes in the status of the people portrayed occurred as a result of later interventions. For instance: the figure with an emperor's crown in the first row kneeling beside the right foot of the Virgin used to be a pope, but his head is a Baroque one. On the copper engraving from 1660 the figure still represents a pope, but most probably he was changed to an emperor when the relief was incorporated into a new altar.
9. The new heads are made of wood and are far inferior to the quality of the original ones.
10. Emilijan Cevc (1978: 448) presumed that the man with a crown in the first row on the heraldic left side could be Sigismund of Luxemburg.
11. Stegenšek thought it should be Friderich of Orthenburg.
12. The graffito proves that the fresco was finished before or in 1426.
13. As some letters from the inscription are not clearly visible, different researchers have read them differently. Cf. also Stupica (1953: 58).
14. Polona Vidmar (2007: 821) presumes that the altars originally stood along the north and south walls of the side aisles.
15. In 1914 A. Stegenšek (1914: 6) saw 20 of them still present, but he stressed that the number had been much higher previously.
16. Johann Winkler was one of the first active photographers in Ptuj. He established a studio which remained the leading one in Ptuj for three generations.
17. Most often the illness was apparent from the image (a human leg or arm, an image of an animal etc.) but not in all cases. The image of a wax frog was used, for example, when a woman with gynaecological problems was asking for health or even for fertility.
18. Alois Kasimir (1852–1930) was a painter and photographer who lived in Ptuj, Graz and Vienna. His children Luigi and Elsa were also painters and sculptors.
19. All the later researchers and conservators repeated this request, but the restoration and removal of the altar to the south aisle of the church did not take place until 1952.
20. France Miheli (1907–1998) studied in Zagreb and spent almost six years (1936–1941) in Ptuj as a teacher in the high school. He researched the ethnographic particularities of the surroundings of Ptuj with great eagerness. The images he observed remained in his mind and were seen consistently throughout his work (Gostiša 1994, 1997, 1999).
21. France Miheli, Parish Fair at Ptujška Gora, oil on canvas, 71.9 x 98.4 cm, 1940, Moderna galerija Ljubljana, Inv. Nr. 114/S. There is another version of the painting from 1939, which was not finished and is in private ownership.

22. After the death of the artist his heirs donated a huge number of drawings (2,440 separate drawings and 97 sketchbooks) to the Ptuj Regional Museum.
23. Women are dressed in long skirts while their heads are covered with white kerchiefs.
24. Krsto Hegeduši (1901–1975) was, after World War II, a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb.
25. The details of this procedure can be read in the Parish Chronicle (Šamperl 2007).
26. Stojan Kerbler was born at Ptujška Gora in 1938. He is one of most successful photographers in Slovenia and in the former Yugoslavia. The list of his international awards is extensive. In the 1970s particularly, he caught the attention of various international juries with his photos of people living in Haloze, a materially poor but spiritually and mystically rich region in the vicinity of Ptuj. His photos are available at the web page <http://www.photo-kerbler.com/zivljenjepis>. Other literature about his opus with a translation into English is by Kerbler (2003) and Ciglence ki (2008). When the church at Ptujška Gora functioned as a museum, the key was kept by the Kerbler family. Stojan's parents were respected teachers and they knew a lot about the history of the church. Sometimes Stojan accompanied the visitors and took on the role of guide.

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