

The Holy Shrine of St. John of Nepomuk on Zelená hora Žďár nad Sázavou

The Holy Shrine of St. John of Nepomuk on Zelená hora is an impressive religious piece of architecture, which is extraordinary for several reasons. It is considered to be the most picturesque Baroque Gothic building and at the same time the most typical piece of work of the famous architect Jan Blažej Santini-Aichel. The Holy Shrine on Zelená hora is timeless not just because of its unique architectural form, but also because of its symbolic meaning, based on geometric and numeric speculations.

The church is the property of the Czech Republic. In 1994, thanks to its rarity, as well as its architectonic and artistic value, the church was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List as the first-listed solitary building and the fourth-listed landmark in the Czech Republic, after the historic centre of Prague, Český Krumlov, and Telč.

The Contracting Person and the Architect

The construction of the Holy Shrine of St. John of Nepomuk near Žďár's monastery was carried out thanks to a close, long-standing, and immensely fruitful cooperation of two extraordinary people – Václav Vejmluva and Jan Blažej Santini-Aichel. The impulse came from Václav Vejmluva, Žďár monastery's Cistercian Abbot, who admired John of Nepomuk, both before his beatification and following his canonization.

The preparation of the project dates back to the end of April 1719, ending in August 1719, which is an uncommonly short period of time for work of such extent. It is considered to be the immediate reaction to the discovery of conserved tissue (at that time assessed as the tongue) in John of Nepomuk's tomb in St. Vitus Cathedral on April 15th 1719. Architect Jan Blažej Santini-Aichel was entrusted with the construction of the project.

He worked according to a detailed order of the investor, Abbot Vejmluva, who gave the architect his conception of not just the choice of the architectonic form, but above all, he assigned a symbolic program, which fully conformed with the requirement of the Church: "assigning is the task of fathers, execution – the artists". This program was the architect's basis for his work. Santini conceived the project as unique and moreover, he did not follow previous building periods and was, therefore, able to build literally on a green field and allow for the timeless architectonic form of his work to excel. Because the contracting person and the architect had been working together, had known each other for a long time, and the Abbot was an educated and obliging man, the final architecture of Santini's work had surely been influenced by their mutual understanding.

Positioning the Building in the Countryside

The location of the premises had been picked with great deliberation. Initially, the low hill located to the east of the monastery, where the holy shrine was to be built, was overgrown by thick wood. This is what its name „the Black Woods“ („Černý les“) refers to. The forest was cut down and the Abbot named the low hill „Green Mountain“ („Zelená hora“), as a reference to the maternal monastery of Žďár's convent friar house, and, at the same time, a place where John of Nepomuk was allegedly raised. Thanks to its location on the top of the de-forested low hill, the building became a dominant feature of the countryside.

Sanctuary Construction, Fittings, and Decoration

Construction of the church unusually began in the middle of the building season, on August 13th 1719. The shell of the church was presumably finished in 1721 and fully completed the following year. The shrine was probably equipped and decorated at least temporarily in the same year and consecrated on September 27th, 1722; however, work on the premises did not finish until after the consecration of the church. What remained was finishing the cloister and the church needed permanent fittings and decorations.

A sculptor from Chrudim, Jan Pavel Czechpauer, started working on the main and side altars, which were based on Santini's designs. After Czechpauer's death, the main altar was supposedly finished by sculptor Řehoř Theny, who is also known as the creator of the sculptural decorations of the original pulpit. The silver pilgrimage statue of St. John of Nepomuk was created according to Theny's model by goldsmith Jan Norbert Diesbach from Prague.

Symbolic and Architectonic Interpretation

The church is built in the shape of a five-pointed star. This fact is based on a legend, which claims that a five-star crown appeared above the water's surface at the place where John of Nepomuk drowned. This symbol reappears in other areas of the building: the premises are accessible through five entrances, there are five chapels and five altars in the church, the Latin word TACUI – I was silent – also has five letters. This word describes a legend according to which the Saint paid with his life for not violating the seal of confession of Queen Sophia (the wife of Wenceslaus IV). The list of facts connected with the number five could go on. The nave of the church is surrounded alternately by four chapels, a chancel, and a pentad of ante chapels. A dominating feature of the church dome is a large red tongue, an attribute of St. John of Nepomuk, surrounded by a circle of flames with rays of light shining through it. This element is, however, the result of a change in the original project design, where there was a central ten-pointed star planned.

Later on, the designer reacted to the fact that very precious relics had been acquired for the new church, which was a lingula of St. John of Nepomuk (a bone to which the tongue is attached). The church thus also became the Saint's shrine. The symbol of the tongue is at the same time a symbol of the triumphant weapon – the sword of the martyr John. That is why the windows above the entrances in the lantern chapels are tongue-shaped. Other windows are bishopmitre shaped and refer to the investor, Abbot Václav Vejmluva. The final shape used for the windows is a spherical equilateral triangle, symbolizing the Holy Trinity.

At the main altar, there is a statue of St. John of Nepomuk standing and visually rising above the globe. The globe is decorated by five eight-pointed Cistercian stars, which represent the five continents where Christianity was proclaimed. The globe is surrounded by five angels deployed in order to create the letter V. Two other equally large angels open a baldachin, which frames the background of the whole scene. Further, a trio of putti are situated above the Saint's head. One of them is holding a key in his hand, another a seal. Two white eagles seem to be upholding the altar table with their wings. An emblem of the church founder Boček from Obřany is situated between them. We can find a divine symbol of a spherical triangle with a halo on the vault above the altar, where there used to be a Hebrew sign – JAHVE.

The side altars are dedicated to the four evangelists: Matthew with a book, Mark with a lion, Luke with a bull, and John with an eagle. The ambit is shaped as a ten-pointed star with five chapels of unknown dedication. It was probably completed before 1730, even though not in full, according to the original author's intention. The vault of the ambit was originally decorated by rich stucco and the roofs above the gates used to carry allegoric statues of John's priestly virtues. The walls of the courtyard were decorated, especially during festive events, by a number of legendary and

symbolic scenes placed in cartouches. Severe Winter were the reason for adjustments of the ambit during the 1760's. Some of the gateways from the corridor to the courtyard were walled up, portals of the gates and chapels were lowered.

Religious Events During the Time of Glory and Subsequent Downfall

Since the beginning, the church on Zelená hora became one of the most visited pilgrimage spots and many grand baroque events took place on its premises. A major upheaval was caused by a fire in 1784, which devastated the monastery, the church of St. John, and the roof of the ambit. What followed was a completely illogical request of Otto Steinbach from Kranichštejn, an Abbot at that time, to abandon the monastery. The monarch, Josef II, granted the request. The monastery was abandoned and the church on Zelená hora with a temporarily covered roof was closed. Valuables were immediately taken away and some of the fittings were later transported to surrounding churches later on. The people of Žďár and Nové Město started to demand the rebuilding and reopening of the church at the end of 1791. The building in the state of disrepair had to wait for its reconstruction until 1792. No later than in the year 1800, masses were celebrated in the refurbished church and regular pilgrimages resumed probably a year later, although they were only negligible reflections of those in the past. Repairs on the roofs of the ambit followed in 1794–1802. Further maintenance and repairs were mostly done due to abrasion resulting from severe climatic conditions, or in worse cases, by fires caused by storms, etc. More steady reconstruction commenced at the beginning of the 20th century; however, it was only the roof that was rebuilt. Further work was halted by World War I. Systematic rebuilding based on a professionally elaborated project began in 1974. The area surrounding the church was covered by grass until the 19th century so that nothing would disturb the perception of the central sanctuary and enough space was kept for the arriving pilgrims. This area, however, started to be used as a graveyard at the beginning of the 19th century. This fact is connected with the concession of the governorate in 1792, which granted permission to reopen the church only under the condition that the graveyard from Žďár would be transferred here and the church would be used for funerals. The area between the church and the ambit started to rise due to the burials and the ambit partially “drowned” in the raised terrain.

Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust

Jan Blažej Santini – Aichel unfortunately did not live to see the premises finally completed. He died in December 1723. Abbot Václav Vejmluva was able to enjoy the shared piece of work for another fifteen years ...