

Milena Bartlová

## Pietà from Jihlava as a site of memory

Considering an artwork as a site of memory and as a focus of identity construction is not at all an obvious approach. The conference “Common Artifacts” aimed at bringing to the fore the recognition of visual artworks as very special objects which have valuable social roles besides their ability to create esthetic contemplation. In my contribution, I will approach images first of all as agents. I do not intend to deny that artworks are created with the intention to express ideas, in the case of medieval or early modern art they are usually religious ideas. Once considered individually, however, images and especially artworks may possess communicative roles beyond the ones that are usually encountered in the primary situation of production and consumption. In this framework, I would like to demonstrate the role played by a statue of Pietà in the communal life of its hometown from the 14<sup>th</sup> century until present. My focus will not lie on the process of creation, but on the social aspects of images that were significant throughout the decades and even centuries after the art works’ making. Images can be found communicating in situations that are rather distant from the context for which they were initially created and in which they were originally comprehended. Such a secondary meaning needs not to be considered as something accidental and external. In fact, we can assume that it is this meaning that brings the capability to enter into new and challenging structures of meaning that in turn assure an old artwork to stay alive, or become alive once again, for new generations to observe. In so far as a recipient is a constitutive element of any artwork, I believe, that research accomplished in the frame of the social agency of artworks is a significant part of art historical research.

One particular aspect of the social agency of artworks in Central and East-Europe is their national character. While knowledge of language divides groups of speakers, visual images, which do not rely on words and texts, may connect. The use of Latin in pre-modern times or nowadays’ large use of English

obviously cannot be dismissed but still, I argue, that in contrast to language, artistic images appeal more easily to emotional and subliminal levels of perception without need for specific preliminary education, and thus may have a much stronger impact. Seen from another point of view, art history in Central and Eastern Europe since the 19<sup>th</sup> century has often used mute artworks as examples and even as proof for competing and mutually excluding national identities. Whoever could claim that early art works of a certain region belonged to their ethnic group, has felt entitled to proclaim his right to rule the land. Too many art historical texts were involved in ethnic, national and racial struggle in our part of Europe<sup>1</sup>. Our current attempt to find a discursive position beyond the national divides requires a reconsideration on a methodological and terminological basis that would prevent us, on the one hand, to disguise the conflicts of the past, and at the same time, enable us to provide a European perspective for our topic.

In order to investigate the communicative agency of a medieval artwork during the six centuries of its existence, the concept of historical memory can be employed. It is possible to recognize more than a singular historical memory in a given place, to consider them not as mutually exclusive, and, consequently, to operate with the concept of multiple identities<sup>2</sup>. In fact, such an approach may be the most adequate one if we were to deal with pre-modern societies whose identity structure differed profoundly from that of the era of modern nationalism. An artwork can be approached as a site of memory: it is an object emotionally charged and physically, even bodily concrete, remaining - more or less - the same materially while entering into different contexts and meanings.

The focus of my contribution will be the monumental wooden sculpture of Pietà from the parish church of St James in Jihlava (Iglau) (fig. 1)<sup>3</sup>. During the restoration completed in the year 2005, rather thick secondary surface layers were removed and as a result, large areas of original polychrome have been revealed

and hence, formal analysis was finally made possible. On the basis of a close stylistic correspondence to the donor's relief of Ludwig der Bayer and his wife from the former chapel of Altes Hof in Munich, and based on the fact that the Munich court art and the Bohemian artistic scene stood in a close artistic relationship during the rule of king John of Luxembourg, the Pietà from Jihlava can be dated to before or around 1330. With its detachable, somewhat puppet-like figure of Christ it represents a relatively early example of the appropriation of the new Lamentation iconography, mediated by the Alpine regions from Italy.



(fig. 1) Pietà from St James church in Jihlava, ca 1330, 167 cm

The Pietà was first mentioned in an art historical context in 1931, when it was stripped bare of its devotional clothing and the Czech scholars compared it to the group of the so-called mystical German Pietàs<sup>4</sup>. Wilhelm Pinder and Georg Dehio coined this term in the 1920s, making it a typical expression for the genuine German national character of the iconography. The second and last time the Iglau Pietà was tho-

roughly studied was in the authoritative Czech volume on Gothic sculpture in Bohemia by Albert Kotal in 1962<sup>5</sup>. Kotal supposed that attempts to obtain a more precise dating on the basis of stylistic grounds were impossible as he thought the religious function completely obscured the artist's style. In addition, he removed the Pietà from the scope of Czech art history, due to its affiliation to the German mystical iconography as well as its origin, that is to say a town dominated by Germans.

Jihlava is a town on the border of Bohemia and Moravia, also known under its German name Iglau. Founded as a royal mining town in the course of the Bohemian silver rush around the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Iglau had a German-speaking majority ever since the dominant language of communication (if not always the mother tongue) of its inhabitants can be determined. During the German nation building movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Iglau became the focal point for the concept of the so-called "German language islands" (Sprachinsel) inside Bohemia and Moravia. After the forced expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia in the wake of World War II, Jihlava's German character was sentenced to be forgotten. It was only after the fall of the Communist regime and the ensuing split of Czechoslovakia that Germans were gradually allowed a place in the communal historical memory: e.g., as the first of its kind, the Jihlava regional museum includes a room dedicated to local German culture.

Little is known about the situation in which the Pietà was carved and painted. Its sheer volume suggests a local production, but the first documented written evidence of active artists in Jihlava dates to the 1430s, i.e. a century later. The town seems never to have been so economically strong as to sustain a resident artistic workshop and even the relatively high quality decorations for the parish church in the 1490s seem to have been either imported or provided by a temporarily settled workshop<sup>6</sup>. The parish in the wealthy mining town was incorporated to the Premonstratensian monastery in Želiv (Seelau) prior to its loss of power during the Hussite wars between 1420-1434. Only a few years before, the town commune had finally managed to gain at least partial and shared authority over the parish church after decades of bitter ar-

guing with the monastery. As a result of the conflict, local burghers habitually chose their burials to not take place in the parish church, but rather in the two mendicant churches and their cloisters. Donations to the parish church only began after 1402, the year when the famous St Catherine sculpture was acquired for a tabernacle of the singers' brotherhood from a prestigious Prague workshop. The Pietà from Jihlava, on the other hand, was made 70 years earlier, for one of the two rich Jihlava mendicants cloisters. The local tradition claims it comes from the Franciscan monastery of Our Lady. The fact that the style of the Pietà conforms to the artistic orientation of the Prague Luxembourg court towards Munich might suggest a possible royal donation, but there is no further information to support such hypothesis.

There is another medieval Pietà group in Jihlava that now belongs to the Jesuit church but originated from the abolished church of the Holy Cross with a Dominican monastery. This provenance may provide an indirect confirmation of the origin of the earlier Pietà from the Franciscans. Typical for high medieval towns, the two orders competed for the favor and attention of the townspeople and located their monasteries as far as possible from each other. The later Jihlava Pietà represents an important example of the type of the Beautiful Style Pietàs that became popular across the whole of Europe around 1400<sup>7</sup>. Like the St Catherine sculpture from the parish church, the Pietà of the Dominicans in Jihlava is cut from marly limestone, typical for Prague workshops and associated with the aura of the imperial city. It is one of the largest of its type.

We are equally at loss concerning the liturgical contexts and religious performances centered on both Pietà sculptures. Still, it seems probable that the Dominicans and burghers who preferred their monastery wanted to obtain an artwork that could successfully compete with the older Franciscan sculpture of the same iconography. The communal identity around 1400 was still divided between the Franciscans and Dominicans, but just 30 years later, after the Hussite wars, the split shifted to a divide between the Roman and Bohemian Catholics – the second term being a self-description of the Hussite, or Utraquist church. The Dominican monastery was never revived again

and the new and formally actual Dominican Pietà might have simply lacked time to gain its own significance in the religious life of the Jihlava community. The older Franciscan Pietà, on the other hand, faced a challenging future.

In 1522, Iglau became the first town in the Bohemian Kingdom to become Lutheran and in 1564 the Prague Premonstratensians felt prompted to take over the neglected legacy of the Želiv monastery<sup>8</sup>. The rich and powerful Strahov monastery pursued a policy of re-catholicization that could prove successful only after the defeat of the non-catholic party in Bohemia in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War. While the Beautiful Style Pietà remained neglected in the former Dominican church, the older Franciscan Pietà acquired an active role in the re-catholicization process. It was moved to a cemetery chapel attached to the parish church and possibly on this occasion a new layer of polychrome was applied around 1600<sup>9</sup>. In that chapel, before the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century at a date that wasn't precisely recorded, the monumental Virgin turned her head away from a priest who performed the mass in spite of being in the state of mortal sin. The religious community of Iglau, that had been unified in their Catholicism for one or two generations by that time, had thus received a special sign from heaven: the moral lesson was mediated by a miraculous image.

Hence, the Pietà acquired a special status. A new, sumptuously decorated chapel was built on the site and the sculpture was integrated into a Baroque altarpiece (fig. 2). Both figures were painted in uniform blackish paint with light red blood traces, which were changed back into polychrome in 1784 by the painter Tobias Süssmayer. But layers of ritual clothing and devotional objects, among which only the two faces of the Virgin and Jesus could be seen, now covered the sculpture. At least two sculptural copies were made, one of them matching the superhuman scale of the original (both are listed in the inventories of the Jihlava regional museum, but they cannot be located). The Pietà became a center of religious festivities and pilgrimages, as well as the subject of devotional books and prints (fig. 3). It was venerated as a holy patron of the town, the spiritual center of the community, one that draws its members together and provi-

des an axis for their identity, anchored both transcendently in heavens and locally in the concrete site.

The silver mines of Jihlava ran out before the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the town economy was re-oriented towards textile industry and trade<sup>10</sup>. The town prospered during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, but was unable to sustain during the industrialization period. The town's industry stagnated due to poor railway connections and the lack of natural resources. In 1930, Jihlava lost its self-government and the county whose center it used to be was administratively abolished. The decision of the same year to strip the miraculous Pietà of its devotional clothes and paraphernalia might be related to this loss only symbolically. The sculpture was radically restored by the local carver Johannes Eigl who covered it with layers of double chalk, thus rendering the sculpted form as "strong, severe and sober" – a formal character typical in the period opinion for Germanic art (fig. 4). The devotion to the sculpture, although significantly weakened, continued up until the spring of 1946, when trains going to the American occupation zone in Germany transported the last of approximately sixteen thousand Germans of Iglau. *Sudetendeutscher Landsmannschaft der Sprachinsel Iglau* is now active in Frankfurt am Main.

The devotion of the miraculous Pietà in the parish church of Iglau seems not to have been particularly strong in the 1930s and 40s and the identity of local Germans was more intensely formed by folklore and language, which were both strongly stressed by the political movement of Sudeten Germans. We thus do not have the kind of modern legend like the one concerning the Black Madonna from Brno. The panel painting of the Virgin, originally a Byzantine icon, was said to have left the town with the forcedly evacuated Germans in 1945. The image returned the following year, moved to do so by the fervent prayers of the Augustinian convent, but appeared "dark and sad" ever since. The legend, in fact, reflects the restoration of the Brno Virgin undertaken in the Moravian National Museum between 1945 and 1947<sup>11</sup>. The Iglau Pietà could not, after all, leave with the Germans, as it was stored in a safe deposit during the last months of the war. It was painted with a new layer of polychrome before being returned to the parish church in 1946.



(fig. 2) Altarpiece of the Sorrowful Virgin in the side chapel of the parish church of St James in Jihlava.



(fig. 3) Bildnuß der Wunderthätigen Mutter Gottes in Iglau, copper engraving, second half of the 18th century.





(fig. 3) Bildnuß der Wunderthätigenn Mutter Gotteß in Iglau, copper engraving, second half of the 18th century.

For sixty years then it stood in its altar, without being particularly venerated or considered in an art historical context. The sculpture, in fact, looked rather like a plaster cast of itself.

In 2005, the Pietà was restored and exhibited for two weeks in Prague at Strahov, where a small international colloquium was held in its presence<sup>12</sup>. Immediately after, it was closed off in its baroque altarpiece again. This is arguably the safest place for the sculpture. Unfortunately, it remains virtually inaccessible as it can be rarely seen at all behind the glass pane and decorative grating; even the access to the chapel itself is strictly limited. The communal Highlands Art Gallery in Jihlava published a book on the restoration and new art historical evaluation of the Pietà in Czech for local readership. Unfortunately, my hope that the sculpture may become a focal point of a reframed local identity proved illusory, because there were no further local activities that would promote it. First, both the Highlands Art Gallery and the Strahov monastery, which administers the Jihlava parish, consi-

dered the task completed in 2006. Second, and more important, after seventy-five years, the Czech inhabitants of Jihlava have created their own sense of local identity, which in accordance with the Czech society as a whole is strongly non-ecclesiastic (I am using this awkward term to denote that it is not irreligious or atheist). The Roman Catholic Church reacts, unfortunately, by defensively recalling its triumphalist past. Art historical objects have become important tokens in the conflict of symbols and in some cases their accessibility is being restricted deliberately<sup>13</sup>.

In the meantime, the Pietà from Jihlava's parish church acquired some art historical prominence. I have been invited to talk about the Pietà in Kalamazoo, in Köln am Rhein, at the world congress in Nürnberg, and at the Technische Universität in Berlin, and in addition of course several times in Jihlava and Brno<sup>14</sup>. I believe that the Pietà's future as a potential identity agent is yet to come.

## Endnoten

1. For further details, see Milena Bartlová, *Naše, národní umění. Studie z dějin dějepisu umění* [Our own, national art: studies in the history of art history], Brno 2009. A German translation is in preparation at GWZO Leipzig
2. For a basic orientation, see Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, München 1999; Heiner Keupp u.a., *Identitätskonstruktionen: Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*, Frankfurt a.M. 1999; *Identities: Time, Difference and Boundaries*, hg. v. Heidrun Friese, New York – Oxford 2002; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994; Françoise Mayer – Zdeněk Vašíček, *Minulost a současnost, paměť a dějiny* [Past and present, memory and history], Brno 2008.
3. A complete art historical analysis and contextualization with references was published in *Die Pietà aus Jihlava/Iglau und die heroischen Vesperbilder des 14. Jahrhunderts*, hg. v. Milena Bartlová, Brno 2007; a shortened version was published as: Milena Bartlová, *Die Pietà aus der Jakobskirche in Iglau: Ein frühes Beispiel für einen neuen ikonographischen Typ*, in: *Frühe rheinische Vesperbilder und ihr Umkreis* (Kölner Beiträge, Bd. 20), hg. v. Ulrike Bergmann, Köln am Rhein 2010, p. 94-102.
4. For all the relevant references and arguments cf. publications as Note 3.
5. Albert Kutal, *České gotické sochařství 1350-1450* [Czech gothic sculpture 1350-1450], Praha 1962, p. 30.
6. For further information on the history of the town, see *Jihlava*, hg. v. Renata Pisková, Praha 2010.
7. Milena Bartlová, *Moravian Beautiful Style?*, in: *The Wanning of the Middle Ages, proceedings from a symposium*, hg. v. Kaliopi Chamonikola, Brno 2001, p. 13-19. Further information on the topic of the Beautiful Style can be found in *Karl IV., Kaiser von Gottes Gnaden*, hg. v. Jiří Fajt, München 2006.
8. Bartlová 2007, *Die Pietà aus Jihlava / Iglau*.
9. A complete report on the restoration of the Pietà was published only in Czech. See Kateřina Knorová – Jan Knor, *Zpráva o restaurování Piety z farního kostela sv. Jakuba v Jihlavě*, in: Milena Bartlová et al., *Pietà z Jihlavy, Jihlava 2007*, p. 43-118.
10. Pisková 2010, *Jihlava*.
11. Klaus Schreiner, *Maria: Jungfrau, Mutter, Herrscherin*, München / Wien 1994, p. 219-220; Milena Bartlová, *Black is Beautiful, aneb Nigra sum sed formosa*, in: *Stříbrný oltář v bazilice Nanebevzetí Panny Marie na Starém Brně* [Silver altarpiece in the church of the Assumption of the Virgin in Old Brno], hg. v. Martin Číhalík - Pavel Suchánek, Brno 2011, p. 25-36. The legend is related by Hans-Martin Fröhlich, *Ein Bildnis der Schwarzen Muttergottes von Brunn in Aachen*, Mönchengladbach 1967.
12. Contributions from the colloquium were published as Bartlová 2007, *Die Pietà aus Jihlava / Iglau*.
13. For more see Milena Bartlová, *Die Kirche und die künstlerischen Denkmäler in Tschechien*, in: *Kunst und Kirche LXXV*, 2013, Nr 1, p. 10-13.
14. Publications: Bartlová 2007, *Die Pietà aus Jihlava / Iglau*; Milena Bartlová, *Imago movens – moving image*, in: *The Challenge of the Object / Die Herausforderung des Objekts*, Congress Proceedings, hg. v. G. Ulrich Großman und Petra Krutisch, Nürnberg 2013, p. 268-271.

## Abbildungen

- Fig. 1: Photo: Jakub Hynek, Prague, 2007.  
 Fig. 2: Photo: Johannes Haupt, Jihlava, 1896.  
 Fig. 3: Photo: Collection of Libor Štunc, Prague.  
 Fig. 4: Photo: Národní památkový ústav Brno.

## Zusammenfassung

The Pietà from Jihlava/Iglau is larger than most life-size wooden sculptures dating from the 1330s. The contribution deals with the history of the artwork which extends over nearly seven hundred years. During this time, the Pietà served primarily as an object of religious devotion but also played an important role as a focus of communal identity for the inhabitants of Jihlava. If perceived as a specific site of memory, the sculpture relates to the changing loyalties in the town: between the Franciscans and the Dominicans, the Catholics and the Reformation, and in modern times between the German and Czech speakers.

## Autorin

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## Titel

Milena Bartlová: Pietà from Jihlava as a site of memory, in: *kunsttexte.de/ostblick*, Nr. 2: *Gemeine Artefakte*, 2014 (6 Seiten), [www.kunsttexte.de/ostblick](http://www.kunsttexte.de/ostblick).