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Camarín de Buenavista in the Church of Santa Maria de la Victoria in Málaga
in the Context of the Reliquary

Camarín de Buenavista w Maladze jako rodzaj relikwiarza

Camarín de Buenavista is the unique and spectacular example of the splendid baroque sacral architecture in Andalusia. Attributed to Francisco Hurtado (as possibly his earliest architectural commission)¹, it is regarded as the most complex item of this type of building and although it was not followed in an unchanged manner in many churches, it is anyway regarded as very influential both in terms of the construction itself and the extremely sophisticated style of multi-symbolic decoration that it is worldwide famous for (Kubler, Soria, 1957:32)².

The camarín is now a part of a Church of Santa Maria de la Victoria whose origins date back to the 14th century. The church became extremely famous during the *reconquista* led by King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile, in the Spanish tradition described as the “Catholic Kings” (*Los Reyes Católicos*). According to the legend (some parts of which can be proved by the historical

¹ Although as the architect responsible for the reconstruction of the church itself Felipe de Unzurrunzaga is regarded.

² What should be mentioned here is the fact that although the chapel (camarín) in Málaga should be undoubtedly incorporated into the corpus of the European highlights of the baroque architecture, it is absolutely unknown not only among the tourists who visit Andalusia, but even among the art historians. As a result, in the fundamental book about the Spanish architecture (Kubler, 1957; Kubler, 1959), one can find only a very short passage about that object and when searching for more modern scientific issues I managed to find only few, mostly from the 80s and 90s of the 20th century. There are some web pages describing camarín, written in a rather popular manner, so definitely the Buenavista camarín in Málaga is still waiting for a modern and complex monograph.

documents), Ferdinand and Isabella donated to this church a miraculous figure of Our Lady that soon became honored as the Our Lady of the Victory (*Santa Maria de la Victoria*) in order to emphasize the glory of the powerful ruling couple as those who defended Christianity and expelled Moors from Spain³.

The church nowadays has three naves. The interior decoration is rather simple and not very opulent that may be related to the rules of the Order of Friars Minor to whom the donation was given and who are now responsible for it as well.

The camarín itself was founded in 1693 as a donation of José Guerrero y Charvarino (1660–1669), the first Duke de Buenavista de la Victoria, who was given this title by Charles II, the king of Spain (<http://www.apellidochacon.es/buenavista.htm>). Together with the chapel, de Buenavista gave money also for the new portico, the campanile, the sacristy, the mausoleum for his family⁴ and the buried chapel for public use.

It is easily seen that the donation was really big – that might be explained by the social position of the duke, who was rather a nouveau riche, very rich but without the genealogy that he might have been proud of – so that is why looking for the opportunity that would have let him show his new aristocratic ostentation. His plans were so ambitious and spectacular that they demanded the existing church to be almost fully reconstructed (Serrato-Díaz, access: 07.02.2014).

Finally, this big project was completed in 1703. The wall of the former presbytery was partly opened to the upper part of the three-level tower-like construction that included the mausoleum of the Buenavista family below the ground, the new sacristy at the level of the church floor and the camarín itself twice as high as the two previous parts of the tower on its top. The total height of the construction is 22 meters.

CAMARÍN AS THE ARCHITECTURAL CONCEPT

According to the definition, “the camarín is a chapel situated behind and above the high altar but still visible from the body of the church; used as place for the cult of a very important and highly venerable icon or statue” (Curl, 2006:880).

The camarín as the architectural idea was not Hurtado’s invention. This type of altar (or chapel) might be genetically connected with the *viril*, the altar with a kind of a window being used to present the Holy Sacrament that might be found

³ The figure is attributed to Juan de Figueroa. Made of polychrome wood, it is related to the so-called School of Seville from the 15th century. The dimensions of the statue are: 137×76×76 centimeters.

⁴ In fact, only four members of the Buenavista family were buried here – the Duke himself, his wife and two their sons. The successor of the couple died having only the bastard son, so the title was transformed to his nephew.

in churches of Aragon and dates back to the 15th century. The first camarín – in the form that we may relate to the chapel in Málaga – was built by Diego Martínez Ponce de Urrana in 1652–1657 for the Desamparados Church in Valencia. What is important and distinctive with this type of religious building is that

the true camarín [...] is visible from the nave: it interacts with the whole church, as a ritual counterweight, opening behind the altar, and designed to balance the high small chamber against a much larger nave on a lower level (Kubler, 1959: 23).

The camarín by Hurtado in Málaga is described by Kubler as follows:

The octagonal walls and dome of the camarín bear a swarm of foliated stuccos. Beneath the vaulted staircase and the camarín is the rectangular burial-vault with macabre stuccos under low elliptical groin-vaults meeting a central cluster of four shafts (Kubler, 1959:32).

THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM OF THE CAMARÍN⁵

What should be regarded as the undoubtedly impressive element of the Málaga camarín is its stucco decoration⁶ – extremely rich and full of symbolic meanings, having its origins in the Bible, in the texts of prayers, the meditative literature and the emblems.

In the lowest part – the Buenavista crypt – black and decorated only in white, there are the figures of the benefactor and his wife praying on their knees, facing each other and adoring the gold cross incrustated with emeralds – the only ray of hope and the symbol of the immortality of the soul. The walls are covered with the symbols of the triumph of death – the skeletons, *transí* figures and floral elements mainly based on the dry acanthus leaves. The leitmotif of the concept is to show the vanity and fragility of human life and all the symbols should be interpreted against the backdrop of death and inevitable passing of time⁷.

Square in shape⁸ that brings us to the symbolic representation of the earth (Kopaliński, 1991:58), low and dark the crypt represents the purgatory and may be treated as a place where the meditation about the vanity and fragility of human being should be initiated.

⁵ Writing this passage I was mainly using the information from Camacho Martínez (2003). All translation from Spanish were prepared by the author.

⁶ In Málaga itself and in its surroundings, any type of marble cannot be found. So stucco in that situation is the cheapest method that may be used for decoration, and in the hands of a talented artist it may bring very spectacular effects that undoubtedly was the case of the camarín de Buenavista.

⁷ In the popular texts about this splendid monument, the phrase “the crypt of 1,000 cadavers” is often used and although the amount of the figures does not reach this number, the impression is so strong that this name may be regarded only a slight exaggeration (Cenizo, access: 20.04.2014).

⁸ 8 square meters, height less than 3 meters.

The multitude and variety of figures representing all states of man's life coming from the child up to the oldster may bring up to mind the idea of *danse macabre* revived and reinterpreted in the expressive and highly emotional baroque style.

The four columns supporting the vault, right in the center of the room, symbolize (among other possible interpretations) the four elements as the interpretation of poor human condition, but when looking up, they mystically redirect the observer to the middle part of the tower – the sacristy – which is regarded as an in-between space, where the presence of God in the tabernacle changes and sanctifies the human being.

Here, there is just one central-positioned column that sends us to the idea of the only and almighty God. This room is not decorated and has no windows so the only source of light comes from the golden tabernacle placed in the ornate cartouche on the northern wall – that as well emphasizes its miraculous origin.

Coming up from the crypt to the chapel one has to climb four runs of the stairs (each consisting of 12 steps). It is easy to observe that the higher we are, the more light comes from outside. That is also regarded as the component with a symbolic meaning. As Cenizo says:

Going up we are getting rid of the sins and coming closer to the eternal life but all that happens after having the experience of real fear caused by the decoration that has reminded us about death (Cenizo, access: 20.04.2014).

When entering the last room one finds himself in the high and very bright space enlightened by eight big windows placed in the tambour (tholobate) of the octagonal dome. The symbolic meaning of its shape is also clear to decode. Eight is the sign of perfection, eternity, cosmic order and the mysterious vision of the future life with God (Kopaliński, 1991:290). It is the figure that is closely related to the Virgin and gives the spectator the opportunity to interpret the space of the chapel as the representation of heaven and paradise.

The decoration, made of polychrome and gold-plated stucco, the painted tiles and stained-glass windows, overpowers by its richness and splendor. The colors used here are white, blue, red and gold – and all could be easily related both to the innocence and humility of the Virgin and to Her glory as a Queen of Heaven.

In the center of the space, on the podium and protected by the baldachin stands the venerable and miraculous figure of *Virgen de la Victoria* (Our Lady of the Victory).

The decoration concentrates around the following motifs:

- a) invocations from the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Litany of Loreto) – with those showing Mary as the Tower and Gate (Tower of David, Tower of ivory, House of gold, Ark of the Covenant, Gate of Heaven) especially

- exposed – which should remind us that we are in the tower and, at the same time, we are entering – via the gate – the sacred space;
- b) The biblical story of the Virgin – with the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Assumption, and the Coronation figured in the stained glass windows;
 - c) The idea of Mary as a *speculum sine macula* – with mirrors hidden among the flowers and multiplying the decorative elements as well as intensifying the effect of all-embracing brightness;
 - d) The idea of king's power – with the coats of arms and animal symbols of the kings;
 - e) The paradise garden – with the hyper variety of floral elements – among which are bunches of roses with reference to Mary as a Mystical Rose;
 - f) The Heaven – as a place with sun, moon and stars as well as the home of the choirs of angels;
 - g) The light – as purity and purification, the power of God, the mystery.

CAMARÍN AS THE KIND OF RELIQUARY

Among other possible interpretations, the camarín de Buenavista in Málaga can be also seen in the context of reliquaries – especially the ostensoria – with their continuous ambivalence of hiding, showing, and presenting.

According to the definition, ostensorium means,

in accordance with its etymology, a vessel designed for the more convenient exhibition of some object of piety. Both the name *ostensorium* and the kindred word *monstrance* (*monstrancia*, from *monstrare*) were originally applied to all kinds of vessels of goldsmith's or silversmith's work in which glass, crystal, etc. were so employed as to allow the contents to be readily distinguished, whether the object thus honored were the Sacred Host itself or only the relic of some saint (Knight, access: 20.02.2014).

Szczepkowska-Naliwajek (1996:49) claims that the idea of presenting the relics might be related to the resolutions of the Lateran Council (1215), during which the necessity of the permanent visual contact with the adorable object was clearly suggested. As a result of this recommendation a lot of transparent reliquaries appeared⁹. They took the form resembling the chalice with the foot and the nodus often decorated or having the inscriptions – or they became parts of bigger monumental altar structures that were very frequently adopting the composition and the ornament taken from the gothic architecture.

⁹ The reliquaries that were equipped with crystal elements let people see what was behind and evoked the connotation with the purity of crystal that might have also deepened and intensified the symbolic meaning of so constructed religious object.

According to the art historian mentioned above, the *quasi*-architectural constructions situated behind the altar (often higher than it), used for various kinds of piety given to the relicts, may be even observed as early as in the period of Merovingian dynasty. Rudolf from Fulda (died in 865) wrote that in the church, behind the altar, a kind of tower with wooden baldachin was constructed. The tower was equipped with windows that were used for the presentation of the relics (Szczepkowska-Naliwajek, 1996:46). Similar objects were characteristic for the churches in the Middle Ages until the 12th century.

Remembering all these facts we can look at the chapel tower in Málaga as if it was a kind of a reliquary – obviously modernized and transformed.

Firstly, we have the three-level building which resembles the three-element construction of the ostensorium, with the expanded and deepened symbolic representation of each of the elements carried out according to the baroque tendencies and exaggeration. The foot, the part that is touching the ground, is in *camarín* strictly connected with this aspect of human being that is not only metaphorically but also physically tied to the ground – the everyday life and the burial inside the ground.

The nodus is the zone between the foot and the bowl. Often formed as a ring, might be interpreted as the sign of the Covenant between God and the human race. In the *camarín*, the nodus is the sacristy with the tabernacle where the Holy Sacrament is kept – Sacrament that is the evident sign of the New Covenant. It marks the space that let the human go up from the foot that means sin, poverty and death to the bowl – symbol of the Heaven full of light and glory.

In the most upper part of the ostensorium – via the transparent crystal – we can observe the relics or the Sacred Host. This part of the reliquary is usually decorated in the most splendid way to emphasize its function as the protection and the scene of *sacrum*, which – as such – is presented to the adoring audience. The top part of the *camarín* is undoubtedly perfectly prepared to fulfill both these tasks. It is the space in which the figure of the Virgin is safely kept and, at the same time, can be seen via the window (*quasi*-window precisely, because there is no any glass) that was cut in the structure of the altar. In order to see the venerable object from the nave, one has to look up, noticing not only the figure itself but the constant glory of the Mary the Queen of Heaven, performed by the splendid decoration.

Secondly, the architectural essence of the *camarín* is to create a special space, separate but, at the same time, connected with the body of the church, put behind and above the altar and dedicated to a sacred object that might be compared with the relics of the saints. This space, invented to hide and show at the same time, may be related to the medieval tradition – and methods – of showing holy objects by providing them with a special *quasi*-building (often the tower) which the *camarín* in Málaga undoubtedly is.

And last but not least, the Latin word *ostendere* – being the stem of the word *ostensorium* (as well as *mostrare*, also having a lot in common with the religious tradition of showing venerated objects, let us remind *monstrance* as a word derived from this verb) made it possible to create the word *ostentatious*, with the meaning “characterized by or given to pretentious or conspicuous show in an attempt to impress others” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/ostentatious>).

This conclusion leads us to the first Duke of Buenavista, whose attempt to impress others by giving a great sum of money for the object that was planned to be a kind of an ostensorium, may with no doubts be interpreted as a demonstration of the powerful gesture of – traditionally reserved almost only for kings – *ostensio reliquiarum* (Pysiak, 2006). A gesture that might have allowed him to feel only just a little step behind the king. Obviously, the vanitative context of the decoration of the crypt may make this impression weaker but on the other hand – when we recollect from the past the tradition of being buried *ad sanctos* – the Duke had planned his tomb not only close to the saints but directly under the feet of the Virgin.

To sum up, when considering the camarín de Buenavista, we have the various aspects of *ostendere* multiplied and complicated in this unique building. They are penetrating and infiltrating one another letting us regard this construction also against the backdrop of the baroque poetry, well known for its tendency to hide and discover meanings by putting elements in various and most often surprising contexts.

We do realize that the interpretation suggested above have some points that would definitely need to be proved with more arguments, but anyway we are sure that thinking about the camarín de Buenavista at the Church of Our Lady of the Victory in Málaga only in the categories of the baroque symbolically decorated chapel does not deplete the complexity of this building as a pearl of an architecture, a place demonstrating power, a space historically and religiously important for the local society that undoubtedly should not be reduced only to the analysis of, indeed, absolutely stunning stucco ornament.

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STRESZCZENIE

Camarín de Buenavista w Maladze to przykład wyjątkowej pod względem architektonicznym i dekoratorskim osiemnastowiecznej budowli, która ma cechy pozwalające postrzegać ją jako rodzaj relikwiarza. Jest trójdzielna: składa się z krypty fundatorów, położonego nad nią pomieszczenia, w którym przechowuje się hostie i wino mszalne oraz wieńczącej całość kaplicy z figurą Matki Boskiej. Trójkąt odpowiada strukturze relikwiarza w formie kielicha. Istotny jest także fakt otwarcia kaplicy maryjnej na przestrzeń nawy głównej, co sprawia, że figura Marii jest widoczna od strony kościoła w otworze wyciętym w głównym ołtarzu. Przypomina to ekspozycję relikwii w puszcze, której część pozostaje przezroczysta, tak by umożliwić wiernym oglądanie świętych szczątków. Camarín de Buenavista odznacza się wyrafinowaną dekoracją stiukową, która w swej warstwie symbolicznej łączy wątki maryjne z wanitatywnymi.

Słowa kluczowe: Camarín, relikwiarz, Málaga, ornament, ostentacja, kult maryjny, barok

SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to present the camarín de Buenavista in the Church of Santa Maria de la Victoria in Málaga, in the context of the reliquary. The chapel is unique and because of its symbolic multidimensional meaning it may be also treated as the reliquary both in the sense of demonstrating an element that is an object of veneration and as a construction planned to underline the position of the founder who is ostentatiously using the prerogatives of the ruler.

Keywords: Camarín, reliquary, Málaga, ornament, ostentation, architecture, baroque