

On the Creation of the Angel Stalls

The Cistercian monastery in Lubiąż is today one of the largest religion complexes in Europe. The monks were brought to Lubiąż as early as 1163 by the Piast duke Bolesław I the Tall, and shortly thereafter construction began on the medieval church together with the adjacent monastic buildings – first Romanesque, later rebuilt in the Gothic style. In that form they remained for the following centuries.

In 1648 the Thirty Years' War came to an end, having devastated Silesia, which at the time was under the rule of the Catholic Habsburgs. The Lubiąż monastery also suffered severely in the conflict, being occupied for many years by Swedish troops. Thanks to the resourcefulness of the Cistercians under the leadership of Abbot Arnold Freiberger (1589–1672), who effectively managed the vast monastic estate, funds were gathered fairly quickly after the war to rebuild and replace what had been destroyed or plundered. After Freiberger's death, his successor Johann Reich (d. 1691) initiated a comprehensive modernization of the monastery in the Baroque style. Consequently, under the rule of these two abbots, Lubiąż became an exceptionally attractive destination for artists seeking work.

The first sculptural commissions for the monastery were carried out by unspecified Silesian workshops. The earliest well-documented one is the Legnica workshop of the sculptor Matthäus Knote (1636–1672), who began working for the Cistercians in 1669. After his premature death, further work was supervised by the artist's widow, Anna Rosina Knote. In 1676 the monks brought the Austrian sculptor Matthias Steinl (c. 1644–1727) to Silesia. Shortly afterward he married Knote's widow (it was a traditional way of taking over a workshop) and moved the workshop from Legnica to Lubiąż.

Steinl, originally from the Salzburg region and probably trained in Antwerp or Amsterdam, was an exceptionally gifted artist. Well acquainted with the pattern books (collections of engraved drawings of architectural elements, ornaments, etc., circulated throughout Europe) published by the French architect Jean Le Pautre, he used them as the basis for designing the side altars and pulpit for the monastic church in Lubiąż. He also designed the most magnificent sculptural work created for Lubiąż – the majestic angel stalls – entrusting their execution to his collaborators (today only two angel figures are attributed to his own hand). Already in 1682 he moved to Wrocław, where he worked for five years for Bishop Franz Ludwig Pfalz von Neuburg, while continuing to oversee the operations of the thriving Lubiąż workshop. During his stay in Wrocław he developed his own pattern books – series of engraved ornamental designs – later published in Nuremberg. In 1687 he was appointed by Emperor Leopold I as court sculptor in Vienna. In addition to sculpture (including exceptionally refined ivory figurines), he designed altars and churches and lectured at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. Despite this brilliant career, he did not entirely break ties with Silesia – as late as 1715 he designed the main altar for the Brothers Hospitallers' church in Wrocław.