

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Art History, Doctoral School
Head of the Doctoral School: **Dr. György Kelényi**

MIRIAM SZÓCS

**17TH-CENTURY TRANSYLVANIAN ALTARS
EARLY BAROQUE ALTARS IN SZÉKELYFÖLD**

PhD thesis

Consultant: **Dr. György Kelényi**

Examination Committee:	Head:	Dr. Mária Prokopp CSc professor
	Officially Invited Examiners:	Dr. György Széphelyi assistant professor
		Dr. János Végh Csc
	Secretary:	Dr. Julianna Ágoston PhD associate professor
	Member:	Dr. Szabolcs Serfőző PhD Dr. Anna Eörsi PhD associate professor Dr. Szilvia Bodnár PhD.

2010 Budapest

In my PhD dissertation I focus on several issues that relate to Transylvanian art of the 17th century. It is a widely held opinion in scholarship that winged altars were continued to be produced in Transylvania during the 17th century. The region is marked by a certain geographic isolation, as art historian Jolán Balogh has also emphasized it and scholars believed that it would account for the preservation of much older motives and forms. In my work I challenge this picture. The geographic isolation did not mean artistic isolation: in the 17th century Transylvanian art maintained its channels and connections both with Upper Hungary and Western Europe as well. The spread of the Ottoman Empire had surely rendered the relationships difficult but it did not cut off Transylvania from the rest of Europe. It is enough to recall that this period saw the greatest number of Transylvanian students who studied at Western universities, while at the same time several artists from Upper Hungary moved to Transylvania. Among these masters we find the goldsmith Sebastian Hann, the painter Jeremias Stranovius, and the wood-carver Johannes Vest. Ecclesiastical sources attest that the Transylvanian Franciscan friars went to Rome between 1635 and 1666 at least ten times, counting only the documented trips.

The artistic evidence also clearly contradicts the continuous tradition of winged altars in the 17th century. We know about eight survived winged altars from this late period in contrast to more than fifty early Baroque altars from Transylvania. It shows that the making of the - by then rather conservative - winged altars became a rather isolated phenomenon.

After outlining the tradition of winged altars I dedicated the next part of my thesis to the various motivations for putting up early baroque altars in Transylvania. The intellectual background that account for the mass production of these altars can be well observed in the ecclesiastical writings of the period. As a result of the Reformation that swept over Transylvania the small number of parishes that remained Catholic badly suffered from the lack of priests and monks. The Catholic Church lost its function as an institution, the role of the Transylvanian bishop became only a nominal one. In order to ameliorate this situation the Church in the 1620's had sent Franciscan friars to Transylvania from the Bosnian provinces and from the monastery of Gyöngyös. These Franciscans arrived to Transylvania explicitly to combat the Reformation and belonged under the jurisdiction of the centre of Counter-Reformation in Rome, the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*.

The appearance of the early Baroque altars, however, did not coincide with the settling of the Franciscan friars in Transylvania but started a few decades later, between 1660 and 1700. One possible reason for this is that the internal controversies between the Bosnian and Hungarian friars ended only by this time, thus the Franciscans could dedicate their energy to other tasks than this internal quarrels. During the reign of Prince Michael Apafi (1661-1690) Transylvania saw a more peaceful era, when Catholics also benefited from

the greater tolerance characteristic of this period and this religious climate favoured the production of altars. An account of an ecclesiastical visit discloses that the Catholic parishes did not only suffer from the lack of priests but the church interiors were also in a poor condition what would promote the putting up new altars. In addition, these four decades constituted the peak activity of the two towering figures of the Franciscan order, Kázmér Damokos (1607-1678) and János Kájoni (1629/30-1687). It was the contemporary existence of these favourable factors that led together to the increase of altars in the second half of the 17th century. As a result of the Franciscans' settling in Transylvania three monastic centres were formed: new monasteries were founded in Mikháza in 1635 and in Gyergyószárhegy in 1665, while at Csíksomlyó the former Medieval monastery became renovated. From the Mikháza monastery we have the whole 17th century interior, while in Gyergyószárhegy only a few fragments were preserved. In Csíksomlyó the altars of the Franciscan church were completely destroyed, only the interior of the Salvator-chapel, that belonged to the friars, survived. The iconography of the altars in the Franciscan centres clearly reflects the Counter-Reformation spirit. Many of them give particular attention to depicting Franciscan and Jesuit monks and also often focus on the figure of Patrona Hungariae, an image especially liked in the Counter-Reformation circles of Upper Hungary. The Franciscan centres had their impact on the neighboring Catholic areas as well. This is the most marked in the Csík region, where the greatest number of altars was produced. While in 17th century Transylvanian architecture we find examples for the survival of Renaissance and even Gothic elements, and in the decorative arts in the Protestant areas the Renaissance motifs dominated, the carved decorations of early Baroque Transylvanian winged altars drew heavily on contemporary motifs. Thus the iconographic elements of Upper and Western Hungary, which were considered up-to-date at that time, reached the Transylvanian region only with a few decades later and not after centuries, as it was supposed in earlier scholarship. Although the painters of the 17th century altars can be rarely identified by name, a comparative analysis of the finds brought us closer to characterize the master of the Csíkdelne altar. On the basis of these results I suggest that the painter of the 17th century altar panels in Csíkdelne is the same Jeremias Stranovius, well known from other documents, who painted the altar panels of the Dominican church in Segesvár as well.