

Rūta Kaminska

(Riga)

STOŁEROVA PARISH CHURCH  
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
ARTISTIC AND ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE  
OF POLISH LIVONIA

No widely accessible publications exist today on the wooden churches of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Latgale or Polish Livonia. This subject has not been in the focus of the Latvian history of architecture and art during the last decades, although this theme remains important in the history of sacred architecture and cultural heritage of both Latvia and neighbouring Catholic countries. The most comprehensive research of this field is the publication (2003) “Latgale’s Wooden Churches in the Roman Catholic Parishes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century” by the historian of architecture Artūrs Krūmiņš, written as his PhD thesis defended in 1939<sup>1</sup>.

The heritage of ancient wooden churches in Polish Livonia that has survived till the present comprises the period from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is represented by a number of Catholic churches still standing in their historical locations. One should add that the oldest Lutheran wooden churches are almost completely lost here but the architecture of Old Believers’ prayer houses is a theme of separate research; also, the majority of

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Krūmiņš, *Latgales koka baznīcas Romas-katoļu draudzēs 18. gadsimtā*, Rīga 2003, 191 p.

these buildings emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and during the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the century. Still the old wooden Catholic parish churches are rarely seen in their authentic appearance. In most cases they have been restored and given a fresh finish many times. Often these buildings have been complemented with new volumes (usually sacristies) or rebuilt completely. At the same time, one should keep in mind that many of these old buildings have perished and are known today only from descriptions, surveys and photographs. Thus the material available to the present-day researcher remains incomplete and one has to seek for additional information on the general traditions of wooden church construction to assess the preserved monuments and place them in the architectural and art-historical heritage. In this respect the analysis of now lost but once outstanding monuments is important. Among these there is the Stoļerova (Stolarow) Catholic Church, significant by its architectonic solution but especially by its painted polychrome interior finish. It is located in the surroundings of Rēzekne (Rzeżyca) town in the middle part of Polish Livonia. This Church had become a legend in the Latvian history of architecture and art and deserves a more thorough examination. The facts gathered so far allow doing this.

Stoļerova Church has been taken up in publications already since the 1930s<sup>2</sup>, information has been aggregated in the form of a manuscript in the 1960s<sup>3</sup> and a number of documents have survived in the Documentation Centre of Latvian State Inspection for Heritage Protection<sup>4</sup>. They include not just the documents compiled by the Latvian specialists of heritage protection but also the copies of 19<sup>th</sup> century visitations from the materials of the Roman Catholic spiritual collegium at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russian Empire, preserved at the Russian State Central History Archive in St. Petersburg.

## CONSTRUCTION HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

According to the documents and the detailed analysis of historical testimonies by historian Roberts Malvess concerning the building's chronology,

---

<sup>2</sup> H. Skrastiņš, *Stoļerovas baznīca*, „Students” 4 (1939), p. 118–121; 5 (1939), p. 176–179.

<sup>3</sup> R. Malvess, *Latgale. Stoļerovas baznīca*, Rīga 1968. (Latvian National Library, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, VBR A 105, 65).

<sup>4</sup> Documentation from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and photographs from 1938, 1949, 1961: Latvian State Inspection for Heritage Protection, Documentation Centre (LSIHP DC), file: *Stolerovas katoļu baznīca*.



Fig. 1. Exterior view of the Stoļerova church. Drawing by Jevgeņijs Kinžalovs, 1949. Latvian State Inspection for Heritage Protection, Documentation Centre (LSIHP DC)

Stoļerova Church was built about 1770 and consecrated as St. Trinity Church at the same time<sup>5</sup>. Its construction was promoted by Ignacy Sokołowski whose family property it was at least since 1660<sup>6</sup>. Roberts Malvess has also specified the personality of the church patron, opposing Gustav Manteuffel who once related this building to the Hylzen family activities<sup>7</sup>. One should add that the Sokołowski family (coat-of-arms Korab) members have occupied a number of administrative posts in Polish Livonia in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, and these lists include also the name of Ignacy Sokołowski<sup>8</sup> from 1749 to 1792. The Sokołowski family appears as the landlords of Stoļerova also in the published inventory documents of this property. In 1690 these lands belonged to Kazimierz Sokołowski but in 1784 – to Ignacy Sokołowski<sup>9</sup>. There is no information on the architect, builders and masters of interior finish of the Stoļerova Church, like in most cases concerning provincial wooden churches at that time. Minor repair works in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century is reported in documents, allowing tracing the further destiny of the building. In 1820 the interior was described as

<sup>5</sup> R. Malvess, *Latgale. Stoļerovas baznīca*, p. 5; the year 1769 appears in the visitation documents from 1855: Central State History Archive in St. Petersburg (CSHASTP), coll. 822, reg. 12, file 2911, p. 825.

<sup>6</sup> R. Malvess, *Latgale. Stoļerovas baznīca*, p. 2–4.

<sup>7</sup> G. Manteuffel, *Inflanty Polskie*, Poznań 1879, p. 148.

<sup>8</sup> *Urzędniczy inflancy XVI-XVIII wieku. Spisy*, ed. by K. Mikulski, A. Rachuba, Kórnik 1994, p. 123, 135, 145, 152, 167.

<sup>9</sup> B. Brežgo, *Latgolas inventari un generalmereišonas zemu apraksti*, Daugavpils 1943, p. 206.

being in good condition<sup>10</sup> but in 1849 and 1855 the necessity of repairs already had become urgent<sup>11</sup>. Possibly some works had been done about 1857 as this year appears on the side altar<sup>12</sup>. More substantial repairs were carried out in the Church about 1890<sup>13</sup>. The condition of the building was influenced also by the situation after World War I when the congregation had no permanent priest in 1926–1928 and the Church was not cared for but already in 1928 restoration works had taken place<sup>14</sup>. The Church that was located aside from important routes survived the World War II successfully. The building and its furnishings was preserved and had been in good condition already in 1961, major repairs were envisaged and started in 1967<sup>15</sup> but never completed as the Church was intentionally burned down in 1968. Then the congregation moved to the neighbouring 18<sup>th</sup> century belfry, the rescued items of furnishings were also relocated there. The stone foundations of the old church in the garden were preserved and a new brick church was constructed on them in 1994–1999. Today it serves its sacred functions but does not resemble the old building at all. The old belfry has survived next to it.

Stoļerova Church had retained its authentic look for almost 200 years. The small country congregation had not enough resources to replace the old building with a more spacious stone one in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it happened throughout Polish Livonia at that time. This authenticity was appreciated and already in 1928 the Church was included in the register of state-protected monuments<sup>16</sup> as one of the then rare monuments from Latgale. This building had preserved its monument status after World War II<sup>17</sup> as well

---

<sup>10</sup> „Kościół cały w ścianach i sufficcie pomalowany dobrze staniony i dotąd utrzymywany”: CSHAStP, coll. 822, reg. 12, file 279, p. 915.

<sup>11</sup> 1849: „The church is painted differently and the paint surface already needs repairing” – CSHAStP, coll. 822, reg. 12, file 2901, p. 111; 1855: “The church... needs repainting” – CSHAStP, coll. 822, reg. 12, file 2901, p. 825. (These visitation documents authentically written in Russian. R.K.)

<sup>12</sup> H. Skrastiņš, *Stoļerovas baznīca*, „Students” 4 (1939), p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> R. Malvess, *Latgale. Stoļerovas baznīca*, p. 7–8.

<sup>14</sup> LSIHP DC, file: Stoļerovas katoļu baznīca.

<sup>15</sup> According with existing regulations, the congregation asks the permission of the monument protection service to carry out repairs. LSIHP DC, file: Stoļerovas katoļu baznīca.

<sup>16</sup> The status of state-protected monument was conferred by the decree of Monument Board dated by 23 March 1928.

<sup>17</sup> The status of the cultural monument confirmed by the decree no. 1145 of the Council of Ministers dated by 22 August 1952.

when a number of other churches lost it due to the Soviet-time ideological restrictions. This building represented a typical large provincial wooden church known in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Latgale. The painted interior finish of Stoļerova Church is an exception in the interior arrangement and decoration of Polish Livonia's wooden churches, as here the role of decorative painting is brought to an extreme level. From this viewpoint, it stands out from all the known 18<sup>th</sup> century wooden churches in Latgale.

## ARCHITECTURE

Stoļerova Church belonged to the spatially most developed type of Polish Livonia's wooden churches, common throughout the entire region during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The majority of wooden churches appeared here just in that period: if 31 wooden churches were numbered in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, 59 new churches were added in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> According to the research by Artūrs Krūmiņš, their layout developed gradually from a small, simple single-premise elongated building with a quadrangular plan, evolving into a more complex solution of planning and volumes complying with the late Baroque construction traditions.<sup>19</sup> Step by step larger buildings emerged instead of small single-premise constructions, and these also could feature division into the nave and aisles, added sacristies and a transept. Façade solutions, setting out from a no-tower solution, gradually develop into expressive, picturesque silhouettes of one-towered or twin-towered churches with the typical Baroque spires. But the spatial solution of buildings has made the researchers of Polish Livonian architecture to speak about the quasi-basilica type<sup>20</sup>. Although the nave in such buildings is raised, it is not lit from above as in classical basilicas. Such buildings are found also in the closest neighbouring countries practicing Latin liturgy but Latgale is one of the farthest North-East point in the spread of this type<sup>21</sup>.

Stoļerova Church is an oblong building and represents the type of layout with the nave and two aisles but without transept. Indrica (Indryca) Church, the oldest wooden church preserved in Polish Livonia, gives a clue to its spatial solution. Indrica Church, standing in the Plater family's oldest

---

<sup>18</sup> A. Krūmiņš, *Latgales koka baznīcas*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, tab. VI

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

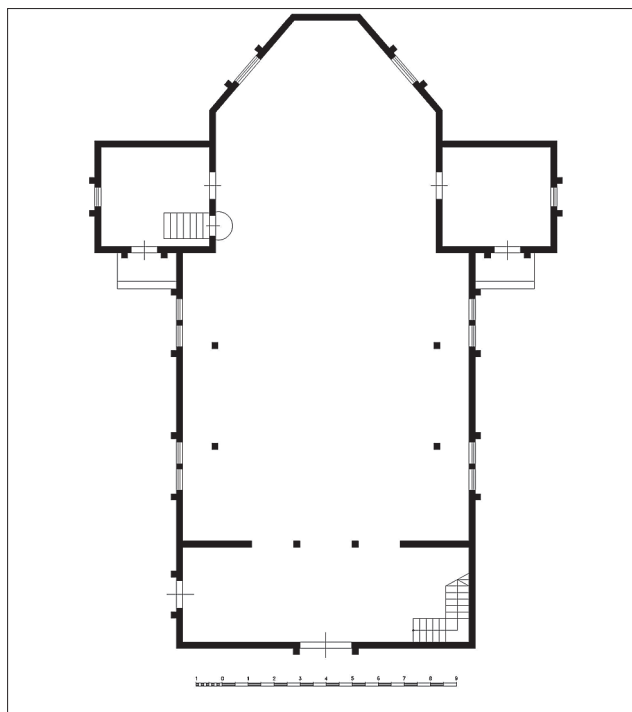


Fig. 2. Plan of the Stoļerova church. Drawing by Gunta Bistere, 2009

property in Polish Livonia, was built about 1698, transferring the building to another place and using the materials of the older Lutheran church. These Baroque-period churches of country congregations are typified by an oblong block ended by a polygonal presbytery with adjacent symmetrically placed sacristies. The presbytery and the nave are usually harmonised in width. But the aisles of the building are very narrow (sometimes just about 1 m wide). They often protrude from the building's block and are roofed separately, thus clearly perceivable in the church's exterior. These churches also manifest the traditional functional division: ante-hall, congregation premise and presbytery. Indrica Church features the one-towered solution but Stoļerova Church had the more picturesque twin-tower composition, demonstrating the typical Baroque-time solutions. Horizontal beam walls of these buildings are usually boarded later; elements of exterior decorative finish also have altered over time. In the case of Stoļerova, these are the window opening finish and decorative elements of façade boarding that loosens the wall surfaces. "Paired" windows high above the ground manifest the typical 18<sup>th</sup> century motif of twin windows, repeated in almost all largest wooden churches of Polish Livonia at that time.





Fig. 3. Belfry of the Stożerova church. Photo: 2008, Mariika Vanaga

The Stożerova Church interior is divided in three parts by attractive, shallow twin arches with slender abutments that make the delimitation more spatially open, allowing perceiving the whole interior more clearly. The ceiling varies from the aisles to the nave. The nave was covered with a cylindrical vault but the aisles had more flat, vaulted board ceiling. Inside, over the main entrance, there was the organ loft with an elegant curve and overhang in the centre, reminding of the principle found in the plastically rich solutions of “music choirs” created by the Vilnius late Baroque architects also in Latgale (organ loft in Pasiene (Posiń) Church (1753–1761) built by Dominicans, etc.). The highly placed pairs of small-paned windows in Stożerova had lit the



Fig. 4a. Interior view of the Stołcowa church. Photo: 1961, LSIHP DC

rough-hewn beam walls of the interior. This created a special texture of the walls, slightly vibrating in light. Three altars had been placed in the Church since the 18<sup>th</sup> century – two side altars ending the aisles obliquely and the High altar standing next to the end wall of the presbytery. The Church furnishings were complemented with a linden-tree pulpit with inlaid decoration, two confessionals and a couple of sets of benches in typical Baroque forms. This description of the Church reveals a pretty spacious but also quite typical building of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Polish Livonia. Similar buildings had been constructed in Malnava (Małnów), Feimaņi (Feymany), Puša (Pusza) and elsewhere. Stołcowa Church deserves special attention because of something else. The ensemble of





Fig. 4b. Interior view of the Stożerova church. Photo: 1961, LSIHP DC

monumental painting predominates the interior: polychrome finish excels not just in the décor of walls and ceilings but also in the items of furnishings. Except the wooden pulpit, all the other items were painted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to eyewitness testimonies, the painting was created on a thin, greyish-white gesso ground applied to the wood; no canvas was used as the ground for painting.

## INTERIOR FINISH

Speaking about the painted interior finish of Stożerova Church, one should focus on both form and content, as both are equally important. In the case of



Fig. 5. View of the side altar. Photo: 1939, LSIHP DC

Stoļerova, the means of illusory painting used to decorate the premise are to be mentioned first, as they contribute to the creation of an eye-catching ensemble. In other Latgale churches of this period such décor is seen in particular details and usually complements wood-carved or stucco furnishings or finish. Examples are either preserved or known to have been in stone churches – the painted High altar in Piedruja (Przydrujsk) Catholic Church (1759–1774) and the painted High altar attic and side altars in Krāslava (Krasław) Catholic Church (1756–1757). Possibly an important new information on this kind of interior finish in churches will emerge in connection with the recently discovered decorative painting on the wooden Puša (Pusza) Catholic Church



Fig. 6. Painted decoration of the nave: "The Large Family of the Blessed Virgin Mary".  
Photo: 1961, LSIHP DC

walls now covered by boarding<sup>22</sup>. Puša Church was built about 1743 and an important Jesuit centre – the so-called *missio Szadursciana* – had been located there.

The optical illusion painted in Stożerowa interior had been overwhelming. Painting here replaces plastic décor, covering all surfaces – walls, ceilings, altars, confessionals, organ loft – with ornamental and figural motifs.

<sup>22</sup> In August and September 2010 there was a painted drapery found in the High altar background and fragments of wall finish in the exposed band between the authentic ceiling cornice and the lower ceiling that had been added later.





Fig. 7. View of the organ gallery.  
Photo: 1939, LSIHP DC

Three-dimensional forms are imitated on the smooth beam walls and silhouette-carved plank surfaces. Wall décor is the clearest manifestation of the deepening of real space by the means of optical illusion. Blue-grey columns with bright yellow capitals are painted at a distance on a light grey background, supporting a profiled cornice and rhythmically dividing the wall into segments. Wall panels in-between are decorated with a gentle floral twine including the motif of blooming rose twigs, derived from the Rococo ornament. In the presbytery part the arrangement of the different planes contributing to illusory depth becomes more complex. Frames with figural compositions are painted in front of the illusory columns. But behind the High altar there is a richly folded,



Fig. 8. Confessional with the painted image of St. Mary Magdalene. Photo: 1961, LSIHP DC

untied drapery motif painted on the wall; over the presbytery cornice there is a panoramic landscape that turns into the sky on the ceiling. On the organ loft ceiling there is a painted expressive, energetic rocaille motif but beneath the loft – the depiction of an angel. The wooden confessionals are also decorated with the motif of framed panels and figural paintings.

The major and most significant painted composition is found on the ceiling of the Church. The covering of aisles is decorated with expressive rocaille and floral ornament but the nave ceiling attracts attention by a figural composition arranged in several bands and framed by rocaille ornament. From the aspect of form this painted ceiling of the nave does not use the common 18<sup>th</sup>



century “view from below” or the “open vault” principle – a perspectival motif with impressive illusory architecture. In Stoļerova the three-row composition is perceivable from a certain position, reminding of some sample engraving as the model.

Also from the viewpoint of content the main accent is certainly the composition of the nave ceiling. Four evangelists located in the corner cartouches of the plafond seem to contemplate the message in the central part. The Large Family of the Blessed Virgin Mary is depicted there. The family genealogy of the Mother of God is related, with inscriptions in Polish describing each person having closer or more distant kinship. In the lower row there are the Apostles James the Less and James the Great, Simon and Jude Thaddaeus. The infant Christ is shown in the centre of the middle row, with Barnabas, Alphaeus, Cleophas and Joachim on the one side and St. Anne, Ann the Prophet (Hanna) and Mary Jacobi on the other. The Mother of God is in the centre of the upper row, to the left there are Zebedee, Salome and Joseph, to the right – St. John the Baptist, Elisabeth and Zachary. This is a rare version of the iconography of the Mother of God based of apocryphal texts<sup>23</sup> and is known in Polish sacred art since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century as the version of enlarged Holy Family that stresses Mary’s and Joseph’s family genealogy and especially emphasises St. Anne’s role as the mother of Mary. In these versions St. Anne is always seen in centre next to the Mother of God. The painting from Bodzentyn by Marcin Czarny dated by 1508 and located in the predella of the church altar<sup>24</sup> is mentioned in Polish sacred art as the model of this solution. This iconographic motif alone makes Stoļerova worth mentioning in the history of this region’s sacred art. Although this part of interior painting is executed in the most craft-like manner, the content increases its importance. The rest of motifs chosen for Stoļerova painted ensemble do not elaborate on the story of the Mother of God. In the presbytery there are figural paintings depicting the great fathers of the church – St. Ambrose, St. Gregory the Great, St. Augustine and St. Jerome. Confessionals are complemented with the images of St. Peter and Mary Magdalene. Painted columns with rocaille viewed from impressive angle and rose-shaped decor are found in the illusory retable of the silhouette-carved wooden altars. Instead of sculpture they are decorated with painted figures – angels, Catholic saints

---

<sup>23</sup> W. Smoleń, *Ilustracje święt kościelnych w polskiej sztuce*, Lublin 1987, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

and Biblical persons (St. Barbara, St. Joseph, St. John the Baptist and Michael the Archangel). Finding Jesuit motifs, like Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier, one is made to think of the presence of Jesuit Order, although there is no information on the direct links of Jesuit fathers to this place. Surely, it points towards the Jesuits' significant contribution to the spread of this type of painting throughout the grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish Livonia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, one should recall that the above-mentioned Puša (Pusza) and Rēzekne (Rzeżyca) are not far away; they had been important spots of Jesuit activity as well as Dagda with its Jesuit *missio Hylzeniana*. Still there is no compelling answer to the question why and from where the impulse had come to include such saints in the Stoļerova painted ensemble of furnishings.

The niches of illusively painted altar retables are complemented with sculptures as well (the motif of Jesus the Nazaren) and separate paintings whose compositions require a further search for prototypes; if this quest succeeds, this would add up to the general view of this painted ensemble. According to documentary evidence, the Stoļerova painted ensemble of furnishings had once been complemented with separate silhouette-carved and painted figures and fragments of Easter decoration with the Tomb of Christ; they had been in the Church still in 1939<sup>25</sup>. The question of the artists involved in the creation of this impressive painted finish remains open. The inscription of the year 1857 with the names of Stefan Stawen and Franz Layzen<sup>26</sup> found on the side altar does not elucidate the case. They are related to some sort of restoration works. Eyewitnesses consider that two or three masters have worked in Stoļerova. Possibly there had been a master with assistants because the skills of building forms, colourings and individual styles differ. To specify this issue of authorship is not an easy task today, as the object itself – the painted ensemble – has perished. One should add that anonymity is typical also of the cases when the painting has survived, including the examples of illusory paintings in Polish Livonia's old churches. For instance, the author of the painted altar in Gurniešu (Gornejaszy) Chapel (3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) remains unknown as well; motifs and style used in this composition are close to the case of Stoļerova. One could add also the painted side altars and the former silhouette-carved figures (early 19<sup>th</sup> century) in Feimaņi (Feymany) Church, belonging to the

---

<sup>25</sup> LSIHP DC, file: Stoļerovas katoļu baznīca.

<sup>26</sup> H. Skrastiņš, *Stoļerovas baznīca*, „Students” 4 (1939), p. 119.



Fig. 9a. Exterior view of the Indrica church. Photo: 2006, Rūta Kaminska

heritage of Classicist period. But in cases the artist is known, he belongs to another level of professional skill and a different group of phenomena. Painted altars by Filippo Castaldi in Krāslava (Kraślów) St. Louis Church (the 1760s) manifests a different level of skill and the synthesis of illusory painting and easel painting principles in creating murals. The element of optical illusion is found in his works as well (the attic of Krāslava Church High altar), but this principle has not been carried to such an extreme level as in Stoļerova, at least in the High altar painting revealed so far. The discovery of side altar paintings in Krāslava could possibly correct this conclusion.

More direct analogies to Stoļerova paintings are found in the sacred art heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania where such type of church interior décor is much better preserved. Lithuanian researchers have also contributed to the study of this field, and paintings from Polish Livonia, including Stoļerova, conform to the systematisation of 18<sup>th</sup> century decorative painting found in the works by Dalia Klajumienė. In this context the Stoļerova painted plafond complies with the compositional type of the decoratively framed motif arranged in horizontal rows<sup>27</sup>. Still from this broader viewpoint the painted plafond of Stoļerova is singled out as a sub-type and stands apart from the most popular solutions<sup>28</sup>.

---

<sup>27</sup> Dalia Klajumienė uses the typological scheme worked out by Polish researchers M. Witwińska and A. Stoga: D. Klajumienė, *XVIII a. sienų tapyba Lietuvos bažnyčių architektūroje*, Vilnius 2004, p. 67–68.

<sup>28</sup> D. Klajumienė, *XVIII a. sienų tapyba*, p. 271.



Fig. 9b. Exterior view of the In-drica church. Photo: 2006, Rūta Kaminska

Summing up the insight into the destiny of one provincial church, one can state that Stożerova Church demonstrates the spread of a certain type of layout and spatial solution in the 18th century Polish Livonia. It fits in well into the broader context of the region's sacred architecture of wooden churches. It is unique in Latvia with its painted interior, a unified ensemble of illusory painting. One should add that examples of illusory painting in the sacred art of Latvia are largely found in Catholic churches. This relates in particular to the illusively painted altars and painted Easter decorations, in some cases found in the churches of the Duchy of Courland as well. In 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran churches there is much more common type of decorative painting that does not attempt to create the effect of optical illusion. Framed, painted compositions with clear boundaries between the real object and depicted motif or scene are included in the items of furnishing (pulpits, benches, organ loft railings). The content of Stożerova painting is also special. From this viewpoint similarities with the sacred paintings from closer or more distant regions are harder to detect. This aspect also singles out Stożerova in the wider regional context of 18<sup>th</sup> century sacred painting.