

# František Sequens: Decoration of the Churches of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Prague-Karlín and Saint Wenceslas in Prague-Smíchov

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## Abstract

KLINEROVÁ, Adéla: František Sequens: Decoration of the Churches of Ss Cyril and Methodius in Prague-Karlín and St Wenceslas in Prague-Smíchov.

The objective of this article is to present the personality of Czech painter František Sequens (1836 – 1896), representative of Prague Academy and artist focused on religious art. Sequens had an opportunity to spend a great part of the 1860s in Rome. This period of his life and formation is considered nowadays determining. The issue of the continuity with the Nazarene art movement is therefore obvious but not that easy to be resolved. The contribution is pointing out the often simplified attribution of religious art of the pursued period to the Nazarene art movement.

Two important commissions were chosen from the whole of Sequens's work: inner decoration of the Churches of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Prague Karlín and St. Wenceslas in Prague-Smíchov. The article is then focused on the monumental mural paintings in the context of these two religious buildings.

**Keywords:** Sequens, Karlín, Smíchov, Prague Academy, Church of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Church of St. Wenceslas

**F**rantišek Sequens, a painter of Czech origin, was active from the 1860s and his contribution to 19<sup>th</sup>-century art lies mostly in the field of monumental religious painting. For this reason he will always be associated with the late Nazarene movement and compared to its work. In this article I focus on the decorations that were done in two churches that represented large and important projects in 19<sup>th</sup>-century religious architecture in Prague: the Church of Ss Cyril and Methodius in Prague-Karlín and the Church of St Wenceslas in Prague-Smíchov.<sup>1</sup> Although František Sequens made a wider contribution to decorating the two churches here I focus mainly on mural paintings and mosaics.

## The biographical background of František Sequens

It should be noted that Sequens is often overlooked in scholarly literature. To date only one short exhibition catalogue / monograph is available on this painter.<sup>2</sup> This may be explained by the relatively little interest there has been in religious art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until a recent increase. Sequens was born in 1836 in Pilsen into the family of a Catholic townsman. He began his art training at the Prague Academy in 1852, but the short period he spent there did not have a very defining influence on him. He then studied from 1854 to 1859 at the Academy in Munich under the tutelage of

<sup>1</sup> This article is partly based on my bachelor and diploma thesis on the subject of these two churches: KLINEROVÁ, Adéla. *Kostel sv. Cyrila a Metoděje v Praze-Karlíně*. Bachelor thesis. Prague : Faculty of Arts of the Charles University in Prague, 2011; KLINEROVÁ, Adéla. *Kostel sv. Václava v Praze na Smíchově. Otázka historismu a novorenesance*. Diploma thesis. Prague : Faculty of Arts of the Charles University in Prague, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Jana Potužáková and Ladislava Tomková, *František Sequens. 1836 – 1896*, exh. cat., Pilsen : Západočeská galerie v Plzni, 1995.

Professor Wilhelm von Kaulbach, a representative of the historical and portrait forms of painting. Sequens continued his art training at the Academy of Antwerp in Belgium, where he studied under Joseph von Leries, who specialised in historical and romantic painting. Sequens returned to Prague in the early 1860s, but only for a short time. He was awarded a scholarship from the Klar Foundation to study in Rome. His Roman period was then extended when he won a state scholarship. This period was the most formative one in terms of the development of his artistic taste and his career. He lived in Rome from 1863 until 1868, when he returned to Bohemia.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from an overview of his academic training, we can learn more about artist's inspirations studying materials from his estate, preserved in Pilsen City Archives. Estate includes a set of reproductions of Flemish paintings of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, reproductions of Roman and antique monuments or Renaissance Italian paintings.<sup>4</sup> It should be mentioned that Josef Führich's cycle of eleven prints, known as *The Triumph of Christ* is also part of Sequens' estate.<sup>5</sup> This famous and valued cycle with interesting iconography featuring a triumphal procession of the representatives of the Church, was first printed in Munich in 1839.<sup>6</sup> To the best of my knowledge, this coloured version of the cycle by Führich is the only work or reproduction of a contemporary artist's work in the estate of František Sequens. This indicates that Sequens was a painter of the later generation who appreciated Führich's work.

During his Roman period Sequens was in contact with other Czech artists such as Václav Levý, Ludvík Šimek, Petr Maixner and Antonín Barvitijs who all held religious art in special regard. It seems that it was during his stay in Rome that he turned from historical painting to religious painting.<sup>7</sup> During that time he also became aware of the work of the Nazarenes which must have had an influence on him.

After returning to Prague he actively participated in the artistic life in the city. From 1875 he was a member of the Christian Academy and he was appointed professor of religious and historical painting at the Prague Academy, where he also became a rector. He led the atelier of religious and historical painting until his death in 1896, but it seems that he rather had little impact on his students. Although there was another candidate for this professorial post, Felix Jenewein, the atelier was closed after he died.<sup>8</sup>

František Sequens personally was highly esteemed in the 1860s, for example by painter and art critic Karel Purkyně.<sup>9</sup> Later on, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he was still respected in his field of religious painting, but his style was mostly seen as outdated or rigid. This opinion was expressed, for example, by art critic K. B. Mádl, a representative of the young generation, in an article depicting the

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<sup>3</sup> For biographical data compare: POTUŽÁKOVÁ - TOMKOVÁ 1995, nepag.; WEITENWEBER, Vilém. František Sequens. In *Zlatá Praha*, XIII, 1896, s. 381-382; František Sequens. In *Světlozor*, XXX, 1896, s. 395; František Sequens. In *Humoristické listy*, XXIX, 1887, s. 112.

<sup>4</sup> Pilsen City Archives, f. Sequens František (1883 - 1924), Ts4h/181-191, Ts4h/192-214, Ts4h/215-221.

<sup>5</sup> Pilsen City Archives, f. Sequens František (1883 - 1924), Ts4h/161-180, G 2316.

<sup>6</sup> MACHALÍKOVÁ, Pavla - TOMÁŠEK, Petr. *Josef Führich (1800 - 1876). Z Chrastavy do Vídně*. Prague : Národní galerie v Praze, 2014, s. 236.

<sup>7</sup> POTUŽÁKOVÁ - TOMKOVÁ 1995, nepag.

<sup>8</sup> FILIP, Aleš - MUSIL, Roman. *Neklidem k Bohu. Náboženské výtvarné umění v Čechách a na Moravě v letech 1870 - 1914*. Prague : Arbor vitae, 2006, p. 68.

<sup>9</sup> PURKYNĚ, Karel. Feuilleton. Gemäldeausstellung 1863. In *Politik*, II, 1863, nepag.

decorations of the Church of St Wenceslas in Prague-Smíchov.<sup>10</sup> This type of criticism, accusing artists of the day of producing outdated work, was very common, Friedrich Overbeck and other representatives of Nazarenes as well as Josef Führich all encountered it.

František Sequens is traditionally associated with the Nazarene art movement, as well as other well-known painters such as Antonín Lhota, Vilém Kandler, Petr Maixner, Josef Matyáš Trenkwald or Zikmund Rudl.<sup>11</sup> František Sequens was certainly influenced by the Nazarene art movement, but not exclusively. He did not adopt every aspect of this movement, which is very complex in genre, style and inspirations. The element of the Nazarene movement that attracted František Sequens was that of religious painting, represented by such artists as Friedrich Overbeck, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld and Josef Führich.

Work by František Sequens can be found in many important churches in Bohemia, including the Church of St Bartholomew in Pilsen and the Metropolitan Cathedral of Ss Vitus, Wenceslaus and Adalbert in Prague. He created altarpieces, frescoes, designs for stained-glass windows, for work in enamel, or for liturgical paraments. He also restored historical mural paintings, for example in the oriel chapel of the Old Town Hall, in Karlštejn Castle, and in the chapels of St Barbara's Church in Kutná Hora. A wide range of artistic production within the field of religious art is something else that Sequens has common in with the artists of the Nazarene movement.



1 Karl Rössner, Ignác Vojtěch Ullmann, Church of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Prague-Karlín, 1854-1863, interior (photograph by the author)

<sup>10</sup> MÁDL, K. B. Nová basilika sv. Václava na Smíchově. In *Ruch*, VII, 1885, p. 431.

<sup>11</sup> Some of these artists were also involved in the decoration of the churches in Karlín and Smíchov.

## **The Decoration of the Church of Ss Cyril and Methodius in Prague-Karlín**

The Church of Ss Cyril and Methodius in Prague-Karlín was the first large Catholic church built in the historical suburbs of Prague in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was built between 1854 and 1863 according to architectural plans created by Viennese architect Karl Rössner and modified by an architect of Czech origin, Ignác Vojtěch Ullmann. A large part of the interior and exterior decorations were finished by the 1870s. The exterior decorations include the tympana with the figural reliefs and the door of the central portal. Among the interior decorations mention can be made by the mural paintings on the front walls of the side aisles and the mural painting in the central apse. These parts of the church's decorations which were completed earlier are indeed important, but it was the second stage of the decorations, begun in the late 1880s, that František Sequens was involved in.

This second stage of decorations includes most notably the paintings on the vaulting and all the decorative paintings done by the Jobst brothers from Vienna. In addition there are the mural paintings on the walls of the nave and inside the lunettes in the presbytery. The final iconographic plan contains a cycle of scenes from the Life of Christ on the evangelical side, a cycle of the Acts of the Apostles on the epistolary side, and four lunettes in the presbytery depicting scenes from the Life of Ss Cyril and Methodius, patrons of the church. (Fig. 1)

František Sequens was invited to participate in the decoration of the church in 1887. He started with drafts for stained-glass windows for the side aisles and then he assumed responsibility for the design and creation of all three cycles mentioned above. At this time he was also head of the atelier of religious and historical painting at the academy, so he engaged his students in the creation of the paintings. This can be seen as a continuation of a certain tradition within academic training. For example, Josef Matyáš Trenkwald, who worked on the paintings in the apse of the same church, also worked on them with his students.

During the year 1890, František Sequens finished his first two paintings. He started in the presbytery with the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, which actually represent the two last scenes from the Life of Christ. The paintings feature strong contour line and an aspect of stillness that makes them seem more monumental. Another characteristic is the use of bright local colours. The scene of the Resurrection of Christ evokes the Italian landscape. The angular broken drapery is reminiscent of late Gothic painting. The golden background forms a unifying element of the paintings of the Life of Christ and Acts of the Apostles. (Fig. 2)

Owing to some problems with funding for the church's interior decorations, František Sequens did not create the other paintings until two years later. Then, in 1892, he started a new cycle of lunette paintings in the presbytery with scenes of the Baptism of the Czech Duke Bořivoj and the Death of St Methodius. (Fig. 3)

In 1895 the whole cycle of the Acts of the Apostles was entrusted to another Czech painter, Zikmund Rudl, who stylistically continued in the way of František Sequens and finished the whole cycle within two years between 1896 and 1898.





2 František Sequens, Resurrection of Christ, 1890, mural painting in the presbytery of the Church of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Prague-Karlín (photograph provided by Tomáš Berger and Tomáš Záhoř)



3 František Sequens, Death of St. Methodius, 1892, mural painting in the presbytery of the Church of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Prague-Karlín (photograph provided by Tomáš Berger and Tomáš Záhoř)

František Sequens died in 1896 and the cycle of the Life of Christ was finished by two of his students, namely Gustav Miksch and Antonín Krisan. That same year they completed two other scenes, the Crucifixion and the Entombment of Christ, using the preparatory drawings made by Sequens. For the other scenes, however, the question of authorship is complicated because the preparatory drawings were made by another painter, Felix Jenewein. We can find preparatory drawings by Felix Jenewein also for the two remaining lunette scenes in presbytery. All these paintings were finished before 1898.

In my opinion the initial composition of the paintings was designed by František Sequens. I assume that Felix Jenewein was asked to adapt Sequens' last drawings so that they could be converted into mural paintings by Krisan and Miksch. This seems even more likely when we take into account that it was expected at the time that Jenewein was to become the head of the atelier of religious and historical painting as Sequens' successor. My dating of the paintings in the church in Karlín is based on a study of archival materials, in particular the Protocols of the Association for Decorating the Church. The document dates from 1885 to 1938.<sup>12</sup>

The overall impression from the mural paintings inside the church in Karlín suggests that the work was influenced by the interiors of Altlerchenfeld Church in Vienna and this is particularly apparent in the decorative paintings. In the case of the paintings by František Sequens, the main influence of the Nazarene tradition can be observed in its compositional scheme, which uses a symmetrical geometric layout and simply styled architecture where necessary. The gestures of the main characters are also important. I believe another element in common is the use of Italian motifs, like a special type of landscape, or motifs typical of Italian Renaissance painting, for example, the hut in the scene of the Birth of Christ.

I would add that the Nazarene movement was of such importance and was so renowned that nearly every painter who devoted his work to religious art was at one time associated with this movement. However in the 1890s, there were also other influential movements that were impacting the Nazarene tradition. In particular this is a reference to the hieratic monumental painting of the Beuron art school, inspired by ancient art. The work of the Beuron art school in Prague is contemporary to the paintings discussed in this paper. Although historicising, compared to the Nazarene art movement they represented a slightly different version of historicism. Another influence that warrants mention was the emerging Symbolist art movement.

## **The Decoration of the Church of St. Wenceslas in Prague-Smíchov**

This exceptional Neorenaissance church was built by architect Antonín Barvitijs between 1881 and 1885. Barvitijs, who spent many years in Rome, is in this case responsible not only for the architecture but also for some of the church's decorations. He involved in this project some artists in his circle of friends with whom he had shared his time in Rome. His intention was to make the interior resemble Roman basilica. (Fig. 4)

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<sup>12</sup> Archives of the Roman Catholic Parish of Karlín, Protokoly Jednoty pro vyzdobení kostela sv. Cyrila a Metoděje v Karlíně [Protocols of the Unity for decorating the Church], manuscript 1885 -1938.





4 Antonín Viktor Barvitiš, Church of St. Wenceslas, Prague-Smíchov, 1881-1885, interior (photograph by the author)



In addition to creating the designs for all stained-glass windows in the church, František Sequens also created the art work in the vestibule and the nave and some of the paintings in the apse. All his work for the Church of St Wenceslas was finished by 1885. For the vestibule, he designed mural paintings depicting the Creation of Adam and Eve. He also created the four-part cycle of paintings depicting the Life of St Wenceslas, the church's patron in the centre of the apse. Finally, he designed the figures of the Sibyls, the Prophets, the Evangelists, the Western Great Church Fathers, St Bonaventura, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the Old Testament figures of Moses and King David for the spandrels of the arcade of the nave, which were executed in mosaic.

The painting work in the vestibule, representing the Creation of Adam and Eve, is usually given only brief mention in the literature and with no reference to František Sequens. When I was studying documents in his estate, I found preparatory drawings for the Creation of Adam and of Eve.<sup>13</sup> Based on these drawings I would attribute authorship of the paintings in the vestibule to František Sequens. Sequens set both scenes within circular medallions on opposite sides of the vestibule. In my opinion he drew inspiration for the composition of these paintings from Renaissance paintings and perhaps also from certain illuminated manuscripts. (Fig. 5)



5 František Sequens, Creation of Eve, 1885, mural painting in the vestibule of the Church of St. Wenceslas in Prague-Smíchov (photograph provided by the author)

<sup>13</sup> Pilsen City Archives, f. Sequens František (1883 – 1924), Ts4h/72-80, G 2272.





6 František Sequens, Cumaean Sibyl, 1885, mosaic in the nave of the Church of St. Wenceslas in Prague-Smíchov (photograph provided by the author)

The inspiration he took from Italian Renaissance painting and specifically from the paintings by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel is evident in the figures in the nave. This influence is most apparent in the figures of the Sibyls and the Prophets, because of their majesty, heavy draperies, and the rotation of the body. The figures in the nave were created using a mosaic technique, which was typical of Roman basilica. This impression is further reinforced by the mosaic in the apse, which was created by Josef Matyáš Trenkwald in the 1890s. The painting work in the concha was designed by František Sequens in the mid-1880s, though the work itself was later entrusted to Trenkwald. (Fig. 6)

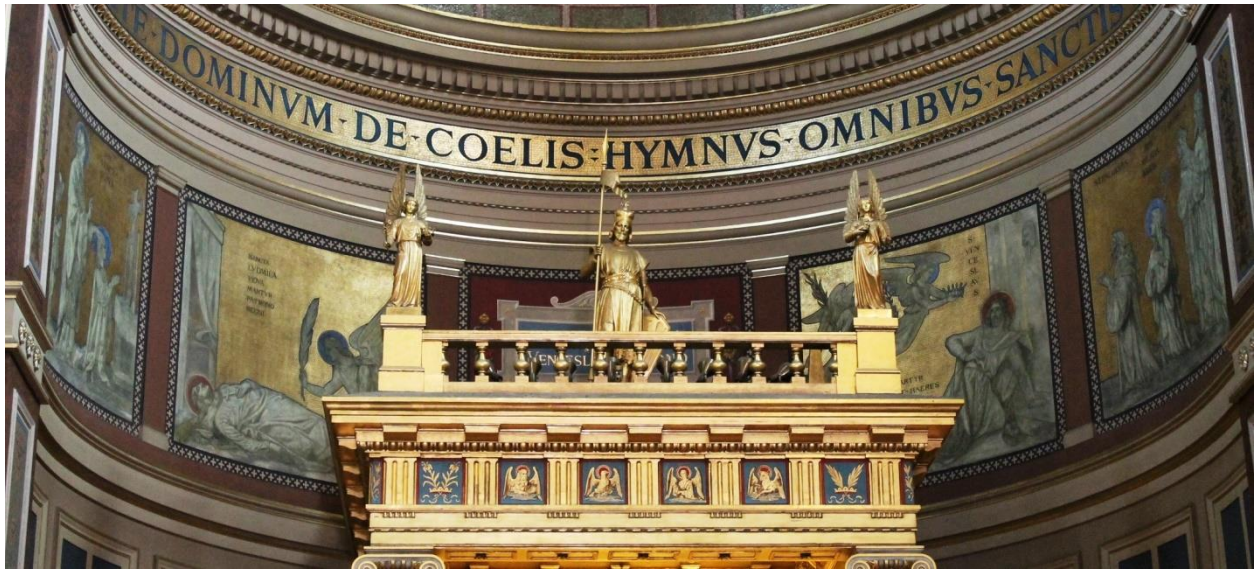
Therefore, the only work by František Sequens in the apse is the four-part cycle with scenes from the Life of St Wenceslas. In contrast to the gold background, all the figures in the cycle are painted using the grisaille method. The same colour strategy was used for the figures in the nave. We can see in the apse the scene from the mass at which St Wenceslas and his parents are

present, the scene of the Death of St Ludmila, followed by the Death of St Wenceslas and then scene showing the descendants of Boleslav I. I find the first and the last scene of the cycle to be iconographically very interesting and unique. The preparatory drawings for these scenes can also be found among the materials in the estate of František Sequens.<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 7)

## Conclusion

Let me conclude with a little comparison of František Sequens' works for both churches. Although the architecture of the church in Karlín was finished twenty years earlier, much of the interior decoration of both churches was conducted at the same time, in the 1880s and 1890s. František Sequens started his work in Karlín in 1887, after he had already finished his work in Smíchov. The paintings in Smíchov were influenced by architect Barvitiu's vision and are rather decorative in style, especially the figures in the nave, given the way they are arranged and the technique too. In the case of the Karlín church he had the possibility to work more freely than in Smíchov, but he had to respect the style of paintings in the apse, which were already completed when he arrived.

<sup>14</sup> Pilsen City Archives, f. Sequens František (1883 - 1924), Ts4h/66, G 2271, Ts4h/81-82, G 2273, Ts4h/114-117, G 2285, Ts4h/118-121, G 2286.



7 František Sequens, Scenes from the Life of St. Wenceslas, 1885, mural painting in the central apse of the Church of St. Wenceslas in Prague-Smíchov (photograph provided by the author)

Most of the decoration work in the church of St Wenceslas was ultimately done by Zikmund Rudl, the same painter who took over a part of Sequens' commission in Karlín. However in the case of Smíchov, Zikmund Rudl was the one who had the option of working more freely. In addition to the Ascension of Christ in the southern side apse, he executed a large cycle of scenes from the Life of Christ located in the side aisles. Rudl is also frequently associated with the Nazarene movement, but in his cycle for Smíchov, which was finished at the turn of the century, we can increasingly observe the emergence of the Symbolist art movement, which had an impact on traditional religious painting. Consequently, this richly decorated religious building can serve as a kind of art gallery, presenting the various inspirations that fed religious art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its progression. (Fig. 8)

In this article the Nazarene movement is presented as a determining influence on monumental religious painting in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, its unique influence is relativised here by the consideration given to other possible influences in this late period and links to earlier artistic patterns, as is demonstrated by the example of František Sequens and his role in creating the decorations of two important churches in Prague from this era.

**Cite:**

Klinerová, Adéla: František Sequens: Decoration of the Churches of Ss Cyril and Methodius in Prague-Karlín and St Wenceslas in Prague-Smíchov. In *Forum Historiae*, 2017, Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 5-14. ISSN 1337-6861.

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