



THE PHILOSOPHICAL HALL, STRAHOV MONASTERY, PRAGUE

STRAHOVSKÝ KLÁŠTER 132, PRAHA 1

INVESTOR/CLIENT: THE ROYAL CANONY OF
THE PREMONSTRATENSIAN
ORDER, STRAHOV, PRAGUE

CONTRACTOR: GEMA ART GROUP A.S.

IMPLEMENTATION: 07/2009–12/2010



The Monastery of the Premonstratensian Order at Strahov in Prague has a history reaching back to the 12th century and is a listed National Cultural Monument of the Czech Republic. The monastery acquired its current Baroque appearance in the years between 1671 and 1674, when an extensive rebuilding was carried out according to design by the architect Giovanni Domenico Orsi. Additional alterations were carried out in 1742 by the architect-builder Anselmo Lurago. The beginnings of today's library of the Strahov monastery can be placed in the era of Giovanni Domenico Orsi's rebuilding work. The Theological Hall was then erected with the purpose of housing the monastery's book collection. The existing collection was enlarged by Abbott Jan Meyer, who purchased in 1780 around 17 thousand new volumes; subsequently, new storage space for them was needed. That is the reason why was built the Philosophical Hall in 1785. Visitors to the Philosophical Hall are immediately drawn to the painting on its ceiling titled "The Spiritual Progress of Mankind" by the artist Franz Anton Maulbertsch. The artist worked in 1794.

The interior of the library was furnished with wooden bookcases made in the 1770s, which were brought here from the abolished monastery in Louka near Znojmo. The book collection of the Philosophical Hall library contains works on history, theology, poetry and liturgical texts. The company GEMA ART GROUP a.s. was responsible for all specialist work involved in the restoration of this monument. The project was of more than one year duration and was financially supported by Prague City Council, Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic and a grant from the EEA and the Norway Financial Mechanism Fund. All work, carried out by experts in possession of the relevant Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic licence, complied with all required technical parameters. All interventions were consulted beforehand with representatives of the National Heritage Institute and the investor.



King Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha



Uncovered painting - attributes of Passion around the cross



Wooden bookcases in the Philosophical Hall



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RESTORATION OF THE CEILING PAINTING "THE SPIRITUAL PROGRESS OF MANKIND"

The painting covers an area of 400 m². The surface was covered in thick dust and in places the ceiling had been damaged by seeping rain water. The incidence of the colour layer becoming detached was most frequent on the west side of the hall. Pulverization of the painting had also occurred. During the previous repairs repainting was carried out but without the necessary sealing. The ceiling was affected by cracks, the deepest ones going through the centre of the painting.

First of all the surface dirt was removed. Where the secondary overpainting interfered with the overall appearance of the artwork, it was carefully removed. The loose portion of both the colour and the underlying layer were fixed and an in-depth strengthening of the plaster was carried out. The area of the extensive central crack was in-filled, sealed with lime grout and overall retouched. The whole surface of the painting was then fixed.





Crack in the vault



Putty crack in the vault



Head of encyclopedist – after cleansing and puttying



Head of encyclopedist – after restauration



The Triumph of God's grace – radiograph



The Triumph of God's grace – detail



Detail of "The Spiritual Progress of Mankind"



Church fathers - st. Gregory, s. Ambrose, st. Augustine



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WOODEN ELEMENTS

The space of the Philosophical Hall of the Strahov library is divided into two levels. The lower level has wood panelled alcoves and wooden bookcases, the upper gallery level, accessed by a staircase, contains wooden book shelves. The library furnishings date back to the second half of the 18th century; the window frames and casements on the east side of the library are from the 1970s.

To start with, a stability evaluation of the library premises was carried out, especially in the area of the gallery deflection. The whole structure was found to be stable. The wooden parts are mainly made from hard walnut, oak and elm wood. Parts which exhibited more serious damage were made from soft wood. The timber was affected by woodworm and some parts of the marquetry were missing. Cracks on the surface of the wood were caused by variations in temperature and dampness. There were also signs of mechanical damage. The varnished surfaces of the marquetry had become opaque and tarnished under the influence of sunlight and were further degraded by more recent applications of a thick shellac coating.

After photo documentation and exact recording of positions, all parts, including the oak parquet flooring, were dismantled. The surfaces had to be first rid of dust deposits. The unsuitable varnish coating was removed mechanically and the surface then smoothed with sandpaper. The inappropriate blue tempera coating inside the bookcases was also removed, using steam and warm water.

Missing parts were replaced with identical copies, damaged areas were in-filled with inserts and small cracks were sealed. Loose parts of the marquetry were taken out, cleaned and re-attached. Areas affected by woodworm were given a hardening treatment. The surface was saturated with linseed oil and then coated with shellac polish, which was subsequently buffed and waxed. Missing shelf supports inside the bookcases were replaced. Re-installation of the wooden parts, including the parquet flooring, in their original settings proved to be an exacting task. Unevenness of the floor between the wooden board base and the parquetry was in-filled with wood splinters and sawdust.

As part of the work, two wooden angels and eight half-figures of angels were also restored.



Wooden bookcases after restoration



Detail of parquets after restoration



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GILDED PARTS

These are ornamental wood carvings in the shape of vegetative elements, ovoid and astragal shapes, foliage and festoons. The decorative gilded parts showed various degrees of damage, relating to their accessibility. The ornamentation placed out of reach was nearly pristine, whilst the gilding of the lower parts was almost rubbed away.

Further degradation was caused by localized past retouching with bronze coating, rather than the original gold leaf. The experts carried out a complete restoration of the wood carvings and used gold leaf for the gilding.



Gilden parts – before restoration



Gilden parts – work in progress