



GREAT HALL,  
CEILING FRESCO,  
THEOLOGY  
(FIG. 40)

keywords (“SI IN IVS VOCAT / QVEAT / NI IT ANTESTA[mino] / IGITVR ENCI / SI CALVITVR / PEDEMVE [...]”). On the steps below the central figure, four old men are absorbed in the study of the Twelve Tables and Emperor Justinian I’s “Corpus iuris civilis” or explain its contents to those around them. An open volume of the Justinian Corpus lies on the steps, showing the definition of “Iustitia” from the

“Institutiones” (I,1) of the “Corpus iuris civilis” (“IVSTITIA EST / CONSTA[N]S / ET PERPE[TUA] / VO[LUNTAS] IVS SVVM / [CVIQUÉ TRIBUENDI]”). In accordance with Metastasio’s programme, Roman Law is represented as embodied in the Twelve Tables, and a distinction is made between the “natural law” of the peoples and “civil law”. The poet’s proposal for the representation of “natural law” was, however, not taken up



by the artist – possibly because its realisation would have required a host of symbols and allegorical allusions. The group on the right side has for its focus two figures in the company of a man – ostensibly a dignitary, as can be seen from his chain and medal – holding an open book. The left-hand group shows an assembly of scholars engaged in various activities, possibly representatives of “natural law”, which had been admitted as

an academic subject as late as 1753 in connection with the extensive reforms undertaken by Maria Theresa. A man holding scrolls (with seal cases attached) may well be a representative of modern law (“feudal law” and “the law governing the Habsburg lands”).

GREAT HALL,  
CEILING FRESCO,  
JURISPRUDENCE  
(FIG. 41)



GREAT HALL,  
CEILING FRESCO,  
PHILOSOPHY  
(FIG. 42)

**“Philosophy” (Fig. 42)**

Various set pieces – a temple in ruins, a pyramid and a massive rock – form the background of the scene. The pyramid (obelisk), in this context the symbol of the central contents and objectives of philosophy – steadfastness and wisdom –, calls to mind Piranesi’s famous engravings of the Pyramid of Cestius in Rome. At the centre of the scene there is a large globe. Stooping over it, an

old man in classical contrapposto extends his right arm in a donnish gesture. Obviously the allusion is to “Geography”. In the left foreground, two young men study an apparatus – a clockwork with a horizontal axis mounted on a plate. Behind them are three old men, earnest and unmoving in their white togas, in all probability Greek philosophers. The right-hand side is dominated by the figure of a physicist manipulating the levers of some



apparatus; behind him is another old man wearing a headband identifying him as an antique scholar, while the rest of the background is made up of figures bearing no insignia or attributes. The rock on the right-hand side of the centre ground is assigned to “Astronomy”: three astronomers are handling a huge refractor (a telescope with several convex lenses), with one of them looking through it to observe the sky.

### “Medicine” (Fig. 43)

The centre of the scene is a dissecting table on which a greenish corpse is shown with amputated arms and an opened trunk. Below the table there is a metal bowl from which a sawn-off leg protrudes; by its side lies a bone saw. In line with Metastasio’s programme, this central part is flanked by the ancillary disciplines “Botany” (right) and “Chemistry” (as well as “Mineralogy” [left]). While, on the

GREAT HALL,  
CEILING FRESCO,  
MEDICINE  
(FIG. 43)

PORTRAIT OF  
GERARD VAN  
SWIETEN,  
MEZZOTINT BY  
J. E. HAID AFTER  
A PAINTING BY  
J. J. LEUPOLD  
(FIG. 44)

left, a number of miners armed with pickaxes are labouring to wrest from the earth substances beneficial to humanity, people on the right are busying themselves collecting bundles of herbs, which stand for the importance of the vegetable kingdom for the medical sciences. Indeed, it was on account of Gerard van Swieten's (1700–1772) (Fig.



44) reform of medical studies of 1749 that “Botany” and “Chemistry” had been introduced as new disciplines.

#### The overall design of the ceiling fresco

Before the backdrop of the comprehensive reforms of all disciplines, Metastasio's programme and its execution by Guglielmi in the Great Hall of the university building reflect iconographically a decisive step in the development of university studies: from the Early Modern Age, when the faculties were defined in biblical and theological terms, to the “modern” interpretation of scientific disciplines inspired by the Age of Enlightenment and reflected in contemporary university reforms. The rapid development of the various branches of scholarship and science in the 18<sup>th</sup> century confronted the iconography of scholarship with new tasks that went far beyond its traditional scope. No longer were the customary concepts capable of adequately representing the current state of the sciences and their diversification. The

requirements of visualising the significance of the divers fields of knowledge for everyday life greatly surpasses the possibilities of a strictly codified iconology such as it was handed down in the relevant manuals of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In Guglielmi's fresco the traditional personifications of “Faith”, “Religion”, “Justice” and “Medicine” are replaced

by a highly realistic, practice-oriented concept which emphasises the tenet that science is rooted in life itself. This is most clearly visible in the depiction of the dissection of a body. Metastasio's scholarly concetto posed almost insurmountable difficulties for Guglielmi in his efforts to translate these concepts into the language of art. How was he to find convincing imagery for such concepts as “Natural Religion” and “Revealed Religion”, “Tradition” and “Speculation”? The artistic representation of “Philosophy”, too, all but overtaxed the artist: He was expected to find a pictorial expression not only for “Metaphysics” and “Ethics” but also for the exploration of Earth and of celestial bodies.

It was probably Archbishop Trautson's way of thinking that prompted the development of this concept: As Protector of the University, he was closely involved in the reforms undertaken in the curricula of theology, philosophy and jurisprudence. What is more, in his famous pastoral letter



GREAT HALL,  
GROUP OF  
STATUES BY J. G.  
MÜLLER, ALIAS  
MOLLINAROLO,  
"LIBERALITY"  
(FIG. 45)

GREAT HALL,  
GROUP OF  
STATUES BY J. G.  
MÜLLER, ALSO  
KNOWN AS  
MOLLINAROLO,  
“FAITH” AND  
“CONSTANCY”  
(FIG. 46)



of 1752 he had already opposed, amongst other practices, the overly frequent use of allegories – popular as they were especially in the age of Baroque. The integration of the positive and historical disciplines of theology as well as the inclusion of natural law in the academic curriculum – so convincingly realised in the iconography of the fresco – can be traced to his initiative. Similarly, the natural science curricula were also thoroughly reformed; here, the decisive impulses were due to van Swieten, the president of the medical faculty.

### The sculptural programme

The intentions of the pictorial programme are underscored both by the four major groups of statues in the wall niches of the Great Hall (created by Jakob Gabriel Müller, also known as Mollinarolo (1721–1780) [as pointed out by Luigi A. Ronzoni]) and the eight pairs of cherubs on the entablatures of the four central projections above the coupled pilasters.

The four large – extremely slender – rhythmically agitated groups in the niches are executed as an interesting mix of free-standing statues and high reliefs, since they are connected with the curved rear wall up to two thirds of their total height. Thematically, they refer to the principal subject of the hall decoration, the allegorical representation of the Habsburg rule: the group left of the entrance represents “Wisdom” and “Vigilance” (symbolised by a mirror and oil lamp), while the right-hand group shows “Liberality” (two women handing out coins from bowls) (Fig. 45). In addition to these groups, which represent properties traditionally attributed to rulers, the opposite sides feature “Faith”, “Constancy” and “Fortitude” as personifications of spiritual and temporal power (with a two-bar cross and a marshal’s baton as their attributes (Fig. 46) as well as “Peaceable and Martial Power” (with a book as well as a crown and sword as their respective attributes). Along with thematically related festoons which had formerly been affixed to the walls and have recently been mounted again in



HALL OF JOHN THE BAPTIST, CEILING  
FRESCO, F. A. MAULBERTSCH,  
CA. 1766/67  
(FIG. 47)





F. A. MAULBERTSCH,  
SO-CALLED  
SELF-PORTRAIT,  
VIENNA,  
ÖSTERREICHISCHE  
GALERIE  
BELVEDERE,  
INV.-NO. 3155  
(FIG. 48)

their original places, they formulate a unitary concept which is also reflected, on the entablature, by at least some of the pairs of cherubs, which refer back to the various faculties shown in the pictorial programme. It is here that painting and sculpture merge to form a conceptual unity which adds to the effect of the overall programme – the apotheosis, in allegorical form, of the virtues of the Habsburg monarchs and the sponsorship of the sciences by the Imperial couple, Franz I Stephan and Maria Theresa.

### The Hall of John the Baptist

Next to the one in the Great Hall, the most important pictorial ensemble decorating the interior of the university building is found in the Hall of John the Baptist, originally a lecture hall of the Faculty of Theology. No documents regarding the execution of the fresco (see Fig. 13, Fig. 47) have survived. The earliest mention is found in a notice in the “Allergnädigst privilegierter Anzeiger” of 18 September 1771. Probably the fresco was painted in the late sixties. The artist was Franz Anton Maulbertsch, born at Langenargen on Lake Constance in 1724 (Fig. 48), the most important painter of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Austria and as likely as not the outstanding Central European fresco painter of his time. His rich Œuvre, like that of none of his contemporaries, encompasses all the various stylistic currents in Baroque painting. Maulbertsch is believed to have been a pupil of Peter van Roy (Royen) and, from 1741, Jakob van Schuppen. His chief works in Vienna were the frescoes in the Piarist Church (1752/1753) and the ceiling fresco “Maria Theresa founding the Order of St. Stephen” in the Council Hall of the Hungarian Embassy in Vienna (1766–1769), which recommended him for the most challenging task of decorating the Hall of John the Baptist. In fact, his name was by that time well known to those in charge of the project, since he had, in 1759, painted the fresco (today unfortunately in very poor condition) in what is now the

“Museumszimmer”, then the Council Room of the Academy of Fine Arts, which was temporarily accommodated in the building. The decoration of the Hall of John the Baptist relies solely on the art of painting. Even though renovated several times, the mural decoration has remained very faithful to the original plan. The hollow moulding above the cornice is accentuated by cartouches at the centre of the sides and in the corners. The decorative border on the narrow side, through which one now enters the hall, originally framed the lecturer’s rostrum, while the entrance was through a – now walled-up – door from the vestibule. The painted dome at the centre of the decorative border was exactly above the rostrum. The wall originally containing the entrance to the hall shows a trompe-l’œil architectural design framing an oval field dedicated to the painted personification of the Church (“Ecclesia” with the Sealed Book) and the New Covenant symbolised by the Chalice with the Host.

Guglielmi’s fresco in the Great Hall was still governed by the principles of traditional Baroque fresco painting: the painted, illusionistic architecture widening the actual space is intended for an onlooker who stands at the centre of the room, looking upwards. While ceiling frescoes were still to be painted towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these later paintings dispensed with spatial illusion and gave the impression of framed pictures sharply distinguished from the architectural features of the room. Stylistically, the



fresco in the Hall of John the Baptist holds an intermediate position between Baroque illusion and the new approach to pictorial ceiling decoration.

Like a mural, but perhaps less consistently, this fresco consists of a bottom zone and the sky above. The scene, which extends along the border and around the corners to the centre of the hall, is still reminiscent of the principle of the viewer standing at the centre below. This contradiction imbues the scene – a rocky landscape grown with bushes and

HALL OF JOHN THE BAPTIST, CEILING FRESCO BY F. A. MAULBERTSCH, CA. 1766/67, DETAIL (BAPTISM) (FIG. 49)

trees (Fig. 47, 49, 50) – with something of the irreality of a fairy world. While most scenes of baptism traditionally show only a few people attending the ceremony, the large area to be painted seems to have persuaded Maulbertsch to break with this tradition. Accordingly, his Baptism of Christ exploits the painter's full repertoire and shows a large number of decoratively arranged spectators, some of whom are shedding their clothes in preparation for being baptised.

The two principal figures, Christ and the Baptist, are given prominence: John stands on a cliff, Christ, praying, is placed above the river or rather a cataract which forms a kind of pedestal from which the figure of Christ rises, forming an impressive contrast with the falling waters. The Father, with extended arms and surrounded by angels, floats above the dove – the Holy Spirit – and the heavenly light emanating from it cascades down onto Christ and focuses the viewer's attention onto Him.

The lightness of the original colour scheme has been faithfully recaptured by a recent restoration. The rocks are so bright as not to compete for attention with the clouds. The woman with child and the oriental sitting behind her are exemplary of Maulbertsch's skill in handling colour. The yellow of the oriental's brocade mantle is brightened to such an extent that the colour is almost swallowed by the radiant light, and the same also holds for the figure of the woman. As regards the group on the other side, it takes a second look to discover that what at first



seemed but one figure is in reality two: an oriental swathed in an ornate wind-blown garment, and behind him another figure with a raspberry-red cap; in front of the two, a reclining young cavalier. By the use of colour, artificial postures and billowing garments Maulbertsch transforms his figures and groups into decorative elements. Independently of the actual shapes of the individual figures, he creates decorative configurations which blend far better into the overall composition than would correctly drawn figures. In its ethereal lightness and emphasis on decoration, the fresco recalls

HALL OF JOHN  
THE BAPTIST,  
CEILING FRESKO  
BY F. A. MAUL-  
BERTSCH,  
CA. 1766/67,  
DETAIL  
(FIG. 50)

Maulbertsch's early Œuvre from the fifties, while the perfect precision of his draughtsmanship already heralds the classicist style of his later works.

The Theological Faculty were customarily represented allegorically or by saints such as Thomas Aquinas or Catherine of Alexandria. That it was decided in the sixties of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to replace this imagery by the Baptism of Christ was probably due to the perceived need to make the pictorial programmes of frescoes more comprehensible, as evidenced in Metastasio's exemplary programme for the Great Hall. Surprisingly, Maulbertsch's fresco does not show John as he baptises Jesus: The Baptist extends his arms, overwhelmed by the revelation of Christ as the Son of God. The painter here adheres closely to the wording in the Gospel according to St. John, the only one that relates that John the Baptist actually saw the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus and, as the text stresses, "abiding upon him" (John 1, 32 et seq.). It is the resulting complete and permanent possession of the Spirit (John 1, 33) that is the foremost characteristic of the Messiah. While the act of baptising is not actually depicted, it is seen as a necessary prerequisite and context of the moment shown by the painter.

Historically, the iconography of the Baptism of Christ in the Hall of John the Baptist is closely connected with the objectives of teaching at the Theological Faculty of the University of Vienna after 1752 – the time when great efforts were made to undermine

the monopoly of the Jesuits and to fight their traditional scholastic theology by a kind of short-term alliance between Augustinianism and Thomism. Maulbertsch's visualisation of baptism as the revelation of Holy Trinity becomes more transparent once we take into account the significant position of this sacrament in contemporary textbooks and academic disputations. Thus, the ceiling fresco cannot be properly understood unless one is familiar with the contemporary discussions of the central issues of baptismal and trinitarian theology. It reflects thematically the doctrines of the Augustinians and the Dominicans and their strong opposition to every and any form of Antitrinitarianism, that prevailed from 1752 or, at the latest, from 1759 when the Jesuits were ousted from the Vienna theological faculty. On account of the perceived need to demonstrate beyond any doubt his opposition to antitrinitarian heresies, the painter deliberately refrained from visualising, in the form of a narrative, a Biblical report or a parable; rather, he clearly highlighted, through the Baptism of Christ, the central message of Catholic revealed religion as it can be derived from the first chapter of the Gospel of John.