



OCCURRENCE OF VINE GREY-COLOURED RELIEFS ON THE BAROQUE FAÇADES OF MODERN-DAY SOPRON

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Abstract

During the renovation of the façades of historic buildings in the Baroque old town of Sopron, researchers have recently found traces of vine grey paint on several occasions on stone carvings. One of the earliest occurrences of this colour dates back to the Jesuit reconstruction of St. George Church in 1714. In the following decades, the natural pigment produced by burning vine twigs, mixed with lime, was also used on the Esterházy Palace and several residential buildings in the city centre. This study presents four façade renovations where the original Baroque colouring was restored as a result of the reconstruction process.

Keywords: *historic monuments, Sopron, Baroque, restoration, façade.*

1. Introduction

In the last 10 years, the façades of more than 80 historic buildings were renewed in Sopron. During the renovations, decisions about the façades' new colouring were preceded by in situ painter-restaurateur's explorations. Traces of paint found on the reliefs of these buildings indicates that the front side of quite a few houses received a new colour. The latest research has drawn attention to the frequent occurrence of a natural paint pigment applied in the 18th century that had not been taken into consideration during the restorations conducted by the National Monument Conservancy (henceforth NMC). The aim of this study is to briefly describe those four buildings where vine grey colour has recently been found by researchers and was reapplied when reconstructing their façades.

2. The origin of vine black pigment and its occurrence in Sopron

Vine black is of vegetable origin, a natural organic pigment that was originally produced by burning and carbonising parched vine twigs. It is a very light, soft and sticky powder whose light-resistance and hiding power are equally excellent. Vine black is the earliest black pigment and was known even by the ancient Romans.

Raffaello Borghini (1537-1588) denominated it as early as 1584, subsequently it was also described by Théodore de Mayerne (1573-1655) around 1630. [1] In Sopron, it occurred on the Baroque buildings of the 18th century. Typically, the façades' carved stone reliefs were painted by vine black pigment mixed with lime, which resulted in a dark toned vine grey surface. Parched vine twigs were available in huge quantities locally, since the town's citizens (whose majority was native German) were cultivating vineyards and dealing with wine-growing.

3. The 1993 restoration of the former Esterházy Palace at 4 Templom Street, Sopron

The earliest owner of the property is recorded in 1481, then it belonged to the family of humanist archbishop Miklós Oláh in the 16th century. Before 1614, Ferenc Hettyey possessed the house. In 1614, Miklós Esterházy (later palatine of Hungary) received it as a dowry due to his marriage with Orsolya Deressfy. The building's current appearance was being formed around 1750 and it belonged to the Esterházy family up until 1945. [2]

The restoration process carried out by the Sopron branch of the NMC began with a detailed historic exploration initiated by art historian

Ferenc Dávid and completed by Judit G. Lászay. The research conducted between 1986-1992 clarified the architectural history of the house and explored quite a great number of valuable medieval details in the building (see Fig. 1). The archaeological work was led by archaeologist János Gömöri. During the restoration, on the surface of one of the upstairs street-facing rooms of the north wing, a late medieval quadratic wall painting made with secco-technique was restored, at the same time on the first floor of the south wing a joint medieval window was reconstructed. Renovation plans were prepared by architect Judit M. Kaló, who published the restoration process of the building in the first volume of *Műemlékvédelem szemle* (Journal of Historic Building Protection) in 1993. On the front page of the journal a colour photo of Templom Street, Sopron was published with the restored Esterházy Palace, where the dark grey colour of the gate's and windows' stone frames could also be seen on the light rose, sgraffito façade. [3] As far as I know, this was the first building in Sopron among those restored by the NMC where the vine grey colour that had been found on the front during the research process was reconstructed. According to Judit G. Lászay, *„The frames were originally black, painted by charcoal, however, the motifs of the friezes representing vine-tendrils and clusters of grapes were colourful. A few – but not enough for reconstruction – yellow, ochre and green pigments remained on the surfaces.”* [4] The above statements suggest that the contemporary appearance of Palatine Miklós Esterházy's building must have been most characteristic and attractive.



Fig. 1. The façade of the building at 4 Templom Street during the exploration process in 1986 (Photo by Galacanu Efstatia).

4. Restoration of vine grey-coloured reliefs in our days

Between 2017 and 2022, within the framework of the Modern Towns Program the façades of 25 buildings were renewed in Sopron. Vine grey colour was applied in three cases on the front of these historic buildings when repainting their reliefs. One of the three buildings is the previously described former Esterházy Palace at 4 Templom Street. The next is the residential building at 15 Templom Street, while the third building (with a sacred function) is St. George Church. The façade of the residential building at 57 Várkerület was renewed in 2024 – in this case, the stone carvings were also reconstructed in grey tone.

4.1. The 2019 restoration of the former Esterházy Palace's stone structures at 4 Templom Street, Sopron

The street-facing façade's damage map as well as the plans of its renovation were prepared by architect Szilárd Fekete in 2016. The restaurateur's proposal concerning the stone carvings was submitted by sculptor-restaurateur József Sütő in 2019. [5] Since the restoration of 1993, the plaster has been damaged in a cca. 0.5 m stripe above the footing zone. Out of the stone carvings, the gate stiles and the stone frames of the two medieval niche windows showed some signs indicating corrosion. During the renovation, those window frames that were located above the level of subsoil water and the absorption limit of salts were first cleansed with low-pressure dry microgranule dispersion. After this, their surfaces were firmed by a diluted solution of silicic acid-ester conserving agent, while the smaller gaps were filled with restaurateur's mortar. The cleansed, firmed and filled stone carvings were coated by vine grey toned silicate hiding paint (see Fig. 2.).

On the footing elements of the gate (both on the right and left side) as well as on the curb stones salts sweated out to an extremely great extent, and the supply of salts was continuous. The architectural plan prescribed the demolition of the stone carvings and their recarving by masking, with a thickness of 10 cm. The new carvings were made of the same material as the previous ones, that is, limestone from Fertőrákos. Before being replaced, the stone stump that had remained in the wall structure was insulated, then the new elements were firmed, and the joints were caulked. The restored gate structure was coloured the same way as the stone-framed windows.

4.2. Restoration of the street-facing façade of the residential building at 15 Templom Street, Sopron

The building in question is a residential building of medieval origin that was reconstructed in the first half of the 17th century and also in the 18th century. In its courtyard a Renaissance loggia can be found. The property was owned by Tamás Dresinger between 1481-1492 and lieutenant-colonel Ringmayer between 1732-57. [6] The next year, the name of Erzsébet Örtl appeared in the land register. In 1782, his son Dr. János Károly Örtl, a lawyer and the first chief archivist of Sopron was the owner of the house. The façade gained its current appearance in his time. In 1796, pharmacist István Török purchased the building and bequeathed it to the Lutheran Convent in 1841. [2] The NMC restored the house in 1976-77, this was the time when the painted late Renaissance surfaces of the street-facing façade were displayed.

The design documentation of the street-facing façade's renovation was drawn by architect Szilárd Fekete in 2016, while the restaurateur's proposal concerning the stone structures was submitted by sculptor-restaurateur József Sütő to the authorities in 2019. [7]

The stone carvings of the upstairs windows were in good condition even before the restoration, having a stone-like colouring. Their sole or-

naments were the hood mould and the recessed stripe in the narrow field between the window frames being closed torispherically both on the right and left sides. The field within the recessed stripe had dark grey colour. The expert judged the condition of the entrance gate stiles critical; the replacement of the right-side curb stone was prescribed by the architectural plan too. Regarding the desalination of the left-side curb stone, the restaurateur suggested an electrolysis process which is able to produce its effect up to a depth of 30 cm.

After the façade scaffolding, art historian András Nemes prepared some research sondes. Based on his findings he stated that the original framing of the upstairs windows was grey, and the recessed stripe below the hood mould had ochre colour. [8] He proposed to colour the gate grey as well; however, he had not found any grey colour on the framing of the downstairs windows. Thus, as a result of the renovation, the upstairs windows received vine grey colour with ochre insert, while the downstairs carvings remained stone-coloured. The basal face of the façade of the building at 15 Templom Street – in accordance with the research results – became off-white, the grey and ochre colouring of its upstairs windows recalls the ornamenting of the Baroque era (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. The façade of the building at 4 Templom Street, restored in 2019 (Photo by Richárd Tóth and the Author).



Fig. 3. The restored façade of the building at 15 Templom Street (Photo by Richárd Tóth and the Author).

4.3. The 2017 renewal of the façade of St. George Church, Sopron

The closed-row, originally single-aisle Gothic private chapel was built at the end of the 15th century. In the 16-17th centuries the building was used by the Protestants, then the Jesuits obtained it in 1674. The chapel burned down during the 1676 blaze, then it was reconstructed as a single-aisle church with a side-chapel. Its west façade was formed in 1714. In 1780, the chapter took over the building. Its Eclectic steeple behind the shrine was raised in 1882, based on the plans of Ferdinánd Spach. The bombings of 1944 damaged the building heavily, however, during its restoration in 1948 several Gothic details were exposed, and its stucco vaults were restored. [2] Nevertheless, its main façade was renovated only in 1961, based on the plans of János Sedlmayr.

The restoration plans of the church's Baroque main façade were prepared by architect Attila Jakab. The probing painter-restaurateur's exploration revealed that during the 1961 restoration of the façade a complete plaster exchange had been carried out. Nevertheless, during the 'careful' cleansing of the stone-carved window frames, the former traces of paint remained on several areas. [9] Generally speaking, the following coats of paint were explored by the researchers: (1) white-colour whitewashing as undercoat, (2) dark grey whitewashing, (3) lighter, warm grey whitewashing, (4) 4-5 layers of white-colour whitewashing, (5) green colouring, (6) ochre whitewashing, (7) pastel yellow whitewashing, (8) red whitewashing from 1961, (9) plastic-based red façade colouring.

To sum up, it is evident that the red colouring applied in 1961 on the reliefs appearing on the white façade had no historical antecedents. At the time of the earliest façade shaping, the architecture standing out from the white-coloured, white-washed surface was coated by dark grey (vine grey) whitewashing. This way of colouring fitted in the colouring routine of the age, as for Jesuit churches.

To meet the architect's request, the painter-restaurateurs examined the coat of paint of the church's windows and doors with some tiny sondes. The earliest revealed layer was an oil coating coloured by copper green, which was painted directly on the surface of the wood. However, during the renovation of 2017, the doors and windows of the façade were coated by a darker and warmer tone of grey than vine grey (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. The restored street-facing façade of St. George Church (Photo by Richárd Tóth and the Author).

4.4. The 2024 renovation of the façade of the residential building at 57 Várkerület, Sopron

The closed-row, U-shaped two-storey Rococo house gained its current appearance in 'the 1770's'. [2] From 1715 on, Sámuel Hartmann, then in 1784 Lajos Thirring owned the building. It belonged to the descendants of the Thirring family up until 1885. In 1898, the names of József Fend and wife, from 1920 on, Lipót Kopstein and wife were entered in the land register. [10]

The renovation plans of the Várkerület-facing façade of the residential house (owned by the municipality of Sopron) were prepared by architect Attila Jakab. The ground floor of the building was previously covered with non-breathable heat-insulating panels, and on the first floor the coat of plaster was already missing from quite large areas. After the façade scaffolding, the contractor did some research on the Rococo stone carvings and revealed that their earliest coat of paint had also had dark grey colour. The renovated front side



Fig. 5. The restored street-facing façade of the building at 57 Várkerület (Photo by the Author).

of the residential house was painted off-white, while the stone carvings were given vine grey colour (see Fig. 5.).

5. Conclusions

During the recent renovation of the façades of the four protected historic buildings presented in this study, the basal faces were painted off-white, while the stone-carved architectural reliefs received vine grey colour. The new way of colouring was a consequence of the painter-restaurateurs' explorations that had revealed the original coats of paint. The Baroque colouring of St. George Church applied in 1714 must have served as an example for shaping the façades of the town's residential buildings, as seen in the cases of Palatine Miklós Esterházy's Baroque palace (4 Templom Street, built around 1750) or lawyer dr. János Károly Örtl's residential building (15 Templom Str., raised in 1782). The colouring appeared even

outside the medieval town walls, on the external row of houses of Várkerület, where it still proved most stylish on the Rococo façade (57 Várkerület).

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