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Expert Reference on Castle Chapel Torgau

The chapel in Schloss Hartenfels in Torgau (Saxony, German) is outstanding in importance not only for religious and political history but for art history. Its selection as a World Heritage Site would both complement and substantially increase the resonance of monuments associated with Martin Luther already inscribed in the UNESCO site list. While the Wittenberg Castle Chapel was where Luther attached the Ninety-Five Theses that began the Reformation, and it and the Wittenberg St. Mary's Church offer the earliest examples of churches adopted to a Protestant approach to the disposition of liturgical space, the Torgau Castle Chapel was the first chapel that Luther himself consecrated (1544), and where he also gave the first sermon. The Torgau chapel was in fact the first house of worship to be constructed that embodied Protestant religious conceptions; its fittings were also newly created to emphasize Lutheran beliefs. The chapel was integrated into the residential castle of Duke-Elector Johann Friedrich the Magnanimous of Saxony, and this location suggests its place both in dynastic as well as confessional politics. Because of its religious and court connections, the Torgau Schlosskapelle served as a model for Protestant churches in Saxony, at first Lutheran chapels elsewhere in Germany and Northern Europe, then to other churches, and ultimately to other Protestant confessions far beyond European confines. The design of the church in Torgau castle and its accoutrements are moreover art historically significant: they are still largely intact in situ, and attest to a long history of recognition and concern.

The Torgau Schlosskapelle was the first church built to incorporate some of the most familiar features of subsequent Protestant church architecture. It lacks a separate chancel or apse; columns, pillars, and pilasters do not block the central space. As a consequence the congregation's view of the altar remains unobstructed. An organ was placed on a separate structure above the altar, stressing the main focus on the longitudinal axis of the church. Together with the uninterrupted space (and possibly the folded vaults into which the ceiling is divided) the organ permitted those in attendance to hear better as well as seeing the altar clearly. The prominent pulpit, still present, hung from a pillar on its north side slightly off axis from the entrance on the south: it also provides a focus for sight and sound. Predecessors including hall churches (e.g. the present "Cathedral" on Halle an der Saale) exist for some aspects of the chapel's open plan, but its lack of any secondary altars (which would have been dedicated to the Virgin and Saints) distinguish the Schlosskapelle. The combination of these features visually express Luther's belief that no intercessors (including priests) are needed with God: Luther said that the priesthood consists of the faithful. The singular focus on the altar moreover underscores the ritual importance of what Lutherans call the Lord's Supper, the communion rite that was one of the two main sacraments the Reformer retained. The appearance of the altar as a simple table supported on figures is also innovative: it diverges from earlier, medieval, conceptions of an altar as a consecrated container of relics and symbolizes a revived conception of the Christian altar as place of sacrifice. On the other hand, the pulpit served for the delivery of pastoral sermons, based on what Luther stated was the foundation for faith, the Word of God as revealed in the Bible. Finally the presence of the organ underscores the importance of the auditory dimension: music and song (Luther was a noteworthy composer of hymns) play an important role in Lutheran services.

Tribunes on two levels supported on arcades that span the sides and the back of the sanctuary constitute another conspicuous element of the chapel's design. Like the prismatic vaults at Torgau that recall the net vaulting of the Wittenberg Castle Church, their presence and the rounded shape of their arches probably depend from Wittenberg. However, they also belong to a long tradition that dates back to the Palace Chapel in Aachen (on the UNESCO list) of castle chapels constructed on several levels. The noticeable decoration of the balustrade of the Torgau tribunal before where the duke would have been seated emphasizes the hierarchical organization of society expressed by the levels of places to sit (or stand). The duke's place lay immediately before the private ducal apartments to the east to which they were connected: this accounts for the reorientation of the chapel with the altar placed to the west, not as is almost always the case, to the east. This coupling of religious with courtly concerns provides one basic reason for Torgau's influence.

While the chapel's patron, Duke Elector Joachim Friedrich did not have long to use his it--he was defeated in the War of the Schmalkaldic League and taken prisoner at the Battle of Mühlberg in 1547, losing his position as elector to his cousins in Dresden—the ideas incorporated at Torgau have echoed long and far. The combination of features found first in the Schlosskapelle (combination of prominent pulpit, emphasis on one altar, unified space, and arcaded tribunes) recur in many Protestant castle chapels of the sixteenth century: at Dresden and Augustusburg in Saxony, Stuttgart in Baden-Württemberg, Schmalkalden in Thuringia (formerly Hesse-Kassel), Schwerin in Mecklenburg, Stettin in Pomerania (now Szczecin in Poland), among other places. This probably also has to do the linkage of political with religious significance at Torgau, which gained fundamental importance with the Treaty of Augsburg that put an end to religious conflicts in 1555. Confirming on-going practices, the Treaty of Augsburg decreed that

the ruler of a region determined its religion: the proliferation of court chapels of the Torgau type may be considered to represent a princely Protestant model for churches. For example, the Dresden electors who built churches in this style probably felt the need to evoke a Lutheran past, covering up the fact that they had turned on their co-religionist cousins. Be that as it may, the connection by marriage of the branch of the Wettin dynasty ruling in Dresden with the royal family of Denmark probably then helped mediate the Torgau model to Denmark. In Denmark Torgau served as a prototype for the castle church in Frederiksborg, and subsequently for new churches in what was then Danish Scania (now Sweden, e.g. Kristiantad). Through the marriage of Anne of Denmark with James I of England, features resembling Torgau may then have been transmitted farther. In the Anglophone world the use of flanking choir lofts, prominent pulpit, central altar, table altar, and organ loft became prominent features, to be seen in early Presbyterian and Episcopalian (Anglican) churches in the United States, for example.

The basic idea of a large open space on the ground level with tribunes on the sides that allow people to observe the ceremony probably also accounts for the appearance of such features in other kinds of Lutheran churches. Plans with open spaces and arcaded tribunes supported on large pillars appear in churches like the formerly Protestant church in Klagenfurt, Carinthia, Austria and the peace churches built after the Thirty Years War in Silesia, now Poland (at Schweidnitz/Świdnica and Jauer (Jawór)).

Other art historical aspects of the chapel are noteworthy. Martin Luther himself said that the Torgau Castle Chapel surpassed the beauty of the Temple of the Salomon (the first temple in Jerusalem) and the Temple of Diana at Ephesus, one of the seven wonders of the world.¹ Many

¹ WA TR, Bd.5, S.533, Nr.6197.

works of high quality associated with the Schlosskapelle speak to his observation. One enters the chapel by Nickel Grohmann through a portal with a rich sculptural frame carved by Simon Schröter that shows angels holding instruments of the Christ's passion. These related to the central events of redemption, providing a meaningful upbeat for the re-enactment of the salvific rites performed in the church. Above the portal an aedicula by Nikolas Hoffmann covers a relief sculpted by Stephan Hermsdorf showing Virgin mourning Christ, which relates a similar message of Christ's redemption of mankind on the cross. The design and painting of the sculpted pulpit in the chapel stem from the workshop of the famous artist Lukas Cranach the Elder; the pulpit itself was carved by Simon Schröter. It represents themes stressing Lutheran teachings of the role of grace and the importance of the Word (Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery, Jesus and the scholars in the Temple, the Expulsion of the Money-changers in the Temple). Now in Dresden, a painting attributed to Lukas Cranach the Younger of Elias and the Priests of Baal—showing Joachim Friedrich prominently—was originally hung opposite the pulpit in 1545, reminding viewers of the true word of God. Schröter and Hermsdorf also carved the angels and cherubs that hold up the altar table: they signify the presence of the divine at the Sacrament.

Finally, an exquisitely executed Renaissance commemorative bronze panel was hung on the wall of the church shortly after the chapel was consecrated. Its inscription and relief portraits celebrate Luther's involvement with the Torgau court church. The bronze offers the first indication of awareness of the historical significance of the church. Such awareness has led to a series of efforts at preservation of the original idea of the monument and conservation of its contents that have continued since the seventeenth century. An early sign was the it was the replacement in 1662 of a painted altarpiece of the Last Supper by Cranach the Elder that no

longer survives and was probably damaged: it was an important alabaster altarpiece taken from the Schlosskapelle in Dresden during the modernization/restoration of the Schloss there. (This alabaster altarpiece was itself damaged in World War II and is now on deposit in Dresden.). Over subsequent centuries efforts have been made to preserve the structural integrity and authenticity of the church, most recently in the Luther year of 2017. As a result, both the exterior and interior of the chapel have been preserved in their essence.

In short, the Torgau Court Chapel more than meets the criteria defining outstanding universal value established by UNESCO. The chapel has exceptional cultural significance that clearly transcends national boundaries. Because of its historical and art historical importance it is of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. Consequently, the permanent protection of the Torgau chapel may be considered of highest importance to the international community as a whole. The Torgau Schlosskapelle well deserves inscription on the World Heritage List.