Austria and Germany

Religious hatred had festered in Central Europe since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. What ensued was the Thirty Years' War, a series of bloody and destructive conflicts among German princes and other European powers (such as Sweden and France) who wished to curb the powers of the Holy Roman Empire, which had been ruled for centuries by the Habsburg family. The consequences of these unsettled times for architecture were disastrous. Money went into the war, not into patronage. And at the war's end, even for the rulers of the larger territories such as Prussia and Austria, there were at first relatively few resources for the arts. By the eighteenth century, however, the Catholic parts of Central Europe (such as Bavaria), and much of Austria were ready to rebuild.

The approach was cosmopolitan. There were German craft builders, whose experience was largely local, and German or Italian architects, who brought with them a direct knowledge of the Roman Baroque. In addition, after the end of the War of Spanish Succession in 1714, and the arrival of a peace that had been so elusive for nearly a century, French ornamental designs, the rocaille came to replace some of the heavier embellishments of an earlier period.

Imperial Style: The Karlskirche, Vienna

Post-war ecclesiastical architecture in Central Europe found an early home in Vienna, seat of the Habsburgs and a city whose wealth and size rivaled that of Paris, Rome, and London. The first of the Austrian Baroque architects was Johann Fischer von Erlach (1656-1723), who began his career as a sculptor, studying in Rome in the circle of Gianlorenzo Bernini. He was well trained, highly literate, and strategically placed to get the best commissions. His book Entwurf einer historischen Architectur (An Outline of Historical Architecture) demonstrates his wide knowledge of architecture and architectural types. His position as tutor in architecture to the Crown Prince Joseph pretty much guaranteed Fischer imperial commissions. But it was not until after the end of the War of Spanish Succession that Fischer was to receive his first, major ecclesiastical project. It was for the Karlskirche (Fig. 1, 2).

Because of St. Charles Borromeo's heroic efforts during the plague of 1576-78 in Milan, Charles VI (Holy Roman Emperor 1711-40) had promised to build a church dedicated to the saint if Vienna was delivered from the plague of 1713. The resulting church demonstrates clearly Fischer's Roman experience. The two columns in front of the church, which depict events in the life of the Emperor's namesake, are copies of Trajan's Column, which dates from the first century C.E. and still stands in Rome's Forum of Trajan near the foot of the Capitoline Hill. In addition, these columns recall two freestanding bronze towers, known as Boaz and Jachin, which were placed before the palace of Solomon in Jerusalem (as described in the First Book of Kings). The names Boaz and Jachin mean something like "He comes with Power" and "God establishes." By erecting these towers, Fischer engages a particular aspect of the Austrian Baroque called Reichsstil. Literally this means "imperial style;" expressively, it means to celebrate the emperor and the empire.

There is a certain amount of pedantry here. The portico clearly derives from the Pantheon. The concave wings connecting the frontispiece with the flanking towers are similar to well-known but unexecuted plans for St. Peter's in Rome and also to Borromini's church of Sant' Agnese in Piazza Navona, also in Rome. The dome, too, is a duplicate of domes by Mansart, Borromini, and others. It is as if standard references from Rome and the Catholic South needed to be transferred piecemeal to Vienna in order to satisfy the imperialist claims of Charles VI.

The Church as Pilgrimage Center: Die Wies, Bavaria

A far less pretentious building is the rural and popular mid-eighteenth-century Bavarian pilgrimage church. Johann Baptist Zimmermann (1680-1758), trained as a painter and plasterer, in collaboration with
his architect brother Domenikus (1685-1766), built and decorated several small, gem-like rustic churches
in the decades preceding 1750. Die Wies (Fig. 3), perhaps their most mature construction, has an
elongated oval nave surrounded by an arcaded ambulatory (Fig. 3). Zimmermann's training in plaster
work and fresco painting shows in the extraordinary decoration of the interior (Fig. 4).

As a pilgrimage church, Die Wies allows, even impels, the pilgrim to walk around the central
area and about the altar, which contains a miraculous image of Christ. The paired columns of the
arcade are separated from one another and from the outside walls by arches. Above eye level in the
ambulatory, large lancet styled windows, alternating with substantially higher oval windows at the
ends of the transverse axis, admit the light that lets worshipper and pilgrim read the decoration.
Spaces, whether from the entrance, the chancel, or the ambulatory merge with one another, creating
a sense of vague, insubstantial boundaries. A necessary part of a pilgrim's journey is mystical, and
the theatricality of the Bavarian Rococo church assists in that experience of Divine "touching." In
Johann Baptist Zimmermann's fresco of the Last Judgment (Fig. 6), one sees a panoply of divine figures--
angels, blessed souls, saints, and allegorical figures--floating in the empyrean mists. In the center of this
visible Heaven sits Christ in Judgment atop the rainbow, ancient symbol of concord between God and
human. The "Bavarian manner" of decoration, what appears to be white plaster with gold highlights,
shapes the boundaries to this vast domain, but does not create a clear border between the human and
spiritual realms. The first line of eccentric and wildly curvilinear patterns is not three-dimensional
architecture: it is painted. The next range of cartouches and irregularly shaped cornices is part of the
"real" architecture of the church. If the worshipper cannot easily tell the difference between physical
architecture and painted architecture, then he or she becomes confounded, and that very perplexity helps
to lose their earthly bonds. German historians sometimes refer to the Baroque idea of a
Gesamtkunstwerk, a synthesis of the arts in which painting, sculpture, and architecture meld in an
indissoluble unity.

Zimmermann painted an elaborate, Baroque throne in the area of Heaven that is just above the
chancel. As the worshipper looks from the empty throne (which is a symbol of wisdom and will be
occupied by Christ at the Second Coming) downward through the arches within arches of the chancel, and
finally to the altarpiece and altar, his eye moves easily but without certainty as to the degree of reality of
each zone and each space. Zimmermann's fresco has widely dispersed figures and no quadratura. As a
self-contained painting, it would not be very gripping. But as part of the architectural complex, it comes
alive and is a necessary part of the entire experience.

These charming pilgrimage churches in Bavaria did not gain favor in the more official circles;
perhaps they were seen as too theatrical and, because of their locations, countrified. Many were of
wooden construction and were, therefore, not considered very grand. By the end of the eighteenth
century, these sometimes whimsical creations of almost delicious ornament were superseded (but not
destroyed) by the much more staid churches of the Neoclassical style.

2. Johann Fischer von Erlach, exterior of Karlskirche, Vienna, 1716-33. The striking feature of this monumental church is that despite its eclectic blend of styles, its overall design succeeds in being visually coherent. In front of an oval nave, oriented lengthwise, stands an unusually broad facade comprising a bizarre mixture of elements. The entrance to the church is represented by a Corinthian hexastyle temple portico on top of a stepped podium, indistinguishable in design terms from a Roman temple front.
3. Domenikus Zimmermann, plan of Die Wies Pilgrimage Church, Bavaria, 1745-54.

4. Domenikus Zimmermann, interior view of Die Wies, Bavaria, showing southern ambulatory, 1745-54.
5. Domenikus Zimmermann, Interior of Die Wies, Bavaria, 1745-54