

## “DEUS EX MACHINA” OR MOVING SCULPTURES IN THE INTERIOR OF LUTHERAN CHURCHES OF LATVIA

Ojārs Spārītis

*Latvian Academy of Arts, Latvia*

**Abstract.** The term “Deus ex machina” was used in ancient Greek and Roman theatre performances as stage machinery provided the appearance of a god or hero to unravel and resolve a hopeless situation. The present article characterizes the appearance, function, and use of moving sculptures - automatons - in Latvian Baroque church interiors. Renaissance science sparked developments in mathematics, astronomy, and mechanics that stimulated not only the invention of curiosities, but also the construction of practical mechanisms and tools. Knowledge transfer from mechanics to applied and fine arts brought moments of mystery and wonder into the fields of performing arts and the spheres of representation and liturgy. The use of automatons helped to invent new mechanisms, making the mechanical movement of “animated sculptures” an attractive public entertainment.

Both written evidence and artefacts preserved in museums and churches bear witness to the social demand for the integration of theatrical elements into the formerly conservative environment, for example, the church. Drawing inspiration from the culturally linked region of former Prussia, the current paper concentrates on moving figures in the interior space of Lutheran churches in Latvia to expose the variety of fascinating objects, including organ facades and baptismal fonts.

**Key words:** Deus ex machina, automaton, church, theatre, mechanic, moving sculpture, baptismal device

### Introduction

The interdisciplinary orientation of this publication is characterized by the author's efforts to exhibit a completely unique phenomenon in the sacred culture of Latvia and Europe of the 17th and 18th centuries - decorative sculptural artefacts used in the baptism ceremony and partially preserved until today - baptismal devices, also colloquially called “baptism machines” (German Taufmaschine). They can be described as movable constructions suspended from the church ceiling in front of the altar. Their manipulation with the help of ropes caused a theatrical experience before the eyes of the congregation. It is this kind of mechanically operable theatrical structure, specially created for the baptism ceremony, that is most directly associated with the “deus ex machina” appearance and the effect characteristic of the stage culture of the Greek theatre. The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes it as follows: “Deus ex machina is a person or thing that appears or is introduced into a situation suddenly and unexpectedly and provides an artificial or contrived solution to an apparently insoluble difficulty” [1]. The term was first used in ancient Greek and Roman drama, where it meant the timely appearance of a god to unravel and resolve the plot. This tells us that in the history of theatre such a technical means is known since the performance of Sophocles' drama *Philoctetes* in the 5th century BC, when the unexpected appearance of a god at the ceiling of the stage was ensured by a crane - *mēchane* in Greek. Greek and Roman devices of stage technique were “rediscovered” in the liturgical performances of the Italian Renaissance church holidays, having a singing choir of angels descend from heaven on a platform powered by ropes and trivets. In the 18th century, the Jesuits, who promoted the introduction of moving mechanisms in the interiors of churches, resorted to the use of similar technical means in churches and Jesuit collegiate theatre performances.

After the division of Catholic Livonia into separate administrative parts - Latgale, called Polish-Livonia, included in the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom, Livonia conquered by the Swedes, and the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia having gained nominal independence - each of the mentioned state formations was included in a disparate region of cultural

influence and exchange from which they received creative impulses for the court, aristocratic or sacred art. Examples of deus-ex-machina-related mechanisms in Latvian cultural heritage could be identified as moving sculptures decorating facades of organs and complicated constructions of movable baptismal fonts. To achieve mentioned aim author uses methods of field observation on different types of sacred art in church interiors, historical and chronological survey for description of artifacts, studies of limited bibliography on regional phenomena, as well as comparativistic approach to stylistic and iconographic analysis. As to the topic oriented publications articles by architect Paul Campe and author of the current survey could be mentioned, as well as a collection of letters among the pastor of St. Jacob's Church in Riga and organ builder Heinrich Andreas Contius, translated by Valda Kvasikova and interpreted by Elita Grosmane [2].

Investigating existing and documented artifacts of moving sculptures in sacred art of Latvia the purpose of the author of the article is to search for those paths of cultural contacts and borrowing of ideas that could have influenced the emergence and use of deus-ex-machina-related mechanisms in the territory of Latvia and the nearby regions. In this context, the evolution of moving mechanisms - automatons - in the Baroque era applied and fine arts for the purpose of entertainment deserves attention which could, directly or indirectly, influence the inclusion of powered mechanisms in sacral interior installations.

The novelty of the research is based on analysis of artifacts in Latvian sacred art as well as in description of use and functioning of mechanically moving sculptures in complex pieces of an interior. An innovative point in the present survey is a presentation of movable baptismal font from the Holy Trinity Church in Jelgava as a complex construction, that allows to identify in different locations of Latvia preserved details of similar but destroyed baptismal fonts.

### Historical background of arcade machines and robots

Ever since the dawn of civilization, the engineering thought of gifted personalities has sought to create various mechanisms that facilitate the work of human hands. They have been invented for building, transport, domestic use and, of



Fig. 1. Centaur automaton. Hans Jakob I. Bachmann, 1602-1606. [photo by author, 2019]



Fig. 2. Wooden sculpture "Drummer". Michael Brinkmann, 1688. [photo by author, 2024]

course, also for military purposes. From the physics course we know about the inventions of Archimedes for moving various weights in ancient Greece; no less amazing are the devices constructed by Arab and ancient Roman engineers for throwing arrows, stones and incendiaries over the walls of besieged cities. Medieval miniatures depict the lifting mechanisms used in the construction of castles and cathedrals whose structures were also used to load goods onto ships. The intellectual power of Renaissance engineers and the hand-crafted mechanisms could also provide worthy entertainment for rulers and bishops. Not far from Florence there is Villa Demidoff, which, with its 160-hectare park, was the property of Francesco I de Medici in the 16th century, called Pratolino. In the 1570s-1580s, the ingenuity of the great engineer and architect Bernardo Buontalenti created a surprise and amusement park here, in which, in addition to bridges and cascades of ponds, grottoes and fountains, water-powered machines were also installed. This not only allowed the intellectual guests of the park to solve mysteries of cabalas, alchemy, and the occult sciences, but also provided surprises with the enigmatic nature of noises, music, moving sculptures and capricious water cascades.

The task of the article is neither to retell the history of automatons and mechanisms, nor to outline the action principles of the early robotics predecessors, but rather to emphasise that the evolution of mechanics and engineering thinking in the world has been related to both solving practical tasks as well as providing entertainment. The story of the so-called Centaur automaton in the Kunstkammer collection of the

Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien will demonstrate this sophisticated mechanical world whose masterpieces had only one task - to surprise and entertain the elite society of the ruling Habsburg dynasty [1]. This 40-cm-tall masterpiece of jewellery and mechanics, designed for the amusement of the invited guests, was made of silver, precious stones and gold in 1602-1606 by Augsburg goldsmith Hans Jakob I. Bachmann [3].

The visual image of the complex mechanism on a pedestal is formed by the figural composition of the mythical Centaur, half-human, half-animal; riding on his back is Diana, goddess of hunting, and two accompanying hunting dogs. The mechanism hidden inside the automaton rotates the wheels under the pedestal and makes the heads and arms of the sculptural figures move. At a certain time, the clock mechanism starts the automaton and, as one of the guests stops in front of it, the Centaur shoots an arrow in his direction. The task of the guest, who is thus "injured", is to call out a loud toast to the other guests and empty his cup. Accordingly, the function of the Trinkspiel-automaton is accomplished. In the 16th and 17th centuries, a number of such admirable machines for entertaining guests were commissioned by royal houses, whose artistic and technically virtuoso execution can surprise even modern engineers.

With a significant time lag, but already following the aesthetics of the Baroque era, the Swedish military administration gave the woodcarver Michael Brinkman commission for 20 wooden sculptures to decorate the interiors of the Riga Arsenal [4]. After the reconstruction of the Riga Castle in the 18th century and the demolition of the Arsenal building, only two pinewood and painted sculptures of drummers from the entire considerable number of sculptures have survived to the present day [2]. The full-size drummers in army uniforms are placed on wooden pedestals and are preserved in the collection of the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation [5]. One of the two sculptures is particularly remarkable because it is equipped with an ingenious lever-and-gear mechanism that can turn the sculpture's head and move its arms. Presumably, the mechanical drummer of the 17th century could create the planned surprise effect when the guest crossed the threshold of the Arsenal or stepped on a particular floor-board which released the spring and made the sculpture beat the shoulder-hung drums with the drumsticks in the drummer's hands.

The example of the Swedish period drummer of the Riga Arsenal shows that the construction of precise mechanisms for scientific purposes as well as for navigation, astronomy or military needs, the construction of automatons and early robots for the purpose of entertainment in the 16th and 17th centuries, facilitated transfer of the technical knowledge of mathematics, physics, optics, mechanics not only to applied art, but also to fine arts. The ability of a moving mechanism to create not only the effect of surprise, but even the effect of "miracle" and mysticism was very cleverly captured and exploited by theatre, opera, and the church. The task of actors who imitated moving sculptures or mechanisms was to offer the viewer a certain dilemma: moving, thus alive? The situation, logical for the evolution of technology and mechanics of the Renaissance and Baroque eras, though unusual for the consciousness of the individual, prompted the question: can a moving doll, capable of imitating a person, have a soul? Until very recently, the church had tried to stifle the progress of scientific thought with various methods and punishments, seeing in it "Satan's cunning", but, unable to stop the development of engineering thought, it adapted to the new conditions and began to use technical achievements

for its own purposes. The Jesuits especially stood out among the religious orders with their rational methods and means, who, for mission purposes, did not hesitate to combine modern scientific achievements not only with business, but also to turn believers to spirituality. To influence their emotional world, they used refined artistic and even technical means. However, in the era of the spread of knowledge obtained from books, it is not always possible to identify the birthplace of an idea or the author of a technical innovation. The migration of builders, artists and various craftsmen endowed with specific knowledge, which ensured the exchange of ideas and technical solutions in a certain geographical area, can be considered quite common. Among the pioneers who researched Baltic cultural contacts was the German art historian Niels von Holst. In his book "Die deutsche Kunst des Baltenslandes im Lichte neuer Forschung", published in Munich in 1942, he outlined the west-east migration routes of artisans based on the facts found in publications and logistical routes marked on maps [6]. Although the purpose of his publication was quite tendentious - to prove that the roots of Livonian culture were created by the German mission, modern research also confirms the leading role of architects and artists who came from Germany, Austria, Denmark and East Prussia in the origin of the cultural heritage of Estonia and Latvia in the 13th-19th centuries.

#### **Moving sculptures in the sacred interior**

In sacred culture, the use of automatons and moving sculptures largely corresponds to the idea of "deus ex machina" in the ancient theatre where a solution to a conflict or impasse situation was achieved with the help of stage equipment. The difference between a liturgical theatre performance, a service or a musical performance and the ancient theatre in the sacred practice of the 17th and 18th centuries was determined by narrowing the range of perception and influencing the consciousness of believers with mechanical means. During these centuries, there was a truly intensive migration of craftsmen and artists between East Prussia and Livonia, and this serves as a motive to look for parallels with the sacred culture of Latvia in this cultural region. A notable example is the Oliwa organ of the Archbishop's Cathedral of Gdańsk (Danzig), whose universal musical possibilities, monumental construction and impressive Rococo façade are a masterpiece of the organ building and art of its time. From 1763 to 1788, this 83-register, 5,100-pipe instrument was created by the organ builder Johann Wilhelm Wulff who incorporated into its façade several rotating stars and suns, as well as sculptures moving with the help of hidden mechanisms. They imitated an orchestra of angels who theatrically "participated" in a musical performance and, when the music was playing, they raised the trumpets to their mouths with the help of movable hands. Another example, even closer to Latvia, can be found in the northeastern part of Poland, in the popular pilgrimage site since the 15th century - the Świeta Lipka (Heiligelinde, Holy Linden) basilica dedicated to Our Lady. During the reign of the Polish king Augustus II, called Augustus II the Strong, (1670-1733), an impressive Baroque ensemble was created during the reconstruction of the church from 1687 to 1730. In 1719-1721, the luxurious interior of the church was supplemented by an instrument built by the prominent Königsberg organ builder Johann Joshua Mosengel (1663-1731). As the basilica of Świeta Lipka was handed over to the Jesuit order, the cultural policy arsenal of the Jesuit priests had room for various means, including technical ones, to manage the emotional mood of the faithful. As the last piece of music was played at the end of the liturgical part of the service, the organist could, with the help of pedals, pulleys and air turbines,



Fig. 3. Organ of the Ugāle church [photo by author, 2015]



Fig. 4. Sculpture of an Angel and rotating Zimbelstern (cymbal star). 1697-1701. [photo by author, 2015]

make the built-in sculptures move their heads and blow trumpets, as well as operate other moving parts, causing the congregation look at the instrument in the organ balcony [7]. The creators of the Lutheran sacred art of the Duchy of Courland maintained a certain restraint in decorating the churches with outwardly effective equipment compared to the interiors of the Catholic churches built in the cultural space of East Prussia. However, even in the Lutheran Courland, one cannot detect any backwardness concerning the trends characteristic of the era such as to integrate automata-related moving sculptures into the interior objects of the church. The construction of the Ugāle (Ugahlen) church was started in 1694 and was completed in a few years at the expense of Baron Johann von Behr [7]. In the context of this publication, the two-part instrument and its façade built in 1697-1701, a collaborative effort of the woodcarver Michael Marquardt (Marquardt) who belonged to the Ventspils (Windau) school of sculpture, and the organ builder Cornelius Rhaneus who was born in Liepāja (Libau), deserves special attention [11]. The main parts of the instrument at the back of the of the Ugāle church balcony and the façade, called Hauptwerk in German terminology, are decorated with a wood-carved sculpture of an eagle [3]. In Christian iconography, it is identified as a symbol of the resurrection of Christ and the evangelist John. With a pedal next to the organ pedals, the organist could move the eagle's wings. In addition, on the front of the organ balcony, on the top of the smallest part of the instrument called reverse positive (Rückpositiv in German), there was a wood-carved sculpture of an angel, and the organist could use a drive mechanism to raise its hand that holds a baton. Under the angel's feet there was a star connected to several bells on an axis, which was turned by a wind rotor and ringing the bells [4]. German organ builders have also given



Fig. 5. Riga. St Jacob's church. Angel with tympanum. 1761. [photo by S. Bitko, 2022]



Fig. 6. Riga. St Jacob's church. Angel with trumpet. 1761. [photo by S. Bitko, 2022]

this rotating and playful-sounding element the terminological designation *Zimbelstern* (cymbal star). The moving parts powered by muscle power and wind energy give the Ugāle church organ the status of an exclusive instrument to be included in the typological group of musical machines created for the space of Latvian sacred culture.

Similar to the decoration of the Ugāle church organ façade, the organ of the Piltene church was also given a sculpture of an eagle in 1721. The epitaph of Wilhelm Alexander von Heyking, owner of the Zirū manor who died in 1714, with the family coat-of-arms on its decorative façade, is accompanied by a record of a bequest of funds for the construction of a new instrument. His son, Ernst Ewald von Heyking, fulfilled his father's wish and commissioned a master for building a new instrument. The craftsman of the decorative part of the organ is the woodcarver Joachim Creutzfeld, who had moved from Lübeck to Courland and who was familiar with the Baroque era tendency to "revive" the static objects of the equipment with theatrically moving sculptures [10]. Thus, adapted to the space of sacred culture, even in the Duchy of Courland with its active construction of churches and furnishing them with artistically high-value equipment, the tradition of building and public display of automatons, which began during the Renaissance, was continued.

Neither did it pass by Riga as the metropolis of the economic and spiritual life of Livonia, although there is little surviving evidence of the use of moving sculptures to complement church facilities. After the Reformation, St. Jacob's church was handed over to the Latvian Lutheran congregation and, after forty years of the Counter-Reformation (1582-1621), when Riga was under the dominant influence of the Polish king

and the Catholic Church, it became again a Lutheran church. According to the agreement between the parish priest H. F. Herwagen and the prominent organ builder Heinrich Andreas Contius, in 1760 the new instrument was transported by water from the master's workshop in Halle to Riga [11]. The organ builder had expressed an offer to come to Riga again, which he did and supplemented the instrument with attractive details – trumpeters, drummers and carillon, which had already been marked as "Stern" in the disposition offer sent in 1759. A quote from a letter from the organ builder Heinrich Andreas Contius on December 14, 1761: "Having arrived here, I found that in this church (St. Jacob's - O.S.) no real church music is played, and that there are even no timpani here; the organ already has a built-in trumpet (a special register of voice - O.S.), and in this connection I have supplemented the external decorations of the organ with a couple of sculptures that, with the help of a special fastening, raise the trumpets to the mouths when the relevant register is turned on and then lower them again. That is why I now want to most humbly make a modest proposal to the High Collegium of the Imperial Church if they could be so kind and give permission to install another register in the organ pedal for playing two timpani. Nothing more would be required than a pair of tympani 2 and 1/2 feet in diameter, and two sculptures, each having a tympanum in front which they strike by means of a special contrivance so as to harmonize with each other and with the trumpet from the organ. If, finally, in order to achieve complete perfection, your High Collegium of the Imperial Church would like to give permission to install carillon through the whole keyboard, it would not cause much effort now, and this organ would gain great advantages compared to other instruments" [12].

The complement of the carillon has not survived to our day, but it could have been similar to the mechanism of the rotating star and bells (German *Zimbelstern*) installed in the Ugāle organ. However, the finished façade of the organ shows that H. A. Contius's offer had been partially accepted and the organ had received one tympanum striker and one trumpet player sculpture [5; 6]. The angel figure with a tympanum on the left side of the instrument has the mobile right arm flexibly attached to the shoulder to be able to strike a rhythm. In addition, the angel on the right side of the organ façade is made with a movable left hand holding a trumpet, which, when raised to the mouth, resonated with the sounds of the trumpet voice register of the organ. Master H. A. Contius's second arrival in Riga to complement the instrument with the sculptures imitating the sounds and movements testifies to the approval on the part of the priest and the church collegium of the automatons in the organ as a synthesis of several arts. Although the two sculptures are no longer operable nowadays, their construction and iconographic content demonstrate the demand of the Baroque society for the synthesis of music and movement in a mechanical instrument.

#### **"Deus ex machina" as an automaton**

##### **in the presentation of the sacrament of baptism**

The meaning of the sacrament of baptism is to symbolically unite each new member of society with Christ and integrate them in the Christian community. Baptism is one of the most important sacraments of the church and, following the instructions of Christ, it is like a contract that is accomplished in liturgical action. In later centuries, it was strengthened by the ceremonial procedure developed by St. Augustine (Augustinum). Reformation ideologist Martin Luther also highlighted the importance of the sacrament of baptism and based it on the three most important references in the Bible. The first is a



Fig. 7. Nurmuiža Lutheran church. Baptismal font. 1687.  
[photo by S. Bitko, 2023]



Fig. 8. Vecpils Catholic church. Baptismal font. Early 18th cent.  
[photo by S. Bitko, 2023]

reference to the situation described in Mark 16:16: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe, will be condemned" [13]. An important indication of the presence of holy water in the baptism ritual as a guarantee of salvation is also found in verses 4 and 5 of the Apostle Paul's 3rd letter to Titus: "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior for people appeared, he saved us, not because of works of righteousness, what would we have done, but for our mercy, with washing for rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" [16]. As the third important pillar, the lines of Chapter 6 from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans are mentioned, with an indication of the importance of baptism in the "renewed life", that is, after the resurrection. Quote: "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" [15]. At the conclusion of the baptism ceremony in all churches of Christian denominations, priests apply the formula that ends the Gospel of Matthew as a wish to the new member admitted to the congregation: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit" [16].

The above-mentioned biblical texts are used in all baptism ceremonies and the interpretation of their literal and as well as allegorical meaning has inspired sculptors and woodcarvers when creating the artistic setting for the baptism ritual in churches. From the baptistery added to the side of the church to the total immersion pool in the church interior, the placement of pedestals for the baptism ritual, holy water vessels or devices suspended from the ceiling in the interior, the evolution of construction and form has come a long way of discovery. 17th and 18th century examples in the cultural heritage of Latvia show a pedestal placed on the floor made in

traditional woodcarving or carpentry techniques, such as can be seen in the Strazde (Strasden), Kabile (Kabillen), Dobele (Doblen), Mežmuiža (Grenzhof), Saldus (Frauenburg) and other churches. The smooth upper surface of such pedestals served for the plate with baptismal water. More complex and richer in terms of imagery are those pedestals for baptismal vessels which are equipped with a lid whose lifting gave access to the plate with water.

In the Nurmuiža (Nurmhusen) Lutheran, church children were baptized at an elaborate pedestal, decorated with twisted columns, painting and gilding, the top of which was shaped like a cup with a lid [7]. At the end of the 17th century, a monumental pedestal of the baptismal font was made for the Subate (Subbath) Lutheran church, the lid of which could not be removed by hand, but to lift it, there was a pulley attached to the ceiling with a chain or a rope. The pedestals of the baptismal fonts of the Vecpils (Altenburg), Kaldabruņa (Kaltenbrunn) and Bebrene (Bewern) churches at the beginning of the 18th century were made according to the same compositional scheme and in the same woodcarvers' workshop [8]. The support part of the pedestal was formed by two angels with a large conch in their raised hands. The other part of the conch was the pedestal cover with the sculptures of John the Baptist and Jesus depicting the sacramental rite of the first baptism. The Kaldabruņa baptismal font had been equipped with a similar cover, but it is unfortunately lost.

In Latvia's heritage of sacred culture, there are no elder written documents neither in churches preserved "baptism angel" (German Taufengel) type sculptures. Art historian E. Grosmane has identified in the collection of Latvian National Museum of History one angel's sculpture from the church of Ugāle as possible example of "baptism angel" type [17]. Such sculptures of "flying" angels made in the 17th and 18th centuries and hung from the ceilings of churches were often found in the Lutheran churches of Central and Northern Germany. Their function was to hold a plate with baptismal water in their outstretched hands [18]. These decorative sculptures could either be hung at a constant height near the altar or the pulpit, or they could be lifted with the help of a winch installed in the attic, a pulley or just ropes. The church servants lowered the vertically movable baptismal angel sculpture to the required height before the service but raised it to the ceiling again after the ceremony of baptism. The brightly painted and expressively shaped wood-carved angels with baptismal water vessels in their hands revitalized the otherwise solemn and sober atmosphere of the church and endowed it with a certain theatricality.

When evaluating the typological diversity of baptismal angels found in the cultural space of the German sacred heritage, in the context of this publication more attention is paid to the more intricate constructions in terms of their composition and structure, which are very few also in German Lutheran churches. The authors of the book "Taufengel in Mitteldeutschland" identify the early 18th century baptismal angels that have been preserved in the churches of the villages of Jeetze (Getche) and Kerkau as a type characteristic of the Altmark region [19]. The singularity of the Jeetze church baptismal angel is manifested in its three-part structure which is suspended on an iron rod at a fixed height, and its iconographic composition [7]. A second sculptural group is attached to the same iron bar at a short distance and above the back of the traditionally shaped angel. This group with miniature sculptures of John the Baptist and Jesus above a blue-painted wood-carved cloud, which at the same time symbolizes the water of the Jordan River, represents the scene of the baptism of Jesus. Even higher above the group



Fig. 9. Baptismal Angel of the Jeetze Lutheran church, Germany. 1717. Taufengel in Mitteldeutschland, 2009, p. 247.



Fig. 10. Two-part baptismal device of the Gramzda Lutheran church. 1743. [photo by S. Bitko, 2023]

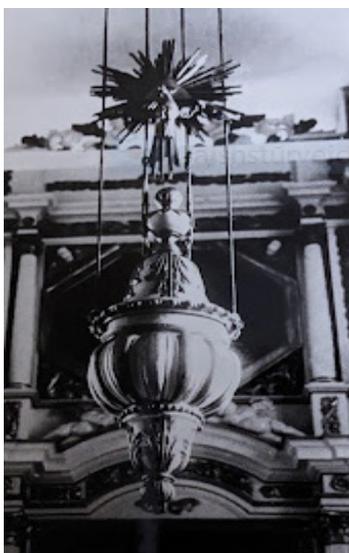


Fig. 11. Two-part baptismal device of St. Anna's church in Jelgava, mid-18th cent. [Bildarchiv Foto Marburg]

of sculptures depicting the first rites of baptism is the third component of the composition. It also depicts clouds and the symbol of the Holy Spirit - a dove [20]. The baptismal angel composition at the church of Kerkau, similar to that of the Jeetze church, has only two components; the anonymous sculptor has not included the sculptural group with the cloud and the dove of the Holy Spirit.

Historically, the Lutheran Church within the current geographic borders of Latvia had maintained active cultural contacts with East Prussia, the states of the central and northern parts of Germany, and Sweden, which influenced the mutual exchange of both masters as well as creative ideas and works of sacred art. It will be difficult to unambiguously argue for the information on the noble families and pastors as customers, as well as parishes and artists about the make or purchase of items of the church furnishings. However, evidence - fragmentary and also in photo documents - of visually attractive baptismal devices in Lutheran churches has been preserved in modern Latvian cultural heritage. During the construction of the Gramzda (Gramsdien) church in 1740-1744, a two-part baptismal device had been made to be suspended from the church ceiling [8]. Its donors were representatives of the von Korff family, the lords of the manor. The lower part of the baptismal device, dated 1743 and made of wood, was shaped like a flower-shaped console, the lid of which is raised by ropes to reveal the petal-shaped baptismal water vessel. The image preserved in the archives Bildarchiv Foto Marburg of the University of Marburg shows a Baroque-shaped baptismal device in St. Anna's church in Jelgava (Mitau), hung high in front of the altar by four ropes [9; 21]. Its style makes it attributable to the art of the mid-18th century, while its construction demonstrates a three-part structure. The artefact consists of a grooved fruit-shaped base with a cone-shaped lid. A flat wood-carving presents a crown of rays symbolizing God's glory - Gloria - and a tiny sculpture of the dove of the Holy Spirit in front. The photo shows the device that was destroyed during the Second World War, and it can be concluded that the baptismal device could perform certain theatrical functions. First, it had to be lowered, and then, by manipulating the ropes, the cover was lifted and separated from the base. The emotional effect was significantly enhanced by the crown of rays sliding up along with the lid, which had to descend again together with the lid at the end of the ceremony.

#### **Baptismal devices by the same hand**

The ecclesiastical art collection of the National History Museum of Latvia contains four sculptural works dating from the end of the 17th century, which were known to be parts of the "baptismal vessel frame" of the Umurga (Ubbenorm) church [20]. However, Rūta Muižniece, author of the 1984 catalogue "Wooden Sculptures of the Latvian SSR History Museum", at the time lacked information about what the construction that was intended for the baptism ceremony might have looked like. Preserved from the dismantled wood-carved installation are two sculptures of half-naked angels facing the viewer, with Baroque-style rich acanthus spirals for legs [10; 11], and a sculpture of an angel immersed up to the waist in a cup of acanthus leaves [12]. All the figures have broken-off arms and wings, many fragments of the acanthus ornaments also are lost, but the sculptures have partially preserved painting and gilding which indicates that the perished baptismal device had been luxurious.

The Līvberze (Behrsen) church parish keeps a fragment of the lost church furnishings: a wooden arch-shaped construction with two half-figures of angels attached to its sides, identical to the two sculptures of the Umurga church baptismal device [15]. Unlike the case of the Umurga church, the Līvberze



Fig. 12.-13. Two sculptures from the baptismal font of the Umurga Lutheran church. CVVM 27921 VS 139 Umurga, CVVM 27920 VS 138 Umurga [photo from the National History Museum of Latvia, 2023]



Fig. 14. Sculpture of an angel from the baptismal font of the Umurga Lutheran church. CVVM 27999 VS 142 Umurga [photo from the National History Museum of Latvia, 2023]



Fig. 15. Fragment of the baptismal device from the Līvberze church [photo by author, 2018]

angels' wings and hands raised in prayer have been fully preserved. The unusual function of the arch is suggested by the vertically drilled holes in its uprights where ropes for lifting the structure might have been hidden. At the top of the arch there is a relief of the dove of the Holy Spirit and a stylized crown of rays. In the lower part of the arch, an extended platform had been made the upper surface of which is covered with a wave-like pattern in blue that imitates the waters of the Jordan River. In the middle of the stylized water, the imprint of the irrecoverable feet of John the Baptist and the sculpted

body of Jesus has been preserved, testifying to the depiction of the scene of baptism in the centre of the arch. Although the arch of the Līvberze baptismal device with the sculptures of angels is fully preserved and still is in the church, it is just one part of the ancient construction. The other remaining detail – an angel – is in the collection of the Rundāle Palace Museum [23].

After marrying the Catholic countess Martha Philippine von Lancy in 1729, Wilhelm Heinrich von Lieven, owner of the Līvberze manor, converted to Catholicism and consequently changed the denominational affiliation of the church and the parish [24]. Such changes led to the need for renovated or completely new church furnishings. Since the preachers of the Jesuit order were active in Jelgava, the capital of the Duchy of Courland, and in Skaistkalne (Schönberg), on the border with the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, it is possible that the influence of Jesuit teachings among the nobility could have contributed to the introduction of attractive items into the austere environment of the Lutheran Church. From the point of style, the evaluation of the formal features of the church interior items - the altar, the pulpit, and the confessionals - allows to date them to the 1830s, and it is on this ground that this dating is also attributable to the baptismal device. Within the context of this article, it gives the time frame for the dating of the typological group of baptismal devices called "baptism machines" (Taufmaschine) as such.

The preserved artefacts demonstrate that in at least two churches - Umurga and Līvberze - baptismal devices of similar design had been located and had also been used. The stylistic identity of both their sculptures and ornaments point to the handwriting of one particular master or the work of one particular workshop. Photographs taken in the 1930s of the Jelgava Holy Trinity Church interior and found in the archives of the Herder Institute in Marburg unexpectedly show a baptismal device of impressive size, made in the same wood-carver's handwriting, in full complement and of an excellent degree of preservation. The said device is suspended by ropes high at the ceiling and faces the upper floor of the altar retable. The photo of the lowered angel as the bottom part of the baptismal device shows its position directly in front of the altar, thus providing the best visibility of the priest-conducted ceremony.

This tradition adopted in the Lutheran Church begins with Martin Luther's proposal to place not only the altar and the pulpit in front of the congregation, but also to find a place for the sacrament of baptism to be truly memorable. The procedure of religious services as developed by the Reformation theologians in 1564 and adopted in Wolfenbüttel provided for the sacrament of baptism to be performed "Not round the corner or secretly, but in facie Ecclesiae (in front of the eyes) - at an open meeting of the congregation", i.e., during a church service [22]. These instructions were also binding on other countries that implemented the reformation following the example of the German lands. By the order of Duke Gotthard Kettler on September 18, 1570, the Duchy of Courland approved and in 1572 in Rostock published its own procedure of worship in a separate book [28]. Since the Jelgava Holy Trinity Church was not only the cathedral of the Duchy of Courland, but also the administrative centre of church politics and the seat of the Superintendent, so it goes without saying that the procedure of services announced from the pulpit of this church, as well as other theological aspects and instructions for the layout of churches, served as a standard for imitation in all Lutheran parishes.

The baptismal device of the Jelgava Holy Trinity Church was a real masterpiece of woodcarving, liturgical performance and



Fig. 16. The baptismal device of the Jelgava Holy Trinity church. Heinrich von Bergen, 1737. Bildarchiv Foto Marburg



Fig. 17. Angel from the bottom part of the baptismal device, the Jelgava Holy Trinity church. Heinrich von Bergen, 1737. Bildarchiv Foto Marburg

also machinery, which, thanks to the donation made in 1731 by the organist Daniel Gudwich's widow to the church treasury, in 1737 the parish saw it installed in the place intended for it [14]. The names of the donor and her late husband appear in the dedication inscription on the side of the baptismal device: "Frau Catharina gbohne gebk. Seel. Herrn Daniel Gudwich beider deutschen Kirchen zu Mitau gewesen organisten nachgelassene Frau Wittwe Gottes Haus zu Ehren ein Tauffe verehret anno 1737". The approximately three-metre-high baptismal device that she donated outshone the those of Umurga and Līvberze both in terms of scale as well as artistic quality and wealth of details.

The rope-suspended baptismal device consisted of three

parts. The bottom one was made in the form of an angel sitting in a bunch of acanthus leaves, above the head with both hands holding a platform for the baptismal water dish [15]. Manipulating the ropes, the minister of the church lowered the entire baptismal device and revealed access to the holy water plate by separating the lower and middle parts. The middle part of the structure was the most magnificent element of the baptismal device. It was framed by a wooden arch with sculptures of praying angels on the sides and a base with the sculptures of John the Baptist and Jesus. The top of the arch was decorated with a wood-carved ruler's crown that characterized the Holy Trinity church as a place of worship under the Duke's patronage. As the baptismal device was operated for the purpose of the ceremony, its lower part with the weight angel was being pulled down. The middle part of the structure, connected by ropes and three mechanisms, simultaneously rose up together with the third – the uppermost – part of the device: a crown of rays with a triangle symbol as a sign of God's triune substance, and a sculpture of a dove personifying the Holy Spirit.

The artistically bright overall image of the richly gilded and painted baptismal device, the theatrical movement of its parts up and down certainly attracted the eyes of the congregation and formed direct associations with the moving decorations powered by theatre machinery or other movement-imitating mechanisms in Baroque art works. The effect created by the baptismal device helped to eliminate all the inconveniences associated with the practical use of the altar space which was recessed far from the rows of congregation pews. On the other hand, the multiple use of the allegorical image of angels as divine messengers in the sculptural decoration of the baptismal device served to transform the mechanical movement into a spiritual experience and heighten the emotional charge of the celebration.

By arranging the similar baptismal devices in a chronological order, the picture of the time frame of when the last three, as the most effective masterpieces of decorative sculpture, could have been made. The baptismal device could have been installed in the ensemble of the Līvberze church around 1729-1730 to attract the congregation's attention to a theatrical activity at the time of the controversial confessional changes. The period of the Umurga church repairs and the production of new furnishings lasted from 1728 to 1739, when new equipment was made and a new painting was ordered for the altar. It is at this time that the outwardly effective baptismal device could have been added to the interior of the church [27]. The Jelgava Holy Trinity Church baptismal device, both artistically and chronologically, closes the series of theatrical masterpieces because after that no other mechanically operated baptismal device suspended from the ceiling was made for Latvia's churches.

The search for the maker of these three sculptural and mechanical masterpieces leads to Heinrich von Bergen, a Russian court sculptor, who was employed, between 1723 and 1725, to make the stucco decoration and fountains of the Kadriorg (Katharinental) palace hall [28]. From 1731 to 1739, his stay in Latvia was connected with several commissions for making sculptures of the Riga St. Peter's Church organ front (1731-1733), creating coats-of-arms and sculptures for the Šāļu, Grēcinieku and Cūku Gates (Schal, Sünder und Schweinepforte, 1737-1739) built into the Riga bastions, as well as making for the Jelgava Holy Trinity church an operable baptismal device (Taufmaschine) to be suspended from the ceiling with ropes [29]. The status of H. von Bergen as a court sculptor and the importance of the large number of commissioned works he had carried out leave no doubt about

the qualifications of this master. This is fully proven by the Jelgava Holy Trinity church baptismal device's sculptural quality and virtuosity of the technical solution, and the quality of sculpture and technical ingenuity even in smaller scale works such as the baptismal devices of the churches at Livbērze and Umurga are not far behind.

### Conclusion

The ascertained name of the sculptor and the scanty information about his activities only allow us to make assumptions about his origins in the German-speaking cultural space, which could have been very wide geographically. On the other hand, his skill as a sculptor in the management of stucco, stone, wood and other materials could have been acquired in lands with generations-cultivated monarchist and aristocratic tastes. Russia, modernized by Peter I's reforms, was also oriented towards high artistic criteria, and H. von Bergen had the power to adapt everything new and European to meet the requirements of the Petersburg court and aristocracy. The range of his works that stretches from the stucco mouldings of the Kadriorg Palace and the sculptures of the organ front of St. Peter's church, to the coats-of-arms at the gates of the Riga city fortress manifests episodic but quite regular cooperation with the parishes and nobility of Tallinn, Riga, and towns in their immediate surroundings. Among them, the execution of less important commissions for attractive baptismal devices for several churches in the vicinity of Riga, is to be considered completely natural.

In accordance with the orientation of the Baroque and Rococo eras towards the involvement of technical solutions for the entertainment of high society life, a social and philosophical basis was created for the "reanimation" of technically ingenious theatrical decorations, moving sculptures and other everyday mechanisms in the processes of public life. Church institutions in the 17th and 18th centuries also used the mechanisms invented for industry, work and practical functions for the emotional and spiritual guidance of society and adapted them for the "theatricalization" of sacred culture. Moving musician figures linked up with the organ bellows or playing mechanisms, angel sculptures and baptismal water vessels hung from the church ceilings with ropes and trivets, as well as the so-called "baptismal machines" undeniably became attractive components of church interiors. The "deus ex machina" technique used in the ancient theatre encouraged the introduction of theatrical artefacts into the contemplative environment of the modern church to influence the emotional world of the church ritual participants with the help of moving images.

Reconstructing the social role of moving figures in sacred art and analysing the evolution of theatrical and emotional effect achieved by mechanically driven sculptures and sound creating machines in studies of mentioned artifacts there were used different methods, such as historical, chronological, typological and iconographic. The investigation different types of moving sculptures in sacred art of Northern and Central part of Germany, former East Prussia, now North-eastern part of Poland and Latvia led to understanding of former cognitive process in designing of a religious practice by means of visualisation of ideas from material world to the spiritual and emotional experience. The achievement of psychological and social effect during the church services realised by help of simple mechanic and technic tools in organ facade sculptures and hanging baptismal fonts has created an evolutionary link from ancient "deus ex machina" stage mechanisms to renaissance and barocco time performing arts, adapted for sacred art.

Noting that the thesis rooted in Aristotle's poetics about the

task of theatrical action - to cause an individual's educational, spiritually and morally experiential development - in the sacred culture of the 17th and 18th centuries has turned into its shocking, surprising or entertaining contrary, it may testify both to a change in the public awareness in favour of a liberalized attitude towards the sacraments and the form of their performance, as well as to a certain democratization of church institutions.

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### Author

**Ojārs Spāritis.** Art historian. Habilitated doctor of art, Professor at the Art Academy of Latvia, vice-President of Latvian Academy of Sciences. 13 Kalpaka Boulevard, LV-1050, Riga, Latvia.

E-mail: [osparitis@gmail.com](mailto:osparitis@gmail.com)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3100-5798>

### Kopsavilkums

“Deus ex Machina” vai kustīgās skulptūras Latvijas luterāņu baznīcu interjerā. Rakstā aplūkots no antīkā grieķu teātra aizgūtā un par “Deus ex Machina” (Dievs no (tehniskas, mākslīgas) ierīces” sauktā paņēmiena – ar tehniskiem līdzekļiem un kustības izmantojumu skatuviskā darbībā, lai atrisinātu dramaturģiska strupceļa situāciju. Uz antīkā teātra skatuves aktieris, kura uzdevums bija iesaistīties darbībā kā augstākas varas pārstāvim vai dievišķam varonim tika nogādāts ar virvju un trišu, sviru vai pat hidraulisku paceļamo mehānismu palīdzību. Uz šo darbību attiecinātais žanriskas apzīmējums “Deus ex Machina” raksturo sarežģītu tehnisko risinājumu aktieru un dekorāciju kustīgai pārvietošanai skatuves telpā.

Renesanses un baroka laikmetā vienlaikus ar mehānikas un inženierzinātnes attīstību atdzima interese par kustīgu skulptūru – automātu – izmantošanu augstdzimušo personu apbrīnai un izklaidei. Mūsdienu robotu priekšteču – automātu un kustīgo skulptūru - spēja piesaistīt sabiedrības uzmanību no aristokrātijas mājokļiem tika pārcelta uz baznīcu interjeriem un piemērota reliģiskā pārdzīvošana kāpināšanai. Iebūvējot kustīgas skulptūras ērģelēs vai attīstot pēc teātra dekorāciju principa kustināmas kristību ierīces Latvijas dievnamu interjeri glabā gan 17.-18. gadsimtu mākslai tipisko, gan tikai mūsu zemei raksturīgo unikālo kultūras mantojuma daļu.