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CENTRE INTERNATIONAL D'ETUDES
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MISSION REPORT
VILNIUS / LITHUANIA
1-5 October 1997
CONSERVATION OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
OF ST. FRANCIS AND ST. BERNARDINE

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1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This mission was organized within the framework of technical assistance for the co-ordination of the Vilnius Old Town Rehabilitation Programme, upon a request forwarded by the Republic of Lithuania to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in June 1997. It responded in particular to a request for expert consultancy for the rehabilitation of the church of St. Francis and Bernardine.

The Old Town of Vilnius was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in December 1994 and is protected as an ensemble by a new law regarding immovable property of cultural value of 1 February 1995. The church of St. Francis and Bernardine is classified as a monument of National level and is indicated as a "Priority Investment Project" in the "Vilnius Old Town Revitalization Strategy" elaborated by international and local consultants and published in Lithuanian and English by UNESCO and the Municipality of Vilnius in 1997.

2. MISSION OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this mission were (i) to discuss the ongoing conservation project with the local team of conservation professionals, local administrators and the owners of the monument (the Franciscans) and (ii) to assist in the identification of needs and priorities, the definition of a working plan and budget and the drafting of grant applications.

The 4-day mission allowed the team to carry out a general assessment of the present state of the project, already initiated in 1981 and to define further actions which will mainly consist of the preparation of a series of documents for the elaboration of grant proposals to be forwarded to UNESCO and other potential funding agencies. These documents will be prepared in English by the local project team, headed by the architect Giedrus Laucius. It was agreed that drafts will be sent to ICCROM for revision. These documents will consist of (i) a summary project description, based on the master plan of 1981, (ii) a description of the future utilization of the monument and (iii) a global project budget and working plan, including long-term protection strategies.

3. MISSION CALENDAR and PEOPLE MET

Wednesday, 1 October

- Arrival at 17:00; reception at airport by Ms. Jūrate Kulikauskiene (Programme co-ordinator, National Commission for UNESCO) and delivery of background documents

Thursday, 2 October

MORNING:

- Site meeting and inspections at St. Francis and Bernardine Church; meeting with Mr.

Giedrius Laucius (architect, State Company of Monuments, project director), Mr. Petras Kaniavičius (Civil Engineer, project co-ordinator appointed by the owners), Mr. Josas Pilipavičius (Conservator-restorer, head of one of the two private teams in charge of the uncovering and conservation of wall paintings, decorations and historic renders), Ms. Rūta Janonienė (Art Historian, Academy of Fine Arts, Vilnius), Ms. Rauckienė (Chemist, Institute of Monument Research, Vilnius) and several Franciscan friars; the visit was co-ordinated by Ms. J. Kulikauskienė and Ms. Justine Poškiene, who also assisted with translations.

AFTERNOON:

- Meeting at the premises of the National Commission for UNESCO with Mr. Dalius Vrubliauskas (conservation architect, promoter of the establishment of a co-ordinating agency for the Old Town of Vilnius - OTRA); briefing on administrative frameworks, responsibilities, infrastructures, training opportunities, etc.

Friday, 3 October

MORNING:

- Site meeting and inspections at St. Francis and Bernardine Church (continued); accompanying persons: J. Kulikauskienė, P. Kaniavičius, J. Poškiene.
- Visit of the churches St. Nicholas, the Holy Trinity (Orthodox) and of the chapel Aušros Vartai with J. Poškiene.

AFTERNOON:

- Meeting at the premises of the National Commission for UNESCO with Mr. Mindaugas Briedis (Lithuanian Delegate at the European Parliament) and Mr. Paulius Kulikauskas (Vice-Minister of European Affairs).

Saturday, 4 October

MORNING:

- Meeting with G. Laucius; illustration of project plans elaborated in 1981 and of the stratigraphic survey on interior surfaces; translation provided by J. Poškiene.
- Site meeting and inspections at St. Francis and Bernardine Church (continued); accompanying person: P. Kaniavičius.

AFTERNOON:

- Visit of the Church of St. John (University Church), the Cathedral and of the Church of St. Peter and Paul with J. Poškiene.

Sunday, 5 October

MORNING:

- Site meeting and inspections at St. Francis and Bernardine Church (continued); accompanying person: P. Kaniavičius.

AFTERNOON:

- Departure at 13:50

4. GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE CHURCH

Originally built as a fortified church,¹ St. Francis and Bernardine is part of a large monastic complex, including a cloister, several adjoining buildings largely transformed and reshaped in later periods, a separate place for the nuns (linked to the main church through a gallery), a belfry and the Church of St. Anne in flamboyant Gothic style.

The church, repaired after the collapse of the nave and partially reshaped in the Baroque period, still displays much of the Gothic sense of space, especially in its present condition, with the large portions of medieval painting that have been brought to light on the north wall and the late-baroque furniture temporarily removed for restoration.

St. Francis and Bernardine has a fascinating architectural history and its particular interest lies in the superposition of many building phases. Mr Laucius, the architect in charge of the project, has identified three different phases in the Gothic period, one Renaissance phase and again three phases in Baroque times.

The church has three naves with a choir and a narthex added in the late Gothic period. On the south side three chapels were added, two of them in the Renaissance and the third during Baroque times.

Roofed with a strongly pitched structure, the building is vaulted (cross vaults) at the same level, both in the nave and in the aisles; all the vaults of the nave and those of the first two bays of the aisles were reconstructed in the Baroque period with the same shape but with a simpler pattern of the ribs; furthermore, the higher portion of the choir (from the apex of the windows upwards) is entirely Baroque.

5. CONSERVATION RELATED ASPECTS

From the structural point of view the building shows no signs of serious trouble and appears to be basically stable. The conservation problems to be dealt with are mainly those related to the presentation of mural paintings and decorated surfaces. However, some architectural aspects need to be considered within the context of the general strategy for the conservation of the church, namely:

- installation of a heating system;

¹ Loopholes are still visible on the north wall at roof level

According the unpublished leaflet prepared by G. Laucius, "Short Historical Information on St. Francis and St. Bernardine Church in Vilnius," building works for this church, which replaced an earlier church in stone masonry, lasted until 1516.

- repair and maintenance of the roof;
- restoration of the windows;
- laying of a new pavement ;
- and restoration of the late Baroque furniture and organ.

The work carried out until now is generally speaking accurate and respectful of the original fabric, but the real problem is how to deal with elements of different periods without turning the church into a museum that, like an "anatomical specimen", displays all its different building phases.

In other words, the main difficulty in the conservation of St. Francis and Bernardine seems to be the presentation of an architectural and artistic whole in which medieval painting, Gothic structure and Baroque additions and finishes should all be enhanced together. In this respect, colours and architectural surfaces are crucial for the interior, especially taking into account the 17 Baroque altars that will be put back after restoration. Outside, the treatment of the elevations is critical, and interventions such as the opening of a window walled up in a late Baroque period, needs perhaps more careful consideration.

Unfortunately, the cloister and the adjoining buildings belong to different owners and this entails obvious difficulties in the development and management of a consistent conservation project. The cloister, three of the four wings of which are occupied by the Academy of Fine Arts, is presently undergoing some structural intervention (underpinning of the side adjacent to the church) which is not planned or controlled by the architect of the church.

It would be most desirable that administrative solutions be found to join all four wings of the cloister to the church so that its conservation can be undertaken consistently as part of the same project and visits, become possible from within the church. In the meantime, it is vital that some sort of co-ordination be developed between the two ownerships and it is hoped that the State Department of Heritage Protection can take control of the works carried out in the entire complex.

6. ASSESSMENT OF PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS

6.1. Mural Paintings, Decorated Surfaces and Historic Renders

A systematic stratigraphic survey carried out in the early 1980s on the interior surfaces of the church and annexed spaces (i.e. cloister, sacristy, side chapels, etc.) revealed a huge extension of painted surfaces and historic renders from Gothic and Baroque periods, covering almost entirely walls, ceilings and vaults of these structures.

The survey was mainly focused on the identification of paintings and painted decorations and

did not go much into the aspect of the historical evolution of the colour schemes of plain wall surfaces in relation to other architectural elements (e.g. ribs, window frames, pillars, etc.) . At a certain stage during the Baroque period, the ribs of the cross-vaults in the nave were decorated with alternate red and black segments, remains of which are still preserved. It appears, however, that mainly light colours (i.e. white and light grey) characterized the interior of the church up to the 19th century, when gradually darker ocher and brown colours were introduced. The dominant white colour of the church interior is documented by the Franciscan chronicle of the monastery for the early Baroque period.²

The historic evolution of painted decorations and colour schemes must be further studied and will be hopefully clarified as a result of the removal of post-Baroque paints. On the basis of presently available data, the following tentative chronology can be established:

6.1.1 Painted surfaces from the Gothic period:

From 1994 on, three large panels with Gothic wall paintings (early 16th century) of high artistic value were uncovered on the north wall (now under restoration). The scenes represented on various registers are rather abraded but still almost entirely legible. Fragments of painting of the same period are preserved on the lower part of the south wall and on the west wall behind the organ. The paintings appear to be painted "a secco" onto the lime-washed Gothic plaster, which is, especially on the north wall, still largely preserved, also in areas without painting. Remains of a painted decoration (flowers) exist on the six remaining Gothic bays of the aisles. Superimposed layers of wall painting from various periods were also uncovered (and partly restored) in the lunettes of the south wing of the cloister (only accessible through the Academy of Fine Arts), the east wing of the cloister (the only wing of the cloister accessible from the church) and in the sacristy. The cross-vaults in the east wing bear painted decorations of the Baroque period, which are already restored.

6.1.2 Painted surfaces from the Baroque period

The most complete painted Baroque surfaces are preserved in the walls and vaults of the choir and on the triumphal arch. These surfaces are still to be uncovered systematically. However, numerous test areas indicate the presence of two superimposed Baroque phases (paint on paint), which seem to be almost entirely preserved. So far no Gothic fragments were found in this part of the church, which also from an architectural point of view is more Baroque than Gothic, due to extensive repairs and structural modifications (e.g. reconstruction of the vault, re-arrangement of windows) after 1655.

² see: unpublished leaflet prepared by Rūta Janoniene, "Frescoes of Vilnius St. Francis and St. Bernardine Church"

On the vaults of the nave, traces of a not very legible, but rather complex decoration are visible. These decorations spread from the intersections of the ribs.

Layers of Baroque decoration are also documented by test areas on the west wall behind the organ and in the upper storey of the first side chapel to the right ("Waina Chapel").

The whitewashed Baroque plaster in nave and aisles seems to be preserved almost entirely on the non-Gothic bays (reconstructed in the 17th century), on the pillars and in areas of the walls where no Gothic plaster exists. It seems, that all later interventions were restricted to local plaster repairs and the re-application of paints.

In the lower parts of the walls of the aisles, painted frames, probably belonging to easel paintings depicting a Calvary, are visible. This monochrome decoration in grey can probably dated to the late Baroque-classicist period along with the monochrome portal of the "Waina Chapel" and its counterpart on the north wall. A marble imitation on the lower part of the nave pillars were evidently painted at the time of the construction of wooden altars in the second part of the 18th century.

6.1.3 Painted surfaces of other periods

The uppermost layer of painting in the cloister is dated to the late Renaissance period.³ The Renaissance chapel of "S. Michael" preserves decorations which were not inspected during this mission, due to partial inaccessibility of the space..

A later, probably 19th century, decoration is almost entirely preserved in the "Magi Chapel" (2nd to the right).

Worth mentioning are two painted figures inserted into the lower row of arches of the tympanum of the west facade of the church, which must be examined and taken into consideration in developing a conservation concept for this area.

6.1.4 Evaluation of the conservation-restoration treatment in progress

The systematic uncovering of historic architectural surfaces and painted decorations was started in 1994. So far, the works carried out by two private Lithuanian firms have achieved the following results:

- Complete uncovering and partial conservation of Gothic paintings on the north wall (left aisle).

³ see: R. Janoniene, op.cit.

- Removal of modern paints and partial uncovering of Baroque and Gothic surfaces on the vaults of nave and aisles and on the south wall
- Uncovering and partial conservation of the palimpsest in the east wing of the cloister and complete conservation of the surfaces in the cross-vaults.
- Uncovering and complete conservation of the painted decoration on the arch, dividing the sacristy.

The Baroque surfaces on the cross-vaults and pillars of the nave, as well as the Gothic surfaces on the six crystal and netlike vaults of the aisles were only roughly uncovered and are still partly hidden by residues of a light grey lime paint. It is necessary to complete the operation in order to have a clearer picture of the conditions and extent of painted decorations and related whitewashed plasters. Moreover, superimposed limewash residues on the pillars tend to obscure the clean-cut features of the fluting.

The removal of post-Baroque paints was done mechanically and it is evident that the objective was to preserve all traces of painted decoration, respecting the uppermost layer in case of superpositions.

On the north wall (left aisle), the conservation-restoration of the left-hand panel is almost completed. The final presentation of the painting consists of a delicate and respectful chromatic re-integration of losses and abrasions in the paint layer, using watercolours and hatching techniques, which allows one to distinguish re-integrated areas from the original. While no attempts are made to reconstruct pictorially missing figurative parts, the lacunae of the decorated frames are completed, which is justified by their repetitive characteristic and by their value as painted architecture. The result of the final presentation of the paintings is very positive.

Detached portions of the plaster were stabilized by means of injections with calcium caseinate, and a commercial thermoplastic resin emulsion was used for the fixation of the paint layer. It is recommended (in case this has not yet been done) to test the long-term behavior of this resin, as many types of thermoplastic resin emulsions show a tendency to discoloration (i.e. yellowing, browning) and cross-linking (i.e. becoming irreversible) on aging. This possible drawback would, however, constitute a problem only for possible surface residues.

6.1.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The interior of the St. Francis and Bernardine church and its adjoining buildings represents a unique situation, with architectural surfaces (wall paintings, painted decorations, whitewashed

renders) form different periods, which almost entirely cover walls, ceilings and other architectural elements. This unique situation is both a challenge and an opportunity to conserve and to present these surfaces and to enhance the aesthetic, artistic, historic and age values of the church interior. Local decision makers and those responsible for the project are fully aware of this opportunity and through discussions with representatives of the project team it became clear that the preservation and presentation of these surfaces is considered an imperative.

The main problem is how to deal with the presentation of painted surfaces from different periods (i.e. Gothic, early Baroque, late Baroque) which historically never co-existed and are often superimposed. The stratigraphic situation might require, in some cases, major decisions to be taken, as for example to destroy a later layer of decoration in order to unveil the earlier scheme, which might be better preserved or artistically more significant, or to present one or the other historic period in a given space. In this regard it will be necessary to establish general guidelines for decision-making in order to guarantee a unified approach, although snap decisions in restricted areas will have to be taken on a case-by-case basis.

The following recommendations are not intended to be binding, but are rather to be considered as a basis for discussion.

- Probably, whitewashed surfaces were the general colour and the ground for painted decorations until the late Baroque period. This facilitates the contemporary presentation of different phases in the same part of the building (e.g. nave, choir, cloister, etc.) or on the same architectural element (e.g. wall, pillar, vault, etc.) without a major loss of aesthetic unity. It is proposed to present whitewashed surfaces as they are (without repainting them) and to develop a methodology which allows an acceptable chromatic balance to be obtained through localized retouching and/or transparent glazes.
- On the basis of the stratigraphic evidence, the layer to be uncovered should be defined for each single part of the building. Areas should be mapped on roof and elevation plans to facilitate decision-making. Following the decision to which level the specific part will be restored, all layers, hiding this level should be removed systematically, also uncovering the whitewashed ground belonging to this level/phase.
- Parts of the building that present dominantly architectural features from one period, should be presented with the surfaces of the same period if possible; according to this principle, for instance, it is proposed to restore the choir to its Baroque version (preferably the later Baroque version, as there are two superimposed and well preserved Baroque layers) and the crystal or netlike vaults in the aisles to the Gothic situation.

- All uncovered surfaces (painted or not) should be stabilized by means of grouting and impregnation with a suitable consolidant where necessary. The methodology applied so far by local conservator-restorers seems to give good results. Maybe, calcium caseinate could be replaced by a modern premixed hydraulic grout for injections.⁴ Moreover, the quality and long-term behaviour of the presently used thermoplastic resin emulsion should be checked, especially with regard to its use as a consolidant and surface fixative.

6.2. Architectural problems

6.2.1 The structure

Despite a tormented building history and the extensive repair and reconstruction to which the church has been subjected after partial collapse, St. Francis and St. Bernardine stands at present in an overall good condition. From the structural point of view, no major defects have been noted and, with the exception of the square Renaissance chapel that could not be properly inspected, it seems reasonable to say that the stability of the building raises no particular cause for concern.

The foundations have been reported to be sound and no changes in the characteristics of the soil have been observed in the past; the visit of the accessible crypts accounts for this judgement since the massive brickwork of the vaults shows no cracks whatsoever.

Many cracks are visible, instead, on the cross-vaults of the nave and on the barrel-vault of the choir.

The first ones indicate that, after the reconstruction of the vaults, the piers moved slightly apart, causing the transverse arches to spread and to open at the crown. As a consequence, secondary cracks developed parallel to those in the middle. These cracks, known as Sabouret's cracks, are somewhat typical defects of masonry vaults and they are not necessarily an alarming sign of danger. Indeed, considering that the out of plumb of the piers does not exceed 10 centimetres at the base and that the cracks themselves look old and dusty, it is suggested that they should be simply kept under observation while the work goes on; if no movements are recorded, they can be filled with mortar so as to restore the continuity of the brickwork along the north-south section.

⁴ Several of these grouts are manufactured in Italy (commercial names e.g. LEDAN TB1, LEIT, PLM-A)

The cracks in the choir are more difficult to explain. The one over the second window from north, possibly caused by a defect of the lunette, calls for some attention and may need to be repaired. It is suggested that the vault of the choir be inspected from the extrados, which was unfortunately not accessible during our inspection.

Finally, the cracks visible in the "Magi Chapel" should no longer be a problem since its structural consolidation by means of a collar beam was recently completed.

6.2.2 The problem of heating the church

If the visual and structural effects of installations, together with the fire risk, are obvious, the ultimate repercussions of a heating system on the moisture conditions in the building's fabric are less easily understood.

Heating a church is a critical issue, because what is desirable for people may not be good for paintings and wooden furniture. Rapid changes of temperature and relative humidity are potential causes of decay for works of art. Cyclic phenomena of condensation and evaporation potentially induced by heating and by the way the system is operated can entail staining and surface deterioration. In a word, the internal environment of a church is crucial for the conservation of the artefacts and if a heating system is to be chosen, this should be done in co-operation with an experienced conservator.

Two types of heating systems have given good results in similar cases:

1) Floor warming with hot water:

If the paving has to be re-laid, this has the advantage of being invisible and requiring low running temperatures which can be slightly increased before the services

2) Box pews local heating:

If box pews can be put in instead of ordinary benches, it has the advantage of limiting the area to be warmed up exactly to where people sit and only to periods of direct use.

6.2.3 The roof

The structure of the roof is made by 37 trusses set every 1.10m over the main body of the church; the vertical posts of these trusses rest on longitudinal beams running every 1.5m that were originally set on large transverse beams spanning from the walls of the aisles and the walls of the nave (during repair work carried out some ten years ago, these beams were replaced by reinforced concrete elements). In addition to this, the vertical elements are connected by horizontal ones both longitudinally and transversely which, altogether, makes an enormous amount of wood with relatively thin section present in the roof space.

As a consequence, fire could spread very rapidly and with devastating effects. It is vital to



photo 1

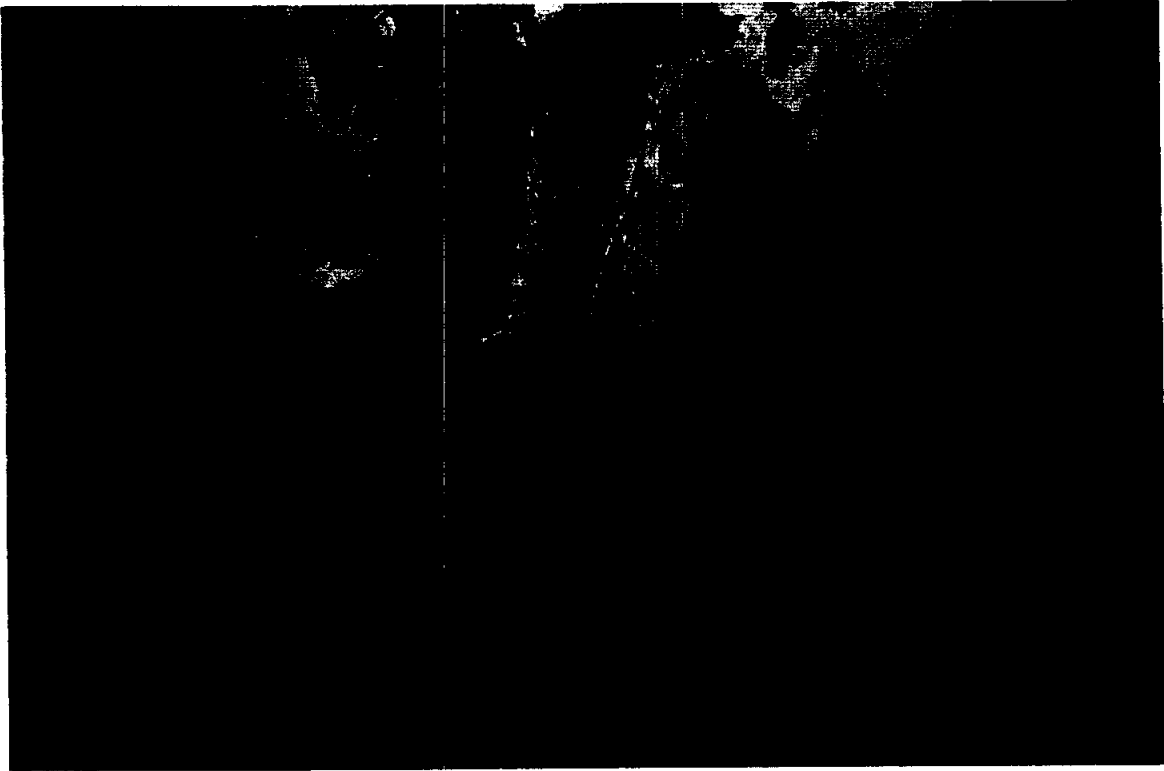


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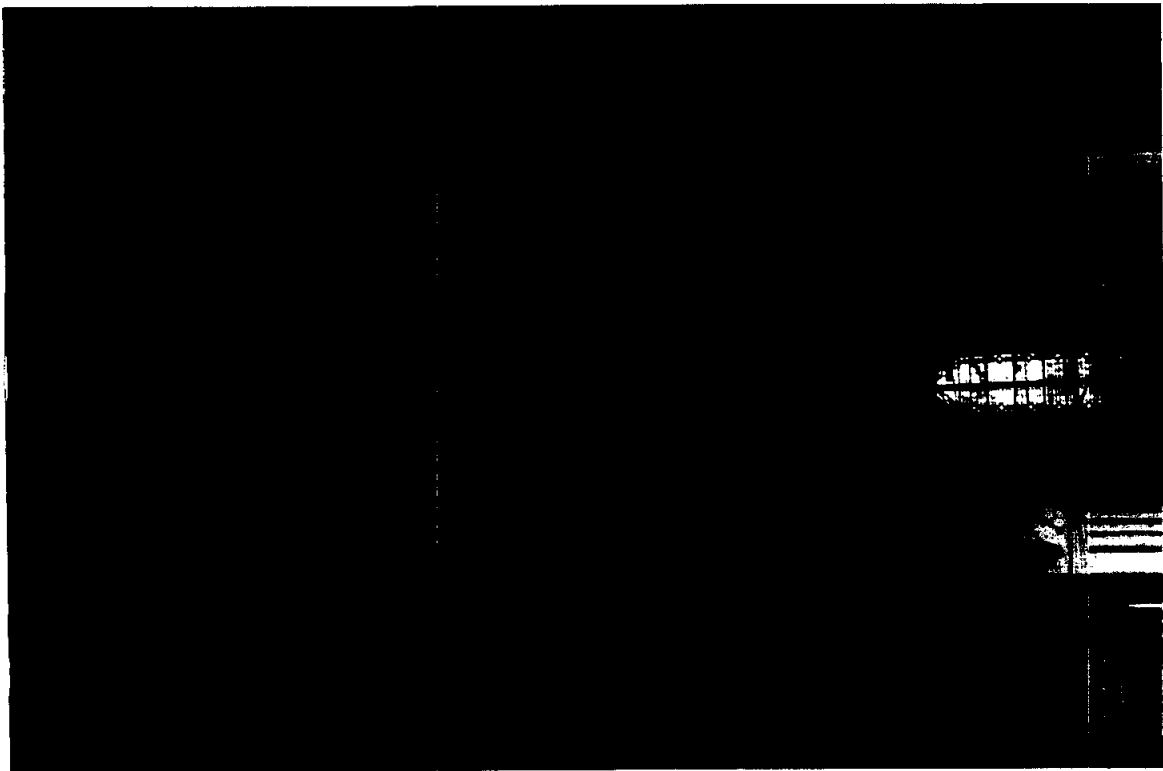
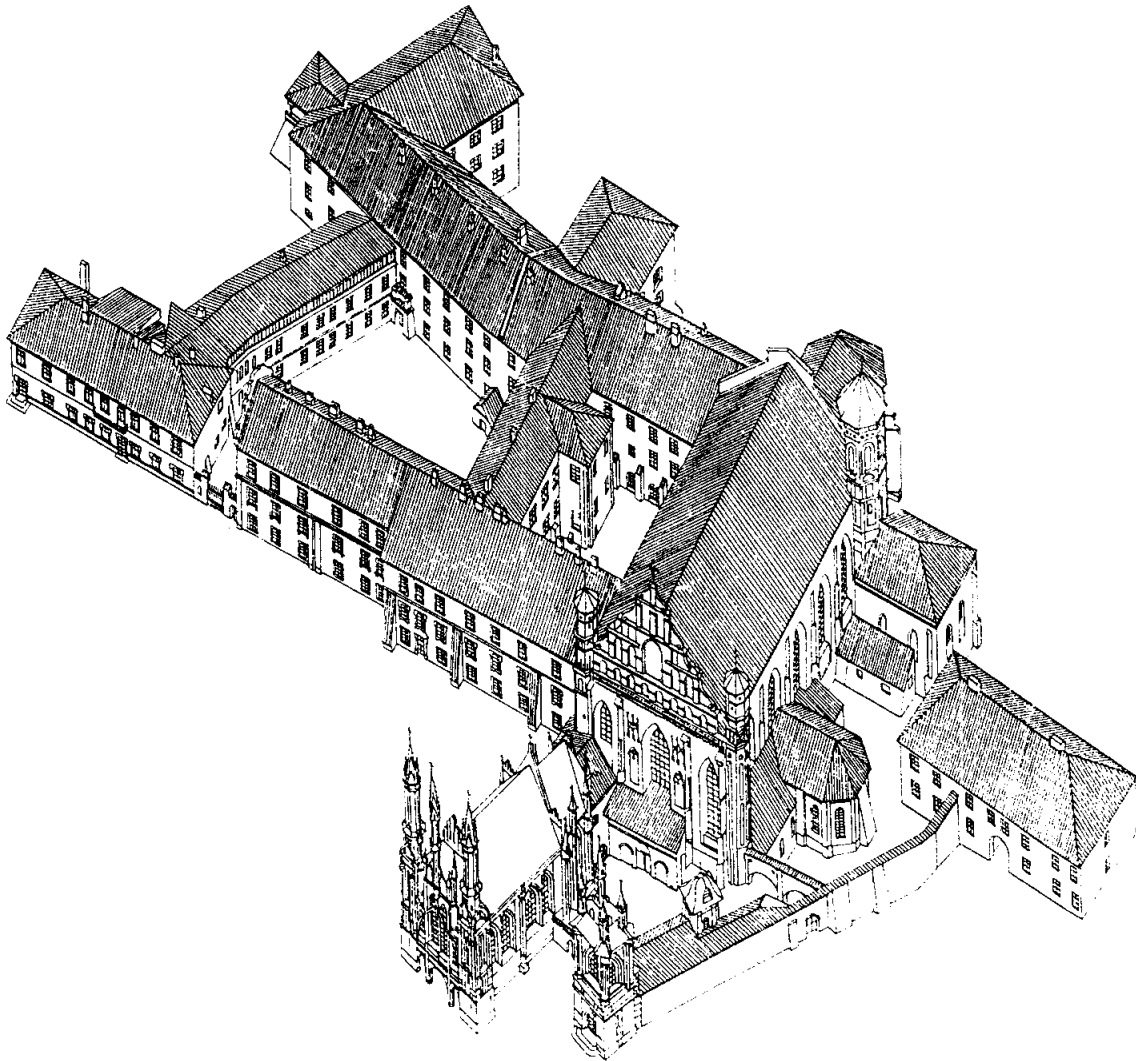


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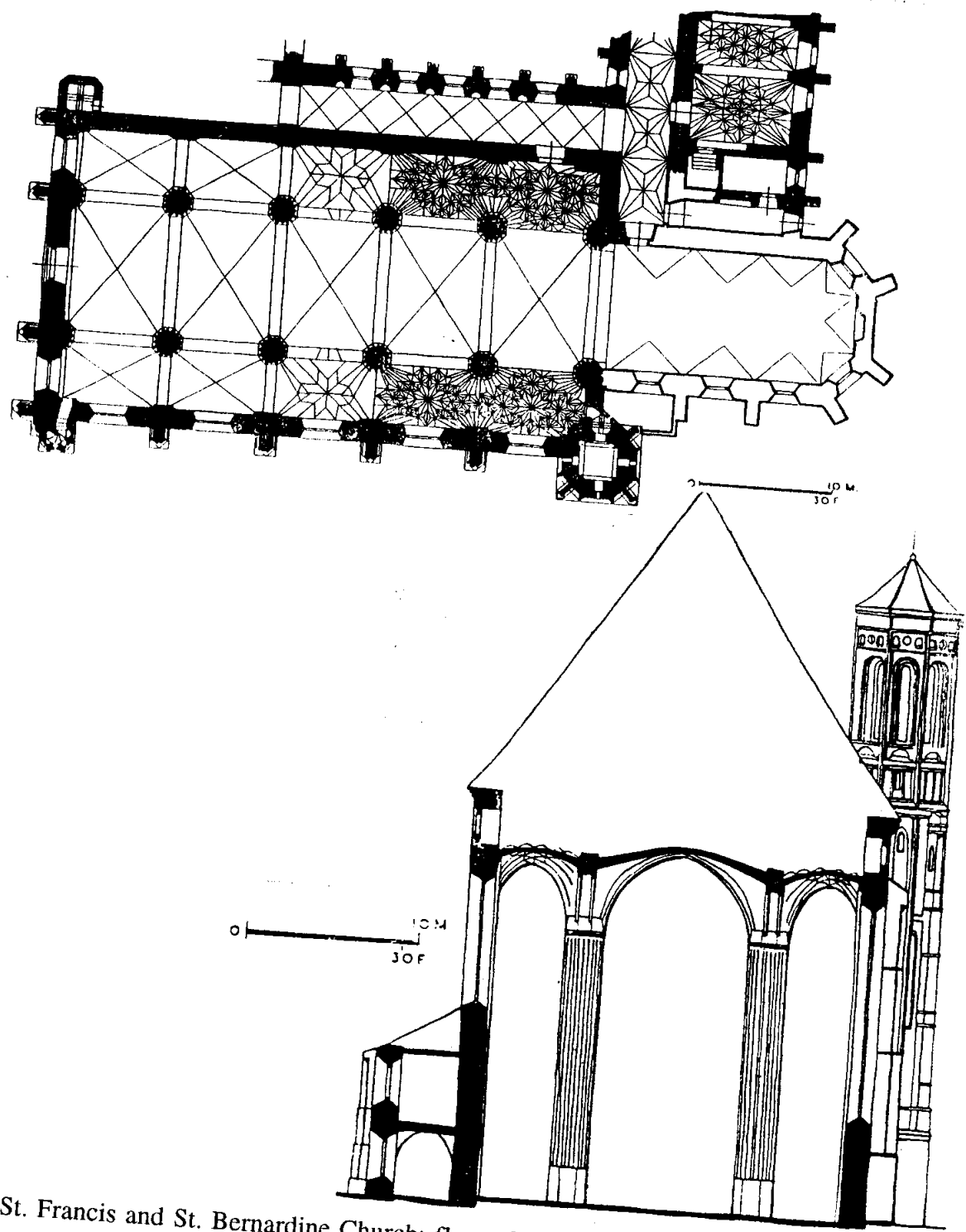


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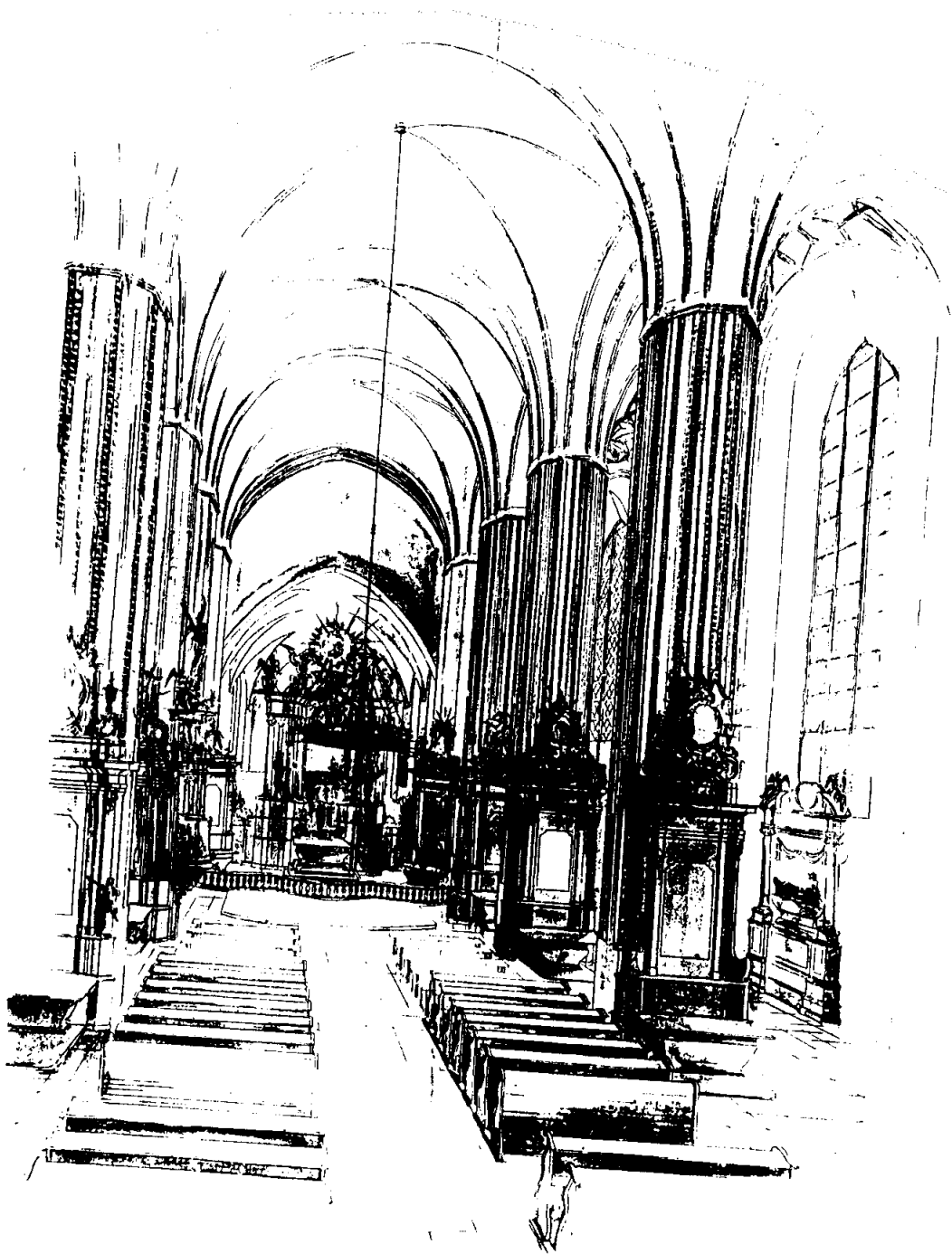
8. DRAWINGS



Vilnius, St. Francis and St. Bernardine Church: general view with annexed buildings



Vilnius, St. Francis and St. Bernardine Church: floor plan and section through the nave



Vilnius, St. Francis and St. Bernardine Church: interior of the nave with 18th-century altars