

## DESCRIPTION

The Column is a work of extraordinary beauty. A massive two-tiered octagonal pedestal with the plan of an isosceles cross rests on three sandstone steps, while four protruding pillars carry the statues of the four saints. The mass of the central part of the Column is relieved by a Baroque aperture in which a lamp once burned. It is worth noting that the lights on plague columns were often the only illumination of town and village squares at night. The second tier of the pedestal is formed by a square pillar, which bears three inscriptions at the bottom, one relating to the erection of the column and the other two to its restorations in 1830 and 1877. This central pillar, articulated like the first by rectangular cartouches and pronounced moldings, is topped by a statue of the Virgin Mary. The body of the Column is made of coarse-grained sandstone from the quarry in Křižany. The material used, the relatively simple forms, and records in the town accounts suggest that the base was not part of the gift from Karl Christian Platz, and was probably made by local artists or craftsmen.



Statue of St. John of Nepomuk



Statue of St. Florian.



Statue of St. Roch



Statue of the Virgin Mary

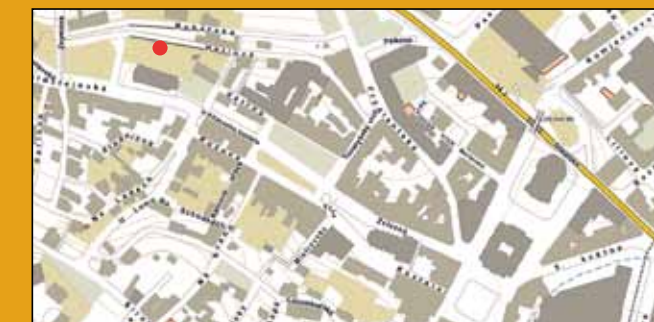
The sculpture placed on this massive pedestal is carved from first-class, fine-grained sandstone from Dvůr Králové, typical of Braun's workshop, and far surpasses the Column in the quality of its execution. Even after centuries, traces of the tools used are visible in the stone and the finest details of the faces and bodies of the saints and their vestments never cease to amaze with the perfection of their workmanship.

On the four pillars of the Column's first tier stand larger-than-life statues of popular patrons against the plague. St. John of Nepomuk occupies a prominent place at the front of the Column. Depicted in a striking contrapposto stance, dressed in a richly draped canon's robe, he holds a crucifix in his hands, his head adorned with a five-pointed halo is slightly tilted and his face turns toward the Heavens with an almost dramatic expression. On St. John's right, we see St. Florian

in the splendid garb of a Roman soldier. He is again depicted in a contrapposto, slightly bent over, holding a banner in his left hand and a bucket of water in his right, which he uses to extinguish a house engulfed in golden flames. But it is not only Florian whose precise depiction so impresses the observer. At the back of the pedestal we find St. Roch in the flowing cloak of a pilgrim, with his hat on his back, his right hand on his chest and his left hand exposing his thigh, from which a dog has just bitten out a plague ulcer. The viewers' attention is naturally drawn to the anatomically extremely faithful representation of the saint's body, as well as to the remarkable detail of the slightly wavy hair of the dog at his feet. The statue of St. Sebastian, depicted just before his execution, completes the set of four saintly representations on the Column's lower tier. The extraordinary depiction of the beauty of his body, tied by ropes to the stump of

a tree, and the expression of his face turned towards the Heavens, leaves no room for doubt about the artist's mastery. This is finally confirmed by the statue with which the whole work culminates, the Immaculate Virgin Mary. This most powerful and beloved protector stands on the earthly Sphere, emerging from the clouds surrounded by angels with conspicuously prominent noses, encircled by a serpent clutching an apple in its fangs. Clad in flowing, draped robes, crowned with a halo of twelve stars, she holds her arms crossed on her breast and turns her lovely face to the Heavens. It is the details of the figures of the saints, the expressions on their faces, the decorative hems of their garments and the dynamic modelling of the figures as such that, together with the amazingly captured expressions of intense emotion, make the sculptural monument stand out among similar others in the Liberec region, and incomparable to any other local works.

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## GPS coordinates

50.7712769N, 15.0529281E

## More info at

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## LIBEREC-STARÉ MĚSTO

### Column with the Statues of the Virgin Mary and the Saints



## COLUMN WITH THE STATUES OF THE VIRGIN MARY AND THE SAINTS

In the garden of the Church of the Finding of the True Cross, next to the stations of the cross and the Chapel of the Holy Sepulcher, a nearly forgotten work of art stands almost hidden from the visitors' eyes: the Column with the statues of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, whose age and artistic quality lend it a prominent position among the sculptural monuments not only in Liberec itself, but in the entire region. The Column, dating from the first quarter of the 18th century, created in the renowned sculpture workshop of Matthias Bernard Braun, is an exceptional and well-preserved example of outstanding Baroque art. The column was created as a so-called plague column, and was therefore an expression of thankfulness, in this case rather personal, of the Gallas manorial governor Karl Christian Platz of Ehrenthal (1663–1722) for surviving the danger of the Black Death, which had beset the Czech lands three times during the governor's lifetime – in 1680, 1694 and 1713. It used to be customary to express gratitude to the patron saints by building various monuments – wayside shrines, churches, chapels or altars, dedicated mainly to the Virgin Mary, but also to other patrons who were believed to give protection against the plague. Plague columns, however, were a relatively new form in this respect. In the Czech lands, columns were erected from the mid-17th century, most of them after the plague of 1680 and especially 1713. As a rule, they were given places of honor in town squares, in full view of all locals and visitors. This was also the case of the Marian Column in Liberec.



The Marian Column in its original location in the former Novoměstské Square. The column stood in this central location from its erection in 1719 until its transfer in 1877. Depiction before 1870.

## HISTORY

On 3 May 1719, a great celebration took place on Novoměstské, today's Sokolovské Square. It was attended by the town leaders, church representatives, manorial and imperial officials; the poor were given alms, noble lords threw money among the watching youth, and a bricklayer's journeyman was given three lashes to commemorate the occasion. On that day, the foundation stone of a new monument was laid in the square: a column dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the most powerful protector against the plague. Its construction and erection was commissioned from the most prominent sculpture workshop in Bohemia, the Braun workshop, by the manorial governor, not only to express his gratitude for God's favor, but also to confirm the magnificence of his donation and his own eminence. The consecration



The column was originally located in Novoměstské Square, along with the Chapel of the Holy Sepulcher seen in the background of the 1860s depiction. The chapel can now also be found in the garden of the Church of the Finding of the True Cross.

of the Column, which took place a year later, on 16 May 1720, was a magnificent spectacle which only confirmed that Liberec had acquired a monument of a quality and form never before seen in the region.

Karl Christian Platz, however, did not enjoy the sight of his tribute to the Heavens for long. He died on 5 August 1722, but he remembered the Column in his will. He bequeathed 300 guildens for its maintenance and ordered that its lamp be lit every Wednesday, Friday and on all Marian feasts, and that devotionals be held at the Column every Wednesday evening. However, the founder was not the only one who had the monument's welfare at heart. People quickly accepted the Column as both a meeting place and a devotional site, as well as a pilgrimage destination. The townspeople organized frequent collections to contribute to its

upkeep, and repair works are recorded in the town accounts. In addition to many minor alterations, the monument had undergone several extensive renovations. In 1830, August Felgenhauer gilded the Column's statues for the first time. However, the monument underwent a much more significant change in 1877 and 1878, when it was not only repaired under the direction of the Liberec sculptor Josef F. Elstner, but also moved from its original site on Novoměstské Square to the garden of the nearby Church of the Finding of the True Cross.

The transfer itself was preceded by a rather extensive discussion. The city and church authorities had first planned to move the monument as early as 1875. They argued that it was located in an area where markets were held, which meant that the Column was often used as a storage place for goods, and that it was an obstacle to traffic and did not enjoy the respect it deserved. No more liturgies were held there and it even had to be fenced off for morality reasons. Opponents of the move invoked its historical and religious significance, as well as its importance for the townspeople, and tried to refute the above reasons, but failed. The main reason seems to be the fact that the Baroque monument no longer suited the contemporary taste; its artistic value was repeatedly denied, and its relocation to an allegedly more reverent place, protected from all the hustle and bustle of the streets, seemed more like a pretext for hiding it from public view.

The Column was finally transferred in the autumn of 1877. Shortly afterwards, however, voices emerged calling for its return to the original location. In 1900, a budget was even drawn up for the Column's return to the then Bismarck Square. In the new location, however, nothing threatened the column and the place seemed dignified enough. In the end, the monument remained in the church garden for good. In the next century, renewed acceptance of the Baroque style meant that the Column was both given recognition for its artistic qualities, but also received more or less successful repairs. In 1909, the base of the column was stripped of the linseed oil coating which it had borne since 1878. Linseed oil was entirely unsuitable for sandstone, but was unfortunately in common use in the 19th century. In 1937, the column underwent extensive renovation, this time under the supervision of the State Heritage Office. However, the works carried out by Josef Senze from Liberec, as well as the previous interventions, were viewed very critically and were found lacking both in execution and expertise.



Column with the statues of the Virgin Mary and the Saints in the garden of the Church of the Finding of the True Cross. One of the Stations of the Cross is visible in the background. Photo from around 1930.

The State Heritage Office demanded a remedy; unfortunately, sources do not reveal whether the demand was fulfilled and to what extent. What is certain, however, is that the Marian Column underwent another significant renovation in 1972, carried out by sculptors Radko Plachta, Mojmír Preclík and Jiří Rada. At the time, the monument was in a very poor condition. The statues of the saints were damaged, the head of the Virgin Mary had a deep crack, St. John of Nepomuk was missing parts of the cross, St. Florian and St. Roch lost their fingers, and St.

Sebastian no longer had a nose. Other defects were also evident: the original putty had worn away and the outlines of the statues were partially covered by unsuitable paint. However, the structure of the column, made of poor quality stone, was in much worse condition. The damage was caused by significant weathering of the material, which the previous unsuitable paint treatments made even worse. Embossed elements and cornices were already largely missing or had fallen off during attempts to clean the monument. The appointed restorers were successful in returning the monument to its original shape and beauty. Due to a lack of regular maintenance, however, the Column had once again fallen into disrepair. It was only 46 years later, in 2018, that the Column was completely restored again.

The body of the pillar was again in a particularly poor condition, covered in black crusts that accelerated the erosion process. Large areas of the stone material were powdering and falling off, the sandstone suffered deep fissures and cracks, and the older sealants had long stopped fulfilling their purpose. Fortunately, the sculptures, made from very high quality stone, survived in much better condition. The problem was a crack in the plinth of the statue of St. Sebastian, which threatened to cause the statue's collapse. During the restoration work, another large crack was discovered in the base of the statue of St. Roch. The remaining defects discovered were rather minor: St. Roch lost his thumb; St. John was missing his halo; the snake lost its venomous fangs; some additions from previous restorations were found to be unsuitable; the gilding of the statues had been washed away; and the crack in the head of the Virgin Mary had reopened.

Restorer Radomil Šolc undertook the task to repair the Column, and carried out the work in two stages. The overall restoration was carried out in 2018, and the statue of St. Roch was structurally reinforced in 2019. During the restoration work, all the above mentioned defects were corrected. Fortunately, the excessively weathered stone material only required minimal replacement, and further replacements only involved accessories that were not an original part of the monument. The entire Column has been cleaned, the eroded stone material has been thoroughly reinforced, and the additions and cracks are now secured with stainless steel pins and fittings. The illegible inscriptions on the Column and the gilding of the saint's robes and emblems have been restored. In the garden of the Church of the Finding of the True Cross, now open to the public, the Baroque monument is finally shining in all its glory once again.