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## Copper mirror : Prague copper engraver Jan Jiří Balzer (1736–1799) in light of his will and testament and estate inventory

### ANNOTATION

This study devoted to the prominent Prague copperplate engraver Jan Jiří Balzer (\* 1736 – † 1799) is based on newly discovered evidence published here for the first time – his will and estate inventory. These and other documents, mentioned here, provide new and more detailed information that adds to the mosaic of the artist's life. This material mainly offers an insight into the operational and production processes of Prague's most important copper engraving and printing workshop in the second half of the 18th century. At the same time, the new evidence enables not only to “map” Balzer's social and professional contacts at the end of the 18th century, but also reflects his entrepreneurial skills.

### SUMMARY

The study focuses on the figure of Jan Jiří Balzer (Johann Georg Balzer, \* 1736 – † 1799), a prominent copper engraver and publisher in Prague during the Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century. The primary sources were newly discovered or rediscovered documents – Balzer's will and probate inventory – supplemented by research into additional archival materials. Examining and interpreting these documents has revealed new facts that enrich our existing knowledge of the personal, professional, and social life of one of Prague's leading engravers and copperplate print dealers of his time.

We follow Balzer's apprenticeship under the influence of the court engraver of the aristocratic Špork family, Michael Heinrich Rentz, his experience abroad, the beginnings of his own business in Lysá nad Labem, and his subsequent establishment in Prague during the Theresian and Josephinian eras. There he founded a copper-engraving workshop – in the Old Town's Týn Court (Ungelt) – in which he employed his younger brothers Matyáš (Matthias) and Řehoř (Gregor). The sources clearly reveal the artist's effort to ensure continuity of the engraving craft within the family, namely through his more talented son Antonín Karel. However, fate ultimately prevented this from happening. The will provides insight into the family and property circumstances of the broader Balzer household and into his attempt to secure his heirs – mostly female. His ownership or co-ownership of several houses (in today's Rybná and Husova streets, where he ran his shop) and the list of active claims held as a creditor suggest that J. J. Balzer belonged to the wealthier strata of Prague society.

However, his solid financial background may have been threatened by the loss of his trade license, which Balzer faced at least twice for circulating inappropriate reproductive prints responding to the foreign-political situation in France (the 1789 Revolution) and Poland (the 1794 uprising). In the end, he was punished “only” by the confiscation of the incriminated plates.

The text, in the context of the Theresian and Josephinian eras and cultural development, maps Balzer's social-professional connections, primarily in Prague's Old Town, in the form of a “network”. Most noteworthy among these are his contacts with the painters Johann Quirin Jahn, Johann Thomas Kleinhardt, and possibly Norbert Grund; with the historian Franz Martin Pelcl (Pelzel); with fellow engravers Jan Berka, František Kuhn, and Antonín Hoffmann; and with the publisher Johann Nepomuk Ferdinand von Schönfeld, as well as with other publishing houses and printing offices clustered around the Klementinum. Other significant connections include those with the entrepreneurial Ringhoffer family, particularly its founder Franz Ringhoffer, and with the art dealer Bernard Pompeius Bolzano, father of the philosopher Bernard Bolzano.

The analysis of the inventory yielded several unique pieces of information about the operation of the engraving and copperplate-printing workshop: at the end of his life, Balzer operated four copperplate printing presses staffed by fifteen employees. Balzer's enterprise can thus be described as a small manufactory. The sources also highlight the engraver's necessary collaboration with paper merchants and other trades such as pharmacists or druggists. The terminology used to denote the size of printing plates corresponds to that commonly used in letterpress printing,

which suggests a transfer of knowledge between the fields.

Specialist literature refers to the vast diversity of Balzer's production, both in book illustration and reproductive printmaking. A large number of templates (plates, matrices) were also found in Balzer's workshop and shop during the recording for the probate inventory. Although most items on the list of copperplate printing plates (matrices) are described only generally, some have been successfully linked to existing prints and book titles. Foremost among them are the plates created after works by the painter Norbert Grund, numbering 266 pieces. Other notable items include works by his son Antonín Karel Balzer: the *Krkonoše Cycle* and the so-called *Karlsbaader Prospekten*. The meaning of the entry "Englische Bilder" remains unclear – it may refer either to engravings after English models or to engravings executed in the aquatint technique, in which Antonín excelled. Naturally, there are pattern books of drawings by Balzer's friends Johann Quirin Jahn and Johann Kleinhardt, as well as – most likely – a large set of 90 portrait plates of figures from Bohemian and Moravian history based on drawings and paintings for the monumental work by M. A. Voigt and F. M. Pelcl, *Abbildungen böhmischer und mährischer Gelehrten und Künstler*, which J. J. Balzer also published independently. This work represents an important contribution to the history of education and art in the Czech lands, and Balzer's engraved portraits included in it remain among the finest and still frequently reproduced images to this day.

**Fig. 1.** Jan Jiří Balzer, 1775: Michael Heinrich Rentz. Copperplate engraving, originally printed in the second volumes of Voigt's *Effigies* (Voigt 1775, between pp. 134 and 135) and Pelcl's *Abbildungen* (1775, between pp. 146 and 147, see Pelcl 1773–1782), subsequently under no. 52 in Balzer's editions of 87 portraits (Balzer 1782a; 1782b). In the inscription below the portrait, the pupil acknowledged his teacher: "Gegraben von seinem Schüller J. Balzer K. K. Privile. Kupferstech. in Prag".

**Fig. 2.** Leopold Peukert / Jan Jiří Balzer, 1794: Prague from Strahov Monastery. Sheet from a collection of 24 views of Prague and its surroundings, entitled '*Prospect*', engraved and published by Jan Jiří Balzer based on designs by Josef Antonín Scotti de Cassano and Leopold Peukert. Coloured copperplate engraving, 317 × 430 mm (© Prague City Archives, Graphic Arts Collection, Vedute, sign. G 210 a).

**Fig. 3.** Franz Leonard Herget / Karl Lutz / Johannes Oppelt, shortly before 1791: *Grundris der Kay. König. Hauptstadt Prag im Königreich Böhmen unter [...] Leopold des II.* Coloured manuscript, 2,780 × 2,290 mm, scale 1 : 1,728 (Prague City Archives, Collection of Maps and Plans, ref. MAP P 1 B/1). A section of Prague's Old Town showing residences of Jan Jiří Balzer's family and relatives, his friends, professional colleagues, business partners, and some other contacts.

**Fig. 4.** Josef Antonín Scotti de Cassano / Jan Jiří Balzer, around 1782: View of Křižovnická Street, Křižovnické Square with St. Francis Seraph Church, and the western façade of Clementinum with Holy Saviour Church on the right. Sheet with a dedication to Count František Josef Pachtá from a collection of six different views of Prague entitled '*Ansicht*', engraved and published by Jan Jiří Balzer based on designs by Josef Antonín Scotti de Cassano. Coloured copperplate engraving, 273 × 415 mm (ÚDU AV ČR SGK, sign. G 0253, © Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, v. v. i.).

**Fig. 5.** Leopold Peukert / Jan Jiří Balzer, 1794: Upper Malostranské Square with a view of Prague Castle. Sheet from a collection of 24 views of Prague and its surroundings, entitled '*Prospect*', engraved and published by Jan Jiří Balzer based on designs by Josef Antonín Scotti de Cassano and Leopold Peukert. Coloured copperplate engraving, 340 × 430 mm (© Lysice State Castle, sub-collection Mobiliární fond Lysice, inv. no. LS506).

**Fig. 6.** Jan Quirin Jahn / Jan Jiří Balzer, 1782: František Martin Pelcl. Copperplate engraving, frontispiece of the first volume of Pelcl's *Geschichte der Böhmen* (Pelcl 1782).

**Fig. 7.** Graphic sheet *Il faut esperer: que le jeu se finira bientot. L'auteur en Campagne 1789*, apparently imported from France, which Jan Jiří Balzer sold in 1794 as approved by the censors, yet it ended up in his court file (NA ČG-Publ, 1786–1795, sign. 115/376).

**Fig. 8.** Friedrich Bernhard Werner (drawing), shortly before 1737 / Johann Georg Ringlin (engraver) / Martin Engelbrecht (publisher), between 1734 and 1739?: Clam-Gallas Palace. To the right of it is house No. 553, which was home to J. J. Balzer's copperplate engraving shop from 1790. Copperplate engraving from the album Engelbrecht 1734/1739, no. 12 (ÚDU AV ČR SGK, sign. G 03661, © Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, v. v. i.).

**Fig. 9.** Jan Jiří Balzer after Jan Quirin Jahn: *Gelasius Dobner e Scholis Piis*. Signed *J. Q. Jahn ad nat. delineavit. – Joan Balzer sc. Pragae*. **Left** – Copper plate with a portrait of Gelasius Dobner, 107 × 157 mm (Museum of Prague, Historical Collection, inv. no. H 027 451, © Museum of Prague, photo J. Vrabec, 2025); **right** – copperplate engraving (Prague City Archives, Graphic Arts Collection, ref. no. GP 1136).

**Fig. 10.** Jan Jiří Balzer after Jan Tomáš Kleinhardt: Copper plate, cartouche with the alliance coat of arms of the Schlik and Nostitz-Rieneck families, probably from 1781, on the occasion of the wedding of Josef Jindřich Schlick and Marie Filipína, daughter of the leading Enlightenment patriot František Antonín, Count of Nostitz-Rieneck (\* 1725 – † 1794). The plate of the size 901 × 650 mm bears a finger print, probably from the period of its production (Museum of Prague, Historical Subcollection, inv. no. H 022 629, © Museum of Prague, photo J. Vrabec, 2025).

**Fig. 11.** Antonín Karel Balzer: *Silver Spring in the Adršpach Rocks*. A sheet from a series of prospectuses of the Krkonoše Mountains “nach der Natur gezeichnet und geätzt” (Balzer 1794), dedicated to Count František Josef Pachta. Coloured etching, 324 × 424 mm (ÚDU AV ČR SGK, inv. no. G 0173, © Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, v. v. i.).

**Fig. 12.** Antonín Karel Balzer: *Sněžka*. A sheet from a series of prospectuses of the Krkonoše Mountains “nach der Natur gezeichnet und geätzt” (Balzer 1794), dedicated to Count Jan Nepomuk Schaffgotsch. Coloured etching, 324 × 424 mm (ÚDU AV ČR SGK, inv. no. G 0187, © Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, v. v. i.).

**Fig. 13.** Jan Quirin Jahn / Jan Jiří Balzer, 1781: Plates from the figurative drawing pattern book *Zeichenbuch für Künstler und Liebhaber der freyen Handzeichnung* (Jahn 1781, plates VII, IX).

**Fig. 14.** Jan Tomáš Kleinhardt / Jan Jiří Balzer, 1783: Plate from the landscape drawing pattern book *Zeichenbuch für Liebhaber der freyen Landschaftszeichnung* (Kleinhardt 1783, nos. 20, 22, 32).

**Fig. 15.** View of an engraving studio with an overview of technologies from the collection of illustrations for the French Encyclopédie, chap. *Gravure en taille douce*, Pl. I (Diderot/d'Alembert 1767, appendix 152, plate I).

**Fig. 16.** Hand copperplate printing press from the collection of illustrations for the French Encyclopédie, chap. *Imprimerie en taille douce*, Pl. I (Diderot/d'Alembert 1769, appendix 23, plate I).

**Fig. 17.** **Left** – the first page of the will of Jan Jiří Balzer, copperplate engraver, dated 4 December, 1799; **right** – the final page of the will bearing the signatures and seals of the testator and witnesses: Jan Jiří Balzer, Dominik Lebermayer, and Josef Nitsche (AMP MHMP I Judiciale, inv. no. 2794).

**Fig. 18.** **Left** – the first page of Jan Jiří Balzer's inventory, dated 19 March, 1800; **right** – the last page of the estate inventory, bearing the signatures of experts, witnesses, and members of the Balzer family (AMP MHMP I Judiciale, sign. IX/3473).

**Appendix 1.** Genealogy of the Balzer family. The following literature was used to compile the family tree, with information verified in the relevant registers: sine 1872; Podlaha 1916, 34-35, 41, 44, 93; Podlaha 1917, 47-48, 200, 284; Podlaha 1924, 259, 278; Toman 1950, 386; Štefan 2008; Trnka/Štefan 2021. If the information is not provided in this literature, the following registers were used: AMP Sbírka matrik (Collection of registers), sign. ŠT Z8, p. 267; sign. ŠT N25, fol. 110, 151 (p. 115, 152); SOA Praha SbM, sign. M 14-9/5, fol. 122, 142 (p. 281, 239); sign. M 14-9/6, p. 11. Engravers marked in bold.

*Translation by Jana Marešová and Linda Foster*