In the theoretical introduction to a redaction of the Vienna Genesis, Franz Wickhoff discusses fundamental styles of visual art. Taking into consideration heterogeneity of artistic representations, Wickhoff distinguishes three styles (summarizing, emphasizing, and sequential style) and applies them on art, stressing the leading style of a particular epoch.

Each style is defined by two principles: by the number of depicted scenes and by the repetition of characters. The summarizing style (die komplettierende Erzählungsweise) connects two or more scenes of a story while no figure appears more than once. The scenes may be variously arranged. Wickhoff presents this style as the oldest one, used for example in Ancient Greek art. Art (capable to tell a story) then continues in the sequential style (die kontinuierende Erzählungsweise) used for example by Michelangelo and his followers. While the previous style prevented the figure from repeating, the sequential style allows it to reappear in each scene of the picture. This feature is significant when it comes to recognition of art to explicitly represent the story. The third style, which Wickhoff mentions, is the emphasizing style (die distinguierende Erzählungsweise) and it is generally used since the fifteenth century. In opposition to the previous styles, the artistic work in this case consists of only one scene (therefore figures appear only once).
Based on Wickhoff’s typology of styles, the study addresses a variety of artistic approaches to the biblical story of beheading of John the Baptist. On the example of the selected paintings, attention will be paid to manners of depiction, variety of characters, and differences in visual representation of the story.

The old art and the story of the beheading

Among the oldest preserved depictions of the story of beheading of John the Baptist belongs the fresco *Feast of Herod* (1315, fig. 1) by Giotto di Bondone (1266/7–1337). The scene of John’s death is a part of the cycle called *Scenes from the Life of St. John the Baptist*, displayed on the north wall of Peruzzi Chapel in Santa Croce in Flor-

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Fig. 1: Giotto di Bondone, *Feast of Herod*, 1315, fresco. Peruzzi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence; with kind permission of the Web Gallery of Art (www.wga.hu).

1 According to the original story from the Holy Bible, John the Baptist was imprisoned for his criticism of Herodias, Herod’s second and unlawful wife. Because Herod hesitated to solve the situation, Herodias instructed her daughter Salome to dance before Herod, and to ask as a reward the head of John the Baptist.
ence. The final scene of the cycle is set in the hall and adjacent chamber, which means that Giotto links two separated scenes into one artistic space. The head of John the Baptist on the platter, presented to Herod, and passed to Salome, is situated in the centre of the depiction. In the other scene, situated on the right from the main scene, Salome presents the head of the prophet to Herodias. A significant feature of Giotto’s painting is the connection of both scenes: Salome and another character in the background exceed the border between the hall and the chamber. This feature distinguishes the otherwise same painting by Lorenzo Monaco (1370–1425), whose style was influenced by Giotto. Monaco’s painting *The Banquet of Herod* (1387–1388) then presents two scenes strictly separated by the border.

During the fifteenth century the depiction of the scenes and the references to the story are changed. At the same time the designation of paintings (mostly referring to the event which enabled the decapitation) is replaced by the reference to the key figure of the story. Salome, the daughter of Herodias, becomes the crucial character not only in the titles of many artworks, but also when it comes to her position within the paintings: she is literally moved into the middle of paintings where up to now the head of the prophet on the platter was placed.

![Fig. 2: Fra Filippo Lippi, *Herod’s Banquet*, 1452–1465, fresco. Duomo, Prato; with kind permission of the Web Gallery of Art (www.wga.hu).](image-url)
The Renaissance art changed the static Salome into a dancer and made her the only dynamic figure of the depiction. Salome also continued to be the only repetitive figure in depicted scenes, which were no longer separated by a border. Probably the most famous examples of this approach to the story of beheading in Renaissance are the fresco *Herod’s Banquet* (1452–1465, fig. 2) by Fra Filippo Lippi (1406–1469), and especially the painting *Dance of Salome* (1461–1462, fig. 3) by Benozzo Gozzoli (1420–1497). While both works depict Salome performing the dance in the middle of the hall, the remaining figures are represented as spectators. Furthermore, Fra Filippo Lippi emphasizes the central scene by using different shades of colors: the middle (and “titular”) scene of the fresco depicts figures in bright colors. Toward the edges, the tableau fades, dark colors are used, and the contours of objects and figures in the background gradually fade away. Salome is captured in three scenes: while dancing before Herodes (the central scene), receiving the head of John the Baptist (the left scene) and presenting the head to her mother (the right scene). These scenes are arranged in linear order. The pictorial narrative by Benozzo Gozzoli represents another possible relation between scenes, the perspective order. The story is “told” from the central scene (Salome dancing before Herod) and continues in the background (where at first the prophet is beheaded and then his head is presented by Salome to Herodias).

All the above mentioned works consist of more than one scene and capture only one dynamic figure, who also literally moves through the scenes. She then becomes the “bearer of action.” The representation of the story is not always necessarily depicted in multiple scenes. The fresco by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494) in Tornabuoni Maria Novella in Florence titled *Herod’s Banquet* (1486–1490) presents the story as a narrative compression: in the only depicted scene, Salome is still dancing before Herod, while the head of John the Baptist is presented on a platter. Hence, two parts of the story (the opening and the final scenes) are fused into one. Using
Wickhoff’s approach, the fresco could be described as an example of the sequential style.\(^2\)

Another feature, present in most of depictions, is generally characteristic of Renaissance art. This feature might be identified as an absence of historicism. It leads to a significant change of the figure’s appearance, while reflecting the contemporary fashion of a particular region. At the beginning of Italian Renaissance Salome wears simple clothes. Over the time, she is presented with the attention to details (such as different layers of clothes, hats, accessories, lace etc.). Colors, attention to details and richness of representation dominate also in works by other painters from Florence, such as Andrea Solari

\(^2\) The only question lies in the number of depicted scenes, since there is only one (even though two parts of the story are presented).
(1460–1524) and Bernardino Luini (1480/2–1532, fig. 4). The common feature of their paintings depicting Salome is the moment when she received the head of John the Baptist. Luini depicts this particular scene on three paintings; Salome averts her gaze from John’s head in all of them. Solari’s approach to representation of Salome is quite different: his Salome prefigures the succeeding interpretation of the story. Her gaze is directed to John’s head with a silent consent to the events.

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

**Fig. 4:** Bernardino Luini, *Salome*, 1527–1531, tempera on panel. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; with kind permission of the Web Gallery of Art (www.wga.hu).

Since the late Renaissance, the gaze of Salome becomes one of the significant features (in support of the adage that eyes are the windows

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3 In the late Renaissance the paintings of Salome were influenced, among others, by the development in the art of portraiture.
to the soul), especially in the scene of Salome receiving the head. The paintings by Luini and Solari also introduce another innovation: in the picture, other figures accompany Salome with John’s head. As already indicated by the title of many paintings, Salome mostly receives John the Baptist’s head from an executioner who is fully depicted or only his hand with John’s head is reaching out from behind of the scene to place the head on the platter.

In the Renaissance period, the theme of beheading of John the Baptist was represented also in the art of regions of the central and Western Europe (especially in works of Flemish artists). For example, the story was depicted by Rogier van der Weyden (1400–1464), Hans Memling (1430–1494) and Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553). The first two artists depict the story of John the Baptist’s death as a part of altarpieces; in the altarpiece by Hans Memling (St. John Altarpiece, 1479, fig. 5), John’s martyrdom is set in the context of the mystical marriage of St. Catherine (middle part) and the depiction of John the Evangelist (right wing). Rogier van der Weyden focuses on John the Baptist’s life; the altarpiece presents three significant moments of Baptist’s life: the birth, baptism of Jesus Christ and John’s death. Both works differ in the number of depicted scenes accompanying the image of John’s decapitation. Van der Weyden’s Salome is set in the foreground together with an executioner. While she is receiving John’s head, in the background Herod’s feast takes place. This single moment differs in the Memling’s depiction. Even though the spatial order is similar to Memling’s, the other scene contains also Salome.

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4 Most of the paintings until the nineteenth century is titled according the depicted scene. In the case of John’s beheading, the scene is usually called "Salome receiving the head of John the Baptist".

5 A specific feature of the Italian Renaissance is the inadequate depiction of this figure (executioner), in society mostly reflected negatively (as a dishonorable man). The proper symbolic presentation of an executioner contain the painting The Beheading of St. John the Baptist (1515) by Lucas Cranach the Elder. The executioner is recognizable not only because of John’s head in his hand but also according to his clothes (unclothed leg).
Fig. 5: Hans Memling, *St. John Altarpiece (left wing)*, 1474–1479, oil on oak panel. Memling-museum, Sint-Janshospitaal, Bruges; with kind permission of the Web Gallery of Art (www.wga.hu).
Both paintings share the spatial arrangement and the characters are depicted according to the same rules: the absence of historicism emphasizes the attention to detail, since figures are dressed according to the contemporary fashion trends of a higher society. This feature also dominates in paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder, who depicts Salome in various scenes of the story.6

The story of beheading was often depicted in Italy, especially by the Florentine school artists. In the northwest Europe, this particular theme was not frequently represented in arts, and it was preferentially depicted in sacral artefacts such as altarpieces. The pictorial narrative, containing two or more scenes of the story, was successively replaced by a depiction of one significant scene implying the original biblical story.

**The early modern period**

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the depiction of the story of beheading corresponds with the traditional interpretation: Salome dances before Herodes, asks for the head of John the Baptist, receives his head on a platter, and then gives it to her mother Herodias. As of the late Renaissance, the traditional scheme of the representation of John’s beheading begins to change (i.e., Luini, Solari, Cranach). This is visible in the style of depictions: only one scene of the story is emphasized, implying the whole narrative of beheading. The implication of the story closely relates to divergent tendencies in literary adaptations of the story, which culminate at the turn of the nineteenth century.7 Salome is successively presented displaying various amounts of approval as well as opposition to John the Baptist’s

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6 Lucas Cranach the Elder depicted Salome repeatedly while presenting the head of John the Baptist. Most of the paintings are set in a hall or another type of building, the painting *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (1515) differs in the use of space: the scene is captured in an open scenery where Salome receives John’s head, while she is surrounded by a crowd.

7 The traditional form of the biblical story has changed successively. While in the Middle Ages, the variants of the gospel scheme dominated (sinful woman/mother – abused child – unstable king – martyrdom of a holy man), since the early modern period, new inter-
violent death. The divergence of her possible attitude is visibly captured in visual art. The gaze of Salome (mentioned earlier) becomes one of her significant features, and also appears to represent the key to interpretation of the depicted story (now reduced to one iconic scene).

Similarly to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance epoch, artists of the early modern period depict the story of John’s martyrdom repeatedly, sometimes stressing the same scene (Caravaggio), or focusing on various parts of the story (i.e. Rubens, Onorio Marinari, Guido Reni). A significant feature of the discussed paintings is the baroque composition: the figures reach out from the dark background into the light. The chiaroscuro is also the main reason why the distinguishing style dominates in the Baroque epoch: in comparison to the Renaissance’s depictions of John’s death, the chiaroscuro allows representation of only one scene of the story, which consequently ceases to be an explicit pictorial narrative. The depicted scene then stands literally in the spotlight of artist’s attention.

Among the well-known renditions of the discussed story belong for example paintings by Caravaggio, Guido Reni, Rubens, Caracciolo and Carlo Dolci. During the early modern period, two scenes of the story were stressed the most: Salome receiving the head of John the Baptist and Salome holding John’s head on a platter.

The “Salome receiving the head” type of depiction is significant of the number of depicted figures. On contrary to the old art, beside the executioner and Salome, there are other figures in the background, who witness to the martyr’s death. The compositional principles of the accompanying figures vary: one or more figures may be represented; they are caught in the moment of reaction to John’s

pretations of the story appeared. Especially the character of the young dancer underwent a distinctive change. Salome is no longer described as an innocent (or naive) child, in the nineteenth century she even becomes "the goddess of decadence", the true femme fatale.

8 The depiction of Salome and of the story of John the Baptist’s death is not limited to baroque art. The aim of the following analyses is to highlight the capability to imply the story through the dancer’s gaze which is common to the non-baroque paintings as well.
death. Some of the accompanying characters are praying (Caravaggio, 1609–1610, fig. 6), or they simply observe the head on the platter, others examine Salome’s reaction. The daughter of Herodias always stands on the side of the picture, and holds a platter where the executioner puts John the Baptist’s head. Above mentioned gaze of the dancer then implies the storyline: in accordance to the biblical story, Salome averts her gaze from the head on the platter. This type of depiction, implying that Salome was pushed or manipulated to dance for John’s head,9 stands in contrary to the images of Salome staring (sometimes even smiling) at John’s head (i.e. Guido Reni, Onorio Marinari). The third and very specific direction of Salome’s gaze is *en face*. As an example of this depiction is Caracciolo’s *Salome* (1615–1620, fig. 7), which might be interpreted as attempting to persuade her observer to judge her actions.

Similar types of gaze may be found in another frequently depicted scene in this period. The “Salome holding the head” type represents the following scene of the story. In the center of attention is Salome with John’s head on a platter. Many artists (i.e. Guido Reni, Onorio Marinari) depict both scenes; worthy of attention is interpretation of Salome’s gaze: while receiving the head, Salome looks straight at the head. On the contrary, the painting presenting Salome with the head on a platter, the figure is facing the potential observer. Besides two mentioned scenes, the moment when Salome presents the head to Herod and Herodias can also be found.10

These three scenes, significant for the early modern period, probably never contain the scene so common (and also iconic) for the former art: the dance of Salome before Herod.

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9 The interpretation of Salome as a child or young adult who was pushed by her mother Herodias to be the part of the crime on the holy man, is the oldest possible approach to the story. This interpretation, originated in the Holy Bible, continued through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, especially in legends (i.e. *Legenda aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine) and it represented one of the branches of the interpretation of the story of beheading in the nineteenth century.

10 The representative of the “presenting” scene is the painting entitled *The Feast of Herod* (1633) by Rubens (1577–1640). Opulent representation of Salome in the baroque style is supported by other figures, captured during their reaction to John’s death.
The nineteenth century

During the nineteenth century the change of Salome’s influence in the story of beheading is recognizable. By the end of the century, she becomes the iconic character, by some researchers even called “the goddess of decadence”.11

While the older literature keeps the interpretation of Salome close to that of the Gospels, the nineteenth century introduces Salome in various images. Besides the traditional image of an abused child, she was newly described as a secret Christian (Heywood 1862, 1867), a fragile woman (Rich 1831), a fille fatale (Flaubert 1877) and a femme

11 Showalter 2009, 149.
fatale (Wilde 1893). In the literary production Salome was introduced in many variations, emphasizing her significance as a woman obsessed with different desires.

The variety of approaches to the story of beheading appears also in visual art. In the previous part of the study the main trends of depicting significant scenes implying the story were introduced. The gaze of Salome, capable to diversify possible interpretations of the dancer, was a preliminary step toward the nineteenth century representations. A similar composition found in the paintings of the old masters was exchanged for a variety of compositional principles, while allowing the presentation of the story through a subjective artistic point of view.

Fig. 9: Lovis Corinth, *Salome*, 1900, oil on canvas. Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig; <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lovis_Corinth_Salome_1900.jpg> (20.04.2015).
Fig. 10: Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition*, 1876, watercolor. Musée du Louvre, Paris; <www.the-athenaeum.org> (20.04.2015).
It is possible to recognize two main trends in the depiction of Salome. The first artistic approach follows the trend of the old art: Salome is captured in one of the scenes of the story. On the contrary, scenes are not unified by their composition. When Caravaggio, Caracciolo and Marinari depicted the scene of Salome receiving John’s head, the composition of elements in the painting was nearly the same. Art of the nineteenth century introduced subjective approach to the story, which was also strongly influenced by the new artistic movements. The story of beheading, originating in the Orient (Middle East), is now linked to this geographical space via motifs, which are associated with this area as imagined by western society.

James Tissot (1836–1902) introduces the dance of Salome (*The Daughter of Herodias Dancing*, 1886–1896, fig. 8) as a picture originating in what is supposed to represent the eastern milieu, Lovis Corinth (1858–1925) connects his *Salome* (1900, fig. 9) with selected motifs of this area (i.e. flowers, peacock feathers, nudity). Tissot’s and Corinth’s works continue in the line of the old art: the story is implied through one specific scene.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Gustave Moreau (1826–1898) introduces the biblical story in the cycle of at least ten studies and paintings depicting various parts of the story. Among them the most famous depictions are *Salome Dancing before Herodes* (1874–1876) and *The Apparition* (1876, fig. 10) both thematizing the dance of Salome (its beginning and the end). The explicit connection between these depictions described Joris Karl Huysmans (1848–1907) through Des Esseintes, the main character of his book *Against the Grain* (1884). The attention is paid especially to Salome and to her change during the dance:

Like the old King, Des Esseintes was overhelmed, over mastered, dizzied before this figure of the dancing girl, less majestic, less imposing, but more ensnaring to the senses than the Salomé of the oil painting.

In the callous and pitiless statue, in the innocent and deadly idol, the emotion, the terror of the human being had dawned; the great lotus flower had disappeared, the goddess vanished; an atrocious nightmare now gripped the throat of mime, intoxicated by the whirl of the dance, of the courtesan, petrified, hypnotized by terror.

In this, she was altogether feminine, obedient to her temperament of a passionate, cruel woman; she was active and alive, more refined and yet more savage, more
hateful and yet more exquisite; she was shown awakening more powerfully the sleeping passions of man; bewitching, subjugating more surely his will, with her unholy charm as of a great flower of concupiscence, born of a sacrilegious birth, reared in a hothouse of impiety.\(^{12}\)

Des Esseintes’s description and interpretation of Salome, including the influence of her transformation on him, show the figure as an example of contemporary approach to women in art.\(^{13}\)

The other artistic trend in the depiction of Salome pays attention strictly to the dancer. The implication of the story is no longer necessary; the depictions of Salome introduce this character as an archetype of a woman. She is often represented while waiting for John’s head, with a platter in her hands. The daring gaze and strong, self-confident look was described on the example of *Salome* (1890) by Ella Ferris Pell (1846–1922) by Bram Dijkstra:

> In Pell’s painting a number of the most characteristic turn-of-the-century attributes of the biblical temptress are absent. She does not glare at us with a look of crazed sexual hunger; she does not have the wan, vampire features of the serpentine dancer; nor does she show herself to be a tubercular adolescent. Instead, she is a woman of flesh and blood. […] Pell’s Salome, a real life-woman, independent, confident, and assertive, was far more threatening, far more a visual declaration of defiance against the canons of male dominance than any of the celebrated viragoes and vampires created by turn-of-the-century intellectuals could ever have been.\(^{14}\)

Similar approaches to Salome were used in the end of the nineteenth century by Henry Regnault (1843–1871), Alphons Mucha (1860–1939) and for example Leopold Schmutzler (1864–1940), Salome becomes in their paintings the true femme fatale.

\(^{12}\) Huysmans 1931, 78.

\(^{13}\) In opposition to the trends in the Western society, art depicted women in their full power, mostly referring to their powerful position in the society. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the differences and similarities between contemporary women and their artistic depictions were introduced in a number of monographs, for example *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siecle Culture* (1986) by Bram Dijkstra and *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (1990) by Elaine Showalter.

\(^{14}\) Dijkstra 1986, 392.
In lieu of the conclusion

Since the Middle Ages the artistic depiction of the story of beheading of John the Baptist has seen significant changes, which may be interpreted on the background of Franz Wickhoff’s typology of artistic styles. The oldest preserved artistic works depicting this story were created in the early fourteenth century in Italy. Many Florentine School artists chose this theme and created frescoes and paintings, mostly stressing and connecting two or three scenes of the story. These pictorial narratives are significant for their capability to explicitly “tell” the story. Salome became nearly the only dynamic figure depicted by the paintings. Beside her depiction while performing the dance before Herod, she was also the figure that remains present in other particular scenes. The summarizing and the sequential style that prevailed in the art of Italian Renaissance also appeared on sacral artefacts in other regions of Europe, especially in works of Flemish painters. Toward the fifteenth and the sixteenth century, the emphasizing style replaces previous trends, strongly influenced by the development of the portraiture. This change is reflected in the titles of works: in the earliest visual representations of the story, titles refer to decapitation of John the Baptist. For instance, the titles of the oldest frescos and paintings first referred to the feast of Herod, and emphasized John the Baptist’s death later. Afterward, the attention is directed toward a particular scene in which Salome always plays the main role (i.e. the dance of Salome).

The change in the preferred style (and also in the titles of paintings) continues in the early modern period. Salome is depicted while receiving John’s head or holding the head on a platter. It is mostly only through one of these two particular scenes that the story of beheading is implicitly told. Furthermore, her gaze becomes the significant key for interpretation of her actions.

In the nineteenth century, Salome is a frequent character in literature and arts. Along with the continuity of previous trends, Salome is closely connected to the area where the original story took place. In this period, Orientalism strongly influenced representation of Salome, bringing in the prejudices of the Western society towards the
female character and the theme, which is visible in the artistic choice of motifs (i. e. specific depiction of space, animals and flower, and female nudity). Toward the end of the century, the approach to the story and to Salome in particular changed: the emphasis was no longer directed toward the implication of the story; Salome is depicted as a strong woman, dangerous for men. This trend is manifested also in the titles of paintings, focusing on the key figure rather than on the story of beheading.

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