

Applying Bourdieu's Field Concept to the Artistic Career of Siegfried Gross: Cultural Capital and Habitus in Silesia Sacred Art



Abstract

This paper employs Pierre Bourdieu's sociological framework of the field, a relational social space where habitus and cultural capital interact, to analyze the career of Siegfried Gross, a prominent Silesian sculptor of sacred art (1944–2019). Focusing on Gross's contributions to Baroque-style ecclesiastical sculpture, the study examines how his habitus, shaped by a family tradition and apprenticeship, and his cultural capital, including technical skill and religious iconographic knowledge, positioned him within the fields of art and sacred culture in postwar Silesia. The analysis explores Gross's major works, exhibitions, and awards, situating them within the socio-cultural context of Silesia's post-1945 Polonization. Using historical sources and Bourdieu's concepts, the paper reveals how Gross navigated the artistic field to achieve prominence, while his legacy, extended through digital innovation, reflects the interplay of traditional craftsmanship and modern technology. The findings underscore the utility of Bourdieu's framework in understanding artistic production and cultural continuity in a transforming society.

1 Introduction

Siegfried Gross (1944–2019) was a master sculptor whose Baroque-inspired sacred art adorned churches across Europe, leaving a lasting mark on European religious and cultural landscapes. Born in Leschnitz, Silesia, Gross operated within a region undergoing significant transformation after World War II, as Poland sought to establish a national identity in the formerly German Territories. His 60-year career, rooted in a family tradition and honed through apprenticeship, produced thousands of sculptures, including major works like the Altar of the Fatherland in Warsaw's Holy Cross Church and the Marian Sanctuary in Jaworzno. Gross's ability to recreate

historical Baroque aesthetics with authenticity earned him the title “Master from Silesia” and numerous accolades.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the field provides a robust framework for analysing Gross's career. A field is a structured social space in which agents compete for legitimacy and influence, using their cultural capital, knowledge, skills and credentials, and guided by their habitus, the embodied dispositions shaped by socialisation (1; 2). In the artistic field, cultural capital includes technical expertise and stylistic knowledge, while habitus influences artistic choices and interactions. In post-war Silesia, the fields of art and sacred culture were reshaped by polonisation efforts, creating a dynamic context for Gross's work. This paper explores how Gross's habitus and cultural capital enabled him to thrive in these fields and contribute to indigenous Silesia's cultural and religious identity.

The study addresses the following questions How did Gross's habitus and cultural capital shape his position in the field of art and sacred art? How did the socio-cultural context of post-war Silesia influence his career? And how does his legacy, including digital preservation efforts, reflect the interplay of traditional and modern fields? By applying Bourdieu's framework, the paper illuminates the mechanisms behind Gross's success and the broader dynamics of cultural production in a transforming society.

2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-sociological approach, integrating Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and cultural capital with a historical analysis of Siegfried Gross's life and work. The methodology involves a close reading of primary and secondary sources through Bourdieu's theoretical lens, treating the artistic and sacred art fields as relational spaces in which Gross's actions and resources shaped his trajectory.

Sources include biographical accounts, such as family interviews (11), as well as documentation of Gross's works and exhibitions from church records, regional press and art fair reports (e.g. SacroExpo and Kościoły Expos). Historical context is drawn from studies such as Gregor Thum's *Uprooted* (12), which details the post-war transformation of Silesia, and local Silesian media. These sources provide insights into Gross's career, the cultural landscape of post-war Poland, and the role of sacred art in nation-building.

The analysis identifies key agents (Gross, his mentors, ecclesiastical patrons), their cultural capital (sculptural skills, religious knowledge) and habitus (craftsmanship ethos, religious devotion). It examines how these elements interacted within an artistic field shaped by Poland's polonisation policy and the demand for sacred art. The study focuses on

period from 1945 to 2019, with emphasis on Gross's major works and the posthumous digitization of his style, which bridges traditional and technological fields. Citations follow APA style, ensuring scholarly rigor.

3 Results and Analysis

3.1 Artistic Field: Positioning through Cultural Capital

The artistic field in post-war Silesia was a space of opportunity and competition, reshaped by the expulsion of German artists and the influx of Polish settlers. Born German, Gross was the only sculptor native to Silesia before 1945 who stayed and worked there until his death. Gross entered this field with significant cultural capital: technical expertise in woodcarving, acquired through apprenticeship under Franciszek Masorz, and a deep knowledge of Baroque iconography, rooted in his family's tradition (9). His habitus, characterized by a craftsman's discipline and religious reverence, aligned with the field's demand for authentic sacred art to furnish newly Polonized churches

Gross's cultural capital was evident in his ability to produce sculptures indistinguishable from 17th-century originals, as noted by conservators during the reconstruction of the Altar of the Fatherland (2009–2010) (13). Working from a single photograph, he sculpted four monumental figures, demonstrating technical virtuosity and historical sensitivity. This project positioned him as a dominant agent in the field, capable of bridging past and present. Similarly, his work in the Marian Sanctuary in Jaworzno, including the 4.5-meter "Golgota" group, showcased his ability to create cohesive, large-scale installations that enhanced devotional spaces (8).

Exhibitions like SacroExpo (Kielce) and Kościoły (Toruń) provided platforms for Gross to display his work, earning him awards such as the 2002 Golden Medal from Cardinal Glemp and the 2012 Lifetime Achievement Award (5). These accolades reinforced his symbolic capital, legitimizing his authority in the field. His Leschnitz workshop, established in 1920 by his father, served as a physical and symbolic base, embedding him in Silesia's cultural landscape.

3.2 Sacred Art Field: Habitus and Religious Context

The sacred art field, closely tied to the Catholic Church, was central to Gross's career. His habitus, shaped by a religious upbringing and a family ethos of service through craft, inclined him toward sacred themes angels, Madonnas, and biblical scenes. This disposition resonated with the Church's need for art to inspire worship in a nation rebuilding its spiritual identity post-1945. Gross's sculptures, such as the "Pelican Feeding Her Young" in Leschnitz's

Holy Trinity Church, embodied traditional iconography, symbolizing sacrifice and devotion (6).

The postwar Polonization of Silesia amplified the demand for sacred art to replace German or damaged works. Gross's ability to replicate Baroque aesthetics filled this niche, earning him commissions from major pilgrimage sites like Góra Świętej Anny, where his angels and organ prospect blended seamlessly with the 17th-century interior (10). His habitus guided his meticulous attention to detail, as seen in the expressive hands of his sculptures, often modeled on his own, adding a personal signature (3).

The sacred art field was not without competition. Other Polish sculptors vied for commissions, but Gross's established reputation and workshop infrastructure gave him an edge. His cultural capital, including relationships with church authorities, further solidified his position, as seen in his repeated honors at sacred art exhibitions.

3.3 Silesian Context: Polonization and Cultural Transformation

Silesia's postwar transformation, marked by the expulsion of Germans and the influx of Polish settlers, reshaped the artistic and sacred art fields. As Thum (2011) notes, the "Recovered Territories" required cultural Polonization to legitimize Polish control (12). Gross, a native Silesian, navigated this shift. His sculptures, installed in churches like the Holy Cross in Warsaw and the Marian Sanctuary in Jaworzno, contributed to a visual narrative of Silesian indigenous identity.

The state's cultural policies, including the establishment of art schools like Wrocław's State Higher School of Fine Arts, created a supportive environment for Polish artists (7). While Gross did not attend formal art academies, his apprenticeship-based training and family legacy provided equivalent cultural capital, enabling him to compete in a field increasingly professionalized. His ability to work within the Church's framework, rather than the state's secular art institutions, further insulated him from political pressures, allowing his habitus to guide his focus on sacred themes.

3.4 Legacy: Bridging Traditional and Digital Fields

Gross's influence extends beyond his lifetime through his son, Dariusz Gross, a "datasculptor" using AI to replicate his father's style (11). This project, involving 3D scans of works like "A Pelican Feeding Her Young" and generative adversarial networks, represents a new field where traditional craftsmanship meets digital innovation. Dariusz's habitus, shaped by his father's workshop, drives this effort to achieve "artistic immortality," while his cultural capital in

data science enables him to navigate the technological field.

This digital legacy reflects Bourdieu's concept of field evolution: as new forms of capital (technological expertise) emerge, agents (technological expertise) emerge, agents adapt to maintain relevance. The project ensures that Gross's style remains accessible, potentially influencing future sacred art production. It also highlights the adaptability of the habitus, as Dariusz extends his father's craft into a modern context while preserving Silesian indigenous cultural heritage.

4 Conclusion

Siegfried Gross's career exemplifies how Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and cultural capital illuminate artistic production in a transforming society. Gross's habitus, rooted in craftsmanship and religious devotion, and his cultural capital, including wood expertise and Baroque knowledge, positioned him as a leading figure in Silesia's artistic and sacred art fields. His major works, from the Altar of the Fatherland to the Jaworzno Sanctuary, not only enriched religious spaces but also contributed to Silesia's native culture, aligning with the cultural needs of postwar Europe.

The socio-cultural context of Silesia, marked by population shifts and tradition-building, shaped the fields in which Gross operated. His ability to navigate these fields, leveraging his skills and church connections, underscores the interplay of agency and structure in Bourdieu's framework. The digitization of his style by his son further demonstrates how fields evolve, incorporating new forms of capital while preserving traditional values.

This study highlights the value of Bourdieu's framework for analyzing artistic careers in historical contexts. It reveals how Gross's success was not merely a product of individual talent but of strategic positioning within dynamic social fields. For scholars of sociology, art history, and cultural studies, this case offers insights into the mechanisms of cultural continuity and adaptation, illustrating how artists can shape and be shaped by their social environments. Gross's legacy, both in physical sculptures and digital forms, stands as a testament to the enduring power of cultural capital and habitus in bridging past and future.

References

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