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THE GOBELIN PORTRAIT
OF KING JOHN III SOBIESKI, ITS PRESERVATION
AND NEW SUGGESTIONS AS TO THE TIME
OF ITS CREATION

Among many objects displayed during the jubilee exhibition organised in Wilanów in the year 1983 on the 300 years anniversary of Vienna battle there was a small Gobelin (tapestry) portrait of king John III Sobieski (Fig. 49, 50). Although it was mentioned in the big catalogue of the exhibition, we decided that it deserves more detailed research because of its high artistic standard and because this type of works of art is very unique.

The portrait was mentioned for the first time in the treatise about Gobelins by J. Pagaczewski, who connected it with the workshop of Francois Glaize who had worked in Poland in 18th century. The same information was given in the publication "Polish tapestries and embroideries" by T. Mańkowski in the year 1954. However, it was the above mentioned catalogue of the jubilee exhibition in the year 1983, that gave the detailed description of the portrait.

The oval portrait sized 30 x 24,5 cm shows the bust of the king (turned three quarters to the right) dressed in an armour and the Polish nobleman's fur lined coat with the Order of the Holy Ghost sash underneath. The portrait is made of very delicate wool and silk with Gobelin technique. Jagged edges fastened during the preservation work prove that it must have been cut out of some bigger picture. Pagaczewski had already suggested that the portrait might have been somewhat bigger and of different size. He also thought that the portrait was ordered by king Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski.

The portrait was, indeed, mentioned in the year 1795 inventory of the Royal Castle in Warsaw with a note "old".

Pagaczewski's suggestions concerning the date, the initiator of this work and the information that the portrait was woven from Stephani's engraving rise some doubts.

Impairing the data given by such an outstanding authority as Pagaczewski was possible thanks to three exhibitions (at Wawel Castle, at Warsaw Royal Castle and at Wilanów) organised on the 300 years anniversary of Vienna victory. There were many objects connected with king John III from 17th up to 20th century. Seeing many of them for the first time enabled us to get a new approach to the portrait. The detailed analysis of the object as well as the source and comparative materials make it possible to form new suggestions concerning the portrait.

As we mentioned before, jagged edges prove that the portrait was cut out of the bigger picture. One should look for the original among graphic or painted works which were so numerous after Vienna victory. The portrait is very similar to the sculptor's panel (now at Montresor castle) from Pierre Vaneau monument. The monument was meant as a gloryfication of the Polish king in Le Puy cathedral.

The creation of the portrait can hardly be connected with Stanislaus Augustus, as in the year 1795 it was described as "old". It seems right to suggest that it was made earlier than the second half of 18th century and that it might have been connected with another patron, bishop Andrzej St. K. Załuski, because Glaize made many similar works for him. The portrait of Vienna victor or the bigger picture gloryfying the courage of the Christianity defender were suitable both, in the bishop's private apartment and in the interior of the Polish church in Rome decorated with five antependiums made by Glaize.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to follow the way of the portrait; we do not know when it was brought to Poland and whether it was still a bigger work then or the cut off fragment. All we know is that in the year 1795 in the Warsaw Royal Castle Collection there was the portrait alone in the gilded frame, which probably hid the jagged edges. We do not know either what happened to the portrait in 19th century.

In the year 1925 the portrait was bought from a private person and became the property of the National Art Collection in Warsaw. Now it belongs to the National Museum in Warsaw.

In the years 1978-1979 it was the subject to the preservation work which saved this valuable portrait of king John III from complete destruction.



50. Portrait of John III Sobieski (tapestry), after restauration



49. Portrait of John III Sobieski (tapestry), before restauration