

POLISH PORTRAIT IN THE WILANÓW COLLECTION

The historical collection of painting at Wilanów, one of the oldest and best known in Poland, continues to provoke interest and to encourage further, more penetrating research.

This unique painting gallery came into being thanks mainly to Stanisław Kostka Potocki, a man of versatile interests, a politician, author, art connoisseur and collector. It contains not only a fine collection of European painting but also a unique gallery of Polish portraits, the only one of its kind. The latter bears first and foremost an artistic character and makes it possible to reconstruct the genealogy of the successive owners of Wilanów: the Sobieskis, Sieniawskis, Czartoryskis, Lubomirskis and the Branickis. Thus it was above all an ancestral gallery showing the splendour and antiquity of the family and its significance in the history of the Polish Commonwealth of the gentry (Fig. 32-35).

In our attempts at determining the character of the gallery we sought help from an inventory - one of the many that have survived - which was drawn up in 1877 by the then owner of Wilanów, Aleksandra Potocka. In fact this was the first list of portraits that perfectly corresponded to today's requirements in cataloguing art collections. It contained precise, in most cases, descriptions, sizes and frequently authors of individual paintings and provided comprehensive information on biography and provenance, all of which largely helped us in identifying the sitters.

The genealogical character of this collection faithfully reflected the owners' interest in the family history, the role of its representatives in the national tradition and various blood ties. Therefore the collection was enlarged with pictures coming from various residences of the family, for example Radzyń, Buczacz, Opole Lubelskie and Roś.

This principle applied in selecting individual portraits had a visible bearing on the artistic character of the entire gallery. For in a number of cases the position occupied by the sitter was more important than the talent of the artist. However the majority of the paintings represent a fine artistic level, since they were frequently produced by painters known both in Poland and abroad, such as Jerzy Szymonowicz Siemiginowski, Bartłomiej Strobel, Marcelli Bacciarelli, Kazimierz Wojniakowski, Aleksander Kucharski and, from among foreign artists, Louis Marteau, Pompeo Batoni, Alexander Roslin, Jan Chrzciciel Lampi, Józef Grassi and Jean Louis David.

As the number of pictures kept growing, the portrait gallery became an inseparable part of the history of the nation which towards the end of the 18th century lost its independence. And when threat to national existence proved obvious Stanisław Kostka Potocki opened his collections to the public in 1805.



33. Portrait of Anna Mohylanka. French painter, 17th century



32. Portrait of Stanislaw Rewera Potocki. Unknown painter, 17th century



35. Portrait of Aleksandra Potocka nee Potocka. Painting by E. Dukszta-Dukszyńska, 1887



34. Portrait of August Potocki. Painting by J. Ender (?), c. 1826