

THE MUSEUM RESIDENCE AT WILANÓW:
ITS ORIGIN, HISTORY AND MODERN
ATTITUDE TO TRADITION

In the early 19th century the two first museums were established in Polish territory: at Puławy by Izabela Czartoryska and at Wilanów by Stanisław Kostka Potocki. In accordance with the prevailing contemporary ideas of romanticism propagating the cult of national heroes and patriotism, the Wilanów Museum had been conceived as a sanctuary of the national past, of the cult of the heroic king John III, a monument to the glory of the Polish arms and the king's military successes (Fig. 23). Such a concept of the museum made it close to the romantic idea of the "repository of trophies", which reverted to the ancient custom of collecting and worshipping certain signs and objects performing a national function and keeping them in one "holy place". The Greeks had had their Delphi with its temple of Apollo, while the Romans had the Forum with Via Sacra where triumphal processions were held. The Wilanów palace rose to a similar status in a natural way because in its appearance it reverted to Roman classicism and its symbolic ideas.

In forming his museum Stanisław Kostka Potocki collected, in the central part of the palace, numerous works of art associated with John III, military items, war trophies and mementoes recalling the victorious battle of Vienna under the leadership of the Polish king.

Alongside this romantic thread, there was another one, inspired by the rationalist currents of the Polish Enlightenment. Thus the general public was given access to various works of European art, from antiquity to the 19th century, a gallery of Polish portrait, and collections of Chinese and Japanese art (Fig. 24). All these works were either inherited by Potocki or, frequently, purchased by him in Italy, France, Austria, Switzerland, Britain and Germany.

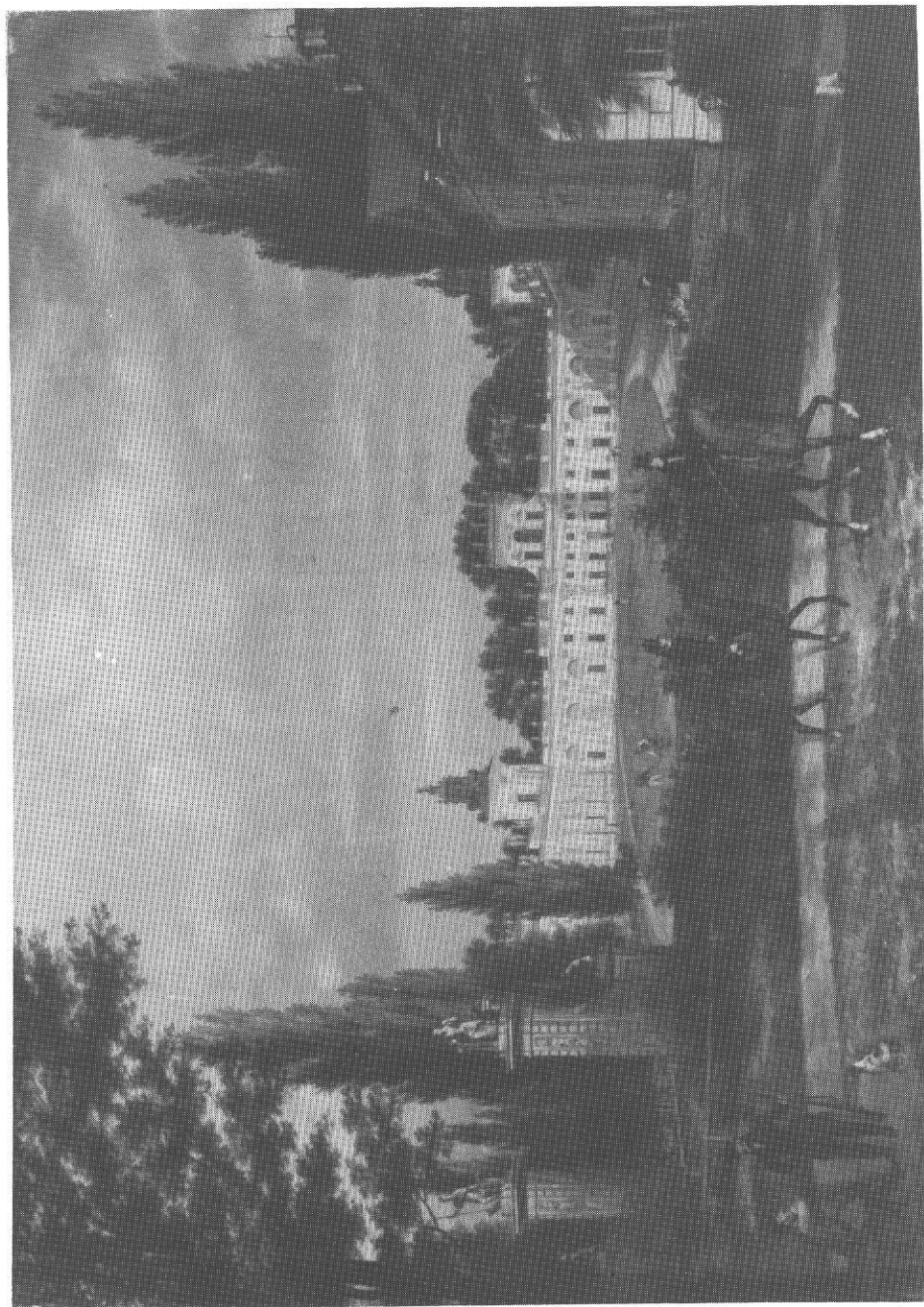
What Stanisław Kostka Potocki started was continued throughout the 19th century by the successive owners of Wilanów who enriched the palace collections with new items of a similar character. In order to display appropriately all these museum pieces, the palace interiors were suitably adapted in accordance with the fashion started by Percier and Fontaine.

During the Second World War the palace collection at Wilanów was plundered by the Nazis, but most of the items have been traced since then and returned to their historical place.

Until 1945 Wilanów was the property of the Branicki family. On 28 April 1945 it was put under state control and turned into a branch of the National Museum in Warsaw.

Following major construction and conservation work carried out in the palace and in the gardens, the Wilanów Museum was furnished in accordance with its long tradition, as a museum residence and at the same time a sanctuary of the national past and a treasury of Polish and world art.

Having adopted the whole wealth of historical and museum tradition Wilanów continues this tradition in a creative way, in keeping with the requirements and possibilities of our times.



23. The Palace of Wilanów from the entrance. Painting by W. Kasprzycki



24. The Palace of Wilanów. Formerly 'Chinese Cabinet' as seen on the photograph by B. Mieczkowski, c. 1911