

THE KING'S DRESSING ROOM

Studies on the Décor of the Palace Interiors at Wilanów

The King's Dressing-room, situated in the garden recess of the palace, is a small quadrangular room with its walls featuring pairs of porte-fenêtres and doors (Fig. 57). Only the stucco work on its ceiling, recalling Abraham Paris's work in the Queen's Mirror Cabinet, remembers the times of John III. The remaining decorative elements date from the period of Augustus II who rented the palace in 1730-1733 and introduced there some alterations.

The author of the decoration in the Dressing-room has been established on the basis of H. Marx's work on the activity of J. S. Mock. Marx quotes the artist's letter in which the latter claimed payment for the work carried out at Wilanów by Poison, Schnell and Rossi. Johann Samuel Mock was probably the author of the design of the décor, and in particular its general idea. The paintings may be ascribed to Lorenzo Rossi, while their framing with mascarons and espagnolettes should be attributed to Martin Schnell, the author of the adjoining Chinese Cabinet. The plafonad is the work of Jules Poison who executed a similar ceiling painting in the Queen's Ante-room. The problem of the two sphinxes in the overdoors has not been solved. Their author was an unknown sculptor from Mock's group, perhaps the same one who sculpted the statues of Hercules in the niches of the southern tower.

The most essential feature in the decoration of the Dressing-room is constituted by eight allegorical wall representations surrounded by grotesque ornaments modelled on the work of J. Bérain, C. F. Audran or D. Marot. Reverting to ancient beliefs and philosophical theories, they show the origins of the world and life, natural phenomena and natural laws, and recurring cycles. The figure that binds all of them together is Eros who performs a cosmogonic part and also serves as a guide introducing us to the secrets of the world being born and presenting the succession of various phenomena taking place.

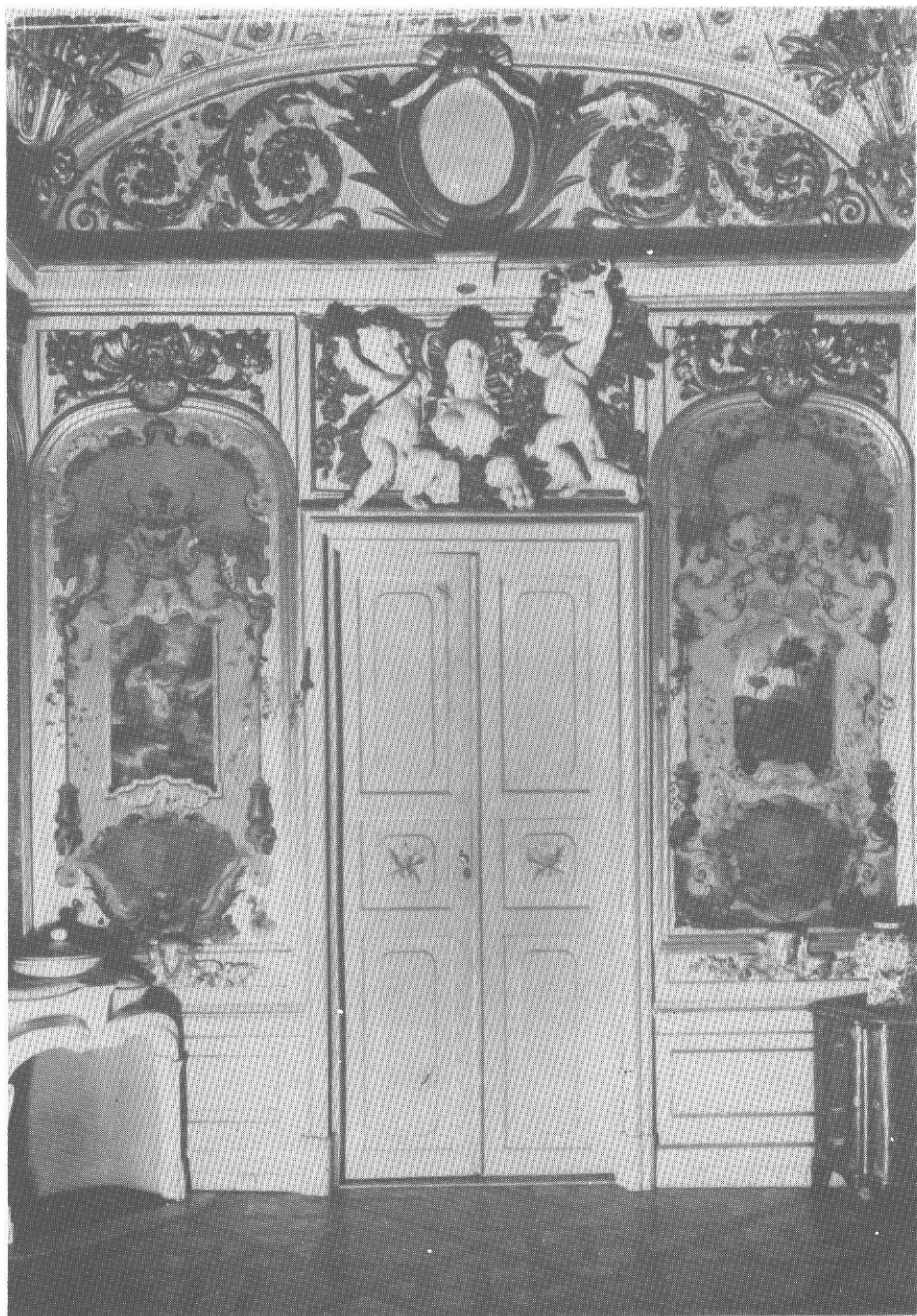
This series begins with the painting on the western wall which shows Chaos, the original existence which gave birth to the world. The continents that are visible are the second original being, Gaia or Earth, the most essential element in the world that is coming into existence. The third original being is Eros. Thus the first panneau represents the real beginning of the universe and the main cosmogonic forces.

The earth and early life on it is shown in the second painting in which the continents and seas are inhabited by pairs of animals. The northern wall features the cult of Dionysus, one of the vegetation deities. This painting shows lush, fertile nature which thanks to the gods' protection develops and bears fruit. In accordance with the classical division of the year, the second painting is devoted to Apollo the Sun to whom the world owes climatic zones and, within them, the four continents. The eastern wall is adorned with representations of Day and Night (Fig. 58) while on the southern wall the scene of Death and mourning is juxtaposed with a representation of Life and love under the protection of Isis and Eros.

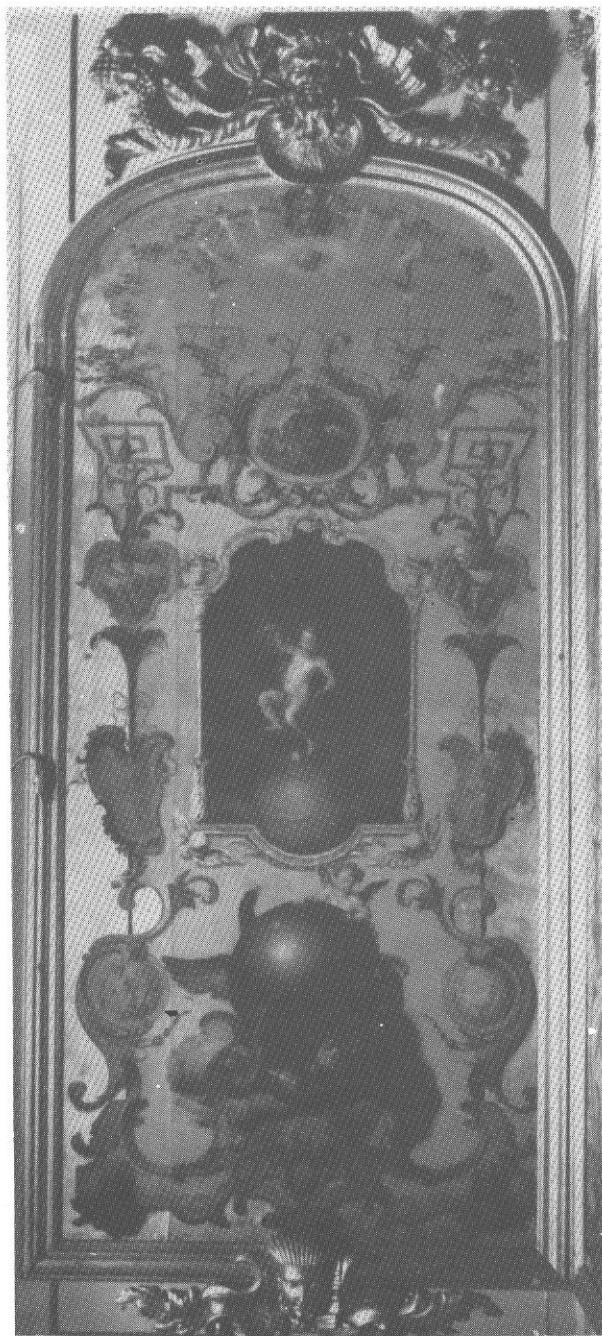
The remaining decorative elements are associated with what is shown in the panneaux. The motifs on the splays of the windows supplement the ideas contained in the paintings. And thus, for example, the head of Priapus, the god of procreative power in nature, is to be seen between planets that have a direct bearing on life and fertility in nature. The head of Eros in flames symbolizes love which overcomes Death, shown side by side, and is the origin of new Life. The sphinxes in the overdoors guard the creative secrets of nature - which are partly revealed on the walls - since it was only them that had knowledge of the past and the future of the world.

A synthesis of the basic truths about the world around us is provided by the symbolic representations in the planfond. There we can see Pan and Isis extending their protection to all life. They represent the fertility of the Earth the fruits of which are to be seen at their feet. However, the true ruler of the world is Eros, shown above them with a sceptre in his hand. He governs over the immortal gods and also controls the deeds of the mortals. The whole decoration of the King's Dressing-room is a paean to Eros, his creative power and absolute control over the world.

The decoration, inspired by classical works, especially Hesiod's "Cosmogony", is very consistent in its symbolic expression and its significance is much deeper than in other series of paintings of this kind in palace interiors dating from the same period.



57. The Palace of Wilanów. Interior of the King's Dressing Room



58. The King's Dressing Room. Decoration of wall panel — Eros reigning over planets and constellations