

STANISŁAW KOSTKA POTOCKI'S COLLECTION  
OF ANCIENT SCULPTURE AND VASES

The second half of the 18th century in Poland saw the beginning of interest in antiquity caused not only by fashion coming from France and England, but also by tradition and close links between our culture and the ancient civilization of Greece and Rome. This interest found expression in a larger number of trips to the Mediterranean and in artistic and collecting activity.

The collection of classical art at Wilanów came into being in two stages, thanks to two owners of the palace. Its bulk was acquired in the late 18th and early 19th centuries by Stanisław Kostka Potocki. In the second half of the 19th century this collection was enlarged by the latter's grandson, August Potocki and his wife Aleksandra née Potocka. S. K. Potocki lived at the time when the first Polish collections of classical art originated, for example those of King Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski, Izabela Lubomirska and Helena Radziwiłł. However among them the Wilanów collection distinguished itself owing to its largest set of ancient vases and to its definite programme which combined the decorative with the didactic character. This was definitely S. K. Potocki's contribution. He acquired both vases and sculptures thanks to purchases in the course of his numerous travels in Italy, Germany, France and England, and also owing to his own discoveries during archaeological excavations conducted at Noli near Naples. Together with his wife he purchased several items from the estate of the deceased king. He accommodated his collection in the palace and in the gothic gallery that he had built in 1802.

His activity was continued by the above mentioned August and Aleksandra Potocki who enlarged it through three purchases: of vases bought from the Mikorskis of Słubice in 1853, of coins bought in 1857 from the estate of Franciszek Potocki, and of sculptures bought in 1858 in Rome. They also rearranged the display of the

collection. The vases and their copies were placed in the Etruscan Cabinet, some of the sculptures adorned the Grand Vestibule, and the majority of details of ancient reliefs were transferred to the Lapidarium. According to B. Tkaczow, all reliefs come from the Roman expedition of the Potockis. Most of the sculptures amassed in the second half of the 18th and in the 19th centuries have survived until today in the Wilanów collection.

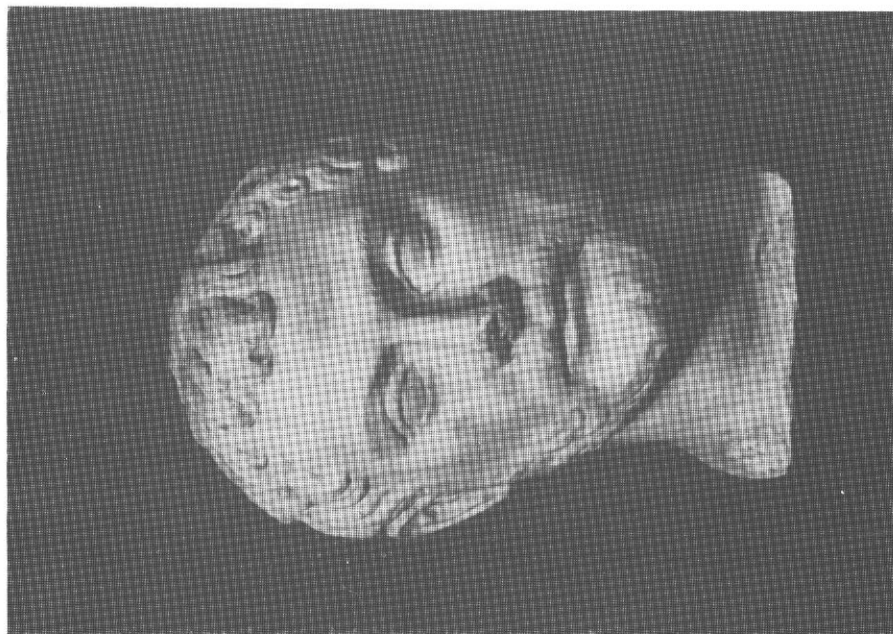
From the point of view of today's classical scholar, the collection as a whole should be regarded as inferior. Of the 25 items of sculpture in the Lapidarium, only five are antique beyond any doubt (Fig. 44), eight constitute combinations of old and modern elements (Fig. 43) or else their ancient origins are doubtful (Fig. 45). The remainder are modern classicist portraits and imitations. Some of the reliefs, too, are 18th and 19th century imitations. We do not know, however, whether the collectors considered them authentic or whether they consciously purchased classicist items. In any case the remaining sculptures, probably bought by Potocki in Italy and England, include some that are excellent genuine Roman portraits which considerably enhance the value of the collection. It should be remembered that at that time the collectors had a different attitude to the works they amassed and that their knowledge of the subject was much inferior to ours. Also Potocki's attitude to the works he collected was changing as he acquired more knowledge of classical art. At the beginning for example, he collected vases to decorate his library. Later he amassed them in order to demonstrate the historical development of this branch of art. The knowledge he gained in the course of amassing his collection served as a basis for a serious academic study that he wrote, "O sztuce u dawnych czyli Winckelmann polski", while the collection was opened to the public in 1805 in a new museum in the palace.



43. Statue of a woman with trumpet



45. Head of a veiled woman



44. Head of a man