

## **| The New Permanent Exhibition in the National Museum: The Gallery of European Old Masters. European and Old Polish Decorative Arts, Painting and Sculpture from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

Reorganizing the exhibition space in its main building, the National Museum in Warsaw structurally rearranges the galleries of Early Modern art. The collections of ancient, Nubian (Faras Gallery) and medieval art will remain on the ground floor. The first floor exhibition presents art of the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The second floor is exclusively dedicated to art of Early Modern period, from the 15<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The former Gallery of Decorative Arts and the Gallery of European and Old Polish Painting have been merged to form a new gallery: the Gallery of European and Old Polish Decorative Arts, Painting and Sculpture. Combining various art forms within one exhibition space, we intend to move away from the traditional discourse of art history which separated “high” pictorial art – painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking – from decorative arts understood exclusively in utilitarian terms. However, in the past such division was not strictly observed until the times of the French Academy and its Salons of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Generally, all art forms were perceived equal, and should any of them have been distinguished, it would not be painting or sculpture but goldsmithing and tapestry-making. The very notion of art – Latin *ars* (followed by Italian *arte* and French *l'art*), Greek *téchne*, German and Dutch *Kunst* – originally referred to artistry, skilful execution or craft. What was most highly esteemed about painting and sculpture was exactly the artisanal expertise, the virtuosity of workmanship. The pictorial character of painting and sculpture – subjected to the principle of the imitation of reality (“imitation of nature”) – was not their discriminant feature either. As demonstrated by our new exhibition, the majority of examples of old artisanal handicraft, while decorative, are mostly figurative depictions.

Decorative arts shared common purposes and functions with painting, sculpture, printmaking and drawing, but also spaces where they were collected and exhibited. The new gallery is divided into three “social spaces” exactly: palace, villa, court; church, chapel and domestic altar; and finally, the city. In other words, we have to do with a division into court culture, religious culture and city culture.

Paintings, sculptures, furniture, tapestries, textiles, carpets, goldsmith objects, silverware, glassware, maiolica, faience and porcelain decorated old city palaces and country villas and great urban and suburban residences, be it royal, princely or aristocratic. They were articles of luxury and splendour, vehicles of moral instruction and political propaganda, objects of sensual entertainment. We exhibit them in the part called “Culture of the Court” encompassing the three

rooms: “Palace and Villa,” “Royal and Princely Court,” “Polish Magnates’ Courts and Nobles’ Manors.” All aforementioned functions were present within the sumptuous Netherlandish tapestries themed around the Bible (the *David and Bathsheba* textile from the early 16<sup>th</sup> c.) or topics from history (tapestries from the series “Story of Roman Wars,” *The Lion Hunt* from the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 16<sup>th</sup> c.) or purely ornamental ones (*mille fleurs* tapestry from the late 16<sup>th</sup> c.). A plenitude of marble and bronze sculptures, paintings (Cranach’s *Adam and Eve*, Hans Baldung’s *Hercules and Antaeus*, Paris Bordone’s *Venus and Cupid*), painted and carved *cassoni* (marriage chests), enamelled plaques and decorative Italian maiolica dishes and plaques (*istoriato* maiolica) promoted ancient mythological themes and the Renaissance fascination with the naked human body. Attractive examples of interior decoration accessories of houses, palaces or villas were Renaissance Italian and Spanish plates, bowls, dishes or vases decorated in the lustre technique, often imitating lavishly ornamented Moorish artefacts. In the country residences of the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> century the culture of *villeggiatura* grew – the culture of retreat from the noise of the city into relaxation offered by poetry, music, performances of pastoral plays and painting (e.g., Matteo Rosselli’s paintings illustrating a scene from Guarino’s *Pastor Fido*). The idyllic universe of ancient idols, nymphs and fauns found representation in paintings but also on maiolica ware, which could sometimes prove monumental, like the large vase from the Castelli manufacture, decorated with motifs from Carracci frescoes at Palazzo Farnese in Rome. Captivating still lifes complemented interior decoration of living and dining rooms, providing pleasure to the eyes and senses, and sometimes even moral instruction for the soul (for instance, through the symbolism of fading signifying the passing of time).

The arts were in the service of political propaganda. They supported courtly splendour and participated in politics. That was the role of representative court portraits – large-sized paintings and bust sculptures. The decoration – or the instrument – of court ceremonial were goldsmith objects, paintings, furniture, tapestries, carpets and other decorative textiles, and costumes. A spectacular example is provided by the set of coronation accessories of Augustus III Wettin and his spouse (the king’s mantle, the king and queen’s crowns, sceptres and orbs, a throne chair, a silver court trumpet and one of the variants of the coronation portrait). Battle and allegoric paintings (like *The Battle of Orsha*) and prints, as well as precious armours and weapons praised the glory of the king’s or magnates’ battle triumphs. Sumptuous outfits revealed hierarchical status of an individual, for instance, the “national costume” worn by Polish magnates and noblemen in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (*zupan* [men’s inner long robe], *kontush* [men’s overcoat with split sleeves], *jubka* [women’s Polish-style loose-fitting jacket], *kontush* sashes) was essentially a republican dress that signified a membership to the social class authorized to participate in parliamentary reign (the reign of pseudo-democracy of noblemen). Artisanal objects proclaimed the glory of a family or dynasty (heraldic carpets and tapestries, the grand tapestry *Emperor Charles V Granting Ducal Title to Mikołaj Radziwiłł*, furniture with armorial decoration etc.). Luxury and its ostentation infiltrated the culture of the table (decorative gold- and silverware, porcelain and faience and glassware; meticulously ornamented cutlery; coffee, tea and chocolate services; travelling sets and accessories).

Paintings, sculptures, furniture, tapestries and textiles, goldsmith objects, glassware and other items were employed during the liturgy in churches and places of religious cult, also supporting individual devotion, prayer and contemplation at home or in a private chapel. Both spheres are presented in the part “Religion and Devotion in Church and at Home” and its successive sections: 1) “Late Medieval Objects of Cult and Piety;” 2) “Renaissance Objects of Private Devotion;” 3) “In the Realm of the Altar: Liturgical Objects;” 4) “After the Council of

Trent: Religious Paintings and Objects in Churches and Convents;" 5) "After the Reformation: Religious Images at Home and in Public Buildings."

In the first three rooms, we have collected late medieval, Renaissance and Mannerist objects from the late 14<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> century, like small Gothic ivory diptychs, liturgical chalices, wine and water cruets, ciboria and reliquaries; late Gothic Italian miniature altars for prayer, early Renaissance paintings for household and confraternity prayer – Italian (Botticelli, Cima da Conegliano, Giovanni Francesco Penni), Netherlandish and German (Master of Messkirch); large and medium-sized altarpieces, Netherlandish (Maarten van Heemskerck) and Italian (Paris Bordone); church tapestries ("Credo" series after designs by Maerten de Vos), liturgical vestments (chasubles etc.), chalices and other liturgical vessels, a large processional cross. It was an era of pictorial religion, in which works of art became an indispensable part of religious practice and piety; they were aimed at mediating between a believer and God and the saints.

In the following room – "After the Reformation" – we present the new Protestant attitude towards religious paintings and sculptures. Works of art were removed from churches, which in Holland turned empty "white churches" (as exemplified by the *Interior of Saint Bavo's Church in Haarlem* by Pieter Saenredam). They were however allowed to find their place – as instructive religious stories and moral examples – in private houses and public buildings: town halls, city councils etc. (paintings by Cornelis van Haarlem, Hendrick ter Brugghen, Pieter Lastman, Carel Fabritius). Religious depictions were maintained in the semi-secular sphere, too – in the form of sepulchral epitaphs (the statue of Christ by Adriaen de Vries). The iconoclast perspective was rejected by the Catholic Church that undertook, also by means of art, an action of inner reform (the Council of Trent) and declared war against Protestantism (the Counter-Reformation). The counter-movement is shown in the last room belonging to this part: "After the Council of Trent." It is home to examples of Baroque liturgical and church accessories (chalices, chasubles, decorative carpets) as well as large-sized paintings from churches and convents from 17<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders (Pieter van Lint, Jacob Jordaens, Abraham Janssens) and Italy (Cecco da Caravaggio, Juseppe de Ribera, Bernardo Cavallino and others).

Decorative arts, painting and sculpture contributed to the high city culture. It is presented in the third part of the gallery: "The City" in its successive sections: 1) "Citizens and Their Institutions: Town Hall and Guild;" 2) "City House and Its Inhabitants;" 3) "Paintings in Collectors' Cabinets;" 4) "Ethos of Patricians and Their Vision of Plebeians."

Archetypes of post-medieval city culture were epitomized by Venice in the South, Amsterdam and Antwerp in the North and Nuremberg in Central Europe. In Northern-European cities, the most expensive and most meticulously crafted artefacts and paintings were commissioned or purchased on the free market by patricians or upper class tradesmen, bankers and wealthy entrepreneurs-craftsmen belonging to guilds. In households, city residences, town halls and seats of guilds and confraternities, their aspiration to achieve high social status – quasi-aristocratic status, in fact – found expression in precious goblets, tankards, cups, flagons and other goldsmith and silversmith objects mostly crafted in Nuremberg or Augsburg, but also in more modest, though still ornate stoneware. The same function was performed by less or more representative portraits (like Dutch paintings from studios of Rembrandt, Govaert Flinck, Ferdinand Bol, Bartholomeus van der Helst). Large furniture (like the exhibited fine Antwerpian cabinet, or the magnificently decorated Dutch and Frisian cupboards), elaborate clocks and luxurious delftware, not to mention impressive tapestries and paintings unfolding exciting ancient and mythological stories (Jan de Bray, Jan Boeckhorst, Willem van Herp) completed the rich furnishings of patrician households.

In genre paintings, purchased and commissioned by patricians and the wealthiest bourgeoisie, they created themselves to be figures of higher social status for whom it was appropriate to pursue courtly or aristocratic leisures: walks in residence parks and gardens or hunting (the painting by David Vinckboons). At the same time, they did not shy away from more luscious games like those depicted in the *Card Players* by Wouter Crabeth. The entertainment of higher classes was juxtaposed against stereotypical images of the lower class: peasants and city plebeians – indecent, brutal, dirty and morally corrupt (paintings by Adriaen Brouwer, Adriaen van Ostade, Cornelis Saftleven and others). Wealth accumulated by patricians allowed them to use pleasure, yet on the other hand the bourgeois, especially Protestant ethics, imposed sensibility and moderation. Therefore, many genre paintings placed in townsmen's households would convey such a moral message (e.g., Jan Steens' *Mismatched Couple*).

Affluent citizens, both Italian and Northern European, who aspired to equal aristocracy, would become collectors of luxurious articles (like delftware or goldsmith objects) and paintings – various landscapes, still lives depicting tableware or fruit and flowers, pictures of animals, depictions of hunting and hunting trophies. Flemish and Dutch painters, along with Italians and Italy-based Frenchmen, were responsible for the widespread popularity of views of Rome and picturesque Campagna (Gaspar van Wittel, called Vanvitelli; Bartholomeus Breenbergh and Cornelis van Poelenburgh; Giovanni Paolo Pannini, Gaspar Dughet). In Holland and Flanders collectors sought for topographically realistic landscapes, winter views, depictions of sea and sea coasts with sand dunes, marine views as well as fantasy images of dangerous mountains and picturesque landscapes and views from exotic countries (*Brasilian Landscape* by Frans Post).

Venice – the theme of a separate cabinet in the second wing of the gallery – was a specific “city for sale,” since it turned its oligarchic, aristocratic tradition into an object of cultural export. The city views – *vedute* – and *capricci* (architectural fantasies) by famous Venetian painters like Bernardo Bellotto (Canaletto the Younger), Francesco Guardi or Michiele Marieschi were produced on an almost massive scale for tourists coming to Venice as touristic keepsakes. The famous glassware produced on Venetian islands (Murano and other sites) conquered Europe where the artistic model – called *façon de Venice* – was universally imitated in Netherlandish, German or Bohemian manufactures.

The last, separate part of the gallery consists of three cabinets, which form sort of treasuries with precious and meticulously worked articles once purchased and collected by kings, princes, magnates, city patricians and the wealthiest of citizens. The sequence of cabinets is preceded by the “Passage of European Porcelain,” followed by the “Cabinet of Porcelain” (including invaluable examples of Böttger stoneware, Meissen and Vienna porcelain), the “Cabinet of Glass and Rock Crystal Ware” (mostly from Polish royal and magnate manufacturers, and German, Bohemian and Russian works), and the “Cabinet of Goldsmithery” (jewellery, clocks, watches, snuff boxes etc.).

Translated by Karolina Koriat