

WHAT DID THE POTOCKIS NEED AN ART COLLECTION FOR, NAMELY ON THE *ART COLLECTING IN THE POTOCKI FAMILY* EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM OF KING JOHN III'S PALACE AT WILANÓW

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To the majority of the public the Wilanów Palace most often brings associations with the figure of King John III. There are few visitors who arrive at Wilanów in order to find here such visible and numerous preserved traces of the collection of art started in 1805 and opened to the general public as the first in Poland's history. Meanwhile, the artistic collections amassed in John III's residence are first of all the effect of the collecting activity of three subsequent generations of the owners of the Wilanów estate: the Potocki family. In 1799–1892, they tried hard to turn the Wilanów Palace into a venue of prominence for education of Polish society and for reviving memory of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth through art.

Wishing to disseminate the knowledge of the activity of those enlightened aristocratic collectors aware of the importance of the goals they assumed the Museum has

mounted a new permanent exhibition telling the story of the tradition of collecting art at Wilanów in the 19th century and telling the story of the ideology underpinning this activity. The Exhibition covers the first floor space of the Palace above the southern and northern garden gallery at the spot where the Gallery of Polish Portrait had been displayed as of the 1960s.¹ Under the Potockis the southern gallery housed a part of the extensive family library, so-called Small Library, August Potocki's collection of militaria,² further on rooms with the art collection of the Far East created by Stanisław Kostka Potocki, and a private Painting Gallery. In 2017–2019, the first floor was thoroughly renovated.³ The alterations in the interior layout were meant to recreate to a degree the functions, and also the décor of the 19th and early 20th century, this following the preserved iconographic records.

Collection creators

In the summer of 1799, the owner of Wilanów, Princess Izabela Lubomirska née Czartoryski gave the Wilanów residence to her daughter Aleksandra and her spouse Stanisław Kostka Potocki.⁴ The Potockis launched the remodelling of the suburban residence.⁵ In 1805, the Palace's interior was opened to the public, and so was the new Gothic Gallery containing a painting collection. It is assumed that the beginning of the Museum took place on 5 August 1805 when Zofia Zamoyska née Czartoryski made an entry in the commemorative *Book for Signing in of those who Have Visited the Wilanów Palace*.⁶

The continuation of the remodelling of the Wilanów Museum has to be attributed to the subsequent generations of the Potockis: Aleksander,⁷ son of Aleksandra and Stanisław Kostka, and their grandson August supported by his extremely energetic spouse Aleksandra née Potocki. The latter were remembered by their contemporaries as dignified guardians of the old residence of King John III and the art museum:⁸ *The exquisite name made the late August assume great responsibilities. Therefore, he went to great lengths to take care of the legacy his ancestors had left him. He eagerly took care of the national mementoes. He tidied and extended the Wilanów collection of his grandfather, and continued adding to the decorations all through his lifetime, namely the library, an exquisite gallery of paintings, and a numismatic cabinet. He found great assistance for that in his dignified spouse Aleksandra née Countess Potocki whom he married in 1845* (erroneous date, it was in 1840: J.P.G). *He worked together with her and allocated exquisite income to the Palace. He turned Wilanów, formerly the residence of the Great Hero and saviour of Christianity John III into the Pantheon of old mementoes, and became the honour and glory of the country. In return for his truly civic service, in 1858, the late August received a decoration unpracticed in our country: the Commander's distinction of the Legion of Honour*.⁹ Heirless Aleksandra Potocka died in January 1892, and she left the Wilanów estate to her cousin Count Ksawery Władysław Branicki (1864–1926), owner of the Montérors and Rosia estates.

The display

The *Art Collecting in the Potocki Family* Exhibition shows selected elements of the *pro publico bono* activity of the Potockis in order to turn the Wilanów residence into a memorial of famous and distinguished Poles and of meaningful episodes in the family history. Similarly as in the former museum of the Potockis the narrative focused on the history of Poland is enriched with objects which give a representative lesson on the history of the art of Europe and the Far East. What we found a priceless source of facts and iconography when working on the new Exhibition concept was the 1877 publication titled *Willanów. Album pamiątek i widoków oraz kopie z obrazów Galerii Wilanowskiej* which was commissioned by Aleksandra Potocka née Potocki.¹⁰ The publication discussing the history of Wilanów and the artworks collected there was prepared by the historian Hipolit Skimborowicz and a team of engravers headed by Wojciech Gerson. Not only do the rich illustrations document the paintings and

crafts pieces amassed at Wilanów, but also the appearance of the Palace itself, its architecture, and interiors.

The display starts in the recreated fragment of the Library. It opens with one of the historic visitors' books.¹¹ This priceless memento is a tangible testimony to the public role fulfilled by the Wilanów Museum in the 19th century, also documenting the ideological meaning of the collection for Poles living in their partitioned homeland. The descent and social status of the visitors, as well as the intensification of the visit frequency over the years permit an interesting anthropological observation. In harmony with the wish of Aleksandra and Stanisław Kostka Potocki the admission to the Palace was free of charge, and any later attempts at charging visitors at false pretences by servants were severely condemned.¹² In harmony with its genuine décor, the whole length of the gallery has been furnished with original historic display cabinets. The gallery contains the modest remains of the Wilanów book collection donated to the Polish people in 1932.¹³ The exhibits in the cabinets are complemented with exceptionally precious mementoes and documents commemorating John III as well as records related to the history of the residence.¹⁴ It is for the first time that a part of a relatively extensive collection of sphragistics: seal plungers and stamps used by the owners and administrators of the residence is displayed. One of the most interesting objects is the seal plunger to mark the books that form part of the Wilanów Library. The spacious Small Library heated with a fireplace mounted here in 1856 was decorated with the coat of arms of the Potockis: Pilawa, with the luckily preserved set of works by Karol Minter, and the monument commissioned from Christian Daniel Rauch.¹⁵ The library display is temporarily¹⁶ complemented with a set of the most precious paintings from the Wilanów collections created within the circles of the following artists: Leonardo da Vinci, Cranach, Rubens, Poussin, and Rembrandt.

The Potockis were the hosts of Wilanów in particularly difficult times. The independence ideas flickering in many European countries were also reviving in the Polish nation divided among the partitioning powers. Among the aristocracy and also the educated bourgeoisie there was a growing need to establish public institutions of social, scientific, and culture-forming profiles, previously absent, which would consolidate the circles of specialists and interested amateurs. A particular role among such organizations was played by those focused on history and research, as well as on collecting. With passion and much effort the knowledge of the past: closer and more distant, was reconstructed. It was particularly the Warsaw and Krakow circles who were most active in this respect owing to their political conditioning. August and Aleksandra Potocki hosted a 'salon' in their palace in Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, thanks to which they were able to establish contacts with e.g., The Warsaw Archaeological and Numismatic Society, Edward Rastawiecki, Aleksander Przezdziecki, Bolesław Podczaszyński, or Karol Beyer, as well as with the owners of the most prominent collections: the creator of the Musaeum Potocianum Franciszek Potocki, Wincenty Krasieński, Henryk Stecki, Jerzy Gauger, or Kazimierz Stronczyński. Deeply interested in history, August himself extended the Wilanów collection of militaria,¹⁷ old coins, or medals. This is testified to by the presentation of the set commissioned by the



1. View of a fragment of the display in the southern wing with a preserved fireplace with sculptures, Photo Volatus Media



2. View of the interior of the Little Library, ca 1915, Photo Henryk Poddębski, IS PAN

Potockis from Karol Minter's.¹⁸ In the Historical Cabinet, the next visiting point on the tour, 94 works of patriotic message have been gathered; they come from the same medal manufacturer of great merit for Polish medal manufacturing. Most importantly, however, the majority of them were purchased through a subscription created by the Potockis. The most precious of them contain: a set of 20 busts of famous Poles moulded by Jakub Tatarkiewicz, 11 reductions of royal and ducal tombs at the Wawel, in Gniezno and Sandomierz, and 31 medallions with the effigies of kings, dukes, hetmans, and representatives of Polish artistic circles. In the daily life of the Palace these works adorned private suites of the Palace's owners.¹⁹ On the grounds of inventories we found them in the room which served as the drawing room, in the armoury, and the rooms of 'Madam Countess' (namely Aleksandra called August's). The display is complemented with priceless mementoes of Stanisław Żółkiewski: tin fragments of the Hetman's sarcophagus with a meaningful inscription treated in history as a *praesagium* in the context of the achievements of his grandson Jan Sobieski: *xoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor*.²⁰ The amassed set of heritage pieces is complemented with a unique *sobiescianum*: an exceptional presentation of Veronica Giuliani (moulded by Wojciech Święcki) bearing the following inscription: *Sta WERONIKA/WSKRZESICIELKA/ARCYBRACHTWA ADORACYI/POWSTAŁEGO/Z OSWOBODZENIA WIEDNIA/PRZEZ JANA III R.1683*. [St Veronica the Reviver of the Adoration Archbrotherhood Created after the Liberation of Vienna by John III 1683].

The new purpose-created rooms for the Exhibition are the Print Cabinet and Iconographic Cabinet. Both were designed with the idea of presenting there objects on

paper: drawings, prints, photographs, and postcards. The first, boasting a display cyclically changing, echoes the old Cabinet of Arts created in the Wilanów Palace by Aleksander Potocki. It was for this cabinet that Potocki systematically incurred new expenses, by e.g., purchasing new prints and employing guardians as well as bookbinders for the extensive collection. The enormous Wilanów collection of drawings and prints together with the book collection survived at the National Library. The discussed display presents fragments of that collection preserved at Wilanów as well as new acquisitions. The Iconographic Cabinet was conceived as a cosy space in which the majority of the amassed objects (photographs and postcards) are a priceless testimony to the way old Wilanów looked: the Palace, the interiors and the collections, as well as the estates that formed part of it.

August and Aleksandra Potocki were famed for their charity, and this aspect of their activity is commemorated by the room preceding the northern gallery. The Potockis together, and after August's death only Aleksandra herself, did not spare resources to support, furnish, and raise churches,²¹ as well as to aid the poor. They were of great assistance to young people aspiring to gain education or girls trying to master skills which would help them independently make their living. Aleksandra tirelessly mounted fund-raising events or participated in those organized by others to assist the needy. One of such initiatives was connected with a major culture-forming event: the *Exhibition of Antiquities and Artworks*²² held in the Potocki Palace at 32 Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, in the building which now houses the Museum of the University of Warsaw. For over six months the Potockis gave access to their private premises to hold



3. A set of fragments of paintings showing the Potockis of the Wilanów, from the left: Józef Cholewicz, Stanisław Kostka Potocki; Pompeo Batoni, Aleksandra Potocka née Lubomirski; Aleksander Kokular, Aleksander Potocki; Johann Ender, August Potocki; Friedrich von Amerling, Aleksandra Potocka née Potocki, design Marcin Wielgo



4. Display cabinet with objects manufactured at Karol Minter's factory, Photo Agnieszka Indyk



5. Display in the Iconographic Cabinet, Photo Marcin Wielgo

the display. The income made on admission was to be allocated to the Shelter of Our Lady. As reported by *Gazeta Warszawska*, the goal was to *amass the biggest possible number of national historical monuments, open a temporary museum, issue a critically composed list of items showing which of them was the property of whom at that moment, and revive the interest in this quite neglected part of the research in the area of history.*²³

The goals were achieved by activating the circle of collectors and researchers. The durable proof of the work performed for the project can be seen in some precursory publications.²⁴ The collector of art and the first professional photographer in Warsaw Karol Beyer sent in a photograph album he published with his own resources commemorating the exhibition.²⁵ It contained 30 charts forming the first on Polish territory illustrated documentation of a display of artworks.²⁶ In our Exhibition, the 1856 *Exhibition of Antiquities* is recalled with e.g., certain exhibits which were displayed there. From among 228 artworks from the Wilanów collection shown at Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, as many as 124 have been preserved at the Museum.²⁷ The selection of the most precious of them decorate some of the display

cabinets in the northern gallery. It is also there that a choice of the artistic crafts items collected by the Potockis are displayed. Among others, they are bisque pieces (the largest bisque collection in family museums) and a unique set of variously decorated items of black and red stoneware (e.g., works by the Elers brothers, Johann Böttger or Ignacy Ceyzik). We also display impressive ruby glass items and vessels intricately ground in the magnate glassworks at Naliboki or Krysztalowa Glassworks, and also cold-painted Saxon glass.

An extremely expressive element of the display is the black-and-white print of the photo of the portrait of Aleksandra Potocka née Potocki whose original once decorated her drawing room. Painted by Karl von Blaas in 1852, the portrait disappeared during WW II. Framed in the genuine frame, the print expressively symbolizes the numerous WW II losses the Museum suffered. Across from Aleksandra's portrait, the eye-catcher is the representative portrait of August Poniatowski painted in 1843 by Jan Ksawery Kaniewski. The iconographic research allowed to connect the painting with its respective frame which had remained empty for many years. Looking at that portrait of the last male member of the Potocki family of Wilanów let us recall that in recognition of his merits



6. First page of the album of photographs by Karol Beyer prepared for the *Exhibition of Antiquities and Objects of Art in Warsaw 1856* mounted at the Potocki Palace in Krakowskie Przedmieście Street



7. Display in the northern gallery, Photo Marcin Wielgo

and his support provided to research institutions, in 1859, Count August Potocki was appointed honorary member of the Vilnius Archaeological Commission. The nomination was sent to him by Count Eustachy Tyszkiewicz, founder of the Museum of Antiquities in Vilnius.²⁸

To sum up let us say that the *Art Collecting in the Potocki Family* Exhibition was a part of a many-years' strategy of the Museum to restore the historic interiors of the Palace, tackling the less known, albeit important activity of the Potocki family to maintain the residence of John III, to turn it into an easily-accessible place of the memory of the history of Poland and contact with art. When preparing the Exhibition, not only were the interiors investigated and conserved, but so were 56 works of art, while with the comfort of visitors in mind 12 gallery benches for the public modelled on the historic pattern were recreated. The works on the display also covered efforts to make the collection accessible and available for experiencing art works to individuals with intellectual disabilities, with the autism spectrum disorder, and communicating non-verbally.

The Sybilla 2022 – awarded *Art Collecting in the Potocki Family* Exhibition was prepared by the team representing the Department of Art and the Department of Prevention and Conservation at the Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów. The Project was implemented in cooperation with the following Museum Departments: of Social Communication, Development, and of Museum Education. The spatial layout design was prepared by Dr Barbara Kowalewska, Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts.



8. Karl von Blaas, *Portrait of Aleksandra Potocka née Potocki*, painting lost, reproduction after a print from Ernest Łuniński's publication *Wilanów*, Warszawa 1915

Abstract: It is the assumptions, goals, and effects of the new permanent display mounted at the Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów titled *Art Collecting in the Potocki Family* that are the topic of the present paper. The Exhibition presents a less known fragment of the Wilanów Palace's history when it was owned by the Potockis: Aleksandra née Lubomirski and Stanisław Kostka, their son Aleksander, and grandson August and his spouse Aleksandra née Potocki. The three generations of the Pilawa-coat-of-arms family wrote a new, albeit extremely important chapter in the history of the former royal and magnate residence, placing in it the Museum of Art and the Memorial Site of the history of the Polish nation for almost a hundred years. The Potockis amassed artistic collections and national mementoes, and introduced changes to the layout of the private spaces of the residence in order to adjust them to serving museum purposes. In harmony with

the Potockis' idea, the systematically growing collection turned into a treasure opened to the general public. It is the first entry in the Wilanów Guest Book: 5 August 1805 that is regarded to have been the launch of the Museum's public operation.

In its narrative and layout the new display refers to the Potockis' Museum. The interiors of the garden gallery on the Palace's first floor have been transformed according to iconographic records from the 19th and early 20th century. In the southern gallery we remind of the Library once functioning here, in the northern one, in turn, we recall Warsaw's important cultural event from 1856: *Exhibition of Antiquities*. As a result of the introduced changes new display spaces have been created: the Historical Cabinet, Print Cabinet, and the Iconographic Cabinet. The first is dedicated to national mementoes, whereas the latter two are cosy display rooms of objects on paper.

Keywords: the Potocki family, Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów, *Exhibition of Antiquities*, Karol Minter, art collection, museum history.

Endnotes

¹ The Gallery of Polish Portrait from the 17th to the 19th century was opened in September 1963 (the Palace was opened to the public on 19 September 1962). Its authors were Profs. Stanisław Lorentz and Stefan Kozakiewicz.

² K. Ajewski, 'Warszawskie kolekcjonerstwo militarnych historycznych okresu zaborów. Cz. 1: Zbrojownie i zbiory', *Muzealnictwo*, 47 (2006), p. 37.

³ The works were implemented as part of the many-years' project of Museum's remodelling and modernization: *Modernization and Remodelling of Display Rooms of the Garden Gallery on the First Floor of the Wilanów Palace at the Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów*.

- ⁴ B. Grochulska, 'Potocki Stanisław Kostka h. Pilawa', in: *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* (dalej: PSB), Vol. 28, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk-Lódź 1984, pp. 158-170.
- ⁵ J. Starzyński, *Wilanów. Dzieje budowy pałacu za Jana III*, Warszawa 1933; W. Fijałkowski, *Wnętrze pałacu w Wilanowie*, Warszawa 1977; A. Kwiatkowska, 'Meble trzech pokoleń rodziny Potockich', *Studia Wilanowskie*, 26 (2019), 83-118, J. Paprocka-Gajek, 'Muzeum', in: *Muzeum Pałacu Króla Jana III w Wilanowie. Arcydzieła malarstwa*, ed. by D. Folga-Januszewska, Warszawa 2019, pp. 224-251.
- ⁶ Central Archives of Historical Records (below: AGAD), Wilanów Administration Archives (below: AGWil.), Zarząd Pałaców, Muzeum i Parków Wilanowskich, Call nos. 166-170. Five volumes of books containing entries of individuals visiting the Wilanów Palace have been preserved (from 1805-1931).
- ⁷ B. Smoleńska, *Aleksander Potocki h. Pilawa (1776-1845)*, PSB, Vol. 27, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk-Lódź 1983, pp. 756-759.
- ⁸ AGAD, AGWil., Allegata Kasowe, Zarząd Główny Dóbr i Interesów Augusta Potockiego, Biuro Interesów Ogólnych Aleksandra hrabiego Potockiego i Potockiego oraz Kasa Generalna i Kasa Domowa: these sections contain receipts and meticulously recorded purchases for Wilanów specifying respective collections: Collection of Antiquities, Gallery of Painting, or the Library, documenting the Potockis' efforts to extend the collections.
- ⁹ *Ibidem*, Zarząd Główny Dóbr i Interesów Augusta Potockiego, Call no. 243, p. 99.
- ¹⁰ Censorship authorized the printing of the work on 25 November 1876.
- ¹¹ Five volumes of books filled with entries by visitors to Wilanów from 5 August 1805 to 28 April 1918 have been preserved at AGAD AGWil. They were systematically presented in the new display from April 2022 to August 2023. See <http://muzeumpamieci.umk.pl/?p=5813>; Z. Maj, A. Załęcka, 'Publiczność muzealna w świetle ksiąg zwiedzających muzeum w Wilanowie w latach 1805-1931', *Studia Wilanowskie*, 6 (1980), p. 31.
- ¹² A note dated September 1850 comes from the Main Administration of Count August Potocki's Estates and Interests informing: *The Administration has been informed, and what is more, their Excellencies Count and Countess too, that servants of the Wilanów Palace dare request the visitors to the Palace to make sizeable donations, to the extent of a rip-off; therefore, the Main Administration instructs the Steward to summon both the Margrave and all the Palace servants to his office to relay to them the dissatisfaction of their Excellencies Count and Countess, and to inform them that only free donations can be received from visitors, such as they make of their politeness and free will, whereas requesting from them any larger donations is not only severely prohibited, but if any further information on such behaviour reaches the ears of the Count and Countess, and it is proven, they will be dismissed from service, this also relevant to the Natolin Palace, which the Steward is also obliged to communicate to Michał Melczyński in charge there. Signed Secretary of the Administration Karniewski*. AGAD, AGWil., Biuro Rządcy Dóbr Wilanów, Call no. 20_112, p. 25.
- ¹³ The core part of the Wilanów Library was given by Count Adam Branicki to the disposal of the President of the Republic of Poland in 1932, and it is now in the collection of the National Library.
- ¹⁴ A ring for a branch of the tree planted by John III founded by S.K. Potocki featuring an inscription related to the durable memory of the glorious deeds of the King, Wil.3381.
- ¹⁵ The most important item on the fireplace is the reduction of the monument of the first Polish rulers executed by the Berlin sculptor Rauch as commissioned by Aleksandra and August Potocki in Berlin. See https://www.wilanow-palac.pl/mieczyslaw_i_boleslaw_chrobry_redukcja_pomnika_pierwszych_wladcow_polski.html (Accessed: 20 August 2023); J. Paprocka-Gajek, W. Przybyszewski, 'Pomnik pierwszych władców Polski – wizerunek utrwalony', *Spotkania z Zabytkami*, 3-4 (2021), pp. 26-34.
- ¹⁶ After the renovation of the northern wing and of the 19th-century Gallery known as the Museum is completed, the Potockis' library will once again be decorated with family portraits and effigies of representatives of Polish Enlightenment which were here originally, this verifiable in sources (Palace inventories) and iconography.
- ¹⁷ K. Ajewski, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- ¹⁸ The first commissions come from 1844. See W. Bałdowski, 'Wizerunek sławnych Polaków i redukcje pomników polskich z wytwórni Mintera w kolekcji wilanowskiej', *Studia Wilanowskie*, 10 (1984), p. 96.
- ¹⁹ AGAD, AGWil., Zarząd Pałaców i Parków, Call no. 183, p. 124.
- ²⁰ Bas-reliefs from the sarcophagus of Hetman Stanisław Żółkiewski from the Żółkwa Collegiate Church of St Lawrence, Wil.2862, Wil.2863.
- ²¹ A. Majdowski, *Ze studiów nad fundacjami Potockich z Wilanowa*, Warszawa 1993.
- ²² J. Kowalczyk, 'Starożytnicy warszawscy połowy XIX w. i ich rola w popularyzacji zabytków ojczystych', in: *Edukacja historyczna społeczeństwa polskiego w XIX w.*, ed. by J. Maternicki, Warszawa 1981, pp. 157-202; P. Deles, J. Paprocka-Gajek, 'W rocznicę otwarcia „Wystawy Starożytności i przedmiotów sztuki”, *Spotkania z Zabytkami*, 7-8 (2020), pp. 6-12; J. Paprocka-Gajek, 'Wilanowska perspektywa warszawskiej „Wystawy Starożytności”, *Studia Wilanowskie*, 26 (2019), pp. 179-245.
- ²³ *Gazeta Warszawska*, 35 (26 January (2 February) 1857), p. 4.
- ²⁴ *Katalog wystawy starożytności i przedmiotów sztuki 1856 urządzonej w Pałacu JW. hr. Augustostwa Potockich w Warszawie na Krakowskim Przedmieściu na korzyść Domu Schronienia Opieki Najświętszej Maryi Panny*, Warszawa 1856; P.B. Podczasyński, *Przegląd historyczny starożytności krajowych. Z powodu wystawy urządzonej w r. 1856 w Pałacu JW. Hr. Aug. Potockich*, Warszawa 1857.
- ²⁵ K. Beyer, *Album wystawy starożytności i przedmiotów sztuki*, Warszawa 1856.
- ²⁶ A copy of the publication purchased for the Museum collection in 2022 is presented in the display.
- ²⁷ There were over 1,050 works and sets at the *Exhibition of Antiquities* at the Potocki Palace, which demonstrates that the Potockis provided more than 25% of the displayed exhibits.
- ²⁸ AGAD, AGWil., Zarząd Główny Dóbr i Interesów Augusta Potockiego, Call no. 242, The Vilnius Archaeological Commission, at their ordinary session on 11/13 of the current month, has included Your Excellency among its Honorary Members, pp. 93-94, 96.

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