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JOHN III SOBIESKI
AND HIS CULTURAL PATRONAGE

In the historical consciousness of Polish society John III Sobieski has always been a brave warrior, victorious commander and the main hero of the Viennese triumph in 1683, and the last illustrious king before the fall of the Commonwealth in the late 18th century.

It is known however that his interests were not restricted to matters which were of concern to a commander in chief, politician and ruler. Like his predecessors on the Polish throne he displayed considerable interest in learning, culture and art.

A reflection of his versatile interests was the rich royal library which contained literary works by both classical and contemporary authors, and publications dealing with almost all fields, including theory of art, painting, sculpture and architecture. His interests had originated earlier, probably during his west European travels in the company of his brother Marek. It was then, at the age of less than twenty, that John Sobieski visited many German, Dutch, French and English towns, saw famous residences, churches and monasteries, and innumerable works of sculpture and painting.

This must have had an influence on his taste and artistic predilections, and especially on the suitable "cultural education" of the future king of Poland. The next stage in his education in the field of art and culture came as a result of his close contacts with the court of John Casimir and Marie Louise.

As a young man Sobieski witnessed the process of revival of the artistic court of John Casimir following the "Swedish Deluge". He also saw how the king reconstructed and refurnished his residences destroyed by foreign troops, how he invited foreign artists to his court and how he imported works of west European art, and finally how he ordered silverware from Gdańsk and Augsburg masters. At the royal court he got familiar with many

outstanding works of European painting and sculpture and admired the king's love of sumptuous tapestries, jewellery and costly weapons.

The memory of things he had seen abroad and at the court of John Casimir, supplemented with literature and conversations with representatives of various fields of learning and art - all this helped to shape his views on culture and to turn him into one of the most enlightened protectors of art in 17th century Poland /Fig.1/.

Wishing to add lustre to his reign through appropriate works of secular and church architecture, as early as the first years of his rule he had the manor house at Jaworów converted into a palace, had the castles in Żółkiew and Lvov enlarged, and the interiors of the Royal Castle in Warsaw and the Wawel Castle in Cracow converted. In the same period he provided funds for the Royal Chapel in Gdańsk and had built anew his residence at Wilanów near Warsaw /Fig. 2/, which today constitutes the most original monument of Polish baroque architecture expressing the king's complex ideological programme and demonstrating fully his personal taste and attitude to art.

John III devoted more attention to architecture soon after the Viennese victory when he became less preoccupied with war matters and when, despite many worries and concerns about the state he could dedicate himself more to artistic matters. Besides the continuation of work on the Royal Castle in Warsaw and the Wilanów residence, he built, in the vicinity of Warsaw a quiet residence for his wife, called in her honour Marymont /Marie Mont/, the Capuchin church at Miodowa street in Warsaw as a votive offering for his victory at Vienna, and undertook the conversion of St. John's cathedral in Warsaw. Within in the circle of the king's patronage there also came into being the church of the Sisters of the Holy Sacrament in the New Town, built from funds provided by Marie Casimire as a thanksgiving for John III's successes at Vienna and the residential and trading district of Marywil /Marie Ville/ which, after a chapel was erected there, became at the same time a religious foundation and a monument to Sobieski's victory.

In order to have his construction and architectural plans implemented John III gathered together a group of architects, the majority of them foreigners, mostly Italian by origin, eith-

er long settled in Poland or invited during his reign /Józef Bellotti, Izydor Affaita, Agostino Locci, Tylman van Gameren/.

The king not only initiated such architectural undertakings and provided suitable funds, but also took active part in the process of construction by exerting his influence on the ultimate character and artistic form of individual works.

With particular passion John III planned new and improved the existing gardens at Wilanów, Jaworów, Żółkiew and Kukizów, as well as in Złoczów, Olesko and Podhorce.

In his artistic interests and activity as a patron of art, a special place was occupied by sculpture connected with architecture and landscaping. Representatives of various nations and different styles, who used various materials and techniques, were employed as sculptors at his court.

He devoted even more attention to painting. At his court he had the best artists available in Poland at the time /Claude Callot, Jerzy Eleuter Siemiginowski, Jan Tretko, Jan Reisner, Michelangelo Palloni/ and he attempted to form Poland's first academy of painting.

His interests in painting were not limited to works created in Poland, by Poles or by arrivals from other countries. During the over twenty years of his reign he purchased many works of art abroad, mostly in Italy and Holland. He also attached much importance to graphic art which could serve well his propaganda aims either by spreading fame of his military successes or by making his likeness familiar everywhere.

However his artistic patronage was most closely associated with applied art or craftsmanship, which provided objects to decorate and furnish his numerous residences and served his military and even personal needs. His court in Warsaw and in the Lvov region employed a large number of master craftsmen of various specialities. While in Warsaw and Wilanów architects, painters, sculptors and stucco workers predominated, craftsmen were usually settled in Lvov and Żółkiew.

The king, as a connoisseur of handicrafts objects, sumptuous silverware, jewellery, costly tapestries, gems, rare arms, expensive attire and armour, was not satisfied with goods produced locally. As was the case with paintings he purchased many objects abroad through his agents operating mostly in Italy, France and Holland.

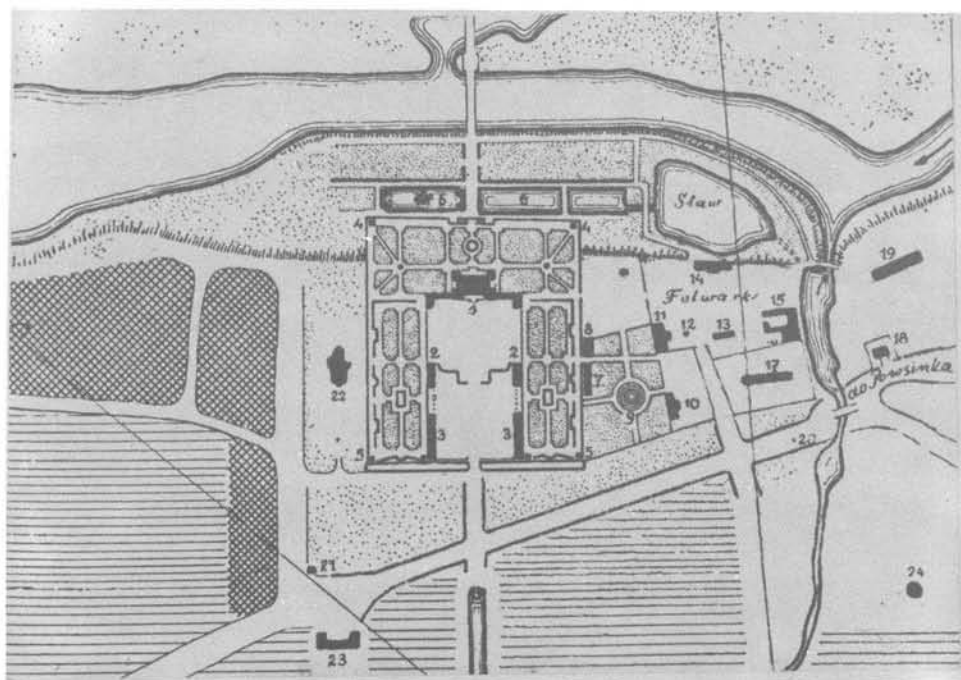
Apart from products of West European craftsmen, the king also imported various objects from China, Persia and Turkey. Many works of eastern art were acquired in the course of his war expeditions. John III also promoted the development of the theatre and music, as well as science and learning and his court always played host to a group of artists and scholars representing a high artistic and intellectual level.

W. Fijałkowski, p. 11—14

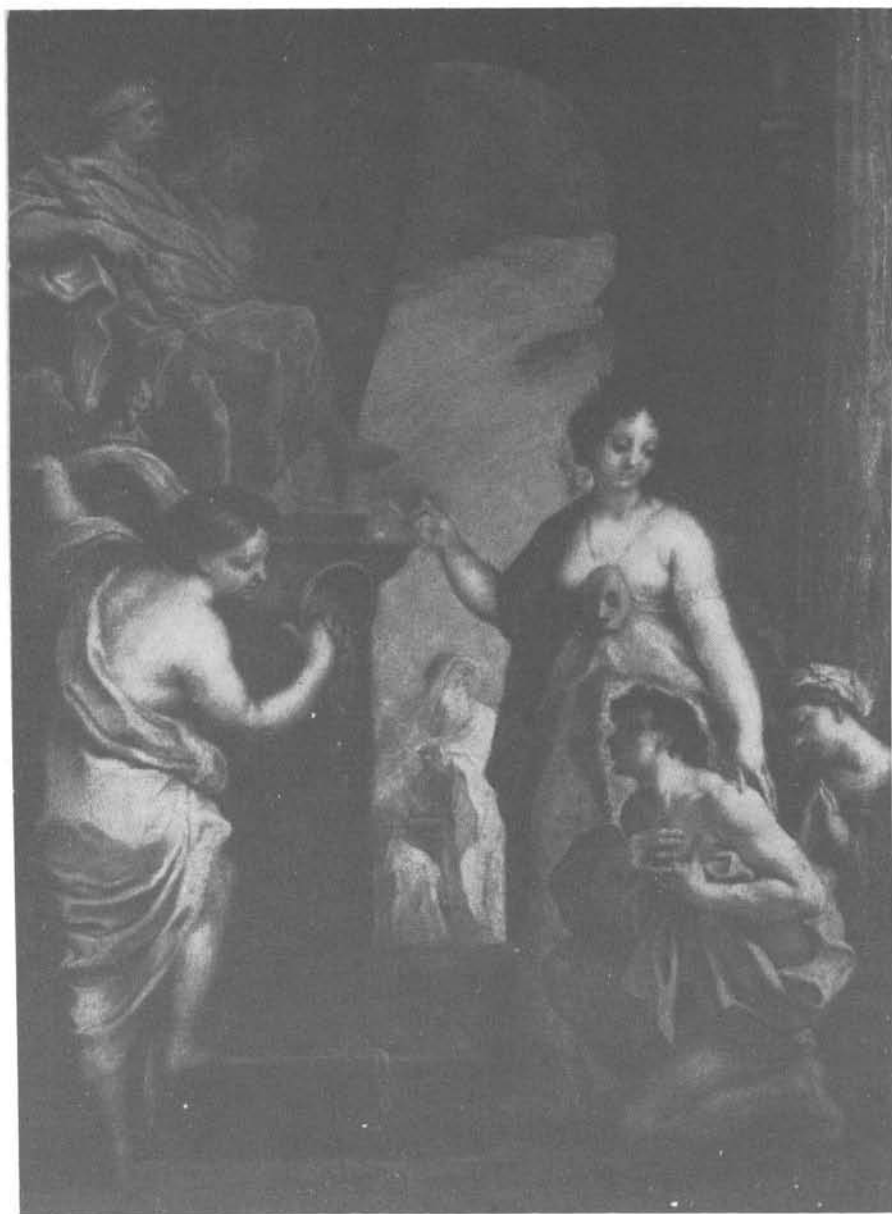
S. Wiliński, p. 15—16



2. The Palace of Wilanów from the garden side. Painting by B. Bellotto Canaletto



3. Wilanów. Plan of the situation from the original of A. Boy, 1682, elaborated by G. Ciótek



1. Apotheosis of Artistic Patronage of King John III Sobieski. Painting by J. Reisner. National Collection of Art, Wawel Castle, Cracow