



Wilanów Palace Museum

ul. Stanisława Kostki Potockiego 10/16

02-958 Warszawa

phone: (+48-22) 842 81 01, 842 48 09

fax: (+48-22) 842 31 16

e-mail: muzeum@muzeum-wilanow.pl,

konservacja@muzeum-wilanow.pl

www.wilanow-palac.pl

www.sklep.wilanow-palac.pl



→ Collection
of biscuits





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In the autumn of 2005 the Sculpture Conservation Atelier took on a project concerning a collection of over 20 different sculptures made of biscuit. The objective was to prepare the items for the exhibition entitled “The Sophisticated Charm of White Porcelain” held in June 2006.

The project was chiefly prompted by a considerable loss of the sculpture substance as well as extensive dirt on the surface of individual objects. Before the schedule of the conservation activities was drawn up, every single sculpture was individually examined to decide on the scope and methods of reconstruction of the missing elements. Simultaneous tests were carried out to determine the usefulness of a new organic resin meant to fill in the losses.

All the sculptures in the discussed set were created in the 18th century, i.e. the heyday of porcelain in Europe. Most of their models originate from the Meissen manufacture, others from Vienna, Berlin and Paris. They were usually produced in a few dozen copies.

The sculptures are made of hard-variety porcelain containing 40-60% of kaolin, 20-40% of quartz and 20-30% of feldspar. Fragments of the sculptures were shaped by impressing soft mass in forms, bound together into elaborate compositions and fired in temperature of 1280-1320° Celsius. The firing process rendered the material tough, resistant to chemicals and non-absorbent (open porosity up to 0.5%).

The programme adopted for the 17 sculptures assumed the reconstruction of most of the missing fragments that are significant from the iconographic point of view. Although individual items in the discussed set differ in size and the sculpture complexity, the common feature of all, from single-element figures to multi-figure compositions enriched with architectural motifs, is their antique-like form. Indeed, some of the sculptures constitute transpositions of Greek prototypes. This fact helped to recreate the shapes of reconstructed details, which would otherwise be impossible due to extensive losses of moulding and accessories as well as non-existent source documents. An example is the reconstructed sword in the composition entitled “The Dying Gaul”.



An item of a different iconography than the rest of the set is a Viennese bust of Carl Ludwig Habsburg. The realistic portrait represents a man in a formal dress typical of his times and a haircut with a plait. The missing plait at the back of the head was reconstructed based on an analogous Viennese bust of the model also created by Elias Hütter, which is part of the Wilanów collection.

Conservation-related decisions were greatly helped by old prints and catalogue illustrations of the originals or replicas of the factory-made copies. Based on these materials and (magnified or reduced) illustrations graduated in the desired direction, reconstructed were numerous details and elements of sculptures, essential in illustrating the author's overall artistic concept. Such approach was particularly beneficial for the figurative group entitled “Cupid Enchained”, whose reconstructed elements included a dove being fed, a sash binding Cupid, seat legs and feathered arrow ends in a damaged quiver.

The Wilanów collection contains examples of two copies of the same model, which enabled conservators to make a cast or an impression of a missing element.

Apart from recreation of separate missing elements making up the entire composition, the most laborious stage of the project was the filling in of numerous form losses caused by mechanical damages. The fortunately extant heads, limbs and other large fragments of biscuit sculptures tend to have clear-cut fracture surfaces, enabling an easy gluing back of the broken-off fragments. The most numerous chips ranging in size from a few mm to 0.5 cm, including fragments of fingers, branch leaves etc., required a particularly meticulous moulding process.

Missing details, such as fragments of hands and legs, pieces of robes, plant ornaments and profiles, were usually reconstructed directly on the renovated object. All activities were invariably preceded by an iconographic, stylistic or anatomical analysis.

The problem of exhibiting spatial items which suffered a major destruction may find various solutions. To quote but one, the Wilanów collection contains a unique extant Dresden figurine of “Apollo Lykeios”. Graphically processed photographic documentation enabled scholars to determine the size and shape of the missing elements and the compositional details. In this case however, the size and extent of losses (circa 2/3 of the mass) prompted the decision to forgo all attempts of reconstruction. The optimal solution adopted for the time of the exhibition was to support the figurine vertically by a transparent plate made of organic glass. The silhouette was located in space and on a surface limited by the size of the original base. The resulting empty space slightly on the side of the exhibit invoked the non-existent column.

Apart from reconstruction, other conservation tasks executed on the discussed objects included the dismantling of some elements, the cleaning of surfaces, the removal of stains and excessive coats (of old glues, plaster) resulting from previous renovations.

Similar conservation-related challenges and identical type of material used in all the sculptures led to the adoption of a uniform approach in the process of cleaning and filling-in of the lost substance.

Metal (brass) construction components securing large elements of sculpted compositions were also restored or, if missing, reconstructed. After being cleaned and preserved with micro-crystalline resin, the components were assembled with the application of silicone separation pads.

After the conservation project was completed, selected items from the collection of biscuits were included in the permanent museum exhibition. They can be viewed in the entrance hall of the Chinese and Hunting Rooms which were open to public in April 2008 following a large-scale conservation.

