

Jan Reisner's painting *Lamentation*,¹ currently hanging on the northern wall of the presbytery of the Church of the Visitation Order in Warsaw, is undoubtedly one of the most interesting paintings produced in the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania in the late seventeenth century (Fig. 1). It is hard to overestimate the importance of this painting to our knowledge of the art of the times of King Jan III, and it can also be regarded as the *opus magnum* of one of the most important artists connected with his court. Unlike, for example, many works by Jerzy Eleuter Szymonowicz-Siemiginowski, this painting is very lucky to have survived until today instead of having been buried for ever under the debris of Warsaw burnt down and ruined during the Second World War. Its history in the years 1944–1948 can be reconstructed on the basis of documents extant in the Archives of the Monastery of the Visitation Order in Warsaw. During this exceptionally difficult period, when inhabitants of the capital grappled with numerous threats, chaos and uncertainty, the work was saved from destruction and restored to the temple of the Visitation Sisters.

As Mariusz Karpowicz has already determined,² the painting was donated to the convent by the artist's wife Cecylia Reisnerowa *primo voto* Lauro in October 1698.³ The inventory made in 1705 mentions it (under the title *Descent from the Cross*) in the chapel described as 'regual'. Information about it was written by a different hand and presumably dates back to the period shortly after Jan Reisner's death, as can be assumed on the basis of other annotations. The painting described clearly as 'from the Honourable Mr Ryzner' replaced the representation of the Passion, which was crossed off the inventory in this place, in the chapel.⁴ However, on the basis of the plan of the church, where four side altars are marked, it is difficult to specify which of them would be the 'regual' one. If this term refers to the convent in any manner, the work was located most probably closer to the monastery, between the big choir and one of sacristies.⁵ The

THE HISTORY OF THE PAINTING *LAMENTATION* FROM THE CHURCH OF THE VISITATION ORDER IN WARSAW

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1 I will consistently use this title, even though all documents that have survived in the monastery of the Visitation Order and studies prepared in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century define the work as *Descent from the Cross*. Arguments for assuming that this is a representation of the scene of mourning are stated in: M. Karpowicz, 'O Janie Reisnerze po raz wtóry', *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, vol. 36, 1974, no. 3, p. 260.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 255.

3 Archive of the Monastery of the Visitation Order in Warsaw (hereinafter: AKSWW), MS, *Book of monthly calculations for the years 1654–1695*, n.p.; *ibid.*, MS, *Annual calculations 1654–1714*, n.p.

4 AKSWW, MS, *Inwentarz z 1705 roku*, p. 38.

5 See: J.A. Chrościcki, *Kościół Wizytek* (Warszawa, 1973), Fig. 4 on p. 26.



inspection visit report prepared in 1779 refers to this painting in the chaplain's sacristy,⁶ and the report from a visit made in 1825 – on the northern wall of the presbytery.⁷ This information is confirmed by a mention in a study published by Łukasz Gołębiowski in 1827.⁸ From that time on, *Lamentation* stayed in the same place until the Second World War, which is confirmed both by information from further inspection visits⁹ and by iconographic evidence, such as a print published in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* in 1879¹⁰ (Fig. 2).

In 1847, the work was probably subjected to conservation procedures supervised by Ksawery Jan Kaniewski. Kaniewski, a professor of the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw, was responsible for the renovation of paintings in the church;¹¹ it is, therefore, hardly probable that *Lamentation* was omitted at that time. The documentation of conservation works carried out in 1968 states that the painting must have been restored twice beforehand¹² – and this previous intervention must have taken place in 1847. In spite of this, the painting was described as 'slightly damaged' in 1856.¹³

Little is known about the further history of the painting. However, in the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century it aroused interest among authors of publications pertaining to the church. Sometimes it was noticed among its furnishings, which were rich and represented a high artistic level. In a passage of several lines describing the church,

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- 6 AKSWW, MS, *Odpis wyjątków z protokołu wizyty kanonicznej – przez X. bp. Młodziejewskiego odbytej w r. 1779, dn. 19 X. Dostarczony nam przez W. P. Bohdziewiczza profesora Kulu – z archiwum Zarządu Miejskiego m.st. Warszawy – gdzie znajdował się w zbiorach po historyku Kobylińskim – który dla celów naukowych odpisał go z oryginału znajdującego się w Archiwum Kurii Metropolitarnej Warszawskiej*, p. 5.
 - 7 AKSWW, MS, *Odpowiedzi na zapytania P.P. Wizytom Klasztoru Warszawskiego w czasie Wizyty w miesiącu czerwcu 1825 roku uczynione*, n.p.
 - 8 Ł. Gołębiowski, *Opisanie historyczno-statystyczne miasta Warszawy* (Warszawa, 1827), p. 103.
 - 9 Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, no. 190, Central Religious Authorities of Congress Poland, ref. no. 896. Files concerning the Church and Monastery of the Visitation Order in Warsaw, MS, *Wykaz Naczyń, sprzętów i aparatów Kościelnych przy Kościele Panien Wizytek w Warszawie przy ulicy Krakowskie Przedmieście znajdujących się w roku 1859*, p. 13; AKSWW, MS, *Spis rzeczy należących do Kościoła i Zakrystii sporządzony ro 1880*, fol. 2. This inventory contains a handwritten remark that it was checked and corrected in 1918, so it can be assumed that the information contained in it, unless verified, presents the situation as per 1918.
 - 10 *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, series 3, vol. 8, no. 188, 2 August 1879, p. 72.
 - 11 *Kurier Warszawski*, no. 326, 5 December 1847.
 - 12 AKSWW, MS, W. Tiunin, *Dokumentacja prac konserwatorskich przy obrazie 'Zdjęcie z krzyża' z kościoła SS. Wizytek w W-wie*, n.p.
 - 13 [F.K. Kurowski], *Kościół i klasztor Panien Wizytek w Warszawie* (Warszawa, 1856), pp. 36–37; id., 'Kościół i klasztor PP. Wizytek, w Warszawie', *Pamiętnik Religijno-Moralny: czasopismo ku zbudowaniu i pożytkowi tak duchownych jako i świeckich osób*, vol. 31, 1856, no. 10, pp. 373–374. The content of both publications is identical; for the sake of simplification, further on I will refer to the first of them.

Łukasz Gołębiowski wrote: ‘There are beautiful paintings in seven altars; in the main altar, there is a painting of the Visitation of the Holy Virgin by Czechowicz,¹⁴ opposite the grille there is the descent of Christ from the Cross, and the Crucified Saviour and the Annunciation of the Holy Virgin attract the visitor’s eye in the sacristy’.¹⁵ Julian Bartoszewicz assessed the quality of the painting as high: ‘Merchant Ryzner remembered the interior decorations and donated two beautiful paintings depicting the Descent from the Cross and Saint Michael’.¹⁶ Franciszek Ksawery Kurowski specified the work as a ‘good example of the Bolognese school’.¹⁷ In his extensive study concerning the history of the church, Walerzy Przyborowski also noted this painting: ‘Other [paintings], depicting the Descent from the Cross and the Crucified Saviour and the Annunciation of the Holy Virgin by an unknown painter in the sacristy, are not devoid of value’.¹⁸



Fig. 1

Lamentation [Oplakiwanie],
2018; Monastery of the
Visitation Sisters

Two myths have developed concerning the painting in question, and the first of them in particular seems significant in the context of its further history, namely, the painting was believed to have been installed in the main altar in the original church. In the preserved manuscript, in reply to Franciszek Ksawery Kurowski’s question: ‘What is the origin of the painting of the Descent from the Cross?’, the Visitation Sisters wrote: ‘It was apparently located in the main altar of the first church’.¹⁹ On

14 The author of the painting in the main altar was Tadeusz Kuntze, not Szymon Czechowicz.

15 Gołębiowski, *Opisanie historyczno-statystyczne*, p. 103.

16 J. Bartoszewicz, *Kościół warszawskie rzymsko-katolickie opisane pod względem historycznym* (Warszawa, 1855), p. 257. The quotation shows that the memory of Jan Rejsner’s donations to the Visitation Sisters continued in the nineteenth century, but that the benefactor was not identified with the author of both canvases. For more about the painting *Św. Michał Archanioł*, see: K. Pyzel, *Poszukiwanie obrazów Jana Rejsnera*, text submitted for print in 2021.

17 [Kurowski], *Kościół i klasztor Panien Wizytek*, p. 36.

18 W. Przyborowski, *Kościół i klasztor Wizytek*, ‘Ziarno’, 1913, no. 15, p. 234.

19 State Archives in Warsaw, no. 201, The Korotyński Family Collection, ref. no. 61, Church of the Protection of St. Joseph (of the Visitation Order), ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście, MS, Request made by Franciszek Ksawery Kurowski to the Visitation Order for information concerning the history of the church and the monastery, p. 34. The fact that these questions were asked by Kurowski is confirmed by the conformity of received information with the content of the text, e.g., with regard to the number of sisters in the monastery or girls in the boarding school: [Kurowski], *Kościół i klasztor Panien Wizytek*, p. 43. Apart from that, it is known that Kurowski’s documents submitted to Franciszek Maksymilian Sobieszczański became a part of the Korotyński Family Collection.

the basis of this information, Kurowski stated in his publication that ‘according to a local legend’, the painting ‘was previously located in the main altar in the original local wooden church’.²⁰ It is worth noting that he thought that the ‘first church’ refers to the original wooden church rather than the first brick church, the immediate predecessor of the current structure; moreover, he omitted the word ‘apparently’. It is, however, obvious that *Lamentation* could not have been located in the main altar of the wooden church, since it was donated to the Visitation Sisters in 1698, while the wooden church existed from 1653 until the 1660s and was subsequently replaced with a brick structure erected in the years 1664–1668.²¹ In that church, according to the inventory made in 1705, the main altar held another painting.²² The statement that *Lamentation* adorned the main altar of the ‘first’ church suggests mainly the significance of the work to the convent of the Visitation Sisters. Seeing that they actually referred to the first wooden church, the nuns certainly regarded this painting as a particularly valuable gift from Cecylia and Jan Reisner, generous benefactors of the monastery (although they did not identify Jan Reisner as the author of the work), and they may have treated it as a material witness to the beginning of their history in Warsaw (and Poland). The subject matter of the painting had also a significant impact on its exceptional status. The wound in Christ’s side exposed in the painting was attributed to His heart, and the cult of the Blessed Heart of Jesus was particularly close to the spirituality of the Visitation Sisters.²³ For example, Christ with the stigmata of five wounds appeared to Margaret Mary Alacoque, a Visitation nun from the monastery in Paray-le-Monial in France, during the third apparition (2 July 1674).²⁴

Another myth that developed around the work says that it was by a painter from the Bolognese school. This attribution made by Kurowski²⁵ became a part of the monastic tradition, which is attested by documents dating back to the first half of the twentieth century that are kept in the monastery

20 Ibid., p. 37.

21 Chrościcki, *Kościół Wizytek*, p. 25; M. Chodyko, K. Guttmejer, J. Sito, *Kościół Wizytek w Warszawie*, Warszawa 2006, p. 7. A document held in the monastery contains a mention of the painting *Św. Alojzy Gonzaga* by Daniel Schultz: ‘In our first wooden church, it was located in the main altar because the church bore the saint’s name – the Queen was his cousin’, AKSWW, MS, *Katalog pamiątek po naszej Królowej- Fundatorce (rozrzuconych po Klasztorze i Kościele)*, n.d., p. 21.

22 ‘W Wielkim Ołtarzu Obraz Wielki Naswiewszey Panny która trzyma Pana Jezusa, a Święta Elzbieta prezentuje iey Jana Świętego’, AKSWW, MS, *Inwentarz z 1705 roku*, n.p.

23 E. Klekot, ‘Najświętsze Serce Jezusowe – sceny z życia symbolu’, *Konteksty*, 1997, no. 3–4 (238–239), pp. 55–66.

24 K. Matwiejuk, ‘Pastoralny wymiar kultu Najświętszego Serca Pana Jezusa’, *Warszawskie Studia Pastoralne*, vol. 10, 2009, pp. 186–87.

25 [Kurowski], *Kościół i klasztor Panien Wizytek*, p. 36.



Ambona w kościele Opieki Św. Józefa (p. p. wizytek) w Warszawie.

Fig. 2

Interior of the Church of the Visitation Order in Warsaw, fig. from *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1879

(more on those further on). Unlike the myth about the painting's location in the main altar of the original church, in this case 'outside' information shaped the monastic tradition. Kurowski's attribution is presumably the result of its comparison to the painting with an identical composition located in the Church of Reformed Franciscans of Saint Antoni Padewski in Warsaw,²⁶ about which he wrote that it was 'the original work made by Annibale'²⁷ (presumably meaning Annibale Carracci). Consequently, he regarded the painting from the Church of the Visitation Order as an example of the Bolognese school, since Carracci was one of its founders and most important representatives. In addition, Kurowski may have been familiar – although via a print, for example, rather than from direct experience – with one of the works on a similar topic related to the output of Annibale Carracci (e.g., *Pietà* from the Louvre, inv. no. INV 198; the painting originates from the church of San Francesco a Ripa in Rome).²⁸ Carracci's output can indeed be indicated as a source of inspiration for the composition of *Lamentation*; for example, it is worth noticing the exposition of Christ's wounds being presented by putti in the Bolognese master's work, and by Mary Magdalene in Reisner's work, their gaze directed suggestively at the spectator.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the statement that the work is a part of the Bolognese school was a sign of recognition for the painter's skill. The perception and evaluation of works of the Bolognese school in Poland in that century is not researched in depth. However, preliminary comments by Anna Lewicka-Morawska allow us to state that works by masters of the Bolognese school – mainly by Guido Reni, but also by Guercino – were appreciated and popular among collectors at that time, and the departure from painting traditions stemming from the achievements of the Carraccis occurred in Poland only at the end of the

26 Currently, in general, two hypotheses collide in the source literature – that the painting was imported from Italy (A. Ryszkiewicz, *Kolekcjonerzy i miłośnicy* [Warszawa, 1981], pp. 157–58, fn. 122; A.J. Szeinke, *Kościół Świętego Antoniego i klasztor Franciszkanów-Reformatów w Warszawie 1623–1987* [Kraków, 1990], pp. 82–83, fn. 174) or that it is a work related to Jan Reisner's workshop (Karpowicz, 'O Janie Reisnerze po raz wtóry', p. 263; id., *Sztuka oświeconego sarmatyzmu* [Warszawa, 1986], p. 59). The discussion is summarised in: J. Żmudziński, 'Nowe wiadomości o obrazach malarza Jana Reisnera', in: *Kultura artystyczna Warszawy XVII–XXI w.*, eds Z. Michalczyk, A. Pieńkos, M. Wardzyński (Warszawa, 2010), p. 77, fn. 6.

27 F.K. Kurowski, *Pamiętki miasta Warszawy*, ed. E. Szwankowski (Poznań, 1949), vol. 2, p. 102. In Kurowski's MS, the word 'Annibale' is followed by an annotation by Franciszek Maksymilian Sobieszczański: 'Vinici'. It is difficult to say what Sobieszczański meant (did he distort the name of Carracci?). Interestingly, in his own study on the Church of Reformed Franciscans, Sobieszczański used the whole content of paragraphs from Kurowski's MS, but he wrote nothing about this painting; see: F.M. Sobieszczański, *Warszawa. Wybór publikacji*, ed., pref. and comment. by K. Zawadzki (Warszawa, 1967), vol. 2, pp. 160–65.

28 D. Posner, *Annibale Carracci. A Study in the Reform of Italian Painting around 1590* (London, 1971), vol. 2, cat. no. 136, pp. 60–61, Fig. 136a.

nineteenth century.²⁹ Works by members of the Bolognese school were undoubtedly perceived as a repository of recognised models and compositions. For example, in his classification of painters, Stanisław Kostka Potocki rated Guercino and Guido Reni most highly in the category of composition. In the summary of points won in four categories (composition, drawing, colours, expression), all the Carraccis and Domenichino ranked third *ex aequo* behind Rubens and Raphael (out of 56 painters covered by the classification).³⁰

Thus, *Lamentation* found its place both in historical publications (most often in the form of a brief mention, although its artistic quality was sometimes appreciated) and in the monastic tradition of the Visitation Sisters from the Warsaw monastery. The two myths referred to above, namely, that it had been located in the main altar in the original church and that it was by an artist from the Bolognese school) influenced the perception of the painting and its recognition as one of the more valuable works in the monastery's collection. Pointing out these contexts is crucial in order to understand the further history of the painting.

During the Second World War, *Lamentation* was damaged to an unknown extent.³¹ After the fall of the Warsaw Uprising and the evacuation of Warsaw's residents (including the nuns) out of the city (Fig. 3), the work disappeared. On the list of stolen paintings, it was mentioned under number one – which seems significant – and described as ‘The Descent from the Cross, format 2 × 3 metres (Bolognese School)’.³² The Visitation Sisters suspected that it might have been held in the National Museum in Warsaw, which is suggested by a letter of 3 July 1945:

These objects, or a large part of them, are probably located in the Museum itself – firstly, a few things have already been found there, and secondly, the Germans had very little time to transport everything out, from 1 November 1944 to the middle of January 1945, when the Bolsheviks entered Warsaw. We indicate that the attached description is not complete, because the inventory book has been lost, and that some of the paintings etc. were not signed as the property of the Monastery.³³

29 A. Lewicka-Morawska, ‘Guercino w polskiej kulturze artystycznej – refleksje po finałowej wystawie w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie’, *Aspiracje*, 2014, no. 2(36), pp. 32–37.

30 A. Kwiatkowska, ‘The journey to Italy from July 1779 to the end of May 1780’, in: P. Jaskanis, A. Rottermund, A. Kwiatkowska, A. Ekielska-Mardal, *Grand Tour. The Birth of a Collection of Stanisław Kostka Potocki* (Warszawa, 2006), p. 97.

31 AKSWW, *Wykaz strat wojennych zespołu wizytkowskiego*, MS, *Załącznik 4a do Kwestionariusza A – w sprawie szkód wojennych, Rzeczy uszkodzone – cenne w latach 1939 i 1944/45*, 31 December 1945, n.p.

32 *Ibid.*, MS, *Załącznik 4b do Kwestionariusza A – w sprawie szkód wojennych, Obrazy, antyczne, cenne – (zrabowane)*, 31 December 1945, n.p. In the preserved rough draft, there is also an annotation: ‘from the Church’.

33 *Ibid.*, MS, A copy of the letter to the management of the National Museum in Warsaw, 3 July 1945, n.p. Many paintings being kept in the monastery feature the inscription ‘VISITATION ORDER, WARSAW’ painted in blue on the reverse.



Fig. 3

View of the ruined city centre in Warsaw (in the foreground, the Old Town and the New Town), aerial photograph, 1946

In the list of losses attached to the letter, the work was again mentioned as the first item ('1. The descent from the Cross – large format [attached photograph]').³⁴ It was deemed advisable to get in touch with the National Museum – Stanisław Lorentz, the director of this institution, was in charge of the rescue action concerning art collections in Warsaw at the end of 1944 and at the beginning of 1945³⁵ and from the beginning of 1945, in charge of the search for, and recovery of, works of art.³⁶ However, the painting was not found in the National Museum. On 20 December 1947, Ms Belżecka (Belzecka) informed the Visitation Sisters that she had seen the lost painting in the Church of the Holy Saviour in Warsaw.³⁷ Maria Magdalena Mogilnicka, Mother Superior of the order,

34 AKSWW, *Wykaz strat wojennych zespołu wizytkowego*, MS, *Spis przedmiotów – zabranych z kościoła i klasztoru SS. Wizytek – w Warszawie (r. 1944–1945)* [enclosed to the letter to the management of the National Museum in Warsaw, 3 July 1945], n.p. It must be added that in the case of both lists of war losses, the item concerning *Lamentation* was crossed out with a pencil, presumably after the painting was returned to the church.

35 S. Lorentz, 'Dzieje Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie', *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, vol. 6, 1962, pp. 42–45.

36 S. Lorentz, 'Odbudowa muzealnictwa warszawskiego w latach 1945–1949', in: *Przeszłość przyszłości Księga Pamiątkowa ku czci Profesora Stanisława Lorentza w setną rocznicę urodzin*, eds A. Rottermund, D. Folga-Januszewska, E. Micke-Broniarek (Warszawa, 1999), pp. 61–66.

37 AKSWW, *Materiały do kroniki 1946–1948*, MS, n.p.

wrote a letter in this respect to the auxiliary bishop of Warsaw and the parish priest of the Church of the Holy Saviour, Waław Majewski:

Some persons told us that a painting of the Descent from the Cross which had been hung in the Church of the Saviour is very similar to the same painting taken away by an unknown person, at the time of our displacement after the uprising, from our Church, which owned it and where it hung on the wall of the Presbytery on the pulpit side opposite our monastic choir grille. Our Sister Door-Keeper saw a painting being kept in the Church of the Saviour and found it to be different from ours in that it is set in a different frame, freshly renovated and varnished. Because it has hung there only for some weeks, we would very much like to obtain some explanations that might make it easier for us to find traces of our lost paintings, because all our efforts, and the war-loss forms we filled in thrice, so far brought almost no result. As far as more valuable objects are concerned, we recovered a painting of St. John the Evangelist from our sacristy, which was given back by the Poznań Museum, because a card confirming its ownership was attached to it. Unfortunately, the painting of the Descent from the Cross did not have such a proof. However, we have its photographs and we enclose them here for the ease of orientation.³⁸

On 19 January 1948, a letter was brought to the Warsaw curia by Sister Maria Donata Źochowska (née Sadowska),³⁹ who put on the habit of a Visitation sister during the war, shortly after one of the Nazis shot her husband, Judge Donat Źochowski, which she saw with her own eyes.⁴⁰ She was presumably the door-keeping sister who verified reports on the found painting, because she often left the monastery to arrange various matters for the convent.⁴¹ The reply to the letter which came from the auxiliary bishop of Warsaw Waław Majewski brings much sensational information, so it is worth quoting in full:

Dear Most Honourable Mother Superior!

The painting in the Church of the Saviour is most probably yours, as I think after comparing photographs. I am ready to give it back at any time against reimbursement of restoration costs. In January 1945, it was brought to me by a Sister of Charity from the hospital at Wola, because it had lain on a rubbish dump in some factory. Nothing has survived except the face. This will be attested by this sister. It was kept in the curia for a few months, because I had invited a commission to express their opinion, and they advised me to restore the painting, so I submitted it for restoration to a specialist – Mr Kononowicz, who had worked on

38 AKSWW, *Wykaz strat wojennych zespołu wizytkowskiego*, MS, Letter by the Mother Superior of the Monastery of the Visitation Order in Warsaw, Maria Magdalena Mogilnicka, to the auxiliary bishop of Warsaw Waław Majewski, 17 January 1948, n.p.

39 AKSWW, *Materiały do kroniki 1946–1948*, MS, n.p.

40 Iwona Brandt's interview with Sister Maria Michalina Teodozja Siąkowska, 21 October 2009, <https://www.1944.pl/archiwum-historii-mowionej/maria-michalina-teodozjasiakowska,2154.html> (accessed 13 April 2021).

41 AKSWW, *Materiały do kroniki 1946–1948*, MS, n.p.

it for 7–8 months. I have bills for everything. Because I restored the painting at the cost of the Church of the Saviour, the costs should be reimbursed to the church. The costs amount to 150,000.

With warmest regards,

Yours devotedly in the Lord, W. Majewski.⁴²

On the basis of these three letters and well-known studies, the history of the painting from the end of 1944 until the beginning of 1948 can be quite accurately reconstructed. After the fall of the Warsaw Uprising, the last Visitation sisters were evacuated from the monastery on 29 October⁴³ and they arrived in Kraków on 1 November 1944. This second date appears in the letter to the management of the National Museum in Warsaw. This overlaps with memories of Sister Maria Michalina Teodozja Siąkowska: ‘And these four sisters arrived here in Kraków from the monastery only on 1 November. And here they liquidated everything and took away the rest of the packages, and when we came back, everything they had not taken away had been stolen’.⁴⁴ When the last sisters left the monastery, the way to the robbery was open, although thefts had occurred earlier as well. Thus, it can be assumed that *Lamentation* was taken out of the church building after 29 October 1944. This was done most probably by Nazi soldiers or their allies stationed in Warsaw.

The painting was stolen (probably cut out from the frames) and then abandoned – the size of the work may have turned out to be a serious obstacle during its transport. It is possible that the poor state of its preservation influenced the assessment of its artistic value and it was decided, when the Nazis were abandoning Warsaw hastily to escape the approaching troops of the Red Army, that the work was not worth taking along. It must be noted, however, that the looting of abandoned property began shortly after the Soviet troops had entered Warsaw on 17 January 1945.⁴⁵ It seems unlikely that someone would have taken the painting out of the church it was not, after all, an object of prime necessity, but they may have picked it up in the street and have later abandoned it, having found more useful things. In those days of intense chaos, behaviour irrational from the perspective of the ‘new’ situation of peacetime was commonplace.

42 AKSWW, *Wykaz strat wojennych zespołu wizytkowego*, MS, Letter by the auxiliary bishop of Warsaw Waclaw Majewski to the Mother Superior of the Monastery of the Visitation Order in Warsaw, Maria Magdalena Mogilnicka, n.d., n.p.

43 J.A. Chrościcki, *Kościół Wizytek*, p. 101.

44 Iwona Brandt’s interview with Sister Maria Michalina Teodozja Siąkowska, 21 October 2009, <https://www.1944.pl/archiwum-historii-mowionej/maria-michalina-teodozja-siakowska>, 2154.html (accessed 13 April 2021).

45 M. Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (Kraków, 2012), pp. 292–94.

According to an account by Waław Majewski, who was the parish priest of the arch-cathedral of St. John in Warsaw,⁴⁶ he received the painting in January 1945 from a Sister of Charity working at a hospital in the Wola district of Warsaw (currently the Institute of Tuberculosis and Lung Diseases at 26, Płocka St.). As to her possible identification by name, it is known that when the Red Army entered Warsaw on 17 January 1945, Professor Janina Misiewicz appointed a team that was supposed to return from the temporary hospital in Pszczelin (currently Brwinów) to the hospital in Wola to take care of it and tidy it up. This group included three Sisters of Charity: Janina Bylica, Irena Danielska and Kazimiera Zaleska.⁴⁷ They reached their destination on 20 January. It can be assumed that the painting was found while provisioning for the destroyed and looted hospital was being arranged. The question arises which of the three Sisters of Charity may have done this. Bishop Majewski's letter indicates that this sister stayed in the convent in Warsaw and may also have continued to work at the hospital in Wola. This may be inferred from the words 'this will be attested by this sister', suggesting that she could be contacted when necessary. If the painting was really brought to the then-parish priest of the arch-cathedral of St. John in January 1945, this means that it had been found between 20 and 31 January. However, things are complicated by the fact that sixty-four Sisters of Charity worked at the hospital in Wola for the entire war period⁴⁸ and in January 1945 further sisters may have returned to



Fig. 4

Sister Janina Bylica at the age of about 19, c. 1930; after www.junosza.pl

46 'Życiorys Ks. Biskupa Dr. Waława Majewskiego', *Wiadomości Archidiecezjalne Warszawskie*, vol. 30, Sep. 1946, no. 1, p. 37.

47 H.A. Jurczak, 'Siostry Miłosierdzia św. Wincentego à Paulo w Szpitalu Wolskim 1939–1945', in: *Szpital Dobrej Woli. Szpital Wolski 1939–1945*, ed. J. Zieliński (Warszawa, 2004), p. 102. However, Irena Danielska was absent from the list of the Pszczelin hospital personnel, which may have been drawn up in January 1945, see: 'Lista personelu Szpitala w Pszczelinie', ed. M. Gepner-Woźniewska, in: *Szpital Dobrej Woli. Szpital Wolski 1939–1945*, ed. J. Zieliński (Warszawa, 2004), pp. 311–12; S. Rumianek, 'Szpitale wojenne w Brwinowie 1944–45', *Brwinowskie Zeszyty Historyczne*, 2008, no. 1, p. 13.

48 'Lista siostr miłosierdzia, które w czasie wojny i okupacji pracowały w Szpitalu Wolskim', ed. M. Gepner-Woźniewska, in: *Szpital Dobrej Woli*, pp. 313–314.



Fig. 5

Bishop Waław Majewski,
‘Życiorys Ks. Biskupa
Dr. Waław Majewskiego’,
*Wiadomości Archidiecezjalne
Warszawskie*, 1946

the facility from the surrounding areas of Warsaw.⁴⁹ However, there is no mention of that in Janina Bylica’s account.⁵⁰ Although it no longer seems possible to identify this Sister of Charity, she was most likely to have been Janina Bylica (Fig. 4). She is known to have engaged in underground activities during the Second World War (she hid people in the hospital in Wola),⁵¹ so it can be assumed that she left the hospital in January 1945, when the situation was highly volatile, in order to arrange provisioning and she may have found the painting during one of such expeditions. These are, however, only speculations.

It must be stressed, however, that the decision to pick up a barely discernible painting out of trash shortly after the Red Army’s entry into Warsaw in January 1945 arouses both admiration and surprise. The situation in those days was dramatic. The desolate city was filled with burnt-down buildings and ruins, there was nowhere to hide, and spectres of poverty, hunger, disease, crime and overwhelming fear loomed on the horizon.⁵² It can be assumed that this Sister of Charity decided to collect the painting because of its topic, the image of Our Lady’s pain over the dead body of her Son, which must have still been visible in spite of the obviously significant damage.

The recovered work was handed over to the parish priest Waław Majewski who shortly after the Warsaw Uprising was engaged in saving liturgical vestments and vessels from the ruins of the churches (Fig. 5). According to Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, ‘when the smoke of the burnt-up Capital subsided, he was the first to stand up among the hot ruins of the temple [i.e. the arch-cathedral of St. John the Baptist] in order to save what had survived. He risked his life to extract priceless sacred vestments and vessels [...] from beneath heaps of bricks and stones, and carried them to safe places’.⁵³ It is, therefore, not surprising that the Sister of Charity handed over the painting to him. The condition of the work was regarded as very poor; according to Father Majewski, ‘nothing has survived except the faces’. His letter suggests that he was initially not convinced that the work was worth restoring, but the appointed commission recommended it. What arguments ultimately prevailed can

49 This is what I learnt from Sister Jadwiga Kisielewska from the Warsaw monastery of the Sisters of Charity. I would like to take this opportunity to thank her very much for having helped me reach documents shedding more light on the events of 1944–1945 in the hospital in Wola.

50 A. Jurczak, *Zgromadzenie Sióstr Miłosierdzia św. Wincentego à Paulo Sług Ubogich Chorych: prowincja warszawska* (Lublin, 2000), p. 270.

51 Janina Bylica, <https://www.1944.pl/powstancze-biogramy/janina-bylica,55331.html> (accessed 22 April 2021).

52 See: M. Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga*.

53 Quoted after: J.A. Chrościcki, ‘Złoty Jubileusz Kapłaństwa Ks. Bpa Waław Majewskiego’, *Wiadomości Archidiecezjalne Warszawskie*, vol. 48, Nov. 1966, no. 11, p. 262.

no longer be said. Did the commission take into account the quality of the painting's preserved fragments which indicated that it was (or could be) a work of high artistic value? Or was the decision made for more pragmatic reasons: since so many churches had been destroyed and numerous works had been lost in their ruins, perhaps even a very damaged picture was worth saving for the sake of its mere existence? The decision to start conservation works may have been made after Bishop Majewski became the parish priest of the Church of the Holy Saviour on 1 July 1946.⁵⁴ This is suggested by a passage from his letter: 'I restored the painting at the cost of the Church of the Saviour'. If that was the case, these 'economic' aspects may have prevailed. It is worth noting that the church furnishings were rapidly supplemented and the church building was under repair in 1946–1947.⁵⁵ A short time later, two big canvases by Michael Willmann taken from the abbey in Lubiąż were hung inside the church, which may be the most striking indication of the strong need to supplement the church building's furnishings after the war. It is also worth noting that the Ministry of Culture and Art formally granted thirty paintings and twenty-two frames to the Metropolitan Curia of Warsaw on the basis of the official record dated 4 August 1952,⁵⁶ whereas an entry in the Chronicle of the Parish of the Saviour in Warsaw informs that paintings by Willmann were hung in the temple as early as 1951 (sic!).⁵⁷ If this is not an error, the record legalised a factual state and Bishop Majewski's need to make extra investments in the church building was truly considerable.

The conservation works referred to in the letter were undoubtedly performed by Wiesław Kononowicz, known mainly as an architect, a construction manager and Stefan Szyller's assistant. In his own curriculum vitae, he defined himself as an 'architect painter'.⁵⁸ However, examples of his painting activity are not widely known⁵⁹ and there is

54 Archives of the Parish of the Holy Saviour in Warsaw (hereinafter: APZW), MS, *Kronika Parafii Zbawiciela w Warszawie*, p. 88. It is also worth noting that if conservation started after 1 July 1946, Bishop Majewski's account raises some doubts. He wrote that the painting had been kept in the curia for 'a few months'. Is it possible that he received the painting in January of 1946, not 1945? If that was the case, it is obviously impossible to determine even hypothetically which Sister of Charity could have found it.

55 APZW, MS, *Kronika Parafii Zbawiciela w Warszawie*, pp. 91–95.

56 K. Sztarbałło, 'Niezwyczajne losy obrazów z kolekcji lubiąskiej', *Ochrona Zabytków*, vol. 53, 2000, no. 1 (208), p. 33.

57 APZW, MS, *Kronika Parafii Zbawiciela w Warszawie*, p. 100.

58 M. Omilanowska, *Architekt Stefan Szyller 1857–1933* (Warszawa, 2008), p. 621 (Appendix 7: *Życiorys własny Wiesława Kononowicza*).

59 Perhaps the best-known project is the construction of a polychrome in the church at the Bródno Cemetery in Warsaw under the patronage of Bishop Wacław Majewski in 1952–1954, see: *Zarys historyczny Bródna i parafii*, <http://www.cmentarz-brodnowski.pl/artykuly/historia/zarys-historyczny-brodna-i-parafii> (accessed 22 April 2021). The



Fig. 6

Lamentation [Oplakiwanie], condition after the conservation work, 1968; Archives of the Convent of the Visitation Order in Warsaw, 'Documentation of Conservation Work on the *Lamentation*'.

no information about his education in this field. Kononowicz did not have a university diploma at all; he only graduated from the department of architecture and construction of Edward Świecimski's private secondary technical school.⁶⁰ Bishop Majewski stated, however, that Kononowicz had worked on the painting for seven to eight months. The decision to entrust this task to him may have been dictated not by any conviction as to his skills as a conservator, but by the fact that Waclaw Majewski had known him, possibly even before the war. Waclaw Majewski served as a vicar in the Church of the Holy Saviour from

information in this text was taken from documents held in the parish archives: an inspection visit book and a chronicle.

60 M. Omilanowska, 'O wykształceniu i organizacji pracy warszawskich architektów w XIX wieku. Kilka uwag', in: *Architekt – budowniczy – mistrz murarski. Materiały z sesji naukowej Instytutu Sztuki PAN Warszawa, 24–25 listopada 2000 roku*, eds H. Faryna-Paszkiwicz, M. Omilanowska, J. Sito (Warszawa, 2007), pp. 98–99.

1931 until the outbreak of the war.⁶¹ Important parts of this church's furnishings, such as the pulpit or the altar of Saint Expeditus, were designed by Stefan Szyller and built under the supervision of Kononowicz; his participation at the design stage cannot be excluded, either.⁶² Construction works were performed in 1929,⁶³ but later, in the 1930s, Kononowicz may have also carried out some minor works and met Waclaw Majewski after the Second World War. It is also possible, although this is not confirmed by available sources, that the architect helped Father Konstanty Pogorzelski, who was the parish priest at that time, in the restoration of the church building. However, such works were not mentioned either by Pogorzelski⁶⁴ or by Kononowicz himself in his own curriculum vitae.⁶⁵ It is also known that the reconstruction of the temple was conducted under the direction of Stanisław Marzyński, a professor of the Technical University of Warsaw, in 1947.⁶⁶ Kononowicz certainly performed minor works in the church from 1949 – he participated in the reconstruction of the main altar (1949), arranged a Christmas crib (1949) and designed Christ's Grave for Easter (1950).⁶⁷ Subsequently, the figure of the Heart of Jesus designed by him was added to the main altar.⁶⁸ Kononowicz, however, was not a proficient conservator; in 1968, Władysława Tiunin criticised the results of his work quite strongly.⁶⁹ Of course, this can be partly justified by the very difficult situation shortly after the war, characterised

61 *Kronika Parafii Zbawiciela w Warszawie* mentions him as a vicar in 1931–1938, with the omission of 1933. There is no such statement for the year 1939 in the book: APZW, MS, *Kronika Parafii Zbawiciela w Warszawie*, pp. 85–86.

62 M. Omilanowska, *Architekt Stefan Szyller*, p. 621.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 523–25.

64 APZW, MS, *Kronika Parafii Zbawiciela w Warszawie*, pp. 78–79.

65 M. Omilanowska, *Architekt Stefan Szyller*, p. 621. This piece of information is published in Wikipedia (https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ko%C5%9Bci%C3%B3%C5%82_Najj%C5%9Bwi%C4%99tszego_Zbawiciela_w_Warszawie). However, it cannot be regarded as reliable: it was introduced on 4 April 2010 (https://pl.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ko%C5%9Bci%C3%B3%C5%82_Najj%C5%9Bwi%C4%99tszego_Zbawiciela_w_Warszawie&diff=prev&oldid=21029886), and the author of this change was a middle or secondary school pupil using the signature 'Cezary Małko', who edited the entry under the project 'School and academic projects / Monuments of Old Town' (https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Projekty_szkolne_i_akademickie/Zabytki_%C5%9Ar%C3%B3dmie%C5%9Bcia) (accessed 7 May 2021).

66 APZW, MS, *Kronika Parafii Zbawiciela w Warszawie*, p. 93. For more on Stanisław Marzyński, see: T. Krogulec, 'Stanisław Marzyński (1904–1992) – budowniczy kościołów', *Almanach Muzealny*, vol. 6, 2010, pp. 221–30.

67 APZW, MS, *Kronika Parafii Zbawiciela w Warszawie*, pp. 99–100.

68 M. Przybyłko, 'Ks. Bp Waclaw Majewski jako proboszcz parafii Zbawiciela w Warszawie', *Wiadomości Archidiecezjalne Warszawskie*, vol. 48, November 1966, no. 11, p. 269.

69 AKSWW, MS, W. Tiunin, *Dokumentacja prac konserwatorskich*, n.p.

by a shortage even of products far more basic than materials for the restoration of works of art – hence, for example, the doubling layer for the painting was made of thick sackcloth and applied in an awkward manner.

The restored work was hung in the Church of the Holy Saviour at the end of 1947. The ‘new’ painting inside the church building must have attracted attention, and finally someone connected it with the *Lamentation* that had hung in the Church of the Visitation Order only a couple of years before. The information reached the nuns and one of them (presumably the aforementioned Maria Donata Żochowska) confirmed the reports visually at the end of 1947 or at the beginning of 1948. Bishop Majewski admitted that the work belonging to the Visitation Sisters had apparently been located in the church and proposed giving the painting back against reimbursement of restoration costs in the amount of 150,000 zlotys. It was a relatively large amount, although its precise analysis is impossible due to the fact that the accurate time of conservation is not known to us and the period from the end of 1945 until around the middle of 1947 was characterised by a high inflation rate⁷⁰ and a progressive increase of wages. This is illustrated by a comparison of average remunerations in June 1946 and November 1947: the average remuneration was slightly over 3,000 zlotys in the first period and nearly 8,500 zlotys in the second period; in Warsaw, the average remuneration exceeded 13,000 zlotys and blue-collar workers earned even almost 17,000 zlotys.⁷¹ Thus, the remuneration of 150,000 zlotys for around eight months of work, even assuming that this amount included the purchase of necessary materials, was a relatively high fee – the conservator worked for 18,750 zlotys per month on the average. The nuns were presumably unable to bear high costs of conservation, so they proposed granting one of the paintings from their collection in return. However, Wiesław Kononowicz assessed that it would require conservation, so the exchange of two works for one was eventually agreed upon.⁷² On 28 September 1948, a large painting of Our Lady of the Rosary and a smaller painting of the Flagellation of Jesus Christ were granted to the Church of the Holy Saviour,⁷³ and on 12 October

70 J. Luszczewicz, ‘Procesy inflacyjne w Polsce w latach 1945–1955. Przejawy, fazy, uwarunkowania, konsekwencje. Przyczynek do badań nad inflacją w PRL’, *Kwartalnik Kolegium Ekonomiczno-Społeczne*, 2014, no. 2, pp. 109–12.

71 H. Jędruszczak, ‘Dochody robotników i urzędników w Polsce w latach 1944–1949’, in: *Polska klasa robotnicza*, ed. S. Kalabiński, vol. 5 (Warszawa, 1973), pp. 441, 457, 478.

72 AKSWW, *Wykaz strat wojennych zespołu wizytowskiego*, MS, Letter by Bishop Waclaw Majewski to the Mother Superior of the Monastery of the Visitation Order in Warsaw, Maria Magdalena Mogilnicka, 13 September 1948, n.p.

73 According to information provided by Canon Robert Strzemieczny, the parish priest of the Church of the Holy Saviour, there are no such paintings in the church today. I would

1948, *Lamentation* was returned to the Visitation Order.⁷⁴ These events were undoubtedly important for the Warsaw convent:

Our painting ‘Descent from the Cross’ has finally returned – it was brought by the painter Kononowicz in a carriage. For the time being, it is placed in the presbytery under the place where it hung previously; a locksmith must change the wheels on which it hung and hang it with help from our people the next morning. Everybody in the house is delighted with its return.⁷⁵

The determination of the Visitation Sisters to get the painting back deserves recognition. It seems to have been motivated by two aspects. Firstly, the painting regarded as a memento of the beginnings of the foundation in Warsaw was an element of the continuity of historical tradition. Secondly, it hung in the presbytery of the church opposite the grille of the monastic choir for many years, so the nuns participating in the Holy Mass constantly had it in front of their eyes. Due to both of these circumstances, *Lamentation* can be regarded as an important factor of the identity of the Warsaw convent, which means that its loss must have been very painful. The sudden interruption of historical continuity on an absolute scale became one of the most tragic yet most common experiences of post-war reality. Jan Parandowski put this fact aptly when referring to his family apartment that had burnt down in the Warsaw Uprising.

We have nothing. The continuity and home tradition is broken forever; everything that will exist from now on will be new and much time will pass before it becomes our own, before it soaks up this familiarity that is specific only to inherited objects and ones that have survived many years with us.⁷⁶

Every object saved from the catastrophe of the war was a reminder that something had existed ‘earlier’ and helped to rebuild the post-war reality; a reality that was both physically and mentally daunting.

* * *

In 1968, Władysława Tiunin (aka Kamińska-Tiunin) carried out a professional conservation of the painting as a part of works conducted by her on easel paintings from the Church of the Visitation Order in 1965–1970⁷⁷ (Fig. 6). On that occasion, ‘after a more thorough examination through

like to take this opportunity to thank Canon Strzemieczny for having helped me to access documents held in the parish archives.

74 AKSWW, *Wykaz strat wojennych zespołu wizytkowskiego*, MS, Information about the return of the painting *Zdjęcie z krzyża* to the church, n.p.

75 AKSWW, *Materiały do kroniki 1946–1948*, MS, n.p.

76 J. Parandowski, *Luźne kartki* (Wrocław, 1967), pp. 14, 15.

77 *Słownik artystów plastyków: artyści plastycy Okręgu Warszawskiego ZPAP: 1945–1970: Słownik biograficzny* (Warszawa, 1972), p. 226. This publication mentions also her earlier conservation works on historical polychromes in many churches throughout Poland.



Fig. 7

Detail from the *Lamentation* painting during the conservation work, 1968; tears on the cheek of Mary Magdalene which were revealed at the time are visible; Archives of the Convent of the Visitation Order in Warsaw

exposure and using ultraviolet rays, it turned out that the original painting is of excellent quality and high value, that the background and figures of saints are seriously damaged, whereas the faces have survived to the relatively largest extent'.⁷⁸ As a result of the works, she wrote, 'we see a beautifully painted work of high artistic value. The three faces and the body of Christ are painted with great finesse. We can see tears flowing down the faces of Our Lady and Mary Magdalene; previously they were covered with paint. The expression on Christ's face has changed much for the better. The original colours of saints' robes have been restored. The remote background is in light colour and the area around the head of Our Lady is brightened'⁷⁹ (Fig. 7). Six years later, Mariusz Karpowicz published a paper of crucial importance for determining the authorship and the historical and artistic value of the painting.⁸⁰ He saw the work shortly after its conservation; many of its artistic qualities, for example the background, have since become unintelligible. Today the painting by Jan Reisner must again be subjected to thorough conservation that will not only save one of the most famous Baroque works in Warsaw, but also will ensure that the effort of all persons who, in the dramatic post-war years, undertook the task of preserving this work and restoring it to the temple of the Visitation Order does not go to waste.

78 AKSWW, MS, W. Tiunin, *Dokumentacja prac konserwatorskich*, n.p.

79 Ibid..

80 Karpowicz, 'O Janie Reisnerze po raz wtóry', pp. 253–68.

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