

## Introduction

The Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów holds a sizeable collection of Far Eastern exhibits made of diverse materials, among them a small group of objects made of ivory. They include Chinese *objets d'art* in a very poor condition, which on account of significant damage were stored in the collection warehouse, most probably since the 1950s. A large set of items with a joint inventory number Wil.9/489/89 and a name 'Basket' [in Polish: 'Koszyczek'] was compiled following a complex inventory preparation, and it resembled a puzzle. A sub-set of three openwork items carved in ivory and partially covered with polychrome was detached from over 290 fragments included in the set. The items received the names 'Basket I', 'Basket II' and 'Basket III (plate)'. Some fragments, c. 85 elements from the set, proved impossible to assign on account of the different material from which they were made, massive fragmentation of the material and significant similarity of the two bone items. There is no complete certainty whether the elements of the body of Basket I and Basket II were correctly assigned; their correct assignment will be possible only in the course of conservation work. Other unassigned elements from the set are fragments of multiple items made of diverse materials, such as exotic wood (carved rosewood stands), stone sculptures, a small sculpture made of animal bone, several other items made of ivory, textiles (cotton and silk [?]) and other items not related to the bone *objets d'art*. Among the most important elements in the group of unidentified fragments are two paper stickers: one, with the number 278, affixed to one of the fragments of the ivory basket, and the other, with the number 2014, preserved as loose. These stickers were helpful in the identification of the ivory items listed above and in piecing together the preserved fragments during the preparation of the inventory.

The discussed set had not been the object of any studies or conservation work before the year 2010. After the inventory was completed, it proved possible to assume that it may constitute an example of Chinese craft from the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century which is unique in Poland.

The inventory-taking of the elements of the set of three baskets, together with the initial substantive study, lasted two months and was completed in December 2010. After becoming familiarised with its results, a commission comprising conservators and curators of the Asian Art Collections, with the support of the Board of Directors of Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów, made a decision on their conservation and revitalisation. This triggered more extensive research and conservation work, which is still continuing. Extensive conservation issues and the unique character of the objects in question required interdisciplinary

## IVORY BASKETS IN THE WILANÓW COLLECTION

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research in various areas; this research contributed to, among others, a more precise determination of their place of origin and the date of their creation. Work has also commenced on the conservation programme and a revitalisation project of the entire set of baskets, together with a design for their display in the interiors of the Wilanów Palace.<sup>1</sup>

### Structure of the objects and technique of their execution (Figs 1–4)

All three baskets are Chinese ivories from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911); their features are typical for the style created in the south of China, known as the Cantonese style as its main centre in the eighteenth century was Canton.<sup>2</sup>

Two out of three ivory baskets: Basket I and Basket II are twin items. Originally, they had the form of decagonal openwork caskets with flat bases on low feet, ogee-shaped cover profiles and bodies. Each cover is topped with a sculpted handle. Unfortunately, only one of them has been preserved. The shape of the third item, Basket III (plate), resembles an openwork plate with an octagonal collar slightly folded inside and a decorative framing at the edge. Its bottom has not been preserved and its overall appearance is unknown. All the baskets are made of ivory, partially covered with polychrome.<sup>3</sup> The exception is the handle from the cover of Basket I, which is in the form of a citron fruit known as Buddha's Hand, realistically carved in exotic wood and decorated with polychrome. Material deriving from Africa was most probably used for the production of bone baskets, commonly applied in the Cantonese workshops in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century on account of its relative accessibility and high demand for the products made of it among Western buyers.

1 It is a part of the author's PhD thesis titled 'Technological and conservation solutions applied to the display design of a set of Chinese 18th-century ivory *objets d'art* from the collection of the Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów in the context of the problems of stabilising the degradation phenomena', currently being prepared under the supervision of Prof. Wiesław Procyk, PhD, at the Faculty of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

2 S.I.R. Kappus, 'China's Ivory. An Approach to Conflict Between Tradition and Ethical Responsibility', a PhD thesis prepared at the Faculty of Arts & Culture – Design, Culture & Society, Universiteit Leiden, <https://studenttheses.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2663547/view>, p. 12 (accessed 16 June 2021). Art theoreticians distinguished two main centres of ivory carving in the Qing Dynasty: Beijing (the so-called North Style) and Canton (the so-called South Style), <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/carving-ivory.php> (accessed 16 June 2021).

3 'Ivory' is the commercial term for dentin of various mammals, primarily tusk of living and extinct proboscideans: elephants, including mammoths, mastodons, as well as tusks of walruses, narwhals and even warthogs and orcas, tusks of hippopotamus and teeth of sperm whales and extinct dinocerata <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ivory> (accessed 23 October 2020). Ivory has features very close to hard wood, for example centric increments or fibrosity; hence every beginner carver would master various techniques by carving wood before being allowed to carve ivory.



Fig. 1-4

Preserved elements of the cover, base and body of Basket I and Basket III (plate)





Fig. 5

Openwork ball from the Wilanów collection, purchased in 1814 by Stanisław Kostka Potocki

Ivories, probably also the Wilanów ones, were usually made in several stages (Fig. 5). Tracing the potential chronology of the baskets' production, it may be assumed that the first stage of work was designing the item (which probably included making a wooden prototype) and subsequently planning the precise carving of a solid elephant tusk into parts. Elephant tusks were carved with manual saws or divided into thin longitudinal slices. Some of the tools made it possible to cut ivory into slices whose thickness was comparable to a paper sheet. Various manual processing tools were used for the cutting and sculptural modelling of the form and for the treatment of the surface at various stages of work. Subsequently, slices and bits of ivory intended for individual structural elements of the work were cut out (for panels) along laminar ducting, making use of the natural features and sizes of the material (cutting along the direction of growth).<sup>4</sup> Then, every element was processed manually with the use of traditional tools for ivory treatment.

<sup>4</sup> The description partially relies on the author's scrutiny of traces left on elements of the items by the tools used in their processing, as well as the structure and the colour of ivory and the technological structure of three items.

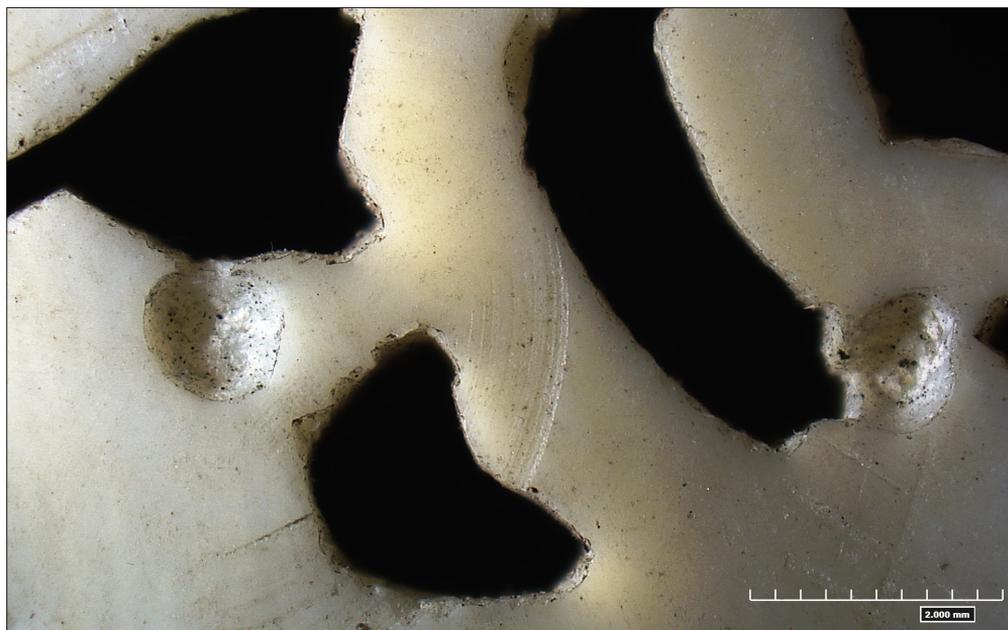


Fig. 6

Mechanical damage visible at the edges of cuts and traces of a borehole on the bottom side of the relief plaquette from the cover of Basket I (photo under the 3D RH-2000 HIIROX microscope)

The structure of each Wilanów item was designed and made of precisely matching elements, mostly decorated with openwork ornaments, which also made it possible to assemble the entire framework without the use of glue (Fig. 6). Two central elements, the cover and the base, bonded the structure of the baskets like keystones. A structure of straight and ogee-shaped elements was built around them and fixed with the use of properly shaped connectors and side cuts. Thin openwork panels were set, enclosed on four sides in cuts, in the resultant framework. The minute and dense ornament carved in the panels resembled a subtle mesh or lace. The panels in the bases were completely straight, while in the parts of body and cover curved into an S-shape. In the body and cover parts of two baskets, the thin openwork panels were artificially shaped, which means that they were purposefully arched to match the shape of cuts in the moulded structural elements. Some type of a last was probably used for their formation. The way in which structural elements were moulded and cut made it possible to assemble the adjoining elements, among others to connect the adjoining elements of the framework, enabling the placement of thin panels (bodies, covers of Baskets I and II) which created the sides, as well as the application of small triangular wedges which stabilised the structure of the body, primarily in the place where the base and the body were connected. The plates used for the walls of bodies and covers have the same thickness and could have been cut out in the desired shape from a larger piece, along the direction of growth of the elephant tusk, and then subjected to further processing: sanding and polishing. Under the microscope, numerous traces of tools



Fig. 7-9

Examples of connections applied in the structural elements of Baskets I and III

and polishing were observed on the surface of the individual sections of baskets. The prepared sections of the items were probably moulded at the very end.

In the centre of the panels, small bas-relief openwork plaquettes covered with polychrome floral compositions, were placed in the bodies and covers of the baskets. They could have been glued to the openwork surfaces with the use of animal glue (?). The plaquettes covered with polychrome were later attached to the bases with copper wires covered in silver; some were glued again with bone glue, while other, separated fragments have been preserved as loose.

On the structural elements of the collar of Basket III, similar narrow relief decorations were attached with pins c. 1 mm in diameter, while on other items they were probably also glued to the openwork fragments.

Each central element (plaquette) in the bases and covers of Baskets I and II has openwork decoration, without polychrome, with an ornamental composition combining realistic or stylised plant, flower, vegetable and





fruit motifs. Relief decorations were carved in haut-relief combined with openwork elements (Fig. 7–9).

The present-day colours of the material from which Baskets I, II and III were made are diverse, from bright to almost grey and green to yellowish, which is the result of the impact of various factors, among others the natural process of ageing of the material and the conditions of storage. The fragility and deformations of the preserved fragments are significant. The macroscopic and microscopic inspection of the material suggests that Baskets I and II were carved from tusks of African elephants originating from the eastern part of Africa. The ivory from this area is characterised by bright colour, relatively high durability and hardness; it is distinguished from elephant tusks from other regions by its slightly fibrous structure. The material from which Basket III (plate) is made has a more creamy colour and a denser structure, with smaller dental canalicula than in the other two.

The characteristic traces of tools on the elements of the three baskets were observed under the 2D and 3D microscope and during the scanning of elements of Basket I. They indicate the application of sharp manual saws with tiny serration, various files, smoothing planes, sharp chisels

or knives, or other special cutting tools in the form of very sharp cutters, adjusted to the repetitive elements of ornaments, for instance the lenticular ones. Their application is visible under the microscope in the form of openings with sharp edges on one side of the panel and slightly rugged edges on the other side, with fragments of dentin tissue, as if pushed out and skewed outwards.

Such application was observed in individually cut openings and on larger areas, on both sides of the ornament. Traditional chisels of various types were also used for the execution of individual details, with compasses and a fluting tool in some areas. There are also traces of a manual bore or a drill for drilling openings, e.g. on the reverse of the central element of the cover or in the elements of the ribs of the bodies or covers of Baskets I and II.

The visual effect was reinforced by covering the relief overlays on the panels of the body and cover with naturalistic polychrome with the use of paint made of natural pigments and protein binder (Fig. 10).

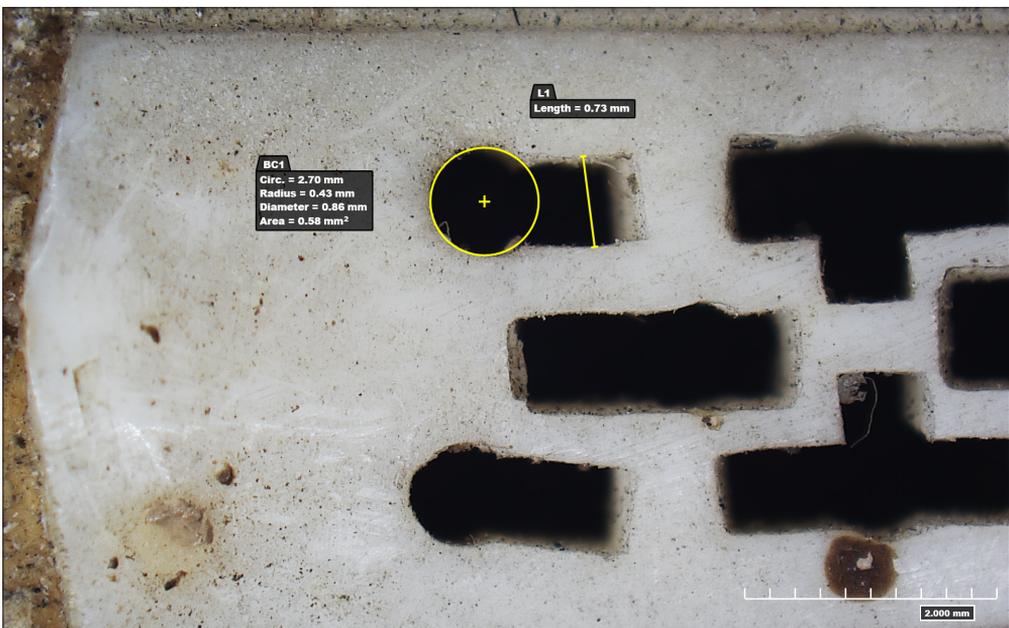
Templates for complex, impressive ivory items were frequently copied or modified to adjust them to the requirements of clients and the skills of the craftsmen who made them.

### Issues pertaining to the baskets' provenance

The port of Canton (Guangzhou) maintained contacts with merchants from Western Europe from the seventeenth century onwards; between 1757 and 1842 it was the only port in the imperial China through which foreign trade could be conducted. Foreign merchants entering the city

Fig. 10

Visible traces of drills on the reverse of an element in the framework of the Basket I cover



were obliged to conform to a system of tightly regulated rules of conduct.<sup>5</sup> The first to set up a trading post in Canton was the British East India Company. Between 1689 and 1834 the merchants who belonged to it enjoyed a monopoly on trade with China. Development of trade caused a huge interest in China in the Western world and flooded it with Chinese goods, including luxury items. The Chinese traded with foreigners on a huge scale, offering not only raw materials, but also diverse products, manufactured *en masse* and in such a way as to indulge the tastes of foreigners. Fashionable silk clothes, craft products and artworks such as furniture, paintings, objects made of porcelain, bronze, bamboo, stone, lacquer and ivory, as well as items made of other, more unique materials were produced in family factories and workshops. Chinese artefacts were rarely brought to Europe, primarily at special orders of collectors, while merchants commonly traded in modern Cantonese products, including ivories, made almost exclusively for export as tokens or as goods made to order.

### The ivory basket from Łańcut

In line with the present-day state of knowledge, the history of the Wilanów baskets may be linked with the persons of Princess Izabela [Elżbieta] Lubomirska née Czartoryska (1736–1816), her daughter Aleksandra Potocka née Lubomirska (1760 or 1760–1831) and her son-in-law Stanisław Kostka Potocki (1755–1821). The baskets may also have been acquired for the collection displayed in the Chinese Apartments in Wilanów by their son, Aleksander Stanisław Potocki (1778–1845). Both Princess Lubomirska and the Potocki couple collected works of art, including Far Eastern and Chinese-style products, among them artefacts made of bone.<sup>6</sup> After transferring the collection to Łańcut, which happened around the year 1800, Izabela Lubomirska arranged a two-room Chinese Apartment on the first floor of the Łańcut Castle.<sup>7</sup> Its interior

5 Pursuant to the edict of Emperor Qianlong, between 1757 and 1842 Canton was the only Chinese port that traded with the West, *The Canton System, Chinese History*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Canton-system> (accessed 21 March 2020).

6 A more extensive discussion on the phenomenon of collecting items of Oriental origin: Turkish, Chinese or Tatar, and the mode of combining them with other ‘antiquities’, which was fashionable at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century in the area of ‘Enlightened’ Poland, see B. Łakomska, *Miłośnicy “chińskości” w dawnej Polsce. Od siedemnastego do początków dziewiętnastego wieku* (Warszawa, 2008), pp. 82–86. In Chapter IV, the author devoted almost four pages to the Chinese Apartments set up in Łańcut and Wilanów during the ownership of Izabela Lubomirska and her son-in-law, Stanisław Kostka Potocki.

7 After the third partition of Poland, in 1799, Izabela Lubomirska handed over the Wilanów estate to her daughter Aleksandra Potocka and settled in the family seat of the Lubomirski family, the Łańcut Castle, where she introduced a number of changes and arranged it according to her needs and taste, [https://www.wilanow-palac.pl/izabela\\_z\\_czartoryskich\\_lubomirska.html](https://www.wilanow-palac.pl/izabela_z_czartoryskich_lubomirska.html) (accessed 21 March 2021).

design, modelled on the interiors of English residences, was in the Pompeian-Chinese style.<sup>8</sup> An octagonal openwork basket made of ivory which was kept in that Apartment had a cover and carved plaquettes on openwork panels and was similar to Baskets I and II from Wilanów.<sup>9</sup> It was listed in the inventory of the Łańcut Castle of 1854 and 1855: 'Basket made of ivory, with carved pattern, a cover and glass cover [...] for the Princess from the French Queen'.<sup>10</sup> Its origin is unknown. The basket continued to be exhibited together with the original glass cover in the same interior before the Second World War, until 1933. Unfortunately, it has not survived in the collections of the Łańcut Castle Museum.<sup>11</sup>

In the album titled *Zamek w Łańcutcie. Zwięzły opis dziejów i zbiorów*, Józef Piotrowski describes the appearance of the palace in the eighteenth century, among others Izabela Lubomirska's Chinese Apartment: 'purposefully low, also very fashionable Chinese rooms, filled with stylish furniture, excellent porcelain and items made of ivory, wood, bronze and crystal'.<sup>12</sup> The album also features a black and white photograph of the basket, taken by Piotrowski.<sup>13</sup>

Based on the recent studies of the pigments used in the polychrome on the relief plaquettes of Baskets I and II (Fig. 11), it was possible to narrow down the time of their creation to the period after 1775 and before 1793. The discovery of Prussian blue in the polychrome allowed to determine the bottom limit of the time of origin.<sup>14</sup> It may, therefore, be assumed that at least two of the Wilanów baskets date to that period. However, it is not known whether they were given by Lubomirska to her daughter Aleksandra and her husband Stanisław Kostka Potocki, becoming a part of their collection of Far Eastern art.<sup>15</sup>

8 She visited, among others, Carlton House in 1790 and the Royal Pavilion in Brighton in 1801–1803.

9 A. Cholewińska-Kruszyńska, 'Królewskie pamiątki w Łańcutcie', *Spotkania z Zabytkami*, vol. 35, 2011, no. 1–2, pp. 52–55.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

11 Another description of this basket comes from the Potocki family archives from Łańcut of 1929: 'Chinese basket, carved in ivory with coloured bas-relief, flowers and birds'. This information, thanks to the kindness of Ms. Aldona Cholewianka-Kruszyńska, was provided to me in correspondence of 9 March 2011 and I am deeply grateful for it.

12 J. Piotrowski, *Zamek w Łańcutcie. Zwięzły opis dziejów i zbiorów* (Lwów, 1933), p. 22.

13 Photograph with the caption: 'Openwork Chinese casket made of ivory, 18th century, from the Łańcut collections of Princess Izabela Lubomirska, Lvov 1933', Piotrowski, *Zamek w Łańcutcie*, Fig. 69.

14 K. Bailey, 'A Note on Prussian Blue in Nineteenth-century Canton', *Studies in Conservation*, vol. 57, 2012, no. 2, pp. 116–21.

15 For example, the Meissen porcelain collection of King Augustus II could have been procured for the Potocki collections via family divisions of the property of Princess Izabela Lubomirska and could have remained in Wilanów. Cf. D.N. Zasławska, *Chinoiserie w Wilanowie* (Warszawa, 2008), p. 287.



Fig. 11

The ivory basket from the Łańcut collection of Izabela Lubomirska, no longer extant; photograph taken by Józef Piotrowski in the 1920s or the 1930s

## The Wilanów history of the baskets

The Wilanów collection of Oriental items compiled by Aleksandra and Stanisław Kostka Potocki featured not only Far Eastern, primarily Chinese, artworks and artefacts, but also products of Cantonese craftsmen and items of daily use. The Potocki couple also arranged some of the Wilanów interiors ‘in the Chinese style’. At the present stage of research, it is not known how the three baskets came to be a part of their collection or how they found their way to Wilanów. The history of Oriental items collected by the Potockis and held in Wilanów was an object of extensive studies, yet there are few entries concerning Chinese ivory products.<sup>16</sup>

Stanisław Kostka Potocki was probably familiar with Chinese ivories and studied the items in his collection. He mentions ‘Chinese carvers’ and their products in his work *O sztuce u dawnych, czyli Winkelman polski* [On the Art of the Ancients, or the Polish Winckelmann]. He admired the impressive skills of Chinese ivory carvers, able to produce multi-layered openwork balls, umbrella and walking stick handles, baskets, vases and trays richly decorated with relief and polychrome. He also described some types of items, referencing the artworks from his collection, and mentioned ivory bas-relief sculptures with erotic themes.<sup>17</sup>

Baskets I, II and III were described for the first time in the inventory of 1832, and again in the 1837 one, supplemented with Chinese objects<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 12). This allows us to pinpoint the probable time of their appearance in Wilanów at the period between 1799 (acquisition of the Wilanów property by the Potocki couple) and 1832. They were also listed in three other Wilanów inventories— those of 1850, 1867 and 1936. The items made of ivory were collected in the ‘Second central room with windows overlooking the Garden’ (at that time known as the Chinese Bedroom and nowadays as the Middle Room), located at the axis of the palace, on the first floor.<sup>19</sup> They were kept on the shelves of a Saxon secretary desk decorated in the Dresden workshop of Martin Schnell,

**Fig. 12**

Page 77 of the 1832 inventory with the first note about the place of storage of Basket I, Basket II and Basket III (plate)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 287.

<sup>17</sup> S.K. Potocki, *O sztuce u dawnych, czyli Winkelman polski* (Warszawa, 1815), part 1, chapter IV (‘O sztuce u Chińczyków’), pp. 194, 199 and 203, <https://polona.pl/item/o-sztuce-u-dawnych-czyli-winkelman-polski-cz-1,OTE1OTY2NTI/7/#item> (accessed 13 August 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych w Warszawie (Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, hereinafter: AGAD), the Wilanów Household Archive (hereinafter: AGWil.), Unit XXI, Administration of the Wilanów Museums, Palaces and Parks (hereinafter: ZPMiPW), ref. no. 174, fol. 77.

<sup>19</sup> AGAD, AGWil., ZPMiPW, ref. no. 174, *Inwentarz Wszelkich Mebli i Ozdób Pokoiowych w Pokojach Palacu Willanowskiego i Oficynach znajdujących się oraz Będących w tymże Palacu na Składzie ... w Miesiącu Czerwcu 1832 roku spisany*. Name of premises according to the description of 1832, fol. 58.

	№	Stron	Adnotacja
e. Dantosto zółta Rypianowa Damskiei Szermad całe haftowane	1.	269	
17. Nad łymce na Sejarie wiszą			
a. Wapelnisz Ryzowy z Włocami Czerwocui i Buzsa Zynowa, Satka, Pińskie i	1.	270	
b. Szlafpek Szafirowy z Matowy, Pińskie i zlotem pomalowany w Nowaty	1.	bez	
18. Biorko Pińskie czworono zakierowane na Posłamentach ta, kimże Osiobna w Tute Kuzaty i Ptaki ozdobione o 4 <sup>ty</sup> Szafielach, Klappa, wewnątrz brygowichami i przegrodzami, na tymże Szafie z Pińskami i Drzewca kami Szklanymi w tute z kwierciad łow o 2 <sup>ty</sup> Klucach na tej Szafie a Sigaret Pińskich, Bronzowych dżwie i z Majsy białyj resna	1.	271	
	3.	276, 278	
Wtedy Szafie na pierworzy fute			
a. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy szeregowej rzadby z przybyty wane Wignozek.	2.	272, 273	
b. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy podobnych wzory szych	2.	274, 275	
c. Szobien z hosi Szonowcy Włocki Pińskie szeregowej nego wyrobu z obu stron z Szobami gęsto	1.	276	
na drugie fute			
d. Wozynkaw z hosi Szonowcy szeregowej z przybywaniami i Włocowami kwiatakami szeregowej Włocow szeregowej rzadby przez Włocow, Dżwie, i Włocow Szasz szeregowej	2.	277, 278	
e. Wozynkaw mały Szobidaw z Zielonem Pińskiem	1.	279	
f. Sigaret z hosi Szonowcy na Posłamentach Drewnianych	2.	280, 281	
g. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy szeregowej Szobami i Pińskami do tyż fute przyniesowane	1.	bez	
u Szafie ubota			
h. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy w Nowaty szochie rzadby z Szobami Szobidaw	1.	282	
i. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy Pińskie, w Bronz opracowanych	2.	283, 284	
k. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy Pińskie na Pińskiem Szobidaw rzadby	1.	285	
l. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy Szobidaw z hosi Szonowcy w różnie Szobami Pińskie, Drzewca i Szobami rzadby z do tyż szochie, zamy szasz szeregowej	1.	286	
m. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy podobnych rzadby w której Szobami z Pińskiem z Majsy Szobidaw	1.	287	
19. Na Szaszach hosi Szochie na Posłamentach Drewnianych Czerwono zakierowanych do tyż Szochie przyniesowane znowidnie w			
na pierwszym Szaszidaw			
a. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy w różnie Nowaty Szobidaw Szochie bez Włocowami podobnych resna do tyż szochie	2.	288, 289	
b. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy Szobidaw w Bronz opracowany	1.	290	
c. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy Szobidaw z Szobami	2.	291, 292	
d. Szasz z hosi Szonowcy Szobidaw w różnie Nowaty i z Szochie szochie w Szochie szochie	2.	293, 294	

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33. w gabłot Szobidaw

which had been transformed into a cabinet.<sup>20</sup> A rectangular paper sticker sized  $1.2 \times 1.0$  cm with the number 278 written in black ink is still attached to the element of the bottom edge of the body and the base of one of the items. This may mean that the item derives from the collection of Stanisław Kostka Potocki. The basket listed as 'e' (with a green handle) entered under no. 279 has not been preserved.

The 'Chinese Inventory' of 1837 also features a note pertaining to two ivory baskets (item 277 and 278) and a plate (item 282) entered under no. 182. The items were still kept in the same room and in the secretary desk.<sup>21</sup> The Wilanów inventory of 1867 prepared after the death of Aleksander Potocki specifies the secretary desk, described as the 'red-varnished desk', still located in the Second Room (Bedroom), described under no. 11 as the place where two ivory baskets were kept.<sup>22</sup> In the Wilanów inventory of 1895, two baskets (I and II) are described in the same red secretary desk under no. 2288 and 2289.<sup>23</sup>

The 'Inventory of the State Agricultural Bank' compiled in 1936 features an entry pertaining to Basket I and II (item 2014 and 2019): 'II Chinese. Cupboard with bone'.<sup>24</sup> Under no. 214, there is the entry: '2014. Basket made of bone, decagonal,  $17 \times 24$ '. The entry on the next page, under no. 2019, reads: '2019. ivory. Richly carved. Shape of decagonal basket, height  $17 \frac{1}{2}$  width 24'. Basket I bears a paper sticker dating from the same period, sized  $2.6 \times 1.5$  cm, with a double dark-blue frame and perforated edges. It bears a fragment of a seal and the number '2014' written in blue ink. The sticker marks the collections covered by the State Agricultural Bank lien towards the debt of the Branicki family.<sup>25</sup>

It is not impossible that the set of three baskets could have been supplemented, or in fact purchased, after Stanisław Kostka Potocki's death by

20 During the last conservation, the panes in the door were replaced with mirrors.

21 AGAD, AGWil., ZPMiPW, ref. no. 175, fols 10 and 11. The note in the 'Inventory of Chinese Items' is analogous to the entry in the 1832 inventory.

22 AGAD, AGWil. ZPMiPW, ref. no. 183, Inventory of 1867, fols 236 and 237.

23 AGAD, AGWil. ZPMiPW, ref. no. 185, Inventory of 1895, fol. 331. The note in Polish is: 'Ivory. Two baskets with covers carved in ivory / openwork sculpture with ivory appliqué / carved and painted, presenting flowers and fruits. Chinese work' (translated by Karolina Alkemade).

24 AGAD, AGWil., ZPMiPW, ref. no. 189, Inventory of the Wilanów Palace by the State Agricultural Bank 1936, compiled by Ossecki, fols 403–04.

25 The sticker with the perforated edge bears the stamp of the Polish Agricultural Bank and the number on it corresponds to the item in inventory of 1936 (inventory of the bank lien) in the first column of the table marked as 'nr PBR'. Only a fragment of the stamp is visible on the sticker, as whole sheets with stickers were stamped and one stamp was used for four or sometimes two stickers. This means that the items were held in lien towards the Branickis debt (information received due to the kindness of Ms. Anna Kwiatkowska).



his son, Aleksander Stanisław Potocki, to enrich the collection.<sup>26</sup> It is also probable that such items were purchased by Aleksandra Potocka at the beginning of the nineteenth century when she was visiting Parisian antique shops in the company of Anetka Potocka née Tyszkiewicz, the wife of Aleksander Potocki. No information about the baskets was found after 1936.<sup>27</sup> The secretary desk where the ivory items had been held was subjected to conservation work in 1836 by a Mr. Karniewski and subsequently by the conservators of the National Museum in Warsaw, after the Wilanów collections were taken over by the state in 1945.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that they were placed in a box, and moved to the Wilanów collection warehouse as damaged items, at that time.

In 1955, the interiors of the Wilanów Palace were emptied of the fittings along with the collection displayed in them (Fig. 13–14). Before the commencement of comprehensive construction, renovation, conservation and restoration works in the entire palace which were to take almost



Fig. 13–14

The secretary desk where the set of artefacts made of ivory was kept in the Chinese Bedroom (now called the Middle Room) is visible on the right-hand side of a 1930 postcard; the same secretary desk next to it – the present-day state

26 Aleksander Stanisław Potocki was also an ardent collector, as mentioned by Wojciech Fijałkowski in his book *Wilanów* (Warszawa, 1973, p. 103). It is probable that he procured the set of ivory baskets whilst expanding the collection of the Far Eastern art. The issue remains an object of study.

27 I am deeply grateful to Anna Kwiatkowska, Joanna Paprocka-Gajek, Karolina Alkemade and Alicja Łoboda from the Department of Art of the Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów for consultations pertaining to issues related to the history of the interiors of the Wilanów Palace.

28 M. Kopplin with the participation of A. Kwiatkowska, *Chinois. Drezdeńska sztuka lakiernicza w Pałacu Wilanowskim* (Münster–Warsaw, 2006), p. 85.

seven years, the entire 'pseudo-Chinese' decoration of walls and ceilings in the Chinese Apartment was removed and the consistent design of the interior was destroyed.<sup>29</sup>

### Application of Prussian Blue and the dating of the baskets

The identification of Prussian blue<sup>30</sup> in the polychrome layer on the relief surface of the decoration on the panels of Basket I and Basket II has also contributed to the determination of the year of 1775 as the probable *terminus post quem* for the creation of the set of baskets (in Basket III (plate), the traditional Chinese blue pigment, i.e. azurite, was applied, which does not contribute in any way to the dating of the plate<sup>31</sup>). Prussian blue was synthesised by the Berlin paint manufacturer Diesbach in, according to various sources, 1704 and 1707 or 1706.<sup>32</sup> Not later than in 1708 it started to be produced and promoted in Europe and in 1709 it was given the name of *Preußisch blau* and *Berlinisch Blau* by the first buyer. The oldest example of its application in European painting is *The Burial of Christ* by Pieter van der Werff, painted in 1709. It is known that Prussian blue was exported to China as a pigment with diverse applications. It was more light-resistant, cheaper and had more intensive colour than indigo, azurite and natural ultramarine procured from lapis-lazuli. Initially, i.e. at the end of the eighteenth century, Prussian blue was brought to the trading post in Canton by the British East India Company. It was used to enhance the colour of tea leaves manufactured for the English market, which at that time were the object of intense trade. This procedure was later abandoned on account of its toxic properties.<sup>33</sup> Based on the studies of Chinese botanical

29 For more, see K. Alkemade, 'Wybrane elementy wystroju apartamentu chińskiego na piętrze korpusu głównego pałacu wilanowskiego i jego zmiany na przestrzeni dziejów – nowe spojrzenie', *Studia Wilanowskie*, vol. 26, 2019, pp. 57–82.

30 Prussian blue has the formula  $\text{FeK}[\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6]$ , and Turnbull's blue  $\text{Fe}^{II}_3[\text{Fe}^{III}(\text{CN})_6]_2$ . It was the first synthetic dark-blue pigment commonly applied in paint from the mid-eighteenth century onwards; it is also the traditional 'blue' pigment in prints of Japanese *aizuri-e* woodcarving, N. Eastaugh, V. Walsh, T. Chaplin, R. Siddall, *Pigment Compendium. A Dictionary of Historical Pigments* (Oxford, 2004), vol. 1, pp. 308–09.

31 Azurite, also known as copper blue or mountain blue, is a natural pigment (pulverised mineral) with the chemical formula  $\text{Cu}_3(\text{CO}_3)_2(\text{OH})_2$ . It had been used as a pigment for over 45,000 years. In China, it was used in paintings from the times of the Sung Dynasty (960–1279). Since the seventeenth century, it has also been produced synthetically, from copper and vinegar in the presence of carbon dioxide from air, P. Rudniewski, *Pigmenty i ich identyfikacja. Skrypt dydaktyczny nr 13* (Warszawa, 1994), p. 53.

32 For more on the history of the discovery and production of Prussian blue, see: *Pigment Compendium*, p. 309.

33 Prussian blue or Turnbull's blue is ferric ferrocyanide ( $\text{FeK}[\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6]$ ), obtained in 1704 in Berlin. It has been produced since 1709 by the company of Johann Konrad Dippler. Among others, hydrogen cyanide was produced from it. The pigment is toxic in greater amounts. It has been applied since the eighteenth century to colour tea during the period of intense trade between China and Western merchants. Cf. S. Rose, *The*

watercolours and paintings exported from Canton to England, it was concluded that Prussian blue, in Cantonese known as *yoang teen*,<sup>34</sup> was used by the artists of Canton mostly in the first half of the nineteenth century, yet it could have been applied as early as c. 1775.<sup>35</sup> After 1775, it found extensive application in painting and artistic craft.<sup>36</sup> Trade in the European synthetic pigment ceased around 1825, when the Chinese discovered the formula for its production and secretly set up a production plant in Canton.<sup>37</sup> Since then, the pigment has also been known as Chinese blue.<sup>38</sup>

### Summary of research issues

A fuller interpretation of artistic values and the provenance of objects requires a combination of their aesthetics with the symbolic layer of their decoration. Symbolic elements are present on various elements on the sides and covers of Baskets I and II: the plants shown in relief plaquettes on the bodies and covers are symbolic, and the symbolic meaning is also manifested in the use of traditional patterns, the composition and the execution of the decorations, and finally the structure of the caskets and the plate.<sup>39</sup>

Baskets I and II comprise two separate elements: their decagonal form contains five pairs of plants with symbolic meanings. On the cover, on the central plaquette, there is a relief octagonal composition with four fanciful flowers known as the *Bao Xiang Hua*; a name which is difficult to translate.<sup>40</sup> The background is filled with a peony scroll; in the centre,

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*Great British Tea Heist* (excerpt from *For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History* [Hutchinson, 2009]), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-great-british-tea-heist-9866709/> (accessed 10 May 2020).

34 *English and Chinese Vocabulary. The Latter in the Canton Dialect*, ed. R. Morrison, (Calcutta, 1840), p. 93, <https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=z7RTAAAcAAJ&rdid=book-z7RTAAAcAAJ&rdot=1> (accessed 07 May 2020).

35 The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) and Victoria and Albert Museum in London have large collections of Chinese watercolours from the beginning of the nineteenth century (1817–1830) made to order in Canton using English paper and Prussian blue. Cf. Bailey, 'A Note on Prussian Blue', pp. 116–21.

36 According to Kate Bailey, this pigment was rarely used in the Far East in the eighteenth century, yet its presence has been identified in at least one examined Cantonese painting, dating from 1775, Bailey, 'A Note on Prussian Blue', pp. 116–21

37 *Ibid.*.

38 *Ibid.*; *Pigment Compendium*, p. 309.

39 A detailed study on the symbols contained in the decorations, the composition and the form of the baskets is prepared by the author as part of this paper.

40 A complex imaginary flower common in Chinese art and a popular decorative motif, especially in the times of the Sui and Tang dynasties, present in diverse decorations, among others on Chinese porcelain. It bears the features of numerous flowers: peony, lotus, chrysanthemum, pomegranate and others. It is also called Buddha's rose. The Mandarin word *hua* (*huā*) denotes 'a flower' or 'a fanciful ornament', while *bao xiang* (*bǎo xiàng*) means 'precious face', which is the epithet for Buddha's face used by Buddhists; P. Bjaaland Welch, *Chinese Art, A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery* (North

a sculpted handle was placed on a low, circular base which symbolizes longevity, happiness and wealth.<sup>41</sup> This pattern is also present in the composition of the circular, openwork plaquette on the base of the baskets, which shows stylised flowers.

In Basket III (plate), the preserved collar is also divided into eight parts and comprises eight openwork panels and ribs. The decoration on every panel presents a different centrally positioned symbolic plant, while the eight structural elements have four pairs of plaquettes with carved Chinese roses on leafy stems or peonies (?) with flowers in two colours. The bottom of the vessels has not been preserved, unfortunately. No information was found on what its appearance may have been.

Two roles can be distinguished in the floral decoration of each of the baskets: aesthetic and symbolic. Native Chinese plants present in the traditional art and medicine were identified in the compositions. The plants were presented in compliance with their metaphorical meaning, in various stages of development (buds, flowers, fruit, etc.).<sup>42</sup> Their choice is not accidental; the symbolic layer in the shapes and decorations of various items was greatly valued by the Chinese.<sup>43</sup> Motifs had diverse meanings in the cultural and linguistic context, depending on whether they occurred individually, in groups or, for example, with animals, offering new meanings via phonetic ideograms.<sup>44</sup>

Placed in the form of plaquettes on the realistically painted decoration of the body, the plants make up a combination of five pairs of important Chinese flowers, fruits or vegetables on leafy or blooming stems, shown on ten side panels of Baskets I and II. The covers also feature compositions of five pairs of most important Chinese flowers: Chinese aster, Chinese camellia, tree peony, Japanese or Chinese anemone, Amur peepervine known as the porcelain berry or wild grape (probably together

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Clarendon, VT, 2008), p. 41. Also M. Russell writes about this ornament in *Contemplating Buddha's Countenance – the Bao Xiang Hua (aka Hosoge or 'Lotus or Peony Scroll')* in *Qing and 20th-Century Chinese Porcelain*, 2019 <https://watersilkdragon.wordpress.com/2019/09/05/contemplating-buddhas-countenance-the-bao-xiang-hua-%E5%AE%9D%E7%9B%B8%E8%8A%B1-aka-hosoge-or-lotus-or-peony-scroll-in-qing-and-c20th-chinese-porcelain/> (accessed 10 May 2021).

41 Ibid..

42 <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-flowers-signs.php> (accessed 10 May 2020).

43 Damian Makowski, PhD Eng., and Alicja Łoboda, assisted me with identification of the majority of plants presented on the panels of Baskets I, II and III (plate).

44 A phonetic ideogram is a phonetic borrowing. The traditional play on words derived from phonetic similarities and the notation of the sound of syllables in the form of combined ideograms and symbolic plants and/or animals. There may also be other hidden or probable meanings: [http://www.neijia.net/neijia/ideogramy\\_29.html](http://www.neijia.net/neijia/ideogramy_29.html); [http://www.neijia.net/neijia/geneza\\_31.html](http://www.neijia.net/neijia/geneza_31.html) (accessed 11 December 2020) – the author of both papers is Bartłomiej Jabłoński; <http://zs-halinow.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/4-PISMO-CHINSKIE.pdf> (accessed 21 February 2021).



Fig. 15-16

A citron fruit on the cover, and a gourd and pumpkin on the body panels of Basket I



with the Japanese Makino anemone) and a carved citron fruit known as Buddha's hand (or arm), in a solid form as the handle on the cover.<sup>45</sup> The bodies and the covers of Baskets I and II feature compositions of fruits and vegetables: pumpkin (*Cucurbita*), gourd (*Lagenaria seringe*), citron (*Citrus medica*), Chinese plum (also known as the Japanese apricot, *Prunus mume*) and peach (*Prunus persica*) (Fig. 15–16).

On Basket III (plate), the decoration on structural elements and in the centre of openwork panels has a relief carving and one-sided polychrome. Narrow relief plaquettes of branches with Chinese roses (?) or peonies in two colours have been placed on the elements of the framework of the collar of the plate, and other flowers: begonia, Chinese iris or daylily, apple-tree flower, orchid, Chinese aster, Chinese camellia, and flowers of apricot and peony are featured each of the eight panels. The plants in plaquettes are shown realistically, with great ease and with awareness of the principles of composition applicable in Chinese painting.

Even as heavily damaged items, the three baskets are a testimony to the exceptional skill of Chinese artisans. It was believed that they were executed in one of the Canton workshops as export products for Western merchants, yet the studies on the style and technology of execution and comparative analyses with similar ivory items<sup>46</sup> give rise to certain doubts with respect to this theory. The baskets could have been intended for the internal market, that is for Chinese clients. This hypothesis is corroborated by the traditional Chinese affirmative symbols and the multi-layered 'wishful' and 'magic' intentions encoded in the decorations.<sup>47</sup> It is also possible that we are dealing with copies of older, popular patterns for objects and decorations that the artisans working in Canton workshops have learnt to reproduce. The baskets could also have been made by a 'nomadic' artisan trained in another centre, who emigrated to Canton for economic reasons.

In relation to the planned conservation work pertaining to the set of three baskets, an opportunity has arisen to study this issue in depth, and the research will definitely be continued. Taking the limited sources and the hitherto results of the conservation studies into account, much pertinent information has already been procured. The Wilanów collections of Far Eastern art are still under study; for example, the issue of collecting after Stanisław Kostka Potocki's death has not been

45 A detailed discussion of the symbolic meanings of vegetal imagery in the decoration of the set of ivory baskets from Wilanów is featured in one of the chapters of the thesis being prepared by the author.

46 With items from the collections of the National Museum in Warsaw made available on-line or in printed publications.

47 The realm of positive symbolism has been present to this day and plays a very important role in the Chinese culture, especially symbols of happiness, welfare and health. It appears in talismans, decorations, paintings on buildings, clothes, etc.

examined in detail and neither has the enhancement of collections of the Wilanów Museum by his son Aleksander. All of these issues will be the object of forthcoming research work. In parallel, pilot conservation activities are carried out on the cover of Basket I. Comprehensive conservation and restoration of all three items has been planned in order to make them a part of the Palace exhibition as an element of the historical Wilanów collection. However, their restoration and storage remains the greatest challenge.

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