



Kraków

Research and conservation project of the Veit Stoss altarpiece in the St. Mary Basilica in Kraków

The research and conservation project of the Veit Stoss altar in St. Mary's Basilica in Kraków was conducted from autumn 2015 to December 2020, by a consortium of key national institutions and important academic institutes of Kraków and Europe. In March 2021, the restored altarpiece was presented to the public. One of the most outstanding works of late Gothic sculpture in Europe, is of symbolic importance for Kraków and its treasure resonating with stories about the history of the city, religious life of its inhabitants, academic development and multiculturalism.

The Veit Stoss altar in Kraków –the altar of the Dormition of the Mother, actually the retable (or altar decoration) of the main altar of St. Mary's church was made in the years 1477-1489 by the sculptor Veit Stoss, who came from Nuremberg and was commissioned by the City Council. The funds for the work came mainly from legacies and donations of the Kraków burghers. St. Mary's church was at that time the most important church of bourgeois Kraków. And so it is today. Continuously, St. Mary's Basilica with its medieval masterpiece, located in the center of the Old Town inscribed on the UNESCO list, plays a part in the most important moments of Kraków. It is also unique in that, with the exception of a sensational World War II episode, the altar still stands today in the place for which it was originally intended.

The research process was interdisciplinary and exceeded classical conservation processes. The course of the project attracted the attention of art historians, conservation experts from all over the world, and at the same time the altarpiece itself was again the object of enormous public and media attention. Each stage of the work aroused great excitement, all the more so because the conservators restored the shape and coloring of the altar before the first conservation, thus coming closer to the original. At the same time, sensational discoveries were made, widely commented on and described by specialist press.

In March 2021, the renovated altar was presented to the public under pandemic restrictions. Despite that, the opening attracted the most important figures and institutions connected with cultural heritage, as well as representatives of Polish authorities.

The Veit Stoss retable has a symbolic meaning for Krakovians. An unusual feature of St. Mary's altar is its realism. The figures immortalized on the altar are portraits of ordinary citizens of that time. The altar is a documentation of the epoch in which it was created and, even today, it is a source of knowledge about the culture, customs and history of the city, the key to understanding its inhabitants, their imaginaries, perceptions, love for the theatricality of life and religiousness. Stoss created the figures replicating all the details, including the unpleasant ones –hands deformed by work and rheumatism, balding skulls, veins visible under the skin. He has also shown clothes, weapons, dishes and household equipment of the city inhabitants. The fidelity to the reality of the time is so impressive that in the 1930s some works were written, even in the field of dermatology, on skin diseases in medieval Kraków, based on the Stoss's work. Numerous narrations, legends, myths have been created around the altar, but also film production industry, literature, series, as well as souvenir business, albums, reproductions have been developed. The altar is one of the biggest tourist attractions in Kraków. Each time it is opened (the altar is a pentaptych, i.e. it has 5 wings), it is a centuries-old ritual for the worshippers. Formerly it was opened only during



major Catholic Church holidays and the faithful could see only the wings of the closed altar on other days. Nowadays, ritual of the opening is held every day, at noon: the opening performs as a spectacle for visitors -before the pandemic, tourists from all over the world have attended those spectacular moments.

Threats and Preservation

For centuries, archpresbyters of St. Mary's parish, having in their care one of the most outstanding works of Gothic art in Europe, were determined to preserve the altar. The altarpiece has been cleaned and renovated many times -the oldest document dates back to 1533. In the 18th century, with a change in artistic taste, the idea of replacing the altarpiece with a new one in the fashionable Baroque style was seriously considered. This dangerous idea fortunately has not come to realization. In 1822 one of the most outstanding European sculptors Bertel Thorvaldsen was impressed by the work and it effected with the efforts for the conservation of the altar, which was carried out in the years 1866-1869 under the direction of Władysław tuszczkiewicz and Jan Matejko - the fathers of the school of Polish conservation (Matejko is an outstanding representative of Polish history painting and the founder of the first Polish Academy of Fine Arts). Subsequent restorations took place in 1932-1934, and the last great conservation - in 1946-1950 - was the repair of damage caused after the altar was plundered by the Germans during World War II.

It is worth mentioning here the unusual wartime fate of the altar. In September 1939, a Krakow art historian, professor Karal Estreicher, intending to protect the altar from destruction during the military operations of the World War II, dismantled the statues of the altar and floated them down the Vistula river to Sandomierz by barges. They were stored in the cathedral and the seminary. However, the Germans located them and deported to Berlin. On Hitler's explicit order, the figures were sent to Nuremberg, the hometown of the altar's creator. The sculptures were stored in an underground shelter built in Obere Schmiedgasse, the same location where the regalia of the Holy Roman Empire robbed in Vienna in 1938 were stored. Since the altar was to serve the people of Nuremberg, the Germans also dismantled the altar's supporting structure remained in the St. Mary church and transported it to Wiesenthau Castle for safekeeping. Germans also dismantled the altar's supporting structure and transported it to Wiesenthau Castle for safekeeping. At the end of the war, Emeryk Hutten-Czapski, a Polish politician and diplomat, tracked down the altar. The pieces of art and the altar's elements found in the shelter were secured by the American occupation authorities in cooperation with the members of the Allied commission responsible for the search for the masterpieces plundered by the Nazis. Thanks to the efforts of professor Karal Estreicher, the Americans organized the transport of the altar to Krakow. The same train transported back to Poland no less valuable treasures plundered during the war - paintings from Polish museum collections (among others by Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt van Rijn, Dirk Bouts, Bartolo di Taddeo, Lucas Cranach) and many other artifacts. The arrival of the train to Krakow was a great patriotic manifestation and the altar became a symbol of the Polish national heritage. The return of the restored altar to St. Mary's Basilica was an important moment for the reconstruction of the country overwhelmed by the post-war crisis.

An Interdisciplinary Project

Preparations for the contemporary conservation project began in 2012. The Conservation Commission to assess the conservation status of the Veit Stoss altarpiece developed a report that concluded that the conservation status of the altarpiece was "stable" but "at risk," with steadily worsening areas of damage. As



a result, in 2013 the Inter-Academy Institute of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art (<https://www.mik.edu.pl/en/>) conducted a full inventory of the altarpiece using 3D laser scanning and produced state-of-the-art survey documentation in the form of orthoplans and vector drawings.

The project was to include comprehensive research and conservation work, along with accompanying educational and organizational activities, including meetings of an international group of experts, the creation of a program for the modern prevention, protection, and safe conservation of the altar, the design of a fire protection system, and the preparation of materials for a monograph.

The project included the full technical and aesthetic conservation of all (200) elements of the altar, together with physical, chemical, art history, mycological and dendrochronological examinations. Physical and chemical examinations included white light and analytical light photography, X-ray computed tomography, stratigraphic analysis, microscopic and microchemical studies.

Academic Value

The Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków is the oldest Polish academy of the visual arts. From its very beginning, its history has been connected with the conservation of the Veit Stoss altar. Jan Matejko, one of the most famous Polish painters, as the founder and first director of the School of Fine Arts, signed an agreement with St. Mary's Parish concerning the artistic care of the interior decoration of the church. This resulted in the creation of decorations, polychromes and conservation works, including the most important treasure of this basilica - truly the main church of the Kraków inhabitants - in contrast to the Royal Wawel Cathedral. After nearly 150 years, the Academy of Fine Arts is still taking care of one of the most outstanding works of art in Poland, and the current conservation work is a continuation of 15 decades of development of the Kraków conservatory school.

The centuries-long history of the altar, its wartime and post-war history are the quintessence of the rich and multinational past of the city. On their basis a multidimensional story about Kraków, a city of Central Europe, and its inhabitants is created. The moment of the grand opening and thanksgiving for the renovation of St. Mary's altar, scheduled for the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary - August 15, 2021, is awaited by the inhabitants of Kraków as the moment when the city returns to normality after the pandemic. For a city experiencing a tourism crisis, it is to be a moment of re-opening for the industry and a turn towards responsible and sustainable tourism, emphasizing the importance of cultural heritage - the basis for the city development and creativity. The altar itself is a symbol of this regeneration, resilience and change in the city's policy, so far based on weekend tourism (citybreak). Thus, the project contributes to the search for the origins and the key to understanding the local identity and, at the same time, Krakow's relationship with the most important European movements in art.