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Left / abandoned / post-German.  
Late Gothic Silesian Retables  
and Their New Settings  
in the Monastery Church in Mogiła  
(Cracow), and the Cathedrals  
in Warsaw and Poznań in the 1940s  
and 1950s

Abstract

Based on three case studies, the text presents the analysis of the process of the reappropriation of three selected “left”/“abandoned”/“post-German” medieval artworks in the three important conservation projects from the first decade of the post-war reconstruction of Poland (1945–1955). The circumstances, course and consequences of mounting late gothic Silesian altarpieces in the presbyteries of the monastery church in Mogiła and in the rebuilt and restored cathedrals in Warsaw and Poznań will be traced. This will enhance the analysis of the process of post-war creation of three monuments of Polish medieval art, different in their architectural and artistic costume and history. They will be examined in the context of foreign artworks, which despite being “left”/“abandoned” remained the carriers of a complicated, multithreaded history, unknown to or ignored by decision-makers.

**Key words:** Late Gothic, altarpiece, Silesia, Recovered Territories, conservation, medievalism

“Left and post-German property” is a phrase introduced in the decree of 8 March 1946 sanctioning the taking over of two categories of property by the Polish State.<sup>1</sup> The first is “left property” (pol. *majątek opuszczony*), which the owner lost between 1939 and 1945 due to the war and did not regain until the end of 1950 (mova-

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1 Dekret z dnia 8 marca 1946 r. o majątkach opuszczonych i poniemieckich [Decree of 8 March 1946 on left and post-German property]. *Dziennik Ustaw*, 13 poz. 87, 8 March 1946.

bles) or 1955 (immovables). The second category included “post-German property” (pol. *majątek poniemiecki*), i.e. property previously owned by the Reich or the Free City of Danzig, German or Danzig legal persons and citizens. The ownership of such property was passed on to the Polish State on 19 April 1946. In earlier Polish legal acts regulating property issues, the term “abandoned” was used instead of “post-German”.<sup>2</sup> Both terms played an important role in redefining material objects located or “found” by the Polish newcomers at the Recovered Territories, as they symbolically denuded the objects of their previous owners and effaced their previous historical, spatial and social context.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, despite the clear legal distinction, especially in official texts and correspondence exchanged between the representatives of state institutions (such as museums, conservators) and the (future) owners of the objects, the terms “left” (pol. *opuszczony*), “abandoned” (pol. *porzucony*), and “post-German” (pol. *poniemiecki*) were used interchangeably with reference to the artworks from the Recovered Territories, notably avoiding the last. This inconsistency, subconscious or intentional, as will be indicated in this text based on three case studies, made it possible to conceal the troublesome “German” past of objects integrated into national collections and historic church interiors in the reality of post-war Poland. As a result, their pre-war biography<sup>4</sup> was left unsaid or presented in broad strokes. At the same time, this practice facilitated coming to prominence of their “abandonment”, neutrality and “availability to be claimed”,<sup>5</sup> and, as a consequence, legitimised their free appropriation and domestication on the new Polish owners’ terms. The ongoing discussion about the legal, moral, social and political consequences of the above-mentioned decree and the taking over (looting) of post-German property<sup>6</sup> will not be discussed in detail.

Based on selected examples, the text aims to analyse the process of the reappropriation of “left”/“abandoned”/“post-German” medieval artworks in the three important conservation projects from the first decade of the post-war reconstruction of Poland (1945–1955).<sup>7</sup> The circumstances, course and consequences of mounting

2 Dekret z dnia 2 marca 1945 o majątkach opuszczonych i porzuconych [Decree of 2 March 1945 on left and abandoned property]. *Dziennik Ustaw*, 9 poz. 45, 2 March 1945.

3 A. Zborowska, “‘Abandoned’ things: Looting German property in post-war Poland”, *History and Anthropology*, 2021, 32, no. 5, pp. 7–9; idem, *Życie rzeczy w powojennej Polsce*, Warszawa 2019, p. 25.

4 I. Kopytoff, “The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process”, in: *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai, Cambridge 2014, pp. 64–92.

5 Zborowska, “‘Abandoned’ things...”, p. 2.

6 B. Sierżputowski, “Public international law in the context of post-German cultural property held within Poland’s borders. A complicated situation or simply a resolution?”, *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 2020, 33, no. 4, pp. 953–968; W. Kowalski, “Sytuacja prawna poniemieckich zbiorów bibliotecznych w Polsce”, *Przegląd Biblioteczny*, 1997, no. 1, pp. 17–23; idem, “Międzynarodowo-prawne implikacje ochrony dziedzictwa kulturowego na Zachodnich i Północnych Ziemiach Polski”, in: *Ochrona dziedzictwa kulturowego Zachodnich i Północnych Ziemi Polski*, ed. J. Kowalczyk, Warszawa, 1995, pp. 15–23.

7 The most comprehensive study devoted to rebuilding and conservation of Polish heritage, especially architecture, at that time see: P. Majewski, *Ideologia i konserwacja. Architektura zabytkowa w Polsce w czasach socrealizmu*, Warszawa, 2009.

late gothic Silesian altarpieces in the presbyteries of the monastery church in Mogiła and in the rebuilt and restored cathedrals in Warsaw and Poznań will be traced. This will enhance the analysis of the process of post-war creation of three monuments of Polish medieval art, different in their architectural and artistic costume and history. They will be examined in the context of foreign artworks, which despite being “left”/“abandoned” remained the carriers of a complicated, multithreaded history, unknown to or ignored by decision-makers. The three selected late Gothic Silesian retables, regarded explicitly as “left”/“abandoned” in the correspondence and official writings from the period in question, are the focus of attention in the text and each of them will receive a separate case study. Such an approach will help, on the one hand, trace and rethink the history of these objects in detail as unique situations, and, on the other hand, show the potential of the approach taken here in relation to other works moved from the Recovered Territories, which, when supported by archival research, can result in a synthesis tracing the most important problems and phenomena occurring in the first stages of the long process of adopting the “left” / “abandoned” / “post-German” objects by the patchwork family of Polish material heritage.<sup>8</sup> Although the findings presented here cannot serve as the basis for any generalisation, they will certainly serve the discussion concerning the existence of any coherent policy towards medieval artworks from the newly annexed territories of Poland in the period 1945–1955. What is more, the text will shed light on possible randomness of the actions taken, dictated perhaps as much by the personal preferences of the decision-makers as by the relatively high artistic class and availability of the artworks in question. In addition, three other issues will be reflected upon, namely the status and potential of the “abandoned” artwork itself, the processes of “naturalising its acquisition”<sup>9</sup> and new emplacement, as well as the objects’ relationship to the new spatial-artistic-social context assigned to them after 1945, especially against a backdrop of the relationship of things to things and people to things. The analysis will focus on phenomena which run parallel to post-war art historians’ research, especially in the field of so-called “Western research”,<sup>10</sup> and have not yet been

8 Selected problems concerning this issue were recently discussed in: T. Torbus, *Rekonstrukcje, dekonstrukcje, (nad)interpretacje*, Gdańsk, 2019.

9 Paraphrasing the term “naturalising of possession” used by: Zborowska, “‘Abandoned’ things...”, op. cit.

10 For the outline and analysis of this research see: A. Labuda, “Polska historia sztuki i ‘Ziemie Odzyskane’”, in: idem, *Z dziejów historii sztuki. Polska Niemcy, Europa*, ed. R. Bąk, Poznań, 2015, pp. 69–104; idem, “Sztuka i historiografia artystyczna w polsko-niemieckiej debacie – zaniedbany problem badawczy”, in: idem, *Z dziejów historii sztuki. Polska Niemcy, Europa*, ed. R. Bąk, Poznań 2015, pp. 105–123; idem, “Niemieckie dziedzictwo historyczno-artystyczne w Polsce. Sądy, stereotypy i opinie po II wojnie światowej”, in: idem, *Z dziejów historii sztuki. Polska Niemcy, Europa*, ed. R. Bąk, Poznań, 2015, pp. 125–141. Earlier versions of these texts: idem, “Das deutsche Kunsterbe in Polen. Ansichten, Gemeinplätze und Meinungen nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg”, *Kunstchronik*, 1997, 50, pp. 325–333; idem, “Kunst und Kunsthistoriographie im deutsch-polnischen Spannungsverhältnis – eine vernachlässigte Forschungsaufgabe”, in: *Deutsche Geschichte und Kultur im heutigen Polen. Fragen der Gegenstandsbestimmung und Methodologie*, ed. H.-J. Karp, Marburg, 1997, pp. 119–135.

determined by such investigations. Finally, the pre-war history of selected objects, although it was not present in the horizon of knowledge of the post-war Polish decision-makers, has been presented here on purpose. Such an approach, which does justice to the contemporary reader, although carrying the risk of anachronism, is aimed at showing the perverse and intricate history of works which, by their very nature lacking nationality, were involved not only in artistic ventures, but also in those motivated by different ideologies and historiographic concepts.

## Mogiła (Cracow)

In 2014, Piotr Chojnacki, the Cistercian abbot in Mogiła, began efforts to acquire the missing sculptural parts of the late Gothic winged altarpiece, which was mounted in the presbytery of the Mogiła monastery church (Fig. 1) in 1948, during the conservation and restoration work held there shortly after the war.<sup>11</sup> The mentioned retable, originally from the church in Steinau an der Oder (after 1945: Ścinawa) in Lower Silesia, with two pairs of movable wings, was completed in 1514, most probably in the workshop of Jakob Beinhart in Breslau (now: Wrocław).<sup>12</sup> Historically and artistically, it had no connections with Lesser Poland and the Cistercians, and was transferred to Mogiła in rather unclear circumstances. Nonetheless, in several respects, the retable's fate seems symptomatic of the "post-German" medieval artworks' fortunes in Poland after 1945 and therefore merits consideration. Even though discussed as a background of the bespoken events, the restoration of the presbytery of the Mogiła church is also of great importance. In 1949, its effects differed drastically not only from its pre-war character, but also from the visions and initial projects created in 1945 by the initiators of the works. Abbot Chojnacki's efforts provide indisputable evidence that no matter the circumstances of its mounting in Mogiła, the Silesian altarpiece has been successfully domesticated over the years. In 21<sup>st</sup> century, it emerges as an indispensable part of the convent church's interior.

The Cistercians settled in the village of Mogiła, now part of Cracow, not later than in 1225.<sup>13</sup> Even though their monastery church, consecrated in 1266, has undergone many renovations and alterations over the centuries, the late-Romanesque and Gothic forms remain prevalent in its oldest eastern part.<sup>14</sup> The abbey played

11 Archiwum Ojców Cystersów w Mogile (Cistercian Archive in Mogiła, further in the text: ACM), Letters from Piotr Chojnacki to Agnieszka Morawińska, director of the National Museum in Warsaw, and to Piotr Oszczanowski, director of the National Museum in Wrocław, 25 April 2014.

12 W. Marcinkowski, *Gotycka nastawa ołtarzowa u kresu rozwoju - Retabulum ze Ścinawy (1514) w kościele klasztorным w Mogile*, Kraków, 2006; B. Maj, "Niezwykłe losy ścinawskiego retabulum. Z dziejów sztuki sakralnej w powojennej Polsce", *Perspektywy kultury / Perspectives on culture*, 2020, 29, pp. 225–230.

13 M. Zdanek, "Proces implantacji opactwa cystersów w Mogile", *Nasza Przyszłość*, 2001, p. 519.

14 M. Szyma, "Architektura kościoła Cystersów w Mogile w XIII i XIV w. Fazy budowy i ich datowanie", *Wiadomości Konserwatorskie Województwa Krakowskiego*, 1997, 7, pp. 141–162.



**Fig. 1.** Presbytery of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Wenceslaus, Mogiła Abbey, Cracow, photo: Wikimedia Commons.

a major role in the political and cultural history of Poland, sharing the country's fate also through invasions, wars and disasters. In January 1945, after the German army left its walls, the historic monastery needed to be renovated and restored to its former function.<sup>15</sup> This work was undertaken by abbot Augustyn Ciesielski. Few months after his arrival in Mogiła on 26 January 1945, he invited Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz, one of the most famous Polish architects and conservators of the interwar period,<sup>16</sup> to collaborate in this enterprise. In many respects Szyszko-Bohusz seemed predestined for it. As a perennial supervisor of the restoration work in Wawel Hill in Cracow and designer of several churches, he also had experience in construction work and conservation of medieval architecture and monastery complexes (Jasna Góra, Tyniec).<sup>17</sup>

In June 1945, the first meeting was organised in order to develop a plan for further actions. It was attended by, among many others, the abbot, Szyszko-Bohusz as well as Bogdan Treter, the Cracow Province Conservator. During the meeting, the complexity of the historic and artistic fabric of the church, consisting of Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque elements, was recognised.<sup>18</sup> Symptomatically, the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century additions turned out to be completely ignored, while the main altar was considered "quasi-baroque" and therefore of little value. In particular, the last object mentioned stood in the way of achieving the objectives formulated at that meeting and progressively implemented by February of the following year. The plan was to uncover all three Gothic windows bricked up in the eastern wall of the presbytery, and to restore, where possible, the Romanesque features of the church interior by exposing stone and brick walls, sparing only few selected remnants of the 16<sup>th</sup> century polychromes. In place of the dismantled Baroque retablo, an altar in the "Romanesque spirit" was to be executed. The work progressed very quickly and its first phase was summarised during the next meeting held in January 1946.<sup>19</sup> The project of the altar space envisaged a stone altar designed by Szyszko-Bohusz, with a silver or gilded cross placed on mensa (Fig. 2). All newly-discovered remnants of Gothic polychromies were to be transferred to the refectory or to the cloister. The space above the newly-designed stained glass windows, was to be covered with a contemporary wall painting "free from naturalism and expressionism". The paintings covering the vaults from 1911 were also to be removed.

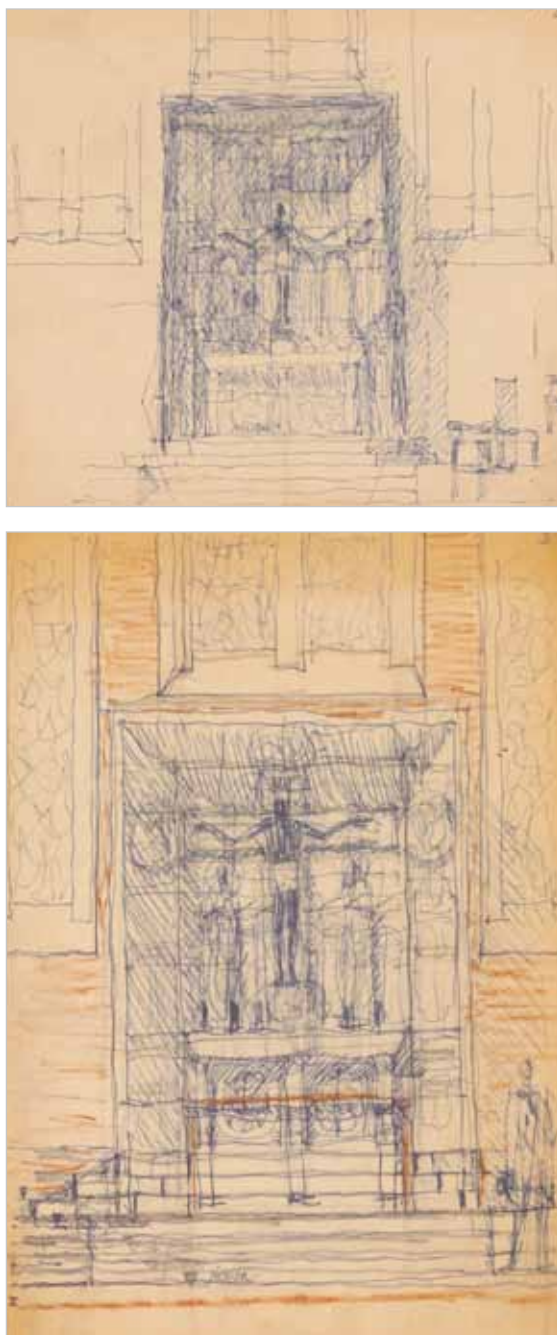
15 M. Starzyński, M. Zdanek, "Historiographus ordinis. O życiu i twórczości ojca Augustyna Ciesielskiego OCist (1909–1968)", in: *Dziedzictwo Cystersów: prace wybrane / Augustyn Ciesielski*, eds. M. Starzyński, M. Zdanek, Kraków, 2013, p. 24.

16 J. A. Mrozek, "Tradycja i awangarda w twórczości Adolfa Szyszko-Bohusza (na przykładzie wybranej grupy obiektów)", in: *Tradycja i innowacja. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Łódź, listopad 1979*, Warszawa, 1981, p. 278.

17 M. Wiśniewski, *Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz*, Kraków, 2013; M. Pilikowski, *Architekt Akademii: Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz w krakowskiej Akademii Sztuk Pięknych*, Kraków, 2020.

18 Records from this meeting are preserved in the collection of Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie, zespół: Spuścizna profesora Adolfa Szyszko-Bohusza, (National Archive in Cracow, unit: The Legacy of Professor Szyszko-Bohusz, further in the text: APK), 29/651/0, p. 203.

19 APK, 29/651/0, p. 213.



**Fig. 2.** Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz, projects of the main altarpiece to the church of Mogiła Abbey, ca. 1945–1946, APK 29/651/0

Undoubtedly, the first stage of the restoration works in the Mogiła church was dominated by Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz's vision. The radical idea of uncovering the walls is reminiscent of similar actions he took during the restoration of churches in Wiślica, Inowłódz<sup>20</sup> or in Tyniec, where the presbytery of the monastery church was "liberated from the baroque varnish".<sup>21</sup> Experience gained during the work on the Wawel Hill must have played an important role. It is evidenced by the shape of the altar designed for the church in Mogiła, which imitates the form of the Neo-Romanesque altar designed by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and mounted in St Leonard's crypt in 1876.<sup>22</sup> Its restoration was carried out by Szyszko-Bohusz in 1937–1938.<sup>23</sup> It would be the second, after Przegorzały,<sup>24</sup> quotation from this particular space introduced into the architect's projects. This time, however, it was unaccomplished. The preserved plans reveal Szyszko-Bohusz's inclination to symmetry and reduction of decoration in favour of simple and dominant form, in harmony with his declared reluctance to reconstruct and a tendency to introduce new designed elements that referred to the stylistic costume of the whole.<sup>25</sup> This approach, shaped in a completely different and bygone era, as well as Szyszko-Bohusz's health, could not withstand the confrontation with the new realities of post-war Poland.

As a result of the changes among the local authorities, the meeting of 28 February 1946<sup>26</sup> was attended by the new Province Conservator, Józef Dutkiewicz,<sup>27</sup> an experienced official, conservator, museologist, and painter, whose interests and education determined the rejection of many of Szyszko-Bohusz's ideas and the shaping of the Mogiła church's presbytery in its present form. Two decisions in particular, taken at this gathering, turned out to be crucial for further course of works. Firstly, examination of the plasterwork was commissioned, which led in the following months to the discovery of late Gothic wall paintings on the eastern wall of the presbytery featuring Annunciation scene, St. Veronica surrounded by two bishops, and a short painted inscription.<sup>28</sup> These and many other findings which followed were attributed to Stanisław Samostrzelnik, one of the most prominent Cracow painters of the first third of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and a Cistercian from Mogiła

20 Wiśniewski, *Adolf* ..., p. 49, 65.

21 APK, 29/651/0, p. 189.

22 <http://www.fototeka.ihs.uj.edu.pl/navigart/node/121612> [accessed 10 January 2022].

23 I. Płuska, "Konserwacja romańskiej krypty św. Leonarda pod katedrą wawelską", *Budownictwo*, 2009, 9, pp. 261–268.

24 W. Szymański, "Vernacularism, Lesser Poland's Heimat, and Auxiliary Sciences in the Study of Architecture for the Third Reich", *Kunsttexte.de*, 3/2019.

25 Pilikowski, op. cit., p. 335.

26 ACM, Protocole of the meeting held in Mogiła, February 1946, no. 130.

27 M. Ostaszewska, "Józef Edward Dutkiewicz a sztuka konserwacji", in: *Sztuka konserwacji i restauracji. Cesare Brandi (1906), jego myśl i debata o dziedzictwie. Sztuka konserwacji-restauracji w Polsce (The Art of Conservation and Restoration. Cesare Brandi (1906–1988), his thought and the heritage debate. Art of conservation-restoration in Poland)*, eds. I. Szmelter, M. Jadzińska, Warszawa, 2007, pp. 216–229.

28 J. Dutkiewicz, "Nowoodkryte dekoracje malarskie", *Ochrona Zabytków*, 1948, 1, no. 2, pp. 69–70.



at the same time.<sup>29</sup> Abbot Ciesielski, the author of a 1945 master thesis about Samostrzelnik, immediately recognised the importance of the discoveries and asked Dutkiewicz in a letter not only to preserve the uncovered paintings, but also to reconstruct missing parts as “a valuable testimony of native Cistercian culture”.<sup>30</sup> In 1948, due to Dutkiewicz’s personal involvement in the work, his wish came true.<sup>31</sup> The second decision made at the meeting in February 1946, dictated by the desire to “bring out the historic shape of the church by exploiting existing values”, involved mounting “an authentic Gothic triptych with the image of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary” on the main altar.<sup>32</sup> Beyond any doubts, Dutkiewicz, as an expert in medieval woodcarving,<sup>33</sup> influenced such a decision, in contrast to the abbot’s declared desire to “restore the austerity of the Cistercian sacral space”.<sup>34</sup> The Cistercians manifested their scepticism about Dutkiewicz’s initiative and their willingness to materialize Szyszko-Bohusz’s project of the main altar several times during the protracted process of providing them with an appropriate retable.

The search for a winged altarpiece began in March 1946 with a reconnaissance of the Wawel Castle’s depot and collection, but it did not yield any results.<sup>35</sup> The second place of inquiry for a suitable retable was the National Museum in Warsaw. These two institutions stored artworks retrieved mainly in 1945–1946 from numerous depots arranged during the war by the Germans in Lower Silesia and other parts of Recovered Territories. The objects in question included not only Polish collections looted during World War II (recovered by the Poles), but also objects from German museum and church collections located mostly within the former territory of the Third Reich (which were, in turn, “secured”).<sup>36</sup> In February 1947, Dutkiewicz’s request to transfer a Silesian late Gothic Marian retable, the so-called Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych, from the National Museum in Warsaw to Mogiła was rejected.<sup>37</sup> At the time, the work was mistakenly thought to have originated from Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the Sand in Wrocław (not Breslau anymore), and, according to the rejection letter, there were plans to return it “to its rightful place”

29 M. Starzyński, “Humanism, Painting and Patronage at Mogiła Abbey in the Renaissance. Abbot Erasmus Ciolek and Artist-Monk Stanislaus Samostrzelnik”, *Citeaux. Commentarii Cistercienses*, 2014, 65, pp. 301–327.

30 ACM, Letter from Mogiła to the Department of Museums and Monuments Protection of the Cracow Province, 2 December 1946, no. 119.

31 Dutkiewicz, “Nowoodkryte...”, pp. 69–70.

32 ACM, Protocole of the meeting held in Mogiła, 28 February 1946, no. 130.

33 J. Dutkiewicz, *Małopolska rzeźba średniowieczna 1300-1450*, Kraków, 1949.

34 ACM, Letter from Mogiła to the Department of Museums and Monuments Protection of the Cracow Province, 2 December 1946, no. 119.

35 APK, 29/651/0, p. 221. In a letter written from Wawel, on stationery bearing the heading “Krakau Burg” (crossed out by its author), sketches of two triptychs were sent, but they turned out too small.

36 J. Kudelski, “Rewindykacja dóbr kultury na Dolnym Śląsku”, *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 2016, 73, pp. 78–79.

37 ACM, Letter of the Chief Director of Museums and Monuments Protection to Józef Dutkiewicz, 17 February 1947, no. 108.

after the church was rebuilt (actually raised from the rubble after the catastrophe of Festung Breslau). Instead, the Cistercians and Dutkiewicz were offered to choose one of the altarpieces “from the left [sic!] property kept in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw”. This seemingly laconic response perfectly illuminates the complicated and ambiguous approach of the Polish authorities, art historians, and museum professionals to the still dissonant heritage taken over (or “secured”) at the Recovered Territories. Firstly, despite referring to artworks from the former territories of the Third Reich, the term “post-German” never came up, even though it was the only legally correct designation of the status of the mentioned objects. Instead, the term “left” was used, which was probably supposed to implicitly inform the addressee that the objects in question originated, indeed, from the Recovered Territories, but at the same time stress that they were unowned and available to be claimed. Secondly, in 1947, the word “left” was not-applicable to the Virgin of the Rosary Polyptych anymore, as according to the letter, the artworks’ future location was, at least theoretically, determined. Hence it was no longer “left” because it had an owner. In this regard, the subject became the still-ruined Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the Sand in Wrocław, located at the territory of Poland since May 1945. Consequently, in 1947, the retable could be considered “owned”, “domesticated” or even “ours” by the Polish authorities. Finally, within the group of “post-German” objects taken over by Poland, the most “lost” or, more appropriately “abandoned”, were the objects whose previous place of storage (such as pre-war Silesian museums and churches) no longer existed, and whose future destination had not yet been determined.

The altarpiece from Steinau, transferred to the Cistercian church in Mogiła on 12 May 1947, complied with the requirements formulated by Dutkiewicz and the Cistercians in terms of both size and iconography. It is a monumental late Gothic pentaptych (only the shrine measures 2,5 x 2 m), featuring an oversized statue of Mary in festive opening and carved Marian scenes in its wings. Moreover, the artwork met the criteria of being “left” / “abandoned” formulated above, because in 1871 it was transferred from Steinau to the collection of Museum schlesischer Altertümer (since 1899: Schlesisches Museum für Kunstgewerbe und Altertümer in Breslau, see Fig. 3), and in 1946 transported from the depot in Henryków (at the Recovered Territories) to Warsaw.<sup>38</sup> Neither did the Silesian museum exist, nor were there any plans of returning the retable to Ścinawa (since 1945 not Steinau anymore). In 1948, after conservation, it was mounted in its present place, even though the restoration of the Mogiła church lasted one more year.

The history of the post-war conservation and restoration of the convent church in Mogiła seems worth elucidating for two reasons. First, the church became the arena where the concepts and personalities of two conservators, representing two different conservation universes, clashed. On the one hand, there was Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz, an architect and restorer with a propensity for historicism and modernism,

38 Marcinkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–13.



**Fig. 3.** Altarpiece from Steinau in the permanent exhibition of Schlesisches Museum für Kunstgewerbe und Altertümer in Breslau, before 1945 (photo: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk)

responsible for the deliberate creation of many monuments to the Polish state re-born after 1918. On the other hand, there was Józef Dutkiewicz, a painter, active artist, and museologist, convinced of the necessity of compensating the lost aesthetic values by new inventions, including works “of equal creative potential”, who believed that the conservator plays the role of an artist-director. What they had in common was the lack of respect for the late Baroque art and all the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century’s changes. As a result of this clash, a new sacral space came into existence, only partially based on historical substance, with many modern interventions and the late Gothic Silesian polyptych historically unrelated to this place.

Secondly, this story evidenced the existence of fundamental differences in the approach to the “post-German” heritage and its post-war allocation among contemporary Polish art historians and museologists. As mentioned in the introduction to this paragraph, in 2014, Abbot Chojnacki of Mogiła sent requests to the National Museums in Warsaw and Wrocław, asking for transferring small sculptural parts from the shrine and crowing of the Silesian retable, as a long-term deposit. As a consequence of the post-war chaos, not only were they not included in the winged altar-

piece sent to Mogiła, but also unwittingly divided between the two museums.<sup>39</sup> The aim of the abbot's initiative, based on earlier findings by Wojciech Marcinkowski, was to merge all the preserved elements of the retable to restore its "splendour and glory".<sup>40</sup> Such an enquiry also proves that the altarpiece, whose mounting in Mogiła in 1948 may appear a result of an odd twist of fate, in a relatively short period of time "grew into" the interior of the Cistercian church, largely created by the post-war conservators, and became domesticated in the minds of its owners and users. Also, from the perspective of the National Museum in Warsaw, the work lost its "abandoned" status and was considered an integral part of the convent church's furnishings, as the museum decided out of its own initiative, to give its own parts of the retable over to Mogiła, which indeed happened in 2017.<sup>41</sup> A completely different response was expressed by the National Museum in Wrocław, which, for the sake of the integrity of the collection and the artworks state of preservation, refused the abbot's request and made the sculpted Crucifixion group available only to make copies, which now crown the retable's shrine in Mogiła.<sup>42</sup> This refusal may have also been influenced by the fact that this particular institution continues the tradition of the pre-war Silesian museums, which is reflected not only in the profile of the collection, especially art before 1900, but also in revindication and popularisation activities. From this perspective, the domestication of the altarpiece from Steinau at Mogiła may appear a far less obvious and justified process. In the near future, the issue of the continued existence of the borders of the Recovered Territories in Polish museology and conservation will certainly merit research.

## Warsaw

The already mentioned Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych embellishing the presbytery of the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the Sand in Wrocław since 1964 (Fig. 4)<sup>43</sup>, which Józef Dutkiewicz had sought for the church in Mogiła in 1946, did not remain unused until the completion of works at the church. Being a deposit of the National Museum in Warsaw, it was lent to the presbytery of the rebuilt St. John's Archcathedral in Warsaw from 1953 to 1964, temporarily filling the space whose shape and decoration had been long debated (Fig. 5). Introducing the late

39 ACM, Letters from Piotr Chojnacki to Agnieszka Morawińska, director of the National Museum in Warsaw, and to Piotr Oszczanowski, director of the National Museum in Wrocław, 25 April 2014.

40 Ibid.

41 Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, Dział Głównego Inwentaryzatora, no. III-520/16 [National Museum in Warsaw, Chief Inventory Department. Handover protocol prepared on 25 November 2016 in Warsaw and signed on 9 February 2017.

42 ACM, Correspondence between the National Museum in Wrocław and the Convent in Mogiła written in the years 2014 and 2015.

43 A. Ziomecka, "Śląskie retabula szafowe w drugiej połowie XV i na początku XVI wieku", *Roczniki Sztuki Śląskiej*, 1976, 10, pp. 137–138.



**Fig. 4.** Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych in the presbytery of the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the Sand in Wrocław, 2001, photo: Romuald Kaczmarek

Gothic Silesian altarpiece to the interior of the church rebuilt in the spirit of the “Mazovian Gothic”,<sup>44</sup> was in line with the practices from the first decade of the post-war reconstructions of sacral architecture in Poland, as this article seeks to demonstrate. In the second half of the 1950s, however, such a practice proved dissonant with the constantly-evolving vision of the interior of the Polish capital’s archcathedral. The vision was dictated mainly by the charismatic Primate Stefan Wyszyński, the organizer of the 1957-1966 celebrations of the Millennium of the Baptism of Poland. He would recognize the primacy of Gothic forms over Baroque ones and was averse to all „pre-war” transformations of medieval artworks.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, in all probability, the sacral space in question was to expose not only

44 Archiwum Archidiecezji Warszawskiej, Prymasowska Rada Odbudowy Kościołów [Archive of the Arche of Warsaw, Primate’s Council for the Reconstruction of Churches; further in the text: AAW], PR. 2 49, Katedra św. Jana, Protokoły komisji ds. Katedry [St. John’s Cathedral, Protocols of the Committee for the Cathedral], p. 3.

45 S. Skibiński, “*Super fundamenta historiae spirituale extruere aedificium* (św. Hieronim). Powojenna regotyżacja katedr w Gnieźnie i Poznaniu”, in: *Oblicza mediewalizmu*, eds. A. Dąbrowska, M. Michalski, Poznań, 2013, p. 154.



**Fig. 5.** Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych in the presbytery of the St. John's Archcathedral in Warsaw, ca. 1955, photo: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe

the “primeval” Mazovian traditions of Warsaw, but Polish Catholicism in general. Thus, two possibilities seem thought-provoking. Firstly, was the decision to mount the Virgin of the Rosary Polyptych in the presbytery of the Warsaw Archcathedral determined by the same factors that had led to the refusal of its transfer to Mogiła, i.e. that it was no longer “unowned” and thus the risk of taking it over seemed minimal? Or perhaps it was its unspectacular size and “extraneousness” that influenced the fact that from the late 1950s its structure was no longer taken into account in subsequent projects of the presbytery’s furnishing? Tracing the circumstances and decisions connected with the mounting and functioning of this work in the interior of Warsaw Archcathedral reveals a very clear paradigm shift in the visions of reconstruction and in the approach towards the domesticated post-German heritage, which took place in the second half of the 1950s.

A misunderstanding or manipulation came up in a letter of refusal concerning the transfer of the Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych to Mogiła. The documented history of the retable does not begin until 1859, when it was found in the storerooms located in the former Canons Regular monastery on the Sand Island in Breslau, adapted for

library purposes at the time.<sup>46</sup> For this reason, the origin of this artwork was referred to as “from the Library” for many years. After conservation in 1862, it was included in the collection of the Schlesisches Museum für Kunstgewerbe und Altertümer in Breslau. The collection was secured by the Germans at the end of the World War II, and its part was moved by the Polish art historians and authorities to the National Museum in Warsaw after 1945.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the retable’s history until 1947 was identical to the history of the already discussed altarpiece from Ścinawa. There are several hypothetical reasons why the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the Sand was considered the place of origin of the retable. If Polish art historians had been at least vaguely familiar with the literature on this artwork, they might have suggested its “library” origin, associating it with the monastery church. It is also possible that they were following the findings of Paul Knötel, who in 1933 mistakenly identified the Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych with the retable of the main altar set up in 1487 in the presbytery of the Sand Church.<sup>48</sup> His hypothesis, however, failed to gain recognition among researchers.<sup>49</sup> According to the most recent studies, the Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych was executed ca. 1500 in a Breslau workshop associated with Jakob Beinhart and an anonymous painter from the circle of the so-called Master of the Helentreuter Triptych.<sup>50</sup> Its place of origin and storage until the 19<sup>th</sup> century remains unknown. Nevertheless, one cannot exclude that the refusal to return the work to Mogiła in 1946 was motivated by other, today unknown circumstances, and the reference to the intention to return the work “to its original place” was an excuse to conceal other plans. In 1947, however, this plan certainly did not include mounting it in the presbytery of one of the most important rebuilt cathedral churches in post-war Poland.

“What we consider today as historical Warsaw is actually a post-war creation based on academic premises, competent suppositions and arbitrary decisions”.<sup>51</sup> This opinion, referring to the Warsaw Old Town as a whole, can undoubtedly be applied also to the process of rebuilding the Warsaw Archcathedral, almost completely destroyed after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944.<sup>52</sup> This “youngest cathedral in Europe”, called “a damp Gothic flower under the cloudy skies of our

46 A. Schultz, *Urkundliche Geschichte der Breslauer Maler-Innung in den Jahren 1345 bis 1523*, Breslau, 1866, p. 138.

47 Ziomecka, “Śląskie retabula...”, p. 137.

48 P. Knötel, “Der Hochaltar der Sandkirche von 1487 in Schlesischen Museum für Kunstgewerbe und Altertümer”, *Schlesiens Vorzeit in Bild und Schrift*, N.F. 1933, 10, pp. 61–66.

49 The remnants of the Gothic retable which once embellished the main altar of the Sand Church in Wrocław are now considered to be a completely different group of objects, see: *Migrations. Late Gothic Art in Silesia*, ed. A. Patała, Wrocław, 2019, pp. 156–161.

50 A. Ziomecka, *Pracownie śląskie w końcu XV wieku. Wrocławski Mistrz Świętej Rodziny*, Wrocław, 1993, pp. 7–16; R. Kaczmarek, “Jacob Beinhart: The career of an immigrant”, in: *Migrations. Late Gothic Art in Silesia*, ed. A. Patała, Wrocław, 2019, p. 75.

51 G. Piątek, *Najlepsze miasto świata. Warszawa w odbudowie 1944–1949*, Warszawa, 2020, p. 208.

52 T. Zagrodzki, *Gotycka architektura katedry św. Jana w Warszawie*, Warszawa, 2000, p. 7; for more comprehensive list of literature in this field see: Torbus, op. cit., p. 9; M. Popiółek-Roßkamp, “Warschau – Ein Wiederaufbau, der vor dem Krieg begann”, Paderborn, 2021, pp. 264–269.

homeland" by a Polish poet,<sup>53</sup> was given its shape as a result of a very incomplete knowledge of its original Gothic form, the still persisting animosity to historicism and 19<sup>th</sup> century modifications, as well as the aspirations and aesthetic preferences of Jan Zachwatowicz, the Polish General Conservator between 1945-1957, one of the most meritorious architects for the reconstruction of post-war Poland. The temple's origins as a parish church date back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>54</sup> Due to a Baroque reconstruction caused by the collapse of the western tower in 1602, its original Gothic shape is not fully known. It gained the status of a cathedral in 1798 and became an archcathedral in 1817. Another significant stage in its history came in 1837-1842, when, apart from lowering its roof, a controversial design of the neo-gothic interior and façade was implemented based on a project by Adam Idźkowski.<sup>55</sup> From the very beginning, these changes provoked criticism, which intensified in 1930s, accompanied by modernisation plans and work undertaken in Warsaw shortly before World War II.<sup>56</sup> The modernisation included certain measures taken in order to emphasise the "primeval", i.e. medieval origins of the Polish capital, such as the uncovering and reconstruction of the medieval city walls by Jan Zachwatowicz in 1938. According to the official narrative, those changes were supposed to provide references to the tradition of the so-called "Mazovian Gothic", a theoretical construct, which was revived after 1945. It was meant to embody the specificity and complexity of Polish culture, and in a broader perspective, its belonging to the Western Christianity.<sup>57</sup> Not surprisingly, in 1935, the English Neo-Gothic façade of the Warsaw Archcathedral was described as "false Gothic"<sup>58</sup> and in 1947 this opinion was maintained by using the term "pseudo-Gothic".<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the statement that the ideological reconstruction of the Warsaw cathedral began before the war seems quite correct.<sup>60</sup>

As early as 1943, i.e. after the destruction of the vaults during the bombardments of 1939 and before the catastrophe of the Warsaw Uprising, Jan Zachwatowicz presented the provost of the Warsaw Archcathedral with a plan to remove its neo-Gothic costume and restore its "old Mazovian" features, which theoretically referred to the local Gothic forms.<sup>61</sup> He sustained his disposition to work on rebuilding the ruined cathedral in 1945, and carried on with the preparatory and project works in 1946-1947. The reconstruction, inaugurated by Primate Augustine Hlond,

53 T. Różewicz, *Równina*, after: M. Czermińska, *Gotyk i pisarze. Topika opisu katedry*, Gdańsk, 2005, p. 235.

54 Zagrodzki, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

55 A. Idźkowski, "Kościół Archykatedralny Śgo Jana w Warszawie", *Biblioteka Warszawska*, 1843, pp. 1-18.

56 J. Trybuś, *Warszawa niezaistniała*, Warszawa, 2012.

57 Ibid., pp. 18, 205, 253-254.

58 Popiołek-Roßkamp, op. cit., p. 265.

59 W. Podlewski, "Projekt odbudowy Starego Miasta", *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki i Kultury*, 1947, p. 39.

60 Popiołek-Roßkamp, op. cit., p. 265.

61 Ibid., pp. 265-266.



began in the spring of 1947 and was substantially completed in 1952.<sup>62</sup> Following the *idée fixe* of returning to the “most representative”, that is 15<sup>th</sup> century’s form of this church,<sup>63</sup> Zachwatowicz gave the archcathedral a gothic form with a high roof. He also planned to create an interior typical for the late Gothic churches.<sup>64</sup> The façade proved to be the most problematic element. In the absence of any sources that would allow for the reconstruction of its medieval form, Zachwatowicz searched for inspirations beyond the borders of Mazovia. According to some scholars, he modelled it on the façade of St. Dorothy’s Church in Wrocław.<sup>65</sup> Providing the archcathedral with Gothic forms can be associated with the tendency, existing already before 1939, to emphasize the long and far-reaching medieval history of Poland by means of architecture. However, interpreting Silesian inspirations as a manifestation of the propaganda search for artistic similarities and common past linking the capital of Poland with the Recovered Territories<sup>66</sup> seems a far-fetched conclusion. All the more so if official press releases continued to claim that the archcathedral represented “Mazovian Gothic”.<sup>67</sup>

While decisions concerning the exterior of the rebuilt Warsaw’s Old Town edifices were made relatively quickly, the shape and furnishings of their interior, including the archcathedral, was not a priority for the decision-makers.<sup>68</sup> Although the consecration of the Warsaw Archcathedral’s presbytery took place on 24 June 1950, it was not until July 1954 that an application was sent, requesting allocation of the Gothic Annunciation with the Unicorn Polyptych to the Warsaw Archcathedral. The artwork was originally from St Elizabeth’s church in Breslau (Fig. 6) and since 1946 had been kept at the National Museum in Warsaw.<sup>69</sup> The request was motivated by the need to set up the main altar stylistically uniform with the rebuilt cathedral. The designated work of art was well-preserved, fairly complete (with a predella and a crowning), undoubtedly monumental (the whole work is almost 8 m high) and of high artistic value. In its most general shape, it corresponded to the retable outlined in Zachwatowicz’s projects from the years 1946–1951 (Fig. 7)<sup>70</sup> and, what is equally important, originated from the Recovered Territories, which implicitly meant that it was “left”. Its availability resulting from being “left” or “abandoned”, however, turned out to be controversial, since the handwritten notes

62 M. I. Kwiatkowska, *Katedra św. Jana*, Warszawa, 1978, p. 222; I. Putkowska, “Jana Zachwatowicza projekt odbudowy katedry św. Jana w Warszawie”, *Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki*, 1994, 38, p. 302.

63 Putkowska, op. cit., p. 302.

64 Ibid., p. 305.

65 Popiołek-Rożkamp, op. cit., pp. 266–267.

66 Ibid., p. 269.

67 *Stolica. Tygodniowa Kronika Odbudowy Warszawy*, 1954 (11.07.1954), 28/342, p. 12.

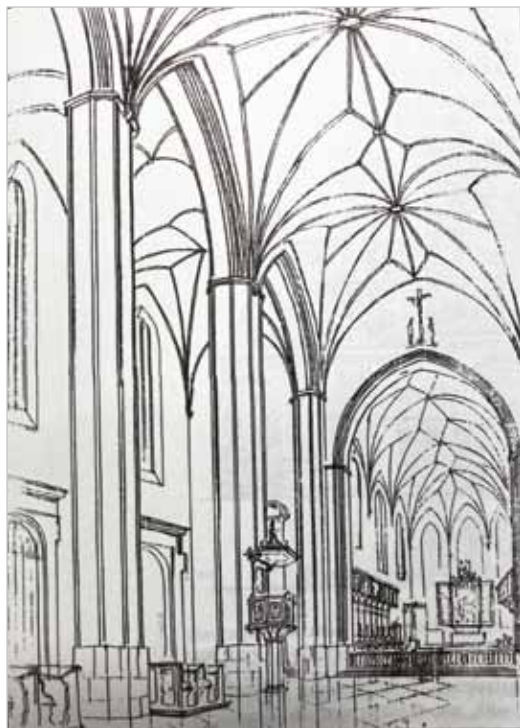
68 Podlewski, op. cit., p. 39.

69 Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, zespół: Urząd do Spraw Wyznań w Warszawie [Archive of New Files in Warsaw, unit: Office for Religious Affairs in Warsaw, further in the text: ANF], no. 2/1587/0/7.5/44/1328.

70 Putkowska, op. cit., p. 305.



**Fig. 6.** Annunciation with the Unicorn Polyptych in the St Elizabeth's church in Breslau before 1945, photo: National Archive in Wrocław



**Fig. 7.** Jan Zachwatowicz, project of the reconstruction of the St. John's Archcatedral in Warsaw, perspective drawing of the interior, 1946-1951, Warsaw Technical University, Department of Polish Architecture

on the above-mentioned application included a remark that the issue should be consulted with the Vicar of the Chapter of the Archdiocese of Wrocław, Kazimierz Lagosz. Does it mean that in 1954, the fate of the Silesian polyptych in question was not yet determined and someone considered its return to Wrocław? Such a hypothesis is contradicted by an event which took place a year earlier. On 17 March 1953, the National Museum in Warsaw received a letter of request, asking for "a triptych [sic!] Madonna with Unicorn for the presbytery of the Gniezno Archcatedral".<sup>71</sup> On 16 April of the same year, Stanisław Lorentz, a long-serving Director of the National Museum in Warsaw, refused to hand the work over, arguing that the retable, of great artistic value, is an exhibit of the National Gallery of Polish Art, and its removal would "impoverish the exhibition of late medieval art to a great extent".<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, Archiwum [Archive of the National Museum in Warsaw], no. VIII-1159/53.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

According to Lorentz's opinion, already in 1953 the status of this polyptych was clear: it was neither "left" nor "post-German", but constituted an important element of the Polish art collection. In all probability, at that time, anyone was aware that in 1935–1937 the Annunciation with the Unicorn Polyptych underwent a very professional technically but at the same time strongly ideologically motivated conservation carried out under a close supervision of Günther Grundmann, the Conservator of the Lower Silesian Province between 1932 and 1945.<sup>73</sup> He planned to create an ideal, implicitly "Germanic", Gothic sacral space in St. Elizabeth Church in Breslau, in which the Annunciation with the Unicorn Polyptych at the main altar was to play an important role. Taking into consideration the obvious fact that attributing national characteristics to any work of Gothic art is a manipulation without any scholarly or logical basis, the polyptych in question, representing universal features of a Gothic artwork, matched both the Germanic vision of the sacral interior and the spaces determined by the Polish national discourse. Its artistic neutrality facilitated rewriting its history by every new owner. Shortly after 1945, its new meaning was written from the perspective of the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, where the polyptych remains to this day. Unfortunately, the justification for the refusal to transfer it to the Warsaw Archcathedral could not be established for the purpose of this article.

In January 1955, the local press reported that a Silesian Gothic retable, i.e. the Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych, previously deposited at the National Museum in Warsaw, was placed in the presbytery of the Warsaw Archcathedral.<sup>74</sup> The installation of the work had taken place in November or December 1954.<sup>75</sup> According to the author of the press release, this work stylistically corresponded with the form of the archcathedral, and the choice of such a work can be justified by the fact that until 1611 it used to house a Gothic triptych presumably executed in Silesia. Neither the journalist nor the decision-makers realised at the time that in Ceglów, some 70 km from Warsaw, survived the sculptures and the wings of a triptych considered to have been created in Cracow or Warsaw.<sup>76</sup> It was not until 1964 that the connection between the altarpiece from Ceglów and the archcathedral in Warsaw was finally confirmed,<sup>77</sup> but this discovery did not result in any actions leading to the restoration and re-establishing of the only preserved wooden Gothic artwork

73 A. Patała, "Stary śląski mistrz w nowym blasku" – manipulacje i konteksty konserwacji Polipptyku Zwiastowania z Jednoróżcem w latach trzydziestych XX wieku", in: *Ingenium et labor. Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Antoniemu Ziembie z okazji 60. urodziny*, eds. P. Borusowski, J. Sikorska, Warszawa, 2020, pp. 329–336.

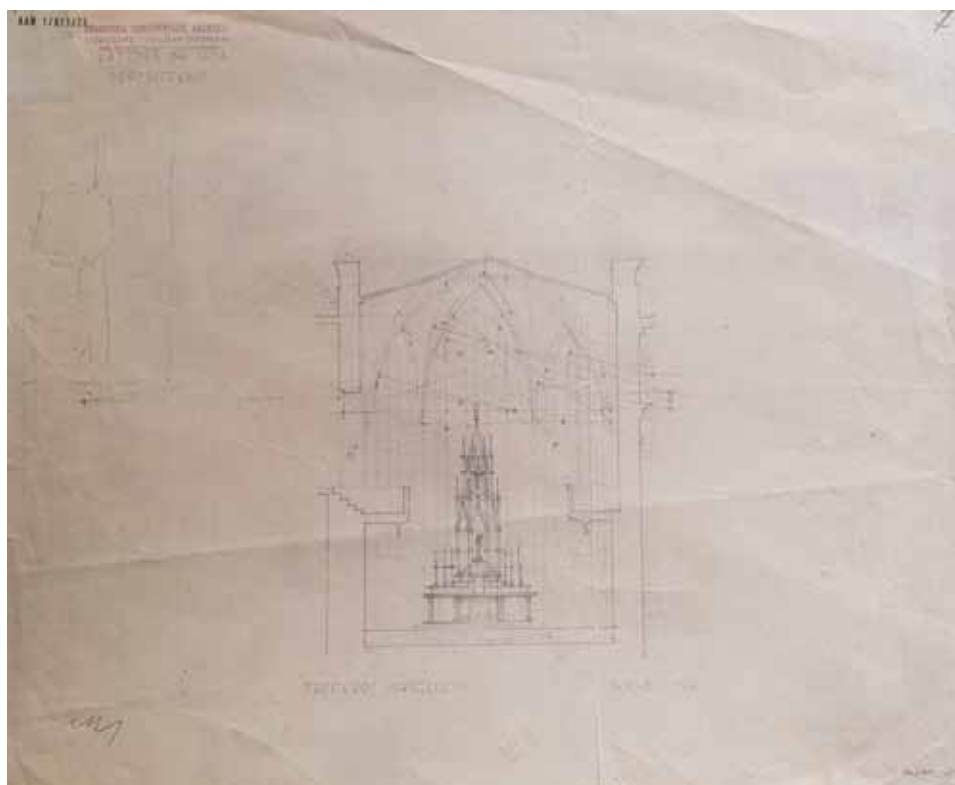
74 T. Komorowski, "Katedra warszawska na ukończeniu", *Stolica. Tygodniowa Kronika Odbudowy Warszawy*, 1955 (30.01.1955), 5/371, p. 4.

75 AAW, 1/0/1/28, no. 9 (as can be concluded from the inventory drawing documentation made by M. Marzyńska).

76 A. S. Labuda, "Malarstwo tablicowe w Wielkopolsce, na Kujawach i Mazowszu", in: *Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce*, eds. A. S. Labuda, K. Secomska, Warszawa, 2003, p. 331.

77 Z. Rewski, "Warszawska proveniencja tryptyku ceglowskiego", *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 1964, 26, p. 20–25.

historically connected with the Warsaw cathedral. It was too late for that. In all probability, the decision to place the Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych in the presbytery of the Warsaw Archcathedral was intentional and related to the fact that the vision of its furnishing had not yet been crystallised. According to the above-mentioned article from January 1955, the presbytery of the archcathedral “had not yet received its final form”, as installation of new stained glass windows and reconstruction of wooden balconies was still to be carried out. Moreover, in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Warsaw the projects of alternative visions of the archcathedral’s presbytery furnishing can be found, including: a ciborium designed in Gothic forms (1957, see Fig. 8)<sup>78</sup>, a sandstone and marble altar with a silver altarpiece above (project by Jan Zachwatowicz, 1959, see Fig. 9),<sup>79</sup> and a winged altarpiece.<sup>80</sup> The divergence of visions was very large, and references to medieval traditions competed with modern forms. Eventually, the latter prevailed.

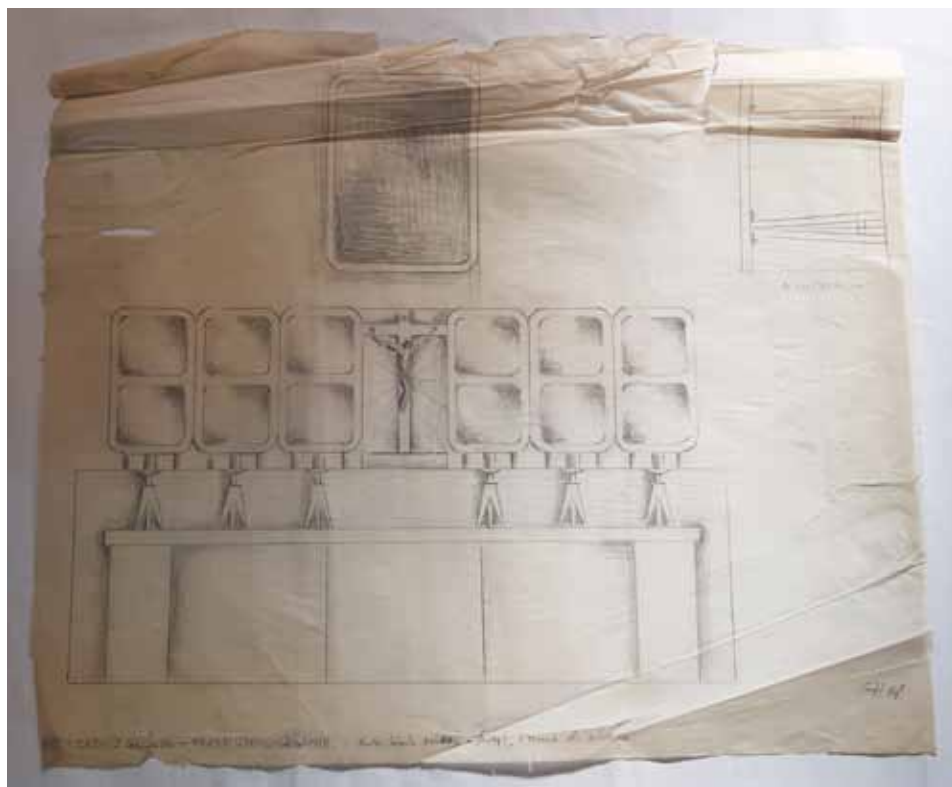


**Fig. 8.** Jan Zachwatowicz, project of the main altarpiece of the St. John’s Archcatedral in Warsaw, 1957, AAW, 1/0/1/25, no. 7

78 AAW, 1/0/1/25, no. 7.

79 AAW, 1/0/1/28, no. 6.

80 AAW, 1/0/1/28, no. 7.



**Fig. 9.** Jan Zachwatowicz, project of the main altarpiece of the St. John's Archcathedral in Warsaw, 1959, AAW, 1/0/1/28, no. 6

The Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych stayed in the Warsaw Archcathedral presbytery only a few years – it was removed from the main altar in 1959 at the latest, but remained in the church until 1964, waiting for the completion of the works in Wrocław.<sup>81</sup> Undoubtedly, it seemed no longer suitable to the liturgical space entrusted to the special protection of Our Lady of Częstochowa (pol. *Matka Boska Częstochowska*) by Stefan Wyszyński. “The most exact copy” of the Częstochowa icon embellished the so-called Primate's Chapel during the consecration of the church in 1960, and consequently was placed in the main altar in 1966, complementing the silver antependium and the altarpiece by Adam Jabłoński.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the terms and conditions of the 1960 contest for the projects of stained glass windows for the archcathedral's presbytery also indicated strengthening the new and beyond-regional narrative dominating the archcathedral's interior. The artists were asked to refer thematically to the history of the cathedral, Warsaw, Poland and the

<sup>81</sup> Ziomecka, “Śląskie retabula...”, p. 137.

<sup>82</sup> Kwiatkowska, op. cit., p. 230.

upcoming jubilee of the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Baptism of Poland.<sup>83</sup> The Virgin of the Rosary Pentaptych clearly did not fit such a framework.

In the first decade of the Polish capital's reconstruction, the Recovered Territories, especially Lower Silesia, were considered as a reservoir of "left"/"abandoned" sacral furnishings, acquired for the needs of the rebuilt churches. One of the examples is the Field Cathedral of the Polish Army whose pipe organ, chandelier and altar were transferred from a Protestant church in Kamienna Góra in 1952.<sup>84</sup> In 1954, the Polish Catholic Church in Warsaw also received a permission to take over an altarpiece from a church nearby Wrocław.<sup>85</sup> The efforts made by the Warsaw Archcathedral in 1954 to retrieve the Gothic altarpiece from the large body of "left" property were well within this operation model. Nevertheless, at the moment of mounting the Polyptych of the Rosary in the presbytery of the archcathedral, it was probably already obvious that the formula of emphasising the long traditions of Polish statehood and its belonging to the Western Christianity by means of Gothic forms had run its course. It remains unknown, however, whether this phenomenon was noticed by Jan Zachwatowicz himself or the impulse came from the church hierarchy in need of a new and modern artistic language. Nevertheless, it was also a time when the movable property from the Recovered Territories had become domesticated enough to prevent it from being moved freely.

## Poznań

The still-extant main altar retable of the Archcathedral Basilica of St. Peter and St. Paul in Poznań,<sup>86</sup> which undoubtedly harmoniously fills the space of its presbytery (Fig. 10), was acquired for this place only in 1952 "by permission of the state and church authorities, from the parish church of St. Catherine in Góra (Silesia) where it had recently stood without liturgical use in the side aisle on a separate foundation, without an altar support".<sup>87</sup> From today's perspective, the acquisition of this magnificent Gothic retable (the shrine measures 4 x 3.4 m) seems a natural consequence of the controversial decision taken in 1946 and carried out by 1957 to rebuild the Poznań Archcathedral in Gothic forms, whose effects are nowadays regarded as "unfortunate".<sup>88</sup> Moreover, the bespoke artwork originated from the Recovered Territories, but its "abandoned" / "post-German" status might have been disregarded

83 AAW, PR. 2 50, pp. 2–3.

84 ANF, no. 2/1587/0/7.3/18/1057.

85 ANF, no. 2/1587/0/8.5/19/288.

86 Ziomecka, "Śląskie retabula...", pp. 80–81; A. Ziomecka, "Góra Śląska", in: *Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce*, vol. II: *Katalog zabytków*, eds. A.S. Labuda, K. Secomska, Warszawa, 2004, pp. 176–177; Marcinkowski, op. cit., chart no 1; *Migrations. Late Gothic...*, pp. 242–243.

87 J. Nowacki, *Dzieje archidiecezji poznańskiej*, Vol. 1: *Kościół katedralny w Poznaniu. Studium historyczne*, Poznań, 1959, p. 225.

88 S. Skibiński, "Królewski charakter katedry poznańskiej", *Kronika Miasta Poznania*, 2003, 1 (*W kręgu katedry. 80 lat kroniki miasta Poznania*), p. 136.





**Fig. 10.** Presbytery of the Archcathedral Basilica of St. Peter and St. Paul in Poznań, 2020, photo: Jarosław Jarzewicz

due to the fact that from the beginning of its existence it was owned by the parish of St. Catherine in Góra (before 1945: Guhrau) in Lower Silesia, since 1945 located in the territory belonging to Poland. Formally, the handed-over or sold retable was already “domesticated” by the new Polish parishioners. However, it remained unused in the church whose Gothic interior had been filled with Late Baroque furnishing since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Rationalising, one might assume that the artwork’s potential, wasted in Góra, was given a chance to be fully exploited in Poznań Archcathedral where it was placed in one of the most prestigious sacral spaces of post-war Poland, regarded as the earliest Polish royal necropolis.<sup>89</sup> There, it received an exposition and viewers appropriate for its size and artistic value. However, it is worth mentioning that the above-mentioned potential was regained only in 1943, after a professional, yet not free from National Socialist propaganda, conservation conducted in Breslau under the supervision of Günther Grundmann. However, it is impossible to resist the impression, which will be justified later in the text, that the pre-war history of the retable and its never-articulated “post-German” status ceased to matter or became neutralised precisely because of the space where it was placed after the war. At the same time, one cannot forget that “works of art do not speak any language, or only a universal visual one”,<sup>90</sup> hence the aforementioned conservation of 1938–1943 rather restored it to its universal form. Hence, it did not require much effort to include it in the Polish national discourse after 1945 and to place it in the presbytery of one of the ideologically most important Polish post-war sacral spaces.

According to the scholars, the polyptych in question is “one of the few larger Silesian polyptychs preserved in its essential parts to such an extent, that its present reconstruction corresponds with the original disposition and proportions”.<sup>91</sup> This work received its late Gothic form twice. The first occurred at the time of its creation, around 1512, when the woodcarvers and painters active in one of the Breslau workshops formed its original shape and dimensions congruent with its destination – the equally magnificent parish church of St. Catherine of Alexandria in Guhrau.<sup>92</sup> The polyptych certainly embellished the presbytery of this church in 1687<sup>93</sup> and remained there until the great fire in 1759. At that time, the work was disintegrated and its parts decorated the Baroque main altar and the walls of the Corpus Christi cemetery church in Guhrau. For the second time, the Late Gothic form of the retable was determined in 1938–1943, already in the spirit of “creative monument conservation” (Schöpferische Denkmalpflege),<sup>94</sup> by German officials

89 Ibid.

90 Labuda, *Z dziejów*, p. 74.

91 Ziomecka, “Śląskie retabula...”, p. 81.

92 On the church in Góra: J. Adamski, *Hale z poligonalnym chórem zintegrowanym w architekturze gotyckiej na terenie Polski*, Kraków, 2010, pp. 21–46.

93 J. Jungnitz, *Visitationsberichte der Diözese Breslau*, Bd. 3, Breslau, 1907, p. 458.

94 S. Fleischner, “Schöpferische Denkmalpflege”. *Kulturideologie des Nationalsozialismus und Positionen der Denkmalpflege*, (Diss. Bamberg 1997), Münster, 1999; G. Grajewski, *Między sztuką, nauką a polityką. Ochrona zabytków na Dolnym Śląsku w czasach III Rzeszy*, Wrocław, 2014 (unpublished PhD), p. 4.



together with conservators and artists acting under their auspices.<sup>95</sup> Although his undertakings cannot be denied professionalism and concern for the fate of artworks, Günther Grundmann was well aware of the effectiveness and visual attractiveness of manipulated historical monuments for propaganda purposes.<sup>96</sup> In fact, he had a special share in this enterprise. It was also Grundmann who accidentally came across fragments of the polyptych in question in 1935. He recognised them as requiring immediate conservation and consolidation to their former shape,<sup>97</sup> and then with great commitment strove to obtain funds for the works conducted in 1938–1943 in the conservation workshop (germ. *Provinzial-Restaurierungswerkstätte*) operating at the *Schlesisches Museum für bildende Künste* in Breslau. Grundmann was committed to restoring the work's Gothic coherence, which led to the removal of modifications considered later than medieval and introduction of new elements reconstructed after other Gothic works (angels holding Mary's crown or a painted scene with St. Jerome).<sup>98</sup> In his justification of the need for this conservation, he wrote that the retable from Guhrau is "a manifestation of the influence of German art in Poland".<sup>99</sup> The peak of the ideological entanglement of the artwork in the Third Reich's propaganda in Silesia seems to be its participation in the exhibition *10 Jahre Denkmalpflege in Niederschlesien* organised in Breslau in the spring of 1943.<sup>100</sup> According to the press releases and lectures accompanying this event, the altarpiece from Gurhau belonged to the group of artworks representing typical "Germanic artistic forms".<sup>101</sup> Finally, in October 1943, the retable was installed in the side nave of St. Catherine of Alexandria Church in Guhrau,<sup>102</sup> from which nine years later it was taken to Poznań.

Next to Gniezno, Cracow and Wrocław, the Archcathedral in Poznań<sup>103</sup> belongs to the group of the oldest and most important Polish Gothic cathedrals. Stylistically,

95 Comprehensive documentation of the works carried out (excluding the iconographic material now belonging to the collections of the Herder Institute in Marburg and, to a lesser extent, to the Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences) in the collection of Archiwum Państwowe Wrocław, zespół: Konserwator Zabytków Prowincji Dolnośląskiej we Wrocławiu (National Archive Wrocław, unit: Conservator of Monuments of the Lower Silesian Province in Breslau; further in the text: APWr), sign. 82/487/0/257.

96 Grajewski, *Między sztuką...*

97 APWr., sign. 82/487/0/257, p. 22 (61) – report from 13 May 1935.

98 APWr., sign. 82/487/0/257, p. 147 (203).

99 APWr., sign. 82/487/0/257, pp. 113 (160) – 114 (161), 7 June 1938.

100 G. Schmitz, "10 Jahre Denkmalpflege in Niederschlesien", *Schlesische Zeitung*, 1943 (11 April).

101 APWr., sign. 82/487/0/257, pp. 135 (190), 136 (191).

102 APWr., sign. 82/487/0/257, p. 154 (208).

103 Nowacki, op. cit.; K. Kalita, "Odbudowa i regotyzacja katedry poznańskiej w latach 1945–1956", in: *W służbie kościoła poznańskiego. Księga pamiątkowa na 70-lecie urodzin Arcybiskupa Metropolity Dr Antoniego Baraniaka*, Poznań, 1974, pp. 139–153; E. Linette, "O gotyckiej architekturze katedry poznańskiej", in: *Podług nieba i zwyczaju polskiego. Studia z historii architektury, sztuki i kultury ofiarowane Adamowi Miłobędzkiemu*, Warszawa, 1988, pp. 92–104; S. Skibiński, *Katedra poznańska*, Poznań 2001; idem, "Królewski charakter...", op. cit.; idem, "Super fundamenta...", op. cit.; J. Jarzewicz, "Nowa katedra po 1945 roku. Odbudowa i rego-

these are multi-phase edifices whose Gothic features were brought out or restored in course of various conservation procedures carried out in the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>104</sup> Until the battles for the liberation of Poznań that took place in February 1945, the cathedral remained in its baroque and classical forms. On 15 February 1945, “the entire cathedral, all its towers and roof went up in bright flames. The temple burned all night long. Its roofs and towers with bells, organs, pews, stalls, pulpit were destroyed”.<sup>105</sup> Although the façade, high altar, and chapels with furnishings survived the fire, on 23 January 1946, it was decided to “strive to restore the cathedral to its medieval Gothic shape”.<sup>106</sup> This decision was formulated, among others, by Jan Zachwatowicz, with the approval of the clergy associated with the archcathedral and art historians. It was controversial, for it assumed the destruction of a large part of the historical substance, yet remained not criticised. The choice was prompted by the discovery of Gothic relics beneath the Baroque layers of walls and plaster, including the triforium arcade in the presbytery, which remains unique among Polish Gothic architecture.<sup>107</sup> The construction and conservation work was preceded by an architectural study completed almost in its entirety in 1947, the results of which were supposed to support the already taken decisions.<sup>108</sup> Archaeological research, on the other hand, lasted much longer, until 1955, and resulted in many important discoveries, including the relics of the earliest Romanesque phases and hypothetical graves of two Piast rulers – Mieszko and Bolesław Chrobry. Nevertheless, in addition to the “tangible” evidence of Gothic relics, the decision to restore (or recreate) the Archcathedral’s gothic forms was determined by several other factors. Firstly, there was a negative approach towards the baroque and classicist transformations of the Poznań Archcathedral, considered to be “ugly additions”.<sup>109</sup> It was coherent with the decisions about the re-gothisation of Gniezno Archcathedral and carried out in parallel and under the dictation of Jan Zachwatowicz. Secondly, this approach was accompanied by the belief in the aesthetic, symbolic and ethical superiority of medieval architecture, which symbolised the thousand-year history of the first bishopric and state in Poland.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, the romantic view, with Primate Wyszyński among its proponents, remained in force, proclaiming that the Gothic cathedral is the most perfect architectural symbol of Christian culture, and „Gothic Poland” is „Christian Poland”, implicitly also pre-Reformation Poland.<sup>111</sup> Finally, the

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tyzacja”, in: *Katedra poznańska. Studia o sztuce*, eds. J. Kowalski, W. Miedziak, Poznań, 2022, pp. 353–381.

104 S. Skibiński, *Polskie katedry gotyckie*, Poznań, 1996; J. Jarzewicz, “Polskie katedry – świadkowie tysiącletnich dziejów chrześcijaństwa”, in: *Wokół Wielkiego Jubileuszu 1050-lecia Chrztu Polski*, ed. R. Słowiński, Poznań, 2017, pp. 63–76.

105 Nowacki, op. cit., p. 168.

106 Ibid., p. 182.

107 Ibid.

108 Kalita, op. cit., p. 146.

109 Skibiński, “*Super fundamenta...*”, p. 154.

110 Jarzewicz, “*Nowa katedra...*”, op. cit..

111 Skibiński, “*Super fundamenta...*”, p. 157.

purpose of the re-gothisation of the archcathedrals in Poznań and Gniezno was to raise their prestige, lost in the times of the partitions, as the oldest Polish cathedrals and thus to refer to the times of their greatest splendour.

Despite such a strong preference for Gothic forms and the desire to achieve the greatest possible formal and stylistic uniformity, many architectural inconsistencies and errors occurred in the reconstruction of the Poznań Archcathedral. These include: incorrect proportions of the western façade, chronological inconsistency of the vaults types, and incorrect form of the triforium in the presbytery. According to J. Jarzewicz, the Poznań Archcathedral is a “modern creation referring to its past medieval shape”,<sup>112</sup> executed against the most essential conservation principles and at the cost of destroying significant authentic parts. Moreover, inconsistencies were not avoided in the process of furnishing the cathedral’s presbytery either.

The process of purchasing and mounting the monumental altarpiece from Góra in the Poznań Archcathedral was neither complicated nor dramatic. According to J. Nowacki, the work was purchased in Góra and underwent conservation before its installation because of the damages caused by transportation. At the time of transaction or a little later, was anyone aware of the circumstances under which the polyptych regained its brilliance? Most likely not, since Nowacki reported that “before World War II, it was renovated in Breslau”.<sup>113</sup> What is more, when selecting the altarpiece, the absence of any connections linking the iconographic programme of the retable and the patron saints of the cathedral, i.e. St. Peter and St. Paul, was ignored – the altarpiece in its festive opening features carved figures of 15 female saints: Mary with Child, St. Catherine and St. Barbara in the shrine and the remaining 12 in the wings. The other two painted openings feature passion scenes and depictions of St. John the Evangelist, St. John the Baptist, St. Christopher and St. Jerome. It cannot be excluded that other practical considerations prevailed – the large size of the polyptych, its good and complete state of preservation and the relatively high artistic class of the work. Did the same determine the process of purchasing it for the Poznań Archcathedral, which had only recently been “restored” to its Gothic forms and furnished with a stylistically relevant late-Gothic Silesian retable, a Baroque pulpit and baptismal font from the so-called Grace Church in Milicz in Lower Silesia<sup>114</sup> – a church erected for Protestants and used by their community until 1945? When pondering over the reasons for the described inconsistency, we can only assume that the furnishings were treated as a secondary, supplementary or even ideologically unimportant element in the process of the ideologically-motivated reconstruction of the archcathedral. Consequently, the post-war fate of the polyptych from Góra only gains significance, when examined from a broader, nationwide perspective. Then, it becomes clear that we are dealing with the manifestation of a more widespread tendency.

112 Jarzewicz, “Nowa katedra...”, op. cit.

113 Nowacki, op. cit. p. 225.

114 R. Gliński, A. Patała, *Dziedzictwo kulturowe gminy Milicz*, Wrocław, 2019, p. 98.

## Conclusion

The presented post-war fates of the selected Late Gothic altarpieces from Lower Silesia, “domesticated”, with varying success, in the interiors of the rebuilt and restored churches in Mogiła, Warsaw and Poznań, prove to be rather special cases. This uniqueness was determined by the high artistic value of the analysed retables, their good and complete state of preservation, and their complicated history. No less important was the fact that they were mounted in the churches considered to be among the most important examples of medieval sacral architecture in Poland. Nevertheless, not only these Silesian Gothic retables became incorporated into the sacral space of non-Silesian churches and museums after 1945. In addition to a retable from Ścinawa, a triptych from Szczodrowo was brought to Mogiła few years later.<sup>115</sup> In turn, an altarpiece from Tymowa (together with the furnishing of the entire church) was sold to the parish of Zalipie (Lesser Poland) and eventually mounted in the church in Żelichow.<sup>116</sup> The same happened in Poznań, where apart from the archcathedral, the presbytery of the St Martin’s Church was and still is embellished with a Silesian Late Gothic altarpiece from Świerzawa (before 1945: Schönau).<sup>117</sup> Moreover, in 1956, the collection of the Museum of the Catholic University of Lublin was enriched by an official donation from the Metropolitan Curia of Wrocław, namely medieval and modern artworks from the collection of the Archdiocesan Museum established in Wrocław in 1898 and still functioning.<sup>118</sup> Taking into account the above-mentioned circumstances, this article has not provided a comprehensive study on appropriation of “post-German” works of medieval art in the churches and museums of post-war Poland, but nevertheless, it has drawn attention at least to some broader phenomena.

Undoubtedly, in the process of rebuilding and restoring church interiors in post-war Poland, artworks from the Recovered Territories were eagerly used, and new Polish authorities treated these territories as a reservoir of “unowned” objects that could be bargain-bought or legally taken over. The main criterion for selection in this process was the availability of the works and their “unowned” status, meaning that the current place of storage of such artworks (such as pre-war Silesian museums or churches, the reconstruction of which was not planned) no longer existed, and their future destination had not yet been determined. What is more, such objects had the potential to attract a new owner, and the only relationship that defined the artworks in question after the war was their relationship to their new owners and the interiors in which they were located.

115 J. Odrobina, “Gotycki tryptyk ze Szczodrowa (1491) w opactwie cysterskim w Mogile”, *Cistercium Mater Nostra*, 2012–2013, 6, pp. 179–196.

116 Ziomecka, “Śląskie retabula...”, pp. 118–119.

117 Ibid., p. 116.

118 K. Przylicki, “Zbiory sztuki Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II w świetle najnowszych ustaleń”, *Liturgia Sacra. Liturgia - Musica – Ars*, 2014, 20/2(44), p. 525.

The key or code to open the above-mentioned reservoir of artworks was the term “left”, implicitly informing about the post-German origin of the work, its abandonment, and availability to be taken. The word “left”, in reference to the retables analysed in this text, appeared primarily in correspondence exchanged between institutions and conservators, as well as in press reports. Therefore, we are dealing with a discourse parallel to the research on the heritage of the Recovered Territories conducted by art historians. “Left” was a common term, incompatible with the terminology used by the law introduced in 1946, but applied to the works of art on purpose. This purpose was to hide their “post-German” nature and sometimes awkward history, and to expose the potential of their apparent historical neutrality, making it possible to redefine them and adapt to the needs of newly created sacral spaces and historical narratives. Interestingly, this was the opposite of the phenomenon observed in the case of “post-German” non-artistic and everyday items “found” in houses and other “abandoned” edifices in the Recovered Territories.<sup>119</sup> In their case, “post-German” status was even welcome, as it facilitated acquiring rights to them by the new owners. In the first decade of the post-war rebuilding of Poland, the bespoken “left” altarpieces were turned into objects by means of which the social imaginary of Polish medieval art and this country’s “primeval” beginnings was formulated. Applying such terminology resulted in an automatic removal of the word indicating the previous owner of the property (post-German), in favor of the broader and more neutral category of impersonal “leaving” and “abandonment”.

Apart from the status of “left” and “unowned, a high artistic value, monumentality, completeness and good state of preservation must be mentioned among the selection criteria for the altarpieces in question. Their iconography or even their confessional context turned out to be less important. This is evidenced by the use of early modern artworks from Protestant churches in Catholic spaces, as exemplified by the Poznań Archcathedral or the Field Cathedral of the Polish Army in Warsaw, as well as the frequent lack of iconographic correspondence between the work of art and the church’s patron saints, as occurred in the Archcathedrals in Warsaw and Poznań.

There are many premises to believe that the appropriation of “post-German” medieval retables into restored and rebuilt sacral spaces in their Gothic forms was possible only in the first decade of Poland’s rebuilt, i.e. in the times of the “gentle revolution” (1944–1949), socialist realism (1949–1955), and Polish thaw (1956).<sup>120</sup> During the first of these periods, in an atmosphere of discussion and dispute, views were formed on the shape and strategy of rebuilding the new post-war Poland. The winning position was represented, among others, by Jan Zachwatowicz who claimed that: “Unwilling to accept the tearing cultural monuments from us, we will reconstruct them, we will rebuild them from the foundations, in order to pass on to the generations, if not the authentic, then at least the exact form of these monu-

119 Zborowska, “‘Abandoned’ things...”, pp. 8–9.

120 Majewski, *op.cit.*

ments, alive in memory and available in materiality“.<sup>121</sup> Importantly, however, the mentioned reconstructions, often based on speculations and imagination of architects, concentrated on the architectural forms of the edifices raised from the rubble, considering it a carrier of information about the age and rank of the object, and at the same time completely marginalising the issue of their furnishings and leaving much freedom and room for possible discussion in this respect. As a consequence of the imperative of “restoring” Gothic forms to objects functioning in a completely different stylistic forms until 1945, in the process of their furnishing, an attempt was made to maintain consistency and create a suggestive image of the past. For this reason, those monumental Gothic artworks were used, whose history could be rewritten. At the same time, it should be emphasised that the architects of the first years of the post-war reconstruction of historic buildings in Poland had already been active in the inter-war period, striving to implement the ideas developed at that time in the new reality. Therefore, in the first decade of their post-war activity, they continued their efforts to emphasize the long history of Polish Christianity and State, and the legitimacy of its history in medieval and especially Gothic art, giving vent to their aversion to Baroque forms and neo-styles. In this way, the ideas of the professionals, dating back to the pre-war period, met with the interests of the authorities of the post-war time.

The above-mentioned period of “gentle revolution” also turns out to be the time of cooperation between the Polish authorities and the representatives of the Catholic Church, especially with Primate Augustyn Hlond and later with Primate Stefan Wyszyński. The cooperation regarded mainly the reconstruction of sacral objects.<sup>122</sup> In this field, as in the final recognition of Poland’s western borders, the interests of the communist state and the church proved to coincide. This difficult relationship became much more strained in the years to come, but the state government’s support for sacral historic edifices never faded completely. Finally, the years 1945–1949 were also a time when about 4.5 million people arrived in the Recovered Territories, and along with the people, things were also put in motion.<sup>123</sup> Radical displacements – spatial, proprietary, and ontological – have occurred. In the subsequent periods mentioned, this movement lost momentum, but its consequences remain apparent today, both in liturgical and museum spaces. Moreover, the case of the church in Mogiła, and especially the events taking place recently, inform about the nascence of a rather new phenomenon of diversification of the approach to “domesticated” “post-German” property among the representatives of cultural institutions, the inhabitants of the former Recovered Territories, and the rest of Poland. This issue certainly requires observation and further research.

121 J. Zachwatowicz, “Program i zasady konserwacji zabytków”, *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki i Kultury*, 1946, 1–2, p. 52.

122 Majewski, op. cit., p. 45.

123 Zborowska, *Życie rzeczy...*, p. 37.

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