

SUMMARY

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THE SOBIESKI CHAPEL IN THE CAPUCHIN CHURCH IN WARSAW. ART AND THE MEDIATION OF MEANINGS IN THE SERVICE OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE KINGDOM OF POLAND'S PROPAGANDA IN 1815–1830

The constitutional period in the history of the Polish Kingdom (popularly known as Congress Poland), spanning fifteen years between the formation of this closely Russia-dependent state at the Congress of Vienna (1815) and the outbreak of the November Uprising (1830), left an indelible mark on the history of Polish art. It was then that phenomena contributing to the development of modern artistic life on Polish lands intensified, and when the country's university education, public art exhibitions and press criticism were firmly established. Art, being a visiting card of the Polish Kingdom's progress in civilization, was also used for political legitimation of the newly created state. The authorities of the Kingdom engaged in openly propagandistic undertakings which employed the prestigious medium of art to promote unequivocally pro-systemic ideas in the public space. And, the more widespread the awareness of what 'good' art meant was, the more logical it was to resort to its mediation in the propaganda discourse aimed at objectively (and, by the same token, rationally) explaining why Poles should accept the existing political situation.

The paper discusses one of the most important examples of such undertakings: the construction of the Chapel of the Heart of King John III Sobieski (also known as the Sobieski Chapel or the Royal Chapel) in the Capuchin church in Warsaw. It was erected in 1828–1830 as a result of a Neoclassical refurbishment of an earlier (Baroque) structure to the design of Henryk Marconi. The work was commissioned by the second and last constitutional ruler of the Kingdom, the Russian Tsar and King of Poland, Nicholas I. Using the idea suggested to the government by the Capuchins (for whom the commemoration of Sobieski was not an aim in itself, but a means to achieve another goal), the Tsar wanted to strengthen the prestige of his royal power which, following the death of Alexander I (the 'restorer' of the Kingdom in 1815), experienced a period of decline immediately preceding the outbreak of the November Uprising. The carefully devised iconographic programme of the chapel was supposed to endorse the controversial current political situation by referring it to the glorious, pre-partition period in the history of Poland, while a monument worthy of the fame of King John was supposed to serve as the most favourable testimony to Nicholas himself. The specific form of expressing these ideas was further emphasised by its propagandistic content. Commemorating Sobieski precisely by means of a sepulchral chapel located inside a church enabled to underscore the religious traits in the legend of the hero of

Vienna, and even to perform a kind of symbolical canonisation of the ruler. The focus on Sobieski's fighting with Muslims was aimed at triggering in the viewer immediate and compelling associations between him and Nicholas who at that time was engaged in a war in the Near East. What is more, the sacralisation of the seventeenth-century defender of Christianity conveyed the same sacred aura onto the founder of the chapel and at the same time Sobieski's Russian successor who was considered to be following in his footsteps. By presenting Nicholas as a truly Christian monarch, the decoration of the chapel endorsed his status as a sovereign who rules Poles not as a result of violence or taking over their land, but by divine right. This idea in the governmental propaganda was developed also with regard to Nicholas's deceased brother.