

LE MOYNE  
COLLEGE'S

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Polish Legacy

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This booklet, first produced in 1982, was the inspiration of Rev. Frank R. Haig, S.J., then President of Le Moyne College, who believed that cultural connections, past and present, between America and its forbearers and between college and community, are important unifying elements in discovering who we are and what we can be together.

Using the history and original descriptions of the paintings from Stephen K. de Ropp, Commissioner of the Polish exhibit of the New York World's Fair, Father Haig and Frances Champion compiled and edited the first edition of the brochure. They were assisted by Dr. Tanya V. Popovic, Cataloging/Reference Librarian, Le Moyne College, who researched the paintings and tapestries in the Biblioteca

Polonaise (Paris), and Cecilia Patalita, Polish Heritage Club of Syracuse, Inc., who translated portions of the Polish research texts and proofread this text.

This revised edition, edited by Inga H. Barnello, contains some additional material on the tapestries researched by Dr. Popovic. It is reissued for the 45th Annual Convention of the American Council for Polish Culture, Inc., hosted by the Polish Heritage Club of Syracuse, Inc. in June 1993. The Club sponsored the printing. Appreciation goes to the Le Moyne College Office of Communications, under the direction of Eileen Hathaway, to Theresa A. Santillo, Assistant to the Director of the Library, and James J. Simonis, Director of the Library for its production.

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## INTRODUCTION

Students may come some day from all parts of the world to Le Moyne College in search of authenticity in Polish culture. In the College library, they will find seven paintings and four tapestries depicting major events in the proud history of a mighty nation. They are the gift of Stephen Kyburg de Ropp, a former teacher at Le Moyne College.

The paintings once constituted part of the Polish exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair. They were augmented by the tapestries that made up the Polish display at the Paris Exhibition in 1937.

De Ropp, a native of Latvia, then a citizen of Switzerland living in England, was asked by the Polish government to form an exhibit because of his expertise. He had been general manager of the Poznan (Poland) International Trade Fair. Simultaneously, he was a member of the board of directors of the European Organization of International Trade Fairs, with offices in Milan and Leipzig. De Ropp accepted the commissionership of a private group to which the Polish government had delegated this task.

In 1938, Prof. Oscar Halecki of Warsaw University, Prof. Jan Kucharzewski (a former Premier), and Prof. Roman Dyboski of Cracow University, were chosen to serve on a committee to determine which seven events in Polish history should be

depicted especially for this occasion. The services of the President of the Polish Academy of Fine Arts were also solicited. The Brotherhood of St. Luke, a body of pre-Raphaelite painters, was engaged to transform these events into art. This assemblage researched thousands of details—coins, medals, engravings, paintings, historical minutiae of dress and life style, and portraiture. Even swatches of materials from museums and private collections were carefully studied so that a true historical frame of reference might be maintained and interpolated into these works of art. This research was conducted all over Europe and, thus, it was not until March 1939 that the final products were shipped to New York.

On arrival, the paintings were installed in the Hall of Honor of the Polish Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. Each was earmarked with a documented replica of the historical event it portrayed. True to the pre-Raphaelite idiom the painting had been conceived and executed in dual, vertical planes with composition simulating 13th-century paintings of tempera on ten-ply hardwood. Each was signed by all of the members of the Brotherhood of St. Luke, which worked as a team—some specializing in landscape, some in portraiture, others in scenery.

When Poland was occupied by Germany in 1940 and its government was in exile in London, the money for sustaining the exhibit was appropriated by the Germans from accounts in Poland. At the request of the Polish government, de Ropp managed to continue the exhibit, but he could not expect help from that beleaguered government. With initiative and perspicacity, he formed an advisory group of prominent Americans. All of the costs of the exhibit were paid through de Ropp's ingenuity. Lacking was his own salary for nine years of work for the government of Poland. The president of the Polish government-in-exile insisted that he take the paintings and tapestries in lieu of his back salary. Thus, when de Ropp gave these paintings and tapestries to Le Moyne College in 1958, he was praised by the Polish president for his "generous and highly unselfish deed." The reward de Ropp received was purely in personal satisfaction. Although he could have sold the art to several wealthy Polish people in Brazil, who sought it via their art dealers, he thought that this treasure should repose in an institution of Catholic character, inasmuch as Poland had been Catholic for nine centuries.

## THE SEVEN PAINTINGS DEPICTING EIGHT CENTURIES OF POLISH HISTORY

This unique series of seven paintings, belonging to the Pre-Raphaelite School of St. Luke, were the work of eleven painters who retired for six months into complete isolation to render these works of art. A group of prominent historians suggested the subject of each painting and indicated the sources of authentic information. Every detail in each painting is historically true. Thus, the mile and one-half long red runner woven by hand for the pilgrimage of Emperor Otto III, the 15th-century carpets in Cracow, the likeness of most central figures in the paintings (the clothes they wore, jewelry, banners, arms), the buildings of 15th-century Cracow and 16th-century Lublin all are authentic in the minutest detail, constituting a unique historical document of unsurpassed interest and value.

The information was collected by a large group of researchers from contemporary chronicles kept in the archives and museums of Poland, Austria, Germany, Italy, France and Sweden; medals and coins; engravings; tapestries; portraits painted by celebrated artists of the time; and from a variety of other sources recommended by the university professors who formed the historical guiding committee.

Features of leading people in each painting are, in fact, portraits. The technique, as with all pre-Raphaelite painters, is akin to that of the miniaturist, allowing for a wealth of detail, which adds to the interest of each painting and allows us to imagine ourselves as part of the scene. The coloring is as authentic as the historical facts depicted. For example, the runner in the painting of Otto's pilgrimage, of which a swatch still exists at the sanctuary of St. Adalbert, was chemically analyzed to reveal the original coloring, and was then reproduced in the painting. The same applies to the coloring of the carpets in the Cracow painting and to the other textiles depicted throughout the series. They truly represent a stupendous piece of research and a historical documentation of unsurpassed value.

The committee of university professors, who were charged with submitting suitable subjects for each painting, had in view the cultural highlights of Poland and her role in Central and Eastern Europe over a span of eight centuries from the year 1000 to 1791. The scenes depicted represent an incomparable archive of factual information about historical happenings of world interest. The scenes represented in the paintings are the following.

1. *Boleslaw the Brave Greeting Otto III on his Pilgrimage to the Shrine of St. Adalbert at Gniezno.* A.D. 1000
2. *The Baptism of Lithuania.* A.D. 1386

3. *Granting of the Charter of Jedlnia.* A.D. 1430
4. *The Act of Union at Lublin.* A.D. 1569
5. *The Warsaw Confederation.* A.D. 1573
6. *The Relief of Vienna.* A.D. 1683
7. *The 3rd of May Constitution.* A.D. 1791

**1** *Boleslaw the Brave Greeting Otto III on his Pilgrimage to the Shrine of St. Adalbert at Gniezno.* A.D. 1000. Otto III of the Saxon House, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, was told that the end of the world would come during the last night of 1000 A.D. The young, dissolute, and pleasure-loving monarch became scared and decided on a pilgrimage of expiation to the tomb of St. Adalbert in the cathedral of Gniezno, the capital of neighboring Poland. He arrived carrying presents for King Boleslaw the Brave of Poland. The Emperor, in pilgrim's garb and barefooted, then started his walk to the tomb of the saint. These presents were the spear which was used by the pagan Prussians when killing St. Maurice and Otto's imperial crown set with jewels. The crown, Otto's votive offering to the shrine of St. Adalbert, has remained there ever since. The pilgrimage took place in December 1000 A.D. Snow covered the ground, and the mile and one-half runner was woven to protect the young emperor's bare feet as he

walked bareheaded to the tomb of the saint. King Boleslaw's entourage shows signs of Scandinavian influence in the arms and the garb of the bodyguard, and of Byzantine influence in the vestments of church dignitaries. It is a historical fact that when the world failed to come to an end at the appointed time, Otto III resumed his luxury-loving habits and drove back to a castle near Cologne in a dissolute orgy. He died soon after, so for him, at least, the prediction was not far off.

**2** *The Baptism of Lithuania. A.D. 1386.* Queen Jadwiga (Hedwig) of Poland was betrothed to a Habsburg duke who was to succeed the emperor. However, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Jagiello, asked for her hand in marriage, promising to espouse Christianity to all his people. Jadwiga gave up her love for the Habsburg in order to bring Christendom a heathen nation. The castle of Wilno (Lithuania's capital), of which ruins exist to this day, is depicted as it looked on the day when the baptismal rites were performed in 1386 A.D. by the primate of Poland and in the Queen's presence. The dress of all present, arms, vestments of clergy and the gown of the Queen, are accurate according to minute descriptions of the event by contemporary eyewitnesses recorded in several chronicles.

**3** *Granting of the Charter of Jedlnia. A.D. 1430.* The Habeas Corpus Act safeguarding the inviolability of the person (more liberal in 1430 than the English writ two and one-half centuries later) was given at Cracow by King Wladislaus. The law was constantly extended and became the germ of unparalleled political liberty. The citizen had unlimited freedom of forming associations, and he might express in speech at public meetings or in print the most daring convictions. Polish tolerance is unique in the history of both the old and new world. At a period when the stench of burnt bodies extended over the whole of Europe and fire devoured the brain of Giordano Bruno and the heart of Savonarola, when the disgraceful principle of *Cuius regio eius religio* was upheld, the Polish king said: "I am not lord of your consciences," and "Faith may not be spread by persecution." The first Polish writer in grand style (all previous having written in Latin only), Mikolaj Rey, famous in the passionate Reformation controversy, fought the Catholic Church in a Catholic county whose king was a Catholic. Elsewhere at that time he would have been burnt at the stake. In Poland, Rey acquired wealth and was rewarded by the king for his literary merits. White Russian clergy, who had only hazy notions of whom Rey was, read his works from the pulpit prefaced with the words "Let us hear what St. Rey says."

The scene depicted in the painting shows King Wladislaus of Poland liberating the serfs and granting personal immunity. The act was given in Cracow, then the capital of Poland, in 1430 A.D. All the buildings, vestments, carpets, as well as the features of the king and primate are exact and were taken from contemporary engravings, coins, and chronicles.

**4** *The Act of Union at Lublin. A.D. 1569.* The precursor of the Pan-European movement of Count Nicholas Coudenhove-Kalergi and the Western European Union of these days, was the voluntary union of Lithuania and Poland by the Treaty of Lublin in 1569 A.D. The plenipotentiaries of the two nations are all known by name because of the signatures on the act, which is kept in the archives in Cracow. The likeness of each is an actual portrait, including the clothes they wore on that occasion. Decorations, buildings, and the whole scene at the city hall of Lublin are strictly authentic.

**5** *The Warsaw Confederation. A.D. 1573.* The spontaneous granting of the freedom of religion is a unique political act in the history of any country. In 1573 A.D., Polish citizens representing different faiths promised each other mutual tolerance. All subsequent kings acceding to the throne were obliged to swear alle-

giance publicly to that supreme democratic act of tolerance. The names and seals of the signatories of this sublime act permitted researchers to locate contemporary portraits of all but one of the group. Thus, with that one exception, all faces in the painting are portraits. The clothes, decorations, and surroundings of that most enlightened assembly of the century, as well as the skyline of Warsaw in 1573 A.D., are authentic and factual down to the least detail.

**6** *The Relief of Vienna. A.D. 1683.* "Leopold, Emperor to the most Serene and Powerful Prince Lord John the Third, King of Poland. We entreat your Serenity to deign to follow actively on the road upon which you have entered and prepare for yourself the glory of liberating and securing the City of Vienna." Thus wrote the Austrian emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1683 A.D. to King Jan Sobieski (John III) of Poland, who was elected not long before to the Polish throne. (Polish kings were elective.) John III was an unusually gifted strategist. The desperate entreaty led to the liberation of Vienna from the Turks. A few more weeks and burning Vienna would have surrendered to the Grand Visir. The Habsburg Holy Roman Empire would have become the domain of the Sultan of Turkey, just as the Byzantine Empire of the East had centuries earlier succumbed to the Porte.

The victory of Vienna by the Polish army under King John III elicited an avalanche of letters of thanks from all the monarchs in Europe, as well as from the Pope, for saving European Christendom. John III was hailed by Charles II of Great Britain: "Your Majesty has been blessed, and what a triumph against the enemy of our faith." Pope Innocent XI wrote "...most joyful news of victory by Christian arms...". Similar letters from the King of Sweden, the King of Denmark, the estates of Belgium, and many others prove that this was a victory that saved Europe from the dominion of the Turks. All these letters are kept in the archives of Schönbrunn in Vienna

**The 3rd of May Constitution.**  
A.D. 1791. A democratic constitution was voted by the general assembly of Poland, the Sejm, on May 3, 1791. This was a voluntary act by the privileged classes that limited their own rights and raised the status of the depressed classes to their own. The constitution defined the prerogatives of the legislature, both the judiciary and executive powers respectively. It was by far the most enlightened constitution of its time and contained many rights which were granted by the British and American constitutions during the 19th century, as well as most granted in France by the Code Napoleon. Most of the faces in the group meeting in the

hall belong to well-known signatories of the Constitution. The elective king was the ill-fated Prince Poniatowski, whom Catherine, the Russian empress, removed to St. Petersburg, after her troops occupied Warsaw.

Thus, the series of paintings presented here portrays the history of the civilization of a nation. The Brotherhood of St. Luke was composed of the following painters: Boleslaw Cybis, Bernard Frydrysiak, Jan Gotard, Aleksander Jedrzejewski, Elias Kanarek, Jeremi Kubicki, Antoni Michalak, Stefan Pluzanski, Janusz Podoski, Tadeusz Pruszkowski, and Jan Zamoyski. Under the direction of Professor Tadeusz Pruszkowski, all participated in the creation of the series we have described above.

The paintings measure 51 inches by 80 inches each. They were cleaned and restored in 1984 by West Lake Conservators, Inc., Skaneateles, New York.

### THE FOUR TAPESTRIES

The four tapestries, measuring nine feet by seven feet, are woven of wool and embroidered in wool, silk, and metal. They are the work of weavers from the workshop called LAD in Warsaw. The tapestries were embroidered in the studio of INICJATYWA under the direction of Marie Lomnicka-Bujakowa. They are

depictions of the work of artist Mieczyslaw Szymanski.

Szymanski, with his knowledge of embroidery, based his design on the most interesting effects possible in embroidery. In what was truly a collaborative process, the painter, in the artisans' workshop, arranged fabric shreds of wool, silk, and metal where he wanted them according to his sketch. The embroiderers, with their knowledge of design, suggested techniques of their own.

The tapestries were first displayed in Paris in 1937 in the Honorary Rotunda of the Polish Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Arts and Technology where they received the *Grand Prix*. They were displayed again at the 1939 New York World's Fair in the Polish Pavilion's Hall of Decorative Art.

Oddly, only three of the tapestries are mentioned in the exhibit catalog of the International Exhibition of Arts and Technology in Paris in 1937. The titles listed are as follows:

1. *The King with Marysienka Encircled by the Ladies of the court*
2. *The King with the Emperor Leopold after the Victory at Vienna*
3. *The Allegory of Victory.*

Two are pictured in this 1937 catalog. One illustration is a fragment depicting an angel. The other depicts the entire work of what appears to be *The King with the Emperor Leopold after the Victory at Vienna.*

*The Official Catalog of the Polish*

*Pavilion (1939)* refers to four tapestries as simply *Four wall-hangings, from the series 'King John III and Marysienka' by Szymanski.*

Thus, the title of a fourth tapestry remains uncertain, as does the assignment of titles. The three hanging on display in the Library's atrium are thought to be the three titled above. A fourth, "The Angel," remains in storage.

The tapestry, *The King with Marysienka Encircled by the Ladies of the Court*, was cleaned and restored in 1985 by Textile Conservation Workshop, Inc. in South Salem, New York.