

DECORATIVE SCULPTURE IN THE CRACOVIAN
CLOTH HALL (SUKIENNICE) FROM THE TIME
OF ITS RESTORATION AND RECONSTRUCTION
BY TOMASZ PRYLIŃSKI IN THE YEARS (1875-1879)

Summary

The mediaeval Cracow lay at the crossroads of important international trade routes. From Hungary to the Baltic led the route passing through Toruń on its way to Gdańsk and from there by sea to Flanders, where an important centre of cloth trade existed. To Wrocław, in turn, led the so-called *via salaria*, along which salt was transported from Cracow to the West, from where cloth was imported to Poland. The transit trade and the right of storage were fundamental to the city's development in the Middle Ages.

In the 14th c. an imposing construction arose in the town centre to house the cloth trade, from which comes its name, the Cloth Hall, still used today. The Cloth Hall has also remained, till our times, a symbol of historic splendour of the city.

The present work concerns the decorative sculpture which originated during the period of the building's restoration, carried out in the years 1875-1879. The architect that supervised the reconstruction, Tomasz Pryliński, added to the building two new architectural elements: projections and arcade. The design of the latter was influenced by the galleries of the famous Palace of Doges in Venice and in like manner the sculptured column capitals received a rich content linked to the city's history. The projections added by Pryliński, and especially their caps, are also adorned with architectural sculpture. The most numerous and most important set of sculptures consists of capitals, whose decoration is either figurative or ornamental - mostly of the vegetal type.

As a result of studies carried out and materials obtained, we can ascertain not only a considerable influence of the great Cracovian artist of the time, the painter Jan Matejko, on the form and contents of this sculptural decoration, but also his outright authorship.

Some researchers have drawn our attention to his fact before, yet most often without providing any detailed sources. The author of the present analysis has set together those works of Matejko's which visibly influenced the Cloth Hall's sculpture and has also pointed out those iconographic patterns from which the artist drew his inspiration. Those were, among others, tombstones and epitaphs of outstanding personages, coming from different epochs, to be seen in Cracovian churches, as well as illustrated masterpieces of old literature.

The sculptural decoration, likewise the architectonic form given to the Cloth Hall during the restoration, reflects the epoch with its artistic trends and conservators' theories.

As far as the ideas and formal conception of the sculptural decoration are concerned, Matejko, whose voice was decisive, enjoyed a greater freedom than the architect, hampered by demands of the town administration.

The role of the historic building and its connection with the city life for over five centuries are illustrated in a series of busts on capitals of the Western projection. By far the most interesting, these sculptures, treated realistically, are presented in a variety of ways in what concerns not only the facial type or expression but also costumes – each detail of clothing is rendered here in conformity with the epoch to which a given person belonged.

The restored Cloth Hall has no architectural analogies in Poland or in Europe and a visible trace of Jan Matejko's talent in its decoration only enhances its exceptionality.

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