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The Arrases of Wawel, the Polish Royal Castle in Krakow

Abstract

The unusual, but well-documented history of the unique tapestry collection of the 'Arrases of Wawel', the Polish kings' castle in Krakow, is briefly presented and its cultural importance emphasised. The problems of maintaining, preserving and restoring historical textile fabrics are mentioned, and the questions of biodeterioration, molecular and submolecular structure changes, de-colouration, and the appearance of stains are stressed. A further article, which will discuss these problems in detail, will be published in a subsequent issue of Fibres & Textiles in Eastern Europe.

Key words: arras, tapestry, conservation, preservation, biodeterioration, micro-organisms, enzymes, structure changes, colour changes.

■ The history of the collection

The Wawel arrases¹⁾, which are also called the Jagiellonian arrases, form a compact and stylistically consistent collection of tapestries.²⁾ Krakow's arras collection is distinctive as regards its uniformity of style, variety of series, and abundance of motives, as well as its historical substantiation, which is of greatest importance. In the second half of the 16th century, the Polish king Sigismund the II Augustus (Zygmunt II August), the last male descendent of the Jagiellonian dynasty, bought 170 arrases for the interior decoration of royal castles and palaces; 142 tapestries from this collection have remained up to the present. The arras collection made up the majority of the furnishing of the Wawel castle,³⁾ which is well thought out as a complete decoration of its rooms. At present, the arrases from this collection are the only original remains of the castle's furnishings from the times of King Sigismund Augustus.

The collection of the Wawel arrases in Krakow includes the following items [1, 2]:

- 19 monumental figurative arrases with scenes inspired by the book of Genesis in three thematically series: the 'History of the first parents', the 'History of Noah', and the 'History of construction of the Tower of Babel'.
- 44 verdure tapestries with landscapes and animal sceneries, unusually unique tapestries which are not found among even the greatest world collections. Different animals which live in their own worlds, full of abundant vegetation, are presented against beautiful backgrounds.
- 12 heraldry and monogram arrases with the coats of arms of Poland and Lithuania (Figure 1), as well as the monogram 'S.A.' (Sigismund Augustus).

- 16 small arrases located over the entrances and above & below the windows, as well as those intended to cover chairs or pillows.

The tapestries were manufactured in the period from 1550 to 1560 in Brussels, according to cartoons of famous Flemish painters. The authorship of these cartoons with figurative scenes is attributed to Michel Coxcien (1499-1592), known as the 'Raphael of the North', that of the verdure tapestries to an anonymous Antwerp artist from the circle of P. Coecke van Aalst 1556), and that of the grotesques and bordures to a Flemish artist from the circles of Cornelis Floris (1514-1575) & Cornelis Bos (1506 or 1510-1556). The tapestries were woven in the Brussels weaving workshops of Pieter van Aelst the Younger, Willem and Jan de Kempener, Jan van Tieghem, Nicolas Leyniers, and other Flemish weavers, who all worked to the orders of contemporary emperors, kings, and popes.

The tapestries called arrases (so-called after the town of Arras in France), had already been imported to Poland by the Polish king Sigismund I the Old (Zygmunt I Stary), the father of King Sigismund Augustus, from the Flemish city of Antwerp, among other locations.

The first order of 16 artistic textiles was placed in Brussels by Sigismund II Augustus in 1523, and was not accidental. The king précised not only the themes, but also the dimensions of the ordered tapestries. The tapestries were to be arranged in distinct thematic cycles, and the shapes and dimensions were selected according to particular walls in the royal rooms. Some of them were unusually large, reaching 9m in width and 5m in height. All the tapestries were manufactured according to the king's instruction.

The arras did not decorate the rooms of the royal castle all the time. After being delivered to the Wawel castle, the valuable tapestries were also occasionally used to decorate various interiors during court and state ceremonies, including the wedding ceremony of Sigismund Augustus and Catherine of Austria in 1553, the coronation of Henry de Valois as Polish king in 1574, the wedding ceremony of Sigismund III Vasa (Zygmunt III Waza) to Anne of Austria in 1592, the coronation of Cecile Renate of Austria, the wife of the Polish king Władysław IV Vasa (Waza) in 1637, the wedding ceremony of King Michał Wiśniowiecki to Eleonora of Habsburg in 1670, and the coronation as king of Stanisław August Poniatowski in 1764 [3].

According to the decision taken by King Sigismund II Augustus in 1571, as expressed in his will, the whole collection of the arras was to have been inherited by his three sisters: Sophia, Duchess of Brunswick, Queen Catherine of Sweden, and Anna (Anna Jagiellonka), Queen of Poland (since 1575) and wife (since 1576) of Stefan Bathory, the then King of Poland. However, the will included a very important historical annotation, which was decisive in the further history of the Wawel collection. In loose translation (originally written in 16th-century Polish) the sentence is as follows: "And if, as no one will be overlooked by death, all three of our sisters, their royal highnesses, will no longer be alive (although I beg You, o Lord, to lengthen their lives) then all the legacy of the royal highnesses should be bequeathed to the Polish Crown and the Duchy of Lithuania considered as one Republic⁴), but only for common use, and not for individual use, and for common decoration, as will be necessary and honest." For a king to hand down his private possession to the state (the Republic of the Two Nations) was an unusual act in these times, as the notion of national property did not exist.

After the death of King Sigismund II Augustus in 1575, the arras collection, which represented huge wealth, was deposited and protected in the castle of Tykocin. At that time, the collection became the object of horse-trading between Anna Jagiellonka, who undertook the efforts in her own name, and in the name of her sisters and the Crown Council, who raised the rights of the Republic to the

'Tykocin treasure'. In 1573 the 'Bible arras' (19 items) and various smaller arras were lent to the Crown with Anna Jagiellonka's permission with the aim of decorating the Wawel castle for the coronation of Henry de Valois. Then, the Polish king (as of 1576) Stefan Bathory received the arras himself, together with other treasures from the castle of Tykocin, but after ten years he returned them to the Republic, according to the will of Sigismund II Augustus [4,5].

In 1578 a series of 30 arras, including the arras of the 'History of the first parents', together with the landscape, animal, and heraldic arras, were sent to Stockholm for Catherine, Queen of Sweden. These tapestries also returned to Poland after ten years, while Sigismund III, the son of Catherine, and the nephew of the last Jagellonian male descendant, was elected as king of Poland.

Sigismund III regarded all the arras and other tapestries as his private property, and in his will divided all these items between his sons. Sigismund's collection was inherited by the Polish king Władysław IV, and after his death in 1648, by his younger brother John Casimir (Jan Kazimierz), who was also crowned king of Poland.

The Wawel arras became the object of arguments during John Casimir's abdication session, which took place in the lower chamber of the Polish parliament (the Sejm) in September 1668. The outgoing king demanded a life pension, claiming that the arras inherited from his ancestors were his property, whereas the members of parliament had their own different opinion, and proved that the arras were the property of the 'Republic of the Two Nations' and must be returned to the Crown. Nine months after the abdication of King John Casimir, an act of pledge for the arras was written, securing a long-term loan to the ex-king provided by Franciscus Gratta, a patrician of Gdańsk. At that time, the inventory included 156 items of tapestries.

In 1724, during the rule of the Polish king Augustus II of Saxony (August II Sas), the lower chamber of the Polish parliament bought back part of the pledged tapestries from the burghers of Gdańsk. In contrast to the past, the arras were stored in the Carmelite monastery in Warsaw, and not in the Wawel castle. After 60 years, the tapestries were trans-

ferred to the 'Palace of the Republic' (the Krasiński palace) which is also located in Warsaw.

In 1795, after the the Polish kingdom lost its independence, the arras were taken out of the country to Russia on the order of the Russian tsarina (empress) Catherine II. From 1860 they decorated the emperor's palaces in the neighbourhood of St. Petersburg. Not until the end of the First World War and the Polish-Soviet War, which Poland won, were the arras returned over the years 1921 to 1926, on the basis of the treaty signed between Poland and Soviet Russia in Riga in 1921.

The beautiful tapestries returned to their primary destination, but did not decorate the rooms of the castle for very long. In 1939, at the beginning of the Second World War, in justified fear that the German invaders would steal the arras, the tapestries were protected in special containers and removed, firstly to Romania. As military action spread across Europe, the arras were taken to France, England, and finally to Canada. Since 1945 the Polish state made persistent efforts to recover all the arras, and at last they returned to Poland on 16 January 1961. One argument for the recovery of the arras – an argument which would be important for Canada, who feared that the valuable tapestries would be taken by the Soviets – was the unprecedented legacy in Sigismund II August's will written in the 16th century in which the king gave his "Flemish curtains with gold" to the Polish nation. Since this moment, and up to today, the Jagiellonian arras have again adorned the rooms of the Wawel castle.

Maintenance, conservation, and preservation of the arras

The collection of the Wawel arras is a Polish national treasure, which is maintained and restored with great care by the staff of the castle's conservation studio. From time to time, the tapestries are thoroughly cleaned, and some of them are even washed. Not all are exposed at the same time, in order to minimise the adverse influence of light and dust. The exposition is changed every few years, and considering the conservation conditions, no more than between ten and twenty of these most valuable tapestries are exposed.



Figure 1. Arras with the coats of arms of Poland and Lithuania and the Figure of Ceres; Brussels, circa 1555; woven with woollen, silk, gold, and silver threads; dimensions 166 × 413 cm.

Antique textile fabrics, including archaeological fabrics, were manufactured from natural fibres, and so they are susceptible to biodeterioration. The growth of micro-organisms on textile fabrics, and the deterioration related to them, depends on the type of fibre and environment factors. The biodeterioration of the arras is caused by enzymes secreted by micro-organisms, especially by fungi. Changes to the morphological fibre's structure, the decomposition of its molecular and sub-molecular structure, and changes in colour may reveal the deterioration. These are the reasons why the conservation of historical tapestries and their preservation against biodeterioration caused by fungi and bacteria are a very important matter. The control of the environment (temperature, humidity, dust, and various chemical pollutions in the air) is the most common method of preserving the arras; an auxiliary method is the use of biocides.

Textile fabrics manufactured from natural fibres, including plant and animal fibres are attacked and decomposed by micro-organisms [6]. Each type of fibre is attacked by specific micro-organisms, which have the ability to decompose the main fibre's component: cellulose in the case of plant fibres, keratin in wool, and fibroin in silk. Independently, micro-organisms appear and grow on the surface of textile fabrics; these gain sustenance from other carbon sources than the textile's component materials, such as dirt for example. The destruction of textiles attacked by micro-organisms is also manifested by a significant decrease of

their strength properties, and as a result of the changes in submolecular structure and morphology, often by stains and changes in colour [7]. These latter mostly appear as the effect of influence of exopigments, which are secreted by the cells and diffused to the substrate. The exopigments are dyes of different chemical structures, which among others include the anthraquinone and carotene groups. Melanin, which is created in shreds of fungi, is also a pigment which often appears, dyeing the textiles deep shades and dark colours. Stains of various colourations may also appear as the result of chemical reactions between the cell's metabolites and the compounds included in the textile's material.

The problems of the deterioration of the Wawel arras, and their preservation against the harmful activity of the environment, as well as bacterial and fungal micro-flora, will be the subject of a paper published in a subsequent issue of *Fibres & Textiles in Eastern Europe*.

Editorial notes:

- 1) The term 'arrases' is generally used to refer to rich tapestries woven with the use of golden threads (from Arras, a town in north-eastern France famous for these fabrics).
- 2) The so-called 'Throne arras', a gift made in 1560 by Christopher Krupski, the starosta (district authority) of Horodło to Sigismund Augustus, is also connected to this collection; this arras presents the 'White Eagle', the Polish coat of arms, surrounded by rich floral, figurative, and

animal motives, and the Korczak coat of arms.

- 3) Wawel, the royal castle of the Polish kings, built in the 10th century; at present, the main part with the royal rooms is a Renaissance castle.
- 4) The Polish state, the kingdom of Poland, was from the 15th century known as the 'Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów' (the Republic of Two Nations), and consisted of the Polish Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

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