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COLLECTIONS OF ARTISTIC HANDICRAFT, MILITARIA
AND FOREIGN PAINTINGS OF THE NIEDZIELSKI FAMILY

Abstract

The assortment of artistic handicraft, textiles, militaria and foreign paintings kept in the manor house of the Larysz Niedzielski family in Śledziejowice constituted a unique collection. In the course of one hundred years, three generations of the Niedzielski family managed to fill a wooden building (constructed in the middle of a vast old park between 1823 and 1825 by the prior owners, Tekla née Niedzielska and Józef Zdzieński), including its walls and cabinets, with very interesting and valuable items. Unfortunately, a number of them were damaged or lost in the course of the cruel peasants' revolt. Nevertheless, thanks to the passion of Erazm Niedzielski, a very precious and numerous collection was saved. It included the favourite numismatic collection, Italian and Dutch paintings, militaria, *kontusz* sashes and tapestries, equipment and glass. There were also French gilded items made of bronze and other small exhibits of significant artistic, and also sentimental, value. Each of the objects had its own history, often related to the long-deceased ancestors. Some of them, e.g. the golden denar of King Vladislaus Łokietek was the object of a transaction concluded in July 1896 between Stanisław Niedzielski and Count Emeryk Hutten-Czapski, which became a part of the Polish history of collecting.

A significant portion of collections ended up in Śledziejowice as dowries of subsequent Niedzielski maidens: Emma née Komar (1820 – 1910), the wife of Erazm, and Apolonia Colonna-Walewska (1865 – 1939), the wife of Stanisław. These dowries included portraits, family tokens and luxury items held by the families for a number of years. This group encompassed gilded bronze items produced in the Parisian workshop of Pierre Philippe Thormire (1751 – 1843): a three-tier sweets stand, a brass Empire style column used as a lamp base and three pairs of Empire style bases for crystal plates, as well as two candle-holders made of gilded bronze in the style of Louis XVI and two candelabra for 9 candles made of two Sèvres vases imitating Chinese porcelain, encased in French gilded bronze in the style of Louis XV. Another luxury item was the French “Breguet” watch, the work of the Swiss watch-maker Abraham Louis Breguet (1747 – 1823), purchased in 1809 in Paris by one of the “grandfathers” who probably stayed there with Napoleon’s army, possibly General Count Stanisław Florian Potocki. It was a personal watch with a large gilded case, with the face with Arab numerals and one hand

fixed in the middle. These items were a true decoration of the house. The watch might have been the property of an ancestor of Apolonia Walewska, i.e. General Potocki, a rich and fashionable man who stayed in Paris together with the army of Prince Joseph in the first years of the 19th century. Another item is also related to the person of General Count Potocki, i.e. the Order of St. Stanislaus from the period of the Congress Kingdom, which Stanisław Niedzielski donated to the Lviv National Museum of King John III along with a collection of coins, a family signet ring and a *kontusz* sash. The items that were traditionally handed over from father to son were weapons. Weapons were encountered in numerous Polish homes. They testified to the family's bravery and valour and, if necessary, provided equipment for fighters, as it was the case with the Circassian *shashka* which Stanisław gave to his son Adam when he was going to war. Weapons, especially ornamented ones, also performed decorative functions. Placed on the wall in the form of a panoply or on a tapestry, they reminded about the valiant past and were also a token after those who fought for the fatherland, even if they were not necessarily family members. In Śledziejowice, such weapons included the sabre of Commander Stanisław Revera Potocki and the Austrian sabre of cavalry officer, General Zygmunt Jordan, one of the commanders in the January Uprising. Obviously, there were also other weapons, including the Spanish cutlass with a Toledo blade, probably a token after an expedition to the Iberian Peninsula, the Caucasian *shashka* and *kama* and, the most noticeable item, i.e. the 17th century Hussar armour adorned with a cavalry cross on the breastplate. It was a combat armour and not a representative one, thence its solid execution and modest decorations. Apart from military articles, the Niedzielski manor house – similarly to any other nobleman's residence – featured old textiles: four Polish *kontusz* sashes and Eastern tapestries of interesting provenance.

Erazm Niedzielski brought two very valuable manuscripts from a trip to Paris in 1869. One was the manuscript of a-moll mazurka op. 17 of Frederic Chopin written in 1833 in Paris.

Archaeological specimens purchased by Erazm Niedzielski in 1872 came from a trip to Italy. These were small ceramic items, donated in 1927 by Doctor Stanisław Niedzielski to the Archaeological Unit of the Jagiellonian University, where they are still kept today.

Other purchases made during the Paris trip in 1869 by Erazm Niedzielski include a translation of a Medieval hymn to the Holy Spirit, *Veni Creator*, written by Adam Mickiewicz ("*Come, the Creator Spirit, Visit the Thoughts of the Faithful...*"). Its authenticity was confirmed by the poet's son, Władysław Mickiewicz. There were also works by foreign authors. In this respect, a collection of old paintings of artists from the area of Italy and the Netherlands is particularly interesting. These were landscapes, portraits, religious and mythological scenes. They were purchased, in a vast majority, by Erazm Niedzielski from a collection of Prince Chancellor Waclaw Antoni Kaunitz (1711 – 1794), which ceased to exist in 1820. The rank of the Niedzielski collection is best

testified by the fact that the most valuable painting found in the Śledziejowice collection is “Venus and Amor” by Jan Mays, currently held by the Museum of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków; another valuable masterpiece was “The Head of the Madonna” probably painted by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1693 – 1770), which was bought by Count Zamoyski from Stanisław Niedzielski. Other precious and rare artefacts include a collection of graphic works of Franciszek Smuglewicz and Marco Carloni, “*Vestigia delle Terme di Tito*” characterised by a very high artistic and technical level. It presents the painted decoration of Titus’ Bathhouse and a part of the Golden House. It was a gift of Stanisław Niedzielski for Countess Elżbieta Hutten-Czapska in 1897. This was a very valuable publication, considered a rarity also in the 19th century.

Erazm Niedzielski was a valued coin collector, well known in Kraków. He accumulated an interesting collection of Greek and Roman coins from the times of the republic and the empire, as well as Polish coins starting with 11th century denars, through coins of district princes and election kings, as well as foreign coins occurring in the Polish lands of various epochs. Its significant portion was donated in 1931 by Stanisław Niedzielski to the Museum of Jan III Sobieski in Lviv.

Kajetan Niedzielski and Erazm Niedzielski were passionate collectors and the Śledziejowice collections were created mostly thanks to their knowledge and passion; apart from true artefacts which could be presented in renowned museums, the collections also include odd items such as horseshoes, fragments of old joinery, an old Polish spur and a metal squiggle. Stanisław Niedzielski did not share the collector’s passion and he put the entire effort to the maintenance of the property destroyed by WWI and economic crisis, even at the cost of selling or exchange of the most valuable items, e.g. the 17th century Eastern tapestries for utility furniture from Erazm Barącz in 1921. The list of Śledziejowice collections which Stanisław Niedzielski prepared in the inter-war period surprises with the variety of the artefacts. It includes numerous remarks about the provenance or further fate of items and constitutes a priceless historical material for the history of collecting. Even though the collections were dispersed, thanks to the list it is possible to reconstruct them.