
TECHNICAL RESCUE WORKS ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SAINT ANNE'S CHURCH IN WARSAW AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO STUDY THE TECHNIQUE, TECHNOLOGY AND ICONOGRAPHY OF THE XVIII CENTURY MURAL PAINTINGS

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Abstract

The paper discusses the necessity of comprehensive approach to a monument on the example of the conservation work carried out in the Saint Anne's academic church in Warsaw. It is important to save the material substance together with the cultural context of the object, which requires full understanding of its iconography and religious content. Saint Anne's church was built on the slope of the Vistula river in the XVth century. It was a temple of the Friars Minor Order. From the beginning such a location of the building caused a lot of construction problems. The necessity of recent rescue works (in 2013) in the nave of the church was an opportunity for conservation and restoration of the polychrome decoration, dating from the XVIIIth century, created by one of the monks, Valenty Zebrowski. The works on the construction became an occasion to carry out researches on the technique and technology of the paintings, as well as on their iconographic and religious message. During conservation works, the iconography of the scenes was correctly interpreted, repaintings were removed and missing pieces of the original composition reconstructed in a new way.

Keywords: baroque, mural painting, iconography, emergency, technical works

1. Introduction

Saint Anne's church in Warsaw was founded by princess Anne of Masovia in 1453 for the Minor Order Friars brought from Cracow. A small gothic building was expanded in the XVIth century by adding of a huge nave. In the XVIIth century the building was increased and obtained a new vault (Figure 1). The present furnishing and decoration of the church dates from the XVIIIth century.

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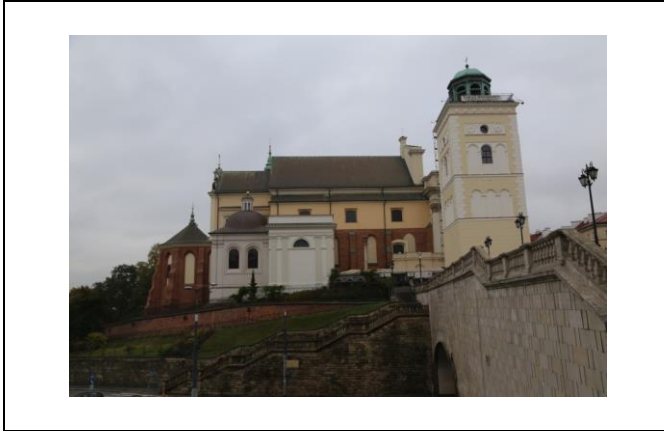


Figure 1. Saint Anne's church, general view of the north wall.

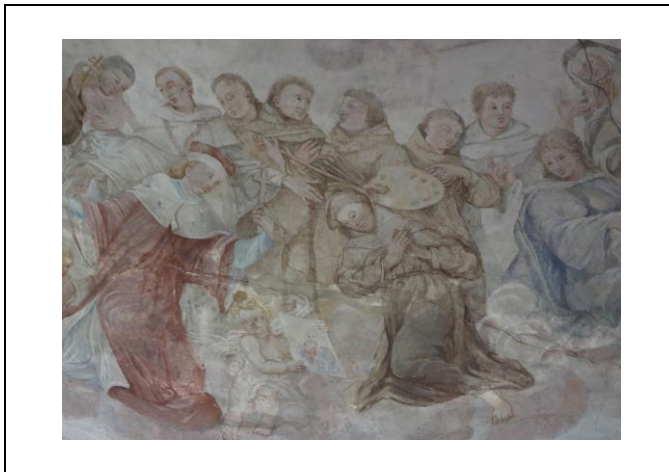


Figure 2. Valenty Žebrowski's self-portrait identified in one of the scenes.

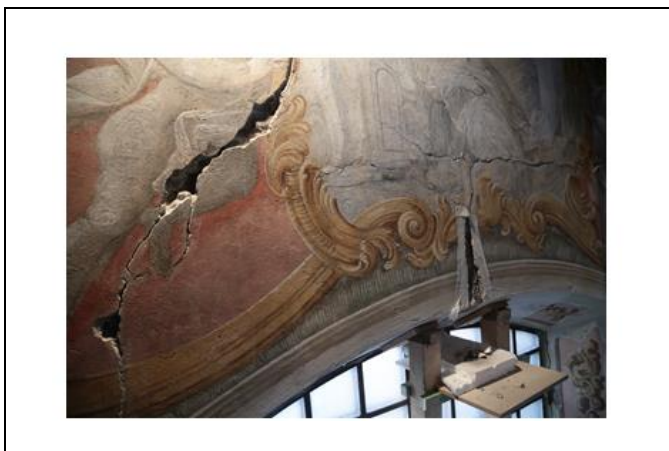


Figure 3. Cracking of the wall structure and plaster layers.

Between 1743 and 1750 one of the monks, Valenty Żebrowski, accomplished a mural painting decoration in the church interior based on the extensive iconographic and religious program. The artist was born in Lubawa in the early XVIIIth century. He joined the monastery and became a painter of many monastic churches in Poland. He died in 1765. His self - portrait was recognized in one of the scenes painted in the chapel of the Saint Anne's church (Figure 2).

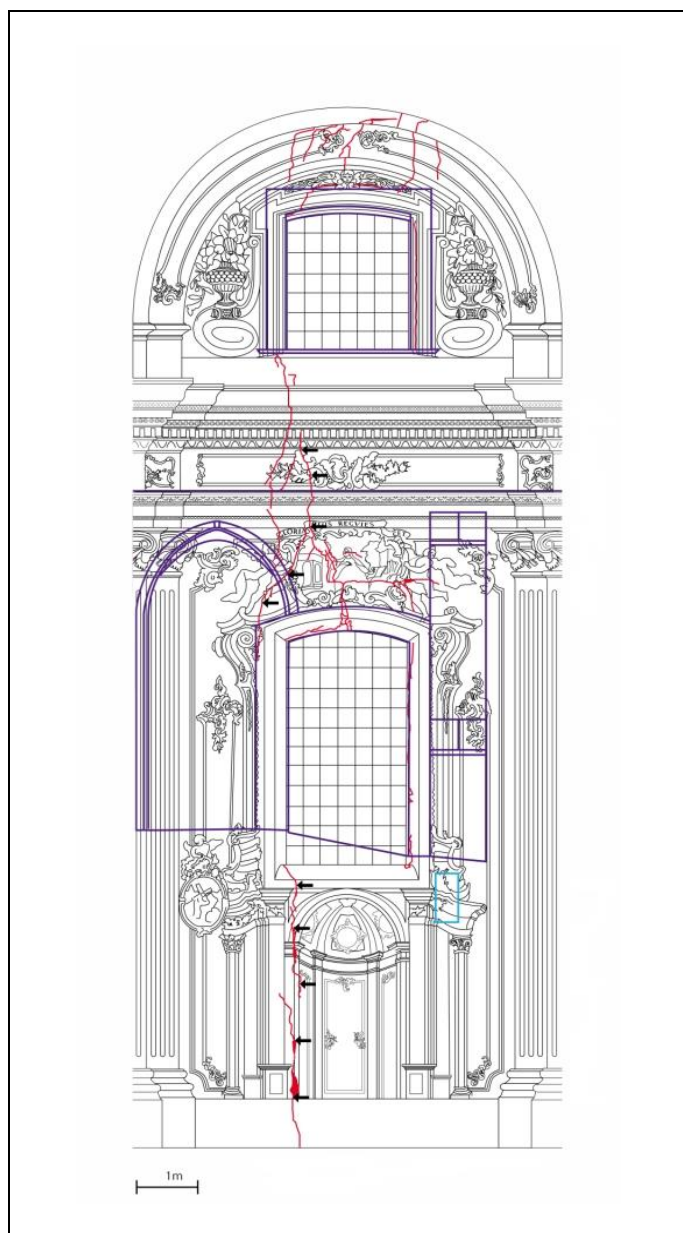


Figure 4. Cracking of the north wall, drawing by B. Rabiej.

The mural paintings from Saint Anne's church were renewed several times; in the XIXth century most of them were repainted. The church, as one of the few in Warsaw, wasn't destroyed during World War II. Although the roof of the building was damaged by the fire, the ceiling and walls have survived. In the 70's of the XXth century the damaged paintings were restored and missing elements were reconstructed [1].

Due to its location the church building has been always exposed to structural problems caused by the subsiding of the Vistula escarpment (Figure 1). In the 50's during the construction of the WZ (East-West) road running along a tunnel close to the church and over the bridge to the other side of the Vistula, the slope stability has been disturbed. The foundations of the church and vault structure began to break due to the subsiding of the north-eastern part of the chancel. Immediate intervention prevented the temple from collapsing. The ground around the building was reinforced with columns and the foundation was encircled by a concrete wreath. The state of the building structure is constantly monitored. Recently new cracks on the ceiling and walls have been noticed. The slope movements have been diagnosed by inclinometers placed at 20m below the ground level.

In the years 2010-2013 some brick elements got loose in the widow lintels and dangerous delamination of the plaster on the north wall was observed (Figure 3). A serious structural rupture of the wall ran along the north facade (in the last span). In the upper part of the wall appeared a structural dissection of the brick wall above the window in the second storey (Figure 4). The rupture was more than 1 cm wide and reached approximately 45cm into the wall, the loose wall moved forward and downward. Repeatedly fixed stucco elements and cornices broke again.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Technical rescue works on the building construction

The rescue works have been undertaken on the northern wall of the church nave in December 2013 (Figure 5). The acoustic researches and infrared detection of the cracking and delamination of the plaster were executed [2]. The heterogeneous wall structure (numerous repairs, an old church window and buttress) have contributed to the serious structural cracks. The works undertaken in 2013 consisted of the hanging of the window lintel by introducing a system of the anchors fastened by a steel beam placed on the vault ceiling (Figure 6). In this way the wall burden was reduced. A part of the wall was re-bricked. The stucco elements were removed (Figures 7, 8), consolidated and re-glued in the same place. The crevices and cracks of the walls were filled with the mortar of reinforced durability. A special committee was appointed to work on the project of the slope movement stabilization.



Figure 5. Temporary protection of the window lintel by using belts.



Figure 6. Reinforcement of the window lintel by using steel construction.



Figure 7. Removed stucco elements.

2.2. Conservation and restoration of the painting

The conservation works on the mural paintings were also carried out. The surface of the paintings was cleaned from dust and dirt. The old patches and cement putties were removed. The original polychrome by Valenty Zebrowski was uncovered from repaintings and retouchings. The technique and technology of the paintings were diagnosed with the use of chemical analyses. The traces of the original drawing (on preserved plaster surface) were read by the UV induced fluorescence method. The scenes were identified and the reconstruction of the missing parts of the composition was carried out.

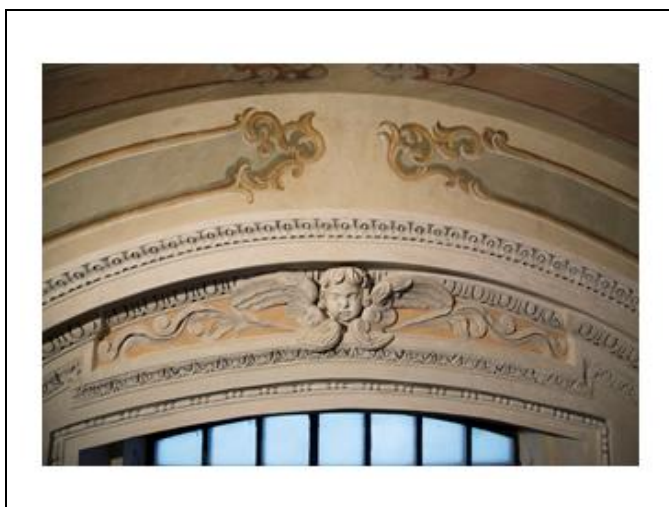


Figure 8. Window lintel - state after conservation.

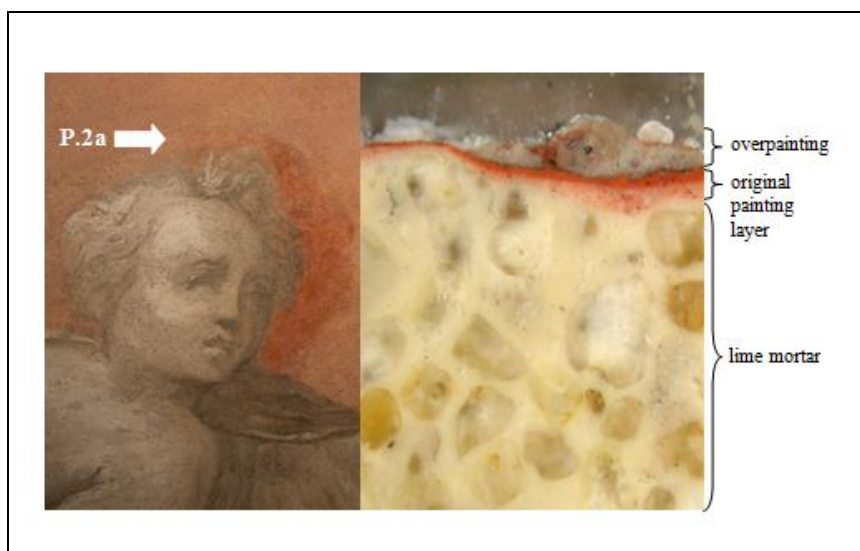


Figure 9. Original red painting layer was covered by overpainting.

3. Results

3.1. Technique and technology of the painting by Valenty Żebrowski

The mural paintings by Valenty Żebrowski date from 1750 to 1764. They were carried out in secco technique on the lime mortar with coarse quartz filler. The artist's palette consists of the following pigments: ochre, red iron oxide (Figure 9), smalt, white limestone, black wood and green earth [E. Jeżewska, *Chemical analysis of the samples taken from the northern wall of the St. Anne's church in Warsaw, XVIIIth century paintings by Valenty Żebrowski*, (manuscript), Warsaw, 2013, 4-19]. This is the third in order of the painted decorations of the church interior. Under the XVIIIth century plaster some relics of the earlier polychromes were discovered.

3.2. Reconstruction of the missing parts methodology

Owing to the UV induced fluorescence photos the original composition of the scenes was discovered. The method is based on the phenomenon of fluorescence emission by various materials. Therefore, even if the painting has not been preserved, the traces of the painting binder absorbed by the plaster surface are still visible in the UV light [3]. In part of the painted cartouche some lost elements of the composition have been identified. The painting presents a sitting woman with a landscape in the background (Figure 10). Her head is surrounded by an aureole, with her face turned to the left, right hand resting on the heart while the left one is placed on an open book and points to a piece of text. The cartouche pole is painted in tones of blue-grey, 'en grisaille' resembling a relief in stone.

In the UV light some unknown elements of the composition became visible: a broken column, books and volutes surrounding the cartouche (Figures 10 and 11). The scene is crowned with a Latin sentence, written on the band above: 'GLORIA EIUS REQUIESCET'. This quotation from the Book of the Wisdom of Sirach (Sir. 14.27) in translation reads: 'WILL BE REST IN HIS GLORY'.

The sentence is a kind of blessing for the sage who by virtue of Wisdom will find favour in the eyes of the Lord. The painting used to be interpreted as a personification of Wisdom, but it could also present the prophetess Deborah, the only woman who led the Israelites in the Age of Judges.

A special wisdom of the woman was suggested by accompanying attributes: books and scrolls of the scripture. This interpretation fits the iconographic program of the entire interior painting, where the heroes from the Old Testament are presented in the cartouches. During the restoration work old reconstructions and retouching were removed, missing parts were reconstructed (Figures 12 and 13). The scene regained its true message and original artistic expression [4].



Figure 10. Central part of the painted cartouche, state before conservation.

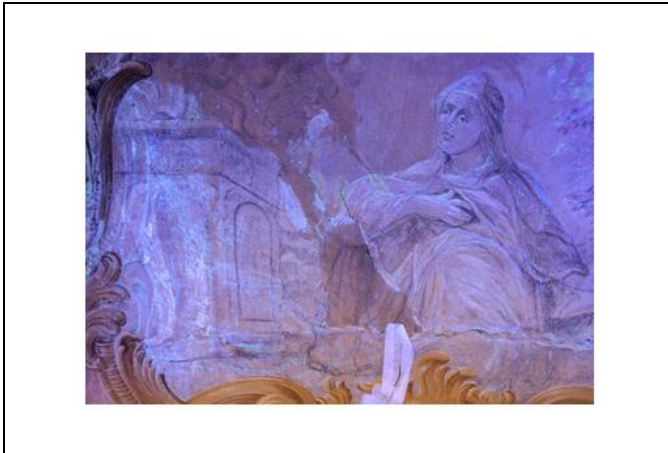


Figure 11. UV light investigation.



Figure 12. Loses of the plaster layer filled with putties.



Figure 13. Painted cartouche, state after conservation.

4. Conclusions

The most important conclusions are:

- conservation and restoration work should be accompanied by a full recognition of the iconographic content and sacral meaning;
- reconstruction should be based on the source and in-depth studies of the polychrome relics;
- particular fragment of the wall paintings cannot be interpreted in isolation from the whole monument and its cultural context;
- even engineering and technical works on the monument can be an opportunity for research and better understanding of the religious and iconographic meaning.

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