

BULLETIN OF THE

POLONUS PHILATELIC SOCIETY



Meets 2nd & 4th Friday of each month at Falcons Hall, 1062 N. Ashland Ave.

Issue 134

December 1955

ALTAR OF ST. MARY'S, CRACOW

by Aloysius J. Paruzynski*

Poland did not issue many postal stamps of a religious motif. Having great respect for the faith, the Poles did not think it proper to have religious pictures daubed by cancellation inks or handed roughly on covers tossed in dusty mail boxes and collection bags, eventually ending up in waste baskets.

However, important occasions in Poland's history warranted the issuance of stamps to commemorate significant phases of her culture. Perhaps the best known of this nature is the Altar Panel, Scott type A60, issued on the 400th anniversary of the death of Wit Stwosz, 15th century sculptor. The stamp depicts the Dormition (death) of the Virgin Mary. Though there are hundreds of stamps of the Madonna issued by many countries, this is the only one depicting the Death of the Blessed Virgin.

This article deals with three aspects of the commemorative issue: the altar, the panel, and the artist.

THE ALTAR

The altar is erected in a five-walled sanctuary of the 14th century Church of St. Mary in Cracow (Poland OS1, N70). Forming the background for the altar are three high gothic windows



which were taken into consideration when the artist-sculptor was making his plans. The altar is the highest gothic in Europe, rising about 42 and a half feet in height and extending 33 feet in width. The central panel is almost 24 feet high and about 17 and a half feet wide. The highest figure is just over nine feet tall. (All dimensions are approximate conversions from the metric scale). In comparison, the famous panel in Sankt Wolfgang, near Salzburg, is about 12 feet 8 inches high and 10 feet 4 inches wide, while another panel in Kefermart, near Linz, is about 10 feet 5 inches high and 10 feet 1 inch wide.

The altar is made of oak while all the carved figures are of lindenwood. Resembling the usual gothic triptychs, the altar is really a pentatyche: i.e., it has five parts—the central panel with two wings swinging on hinges as doors over the stationary wings on both sides of the central panel. The wings have a total of 18 bas reliefs depicting scenes from the life of Christ and His Mother. The altar has three

*This article appeared in the COROS CHRONICLE, an organ of the collectors of Religion on Stamps Society, October 1955 issue.

main subjects, namely, the Dormition of Mary, her Assumption, and the Coronation. The panel is supported by a predella and the altar is crowned by an azure baldachin above the topmost group. Altogether there are over two hundred carved figures in the altar.

THE PANEL

In the Dormition scene we see Mary and the twelve apostles, five in the foreground, the others in the background. Mary, young, of delicate beauty, is limp, falling like a cut flower in the hands of a supporting apostle. Her hands are listless and the glazed eyes "as with fog" are hiding back of the eyelids. The tall, bearded apostle is evidently surprised by the role that befell him—supporting, in his huge, rough hands, the slim and tender body of the Lady. The most emotional of Christ's disciples, John, is bending frightened and lifting part of his cloak to wipe away his tears. Old Peter, affected by the death of Mary, is reading prayers for the dead. The apostle to the left, grieving though solemn, is holding the holy water vessel, while to the right, the apostle with his hands helplessly opened, is lifting his head upwards as though he already sees Mary at the side of Christ. In the back of this group are crowded other apostles. To the side, one of the apostles is extinguishing a candle—symbol of life. The other apostle looks heavenward. Between them are the remaining four apostles with expressions of wonder at this scene of death or, perhaps, seeing a vision above them. The gestures of the individual figures, the characteristic position of their heads and torsos, the formation of the cloaks "breaking" in all directions, creates in the viewer an impression of movement and unrest. All the figures are made of individual linden-wood trunks and stumps. The figure of Mary and the apostle supporting her are made of one stump. The statues are painted in polychrome.

THE ARTIST

Wit Stwosz (who may be seen on Poland OSPS) came to Cracow from Nuremberg in 1475. Most likely he was not a native of Nuremberg, nevertheless, he gave up his citizenship of that city and began his monumental work on the altar in 1477. Two years were

spent in preparation—planning, finding a studio, gathering materials, etc.

Little is known of the ancestry, early life and works of the artist before his coming to Cracow. The encyclopedia ORGELBRAND, published in 1884, states that the artist's parents lived in Cracow. There are many variations of his surname, as Stosz, Schtoss, Stoss, Stwoss and Stosche; and his christian name as Vit, Fit, Witus, Wit, Feyt and Veydt.

It is supposed that the artist was thirty-two years of age when he began his work on the Altar "in the year of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, 1477, on the feast of St. Urban," (May 25th) as reads an entry on a parchment record deposited in the altar and found in 1533. The altar was completed in July 1489. The city clerk made another entry on the parchment, "... wonderfully behaved, polite and industrious master, whose intellect and artistry is famed throughout Christendom and whose work of art shall remain for ages."

The altar remained in its original place until 1939. At various periods, some renovations and repainting took place and fresh gold leaf added. In the face of war in 1939, Polish artists and officials, anticipating Hitlerian methods of banditry, decided to preserve the altar by moving it to a safe location. It was dismantled, crated and moved by river scows to Sandomierz, and shipped it to Germany where it The Germans found the altar, however, was repacked and deposited in a vault in the Reich Bank of Berlin. Later it was removed to a shelter near a castle in Nuremberg where climatic conditions and inexpert handling resulted in damage to the wood and painting.

After Germany's capitulation, the efforts of the Ministry of Culture and Art of Poland were successful in returning the altar to Cracow on April 30, 1946. Subsequently, the government appropriated a huge sum of money for the restoration which took four years to complete. Through diligent and exhaustive work of artists, the altar and its central panel again regained the appearance in beauty and detail given it by Wit Stwosz. God-willing, this work of art "shall remain for ages."

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Compiled by J. J. Domar

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NEW ISSUES

by J. J. Domar

On Oct. 1 and 2, 1955 a Grape Gathering Celebration, traditional since 1431, was held at Zielona Góra. At the same time the First Philatelic Exhibition of Lubuska was held. In conjunction with these two events, the Polish Post issued stamps on the occasion of the 10th Anniv. of the recovery of the western territories of Silesia, Pomorze and Mazur. The stamp designs show capitals of these Provinces: the 25 gr green—Szczecin; the 40 gr red—Cathedral at Wrocław; the 60 gr blue Town Hall at Oplon. Steel engraved in sheets of 100. During the Exhibition the stamps were sold only in special booklets with a special exhibition cancellation and a Grape Gathering Celebration cancellation.

—Dr. M.A. Rayall de Ragan

Set of four stamps honoring the Mickiewicz Celebration Year 1955.

Date of issue: October 10, 1955.

Values: 20 gr brown

40 gr brown and orange

60 gr brown and green

95 gr black and red brown

Perforation: 20 gr. — 12 x 12½

40, 60 and 95 gr — 12¼ 12¾

Paper: white, unwatermarked

Gum: white

Process: Rotogravure

Measurement: 20 gr—43 x 25.5 mm

40, 60 and 95 gr—25.5 x 31.25 mm

— Prasa i Książka

Not much official information has been received on "New Issues." Our last notification is dated Nov. 8th.

At this time we were informed that on October 21st a set of two stamps were issued to honor the 50th Anniversary of the Polish Teachers Trade Union.

Issued in two values: A 40 groszy brown—showing a child at a blackboard with a teacher in back supervising.

A 60 groszy blue, showing an open book, and the lamp of knowledge. The size is 31¼ 25½ mm., perf. 12¼, rotogravured on white unwatermarked paper.

You will recall seeing notices in various publications in regard to the color variety of the Kosciuszko stamp discovered by a New York dealer.

Since his discovery, (actually we knew of it for some months previous) eight different color varieties have appeared. The colors range in shades from a sort of blue black, purplish to a red brown. Six were imperf. and two perforated. They are strictly color proofs.

I have also received a sample page of a new album which is being distributed by "Prasa i Książka." It is for stamps issued 1944 to 1955. Containing 100 loose leaf pages, 24 x 29 cm, high grade glossy paper two-toned and illustrated, all titles are in Polish. It gives no other information except the reason for the issue. Price is \$4.00.

That's all for now!

CORRECTION PLEASE!

To the article "The First Polish Postage Stamps in Zloty Currency" by V. Rachmanov that appeared in the November BULLETIN No. 133, we wish to make the following correction:

In the fifth paragraph on Perforations on page 133-2, where the "x" appears, the text should read "Perf. 10 — 10½; 11½ — 12½ and 12½ — 13½", which means Perf. 10 to 10½; 11½ to 12½ and 12½ to 13½.

The next paragraph should read "Line-perforation: 11½ — 12½ and 12½ — 13½ all values on etc." And further on "The 15 groszy on thin paper is also known with compound perforation 12½ — 13½ by 10½ — 11½."

APPLICANTS PENDING

S. Styczynski

1226 N. Grenview Ave.

Chicago 22, Illinois

J. Szyszkiewicz

2723 W. Crystal Street

Chicago 22, Illinois

FREE!

FREE!

FREE!

As we mentioned in a previous BULLETIN, Polonus has undertaken the expense of reprinting a lengthy article on Poland No. 1 by V. Rachmanov that appeared in the Collector's Club Philatelic Journal. This wonderful article from the publication of one of the most distinguished philatelic societies in the world, has already been printed in booklet form, and will be mailed out shortly to all paid-up Polonus members free of charge.

— POLPEX 1956 —

FRIDAY — SATURDAY — SUNDAY
MARCH 9th — 10th — 11th, 1956
at POLISH FALCONS HALL
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

With this issue of the BULETIN, we are including a Prospectus or entry blank for exhibiting at Polpex 1956. If you are planning to exhibit at our coming annual show, we urge you to fill out the Prospectus and send it in as soon as possible. The Exhibition is limited to 100 frames, and it's first come—first served.

At the last Polpex Committee meeting, Myron Steczynski submitted the preliminary sketch for the souvenir sheet which was unanimously approved. It's design will show the famous painting of Our Lady of Częstochowa and will commemorate the 600th anniversary of the defense of the monastery at Częstochowa under Father Kordecki, from the siege by the Swedes.

The Polpex Committee plans to have articles on Polish philately appear in various national philatelic publications about the time of the exhibition. From various Chicagoland members articles have been promised on the Kraków Issues, Polish Revenues, Przedbórz Locals and Mickiewicz. We are still in need of more material and invite members of Polonus who are capable of doing so to write up some phase of Poland philately and to send the article together with any illustrative material to Chester Schafer, 864 N. Ashland Ave., Chicago 22, Ill., by Feb. 5th.

—Roman Burkiewicz,
Polpex Chairman

PHILATELY ON TELEVISION

Stamps and stamp collecting are the subject of the Tuesday morning session of the "Fun and Facts" program over television WCPO-TV of Cincinnati, Ohio. It comes on at 8:30 a.m. and is conducted by Mrs. Eloise Kadesch. The station broadcasts on Channel 9. It is sponsored by the University of Cincinnati and was originally intended for children but since these are in or on their way to school at that hour, the slant is towards an adult audience. Every other week a separate country and its stamps are featured with the in-between ones introducing a guest philatelist.

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Polonus Philatelic Society is non-political. The views expressed by the authors of articles appearing herein do not necessarily express the views of the Polonus Philatelic Society.

TID BITS

Dr. M. E. Uznanski did it again! He took the first prize plaque at the International Show at Oslo with his Christmas Seals.

The active Doctor also celebrated his 25th anniversary as a doctor with the Obstetrics Dept. at St. Mary's Hospital in Chicago. A banquet was held in his honor. May we add our heartiest congratulations.
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Members V. Rachmanov and Rev. Bialduga were also recently honored by a write-up in STAMPS magazine.
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At the past Czechoslovak show a new type of steel easel and aluminum frame were introduced. This new type equipment for stamp exhibitions will start a new trend.
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Barney Fialkowski is the newly elected President of the Austin Phil. Club.
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Our December 23rd Christmas Beeba attracted 35 members and 4 visitors and included a Parade of Past Presidents. Program Chairman John Skotnicki deserves credit for a successful party. Music was provided by the Polonus Polka Band consisting of William Juszcak and Ed Kowalski. A larger and illustrated description of this affair will appear in the January BULLETIN.