

18th-century wall paintings in Poland

The Grotesque in Fresco

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Wall paintings executed in 18th-century manor homes and palaces mix biblical and classical themes with ordinary motifs drawn from everyday life. Here griffons, centaurs, and other hybrids intermingle with realistically portrayed animals, plants, and landscapes, as well as everyday objects

“Unlike reality” was the term the Roman architect Vitruvius used to describe the grotesque – a fanciful style

of wall decoration that combined elements of reality with imaginative imagery. Full of reproach, Vitruvius claimed that only paintings striving to imitate nature could be of any value. Horace, however, took a more favorable view of the grotesque style, in fact likening it to poetry. He was the first to notice the marked similarity between a poet’s flights of fancy and the kind of fantastic creatures, oscillating between dreamland and reality, that could emerge at the stroke of a painter’s brush.

Harmonia mundi

The very term “grotesque” itself arose out of a set of somewhat coincidental associations. It was initially used to describe a classical type of colorful paintings rediscovered at the end of the 15th century in the ruins of ancient Roman houses called “grottos.” Here, artists encountered



Portr. Jamski

The Dining Hall in the White House in Warsaw's Royal Łazienki Park boasts frescoes painted by J.B. Piersch in 1777, full of mythological and plant motifs

a vast range of motifs: mythological sphinxes, griffins, sea monsters, shapely festoons offering nesting space to birds, eagle heads and crabs. Inspired by these discoveries, Raphael and the artists gathered around him soon developed a new approach to polychrome decoration; the most celebrated achievement in this style consisted in the paintings that decorated the pilasters of the so-called Raphael Loggia (1519), a long gallery built for Pope Leo X in the Vatican Palace. This style was subsequently imitated and copied all across modern-era Europe, reaching Poland in the latter half of the 18th century. Varied motifs – some painted, others executed in stucco – were incorporated into a rigorous and consistent geometric structure made up of diverse forms, arranged into repetitive schemes.

The aim of Leo X and the artists he retained was to convey a harmonious vision of the world, perceived as a microcosm comprised of myriad contrasts. Consequently, the Loggia paintings contained Biblical characters and themes interspersed with ancient heroes, gods, and fantastic creatures, plus wholly ordinary motifs drawn from everyday life. Animalist motifs, probably drawn from Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*, were treated with an almost scientific passion: there were diverse species of birds perched on the same tree, various fish, festoons of fruit and vegetables, and musical instruments, all of them resembling the specimen illustrations offered in scientific atlases. Even miniature landscape scenes and everyday objects were included. Yet such naturalistic elements were also accompanied by griffins, centaurs, hybrids and other mythological creatures, more reminiscent of freak-show exhibits than any real creatures.

The grotesque style therefore sought to draw together two opposite poles of existence: the real world and a spiritual domain that existed only in the imagination. In essence, the grotesque represented an imitation of both worlds at the same time.

Pompeian grotesques in Mazovia

In the latter half of the 18th century, the so-called classicist (or "Pompeian") grotesque – a decorative ornamental style inspired both by the Raphael Loggias and by newly uncovered archeological discoveries – became established in Europe, including in Poland. Grotesque paintings became synonymous with classical decorative patterns, a hallmark of the Enlightenment's affinity for ancient art, and thus become a refined element of *all'antica* interior design.

Poland's King Stanisław August commissioned his court painter Jan Bogumił Plersch to decorate one of the interiors of the White House in Warsaw's Łazienki park-and-palace complex in the grotesque style (the Dining Hall on the ground floor, executed around 1777). This move triggered a fashion among the Polish aristocracy, and grotesque interiors became increasingly popular at Polish manor homes and palaces starting in the early 1780s. By

Piotr Jamski



The „Pompeian” Cabinet frescoes in the Walicki Palace in Mała Wieś represent one of Poland's very few preserved examples of 18th-century wall paintings

the time the century drew to a close, it would have surely been difficult to find any aristocratic residence in Warsaw or the Mazovia (*Mazowsze*) region – which present author's research has concentrated on – that lacked a classical-leaning, grotesque-style interior. Yet aside from the White House interior in Warsaw, few have survived to the present day, the extant examples being at the manor home of General Andrzej Mokronowski in Jordanowice (now Grodzisk Mazowiecki), at the Palace on the Water in Warsaw's Łazienki complex (the Ballroom), at the Royal Castle in Warsaw (the Cabinet of Monarchs), the Radziwiłł Palace in Nieborów (the Green Room and Yellow Room), the Walicki Palace in Mała Wieś (the "Pompeian" Cabinet), the Giedroyc Palace in Rybienko (the salon) and the Krasieński Palace in Radziejowice (an *enfilade* suite). The artists who created these polychrome paintings remain frequently unknown to posterity. This fact notwithstanding, the present author attempted to employ available comparative methods to identify the artists likely to have created these interiors. Apart from the aforementioned J. B. Plersch, there were other decorators who painted in the grotesque style in Poland at that time, including Szymon Mańkowski, Robert Stankiewicz and Vincenzo Brenna



Krzysztof Kalifski

The White House in Warsaw's Royal Łazienki Park, built in 1774–1776, has preserved its rare original wall decorations inside

(famous for numerous grotesque decorations in Europe), as well as the latter's associates and students: Antonio Tombari, Domenico Masolatti and Adam Byczkowski.

The White House in Łazienki

The multifaceted nature of the grotesque style enabled complex content to be conveyed in a seemingly frivolous and amusing form. This must have been particularly valued by King Stanisław August, who like other rulers treated interior design as an important vehicle for conveying certain ideas. The decorations at all his royal mansions conveyed the ideology of power. An excellent example of this stance towards the grotesque is to be found in the polychrome Dining Hall of the White House in Warsaw's Łazienki complex. Like other paintings of this type, it portrays an entire universe of its own: bizarre monsters as had been described so reproachfully by Vitruvius, human figures, mythological gods, landscape scenes, animals, zodiac signs and ornamental motifs. Time-honored allegories and symbols were employed to portray Day and Night, the Four Seasons, the Four Elements, and the Four Continents. All these elements, closely intertwined, comprised a microcosm whose intrinsic parts included the powerful natural elements, the continuous cycle of the seasons, human beings working in accordance with the age-old cycle of nature, and *mundus animalis*. Undoubtedly, the most prominent role in the microcosm depicted on the walls of the Dining Hall was played by the king, as the guardian of this ancient order of things.

In the cabinet in Walicki Palace in Mała Wieś, an unknown painter (likely Antonio Tombari or a Polish painter associated with Vincenzo Brenna) likewise depicted symbols of the Four Seasons, the Four Elements and the signs of the zodiac, but he also included artistic allegories and, interestingly, scenes drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The latter's poetic vision of a world in constant change meshes well the notion of the grotesque style, composed of numerous and diverse elements. Metamorphosis was frequently depicted literally in grotesque paintings, such as by showing human figures or animals turning into tree branches. The combination of transformation scenes and allegories of the seasons and the elements seem to be particularly well-founded, as all natural phenomena are indeed subject to constant metamorphosis.

The grotesque style thus perfectly expressed the diversity of the world and its changeability – yet, as Horace put it, it did so in a way similar to poetry, far from striving to offer any unambiguous depiction. ■

Further reading:

- Bernatowicz A. (2004). The Grotesque and the Symbolism of Royal Rule – The Decoration of the Dining Hall in the White House [in Polish]. *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, 29, pp. 183–202.
- Bernatowicz A. (in print). *Unlike Reality: Grotesque Paintings in Palace Interiors in the Mazovia Region (1777–1820)* [in Polish]. Wydawnictwo Instytutu Sztuki PAN, Warsaw.
- Morel P. (1997). *Les grotesques. Les figures de l'imaginaire dans la peinture italienne de la fin de la Renaissance*. Flammarion, Paris.