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## Jan Matejko at the World Exposition 1873 Vienna

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## Jan Matejko at the World Exposition 1873 Vienna

The importance of Jan Matejko with respect to the art and history of Poland is undisputed. His oeuvre as well as his person continue to be omnipresent in Poland today and are also a topic of research. In Austria and Germany, however, the history painter is widely unknown despite numerous points of contact with the German-speaking cultural landscape during the artist's life. Following the Krakow uprising in 1846, Austria annexed Krakow, where Matejko was born in 1838 and which had been an independent free state up to that point.<sup>1</sup> Until his death in 1893, Krakow remained the centre of his life. The artist was as such part of the Habsburg Monarchy, which he presented with his work at international exhibitions. Matejko studied and worked in Munich, Vienna and Berlin among others. Between 1867 and 1892, his works were shown at over 30 expositions in Austria and Germany in addition to the ten major exhibitions in Paris such as the Paris Salons and the World Expositions that attracted interest across Europe.<sup>2</sup> This in turn raises the question as to how Matejko's work was received during his lifetime in the German-speaking territory, particularly in Vienna, the centre of the Da-

nubian Monarchy.<sup>3</sup> With the example of the 1873 World Exposition Vienna, this article will explore, in excerpts, the little known and widely unexamined history surrounding the reception of Matejko's work drawing on reports in the Viennese press at the time.<sup>4</sup>

Jan Matejko's participation in international exhibitions began in 1865 at the Paris Salon with *Skarga's Sermon*<sup>5</sup> (1864, ill. 1). The Polish nobleman Maurycy Potocki had purchased the painting one year prior and helped to finance Matejko's participation in the Salon.<sup>6</sup> *Skarga's Sermon* was awarded one of 41 medals in the category painting.<sup>7</sup> No immediate reactions to this can be found in the Vi-

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<sup>3</sup> This question will be explored in depth in the author's dissertation project *Die Rezeption Jan Matejkos im 19. Jahrhundert im deutschsprachigen Raum, aufgezeigt am Beispiel Wiens und Berlins* ("An exploration of the reception of Jan Matejko in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century German-Speaking Territory based on the example of Vienna and Berlin"). The submission of the dissertation is planned for 2017.

<sup>4</sup> The newspapers described below were researched with the virtual platform AustriaN Newspapers Online (ANNO) of the Austrian National Library ([www.anno.onb.ac.at](http://www.anno.onb.ac.at)).

<sup>5</sup> *Skarga's Sermon*, 1864, oil on canvas, 224 × 397 cm, National Museum in Warsaw (in possession of the Royal Castle in Warsaw).

<sup>6</sup> *Matejko* (1993: 76).

<sup>7</sup> Zgórnjak (1998: 77).

<sup>1</sup> Purchla (1993: 7).

<sup>2</sup> *Matejko* (1993: *passim*).

ennese press, still the exceedingly successful showing of the *Skarga's Sermon* did not go unnoticed in Vienna. The following year, the Viennese Commission decided that Matejko's *Rejtan – The Fall of Poland*<sup>8</sup> (1866), would be presented in the Austrian department of the World Exposition 1867 Paris.<sup>9</sup> Extensive reporting on the event indicated the surprise of Vienna's inhabitants with respect to "exceedingly significant" (*höchst bedeutende*) and "outstanding" (*vorzügliche*) work of the artist, who had remained widely unknown up to that point and who originated from an area of the empire „where one would least expect such valuable contributions" (*von wo man so werthvolle Beiträge am wenigsten erwartet hätte*).<sup>10</sup> Matejko was the only representative of Austria to be awarded one of the fifteen first class medals for painting.<sup>11</sup> The purchase of the painting by Emperor Franz Joseph I and the subsequent award of the Knight's Cross of the Order of Franz Joseph to the artist affirmed the acceptance and adoption of Matejko by and on behalf of the Habsburg Monarchy.<sup>12</sup> The World Exposition 1873 marked a high point in Matejko's now regular participation in Viennese exhibitions as well as his presentation as an Austrian artist.

For the World Exposition 1873 Vienna, the Austrians occupied about a quarter of the area available in the Kunsthalle. This included eight rooms and part of the collectively used central room. France and Germany also each accounted for about one quarter of the area used. The last quarter was divided up among the other exhibiting nations.<sup>13</sup> As for the number of works contributed, France presented the most works at 1,573 of the total of 6,060 works. Austria followed with 1,079 items and Germany with 1,026. A glance at the figures of the World Exposition 1867 Paris clearly reveals the extent of the host's ambition in 1873 to adequately present itself as an exhibiting nation. The total number of artworks presented increased by about 2,000 items from 1867 to 1873. At the same time, France presented approx. one third more works in Vienna than in Paris, Germany nearly doubled the

number of works shown and Austria increased its number of contributions nearly five-fold.<sup>14</sup> In the international central room, the Austrian, or more precisely the Viennese painters were represented by Franz von Lenbach and Hans Canon.<sup>15</sup> Matejko's works dominated the first adjoining room of the Austrian department.<sup>16</sup> The newspaper "Das Vaterland" dated 21<sup>st</sup> May states that the works of Matejko here, similar to Carl Theodor von Piloty's *Thusnelda Led in Germanicus' Triumph* (1873) in the "room of honour" (*Ehrensaale*) eclipsed all other works.<sup>17</sup> The article was referring to *Skarga's Sermon*, the *Union of Lublin* (1869, ill. 2) and *Stefan Batory at Pskov* (1872, ill. 3).<sup>18</sup> Matejko also presented his latest work *Copernicus* (1873, ill. 4) as well as seven portraits.<sup>19</sup>

From the 1860s on, Vienna's press began to cover the World Exposition. By the time the exposition opened on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1873 as well as during its term, the grand-scale representative project of the imperial and royal monarchy was reported on with increasing frequency and depth. Exposition Director Wilhelm Freiherr von Schwarz-Senborn had the "Weltausstellungs-Correspondenz" published from 1871 on. The news, which was compiled internally, provided the media with a regular supply of information. The "Wiener Weltausstellungs-Zeitung" (1871) and the "Allgemeine Illustrierte Weltausstellungs-Zeitung" (1872) were both founded to this end as further additions to the Viennese newspaper landscape, which covered the World Exposition in a variety of formats. As for the quality of reporting, it must be noted that Schwarz-Senborn attempted to influence the portrayal of the project in the media, above all through the "Weltausstellungs-Correspondenz" and the aforementioned exposition

<sup>14</sup> Springer (1874: 109).

<sup>15</sup> Ranzoni (1873: 1).

<sup>16</sup> Lehmann (2011: 65).

<sup>17</sup> In der Kunsthalle (1873: 2). *Thusnelda Led in Germanicus' Triumph*, 1873, oil on canvas, 490 × 710 cm, Munich, New Pinakothek.

<sup>18</sup> *Union of Lublin*, 1869, oil on canvas, 298 × 512 cm, Lublin Museum (in possession of the National Museum in Warsaw); *Stefan Batory at Pskov*, 1872, oil on canvas, 322 × 545 cm, Royal Castle in Warsaw.

<sup>19</sup> *Copernicus*, 1873, oil on canvas, 225 × 315 cm, Jagiellonian University, Collegium Novum, Krakow; *Portrait of Artist's Wife in Wedding Dress* (1865); *Portrait of Mademoiselle Zakaszewska* (1868); *Portrait of Artist's Children* (1870); *Portrait of Leonard Serafiński* (1870); *Portrait of Antoni Serafiński* (1870); *Portrait of Maria Pusłowska* (1871); *Portrait of Zofia Cielecka* (1871). *Matejko* (1993: 83, 102, 110–112, 114, 164).

<sup>8</sup> *Rejtan. The Fall of Poland*, 1866, oil on canvas, 282 × 487 cm, Royal Castle in Warsaw.

<sup>9</sup> Zgórnjak (1998: 153).

<sup>10</sup> Die österreichische Kunst (1867: 4).

<sup>11</sup> Zgórnjak (1998: 77).

<sup>12</sup> Micke-Broniarek (2004).

<sup>13</sup> Die Raumverteilung (1873: 3); Drexlerowa, Olszewski (2008: 103–129).

III. 1.  
*Skarga's Sermon*, 1864, oil on  
 canvas, 224 × 397 cm, National  
 Museum in Warsaw in  
 possession of the Royal  
 Castle in Warsaw, ZKW 2048,  
 fot. Andrzej Ring



III. 2.  
*Union of Lublin*, 1869, oil on  
 canvas, 298 × 512 cm, Lublin  
 Museum in possession of the  
 National Museum in Warsaw



III. 3.  
*Stefan Batory at Pskov*,  
 1872, oil on canvas,  
 322 × 545 cm, Royal Castle  
 in Warsaw – Museum,  
 ZKW/1047, fot. Andrzej Ring,  
 Lech Sandzewicz





Ill. 4. *Copernicus*, 1873, oil on canvas, 225 × 315 cm, Jagiellonian University, Collegium Novum, Krakow

newspapers. Paid reporting in connection with the World Exposition was also no exception. Anyway high-quality articles containing critical reviews of the exposition content also appeared.<sup>20</sup> Against this background, reporting on the World Exposition, Austrian art shown at the World Exposition and Jan Matejko must be critically investigated.

The Viennese World Exposition opened on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1873 – the Kunsthalle followed with a delay of nearly two weeks. The artworks had not been delivered on time, due in part to overburdened railway lines so that many countries were still busy unpacking and hanging various artworks even after the official opening day. Austria, as stated in the press, was “of course the furthest along in hanging its works” (*selbstverständlich mit dem Hängen der Bilder am weitesten vorgeschritten*).<sup>21</sup> But also in Austria’s case, paintings were delivered until shortly before the opening of the exposition.<sup>22</sup> The “Internationale Ausstellungs-Zeitung”, an insert included with the “Neue Freie Presse”, focused on a number of artists from the Austrian department following the account of these circumstances. Matejko is the first of 55 artists to be named:

Matejko’s works, including a number of exceptional portraits, in the class of history painting are the most spectacular; the artist’s recently created large format painting *Copernicus* is also already in place [...].<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Bernád (2013).

<sup>21</sup> *Ausstellungschronik* (1873: 6).

<sup>22</sup> *Ausstellungschronik* (1873a: 5).

<sup>23</sup> *Am hervorragendsten ist im Historienfache Matejko vertreten, der auch einige ausgezeichnete Porträts eingesendet hat; auch das von dem Künstler neuestens geschaffene grosse Ge-*

Matejko is mentioned in the further coverage of the World Exposition not only as a participating artist, but also as a potential member of the jury prior to the exposition. The “Internationale Ausstellungszeitung” dated 3<sup>rd</sup> May presents the nominees, proposed by more than one commission, among who is “Johann Matejko”.<sup>24</sup> One must assume that Matejko was not selected as juror as no further mention is made of this point.

On the opening day, an extensive report of a secret, advance visit to the Kunsthalle by the author appeared on the feature page of the “Presse”. Among other things, he observes “the grand, vibrant resplendence of Austrian art” (*die große, frische Farbenfreudigkeit in der österreichischen Kunst*). In praising Matejko’s command of colour, he refers to the central theme of the artist’s works – momentous occasions in Poland’s history:

Even Matejko’s brilliant colours – whether recounting Polish songs long lost in the annals of poetry on broad canvases or portraying every national tragedy suffered by Poland with genuine patriotic melancholy – suggest through their vibrant freshness that Poland may in fact not yet be lost. Though he paints the individual acts of this unprecedented historic tragedy in the brightest light and with most vibrant tones on his palette.<sup>25</sup>

Emperor Franz Josef I. opened the Kunsthalle on May 16<sup>th</sup>. A contribution of the “Presse” on the following day outlined his walk through the exhibition: he started in the central international hall particularly viewing the works of Canon, de Keyser, Camphausen and Hiddemann.<sup>26</sup> He entered the Austrian department next where “the paintings of Matejko and Blaas attracted his attention for a long time” (*wo die Gemälde von Matejko und Blaas seine Aufmerksamkeit lange fesselten*). Only few further artists are mentioned by name. That the Emperor

*mälde: „Copernicus” ist bereits placirt [...]. Ausstellungschronik* (1873: 6).

<sup>24</sup> Zur Wahl der Juroren (1873: 2–3).

<sup>25</sup> *Selbst Matejko’s brillantes Colorit – obgleich er die längst in der Poesie abgeschaffenen Polenlieder auf breiten Leinwänden weiter singt und jedes große polnische National-Unglück mit echtem Patriotenschmerz darstellt – scheint durch die lebensmuthige Frische seiner Farbengebung anzudeuten, daß Polen eigentlich noch nicht verloren sei. Malt er doch die einzelnen Acte dieser historischen Special-Tragödie in dem hellsten Licht und mit den brilliantesten Tönen, die er auf seiner Palette hat.* J. B. (1873: 2).

<sup>26</sup> Hans Canon – Austrian department, Nicaise de Keyser – Belgian department, Wilhelm Camphausen und Friedrich Hiddemann – German department.

spoke well about the exhibition and Austria's contribution is not surprising.<sup>27</sup>

In the first days after opening the press coverage mainly had an overview-character due to the fact that parts of the exhibition were not yet completed and a comprehensive assessment thus not possible.<sup>28</sup> An exhibition catalogue for the Austrian art was furthermore not yet available. Regarding a "total impression" (*Totaleindruck*), the "Internationale Weltausstellungs-Zeitung" on May 21<sup>st</sup> published a listing of the "matadors" (*Matadoren*) of the Austrian department, with Matejko topping the list.<sup>29</sup> With the mention of "The Congress in Lublin" (*Der Kongreß in Lublin*) the author remembers: "a Diabolino recently printed as the painting was talked about in our paper: Dublin, as if the Polish Reichstag were meeting in Ireland." (*ein Diabolino druckte neulich, als in unserem Blatte von dem Bilde die Rede war: Dublin, als wenn der polnische Reichstag in Irland tagte*).<sup>30</sup> Such a misconception of the picture theme was by no means unusual considering preceding and following reviews of Matejko's works. Matejko as an artist was highly appreciated, however a repeated point of criticism stayed that the episodes of Polish history depicted in his works could not be identified without explanation. Furthermore, the lack of relevance for the non-Polish audience was often negatively mentioned. Emerich Ranzoni, editor of the "Neue Freie Presse" and Viennese art consultant clearly notes in his article on Austrian art in the Kunsthalle:

Canon and Matejko are the only artists who embody the true grandeur of art; the latter's eminent gift, bordering on genius, for history painting is such that our only regret in light of his exceedingly gripping paintings is their depiction of events that leave the entire world – with the exception of Poland – explaining: "What's Hecuba to us?"<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> J. L. (1873: 8).

<sup>28</sup> The German department opened on May 31<sup>st</sup>. The French opened their exposition gradually. Wiener Weltausstellung (1873: 2); *Die Presse* (1873: 9).

<sup>29</sup> 30 names are mentioned before single artists are highlighted and commented on. Aus der Kunsthalle (1873: 1).

<sup>30</sup> Aus der Kunsthalle (1873: 1).

<sup>31</sup> *Die eigentliche grosse Kunst ist in der Kunsthalle nur durch Canon und Matejko würdig vertreten; Letzterer hat eine so eminente, an Genialität streifende Begabung für Historienmalerei, dass wir seinen so ergreifenden Gemälden gegenüber nur immer bedauern, da Vorwürfe behandelt zu finden, über welche die ganze Welt, mit Ausnahme der Polen sagt: „Was ist uns Hekuba!“*

From the end of May a growing amount of differentiated reviews could be found for the art displayed during the World Exposition, including Jan Matejko's works. A piece in the newspaper "Das Vaterland" from May 21<sup>st</sup> refers to Carl Theodor von Piloty's *Thusnelda Led in Germanicus' Triumph* as the "pearl of the exhibition" (*Perle der Ausstellung*), whereafter the author addresses Matejko's paintings. He praises the expressiveness of *Skarga's Sermon* – "an early creation of Matejko, but by no means an insignificant one" (*eine der frühesten Schöpfungen Matejko's, aber keineswegs eine seiner unbedeutendsten*) – which also reaches out to those observers that were not familiar with Polish history.<sup>32</sup> The work that was not previously displayed in Vienna, essentially received positive reviews. However, none of the contributions mentioned that Matejko was awarded for *Skarga's Sermon* in Paris in 1865. In his article August Wilhelm Ambros, critic of the *Wiener Abendpost*, describes it as the most touching of the three displayed works.<sup>33</sup> "Wiener Sonn- und Montags-Zeitung" on August 10<sup>th</sup> however gives a more sober assessment of *Skarga's Sermon*, termed *Skarpo* by the author. Like *Copernicus* the work would rather belong to the "historic genre" (*historisches Genre*). The author's opinion can be explained by the fact that he assumes that the Jesuit friar depicted in the painting is directed against Protestantism.<sup>34</sup>

Highly acclaimed by the critics was the *Union of Lublin*, which was previously displayed in the Künstlerhaus in Vienna in 1869, as a result of which it was already reviewed in great detail.<sup>35</sup> The painting however did not stay uncommented. It signals "in the work of the artist a considerable improvement, a purification since his *Rejtan* in the Paris World Exposition [...] especially in regards to the colour harmony. The drawing is exemplary" (*in dem Wirken des Künstlers einen namhaften Fortschritt, eine Läuterung seit seinem auf der Pariser Weltausstellung mit dem ersten Preis ausgezeichneten Rejtan [...] insbesondere in der Farbenharmonie. Die Zeichnung ist dort wie hier musterhaft*).<sup>36</sup> Ambros

With reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba"), Ranzoni expresses that the picture themes are irrelevant for the world, but not for the Poles. Ranzoni (1873a: 2).

<sup>32</sup> In der Kunsthalle (1873: 2).

<sup>33</sup> Ambros (1873: 1027).

<sup>34</sup> Die Historien-Malerei in der Kunsthalle (1873: 2).

<sup>35</sup> *Matejko* (1993: 106).

<sup>36</sup> In der Kunsthalle (1873: 2).

praises the numerous “striking personalities and characters” (*Charakterköpfe und Charakterfiguren*), in the *Union of Lublin* even if the ladies were pictured “with a somewhat ordinary beauty” (*mit etwas allgemeiner Schönheit*).<sup>37</sup>

Matejko’s *Stefan Batory at Pskov* received a considerable amount of reviews within the scope of a previous display in Vienna.<sup>38</sup> The work was equally well received like in the Österreichischen Kunstverein in 1872. “Das Vaterland” writes on May 21<sup>st</sup>: “It has the same imposing effect like the *Union* and can with it be recognized as the most exquisite work in the Austrian art exhibition.” (*Es macht denselben imponirenden Eindruck, wie die „Union“, und dürfte mit dieser als das vorzüglichste Werk der österreichischen Kunst-Ausstellung anerkannt werden*).<sup>39</sup> August Wilhelm Ambros refers to the vaunted, “although slightly restless colouration” (*wenn auch etwas unruhige Färbung*) of *Stefan Batory at Pskov*, that appears “hard and colourful” (*hart und bunt*) due to the unfavorable positioning of the picture. His enthusiasm for the painting is nevertheless quite obvious, especially the “spirited, harshly shaped characteristics of the individual figures” (*geistvolle, bis zur Herbheit scharf gefaßte Charakteristik der einzelnen Figuren*).<sup>40</sup>

Matejko’s *Copernicus* received less favourable reviews. Ambros for example describes it as “improvised and anything but fortunate incidental work” (*improvisirte und keineswegs glücklich ausgefallene Gelegenheitsarbeit*):

[...] this visage staring into the sky cast in an unsettlingly shrill moonlight reminds us more of one moonstruck than the actual genius whose pensive gaze once deciphered the mechanics behind celestial movements.<sup>41</sup>

Matejko’s portraits that were presented during the World Exposition received only little attention by comparison. If however mentioned, they were positively acclaimed without exception. For example, the “Wiener Sonn- und Montags-Zeitung” men-

tions on October 13<sup>th</sup>: “We have wonderful portraits of Matejko and Rodakowsky” (*Wir haben herrliche Porträts von Matejko und Rodakowsky*).<sup>42</sup> Especially the characterization of the displayed figures which Matejko carries out on the whole appearance from the faces over posture to the hands is highlighted with appreciation.<sup>43</sup>

As one can suspect according to the positive reports in the press, Jan Matejko’s achievement was also honoured by the jury with the award of a medal.<sup>44</sup> Following the World Exposition 1873, Matejko continued to show his works regularly in Vienna, Paris as well as other major metropolises of Europe and beyond. By 1893, following Paris and Vienna, his works were shown at three other World Expositions: 1878 and 1889 again in the French capital as well as in Chicago in 1893.<sup>45</sup> There is no doubt, however, that the Viennese World Exposition marked a high point in many respects, both in Matejko’s career as well as in determining the role he played in the art world of the Habsburg Monarchy. No other exhibition outside of Poland showed as many of his works; only in Vienna did Matejko represent the host of the World Exposition and only there did the press coverage permit so many reviews of Matejko’s work within the context of the entire World Exposition project. Unlike any other exhibition, the contemporary critique in connection with the 1873 Viennese World Exposition revealed how the Habsburger Monarchy dealt with “its” artist, Jan Matejko, affirming the importance of the painter for Poland but also his relevance beyond the borders of his native country.

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<sup>37</sup> Ambros (1873: 1027).

<sup>38</sup> *Matejko* (1993: 118).

<sup>39</sup> In der Kunsthalle (1873: 2).

<sup>40</sup> Ambros (1873: 1027).

<sup>41</sup> [...] *diese in gespentig greller Mondbeleuchtung gegen Himmel starrende Gestalt läßt uns eber an einen Mondsüchtigen als an den genialen Mann denken, dessen geistiger Blick zuerst die Mechanik der Himmelsbewegungen durchschaute*. Ambros (1873: 1027).

<sup>42</sup> Die Bildnißmalerei (1873: 1).

<sup>43</sup> Ambros (1873: 1027); Ranzoni (1873b: 2).

<sup>44</sup> *Neues Fremden-Blatt* (1873: 5).

<sup>45</sup> *Matejko* (1993: 145, 232, 201).

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