

## “REJTAN, OR THE FALL OF POLAND” BY JAN MATEJKO

Completed in 1866 as an expression of the painter’s experiences following the suppression of the January Insurrection, *Rejtan: Upadek Polski* [Rejtan, or the Fall of Poland] (figure 4) by Jan Matejko provides, in my opinion, a perfect summary of the history of Poland from 1772 (the year of its First Partition) to 1918 (the year when Poland regained its independence).

Incidentally, through his paintings, from *Zaprowadzenie chrześcijaństwa R.P. 965* [Introduction of Christianity to Poland, AD 965] to *Polonia. Rok 1863* [Polonia: Year 1863] (his only work devoted to the theme of Poland after the Partitions), Matejko seems to be teaching us an intensive course in Polish history. The latter work shows three female figures which are allegories of Poland, Russia, and Lithuania and reveal the painter’s rootedness in the same cultural awareness which had been the symbolic source of the Chapel of the Holy Trinity.

It is also worth noting that *Rejtan* may be interpreted as part of Matejko’s series of paintings addressing the fall of Poland (*Stańczyk* of 1862, *Kazanie Skargi* [Skarga’s Sermon] of 1864, and *Polonia* of 1864, were all created prior to *Rejtan*).

At first glance, the choice of *Rejtan* as another milestone of Polish cultural awareness appears problematic. The controversy which broke out shortly after the painting had been completed and the criticism it received from Matejko's countrymen and from art critics, despite its success with the audience at the Paris International Exhibition of 1867, are universally known.<sup>43</sup> It has also been admitted that the work is confusing and literally brims with historical inaccuracies. Numerous works on Matejko cite the story told by Stanisław Tarnowski who, while attending the Paris Exhibition, had overheard an intriguing explanation of the painting, "The one lying on the ground has lost heavily at cards, which is what those scattered ducats hint at, and he is about to blow his brains out, while those three standing over him are trying to persuade him not to despair at such trifles."<sup>44</sup>

And yet I believe that as a synthesis and allegory of the experience of the Partitions and of Polish martyrdom, *Rejtan, or The Fall of Poland* finds no equals. While the first part of the title (the name of the deputy who was regarded as the patron saint of the insurrectionary acts during the 123 years of captivity) is a symbol of disagreement and resistance, the second (frequently forgotten) part of the title emphasizes the condition of the Polish state: its descent to the underworld, as it were, but not its total collapse. The fact that Poland was not completely lost, so well reflected in Dąbrowski's *Mazurka*, was also expressed in Matejko's painting, in a figure of a young man with a four-cornered cap (*rogatywka*) and a saber in his hands. The figure may be interpreted as that of a harbinger of the experience of the Polish nation, which, although deprived of its state, would survive through its culture: the experience which Bohdan Cywiński compared to a perseverant telling of our national 'tale' of sovereignty.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, Matejko's painting—if supplied with necessary commentary—conveys a condensed vision: not one of the cause of the fall of the First Polish Republic, but rather that of its entirely new destiny in the coming century. Matejko, who is known to have supported the January Insurrection by delivering weapons to the insurgents, was acutely aware that the new future was approaching. *Rejtan*, painted after the Insurrection had been crashed, was so explained by the artist:

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<sup>43</sup> On the reception of the painting by the critics and the general public in Paris, see Marek Z g ó r n i a k, *Matejko w Paryżu: Opinie krytyków francuskich z lat 1865-1870* (Kraków: Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1998), 153–82.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted after Z g ó r n i a k, *Matejko w Paryżu*, 172.

<sup>45</sup> See Bohdan C y w i ń s k i, *Baśń niepodległa, czyli w stronę politologii kultury: Wykłady witebskie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2006).

The man on the ground, vibrant with the fire of enthusiasm and the pain of despair, ready for sacrifice up to the point of martyrdom—symbolizes the nation, that is Poland, thrown to the ground with brutal force, treachery, bribery, rape, and pillage, but not defeated. *Rejtan* is a historical symbol ... The Nation-*Rejtan* will endure, like he did in the *Sejm* [Parliament] chamber, stubbornly, forever, until the mad idea of the homeland without a land of its own had taken root; the Nation will last as lasts the memory of *Rejtan's* virtue and *Rejtan's* love.

Interestingly enough, *Rejtan* belongs among the most characteristic and most popular paintings by Jan Matejko, its relevance having been recognized in a variety of later political contexts.