

Conservation of wooden sculpture of saint Anne

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Abstract: *Conservation of wooden sculpture of saint Anne.* The wooden sculpture, originally primed and polychromed, was for many years exposed to atmospheric influence. The external technological layers – the priming and the paint layer were not preserved. The wood deteriorated to a high degree. The process of conservation allowed for maintaining the sculpture's function as a relict and its reception as a work of art.

Keywords: conservation of art object, wood, sculpture

The sculpture depicts saint Anne as an old stooping woman holding a book in her right hand. It is carved out of a single block of lime wood. The figure is 126cm of height. Unfortunately, the external technological layers – the priming, the paint layer, as well as possible gilding – have completely withered. At the time when the conservation treatment was undertaken, the sculpture resided in a shrine on S. Kostki Potockiego street in the Wilanow district of Warsaw.

The hinder part of the figure was not sculpted, but deeply grooved which indicates that it was originally intended to be attached to a wall. Some traits of grounding found in recesses of the sculpture show that it was primed, and probably polychromed. Application of this technology means that the piece was meant to be displayed inside a building.

The provenance of the sculpture is unknown. There is no knowledge of when and where from it was brought to its present residence. Judging by the style it is a Silesian baroque sculpture. It was certainly moved from its original place to a roadside shrine, and adapted to be viewed from all sides with its back provisionally concealed by wooden planks. It is very likely that it was one of the many works of art which were brought to Warsaw from the Recovered Territories after World War II.

Placing the sculpture in an open shrine with only a roofing exposed it to environmental fluctuations, which caused complete deterioration of its polychrome. Consecutive working of rain, melting snow, and sun lead to humidifying, and then parching of the glue priming which resulted in its flaking and eventual loss, followed by cracking and degradation of the wood. The condition of the sculpture testified to its exposure to long lasting humidity during the Autumn and Winter seasons alternating with the dehydrating influence of the sun during the Summer months. The humidified wood swelled, and then contracted as it dried which caused cracking. This process, at first only concerning the external layers, in time penetrated deeper into the wood. Damage caused by fungus and mould resulted in destruction of the structure of wood (the base of the sculpture and the left arm of the figure). Water which saturated the wood during the rainy Autumn season froze in Winter thereby extending in volume, and causing its further cracking and delaminating. All the above mentioned processes have contributed to destruction of the sculpture.

The bottom part of the original figure no longer exists. During the previous conservation process it was replaced, and a structure holding the figure upright was introduced.¹ The extent of the damage: the altered surface of the wood, the cracks, and the

¹ It is hard to determine when and by whom previous conservation works were done.

overall erosion of the wood caused by atmospheric influence renders impossible restoring the piece to its original form. It was, therefore, decided to maintain the sculpture's function as a relict having performed the necessary conservation procedures which would also allow its reception as a work of art. Following the conservation process, the sculpture is not to return to its previous place.

Conservation work began with the disinfection of the object². Beech wood pegs, about 5 mm in diameter, were pasted underneath the sculpture, which enabled the vertical adjustment of the sculpture as well as determining the actual height of the figure. After that all losses at the reverse side and in the place of feet of the sculpture were supplemented by linden wood. Henkel Pattex glue was used for bonding. Major losses unfit for repairing and losses larger than a few millimeters at the places of joints were filled with Axson SC 258 epoxy paste³, used mainly in places where the wood has been leached by rainwater – i.e. on the left shoulder and at the bottom of the sculpture.

The cavities in the left arm, in the folds of the robe on this arm, the right thumb, and in the fold on the back side of the robe below the belt, and below the foot were filled with dry lime-wood. Narrow strips of wood were inserted into the cracks on the saint's head and on the stomach⁴. Large supplements at the reverse side of the sculpture were fitted in the places where the original surface was chopped down. Henkel Pattex glue was used for bonding. Special emphasis was placed on removing the old wood thoroughly up to the healthy tissue during the bonding process. Major wooden supplements adhered quite well to the original surface, as they were pasted in the places where the wooden features were added during the previous conservation intervention after the drastic alignment of the surface. The structure of the degraded wood was strengthened during the pasting work by the use of the local injection of Rohm&Hass B72 Paraloid solution in toluene at relatively low concentrations (5-10 %). The treatment was repeated several times. Small fissures and connections between the supplements and the original object were filled with ZAR Latex Wood Patch. The surface was thereafter mechanically wet processed with the use of cork.

The base of the sculpture which was replaced during the previous conservation was kept. Although it is made of a different kind of wood the outline of shoes is marked on its surface. It was possibly carved when the original feet still existed. In the process of current conservation, the size and the shape of the shoes served as basis for the reconstruction of the feet.

After small fissures were filled and their surfaces processed the sculpture was coated with 12% shellac solution in denatured alcohol. When dried, the retouch has been done with Rembrandt acrylic paints. Maimeri retouching paints dissolved in Maimeri Solvent Forte were used for a finishing touch. The entire surface of the sculpture was covered with Gualtiero Meazza S.R.L. Novecento Legno liquid wax.

The sculpture which was to a large extent damaged, following the process of conservation can once again be viewed as an object of art. The composition of the sculpture was restored by filling in cavities and replacing damaged parts. It was decided that due to its condition, as well as its value, the sculpture can no longer be displayed in the previous location. Therefore, a mould was made and from it a cast in epoxy resin. This was painted to imitate the wood of the original. The copy was placed in the shrine in Wilanów, and the

² The preparation was chosen after mycological tests. The surface of the sculpture was covered with Altax Boramon C 30.

³ Once dried, the epoxy paste used to fill losses can be processed or removed with the use of woodworking tools.

⁴ The carpentry work was performed by Wiesław Mydłowiecki from the Conservation Workshop at the Royal Castle in Warsaw.

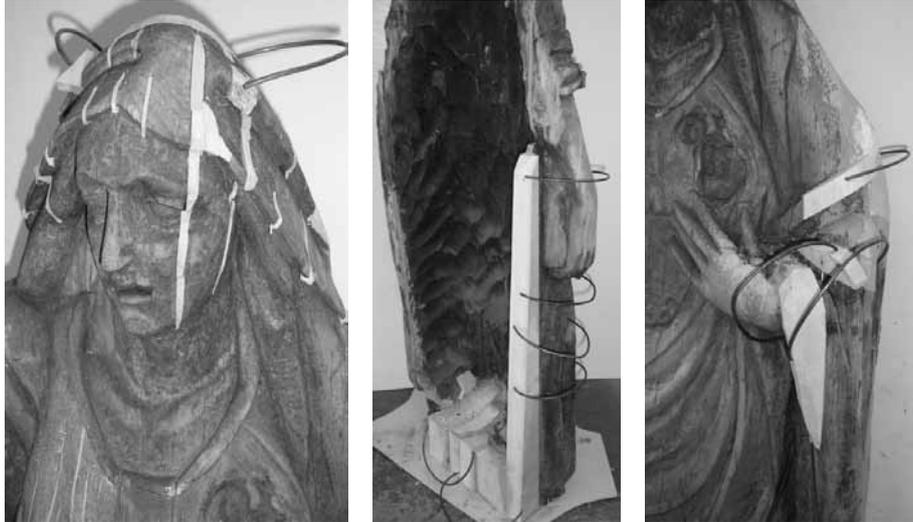
original in the Historical Museum of Warsaw as a deposit. In the future, it will be displayed in the Wilanow Townhouse.



a. b. c. d.
II.1 Saint Anne of Wilanow. The front of the sculpture before and after conservation (a,b), the back of the sculpture before and after conservation (c,d)



a. b.
II.2 Saint Anne of Wilanow. A close-up of the left arm. Before conservation (a), and after conservation (b)



II.3. Saint Anne from Wilanow. A close-up of the sculpture during the process of insertion of wooden fillings

Streszczenie: *Konserwacja drewnianej rzeźby św. Anny.* Drewniana rzeźba, pierwotnie gruntowana i polichromowana była narażona na wieloletnie działanie zewnętrznych warunków atmosferycznych. Zewnętrzne warstwy technologiczne – grunt i warstwa malarska nie zachowały się. Drewno silnie zerodowało. Zakonserwowano rzeźbę zachowując ją w formie reliktu. Wykonano niezbędne zabezpieczenia oraz uzupełniono formę rzeźbiarską umożliwiając odbiór obiektu jako dzieła sztuki.

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