

Brendan Reynolds

Polish Heritage Society of Rochester

2020 Literary Competition

“Krakow is one of my favorite places on Earth. It is a medieval city full of young people. A wonderful, striking combination”(American author Jonathan Carrol). Krakow is the second largest and one of the oldest cities in Poland. Since the seventh century, it has been the centre of Polish economic, academic, and artistic life (2). While there is artwork to be seen all around the city, the most famous pieces of artwork are housed in the museums. Specifically, the National Museum in Krakow, the oldest museum in the city. This museum contains items such as World War II uniforms, sculptures, tapestry, and paintings (1). Artists such as Jan Matejko and Leonardo Da Vinci helped paint some of the famous pieces of artwork in this museum. The best way to appreciate Krakow is by stepping into their National Museum and learning about the artwork it features.

Krakow’s museum captivates the city's artwork in a beautiful and modern way. I recently interviewed a Rochester New York Polish art enthusiast, Frances Bryniarski. During our interview, Frances told me just how beautiful it was within the walls of the museum. “You walk in and you immediately feel as if you are in the heart of Italy. From the paintings, the jewels, the armor, and the tapestry, you feel as if you are walking through any European City”(6). After learning about how Poland was raided in World War II and how the paintings were carefully preserved, you can appreciate the artwork on a whole new level. On a virtual tour, one could see how vastly different their artwork is in Krakow. I immediately fell in love with the “Arms and

Uniforms” section of the museum. The armored chest plates, replicas of war horses, and the beautiful background paintings depicting war zones captured my attention. These exhibits put into perspective what life was in Krakow from 1500-1700. I could not imagine fighting in those heavy metal armored suits with feathers on my helmet. During the virtual visit, museum tourists can come to appreciate the efforts and stamina required. Both Mrs. Bryniarski and I noticed that the National Museum is also very modern. It does not feel as if you are looking at history, it feels as if you are experiencing it first-hand. You can tour through different regions of Poland and different points in history as you are welcomed with the rich sense of culture and pride (6). After Poland was raided by the Nazis in World War II, the locals in Krakow knew how important it was to try and preserve the paintings for future generations to enjoy and be inspired by. “The museum shows how saturated Krakow is with culture and the feeling is unmatched by any other city”(6).

Krakow is also home to one of the most inspiring and talented artists, Jan Matejko. Just to illustrate the impact that Matejko had on Poland, his house was preserved after he passed away and his family turned it into an official branch of the National Museum of Krakow(3). Jan started his journey in 1852 when he joined the Krakow School of Fine Arts. As a child, his father was a music teacher of Czech ancestry while his mother stayed home to take care of him. As he grew older, he traveled for more artistic enlightenment; to Paris, Prague, Budapest, and Constantinople(5). He came home and started working on some of the most beautiful pieces of artwork Poland has ever seen. Ranging from landscapes, portraits, and most recognized, his depiction of political events. Paintings like “Stanczyk” brought him a lot of fame at the time. The painting, currently housed in Warsaw, consisted of a jester in Poland sitting alone in a room.

However, instead of acting witty and funny, the jester is glooming, almost about to cry(4). Matejko does a great job illustrating contrast on this oil painting. It attracts the viewer's attention because many people expect the jester to always be laughing, when in reality he is sad about the political events taking place at the time. His lonely thoughts are due to the loss of the easternmost fortress of Smolensk after the 1514 war with Moscow. The jester is portraying the feeling of concern that the citizens have for the fate of their country. Furthermore, Matejko worked to preserve historical landmarks in Krakow. He joined many foreign academies including both the Paris and the Berlin Academy of Art. He preserved landmarks like the Church of Saint Mary, the Cloth Hall, and the Wawel Castle(5). Matejko was an inspiration to Poland. Through his preservation efforts, political paintings, and his ability to inspire other artists after his death, he left a lasting legacy.

Within the National Museum of Krakow is a very famous painting called the Lady with an Ermine. It was painted in 1490 by the world renowned renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci. If you are going to the National Museum in Krakow, this is one of the first paintings that you will want to view. The painting was not only created by a famous artist, but it has historical significance as well. In the painting we see Cecylia Gallerani, lover of Duke of Milan Ludovico. However, as the painting was being made, Ludovico decided to marry someone else instead of Cecylia. Da Vinci was then told to make Cecylia look less appealing because he did not want to see her as beautiful anymore. So, Da Vinci drew an ermine in her arms to draw the attention away from her portrait(4). Some say that the ermine represents the Duke himself. After the way that he treated Cecylia, leaving her alone and heartbroken, all she is left with is a sad ermine in her arms instead of a loving husband. Polish art critic Marek Rostworowski, described it as a

painting with “abandoned traditional conventions. Instead of being confined to the painting's surface, she is drawn into the dark from which the light brings out the colors directed towards it”. This beautiful artwork is a dynamic painting with great physical and historical significance. It has been and continues to be a favorite sight for tourists traveling to Krakow.

Thanks to the National Museum in Krakow, tourists are able to enjoy these pieces of artwork and can understand more about the history of Poland. They can create a better appreciation for the artwork knowing that it survived World War II and the concentration camps. The artwork of Krakow represents the resilience and beauty of Poland. To some, it may look like paint on a canvas, but to the citizens in Krakow, it is war, bloodshed, rebirth, and the tightly woven sense of culture all the way from Krakow to Rochester, New York.

Bibliography

- 1) "10 Unmissable Paintings at the National Museum in Krakow." *Culture.pl*, culture.pl/en/article/10-unmissable-paintings-national-museum-in-krakow.
- 2) Moser, Benjamin. "Polish Renaissance." *Condé Nast Traveler*, Condé Nast Traveler, 12 Aug. 2014, www.cntraveler.com/stories/2010-05-12/polish-renaissance.
- 3) "Museum of Contemporary Art (MOC AK): Kraków Sightseeing: Krakow." *Museum of Contemporary Art (MOC AK) | Kraków Sightseeing*, www.inyourpocket.com/krakow/museum-of-contemporary-art-mocak_77377v.
- 4) "National Museum in Krakow - Welcome to the National Museum in Krakow." *National Museum in Krakow - Welcome to the National Museum in Krakow*, mnk.pl/dashboard/branches.
- 5) Skrabonja, Elizabeth. "Jan Matejko." *Polish Masters*.
- 6) Phone call interview with Frances Bryniarski on 4/16/20