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PAINTINGS IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY-
-MODERN ART IN ROME AND VENICE

In 1904 Stanisław Lewandowski, the author of the first monographic study on Siemiradzki's output, wrote: "The truest side of Siemiradzki's talent shone out in his decorative plafonds, which he executed at that time in the palace of Count Zawisza in Warsaw and for Mr. Nechaev-Maltsov in St. Petersburg (*Spring* and *Aurora*)".¹ This essay, which is intended as an introduction to the problem of Siemiradzki's plafond paintings, presents an analysis of those three compositions.

The earliest of them was the plafond entitled *Light and Dark* (1880–1883), which was painted for the interior of the palace owned by Jan Kazimierz Zawisza, known as the Przebendowski Palace, in Warsaw, which had been restructured in 1863 by the architect Wojciech Bobiński. Its vestibule was decorated with a large oval painting, ca. 8m in diameter, installed there in 1884 and destroyed during the Second World War (fig. X).² It had been painted by Siemiradzki, in Rome; soon after it was finished, in January 1883, it was presented in *Esposizione Internazionale di Belle Arti*. In the autumn of the same year

1] Stanisław LEWANDOWSKI, *Henryk Siemiradzki*, Gebethner & Wolff, Warszawa, Kraków 1904, p. 78.

2] Anna SARATOWICZ, *Pałac Przebendowskich*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1990.

it was delivered to Warsaw, where prior to its installation in the vestibule of the Przebendowski Palace it was presented at the *Resursa Obywatelska*, home to the Merchant's Resource Association.³

This painting is known to us only from descriptions, from old photographs and prints, as well as from a number of drawings. A preparatory cartoon for it and a colour sketch in oils showing one of the preparatory versions are also extant. According to those period sources, the lower part of the composition featured the Altar of Destiny with the personification of Despair sitting on its steps, with a chalice of poison in her hand, and a male personification of Hopelessness. On the right-hand side there was Sphinx seated on a plinth, Pandora with her box, and behind them a figure representing Evil with a scroll bearing the word *Humanitas*. Below, there were figures symbolising Ignorance and Fraud bound with a chain. Hovering above Despair was Psyche with butterfly wings, with Hope (seen in an unusual perspective) to her right. On the altar stood the three Fates (Moirae). A "progressive march of humanity" was featured over their heads, with the personifications of the Arts, Inspiration riding the Pegasus above them, as well as Fame, Truth hand in hand with Science and Competence; above, in the clouds, there were allegories of various human abilities. The composition was topped with winged personifications of Justice and Peace. The powers of Darkness could be seen at the top edge.⁴ Not much is known regarding the artistic idea which made Siemiradzki focus on such a subject.

The composition of the plafond features a foreshortened perspective, an artistic tool that can be traced back to the famous fresco by Pietro da Cortona *Glorification of the Reign of Pope Urban VIII* (1633-1639) in the Salone Grande of the Palazzo Barberini (fig. 70) (for example the poses of the Satyr there and Siemiradzki's personification of Hopelessness are similar) and to the notions of perspective as described Andrea Pozzo. The general composition of the Warsaw plafond can also be compared to the *Adoration of the Name of Jesus* (1674-1679), a fresco by Giovanni Battista Gaulli (1639-1709) on the ceiling of the Il Gesù church in Rome.⁵

3] Ibid., p. 101.

4] An analysis of the painting's composition is possible because a preparatory cartoon for it had been found in Rome; see: Marzena KRÓLIKOWSKA-DZIUBECKA, *Dzieje pewnej kompozycji. Plafon Henryka Siemiradzkiego w Pałacu Przebendowskich w Warszawie*, "Sztuka Europy Wschodniej", 2016, vol. IV, pp. 129-141.

5] Rudolf WITTKOWER, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600-1750*, revised by Joseph Connors and

A comparative study of the allegories in the art of early-modern Rome and in the paintings by Siemiradzki is faced with the necessity to take under consideration the change in iconography resulting from the ongoing “crisis of the systems of allegories, its rejection, its uselessness and insufficiency in expressing new, current subjects, and the impetuous search for new formulas”.⁶ Thus, the Warsaw plafond by Siemiradzki shows a combination of artistic forms rooted in the tradition of the frescoes seen in the palaces and churches of 17th and 18th century Rome, yet at the same time it demonstrates the process of looking for new symbolic imagery, better suited to the 19th century audience.

The analysis of Siemiradzki's still-extant plafond in the palace of Yury Nechaev-Maltsov in St. Petersburg, entitled *Aurora* (fig. 71), provides another example of the same problem. Information on the artistic intentions regarding the subject of this work is, unfortunately, scarce. The Nechaev-Maltsov Palace itself is an example of an eclectic style. The architectonic articulation of the exterior facade is related to the Florentine Renaissance, reminiscent of the Medici-Riccardi Palace by Michelozzo, although in the St. Petersburg palace the portal is within the central projection. The lower storey is similarly rusticated, and the windows of the upper storeys have the same shape as those in Florence. However, the interior design is in the Rococo style, consisting of rich, glittering ornamentation on white-painted walls and mirror frames. The theme of the plafond was thus most probably requested by the owner, who could have been inspired by the early-modern stylistic features of his palace. Work on the *Aurora* plafond, according to the articles in period newspapers, had started in 1884 and was completed in 1888: “Furthermore, the plafond entitled *Aurora* was sent directly from the artist's studio in Rome to the banks of the Neva River, to St. Petersburg, to Mr. Nechaev-Maltsov, the famous connoisseur and art lover, who commissioned it from H. Siemiradzki for his palace”.⁷

There are very few notices in newspapers that could possibly provide us with information regarding composition or symbols of the subject. The subject itself was not clear to the contemporary viewers, as indicated by a short note published in “Tygodnik Ilustrowany” of 21 May 1892 together with a wood-engraving reproduction of

Jennifer Montagu, vol. 2: *The High Baroque 1625–1675*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1999, p. 141, fig. 175.

6] Maria POPRZEĆKA, *Akademizm*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1989, p. 94.

7] (*Editor's Note*), “Świat. Dwutygodnik Ilustrowany”, 1888, no. 7, p. 327.

the painting.⁸ In the plafond, Aurora is “personified as a winged virgin” (which is at odds with the iconographic tradition), with a burning torch in her right hand, holding the horses’ reins in her left. Apollo’s quadriga is surrounded in a rosy and golden glow. Below, there is, as the author of the note put it, “a lovely group of a sleeping Maenad and a young man wearing a wreath, as well as a formidable woman who awakens the lions harnessed to the chariot”, and above, “a group of putti scattering heavenly roses besprinkled with refreshing dew-drops”.⁹ Here, again, any interpretation – obviously not quite clear to the author of this description – faces the difficulties which, as mentioned above, are not unusual in the case of Academic painting. However, some formal similarities between Siemiradzki’s painting and the Roman tradition can be traced. Affinity with the quadriga in the fresco *Aurora* by Guercino in Casino dell’Aurora Ludovisi seems obvious. Some 19th century art critics, on the other hand, compared Siemiradzki’s *Aurora* to that by Guido Reni in Casino Rospigliosi (1613–1614), but in this case, the affinity is in the subject, not in the composition itself.¹⁰

Several art critics, for instance Henryk Struve or the already-mentioned Lewandowski, compared paintings of this type to Correggio (mainly to his *Assumption* in the dome of the cathedral in Parma, 1526–1530, which was considered “a prototype of innumerable Baroque domes”)¹¹ or to Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, “that Venetian painter possessed of blazing colours and a wild decorative temperament”,¹² whom Siemiradzki was assumed to resemble. However, no-one mentioned direct analogies to the early-modern painting in Rome, perhaps with the exception of Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel.

The question arises whether the composition of the *Aurora* plafond could have been influenced by the paintings of Stefano Torelli (1712–1780), who was invited to Russia in 1762. In 1766–1768 he painted an oil on canvas entitled *The Triumph of Venus and the Three Graces* for the Salon of the Muses in the Chinese Palace in Oranienbaum (now Lomonosov) near St. Petersburg, which was erected in 1762–1768 for

8] “Tygodnik Ilustrowany”, 1892, vol. V, no. 125, pp. 328–329.

9] *Nasze ryciny*, “Tygodnik Ilustrowany”, 1892, vol. V, no. 125, p. 334.

10] *Ibid.*, pp. 333–334.

11] Frederick HARTT, David G. WILKINS, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, Pearson, Upper Saddle River 2007, p. 583, 585.

12] S. LEWANDOWSKI, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

Catherine the Great and her son Pavel by the architect Antonio Rinaldi (1709 – ca. 1794).¹³

Another Italian artist, who according to 18th century sources worked in Russia, was Jacopo Guarana (1720–1808), who allegedly painted plafonds in the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg and Oranienbaum.¹⁴ Guarana was also active in Venice, where he painted, among others, *Le Virtù* in Ca'Rezzonico (fig. 72) and *Allegory of the Virtues Mocenigo* (now in the collection of Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice) (fig. 73); he also decorated a number of villas in the Veneto, e.g. Villa Pisani in Stra. He was considered a follower of Tiepolo.¹⁵

Siemiradzki's other commission for Nechaev-Maltsov was the plafond *Spring* (fig. 74), also extant in his palace, with the artist's signature and the date 1890. Showing "the spring sky of Rome, with its light, fragrant clouds", which gave the painting its "vitality, lightness and naturalness", it was considered a masterpiece.¹⁶ Some critics, however, noticed a lack of uniformity in it, because the composition being divided into two groups, with an empty central part. It seems that the author of the above description saw the painting still in Siemiradzki's studio, but was not sure of his interpretation. In fact, the basic composition of the picture consists of three groups: in the upper part, there is Zephyr and the nymph Chloris (whose story was described by Ovid in *Fasti*). Its central figure is Flora, the goddess of flowers and of spring, carried by swans. Beside her, there is a putto holding burning torches in its hands, and below – a putto with a syrinx, holding a bird in its left hand. The bottom right part of the composition is filled with a group of a naked female figure scattering flowers, accompanied by a Cupid with a bow, arrow and quiver, surrounded with hovering birds and putti. This figure may represent the goddess Venus or be another personification of Spring. In this work, Siemiradzki – as was the prevailing practice in the 19th century art – created his personal iconography.

The three plafonds by Siemiradzki had a form of decorative *panneaux* painted on canvas and placed in architectural frames. Apart from the preparatory drawings, the artist made oil sketches on paper

13] Claudia SOLACINI, *Stefano Torelli alla corte di Caterina II*, "Ricerche di storia dell'arte" Rivista quadrimestrale, 2013, no. 110–111, pp. 161–164.

14] Simone GUERRIERO, *Guarana, Giacomo (Jacopo)*, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 2003, vol. 60 [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giacomo-guarana_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giacomo-guarana_(Dizionario-Biografico)/), 15-10-2018

15] R. WITTKOWER, op. cit., vol. 3: *Late Baroque and Rococo 1675–1750*, p. 121, no. 93.

16] *Nasze ryciny*, "Tygodnik Ilustrowany", 1891, vol. IV, no. 92, p. 222.

or canvas, smaller in scale, which presented general concept of the painting. This agrees with the Italian practice: not all plafonds in Rome were effected as frescoes, some were painted on canvas, for example those by Corrado Giaquinto (1703–1765), a Neapolitan painter active in Rome in 1723–1753. His work *Minerva Presenting Spain to Jupiter and Juno*, ca. 1751, was placed on the ceiling of Palazzo Rondinini at Via del Corso in Rome, where the artist applied the light and clear colour typical for the Rococo style.¹⁷

Three plafonds by Henryk Siemiradzki under discussion here evince a clearly noticeable inspiration with early-modern painting in Rome. As it has been stated above, the layout, with darker figures in the lower sections of the composition and lighter ones in the upper ones, recall the works of Andrea Pozzo, for example frescoes on the ceiling in San Ignazio (1685) (fig. 75), where the perspective foreshortening is close to that in Siemiradzki's *Light and Dark*. A question arises whether Siemiradzki made use of the principles of perspective as described in Pozzo's *Perspectiva Pictorum et Architectorum (Perspective in Architecture and Painting)*, applying them in his art.¹⁸

In the three examples of the plafonds by Siemiradzki analysed above (which should be treated as introductory outline of the problem of his plafond paintings), the artist was using allegories – a mode that was under criticism in his times – trying to create new symbols appropriate to the new requirements of communication with the public, who was faced with the necessity of deconstructing the early-modern iconography. On the other hand, it can be assumed that Siemiradzki's paintings, as those of many artists of the past, were deeply rooted in tradition, especially one which he had been able to behold with his own eyes, that is the tradition of the great masters active in Rome and Venice in the 17th and 18th centuries.

17] R. WITTKOWER, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 75.

18] Andrea Pozzo, *Perspectiva Pictorum et Architectorum Andreae Putei*, Joannis Jacobi Komarek, Rome 1693.



70. Pietro da Cortona, *Glorification of the Reign of Pope Urban VIII*, 1633-1639, fresco, Gran Salone, Palazzo Barberini, Rome. Photo M. Królikowska-Dziubecka.



71. Henryk Siemiradzki, *Aurora*, 1884-1888, oil on canvas, former residence of Yury Nechaev-Maltsov, St. Petersburg. Photo J. Czop.

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72. Jacopo Guarana, *Le Virtù*, 1757-1758, fresco, Tapestry Room, Ca'Rezzonico, Venice. Photo in public domain.



73. Jacopo Guarana, *Allegory of the Virtues Mocenigo*, 1787, oil on canvas, 33cm x 50.5 cm, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo in public domain.



74. Henryk Siemiradzki, *Spring*, 1890, oil on canvas, former residence of Yuri Nechaev-Maltsov, St. Petersburg. Photo J. Czop.

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75. Andrea Pozzo, *Allegory of the Missionary Work of the Jesuits*, 1691-1694, fresco, ceiling of the nave in S. Ignazio, Rome. Photo M. Królikowska-Dziubecka.