



Wojciech Weiss on a visit to the Chłapowski family: A Wielkopolska episode in the work of the Cracovian painter

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Wojciech Weiss is a painter associated primarily with the artistic milieu of Kraków. While still a “boy from Podgórze”,¹ he was admitted into the School of Fine Arts with the approval of the then director of the school - painter Jan Matejko. The artist’s famous debut – the *Melancholic* from 1898 (see: **Fig. 1**) – paved his way to fame, and since then Weiss has in fact only consolidated his position within the Kraków artistic community.² He soon became a member of the “Sztuka” (“Art”) Society of Polish Artists, then the Viennese Secession, and finally assumed membership on the board of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts.³ For a number of terms, he served as the rector and lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, and went on to educate subsequent generations of Polish painters.⁴ His relatively stable financial situation, provided by a full-time position at the Kraków academy, and the proceeds from the sale of his works at exhibitions, including international ones (and there was substantial demand for the master’s works)⁵ meant that Weiss was rarely associated

- 1 L. Kowalski, *Pędzlem i piórem*, introduction by J. Wiktor, Kraków 1934, p. 66.
- 2 At the exhibition of “Sztuka” Society of Polish Artists, the *Melancholic* featured among the works of academy professors. This distinction was a tribute and validation of Weiss’s talent and paved the way to further exhibitions. R. Weiss, *Lata nauki w Szkole Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie*, [in:] *Wojciech Weiss w Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie*, J. Antos, Z. Weiss-Nowina Konopka (eds.), Kraków 2010, p. 30.
- 3 Idem, *Wojciech Weiss: kalendarium życia i twórczości*, [in:] *Ten krakowski Japończyk... Inspiracje sztuką Japonii w twórczości Wojciecha Weissa*, A. Król (scientific ed.), E. Ryżewska (ed.), Kraków 2008, pp. 194–196.
- 4 J. Grabowska, *Wojciech Weiss w Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie. Kalendarium*, [in:] *Wojciech Weiss w Akademii Sztuk Pięknych*, pp. 102–139.
- 5 We know this based on letters written by the board of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts. In a letter dated 11 April 1912, the secretary of the Society – Leonard Lepszy – informed Weiss: “We assumed that after posting the notices announcing that there were willing buyers, imitators would come, but apart from your works, others have not yet found success with the buying public, who have clearly emptied their pockets purchasing cakes and wine, and now has no money for art”. Collection of the family of Wojciech Weiss (hereinafter: zw), Letter from the secretary of the board of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts, Leonard Lepszy, to Wojciech Weiss, 11 IV 1912.



1. Wojciech Weiss, *Melanholik* [Melancholic (Totenmesse, Portrait of Antoni Procajłowicz)], 1898, oil on canvas, 128 × 65.5 cm, National Museum in Kraków



2. Wojciech Weiss, *Portret kobiety w białej sukni* (Helena z Mielżyńskich Chłapowskiej) [Portrait of a Woman in a White Dress (Helena Chłapowska née Mielżyńska)], 1911, oil on canvas, 146 × 96 cm, National Museum in Poznań

with the commercial practice of painting portraits on commission, to which other artists often resorted in order to supplement their modest income or simply to gain the protection of the influential aristocracy. Weiss, it would seem, did not need such protection. Already during his studies, he stood out from his colleagues due to his talent and quickly won the commendation of critics who offered favourable opinions about his works.⁶ An ambitious painter might find it difficult to adapt to the needs of his client. As a rule, likenesses created for family galleries were primarily intended to satisfy the taste of the contracting party, which meant an uncomfortable dependence on the whim of the model and the requirements of the client. The creator was expected to represent the portrayed person as realistically and faithfully as possible, rather than to perform an artistic feat. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that this type of work might be discredited by artists; that it might be considered unsatisfying, repetitive and tedious, and worthy of attention only if it brought significant profits.

Meanwhile, in the first days of September 1911, Weiss arrived in Bonikowo (in the Kościan district) at the invitation of Alfred Chłapowski, later the ambassador of the Republic of Poland in Paris. The purpose of this visit was clearly defined: Weiss was to paint a portrait of Helena Chłapowska née Mielżyńska – the client's wife.⁷ We

6 A collection of critical texts on Weiss's painting was edited by W. Juszcak, *Intensywność – portret*, [in:] idem, *Malarstwo polskiego modernizmu*, Gdańsk 2004, pp. 558–573.

7 Ł. Kossowski, Z. Weiss-Nowina Konopka, *Piękno do mnie przyszło... Wojciech Weiss – malarstwo białego okresu 1905–1912*. Muzeum Pałac w Wilanowie, kwiecień–czerwiec 2007, Warszawa

might ask, what made the artist living in Kraków (as an already established painter, renowned in the local artistic milieu) finally accept the offer from Wielkopolska region? Is it, perhaps, that our knowledge of Weiss the portraitist needs updating?

The fortunate discovery of the Chłapowskis' correspondence and Weiss' private letters related to the above-mentioned commission provided a lot of new information, giving us an idea of how the specific relationship between the artist and the client was developing, and how the painter assessed and judged the situation. Of these two outlined perspectives, Weiss's account, not devoid of a substantial dose of humour and healthy perspective, seems to be particularly valuable. The artist revealed how much the realities of life of the rich landed gentry of Wielkopolska noble families – the Chłapowski and the Mielżyński – differed from those to which he was accustomed when living in Małopolska.

Sources allow us to conclude that the aforementioned portrait of Helena Chłapowska is a painting that is not usually on display; it is kept in the National Museum in Poznań and was previously known as the *Portret kobiety w białej sukni* (Portrait of a Woman in a White Dress (see: Fig. 2). The letters helped not only in identifying the person portrayed, but also in reconstructing the circumstances of the creation of the work, which ultimately allowed us to deny the information, erroneously repeated in the literature on the subject, that the portrait was painted in Bonikowo.

The Wielkopolska episode in Weiss's life requires separate consideration, which is the purpose of the present article. Starting from the revision of information about Helena Chłapowska's portrait, I will look at its formal layer, as the painting has not been the subject of a broader analysis to date. Even though the artist himself was quite critical of it (indeed, he called it "a flop"⁸), one cannot easily succumb to this negative opinion. When viewed carefully, the portrait shows many original formal solutions, some of which are quite characteristic features of Weiss's work, and these are certainly worth emphasizing. In turn, the analysis of source materials, official correspondence of the contracting party (Alfred and Helena Chłapowski) and the painter's private letters addressed to his wife Irena will allow us to recreate in detail the process of crafting the commissioned portrait, and to clarify doubts regarding its development. In the last part, I will propose a certain hypothesis as to Alfred Chłapowski's intentions in choosing the Kraków painter as the contractor for the portrait's commission. The case study presented herein may become a contribution to undertaking more advanced research on Weiss's activities in Wielkopolska in the future.

Data about the work

Portret kobiety w białej sukni, that is, the portrait of a woman (Helena Chłapowska née Mielżyńska) in a white dress entered the collection of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum (today's National Museum in Poznań) in 1942 in transport from Bonikowo, the Chłapowski family estate.⁹ Among the works confiscated by the German occupiers, the painting was listed as *Portrait of a Woman (Damenbildnis)* by an

[exhibition catalogue at the Wilanów Palace Museum, April–June 2007], Warszawa–Kraków 2007, p. 256.

8 zw, Letter of Wojciech Weiss to Irena Weiss, Pawłowice, 13 September 1911 (hereinafter: Letter of W. Weiss, 13 September 1911).

9 Data according to information in the items inventory chart and museum data base, Accession Number MNP Mp 321.

unknown painter with the reference number “WRW” from 1911.¹⁰ This was, in fact, a misreading of the characteristic tied monogram “WW” that Wojciech Weiss used to sign his works. This sign is located in the lower left corner of the painting, right next to the date 1911, which allowed us to determine the time of the work’s creation.

Apart from the exhibition “Kobieta w secesji” (The Woman in Art Nouveau) in Olsztyn in 1994,¹¹ the painting was never on show anywhere. Neither did it feature at Weiss’ monographic exhibition in Poznań, organized in the 1970s, although, interestingly, the exhibition catalogue did make a reference to the artist’s stay in Wielkopolska. According to this account, portrait sessions were to take place at the Chłapowski estate in Bonikowo.¹² However, this information was not tied to the painting in the museum’s storage, although based on the consistency of dating and provenance, it could already be concluded at this stage that the work depicts Helena Chłapowska née Mielżyńska. The title *Portret kobiety w białej sukni* (Portrait of a Woman in a White Dress) was given secondarily, without delving into the history of the item.

The painting was also mentioned in the calendar of Weiss’s life and work, found in the catalogue of the exhibition *Piękno do mnie przyszło... – Wojciech Weiss. Malarstwo białego okresu 1905–1912* (Beauty Came to Me... – Wojciech Weiss. Paintings of the white period 1905–1912), which states that: “The price for the portrait was agreed: 3,000 crowns, sitting time: 2 weeks”.¹³

Analysis of the painting

The portrait shows a woman sitting on a Louis xv-style sofa in a bright room, the walls of which are covered with a *coltrine* wallpaper, decorated with a grotesque ornament. Vertical ornamental stripes echo the frame of the painting, emphasizing the closure of the composition on either side of the figure, although placing the latter on the sofa does not respect this symmetrical order. Neither the silhouette nor the piece of furniture fits into the entire image field, because they have been moved away from the left edge and in the opposite direction. Such a move would leave some free space on the left, but it has been ingeniously arranged – the void is filled with the woman’s shadow. In this way, the figure is connected with the area on the left of the image field, from which she is visually moving away. Opening the composition on the right side gives the impression of “pulling” the portrayed woman therein. At the same time, tilting her silhouette in the opposite direction has the contrary effect, which creates visual tension.

The model’s pose is only seemingly static. The woman turns gently towards the viewer, but she does not present herself frontally. Instead, her body is placed slightly skewed in relation to the plane, along the diagonal of the painting, and at the same time slightly deviating from the vertical axis of the field. The woman

10 Archives of the National Museum in Poznań, File of documents from Bonikowo, no. MNP A2957. The said portrait of a woman is listed as number 17. It was given Accession Number KFM 5377.

11 G. Prusińska, A. Witzczak-Kufel, *Kobieta w secesji* (The Woman in Art Nouveau), catalogue of an exhibition at the Museum of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, December 1993 – March 1994, and at the Museum in Elbląg, October–December 1994, Olsztyn 1994, item 30, p. 26.

12 “At the invitation of Alfred Chłapowski, he comes to Wielkopolska and in the first days of September he paints a portrait of Helena, née Mielżyńska, Chłapowska at their estate in Bonikowo.” – J. Nowakowski, *Kalendarium życia i twórczości, Wojciech Weiss* [catalogue of a monographic exhibition, A. Ławniczakowa (ed.), National Museum in Poznań, VI–IX 1977], Poznań 1977, p. 60.

13 Ł. Kossowski, Z. Weiss-Nowina Konopka, *Piękno do mnie przyszło...*, p. 256.

crossed her left leg over her right one, and the resulting bevel is repeated in the crook of her right arm, which the lady has put on the armrest. In turn, the tension of the left arm echoes the straightened right leg, hidden under the folds of the pearl-coloured dress. The tension thus created in the body is a variation on the classic *contrapposto*, and is perfectly balanced around the woman's waist, which is also the compositional centre of the painting, perfectly highlighted by the cut of the silk robe. The latter is sewn of at least two layers, which are fastened at the waist with a decorative fabric belt. This connecting element is also a bond between the diagonals of the image, outlined in the intersecting lines of the dress.

The visual attractiveness of the portrait is accomplished by the sublime play of optical rhythms. The equivalent of the semicircular indentation of the upper part of the dress that the portrayed woman is wearing is the finishing of its bottom layer, and this shape is again duplicated by the line of the necklace. The latter, in turn, corresponds with the shape of the model's face. The arc of the woman's arms is echoed in the golden frame of the sofa, which is complemented by the shape of the bent leg of the furniture. This specific rhythm of the lines is further replicated by the sequence of vertical stripes of the ornament – again, the shadow of the model harmonizes with that. A discreet grotesque effect is created herein, resulting from the interpenetration of the outline of the figure with plant motifs, similar to the pattern visible on the wall.

The problems of the ambiguous pose of the model and the relationship of the figures to the background seem particularly interesting in the Portrait of Helena Chłapowska. One may get the impression that the artist, in this instance, is continuing certain compositional ideas that had intrigued him since his youth - which had already been noticed by Wiesław Juszcak. The latter scholar wrote that Weiss's early works were characterized by the "deformation of the presented space - moving away from the naturalistically illusory three-dimensionality towards flattening the imagined shapes and embedding them in an increasingly 'painterly', objectively undefined 'abstract' background, almost blending into the surface of the canvas".¹⁴ These considerations also concerned *The Melancholik*, which in terms of spatial correspondences can be related to the portrait of Helena Chłapowska analysed herein.

In *Melancholik*, the silhouette of the decadent Antoni Procajłowicz "emerges" from the left corner of the painting and remains as if suspended in an undefined space. The man is sitting in a room, against the background of a fabric that is hung slightly diagonally in relation to the plane of the painting. This slanting line is especially visible in the upper left edge, where an unexpected red band (perhaps a fragment of the room's wall) aggressively cuts off a part of the decorative background and breaks its surface. The relationship between the figure and the background is not at all obvious. Due to the inconsistent positioning of the figure's shadow, one may get the impression that the man is positioned both in front of the fabric and sideways to it. Although the shadow connects the figure with the surroundings, it does not faithfully reflect the silhouette – it seems too small compared to it, and takes on a skull-like shape, which has not gone unnoticed by critics.¹⁵ This is in-

14 W. Juszcak, *Młody Weiss*, Warszawa 1979, p. 61.

15 C. Jellenta, *Sztuki plastyczne. Drugi występ „Sztuki”*, "Przegląd Tygodniowy Życia Społecznego, Literatury i Sztuk Pięknych", 31 March 1899, p. 153. Cf. S. Tomkowicz, *Wystawa „Sztuki” w Krakowie*, "Czas", 7 July 1898, p. 2.



3. Wojciech Weiss, *Renia czytająca I* (Renia Reading I), 1908, oil on canvas, 72 × 58 cm, deposit of the National Museum in Kraków, courtesy of Zofia Weiss-Nowina Konopka

4. Wojciech Weiss, *Portret kobiety w białej sukni* (Helena z Mielżyńskich Chtapowskiej) [Portrait of a Woman in a White Dress (Helena Chtapowska née Mielżyńska)], 1911, oil on canvas, 146 × 96 cm, National Museum in Poznań (detail)



tentional, of course. The shadow here has a vanitative significance and refers to the title of the painting.

In the Portrait of Helena Chłapowska there are still echoes of some of the formal solutions already noticeable in the *Melancholik*, but here the artist applied them in a different manner. The silhouette of the woman, just like in the above-mentioned painting, seems to grow out of the right corner. The shadow, however, does not hide any symbolic meanings in this case. And yet, although still imperfectly, it repeats the silhouette of the model and isolates her from the bright background. The repetition of the main motif thus obtained serves to fill the void on the left-hand side and balance the composition.

When analysing the *Melancholik*, Wiesław Juszcak remarked that the work shows “an intermediate stage in the formation of expressionistic space”,¹⁶ which can be understood as a visual complication expressed in the unstable relationship of the figures to the background: “‘Logically’ there are two planes here, but the pictorial, optical order, contradicts this objective logic in many places”.¹⁷ In Helena Chłapowska’s portrait, spatial relations are also ambiguous. The sofa is placed slightly diagonally, while the background appears more frontal. The figure gently moves away from the background and does not obey the proposed rhythm of the decoration, and at the same time moves closer to it, to support the

shadow that unites it with the background. The model and the sofa are two “material”, three-dimensional components of the painting that are embedded in its spatial order, while the decorative background, to use Juszcak’s language, wins in the battle to “hold the plane” of the painting. Vertical bands of grotesque ornaments visually organize the composition, simultaneously making the painting decorative.

In this respect, the painting is closer to the style of the works of the artist’s “white period” (1905–1912). As Zofia Weiss-Nowina Konopka wrote, in portraits from that time, “the background is a purely decorative surface, integrating the model into the interior.” As the scholar further observed: “The artist [...] moves his experiences into the field of greater intimacy and decorativeness. He thus becomes close to the poetics of the paintings by the Nabis, who often abandoned the

¹⁶ W. Juszcak, *Młody Weiss*, p. 61.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 61–62.

problem of depth and space in the image in order to obtain more flat colour compositions”.¹⁸

In his “white period”, Weiss more deeply explored the problem of the character’s dependence on the background. A good example of this is the portrait of *Renia czytająca I* (Renia reading I, 1908, owned by the artist’s family, see: **Fig. 3**), in which the decorative background has been granted “equal rights.” The figure, stylized as a Japanese woman, perfectly harmonizes with the brick-red setting, whose floral motifs invite free associations with the patterns of Far Eastern costumes. The figure and the background almost merge, creating a harmonious structure of colourful patches. Very expressive and decisive brushstrokes create an image that remains on the verge of a painting sketch.

Helena Chłapowska’s portrait is characterized by much more restraint and less freedom in using the brush, but on closer observation we notice that the artist constantly balanced between sketchiness and literalness. At times there is a distinct sense of haste and lack of attention to detail. The artist treated the decorative background with sweeping brush strokes, while the sofa was described not so much with spots of colour as with a flexible line. In turn, Weiss painted some parts of the face, the dress, the back of the sofa, and the model’s left hand with the greatest care. Developed with precise and short brush strokes, they gained a delicate texture and sometimes even thicker *impastos*. The latter are especially visible in the upper part of the dress and on the upholstery of the sofa, whose pastel pink decorations add a refreshing accent to the subdued colour scheme (see: **Fig. 4**). The head of the portrayed woman also seems to be visually contrasting against the rest of her body. Surrounded by a contour of a flesh-coloured, warm hue, it contrasts strongly with the neck, built with patches of steel-grey and celadon. This difference in colour temperature would be justified by the presence of a very thin, transparent material covering the woman’s cleavage and neck. However, the cover is not easy to see due to the lack of a visible edge of the fabric, which raises the question: is this a simple oversight by the artist, or perhaps he painted these parts (face and neck) independently of each other – and in a different way – merely days apart?

If you look closely at some parts of the canvas, you can trace the individual stages of applying the layers of paint. You can see that the grotesque ornament at the bottom of the painting was sketched by Weiss against a background of brown spots that create a shadow of the silhouette (see: **Fig. 5**). The model’s right hand, resting nearby, became the basis for the secondary colour play, the final effect of which was the creation of the fabric of the sleeve. The two hands are elaborated in completely different ways – the right one has a clear contour, the left one is painted with patches of colour, harmoniously blending with the background of the dress and the sofa. The white dress that previously featured in the title of the painting is actually rather pearly, creamy and ash-grey, and the admixtures of pink, blue, beige and dirty green prove that the colours of the painting are more complex than it appeared at first glance.

The portrait of Helena Chłapowska combines Weiss’s previous painting experiences – both from the early stage of his work and from the subsequent “white



5. Wojciech Weiss, *Portret kobiety w białej sukni* (Heleny z Mielżyńskich Chłapowskiej) [Portrait of a Woman in a White Dress (Helena Chłapowska née Mielżyńska)], 1911, oil on canvas, 146 × 96 cm, National Museum in Poznań (detail)

18 Ł. Kossowski, Z. Weiss-Nowina Konopka, *Piękno do mnie przyszło...*, p. 31.

period.” The consequence of the former is the way of approaching the figure, the inclusion of shadow in the painting narrative, and the flexible contour line, still reminiscent of Art Nouveau. However, the narrowing of the colour scheme to pastel hues, and the aforementioned stylistic inconsistencies – from precisely placed patches to quick, sketchy treatment of painting matter – are consistent with the artist’s quests during his “white period.” Although, admittedly, the discussed work is not one of Weiss’s greatest artistic accomplishments (there are some awkward distortions to the proportions, especially in the legs and the torso), it must be admitted that the artistic, painterly qualities compensate for the technical shortcomings. We should note that narrowing down the colour scheme was an additional difficulty for the artist, and the unique sense of colour nuances, the ability to differentiate shades of white as well as painting craft prove that it is the result of the work of a master who has “excessive sense of colours, [who] reduces the tones of his palette to the few most fundamental, and begins to look for the symphony of colours, the concept of which came to Europe from the Japanese masters”.¹⁹ In turn, the entire constellation of visual tensions analysed earlier testifies to a sophisticated compositional concept, which supports the artistic value of this portrait.

Story behind the commission

The commission to paint a portrait of Helena Chłapowska was made through one Jan Zieliński, about whom we do not have specific knowledge. A letter from Alfred Chłapowski of June 27, 1911, indicates that Weiss accepted the order, having approved the financial terms offered to him. In the above-mentioned letter, Chłapowski maintains the previous arrangements, and asks the artist to specify the date of arrival in Bonikowo: “Having consulted with Honourable Professor at my request, Mr. Jan K. Zieliński informs us that we can count on His arrival this summer to make a larger oil portrait of my wife. Considering the price of 3,000 crowns as agreed, I would now like to find out at least approximately when Honourable Professor will be free to come, and how long will He probably stay here, so that our plans do not clash, because we have several journeys ahead of us”.²⁰

Apparently, the beginning of September turned out to be suitable for the artist, and the Chłapowskis agreed to this proposal: “I am pleased to inform Honourable Professor that we are most definitely expecting him in the first days of September, and that this date is very convenient for us”²¹ – wrote Helena on behalf of her husband, in another letter. Before Weiss reached Bonikowo, Chłapowska sent two more letters from Switzerland, where she was vacationing with her husband. The couple stayed at the very exclusive Palace Hôtel located within the picturesque Bürgenstock complex.²² In a letter of August 16, Chłapowska kindly re-

19 K. S., *Z wędrówki po pracowniach. U Profesora Weissa*, “Tygodnik Ilustrowany”, 10, 1910, p. 192.

20 zw, Letter of Alfred Chłapowski, Bonikowo, 27 June 1911.

21 Ibidem, Letter of Helena Chłapowska to Wojciech Weiss, Bonikowo, 15 July 1911.

22 The Palace Hôtel was built in 1903 on the site of the former Bürgenstock complex, which had existed since 1873 and was initially conceived as an exclusive medical facility. See: Bürgenstock Complex, <<https://burgenstockresort.com>> (as of 20 March 2023). The hotel staff refused to provide access to archival registration books in order to obtain more information about the Chłapowskis’ stay in Switzerland. Did the couple go there to convalesce? From Chłapowska’s war memoirs, we know that Alfred suffered from bronchitis towards the end of his

minded Weiss of his obligation and tried to establish the artist's working time in Bonikowo. According to her information, the Chłapowskis intended to go to Lviv in the second half of September, therefore they wished for Weiss to finish the work before their journey. Accordingly, she proposed a date between September 3 and 19.²³ From the context of the next letter we learn that ultimately Weiss intended to arrive in Bonikowo on September 2 and asked to be picked up from the Kosten (Kościan) station by horse and carriage. He also asked whether there were easels on site. Chłapowska apologized that she would not be able to provide the artist with tools, as the couple were meant to return to the estate only on the eve of the painter's visit.²⁴

The remuneration proposed by Chłapowski would be considered a very decent rate. At that time, it was equivalent to almost one kilogram of gold.²⁵ For the sake of comparison – in 1912, Edward Raczynski purchased two paintings by Weiss for his collection, at 1,000 crowns each.²⁶ Chłapowski was ready to pay three times as much for the likeness of his wife. From the content of the letter, we learn that the amount of remuneration had already been agreed. We do not know which of the parties proposed this amount, and whether it was achieved through any previous negotiations. Did Alfred Chłapowski wish to show generosity to the artist in recognition of his talent? Or could it be that he had to use a financial argument to convince the artist that it was worth undertaking a job towards which he himself was perhaps feeling reluctant? Ultimately, it was agreed that the painter would arrive at the residence in Bonikowo on September 2, 1911, which does not mean that the painting was created there.

life. (H. Chłapowska, *Barbarzyństwo niemieckie. Fragment dziennika*, [in:] *Pamiętnik Towarzystwa Miłośników Ziemi Kościańskiej 1983–1985*, H. Florkowski (ed.), Kościan 1992, pp. 26–46, p. 38). It is not known whether he had previously struggled with respiratory failure.

23 “Przychodzę Pana Profesora zapytać, czy Pan nie zapomniał o swej obietnicy przybycia do Bonikowa celem zrobienia mego portretu. [...] czy możemy Go prosić o przyjechanie 3 września [...], a to dla tego [sic!], że 19 września musimy być we Lwowie, a że Pan Profesor pisał, że zrobienie portretu potrwa 2 tygodnie, więc od 3 do 19 września będziemy mieć czas” (“I have come to ask Honourable Professor, if you have not forgotten your promise to come to Bonikowo to have my portrait taken. [...] can we ask Professor to come on September 3 [...], because [sic!] we have to be in Lviv on September 19, and since Professor wrote that taking the portrait would take 2 weeks, we will have time from September 3 to 19”). zw, Letter of Helena Chłapowska to Wojciech Weiss, Bürgenstock, Palace Hôtel, 16 August 1911.

24 „Stosownie do ostatniego listu Pańskiego liczymy na Jego przyjazd do Bonikowa dn. 2 września. Konie wedle życzenia w Kościanie (Kosten) czekać będą, gdy otrzymamy wiadomość, którym pociągami Pan przybędzie. Szaług w Bonikowie niestety nie ma! Przykro mi, że będzie Pan miał ambaras z przywiezieniem takowych, lecz niepodobna mi o nie się wystarać, a to tem mniej, że dopiero 1 września do domu wrócimy” (“In accordance with Professor's last letter, we count on your arrival in Bonikowo on September 2. The horses will be waiting in Kościan (Kosten) as He wishes, when we receive information about which train you will arrive by. Unfortunately, there are no easels in Bonikowo! I am sorry that you will have trouble bringing them, but I cannot obtain them, especially since we will not return home until September 1”). zw, Letter of Helena Chłapowska to Wojciech Weiss, Bürgenstock, Palace Hôtel, 25 August 1911 (hereinafter: Letter of H. Chłapowska, 25 August 1911).

25 Precisely 913 grams. See: *Przelicznik walut historycznych*, <<https://historicalstatistics.org>> (as of 12 September 2022).

26 We are talking about two paintings: *Zuzanna i starcy* (Susanna and the Elders) and *Pogrzeb* (Funeral). Raczynski bought them for 1,000 crowns each, and in addition the watercolour *Most* (Bridge) for 500 crowns. zw, Society of Friends of Fine Arts in Kraków, 11 April 1912.

Bonikowo?

Wojciech Weiss's family records include three letters sent from Wielkopolska to his wife Irena, in which the painter described his stay with the Chłapowski family in quite some detail.²⁷ Thanks to these notes, it is possible to determine the circumstances in which the portrait was created.

The first of the preserved letters is dated September 5, 1911, and was sent not from Bonikowo, but from Pawłowice. Weiss wrote to Irena: "You will be very surprised that I am in Pawłów, a manor that is 50 kilometers away from Bonikowo (on the Lissa²⁸–Skalmierzyce railroad). Well, all this because Mrs. Chłapowska's children are in Pawłów, so we are doing the portrait here".²⁹

The name "Pawłów" may be misleading, as in fact it refers to Pawłowice – an estate that belonged to Helena's family, and at that time to her uncle Maksymilian Mielżyński.³⁰ Although the artist explained that the change of place of work was influenced by family circumstances, it is possible that the ongoing renovation works in Bonikowo, the date of which is still disputed among researchers,³¹ were not conducive to the painter's creative work and, to some extent, determined the choice of Pawłowice. Weiss was happy with the unexpected turn of events, because – as he confessed to his wife – the Chłapowski residence (which was apparently still waiting for transformation) was not to his liking: "For me, this is an enormous improvement. Boników is a manor from the nineteenth century – ugly, styleless,

27 I was able to peruse these letters courtesy of Ms Zofia Weiss-Nowina Konopka, who made the preserved correspondence available to me. At this point I would like to thank her most sincerely.

28 Lissa – today's Leszno.

29 zw, Letter from Wojciech Weiss to Irena Weiss, Pawłowice, 5 September 1911 (hereinafter: Letter of W. Weiss, 5 September 1911). The Chłapowski children whom the artist mentions are Teresa (1910–1980) and Krystyna (1911–1995). D. Chłapowski, *Chłapowscy. Kronika rodzinna*, Warszawa 1998, p. 148.

30 According to the *Słownik historyczno-geograficzny ziem polskich w średniowieczu* (Historical and Geographical Dictionary of Polish Lands in the Middle Ages), the name "Pawlowo" appeared in 1398, and then it was no longer used. Cf. <<http://www.slownik.ihpan.edu.pl>> (as of 20 March 2023). See: M. Strzałko, *Majątki wielkopolskie*, vol. VII: *Powiat śremski*, Szreniawa 2002, pp. 119–124. On page 119, the author lists various names for this village (Pawłowice, Pawlowicze, Polschowicz, Pawelwitz, German Pawlowitz), there is no name "Pawłów", which Weiss used. It is therefore difficult to say where this mistake came from.

31 The duration of the reconstruction of the palace in Bonikowo is a controversial issue. The Chłapowski family chronicle states: "in 1912 they rebuilt the manor house in Bonikowo, enlarging it to the size and appearance of the palace" (D. Chłapowski, *Chłapowscy*, p. 143). The landed gentry ledger states that the palace was renovated in 1914 (S. Sas-Lityński (ed.), *Złota księga ziemiaństwa polskiego poświęcona kulturze i wytwórczości rolnej. Wielkopolska*, Warszawa–Poznań 1929, p. 49), which is consistent with the information provided in the *Katalogu Zabytków Sztuki w Polsce* (Catalog of Art Monuments in Poland, kZSP, vol. v: Powiat kościański, T. Ruszczyńska, A. Sławska (eds.), Poznań 1980, p. 11). In her study of the Wielkopolska estates, Jolanta Goszczyńska states that the palace was rebuilt in the years 1910–1911 (J. Goszczyńska, *Majątki wielkopolskie*, vol. v: *Powiat kościański*, Szreniawa 1998, p. 9), whereas Gabriela Klause, who is citing the most reliable source – namely, the Bonikowo reconstruction project – offers the period 1905–1911 (G. Klause, *Roger Sławski. 1871–1963. Architekt*, Poznań 1999, p. 38). It is known that this project was presented during Sławski's exhibition at the Society of Friends of Fine Arts in Poznań (in May 1905) and that it "was distinguished by its picturesque treatment of classical baroque" ("Dziennik Poznański", 6 May 1905, p. 1). Given such significant discrepancies in dating, it is difficult to say unequivocally at what stage the renovation works in Bonikowo were when Weiss arrived there, but the mention in his letter that "Boników was styleless" could mean that the building's appearance had not yet been changed, as intended in the 1905 design.



while Pawłów is a museum: A huge, magnificent palace from the seventeenth century”.³² The Mielżyński residence exceeded his expectations by far.

6. Mielżyński Palace in Pawłowice, 1779–1792, view of the façade, 2021. Photo by Kinga Sibilska

Pawłowice

It is not without reason that Pawłowice (see: **Fig. 6**) was hailed as “the most delicious palace in Poznań” – its first owner was the richest man in Wielkopolska – the great Crown writer Maksymilian Mielżyński (1738–1799).³³ Maksymilian invited the most outstanding artists to build the residence and create its decorations: the famous German architect Karl Gotthard Langhans, and the leading representative of classicism in Poland Jan Christian Kamsetzer.³⁴ Much later, when Wojciech Weiss came to the residence in 1911, the owner of the Pawłowice estate was Leon Mielżyński’s older son, Maksymilian (1844–1916).³⁵ In a letter to his wife, Weiss recalled that “an old bachelor with a bushy moustache” took him for a ride around his estate “managed in exemplary way.” The artist was surprised by what he saw: “It was the first time I saw a plow with 5 blades, a motor plow, and machines that immediately thresh and press straw”.³⁶ The technical innovations mentioned by the artist were the result of the owner’s efforts to modernize the farm. Already in 1900, he purchased a set of steam plows and drained the fields, and in 1907 he built a local railway connecting his estates (Kąkolewo with Pawłowice).³⁷ Maksymilian also took care of the furnishings and surroundings of the palace. It was during his time that electricity was installed there, and guest rooms were added in the southern gallery, where the famous Poznań artist Waclaw Marcinkowski, the author of three sculptures decorating the palace, was most likely stationed.³⁸

32 Letter of W. Weiss, 5 September 1911.

33 A. Łuczak, *Pałac w Pawłowicach – rozproszone zbiory ziemiańskie*, “Cenne, Bezcenne, Utracone”, 5(17), 1999, pp. 4–8.

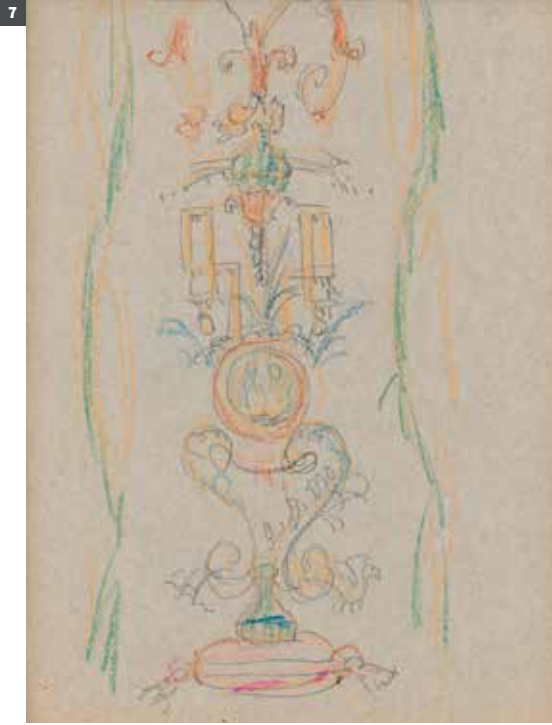
34 Ibidem. Por. J. Wawrzyniak, *700 lat Pawłowic. Dzieje wsi, parafii, majątku ziemskiego i pałacu Mielżyńskich*, Krzemieniewo 2010, p. 19. More details about the palace architecture on pages 105–109.

35 In 1885, while his father was still living, Maksymilian inherited the Pawłowice estate (Pawłowice together with Mały Dwór, Kociugi, Kąkolew), which was 4,198 hectares of land. His brother, Maciej (Helena’s father), took possession of Łęka Wielka and Żytowiecko – a total of 2,612 hectares of land. (See: J. Wawrzyniak, *700 lat Pawłowic*, p. 28).

36 Letter of W. Weiss, 5 September 1911.

37 J. Wawrzyniak, *700 lat Pawłowic*, p. 33.

38 Only two of the sculptures have survived to this day – portraits of village children standing in the main hall, supposedly considered to be portraits of Maciej Mielżyński’s children: Helena and



Weiss admired the class of the equipment he saw in Pawłowice: “Niuta, what furniture they have here, it is a fairy tale”.³⁹ In his free time from work, he sketched the surroundings and interiors of the palace. Several drawings depicting *coltrine* wallpaper ornaments and furniture have survived (see: **Fig. 7**).⁴⁰ Particularly interesting is the drawing of the wardrobe, which the artist described with exact dimensions (see: **Fig. 8**). Was it supposed to be used by the owners for stocktaking purposes?⁴¹ So far, it has not been possible to determine the reason for taking such detailed notes, but it is certain that the Mielżyński family owned an extraordinary collection of furniture that dated back to the times of the first owner.⁴²

Weiss’s perspective

Based on Weiss’s correspondence, the details of the execution of the commission can be reconstructed. The artist started working in Pawłowice on Monday,

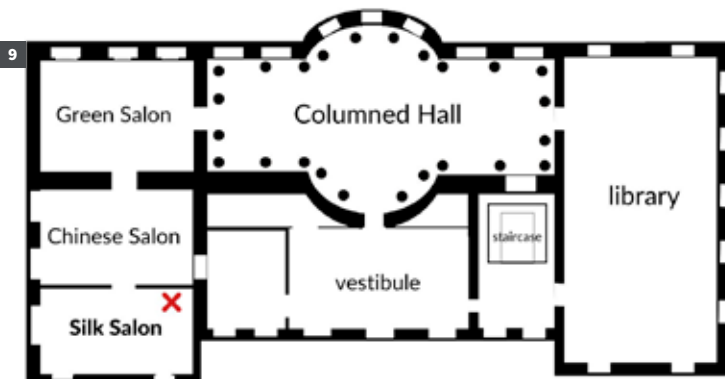
Krzysztof. The third sculpture, now lost, was the statue of Atlas placed on the top of the palace – still visible in the Weiss’s sketches of of Pawłowice.

39 Niuta, Niutka, Niutuś (from diminutive Renia, Reniutka) – were Weiss’ affectionate nicknames for Irena. Letter of W. Weiss, 5 September 1911.

40 Currently, Weiss’ sketches from Pawłowice are in the artist’s family collection. They were made available to me thanks to the courtesy of Mrs. Zofia Weiss-Nowina Konopka.

41 Currently, the wardrobe is part of the collection of the National Museum in Poznań (Accession Number MNP Rd6).

42 According to the inventory list from 1933, there were about 900 pieces of furniture from different eras in Pawłowice. There were Biedermeier and historicising suits of furniture, as well as older pieces in the French style (Louis xv and xvi). During the war (in 1941), the palace was transformed into a seminary for German teachers, and the collections were dispersed. At present, a small part of the furniture remains in the collections of the National Museum in Poznań. (See: A. Łuczak, *Pałac w Pawłowicach*, pp. 6–7). For more information about the palace’s furnishings, see: J. Wawrzyniak, *700 lat Pawłowic*, pp. 50–52.



✗ - the place where the model was sitting.

7. Wojciech Weiss, sketch of an ornament from Pawłowice, 1911, property of the artist’s family, courtesy of Zofia Weiss-Nowina Konopka

8. Wojciech Weiss, sketch of a wardrobe from Pawłowice, 1911, property of the artist’s family, courtesy of Zofia Weiss-Nowina Konopka

9. Plan of the first floor of the palace in Pawłowice. Drawing by Kinga Sibilska

September 4.⁴³ The session with the woman sitting for the portrait took place in the silk salon, which crowned the enfilade of representative rooms on the first floor of the palace, in the southern wing (see: **Fig. 9**).⁴⁴ Judging by the furnishings, it seemed to be a room most worthy of the person being immortalized: “I paint in the living room, wallpapered with satin, purchased long ago at an auction from the kings of France. The pattern, embroidered with silk, has intricate arabesques, and pearl background. Such background, a dress of a similar colour, a Louis xv sofa”.⁴⁵



10

He enjoyed favourable working conditions: “No one disturbs me, it is more comfortable than in the studio”.⁴⁶ He could enjoy the freedom to create without distractions – “the portrait is going quite well, I am painting it in an empty living room upstairs, no one is nagging me”.⁴⁷ It can be assumed that he did not even constrain himself to working in one specific space of the silk salon, as indicated by the words: “I paint in reception rooms [...] as they are always empty”.⁴⁸

10. Wojciech Weiss, sketch of a silk salon (northern wall) with a visible portrait of Chtapowska, 1911, property of the artist’s family, courtesy of Zofia Weiss-Nowina Konopka

Thanks to Weiss’s preserved sketch (see: **Fig. 10**), we know that the room was specially arranged for the purpose of the portrait session, with a carpet-covered platform on which the sofa was placed. Comparing the sketch with a real view of the room allows us to precisely indicate the place where the woman was sitting (see: **Fig. 11**). In turn, the comparison of the rhythm of the ornaments visible on the wallpaper with those painted by Weiss confirms that the model must have been sitting on a platform and that the artist simplified or removed some ornaments in the final composition (see: **Fig. 12, 13**). Another dilemma for the artist to consider was the position of the portrayed woman’s left hand. A simple sketch included in a letter to his wife shows that he was considering one of two options: her hand

43 “I started the portrait yesterday,” Weiss wrote in a letter dated September 5, 1911. It was a Tuesday, which is evident from the content of the letters and is confirmed by the historical calendar. See: *Kalendarz historyczny*, <<https://www.kalendarz-365.pl/kalendarz-1911.html>> (as of 28 March 2023).

44 The Silk Salon is currently the only room in which most of the original furnishings of the palace have been preserved (although not all of the furniture found therein currently has been there in 1911). The walls are upholstered with satin fabric, which the first owner of Pawłowice – Maksymilian – ordered in 1790 in Paris (A. Łuczak, *Pałac w Pawłowicach*, p. 6). Weiss carefully studied the grotesque and floral ornaments embroidered with silk threads that decorated it and copied those into a sketchbook (the sketches remain in the Weiss family collection).

45 Letter from W. Weiss, September 5, 1911. The sofa on which the model was sitting is no longer in the “silk salon”, although it is very likely that it was the same sofa that is currently in the collection of the National Museum in Poznań, albeit with a different upholstery (Accession Number MNP Rd53/1).

46 Ibidem.

47 zw, Letter of Wojciech Weiss to Irena Weiss, Pawłowice, 10 September 1911 (hereinafter: Letter of W. Weiss, 10 September 1911).

48 Letter of W. Weiss, 5 September 1911. The Silk Salon was one of many reception rooms in Pawłowice; on the same floor there was also a “Chinese” salon, a “green” salon, and on the ground floor – a “blue” salon, where coffee or tea would be served (J. Wawrzyniak, *700 lat Pawłowic*, p. 107).



11. Silk salon in the Mielżyński Palace in Pawłowice (view of the northern wall, where the model was sitting), as of 2021. Photo by Kinga Sibilska

12. Silk salon in the Mielżyński Palace in Pawłowice, fragment of a wallpaper on the northern wall, as of 2021. Photo by Kinga Sibilska

13. Wojciech Weiss, *Portret kobiety w białej sukni (Heleny z Mielżyńskich Chłapowskiej)* [Portrait of a Woman in a White Dress (Helena Chłapowska née Mielżyńska)], 1911, oil on canvas, 146 × 96 cm, National Museum in Poznań (detail)

14. Wojciech Weiss, sketch of the portrait of Helena Chłapowska née Mielżyńska included in a letter to Irena Weiss (September 5, 1911), property of the artist's family, courtesy of Zofia Weiss-Nowina Konopka



lying on her stomach or stretched straight out (see: Fig. 14).⁴⁹ As we now know, he ultimately decided on the second solution.

Judging by Weiss's words, Helena Chłapowska turned out to be a bit of a troublesome model: "The one portrayed has a very interesting mimosa-shaped head, very sensitive and nervous, it withers, rather like you, my dear, under the painter's gaze. Because of this, I have a very difficult portrait to paint".⁵⁰

Perhaps the woman was so bored with sitting for the portrait that the artist limited the sessions to a minimum. In my earlier analysis of the painting, I mentioned that there was a clear difference in the treatment of some parts of the canvas. It looks as if the painter used the posing time to paint the face very precisely and refined the rest later on the basis of a quick sketch, painting without a model, from memory. He wrote: "the portrait is going quite well, I am painting it in an empty living room upstairs".⁵¹ Moreover, it is possible that

Chłapowska left Pawłowice before the painter did. According to the arrangements, Weiss was scheduled to go to Bonikowo first, to join the Chłapowski family on the way back to Kraków: "On Saturday afternoon I am going to Bonikowo by train, and we shall leave from there at 4 o'clock".⁵²

Despite his admiration for the area and the way that the estate was managed, the thought of returning home had accompanied the artist incessantly since he arrived in Pawłowice, and his longing for his beloved wife was sometimes unbearable. After a week, he confessed: "I am in a good mood, I just really miss you, I am rushing the time

49 Letter of W. Weiss, 5 September 1911.

50 Ibidem.

51 Letter of W. Weiss, 10 September 1911.

52 Letter of W. Weiss, 13 September 1911. It is doubtful that the portrayed woman accompanied Weiss on the journey, since the Chłapowskis had a car; and if it were so, Weiss would have probably mentioned it.

to have you with me, I miss you so much”.⁵³ The hosts provided the artist with various attractions, but these were not necessarily to his liking. He recounted: “I attended a hunting party for partridges today, they hit the poor birds terribly”.⁵⁴ At the end of his stay in Pawłowice, he only dreamed about the upcoming trip with Irena: “Okay, honey, we shall go to Zakopane for a week, it will be good for us. You are probably bored with the monotony of the countryside, I am stupefied by polishing a botch job, listening to stories about hunting, about the cook, about a drought, etc. I am furiously bored, I would not like to live so stupidly. Oh, how I long to breathe the fresh air of free people”.⁵⁵

The vision of his return looked quite promising for Weiss. The Chłapowskis were going to Lviv by car and offered the artist transport with an overnight stay in Wrocław, whence Weiss was meant to go by train to the Kraków that he missed so much. At that time, owning a car was a sign of the owners’ great wealth, and this form of transportation was rare. It is therefore no wonder that the artist considered this a great opportunity: “It is a pleasant distraction and a novelty for me to travel in this way, so I happily accepted the invitation”,⁵⁶ and at the same time he reassured Irena of the safety of this escapade: “Don’t Niuta worry about me. The Chłapowski family covered huge distances by car: Poznań, Paris, Biarritz [...]”.⁵⁷ “Don’t you fret that I will catch a cold during the trip, I will wear warm shirts underneath, and in addition to my coat, they will also provide me with an automobile cloak”.⁵⁸

Based on Weiss’s letters, it can be concluded that the artist stayed in Pawłowice from Monday, September 4, to Saturday, September 16, 1911, thus the work on the portrait took him less than two weeks. It is not certain whether Chłapowska was in Pawłowice for as long as that, and we do not know how often she sat for the portrait. After finishing his work, according to a previously established plan, Weiss returned to Bonikowo on Saturday, September 16, and from there he went with the Chłapowski family to Wrocław. He was supposed to reach Kraków on Sunday, September 17 in the evening. After a well-deserved rest with his wife in Zakopane, he planned to return to the Chłapowski family. He mentioned it twice: “I do not know what the portrait will look like, but I promised that I will come for a few days around October 5 to devarnish [*sic!*]”,⁵⁹ and in another excerpt: “The portrait is almost finished, I will come again after the first, to give a final touch, to devarnish it, see what it looks like in the frame”.⁶⁰ It is not known when exactly – if at all – the painter appeared again in Wielkopolska, but the portrait is covered with a layer of varnish, which would indicate that Weiss most likely fulfilled his promise, and the Portrait of Helena Chłapowska was finally transported from Pawłowice to Bonikowo, becoming an important part of the family collection.⁶¹

53 Letter of W. Weiss, 10 September 1911.

54 Ibidem.

55 Letter of W. Weiss, 13 September 1911.

56 Letter of W. Weiss, 10 September 1911.

57 Ibidem.

58 Letter of W. Weiss, 13 September 1911.

59 Letter of W. Weiss, 5 September 1911.

60 Letter of W. Weiss, 13 September 1911.

61 In their Bonikowo palace one could admire: “several valuable and old paintings, such as those by the Dutchman Pieter van Thys, Salvator Rosa, [...] a rich collection of engravings (Moreau le jeune, Chodowiecki) and newer paintings by Juliusz Kossak, [Julian] Fałat, Jacek Malczewski,

One more question remains – what has led Wojciech Weiss become Helena Chłapowska’s portraitist? It can be assumed that the future ambassador, who was attached to the family tradition of commemoration, wanted the image of his wife to be painted by a well-known and highly regarded painter.⁶² All the more so because on October 3, 1911, the fourth wedding anniversary of the Chłapowski family was approaching, and it was fitting that the missing painting of his beloved wife should finally be hung in their renovated residence.⁶³ Around 1910, Weiss already enjoyed an established position on the art market. Since his famous debut in 1898, he has gained the reputation of an excellent painter who “does not engage in slavish copying of a model”.⁶⁴ An individual show, organized in 1909 in the building of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts in Kraków, resulted in further exhibition offers, also in Poznań.⁶⁵ At the end of January 1909, the activities of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts were reactivated here, and their important postulate was to strengthen contacts with Kraków.⁶⁶ Chłapowski, who was well acquainted with the cultural milieu (and not only the one in Poznań), easily managed to get in touch with Weiss, and he certainly also saw his paintings at the “Sztuka” exhibition in 1909.⁶⁷

There is yet another possibility, albeit less likely: contact with Weiss could have been made through Brodnica (in Śrem County), where Alfred’s relative, Antonina Mańkowska née Chłapowski, had lived.⁶⁸ Weiss had painted her portrait in 1903, but unfortunately we only know this likeness from photographs.⁶⁹ Weiss apparently came into contact with the Mańkowski family through Leon Mańkowski (1858–1909), who invited him to Mojówka in Podolia, where the artist was asked to paint family portraits. Weiss, it seems, was more appreciated there for playing the violin than for his painting.⁷⁰ Since he was portraying the Mańkowski

and finally [...] an entire gallery of family portraits by Kraus and Lampi, Weiss, Pochwalski, Etcheverry” S. Sas-Lityński (ed.), *Złota księga*, p. 49.

62 A. Kwilecki, *Ziemiaństwo wielkopolskie*, Warszawa 1998, p. 59.

63 The wedding took place on 3 October 1907 at Pawłowice (D. Chłapowski, *Chłapowscy*, p. 143).

64 S. Tomkowicz, *Wystawa*, p. 2.

65 The artist is invited to participate [in:] the “Salon” in Russia; 5th exhibition of Associazione degli Artisti Italiani in Florence; 4th Spring Exhibition at the Industrial Museum in Lviv; individual shows organized by the Societies of Friends of Fine Arts in Poznań and Lviv (Ł. Kossowski, Z. Weiss-Nowina Konopka, *Piękno do mnie przyszło...*, pp. 253–254).

66 I. Moderska, *Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Sztuk Pięknych w Poznaniu*, [in:] *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1890–1914. Praca zbiorowa*, A. Wojciechowski (ed.), Wrocław 1967, pp. 175–177.

67 *I. Wystawa Towarzystwa Artystów Polskich “Sztuka”* [catalogue of the Poznań exhibition, October–November 1909], S. Filipkiewicz (ed.), Poznań 1909, items 144–148.

68 Antonina, née Chłapowska Mańkowska (1852–1936), wife of Waclaw Mańkowski (1850–1909), a great authority in the field of agriculture. A.E. Mańkowski, Waclaw Mańkowski z Brodnicy and his children, [in:] *Kronika domowa Mańkowskich*, Warszawa–Szczawnica 2017, pp. 465–493, cf. D. Chłapowski, *Chłapowscy*, tables 6, 8. Antonina and Alfred shared a common great-grandfather – Józef Chłapowski of Chłapowo, Dryja coat of arms (1756–1826), who married twice. Antonina was the great-granddaughter of Urszula Moszczeńska (1762–1796), Józef’s first wife, and Alfred was the great-grandson of Maria Magdalena Bogucka (ca. 1770–1840), Józef’s second wife.

69 The Wojciech Weiss family archive contains correspondence, a reproduction of the painting, and a photograph by Antonina Mańkowska, based on which the artist probably painted.

70 “My uncle, Prof. Leon Mańkowski, invited the famous painter Wojciech Weiss, in Kraków. The master was still a little-known painter, and also played the violin well. Uncle Leon came with him to Mojówka and in their free time they played at the piano, accompanied by Uncle Leon [...]. Master Weiss already had his characteristic face colouring, which he painted in a reddish

family before 1903, it means that when he came to Wielkopolska, he already had experience in creating paintings on commission. It is therefore possible that the Mańkowski family recommended Weiss to the Chłapowski family, although this is a fragile hypothesis because, as we already know, the family did not really like these portraits. The portrait of Antonina was no exception in this respect, as confirmed by the account of Krzysztof Morawski, who visited Brodnica in 1923: “In the living room, above the fireplace, there was a beautiful portrait of Aunt Tosia by Wojciech Weiss, a good painting, although dissimilar and disliked by the family. It was hung so high that it was hardly visible. I do not know what happened to it afterwards”.⁷¹

Weiss, probably discouraged by this type of work, was not willing to accept further orders, but perhaps tempted by the attractive price, he agreed to create a portrait of Helena Chłapowska as an exception. By painting such a significant person, he could quietly count on gaining fame in Wielkopolska, and thus also greater profits from sales. Although the transactions were usually mediated by the Society of Friends of Fine Arts, the works were in fact purchased by landowners. As I have already mentioned, by selling paintings to Raczyński, less than a year after painting the portrait of Helena Chłapowska, Weiss earned almost the same amount of money again, and in the same year 1912, the Society of Friends of Fine Arts in Poznań reported that it had found further buyers for Weiss’s works.⁷² It certainly seems that this inconspicuous episode in Wielkopolska was more important than one might have expected.

To conclude, *Portret kobiety w białej sukni* (Portrait of a Woman in a White Dress) from the collection of the National Museum in Poznań depicts Helena Chłapowska née Mielżyńska. Chronologically, the portrait falls within the “white period” of Weiss’s work, but it is worth noting that in this particular painting the artist continued several threads or issues that interested him in his youth, including the non-obvious posing of the portrayed person, and the complexity of spatial relations. As source materials prove, Weiss painted the portrait in the first half of September 1911 in Pawłowice, and not – as previously believed – in Bonikowo. The painting was created within a period of two weeks, therefore, this relatively short time the artist had to complete the order could explain the technical shortcomings and discrepancies – in the sense of unequal treatment – in the development of individual parts of the painting. Nevertheless, based on a careful analysis of the original, albeit without specialized research as yet, it is possible to recreate the order in which some painting layers were applied, which allows us to trace the process of the work’s creation. We do not know how much time Weiss devoted

tone. The portraits were very similar, treated realistically, and he did not embellish his models at all, as had been done in the past. My uncles were not pleased, and these undoubtedly good portraits were later also found in the possession of Henryk Mańkowski, who knew art and was a refined aesthete.” Collection of the Mańkowski family, Memoirs of Jan Maria Mańkowski, typescript (fragment made available thanks to the courtesy of Mr. Andrzej Mańkowski, cf. A. Saryusz-Zaleska, *Niezapomniana Ukraina*, Warszawa 2007, p. 68).

⁷¹ K. Morawski, *Z Krakowa i Wielkopolski*, Warszawa 2016, p. 145.

⁷² In June 1912, the Society wished to purchase the *Głowa starca* (Head of an Old Man) for a lottery among its members, and in December the Society’s secretary reported that a buyer had been found for *Jesień* (Autumn). zw, Letters from the board of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts in Poznań to Wojciech Weiss, 21 June 1912, 3 December 1912.

to painting from nature during the sessions with the model, but based on the inspection of the work, it can be concluded – and this is supported by the sources – that the artist could have painted the picture on a quick sketch and refined the details only (face and hands) during the sittings. It is difficult to determine beyond doubt whether the noticeable haste was due to lack of time, fatigue, or simply an intended painterly effect. Ultimately, Weiss left the image technically heterogeneous, which was quite common during his “white period.” The artist often moved from sketchy parts of the canvas to carefully crafted surfaces where the painting matter comes to the fore. This cannot be sufficiently assessed using reproductions. As one of the critics rightly noted in “Tygodnik Ilustrowany”: “For Weiss’s paintings today, the camera is deadly. They work only with colour, and not with line and shape. At a certain distance from the canvas, the colours scattered upon it begin to play out their bizarre life. Weiss’s ‘plain air’ then trembles like air heated by the rays of the sun. The subtlest shades of colours become accessible to the eye, so that the viewer discovers completely new and previously unnoticed beauty in these works [...]. On a photographic plate, however, all this will disappear. Weiss’s works must be seen in the original to be properly appreciated”.⁷³

The story of Helena Chłapowska’s portrait, narrated above, is a prime example of Weiss’s commercial activity. The author’s harsh comment deprecating the work confirms that he treated this type of practice as secondary. The world of the wealthy landed gentry of Wielkopolska seemed alien to him. Despite his initial admiration for the decor and surroundings of the palace in Pawłowice, the artist felt lost in its large and empty spaces, and he considered the typical entertainment that the owners indulged in to be a waste of time. No wonder he was rushing through the days, dreaming of returning to Kraków, where his beloved Irena was waiting for him. The Wielkopolska episode in the artist’s work shows that there are still many unrecognized areas in Wojciech Weiss’s oeuvre, and one of those is the degree of the artist’s involvement in the creation of images of wealthy landowners, and, more broadly, Weiss’s activities in Wielkopolska.

Abstract

Wojciech Weiss on a visit to the Chłapowski family: A Wielkopolska episode in the work of the Cracovian painter

The article reveals details of Wojciech Weiss’s stay in Wielkopolska in early September 1911. Recently discovered correspondence from Alfred and Helena Chłapowski, as well as Weiss’s private letters, unveiled unknown aspects of the artist as a creator of gentry portraits, while also highlighting gaps in our knowledge on the subject. The letters allowed for the connection of facts with a specific painting – Portrait of a Woman in a White Dress), currently in the collection of the National Museum in Poznań, overlooked by researchers so far. This is the first attempt to address this topic through a comparative analysis of the artwork with written sources. The research allowed for the verification of previous data about the object, ultimately confirming the identity of the portrayed woman and correcting the mistaken information regarding the place of the artwork’s creation. The erroneous belief that the painting was created in Bonikowo, at the Chłapowski estate, stemmed from the fact that the painting was taken from there by German occupiers and transported

⁷³ K.S., *Z wędrówki po pracowniach*, p. 192.

to the Kaiser Friedrich Museum (today's National Museum in Poznań). Meanwhile, Weiss painted the portrait in Pawłowice, at the familial estate of Helena Chłapowska. The conclusions from this research may contribute to future broader research studies on Wojciech Weiss's activities in the Wielkopolska region.

KEYWORDS:

Wojciech Weiss,
landowners' portraits,
Chłapowscy, Bonikowo,
Pawłowice, portrait
of Helena Chłapowska

Literature

Archive materials

Archive of the National Museum in Poznań

A file of documents from Bonikowo, Accession Number MNP A2957

Wojciech Weiss's family collection

Letter from Alfred Chłapowski, Bonikowo, 27 June 1911

Letter from Helena Chłapowska to Wojciech Weiss, Bonikowo, 15 July 1911

Letter from Helena Chłapowska to Wojciech Weiss, Bürgenstock, Palace Hôtel,
16 August 1911

Letter from Helena Chłapowska to Wojciech Weiss, Bürgenstock, Palace Hôtel,
25 August 1911

Letter from Wojciech Weiss to Irena Weiss, Pawłowice, 5 September 1911

Letter from Wojciech Weiss to Irena Weiss, Pawłowice, 10 September 1911

Letter from Wojciech Weiss to Irena Weiss, Pawłowice, 13 September 1911

Letter from the secretary of the Board of the Society of Friends of the Fine Arts Leonard Lepszy to Wojciech Weiss, 11 April 1912

Letter from the Board of the Society of Friends of the Fine Arts in Poznań to Wojciech Weiss, Poznań, 21 June 1912

Letter from the Board of the Society of Friends of the Fine Arts in Poznań to Wojciech Weiss, Poznań, 3 December 1912

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