

The Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn – the history of the miraculous painting



The painting of the *Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn*, also known as *the Blessed Virgin with Infant Jesus in the Mystical Garden*, is associated with Gościeszyn and the generations of its inhabitants from the 15th century. Situated in the high altar of the church of Visitation of Holy Virgin Mary, it is revered from the immemorial not only by the locals. This work of art was painted between 1480 and 1490 and is considered to be of Jan Schyling authorship by some art historians. This assumption is based on way of placing the extended background and mixing the Netherlands way of presenting the landscape with the Italian way of placing the main figure in the foreground, which are characteristic of Schyling painting and those times.

It is also possible to make another hypothesis on the origin of the painting. Because of the elements of Netherlandish and Flemish art that are clearly visible in this work, the *Blessed Virgining of Gościeszyn* is considered to be painted by some of the Netherlands painters. Among them, born in 1410 and working mainly in Louvian in Belgium, Dirk Bouts is believed to influence the creator.

This Late Ghotic tempera painting is created on the linden wood with the dimensions of 40.5 x 31in. Situated in the garden surrounded with the brick wall that ends up with the battlements, Blessed Virgin is holding Infant Jesus on Her knees with Her right hand turning the page of an open book. As Her background there is an ornamental column with a pomegranate motif. A lot of space of this work of art is covered by the stylish draperies enriched by the linings in different colours. At the bottom of this painting there are light-green plants against the dark-green setting around the outspread fabric. At the top, there are two angels placed symmetrically, floating above the main figure with a decorative crown. The background outside the wall presents the landscape of a city, on the left side, with a castle, on the right side.

The worship of Blessed Virgin from Gościeszyn has existed here for centuries. The stock list from 1785 informs about 37 ex-votos connected with the painting, expressing gratitude of the faithful, 2 silver crowns and 1 “dress”, which adorn the painting. All these confirms that the marvellous painting has been adored for more than 200 years and it also proves countless graces granted by God through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin to His people. Feliks Dietrich, a priest and a custodian of the sanctuary of Gościeszyn (from 1967 till 2007) admitted that the parishioners and all visiting pilgrims prayed to God for graces through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin. The Gościeszyn's parishioners also remember about a pair of crutches, hanging at the painting as a proof of miraculous healing, which, unfortunately, were missing during the rebuilding of the church. They also remind that before the World War II the pilgrims, who arrived to Gościeszyn two days before the church fair, went to the Blessed Virgin from Gościeszyn on their knees for a hundred meters from the sanctuary. After the WW II till 1956 the official pilgrimages in Poland were prohibited so the pilgrims appeared individually.

The Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn is the patron of the parish in Gościeszyn.

**The church fairs take place during the celebrations of
the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (31st May)
and the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (8th September).**

The church in Gościeszyn has been destroyed and rebuilt several times. It resulted that the marvellous painting has not been stored in perfect conditions for years and in the 1930s the local work of art was destroyed a lot. Before the Polish Gothic Art Exhibition (1935) the painting was delivered to the Diocese in Gniezno to be preserved by Stanisław Smogulecki. His unprofessional and improper intervention caused irreversible changes in the structure of the painting. Smogulecki's incompetent repainting it to a new basis resulted in diminution of the work's value and its artistic impact.

The Gościeszyn's marvellous painting has been, once again, put to restoration. Fortunately, the works from 1960 were more professional, covered by Ewa and Jerzy Wolscy, the experts from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. They removed the coat of paint that was put by Smogulecki and in this way restored its original splendour. On the 26th May, 1960 the Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn returned ceremonially to Gościeszyn's sanctuary by the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński. Year 1973 brought one more restoration, by Teresa Żukowska from Cracow, which was necessary because of the unfavourable conditions in the church.

The album "Polish Madonnas", a collection of the most impressive and famous Polish paintings of the Mother of God from 1990, where the Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn was also published, was most probably the way more people got to know the work. Unfortunately, also those who, at night on 14th April 1992, broke into the parish church and stole the priceless painting. It made the locals devastated and even depressed, especially as the Gościeszyn's work of art survived through the hard years of Prussian occupation and the wars, but did not outlast the times of peace and regained freedom after the 1989.

In the empty frame of the missing painting the wooden figure of Sorrowful Christ was placed. The worried face of the sculpture, which was quite meaningful, provoked thinking about human nature and life. From the very next day, a local priest and all the faithful started praying for the early retrieval of the stolen work of art and getting it back to their church. Feliks Dietrich kept encouraging the locals to the passionate prayers and faith and he himself had no doubts about granting prayers by God. He gave the parish families the photographs of the Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn, so that the God's Mother settled in the locals' houses and their hearts.

The idea of placing a photograph instead of the missing painting was considered at a time, as well as the concept of painting a new copy in place of the stolen work. However, the local priest never carried out those plans, as he was worried it would be understood as a sign of losing hope. The parish continued to pray trying to support also the police that from July 1994 was assisted by Interpol. After 6 years of praying, worries, concerns, but also faith, the hope for retrieval the Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn appeared. On the 8th April 1998, after conducting additional investigation, the Office for State Protection announced that the thieves were found. Three months later the radio and television information confirmed that the painting was retrieved. The news made the locals so happy and delighted that the custodian of the sanctuary promised that as they did pray for getting back the missing picture for six years, for the next six they would thank for the retrieval of the marvellous painting.

After the theft from 1992, the painting was stored in such extremely unfavourable conditions that it required immediate specialist care. On the 5th October 1999, Special Anti-terrorist Police Squad transported the marvellous painting to the conservation laboratory of Ewa and Jerzy Wolscy in Łódź. After completing the work connected with the renovation, the Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn was placed on deposit in a treasure house in the monastery Jasna Góra in Częstochowa. In the meantime the idea of buying a copy of the miraculous painting was considered, as there was one painted by an artist from Toruń, but that one was expected to be presented the Pope John Paul II during His visit in Poland in June 1999, as a gift from the police. The present was supposed to

symbolised the hardship and difficulty that the police had to overcome. The copy of the Blessed Virgin with Infant Jesus in the Mystical Garden was taken by the Pope to the See of Peter which was perceived as the honour because John Paul II did not take all the presents with him.

**ON THE 31TH MAY 2000,
THE METROPOLITAN OF GNIEZNO, ARCHBISHOP JÓZEF MUSZYŃSKI
SET THE REGIONAL SANCTUARY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN OF GOŚCIESZYN**

However, it was necessary to meet the requirements of the general protection of the works of art to have the Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn back in the parish church. In 2002 an alarm system was installed, later also a fire protection system, a bullet-proof and flame resistant protection unit were placed in the local sanctuary.

Each time when the painting is automatically revealed and hidden, the anthem "Intray to the Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn", composed by Waclaw Cholewiński and recoded by Janowiec Brass Band, is heard.

During the church ceremony that took place on the 29th May 2005, His Eminence Archbishop Henryk Muszyński, the Metropolitan of Gniezno with the Bishop Bogdan Wojtuś and Bishop Wojciech Polak celebrated the mass and revealed the marvellous painting, the Blessed Virgin of Gościeszyn.