

The Angel Stalls - A Tumultuous History

In 1810 the Prussian authorities, searching for funds to pay war reparations to Napoleon, dissolved the monastic orders in Silesia. This meant the liquidation of monasteries and the takeover of their property by the state. While the vast Lubiąż estates could be divided and sold, or adapted to new functions, the monastic building itself—immense in scale—posed a far greater challenge. It was only in 1823 that a final decision was made to establish a psychiatric hospital there. The church remained in use as a place of worship for both patients and local villagers. Nevertheless, over the years many elements of its rich furnishings were sold or transferred to museums—though the angel stalls fortunately remained in place. Their condition gradually deteriorated, which was noted in 1927, when a general restoration of the entire church interior was recommended. A thorough conservation of the stalls was carried out in 1935–1936 by the sculptor Adolf Thiele from Lamowice near Wrocław. He installed new foundations, impregnated the wood, replenished missing carving fragments, and covered the structure with new polychromy. Interestingly, during the dismantling the individual components were marked with letters still visible today: “EL” for the north side (on the *left* when facing the high altar) and “ER” for the south side (on the *right*). This system was meant to facilitate reassembly. The letter E was an abbreviation for *Engelsgestühl* (angel stalls), A marked pieces from the abbatial loges (*Abtgestühl*), and B those from the confessionals (*Beichtstuhl*). Some markings were accompanied by additional numbering.

After the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Günther Grundmann, the Provincial Conservator of Lower Silesia, placed the Lubiąż monastic complex on a list of objects requiring special protection. In 1940 the psychiatric institution operating in the monastery was closed and its rooms were taken over for a transit camp for *Volksdeutsche*. At the same time the church was closed to the faithful, and in 1940 or 1941 a small munitions factory was set up in the monastery cellars, operated by prisoners and forced labourers.

In 1943 the factory was replaced by a branch of the Telefunken research and development institute, engaged in military radar research. Its presence increased the risk of Allied air raids, and Grundmann consequently ordered the evacuation of the Lubiąż artworks. Initially he planned to secure the angel stalls on-site by encasing them, but he changed his mind and, in August 1943, enlisted the help of Adolf Thiele—the same sculptor responsible for their previous conservation—to dismantle the structure. The entire operation was supervised by Dr. Ing. Kurt Sommer, who produced precise technical drawings, while Renata Hesse of the Lower Silesian Conservation Office prepared detailed photographic documentation. Some of the photographs bear numbering intended to facilitate reassembly. The decorative components of the stalls were dismantled and placed in crates, which were then transported to Lubomierz—to the former Benedictine convent church and to the nearby Church of the Holy Cross. The same hiding place also received 43 monastic paintings by Michael

Willmann, a medieval sculpture of the Pietà, eight Baroque figures from the bishops' tomb, and the decoration of the abbatial loges and confessionals.

At the turn of 1944 and 1945 Grundmann decided to move the Lubiąż artworks to Szklarska Poręba Średnia, likely needing space for objects evacuated from Polish territory. They were stored in at least two caches whose exact locations remain unknown. In May 1945 their contents were seized by the Soviet Army. Soon after, Witold Kiezkowski, a representative of the Polish Ministry of Culture and Art coordinating the restitution of cultural property in Lower Silesia, began efforts to secure the objects for the Polish side, which succeeded in October 1945. Among the recovered materials were 34 crates containing the sculptural decoration of the stalls, the abbatial loges, and the confessionals (the ensemble was no longer complete—the caches in Szklarska Poręba were likely plundered during wartime). The crates handed over by the Soviets were secured in the Polish museum depot at the Paulinum Palace in Jelenia Góra, from where they were transported to the Royal Castle on Wawel Hill in Kraków, and in 1946 to the National Museum in Warsaw. This still was not the end of their journey: in 1947 some of the decoration (92 pieces) was transferred to the palace in Rogalin, from where they finally reached the Silesian (now National) Museum in Wrocław in 1970. Other fragments, by decision of the General Conservator of Monuments, were sent in 1950 to the war-damaged Church of St. Martin the Bishop in Stężyca near Dęblin. Local craftsmen used them to create new furnishings for the church—its main altar, side altars, pulpit, and sedilia.

Let us return briefly to the monastic church in Lubiąż itself. After the Red Army occupied the monastery on 25 January 1945, a transit camp for prisoners of war and forced labourers returning to the USSR was installed inside, followed by a hospital for Soviet soldiers, which operated until 1947. As one might expect, housing such institutions in the complex led to its progressive devastation. A year later, in 1948, further elements of the church furnishings were secured and transferred to the newly established Silesian Museum in Wrocław, including components of the stalls' decoration which, for unknown reasons, had not been sent to Lubomierz and thus survived the destructive wartime and post-war events. A second batch (including preserved altar sculptures) was transferred much later, in 1962, by decision of the Provincial Conservator of Monuments. The wooden structural framework of the stalls themselves did not survive—most likely burned as firewood by Soviet troops.

Today the monastic church bears little resemblance to its former splendour, and its furnishings are lost or scattered across Poland. Since 1989 the monastery has been managed by the Lubiąż Foundation, which carries out rescue and restoration work on the entire complex.

Barbara Andruszkiewicz
Art historian, National Museum in Wrocław