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Descriptions for the Multisensory UNESCO project

***Dębno – St. Michael the Archangel Church***

The first references to the parish in Dębno appeared in the first half of the 14th century, although the present wooden temple was built in the second half of the 15th century. It is a late-Gothic wooden church, oriented with the chancel facing east. It was built of larch and fir wood, using a log construction (where the logs are stacked horizontally, with their ends interlocked with notches and such buildings were erected without the use of nails). A belfry tower (with an over-hanging substructure that houses bells) was added at the west end of the church at the beginning of the 17th century: it is described in the protocol of visitation from 1607-1608, and there is an inscription on the lintel that seems to bear the date ‘1601’. The inscription also used to contain the name of the tower's builder but, unfortunately, this part is illegible today. At that time, the church was under royal patronage.

On the outside, the church is covered with wooden panels. The church consists of a nave and a chancel, which is narrower than the nave but is the same height (they are both covered by one roof). On the roof, where the nave turns into the chancel, there is a small turret: the so-called ridge turret. The western portal and the entrance to the sacristy are crowned with a pointed arch, and the southern portal with an inflexed arch. The southern entrance to the church leads through a porch built in the 19th century. Around the church, there are roofed arcades, called *soboty* (“Saturdays”), erected at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. In 2003, the church was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

*Fun fact – the old days of Dębno*

Dębno was probably one of the settlements founded in the 13th century by the Cistercians who settled in Ludźmierz in 1234 (however, they quickly left it and moved to Szczyrzyc). The Cistercians possibly also founded the original parish in Dębno. The first mention of the church and the parish priest, however, comes from 1335, when the brothers Piotr, Marcin and Jerzy Lesicki granted their hereditary estate in Dębno to Urban of Grywałd. In 1400, Pope Boniface IX ordered the appointment of Paul, the canon of St. Margaret’s Monastery in Libichowa, as parish priest in Dębno. The Monastery in Libichowa (now Trzciana) belonged to the Canons Regular of Penance, who were called "Marks" (after their mother church in Kraków dedicated to St. Mark). However, according to Jan Długosz, around 1480, the parish in Dębno was associated with the abbey in Szczyrzyc, but the link disappeared over time. Interestingly, according to local legend, the present church (from the end of the 15th century) was built not by monks, but by... robbers who had a vision of St. Michael, the patron saint of the temple, on an oak tree.

*Fun fact: Jánosík’s wedding*

Folk tales about the robber Jánosík, written down by Jan Kasprowicz, were published in the 18th volume of his works, entitled “Mój świat” ("My World", 1930). It also contains the information that Jánosík built the church in Dębno. Meanwhile, it is this church where the TV show character Jánosík (played by Marek Perepeczko) married his beloved Maryna in a famous Polish TV series from 1973 called Jánosík, which was directed by Jerzy Passendorfer. The outdoor shots, however, showed another sacred building as the place of the robber's wedding, namely the St. John the Baptist Chapel in Chochołowska Valley. Contrary to popular belief, the chapel was not built for the TV series, but was erected in the 1950s.

**Murals**

The church’s walls, the matroneum and the ceiling are decorated with late-Gothic paintings dating back to the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries. They are patterned decorations, created using templates. Rhythmically repeated decorative motifs form geometric and floral ornaments with a total of 77 motifs in 12 layouts, using over 30 colours. They are interspersed with little hunting scenes and the silhouettes of deer. According to medieval bestiaries, or books that described various animals, the deer is an enemy of the serpent. It was believed that the deer pulls the serpent out of its hideout and eats it, and then drinks water, thereby rejuvenating itself, with this thread associated with Jesus luring the serpent-Satan out of a hiding place. The biblical verse from the Song of Songs (Song 2:9): "My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag" was also understood as relating to Jesus the Bridegroom. The deer was also a symbol of *Sol Invictus* (Unconquered Sun, an ancient deity associated with Jesus by Christians), because its antlers were related to the symbolism of light and solar rays. The deer seeking a hidden spring was compared to a soul that seeks God; hence the deer is also associated with the symbolism of baptism. In addition, it was said that deer, when travelling in groups, put their snouts on one another and support each other in this way, which was seen as a symbol of the joint action of Church members.

In addition, the paintings in the church in Dębno include heraldic depictions of the White Eagle (above the crucifix on the rood beam) and St. George fighting against a dragon (in the chancel). According to legend, St. George was a knight who killed a dragon. Portrayals of George are sometimes confused with the image of Michael the Archangel fighting the devil, also often portrayed in the form of a dragon. Although the church in Dębno is dedicated to St. Michael, the painting depicts St. George: first of all, the main character does not have angel wings and, second of all, he is sitting on a horse, while Michael was always shown fighting “on foot”.

Patterns similar or identical to those in the church in Dębno can be found among the decorations of the churches in Łopuszna and Harklowa. The patterned ornaments were possibly the work of travelling artists as similar decorations were used in churches in Silesia or Upper Hungary (present-day Slovakia).

**Main altar:**

The altarpiece of the main altar in the church in Dębno has the form of a late-Gothic triptych. Painted with tempera paints on linden boards, using gold and silver foil, it was built at the beginning of the 16th century, or at least the majority of it was. The central part (172 x 140 cm) and the obverse (inner parts) of the wings (172 x 71 cm) date back to around 1505-1510 and are attributed to a painter called the Master of the Holy Kinship. The finial and the reverse (outer parts) of the wings are younger, being created around 1530-1540, while the predella may come from the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries.

***What is a triptych?***

A triptych is a type of altarpiece consisting of a middle panel and two side panels that can be folded, a finial, and a platform called a predella. These types of altarpieces were very popular in the late Middle Ages, especially in the 15th and early 16th centuries. The movable wings decorated on both sides allowed the contents presented in the altar to be changed: the open triptych was more representative and we call it a “Sunday” or “Holiday” opening, while the closed altar was used on weekdays and during Lent or Advent. Hence, a Holiday opening is usually more richly decorated, often with a golden background, while everyday openings are more modest and more sparsely decorated.

***Open triptych***

The middle panel of the Dębno triptych shows the so-called *sacra conversazione*, in other words “holy conversation”. However, a better translation would be “holy community”, since this type of depiction is associated with a belief in the communion of saints and, in this context, the term *conversatione* can be found in texts from the 13th and 14th centuries. *Sacra conversazione* is a depiction of the Virgin and Child amidst a group of saints, often from different eras, forming a community of saints in heaven. This iconographic type developed in Italian art in the early 14th century and became popular in the following century. In the case of the Dębno altarpiece, Madonna is accompanied by St. Michael the Archangel (patron saint of the church) and St. Catherine of Alexandria. Both these characters have a sword as their attribute: Catherine was martyred (beheaded with a sword), while Michael the Archangel was depicted with a raised sword, striking a blow to the devil, whom he was said to have overcome as the commander of the Heavenly Host. In addition, Michael’s role is to weigh the good and evil deeds of every soul on Judgement Day; therefore, he has a pair of scales as his second attribute. On one scale, we can see a small man representing a just soul. His merits cannot be outweighed even by the millstone lying on the other scale, additionally weighed down by little devils clinging to the pair of scales. The raised sword and the armour, as well as the pair of scales, are enough to identify the young man as St. Michael. The artist did not paint his wings in this case, since it might have considerably increased the density of the painting’s composition.

The inner parts of the triptych wings also depict saints: in the upper part, we can see the two St. Johns, and in the lower part: two bishops, Stanislaus and Nicholas. In accordance with tradition, John the Evangelist was portrayed as a young man with no facial hair; with a chalice in his hand as, according to legend, he drank a cup of deadly poison, but remained alive. John the Baptist, on the other hand, has a beard and moustache, wearing animal’s skin with an outer toga-like garment of cloth, which is a reference to his life as a hermit. He is pointing to a lamb he is holding on a book: it is a reference to the words "Behold the Lamb of God" that John the Baptist used to define Jesus. Saint Nicholas’ attributes are three golden balls which, according to legend, symbolise the dowry of three pieces of gold that Bishop Nicholas gave to three poor girls, coming surreptitiously to them three nights in a row and tossing them a bag of gold each night. Meanwhile, at St. Stanislaus’ feet, there is a man rising from the grave: it is Piotrawin (Piotrowin) who, according to legend, was resurrected from the dead by the Bishop of Kraków.

***Master of the Holy Kinship***

An anonymous painter, referred to as the Master of the Holy Kinship, ran one of the most active workshops in the Kraków region in the first quarter of the 16th century. Modern researchers associate over 20 preserved works with him. The painter would depict figures with serious facial expressions, often with drooping mouth corners; the faces he painted had expressive and long noses, straight or slightly aquiline. The Master would frequently paint his characters wearing fancy headgear, with his works showing men’s hats or women’s mob caps in interesting shapes. When we look closer, there is another characteristic element with eyebrows showing a "herringbone" pattern; according to Jerzy Gadomski, the Master also specialised in an effective technique of painting glossy hair and coiffed beards. Shimmering golden curls are particularly eye-catching in the young long-haired men (often with a fringe) painted by the Master of the Holy Kinship. Archangel Michael from the triptych in the Dębno church is an example of such a figure.

The expressiveness of the works by the Master of the Holy Kinship is hidden both in the expressive faces of the characters he painted and in their robes. The sharp, dynamic, and dispersed folds look almost like bent metal sheets: hard forms seem to be independent of the body shapes they cover. This is a late-Gothic style rooted in 15th-century Early-Netherlandish art, which was popularized in the Kraków circle through the work of Veit Stoss. The Master of the Holy Kinship almost certainly followed the model of St. Mary's Altar in Krakow: the saints depicted in the Dębno triptych are clothed in robes whose folds have shapes very similar to those in the work by Veit Stoss. For example, the cloak of Saint Stanislaus from Dębno is arranged in the so-called “spoon-like” folds (stiff, rounded, large tails surrounding the figure), while the cloak of St. John the Baptist from Dębno is wrapped around its own axis, creating the so-called “rotational” fold.

*Fun fact: Holy Kinship on e-commerce service.*

In 2007, Katarzyna Bury, at the time an art history student at the Jagiellonian University, found a previously unknown painting of the Master of the Holy Kinship on Allegro.pl (Polish online auction service). Someone placed a board, with the remains of a Gothic painting, for auction online. It turned out that there were five similar panels and they were elements of a painting by the Master of the Holy Kinship, depicting the family of the Virgin Mary. The panels come from an unknown church near Pilica, where they served as drawer bottoms in a sacristy wardrobe. Currently, they are part of a private collection and their owner decided not to sell them on the Internet.

*Fun fact: miraculously preserved paintings of the Master of the Holy Kinship*

Several other paintings of *sacra conversazione* from the Master of the Holy Kinship’s workshop miraculously survived the fires of the churches they were in. Two paintings from a wooden church in Łękawica (Madonna with Saints Andrew and Peter, and Madonna with Saints Nicholas and Stanislaus) are now deposited in the City Museum in Żywiec; the church itself was completely burnt down in 1992 when a fire probably started because of incense. Another painting, with Madonna and Saints Martin and Urban, was hung in the former wooden church in Pisarzowice. There, unreported and non-supervised renovation works carried out in the temple in 1965 started a fire as well, but the parishioners were able to take the painting of the Master of the Holy Kinship out of the burning church. Last but not least, another painting by this author, depicting Madonna and the two Saint Johns, came from a wooden church in Komorowice. The temple was transferred to Wola Justowska in Krakow and burned there twice: in 1978 as a result of an electrical fault, and then again in 2002, after it had been reconstructed. This time, the painting survived, because it stayed in Komorowice when the old church was moved to Krakow.

***Finial, predella and the reverse sides of wings***

The Crucifixion on the altar’s finial in Dębno and the Passion cycle shown on the reverse sides of the wings were made later, probably in the 1530s. The Passion cycle consists of depictions of Jesus in Gethsemane, *Ecce Homo*, Flagellation, and the Fall under the Cross. The paintings are rather provincial, and the depicted figures of the executioners are dressed in Renaissance outfits.

The predella at the bottom of the Dębno altarpiece may have been built around 1700. It mimics the form of a late-Gothic element of the altar, but has a space for a tabernacle, which was not included in the late medieval structure. The predella is decorated with painted columns and arches, located above half-figures of two saintly bishops: Nicholas (described as ST NI, or Nicolaus) and Adalbert (described as ST AD, or Adalbertus). Contrary to what some publications say, the predella does not include a depiction of St. Stanislaus.

**Copy of the so-called "Saints of Dębno"**

On the northern wall of the church in Dębno, there is a small rectangular plaque with an image of two saints; it is a copy of the so-called “Dębno board”, with the original currently in the Archdiocesan Museum in Kraków. In the autumn of 1949, when the roofed arcades of the church were being repaired, a board with the painted figures of two saints was found. The small board, only 68.5 x 23.5 cm, was removed from the arcades and placed on one of the side altars. A few days later, the church was visited by art historians, Tadeusz Dobrowolski and Józef Dutkiewicz, who immediately noticed the previously unknown painting. They thought it was a remnant of a late Roman painting from the late 13th century; today, it is believed that "Saints of Dębno" dates back even earlier, to the 1270s or 1280s.

The two holy women depicted here are dressed in tunics and overclothes and are holding palms in their hands, symbolising martyrdom. The remaining inscriptions over the heads of the saints say that they are St. Catherine and St. Agnes. This is almost certainly part of a larger composition (maybe an altarpiece) depicting saints surrounding the enthroned Virgin and Child.

The Dębno panel is usually referred to as a late Romanesque relic as the painting does contain features that we usually associate with the Romanesque style: the figures are shown in a simplified way, the forms are flat and geometrised and have a distinctive contour. At the same time, however, the angular folds of the characters' clothing may be associated with the style of German painting of the 3rd quarter of the 13th century, characterized by geometrised drapery and called *Zackenstil* (from German, "Zig-zag Style"). One of the saints from the Dębno panel is making a courtly gesture of supporting the overcoat belt, characteristic of the depictions of beautiful women in Gothic cathedrals (including statues of the Wise Virgins from the Cathedral of Magdeburg from around 1250). The Saints of Dębno are therefore not fully associated with the traditions of the earlier Romanesque art, but also include references to the contemporary 13th-century Gothic art.

It is hard to say where the Dębno painting was created, with it usually being assumed that it came from Krakow, although some researchers associate it with Spisz. Interestingly, the oldest preserved Lesser Poland relics of panel painting, not counting the panel from Dębno, date from the beginning of the 15th century, although there are mentions of paintings from the 14th century. The guild of painters in Krakow was founded before 1404, but paintings had definitely been created there earlier; we can actually assume that artists had been active in Krakow in the 13th century. It was at that time when Lesser Poland (the term is here understood as a historical region, which mostly coincides with the area of former Western Galicia, much larger than the present voivodeship) started to play a dominant role in shaping Polish culture. During the period of fragmentation of Poland (high Middle Ages), Kraków gained its status as the most important centre for the lands ruled by the Piast princes.

**Rood beam**

A rood beam was a structural reinforcement of the so-called chancel arch, which divided the nave from the chancel. In medieval churches, the latter, reserved for the clergy and the mass celebration, was separated from the area used by the congregation with a choir rail. The custom of putting a crucifix on the beam emerged from the ancient tradition of placing the Holy Cross altar in the middle of the church.

The crucifix from the rood beam of the Dębno church dates back to the late 14th century, which means it was created much earlier than the current temple. It might be a preserved interior element of the previous church in Dębno, since the local parish had already existed in the 1st half of the 14th century. The crucified Jesus was depicted dead: his head lowered and eyes closed, and there is a visible bleeding wound in his side, which the perpetrators inflicted upon the Saviour after his death. The cross on which Christ hangs does not look like a simple form made of beams, but is rather shaped like a tree: the arms spread to the sides at a slight angle, like branches, and the entire cross is green and covered with bud-like extensions. The cross has the form of the so-called "Tree of Life" (Latin: *Arbor Vitae*). Medieval authors juxtaposed the Tree of the Cross with the Paradise Tree: the forbidden Paradise Tree brought sin and death, while the Tree of the Cross gave humanity life and redemption. The concept of the cross as a tree of life became particularly popular after the 13th century, which was largely influenced by the texts of St. Bonaventure, who compared the Cross of Christ to a blossoming tree. The next century saw an increase in popularity of the so-called mystic crucifixes which emphasized the suffering aspect of the crucified Christ: his body was depicted as emaciated and covered with blood clots, while the arms of the Y-shaped cross reinforced the impression of the tormented body hanging on the cross.

The ends of the arms of the Dębno cross have four medallions: three of them contain preserved painted figures of Apocalyptic beings, identified with the symbols of the Four Evangelists. They were also interpreted as a personification of the four corners of the world or, more generally, of all the creations that take part in the Act of Redemption. The Cross was understood not only as an instrument of torture, but mainly as the Throne of Glory of Jesus, shown as the ruler of the universe. Medieval theologians also interpreted the Apocalyptic beings as personifications of various aspects of the Person of Christ: power (lion), sacrifice (ox), or victory and freedom (eagle). The Apocalyptic beings surrounding Christ can also traditionally refer to biblical creatures that can be found in the descriptions of God's revelation (animals of the Apocalypse, and beings from the Book of Ezekiel).

Currently, the rood beam contains the entire Crucifixion group: on the sides of the medieval crucifix, there are figures of the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist painted on contoured boards. They were, however, added later, maybe in the 17th century.

**Tabernacle**

The church in Dębno houses a group of unique late-Gothic pieces of furniture, including a pulpit, font cover, bench, and tabernacle. It is not a tabernacle from the main altar, but rather a wooden cabinet intended to be secured to the adjacent wall. In the Middle Ages, the Host was initially kept in the sacristy or in "cabinets" hidden in the chancel wall; over time, it became a custom to build decorative structures, called sacraria. However, they were not elements of the altarpiece. The change took place following the decisions of the Council of Trent (1545-1563); according to the post-conciliar instructions, the Blessed Sacrament was meant to be kept in a tabernacle secured in the main altar. Reforms introduced by the Council of Trent, which played a significant role in changing the equipment of churches, were related to the Counter-Reformation; the clergy decided to place greater emphasis on developing the cult of the Eucharist. As a result of those provisions, over time, most churches adapted their equipment according to the new instructions of the Church authorities, while removing the old elements. The pre-conciliar late-Gothic tabernacle, unrelated to the structure of the altarpiece, is therefore a truly unique item.

**Side altars**

The side altars come from the 17th century; the predella of the altar by the north wall, next to an atmospheric nativity scene, includes the date ‘1661’ (not 1651, as some publications say). The central part of the altar, on the other hand, shows Gothic figures of the Virgin and Child and Saints Catherine, Barbara, Cecilia, and Dorothea (2nd quarter of the 15th century). They are the remains of the so-called Four Virgins' Altar, i.e. an altarpiece whose middle part showed the image of the Virgin and Child surrounded by four smaller figures of Holy Virgins (early Christian martyrs). The other side altar contains a painting that depicts the Holy Pope; it might be St. Gregory the Great or St. Urban. Interestingly, in 1611, St. Urban was mentioned as the second patron saint of the church in Dębno, but later his cult in this temple slowly disappeared. The remains of the older side altar survived in the form of a shrine (the middle part of the triptych) containing a figure of St. Nicholas, dating from the 1st quarter of the 15th century. The sloping side walls of the shrine show painted figures of Early Christian deacons, depicted with instruments of their passion: St. Lawrence with a gridiron (he is said to have been roasted on a gridiron) and St. Stephen with stones (he was stoned).

*Fun fact: bells*

The chancel houses old bells, commonly known as chimes. It is highly unlikely that they come from medieval times as some guidebooks suggest, let alone from the 5th century (they are more likely to date from around the 19th century)! Meanwhile, such information about the church in Dębno can be found in many publications (especially online). The mistake may have started with a typo: someone once may have "lost" the Roman numeral ‘X’ when copying the date from a text which incorrectly suggested that the bells had come from the 15th (XV) century.

*Fun fact: saved by… being forgotten?*

The late-medieval elements of decoration and equipment from the church in Dębno have survived there for centuries. It is possible that they have avoided being replaced by ‘the updated models’ thanks to the fact that the church in Dębno gradually lost its significance in modern times. In the 16th century, parish priests from Dębno resided in other villages (in Harklowa and Maniowy) and, in 1630, Dębno lost its status as a parish and was incorporated into the parish in Maniowy. In the 18th century, masses were celebrated here only every third Sunday. This gem of Podhale monuments was not "discovered" by the researchers until the mid-19th century.