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# THE ENGLISH VOYAGE OF MICHAŁ JERZY WANDALIN MNISZECH AND PLAN TO FOUND THE POLISH MUSEUM

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When Michał Jerzy Wandalin Mniszech (1742–1806) was visiting England in 1766, he was twenty-four.<sup>1</sup> However, he had already been a well experienced traveller, including his youthful trip together with his father Jan Karol Mniszech (1716–1759) to Istanbul, a longer study stay in Switzerland, and trips to German countries, the Netherlands and France, while heading for subsequent future voyages across Europe, particularly Italy, with which his meticulous education was to have been completed.<sup>2</sup> Mniszech made ample reports of many foreign expeditions, today dispersed throughout Polish and European libraries.<sup>3</sup> They are not so much voyage diaries as rather systematic reports following a thematic key or tourist guides which he called with a general term *Observations*. Were they supposed to serve merely private purposes, namely educational and mnemonic, or were they meant to reach a wider public? This is not known for sure. What can, however, be said about them is that they were written by a man of comprehensive insatiable curiosity fuelled and directed by the tutor of the young magnate, Swiss Calvinist clergyman and a versatile scientist Elie Bertrand (1713–1797).<sup>4</sup> Young Mniszech was interested in political, social, scientific, and cultural matters, and he would report on them all in his writings. An account of the above-mentioned trip to England titled *Observations contenues dans ce volume faite en 1766, Angleterre* [Observations Contained in This Volume Were Made in England in 1766] has also been preserved.<sup>5</sup>

The English stay is crucial for our considerations. It was that very trip that undoubtedly gave the first impulse, and maybe even the most decisive, to that initiative of Mniszech's which is of greatest interest to us: to the project of founding the Polish Museum declared almost a decade after his return from England: in 1775.

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Having arrived in England in late August 1766, Mniszech left in mid-November; he spent most of those not fully three months in London, although he went on two fortnight trips to the countryside. The patronage, thus the most important next to the financial background condition for effective travels across Europe in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was provided to him by a relative to his family by marriage Count Hanz Moritz von Brühl (1736–1809), a Saxon minister in London.<sup>6</sup> Thus the door to private individuals, institutions and associations, workshops and manufactories were in general, albeit most often against a fee, open to the young Pole.

Mniszech's activity in London and the English countryside has been in detail described by Zofia Libiszowska and Marek Bratuń, and I recommend their studies to an interested Reader.<sup>7</sup> Here let me mention only that the youth was interested in architecture monuments and public buildings, public utility devices and resident security issues, magnates' mansions as much as hospitals and orphanages,

manufactories and workshops, technological novelties and scientific inventions, scientific and literary societies, finally: cabinets and collections. Obviously, what matters most to us is Mniszech's interest in the British Museums, no doubt extremely intense (although he spent in it not *entire* days, as Zofia Libiszewska writes, but more likely many hours). He dedicated 30 of the 300 pages of his English *Observations* to the institution. However, we should not forget that to him the British Museum is but a link in the whole network of scientific, cultural, and artistic institutions, mutually interrelated and supporting each other, constituting at the same time the reason for and testimony to the civilizational primacy of the British in the world.

What was the British Museum in 1766? First of all, it was a young institution, merely boasting a several-years' experience; founded in 1753, it started operations, meaning it opened to the public, only six years later, in 1759.<sup>8</sup> It was then located in its first building: the no longer existing Montague House in Great Russel Street in Bloomsbury. The basis of the Museum collection was created by the famous collection of the doctor, naturalist, and the versatile scientist Hans Sloane (1660–1753); widely available in his house in Bloomsbury, and later Chelsea, for several decades having constituted a scientific and tourist attraction of London, following the death of its owner, complying with his wish, it was purchased for the nation upon the decision of the British Parliament. It represented the collection type popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which could be defined as 'encyclopaedic', since it contained specimens of different origin and kind.<sup>9</sup> In 1753, it boasted over 43.000 nature items (not counting the plants collected in the herbarium amounting to over 300 volumes), 24.000 coins and medals, and over 5.000 exhibits of other type: antiquities, ethnographic items, scientific instruments. Its integral part was the library containing almost 90.000 books and manuscripts. At the British Museum the collections were combined with two other book collections acquired around that time: of Robert Bruce Cotton and Robert and Edward Harley. It was only as of the 1770s, beginning with the purchase of the collection of William Hamilton (which Mniszech saw in Naples in 1767), that the British Museum was slowly beginning to gain its profile with which we associate it today, namely the museum of antiquities. Interestingly, one more thing is important: in a way, contrary to its name, the Museum initially had very few exhibits of 'British' provenance; it was only in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that together with the extension of the section of native antiquities, this lack was compensated for.

The Museum was founded as a public institution, and, as phrased in the founding document: *the British Museum Act of 1753*, it was *not merely dedicated to instructing and entertaining scientists and amateurs, but also to benefit the general public*. However, in this document and the following ones, and actually in all the early texts addressing the Museum, it was emphasized that the project had mainly a scientific as well as a teaching profile and potential; moreover, it was targeted at representatives of the intellectual elite: *all studious and curious persons*. As seen against the standards of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Museum was indeed widely open, although the access to it was by no means easy. It was regulated, similarly as the course of the visit by



1. Heinrich Friedrich Füger and Wincenty Lesseur, *Portrait of Michał Jerzy, Count Wandalin Mniszech*, miniature, watercolour and gouache on ivory, 14.7 x 10.9 cm, 1791, National Museum in Warsaw, Min. 886 MNW; public domain

detailed rules worked out by the Museum board, and released as a publication in 1759 called the *Statutes and Rules Relating to the Inspection and Use of the British Museum*.<sup>10</sup> In all likelihood Michał Jerzy Mniszech had to abide by them.

The Museum was open from Monday to Friday, between nine in the morning three in the afternoon. The entrance was free, yet it required a ticket one needed to apply for beforehand in writing, giving one's *surname, status, and domicile*, as well as the desired date and hour of the visit. The visits were conducted in small groups, with a guide (one of the librarians), and they did not last more than two to three hours (many visitors, including Mniszech, complained about too fast a pace and superficiality of that guided tour). A second visit to the Museum was possible, however, it required going again through the entire application procedure.

Despite some critical remarks Mniszech formulated, he was extremely impressed by it. After all, a regular visitor to cabinets of art and natural history in many parts of Europe, he did not hesitate to evaluate it as *sans doute la plus considérable qu'il y ait dans le monde (undoubtedly the most significant in the world)*.<sup>11</sup> Having briefly presented in his *Observations* the story of establishing the Museum, principles of its organization and making accessible to the general public, criticizing the lack of systematic collection ordering and of a printed catalogue in the proper meaning of the term, *which would be extremely useful*, Mniszech described one by one subsequent rooms of Montague House and the exhibits collected there, paying particular attention to nature collections. It is worthwhile quoting a fragment of one of such descriptions to appreciate the poetics they entail:



2. Michael Angelo Rooker, *Entrance to the Montagu House from Great Russell Street*, watercolour and drawing in pencil and ink, 15.5 x 20.3 cm, 1778, British Museum, 1868,0328.334; Asset number 266715001, © The Trustees of the British Museum, shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence

*Sine's collection of natural curiosities begins in Room Nine and covers four rooms. It is made up of 70 sections placed in the same number of glazed cabinets. In the centre of each room and by the windows there are also glass-covered tables displaying gems, cut and carved stones, stone imprints from the cabinet of the King of France, a collection of insects of all species, then sea shells, and all the other curiosities. In sections one and two the following have been gathered: flints, agates, and sardonyses; among the agates there are numerous dendrites, called Mocoës here. In [department] three and four, there are jaspers, among which we can find heliotropes or bloody jaspers which the English call Blood-Stone.<sup>12</sup> There is no doubt that in his descriptions Mniszek resorted to his own observations, however, it is also certain, this testified to by the order and language of the description that his report owed a lot to Edmund Powlett and the latter's *General Contents of the British Museum*, serving as the most important 'guide' to the collection at the time, whose second edition was released in 1762.<sup>13</sup>*

Michał Jerzy's account of the British Museum is interrupted quite unexpectedly upon the description of the last room: it is not concluded with any summary or general reflection in which the author would point to, e.g., benefits resulting from the institution's existence, or its social

or scientific impact. It is, nonetheless, known that he must have reflected upon the British Museum along these lines, since it certainly motivated the project of establishing the Polish Museum Mniszech announced in 1775.

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Michał Jerzy's extensive travels were serving educational purposes, namely simply preparation for the service to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the treatise *La chaîne humaine, ou l'encyclopédie des sciences humaines* (*Human Chain or Encyclopaedia of Human Sciences*) elaborated under the guidance of Elie Bertrand in 1762, Mniszech wrote about the essence of travelling, sensitizing or in a way admonishing himself: *During travelling, the object of attention should be observation focused on crafts and manufactories which could be introduced and perfected in homeland. Equally on estates, agriculture and everything which can serve to improve its various branches. These should actually be the main goals of all the travels.*<sup>14</sup> And indeed, the home perspective is permanently present in Mniszech's accounts and correspondence... and it inevitably leads to depressing conclusions. In a letter to Feliks Łoyko (1717–1779), a family friend and his guardian, written just before leaving London, and summing up all his English experience, Mniszech wrote



straightforwardly: *All that we see here (...) incites our admiration. Returning to our country in our thoughts fills with sadness. I feel humiliated every day.*<sup>15</sup> The awareness that the Commonwealth was backward and in crisis, and the urgency to improve it, fuelled his actions. Upon his return to Poland, Mniszech was tightly connected with the court as of 1772; he became one of the main personalities of the reformers' fraction affiliated to King Stanislaus Augustus by exerting numerous prominent state functions: a member of the Society for Elementary Books and the Commission of National Education (1777–1783), Lithuanian Grand Secretary (from 1778), Court Marshal of Lithuania (1781–1783), Grand Marshal of the Crown (1783–1793). The plan to found the Polish Museum was an element of an ambitious programme of revival and civilizational progress of the decaying state.

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Featuring merely the author's initials (M.M.), the *Memorial Thoughts on Founding the Musaeum Polonicum* was published in 1775 in the second part of the 11<sup>th</sup> volume of the 'Zabawy Przyjemne y Pożyteczne z różnych autorów zebrane', a periodical that was an organ of the literary circle affiliated to the royal court.<sup>16</sup> The Memorial has to be essentially seen in the context of Mniszech's efforts to implement two other projects: education reform in compliance with the ideals of the Commission of National Education and plans for establishing *assemblies of learned citizens*, namely an academy of sciences. In brief, the *Musaeum Polonicum* was to constitute an element of a coherent system of science and education which Mniszech, following the ideas of Enlightenment ideologies, considered to be the precondition and basis for the state's and nation's prosperity and success. It is from *reasoned education*, as can be read in the Memorial, that future benefits for the country and its citizens should come; such education was to *secure certain, decent, easy means, guaranteeing the posterity true good*. The Museum was to play a definite role in this system: it would be a prolongation of and complement to schooling,<sup>17</sup> since Mniszech believed that the efforts undertaken in schools *could possibly be more effective if they were accompanied by inspirations to copy, reliable models leading to a faster and infallible cognition of things. They could shorten the ways of gaining knowledge, making them easier, and therefore more seductive.*<sup>18</sup> It was museums that were to provide *inspirations to copy and models*; thus in Mniszech's intention it was first of all to be an educating institution.

How did Mniszech imagine such a model institution? It was to combine a library and cabinets. The Library, which he attributed the utmost importance to, was to collect studies and sources for nation's history (thus also playing the role of an archive), as well as professional studies dedicated to respective sciences. The cabinets were to amass respectively: the coin collection would focus on coins and domestic medals, the dactyliotheca, on gems and ancient and modern cameos, or strictly speaking their contemporary impressions *en masse*; copies of sculptures and print reproductions of art works; scientific instruments, wax anatomy preparations and machine models; gallery of portraits of *individuals illustrious for homeland, deserving tribute from the posterity*; finally nature collections composed of native specimens

representing *three reigns making up natural history*, thus the kingdom of minerals, plants, and animals. Mniszech did not formulate any detailed proposals how these collections were to be arranged, displayed, or made accessible.

Thus the overall structural scheme of the Polish Museum was close to the 'encyclopaedic' arrangement of the British Museum. Similarly as the British one, it was to be an institution established with public funding (*twenty thousand Polish zlotys (...) will most likely suffice for the first beginnings*), and to develop thanks to the generosity of private individuals (*With time citizens will join in such a useful work. So many examples from England will heat up our coldness*). Its main *raison d'être* was to be, similarly as in the case of the British Museum, usefulness (not e.g., splendour which throughout the whole modern era constituted an essential value of a collection). In brief, it was to be a public utility institution, implementing its goals by supporting and disseminating knowledge.

Nonetheless, Mniszech did not slavishly copy the British, or more broadly speaking, European solutions, adjusting them rather to local needs and potential. Firstly, the *Musaeum Polonicum*, strictly in compliance with its name, was to be definitely profiled locally, that means, it was to collect objects which directly referred to either native history or natural history (medals, portraits, harvest specimens), or were to serve the development of the native industry (*machine models*). This was an attitude resulting as much from 'patriotic' motivations as from a reliable assessment of the strongly limited potential of the country poor in *precious, rare and collected over a long time treasures as well as pleasant cuddly objects of liberated arts*. Secondly, it was a project-investment, meant to yield benefit in a long run. That is why it was to mainly serve the 'youth', the only addressee group which Mniszech identifies in his Memorial. In this focus more on future than present profits we can identify an attitude characteristic of many activists of the Polish Enlightenment, clear in almost all, so numerous, memorials and proposals submitted in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This applies to a peculiar fusion of complexes, pride, and hope: here are citizens of a civilizationally backward country who can enter an effective *rivalry* between themselves and representatives of other nations, and are capable of, as phrased by Zygmunt Vogel in his *Views of Painterly Trip Collected in Poland* (1805), *works which even if do not exceed creations of mastery of other nations, (...) can place them close to them*<sup>19</sup>; this is precisely a view that Mniszech had undoubtedly shared three decades before him.

The fate of Mniszech's museum was the same as that of the substantial majority of those memorials and proposals. Out of the three links that were in his intention meant to compose a reformed coherent system of science and education, after the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, finally only one was partially implemented, namely the reformed education under the auspices of the Commission of National Education. The Warsaw Society of Friends of Learning was established only in 1800. Much more time had to pass, namely until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before an independent public and national museum was founded. The museum actually established following completely different ideals than those proclaimed by Michał Jerzy Mniszech.

**Abstract:** It is the plan to found the Polish Museum declared in 1775 by Michał Jerzy Wandalin Mniszech (1748–1806) that is tackled in the paper. Argumentation is presented that the major impulse for the idea to establish a museum in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was felt by Mniszech following his visit to the British Museum in 1766. It is from the inspiration by that Museum that the overall structural scheme of the Polish Museum, adjusted to the Polish potential and conditions was conceived. Just like the latter, the Polish Museum was to be funded with public financing and opened to the general public, while its main *raison d'être*, similarly as that of the London museum,

was benefit understood as supporting and popularizing knowledge, since Mniszech's museum first of all was to be an educational institution targeted mainly at young people and calculated to yield future advantages. Next to the reformed general public system and the academy of sciences, it was to become an essential element of the coherent system of science and education which M.J. Mniszech considered a condition and basis of the wealth and success of the state and nation. The ambitious and unaccomplished plan to found the Polish Museum formed part of the committed programme of the revival and civilizational promotion of the state suffering at the time the process of degradation.

**Keywords:** Michał Jerzy Wandalin Mniszech, Musaeum Polonicum, Polish museology, early museum initiative, British Museum in London, collecting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> As for Mniszech's biography see A. Rosner, *Mniszech Michał Jerzy Wandalin*, in: *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary], Vol. 21, Wrocław i in. 1976, pp. 480-484. Sometimes in literature 1848 is given, possibly erroneously, as the year of Mniszech's birth; occasionally also his birth place given is different; either at Wiśniowiec, or more likely, at Dziewięczyż in Ruthenia.
- <sup>2</sup> W. Bratuń dedicated an ample study based an extensive source research to Mniszech's travels, „*Ten wykwinny, wykształcony Europejczyk*”. *Zagraniczne studia i podróże edukacyjne Michała Jerzego Wandalina Mniszcha w latach 1762-1768* [‘That Elegant Educated European’. Foreign Studies and Educational Trips of Michał Jerzy Wandalin Mniszech in 1762-1768], Opole 2002. On the stay in Switzerland, see *Idem, Relations polono-suisse au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Nouvelles approches*, Wrocław 2012, pp. 15-37.
- <sup>3</sup> Discussed by M. Bratuń, *ibid.*, pp. 22-27.
- <sup>4</sup> On Bertrand see M. Weidmann, *Un pasteur-naturaliste du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Elie Bertrand (1713-1797)*, ‘Revue historique vaudoise’ 1986, No. 94, pp. 63-108; T. Dubois, *La diffusion des connaissances utiles au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Élie Bertrand, la Société économique d’Yverdon, sa bibliothèque et son cabinet de curiosités*, ‘Histoire et civilisation du livre’ 2014, No. 10, pp. 375-408.
- <sup>5</sup> Stefanyk National Science Library, Lvov, MS 5636/II (below as: *Angleterre*); also: *Journaux des voyages par m. le comte Michel Mniszech concernant les observations faites au cours de ses voyages en Europe des années 1765, 1766, 1767 et 1768*, Historical Library, Versailles Palace, MS 4<sup>o</sup>, 61-61. In the present paper I resort to the Lvov manuscript.
- <sup>6</sup> Michał Jerzy had bonds with the Brühls through his paternal uncle Jerzy August Wandalin Mniszech (1715-1778) married to Maria Amalia née Brühl (1736-1772), daughter of Heinrich von Brühl (1700-1763), minister of Augustus III.
- <sup>7</sup> Z. Libiszowska, *Życie polskie w Londynie w XVIII wieku* [Polish Life in London in the 18<sup>th</sup> century], Warszawa 1972, pp. 7-57; M. Bratuń, „*Ten wykwinny...*”, pp. 166-179.
- <sup>8</sup> From among many publications on the British Museum history see M. Caygill, *The Story of the British Museum*, London 1996; D.M. Wilson, *The British Museum: A History*, London 2002; R.G.W. Anderson, *British Museum, London: Institutionalizing Enlightenment*, in: *The First Modern Museums of Art. The Birth of an Institution in 18<sup>th</sup>- and Early 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Europe*, C. Paul (ed.), Los Angeles 2012, pp. 47-71.
- <sup>9</sup> See A. MacGregor, *Sir Hans Sloane: Collector, Scientist, Antiquary, Founding Father of the British Museum*, London 1994.
- <sup>10</sup> *Statutes and Rules Relating to the Inspection and Use of the British Museum and for the Better Security, and Preservation of the same, by Order of the Trustees*, London 1759.
- <sup>11</sup> *Angleterre*, p. 97.
- <sup>12</sup> *Angleterre*, pp. 107-108.
- <sup>13</sup> E. Powlett, *The General Contents of the British Museum: with Remarks. Serving as a Directory in Viewing that Noble Cabinet*, London 1762; with reference to the stones in Sloane's collection see pp. 66-70. Mniszech may have also been familiar with the recently published description of the fossils from the Museum collection: G. Brander, *Fossilia Hantoniensia Collecta, et in Musaeo Britannico Deposita*, London 1766.
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted after: M. Bratuń, „*Ten wykwinny...*”, p. 152.
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 179.
- <sup>16</sup> Using the same wording, though anonymously, it may have appeared that very year as a jobbing print. Reprinted: *Myśli* [Thoughts], in: *Zabawy przyjemne i pożyteczne* (1770-1777). *Wybór* [‘Zabawy przyjemne i pożyteczne’ (1770-1777). Selection], J. Platt (Comp. and introduction), series I ‘Biblioteka Narodowa’ 1968, Vol. 195, pp. 66-75, and recently also in: *Muzeum w kulturze pamięci na ziemiach Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów. Antologia wczesnych tekstów* [Museum in Memory Culture in the Territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Anthology of Early Texts], Vol. I: 1766-1882, T.F. de Rosset, M.F. Woźniak, E. Bednarz Doiczmanowa (ed.), Toruń 2021, pp. 47-64 (in M. Mencfel's comments to that edition you will find a more extensive discussion of the motifs which in the present article have been treated either superficially or merely signalled).
- <sup>17</sup> It is worth adding that also the Resolutions of the Commission of National Education from 1783 provided for establishing at newly founded or reformed schools of *musaeum in which there are also instruments (...)* for example: *Physical, Geometrical & etc and Cabinet of natural history*, see zob. A. Tołysz, *Muzea szkolne w Królestwie Polskim – rozpoznanie problematyki* [School Museums in the Kingdom of Poland: Identification of Main Issues], ‘Muzealnictwo’ 2018, No. 59, pp. 39-47.

<sup>18</sup>When expressing his conviction that a collection of things and effigies provides *reliable models leading to a faster and infallible cognition of things*, Mniszech shows himself as a heir to the museological thought that had had over 200 years. Already in 1565, in a treatise that can be regarded its earliest manifestation, Samuel Quicchelberg (Quiccheberg) claimed that with museums it was *possible to quickly, easily, and reliably gain unique and new knowledge of things and admirable wisdom*. The background to such claim can be found in the conviction that things and images have persuasive power, based, in turn, on the belief that eyesight is particularly effective as a cognition tool. All that ensemble of convictions constituted an essential element in European intellectual culture, at least until the decline of the modern era. See M. Mencfel, *Najdoskonalsza wiedza i pełnia władzy. Kolekcjonerstwo i sztuka pamięci w epoce wczesnonowoczesnej* [The Most Perfect Knowledge and Entire Power], *Mnemonika i pamięć kulturowa epok dawnych*, [Mnemonics and Cultural Memory of the Old Eras], M. Prejs and A. Jakóbczyk-Gola (ed.), Neriton, Warszawa 2013, pp. 221-248.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted after: Krystyna Sroczyńska, *Zygmunt Vogel. Rysownik gabinetowy Stanisława Augusta* [Zygmunt Vogel. Cabinet Draughtsman of Stanislaus Augustus], Wrocław 1969, 123.

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