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The Coffin Portrait and Celebration of Death in Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Modern Period

The coffin portrait (in Polish: *portret trumienny*) developed in the Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 17th and 18th century, especially in its western provinces of Greater Poland (*Wielkopolska*) and Royal Prussia (*Prusy Królewskie*). These realistic images of the deceased persons were put on coffins during the funeral ceremonies. The tradition to decorate sarcophagi with such pictures was born and observed almost exclusively among the nobles (Pol. *szlachta*) and constituted a part of lifestyle and ideology of this social stratum in the modern period, known under the name *sarmatism*. The funerals of nobles in 17th and 18th century turned into shows of luxury which lasted for days. The body – dressed in festive clothes – was put in a bed, and shown to the mourners. Afterwards, funeral ceremonies took place, and those who could afford it spent exorbitant amounts of money on them, turning solemnities into almost triumphant events. The churches were decorated with *castris doloris*, designed and built especially for this occasion, and the funeral itself was adorned with symbolic acts played by hired actors. An important part of this decorum was provided by the portrait put on the narrow end of the coffin, overlooking the crowd gathered to mourn the deceased. Sometimes, a broader ensemble of metal plates was put on coffins, both on its ends and sides, which comprised the portrait itself, an inscription cartouche and several coats-of-arms proclaiming pedigree. The shape of the portrait was adopted to the cut of the coffin, being commonly hexagonal or octagonal. These depictions were mostly executed on metal (copper, tin or lead). The images were highly realistic, with the intent to create an impression that the deceased is taking part in his own funeral, which was helped by delivery of funeral speeches in which the dead symbolically bid farewell to the earthly life. To these ends the eyes of portrayed person were shown looking directly and intensively at the viewers.

After the funeral ceremonies, the portrait was often removed from the coffin and hung on the wall of the church that the deceased had been patronizing (although instances of portraits left on coffins and buried with them are also known). The images were sometimes put in decorative frames together with the coat-of-arms of the deceased and funeral inscriptions to form a specific epitaph.

The oldest preserved object in question was made for the king Stephen Báthory, who died in 1586. It was deposited on the tin sarcophagus and buried in the monarchs' crypt at the Wawel castle in Cracow. There are no other known coffin portraits from the 16th century. They didn't find acceptance among the kings either – none of them after Báthory had one accompany his sepulchre. The second link in the evolution of the coffin portrait is constituted by the image of Adam Sędziwój Czarnkowski (died 1627) from the church in Czarnków, also put on a tin sarcophagus. It has a rectangular form with the upper edge formed by an arch. The typical, polygonal form emerged shortly before mid-17th century (for example: the portrait of Jan Choiński, died 1646, from church in Golejewko).

The most recent existing funeral portrait is that of priest Marcin Porczyński, dating from 1809. The tradition disappeared in the 19th century with the extinction of *sarmatism*.