



Stanisław Mossakowski

King Sigismund Chapel

at Cracow
Cathedral
(1515–1533)



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The Sigismund Chapel

a mausoleum erected between 1515–1533 for the King of Poland Sigismund I the Jagiellon at Cracow Cathedral, is universally regarded as the perfect example of High Renaissance architecture north of the Alps. It was designed by Bartolomeo Berrecci who also oversaw its construction and execution of sculptural decoration by a team of Italian and local sculptors. Only a few years younger than Benedetto da Rovezzano (b. 1474), Berrecci presumably took part in the initial stage (1505–1506) of work on the mausoleum of St John Gualbert in Badia di Passignano, probably staying chiefly in the Carrara quarries. In all likelihood it was there that he met Michelangelo and became acquainted with the first project of the mausoleum of Julius II and with the master's sketches for its decoration (familiarity with the motifs and compositional schemes in the ornamental reliefs carved in the two stages of work on the tomb of Julius II is revealed in numerous parts of the Sigismund Chapel's decoration). Moreover, Berrecci must have known at least some of Sansovino's and Rovezzano's designs of reliefs for the Santa Casa in Loreto (1513–1515), while some of Berrecci's collaborators



may have come from the workshops of these two sculptors. Apart from their own artistic backgrounds which should also be traced back to Rome, mainly to Michelangelo's workshop and the circle of Raphael, the maestro Bartolomeo himself must have already known the art of the Eternal City by 1515. Particularly noteworthy in the chapel's decoration are several instances of compositional motifs unquestionably borrowed from the Roman works of Raphael and the artists from his circle. Numerous compositional forms and motifs employed in this structure reveal an amazing concurrence with contemporary achievements of Italian, especially Roman, architecture and art, and the wealth of its relief interior decoration is related to the oeuvre of such sculptors as Andrea Sansovino, Andrea Ferucci and Benedetto da Rovezzano. Very few structures, even in contemporary Italy, showed such an accumulation of forms and thematic motifs of antique provenance as the Cracow mausoleum did. Archaeological fidelity in imitating antique motifs and a departure from Vitruvius's classical principles have their counterparts in Italian works created concurrently with the Sigismund Chapel.

Stanisław Mossakowski



(b. 1937 in Sambor, in the present-day Ukraine) graduated from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow in 1958; former director of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw (now the chairman of the Institute's Research Council); member of a number of Polish as well as international scientific societies (Ateneo Veneto in Venice, Accademia Clementina in Bologna, Académie Européenne des Sciences, des Arts et des Lettres in Paris, among others). He specializes in the history of architecture and decorative sculpture, the role of antique tradition in art, Polish-Italian art relations as well as the relationship between art history and the history of ideas. He is the author of a number of books, as well as more than 130 articles and treatises. He has received numerous awards (e.g. the Gottfried von Herder Prize of the University of Vienna in 2003).