

= Rejtan (painting) =

Rejtan , or the Fall of Poland (Polish : Rejtan . Upadek Polski) is an oil painting by the Polish artist Jan Matejko , finished in 1866 , depicting the protest of Tadeusz Rejtan (lower right) against the First Partition of Poland during the Partition Sejm of 1773 . Both a depiction of a historical moment , and an allegory for the surrounding period of Polish history , the painting is one of Matejko 's most famous works , and an iconic picture of an emotional protest .

= = Historical context = =

Tadeusz Rejtan was a deputy in the Sejm (parliament) of the Polish @-@ Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1773 , infamously known as the Partition Sejm . The Sejm convened to review the demands of three Commonwealth 's neighbours (the Russian Empire , Prussia and Austria) in order to legalize their territorial demands , known as the First Partition of Poland . The Sejm operated under threat of foreign forces present in the Commonwealth , and with a significant number of deputies either bribed or threatened by foreign diplomats . The three powers officially justified their actions as a compensation for dealing with a troublesome neighbor and restoring order through military intervention in the civil war (the War of Bar Confederation) ; in fact all three were interested in territorial gains .

On 21 April that year , Rejtan , in a dramatic gesture at the Sejm , is said to have bared his chest and laid himself down in a doorway , blocking the way with his own body in a dramatic attempt to stop the other members from leaving the chamber where the debate was being held . Leaving of the chamber would have signified an end to the discussion , and the acceptance of the motion , meaning the acceptance of foreign territorial demands .

= = Scene description = =

The painting portrays this scene , although as usual with Matejko 's work , it sacrifices some historical reality for more dramatic presentation . It serves as an allegory for all three Partitions of Poland (1772 , 1793 , 1795) and portrays a number of major historical figures of this era . Rejtan is the most visible , occupying the entire right side of the painting , in the midst of his dramatic pose which has been compared to Liberty Leading the People . His position on this painting exemplifies the golden ratio .

To his left , in the center , are the " traitors " , many of them on the Russian payroll , and future members of the Targowica Confederation . Adam Poniński , marshal of the Sejm , pointing in red court dress , either demands that Rejtan leaves or points to the armed Russian guards outside the door ; he holds a simple wooden walking stick instead of a more elaborate marshall 's staff , which Rejtan stole a day earlier . Behind him are bishop Ignacy Massalski and Prince Antoni Stanisław Czetwyrński @-@ ?wiatopek . To his right , Hetman Franciszek Ksawery Branicki hides his face in his hands ; which likely was Matejko 's solution for a prosaic problem ? he probably did not have access to a likeness of Branicki . Szczesny Potocki , with the blue sash , looks to the ground , embarrassed . Behind the overturned chair , his father , Franciszek Salezy Potocki , also embarrassed , drops a quill pen and looks away . Between the two Potockis Jacek Małachowski is engaged in discussion with Samuel Korsak , while Karol Radziwiłł simply observes the situation , amused . On the ground , turned over , lies an armchair , with Branicki 's hat and a coin purse , from which the coins spill towards Poniński , alluding to the real reason he is intent on concluding the debate .

To the left of the elder Potocki , the seated primate of Poland , Michał Jerzy Poniatowski , is engaged in a conversation with the chancellor Michał Fryderyk Czartoryski , both ignoring the disruption . Behind them in the blue waistcoat , King Stanisław August Poniatowski , annoyed , stands up from the throne , wanting to leave , and looking at his pocket watch .

From the gallery , the scene is observed by one of the main architects of the partitions , Russian ambassador Nicholas Repnin . He is seated between two ladies , likely Izabela Lubomirska and

either Elżbieta Grabowska or Izabela Czartoryska . To his right , another important symbol is shown in the painting of Russian Tsarina Catherine of Russia . Finally , in the open doors , behind Rejtan , stands a Russian soldier (although in reality the Sejm was " guarded " not by Russian , but by Prussian troops) .

The only person clearly sympathetic to Rejtan is a young man in the middle of the room , holding in his hands a saber and a rogatywka , symbolizing the supporters of the anti-Russian Bar Confederation , and future insurgents from the Polish Uprisings in the Russian partition .

= = History , reception and significance = =

Matejko began work on this painting in August 1864 and finished it in November 1866 . It was one of many paintings portraying key historical moments in the history of Poland that he would create over his life . Matejko however did not simply illustrate the history , he intended his paintings to have powerful educational and emotional values .

The work caused a scandal in contemporary , still partitioned Poland ; it was discussed even before its unveiling . It offended a number of society figures , many tracing direct lineage to the major magnate families whose members are portrayed in the painting as traitors to the Polish cause . There were a number of critical reviews of the work in the contemporary press , Matejko received anonymous threats , and some aristocrats are said to have considered buying the painting only to destroy it . Some accused him of defeatism , pessimism , exploiting public sentiment over a historical scandal for contemporary publicity ; it was thus criticized by notable artists such as Józef Ignacy Kraszewski and Cyprian Norwid . In Paris , a French Polish aristocrat , Count Alexandre Joseph Colonna Walewski , campaigned against including it in an exhibition . The painting , however , quickly garnered supporters , who in turn reproduced modified copies of it , replacing historical figures with major contemporary critics . Responding to the public outcry , Matejko painted a response ? a painting titled Judgement on Matejko (Wyrok na Matejkę , 1867) , in which he portrayed his execution by some of his most vocal critics .

Serious art critics had less emotional , but also mixed , opinions of the work . It was received less favourably by Józef Szulski and Stanisław Tarnowski , but praised by painters Henryk Siemiradzki and Artur Grottger . Comments of Wojciech Korneli Stattler are interpreted by different authors as either praise , or critique . In Paris , displayed at Exposition Universelle , 1867 the painting received a gold medal . While in Poland the painting 's context and message was clearly understood , the work , displayed in Paris , proved to be too obscure for the audience there , with few understanding the complex , historical context ; some French critics interpreted it as a painting of a gambling hall . It is said , however , to have been well understood by the Russian visitors to the French gallery , some of whom are said to have been interested in acquiring the painting , which was commended by Poles as " they bought the real ones , might as well buy the painted ones , too " . Eventually , however , the painting was acquired by Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria for 50 000 francs . It was shown at a gallery in Vienna , and eventually ended up at the Hofmuseum . Thanks to the efforts of minister Juliusz Twardowski it was purchased by the government of the Second Polish Republic in 1920 . As part of the Wawel Royal Castle National Art Collection it has been on a public display in the Royal Castle in Warsaw since 1931 , with the exception of the period of World War II , when it was briefly looted by the Nazis .

The painting is usually interpreted as criticism of the Russian interference in Polish political affairs , and the collaboration of treasonous Polish aristocrats . By the end of World War I it was already seen as a priceless artifact of Polish culture . The painting was positively interpreted in communist Poland as a symbol of critique of the Polish nobility , blamed for their selfishness leading to the partitions . More recently , the painting has been interpreted as the symbol of solitary protest , and a moral justification of dissent , even when such a protest is known to be futile , ignored by most . It has also been described as an iconic picture of an emotional protest and a symbol of desperate , patriotic protest . In the 1980s the painting inspired a protest song by Jacek Kaczmarski . Over time , the painting has become famous in Poland ; Walter M. Cummins notes that the scene from this work was " made familiar to every Polish child by [this] frequently reproduced painting " .

