

The culture of gifts: the role and value of luxury goods at an 18th century court¹

The inventories of the royal jewels belonging to Stanisław August Poniatowski, king of the Republic of Poland and Lithuania (1764-1795), include ten caskets containing hundreds of every kind of jewellery – from ear-rings, bracelets, necklaces to stars and crosses of the Polish orders of Saint Stanislas and the White Eagle.² Each piece has its own number and an evaluation, which also varied highly: from just 5-10 ducats up to even 8000 ducats in the case of snuff-boxes richly decorated with gem-stones and the most ceremonial sets of orders. In 1798, after the death of the king, when the caskets were examined to evaluate the royal inheritance, they were found almost empty. The royal jewels were in fact circulating: during Stanisław August's reign the inventories were being completed respectively, at least once a month, as some jewels were added and some were taken from the caskets. In the case of the pieces taken from the caskets their destination was exactly recorded. The notes in the inventories make the role and function of the royal jewels quite clear. Besides the sets belonging to the various ceremonial suits of the king, all the jewels were being used as gifts: in the inventories we can find the name of the person to which the jewel was given, the circumstances of the gift-giving, the exact date and the name of the intermediary, as rarely the king was donating the gift in person. In the account books kept yearly by the monarch himself in the last part entitled *caritez et presents* the same information is written but with greater emphasis on the person, which received the gift – his or her name is mentioned first, in the second place the given jewel is identified by the number (for example: a ring from casket 2 number 127) and by its value.³ These account books show well how important the jewels were in every aspect of court life. The king was in fact donating pieces from the caskets almost daily and these gifts were to accompany all kinds of court relations – the diplomatic, the court, the family, the artistic etc.

As the scholars of the 16th and 17th century French culture, inspired by Marcel Mauss anthropological studies of archaic cultures, have shown, the gifts are a distinct category of objects very important for the understanding of court culture.⁴ Their models can as well be

¹ This is a summary of the chapter „The culture of gifts” of the PhD „Art-Ceremonial-Information. The Formation of a European Court in Stanisław August Poniatowskis' Warsaw” written at the History Department of the Warsaw University and the Ca Foscari in Venice in 2005.

² Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych (Warszawa, abb. AGAD) Archiwum Księcia Józefa Poniatowskiego i Marii Tyszkiewiczowej nr 392-395.

³ AGAD, Archiwum Rodzinne Poniatowskich, *Rachunki Percepty i Ekspensy kasy Stanisława Augusta*, nr 404-428.

⁴ M. Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London-New York 1990; N. Zemon Davies, *The Gift in 16th Century France*, University of Wisconsin Press 2000; S. Kettering, *Patronage in 16th and 17th Century France*, Ashgate 2002, especially charter 2: *Gift-giving and Patronage in Early Modern France*, p. 131-151; P. Findlen, *Possessing Nature. Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, University of California Press 1994, chapter *Patrons, Brokers and Strategies*, p. 346-392, *eadem*, *The Economy of Scientific Exchange in Early Modern Italy*, [in:] *Patronage and Institutions. Science, Technology and Medicine at the European Court, 1500-1750*, ed. B.T. Moran, Boydell Press 1991; *The Diplomacy of Art*, *op. cit.*

used for the description of Stanisław August Poniatowski's court of the second half of the 18th century.

The gifts were an important category in the economy of an 18th-century court. The already mentioned king's account books of the private *Recette et Depense* show this peculiarity very well. The royal yearly expenses are grouped into fixed categories: loans and casuals; court salaries; army and stable; science art and royal buildings; wardrobe; theatre; politics and finally – alms and presents.⁵ The gifts are to be found in every category of the royal expenses. First of all they are repeatedly made to court people, servants, artists in the form of money or of a *bijoux* – a jewellery piece. These gifts show great similarities to the salaries, and in many cases they are a kind of addition to the usual remuneration received by court people. We can state then that in the court culture the gifts have an economic value and may be called a kind of payment.

An example from the royal account book for the year 1781 clearly illustrates this economic function of the gift. In 1781 the emperor Joseph II returned to the primate Michał Poniatowski, the king's brother, 2000 ducats of revenues from his lands in the region of Galicja, blocked in consequence of the first partitions. However, most of this sum was due to the king, as Stanisław August has had already recompensed his brother's loss with 1500 ducats. The monarch did not request the money from the primate, suggesting instead a gift exchange: „Je vous en fets present (of the 1500#) a condition que Vous me faisiez present des 900 # que je Vous dois pour les busts.”⁶ The king would make a gift of the 1500 ducats to the primate, and Michał Poniatowski would make a gift of some marble bust for which his royal brother owed him 900 ducats. The payment was then done by a gift-transaction, it is however important to notice that the value of the marble busts did not balance the 1500 ducats which the primate owed to the king. In fact it is a peculiarity of the economy of the gift, that its monetary price is only an element of its value. The king could balance the 1500 ducats with 900 ducats thanks to the gift exchange, showing with this transaction, unequal from the economic point of view, his gratefulness for the primate's loyalty and friendship, underlining the blood chains. Thanks to the form of gift-giving the obvious monetary aspects of this transaction became secondary and the sums were easily equalized.

The same can be said of presents for the court people, artists, servants etc. Although the gifts were often listed in the account books together with salaries – just as in the above described example they cannot be understood only as a monetary payment. Their economic value was very important – for the court people the gifts were an obvious element of revenues – but as important was their symbolic aspect: the gifts were given for loyalty, good service, in occasion of weddings, baptisms, etc. This symbolic, non-monetary aspect distinguishes the gifts from salaries.

One of the main rules of the functioning of the gift is the necessity to reciprocate the gift. The “economy of the gift” may be than defined as a kind of exchange, in which the values of the exchanged gifts did not have to be equal and sometimes did not have a monetary value at all. The economy of the gift is than never strictly economic and it always has a symbolic aspect as well.

The gifts were for example very important in the king's relations with ambassadors of foreign courts – in this case they were not a kind of payment, but an indispensable element which was very helpful in diplomatic negotiations. This is the reason why this category of gifts was booked by the king under the expenditure for *Politique*. This role of the gifts was

⁵ AGAD, Archiwum Rodzinne Poniatowskich, *Rachunki Percepty i Ekspensy kasy Stanisława Augusta*, nr 417.

⁶ *Ibidem*, nr 414.

well established in modern diplomacy, described as a kind of language helpful to name in a symbolic way the expectations, to persuade, to confirm the good relations.⁷

The diplomatic negotiations are just an example of a court relation established with the aid of the rhetoric of the gift. On the top of the court ladder the rulers of the European kingdoms were exchanging gifts in an obligatory gesture of friendship. On the bottom – gifts were being sent by numerous nobles, artists, artisans, scientists etc. with the hope of receiving a royal commission, order, title or place at the court, as according to the „economy of the gift” the king had to return the present. The gifts were than perfect expressions of the clients expectations. With the aid of the language of gifts all kinds of court relations were than established.

According to Mauss the gifts are a kind of signs and gift exchange forms a symbolic language. The same is true for the 18th-century court culture, where we can easily describe the rulers of the gift exchange. Every element of this exchange (the choice of the gift, its presentation, receiving or refusal) was governed by the ceremonial rulers. The presentation of a diplomatic gift was taking place in a ceremonial interior, in a solemn situation, in precise suits. The gift presented to the king by one of the many royal clients was accompanied by a formal letter. These rulers were however not fixed and the politics of gifts required refinement and tact both in endowing the gift with meaning and with the gifts’ interpretation. Not everybody had a direct access to the king and the gifts were often presented with the aid of brokers, who as well required gifts for their services. We can than say that gifts were present in all kinds of relations at court. For the clients, as well as for the diplomats the gifts were a strategy of success.

In 18th-century court culture a gift could consist of a sum of money but usually it was a precious object. In the royal books of expenses under the category of gifts we will find first of all jewels. As we have seen in the inventories of the king’s *bijoux* his court goldsmiths were mostly busy with the making of objects designed for gifts and of stars and crosses of the Polish Orders, whose distribution was closely chained to the culture of gifts. These jewels had the features of the gift, bearing both an economic and a symbolic value. One of the most popular *bijoux* designed for presents was the snuff-box. It was made in gold and in precious stones (its value could vary from 50 up to 5000 ducats) and it was always decorated with a miniature with the royal effigy. The snuff-box or its stones could easily be sold, while the miniature symbolizing the royal patronage, was always kept and shown during social encounters, used as a status symbol. Many other jewels had the same meaning, as the numerous rings or buttons decorated with the royal monogram in diamonds or other stones. The inventory of jewels of Tommaso Antici, the minister of Stanisław August Poniatowski and the Warsaw court at the Vatican, show well the royal jewels circulation – the description of some of the pieces from the royal caskets is to be found here.⁸ The first item recorded is the great order of the White Eagle with a large cross and star all in diamonds of the value of 4000 ducats received in the occasion of the cardinal election, followed by the diamond order of Saint Stanislas, different small stars in gold and silver of both orders, a diamond ring with the royal portrait, a golden snuff-box with the royal portrait surrounded with brilliants, both of them received as gifts. As Antici’s inventory shows, these jewels were short-lived – in fact next to every piece is an annotation of the selling of the diamonds – the jewels’ most precious part. Antici, who received the rich and impressive order of the White Eagle in 1789, had the chance to wear it only in few ceremonial occasions, as already in 1798 he was forced to sell the brilliants. According to the ceremonial such diplomatic gifts as those made by the king to his minister were highly symbolic, but for Antici, who perfectly understood this meaning

⁷ The recommendation for ambassadors to make gifts are present in most of the diplomatic treaties, as in Don Juan Antonio de Vera, *El Enbaxador*, Sewilla 1620, p. 130v-132r.

⁸ Archivio Antici-Mattei (Recanati), Fondo Antici, busta 24, fsc. 7.

governed by ceremonial rulers, the gifts' economic value was as important. The cardinal promotion meant great costs and Antici was hoping that the royal gift would at least partly gratify his expenses. In the letters to his brother he didn't describe the unusual richness of the Order of the White Eagle which he received (in fact it was the first one of this kind) but complained for its 4000 ducats value, as he was hoping for much more. In fact, according to the custom, he was supposed to receive a precious gift from the king, the master and broker of his promotion, and he was hoping that its value would be much higher. The example of the diamond gift shows well how clear was the language of gifts in court culture and how these special gifts were fabricated. Stanisław August knew well that his gift had to be exceptional and expensive. The great diamond order for Antici was then modelled on the king's order, made especially as a part of the coronation suit. For its fabrication several jewels (small orders, buttons and even a pair of ear-rings) from the caskets were used – and this supply of jewellery, which one could remake, was the only material which the monarch could use, as at the moment he had great financial problems. For Antici the meaning of the gift, its ceremonial function and its value were clear and he did not need any explanation as to its purpose and use, in the letter to his brother he concluded, that his royal master must have had some financial problems and this is the reason why its value is under expectations found upon the habit.⁹

For the papal nuncios, who received gifts from the king at the beginning, at the end and often during their mission at the Warsaw court, the value of the presents was also very important. The nuncio Antonio Visconti mentions in his private diary that he was showing the jewels, which he received from the king, to the royal goldsmith for evaluation.¹⁰ The undertaking of the mission meant serious expenses, which partly the nuncio had to cover from his own sources – the travel, the arrangement of the residence, the gift for the king and his family, which was to inaugurate his mission. The king was very conscious of the nuncios' financial situation and with his reciprocal gift he opted to support him. In fact, at the Warsaw court, it became customary that for the inauguration gift the nuncios were receiving an expensive and indispensable element of their mission – a saddle of horses of the best blood. The gift, which was given by the king at the end of the nuncios' mission, had to be more meaningful, as it was to symbolize the good relations between the king and the nuncio and the passing of a formal and official relation into one based on friendship. In this case a jewel was always used – a snuffbox with the king's portrait. Its value was significant, as they were among the most expensive jewels produced at the Warsaw court – evaluated even for 5000 ducats. In fact, it was through the value of the gift that the nuncio read the appraisal of his mission.¹¹

Jewels were the most significant kind of royal presents and the culture of gifts was the most important impulse for the flourishing of goldsmith's production at the Warsaw court. A good supply of jewels, of stones and prefabricates (such as golden boxes or rings) had to be always present in the royal caskets, as the king was distributing almost daily gifts of a different range of value and he had to be prepared for great expenses, as the 5000 ducats snuff-boxes for the nuncios. The king, whose financial position was very weak, could not afford sudden expenses, so the expenditure for jewels was planned ahead and the caskets were always well supplied.

The jewels listed in the inventories of the belongings of court people tell much of their position. The presence of a snuff-box with the royal portrait in Antici's inventory is a clear mark of his high position at court (the royal portrait was among the most prestigious gifts) and

⁹ Archivio Antici-Mattei, Fondo Antici, busta 69.

¹⁰ ASVat., Segreteria di Stato, Polonia, *Diario del nunzio Visconti*, nr 373.

¹¹ Antonio Visconti writes in his diary that the gifts from the court of Vienna were under his expectations and that he is worried, that his mission was underestimated, *ibidem*.

the expensive diamond Order set only reinforces it. The inventory of jewellery belonging to Gaetano Ghigiotti, the king's secretary for Italian affairs, must have been very long and full of every kind of jewels of the value between 5 to 100 ducats.¹² Ghigiotti, was in fact the broker of every Italian client, and this service was an important source of revenues paid in the form of jewellery gifts.

Jewellery was the most popular kind of gift in the court society, but not the only one. It was perfect in the relation patron-client, uniting both a strong economic value with a symbolic meaning. A distinct kind of present was the gift designed for monarchs, which did not have to have an explicit economic value, but which had to be unique and exceptional.

The nuncios' and other ambassadors' missions were inaugurated by the exchange of gifts of the highest rank, as the nuncio was presenting the king in the name of the pope. In the second half of the 18th-century in the case of gifts between the crowned heads expensive and unique luxury and artistic products of the country were chosen. The nuncios' gifts were produced in the Vatican workshops: luxurious tapestry or mosaic copies in gilded frames with the papal coat of arms of the masterpieces of painting from the papal collections, elegant sacramental vessels, bronze and gilded sculptures with sacral subjects, plaster or marble copies of the famous Roman statues, sometimes even examples of antique sculpture.¹³ Like in the case of the court goldsmiths in Warsaw, one of the main activities of the Vatican workshops was the production of unique, expensive and purely Roman luxury objects for diplomatic gifts.

Similar kinds of objects are to be found in the diplomatic gift-strategy at other 18th-century courts. Stanisław August designed for the diplomatic gifts famous country products. Among the main "Polish" gifts were the Lithuanian hunting dogs and the famous northern furs. However, the most important were luxury objects produced in the royal workshops or by the royal artists. In the occasion of the diplomatic visit of Numan Bey, the Ottoman Empire's nuncio, a unique and impressive porcelain set was produced in the royal workshop of Belweder – with oriental motifs and an inscription in Turkish. Among the favourite gifts of the Polish king were watercolours or small oil pictures with the views of his summer residence, Łazienki.

Stanisław August received artistic and luxurious objects not only in the gift-exchange of the highest rank. Those kinds of objects were natural gifts not only from artists and artisans seeking for patronage at the Warsaw court, but also for any other kind of clients. The king received for example many Bolognese paintings from the Bolognese nobles, who were hoping for a title or an order of the Polish king.

The rulers of this kind of gift-exchange were as clear as in the case of gift-exchange with jewellery. However, next to the symbolic meaning, the price and economic value of the gift was substituted by the mastery of execution, uniqueness, fashion etc. The king, in fact, did not use those gifts as a kind of capital and a source of revenues – the gifts were entering in his collections or decorating his residences. Just as the clients had expectations as to the value of the gifts which they were receiving, the king had his expectations as to the style or artfulness of the object. The correspondence between Gaetano Ghigiotti and the king related to the nomination of Lorenzo Litta for the Warsaw nunciature makes this point very clear. The king in fact asked Ghigiotti to affect on the choice of the traditional inaugurating gift, sending exact drawings of two mosaic tables to be made for the decoration of his summer residence

¹² In a letter to his friend Giuseppe Taruffi, the secretary of the Warsaw nuncio, Antonio Visconti, writes that Gaetano Ghigiotti has a lot of jewellery – gifts from the Italian clients. Letter of Giuseppe Taruffi, Giovanni Albergati of 30 XI 1767, Archivio di Stato di Bologna, Carteggi, nr 16.

¹³ Jeffrey Collins, *Arsenals of Art: The Patronage of Pope Pius VI and the End of Ancien Régime*, Phd Yale University 1994, chapter: *Public Propaganda: Images of Sovereignty*, pp. 68-127.

interior.¹⁴ One might probably argue that the diplomatic gifts were chosen according to the custom (the king could not for example ask the nuncio to buy him a Fragonard's painting) by the king himself. The same can be said of the client's gifts, who knew well that a well chosen present was the strategy of success and were well informed by the brokers on the royal taste and preferences. An artistic gift for a monarch was designed to enter his collection, as the example of Tommaso Antici's gifts for Pius VI in occasion of his cardinal promotion shows – the neo-cardinal bought two authentic pictures by Rubens and Van Dyck and ordered for them gilded frames with the papal coat of arms.

The culture of gifts and the economy of gift-exchange are crucial for the understanding of luxury and artistic production and consumption at an 18th-century court. The example of Stanisław August Poniatowski's Warsaw may as well be used as a model of this phenomenon. In the royal expenditure under the category of gifts we will find mostly luxury and artistic objects, in many cases their production was the outcome of the culture of gifts (jewels). On the other side the role of gifts is very significant in the collections and furnishings of the royal residences. Such luxury and artistic objects had special meanings and functions and there is a great gap between a painting commissioned by the king and a painting which he received as a present from an artist seeking for patronage: the social and cultural messages are different. The luxury and artistic objects had also a peculiar economic value and we may distinguish an economy of the gift. The gift-giving was understood in 18th-century as an economic transaction of its own – in the account books the gift-giving transaction is present under every kind of expenditure – the above described example of gift-exchange between the king and his brother was booked under the expenditure for ... arts and sciences – at the end the king became in this way the owner of a series of marble busts.

¹⁴ Stanisław August's letter to Gaetano Ghigiotti of 30 VIII 1793, AGAD, Archiwum Ghigiottiego, 514a.