

THE LIMNER COMPANY



POLISH SCHOOL

Portrait of Jan III Sobieski (1624-1696), wearing 'Ottoman' clothing; a red cloak with black fur trim, a gold embroidered jacket, and a white headdress decorated with pearls and a black feather

Circa: Circa 1654

circa 1654.

Oil on copper

Oval, 80mm (3 1/8 in) high.

Born into Polish nobility, this portrait depicts Jan (John) III Sobieski, who became King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania in 1674. Sobieski began his career as a diplomat in the Ottoman Empire, and he later became a soldier and gained renown for his success in the army. It is for this reason that he is depicted in Ottoman dress here. Another portrait of Sobieski, previously in the collection of the Duke of Richmond at Goodwood, shows him in a similar outfit, riding a horse.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was almost constantly engaged in conflict in the seventeenth century, largely against Sweden and Russia. Jan (John) III Sobieski was deemed a military hero from his time on the battlefield, which later helped him to be elected King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania in 1674. As a young man, he had travelled in Western Europe, and his first battle was the Siege of Zamość in 1648. Sobieski also received the patronage of Queen Maria Louise, wife of one of his predecessors as King, John II Casimir Vasa (1609-1672). He soon rose through the ranks of the army and by 1668 was made the Grand Hetman (thereby achieving the highest possible rank).

Sobieski was able to become king in 1674 because the nobility elected monarchs in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in this period. Sobieski had not intended to enter the running for King before the election began, but a call for piasts (supporters and members of the Piast dynasty, of Polish descent) to be banned from running for king began speculation that Sobieski could indeed be a successful candidate. His opponents were pro-French and pro-Habsburg. As King, Sobieski hoped to

strengthen the government of Poland and to make the monarchy hereditary, therefore ending the electoral process through which he had been made king. This had been attempted before but had always failed, and this did not change with Sobieski's efforts. He was more successful with his military efforts and was able to completely reorganise the army, most famously leading them to success at the Battle of Vienna in 1683, fighting alongside Austrian and German troops against the invading Ottoman army.

It may seem surprising that the king has been depicted in 'Ottoman' dress in this portrait; however, there were multiple junctures in his life when he was absorbed in Ottoman culture and engaged in peace with the empire. In 1654, he was sent as part of a diplomatic mission to Turkey, where he learned Tatar and Turkish, as well as about Ottoman traditions and culture. Furthermore, the Treaty of Żurawno in 1676 saw a period of peace between Poland and the Ottomans. Another portrait of Sobieski, previously in the collection of the Duke of Richmond at Goodwood, shows him in a similar outfit, riding a horse. The date of this portrait is linked to his former experience in the Ottoman empire, as he looks younger than in many of the portraits painted of him as King.

His outfit is not only culturally significant but also luxurious. The fur used to trim his jacket, and the feather (likely that of an Ostrich) upon his headdress display his wealth and well-travelled lifestyle. The unknown artist responsible for this depiction has not shied away from capturing Sobieski's large head, which was widely noted at the time, especially as he approached middle age. One French ambassador remarked that from a distance, he looked like a gigantic egg, with a large belly and small feet. This did not, however, stop him from being a deeply respected king, nor did it prevent him from leading the Polish army to success.