

„Salty Bread”

Natalia Wiernik’s artistic project entitled “Salty Bread” is organised as part of this year’s celebration of the 50 th anniversary of the official opening, by Alfons Długosz, the first director of the museum, of the permanent museum exhibition in the Wieliczka Salt Mine. Długosz, who was also an artist, showed his appreciation for the space of the Mine and its history and initiated activities aimed at saving the salt chambers and old mining machines and tools by transforming them into museum exhibits forming a part of the underground display. His passion and devotion resulted in establishment of the Wieliczka Museum and subsequently in entering the Wieliczka Salt Mine into the first UNESCO World Heritage List in 1978.

It is the first time that the collection and the underground display of the Museum have been made available for artistic activities on such a broad scale. Natalia Wiernik, using photography, video and performance, discusses issues related to the specific nature of the Mine/ Museum, its role in the protection of multi-century mining heritage and reflects on the museum exhibits using the example of the collection of salt cellars.

The title of the exhibition, “Salty Bread”, makes references to a short film produced by the Educational Film Production Studio in Łódź in 1958 which was created on the basis of Alfons Długosz’s guidelines. The film shows how the work of Wieliczka miners might have probably looked in the old days when the mining machines and tools found by Długosz were used in the mine. Alfons Długosz’s activities, inseparably linked to the Wieliczka Salt Mine, constitute the starting point for the discussion on the “Salty Bread” project.

Długosz was also an artist and his appearance in the Mine resulted in the introduction of a “new” order. He transformed the manner of thinking about the Mine, which started to be treated as heritage worth preserving and protecting. The tools and mining machines found in the Salt Mine became museum exhibits. This change of perspective and the necessity of taking a new look allowed for seeing these items in a completely new light. Natalia Wiernik introduces her “order” into the collection of salt cellars, which had been rigidly ordered and categorised. Chaos and concentration of elements “thrown off” the table by the artist show the vastness of the collection and encourage to taking a new look at the museum exhibits.

Salt cellars placed against the backdrop of reproductions of 17th century still lifes from Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, seem to form the part of paintings; once again, they become the elements of tableware, objects of every-day use.

The disorder, the light reflected from shiny surfaces and the use of lavishly decorated, luxury items is a common denominator uniting the works of the old masters with the modern creation. Showing two overlapping and, at the same time, penetrating museum collections in this project induces to reflection on the concept of a museum and its role in forming collections.

It is not an accident that the photographs of salt cellars are placed in the Maria Teresa II Chamber; this location allows for experiencing the space of the Mine with preserved traces of the miners' work in an uninterrupted manner. This is the symbolic beginning and the end: the place where salt had been extracted for centuries and items in which it was served on tables are brought together.

An indispensable element uniting these two realities were people who had been working here for ages. The film "Salty Bread" tries to show the former work of miners – the artist reaches for this motive in order to attract attention to the work of the contemporary museum workers, who take care of the space of the Salt Mine and the collections. Using performance and video, the artist accentuates their small, every-day gestures which show the very core of protection of cultural heritage.

The issue of introducing a new order may be interpreted in this project also from a different perspective – as a return to the original; cleansing from the unnecessary elements, reaching to the things that are the most important – in this case the Salt Mine as such and its very nature.

curator Agata Franaszek