

PAINTED DECORATION OF THE ETRUSCAN CABINET
IN THE WILANÓW MUSEUM

The Etruscan Cabinet, situated on the ground floor of the northern tower of the palace and facing the gardens, has undergone numerous conversions. Under John III it merely linked the palace chambers with a spiral staircase of the tower and it continued to serve this function until the times of Stanisław Kostka Potocki. It was only in 1850, when the northern flight of rooms of the left wing was laid out and rearranged to suit the purposes of a museum exposition, that a door in the western wall of the Cabinet connected the northern gallery with the Grand Crimson Room (Fig. 29).

The idea to display in this chamber a separate collection of ancient vases and to provide this display with a proper setting, is connected with the purchase by August Potocki of the famous collection of vases from the Mikorskis of Słubice in 1853. The new décor in the Cabinet was designed by Henryk Marconi and his son Leandro.

The tradition of setting aside special premises to display classical collections and of decorating the walls and ceilings of such rooms in a way reverting to ancient art, goes back to the 18th century and was started in c. 1760 by Robert Adam in the Syon House. In Poland, similar Etruscan cabinets were to be found in Puławy and Arkadia near Nieborów, but their décor has not survived. Such an interior has been preserved in Natolin, the work of Henryk Marconi.

The Etruscan Cabinet at Wilanów, which is an example of an individual approach by the designers, has so far not been thoroughly researched. A more detailed description of it is to be found only in a monograph on Wilanów by H. Skimborowicz and W. Gerson who describe scenes from "Odyssey" as "painted according to the ideas of Flaxman, the famous English sculptor". Following this trace we have succeeded in discovering the models of the representations that adorn the ceiling of the Wilanów cabinet. However further research proved that their author, presumably Henryk Marconi's second son,

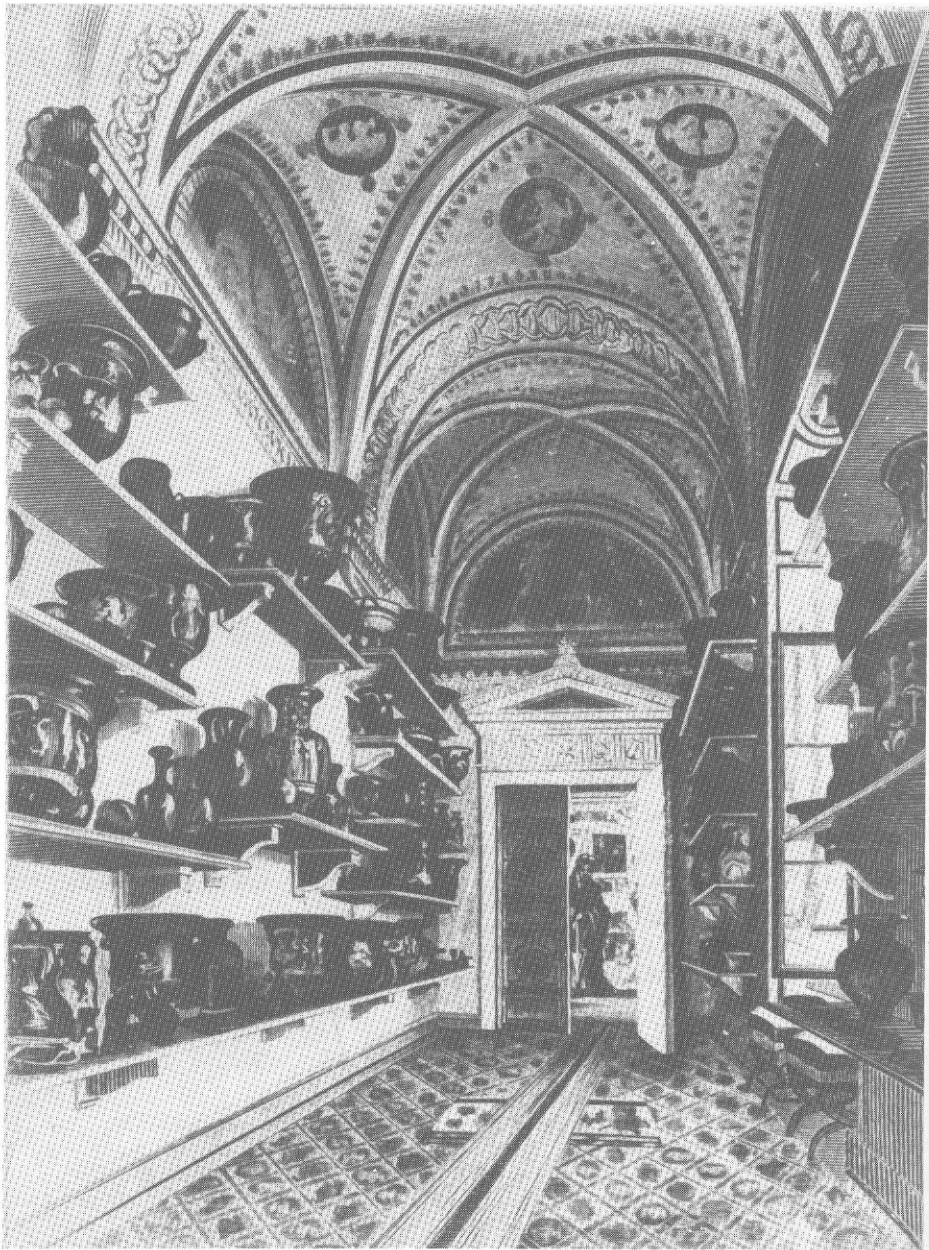
Karol Tytus, did not pattern his designs directly on the drawings of John Flaxman, but transposed faithfully into monumental paintings the sketches of Tommaso Piroli. The first edition of illustrations to Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey", produced by Piroli according to Flaxman's drawings was published in Rome in 1793. In our attempts at identifying the patterns for the Wilanów paintings we have used the Florentine edition of 1826.

The painted decoration of the Etruscan Cabinet is found mainly on the cross vaulting composed of three bays. These are adorned with tondos with a figure of a child holding an ancient vase. These representations are reminiscent of the figural decoration of 16th century Urbino majolica, and even more so of its Nevers imitation.

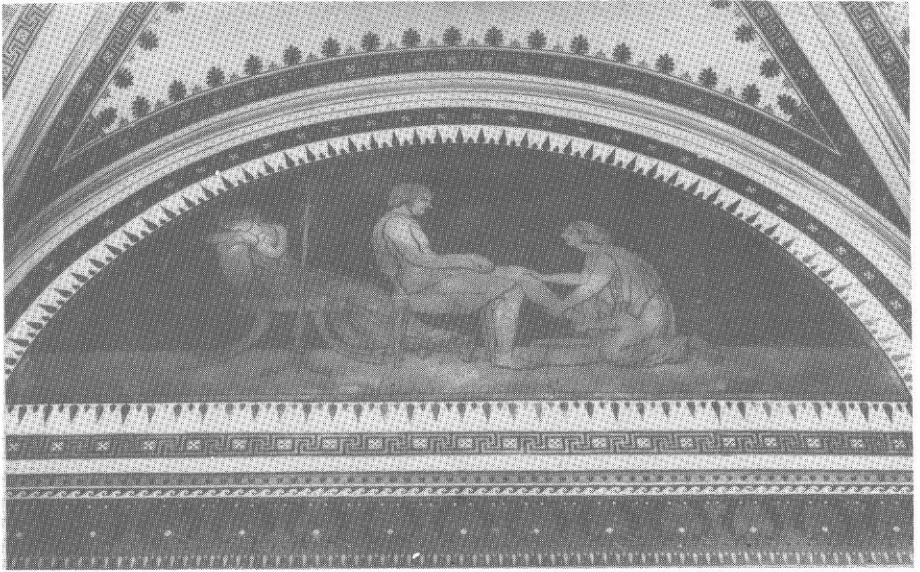
The scenes from "Odyssey" of interest to us are distributed on the walls of the Cabinet, filling the head arches of the bays, that is eight semi-circular fields (Fig. 30, 31). The paintings on the whole are faithful replicas of Piroli's prints and the departures from the original were caused by the necessity of adapting the composition to the semi-circular areas. The paintings with figural scenes are accompanied by plant and geometrical ornaments which underline the architectural divisions. The decoration of the vaulting reverts to the tradition of red figural painting.

The painted decoration of the Cabinet is complemented with portals with entablatures painted en grisaille and doors featuring scenes from "Iliad" and "Odyssey", window splays emblazoned with vases and ceramic tile floor with painted Egyptian motifs.

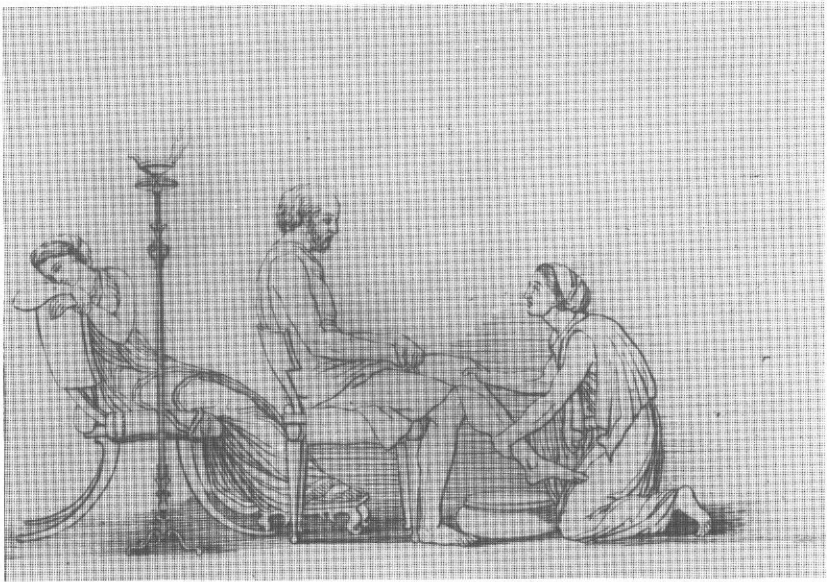
The Etruscan Cabinet in Wilanów, though modest in size, demonstrates the designers' and artists' artistic individuality. They must have studied carefully the classical originals and from chosen elements composed a completely new whole, thus the decoration of this room is by no means an imitation.



29. Wilanów. Etruscan Cabinet. Engraving by A. Malinowski from Waroczewski 1877



30. Etruscan Cabinet. Vault's decoration — Euriclea recognizes Odysseus



31. Euriclea recognizes Odysseus. Engraving T. Piroli from J. Flaxman, the end of 18th century