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Preliminary Analyses of Silk Flowers from Modern Graves in Poland

Introduction

Remains of infants, children, young males and females from wealthy families in Poland in the Baroque period (c. 17th-18th centuries) were usually richly decorated, including the grave equipment and catafalques used during burial ceremonies, which were covered with very popular wreaths and crowns, made from natural and artificial flowers.¹ These elements symbolised the young age and innocence of the deceased. Additional elements consisted of precious haberdashery made from silver, gold or fake precious metal threads (Grupa 2005, 31–32).² The type and quantity of deposited flowers depended mainly on the season and the parents' wealth. Spring and summer delivered a variety of colourful field and meadow flowers that were used for decorating bodies while single flowers or small bunches were put into coffins.³ In autumn and winter, decorations were made of thin wire, textile, paper or glass, arranged into forms resembling commonly-known plants (Drażkowska 2007, 491).

In the course of archaeological explorations of cemeteries and churches, archaeologists frequently report the presence of artificial flowers and wreaths in children's burials; wreaths of natural flowers are rare.⁴ Flowers act as symbols of beauty and love but, due to their delicacy, fade away quickly, as Ryken *et al.* have pointed out: "That is the symbolism of flowers appearing in the Book of Psalms, in the Old and New Testament, when they speak about human beings who one day bloom like flowers, only to disappear on the next day" (Ryken and Wilhoit 1998, 416). It is difficult to establish, based on the archaeological materials, how far artificial flowers go back in material culture history. They appear in grave equipment and in both Catholic and Protestant rites from the 17th century onward (Westphalen 2007, 130-131; Guszpit *et al.* 2010, 632).

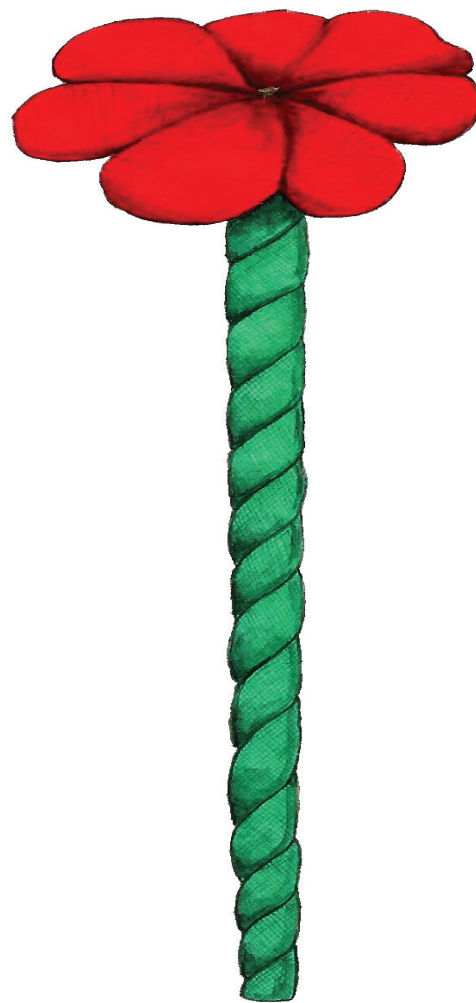


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of artificial flower from the grave of Anna Vasa (Drawing: M. Nowak).



Fig. 2. White lily flower from Gnień (Photo: A. Wojciechowska).

Types of artificial flowers

Artificial flowers were manufactured using various materials, although their base usually included brass wire imitating gold, different kinds of silk and paper. The wire frequently created frames of flower calyces and leaves, and then yarn, textile and paper filled the space between the wire construction. Flowers were made in different sizes. Princess Anna Wazówna, who died in 1625, had the simplest form of artificial flowers put into her grave (Grupa 2005, 32): a wooden slat *c.* 1 m long was wound round spirally with silk fabric and, at one end, a primitive calyx made of silk in plain weave was fastened with a metal rivet (Fig. 1). Other examples of flowers found in graves involve much more elaborate constructions and vary in size from 1 to 12 cm (Fig. 2). Their proportions depend on the technique of the grave wreaths, small bunches or coffin decorations.

Sometimes flowers were made out of loose yarn. Yarn strands were put alongside one another and fixed with some kind of glue (*e.g.* starch or egg white, applied in such a way as not to make spots on the surface). When it dried, the calyx and leaves were cut out of them, constructing, *e.g.*, carnations, cornflowers, ox-eye daisies and forget-me-nots. The calyx was fixed onto the metal wire by wrapping the textile and the wire with silk thread or thinner wire.

The other method was to build a metal frame filled with silk thread, interlaced in different directions,

making a delicate net, or using textile in plain weave or satin weave and adding petals (Fig. 3). These have been found in the form of three-dimensional flowers resembling roses, lilies (Fig. 2) or tulips. To produce silk flowers, various forms of textile were used. Archaeologists report silk yarn, fabric in plain weave and silk ribbons and bands (Table 2).

Exploring the crypt in St. Catherine's Chapel in the Church of St. Nicolas in Gnień, archaeologists excavated several kinds of artificial flowers in child burials, five of which resemble white lilies (Fig. 3). A lily, "in accordance with Greek mythology, was made of Hera's milk; Aphrodite, the goddess of love, hated the flower as a symbol of virginity. Christianity adopted the symbol as an interpretation of innocence, purity, virginity, hope, the Holy Virgin Mary" (Kopaliński 2006, 197). Each flower consists of four petals, with edges bent outwards, made in plain weave textile, originally probably white, but at present blue or green. The latter is secondary colouring resulting from corrosion products or from the brass wire used in the internal and external frame of the flowers. In addition, the petals' rims were wound round with decoratively twisted thin wire. Silk yarn placed on petal surfaces combined with brass wire gave the impression of gold glittering. The stem was tangled with petals and probably iron wire and the whole construction was wrapped round with more delicate brass wire and silk yarn (Wojciechowska 2012, 27).

Site	White lily	Dog-rose	Forget-me-not	Others
Bytom Odrzański	-	-	-	X
Gniew	X	X	X	X
Gdańsk	X	X		X
Kwidzyn	X	-	-	-
Toruń	-	-	-	X

Table 1. Flower species excavated in Polish sites

Site	Glued silk yarn	Plain weave	Bands	Felt	Paper
Bytom Odrzański	-	X	X	-	-
Gniew	X	X	X	-	X
Gdańsk	X	-	-	X	X
Kwidzyn	X	-	-	-	X
Toruń	-	X	-	-	-

Table 2. Materials used for artificial flower production

The same technique was applied to another two flowers, although their shape was different: not a lily, but a briar rose,

“which symbolizes evanescence, death, resurrection; particularly a faded rose, which expresses fragility of life and happiness, as well as grief of losing them. It is an attribute of the world of the blessed souls in the Elysian Fields. What blooms in nature the most beautifully, like roses, lilies, violets, also fades rapidly; similarly – the most beautiful flowers of human life die particularly quickly” (Kopaliński 2006, 363).

The petals are directed to the outside and the edges are rolled slightly inwards. The flower underlying structure served not only for decoration, but also, as in the case of the lily, to maintain the whole construction, fastening the thin wire of the petals. The textile placed between this underlying structure and a petal was not silk yarn like the ones described



Fig. 3. Flower calyx made of paper from Gniew (Photo: Dawid Grupa).

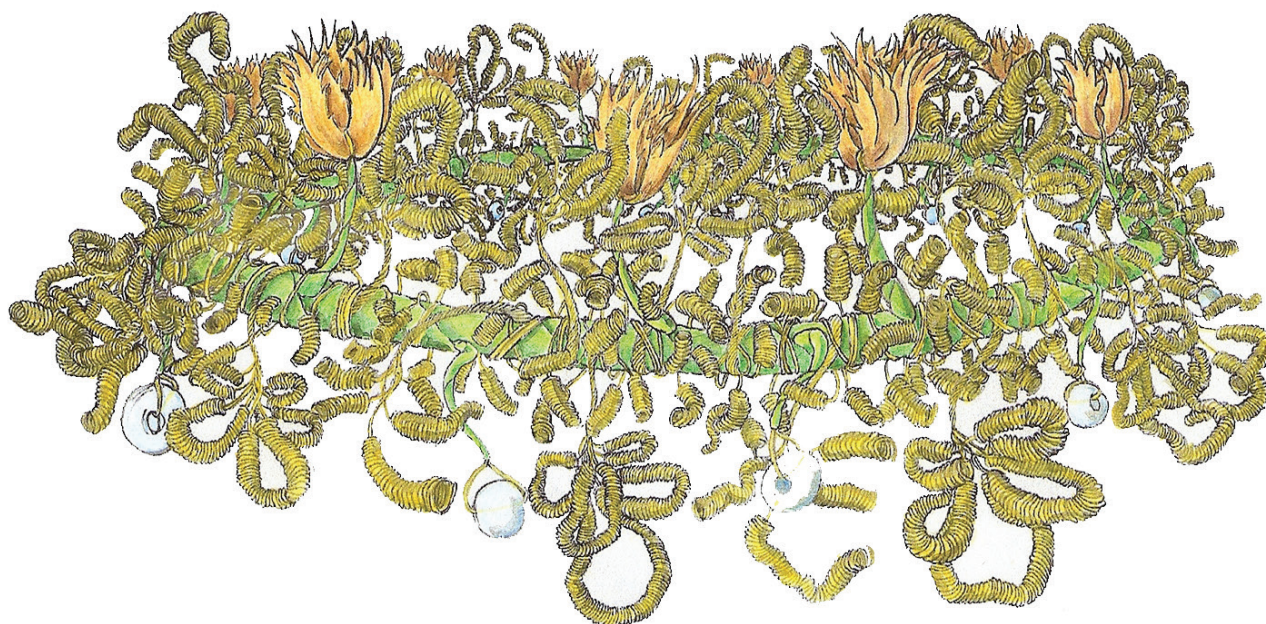


Fig. 4. Wreath reconstruction from Gniew (Drawing: M. Nowak).

above, but linen. Delicate wires stick out from the flower middle, probably imitating stamens. The stem end is folded, presumably as a result of being part of some construction. One of the flowers discussed above is well preserved, because only one of its petals is missing, while the other consists of three petals, with the other parts, *i.e.* the stem and the underlying structure, barely left (Wojciechowska 2012, 28).

Other flowers imitated carnations or a plant called chicory, which was commonly accessible in the 18th century, thus making it easy to imitate. As Drażkowska describes,

“[f]lowers were made of identical textile and the same form: one of two longer edges of silk narrow strip was cut and frayed. Next, this cut fragment was folded and its bottom part was tied round with string. The others were pressed flat to make imitation of flower buds” (Drażkowska 2007, 492).

Some flowers had metal wire as a stem or a branch or serving as part of a bigger construction. At present the flowers are pale yellow but they may have been golden in the past, glittering on children’s garments. In 1899 G.W. Gessmann prepared a dictionary of flower language, which explained how it was possible to express difficult news arranging sophisticated bunches of flowers. He described a carnation as a

flower symbolising “My heart is filled with yearning” (quoted in Biederman 2001, 182). Putting carnations into graves could have been interpreted as longing for a person who passed away too soon.

The last type of flowers recognised during grave crypt exploration can be described as small ones in plain weave. As Drażkowska describes, “[t]hey were formed of a narrow fabric strip and one of longer edges was cut into regular rounded wave, while the opposite edge was tied with string” (Drażkowska 2007, 493). Some of them have preserved stems of thin brass wire with leaves. The flowers were originally white or blue. Petal shape and flower form suggest a forget-me-not, defined by G.W. Gessmann as “These words remind of desire to see the other person – do not forget me” (quoted in Biederman 2001, 183).

Apart from textiles, paper was also used to make artificial flowers, but these do not survive well. Wreaths from Gniew revealed tiny, 1 cm-wide forget-me-not calyces made of paper (Fig. 3).

Another (southern) crypt, located in St Ann’s Chapel in Gniew also contained elements of wreaths and artificial flowers resembling parrot tulips (Fig. 4) very carefully made from brass wire, silk and white glass beads. Thin wire was used to construct leaves, branches and flower frames. Petals resembling butterfly wings were made of thin silk yarn, making the structure transparent. The whole composition was wrapped with thicker silk yarn and all these elements



Fig. 5. Flowers made of delicate soft felt from Gdańsk (Photo: Dawid Grupa).

were fastened around a metal stalk with a flower on the top (Grupa *et al.* 2013, 138–139; Grupa *et al.* 2015, 117).

The excavations at St. John's Church in Gdańsk uncovered a metal wreath with textile flowers. The hoop of brass wire had flowers of glued yarn resembling common chicory or carnation, between which bundles of wire twisted into spirals were placed (imitating small flowers or buds). The archaeologists also identified flower relics similar to lilies and dog-roses. The base of the flowers were formed of a brass wire, the empty space was filled with stiff paper and the external surface was covered with silk yarn placed vertically (Drażkowska 2007, 492–493). Similar flowers were excavated in the grave of a young woman buried in Kwidzyn Cathedral (Grupa 2014, 18). Of exceptional interest are the objects made of delicate soft felt, in one or two colours, with a diameter not exceeding 2 cm and placed in layers on top of one another (Fig. 5). This find is unique.

The southern crypt in Gniezno contained two children's bonnets decorated with artificial flowers of silk bands in plain weave, with diameters of 1.5–2 cm; one rim was creased making a circle imitating a flower petal. Some others had another layer of petals with a smaller diameter and different colours (Grupa *et al.* 2015, 56, 104, fig. 34, 35). Band flowers also decorated several coffin pillows were found in the child's crypt of Schonaich family in Bytom Odrzański. The find

contained three pillows with band flowers 6.3 cm wide and rims decorated with delicate stripes placed in four corners (Grupa 2011, 15, 86). Flowers were made of silk fabric in plain weave, paper or yarn, placed parallel and glued with some substance (Table 2) like isinglass or plant resin and petal shapes were cut out when the structure was dry (yarn serving for making flowers might have been of poorer quality and its short sections could be glued and shaped without any difficulty). Identifying textile colours is impossible at present, because as pigments decomposed they lost their original colours, turned golden brown and became partly soaked with metal corrosion products: brass (green) and iron (rusty brown).

Silk of poorer quality is recorded in written sources of haberdashers guilds (Bogucka 1956, 114). This kind of silk was produced in central Europe, probably in Poland as well, because mulberries have appeared in Pomerania. Haberdashers decorated various types of headdress for both males and females and probably produced artificial flowers in their workshops. Archaeologists have recorded lower-quality silk bands in the southern crypt of the church at Gniezno, out of 300 items made of silk bands, 13 are evidently different. In each example the warp consists of two strands, each of which has a z-twist (Grupa *et al.* 2015, 49–51). Short yarn sections had to be twisted to be used in weaving. In this case, the fact confirms its local production.



Flowers and regulations

The range and quantity of decoration used for burials were regulated administratively all over Europe. Sumptuary laws from Kołobrzeg, Gdańsk, Szczecin, Toruń, Stralsund, Hamburg and Leipzig define exactly how many and in what way flowers could be used together with golden haberdashery to dress deceased infants, girls and young boys. The restriction was justified as a measure to protect citizens' finances (Kizik 1998, 90–91; Grupa 2005, 32). However, these regulations were obviously not so strictly obeyed, as there are several examples of laws forbidding excessive adornment of bodies and coffins and reiterating the punishment for not respecting them. Despite all of these administrative efforts, the custom found its way into the funeral culture of 16th-18th-century Europe.

Legislators usually did not interfere in wreath construction and the kinds of flowers used, but rather defined materials regarded as too expensive for the purpose. From iconography we know of only small and modest maiden wreaths. Archaeology, however, complement this information and thanks to excavations in various churches, we have a much more detailed knowledge of wreath relics, artificial flowers and haberdashery than sumptuary law regulations indicate.

Ribbons and artificial flowers were also used to decorate various headdresses. Information on the subject can be found for example in court records, where cap-makers and haberdashers try to establish the range of their activities in decorating headgear. In the 18th century the work was partially taken over by milliners, making huge constructions for women's headgear. It is difficult to establish, however, which professional group was responsible for manufacturing grave wreaths – haberdashers, hat-makers or craftsmen making gold wire? The latter professional group belonged to the wealthiest in Gdańsk, being granted a special sumptuary law by the town's authorities in the 18th century (Grupa 2005, 91).

Notes

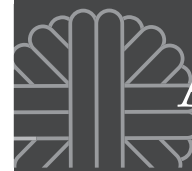
1. It was reported that sometimes the body was decorated with natural, dry or artificial flowers. The burials of Frederic Christian and Mary Catherine in Roskilde Cathedral provide evidence of plants, identified as rosemary and lavender. The same herbs also filled pillows and mattresses placed inside their coffins (Østergård 1993, 220–221; Grupa 2005, 32).
2. In archaeological contexts we usually find artefacts made of brass wire, which originally imitated gold, called 'fake haberdashery'. The surfaces of

these types of archaeological objects are coated with corrosion products, giving evidence of copper in the alloy (Grupa 2013, 135).

3. One of the children found in Gniew was equipped with a bunch of flowers, consisting of three artificial flowers made of metal wire tied with silk ribbon.
4. At the site of Szczuczyn, coffin no 17 contained remains of a small boy, Stanisław Konopka, with signs of a herb wreath (presumably common rue and mugwort) with a diameter of 8 cm on his right temple (Grupa *et al.* 2014, 67, 102). Brown spots of deformed circles, registered on grave textile relics, sometimes indicate signs of wreaths made of natural flowers and herbs (author's observations during textile conservation treatments; Grupa *et al.* 2015, 121).

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