



Jan Sobieski at Vienna (1683). A high quality color photograph of this painting and related works by Matejko can be found at https://www.academia.edu/42739074/Painting_and_Politics_April.

Painting and Politics in the Vatican Museum

Jan Matejko's *Sobieski at Vienna (1683)*

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Amid the splendours of the Vatican Museum in Rome, amongst the lush and abundant canvases of Raphael and other great artists, hangs an exceptionally large painting depicting the defeat of the last great invasion of Europe by the Turks: the relief of the 1683 siege of Vienna by a coalition of Christian forces led by the king of Poland, John III, also known as Jan Sobieski.¹ Sobieski was the last king of Poland to attempt to restore his country's power and glory before the steady decline and final disappearance of that state in the late eighteenth century, and he is written into the early modern history of Europe as the man who symbolized the repulse of that powerful Ottoman attempt to conquer Europe, or, as it was seen then, the last Muslim invasion of Christendom. Though afterwards, historians would dispute who truly deserved credit for this impressive Christian victory over the armies of Islam, with several historians, Austrian and others, giving primary credit to one or another of the Austrian commanders, there is no doubt that Sobieski stood at the head of the multinational relief force,

¹ Jan Matejko, *Jan Sobieski, King of Poland, Defeats the Turks at the Gates of Vienna*, oil on linen (485x894 cm), Sobieski Room, Vatican Palaces. Inventory number: 2613. Krystyna Sroczyńska, ed., *Matejko: Obrazy olejne; Katalog* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1993), 2:192–95. Also see Carlo Pietrangeli, *The Vatican Museums: Five Centuries of History* (Rome: Edizioni Quazar, 1993), 212–13, 219 (though Pietrangeli states incorrectly that the work was painted in 1883; in fact, it was begun in 1881 and only completed in 1883).

led the final and decisive cavalry charge down the Kahlenberg Mountain to break through and destroy the Turkish lines around the city, and was the first to reach the Turkish camp and capture its flag, believed at the time to be the same banner carried by the Prophet Mohammed into battle some thousand years before.

The painting in the Vatican Museum shows a splendidly mounted Sobieski, surrounded by his Polish soldiers and German allies, handing the emissary, Jan Kazimierz Denhoff (despite his German-sounding surname, Denhoff was a Pole) a letter to be delivered to Pope Innocent XI. The image exudes the pride and satisfaction of a confident soldier over a hard-won victory, an achievement recognised by almost all of Christendom. This victory reached its culmination several years later with the liberation of Hungary, the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699), and Ottoman recognition that their centuries-long enterprise in central Europe, which had seen so many impressive victories and conquests, was over.²

The questions remain, however: who painted this great canvas, when was it painted, for what reason, and how did it find a home in the Vatican Museum, rather than in another, perhaps more appropriate place, one more closely connected to the epochal event that it depicts?

The creator of this painting was the patriotic Polish artist Jan Matejko (1838–1893), a native of Krakow in Austrian Galicia, a region that had been acquired by the Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa and her son Josef II during the partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century, less than a century after the relief of Vienna. Matejko was born of a Czech father and

² For the historical background, see John Stoye, *The Siege of Vienna: The Last Great Trial between Cross and Crescent* (London: Collins, 1964); Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Enemy at the Gate: Habsburgs, Ottomans, and the Battle for Europe* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); and Thomas Mack Barker, *Double Eagle and Crescent: Vienna's Second Turkish Siege and Its Historical Setting* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1967). Unfortunately, none of these authors appear to read Polish and all have a slight Germanic bias in regard to Polish-German relations, especially Barker, who sometimes presents a polemic against Sobieski. For a useful corrective that includes a Polish view, see L.R. Lewitter, "John III Sobieski: Saviour of Vienna," *History Today* 12, no. 3 and 4 (1962): 168–76 and 243–52.