

## Color traditions in Polish wooden architecture

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### ABSTRACT

In the paper are presented results of the author's researches, included in her doctoral dissertation titled "Color in architecture and rural planning (particularly in South Poland villages)", where she undertook efforts to systemize knowledge on application and symbolism of color in Polish wooden country cottages.

The state of researches, chronology and range of the multicolor carcasses decoration of Polish wooden houses, were presented, but also function of decorative elements, selection of dyes and issues of decoration in respect of form and construction of buildings.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Color was always an important element of each community life. People believed in its symbolism and magic, and each shade had certain stack of mystery and meanings, transforming in time, together with changing habits, tastes and technical abilities.

Decoration of residential houses with various geometrical, floral or animal motives was popular all over the globe. Also on the Polish territory the tradition of multicolour decoration of wooden country houses carcasses existed.

Władysław Hickel, researcher of the Zalipie's art wrote about façades decoration feature: „*This painting proofs, that there is a great deal of unexploited talent and sunny colourfulness feeling in these people. In these works, worth of admiration, made casually, is a simplicity, freedom and logic and particularly balance of various supplementary to the sunlight spectrum shades*”.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. A STATE OF RESEACHES, CHRONOLOGY AND THE FEATURE RANGE

Knowledge on the multicolour paintings on the wooden residential buildings walls is relatively new. The earliest researched site was Powiśle Dąbrowskie, discovered at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup>

In year 1946 Polish Ministry of Culture and Art has created the State Institute for Folk Art Researches, and one of its section was the Decoration Section, assigned to research folk art ornamentals and decoration. Thanks to the Section's members work, it was possible to discover and to systematize many types of ornaments used in sculpture, embroidery, and folk architecture. Appearance of wooden houses walls decoration on certain areas of Poland was set only then.

All researches show, that multicolour and patterned way of painting had to be very popular in Poland someday. Unfortunately, due to too small number of available materials, there is no way to set now a range of the wooden cottages carcasses painting, nor areas of particular decoration motives appearance.

Certainly this feature was present in South and Central Poland. On the South the range covers slopes of Sudety mountains and entire Małopolska: surroundings of Krakow, Nowy Sącz area, Lemko land, neighbourhood of Przemyśl (Medyka, Poździacz) and Powiśle Dąbrowskie (Zalipie).

In central Poland the best-known sites are: Łowicz and surroundings of Opoczno and Radom. Generally it is possible to distinguish two main types of decorations presented in all regions:

- Painting by lime or clay of simple signs and symbols on raw or paint primed carcass
- Decorating of lime whitened façades with mono or multicolor floral, geometric and sometimes zoomorphic and figurative motives, concentrated around windows and doors

Probably earlier chronologically is carcass painting with stripes, later color decoration of lime-whitened walls.<sup>8</sup>

Commonly used on Małopolska area blue color so called. „siwy” – has reference to the dye added to lime used for priming, appeared probably in the second half of the 19th century.<sup>1</sup>

In thirties of 20<sup>th</sup> century was introduced general regulation (certainly for hygienical reasons) for wooden cottages walls whitening, what causes in great measure a disappearance of local decoration habits. A zeal of whitening run often to exaggeration in painting of not only buildings walls, but also decorative gables, window frames, fences and even beehives.<sup>4</sup>

A different way of painting whitened walls was developed. The most well known site of this kind of painting is Powiśle Dąbrowskie, particularly Zalipie village. A famous sometime ago „chałupa bronowicka” – from Bronowice by Krakow, should be mentioned, representing the best character of the "nadwiślańska" architecture – painted carcass and rich woodcraft detail.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. FUNCTION

The beginning of decoration introduction to residential architecture should be seen in traditional handcrafts. The patterns placed on façades were often directly transferred to other kinds of folk art. It is not accidental that initially only women were painting façades. They were also engaged in embroidery, ceramics, tailoring of multicolor folk clothes, weaving of carpets and tapestries, and finally painting of wooden chests. (In Hungary there was a special expression for a woman painting patterns on houses walls – *iro asszony* - means „writing woman”.<sup>6</sup> )

Initially carcass whitening habit should be linked in underlining with lime of gaps between beams, marking of a carcass with rows of vertical and horizontal dots, waves painting and simple or diagonal checks – and finally painting of frames around windows and doors.<sup>8</sup>

**Paintings on cottage carcasses were made for utilitarian, symbolic, informative and finally pure aesthetic functions.** Interior decoration, and later walls ornamentals, has developed from so-called. „packi” – what is about round patches made by dissolved clay mixed with ash to brighten smoked parts of walls, stoves and ceilings.<sup>10</sup>

Later destructed, turned grey carcass beams were covered with yellow or red clay.

Main reason for carcass painting according to its architectural structure was **a protection of gaps between beams**. These gaps were clogged with a moss, additionally covered by clay, what lasted longer when protected by lime.

Beams ends and gaps between beams painting had also a task to protect against destruction – alike frames around windows and doors.

Lime became a preserving agent, and protruded ends of corners were often whitened. In result there were vertical decorations of cottage corners and horizontal decoration of carcasses.

Walls decorations were often **connected with holidays** of Easter and Christmas or with important family celebrations like e.g. weddings. On outer side of house doors, where a bride was from, often flowers and branches were lime painted. These temporary symbols were next washed out of a façade.

Some of façade painted signs were **property signs** – other had **magic meanings**. In Slavic folk culture there were several magic symbols as: pentagram, hexagonal star, or six leaves rosette inscribed in a circle. Paintings of moon and sun phases were often, what was later transformed in painting metaphor into a five petals flower. There was a general habit of marking doors with a cross painted white or "greyed" lime.

**Protective signs and magic symbols**, which shall protect inhabitants and animals, were placed next to windows and doors. Signs painted on barn doors shall secure a protection of collected crops.

In all regions use of blue and green colors was common for painting stripes around windows and doors. It is not out of question that this color, alike magical signs and symbols, had to protect a house against an evil. Symbolic use of these colors on façades was not proof anyway.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4. SELECTION OF SHADES**

In respect of selection of shades, it is now hard to set unambiguously whether accessibility of a dye only influenced its use or there were also reasons of symbolic nature. Undoubtedly it is possible to separate certain regions of applying given color shades, which are not present elsewhere. In Ropianka village, in central Lemko land, carcasses were primed by residues of crude oil, what in an arrangement with lime whitened gaps between beams created great, contrastive color composition<sup>8</sup>. On the Lemko- Bojko lands the dye was made of burned clay colouring carcasses on terracotta tint, then barn doors were often paint light yellow with grated clay. On this background only there were contrastive decorative motifs painted with lime.

On the Krakow land were used variety of colors for coloring carcasses. For example in Maciejowice area, locals considered that dark blue houses are only these of „galicjany” (from Galicia) – and locally used color was white.<sup>1</sup>

In cottages type „myte”(washed) only painted were clay filled gaps between beams with a light or dark blue color. Beams were left natural - after a year darkening, patinating on brown or grey, depending of used wood”.<sup>15</sup>

In cottages type „w kolorowe pasy”(color stripes) both beams and gaps were painted. These types of cottages are rich of color patterns. Beams are usually brown, ochre (referring to color of washed wood), and seldom red. Clay was primed blue, dark blue or green. In this color type frequently plinths, windows and doors frames and beam-ends are painted e.g. green.<sup>1</sup>

Lime whitening of walls, on subbase of yellow clay, filling gaps between carcasses gave other decorative possibilities. In Krakow and Nowy Sącz areas there were formulated several color types – from white to navy blue or even dark blue – depending of dye concentration in lime. In this color type plinths were often painted, due to rather functional reasons in darker colors e.g. black.

In Powiśle Dąbrowskie walls were painted uniformly light blue, creamy, light brown or pink, then on this background multicolour floral and geometric motifs were put.

Specific color inversion present a cottage discovered by prof. Reinfuss in 1937 in Wetlina (Bieszczady) primed with red dye, made of burn clay, painted gaps between carcasses and herring bone pattern.<sup>8</sup>

#### **5. DECORATION AND BUILDING STRUCTURE**

A color applied in wooden architecture generally underlined and emphasized elements of building structure, fulfilling both utilitarian and aesthetic functions. It was regarded, that walls should be painted according to surface kind and advancement. Hence e.g. bricked apexes are generally even blue painted. Separate colors were selected to various architectural elements, other to plinths, other beams ends, carcasses, gaps, and finally to windows and doors framing and other decorative motifs.<sup>13</sup>

A building was never colored the same. Differences in a way of painting appear not only between residential and house holding parts, but also between each wall of residence building. Decorative motifs were concentrated on some parts of walls or were on its entire surface. The ornaments located on corners of an object or also along eaves and plinths may be regarded as desire for underlining a building solid.

Wooden buildings outer walls decoration often concentrated next to windows and doors. The simplest type of windows decoration was a white stripe along a frame. Sometimes windows frames were painted green or dark blue, what combined with dark carcass gave an impression of high-class decoration. On windows frames and also on sides appeared decorative motifs like stars or herring bone patterns, and in the regions, where commonly was whitening of entire carcass a multicolour decoration of windows was developed.

In areas, where were windows shutters, paintings were also placed on their surfaces. Doors decorative motifs were put directly on a frame, on wings, or on carcass next to entrance. Beside floral motifs – like flowers or branches – there were often geometrical motifs.

## 6. SUMMARY

Nowadays most of painted wooden cottages forming in the past "multicolor complexes" were lost forever – and these left are often in very bad technical shape.

Many factors were combined that this long tradition of wooden cottages carcasses decoration disappeared, and even its elements, worth preserving were distorted and simplified. Colourful, painted wooden cottages are very seldom in surrounding landscape and interest about them is very small - one can say - marginal. There are some of them in heritage parks, but still it is hard to find their unique colors in nature.

Not long time ago such place, where traditions of painting was preserved was Powiśle Dąbrowskie and particularly Zalipie village. This site was preserved because the contest for the most beautiful painted cottage organized for the first time in 1948. Nowadays is hard to find in Zalipie traces of old greatness – there are only few painted cottages, and it is even difficult to find the village itself.

However it looks that tradition of color application in regional wooden architecture should be treated not only as interesting feature of far past, but as an element of cultural heritage, forming a base for creation of professional and most effective method of color selection for contemporary architecture of Polish countryside.

*„In periods of sudden changes in architecture of Polish countryside, the cottages of painted carcasses, disappearing rapidly, are fine decorative factor and native form of artistic expression of Polish countryside.”<sup>7</sup>*

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