

# Layering of façades. A few comments on the colour of Krakow's façades in earlier and contemporary times

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**Abstract:** Witnesses to a bygone age, *façades are evidence of past life. Interpretation of traces, and particularly colours, aids to recognize old tastes and moods.* This paper reviews ornamentation methods used for the outer-walls of buildings in Krakow from the city foundation (1257) until the 1950s. The first part of the paper presents evidence to corroborate a theory that, in spite of a common misconception, medieval façades were not left in their raw condition but plastered. Obviously, plaster did not recall its modern clear and even equivalent, but was greyish and bumpy. Usually this plaster received a multicolour painted finish. Surprisingly for our contemporaries, stone details such as window and door stone work were also painted, the practice being common until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ornamentation methods varied throughout the ages, though rich colouring was popular and characteristic for Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Classicism. Dimmed colours as seen in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were only occasional in fact. The older the building, the more plaster and painted layers it would receive. Learning about this layering takes us through the history of the building.

**Keywords:** Krakow, *façades*, colours, history, preservation

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## FOREWORD

“Palimpsest” is a notion used widely in literary works, archival science and history. An encyclopedia defines palimpsest as “a text hand written on a material that has been previously used and from which the earlier writing has been erased”. In a metaphorical understanding, the word “palimpsest” will mean “a text of many meanings or of multilayered semantics”. The latter may also be referred to as *façades*. These are evidence of a specific era, and with the passing of time will also be a reminder of former times. Interpretation of symbols contained in *façades*, and particularly of colours, aids to identify old tastes and moods.

Subsequent generations would erase traces of their predecessors, not to the extent, however, that nothing would survive. Hence we may often encounter this allegorical palimpsest in *façades*. Palimpsest in the strict sense of this word has been subject to protective measures for more than 200 years. What about *façades*? In theory, a breakthrough in measures applied for their protection dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it followed the concepts of Alois Riegl and Max Dvořak. This is in line with the entire approach to a relic as a structure often characterized by numerous layers where each layer deserves conservation (Krasnowolski 2008: 37–38). But, practice does not necessarily follow theory.

## LAYERING IN HISTORY

In the year 1934 Bogdan Treter, the conservator for the Province of Krakow, while visiting Wieliczka recorded an order in his diary that the tower of the Salt Mine castle be renovated: “so that the walls are left without the finish due to the excessive use of stone” (Dyba et al. 2000: 57). In the light of contemporary expertise such a statement did not require any further comments. Removing plaster from medieval buildings in order to recover the presumed original outlook was – even 30 years after Riegl! – an axiom beyond any doubt. It was simply acknowledged that a building dating back beyond than the 16<sup>th</sup> century could not be plastered (Dettloff 2006: 335–344). This belief was rooted in the ideological approach of Viollet-le-Duc, a great conservator of French relics as well as in the expertise of German conservators, who for almost 100 years had been removing plaster from all buildings that were intended to have a medieval look. The decision to remove plaster from the tower of the city hall had been taken in 1930 (Dettloff 2006: 341–342, Komorowski

& Sudacka 2007: 92–93), that is four years before Treter made the above mentioned note. We do know today, and perhaps it was not a secret then, that the tower had been plastered since the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Under the scrutiny of a conservator, everything what had the “gothic” shape, would shake off this inelegant plaster dress. Zygmunt Hendel and Tadeusz Stryjeński deleted the plaster from the Church of Saint Cross (Tomkowicz 1896: 79) at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 1), while Sławomir Odrzywolski took the plaster off the eastern wing of the Augustian monastery at the beginning of the next century (Tomkowicz 1908: 72). Justifiably, respectful buildings as those could not be marred by lichen covered plaster. Lamentably, the bell tower of the Church of St. Mark, known to have been erected by master Krzysztof Żelasko in 1617, was “peeled” as well. As a result, there came to light poor building skills of the craftsmen, who must have known that the building would be plastered anyway (Paciorek 1996: 198–203, Komorowski & Follprecht 2007: 235).



**Fig. 1.** The Church of St. Cross (the 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century and the 15<sup>th</sup> century) and a part of the utility building adjoining the Słowacki Theatre (1893) as seen from the eastern side. Plastering was removed from the Church walls at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The utility building retained its original plastering (phot. P. Komorowski)



**Fig. 2.** The buildings on the premises of mayor Henryk at Bracka Street (circa 1300), reconstruction by Waldemar Komorowski and Piotr Opaliński. Walls of the central building on the plot – i.e. the stone tower in the centre of the plot – were plastered

Contemporary conservation projects, however, tend to maintain and justify this state. Careful renovation works were therefore carried out in the case of the wall in the chancel of the Church of St. Cross, where after conservation works of Hendel and Stryjeński there had been left odd mortar joints, previously not reported (subsequent conservation works maintained this conduct out of respect for old conservation methods). The town hall tower was exposed as brick and stone, although we do know its original look from before 1930 and earlier times. A proposal for partial recovery of the plaster was rejected by professor Wiktor Zin in 1997, though the professor himself found in the 1960s evidence of painted decoration covering the entire tower back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Zin 1966: 123). This would be an effect of inertia or being used to aesthetics of a presumably plain medieval wall, which evokes different than contemporary and seemingly more archaic impressions.

What was the truth though? One cannot deliver a general answer, however, run for a dozen years, the research into medieval architecture has proven that plastering houses was a common practice from the very beginning, that is from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Some evidence indicates that the same practice was used for churches. Plastering in temples received a paint coating (Łużyniecka 1999:

ill. 20–24, Dettloff 2006: 344, Raue 2010: 31–45). Plaster did not necessarily display the same properties as its contemporary equivalent – it was not even and fair, but uneven and dirty, containing many impurities, especially crushed coal. It played the same role though as it protected the surface of the wall by, at least, evening out the unevenness. It must have been quite an expense, too, but its application made buildings look less like fortress, by softening the raw image of originally stone edifices; it also added an extra heating layer. Numerous remainders of plaster can be observed in the Szara Tenement House, the Palace of Krzysztofory and many other houses, in which evidence of old plastering was found (Cechosz & Holcer 2007: 12–23). On this basis I have introduced plaster on façades of the mayor house in Bracka Street (Fig. 2); the house being reconstructed as a theoretical model, as well as the Town Hall dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

There is no information whether façades of houses dating back to the late Gothic period would receive a plaster layer or a thin film of white paint, and we may never learn this since all protective layers have been removed from these houses so far. In tenement houses, the basic element of façades was the front, made of careful brickwork (partially vitrified bricks, called “zendrówka”), separated by thick and carefully made

mortar joints. The contrast between the front and bright stonework was then considered aesthetic. As a matter of fact, the historian Jan Długosz called brick precious material (Węclawowicz 1987: 173). There are very few examples of exposed brick façades, which would not be transformed during conservation works – in houses in 8 Szpitalna Street (Remer 1938: 259–260, Krasnowolski 1998: 54–55) (Fig. 3) and 14 Mikołajska Street the original front is only partially preserved. Worth mentioning are façades of houses in 4 and 6 Sienna Street, largely authentic. The façade of the former was built in a so called “Polish style brickwork (header + stretcher), where headers are made of vitrified bricks (*zendrówka*), thus rendering a pattern” (Jamroz 1983: 144–145). Vitrified bricks are nowhere in the recently exposed façade of the house in 6 Sienna Street, though the brickwork bond is analogous. According to popular belief, façades of gothic houses were made of plain brick. This opinion was somehow borne out by carefully made mortar joints. The viability of this concept was challenged by Stanisław Jamroz some 30 years ago, when he suggested that façades could have been decorated by coatings. The statement was much ahead of slowly developing opinions of our community when it comes to the issue of façades of medieval Krakow houses and acceptance of reconstructing authentic medieval solutions, which popularity confirmed by architectural researches results has been growing in other cities. An extensive review of those can be found in the volume published in 2010 and containing resources related to the conference *Colours of historical façades from the Middle Ages until contemporary times*, which to some extent summarized excavations carried out for the last 50 years. Exposures made in medieval façades proved that in the majority of them “the brick wall was thinly, almost transparently, plastered and on such base the actual brickwork motif together with white mortar joints were painted [...]. Plaster painting would have various forms. Imitations of precious material obtained by means of painting were common [...]. Also, a motif of stone blocks was rendered with the use of colourful mortar joints [...]. Stone bars of window traceries and stone friezes were also imitated” (Guttmejer 2010: 17–18). Examples of such illusionary decoration were paintings (together with window imitations)

on the façades of tenement houses in Brzeg and Wrocław (Chorowska & Lasota 2004: 43, ill. 7). According to the text of Bartłomiej Stein written in 1506, tenement houses in the Market Square of Wrocław had “decorated façades, painted different colours” (Pieńczewska 1978: 41). On the basis of research into the façades of the Cloth Hall (Sukiennice), which was decorated “with a polychromy containing a thin, only a few-centimeter thick mortar layer and painted red with white mortar joints” (Jamroz 1983: 145), one may assume that tenement houses of Krakow could have been similarly decorated, whereas their stonework could have been “colourful”. Some mansions too had “painted” façades, among others, the residence of Kurozwęcki dating back to the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, located in the corner between Podzamcze Street and Kanonicza Street (Bogdanowska 1972: 20).



**Fig. 3.** The tenement house at 8 Szpitalna Street (the 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century). Plastering of its medieval brick facade was stripped off during restoration works carried out in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (phot. Ł. Holcer)

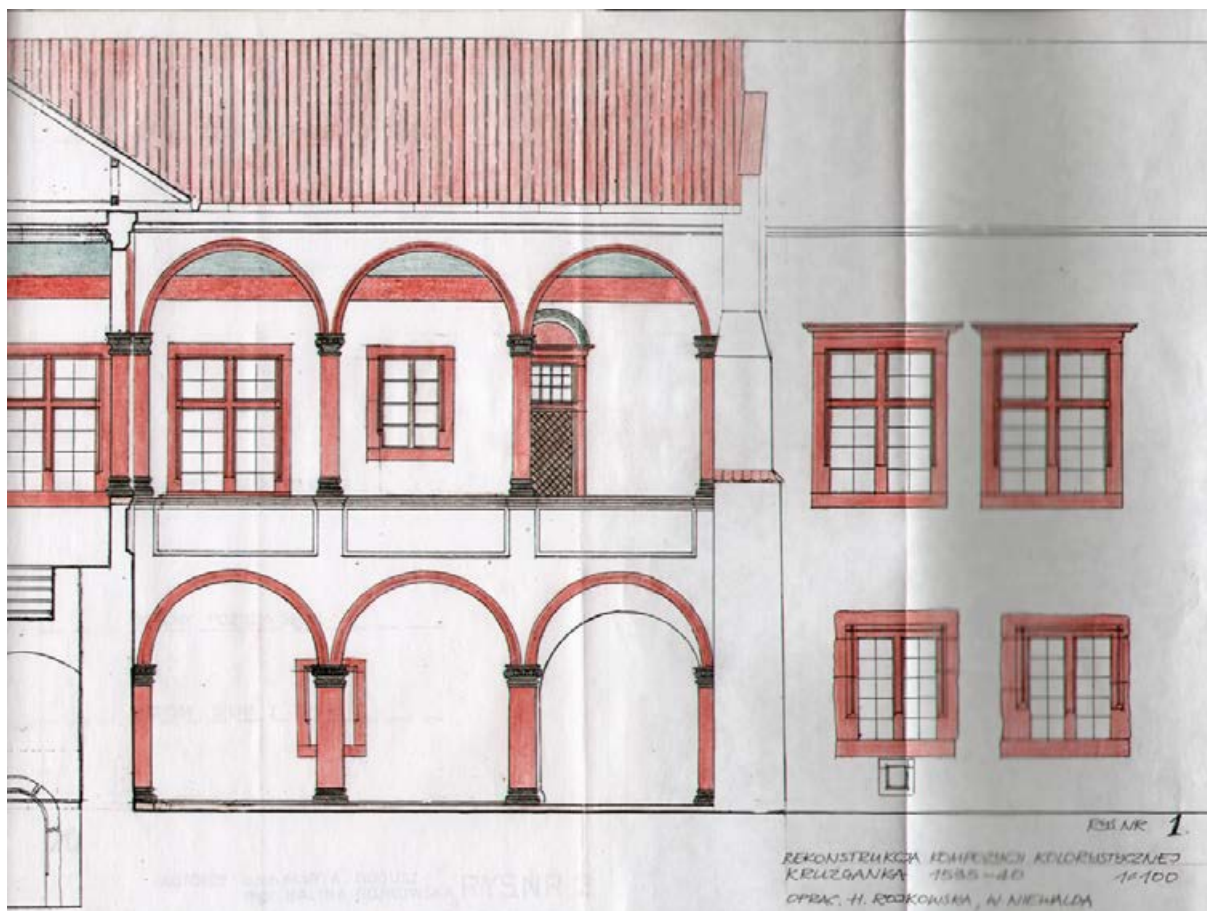


Fig. 4. The palace at 18 Kanonicza Street (the second quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century). Colouring reconstruction of the back of the building by Halina Rojkowska and Waldemar Niewalda

A deeply rooted inclination for multicolour did not change in the Renaissance. On the basis of descriptions and preserved relics, Zygmunt Hendel reconstructed the castle of king Sigismund I as extraordinarily colourful. In practice, however, Renaissance buildings were deemed to remain “white”, in line with the common belief that the Renaissance, as a tribute to the Antiquity, was supposed to cut itself off multicolour. While the Antiquity had not been colourless, the Renaissance was not monochrome. Fronts were painted intense warm and cold, also contrasting colours, just as in the case of the back façade of the mansion in 18 Kanonicza Street. According to Waldemar Niewalda and Halina Rojkowska, column shafts and stonework holes were red, whereas the base and capital were painted graphite (Fig. 4).

In the Baroque a tendency to paint façades many different colours was even more common.

Contrasting colour combinations and use of materials imitating precious materials gained popularity, just as chiaroscuro effects and multi-shades. There is not enough time now to sketch basic trends in façade decoration for the period of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century up to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Let me just mention one key breakthrough. Until the Saxon times contrasting combinations of fair walls and intense decorative elements were extensively used, though red, green, ochre and even black walls were also common. From the early decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was marked a distinct trend of abandoning such a colour combination and painting façades blue or grey which was then coupled with fair decorations. Let me propose some contrasting examples originating from Wrocław – the earlier era is represented by the monastery of the Knights of the Cross, the new era – by the Church of St. Ursula’s Order (Brzezowski 2010: 118, ill. 13, 14). An

equivalent of the said Wrocław church in Krakow is the façade of the Church of Piarists originating from the 1750s (Fig. 5). The trend was common in Kraków also in secular architecture, though it developed a local modification – in the entry of the analyst Kazimierz Girtler made in 1809, information about a house in Szpitalna Street was found; grey walls of the house were “painted grey around windows which resembled stone frames, just as it had been used in the times of the king Jan III and the Saxons” (Girtler 1971: 59).



*Fig. 5. The façade of the Church of Piarists (1759–1761, Franciszek Placidi). Cool colouring originating from the erection period (phot. P. Komorowski)*

One should remember although impossible to credit now, but then a popular practice of tinting stonework. Established by the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century theory and expertise was a belief that stone portals and window frames were not painted (let us call this “plain stone” aesthetics), however this has not been sustained by recent research. According to the architecture historian Wojciech Brzezowski, “falsity of this fact is borne out by results of stratigraphic tests. Stone tinting has been

evidenced by written texts. [...]. Results of restoration works carried out in Austria and Germany prove ubiquity of painting stone elements of both Baroque and earlier façades [...]. In great Baroque monasteries in Austria painting of stone elements of façades was almost entirely recovered. Lamentably, an erroneous conservation theory led to removing the entire old painting during conservation works in many historical monuments as it was deemed secondary and unnecessary. Natural stone was unreasonably exposed even in those spots where its original use had been for technological purposes and did not bring in any aesthetic value” (Brzezowski 2010: 119–121).

An important element of a colourful façade was the colour of woodwork and grating. One must acknowledge the concept of Jan Tajchman stating that the modern times opted for colours ranging from dark olive, through bright grey, bright brown to even red. Green, a legacy of the Middle Ages, was in vogue also in Renaissance, though it was reportedly very expensive. Green would maintain its popularity long into the Modern Times. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century at the Wawel Castle both windows and shutters were painted green, whereas iron shutters and gratings were painted blue and green. Some windows and shutters were even painted red. It was only late into the Baroque when brighter colours, most likely silver and grey, appeared. White was appreciated in 1815. Popularity of red did not fade away though. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw windows in Toruń painted red (Tajchman 1979: 33), and this tradition persisted until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 6).

Let us now come back to the mainstream. In spite of suppressing the inclination for a shocking colour combination, at the end of the Baroque contrasting colours would still be widely used. Evidence of the above was found in images of the Market Square and Krakow’s main streets in the last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where numerous houses would be painted carmine, yellow, green or brown (very intense), with contrasting decorations. Nowadays, these are sometimes reconstructed.

For purposes of a single stay of the king Stanisław August Poniatowski in Krakow in 1787 the city hall was painted pink (Fig. 7). The use of pink and the like warm colours was established in the late Baroque colour trends. They were used in,



**Fig. 6.** *The Mikolajska Street close to Gródek at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An oil painting by Teodor Baltazar Stachowicz, The Historical Museum of the City of Krakow, record no. 244/VIII. Bright colouring of façades; the Mikolajska Gate, the Church of Dominicans and convent painted various shades of white. Window shutters and frames of the house in the right corner painted red*

among others, subsequent versions of façades of the Church of St. Anne. This is not perhaps the place to refer back to them, however, one may say that nine changes of the façade colour resulted in the colour not quite reminiscent of the original shade, gaudy for contemporaries and including ideas which presently would be unacceptable, such as plastering stone elements and painting brick motif imitation (Dettloff 2010: 131–134). The history of the colour used for the façade of the Church of St. Anne shows how a historical monument was adapted to fit the tastes of a particular age, and this is also observed of late. We do like the façade now, but would people of the Baroque like it as well?

The Classicism marked its beginnings in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by introducing monochrome ideas, however, it did not abandon colour intensity. Images of the Market Square and the streets of Krakow (Figs 6, 8) show houses painted the same colours as before – olive, blue, carmine.



**Fig. 7.** *The town hall (in the centre), the granary (to the left), the tower of the town hall and prison in 1794, as seen from the west. A part of the painting by Michał Stachowicz, The Historical Museum of the City of Krakow, record no. 786/VIII. All the buildings were plastered – the town hall was painted pink, the granary was grey, the tower and the prison were painted white*



**Fig. 8.** Tenement houses at 13 Rynek Główny. Here seen before renovation works carried out in 1838 and subsequent joining of the buildings. A watercolour by Józef Louis stored in the Jagiellonian Library, record no 5925, card no. 273. Bright colouring of facades, with colour marked decoration elements

There were more and more yellow and ochre shades (Borowiejska-Birkenmajerowa & Demel 1963: 103), and these would prevail in the course of time (Fig. 9). The Biedermeier would also use a delicate decoration (Fig. 10). The trend of bordering windows with darker bands would still remain.

After the 1850s neostyles became omnipresent. Architecture was then assumed to be single-coloured (Demel 1958: 629), perhaps in a bit exaggerated and doctrinal mode (Fig. 11). In hindsight orthodoxy may too prove harmful. There are numerous examples of multi-coloured façades, which owe their character to slight colour variations, or even two contrasting colours used on a façade, which a front would not partially be plastered (Fig. 1) or covered with sgraffito. A tendency for tinting façades was always strong, particularly among contractors, however this was not appropriately embraced by existing styles.

In the Art Nouveau 'multicolour' becomes a policy (Wallis 1984: 166–168). It can be obtained through the use of paint but also texture and material. The layout of these would either be subtle or contrasting, but always tasteful. Buildings were a sculpture or a painting. Among such successful and prestigious projects one may single out the Old Theatre (Stary Teatr, 1903–1906) (Fig. 12) and the Palace of Arts (Pałac Sztuki, 1898–1901).



**Fig. 9.** The eastern half of the Market Square, as seen from the north. A watercolour from 1860, The National Museum in Krakow, record no. III, 10067. Bright colouring of facades





**Fig. 10.** The façade of the tenement house at 47 Floriańska Street (1821–1827) upon recovering the Biedermeier colouring (phot. P. Komorowski)



**Fig. 11.** The façade of the house of Jan Matejko, 41 Floriańska Street (1873, Tomasz Pryliński). Monochromatic colouring originated in Historism (phot. P. Komorowski)



**Fig. 12.** The Old Theatre (Stary Teatr) (1903–1906, Tadeusz Stryjeński, Franciszek Mączyński). Recovered Art Nouveau colouring originating from the erection period

Similarly to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one of important new materials used for finishing façades was so called Roman plaster, while in the interwar period saw the use of stucco. These found application in the finishing of large prestigious edifices around the Old Town (banks in Wielopole, Kleparz, the Music Hall) and around the City Park (Planty) (the Stock Exchange in św. Tomasza Street) as well as the ornamentation of façades of old tenement houses, palaces, department stores, in which case one may notice a comeback of palimpsest.

## CONCLUSION

In Old Krakow we are surrounded almost exclusively by façades of multilayered palimpsest-type structure. We may well remember that the outer mask hides much more valuable, and what we can be sure of, a much older face.

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