

EPITAPHS

What you see in front of you is an epitaph, or a short text honoring the deceased. These may be inscribed on tombstones or plaques.

Epitaphs could exist on tombstones, engraved on the tomb, or on a plaque hung on a church wall, near the burial site. They are usually made of stone, cast iron or bronze. The decoration of the plaque depends on the imagination and creativity of those who ordered them. There are both: simple forms - with a coat of arms and inscription, as well as sophisticated ones - that are richly gemmed, depicting one or more biblical scenes or a portrait of the deceased.

In the Cathedral Basilica of the Holy Cross, there are as many as 27 such commemorative epitaphs. They are mainly dedicated to clergymen, representatives of eminent noble families, townspeople, patricians and their close ones. Undoubtedly, they are a part the history of Silesian artist handicrafting, the inscriptions as well depict the history of the city.

One of the most beautiful epitaphs from the 1630's was made of golden polychrome sandstone. Its founder was Jerzy Skopek, a curator of the collegiate church and an Opole canon. It presents four scenes. The lowest one depicts crucified Jesus Christ and kneeling Saint Lutgardis, a precursor of services devoted to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. On the other side of the cross, Jerzy Skopek himself is kneeling. There are inscriptions on both sides of the painting. The first one says: "For God, the best, the greatest, for the Virgin Mother of God and for his Patron Saints in heaven." The second informs that the founder "without fear and not out of greed" created this epitaph for his parents: town senator Baltazar Skopek, and his wife Helena Weissenberger.

Just above this scene, there is another depicting Saint George, the founder's patron, fighting with a dragon. In the background of this scene, a mysterious woman with a sheep can be observed. The biggest scene of the epitaph, the third from the bottom, represents three wise men giving a bow in a renaissance chamber. The role of the three Wise Men are played by: Baltazar, George and Helena Skopek, accompanied by Saint Helena holding a cross in her hands, who is a patron of George's mother. At the bottom of the beautiful epitaph, there is a scene illustrating the Holy Trinity with an inscription reading "Holy Trinity, have mercy on us."

It is also worthwhile to pay attention to an epitaph consisting of two scenes from the XVIth century, devoted to Dorota Zybrzecka. She was married to Joahim Jendriczek, a patrician from Opole who founded this piece of art. It is bricked on the northern nave of the church. Its bottom scene depicts the birth of Jesus Christ with Virgin Mary kneeling at the crib, and among others, Saint Joseph bending over the crib. The scene also illustrates a bull and a donkey. In the left upper corner of the scene, one can see an angel announcing the birth of the Savior. Also shown in this scene is the poinsettia. However, the upper scene represents the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, standing with his hands up in the air and covered with a coat, with sleeping soldiers surrounding him.

There is also a beautiful epitaph plaque placed at the side entrance to the Cathedral on the left side of the sacristy, founded in 1608 by Jerzy Sebastian Stephecius, an Opole dean. The epitaph consists of one scene where the Virgin Mary, dressed in a loose vestment is holding Jesus Christ, who has been taken down from the cross. Her left hand holds up his head and her right hand holds up his inert body. A radiant aureole surrounds his head and under the scene, with an inscription: "Support those who are miserable, buoy those who are fainthearted and comfort those who cry."

In the northern nave of the Opole collegiate church, there is another epitaph depicting Jesus Christ, sitting at the tomb with a thorned crown on his head, holding a whip and twigs. There are tools at his feet referring to the crucifixion which include: nails, a hammer, pliers, dice, and a jar with water. There is a column used for whipping, with a cock standing at the top. This symbolizes the cock which was supposed to crow three times, the same number of times Peter renounced the Risen Christ. There is an inscription under the scene, which informs that the epitaph was founded in 1627 by Grzegorz Schraiber, an Opole patrician, for his wife Margaret.

The walk among the epitaphs in the Opole cathedral may be an interesting journey through time. Exquisitely gemmed with coats of arms, or plant motifs plaques indicate how important the deceased and their families were. They are a sign of respect and a reminder for the posterity to pray on behalf of those who passed away. And that is the reason why they shouldn't be passed by indifferently.