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Authenticity and significance in wooden buildings – the problems of conservation of orthodox churches from Poland

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Abstract

The paper critically discusses problems of conservation of wooden orthodox temples from south-eastern part of Poland (particular attention is directed towards the interior polychrome and iconostasis) and thus appropriate methodological approach to their restoration. Special focus is placed on analyzing where to look for significance and authenticity of such wooden historical buildings, the issue of “valuable contribution” as well as the legitimacy of the concept of “minimum intervention”. There is also discussion of what must be taken into account when planning conservation action to ensure that the authenticity of wooden temple will be maintained.

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1. Introduction

The wooden architecture represents one of the most magnificent examples of built heritage almost all over the world. However it is justified to say that its importance is especially noticeable in building tradition of Russia, Far Eastern countries (just to mention Japan), as well as Northern and Eastern Europe. It was there that it had been brought to the highest perfection and to this day is considered one of the most important expressions of local material and spiritual culture.

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Among the wooden architectural structures which were erected there over the centuries it is noteworthy to indicate the special beauty of wooden vernacular churches from the south-eastern part of Poland. Their concentration in this area is considered by many as “the one of the biggest in the world and compared only with some regions in Scandinavia” [Duda, Michniewski, Michniewska, Wypych, 2006]. Majority of those temples still existing until today were erected between late 14th and early 20th century and it is represented by two types of churches: so called “Catholic churches” – built for the Polish, Roman-Catholic communities (Photo 1, 2) and so called “Orthodox churches” – built for the Ukrainian, Greek-Catholic communities (Photo 3). This division into two architecturally different types of church directly results from the two separable Christian denominational traditions that coexisted in these lands for centuries and had developed distinct forms of religious ritual and thus also forms of the temple.



Photo 1 - The Catholic Church of Sts. Philip and St. James in Sękowa (Poland), wooden temple built around 1520, on the UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2003 (source: Fot. T. Tomaszek)



Photo 2 - The Catholic Church of Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Michael Archangel in Haczów (Poland), the oldest and biggest wooden gothic temple in Europe, erected in the 14th century, on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites since 2003 (source: Fot. T. Tomaszek)

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