**“CITRI ET AUREA”, THE JOINT PROJECT STAGED BY THE BOBOLI GARDENS AND THE WILANÓW MUSEUM BEGINS**

***The project which aims to develop the historic collections of citrus trees conserved by the two museum institutions is ready to bud. “Like in the court of the Grand Duke Cosimo III - states Director Schmidt – we are currently witnessing the continuation of the partnerships forged between Tuscany and Poland to develop and preserve our historic botanical heritage”***

The **Boboli Gardens** and the **Museum of the Palace of King John III Sobieski in Wilanów** are joining forces to make the most of their heritage. And the city of Florence is the starting point for the “Citri et Aurea” project, which aims to develop the historic botanical collections of citrus trees conserved by the two museum institutions.

The project, launched recently with the visit of three Polish specialists to Florence, will offer an in-depth insight into the relations between Italy and Poland in the field of gardening, favouring the exchange of skills and good practices regarding the creation of a collection of citrus trees and how to maintain it properly.

**The Boboli Gardens boasts an extraordinary botanical collection indubitably considered one of a kind worldwide, with over 500 pots containing citrus trees of approximately 90 different varieties**. Over twenty of these are ancient varieties from Medicean times. The Boboli citrus plant collection is one of the most important botanical collections in Europe, started by Cosimo I himself back in 1500.
In fact the Medici were the first ones to take an interest in managing the layout of the Boboli Gardens and in 1500 they created the Italian-style garden model that would subsequently be emulated in many other European courts. Over time, the space has grown to span its current area of approximately 30,000 square metres. Divided into different sections, Boboli is a veritable open-air museum populated by ancient and Renaissance statues. It is decorated with grottos, notably including the extremely famous one created by Bernardo Buontalenti, and large fountains, such as those of *Neptune* and the *Ocean*. The subsequent Lorenese and Savoy dynasties, in addition to enriching the architectural heritage of the gardens, also preserved their biodiversity and added further specimens of the plants from the collections inherited from the Medici period.

One outstandingly evocative visual is offered by the terraced vineyard area where the eighteenth century Kaffeehaus pavilion is located, a rare example of Rococò architecture in Tuscany. Then there is the Lemon Grove, built by Zanobi del Rosso between 1777 and 1778, where some of the most ancient varieties are preserved. Many of these were developed by the Medici family’s gardeners, such as the *Citrus limonimedica Florentina,* also well-known as the Bizzarria, which dates back to the mid-1600s, a ‘freak of nature’ (as it was defined by the botanists of the time) which produces fruits that combine the lemon, the sour orange and the lime. Finally the ‘Adam’s apple’(one of the oldest citrus trees, its fruits were offered as tokens of love by young men to the young ladies of the time).

The project “Citri et Aurea” is inspired by a historic episode of great importance for the birth of the botanical collections of the Polish museum in Wilanów.

Following the battle of Vienna in 1683, profitable links were formed between Tuscany and Poland, through the Medicean court of the **Grand Duke Cosimo III** and the court of King John III, in [P](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingua_polacca)olish **Jan Sobieski** (sovereign of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from 1674 to 1695).

The Polish king had commissioned the construction of a luxurious Baroque palace on the outskirts of Warsaw, in place of the ancient village of Milanów, and he planned to use it as a summer residence and as a venue in which the court could be entertained. In 1683, when working out a fitting landscaping plan for the extensive palace grounds, Sobieski contacted Cosimo III through an ambassador, enquiring whether the Grand Duke would be willing to send some of the plants from his famous collections to Poland.

The letters written by the Polish Ambassador to the Grand Duke of Tuscany Cosimo III de’ Medici are conserved in the State Archive in Florence. These detail Sobieski’s request for some of the rare and exquisite plants grown in the Florentine gardens to be sent to Poland to decorate the royal gardens as a tangible sign of their friendship. “*His Majesty has explicitly ordered me to ask for one of the favours Your Majesty often grants, and kindly request a few young plants from your area, as rare and precious as you can spare, so that they can be used to decorate his gardens, in which he also wishes to have reminders of Your Majesty.*” (1683 Firenze, ASFI, Miscellanea Medicea, series 368, enclosure 1).

The letter goes on to refer that the plants would have had to arrive by the middle of the following April, accompanied by a courier who would be capable of keeping them safe during the journey and would water them every day. It continues specifying that, in order to keep them in optimum condition, the plants would have to be duly packed with the roots in a root ball, wrapped in fabric canvas and placed in crates with openings that would enable them to be watered: “*but these would need to reach Poland in the middle of next April and for this reason I know that this will not be possible unless they are sent with an express messenger, who would have to be informed about how to look after them, and water them every day, having them placed in a crate open at the bottom, so that from there he could water the roots, which would need to be completely wrapped in material and kept in some soil*”. (*Ibid*)

The document goes on to list the plants requested by Sobieski for his gardens: Adam’s Apple (pinkish apples with a delicious scent), peaches, nectarines, white cherry blossoms, Pescia asparagus, fig trees and any others that the Grand Duke’s gardeners might have deemed suitable for sending to Poland.

And indeed, on 6 March 1683, eight crates of plants left for Warsaw. Inside, the species listed by the historical sources notably included: The Adam’s Apple citrus plant (Citrus lumia 'Pomum Adami'), certain varieties of peach (Prunus persica), the Sour Cherry (Prunus cerasus), the Pescia Asparagus (Asparagus officinalis ‘from Pescia’), the ‘Brogiotto’ fig tree (Ficus carica ‘Brogiotto’) and others too. As indicated in the letter, an Italian gardener accompanied the plants from Florence to Wilanów, ensuring that they were preserved as carefully as possible.

In the 16th century, gardens were associated with the golden age and, specifically, with the eleventh of the Twelve Labours of Hercules: legend has it that Hercules found himself having to face the challenge of stealing three golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides nymphs, the location of which was unknown. After a long pilgrimage, Hercules finally managed to obtain the apples from the giant Atlas, the only one who knew where the precious fruits were to be found.

In the fountains and sculptural groups of the numerous gardens adorning their palaces and villas, the Medici frequently referred to the legend of Hercules, associating the virtues of the mythical hero and his talents of strength combined with far-sightedness, to their own dynasty.

In particular, the citrus trees became an important symbolic element within the gardens, precisely because they could immediately be associated, due to their shape and colour, to the golden apples of the Hesperides. This motif spread from the gardens of Florence and Tuscany throughout Europe, resulting in the creation of some extraordinary collections of citrus trees.

King John III was known as ‘Polish Hercules’ (*Hercules Polonus*) throughout his reign, due to his continuous references to the hero and his use of images related to the myth of the Hesperides, as can be seen in is residence in Wilanów, the decorations of the palace and the surrounding Baroque grounds. His court architects and gardeners created a true paradise of citrus trees which, together with the group of statues, was purposely designed to glorify the figure of the sovereign. Unfortunately, over the centuries, these royal collections were gradually lost.

In 2016, the museum launched an important project that aimed to rebuild its botanical collections: 38 orange trees were planted in characteristic oak vases, rebuilt based on the paintings of Bernardo Bellotto (conserved in Warsaw in The Royal Castle Museum). Currently, the Wilanów collection contains over 100 plants of the following species: common lemon (Citrus limon), sweet orange (Citrus × sinensis), mandarin (Citrus reticulata), grapefruit (Citrus × paradisi) and sour orange (Citrus × aurantium).

**The Director of the Uffizi Galleries, Eike Schmidt**, stated: “We are pleased to be key partners in this project *which will strengthen the bonds between Florence and Poland. Thanks to the diligence of the Grand Duke first of all, and then the Boboli gardeners over the centuries, we can now boast an exceptional botanical heritage. We are witnessing the continuation of the partnerships forged between Tuscany and Poland back in the court of the Grand Duke Cosimo III, and these strive to develop the Boboli Gardens and preserve their plants, which are the protagonists of their history*”.

“*The reign of King John III – commented* **Paweł Jaskanis**, **Director of the Museum of the Palace in Wilanów,** - *was a period in which the artistic and scientific relationships between Poland and Florence were reborn. And another field in which the Sobieski and Medici courts collaborated has emerged from the rich correspondence they exchanged: gardens. Thanks to the kindness and friendship of Cosimo III, the Polish king obtained many exotic plants, including citrus trees, which decorated his new residence in Wilanów. More than 300 years after these events, the Museum of the Palace of King John III in Wilanów has joined forces with the Uffizi Galleries (Boboli Gardens) to rebuild the historic collection of citrus trees. This project also reinforces the scientific contacts led by Adam Adamanty Kochański, Jesuit, lecturer at the University of Florence, mathematician and royal librarian”*.

The project is funded by the Ministry for Culture and the National Heritage of the Polish Republic, within the scope of the programme “Inspiring Culture”, with the support of the Polish institutions present in Italy (*Istituto Polacco* and *Accademia Polacca delle Scienze* in Rome); due to its importance, the project has also received the patronage of the European Network of Historic Gardens.