
THE LEGENDS OF THE BLACK MADONNA



In 1430 the monastery at Czestochowa was attacked by the heretical Hussites. They plundered the church and attempted to carry away the treasured Madonna but in this they met with mysterious difficulties. They could not start their wagons; their horses steadfastly refused to pull. Angered, one of the soldiers drew his sword and ruthlessly slashed the cheek of the Madonna again and again. Finally, having thrown the picture aside, they had no trouble leaving. The Black Madonna remained, desecrated but enduring.

Then, in 1655, under attack by tens of thousands of Swedes from the North, pagan Turks from the South, and Russian Cossacks from the East, the enemy surrounded Czestochowa again and demanded that its force of only one hundred defenders within surrender. By all military calculations, the monastery should have fallen in only hours; but the battle raged for six weeks. Finally, exhausted and stunned, the enemy gave up and retreated.

The result was startling: a new spirit and strength awakened in the Polish people. In gratitude to Our Lady's intercessions, King Jan Kazimierz made his now-celebrated vows in the name of the whole nation: he established the Blessed Virgin as the Queen of Poland; promised that all Polish people would remain faithful to God; and vowed that in Poland never again would any group of people suffer oppression.

Here, where myth and history intersect, the oldest and most treasured artifact of the Felidans exemplifies the rare needlework for which the order is justly famous.

"With only the fire-blackened faces and hands painted, the rest are all stitches, stitches, stitches by the thousand and, in hues and shades of hues which it would seem only a master of pigment could mix, after years of study; yet these young girls sort their silks and fill in their embroidery frames with the quick eye and rapid fingers of the born artist.

"The entire frame is the work of children from the convent in Livonia, embodying symbols of Poland and Lithuania, commemorating the uniting of two kingdoms; the seal of Columbia — that land of the free where so many of our race have found our lost freedom; as well as the Seal of the State of Michigan and the coat of arms of the fair City of the Strait, beloved Detroit. Also embroidered are the 'heart' of the Felician Sisters, and the constantly chanted 'Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis.'

"It is a work of rare beauty and a memorial of skill, patience and enormous artistic merit."
—Detroit Sunday News, 26 March 1893