

About salt carving

Those who know it say it is like a woman – tough, but fragile and unpredictable. Usually silvery grey, it sometimes hides white inclusions. Carelessly struck by a chisel, it cracks, but in talented hands, it willingly changes into desired shapes. Salt, which is what we are talking about, has been used by miners for centuries as sculpting material, and their works decorate, among others, the Tourist Route.

“Salt is a difficult material, but undoubtedly beautiful. Brittle, it reacts to the chisel in various ways. Sometimes it plays tricks, it is not monochromatic and sometimes it happens that a detail unexpectedly appears in the transparent salt – a nose or an eye. On the other hand, there are no inclusions in spiza salt, which means it is uniform in colour”, explains the sculptor miner Piotr Starowicz.

It is difficult to say who and when first felt the need to beautify the mine with sculptures. The pious miners created underground chapels, decorating them with wooden figures of the saints. Salt, however, had an advantage over wood in that it did not burn. In the old days, fire used to be a frequent guest in the Wieliczka underground and royal commissions banned the construction of wooden chapels, leaning towards those that used salt. In the 17th century, an anonymous artist (or artists) carved St Anthony’s Chapel in a lump of green salt. Passion scenes, statues of patron saints, angelic and royal images, architectural elements – the place of worship is a delight for visitors.

However, the most impressive is St Kinga’s Chapel. It is a chapel – or rather church – carved in salt and illuminated with huge chandeliers made from halite crystals. Brothers Józef and Tomasz Markowski, as well as Antoni Wyrodek – these were three miners, self-taught sculptors, who conjured up this unique sanctuary. The chapel was founded at the end of the 19th century, but decoration work continued until the the 1960s. Individual sculptures and bas-reliefs tell the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Talented contemporary miners also leave their works in the temple, such as the statue of John Paul II.

The first tourist route was created by the Austrians. Many secular sculptures appeared on the route to amaze the guests. For example, the mythological figures of Neptune and Vulcan were placed in the Lętów Chamber. Archduke Franz Karl was especially commemorated with a salt obelisk for his two visits to the mine (the chamber is located on the Mining Route).

The Copernicus Monument, the legend of St Kinga’s ring, the bust of Casimir the Great, the dwarves populating the Kunegunda shaft station, the monument to Józef Piłsudski – there is no shortage of salt art works on the contemporary tourist route. Among those who have contributed to the Mine, Władysław Hapek and Mieczysław Kluzek stand out, while among contemporary artists, Stanisław Anioł, Juliusz Chimiak, Paweł Janowski, Piotr Starowicz, Marek Janowski and Marek Stachura are noteworthy. They continue the centuries-old tradition of carving in Wieliczka salt.