

FOR GENERAL JOY, IN HONOR OF THE RULING: FIREWORKS IN THE 18TH CENTURY

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In the 18th c. fireworks became the usual attribute of the most important state celebrations of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They were used for the anniversaries of the rulers, the official entry of officials, the festivities of the nobility, prepared for special church celebrations. Fireworks were described in the press of that time and often mentioned as an attribute for occasional poetry. The correspondence of the nobility testifies that fireworks raised the live interest of the public: performances of fire were awaited as an exclusive event, they were mentioned among the important news.

In the 18th c. fireworks were often prepared in the space of a city and became a major public spectacle, the audience of which were all the residents of the city. The texts describing the shows of fire always emphasized the abundance of observers, provided their reaction of wonder and admiration. However, the purpose of the fire performances was related to the political life of the nobility and representation purposes. The nobility was the most frequent customer of the fireworks. The representation goals are shown by the fact that it was important to publish in the press the name of the customer of the fireworks and the large funds spent on them. Officers, often mastering several fields of engineering, serving in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania army and for aristocrats were employed in the professional design of fireworks.

The designers of fireworks in creating the programs of shows most often relied on the steady canon of baroque symbolism. In the decorations of the 18th c. Grand Duchy of Lithuania emblems and Latin inscriptions still held great significance. Coats of arms and insignias mainly inspired the emblems. Ancient mythological figures also played an important role in the allegorical imagery of the fireworks. Mars was probably the most commonly illustrated ancient deity in fireworks, probably, being the most suitable symbolically to display the merits of the ruler, as the defender of the state.

Judging from newspaper reports, the artifice of the construction of fireworks was particularly assessed by the audience. For the fireworks makers it was important to provoke the surprise of the viewers. It was often stressed that such a firework had not yet been seen anywhere, finer than all previously made. A river environment was often selected for fireworks, so that the flames reflected in the water would double the visual effects, replicate the operation of natural disasters. In Vilnius almost every year fireworks were prepared on both banks of the Neris River in front of the armory, as well as on the river itself.

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