

| Polish Art in the Far East. Exhibitions *Treasures from Chopin's Country* at the National Museum of China in Beijing and *Polish Art: An Enduring Spirit* at the National Museum of Korea in Seoul

Treasures from Chopin's Country. Polish Art from the 15th–20th Century, shown at the National Museum of China in Beijing (6 February – 10 May 2015), and its modified version – *Polish Art: An Enduring Spirit* at the National Museum of Korea in Seoul (4 June – 30 August 2015) were in many aspects unprecedented in terms of museum exhibitions. Both shows were organized by the National Museum in Warsaw in cooperation with the National Museums in Krakow and Poznań as well as the Royal Castle in Warsaw. First of all, these were the largest displays of Polish art ever to have been shown outside Europe. Secondly, one ought to mention the scale. In Beijing, 350 exhibits were presented on 1800 sq m of exhibition rooms, in Seoul – 250 exhibits in rooms measuring 1500 sq m. The exhibits encompassed all genres of art: oil paintings, watercolours, miniatures, wooden, metal and marble sculptures, goldsmiths' objects, weaponry, horse-riding equipment, medals, costumes, fabrics and posters. In the National Museum of China, the Polish exhibition enjoyed the status of a “national” exhibition, showcasing the entire cultural heritage of a country, which had hitherto only been granted to German and British exhibitions. Last but not least, the location of both exhibitions was also unique. In Beijing, it was the monumental building of the National Museum of China situated on Tiananmen Square – the most prestigious Chinese cultural institution. In Seoul, the exhibition took place in the spacious, modern building of the National Museum of Korea, situated in a beautiful park in the centre of the South Korean capital.

The above data provide an indication of the scale of organizational, formal, legal, logistical, transport and conservation difficulties facing the National Museum in Warsaw. The tender for transport services related to the exhibitions was awarded to Renesans Trans, which again proved to be a reliable partner: suffice it to mention that the transport of exhibits required three transport aircrafts. The success of the Beijing exhibition, which also manifested itself in the initially unplanned invitation of the exhibition to Seoul, meant that the organizational effort had to be multiplied and more sophisticated. All involved departments of the NMW, including in particular the Exhibition Department and the Conservation Department, were faced with a tremendous challenge. As already stated, not only was it addressed successfully, but participants within the organization were left with a sense of satisfaction at going beyond routine museum experience.

Another challenge was to create the script for an exhibition addressed to a broad audience, for whom Poland may be a completely unknown country, at most associated with the music of

Chopin, which is popular in the Far East. From our perspective, the recipient remained largely virtual and implicit – hence the importance of opinions submitted by the Beijing Museum, which forced us to correct our assumptions. We were sure that we had to begin with the basics and not expect any knowledge of Polish art or history from the broader Chinese public. Furthermore, the exhibition format required striking a compromise and balance between our content and display-related ideas on the one hand and the expectations and habits of the Beijing Museum, for which the exhibition was intended, on the other. At the same time, we had to attentively revise our truisms and platitudes – as well as curb our ambition where it infringed upon the conventions adopted by the Chinese side. The fundamental question was: how can we use art to present Poland, its history and culture in an attractive manner that will at the same time be understandable for viewers informed with millennia of another history, another culture and another type of art? How can we interest, attract, stimulate audiences, for whom this will largely be the first contact with Polish art? Should we emphasize the place of Polish art in the European art universe? Or on the contrary – try to highlight its specific, typically Polish characteristics? The answer may seem conservative, yet the exhibition was addressed to a remote, unknown audience and this was the predominant factor to be reckoned with. Therefore, we had to transgress today's historiography, with its tendencies to deconstruct and revise established stereotypes of "Polishness" or "national history." On the contrary – such stereotypes had to be created from scratch for the Chinese public. We had to build a suggestive image of Poland, at the same time avoiding the clichés of "export" exhibitions, ideological simplifications and distortions – and maintaining respect and proportion towards Chinese culture, which dates back five thousand years.

The assumption of "national" exhibitions – such as the one in Beijing – is the presentation of a country. Art is not an object in itself – it is a medium through which we can introduce people to history, culture and spirituality. The task we faced was to introduce the Chinese and then the Korean visitor to a remote country situated in the heart of Europe, between the East and West of the continent. Our goal was cognitive rather than educational. This was supposed to be a lively narrative, and not a systematic, historical lecture; a story with its own plot, narrative line and twists, told in the language of art. Furthermore, by showing Polish culture as open and absorbing various influences, we also tried to underline its specific nature and capacity to adapt foreign patterns "according to the heavens and Polish customs."

In order to visualize the location of our country, the entrance to the exhibition was preceded by an animated map showing the geographic location of Poland in the European and Asian context. It also presented the historical evolution of the Polish lands, which – as was later demonstrated by the exhibition – exerted a profound influence on our culture and art. In the adopted chronological narrative, visitors were guided through subsequent epochs, from the Middle Ages to the present day. The first room, with a display of medieval art (albeit structured using objects that are normally not on view), turned out to be very attractive for the audience, especially in the Seoul Museum, where its qualities were beautifully enhanced by the light. Triptychs from the 15th century, fragments of altar sculptures, vestments and liturgical paraphernalia – the first stage of the journey through Polish history depicted the Western orientation of Polish culture, which from the very outset of our statehood was shaped in the sphere of Western Christianity.

The subsequent exhibition space presented the heyday of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which stretched from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south; the times of its political power and eastward expansion. It opened with an impressive statue of Jan III Sobieski – the Sarmatian king. We attempted to present Old Polish culture,

together with an introduction to Sarmatian ideology, in all its glory and variety, by accumulating a typical gallery of representative portraits, coffin portraits, examples of weaponry, including the winged hussar armour, opulent horse-riding equipment, outstanding goldsmiths' masterpieces, a sophisticated set of medals and portrait miniatures. The Polish attire presented itself particularly lavishly. Its significance for Polish culture was illustrated not only by the very garments and a set of "Slutsk sashes," but also by miniature "Polish" figurines from Meissen, supplemented by a china figure of King Augustus III of Poland in a *kontusz* (kontush). In line with the Sarmatian taste, the display was saturated, dense, colourful and shining.

The Old Polish part of the exhibition followed one of the basic assumptions of the script: on the one hand, it brought out the particular characteristics of Polish art, on the other – it attempted to present it as familiar to the Chinese viewer by suggesting certain proximities, as testified by the Oriental influences that were typical for Sarmatism. This assumption was based on our conviction that a sense of complete alienation, albeit intriguing, blocks spiritual contact rather than builds relations. In order to establish contact, we need to see similarities, arouse associations with something familiar. This is why this part of the exhibition features "Chinese" *tsun* vases produced at the Belvedere manufacture in Warsaw.

The Polish historical narrative had its dramatic twist in the form of partitions and loss of independence. It was somewhat presaged by the disquieting portrait of King Stanislaus Augustus with an hourglass. The essence of the disaster was clearly illustrated by the *Troelfth Cake* print, depicting the rulers of Russia, Prussia and Austria tearing a map of Poland. Jan Matejko's *Polonia* – a synthesis of Polish martyrological iconography – is a concise representation of the "age of enslavement." In both editions of the exhibition, this small part, composed of but a few images, was separated, creating a clear spatial cut in the narrative. The collapse of Polish history was expressed through broken linearity and a visible change in the nature and atmosphere of the exhibition.

The largest part of the exhibition was devoted to 19th-century art, primarily painting. This was motivated by several reasons – not just the heyday of Polish painting in this century. According to the educational system employed in Chinese art schools, "Western" art is primarily understood as figurative, Realist oil painting on canvas. Incidentally, one may notice that – paradoxically – this supposedly "Western" medium was chosen as the main propaganda tool of communist China (suffice it to enter the official room that welcomes visitors to the National Museum of China or the permanent exhibition at the National Gallery in Beijing).

The broadly represented 19th-century painting, which probably stirred the greatest interest, was to convey an additional message. Namely, to indicate the function adopted by art during the lack of statehood, which was radically different from its previous roles. Even though from our point of view the idea of art's mission to build and sustain national identity and unity may seem a hackneyed concept, it was precisely what ought to have been conveyed to the Chinese audience. The idea that visionary poetry, beloved familiar landscapes, memory of bygone glory, folk art traditions and the music of Chopin, perceived as quintessentially Polish, served as the Poles' spiritual homeland during political enslavement turned out to be clear and convincing. Contemporary demands to create "Polish national painting," free from cosmopolitan themes and influences, was accepted with similar understanding. This may be illustrated by the fact that the entire 19th-century part of the exhibition was entitled "kingdom of the spirit" – on the initiative of the Chinese curator, Ms. Wang Hui, who picked this expression from the explanatory text. Another proof of the Chinese colleagues' understanding of Polish history, mentality and emotionality – which are usually hard to grasp for foreigners – was the selection of Teofil Kwiatkowski's *Chopin's Polonaise – Ball at the Hôtel*

Lambert in Paris for the enormous banner advertising the exhibition. Kwiatkowski's oneiric watercolour – which combined emigrant nostalgia with dreams of former glory, contemporaneity with history, real and fictional characters, Polish visionary poets and winged hussars, the live and the dead, stepping on tombstones to the accompaniment of Chopin's *polonaise* – seemed to be a quintessence of Romantic Polish spirituality. It turned out that this peculiar, ambiguous and unclear representation resonated well in this culturally remote environment. We experienced many similar surprises while working with our Chinese and later Korean colleagues.

We managed to present 19th-century painting in an effective and multi-lateral way, taking into account all genres and mostly relying on the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw. Our fears that the historical painting could turn out to be difficult and illegible for the Chinese public proved premature. The entire exhibition was accompanied by clarifications and comments, very aptly selected by Beijing (and later Seoul) curators from catalogue texts. The paintings also spoke for themselves, though. Apart from Matejko's admirable mastery in recreating distinctive countenances, attires or armours, *Bathory at Pskov* seemed understandable to a viewer not acquainted with 16th-century Muscovite Wars. A proud victor, humiliation of the defeated and a disconcerting negotiator – this was enough to intrigue the public. By the same token, the death of young and beautiful Barbara Radziwiłł could be moving even if one did not know her history. Landscapes (with a broad selection of Chełmoński's works), folklore scenes or Varsovian *vedute* accompanying the section devoted to Chopin required no additional explanations. The display also included portraits of beautiful women and several nudes, which demonstrated another popular aspect of 19th-century painting productions, somewhat different to the national and patriotic one.

We tried to present the “happy hour” of Polish art, namely the period of Young Poland, as the time when the national duties of art, which had dominated throughout the outgoing 19th-century, began to be overcome for the sake of purely artistic values. At the same time, this period yielded a great number of outstanding creative personalities: Wyspiański, Mehoffer, Ruszczyc, Krzyżanowski, Malczewski, Wojtkiewicz. Unfortunately, since the display coincided with monographic exhibitions of Olga Boznańska at the National Museums in Krakow and Warsaw, her art may have been represented somewhat inadequately as to its value. Another difficulty was associated with presenting the work of Stanisław Wyspiański – an artist associated with the design of stained glass windows and pastels, which are not loaned for reasons of conservation. An exception to the rule of not showing reproductions was allowed for Wyspiański: his stained glass *Become!* from the Franciscan church in Krakow was shown as an enormous projection. A truly monumental effect was achieved in Seoul, where the slide had the same dimensions as the original work. In the Young Poland component, sculptures became an important partner of the paintings, including Dunikowski's *Breath*, which genuinely impressed Ai Weiwei. The famous Chinese artist and dissident decided to visit our exhibition just one day after the official opening, which we interpret as one of its successes.

Art created in the interwar period and the People's Republic of Poland was presented in a much more cursory manner. On the one hand, the interwar section emphasized the typical 1920s aspirations to create a modern, national style that would combine Polish folk inspirations with current artistic trends. It was represented by a set of works created for the Exposition of Decorative Arts in Paris – Zofia Stryjeńska's impetuous *panneaux*, Szczepkowski's sculpted wooden altar and Kuna's sculpture. On the other hand, we demonstrated the multitude of artistic movements, proving that art was becoming liberated from its long-time burden of national obligations – from constructivist avant-garde to Kapist colourism.

It was not easy to present a brief outline of 45 years of art in communist Poland. However, we seem to have managed to do so without employing deforming simplifications or distortions. Three stages are clearly visible here. Socialist Realism was represented by good paintings by Kobzdej, Fangor and Wróblewski. It was followed by an eruption of post-thaw modernity, alongside a presentation of its most important personalities (Kantor, Nowosielski, Brzozowski, Gierowski, Stażewski). The display culminated with the return to politically engaged art that was dominant in the 1980s (Sobocki, Grzywacz, Dwurnik).

In order to honour the personal wish of Mr Chen Ping, Deputy Director of the National Museum of China and researcher of poster art, the last section of the Beijing exhibition was an impressive display of the “Polish School of Posters.” It was greatly popular, as the Polish poster is possibly the only artistic genre that is recognizable in contemporary China. One ought to hope that after *Treasures from Chopin’s Country* it will cease to be the only one.

The transfer of the exhibition from Beijing to Seoul entailed more than just a change of the museum setting and display arrangement. The Polish exhibition was to face an entirely different context – in terms of the political, social and cultural systems. This context actively influences the reception of museum presentations, sometimes even determining it. According to an anecdote, on account of the location and historical experience, Koreans are sometimes referred to as “Poles of the Far East” – indeed, they demonstrated exquisite understanding of the specifics of a country surrounded by two expansive powers. Without limiting the identifying role of Chopin, a proposal was put forward to modify the exhibition title. Korean curators called it *Polish Art: An Enduring Spirit*, which testifies to the understanding of the main message of our exhibition, which was to show art as a potent force that shapes and sustains the sense of national identity and gains particular weight in the context of political oppression. Upon the request of the Seoul Museum, we introduced the theme of Copernicus to the exhibition (not included in the initial script). The part devoted to Chopin was also enlarged, thanks to which the marketing department could present the country as the “land of Copernicus and Chopin.”

It would be hard not to express our admiration for, and gratitude to, two Korean curators, Mr Woollim Kim and Mr Seung-ik Kim, whose enthusiasm and creativity were vital elements contributing to the successful preparation of the Polish exhibition in a record short time. On their initiative, medieval art was accompanied by the hymn *Bogurodzica* (Mother of God) translated into Korean and the historical painting section – with the invocation to *Pan Tadeusz* (Mr Thaddeus), the Polish national epic. The (facsimile of the) Stockholm roll, presented more effectively than in Beijing, became animated: King Sigismund III’s wedding procession began to move, accompanied by hoofbeats and the sound of trumpets... An animated 8-minute film on the history of Poland, created for the Expo 2010 in Shanghai, was also incorporated into the exhibition. The Korean edition of the catalogue was enriched by two essays: on Matejko and Malczewski, also written by the curators of the exhibition.

Catalogues accompanied both editions of the exhibition. Although different in terms of their editing, both versions are very meticulous. They represent full academic catalogues with very lengthy notes containing information and interpretation demanded by the Chinese side. The catalogue part *sensu stricto* is preceded by the text of Director Agnieszka Morawińska on the National Museum in Warsaw and the text by curator Maria Poprzęcka, which elaborates on the exhibition, its assumptions and structure. Authors of the notes and the editing team were faced with a particular challenge, namely to explain matters, terms or names that are obvious to us yet may be unknown or unclear for the Far Eastern reader. For example, even the simplest painting title, *Girl in a Łowicz Apron* (*Zapaska*) required an explanation of what both Łowicz and *zapaska* signify. Incidentally, this modest girl painted by Apoloniusz

Kędzierski became the face of the Seoul exhibition, and of Poland. Enlarged to the monumental size of the Museum's façade, she was present in the streets of Seoul, on bus stops and the underground.

On the one hand, the selection of exhibits was motivated by their significance for Polish art, on the other hand – by their artistic merit. Yet we all know how reluctant museums are to loan their “canonical” works that adorn the galleries or – as the case may be – that are difficult to transport or sensitive from the conservators' point of view. Since the Director of the Royal Castle in Warsaw, Prof. Andrzej Rottermund, understood the rank of the exhibition, an enormous, recently conserved canvas by Jan Matejko depicting *Bathory at Pskov* was sent to Beijing and Seoul. As undoubtedly the most spectacular among the displayed objects, it was featured on the covers of both catalogues, posters and banners. Numerous visitors stopped to take selfies in front of it. The triumphant Polish king will leave a trace in tens of thousands of Chinese and Korean smartphones. Another work that was indispensable at the exhibition entitled *Treasures from Chopin's Country* was the above-mentioned *Chopin's Polonaise – Ball at the Hôtel Lambert in Paris* by Teofil Kwiatkowski. The Director of the National Museum in Poznań, Prof. Wojciech Suchocki, loaned the painting despite reasonable fears of the conservators – *Chopin's Polonaise* is a watercolour and gouache on paper glued onto canvas. This gesture was fully appreciated in Beijing, where – as I have already mentioned – *Ball at the Hôtel Lambert in Paris* was depicted on the enormous banner opening the exhibition. To me, a photograph showing a group of Chinese children swarming against the background of the phantasmagorical procession of Polish history moving to the rhythm of Chopin's *polonaise* represents a moving summary of the presence of Polish art in Beijing.

Finally, let me add a few acknowledgments and words of gratitude. I think that everyone involved in putting on the Chinese and Korean exhibitions will remember the “Far Eastern adventure” as a unique experience, both professional and personal, that included coming to terms with our lack of knowledge, getting rid of bias and overcoming the sense of alienation. In that respect, employees of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute – Dr Marcin Jacoby, Ms. Agnieszka Walulik and Ms. Ewa Paszkowicz – were a tremendous support, and provided us with comprehensive assistance, not only in linguistic matters. Without them, it would be difficult to imagine the entire process of working on the exhibition that took several years. Organizers of the exhibition are also grateful to the Institute for AMI's key role in inviting the exhibition to Korea. Moreover, as an external curator, I have to express my admiration for the professionalism of the Polish team and the ability to cooperate, sometimes in difficult conditions. At the press conference held prior to the opening of the exhibition in Beijing, the Director of the National Museum of China said that the work of the Polish team would set a model for his Chinese employees, a comment to be noted in the *Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw*.

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska