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The New Gallery of Medieval Art of the National Museum in Warsaw

Most works in the medieval art collection of the National Museum in Warsaw date back to the late Middle Ages (fourteenth–sixteenth centuries), stem from northern Europe and represent almost exclusively church items. The works on display exemplify the various functions of such objects. This is the first thread of the new museum narrative implemented in the newly opened gallery.

Theoretical Assumptions of the New Display

The new, fledgling take on the history of art, initiated at the end of the 1990s and developed at the beginning of the current century, begins to be dominated by the motto which advocates the "return to things" (Bruno Latour, Ewa Domańska). It signifies a break from the "linguistic shift" and its postmodern consequences – post-structuralism, intertextuality and deconstruction – which were subjected to the principle of linguistic and semiological constructivism. According to the old post-structural approach, cultural phenomena, events and artefacts from the past are formulated, i.e., established, through the language of the researcher's description. The work of art has not been created once and for all by its author from the past, but it is created (recreated) anew in the process of continuous reception, determined by the potential of the recipient, researcher, historian – in particular by his language, by the way he names and defines these events and artefacts. History itself does not exist, it is created by historiography. Only the past exists – the lost reality of past times, the bygone world of events, whose only trace are accounts and evidence (artefacts and ecofacts), and to which we no longer have direct access. New tendencies in historical sciences, which comprise the anti-anthropocentric formation known as posthumanism (posthumanities), represent a clear move away from textuality, i.e., treating objects of culture as texts of culture. The emphasis is placed on the functional agency of objects and all entities that co-shape the human environment. Bruno Latour – the "pope" of new posthumanism – sees the human civilisation as a network of connections between things (including objects of art) and human institutions, customs and rituals. Objects of art as things have the agency to form the human environment, which – on account of their active presence (their function of "actor," "agent" or the acting factor – from Latin *agens*) – becomes a common environment for humans and non-humans: things, devices and mechanisms, animals, formations of the animal and plant world (say: a forest, wood, a wooden panel and sculpture material). The subjectivity and agency of humans, which have hitherto been taken for granted in the humanist tradition, no longer suffice to describe the relationships between humans and the environment. For the world of humans is at the same time a world of objects and, consequently, of techniques and technologies, of mineral, organic and synthetic materials. Objects, which obviously first have to be made by humans, soon gain autonomy of action and exert a real influence on human

activities, rituals and institutions. They enforce, determine, limit or develop them. They become agents.

If we look at objects of late medieval art in that way, from the perspective of their agency, it is especially important to ensure that the display conveys their possible functions, both primary and secondary. That it demonstrates how a triptych, pentaptych or polyptych functioned as an altarpiece and how a small prayer diptych was used. That it suggests (as far as it is possible in the context of the obligatory display glass-cases) that many of the objects – books, reliquaries, ostensoria, ciboria, chalices – were held and manipulated, thus becoming devices and mechanisms. That devotional images and reliquaries were touched, caressed and kissed. That crucifixes, often placed at a considerable high, affected the faithful as they were moving within the church interior towards the main altar or one of the side chapels. That the manner of opening the winged altarpieces was very suggestive for the viewer, which initiated the process of ritual and liturgical behaviours. That groups of figures that formed part of the Way of the Cross, arranged in the space, enforced the kind of prayer that made the congregation identify with the suffering Christ. Naturally, it is not possible to convey all of the above in museum conditions, but the system of arranging, grouping and separating objects (assisted by the system of textual information on computer stands installed in individual rooms) should be conducive to reflection on the functions of objects of art, artefacts, and how they used to be operated. Visitors can walk around, circle or at least see all objects from behind; the installation system highlights the proximity of the displayed works to the viewer, so as to provoke the impression that they can be touched (even though it is impossible). What is important is to show the substance of these works, including their undeveloped reverse sides, revealing raw wood or other materials. This emphasizes the status of these objects as things existing between matter and artistic form.

The second thread of the medieval art display is the move away from the traditional model of "national" schools and centralist cultural and state centres in favour of the model of trans-"nationality," trans-statehood, trans-regionalism and multi-regionalism. The model of narration developed based on the *centre–periphery* category is established in the old history of art. According to that model, art is created in important state centres – administrative capitals, courtly seats and powerful hubs of the patriciate; in the case of the late Middle Ages – in the capital of the French monarchy, Paris, in Dijon (Burgundy) and Netherlandish metropolises: Ghent, Bruges, Brussels; in the imperial capitals of the Reich: Prague and Vienna, or imperial cities such as Nuremberg and powerful trade and banking centres situated in southern Germany, such as Augsburg and the above-mentioned Nuremberg, as well as Hanseatic centres: Lübeck, Hamburg, Gdańsk; in the capitals of states, duchies or bishoprics, such as Krakow or Wrocław. The flow of models and direction of development are described as a centrifugal pattern, emanating from the centre towards the periphery.

This model, which has in the meantime become obsolete, falsifies the past, preventing us from acknowledging the diversity of mutual references and the accumulation of numerous influences. What is more, it depreciates the non-central regions, situated on the edge of the main political powers of the time, as peripheral, and therefore worse. However, these regional cultural landscapes could be and usually were as important and meaningful in terms of art as the so-called main centres, as proved by the example of Silesia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the state of the Teutonic Order, Pomerania and Gdańsk between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries. The history of art has subjected such areas to the ideology of cultural "colonization." Even if it acknowledged their presence at all, it always shrugged off

their achievements as a result of an external influence of one of the European centres. Silesian art was squeezed into the framework of subsequent periods dominated by models stemming from European artistic centres: first Prague, then Nuremberg, whereas Gdańsk art was limited to the artistic influences from Netherlandish or Hanseatic cities. First of all, this viewpoint erases the various detailed impulses of interactions with and borrowings from art that w a s n o t central for Northern Europe of the time (for example the fact that the *Altarpiece of Saint Barbara* by the Master identified as Wilhelm von Aachen is the result of a link between the Cologne-Mosan traditions and the formulas of Franconian-Bavarian painting, especially from Nuremberg, rather than just the result of a fetishized "Netherlandish influence" treated as a historiographical key to interpret just about anything). Secondly – and more importantly – it erases the peculiar character and artistic autonomy of the given region. For example, Silesian art created between 1450 and 1530 cannot be limited only to the reception of Netherlandish models filtered through painting from Nuremberg or southern Germany, and therefore to the break from the models proposed by Prague and Bohemian art of the 1390–1430 period. What should be emphasized are the intra-regional relationships between the achievements of individual workshops: from Wrocław, Legnica, Świdnica, Żagań, Nysa, and so on. The locality, individuality and singular nature of the given artistic formation are lost in the historiographical "centre–periphery" construct. For example, the specific nature of Silesian art from the 1460–1530 period, which consisted in the near mass production of numerous monumental, sometimes even gigantic multi-panel folding two- and four-winged altarpieces, characterized by an incredibly extensive, episodic historical narration on the wings, juxtaposed with statuary figures of worship in the middle part and rich tracery and sculpture decorations. This phenomenon is so widespread in the region and so distinctive within the trans-regional North European panorama, that it cannot be summarized as simply a native or vernacular characteristic. It has to stem from important historical circumstances, i.a., the need to promote the Catholic religion following Hussite Wars as well as the need to prove the prestige of large cities competing with centres which used to hold power within or over Silesia: the imperial court in Prague, the episcopal court in Wrocław and Nysa and the courts of local dukes, who were losing their influence.

On the other hand, the traditional history of art, which uses the centre–periphery narration, is astonished to discover in the culture of a non-central region a high theoretical consciousness of the artists, virtuoso craftsmanship and a sense of illusion, i.e., characteristics that should be attributed to the "great masters" from the main European courtly or urban centres and not to some local craftsmen. This is why the splendid relief by Jakob Beinhart, *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin*, which rejects the garish polychromy and gilding, is still viewed as a reflection of inventions from the North European art centres of the time – the reflection of ideas developed by Tilman Riemenschneider from Swabia (Würzburg) and Veit Stoss from Franconia (Nuremberg). However, it cannot be excluded that the master from Wrocław did not borrow the monochrome formula from the above-mentioned masters from southern Germany, but arrived at it independently, in order to convince the viewer that he was seeing merely a material object of craftsmanship and a work of art depicting saintly figures and their relics (the seamless robe of Jesus and the miraculous painting of the Virgin) rather than the persons and relics themselves, so he should worship the saints and not the material object represented by the relief. This idea of the "material truth" as opposed to the "sacral truth" (which is merely a representation and not a real presence) is a rather popular feature of fifteenth century art (as employed in Netherlandish and German painting, Burgundy and Netherlandish stone sculpture, e.g., by Claus Sluter and his followers, in bronze sculpture, and so on), so Beinhart

need not have borrowed it from Riemenschneider. This might have been an original idea of the outstanding, albeit "local," artist.

The history of regional art and trans-regional history, which are the background of the gallery, also counterbalance the inclinations towards or influences of nationalist attitudes, inscribed in the traditional model of centralist history. This allegedly "absolute" (treated as a historiographical paradigm) domination of the artistic map of North Europe of the time by the "leading centres" – Paris, Prague or Nuremberg – stems precisely from adopting such a standpoint. Having entered, undoubtedly out of nationalist reasons, into competition with the Italo-centric model of the Vasarian history of art, French scholars of the late nineteenth century (Louis Courajod et al.) promoted the gallocentric, francocentric model of art. Carolingian, Roman and classical Gothic art served as the measure of excellence – as a purely French product, contrary to the Italian Renaissance. Consequently, Burgundy art (Claus Sluter in sculpture, Jean Malouel in painting) or Paris art c. 1400 (the Franco-Flemish painting of the Limburg brothers, the Master of Boucicaut, the Rohan Master et al.) were adopted as the point of departure for late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance respectively. Germans (Kurt Gestenberg et al.), again in a nationalist vein and referring to Goethe (the Cologne cathedral as a masterpiece of Germanity), saw this measure of excellence in *Sondergotik* – late Gothic regarded as purely and intrinsically German. The Soft Style or Beautiful Style (*Weicher / Schöner Stil*) of the 1390–1420 period also must have been German (according to Hans Börger and Wilhelm Pinder), especially the style of the Beautiful Madonnas, which must have been created by a single Teutonic genius – the Master of the Beautiful Madonnas, who was invented by historians and whose alleged activity was placed within German-speaking Europe: in the area of Salzburg or the state of the Teutonic Order. The Czechs (Albert Kutal, Jaroslav Pešina, Jiří Fajt) are wont to promote the Bohemo-centric genesis of late Gothic in Central and Central-Eastern Europe, emphasizing the fundamental role of Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV and his court in Prague and arguing with the Germans about the Czech or German character of Luxembourg art (of Charles IV and Wenceslaus III), the sculpture and architecture of the Parler family, the circle of the Master of Beautiful Madonnas or the Soft and Beautiful Styles in painting (the Master of Vyšší Brod / Hohenfurth, the Master of Třeboň / Wittingau). Not to mention the thoroughly false belief, until recently held by certain scholars, concerning the Polish origin of "Wit Stwosz" – Nuremberg-born Veit Stoss, who was also active in Krakow. A way out of this vicious circle of nationalisms and their attempts to colonize old regional culture is offered by a map of late medieval art depicted as a network rather than a spiderweb. A network of many equally important and evenly distributed places of art production, overlapping with the network of relationships between things (objects of art) and human institutions, customs and rituals described at the beginning.

The review of the various functions performed by medieval works of art begins with the fragments of sculpted architectural decorations from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries (stone capitals of columns) in the first room. They are followed by free-standing sculptures and figures of worship, independent from architecture – from the earliest preserved example from Poland, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned*, known as *Madonna of Ołobok* and dated at late twelfth or early thirteenth century (**fig. 1**) to the statue of *Beautiful Madonna from Wrocław* from c. 1390 (**fig. 2**) – and the figure of Mary with saints from the fifteenth century, which were placed at altars or on consoles jutting from church or chapel walls. Images of the Virgin holding the Child (e.g., the Beautiful Madonnas) and Mary mourning over the body of Christ held on her lap (*Pietà*) were most often found next to walls, in aisles or chapels

of the church, placed on corbels or in niches, rarely on altars. Behind and above the mensa (tabletop) or the altar there was an altarpiece (*retabulum*), which illustrated important dogma or doctrine matters and in the north of Europe mostly took on the form of a winged triptych or pentaptych (**fig. 3**). Crucifixes (images of Christ on the Cross – **fig. 5**) and figurative Crucifixion groups (the crucifix assisted by Mary and Saint John the Evangelist, sometimes also Mary Magdalene) were placed on the so-called rood beam at the entrance to the chancel (presbytery or choir), less often on the walls of the presbytery, aisle or side chapel. The following liturgical items were associated with the altar: ostensoria (to demonstrate the host; later monstrances), ciboria (for holding the host and consecrated wafers) and reliquaries, held at church treasuries and placed on the altar during liturgy and religious celebrations. An indispensable part of church furniture was the baptismal font (like the one displayed at the entrance to the third room). Epitaphs (paintings commemorating the deceased, such as the *Epitaph of Barbara Polani* in the first room or epitaphs displayed at the end of the second gallery room) and votive panels: thanksgiving (panel depicting *Christ Dolorosus* from Brzeg) or commemorating guild fraternities (*The Annunciation* from the chapel of the guild of Wrocław painters) were funded by private persons and placed in church chapels and aisles. This was also the most common location for panels with narrative scenes, mostly from the lives of saints (*Legend of Saint Hedwig* in the first room – **fig. 6**), but detailed stories composed of many episodes were often placed on wings of altar triptychs and polyptychs (e.g., quarters of the *Polyptych from Grudziądz / Graudenz* in the first room – **fig. 3** and the Legnica and Strzegom polyptychs in the second).

Summary Description of the Gallery Display

Works on display in the first room represent the international, trans-regional character of late fourteenth century art (e.g., the group of Virgins standing on a lion) and art of the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (the so-called International Gothic of c. 1400, also known as the Court Gothic Style or the Beautiful Style). Even though the works share a similar form, they were executed in very diverse environments: in Bohemia and Silesia, southern Germany and Austria, in the territory of the state of the Teutonic Order, including Gdańsk and Pomerania, in Burgundy and the Netherlands as well as in England and Spain.

Subsequent rooms explore the art of the 1440–1530 period from three important Central European regions: first Silesia, then Lesser Poland, Kuyavia and Greater Poland and finally Gdańsk, Prussia and Pomerania.

The display of Silesian art is divided into three parts. Firstly (at the beginning of the second gallery room), it depicts the shift of Wrocław painting and sculpture of 1440–60 from the Bohemian and Prague influences and the Beautiful Style to the trans-regional formula of "Netherlandish realism," mediated by southern Germany (*Altarpiece of Saint Barbara* – **fig. 7**, *Crucifixion Triptych of Peter von Wartenberg*, sculptures from the circle of Hans Multscher).

The second part (also in the second room) is devoted to the heyday of Silesian, mainly Wrocław-based, workshops from the 1460–80 period, which produced magnificent multi-panel and multi-figural altarpieces that combined painting and sculpture (*The Annunciation with the Unicorn Polyptych* – **fig. 8**, *Polyptych from Legnica*, *Polyptych from Strzegom*).

The third part (already in the third room) explores both the development of this phenomenon in Silesia in 1480–1530 and the variety of formulas and functions of art of the time: devotional, didactic panels serving for prayer and instruction (*Allegory of the Glory of the Virgin – Corona Beatissimae Virginis Mariae*); prayer and altar reliefs (such as *Saint Luke Painting the*

Virgin by Jakob Beinhart; votive panels and epitaphs, which were extremely popular among the patriciate and affluent townspeople, who funded them for the city churches; relic-like images of the head of Saint John the Baptist (patron of Wrocław and Silesia) on a platter; grand crucifixes from walls and rood beams (like the one from the workshop of Michael Pacher, which used to hang in the Wrocław Cathedral) or groups of figures forming the Way of the Cross, arranged as if in a staged performance (*Carrying of the Cross* from the Krappe chapel at Saint Elisabeth's Church in Wrocław, c. 1492).

Albeit modest, the display of Krakow and Lesser Poland as well as Kuyavia and Greater Poland art of the 1440–1520 period is a good example of the shift from the inter-regional Beautiful Style (*Pietà* on painted panel – **fig. 9**) to the German and Netherlandish realism (*Triptych of Saint Stanislaus the Bishop* known as the *Triptych from Pławno*, *The Virgin and Child with Saints Felicity and Perpetua* – **fig. 10**). Like in other units of the gallery, here too we can see the main functional types of late medieval art: a winged altarpiece, either combining painting and sculpture (*Triptych from Pławno*) or solely painted (*The Virgin and Child with Saints*, known as the *Triptych from Wołowiec*), a monumental painted panel from a reredos, used for worship (*The Virgin and Child with Saints Felicity and Perpetua*), a devotional panel for private prayer or prayer and confraternity church services celebrated in a church chapel (*Pietà*), epitaphs and votive and commemorative panels with images of donors adoring saintly figures (*The Virgin and Child with Bishop Jan Lubrański*). Although the current condition of several works is not perfect, this allows us to see the stages of creating a medieval painting, which are not noticeable in well-preserved paintings. One may see with the naked eye the subsequent layers usually hidden underneath the paint: from the surface of the wooden panel, which serves as the basis of the painting, through the chalk-and-glue primer, the underpainting of the composition, to the final layer of tempera or oil paints (see the *Dormition of the Virgin* – a quarter of the *Triptych from Sienno*).

The last segment of the gallery is a display of art created in Gdańsk, Pomerania, Prussia and the northern Hanseatic area between 1430 and 1520. From the very beginning of its development, the painting of this region is clearly associated with Netherlandish centres (*The Holy Trinity* (*Pietas Patris*) from Saint Mary's Church in Gdańsk dated c. 1430–40, **fig. 11**). This is demonstrated by the magnificent altarpieces from Gdańsk and the surrounding area and from Hamburg. The *Jerusalem Triptych* (c. 1497–1500) was executed in a Netherlandish or Netherlands-influenced workshop from northern Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia?). Wings of the *Altarpiece from the Hamburg Cathedral* (1499), also based on Netherlandish models, were created in the workshop of Absolon Stumme in Hamburg. Direct imports from southern Netherlands are represented by the monumental *Polyptych from Pruszcz Gdański* (c. 1515), executed in a woodcarving and sculpture workshop from Brussels and the painting workshop of Colijn de Coter, and *Saint Reinhold's Polyptych* (**figs 12–13**) from Saint Mary's Church in Gdańsk (1515–16) sculpted in the workshop of Jan de Molder and painted in the workshop of Joos van Cleve in Antwerp. These are examples of export products of Brabant centres, which provided entire Europe with altarpieces – including Gdańsk and Pomerania, which experienced an influx of such imports between 1500 and 1530.