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The Newly Refurbished Galleries of European Old Masters and of Old Polish and European Portraiture

In its 150th-anniversary year, the National Museum in Warsaw unveiled its reorganized galleries of old painting, the Gallery of European Old Masters and the Gallery of Old Polish and European Portraiture. Their narrative order has changed, with a new arrangement replacing the traditional periodization sequences and stylistic developments within "national schools," such as Netherlandish, German, Italian, Dutch or Old Polish. The new narrative seeks to spotlight the original functions of the works and to display the variety of iconographic types and forms within their social context. It asks the viewer: Why and for whom were the paintings created? What was their ideological and social message? Whose aspirations and intentions did they express? What were the functions of their customs and rituals? The new arrangement ties many fragmentary narratives into a universal panorama of Old European painting. We do not want to hide the differences between periods and regions – we have kept some traditional chronological and geographical classifications – but above all we have chosen to expose the diversity within collectivity. We wanted to juxtapose the achievements of the artistic communities of South and North, of Italian and French with Netherlandish, Flemish, Dutch and German painting. We now show groups of works according to the hierarchy of genres created by the Renaissance theory of art. Hence, the sequence of galleries. On the second floor is the gallery of the most highly valued large and small "histories," high Biblical, mythological, allegorical and literary themes. On the first floor, apart from the portrait gallery, in the avant-corps of the building, is the gallery of landscapes in its many forms: the heroic, the picturesque and the realistic-topographic. Cabinet and salon paintings of "low" subjects, genre paintings, animals and still lifes are displayed in the ground floor avant-corps. Now, the topography of the individual galleries from the upper floors down to the ground floor reflects the pyramid of painting genres, from the highest "histories" to the lowest still lifes. The visitor can start on the bottom rungs of the ladder and climb to the heights of the large and small "histories," or do the reverse.

Old art theory considered religious, mythological and allegorical subjects to be the most noble and "highest," calling them "histories" (*storie*). These multifigural compositions, as well as individual figures, have their sources in the literatures of antiquity, the Bible and Christianity. This category of painting is the most ambitious, expecting the viewer to have a knowledge of theology and the humanities. The "histories" played a liturgical role in church altars, a commemorative one in epitaphs and a devotional one in private prayer paintings in homes and chapels; they functioned to decorate and to impart political glory on residences and public buildings and, finally, served to delight eyes and minds in the collections of connoisseurs. Cult paintings in altar settings preached the truths of faith and illustrated objects of religious veneration; devotional paintings inspired prayer and meditation on Incarnation, Passion and

Salvation and the lives of the saints. Hung in secular interiors, they pleased the senses and regaled the intellect, but also conveyed moral messages by displaying ideals and virtues such as virility, constancy, obedience and reason as paradigms for emulation. They presented erudite philosophical and political topics and programmes to glorify reigning individuals and elites.

The sequence of the groups of paintings follows these principles: the first are the "Early 'histories:' Italian mythologies, Netherlandish lives of the saints, German battles" shown through examples of Italian dowry chests, *cassoni* (antique mythology and history), the Brussels artist Aert van den Bossche's *The Martyrdom of Saint Crispin and Saint Crispinian* (the type of Netherlandish lives of the saints presented as an expanded narrative against a panoramic landscape) and *The Battle of Orsza* attributed to Hans Krell from the circle of Lucas Cranach the Elder (the type of crowded battle composition characteristic of sixteenth-century Germany). Next, "Early histories – Venetian *poesie*" representing the Venetian culture of the *villegiatura* (Giovanni Battista Cariani's *A Rural Concert*, Francesco Bassano's *The Forge of Vulcan*, Giovanni Battista Zelotti's *Apollo and Marsyas*). Occupying the next space are the "Great Baroque 'histories'" by the Italian and Dutch Caravaggionists, the painters of Rome and Bologna, Naples, Poland, Austria and Germany (including Cecco del Caravaggio, Antiveduto Gramatica, Francesco Guarino, Bernardo Cavallino and Hendrick ter Brugghen). Particular motifs are emphasized here: "Stories of the martyred body: heroic martyrdoms, suicides and ecstasies" (including Antonio Carneo's *The Death of Lucretia,* Johann Carl Loth's, known as Carlotto, *The Suicide of Cato the Younger*, Andrea Vaccaro's *Saint Mary Magdalene*, Luca Giordano's *Prometheus*, Szymon Czechowicz's *The Martyrdom of Saint John Nepomucen*) and "Triumphs and allegories," Baroque paintings dynamic in form and erudite in content, destined for the interiors of churches and monasteries (for instance, Michael Willmann), as well as residences and collectors' galleries and rooms (Tadeusz Kuntze, Gaspare Dziani, Giovanni Battista Pittoni, Franz Anton Maulbertsch). Distinguished in separate rooms are the "Great 'histories' of the Flemish Baroque: paintings in the service of the Counter-Reformation" (Jacob Jordaens's *The Holy Family*, Abraham Janssens's *Ecce Homo* and *Lamentation* and the monumental story *Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Praying for the Conversion of Berthold von Leinbach* attributed to Pieter van Lint (**fig. 1**) and "Biblical 'histories' of the Rembrandt circle: Paintings in the service of Protestant faith and morality" (Pieter Lastman, Jan Victors, Carel Fabritius, Gerbrand van Eeckhout, etc.).

Types of functional paintings serving the workshop practice are displayed in a room to the side: *modelli* and *ricordi*. They include *The Triumph of Frederick Hendrick, Prince of Orange* by Jacob Jordaens, a sketch for the monumental painting of the Huis ten Bosch palace outside The Hague and Guercino's *Saint Francis Listening to Angels' Music*, a *ricordo* replicating the composition of the altar painting in the Dondini Chapel in Saint Peter's Church in Cento (presently in the Louvre).

The large room juxtaposes "Dutch, Flemish and French mythologies," including stories from antiquity by painters from Rembrandt's circle (Constantijn van Renesse, Ferdinand Bol), Dutch Classicists (Jan de Bray), Flemish Baroque artists (Jan Boeckhorst, Willem van Herp) with French Classicists (François Perrier) and the painters of the Rococo (Nicolas Bertin, Charles-Joseph Natoire), which were displayed in wealthy homes and residences, offering rich literary material addressed to a social elite educated in the humanities, with a motif entitled "The body: The nude in Italian and Northern European painting" (**fig. 2**). This motif presents various renderings on nudity: the body in the moral categories of antiquity (Hans Baldung Grien's *Hercules and Antaeus*) and Christianity (Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Adam and Eve*, Jacques de Backer's *Last Judgment*), Christ's Eucharistic body (images of Christ by Denis

Calvaert, Daniele Crespi, Cornelis van Haarlem, Adriaen de Vries) and the erotic body (*Venus and Amor* by Paris Bordone, *Apollo* by Pietro della Vecchio). "*Sacrum*: Paintings for private devotion and altar paintings" occupies a separate spatial sequence. It was the fundamental function of old religious painting to produce altar paintings to accompany the liturgy and to comment on it, as well as smaller devotional paintings for private worship. The devotional paintings created from the second half of the fourteenth century on as a result of new movements of religious renewal (*devotio moderna* and others), and popularized in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were intended for use in homes or in brotherhood or family chapels. They were used for personal prayer, meditation and contemplation about the truths of faith or events in Biblical history. They were to deepen faith by helping the viewer to feel Christ's suffering (Passion subjects), Mary's tender motherhood (representations of the Virgin and Child) and the lives of the saints (hagiography). They were separate paintings or small, portable altars, triptychs or diptychs. Early Italian panels and altars of the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries (Master of the Strauss Madonna and others), Venetian (Cima da Conegliano and Pasqualino Veneto) and Florentine (Fra Diamante, Sandro Botticelli, Bernardino Pinturricchio, Sebastiano Mainardi, Dosso Dossi), Netherlandish (Dirk Bouts, imitator of Quentin Massys, Adriaen van Overbeke, etc.) and German (Barthel Bruyn, Hans Baegert, Master of Messkirch and others) paintings of the Renaissance represent this type of work. Over time, devotional paintings became cabinet paintings, as they were gathered by private collectors no longer solely for religious purposes but as collections, and for their artistic merit (e.g., Giovanni Battista Penni, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, Denis Calvaert, Dirck de Quade van Ravesteyn, Bartholomäus Strobel).

Netherlandish and German altarpieces (*retabula*) were usually constructed as folding triptychs or polyptychs (**fig. 3**), while Italian ones were multi-panel compositions or single paintings inside permanent architectural frames. Retables showed not only sacred persons and events marking objects of worship, but also represented the patron saints of trades, fraternities and families, serving as the foundation of each group's identity. They often also included portraits of the individuals who had commissioned them (donors, funders), helping to glorify their position in society, memorializing them and their status (the function of commemoration) and, after their death, guaranteeing prayers and Masses for their souls in purgatory, which were recorded in the funding document. Altar paintings by Lorenzo Veneziano, Costantino di Jacopo Zelli, Paris Bordone, Benedetto Coda, Teodoro d'Errico, Jean Bellegambe, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, the Netherlandish masters of the *Triptych of the Mass of Saint George* and *Triptych of the Allegory of the Immaculate Conception* and Maerten van Heemskerck are used as examples of these functions.

The landscape gallery occupies a separate large room (**fig. 4**). It shows various painting formulas: the early Netherlandish type of panoramic landscape (Gillis Mostaert and Cornelis Molenaer, Master of the Prodigal Son); Flemish forest- and parkscapes ca. 1600, which are fancifully arranged according to Mannerist principles (Jan Brueghel the Elder, Abraham Govaerts, David Vinckboons, Jacques d'Artois); seventeenth-century Dutch landscapes, which realistically record the country's topography (the patriotic landscape, for example dunes and forests by Pieter de Neyn and Jan Wijnants; seascapes and marines by Lieve Verschuir, Abraham de Verwer, Simon de Vlieger and winterscapes by Thomas Heeremans and Anthonie Beerstraten) or picturesque visions of ferocious nature (for example, Allaert van Everdingen); Italian Baroque landscapes, which give a dynamic and fantastical interpretation of the force of the elements (Antonio Marini, Pieter Mulier [Pietro Tempesta], Marco Ricci), the Classic and Classicist French-Italian landscape (Gaspard Dughet); the idyllic-Arcadian landscapes of the French Rococo (Jean-Pierre Norblin) and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch

and Venetian architectural *vedute* and *capricci* (Willem van Nieulandt, Gaspar van Wittel – Gaspare Vanvitelli, Giovanni Paolo Pannini, Michiele Marieschi, Bernardo Bellotto, **figs 5–8**) confronting the Dutch genre of church interiors (Pieter Saenredam, **fig. 9**). These formulas suited different conceptions of nature: nature as the setting for the story of the Salvation; uncontrollable and terrifying elements; nature subjugated and governed by man; heroic nature as background to lofty human deeds and great histories; nature as a tranquil and joyful refuge from the mayhem of the active life (the motif of love and pastoral poetry of antiquity and the Renaissance, *locus amoenus*). The large landscapes decorated the residences of rulers, aristocrats and prosperous burghers. The small ones, much more refined in their form, on the other hand, were clustered in collectors' cabinets. They also adorned the dining, sitting and other rooms in homes in Holland, Flanders and Germany.

The gallery of "low genres" on the ground floor presents genre paintings, still lifes and representations of animals. It features three groups of pictures. The first are "Images of custom," genre paintings in various forms: merry companies or elegant society, soldiers or officers' guard houses, kitchens, pantries and markets, peasant inns and brawls and characteristic, picturesque human types (Dutch *tronies*). Their presentation emphasizes the belief that although these common themes had deeper symbolic meaning, which required familiarity with emblematic literature, moralizing poetry or proverbs, in most cases genre paintings were viewed as amusement, entertainment according to antiquity's theoretical category of the *modus comicus*. They also served to maintain social hierarchy: they enabled the elites to set themselves apart from the plebeian strata, which here appear as more primitive. Netherlandish and Italian homes had rooms decorated with them, and art lovers passionately collected them for their studies. Still lifes are the second group, characterised mainly by virtuosity in the art of imitation of various forms of matter according to the Mannerist concept of "art as a second nature." This idea was expressed in Flemish and Dutch renderings of nature's creations (flowers, fruits, seashells) and portrayals of meals, whether modest breakfasts or lavish banquets (**fig. 10**). Many still lifes have a symbolic meaning: a lesson about the fleeting nature of earthly pleasures and riches. Small and medium-sized Dutch and Flemish, Spanish and Italian still lifes were collector's objects usually arranged in groups together with landscapes and small histories on the walls of cabinets, giving an encyclopaedic description of the world of plants and natural objects. Large paintings of the same subjects, on the other hand, embellished the interiors of homes and residences, especially their dining rooms and sculleries, serving as decoration (**fig. 11**). Closing this gallery is this room's section on "The world of animals." The Flemish and Dutch images of animals in this group are mostly large compositions intended for the palaces and homes of the wealthy. The earliest of such paintings follow the Mannerist tradition of curiosities and *naturalia* cabinets; they often are representations of actual animals from court menageries, for instance Emperor Rudolph's in Prague (**fig. 12**). The universal subjects of Flemish animal paintings – *Concerts of Birds* and *Backyards with Poultry* – served as metaphors of human behaviour (calling for human harmony and common action, warning against petulance and the temptation of unclean conquering love), while *Dogs Stalking Game* or *Dogs with Hunting Trophies* praised the virtues of vigilance and self-possession. Hunting motifs exposed the rich bourgeoisie's ambitions of leisure and hunting, once the exclusive domain of the aristocracy (**fig. 13**).

The separate Gallery of Old Polish and European Portrait, which combines the Gallery of Old European Painting with the Gallery of 19th-Century Art, shows the two main functions of the old portraits. First, the person acquires presence and is memorialized through physiognomic similarity (*similitudo*). Second, social hierarchy is created by demonstrating

his social status as a ruler or political personality. The monumental court and aristocratic portraits, common across sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Europe, reflected the formula of representativeness and hierarchy and were rich with the attributes of power (showy dress, insignia, coats of arms, etc.); according to the interpretation made popular by Titian and the Venetian masters, the person was shown *en pied* (full figure, standing), with a thick curtain or a fragment of an architectural column as background (**figs 14–15**). Within this genre was also developed the less official portrait, with the person portrayed in informal, homey dress in a dynamic pose. But the art of portraits was born out of smaller and less representational forms: the half-figural face and bust, the type created by the early Netherlandish and German and Italian masters of the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries (**fig. 16**). All European centres used it widely, and the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie accepted it, too (**fig. 17**). Unlike the profile portrait, which recalled the model of renditions of rulers in antique and modern coins and medals, it referred to the elevated tradition of antique sculpture busts and bust-shaped reliquaries. These allusions elevated the model's position, giving him social splendour. Its diminutive version, which was often portable, also made it possible to carry one's own or a dear one's image; it led to the development of the private, miniature, portrait.

The division of the galleries into groups and rooms reflects these functions and messages: "Monumental aristocratic and court portraits" (Poland, Italy, Holland and Flanders, Germany and Austria); "Patrician and bourgeois portraits of the sixteenth century" (Italy and Germany); "Bourgeois, patrician and aristocratic portraits of the seventeenth century" (Holland, Flanders, Italy); "Old Polish and Gdańsk portraits: images of royal power, fune-rary portraits, portraits of the nobility-magnates and the bourgeoisie"; "Eighteenth-century portraiture: pictures of prestige" and "Portraits of the eighteenth century: images of politicians and intellectuals of the Enlightenment" (**figs 18–19**).

This narrative woven across the museum's many exhibition spaces sends two important messages to the viewer: the paintings' social significance lying in their various functions, and the integral ties between Old Polish art and the artistic culture of Western Europe of the time.