

## I The Gallery of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Art

As the sesquicentennial of the National Museum in Warsaw drew nearer, the occasion became a wonderful pretext for unveiling a new concept in the layout of permanent galleries. The former Gallery of Polish Painting housed in the building on Aleje Jerozolimskie has undergone several transformations due to the unique character of Polish art, its historical significance, wealth and evolution.

The new jubilee exhibition on the first floor has a different layout from previous exhibitions. Here, works of Polish and European art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the collections of the National Museum in Warsaw are gathered in a single space. We see pieces by Polish artists confronted – for the purpose of examining both the similarities and the differences – with works by their European contemporaries from France, Germany and Russia.

The museum's history and the expansion of its collections have always been influenced by the issue of national identity – presenting the works of great Polish artists reflects a sense of patriotic and civic responsibility. The concept behind the new Gallery of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Art is contiguous with the values and goals established during the original founding of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1862 to showcase national works of art. The simultaneous presenting of select art from the rest of Europe and other cultural centres underscores the uniqueness, richness and significance of Poland's artistic legacy by virtue of comparison. It demonstrates that the development of Polish art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was dynamic, with the role of art and artist perpetually reinterpreted and re-evaluated. There was no constant revival of existing forms and subjects – tragic circumstances gave life to new meanings, motifs and progress in technical expertise. The national inclination to patriotic traditionalism, much emphasised in critical circles during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, functioned alongside and was forced to reckon with the emergence of Modernism. Wiesław Juszczak stated that the unique features of Polish Modernism had roots in the movement's ties to tradition.<sup>1</sup> The works of European and Polish art shown together at the National Museum in Warsaw are a testimony to the fact that, although we existed on the “periphery” and did not have statehood, we were indeed a historic nation – with a land, a strong tradition, a native upper class and a culture.<sup>2</sup> Polish artists studying in various European cities either embraced new ideas and directions, rejected them or adapted them creatively. Hence, the distinctness of their output was not a result of “backwardness” but of conscious decisions informed by the tragic ordeal of our then-enslaved nation, which reached out to tradition as a source of national identity.

<sup>1</sup> Wiesław Juszczak, *Malarstwo polskie. Modernizm* [Polish Painting. Modernism] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe; Oficyna Wydawnicza Auriga, 1977), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Tomasz Kizwalter, “Modernizacja z polskiej perspektywy: wiek XIX” [“Modernisation from the Polish Perspective: the 19<sup>th</sup> Century”], in *Drogi do nowoczesności. Idea modernizacji w polskiej myśli politycznej* [The Road to Modernity. The Ideal of Modernisation in Polish Political Thinking], Jacek Kleczkowski, Michał Sułdrzyński, eds (Krakow: Center for Political Thought and Tischner European University, 2006), p. 51.

The Gallery of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Art still continues to employ the classic aesthetic / historical model for the exhibition of works. The display is arranged chronologically with groupings according to style, trend, artistic circle (e.g., the Munich school, the St Petersburg school, the Pont-Aven school, Les Nabis) and artistic personalities.

The gallery begins with paintings from the leading artistic currents of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – Classicism and Romanticism. We decided against introducing dichotomic divisions (such as rationalism vs. mysticism, reason vs. feeling, imitation vs. expression, sketch vs. finished work) under the belief that this kind of traditional analysis fails to reflect the character of art from this period. Instead, we attempted to generate a “dialogue” between works from a common time period, but from various areas and circles. In his competition entry *Saul's Wrath at David*, Antoni Brodowski treats a lofty and ancient subject from the Old Testament. From a formal perspective, the artist employs (as he also does in his *Oedipus and Antigone*, 1828) academic principles defined in 17<sup>th</sup>-century French art theory. The proximity of Polish art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to French patterns becomes evident in a comparison of a sketch of a male figure by the Romantic painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres with Brodowski's *Paris in a Phrygian Cap* (ca. 1813–1814), or a portrait by François Gérard with Brodowski's portrait of his own brother (ca. 1815). Equally enlightening is the juxtaposition of *Embroiderer at the Window* (1817) by Georg Friedrich Kersting (**fig. 1**), a German Romantic artist with ties to the Biedermeier style, with the work *The Drawing Room in the Artist's Home* (ca. 1830) by Aleksander Kokular. Both works emanate a sense of quiet and concentration, both reveal a similar treatment of light and both are marked with a painstaking attention to detail. The next section of the exhibition presents the development of historical painting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, from Piotr Michałowski to Jan Matejko, with a casual comparison to painting from the rest of Europe.

We see taking shape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century a sentiment about the impoverished state of art in the first half of the century. It was a belief shared by Adam Mickiewicz, who referred to paintings as copies, due to their being an imitation of reality. In 1844 he wrote on the subject of the Polish inclination for harbouring “memories of an invisible world; what others, for fear of them disappearing carve in stone, cast in bronze, and spread on canvas, the Slavs keep alive.”<sup>3</sup> In Wiesław Juszczak's opinion, historical painting, bridging the gap between painting and literature, was brought to the forefront of the arts world thanks to Artur Grottger and Jan Matejko, since “the generation of bards never produced a master who was their equal.”<sup>4</sup> The gallery's pieces by Piotr Michałowski, Henryk Rodakowski and Józef Simmler demonstrate both the development of a Polish national awareness and Polish art's references to French works that had inspired it – by artists such as Jacques-Louis David, Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix and Paul Delaroche. Michałowski endowed Polish painting with a new understanding of space and introduced unique compositional approaches and a textural liberty reminiscent of Delacroix. His images of anonymous heroes of Napoleon's campaigns were unique in Poland's nationalist / patriotic painting, which, emphasizing national issues under the inspiration of literature and the like, tended to portray the deeds of homegrown military units.

Of particular importance within the exhibition is the room devoted to the work of Jan Matejko. Shaped by Romantic poetry, this master's achievements in painting imparted a specific type of historical awareness on later generations of Polish artists and writers. Stanisław

<sup>3</sup> From: Maria Poprzęcka, *Arcydzieła malarstwa polskiego* [Masterpieces of Polish Painting] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 1997), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Juszczak, p. 39.

Witkiewicz is known to have reproached Matejko for the overwhelming influence the latter's output exerted. Meanwhile, Matejko's works possessed many characteristics that are analogous to European painting of that time and to the category known as *genre historique*, patterned after literature's *roman historique*. Matejko, an expressive historical painter, paid great attention to details in his treatment of subjects from Polish national history, and as no one in Polish art before him, he was able to capture his heroes' state of spiritual consternation and psychological depth. In the Matejko Room, we are privy to this master's most famous works, including comprehensively restored for the museum's anniversary *The Battle of Grunwald* [Tannenberg] (1878) and the equally revered *The Sermon of Piotr Skarga* (1864), as well as remarkable portraits of the artist's children and wife, and a self-portrait – calling attention to their potent expressiveness and masterful execution.

The works of Matejko shaped later artists such as Malczewski, Wyspiański and Mehoffer, and his influence left a mark on stained-glass design and polychrome work in Krakow churches, and on the entire lineage of Polish Expressionist portraiture. Yet, after Matejko, historical painting dwindled in popularity or underwent significant transformation, as evidenced in works by Malczewski and Wyspiański, which are on display in adjacent rooms.

Continuing through the gallery, visitors can trace the abundance and growing interplay of a diverse range of influences and aesthetic concepts in art from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The room that formerly housed an exhibit of academic painting is now devoted to two phenomena: European academic art and the Polish iteration of the Munich school style. At that time, Academic art maintained a dominant position in the artistic environments of most European countries, and Poland's lack of an academy offering a higher arts education (Wojciech Gerson's Drawing Class in Warsaw had only the status of a secondary institution) drove aspiring artists to pursue an education abroad, mainly in Munich and St Petersburg. The wealth and diversity of European academic art is illustrated by – alongside works by then-popular artists such as Hans Makart and Gabriel von Max – the well-known and highly prized canvas *The Christian Dirce* (1897) by Henryk Siemiradzki (a graduate of the St Petersburg academy, residing mainly in Rome), as well as pieces by Władysław Czachórski and Maurycy Gottlieb, a student of Matejko's (fig. 2). In the paintings of artists educated in Munich, St Petersburg and Krakow we see similar means of expression, comparable dramatic effects, references to history, the Bible, mythology, and Shakespearean dramas, as well as fluent use of colour and a skilful handling of light, especially partial light and partial shadows, in the articulation of the subject matter. The exhibition's placement of works by Polish artists alongside those of artists from Germany and Austria, including Makart and Von Max (both graduates of the Munich academy), occurs to be a very interesting turn. The Vienna-based Makart became one of the most famous artists of his day, rivalled only by Siemiradzki in Rome and Lawrence Alma-Tadema in London. Fittingly, Alma-Tadema's small *Portrait of Ignacy Jan Paderewski* is also on display in this room.

Despite the fact that the Munich and St Petersburg academies were both rooted in a teaching philosophy that was consistent throughout most of Europe, the circles of the two academies varied artistically, and thus, are represented separately within the gallery's new arrangement. Common to both of them is a tendency to reference certain motifs, such as local landscapes, genre scenes and portraiture. They also made attempts to abandon historical subject matter in favour of "pure" forms of art. External factors, such as a lack of autonomy, the constant necessity to reach back into national history and a need to manifest Polishness, all contributed to a new understanding of history taking shape. "The 1880s saw the emergence of a pervasive alternate history; history as a field of emotions and moods, a field of individual and collective

experiences, as an emotional category”<sup>5</sup> (fig. 3). Polish landscapes in the works of Maksymilian and Aleksander Gierymski, Józef Chełmoński, and Witold Pruszkowski emanate a melancholy and longing, an internal disquiet and a concerted focus. The shades of brown and grey that dominate the colour palettes of these pieces lie in stark contrast to the accents of diffuse light – an effect that reinforces the sense of desolation and expectation. Polish artists from the Munich circle retained in their “painterly memories” (a term coined by Simon Schama<sup>6</sup>) views of their homeland, often sombre and evoking a nostalgic mood, and expressing a feeling of loneliness or glorifying the allure of life as it once had been. Chełmoński’s *Indian Summer* (1875), in spirit one of the most Polish Symbolist landscapes, was created in Warsaw, far away from the Ukrainian steppe it depicts.

Polish artists owed to the Munich school their exquisite mastery of painting technique and a skilfulness in employing a wide gamut of soft and cool hues. Graduates of the Munich academy – the Gierymski brothers, Adam Chmielewski, Józef Brandt and Chełmoński – took a new understanding of painting back to their homeland. This revelation was initiated largely by the principles of realism discovered among the circle of Wilhelm Leibl, who himself was influenced by Gustave Courbet. The group of artists associated with Leibl shared an openness and plurality of attitudes regarding aesthetics, and their works were differentiated by their exceptional technical quality and a romantic atmosphere stemming from the use of muted colours. In the room dedicated to Polish artists from the Munich school, we see Courbet’s *Seashore* (1867, fig. 4), emanating an aura of emptiness, and a sensation of nothingness and human fragility, in correspondence with Gierymski’s “mood landscapes” (*Stimmungslandschaft*). What sets Courbet’s landscape apart from the works surrounding it in this room is its vivid colour. For Polish artists, Courbet’s call to “be contemporary” by reflecting life and nature without sacrificing individuality meant searching for a “here and now” even in bygone times, as can particularly be noticed in two of Józef Brandt’s paintings on display in the gallery: *Rescue of Tartar Captives* (1878) and *Czarniecki at Kölding* (1870).

Conversely, the painters educated at the St Petersburg academy introduced elements of early Expressionism into Polish art. Despite sharing a similar understanding of landscape and portraiture to their Munich-educated counterparts, the St Petersburg-educated painters favoured different artistic means. Ferdynand Ruszczyc’s *Soil* (1898), Konrad Krzyżanowski’s portraits or Stiepan Kolesnikov’s *Orthodox Church at Dusk* (1906) are moody and extremely personal works depicting a deformed reality. What differentiates them from works by artists of the Munich school is their intense colours, sketch-like spontaneity and boldness of strokes. Their expressionism was an attempt to create a new method of “internalised” communication between the artist and the viewer. The landscapes, portraits and genre scenes are individualised, transformed into tension-filled visions of reality and human figures by way of the artists’ extreme subjectivity. The contrasting “unnatural,” dark or monochromatic hues, the exceedingly flat or unnaturally bulging perspective and a deformation of nature underscoring man’s alienation from his surroundings are all techniques employed to intensify the expressive potency of these works.

One room is dedicated to Polish artists’ take on Post-Impressionism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here, we find works by Józef Pankiewicz, Władysław Podkowiński, Olga Boznańska, Leon Wyczółkowski and Jan Stanisławski alongside paintings by Auguste Renoir, Max Slevogt and

<sup>5</sup> Juszcak, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1996).

Paul Signac. Though Polish Post-Impressionist artists incorporated techniques borrowed from French Impressionism, their work was quite distinct, with a common attitude toward Impressionism linking the several variations of Post-Impressionist style. In the French approach, the leading role was played by natural light – it stratified the subject into layers of various colours and imparted a separation of tones. The painter's aim was to study the optical effect of light and to capture its fleetingness in the picture, resulting in a naturalistic recording of natural elements or outdoor scenes. Polish painters who had been exposed to the work of the Impressionists treated light as a source of expression inherent in the subject itself, bringing out the subject's contrasting shadows and half-tones rather than prismatic colours. Among the no-teworthy Post-Impressionist paintings in this room are a late landscape from the South of France by Renoir (1908–1912); a “Dutch-style” landscape by Slevogt, marked by long and thick strokes of the brush and palette knife; and Signac's precise Neo-Impressionist landscape conveying no trace of ethereality in its depiction of a port in Antibes (*Antibes. Morning*, 1914). The subsequent pieces demonstrate Józef Pankiewicz's and Leon Wyczółkowski's move away from Impressionism, followed by some original works by Jan Stanisławski. After a period of Divisionist experimentation, the former two artists applied themselves to painting dark and almost gloomy landscapes, thought-provoking nocturnes and indoor scenes.

Several of the following rooms are dedicated to the two leading styles of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – Symbolism and early Expressionism. “Artistic intensity [at the twilight of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Poland] causes difficulty in the stylistic categorization of paintings from that time, that symbolic and expressive syndrome of Modernism.”<sup>7</sup> We see several examples of works by Władysław Ślewiński and Paul Sérusier, both of whom owe a great deal to the Symbolism of Paul Gauguin, yet each arriving at their own interpretations of the style. Ślewiński gradually darkened his colour palette towards a shadow play effect, while Sérusier built a hermetic world of Breton landscapes inhabited by mysterious figures. Both employed principles of Cloisonnism, bringing to the fore, above all, the decorative character of their canvasses. Along with Gauguin, they can be credited with the creation of this particular style within European Modernism as it is understood today – as a rejection of the pursuit of imitating nature and an acknowledgment that art should exist for art's sake, with aesthetic quality being an autonomous value.<sup>8</sup> Alongside the works by Ślewiński and Sérusier are paintings by the German Symbolist Franz von Stuck and Wojciech Weiss's Expressionist *Spring* (1898) and *Obsession* (1899–1900). Also present are works of mythological subject matter, with the intriguing sketch *Faun and a Girl* (before 1905) by Max Slevogt and the richly coloured *Narcissus* (ca. 1900) by Ludwig von Hofmann. The room also houses compositions that had previously resided in separate areas by Olga Boznańska and Witold Wojtkiewicz, whose works of art remain a unique phenomenon not only in Polish art but in that of Europe on the whole. In the world created by Wojtkiewicz, we find ourselves surrounded by dolls, clowns, old folks and children alienated amidst strange works of nature (**fig. 5**). Meanwhile, in Sérusier's paintings we encounter a world of Breton legends and tales, which the artist created by adapting and transforming Japanese patterns. His works are decorative and distinguish themselves with their organic colour palette, stratification and austerity of expression. Wojtkiewicz painted three-dimensional scenes,

<sup>7</sup> Maria Poprzęcka, *Pochwała malarstwa. Studia z historii i teorii sztuki* [In Praise of Painting. Studies of Art History and Theory] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 2000), p. 244.

<sup>8</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Obrona modernizmu. Wybór esejów* [In Defence of Modernism. Selected Essays], trans. Grzegorz Dziamski, Maria Śpik-Dziamska, compiled and edited by Grzegorz Dziamski (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), p. 77.



though he sometimes blurred the planes with his contorted, crooked figures and bewildering marionettes painted in brisk tangled lines. His paintings are dominated by greys, whites and various pastels, or dark tones suggesting passion, isolation and death (fig. 6).

Facing Wojtkiewicz's works are paintings by the Munich-educated and Paris-based Boznańska. Her pieces are composed of minute spots of paint, with overall restrained colours dominated by grey. Full of emotional tension, they oscillate in a strange light much like the painting and drawings of Wojtkiewicz. Her subjects – usually figures indoors, delicate, brittle, immersed in their own private world and sometimes quite unrealistic – are marked with characteristically diffuse outlines and are bathed in rippled light.

Symbolism is also duly represented within the many artistic manifestations of Modernism in Poland. Romanticism extolled a conviction that was very firmly rooted in European art, namely that the role of the artist is to reveal transcendental truths, and that art should be neither an illustration of the everyday reality nor of historical events. In this section, we grant a considerable amount of space to works by Jacek Malczewski. Paintings from his “Siberian” period are displayed alongside pieces that came later, including those from a period when he was greatly influenced by German Symbolism, as well as those which he created at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These paintings are arranged in a dialogue with other representatives of the Young Poland movement – Józef Mehoffer, Witold Wojtkiewicz, and Edward Okuń. All of these artists are linked by a common interest in “history” presented on canvas in the form of a literary, mythological or fable narrative. Even the portraits, especially Malczewski's, contain hidden meanings: apparitions, animals, mythical creatures and various symbols referring to the activity of the subject mingle with their physiognomy. Among these paintings, the landscapes can be said to possess an imaginary character. Painting types become jumbled and historical themes seep into landscapes and portraits. Józef Mehoffer's *Strange Garden* (1902–1903), though in the artist's mind it was meant to be a reflection of his happy family life – a *hortus deliciarum* of sorts,<sup>9</sup> in fact employs symbols originating in the artist's imagination and presents an illusory world thanks to the chiaroscuro used (fig. 7). Although Mehoffer titled the painting *Sunshine* at a 1905 exhibition in Munich, the critics failed to get a sense of idyll from the mood it emanated.<sup>10</sup> A strange internal tension also arises between the children and the trembling landscape bathed in light, washed-out tones in Wojtkiewicz's *Abduction of the Princess (Flight)* (1908). Also Symbolistic in its depiction of the subject is *Saint Agnes* (1920–1921) by Malczewski (fig. 8). Here, the artist places the figure of the saint, wearing a large scarf with feathers and a heavy coat slumping towards the ground, against a background of nature in rebirth. In our historical and artistic context, Malczewski's *œuvre* is considered groundbreaking, insightful, and – through his apparent departure from tradition – truly innovative. Meanwhile, foreign viewers discern elements of kitsch in his works and find evidence of an unrestrained ego (the large number of self-portraits being a case

<sup>9</sup> Agnieszka Morawińska, “*Hortus deliciarum* Józefa Mehoffera” [“Józef Mehoffer's *hortus deliciarum*”], in *Ars auro prior. Studia Ioanni Białostocki sexagenario dicata* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1981), pp. 713–8.

<sup>10</sup> Opinion of the well-known art critics Ludwig Hevesi and William Ritter, see Marta Smolińska-Buczuk, “‘Dziwny ogród’ Józefa Mehoffera. Topografia interpretacji” [“Józef Mehoffer's ‘Strange Garden.’ A Topography of Interpretation”], in *Wielkie dzieła, wielkie interpretacje. Materiały LV ogólnopolskiej sesji naukowej Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki Warszawa 17–18 listopada 2006* [Great Works, Great Interpretations. Proceedings of the 55<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Art Historians, Warsaw, 17–18 November 2006], Maria Poprzęcka, ed. (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, 2007), pp. 192–5.

in point), set against a Surrealist background.<sup>11</sup> This section of the exhibition presents an overview of Symbolist landscapes and brings to the forefront one of the category's most significant traits – a conviction that the world cannot be described directly with the methods known for centuries; that artists must utilize particular symbols, “stand ins,” or as Gauguin called them – parabolas.<sup>12</sup>

In the new layout, a completely distinct section is devoted to Wyspiański due to the nature of this artist's work, which overlapped various fields of art and ranged from romantic flights of fancy to pessimistic lamentations on the end of the century to doubts in his own abilities. This separate room holds the artist's landscapes, portraits, and designs for stained glass windows and textiles. Such an arrangement was also necessitated by a conservatorial concern – most of the works exhibited here are drawings in pastels and mixed media, which demand specific conditions.

The Gallery of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Art upholds the general principle that most European art institutions still abide by – to present the most important developments in art through the works of outstanding artists. Simultaneously, the stature of the national museum obliges it to create and maintain a canon of art. With that in mind, the gallery's mission should reflect a challenge to continually search for new ways to interpret and analyse artistic achievements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We were faced with the call to select pieces from a massive pool of works in our possession and we did so with a view to offering visitors an image of 19<sup>th</sup>-century art that is pertinent to today's audiences. An intensity of artistic issues, overlapping styles and Poland's unique historical experiences all complicated our challenge to arrange works in a way that would demonstrate not only the ties between Polish and European art, but also difficulties in accepting new directions and a peculiar type of conservatism. All of this is worth remembering when touring the new exhibition in the Gallery of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Art – interpreting the creative message of artists and their works anew, in the here and now.

Translated by Simon Włoch

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<sup>11</sup> Henri Loyrette's introduction to the exhibition catalogue: *Jacek Malczewski 1854–1929*, Musée d'Orsay, 15 February – 14 May 2000 (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2000), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> From: *Moderniści o sztuce* [Modernists on Art], compiled by, edited by and with introduction by Elżbieta Grabska (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1971), p. 222.