

## **| The Exhibition “The Elevated: From the Pharaohs to Lady Gaga” (17 May – 23 September 2012)**

The exhibition “The Elevated: From the Pharaohs to Lady Gaga” was devoted to a key problem in human societies, the tension between hierarchy and equality, with the need for hierarchical order and the desire (utopia?) of equality. Its main theme was the relationship between two great governing principles: the traditions of old hierarchical societies and the democratic tradition and formula, with parliamentarism and *soi-disant* egalitarianism. It was the first time in Poland and the world that this concept thus defined became the subject of a museum exhibition.

The exhibition synthesized the history of hierarchical societies and mechanisms of contemporary society such as equality and hierarchization of communications on the Internet, media spectacularity as a way to represent powers and individuals, the role of the fourth estate (television, press and Internet media) in shaping today’s society; celebrityism (media stars as simulacra of culture); the virtualization of the public image and strategies for creating it; the crisis of tradition and the challenges of the new media civilization. The exhibition shows the most typical ways of raising the social status of individuals and groups, in other words, methods of building a public image yesterday and today, from antiquity to contemporary media celebrities. Making up the show were 546 exhibits, mostly from the holdings of the National Museum in Warsaw, with a dozen or so from other Polish museums and collections.

The exhibition was created by Krzysztof Pomian (CNRS, Paris; Musée de l’Europe, Brussels), Antoni Ziemba (University of Warsaw, National Museum in Warsaw), Grażyna Bastek (NMW), Aleksandra Janiszewska (NMW) and the whole team of the museum’s curators and researchers. The museum’s partners were Musée de l’Europe in Brussels and the Institute of Art History, University of Warsaw. Accompanying it were two major projects, the publication of a large, eponymous book discussing the issues focal to the exhibition<sup>1</sup> and an

<sup>1</sup> *Wywyższeni. Od faraona do Lady Gagi*, Krzysztof Pomian, ed. (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 2012). The book consists of the following articles: Krzysztof Pomian, “Krótka historia nierówności między ludźmi na przykładzie Europy” [A short history of inequality between people using the example of Europe]; Antoni Ziemba, “Dawna sztuka w służbie władzy – mechanizmy sprawowania władzy poprzez sztukę w społecznościach hierarchicznych” [Old art in the service of people in power: The mechanisms of exercising power with art in hierarchical societies]; Mirosława Marody, “Wywyższenie w dobie różnorodności” [The elevated in an era of diversity]; Paweł Majewski, “Pojawiać się i znikać – somatyka w przedstawieniach władzy. Szkic” [To appear and to disappear: The somatics in representing those in power. A sketch]; Monika Dolińska, “Prawo do nieśmiertelności – mumia i sarkofag” [The right to immortality: The mummy and the sarcophagus]; Juliusz A. Chrościcki, “Prawo do nieśmiertelności: trumna z ciałem, uroczysty pochówek, pomnik” [The right to immortality: The coffin with the body, the burial ceremony, the monument]; Antoni Ziemba, “Prawo do twarzy – przywilej imiennego wizerunku. Społeczne i antropologiczne funkcje portretu” [The right to a face: The privilege to a named image. The social and anthropological functions of the portrait]; Zofia Keler-Piętowska, “Medal – dokument z życia wyższych sfer” [The medal: A document from the life of the upper strata of society]; Barbara Arciszewska, “Wywyższeni: architektura jako instrument hierarchizacji społecznej” [The elevated: Architecture as an instrument of social hierarchization]; Ewa Orlińska-Mianowska, “Ubiór i jego ozdoby jako oznaki wyższości” [Dress and its embellishments as signs of superiority]; Ryszard Bobrow

education programme, which included a multi-segment public debate about the mechanisms of democracy and social hierarchies.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition was divided into three conceptual parts. The first one addressed the irrepressible privileges of the elevated, of social elites. The uppermost of these privileges is the right to immortality, which symbolically eternalizes the prominent person through the funeral rite, sepulchral art (tombs and tombstones, steles of antiquity, Greece, Etruscans and Romans; *castra doloris* and catafalques, Old Polish coffin portraits). The second entitlement is the right to a face, the privilege of having a named image as a portrait serving social elevation and constructing hierarchy. The first room of the exhibition was crowded with busts and portrait heads ranging from antiquity to the twentieth century. The right to a face was only democratized by portrait photography at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (beginning with the daguerreotype and progressing to family photograph albums and photo booths).

Numismatic specimen, which in themselves stemmed from the privilege of the elevated to mint and issue coins and medals, told their own narrative, which accompanied the sequence of issues. They represented themes such as the funeral, the burial, the tombstone, the allegories of power, the architecture of power, the statues of power, heraldry, the assembly of Polish rulers, the insignia of power, coronations, births, nuptials, supremacy, victory, conquest, homage and military triumph, parades, entries and portraits of rulers and of distinguished persons.

The second part of the exhibition provided a synthetic historical overview. First, it showed the old hierarchical societies, beginning with the systems of antiquity where the ruler appeared as a deity and his subjects were elevated through proximity to him (Mesopotamian stamps, Assyrian and Egyptian sculpture) and those societies in which the ruler governed by divine appointment, surrounded by sacrum (the idea of the Roman Empire with the apotheosis of Caesar, which would be adopted in the conceptions of the Byzantine Basileus, Nubian princes and modern monarchs). The old hierarchical societies believed in three basic criteria for elevation: elevation by birth seen in the system of heraldry, genealogy and orders; elevation with money and elevation through the power of education, knowledge and intellectual and creative achievement. Demonstrations of the elevated ones' piety (the funding of works of religious art) played an important part in building the elites' prestige. The elite created a comprehensive system of attributes of power. They included paintings (glorifying images, the portrait of the current ruler, the statue as portrait, the equestrian portrait), sounds (coronation or funereal music, table music) and words (monarchs' titles). But, above all, by dress and props. For example, coronation dress was subjected to various political strategies, as was the case of the elected Polish kings: when the monarch appeared in nobility-national dress (which in fact was republican-civic), he was presenting himself as a citizen of the republic, of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, who had been elected as "first among equals"; when he appeared in universal European royal, coronation dress or in Roman costume made to look antique, he was claiming hereditary, absolute power that defied choice. Specific places and rituals also constructed social hierarchy: residences (palaces and gardens), the symbolic architecture of power (the triumphal arch, column, obelisk) and ceremonies (coronations, enthronements,

i Wanda Załęska, "Kultura stołu jako sposób wywyższenia" [The culture of the table as a method of social elevation]; Bartek Chaciński, "WWWywyższenie" [EleWWWation]; Ewa Wójtowicz, "Celebrytyzm w sieci. Droga do sławy w Internecie 2.0." [Celebrity on the Internet. The road to fame on the Internet 2.0.]. It also includes an illustrated map of the exhibition created by Grażyna Bastek and Antoni Ziemia and a list of exhibits by Aleksandra Janiszewska.

<sup>2</sup> Przemysław Głowacki and team (Education Department of the National Museum in Warsaw) developed this programme.

investitures, birth announcements, weddings, audiences and homages, triumphant entries and parades) and leisure (hunts, games in the park, sports, tournaments, banquets, feasts, balls). The culture of the table and of feasting (such as Heinrich, Count von Brühl's *Swan Service*) was a space where the ostentation of power could be celebrated.

The exhibition's next historical section, "A façade of equality. Republican hierarchies," announced regimes that proclaimed equality to negate the hierarchy of birth. It used examples to signal the aristocratic ethos in Greek democracies and oligarchies (the Greek athlete's figure, which suggests a similarity between the elevated human and the god Apollo and marks being part of the elite thanks to a native and a practised strength and corporal beauty, which in turn generate moral beauty, nobility and virility); civic ethos in republican and imperial Rome (sculpted bust of a citizen) and the mediaeval and modern republican regimes: Venice as a republic of the urban aristocracy directed by the doge, the Republic of the United Provinces of the Netherlands as a republic of urban patricians led by the *stadhouder* and the noble-magnate Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth governed by the elected monarch. In the latter regime, power was exercised through free elections and legislation created by laws (constitutions) by the parliament (Sejm), which convened with the king as chairman, expressing the tension between hierarchy and the utopia of equality. The portraits of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Polish magnates made it clear that for them dress carried political ideology. The ruler or the aristocrat could appear in dress wrongly called national costume, which in fact was civic dress perceived as native, belonging to the Commonwealth's "people," the nobility. It signified being a citizen of the republic, a communal state of declared equality and parliamentary democracy. Foreign dress, however, when worn by a magnate raised him above the mass of citizens and indicated that he belonged to a supranational court elite. The knight's dress (armour) could be ambiguous: by referring to the virtue of courage, it either suggested belonging to the knightly order from the feudal hierarchy or referred to the traditions of the *milites* of antiquity, especially the citizens of Rome with their egalitarian ethos. A series of lithographs by Stanisław Lentz with portraits of the deputies to the First Constitutional Assembly in 1919 illustrate the principle of equality before the law and the introduction of laws of equality in Europe in the nineteenth–twentieth centuries. It was juxtaposed to a series of paintings of deputies to the Four-Year Sejm of 1784–1791 by Józef Peszka. The Sejm elections in 1918 (for 1919) were the first fully equal democratic act, since men, women and ethnic and religious minorities took part. The March Constitution of 1921 established this system.

Authoritarian systems, which the exhibition called periods of regression, recurred regularly after democratic and more or less egalitarian regimes. The motif of "Józef Piłsudski – from citizen to dictator" showed authoritarian Europe through the two versions in the marshal's iconography: the cult of civic virtues presented in the images of a modest legionary and citizen in an army coat devoid of distinctions juxtaposed to the personality cult shown in the glorifying images of the Chief, leader and ruler of nation and state. Totalitarian Europe was represented by the contrast of propaganda photographs and films (including some by Leni Riefenstahl) and a Nazi uniform with a concentration camp inmate's striped uniform and paintings by Jonasz Stern, Xawery Dunikowski and Andrzej Wróblewski, which showed the absolutism of the new slave society's reign over life and death. Stalinism and "real" communism proclaimed equality, but it was only pretend equality with the cult of the Leader, new collective heroes hierarchically elevated, the party functionaries, juxtaposed to the "people," employees and proletarians, whom the propaganda portrayed as a community of equal and satisfied citizens.

"Today's hierarchies," the section devoted to contemporary society, was the third and last part of the exhibition. Our democratic society, despite its foundation of the principles of

citizens' equality under the law, observance of human rights and the freedom of expression, remains deeply hierarchical. The traditional criteria of elevation by wealth, education and talent remain in force, but not birth, which has been replaced by beauty, physical attractiveness and, above all, talent for self-promotion. The media are the platform for building and maintaining social position. A person's public image has been transformed into the promotion of celebrities and personalities, which followed from the cult of opera divas, Hollywood stars and icons of pop culture (pop-art, Andy Warhol). Digital tablets, which in themselves are "gadgets of pop culture," showed well-known Poles from the worlds of politics, culture, the arts, music, sport and iconic crowd idols. Some of the images are no more than simulacra (as defined by Jean Baudrillard), symbols lacking meaning, which are presented for their own sake, for the ostentation of "being visible and being seen." The Internet's social portals, in turn, make it possible for any user to self-create his image, to give himself elite prestige and make himself the object of admiration. As is shown by election posters, this also shapes the transformation of the traditional image of the politician from a statesman (Tadeusz Mazowiecki) or an activist or revolutionary (Lech Wałęsa) into a personality who exposes his corporality or sexuality for political gains (Marta Ratuszyńska), while the phenomenon of Internet popularity increasingly becomes the subject of fabricated artistic-social provocations (the virtual *Kampania prezydencka Wiktorii Cukt* [The presidential campaign of Wiktor Cuk], 2001; Marcel Łoziński's film *Jak to się robi?* [How It's Done], 2006). The world of media celebrityism combines with the extreme division of society into a narrow and shallow elite of the wealthy (big capital and the top celebrities) and the rest of the human masses. The exhibition interpreted this phenomenon by provoking a collision of images of celebrities and top-brand luxury products with Nicolas Groszpiere's photograms of cheap apartment blocks (2007–2012).

Closing the exhibition was a series of photograms by Oskar Dawicki, *Obituaries* (2004). They were placed in "The Right to Immortality" section, next to the *castrum doloris*, symbolically returning to the beginning of the exhibition, where they also gave a critical perspective on the contemporary cult of celebrities and commented forcefully on the relativity and evanescence of media celebrities, even the most deserving and distinguished ones.