

# | Maria Skubiszewska

(31 March 1930 – 13 April 2011)

Maria Skubiszewska worked for the National Museum in Warsaw for twenty-four years. Her work and her personality left a lasting imprint on our institution.

## Her Family

Maria was born on 31 March 1930 in Suchodoły (Krasnystaw District, Lublin Province) to Wojciech Michalski, owner of the Suchodoły estate, and Róża Ksawera Deskur, owner of Ostrów estate near Klimontowo in Kielce Province. Theirs was a home with patriotic traditions going back many generations. Two great-grandfathers in both families had taken part in uprisings, suffering severe consequences: Felicjan Michalski (1788–1865), a lieutenant-colonel in the army of the Duchy of Warsaw, was wounded in the November Uprising of 1830 and spent a year in Russian captivity. Andrzej Deskur (1825–1903) was exiled to Siberia for ten years for trying to organize a rebellion in the Russian partition in 1846. After the January Uprising of 1863 he spent three years (1864–1867) in the Urals.

The outbreak of the Second World War dramatically disrupted Maria's and her four siblings' blissful childhood in the manor house, exposing them directly to a series of traumatic events. A battle with the Germans in the vicinity of the house, the pacification of nearby villages, the Bolshevik invasion, her father's unavoidable flight, the confiscation of their home and the deportation of her mother (who courageously slipped out of the train that was carrying her away and luckily survived), followed by the German occupation of their part of Lublin Province and the murders of Jews she witnessed – all these experiences would have been a huge shock even to someone older than nine.

## Her Education

After the Red Army invaded again in 1944, the Michalski family was forced to leave its beloved home. They spent a year in Ostrów in Kielce Province from July 1944, and then, with her parents, sister and three brothers, Maria settled in Krakow. It was there that the young girl would be formed, intellectually and spiritually. In May 1948 she completed the secondary school run by the Ursuline Sisters, where her teachers included the eminent Father Józef Rozwadowski, a future bishop of Łódź. Family, friends, pre-war teachers and the royal city of Krakow itself softened the harsh new reality. As Maria later wrote in her memoirs, the city “did not surrender to the terror of the imported ideology, but calmly cultivated its own old lifestyle and its intellectual soul, in its beautiful architectural frame and on a foundation of its splendid traditions.”<sup>1</sup> Her course in the Department of Art History of the Jagiellonian University in 1948–1952 flowed in a similar atmosphere and in a spirit of internal resistance to the politics of captivity. She obtained her Master's degree with a thesis supervised by Professor Wojśław Molè on *The human figure in fifteenth-century Venetian painting*.

<sup>1</sup> Maria Skubiszewska wrote these memoirs late in life, and they were never published. Piotr Skubiszewski read their excerpts at his wife's funeral.

## Her Work

Before completing her studies, in 1951–1952, Maria worked in the Department of Research on the Origins of the Polish State in the research station of Wawel Castle, where her tasks included archaeological research on fragments of a Romanesque cathedral from the era of Duke Władysław I Herman. From 1 September 1952 to 31 December 1960 she was employed in the Wawel Castle's State Art Collection. First, she served as an instructor in its Education Department, and beginning on 14 January 1956 as a museum assistant in the Painting and Sculpture Department, then from 1 October 1958 as an assistant curator. After she moved to museum work, the director of the State Art Collection, Professor Jerzy Szablowski, and department head Dr Anna Bocheńska entrusted her with creating a catalogue of Italian paintings in the castle holdings, a decision that would define her main scholarly interests.

In 1956 Professor Szablowski included Maria in his team charged with preparing a volume about the relics on Wawel Hill in the series *Katalog Zabytków Sztuki w Polsce*.<sup>2</sup> Her job included creating an inventory of the castle's Gothic chapels and sculptures and of the royal tombs in its cathedral. This developed her interest in tomb sculpture and launched her study of King Casimir Jagiellonian's tomb. Its iconography later became the subject of her doctoral dissertation, which she wrote under the guidance of Professor Lech Kalinowski and defended at the Jagiellonian University on 30 January 1969. As its starting point, she used Erwin Panofski's newest direction in iconographic research, presented in his book that introduced a division of sepulchral iconography into retrospective and prospective. Skubiszewska added a third element, that of death itself as the most important moment of transition from temporal to eternal life. This innovative interpretation of a unique representation in sepulchral art of a medallion on the king's chest with Mother Earth in labour as a symbol was initially published in English,<sup>3</sup> and only later in Polish as her complete dissertation.<sup>4</sup> The interpretation of the image of the earth as the mother of the dying and the idea of death as birth into a new – eternal – life, supported with writings by authors from antiquity and early Christianity, was the culmination of an exceptionally coherent, clear and fascinating discourse on the iconography of the late-mediaeval masterpiece by Wit Stwos (Veit Stoss). This iconography on the one hand reflects humanistic ideals visibly inspired by Filippo Buonaccorsi, called Callimachus, who was then active in Krakow, and, on the other hand, is permeated with deep theological thought disseminated in its era in many moralistic texts about *ars moriendi*. Skubiszewska's work is not only an outstanding academic study, but also an authentic expression of her humanistic and Christian worldview, to which she remained faithful throughout her life.

After marrying Piotr Skubiszewski in 1960, Maria moved to Poznań, where she became an assistant curator in the Department of Foreign Painting of the National Museum in Poznań

<sup>2</sup> *Katalog Zabytków Sztuki w Polsce* [Catalogue of historic monuments in Poland], vol. 4: *Miasto Kraków* [The city of Krakow], part 1: *Wawel* [Wawel], a collective work directed and edited by Jerzy Szablowski (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Państwowe Zbiory Sztuki na Wawelu, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> Maria Skubiszewska, "Death as Birth. The Symbol on the Tomb of a King of Poland," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. 36, third series (1973), pp. 43–51.

<sup>4</sup> Skubiszewska, "Program ikonograficzny nagrobka Kazimierza Jagiellończyka w katedrze wawelskiej" [The iconographic programme of the tomb of Casimir Jagiellonian's tomb in the Wawel cathedral], *Studia do Dziejów Wawelu*, vol. 4 (1978), pp. 117–214.

(2 June 1961 – 31 December 1964) and where, as in Krakow, she worked on the Italian painting collection. Then the couple moved again, this time to Warsaw, and on 2 January 1965 she was employed by the National Museum in Warsaw, in whose Gallery of Foreign Art she served as an assistant curator and then curator (with a break in 1985–1989). From 15 January 1990 until retirement on 1 June 1994, she managed that gallery as its curator.

At the National Museum in Warsaw, Maria Skubiszewska was also charged with the Italian painting collection. Together with Jan Białostocki and his team she edited the first comprehensive academic catalogue of pre-1600 French, Netherlandish and Italian paintings in the museum's collection.<sup>5</sup> This book was the third, after the Wawel<sup>6</sup> and Poznań (published only in 1995)<sup>7</sup> volumes, in the series of exhaustive *catalogues raisonnés* of the largest collections of Italian paintings in Poland, the result of her exceptionally meticulous endeavours in all the museums in which she worked. These books are a paradigm of the *catalogue raisonné*, an example of precise scholarly thought and methods used by a researcher striving to collect the complete documentation for the work in question. The clear reasoning includes a full attribution discussion and an exhaustive iconography of the works presented in a matter-of-fact manner and with striking discipline, in language that is lively and avoids unnecessary embellishment. These catalogues of the collections of pre-1600 Italian art in public holdings in Poland will remain a key point of reference for many future generations of researchers.

Maria enriched her already deep knowledge and expertise in the field of Italian art by travelling to Italy. The trips were often, but not always, made possible by fellowships from various institutions, such as Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana in Rome, the Lanckoroński Foundation in Rome, École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris and the Ministry of Culture and Arts in Warsaw.

In Rome, Maria received consistent support from the Istituto Storico Polacco and personally from its founders, Professor Karolina Lanckorońska and Father Walerian Meysztowicz. These friendships lasted throughout their lives. Professor Lanckorońska entrusted Maria with writing a study of the Italian art collection in the Lanckoroński gallery, which she generously donated to Wawel Castle in 1996. The catalogue, which Maria wrote with Kazimierz Kuczman and which was published in 2008, six years after Professor Lanckorońska's death, was to be the last of Maria Skubiszewska's important works about collections of Italian art.<sup>8</sup> It was also a beautiful and worthy finale to this long friendship with the last representative of the great Lanckoroński family. The earlier exhibition organized by the Wawel Castle staff, with Maria's participation, entitled "Homage to the donor" was the official expression of gratitude and homage.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Malarstwo francuskie, niderlandzkie, włoskie do 1600*, collection catalogue edited by Jan Białostocki and Maria Skubiszewska and staff (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 1979). Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. Galeria Malarstwa Obcego.

<sup>6</sup> Maria Skubiszewska, *Malarstwo włoskie w zbiorach wawelskich* [Italian painting in the Wawel collection], collection catalogue (Krakow: Państwowe Zbiory Sztuki, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Skubiszewska, *Malarstwo włoskie do 1600* [Italian painting before 1600] (Poznań: National Museum in Poznań, 1995). Katalog Zbiorów Muzeum Narodowego w Poznaniu, vol. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Skubiszewska, Kazimierz Kuczman, *Obrazy z kolekcji Lanckorońskich z wieków XIV–XVI w zbiorach Zamku Królewskiego na Wawelu* [Fourteenth- to sixteenth-century paintings from the Lanckoroński collection in the Wawel Royal Castle] (Krakow: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Maria Skubiszewska, "Obrazy włoskie z daru Lanckorońskich," in *Donatorce – w hołdzie. Katalog wystawy odnowionych obrazów i rodzinnych pamiątek z daru Karoliny Lanckorońskiej. Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, sierpień–październik 1998. To the Donor in Homage. A Catalogue of Restored Paintings and Family Mementoes from Karolina*

Maria got to know all the important European museums and galleries that own important collections of Italian art, and she was able to study also some of their storage holdings, including the Hermitage. She conducted research at the Biblioteca Hertziana in Rome, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence and Kunstbibliothek in Berlin. She worked together with many art historians, consulting them on attributions. They included Roseline Bacou, curator of drawings at the Louvre; Rodolfo Pallucchini, in those years the greatest authority on Venetian painting; Francesco Santi, director of the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria in Perugia; Federico Zeri, an eminent expert on Italian painting; Yuri Kuznetsov, curator of painting and drawing at the State Hermitage Museum and Michel Laclotte, curator of painting at the Louvre and later its director. Ties of friendship linked her to some of these scholars, including Bacou, Pallucchini and Laclotte. Laclotte wrote about Maria in his memoirs with great warmth and deep respect.<sup>10</sup>

Maria Skubiszewska's serious professionalism and great knowledge of Italian painting also produced dozens of scholarly articles and the book *Malarstwo Italii w latach 1250–1400* [Italy's painting in 1250–1400].<sup>11</sup> Her most remarkable writings include an article about two valuable paintings by Franciabigio in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw,<sup>12</sup> in which she argues for a new attribution and which became accepted in world literature. Her book remains an indispensable university textbook, with an exceptionally clear and gripping narrative about the beginnings of Italian painting, its development, its main achievements in Giotto's studio and in the work of the artists working in Siena, all the way until its decline following the Black Death of 1348. But it is also fascinating reading for every amateur of early Italian painting. Skubiszewska's deep analysis of large numbers of artistic works and currents sketched out against a historical, social and economic background, reflects her ability, characteristic of all her scholarship, to combine her extensive knowledge of the subject with logical reasoning and a perfectly disciplined formulation. It would be a dream to see a second edition of this book, with modern graphic design and new colour illustrations!

At the National Museum in Warsaw in 1967–1973, Maria also served as the managing editor of the *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie*, at the time Poland's only foreign-language publication about the history of art. It had been founded in 1960 by Jan Białostocki, who was its editor until his death in 1988.

Maria and her husband spent 1981–1989 in France. After returning to Poland and to the National Museum in Warsaw, she served for four years as the curator of the Department of Foreign Painting. In this period of Poland's political transformation, she was in charge of resolving difficult questions of ownership of the works deposited before the Second World War by numerous aristocratic families. She also oversaw her staff's creation of a guide to the museum's collection.<sup>13</sup>

*Lanckorońska's Donation*, Kazimierz Kuczman, Jerzy T. Petrus, Maria Podlódowska-Reklewska, eds (Krakow: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 1998), pp. 23–7. Kazimierz Kuczman, who had served as the exhibition's curator, also wrote in this catalogue about Italian painting.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Laclotte, *Histoires de musées. Souvenir d'un conservateur* (Paris: Éditions Scala, 2003), pp. 193–4.

<sup>11</sup> Maria Skubiszewska, *Malarstwo Italii w latach 1250–1400* [Italy's painting in 1250–1400] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Auriga Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1980). *Malarstwo Europejskie w Średniowieczu*, vol. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Skubiszewska, "Franciabigio's two tondi with Annunciation," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie*, n° 3, XVI (1975), pp. 84–96.

<sup>13</sup> *National Museum in Warsaw. Guide. Galleries and Study Collections*, Dorota Folga-Januszewska, Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, eds (Warsaw: National Museum in Warsaw, 2006).

## Maria

Maria Skubiszewska was a beautiful woman. Her noble appearance seemed to reflect the inner principles guiding her life. To her younger colleagues, she was an older sister. Her attitude was stimulating and controlling, which at times produced resistance from young people. But she was supportive, primarily from concern for their growth, something that was often combined with encouragement to work intensively on a doctorate, to build up their knowledge. Her interest in introducing her protégés to professional secrets did not consist only of encouragement but translated into practical assistance for many of them, including this author, to find professional trips to London or Rome.

Maria and Piotr loved the sea. Because of their friendship with Father Janusz Pasierb, they were able to spend an annual holiday in the mediaeval convent of the Benedictine Sisters in Żarnowiec in Pomerania. The convent attracted the humanities elites from Krakow and Warsaw. In her essay “Wakacje w Żarnowcu” published in a volume commemorating Father Pasierb, Maria wrote beautifully about the unforgettable atmosphere of those sojourns and the people who created it.<sup>14</sup>

It would be impossible to pass over Maria’s social and patriotic sensibility. When Solidarity was born in Poland in August 1980, she immediately became involved in this great movement. She led the effort to create an institutional committee at the National Museum in Warsaw, the first in a museum. Already on 2 September 1980 the staff elected her as their delegate to the National Commission in Gdańsk, and on the very next day she registered the National Museum in Warsaw Solidarity committee. She resigned from this position on 15 January 1981, but for some time continued to assist her successor, Professor Włodzimierz Godlewski, and organized Lech Wałęsa’s visit to the museum on 28 February 1981.

Maria remained closely tied spiritually to Poland during her years in France. In Poitiers, their new university milieu, where Professor Skubiszewski lectured, Maria and Piotr encouraged friends and acquaintances to offer gestures of solidarity and material assistance to the Poles. Her colleagues at the National Museum began to receive mailings from Frenchmen they did not know. The memory of touchingly regular parcels containing coffee, tea and other rarities in those horrible times of political and economic scarcity lives on.

When Maria Skubiszewska retired in June 1994, she said good-bye to her co-workers in high style, inviting them all, with friends or relatives they wanted to bring along, for a weekend at her seaside home in Dębki. After the Benedictine Sisters had stopped receiving guests in their cloister in Żarnowiec and after she and Piotr returned from France, they built a house on the Baltic, which became their beloved refuge.

Maria died in Warsaw on 13 April 2011.

Hanna Benesz

<sup>14</sup> Maria Skubiszewska, “Wakacje w Żarnowcu” [Holidays in Żarnowiec], in *Wstępujący na wzgórze. Wspomnienia o ks. Januszu St. Pasierbie* [Walking up the mountain. Reminiscences about Father Janusz S. Pasierb], Maria Wilczek, ed. (Pelplin: Wydawnictwo Bernardinum, 1996), pp. 110–7.