

| Krystyna Secomska's Research on Old Masters Paintings

In her scholarly work, Krystyna Secomska combined two almost irreconcilable skills: a deep erudition with a great talent for colourful historical narrative, sparkling mental shortcuts and crystal-clear explanation of complex issues. She had brilliant style. Only outstanding personalities write about art with such great style. But then Krystyna Secomska was a scholar whose academic interests and endeavours stemmed from a deeply ingrained culture, a culture of being, of living, of feeling and of empathizing. I can only think of an old-school way to put it: she had a beautiful soul. And so she wrote beautifully, she studied things beautifully and she sought out the culture of beauty in the distant past, bringing it back to life.

She was a quiet, modest person, happy to operate off to the side. And yet hers was an eminent scholarship, and it should have brought her fame. But she shunned fame and, satisfied with her Polish audience, never pushed to have her work translated. Alas, none of us took it upon ourselves to send her most important writings to a Western publisher. And now it is too late! Shame. We are to blame.

Initially, Krystyna Secomska conducted research on mediaeval iconography. Her splendid article on the late-fifteenth-century Brussels painting *The Martyrdom of Saints Crispian and Crispinian* (1490–1494, at the time dated as early sixteenth-century), from the National Museum in Warsaw, was published in the *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* in 1965.¹ It was an erudite discussion of the late-mediaeval world of big-city culture, bourgeois piety and tradesmen's spirituality.

In the 1970s she wrote a long, 300-page treatise on *Legenda Aleksandra Wielkiego w "Panteonie" sandomierskim: miniatury w Kodeksie z 1335 roku* [The legend of Alexander the Great in the Sandomierz "Pantheon": Miniatures in the Codex of 1335].² Its title might imply that it was a modest contribution describing the series of illuminations contained in a single codex, but it is not so: it was a panoramic review of the iconographic motif, of great significance in the intellectual history of late-mediaeval Europe. She uncovered this lay aspect of the "imagined world," the *imaginarium* of the court civilization of the thirteenth- to fifteenth-centuries. Its dozen-page précis had fortunately appeared earlier in the renowned *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*,³ confirming Secomska's position in the scholarly world.

Actually, Krystyna Secomska pursued this interest in late mediaeval art of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries all her life. It can be seen in her articles on "Wniebowzięcie w kościele parafialnym w Warcie: analiza ikonograficzna" [The Assumption in the parish church in Warta:

¹ Krystyna Secomska "Martyrium SS. Crispini et Crispiniani MM' et un tableau néerlandais du début du XVI^e siècle," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie*, vol. 6, n° 1 (1965), pp. 5–16.

² Secomska, *Legenda Aleksandra Wielkiego w „Panteonie” sandomierskim: miniatury w Kodeksie z 1335 roku* (Wrocław et al.: Ossolineum, 1977).

³ Secomska, "The Miniature Cycle in the Sandomierz Pantheon and the Mediaeval Iconography of Alexander's Indian Campaign," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 38 (1975), pp. 53–71.

an iconographic analysis]⁴ and “Wielkopolska czy Kraków? Geneza stylu Mistrza z Warty” [Greater Poland or Krakow? The genesis of the style of the Master of Warta];⁵ “Ołtarz św. Jana Jałmużnika” [The altar of St John Cantius]⁶ and “Krakowska Legenda św. Jana Jałmużnika. Problemy stylu i warsztatu” [The Krakow legend of St John Cantius. Issues of style and method]⁷ and “Freski w opolskiej Kaplicy Piastowskiej i malowidła w kościele w Lubiechowej: ze studiów nad gotyckim malarstwem ściennym na Śląsku” [Frescoes in the Piast Chapel in Opole and paintings in the church in Lubiechowa: Studies of Gothic wall paintings in Silesia].⁸ Her crowning achievement in this field is her last work, the monumental three-volume edition in the series on *Dzieje Sztuki w Polsce* [History of art in Poland], *Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce* [Gothic painting in Poland], which she co-edited with Adam Labuda. In view of the quantity of materials and number of authors involved, which necessarily also included so-called personnel management, it was a truly heroic task. The tomes also contain many notes written by her.

Yet there is no question that in all her work on late mediaeval and early Renaissance art, another publication was Secomska's *opus magnum*. It was the book *Mistrzowie i księżęta*⁹ [Masters and dukes], an exceptionally colourful and erudite narrative about French painting in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that was her scholarly masterpiece (yes, I dare use this word!). Considering the time it was published, it brought a phenomenal amount of knowledge on this subject, and presented and critiqued the most up-to-date scholarship. This 1972 publication was supplemented in 1989 by an excellent essay discussing the most recent authentications and discoveries. Had this book appeared in French, or another Western language, then, its author would inevitably have become a scholar of international renown, joining the small circle of Polish scholars of the Old Masters who had an international reputation, such as Jan Białostocki or Piotr Skubiszewski. Her work was the outcome of close collaboration with prominent historians of French art, especially with Charles Sterling.

What makes this book brilliant is the succinctness of its ideas and its almost fiction-like narrative. But it is also its thoroughness in telling facts and research hypotheses that continues to make it the cornerstone and indispensable source of Poland's knowledge about fifteenth- and sixteenth-century French painting. It serves as a textbook, but it also tells a lively story. It remains a regular point of reference for all the analyses and surveys of this art that have come in its wake. It begs to be quoted by seducing all who look at it with the beauty of its thought and of its rhetoric. I know what I am talking about because I, too, cannot resist the temptation to

⁴ Secomska, “‘Wniebowzięcie’ w kościele parafialnym w Warcie: analiza ikonograficzna,” in *Malarstwo gotyckie w Wielkopolsce: studia o dziełach i ludziach*, Adam S. Labuda, ed. (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 1994), pp. 121–62. *Prace Komisji Historii Sztuki*, vol. 20. A shortened version of the article had appeared earlier in *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 49 (1987), pp. 109–44.

⁵ Secomska, “Wielkopolska czy Kraków? Geneza stylu Mistrza z Warty?,” in *Malarstwo gotyckie w Wielkopolsce...*, op. cit., pp. 163–95.

⁶ Secomska, “Ołtarz św. Jana Jałmużnika,” in *Studia renesansowe*, Michał Walicki, ed., vol. 4 (Wrocław–Warsaw–Krakow: Państwowy Instytut Sztuki, 1964).

⁷ Secomska, “Krakowska Legenda św. Jana Jałmużnika. Problemy stylu i warsztatu,” *Folia Historiae Artium*, 27 (1991), pp. 71–110.

⁸ Secomska, “Freski w opolskiej Kaplicy Piastowskiej i malowidła w kościele w Lubiechowej: ze studiów nad gotyckim malarstwem ściennym na Śląsku,” *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, 21 (1995), pp. 107–80.

⁹ Secomska, *Mistrzowie i księżęta. Malarstwo francuskie XV i XVI wieku* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1972).

refer to it as I write my own book, which includes a discussion of the influence of Netherlandish art on fifteenth-century French art.

Secomska's work discusses French, French-Flemish and Burgundian painting around 1400–1430 in the circles of patronage of French Charles VI, Philip the Good of Burgundy and John the Fearless, Jean de Berry and the Dukes of Anjou in Paris, Dijon, Bourges and Angers (the chapter on “Od Bourges do Mont-Saint-Michel” [From Bourges to Mont-Saint-Michel]); painting in central and northern France ca. 1450 – ca. 1470, created in Paris, Bourges, Tours and Angers (“*Viridarium Franciae*”); southern French in 1440–1500 around Aix, Avignon and Marseille including its linkages to the Netherlands and Naples (“*Lekcja prowansalska*” [The Provençal lesson]); northern and central French ca. 1500, from Paris, Amiens, Bourges, Tours, Moulins, Autun, Beaune and Dijon (“*W stronę Autun*” [Towards Autun]) and, finally, Mannerism in Paris, Fontainebleau and the Touraine (“*Źródło młodości*” [The source of youth]).

Secomska, faithful to her book's title, *Masters and dukes*, gives us a two-track approach to history and art. On the one hand, she presents them from the perspective of the milieu, the circles of artistic patronage and art's social determinants. On the other hand, she communicates the points of view of the individual artists entangled in these conditions. These masters' ties to “their” princes, protectors and patrons make this book immensely valuable.

Yet hers is not at all a “procession of the great masters,” the annoying practise in traditional art history of threading a succession of great names. First, alongside the “great” names – such as Jean Malouel, Henri Bellechose, Melchior Broederlam, the Limbourg brothers, Master Boucicaut, the Rohan Master, the Bedford Master, Jean Fouquet, Simon Marmion, Roi René's court painter Barthelémy d'Eyck, Enguerrand Quarton, Nicolas Froment, Master of Moulins Jean Hey, Rosso Fiorentini, Primaticcio, Niccolò del'Abbate, Jean Cousin, François and Jean Clouet – Secomska presents many lesser-known masters of late mediaeval and Renaissance French art, who are often no less important and talented. The second group includes Master of Thouzon, Jacques Iverny, Jakob de Litemont, Master of the Parliament of Paris, Master of the Boulbon Altarpiece, Master of the Legend of St Sebastian, Josse Lieferinxe, Nicolas Dipre, Master of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, Maître de Saint Gilles, Jean Perréal, Jean Colombe, Jean Bourdichon, Ruggiero de' Ruggieri, Léonard Thiry, Geoffroy Dumoustier, Antoine Caron, Corneille de Lyon, François Quesnel, Pierre and Étienne Dumoustier, Thoissaint Dubreuil, Martin Fréminet and many others. In painting a picture of their common ties, contacts, borrowing and emulation, Secomska reconstructs as much as is possible the time-tattered web of the fertile relations among the various courts and cities of Europe in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Second, painting is neither art for art's sake nor an autonomous phenomenon. To her, it grows out of many cultures, and she presents it in a broad civilizational context. She writes with rhetorical bravura and flair (see her colourful description of France in 1415–1444 at the beginning of the second chapter, a real historiographic tour de force!) about the background of historical events, analyzes the ways in which historical and social processes condition art very effectively, albeit briefly. It is with panache and intuition that she reconstructs the iconographic *imaginarium* of the art of that era and the religious imagination of its people (for instance, when she writes about the piety of the Passion as the source of the representations of the Pietà, of the Lamentation of Christ and of related subjects, also at the beginning of Chapter II) but also their secular urges, desires, aspirations and ambitions (her brief but precise analysis of the bourgeoisie's art patronage in the first half of the fifteenth century). Accompanying this historical narrative and analysis are quotations from contemporary poetry and literature, chroniclers' lively tales and proclamations by monarchs and princes.

Another of the book's great virtues are the precise descriptions, thorough analyses, conscientiously collected researchers' opinions and balanced attributions. It is a book that continues to fascinate with its lively story of the Old Masters. I read it again and again, at my desk and at bedtime.

Secomska's *Malarstwo francuskie XVII wieku* [Seventeenth-century French painting]¹⁰ was that book's continuation, a textbook-like synthesis of the phenomena that followed it chronologically: Mannerist painting and the early Baroque in the eras of Henri IV and Louis XIII (the so-called Second School of Fontainebleau, the Circle of Lorraine, the French Caravaggionists, Claude Vignon, Simon Vouet and Jacques Blanchard); then the work of Georges de La Tour; Poussin and Claude Lorraine in Rome and Paris; the Parisian Classicists (Jacques Stella, François Perrier, Laurent de La Hyre, Eustache Le Sueur, Sébastien Burdon, Philippe de Champaigne) and the so-called *peintres de la réalité* (the Le Nain brothers and others); they were followed by Louis XIV's decorative-painting "manufacture," Jean-Baptiste Colbert and Charles Le Brun and the successor generations, the young artists Hyacinthe Rigaud, Nicolas de Largillierre and others.

And again, the "well-known and well-liked" painters appear here alongside other, generally underestimated masters. The reader makes the acquaintance of not only the famous brothers Le Nain, representatives of the "painting of Realism," but also of Louis Moillon, François Garnier, Jacques Linard and Pierre Boucle, and then of the "Intimists" of still lifes, Lubin Baugin and Sébastien Stoskopff, who are well known today but were not when Secomska was writing her book. The great Classicists, such as Charles Le Brun, or their rivals, Pierre Mignard and others, appear encircled by the work of painters she presents in excellent brevity, the *pictores minores* from Paris and the provinces: René-Antoine Houasse, Charles de La Fosse, Jean Jouvenet, Gabriel Ravel, Nicolas Colombel, Nicolas Mignard, Jean-Pierre and Antoine Rivalz, Henri Testelin, Jean Nocret, François de Troy, Adam Frans van der Meulen, Jacques Foucquier, Francisque Millet, Jean Lemaire and many others. Again, Krystyna Secomska does not boil down her story to a parade of the masters. Political history, court life at Fontainebleau, Nancy or Paris, customs, poetry and literature, theatre and tragedy, quarrels and intrigues in the Academy, the tactical manoeuvres of the monarch, his ministers and the managers of great artistic-decorative enterprises – all this creates the historical-cultural texture out of which art is born here. The author's primary goal is not to describe, record and present the works – even though she is a virtuosa of concise analysis – but to narrate historical events and phenomena and the human ambitions and strategies that fashioned history's pulse.

Krystyna Secomska's research on French art also generated excellent articles and notes in the catalogues published by the National Museum in Warsaw,¹¹ as well as co-authorship of the splendid exhibition and its catalogue, which remains a reference work, *Sztuka francuska w zbiorach polskich* [French art in Polish collections].¹²

In the same year as *Malarstwo francuskie XVII wieku*, 1985, Secomska published an excellent, readable short monograph on Jacopo Tintoretto.¹³ This was one of her few escapades into Italian art, but what a successful escapade it was! A concise line of thought, a clear text and lively language familiarized the public with this Venetian painter's personality and work.

¹⁰ Secomska, *Malarstwo francuskie XVII wieku* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1985).

¹¹ Among which worth mentioning is *Malarstwo francuskie, niderlandzkie i włoskie do 1600*, Jan Białostocki and Maria Secomska, eds, with the assistance of the museum staff, collection catalogue (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 1979). Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. Galeria Malarstwa Obcego.

¹² *Sztuka francuska w zbiorach polskich 1230–1830*, Anna Dobrzycka, ed., exh. cat., The National Museum in Poznań, [June–July] (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 1973).

¹³ Secomska, *Tintoretto* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1984). W kręgu sztuki.

Her last great treatise was *Spór o starożytność. Problemy malarstwa w „Paralelach” Perrault* [The debate about antiquity: Issues in the painting in Perrault’s “Parallels”],¹⁴ a large, over 450-page, second *opus magnum*.

She took Charles Perrault’s *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes* as a symptom of the many-sided polemics in the Paris Academy and extracted from it the imperative of progress, modernity and emulative creation, which served as the engine of the paradigmatic antinomy of tradition-modernity in French and European thought in the seventeenth century and later. She presented it as a rhetorical platform, which revealed the nationalistic strategies developing behind the scenes of the famous *querelle*. She showed the many dimensions of academic thinking, replacing the traditionally accepted monolith, as a formation to which generations of theorists and artists would make references. For instance, she pointed out the germs of the concept of historical relativism in this formation, later taken up in nineteenth-century thought, as well as the “theory of climate” which would be popularized many centuries later by Gottfried Semper and others. She corroborated the surprising thesis about the deep-rootedness of Herder’s and the pre-Romantics’ concept in the academic conceptual construction expressed in the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns.

From the scholarly point of view, this book is one of the most important in Polish academic literature of the twentieth century, one that has also been noticed and appreciated in Western literature. But, again, what a pity that it has not been published in another language, so that it could be read widely internationally, as it deserves to be.

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¹⁴ Secomska, *Spór o starożytność. Problemy malarstwa w „Paralelach” Perrault* (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1991). See *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 1–2 (2010), pp. 221–2.