

| The National Museum in Warsaw's Gallery of Ancient Art – Back After Years

The Gallery of Ancient Art is located on the ground floor of the National Museum of Warsaw building and occupies one of its most prominent interiors – entered into directly from the main entrance foyer. After several years of work on the rearrangement of the exhibition, the gallery was finally ready on 15 December 2020, though the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the arrival of the first visitors until February 2021.¹ In the first weeks after the Museum's re-opening, enjoying the greatest amount of interest from the public was the Gallery of Ancient Art, whose new incarnation wonderfully resumes the long tradition of ancient art being on display in the halls of the NMW. This article is an attempt to illustrate the concept of the new exhibition in relation to its earlier history.

Presentations of artefacts of ancient cultures have been a presence in the building on aleja 3 Maja (today Aleje Jerozolimskie) almost from the earliest days of its existence.² The first of these came on the initiative of Stanisław Lorentz (at the time the museum's deputy director, and from 1938–82 its director, interrupted by the Second World War). Already in 1936, a full two years prior to the official opening of the museum's new home, Lorentz contacted the archaeologist Kazimierz Michałowski, who had been in the process of planning an expedition to Edfu, Egypt, with a proposal to stage an exhibition showing the findings from the excavations there.³ Arriving at the NMW in 1937 were 30 crates of artefacts from Edfu, which were put on display later that same year in a show titled the *Exhibition of Józef Piłsudski University Excavations in Egypt* held in the museum's temporary exhibition space

¹ The official reopening of the NMW's Gallery of Ancient Art had been planned for 16 December 2020. Unfortunately, this proved impossible due to the situation resulting from the pandemic and the closure of all culture institutions in the final months of 2020. Upon completion of installation works at the gallery, the exhibition was toured by the Minister of Culture, National Heritage and Sport, Piotr Gliński, on 22 December 2020.

² On the history of the NMW building, see Piotr Kibort, "Na skarpie. Gmach Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie – historia projektowania i budowy w latach 1919–1938" in *Marzenie i rzeczywistość. Gmach Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie* (Warsaw, 2016), pp. 34–75. I sincerely thank Piotr Kibort for his consultation on the matter of the history of the NMW building. Providing help in selecting photographs of the old gallery was Anna Masłowska, to whom I also extend my gratitude.

³ The University of Warsaw, which coordinated the mission, entrusted its leadership to Kazimierz Michałowski, see Stanisław Lorentz, "Z dziejów Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Ann. 9 (1965), p. 337; see also Kazimierz Michałowski, "Galeria Sztuki Starożytnej w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Ann. 2 (1957), p. 113; Stanisław Lorentz, "Wystawy Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie 1945–1975," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Ann. 20 (1976), p. 407.

from 28 September to 28 November (**fig. 1**).⁴ Later, the items from that exhibition were shown once more (this time with other artefacts) in the museum building's third wing, which was officially opened on 18 June 1938 (**fig. 2**).⁵

The collection of ancient art suffered tremendous losses during the Second World War, a fact which the famed *Warsaw Accuses* exhibition attempted to illustrate in May 1945.⁶ Though the main part of that exhibition occupied the building's third wing, the artefacts themselves, most of them from Edfu, were gathered in the "Egypt Room," whose entrance was crowned with the words "Enduring for forty centuries – destroyed at the hands of the Germans" (**fig. 3**).⁷ Many years later, Michałowski would recount the time in a highly personal and emotional manner in an article titled "Ancient Art at the *Warsaw Accuses* Exhibition."⁸

After the Second World War, the Gallery of Ancient Art remained closed until May 1949. When it did reopen, it was subdivided into sections dedicated to the art of three main historical centres: Egypt, Greece and Rome (**fig. 4**).⁹ As Maria Ludwika Bernhard noted in 1953, the gallery's opening was a milestone in Polish museology as it represented the first implementation of "a new exhibition premise, one which chiefly accentuated the artefact illuminated with artificial light, and which to the greatest extent to date yearned to eliminate museum furniture."¹⁰ Michałowski himself, in his memoir penned in 1976–78, described the event as "surely one of the most modern ever in Europe."¹¹ The path for viewing the exhibition was not chronological, which resulted from the fact that production work on the show took into consideration the available spaces in the museum and it was deemed that the long first room would not be suitable for the Egyptian artefacts (chronologically the earliest).¹² And so, as they entered the gallery, visitors first encountered Greek and Roman art, with Egyptian artefacts shown last. In fact, the characteristic trait of that exhibition was its use of the original space – highly prominent were the ceiling beams and tall windows. In the subsequent years, the collection was expanded and enriched with the addition of items like those acquired in later archaeological digs, for example in Myrmekion (in 1956, in collaboration

⁴ Anna Masłowska, *Kronika wystaw Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie 1862–2002*, vol. 1: 1862–1962 (Warsaw 2002), pp. 86–87; see also Stanisław Lorentz, "Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie: zarys historyczny," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Ann. 1 (1938), p. 56; Kazimierz Michałowski, *Od Edfu do Faras. Polskie odkrycia archeologii śródziemnomorskiej* (Warsaw, 1983), p. 21; Kazimierz Michałowski, *Wspomnienia* (Warsaw, 1986), p. 160.

⁵ Masłowska, op. cit., p. 37.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 98–99.

⁷ Dariusz Kaczmarzyk, "Pamiętnik wystawy 'Warszawa oskarża'. 3 maja 1945 – 28 stycznia 1946 w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Ann. 20 (1976), p. 613.

⁸ The text opened as follows: "Smashed was pottery from the Old Kingdom which had survived for nearly five thousand years, very valuable Roman glass wares were shattered, stone sculptures and reliefs from Egypt, Greece and Rome were maimed, desecrated by soldiers' boots, mummy cartonnages were stomped on and crumpled [...] as were what remained of the looted and torn necklaces and broken alabaster vessels from that period. Such a picture of destruction as we encountered after the liberation at the Department of Ancient Art was related in an equally convincing and jarring manner [...] in the exhibition 'Warsaw Accuses.'" See Kazimierz Michałowski, "Sztuka starożytna na wystawie 'Warszawa oskarża,'" *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie* (1976), v. 20, pp. 592–93.

⁹ Maria Ludwika Bernhard, "Zbiory sztuki starożytnej w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie," *Muzealnictwo*, Ann. 3 (1953), p. 43 (a map was included on p. 42).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

¹¹ Michałowski, *Wspomnienia*, op. cit., p. 202.

¹² Bernhard, op. cit., p. 45.

with the Hermitage Museum),¹³ Tell Atrib (in 1957), Deir el-Bahari (in 1961),¹⁴ and Faras (in 1961).¹⁵ In 1980, the exhibition was temporarily closed for modernisation. One year later, the section with Greek and Roman artefacts was reopened with relatively few changes, though the Egyptian part remained under construction for another two years.¹⁶

After more than 60 years of uninterrupted operation, during which only slight modifications were introduced, the Gallery of Ancient Art was in need of urgent renovations – its technical condition forcing its closure to the public already in 2011.¹⁷ At that point, discussions on the nature of the future exhibition and on how to finance it began. The realisation of the project known as the “Rearrangement of the National Museum in Warsaw’s Gallery of Ancient Art Permanent Exhibition” was made possible thanks to European Union funding under the Operational Programme Infrastructure and Environment 2014–20,¹⁸ in addition to national input coming from funds granted by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.¹⁹

Responsible for the general outline of the exhibition’s new concept was the museum’s director at the time, Agnieszka Morawińska. The widescale reorganisation works carried out during her tenure (2010–2018) resulted in the opening of other, newly refurbished parts of the museum: the Gallery of Medieval Art and the Gallery of 20th and 21st Century Art in 2013,²⁰ the Faras Gallery in 2014, the Gallery of Old Masters in 2016, and the Gallery of Polish Design in 2017. The Gallery of Ancient Art thus became the last of the planned museum spaces to be modernised or created in that period.²¹

The chief premise behind the project was to reverse the former narrative.²² The years 2013–14 saw work dedicated to defining the exhibition’s new script, which was to concentrate heavily on the gallery’s educational potential and whose governing principle was to “show the role played by ancient art and classical civilisations in the development of Europe.”²³ A competition to select a concept for the gallery’s new arrangement was held and the winning

¹³ Barbara Ruszczyk, Wanda Zdrojewska, “Galeria Sztuki Starożytnej,” *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Ann. 31, (1987), p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁵ At that time, the Faras collection was part of the Collection of Ancient Art. It was made a distinct collection in 1997. Most of the Faras artefacts joined the Collection of Eastern Christian Art, while the pharaonic and Meroitic artefacts remained in the ancient art collection. In 2011 the collections were merged once again, and in December 2020 were named the Collection of Ancient and Eastern Christian Art. The Polish archaeological missions in which Kazimierz Michałowski was involved, therefore those overseen or co-overseen by the National Museum in Warsaw, were recalled in his book: Kazimierz Michałowski, *Od Edfu do Faras...*

¹⁶ Ruszczyk, Zdrojewska, *op. cit.*, p. 38 and fig. 18.

¹⁷ “Struktura ekspozycji stałych” in *Raport Roczny Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie 2013–2014* (Warsaw, 2015), p. 42.

¹⁸ Priority Axis VIII: Protection of Cultural Heritage and Development of Cultural Resources.

¹⁹ See <<https://mapadotacji.gov.pl/projekty/747098/>>. [retrieved: 1 January 2021]. In 2021, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage changed its name to the Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sport.

²⁰ The Gallery of 20th and 21st Century Art was closed in 2019.

²¹ “Rearanżacja galerii stałych” in *Raport Roczny Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie 2012* (Warsaw, 2013), pp. 39, 42.

²² Witold Dobrowolski, “Historia Galerii” in *Galeria Sztuki Starożytnej. Przewodnik* (Warsaw, 2007), p. 10.

²³ The project’s head was Alfred Twardecki, and involved were Monika Dolińska, Andrzej Reiche, Małgorzata Korzeniowska, Tomasz Górecki and Joanna Wiercińska. *Raport Roczny Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie 2013–2014*, p. 173.

entry was announced in 2014. The selected concept, submitted by Nizio Design International, hinged on the interplay of light and darkness in its aesthetic presentation. The idea was to build a minimalistic setting corresponding above all to the nature of the artefacts on display and providing the best possible context for their aesthetic values to be highlighted.²⁴ Though the vision needed to be tailored to the space allotted for the exhibition, it was also decided to make considerable modifications to the space. The most significant changes involved doing away with the tall windows as the source of light and a décor element, introducing new divisions to the original lateral layout to create three rooms with separate entryways, and eliminating the mezzanine in the final section of the exhibition in favour of two separate floors providing two new distinct rooms. Construction work carried out by the Castellum Building and Conservation Company began in 2017.²⁵

The new gallery's 716 m² of floor space was divided into nine rooms relating to successive periods and places, representing the culture and art of: Egypt (three rooms), the Near East (one room) and Greece and Rome (five rooms, also housing the Cyprian and Etruscan collections).

The Egyptian part of the exhibition focusses on the afterlife, on the Egyptians' beliefs and convictions on that which cannot be seen, and on the gods that rule and watch over the world. Entering the gallery, visitors can admire freestanding sculptures of the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet (dated to c. 1390–52 BC), a fragment of a statue of the god Amon with the face of the pharaoh Tutankhamun (c. 1336–27 BC), and a sphinx of Thutmose III (c. 1479–25 BC) (fig. 5). Deserving particular attention are the items shown in the display cases, which, though perhaps not as spectacular, are no less interesting: a sculpture model of the head of Nectanebo I or II (380–343 BC) or a head of the Ptolemaic prince Caesarion (44–30 BC).

In the first side room, which introduces the subject of the Egyptians' beliefs on the afterlife, visitors can view some wonderfully preserved papyruses, in particular the *Book of the Dead of Bakai* (c. 1550–1295 BC) – a papyrus measuring nearly nine metres in length telling the tale of a soul's journey to the afterlife in hieroglyphs and pictures. Also relating to these beliefs are several ushabti figures presented in a nearby display case. Another display case

²⁴ “9 przestrzeni dedykowanych kulturze i sztuce starożytnej oraz antycznym cywilizacjom.” [online], <<http://nizio.com.pl/galeria-sztuki-starozytniej-w-muzeum-narodowym-w-warszawie/>>, [retrieved: 20 November 2020].

²⁵ The Gallery of Ancient Art is the product of the work of many individuals. Involved in its preparation in the years 2013–20 in the Collections of Ancient and Eastern Christian Art were (in alphabetical order): Dr Monika Dolińska, Emil Jęczmienowski, Tomasz Górecki, Małgorzata Korzeniowska, Weronika Krzemień, Dr Marcin Matera, Dr Monika Muszyńska, Andrzej Reiche, Dr Alfred Twardecki and Joanna Wiercińska. Its curators at the time were: Dr Alfred Twardecki (up to December 2018), Dr Monika Dolińska (from 2018 to late May 2020) and the author of the herein article (from June 2020). Assisting in the preparation of the exhibition was Aleksandra Pikulska. In the course of the proposal's drafting and, later, its realisation, the project managers changed. They were: Magdalena Radzicka, Bartłomiej Podlewski, Krzysztof Wojdak and Arkadiusz Kosowski. Construction works began in 2018, during the tenure of Dr Agnieszka Morawińska, and continued through the tenures of successive directors: NMW acting director Dr Piotr Rypson, Prof Dr hab Jerzy Miziołek, and finally Dr hab Łukasz Gawęł. The artefacts' display in the gallery would not have been possible without the invaluable work of the conservators: Weronika Chutkowska, Zbigniew Godziejewski, Joanna Lis, Andrzej Karolczak, Agnieszka Kijowska, Cezary Michno and Katarzyna Rachuta of the Ancient Art and Stone Sculpture Conservation Studio, Katarzyna Kowalska, Dr Anna Mistewicz, Dr Piotr M. Zalewski and Ada Kokot of the Ceramics, Glass and Metal Conservation Studio; Magdalena Borkowska, Małgorzata Myślicka, Dorota Nowak and Ewa Wadowska of the Paper Conservation Studio, and Barbara Kowalska, Mirosława Machulak and Justyna Miecznik of the Textile Conservation Studio. Overseeing all of the conservation work was Dorota Ignatowicz-Woźniakowska. The exhibition could not have come to fruition without the dedicated and often overlooked work of many employees of the NMW, all of whom deserve thanks.

holds a large selection of Egyptian vessels of various functions (cult and everyday use items) and different materials (from clay to precious alabaster) (**fig. 6**). Outside of the entrance to the next side room are display cases with animal mummies and sarcophagi and a figure of the guardian of sacred places – Anubis (c. 1550–1069 BC). Located inside the room is an exceptionally precious and splendid artefact – a false door from the mastaba of an official named Izi (c. 2345–2323 BC). Near the false door is a collection of cartonnage and sarcophagi, which, though from different periods in Egypt’s long history, represent the enduring belief in the need to preserve and secure the body so as to ensure the deceased’s continued life in the realm of the dead. Shown in this context is a mummy discovered in the sarcophagus of a priest named Hor-Djehuti along with his cartonnage and sarcophagus (1st c. BC) (**fig. 7**).

Concluding the Egyptian section of the gallery is the so-called Ptolemaic Court, gathered in which are predominantly stone objects from the Polish-French excavation site at Edfu. Particularly noteworthy here is a naos from the second half of the first century BC showing the goddesses Hathor and Sekhmet (**fig. 8**). Adorning the exterior wall of this room is the National Museum in Warsaw’s only example of an ancient panel painting – a mummy portrait of a boy dated to the second half of the 2nd century AD.

The ancient artefacts shown in the Egyptian rooms are presented in yet another interesting context via examples of the Egyptomania that has held sway over Europeans for centuries. And so, shown in one of the display cases are a number of 19th-century utilitarian items produced in a specific “Egyptian” style, among them an Empire candlestick showing the Artemis of Ephesus, which evidences the fascination with the culture and art of the land of the pharaohs that endures to this day.

Presented in the small space opposite the “Ptolemaic Court” are items from the Near East collection. Although the size of this collection cannot rival that of the Egyptian or Greco-Roman holdings, visitors will find here an assortment of tremendous variety – examples of Sumerian tablets inscribed with cuneiform from the 21st century BC, fragments of magnificent figural sculptures, in particular reliefs from the palaces in Nimrud and Nineveh from the 9th and 7th centuries BC, as well as one of the most recognized items from the exhibition, which also serves as its emblem: a relief mask in the shape of a bull’s head (protoma) likely from Iran and dated to the second half of the second millennium BC, which despite its diminutive size is superb evidence of the technical mastery possessed by ancient artisans (**fig. 9**).

The largest space in the new gallery is devoted to art from Etruria, Cyprus, Greece and Rome. Visitors will find here, for example, Cyprian works reflecting the island’s specific mix of Eastern and Western cultural influences, among them a bull-shaped vessel likely used in ritual libations dated to 1450–1200 BC. Several display cases present items connected with religious worship, sacrifices or pilgrimage practices, particularly noteworthy being a 1st–2nd century AD Greek votive inscription from Asia Minor showing feet – a symbolic image of a pilgrimage taken. Shown in a display case of items connected with Mediterranean merchants and tradespeople are objects representative of their work and activities, like, for example, Greek ostraca, potsherds inscribed with ink which are in fact ancient receipts. Gathered in this part of the gallery are some fascinating examples of terracotta artefacts, like Roman “Campana” architectural reliefs, of which especially eye-catching are some 1st-century AD depictions of Perseus with the head of Medusa. Also shown in this room is an impressive tombstone showing a rider on a horse (dated to between the 1st c. BC and 1st c. AD) and a more than five-metre-tall Corinthian column from Tell Atrac from the first half of the 2nd century (**fig. 10**). Gathered a little further are artefacts depicting Greek and Roman warfare and these cultures’ love of sports and entertainment. Visitors can also find

here women's items used for work and for beauty care. These often-inconspicuous objects can provide great insight into certain aspects of the lives led by their ancient users. Other artefacts grouped in display cases illustrate ancient beliefs in deities and tales of heroes, or relate to mystery and ecstatic cults. Occupying the centre of the room are monumental statues – Roman copies of Greek originals, of which one is a Capitoline type statue of Jupiter from the late 2nd to 3rd century (**fig. 11**).

One of the most exquisite, diverse and valuable sets of ancient artefacts in the NMW collection is its assortment of vases. Though they appear in various places throughout the gallery, the most prized examples are shown together in a separate room, whose precise lighting allows visitors to admire the sublime shapes of the kraters, amphorae, lekythoi, stamnoi, kylikes, aryballoi, alabastra, pyxides, and skyphoi as well as, and perhaps above all, their decoration. This room is itself a bona fide gallery of black- and red-figure pottery painting (**fig. 12**). The objects here are presented in chronological order. The most valuable among them are a kalpis with an extremely rare portrayal of Sappho, likely from Athens and dated to c. 510 BC, and a red-figure amphora with a depiction of an ephebos or satyr by the painter Euthymides (c. 515–500 BC). Supplementing the display is a multimedia presentation on the techniques employed in the production of Greek vases.

The last rooms of the gallery are located on two levels. Shown along both sides of the stairs leading to the upper floor are statues of toga-clad Romans dated to the 1st to 3rd centuries, while the centre of the room is occupied by a multimedia area focussing on the Roman *impluvium*, a basin located in the atrium of a home and serving as a water reservoir. Also located in this room is a relief dated to AD 212–217 showing the emperor Caracalla and his mother Julia Domna, who is crowning her son, and a collection of Roman portrait sculptures, a set of glass artefacts, items connected with domestic worship, and a collection of coins. Some of the pieces here are treasures in the truest sense – like a Roman Rondanini Tablet illustrating the Odyssey, which can be dated to somewhere between 30 BC and AD 14, or a patera made in Gaul but incorporating a medallion of Theodosius II, who ruled Constantinople in the first half of the 5th century. Another unique artefact is a Coptic tunic with depictions of the feats of Heracles, dated to the 6th–8th century. The piece comes from Egypt and is evidence of the persistence of the legends of ancient heroes among Christians living in the Mediterranean region. Much like in the part of the exhibition devoted to the art of ancient Egypt, appearing here are also works demonstrating early modern and modern modes of fascination with antiquity, including a noteworthy bronze model of the Arch of Constantine from circa 1820 (**fig. 13**). Gathered in the room on the lower floor are artefacts connected with death and cults of the dead, with emperors and deities of the Roman era, and with the memorialisation of ordinary people, including urns, sarcophagi and fragments thereof, as well as inscriptions and tomb altars. Unique here is a base for a sacrificial bowl from the second century AD discovered in a barbarian grave from the late 3rd to early 4th century in Zakrzów, Poland. Closing the exhibition are artefacts illustrating the multitude of religious cults in the Roman Empire. These are objects connected with the cults of Mithras and Cybele as well as ones relating to the emergence of the new religion of Christianity, represented here mainly by tomb inscriptions (**fig. 14**).

Though laid out in chronological order, the new exhibition at the National Museum in Warsaw allows visitors to explore the art of ancient cultures according to various leads: via religious conceptions, cults and rituals, and practices connected with life after death, via the perspective of public and economic life, or via the social roles played by the sexes. The exhibition presents official art intended for the elite as well as artistic objects and items of

everyday use possessed by members of all ancient social strata. Often, these are unassuming artefacts, yet ones that bring awareness to the similarities between the world occupied by people of ancient cultures and our modern world.²⁶

Visitors to the exhibition can view more than 1860 artefacts, the majority of which are the property of the NMW. Some of them are from historical collections, like the Czartoryski collection in Gołuchów, the Tyszkiewicz collection in Łohojsk, the Radziwiłł collection in Nieborów, or the Lyceum Hosianum collection in Braniewo. Filling in the presentation are artefacts on long-term loan from the Louvre in Paris (residing at the NMW since 1960)²⁷ and from the University of Warsaw (at the NMW since the 1930s). It is to be stressed that the staff behind the Ancient Art Collection, respected specialists, have been particularly involved in archaeological work at sites throughout the Mediterranean region and in the Near East,²⁸ some of the objects discovered by them being on display in the gallery.

For years, the National Museum in Warsaw's Gallery of Ancient Art, overseen by esteemed figures like Kazimierz Michałowski, Maria Ludwika Bernhard, Barbara Ruszczyc, Jadwiga Lipińska and Witold Dobrowolski, has continued to inspire its visitors and fuel their passion for ancient art and old cultures. Its holdings have been the subject of numerous scholarly papers, many of which were published in the *Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw*, and have been shown in other exhibitions organised beyond Warsaw and abroad. With the long-awaited reopening of the Gallery of Ancient Art, its collections have been given new life. Are new analyses and interpretations to follow? We trust that the gallery's new arrangement becomes a subject to inspire discussion in the museum community.

Translated by Szymon Włoch

²⁶ This aspect in the interpretation of ancient artefacts is discussed in the popular book published to coincide with the gallery's opening, titled *My i oni. Sztuka starożytna w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie / We and Those Before Us. Ancient Art in the National Museum in Warsaw*, academic ed. Aleksandra Sulikowska-Bełczowska (Warsaw, 2020).

²⁷ Ruszczyc, Zdrojewska, op. cit., p. 18; see also Maślowska, op. cit., pp. 206–7.

²⁸ Ruszczyc, Zdrojewska, op. cit., pp. 13–17.