

| Janina Michałkowa

(22 September 1925 – 16 October 2018)

Janina Michałkowa – known to her friends as Beata (her alias in the Home Army) and to her family as Nina – worked at the National Museum in Warsaw for nearly half a century, in the Department of Foreign Painting (currently the Collection of Old European Art). With the department's long-time curator, Prof. Jan Białostocki, the pair were not only friends but a highly coordinated research tandem. Their joint successes in their museum work, exhibition practice and publishing have gone down in the museum's history, contributing to the institution's reputation and to the stature of Polish research on early modern art. Janina Michałkowa's sharp eye, combined with an excellent knowledge of foreign languages, literature and various aspects of the humanities made her an outstanding expert on old painting and culture.

She was born in Warsaw on 22 September 1925 as the second of three daughters to Irena, née Kwiek, and the historian Dr. Jan Biłk. The family home was located at 38 Tamka Street in Warsaw. Janina passed her secondary school leaving exams in an underground school in May 1944. She joined the Warsaw Uprising, fighting in the Krybar group active in Powiśle district (Zaremba-Piorun battalion, 3rd company, 1st platoon), in which she was a liaison officer with the rank of corporal and went by the alias Beata Męćwierz. After the collapse of the uprising, she was taken along with her mother and sisters to the German Stalag in Mühlberg and later to Oberlangen, which was liberated in April 1945 by soldiers from Gen. Stanisław Maczek's 1st Armoured Division.

After living through the occupation in Poland and experiencing the German camps, she helped define the post-war generation to whose determination and hard work we owe the rebuilding of the country and its culture. She completed her studies in art history and archaeology with honours in the faculty of humanities at the Université Libre in Brussels in 1949, presenting a diploma thesis on Jan Gossaert. By February 1950, she was working in the National Museum in Warsaw's Department of Foreign Painting. In 1968, she earned her humanities doctorate from the University of Warsaw on the basis of a dissertation on the *bamboccianti* – a group of Flemish and Dutch painters active in Rome – which she published two years later.¹ In 1956, she was awarded a silver Cross of Merit, and in 1974 – a Knight's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta. In 2002, she was honoured with the title of Meritorious Culture Activist (today the Gloria Artis Medal of Merit to Culture).

One might say that she was destined to work at the National Museum. An early memory of hers concerned a Christmas party at the museum she had attended as a child with her father, Jan Biłk, who was the director of the Education and Culture Department in the Warsaw City Council under mayor Stefan Starzyński. Starting out at the museum in 1950, she continued to work there full time until 1985, only to stay on after reaching retirement age and replacing Jan Białostocki as curator of the Department of Foreign Painting following his premature death in 1988.

¹ Janina Michałkowa, "Bamboccio i bamboccianti. Krytyka i teoria sztuki wobec 'komicznego' malarstwa rodzajowego," in *Myśl o sztuce i sztuka XVII i XVIII wieku*, Jan Białostocki, ed. (Warsaw, 1970), pp. 121–66.

As an art historian and museologist, her interests were extensive. She specialised in both Northern and Southern European painting, with equal ease moving about the difficult and highly varied Italian as well as Flemish and Dutch schools. In keeping with the education she had acquired in Belgium, in the first years of her work at the National Museum in Warsaw she specialised in Old Netherlandish art: Rembrandt and Jan Lievens, Dutch and Flemish portraiture, genre painting and landscapes. In the 1960s, joining the range of her academic interest was Italian painting from the *trecento* to the 18th century. With time, her attention focussed on the 17th century, which she perceived as a diverse whole: from Caravaggio in the South and the Caravaggisti of Northern Europe to the representatives of the *grand siècle* in France, like Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, on each of whom she would write a book (1980 and 1991). She was involved in every exhibition of old European art and all of the accompanying publications, from the groundbreaking 1956 show *Rembrandt and His Circle*, to *Art from the Time of Michelangelo* (1963–64), *Venetian Painting* (1968), *The Birth of the Early Modern Landscape* (1872) *Ars emblematica* (1981), *Europäische Malerei des Barock aus dem Nationalmuseum in Warschau* (Braunschweig, Munich, Utrecht, Cologne, 1988–89) and *Art More Valuable than Gold* in 1999. Janina Michałkova's legacy also includes academic and popular works (e.g., *Paintings by Foreign Masters in Polish Collections* – a splendid album with scholarly commentary in glosses, 1992). She wrote on Rembrandt and his students, on Poussin and Lorrain, on Guercino and Panini. In her typically conscientious manner, she authored write ups on the NMW's new acquisitions of European art in the *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie*² and in foreign periodicals, encouraging her colleagues to do the same. What she enjoyed most in her work at the museum was studying professional literature devoted to painting – etched in our memory is a picture of Beata surrounded by heaps of books and magazines in the museum library, sitting in the same chair as always.

Because of her long and happy marriage to an expert on filmmaking and film theory – Bolesław Michałek, whom she married in 1950 – she was just as much at home in film circles as she was in museum circles. To us new museum staffers at the time, she was a link to the international world of art history and culture at large – she would give us as many tips on old art as on the latest books, films and plays. Beata knew everybody and everything that was worth knowing at the time.

Joining her husband, Bolesław Michałek (1925–97), on his foreign trips as a lecturer at the American University in Washington in the 1983/84 academic year and in Mainz, Germany (1987–89), and in 1990–95 as the first Polish ambassador in Rome after the political transformation in 1989, she took advantage of many opportunities to continue her research work in those cities' museums and libraries. In fact, she provided her fellow museologists with many chances too, letting them stay with her and her husband in Rome. After 1995, she continued to be part of the National Museum, preparing a catalogue of Italian paintings in the collection and contributing texts to exhibition catalogues.³

Now, a few words on Beata the person. She was a “radiant” individual – that is probably the best word to describe her manner and character. Inasmuch as Jan Białostocki, with his

² See the bibliography of *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* from the years 1960–2009 published in the first issue of *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie. Nowa Seria / Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw. New Series*, 1(37) (2012), p. 347.

³ See, i.a., Janina Michałkova, “Guercino w Polsce,” in *Sztuka cenniejsza niż złoto. Obrazy, rysunki i ryciny dawnych mistrzów europejskich ze zbiorów polskich*, exhibition in memory of Jan Białostocki, March–May 1999, The National Museum in Warsaw (Warsaw, 1999), pp. 56–61.

Olympian composure, was the “Professor” with a capital P, then Janina Michałkova was everyone’s beloved “Beata.” With her sincerity and openness to people, she was a pillar of support to her colleagues, not only in professional matters but in life, always ready to help, with discretion and no fuss, full of dedication and sensitivity.

These qualities made her want to get involved in social causes too. In the hard times of martial law, it was to Beata that we owed all the very welcome help we received from our colleagues abroad. Beata and Bolesław’s large flat on Aleje Jerozolimskie Street (which replaced their first own, though small, place on Nowiniarska Street) always had its door wide open to family, friends and acquaintances, who would gather round chef Bolesław’s table and always find somebody interesting to talk with, fascinating subjects, and an atmosphere of tremendous sincerity. One particular gathering could be called historic – the day that the authorities shut down the Congress of Culture in December 1981, upon which some of the participants headed to the Michałeks’ nearby home to monitor how the situation would develop. That atmosphere permeated into our everyday life at the museum, making our work in the foreign painting department so special in every way.

Beata was extremely hard-working, demanding – mostly of herself – and diligent. Deadlines, especially publishing ones, were sacred to her. I remember her article (“Pietro della Vecchia, Friend of Boschini, Expert, Conservator, Forger”) for Jan Białostocki’s sixtieth-birthday book, which she left in my hands the day before her hospitalisation. As an aside, Marco Boschini’s famous 1660 poem *La Carta del Navegar Pitoresco*, written in the Venetian dialect, was one of Beata’s favourite pieces of writing. With great care and out of regard for her research on Baroque painting, she would read source texts in their original languages.

She was loved and respected by everyone. And it was all deserved – for her work ethos and wide range of interests, her huge heart and goodness, her positivity and sense of humour. We’ll miss her smile and her knowledge, which she so eagerly shared with others, treating her younger colleagues, even the newcomers, as peers, or, to put it more accurately – as friends.

Justyna Guze

Translated by Szymon Włoch