

# | Hanna Benesz

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Hanna Benesz was a graduate of the Institute of Art History and the Institute of Applied Linguistics of the University of Warsaw. She began working at the National Museum in Warsaw in 1975, right after she completed her studies. She always emphasized how much her museum career and life owed to Prof. Jan Białostocki, long-standing curator of the then Department of Foreign Painting. This is how she recalled the beginning of her professional career in an interview from 2008: “When I started working in the Gallery of European Painting of the National Museum in Warsaw, my task was to complete the data in the files of paintings from various schools. These were usually objects from the storage, the gallery paintings having already been examined in a more advanced way. I had to deal with both artistic and historical aspects and also with the inventories, because many paintings had double or mistaken numbers. In doing so, I got to know literally dozens if not hundreds of pictures, and gained a general knowledge of the remaining paintings in storage. [...] When I became curator and was given Early Netherlandish and Flemish paintings as my field, compiling a complete summary catalogue became a still more valuable learning experience.” This was the beginning of Hanna’s love of the museum collection, to which she devoted many years of attribution, iconographic and provenance research.

Hanna Benesz published numerous articles in renowned Polish and foreign scholarly journals. She collaborated with eminent specialists and scholars around the world as well as with a number of Western research centres, such as the J. Paul Getty Research Center in Los Angeles or Dutch, Belgian and German museums. She curated and co-curated many exhibitions in Poland and abroad, contributing essays and entries to their catalogues. A selection of the most important ones includes: *Malarstwo flamandzkie XVII wieku* [17<sup>th</sup>-century Flemish painting] (Copper Museum in Legnica, 1985); *European Baroque Painting. The National Museum in Warsaw* (Kumamoto, Toyohashi, Yokohama, Osaka, Tokyo, 1992–93); *Sztuka cenniejsza niż złoto. Obrazy, rysunki i ryciny dawnych mistrzów europejskich ze zbiorów polskich* [Art more precious than gold. European Old Masters paintings, drawings and prints from the Polish collections] (NMW, 1999); *Arcydzieło Petera Paula Rubensa „Zdjęcie z krzyża”. Z tradycji przedstawień pasyjnych w malarstwie i grafice północnoeuropejskiej XVI i XVII wieku* [“The Deposition” by Peter Paul Rubens and the Passion iconography in northern European painting and graphic art of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries] (NMW, 2000); *Transalpinum. Od Giorgiona i Dürera do Tycjana i Rubensa. Malarstwo europejskie ze zbiorów Kunsthistorisches Museum w Wiedniu, Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie i Muzeum Narodowego w Gdańsku* / *Transalpinum. From Giorgione and Dürer to Titian and Rubens. European Paintings from the Collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, National Museum in Warsaw and National Museum in Gdańsk* (National Museums in Warsaw and Gdańsk, 2004–5); and *Złoty Wiek malarstwa flamandzkiego. Rubens, van Dyck, Jordaens... 1608–1678* [The Golden Age of Flemish painting. Rubens, Van Dyck, Jordaens... 1608–1678] (National Museums in Warsaw and Gdańsk, 2007).

Hanna also took part in the ambitious international project “Gerson Digital: Poland,” initiated and pursued by the renowned RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunstdocumentatie / Netherlands Institute of Art History). This endeavour led to hundreds of Dutch and Flemish artworks held at the NMW and other Polish museums being published on a website. Hanna

Benesz also spent many years making paintings available on the “Digital NMW” platform, contributing almost 300 entries, often with extensive descriptions. These texts, while adhering to the highest academic standards, are written in a thoroughly accessible language. Hanna’s writings on art testify to her expert and deep knowledge on the subject, but she was careful to avoid academic jargon. Instead, she employed beautiful, vivid, literary language so that (to quote the Polish poet Juliusz Słowacki – as she was wont to do): “the pliable tongue might say everything the eyes will see and the head will think.”

The year 2016 saw the publication of Hanna Benesz’s *opus magnum*: the monumental catalogue of Netherlandish, Dutch and Flemish paintings in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw and the Nieborów Palace (973 entries), written with Maria Kluk and published in two volumes in English. The catalogue’s scholarly merit was noted and awarded by the jury of the Sybilla Competition in the category: Museum Event of the Year – Publication.

Hanna was a member of the International Committee of the Curators of Dutch and Flemish Art (CODART). Taking part in its annual conferences, where she presented papers and participated in debates, she indefatigably promoted the collections of the National Museum in Warsaw and the research pursued there. In 2004, she participated in organizing a visit of foreign curators to Polish institutions collecting Dutch and Flemish art. In 2017, she took part in preparing the annual international CODART conference in Warsaw. During the event, in recognition of her substantial contribution to research on Dutch art in Poland, by decision of the King of the Netherlands Willem-Alexander, Hanna Benesz was decorated with the Order of Orange-Nassau awarded for civil and military services. She received the decoration from the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Poland during a gala event in the Royal Theatre in the Łazienki Park in Warsaw, in the presence of her family and almost 120 curators from all over the world. His Excellency Ron van Dartel thanked Hanna for “opening the Warsaw collection of Dutch paintings to the world, thereby contributing to the promotion of Dutch cultural heritage.” Therefore, Hanna Benesz became a Knight (not “dame,” which she liked to jokingly emphasize) of the Order of Orange-Nassau. She proudly wore the order’s ribbon, underlining that she was only allowed to wear the cross once a year, on the birthday of the king – the Grand Master of the Order.

Hanna Benesz’s last, unfinished scholarly project was, in a way, a return to the very beginnings of her work. It concerned providing descriptions to several hundred anonymous Old Masters paintings in the digital database. Like forty years before, she approached the task with passion and involvement. Even though this time she could avail herself fully of the possibilities provided by online databases and had quality images of the analysed paintings at her disposal – she still believed she had to study them one more time in the storerooms. She was always able to find something interesting in these seemingly second-rate works – be it a specific artistic form, iconography or provenance. She devoted her attention to all of them, because – in her opinion – all of them were worthy of her time.

It is hard to resist the impression that Hanna’s approach to her scholarly work was inextricably connected with her approach to people. Everyone experienced it. She graced each of us with her smile and her time, and – in her own words – acted as a “museum mum” for a group of younger curators, although she treated them as partners rather than pupils. She embodied a unique kind of ethical integrity, this undefinable sense of what was good and decent – and what wasn’t. She served as a moral authority to many people, a compass of proper attitudes and decisions. She deeply believed in God and served as a rare example of a Christian in the deepest sense of the word. She liked people – her “neighbours” – and looked for the good within them. With her way of being, she emanated friendship all around. She helped people,

for instance by organizing a long-standing support fund for the sick and poor. She opened her home to friends in need, to support them in surmounting critical times. Her character was marked by tenderness, friendliness, patience and discreet empathy. Yet another of her features was an effervescent predilection for joy, jokes and laughter; she was an excellent companion to be around and to travel with. Her joy was beautiful and contagious. She was thoroughly human. And this was also why we needed her so.

It has been more than a year since she last came to the museum, and we still find it hard to get used to this loss. Hanna orphaned not only her paintings, but us – her “museum children.”

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