

| Masters of the Pastel. From Marteau to Witkacy. The Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw Exhibition

The *Masters of the Pastel. From Marteau to Witkacy. The Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw* (29 October 2015 – 31 January 2016) exhibition crowned a two-year research project aiming to contribute to the history of pastels by studying the museum's own pastel collection.¹ The inspiration for this initiative included an interest in the pastel technique itself, the susceptibility of pastels to mechanical damage and the irreversibility of changes in them caused by their dusting-off. For these reasons, most museum curators and paper conservators make every effort to severely curtail pastels' travel, and hence to limit their loans. Once the research project was underway, the curators realized that they were riding on the wave of a pastel revival. A number of exhibitions² and detailed studies of the many aspects of pastels,³ including monographs about the most eminent pastel painters,⁴ have recently emerged in many countries.

From the start, the preparations for the exhibition ran along two tracks. The art history research, which began with a critical reading of existing literature, led to several revised attributions and interpretations of works in the museum's pastel collection.⁵ As these played a role in the choice of works for the show, gradually the final selection fell into place. Running parallel to the research was conservation,⁶ which revealed that many of the museum's stored

¹ Anna Grochala and Dr Joanna Sikorska developed the proposal for this exhibition in 2013. The team preparing the exhibition included staff of the Department of Prints and Drawings: Piotr Borusowski, Piotr P. Czyż, Ewa Frąckowiak, Justyna Guze, Piotr Kibort, Kamilla Pijanowska, Anna Pusz, Marcin Romeyko-Hurko, Anna Rudzińska and Joanna A. Tomicka, and the collaborators Paulina Adamczyk and Ewa Milicer.

² It included *Pastel Portraits: Images of 18th-Century Europe*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 17 May – 14 August 2011, and *The Craze for Pastel*, Tate Britain, London, 7 April – 21 September 2014. Almost concurrently with the Warsaw exhibition ran large presentations of Liotard (*Jean-Étienne Liotard*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 24 October 2015 – 31 January 2016) and Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (*Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun 1755–1842*, Grand Palais, Paris, 23 September 2015 – 11 January 2016).

³ *The Broad Spectrum. Studies in the Materials, Techniques, and Conservation of Color on Paper*, ed. Harriet K. Stratis and Britt Salvesen (London, 2002); Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800* (London, 2006); Thea Burns, *The Invention of Pastel Painting* (London, 2007); Thea Burns, Philippe Saunier, *The Art of the Pastel* (New York–London, 2015).

⁴ Among the many publications celebrating anniversaries of Rosalba Carriera, Bernardina Sani's *Rosalba Carriera (1673–1757). Maestra del pastello nell'Europa 'ancien régime'* (Turin, 2007) is the most noteworthy.

⁵ Research findings were discussed in the large catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, *Mistrzowie pastelu. Od Marteau do Witkacego. Kolekcja Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Anna Grochala, with Joanna Sikorska, eds, design Jerzy Gruchot, Wojciech Koss / Full Metal Jacket, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie (Warsaw, 2015).

⁶ The team from the museum's Department of Paper Conservation responsible for the conservation, Magdalena Borkowska, Dorota Dzik-Kruszelnicka, Wanda Głowacka and Ewa Wadowska, was led by Dorota Nowak.

works were of exhibition quality and could now be shown to the public, some of them for the first time. In both the accompanying catalogue and the exhibition, the team decided to outline different museums' policies on pastel maintenance. Taking into consideration the current state of knowledge of the physical and chemical attributes of the pastel technique, the aim was to address the issues concerning their maintenance.⁷

As a result, the exhibition scenario focused on the contributions of Polish painters and draughtsmen in the history of pastel. The curators made it their goal to venture beyond the well-known and popular artists. Thus, they wanted to display works by pastellists they believed unjustly forgotten, whose pastels had passed the test of time, and also to include – along with established pastellists – artists who used the pastel technique only sporadically but who had also achieved noteworthy results. Supplementing the exhibition's narrative on the transformation of the pastel technique in Poland were a handful of the museum's own valuable works by European artists, which created a broader context for the functioning of pastels in the iconospheres of different periods. The fitting choice of works and their chronological and thematic assembly in the exhibition, as well as the accompanying texts, demonstrated how this demanding technique – which for both artistic and conservation reasons overlaps painting and drawing – has easily attracted “myths” which played a significant role in the perception of pastels. The exhibition assembled nearly 250 works in seven rooms titled: *Golden Age, Not just portraiture, Landscape, Culmination, Pastel in the workshop of masters, The Wawel Treasury* and *Towards mid-twentieth century* with two additional sections titled *A Challenge for the art conservator* and *Reception of the pastel in the graphic arts*, which served as informative appendices.

Zuzanna Łapieś of Agencja C.A.C. Wzornictwo together with Urszula Kubicz-Fik and Jerzy Junosza-Szaniawski designed the exhibition with the aim of underscoring the pastels' visual attractiveness and decorative qualities. Painting the walls several shades of blue and creating a legible system of annotation using historical sources as commentaries to the works on show, enriched their presentation.

The introductory section used an appendix titled *Dry colouring* to explore the origins of the pastel technique in drawings and its early use in the art of the portrait, in the 16th and 17th centuries,⁸ although the main subject of the first part of the exhibition was the Golden Age of pastels, the 18th century. The selected works put on view the iconosphere and tastes of the era, which were largely shaped by pastellists, beginning with portraits of members of the elite and moving on to decorative allegories and personifications, often with an erotic touch. Copies of the best-known pastels (such as *The Chocolate Girl* by Jean-Étienne Liotard), as well as pastel versions of oil paintings, were also included. Displaying the works of such artists as Louis-François Marteau, Anna Rajecka and Aleksander Kucharski alongside each other clearly underscored the international nature of the pastel art of the era by artists seeking clients in

The frame conservation by a team from the museum's Department of Sculpture and Wood Painting Conservation, Piotr Grochowski, Ewa Lechowska, Karolina Lechowska and Marek Święcki, was led by Agnieszka Czubak.

⁷ Comparing experiences with colleagues from print departments in Poland and abroad was exceptionally valuable. We would especially like to thank Leila Sauvage of the Paper Conservation Lab of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The excellent works in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries which represent a wide spectrum of approaches to the workshop aspects of the technique provide an extremely interesting set of examples to analyse for types of ground, methods of using pastel pencils or sensitivity to photodegradation. Agnieszka Marecka, a conservator at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, has used selected examples from the National Museum in Warsaw pastel collection in her research.

⁸ Also presented were examples of 16th–18th-century books and textbooks about the art of the pastel.

different art centres and fitting in with the expectations of their predominantly aristocratic audience. The pastels of the Stanislavian era turned out to be an especially interesting subject for the attribution research, which encountered various difficulties, some stemming from the pastel technique itself (the poor condition of many of the works) and a lack of archival documentation to confirm the existing attributions of others (often deriving from the prominence of some of the artists). Nonetheless, the planning of the exhibition, which included researching surviving historical sources and conducting an in-depth comparative analysis, yielded some suggestions of new attributions for anonymous or misattributed works.⁹

Another goal of the exhibition was to present the pastel's role in the 19th century, a time of social changes and of a dominant hierarchy of art subjects and techniques. Regardless of the rejection of the pastel as an art of the *ancien régime*, alleged in writings at the time and later, the demand for pastel portraits did not wane, as they continued to be commissioned by new clients, the nobility and the bourgeoisie. New generations of painters in both larger towns and the provinces were drawn to it. Thus, pastels now not only decorated private spaces but also began to be shown in public exhibitions attracting some attention from the press. Critics frequently referred to the pastel's "gender" – its femininity. On the one hand, this technique was considered perfect for bringing to view women's beauty, and on the other as fitting for women artists, "heiresses" to Rosalba Carriera, such as Emilia Dukszyńska-Dukszta and Anna Bilińska. While the portrait remained dominant (as represented here by works including those of Tytus Maleszewski), new subjects appeared: inspired by Polish Romantic literature (the pastels of Witold Pruszkowski), derived from observations of everyday life (studies by Aleksander Orłowski), folk themes (e.g., Kazimierz Sichulski) and the beauty of nature (including landscapes by Kazimierz Stabrowski and Leon Wyczółkowski). The pastel's luminist attributes made it attractive not only to experienced pastellists, but also to landscape painters for whom pastels became kind of a "springboard" for oil painting (for instance, Jan Stanisławski, Józef Rapacki). The swiftness of this technique made it fitting for *en plein air* studies (as is exemplified perfectly by a sketch by Max Liebermann) or for works painted with a reporter's passion (a pastel by Władysław Podkowiński). Treating the criterion of suitability for landscapes fairly flexibly, the exhibition curators included in this group two exceptional works by Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis and Oskar Sosnowski, reflecting the artists' philosophical interests. Pastel was used not only in the finished works, but also for design, serving as an artistic note (as exemplified by the work of Heinrich Rudolf Zille).

The pastel technique again became wildly popular at the turn of the 20th century. In Polish art, it was manifested not only in the quality of the works, but also in their quantity. Hence the focus on this period in two rooms, *Culmination* and *Pastel in the workshop of masters*. Numerous pastellists were active then, including some with considerable talent who were valued not only in Poland but also abroad. The art of the portrait was enjoying a revival now, which the exhibition illustrated with works by painters such as Kazimierz Mordasewicz, Teodor

⁹ They include proposed and new attributions of the portraits of Maria and Tomasz Czapski to the circle of Jakob Wessel (see *Mistrzowie pastelów...*, op. cit., p. 290, cat. nos I.99 and I.100), the composition *God Appearing to Cain* to Christian Wilhelm Ernst Dietrich (see *Mistrzowie pastelów...*, op. cit., p. 150, cat. no. I.28), and portraits of Andrzej and Teresa Poniatowski to Pierre-Joseph Lion (see *Mistrzowie pastelów...*, op. cit., pp. 238–40, cat. nos I.71 and I.72). Despite the lack of accessible comparative materials and definitive attribution, the curators decided to exhibit and publish in the catalogue the pastel *Autumnal Landscape* in agreement with the record in the inventory as a work of Wilhelm Wyrwiński (see *Mistrzowie pastelów...*, op. cit., pp. 496–98, cat. no. I.224). Thanks to this decision, the attribution was verified and proved to have been the work of Małgorzata Łada-Maciągowa (1881–1969).

Axentowicz and Leon Kaufmann (Kamir). Each of them used the pastel technique in an original way and developed a personal style, which originated from currents present in both old and contemporary European art. This broader European context was highlighted by the works of French artists, Jean-François Millet¹⁰ who revived the mid-19th-century pastel art and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, as well as a Polish painter active in France, Władysław Ślewiński, and the German Adolph Menzel.

The uniqueness of Stanisław Wyspiański's art appeared against this background. It was a challenge to select the pastels from a collection of dozens in the possession of the National Museum in Warsaw. The decision was made to show the works that were kept in storage and not to use those exhibited in the Gallery of 19th-Century Art. His 1902 *Self-Portrait* was the exception, and it was used to open the "series" of his pastel portraits and decorative designs. Wyspiański's work inspired many artists, and for this reason two pastels by Tymon Niesiołowski were shown in its immediate proximity, as was a larger selection of works by the somewhat forgotten Jan Rembowski.¹¹

A special place was devoted to the grand master of the pastel technique, Leon Wyczółkowski. The concept of this part of the exhibition was constructed around his superb series, exceptional not only in Polish art, "The Wawel Treasury" of 1907. This was the first time since the painter's 1937 posthumous exhibition that this series of virtuoso "portraits" of the most precious pieces in the treasury of the Krakow Cathedral was shown in its entirety.¹² Wyczółkowski's self-portraits inspired by the Post-Impressionists and the art of the Far East, themes drawn from the culture of Podhale or including some aspects of Japonisme gave this part of the exhibition a monographic quality.

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy) engaged the pastel traditions in an original dialogue, and his works gave the exhibition a final accent. He made an excellent and rebellious reference to this technique's popularity in portraiture by creating his Portrait Company 'S.I. Witkiewicz' and its Type A portraits. His expressive, ferocious works created under the influence of various stimulants, on the other hand, reflect the changes taking place in the art of the pastel in the second half of the 19th century. In the exhibition, the series by Waclaw Borowski which fit into the classicizing current in Polish art, were displayed as a contrast to Witkacy.

Two small appendices enriched the narrative of the exhibition. The first addressed the conservation of pastels, its unique features and the crucial role of preventative procedures and actions. The second one showed the different relationships between graphic art and the pastel from the 18th to the early 20th century, ranging from the purely reproductive function of graphic art through workshop experimentations which led to the development of new graphic techniques inspired by pastels, the artists' creative, interpretative approaches to original pastels – their own as well as those of other *peintres-graveurs*.

A programme of educational activities accompanying the exhibition included lectures, guided tours and drawing workshops for children, teenagers and adults. It offered an opportunity

¹⁰ The authorship of the *Little Shepherdess* was determined during the preparation of the exhibition (see *Mistrzowie pastelów...*, op. cit., pp. 268–70, cat. no. I.88).

¹¹ We would like to express our deep gratitude to Dr Urszula Makowska for kindly sharing with us with her unpublished dissertation, written under the mentorship of Prof. Dr. Hab. Wiesław Juszcak, *Jan Rembowski (1879–1923). Współczesność i mity* (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Science, Institute of Arts, 2005).

¹² For the contexts of the origins and meaning of this series, see Piotr P. Czyż, *Leon Wyczółkowski's "The Wawel Treasury" as an Artistic Reflection on the History of Poland*, in this issue of the *Journal*, pp. 110–36.

to learn about the reasons for the changing popularity of pastels, their place in the hierarchy of artistic techniques and presence in various areas of both high and popular cultures across the centuries.¹³ The pastels shown here were published on the Digital NMW while the exhibition was on. Running parallel to the exhibition was a pilot project co-organized by the National Museum in Warsaw and Wikimedia Polska, which added new (or much-expanded) articles focusing on the pastel and its artists to Wikipedia resources. The museum's Wikipedian-in-Residence worked on it together with a group of volunteers and museum specialists.¹⁴

The exhibition shed a new light on the museum's pastel collection, contributed significantly to expanding knowledge about it and brought back several forgotten artists. As it was of a pioneering character in Polish museums, it offered an exceptional opportunity to learn about works from one of the museum's special collections, many of which had never before been put on display; the show and the catalogue allowed them to enter the academic circuit. It was an important catalyst for the discussion of the existing state of knowledge about the history of pastels in Poland. Finally, it drew attention to both issues of its conservation and questions of disparate connections between the art of the pastel and graphic art.

Masters of the Pastel was noticed by scholars outside Poland. Thus, Neil Jeffares, in a specialist's study on the Internet, called the Warsaw exhibition the first broad presentation of pastel works exclusively from the museum's own collection.¹⁵ This connection led to the commissioning by the *Journal's* editors of articles about the art of the pastel by Thea Burns and Neil Jeffares.¹⁶

The exhibition elicited great public interest¹⁷: 72,000 visitors attended it, and the catalogue went out of print while the exhibition was still on. The jury of the Tenth Competition of Mazowieckie Zdarzenia Muzealne "Wierzba" ("Wierzba" Masovian Museum Events) awarded *Masters of the Pastel* distinction in the category of exhibitions put on by larger museums.¹⁸

Translated by Maja Łatyńska

¹³ Edyta Rubka-Kostyra of the Education Department of the National Museum in Warsaw coordinated the educational programme and initiated several of the educational projects.

¹⁴ While the exhibition was on, more than 100 photos of pastels shown in it were sent to Wikimedia Commons. They not only serve as illustrations of the articles submitted for the project, but also added to the existing pastel articles on Wikipedia. Karolina Tabak of the Visual Documentation Department of the National Museum in Warsaw and Maria Drozdek of Wikimedia Polska coordinated the project.

¹⁵ See Neil Jeffares, *Prolegomena to Pastels & pastellists* [online] at: <<http://www.pastellists.com/Misc/Prolegomena.pdf>> [retrieved: 21 April 2017], p. 42.

¹⁶ See Neil Jeffares, *Polska i jej elity na tle popularności portretu pastelowego w XVIII-wiecznej Europie / Poland, Élites and the Spread of Pastel Portraiture in 18th-century Europe* – s. 137–155; Thea Burns, *Fizyczna i konceptualna wrażliwość? Uwagi na temat wystawiania XIX-wiecznych pastelów francuskich / Physical and Conceptual Fragility? Remarks on Exhibiting Pastels from 19th-century France* – s. 156–181 in the current issue of the *Journal*.

¹⁷ The Promotion Department organized numerous events, which attracted the attention of the media. The exhibition finissage on Sunday, 31 January 2016, drew crowds of visitors, which led to the extension of the exhibition by one symbolic day, 2 February 2016.

¹⁸ See *Konkurs Mazowieckie Zdarzenia Muzealne „Wierzba” 2007–2016*, Departament Kultury, Promocji i Turystyki Urzędu Marszałkowskiego Województwa Mazowieckiego w Warszawie [Department of Culture, Promotion and Tourism of the Office of the Marshal of Mazovia Province], ed. (Warsaw, 2016), p. 118.