

| Antoni Madeyski and Aleksander Gierymski: The Story of a Friendship

“In late summer of 1899, someone knocked on the door to my studio; when I opened, I saw a slender gentleman with greyish hair, a beautiful, expressive face and nervous movements. ‘Mr Madeyski?’ - ‘Yes, Mr...’ - ‘Gierymski.’ Upon hearing this name, I warmly shook the outstretched hand and could not contain the outpouring of affection and friendliness I had long felt for the unknown Master. I noticed that it somewhat disconcerted him.”¹ This is how sculptor Antoni Madeyski described his first encounter with Aleksander Gierymski, which marked the beginning of an intense, albeit brief friendship between the two artists, who knew each other less than two years.

Gierymski had already lived in Rome on and off for a number of years when Madeyski arrived there in the spring of 1898. The sculptor, who received his education at the Krakow School of Fine Arts, and then at the academies of Vienna and Saint Petersburg, was an established and recognized artist in the metropolis on the Neva. His decision to settle in the Eternal City was rather unexpected, and largely influenced by his uncle, sculptor Wiktor Brodzki (1817–1904),² who had lived there for over four decades. The artist’s critical perception of the Saint Petersburg milieu most likely also played an important role. “The dream of every sculptor in Saint Petersburg is to earn enough money to leave. Sculptors face oddly unfavourable conditions here: studios are few and far between; if you do find a studio, you won’t get marble [...] you have to work in tough conditions, because life is expensive, and once you manage to cope with all the difficulties and create an object that is to your liking [...] you may as well take it as a keepsake, because no-one buys sculptures here.”³

Brodzki quickly introduced the young artist to the Polish community in Rome. Joint gatherings and meetings at the Trattoria dei Tre Re on via Flaminia, at Fiorelli’s on via delle Colonnate and – last but not least – at the Café Greco on via Condotti allowed the sculptor to quickly adjust and settle in this new environment. After but a short while, he was hailed as the informal protector of the Polish diaspora in Rome, becoming known as a splendid organizer and energetic activist: “elected chairman of the Polish reading room in Rome, he became the life and soul of the colony, bringing in books, taking out newspaper subscriptions, collecting fees, organizing anniversaries and celebrations – always active, full of energy and initiative,

¹ Zbigniew Zalewski, *Tajemnica twórcy sarkofagów wawelskich*, Department of Manuscripts of the National Library in Warsaw, ref. 15355, p. 188, TS.

² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³ Wierzbicka [K. Waliszewski], “Artyści polscy w Petersburgu,” *Kraj*, no. 15(1898), p. 172.

lending his aid to every good and noble cause.”⁴ Soon his studio at 26 via Flaminia became the meeting-point for fellow countrymen, “where among Slutsk sashes and kilim carpets one only talked about Poland.”⁵

In the summer of 1900, Gierymski travelled to Paris for the Exposition Universelle and used this opportunity to visit his friend and patron Bruno Abakanowicz (1852–1900) in Saint-Maur-des-Fossés near the French capital. There, on 29 August, he witnessed the latter’s entirely unexpected and sudden death. According to some opinions, this dramatic event may well have influenced the subsequent breakdown of the artist’s health. Madeyski commented on the psychological condition of his friend with his typical sensitivity: “[Gierymski’s] nervousness and anxiety are getting worse, especially after the sudden death of his friend, engineer Bruno Abakanowicz. Entirely consumed by his art, Gierymski was completely inept when it came to financial matters, particularly in the last years of his life. Abakanowicz took finished paintings from his studio, personally sold them and provided a secure *conto corrente* for Gierymski at all times, so that he did not have to worry about his existential needs, which were limited to a minimum anyway. Abakanowicz’s death deprived him of a sense of peace about the future.”⁶ Later on, it was probably Madeyski who offered the greatest financial support to the artist.⁷

In early September Aleksander left Paris to return to Rome, with a three-week sojourn in Verona, where he made over a dozen sketches of the city and its architecture. In his letter from Rome of 7 November, he informed Madeyski – who at that time was in Krakow to finalize the design specifications for a tombstone of Queen Jadwiga for the Wawel cathedral – about his stay in Verona, the move to a new studio at 33 via Margutta and a satisfactory conclusion to his troubles with a bill of exchange. He even felt responsible for taking care of Brodzki during Madeyski’s absence.⁸ It could seem that the painter’s condition stabilized itself, as during the autumn and winter he was busy finishing the views of Verona. Gierymski and Madeyski spent their free time together, eating out at the trattoria on via Flaminia almost every day.

On 24 February 1901, after a sudden relapse of his illness, the painter was placed at the Santa Maria della Pietà mental hospital on via Lungara in Trastevere. He died several days later, on 6 March.⁹ Since his death certificate is missing, the cause of his demise remains unknown. Madeyski explained it in the following words: “Abakanowicz’s death deprived him [Gierymski] of a sense of peace about the future, the sick nerves did not withstand the powerful shock, several weeks of agony were followed by an attack on the brain and a paralysis of internal organs. The insanity only lasted four days; he regained consciousness two days before he died.”¹⁰

Madeyski communicated the news to the small circle of mutual acquaintances. Zofia Abakanowicz (1882–1942), Bruno’s daughter, offered to cover all costs related to the artist’s

⁴ Alfred Wysocki, “Artyści polscy w Rzymie,” *Kraj*, no. 11(1899), pp. 13–14.

⁵ Id., *Sprzed pół wieku* (Krakow, 1974), p. 177.

⁶ Antoni Madeyski, “Polscy artyści w Rzymie (garść wspomnień),” *Sztuki Piękne*, no. 1(1930), p. 12.

⁷ The Collection of Iconography and Photography of the National Museum in Warsaw (further: CIPNMW) contains a loose piece of paper with Madeyski’s handwritten note: “in February I lent G. – 70 l.” (inv. no. Dep.5568/40).

⁸ Zalewski, *Tajemnica...*, op. cit., p. 212.

⁹ The bill for the artist’s stay and treatment at Manicomio Santa Maria della Pietà, dated 6 March 1901, covers the period between 24 February and 6 March (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5568/38).

¹⁰ Madeyski, “Polscy artyści...,” op. cit., p. 12.

death.¹¹ Several weeks later, her former governess and companion Klementyna Kaczmarek expressed their mutual gratitude for laying a palm wreath from Gierymski's Saint-Maur friends on the grave and expressed her readiness to provide Madeyski with an appropriate sum to purchase a cemetery plot in Rome.¹²

In the meantime, the sculptor set about arranging formalities and preparations related to the funeral.¹³ On 10 March, in view of the lack of appropriate funds to purchase a permanent burial site, the artist's body was provisionally laid to rest in the catacombs of the Campo Verano cemetery in Rome. Consequently, Madeyski had to pay a quarterly fee, which increased proportionally over time.¹⁴ He also undertook to take care of Aleksander's legacy, i.e., the paintings and sketches as well as everyday objects from his studio. Since they all had to be sent to Gierymski's legal heirs – siblings Maria and Stanisław Kuczborski who resided in Warsaw – Madeyski drew up a detailed inventory of the artist's possessions in Russian in order to send it to his family and submit it to the Russian consulate in Rome.¹⁵ Apart from 56 paintings (mostly small-format sketches), Gierymski left behind very modest belongings.¹⁶ Maria Kuczborska first wrote the sculptor already on 10 March in order to clarify how many works were found in the artist's studio. She informed him that upon receiving news of her uncle's death via telegram sent by consul Salviati, she communicated with the Russian consul in Rome and asked him to take Gierymski's legacy under his care.¹⁷ Karol Benni (1843–1916), who chaired the Zachęta Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts in Warsaw, was in contact with Madeyski and subsequently reached out to the heirs with a suggestion to show the works from the painter's studio at Zachęta that autumn and put them up for sale; the proceeds would be used to purchase a burial site at Campo Verano. Benni further proposed that two selected paintings should be offered for purchase to the National Museum in Krakow and the Zachęta in Warsaw – the sum thus obtained would serve to cover any debts resting with the deceased.¹⁸ On 30 March, the Kuczborskis wrote Madeyski: “[...] not for one moment have we been against your ideas, Sir; on the contrary, we desire with all our hearts to commemorate in a feasible manner not just our uncle, but also an artist who rendered services to our art.”¹⁹ They also ask for his guidance on the formalities related to succession proceedings and for a statement of all debts as well as

¹¹ Zofia Abakanowicz's letter to Madeyski of 8 March 1901 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5533).

¹² Klementyna Kaczmarek's letter to Madeyski of 9 April 1901 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5535).

¹³ A note written by Madeyski with a detailed statement of expenses, meticulously jotted down after Gierymski's death, which amounted to 252 lire and 25 centesimi (CIP NMW, Dep.5568/39).

¹⁴ Bills for the use of cemetery plot were issued in the name of Antoni Madeyski (CIP NMW, inv. nos Dep.5568/2–11).

¹⁵ Draft inventory in Russian and Polish (CIP NMW, inv. nos Dep.5568/37 and Dep.5568/36).

¹⁶ A list of Gierymski's personal belongings, drawn up in the artist's studio after his death as per the inventory drafted for the Russian consulate in Rome: a Kodak photographic camera with a strap and film, a box of old photographs, two old boxes with paints and brushes, two magnifying lenses, two lamps with reflector, two pairs of trousers, a coat, a light jacket, a red scarf, two bed sheets and a smock, a canvas travel bag for bed sheets, a mirror in a narrow wooden frame, a carved black frame, an old easel, a canvas screen, a medium-calibre gun, a box of cartridges, a used oilcloth suitcase, two pairs of shoes, woollen underdrawers, a vest, a jacket, a nightgown, four handkerchiefs, two pairs of socks, seven collars, Knight's Cross of the Order of Franz Joseph with a statute and diploma in the name of Gierymski, a bronze relief depicting Stephen Báthory by Madeyski, a feather quilt, a pillow, two keys, an English-German dictionary belonging to count Czosnowski, an old wallet.

¹⁷ Maria Kuczborska's letter to Madeyski of 10 March 1901 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5540).

¹⁸ Karol Benni's letter to Madeyski of 1 April 1901 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5549).

¹⁹ Maria and Stanisław Kuczborskis' letter to Madeyski of 30 March 1901 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5541).

the cost of purchasing a cemetery plot. Furthermore, to compensate Madeyski for his effort, they suggest that “out of the few bits and pieces that our Uncle left behind, would you be so kind, Sir, as to select something that would serve as a memento of your deceased friend and companion.”²⁰

Arranging legitimization documents proved to be a rather complex matter, so the Kuczborskis decided to entrust this task to sworn lawyer Adam Oderfeld (1856–1910) from Warsaw. He immediately contacted the sculptor, asking to be sent Gierymski’s death certificate authorized by the Russian consulate.²¹ On 28 June he confirmed receipt of the document and sent 15 marks in return as reimbursement of the expenses incurred in Rome. At the same time, sending the painter’s works to Warsaw transpired to be problematic: the Russian consul declined his authorization to take them out of the country, because he was not aware of the legal procedure in such cases.

The succession proceedings were lengthier than expected, so it soon turned out that the autumn of 1901 was no longer a feasible date to organize Gierymski’s posthumous exhibition. The opening was expected to take place in spring of the following year at the earliest. The family expressed a further wish for the exhibition, which – apart from their uncle’s last works – should include “his painting accessories and a death mask of his face and hand.”²² In the same letter, Maria Kuczborska also communicated her exact instructions regarding the objects left in the artist’s studio. “We wish to have all the remaining items transported to Warsaw and kindly ask you, Sir, to only sell dealers those that represent no [emphasis M.K.] material or sentimental value, and are heavy. You may select these items at your own discretion, Sir. Apart from all the canvases, it is important that we receive the painting accessories, collection of photographs, revolver, Austrian cross, [...] bronze relief and paraphernalia found in Uncle’s pockets.”²³ Maria Kuczborska revisits this subject time and again in her subsequent letters.²⁴ Citing the sculptor’s exceptional kindness and generosity, she demands to have the paintings and sketches that remain in his provisional custody certified for authenticity. To this end, Madeyski delivered the inventory of Gierymski’s estate to the Russian consulate already in May and obtained its authentication. The paintings were equipped with paper stickers containing their data, and affixed with seals.²⁵ Sets of works were marked with subsequent numbers and, additionally, letters of the alphabet. Most of them depicted views of Verona and Piazza del Popolo as well as the Villa Borghese gardens in Rome, and were created towards the end of the artist’s life.

²⁰ Ibid. Out of Gierymski’s works left in the studio, Madeyski chose to keep the following paintings (currently held at the National Museum in Krakow): *Angelus*, sketch (inv. no. ND 2058), *Old Woman Keeping Watch over Body II* (inv. no. MNK II-a-320), *Pineta di Villa Borghese in Rome* (inv. no. ND 2062). The sculptor probably deposited four paintings at the National Museum in Krakow after Gierymski’s 1902 posthumous exhibition. The fourth work was *View from the Terrace of the Studio on via Flaminia in Rome* (inv. no. ND 2061), which the painter gave him in 1900.

²¹ Adam Oderfeld’s letter to Madeyski of 6 June 1901 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5559).

²² Kuczborska’s letter to Madeyski of 13 June 1901 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5542). Madeyski made Gierymski’s death mask.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Kuczborska’s letter to Madeyski of 1 May 1902 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5539).

²⁵ Out of the 56 paintings, 11 were devoid of the said markings, since the consul and expert decided that they exhibited no value. Draft of Madeyski’s letter to the Kuczborskis of 1 July 1902 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5562).

The sculptor also offered to design and execute Aleksander Gierymski's tombstone. He exchanged letters with Karol Benni on the subject, arranging the – mostly financial – terms and details of the entire endeavour. In his letter of 6 May 1902, he undertook the following: “for those three things,²⁶ if this is fine by you, I shall refrain from my fee and donate my work, which consists in executing models of the tombstone and bust meant to decorate it, as well as attending to erecting the tombstone, so that you would only have to pay for the bricklayers and mason, and for casting the bust in bronze or carving it in marble.”²⁷

In the spring of 1902, all parties interested in formally assuming the estate and organizing the artist's exhibition were already concerned about the tardiness of the persons and institutions involved. On behalf of Zachęta and Madeyski himself, the Society's chair Karol Benni decided to call on lawyer Oderfeld, who – according to an account given by Committee member Kazimierz Bronowski – was “guilty of delay and negligence” as well as dilatory and dismissive with regard to the matter at hand.²⁸ The reminder worked and already on 5 June the lawyer assured Zachęta's authorities, represented by Leon Papiński, that he would shortly be receiving an official certificate concluding the succession proceedings from the Justice of the Peace of the 10th Unit.²⁹ After the Kuczborskis had been recognized as Aleksander Gierymski's legal heirs, on 24 June they granted Madeyski full powers to manage his legacy. This news coincided with his urgent trip to Carrara, which the artist had to postpone in order to personally attend to packing the works and smaller objects to special boxes and commissioning a shipment company to gradually send them to Warsaw. It was decided that items urgently needed for the exhibition would be delivered *par grande vitesse*, and those of negligible value – *par petite vitesse*. All of the artist's works and property were placed in four parcels marked with numbers and letters “A.G.” The first contained 13 canvases on stretcher bars, the second – two canvases and a carved frame, the third – 41 canvases without stretcher bars, and the fourth – personal belongings.³⁰

On 30 August, the posthumous exhibition of Aleksander Gierymski was solemnly opened in the Matejko Room at the seat of the Zachęta Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts. It showcased 180 paintings, sketches, drawings and woodcuts as well as the painter's bust cast in bronze according to Madeyski's design. It was also officially stated that all proceeds from the sale of works belonging to the Kuczborskis would be used to purchase a permanent burial plot at the Roman cemetery.

Gierymski's remains were not moved until 9 March 1903 – to a newly purchased grave in Campo Verano, situated on a hill called Pincetto overlooking Campagna and the Sabine mountains. The modest ceremony was attended by around ten persons, mostly Poles from the Roman colony of artists, with Stanisław Kuczborski being the only family member present. The grave was consecrated by father Konstanty Czorba, Prosecutor of the Resurrectionist Congregation. The burial site was rather large: 2 m long, 1.4 m wide and around 2 m high. A few weeks later, it could already boast a Tivoli travertine tombstone of over 3 m, decorated with a marble plaque with gold lettering and a bronze bust of the painter placed in a niche. To

²⁶ See n. 24.

²⁷ Copy of Madeyski's letter to Benni of 6 May 1902 (CIP NMW, inv. no. 3773/19/89).

²⁸ Kazimierz Bronowski's letter to Madeyski of 24 May 1902 (CIP NMW, inv. no. 3773/17/89).

²⁹ Oderfeld's letter to Leon Papiński of 5 June 1902 (CIP NMW, inv. no. 3767/41/89).

³⁰ See n. 25.

the left, the sculptor placed a stone vigil light with lions' heads holding garlands, and next to it a palette covered with vine scrolls. He also had plans for the surroundings of the grave: "in the autumn, I am going to plant a weeping willow behind the tombstone, and rosebushes at the sides; this will make for a proper setting and separate it from other tombstones."³¹ When purchasing the cemetery plot in Rome, Madeyski was concerned about the future of other compatriots, too. "It can fit up to eight coffins. When I purchased the plot from the municipality, I included a proviso in the contract that the remains of other Polish artists who die in Rome may also be interred there. A separate, permanent grave represents considerable costs, and we, artistic folk, are mostly poor – someone may yet make a use of this proviso."³² Zachęta authorities acceded to the sculptor's idea, provided that each new interment would require a separate consent issued by the Society's Committee.³³ The cost of purchasing the grave and executing the tombstone greatly exceeded the 800 roubles sent to Madeyski in three instalments by Zachęta's Board via Bank Handlowy.³⁴ The sculptor paid the remaining amount out of his own pocket and using Zofia Abakanowicz's previous donation of 500 francs.

There are few accounts of the last months of Gierymski's life, which is why Madeyski's description of his mental state, character and predilections contained in the draft work devoted to the painter is all the more valuable.³⁵ It explains certain matters and challenges a number of myths that grew up around him at a later stage. The sculptor's observations and thorough analysis of his friend's psyche give an indication of the intimate bond between the two artists. "Gierymski spent the last year and a half of his life in Rome, bar a few months filled with an excursion to the Paris exhibition. Here, apart from working hours, our lives were practically inseparable. Since I've not encountered any longer passages about his activities here – in Rome – in any posthumous articles published in various magazines, and because our acquaintance, although established a short while ago, transformed into a warm friendship, I am able to supplement the final months of the life and work of this fine painter that remain publicly unknown. Gierymski arrived in Rome from France in late summer of 1899, in search of light and warmth, as he said; he needed the former for his paintings, and regarded the latter as indispensable for his frail health and shattered nerves. Here, he set out to work right away, leading a pedantically regular lifestyle. His nerves were irritated to such an extent that he found it hard to control them, which is why he avoided people, especially new acquaintances, and did not rekindle old ones formed during his last stay in Rome. Yet if he did lavish his friendship upon someone, he was eager to spend time with them and looked for their company, unable to stand neither the madding crowd nor complete loneliness outside of working hours. It was extremely interesting to talk to him, because this subtle researcher of nature, verging on

³¹ Draft of Madeyski's letter to Stanisław Witkiewicz, undated (CIP NMW, inv. no. MS 3927). In February 1904, Madeyski purchased the following plants for Gierymski's grave: *Salix babylonica* – 1 pc, *Rosa hybrida* – 6 pcs, *Thuia compacta* – 2 pcs (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5568/1).

³² Ibid.

³³ Benni's letter to Madeyski of 10 March 1903 (CIP NMW, inv. no. 3773/21/89).

³⁴ The first instalment was sent on 27 November 1902 (62 francs and 85 cents), the second – on 10 March 1903 (1000 francs), and the third – on 20 July 1903 (1053 lire). The converted final amount totalled at 800 roubles and 85 kopeks. Madeyski's bill drawn up by F. Wąsowski, curator of the Zachęta Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts exhibition in the Kingdom of Poland of 7/20 July 1903 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5566). 100 roubles donated by Ignacy Korwin Milewski was included in this amount.

³⁵ Zalewski, *Tajemnica...*, op. cit., p. 188. The author believes that Madeyski intended to devote a larger publication to Gierymski.

pedantry, this zealous labourer of the easel, this supposed sceptic and recluse was interested in everything that was going on in the world and read a ton of papers. There were no political or social matters of which he wouldn't be aware, his judgments were original and bold, at times ruthless, yet even in that ruthlessness of his could one recognize an extremely noble, virtuous and good character. (He had an amazing memory and powers of observation. His knowledge of history, geography and ethnography was astounding.) To those who did not know him well, he seemed to be an extreme pessimist, and he kept convincing himself that he was one, yet in his case this was merely an abnormal condition fuelled by an unparalleled sensitivity rather than a rational manner of thinking."³⁶

The services rendered by the sculptor to Aleksander Gierymski cannot be overestimated. This friendship may be evaluated first of all in terms of loyalty and devotion to the artist, who – usually so oversensitive and introverted – placed his trust in Madeyski and greatly valued his company. Apart from concern regarding existential matters and financial support, theirs was above all a spiritual and emotional bond. Its highest expression was manifested after Aleksander's death, when the sculptor spent two years attending to complicated formalities concerning his friend's interment and sought to organize a display of his works in the country as well as erect a tombstone which he himself designed and whose cost he was generous enough to partially cover. He also wanted the painter to be remembered and wished for some of the more finished sketches from his legacy to be held in Polish museums.³⁷

Madeyski's involvement in affairs concerning Gierymski hindered his own creative efforts. At that time, he received many commissions that translated into designs and the execution of such sculptures as *Pain* (1898), *Spectrum* (1899), the bust of Jan Matejko (1901) intended for decoration of the façade of the new building of the Society of Friends of the Fine Arts in Krakow and the monumental tombstone of Queen Jadwiga for the Wawel cathedral (1902). Owing to a multitude of various activities, he could not avoid delays in working on the sarcophagus, which he had to account for to his donor, Karol Lanckoroński (1848–1933).³⁸ In a letter to Oderfeld written a few months later, he complained impatiently: "I have no time for any efforts, I'm v. busy finishing the model of Queen Jadwiga's statue for the Wawel and everything that directs my thoughts away from this job disturbs me in my work, this is a v. bad time even for correspondence."³⁹ Despite such moments of discouragement, owing to his enormous patience and determination, he managed to bring all his projects to a successful conclusion. He wrote to Benni: "I hope that you can believe me when I say that I am not taking this job for profit, but for the memory of a friend, man and artist and to fulfil what I undertook to do."⁴⁰

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska

³⁶ Ibid., p. 189.

³⁷ See n. 20.

³⁸ Madeyski's letter to Karol Lanckoroński of 3 March 1901 (CIP NMW, inv. no. 3767/17/89).

³⁹ Draft of Madeyski's letter to Oderfeld of 15 July 1901 (CIP NMW, inv. no. Dep.5560).

⁴⁰ Draft of Madeyski's letter to Benni, undated (CIP NMW, inv. no. 3773/17/89).