

## **I Olga Boznańska's Paintings from the Collection of Bolesław Biegas – the Donation to the Historical and Literary Society in Paris**

The Polish Historical and Literary Society attracted few painters or sculptors. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these were Henryk Rodakowski and Władysław Oleszczyński, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Konstanty Brandl, Józef Czapski, Jan Ekiert, Mieczysław Lurczyński, Franciszek Prochaski and Waław Zawadowski. However, it was Bolesław Biegas who occupied a special place in the Society's history. He was one of the most generous benefactors of this respectable institution that was established by the Great Emigration after the collapse of the November Uprising. Biegas drew up his last will of 23 April 1950 bequeathing all the items from his atelier at 3 bis, rue Jean Ferrandi to the Great Emigration, including 151 sculptures, 373 paintings, two linen textiles, several hundreds of drawings, archives (correspondence and manuscripts of theatre plays) and library (consisting mainly of exhibition catalogues, sometimes very rare ones, for instance issued by the Vienna Secession), as well as paintings and prints by Gustaw Gwozdecki and Paolo Troubetzkoy. The most illustrious part of the bequest was, however, an important set of Olga Boznańska's works, which today forms one third of her works in the Society's collections.

In the "Inventory of sculptures, paintings, textiles and carpets, furniture and varia donated by Mr Bolesław Biegas in the years 1950–54 to the Historical and Literary Society in Paris,"<sup>1</sup> drawn up on 28 December 1954 by Jan Szymański, the cultural attaché of the Polish Embassy in Paris in the interwar period, mention is made of six paintings by Olga Boznańska: "525. Self-Portrait, 32 × 40 cm. In gilded frame (1925), on the reverse [there is] an unfinished portrait of a young English woman (**fig. 1**); 526. Self-Portrait, 41 × 52.5 cm, behind glass, in gilded frame (**fig. 2**); 527. Portrait of B. Biegas, 52.5 × 81 cm, in green-and-gilded frame, on the reverse an unfinished self-portrait (1917–18) (**fig. 3**); 528. Portrait of Jadwiga Tryczłowa [Trutschel], 75.5 × 96.5 cm, signed, unfinished, damaged (1924–26) (**fig. 4**); 529. Flowers, 25 × 46 cm, in a small wooden frame (1920) (**fig. 5**); 530. Self-Portrait, on canvas (in a small wooden frame wrapped in painted linen) (**fig. 6**)."

Szymański did not date the two self-portraits numbered 526 and 530. The dating of the remaining paintings was confirmed during preparatory works before the exhibition on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Boznańska's death. The exhibition was held in the exhibition rooms at 6 quai d'Orléans – since 1903, the residence of the Adam Mickiewicz Museum, and

<sup>1</sup> The manuscript is to be found in Biegas's archive at the Historical and Literary Society in the Polish Library in Paris. One of Szymański's tasks was maintaining contacts with Polish artists settled in France.

since 1974, also the Bolesław Biegas Museum.<sup>2</sup> Ewa Bobrowska, the exhibition curator, dated Biegas's portrait to late 1917/early 1918, and Jadwiga Trutschel's portrait to the years 1924–25.<sup>3</sup>

Search queries on Biegas have revealed, however, that the dating of his paintings and sculptures proposed in the aforementioned inventory drawn up by Jan Szymański had been very often made up. Undoubtedly, while dating Boznańska's painterly works, he must have relied on Biegas's fallible memory and did not apply appropriate methodological guidelines.

Biegas was friends with Boznańska – he became acquainted with her immediately after his arrival in Paris, and already in early 1902, he modelled her sculptural bust.<sup>4</sup> It was his only work accepted by the jury of the Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, in which Boznańska also participated. She presented four of her works there: *Portrait of a Man*, *Portrait of a Fair-Haired Man*, *A Study of a Young Girl* and *A Study of a Young Man*. Actually, Biegas could have been portrayed in one of these paintings. Information contained in the Salon's printed catalogue are too general to draw precise conclusions as to the identity of the portrayed persons. Dating Biegas's portrait to 1902 however seems to be confirmed by a photograph preserved in his archive which was taken in his first atelier in Paris, at rue Falguière. The photograph shows him dressed exactly the same as in Boznańska's painting and even presented similarly – with crossed arms and a fringe falling on his forehead.<sup>5</sup> There is also Biegas's sculptural bust of Boznańska visible in this photograph, whose whiteness mirrors the whiteness of gypsum of the *World*, a sculpture rejected by the jury of the Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts and consequently exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants, along with the bronze-cast *Chopin*. Nevertheless, the photograph remains an important testimony related to the Parisian artistic "colony" of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also portrays Jan Lorentowicz, whose sculptural bust, still in clay, Biegas had just finished, as well as Adolf Basler and two other unidentified persons. Basler, together with Stanisław Gierszyński, was the initiator of the special issue of *La Plume* of 1902 dedicated to Biegas, and in 1904 – the author of a text about Olga Boznańska, published in *Sztuka* journal<sup>6</sup> issued in Paris by Antoni Potocki. He was one of the first art critics who separated Boznańska from the burdening comparisons with the art of Eugène Carrière, who was at the height of artistic fame in Paris at the time. Gierszyński emphasized the originality and significance of her compositional concepts that proved elusive to classifications.

On the reverse of Biegas's portrait was initially Boznańska's self-portrait (**fig. 7**). The painting on cardboard was renovated in 1978 by Joanna Wierusz-Kowalska who masterfully managed to separate the two pictures. In the centre of the vaguely sketched composition, there runs an oblique line that corresponds (running in an opposite direction) to the line on the painting *View from the Window in Paul Nauen's Atelier in Munich*, a work also in the collection of the Polish Historical and Literary Society. One may therefore presume that the unfinished self-portrait can be dated to the Munich period.

<sup>2</sup> Ewa Bobrowska-Jakubowska, *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940)*, exh. cat., The Adam Mickiewicz Museum at the Polish Library in Paris (Paris, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25, cat. nos 23 and 24.

<sup>4</sup> The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. Rz.W.881. Antoni Potocki, "Kolonya paryska," *Sztuka*, no. 4 (1904), Paris, p. 3; *Boleslas Biegas. Sculptures. Peintures*, exh. cat., Trianon de Bagatelle, Paris, 1992 (Paris, 1992), p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> Biegas's Archive, inv. no. phot. Bieg.58 in *Boleslas Biegas...*, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Adolf Basler, "Olga Boznańska," in *Sztuka* no. 8–9 (1904), pp. 377–79.

Boznańska had a recurring practice of using both sides of her paintings, as in the Biegas's portrait and also in the case of the *Self-Portrait* of 1925,<sup>7</sup> whose reverse side features an advanced sketch of the *Portrait of a Young English Woman* (fig. 8). The dating of this work suggested by Szymański seems acceptable, although during the entire Parisian period, dating from the moment Boznańska arrived in the capital of France in 1898 until her death in 1940, her works in general present a certain stylistic unity and coherence. The *Self-Portrait* inventoried by Szymański under the number 526 (fig. 2) resembles it. Boznańska left bare cardboard in several places – cardboard being her favourite ground in painterly compositions because of the matte effect it produced. The 1920s could be the presumed dating of the canvas *Self-Portrait with a Lamp* (fig. 6), which is one of the most beautiful pictures of Boznańska in the Society's holdings. This painting distinguishes itself not only by the type of ground, but also by its horizontal format. As observed by Agnieszka Bagińska, underneath the lamp, one can spot a picture whose composition is very close to the *Nanny (Woman with Child)* from the National Museum in Wrocław – signed and dated to 1899.<sup>8</sup> It permits us to assume that the self-portrait was painted at the same time and not c. 1910<sup>9</sup> and belongs to the first works finished by Boznańska in Paris. With regard to its dominant brownish tone, it is one of her works that display the most resemblance with Carrière's foggy, monochromatic paintings, even if it differs from his works in the many flashes of yellow and green on the level of the lamp.

With the exception of the *Portrait of Jadwiga Trutschel*, Boznańska's paintings donated to the Society are not signed. The work was reproduced in the catalogue of the Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1908,<sup>10</sup> but is not featured in the list of works exhibited that year by Boznańska.<sup>11</sup> Jadwiga Trutschel, together with her husband, Count Henryk Trutschel, were Biegas's art patrons from the moment the sculptor came to Paris in late 1901. The pair treated him as their own son and supported him financially throughout his entire career. As in the case of the portrait of the sculptor, a photograph preserved in his archive – the earliest known document where he can be seen in the Trutschels' company – may be indicative of the portrait's dating. Since the plaster sculpture *Chopin* visible in the centre that was later cast in bronze and exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants in the end of March, was not yet finished at that time, the photograph must have been taken in February 1902. Jadwiga and Henryk Trutschel strike poses which are similar to those on the portraits painted by Boznańska. In Henryk's portrait (the National Museum in Poznań), there is a signature and date: 1905. We do not know why or when this painting made its way to Poznań. Henryk Trutschel died in Paris in 1928; his wife may have been compelled to part with the painting due to the lack of storage space in her apartment at rue Deschamps where she followed a life of declining activity until her death on 14 September 1939. According to her last will written down in the testament of 26 June 1937, Biegas inherited all her wealth, including her portrait painted by Boznańska.

<sup>7</sup> As dated by Szymański.

<sup>8</sup> Agnieszka Bagińska, "Autoportret z lampą," in *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940)*, Renata Higersberger, ed., exh. cat., The National Museum in Warsaw (Warsaw, 2015), p. 175, cat. no. 83.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. See also *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940)*, Ewa Bobrowska, ed., exh. cat., The National Museum in Krakow; The National Museum in Warsaw, 2014–2015 (Krakow, 2014), p. 129, cat. no. I.20.

<sup>10</sup> *Catalogue illustré du Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts*, Grand Palais (Paris, 1908), p. 179.

<sup>11</sup> No. 152 – *Portrait of Mrs. F...*; no. 153 – *Portrait of Miss Cheilley*; no. 154 – *Portrait of Miss de P...*; no. 155 – *Portrait of Mrs V... with Her Daughter*.

Since the *Portrait of Jadwiga Trutschel* was reproduced in the aforementioned catalogue of 1908, it could have not been painted in late 1924/early 1925 as suggested by Szymański. The dating was not corrected during the preparatory works for the 1990 exhibition, which is even more surprising in that the catalogue belongs to the documentation of the art collection of the Polish Historical and Literary Society. A question is left unanswered as to why this portrait was reproduced in 1908 in spite of the fact that it was not listed among exhibited works? We may presume that the artist did not have a proper photograph and sent a picture of her earlier work to the editorial staff. Since the portrait of Henryk Trutschel is dated to 1905, it seems tempting to date his wife's portrait similarly. The painting, however, could have even been painted back in 1902, when Jadwiga was 50 years old, as her facial traits in the mentioned photograph particularly resemble those in the painting. In the later photographs from Biegas's archive, her face appears more rounded. Additionally, both in the photograph and in the painting, the woman is wearing the same type of hat.

Bolesław Biegas maintained very close relationship with the Belgian poet Émile Verhaeren, who dedicated to him a laudative text published in the *Album* issued by Louis Theveny. In 1906, the sculptor twice modelled Verhaeren's portrait and the portrait of his spouse Marthe and simultaneously painted the poet's portrait as well. Verhaeren considered Biegas a poet: "Yes, you are a poet, my dear Biegas."<sup>12</sup> His text preceded the Matisse declaration in his *Notes of a Painter* of 1908: "What I am after, above all, is expression," whose definition he developed: "Expression to my way of thinking does not consist of the passion mirrored upon a human face or betrayed by a violent gesture. The whole arrangement of the picture is expressive."<sup>13</sup> Two years earlier, Verhaeren put emphasis on the role of "expression" in Biegas's artistic work. He concluded his study with the following words: "The mouth, the forehead, the eyes are for you something more than the body: they are, first of all, the thought, the will, the feeling. You are not interested in anything unless it is related to expression."<sup>14</sup> This conclusion uncannily relates to Boznańska's portraits, too, who in 1911 exhibited a likeness of the Belgian poet at the Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts. The painter could have been acquainted with him through Biegas and the Trutschels. In 2004, the portrait was presented as a demonstration of the relations linking Verhaeren with the Polish artistic and literary circles in Paris.<sup>15</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, who had a rudimentary knowledge of Polish culture, had already noted in his artistic chronicles the presence of Boznańska's works at the Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts – but he failed to notice even a trace of Polish character in her painting! The son of Angelika Kostrowicka considered Olga Boznańska to be a "Germanized" artist; he underlined her "German manner" in 1910<sup>16</sup> and after visiting the exhibition of the Salon of the Quelques he had observed "in her canvases most of all Munich painting, too Munich in

<sup>12</sup> Émile Verhaeren, "Boleslas Biegas," in *Boleslas Biegas. Sculpteur et peintre. Album* (Paris [1906]), p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Henri Matisse. Écrits et propos sur l'art, texte, notes et index établis par Dominique Fourcade* (Paris, 1992), p. 42. English translation: Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, with contributions by Peter Selz and Joshua C. Taylor (Berkeley etc., 1968), pp. 131–32.

<sup>14</sup> Verhaeren, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Xavier Deryng et al., *Le symbolisme polonais*, exh. cat., Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes, 2004–2005 (Paris, 2004), p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, édition de Pierre Caizergues et Michel Décaudin (Paris, 1991), vol. 2, p. 176.

fact.”<sup>17</sup> In 1911, he made notice of the Verhaeren portrait – he appreciated it and expressed more moderate evaluation of its “German quality.” This time around, he targeted the portrayed poet: “An exhibition of Miss Olga Boznańska, whose somewhat German mannerism permitted to wonderfully render the German aspect of poet Émile Verhaeren.”<sup>18</sup>

Olga Boznańska and Bolesław Biegas lived since their arrival to Paris in the same quarter of Montparnasse, yet none of them frequented the legendary cafes of Le Dôme, La Rotonde or La Coupole. Their ateliers, Boznańska's at 49 boulevard du Montparnasse, and Biegas's at 3 bis, rue de Bagneux (modern rue Jean Ferrandi), were located close to each other. Gradually, they turned into figures from a past era who managed to avoid the turbulences of the Parisian artistic scene, mostly avant-garde, whose members – christened “Montparnos” by Michel Georges-Michel – would make their appearances during night-time celebrations.

According to the testimony of Zofia Kulasińska-Couret, Boznańska and Biegas sometimes shared a walk along the boulevard du Montparnasse, refraining from crossing the street to reach the other side of rue de Rennes, as if willing to mark their proper territory, both wearing anachronic attires: Boznańska in her outmoded dresses, Biegas in a long pelerine, both sporting headwear from a past epoch. A precious proof of these relations is the photograph of Boznańska's atelier preserved in Biegas's archive and dedicated to him: “To Mr Biegas the impossible colleague. Olga Boznańska.” After their death, the artists remained together, too, buried at the cemetery of the Polish Emigration in Montmorency. Boznańska's tomb bears an inscription: “Olga de Boznańska. Artiste peintre. \* Cracovie 15 avril 1865 + Paris 26 octobre 1940. Wieczny odpoczynek racz jej dać Panie a światłość wiekoista niech jej świeci na wieki wieków. Amen!” [Olga de Boznańska. Artist painter. Krakow 15 April 1865 Paris 26 October 1940. Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her for ever and ever. Amen!]. Biegas, on the other hand, rests in the tomb of the Polish Historical and Literary Society, financed and erected by himself – another lasting testimony to his generosity.

Translated by Karolina Koriat

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 262.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 311.