

| Olga Boznańska's *Flower Girls*. Japonisme or the Tradition of *Rückenfigur*?

The *Flower Girls*, painted by Olga Boznańska in 1889 during her art studies in Munich, depict an interior with three girls seated at a table in front of a window, occupied with arranging flower bouquets (**fig. 1**). The painting has been qualified as an example of japonisme in Boznańska's art. The question of its genesis demands, however, to be resumed. Our basis for comparative study will be Utagawa Hiroshige's woodcut, already referred to in the context of Boznańska's work: *Three Women on a Veranda on the Sumida River in the Moonlight* (**fig. 2**) as well as a number of other depictions of women in interiors.

An argument for Boznańska's inspiration taken from Japanese works would be the "new flat space, based on vertical and horizontal divisions,"¹ "space flattened and verticalized."² However, this diagnosis appears to be imprecise, since the construction of space based on aforementioned divisions does not necessarily imply its flatness, an example being Raphael's *School of Athens*. It is also hard to accept without reservations a remark on the "flattening of space" which relates to a painting with a motif of an open window in the centre of the composition. The depth marked in that window has already been discussed by Helena Blum.³ The necessity of advanced reflection on the picture's genesis is also suggested by the opening of architecture onto landscape, thus "developing the composition's background and simultaneously bringing the foreground closer to the viewer,"⁴ elsewhere considered a proof of inspiration from Japanese art. All the same, this observation should be considered insufficient, as the motif of an architectural opening of the composition deep into the background is one of the most popular tropes in European painting; just to cite works that Boznańska knew from Munich's Alte Pinakothek, like the copy of Rogier van der Weyden's *Saint Lucas Drawing the Madonna*, Filippino Lippi's *Annunciation* or Jan Gossaert's *Danaë*.⁵

Undoubtedly, Utagawa's woodcut has one quality analogous to Boznańska's *Flower Girls*: the vertical division of the composition into three parts by means of architectural elements. Yet in

¹ Manggha Boznańskiej. *Inspiracje sztuką Japonii w malarstwie Olgi Boznańskiej*, Anna Król, ed., exh. cat., Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, Krakow, 2006 (Krakow, 2006), p. 66.

² Łukasz Kossowski, "Między japonerie a japonizmem. Kilka uwag o japońskich fascynacjach w sztuce Olgi Boznańskiej," in *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940)*, Renata Higersberger, ed., exh. cat., The National Museum in Warsaw, 2015 (Warsaw, 2015), p. 50.

³ Helena Blum, *Olga Boznańska. Zarys życia i twórczości* (Krakow, 1964), p. 23.

⁴ *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940)*, Ewa Bobrowska, ed., exh. cat., The National Museum in Krakow, 2014–2015 (Krakow, 2014), p. 287.

⁵ A copy of van der Weyden's painting as well as Gossaert's painting were exhibited at that time in the Cabinet III, and Lippi's painting – in the Exhibition Room IX. Cf. Rudolf Marggraff, *Die ältere königliche Pinakothek zu München* (München, 1869), p. 109 (no. 554), p. 133 (no. 41, 42).

Utagawa's work, these elements are theatre wings, obliquely positioned, so that they direct the viewer's eye towards figures standing next to them and towards the landscape opening in the background. The figures are mediators between the interior and the landscape, which applies both to the side figures and the central figure that forms an optical continuity with the tree in the background and whose voluminous robe provides a symmetrical element mirroring the tree's crown. In Boznańska's painting, we can see, first of all, architecture's optical autonomy from human figures resulting from the slight trespass of the horizontal axis of the picture and the fact that the window is situated in the upper part of the composition; and secondly, the precise placement of figures in the architectural grid – inversely to that of the Japanese woodcut. If we are to follow the recommendation of Hans Sedlmayr that an analysis of a work of art should be based on impression-based understanding (*das anmutungshafte Verstehen*), then we could state that Boznańska's painting is characterized by a specific stiffness of the figural arrangement, resulting directly from the spatial disposition of figures following the composition's division by the elements of architecture, which makes its expression fundamentally different from Utagawa's work. The stiffness, however, should not be understood negatively as a sign of lack of skill of the young artist. The consequence visible in the subjection of figures to architecture confirms that the device was fully intentional.

Another difference between the *Flower Girls* and the woodcut is that in the latter, the figures – depicted in full length – are shown as distant from the viewer and therefore, as if, “on stage.”⁶ In Boznańska's painting, on the other hand, the floor is significantly reduced, which distances the image both from the convention of modern era painting based on the Albertian model and from Japanese art. It should be reckoned as a result of changes that took place in European art of the 19th century and whose objective was to define the viewer *within* the very structure of the piece and working out such a formula by means of which the viewer is pulled in the picture and somehow united with its structure in the very act of reception.⁷

The construction of Boznańska's painting places the implied viewer right behind the girl who is sitting backwards.⁸ The beholder shares the floor with the figures who are “cut off” by the bottom frame of the painting. The specificity of the reference of the depiction to the viewer also stems from the fact that he is the only one who undoubtedly directs his look through the window depicted in the background. The landscape behind the window relates “to me” – the picture “has me in mind.” On the other hand, the Japanese woodcut is composed as a decorative panneau spread before the eyes of the viewer for aesthetic contemplation. The way in which Boznańska's painting defines the viewer within should be examined, especially since she repeated this device in the series of paintings *Breton Woman* painted in the years 1889–90.

Finally, one of the essential differences between the discussed works is the presence of a figure depicted backwards in Boznańska's painting – the figure which is at the same time the most prominent of all three, since she is placed in the vertical axis of the visual field, with her head in the optical centre. On Japanese woodcuts, figures who turn their back to the viewer

⁶ In Japanese woodcuts it is oftentimes a result of the fact that the “model viewer” is positioned in a neutral point of observation above the plane on which the figures are placed.

⁷ On the “implied viewer” category see Wolfgang Kemp, *Der Anteil des Betrachters. Rezeptionsästhetische Studien zur Malerei des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München, 1983).

⁸ It is one of the distinctive features separating Boznańska's painting from Charles Cottet's *Card Players* (1833, Musée d'Orsay), which, according to Piotr Kopszak, the artist “imitated” when composing her work. See Piotr Kopszak, *Olga Boznańska* (Warsaw, 2006), p. 35.

are either distant or situated near the bottom of the composition, below the level of the main protagonists of the scene. Their position is inferior, and therefore different or opposite to the position occupied by the figure from Boznańska's painting, whom I will onwards call by the German term *Rückenfigur*.

Boznańska's painting follows the longstanding tradition of European painting with *Rückenfigur* that harks back to ancient art. The figure near the window that is situated in the axis of the visual field associates the picture in this tradition as closer to the works of Romantic artists like Johann H.W. Tischbein (*Goethe at the Window*, 1787) or Caspar David Friedrich (*Woman at the Window*, 1822). At the same time, the depiction of figures seated at the table immersed in work and the manner of framing the window by leaving its upper edge outside the picture, allows identification of the source of inspiration in the works of painters contemporary to Boznańska, like Max Liebermann (*Shoemaker's Workshop*, 1881) or Fritz von Uhde (several versions of the *Dutch Seamstresses*, 1883–85) (**fig. 3**).⁹ What is left in Boznańska's work from the earlier tradition is the axial and almost symmetrical structure of the image, which translates into the exposition of a distinctive relationship between the figure seated backwards and the window. What connects her work to modern times is the depiction of figures who, despite being seated near a window, are not looking through it. This difference can easily become the reason for precipitous conclusions only based on the figures' activity, that the girls are confined in the interior to perform enforced labour. However, a proper interpretation must follow instructions contained and delivered by the picture itself.

In the *Flower Girls*, the first hint is provided by the separation of the figure on the left, isolated within the gray stripe of the wall. In this zone, the match of the two faces is not accidental – the one depicted in the portrait hanging on the wall neighbours the face of the young flower girl. The viewer's look meets the eyes of the first face only. The girl, though seated frontally to the viewer, is not looking straight. Before commenting on that difference, we would like to remark that the light-coloured apron of the flower girl, above which she arranges flowers, is an analogy to the table top of the same colour and lightness, densely covered with blossoms. The flowers that she is plaiting look like a nucleus of what is spread over the table in the central field of the picture. The table top reflects the light entering through the window and also provides an optical reference to the plane of the floor on which the table stands. As such, it mediates between the sky and the earth. The way in which the seated figures refer to it and the way in which the table regulates the perception of the picture by the viewer, determine the place of both the girls and the viewer in the relation to these two poles of the world.

The table top frames the head of the *Rückenfigur*. Its back edge runs along the level of the eyes of the girl. The presumption that this girl is looking through the window is confronted with the fact that the other two girls are looking down. However, concluding that she is also looking down remains a mere speculation which cannot become the fundament for an analysis of a work of art. The painting shows that the location of the edge of the table top on the level of the figure's eyes replaces the inaccessibility of her look. This dependency co-determines the viewer's look instead. The table transposes the daylight into a horizontal stripe which makes

⁹ On the tradition of *Rückenfigur* in German painting of the 19th century see Erik Frossman, "Fensterbilder von der Romantik bis zur Moderne," in *Konsthistorkiska Studier – Festskrift fuer Sten Karling* (Stockholm, 1966), pp. 289–320; Guntram Wilks, *Das Motiv der Rückenfigur un dessen Bedeutungswandlungen in der deutschen und skandinavischen Malerei zwischen 1800 und der Mitte der 1940er Jahre* (Marburg, 2005). "I was fascinated with his paintings" (Olga Boznańska on Fritz Uhde), in Junius, "U Olgi Boznańskiejj w Paryżu," *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, no. 42 (1938), pp. 805–6.

the viewer's eye stretch right and left from the figure's head. The movement of the eye along a horizontal line to the left, to the beginning, into the past, and to the right – into the future, is a synonym of the determination of the perception of the world and the viewer's presence within – by time. The figure seated backwards does not direct the viewer's look into the landscape, infinity and the absolute confined in nature, as the Romantic pictures with *Rückenfigur* are usually described. The viewer does not find a reference which would give a sensation of suspension and insignificance of time in the face of timelessness. All that is related in the pictorial tradition within the function of the Romantic *Rückenfigur* is therefore questioned.

In *Flower Girls*, the situation of *Rückenfigur* is additionally defined, firstly, by the figure sitting opposite, since she is unified with the other optically, secondly, by the question of the figure's look, and thirdly – by the landscape behind the window. An attempt at reconstructing spatial relations within the depiction permits the conclusion that the table is placed in front of the wall. Yet if one looks at the picture *as image*, one sees the table as if inserted in the window's niche and pushing the figure seated behind it against the window. The optical closeness of the table and window is underlined by the analogy between the table top and the equally lit and situated windowsill. The person sitting with her back turned is wedged between the chair's backrest and the table, while the figure seated in the background is wedged between the table and the window. At the same time, she is not situated in the field of the window opening on the landscape, but is visually pressed against the central, vertical element of the window frame. This element is also a clear reference to the position of the viewer in front of the picture. The viewer intuitively positions oneself centrally in front of the picture, since it is only in this relation that the painting actualizes itself in its optical fulness. The viewer's silhouette becomes the symmetrical complement of the relation: the window frame – the girl behind the table – the table top as the symmetrical axis – *Rückenfigur* – the viewer. The entirety of the described relations creates an impression of confinement of figures in space, complementing the aforementioned situation of the viewer being “confined” in time.

The relation is, on its part, also complemented by the fact that the *Rückenfigur* covers, with her hair bun, one eye of the figure sitting opposite. The precision of this trick is not inferior to the ones from pictorial tradition in such masterpieces of painting as Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* or Jan Matejko's *Alchemist Sędziwój* [*Sendigovius*] (the figure standing in the door to the right). The trick was intended to expose the look of this eye as the only one directed towards the viewer.¹⁰ In Boznańska's work, the partly covered face of the girl situated in the centre of the composition – the unavoidable focus of the viewer – visualises the situation of the viewer's inability to enter any exchange of looks. This indicates that the meaning of relations between the figures and between them and the viewer is formed on a different basis. Their recognition by the viewer is only possible by looking at the picture *as image*.

An element of the pictorial play is the aforementioned co-definition of the figures by the landscape seen through the window.¹¹ Front to back, we can see a lantern, a broad sweep of grass and distant buildings with a tower. The selection of elements is not accidental. The building with a distinctively vertical character that can be identified as a church tower is

¹⁰ See Michał Haake, *Portret w malarstwie polskim u progu nowoczesności* (Kraków, 2008), pp. 181–86.

¹¹ I am applying the term “play” in reference to the picture in the sense given to it by Hans-Georg Gadamer in “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” in his *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, Robert Bernasconi, ed. (Cambridge, 1986).

found in one painting from the series *Breton Women*.¹² The determination of the landscape's composition can be traced in the surprising separation of the house where the flower girls are working from the buildings in the distance by the extent of land that takes more than a half of the window's height. The division of the window into two fields reflects the division of the table top into two parts and therefore subjects the view from the window to the relation past-future. This division brings out the relation between the elements situated one above another. In the right-hand field – on the future side – are the motifs of the lantern and the tower. An element reinforcing the mutual reference of the two motifs is the small low house which mediates between them: on the one hand, formally corresponding with the lantern's roof and on the other hand – being adjacent to the building with a tower. A lantern structurally related with the motif of a church tower can be found in Aleksander Gierymski's painting *Street Spring at Oboźna Street in Warsaw* (fig. 4). In Józef Pankiewicz's painting *Old Town's Market*, a lantern is unified with a religiously-themed sculptural top of a tenement house (fig. 5). In both works, the relation is employed to visualize an encounter of tradition and modernity.¹³ Optical rivalry occurs between the two symbolical motifs. This is how the match should be understood in Boznańska's painting, too. In her work, this rivalry is complemented with a precise placement of the lantern within the stripe of green. Modernity is identified with the dominant of the horizontal order and this order – the broad stripe of soil – dominates in the structure of the landscape outside the window. This dependency strikes in particular when compared with Friedrich's painting *Woman Looking Through the Window*, where the window, situated higher than the figure, is filled with a brightly lit sky. Summarizing the culture of the 19th century, Werner Hofmann observed the ongoing questioning of fundamental truths of Christianity in Europe, the relativisation of "absolute criteria," the constitutioning of reality consisting of "parts devoid of the common denominator," in which "after breaking the vertical axes, only a horizontal plane has been left, where the antagonistic powers play their dialogue."¹⁴ The landscape in the window in Boznańska's painting is a pars pro toto of the world as such. The basic relation which defines this world is summarized by the selection of elements and relations between them.

The relation between the tower and the lantern is structurally complemented by the flower in a pot standing on the table (the lantern is placed between the tower and the flower pot). The pot finds a complement in the motif of a larger flower pot which stands on the floor to the right. In the relation of these objects, the look becomes once again directed underneath the table, towards the ground. The shape of the pot repeats the oval outline of the backrest of the chair framing the *Rückenfigur*. The confinement of the figures in the interior consists also in their unification with the zone of the ground. The only way for a viewer to resist this downward tendency is to look up the stems of the tall plant. The geometry of the table legs is transformed by them into a vigorous construct which covers the rigour of architecture (the corner of the window niche) and raises one's viewpoint. The black knob accentuating the materiality of the window frame yields to dispersion in the nebula of tiny dark-coloured leaves of the plant. On top, the plant branches out and directs the viewer's look into two opposite directions – towards the tower and the saturated stains of red on the right. They have been identified as Japanese

¹² *Breton Woman*, 1890, The National Museum in Krakow.

¹³ See Michał Haake, *Figuralizm Aleksandra Gierymskiego* (Poznań, 2015).

¹⁴ Werner Hofmann, *Das Irdische Paradies. Motive und Ideen des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1974), p. 254 [the quoted phrases are translated from the Polish version].

fans. They are painted in such a manner, however, so as to activate this level of perception where one observes purely painterly aspects. They visualize a conviction expressed that year by Maurice Denis that a picture, before it becomes a recognizable motif, is but a plane covered with paint in a specific order.¹⁵ Analogically, in Boznańska's painting *Japanese Woman* (1889), the red fan provides a counterbalance for the model's head, and in the two portraits of women with a red umbrella (1888, 1892), the title prop forms an internal tondo framed with a black stripe which strongly distinguishes the heads from the surroundings. In any case, the Japanese element works mostly as an intense colour value, appointed to underline the figure's face. In 1887, the artist wrote in a letter to her Mother: "[...] unfortunately, I like colour too much, I often hear that. I cannot understand how painters may consider the heads I have recently sent them as ugly, it seems to me indeed that they don't understand them. The girl isn't pretty, yet the colour is so graceful especially here [...]"¹⁶ It is not by accident that these colourful stains are placed on the level of the mentioned portrait as its pendant. The perception of Boznańska's portraits is an entrance into a relation with a certain optical reality of strictly painterly, unreal structure, whose one element is a figure's look. This is why the *Flower Girls*, depicting a scene wavering between a portrait and an intensive colour study, which also creates an optical fundament for Boznańska's signature, can be reckoned a concise artistic manifesto of the painter.

In the *Flower Girls*, the relation of the tower and the red stains visualizes the opposition of one form of spirituality – a different one, embodied by art and by strictly artistic language. The order of art was here determined as the only one which can provide a counterpart for man's attachment to earth. In this way, a reevaluation of Romanticism is taking place which considered art and religion as equal. I observe here a distinctive connection between the meaning of this relation and the conclusions that Alois Riegl formulated thinking of 19th-century art in his text *Mood as the Content of Modern Art*.¹⁷ He pointed to art as the phenomenon which in a world devoid of faith makes life bearable and restores meaning. "I live by painting, with all my soul," wrote Boznańska in 1887,¹⁸ "[...] the moment I am not able to paint anymore, I should cease to live" – she added in 1896.¹⁹

Translated by Karolina Koriat

¹⁵ Maurice Denis, "Definition of Neo-Traditionism" [1890], in *Art in Theory: 1815–1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Geiger, eds (Oxford, 2000), pp. 862–68.

¹⁶ Letter to Mother, 20 March 1887, Munich. After: H. Blum, op. cit., p. 20.

¹⁷ Alois Riegl, *Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst* (1899), in: id., *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Artur Rosenauer, ed. (Wien, 1996), p. 27ff. See also Ksawery Piwocki, *Pierwsza nowoczesna historia sztuki. Poglądy Aloisa Riegla* (Warsaw, 1970), pp. 171–75.

¹⁸ Letter to Father, 20 March 1887, Munich. After: H. Blum, op. cit., p. 32.

¹⁹ Letter to Father [no precise date] 1896, Paris. After: ibid., p. 42.