

Art in the Service of an Oppressed Nation

Introduction to the History of Polish Painting in the Nineteenth Century

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IN 1795, after eight hundred years of independent life, Poland watched helplessly as Russia, Prussia, and Austria partitioned its territory into three occupied zones, marking the end of its existence as an independent state. During the dark century of occupation that followed, Poland possessed neither the institutions nor the leadership to maintain a normal national life. For spiritual leadership, restoration of lost pride, and plans for the future, Poland turned to the only group in firm possession of a discernible national Polish identity – its poets and artists.

Although influenced by the major European cultural and artistic movements of the time, Polish nineteenth-century art is distinguished by its preoccupation with the sociopolitical and ideological conditions of Poland's status as an oppressed nation. This national element underlies the entire artistic expression of nineteenth-century Poland.

The Face of Nineteenth-Century Europe

The period from 1815 to 1914 is unique in European history. The new European order created at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 resulted in a hundred years of unprecedented peace and stability that lasted until the onset of World War I. This seeming stability, however, was marked by successive changes over the course of the century that gradually led to a very different configuration of the map of Europe from the one established by the Congress of Vienna.

The network of basic alliances and agreements constructed at Vienna was sufficiently flexible to allow far-reaching political and cultural changes that resulted in the formation of new political entities based on cultural and ethnic similarities. These changes came about gradually as a result of local wars, uprisings, revolutions, and sometimes diplomatic agreements. Thus, a number of nations gained (or in some cases regained) their political independence, while others redefined themselves within ethnic borders. The independence of Belgium and Greece (1830), the unification and independence of Romania (1859), the unification of Italy (1850–1870) and Germany (1871), the independence of Bulgaria and Serbia (1878), the independence of

Norway (1905) and Albania (1912) were part of a larger process that ended in 1918 with the creation of a whole string of states in Central and Eastern Europe, all based on the cultural or ethnic identity of the population.

Cultural identities were strengthened by newly won statehood as the influence formerly imposed by stronger neighbors declined. Public patronage superseded royal, ecclesiastical, and noble patronage. Modern educational systems were created, and societies of scholars and intellectuals formed. Artistic life was transformed by the emergence of new opportunities for education, exhibitions, and criticism.

The arts played a fundamental role in awakening and maintaining national consciousness. The development of government and community institutions—from parliaments and ministries to museums and opera houses—encouraged the demand for art that reflected the native tradition. Long-forgotten patterns of national culture were revived as new national identities drew upon the native art and literature of the past for validation.

The political function that art was asked to play often had the effect of emphasizing content over style. This feature characterized the art of many of the new states, particularly in Eastern Europe. But it also held true for Germany, Italy, and other nations that had not suffered particularly from foreign oppression but had attained national unity only after centuries of division. By contrast, national ideology played a much smaller part in the development of the arts in those Western European countries that had enjoyed a long tradition of independence and a growing liberalization of society. To be sure, even in those countries state patronage produced a number of historical and allegorical works for purposes of propaganda. Their creators were amply rewarded and praised during their lifetimes, but for the most part such works have vanished from the history of art. Independent artists, however, usually turned to historical subjects either to serve a purely pictorial end or to provide an allusion to a favorite philosophical tenet.

The liberation of the arts from their political and moral charge contributed significantly to an enormous acceleration in artistic evolution in the second half of the nineteenth century. Freed of patriotic obligations, writers and painters could confront larger human problems, carrying philosophical ideas through the content of their works, recording social change, examining the psychology of their heroes, or simply contemplating the beauty of nature. Artistic discussions increasingly shifted from questions of content—what to write and what to paint—to matters of artistic expression. By the end of the nineteenth century, “Art for Art’s Sake” was the battle cry of the avant-garde throughout Western Europe.

The Face of Nineteenth-Century Poland

Even within this climate of diversity, the situation in Poland during the nineteenth century was unique. Unlike many of its neighbors, Poland had a long history of independence. In fact, its division into three occupied zones in 1795 followed eight hundred years of statehood. Paradoxically, Poland lost its freedom just as it was resolving deep-rooted crises caused by the decline of feudalism. During the latter

part of the eighteenth century, Poland had undergone a series of progressive reforms in politics, economy, and culture, culminating in the enlightened Constitution of May 3, 1791. The high hopes that accompanied this event soon vanished when the whole territory fell under the divided rule of Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1795. Suddenly, Poland—a state that was among the largest on the continent, a state that until the end of the seventeenth century had been a great European power—ceased to exist. Thus, the nineteenth century, a century that brought new independence to so many other nations, brought an unaccustomed oppression to Poland. The occupation lasted for nearly 125 years, ending only with the complete restructuring of the world order brought about by the end of World War I.

The Polish nation never accepted the reality of partition, regarding it as a national tragedy that affected the fate not only of the community, but of every individual. During this dark period, relentless efforts to regain Poland's freedom took many forms, from diplomacy, to repeated unsuccessful national uprisings (1830, 1846, 1848, 1863), and the involvement of Poles in various foreign campaigns and conspiracies of various kinds—military, masonic, carbonarist, and later socialist.

During the century-and-a-quarter of occupation, Polish nationalists exploited ideology to preserve a sense of national unity. Of major importance was a distinction drawn between nationhood and statehood: A Pole who happened to be a subject of Russia, Prussia, Austria, or who acquired the citizenship of any other country, never ceased to be a member of the Polish nation. In an era when Poland technically did not exist as a political state and was not to be found on any map, its citizens were made more conscious than ever of its ethnic, historical, and cultural identity. This pervasive national sentiment embraced not only wider and wider circles of Polish society, but also assimilated other ethnic groups living in the country, such as German immigrants and a part of the numerous Jewish minority.

IDEOLOGICAL TRENDS

The divided Polish nation, cherishing the idea of its unity and the future restoration of its glorious traditions, needed intellectual and ideological tools to keep its hope of independence alive. It found such tools in Romanticism, which proved of incalculable importance to Polish nineteenth-century culture. Romanticism championed the individual as culture hero as part of the cult of sentiment. Yet, paradoxically, it was art for and by the urban middle class, whence the vast majority of its artists and patrons arose. It nevertheless exalted rural life in the face of the rapid growth of cities created by the Industrial Revolution. Such contradictions were typical of Romanticism, which represented a flight from reality, for it celebrated whatever appealed to the imagination. The height of the Romantic movement in Poland lasted from approximately 1820 to 1850, and did not wane entirely until the end of the period of partition. There was no intellectual challenger to Romanticism until the rise of Positivism following the disastrous uprising of 1853. As an ideological doctrine, however, Positivism provided an alternative to Romanticism but did not replace it. The basic ideas of Polish Romanticism were present in a disguised form even in the works of Positivist authors, and at the turn of the century, the Romantic tradition showed its

continuing force when it was taken over by the neoromantics. The simultaneous survival of Positivism and Romanticism created a dichotomy of political and cultural thought that survives to this day in Poland.

Positivism, whatever its benefits, lacked the moral force to effect the kind of sweeping change that might bring about Polish independence. By encouraging reforms in the economy, public education, and hygiene, it favored short-term gains at the expense of the ultimate goal, and as time went by, it inched toward acceptance of the status quo. What Positivism lacked in moral force, Romanticism had in abundance—but not in a form to bring about independence. The Romantic policy of armed struggle resulted in repeated defeats, with massive destruction and thousands killed, deported, or exiled. Still, in Poland's particular situation during the nineteenth century, only a program that risked all could counter the temptation to surrender and be assimilated by the much larger and economically stronger oppressors. Only Romanticism, by glossing over the real disproportion of means, could create a vision of final victory and save the national soul from despair.

THE ROLE OF ARTISTS

During the long period of partition, Poland had almost none of the institutions necessary to maintain a normal national life. Nor did it have anyone who could assume spiritual leadership, restore to society its lost pride, and plan for the future. Thus, over time, an extraordinary thing occurred: The leadership role played in other countries by successful politicians and victorious generals was assumed in Poland by the only group in firm possession of a discernible national Polish identity—its poets and artists.

The identification of artists as leaders in the Polish nationalist movement began early in the nineteenth century, when three Polish poets, Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Zygmunt Krasiński, were elevated to the rank of prophets and national leaders. A fourth prophet, the painter Jan Matejko, was declared the spiritual leader of the splintered Polish nation a generation later. In 1878, an unprecedented ceremony took place at the royal residence of Wawel in the city of Cracow. Matejko proclaimed an interregnum—a state in which, in the absence of political structures and leaders, the nation's direction would be dictated by ideas embodied in the arts.

In assigning such importance to its artists, Poland differed from other nations of similar fate, such as Hungary and Bohemia. The influence of Polish art was even greater than in places where art was obliged to play a patriotic role, such as post-Napoleonic Germany, or was used as a social instrument, for example the Russian itinerants movement. This kind of primacy gave an enormous stimulus to Polish art, but it also presented clear and sometimes dangerous limitations. An artist elevated to the status of a national hero was expected to obey the laws of a rigid morality and to dedicate himself to ideas crucial to national survival. The endless discussions about national art defined precisely its ideological tasks, but gave little consideration to problems of form. Artists might easily find themselves accused of antisocial individualism or cosmopolitanism. As late as 1888 the great Matejko openly criticized the “foreign-tinged thoughtlessness” of his younger colleague Aleksander Gierymski, an artist who at the time was strongly influenced by modern French currents.

Under such circumstances, the development of Polish art proceeded on its own course, one that was not always in agreement with trends prevalent throughout the rest of Europe. The dominating feature of Polish literature and painting was its concentration on patriotic problems, a focus present not only in nationalistic imagery, but in all of nineteenth-century Polish art. Without this key, it is impossible to understand the historical paintings, let alone the genre pictures, portraits, or even landscapes.

A Progressive History of Nineteenth-Century Polish Art

The century of Poland's partition has a historical unity, but its painting can be divided into four periods: 1795 to the 1820s, the 1820s to 1860, 1860 to 1890, and 1890 to World War I. These divisions correspond roughly to European art movements: Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Historicism and Naturalism, and early Modernism (encompassing various Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements). The social framework within which the artists pursued their profession differed from period to period, as did the prevailing intellectual and emotional attitude of the public toward the arts.



Fig. 1.
Franciszek Smuglewicz.
Kościuszko's Oath in 1794 (1797).
National Museum, Cracow.

THE NEOCLASSIC PERIOD

The three decades from 1795 to the 1820s were a transitional time during which Polish artists adjusted and adapted to Poland's new situation. It was not easy to be an artist in a country where the old structures of patronage had largely collapsed. The royal court, which under King Stanislaus August Poniatowski had been a brilliant artistic center, had ceased to exist, and the patronage of the Catholic church was drastically curtailed. The majority of painters were permanently employed by rich aristocratic families at country residences. Artists working independently in the impoverished cities occupied a social status halfway between that of traditional artisan and modern professional.

Some artists compensated for the deficiencies of artistic education within Poland by traveling abroad, mostly to Paris. Occasionally, however, new educational and professional opportunities presented themselves within Poland. The University of Vilna created a Faculty of Fine Arts in 1797, and the University of Warsaw followed suit in 1817. From 1819 on, art exhibitions were regularly organized in Warsaw.

Both in style and iconography, the art schools and exhibition halls were dominated by Neoclassicism during this period. The Neoclassic formula conceived in the circle of King Stanislaus August seemed well-suited to the conception of art as a tool of patriotism. Nostalgic paintings recorded glorious moments of the national past and documented important contemporary events (fig. 1), mostly those connected with

the Napoleonic wars. Series of prints were published, illustrating national history, monuments, and picturesque motifs.

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

During the 1820s Polish culture underwent a Romantic revolution. The initial field of battle was Polish literature, and the stakes were high, for the controversy, in essence, was over the best means of preserving the national Polish identity.

On 29 November 1830, Polish Romantics turned from theory to action. In the face of overwhelming opposition, a small group of young officers and students unleashed an anti-Russian uprising. As a feat of arms it was a failure; the Polish cause was bloodily extinguished after a few months of combat. The defeat on the battlefield

did not, however, translate into a defeat of the spirit. It caused no major ideological reorientation in leading political and intellectual circles.

By the 1830s some Poles had begun to view their nation's problems of freedom and independence in terms of religion. This point of view found its highest expression in the messianic movement, which conceived of Poland as a metaphor for Christ. It was the most striking among the various similar movements in Romantic Europe. According to a whole school of philosophers, writers and poets, led by Adam Mickiewicz, relentless struggle and sacrifice constituted Poland's special mission, one in which all the sufferings of mankind were accepted in order to guide it to true freedom.

Perhaps because it provided a consciously programmatic way of presenting and solving problems of critical interest to the society, Polish literature towered above other cultural manifestations of Romanticism in its fullness, variety, and artistic level. It followed naturally that the particular role of the arts in the life of the Polish nation was conceived in relation to literature, and that the part accorded to the other arts echoed literature's leading role.

During the Romantic period no Polish painter was able to produce any work comparable in quality and influence to the poetry of Mickiewicz, Słowacki, and Krasiński. Nor were painters able to form a circle in which a common artistic program might emerge. Indeed, the leading theoretical and critical pronouncements on the problems of painting were made by poets and literary critics, not by painters—and certainly not by connoisseurs and art critics, of which Poland in the first half of the nineteenth century had very few.

Influenced by literary thought, Polish art of the Romantic era concentrated not on actual paintings, but rather on program and theory. Scant attention was paid to form; content was all important. According to the theorists of the time, the artist's chief goal was to create a truly national art, one that would have a patriotic influence on the public. Depending on the theoretician, desirable subject matter might be reli-

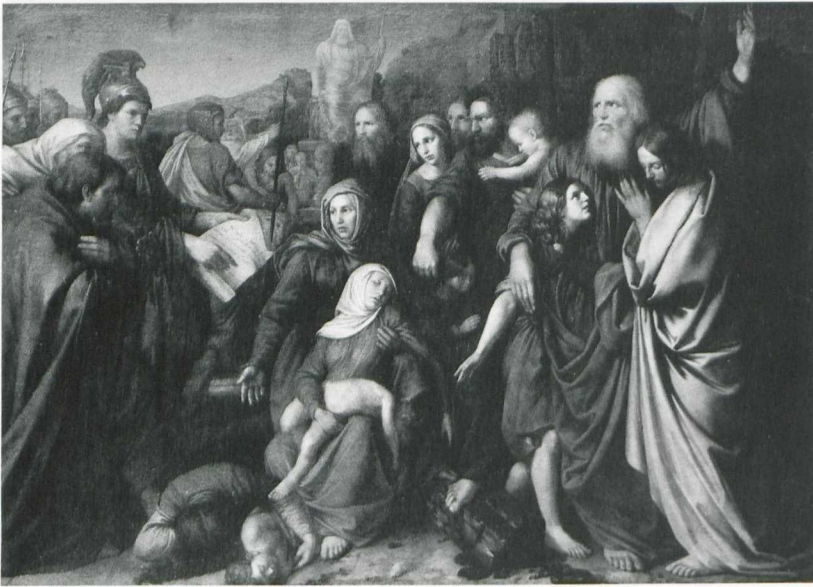


Fig. 2.
Wojciech Korneli Stattler. *The Maccabees* (1830–1842). National Museum, Cracow.

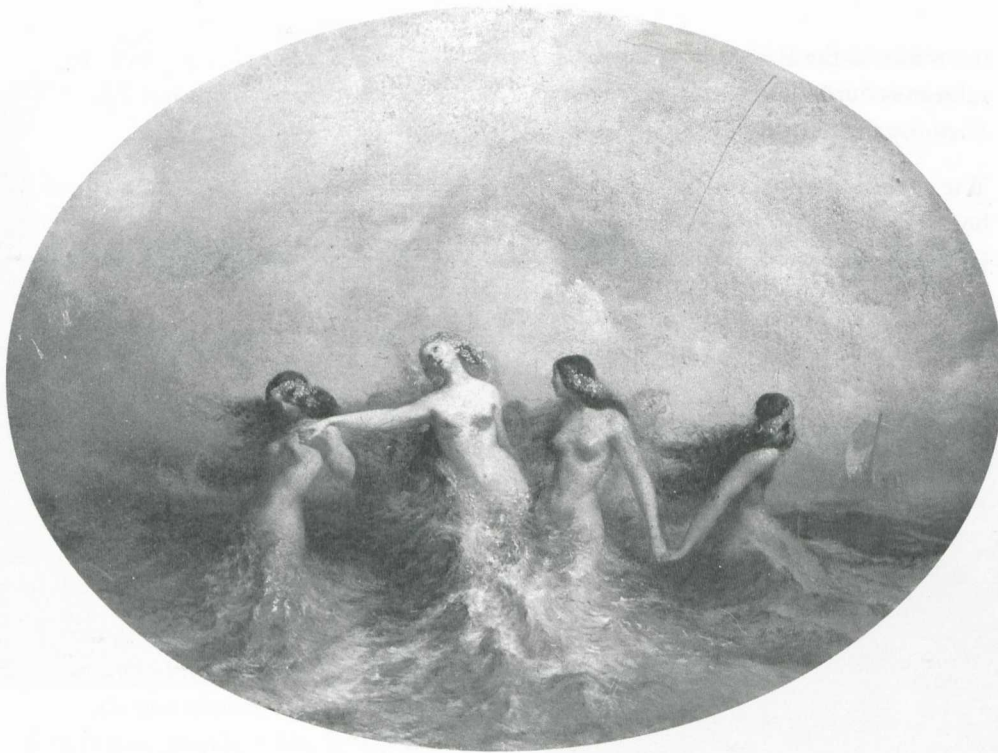


Fig. 3.
Teofil Kwiatkowski. *The Sirens* (1845).
Czartoryski Museum, Cracow.

gious, historical, literary, or folk-traditional. Subjects drawn from the national past were most highly recommended, but many things were sanctioned as national art: genre painting depicting the life of ordinary people, and landscapes of parts of Poland, ranging through a vast stretch of land from the Oder River to the Dnieper, far east in the Ukraine.

By the middle of the 1840s, this conception of the artist's patriotic task had created a particular system of artistic values in Poland. Unfortunately, however, this system of values sometimes contrasted with the taste of the foreign public and critics. An example of the divergent response to Polish art of the era is the reception in 1844 of Wojciech Korneli Stattler's huge composition *The Maccabees* (fig. 2) in Paris. *The Maccabees*, whose subject was suggested to Stattler by Adam Mickiewicz, contained an allegorical allusion to the fate of the Polish nation. The painting was received with enthusiasm in the Polish émigré circles (Juliusz Słowacki's praise of it in his letter to Stattler is of surpassing eloquence), and was awarded a gold medal in the Salon. The reaction of the French critics, however, was universally negative.

It is not difficult to understand this divergence of response. The Poles, interested mainly in the content of the painting, saw in it a reflection of their own misfortune that was nothing short of inspirational. But Parisian connoisseurs had little interest in the content, and instead evaluated the painting according to its quality. By their standards, Stattler's canvas was a complete anachronism. In their view, the well-balanced proportions, the noble classical heads, the erudite references to the works of the greatest masters of the Renaissance had combined to make the painting monumental, correct, and lifeless.

By contrast, two years later Teofil Kwiatkowski gained very favorable notices among French critics for his painting *The Sirens* (fig. 3), exhibited in the Salon of 1846. Théophile Gauthier, who owned a replica of the painting, devoted a poem to it. The French critics appreciated the quality of Kwiatkowski's art, close in its modernity to

the works of the Barbizon school. Polish critics, on the other hand, criticized the subject as “unfit for the present times and for a Polish artist,” and damned *The Sirens* by faint praise, calling it “quite nice.”

The expectation that artists should serve the nation by creating a truly national art bore no relation to their education and working conditions. In fact, the environment for artists was deteriorating. The achievements of the preceding period had for the most part been lost as a result of repressions following the 1830–31 uprising. Two fine arts faculties were closed with the suppression of the Universities in Warsaw

and Vilna, and public exhibition was suspended for several years. The state of art in the dark decade of the 1830s was a vicious circle: Because there was no institution or structure to encourage artistic activity, artists did not improve; because art was weak, the public took no interest in it; because the public took no interest in art, no institutes or structure were implemented to encourage artistic activity.

Not until the 1840s were there signs of improvement, but once begun, it was steady. In 1842 the Cracow School of Fine Arts, the only one remaining in the country, was radically reformed by Wojciech

Korneli Stattler, and in 1852 was given an entirely new direction by Władysław Luszczykiewicz, a history painter and the first qualified Polish art historian. In 1844 a new School of Fine Arts was established in Warsaw; in 1854 a Society of Fine Arts was formed in Cracow; and in 1860 a similar one appeared in Warsaw. Once more, art exhibitions were mounted in Poland. During the 1850s the first serious publications on the history of Polish art began to appear. These efforts came to fruition after 1860, when a realignment between literature and art allowed the full realization of a program of national art.

THE HISTORICIST AND NATURALIST PERIOD

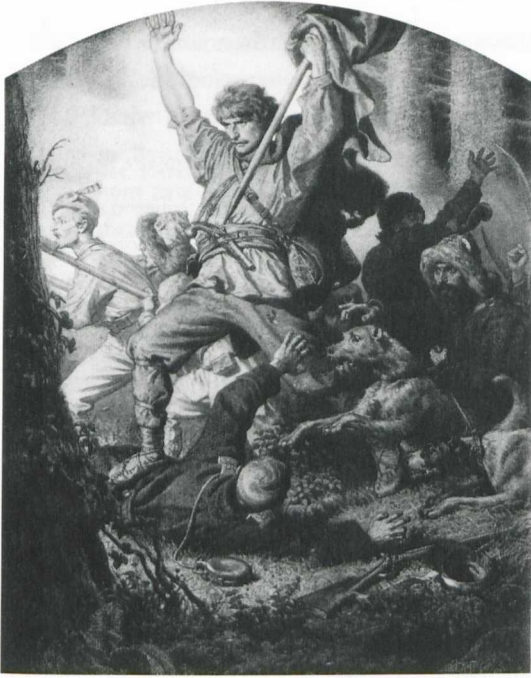
The January uprising of 1853 formed a watershed in the history and culture of the Polish nation, bringing Romanticism to an end and determining Polish attitudes in the second half of the nineteenth century. The losses sustained on the battlefield, through forced labor in Siberia, and through a new wave of emigration deprived the Russian occupation zone of an entire generation of Poles.

As the last representatives of the so-called Great Emigration of 1830–31 died off abroad, few were left to advocate the Romantic cause of armed resistance. The upper hand in Warsaw was now held by Positivist views, which deprecated the legacy of the past and made a cult of rationalism and progress. The modernization of the country, the improvement of its economy and education—a patriotic duty of prime importance—were to be achieved through everyday work.



Fig. 4.

Jan Matejko. *King Stephen Batory at Pskov in 1581* (1872). National Museum, Warsaw.



In Galicia, part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the secularism of Warsaw Positivists was replaced by a specific kind of historicism that aimed at developing what were believed to be Christian values and democratic traditions of the Polish nobility. This program, promoted by a group of Cracow conservatives, was well suited to the political situation of the Hapsburg Empire, which after 1856 was evolving rapidly toward parliamentary liberalism, local autonomy, and unimpeded cultural development of its various nations.

By contrast, in the Prussian zone the 1870 German victory over France gave force to Prussia's effort to assim-

ilate subject peoples. The local Positivism differed from the Warsaw version in its emphasis on the defense of Polish language and Catholicism, but in both places the goals of Positivism were exalted as patriotic duties.

The clash between Positivism and Romanticism focused on how art could best achieve its ultimate goal of serving patriotic ends. Once again, the primary ideological battleground was literature. The Positivist view was that literature should abandon great conceptions and unattainable ideals in favor of honestly portraying reality. Philosophical poetry gave way to realistic prose.

Positivist ideas did not immediately affect painting, either in theory or practice. Considered realistic by its very nature and therefore adapted to the needs of the epoch, painting escaped the accusation of futilely stirring the imagination of its audience. Thus, the traditional hierarchy of subjects for painting was preserved unchanged. The first place continued to be claimed by religious and historical painting, but the "inferior" categories of genre and landscape were encouraged to reveal the national character. Nature, the focus of European art of the time, was recommended to artists as worthy of study, though photographic naturalism was censured as obscuring deeper meaning. Meanwhile, the program of national art as formulated by Romantic theorists retained its importance. In fact, during this period it gained its first real possibility of realization, thanks primarily to Jan Matejko and Artur Grottger.

Jan Matejko used his huge historical compositions to present a philosophical vision of Polish history encompassing the past glory of Poland and the reasons for its collapse (fig. 4). To criticism of his idiosyncratic, increasingly anachronistic Neo-Baroque style, he replied that he "aimed at much more important matters than art itself." Artur Grottger applied a sentimental and detailed style, derived from Austrian Biedermeier, to pathetic scenes of national martyrdom. He gained a popularity comparable to Matejko's, thanks to a series of black-and-white drawings illustrating the events of 1861-63 and the tragedy of the January uprising (fig. 5). His work was universally recognized as an ideal incarnation of the national arts.

Fig. 5.
Artur Grottger. *The Fight from the Cycle Lithuania* (1866). National Museum, Cracow.

Although some voices in the 1850s had continued to deny the existence of a national school of Polish painting and even questioned the usefulness of creating one, opposition evaporated by the 1860s. Critics reported on the progress of painting with growing satisfaction, welcoming Matejko as the long-awaited genius. In 1878, at the height of the reaction against Romanticism, an ultra-Romantic gesture was made, the investiture of Matejko with symbolic sovereignty over the people of Poland. Thus painting, which until then had played a minor role in the national culture, came to the fore. From denigrating the skills of Polish painters, critics turned to an equally exaggerated view, now extolling the superiority of Polish painters over those of all other nations.



Fig. 6.
Aleksander Gierymski. *Sand Dredgers*
(1887). National Museum, Warsaw.

Truly new ideas about Polish painting did not appear until the latter half of the 1870s when, prompted by enlightened critics connected with Positivist circles, the emphasis in discussions began to shift from the subject of artistic work to its form. Critics began to make claims for the equality of all categories of painting, and this was accompanied by the increasingly conscious propagation of the principles of Naturalism.

Polish Naturalism reached its apogee in the middle of the 1880s, after it had already determined the style of numerous Polish painters for nearly a decade (fig. 6). But even

during the height of the Naturalism movement, its most uncompromising adherents, such as Stanisław Witkiewicz, never lost sight of art's patriotic function. Though the educational influence of art on society would be mediated less by its didactic iconography than by its quality, art would continue to create national values.

The intensive development of Polish painting after 1860 was due to previous successes in organizing artistic institutions. Although it was officially only a secondary school, the Cracow School of Fine Arts approached the level of an academy under its successive directors, Władysław Luszczykiewicz and Jan Matejko. During the twenty years of its existence, the Warsaw School of Fine Arts had succeeded in training a large number of artists of merit. Moreover, the school's closure following the 1863 uprising was in some measure compensated by the so-called drawing class, in which Wojciech Gerson played the leading role. Also important were the fine arts societies in Cracow, Lvov (founded in 1851), and Poznań (established in 1888 as a branch of the Cracow Society).

The regular exhibitions arranged by the various fine arts societies contributed to the popularization of art and to the development of professional criticism. But their activity also had negative effects. As joint-stock societies, they rewarded their members with prizes in the form of works of art drawn by lot each year. To content a large number of members, they frequently rejected the purchase of expensive works of high quality, giving preference to small, superficially and almost serially produced pictures with Polish subjects. In addition, exhibitions were limited in most cases to

works produced within the occupation zone to which the particular society belonged. Thus, paradoxically, the achievements of Polish painting as a whole were for a long time best displayed at international exhibitions.

With the Paris exposition of 1867 and the Vienna exposition of 1873, Polish artists began to enjoy an international acclaim that lasted for a quarter of a century. The first important exhibitions of Polish art were organized in 1887 in Cracow, in 1891 in Berlin (again as part of an international exposition), and in 1894 in Lvov. As the influence of Polish artists widened, so did their horizons. Their training was increasingly completed abroad. A favorite destination was the Munich Academy, where there was a large and very active circle of Polish painters.

THE MODERN PERIOD

The modern or Young Poland period of Polish art began during the last decade of the nineteenth century and lasted through World War I. Although it is usually treated as the antithesis of the art of the preceding periods, it in fact represented a continuation and synthesis of tendencies that had been developing throughout the nineteenth century. Polish art of the modern period continued to be realistic, but now realism served to express symbolic content. Nevertheless, there was a new trend, one that pitted the Romantic ideal of the national and social task of art against the conception, novel in Poland, of Art for Art's Sake.

The most important historical development in Poland at this time was the birth of full-scale political parties ranging from a right-wing nationalist party to a peasant movement and a socialist party. Although their tactics differed, all these organizations—legal, semi-legal, and underground—aimed at the unification and liberation of the country. As political organization solidified, it was no longer necessary to look to poets and painters to serve as national leaders.

In fact, most artists no longer aspired to national leadership, having grown tired of the limitations and burdens of public service. In addition, their taste for leadership was dampened by increased knowledge of modern European intellectual and artistic currents. Positivist ideas of rationalism and social involvement went out of fashion. Artists, who had entered the middle class only in the previous generation, now often isolated themselves from society, scorning its pedestrian taste. The tendency of artists to distance themselves from bourgeois society led in turn to a new unity of literary and artistic circles.

In general, both writers and artists now aimed their work at a restricted audience of aesthetes, legitimating such an attitude by confused, irrational theories of the "philosophy of depth" and the "naked soul," based mainly on the writings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Among the Polish intellectual elite, Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolism was also very popular. Indeed, spiritualist and symbolic strains of the Polish Romantic tradition so affected the literature of the turn of the century that it was labeled neoromantic.

In its most extreme form, the divorce between artists and society was limited to small groups or blustering individuals, and it more often characterized writers than painters. Stanisław Wyspiański, for example, was a close friend of Stanisław



Fig. 7.

Stanisław Wyspiański. *King Kasimir the Great* (a sketch for a stained glass window in Cracow Cathedral) (1900–1902). National Museum, Cracow.

Przybyszewski, the main prophet of decadentism and advocate of Art for Art's Sake. Yet Wyspiański never fully accepted Przybyszewski's ideas and was deeply impressed with the national mission of art.

But even artists who did not abandon the tradition of national involvement held patriotic attitudes less blatant than in the time of Matejko and Grottger. It was not easy to formulate a modern program of national painting. The tradition of armed struggle for independence, promulgated for the last time in the revolution of 1905, was carried on only by the underground Polish socialist party. History continued to provide subjects for art, but they were given highly individualistic and symbolic form, as in the work of Jacek Malczewski and Stanisław Wyspiański (fig. 7).

Folk culture was also recognized as a rich source of national tradition, and it merged with national history into an indivisible unity. The contemporary peasant was invested with the power and dignity of ancient heroes. Scenes and figures of the past were presented in the guise of folk art.

The characteristic motifs of folk art appeared often in decorative arts, ornament, and even in painting. Attachment to the national tradition might simply be reflected in the choice of Polish genre or landscape motifs, or the conscious continuation of a realistic style in defiance of ultra-modern trends considered cosmopolitan. The ideological and aesthetic fascination with the countryside and its inhabitants sometimes resulted in the marriages of poets and painters with peasants. Such was the case of the multi-faceted Stanisław Wyspiański, whose drama "The Wedding" is both a manifesto and a parody of the confusions of Polish patriotic ideology.

Around the turn of the century, Polish culture reached a climax. Formal and informal associations of artists, previously rare, now became common. The two most important were in Cracow. *Sztuka* (Art), founded in 1897, included all leading modernists and was closely related to the Vienna Secession. *Polska Sztuka Stosowana* (Polish Applied Art), founded in 1901, aimed at improving the level of the decorative arts by uniting Polish folk traditions with modern principles. Founded on uniform aesthetic principles developed in congenial surroundings, such associations had the effect of minimizing stylistic controversies and overcoming ideological divisions among artists.

Cultural activity was widespread and diverse, creating a cultural atmosphere of extraordinary richness and charm. The café became a favorite meeting place of the artistic elite. It served as a discussion club, sometimes an exhibition salon, and even a theatre. Such was the case with the well-known Cracow café, *Jama Michalikowa* (Michalik's Cave), seat of an equally famous artistic cabaret, the *Green Balloon*. Literary and artistic periodicals reached the height of their development, and the quality of their design and typography exceeded all earlier and later achievements.

Important changes occurred in the system of artistic education. In 1895 Julian Fałat undertook the reform of the Cracow School of Fine Arts, entrusting all its chairs to outstanding modernists, including Leon Wyczółkowski, Teodor Axentowicz, Jacek Malczewski, and Jan Stanisławski. In 1900 the Cracow School was officially recognized as an academy. Among its professors at the beginning of the twentieth century were also Stanisław Wyspiański, Józef Mehoffer, Ferdynand Ruszczyc, Wojciech Weiss, and Józef Pankiewicz. In 1904 a new school of fine arts was founded in Warsaw.

The unique atmosphere of the period, full of fantasy and poetry and somehow detached from the still-difficult political reality, gave rise at the turn of the century to an unprecedented explosion of artistic talent. And although this art no longer pretended to govern the national soul, it played a more important role than ever in the life of Polish society. Well-to-do bourgeois eagerly bought works of modern painters. Conservative politicians and professors frequented the spectacles of the Green Balloon. *La belle époque* in Poland fully deserved its denomination, and the *fin de siècle* survived well past 1900.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, a new generation brought about a change of artistic ideas in Poland. At the same time different political groups became intensely active, preparing for a new phase of the armed struggle for independence. The outbreak of World War I created new conditions for this struggle, and Poland would soon see the end of her long wait for liberty. Polish art had completed its unique historical role, and artists no longer needed to stand in for generals and politicians.

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