

SCULPTURAL METAPHYSICS OF GUSTAW ZEMŁA

TADEUS CHRZANOWSKI

Kazimierz Gustaw Zemła belongs to a small group of the most distinguished contemporary Polish sculptors. He is acknowledged as the creator of impressive monuments and grandiose sculptures, he speaks by means of his own language, which is easily recognisable not only because of his personal handwriting – the factual and formal shape of the works – but also due to the context of his artistic message. Much space in books, articles and catalogues has been devoted to his production, but its constant development becomes more and more suggestive, and more and more personal¹. For many years as professor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, he passed his experience on to following generations. In this short essay I do not intend to write about his artistic output in general, but instead I would like to concentrate on some features of his work and to discuss a certain phenomenon connected with the completion of one great commission. This article also addresses the issue of present day patronage.

Zemła's career began in 1967 in a quite spectacular way: he won the competition for the Monument to Silesian Insurgents (fig. 1) and realized his project in the very centre of Katowice, the capital of the black, coal-mining, Silesia². Its wings, as if congealed in bronze, placed in the centre of the city, were received with much approval and thus the door was open for the artist to create new monumental works. The statue of a distinguished poet, Władysław Broniewski was placed in Płock, in 1973 a monument commemorating the fallen in the World War II was realized in Warsaw, and in 1974 in Szczecin the Monument to Polish Achievement (commonly called the "Eagle's Nest") was erected. In Płock and Szczecin the motif of wings reappears, however, in the Warsaw sculpture the artist uses a creative transposition of the antique figure of the Dying Gaul together with elements influenced by the reclining figures of Henry Moore.

These wings – motionless and petrified – but exemplifying the dynamism of an upward flight, these enormous wings so full of vigilance and the sense of incipient departure foretold already the artist's metaphysical vision, which in the future was to mingle reality with illusion, temporality with transcendency. One might say that the artist stopped between abstraction and realism, though these terms mean so little today. What is important is the juxtaposition of the material sphere *profanum* and immateriality *sacrum*.

Zemła also created sculptures, lesser in size, but even these tended to be powerful. Another feature of his creative process is cyclical production: he discovers a subject, a message and explores it in depth, as he con-



1. KAZIMIERZ GUSTAW ZEMŁA, "Monument of the Silesian Insurgents", 1967, bronze. Katowice.

¹ From the large list of bibliographical publications where the art of Gustaw Zemła is analysed I would like to mention: H. KOTKOWSKA-BAREJA, *La sculpture contemporaine polonaise*, Varsovie 1974, p. 150; A. OSEKA, W. SKRODZKI, *Współczesna rzeźba polska* [Contemporary Polish Sculpture], Warsaw 1977, p. 41; I. GRZESIUK-OLSZEWSKA, "Polska rzeźba pomnikowa 1945-1980" [Polish Monumental Sculpture 1945-1980], in *Sztuka* 1981, no. 1; *Współczesna sztuka polska (Polish Contemporary Art)*, Collective work ed. by A. RYSZKIEWICZ, Warsaw 1981, pp. 381-386; A. K. OLSZEWSKI, *Dzieje sztuki polskiej 1890-1980* [The History of Polish Art 1890-1980], Warsaw 1988, pp. 136, 138. See also some of the more important catalogues: *Gustaw Zemła, Wystawa rzeźby* [Exhibition of sculptures], Katowice 1972; *Ausstellung Gustaw Zemła Plastik*, Berlin 1975; *Gustaw Zemła, Znak Pojednania, rzeźba sakralna* [Sign of Reconciliation - religious sculpture], Lublin 1992; *Gustaw Zemła, Rzeźba* [Sculpture], Wydawnictwo Rollland, Gorzów Wielkopolski 1995.

² W. WIERZCHOWSKA, "Gustaw Zemła", in *Projekt* 1968, 5/67, pp. 16-20, text in English.



2. KAZIMIERZ GUSTAW ZEMŁA, "Christ Crucified", 1982, a) bronze, b) gesso model. Mistrzejowice.

3. Detail of figure 2.



fesses, until he perceives the phenomenon of decorativeness creeping in. According to him decorative effects express fallowness³. This is how the "Cycles": "Niobe", "Open Hands", "The Sun" came into being followed by "Crucified Ones".

In 1980 a revolution took place in Poland. Not for the first time, but for the first time with such force, Polish society stood up against a decaying and alien political system. At the same time Zemła's great metaphysical adventure began. A new church dedicated to St. Maximilian Kolbe was erected, against government opposition, in one of the Nowa Huta districts – Mistrzejowice. Nowa Huta, the "socialist town", was built very close to Cracow in order to destroy its conservative atmosphere. The architect, Józef Dutkiewicz, based himself on local traditions (but on a monumental scale). The Church's interior with reinforced concrete beams harks back to the Gothic⁴. Msgr. Mikołaj Kuczkowski supervised the work on behalf of the Archdiocese, and Andrzej Ciecchanowiecki not only financed most of the construction but played a pivotal role when it came to the interior decoration. Many ideas were discarded: frescoes, mosaics, stained glass. Finally, at Ciecchanowiecki's suggestion, a purely sculptural solution was decided on. A historian of early sculpture, he turned to a contemporary sculptor for a modern building. Zemła was chosen to realize a monumental altar group with the Crucified Christ in the centre (figs. 2, 3). In 1982 the powerful Corpus was hung on the eastern wall and since then has been greatly admired. Two other equally oversized figures followed. These were placed on both sides of the figure of Christ: the Madonna of Immaculate Conception (Patroness of Poland), the other of St. Maximilian (Patron Saint of the Mistrzejowice church and of the victims of World War II). The statue of St. John the Baptist (fig. 4), a family epitaph of the founder, and the font came into being next, and were located in the South, in the Order of Malta Chapel. The North Chapel houses St. Hedwig's figure and is completed by a series of bas-reliefs of the Mysteries of the Rosary. In the nave, on both sides high-reliefs of the Stations of the Cross figure. Finally the statue of Pope, John Paul II was erected in

³ GRZESIUK-OLSZEWSKA, "Polska rzeźba pomnikowa 1945-1980" cit., pp. 50-51.

⁴ The interview with the artist by W. Wierchowska published in the Catalogue: *Gustaw Zemła - Znak Krzyża* [Sign of the Cross], Płock 1991, p. 9-10.

4. KAZIMIERZ GUSTAW ZEMŁA, "St. John the Baptist", 1984, bronze. Mistrzejowice.



front of the church commemorating its consecration by the Pontiff in 1984⁵.

For Gustaw Zemła the realization of such a grandiose series of sculptures for the Mistrzejowice church appears to have been an invaluable artistic experience and a spiritual turning point. Prof. Knapinski commented concisely: "It is not so that the artist produces a statue of Christ. As Gustaw's friend for 10 years I have observed his struggle to understand great issues of sacred art. And I can see a reverse process going on: it is Christ, who sculpts and forms the artist himself"¹⁶.

There are a couple of characteristic features, which appear in Zemła's works. The very first is the already mentioned motif of the shaped, abstract, wings. They form the core of the composition and from them heads or human figures emerge in a happy marriage of abstract and realistic elements. The second feature is a gesture of stretched out arms, and open palms (the artist shuns showing fists). The open arms stress first the horizontal structure of the composition, as opposed to the vertical one, especially in the human figure. Wide open arms, the gesture of embracing or receiving, of having an open heart to people, once led Zemła to the theme of crucified figure, and Crucifixes, which often – like the first one, in Mistrzejowice – forsake the wooden cross, the gesture of embracing is enough. This gesture which in Russian art has a beautiful name: *rozpiatie*, which means "opening up or stretching out". Another characteristic aspect of Zemła's sculptures is the fact that the figures are often open as if cracked, as if they had been hit with a great force, or rather as a need to exhibit the inner self. Sometimes this human, and at the same time inhuman crack splits the head in half which can be easily noticed in the composition entitled "The Raised Hand". There are many other constantly recurrent motives like that of the pitiless, tough, rope which holds a human being in its bond. A chain serves a similar purpose. However, anybody who survived World War II and the years of Stalinist terror in our country, on the byways of Europe, lives under the impact of conscious imprisonment. All of us grew up "imprisoned" and that is why the Polish people are beyond the comprehension of many other nations.

I would like to concentrate for a moment on the series of reliefs depicting the Stations of the Cross in Mistrzejowice (fig. 5). They are high reliefs, sometimes moving into full sculptures, not large in size, but often a monumental symbol has been woven into them. Zemła commented as follows: "I understood quite a long time ago that a sculpture needs a synthesis, a symbol, a sign, concentration and wisdom, that in sculpture you cannot relate events, that expression alone is what matters. Then I also realized that my creations could not be divided into commissioned works and my private works. I have tried to link my creative imagination with the needs resulting from real life"¹⁷. However, the Stations of the Cross are not an apparent, but a real narrative series: it is after all the story of the Saviour's progress leading to His Sacrifice and Redemption. But the individual Stations of the Mistrzejowice series abandon the direct narrative pattern. Christ is portrayed mostly alone, or with somebody equally important – His Mo-

ther. Apart from those figures, who by means of positioning or gestures transmit their messages to us, there are only a few attributes: the Cross, a rope, frozen rays of the Sun, gritty terrain, abandoned to temptation and sin. At this point the basic question, which is so obvious, when we visit the Mistrzejowice church must be asked: what is patronage in modern times, patronage which apparently disappeared, and has been replaced by imposition of State or Society, which is either a "diktat" or a sign of artistic blindness, and often opposed to the freedom of the creator. Zemła's and Ciechanowiecki's collaboration may serve as an exemplary attempt to restore the relationship between artist and the immediate recipient of his work. It is not the matter of pay, because patronage can't be viewed in financial terms only. What matters is the feeling of cooperation, friendship and mutual inspiration. Nobody would of course demand today any creative work from an artist, following some imposed rules. An artist nevertheless needs a patron. Not every one though. I quote Zemła again; "There are two attitudes: one, when a person knows, is certain, has no doubts, and creates. The second consists of having thousands of questions, innumerable doubts. I belong to those, who have doubts. I constantly need the close presence of my friends, who keep encouraging me and stay my hand when I try to destroy an unfinished sculpture"⁸. I am sure that he found such a friend in Ciechanowiecki, who rendered possible the creation of the marvellous and homogeneous ensemble in the church of Mistrzejowice.

Zemła's most recent work has currently been completed: a huge statue of Moses (fig. 6). It will be placed on one of the squares in Łódź in commemoration of the Holocaust. This monument is being sponsored by a foundation, whose aim is to remind and record the presence of the chosen nation in the history of our country. I do not wish to anticipate events: we will soon be able to judge the statue, but it would appear that the latest work of Gustaw Zemła will prove to be one of decisive importance to him and his art.

5. KAZIMIERZ GUSTAW ZEMŁA, "Pietà", 1992, one of the Stations of the Cross, original gesso.

6. KAZIMIERZ GUSTAW ZEMŁA, Fragment of the gesso model for the Monument of Moses for Łódź, 1994.



⁵ U. DARSKA-IMAMURA, "Polskie drogi" [Polish Ways], in *Projekt* 1989, no. 4/187, pp. 2-9; T. CHRZANOWSKI, "Czy można być dziś w Polsce mecenasem?" (Is it possible to be an art patron in contemporary Poland?), in *Projekt* 1990, 5/194, pp. 10-13.

⁶ R. KNAPIŃSKI in the cited catalogue: *Gustaw Zemła - Znak Pojednania*, Introduction.

⁷ *Gustaw Zemła - Znak Krzyża* cit., p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.