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Polish Painting between Historicism and Modernism

In order to understand the specificity of the Polish art of the nineteenth century, it is worth recalling a few historical facts. Key among these is that throughout the nineteenth century Poland did not exist as an independent state. In the course of successive partitions in the late eighteenth century, the Polish lands had been divided among Russia, Prussia and Austria. The three partitioning powers then proceeded, with varying degrees of severity, to denationalize their newly-gained territories. It was this lack of statehood in the nineteenth century that gave Polish art the exalted status of an upholder of national consciousness with the mission to consolidate the nation divided between three hostile states. In the words of a poet, artists were to exercise a “reign of souls” over the enslaved nation. The great prestige enjoyed by the towering Romantic poets of the first half of the nineteenth century led to art being treated as a national religion and a path toward moral and national revival.

The great hopes that accompanied the emergence of national painting stemmed from the belief that the medium was uniquely qualified to rouse and promote patriotic sentiment. National art obviously needed to be based on subjects taken from history. Historical painting was conceived as a sort of visual Bible of national consciousness. The growing hopes for a “Polish epic” in painting were the most serious challenge with which the generation of artists coming of age around the mid-1800s had to contend. Sensational historical romances devoid of any moral dimension popular in Western European painting of the time were inappropriate for such a purpose.

The expectations for a national art were fulfilled only with the appearance of what would be the most remarkable chapter in the Polish painting of the nineteenth century: the works of Jan Matejko (1838–1893). Matejko gave an entirely new meaning to history painting: transforming it from an edifying reconstruction or a moving illustration of past events into a philosophical vision of Polish history in a suggestive, expressive and spectacular form. The phenomenon of Matejko can be understood only if one recognizes how much history mattered to Poles in the nineteenth century. Deprived of its independence, the nation turned its back on the present with all its failures, humiliation and perils. The romantic preoccupation with the past, and the sense of helplessness in the face of reality caused topical issues to be played out vicariously, in the costume of earlier periods. Before Matejko, history had been the domain of philosophers, poets and essayists. His paintings made history a constituent of a popular consciousness.

Matejko wanted not only to “tell stories” or illustrate events by following the facts, but to reveal higher truths. A painting was to be a lecture on the philosophical dimension of history, to bring out the moral and political lessons it contained. Wanting to

reveal the causes and effects of the fact he was depicting, the artist stretched historical truth to include all relevant people and events within one image, even at the expense of historical truth. Such a vision of history painting led to confusion among Matejko's contemporaries as well as later students of his works.

In keeping with the Polish historical thinking of the time, Matejko saw the past as a sweeping drama of antagonistic desires, judged by God whose verdicts shed light on the designs of Providence. Such a blend of the prophesy and settling scores with the past is found in Matejko's *Rejtan – The Fall of Poland* from 1866. The canvas apparently shows a particular historical fact: the protest of Deputy Tadeusz Rejtan at the parliamentary session of 1773 against the first partition of Poland by Russia, Prussia and Austria. Wanting to prevent the deputies from signing the document confirming the partition, Rejtan, rending his clothes, threw himself to the ground, and blocked the door to the *Sejm* chamber with his body. Matejko was invoking a fact deeply ingrained in national history and patriotic mythology (under Soviet domination the painting became a symbol of anti-Russian and anti-Communist resistance). In fact, however, the painting melds together various historical events. The painting does not show the "downfall of Poland" as such but the entire decade-long process leading up to the loss of statehood. To this end, the artist brought together persons who could not have witnessed Rejtan's protest, although their doings had served to erase Poland from the map of Europe.

Such a pessimistic, accusatory accounting with the past provoked outrage and heated criticism. No canvas in Polish history had ever met with such a violent response. The artist was accused of defaming the past. Let us remember that *Rejtan* had been painted at a particularly painful juncture in Polish history: during the harsh repressions following the fall of the anti-Russian uprising of 1863. Meanwhile, instead of an uplifting apology of the past, which the oppressed and defeated nation needed so badly, Matejko provided bitter truth about the root causes of enslavement – the corruption of political elites. One can say that there are clear parallels here with current attempts to reappraise Polish history, and the trouble Poles in 2009 have with accepting facts that call into question their heroic and apologetic vision of history.

In the wake of the scandal that *Rejtan* caused, Matejko, always sensitive to the social mood and his own position, modified the nature of his painting. In his later monumental canvases he sought to glorify great events from the nation's history. No longer controversial, the paintings met with increasing approval, earning their maker the status of a national prophet. Yet his basic creative tenets remained unchanged, as did his faith in Poland's historic mission. This can be seen in his most famous monumental work, *The Battle of Grunwald*, completed in 1878. Its subject is the victorious battle waged in July 1410 at Grunwald (Tannenberg) by the combined forces of Poland and Ruthenia-Lithuania under the command of Polish King Władysław II Jagiełło against the Order of Teutonic Knights. Following the description of the battle given by mediaeval chronicler Jan Długosz, the painter chose to concentrate on the decisive closing moments of the battle and highlight the mortally wounded Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, Ulrich von Jungingen, and the frenzied figure of Grand Duke of Lithuania Vytautas The Great (in Polish: *Witold*). The urge to pack the painting full

of historical-philosophic, political, and religious content prevailed over faithfulness to the historical account: above the battlefield, the patron of Poland, Saint Stanislaw, blesses the combatants, showing that it was the Poles who had Providence on their side. Even the “wind of history” ruffling the great white cloak of the Grand Master and blowing into enemy eyes seem to be favoring Poland.

Faith in Providence and the recognition of the sacred dimension of history went hand in hand with political topicality. *Grunwald* was painted during the intensification of the *Kulturkampf* – an anti-Polish and anti-Catholic campaign of Germanization on native Polish lands that were made part of Prussia. Its anti-German propaganda proved so enduring that, during the Nazi occupation of Poland, a ten million mark reward was offered for information on whereabouts of the painting which was hidden with other works by Matejko by the Polish museum staff at the risk of their lives. Even today, despite competition from the new, more attractive media, *The Battle of Grunwald* has lost none of its appeal and political significance. When the painting was put on display in Vilna in 1999, the exhibition became a national event and the work was seen by over 300,000 people (that is, half the city’s population).

The phenomenon of Matejko’s art is hard to pin down today. Was it a provincial, artistically outdated curiosity? An outcrop of national complexes and trauma fatally entwined with national megalomania? Yet, despite the Matejko’s intentions, his complex historical and philosophical message, and his vision of the nation’s mission and its lost opportunities, was never clearly read. Throughout the twentieth century his paintings were manipulated for current political and propaganda ends. Matejko was made out to be an exponent or precursor of various ideologies. The general reading of his work soon came to be dominated by a single motif – that of a consoling display of erstwhile power and glory. However one judges the impact this mythologized view of the past had on the Polish mind, one has to admit that Matejko created “representative stereotypes of an unparalleled power and endurance.” For the broad public, his paintings defined the canon of national mythology, becoming a component of the national identity.

The significance of Matejko’s art, however, is not only due to his vision which – thanks to its omnipresence in schoolbooks, on paper money and postage stamps – still shapes the way an average Pole sees history. Power over the national imagination was not the only thing that Matejko had taken over from the poets. Regardless of the criticism it had been subjected to in the last century, his work gave painting, formerly seen as a second-rate art, the status of a “national” and “prophetic” medium.

The turn of the nineteenth century – epoch around 1900 – constituted the “happy hour” of Polish painting. Art of the period described itself as “Young Poland”, and opposed the past, in particular historical painting which was nearing his end. On the other hand, it must be kept in mind that it was precisely to the visionary approach of Matejko that Polish painting owed its high rank in the hierarchy of national values and successive generations of artists benefited from the privileged position Matejko won for art. A second premise of this flourishing phase was the conviction about the autonomous existence and destiny of art. The fact, that Polish painting has attained independent existence was predominantly a unique condensation of artistic problems,

which poses difficulties in proposing a stylistic definition of an art oscillating between Symbolism, Expressionism, and Art Nouveau (called in Poland *Secesja*) decorativeness and stylization, and, as a rule, described as Modernism. Many artists saw an opportunity to be relieved of their duty to the nation and finally concentrate on purely artistic matters. Inclusion into current artistic problems and a confrontation with the idea of the unity of arts - painting, poetry, music - so essential for symbolist aesthetics, were possible not only due familiarity with fashionable programs and theories, but to the maturity attained by Polish painting, which for long time remained indifferent to aesthetics discussions conducted "somewhere in Europe."

All this became possible thanks to an unprecedented eruption of artistic talents. Above them towered the versatile individuality of Stanisław Wyspiański, a painter, poet, dramatist, reformer of the theatre, stage designer, typographer, one of the creators of the program and praxis of the applied arts in Poland and, finally co-author of a design for adapting the Wawel Hill into a Polish Acropolis. His greatest achievements in visual arts are stained-glass windows in the Franciscan Church in Krakow (*God the Father*) and designs for stained-glass windows in the Wawel Cathedral - shocking depiction of royal cadavers. Apart from these monumental visionary works, Wyspiański's legacy contains numerous pastel portraits. At the end of his life, immobilized by a grave illness, he executed the series of pastel landscapes *Views of Kościuszko Mound from the Artist's Study Window*, painted at different times of day and year, in an ever-changing weather. Regardless of the supposed symbolist meaning, the series shows the inspiration of Japanese prints, fascinating many Polish artists of the time. The modernism at the turn of the nineteenth century was the first moment in Polish art influenced by the Far Eastern culture.

Another gifted pupil of Matejko was Jacek Malczewski. The painter created his own unique symbolic vocabulary in which corporeal and robust figures of chimeras, fauns, angels and fairy-tale deities appear both in allegorical portraits, landscapes, genre and religious scenes. Strange, extravagant Malczewski's work is the most vivid example of a blend of folk motifs and anti-classical vision of antiquity, typical for Polish Modernism. The artist achieved a peculiar Polonization of ancient Greek mythology, not only by placing chimeras and fauns in Polish landscape but also within a historical and national context. Regardless from dramatically different artistic language, the work by Wyspiański and Malczewski - the most outstanding artists of the time - show how much Polish art remained dominated by the ideas of Polish historical fate, trauma and destiny. These happened because in Polish painting Historicism was not merely a question of subject-matter or costume, or stylistic convention which would have been easy to abandon in favor of "Modernity." It had reached down into the most profound foundations of creativity, defining the place occupied by art in the axiological hierarchy.

Modernism left behind a magnificent gallery of portraits. Never before did Polish painters penetrate the psyche of their models, and reach the inner life hidden behind the mask of the face, as was now accomplished by Olga Boznańska or Konrad Krzyżanowski. It was precisely these portraits - nervous, restless, melancholy - which most markedly disclosed decadent autumnal ambience, the waning of an epoch which

so readily accentuated its youth. An exception in the pessimistic tones was the radiant affirmation of life and its charms evoked by the paintings of Józef Mehoffer.

Wyspiański's *Views of Kościuszko Mound* confirms the importance of landscapes in Polish modernist painting. Just as for the previous generation the great theme was the History, so for the modernist Young Poland artists it was the Nature. Landscapes were executed by almost all painters of the period. Just as Matejko's art shaped the Polish vision of history, so Young Poland exerted an equally strong impact on the perception of nature. It granted permanence to places of collective national memory and nostalgia, the Polish land of reminiscences and feelings, and recalled with tenderness: the countryside old manors and cottages, the vast expanses of the sky, the tumultuous clouds over the horizon, the furrows of freshly plowed soil, the blooming orchards, typical Polish mallows, the sandy roads of Mazovian plains, the snow-white Tatra Mountains. These images still determine our expectations and dreams of nature, and enable us to see it "as it should be." Such a painting manages to come up with a language of social communication as successful as that of nineteenth century historical painting.

Seen in retrospect, Polish Modernist painting appears to be not so much innovative and turning-point, as equilibrant and mature. At the same time we discover a balance between national obligations and "pure art," native tradition and impulses produced by other art centers, between modernity and the possibility of its social acceptance. It was this equilibrium that made Polish painting of that period able to preserve its identity within the process of change – something that is has not always managed to do later.