

Maria
Poprzęcka

A Reminiscence about Jan Białostocki (1921-1988)

Jan Białostocki, an historian of art, professor of Warsaw University, curator of the Gallery of Foreign Art in the National Museum in Warsaw, one of the greatest scholars and humanists of our time, died on 25 December. For many days the obituaries in the press listed his works, achievements, functions, titles and honours. He was a member of the Polish Academy of Sciences and numerous foreign academies, Doctor Honoris Causa of three universities (Groningen, Mainz, and Brussels), member of many international scientific organizations, lecturer at the universities in Cambridge, Leyden, Sydney, Mexico, New Haven (Yale), New York, Tokyo and Moscow. His accomplishments and works appear to go beyond the capabilities of a single person whose life was ended by grave illness followed by death at the age of 67. But then the life of Professor Białostocki contains few events, accidents or twists of fate and was filled by untiring work, marked by successive publications, exhibitions, and lectures at the universities of almost all continents.

A graduate of Warsaw's Adam Mickiewicz gymnasium, a student of the clandestine university during the occupation, an inmate of the concentration camps in Grossrosen, Mauthausen and Linz III, from 1945 Professor Białostocki became associated with two institutions, Warsaw University and the National Museum, to which he remained loyal, despite his world fame and innumerable voyages, until the very end of his life. He was a student of the philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz, while in the history of art he owed most to Michał Walicki and Erwin Panofsky, an American scholar of German descent, and close friend. Władysław Tatarkiewicz was Białostocki's master in logical, orderly thinking and clear precision of statement. Białostocki admired Michał Walicki's emotional synthesis of knowledge and impression, and from Panofsky he adopted a comprehension of the tasks of humanist as a striving towards the transformation of the chaotic variety of man's works into a cosmos of culture, towards deciphering, comprehending and transmitting the traces of human existence, which without that activity would remain dead and fall prey to time. Professor Białostocki paid his debt of gratitude to these three teachers by dedicating portraits-remembrances, which are summaries of their scientific work.

It is difficult to describe briefly the scope and nature of Professor Białostocki's research. The bibliography of his works contains over 500 items: books, dissertations, articles, museum and exhibition catalogues, written and published in different languages and countries, many of which became classics in the literature on art. His favourite was the modern period, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, from the primitive paintings of the Dutch masters to the art of the twilight of the Baroque. The two artists

closest to Białostocki were Dürer and Rembrandt, to whom he kept returning throughout his whole life. But he also wrote about Romantic painting, twentieth-century sculpture, contemporary artists, the recurrence of themes, the history of images, ideas and topics and encompassed the enormous domains of art past and present. The object of his interest and expertise was European art, the only exception being a book on pre-Columbian art – the outcome of lectures held in Mexico. For a quarter of a century, Professor Białostocki gave lectures on the history of artistic doctrines and published many theoretical texts, for which he had a special liking. The peak of this activity was an anthology of reflections on art, the result of immense translation and critical work, which made it possible to consort with thoughts about art from antiquity until the nineteenth century, a work which has no counterpart in world literature. Like the great representatives of the Vienna school of art history, Białostocki combined the functions of an academic teacher and a museum expert, didactic work and the competence of a connoisseur who enjoys direct contact with works of art.

The entire scientific activity of Professor Białostocki was accompanied by incessant theoretical reflection on the tasks of the humanities and the position which is held among them by the history of art. Professor Białostocki was always closest to iconology – a research method concentrating on the contentual interpretation of a work of art, the deciphering of the meanings, senses and symbols contained therein. He remained, however, open to all new attitudes and methodological stands and proposals – such as structuralism and semiotics – a review of which he gave in a series of lectures at the Collège de France, repeated subsequently at the Polish Academy of Sciences, in which, with his typical sober rationalism, he emphasized what is truly useful for the comprehension and explanation of the visual arts. Professor Białostocki was untiring in imbuing Polish historians of art with an awareness of the methods and aims of their work, which are so easy to lose in everyday routine. No one in the history of art in Poland has accomplished as much for its absorption of the greatest achievements of world science, the expansion of research horizons, the indication of extensive perspectives and, at the same time, for the instilling of responsibility for the retention of tradition in a period of profound transformations experienced on a worldwide scale. Professor Białostocki linked them with a feeling of responsibility for the state of the professional environment of which he was a custodian, by heading for many years the Society of Historians of Art, organising scientific conferences, inspiring publications, founding periodicals. He was always active, present, full of ideas and energy, never refusing advice and help. Hence the distress which is caused by his death is accompanied by a feeling of a catastrophe which has befallen an entire branch of science.

The trust in which Professor Białostocki was held was not only intended for a scholar but for a man of great honesty, sensitive and conscientious, tactful and delicate in his contacts with people. The extent to which his prestige and authority in the intellectual milieu was highly regarded is demonstrated by the fact that he was given the function of chairman at the memorable Congress of Polish Culture whose session was interrupted on 13 December 1981. At that time, Professor Białostocki also fulfilled the

duties of deputy chairman of the Committee of Creative and Scientific Societies; he always remained a supporter of "Solidarity".

The unbelievable erudition of Professor Białostocki served not only a narrow group of specialists. His full schedule was never a reason for refusing to give a popular lecture, even if this was connected with a tiring journey. Years ago Professor Białostocki had a series of lectures on television concerning the history of European art which became the basis for a book entitled *More Precious than Gold* — a story about the development of art from Early Christianity until the present day in which the highest possible expertise is combined with excellent literary form. For two generations of art lovers this book has been a wonderful introduction to the world it presents.

It was said at Professor Białostocki's grave that it is not true that there are no people who are irreplaceable. This is an opinion expressed by the mediocre about the mediocre. No one can replace Professor Białostocki. It is impossible for his pupils and coworkers who had the good fortune to enjoy daily contact with him to be able to fully comprehend their loss at the moment. That beautiful autumn evening in 1981 when in the ballroom of the illuminated Łazienki palace we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Professor's birthday seems to be still alive. The commemorative book offered upon this occasion — an imposing volume containing a collection of articles by friends and colleagues from the whole world — was entitled in accordance with the dominant thought expressed by the Professor: "Ars auro prior" — art more precious than gold. The Professor — as always simple, direct, smiling — talked about his life as a gift of fortunate fate, and this is the way he will remain in our memory. But also that which he taught us, not only what we learned from his lectures, seminars or books, but above all that which he taught us by his own life, his daily presence among us, will remain. Professor Białostocki was not only the highest scientific authority but also an unwavering moral authority.

He taught us that the aim of scientific cognition is Truth and that it has no shadings.

He taught us that the task of an historian of art is "to restore the great richness of human imagination, wisdom and beauty condensed in works of art, to change them once again from symbols of culture, which they had become, into the material of human experience".

He wanted us to remember that the object of our investigations — the world of art — is a world of the most extraordinary human products and that the investigator should remain humble.

As a good person he showed how to combine unusual industriousness and righteousness with a sincere understanding towards others.

The greatest universities offered him their chairs, but Professor Białostocki believed that it was his duty to remain here, proving that one can be a world famous scholar and remain a simple and modest person.

He taught us how, by consorting with Beauty, one can serve people.

He left us this idea as a duty and a message — *Non omnis moriatur.*