

ART

in CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL SYSTEMS

CENTRAL and EASTERN EUROPE

Eds. WALDEMAR KULIGOWSKI
AND ADAM POMIECIŃSKI



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Made in “Polish village” – modern ethno-design vs. traditional culture of Polish countryside

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Polish village – colourful, merry, integrated with nature, having its own internal rules – is a collective myth, distant in time. It is a classic subject of ethnographic survey – field search and academic studies. In contemporary world one face only some selected elements – either traditions still alive or those transformed and adjusted to the needs of modern audience – tourists but also artists and designers. The subject of ethnographic research has changed from studying the nature of a village itself to searching for “rural” elements inspiring artists of different provenance. New face of Polish countryside has contributed to discussion held both in academic circles and mass media¹. Numerous articles in press, handicraft markets, more and more popular fashion for hand-crafting are different aspects of interest in traditional culture of Polish countryside.²

Current interest in Polish folk art and craftwork has been another wave of folk fashion. This all-European trend, seeking inspiration in egalitarian culture, has its origin in the first half of the 19th century. In several European countries academic artists marveled at the simplicity of folk art, its colours, aesthetic and formal solutions. One of the first movements opposing industrialization, that was blamed for decline of design and bad influence on the quality of produced items, was Arts and Crafts Movement. Products signed

¹ A. Sabor, ‘Kierpce na obcasach’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, June 6, 2010; no 23 (3178).

² More about fashion for hand-crafting – A.W. Brzezińska, “Wakacje z koronką. Oferta kształcenia w zakresie rękodzieła (wybrane przykłady)”, In: M. Krajewski, *Hand-made. Praca ręk w postindustrialnej rzeczywistości*, Warsaw, 2010, pp. 272-278.

with the trademark of Arts and Crafts combined both simplicity and functionality. Thus they put handicraft and attention to detail on pedestal. Polish decorative art (industrial design) also returned to its roots. The spirit of the nation was discerned in rusticity. Polish artists gathered around such artistic groups as the Cracow Workshops, Polish Applied Art Society, “ŁAD” Co-operative or finally Cepelia. Their projects echoed the philosophy of John Ruskin and William Morris who amongst other things rejected mass production as having a bad influence on the quality of products.

The period of Polish People’s Republic was identified mainly with the works presented in Cepelia. The role of folk art products was thought to be reduced to mass decorations being the synonym of kitsch. Soon after that period, however, the fashion for Polish handicraft, traditional folk art and works inspired by rural life style, returned. Modern experiments of Polish artists within the trend of so-called ethno-design proceed in two directions. On the one hand, they are inspired by specific folk art objects serving mainly as certain kind of decoration to formal and technological solutions. On the other hand, artists attempt to analyze traditional folk culture of Polish countryside in depth. Their work is influenced by rural life style, both its virtues and vices. This profound study of Polish folk culture also takes into account changing cultural landscape. It involves seeking new artistic solutions thanks to which one may be brought closer to nature.

ETHNO-DESIGN – THE ORIGINS OF THE IDEA

Modern ethno-design refers directly to the 19th-century idea of John Ruskin, who acted against industrialization as the primal cause of decline in traditional craftwork. As Irena Huml says: “(...) the return to craftwork was to become an antidote to prevailing monotony of machine work. It opposed the ennobling of handicraft and making it everyday joy of a man to this monotony. The cult of beauty and nature as the source of philosophical conception lay at the basis of that approach”.³ William Morris became the continuator of Ruskin. To Morris industrialization was an obstacle to the development of art. He thought all artistic inspirations should be sought in nature. He realized Ruskin’s ideas and put them into practice.⁴ Arts and

³ I. Huml, *Polska sztuka stosowana XX wieku*, Warsaw, 1978, p. 524.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Crafts Movement established in 1888 took a view that the 19th-century industrialization had been the reason for the decline of design and the quality of produced items. Artists gathered in its ranks chose the promotion of traditional craft production and handicraft as their main goal. They also wanted the revival of hand-made art – thought to be an antidote to industrial revolution eliminating individual products⁵.

At the beginning of the 20th century the possibility of applying art in industry was considered also in Poland. At the end of the 19th century the ideas of Ruskin and Morris were already known. Consequently, Polish Applied Art Society in Cracow (1901-1913) became the direct reference to the ideas of Arts and Crafts. It gathered such artists as Stanislaw Witkiewicz, Stanislaw Wyspianski, Józef Mehoffer or Karol Stryjenski. Apart from those academic artists, artisans also belonged to the society. The objective of their joint work was to collect and preserve artistic work of Polish people. They also desired to create and popularize artistic craftwork⁶. The spiritual heir of those ideas and the continuator of already undertaken activities was the association Cracow Workshops (1913-1926). In its “founding” ideas it referred directly to the philosophy of Morris and Ruskin. Its objective was both the revival of craftwork and the attention to the aesthetic of mass production. The cooperation of visual artists and craftsmen was meant to be a guarantee of the highest quality items of mass production. All products were to be natural (use of materials that came into being without man’s participation – colour, structure), technical (having their functional sense and logic of construction) and artistic (satisfying inner need for beauty)⁷.

The activity of “ŁAD” Cooperative of Visual Artists in Warsaw founded in 1926 connected the prewar period with the post-war years. It gathered academic artists in its ranks. Their projects referred to the most modern trends in design. At the same time they did not reject the traditions of Polish craftwork and handicraft. The artistic experiments of Eleonora Lutyńska were the example of such activity. They contributed to the revival of the

⁵ L. Bhaskaran, *Design w XX wieku. Główne nurty i style we współczesnym designie*, Warsaw, 2006, pp. 24-25.

⁶ More about the activities of the Society in: I. Huml, *Polska sztuka stosowana XX wieku* Warsaw, 1978.

⁷ I. Huml, *Warsztaty krakowskie*, Warsaw, 1973.

technique of weaving double-warp carpets in Podlaskie region. Generally, the objective of artists was to strive for perfection of form, material and workmanship. They designed mainly household goods.⁸

In the post-war reality circles interested in continuation of prewar traditions of associations cooperating with folk artists were soon organized. In 1949 the Central Guild of Folk Arts and Crafts, popularly called Cepelia, was established. It gained control over “ŁAD” Cooperative in 1950. Products with the trademark of Cepelia set the direction of design after the folk fashion for many years becoming the synonym of kitsch and tastelessness. The role of Cepelia however, was not to be overestimated. Thanks to many regional centres, design workshops or studios and documentation of different manifestations of folk artistic activities, many branches of folk industry and handicraft had the chance of survival in any form. The main goal of the Guild was to sustain and develop folk art and handicraft traditional in content and way of production.⁹ Produced items were to be adjusted to the tastes of mass audience, most often city inhabitants. With the passing of time this noble idea turned into mass production of low quality goods not able to keep up with modern trends. The word “cepeliada” has been used in colloquial language until today but it conveys definitely pejorative connotations.

Contemporary search called ethno-design inspired by different folk elements is therefore the continuation of conceptions worked out during two centuries. Both artists gathered in Morris’ workshops and those cooperating with different artistic circles in the first half of the 20th century in Poland turned to the environment of craftsmen and folk artists to learn vanishing trades from them. And so have done modern designers. Often in cooperation with an ethnographer, who becomes a liaison between the traditional and contemporary world, new objects come into existence promoting the idea of return to the source. The cooperation with folk artists, learning their trades, documentary and research works are aimed at promoting new Polish design. Do these designers however refer only to the achievements of material culture? Isn’t their search deeper, thought to become new philosophy rooted in nature itself?

⁸ A. Frąckiewicz, *Etnodizajn ma sto lat! Czyli obecność sztuki ludowej w projektowaniu*, Cracow, 2009, <http://www.etnodizajn.pl/teoria/troche-historii> (access on April 21, 2011).

⁹ K. Burza et al., *Rękodzieło ludowe i artystyczne Cepelii*, Warsaw, 1989.

INSPIRATIONS FROM UNDER THATCH

Cultural landscape means everything a man managed to produce and leave behind over many centuries. It is also the outcome of what is *natural* and what is *cultural*. Getting used to geographic conditions, a man gradually adapted to changes, tamed nature. In his everyday life he made use of what nature created. That was wood to build a house, construct furniture and tools; pliable birch twigs and osiers to make baskets and fences enclosing people's homes; straw to cover roofs and weather-strip walls; flax to produce fibers and fabric; animal skins to produce harness, shoes or sheepskin coats. Life in harmony with the cycles of nature, listening intently to the sound of the forest, sky observation and fortune-telling based on weather phenomena built the traditions of Polish countryside.

This special kind of heritage has inspired generations of artists, craftsmen and academics. The traditions of Polish countryside were based on the achievements of many generations, representatives of different regional and ethnic groups. This variety is the effect of people's living in differentiated geographic conditions. The result of negotiations with nature is the cultural variety easily seen in traditional food, celebrating holidays, constructing buildings or decorating festive clothes.

Art has always accompanied man. It allowed him to express himself, his emotions and experiences. It was an authentic phenomenon to Polish countryside. It was changing constantly and looking for inspirations in the nearest surroundings. Art was the way of expressing everyday and holiday life. It was not a hard shell. Artists were never repeating the same patterns. As they were often amateurs, they learnt metal processing on their own. They experimented with colour and structure. Their inspiration usually came from the observations of family life and either village or town everyday scenes. Artifacts of Polish folk art divide in two groups. The first group is so-called visual plastic arts that embraces its classic branches such as sculpture (in wood, stone and bread), wood engravings and painting (on board, glass, sheet metal and tiles). The products of craftsmen constitute second group. The latter has changed their character and application with the development of industry. From the objects of everyday use they turned into decorations (for example pottery and woodcarving). The characteristic feature of Polish art is its authenticity and *natural* way of artistic thinking coming from respect for and knowledge of material, tools, technique

and actual performance.¹⁰ Just as an ethnographer created the systematics of researched phenomena, so do the designers within the ethno-design trend. They seek new ways of inspiration. There are several directions of their artistic experiments. The easiest way is to transfer the element out of its original context on a finished object, for example a fragment of paper-cutting, a piece of sculpture or pattern of embroidery or colour scheme (e.g., use of Łowicz paper-cut patterns in imprints on bedclothes). Next stage is processing those patterns and giving them more geometrical form (e.g., use of handles that were originally parts of tools in ceramic vessels). The deepest inspiration, one may say a variant of certain philosophy, applies to formal solutions – functional and serving the needs of a user but presented in a new form. In this particular group of objects, symbolism plays an important role (e.g. a bread bin in the shape of a house expresses respect for bread – custom so diligently observed in traditional folk culture).

THREE INSPIRATIONS BY RUSTICITY

Cultural landscape of Polish village is the record of means by use of which a man tamed nature and learnt to adapt it in a creative way to his needs. Cultural forms – the subject of ethnographic research – have been the result of using different available materials – wood and stone, products of plant and animal origin that demanded specific knowledge and skills. In the end, items of everyday use were produced. They satisfied both practical and aesthetic needs. The tradition “preserved” in the landscape in the form of regional variety of constructing, house keeping, craftwork and handicraft was determined especially by the availability of material. It was also shaped by external and internal ethnic contacts. Countryside as the territory governed by its own rules has undergone transformations, natural processes of standardization and globalization during centuries. Buildings made from prefabricated elements took place of traditional rural houses. Wooden fences were replaced by concrete forms. National dress became a costume and a piece of stage setting used for commercial purposes. The inside of a village house equals to a flat in the city in terms of the rich variety of household articles.

¹⁰ J. Słomska, ‘Sztuka ludowa, czyli o potrzebie ludowości’, In: A.W. Brzezińska, A. Hulewska, J. Słomska, *Edukacja regionalna*, Warsaw, 2006, pp. 227-230.

The idea of village is also certain type of myth, collective image about life close to nature and according to the cycles of nature. Such world of traditional folk culture and rural landscape is preserved by open-air museums. A visitor has the chance of observing village life in reconstructed, specially arranged interiors full of old furnishings, in a dusty village lane. Folk culture has become the popular image of what the village used to be in the past. That reconstructed reality is often the inspiration to designers creating within the trend of ethno-design. But is it only inspiration?

In 2006, a design company AZE DESIGN was established by Anna Kotowicz-Puszkarewicz and Artur Puszkarewicz. The designers call their art work "the conscious design". They define this term as follows – "it is a term that defines our way of thinking about design. Our inspiration comes from everyday situations. We make use of both old handicraft techniques and new technologies. We combine this specific approach with the search of the easiest solutions and intellectual reflection (...). We design items the objective of which is to provoke a consumer to think, not only to use them".¹¹ Their projects are characterized by the synergy of actions and products – traditional and modern, familiar but surprising at the same time. They seek inspiration in rural landscape, traditional handicraft techniques (braiding, weaving, decoration). They also find new applications for traditional materials (straw, wool, wood). The designers are connected with Podlasie. Their projects echo the inspiration by this region. Use of traditional material and technique is seen in a product called "KOKO'N lamp". The technique of "sewing" from straw was applied to make the object. The form of lamp makes one think of an old form of a beehive so-called "kószka"(a skep). It is therefore a creative reference to the tradition of Podlasie countryside. The lamp also presents a new application (material, the form itself and a new function). Drawing on rich traditions of the borderland of Poland, Belarus and Ukraine the designers created a product named "FOLK carpet." They combined the technique of fulling (felting a fabric) and screen printing to create a very modern form, well placed among contemporary, minimalistic trends. The carpet's ornament is a geometrical pattern – a transformation of folk embroidery. But the expression of a really modern and original attitude towards tradition, the result of observations done in a changing reality and of conscious reflection over

¹¹ Based on press materials made available by AZE DESIGN.



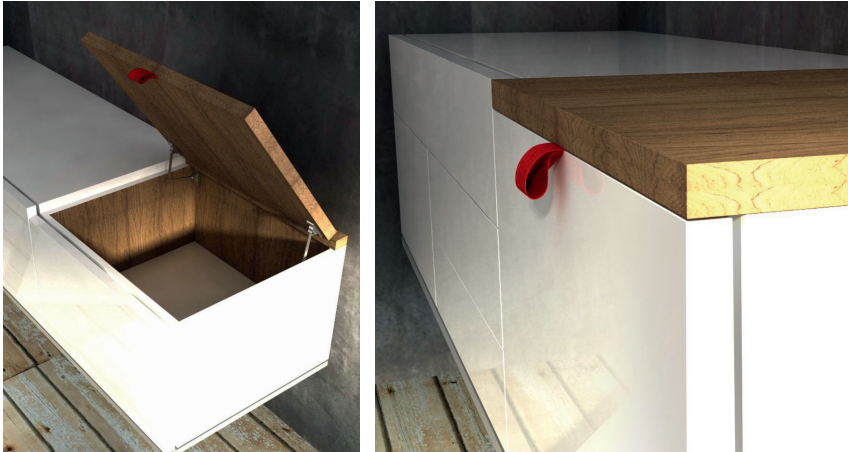
TENSE coat hanger by AZE Design

changes visible in rural landscape, is “TENSE coat hanger.” Made of light materials, it has a characteristic, simple form and makes an icon of contemporary design in the trend of ethno-design. The designers themselves say: “Pylons in natural and urban landscape were the inspiration to this project. Their geometrical form subordinated only to the function of ‘tensing’ electric wires has now found a completely new application”.¹² Just as the introduction of electricity was the evidence of changes in the rural landscape, so in the field of Polish (and not only Polish) design, this project has become the determinant of new ways of thinking about tradition and changes in the countryside.

The inspiration of the inside of a peasant chamber but also the functionality of specific appliances and constructional solutions is seen in projects designed by Tomasz Pydo. At first glance, this minimalistic and very modern furniture – tables and chairs, chests of drawers and bookshelves – is not associated with rusticity. This is an example of inspiration not only by the form and ornaments but above all by the function. Pydo’s projects are characterized (as he himself explains) by timeless stylistics and functionality.¹³ A very clear inspiration by the decorativeness of Polish handicraft are

¹² In January, 2010, TENSE coat hanger was included in the collection of modern design at the National Museum, Warsaw.

¹³ The source: <http://www.meble.pl/tomasz-pydo,d144.html> (last access on April 18, 2011).



Ethnochest by Tomasz Pydo

“LEAF chairs.” Their seats and backs resemble paper-cut elements. Chest of drawers are different type of projects. The first is “SAPLING chest of drawers” – very simple solid with a dominating, seemingly ”raw,” wooden top. A hanger in the colour of natural wood is fixed to the side of the chest. Its form resembles a piece of branch. This obvious reference to nature provokes use of natural forms and their adaptation to human needs. One of the most characteristic rural items of furniture is a dowry chest to which a chest of drawers with the function of a chest refers. Also simple in form, it combines the colour of clean white with the hue of natural wood. The latter constitutes the lid of a built-in chest (as the designer describes):¹⁴ ”I have been motivated by the idea of creating a modern piece of furniture with a traditional accent in the form of a chest’s lid that has given the whole thing an exceptional character. The combination of something clean, modern and industrial with a natural, raw, wooden element, the function of which is rooted in our history, appeared to me as a very interesting idea. Even the way of opening the chest is designed on the principle of contrast. On one side of the chest there are units and drawers opened by »click«. Next to them one can see a piece of linen handle the use of which needs certain power to reach the inside of a secrete box. All of that is designed for

¹⁴ The project for PROFAP company.



SHE! Lamp by Katarzyna Herman-Janiec

the exceptionality of this action. This hiding place is also meant to gain the name of the most precious in the whole chamber”.¹⁵ This modern project restores to an interior one of the most characteristic folk pieces of furniture at one time. It is important from the point of view of its function (storing) and also an essential element of social culture (dowry chests). Roman Reinfuss explains – “Painted chest was formerly an object of ardent desire of every adolescent girl” (Reinfuss, 1954, p. 5).

Another type of inspiration by rusticity is presented by the Protein Design company. The designer Katarzyna Herman-Janiec refers mainly to folk aesthetic in her artistic proposals. She plays with colours, looks for new formal solutions to village-inspired objects. “Pleciaki” buckets hand-woven from paper wicker are a good example of her design ideas. They serve as toy boxes or unique seats. Other projects are the design of furniture made of light wood covered with colourful striped fabric, or “BABA pouffe” resembling village stools in its form, colour and ornaments. An interesting example of folk inspiration and play at the same time is “SHE Lamp.” It is a small object – a variation on the subject of a table lamp. It comes in three versions. The most distinct reference to rusticity are lamps the shades of which look like Łowicz full dress skirts (colourful stripes) or Podhale skirts (colourful flowers). Lamps owe their jolly look to their stands – legs made of red durable plexi. The latter give the whole lamp original, slightly surrealistic character. The lamp looks like a folk female dancer’s trunk without its upper part.¹⁶

¹⁵ The correspondence with the author via electronic mail (access on May 4, 2011).

¹⁶ The description of the product can be found on site: <http://www.proteindesign.pl/furniture/she-lamp.html> (last access on April 18, 2011).

TO PRESERVE, DESCRIBE AND PRESENT ETHNO-DESIGN

The phenomenon of ethno-design has already gained the name of cultural phenomenon in academic environment. It inspires not only designers and artists but also museologists. This powerful trend in today's world, dictated by the desire to emphasize local, regional, traditional and familiar provenance of objects is slowly finding its reflection in museum activities. In 2009 in the Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Cracow the first edition of festival "Rzecz Małopolska. Ethno-design Festival" (6th November, 2009) took place. In the main building of the museum interestingly arranged exhibition "What is Ethno-design?" was held (author: Anna Zabdyrska). Permanent exhibition of the museum is a classic ethnographic narration showing old rural life (the arrangement of a traditional peasant chamber, story of annual rituals, collection of national clothes from Małopolska, etc.). Modern objects of ethno-design trend though, were introduced into that traditional reality. In the second exhibition "Natural Resources of Polish Design" (author: Agnieszka Jacobson-Cielecka) products, prototypes or work projects created by Polish artists within the trend of ethno-design were presented.¹⁷ "Ethno-design Talks" played an important part of Cracow undertaking. The representatives of different environments (an art historian, ethnologists, designers, museologists) were invited to take part in a discussion on the phenomenon, history, condition of design inspired by cultural heritage.

The National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw also participated in documenting the manifestations of ethno-design. The first collection in Poland is being arranged from the very beginning. It is meant to embrace objects recognized as ethno-design projects. As the Internet site of the Museum reads – "The creation of collections of textiles, accessories, jewelry and toys inspired by the decorations and techniques used in traditional cultures, is aimed at documenting the cultural phenomenon known as ethno-design, which marks a strong trend in global design. After the designation and substantive support of the usefulness of an object in ETHNOCOLLECTION, each will be given an inventory number, detailed description and photographic documentation. The catalogue card will also contain the note about the author. In their own new life, the objects will be preserved and stored carefully so

¹⁷ The exhibition was prepared by the Regional Museum in Stalowa Wola; it made a guest appearance at the Ethno-design Festival.

that they can be used over the years, both by researchers and the public”.¹⁸ Collector’s action is accompanied by numerous popularizing activities – temporary exhibitions, “Toy Fairs – Ethno, Eco, Edu” (22nd May, 2011).

Another interesting undertaking was the competition organized by both the National Ethnographic Museum and the Department of Industrial Design of the Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw. Its objective was to create a modern gadget that would be a souvenir of the visit in an ethnographic museum. On one hand, the competition was an attempt to engage ethnographic centres in the discourse on contemporary (folk and ethnic) trends in design. On the other hand, it was an attempt to introduce modernity in museum walls, commonly viewed as the guards of regional traditions. The summary of the contest was exhibition titled “Ethno-gadget. A Souvenir of the Stay in Museum” (6th -31st May, 2009) during which the results of designers’ work were presented. As one can read in a catalogue accompanying the exhibition “[projects – note by AWB] are the reflection of the newest trends in world design inspired by traditional cultures’ patterns; others refer to folk forms showing their modern faces.” Thirteen winners were selected at the end of the competition. The first prizes were given to the following projects:

1. “ELO birds” designed by Dorota Kulawik – small, glazed, clay bird figures (they were given their own names by the designer) resembling traditional clay figures – toys;
2. “Ethno-soap” by Michał Mitek, for whom the stripes, main decorative element of folk fabric, became the inspiration;
3. Nikodem Szponar’s project – “Folk T-shirts”; motifs transformed from some selected elements of national clothes were printed on cotton T-shirts.

Among others, the cross stitch was used as an imprint as well as female bodice from Kurpie regional dress or decorative motifs characteristic to Podhale clothes. Other more interesting projects (that were given either 2nd prize or the distinction) are – “beads” designed by Klara Jankiewicz (single beads fixed to clothes by means of a magnet; it allows their free arrangement); “rollers” by Joanna Karbowskiak (a small paint roller decorated with the patterns of cockerels from folk paper-cuts) or “ethno-jackstraws” by

¹⁸ The source: http://ethnomuseum.website.pl/doc_1070-_etnokolekcja-2011-w-panstwowym-muzeum-etnograficznym.html (last access on April 18, 2011).

Przemysław Ostaszewski (colour sticks used in play, at the ends of which single motifs from folk paper-cuttings or woodcarving elements were placed).

The actions aimed at the promotion of Polish ethno-design are also undertaken by the environments of designers themselves or business representatives interested in implementing Polish projects, in their production and presentation on an international scale. An example of actions enabling young designers to contact the environment of folk artists and craftsmen are NEW FOLK DESIGN festivals. Two editions have been organized until now by the Pro-Design company from Poznan in cooperation with the Marshal's Office of the province of Great Poland. During the first edition in 2009, young designers had the opportunity of cooperating with folk artists at a few days' workshops. Every artist presented a different branch of craft and came from a different region of Poland. Young artists were thus inspired by sculpture from Kociewie, embroidery and paper-cuts from the White Forest and the Kurpiowska Forest, folk toys from Stryżawa, lace made by means of embroidery technique from Jarocin and braided products from Great Poland. The main idea of the organizer was the announcement of the contest for the design of "Souvenirs of Poland." The jury selected a dozen or so projects as prototypes, amongst which prizewinners were chosen. The winners were inspired by traditional architecture from Podlasie (project of a bread bin presented by Marzenna Rusiłowicz in the shape of a house with a removed roof, decorated with cross stitch motifs), forms of spending leisure time by village children (Ola Mirecka's project of a swing braided from wicker that can be hung on a tree), articles of everyday use (mugs with impressed structure of such different materials as wood, fabric, paper or wicker designed by Karina Marusińska) or a dumpling-pillow in its form and name referring to the most popular regional product – dumplings, designed by Barbara Połczyńska. In 2010 second edition of the festival took place.¹⁹

The actions presented above aimed at presenting the phenomenon of ethno-design prove how strongly this trend has developed. It takes various forms – from business parties for designers and producers through events promoting the knowledge of the sources of Polish ethno-design to actions popularizing this forceful trend in Polish industrial design.

¹⁹ See more about the event at: www.nowyfolk.pl

Anna Weronika Brzezińska

MADE IN „POLSKA WIEŚ” – WSPÓŁCZESNY ETNODIZAJN
WOBEK TRADYCYJNEJ KULTURY POLSKIEJ WSI

Tradycyjna polska wieś – kolorowa, wesoła, zintegrowana z naturą i rządząca się swoimi prawami to zbiorowy mit, odległy w czasie. To klasyczny temat wielu poszukiwań etnograficznych – terenowych, naukowych opracowań i porównań. We współczesnym świecie mamy do czynienia jedynie z wybranymi elementami – tradycjami jeszcze żywymi lub przetworzonymi i dostosowanymi do wymogów współczesnego odbiorcy – turyści, ale także artyści i projektanci. Obecne zainteresowanie polską sztuką ludową i rzemiosłem to kolejna fala mody folkowej. Ten ogólnoeuropejski trend, poszukujący w kulturze egalitarnej natchnienia i inspiracji swój początek bierze w I połowie XIX wieku. W polskiej sztuce dekoracyjnej (wzornictwie przemysłowym) także nastąpił powrót do źródeł, a w ludowości i wiejskości doszukiwano się narodowego ducha, inspiracją dla polskich artystów był angielski Ruch Arts and Craft, a w ich projektach widoczne były echa filozofii Johna Ruskina oraz Williama Morrisa m. in. odrzucających masową produkcję, mającą wg nich zły wpływ na jakość produkowanych przedmiotów, jednocześnie na piedestał wnoszących umiejętności rękodzielnicze i rzemieślnicze.

Po okresie PRLu utożsamianym głównie z funkcjonowaniem Cepelii i sprowadzeniem produktów inspirowanych ludowością do roli masowych dekoracji, stanowiących często synonim kiczu, powróciła moda na polskie rękodzieło, tradycyjną sztukę ludową oraz na inspiracje wypływające z obserwowania wiejskiego stylu życia. Współczesne poszukiwania polskich twórców w obszarze tworzących w ramach nurtu zwanego etnodizajnem przebiegają dwutorowo. Z jednej strony to inspiracja tylko przejawami ludowości, jej konkretnymi wytworami, które stanowią głównie dekorację dla współczesnych rozwiązań formalnych i technologicznych. Jednak coraz silniejszy jest drugi nurt, starający się wniknąć głębiej, którego celem jest zrozumienie istoty tradycyjnej kultury ludowej polskiej wsi. To inspiracja wiejskim stylem życia, wraz z jego zaletami i wadami, to wreszcie inspiracja zmieniającym się krajobrazem kulturowym i poszukiwanie nowych rozwiązań, dzięki którym odbiorca zbliży się do natury. Projekty zaliczane do nurtu etnodizajnu cechuje przede wszystkim różnorodność wykorzystanych materiałów (tradycyjnych i nowoczesnych), sposób ich przetworzenia, zachowanie pierwotnej funkcji lub nadanie nowej. Większość tych projektów sytuuje się też w nurcie eko-artu, sztuki nawiązującej do natury, z wykorzystaniem ekologicznych materiałów. Jest więc etnodizajn XXI kontynuacją ideologii stworzonej już w wieku XIX – przeciwstawieniem dla przemysłu, technicyzacji i umasowienia. A dla współczesnego człowieka – miejskiego – może być etnodizajn powrotem do źródeł.