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ART AND INDEPENDENCE: POLISH ART IN THE 1920S.*

At the beginning of the 1890s Jacek Malczewski painted a picture called *Melancholy* with the very significant subtitle: *Prologue. Vision. The Last Century in Poland* (ill. 1). This work tides two basic factors of Malczewski's art: the question of Polish history or Polish *historiosophy* on the one hand, and the question of the role and status of Polish artist, on the other.

The painting shows an interior of the studio where, on the one side, sits the artist, in front of the easel, with his back to us, and, on the other side, is a half-open window with the black worn figure between its frame. Inside of the studio, however there is a whirling crowd of many people shaped as a cross. The top of the cross is located at the right lower corner of the picture, while its left arm touches the window-sill. The description of the figures is very important here: at the base of the cross you can find children — this is the beginning of the century, in the middle there is a group of young men with scythes (*scythemmen*), who symbolize Polish national insurrections in the 19th century, then, the above mentioned left arm is created by the figures of dying warprisoners, who were sending by the Tsar to Siberia after numerous uprisings.

The painting represents, therefore, Polish history of the 19th century, the history of the number of revolts and insurrections, fights for independence, resulted in failure and the victims of repressions. Standing, thus, outside of the studio black worn figure, is not only the death but also the future liberation, i. e. the liberation through the death of the nation. "The last century in Poland" is, consequently, the last century of foreign domination and lack of independence of the country split at the end of the 18th century in three sectors: Russian, German and Austrian. The liberation through death, thus, is identified with the Passion and the Resurrection of Christ.

Such a symbolical relationship is suggested by the from of the cross. It is also related to the tradition of Romanticism and Polish Messianism, formulated, among others, by the great Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz. According to this ideology Poland, identified with Christ and the Passion, is leading the world to the Redemption.

* This is an enlarged version of my paper presented at the CAA Conference, Washington DC, 1991 (session: "Nationalism and Internationalism in the Modern Art of Eastern and Central Eastern Europe, ca. 1900 – 1945", led by Steven Mansbach).

The basic title of the painting is, let me recall it ones again, *Melancholy*. “Melancholy”, however, is the symbol of the artist. Thus, Malczewski’s painting is the expression of the question of the Polish artist, his national duty and status. The painter sitting in front of the easel is opposing to another painter, located at the top of the cross, who is one of the number of persons in the whirling crowd. The last one holds a brush in his hand, as if he is working; the first one does not work (i. e. paint) — he is thinking, meditating; he is, however, at a state of ecstasy. He is the Artist; the second one is just a painter being inside historical processes and can not, therefore, see them as a whole. The former one, the Artist, formulates the vision of Poland, he sees the history of Polish nation, its suffering and death, but also its future liberation. He is outside of the historical processes and this is the reason that he can see the destiny of the nation.

The duty of the Polish artists, thus, according to Malczewski, is representing the national *historiosophy*. To be genuine Polish artist in the 19th century means, finally, to be an artist involved in the question of the future independence of the country.

The year 1918, when Poland regained its independence after more than the 100 years of foreign domination, changed radically the relationships between Polish culture and the political nation. In the 19th century the promotion of a “Polish” art and literature as a kind of “national duty” was widely embraced as a means to compensate for the loss of political independence at the end of the 18th century. However, with the emergence of an independent Polish state at the end of War World I, such a “national duty” no longer seemed necessary. Moreover, strong tendencies toward an autonomous art had emerged in Poland in the last decade of the 19th century.

The recovery of independence was also conducive to the appearance in Poland of a modern art that sought to become a participant in an international movement. Culture should free itself from a “national service”, and art should seek a universal orientation. However, as we will see, such expectations were not wholly fulfilled. After 130 years of foreign domination, the newly-independent Poland still looked to art as a means to define the national identity. Hence, independence merely reformulated, and did not obviate, the need for a Polish national culture.

Despite the re-emergence of a politically united nation-state, the country was still divided, culturally if no longer politically. Each of the three parts of the new state had had a distinct experience; the mentality among Poles who lived under the Russian occupation until 1918 was different from that of those who lived in the former German sector; and the same was true for those Poles who had lived under Austrian suzerainty. Additionally, Poland’s political borders were not absolutely certain, and Polish diplomacy had established few reliable alliances. In this precarious situation, nationalism played an instrumental role in the consolidation and survival of the newly-independent state: nationalism served successfully as an ideology through which to unify the country. Adducing the system of common national values, nationalism offered the most credible possibility to effect political unification.

According to many art historians, modern art in Poland appeared more or less simultaneously in three separate cities about the time of War World I¹: in Poznań, which

¹ See among others: J. Malinowski, *The Artists’ Society “Bunt”*, in: *Co robić po kubiźmie? [What to do after Cubism?]*, Kraków 1984, p. 142.

was still a province of Prussia, the artists' group known as *Bunt* [or the *Revolt*] was founded in 1917; in Łódź, in 1919, the Jewish group of *Jung Idysz* was established; and in 1917, in Cracow, the most dynamic Polish art center of those years (and a political part of the Austria-Hungary Empire), there was founded the *Formiści* [or the *Formists*], who had developed a tradition of the "Independent Exhibitions" from 1911, and where the first "modern" pictures, painted by Tytus Czyżewski, among others, had been shown [ill. 2].

As the following discussion will focus on the tensions between modernism and nationalism, I will omit a consideration of the *Jung Idysz*. Time does not allow an examination of this unique group of artists, for whom the problems of "national identification" ("national" means "Polish" in this context) and the involvement in the "national paradigm" of reception, were not germane. Instead, I will speak briefly about the *Bunt*, and later direct my attention to the *Formiści* and other movements which directly confronted the crucial issue of modernism and nationalism.

As an artists' group *Bunt* was established in the circle of German Expressionism [ill. 3], its political reception, especially among the Poznań audience where anti-German feelings ran quite controversial. The *Bunt* tried to stress the universal aspects of its art, tried to express existential dimensions of the human being and reveal the "naked soul." Therefore, the "revolt" of these artists was not only against the old structures of art but also against contemporary social structures. Motifs of socialism, anarchism, as well as psychologism, were mixed together, and produced a theory and practice which were not homogeneous but revolutionary. If we speak about the tensions between nationalism and internationalism in Polish culture we can say that the *Bunt*, taken as whole, falls into the internationalist category. This does not mean, however, that these artists avoided the political discussions concerning the question of the new state, the structure and shape of the independent country. Indeed, they manifested several times their sympathy to Józef Piłsudski, a former socialist, later an autocratic leader of Poland, against whom, in Poznań in particular, there existed a profound opposition. In this previously Prussian region, the movement of National Democracy, led by the political competitor of Piłsudski, Roman Dmowski, had strong support. The political orientation of the *Bunt* can thus be connected to modernism (so to speak: "international" art), since it provoked among the citizens of Poznań a hostile attitude to the artists of *Bunt* who were sympathetic to the aesthetics of (German) Expressionism, an artistic idiom which was widely-understood in this region of Poland as a singularly German movement, as the cultural style of the former overlords and their cultural expansion, the *Kulturkampf*.

The *Formists*, the second artists' group that must figure in any consideration of modern Polish culture, derived from different sources [ill. 4]. "First of all, the difference between the *Bunt* and the *Formists* — as one Polish art historian has pointed out — is based on the opposition between systems of values. While the *Formists* stressed the primacy of **form**, the *Bunt* argued that the expression of the **content** was the most important task of art."²

This is not, however, a precise differentiation. On the one hand, the *Bunt*, attempted to speak about the essence of man and the universal dimension of the being. In that

² Ibidem, p. 138.

sense, these artists attended closely to the "content of art." However, such a content, the "cry of the naked soul", using the words of Stanisław Przybyszewski, could, it was believed, be expressed **only** in the forms of modern art. The form was still a very important factor in the work of art. On the other hand, the *Formists* treated visual forms as if they were semantics. Although the painters argued against the domination of literary reference in art, the subject remained important in their works. However, in accordance with the ideas of modernism, they sought the essence of art in the field of forms as the avenue to arrive at a future artistic culture.

The *Formists's* stress on formal elements did not determine the semantic neutralization of painting. On the contrary, the form implied quite particular meanings. Some Formists, such as Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, or Witkacy, created an idiom understood as "pure form," but not necessarily as Abstractionism.³

Just as Picasso related his painting to African sculpture, manifesting his interest not only in its formal aspects, but also in political terms⁴, the "*Formists*", drew their art forms from Polish folklore and went beyond merely formalists considerations. "Art naïve" was a challenge for them. The lack of classical perspective and rules of visual composition as well as "primitive" forms were models for modern artists in Cracow. Their painting has been related to the "art naïve" of **polish folklore**. At the *Formist's* first exhibition, which took place in Cracow in November 1917, folk glass painting was also displayed. Furthermore, the *Formists* often employed the second name of their group: "Polish Expressionists". The restriction of the idea of Expressionism to "Polish" Expressionism (we can say also: towards *national* Expressionism or *national* modernism) identified this movement (i. e. Formism) as a *national* one⁵. The "national" connotation of the name of the group, as well as their association with folk art, allows us to recognize the Formists as a continuation of "Young Poland," a movement which had been very vital in Cracow.

Formism was not, then, a "universal movement." Its modernism was a **national one** as was the modernism of "Young Poland." Tytus Czyżewski working on his *Highland Robber* recollected the folk story about this local hero who robbed the rich to divide their fortunes among the poor [ill. 5]. Using this popular folk-image of the highland robber, in this case Janosik, Czyżewski painted, nevertheless, a quite modern picture. This image might be seen as the turning point in the relationship between "Young Poland" and Formism. Whereas the former stressed the iconographic level of the painting, the latter emphasized the formal aspects of art, as understood in terms of modernism.

The *Formists* intended to create a new style which would be at the same time both "national" and "modern."⁶ One reviewer of their exhibition in Cracow wrote: "Polish Formism, which had sprouted on native soil, and which had been influenced by Polish *primitives*, became the expression of the national art (...) For the first time in Polish

³ P. Piotrowski, *Art in the Crucible of History*, "The Polish Review", vol. XXXIII, New York 1988, No 2.

⁴ P. Leighton, "Anticolonialism and Primitivism: The Politics of the Sublime Grotesque", a paper given to the CASVA, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., October 1989.

⁵ J. Pollakówna, *Formiści* [The Formists], Warszawa 1972, p. 62.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

art, a movement appeared with the will to create a Polish independent style."⁷ This aspiration, however, turned out to be a unrealistic dream because the group had been established by artists who expressed different programs and attitudes. Indeed, the *Formists* had experienced inner contradictions almost from the beginning, and these tensions continued to increase until, in 1922, the group dissolved. Coincidentally, at that same moment, the above-mentioned group of *Bunt*, also disappeared from the Polish art scene.

In terms of social reception, these two movements did not enjoy the same status. The *Bunt*, acting without national identification, was soon marginalized to the fringe of Polish society. The nation needed modernism, but a local Polish one and not an international one. Such a social demand was fulfilled much better by the Cracow-based *Formists* than by the *Bunt*. The disintegration of the *Formists* in 1922, then, was a result of the contradictions and tensions among artists and not the effect of external pressure, as was indeed the case for the *Bunt* painters. The break up of the Cracow group, however, did not mean that the needs it apparently fulfilled disappeared in Poland with the *Formists*. Certainly, they did not. Moreover, the another group, the *Rythm*, was established in 1922, and continued grappling with those issues which had characterized the activities of the *Formists* [ill. 6].

The artists belonging to *Rythm* undertook, likewise, the task of combining modernism with national identity. These artists were understood by their inter-war Polish audience as successors to the *Formists*.⁸ It is true that several former *Formists* joined this artists' group; but, mostly, *Rythm* attracted much more conservative painters. Consequently, the art of the *Rythm* was less ambitious and more modest.

We have to remember that the situation of modernism in Poland at this moment was not too different from that in Europe at large. In France, for example, modernism during the 1920s. was fundamentally different from modernism at the beginning of World War I. One can observe a kind of return to classical features, a kind of *retour a l'ordre*.⁹ Modernism was, so to say, "conventionalized" or "domesticated" and thus became easier for a larger audience to accept. The Polish *Rythm* should be seen in this context. Many art works made in Poland as well as in France adapted themselves to a classical tradition, employing modernist formal elements as *stylization* [ill. 7].

There were, of course, some quite modern currents in Polish culture during the twenties. Polish Constructivism, for example, postulated some fundamental questions of modern art, and continued the revolutionary debates that had been initiated in Russia: on the one hand, the question of the analysis of the picture, its visual pure structure (e. i. Strzeminski and his Unism, where a material surface of the painting has been identified with the painting itself [ill. 8]) and, on the other hand, the thoughts of utilitarianism or Productivism, where the *laboratory experiments* of Constructivism had been used in the real social and political fields (e. g. Szczuka and his posters [ill. 9]).¹⁰

⁷ A quotation from: H. Anders, *Rytm. W poszukiwaniu stylu narodowego* [The Rhythm. In Search of a National Style], Warszawa 1972, p. 127 – 128.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ See: *Le Retour a l'ordre dans les arts plastiques et l'architecture, 1919 – 1925*, Universite de Saint-Etienne, Travaux VII, 1975.

¹⁰ A. Turowski, *Konstrukttywizm polski* [Polish Constructivism], Warszawa 1981.

However, it must be stated that Constructivism simply was by its very nature international. These artists were not interested in the question of the dialectics between modernism and nationality. They situated themselves beyond such a problem, and were uninterested in the "search for a modern national style" that preoccupied so many figures in Poland and elsewhere, not only in the field of art but in politics as well. But, there were connections between Constructivists and the Polish Communist Party, connections which carried implications for the artists since the Polish Communist party not only had rejected the necessity of national independence but instead supported the idea of the incorporation of Poland into the Soviet Union. The Polish Constructivists' identification with this anti-nationalist program surely compromised the artists' standing with much of the public and inexorably led to the identification of Constructivism with bolshevism during the inter-war period in Poland. One might argue that a similar reception can be observed in the West. In Poland, however, these connotations were stronger than in other countries and had a more substantial political background. The memories of the Polish-Soviet war (1920) and the march of the Red Army, which had been "in haste to help the German working class," were still very much alive. That, of course, intensified a "nationalistic" reception of Constructivism and a political antipathy to it. Nonetheless, this movement was too strong and too creative to be moved to the margins of social life, as the *Bunt* had been earlier in the decade.

Although Constructivism was not marginal, neither was it at the center of the Polish art world in the 1920s., especially the official one, supported by the state institutions. Closer to the center was the above-mentioned *Rhythm* whose paintings decorated the walls of state offices, as well as churches, banks, and similar institutions [ill. 10]. *Rhythm* painters even designed the most popular images of the official visual culture, namely the bank-notes [ill. 11], the postage stamps [ill. 12], the posters, and so forth. Not surprisingly, these artists were chosen for the most prestigious exhibitions, such as the *L'Exposition Internationale des Art Decoratifs et Industriels* in Paris, in 1925.

The Polish and French press, reviewing the exhibition, claimed that it was a success for the Polish art. Indeed, among the 251 Polish artists taking part at the exhibition, 172 received awards, included 36 Grand Prix.¹¹ Not all of them, of course, were the members of the *Rhythm*. But those who were, played a significant role in the exhibition.

The Polish part of the exhibition was opened by the Henryk Kuna's sculpture standing on the yard [ill. 13, 14]. This was, however, neither a national, nor a modern art work; it was a rather classical sculpture. Jan Szczepkowski's reliefs, however, were influenced both by the native subjects or religious motifs and modern language [ill. 15]. A similar example is revealed by the *panneaux* of Zofia Stryjeńska, who also received a Grand Prix [ill. 16].

French art critics have described these works in terms of modernism, mentioning the tradition of cubism in particular.¹² Polish audience and the organizers of the exhibition, on the other hand, stressed the question of the *nationalization* of modernism,

¹¹ M. Rogoyska, *Paryskie zwycięstwo sztuki polskiej w roku 1925* [The Victory of Polish Art in 1925], in: *Z zagadnień plastyki polskiej, 1918 – 1939* [The Selected Issues in Polish Art, 1918 – 1939], Wrocław 1963, p. 28 – 29.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 42 – 43.



1. Jacek Malczewski. *Melancholia* [Melancholy], 1890 – 1894, Muzeum Narodowe, Poznań.
(Phot. L. Perz, F. Maćkowiak)



2. Tytus Czyżewski, *Głowa* [A Head], 1915. (Rep. R. Rau.)



3. Władysław Skotarek, *Panika* [A Panic], 1919, Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa.. (Rep. R. Rau.)



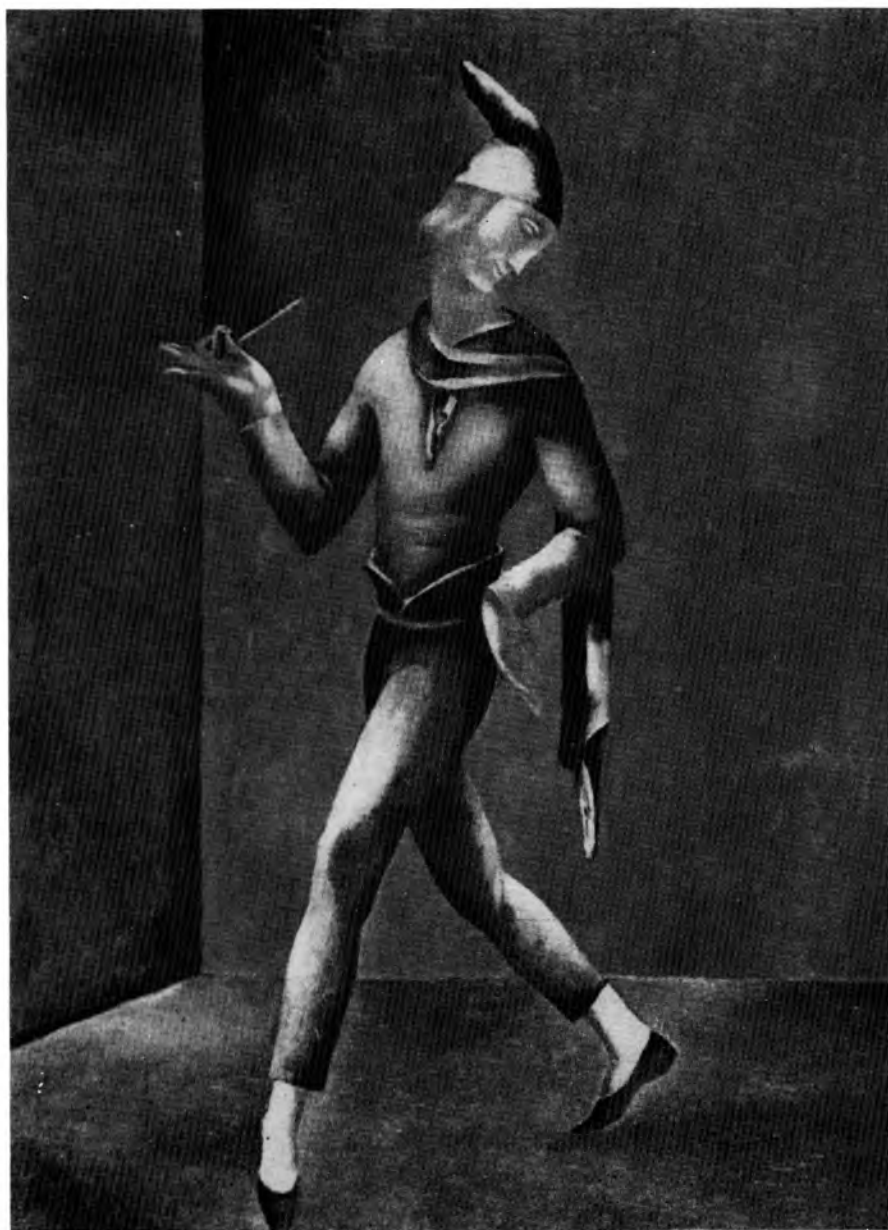
4. Tytus Czyżewski, *Formiści* [The Formists], 1917. (Rep. R. Rau.)



5. Tytus Czyżewski, *Zbójnik* [The Highland Robber], 1917 – 1918, Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa.

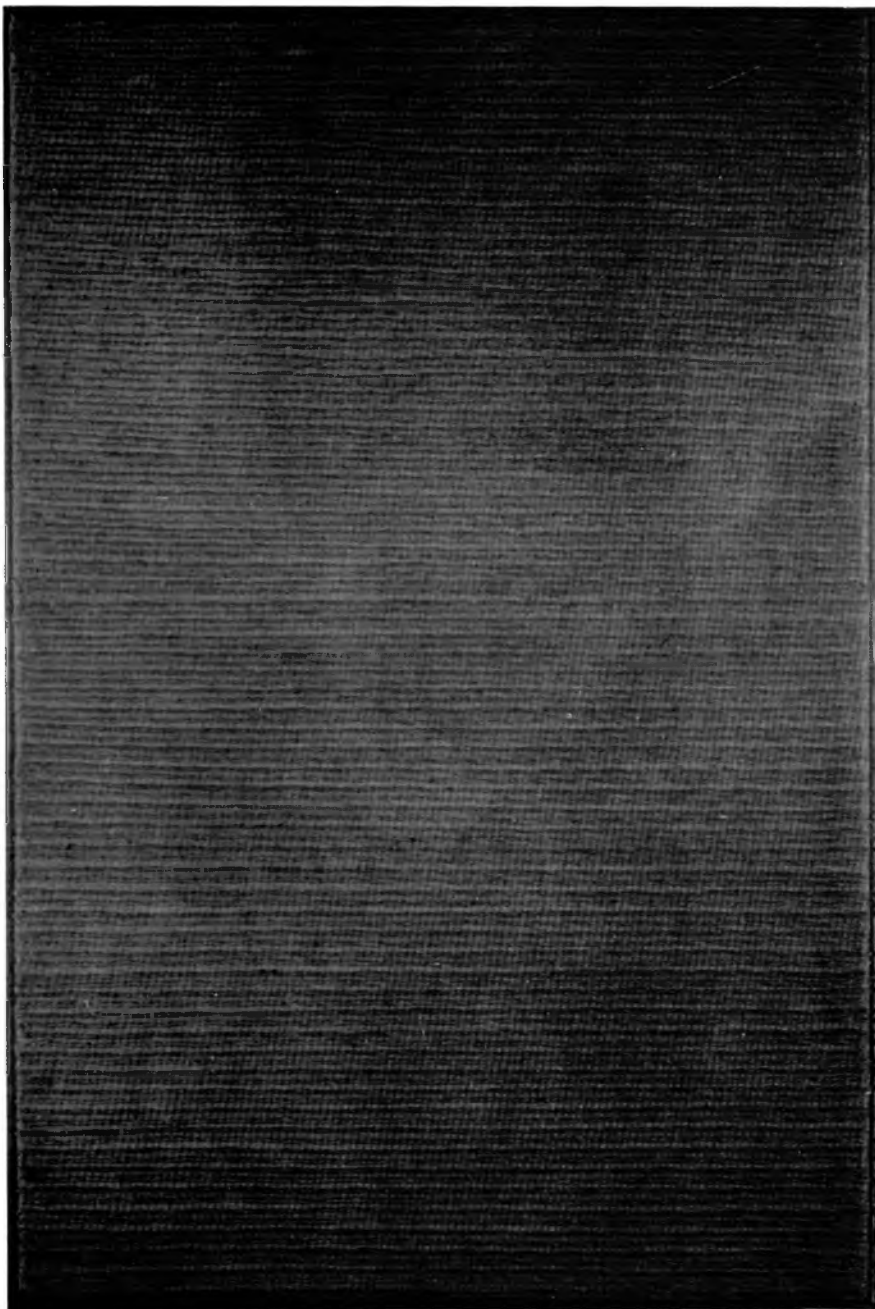


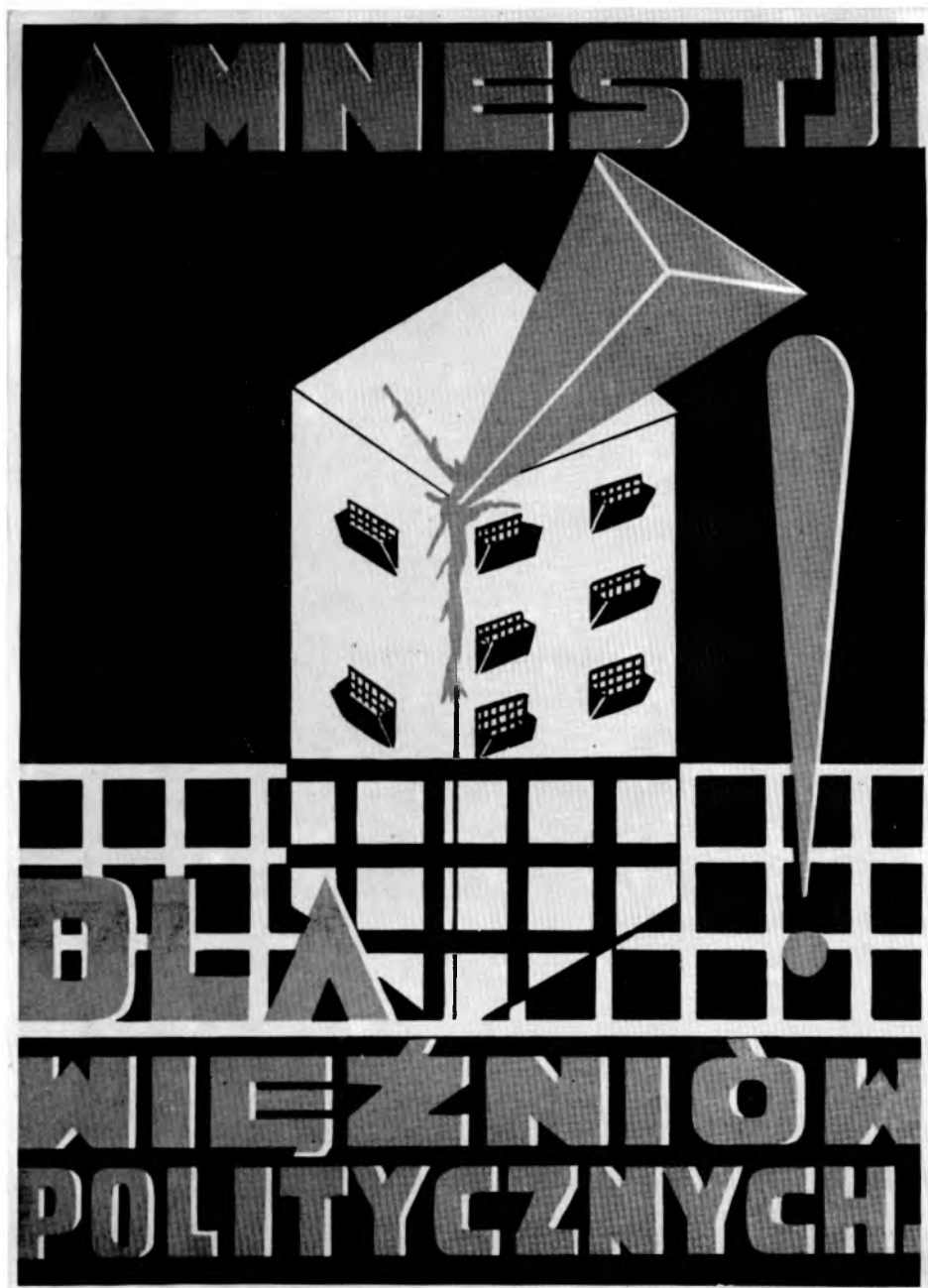
6. Waclaw Borowski, *Rythm* [The Rhythm], 1922, Muzeum Plakatu, Wilanów. (Rep. R. Rau.)



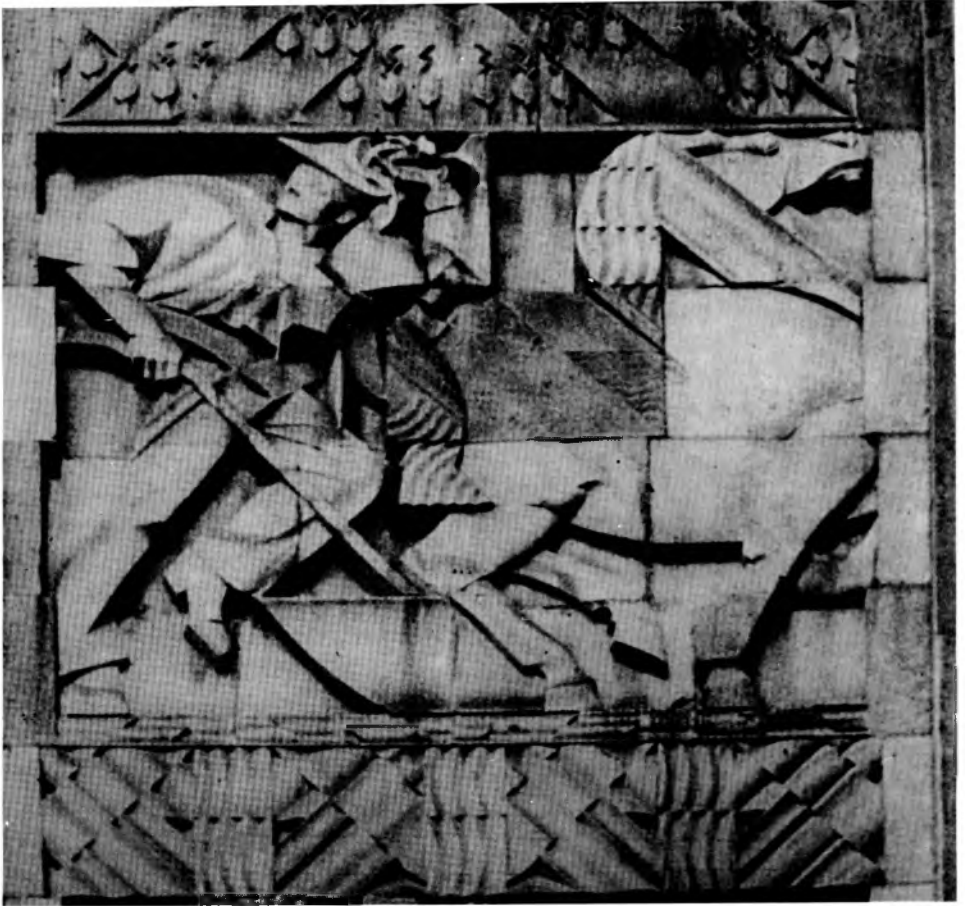
7. Eugeniusz Zak, *Pierrot*, 1921, Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa.. (Rep. R. Rau.)

8. Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja umiarkowana* No 9 [The Umistic Composition No 9], 1931. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź. (Rep. R. Rau.)





9. Mieczysław Szczuka, *Amnestia dla więźniów politycznych* [Amnesty for Political Prisoners], 1926. (Rep. R. Rau.)



10. Jan Szczepkowski, *Rolnictwo* [Agriculture], 1927 – 1932. (Rep. R. Rau.)



11. Zygmunt Kamiński, banknot, projekt [a project of the bank-note], 1936. (Rep. R. Rau.)



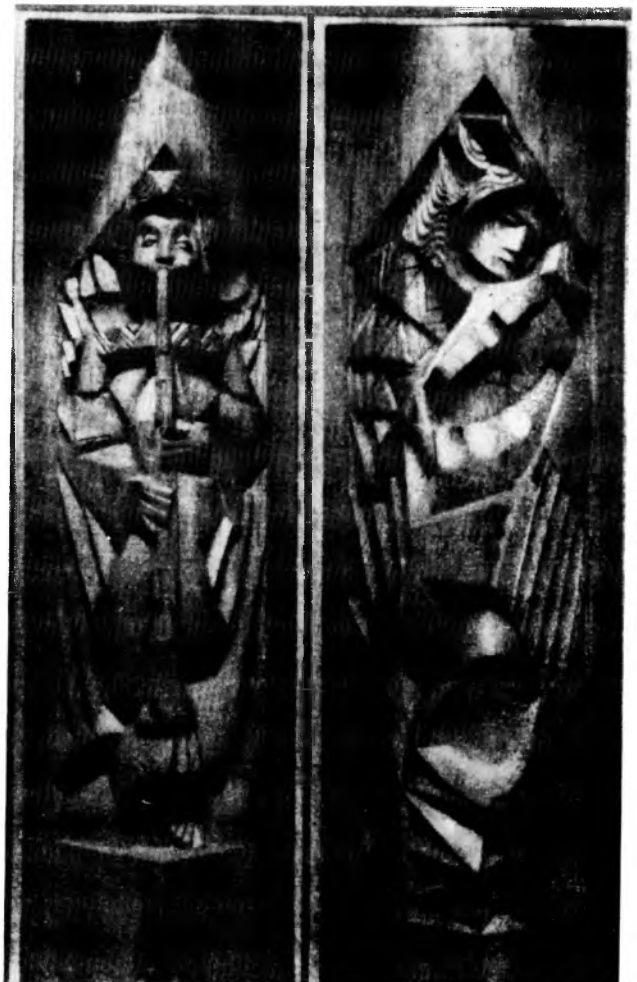
12. Tadeusz Gronowski. znaczek, projekt [a project of the postage stamp], 1930. (Rep. R. Rau.)



13. "L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels", dziedziniec Pawilonu Polskiego [the yard of the Polish Pavillion], Paris 1925. (Rep. R. Rau.)



14. Henryk Kuna, *Rythm* [The Rhythm], 1922,
Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa. (Rep. R. Rau.)



15. Jan Szczepkowski,
reliefy w kaplicy [Reliefs in the Chapel],
"L'Exposition Internationale des Arts
Decoratifs et Industriels",
Pawilon Polski [the Polish Pavillion],
Paris, 1925. (Rep. R. Rau.)



16. Zofia Stryjeńska, *Panneaux: Styczeń — Luty* [Panneaux: January — February], 1925. (Rep. R. Rau.)



17. Zofia Stryjenska, il. do bajki W. Sieroszewskiego *Przygoda Tygrysa*
[ill. for "The Adventure of the Tiger" by W. Sieroszewski]. 1930. (Rep. R. Rau.)

the compilation of the native, national tradition, with modern forms. This artistic presentation seemed to be a very convenient way to legitimize the new, independent state. Additionally, this presentation took place in an international forum, in the cultural capital of Europe, in Paris. The Polish artists's ideological approach grew stronger in such a context.

It must be said that Poland, for the sake of both its internal and external policy, needed this kind of self-presentation. The native motifs referred to centuries of Polish tradition; they seemed to justify the title to the independence. The embrace of modernism, at the same time, seemed to imply that this new state was a modern country. Modernism lent international prestige. Finally, the formula of the *nationalized modernism* allowed the state to use art as an instrument of propaganda, a tool to legitimize the independence of Poland.

The difference between the situation around War World I, when Poland gained its independence, and in the twenties, was a result of the spontaneous character of the idea of modern Polish art as formulated by the *Formists*, on the one hand; and an instrumental contribution of the *Rhythm* on the other. The former artists appeared when there existed a spontaneous social need to express both a national and modern identity; the program of the *Rhythm*, as well as state patronage policy, was much more tactical. Their practice had been planned for such an official demand. Hence, the *nationalized modernism* of the *Rhythm* was linked with the modernism of the state.

In our view, it is difficult to find truly modern elements in this art, especially in the painting of the popular artist, Zofia Stryjeńska. If we claim that "she has combined in her painting native motifs and modern forms," it means that we are reconstructing the historical criticism of her art, that we are further reconstructing its social reception, rather than considering the painting itself. Stryjeńska's modernism has been perceived by the audience as such because of the "sharp-edged line," the "geometric composition," the "expression of the movement," and the "way of the presentation of the urban landscape." [ill. 17].¹³ So, one might say that the modernism of Stryjeńska (and all artists in this circle as well) has been *faked modernism*. Furthermore, if the state was legitimized through *faked modernism*, was the modern character of Poland in the twenties *fake* as well?

Unfortunately, this question cannot be answered in the context of this presentation. But it is necessary to ask whether a modernism, which is *nationalized*, can ever maintain its *modern* character?

Polish artistic culture of the 1920s. was a culture that was bounded by national traditions and the political development. In such a fragile environment, a delicate balance between modernism and nationality was not easy to maintain, as can be observed in the case of the *Formists*, and from such circumstances can emerge a *faked modernism* as with the art of the *Rhythm*. The latter was the result of the national "instrumentalization" of art, of the ideological mission to legitimize the state. In this perspective, then, we can see that in the twenties the ontologies of modernism and nationalism were discordant. Finally, one might say that *state* or *nationalized modernism* without its cosmopolitan background is artificial.

¹³ See: D. Suchocka, *O sukcesie Zofii Stryjeńskiej* [On the Zofia Stryjeńska's Success], "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki" [The Bulletin of Art History] 1981, vol. XLIII, No 4.