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**INTERNATIONAL CRITICAL RECEPTION
OF PROPAGANDIST EXHIBITIONS OF POLISH ART
IN THE 1920S AND 1930S****

The goal of this article is first of all to describe the reception of exhibitions of Polish interwar art in the foreign press. I pay closer attention to those of exhibitions that were most prestigious and acclaimed, such as the Venice Biennale, where representatives of Polish art were juxtaposed with other countries' pavilions and judged in comparison to them. It was the time of the battle against the radical avant-garde, accused of bringing art to a state of impasse, stagnation, or even slow agony. Most exhibitions of Polish art abroad were organized by Mieczysław Treter (1883–1943) a philosopher and art historian, but also an exhibition curator and director of TOSSPO (the Association for the Promotion of Polish Art Abroad), who faced a very difficult task trying to fulfil his mission to promote Polish art through exhibitions. He had to take into account this artistic climate and the dynamically changing situation on the art market, and respond to the expectations of foreign critics, who would examine the art of particular nations with the focus on manifestations of national style. On the other hand, he had to consider the opinions of the Polish artists and critics as well as pressures from the ministry and Polish diplomats.

Keywords: Mieczyslaw Treter, TOSSPO, art criticism, Polish art in the interwar period, exhibitions of Polish art abroad

Repeated calls for greater control of machinery and mechanised progress, warnings against the diminishing level of spirituality, and encouragements to battle against artistic crisis through a return to tradition, humanity, and national identity – all these exhortations were recurring elements of the pan-European turn against the radical avant-garde, accused of bringing art to a state of impasse, stagnation, or even slow agony (Golan 1995: 85–105). A distinctly anti-avant-garde climate, with common xenophobic undertones and amplified by the growing anti-Semitism and nationalism in most European states already dominated visual arts in the late 1920s, but it grew exponentially in the following decade. A turn against abstraction – seen as soulless, overly intellectual and incomprehensible – pushed art into one

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dominant direction: art that brought back figurative subject-matter and reinstated nature as an important point of reference for any type of artistic practice (new classicism, new realism, and Surrealism). Slogans promoting the return to the old order and to the human figure resounded along with distinct voices that advocated a clean break with avant-garde universality in favour of a search for particular, ethnic elements of art of individual nations.

This tendency was reflected in world exhibitions, primarily at the Venice Biennale. In the period in question, both the Italian central pavilion as well as the majority of national pavilions were dominated by the art of new classicism, actively marginalising the few examples of followers of the radical modernism (Donaggio 1988: 21–26). Mieczysław Treter, a Polish art historian and celebrated critic who had been regularly visiting the Italian capital of art since 1907, had numerous opportunities to observe this artistic transformation¹. When in 1926 he was appointed the director of the Association for the Promotion of Polish Art Abroad (Towarzystwo Szerzenia Sztuki Polskiej Wśród Obcych, TOSSPO), responsible for the programme policy and frequently also for organisation of exhibitions of Polish art abroad, he was perfectly aware of the expectations on the part of foreign viewers and critics. Well-informed in the matter of popular trends, he made efforts to persuade Polish “malcontents” who were complaining about the unfair omission of works made by left-wing artists that the foreign audiences were not interested in seeing last-season’s “Paris trends” brought from Krakow or Warsaw, but rather exhibitions of what was special in our art, different, local, and typically Polish:

It is not our similarity but our difference from foreign art that makes foreign viewers curious, moved, impressed or irritated; only manifestations of our complete individuality, the different structure of our national culture and our tribal temperament in our art can amuse and impress international viewers (Treter 1921, no. 198: 4).

Understandably, neither the radical avant-garde, with its universalism, nor Colourism, with its distinct Parisian provenance, were able to meet such requirements. Particularly unimpressive for international audiences was the Polish avant-garde, which even at the French salons seemed merely an echo of out-dated “-isms”. Treter’s diagnosis found its confirmation in the statements of French critics, reviewers of the exhibition of Polish Modern Art at the Autumn Salon in Paris in 1929², who observed its excessive dependence on already “out-dated” Cubism (*Kronika artystyczna* 1929: 157–158). Similar opinions were voiced by the Dutch press, which criticised organisers of the exhibition of Polish Art in Amsterdam (1929) for showing works that failed to display any typically ethnic features or express a national spirit, and instead spoke with an international “street jargon” (Treter 1933: 145). Even Belgian critics, known for their generally positive attitude towards the avant-garde, appreciated those works in the Polish exhibition that opposed the tyranny of foreign influences and displayed a powerful

¹ More about Treter, his aesthetics, art criticism and activities see: (Wasilewska 2019).

² The exhibition *L’Art. Polonais Moderne*, curated by Chil Aronson, was exceptionally organised without the participation of TOSSPO, under the auspices of the Society for the Support of Artistic-Literary Connections Between Poland and France. Chil Aronson, real name Joachim Weingart, was a Polish painter of Jewish background, one of the major representatives of École de Paris.

national spirit, i.e. expressed a distinctively Polish temperament, reflecting purity, familiarity, and racial honesty³. Belgian and Dutch viewers were particularly impressed with Władysław Skoczylas's woodcuts, Zofia Stryjeńska's and Włodzimierz Jarocki's paintings, as well as by the classicist art of Eugeniusz Zak. They emphasised the significance of Krakow's "Sztuka" as the most "vital" group with the strongest national characteristics.

Planning exhibitions of Polish art abroad, the director of TOSSPO responded to the expectations and needs of their viewers, who would examine the art of a particular nation with a focus on manifestations of individual style. This general trend was also in keeping with Treter's own understanding of art and the hierarchy of artistic phenomena. More than anything, however, it presented him with strong arguments in his battle against "always unsatisfied malcontents" on the one hand, and "mediocre artists" who demanded to be included in exhibitions on the other. This is why the archive of TOSSPO contains numerous press clippings that Treter collected to prove that it was this distinctly different physiognomy that was desired by critics of all the countries that hosted exhibitions of Polish art: from the Benelux to Scandinavia, the Baltic countries and Russia, to the United States. "Everyone is interested," he wrote in the daily *Gazeta Polska*, "whether and what does Poland contribute to art that is distinctly its own?" (Treter 1931: 3). Treter quoted long excerpts from a statement by an editor of *Nationaltidende* (a mass-circulated magazine with a clear conservative profile), who noted the originality and expressive power manifested by Polish landscape painting, figurative compositions, and portraits. The Danish critic particularly appreciated the artists of the older generation, members of Krakow's "Sztuka"⁴, including Xawery Dunikowski, Konstanty Laszczka, Fryderyk Pautsch, and Wojciech Weiss, as well as the woodcuts of Władysław Skoczylas, and classicist art by Tadeusz Pruszkowski. However, he did not fail to mention the "depravation of taste" manifested in a Cubism-inspired European modernism that spoiled the entire exhibition with its attempt to speak "an international lingo" instead of its own native language (Treter 1931: 3). A high-profile exhibition in Moscow which travelled later also to Tallinn and Riga provoked similar reactions in the local press. Treter's collection of press clippings, published in "Sztuki Piękne", presents a generally positive reception with some critical comments made about the modernists, then represented in small numbers. These critical opinions were clearly in congruence with Treter's own beliefs: both with his understanding of the specificity of Polish art (the Slavic temperament, the location of the country on the border between the East and the West, and its early adoption of Christianity), as well as with his assessment of postwar art, where the influence of foreign trends mixed with the search for the country's own style, based on tradition and vernacular production. Estonian and Latvian critics emphasised the significance of the Krakow "Sztuka" group and

³ Curiously, Belgian and Dutch critics gave the same arguments that were often used by Treter. Equally similar were the polemical tools they employed: the suggested contrast between overly intellectual, philosophical art from Paris and vivid art pulsating with the blood of life that is honest, spontaneous, and full of truth, where the soul of the nation can finally express itself. Cf. (Wasilewska 2018).

⁴ Towarzystwo Artystów Polskich "Sztuka" ["Art" Society of Polish Artists] – an artistic group active in Krakow in 1897–1950, formed of artists representing Art Nouveau, Symbolism, and Naturalism. Among its members were: Teodor Axentowicz, Józef Chełmoński, Julian Fałat, Jacek Malczewski, Józef Mehoffer, Jan Stanisławski, Włodzimierz Tetmajer, Leon Wyczółkowski, and Stanisław Wyspiański.

its “spirit of national uniqueness”, singling out the work of Sichulski, Jarocki, Wyczółkowski, and Dunikowski, that is, artists of the Polish Art Nouveau with their decadent, fin de siècle spirit and fascination with the rural folklore. From among the younger generation the most favourably received were members of the moderately modernist Rytm [Rhythm] Group⁵ as well as Bractwo św. Łukasza [St. Lucas Brotherhood]⁶, whose members drew on the old Italian and Dutch masters. From among the radical modernist artists only Romuald Kamil Witkowski enjoyed some appreciation as a painter who did not blindly follow foreign influences. However, it should be noted that in these exhibitions, avant-garde trends constituted a small minority; local critics were therefore presented with a rather distorted image of Polish art. It also seems that their opinions were powerfully influenced by Treter’s activity – his lectures delivered in the language of the host country and his lengthy introductions to exhibition catalogues, which, as he was ready to admit, were “of great help to current criticism”. Therefore, a discussion of the reception of Polish art abroad cannot ignore Treter’s activities that effectively worked to push reviewers in certain directions, suggest particular interpretations or even criteria for assessment, and, above all, create a slightly distorted and certainly incomplete picture of contemporary Polish art.

Equally lacking in objectivity was also the Italian press that published reports from the Venice Biennale exhibitions, yet, in this case, it was the diplomatic relations that determined how Polish art was received. Formist artist Konrad Winkler offered a scathing comment on this situation: “Italian critics always write about foreign pavilions with extreme caution – they praise everything and anything so that the city’s trade with globetrotters goes smoothly, and hotels «under the azure sky» stay fully booked” (Winkler 1933: 482). This ironic remark was quite exaggerated and, moreover, profits from tourism were hardly the “driving force” of local art criticism. The Italian press in the 1930s, predominantly adulating the fascist regime, generally showed little interest in the pavilions of other countries, focusing rather on creating panegyrics on Italian artists, singing the praises of the virtues of the Italian spirit. Occasion for that came with both group exhibitions of Italian art, as well as with thematic shows (of portraits, landscape painting etc.), which were supposed to demonstrate the victory of figurative and ideological painting that came back after a long period of recovering all that was humanistic and spiritual and also “beautiful, noble, and honest” (Scarpa 1934: 6). The new art of Italy, which dealt a powerful blow to the intellectual artistic sham armed with “modernist helmets” (Soffici 1928: 245), enjoyed a moment of triumph thanks to enthusiastic reviews by renowned critics such as Piero Scarpa, Ugo Ojetti, Emilio Zanzi, as well as by former

⁵ Stowarzyszenie Artystów Polskich “Rytm” [“Rhythm” Society of Polish Artists]: an artistic society active in the interwar period. It was positioned in the political centre of the Polish art scene – between the conservative circles of the Towarzystwo Zachęty Sztuk Pięknych [Association for the Encouragement of Fine Arts] and avant-garde groups, seeking to combine tradition with modernity. The most renowned representatives of Rytm group were: Eugeniusz Zak, Waclaw Borowski, Władysław Skoczylas, Edward Wittig, and Tadeusz Pruszkowski. Zofia Stryjeńska also often exhibited with this group.

⁶ Bractwo św. Łukasza [St. Lucas Brotherhood] – an art group founded in 1925 by Tadeusz Pruszkowski and his students (Jan Gotard, Antoni Michalak, Jan Zamojski, Bolesław Cybis etc.). Paying great attention to artistic craft, members of the group referred to the painting of the 16th and 17th century. They painted historical scenes, landscapes, portraits, genre and biblical subjects. The group was very active until 1939.

Futurists, particularly Carlo Carra and Ardegnò Soffici. With undisguised satisfaction Treter quoted their statements, because they expressed opinions on art that he fully embraced. He was equally approving of their recurring references to medical terminology, which served to present Italian art as recovering from a long disease of the avant-garde. However, in his letters to Marini, the curator of the Venice Biennale, Treter complained about the meagre interest of the Italian press in pavilions of other countries. These complaints were fully justified. Italian critics usually offered short and largely uninformative remarks on foreign exhibitions, occasionally dedicating more space to the discussion of their immediate political and artistic rivals. They cut themselves off from German fascism and Hitler, who downgraded the significance of artistic elements in art, and mostly attempted to demonstrate the superiority of Italian art over French art, shown as weary, disorientated, low-spirited, and lost – as Carra argued – in its formalism and modernism (Treter 1934a: 444). Their opinions about other pavilions – inasmuch as they extended casual pleasantries – were limited to two major issues: national distinctiveness and the influence of trends from Paris. As a result, American, Danish, and Czechoslovakian art were invariably criticised for their “Frenchified” quality, while Hungarian, Belgian, and quite often Polish artists as well were appreciated.

The Polish pavilion attracted their attention in 1932, when, for the first time, Poland sent its representatives to present their art in their own separate, national pavilion. The majority of opinions expressed positive response, while some were openly enthusiastic, gladly welcoming the “young, vivid and independent art” that “expressed the great spirit of the heroic nation” (Treter 1933b: 103). Opinions of this type were rarely formulated upon purely artistic criteria. Instead, they were dictated by matters of diplomacy and courtesy: Poland was Italy’s ally, approvingly accepting Mussolini’s rule, particularly his patronage over Italian art, while posing no political or artistic threat to the country. Critical texts that extended beyond the uninformative flattery focused primarily on the national features of Polish art – manifested both in its choice of ethnographic subject matter, as well as in its specificity and expressive power.

What most of the critics shared was their undivided appreciation for the work of Xawery Dunikowski, lauded for his combination of a truly national, “energetic” expression with a deeply individual character (Treter 1933b: 103, 104, 113). The works of Jarocki, Sichulski, and Weiss were also recognised. Members of the Rytm Group, particularly the reflective sculptures of Henryk Kuna, were also appreciated, although without any notable enthusiasm. Curiously, yet again, several critics were favourably disposed towards the work of Romuald Kamil Witkowski – mainly due to the alleged impact of Italian futurists on his art, but also for his own, individual means of expression (Treter 1933b: 104). There were as many as eight paintings by Witkowski in the exhibition, and, moreover, Treter presented him, with significant exaggeration, as “the most renowned of our ultra-modernists”. Meanwhile, other modernist artists were not featured at the TOSSPO show, even though the catalogue advertised it as “an at once comprehensive and singular” exhibition of Polish contemporary art. In his introduction to this catalogue, Treter created a much-distorted picture of the art scene in Poland, where, he claimed, there was no space for the avant-garde (Treter 1932a: 255). Meanwhile, this introduction offered an important starting point for Italian critics, often working as their primary reference point, or even as the sole material for their considerations, as manifested

by numerous texts that summarised large portions of Treter's introduction or repeated the main tenets of his overview.

Reviews from the Biennale of 1934 and from the subsequent editions suggest that what Italian critics chose as their primary criterion for assessment of international art was its congruence with the trends appreciated at the time in Italy (Treter 1932b: 9). Whereas two years before, pavilions of other countries were investigated in search of national individuality, in 1934, and particularly in the subsequent editions of the Biennale, the works that were appreciated conformed to the movement of new classicism, embraced the premise of restoring the significance of craft and humanism, and, above all, negated modernism of distinctly Parisian provenance, both in the area of Post-Impressionist art, as well as in cubist-abstract compositions (Zamoyski 1989: 456–473). For example, in 1938, the editor of the fascist magazine *La Stripe* argued that Italy – which championed “the return to wisdom and fundamental values, to aspirations towards a higher spirit, honesty and personality” – was making an impact on art of other countries (Margotti 1938: 271). In this vein, a retrospective exhibition of Degas, shown at the 1936 Biennale, was received by Italian critics with general approbation – yet, they ignored the painter's “Parisian” aspect and, instead, identified “distinct Italian influence” in his art. D. Valeri had no doubts that “the painter's spirit was formed in the great Italian school, in galleries of Naples, Rome, and Florence”, so he appreciated Degas's art for its typically Italian simplicity, harmony of composition, realism, and universal beauty (Valeri 1936: 220). At the time, Polish art – which did not always conform to the dominating trends of fascist Italy – was received sometimes with reserve, yet more often with courteous consideration (Scarpa 1936: 28). Very rarely were Treter's decisions openly criticised (even when he had the courage to open monographic exhibitions of Olga Boznańska, a France-based Polish artist, of Tadeusz Makowski, a typical representative of the *École de Paris*, or of colourist painter Waślaw Waśowicz). In Italy, Treter was a renowned and celebrated figure, who was even awarded the Corona Italia medal, so his articles in exhibition catalogues were generally trusted, to the point that his opinions on Polish art presented at the Biennale were commonly repeated (Zorzi 1938: 229–230)⁷.

Treter as a director of TOSSPO was certainly not uncompromising – he had to take into consideration the expectations and trends dominating in the countries where he organised exhibitions of contemporary Polish art. However, he cannot be accused of particularism and complete adherence to the dictates of political correctness, especially when this would mean renouncing freedom and conforming to the demands of foreign ideologies. He proved this at the exhibition of Polish art in the Third Reich in 1935, a period when Hitler was already in power, but before the infamous exhibition of degenerate art in Munich. Taking the role of curator of this show, Treter sought to use art to stabilise political relations between the two countries on the one hand, while, at the same time, without demonstrating excessive claims to Poland's position as a superpower. He wanted to create a strong and powerful image of our country – reflected in and realised through art. This is why, to a perhaps greater degree than

⁷ Evidence for copying selected fragments of Treter's texts and explicit relying on his opinions are, for example, Scarpa and Valery's articles on Polish art (Scarpa 1936: 28; Valeri 1936: 220). Treter himself also mentions this many times (Treter 1934a: 441–474).

in exhibitions in other countries, he put the focus on emphasising the individuality of Polish art, its racial and national character. The display accommodated a diverse selection of the works of Jan Matejko, Julian Fałat, and Stanisław Wyspiański, as well as those by Skoczylas, the St. Lucas Brotherhood, and even the colourists. In total, this largest show ever organised by TOSSPO included more than 700 works by several dozen artists. The only omission in this comprehensive overview was constructivist abstraction, which was commonly excluded, although Treter wrote about it in his catalogue essay, mentioning its universal, international character, inspired by the European avant-garde (Treter 1935).

In the Third Reich, the exhibition of Polish art enjoyed great popularity, which was proved not only by Hitler's presence at the official opening in Berlin, but also by the purchase of numerous works for German collections, high attendance numbers, and, above all, by a unanimously enthusiastic reception by the German press. The critics were undivided in their indication of racial distinctiveness of Polish art, its deeply national expression, and originality. Karol Jerzy Heise of the "Frankfurter Zeitung" appreciated the painters from the Krakow "Sztuka" group (for their individuality, distinctiveness, and specifically national "ingenious" expression), singing the praises of Skoczylas's woodcuts in which he identified originality coming with a strong Polish character. Much less enthusiastic was his opinion of Stryjeńska's work, which he deemed to be excessively mannerist and decorative. The Munich-based journalist appreciated the technical skills of Pruszkowski's followers and of Rytm artists, yet he underlined that this type of art could be made anywhere. Meanwhile, as noted by the "IKC" editor who summarised his comments, the critic was only interested in art "that could not be found anywhere else in the world", i.e. in "our distinctiveness and individuality" ([b.a.] 1935: 8).

In general, however, both exhibitions – in Berlin and in Munich – were very much applauded by the German critics, which was scrupulously noted by Franciszek Klein, who shared this news with his Polish readers. Relying on more than two hundred clippings from the contemporary German press⁸, the critic emphasised that regardless of their positive or negative overtones, all the reviews identified the distinct, national character of Polish art, which was seen as retaining its individuality despite foreign influences.

The Polish exhibition – as Klein reported after the "Deutsche Zukunft" reviewer – [...] is much more attractive in terms of its vital force, rather than in the context of purely artistic problems. What is experienced in this art is not so much images, but the image of the nation which, in its landscapes and portraits, in its rural scenes and images of animals, seeks to reveal its outlook on the world and express its attitude to nature and to Western nations (Klein 1935: 10).

German reviewers did not mind either the presence of painters who manifested close affinity with École de Paris (although, admittedly, they were less enthusiastic about their art or simply ignored it), or of those of Jewish background (such as Jan Gotard, who enjoyed a generally positive reception). Perhaps this was the last display of relatively healthy relations

⁸ These materials were collected by A. Schustermann's press office in Berlin, while, at present, a large number of these clippings is stored at the Archive of New Files of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw [Archiwum Akt Nowych MSZ w Warszawie] (signature 8727).

between Poland and Germany, which art – successfully for now – also tried to stabilise. However, this positive reaction also served as proof of the success of the promotional policy of TOSSPO and of Treter's diplomatic talents, since he was able to not only resist the pressure of the Nazi ideology but also to balance Poland's ambitions to present itself as a major political power.

Both as a director of TOSSPO and as a curator of international exhibitions Treter faced a difficult task. He had to take into account the opinions of the TOSSPO board members as well as the decisions, and often even pressures, from the ministry and diplomats. He could not completely ignore the malcontents and the unfavourable Polish critics; on the other hand, he had to consider the dynamically changing situation on the art market, and, more than anything, how to fulfil his mission to promote Polish art through exhibitions. His personal sympathies, opinions, and artistic preferences, so confluent with the general trend dominating in European art at the time, made this task a little easier, allowing him also to build his position as a connoisseur and promoter of art abroad. Above all, however, Treter worked with a sense of romantic mission, convinced that by following the direction he set for himself, that is, by promoting exceptional artists representing high artistic merit and strong national distinctiveness, he would serve the goal of "bringing back true art". He believed that this way he could restore its former stature, weakened by the disease of the avant-garde. Above all, however, he was certain he could contribute to raising Poland's prestige on the international level. Although to a large extent these ambitions were utopian, the positive reactions of foreign reviewers of exhibitions of Polish art proved that Treter was able to effectively identify and follow popular artistic trends and successfully realise his programme despite the (often justified) criticism of the Polish artistic milieu. This programme – even if it did not actually boost the country's prestige – certainly served to create a positive image of contemporary Polish art as representing a high artistic level and distinct national quality.

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PROPAGANDOWE WYSTAWY SZTUKI POLSKIEJ W OPINII KRYTYKI ZAGRANICZNEJ W LATACH 20. I 30. XX WIEKU

Celem artykułu jest przede wszystkim opis recepcji wystaw polskiej sztuki międzywojennej w prasie zagranicznej. Skupiono się przede wszystkim na wystawach najbardziej znanych i prestiżowych, takich jak weneckie biennale, gdzie reprezentanci polskiej sztuki konfrontowani byli z pawilonami innych krajów i oceniani w zestawieniu z nimi. A były to czasy walki przeciwko radykalnej awangardzie, oskarżanej o wprowadzenie sztuki w stan impasu, stagnacji, a nawet powolnej agonii. Większość wystaw polskiej sztuki za granicą organizował wówczas Mieczysław Treter, filozof i historyk sztuki, a także kurator wystaw i dyrektor TOSSPO (Towarzystwa Szerzenia Sztuki Polskiej Wśród Obcych), który mierzył się z niezwykle trudnym zadaniem, próbując wypełnić misję promowania sztuki polskiej za granicą. Musiał bowiem brać pod uwagę artystyczny klimat i dynamicznie zmieniającą się sytuację na rynku sztuki oraz odpowiadać na oczekiwania zagranicznych krytyków, którzy oceniali sztukę przede wszystkim pod kątem manifestowania przez nią stylu narodowego poszczególnych nacji. Z drugiej strony musiał się też liczyć z opinią polskich krytyków i artystów oraz z naciskami ze strony dyplomacji.

Słowa kluczowe: Mieczysław Treter, TOSSPO, krytyka artystyczna, sztuka polska okresu międzywojennego, wystawy sztuki polskiej za granicą