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book review of

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edited by Julia Griffin and Andrzej Szczerski

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Julia Griffin and Andrzej Szczerski, eds.,
Young Poland: The Polish Arts and Crafts Movement, 1890–1918.
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Young Poland: The Polish Arts and Crafts Movement, 1890–1918 is the result of a collaborative research project between the National Museum in Kraków, the Polish Institute in London, and the William Morris Gallery in London. It accompanies an exhibition on Young Poland held at the gallery from October 2021 to January 2022. *Młoda Polska*, or Young Poland, was a cultural movement that sought to reassert and express Polish nationhood through art, craft, and design around the turn of the twentieth century. It emerged at a time when Poland as an independent nation did not exist but was geographically and politically partitioned, divided between the Russian Empire (in the east), the Austro-Hungarian Empire (in the southwest), and East Prussia (in the northwest).

Edited by Julia Griffin and Andrzej Szczerski, with contributions from sixteen authors, *Young Poland* is the first book-length study in English which critically examines Polish art, craft, and design in this period, which have hitherto only been explored in chapters within larger surveys, such as Linda Parry and Karen Livingstone's *International Arts and Crafts* and Rosalind Polly Blakesley's *The Arts and Crafts Movement*.^[1] It refreshes scholarship of Polish visual and material culture of this period, which has largely been concerned with painting, by shifting focus to the applied arts. Throughout, *Young Poland* is conceived as an iteration of the British Arts and Crafts movement, as the editors make known in their introduction: "Our book argues that the culturally and politically motivated proliferation of applied arts and the revival of handicrafts during the Young Poland period constituted the Polish interpretation of the [British] Arts and Crafts movement's principles" (15).

The book is structured in two parts. Part 1 addresses Young Poland's key ideas, artists, designers, makers, societies, buildings, and decorative schemes, while part 2 focuses on specific object types and craft practices, examining interiors, furniture, textiles, ceramics, children's toys, Christmas decorations, and the book beautiful. This structure echoes that

used in *International Arts and Crafts*, but it is pleasing to see that the *Young Poland* editors offer an updated range of objects and media, introducing topics rarely studied in the field: paper cuttings, lacemaking, children's nursery decoration and toys, and Christmas decorations.

Chapter 1 examines the reception of the Pre-Raphaelitism and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Poland and shows how the writings and theories of John Ruskin and William Morris were adopted by Young Poland practitioners. In chapter 2, the artist, designer, poet, and playwright Stanisław Wyspiański is compared to William Morris. Wyspiański and Morris are found to be kindred spirits, whose activities and interests share numerous parallels. Additional comparisons with other Arts and Crafts figures might, however, have helped set Wyspiański in a broader dialogue between Poland and Britain in this period.^[2] Wyspiański's designs and mural decorations for the Franciscan Church in Kraków are the subject of chapter 3, which discusses the artist in comparison to George Frederic Watts and in the context of Symbolism. While Wyspiański's scheme conventionalizes nature and employs a geometric latticework, which is compared to William Morris's *Trellis* wallpaper, the overall effect of Wyspiański's scheme overwhelms the harmonised repose of a Morris & Co. interior: flowers are made monumental, color is psychedelic, and in a stained-glass window of 'God the Creator,' raw cosmic energy finds visual form. While it is convincingly argued that the artist's interests strongly overlapped with those of Morris, Wyspiański diverges from Morris in the scale, aims, and effects of this decorative scheme. Wyspiański is considered again in the fourth chapter in relation to his unrealised designs for stained glass for Wawel Cathedral, on Wawel Hill, Kraków. Largely historical in approach, this chapter contextualises the prominence of Wawel Hill as a key site of Polish national identity. Wyspiański's series of paintings featuring Wawel Castle are discussed in a mediation on the artist's 1897–99 painting *Chochóły* (*Straw Protected Bushes*) in chapter 5. The chapter's author describes *Chochóły* as a nocturne, and comparison between the paintings of James McNeill Whistler and Wyspiański might have been appropriate.

The book's second key protagonist, Stanisław Witkiewicz, and his Zakopane Style are the subject of chapter 6. The Zakopane Style is important for the story of Young Poland as it was Poland's first national style. It derived from vernacular architecture and craft traditions of the Podhale Highlanders in the Tatra Mountains, and was named after the town of Zakopane, a popular summer retreat and health resort in the region. Zakopane became an important centre for Young Poland. Like Kraków, it was situated in Galicia, which "enjoyed relative political freedom," and the Polish language was not prohibited there (92). The distinctive style harmonized interior decoration schemes with the architecture and the surrounding exterior plot.

Chapter 7 continues the analysis of architecture and decorative schemes designed in the Zakopane style, while also introducing the book's third key protagonist: Karol Kłosowski. His home, known as Silent Villa, is positioned as a significant example in the development of vernacular building in the Tatras and in the tradition of artists' wooden houses in Northern Europe. The chapter demonstrates Kłosowski's thorough and holistic approach to design, which he successfully carries across media and surface type. This is evident in Silent Villa in a carved design on a wooden door depicting a spider set within the concentric rings of its splayed web, which references the artist's proficiency in making lace designs and paper cuttings. Kłosowski's genius for ornament is argued for in the proceeding chapter. Again, a

comparison with William Morris is invoked, and throughout the book Morris is set as a sort of benchmark against which Young Poland protagonists are assessed. This seems appropriate as Morris is widely accepted as the father of the Arts and Crafts movement and his views, such as the belief in the equality between the so-called fine and decorative arts, are matched up with similar values held by Young Poland protagonists, such as Witkiewicz and Kłosowski. However, Morris died in 1896, just as Young Poland artists, designers, and makers were finding their feet, and therefore comparisons with other Arts and Crafts figures working beyond 1896 might have been productive. In general, the book could have considered more deeply Young Poland and its protagonists alongside the development of the Arts and Crafts in Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century. This might have facilitated possible comparative analysis in, for example, how efforts to unite craft and industry were attempted in Britain and Poland.

The theme of craft and industry in Poland is touched on in chapter 9, on the Kraków Workshops. These workshops were based in the buildings of the city's Museum of Technology and Industry and produced metalwork, bookbinding, leatherwork, weaving, batik, dyed textiles, and cabinet making. Broadly speaking, their manufactures were results of collaboration between art, craft, and industry and aimed to make everyday, commercial objects artistic. Like designers working in the Zakopane style, folk art was an important resource for workshop members, but they were more discerning in how they used folk motifs, which they did not blindly reproduce but selectively combined with modern geometric forms to produce new idioms. We are introduced to Antoni Buszek who headed the batik workshop and his Buszek theory—a method of design whereby uneducated children were trained in batik and then encouraged to produce designs using their “innate imaginative capacities” (126). Examples of batik produced by peasant women are illustrated and their accompanying captions tell us that they are held in the Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum.^[3] Thus, this chapter develops the theme of ethnography, which is briefly cited in previous chapters in relation to the recording of vernacular craft and motifs in Podhale. In the batik workshops rural women designers and makers are primitivized as, under Buszek theory, they can tap into an un-spoilt, timeless culture. This primitivizing is not expounded nor critiqued in the chapter, but perhaps this rich topic could be developed by future scholarship into a larger project on ethnography, folk culture, and the art and crafts.

The final chapter of part I examines the watercolors by the poet and painter Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska. The reading of her watercolors is largely biographical. While women makers and designers do feature in the book, albeit lightly, this is the only chapter devoted to a woman artist, and the book's balance is tilted toward men (three chapters on Wyspiański, two on Kłosowski and one on Witkiewicz). This final chapter ties in nicely with foregoing discussion of Zakopane: Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska lived periodically during the 1910s and 1920s in Witkiewicz's House Under the Firs in Zakopane with her second husband Jan Pawlikowski, an ethnographer; but this chapter also looks forward: we are introduced to fellow Zakopane resident Rita Sacchetto, a dancer, silent film star, and member of the avant-garde Formist group.

The way that Young Poland artists, designers, and craftspeople drew from a range of ideas, workshop models, and movement ideologies is advanced in the short chapters in part two of

the book, which focuses on objects and craft practices. It was not just British Pre-Raphaelite and Arts and Crafts figures and ideas which influenced Young Poland, but art schools of Paris and Vienna, such as the Atelier Martine and the Wiener Werkstätte, as well as movements and influences that stretched across Europe around the turn of the twentieth century: Art Nouveau, Symbolism, and the arts of Asia, especially Japan. Young Poland emerges as a complex and multi-faceted movement that sits within a heterogeneous flow of exchange and influence. Thus, the book realizes its aim to destabilize a center-periphery model in which Poland is positioned as marginal; here Poland is placed “at the centre of the pan-European design reform phenomenon” (12).

However, the way the editors conceptualize the Arts and Crafts movement and frame Young Poland in relation to that movement could have been developed more. A more precise laying out of how the editors define the movement (as definitions do vary) would have helped this. The editors adopt Parry and Livingstone’s analysis that what bound together the stylistic and visual variation of Arts and Crafts objects “was a unity of ideas.”^[4] Indeed, the book concentrates on the ideological principles of the Arts and Crafts movement and how they were replicated by Young Poland practitioners. However, these principles were often in conflict with practice. The ideal of the designer-maker, invoked in the book as a model to which some Young Poland practitioners aspired, was hard to realize. Few excelled in both design and technical proficiency of making, and often teams of makers worked others’ designs in organisations like Morris & Co. and Charles Robert Ashbee’s Guild of Handicraft. The book’s authors also state that the Arts and Crafts movement was in retreat in the 1910s and 1920s. Recent work by Zoë Thomas, however, has argued that the early decades of the twentieth century was a productive period in which many women art and craft workers were establishing themselves.^[5] And, while the landscape of art and craft certainly changed in this period, hand-making and vernacular craft nevertheless continued to be paramount for many practitioners, such as the community of craftspeople in Ditchling, East Sussex.

While it is compellingly argued that the British Arts and Crafts movement was a general model and primary source of inspiration for Young Poland, a like-for-like version is not quite complete. The book makes clear the shared interests between the arts and crafts in Britain and Poland—unity between the arts, emphasis on materials and craftsmanship, interest in the vernacular, interest and conventionalized representation of nature—and we can see similar initiatives between the Polish Applied Arts Society and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. However, distinctions between Britain and Poland are also apparent. Young Poland didn’t have the context of industrialization and mass-production against which, in part, Arts and Crafts protagonists in Britain reacted: “the ethos of handiwork did not have the same pre-industrial and/or anti-capitalist connotations as it did for the protagonists of the British Arts and Crafts movement” (47). Politics differed, too. While a form of nationalism was an impetus for Young Poland, socialism was the political position of many British Arts and Crafts figures, notably William Morris. But not all were socialists nor political in their practice, and the movement should not be defined as a whole in socialist terms.

Overall, this book is productive, providing a major reappraisal of international arts and crafts and rich insight into figures and groups little-known in English language art history.

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Notes

[1] Linda Parry and Karen Livingstone, *International Arts and Crafts* (London: V&A Publications, 2005) and Rosalind Polly Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (London: Phaidon, 2006).

[2] Like Wyspiański, Ernest Gimson was a multi-media designer (architecture, woodwork, metalwork, plasterwork, and embroidery) who didn't always execute his designs; like Wyspiański, May Morris strove for bold and bright coloring in her designs and, too, had a similarly strong interest in birds; and like Wyspiański, native vernacular architecture and country crafts were central to Philip Webb's buildings.

[3] The illustrations are excellent, but the captions could have been laid out more clearly.

[4] Parry and Livingstone, *International Arts and Crafts*, 10.

[5] Zoë Thomas, *Women Art Workers of the Arts and Crafts Movement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).