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book review of

*Polish Art Nouveau* by Stefania Krzysztofowicz-Kozakowska

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Stefania Krzysztowicz-Kozakowska  
*Polish Art Nouveau*, translated by Krzysztof Kwasniewicz  
Kraków: Wydawnictwo Kluszczyński, 1999  
464 pp.; 608 color ill.; \$99.90  
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For a nineteenth-century artist to attain stardom it was undoubtedly advantageous to be French. Failing that, to be British was second best and German a distant third. But to be Eastern European was an almost insuperable obstacle to attaining international artistic celebrity. Among the approximately five hundred illustrations in Robert Rosenblum and H. W. Janson's *19th-Century Art* (1984), for instance, there is only one work by a Polish artist, Aleksander Gierymski's *The Arbor (Study with Top Hat)*, ca. 1880–82, and that is probably one more than in other standard texts.

This neglect makes all the more valuable *Polish Art Nouveau*, a recently published study by Stefania Krzysztowicz-Kozakowska, a curator at the National Museum in Kraków and the author of several books and exhibition catalogues on Polish art. This lavishly illustrated volume focuses on the most characteristic and progressive currents of Polish art and architecture during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth. Although technically, of course, the Polish state did not exist at that time, it was a period during which Polish culture achieved a remarkable creative flowering, and the author effectively re-creates the cultural milieu that incubated this paradoxical development. She introduces not only the leading artists, architects, and designers of the period but also the writers and patrons who supported them. She describes the journals that promoted their work and the cafes, cabarets, and salons they patronized. She also identifies some of the factors that contributed to this renaissance of Polish art.

These include the emergence of Young Poland, a broad cultural movement that embraced pan-European tendencies such as symbolism and decadence while at the same time promoting a national self-consciousness. Artur Górski, whose writings gave Young Poland its name, proclaimed: "We want our art to be Polish—Polish through and through" (p. 7). Perhaps the leading spirit of Young Poland was the very cosmopolitan novelist Stanisław Przybyszewski, a friend of August Strindberg and Edvard Munch and a disciple of Nietzsche, who settled in Kraków in 1898 and whose pervasive influence in all aspects of Polish art—painting, printmaking, and sculpture—is examined here.

Equally significant was the transformation in 1895 of the conservative and underfunded Kraków School of Fine Arts into a prestigious and progressive academy. Its professors, and their students, were to become the core of the dynamic Sztuka (Society of Polish Artists) and the standard bearers of Polish art for years to come. Among them were Jacek Malczewski, a proto-surrealist specializing in themes derived from Polish literature and history; Jan Stanisławski, a painter of small, evocative landscapes, and a charismatic and influential teacher who encouraged his students to leave the studio and work out-of-doors; and, perhaps the leading representative of Polish art nouveau, the incredibly versatile Stanisław Wyspiański, who not only excelled at painting, graphic arts, stained glass, interior decoration, and furniture design, but was an innovative dramatist as well.

A more intangible factor in the efflorescence of Polish art in this period was the affinity between the Polish national tradition (and, if there is such a thing, temperament) and the international fin-de-siècle style. Impressionism had been introduced to Poland in 1890 by Józef Pankiewicz and Władysław Podkowiński, two young painters returning from Paris to Warsaw, but its impact was relatively minor and it was soon abandoned even by its original ambassadors. Its sunny surfaces and purported objectivity evidently did not accord with the national taste with which the more expressive and suggestive styles of the late nineteenth century associated with Symbolism and Synthetism were much more in tune. "Art is a cosmic, metaphysical force through which the absolute and the eternal manifests itself," wrote Przybyszewski, and many of his countrymen seem to have agreed (p. 8).

A mood of pessimism pervaded much fin-de-siècle art, and in Poland, with its tragic history and frustrated national aspirations, this was especially pronounced. "Where the ground is sad, so must be the painting," observed Olga Boznanska, a portraitist and the most prominent Polish woman painter of the period (p. 24). The author perceptively comments on the strategies used to impart a sense of despondency and alienation in landscape. Autumn and winter are the preferred seasons and nocturnes are popular. Heavy, dark clouds make skies look ominous, isolated trees convey loneliness, and flowing water recalls the inexorable passage of time. There is melancholy even in portraiture, and an attraction to the macabre and the demonic in figure painting. Jacek Malczewski, for instance, painted two images of Death as a female grim reaper (pls. 90, 126) as well as a *Self-Portrait with Death* (pl. 160).

Krzysztofowicz-Kozakowska identifies a so-called "peasant mania" as another significant ingredient of the art of the period. Again, this was an international current that had an especial resonance in Poland, where the peasant was seen as embodying the resilience of the national spirit. "The Polish peasant is the hope for the future, the rescue for the sinking ship," wrote the painter Włodzimierz Tetmajer, one of several members of the intelligentsia who proved their admiration by marrying peasant women (pp. 11–12).

This respect for the peasant class emerges in painting mainly in images of them in picturesque and colorful costumes and in scenes of rural labor. In architecture and the applied arts, however, the influence of folk culture was more fundamental. The "Zakopane style," based on wooden cottages in a village of that name in the Tatra Mountains, was viewed as a truly national architectural style and inspired some charming domestic architecture and interior decoration. Predictably, though, it was of limited usefulness when applied to buildings on a grander scale and in materials other than wood. Much of Polish art nouveau architecture, in fact, seems to consist of undulating linear ornament superimposed on fairly standard buildings.

The folk tradition also played a significant role in the revival of applied and graphic arts around the turn of the century. This development was sponsored by the very influential Polish Applied Arts Society, founded in Kraków in 1901, one of whose goals was to encourage an appreciation of folk crafts and to promote them as models for other areas of artistic endeavor. The Society's mission clearly was derived in part from the teachings of John Ruskin and William Morris, but also in part from native theorists and writers. Native tendencies were always supplemented by international influences. Polish artists often

toured, studied, or even lived abroad, and exhibitions brought Western European art to Poland. Japanese prints were exhibited and collected, and the works of Arnold Böcklin, Max Klinger, Alphonse Mucha, Edvard Munch, Félicien Rops, and Jan Toorop were all shown in Poland, as were Lalique glassware and other art nouveau products. The result, as both the text and the illustrations of this book demonstrate, was a highly diverse artistic scene.

About a third of the text and half the plates in *Polish Art Nouveau* are devoted to painting, the most original and distinguished sphere of Polish artistic life of the period; but architecture, graphic arts, sculpture, and the various applied and decorative arts that are especially associated with the art nouveau movement are also discussed and amply illustrated.

For all its strengths, *Polish Art Nouveau* does have some shortcomings. To begin with, its title does not adequately convey the range of the work covered, which, particularly in painting, goes beyond the ornamental and formal qualities normally associated with the term art nouveau. And although the text is accompanied with helpful side illustrations, including photos of the artists, illustrations of their work, and so forth, it is not keyed to the more than six hundred gorgeous plates that follow. There are no references to plate numbers in the text, so it is sometimes hard to relate the written and the visual material. There are also some lapses in the generally capable translation: apartment buildings are always described as "tenements" and "suburban" seems to be used for anything outside the city.

For Western readers, it seems to me, there is inadequate explanation of the historical and political situations and their impact on artistic conditions. The author does mention the relative liberalism of the Austrian administration, but does not sufficiently explain the differences between the three partition zones that made Galicia (the Austrian administered area), and Kraków in particular, the hub of Polish art whereas Warsaw, in the more restrictive atmosphere of the Russian zone, tended to lag behind.

Overall, however, *Polish Art Nouveau* will be a revelation to Western readers and viewers of an art that is closely related to, yet tantalizingly distinct from, its more familiar Western European counterparts.

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