

MARIA POPRZECKA

ENTER THE DRAGON

The significance of the “Poznań art history” in Polish art history since 1970 must be an object of comprehensive and many-sided research. To begin with, I will focus on just one moment in its already long history. Taking a strictly private perspective, I will return to the situation when I encountered the “Poznań art history” for the first time – let me call it “enter the dragon.” This catchy title, borrowed from pop culture, is not supposed to put into doubt the quality of scholarship, but to convey the impetus with which a group of young art historians from Poznań succeeded in entering the occupied, conservative arena of Polish art history.

In 1970, by accident and unexpectedly, I started working in the Institute of Art History at the University of Warsaw. Just next year, in 1971, quite “by chance,” as my academic advisor Professor Jan Białostocki put it, I successfully defended my Ph.D. dissertation. My position was indeed most favorable – a university job, the youngest doctor in the field, and, above all, a sense of satisfaction and safety since as a young art historian I found myself in possibly the best place in the country. Perhaps not quite fully, but still I was aware that the Polish art history of the 1960s, when I was a student, was traditional, with its roots reaching the nineteenth century positivism, focused on the matter-of-fact studies and stock-taking of Polish art, and rather uncritically adapting the concepts, methods, and classifications proposed by the “Western” art history, including also the history of the twentieth-century art, particularly that of the avant-gardes. On the other hand, what made my situation comfortable was the presence of Jan Białostocki who already at that time was a scholar of high international reputation. Traveling a lot, knowing many foreign scholars personally, a member of international organizations, and a close friend of Erwin Panofsky but at the same time easy-going and modest with his Polish colleagues, Białostocki created an illusion that the wide world of conferences and first-rate periodicals and presses was close at hand. Even though his position did not result in any privileges or favors for us (he did not have his “court,” “train” or “school”), his very presence in the

Institute effectively protected us against a devastating sense of Poland-centered parochialism.

Still, graduating and then beginning my academic work, I knew not a single art historian from Cracow or Poznań, not to mention other, smaller research centers. They were at best known as names on secondary literature lists, with their publications sometimes obligatory to read. Some of them were characters in anecdotes or briefly appeared in the media (e.g., Professor Zdzisław Kępiński who made a risky attribution of some minor altarpiece to Veit Stoss). In the first place, I mean senior faculty members who, remembered from today's point of view, on memorial photos looked like a bunch of "men in black," personifying mandatory reading. Their elitism was, however, not a consequence of intended isolation. Communication among cities, both among universities and research groups, was almost non-existent. So it was, including various stereotypes and prejudices.

As a long-term chairman of the Board of the Association of Art Historians (SHS), Professor Białostocki was doing his best to break that isolation (sometimes combined with recalcitrance) of Polish academic centers of art history. One of the ways to bring about that effect was publishing the proceedings of national art history conferences which, even though they were organized already in the 1950s, never resulted in integrated publications. Particular papers were published separately so that a chance to bring together the participants was at least in part lost. The first volume, *Późny gotyk. Studia nad sztuką przełomu średniowiecza i czasów nowych* [Late Gothic Style. Studies on the Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Times], was an aftermath of the conference held in the town hall of Wrocław in 1962. It was dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Professor Szczęsny Dettloff. In fact, volumes from that series, still continued today, always both focused on a specific theme and many-sided, provide valuable material for the study of Polish art history of the last seventy years – its scholarly, intellectual, and spiritual condition.

It was during one of those annual conferences of the Association of Art Historians – the 1974 conference at the National Museum in Warsaw on "Reflection on Art" [Myśl o sztuce] – when a situation took place, which I want to remember, in terms of emotions rather than reflection. I am aware that such retrospection is always risky, still I will try since what I want to recall is not so much facts, but the aura of the event. The conference was opened by aged Professor Władysław Tatarkiewicz and closed by Professor Białostocki who summed up forty years of the Association's activity. The program included more than twenty papers, e.g., Andrzej Rottermund talked about Durand's theories of architecture, Jacek Woźniakowski on English art critics, Elżbieta Grabska on the Goncourt brothers, and Maria Rzepińska on the theo-

ries of Polish colorism. According to the conference topic, some other presentations focused on Polish art historians: Atanazy Raczyński, Władysław Łuszczkiewicz, Zygmunt Batowski, Oskar Sosnowski, and Władysław Podlacha. No doubt, the conference was interesting, the choice of topics wide, and the presenters excellent – all in all, the quality was high, which was not always the case at the SHS sessions. Still, that was not the reason why my first reaction made me refer to the conference as “Enter the Dragon.”

The event which prompted me that phrase was an unusually stormy, both in form and in its critical fervor, polemic of young art historians from Poznań with a paper by Zofia Ostrowska-Kęłłowska, “The Problem of Historicism in the Study of the Nineteenth-Century Architecture” [Problem historyzmu w badaniach nad architekturą wieku XIX]. A record of that debate published in the proceedings volume does not match its reality. Above all, it does not convey the emotions of the participants. Significantly, the discussion was provoked by a text which was not just good, but excellent both as regards the scope of research and the methodological self-consciousness which surpassed most other presentations. From the opponents’ tactical point of view, it was the right choice of target because its quality guaranteed a high level of the debate. Their approach was a public debut of the “polemical” and “critical” art history which emerged with anarchic energy at the 12th Congress of Art History in Cologne in April 1970. “Never before and never after it did any debate of a group of art historians in Germany receive so much public attention.”¹ In short, in Cologne art history as an academic discipline was subjected to devastating criticism inspired by various currents of neo-Marxism and put under revision as one of the crucial components of the ideology of the ruling class/power, in Germany additionally stigmatized by collaboration with the Nazi regime. The aim of the revision was to challenge the paradigms of the discipline: in the first place, to question the idea of Art, which was the foundation of art history as a field of research in its own right. What followed was demythologization of its constituent discourses on beauty, the autonomy of Art, artistic genius, etc. Analysis of the discourse of art history was intended to reveal its ideological premises, assumptions, and received ways of thinking.

Did the young art historians from Poznań hope to obtain a similar reaction and provoke comparable repercussions? Clearly, they did not mean only a polemic with Zofia Ostrowska-Kęłłowska’s paper, which the record implies. Their criticism was aimed at Polish academic institutions, main-

¹ M. Bryl, *Suwerenność dyscypliny. Polemiczna historia historii sztuki od 1970 roku*, Poznań 2008, 173ff. [trans. M. W].

ly at the Association of Art Historians, as well as programs of conferences, the academia's petrification, empty scholarly rituals, etc. Could the Poznań demonstration become similar as the *succès de scandale* to Martin Warnke's workshop in Cologne?

It should be noted that the Poznań participants in the Warsaw conference dispute did not officially take part in that or any other of the previous SHS conferences, with the exception of Andrzej Turowski's presentation on Władysław Strzemiński during the 1969 conference on "Art in the 20th Century."² That gave them a critical thrust and sense of independence, but on the other hand, they could be perceived as "aliens," with all the negative connotations of this word. Their collective demonstration was not included in the official conference program, but still it must have been preprogrammed. The art historians from Poznań were perfectly well prepared for their public coming out. A year before, in November 1973, in the Rogalin palace-turned-into museum near Poznań, they had an unprecedented discussion meeting with Warnke about *Das Kunstwerk zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung*,³ a collection of essays edited by the German scholar. Analyzing the papers from "Warnke's workshop," Polish art historians shared their polemical bias against the traditional art history based on the paradigm of stylistic-iconographic analysis. For obvious reasons, the Polish-German debate for the most part ignored the context of Nazism and the relation between art history and capitalism in favor of methodological problems, which allowed for stressing the polemical self-consciousness of the art history of that period. The proceedings of the Rogalin meeting were published after a few years (1976),⁴ which was quite characteristic of Poland at that time. However, the Rogalin meeting, closed and hermetic, for many years continued to be a point of reference for other debates – interpreted and analyzed by Piotr Piotrowski, Mariusz Bryl,⁵ and others. I had to mention it as a necessary element of my reconstruction of the debate in Warsaw in 1974 as its background. The opponents were well prepared, while most of

² The previous SHS conferences had the following topics: "The Function of the Work of Art" (1970), "Art of the Second Half of the 19th Century" (1971), "Art around 1600" (1972), and "Renaissance" (1973). The proceedings volume of the last one included also papers delivered at the conference of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Cracow.

³ *Das Kunstwerk zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung*, ed. M. Warnke, Gütersloh 1970.

⁴ *Interpretacja dzieła sztuki. Studia i dyskusje*, ed. J. Białostocki, Warszawa-Poznań 1976.

⁵ See Bryl, esp. Chapter III, pp. 196–201.

the audience they were addressing was not prepared at all. Hence the effect of shock and abstruse provocation that many "common" art historians experienced.

To return to my private perspective and memories: I heard about the Rogalin meeting from Professor Białostocki who was its only invited Polish participant not from Poznań. Due to a number of circumstances, I found the German *Ideologiekritik* completely unacceptable. Still, perhaps thanks to its methodological "purification" in the Polish context, the first stormy encounter with the "Poznań art history" became an emancipatory experience for me as well. Maybe for the first time in my career, I appreciated the value (and perhaps also the charm) of rebellion and opposition. Perhaps even the temptation of patricide. A neatly ordered field over which we were supposed to have dominion, as our professors taught us, was subverted and since then nothing could be taken for granted. Art history revealed itself to me as a rough, unpredictable, and independent realm of liberty: the freedom to choose the ways of its understanding, exploration, and emotional response. The point was not to replace iconology with structuralism, abandon Ernst Gombrich in favor of John Berger or renounce scholarly meticulousness with passionate engagement. The gist was the awareness of options and the possibility of choice. Perhaps it was a paradox that "Warnke's workshop," ideologically dogmatic, exemplified the spirit of revolt, i.e., that of freedom. I realize that after almost fifty years my memory may be faulty – crippled by wishful thinking, compensation, and a tendency to mythologize. Still, there is no need to persuade art historians who often think in anthropological terms about the value of mythologization. Thus, the conference of the Association of Art Historians on "Reflection on Art," during which I presented my only study based exclusively on archives, to my surprise turned out liberating and provided a stimulus to practice critical thinking that protected me against intellectual captivity. Causing a blessed turmoil, it made me believe once and for all that when dealing with art, one can never feel sure and safe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bryl M., *Suwerenność dyscypliny. Polemiczna historia historii sztuki od 1970 roku*, Poznań 2008
- Interpretacja dzieła sztuki. Studia i dyskusje*, ed. J. Białostocki, Warszawa-Poznań 1976
- Das Kunstwerk zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung*, ed. M. Warnke, Gütersloh 1970

Maria Poprzęcka

University of Warsaw

ENTER THE DRAGON

The paper is a reminiscence of my first meeting with the colleagues from the Institute of Art History of Adam Mickiewicz University, which took place at an annual conference of the Association of Art Historians in 1974, titled "Reflection on Art." Choosing an unusual title, I wanted to convey the impetus with which a group of young art historians from Poznań entered the decent and somewhat stagnant stage of Polish art history. The critique they presented was directed against Polish academic institutions, the problematic of the conference, the empty rituals of academic life, etc. Even though I did not accept all their objections, the heated debate suddenly turned out for me to be a liberating factor, stimulating continuous critical thinking which is an antidote for spiritual and intellectual captivity.

Keywords:

history of art history, conference, Poznań, Association of Art Historians, institutional critique