

KUNSTHALLE MÜNCHEN

Press release

SILENT REBELS POLISH SYMBOLISM AROUND 1900 25 March – 7 August 2022

The Kunsthalle München is presenting the largest exhibition to date in Germany about the flourishing of Polish art between 1890 and 1918. It comprises some 130 masterpieces from the National Museums of Warsaw, Krakow and Poznań, as well as from other public and private collections. Polish painting at the dawn of the 20th century transports the beholder to a world of myths and legends, dreamlike landscapes, ancient traditions and customs, to the depths of the human soul. In a nation without sovereignty – until its independence in 1918, Poland was partitioned between Russia, Prussia and Austria-Hungary – a young generation of artists began breathing new life into the art of painting. With their works, they created what was lacking in the political arena: a common identity. They drew inspiration from their own Polish history, culture and natural environment, as well as from the art circles of Munich, Paris, St. Petersburg and Vienna.

The turn of the 20th century was the golden age of Polish culture. The “Young Poland” movement (1890–1918), associated with literature, visual arts and music, initially originated in Krakow. Thanks to the more liberal politics of Austria-Hungary, Poland’s former capital city was more conducive to the flourishing of Polish cultural life than the Prussian and Russian occupied areas, where greater restrictions were imposed. Nonetheless, despite all the constraints, Warsaw was the most important centre of art besides Kraków.

The term “Young Poland” was coined by writer and literature critic Artur Górski (1870–1959), whose 1898 series of essays by the same name described a shift in values in contemporary literature and art: “Supplanting the masses, the individual became the highest value and expression of the greatest dignity on earth; supplanting social ethics, [there arose] the ethics of the soul [...]”. Casting the rationalist philosophy of positivism aside, the new generation reflected instead on the Romantic tradition. With this tradition, they shared among other things, a rebellious spirit, the stylisation of the artist as a visionary creator and the eagerness to depict emotional states. However, reformulating the task of literature and art revealed a fundamental contradiction. Despite invoking the Romantic national cult and the need for a popular, “quintessentially Polish” art, they rejected any patriotic obligation towards society.

Divided into ten thematic sections, the exhibition showcases the remarkable versatility and multifaceted finesse of Polish art of this period, which has been largely overlooked – quite

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unjustly – in Germany until now. The show traces its development, contextualising it in the cultural, social and political background of both Poland and Europe.

With paintings by Jan Matejko (1838–1893) and Leon Wyczółkowski (1852–1936), the prologue introduces Stańczyk, the wise court jester fearing for the future of Poland – a historical, 16th century personage who subsequently became a notable Polish icon and a key figure with whom the artists could identify. The first section is dedicated to the avant-garde centres of Warsaw and Krakow, and to the special role played by Polish artists due to the political situation, which was thus summed up by Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907): “Art should grant us that which our surroundings cannot”. This section also includes works by Jan Matejko and Wojciech Gerson (1831–1901), the most renowned teachers in Krakow and Warsaw. Both firmly believed that artists had an obligation to their homeland and society. The painters of the next generation discovered an increasing conflict between their patriotic duties and their desire for artistic freedom. Although they continued to explore national themes, they departed from the paths of classic historical painting and established a new, visual language of Symbolism. First and foremost, it was Jacek Malczewski (1854–1929), one of the most outstanding artists of his generation, who addressed the ambivalence of artistic contemplation of the historical past; despite spurring the creative process, it could by the same token also suppress the development of new topics and modes of expression.

The second section sheds light on the international bonds of the Polish artists, many of whom studied, exhibited or travelled abroad, and were in close contact with the art circles of Paris, Munich, Vienna and St. Petersburg. In the French capital, for example, they encountered modern movements, such as Impressionism and Japonism, while their association with the Munich art scene mainly found expression in an enhanced reception of Realism, the atmospheric landscape and the Symbolist painting of Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) or Franz von Stuck (1863–1928). The new sources of inspiration proved particularly fruitful for landscape painting (section 3), which already enjoyed a special standing in Poland: the depiction of the Polish countryside played a compensatory role for the loss of the state. A distinct preference is thereby discernible for melancholy autumn and winter scenes, the changing seasons and times of day. In the withering or dormant natural world, with its promise of a reawakening in spring, the state of occupation and the hope of renewal hint at Poland's future independence. At the same time, the landscape frequently serves as the mirror of the soul, just like the Symbolist movements of other European countries, in which an enhancement of the individual and their emotional state can be observed. To all intents and purposes, it may be interpreted as the artist's inner landscape, as a means of expressing their emotional moods through the various stages of nature.

In contrast to the visual metaphors of stagnation and death, section 4 focuses on spring, childhood and rebirth: themes that were gaining in popularity during the same era in other European countries when viewed through the lens of Art Nouveau. Children, the embodiment of purity and innocence, are shown in harmony with nature. Moreover, artists such as Wojciech Weiss (1875–1950, *Spring, Poppies*) drew analogies between the re-emergence of the

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natural world in spring and physical growth or sexual awakening at the dawn of adolescence. Furthermore, children served as a canvas onto which the ideal of an impartial, fresh look could be projected, mimicking that to which artists aspired in their creative process.

The fifth section of the exhibition looks at the various myths and mythification processes that influenced Polish art at the turn of the century. The artists drew on ancient sources and figures, along with folk legends and myths from romantic Polish literature, all of which explored questions of religion and origin as well as historical accounts of captivity and exile. Another central component of their oeuvre is the mythification of the Polish countryside and rural life, particularly that of the Tatra Mountains and its inhabitants, who were elevated to key ideological and political symbols of freedom and moral regeneration.

As section 6 highlights, the goal was to spark a renaissance of art by declaring farmers role models – as the embodiment of native Slavic culture – and encouraging a return to religiosity and folk traditions. Painters like Władysław Jarocki (1879–1965) and Kazimierz Sichulski (1879–1942) took inspiration from folklore and traditional crafts, creating vivid, often also decorative, ornamental scenes, while pictures such as Vlastimil Hofman's (1881–1970) *Confession* reflected the deep piety prevailing in Poland at that time. Although the freedom to practice Catholicism was at times forbidden by the occupying powers of other faiths, the religion was a core element of national identity. The messianic doctrine adopted by Romantic writers that Poland was the “Christ of nations” and would one day free all people from slavery was instrumental in establishing this close link between politics and religion.

In addition to faith itself, art was progressively accorded an almost religious status, which led to artists being (self-)styled as prophets or spiritual leaders. Therefore, the portraits presented in section 7 also include several examples of the genre of the artist's self-portrait, which evolved into a central theme of modern art. Above all in Symbolism, artists were said to possess the ability to attain transcendental, spiritual spheres, which were accessible to most people through art alone. Works from this time frequently contain references to music, which was regarded as the gateway to a new art thanks to its expression of contents that are neither logical nor rational and its power of targeting our emotions.

The eighth section, which continues the themes of synaesthesia and the strong ties between music and painting, studies the concept of the “naked soul” established by the decadence writer Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868–1927) and its impact on Polish art at the turn of the century. Accordingly, art was said to recreate the life of the soul in all its manifestations, “whether they be good or bad, ugly or beautiful”. With the aim of enhancing the senses and honing perception, artists such as Weiss, Władysław Podkowiński (1866–1895) and Olga Boznańska (1865–1940) produced pictures in which different forms of intoxication, music, dreams, visions or the innocent, child-like gaze served as a means of rapprochement with the soul.

The following section uses paintings and graphic works by Witold Wojtkiewicz to visualise the deconstruction of the myth of the priestly artist. With his satirical, grotesque scenes, Wojtkiewicz shattered the romantic pathos of his predecessors, raising the curtain on an alternative world of tragicomedy, peopled with characters from fairy tales, clowns, dolls and toys. The exhibition concludes with a section on the figure of Polonia as the personification

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of Polish nationality, for which Malczewski in particular developed a differentiated, individual iconography, and other images that can be interpreted as patriotic metaphors, like the ship that is foundering but not sinking (Ferdynand Ruszczyc [1870–1936]: *Nec mergitur*) or the knight calling to arms in the fight for independence (Leon Wyczółkowski: *Knight among flowers*).

The exhibition was initiated by the Kunsthalle München and is co-organised with the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, the National Museum in Warsaw, the National Museum in Kraków and the National Museum in Poznań.

With around 350,000 visitors every year, the **Kunsthalle München** is one of Germany's most prestigious exhibition houses. Located at the heart of Munich, the Kunsthalle stages three large exhibitions a year on a variety of themes. Equipped with state-of-the-art museum technology, the approximately 1,200 m² exhibition space is a respected platform for artworks representing a variety of genres from painting, sculpture, graphic art, photography and crafts, through to design and fashion. The Kunsthalle München's diverse programme alternates monographic exhibitions with thematic projects, yet also includes interdisciplinary concepts.

The **Adam Mickiewicz Institute** is a national institution of culture. Its mission is to build lasting interest in Polish culture globally. The Institute works with foreign partners and initiates international cultural exchange in accordance with Poland's foreign policy. The Institute has implemented cultural projects in 70 countries on six continents, including the United Kingdom, France, Israel, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Russia, the USA, Canada, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, China, Japan, and Korea. The Institute has presented 38 strategic programmes to an audience of 60 million. It also runs the Culture.pl website – a frequently updated service about the most interesting events and phenomena related to Polish culture. The Adam Mickiewicz Institute is governed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

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Edward Okuń, *The War and Us*, 1917–23
oil on canvas, 88 × 111, National Museum in Warsaw



Jan Matejko, *Stańczyk*, 1862,
oil on canvas, 88 x 120 cm, National Museum in Warsaw



Ferdynand Ruszczyc, *The Cloud*, 1902,
oil on canvas, 103,5 x 78 cm, National
Museum in Poznań
Photo: © Digital Photography
Studio at the National Museum in
Poznań



Olga Boznańska, *Girl with
Chrysanthemums*, 1894
oil on board, 88,5 x 69 cm,
National Museum in Krakow,
Photo: © The Photographic Studio
of the National Museum in Kraków



Jacek Malczewski, *The Derwid*, 1902
oil on board, 53 x 45 cm
National Museum in Krakow,
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OPENING HOURS

daily 10am–8pm | **20.4., 18.5., 15.6. and 20.7.2022:** 10am–10pm

Special opening hours for school groups:

each wednesday 9am–10am, by appointment only: kontakt@kunsthalle-muc.de

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Roger Diederer

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PRESS ENQUIRIES

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ADMISSION FEE

Standard: € 15 | **Reduced fees:** Senior citizens (60+): € 13 | Students (< 30 years) and unemployed: € 7 | Young people (6–18 years): € 2 | Children under 6: free of charge | school classes: € 2 per pupil (pre-booked) | Family pass for 2 adults and their (grand-)children (< 18 years): € 28 | On tuesdays 50% discount on all admission fees.

AUDIO TOUR

A **free audio tour** for the exhibition is available and can be accessed from home and in the exhibition with your own mobile device (www.kunsthalle-muc.de/stille-rebellen-audio).

GUIDED TOURS

Guided tours for groups: guided tours in languages other than German: Mon, Wed–Fri: 10am–8pm, by appointment only: kontakt@kunsthalle-muc.de

ACCOMPANYING PROGRAMME (SUMMARY)

Afterwork^{KH} evenings, lectures, curator's tours, public tours and guided tours for children. In addition, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute organises an extensive accompanying programme about Polish culture – Focus on Poland, consisting of film screenings, like a silent movies programme, visual art presentations – the neo-stained glass work “The Last Supper XXI” by Piotr Barszczowski, an exhibition of Mieczysław Karłowicz's works as well as concerts for example Karol Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater*, among others. More information will be available at: www.kunsthalle-muc.de and www.culture.pl/en

CATALOGUE

Accompanying the exhibition Hirmer-Verlag has published an extensive catalogue with 220 colour illustrations. Edited by Roger Diederer, Nerina Santorius and Albert Godetzky. With essays by Agnieszka Bagińska, Albert Godetzky, Michał Haake, Urszula Kozakowska-Zaucha, Agnieszka Rosales Rodríguez, Nerina Santorius, Agnieszka Skalska.

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