

The reception of the Vienna school of art history in Poland in the years 1945-1955

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It is with a fair amount of certainty that one can state today the importance of the Vienna school of art history for the Polish art historians at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the interwar period or the 1960s and 1970s.¹ Yet very little is known about the years in-between. In studies on history of Polish art history, those years remain omitted — with silence that is both eloquent and underestimating — as a time of methodological standstill, or worse — ideological submission to the socialist ideology.² It is commonly accepted that strong anti-German sentiment during the second half of the 1940s and the domination of Soviet doctrine in the first half of the 1950s both complicated further dissemination of works and methods of the Viennese scholars. However, a closer look at the matter would suggest that their writing and ideas remained present in the Polish art history of the period, allowing it to serve as a chain link between the interwar years and the development of the discipline in the following decades.

I

A step back into interwar time is required in pursuit of that line of argument, for the perception of the Vienna School among Polish art historians in a given period was — as Wojciech Bałus pointed out — somewhat selective, not to say limited, to begin with.³ First of all, it concentrated on the scholars of the 'II Art History Institute of the University of Vienna' (Franz Wichhoff, Alois Riegl, Max Dvořák and Hans Tietze), leaving out the so-called younger school. Secondly, and more importantly, the Viennese art historians were perceived rather as individual initiators or contributors to particular methodological currents, such as *Kunstgeschichte als Formgeschichte* and *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*. Both of these approaches were widely recognized and used in Polish studies, primarily during the formal or stylistic

¹ Wojciech Bałus, 'The place of the Vienna school of art history in Polish art historiography of the interwar period', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 21: December 2019, 1-14; Wojciech Bałus, 'W opozycji do głównego nurtu? Ksawery Piwocki i Lech Kalinowski o wiedeńskiej szkole historii sztuki', *Modus. Prace z Historii Sztuki*, 10-11: 2011, 7-22.

² Joanna Sosnowska, 'Polska historia sztuki w latach 1945-1989. Zagadnienia metodologii', in Urszula Jakubowska, Jerzy Myśliński, eds., *Humanistyka polska w latach 1945-1990*, Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2006, 206-229; Karolina Łabowicz-Dymanus, 'Normative Practice and "Tradition Management" in the Polish Art and History of Art of the 1950s', in Krista Kodres, Kristina Jõekalda, Michaela Marek, eds., *A socialist realist history? Writing History in the Post-War Decades*, Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau, 2019, 81-99.

³ Bałus, *The place of the Vienna school*, 2-3.

analysis stage and in interpretations akin to *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*. It should also be noted that the commonality of such methodological approaches often resulted in using them without references. Therefore, as Bałus concludes, the influence of the Vienna School on the Polish art historians of that time often needs to be meticulously traced through the terminology used in their writings and the range of the problems discussed.⁴

II

Very little is known about the works of Polish art historians during the following war years, between 1939 and 1945. Few manuscripts survived and even fewer were subsequently published. The materials that can be traced show no original input in methodological discussion, rather the attempts for a synthesis of the pre-existing approaches in art-historical studies.⁵ The most wide-scale project among them was a textbook *Art history, its Scientific Premises and Methods of Inquiry* by a Lviv art historian, professor Władysław Podlacha.⁶ The book, if it had been published, would have been the first study of this kind in Poland. It was supposed to be an academic compendium of various methodological currents in art history, presented in their historical development, with a particular regard for the 19th and 20th century writings. Podlacha's instrumental treatment of different art historical concepts resulted in using them as sets of scientific optics, disclosing different features of a complex subject which he considered artwork to be. Thus, in his methodological system the approach of *Kunstgeschichte als Formgeschichte* was used alongside *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*. They split the interpretation of artwork — the final and most important stage of his scientific investigation. After the war, however, the book did not get a chance to appear in print.

It is generally believed that due to the strong anti-German sentiment of the later, post-war years a shift in the attitude towards the Viennese scholars must have occurred. However, the strategies of approach to their scientific legacy varied. At the absolute extreme was a complete exclusion of any German-language studies: a telling example of that can be the book *Abstractionism and naturalism in art*, published by Marian Morelowski in 1947 — though heavily inspired in his work by Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, the Polish professor cited neither him, nor any other German or Austrian scholar.⁷ On a personal level, the exceptions from a general *damnatio memoriae* of German-speaking art historians required a justification, a case of which can be found in publications concerning Heinrich Wölfflin, whose Swiss (and not German) origin was emphasized with every mention of him.

⁴ Bałus, *The place of the Vienna school*, 6.

⁵ For the list of the studies and manuscripts see: Ksawery Piwocki, 'Prace polskich historyków sztuki w czasie wojny', *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki i Kultury*, 8: 1946, 149-151.

⁶ The manuscripts of the book are kept at the Library of the Ossoliński National Institute: akc. 65/75: Władysław Podlacha, 'Historia sztuki, jej założenia i metody badawcze', 1-8.

⁷ Marian Morelowski, *Abstrakcjonizm i naturalizm w sztuce*, Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 1947; Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie*, München : R. Piper & Co., 1911.

However, there still remained a more toned-down approach, perhaps best formulated in 1946 by Ksawery Piwocki:

In the field of art theory and methodology of art history it seems to be of the utmost importance to put to print our own works and replace as soon as possible the German books on the subject, which still remain the only textbooks we have in our libraries. I understand, however, that a complete elimination of German achievements in this subject is impossible and even undesirable [...].⁸

Overall, the writings of Viennese art historians, though rarely cited, directly praised or argued with, remained relevant in the 1940s Poland.

It should also be noted, that the second half of the decade showed few attempts to combine the Polish art historical tradition with the perspective of the socialist art history. The years 1945-1948, sometimes described as those of 'mild revolution' in reference to Polish art scene,⁹ do not show revolutionary tendencies in Polish art historical science.

III

It was not until 1949, that the Polish United Workers' Party seized full power in the Polish People's Republic and subsequently demanded that Polish scientists actively engaged in the process of the socialist transformation of the society — the years 1949-1955 scope the period of intensified imposition of the Soviet ideology in the humanities in Poland.¹⁰

It seems that the Polish art historians struggled with fitting their discipline into the new political orientation, so, in efforts to unify and correct their approach, the leading role was given to a freshly reformed Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Science in Warsaw (a centralizing solution, which clearly mirrored the Institute of Art History at the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union).¹¹ Its agenda was consistently channelled through various committees, congresses and conferences (e.g. I Congress of Polish Art Historians in 1950) or publications. The institute also took over the editorial boards of key scientific journals. That was the case of a hastily reformed *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* (now meant to concentrate on art historical studies) and a newly founded journal with an exhaustive title *Materials for Studies and Discussions in theory and history of arts, art critique and methodology of the research on art* (supposed to deal with art theory and art historical methodology).¹²

⁸ Piwocki, *Prace polskich historyków sztuki*, 153.

⁹ On the use and the origin of the term see: Anna Markowska, 'Wokół roku 1948: "rewolucja łagodna" i historia sztuki', *Artium Quaestiones*, 30: 2019, 367-391.

¹⁰ See: Juliusz Starzyński, *Badania nad sztuką. Dorobek, stan i potrzeby. Z powodu I Kongresu Nauki Polskiej*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Sztuki, 1951, s. 62.

¹¹ Edward Krasieński, ed., *Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1949-1999*, Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2000, 29—115.

¹² Krasieński, ed., *Instytut Sztuki*, 160-165, 176-178.

Following that demarcation line, which separated studies on art from comments on art historical investigation, I would like to consider separately the attitude to the Vienna school output which those two kinds of texts demonstrated.

In the methodological and theoretical writings, when reflecting on Polish art history and its methods in the interwar era, the two previously joined perspectives of formal analysis and historical interpretation (of the *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* kind) began to be artificially separated. The critical remarks focused on the formalist approach, which ultimately created an illusion of it being the only method used by the interwar Polish scholars. The line of argument concentrated on its disregard for the historical circumstances of the artistic process.¹³ At the same time *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, associated personally with Dvořák, was valued as superior to the formalist method, due to the attention it paid to the historical circumstances of artistic creation, with its only detectable shortcoming being the concentration on 'ideas' and neglecting the 'material foundations'.¹⁴

The verbal refurbishing of most of these texts with the ideas and quotes from Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Karl Marx or Friedrich Engels can be accurately described by the term Milena Bartlová used in her study of the Czech art history of the time: self-sovietization.¹⁵ It is important, however, to notice a particular commonality of pursuit between the Polish art historical discourse of the 1930s and 1950s. The shift of attention from the formal solutions to the historical circumstances of the creative process reoccurred both then and now. It seems that the Polish art historians often understood the overall direction of the soviet art history through an already well known *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* perspective.

Were those tendencies visible in the art historical studies conducted at the time? Cross-sectional material for comparison can be offered by the nation-wide conferences organized by the previously mentioned Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Science. Highlighting ideologically compelling topics, such as the art of Jan Matejko, Wit Stwosz or Polish renaissance, they gathered papers by the most prominent and active scholars from different Polish universities, generations and research formations. Although such conferences were organized so that the participants could work collectively on the correct ideological interpretation of historical facts, their periodization and evaluation — often in the presence of soviet colleagues and political authorities — the shorthand records of the held discussions show that the conducted research still followed the pre-war type of methodological approach and goals. A blunt example of such attitude can be drawn from the main ideologist of the period, Juliusz Starzyński:¹⁶ in his paper on the origins of the Polish

¹³ Juliusz Starzyński, *Sztuka w świetle historii*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Sztuki, 1951, 122-130.

¹⁴ Juliusz Starzyński, *Sztuka w świetle historii*, 130-131, 149-160.

¹⁵ Milena Bartlová, 'New Political Orientation of Czech Art History Around 1950', in Krista Kodres, Kristina Jõekalda, Michaela Marek, eds., *A socialist realist history? Writing History in the Post-War Decades*, Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau, 2019, 41-44.

¹⁶ Starzyński remains a controversial figure in the history of Polish art history. See: Marta Leśniakowska, 'Władza Spojrzenia — władza języka. Juliusza Starzyńskiego obraz sztuki i

renaissance from 1952 he openly uses the idea of *Weltanschauung*, as an explanation for the connection between the form of art works and the historical circumstances in which they were created.¹⁷

Thus, the Vienna school of art history held out as a reference point for Polish scholars in the years 1945-1955. While the formal approach was nominally discarded, the *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* remained — as an undercurrent of Polish art history.

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jej historii', *Modus. Prace z Historii Sztuki*, 12-13: 2013, 27-52; Łabowicz-Dymanus, 'Normative Practice', 81-99; Joanna Sosnowska, 'Juliusz Starzyński (1906–1974)', *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, 36: 2011, 137-155.

¹⁷ Juliusz Starzyński, 'W sprawie syntezy dziejów sztuki polskiego odrodzenia', *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 14: 1952, 14-39.