

## History of Art today.

### Annual meeting of the Polish Association of Art Historians. Poznań, November 19<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>th</sup> 2009.

Reviewed by Anna Poczobutt and Agnieszka Gryśka

The Annual Meeting of the Association of Art Historians (Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki), held in Poznań on November 19<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>th</sup> 2009, focused mainly on the theme *History of Art Today*. The 75th anniversary of the Association of Art Historians and the 90th anniversary of the Faculty of History of Art at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Instytut Historii Sztuki, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza) determined the special character of the event. Unlike previous sessions, it did not address art as a historical phenomenon but turned its attention to the discipline of history of art itself.

The keynote lecture prior to the meeting was delivered by MARIA POPRZEĆKA, head of the Association of Art Historians. Poprzęcka presented her differentiation of “art history” into different yet co-existing types: “academic”, “informal” and “museum-related”. At the same time, she emphasized the fact that these types are all equally important and mentioned certain problems they are currently facing. Regarding the first type as practised in the art history departments at Polish universities, the speaker highlighted the stimulating potential of periodic crises which only a small number of researchers in the field are aware of. Poprzęcka also mentioned the topicality of Polish art history in relation to global trends as well as the innovative work carried out by scholars constantly forced to create new methodological approaches in response to changes that affect particular areas of their research. However, the speech also addressed the weaknesses of the current system of teaching art history which – having been forced into the framework of existing academic structures – is now producing graduates whose skills do not correspond to requirements of the job market.

According to Maria Poprzęcka, the current education system suffers from insufficiently trained adminis-

trators – as does the protection of works of art and the overseeing of artistic activities. She also addressed the most significant problems of “museum-related” art history, including the slow pace of changing organizational structure of museums as well as re-defining the objectives of their collecting and purchasing policies (taking into account the evolution of art itself and the demands of society). The speech was a perfect introduction to both the session in general and the issues raised by other speakers throughout the meeting.

The floor was then given to two speakers – JAROSŁAW JARZEWICZ and JANUSZ DOBESZ – who focused on the overarching theme of art historians’ self-perception and questioning of their activities with regard to current debates about the role and definition of the discipline in general. These two papers sparked a lively discussion as they raised issues aiming at research currently pursued at the Poznań Department of Art History. Scholars concerned were present in the room and confronted with direct criticism of passages from their publications.

Further papers by WOJCIECH BAŁUS and MARIUSZ BRYL proved to be as interesting as the first part of the meeting. The former elaborated on themes already touched upon by Jarzewicz such as digressions on analysis of inter pictorial relationships – a topic intriguing many contemporary art historians – and the category of ‘influence’ itself. Bryl, on the other hand, presented his own project of “enlightened criticism of images” as a specific methodological approach conceived in order to challenge manipulation we are subjected to in our civilization – often involuntarily and subconsciously – whilst frequenting public spaces. The speaker discussed a case study that focused on a selected example of a press photo, proving that the photo itself had been tampered with and

explaining its manipulative function when displayed next to an unrelated text. Both speeches were widely commented on during the following discussion.

The next section focused on the perception of art and the relationship between the artwork and the viewer or interpreter respectively. DARIUSZ TABOR asked provocatively whether it is possible to define an art-historical hermeneutics. Without pretending to have a ready answer to his own question, he sketched several lines of further investigation: project, horizons and interpretation. Guided by these concepts he attempted to interpret three works of art: the monstrance of Racibórz (c. 1495), the Epitaph of Jan Hess in Wrocław (1547-1549) and the building of the Resurrectionists' Clerical Seminary in Kraków (1985-1996). The author emphasized that interpretation can only ever be a final negotiation of the multi-contextual reading of an artwork, hence forcing art historians to use multiple hermeneutics. KRYSZYNA BOGACKA presented the perception of art from a psychological point of view as cultural and sociological phenomenon. Focusing on an area ignored by the history of art, she traced the processes taking place in the viewer's mind whilst engaging with an artwork. Bogacka pointed out the 'illiterate' perception of art (in terms of academic knowledge) as a matter of special interest.

The discernible theme drawing together the last section was the relationship between history of art and other disciplines. First, KAZIMIERZ PIOTROWSKI gave an elaborate outline of the understanding of history of art and philosophy of art as forming components of the post-modern tradition. The author applied the philosophical concept of thaumaturgy (the capability to work miracles) to the discourse on art. MATEUSZ SALWA considered whether there is a borderline between history of art and aesthetics. Characterizing history of art as a discipline aiming at generality and aesthetics as one in search of the particular, he emphasized theory as their common basis and concluded that any borderline – if existing at all – is merely an institutional one. GRAŻYNA BASTEK presented an approach to the technological history of art, an interdisciplinary method using the latest technology in order to reveal the original appearance of the artwork. The correct attribution of artworks is not the only result of combining successfully practical

skills with historical knowledge. By turning its attention to the 'invisible', technological history of art questions interpretations hitherto advanced by scholars relying exclusively on the final or current state of the object. The importance of the technological approach was recognized in the lively debate following this paper.

The four thematic sections on the second day of the meeting included presentations mostly concerned with methodological issues, focusing in particular on the interdisciplinary exchange of knowledge when studying objects at the threshold of several academic disciplines. Papers delivered during the morning sections dealt with methodological problems and ideas arising within clearly distinguishable fields of research, namely Byzantine art, the study of castle architecture, and furniture design. JACEK MAJ presented the current state and possibilities of the study of Byzantine art in Poland based on a survey conducted within the small community of Polish scholars specializing in this period. TOMASZ RATAJCZAK demonstrated that castle architecture is either ignored completely or mentioned only briefly in art-historical publications. He forcefully postulated that this attitude be changed, for example by applying stylistic analysis to this type of building, investigating symbolic meanings of castle architecture, or employing criteria taken from descriptions in current urban literature. Ratajczak thus insists on characterizing castle studies as a field of research where the disciplines of art history, archaeology and architecture need to cooperate. TADEUSZ ŻUCHOWSKI had prepared a paper on the study of furniture design in Poland which – in his absence – was read by Piotr Korduba. A key point was the lack of methodological reflection in this area. Instead of concentrating exclusively on traditional stylistic analyses new insights could be gained by employing methods inspired by post-modernism, recognizing pieces of furniture as objects perceived by touch which are more akin to kinetic installations with regard to their features and movable parts.

The following section comprised the papers by JANOS BRENDEL and GABRIELA ŚWITEK who addressed shortcomings of art history in engaging with the oeuvre of particular modern artists. Brendel saw one reason in the low quality of many works of con-

temporary art. Świtek, on the other hand, presented a number of public artworks which, he argued, form in themselves attempts at introducing a degree of order to their respective spatial settings. The papers by FILIP LIPIŃSKI and EWA ŁUKASZEWICZ-JĘDRZEJEWSKA engaged with the relationship between art history and the media. Generally considered to be of marginal importance or completely irrelevant to the discipline, the media accordingly ought to be endorsed both as unrelated partner in the area of academic reflections and as a teaching tool. Based on Erwin Panofsky's classic work and the current surge of interest in the theory of Aby Warburg, Lipiński argued that cinema and fine arts are becoming increasingly similar, both visually and conceptually. Łukaszewicz-Jędrzejewska discussed her own method teaching the history of art as well as advertising in schools: the comparison of both fields – presented through a network of relations – supports the students' learning process.

The following section was largely devoted to the exchange of knowledge between related areas of research. TOMASZ DZIUBECKI presented a modern visualization of an architectural object and its use as a teaching aid. JAKUB LEWICKI discussed examples of overlap between the history of art as taught at universities and the history of architecture as taught at technical universities; and IWONA BŁASZCZYK analyzed the state of the current system of monument protection in Poland.

The third day of the meeting was divided into two parts: history of art in context of museum and university. In the first speech, PIOTR PIOTROWSKI addressed the potential tension between these institutions and considered the roles of the curator and the professor – both of which he embodies. He discussed their respective ways of expressing themselves and analyzing works of art with regard to their intended audiences. He saw the widening gap between curator and professor in the light of the linguistic turn within the humanities and discussed ways in which they are still able to engage with, and influence each other. MARCIN SZELAĞ discussed the status of museum education in Poland which, he argued, is neglected in spite of the museums' established didactic role and growing social expectations to increase art-historical

literacy. Szelağ highlighted the discrepancy between the relevance of museum education as the only way to fulfill these expectations on the one hand and the diminished prestige of education officers as compared to curators on the other – as long as the former are merely seen as “helpers”, no meaningful museum education can take place. MARIA BRODZKA-BESTRY came to similar conclusions. She also presented the educational techniques and ideas applied in the Education Department of the Royal Castle in Warszawa. KATARZYNA KLUCZWAJD discussed the same problem from the curator's point of view. She pointed out that the esteem of this profession has decreased since 1989. Accordingly, curators have now been degraded to mere organizers whereas they used to be at the heart of the museum as an institution. Rather than creating a museum's profile and shaping the visitors' artistic tastes, KluczwaJD suggested, the curator has become a mere “executor” of the institution's marketing plan driven by the need to attract as large audiences as possible.

The last part of the meeting included brief presentations of Art History Departments in nine academic centers of Poland. Short histories of these institutions were presented, key figures and events highlighted and a survey of their current activities and didactic policies given. (See the conference overview) This review of academic art history in Poland demonstrated the variety of different approaches within the same discipline. Thus, the differences to be observed not only form a diverse and rich educational profile of history of art in Poland but also ensure a fruitful intellectual exchange between the respective institutions and scholars.

The papers and discussions during the three-day meeting highlighted various tensions within the discipline. However, they do not have to be perceived as a potential threat to the integrity of history of art. In fact, they can even contribute towards a future renewal and strengthening of Art History. A greater awareness of its rich methodological tradition and the opening of perspectives for future research is only one of many results of the meeting.

## Conference overview

*Opening address:* Maria Poprzęcka (Warszawa)

*Panel I* (Moderation Piotr Juszkiewicz)

Janusz Dobesz (Wrocław): Historyk sztuki – zawód, posłannictwo czy hobby? (Art Historian - profession, mission or hobby?)

Jarosław Jarzewicz (Poznań): Czy historia sztuki jest już historią? (Is Art History a history yet?)

Wojciech Bałus (Kraków): O residuach stylistycznej historii sztuki (On residua of the stylistic art history)

Mariusz Bryl (Poznań): Etyczny wymiar krytyki obrazu (Ethical dimension of image criticism)

*Panel II* (Moderation: Wojciech Bałus)

Dariusz Tabor CR (Kraków): Czy istnieje hermeneutyka historii sztuki? (Does the hermeneutics of Art History exist?)

Katarzyna Bogacka (Warszawa): Społeczne aspekty postrzegania i interpretacji sztuki. Przyczynek metodologiczny (Social aspects of perceiving and interpreting art. Methodological contribution)

Kazimierz Piotrowski (Łódź): Historia sztuki wobec daru (między odpowiedzialnością a taumaturgia) (Art History and the gift (between responsibility and thaumaturgy))

Mateusz Salwa (Warszawa): Czy historia sztuki i estetyka ze sobą graniczą? (Do art history and esthetics border upon each other?)

Grażyna Bastek (Warszawa): Technical art history, czyli archeologia malarstwa (Technical art history – archeology of painting)

*Panel III* (Moderation: Jarosław Jarzewicz)

Jacek Maj (Kraków): Historia sztuki bizantyńskiej w Polsce. Stan i perspektywy badawcze (History of the Byzantine art in Poland. Present researches and perspectives)

Tomasz Ratajczak (Poznań): Polska historia sztuki wobec badań kastelologicznych (Polish art history in consideration of castelology researches)

Tadeusz J. Żuchowski (Poznań): O problemach polskich badań nad meblarstwem (Concerning questions of Polish furniture studies)

János Brendel (Poznań): Historia sztuki wobec sztuki współczesnej (Art history and contemporary art)

Gabriela Świtek (Warszawa): „Zwrot przestrzenny”? Historia sztuki a współczesne praktyki artystyczne (Spatial turn? History of art in view of contemporary art praxis)

*Panel IV* (Moderation: Piotr Krasny)

Filip Lipiński (Poznań): Historia sztuki wobec kina i studiów nad filmem (History of art in consideration of the cinema and film studies)

Ewa Łukaszewicz-Jędrzejewska (Wrocław): „Nazywał się Bosch... Hieronimus Bosch”. (His name was Bosch... Hieronymus Bosch)

Jakub Lewicki (Warszawa): Politechniczna historia architektury a uniwersytecka historia sztuki. Przemiany ostatnich lat i perspektywy rozwoju (Politechnical history of architecture against the background of University history of art. Last years' transformations and development perspectives)

Tomasz Dziubecki (Białystok): Wizualizacja architektury zabytkowej. Możliwości i wyzwania (Visualisation of historical architecture. Opportunities and challenges)

Iwona Błaszczuk (Poznań): Historyk sztuki wobec współczesnej ochrony zabytków (Art historians concerning art conservation in present days)

*Panel V* (Moderation: Mariusz Bryl)

Piotr Piotrowski (Poznań): Dwie (lub więcej) historie sztuki (Two (or more) histories of art)

Marcin Szelaż (Poznań): Historia sztuki w muzeum (Art History in museums)

Katarzyna Kluczwajd (Toruń): Czy dziś muzeum potrzebny jest kustosz? (Do museums still need a custodian?)

Maria Brodzka-Bestry (Warszawa): Spotkanie ze sztuką w muzeum. Metody pracy historyka sztuki z dziećmi, młodzieżą i dorosłymi (Meeting art in the museum. Art historians working with children, students and adults)

*Art History at Polish Universities. Academic faculty, research perspectives* (Moderation: Tadeusz J. Żuchowski)

Jacek Friedrich: Uniwersytet Gdański (Gdańsk University)

Barbara Szczypka-Gwiazda: Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach (University of Silesia, Katowice)

Piotr Krasny: Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie (Jagiellonian University, Kraków)

Krzysztof Stefański: Uniwersytet Łódzki (Łódź University)

Ryszard Mączyński: Uniwersytet im. Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń)

Zbigniew Bania: Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Warszawa)

Aleksandra Sulikowska-Gąska: Uniwersytet Warszawski (University of Warszawa)

Waldemar Okoń: Uniwersytet Wrocławski (Wrocław University)

Piotr Korduba: Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)

## Authors

Anna Poczobutt has received her MA in Art History from Adam-Mickiewicz-University in Poznań in 2007. Currently, continues her research as a PhD student, working on her dissertation on the architecture of EXPO pavillions after the World War II, focusing on the issue of "temporal architecture". Her further academic interests include contemporary architecture, modern and contemporary design.

Agnieszka Gryska is art historian, PhD student at the Adam-Mickiewicz-University in Poznań, where she deals with the discourse of ornament in 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture. Active also as a curator, among others curated (in cooperation with dr Małgorzata Jankowska) project of city space interventions *Entopia. Harmony of the city in Toruń*. Contributes with *ARTLUK magazine*, where she co-conducts the rubric "archiwalia".

## Conference review

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