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*Art East Central*. 2023, vol. [3], iss. 3, pp. 177-182

ISSN 2695-1428 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/AEC2023-3-11>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79019>

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Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20231222

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## Keywords

Poland; national art; national culture; architecture; historicism; Zakopane style; scientific societies

<https://doi.org/10.5817/AEC2023-3-11>

# National Art and Culture in Poland before the First World War

A Review of: Adrianna Dominika Sznapić, *'Otoczyć naród swój pięknem...'* *Dyskusja wokół idea kultury i sztuki narodowej na ziemiach polskich na przełomie XIX i XX wieku na tle prądów europejskich* [‘To surround the nation with beauty...’ Discussion around the idea of national culture and art in the Polish lands of the turn of the 19th century in the context of European tendencies]. Warsaw: Institute of Art History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2021. 486 pp. ISBN 978-83-66911.

## Natalia Keller

This book by Adrianna Dominika Sznapić is devoted to the discourse of national art and culture in Poland. It elaborates on a broad chronological and thematic range of concepts, events and activities in an attempt to trace the development and evolution of the ideas of national art, style and culture proposed by the Polish intelligentsia before Poland regained its independence in 1918. Much of the publication focuses on the last decades of the nineteenth century (from around 1880) until the outbreak of the First World War. However, in specific cases, the author ventures back to as early as the 1820-1830s, while the epilogue discusses events of 1925. The monograph thus covers a period of around a century. As for the term used in the title of the volume: ‘Polish lands’ (Polskie ziemie) refers to the territory of the pre-partition Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth composed of parts of modern-day Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia.

The publication has a complex structure divided into four sections. Part One serves as an introduction to the main argument and provides details about methodology, chronological and territorial scope, used literature and sources as well as goals of the study. The last chapter of this section also briefly explains the ideas of John Ruskin and the Arts & Crafts Movement as well as their reception in various countries of continental Europe. Following the author’s claims, the main goal of the volume is to recreate the discourse revolving ideas of national art and culture that took place in the Polish lands and to uncover the intellectual background that stimulated the discussions about them. Additionally, the social reception of these ideas is further analysed in the context of cultural private associations that, according to the author, attempted to translate the postulates of discussions into practice (p. 8). From a very wide range of tangible and intangible cultural heritage that expressed patriotic feelings of the Polish intelligentsia of the turn of the nineteenth century – such as literature, music and customs, to name just a few – the volume’s subsequent sections focus principally on architecture and, to a smaller extent, applied arts, which were ‘the best fields for application of national styles’ since ‘almost every person was in contact with these art disciplines’

(p. 11). To trace the development of the concepts of national art and style, Sznapiak undertakes interdisciplinary research merging methods of history of art and architecture with those of social history, culture studies, history of ideas and the history of science (p. 13). As such, the volume promises a new, interesting perspective on a topic that has been broadly studied in art history principally in terms of aesthetic and formal characteristics.<sup>1</sup>

In Part Two the author identifies and analyses two tendencies in the discussion of national art. The first consists of historicism and debates about architectural styles of the past. Sznapiak focuses on early discussions and scholarship related with the development of disciplines of the history of art and architecture, museology, architectural conservation and preservation and on how they influenced the emergence of styles that lay claim to the title of ‘national style’. These included a variant of northern gothic called the Vistula-Baltic style (*styl wiślano-bałtycki*), which became the preferred style for church architecture of the turn of the century, or the so-called *styl nadwiślański* (Vistula style), which was inspired by the Gothic architecture of Lesser Poland (the area around Cracow). Other, lesser known and loosely defined options included the so-called ‘homely style’ (*styl swojski*) or the ‘transitional style’ (*styl przejściowy*). One of the most interesting issues touched upon is the fact that early studies of art historical character deliberated over when, in the past, Polish art and architecture stopped being independent and instead started closely following Western tendencies. Such considerations often influenced the selection of preferred historical styles as model sources for the proposed national styles. The section also explores the idea of national painting expounded in the writings of Karol Matuszewski (1842-1902). An art critic and publicist, Matuszewski studied Cracow’s medieval and early-modern guild painting, and sought to establish its distinctive, local, independent character. For Matuszewski, the later development of Polish art was inhibited by the aggressive and overwhelming introduction of Renaissance art and only in the works of his own contemporaries (they included, among others, the painters Artur Grottger, Jan Matejko or Józef Chełmoński) could he observe the rebirth of national painting (pp. 74-78). This is an interesting claim and Sznapiak suggests, too, for some writers on the subject, national art had more to do with iconography than with any formal national style.

The second tendency identified by Sznapiak in this section looked back to vernacular folk art and architecture in search of models for the national style. Here, notable examples were the well-known and much-studied Zakopane style or the so-called *styl dworski* (the manorial style) a classicising tendency that looked to the Polish noble house (*dwór* or *dworek*) as its model. The chapters devoted to the inventor and main promoter of Zakopane style, Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851-1915), are the most comprehensive and well developed. Among others, the reader is presented with an interesting discussion that Witkiewicz and his supporters held in the press with a group of architects (Edgar Kováts, Władysław Ekielski and Jan Sas Zubrzycki) who, following technical and scientific norms of their profession, refused to accept that the Zakopane style could be considered a style at all. The conflict seems to illustrate well the fact that the style in question was the invention of an *artist*, not an architect, with a specific ideological agenda.

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1) Key publications in English on the topic include: David Crowley, *National Style and the Nation-State: Design in Poland from the Vernacular Revival to the International Style*, Manchester-New York: Manchester University Press, 1992; Nicola Gordon Bowe, ed., *Art and the National Dream: The Search for Vernacular Expression in Turn-off-the-Century Design*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1993; Andrzej Szczerski, ed., *Polskie style narodowe 1890-1918 / Polish national styles 1890-1918*, Cracow: National Museum, 2021.

Derived from the picturesque imagination of the origins of Polish architecture, the Zakopane style gained popularity as a symbol of 'Polishness' that appealed to the ambitions and unfulfilled aspirations of the upper middle class, mainly in the Congress Poland and Eastern Borderlands, who wished to emphasise their Polish identity visually. What is perhaps missing from this examination of the discussions around the Zakopane style is a consideration as to whether Witkiewicz was himself a modernizing reformer or merely a nostalgic romantic.<sup>2</sup>

Part Three changes the perspective and attempts to present the social reception of the ideas of national art and culture. To do so, the author chooses to analyse the activities of a number of private cultural and scientific associations and societies. These are discussed in three subchapters, each devoted to a land under the rule of another partitioning state, with their main cities treated as centres of activities: Galicia with Kraków and Lviv, Grand Duchy of Posen with Poznań and Congress Poland with Warsaw. As the author explains, the emphasis is put on Galicia, due to the legal and formal restrictions that limited the possibility of similar activities in other partitions. Most of the societies discussed (including the Society for the Beautification of Cracow and its Surroundings, and the L'viv Historical Society) focused on the topics of architecture preservation and conservation. However, Sznepik presents also an array of organizations in fields such as history, science, education, literature, tourism, photography, museology or ethnography. The range of different types of endeavours (among others, books and journals publications, the organization of conferences and congresses, museums and exhibitions, lectures, courses, tours, commemoration events, scholarships, conservations) taken up by these private groups provides compelling evidence that they took over many functions of public institutions when Polish universities or national collections could not flourish or even exist.

The last, fourth, part contains the conclusion and an epilogue discussing the importance of some of the associations mentioned for preservation of cultural heritage during the Great War, as well as the public reception, as presented in press, of the Polish Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris in 1925.

The volume provides an important contribution to the literature on topics related to national culture and art in the Polish lands. It will be a useful introduction to, among others, profiles of scholars and professionals taking part in the discussions about Polish heritage and to the early achievements of Polish academia, including those in art history, archaeology, ethnography, conservation, or museology. It also presents a wide perspective on the concept of 'national style' and discusses many of the proposed styles that refer to both historicism and folk tradition. Moreover, readers will welcome the abundant quotations from primary sources – archival documents, historic publications and press clippings – that might not be readily available elsewhere. In general, Sznepik presents a good overview of the voices and highlights in the discussions relating to the concept of national character and culture of the turn of the century. Her book is a welcome addition to Polish historiography that emphasises continuation (as opposed to rupture) between Polish cultural thought before 1918 and that of the interwar Second Polish Republic.

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2) This idea has been proposed principally in Andrzej Szczerski, 'Styl narodowy – Zakopane, Litwa i Esperanto,' in idem, *Cztery nowoczesności. Teksty o sztuce i architekturze polskiej XX wieku* [Four modernities: texts on Polish art and architecture in the twentieth century], Cracow: Neriton, 2015, 19-39. Szczerski observes that the Zakopane style had also modernizing, democratizing and universal character and was intended to serve as an initiator of social reform.

However, covering such a broad thematic scope, the publication is not without its shortcomings. The author herself admits that the subject she placed in the centre of her reflection is 'difficult to define, oftentimes almost intangible, looming between the lines of programmatic texts, deciphered intuitively from the surrounding architecture or artworks' (p. 7). And indeed, the reader struggles with the elusiveness of the main topic throughout the volume. Following the proceedings of the 1995 conference of the Association of Polish Art Historians, Sznajdek defines 'national style' as the vehicle of an idea, consciously intended and received as a sign of a specific patriotic idea (pp. 9-10).<sup>3</sup> However, throughout the study, terms such as 'national style', 'Polish art', 'national art', 'national culture', 'Polish cultural heritage', 'Polish spirit' and 'national feelings' are used interchangeably and, without justification, her definition is applied to all of them. As a result, the reader is left wondering what the relationship and direction of influence between these terms might be (or how the author understands them). Can art be national in character but not in the national style? Is *all* Polish heritage automatically considered national art and why (or not)? Another issue is the use of the concept 'Polishness' and the adjective 'Polish' in reference to culture and art. What definition of these terms does the author follow, for instance, in her selection of source material? It is not stated directly, but the definition that emerges between the lines has a conservative character where 'Polish' means of Polish ethnicity and Catholic origin, excluding from discussion the national, ethnic and religious minorities that composed the society of the pre-partitions Commonwealth. The author states that the issue of the reciprocal influence of Polish and, for instance, Ukrainian, Lithuanian or Jewish discourse about national culture exceeds the scope of the study (p. 12), but one might nevertheless have hoped for discussion about whether non-Catholic and ethnically non-Polish examples would have been considered part of the 'Polish national culture' at the time.<sup>4</sup>

The overall character of the publication is compilatory with the ambition of offering analytical examination, but the reader is sometimes left wanting more critical inspection of some issues. For instance, the problem of class is fully omitted from the examination even though it was surely an important factor. Considering that virtually the only participants in the debates and the societies that fostered them were the aristocratic, intellectual and artistic elites, the question remains as to how or even *if* they extended to all layers of a Polish society that was predominantly rural and agrarian character. Related to this are the ideas, mentioned earlier, of democratization, social reform and the modernizing character of the national style projects, which are all absent from the analysis. This is part of a deeper issue about the study, namely that there is little discussion of why or to what end the national styles were conceived in the first place. What were their theoreticians' goals and ambitions apart from the straightforward preservation or expression of the national character?

Finally, a reader with an art historical background will perhaps be wondering about the selection of the photos illustrating the volume. Their usage may sometimes give the impression of the lack of purposefulness that a study of visual material requires. This might be because

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3) D. Konstantynów, R. Pasieczny and P. Paszkiewicz, eds, *Nacjonalizm w sztuce i historii sztuki 1789-1950. Materiały z konferencji zorganizowanej przez Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk i Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki w dniach 5-7 grudnia 1995 w Warszawie*, Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1998.

4) The only reference to the issue is regarding the presence of Hutsulshchyna in the Galicia Pavilion at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1900, 228-229.

of the academic background of the author: Sznapiak is not an art historian, but a historian focusing on the history of ideas, culture and social history. As a result, we find photographs of objects that are not mentioned in the text or are irrelevant to the argument (for example, many various designs related to the English Arts & Crafts Movement), while in other places where specific buildings or styles are discussed, the reader will find no accompanying relevant illustrations.

Despite such shortcomings, Sznapiak's book will be a relevant addition to the bibliography for anyone interested in the topics of history, culture and patriotism of the times before Poland reappeared on the map of Europe. It contains a significant amount of scholarship regarding the thought and activities of Polish intelligentsia of the turn of the nineteenth century and will be a useful basis for further critical studies devoted to the history of art and architecture in Poland.



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