
Anna Baranowa / Józef Czapski – on dilettantism and ardency

I am wondering how it happens that I consider Józef Czapski to be one of the closest to me artists. It is enough when I reach out for his texts, or see, here or there, one of his paintings. Even after a long break. In his case the artist format tightly combines with the human format. 20 years after his death there is probably no doubt about Czapski having been an artist and a man who had lived up to all dimensions, even though he himself would hesitate endlessly, what was reflected on the pages of his diary, where he used to record day by day his struggle for his own vision to “reach his own breath”. “What for do you paint? What for do you write? Because you know that this is where you can afford a sort of progress, where you can move, if you are able to be at work entirely” – he wrote down in his diary on 8 June 1965. The repeated questions about sense of creation were enforced with an opinion uttered about the artist. His fellow-painters from Komitet Paryski [Parisian Committee], who he took more care about than himself, were ready to treat him rather as a manager in charge of their issues than a painter. It was rooted deep down in him as he talked about this even at the end of his life, when he eventually could feel great admiration. His friends from the aristocratic *milieu* did not save him anguish either. Wacław Zbyszewski in his article, published in the London “News” on the occasion of the artist’s 70th anniversary, gathered numerous *lieux communs* concerning Czapski that circulated in the Polish émigré milieu. How does it happen that in Polish out-of-the-way places artists who exceed one discipline become disparaged, what, luckily, has changed recently?

I like the idea of seeing a complete, or following Wojciech Karpiński’s expression, “a multi-stringed” personality in Czapski. I am also in the group of those who see Czapski high – as the culmination of a spirit. In this sense the dilettantism he was accused of becomes an attitude of acute, open and penetrating minds. This is exactly what Czapski was like, he derived freely from universal culture, not feeling forced to justify his choices. Culture – understood as the domain of a human spirit – was his natural environment, he used to infect others with love for it. And how should an art historian write about these ardent fulfillments? Do Józef Czapski’s diaries make studies on his painting easier or more difficult? Most certainly both. As a lasting source of traces and concepts they are incredibly refreshing, but at the same time they impose limitations and points of view as we suddenly find ourselves thinking and writing in Czapski’s phrases, both illuminating and neurotic. The painter raises the bar high for those who study his oeuvre. He makes them take an ardency test.