



1. NN, photograph showing the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists - in the foreground *An Archer* sculpture by Olga Niewska, 1930, photography, 8,9 × 12,7 cm; Leon Wyczółkowski District Museum in Bydgoszcz. Photo: by courtesy of the Leon Wyczółkowski District Museum in Bydgoszcz

The 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists in Bydgoszcz

On the strategies of visibility on the cultural map of the reborn Second Polish Republic

Karolina Rosiejka

University of Arts in Poznań

Introduction

The 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists, organised in 1930 in Bydgoszcz, was an atypical event, both among Polish exhibitions and in the history of women's art exhibitions. This text aims to introduce this exhibition, which is completely forgotten today. It will serve to look at and explain the reasons for its particularity. It will show the consequences of the event, which, as will be demonstrated, allow us today to better understand the conditions to which women's creativity was subjected, paving the way for the mainstream phenomena of interwar exhibitionism. The focus will be on the intentions of the organizers of this exhibition, the attitudes of the participating artists, the works presented and their reception¹.

Women's art exhibitions historically took place in large urban centres and liberal institutions. Bydgoszcz, however, was a peripheral and conservative cultural centre on the map of the Second Republic. Organising an exhibition of Polish women artists in the centre of Kuyavia was therefore an unusual move. Reading accounts of women's art exhibitions in the press of the inter-war period, one can see that presentations showing the activities of exclusively female artists were treated as events that were innovative and modern in their intentions, although they had already begun to appear in the 19th c. – in Poland and elsewhere. For a long time, women's artistic activity did not have a professional dimension, and female adepts of art all over the world were deprived of the opportunity to participate fully in artistic education and creative life until the end of the World War I.



¹ The information contained in this text is the result of research carried out within the framework of a scientific project implemented at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań under the direction of Prof. Agata Jakubowska within the funds of the National Science Centre and the project 2013/09/B/HS2/02065 under the title *The History of Women's Art Exhibitions in Poland*. The project reconstructs the history of women's art exhibitions in Poland and its territories from the 19th to the early 21st c., showing constants in women's exhibitions as well as the evolution of certain ideas. During a search at the Bydgoszcz Regional Museum, which was one of the stages of the work, it was possible to discover hitherto unpublished information about the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists and to reconstruct its shape and history.



² T. Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women's Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven 1994, pp. 5–10.

³ J. Sosnowska, *Przedmiot i rzecz*, "Sztuka i Dokumentacja" 2016, No. 15, p. 10.

⁴ M. Pepchinski, *Feminist Space: Exhibitions and Discourses between Philadelphia and Berlin 1865–1912*, Weimar 2007, p. 154.

They were forced to take expensive private lessons or attend courses organised by progressive non-state institutions, but requiring the payment of appropriate tuition fees. Teachers often gave women less attention than students of the opposite sex. As a result, they were in a weaker position than men. However, as Tamar Garb notes, women reacted to these unfavourable conditions in the second half of the 19th c. by starting to form associations to help them participate more effectively in the art world². Opportunities were seen in the spirit of cooperation. It was thought that in this way it would be possible to help women artists to exhibit and sell their artworks. Organisations such as the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs or the Society of Female Artists, as well as many others, started exhibitions of art created exclusively by women. They helped raise funds for education, developing skills, and gave publicity to women's achievements in the press. Their members were mainly women artists from affluent families with liberal attitudes and, to a lesser extent, representatives of the well-to-do middle class. For the economic effort involved in becoming an artist was within the financial reach of these groups. In addition, compared to men, the status of women creators was less associated with earning a living, which was hugely controversial in the 19th century. Female labour was seen as indecent and disruptive to the social order, where the man was responsible for providing for the family's material existence. Women's organisations for female artists and their exhibitions were geared towards introducing women to the field of art, and from a 19th c. perspective, the road to their full professionalisation remained long. The second opportunity to exhibit work was through exhibitions of women's work, popularised in the same century. As Joanna Sosnowska writes, they grew out of the idea of industrial exhibitions and monumental world exhibitions, showing the achievements of humanity as a whole³. They displayed objects of various kinds made by women's organisations and cooperatives, created to provide for the lower classes, as well as the fruits of the activities of women from the upper classes. They were intended to attest to skills in housekeeping or to feed charitable causes, as purchasable goods, the sale of which supported various philanthropic tasks. As Mary Pepchinski has pointed out, exhibitions of women's work in the 19th c., although they faced many organisational difficulties and were often met with reluctance, paved the way for women's artistic and exhibition activity in the following century⁴.

The organisation of the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists at the Bydgoszcz City Museum was unique for two reasons. Women's art exhibitions usually occurred in large urban centres and were initiated by associations supporting women's professional and artistic activity. The Bydgoszcz exhibition, on the other hand, took place in a peripheral art centre and was organised by the museum management without the mediation of women's organisations. These circumstances require characterisation and clarification.

The documentation of the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists gathered at the District Museum in Bydgoszcz, an institution established in place of the Bydgoszcz City Museum, i.e. the organiser of the event discussed here, indicates that the idea for the preparation and realisation of this presentation came entirely from the management of the institution and its employees. In 1930 the museum was headed by Kazimierz Borucki, who administered after Tadeusz Dobrowolski had left his post. Borucki continued the vigorous exhibition activities initiated by his predecessor, aiming to strengthen the position of the Bydgoszcz centre on the cultural map of the country⁵. Today we have no information about Borucki's sympathies, or lack thereof, for women's art and the idea of gender equality. However, it is possible to speculate that the idea to exhibit only the art of women artists was dictated by the desire to strengthen the position of the Bydgoszcz museum on the map of the reborn country. The issue of emancipation in the late 1920s and at the beginning of the following decade was strongly exposed in social discourse. It was one of the threads of the state narrative of the Second Republic, embodying, at least on the level of declarations, the modern progressive and socially engaged nature of government. Exhibitions of women's art functioned as evidence of the enlightened nature of cultural institutions, audiences and, more broadly, the country. They demonstrated a rejection of the harmful prejudices of the past, which will be discussed later in this text.

Not much was written about the exhibition itself. In 1930, reviews of the event appeared in the local press, in "Gazeta Bydgoska" and "Dziennik Bydgoski"⁶. Both magazines spoke positively about the exposition, pointing to the participation of both experienced and young, but always gifted women artists. This was supposed to be a good sign of the level of education in Poland, the creativity of female artists and the degree of equality being introduced in the country. The 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists in Bydgoszcz in 1930 was not subsequently written about for many years. This issue was raised a few years ago by Karolina Staszak in an article devoted to the exhibition activities of the Association of Polish Women Artists in Lviv⁷. The author points therein to the female painters from the Lviv association, present at the Bydgoszcz exhibition, as another exposition allowing for the display of women's art. However, the author does not provide any information about the Bydgoszcz event, as this was not the focus of her interest.

Faced with an extremely scarce state of research, the intentions of this text will be carried out on the basis of archival materials collected during a search at the District Museum in Bydgoszcz. In the event folder we can find, among other things: 1) correspondence between the museum employees; 2) letters exchanged between the museum and the artists who were to participate in the exhibition; 3) messages sent to the local press; 4) photographic documentation of



⁵ See Kazimierz Borucki [entry], [in:] S. Błażejowski, J. Kutta, M. Romaniuk, *Bydgoski słownik biograficzny*, Ed. J. Kutta, Vol. 2, Bydgoszcz 1995; M. Borowska, *Wystawy Związku Plastyków Pomorskich i Grupy Plastyków Pomorskich w Muzeum Miejskim w Bydgoszczy w latach 1930–1936*, "Porta Aurea" Vol. 17 (2018), pp. 136–139.

⁶ NN, *Wystawa Artystek Polskich*, "Gazeta Bydgoska" 1930, No. of 26 January, p. 6; NN, *Wystawa Malarek i Rzeźbiarek*, "Gazeta Bydgoska" 1930, No. of 28 January, p. 5; NN, *Kronika*, "Dziennik Bydgoski" 1930, No. of 26 January, p. 12.

⁷ K. Staszak, *Działalność wystawiennicza Związku Artystek Polskich we Lwowie*, "Sztuka i Dokumentacja" 2016, No. 15.



⁸ Quoted after a note prepared for the press from the folder of the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists (in the collection of the District Museum in Bydgoszcz).

the event; 5) an invitation to the opening; 6) a catalogue with a list of the exhibiting artists and the works they are presenting.

1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists

The exhibition was planned from January to February 1930. Due to its popularity it was extended until March. There were shown 120 works by 20 women artists: Zofia Albinowska-Minkiewiczowa, Anna Berent, Stanisława Centnerszwer, Aniela Czarnowska, Zofia Dziurzyńska-Rosińska, Wanda Gentil-Tippenhauer, Janina Gessnerówna, Ludmiła Kasztelanówna, Janina Konarska, Michalina Krzyżanowska, Malwina Menes-Kuczyńska, Dora Mukułowska, Olga Neymanowa, Olga Niewska, Kazimiera Pajzderska, Leona Szczepanowicz, Jadwiga Tetmajer-Naimska, Irena Weiss, Anna Wilczyńska and Maria Wodzicka.

According to the correspondence preserved in the museum and the materials accompanying the event and its organisation, it was initially intended to include only works by women who had previously exhibited at the 1929 General National Exhibition (GNE) in Poznań. Among those invited were artists who were recognisable at the time, as well as those who would become well-known in subsequent years due to their innovation and creative courage: Tamara Łempicka, Pia Górska, Janina Prószyńska and Stryjeńska, as well as Nina Alexandrowicz and Alicja Halicka, who were active in Paris at the time. However, the idea was modified due to the small number of works submitted from those previously involved in the GNE, to whom personal invitations were extended in advance. A large number of them never responded. As a result, the Bydgoszcz City Museum placed an announcement in various titles of the national press about the acceptance of women's works. It read as follows:

The Bydgoszcz City Museum intends to hold an exhibition of paintings and sculptures, **consisting exclusively of works by Polish women artists** [underlining as in the original], whose outstanding works have already delighted citizens throughout the country – especially during the General Exhibition in Poznań⁸.

The selection of works, exclusively by women and shown earlier at the GNE, finds a clear correlation with the way of thinking about Polishness at the time, under the sign of Józef Piłsudski's federalist concept of Polishness. It was based on the conviction that the strength of Polish society stemmed from its diversity, and that the presence of women in it was an indispensable and necessary aspect. The translation of this thought into practice was evidenced not only by the decreeing of women's suffrage at the end of November 1918, but also by support for women's social and emancipatory

activities⁹. As Aneta Górnicka-Boratyńska and Magdalena Gawin, researchers into the history of the women's movement in Poland, wrote, the 1920s were a period of intensified activity of various women's circles: those originating from the National Democracy movement, groups following in the footsteps of the organic work tradition and sympathising with the left wing of the time, headed by Zofia Moraczewska and Michalina Mościcka, as well as the most modern and radical feminists associated with the milieu of Irena Krzywicka¹⁰.

The legacy of the General National Exhibition

The General National Exhibition, crowning the first decade of freedom, was intended to show both the achievements of the first decade of independence and the commitment of all those who fought for Poland's independence and then worked in the reality of the Second Republic to consolidate it¹¹. The exhibition, was a highlight of the 1920s. It displayed the most important activities undertaken in the young state at the time. The official discourse around the General National Exhibition expressed intentions coinciding with the narrative of the authorities and their ways of constructing the image of the country in practical and symbolic terms. The issue of women's empowerment and the public presentation of their achievements during the Poznań General National Exhibition, which is at the focus of this article, was often taken up in the official periodical of the event, the "Echo Powszechnej Wystawy Krajowej" (Echo of the General National Exhibition), and in a collection of official texts published just after the GNE, by the office organising the event, under the title *Powszechna Wystawa Krajowa w Poznaniu w roku 1929* (General National Exhibition in Poznań in 1929). The following statements can be found in these publications:

Do we realise the importance and momentousness of this great task? Do we feel sufficiently in touch with the living pulse with which our work must beat, in order to recreate the resilience of effort and the forging of the hammers of the underground during the period of captivity? To prove our participation in the gigantic struggle for final liberation [...]. The General National Exhibition is to testify to the vigour and will of the Polish spirit [...]. About connecting the past with the present to pave the way for future healthy actions¹².

There was no way that the achievements of women's work and creativity could be placed outside the framework of the great picture of Polish accomplishments that will be the General National Exhibition of 1929 [...]. The fervent heart that Polish women have always put into every endeavour of national importance will undoubtedly be able to strike a lively pulse this time, too, when it comes to the dignity of her achievements and the well-deserved glory of her name¹³.



⁹ See A. Deruga, *O federalizmie i polityce wschodniej obozu belwederskiego (na marginesie książki Józefa Lewandowskiego "Federalizm. Litwa i Białoruś w polityce obozu belwederskiego (listopad 1918 - kwiecień 1920)*, Warszawa 1962, s. 271), "Przegląd Historyczny" 1964, No. 2.

¹⁰ A. Górnicka-Boratyńska, *Staśmy się sobą: cztery projekty emancypacji (1863-1939)*, Izabelin 2001, p. 6; M. Gawin, *Spór o równouprawnienie kobiet (1864-1919)*, Warszawa 2015, p. 289.

¹¹ See M. R. Bombicki, *P.W.K. - Powszechna Wystawa Krajowa w Poznaniu 1929*, Poznań 1992, p. 11.

¹² *Odezwa Podkomitetu Krakowskiego "Do Polek"*, "Echo Powszechnej Wystawy Krajowej 1929" 1929, No. 2, p. 35.

¹³ J. Lutosławski, *Praca kobiet na P.W.K.*, "Echo Powszechnej Wystawy Krajowej w roku 1929" 1929, No. 11, pp. 7-8.



¹⁴ S. Wachowiak, *Powszechna Wystawa Krajowa w Poznaniu w roku 1929*, Poznań 1930, p. 275.

¹⁵ See J. Sosnowska, *Poza kanonem. Sztuka polskich artystek 1880-1939*, Warszawa 2003, pp. 179-220; A. Kos-trzyńska-Miłosz, *Sztuka w rzemiośle na Powszechnej Wystawie Krajowej w Poznaniu*, "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki" 2009, No. 4; Sz. P. Kubiak, "Nowy duch" w Poznaniu. *Pawilon Pracy Kobiet Anatolii Hryniewickiej-Piotrowskiej*, "Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki" 2009, No. 4; M. Leśniakowska, *Nagie ciało architektury. Pawilon "Praca Kobiet" na Powszechnej Wystawie Krajowej w Poznaniu*, "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki" 2009, No. 4; K. Rosiejka, *Dyskurs wokół zagadnienia pracy kobiet w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym. Na przykładzie wypowiedzi towarzyszących Pawilonowi Pracy Kobiet oraz Pawilonowi Ziemianek i Włościanek na Powszechnej Wystawie Krajowej w Poznaniu*, "Sztuka i Dokumentacja" 2016, No. 15.

¹⁶ See E. Kiewnarska, *Pawilon Ziemianek i Włościanek na PWK w Poznaniu*, "Bluszcz" 1929, No. 24, p. 8.

¹⁷ See N...ska, *Pawilon Pracy Kobiet*, "Bluszcz" 1929, No. 26, p. 17.

¹⁸ See T. Seweryn, *Kontrasty na Powszechnej Wystawie Krajowej*, "Rzeczy Piękne" 1929, No. 7/9; N...ska, *Pawilon...*

The first demonstration of women's work in Poland [...] has unfailingly become an important step forward in the history of the progress and development of women's activity [...]¹⁴.

Women's activity, as part of the official discourse of the government agenda organising the General National Exhibition, was presented as extremely important. This activity was supposed to span the entire history of Poland, which had been co-created by generations of female citizens. With the establishment of the Second Republic of Poland, the historical legacy of women's activism was made visible and treated as a positive force for getting out from under the slavery during the Partition. The present and the future became just as important as the past. In the above statements they appear as still requiring women's participation.

The discursive emphasis on women's participation in Poland's history and present translated into the organisation of two exclusively women's pavilions at the General National Exhibition: The Pavilion of Women's Work and the Pavilion of Women Landed Gentry and Peasant Women¹⁵. Both expositions were prepared by exclusively women's associations: The Committee of the Women's Labour Exhibition and the General Council of the Women Landed Gentry. Various objects, not only art, were collected there. Documentation of the activities of women's organisations, artisanry, products of women's cooperatives, artisanship, individual examples of painting and sculpture were displayed. Both highlighted the involvement of the female part of Polish society, both urban and rural, in building a national identity, fighting the Partitioners and developing the Second Republic. The most important aspect of both pavilions was to emphasise the diverse and positive dimension of women's activities, which went far beyond art.

In the Pavilion of Women Landed Gentry and Peasant Women, the works of female folk artists working on kilims, embroidery and handicrafts were shown in the area of art, according to descriptions written by visitors to this exhibition¹⁶. One could also watch the work of professional artists Lela Pawlikowska and Jadwiga Mazaraki who mainly dealt with themes of folklore and village life. Art was more strongly presented in the Pavilion of Women's Work. The very building by Anatolia Hryniewiecka-Piotrowska was a manifesto of the architect's fascination with modern abstract art. The central place inside the Pavilion – as we read again in the accounts of the GND – was occupied by works by artists recognised in the art world: Olga Boznańska, Luna Draxlerowa, Krzyżanowska or Stryjeńska¹⁷. At the same time, it was pointed out that the largest number of women presented their works at the Palace of Art, which, after all, became the subject of criticism from the left-wing women's circles of the time, considering it a betrayal of women's solidarity¹⁸.

At the Palace of Art, examples of some of the most prominent works by contemporary women and men artists were on display, particularly those in a modern expressionist and geometric style. The works presented in the Palace of Art were intended to show the modern character of Poland as a country whose citizens were willing to take courageous steps in pursuit of the continuous development of the young country and its art¹⁹. In the hall of honour (which was the heart of the exhibition – as the “Echo Powszechnej Wystawy Krajowej” proclaimed²⁰), only Boznańska’s works were placed, as the only woman among many men – the classics of Polish modern art. In the smaller expositions of art groups, women were a real rarity. As part of the Sztuka Polish Artists’ Art Society exhibition, sculptures by Zofia Trzcińska-Kamińska were presented, in addition to Boznańska’s works again. Kazimiera Adamska-Rouba, Maria Borzobohata-Woźnicka, Halina Dąbrowska, Leona Szczepanowicz and Helena Teodorowicz-Karpowska appeared on behalf of the Vilnius Society of Artists. Also arriving from Vilnius were kilims under the banner of Vilnius Decorative Textiles, made exclusively by women. Among the artists from the Proarte, Zofia Rudzka and Władysława Augustynowicz exhibited their works at the Palace of Art, whilst from the Poznań Plastyka, Zofia Dziurzyńska-Rosińska appeared, and from the Praesens, Maria Nicz-Borowiakowa. There were also women artists from Paris in the group exhibition: Alexandrowicz, Wanda Chełmońska, Halicka, Konarska, Maryla Lednicka-Szczytt, Łempicka, Cecylia Marylska, Mela Muter, Neymanowa, Zofia Piramowicz, Irena Pokrzywicka, Helena Zielińska. Undoubtedly, women were most numerous on the periphery of the exhibition, in the section of artists with no affiliation to art groups, located on the second floor of the extremely spacious Palace of Art. Women, in this section of the exhibition, made up the bulk of the exhibitors, although men’s work occasionally appeared here too. Nevertheless, the tendency is striking. Women were remarkably rare participants in those parts of the show where the activities of the art groups were presented and in the hall of honour, while they often appeared in the less exposed part of the Palace of Art, devoid of any thematic background to structure the exhibition. Their presence on the periphery resulted also in a poor reception of their work.

The Bydgoszcz exhibition seems special in its intentions. On the one hand, its creators followed the official state narrative emphasising the progressive nature of modern national art and Polish society, especially in terms of its struggle for equality of women and men. On the other, the organisers of the Bydgoszcz exhibition seem to have ignored the problematic legacy of the General National Exhibition. In fact, the declarations accompanying the 1929 Poznań event turned out to be far from exhibition practice. Firstly, women’s artworks constituted a small fraction of all the objects on display, disappearing even within the women’s pavilions. Secondly, the declared apprecia-



¹⁹ See **D. Konstantynow**, “Gmach dziesięciolecia sztuki polskiej”. Pałac Sztuki na Powszechnej Wystawie Krajowej w Poznaniu, “Biuletyn Historii Sztuki” 2009, No. 4.

²⁰ **J. Mortkowicz**, *Sztuka i kultura. Pałac Sztuki na P.W.K.*, “Echo Powszechnej Wystawy Krajowej” 1929, No. 12, p. 77.



²¹ J. Sosnowska, *Przedmiot i rzecz...*, p. 13.

²² Mention should be made here of the activities of the Kolor Group, the Fresk Group, Ars Feminae, the Union of Polish Women Artists, and the Union of Polish Women Artists from Lviv. For documentation of the initiatives of the above-mentioned groups see *Wystawy sztuki kobiet*, <http://wystawykobiet.amu.edu.pl> (access date: 24.01.2023).

²³ See J. Wójciak, *Stosunki polityczne i narodowościowe w latach 1850-1914*, [in:] *Historia Bydgoszczy*, Sc. Ed. M. Biskup, Vol. 1: *Do roku 1920*, Warszawa-Poznań 1991, pp. 52-53; J. Kutta, *Polacy i Niemcy w Bydgoszczy w czasie zaborów (1772-1919)*, [in:] *Polacy i Niemcy w Bydgoszczy. Sympozjum, 20 kwietnia 2006*, Muzeum Okręgowe im. Leona Wyczółkowskiego w Bydgoszczy, Ed. I. Loose, Bydgoszcz 2006, p. 32.

²⁴ See K. Grysińska-Jarmuła, *Polsko-niemieckie relacje w Bydgoszczy w tzw. okresie pruskim*, [in:] *Dobre i złe sąsiedztwa. Historia kluczem do zrozumienia współczesnych relacji międzysąsiedzkich*, Sc. Ed. T. Maresz, K. Grysińska-Jarmuła, Bydgoszcz 2016, p. 68.

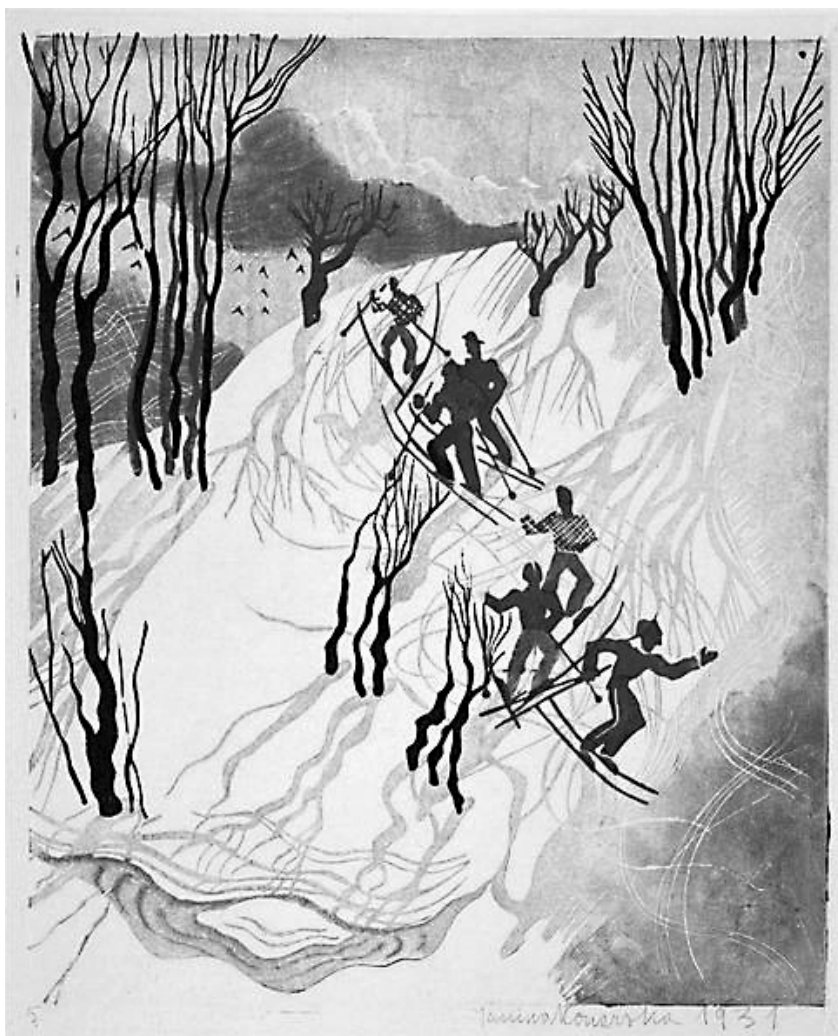
²⁵ See F. Mincer, *Bydgoszcz jako stolica Obwodu Nadnoteckiego w Królestwie Pruskim (1772-1806) i Departamentu Bydgoskiego w Księstwie Warszawskim (1807-1815)*, [in:] *Bydgoszcz jako ośrodek administracyjny na przestrzeni wieków*, Ed. Z. Biegański, W. Jastrzębski, Bydgoszcz 1998, pp. 85-107; I. Jastrzębska-Puzowska, *Od miasteczka do metropolii. Rozwój architektoniczny i urbanistyczny Bydgoszczy w latach 1850-1920*, Toruń 2006, p. 12; K. Grysińska-Jarmuła, *Bydgoszcz w okresie I wojny światowej*, "Kronika Bydgoska" Vol. 35 (2014), pp. 26-27.

tion of women's activity turned out not to translate into artistic reality. The organisers of the Palace of Art clearly favoured male artists, offering them better and more prominent places in the exhibition building, while women's works were placed in remote rooms located on the higher and less frequently visited floors of the palace.

Exhibition strategy

As Joanna Sosnowska noted, at the General National Exhibition in Poznań there was art everywhere, but art created by women artists was scarce, and paradoxically the least in the exclusively women's pavilions²¹. The initiators of the Bydgoszcz exhibition, just a few months after the closing of the GNE decided to give women's artistic activity visibility. The 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists was intended to integrate the discourse on gender equality with exhibition practice, showing women's work as a clearly defined phenomenon. A major novelty was the omission of the assistance of women's groups during the organisation of the event. In the post-exhibition documentation, there is no trace of any connection to women's circles. This is an isolated phenomenon in the history of women's art of the interwar period. Whereas in the 19th c., exhibitions of women's works were organised primarily by men, who were on the boards of the organising institutions, which were mainly industrial museums and private galleries looking for new areas of activity, it was women who stood behind exhibitions of women artists after the end of the World War I. The previously mentioned state discourse around the issue of gender equality, in the new reality of the Second Republic, was certainly a driving force in placing the preparation of exhibitions by women artists in the hands of female organisers. Intensely emerging and no less vibrantly active in the interwar period, women's groups initiated exhibitions of women's art as contributing to a change in the position of female artists within social relations²². The Bydgoszcz exhibition changed this course after twelve years of the interwar period. The activity of women artists and the discourse associated with it did not only or primarily serve women, who entered the essential field of art and its mainstream.

Bydgoszcz was a peripheral town before the Partitions, and patriotic activity, at the time of the loss of independence, featured poorly in the lives of the inhabitants²³. The Prussian partitioner worked intensively in the city, making it an important urban centre²⁴. Investments in the canal system and the railway network made the city an important trade centre in the 19th century. It was also the Prussian authorities who organised the redevelopment of Bydgoszcz's old town and placed a number of representative buildings, such as the theatre edifice and the Bydgoszcz Agricultural Institutes, within its boundaries²⁵. The dynamics of the city's development was remark-



2. Janina Konarska, *Narty*, 1931, coloured woodcut, 28 × 23 cm, London, Victoria and Albert Museum. Photo: Victoria & Albert Search, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O735567/skiers-colour-woodcut-konarska-janina> (access date: 1.09.2020)

able, so that in the second half of the 19th c. it gained the status of the seventh largest urban centre in the former lands of the Polish Commonwealth. Although this process influenced the position of the city in the Second Republic of Poland, it simultaneously left its mark on the mentality of the inhabitants of Bydgoszcz. The period of greatest development, although it contributed to prosperity, was associated with the marginalisation of the role of the Polish bourgeoisie. Deprived of influence on the fate of the city, also due to the continuous improvement of their own standard of living, they became less involved in independence activities²⁶. As a result, when Poland reappeared on the maps in 1918, Bydgoszcz was associated with a well-functioning post-Prussian commercial centre, its Polish identity, however, was undefined²⁷. An exhibition such as the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists could therefore play a role in creating a new image of the town as modern and mentally Polish.



²⁶ See E. Nowikiewicz, "Bydgoszcz to nie Heidelberg..., a Brda to nie Neckar. Ale i tu da się żyć". *Polsko-niemieckie sąsiedztwo w Bydgoszczy na przełomie XIX i XX wieku w świetle literatury Marchii Wschodniej (Ostmarkenliteratur)*, "Kronika Bydgoska" Vol. 26 (2005), p. 52.

²⁷ See J. Hryniewicz, *Polityczne i gospodarcze następstwa Zaboru Pruskiego*, "Studia Regionalne i Lokalne" 2003, No. 3, pp. 72-77.

3. Janina Konarska, *Narciarze*, 1929, coloured woodcut, 28 x 23 cm, private collection. Photo: Kulpińska Katarzyna, *Sport w grafice polskich artystek w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym*, "Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici, Zabytkoznawstwo i Konserwatorstwo" Vol. 45 (2014), p. 305



This is confirmed by the materials accompanying the Bydgoszcz exhibition. The museum management, when encouraging journalists to visit the exhibition, pointed out that the event was particularly important for the city, showing its commitment to building a new Polish identity. This impact is evident in the articles appearing in the press. As these texts repeat information provided by the museum to local newspapers, as evidenced by the documentation collected at the Bydgoszcz District Museum.

“Dziennik Bydgoski” (Bydgoszcz Daily) of 26 January 1930 wrote about the exhibition as follows:

As the first exhibition in Bydgoszcz and Western Poland in general, it will be an unprecedented event in the artistic life of our city, whose inhabitants will

have the opportunity to learn more about the creative achievements of the Polish woman in the field of visual arts [...]²⁸.



²⁸ NN, *Wystawa Malarek...*, p. 5.

²⁹ NN, *Wystawa Artystek...*, p. 6.

“The *Gazeta Bydgoska*” (Bydgoszcz Newspaper), of the same day, mentioned the event in almost the same words, taken directly from press materials provided by the Museum:

“this exhibition will be an unprecedented event in the artistic life of our city, whose inhabitants will have the opportunity to learn more about the creative accomplishments of the Polish woman²⁹.”

It is also clear from the archives collected by the museum in connection with the preparation of the exposition that the exhibition wanted to be presented in the national press as an event of importance for the city and the region. It was intended to show the experience of modern Polishness, shared by a region that had previously been deprived of this identity. The selection of works created during the first years of independence and of women – the greatest beneficiaries of the changes taking place in Poland – was to show what was most current in national art, both stylistically, thematically, socially and in terms of manners. Unfortunately, the national press did not pay much attention to the exposition. It was signalled by mere mentions, which seems to confirm Bydgoszcz’s marginal position as a cultural centre. The reason may have been that the organisers broke out of the previous practice of presenting women’s art with the support of pro-women’s organisations, which made the event unique in the history of exhibiting women’s art. It also deprived itself of an advocate such as the various bodies of these groups, as well as the attention of magazines associated with the circles, above all the “*Bluszcz*” or the “*Kobieta Współczesna*”, strongly influencing the national reception of cultural events. Perhaps, although no relevant evidence has remained anywhere to support this thesis, women’s circles felt that, behold, female artistic activity had begun to undergo processes of instrumentalisation. It was being involved for purposes other than making gender equality a reality.

Images. Between past and present

The lack of wider interest in the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists may also be due to the poor response from female artists and the resulting display of largely works by artists outside the leading women’s art scene. The halls of the Bydgoszcz museum exhibited the works of 20 women artists [Fig. 1]. Albinowska-Minkiewiczowa, Berent, Centnerszwer, Czarnowska, Dziurzyńska-Rosińska, Gessnerówna, Konarska, Krzyżanowska, Menes-Kuczyńska, Mukułowka, Neymanowa, Niewska, Pajzderska, Szczepanowicz, Tetmajer-Naims-



³⁰ See E. Bobrowska, *Emancypantki? Artystki polskie w Paryżu na przełomie XIX i XX wieku*, "Archiwum Emigracji" 2012, No. 1/2, pp. 11-18.

ka, Weiss, Wilczyńska and Wodzicka had previously presented their works at the General National Exhibition. What was missing in Bydgoszcz, however, were women artists recognisable and/or using modern imagery poetics who were present at the 1929 exhibition in Poznań, such as Alexandrowicz, Boznańska, Chełmońska, Halicka, Łempicka, Muter, Piramowicz, Pokrzywicka, Prószyńska, Rudzka and Trzcńska-Kamińska. However, to the group of exhibitors at the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists were added artists who had applied to show their work, despite their absence from the GNE. Gentil-Tippenhauer and Kasztelanówna should be mentioned here.

The last of the reasons for the exhibition's poor response seems to be the stylistic aspect of the works shown and the range of themes explored by the artists. The walls of the Bydgoszcz museum were filled mainly with depictions of nature, as can be inferred from the only photograph showing the exhibition [Fig. 1]. The visual side of the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists is also evidenced by the list of works exhibited then and the nature of the paintings involved in the event, now possible to reconstruct on the basis of the surviving part of their oeuvre, covering the period up to 1930. On the walls, they adjoined pastel-coloured still-life paintings of flowers by Albinowska-Minkiewiczowa, Dziurzyńska-Rosińska, Menes-Kuczyńska and Pajzderska, painted in a blurred and broad colour pattern. The choice of artistic means, as well as the style, resulted from their experience: emigration wandering in the period of Polish subjection to the partitioners and the search for new artistic experience in French, German or Swiss schools and artistic circles there³⁰. Reminiscences of emigration were also evident in themes and compositions, for example by Berent. She depicted Swiss peasants and used the language of symbolism and deep melancholy (*Zwiędłe róże* [Withered Roses], *Rycerz* [A Knight], *Pieśń wieczorna* [Evening Song]). The experience of life abroad also flowed from the works of Stanisława Centnerszwer. She depicted Italian alleys in her compositions: *Rialto (Wenecja)* (Rialto [Venice]), *Mury klasztoru (Wenecja)* (Monastery Walls [Venice]), *Żaglówki na Lido* (Sailboats on the Lido). She did this in a different way to Berent, for without sadness. Instead, she attempted an almost postcard-like capture of the romantic reality of Italy.

The works shown were far from the discursive layer around the Bydgoszcz exhibition. For the artists were meant to show current themes and modern modes of expression and the female experience, absent from art's masculinised past. Above all, however, they explored post-impressionist compositional ideas that were well embedded in the inter-war tradition of the art world – ideas that were still of 19th c. provenance. They fitted in not with the avant-garde changes taking place at the time, but with earlier tendencies. Their paintings were also far from the question of Polishness standing at the centre of the discourse around the exhibition, often focusing on views from beyond the Polish borders. Exploration of the Polish

landscape is present only in Gentil-Tippenhauer's views of the Tatra Mountains (watercolours *Giewont* [The Giewont] and *Nad rzeką* [On the River]), and in Gessnerówna's painterly explorations of the territory of the Second Republic of Poland (*Śnieg w marcu – Bukowina* [Snow in March – Bukovina], *Tatry* [The Tatra Mountains], *Hawrań i Murań* [Hawrań and Murań], *Kościół Kasprowy* [Kasprowy Church], *Synyce (Żabie – Huculszczyzna)* [Synyce (Żabie – Hutzul Region)], *Dzień mglisty – Pokucie* [Misty Day – Pokucie]), although even these works can hardly be described as modern due to their visual aspect. They remained conservative, pursuing the strategy, used repeatedly during the Partitions, of noting and highlighting the beauty of Polish landscapes and local nature. The works described above did not match the declarations manifested in the statements made at the Bydgoszcz museum on the eve of the 1st Exhibition of Women Artists of Poland.

There were only two artists whose works are close to the spirit of the inter-war period, marked by courage, a willingness to experiment and to transform the existing reality. We should mention the sculptures by Niewska and the prints by Konarska. Working in woodcuts, Konarska was a favourite of Władysław Skoczylas. She created in a modern way and in accordance with the then popular cubist tendencies while exposing current themes, including national issues. The works of both artists found a positive response not only in Poland, a country in search of its national identity at that time, but also abroad³¹. The works of these artists, discussed later in the text, shown for the first time in Bydgoszcz at the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists, were in fact honoured in subsequent years at international exhibitions devoted to sport.

An entire portfolio of Konarska's woodcuts dedicated to the patron saints was exhibited in Bydgoszcz. Also on display were her memories from the south of France in the form of views under the titles *Na Lazurowym wybrzeżu* (On the Côte d'Azur) and *Marsylia* (Marseille). The most interesting work, however, was *Narty* (Ski). They were part of a later series presenting sporting disciplines, which was entered into the Olympic competition accompanying the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, where the artist was awarded a silver medal for it³². In Bydgoszcz, it is likely that the work now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London was shown [Fig. 2] or its other earlier version, the 1929 print *Narciarze* (Skiers) [Fig. 3]. The inaccuracy arises from the fact that Konarska's *Narty* was dated by the graphic artist herself as 1931, i.e. after the Bydgoszcz exhibition. It is possible that the artist added the date on the obverse when she sent the works to the Olympic competition in the United States, wanting to mark the chronological consistency of the series. It is also possible that she sent to Bydgoszcz the print now known as *Narciarze*, and that the information regarding the title and given in the catalogue is a mistake. Regardless of which work was



³¹ See K. Kulpińska, *Sport w grafice polskich artystek w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym*, "Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici. Zabytkoznawstwo i Konserwatorstwo" Vol. 45 (2014), pp. 287–292.

³² Z. Porada, *Polskie artystki w Olimpijskich Konkursach Sztuki i Literatury 1928–1948*, "Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie. Kultura Fizyczna" 2017, No. 4, p. 37.



³³ It is not possible to determine this due to the scanty photographic documentation of the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists in Bydgoszcz, limited to just one photograph.

³⁴ See M. Mańska, *Drzeworyt japoński a sprawa polska – o japońskich aspektach batalii o nową sztukę*, "Litteraria Copernicana" 2014, No. 2.

³⁵ See NN, *Wystawa Artystek...*, p. 6; NN, *Wystawa Malarek...*, p. 5; NN, *Kronika...*, p. 12.

presented in Bydgoszcz, both are extremely interesting³³. They use simple geometric language and far-reaching syntheses. Both colour woodcuts are based on a play with empty space within the pictorial space and the interplay of contrasting elements. In *Narty*, at the centre of the purist print there are the outlines of skiers coming down the slope, whose schematically treated bodies formed a diagonal descending towards the lower right-hand corner of the composition. The diagonal pierced the patch of snow, flatly marked out by the artist and sparsely variegated by the falling shadows of naked winter trees, forming a kind of ornament delicately outlined in a graphic vocabulary of means. Not only the titular skiers draw the viewer's gaze, but also the rawness of the landscape, created by Konarska with the unfilled space within the work. A similar mechanism can also be seen in *Narciarze*, where, somewhat less dynamically captured, the bodies of numerous athletes, crowded and placed in the upper right part of the composition, seem to be heading towards the boundless white void shown on the opposite side of the woodcut. Konarska enriched the whole with lines suggesting the marks left by the skis. These lines become a kind of puristic motif diversifying the compositions. Konarska's works remain modern, operating with perspective shortcuts, flattening of forms and dynamisation of the inner space of the picture. The play with the interplay between emptiness and form, nature and human silhouettes, brings to mind compositional solutions known from Japanese art, especially from the woodcuts popular in Europe from the late 19th c. onwards. They inspired generations of artists, active from the early years of the 20th c., who paved the way for modern avant-garde art and artists seeking, like Konarska, new means of expression³⁴.

Olga Niewska showed in Bydgoszcz, among others, *Łucznik* (Archer) [Fig.1], a plaster sculpture later presented, albeit without prize success, in Los Angeles at the aforementioned 1932 Olympic exhibition. This work was placed in the centre of the only preserved photograph documenting the Bydgoszcz exhibition, as well as being readily mentioned in press coverage of the event³⁵. *Łucznik* is a dynamically captured male nude depicting a bowman. The athlete's body has been treated synthetically, and the viewer's attention has been focused on the part of his face and arms, the arrangement of which seems to correspond with a state of intense concentration over the trajectory of the just-released arrow. Despite the simplifications, the work, unlike Konarska's printmaking, does not draw on modern and geographically distant sources of inspiration for the form. The sculpture remains classical in expression, grasping the beauty as well as the strength of the athlete. Although the act of physical exercise is at its centre, the composition seems, through its use of more conservative language, less surprising than *Narty*, which may explain the fact that it passed unremarked in Los Angeles.

Sport attracted both artists, months before the Olympic exhibition, being their actual area of interest and not just the realisation of a competition task. This theme also particularly overlapped with the spirit of the era. In an article devoted to sport and Polish literature of the 1920s and 1930s, Wojciech Śmieja pointed out that for the ideology of the period, physical fitness was a sign of causative capabilities, allowing people to shape reality according to their own will³⁶. The power of sport made it possible to achieve the hitherto impossible, to break established boundaries in the drive towards the new and better, which was clearly inscribed in the modernist logic and philosophy dominating the period described here. After the period of the World War I, physical fitness was also visual evidence of the regeneration of man, who not long ago had been devastated by modern mass weapons and starvation³⁷. Sport was finally seen as replacing the need for competition, previously exercised precisely in the war arena³⁸. At the same time, by providing physical prowess, it was supposed to help maintain combat capability, should another conflict flare up³⁹. In interwar Poland, sport also became an activity of emancipating women, being one of the clear signs of the coming equality⁴⁰.

The popularisation of sport, including women's sport, in Poland was linked to the political activity of Józef Piłsudski. In the context of this text, mention should be made first and foremost of the promotion of women's sports initiatives, such as the 1st Congress for Women's Physical Education and Sport (1928) and the 2nd Congress of Women's Physical Culture (1928)⁴¹. As Maciej Stańczyk, a researcher of the issue, pointed out, Piłsudski saw in sport the assets indicated above and typical of the inter-war period, related to the fantasy of creating a new causative human, not only being in harmony with their nature, but above all combat-capable and ready to shake up the fragile peace of the early 20th century⁴².

The works of Konarska and Niewska should therefore be seen as the voice of women interested in sport, creating art close to the trends and social expectations characteristic of the era. These two cases, however, remained isolated, being the most interesting examples of works shown at the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists in Bydgoszcz, both in content and style. Both artists escaped the peregrinations of the past by aiming for a simplified form typical of the 20th century. Their works stood out, being separate. The 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists created, in effect, a completely different image of women's art, far from what the attempts of Konarska and Niewska represented. Women's art in Bydgoszcz began to be perceived as still immersed in pre-war artistic tendencies, which were not surprising to a wide non-Bydgoszcz and artistically sophisticated audience. The exhibition exposed earlier experiences, mainly related to the period of Polish dependence on neighbouring countries. It offered no new visuals, creating a thematically and stylistically conservative panorama of women's work at the dawn of the second decade of the interwar period.



³⁶ W. Śmieja, *Od ideologii ciała do cielesności zideologizowanej. Sport i literatura w latach 1918–1939 (wybrane przykłady)*, "Teksty Drugie" 2011, No. 4.

³⁷ See *ibidem*, p. 38.

³⁸ See *ibidem*, p. 36.

³⁹ See M. Mazurkiewicz, *Motywy sportowe w polskiej sztuce międzywojennej – rekonesans*, "Literatura i Kultura Popularna" Vol. 22 (2016).

⁴⁰ See K. Szujecki, *Dwudziestolecie międzywojenne*, Vol. 15: *Sport*, Warszawa 2013, p. 9.

⁴¹ See *ibidem*, p. 80.

⁴² M. Stańczyk, *Piłsudski od sportu wolał sportowanie*, <http://jpilsudski.org/artykuly-publicystyka-felietony/przeglad-prasy/item/2226-pilsudski-od-sportu-wolał-sportowanie> (access date: 24.08.2020).



⁴³ See J. Sosnowska, *Przedmiot i rzecz...*; M. Romeyko-Hurko, *Szkoła Dekoracyjno-Artystyczna Chalus i Dunin - zapomniany rozdział życia artystycznego Warszawy*, "Sztuka i Dokumentacja" 2016, No. 15.

The exhibition was a half success. It was certainly an important event in the life of Bydgoszcz and its inhabitants. Positive reactions from the local press and numerous visitors forcing the organisers to extend the opening of the exhibition by a month, testify to the local interest in the works and their positive reception. The 1st Exhibition of Women Artists of Poland gave the city's residents a sense of the change that had taken place after regaining independence. It was the first time that the museum created a presentation consisting exclusively of works by women, who had hitherto been rare participants in the art world in this part of Poland. Exposing, in the discursive layer, Polishness must have reinforced the sense of Bydgoszcz returning to the borders of the country with its heritage and the future projected by the state authorities. However, the works shown were not able to fully meet the declarations of the museum's management and their anchoring in the national mood of emancipation. The modernity of the works was debatable, and pieces by Konarska and Niewska were merely exceptions. While the Bydgoszcz public, deprived of contact with Polish art for many years, visited the exhibition with enthusiasm, the Warsaw, Kraków, Lviv or Poznań public, never deprived of such contact, remained uninterested in the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists in Bydgoszcz⁴³. Inhabitants of these cities, where artistic life remained intensive (also during the Partition period), regularly frequented galleries from the 19th c. onwards, which were also keen to present women's work. Long before the interwar period, these audiences had the chance to admire panoramas of women's work. In this light, the 1st Exhibition of Women Artists of Poland in Bydgoszcz must have seemed derivative to them for stylistic reasons, and the female exclusivity of the event's selection of participants no longer remained surprising or attractive to them. Although in 1930 the event described here was labelled the first exhibition of Polish women artists, expressing the museum's ambition to continue such exhibitions on a regular basis, it had no sequels. This is a clear indication of the failure of the venture in its efforts to make the city visible in the Second Republic.

Summary

The 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists in Bydgoszcz, together with its accompanying circumstances, reveals the conditions to which women's art was subjected in Poland between the wars. The preserved documentation of the event clearly indicates that the use of women artists was prompted by a desire to make the image of the institution look more modern. This was to be achieved through the use of the equality discourse, which triumphed during the period in question in the reborn Second Republic. Fully professional and supported by a proper education, women's activities, including artistic

ones, were seen as a visible sign of the coming equality, indicating an abandonment of the constraining beliefs of the past. Poles perceived their participation in this process as particularly advanced compared to other countries, which positively testified to the strength and modernity of the reborn nation and its peculiar primacy in modernising processes. On this wave, women's art became more and more popular, more and more women were creating, and the number of exhibitions with exclusively female participation increased year by year. Women's art was also seen as modern, growing out of the experiences of new participants in a previously masculinised artistic world.

The exhibition discussed in this text clearly reveals a gap, which has not yet been the subject of research and therefore demands further analysis, between the expectations regarding women's art – visible in declarations, and the artistic practice – visible on the walls of gallery halls. The Bydgoszcz event shows that women artists have been reluctant to indulge in the search for modern form, creating from within the artistic phenomena in the framework of which they were educated. What is more, in the reception of the exhibition, one searches in vain for observations that speak of a visuality intended to convey the feminine essence in artistic form. The paintings of the women did not stand out in any particular way, which may have had something to do with their gender. Rather, in retrospect, what is discernible is the aspects of their art that indicate the socio-cultural constraints that prevented them from fully developing their creative potential.

Instrumentalising women's art by the Bydgoszcz exhibition, in order to change the image of the organising institution and the city – its home – can indicate the migration of women's art from the margins of the artistic world – as it was in the 19th c. – towards its centre. The equality discourse, on the one hand, has become a causative force, allowing this process to strengthen itself, enabling women's professional and artistic ambitions to be fulfilled. On the other hand, the issue of equality, for which the struggles had begun decades earlier, helped to create favourable conditions for the implementation of emancipatory demands, expanding the possibilities for women's personal and non-personal action.

Słowa kluczowe

Janina Konarska, dwudziestolecie międzywojenne, Olga Niewska, sport, sztuka kobiet

Keywords

Janina Konarska, interwar period, Olga Niewska, sport, women's art

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Karolina Rosiejka, PhD, karolina.rosiejka@uap.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-6381-6101

Doctor of humanities in the field of art sciences. Since the academic year 2019/2020, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Art Education and Curatorial Studies at the University of Arts in Poznań. Graduate of the Interdisciplinary Individualized Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, where she completed her MA in art history, and a graduate in history at the Adam Mickiewicz University. She obtained her doctoral degree at the same university. She is interested in the methodology of art history, art in a social context, the relationship of artistic creation with social, political, scientific and critical discourses. A researcher of the presence and activity of women artists in the reality of the art world, she is fascinated by artistic phenomena of the 20th century. She is the author of a doctoral thesis *Amerykański modernizm w świetle recepcji prac Georgii O’Keeffe (American Modernism in Art Criticism Devoted to Georgia O’Keeffe’s Art)*, 2019), scientific articles published, among others, in “Sztuka i Dokumentacja”, “Teksty Drugie” and “Kultura i Historia”, as well as numerous scientific texts in post-conference volumes.

Summary

KAROLINA ROSIEJKA (University of Arts in Poznan) / The 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists in Bydgoszcz. On the strategies of visibility on the cultural map of the reborn Second Polish Republic

The text presents the background to the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists, which took place in 1930 in the Bydgoszcz City Museum. The exhibition presenting only works by women is linked in the article to the social discourse of the Second Republic. It sought to build a progressive reborn Polish society based on the ideal of equality, including gender equality. The text proves that the 1st Exhibition of Polish Women Artists was aimed at raising the profile of the institution organising the event on the cultural map of Poland, and further, of the city itself, where the exhibition was held. The circumstances of the organisation of the exhibition and its resonance presented here make it possible to show the status of women's art in the inter-war period, which evolved from a peripheral artistic reality into a phenomenon increasingly at the centre of art world manifestations.