

Delayed Discovery or Willful Forgetting? The Reception of Polish Classical Modernism in America

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Early Reception

Only in the last three or four decades have American museums and private collectors been assembling impressive holdings of modern Polish art (figures 1 and 2).¹ From the interwar years through the 1970s, few U.S. institutions and only a couple of individuals acquired significant works of Poland's extraordinary and varied classical modernism from the early twentieth century, even though these works were decisive for the development of modern art universally.² This American collecting practice differed significantly from that regarding central European modernist art and design, especially art deriving from Germany and from several of the

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The reception history for the United Kingdom, and in particular for France and Germany, departs significantly from that of the United States. The frequent presence of Polish artists in Paris and, especially, Berlin, as well as the strong support offered to Polish modernists by the publishers of "advanced" journals (*Der Sturm*, *Die Aktion*, among them), plus the intense transnational exchange of periodicals, catalogues, and "artists' books" between Polish modernists and their brethren throughout all of Europe (but with only a very few American counterparts, such as *Broom*) may account for the broad, continuous, and authentic appreciation of Polish modernist art and aesthetic theory throughout Europe.

1. For a brief account of the formation of private American collections of Polish art (primarily nonmodernist), see Czesław Czapliński, "Polish Art Collections in America," www.PolishArtWorld.com (last accessed 6 June 2012). Most every collector was of Polish extraction, and the plurality began collecting only in or after the 1980s. The most prominent among them was Wojciech Fibak, who amassed a large number of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century Polish painters of several schools, conservative and modern. See also Władysław Wantuła, "Some Remarks on Collecting Polish Paintings in the States," in Tom Podl and Christopher D. Kamyszew, eds., *A Discovering Eye: Polish Painting in the Collection of Tom Podl* (Chicago, 1993), 15–18; and especially Anna Król and Artur Tanikowski, eds., *Colors of Identity: Polish Art from the Collection of Tom Podl* (Kraków, 2001), which emphasizes the creative role played by Paris in the formation of twentieth-century Polish art.

2. In addition to the numerous studies of Polish classical modern art listed in the extensive bibliography in Polish and western languages in S. A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999), 360–67, see also the number of innovative studies that have appeared over the last decade in *Centropa: A Journal of Central European Architecture and Related Arts*. For instance, Anna Brzyski, "Between the Nation and the World: Nationalism and the Emergence of Polish Modern Art," *Centropa* 1, no. 3 (September 2001); and Irena Kossowska, "Parisian Stimuli: Traditionalism and Aestheticism in Polish Art of the 1920s," *Centropa* 6, no. 2 (May 2006). See also the essays in Arnold Bartzky, Marina Dmitrieva, and Stefan Troebst, eds., *Neue Staaten—neue Bilder? Visuelle Kultur im Dienst staatlicher Selbstdarstellung in Zentral- und Ost-europa seit 1918* (Cologne, 2005).

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Figure 1. Leopold Gottlieb, *The Wounded*, ca. 1912–1914, gouache on paper. The Podl Collection (courtesy of Catherine Podl).



Figure 2. Alicja Halicka, *Cubist Still Life*, 1915, oil on canvas. The Podl Collection (courtesy of Catherine Podl).

successor states to the Dual Monarchy, principally Austria and Hungary.³ Matters did not begin this way, however. In truth, America was an early and enthusiastic consumer of Polish modern art—at least for the two decades between the Armory Show in 1913 and the consolidation of an essentialist modernist canon by the Museum of Modern Art and its supporters from the mid-1930s.⁴

The Art Institute of Chicago was among the first of the large American museums to take Polish modern art seriously, though *not* because the city was quickly becoming the center of Polish immigration in North America.⁵ Rather, in 1931, the museum elected to acquire twenty-three objects from the stunning collection assembled by Arthur Jerome Eddy (1859–1920), including the Polish canvases that were among the collector's most cherished works of early twentieth-century art.⁶ In conformity with what would become an American practice, the Art Institute waited some time (in this case, eleven years) after the collector's death to choose the art for its permanent collection; and even these seminal examples of classical modernism had been in the United States since 1913, when Eddy, advised by Vasilii Kandinskii, acquired them directly from the Armory Show at

3. Although the bibliography for the instrumental role played by Hungarian artists in the development of modern art in America is substantial, the best overview remains that provided in Oliver Botar, "Selected Bibliography," in S. A. Mansbach, *Standing in the Tempest: Painters of the Hungarian Avant-Garde, 1908–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 213–27. Austrian modern art and design enjoyed a privileged place in the United States from the early years of the twentieth century. By 1922 the New York market was perceived as sufficiently strong to persuade the Wiener Werkstätte to open a store on Fifth Avenue through which to promote and sell its products to an American market.

4. The International Exhibition of Modern Art sponsored by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors was held in the 69th Infantry Regimental Armory in New York between 15 February and 15 March 1913. The exhibition presented approximately 1,250 paintings, sculptures, and works of decorative art by roughly 300 mostly European artists. Following its run in Manhattan, the exposition traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago (24 March–16 April 1913), where space limitations persuaded the organizers to reduce the number of displayed objects to 634, thereby eliminating most of the American art. The third and final venue was Boston's Copley Society of Art from 28 April to 19 May 1913.

5. Although statistics vary regarding Chicago's Polish population between 1910 and 1920, most agree that the number was at least 300,000 in the greater metropolitan area, including the steel-making cities of northwestern Indiana, which had attracted great numbers of immigrants from the Russian and Austrian partitions.

6. The Arthur Jerome Eddy Memorial Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago contains major monuments of international modern art, including paintings by the Americans James McNeill Whistler (such as the portrait of the collector, *Arrangement in Flesh Color and Brown*, 1894), Winslow Homer (*Coast of Maine*, 1893), and Arthur Dove; the Germans Franz Marc (*The Bewitched Mill*, 1913) and Gabriele Münter; the Portuguese Amadeo de Souza Cardoso (*Leap of the Rabbit*, 1911); the French artists André Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, Auguste Herbin, and André Dunoyer de Segonzac; and sculpture by Auguste Rodin. See Art Institute of Chicago, *The Arthur Jerome Eddy Collection of Modern Paintings and Sculpture* (Chicago, 1931). For the collector's attitudes toward the spiritual satisfaction in art, see Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Delight and the Soul of Art: Five Lectures* (Philadelphia, 1902); for his appreciation of Whistler, see Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Recollections and Impressions of James A. McNeill Whistler* (Philadelphia, 1903). See also Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* (Chicago, 1914).

its New York—rather than its later Chicago—venue.⁷ Eddy's collection was renowned for its Kandinskiis, such as *Troika* (oil on cardboard, 1911) and *Improvisation 30 (Kanonen)* (Improvisation 30 [Cannons], oil on canvas, 1913), and especially for the 1911 composition, closely related to the painter's now-lost first work of art exploring abstraction.⁸ Eddy's sharp vision and scholarly appreciation of modernist aesthetics also persuaded him of the virtues of Polish painting; and he seized the chance to acquire Eugeniusz Zak's *Pasterz* (Shepherd, oil on canvas, 1910–11; figure 3). Alas, he either did not succeed in purchasing or chose not to acquire Zak's other canvas on display in New York, titled *W lecie* (In Summer, 1912), which went to the renowned New York collector of "ultramodernism" John Quinn, before both works were placed on view in the Armory Show's Chicago venue in 1913.⁹

Others came under the sway of Kandinskii's taste and his philosophy of abstraction. The Russian also exerted influence on the painter, patroness, and impresario of advanced art, Katherine Dreier, the founder of the Société Anonyme.¹⁰ With her customary rhetorical flourish, Dreier dedicated her 1926 catalogue *Modern Art* to Kandinskii on "his Sixtieth Birthday, and in recognition of the Thirty Years' fight which never abated and is Carried on To-day with the same Vigor, Enthusiasm and Philosophic Calm, which he has always shown."¹¹ Among dozens of modern artists from central, southeastern, and eastern Europe whose canvases Dreier collected and prominently exhibited, most decisively in the 1926 Société Anonyme exhibition in Brooklyn, the husband and wife figures of Alicja Halicka (1894–1975) and Ludwik Kazimierz Władysław Markus,

7. For a discussion of the controversy engendered by the display of the Eddy Collection at the Art Institute during its initial exhibition there in early 1922, and the consequent pressure within and upon the Institute to reject modern art, see Richard R. Brettell and Sue Ann Price, "From the Armory Show to the Century of Progress: The Art Institute Assimilates Modernism," in Sue Ann Price, ed., *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde: Modernism in Chicago, 1910–1940* (Chicago, 1990), 209–25. See also Stefan Germer, "Traditions and Trends: Taste Patterns in Chicago Collecting," in Price, ed., *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde*, 181–86.

8. See Hans K. Roethel and Jean K. Benjamin, "A New Light on Kandinsky's First Abstract Painting," *Burlington Magazine* 119, no. 896 (November 1977): 772–73.

9. According to Irena Kossowska (personal communication, May 2009), *Shepherd* may have had a pendant, *Pasterka* (Shepherdess), dated 1911. The second canvas is known only from a photo (now at the National Museum in Warsaw). That canvas was purchased by Aleksander Koch, the publisher of *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*. See *The John Quinn Collection of Paintings, Water Colors, Drawings and Sculpture* (Huntington, N.Y., 1926), which lists in several volumes the contents of Quinn's art collection (but not his equally impressive holdings in rare manuscripts, autographs, and paper ephemera) following his death in 1925. Zak's *In Summer*, cat. #234 in the Armory Show, was illustrated in the 1926 catalogue, but it was apparently not on offer when more than 800 works, the bulk of his enormous art collection, were sold at auction in 1927. See the sales catalogues for *The John Quinn Collection: Paintings and Sculptures of the Moderns* (New York, 1927).

10. For a comprehensive study of the Société Anonyme, see Robert L. Herbert, Eleanor S. Apter, and Elise K. Kenney, *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 1984). See also Jennifer R. Gross, ed., *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America* (New Haven, 2006).

11. Dedicatory page, Katherine S. Dreier, *Modern Art* (New York, 1926).

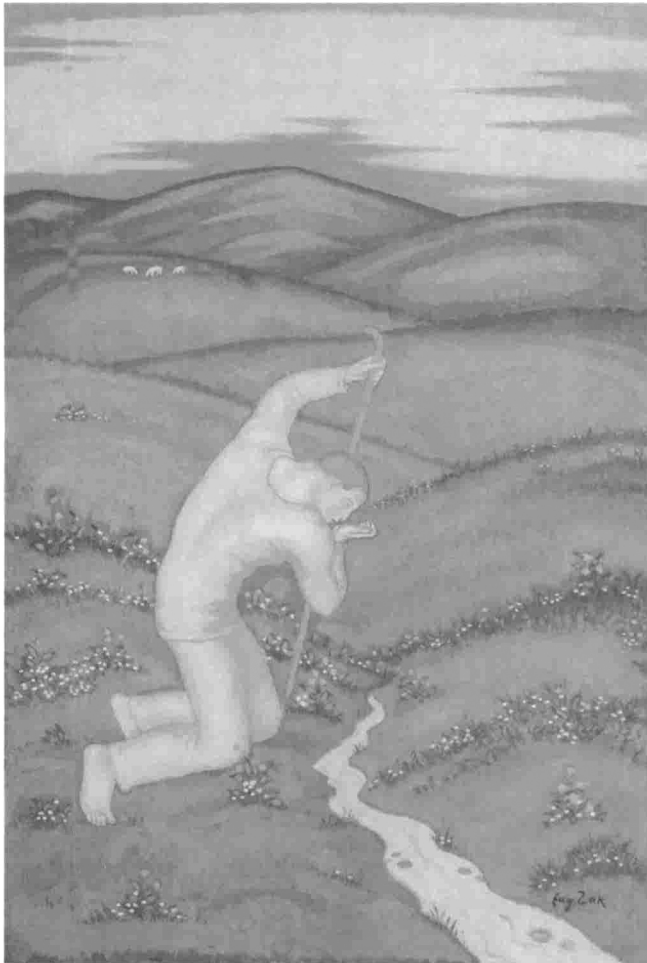


Figure 3. Eugène [Eugeniusz] Zak, *The Shepherd*, 1910–1911, oil on canvas. Arthur Jerome Eddy Memorial Collection, 1931.519. The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

better known today as Louis Marcoussis (1878/1883–1941), represented Poland.¹² Advised in her purchases and exhibition program by Marcel Duchamp, as well as counseled by Kandinskii, Dreier was doubtless impressed by the fact that fellow American collectors of modern art had works by both Halicka and Marcoussis in their homes (figure 4). Albert C. Barnes in Philadelphia, Frederick Clay Bartlett in Chicago, and Rodman Wanamaker in New York were avid supporters of modern painters and

12. Dreier, *Modern Art*, 66–67. The exhibition was held at the Brooklyn Museum (November–December 1926) before moving to the Anderson Galleries in Manhattan, the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, and the Art Gallery of Toronto. For an analysis of the exhibition, see Ruth L. Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition: Katherine Dreier and Modernism in America* (Ann Arbor, 1982).

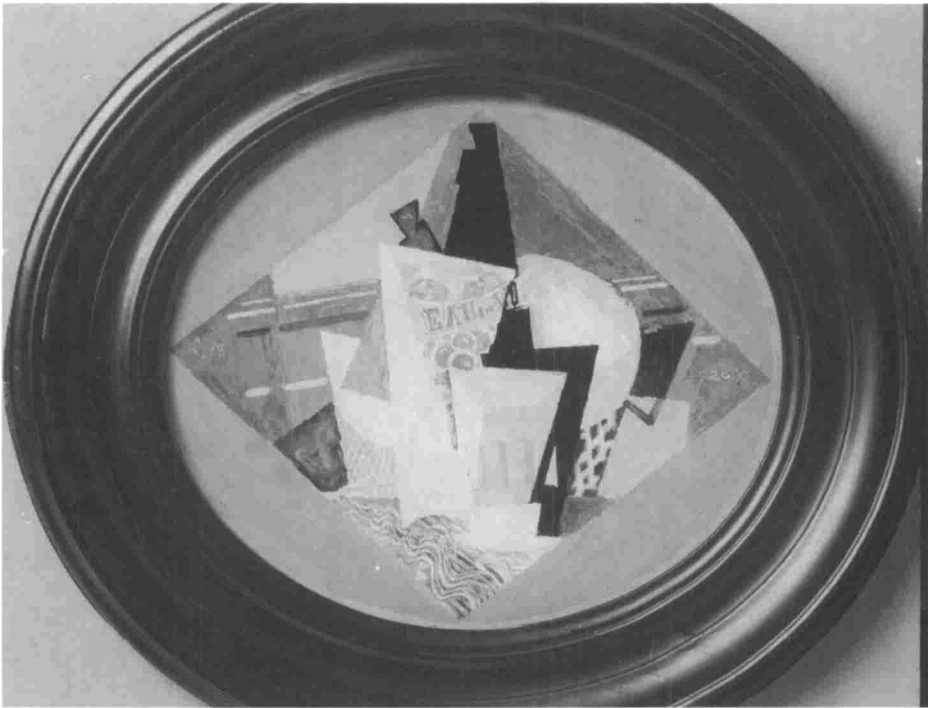


Figure 4. Louis Marcoussis, *Painting on Glass, No. 17*, 1920, oil on glass. Gift from the estate of Katherine S. Dreier, 1953. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

the work of the cubists; and, like Dreier herself, they acknowledged Marcoussis, especially, as “one of the most brilliant and original of the cubist group.”¹³

Perhaps the most notable presence of Polish modern art in New York was the two-week-long presentation in 1927 of “architecture, engineering, industrial arts, and modern art” under the rubric Machine-Age Exposition, which the advertising broadsheet averred “presented together for the first time in such a manner that the inter-relation-inter-influence will be shown and emphasized.”¹⁴ Jane Heap, a prominent publisher and advocate of literary modernism, instigated this exhibition, which a *New Yorker* critic described as “cubist and constructionist figures by reputable modern artists.”¹⁵ The co-organizer of the Polish contribution was Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952), among the most original and influential artistic figures of the time. Among those of his compatriots whose work was exhibited at the West 57th Street location (which was not a museum or traditional art venue) was Henryk Stażewski (1894–1988), who had participated in most every Polish modernist movement. Although few sales

13. Dreier, *Modern Art*, 67.

14. For an image of the advertisement, see www.flickr.com/photos/pantufila/2651264325/ (last accessed 6 June 2012).

15. E. B. White, “Machine Age,” *New Yorker*, 21 May 1927, 16.

resulted from the exhibition, the display garnered considerable publicity, much of which was favorable as the New York-based weekly magazines and daily newspapers attest.

In 1933 the Brooklyn Museum mounted an exhibition of Polish art that imaginatively juxtaposed folk and modern art. The project was supported by the Polish government, which grew increasingly active in promoting Polish art in North America through the 1930s, although modernist art was generally ignored in favor of folk and decorative art, figurative art, or historical art. Outside Chicago and New York, Polish art was displayed as well, although this often consisted of exhibitions that focused on the decorative or industrial arts, as for example the Exhibition of Polish Graphic Arts, displayed in May 1935 at the Dallas Museum of Art or the 1927 International Bookplate Exhibition held in Los Angeles. The latter display, notably, included the remarkable Karol Hiller (1891–1939), a chemist by training who turned to abstraction and to radically new processes of art making.¹⁶ Perhaps the most notable exception to the practice of displaying Polish art principally in Chicago and New York was Pittsburgh, where both the university and the Carnegie Institute manifested a deep and prolonged interest in central European art (and artifacts), and where Michał Rouba (1893–1941), a modestly modern landscape painter and renowned teacher in Wilna, was given an exhibition. In similar fashion during this period, Pittsburgh played host to the work of Roman Kramsztyk (1885–1942), who exhibited rather conservative paintings at the Carnegie Institute in 1931 and 1932 (as well as in St. Louis and Baltimore in 1932, and in New York in 1933). Leopold Gottlieb (1879–1934) presented canvases of traditional subject and style at the Carnegie Institute in 1933; and Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa (1897–1988) displayed coloristic figurative paintings at the Carnegie Institute in 1938. In a more modern idiom were the paintings presented at the Carnegie Institute in 1938 by Jan Cybis (1897–1972), a leading proponent of a controlled colorism through which a work of art could and must be structured to compose not images from nature but arrangements of colored forms that followed purely pictorial laws. Eugeniusz Geppert (1890–1979), who belonged to the progressive formations of *Zwornik* and *Nowa Generacja*, showed at the fine arts pavilion associated with the Olympic Games in Los Angeles (1932) and at the International Art Exhibition held in Pittsburgh in 1938.¹⁷ The Polish artist most frequently displayed in America during the interwar years was Wojciech Weiss (1875–1950), who was among the most innovative painters stylistically early in the twentieth century but who mostly displayed more conser-

16. For a brief discussion in English of Hiller's activities and contributions to Polish art, see Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, 130–34. The standard Polish study is *Karol Hiller, 1891–1939: Nowe widzenie: malarstwo, heliografia, rysunek, grafika* (Łódź, 2002), concept and exhibition catalogue by Zenobia Karnicka and Zmarla Janina Ładnowska, edited by Marcin Bauer and Jacek Ojrzyński.

17. *Zwornik* (Keystone) was a loose association of Kraków artists, founded in 1928, which advanced colorism and revived native folk imagery among the modernists. For an English-language study of *Nowa Generacja*, see Myroslava M. Mudrak, *The New Generation and Artistic Modernism in the Ukraine* (Ann Arbor, 1986).

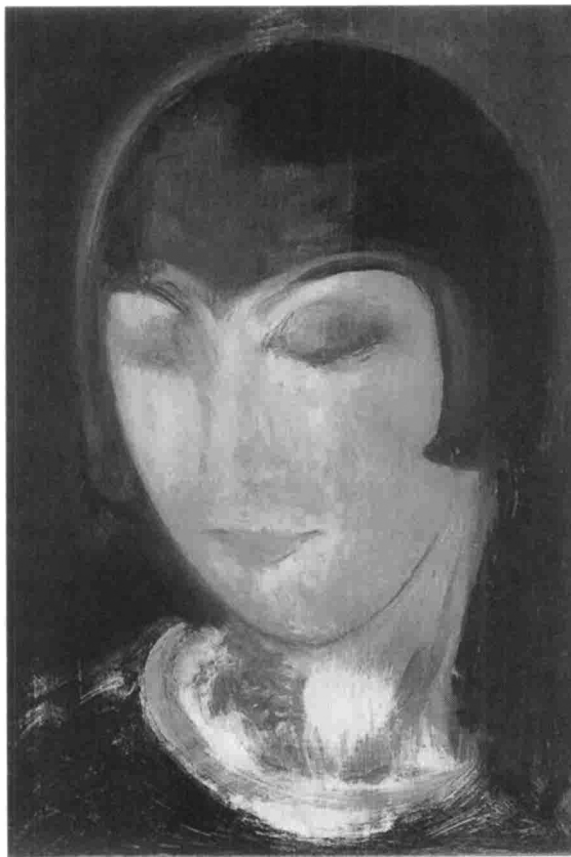


Figure 5. Gustaw Gwozdecki, *Kiki de Montparnasse*, 1920, oil on canvas. Location unknown.

vative canvases in Pittsburgh's Carnegie Institute (1925, 1926, 1931, 1932, 1937, and 1938) and at the New York World's Fair in 1939.¹⁸

Polish painters themselves, in addition to their works, had a presence in the United States. Gustaw Gwozdecki (1880–1935), once connected to the formists, a Kraków-based band of innovative painters who advocated “notions of realism and beauty developed from the experiences of cubism, futurism and expressionism” established himself in New York in 1916.¹⁹ Dreier purchased at least six works from him, though none was ever put on exhibition (figure 5). Zygmunt Menkes (1896–1986), a member of both the progressive *Nowa Generacja* and *Zwornik*, also moved to New York (in 1935). His talents were recognized by medals awarded by

18. Cybis also displayed work at the Finch College Museum of Art in New York (1966) and in the Exhibition of Polish Landscape mounted in Chicago and Washington in 1969–70. Work by the stylistically conservative painter Szymon Mondzain (1890–1979) was to be seen at a one-man exhibition in Chicago in 1920.

19. Leon Chwistek, introduction to the catalogue *III Wystawy Formistów w 1919 roku* (Kraków, 1919), 8.



Figure 6. Zygmunt Menkes, *Woman in Red Blouse*, 1922, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Vita Susak, Curator of the Department of European Art at the Lviv National Art Gallery (Ukraine).

the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, and the National Academy of Design (figure 6).²⁰

Despite the creative contributions to the history of modern art in America by these and other Polish artists, what is noteworthy is just how few Polish artists actually immigrated to the United States during the interwar decades—at least compared to the large numbers of painters, architects, and designers from elsewhere in east central Europe, many from the Bauhaus, who staffed the country's art schools, served as museum curators, and shaped the general aesthetic landscape of early twentieth-

20. See Irena Kossowska, "Zygmunt (Sigmund) Menkes," in "Profiles" (2001), at www.culture.pl/web/english/resources-visual-arts-full-page/-/eo_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/zygmunt-sigmund-menkes (last accessed 6 June 2012).

century America. Thus the history of Polish modern art in America differs sharply from the reception afforded progressive work (and artists) from other east central (and eastern) European lands, especially Hungary, whose legions of modernists seeking refuge in America fundamentally reshaped architecture, graphic design, and aesthetic education in the United States. The Polish presence may have been less evident than that of the somewhat later, mostly Jewish, figures from Budapest and Pécs, of Czechs (Bohemians) who had emigrated somewhat earlier (the 1890s), and especially of artist émigrés from the Russian (and Soviet) sphere, who gravitated to America in significant numbers during the 1920s, even if their participation at the highest levels of American aesthetic culture may have been more circumscribed than that of the central Europeans. In any event, Poland departs from this pattern of migration to America, particularly during the 1930s, when Polish artists might have introduced the modern styles, themes, and theories their work had manifested during the preceding decade and a half in their homeland. The powerfully original versions of expressionism, cubism, futurism, and especially geometric abstraction represented by the formists, Jung Idysz, Blok, Praesens, and a.r. groups, so central to the development of European modernism, never achieved resonance in 1930s America, mostly due to the absence of their adherents in the United States.

Perhaps this comparative paucity of Poles can be attributed to the heady responsibilities and unusual opportunities open to modern artists in their native land. The chance to build a free, modern Poland surely garnered the attention and absorbed the energies of artists throughout the new nation, regardless of the stylistic character of their work. Strzebiński, Katarzyna Kobro (1891–1951), Zbigniew Pronaszko (1895–1958), August Zamojski (1893–1970), and Mieczysław Szczuka (1898–1927), among other leading figures, channeled their talents toward building a new and democratic Poland. Groups of forward-thinking figures of many different political orientations readily put their talents at the service of their nation, and many remained active in the Polish Republic until its sudden, violent demise in 1939. After the double invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, few had the chance to escape. The partial exception to this pattern may be found among a cadre of mostly Jewish artists, who for reasons of prejudice or preference elected emigration, several to the United States. Perhaps the most distinguished of these was Teresa Żarnower (1895–1950), Jewish by birth and a committed leftist, two circumstances that persuaded her to leave Poland in 1939, when Nazi Germany's threat became impossible to ignore.²¹ By and large, however, Polish modern artists remained within the revised borders of their homeland.

21. Żarnower's husband, Mieczysław Szczuka (born 1898), was her partner in art and politics, and co-founder, with her, of the leftist-leaning Blok group and eponymous periodical through which abstraction was vigorously advanced. His untimely death in 1927 was an emotional blow from which she never fully recovered. Her depression deepened during her exilic years in New York, and it likely led to her suicide in 1950. Andrzej Turowski makes the case for suicide (*Budowniczości świata: Z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej* [Kraków, 2000], 218), while Ryszard Stanisławski claims that Żarnower perished in

Despite the dearth of Polish artists and art historians who made their way to the United States between the consolidation of authoritarianism under Józef Klemens Piłsudski (from 1926 to 1935) and the 1939 invasion by German and Soviet armies, the reception of Polish modern art in America was fundamentally positive, although traditional forms and styles were perhaps more widely appreciated (if the number of exhibitions of modern versus traditional Polish art throughout the United States can be taken as an indicator).²² The 1930s was a watershed decade for modern art in America and Poland's contribution to it, less on account of what was actually created than as a result of what was critically received and institutionally presented. Between the decade's beginning with the November 1929 opening in Manhattan of the Museum of Modern Art and its symbolic close in New York City's Borough of Queens with the 1939 World's Fair, the parameters of modernism were redefined in America, with implications for the world beyond.

The 1939 World's Fair attracted 44 million visitors in its two seasons. All who entered the gates were introduced to what the organizers acclaimed as "the world of tomorrow," a theme intended as an antidote to the demoralization of the Great Depression. Just months after the fair opened in April, however, much of the globe had tipped into the catastrophe of war. Thus many who traveled to New York to attend the largest world exposition in generations witnessed less the optimism of progress than the afterglow of surrendered possibilities. And perhaps no display better incarnated that contradiction between ideal vision and sober reality than the Polish Pavilion, which—along with the Czecho-Slovak Pavilion—failed to reopen for the second season due to the occupation of the respective homelands by hostile foreign powers (figure 7).

The result of a collaborative design by Jan Cybulski, Jan Galinowski, and Felicjan Kowarski, the Polish Pavilion soared with the Republic's

a fire that consumed her New York apartment. Król herself provides a third alternative explanation for the artist's death: shock from receiving a letter from the brother whom she thought long dead. See Monika Król, "Collaboration and Compromise: Women Artists in Polish-German Avant-Garde Circles, 1910–1930," in Timothy O. Benson, ed., *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 354.

22. For a list of Polish émigré artists, see the appendix of central European émigré scholars (to the United States) in S. A. Mansbach, "The Artifice of Modern(ist) Art History," in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 109–13.

A review of the Hoover Institute's substantial Polonia holdings, especially its collections of Polish posters and its archives of various Polish-American Arts and Cultural foundations, reveals the important role modern and, more often, traditional art played in both the interwar and immediate World War II decades. Herbert Hoover's keen interest in Poland through the various aid missions he directed prompted the Hoover Institute's prolonged collection activity in Polonia. See also Ann Hetzel Gunkel, "Ethnic Aesthetics: Considering Polish-American Art," *Polish-American Studies* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 5–24, for a consideration of the interplay between tradition and modernism, although the author's focus is on two contemporary figures. In the present context, the art bibliographical holdings of the Polish Museum of America (in Chicago) merit consultation. I thank Teresa Sromek, assistant archivist and librarian there, for her assistance.

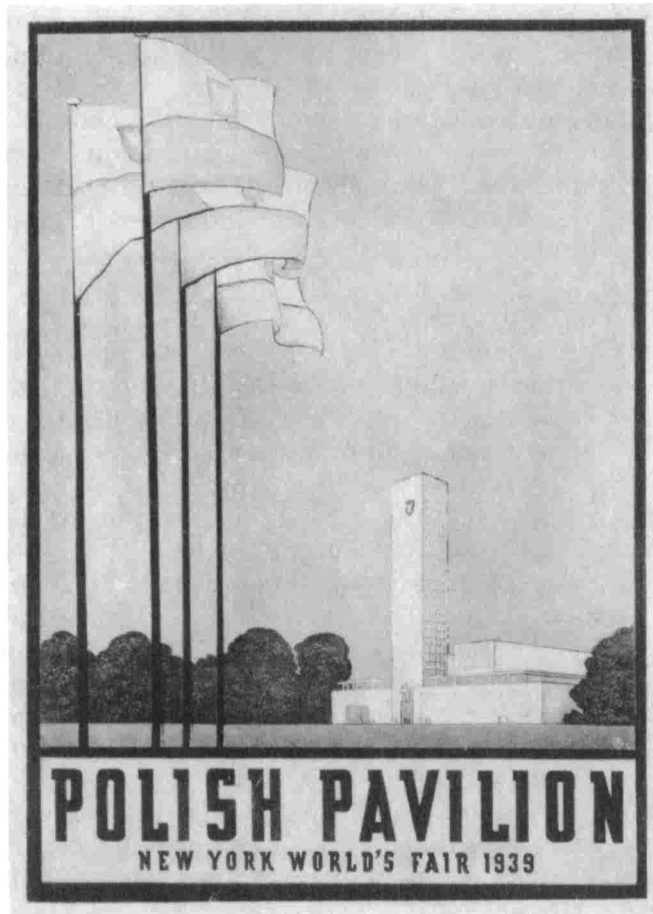


Figure 7. Polish Pavilion, New York World's Fair, 1939, vintage postcard. Collection of the author.

possibilities (figure 8).²³ A shimmering golden tower surmounted the stepped cubist blocks of the modernist structure behind a monumental sculpture that depicted Władysław II Jagiełło, Poland's fourteenth-century king, regally astride his mount. The play between solidity and transparency, between golden tower and white walls, between figuration and abstraction—all attesting to the nation's modernity—was apparent in the interior as well. Here, especially in the imposing entrance halls, Tadeusz Gronowski (1894–1990) had designed a program of stained glass, abstract

23. On page 12 of the *Official Catalogue of the Polish Pavilion at the World's Fair in New York* (Warsaw, 1939), Kowarski and his colleagues are identified as the designers, most likely of the building itself. The interior designs for the fifteen exhibition subsections (along with the restaurant) were entrusted to various interior architects or designers, as acknowledged in the official catalogue. The Polish Pavilion in New York reprised the success, but not the flamboyant expressionist style, of Poland's pavilion at the 1925 Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes in Paris, designed by the Society of Polish Applied Arts, which was awarded the exposition's gold medal for architectural design.

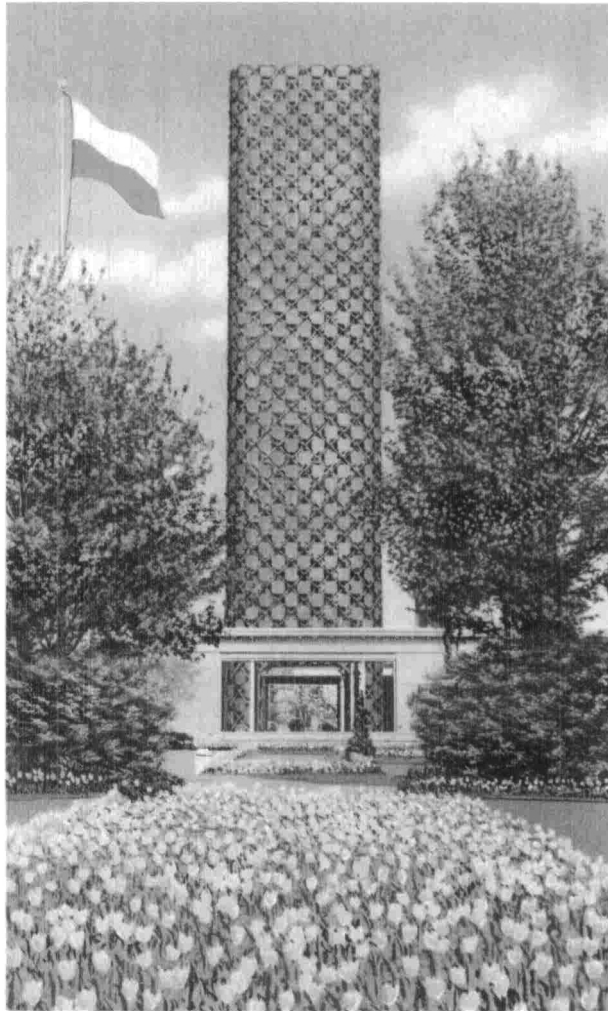


Figure 8. Polish Pavilion, New York World's Fair, 1939, vintage postcard. Collection of the author.

from a distance but crystallizing into a series of heroic figures who take up arms in defense of their Polish homeland. Deploying architecture and design in support of the nation was a calculated strategy of the Polish government, which saw itself imperiled by Nazi Germany's hostility, Stalinist Russia's revengeful desires, and Lithuania's irredentist aspirations. Thus the pavilion and the accompanying 502-page catalogue endeavored to affirm and defend the nation's cultural achievements, noble history, and political legitimacy.²⁴ And toward that existential goal, Poland put on dis-

24. Of particular note in this regard are the first three essays in the opening chapter of the pavilion's catalogue. Under the expansive heading, "The Past and the Future of Poland," Jan Parandowsky ("Polish Culture"), Roman Dyboski ("Poland Old and New"), and Jerzy Ponikiewski ("The Geopolitical Situation of Poland in Europe") authored essays that

play in New York, within a surpassingly modernist building, fronted by a mythologized king, every imaginable material, geographical, and humanistic aspect of the newly established Republic: art, decorative arts, science, communication, maritime activities, social welfare (including education, architecture, and city planning, as well as social security), industrial production, agriculture, textiles, peasant art, forests, and commercial information, along with an unparalleled presentation of old master sculpture and paintings from Polish private and public collections (including, among the “100 Pictures of Polish and Foreign Art,” Leonardo da Vinci’s *Lady with the Ermine / Weasel* and Raphael’s *Portrait of a Young Man*). Surely, this totalizing program achieved a profound resonance both in America and for Poles universally, as the pavilion was awarded the gold medal of the World’s Fair. Whether this signal accomplishment was the result of political sympathy or derived purely from the pavilion’s aesthetic merit and ambitious program cannot be known with certainty, as similar praise was garnered by the modernist Czecho-Slovak Pavilion. The Polish Pavilion, with the art it inventively displayed, was the last major manifestation of Polish modernism to be widely recognized in America for almost a generation.²⁵

A Changed Aesthetic Environment

Ten years before the World of Tomorrow threw open its gates, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) opened its doors. But unlike the broad scope of works that would be shown in Poland’s pavilion, MoMA exhibited a narrow range of art and artifacts under its organizing rubric, “modern.” Its first director and animating force, Alfred Barr (1902–1981), and several of his curators, most prominently Phillip Johnson (1906–2005), a

celebrated Poland’s uniqueness and its rightful place in world history and contemporary political affairs. Each scholar endeavored to make a convincing case to an American (and English-reading) public for Poland’s legitimacy and the need to safeguard its status in the face of foreign threats. By contrast, the essays in the second chapter, “Art,” are less politically tendentious, though individually (“The Art of Poland before the Partitions,” “Modern Polish Art,” “Polish Music,” and “The Theatre in Poland”) and collectively they affirm the European (as opposed to the Asiatic, *pace* Russian) nature of Polish culture.

25. Anticipating by just a few months the New York World’s Fair was San Francisco’s competing Golden Gate International Exposition (1939 and 1940). This west coast fair celebrated the city’s two newly built bridges (the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge). The San Francisco fair hosted a highly touted Division of Contemporary Art exhibition (18 February to 29 October 1939) at which several east central European nations were represented. Czechoslovakia sent fifteen paintings; Hungary shipped seven paintings (and four bronze sculptures), all by modernists, several of whom were politically out of favor with Admiral Miklós Horthy’s fascist regime; Italy was represented by thirty-eight artists, including the modernists Carlo Carrà, Giorgio De Chirico, Giorgio Morandi, and Ardengo Soffici. Significantly, Poland was not present at all, though it was likely invited to send paintings of a modern character. Nazi Germany’s participation was not welcome; nonetheless, the section devoted to “Contemporary European Art in American Collections” presented canvases by Max Beckmann, Lovis Corinth, Otto Dix, Carl Hofer, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Franz Marc, Emil Nolde, and others whom Adolf Hitler had deemed “degenerate” in the 1937 Entartete Kunst exhibitions that traveled through the Reich.

classmate from graduate study at Harvard, were keenly aware of European modernism in all its richness and diversity, including what had developed during the 1920s in Poland. In addition to Barr's substantial correspondence with art dealers, museum curators, and artists from central and eastern Europe, the director of the MoMA made a number of excursions to see the contemporary art, architecture, and design being made in this region, especially in Germany, Poland, and Russia. Johnson also made several trips to Germany and at least one to Poland. The principal motivation was more likely political than aesthetic, however, as Johnson's extreme sympathy for Nazi doctrine and practices, especially between 1932 and 1940, including a deep-seated antisemitism, led to study tours of German achievement and Polish backwardness. Accepting an invitation from the German Propaganda Ministry, Johnson accompanied Viola Bodenschatz, the wife of Major General Karl Bodenschatz, a senior aide to Hermann Göring, on a trip to Poland just a month before the German invasion. In an article for the American journal *Social Justice's* September 1939 issue, MoMA's senior curator reported:

When I first drove into Poland, the countryside was a shock to me. Like most Americans who learned their geography since the World War, I was brought up to think of Poland as a country which looked much like the other countries of Europe. . . . Once on the Polish side [of the Polish-German border], I thought I must be in the region of some awful plague. The fields were nothing but stone, there were no trees, mere paths instead of roads. In the towns there were no shops, no automobiles, no pavements and again no trees. There were not even any Poles to be seen in the streets, only Jews!²⁶

Whereas Johnson and Barr's embrace of German, French, American, and other "western" modern art was both immediate and extensive, that from east central and eastern Europe was at the start tentative and begrudging.²⁷ Within a decade, a series of exhibitions in MoMA's galleries—

26. See Kazys Varnelis, "We Cannot Not Know History': Philip Johnson's Politics and Cynical Survival," *Journal of Architectural Education* 49, no. 1 (September 1995): 92–104: "Again Johnson singled out the Jews in classically antisemitic terms, this time comparing them with a disease upon the European race. . . . While he had disparaged Poland and its large Jewish population, Johnson painted Germany in a starkly better light." See also Varnelis's selected bibliography, which lists nine of Johnson's most notorious published political writings, including "Poland's Choice between War and Bolshevism Is a 'Deal' with Germany," *Social Justice*, 11 September 1939, 4, which appeared during Germany's invasion of Poland.

27. By contrast, the inaugural exhibition at the new Museum of Non-Objective Art (today's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), *Art of Tomorrow*, thematized for art the universality that inspired *The World of Tomorrow* concept of the 1939 World's Fair. As (Baroness) Hilla Rebay, the chief motivator of and advisor to Solomon Guggenheim regarding his collecting and exhibiting activities, wrote in the catalogue's essay, "The Value of Non-Objectivity": "The theme center of the New York World's Fair owes its inspiration to the creation of Rudolf Bauer, 'The Holy One,' painted in 1936, exhibited and published in the United States of America" and serving as the frontispiece to the Guggenheim Foundation's 1939 catalogue. See Hilla Rebay, "The Value of Non-Objectivity," in the catalogue for the inaugural exhibition *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings* (New York, 1937), n.p. It is significant to note here the names and numbers of works by "non-objective" artists from central and eastern Europe then in the Guggenheim Foundation's collection:

including Modern Architecture: International Exhibition (1932), Machine Art (1934), Cubism and Abstract Art (1936), Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism (1936), and Bauhaus, 1919–1928 (1938)—many organized in collaboration with European émigré scholars and artists, had redefined the scope, styles, and meanings of modernism. As a result, the full sweep of progressive styles had been dramatically narrowed. The result of this calculated enterprise was the creation of a “canonical modernism,” one that would have long-lasting consequences for the reception of Polish—and most east central (and eastern) European—modern art in America.²⁸

None of MoMA’s trailblazing shows between 1932 and 1943 treated the ideological bases of modern art forthrightly, nor did they deal with the political and social perspectives that had been central to most of the artists whose works were on display in New York. In every instance, the museum endeavored to downplay politics in favor of elevating aesthetics to the decisive determinant of creativity. Perhaps there were justifiable reasons for Barr and his colleagues to fasten exclusively on artistic “development” rather than on the extra-aesthetic context or animating forces that propelled and shaped the artists’ creation of ever more radically novel styles of expression. Barr’s influential hand-drawn chart illustrating the evolution of modern art (ca. 1936) does have the attraction of ignoring national, racial, and cultural typologies in favor of a seemingly immanent ontogeny of history. Thus under the “curatorship” of Barr and Johnson’s MoMA, the history of modern art was presented predominantly as an evolution of style, affirmed as a Hegelian unfolding of the absolute “spirit of abstraction,” with each succeeding movement ever more self-consciously advancing non-objectivity.²⁹

The result of these conscious efforts by Barr and his museum col-

Kandinskii (#239–#342, from 1912–36), László Moholy-Nagy (#353–#358, from 1927–30, Jindřich Štyrský (#401 and #402, 1927), and Toyen (#403, 1927). For our purposes, it is important to recognize that Bauer, Rebay’s most admired artist, represented in the collection by 215 works (from 1915–39) and illustrated with 22 full-page color images, was born (1889) in Lindenwald (Wąweln, northeast of Bydgoszcz [Bromberg]), which Hilla Rebay considered to be Poland. Also listed, but most likely not exhibited, were David Burliuk, Marc Chagall, and Emil Filla.

28. It merits mention here that Hungarian, “Russian” (encapsulating Ukrainian, Belorussian, and other constituent republics of the USSR), and, to a lesser degree, Yugoslavian, Czech, and Romanian classical modernism was integrated, admittedly irregularly, into American institutional collections, although usually displayed in “specialized” settings, as for example the Czech art in the “Bohemian” (Webster) branch of the New York Public Library on East 70th Street. See Robert H. Davis and Edward Kasinec, “From Shelf to Spotlight: Rediscovering Modernist Books from Eastern Europe at the New York Public Library,” in S. A. Mansbach, *Graphic Modernism: From the Baltic to the Balkans, 1910–1935* (New York, 2007), esp. 59–62.

29. Barr’s conceptualization of abstraction differed essentially from that advanced by Rebay and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. For the organizers of the Museum of Non-Objective Art, abstraction was the spiritual culmination of modern aesthetic expression. As a result, Rebay and the Guggenheim Foundation were especially open to all forms of modernist art from east central and eastern Europe that might be understood as possessing a spiritual content. See Rebay, “The Value of Non-Objectivity,” esp. 4 and 9.

leagues was to institutionalize through MoMA's exhibitions a restricted vision of modernist art for an American audience and to promote an Americanized conception of modern art whose hundreds of exhibited items point up modern design but avoid the political and social reforms that modern design was intended to effect.³⁰ Barr's putatively apolitical attitude was decisive in the museum's presentation of the exhibitions *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), as well as *Bauhaus, 1919–1928* (1938).³¹ Barr's reluctance to acknowledge in cosmopolitan New York City the revolutionary social agenda of the avant-garde was recognized almost immediately as a major failing by both the popular and scholarly press. In 1937, the Lithuanian-born Meyer Schapiro criticized Barr for decontextualizing the art he chose to display. Barr conceded Schapiro's point, at least partially. Already in the 1936 catalogue for *Cubism and Abstract Art*, the museum director had granted that focusing predominantly on the aesthetic autonomy of works of art "involves a great impoverishment of painting, an elimination of . . . [the consideration of] subject matter, sentimental, documentary, political, sexual, religious. . . . But in his art the abstract artist prefers impoverishment to adulteration."³²

What I am suggesting is that the dominant narrative of modern art began to emerge institutionally during the decade preceding America's entry into World War II, rather than twenty years earlier, when Poland's truly extraordinary and varied modern art—as well as the modernism created by legions of Hungarians and Russians, and by a good number of Romanians, Czechs, and others from central, southeastern, and eastern Europe—was taken seriously by collectors and exhibited widely in Europe and was far from ignored in America. This later and ultimately dominant "story of art" was decisively instrumentalized by American museums, led by MoMA and abetted by those intellectuals most deeply affected by the

30. For a more comprehensive study of these issues, particularly of the ways in which MoMA assisted in institutionalizing the canonical story of modern art, see Mansbach, "The Artifice of Modern(ist) Art History," 96–121.

31. For additional reasons why the political dimensions of the Bauhaus may have been consciously ignored by MoMA and Walter Gropius, and those following their lead, see Karen Michaels, "Transfer and Transformation: The German Period in American Art History," in Stephanie Barron, ed., *Exiles + Émigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler* (Los Angeles, 1997), 304–16.

32. Excerpted from Irving Sandler, "Introduction," to *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (New York, 1986), 86. Barr was clearly aware of the potential dangers his attitudes carried. Referring to the historical tendentiousness of Gropius with whom he collaborated closely on the 1938 exhibition, *Bauhaus, 1919–1928*, Barr felt obliged to reprimand the architect for willfully excising historically verifiable material essential to the understanding of the Bauhaus. According to Anthony Alofsin, Barr complained bitterly of Gropius's endeavor "to impede an objective assessment of the Bauhaus" and, on the mendaciousness of the exhibition's catalogue, writing: "The book [on the Bauhaus under Gropius's directorship] is not complete even within its field calling eventually for a more definitive and dispassionate study. I must ask you to replace these omissions in the interest of the Museum's scholarly integrity." Excerpted from a letter from Barr to Gropius dated 24 June 1955, Houghton ms. HL, Harvard, as cited in Anthony Alofsin, *The Struggle for Modernism: Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and City Planning at Harvard* (New York, 2002), 163 and 86.

political outrages of the 1920s and 1930s; namely, the legion of émigré humanities scholars and artists from central Europe—few of whom were Poles—who chose to initiate in their adopted American home a new history, both academic and personal.

It is important to stress here the difference between the United Kingdom and the United States. Most of central Europe's left-wing or left-leaning intellectuals elected to emigrate to Great Britain rather than America. And many were able to secure teaching, research, or museum posts. To name but the most prominent, Frederick (Frigyes) Antal, Francis Klingender, and Arnold Hauser, all eloquent advocates of the social history of art and all émigrés from Miklós Horthy's Budapest, opted for England, claiming—probably correctly—that Great Britain was more receptive to Marxist intellectuals (during the 1930s and 1940s) than the United States.³³ Similarly, a notable number of Polish politicians and scientists had gravitated to Great Britain by the early 1930s, both to take advantage of the opportunities there as well as to profit from the ideological tolerance for which England had long been known. As a consequence, the Polish government-in-exile, established in London at the end of the decade, could draw on a large cadre of already resident emigrant talent. Significantly, comparatively few of the Poles active in the United Kingdom were visual artists, and among these none could be classified as avant-garde, a fact that can likely be attributed to the host nation's general antipathy toward modernist art (its own and foreign) during the 1920s and 1930s.

In ways both overt and subtle, the exiles in America fought against their erstwhile European oppressors with the intellectual means at their command, principally scientific research and the writing of cultural history. In this charged context, modern art from roughly 1900 through the ensuing decades owes its orthodox chronicle to those central European émigrés (and their confederates in the United States) who labored creatively to institutionalize a partisan chronicle through which to counter totalitarian prejudice. By means of public art exhibitions, university courses, and especially through the newly reinvented art history survey texts, these scholars endeavored to plant safely in exile the high culture of central Europe that had been uprooted from its native soil.³⁴ Thus, we must acknowledge that what for us has become the conventional story of early twentieth-century art is less an impartial account than a calculated artifice. The prevailing history of modern art is the direct extension of the tactical response to the tragic conditions of the (1920s and) 1930s in central Europe by those who sought to counter the fascist war against

33. See S. A. Mansbach, "Another History of Modern Art," in Lia Lindner and Christian Fuhrmeister, eds., *Transformationen der Moderne um 1900—Künstler aus Ungarn, Rumänien und Bulgarien in München* (Munich, forthcoming), 325–31.

34. For an examination of the character, content, and effect of the art history survey book, especially the seminally influential texts by E[rnst]. H. Gombrich (*The Story of Art* [New York, 1950]), and H[orst]. W. (with Dora Jane) Janson, *The Story of Painting: From Cave Painting to Modern Times* (New York, 1952) and *History of Art: A Survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day*, 1st ed. [New York, 1962]), see S. A. Mansbach, "Menzel's Popular Reception in the English-Speaking World," in Thomas Gaetgens, Claude Keisch, and Peter-Klaus Schuster, eds., *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, vol. 1 (special supplement to 1999) (Berlin, 2002), 325–21.

liberalism and cosmopolitanism. For it was this philosophy of tolerance and the parallel praxis of free inquiry that the continent's intellectuals individually and collectively embodied that were at greatest peril.

The determined authoritarian assault on the values, often revolutionary, that pioneering modernism celebrated, and to which legions of its adherents and audiences fell victim—no more so, perhaps, than Poland's engagé painters, architects, and designers—engendered among Europe's exiles a concerted response. In addition to participating actively in the worldwide combat against Nazism (and later, Soviet communism), many of the 250 art historians who fled continental Europe waged a prolonged battle against the willful ignorance and ideological blindness of the régimes that had come to power in their native lands.³⁵ Perhaps the émigrés' most effective weapon was their abiding commitment to scholarship, through which they continued to exemplify the best traditions of scientific inquiry for which the central European educational model had until recently been the universal model: liberal inquiry, scientific evidence, rational argumentation, and intellectual probity.

In countless scholarly articles, cultural essays, exhibition catalogue contributions, and lectures on modern art in general, central European pedagogical institutions—most prominently the Bauhaus—were extolled for encouraging imagination and for bold experimentation.³⁶ In like manner, the nonconformist modernist impulses of the early twentieth century were deemed praiseworthy, as much for their victimization by authoritarian régimes in Europe as for their aesthetic innovation, which was highly prized in America. In this regard, then, Polish modernist art, like most other progressive art from central and eastern Europe, was affirmed in the United States, even though Poles themselves were less apparent in this American process than were Germans and Hungarians, particularly from the Bauhaus, who relocated to the United States during the mid-1930s. For all the Gropiuses, Herbert Bayers, László Moholy-Nagys, and György Kepeses present in America, however, their Polish counterparts by and large elected to remain in their native land in order to build a new state, even when conditions turned less favorable and the promise of liberal democracy diminished as Piłsudski's conservative regime consolidated power in the mid-1920s.

Whether, in fact, Polish and other adherents of central European expressionism, creators of cubism, youthful partisans of Dada, or Bauhaus pedagogues ever incarnated the virtues that their advocates in exile attributed to them has rightly been questioned.³⁷ Nonetheless, the creators of

35. For a listing of German, Austrian, Hungarian, and other central European academic or museum-based art specialists who elected, or were forced to seek, refuge in the English-speaking nations of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and South Africa, see the appendix to Mansbach, "The Artifice of Modern(ist) Art History," 109–13.

36. See Gombrich, *Story of Art*, 420; Janson, *History of Art*, 544.

37. Among recent critical assessments of Bauhaus policies and practices, see Sigrid Wortmann Weltge, *Bauhaus Textiles: Women Artists and the Weaving Workshop* (New York, 1998); and Anja Baumhoff, *The Gendered World of the Bauhaus: The Politics of Power at the Weimar Republic's Premier Art Institute, 1919–1932* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001).

advanced art and theory incontrovertibly faced bitter opposition, though not only from the forces of political extremism. The aesthetic revolutions of modernism were rooted in and often inseparable from an activist politics and social radicalism. Dozens of modernists, including the entire Polish cadre, positively perceived their antitraditional art as the decisive “social condenser” through which to construct a new world for a new humankind. And it was likely these social—and frequently socialist—objectives, even more than the artists’ aesthetic expression, that alienated large numbers of the public, as well as antagonized European authoritarian regimes, as we know from the countless charges (and numerous exhibitions pillorying modern art) mounted in Horthy’s Hungary, Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia, and Antonescu’s Romania, among other sites. In this emotionally charged environment, only a few governmental officials were sufficiently courageous to promote the new art; even fewer were willing to advocate the theory behind it. The noble attempts of several bold museum curators and directors—especially in Łódź and Lwów, among other centers of modernist activity—to acquire, display, and acknowledge the revolutionary nature of advanced art stands in sharp contrast to the widespread public discomfiture with the radical “new vision,” or *Neues Sehen*, László Moholy-Nagy’s term both for new methods of photography and a new way of perceiving reality.³⁸

What disquieted many supporters of innovative culture both in an increasingly politicized central Europe and in the United States was the inflammatory political rhetoric of the modernists, even more than the aesthetic revolution this rhetoric promulgated. Perhaps for this reason in the various exhibition catalogues devoted to Polish artists in pre-World War II North America, the focus remained almost exclusively on stylistic developments. One need only review the publications by Rouba, Hilla Rebay, and Eddy, among others, to recognize the primacy of formal concerns at the expense of the artists’ varied ideological worldviews. Many of the aesthetically progressive American patrons of modern art and design were uncomfortable with the ideological propaganda that lay at the core of radical art, which most Polish modernists elected not to moderate.³⁹ As a consequence, the Americans who sought to promote this art frequently downplayed its politically incendiary nature, a practice that was most public in Barr’s exhibitions at the young MoMA in New York. The calculated decision to sidestep a full and faithful accounting of modern art’s formative philosophical phase was in no way limited to museum galleries. A similar partiality was evident in the publications by most central

38. In volumes he published during his Bauhaus years and after, most emphatically in *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (1925) and *Von Material zur Architektur* (1929) (eventually published in English as *The New Vision*, 1932), Moholy-Nagy argued that the viewfinder could train all of us to see more profoundly, thereby revolutionizing our relationships with society and the material world at large.

39. See, for example, Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja przestrzeni: Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*, most likely composed collaboratively with Katarzyna Kobro in 1929 and published in 1931 in Łódź as volume 2 in the projected library series of the a.r. Group. Also see Mieczysław Szczuka, “Próba wyjaśnienia nieporozumień ze stosunku publiczności do Nowej Sztuki,” *Blok*, 1924, no. 2; and editors, “Co to jest konstruktywizm,” *Blok*, 1924, nos. 6–7.

European scholars once they were forced into exile. Almost none treated the art of their own time candidly. The avoidance of a direct engagement with contemporary art and modern aesthetics was due only in part to the transplantation to America of the customary practice among central European university academics of leaving the treatment of modern art to critics, journalists, and a few museum professionals. More decisive was the émigrés' conscious strategy of eschewing modernism as part of their greater resolve to forswear the explicitly political in art.

Under the "curatorship" of Janson, Walter Gropius, and Barr, among many others, the history of modern art was presented to an American audience predominantly as an evolution of style, affirmed as a Hegelian unfolding of the absolute "spirit of abstraction," with each succeeding movement ever more self-consciously advancing nonobjectivity. Little if any attention was paid to the activist politics, idealistic ideologies, or nationalist aspirations for which modern art, including the early abstraction developed in Poland by Strzemiński, Kobro, Stażewski (figure 9), among others, was originally conceived and most often deployed by its makers and its cadre of early supporters. Rather, the art from the early decades of the twentieth century was represented and invoked by the émigré art historians and their domestic museum allies as an effective agent in a larger campaign to defend what classical modernism was not—or what it was only exceptionally—namely, democratic, tolerant (of competing viewpoints), and rationally scientific.

Not coincidentally, these last-named virtues, though only rarely evident in the writings of the artists or demonstrable in their designs, were essential characteristics of the very central European scholarly tradition represented by the émigrés themselves and manifested in most American museums and universities. Moreover, these noble attributes were championed (if not always practiced) in a fateful struggle with totalitarianism: first fascist, then communist. And it was through defending the "Western liberal tradition," fatally compromised by Adolf Hitler and continuously endangered by Iosif Stalin, that a partisan story of modern art was drafted. Yet this story had consequences for comprehending America's attitude toward Polish modern art. Indeed, many in America perceived the very "nation-building" to which so many of Poland's artists devoted themselves during the period of avant-garde activity as compromising the purely stylistic innovation that was lionized by America's leading museums of modern art.

Collecting practices and interests would change radically during the 1940s, when significant numbers of European artists sought refuge in the United States and made contact with MoMA's curators. In addition, Johnson's earlier political and social antipathy to Polish culture would moderate substantially as his enthusiasm for Hitler's Germany, by then America's wartime foe, evaporated. And finally, the consistent enthusiasm for abstract art from the world over, promoted by Peggy Guggenheim's new Museum of Non-Objective Art, established in 1939, likely served as a goad to MoMA's initial efforts to expand its geographical horizons. Nowhere are the results of this shift in MoMA's practice more evident than in its well-received exhibition, *Fifteen Polish Painters* (1961). As the accom-

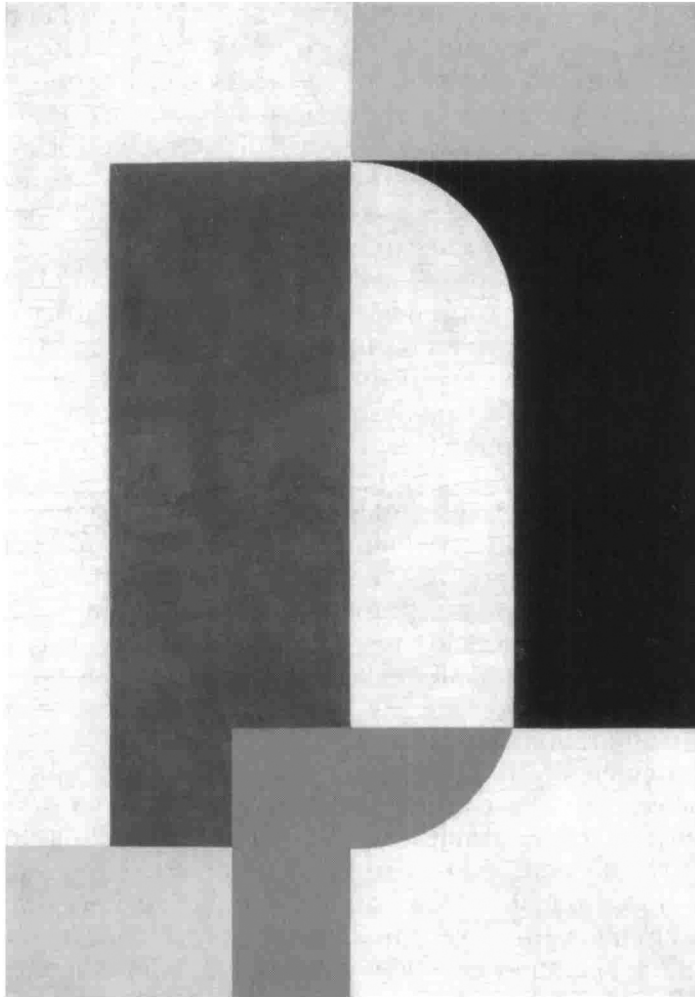


Figure 9. Henryk Stazewski, *Composition*, ca. 1929–1930, oil on canvas. Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi.

panying catalogue makes clear, the museum organizers generally avoided any substantial discussion of the profound political and social content that informed the contemporaneous Polish art world. Nonetheless, this public display in New York marked a notable openness to Polish modern art, as it constituted, in the words of the press release (31 July 1961), “the first comprehensive exhibition in this country devoted to the vital new art movement in Poland,” which was essentially a variant of surrealism and tachism rather than the engaged geometric abstraction that had been advocated by the classical Polish avant-garde of the 1930s.⁴⁰

40. Between 1 June and 1 July 1945—that is, immediately following the surrender of Nazi Germany—the Detroit Institute of Arts mounted *Polish Paintings: A Loan Exhibition*. The exhibition, organized under the auspices of The Friends of Polish Art, might be understood as a celebration of Poland’s liberation from German occupation and an attestation of the survival of Polish (visual) culture in spite of the Nazi attempt to eradicate it.

Postwar Consequences

Many American-based art historians drew on their successful earlier struggle against fascism to wage an effective campaign against Soviet ideology. Early in the Cold War, they endeavored to enlist a new and unprecedentedly large generation of Americans. An ideal pool of potential recruits was available in the corps of American college students, hundreds of thousands of whom were attending university with financial support under the G.I. Bill of Rights. These mostly first-generation university students often lacked a basic familiarity with visual culture, which the art history survey book could effectively address. But in addition, this newly reformatted class of texts, written primarily by central European émigrés, fulfilled a political mission congruent with the dominant governmental stance of post-World War II America. In brief, the surveys of western art educated American students to see in modernist aesthetic experimentation an affirmation of the very virtues cherished in liberal societies but attacked either as “degenerate” or as “bourgeois formalism” by dictatorships on the right and left. Thus, instead of acknowledging classical modern art on its own terms as a template by which to project the artists’ ideal vision of perfect relationships—social, political, and aesthetic—the émigré historians reconfigured modernism as a more or less moderate, socially unthreatening attempt by rational artists to advance a stylistic imperative.⁴¹

In truth, the chronicle of style articulated by these historians, and by the curators who authored countless exhibition catalogues on classical modern art, is quite artful, as long as one focuses principally on the phenomenological aspects of art, architecture, and designed objects. But once one inquires into the social, cultural, or political matrices from which art developed, one is compelled to reckon with the formative role exerted on stylistic choices by extra-aesthetic forces and concerns. This realization is in no manner revolutionary. Indeed, it has served as the foundation of art historical methodology since the establishment of *Kunstgeschichte* as a formal academic discipline in the first half of the nineteenth century. Further, such lines of inquiry were brilliantly practiced by generations of central European scholars, especially by those born between roughly 1880 and 1910 in imperial Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Poland. One has only to recall the names of Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Gombrich, Hauser, Klingender, Antal, among dozens of other émigré historians of the visual arts to appreciate the contributions they made to the sophisticated methods of the discipline: iconography, iconology, psychology, and social history to mention but a few. Nonetheless, it is important and paradoxical

As far as I can tell from the accompanying exhibition catalogue, there were no explicitly modernist canvases displayed.

41. See Mitchell Schwartz, “Origins of the Art History Survey Text,” *Art Journal* 54, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 24–29; and Mansbach, “Another History of Modern Art.” For an appreciation of how the history of art can and has been practiced, with an intimation for its presentation in textbooks, see the iconic study by Erwin Panofsky, “The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline,” which served as the introduction to the émigré scholar’s still widely read *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (Garden City, N.Y., 1955), 1–25, esp. 16–17.

cal to note the very absence of these “structurally deep” methodologies or modes of inquiry in the treatment of classical modernism in the survey books and exhibition catalogues by many of these same scholars.⁴² Their almost exclusive focus on the dynamic development of modern art as a stylistic phenomenon stands in contrast to their analysis of Renaissance art or eighteenth-century art, for example, where the careful consideration of the pivotal role of religion and politics, or that of industrialization and social stratification, was primary to the assessment of the production of art. This attenuation of approach by the very authors for whom social, political, religious, and economic contexts had been central to their scholarship of earlier historical periods must have been as calculated as the manifestos of the modernists themselves.

There is a dimension to the émigrés’ strategy that merits our attention here, especially at a time when scholars are reassessing the history of the various humanities disciplines and their practices. The portrayal of modern artists and of the classically trained central European émigré scholars as noble victims of politically induced mass intolerance and government-sanctioned prejudice fits well with the widespread practice of idealizing the casualties of injustice. That Polish expressionists, cubists, futurists, and abstractionists ran afoul of powerful forces domestic and foreign and that they suffered savage attacks are doleful facts of modern history. Yet it is also important to note that these artists (and their apologists) had been “embattled” long before the various Soviet-styled regimes took official action against them. Within the contentious context of modernism itself, and perhaps this was nowhere more heated than during the first dozen years of Poland’s Second Republic, advanced figures and their supporters, especially from the Bauhaus orbit, contested with legions of other progressive designers, most of whom shared an equally passionate commitment to pioneering aesthetics. Moreover, many of these non-German figures from Romania, Hungary, and especially Poland likewise issued manifestos, secured commissions, constructed impressive modern buildings, and contributed mightily to modern painting, sculpture, set design, and other modes of progressive expression. Until recently, however, these highly original (mostly) east central European modernists and their works rarely garnered the serious attention of historians beyond their native borders. It might be claimed, ironically, that the distinctive early modern art from Poland (figure 10) and throughout east central and Balkan Europe fell victim to the victims of modern history.

Obviously, the Cold War era made it difficult to access the modern art (and texts) of east central and eastern Europe.⁴³ Thus the original voices

42. Here, one should likely except the social historians, who almost alone consistently advocated the decisive role of politics, social stratification, and means of production for a proper comprehension of the meanings and purposes of art. Yet Klingender, Antal, and even Hauser were far less concerned with the development of modern art than they were engaged with early periods, especially with eighteenth-century culture and its attachment to (mostly British) industrialization.

43. For an incisive English-language account of the avant-garde in eastern Europe between the end of World War II and the conclusion of the Cold War, see Piotr Piotrowski,



Figure 10. August Zamoyski (artist) / Jerzy Hulewicz (editor), Cover of *Zdrój*, 1918, vol. 3. Poznań: Ostoja. Digital ID 1565054. The New York Public Library, Slavic and Baltic Collections.

of the modern artists, architects, and critics from Poland and throughout the region were rarely heard in the west. But perhaps a more compelling—and disturbing—reason for the failure of most American scholars of classical modern art to have accommodated in their narratives the surpassingly inventive architecture, art, and design that had originated in east central Europe may be attributed to ideological bias. Succinctly stated, classical modern art from east central and eastern Europe did not conform to the paradigms established for modernism in the United States, especially those advanced by the central European émigré scholars in their canonical surveys published in the post-World War II era and

In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989, trans. Anna Brzyski (London, 2009), the translation of *Awangarda w cieniu Jalty: Sztuka Europy Środkowo-wschodniej w latach 1945–1989* (Poznań, 2005).

codified through such institutions as MoMA. The histories of eastern European progressive figures, movements, and monuments had to wait a long time before being brought to the attention of English-reading audiences.⁴⁴ Even though there were exhibitions of modernist Polish painting in the United States during the early 1960s and 1970s, such as two notable shows at MoMA—the 1961 exhibition of Fifteen Polish Painters, mentioned above, and the 1976 Exhibit of Polish Constructivism, 1923–36—no substantial scholarly study or popular overview appeared in English on prominent Polish modernist painters or architects between the 1930s and the 1970s.⁴⁵

By the 1970s, the sway of the émigré art historians began to diminish and new political conditions favored an inspection of received opinion. Moreover, with the rise of postmodernism, license was given to break free of historical constraints in order to bring fresh references, overlooked sources, and innovative forms into the fold of accepted aesthetic and academic discourse. In the last ten years or so, many Anglo-American scholars have been authoring new surveys that set aside a single, universalizing theory of modernism in favor of flexible methodologies and broader visions.⁴⁶ These books endeavor to account for those modernisms that do not lend themselves to the precepts of the émigré historians and their disciples. The rewards for developing new critical procedures and methodological practices are more than merely “archaeological.” In addition to uncovering or reinterpreting major modernist monuments from Poland and elsewhere too long buried by art historical neglect or purposeful propaganda, a cohort of scholars on both sides of the Atlantic is collectively restoring to modern art its suppressed richness and original creative complexity. By examining and assessing modern art with a broader perspective, a less restrictive focus, and a more nuanced methodology, the creative variety of modern art’s foundations can be more fully appreciated. Paradoxically, such a return to origins coincides beautifully with a

44. Here, one might cite as representative Andrzej Olszewski’s English-language text, *An Outline of Polish Twentieth Century Art and Architecture* (Warsaw, 1989), or Lajos Németh’s English-language translation from the original Hungarian, *Modern Hungarian Art* (Budapest, 1968). It was primarily through exhibitions that a western public had a firsthand encounter with the original achievements from east central Europe. Among the dozens of exhibitions, some rather small in scale, the following might be mentioned: Galerie Denise René, *Précurseurs de l’art abstrait en Pologne: Kazimierz Malewicz, Katarzyna Kobro, Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Henryk Berlewi, Henryk Stazewski* (Paris, 1957); Hubertus Gaßner, ed., *Wechselwirkungen: Ungarische avant-garde in der Weimarer Republik* (Marburg, 1986); *Osteuropäischer Avantgarde* (Bochum, 1988); Mansbach, *Standing in the Tempest*; and Ryszard Stanislawski and Christoph Brockhaus, eds., *Europa, Europa: Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa* (Bonn, 1994).

45. The first significant English-language text to pay attention to the multitaled modernist figure Tadeusz Kantor, for instance, was the catalogue *Tadeusz Kantor: Emballages, 1960–76*, which was published in London by the Whitechapel Gallery in September 1976. See also Olszewski, *An Outline of Polish Twentieth Century Art and Architecture*.

46. For example, Richard R. Brettell, *Modern Art, 1851–1929: Capitalism and Representation* (Oxford, 1999); Jeremy Howard, *East European Art, 1650–1950* (Oxford, 2006); Elizabeth Clegg, *Art, Design and Architecture in Central Europe, 1890–1920* (New Haven, 2006); as well as Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*.

rediscovery of the role Polish modern art played in America during the early decades of the last century. Thus it is appropriate that we recall the times and words of the first great American collector of Polish and central European modern art, Dreier, who a hundred years ago highly prized both the styles and the strategies of modernism's creators. As the great patroness wrote about the innovative art she collected and presented: "To those of us who have watched the growth of this [modern art] movement almost from its inception, one fact stands out specially clearly and that is that it appears not to be dependent, or to rest upon the reputation of a few well-known names, but has a vitality and strength, which inspires and leads. . . . Like the saints of old, it is so infinitely bigger than any one man or than some personal conception of beauty as expressed in old and dying forms."⁴⁷

47. Dreier, "Introduction," *Modern Art*, unpaginated.