

IRENA JAKIMOWICZ: AN IDEAL MUSEOLOGIST

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Irena Jakimowicz, née Jakubowski, was born in Radom on 8 August 1922. Having studied history of art on clandestine courses of the University of Warsaw in 1943–44 during the Nazi occupation of Poland, she graduated in 1951. In 1946, she married Andrzej Jakimowicz, a later professor of art history at the University of Warsaw, among others a monographist of Jacek Malczewski. They had two children: Marta and Jacek.

Irena Jakimowicz dedicated all her grown-up life to the National Museum in Warsaw (MNW). She started work in the Museum's Educational Department already in 1945, in 1953 becoming an assistant professor in the Polish Graphic Arts Department, five years later out of which she selected works executed after 1914, turning them into the Department of Prints and Contemporary Drawings which she curated. Until early 1982, the Department formed part of the Gallery of Contemporary Art, yet it subsequently gained autonomy as the Cabinet of Prints and Contemporary Drawings curated by Irena Jakimowicz. Next to the Department of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture, it formed part of the Gallery of Contemporary Art of MNW curated by Jerzy Zanoziński. In early 1981, an independent Cabinet of Prints and Contemporary Drawings was created, and Irena Jakimowicz became its curator. She retained this positions until the retirement in May 1991, having worked at MNW for 46 years.

The work of Irena Jakimowicz consisted in building the collection, studying it, and communicating it through exhibitions accompanied by reasoned catalogues, and also through papers and books. Still as the employee of the Department of Polish Graphic Arts, she prepared two major exhibitions: 'Within the Circle of the Rembrandt Tradition' in the spring of 1956¹ and 'From Young Poland to Today', held in 1959.² The first displayed works: drawings and prints, by Rembrandt-inspired artists. The exhibition marked out a certain trend in Polish museum displays; not owning works of any Western artists, out of necessity, which still continues a factor, museums are obliged in certain situations to resort to local collections. This may lead, and it usually does,



1. Irena Jakimowicz taking visitors round the monographic exhibition of Bronisław Wojciech Linke, on the left in the foreground Prof. Stanisław Lorentz, Director of the National Museum in Warsaw (MNW); the first on the right is Tadeusz Galiński, Minister of Culture, 1963

to interesting studies, and even discoveries within the local environment, particularly in view of its connections with the art from other circles.

Having selected out of the entire MNW collection of works on paper: prints and drawings executed after 1914, Irena Jakimowicz concentrated on contemporary art. Her first bigger project as the head of the newly formed department was the exhibition, in a way programmatic, 'Polish Contemporary Graphic Arts 1900–1960', mounted in 1960.³ Furthermore, she also studied about 1.000 prints and

drawings by Tadeusz Makowski, who passed away in 1932, since in 1959 MNW purchased almost the entire content of the artist's Paris studio; apart from different works on paper, there were also over 300 oil paintings which ended up in the Department of Contemporary Painting. All of this resulted in a big monograph exhibition of Makowski, accompanied by a reasoned catalogue prepared by a great expert in the artist's works Prof. Władysława Jaworska.⁴

The next challenge Irena Jakimowicz faced was to mount the posthumous exhibition of Bronisław Wojciech Linke who died on 6 October 1962. He, too, left as his legacy a large number of works on paper, mainly drawings. His widow Anna Maria Linke eagerly helped to put together the exhibition of her husband's works, organized the following year. This exhibition was also accompanied by a reasoned catalogue, and following the display, 380 works by the artist were deposited at MNW.⁵

The subsequent monographic exhibitions displayed the works by respectively Zygmunt Waliszewski (1964), Feliks Topolski (1965), Wacław Wąsowicz (1969), and Tadeusz Kulisiewicz (1971). These really consolidated the position of Jakimowicz as a biographer and expert in the oeuvre of particular contemporary artists, especially those in whose oeuvre a prominent place was taken by drawings and prints.

All these tasks did not prevent Irena Jakimowicz from preparing her doctoral dissertation dedicated to Tomasz Zieliński, a collector and patron, which she defended in 1970.

On 7 December 1970, an extremely intriguing Polish artist Konstanty Brandel passed away in Paris, and Witold Leitgeber, his nephew and heir, donated over 600 drawings and prints to MNW, these including his famous series of *Cathedrals*, in which the artist included innovatory experiments in reflecting space. This collection, too, had to be studied and subsequently presented in an exhibition which was mounted in 1977.⁶

In the meantime, Irena Jakimowicz was preparing the book *Witkacy – Chwistek – Strzemiński* discussing the oeuvre of those three artists, concentrating mainly on their theoretical views.

Based on the collection of Janet Gotlib, widow of Henryk Gotlib, who died in England in 1966, Irena Jakimowicz organized yet another monographic display presenting the oeuvre of the artist little known in Poland.⁷

After a series of huge monographic exhibitions dedicated to the artistic output of single artists, there came the time for thematic exhibitions. Together with a group of the Cabinet team, Irena Jakimowicz undertook the attempt to show the beginnings of modern art revived in the 1918 Poland. The tendencies were represented by the artists at first, still in 1917, jointly displaying their works as Polish Expressionists, and later as Formists. The group included the brothers Andrzej and Zbigniew Pronaszko, Tytus Czyżewski, Leon Chwistek, Leon Dożycki, Henryk Gotlib, Jan Hrynkowski, Jacek Mierzejewski, Tymon Niesiołowski, Konrad Winkler, and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. As can be seen from the list of names, the group was a non-homogenous body; not only did it encompass outstanding, but also very different artistic personalities, thus their overall, but also cohesive presentation was quite a challenge. The Exhibition was held in the spring of 1985. Enjoying a high turnout, it weekly had a tour guided by respective

individuals who together with Irena Jakimowicz had participated in its preparation, and attracted quite a crowd of the public interested in the presentation of varied artistic approaches corresponding with the new trends in West European art of the time. Thanks to Radosław Mleczeko, assistant to the Cabinet with musical background, the display was additionally accompanied by a series of concerts of young composers who for the purpose created pieces inspired by painterly works displayed at MNW. It was only four years after the exhibition that the reasoned catalogue was published; apart from the pieces displayed, it also included works of respective artists from the whole of the Formist period, together with the notes on them and bibliography. The publication has continued to-date as a precious source and a departure point for further research into this extremely interesting phenomenon in Polish art.⁸

At the same time Irena Jakimowicz was working on the monograph on Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz meant to crown her work at MNW. The pieces in the museum collection constituted merely a fraction of the oeuvre of this extremely prolific artist. Jakimowicz's ambition was to collect their largest possible number in her catalogue. With the contribution of the author of this paper, who joined the project in the autumn of 1985, it was possible to catalogue 3.073 works known from autopsy or reliable records.⁹ This meant searching in private collections, both in Warsaw and other towns: Cracow, Poznan, Zakopane, and Torun, which at the same time led to meeting people and getting to know various anecdotes connected with the life of Witkacy and his closest environment, since many owners or their children and relatives had sat for the portraits executed by the artist. On the humorous note, what resulted from this search was the gaining of the recipe for the 'Witkacy cake': sponge with a strawberry cream layer; one of the works' owners served it to Irena Jakimowicz. She mastered the tricks of its preparation and the cake became the most favourite snack of the Cabinet employees.¹⁰

The works on Witkacy's catalogue were closed in November 1988, while the exhibition containing over 600 works rented from places around Poland, both from museum and private collections, was held in late 1989 and early 1990.

Independently of this, Irena Jakimowicz prepared an album dedicated to Witkacy published in 1985 by the Warsaw Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, featuring reproductions of 223 works and 15 photographs, as well as an extensive paper related to the painting and drawing output of the artist.¹¹ Two years later the book was released in its English and German versions.¹²

Slightly earlier, in 1984, the 'Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie' had published two Jakimowicz's papers discussing interesting, previously untackled aspects of Witkacy's oeuvre, namely his experimentations with drugs and their painterly results,¹³ as well as the text dealing with the artist's stay in Russia in 1914–1918.¹⁴ Three years later an innovative analysis of the artist's self-portraits was published in the same Annual.¹⁵

In the 'Bulletin de Musée National du Varsovie' Irena Jakimowicz published three articles dedicated to the new acquisitions of Witkacy's works by MNW: an extremely interesting pair of self-portraits as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde



2. Irena Jakimowicz, Nieborów ca 1963

executed in April 1938, and an impressive double portrait of Helena Lisińska and Jan Gadomski against landscape from August 1939 (the three works purchased in 1984),¹⁶ the portrait of Maryla Grossman with the self-portrait from January 1927 purchased in 1989,¹⁷ and the puzzling 1911 oil composition showing five caricatured figures seen against landscape, which joined the Museum collection in 1990 at the instigation of Irena Jakimowicz.¹⁸ By that time the collection of the Cabinet of Graphic Arts and Contemporary Drawings had amassed over 37.000 items.

When retiring in May 1991, Irena Jakimowicz did not interrupt her professional activity, immediately afterwards initiating works on the book she had long planned called *Five Centuries of Polish Printmaking*: a synthetic, and penetrating overview of prints executed in Poland, beginning with copperplates by Veit Stoss from the late 16th century, to computer art of Tadeusz Mysłowski and Jan Pamuła's experiments from the mid-1990s.¹⁹ Richly illustrated, the book also contained biographical notes, a lexicon of printmaking techniques, and a list of selected literature on the subject. Even a major heart attack she suffered in early 1992 did not interrupt Irena Jakimowicz's work on the book, which became a basis for a monumental exhibition presenting over 600 works, mounted at MNW in the spring of 1997. It was co-curated by Anna Grochala, the then Curator of the Cabinet of Prints and Polish Drawings responsible for preparing the part of the display covering items executed before 1914.

Simultaneously with the work on this display, Irena Jakimowicz was preparing a monograph album on Jerzy Mierzejewski, a painter born in 1917, son of the Formist

Jacek Mierzejewski, and a lecturer at the Lodz National Film School (PWSFiT) in 1950–1975.²⁰

Regrettably, Irena Jakimowicz was too unwell to participate in two Witkacy-dedicated conferences she was invited to: the one in St Petersburg in June 1993 and that in September 1994 at the Museum of Central Pomerania in Słupsk.²¹ I had the privilege of reading the papers she had prepared for both of them.

Following the Exhibition 'Five Centuries of Polish Printmaking', Irena Jakimowicz started yet another work she was not permitted to finish. It was a monograph on Mieczysław Jakimowicz (1881–1917), a relative of her husband Andrzej. This little-known draughtsman and graphic artist were member of the Group of Five formed in 1905, bringing together Leopold Gottlieb, Vlastimil Hoffman, Jan Rembowski, and Witold Wojtkiewicz. The collecting of materials for this project was interrupted by Irena Jakimowicz's death on 16 January 1999.

Apart from preparing exhibitions and publications, Irena Jakimowicz, with much commitment and meticulousness, continued consolidating the Cabinet's collection. Thanks to her contacts, established and carefully maintained throughout her life, the collections were enriched with many interesting works of contemporary artists, in many a case their series. Next to the afore-mentioned sets of works by Makowski, Brandl, Linke, Gotlieb or Topolski, mention has to be made of several dozens of the prints by Roger Loewig, a German artist, who feeling the urge to compensate the Polish people for the crimes committed by the older



3. Press conference before the opening of the Exhibition 'Five Centuries of Polish Prints', MNW 1997

generation of his compatriots, presented his works to MNW. They were displayed in the autumn of 1986.²²

Irena Jakimowicz cooperated on a regular basis with the Kupferstich Kabinett in Dresden, which yielded an exchange of prints by Polish artists purchased for the purpose by the Ministry of Culture and Art for those by German artists. Another opportunity to acquire foreign exhibits was the fact that for a long time Irena Jakimowicz participated as member of the Jury of the Florence Drawing Triennial and the International Print Biennial held in Cracow as of 1962.

When in the 1980s Polish artistic life almost entirely came to a standstill, limiting itself to private shows, Irena Jakimowicz supported young artists representing the variant of the so-called New Wild (*Neue Wilde*) who with their expressive, often mocking works of ironic titles protested against the realities around them. Although the activity was in opposition to the then cultural policy, additionally bearing in mind the fact that the state was the only patron of art having at its disposal financial means, Irena Jakimowicz succeeded in purchasing works of several artists of the trend, such as Ryszard Grzyb or Włodzimierz Pawlak.

An important form of the activity of Irena Jakimowicz was educating young employees. Despite her widely known and almost proverbial 'tough character', Mrs Jakimowicz was a wonderful Boss, and almost all her employees recall her with warmth and gratitude. Extremely demanding, yet first of all from herself, she was prolifically active in her career and expected the same from us. Encouraging us to further our professional interests and publish research results. She would almost always share her papers with us before publishing them, eager to hear our comments, often introducing corrections based on those. And *vice versa*: she was eager to read our papers, commenting on them with a friendly attitude, suggesting possible changes and improvements. Ready to admit her mistakes, she was capable of apologizing for them, even thankful for them having been pointed to. Strict and critical within our own group, she would defend us with determination as a proverbial mother lioness defending her cubs with extensive praise.

She always prepared the exhibitions together with the whole Cabinet team, which was for junior employees a practical and at the same time fascinating course in creating a peculiar reality, namely a display of a work of art. We could learn how much depends on the order of exhibits, their layout, frames in which they are put, and on the colour of the backdrop they are placed against.

On every day basis she would teach us to be museologists: we learnt how to take care of objects on paper, how to preserve them, and how to show unrelenting consistency in obeying conservation and safety rules. One of them became almost proverbial: never to put small objects on larger ones, and those who were not able to promptly assimilate it, were not fit for becoming part of the Cabinet team.

When preparing catalogues, we learnt how to make descriptions as well as catalogue and biographical entries, which Mrs Jakimowicz would verify to the last comma. Looking deep into the eyes of the author, she would pose that penetrating question: *Are you sure, dear, that here a colon not a semicolon should be put?* When someone had begun writing a doctoral dissertation under her supervision, and it seemed to be taking too long, she would take almost



4. Opening of the Exhibition 'Five Centuries of Polish Prints', MNW 1997

every possible opportunity to ask: *And has your dissertation been progressing, Mr/Mrs...?* If she was keen on somebody's publication or exhibition, she spared no praise. Showing quite a peculiar, but winning sense of humour, she was fond of different bon mots, neologisms, attractive figures of speech, as well as poignant and humorous punchlines.

She encouraged us to take part in conference, visit exhibitions; we would occasionally visit some all together, on which occasion Mrs Jakimowicz's observations were a priceless lesson of viewing not only respective exhibits, but also the display lay-out, this extremely valuable in our future projects.

It is not thus surprising that the majority of us have 'turned out all right', which she was extremely proud of and boasted about, claiming she treated us like her most accomplished exhibitions and books. The majority of us have acquired doctoral degrees and have become recognizable individuals within our circles, like Dorota Folga-Januszewska, a long-standing director of MNW responsible for academic questions, Deputy Director of the Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów, professor at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University and Academy Fine Arts, twice President of ICOM Poland, each time for two terms of office, author of numerous exhibitions and publications; Marcin Giżyński, professor at the Rhode Art School of Design in Providence (USA), author of many documentaries and cartoons, art critic, and author of many publications; Sławomir Bołdok, working for DESA, afterwards Editor-in-Chief of the monthly dedicated to the art market 'Art & Business', running courses in these issues at the University of Warsaw;



5. At the opening of the Exhibition 'Five Centuries of Polish Prints', from the left: Zdzisław Podkański, Minister of Culture; Franciszek Cemka, Director of the Museum Department at the Ministry of Culture and Art; Irena Jakimowicz; Ferdynand Ruszczyk, MNW Director; Dorota Folga-Januszewska, MNW Deputy



6. Irena Jakimowicz and Dorota Folga-Januszewska, 1998

Anna Manicka, a monographist of Bronisław Wojciech Linke, author of some dozen exhibitions and several tens of publications, currently Curator of the Cabinet of Prints and Contemporary Drawings at MNW; Maryla Sitkowska, a long-standing Curator of the Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts, author of numerous exhibitions and publications, and myself, a long-standing Curator of the Cabinet of Prints and Contemporary Drawings, Mrs Jakimowicz's continuator in Witkacy Studies, author of 15 exhibitions and almost 200 publications, including 10 books, mainly on Witkacy, and the Witkacy-related www.witkacy.hg.pl website, active

participant of over 40 conferences, these including the annual meetings of ICOFOM (International Committee for Museology).

Not only was Irena Jakimowicz an outstanding museologist, who not just fully, but with an extra output fulfilled all the responsibilities of her profession as stemming from the Act on Museums, but also an interesting, creative, and powerful personality who has left her trace not just in the numerous publications, but also in the work of the individuals who followed in her footsteps and developed her accomplishments.

Abstract: Having studied history of art on clandestine Warsaw University courses run in 1943–1944, Irena Jakimowicz (1922–1999) graduated in 1951. In 1945–1991, she worked at the National Museum in Warsaw, initially in the Educational Department, from 1953 in the Polish Graphic Arts Department, out of which in 1958 she selected works executed after 1914, turning them into the Department of Graphic Arts and Contemporary Drawings which she headed as curator. Until early 1982, the Department formed part of the Gallery of Contemporary Art, yet it subsequently gained autonomy as the Cabinet of Graphic Arts and Contemporary Drawings curated by Irena Jakimowicz.

Jakimowicz mounted some dozens exhibitions, mainly monographic ones of Polish contemporary artists, e.g. Bronisław Wojciech Linke (1963), Zygmunt Waliszewski (1964), Feliks Topolski (1965), Wacław Wąsowicz (1969), Tadeusz Kulisiewicz (1971), Konstanty Brandel (1977), Henryk Gotlib (1980), Stanisław Ignacy

Witkiewicz (1989/1990). All the exhibitions were accompanied by reasoned catalogues. Furthermore, Jakimowicz authored several cross-sectional, such as 'Within the Circle of the Rembrandt Tradition' (1956), 'From Young Poland to Today' (1959), 'Polish Contemporary Graphic Arts 1900–1960' (1960), 'The Formists' (1985), 'Five Centuries of Polish Prints' (1997).

In 1970, she defended her doctoral dissertation dedicated to the collector Tomasz Zieliński. Moreover, she authored many papers, reviews, and books, e.g. *Witkacy – Chwistek – Strzebiński* (1976), *Witkacy Malarz [Witkacy the Painter]* (1985), *Jerzy Mierzejewski* (1996).

She was a wonderful Boss: demanding, but strict with herself, too. Attentive to her employees' development, she could appreciate and use their abilities to their own benefit and to the benefit of their institution. Those who had the privilege and pleasure of cooperating with her, recall her with admiration saying what a likeable person she was.

Keywords: Irena Jakimowicz (1922–1999), contemporary graphic arts, contemporary drawing, studies in Witkacy, National Museum in Warsaw, Cabinet of Prints and Contemporary Drawings, museology, monograph exhibitions of contemporary artists.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Catalogue was published five years later: I. Jakimowicz, *W kręgu Rembrandtowskiej tradycji: rysunki i grafika* [Within the Circle of the Rembrandt Tradition: Drawings and Prints], Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 1961.
- ² I. Jakimowicz, *Od Młodej Polski do naszych dni – rysunki i studia malarские. Katalog* [From Young Poland to Today: Drawings and Painterly Studies. Catalogue], Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, Warszawa Feb-April 1959.
- ³ *Polska grafika współczesna 1900–1960. Katalog* [Polish Contemporary Graphic Arts 1900–1960. Catalogue], I. Jakimowicz (ed.), Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 1960.
- ⁴ *Tadeusz Makowski (1882–1932): malarstwo, rysunki, grafika* [Tadeusz Makowski (1882–1932): Painting, Drawings, Prints], W. Jaworska et al. (comp.), Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 1960.
- ⁵ Following her death in April 1989, the works became property of MNW. *Bronisław Wojciech Linke 1906–1962: Katalog* [Bronisław Wojciech Linke 1906–1962: Catalogue], I. Jakimowicz (ed. and comp.), Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 1963.
- ⁶ *Konstanty Brandel (1880–1970)*, I. Jakimowicz (comp.), Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 1977.
- ⁷ *Henryk Gotlib 1890–1966: wystawa malarstwa i rysunku* [Henryk Gotlib 1890–1966: Exhibition of Painting and Drawing], I. Jakimowicz (introduction), B. Askanas (biography), Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 1980.
- ⁸ *Formiści* [The Formists], I. Jakimowicz (ed.), Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 1989.
- ⁹ *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz 1885–1939. Katalog dzieł malarskich* [Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz 1885–1939. Catalogue of Painterly Works]. I. Jakimowicz in cooperation with A. Żakiewicz (Comp.), Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 1990.
- ¹⁰ See: www.witkacy.hg.pl
- ¹¹ I. Jakimowicz, *Witkacy Malarz* [Witkacy the Painter], WAiF, Warszawa 1985.
- ¹² *Eadem, Witkacy als Maler*, WAiF, Warszawa 1987; *eadem, Witkacy the Painter*, WAiF, Warszawa 1987.
- ¹³ *Eadem, O poszerzenie przestrzeni wewnętrznej. Z eksperymentów narkotycznych S.I. Witkiewicza* [On Expanding the Internal Space. From Narcotic Experimentations of S.I. Witkiewicz], 'Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie' 1984, pp. 215–72.

- ¹⁴ Eadem, *Witkacy w Rosji* [Witkacy in Russia], 'Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie' 1984, pp. 173-214.
- ¹⁵ Eadem, *O rozmaitym użytkowaniu lustra, czyli autoportrety Witkacego* [On a Various Use of Mirror, Namely Witkacy's Self-Portraits], 'Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie' 1987, pp. 499-534.
- ¹⁶ Eadem, *Metaphor and Realism. Witkacy's Late Works in the National Museum's Collection*. 1984 *Acquisitions*, 'Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie' 1985, Nos. 3-4, pp. 79-86.
- ¹⁷ Eadem, *Falsehood of Woman or the Duality of Existence in Witkacy*, 'Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie' 1993, No. 1-4, pp. 10-24.
- ¹⁸ Eadem, *La peinture dans le miroir du roman*, 'Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie' 1991, No. 1, pp. 3-10.
- ¹⁹ Eadem, *Pięć wieków grafiki polskiej* [Five Centuries of Polish Printmaking], Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 1997.
- ²⁰ Eadem, *Jerzy Mierzejewski*, WAiF, Warszawa 1996; the artist died in 2012.
- ²¹ Eadem, *Falsz kobiety, czyli o dwoistości istnienia* [Falsehood of Woman, or the Duality of Existence in Witkacy], in: *Witkacy. Życie i twórczość* [Witkacy. Life and Oeuvre], J. Degler (Ed.), Wiedza o Kulturze, Wrocław 1996, pp. 25-51.
- ²² Roger Loewig: *rysunki i grafiki. Wystawa daru dla Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie* [Roger Loewig: Drawings and Prints. Exhibition of the Donation to the National Museum in Warsaw], I. Jakimowicz (Comp.), Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa 1986.
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