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POET OF ART – JANUSZ WAŁEK

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Abstract: Janusz Wałek, art historian, museum curator, and pedagogue, was born in 1941 in Bobowa and died on 8 July 2018. Graduated from the Jagiellonian University, where he studied history of art. From 1968 employed at the Czartoryski Museum – Branch of the National Museum in Cracow where subsequently he became for many years head of the European Painting Gallery. Lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts, the National Academy of Theatre Arts, and the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. Author of two books and numerous texts about art. Janusz Wałek was also a poet and winner of the Main Prize in the Jacek Bierezin National Poetry Competition.

Janusz Wałek was a student of Marek Rostworowski, with whom he co-worked on a number of acclaimed exhibitions: “Romanticism and Romanticity in Polish Art of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century”, “The Polish Self-portrait”, and

“Polish Jews”. Author of numerous expositions and art shows, i.a. “The Monumental Theatre of Stanisław Wyspiański” and presentations of great artists: Goya, Raphael, Titian, and El Greco. As a renowned expert on the Czartoryski collections Janusz Wałek created several scenarios of permanent exhibitions shown in Cracow and Niepołomice. Author of a scenario and program for The Europeum Centre for European Culture. Specialised primarily, although not exclusively, in the art and culture of the Renaissance.

The article presents Janusz Wałek as a museum curator totally devoted to art and accentuates his creativity, broad perception of art and culture, unconventional approach to museum undertakings, and great sensitivity and imagination. Emphasis is also placed on the fact that Janusz Wałek spoke and wrote about art not only with expertise, but also as a poet – with zest and, first and foremost, beautifully.

Keywords: Janusz Wałek, museology, history of art, Czartoryski Collection, National Museum in Cracow, European Painting Gallery, Lady with an Ermine by Leonardo da Vinci, creativity, imagination, poetry.

While describing *Adoration of the Child* by Lorenzo Lotto Janusz Wałek wrote in 1997 that the precision of its execution and the *outright crystal purity of the line lead us away from real life towards some sort of eternal perfect existence, which can be best expressed by a work of art*. These words reflect well the attitude of their author towards art, which he perceived as the most important in the world, with which he communed during his entire life, and which he experienced and understood profoundly. Janusz Wałek was also capable of brilliantly talking and writing about it. And it is his remembered or recorded words that shall remain for always in “some sort of eternal perfect existence”. Their author died on 8 July 2018.

Janusz Wałek was born on 4 November 1941 in Bobowa in the county of Gorlice. He graduated from the Bartłomiej Nowodworski High School (the famous “Nowodworek”) in Cracow and then from the Institute of the History of Art at the Jagiellonian University. From 1968 he worked at the National Museum in Cracow - the Czartoryski Museum

– where he became head of the Department of European Painting. Simultaneously lectured on the history of art in Cracow academies: the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts and the Ludwik Solski State Drama School (today: the Stanisław Wyspiański National Academy of Theatre Arts) and taught museology at the Jagiellonian University. Author of numerous texts and articles on art as well as books: *Dzieje Polski w malarstwie i poezji (1987 and 1991)* and *Portrety kobiece Leonarda da Vinci (1994)*. His successive publication was to have been about Lady with an Ermine, but he never completed it. Janusz Wałek was an expert on Renaissance art, especially Italian, and just as knowledgeable about the arcana of modern art.

For a certain period of time he was even head of the Department of Modern Polish Art and Culture at the National Museum in Cracow.

Janusz Wałek was associated predominantly with the title of “guardian of the Lady” because to the early 2000s he looked after the Leonardo canvas while it was loaned



1. and 2. Janusz Wałek and Zofia Gołubiew (director of the National Museum in Cracow) during celebrations marking the 200th anniversary of the Princes Czartoryski Museum, Arsenal of the Princes Czartoryski Museum, 4 June 2001 (photo: from the Archive of the National Museum in Cracow, ref. F/373/2001)217

abroad. In my opinion, attributing only this particular title considerably diminishes Wałek's personality and accomplishments for museology and art (not to mention the fact that he did not accompany this particular painting on its last journeys). Janusz Wałek was a student of Marek Rostworowski and probably this is the reason for his highly untypical approach to museum tasks, which, *nota bene*, occasionally became the source of surprises and even dilemmas both for him and heads of the institution. First and foremost, he was extremely sensitive to the beauty of art, to which he reacted as a true visionary – with immense creativity, ingenuity, and artistic whimsy.

The Janusz Wałek biography includes winning Main Prize in the Jacek Bierezin National Poetry Competition, organised in 1997 by the Łódź Branch of the Polish Writers' Association, for his *Kwartety kopenhaskie* (a volume of poems issued in 1998). He was, therefore, a poet but also – dare I add – a poet of art and culture, since his texts about art are suffused with poetry and the numerous exhibitions prepared by him contained its tangible traces.

Initially Wałek worked together with Marek Rostworowski arranging the unforgettable "Romanticism and Romanticity in Polish Art of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century" exhibition shown in 1975 in Cracow, Warsaw, and Katowice. He was also co-author of the celebrated "The Polish Self-portrait" (1979) and the "Polish Jews" expositions (1989). After Rostworowski's departure from the Museum Wałek prepared

successive interesting presentations, primarily co-operating with his colleague – custodian Dorota Dec. In 1992, when *Lady with an Ermine* was loaned to the USA, he brought over – as part of an exchange with the Gallery of Art in Washington – El Greco's unique *The Laocoön* and set up its exposition together with an entire accompanying program. The year 1998 was marked, in turn, by a display of two outstanding Italian Renaissance works of art – *Venus of Urbino* by Titian and *La Velata* by Raphael, which Wałek gave the apt title: "Raphael, Titian – Princes amongst Painters". In 2001, at the time of the celebrations of the 200th anniversary of the Princes Czartoryski Museum, Wałek and Dorota Dec arranged the exhibition: "Times!"

People! Their works! *Theatrum* of paintings belonging to Princess Izabela Czartoryska: paintings and miniatures from the Gothic House and the Temple of the Sybil in Puławy".

When the National Museum in Cracow commemorated the 100th anniversary of the death of Stanisław Wyspiański he turned to Janusz Wałek with a request to design an exhibition that would become a rehearsal of sorts for establishing a Department of the National Museum in Cracow dedicated to the author of *The Wedding*. Wałek wrote a scenario for a thoroughly untypical exhibition – a *sui generis* spectacle conceived with great impetus and "non-museum" vision while simultaneously demonstrating profound familiarity with the theme. The exposition was created by applying multiple and diverse measures such as stage design and multimedia

as well as film, sound, and light effects, etc. Only in this way was it possible to portray the outstanding and manifold oeuvre of an artist who was one of Wałek's favourite authors, insightfully interpreted and understood. "The Monumental Theatre of Stanisław Wyspiański" memorable exhibition featured in 2007 in the Main Building of the National Museum in Cracow became a great artistic event. We wished to use this remarkable occasion for promoting Wyspiański abroad. Janusz even prepared the necessary material but financial obstacles made it impossible to realise our project – a great pity.

In 2009 Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine* was loaned to Budapest. Since due payment was to be deposited in the bank account of the Princes Czartoryski Foundation and not that of the National Museum in Cracow I asked László Baán, director of the Museum of Fine Arts (Szépművészeti Múzeum) in Budapest, to lend us an equally valuable painting in exchange. We received Francisco Goya's extremely interesting *Episode in the Spanish War of Independence*, a *sui generis* study for the famous *3 May 1808*. Despite its unquestionable artistic value this canvas alone would have probably not become an attraction as great as the "Goya. The Sleep of Reason" exhibition created by Janusz Wałek, who by adding to the Budapest exhibit etchings from *The Disasters of War* series turned the display into a dark *theatrum*.

Naturally, Janusz Wałek was the author or co-author of many more exhibitions and accompanying publications. First and foremost, he was the co-creator of a permanent gallery of European painting and sculpture at the Czartoryski Museum, closed decades later by the Czartoryski Foundation, which in 2010 commenced a renovation of the Palace. From that time objects from the Czartoryski Collection remained scattered for a number of years in assorted Polish museums, and we started to launch European collections created exclusively by the National Museum. True, they do not include the famous *Lady with an Ermine*, but instead they contain many invaluable and magnificent works, such as *The Sermon of St. John the Baptist* by Pieter Brueghel the Younger or the earlier-mentioned canvas by Lott (Janusz Wałek wrote about it stirringly in a book with the evocative title: *Obraz jak klejnot*, which he designed and published in 1997). First of all, in 2010, together with the Royal Castle in Niepołomice, a close partner of the National Museum in Cracow, we held the exhibition: "European Treasures of the National Museum from the Princes Czartoryski Museum in Cracow", whose scenario was – naturally – devised by Janusz Wałek. Next, we renovated the historical Granary in Sikorskiego Square in order to show our European collection. The program of this new Museum department, whose opening took place in 2013, was conceived by Janusz Wałek,

who named it: "The Europeum Centre for European Culture", envisaged as a "living" art centre. The "Europeum" program revealed Wałek's extremely wide perception of culture – he planned to enhance the reception of the displayed paintings, sculptures, and graphic art by organising contextual events from the domains of literature, poetry, music, drama, and even philosophy.

Profound knowledge of the Czartoryski Collection was the reason why in 2012 Janusz Wałek was commissioned to prepare a special display of *Lady with an Ermine* after the canvas returned from its trips abroad. He proposed several alternative sites – the Gallery of 19th Century Polish Art in the Cloth Hall, the Bishop Erazm Ciołek Palace, the Szolayski House – and a number of scenarios, each brilliantly matching the character of the given Museum department and ingeniously displaying the Leonardo canvas together with other works from the collection. None of those ideas were realised owing to decisions made by the funder – the Minister of Culture – and thus for several years *Lady* was shown at the Royal Castle on Wawel Hill.

The creation of a new permanent exhibition – after completing the renovation of the Palace – was envisaged as the crowning of Wałek's activity focused on the Czartoryski Collection. Together with a team he prepared a novel scenario testifying not only to his acquaintance with the Collection but also to an awareness of the specific ambiance of the exceptional nineteenth-century museum. The scenario, initially approved by a special commission and funder, was subsequently rejected. Several years later, in 2017, Janusz Wałek created "Priceless", his last Czartoryski Collection exhibition opened at the Czartoryski Museum – Arsenal, on view until the end of February 2018.

Apart from the "guardian of the *Lady*" label Wałek was attributed also with great erudition. I am incapable of assessing his rank as an erudite, but for many years I observed how freely he moved in the world of classical and extremely widely treated European culture, thus demonstrating his knowledge. Quite possibly, there are better experts on history or art, representing a scientific approach and winning successive degrees, but not many are capable of tackling those fields in such a creative and visionary manner. Janusz Wałek not only spoke about art with great intuition and eloquence – and hence was even described as an "orator" – and wrote about it as a poet, as was mentioned above, but was also capable of turning exhibitions into extremely attractive artistic spectacles. He introduced into the history of art and museology enormous sensitivity and imagination as well as a valuable and rare, unconventional approach.

Janusz Wałek loved all symptoms of art. And lived for its sake.

Zofia Gołubiew

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