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Symcha Trachter. Reconstruction

Review: *Symcha Trachter 1894-1942.*

Światło i barwa [Light and Colour],

28.08-25.10.2020,

Żydowski Instytut Historyczny,

curator: Jakub Bendkowski.

In the era of the “biographical turn” and developing microhistorical research, exhibitions are more and more often a tool for re-constructing an artist’s biography and intervening in the canon of art history. Exhibitions address distinct research problems by bringing forgotten artists back into the artistic circulation or exposing non-obvious aspects of the art of those already well-recognized. Therefore, it is worth looking at them not only because of the cognitive values, re-evaluations, or general revisions of artistic phenomena but also because they reveal strategies for constructing a historical narrative. They can therefore serve as a particularly sensitive barometer of the self-awareness of not only a curator, but also an art historian, and, at the same time, of the methods of their discipline. One of such exhibitions was the exhibition on Symcha Trachter, prepared by Jakub Bendkowski, presented at the Jewish Historical Institute.

On the surface, it was a conventional exhibition. Trachter’s works were shown here in chronological order, with particular emphasis on the topographic paths of his painting career. The starting point was Lublin, a provincial city under the Russian partition, where the artist was born into a wealthy assimilated Jewish family, then Warsaw and Krakow, as well as Vienna, where he studied painting, Paris, which for Trachter - as for many others - was an artistic Mecca and a laboratory of experiments. Finally, again, his native Lublin, now a peripheral city of central Poland, then Kazimierz Dolny - a beloved place of rest and unhindered creation, at the end Warsaw, the capital where Trachter would seem to have a stable future of a recognized artist. However, the story ended differently, as was recalled by the multimedia project of the young intermedia artist Agnieszka Mastalerz, closing the exhibition, recalling Trachter’s last and now lost work - a wall painting depicting Job, the result of cooperation with Feliks Frydman and Samuel Puterman. It was

completed in May 1942 in the building of the Warsaw Judenrat. Two months later, the artist, still in the ghetto, was dragged onto the Umschlagplatz, from where he probably was transported to the Treblinka extermination camp.

However, for two reasons, the exhibition is not a typical example of a retrospective of a lesser-known or forgotten artist, or perhaps I should put it differently: it could be a model example of such an exhibition. First of all, it has been prepared with great care in terms of facts, which makes the artist's personality truly palpable for the viewer. The exhibition includes not only drawings and paintings with appropriate descriptions, but also photographs, documents, and letters, meticulously collected by the curator thanks to the cooperation with researchers from Lublin. Secondly, it is worth appreciating the skilful connection of Trachter's work with general artistic trends in Poland and Europe, thanks to which the exhibition's subtitle, "light and color", is not just an empty phrase. Having mastered the academic workshop, influenced by the experience in the studio of Stanisław Lenz at the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Trachter used perfect drawing and realistic style, and then, probably under the influence of Stanisław Kamocki at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, he delved into the problem of landscape, and work out the Impressionist impulses. Parisian experiences, including contact with the painting of



Fig. 1. *Landscape, 1927*, The National Museum in Lublin

Chaim Soutine, gave his painting an expressive, slightly primitive character, making Trachter an outstanding colourist, aware of the problems of painting texture and structure of a composition. The exhibition, therefore, presents the full range of his technical versatility, apparent not only in painting but also in pencil, pastel, and ink drawings.

An extension of the exhibition is its *catalogue raisonné*, developed by Bendkowski, which organizes the biographical information and - like the exhibition - shows the individuality of the painter's style, at the same time encouraging further interpretations. The other catalogue texts, prepared by the invited authors, deal with the community of Lublin artists (Lechosław Lameński, Elżbieta Błotnicka-Mazur), as well as the artistic colony in Kazimierz Dolny (Dorota Seweryn-Puchalska). These essays reconstruct the context that could not be commented on in the exhibition, such as Trachter's place in the artistic environment, also among Jewish artists. The colour of the artist's biography is added by the reprint of letters addressed primarily to Wiktor Ziółkowski, an artist's friend, Lublin critic, and animator of artistic life, preserved at the Provincial Public Library of Hieronim Łopaciński in Lublin. It seems that Bendkowski, the curator and editor of the catalogue, the author of the introductory text, which indicates how the artist's work might be perceived, avoided formulating overly categorical judgments about Trachter's output and his possible place in the history of art in Poland. This can be viewed both as an added value and a challenge because it has satisfied the research reliability and precision of the historical reconstruction, but on the other hand, it raises the question of whether the artist's persona has lost some of its clarity. As a result, both thanks to the exhibition itself and the catalogue, we get interesting, unknown visual and written material, as well as several references to the artistic trends of the era, but we have to form our opinion on the artistic quality of Trachter's work. In the era of getting used to the quick consumption of successive "hot" names and equally quick reviews, this may turn against the recognition of the painter from Lublin, although it is difficult to say whether it should be regretted. It is perhaps more regrettable that the questions about Trachter's place within the Jewish artists' milieu and the relationship of his painting with Jewish culture were not fully exposed; such traces were mentioned in the catalogue, while these are probably more important issues due to the history of the place where the exhibition was shown and the moment in the historical discourse about the place of Jews in Polish culture. However, these are doubts that are understandable at this stage of the historical recognition of the artist's oeuvre.

The leading theme of the exhibition, self-imposed on the viewer, is certainly the characteristic "Trachterian" way of depicting the city. Probably inspired by Soutine, Cézanne, Utrillo, but also very aware of his means of expression, Trachter departed from mimetic art in favour of constructing a painting space that would symbolically refer to his closeness to the place he depicted. Trachter's vision of the city seems to be at the same time oneiric and specific. The rich painting texture and the perfect use of light make it possible to expose the materiality of the landscape. This mechanism of creation - filtering a specific space through the empathetic rebuilding of it with the help of the imagination and individual painting solutions seems to

be characteristic of provincial artists, representatives of artistic colonies most often concerned with the problem of mythization of reality. Apart from the artists mentioned in the exhibition catalogue, it would be worth recalling one more character, Bruno Schulz, in whose writing, but also sometimes in drawing and graphic art, the hometown, *shtetl*, becomes a universal place, suspended in timelessness, strictly related to the artist's "I", his relationship to himself, the world and his work. In this sense, Trachter's work also contributes to the ever-developing mythology of places important to him - Lublin and Kazimierz Dolny, which so far has hardly taken into account the artist's oeuvre. The places of the apparitions of the Seer, a *tzaddik*, who reads the future, as well as the paths of the poet Józef Czechowicz, a leading representative of the interwar second avant-garde, would undoubtedly allow the individual trait of Trachter's painting to echo even more vividly. Thus, oddly enough, the artist was noticed not there, in the provinces, but Warsaw, in the centre that he knew, but probably did not feel at home. However, it seems normal considering that he was one of those who drew from the province, chose the province, but went beyond it in terms of their talent. It remains to regret that he was not allowed to develop this talent fully.



Fig. 2. *Winter Landscape*, 1936, The National Museum in Lublin

The conventionality of the exhibition is also questioned by the multimedia production that ends it, which, I believe, largely corresponds to the curator's assumptions and, what's more, shows that the exhibition also has an auto-thematic potential. The production of Agnieszka Mastalerz, titled *Uz*, is a composition of a dozen or so echograms - images based on GPR readings of selected hotel walls at Grzybowska Street, standing near the non-existent Judenrat seat, where Trachter made his last work - a painting depicting Job. Mastalerz performed an archaeological operation on a matter that can only symbolically refer to an actual commission that once existed, and yet this gesture brought her closer to the past, both in space and in the existential dimension. The vehicle for this rapprochement was her gesture, working with history and imagination through a technical, seemingly objective, tool of analysis. The title "Uz" is the land from which Job came. Could this biblical character be Trachter's alter ego? The question is probably rhetorical because Job is a metaphor for every suffering, homeless person, which for an artist can also be the essence of humanity, art itself. Yet Job still trusts. This very well thought-out and essentially poetic work summarizes the artist's biography and at the same time makes us reflect on who he is for us, visitors, and what the exhibition is for us. The work by Mastalerz draws attention to the core problem of constructing a historical narrative about art, and above all, about the man who created it. As art historians, we deal with the desire to show the truth about the past, to faithfully and objectively present artistic facts, which in this case has certainly been achieved to a high degree, with the humility of the researcher deserving recognition. However, something was lost forever. It is probably not only a painting by Trachter, Frydman, and Puterman but also the dynamics of existence, the dialectic of artistic choices, the prose of life, and unyielding history, which we can only try to restore imperfectly, regardless of the tools used to analyze. What we can see at the exhibition or what has survived is not all. The abstract visual structure of Mastalerz's production resembles a landscape, perhaps it is a view of the desert, the mythical land of Uz, or a distant afterimage of Trachter's town.