

# THE ART OF BEING TENDER

**P**ainter and graphic designer **Rafał Olbiński** explains how art motivates us to be better people and why good manners are worth more than laws.

## Which of your works would be the most apt illustrations of tender sensitivity or affection?

**RAFAŁ OLBIŃSKI:** The concept of “love for one’s neighbor,” important in the Christian tradition, is particularly dear to me. In my work, however, I must admit that I usually draw upon Hellenistic culture, which depicts reality as embroiled in an endless clash against the unreal, against dreams, and presents conflicts between an individual and society and between the heart and the mind. That period in history reminds us that man cannot achieve anything grand without hard work and sacrifice, and life is a constant interplay of ecstasy and agony.

Posters are an important part of my work. I’m usually commissioned to make them on specific topics, chiefly to promote cultural events such as operas, theatrical performances, movies, and festivals. Such events usually appeal to passionate emotions. The poster I made for *Tristan & Isolde* fits the topic of tenderness best; yearning and tenderness are dominant emotions in Richard Wagner’s opera. The same holds true for Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida*. The question is: what did the two lovers, Aida and Radamès, feel in the last moments of their lives: tenderness or terror? Either way, tenderness could help them in such a situation. Death, if enwreathed with tenderness, is calmer, easier to accept. How else could we make better use of these final moments of life, when death is inevitable? Tenderness helps us go through these moments in a somewhat less painful way. In this context, I understand tenderness as emphasis placed on being close to another person. When their lives are in danger, people often grab one other by the hand, seeking support. I presume that tenderness helps in extreme situations, because it plays the role of short-term therapy.

I have produced several paintings and also books that touch upon this topic. For example, a book of sonnets inspired by my paintings, written by Ian David Lukins, a British poet who lives in Denmark, recently came out in Poland (*Olbiński: Ars picturae*, Olszanica 2018). My paintings must have prompted the poet to feel emotions close to our search for tenderness. The book is his interpretation of my work, because art is

in reality about the emotions in the eyes or hearts of the recipients, not the artists. It doesn’t matter what prompted George Byron or John Keats to write their poems. The important thing is how their poetry inspired their readers. There is a ballad by Keats entitled *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, which has inspired many painters, including Jerzy Kossak.

## How else might we understand “tenderness”?

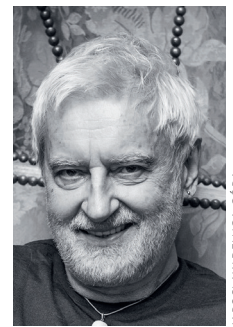
I once read the commentary on manners written by Edmund Burke, the father of modern conservatism. His words are now becoming very topical. One of his arguments was that manners were more important than laws in shaping society, because the average person has little contact with the law, whereas manners are the air we breathe every day. Manners are what make us either civilized, gentle and tender, or boorish and primitive. Unfortunately, what we are witnessing today is the degradation of manners and cultured behavior. I find this process horrifying. Let’s remember that democracy is a reflection of the society that creates it. If people are tolerant and well-behaved, then democracy is friendly and open to everyone. But if society is formed by people who are aggressive, this affects the system of government, turning it into a democracy of barbarians. Good-mannered people respect every human being, so they won’t take part in executing homosexuals.

## Tenderness often goes hand-in-hand with respect and a lack of indifference.

Tenderness is the best form of empathy we could imagine. It is close to showing compassion, caring for other people’s needs, holding their hands, and stroking their heads. It is the physical expression of empathy.

## Do artists have a mandate to teach people how to be tender?

Artists by definition deal with esthetics and beauty, so indeed they should teach people how to be tender. That said, we must remember that these criteria have been dismantled in this era for purely mercantile rea-



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lectures at the School of Visual Arts in New York. He is an illustrator and painter, in addition to a poster designer and set designer. His posters and illustrations have been published in such magazines as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Businessweek*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker*. He has also designed posters for the New York City Opera, the Utah Opera, the San Francisco Opera, and Opera Philadelphia. His work has been exhibited worldwide, including in the United States, Japan, France, Germany, and Poland.





*Tristan & Isolde*, Richard Wagner, poster, Allegro Corporation, Portland, USA, 2007



sons. What does art mean in today's market, where what matters is above all to buy cheap and sell dear? It's a lot easier to monetize goods that are not subject to any criteria of high or low quality. That's exactly the reason for the dismantling of esthetic criteria in art. Art should naturally respond to the human need for beauty. Every person feels this need, be it to a greater or lesser extent. Artists constantly make use of emotions, both positive and negative. But if the main goal of artists is to sell their works for as much money as possible, they lose sight of the most important thing. You have money if you're good at what you do and your work is met with recognition. But you can't treat money as the main goal of your creative pursuits. The most important thing is, and should be, the amazing joy of creating something that did not exist before. It comes as no surprise that the Talmud says that an artist stands close to God, because an artist is also a creator, though this may be a somewhat far-fetched comparison. What I invent and paint today did not exist yesterday. I get the greatest satisfaction from presenting a known topic in a completely new way. So if artists can generate emotions and use their works to convey moral messages, then art fulfills one of its roles in society. Experiencing art should make us better, complete as people. Our sensitivity should grow through contact with art.

**Artists could also play a different role by being a barometer of social change.**

Yes. Thanks to their tools, artists can reflect social moods, needs, and fears. What is more, they can be ahead of their time. All artists want is for their work to survive them, which is a manifestation of the dream of immortality. You can achieve it through what you create. The message carried by the work of an artist is therefore often addressed to people who are not yet born. This is, on the one hand, an enormous responsibility and, on the other, a fantastic opportunity. I believe that every artist wants to live on in the memories of future generations.

**Do the themes that appear in your works reflect current events or do they refer to timeless, ancient values?**

Antiquity is my civilizational alphabet. It supplies me with metaphors and symbols, but I don't restrict myself to it. I broaden my topics based on the experiences that have made an impression on me. Such recent experiences have included, for example, watching Alexander McQueen's fashion show called "Plato's Atlantis" or listening to Billie Eilish, who is able to convey fantastic emotions with her music. Such experiences motivate me to constantly improve the quality of my work. It doesn't matter if we call this "tenderness," or use a different word instead. I mean positive emotions that are conveyed by art and motivate people into ac-

tion. The true hell for every artist lies in mediocrity, so it's important to experience great art, because it reminds us about standards, and raising standards ensures progress. This holds true for all aspects of life. I'm glad that there are people in Poland who are raising the bar, for example Olga Tokarczuk.

**You lived in New York, now you live in Warsaw, so you have first-hand knowledge of the artistic milieu in different countries. Are nations that are burdened by their difficult past more creative than those that have lived in prosperity for years?**

Tradition is crucial. Why does the Czech Republic have great tennis players? A few great players appeared, then others wanted to emulate them. Authorities matter, because they inspire the imagination of young people, prompting them to follow in the footsteps of such authorities. I hope that Olga Tokarczuk will inspire young women to write. Women are in general great writers. For example, no other crime writer was more talented than Agatha Christie. There are P. D. James and also Mary Shelley, who did what every author dreams of doing – she went down in history for creating a culturally iconic character, namely Frankenstein. A literary character that conveys ideas that remain topical today, in the era of artificial intelligence.

**What are you working on currently? What are you drawing inspiration from?**

I have worked every day for the past 50 years, and the rhythm of my work is determined by deadlines. I have no time to seek inspiration. Rather, I want to broaden my horizons and recharge my batteries thanks to inspiring experiences. I go to work, which means going to my studio, which is in another room, and I work there, just like a bus driver. But my work is perhaps less interesting, because many things can happen to a bus driver.

I'm putting the finishing touches on the book *Akty i prawie akty* [Nudes and Almost Nudes], which presents around 80% of my works. I have asked 20 people to tell me what comes to their minds when they see a specific painting. The most surprising descriptions came from a 10-year-old boy, deprived of any inhibitions or borrowed associations, simply the direct impressions of that boy. Also, I'm starting to work on scenography for Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, to be staged by the Warsaw Chamber Opera. I like such projects as designing covers, advertising campaigns devoted to a specific topic. I like challenges a lot. The more difficult the task, the better. I'd like to do something that could be a pleasant surprise even to Mozart.

INTERVIEW BY DR. JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA