

The Art of Women

JOANNA SOSNOWSKA

Institute of Art, Warszawa
Polish Academy of Sciences
joanna.sosnowska@ispan.pl

In the 1920s Polish female painters and sculptors made their mark on the artistic scene in Poland and in Europe. Now their accomplishments are being rediscovered

There have always been artistically active women, although they have not always been involved in the artistic mainstream. What we are referring to here, of course, is the marginalization of women, a widespread phenomenon that remained unchanged by the fact that certain individual women did rise to prominence among men and earned respect for their opinions. The 19th century saw women slowly begin to achieve the right to participate in social life, to work creatively, as well as to make decisions for themselves and for others. Female artists also contributed to this process, as they demanded to be given a place on the artistic scene.

Destination: Paris and Munich

In the Polish lands in the second half of the 19th century, then under foreign partition, the process of women's artistic emancipation came up against obstacles of a political nature as patriotic duties were considered to be of greater importance than personal ambitions. Nonetheless, professional success was also considered a way of fulfilling one's duty to the homeland, and self-reliance often became a necessity for many women when wars, insurgencies, and Siberian exile took men away. In the period of Positivism, the priority was on rebuilding the nation's economic strength, weakened by the collapse of the January Uprising (1863). Consequently, the arts did not enjoy much prestige, and artists ranked amongst the worst paid social class. Nonetheless it was at that time that many young women decided to become artists, since for them gaining any form of education meant attaining a higher social standing and escaping the narrow world of household chores. Once having gained an education, most of them did not pursue fame in the world of art, but devoted themselves instead to grass-roots social work: teaching artistic technique at girl's schools they themselves had set up, practicing interior design or costume design, etc.

Around 1880 a large group of female students who had studied with the well-known Polish painter Wojciech Gerson went from Warsaw to study at the prestigious Académie Julian in Paris. The most brilliant student in this group was Anna Bilińska, who was awarded a medal for an excellent self-portrait at the Salon in Paris in 1887. The career prospects of this young artist looked very bright, but were alas cut short by her unexpected illness and premature death. Although well-known and respected during her lifetime she was later essentially



Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie

Anna Bilińska was a master of realistic portraits. Here, her outstanding self-portrait which was awarded a medal at the Salon in Paris in 1887

forgotten. In 2000, her *Self-portrait* appeared on the cover of a book by Frances Borzello published in London, entitled *A World of Our Own: Women as Artists*, where the author emphasizes her outstanding talent.

Women from other parts of Poland also went to Paris to study, as can be exemplified by two artists from Lwów: a painter Maria Dulębianka and an excellent portraitist Aniela Pająkówna. A great female painter Olga Boznańska spent the latter half of her life in Paris, yet she came to the artistic capital as a fully-fledged artist already famous for her achievements not just in Poland, and after having studied in Kraków and Munich. Zofia Stryjeńska went to Munich shortly before the outbreak of WWI in order to study, disguised as a man, at the Academy – then still off-limits for women.

At that time many women were already active in the field of art in Poland. One factor behind this was the fact that the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, established in 1904, imposed no restraints on the admission of women. Here, women had the opportunity to work with naked models, engage in *plein air* exercises, and learn the art of painting. They also studied sculpture, which had only recently been considered a particularly inappropriate discipline for women, as it required physical effort and was dirty and indecent due to the very contact with materials. These new educational opportunities subsequently gave rise to a virtual “bumper crop” of female talent.

National Gallery of women

WWI accelerated the process that had been initiated by the “suffragettes” in almost in all of Europe and in the United States, and Polish women were granted the right to vote. Moreover, after a century and a half of nonexistence, an independent Polish state reemerged from the foreign-partitioned lands. Women in Poland not only regained, together with Polish men, a sense of common ownership of their state, mother tongue, schools, and public institutions, Polish women also recovered their feminine identity in the most colloquial sense: they no longer had to stand in for men while they were in prison or exile. In the wake of regained independence and the subsequent air of enthusiasm, an artistically-conducive climate in Poland enabled the above-mentioned Zofia Stryjeńska to enjoy fame and popularity on a scale unparalleled either in Poland or abroad. In recognition of her achievements she received a commission for six large *panneaux decoratifs* in the Polish pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris in 1925, for which she won the *Grand Prix*. Stryjeńska was then hailed as “the greatest Polish artist” – here the use of the grammatically masculine form in Polish, *artysta*, rather than the specifically feminine and inferior form *artystka*, was clearly a kind of promotion, especially if we consider the fact that only 30 years before Bilińska had been praised for being “like an artist” (*artysta*) and for painting “like men.”



Niewska, who honed her skill in sculpture by studying at the School of Art in Kraków and in Paris, kissing her own rendition of her husband's torso

Apart from Stryjeńska, many eminent female artists were active in the interwar period. As a completely new phenomenon, women began to produce works of arts that were manifestly erotic in their character. Painting and sculpture began to draw upon sporting themes, and women turned out to be much better in this area than their male colleagues. One particularly notable example is to be found in sculptures by the outstandingly talented artist Olga Niewska, who did not hesitate to address typically “masculine” themes, such as in *The Athlete* and *The Boxer*. She also produced a sculptural portrait of Marshal Józef Piłsudski, an eminent statesman who twice held the office of Prime Minister in interwar Poland – such prestigious commissions were only the fare of established artists.

Interestingly, traditional handicrafts gained great importance and popularity in the 1920s, among both male and female artists – particularly weaving, which had mainly been considered a women’s activity. And here an unforeseen occurrence took place: the tables turned and men chiefly became engaged in furthering this craft as a domain of art. Women did also take part in this process, yet with very few exceptions they did not have the enthusiasm that the men exuded. A closer look at the Polish art of the interwar period allows one to hypothesize that at that time it was in fact women who created truly “masculine” works of art, while men, striving to achieve domination in all areas, unconsciously became “feminine.” ■

Further reading:

- Sosnowska J. (2003). *Beyond the Canon: The Art of Polish Female Artists 1980-1939* [in Polish]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Sztuki PAN.
Morawińska A., (Ed.) (1991). *Polish Female Artists - Exhibition Catalog* [in Polish]. Warszawa: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie.