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## Queer Heritage in Central Europe: Desperately Seeking a Queer

### Abstract

The essay investigates the notion of queer heritage with regard to Central Europe and identifies a number of challenges related to the process of researching queer art history and heritage in Central Europe. Having addressed the status of largely “queer-philic” Western historiography, the paper offers a brief discussion of the Józef Czapski Pavilion in Krakow which is seen as an illustration of the problematic condition of queer heritage in Central Europe. Finally, by bringing the example of the 2017 show *Dziedzictwo (Heritage)*, the essay attempts to offer the region-specific definition of queer heritage.

**Keywords:** queer heritage, Central Europe, art history, Józef Czapski

Over the last several decades, a “queer desire for history”<sup>1</sup> famously formulated by Carolyn Dinshaw in her 1999 study *Getting Medieval* has resulted in a major revaluation and re-interpretation of the past from the point of view of gay and lesbian, as well as queer studies. Heritage, aptly described by Sharon Macdonald as “meaningful pasts that should be remembered”,<sup>2</sup> and the many disciplines it entails – including history of art and architecture – have not remained immune to the process of queering the past. In what appears as largely “queer-philic” Western historiography and public history, one has recently witnessed a number of attempts that have aimed at

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1 C. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, Durham, 1999, p. 8.

2 S. Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, London, 2009, p. 1.

not only remembering the queer past but also creatively and productively engaging with it – from Matthew M. Reeve’s groundbreaking investigation of the Gothic style and queer sexuality (*Gothic Architecture and Sexuality in the Circle of Horace Walpole*, 2020) and Tate Britain’s pioneering examination of queer visual culture (*Queer British Art 1861–1867*, 2017), to an array of projects unearthing LGBTQ histories embedded in historic buildings, museum collections, and urban/rural landscapes (Historic England’s “Pride of Place” or National Trust’s “Prejudice and Pride”).

However, it is not tantamount to saying that the “sanctity of the closet”<sup>3</sup> has been successfully and conclusively discounted in Western debates about cultural heritage – both academic and public debates as testified to by the following two examples. In 2019, a conference entitled “Text, Artefact, Identity: Horace Walpole and Queer Eighteenth Century” was held in one of the “queerest” spaces of Georgian England, i.e. Strawberry Hill. The event which gathered a group of international scholars and which addressed the idea (and practice) of queering 18th-century art and literature became – quite unexpectedly – a battlefield between those who, in the face of the lack of the “actual proof of homosexuality”<sup>4</sup> refused to acknowledge Walpole’s homosexuality and those who – much aware of various limitations related to the process of unearthing and historicising non-heteronormative sexualities – recognised Walpole as an example of a pre-emancipatory queer sensitivity and subjectivity. Additionally, two years before the Strawberry Hill conference, the general public found themselves in a state of intense argument in the aftermath of the activities undertaken by the National Trust within the framework of the “Prejudice and Pride” project which attempted to commemorate the 50th anniversary of decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and to discover the queer history of various historic sites.<sup>5</sup> One of such sites was Norfolk-based Felbrigg Hall owned by a non-heteronormative historian and biographer Robert Wyndham Ketton-Cremer. When the National Trust asked the volunteer guides to wear the rainbow lanyards and include in the guided tours the story of Ketton-Cremer’s queerness, some volunteers refused to do so, arguing that the writer had never disclosed his sexuality.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of the above, one might be tempted to ask about the presence (or absence) of the “queer historical impulse”<sup>7</sup> in Central Europe – especially its art and architecture, their respective histories, as well as visual culture. If queer heritage remains a contested issue in “queer-philic” Western historiography, what is the sta-

3 E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley–Los Angeles, 1990, p. 56.

4 Ibid., pp. 52–53.

5 M. Cook, A. Oram, *Prejudice & Pride: Celebrating LGBTQ Heritage*, Swindon, 2017; *Prejudice and Pride: LGBTQ Heritage and Its Contemporary Implications*, eds. R. Sandell, R. Lennon, M. Smith, Leicester, 2018.

6 N. Grierson, “National Trust Reverses Decision Enforcing Use of Gay Pride Badges”, *The Guardian*, 5.08.2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/aug/05/national-trust-reverses-decision-on-gay-pride-badges> [accessed 29/12/2022]; C. Bennett, “Is Ousting People Really the Remit of the National Trust?”, *The Guardian*, 13.08.2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/12/is-outing-people-remit-of-national-trust> [accessed 29/12/2022].

7 Dinshaw, op. cit., p. 2.

tus of queer heritage in the region – particularly when confronted with a paucity of sources and institutional queerphobia? One example – imperfect as it may be but offering a pertinent comment on Central European queer past – might serve as an illustration of the condition of queer heritage in Central Europe.

An example is the Krakow-based Józef Czapski Pavilion dedicated to Józef Czapski, an eminent Polish writer, painter, and critic, as well as one of the founders of “Kultura”, a Polish-émigré magazine that played a prominent role in Polish cultural and political life throughout the second half of the 20th century. In his will, Czapski donated his archive, including diaries, personal mementos and books, as well as family documents, to the National Museum in Krakow – which, in turn, decided to build a new museum that would focus on the life and work of the artist. The building was officially opened in 2016 thus becoming not only the newest branch of the National Museum in Krakow – the biggest national museum in Poland – but also the youngest biographical museum in Poland.

Czapski himself was an extraordinary figure: an aristocrat born in Prague and educated in Sankt Petersburg and Krakow; an officer in the Polish Army; a man who escaped the Katyn massacre and returned to Europe via the Persian corridor; a special envoy of the Polish government-in-exile tasked with investigating the fate of Poles that remained in the parts of Poland annexed by the Soviets in 1939; a writer whose works were banned in the Polish People’s Republic; a successful painter who forged a career in Paris; a devout Catholic; and, most importantly from the point of view of the present discussion, a queer man. Despite a number of documented affairs with men,<sup>8</sup> Czapski’s sexuality has remained a taboo. Or, to put it differently, Czapski’s non-heteronormative sexuality has been erased while he himself has been successfully relocated into the closet. His often-conflicted private life has been replaced with vibrant political and cultural activism, particularly his opposition to the communist regime. Thus, Czapski has successfully entered the pantheon of national mythology which, however, refused to be “saturated with sexual impulsion”.<sup>9</sup>

The Józef Czapski Pavilion in Krakow is a testament to this kind of homophobic closeting. It has not become an instrument for dismantling “nationally-owned” and essentially homophobic historical discourse about the past but its ally. The most important part of the pavilion is a permanent exhibition which offers a narrative about Czapski’s life and work – a display that brings together authentic objects (books, paintings) and multimedia. But Czapski’s life and works are not there to narrate the story of Czapski the man; they are not there to reveal a “truth of the [queer – WS, RK] man”<sup>10</sup> as biographers would say. The exhibition’s clear intent is to show Czapski as a witness, chronicler, and, one might add, an embodiment of Polish and European hetero-history. Consequently, the biography of the artist

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8 Cf. A. Synoradzka-Demadre, *Jerzy Andrzejewski. Przyczynek do biografii prywatnej*, Warszawa, 2016, pp. 52–61.

9 Kosofsky Sedgwick, op. cit., p. 73.

10 G. Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”, in: *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. J. Olney, Princeton, 1980, p. 43.

becomes reduced to him performing a few roles that are crucial from the point of view of building a national mythology: that of an advocate of Polish independence, a witness of traumatic WWII events, a public intellectual, an enemy of the totalitarian communist regime, a solitary figure fully dedicated to his art – in short, the national hero par excellence. Not surprisingly, not a singular reference to his sexuality and his affairs with men can be found in his museum.

It is impossible not to see this absence as a failure of national historiography, national museology, and national biography. This essential national failure became even more acute when in 2018 Eric Karpeles – an American writer and painter, as well as admirer of Czapski's art – published his biography of Czapski entitled *Almost Nothing: The 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art and Life of Józef Czapski* (in English; its Polish translation appeared a year later). This book is not only the first proper biography of Czapski but also the first work that openly addresses his sexuality. Perhaps one of the most revealing moments – in the light of the present discussion of Central European politics of the closet – is the following incident, which happened when Karpeles was touring around Poland with one of Czapski's relatives:

Chewing his lip a bit, his eyes darting about, he [Babu, Czapski's relative] asked sheepishly if I would mind if he were to ask me something personal about his well-known ancestor. "I've heard about him my whole life," he announced with some trepidation. "He's like a hovering spirit. But conversation about him within the family always goes only so far and then stops. I've heard some kind of rumbling noises from friends of the family, stories about him beyond the saintly legend, but no one in the family wants to talk about it. You seem to know so much about him." Long pause. "Was he gay?"

It was a relief to hear the question put so directly. It may be the twenty-first century, but I was in Poland, a country where eighty percent of the population identifies as Catholic, where many long-held taboos remain firmly intact. And so I sensed a lot was at stake. I knew that my reply to this sophisticated but credulous Józef Czapski look-alike should not be flippant. Maintaining my credibility and standing within the family of Czapski descendants was no small consideration; I needed their permission in order to publish my research. I couldn't risk ruffling feathers by making pronouncements about a renowned member of their tribe I'd never met. It was clear to me, however, that to prevaricate under these circumstances would be wrong. If Czapski had no illusions about himself, Babu, having asked a question point-blank, had the right to an honest answer. I took a deep breath. "He slept with both women and men," I said, "but I believe his sexual preference was primarily homoerotic. So, essentially, about what you're asking, the answer is yes."<sup>11</sup>

When read in the context of Czapski's biographical museum, the passage itself helps one to identify a number of challenges related to the process of researching queer history and heritage in Central Europe. Though a number of important differences can be identified when discussing individual national and cultural traditions that comprise Central Europe and its "memory-heritage-identity complex",<sup>12</sup> we

11 E. Karpeles, *Almost Nothing: The 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art and Life of Józef Czapski*, New York, 2018, p. 381.

12 S. Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*, London–New York, 2013.

believe that one is entitled to formulate some general remarks about the status and history of queer past and heritage in the region.

Firstly, it might be argued that Central Europe faces greater institutional homophobia than so-called Western Europe – which mirrors the East/West divide regarding the level of bias and discrimination towards LGBTQ people in Europe. Traces of it can be easily identified in various approaches undertaken by public institutions and national bodies towards the queer past – from academia to museums and heritage institutions. This regional “politics of the closet” manifests itself in, for example, censorship, lack of funding, rejection by peers, etc. For this very reason, in present-day Central Europe a “queer historical impulse” is to be found not so much in academic historiography but primarily in the field of public history, not in national museums but in independent art projects.

Secondly, public homophobia is often paralleled by private, internalised homophobia and the feelings of secrecy and shame – like the ones surrounding the issues of Czapski’s sexuality and voiced by his relatives. For this reason, one can observe the general reluctance to address issues that are directly related to someone’s non-heteronormative sexuality which oftentimes results in the destruction of “evidence” by family members, problems with collecting oral history testimonies, etc.

Thirdly, due to a number of traumatic historical events, particularly the annihilation of Central European cultural production during WWII, any research into queer heritage is necessarily defined by the limited number of archival sources. Those archival gaps and omissions often supplemented by the considerable control over the archives’ content prevent one from properly and thoroughly researching potential queer pasts in the entire region. However, this condition also requires re-thinking the role and the onto-epistemological status of the archive.

Another observation that can be formulated with regard to the status of queer heritage in Central Europe is that research into the queer past of the region – as well as the production of discourse related to it – is often carried out outside Central Europe; or is done or inspired by outsiders who are not constrained by some of the limitations the regional scholarship inevitably faces (as exemplified by Karpeles). Additionally, Central-European research into queer past – once carried out – has a tendency to become an ally of what David Halperin defined as a “homosexual essentialism”,<sup>13</sup> i.e. its aim is to justify some present-day models of gay life instead of acknowledging the very heterogeneity of queer identities, past and present. In this sense, it is often LG heritage/past often “implicat[ed] in the various strategies of elitism and exclusion”<sup>14</sup> rather than queer heritage and queer past.

Finally, it could be argued that the status of queer heritage in Central Europe may be best summed up by the category of “dissonant” or “difficult heritage”:<sup>15</sup> one that is incongruous and discrepant; one that produces disharmonies and conflicts in

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13 D. M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, Chicago–London, 2002, p. 16.

14 Ibid.

15 J. E. Tunbridge, G. J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*, Chichester, 1996.

the very aftermath of contemporary users' engagement with a queer legacy which is either embraced or entirely disavowed.

The question that one needs to ask in the light of the above-listed reservations is thus the following: How does one do the history of queer art (or, alternatively, queer history of art) in Central Europe?

Perhaps the answer to this question can be found in the exhibition that was opened just a few weeks after the Felbrigg Hall scandal and which, similarly to the "Prejudice and Pride" campaign mentioned before, hoped to unearth "silent voices" and to complement the official Polish history with non-heteronormative narratives, identities, and phenomena. The impulse for the creation of the exhibition entitled *Dziedzictwo (Heritage)* which was organised in the landmark Warsaw venue, the Palace of Culture and Science, within the framework of the "POMADA Queer Festival 7" in September 2017, was the very indifference of public institutions and museums to queer pasts – especially their resistance to re-write and re-conceptualise their collections and archives. In particular, it was a reaction to the monumental, myth-making, and essentially nationalist (since it understood heritage exclusively as "national heritage") show *#dziedzictwo (#heritage)* which was put on display at the National Museum in Krakow a few months earlier. Warsaw-based *Heritage*, among which exhibits one could find Czapski's letters, was thus a response to Krakow-based *#heritage*.

The reasons why Warsaw's *Heritage* deserves to be recognised as a prime example of how to do queer history (of art) in Central Europe are several, including its re-interpretation (in the spirit of Kosofsky-Sedgwick) of the category of "evidence", its broad conceptualisation of the concept of the exhibit or artwork and the mode of their presentation, or its introduction of the term "queer heritage" to museology and art history discourse. Most importantly, however, the show suggested what queer heritage is really about and what it should entail. It should not be concerned with – to paraphrase Gregory Hutcheson's famous phrase – "desperately seeking a sodomite",<sup>16</sup> but should, instead, reach out to the resources of difficult, dissonant, or unwanted past and provide it with a new meaning – one that will be relevant from the point of view of the non-heteronormative users of the very past. For the creators of *Dziedzictwo (Heritage)*, queering the past was tantamount to the process of "past presencing"<sup>17</sup> in which a given past might become somebody's (queer) present. Queer heritage is thus not about the "thing-in-itself" but about the meaning that one – a member of both imagined and real non-heteronormative communities – might give to the thing. Providing the thing with the meaning which allows to recognise it as one's own heritage originates in a desire. It is a desire to become the subject of history who wants to make its own past which, so far, has not been told

16 G. S. Hutcheson, "Desperately Seeking Sodom: Queerness in the Chronicles of Alvaro de Luna", in: *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, eds. J. Blackmore, G. S. Hutcheson, Durham, 1996, p. 223.

17 Macdonald, *Memorylands*..., pp. 15–17.

by heteronormative historiographies and has not been stored in heteronormative archives not a “foreign country” anymore.<sup>18</sup>

So how should one do the queer history of art in the third decade of the 21st century? How should one do it in Central Europe where, as Anita Kurimay aptly notes, “within and without the walls of [its] academic institutions, homophobia and sexism are present” and where a researcher is constantly confronted with “the erasure (both literally and figuratively) of sources”?<sup>19</sup> Should one study the art works and life of “great homosexuals”<sup>20</sup> only? Or, perhaps, one should focus exclusively on different discursive practices that have been part of such studies and, in the process, avoid a “homosexual essentialism” in favour of a “heterogeneity of queer identities”?<sup>21</sup> It seems to us that the best answer to this question can still be found in *Getting Medieval* by Carolyn Dinshaw who argues that the way to do queer history is to follow a queer historical impulse: “an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now.”<sup>22</sup>

We are certain that the authors that have kindly contributed to the special issue of “Ikonotheke” have followed the very impulse. And, consequently, have made our past, present, and future “queerer”.<sup>23</sup>

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18 D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge, 1985.

19 A. Kurimay, *Queer Budapest, 1873–1961*, Chicago, 2020, p. 13.

20 Halperin, op. cit., p. 6.

21 Ibid., p. 16.

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