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ZACHĘTA – NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WARSAW

The Exhibition-Organising Activity of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries (1950–1956) Based on the Example of Selected Exhibitions at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions

The last few years have brought about the increasing interest of Polish scholarship in art history and the history of exhibitions,¹ resulting from the ever more importance being ascribed to the role of both the exposition and the curator. Bruce Altshuler, the author of *Salon to Biennial – Exhibitions That Made Art History*, points out that while researching the history of exhibitions it is possible to find forgotten materials and little-known publications, long hidden in archives and libraries, which might expand or correct our knowledge on events that were organised in the past.² It would be difficult not to agree with his assessment. The documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries (Komitet Współpracy Kulturalnej z Zagranicą, KWKZ), an official agency active in the years 1950–1956, which is currently

1 The present article was written as a part of the research project entitled “Historia wystaw w Zachęcie – Centralnym Biurze Wystaw Artystycznych w latach 1949–1970” [The History of Exhibitions at Zachęta, the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, in the Period 1949–1970] conducted within the framework of the National Programme for the Development of Humanities at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education for the years 2014–2017, no. 0086/NPRH3/H11/82/2014. On Polish research on the history of exhibitions, cf. e.g. the reconstruction of and book on the First Exhibition of Modern Art in Cracow in 1948 (*I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej pięćdziesiąt lat później* [The First Exhibition of Modern Art fifty years later], eds. M. Świca, J. Chrobak, Cracow, 1998) or the anthology of texts *Display. Strategie wystawiania* [Display. Strategies of exhibiting], eds. M. Hussakowska, E. M. Tatar, Cracow, 2012.

2 B. Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial – Exhibitions That Made Art History. Volume I: 1863–1959*, London, 2008, p. 7.

deposited at the Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw,³ constitutes an invaluable source for a Polish scholar. The Committee's activity has so far received little scholarly attention. In her article "Działalność Komitetu Współpracy Kulturalnej z Zagranicą w latach 1950–1956" [Activity of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries in the years 1950–1956],⁴ Anna Lisiecka presented a general outline of how this institution operated, but she did not concentrate on the Committee's activity in the field of exhibition organisation.

Yet an analysis of the Committee's documentation, which contains a series of detailed reports produced during the period of Stalinism, reveals a variety of interesting facts and figures that allow us to determine the character of exhibition organisation in Poland in the first half of the 1950s. In the six years of its existence, the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries organised around a hundred exhibitions.⁵ The aim of the current essay is to outline the Committee's exhibition organisation programme. Only selected – although it seems the most essential – issues have been signalled here. I would like to present a review of the exhibitions hosted in the main building of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions (Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, CBWA), i.e. at the Zachęta, by placing them in the context of other exhibitions that were organised by the Committee.⁶ In addition, it must immediately be noted that a larger number of exhibitions was planned to be hosted at the Zachęta, but this proved impossible for lack of space.⁷

3 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, file no. 175, signatures 1–274.

4 A. Lisiecka, "Działalność Komitetu Współpracy Kulturalnej z Zagranicą w latach 1950–1956" [Activity of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries in the years 1950–1956], in: *Przebudować człowieka: komunistyczne wysiłki zmiany mentalności* [To remodel a man. Socialist efforts to change people's mentality], ed. M. Kula, Warsaw, 2001, pp. 203–260.

5 These were exhibitions of Bulgarian and Romanian architecture, contemporary art from the Soviet Union, China, Czechoslovakia, the GDR, Romania and Hungary; exhibitions illustrating the building of a new political system in various satellite countries of the USSR and presenting their folk art, exhibitions of the art of Communism-friendly artists from beyond the Iron Curtain (mainly from England, France, Italy and Mexico) and – towards the end of the Committee's existence – shows illustrating selected artistic phenomena in the Federal Republic of Germany and Switzerland; exhibitions of Indian and Iranian art were also brought in. Foreign exhibitions included mainly historical and contemporary Realistic painting in the countries of the Eastern bloc, as well as graphic art, illustration, poster and photography from beyond the Iron Curtain.

6 Exhibitions shown at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions were later often transferred to other centres: Lublin, Łódź, Poznań or Wrocław. In addition, reports lodged in the Archives of Modern Records reveal that institutions parallel to the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries were active in other countries of the Eastern bloc; they most probably presented a similar set of exhibitions.

7 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 16, p. 198.

At this point it is once again necessary to refer to Altshuler, as he emphasised that images showing the display are the most important tool in researching the history of exhibitions.⁸ The events in question are difficult to reconstruct because, in the Polish context of the first half of the 1950s, documentation of the entire exhibition space was rarely made. Only from today's perspective, i.e. the perspective of researchers on the history of exhibitions, we are able to equally appreciate what was exhibited and how it was exhibited. In reference to the exhibitions discussed herein, the pertinent principles of cultural policy and the reception of these events in art criticism and in the recollections of eyewitnesses become much more important.

Photographs of only some of the exhibitions organised by the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries have survived. It seems that none of the shows was designed in an innovative way. Their appearance was rather traditional, reminiscent of the pre-war exhibitions; although the works were not hanging all the way up to the ceiling (as had been done in the traditional salon system which developed in 18th-century France and spread over continental Europe, Russia and Great Britain⁹), they were closely spaced, with not enough distance between them to be viewed in a convenient manner. In the case of exhibitions organised by the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, we may speak of Socialist Realist methods of exhibiting art: paintings or sculptures had to refer to the aesthetics of 19th-century Realism, and the character of the exhibition designs also had to relate to that period and out of necessity omitted the achievements of the avant-garde. Before the war, Europe had seen propagandist exhibitions from the Soviet Union or Fascist Italy that made use of avant-garde solutions in the area of exhibition design.¹⁰ Mary Ann Staniszewski highlights the fact that the situation changed radically after the 2nd World War; the only place where experiments concerning exhibition techniques were conducted were industrial design shows.¹¹ Hence the events discussed herein, which were an expression of the cultural policy of a Communist state, at the same time constituted a part of a wider European trend.

The foundation and principles of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries

The new Act on the Organisation of Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries came into force on 18 July 1950. Its first article read: "In order to maintain

8 B. Altshuler, op. cit., p. 7.

9 Ibid., p. 16.

10 M. A. Staniszewski, "Installation Design in Italy and the Art of Propaganda", in: eadem, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at Museum of Modern Art*, London, 2001, pp. 50–57.

11 Ibid., p. 57.

and advance cultural cooperation with foreign countries, and especially to enhance cultural cooperation with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the countries of popular democracy, the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries attached to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers is hereby established [...]”.¹² The range of tasks assigned to the newly founded institution was extremely broad: to plan and maintain cultural relations with other nations; to keep foreign recipients abreast as to Poland’s social, cultural and scholarly life; to work on proposals referring to Poland’s participation in international events related to issues of art, science, technology and sport; to organise international cultural events in the country; to guide and look after foreigners coming to Poland in respect of cultural issues. The aim behind founding the Committee is flawlessly summed up in a note from 1955, which informs us that one of the key achievements of the institution was that it centralised, expanded and politicised artistic exchange.¹³ Not all plans associated with the Committee came to fruition; it was remarked that the range of tasks assigned to this institution in the Act related to the entire cooperation between the People’s Republic of Poland and foreign countries and was thus, in fact, too broad.¹⁴

The activities of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries – similarly to those of other institutions that operated in the People’s Republic of Poland during the Stalinist period – were under tight control. The Committee’s contacts with foreign organisations could be conducted solely through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and invited guests were under total control. *Tymczasowy statut Komitetu Współpracy Kulturalnej z Zagranicą* [The temporary statute of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries] proclaimed: “The existing multi-directionality in the area of, for example, inviting foreign delegations by various institutions, does not allow for sufficient planning, for making appropriate propagandistic use of their visit, and especially does not guarantee their proper supervision as regards politics”.¹⁵ It was therefore decided to close all other agencies intended to conduct foreign cooperation that existed at ministries and other public institutions. The Committee took over the tasks of the foreign cooperation offices at the Ministry of Culture and Art and at the Ministry of Education, as well as the tasks of the Associations for Friendship.¹⁶ It was to promote not only the cultural achievements of the People’s Republic of Poland, but also those of the USSR and of the other countries of the Eastern bloc.

As has already been mentioned, organising exhibitions was only one among

12 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 1, p. 1.

13 Ibid., p. 236.

14 Ibid., p. 241.

15 Ibid., p. 27.

16 With the exception of the Association for Polish-Soviet Friendship and the Association for Friendship with the Greek Democracy.

a multitude of tasks assigned to the Committee for Cultural Cooperation. Reports for the year 1953 contain complaints that “greater panache in the area of exhibition organisation is stymied by the lack of appropriate spaces, especially in Warsaw”.¹⁷ An office concerned solely with exhibitions was established only towards the end of the Committee’s existence. On 22 November 1954 the General Secretariat issued a decision that “an Independent Department for organising and coordinating all issues arising from the Committee’s tasks in the area of exhibition organisation” would be established as per 1 December 1954.¹⁸ The tasks of the newly established department included supervising the appointment of the exhibition’s commissioner, supervising the technical organisation of the display, translating and editing materials to be published in the catalogue, preparing relevant cost estimates and preparing a register of guests to be invited to the opening.¹⁹ Its other duties involved drafting the annual plan of exhibitions and issuing quarterly reports regarding completion of this plan.

Cultural exchange with the Soviet Union and with other countries of the Eastern bloc, with whom culture-related agreements had been signed, was the most energetic. As for countries beyond the Iron Curtain, contacts were maintained solely with the “progressive and democratic artistic and scholarly milieus”, i.e., to translate this newspeak into today’s language, with milieus that were involved in the operation of Communist parties.²⁰ The Committee’s reports bluntly stated that with respect to those countries, political and propagandistic factors were of far greater importance than strictly artistic ones. To cite a note from 1955: “Quite different is the state of affairs in the area of cooperation with the capitalist states, where the lack of any prospect of making precise plans causes this exchange to be erratic and uneven. [...] In many cases, while inviting foreign artists the Committee’s Bureau makes the political significance of the projected enterprise its first priority and treats professional artistic issues as only secondary”.²¹ All that can be added is that, despite the above, attempts were made to prevent some events from happening because the artistic quality of the proposed artworks was low.²²

17 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 9, p. 22.

18 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 1, p. 205.

19 Ibid., pp. 205–206.

20 Ibid., p. 179.

21 Ibid., p. 235.

22 Cf. e.g. Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 18, p. 27.

Exhibitions of art from the Soviet Union

Exhibitions of art produced in the Soviet Union were, for obvious reasons, the central point of the exhibition programme proposed by the Committee for Cultural Cooperation. However, a review of the extant materials pertaining to events organised at that time clearly reveals that Soviet art did not dominate the enterprise. Art produced in countries of the Eastern bloc was shown in a much greater quantity, and in each case the similarity of those countries' art to Polish art was emphasised.

In 1951 the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions (Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, CBWA) hosted the first Polish exhibition of works by Soviet artists. Its propagandistic dimension is confirmed by the membership of its honorary committee, which included, among others, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers Aleksander Zawadzki, Chairman of the Association for Polish-Soviet Friendship Edward Ochab, Ambassador of the USSR in Warsaw Arkadiy Alexandrovich Sobolev, Undersecretary of State at the Presidium of the Council of Ministers Jakub Berman, Minister of Foreign Affairs Stanisław Skrzyszewski, and Minister of Culture and Art Stefan Dybowski. Two posters promoting the exhibition were printed; one contained a reproduction of a painting in colour, which in those days was a rare occurrence (Fig. 1). The introduction for the catalogue, entitled "Pierwsza wystawa prac plastyków

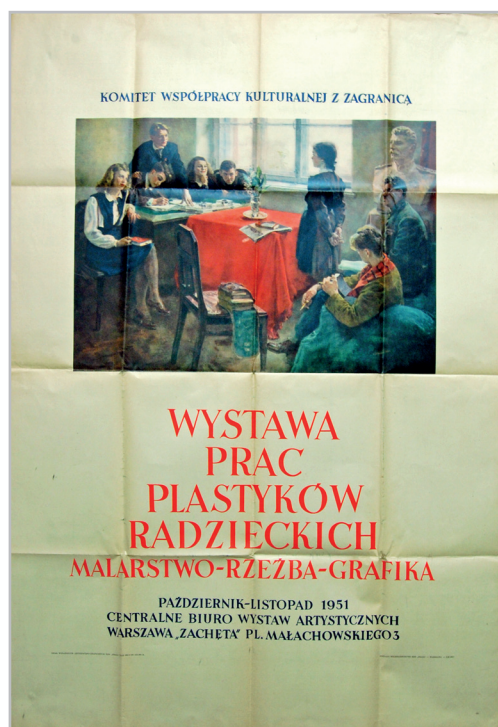


Fig. 1. Poster for *Wystawa prac plastyków radzieckich* [Exhibition of Works by Soviet Artists], 1951, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw



Fig. 2. *Wystawa prac plastyków radzieckich* [Exhibition of Works by Soviet Artists], 1951, a view of the exhibition – staircase with a sculptural portrait of Joseph Stalin, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

radzieckich” [The first exhibition of works by Soviet artists], was written by the General Secretary of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation, Jan Karol Wende. It also included a text by the leading representative of Socialist Realism in Poland, Juliusz Krajewski, entitled “Humanizm sztuki radzieckiej” [The humanism of Soviet art], and an essay by Olga Mikhailovna Malashenko, an art historian from the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, who provided a step-by-step analysis of the method of Socialist Realism.²³

An inspection of the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art Archive reveals that this is one of the most fully documented exhibitions. A set of photographs clearly shows how propagandistic the tone of the display was. The setting did not differ much from those organised by the pre-war Association for the Encouragement of Fine Arts; the paintings were traditionally arranged and potted ferns were often placed in spaces between the exhibits. Only the staircase was decorated with a sculptural portrait of Josef Stalin, its plinth surrounded with flowers and with Polish and Soviet flags (Fig. 2). To the left hung a placard with a quotation from Vladimir Lenin: “Art belongs to the people. It must have its deepest roots in the broad masses of workers. It must be

23 O. M. Małaszenko, untitled, in: *Wystawa prac plastyków radzieckich. Malarstwo – rzeźba – grafika* [Exhibition of Works by Soviet Artists. Painting – Sculpture – Graphic Art], exhibition catalogue, Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1951, p. 13.

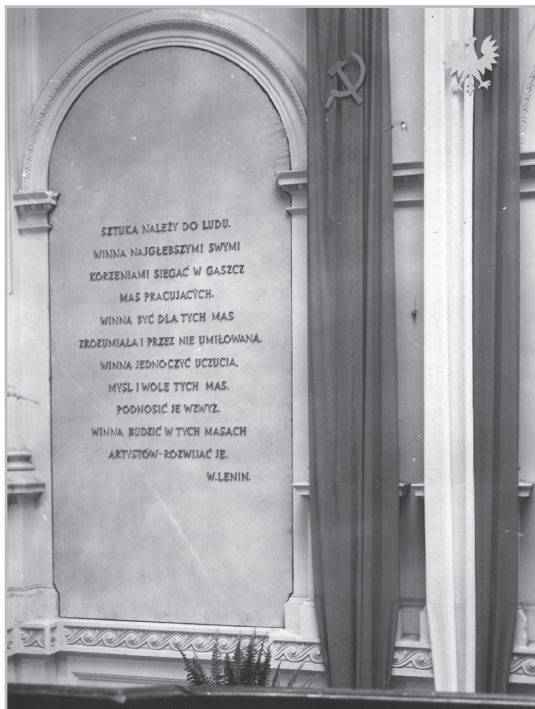


Fig. 3. *Wystawa prac plastyków radzieckich* [Exhibition of Works by Soviet Artists], 1951, a view of the exhibition – staircase with a quotation from Vladimir Lenin, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

understood and loved by them. It must unite the feelings, thoughts and will of these masses. It must uplift them. It should awaken the artists in them; it should develop them” (Fig. 3). The plinths of sculptures representing Stalin which stood in the exhibition halls were also surrounded by flowers (Fig. 4). A small table in the corner, surrounded by three chairs and with a memorial book on top, is also worth noting; this was an obligatory element of every exhibition held at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in the 1950s.

The *Exhibition of Works by Soviet Artists* was a huge enterprise and became a model for exhibitions pertaining to countries of the Eastern bloc. Not only Socialist Realist strategies of displaying art were imitated, but, above all, the iconography of the exhibited paintings and sculptures. The core of the works shown at the first Polish exhibition of works by Soviet artists were canvases from the all-Soviet exhibitions in the years 1947–1950. Their topics revolved around the activities of Lenin and Stalin (e.g. *Lenin przemawiający na III Zjeździe Komsomolu* [Lenin speaking at the 3rd Conference of the Komsomol]) and their great mutual friendship, the Soviet people’s love for their leader, the struggle for peace, the building of the new system, the active involvement of Soviet youth in Communism and the new Soviet landscape. Another frequent topic were the portraits of Soviet activists, e.g. Molotov, and the “heroes of labour”.



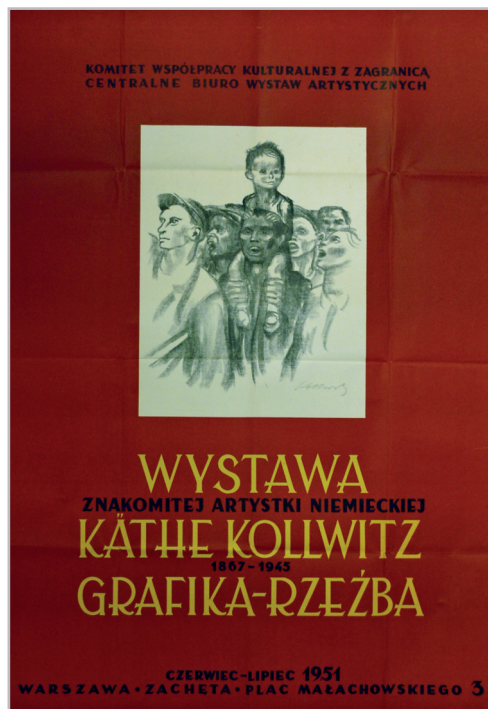
Fig. 4. *Wystawa prac plastyków radzieckich* [Exhibition of Works by Soviet Artists], 1951, a view of the exhibition, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

Exhibitions of art from countries of the Eastern bloc

One of the first shows to be organised by the Committee for Cultural Cooperation at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions was the exhibition entitled *Käthe Kollwitz 1867–1945. Graphic art – Sculpture* (*Käthe Kollwitz 1867–1945. Grafika – Rzeźba*, 1951). It was characterised by a high artistic quality; this was even emphasised on the poster, which announced the “exhibition of an outstanding German artist” (Fig. 5). It encompassed a total of 66 graphic works, 5 drawings, 7 sculptures and 12 reproductions (exhibiting reproductions was a very frequent practice in those days). Kollwitz had died in 1945, so her oeuvre was open to manipulation. This was pointed out already by Jacek Woźniakowski: “Graphic works of Käthe Kollwitz, an artist posthumously turned into a precursor of Socialist Realism, came to us quite frequently [...]”.²⁴ It is worth adding that in Poland a similar thing had happened to the

24 J. Woźniakowski, “Nieznany czar Zachodu. Odszukiwanie kontaktu” [The strange charm of the West. Searching for contact], in: *Sztuka polska po 1945 roku. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*. Warszawa, listopad 1984 [Polish art after 1945. Materials from a session of the Association of Art Historians, Warsaw, November 1984], Warsaw, 1987, p. 116.

Fig. 5. Poster for the exhibition *Käthe Kollwitz, 1867–1945. Grafika – rzeźba* [Käthe Kollwitz 1867–1945. Graphic Art – Sculpture], 1951, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw



oeuvre of Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski,²⁵ who was pronounced to have been an precursor of Socialist Realism.

Kollwitz's work was described as "progressive"; this term was applied to all pro-Communist artists, also those from beyond the Iron Curtain. The catalogue contains an anonymous text which, among others, informs us that after the Revolution in Russia, Kollwitz produced a series of works in support of that country, and that in 1927 she went to Moscow to attend the celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of Soviet rule. The dramatic aspect of her art and its non-compliance with the optimism required by Socialist Realism were equally emphasised.²⁶

The man responsible for the shape of Käthe Kollwitz's exhibition was most probably Otto Nagel (1894–1967), one of the artist's close friends and, after her death, the guardian of her legacy. A solo exhibition of his own works took place at the Zachęta four years later. It consisted of about 90 oils and pastels dating from the pre- and post-war period. The tone of the reviews

25 M. Lachowski, *Nowocześni po katastrofie. Sztuka w Polsce w latach 1945–1960* [The Moderns after a catastrophe. Art in Poland in the years 1945–1960], Lublin, 2013, p. 68.

26 Untitled, in: *Käthe Kollwitz, 1867–1945. Grafika – Rzeźba* [Käthe Kollwitz 1867–1945. Graphic art – Sculpture], exhibition catalogue, Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1951, pp. 5–6.

was critical.²⁷ The documents of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation contain an interesting description of the German artist, who came to the opening of his own exhibition: "Prof. Nagel refused the offer of visiting the National Gallery or the Institute of Industrial Design, saying that after his recent visit to Moscow he was replete with artistic experiences. But he very much liked the meetings with artists, partially considering those meetings to be a tribute paid to his art. He was also very fond of emphasising who he is, how many and what posts he holds, what distinctions he has been awarded, and who he meets".²⁸

The profile of exhibitions of art from countries of the Eastern bloc is easily discernible. In 1953 the Zachęta hosted an unusual exhibition – not of art, but of propagandistic photography. *New Albania on the Path to Socialism* (*Nowa Albania na drodze do socjalizmu*) was a problem-oriented show reporting the history and life of the Albanian people. The prose-writer and translator Anna Milska, who in 1950 published her impressions from a journey to Albania under the title *Shqiptarija – ojczyzna górskich orłów* [*Shqiptarija – the land of mountain eagles*], was designated to write the introduction to the catalogue. "The first Albanian exhibition in Poland illustrates Albania's ever-increasing material and cultural prosperity. It offers an image of the first years of the Five-Year Plan: 1951–1955", explained Milska.²⁹ The arrangement of the display was planned as follows: 1. Introductory information on the People's Republic of Albania; 2. History of the liberation movement; 3. Struggle with the Fascist occupation forces; 4. The People's Albania on the path to Socialism: a) industry, agriculture; b) science, culture and art c) the Albanian army; d) the Five-Year Plan; e) friendship with the Soviet Union and countries of the people's democracy; f) the Albanian people in the struggle for peace.

The Committee for Cultural Cooperation prepared similar exhibitions referring to other countries of the Eastern bloc, also ones held outside the Zachęta building. In 1953 the residents of Cracow enjoyed an exhibition *Hungary on the Path to Socialism* (*Węgry na drodze do socjalizmu*) held at the Palace of Art. The following year, the Historical Museum in Warsaw hosted the exhibition *The Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (*Koreańska Republika Ludowo-Demokratyczna*), and the Silesian Museum in Wrocław and the Polish Army House in Warsaw hosted the exhibition *Ten Years of Free Bulgaria* (*10 lat wolnej Bułgarii*).³⁰

Other events planned by the Committee were shows of art produced in

27 I. Witz, "Malarstwo Otto Nagla" [Otto Nagel's painting], *Życie Warszawy*, 1955, no. 141, p. 3.

28 D. Żmij, *Sprawozdanie z pobytu profesora Nagla z małżonką* [A report from Prof. Nagel and his wife's stay in Poland], 5 June 1955, Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 152, p. 38.

29 A. Milska, untitled, in: *Nowa Albania na drodze do socjalizmu* [New Albania on the Path to Socialism], exhibition catalogue, Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1953, p. 8.

30 *Sztuka obca w Polsce 1944–1960* [Foreign art in Poland 1944–1960], typescript, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art Archive.



Fig. 6. *Wystawa sztuki Rumuńskiej Republiki Ludowej* [Exhibition of Art from the People's Republic of Romania], 1952, a view of the exhibition – staircase with a portrait of Joseph Stalin, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

all of the countries of the Eastern bloc. These exhibitions were intended to confirm the thesis that the aesthetics of Socialist Realism was a logical consequence of the realistic tendencies that had been developing in those countries throughout past centuries. The *Exhibition of Art from the People's Republic of Romania* (*Wystawa sztuki Rumuńskiej Republiki Ludowej*) was shown in 1952.³¹ The number of exhibited caricatures was considerable in comparison to exhibitions from other countries, and the author of the introduction explained that they “enjoyed great popularity in Romania”.³² Examples of Romanian folk art were exhibited but not included in the catalogue. The introduction emphasised that “in Romanian folk art a Polish viewer will find many traces of kinship with Polish folk production from the Podkarpacie and Podhale regions”.³³

The exhibition design was similar to that of the *Exhibition of Works by Soviet Artists* in 1951. The display occupied “6 large halls”.³⁴ In the staircase, an oil portrait of Josef Stalin hung against the background of a draped fabric (Fig. 6).

31 An exhibition of Romanian graphic art (*Wystawa grafiki rumuńskiej*) took place in 1955.

32 Untitled, in: *Wystawa sztuki Rumuńskiej Republiki Ludowej* [Exhibition of Art from the People's Republic of Romania], exhibition catalogue, Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1952, p. 6.

33 Ibid., p. 7.

34 “Otwarcie Wystawy Sztuki Rumuńskiej” [Opening of the exhibition of Romanian art], *Kurier Codzienny* (Warsaw), 1952, no. 195, p. 3.

Portraits of the general secretaries of the Communist parties of Poland and Romania were placed on both of its sides. Below were flowers and the flags of the People's Republic of Poland, of the People's Republic of Romania and of the Soviet Union. Stefan Henel commented: "The folk costume section literally overflows with colours, ornamental motifs and rich compositions. With a feeling akin to envy we realise that Romanian folk costume design shows much greater artistic inventiveness than ours"³⁵ (Fig. 7). Józef Grabowski did not omit to add in his review that Romania had long been appreciative of its folk art production and that a museum devoted solely to it, called the Museum of National Art, had been established in Bucharest.³⁶

Exhibitions of folk art of the Soviet Union's satellite countries were organised relatively often (in those days exhibitions of professional and folk art were organised together; only later was the folk art relegated to ethnographic museums). The year 1953 witnessed the *Exhibition of Bulgarian Folk Art* (*Wystawa bułgarskiej sztuki ludowej*) at the Zachęta and the *Exhibition of Folk Art of the GDR* (*Wystawa sztuki ludowej NRD*) at the National Theatre in Warsaw. These were later complemented by the *Exhibition of Hungarian Folk Art* (*Wystawa węgierskiej sztuki ludowej*) at the Radziwiłł Palace (1954) and the *Exhibition of Chinese Cut-outs* (*Wystawa wycinanki chińskiej*) at the Palace of Culture and Science (1956).³⁷

The *Exhibition of Bulgarian Folk Art* consisted of two sections. The first section contained exhibits dating from the 19th and 20th century (Fig. 8): folk costumes, embroideries, woodcarvings, paintings on wood, wooden utensils, metalwork, jewellery, musical instruments, weapons, maps, models of Bulgarian folk houses and objects connected with the practice of folk customs; the second section embraced industrial crafts and decorative art dating from after 9 September 1944:³⁸ clothing, embroideries, fabrics, carpets, woodcarvings, wooden utensils, pottery, metalwork and drawings on wood. The exhibition ended with an industrial design section, i.e. folk fabrics and embroideries used as models in the textile industry and designs for interiors in the Bulgarian style.³⁹

The Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries conducted a vigorous exchange with China, as manifested by, among others, the *Exhibition of art and craft from the People's Republic of China* (*Wystawa rzemiosła artystycznego Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej*) organised in 1954. It has been recorded

35 S. Henel, "Barwy i sztuka Rumunii" [The colours and art of Romania], *Express Wieczorny*, 1952, no. 203, p. 3.

36 J. Grabowski, "Sztuka ludowa Rumunii" [Folk art of Romania], *Słowo Powszechne*, 1952, no. 230, p. 4.

37 Then at the Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Bydgoszcz and in the Lublin Museum.

38 The day on which the Red Army entered the country and the Communists seized power. In the Communist period it was celebrated as a national holiday.

39 In addition, the *Exhibition of Bulgarian Graphic Art and Illustration* [*Wystawa bułgarskiej grafiki i ilustracji*] was organised in 1956.



Fig. 7. *Wystawa sztuki Rumuńskiej Republiki Ludowej* [Exhibition of Art from the People's Republic of Romania], 1952, a view of the exhibition, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw



Fig. 8. *Wystawa bułgarskiej sztuki ludowej* [Exhibition of Bulgarian Folk Art], 1953, a view of the exhibition, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

that the display was designed by the artist Maria Jarema, a close collaborator of Tadeusz Kantor. She had participated in three Exhibitions of Modern Art (in 1948/48, 1957 and 1959) and then, during the period of Socialist Realism, she withdrew from the artistic community.⁴⁰ The Committee's documentation yields an interesting piece of information on this event: "It must be noted that organisation of the exhibition went slowly and with much difficulty because the arrangement designed for this exhibition by the management of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions did not suit the Chinese conception [for it]. The arrangement of the exhibition was entirely redesigned only upon the command of the General Secretary of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, Ambassador J. K. Wende, and in keeping with his recommendations; the final design wholly satisfied the Chinese side. These negotiations were very aggravating to the Chinese because the management of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions did not abandon its plans easily, treating the Chinese and the exhibits in a condescending manner".⁴¹

The *Exhibition of Chinese Woodcuts* (*Wystawa drzeworytu chińskiego*, Fig. 9) opened in 1954, also at the Zachęta. This is how it was described by Urszula Pomorska: "Small, because it consists of only 74 woodcut works, this exhibition showcases the last five years of Chinese output in this area and amply demonstrates that Chinese artists energetically react to all manifestations of contemporary life in their magnificent free country".⁴²

A vast review of Czechoslovakian art took place in the year 1952. It was a mammoth undertaking; over 600 works documenting the development of Czechoslovakian art from 1848 onward were gathered in seven exhibition halls (Fig. 10). The function of the commissioner of the *Exhibition of Czechoslovakian Art of the 19th and 20th Century* (*Wystawa sztuki czeskosłowackiej XIX i XX wieku*),⁴³ which was transferred from Leningrad, was entrusted to the art historian Dr Miroslav Míčko.⁴⁴ In a lecture given during the vernissage, he characterised the stages of development of this art.⁴⁵ The high status of the event is confirmed in a review by Jerzy Zanoziński:

40 M. Hermansdorfer, untitled, in: B. Ilkosz, *Maria Jarema 1908–1958*, exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Wrocław, Zachęta – The Gallery of Contemporary Art, Wrocław, 1998, p. 10.

41 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 111, p. 3.

42 U. Pomorska, "Z pracowni Li Liczangu w Pekinie" [From Li Lichang studio in Peking], *Express Wieczorny*, 1955, no. 157, p. 3.

43 In 1950 the Committee brought the *Exhibition of Czech Painting* [*Wystawa malarstwa czeskiego*] to the Central Bureau of Art Exhibition's pavilions in Sopot, and in 1955 the *Exhibition of Czechoslovakian Applied Graphic Art* [*Wystawa czeskosłowackiej grafiki użytkowej*] to the Zachęta.

44 Miroslav Míčko (1912–1970) – a Czech critic, theoretician and historian of modern art.

45 "Otwarcie wystawy sztuki czeskosłowackiej" [Opening of the exhibition of Czechoslovakian art], *Życie Warszawy*, 1954, no. 100, p. 1.



Fig. 9. Poster for *Wystawa drzeworytu chińskiego* [Exhibition of Chinese Woodcuts], 1954, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw



Fig. 10. Poster for *Wystawa sztuki czechosłowackiej XIX i XX wieku* [Exhibition of Czechoslovakian Art of the 19th and 20th Century], 1954, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

The exhibition has been meticulously prepared. Its Czechoslovakian organisers did not stint on the best works of early art which adorn the great museums of their homeland. Thanks to this, the retrospective section of the exhibition allows us to become entirely well acquainted with the history of realistic art in Czechoslovakia during the past century. The contemporary section seems to be somewhat overshadowed by the retrospective one, even if only because it contains a far smaller number of exhibits. A visitor coming to the exhibition for the first time is struck by the fact that painting is not preponderant over sculpture, which is usually dispatched [to exhibitions] in small numbers and as small specimens due to transportation difficulties. [...] Finally, the thorough scholarly background of the exhibition is worth emphasising. Two publications: the beautifully edited, richly illustrated album and the catalogue, greatly facilitate our tour around the halls of the Zachęta and allow us to orient ourselves in the accumulation of exhibits gathered therein.⁴⁶

Zanoziński subtly suggested that the artistic quality of the works held in the aesthetics of Social Realism did not equal the quality of art that had been produced in the Czechoslovakian nation during the 19th century.

Vestigial information regarding the arrangement of the exhibition is found in *Życie Literackie*: “Works which constitute the pinnacle of Czech art in the second half of the 19th century are exhibited in the main space, the Matejko Hall. [...] The subsequent halls contain exhibits from the turn of the 19th century and from later years, when the influence of Impressionism becomes evident”.⁴⁷

The *Exhibition of Ukrainian Art* (*Wystawa plastyki ukraińskiej*) in 1955 is worthy of interest as well; it was the only exhibition showing the achievements of just one Soviet republic to be organised in that period.⁴⁸ Its organiser, however, was not the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, but the Ministry of Culture and Art and the Association of Polish Artists and Designers (*Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków*, ZPAP); this may have been a harbinger of the Committee’s gradual decline. The ideological principles behind this event are expounded in a typescript extant in its documentation:

Spiritual kinship between our nations is particularly obvious in that most characteristic form which is folk art. Suffice it to look at the magnificent works of Ukrainian and Polish folk art – the colourful carpets, embroideries, fabrics, pottery, sculptures in wood, murals etc. – to find how close the art of the Polish and Ukrainian nations are, and how vast their shared, mutual influence. We can observe the same process in professional art: in painting, graphics and sculpture.⁴⁹

46 J. Zanoziński, “Wystawa sztuki czeskosłowackiej” [Exhibition of Czechoslovakian art], *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1954, no. 19, p. 8.

47 “Wystawa sztuki czeskosłowackiej XIX i XX w.” [Exhibition of Czechoslovakian Art of the 19th and 20th Century], *Życie Literackie*, 1954, no. 18, p. 8.

48 I am grateful to Dr hab. Gabriela Świtek for bringing this to my attention.

49 A typescript included in the materials referring to the exhibition held in the documentation department of the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art.

Similar phrases were also used regarding the exhibitions of Czechoslovakian, Bulgarian or Hungarian art; generally, of art produced in the countries of the Eastern bloc.

Exhibitions of art from beyond the Iron Curtain

In the first half of the 1950s, the Western artists most often exhibited in the countries of the Eastern bloc were those from France⁵⁰ and Italy,⁵¹ owing to the strong position of the Communist parties and the well-developed cultural policy in their homelands. Westerners involved in the Communist ideology were also present in the Polish artistic life of the era, e.g. the Londoner Paul Hogarth⁵² or the American William Gropper;⁵³ their works were shown at the *Exhibition of the Oeuvre of Progressive Artists* (*Wystawa prac postępowych artystów plastyków*) at the Zachęta (1954).

The *Exhibition of Contemporary French Art* (*Wystawa współczesnej plastyki francuskiej*, 1952) was one of the shows that was central to the Committee's cultural policy. It was dominated by the French Socialist Realists, but it also included works by the Modernists – Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger and Henri Matisse. The authorities were trying to prove in this way that artists in Communist countries were not being harassed at all and that Western art which did not conform to the aesthetics of Socialist Realism could, in fact, be seen in the Eastern bloc. A monographic study of this exhibition is already in existence, so I will only point to the issues that were not mentioned therein.⁵⁴

The Zachęta's documentation contains no photographic records of the exhibition, but material extant in the National Film Archive enables us to partially reconstruct the arrangement of the display and the scale of the exhibited works. This material is particularly interesting, since it reveals the quality of the Modernists' presence within the framework of this exhibition. Analysing this event today, art historians underline solely the fact that the Modernists, especially Picasso, were exhibited. It is, however, interesting how the Modernist

50 Cf. D. Berhtet, *Le P.C.F., la culture et l'art. 1947–1954*, Paris, 1990.

51 Cf. J. J. G. Gutiérrez, "The Politics of Abstract Art: Forma 1 and the Italian Communist Party, 1947–1951", *Cercles. Revista d'Història Cultural*, 2012, no. 15, pp. 111–135; A. R. Duran, *Painting, Politics and the New Front of Cold War Italy*, Farnham, 2014.

52 Cf. D. Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins in Postwar Britain*, Durham–London, 1997.

53 Cf. *People are my Landscape: Social Struggle in the Art of William Gropper*, <http://library.syr.edu/digital/exhibits/g/Gropper/case2.htm> [accessed 27 January 2015].

54 Cf. K. Zychowicz, *Paryska lewica w stalinowskiej Warszawie. Wystawa współczesnej plastyki francuskiej w CBWA w 1952 roku* [The Paris Left in Stalinist Warsaw. An exhibition of contemporary French art at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Warsaw], Warsaw, 2014.

works, which were dominated by the large-format canvases of the French Realists, merged into the general character of the exhibition.

Materials collected in the Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw have yielded a note indicating that the person mainly responsible for the shape of this exhibition was André Fougeron. It reads: "The largest event as regards exhibitions prepared by the Department is unquestionably the exhibition of contemporary French painting, to which our political and artistic powers attach great importance. Also the French progressive organisations evince great interest in it. The outstanding French painter André Fougeron has been designated responsible for the effort on their behalf".⁵⁵ The archive materials do much to explain this situation, as many scholars have pointed to Ryszard Stanisławski as the curator of this exhibition.⁵⁶

The *Exhibition of French Artistic Textiles* (*Wystawa francuskiej tkaniny artystycznej*) was on show at the Zachęta in late 1953 and early 1954. If the Committee's documentation is to be believed, the "French painters submitted a request for an exhibition of French textiles to be organised".⁵⁷ The Ministry of Culture and Art proposed that the building of the Institute of Industrial Design be the venue, but ultimately the exhibition was hosted by the Zachęta. The *Ilustrowany Kurier Polski* newspaper reported that "35 pieces of artistic textiles made in the renowned weaving centre of Aubusson following designs by contemporary French painters were on show in 3 large exhibition halls".⁵⁸

The Modernist textiles were arranged against a neutral background and in a distance, thus allowing the audience to view them in a convenient manner (Fig. 11). The exhibition was entirely outside the framework of the Socialist Realist aesthetics. This is confirmed by Hanna Szczawińska's review in the *Tygodnik Powszechny* weekly: "The first impressions of the viewer dazed by the charm of the colour combinations, by the shouting of abstract and surrealist compositions, may bring to mind flowers... which have spoken out loud".⁵⁹ This one and only truly critical text (the other reviews mostly summarised

55 Cf. *Sprawozdanie z pracy Wydziałów Krajów Różnych za miesiąc grudzień 1951 r.* [Report from the work of the Departments of Diverse Countries for the month of December, 1951], Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 18, p. 54.

56 K. Murawska-Muthesius, "How the West Corroborated Socialist Realism in the East: Fougeron, Taslitzky and Picasso in Warsaw", *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 2003, no. 2, p. 319; eadem, "Paris from behind the Iron Curtain", in: *Paris: Capital of the Arts 1900-1968*, ed. S. Wilson, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, London, 2002, p. 254.

57 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 267, p. 111.

58 "Francuska tkanina artystyczna na wystawie w 'Zachęcie'" [French artistic textiles on show at the Zachęta], *Ilustrowany Kurier Polski* (Bydgoszcz), 1953, no. 297, p. 5.

59 H. Szczawińska, "Francuska tkanina artystyczna" [French artistic textiles], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1954, no. 3, p. 9.



Fig. 11. *Wystawa francuskiej tkaniny artystycznej* [Exhibition of French Artistic Textiles], 1953/1954, a view of the exhibition, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

the history of French textiles) tells us that the exhibition “unfortunately does not include large textiles of a more monumental nature. It does not include them simply because those gigantic textiles, being very costly, are produced solely on commission and are difficult to be loaned out for an exhibition. Nevertheless, we have been shown some larger pieces [...]”.⁶⁰ It is worth adding that echoes of this event are found in Leopold Tyrmand’s diary from 1954; the writer shared Szczawińska’s view: “The magic of the colour, intelligence of the contents, stunning perfection of the draughtsmanship, esprit, creative fantasy, subtle emotiveness; one could continue this catalogue endlessly or write simply: true Art”.⁶¹

The catalogue of the exhibition of French textiles opened with an essay by Léon Moussinac, a theatre, film and applied art critic, one of the leading French intellectuals linked with the Communist movement in the first half of the 20th century. Moussinac pointed out both the strengths and weaknesses of the French textile art: “Artists who designed textiles in the 14th and 15th century found a generally understood form of artistic expression. Their successors in the 20th century have no less great ambitions; yet for their form of artistic expression to possess the same virtues they will have to continue growing

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶¹ L. Tyrmand, *Dziennik 1954: wersja oryginalna* [Diary 1954: the original version], edited and introduced by H. Dasko, Warsaw, 1999, p. 42.



Fig. 12. Poster for *Wystawa prac postępowych artystów plastyków* [Exhibition of the Oeuvre of Progressive Artists], 1954, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

independent of painting”.⁶² The author of the second essay in the catalogue was Ryszard Stanisławski. He was aware that the textiles were Modernist in style, so he felt compelled to justify their presence in the People’s Republic of Poland: “Not touching upon the issue of their topics, which, as has already been stated, may have been determined by the requirements of the environment, it seems that the undertaken topics are in many cases expressed by means of a form that is not always close to the realistic form. The decorative character of textile does, in fact, call for a special licence, but perhaps not in order to transgress it”.⁶³ A reviewer from Wrocław (to where the exhibition was moved) added: “The opinion prevalent in private conversations was that organising such an exhibition during the period of the struggle for Socialist Realism was strange and harmful”.⁶⁴

The *Exhibition of the Oeuvre of Progressive Artists* (*Wystawa prac postępowych artystów plastyków*, Fig. 12), one of the largest reviews of Western-European graphic art to be held in Poland after the war, took place in 1954.⁶⁵ It can be considered a summary of the exhibition-organising policy implemented by the

62 L. Moussinac, untitled, in: *Wystawa francuskiej tkaniny artystycznej* [Exhibition of French artistic textiles], exhibition catalogue, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1953, pp. 8–9.

63 R. Stanisławski, untitled, in: *Wystawa francuskiej tkaniny...*, *ibid.*, p. 17.

64 *Sprawozdanie z wystawy francuskiej tkaniny artystycznej we Wrocławiu (5.XII.53)* [Report from the exhibition of French artistic textiles in Wrocław (5 December ‘53)], Zachęta – National Gallery of Art Archive, 20/868.

65 The exhibition was also presented at the National Museum in Poznań and, interestingly, in the Jerka Village House of Culture (Kościan County, 25 April – 2 May 1954). Cf. the



Fig. 13. Poster for the exhibition *Renato Guttuso. Obrazy i rysunek* [Renato Guttuso. Paintings and drawing], 1954, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries with respect to artists from beyond the Iron Curtain. This is because almost all of the artists who had exhibited in Poland in the first half of the 1950s were present there as well. In the introduction to the catalogue, Andrzej Jakimowicz explained the character of the show: “A clear factor that unites the works exhibited here is the ideological cause, the issue of the artists’ stance in that struggle for peace and social justice which is now enfolding the entire world. It is precisely this criterion of ideological contents that constitutes an entire novelty in the field of international art exhibitions”.⁶⁶ Here, again, the realistic character of the works was mentioned: “The exhibition shows that, wishing to convey the fiery contents of his protest and the zeal of his belief to other people, an artist reaches this aim most accurately when he makes use of the unambiguous, simple and intelligible message of a realistic artistic statement”.⁶⁷

One more exhibition that was very important to Polish artists took place in the same year: *Renato Guttuso. Paintings and drawings* (*Renato Guttuso. Obrazy i rysunek*, Fig. 13). Guttuso, just as André Fougeron, was a painter who

documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 273, p. 3.

66 A. Jakimowicz, untitled, in: *Wystawa prac postępowych artystów plastyków* [Exhibition of the oeuvre of progressive artists], exhibition catalogue, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1954, s. 3.

67 Ibid., p. 5.

abandoned art inspired by Picasso's painting and turned towards more intelligible representations; hence his work was often exhibited in the countries of the Eastern bloc.⁶⁸ The exhibitions of Fougeron and Guttuso were of key importance to the formation of Polish art in the 1950s; the oeuvre of the iconic figure of Polish art, Andrzej Wróblewski, is an example.⁶⁹

Guttuso's works were arranged in two large exhibition halls at the Zachęta; the exhibition contained 30 paintings and a few dozen drawings dating from the two previous years (with the exception of the canvas *The Battle of Ponte dell'Ammiraglio*, painted in 1951–1952). These works included only one still life and a few landscapes; other works focused on workers on strike, peasants or miners' wives. Hanna Szczawińska reported that "interesting observations are yielded by heated debates caused by the exhibition of works by the Italian artist Renato Guttuso. The biting tone of these debates, which have appeared in the visitors' book, and the great number of entries therein, are the best indication of how interesting the problem of Guttuso's output is and how much we have been in need of such an exhibition. It is good that our habitually cautious Realism is confronted with such a strong creative passion [...]"⁷⁰ Afterwards the exhibition was moved to the Lublin Castle. A report that describes the typically Socialist Realist manner of displaying works of art is worth noting: "Thus, in the first hall, where a prominent decorative accent and the flags had also been placed, there were such paintings as *The Death of a Hero*, *Greece 1952*, *Occupation of the Uncultivated Lands of Sicily*, *Wives of Sulphur Miners*, *Wives of Workers on Strike* and *The Unemployed*. [...] All of the exhibition halls were decorated with cut flowers and potted shrubs".⁷¹

In 1955 the Zachęta hosted one of the most important exhibitions of foreign art in the entire history of the People's Republic of Poland – the *Exhibition of Mexican Art* (*Wystawa sztuki meksykańskiej*), which was prepared by the National Front for the Visual Arts (*Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas*, FNAP) in Mexico (Fig. 14).⁷² Jacek Woźniakowski described this event, together with the exhibition of French painting in Cracow in 1946, as "the two most important foreign exhibitions to take place [in Poland] in the early post-war period",⁷³ which "aroused feverish commotion and reactions among painters more or less similar to Delacroix's reaction to Constable (influenced by the Englishman's palette,

68 On Guttuso's connections with politics, cf. e.g. A. Potts, "Realism and Materialism in Postwar European Art", in: *Renew Marxist Art History*, eds. W. Carter, B. Haran, F. J. Schwartz, London, 2013, pp. 400–419.

69 J. Woźniakowski, op. cit., p. 116; J. Ilkosz, "Malarstwo realizmu socjalistycznego w Polsce" [Socialist Realist painting in Poland], in: *Sztuka polska po 1945 roku...*, op. cit., p. 210.

70 H. Szczawińska, "Guttuso", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1954, no. 19, p. 8.

71 I. Iskrzycka, *Sprawozdanie z organizacji wystawy prac Renato Guttuso* [Report from the organisation of the exhibition of Renato Guttuso's works], Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 271, p. 2.

72 Two versions of the poster for this exhibition are in existence.

73 J. Woźniakowski, op. cit., p. 116.



Fig. 14. Poster for *Wystawa sztuki meksykańskiej* [Exhibition of Mexican Art], 1955, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

the French master reportedly repainted *The Massacre at Chios*)”.⁷⁴ Woźniakowski was of the opinion that the Polish audience had overestimated both exhibitions, considering them a presentation of the most recent trends in art, while in reality they showed phenomena which by then had already been well established. At the same time he highlighted the influence of the Mexicans’ oeuvre at the Arsenal show a few months later.⁷⁵ The exhibition is also important to European art history in general. After the exhibition closed, Frida Kahlo’s canvas *The Wounded Table* (1939/1940) got lost during its transport to Moscow. This was the largest painting to have ever been produced by Kahlo;⁷⁶ it constituted an expression of her feelings caused by her husband Diego Rivera’s infidelity and had been presented at the Fourth International Exhibition of Surrealism organised in Mexico City by André Breton.⁷⁷ A few years ago it was one of

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ This is a colloquial name for this exhibition, from the place where it was held; the official name was *Przeciw wojnie – przeciw faszyzmowi* [Against war – against fascism]. It was organised in 1955 in the framework of the Fifth World Festival of Youth and Students in Warsaw. Some scholars consider it to be a symbol of the so-called thaw, which was then in progress in the Polish artistic life.

⁷⁶ Cf. <https://vimeo.com/album/2152181/video/53733440> [accessed 19 February 2016].

⁷⁷ http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/surr/hd_surr.htm [accessed 19 February 2016]. Diego Rivera also participated in this exhibition, although neither of them ever officially joined the Surrealist movement.

the protagonists of the *Gallery of Lost Art* project, which consisted in preparing a catalogue of famous works of art that had been destroyed or lost during the past hundred years.⁷⁸

The exhibition was a colossal enterprise, as highlighted by the fact that the introduction to its catalogue was penned by the general secretary of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, Jan Karol Wende (who had earlier prepared the preface to the *Exhibition of Works by Soviet Artists* album). He rightly stressed that “it is for the first time that the multitudes of Polish art lovers [...] have the opportunity to become directly acquainted with such a broad range of Mexican art”.⁷⁹ The Mexican side sent to Poland not only examples of contemporary art, but also a retrospective section illustrating the development of graphic art from the 16th century onwards.

The exhibition had been in the planning stage since 1952.⁸⁰ A letter from the Ministry of Culture and Art explained that “owing to the lack of an appropriate venue in Warsaw, we are unable to organise a display of Mexican art that would occupy ca. 3000 m². Instead, the Ministry offers to accept a part of the Mexican exhibits – a half of them – and to leave the selection of topics (folk art or painting and other disciplines of the visual arts) to be decided by the Mexican side”.⁸¹ Interesting information has been located in the documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “After Siqueiros⁸² had returned from Poland, he began, together with a group of the local progressive artists – out of their own initiative – a campaign to send the exhibition of Mexican art – which is to be shown in Paris from May to July of this year – to countries

78 <http://galleryoflostart.com/> [accessed 28 January 2016].

79 J. K. Wende, untitled, in: *Wystawa sztuki meksykańskiej* [Exhibition of Mexican Art], exhibition catalogue, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1955, p. 5.

80 It would be difficult to assume that a work by Frida Kahlo (Lev Trotsky’s lover) could have been shown at this exhibition in 1952, i.e. while Stalin was alive. In 1940 Trotsky had been assassinated in Mexico, upon Stalin’s orders. I am grateful to Dr hab. Gabriela Świtek for bringing this circumstance to my attention.

81 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 256, p. 19.

82 Siqueiros visited Poland in 1951. Cf. a report from his stay – documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 206. It reads: “This was the first time I saw Siqueiros’s works and I must admit that they seemed to me like ornaments in hell, terrible dreams that had been given a shape. His art, with no restraint at all, full of symbolism and allegories, very formalistic and at the same time full of strange expressiveness, truly frightened me at first. [...] But to come back to the report; having seen the Krajewskis’ atelier, we visited Prof. Kokoszko, who showed some of his interesting works to the visitors, and then Prof. Bylina, who was busy working on some historical painting. Siqueiros expressed his admiration, but I do not think that it was an honest one. Our art does not speak to him even 10 percent as much as our nature, landscape, the rebuilding of Warsaw, and even architecture do” (pp. 4–5). Under the same signature there is also an interesting report from Diego Rivera’s stay in Poland in 1956.

of the Socialist camp. The delegation that went to the Art Department in regard of this matter was headed by Siqueiros and Diego Rivera. This delegation obtained permission to send the post-Paris exhibition to one of the Socialist countries on condition that the Art Department receives an official invitation. Siqueiros and Rivera notified the Republic of Poland's legation of this, asking them to have a relevant letter to be sent by the Polish side as soon as possible".⁸³

Mexican art of the 20th century was famous for its murals, but these were impossible to bring. Juliusz Starzyński argued, however, that "no less important is the powerful blast of monumentality and drama, which is the fundamental feature of this art – discernible also in easel painting and in graphic art in all its manifestations, regardless of the technique and format".⁸⁴ The lacuna was filled by means of documentation, i.e. photographic enlargements of Mexican murals, chiefly by José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Apart from the works of art, 60 reproductions, 50 monographic studies on art, illustrated catalogues, magazines and newspapers were also displayed.

In his analysis of the Cracow edition of the show, Konrad Winkler pointed out that "this art is unquestionably realistic if, not guided by orthodox pedantry, we consider every representation of the world that is intelligible and conforms to reality to constitute Realism". He also added that "F. Kahlo's surrealist composition entitled *The Wounded Table* and a few half-realistic and symbolic works do not spoil the impact of this show".⁸⁵ An important piece of information as to the character of this show is given by Jerzy Olkiewicz: "Another interesting feature of the entire exhibition is the colour of the paintings; with all their revolutionary nature, with the strong emphasis on contents, the Mexican painters do not cease to be good painters".⁸⁶

The year 1956 witnessed two exhibitions which portended the disintegration of the exhibition policy implemented by the Committee for Cultural Cooperation. In their case, the novelty was the seeming absence of ideological contents. Yet these exhibitions by no means referred to the newest Western trends; it was decided to focus on safe topics: the historically well-established phenomena in German graphic art and the oeuvre of an artist who moved outside the current tendencies in the world's art. The former was the *Exhibition of the Oeuvre of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany* (*Wystawa prac grafików z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej*, Fig. 15). In his introduction to the catalogue, Jan Białostocki assured that "the exhibition is enlightening and interesting as one of the first, after many years, opportunities to become

83 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 256, p. 21.

84 J. Starzyński, untitled, in: *Wystawa sztuki meksykańskiej...*, op. cit., p. 12.

85 K. Winkler, "Plastyka meksykańska" [Mexican art], *Dziennik Polski*, 1955, no. 71, p. 3.

86 J. Olkiewicz, "Kwiaty i piszczele" [Flowers and shinbones], *Dziś i Jutro*, 1955, no. 9, p. 8.



Fig. 15. Invitation to *Wystawa prac grafików z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej* [Exhibition of the Oeuvre of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany], 1956, photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

acquainted with the current output of artists from the Federal Republic of Germany”.⁸⁷ The exhibition encompassed graphic works from various periods, but only three works by artists from the young generation, ones born in the years 1917–1923 (i.e. Otto Eglau, Hildegard Peters and Christa von Schnitzler-Croissant), were included.

In the same year the Committee introduced *Woodcuts and Sculptures by Robert Hainard* (*Drzeworyty i rzeźby Roberta Hainarda*). The art of this Swiss artist focused mostly on painting and sculpting animals; it is, however, worth noting that his views were leftist and that he belonged to the “Connaitre” organisation in Geneva.⁸⁸ The idea behind organising this exhibition in Poland is evident from a letter that came from the Polish legation in Bern: “Hainard would like to spend at least 6 weeks in Poland, at his own expense, which he explains in detail in his letter. On our part, we wholeheartedly support

⁸⁷ J. Białostocki, untitled, in: *Wystawa prac grafików z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej* [Exhibition of the oeuvre of graphic artists from the Federal Republic of Germany], exhibition catalogue, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1956, p. 5.

⁸⁸ Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 264, p. 46.

Hainard's request; he appears to be a decent man, a bit of an eccentric. We would all the more like it to happen since the Swiss press is now (after the conference of ministers) writing much about the impossibility of having a cultural exchange with our countries, about the Iron Curtain coming down and so on. We would like to ask for the decision to be taken quickly and, if possible, for it to be a favourable one".⁸⁹ Elsewhere, it was added: "We also emphasise that our rejection would offend the initiator of this exhibition, Mr. Bouffard, who has been conducting a large propagandist campaign in favour of our country".⁹⁰

During this period, the exhibition's commissioner is increasingly more often mentioned in pertinent information.⁹¹ It initially belonged mainly to the artists. Interestingly, the commissioner of three of the above events (*Exhibition of Mexican Art*, *Exhibition of the Oeuvre of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany*, *Woodcuts and Sculptures by Robert Hainard*) was the painter and graphic artist Roman Artymowski, who for many years had been a lecturer in graphic arts in Baghdad and who was also involved in writing about art. He was the commissioner of exhibitions of Polish art abroad many times, arranging exhibitions and writing introductions to catalogues.⁹² It is worth noting, however, that this function was soon taken over by art historians. The term "commissioner" (in Polish: *komisarz*) was used practically until the end of the People's Republic of Poland; this was connected with, among others, the dominance of French culture in Poland at that time (cf. the French term *commissaire d'exposition*).

Summing up these observations on exhibitions organised by the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, it should not be forgotten that many of them were hosted abroad. The branches of art that were most

89 *Wyciąg z pisma poselstwa PRL w Bernie* [Summary of the letter from the People's Republic of Poland legation in Bern], documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 264, p. 2.

90 *Notatka dla Ambasadora w sprawie zorganizowania w Polsce wystawy prac graficznych i rzeźbiarskich Roberta Hainarda (Szwajcaria)* [Note to the Ambassador on re-organising the exhibition of graphic and painted works of Robert Hainard (Switzerland) in Poland], documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 264, p. 51.

91 The range of a commissioner's duties can also be found in the Committee's documentation, e.g. in the documents referring to Robert Hainard's exhibition. These included being present at the unpacking of the exhibits, collecting and editing the catalogue materials, accepting texts, selecting the poster and illustrations for the catalogue, collaborating in the preparation of the catalogue, poster and invitations, supervising the design of the display and the concept for decoration design, being present when the report was written out after the dismantling of the display, and helping to prepare the press conference. Cf. documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 264, p. 5.

92 B. Kowalska, "Roman Artymowski", in: *Roman Artymowski 1919–1993, akwarele*, exhibition catalogue, State Art Gallery in Łódź, Łódź, 1996, p. 6.

often exhibited outside of Poland were poster and graphic art. This is how this fact was justified in a document referring to an exhibition of graphic art which was intended to be exhibited in the United States of America, South America and Canada: "Limited opportunities for propaganda in the abovementioned area region force us to resign from showing problem-oriented exhibitions there and to place the main emphasis on art-oriented ones. Being typically art-oriented, an exhibition of graphic art would nevertheless acquaint the population of those countries with life in the People's Republic of Poland due to the undertaken topics".⁹³

Organising foreign exhibitions was not an easy task. One of the Committee's employees reported:

Worth emphasising is the fact that the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries does not have sufficiently qualified personnel to responsibly prepare exhibitions intended [to be shown] abroad. This is done in a "cottage industry" system, with the aid of one specialist consultant who visits the Committee once a week (sometimes even more rarely). In these conditions, it is difficult to deal with the overload of accumulating issues and to put the exhibition department on a level which it deserves to be at due to the serious propagandist and political role of our exhibitions and their outreach towards the masses. And it must be stated that Polish exhibitions [hosted] in capitalist countries find many attentive recipients and are highly regarded not only in the progressive, but even in the bourgeois press.⁹⁴

Documents located at the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art Archive indicate, however, that in reality the foreign exhibitions were organised by the Bureau's staff members: "A serious complication in the attempt to put the central system of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in order is the issue of foreign exhibitions organised by the Central Bureau outside of their own service plan and budget, on commission from the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries and with its money".⁹⁵

On the whole, the idea to centralise the entire cultural exchange with foreign countries turned out to be a utopia. In 1955, the Ministry of Culture and Art offered a proposal to decentralise the exchange and to dissolve the Committee for Cultural Cooperation.⁹⁶ The related conference took place on 6 May 1956;⁹⁷ the decree was valid as per 31 December of the same year.

93 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 234, p. 60.

94 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 9, p. 38.

95 *Uwagi do schematu organizacyjnego CBWA* [Comments to the organisational model of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions], 1950–1957, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art Archive, signature 12/1.

96 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 1, pp. 215–216.

97 Documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, signature 2, p. 33.

The decision was validated as follows: "The large quantitative increase of exchange, the considerable broadening of the geographical and thematic scope of intellectual contacts – all of this suggested either a very severe increase in the workforce requirements of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries or the liquidation of this agency and passing on its tasks to individual departments, institutions, etc."⁹⁸

* * *

At this point it would be worthwhile to offer a general characterisation of the policy of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries with regard to exhibitions. Foreign exhibitions prepared by this agency were intended to justify the state's cultural strategy as based on promoting the aesthetics of Socialist Realism, a style which programmatically referred to 19th-century Realism and its historical traditions. Art produced in the aesthetics of Socialist Realism was to show the postulated image of reality; hence it could not be critical of it and had to be optimistic in spirit.

Attempts at justifying the presence of Socialist Realism in Poland were based on references to the native tradition. Juliusz Starzyński specified two points in Polish art that may have influenced its formation: the so-called Bourgeois Realism of the late 15th and early 16th century, and the harbingers of the so-called Critical Realism of the second half of the 19th century.⁹⁹ The concept of "Critical Realism" functioned mainly in literary criticism; it was coined by Nikolay Chernyshevsky and popularised by Maxim Gorky to describe a realistic trend in Western literature of the first half of the 19th century which was interpreted as critical towards the bourgeoisie in the period of triumphant capitalism. This concept was to constitute the origin for Socialist Realism; in fact, it was the central element of its tradition. However, interpreting Socialist Realism as a successor to Critical Realism was not permitted, because the latter was represented by bourgeois writers, who pointed out detrimental social phenomena, but either responded to them by creating various utopias or failed to propose any optimistic perspectives for the future.¹⁰⁰ A similar strategy was applied with reference to exhibitions of art produced in the countries of the Eastern bloc; these would encompass the local version of Socialist Realism plus 19th-century painting that could be described as "Critical Realism".

In addition, it was essential to associate the concept of "Socialist Realism" with art produced in the countries of the Eastern bloc. The output of artists from Western Europe or from the United States would often appear

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

⁹⁹ J. Starzyński, "Z zagadnień realizmu w tradycjach malarstwa polskiego" [On Realism in Polish painting traditions], *Przegląd Artystyczny*, 1951, no. 1, p. 6.

¹⁰⁰ A. Makowski, "Realizm krytyczny" [Critical Realism], in: *Słownik realizmu socjalistycznego* [Dictionary of Socialist Realism], eds. Z. Łapiński, W. Tomasiak, Cracow, 2004, pp. 257–260.

in exhibition halls or be discussed in magazines. The form of their works was often very different from the character of the paintings and sculptures which were representative of Polish art; hence Jan Lenica explained that in relation to these artists, it was only possible to talk about broadly understood realism, i.e. not about imitating objects, but about the “moral climate” of their works.¹⁰¹ This, however, was already in the twilight of Socialist Realism’s supremacy in Polish art and the definition of Realism that had been valid in the period of the “mild revolution” was slowly being returned to (before the introduction of Socialist Realism in the year 1949, Realism was interpreted very broadly, mostly as a conception that modernises itself parallel to reality).

Bringing to Poland exhibitions of folk art from the “fraternal” countries of the Eastern bloc was an important element of the policy of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation. As observed by Piotr Korduba, what occurred in Poland in the period 1949–1956 was “an instrumental inclusion of folk art in the social and cultural remodelling of the country in the Socialist spirit”.¹⁰² Włodzimierz Sokorski, the foremost theoretician of Socialist Realism in its Polish edition, wrote the essay “O właściwy stosunek do sztuki ludowej” [In favour of the correct attitude towards folk art]. Its tone should be familiar by now: “We are reaching for those invaluable treasures of folk culture which were an expression of its social distinctiveness and of the social protest against the cosmopolitan art of the small bourgeoisie, and we desire to merge this living, powerful current of the folk masses into the new national culture of Socialism [...]”.¹⁰³

It should not be forgotten, however, that the period of Socialist Realism in Poland was characterised by an inner dynamics. Exhibitions shown in late 1953 and in 1954 already heralded the slow departure from the requirements of Socialist Realism. The last exhibitions to be prepared by the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries did not fit the principles of its policy – their political dimension was no longer as clear-cut as had been in the case of earlier events. In the Soviet Union, the doctrine of Socialist Realism was obligatory until the death of Stalin in 1953, and the first changes were to be observed three years later, after Nikita Khrushchev’s speech at the 20th Party Congress. Similar processes took place in the Polish artistic life. History came full circle, in a sense, because as the aesthetics of Socialist Realism was being abandoned, the post-war debate on the diversity of the forms of Realism was retuned to. The concept of Realism was broadened once again. In 1954 Juliusz Starzyński, one of the leading theoreticians of Socialist Realism

101 J. Lenica, “Proste i okrężne drogi” [Straight and winding roads], *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1954, no. 7, p. 8.

102 P. Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż: Towarzystwo Popierania Przemysłu Ludowego, Cepelia, Instytut Wzornictwa Przemysłowego* [Folksiness on sale: The Association for Supporting the Folk Industry, Cepelia, Institute of Industrial Design], Warsaw, 2013, p. 264.

103 W. Sokorski, “O właściwy stosunek do sztuki ludowej” [In favour of a correct attitude towards folk art], *Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 1949, vol. 2, p. 133.

in Poland, made a statement concerning the “broadly understood tradition”, in which he permitted Polish artists to make use of the artistic explorations of the Impressionists and of Picasso.¹⁰⁴ To him, Picasso was a representative of Realism regardless of his use of deformation, because his art was characterised by the authenticity of feeling.¹⁰⁵

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

Abstract

The documentation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, which was an official agency active in the years 1950–1956, is currently deposited at the Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw and constitutes an invaluable source for any Polish scholar interested in the history of exhibitions. It contains large amounts of interesting data which make it possible to ascertain the character of Polish exhibition-organising activity in the first half of the 1950s. In the six years of its existence the Committee organised ca. one hundred exhibitions. The essay concerns exhibitions hosted in the main building of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, i.e. the Zachęta. Foreign exhibitions prepared by the Committee were intended to justify the state’s cultural strategy based on promoting the aesthetics of Socialist Realism, which programmatically referred to 19th-century Realism and its historical traditions. Exhibitions of art produced in the countries of the Eastern bloc presented the local version of Social Realism plus 19th-century painting that could be described as “Critical Realism”. Bringing to Poland exhibitions of folk art from the “brotherly” countries of the Eastern bloc was an important element of the Committee’s policy, as in the years 1949–1956 attempts were made to use folk art in the process of remodelling the country in the Socialist spirit. The Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries was established in 1950 in order to centralise, expand and politicise artistic exchange. On the whole, however, the idea to centralise all of the cultural exchange with foreign countries turned out to be a utopia. In 1955, just as the so-called thaw was beginning, the Ministry of Culture and Art offered the proposal to decentralise the exchange and to dissolve the Committee.

104 J. Starzyński, “Od Courbetta do Picassa czyli o perspektywach sztuki nowoczesnej” [From Courbet to Picasso, or on the perspectives of modern art], *Materiały do Studiów i Dyskusji* [Materials for studies and discussions], 1954, no. 3–4, p. 27; idem, “Tradycja szeroko pojęta” [Tradition broadly understood], *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1954, no. 16, p. 4.

105 J. Starzyński, “Sztuka wieczyście młoda” [The eternally young art], *Materiały do Studiów i Dyskusji z Zakresu Teorii i Historii Sztuki, Krytyki Artystycznej oraz Badań nad Sztuką* [Materials for studies and discussions on the theory and history of art, art criticism and research on art], 1955, no. 1–2, pp. 140–164.