

Katarzyna Matul

ART HISTORY SECTION, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF LAUSANNE

The Transition to Art: Poster Exhibitions at the Outset of the Poster's Institutionalisation

After the opening of the First International Poster Biennial which was organised in June of 1966 at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions (Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, CBWA), one of the critics claimed:

The poster is a relatively fresh area of art; it is almost within our times that it has passed from being a purely utilitarian medium to a domain of art. Not wholly, of course; but everywhere in the world the number of posters of first-rate artistic quality, produced not by artisan experts of advertising but by talented artists, is increasing. While becoming a work of art the poster did not shed its original function: to advertise or to announce; its aesthetic qualities do not banish information, which results in the fact that a poster exhibition is also, to a greater degree than is the case with other art exhibitions, an overview of daily life in our civilisation.¹

What happened when the poster – originally an advertising medium – became an object of appreciation in museums? What criteria did it have to comply with in order to be acceptable on the walls of a temple of art? Did it necessarily have to give up its utilitarian function, its mass and reproducible character – or perhaps, on the contrary, the criteria of its originality² and rarity³ were not indispensable? And, finally, who had the power to give it the status of “high art”⁴?

- 1 (NIL), “Biennale Plakatu ‘66” [Poster Biennial ‘66], *Zwierciadło*, 26 June 1966, no. 26.
- 2 Melot defines the concept of originality as consisting of two parts: uniqueness and authenticity, M. Melot, “La notion d’originalité et son importance dans la définition des objets d’art”, in: *Sociologie de l’art*, ed. R. Moulin, Paris, 1999 [1986], p. 192.
- 3 Cf. R. Moulin, “La genèse de la rareté artistique”, in: idem, *De la valeur de l’art*, Paris, 1995, pp. 161–191; “L’un et le multiple, le contrôle de la rareté artistique”, in: *Sociologie de l’art*, eds. A. Blanc, R. Moulin, Proceedings from the international symposium in Marseille, 13–14 June 1985, Paris, 1986.
- 4 I am borrowing the terminology from K. Varnedoe, A. Gopnik, *High&Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), 7 October 1990 – 15 January 1991, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1990. The denominations

The First International Poster Biennial organised at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in 1966, and the creation, two years later, of the Poster Museum in Wilanów (as a department of the National Museum in Warsaw) were two key moments of the institutionalisation of this medium.⁵ This article attempts to analyse poster exhibitions held in the 1950s, i.e. in the period preceding the two events which are of major importance in the process of the poster's institutionalisation. During this period the interest of museum curators in this medium must be envisioned as always being underpinned by political and propagandist interests, and it is in this double perspective, i.e. cultural and political, that the transition of the poster to the status of a work of art will be analysed here.

A democratic art museum

The position of poster art after the 2nd World War was conditioned, as every part of the cultural and social life in Poland at that time was, by the country's new political situation. The Soviet government that had been implanted in Poland brought a new order and a strange culture to be imposed on the local customs. But the status of art was complicated by the similarities which existed between Communist ideals of the democratisation of art and the forward-thinking tendencies towards a more autonomous art which were widespread among Polish artists of the 1930s.⁶ From then on, the challenge lay in how to elaborate on the definition of art so that it would meet the new social and political demands. One particular function of the "new art" was to become a sort of education tool for the "aesthetically illiterate"⁷ public. Therefore, an everyday environment possessing a high artistic level needed to be created, with the roads, factories, social and educational centres and interiors of homes taking part in an awakening of the citizens' artistic sense. Art exhibitions were

of "major" and "minor" arts, as those used in the rest of this article, will serve to distinguish between the different artistic genres according to a traditional hierarchy, with painting, sculpture or architecture on the one hand and graphic arts, poster art, caricatures or illustrations on the other.

5 On the International Poster Biennial in Warsaw, cf. K. Matul, *Jak to było możliwe? O powstawaniu Międzynarodowego Biennale Plakatu* [How was it possible? The origins of the International Poster Biennial in Warsaw], Cracow, 2015.

6 Cf. W. Baraniewski, "Wobec realizmu socjalistycznego" [Facing Socialist Realism], in: *Sztuka polska po 1945 roku. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*, Warszawa, listopad 1984 [Proceedings from the Session of the Association of Polish Art Historians, Warsaw, November 1984], Warsaw, 1987, p. 179; *Sztuka wszędzie. Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie 1904–1944* [Art everywhere. The Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, 1904–1944], eds. J. Gola, M. Sitkowska, A. Szewczyk, Warsaw, 2012.

7 Cf. S. Teisseyre, "Rola i zadania sztuk plastycznych" [The role and aims of fine arts], *Odrodzenie*, 29 April 1945, no. 22.

also supposed to express the new view of this democratic art – an art created mainly for the working classes – and therefore participated in the overthrowing of the traditional artistic hierarchy that was deemed characteristic of a capitalist system. The “minor” arts were placed at the same level as the “major” ones, all having to equally contribute to the citizens’ visual education. In this context it was necessary to rethink the role of the art museum as a part of the new political reality. During the interwar period the museum had been aimed at the elite; now, in Communist Poland, it had to open its doors to the masses. In 1945, in the journal *Kuźnica*, Kazimierz Majewski reviewed this new role of museums:

At this point we are concerned with just one issue: the usefulness of museums in pre-September Poland. Here, regrettably, one thing must be admitted: this usefulness was limited as to both quality and quantity. Before 1939, Polish museums, with a few exceptions, were elitist in character, as was in keeping with the then-current socio-political system of our state. So what are museums supposed to be like in this new, democratic Poland? [...] There are those who think that museums are to be a locus of aesthetic experiences (art museums) or to provide an impulse for cognitive effort (historical, archaeological or ethnographic museums); but there are also those who claim that museums are [...] to be a basic visual handbook for the broad masses.⁸

The need for culture to be socially useful within the new political context made the poster one of the privileged mediums for an exhibition. By its nature, a poster conveyed an idea, it spoke directly to the recipients, and it was suitable for mass production; all these traits made it a perfect medium for propaganda and for “education of the masses”. In addition, poster designers, increasingly more often referred to as the “Polish School of Poster”, were gaining increasing recognition worldwide, which encouraged the critics to enthusiastically impose the status of a work of art on the poster. These two factors, i.e. political and artistic, proved essential in the institutionalisation process of this medium in Poland. During the period of Socialist Realism, which had begun in Poland in 1949, the attributes of a poster (i.e. the intelligibility of its artistic language, the use of commonly understood metaphors, and its ability to elicit a desired response from the viewer) proved to be so important to the ideologists of the doctrine that they were afterwards applied to all disciplines of art.⁹

Thus the first exhibitions to be organised after the reopening of the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions were conceived to demonstrate the reversal in the traditional hierarchy of art with its order that was evidently characterised by the superiority of painting or sculpture. The following areas were

8 K. Majewski, “Muzea w nowej Polsce” [Museums in the new Poland], *Kuźnica*, 2 December 1945, no. 14, p. 5.

9 M. Sitkowska, “Plakatowa sztuka socrealizmu” [Poster art in Socialist Realism], in: *Oblicza socrealizmu* [Aspects of Socialist Realism], eds. M. Sitkowska, A. Zacharska, Warsaw, 1987, p. 19.

presented: caricature (*Radziecka karykatura polityczna w walce o pokój* [Russian political caricature in the struggle for peace], 23 July – 10 August 1951); books and illustrations (Ogólnopolska wystawa książki i ilustracji [National exhibition of books and illustrations], 25 September – 10 October 1951), and interior design and decorative art (I Ogólnopolska wystawa architektury wnętrz i sztuki dekoracyjnej [First national exhibition of interior design and decorative art], 26 May – 23 July 1952). Yet during exhibitions presenting these different artistic genres, categorisation of the genres followed the “painting, sculpture and graphic arts” pattern; cases in point are the very first exhibition, *Plastycy w walce o pokój* ([Artists in the struggle for peace], 18 September 1950 – 15 January 1951) or the three national exhibitions of fine arts (I, II, III Ogólnopolska wystawa plastyki) that were held in 1950, 1951 and 1952, which are major events in the history of Socialist Realism in Poland. Being a part of the last genre, the poster was therefore treated as minor and the creators of posters were featured only to a limited extent. In addition, they did not exhibit posters, but other types of artworks: oil paintings on canvas, drawings, gouaches¹⁰ or watercolours.¹¹

Feeling that poster art was being neglected not only by political leaders, but also by members of the art world, the Ministry of Art and Culture organised a debate entitled “The Contemporary Polish Poster”. It was held at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions on 1 December 1951 and attended by poster designers, critics and political leaders, including Włodzimierz Sokorski. The debate was the first major meeting to be dedicated to the poster since the implementation of Socialist Realism. Ignacy Witz, a poster designer, art critic, teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts and director of the Department of Graphic Art Editions (Departament Wydawnictw Artystyczno-Graficznych, DWAG),¹² opened the meeting with the assertion that since the establishment of Socialist Realism, the poster had been “neglected by the critics, by the artists, and by the Party”.¹³

10 At the First National Exhibition of Fine Arts Wojciech Fangor presented two oil paintings on canvas and Jan Lenica presented two gouaches, cf. exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw, March – April 1950, pp. 25, 59.

11 At the Second National Exhibition of Fine Arts Eryk Lipiński presented seven watercolours; cf. exhibition catalogue, Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, December 1951 – February 1952, p. 49.

12 The Department of Graphic Art Editions (Departament Wydawnictw Artystyczno-Graficznych, DWAG), which would soon be renamed Graphics and Art Publishing House (Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne, WAG).

13 The typescript of the speech given by Ignacy Witz during the “Polski plakat współczesny” [The contemporary Polish poster] debate that was organised at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions by the Ministry of Art and Culture and by the Association of Polish Artists, 1 December 1951, Poznań, documentation from the Poster and Design Gallery, National Museum in Poznań (documentation filed by Szymon Bojko), pp. 1, 2. The text contains many corrections, crossed-out sections and marks which were most probably made by another person.

Thus far, not a single conference referring to poster art, not a single exhibition of posters has been organised in Poland, even though such exhibitions of Polish posters have been organised in many countries, both bourgeois ones and those of popular democracy [phrase amended to *ludowy*, i.e. 'people's' (countries)]. The poster has not been written about, the creators of posters have not been given aid in the form of sympathetic Party criticism, the tortuous paths taken by some artists have not been straightened.¹⁴

The meeting was thus intended to give the political leaders, critics and art historians a chance to catch up on the backlog they had created by marginalising the poster. Witz claimed equal importance for this medium as compared to other artistic genres in terms of art criticism, as well as in terms of historiography and museology.

In this context the First National Poster Exhibition [Pierwsza ogólnopolska wystawa plakatu], which was the first important presentation of the Polish poster to be held after 1945 and was organised at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in June 1953, was supposed to contribute to establishing the assumptions postulated by Witz.¹⁵ The exhibition was preceded by two debates organised at the Artistic Council meeting of the Graphics and Art Publishing House (Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne, WAG), which, as is revealed in a confidential note written in July 1953 and addressed to the Department for Agitation and Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, "ended with [the participants'] arriving at an essentially identical view of the ideological and artistic value of the poster".¹⁶ Just as the National Exhibitions of Fine Arts [Ogólnopolskie wystawy plastyki], the First National Poster Exhibition was supposed to be an update on the production of posters since the implementation of the Communist system, and especially on the criteria of Socialist Realism as regarding the medium of the poster.

Yet these artistic criteria were not easy to specify. Socialist Realism was introduced in the 1930s¹⁷ in reference to literature and had never been defined as a true artistic movement or as an art theory.¹⁸ Its ideological and political dimension thrust upon art the imperative of fulfilling the mission of spreading propaganda and education, but the aesthetic guidelines remained very general. The idea of "art that would be Socialist in content and national in

14 Ibid., pp. 3, 4.

15 The organisational committee of the exhibition included Tadeusz Gronowski, Eryk Lipiński, Józef Mroszczak, Tadeusz Trepkowski, Roman Artymowski and Armand Vetulani.

16 A confidential information note, Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archives of Modern Records], Warsaw, Group: Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, Department for Agitation and Propaganda, 1953, 237/VIII/61, p. 3.

17 The term "Socialist Realism" was introduced in the Soviet Union in 1932.

18 A. Baudin, *Les Arts plastiques et leurs institutions. Le réalisme socialiste soviétique de la période jdanovienne (1947–1953)*, Bern, 1997, p. 1.

form”, launched by Stalin in 1925, was to translate into iconography that was related to current events in the country, especially those representative of political leaders and “Socialist men”: workers, peasants, miners.¹⁹ Polish posters were supposed to imitate the “realistic” style of Soviet ones²⁰ and, above all, to avoid the pitfalls of “Formalism” and “Naturalism” – two keywords of this doctrine that often led to confusion.²¹ But the period of an unconditional obligation to create art in the “Soviet style” lasted only until the debate at the Council of State in October 1951.²² In fact, the implementation of Socialist Realism resulted in artistic uniformity of art and in its increasingly mediocre quality, often referred to as “schematism”.²³ Additionally, a conflict arose at the Academy of Fine Arts, where even artists faithful to the Communist party openly criticised Socialist Realism.²⁴ The political leaders quickly realised what the problem was and acted swiftly. They decided to reject the “Muscovite” faction, which consisted of such poster artists as Włodzimierz Zakrzewski, Lucjan Jagodziński or Hanna and Juliusz Krajewski, who advocated Socialist

19 W. Włodarczyk, *Socrealizm. Sztuka polska w latach 1950–1954* [Socialist Realism. Polish art in the years 1950–1954], Paris, 1986; A. Baudin, op. cit. ; J. Studzińska, *Socrealizm w malarstwie polskim* [Socialist Realism in Polish Painting], Warsaw, 2014.

20 D. King, *Revolutionary Posters. From Civil War to Socialist Realism. From Bolshevism to the End of Stalinism*, London, 2012; V. E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power. Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, 1997.

21 “Stalinist aestheticians defined Formalism and Naturalism as phenomena which, from the point of view of the doctrine, were negative; as two distinct variants of anti-realistic deformation. The naturalistic deformation (the ‘naked Naturalism’) was assumed to rely on excessive [...] attention to registering unimportant details, on the ‘vulgar’ copying of reality without interpreting it ideologically. The formalistic deformation, in turn, relied on the forced separation of form from the contents, on making the form absolute and subjective. The semantic field of the primary category of ‘Formalism’ included the following terms, which sometimes were treated as synonymous with it: aestheticism, decadence, art for art’s sake, experimentalism, vagueness, cosmopolitanism etc.”, G. Wołowiec, “Formalizm–naturalizm” [Formalism–Naturalism], in: *Słownik realizmu socjalistycznego* [Dictionary of Socialist Realism], eds. Z. Łapiński, W. Tomasiak, Cracow, 2004, p. 70.

22 On the premature end of Socialist Realism in the field of poster art (as compared to painting), see Z. Schubert, “Plakat” [The poster], in: *Odwilż, sztuka ok. 1956 r.* [The thaw. Art circa 1956], ed. P. Piotrowski, Poznań, 1996, pp. 121–128; A. Turowski : “‘L’école polonaise de l’affiche’ en question”, in: *L’affiche polonaise de 1945 à 2004. Des slogans et des signes*, eds. J.-C. Famulicki, M. Kurpiak, Paris, 2005.

23 “The term ‘formal schematism’ was used in Stalinist criticism to denote works of art which made use of too conventional means of expression or which featured too optimistic or, conversely, too pessimistic scenes devoid of individual expression. The ‘schematism of contents’, in turn, revealed itself in a too superficial approach to ideological contents and in the absence of an authentic ideological message”; G. Wołowiec, “Schematyzm” [Schematism], in: *Słownik realizmu...*, op. cit., pp. 311–312.

24 W. Włodarczyk, *Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie w latach 1944–2004: 100 lat Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie* [The Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in the years 1944–2004: one hundred years of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw], Warsaw, 2005.

Realism in its Soviet version, while giving tacit support to the trend in poster art represented by the “Formalist” faction, represented by Henryk Tomaszewski, Tadeusz Trepkowski, Wojciech Fangor and others.²⁵

Thus, compromising on the dogmatic (that is, Soviet) version of Socialist Realism proved beneficial to the political leaders. No longer forced to use graphic models that were foreign to their culture and artistic traditions, poster artists began striving to produce high-quality works that would nevertheless remain consistent with the Communist ideology. The artists of the “Formalist” faction were aware as to what kind of posters would be found acceptable. Wojciech Fangor mentioned in an interview that “the social and political posters had to be more understandable and concrete, and could not have many metaphors”. When asked if that was what the patrons demanded, Fangor replied: “Obviously. But we knew we had to create [posters] that way. I was a part of the Graphics and Art Publishing House and the Central Film Rental Agency (Centrala Wynajmu Filmów). The submitted posters, be they political, social or focused on safety at work, were made so that the people at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party would not criticise them”.²⁶ At the same time the poster artists from the “Formalist” faction claimed an individual, subjective and artistic form that was unique to each artist, and this quasi-liberty of expression was the main issue during the debates organised in the 1950s.

Therefore, the First National Poster Exhibition [Pierwsza ogólnopolska wystawa plakatu] confirmed the ongoing changes, even though it was meant to present the best posters of Socialist Realism. The “Muscovite” faction was progressively losing its influence and, in parallel, the “Formalist” faction gained the trust of the political leaders. The “aesthetic” criteria proved to be important enough for the exhibition’s jury that the first prizes were awarded to poster designers who were often accused of having the “Formalist” approach: Henryk Tomaszewski, Tadeusz Trepkowski and Wojciech Fangor.²⁷ The second and third prizes were shared between the representatives of the “Formalist” and “Muscovite” factions: the second prize was awarded to Józef Mroszczak, Włodzimierz Zakrzewski and Tadeusz Gronowski, and the third prize to Lucjan Jagodziński, Eryk Lipiński, Walerian Borowczyk and Jan Tarasin.²⁸ Even

25 The adjectives “Muscovite” and “Formalist” are not used in contemporary historiography. The faction herein called “Muscovite” is sometimes called the “Krajewcy group” in the historiography. The name “Formalist” held a negative connotation, which is here erased by means of the quotation marks.

26 *Jak ktoś mógł na to pozwolić! Z twórcami polskiej szkoły grafiki rozmawia Janusz Górski* [How could someone have allowed that! The creators of the Polish school of graphic art in an interview with Janusz Górski], Gdańsk, 2011, p. 24.

27 The composition of the jury was not presented in detail in the exhibition catalogue.

28 Distinctions were awarded to Witold Chmielewski, Barbara Dutkowska, Wiktor Górka, Jerzy Karolak, Zbigniew Lengren, Jan Lenica and Olga Siemaszkowa, Ignacy Witz and Wojciech Zamecznik.

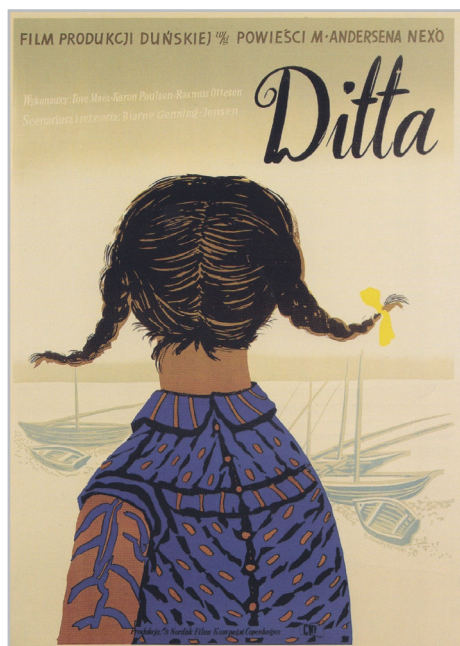


Fig. 1. Henryk Tomaszewski, *Ditta* (a poster for *Ditte menneskebarn*, Denmark, directed by Bjarne Genning Jensen, 1946), offset, 98 cm × 68 cm, 1952

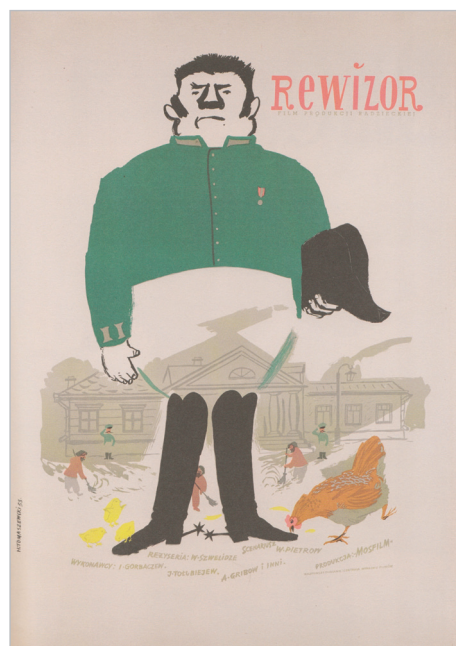


Fig. 2. Henryk Tomaszewski, *Rewizor* (a poster for *Pesuzop*, Soviet Union, directed by Vladimir Petrov, 1952), offset, 86 cm × 61 cm, 1953

though mainly the less experimental posters were awarded, their divergence from the current criteria of Socialist Realism, and the fact that they were influenced by Western art, were obvious.²⁹ This was demonstrated not only by the

²⁹ The first prizes were awarded to the following posters: Henryk Tomaszewski *Dla nich budujemy nowe szczęśliwe życie* [For them we are building a new and happy life] (1951), 22 lipca [22 July] (1951), *Ditta* (a poster for *Ditte menneskebarn*, Denmark, directed by Bjarne Genning Jensen, 1946), *Pod niebem Sycylii* [Under the Sicilian sky] (a poster for *In nome della legge*, Italy, directed by Pietro Germi, 1949) and *Rewizor* [The Inspector-General] (a poster for *Pesuzop*, Soviet Union, directed by Vladimir Petrov, 1952); Tadeusz Trepkowski: *Nie* [No], *Chwała wyzwolicielom* [Glory to the liberators], *Warszawa* [Warsaw], *Dusze czarnych* [The souls of negroes] (a poster for *Hallelujah!*, USA, directed by King Vidor, 1929); Wojciech Fangor: *IV Światowy Festiwal Młodzieży i Studentów* [The Fourth World Festival of Youth and Students] (produced with the aid of Jerzy Tchórzewski), *Stróż tajemnicy wojskowej* [Keep military secrets], *Mury Malapagi* [The walls of Malapaga] (a poster for *Au-delà des grilles/Le mura di Malapaga*, France/Italy, directed by René Clément, 1949), and *Na dnie* [At the bottom] (a poster for *Donzoko (The Lower Depths)*, Japan, directed by Akira Kurosawa, 1957). In addition to the prizes for posters on display, four poster designers were specially distinguished for national awards: Tadeusz Gronowski received the Knight's Cross of the Polonia Restituta Order and Tadeusz Trepkowski received the Golden Cross of Merit – both granted by the Council of State.



Fig. 3. Henryk Tomaszewski, *Dla nich budujemy szczęśliwe życie*. *Dni Oświaty, Książki i Prasy, maj 1951* [For them we are building a happy life. Education, Books and Press Fair, May 1951], offset, 99 cm × 67 cm, 1951

culture-related posters, such as *Ditta* for the Danish film *Ditte menneskebarn*, or *Rewizor* [The Inspector-General] for the Soviet film *Ревизор* (Figs. 1–2), but also by propagandist works, such as Henryk Tomaszewski's *Dla nich budujemy szczęśliwe życie* [For them we are building a happy life], which received the first prize (Fig. 3). The tension which is evident in this poster – between representation and expression on the one hand and between the objective and subjective on the other – is similar to the tension which emanates from Surrealist art (Fig. 4). The representation is figurative (and therefore realistic in the meaning of the doctrine), but its realism is ruptured by the motif of the dove of peace, which is a visual materialisation of one of the girls' thoughts or dreams of happiness. Although recognised as a perfect example of Socialist Realism, this image is thus subtly subversive – it is opposed to the doctrine, whereas it reconnects with the entire tradition of representing an imagined reality that is well known from the history of art, from Gothic paintings to Surrealism.

Henryk Tomaszewski and Józef Mroszczak were also awarded prizes granted by the Council of State. Cf. *O plakacie. Zbiór materiałów z narad i dyskusji oraz artykułów poświęconych aktualnym problemom plakatu* [On the poster. A contribution to the current problems of the political poster: materials from meetings, councils and articles] (printed matter filed as a manuscript), p. 163.

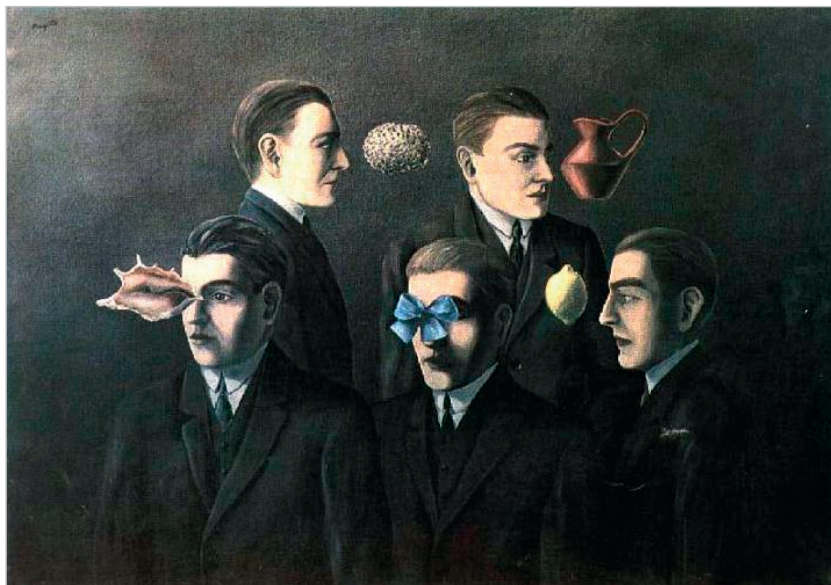


Fig. 4. René Magritte, *Les objets familiers*, oil on canvas, 81 cm × 116 cm, 1928

The Second National Exhibition of Illustration, Poster and Small-Format Graphic Art, 1955

While the First National Poster Exhibition took place in an atmosphere of calling the criteria of Socialist Realism into question, the speeches accompanying subsequent exhibitions of this medium predominantly focused on the potential reversal of the traditional hierarchy of arts. The Second National Exhibition of Illustration, Poster and Small-Format Graphic Art, organised at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in 1955, was commented on by Jan Białostocki – a historian of art and himself an author of posters – in an article “Sztuka potrzebna” [Useful art]. Białostocki argued that the division between painting – traditionally considered to be a durable art allowing artists to freely express themselves – and “utilitarian” and ephemeral graphic arts was just a construct which was outdated and, moreover, inadequate within the new social system. Furthermore, Białostocki regretted that posters were not being displayed in art museums, even though this “bright” art sometimes presented artistic values that were higher than in painting:

The National Gallery of Polish Art at the National Museum in Warsaw exhibits paintings by Studnicki, Taranczewski and Cybis; by Kokoszek, Zakrzewski and Bylina, thus closing the vast line of progress throughout history. Posters by Trepkowski or Tomaszewski are absent. Thus the division entrenched in the traditional approach is conveyed by the

fact that easel painting, regardless of its greater or lesser artistic quality, is considered worthy of being displayed in the halls of that pantheon of art – a museum – and that “utilitarian” graphic art, regardless of its greater or lesser artistic merits, is considered unworthy of the honour granted to “higher” or “pure” art.³⁰

According to Białostocki, the utilitarian aspect of the poster, which until then had prevented its artistic consecration, must no longer be considered an obstacle for it to achieve recognition as an art. On the contrary, being inseparably linked to everyday life, poster art had an advantage as compared to painting, whose disengagement regarding social utility of art would cause its crisis. Białostocki therefore saw no contradiction between the aesthetic aspect of the poster and its utilitarian function in the streets:

At the exhibition we see posters and book covers displayed as works of art, but, in fact, this is but our secondary contact with them. We have already encountered these works in their proper function: they have informed, persuaded, moved us. Viewing this display, I realised what a difference there was between the pictures which usually fill the halls of Zachęta and are painted to be exhibited, and living art, for which an exhibition is just a show of its might and a review before the subsequent creative phase.³¹

Even if art historians had not regarded the poster’s utilitarian function and its mass and reproducible character to be an obstacle to its entrance into art museums, the techniques applied in the creation of posters played an important role in its rejection. Michel Melot discovered that from the second half of the 19th century onward, ancient techniques were resorted to in order to confirm the originality³² of a multiple medium, such as printmaking.³³ In the case of the Polish poster after 1945, its valuation was based on its use of ancient techniques, i.e. painting and drawing. Photography, on the other hand, was linked to Western advertising, which the Polish poster had to distance itself from for ideological reasons. Even though in his article Białostocki remarked that in some cinematic posters photography was used well, he noted that “the best posters [were] constructed with painterly means”.³⁴ In an article on Henryk Tomaszewski, another art historian, Michał Walicki, confirmed the importance of this criterion in the process of the poster’s “artification”.³⁵ In his view, the photographic poster was a “dangerous competitor” that had wrongly replaced the painted poster. With these evaluation criteria in place, Henryk Tomaszewski’s works became the best examples of the poster as a work of

30 J. Białostocki, “Sztuka potrzebna” [A needed art], *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 12–18 April 1955, no. 19.

31 Ibid.

32 M. Melot, op. cit., p. 192.

33 Ibid., p. 193.

34 J. Białostocki, op. cit.

35 *De l’artification. Enquêtes sur le passage à l’art*, eds. N. Heinrich, R. Schapiro, Paris, 2012.

art that was representative of the new design. During his career Tomaszewski undeniably achieved the highest possible artistic recognition amongst Polish poster designers,³⁶ and it is not insignificant that Białostocki considered him to be a “poster painter”.³⁷ For Walicki, the merit of Tomaszewski’s posters began, first of all, with their author’s “artistic vision, enamoured of contrasts and hints”, with his “sense of decorativeness, seasoned with a charming, playful and light sarcasm”, and with “the nobility and elegance of the curvature of the script, which masterfully enhanced the contents of the poster in terms of meaning as well as in terms of shape”.³⁸

Thus, despite Białostocki’s willingness to overthrow the traditional hierarchy of art and to allow the poster to enter art museums as a “useful art”, other criteria proved necessary for the poster’s transition to the status of art. In order to be seriously considered as a candidate for museum displays, the poster had to come closer to painting. In the same way its creators had to come closer to artists working in the “major” arts. The utilitarian aspect of the poster was overlooked, and the unity of the author with his creation was highlighted. This fact is best expressed by Białostocki’s observation: “Each of Tomaszewski’s posters, be it excellent, good or mediocre, speaks solely of its author, who in all the honesty of his talent and the richness of his artistic capabilities wishes to serve the artistic needs and always most diligently seeks the best path, most straightforwardly leading towards the goal”.³⁹ Raymonde Moulin remarked that already during the first industrial revolution, i.e. that of the 18th century,

to demonstrate the specificity of their product as compared to the artisanal product and at the same time as compared to the industrial product, artists sought to remove from their own practice the factor they had shared with the two other [groups], namely the utilitarian project: the philosophical theory of art as an endless finality justifying their survival.⁴⁰

The same principle governed the field of the Polish poster, which therefore became, to use Kant’s phrase, an “endless finality”.⁴¹ In this way the critics underlined the fact that the poster’s theme was no longer a pretext for Polish creators; by means of the poster they expressed their own artistic vision, just as a painter does through the intermediation of the picture. The work of art and the person would therefore be united in an indissoluble unity.

36 At the Zachęta exhibition Tomaszewski was awarded the first prize, i.e. 5000 zloty (tied with Jan Lenica). “Nagrody na wystawie ilustracji i plakatu” [Prizes at the exhibition of illustrations and posters], *Ekspresz Poznański*, 20 May 1955, no. 119.

37 J. Białostocki, “Henryk Tomaszewski”, *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 13–19 August 1953, no. 32.

38 M. Walicki, “Plakaty Henryka” [Henryk’s posters], *Nowiny Literackie*, 15 August 1948, no. 33 (73), year II, p. 4.

39 Ibid.

40 R. Moulin, “La genèse de la rareté...”, op. cit., p. 162 [translation mine – K. M.].

41 I. Kant, *Critic of Judgment*, translated by W. S. Pluhar, Indianapolis IN, 1987.

An examination of poster exhibitions held in Poland in the 1950s reveals the political and artistic contradictions accompanying the steps taken by the poster from the streets to the museum. While the Communist leaders claimed that it was equal in importance with other artistic genres, the reversal of the artistic hierarchy was far from being a fact. The poster ultimately found its place in museums; but in order to be seriously considered as a candidate for museum display, it first had to deny its utilitarian function and to emphasise its connection with painting.

Abstract

What happened when the poster, originally an advertising medium, became an object of appreciation in the museums of Communist Poland? What criteria did it have to comply with in order to be accepted into a temple of art, a museum? The article analyses poster exhibitions organised at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in the 1950s. During this period, the interest of museum curators, critics and art historians in this medium must be envisioned as always being underpinned by political and propagandist interests; the transition of the poster to the status of a work of art is analysed here in this double, i.e. cultural and political, perspective.