

Agnieszka Rosales Rodriguez

INSTITUTE OF ART HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

A State of Latent Life: The Paintings of Olga Boznańska

*Wir müssen es aussprechen, daß das Wesen der Schönheit nicht im Wirken liegt,
sondern im Sein.*

Rainer Maria Rilke, "Über Kunst"
(*Ver Sacrum*, Nov. 1898)

The opening piece for the exhibition of Olga Boznańska's works at the National Museum in Warsaw is provoking and intriguing. It was an enlarged reproduction of a photograph of the painter made in her Parisian studio at Montparnasse Boulevard, two years before her death (anonymous photographer, National Museum in Cracow). The picture of the aged painter with a piercing gaze and a vulgar cigarette hanging limply from the corner of her mouth may have been designed to look quirky and ironic, yet nonetheless it serves as an illustration of the tensions occurring in the representation of an artist's atelier as a place where the private and public spheres intermingle, the place of creation that is rife with the artistic power of the imagination, but also with the mundane trivialities of life, physical strain and creation understood as hard work which may sometimes take over the artist's life almost completely, as was the case with Olga Boznańska. The mythical aura of her studio, fondly remembered by visiting artists and critics, such as Marcin Samlicki and Adam Gerżabek, grew from the carefully orchestrated half-light, the thick tobacco smoke and the fumes which blurred the contours and dulled the colours, the disarray and the charm of the space cluttered with art supplies and paintings, and finally Boznańska's "menagerie".¹ The painter herself was very willing to model for photographs in her own studio, and in the course of her long life she allowed

1 More on Boznańska's studio and her self-portraits in: A. Bagińska, *U Olgi Boznańskiej. Oblicza pracowni artystki* [At Olga Boznańska's. Images of the Artist's Studio], Toruń, 2013; J. Sosnowska, *Poza kanonem, Sztuka polskich artystek 1880–1939* [Outside the Canon. The Art of Polish Female Artists 1880–1939], Warsaw, 2003; R. Higersberger, "By the light of a paraffin lamp. The Intimist painting of Olga Boznańska", in: *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940)*, exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw, 2015, pp. 63–70.

photographers to capture her image in various poses and attires, surrounded by her own works and mirrors reflecting levels of thoughts on illusions, the nature of art and artistic representation. Similarly to Boznańska's artistic renditions of her own studio, the photographs showing her at her work, brush in hand and clad in a paint-stained apron manifest the ethos of painting as hard work, i.e. not its conceptual aspects but the physical ones, which are often concealed by artists for the sake of self-advertisement and to maintain their prestigious status of members of the elite. Earlier examples of painters demonstrating the "dirtier side" of their profession may certainly be found, yet only towards the end of the 19th century did this new understanding of the creative act as a tiring struggle undertaken day by day start to be emphasised and portrayed without shame by the indefatigable Paul Cézanne, who wanted to die while painting; by Vincent van Gogh, who was dying while painting every day, drained by the exhausting Provençal sun; by Claude Monet, whom neither old age nor a cataract could stop from creating paintings as large as Nature itself, a feat that required much stamina and steady hands; and by the modern Pygmalion – the tireless Auguste Rodin – whose works reveal the transformation of lifeless stone into living matter, ennobling the very act of processing raw material, shaping, drilling and, finally, sculpting. These were the pioneers, *les phares*, to use Baudelaire's term, the torches, the lights that lit the way for dozens of other artists seeking the ideal of art that would be intimate and honest, marked with the sensual and tangible presence of the artist who reveals their secrets and their uncertainty. "When I am not able to paint anymore, I should just die"² – declared Boznańska in a letter to her father dated 1896, the same year when a young Austrian poet named Rilke came to Munich to study the history of art and aesthetics.

The quite modern myth of an organic connection, a communion of art and life, was paid for with hardship and many sacrifices, poverty and the tragedy of failure, which was suggestively illustrated in the literature of the period. Boznańska was fortunate to be a fulfilled artist, aware of the aims and the significance of her work. Significantly, she saw her art as sincere, real, devoid of mannerisms and falsity.³ Her attitude and her entire artistic framework may have been inherited from the Munich community, which not only shaped Boznańska's technical skills and the aesthetic orientation of her early art, but also provided an inalienable and solid basis for her artistic coming of age in the capital of France. Renata Higersberger aptly observed that even Boznańska's "Intimism", associated with the French roots of *les Nabis* (especially in Édouard Vuillard's version), could be traced back to Munich⁴. Incidentally, the 19th-century

2 A letter from Boznańska to her father, 1896, quoted in: A. Król, "„robotą Pani ucieszyć Krakowianów ...", czyli wystawiając Boznańską" ["to please the Cracovians with your art ..."] On Exhibiting Boznańska], in: *Olga Boznańska w Akademii* [Olga Boznańska at the Academy], exhibition catalogue, Academy of Fine Arts, Cracow, 2005; p. 12.

3 Letter to Julia Gradomska, 1909, quoted in: R. Higersberger, op. cit., p. 64.

4 R. Higersberger, op. cit., p. 67.

“genre” of *interieurs*, grounded in both the Dutch and French tradition of the 17th and 18th centuries, came in different varieties: elegant and refined, as created by artists such as Albert von Keller, Arthur von Ramberg or Władysław Czachórski (for whom Boznańska felt little appreciation), but also private and intimate, free of the human factor, as rendered, e.g. by the Danish or such painters as Adolph von Menzel or Carl Schuch.

The oft-repeated quote in which Boznańska reveals her ardent admiration for the works of the leading German realist painter, Wilhelm Leibl, (“...what a magnificent and powerful painter, what a colourist, how skilled in applying paint! How he captures individuality! He could proudly stand beside contemporary French painters”⁵) illustrates the still underestimated role that this artistic circle had in shaping this young Polish painter’s basic artistic views. Significantly, the strength of Boznańska’s connection to the artistic culture of Munich, emphasised by the painter herself and usually neglected by Polish historians due to the overstated importance of Paris as the central point on the map of artistic modernity, was fully appreciated by Józef Czapski in his *Recollections of Olga Boznańska*, presented in 1978 at the Polish Library in Paris. As a colourist who was sensitive to painterly qualities, Czapski saw the fundamental significance of the artistic education that Boznańska had acquired in “Athens upon the Isar”. Incidentally, as a result of international exhibitions and direct artistic contacts the course of this education was greatly influenced by the French art of the Barbizon school as well as by the works of Courbet and Manet.⁶ Czapski admitted: “If I think that her age of greatness started in Munich, of which my generation in the 1920s spoke only ill, since Munich was nothing and only Paris ever counted, then I think my generation was wrong. It was in Munich and due to Munich that we had a number of great painters. I will not enumerate all of them, but it is sufficient to mention Gierymski and Boznańska. All of her painterly education came from Munich [...]”.⁷

The idol dominating Boznańska’s Munich inspirations was usually Whistler, who was then perceived as a thoroughly modern artist, displaying both

5 M. Samlicki, “Olga Boznańska”, *Sztuki Piękne*, 3, year 2, 1925–26, 2.

6 Cf. *Courbet und Deutschland*, exhibition catalogue, Hamburger Kunsthalle, 1978; Städtische Galerie im Städelischen Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main, 1979.

7 *Wspomnienie o Oldze Boznańskiej wygłoszone przez Józefa Czapskiego dnia 3 maja 1978 w Bibliotece Polskiej* [A Tribute to Olga Boznańska given by Józef Czapski on 3 May 1978 at the Polish Library], quoted in: *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940). Peintures*, exhibition catalogue, Musée Adam Mickiewicz à la Bibliothèque Polonaise, Paris, 1990 (Introduction by E. Bobrowska-Jakubowska), p. 6. The overly sharp juxtaposition of the Munich and Parisian circles and the favouritism towards the latter was also noted by Halina Stępień: H. Stępień, “Odkrywanie Monachium” [Discovering Munich], in: *Malarze polscy w Monachium. Materiały sesji naukowej pod red. Z. Fałtynowicza i E. Ptaszyńskiej* [Polish Painters in Munich. Proceedings from the Scholarly Session ed. by Z. Fałtynowicz and E. Ptaszyńska], Suwałki, 2007, p. 8.



Fig. 1. Wilhelm Trübner, *On the Sofa*, 1872, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

the Spanish style reminiscent of the great Diego Velázquez and tendencies typical of Japonism and aestheticism.⁸ However, as Piotr Kopszak aptly observed,⁹ equally significant lessons in colour and tone application were provided by the context of the so-called Hague School. Indeed, the works of Jacob, Matthias and Willem Maris, Hendrik Mesdag, Albert Neuhuys or Anton Mauve relied on a rich scale of greys, muted greens and ochres, which Dutch painters had learnt to use not only while working *en plein air* beneath the heavy sky of the North Sea, but also by following the example of 17th-century landscape artists such as Jan van Goyen, Salomon and Jacob van Ruysdael and Philips Koninck.

8 More on Whistler and other artists who inspired Boznańska: E. Bobrowska, "Olga Boznańska and Her Artistic Friendships", in: *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940)*, exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Cracow, Cracow, 2014, pp. 62–102.

9 P. Kopszak, "In Munich", in: *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940)*, exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Cracow, op. cit., pp. 36–46.



Fig. 2. Fritz von Uhde, *The Busy Family*, ca. 1885, Risd Museum, Providence

This panorama of visual affinities could, however, include many more artists who, similarly to Olga Boznańska, took off from realistic studies of light and colour to discover its potential for expression, not description. Alongside numerous oil paintings, watercolours and pastels by Whistler, the international exhibition in 1888¹⁰ featured works by Lovis Corinth, Fritz von Uhde, Wilhelm Trübner, Max Liebermann, Camille Corot and Alfred Stevens. In the following year, visitors could see many paintings by Dutch artists, by Trübner and Fritz von Uhde, but also works by Leopold Kalckreuth, Ludwig Eibl and Hugo von Habermann.¹¹

10 *Illustrierter Katalog der III. Internationalen Kunstausstellung (Münchener Jubiläumsausstellung) im Königl. Glaspalaste zu München 1888*, 1. Aufl., ausgeg. Anfang Juni, München, 1888, retrieved from: <http://www.bayerische-landesbibliothek-online.de/glaspalast/zendindex.html?zendurl=http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/bsb00002401/images/&projectdirectory=glaspalast> [accessed 15 Apr. 2015].

11 *Illustrierter Katalog der Münchener Jahresausstellung von Kunstwerken Aller Nationen im königl. Glaspalaste 1889*, 1. Aufl., ausgegeben am 1. Juli, München, 1889, retrieved from: <http://www.bayerische-landesbibliothek-online.de/glaspalast/zendindex.html?zendurl=http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/bsb00002403/images/&projectdirectory=glaspalast> [accessed 15 Apr. 2015].

In 1891 Munich hosted an exhibition of paintings by Camille Corot, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Franz Lenbach, Édouard Manet (featuring also his still lifes), Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, Adolphe Monticelli, Lesser Ury and Otto Scholderer, pastels by Max Liebermann, and gouaches and watercolours by Adolph Menzel.¹² The list of works – German, French, Scandinavian, Dutch, Polish, Italian and British – that were shown at the international exhibition in the years when Boznańska was staying in the capital of Bavaria reveals a picture of extremely complex artistic relations that cannot be regarded in clear-cut categories of influences. Equally significant is the fact that modern artists, celebrated for their independence and seeking new forms, were known to the Munich public as authors of the works exhibited at the Glaspalast. The catalogues of Secession mention Corinth, Corot, Courbet, Hugo Habermann, Kalckreuth, Gotthard Kuehl, Liebermann, Jacob Maris, Jean-François Raffaëlli, Trübner, von Uhde, Ury,¹³ Jozef Israëls, Frank Currier,¹⁴ Manet and Whistler.¹⁵

The striking “painterliness” of the works created by such different circles, the blurring of the form constructed with blots of paint, the finesse of colour applied in an increasingly broad and more uninhibited manner, or quavering with short and fine strokes of the brush hitting vibrating surfaces, was not only a result of the revelations of French Impressionism, but in a broader perspective also the product of 19th-century landscape painting and the rediscovery of old “non-academic” masters regarded as patrons of modern artistic trends. The Munich circles wished to reconcile the two seemingly contradictory tendencies, i.e. careful observation of nature and investigating the workshop secrets of art from bygone eras. At the international exhibition in 1869, Courbet himself made three exquisite copies of paintings by old masters;¹⁶

12 *Illustrierter Katalog der Münchener Jahresausstellung von Kunstwerken Aller Nationen im kgl. Glaspalaste 1891*, 3. Aufl., ausgeg. am 24. Juli, München, [1891], retrieved from: <http://www.bayerische-landesbibliothek-online.de/glaspalast/zendindex.html?zendurl=http://daten.digital-e-sammlungen.de/~db/bsb00002405/images/&projectdirectory=glaspalast> [accessed 15 Apr. 2015].

13 *Offizieller Katalog der Internationalen Kunst-Ausstellung des Vereins bildender Künstler Münchens (A.V.) "Secession" 1893*, München : Bruckmann, 1893, retrieved from: http://digital.bib-bvb.de/webclient/DeliveryManager?custom_att_2=simple_viewer&pid=4111217 [accessed 15 Apr. 2015].

14 *Offizieller Katalog der Internationalen Kunst-Ausstellung des Vereins bildender Künstler Münchens (A.V.) "Secession" 1894*, München : Bruckmann, 1894, retrieved from: http://digital.bib-bvb.de/webclient/DeliveryManager?custom_att_2=simple_viewer&pid=4133114 [accessed 15 Apr. 2015].

15 *Offizieller Katalog der Internationalen Kunst-Ausstellung des Vereins bildender Künstler Münchens (A.V.) "Secession" 1895*, München : Bruckmann, 1895, retrieved from: http://digital.bib-bvb.de/webclient/DeliveryManager?custom_att_2=simple_viewer&pid=4136745 [accessed 15 Apr. 2015].

16 Cf. S. Faunce, L. Nochlin, *Courbet Reconsidered*, exhibition catalogue, The Brooklyn Museum, New York, 1988–1989, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 194.



Fig. 3. Lesser Ury, *Woman at a Writing Desk*, 1898, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

meaning to reconstruct the internal process of creation, not to imitate the external effect of the form.¹⁷

Camille Corot's motto – "One takes a brush and paints"¹⁸ – which Czap-ski quoted to describe Boznańska's attitude, expresses the supremacy of the painter's work, practice, keen eye and capable hands over all artistic doctrines. As early as in 1904, Adolf Basler noted: "her art is unassuming, inducing one only to look, not to philosophise".¹⁹ The fact that the critic was disinclined to call Boznańska's painting "philosophical" reveals a dislike for literary symbolism and the weight of artistic programmes; it was a manifestation of delight with the purely sensual aspect of painting, the subtle extravaganza of colour, the trivial matter made powerful by the uniqueness of the visual form. This ethos of a true artist whose work could only be accurately assessed by another artist was embodied by Wilhelm Leibl, who casually expressed the elite

17 Ch. Lenz, *Adolf Friedrich Graf von Schack, Kunstsammler, Literat und Reisender*, exhibition catalogue, Bayerische Staatsgemaldesammlungen Schack-Galerie, Munich, 1994, p. 27.

18 *Wspomnienie o Oldze Boznańskiej*, op. cit., p. 7.

19 A. Basler, "Olga Boznańska", *Sztuka*, 8–9 November–December 1904, p. 377, quoted in: H. Blum, *Olga Boznańska. Zarys życia i twórczości* [Olga Boznańska. Her Life and Art], Cracow, 1964, p. 48.

concept of painting. Averse to theoretical considerations, he implemented his own principles of autonomous and pure art (*Reinmalerei*), choosing unattractive, trivial subjects while painting in villages in the vicinity of Munich. The attitude presented by Leibl, who regarded art in terms of a sound and beautiful craft (*schönes Handwerk*), was popularised by his circle of artists, which included Theodor Alt, Rudolf Hirth du Frênes, Fritz Schider, Karl Haider, Ferdinand Barth, Johann Sperl, Wilhelm Trübner, Albert Lang and Carl Schuch. This community maintained close artistic and personal relations with the so-called Duveneck Boys, a group led by the American painter Frank Duveneck and later by Frank Currier. It is known for a fact that Boznańska also kept in touch with American artists.²⁰

The primary value to be revered by this informal group of Leibl-Kreis, which was the most active in the 1870s, was *Ehrlichkeit*, i.e. honesty, invoked not only by Courbet or Manet, but also by Menzel, who identified artistic genius with diligence or care (*Fleiss*).²¹ Leibl achieved international acclaim at the Glaspalast in 1869, where his works were exhibited alongside those by Manet and Courbet. Awarded a gold medal for his *Portrait of Mina Gedon* (*Portrait der Frau Gedon*), Leibl won Courbet's admiration and was invited to Paris. Leibl's colourism, praised by the French realist painter, originated primarily from his fascination with old Flemish and Dutch art, although in the 1870s he also devoted much attention to studying old German paintings; an activity which earned him the title of a "modern Holbein".

The idea of *echte Malerei* was implemented in the Munich circle not as much in the subject matter (spurning literary fiction and historical attire), as in the masterful technical skills – the trademark of the Academy, which was highly regarded for its characteristic style relying on brightness and subtle gradation of colour and light.

Even Karl Theodor von Piloty, who was considered an academic authority, allegedly voiced views similar to those of Leibl: "the most important thing about painting is painting".²² At the end of the 19th century, the German theory of art that had been formulated by Wilhelm Trübner and Carl Schuch retraced its steps to the origins of the term 'Kunst' as a skill, a technique. The moral imperative of sincerity necessitated the cult of hard work, humility and the perception of painting not in terms of grand ideals but – to use Rainer Maria Rilke's words – "small, conscientious realisation" ("*kleine gewissenhafte Verwirklichung*"²³). The Austrian poet who had redefined the role of an act of creation was not alone in his opinions and his appreciation of Rodin's art. Such views are a proud declaration of the painters' newly-acquired self-awareness

20 P. Kopszak, *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940)*, Warsaw, 2006, p. 38.

21 E. Ruhmer, *Der Leibl-Kreis und die reine Malerei*, Rosenheim, 1984, p. 58.

22 Quoted in: R. Neuhaus, *Bildnismalerei des Leibl-Kreises. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Technik der Malerei der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Marburg, 1953, p. 16.

23 R. M. Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, Leipzig, 1913, p. 17.



Fig. 4. Wilhelm Leibl, *Portrait of Lina Kirchdorffer*, 1871, Neue Pinakothek, Munich

as regards the “knowledge of the form”,²⁴ the ennobling of the creative act as autonomous artistic expression that is independent of the subject matter yet replete with spiritual meaning.

Luminous grey under-paintings on a white ground, refined palettes of cold muted colours, often gravitating towards greyscale (and later, under the influence of Impressionism, towards pastel blues), the abundance of colour nuances, the orchestration of half-tints, the masterful softness of transitions and conscious use of sensual, haptic properties of paint, were the trademarks of more than one generation of painters associated with Munich. Boznańska, who was called the grey painter of ashen visions, was fully aware of these mannerisms, the use of which required a deep understanding of colour evocative of the works of Velázquez, Frans Hals, Vermeer or Chardin, but also of contemporary painters who were inspired by the old masters – such as Whistler and the artists from the Hague School whose paintings were exhibited in Munich when Boznańska was in the city. According to Eugène Fromentin, the style of the entire Dutch school was an example of colourist painting “so reduced, almost monochromatic, and yet so rich in its results”.²⁵ However, the palette could with equal ease be “executed” in the war tones of Rembrandt, Ribera, Titian and Van Dyck. Fromentin’s unfailing eye also noticed that “in a visible state or in a latent state, a little of the Rembrandt of warm mists is everywhere,

24 E. Grabska, *Moderniści o sztuce* [The Modernists on Art], Warsaw, 1971, p. 13.

25 E. Fromentin, *The Old Masters of Belgium and Holland*, translated by M. C. Robins, Boston, 1882, p. 139.

at the beginning of our modern school".²⁶ This premise of adapting a specified colour *modus* (Boznańska mentioned "colour premises" undertaken at the initial stage of the painting process in order to create a harmonious whole²⁷) went against the basic stipulations of Impressionism as an art of spontaneity, capturing the fleeting states of light and colourful reflexes as they appeared. Thus the modern understanding of colour, harmony and painterly texture was based on a study of the works of the old masters, who were now identified not only as historical figures, but also as universal and relevant models of artistic perfection, daring painters to challenge academic propriety. In the Munich circles this dialogue was incorporated into the process of education. Due to the ample collection of the Alte Pinakothek and the exhibitions of traditional art, entering into an openly declared competition with the grand masters was regarded as a test of the painter's abilities and his artistic culture. In France, young artists (and the critics that favoured them) wished rather to be seen as pioneers, emphasising the progressive nature of their art over its connections with tradition, from which they nonetheless drew with as much flair as the artists from Munich. Emile Zola styled Manet – the leader of the independent youth – as an artist with innate talent who owed nothing to the art held in museums, even though, paradoxically, it was Manet who engaged in the most complex, subtle and sophisticated games with the historic art of the Spaniards, Venetians and Dutchmen. This declarative radicalism of attitude gave rise to the long-persisting idea that Impressionism was a creation of a new artistic world, built from nothing. Pissarro was the first to provocatively state that he would like to burn the Louvre, while Claude Monet declared never to have had the time to see the great museum.²⁸

Owing to her studies in Munich and the incessant encounters with very different presentations of colour, often motivated by the same ambition to capture the ephemeral, Boznańska was "prepared" for the experience of Impressionism. The French art movement did not revolutionise her vision of painting, but rather reinforced it and made her more willing (as did Japanese woodcuts) to accentuate the lack of depth, to use traditional chiaroscuro and to enrich her colour palette. Boznańska herself was surprised that her art was associated with Impressionism.²⁹ The illusory nature of Boznańska's Impressionist origins was exposed already by Wiesław Juszczak,³⁰ who brilliantly associated

26 Ibid., p. 206.

27 Quoted in: A. Król, op. cit., p. 15.

28 T. Reff, "Copyists in the Louvre", 1850–70, *Art Bulletin*, 46, 1964 (December), pp. 552–553; Cf. A. Dumas, *Old Art into New. The Impressionists and the Reinvention of Tradition*, in: *Inspiring Impressionism. The Impressionists and the Art of the Past*, ed. A. Dumas, exhibition catalogue, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, 2007–2008; Denver Art Museum, 2008; Seattle Art Museum, 2008.

29 After: H. Blum, op. cit., p. 49.

30 W. Juszczak, *Malarstwo polskiego modernizmu* [Polish Modernist Painting], Gdańsk, 2004, p. 19.

her work with Cezary Jellenta's³¹ category of Intensivism and included it into the circle of budding Expressionism. By mentioning intensity, vehemence and focus on the nature portrayed, the Polish critic added that he would be inclined to call such an effect 'impression' if this word evoked clear associations with the strength and ferocity of the sensation experienced by anyone looking at Boznańska's art. As Jerzy Stemplowski³² observed, Boznańska's work is along the borderline of Naturalism, which transforms reality into a work of art and struggles with matter, testing its resistance "fibre by fibre". Interestingly, similar "borderline" qualities may be found in the works of Edgar Degas, who shared Boznańska's fascination with the effects of pastel and a grainy, lustreless texture – the "sinewy language" of realism, as Joris-Karl Huysmans³³ graphically put it. This tension, so apparent in Boznańska's paintings, did not merely stem from a keen psychological analysis of the model, from the model's sharp features revealing bitterness, frustration, vanity or emptiness. It seems that the artistic principle of the intensity of perception is apparent not only in Boznańska's portraits, but also in her other works, such as still lifes and the depictions of the view from her window. Incidentally, some of those "landscape motifs" seen from the window of her studio, arranged as a vertical composition divided into sections delineated by layers of colour, foreshadow the landscapes that were painted two decades later in Murnau by artists associated with Wassily Kandinsky. However, the "transsubstantiation", the transformation of the raw material, the dematerialisation of phenomena, plays out in the painterly matter itself. Paint applied onto oil-absorbing cardboard, often with no ground and emphasised on the surface of the painting as a deliberate aesthetic under-painting, is porous at places and disperses light; it shimmers and quivers. It is both tangible and unreal. Applied in layers, dry on dry (especially after 1900) with fine brushstrokes, often scraped off with a knife,³⁴ the paint resembles dry pastel; it is a mosaic of intricately harmonious patches, an exposition of painting itself. Boznańska was an excellent colourist, composing flawless, masterful symphonies of colours and half-tints.³⁵ As Piotr Kopszak³⁶ emphasised, she did not search blindly for the form, but had a solid foundation of technical skills even before she came to Paris, where she started to apply blots of paint with ever increasing liberty.

31 C. Jellenta, "Intensywizm" [Intensivism], *Głos*, 1897, no. 34–36.

32 J. Stemplowski, "Graniczne punkty sztuki naturalistów" [Limiting Points of Naturalist Art], *Głos Plastyków*, VI, 1938, pp. 5–12.

33 J.-K. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, transl. K. Wallace, retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14323/14323-h/14323-h.htm>.

34 Król, op. cit., pp. 15–16.

35 Recent research has shown that Boznańska's palette was not narrow at all; at least 28 pigments have been identified so far. Cf. A. Lewandowska, "A palette split in two...". Olga Boznańska: a Conservator's Approach", in: *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940)*, exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Warsaw, op. cit., pp. 95–99.

36 Kopszak, op. cit., p. 28.

She may have learnt to tap into the mysteries of colour not only from Whistler, who was so admired in Munich, but also from Leibl (who, similarly to Boznańska, employed a relatively rich palette, though still gravitating towards visual unity), and Corot, whose later works feature masterfully arranged silvery, pearly and emerald-grey tones and the resulting effect of softness, haziness and lightness of the painterly surface (noticed by Czapski's discerning eye). An equal measure of colouring skill was exhibited by Polish artists from Munich – by Brandt and the Gierymski brothers. Parallel to Whistler's luminous "harmonies", "arrangements" and mysterious "nocturnes", Munich artists created their own tradition of painting "Stimmungen". As was noted by Stanisław Witkiewicz in 1901, this term "encompassed the sphere of light and colour sensations which were subtle in scale, with no sharp contrasts; a calm composition of blots of colour, faded or subdued", resulting in "a complete harmony, calm and evenness of tone".³⁷ The musical term (tuning, harmony) was also used to signify mood and referred to a communion with the state of the soul. Boznańska's paintings, in which the critic writing for *Głos narodu* saw an interplay of spiritual impressions, visionary ethereality, "reflections let through the crystal prism of the artist's own soul",³⁸ are not easy to psychologise, however. As has already been mentioned above, the expressive qualities of her paintings stemmed not only from the poignancy of description, but also from the vividness of the painterly surface. Such intensity of vision, in which the element of light incessantly disrupts the stability of forms and outlines, exposing their dreamlike features, the emergence and miraculous re-emergence in which the boundaries between the object of perception and the perceiving individual are blurred, in which reality becomes a vision, is very close to the art of the great Claude Monet. Already the Polish critic Adolf Basler observed that Boznańska "spinning only the weave of her own vision – arrives at more and more painterly expressions",³⁹ while the refined surface of her canvas, with its physically tangible substance, is the effect of "an over-spiritualisation of the senses". Interestingly, Wojciech Gerson arrived at a similar conclusion in his critique of Impressionism, employing the metaphor of "the metaphysics of the senses".⁴⁰ The discourse of art criticism in that epoch was flawless in intuiting and expressing symbolist aspirations in art, which grew on the foundation of a positivist fascination with the material and the visual. Zenon Przesmycki compared light to the soul,⁴¹ and long before

37 S. Witkiewicz, "Aleksander Gierymski", *Biblioteka Polska*, 1901, II–IV, quoted in: Juszcak, op. cit., p. 79.

38 A. Radomir, "Salon Krakowski" [The Cracow Salon], *Głos Narodu*, 1899, no. 29, quoted in: Juszcak, op. cit., pp. 95–96.

39 Basler, *Olga Boznańska...*, op. cit., after: Blum, op. cit., p. 48.

40 W. Gerson, "Impresjonizm" [Impressionism], *Biblioteka Warszawska*, 1891, vol. 1, pp. 95–106, quoted in: W. Juszcak, op. cit., p. 188.

41 Text accompanying the reproduction of *The Hut* by Jan Stanisławski, quoted after: Juszcak, op. cit., p. 74.

him Bolesław Prus had called light the universal spirit of all nature, giving it significance and as connecting the most distant of objects.⁴² Light, the necessary prerequisite of sight, has been associated with cognitive potential since the earliest days of humanist thought. Boznańska's collection in Paris included a catalogue of Monet's exhibition held at the gallery of Durand-Ruel. Octave Mirbeau regarded the works of the French master in terms of Intensivism: "[...] Within there is a dream and a nightmare, a mystery, the invisible and the unreal, and all is peculiar in nature [...]"⁴³ The passage could very well be used to describe Boznańska's paintings created during her Paris years.

The relation between Boznańska's art and that of Monet is not regarded in terms of simple influence, but rather as an affinity of artistic sensitivity, a brilliant intuitive understanding of paint and expressiveness of the painterly substance, which in Monet's mature style (apparent already in his *Rouen Cathedral* series) shimmers with glittering light, transforms wondrously, quivers and pulsates with a vivid glow, expresses rather than depicts. In the later works by the great French painter such a jewel-like gleam of paint is dominated by more expressive, sharp painterly motion, which revealed the movement of the brush, becoming the embodiment of the modern understanding of a painting as sheer execution.⁴⁴ The "poetry of the ephemeral", which was close to Boznańska's ideas yet not equivalent to the concept of fast painting, led to the sophistication and over-refinement of the senses, the sublimation of vision reaching beyond the simple visual plane and opening into the realm of transcendence. The artistic materials revealed the spiritual potential of matter and its ability to capture life. Within the framework of German thought the affirmation of the material and the absolutisation of skill led to metaphysics. When explaining the concept of absolute and pure art, Wilhelm Trübner used the term *Geist* in association with artistic skill.⁴⁵ Trübner's student Schuch also elevated the *rein Malerische* to the status of the *geistig Expressive*. In his *Journals* the artist emphasised that garish things are primitive and lacking in spirit, and that it is the painter's task to rob objects of their materialness and to expose the aesthetic essence of phenomena.⁴⁶ Following in the footsteps of the Munich circle, the Austrian painter believed in skill and conscious use and knowledge of artistic techniques, seeing them as a solid basis for decent art.

42 B. Prus, "Kronika tygodniowa" [The Weekly Chronicle], *Kurier Codzienny*, 1888, no. 194, quoted in: W. Okoń, *Stygająca planeta. Polska krytyka artystyczna wobec malarstwa historycznego i historii* [The Cooling Planet. Polish Art Criticism vs. Historical Painting and History], Wrocław, 2002, p. 114.

43 Quoted after: Blum, op. cit., p. 88.

44 Cf. R. Brettell, "Painting as Performance: Spontaneity and its appearances in painting, and the intellectual origins of the Impression", in: idem, *Painting quickly in France 1860–1890*, New Haven–London, 2000.

45 W. Trübner, *Personalien und Prinzipien*, quoted in: J. Geissler, *Die Kunsttheorien von Adolf Hildebrand, Wilhelm Trübner und Max Liebermann*, Bad Wildungen, 1963, p. 145.

46 After: Ruhmer, op. cit., p. 48.



Fig. 5. Carl Schuch, *Peonies*, ca. 1888, Neue Pinakothek, Munich

Although he spent many years in Paris, where he could observe the success enjoyed by the Impressionists, he remained sceptical towards the movement, opining that the French had traded spirit for mannerisms.⁴⁷

Max Liebermann, who belonged to the Art Nouveau circle in Berlin, also perceived execution and skill as a manifestation of spirit (*Geist*).⁴⁸ Accentuating the non-discursive nature of painting, he invoked the sensual art of Hals, Velázquez and Rembrandt, connecting the latter painter with the works of the admired Jozef Israëls.⁴⁹ Expression (*Ausdruck*) serves as a key category in Liebermann's theoretical musings, in which the German artist touches upon the significant problem tackled by artists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and which is also manifest in Boznańska's works: the characteristic adequacy, even equivalence, between the subject matter and the form, the need to go beneath the surface of things, beyond the triviality and obviousness of naturalism, to expose the spirit or life with a painter's tools. As one critic describing Boznańska's works put it: "[...] one would think that somewhere behind the faces one sees not the life that moves them, but the spirit that governs them".⁵⁰ The art of the Polish painter appears to be a constant search for, to use Rilke's phrase, the "quiet origins of life".⁵¹ The still lifes

47 A. Reuter, "Ein 'Logiker' der Farbe. Die Pariser Notizhefte", in: A. Huslein-Arco, S. Kojá, *Carl Schuch. Ein Europäischer Maler*, exhibition catalogue, Belvedere, Vienna, 2012, p. 205.

48 M. Liebermann, *Phantasie in der Malerei*, Berlin, 1916, p. 16.

49 M. Liebermann, "Jozef Israëls" [1901], in: idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin, 1922, p. 88.

50 Quoted after: *Olga Boznańska (1865–1940). Peintures*, op. cit., p. 4.

51 R. M. Rilke, *Moderne Lyrik*, a lecture in Prague, 5 March 1898, quoted after: www.unidue.de/lyriktheorie/texte/1898_rilke.html; Grabska, op. cit.

barely touched with a brush, like Japanese *ukiyo-e*, the silent portraits whose structure suggests disintegration and disappearance, all manifest a reflection on death and evanescence – not only when the depicted subject matter are anemones, the flowers that grew from the blood of Aphrodite's lover who had died a tragic death.

The majority of Boznańska's works are portraits, yet each of them reveals the same wish to immortalise a fleeting presence, to capture the images of a transient life that is apparent in her glimmering still lifes evocative of Chardin's works. This wish, an expression of the great "neurosis of the age"⁵², left a deep mark on the art theory, philosophy and literature of this period. Art was tormented by a sense of insignificance of the world, and at the same time thoroughly saturated with the rhythm and vitality of life which, as the German philosopher Georg Simmel put it, continues to flow, never to cease, and challenges the permanence of any form.⁵³ Such art laid pretences bare in order to ultimately defy death. To Simmel, traces of this modern version of Heracliteism could be found in portraits by Rembrandt, who depicted the moment of death in everything that was alive, and in Rodin's art, depicting motion, blurring the unity of outlines and nullifying all durability.⁵⁴ Comparing Boznańska with Rembrandt, who was then seen as a great modern artist, seems apt not only due to her command of the substance of the painting and in her later works tending towards more abstract and less definite forms, but also due to the large number of self-portraits recording the inevitable, cruel passage of time.

Unaccustomed to any tinsel, Boznańska led a very modest existence, and in her old age lived practically like a hermit. As Czapski recalled, she wore rags while working and was unwilling to regard her studio as a temple. Nevertheless, her life had much in common with Rilke's notion of living art and with Marcel Proust's philosophy of art embodied in the literary figure of Elstir. Proust's fictional artist epitomised the modernists' longing for capturing the essence of the world. The description of his studio might as well be used in reference to Boznańska's working space: "The shutters were closed almost everywhere round the studio, which was fairly cool and [...] dark; there was open only one little rectangular window embowered in honeysuckle, which, over a strip of garden, gave on an avenue; so that the atmosphere of the greater part of the studio was dusky, transparent and compact in the mass, but liquid and sparkling at the rifts where the golden clasp of sunlight banded it [...]"⁵⁵ As in the "greenhouse raffinates"⁵⁶ concocted by Proust, who saw the precious

⁵² Gerson, op. cit.

⁵³ G. Simmel, "Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur", Munich–Leipzig, 1918, in: S. Magala, *Georg Simmel. Wybór pism*, Warsaw, 1980, p. 134.

⁵⁴ G. Simmel, *Rembrandt, Ein kunstphilosophischer Versuch*, Munich, 1925, p. 89.

⁵⁵ M. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 2, transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300401.txt> [accessed 27 Sept. 2015].

⁵⁶ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Dziennik pisany nocą. 1997–1999* [Journal Written at Night], Warsaw, 2000, pp. 279–281 [20 February 1999].

substance of Vermeer's painting as an epiphany of spiritual beauty,⁵⁷ or the appeal of Elstir's seascapes which "lay in a sort of metamorphosis of the things represented in it, analogous to what in poetry we call metaphor",⁵⁸ so the "refined matter" of Boznańska's paintings reveals that which is unchanging and everlasting. The Polish painter had a "physical" sense of substance. If the paintings of flowers created by Proust's fictional artist revealed the essence of the nature of plants,⁵⁹ i.e. the life hidden deep within a *nature morte*, Boznańska managed to achieve a similar metamorphosis not only with regard to objects, but also to people. Elstir, a literary transposition of Whistler and Manet, admired the works of Chardin and Perronneau and reached unity and fluency in his poetic vision, suppressing in his paintings the line between land and sea, the sun and the wave.⁶⁰ Boznańska, in turn, transformed her models into dashes of colour, dispersing their forms and blurring outlines, but not eviscerating them completely.

Similarly to Maurice Maeterlinck's *Serres chaudes*, Boznańska's "greenhouse" art is dominated by muted colours and the aesthetics of nuances. These works manifest her ability to evoke and suggest, which was characteristic of symbolist artists ("*pas de couleurs rien que la nuance*", wrote Verlaine⁶¹). Maeterlinck's poetry is saturated with metaphors of dreams, spirit, sadness and helplessness; full of reflections, echoes and visions. It shares a stylistic affinity with the works of Boznańska; the Polish painter was acquainted with Zenon Przesmycki, who promoted the works of the Belgian poet. William Ritter's often quoted interpretation⁶² of Boznańska's *Girl with Chrysanthemums* (1894, the National Museum in Cracow) as the modern ideal of Maeterlinck's figure – sickly, pale, chilling – is not the only symbol of this spiritual analogy. In 1909 Boznańska herself wrote of her paintings in a letter to Julia Gradomska, stating that they are "quiet and lively, as if separated from the audience by a delicate veil".⁶³ This poetics of spectral life and beauty, visible and invisible, hidden, inaccessible and revealed, may also be found in the theoretical works by Stephane Mallarmé, who repeatedly mentions contemplation of an object and the images that arise from thoughts that elicit the state of the soul.⁶⁴

57 Proust, op. cit., vol. 5, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300401.txt> [accessed 27 Sept. 2015].

58 Proust, op. cit., vol. 2, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300401.txt> [accessed 27 Sept. 2015].

59 B. Bucknall, *The Religion of Art in Proust*, Urbana, 1969, p. 64.

60 Proust, op. cit., vol. 2, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300401.txt> [accessed 27 Sept. 2015].

61 Quoted in: M. Rzepińska, *Historia koloru w dziejach malarstwa europejskiego* [The History of Colour in European Painting], Cracow, 1983, p. 532.

62 W. Ritter, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, IV, 1896, no. 1, quoted in: Blum, op. cit. p. 28.

63 Quoted in: Król, op. cit., p. 15.

64 S. Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes* (answer to J. Huret's questionnaire: *Evolution littéraire*), 1891, in: Grabska, op. cit., p. 252.



Fig. 6. Édouard Manet, *Two Roses on a Tablecloth*, 1882, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Boznańska's paintings are intense in their expression of reality, filled with strangely silent subject matter, odd characters that seem fictitious or recalled from memory and appear to be leading a mysterious existence, yet are passive and withdrawn. Her art resembles a mirage which exposes the tension between the realms of the visible and the invisible, the hidden and the revealed; it offers a soothing hope for "communing with all things above the darkness",⁶⁵ in accordance with the beautiful utopia of the *fin de siècle*.

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

Abstract

Olga Boznańska's painting is the epitome of a new approach to the physical matter of painting, reflecting the late nineteenth-century myth of the organic communion of work and life. The artist herself declared her art as honest and true, devoid of any affectation; she left many paintings and photographs depicting herself as a professional in the process of working, in the studio. Although Boznańska spent most of her life in Paris and was inspired by the Impressionists and *les Nabis*, her formation took place in Munich. Her years of education and first steps in artistic practice in the capital of Bavaria were decisive not only in the matter of the workshop or skills of the talented painter, but also in the

⁶⁵ Rilke, *Moderne Lyrik*, op. cit.

matter of her aesthetic attitude. Boznańska's close relationship with the visual culture of Munich and the essential role of this artistic centre in her career were usually underestimated and dominated by Paris. Boznańska admired the oeuvre of the great German colourist Wilhelm Leibl, and at the exhibitions she could follow many other contemporary German realists and impressionists. It was Leibl who proclaimed the ethos of "honest painting" (*echte Malerei*), considered as "the beautiful craft". The circle of painters that was concentrated around him fulfilled this concept of autonomic art – *Reinmalerei*, of painting portraits, still lifes and genre scenes. Olga Boznańska must have been influenced by the ideas and the painterly effects of the German artists and their American followers, such as Frank Duveneck. She shared with them the same quest for the subtle gradations of colour and explored the potentialities of paint as a material. This approach to technique was ennobled by the German theory of art (Wilhelm Trübner, Carl Schuch), which was the basis for the metaphysical concept of painting. The visual effects of Boznańska's works are close to those of Munich art at the borderline between realism and expressionism. Her fascination with visuality led her to an original expression of spirituality.