

Summary

Polishness Imagined: Visual Arts of the Second Polish Republic from Socio-Cultural History Perspective

The book offers a reconstruction and analysis of “images of Polishness” in the visual arts of the Second Polish Republic, approached as a repository of symbols, forms and materials that are intuitively recognised as “ours”, “Polish”, “national” by most members of the nation. By introducing a concept of “Polishness imagined” the book refers to Benedict Anderson’s prominent definition of a nation as an imagined community, and draws more broadly on social constructivism. Consequently, “images of Polishness” are viewed as a part of the Polish symbolic universe. The author assumes that individuals experience a nation through various symbols that represent national identity and express emotions associated therewith. While all members of a nation have access to its symbolic universe, the creation and interpretation of symbols is reserved for individuals with the highest cultural competence, primarily intellectuals and artists. Visual arts contribute to this universe by providing enigmatic yet compelling images of such abstract notions as “nation” and “national identity”. Not only is the message they convey highly persuasive but also open to interpretation, and can thus serve as ground for common experience to individuals holding different worldviews.

Although the core of the Polish symbolic universe dates back to the era of partitions, the book focuses on the Second Polish Republic, since regaining independence is usually considered a threshold of contemporary by the historians of Polish culture. In 1918 Polish elites began constructing a state that would meet the standards of sovereignty, democracy and modernisation set by Western Europe. Since the society of the new state was very diverse, both in terms of ethnicity and social status, there was a strong need to foster the sense of fraternity and equality among all citizens. To that end, the Polish symbolic universe needed to be remodelled and modernised.

Before analysing “images of Polishness” forged in the inter-war period, the author sets up a theoretical framework that: a) outlines the constructivist approach to such key notions as “nation”, “art”, “national art”, and “history”; b) discusses the concept of national

art as an idiom characteristic for peripheral artistic spaces (such as Central-Eastern Europe) in contrast to universal modern art produced in the centre; c) examines social functions of national art within two key contexts: Polish symbolic universe and canon of national culture.

The main body of the book consists of two parts presenting historical studies of the “images of Polishness” available in the Polish field of art in the years 1925 and 1937. The idea behind the structure is to demonstrate the difference between the twenties and the thirties, not only in visual arts but also in the socio-political setting. Each part comprises five chapters: (1) mapping the Polish artfield; (2) analysing the “images of Polishness”; (3) examining external representations of the Second Polish Republic; (4) reconstructing the reception of these images and their authors in the Polish press; (5) early conclusions.

To demonstrate the scope of possibilities available in the Polish field of art, the book presents profiles of artists – authors of popular “images of Polishness”. The 1925 selection features: Wojciech Kossak and Jacek Malczewski – highly popular proponents of the nineteenth-century-style history painting; Władysław Jaroński – a painter representing Polish modernism (Young Poland); Zofia Stryjeńska, Władysław Skoczylas, Jan Szczepkowski, and Wojciech Jastrzębowski – creators of the national style, an idiom that approached the status of the official state art; Stanisław Szukalski – a controversial sculptor who developed his own vision of the national style. The same artists are revisited in the 1937 section plus three younger authors are introduced: Tadeusz Cieślowski (son) – a graphic artist who specialised in synthetic representations of Poland and her cities; Mieczysław Szymański – a designer of large tapestries illustrating Polish history; Jan Bogusławski – one of the architects searching for a new formula of national style interiors.

The following chapters discuss public reception of the “images of Polishness” introduced by the artists listed above. The first examines the role of both, images and artists, in the representation of the Second Polish Republic at the international exhibitions in Paris: Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts (1925) and Art and Technology in Modern Life (1937). The second focuses on the Polish press and is organised into three sections according to three target reader groups: agents in the field of arts, readers with high cultural competence and the general public.

During the inter-war period artists used various formulas of national art and created different “images of Polishness”. These ranged from conservative visions based on the traditions of Polish nobility and embedded in the nineteenth-century-style history painting, through folk-inspired representations characteristic for the national style, state symbols and heroes designed for monumental art projects, to enigmatic combinations of local forms, colours and cultural traditions inspired by regionalism. The author argues that while 1925, notably the Polish section at the Paris exhibition, brought about the triumph of Polish national style, in 1937 the national style was growing old, prompting artists to search for a new formula in the vein of monumentalism or regionalism. However, only liberal and culturally competent audiences – leaning towards national art that would combine universal modernity with popular tradition – could keep up with this development. The general public preferred conservative and realistic “images of Polishness” that entered the canon of national culture prior to the First World War.