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Egyptian motifs in the graphic works of Ewa Siedlecka-Kotula (1915–1982)

Abstract

The subject of this article are the Egyptian inspirations in the graphic works of Ewa Siedlecka-Kotula, an artist living and working in Kraków in the second half of the 19th century. During the period from May 1948 until June 1949 she resided in Cairo, a productive period which came to fruition in the form of a special cycle of linocuts, executed in 1969 and based on earlier sketches. The series comprises of the following works: “Kobiety/Women”, “Woda/Water”, “Ryż/Rice”, “Tkacze/Weavers”, “Pasterka/Female shepherd”, and “Barany/Rams”, depicting contemporary Egyptians and their typical, everyday tasks. During her stay in Egypt the artist also designed the exhibition graphics for the 16th Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition in Cairo. Her works were put on display at an individual exhibition (December 1948). She also participated in the exhibitions entitled “Le salon des femmes-artistes” in Cairo Women’s Club (March 1949) and “France-Égypte” in the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo (May 1949). Ewa Siedlecka-Kotula’s works met with much interest at that time. Unfortunately, references to antiquity are very scarce in her art, and include only a watercolour showing an Egyptian peasant by a shaduf (fig. 1), and a drawing of a female offering-bringer figurine from the tomb of Nakhti, overseer of the seal, in Asyut (early 12th dynasty, around 1900 BC). The latter drawing was perhaps made in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, and most likely represents a statuette whose current fate remains unknown, which would make this drawing an exceptional record.

Keywords

Polish 20th-century printmaking; Egyptian inspirations in modern art; 16th Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition in Cairo (1948); figurine of a female offering-bringer from the Nakhti tomb in Asyut (12th Dynasty).

In the milieu of Kraków graphic artists of the 20th century, Ewa Siedlecka-Kotula's works were noticed and prized, both among broader circles of art lovers and in the narrower group of her fellow artists. Her favourite technique was woodcut with linocut gaining favour in her later years. As one of the art critics of the time put it: "She trusts woodcut, and what is more – she knows its rules, its potential, its nature. And this is woodcut that partially derives from a specific tradition of expressionist woodcut. Surface treated without restraints acts as a colour field, tonal contrasts intensify, mounting tensions".¹ It was also underlined that the subject of her art was human being: "The subject is human being, human being in relation to reality, human being in the centre of reality. Human existence. This subject matter does not arise from speculation or some abstract generalisation. [...] The starting point is not the concept but the picture of reality. The true picture, which at some point was observed".² Another author, when assessing her works, claimed that "What is important is that a woodcut is preceded by a sketch, drawing, note, or other record of impression. Therefore the creation of the form is not a futile make up, not a decoration, but an interpretation, definition, transformation, and discovery of the own vision. And thanks to that, the expressions that sometimes near abstraction still have this sound, 'observational' character".³

Ewa Siedlecka-Kotula was strongly tied with Kraków, not only as the place of her birth.⁴ The city and its monuments played an important role in her art, too. In this context it is enough to mention such graphic works as "Sarkofagi żywe/Sarcophagi alive" (the cycle inspired by the tombs of Polish kings in the Wawel cathedral), "Planty/Planty Park", or "Kościoły Krakowa/Kraków churches". She also spent the period of the German occupation during World War II in Kraków. In the years 1942–1945 her flat at Szewska street 21 became a place where artists and writers gathered, and where the first rehearsals and performances took place of a clandestine theatre led by Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990), whose ideas later gained world-wide popularity.⁵ Ewa Siedlecka graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, where she was later employed in the Faculty of Graphic Arts from 1956 till 1975.

¹ M. Gutowski, *Ewa Siedlecka-Kotula. Grafika* (a brochure accompanying the artist's exhibition in the Kraków "Desa" Gallery, May 1970).

² Ibidem.

³ S. Rodziński, *Grafika Ewy Siedleckiej-Kotuli*, "Tygodnik Powszechny" R. XXIX, no 36 (1389) of 7 IX 1975, p. 6 (in connection with another exhibition of her works in the "Przysmat" Gallery in Kraków).

⁴ See her detailed biography in: "Polski słownik biograficzny" 36, 1995–1996, p. 531–533 (E. Dwornik Gutowska).

⁵ As Tadeusz Brzozowski (1918–1987) recalled "Ewa, who also was an actor in this secret theatre, cared for everybody, artists and spectators alike. Today, in the same old house, she carefully carves in wood legends about the world that is gone and the world that is just passing away" (1979).

Along with artistic printmaking, Ewa Siedlecka-Kotula was also active in the field of graphic design. She was the author of numerous book covers, mostly designed for two Kraków-based publishing houses, namely “Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne” and “Wydawnictwo Literackie”. She presented her works many times at individual and group exhibitions, both in Poland and abroad.⁶

A few years after the end of World War II, in a very complicated political reality of that time, Ewa Siedlecka discovered an opportunity for creative activity in a completely different environment, becoming beyond any doubt fascinated not only by its exotic nature but also by its ancient cultural tradition. In the years 1948–1949 she spent a longer time in Egypt⁷ and then, before coming back to Poland, in France. The Egyptian period remains little known, despite the fact that it resulted in at least one cycle of works (linocuts), which however were executed only in 1969. The series comprises of the following works: “Kobiety/Women”, “Woda/Water”, “Ryż/Rice”, “Tkacze/Weavers”, “Pasterka/Female shepherd”, and “Barany/Rams”. Ewa Siedlecka arrived in Egypt in mid-1948⁸ and, benefiting from the new perspectives which were opening before her, picked up several challenges. Among other works, she designed the exhibition graphics for the 16th Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition in Cairo, creating appropriate graphic panels. These works, together with the drawings, were next (December 1948) put on display in Cairo in her individual exhibition. In the following year she participated in the exhibitions entitled “Le salon des femmes-artistes” in Cairo Women’s Club (March 1949) and “France-Égypte” in the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo (May 1949). Her works (gouaches, among others) met with a keen response from the Egyptian press, and also with recognition (and interest from the buyers) among the intellectual elites of Cairo. In June of 1949, after a year in Egypt, the artist departed for Paris, where she spent another year.

Today, based only on what has survived and is available from the artist’s legacy,⁹ one may think that ancient Egypt and its monuments were not the object of her particular awe or keen interest. Instead, her artistic interest focused on the contemporary inhabitants of the country. During her stay in Egypt the artist drew a considerable number of sketches (pencil, black ink), which only after

⁶ The most comprehensive list can be found in the biographical entry quoted in footnote 4.

⁷ Also her father, Professor Michał Siedlecki (1873-1940) had spent four months in Egypt at the beginning of 1906 (he visited Nubia as well) while conducting his studies on tropical wildlife. Cf. “Polski słownik biograficzny” 36, 1995–1996, p. 550–553 (T.S. Sroka).

⁸ As the author of the biographical entry informs us, the artist “in the middle of 1948 took a leave of absence from the academy <to supplement her studies abroad> and left for Cairo on the invitation of her friend from Polish embassy” (see above, footnote 4, p. 531).

⁹ Kept mostly in the Collection of Graphic Arts of the Jagiellonian Library and in the collection of the Main Library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. In addition, apart from private collections in Poland and abroad, her works can be found in the Diocesan Museum in Tarnów and in the museum in Jelenia Góra.

a number of years (in this case more than twenty years!) she transformed into wood- and linocuts, forming a separate cycle mentioned above.¹⁰

However, the art left by her ancient forebears surely did not pass unnoticed. One of her watercolours (Fig. 1:a),¹¹ showing a peasant watering the land using a shaduf, has a surprising composition. The silhouette of the working man and the shaduf itself refer precisely to the representation known from one of the Theban tombs (Fig. 1:b), which Ewa Siedlecka might have seen in the classic study by John Gardner Wilkinson (1797–1875), first published in 1873 and whose later editions also gained much popularity.¹² The peasant was depicted according to the ancient canon, including an eye rendered in the “Egyptian” style. In the upper field of her picture the artist additionally placed two small figures of Arab women, apparently seen from a greater distance (one of them is shown carrying a jar on her head in a very characteristic manner).

A delicate drawing showing a figurine belonging to a characteristic group of wooden statuettes of female offering-bringers from one of the Asyut tombs deserves separate attention (Fig. 2).¹³ The wooden statuettes covered with painted stucco (approximately 57–60 cm high) from this group come from Tomb no 7 in Asyut, belonging to Nakhti, the overseer of the seal.¹⁴ His activity falls into the times of the early 12th Dynasty (Middle Kingdom, ca 1900 BC). The girl is shown in front view, with her left leg stepped forward; her left hand

¹⁰ For every artwork from the “Egypt” series we can make a direct “sketch – finished graphic work” match (based, among others, on the sketches and linocut prints from the collection of the Jagiellonian University). Ewa Siedlecka’s works featuring Egyptian motifs have not been particularly often put on display: three gouaches “from Egypt” she shown on the Polish Winter Exhibition of Plastic Arts (Radom, 1953), while the linocuts of the “Egypt” series could be seen on the exhibitions in the “Desa” Gallery (Kraków, 1970), “Pryzmat” Gallery (Kraków, 1975), in the Wschowa Regional Museum (Wschowa, 1978), in the Mikołaj Kopernik Museum (Frombork, 1978/9), and in the Artists Gallery (Olsztyn, 1980).

¹¹ Black and shades of grey, cardboard, 32.0 x 23.5 cm. Jagiellonian Library, cat.no. IR 5977.

¹² J.G. Wilkinson, *Manners and customs of the ancient Egyptians. Including their private life, government, laws, arts, manufactures, religion, agriculture, and early history, derived from a comparison of the painting, sculptures, and monuments still existing, with the accounts of ancient authors*, vol. 1–3, London 1837. More accessible is the concise edition: *A popular account of the ancient Egyptians [...] in two volumes*, London 1878 (the illustration quoted here can be found in vol. II, on page 4, under the number 356).

¹³ Black ink, pen and ink drawing on paper, 27.0 x 21.0 cm. Cf. Jagiellonian Library, cat.no. IR 5650 (file 106).

¹⁴ B. Porter, R.L.B. Moss, *Topographical bibliography of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic texts, reliefs, and paintings, vol. IV, Lower and Middle Egypt (Delta and Cairo to Asyut)*, Oxford 1934, p. 266. Cf. E.G. Chassinat, C. Palanque, *Une campagne de fouilles dans la nécropole d’Assiout* (Mémoire publiés par les membres de l’Institut d’Archéologie Orientale du Caire, t. XXIV), Cairo 1911. Statuettes of that type were compiled in the study by J.H. Breasted Jr, *Egyptian servant statues* (Bollingen Series, Vol. XIII), Washington 1948, where the category discussed here was attributed to group IV-1-3-D (which comprises of 18 objects): “Servants carrying supplies for deceased. Women servants singly or in rows of two or more, bring supplies for deceased”.

is raised and supports the container with votive offerings, while in her right hand, pointing downwards, she holds a live duck, kept characteristically by its wings. On the skirt dropping from her waist down (her torso is bare) she is wearing a decorative net composed of strings of colourful faience beads, which reaches slightly below her knees.¹⁵ Such plastic models, known in larger sets from the tombs dated to the 1st Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom, are thought to be counterparts of the relief decoration known from the walls of Old Kingdom mastabas.¹⁶ The girls carrying votive offerings were meant to be the personifications of estates belonging to or supervised by the deceased. The discussed statuette of a female offering-bringer must have surely attracted a particular interest of the artist, probably during her visit to the Egyptian Museum, which was a must for every tourist coming to Cairo. It was most likely the characteristic pose of a young girl that induced the artist to immediately record her impressions and feelings on paper, which at the same time resulted in what we may see as a very good drawing documentation. The extant sketch allows us to assume that it represents the only statuette of the group that has no photographic or drawing documentation, and whose fate is unknown.¹⁷ Although it has been mentioned in the excavations report¹⁸ and in one of the basic studies,¹⁹ no information has been provided about the place where the artefact was kept,²⁰ nor was its inventory number recorded. Thus, it is possible that in 1948 Ewa Siedlecka-Kotula might have documented a statuette which a scholar preparing shortly before the comprehensive catalogue of this category of finds was unable to access.²¹

¹⁵ These characteristics of dress are unique and cannot be seen on other objects from this group.

¹⁶ Cf. C. Aldred, *Egyptian art in the days of the Pharaohs 3100–320 BC*, London 1980, s. 110: “The number of servant figures increased and these were now hacked out of wood and crudely painted. Groups of these figures appear in models of brew- and bakehouses, slaughter-yards, granaries and the like, replacing the two-dimensional representations that had enlivened the walls of Old Kingdom tomb chapels”. See also Angela M. J. Tooley, *Egyptian models and scenes* (Shire Egyptology Series), Princes Risborough 1995, pp. 19–27 (“Masters, servants and offering bearers”).

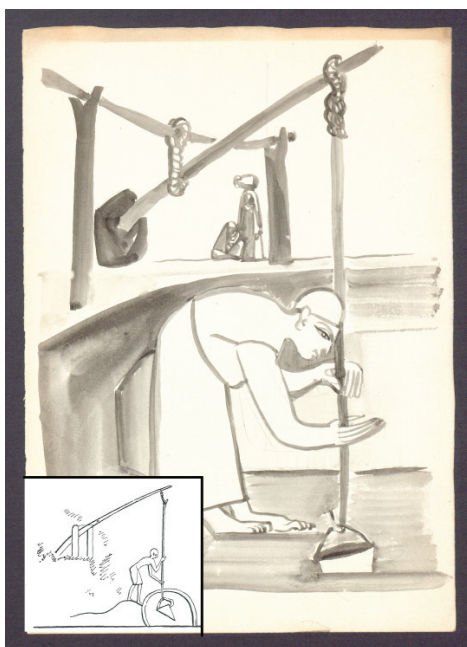
¹⁷ Cf. J.H. Breasted Jr., *Egyptian servant statues*, IV-1-3-D 7 and in a detailed register available in the internet (members.optusnet.com.au/~gwat/Models/LISTS/refs.html): accession number and Museum unknown. The figurine was the tallest of the entire group (height of 77 cm), and in Tomb no 7 in Asyut was placed directly opposite to that of Nakhti, the owner of the tomb.

¹⁸ E.G. Chassinat, C. Palanque, *Une campagne de fouilles dans la nécropole d'Assiout*, p. 33.

¹⁹ J.H. Breasted Jr., *Egyptian servant statues*, IV-1-3-D 7.

²⁰ The finds from the Nakhti's tomb were distributed among the Louvre Museum (e.g. sarcophagi and six figurines) and the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Most likely, three figurines of offering-bringers were left in Cairo; the identification of two of them raises no doubts: see Chassinat, Palanque, *Une campagne de fouilles dans la nécropole d'Assiout*, p. 33–34, pls. IV. IX–X; Breasted Jr., *Egyptian servant statues*, IV-1-3-D 8 and IV-1-3-D 9 and D. Wildung, S. Schoske (ed.), *Nofret – die Schöne. Die Frau im Alten Ägypten*, Mainz 1984, p. 96–97.

²¹ J.H. Breasted Jr., *Egyptian servant statues*, object IV-1-3-D 7 and for the complete list of tomb models see members.optusnet.com.au/~gwat/Models/LISTS/refs.html.



1. An Egyptian drawing water using a shaduf.

A: Ewa Siedlecka-Kotula. Watercolour, shades of black, cardboard, 32.0 x 23.5 cm.

B: a scene from a Theban tomb (drawing), after Gardner Wilkinson,

A Popular Account of the Ancient Egyptians, Vol. II, London 1878, p. 4., fig. 356.



2. Ewa Siedlecka-Kotula, Statuette of a female offering-bringer (Cairo, Egyptian Museum). Ink drawing, cardboard, 22.0 x 9.0 cm.