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POLISH MARITIME ART PRIOR TO 1939

On the presence of the sea
in Polish painting.

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Some Polish art historians are wont to claim that maritime art did not exist in Poland prior to 1918, or even that it has never existed at all. In a sense, this echoes the views of interwar authors who were so swept up by the great enthusiasm in the wake of Poland regaining access to the Baltic that they only took into account maritime art dedicated to the Polish coast. When we also consider the limited scope of research into the topic, it is no wonder that the awareness of Polish maritime art remains so low.

The Romantic poets believed that art is created purely through divine inspiration, coming down straight from the heavens. Art historians nevertheless disagree. Artists are always influenced by their predecessors, by their education, and their opportunities to exhibit and sell their works. These factors had a unique impact on the Polish artists of the 19th century, which took the country's maritime art in a different direction to that being created elsewhere. After the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century, the Baltic coastline was held by Prussia (later incorporated into Germany). With regard to maritime art, this made for a very different situation to that in the United Kingdom, Germany or the Netherlands. Put

simply, in the absence of any Polish state there was no Polish navy to paint; without Polish shipowners there were no ships under the Polish flag or merchants who might commission paintings of them. This meant that there was simply no funding or market for traditional maritime art in partitioned Poland, and artists therefore took a different direction to those working elsewhere in Europe – they painted pure seascapes. During the second half of the 19th century, artists were fascinated by the relationships between light and color and how they were affected by weather, and found that coastlines offered excellent opportunities for such observations. The Impressionists had been fascinated by the coast of Brittany; later the artists inspired by Symbolism were drawn to cold Scandinavian shores, expanding the scope of interest beyond the Mediterranean.

Breton fishermen were painted by Aleksander Gierymski, Olga Boznańska, and Władysław Wankie. Wankie's journey to Brittany inspired him to create a series of views of flat sandy beaches with women wearing traditional clothes – drying nets, collecting shellfish or unloading fishing boats. The main motif in these works is the effect of muted light on wet sand and still water. Wankie's paintings capture a transient mood of calm melancholy as a day comes to an end. Invoking the Symbolist aesthetic popular in the late 19th century, the artist used that mood to stress the harmony between humankind and nature while underlining the power of nature and its clear if subtle dominance over people.

Fig. 1

Michał Gorstkin-Wywiórski (1861–1926), *Seascape with a Shipwreck*, turn of the 20th century



Fig. 2

Feliks Michał Wyrzywański (1875–1944), *Courting*, 1911

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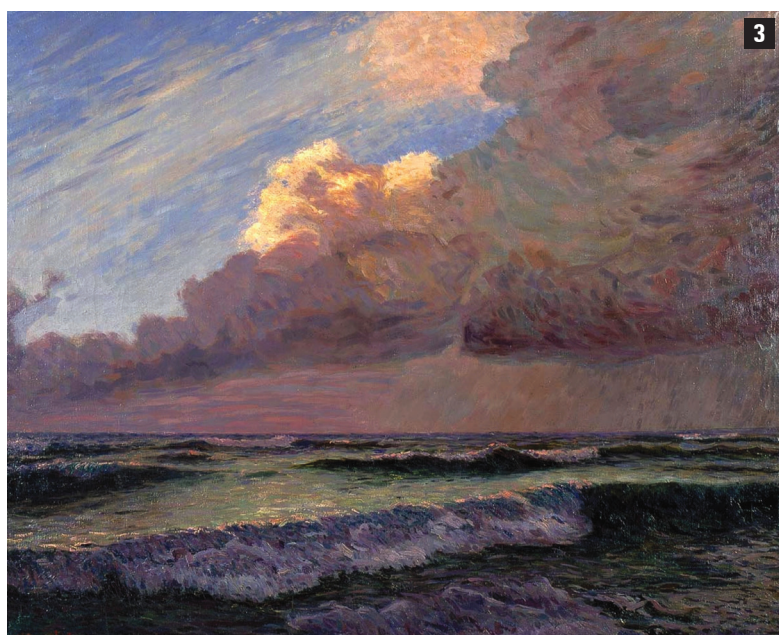


Fig. 3
 Włodzimierz Nałęcz
 (1865–1946),
Stormy Evening, 1938

Another artist inspired by Symbolism was Michał Gorstkin-Wywiórski, a master of landscape paintings, protegee of Count Edward Raczyński and collaborator of Jan Styka and Julian Fałat on large panoramas, which were popular at the turn of the 20th century. From the very beginning of his career the sea was an important motif in his art. His debut painting, shown at the Society of Friends of Fine Arts in Kraków in 1884, was titled *By the Seaside*. He found inspiration

in the seascapes of Scandinavia and the Netherlands, although he did not limit himself to simply illustrating them – he strived to convey the emotions evoked by them. He experimented with different colors, tending towards a limited, almost monochromatic palette. He also adjusted his technique depending on the atmosphere of each seascape. He painted the rocky Norwegian coast with bold, decisive brushstrokes and using impastos, keeping to blues, greys and muted browns. On the other hand, the texture of his paintings depicting the calm Dutch coast is completely smooth with barely detectable traces of a brush and very delicate, light colors.

A perfect example of the symbolic aspect of many of Wywiórski's works is *Seascape with a Shipwreck* (Fig. 1). The dark outline of the wreck, cutting a diagonal on the painting, rests on a bare, rocky shore. A simple wooden coffin is visible inside. The scene is utterly empty bar the rocks, sea, and sky. The painting provokes reflection that goes far deeper than simply admiring the view. It stirs a sense of isolation and a feeling of helplessness and insignificance in the face of the mysterious power of nature and fate.

Paintings by Feliks Michał Wyrzywalski induce completely different emotions. He started off in Symbolism with serious, monumental works, until he discovered the Mediterranean. Its warmth and clarity serves as background to numerous scenes inspired loosely by ancient mythology. In *Courting* (Fig. 2) he shows a nymph sitting on a stone in shallow water and two adoring sileni, one playing the flute. Paint-

Fig. 4
 Wojciech Weiss
 (1875–1950),
*Landscape from
 the Vicinities of Lisi Jar*,
 1930s



ed in a light, sunny palette with limpid, pale green sea water, blue sky, and warm hues of naked bodies, it emanates serenity. In terms of technique it is an excellent example of Wyrzywalski's masterful way of depicting the clarity of sunlit water and its full range of colors and movement. To this day the painting continues to enchant viewers with its tranquility and joie de vivre.

In the late 19th century, Poland's artistic and intellectual circles became interested in the Baltic coast as a part of the future reborn Polish state. At the threshold of the 20th century, Leon Wyczółkowski visited the Tyszkiewicz family estate in Połoga, where he created a cycle of small oil paintings showing the open sea in shades of muted blues and greys, distinctive of the Baltic. He also created drawings of twisted coastal pines and boats on the sandy shore. His fascination with Japanese art clearly comes through in these drawings with the dramatic contrasts of almost black forms in the foreground and pale grey landscapes in the background, and in the fluid lines defining shapes of objects.

Poland's regained independence and access to the coast – albeit limited – was celebrated by a symbolic ceremony of the country's "wedding to the sea." As well as dignitaries, diplomats, and priests, the celebrations were also attended by artists. Perhaps the most illustrious was Julian Fałat, who created a monumental painting depicting the key moment of the ceremony: the raising of the Polish flag. The event was also attended by Henryk Uziembło who painted a cycle of watercolors illustrating it. He remained fascinated by the sea throughout his life. In the 1930s he visited the Polesie region where he documented the lives of mariners of the Pińsk Flotilla, patrolling the Pripyat River on the Polish border. He also frequented the Baltic coast and often painted Jastrzębia Góra, Lisi Jar and Kuźnica. His paintings reveal his predilection for vivid colors and fluid, decorative contours rooted in *fin-de-siècle* traditions.

The two most famous Polish maritime painters began their careers at the start of the 20th century. Włodzimierz Nałęcz's first love was the North Sea; later he turned his interest to the Baltic during the 1900s. After Poland regained independence, he bought land in Lisi Jar where he held annual maritime art workshops. He and his guests frequently painted this fragment of the coast. His paintings veer towards a synthesis: forms are shaped by light expressed as subtle yet saturated shades of blue, violet and yellow. The intensity and angle of light also give different ambiances to individual compositions (Fig. 3).

Poland's newly regained independence was received with great enthusiasm by the entire society, including artistic circles. Artists representing different schools, styles and techniques spent summers at Polish seaside resorts, enrolled at the Polish Maritime Art



Society created within the Society of Polish Artists and exhibited their art all over the country. Many visited Włodzimierz Nałęcz's studio in Lisi Jar. They included Wojciech Weiss, rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. He became interested in maritime art in the early 20th century when he frequently visited Venice; his oils and watercolors depicted the city from the water level showing ships against the backdrop of famous monuments of the Serenissima. He went on to paint the beaches of the French Riviera, and after 1918 he turned his attention to the Baltic coast. Most of his Baltic landscapes feature saturated colors and soft, smooth textures. Shapes are formed with color rather than lines. In *Landscape from the Vicinities of Lisi Jar* (Fig. 4) he sketches a highly personal vision of raw nature brought to life with sunshine and saturated with light. He uses bright, lively, contrasting colors to create a harmonious, suggestive whole.

Lisi Jar was also visited by artists from the circles of Jan Stanisławski – an undisputed master of landscape painting and a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts

Fig. 5
Marian Mokwa (1889–1987),
Boats on a Beach, 1924

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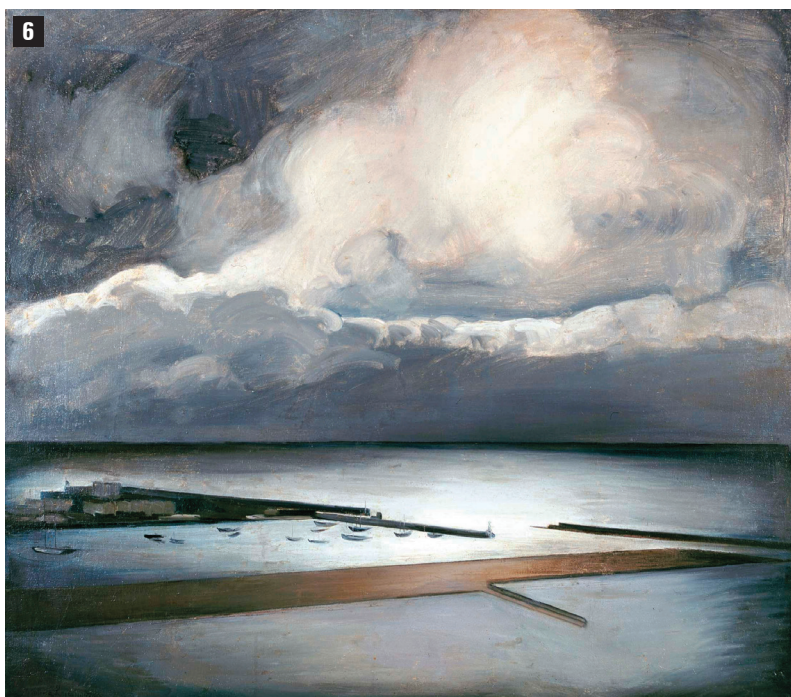


Fig. 6
 Michalina Krzyżanowska
 (1883–1962), *Gdynia*
 – *President's Basin*, 1935

Fot. 7
 Mela Muter (working
 name of Maria Melania
 Muttermilch,
 1876–1967), *Storm in the
 Port*, 1920s

in Kraków, who introduced outdoor sessions to the regular teaching program at the Academy. His most talented students flocked to the Baltic to paint the Polish coast. They included Stefan Filipkiewicz, who created a series of views of Lisi Jar at different times of year, clearly inspired by Claude Monet's cycle of paintings of Rouen cathedral. His colleague Henryk Szczygliński painted the beach in Gdynia-Orłowo, invoking the decorative traditions of the *fin-de-siècle* style. He is also known for his seascapes from Dubrovnik on the Adriatic.



It is Marian Mokwa, however, who is the artist perhaps most synonymous with Polish maritime art. He developed a highly individual style: he applied paint with short, tense brushstrokes and frequently reached for impastos. His control of sketching and perspective was flawless. His greatest achievement was the development of a distinctive color palette evocative of the Baltic, comprising muted shades of greens and blues broken through with greys. In his seascapes he created the effect of diffuse, silvery light which brightens the sky without giving sharp contours or contrasts (Fig. 5). Occasionally, when creating images of sunny summer days, he made use of saturated shades of blues with a range of tonalities depending on distance.

One major topic which drew the attention of many artists was the construction of the port in Gdynia. The transformation of what was once a coastal village into a bustling city with a population exceeding 120,000 over just a decade was a powerful inspiration for many. They included Michalina Krzyżanowska, who created a series of paintings documenting the development of the port in the mid-1930s (Fig. 6). The polished, disciplined works, painted in shades of blues and greys and with a glistening, silvery light which subtly brings out the massive shapes of the growing wharfs, cast a very modern look at seascapes.

After 1918 many Polish artists remained in the West. They maintained links with their homeland by participating in exhibitions of Polish art abroad and at major galleries in Poland. Particularly noteworthy in this respect are Mela Muter, Henryk Epstein, and Jan Rubczak. Their works include paintings of fishing villages in Brittany and Provence, of which Mela Muter's *Storm in the Port* is an excellent example (Fig. 7). It is a view over a small fishing port in the south of France (which the inscription reveals to be Grau-du-Roi between Marseille and Montpellier) as a storm is incoming. The center shows fishing boats and low buildings on the other bank of the port channel, and in the background a lighthouse marking the entry to the port and the open sea beyond. A leaden sky lies heavy over the scene. The striking power of the painting is in its vivid colors and expressive, distinctive shapes which evoke the sense of peculiar tension often perceptible before a storm.

This article could easily be continued at length, showcasing many more paintings and their authors, their skills, interests and frequently turbulent biographies. The comments offered herein merely serve as an introduction to a wider discussion of Polish maritime art – they are an invitation to a closer examination of this extensive, diverse and still relatively poorly studied field of Polish art.

PHOTOS OF PAINTINGS FROM THE COLLECTION OF
 THE NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM IN GDAŃSK.