

“Artificial” – i.e. “Pertaining to Art”?

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Despite clearly sharing an outward resemblance, the English noun *art* seems to have little in common with the adjective *artificial*. Quite analogously, their Polish counterparts, *sztuka* “art” and *sztuczny* “artificial,” might be sensed by Polish speakers to be quite unrelated. And yet each pair is closely entwined in history and meaning; to see the connections more clearly, we have to look back centuries.

The English noun *art* comes straight from Latin *ars* “craft, skill,” whereas the noun *artificial* derives from *artificium*, something done by craft or skill, and so: “a work of art; skill; construct.” From there it was a short jump to “not natural, not spontaneous,” and from there to “not genuine.”

Polish *sztuka* “art” is also a borrowing, this time from German *Stück*, originally (in the language of settlers who founded cities under German law in the 13th and 14th centuries) meaning a piece of something, a fragment of a whole. A relic of this meaning can be found in the name of the Polish meat dish *sztuka-mięs* – today very specialized (“a piece of boiled beef”), but formerly having a more general meaning (simply “a hunk of meat”). Back then, the word *sztuka* could be combined with almost anything divisible into parts: *sztuka chleba* “portion (of a loaf) of bread,” *sztuka żelaza* “a portion of iron.” However, as is easy to imagine, it is not hard for a portion of something to be treated as a separate thing in its own right, leading to a certain shift to a “piece of bread” and “a piece of iron,” respectively. This “piece” meaning is also evident today in phrases such as *2 zł za sztukę* “they cost 2 zlotys apiece.”

Next there emerged another meaning of Polish *sztuka*, bridging between the old meaning of “piece” and today’s sense of “artistic activity.” The term came to be applied not just to any object, but to ones that are the product of some craft, especially ones that attested its creator’s impressive skill and craftsmanship. Craftsmen, of course, create their works by imitating nature, in a sense – thus giving rise to a certain opposition between *sztuka* “art, artifice, craft” vs. *natura* “nature.” One eighteenth-century statement from the Polish periodical *Monitor* illustrates this quite nicely: “The charms be gifted by nature [*natura*] cannot be compared to those molded by artifice [*sztuka*].” We can clearly see here the beginnings of the more modern opposition *naturalny* “natural” vs. *sztuczny* “created by craft, involving artifice, artificial.” The imitation of nature by artworks (once called *sutki* in Polish) eventually gave rise to the modern use of the Polish term *sztuka* for the abstract sense of art itself.

Notice how the specialized meaning of both English *art* and Polish *sztuka* “fine art” neatly draw together the two strands of meaning seen above: “art is artificial” (or: *sztuka jest sztuczna*), we might indeed say, both in one sense, in that it is based on the imitation of nature, on artifice, and in another, that it is a product of craft, skill, ingenuity, cleverness, and artistry. ■

In writing this text, I was inspired by Radosław Pawelec’s book *Dzieje sztuki: Leksemy i pojęcia* [The History of Art: Lexemes and Concepts], Warsaw 2003, from which I have borrowed the quoted fragment from *Monitor*.



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