

Piotr Szaradowski

Lecturer of the history of fashion and the history of art and design at the School of Form of SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities. Former long-term employee of the Museum Education Division of the National Museum in Poznań, where he created educational programs and projects. Active in museum education and the presentation of fashion in museums and galleries. Co-author of exhibitions dedicated to the history of fashion and clothing. Author of the book *Francja elegancja. Z historii haute couture*, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2016.

Design and Anti-design. Around the Exhibit of the Museum of Applied Arts in Poznań

2017 saw the launch of a new permanent exhibit of the Museum of Applied Arts (MSU) in Poznań, a branch of the National Museum in Poznań that is located in the “Raczyński Building” it occupied previously and in the adjacent, recently constructed Castle of Przemysł. Leaving aside the controversies that accompanied the construction itself and the style that was given to the building¹, I would like to focus on the exhibit that is accessible to the public. I am interested primarily in the educational aspect of this exhibit and its coherence. I would also like to point out whether and how it relates to the problems affecting the contemporary world, as has become a standard in Western museums of similar profile in recent years.

The MSU exhibition occupies the ground floor, the first and second floors, and the basement, a total of 14 rooms with 2,000 museum objects arranged chronologically from the Middle Ages to the present day. The majority of the rooms are very briefly defined, mostly by single words: Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Historicism. There are also rooms that connect different objects around one theme, such as the Treasury, the Armoury, or the Far East. In two rooms we can also find motifs related to the Museum’s own history and holdings. The present is represented in two rooms: After 1945 and Contemporary Unique Art. Therefore, it is not material, functional, or design problems that come to the fore, but stylistic issues that give the whole exhibition an order following

» 1 P. Lewandowski, *Gesty i fikcje, czyli z dziejów pewnej odbudowy* [*Gestures and fictions, or the history of one reconstruction*], in: “Czas Kultury”, <http://czaskultury.pl/artykuly/gesty-i-fikcje-czyli-z-dziejow-pewnej-odbudowy/> [access: 26.04.2019]; *Zamek Królewski w Poznaniu – nowy zabytek czy nowotwór?* [*Royal Castle in Poznań – a new historical monument or a tumour?*] in: *Odbudowa Rekonstrukcją Pogania*, <https://odbudowarekonstrukcjapogania.wordpress.com/2017/03/26/zamek-krolewski-w-poznaniu-nowy-zabytek-czy-nowotwor/> [access: 26.04.2019].

the history of art. The layout chosen by the Museum is therefore clearly conservative in character; the narrative is based on changing styles. Therefore, the exhibition constantly refers the visitor to historical knowledge and does not help to understand the functionality of certain objects, regardless of their style. It can be considered a kind of “classic” layout that is in place in most similar museums. An interesting alternative on Polish soil was proposed by the National Museum in Warsaw (MNW), which opened permanent galleries a few months before the MSU, in December 2016. The galleries were dedicated to old art and combined European and Old Polish arts and crafts, painting and sculpture from the 15th through to the 18th century. While preserving the chronological arrangement, the authors of the scenario of this exhibition proposed a fundamental “division into <social spaces>: 1) palace, villa, manor; 2) church, chapel and house altar; 3) city. In other words: 1) Court culture, 2) Religious culture, 3) Urban culture”.² They stress at the same time that in the period under scrutiny there was no clear-cut division into “high” art and crafts. We can therefore say that the same way of thinking (along the lines of art history) is more prominent at MNW, with far-reaching consequences, i.e. an interesting combination of arts and crafts, which helps identify whole processes rather than their fragments³.

Coming back to the Poznań museum, we must indicate that art has previously been displayed in the direct vicinity of MSU, in the Gallery of Painting and Sculpture, also known as the Main Building of the National Museum in Poznań. Theoretically, it was impossible to apply the same measure to MSU; however, this could have provided an opportunity to look for new solutions not based on artistic styles. Unfortunately, the creators of the MSU exhibition followed the well-trodden path, not avoiding inconsistencies. In order to take a “step forward” and create more neutral and “modern” interiors, light grey was used in the museum interiors, which, however, has its own, very distinctive exceptions. The first one is located right at the beginning of the sightseeing route, i.e. the dark and backward Middle Ages. It is difficult to interpret such a choice in terms of the conservative protection of the fabrics found there, as they are to

» 2 *Galeria Sztuki Dawnej, Europejskie i Staropolskie Rzemiosło Artystyczne, Malarstwo i Rzeźba od XV do XVIII wieku*, <https://www.mnw.art.pl/kolekcje/galer/galeria-sztuki-dawnej/> [access: 21.03.2019].

» 3 Although this thinking about old art in holistic terms stands out in Poland, similar solutions, carried out both earlier and more boldly, can be found above all in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (galleries dedicated to British art were launched in November 2001). See: S. Fisher, C. Mansfield, S. Lalvani, *The British Galleries Project at V&A. Art People in Tune with New Plans for the Interpretation? Qualitative Research with Visitors and Non-Visitors* http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/legacy_documents/file_upload/5801_file.pdf [access: 26.04.2019] and Ch. Wilk, *The V&A British Galleries*, in: *History Today*, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/va-british-galleries> [access: 26.04.2019].

be found in other rooms, too, where the light and colour of the walls are clearly brighter. Unfortunately, the description of this part of the exhibition lacks an adequate explanation of this issue. On the other hand, it refers to the division into the realms of the sacred and the profane, which – unfortunately and paradoxically – is not clearly marked within the space of the exhibition itself. The second clear deviation from neutral grey is the part of the exhibit devoted to Biedermeier, where the walls are painted in a bright shade of green and the arrangement of objects is a classic example of a so-called period room, i.e. a fully arranged interior displaying all the presented objects in their original context. Interestingly, this section contains two paintings, i.e. living room portraits. This set-up is all the more surprising when we realise that the other two styles introduced in the same interior, i.e. Empire and Classicism, are discussed in neutral, glass display cases facing one another.

Unfortunately, the inconsistencies also apply to the layout of the exhibit itself, and not only to the way it is presented. The most striking one is the MSU's presentation of unique artistic fabrics, glassware, and ceramics. These are works of an exceptionally artistic character, which (like the works of Magdalena Abakanowicz) are most often presented on premises reserved for art. While one could justify fabric itself as a medium following the concepts of the previous rooms which display fabrics, the context is completely different. There are no other utility objects, furniture, or anything that would give these items a more utilitarian character. Ultimately, we have artistic works. Such an arrangement of the exhibit also has the disadvantage that it strengthens the feeling in visitors that the closer they get to the present day, the less understandable, the less readable, the more sophisticated, and the less utilitarian the artefacts are. In general, in comparison to the presentations of earlier eras, objects from the twentieth century make up merely three rooms. One small room houses the Secession, the Fashion Parade (from the 1880s to 1960s), and the objects from the interwar period. The next room contains the aforementioned period From 1945 Until Now. The third and last one fits chronologically, but not logically. This is Contemporary Unique Art. (Photo 1) Hence, today's truly contemporary problems related to applied art, such as recycling or the role of technology (digitality of today's world, 3D printing, etc.), in fact do not appear in the exhibit⁴.

It may be interesting and enriching to look at this museum exhibition not from the point of view of an educator, but from that of designer-practitioner, graphic designer and, at the same time, a recognized specialist in the field of design, Marcin Wicha. He is the author of the

» 4 Nor are they addresses during lessons for school students. See: <https://msu.mnp.art.pl/pl/lekcje-muzealne/kl/sl/wl/2> [access: 26.04.2019].

2015 book under the telling title *Jak przestałem kochać design* [How I stopped loving design].⁵ One of the remarks that comes to the fore in Wicha's opinion (in fact the one leading to "not loving design") is identifying the word design with nice objects standing on kitchen countertops⁶, most often unused, supposed to testify to the sophistication and/or status of their owners. This understanding of the word design, which Wicha deplores, is becoming more and more common, thus contributing to its loss of true meaning and role. The critic is referring to utility and ergonomics, which should play a leading role in the design of objects and ultimately determine whether something is right or wrong. Not to mention that according to Wicha, design is also about trivial things like garbage bins, pens, medicine packaging, which absolutely does not diminish its importance. Interestingly, the author raises the issue of educating children in the field of design: "Design has nothing to do with the benches where an eight-year-old sits. Nothing to do with his schoolbag and the ten kilos of textbooks he carries to school. Design does not deal with grandmother's arthritis, grandfather's medicine, or a classmate's ADHD. If a kid breaks his arm and goes to the E.R., no designer will show his parents the way to the X-ray room. No one will care about the arrows and the plaques. They will wander back and forth along hospital corridors, ask nurses and other parents. No superStarck will ever think of safer toys or rehabilitation equipment. All of this doesn't deserve attention. Design has one single task: to justify the price".⁷

Looking from this perspective, the exhibition of contemporary design in MSU appears to be an educational failure. Each of the objects designed by Western artists has its own separate place in a display case. They are presented separately and with no consideration for their context, as opposed to Polish design from the 1960s exposed on the opposite wall. In addition, the commentary to this room (After 1945) reassures us that a substantive division runs along the East–West line, showing examples of Western design as desirable, exclusive objects from a different, better world. (Fig. 2) Objects representing the interwar period are shown in much the same way – as beautiful objects. Of course, it is not that "pretty objects" must not be displayed but that the focus must be more on their use, role, production methods, and even on the sense of their presence in our homes. Unfortunately, the exhibit does not pose questions about how many objects we need in order to live, what these objects are, what we do with things we don't use anymore, and so on. So there's little chance that

» 5 M. Wicha, *Jak przestałem kochać design*, Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków 2015.

» 6 *Ibid.*, p. 213-224 [Chapters: *Wyciskarka* and *Forum wyciskarkij*].

» 7 *Ibid.*, p. 214–215.

a visit to the MSU will bring up issues such as recycling, overconsumption, environmental pollution, and waste generation, all of which, from today's perspective, appear to be crucial to the world we live in. Although the MSU exhibit theoretically discusses contemporary times, it ultimately remains in the past, where the historical and artistic style dominated.

Talking about taking up the subject of contemporary problems and challenges for design, one can return to the National Museum in Warsaw, this time to the Gallery of Polish Design, launched in late 2017 as part of the permanent exhibit.⁸ Regrettably, one can see from the start that MNW did not avoid the fetishization of beautiful objects of desire on white shelves, almost like at home. Only some of these items were actually meant to be used for decoration. However, the Warsaw exhibit, in contrast to the Poznań one, remains coherent and consistent in its choices – in what it presents to the public. The story of design does not change into a story of unique artistic fabrics, glass, or ceramics. MNW brings its presentation of Polish design to the present day. Among the exhibited objects there are works by Oskar Zięta and Bartosz Mucha. MNW also takes a step further, despite the small space devoted to the Design Gallery. As a visitor, we get the opportunity to look at industrial design or design for a special target group (children). These two aspects open the visitors to other issues and allow them to talk about other problems, not only aesthetic or stylistic ones. They provide a starting point for talking about, say, production, mass-scale production, and adjustment to a specific target group.

The Warsaw and Poznań exhibits, however, did not avoid one more mistake in thinking about the exhibition, especially with respect to displaying design. In the guidebook for the MNW Gallery of Polish Design we may read that the museum holdings consist of over 25,000 objects from the collection of the Centre of Modern Design (*Ośrodek Wzornictwa Nowoczesnego*)⁹. The objects on display, then, are the tip of an iceberg. Yet, in the set of captions for objects available in the Gallery itself and on the MNW website¹⁰ only a few are designated with a symbol which says that the objects may be exchanged for reasons of conservation. All the rest are there “for good”. This thinking about stability is reinforced by the system of object description, printed for the entire Gallery, completely inflexible, without taking into account the possibility of more frequent replacement of objects. The Design Gallery is meant to last. The same fea-

» 8 *Galeria Wzornictwa Polskiego*, <https://www.mnw.art.pl/kolekcje/galer/galeria-wzornictwa/> [access: 21.03.2019].

» 9 *Przewodnik Galeria Wzornictwa Polskiego*, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, Warszawa 2017, p. 4.

» 10 *Galeria Wzornictwa Polskiego, podpisy do obiektów*, http://www.mnw.art.pl/gfx/muzeum-narodowe/userfiles/_public/galeria_wzornictwa_polskiego_podpisy_do_obiektow.pdf [access: 21.03.2019].

tures of an unchangeable, immovable exhibit apply to MSU, even though there are many places on the Museum premises (for example, the Fashion Parade or the Treasury) where exhibits could be exchanged, for example in a seasonal cycle, without the loss of narration, changes of names in the plans, etc. The gallery is meant to last. Additionally, the Poznań Museum does not react to current events, as if reality were somewhere out there. For comparison and example, it is worth quoting the history of the appearance in the collections of many Western museums in 2017 of pink, female, woollen hats – the so-called pussyhats worn by protesting women during the march in Washington on 21 January 2017¹¹. An interesting Polish equivalent could be the black umbrella used in the protests in many Polish cities on 3 October 2016. This could show that known and used objects in everyday life can change their meaning or acquire new ones.

In the book mentioned above, Marcin Wicha introduces the concept of anti-design as the opposite of design. He defines these two concepts concisely, though very tellingly: Design is a process. Anti-design is a state.¹² While such a relation between design and anti-design may lead to multiple interesting conclusions for museum exhibits, far more significant are the consequences of such thinking for museum education. Education is a process, too. Therefore, its general absence from permanent museum exhibits is not surprising: it does not fit in with spaces designed in such a way. Even if education appears in them, it is in the form of workshops or lessons that do not change the form of the exhibition in any way. The same is true of the frequent attempts to place education within an exhibition, but in a separate room, so that it does not disturb the exhibition space. Meanwhile, the potential of education as a factor changing the character of a museum is enormous, especially in combination with design. Moreover, thinking in terms of a process corresponds better to the impermanence of the present day and life in general.

Examples of how to tackle contemporary problems without seeking definitive solutions can be easily found in many European (among others) museums, including those that have functioned unchanged over the years. *Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe* Hamburg as early as 2015 held an exhibition dedicated to fast fashion; the show did not have a bloated budget (it was made up mainly of charts, display panels and posters) or take up too much space¹³. Still, it proved important and necessary enough (with

» 11 *The Pussyhat*, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-pussyhat> [access: 26.04.2019], K. Brooks, *How Pussy Hats Are Making Their Way Into Museum Around the World*, HuffPost, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-pussy-hats-are-making-their-way-into-museums-around-the-world_n_58c6dd50e4b081a56dee37f3 [access: 26.04.2019].

» 12 M. Wicha, *Jak..*, p. 141.

» 13 It is accompanied by a website: <http://www.fastfashion-dieausstellung.de/en/> [access: 26.04.2019].

huge educational potential) that until now [2019] it has been installed in German museums and has moreover visited Indonesia, the Philippines, and Australia¹⁴. At the same time, it set the direction for the Hamburg museum to follow to this day. The most recent temporary exhibitions of this institution have the telling motto: *Social Design*¹⁵. The MAK (*Museum für angewandte Kunst*) in Vienna, whose exhibit, although designed by artists “stuck in time”, has changed. The celebration of the 150th anniversary was marked among others by a new exhibition titled *MAK Design Lab*, strongly linked to contemporary issues and highly appreciated by visitors. Similarly, the *Victoria and Albert Museum*, so deeply rooted in history, with its impressive collection of works of art and crafts, is opening up to completely different subjects and, consequently, new types of exhibitions. In May 2019 it launched a temporary exhibition called *FOOD: Bigger than the Plate*,¹⁶ dedicated to the production and consumption of food today and to the consequences of our dietary choices. Naturally, this museum does not scrap the exhibits that have earned its prestigious position, yet it becomes patently clear that a new thinking about design and its social role has dawned.

Heraclitus of Ephesus observed back in the 6th c. BC that everything flows (*panta rhei*). The tempo of change is unprecedented today and there is no indication that the foreseeable future is going to be any different. Therefore, a museum education (among others) which takes these processes into account, as well as the design of exhibitions that give flexibility to the creators of exhibitions, seems an obvious choice. Unfortunately, as demonstrated above, this is not true of many Polish museums, which still remain in a more or less distant past. This is most evident in exhibitions devoted to everyday objects and design which accompany us on a daily basis. According to these exhibitions, the main role in our lives is played by cups, vases, nice chairs, or decorative fabrics. This may, of course, give a false sense of bliss and a kind of security, for which the more uncertain the future, the greater the demand. The past, on the other hand, is already known, familiarised, and apparently safer. From this point of view, it is easier to understand that many Polish museums demonstrate a kind of escapism and an unwillingness to confront the dynamically changing reality. Education can help. So can design. However, they should be allowed to play their role. ●

» 14 The newest edition will take place in the latter half of 2019 at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen Berlin. <https://www.mkg-hamburg.de/en/exhibitions/archive/2015/fast-fashion.html> [access: 26.04.2019].

» 15 “Social Design”, <https://www.mkg-hamburg.de/en/exhibitions/current/social-design.html> [access: 26.04.2019].

» 16 “FOOD: Bigger than the Plate”, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/food-bigger-than-the-plate> [access: 26.04.2019].