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The cultural life in Vilnius in the interwar period

Every city, growing for centuries as the natural environment for its inhabitants, is the center of attention where the best and bravest citizens make countless efforts in the aim of making its specific buildings look grand and nice as well as improving the city as a whole to best meet the needs both practical and spiritual of whole generations

[13, p. 1].

The interwar period in Vilnius

It was Vilnius that was the center of national traditions and Polishness during partitions. After the January Uprising failed, the cultural life of the city virtually collapsed. Only after 1919, when Stefan Batory University, closed by czarist authorities in 1832, was reactivated, were the important organizations of artists and scientific societies established in the city. The city soon became the center of the artistic community. As a result of its great achievements in

the area of fine arts, theater, literature, architecture, conservation of historical sites and scientific research, Vilnius was an influential cultural center in the interwar period. It should be stressed that the significance of artistic groups operating in the city was great. Both the number of exhibitions and the participation of the artists in Vilnius in Polish and foreign exhibitions also testify to the presence of Polish culture in that city.

Vilnius organizations of artists

The first Polish organization of professional artists in the interwar period was the Vilnius Society of Fine Arts (*Wileńskie Towarzystwo Artystów Plastyków*). It was established in May 1920 by the painters Ludomir Sleńdziński, Waław Czechowicz, Bronisław Jamontt, Józef Karczewski, Michał Rouba, the sculptor Piotr Hermanowicz and the architect Stanisław Woźnicki. L. Sleńdziński was its first president and he held that position during the whole existence of WTAP, except for 1923–1925, when he was traveling abroad. The Statute of the Society, was approved on May 28th, 1920, provided the basic objectives that included the promoting of artistic culture, providing assistance to artists and integrating the artistic community. Regarding the members of WTAP, it can be noted that

apart from Józef Karczewski, who came from Warsaw, they all were from Vilnius. They all studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Petersburg. Soon the Society grew and among its new members were e.g. Rafał Jachimowicz, Edward Karniej, Teodor Bursze, Jan Dąbrowski, Szczesny Kowarski, Gustaw Pilecki, Czesław Wierusz-Kowalski. They were painters, architects and a sculptor. On February 27, 1921, the Society opened the “School of Drawing” offering three-year-long courses of studies. The program included classes in drawing, painting, sculpture, technical drawing, composition and graphic. Lectures included art history, perspective, anatomy, pedagogy, drawing methods and descriptive geometry. L. Sleńdziński was the school’s director and when he was abroad Czesław Wierusz-Kowalski would assume the director’s obligations. It turned out that there was a great demand for this type of school

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in Vilnius and around it. The school was very popular and its operation was specially appreciated in the artistic community in Vilnius. A review of its students' works exhibitions read that: "The secondary school of drawing is the first real result of the activity initiated by W.T.A.P. against dilettantism in pure art and applied by implanting students with the fundamental knowledge of fine arts – both theoretical and practical. The exhibited works (...) evidently testified to the qualifications of the school's directors with the painter artist L. Śleńdziński, their rigorous methods, and the professional knowledge of the teaching system" [3, p. 43]. Although as a result of withdrawing the ministerial aid in 1923 the school was closed, the members of WTAP continued to teach drawing. Two years later the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Enlightenment opened Supplemental Courses for Artisans that were transformed in 1928 into the School of Handicrafts in Vilnius.

Ten years after WTAP was established, on February 14, 1930, Czesław Znamierowski, Władysław Dunin-Marcinkiewicz and Piotr Żyngiel established the Vilnius Society of Independent Artist Painters (*Wileńskie Towarzystwo Niezależnych Artystów Malarzy*). Its Statute provided that its objective is to "spiritually unite the artistic painting forces that are not associated in any kind of society in order to strive together for the elevation of culture in painting art" [6, p. 30]. Two years later, WT-NAM with its new members assumed the name of Vilnius Society of Independent Fine Arts (*Wileńskie Towarzystwo Niezależnych Artystów Sztuk Plastycznych*). Its new Statute defined its objectives which included e.g. organizing exhibitions, lectures, and opening art schools. The Society existed until 1939. During the interwar period, other groups were established too such as "Art Cooperative (*Spółdzielnia Artystyczna*)", "Vilnius Artists' Cooperative (*Spółdzielnia Pracy Artystów Wileńskich*)", "Society

of Fine Arts Vilnius Group (*Towarzystwo Artystów Plastyków Grupa Wileńska*)", "Jewish Society of Fine Arts (*Żydowskie Towarzystwo Artystów Plastyków*)". In line with their Statutes, apart from protecting their professional interests, all of those organizations contributed to a great increase in the number of exhibitions and turning Vilnius into an important artistic and cultural center in Poland. The first exhibition in Vilnius after 18 years was held in December 1921. It exhibited the Polish painting masterpieces since the second half of the 19th century until contemporary times. The first Annual Exhibition of the Vilnius Society of Fine Arts was opened on April 23rd, 1922 in Vilnius at Mickiewicza Street 33a. It was a memorable event for the community of artists [14, pp. 7–9], [9, pp. 2–3], [4, p. 3]. "Południe" Magazine wrote that "Vilnius held the first ever exhibition of the works of its own artists and that is why the exhibition of the Society with 245 works of its 24 members is for Vilnius a serious and promising event.(...) The most prominent painters include Mr. L. Śleńdziński who relentlessly strives for impeccable composition, synthetically enhanced form enclosed within a kind of highly expressive character of drawing. His profound knowledge and respect for the mastery of early painting is a means of achieving those objectives so his works, portraits and pan-neau could be distinguished from among other contemporaries with perfect understanding of oil painting, fitness, and simplicity of form as well as decorative planes" [11, p. 58]. Already in October the same year, the Society held the first exhibition in Warsaw in the building of former Officer Cadet School in Łazienki Park [2, p. 15]. The exhibition was honored with the presence of Marshal Józef Piłsudski with a group of diplomats and celebrities from the Warsaw cultural community. Apart from a lot of exhibitions held by the organizations of artists operating in Vilnius, individual exhibitions were organized in the city



Fig. 1. Vilnius. "Bracia Jabłkowscy" Joint Stock Company Department Store Building, designed by Karol Jankowski and Franciszek Lilpop. Source: [14]

Il. 1. Wilno. Dom Towarowo-Przemysłowy Spółki Akcyjnej „Bracia Jabłkowscy”, proj. Karol Jankowski i Franciszek Lilpop. Źródło: [14]

too – for instance the exhibition of sketches by Stanisław Noakowski in 1923, watercolors by Anna Römerowa in 1926, wood engravings by Władysław Bielecki in 1933, paintings by Wojciech Kossak in 1937 and many others. It

should be emphasized that all these exhibitions had special significance in the artistic life of the city, being the core of its cultural life.

The Cultural Magazines in Vilnius

A significant growth in the number of the periodicals on culture should also be noted. For two years since September 1921, WTAP published its own magazine dedicated to art and artistic review “Południe”. A dozen or so periodicals on art were published during the interwar period¹. Furthermore, such dailies as “Kurier Wileński”, “Dziennik Wileński”, and “Słowo” dedicated pretty much

of its publishing space to culture too. The authors of art reviews in the press included art historians, local writers, journalists as well as artists themselves. The community of Vilnius was informed on a regular basis not only of the current artistic events in the city but it was provided with the information about culture in general as well. Undoubtedly, these activities contributed to the popular growth of interest in art.

¹ “Hipogryf” (1920), “Południe”, “Sztuka i Film” (1924), “Wileński Przegląd Artystyczny” (1924), “Tygodnik Wileński” (1925), “Przegląd Artystyczny” (1925–1936), “Sztuka i Sport” (1926), “Światfilm” (1927), “Źródła Mocy” (1927–1931), “Nasza Forma” (1930), “Włóczę-

ga” (1932–1936), “Środy Literackie” (1935–1937), “Comoedia” (1938–1939). Source [6, pp. 47–48].

Architecture of Vilnius

Some of the buildings which were erected during the interwar period in Vilnius were significant achievements of Polish architecture of that period. They include slightly earlier designs by Antoni Wiwulski (1877-1919) – the sculptor and architect who designed the church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Pohulanka in 1913. The construction was suspended when World War I broke out and the architect’s death prevented its completion as originally designed because A. Wiwulski did not leave the final design version. J. Kłos claimed that the building had “completely new forms, sculptural rather than architectural.(...) Although the artist made an audacious attempt on design-

ing an exceptionally difficult building and he himself was only looking for a means of expression of his ideas relying on the patterns on French modernism, one could expect that his talents would win over still uncontrolled material and overtly vivid imagination” [13, p. 91]. In the 1960s, the church, which was still unfinished, was converted into a performance hall of the Trade Unions’ Community Center (*Dom Kultury Związków Zawodowych*). The “Bracia Jabłkowscy” Joint Stock Company Department Store Building which opened on June 12, 1924 (Fig. 1) was one of the first architectural designs in the interwar period in Vilnius. In 1921, “Bracia Jabłkowscy” Company



Fig. 2. Vilnius. House at Montwiłłowski Street, designed by Stefan Narębski. Source: [16]

Il. 2. Wilno. Dom przy zaułku Montwiłłowskim, proj. Stefan Narębski. Źródło: [16]

purchased the building that was only in the construction stage. “The original design of the building was different: the first building with office space and stores at the ground floor in Vilnius was to be built in the most prominent place of the city, at the junction of three streets. These plans were thwarted by the turmoil of war” [1, p. 10]. Karol Jankowski and Franciszek Lilpop bought the building alteration design to meet the needs of Bracia Jabłkowsy Joint Stock Company. The construction was completed in 1921–1924. The architects used a steel-reinforced concrete frame structure that enabled them to freely design the open-space interior layout. The main staircase with elevators was designed in the center opposite the entrance. Its architecture is dominated by simple forms with simple historical detail and the rhythmic layout of pilasters emphasizes the monumental character of the façade. There is a certain analogy visible between that building and the building of the “Bracia Jabłkowsy” Department Store designed 10 years earlier by the same team of architects in Warsaw. It can be claimed that the classical composition of forms was combined with a frame structure. A.K. Olszewski classifies that architecture as “half-modernism based on the classical conception and other historical forms” [10, p. 31]. The no longer existing residential house for officers located at Wileńska Street is another building worth noting. That five-storied grand building was erected at the end of the 1920s. Its architecture was based on a symmetrical axial plan, whereas the forms – tympana, columns, and porticos followed the ancient–Palladian patterns [10, p. 30]. That monumental structure, destroyed in 1944, was designed in its forms in line with academic classicism. At the same time, the miners’ barracks designed by Juliusz Klos were built. That building also features evident forms of academic classicism. *The large building of the Institute of Descriptive Anatomy designed by Arch. Konrad Klos*, built in 1928–1929, had similar architecture [13, p. 162]. The construction of the Technical School designed by Ludwik Sokołowski began in the second half of the 1920s. “The complex, designed in the spirit of historicism, was composed of the main building with an elevated projection

and side wings whose structures cascaded along with the landscape. The unfinished façades indicated the ground level ready for rustication, prominent cornices and sills. The tall roofs with lucarnes and architecturally designed chimneys provided an attractive and monumental building” [8, pp. 126, 127]. Other designs featuring the forms of academic classicism, designed by Stefan Narębski, included for instance the house at Montwiłłowski Street from 1929 (Fig. 2) of the elementary school in Antokol 1930–1931 (Fig. 3). During the interwar period, there were also other buildings designed in Vilnius with half-modern features and no distinct forms of academic classicism such as constructed in 1931 the building of the Chamber of Commerce designed by Zygmunt Tarasin or the Polish Radio Station designed by Antoni Dygat at the beginning of the 1930s. Interesting public buildings were erected in the second half of the 1930s too.

They include for instance the building constructed in 1936–1937 of *Powszechna Kasa Oszczędności* designed by Zbigniew Puget and Juliusz Żórawski (Fig. 4). The five-storied building, designed partly in frame structure, features a representative interior of the two-storied tall transaction room decorated with a wall painting by Ludomir Sleńdziński titled “Work–Fortune–Frugality”. It is a triptych painted with tempera in *al secco* technique presenting the allegories of *Fortune, Work, Frugality*. The composition by Sleńdziński took up the whole wall above the entrance to the treasury vault. “Everything was clearly and logically subjected to the main objective of the work – its decorative function” [5, p. 5]. Another example is the building constructed in 1937–1938 of *Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego* designed by Stanisław Gałęzowski and Jerzy Pańkowski (Fig. 5).

The four-storied building in reinforced-steel frame structure also had its transaction room decorated with a wall painting by Ludomir Sleńdziński. It was an allegory titled “Economic Life in Vilnius Land”. Its central section with the scene titled the “Symbol of Time” was framed on the sides by the paintings of such national industries as “Weaving, Industry, Carpentry” and “Commerce, Fishing,



Fig. 3. Vilnius. Elementary School in Antokol, designed by Stefan Narębski. Source: [15]

Il. 3. Wilno. Szkoła Powszechna na Antokolu, proj. Stefan Narębski. Źródło: [15]



Fig. 4. Vilnius. Building of Powszechna Kasa Oszczędności, designed by Zbigniew Puget and Juliusz Żórawski, (photo by M.J. Żychowska, 2009)

Il.4. Wilno. Gmach Powszechnej Kasy Oszczędności, proj. Zbigniew Puget i Juliusz Żórawski, (fot. M.J. Żychowska, 2009)

Timber Floating”. The whole composition falls in between the “conventionalized classicism and realism” [7, p. 492]. The entrance projection was decorated with the sculpture by Tadeusz Godziszewski. Another public building from the second half of the 1930s was the Social Insurance building designed by Stanisław Murczyński and Jerzy Sołtan constructed in 1937–1938. The five-storied building was erected as a frame structure. E. Małachowicz stated that “it is one of the most prominent architectural structures of those times in Vilnius. (...) The whole structure (...) alludes to classicism” [8, pp. 129, 130]. At the end



Fig. 5. Vilnius. Building of Bank Gospodarstwa Rolnego, designed by Stanisław Gałęzowski and Jerzy Pańkowski, (photo by M.J. Żychowska, 2009)

Il. 5. Wilno. Gmach Banku Gospodarstwa Rolnego, proj. Stanisław Gałęzowski i Jerzy Pańkowski, (fot. M.J. Żychowska, 2009)

of the 1930s, the elementary school designed by Romuald Gutt with evident functionalism features was constructed at Beliny-Prażmowskiego Street. There were numerous other residential buildings designed in the interwar period such as townhouses, villas, single family houses. Apart from that there were a lot of great designs that were never completed because of World War II broke out. This is also why some of the constructions that began just before 1939 were never finished.

It can be claimed that many new important buildings were constructed in the interwar period in Vilnius. It is clear that architects cooperated with sculptors and painters. Apart from the architectural heritage of the interwar period one should not forget that Vilnius is a city with great Gothic through Renaissance architecture.

Vilnius, culture, interwar

During the interwar period, Vilnius was one of the main centers of artistic life in Poland, a city of art and culture. All of the phenomena described above testify to the existence of an important cultural community affecting not

only the city itself but far beyond its borders. It can be claimed that Vilnius was one of the most important cultural centers in the Second Republic of Poland.

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Życie kulturalne Wilna a dwudziestolecie międzywojenne

W okresie zaborów znaczącym ośrodkiem narodowych tradycji oraz polskości było Wilno. Po upadku powstania styczniowego życie kulturalne miasta wyraźnie się załamało. Dopiero od roku 1919, od momentu reaktywowania zamkniętego przez władze carskie w 1832 roku Uniwersytetu im. Stefana Batoiego, powstały tu znaczące organizacje artystyczne oraz towarzystwa naukowe. Miasto wkrótce stało się centrum środowisk twórczych. Sukcesy w dziedzinie plastyki, teatru, literatury, architektury, konserwacji zabytków oraz badań naukowych spowodowały, że Wilno w okresie międzywojennym było znaczącym w kulturze miastem. Należy tu podkreślić znaczenie działalności ugrupowań artystycznych, jak chociażby Wileńskiego Towarzystwa Artystów Plastyków, czy Wileńskiego

Towarzystwa Niezależnych Artystów Malarzy. Liczba zorganizowanych wystaw oraz aktywność wileńskich twórców w wystawach zarówno polskich, jak i zagranicznych stanowią świadectwo obecności tego miasta w kulturze polskiej. W okresie dwudziestolecia międzywojennego w Wilnie powstały również realizacje architektoniczne stanowiące znaczące osiągnięcia architektury polskiej tego okresu. W architekturze tej wyraźnie widoczne jest współdziałanie architektów z innymi twórcami, jak rzeźbiarzami, czy malarzami. Wszystkie te zjawiska dowodzą istnienia w latach międzywojennych istotnego środowiska kulturalnego oddziaływającego nie tylko na samo miasto, ale również daleko poza nim.

Key words: Vilnius, artists, interwar

Słowa kluczowe: Wilno, artyści, dwudziestolecie międzywojenne