

Stefan Żechowski

(Born 19 VII 1912, Książ Wielki - Died 28 X 1984, Książ Wielki)

The painter, pastellist, draughtsman, illustrator. He was born to a peasant family as the youngest of four sons of Florentyna née Gawęcka and Wincenty Żechowski. In 1929 began studies at the Decorative Arts and Artistic Industry School in Cracow (graduated in 1932), in 1929-1936 as a member of the artistic group *Szczep Rogate Serce* of Stanisław Szukalski took part in all exhibitions of the group signing his works in the beginning as *Radosław*, and since 1932 as *Ziemin*. He had his first one-man show of drawings in Cracow in 1930. In 1936-1937 he created a cycle of 37 illustrations to the novel *Motory* by Emil Zegadłowicz, which was banned in 1938 on a charge of the dissemination of anti-state and indecent content, in 1945 he became a member of the Polish Workers' Party and in 1946 he safeguarded officially works of art in the landed estates subdivided by the state (Miechów region), but he left for Zabrze under threat of death by the underground (National Armed Forces, NSZ), in the 1940s-1950s he produced a series of portrait postage stamps and the Social Realism paintings for schools, youth clubs and culture centres, above all portraits of the famous literati, scientists and Polish revolutionaries, in 1953 his many drawings, correspondence and diary perished in the fire of his family house in Książ Wielki. In 1965 Andrzej Banach organised a display of his works at the *Librairie la Proue* Gallery in Brussels, in 1966 his works were reproduced in the anthologies *Les chefs-d'œuvre de l'amour sensuel* published in Paris, in 1973-1974 he was awarded a grant by the Kosciuszko Foundation in New York to stay in the USA for six months, and he had there his one-man show in 1974. In 1977 Ryszard Wójcik produced a TV documentary on the artist *Pustelnik*, in 1981 Wydawnictwo Łódzkie published his reconstructed memoirs *Na jawie*, and in 2004 Stefan Szlachtycz made another documentary on him *Żech. Prawda naga*. He had altogether eighteen one-man shows (the two permanent ones including) and fourteen joint exhibitions in 1930-2013, his works are part of the collections at the National Museums in Kielce, Cracow, Poznań, Warsaw and Wrocław, District Museums in Rzeszów and Toruń, Museum in Bielsko-Biała, Upper Silesia Museum in Bytom, Emil Zegadłowicz Museum in Gorzeń Górny, Silesian Museum in Katowice, Zamoyski Family Museum in Kozłówka, Eryk Lipiński Caricature Museum in Warsaw, Post and Telecommunication Museum in Wrocław, Municipal Museum in Zabrze, Artistic Exhibitions Gallery in Kielce, *U Jaksy* Gallery in Miechów and several dozen private collections in Poland and abroad.

Stefan Żechowski was the artist that expressed revolutionary content in a traditional form which he much appreciated having been brought up in admiration for the Cracow school, Polish Art Nouveau painting, European academism and symbolism simultaneously showing in general complete disregard for the achievements of the 20th-century avant-garde. He transferred his extraordinary, even as for an artist, introvert oversensitivity and imagination

entirely to his works of very individual philosophical meaning and conservative, chiaroscuro form rejected by the modern artists. He was the uncompromising and consistent artist, because he would paint, irrespective of an artistic technique, only what he really wanted to paint and what he thought was worth of his constant interest heedless of opinion of the people around him and professional criticism.

Introduction

The National Museum in Kielce displayed in 1997 a modest exhibition of Stefan Żechowski, the non-monographic one on purpose, which resulted from a desire to show off the augmentation of the 20th-century collection of the Museum by forty nine works by the artist through the generous deed of Mrs Marianna Żechowska. The exhibition catalogue sold well in the country and abroad - it is obviously easy matter as regards Żechowski - but the fact that the impressive output of his was part of many public and private collections led to an idea of producing an enormous bilingual publication on him, the iconographic encyclopaedia that could blend all topics, motifs, interests, passions and phobias completely crystallised already in the 1930s. The preparation of the photographic-archival inventory of the artist's works at nine museums and galleries and three private collections (423 works) by J. Daniel and K. K. Pęczalski in 1997-1999 was decisive.ⁱ The inventory was gifted to the Museum in 2002 for every interested scholar to make use of it, it was stored digitally and in the meantime it became naturally the very historic source, because for the last several years some of the public collections which appeared in the inventory were augmented, some of the private ones ceased to exist at all or were reduced considerably, and other collections came into being during a period of the constantly developing Polish art market. As a result, after the Museum reached a decision to publish the Polish-English catalogue raisonné of the artist's œuvre available in Poland and to organise his great retrospective exhibition, and conventional and online preliminary research was announced, eventually the artistic output could comprise over 1500 works from the nineteen public and sixteen private collections.

But the collection of Marianna Żechowska was crucial having been examined as a whole for the first time, with the artist's works never displayed even in a narrow circle of viewers, and obviously the Museum's collection itself augmented by consecutive gifts of the artist's widow to the imposing number of four hundred and sixty three works.

The premised catalogue has been aimed at presenting the complete, prolific and consistent artist through the works attributed to him, the artist extraordinarily sincere in his non-avant-gardeness and anachronism which in the end resulted in originality and instantly recognisable manner to be copied only in a pathetic way - the artefacts collected and examined on an unprecedented scale as regards their amount and selection should become, like hard digital data, the higher authority when making any attribution and judgement evaluation of the

works newly appeared on the art market. It is only after having analysed the output of Żechowski comprehensively that one can appreciate his niche uniqueness though in that case extreme introversion and real poverty (the latter accompanied him despite of the political system he happened to live in) influenced evidently his artistic choices regarding both preferred cheap techniques without developing oil painting and humanistic and existential topics, often in a symbolic disguise, which inseparably define his art. In total, the oil paintings opening the catalogue are not so few (158) as compared with the pastels (170) for which together with the drawings Żechowski is mostly renowned. The smaller part of them is painted with highest competence in the respectable technique including the refined symbolic paintings and several Socialist-Realistic ones which is not surprising, because the Socialist Realism was by definition an academic style. Having characterised the inventory from 1997-1999 I compared the Socialist-Realistic and overoptimistic works by Żechowski - soft, sculptural, individually composed - with among others works by the famous and very popular American illustrators such as Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) - in a different place and time Żechowski could have been his Polish counterpart.ⁱⁱ In that group a discovery was a group of small landscapes from *Książ Wielki* with or without staffage, which is unusual in the Żechowski's output and it can be regretted that there are so few of them, because they are very good artistically. The group as the first one introduces also the self-portraits which stand out from the rest in most of the groups in terms of quantity and quality, it is obvious that Żechowski attached great significance to them, in more durable techniques they are more refined and their idealisation typical for him draws on the Polish (Jacek Malczewski) or Dutch-Flemish models invariably admired by the artist. The less interesting here are representations of women, there are many painted sketches and portraits of identified sitters, but one can hardly find in them a fortunate combination of fascination with a female delicate body and heavy demanding technique. The smallest is the watercolour group (171), once again the very early landscapes and symbolic compositions are the most interesting, and the two sets of representations of animals commissioned and not used are testimony to another talent of Żechowski wasted by circumstances in that case as an illustrator of fairy tales for children.

Pastels introduce a really big variety of themes and styles, from the typical pompous ones à la Szukalski (very few in the group) to the awkward ones by the ailing Żechowski (fortunately very few also). The symbolic compositions are the most valuable, here the artist's mastery of crayon combined with the variety of topics brought about fully satisfactory artistically results, though not so numerous as in the case of the black-and-white drawings. And above all female nudity and erotic representations for sure dominant and the most conspicuous in the group - the collected works entitle to repeat once again that for Żechowski erotic topics were not an addition, a theme imposed on the artist spurred by actually commercially modest and very selective popularity; they were simultaneously developed

with the topics concerning the eternal battle of good and evil, and they were the fundamental and deeply felt artistic topics since his teenage period, despite of a hostile reception from the Polish opinionated circles before and after the Second World War (constant accusations of pornography and the mentioned anachronism that verged on kitsch, presently they seem to be infantile and unprofessional). By that nudity and erotic topics Żechowski did not express only sensual relations between a woman and a man, but they were also a means to show the artist's and the man's fears faced with the intrusive world, badly constructed, and with the nature's biological laws and their not very humanitarian and non-intellectual philosophy of survival the strongest. The world was bad, but not completely when before eyes longing for the Greek ideal a naked woman or a man stand or in a moment of their natural union, hence their representations can do without any hypocrisy, draw literally on ancient treasure of topics, and still more on abundant erotica of the great masters of modern Europe, though bearing in mind the artist's admiration for his steatopygian sitters that origin could be definitely by far moved back to the very beginning of representation of human nudity and (inseparably) sexuality. That is why maybe the erotic scenes by Żechowski are not the delicious erotica of Rococo, but a mixture not to copied by someone else of a short while, the lot, torture, derision, embarrassing physiology or destiny.ⁱⁱⁱ But to be more precise - and to correct judgements passed several years ago - his erotic scenes are not only the delicious erotica, but they are it also, the pure pleasure and fun, more idealised in pastel than in pencil equal play of partners, not distorted by domination of a magnified woman over a horror-stricken miniaturised man of Art Nouveau origin. The little heads of women and men in the group are very refined, their cream-pink complexion characteristic for the artist, like the identical hue of their naked bodies' skin, is set off by the emerald green, blue, navy blue with tints of yellow and black, classic red is the least and it appears above all in the ginger-coral variant. Among the few religious compositions some lately discovered are worth of interest, because of their vivid colour scheme and original representation of a less known theme.

Incomparably the most numerous group of black-and-white and monochrome works begins with the compositions in Indian ink and pen and ballpoint (118), not small set of the finished works and sketches in which, as in the most of the groups, the typical iconographic pattern of representations is repeated - symbolic compositions, male heads (well-thought self-portraits, of course, and famous people including) and female heads, nudes and erotic scenes (for the first time more explicit). Short cycle with angels, winged persons, satyrs and fauns, caricatures and fairy-tale compositions present the Żechowski's excellent stroke equally useful at showing both beauty or solemnity and ugliness or ridicule.

The finished drawings and illustrations (479) is the big group of works of the widest iconographic variety, together with the sketches, with which Żechowski has been primarily identified by those scholars that want to, through some of the works' literary pathos and seriousness, make of Żechowski an artist worth of academic interest. If the artist used to read

much and had his literary idols it does not mean that one can regard him as a more or less bright illustrator of literature. It is detrimental to him not to appreciate above all his visual imagination, not the verbal one, Żechowski thought by images, literature was his inspiration out of many, it was whirling visions which he remembered for years as every visualiser that caused him to repeat the same topics and motifs over and over again - it has been obvious after having analysed the collected oeuvre. Much more interesting and justified is to follow formal evolution of his human figure which after all became his main means of expression. He chose a slender apparition man or on the contrary a very muscular man with characteristic grimace or gesture of a battle with a much more stronger opponent as symbols of his life's grand ideas which he described at length in his memoirs and diaries - and in the centre of his interest was always the idea of battle with evil in the form of partly anthropomorphic snake creature in multiple configurations with the Earth as a planet afflicted by it as well as by death and poverty, and having conquered even Christ all the three win. The compositions are either visionary or naturalistic, moreover, his rendering of a detail in the latter place Żechowski among the greatest virtuosos of pencil and it is difficult in principle to compare that mastery with achievements of anyone from his contemporaries, because it is extraordinarily non-modern in a sense of a neutral quality and not an assessment. Whereas the appalling scenes from the Second World War rendered in the mentioned soft, haptic and sculptural manner despite of that terrify with represented cruelty. The Socialist Realism of Żechowski in pencil is certainly more individual than the one of most of Polish artists active in that unfortunate artistically period, the sculptural form narrates prescriptively positive story in a vivid way with a great liking for a genre detail. The self-portraits in that group are various, they come from different periods, like the male heads in general, present in a definite way a whole scale of pencil manners of Żechowski and without doubt they were important for him since the early 1930s. The female heads here are much less numerous, but they are varied, of different age and views. The full bloom comes with pairs (the self-portrait pairs including), nudes and erotic scenes. The woman's body pulsates and beams and she herself is very satisfied with it regardless of her physique or the presence of a man that is submissive, because he desires her. In that group it appears in a finished and fully intended way the complete exposition of a woman and a man's nudity and their union in many positions without any inhibition and veil, very naturally, and the sculptural and chiaroscuro modelling of Żechowski performs well once again. I do think that the collected material supports an opinion on Żechowski as one of the best author of erotic scenes in Europe and around the world, and it does not exclude the fact of not all of them being on the same artistic level. But even the most explicit drawings still in general comply with the Kant's definition of non stimulating beauty - in most cases Żechowski struck a balance between an understated composition, stroke, shade and a view of a figure which interested him unlike the 18th or 19th-century erotica either too detailed by referring to the late-Renaissance or baroque

examples or explicitly pornographic without any attention to recognisable individualism. The topics known from the oil and pastel groups, the biblical and mythological ones including, repeats themselves in other variations like the artist's favourite women's naked bodies multiplied fern-like. In that group also the motif of the winged man or woman is one of the best. The least numerous are representations of eroticism and death or erotic grotesques in which a miniaturised man is dominated by exceedingly amused women. As one of two exceptions one should draw attention to two drawings from 1936 (cat. 740, 741) from a cycle of works on Stefan and Helena - both of them are really exceptional in the Żechowski's output, they only are a visual testimony to the artist's fascination with the 20th-century Surrealism of which he would mentioned - motionless like stone statues figures made from pencil and charcoal pellets create an uncanny mood of a parallel world and change contemporary genre scenes into timeless permanency which Georges Seurat would not be ashamed of.

The illustrations, exceptionally important for Żechowski, are not stylistically a homogenous group - they are both naturalistic, visionary and sculptural, they span over thirty years of the artist's activity, so it is not surprising, but that is why they represent it on a very high level bearing in mind the artist's genuine devotion and commitment. They cannot presently arouse any sensation, they are solid and simply heavy, because of content that haunted the artist, they equal the texts and are very original. The depressing SF anti-utopia *On the Silver Globe* by Jerzy Żuławski seems to be less black in the curvy-carnal interpretation of Żechowski, on the other hand it does not surprise that the artist got interested in the novel that in fact focuses on two known to him loves - the loves of a woman and the Earth. But a discovery happened among the illustrations - in one of the private collections there are fifteen drawings (1969, cat. 938-952) to another SF novel *Zwölf Uhr Einundvierzig. Ein Roman aus dem Jahr 2289* (*Twelve O'Clock Forty One. A Novel from the Year 2289*) by Konrad Gruda, the Polish émigré sports journalist, published in Germany in 1975 and unknown in Poland. The Polish original of the novel does not exist anymore, to which Żechowski had to produce the drawings, unfortunately they were not published in the German edition, but survived and perfectly represent a pleasant mixture of industrial-streamlined style of the 1960s (after all, it was the age of space travels) with the curves of Żechowski.

Undoubtedly a huge set of the sketches by Żechowski (493) is a discovery, most of them now in the Museum's collection thanks to successive gifts of Mrs Marianna Żechowska. The variety of themes and styles makes them a thick compendium on the artist's skills and technique, his topic obsessions, enormous imagination and philosophical quandaries. The earliest sketches refer deliberately to the admired Jacek Malczewski, angels, angel women, winged persons, but soon sharp-formed, depressed, suppressed or rebellious figures of men appear - his constant symbols of the lost battle with the world. The self-portraits and little

heads of famous and unknown men, serious and caricature, idealised and realistic, ephebes and old men, most often in full face or profile, like in the above mentioned groups, but in a wider selection of them - the independent sketches or first versions of finished compositions in more durable techniques. The heads of women are less numerous, there are much more their nudes in diverse positions and disguises, but always without a too detailed background - the naked woman of Żechowski is hardly a symbol of grand ideas or abstract notions (Polonia-Poland, death, longing etc.), she is above all sheer desire and its fulfilment in a small, but important group of erotic scenes in which a man is either her equal partner or he helplessly accompanies her lush sexuality. Those erotic scenes should become the touchstone of authenticity of tasteless, inept imitations which appear on the Polish art market - that is why also preliminary sketches have been reproduced in the catalogue and it concerns genre and religious scenes as well - a multitude of the attributed combinations of Żechowski's strokes should facilitate rejection of forgeries and confirmation of original works on every theme. The group closes with the portfolio of the burnt fragments, handmade by the artist himself that in pain collected his partly burnt works after the fire of his house in 1953 - they were very valuable for him, hence they have been included in the catalogue as a whole and exception.

In the varia group there are a representative selection of wine bottles decorated with handmade compositions by the artist, the concept of Andrzej Banach that did so much for popularisation of his art in Poland and abroad, the group lacks objects from abroad exactly, but as a matter of principle the publication contains only the works from the Polish collections.

From the beginning the catalogue was to be simultaneously Polish-English on account of an intention to present and popularise Żechowski further abroad in a complete and less sensational, but more scholarly way. And for that reason some glosses have been added, some have been edited with regard to an Anglo-Saxon reader that surely interprets Żechowski in his own cultural context.

To this day Stefan Żechowski had smaller or bigger one-man shows and displays of rather regional and social importance, accompanied by publications which to a small degree did justice to his untypical talent (the Kielce exhibition from 1997 including). The present event has been aimed to strip definitively that output of an incorrect and evaluative adjective *controversial*, because in Europe and the world it was not controversial even in the 1920s and 1930s. It is rich in imagination which is not the imagination of the great pioneers of the European avant-garde, because it is not pioneering, ascetic and intellectual, but mannerly carnal, narrative and mythical on comparable level of mastering artistic expression and passion and in addition with a distinct aftertaste of the interesting phobia.

The detailed analysis of the inventory and the works by S. Żechowski it comprised see: I. Rajkowska, *Stefan Żechowski (1912-1984) - Nie to jest sprawą losu, że takie mam życie, Lecz to, że taki jestem*, RMNKi T. 23, Kielce 2007, pp. 13-25. Mrs Marianna Żechowska made the inventory come into existence

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 16

ⁱⁱⁱ See I. Rajkowska, *Sztuka erotyczna Żechowskiego*, in: *Stefan Żechowski*. Katalog wystawy, Muzeum Narodowe w Kielcach 1997