

## ***(Non)mandatory teaching of KPism***

The exhibition commemorating the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Paris Committee (Komitet Paryski) aims to revisit the work of Józef Pankiewicz's students, known as KPists – the group's name derived from the acronym for the Paris Committee (KP) – in the context of the reception of their artistic programme at the post-war Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Artists spanning several generations gathered around the studios of Jan Cybis, Artur Nacht-Samborski and Eugeniusz Eibisch. They espoused the tradition of the professors and masters, breaking or contesting it in various ways.

The title of the exhibition makes playful reference to Andrzej Osęka's "Mandatory Teaching of KPism", a text published in *Przegląd Kulturalny* [Cultural Review] in 1960. Having seen the end-of-year exhibition of the Faculty of Painting, Osęka criticized the academic curriculum, accusing it of insular conception of art, conventional and not very well defined – in which the preferred mode is to extract "painting values" while rejecting drawing, and "defining the form with colour".

Osęka's review has inspired us to look at the teaching at the Academy through the prism of the holdings of the Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts, which include numerous student pieces collected since the late 1950s. The selection of paintings shows how the artists incorporated the KPist capital, the idiom of the Academy, into their own art practice. The relay of generations shows artists exploiting the lesson of colour, using colour and light as means of composition and expression, but also referring, apart from technical issues, to the autonomy of the painting, which was important for the KPists.

The exhibition is divided into two parts. The first one includes paintings by Józef Pankiewicz and his students from the circle of the Paris Committee, such as Jan Cybis, Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa, Józef Czapski, Piotr Potworowski, Janusz Strzałecki, Artur Nacht-Samborski, Zygmunt Waliszewski – as well as painters who joined them later, such as Stanisław Szczepański and Czesław Rzepiński. The second part presents some artists from the studios of Cybis, Nacht-Samborski and Eibisch, and from those of other professors who resumed the KPist programme at the post-war Academy.

Most of the featured works come from the collection of the Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Paintings by Józef Pankiewicz and members of the Paris Committee from the 1920s and 1930s are on loan from the National Museum in Warsaw. Several works supplementing the exhibition come from private collections.

### **The Paris Committee**

In 1923 a group of students of the Krakow Academy, inspired by Józef Pankiewicz's Paris travels, established the Paris Committee in order to continue their studies of art in the present capital of culture and art. Students from various studios of the Krakow Academy – Seweryn Boraczok, Jan Cybis, Józef Czapski, Józef Jarema, Artur Nacht-Samborski, Tadeusz Piotr Potworowski, Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa, Zygmunt Waliszewski, Dorota Seydenmann, Janusz Strzałecki and Marian Szczyrbuła, were primarily interested in new trends in European art. Aware of the lack of continuity in the tradition of Polish art, Pankiewicz saw the need to educate students on the examples of the classical tradition of the West. For this reason, he had already sought to establish a branch of the Academy in Paris, which was finally established in 1925.

The KPists left for Paris in 1924. There, for seven years, under the supervision of Pankiewicz, they studied both contemporary painting and the paintings of the old masters in the Louvre. They spent the summer months on plein-air in the south of France, in La Ciotat and Collioure, or in Fontainebleau. It was a lively artistic and social milieu. In order to raise funds for their studies, they organized the legendary Super Jazz Bal du Montparnasse (1925), whose patron was Pablo Picasso, and the committee included Pierre Bonnard, Constantin Brâncuși, Olga Boznańska, Jean Cocteau, Raoul Dufy, Marie Laurencin. Joint appearances were important to the group. They brought them recognition and publicity, such as a painting competition announced by the Union of Polish Artists in Paris in 1929, in which KPist paintings received five ex aequo awards, as well as exhibitions at Galerie Zak in Paris (1930) and Galerie Moss in Geneva (1931).

It was in France, mainly under the influence of the art of Bonnard and Cezanne, where the views of the KPists were shaped, and they were the starting point of their individual painting practice. The guiding principle was the autonomy of the painting, whereby the material of painting itself became its content. The subject was seen only as the reason for painterly experience, an incentive to recreate the structure of reality on canvas through colour expressing light and space. On the other hand, technical issues became important, such as the Post-impressionist attention to colour relations, defining the shape not by value, but by the contrast of warm and cold tones.

The members of the group aimed at consolidating the principles of good painting practice, based not only on the awareness of technique, but also on reflection on the image and the artist's ethos. The experiences of the Paris period, especially "resolving the painting on canvas" and Pankiewicz's concept of the "colour play", were developed by every KPist in their individual way, conditioned by their interests, going beyond the original assumptions of the group's philosophy. The important collective exhibition of the KPists took place at the "Polonia" Polish Art Club in 1931. In its catalogue, Jan Cybis put forward the programmatic assumptions of the KPists.

After returning to Poland, the KPists took over *Głos Plastyków* [The Artists' Voice], a magazine devoted to visual arts, published by the Association of Visual Artists in Krakow. There, they popularized the idea of Colourism, discussed the issues of the artist's work and of artistic culture. After the war, they became involved in the activities of the Union of Professional Visual Artists, and above all, they were appointed to most of the positions at academic art schools. Jan Cybis at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and the Academic School of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, Artur Nacht-Samborski at the Academic School of Fine Arts in Gdańsk and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Tadeusz Piotr Potworowski at the Academic Schools of Fine Arts in Gdańsk and Poznań, Janusz Strzałecki at the Academic School of Fine Arts in Gdańsk and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. They taught several generations of artists, most of whom were interested mainly in the issue of colour in the structure of a painting.

### **Master's workshop**

In the post-war years, the KPists played a decisive role in designing the curriculum of the Warsaw Academy. The following people worked at the Faculty of Painting: Jan Cybis, from 1946, from 1949 Artur Nacht-Samborski and Stanisław Szczepański, and also Eugeniusz Eibisch, a Colourist informally associated with the group, but like the KPists – brought up on French art.

It was Jan Cybis who was a key figure in shaping the school's curriculum as well as its structure. The charismatic teacher skilfully made alliances to support painters who shared his understanding of art as candidates to fill in vacant positions, also at other faculties. In this way, he consolidated the KPist paradigm, which was only slightly modified by the lecturers according to the needs of individual studios.

The KPists based their teaching on the model of the master's workshop and the principle of the autonomy of the painting. The professor and master educated mainly through his own work and moral attitude. He was supposed to be the student's guide in the teaching process, disclosing to him/her the world of art, teaching him/her artistic sensibility. Writing about teaching, Cybis points out the need to "de-academicize" the Academy, seeing the institution as "a school of free art practice" and "a centre of creative and fresh thought". In students' memories of Cybis and Nacht, the recurring image is that of a teacher who is an authority, constantly arousing curiosity to discover art and encouraging them to explore on their own.

Education based on the studies of the nude, still life and landscape was a way of communicating between the professor and the student, a starting point for critique and discussion of the structure of the painting. Eibisch was famous for his colour-sublimated, and thus difficult to paint, still lifes. Nacht paid attention to colour, the play of light, form, but also to the emotional effect of the painting. To Cybis, in addition to the above-mentioned issues, there was value in the process itself, persistent painting in search of the perfect painting solution.

The formula of the painting's autonomy rejected the ideological dimension of art and socially engaged art practice. The painting was assessed only for its purely painterly values. The Post-impressionist use of scaled colour contrast led to structures composed of patches of colour. Moving away from the tradition of representational art and emphasis on the formal side of imaging paved the way for new explorations, for bolder colour experiments in the material of painting. The KPist supremacy of colour and light can be found in many later abstract paintings, which preserve the colour sensitivity, developed under the influence of the masters, in the quivering of the painting's texture.

Shrouded in a Parisian legend, the KPists were perceived as continuators of the great tradition of European art, testifying to the endurance of "painting qualities". They made painters interested in purely artistic issues. Even non-figurative compositions, expressing the artist's experiences, his/her emotional attitude to the surrounding reality, originated in an analysis of the internal structure of the painting. Preserved in the teaching tradition, Colourism allows the artist to redefine the painting, constantly expanding the possibilities of exploring the canvas.

Stefan Gierowski, an unofficial student of Cybis and teacher of several generations of painters at the Warsaw Academy, said: "it's not about imitating, but about drawing on".