

The problem of art's rightful place in society as seen in early-1930s Poland

# Art and the State

DARIUSZ KONSTANTYNÓW

Institute of Art, Warsaw  
Polish Academy of Sciences  
dariusz.konstantynow@ispan.pl

**State patronage for artists and forging bonds between art and society, concepts promoted in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, also won supporters among Polish artists, who saw them as a remedy for the "crisis of art"**

The improvement in political relations between Poland and the USSR, sealed by a nonaggression pact signed in 1932, largely facilitated more intensive contacts in the artistic domain as well. A prominent ex-

ample of the many signs of this rapprochement can be found in two Soviet art exhibitions held at the Institute for the Propaganda of Art (IPS) in Warsaw: the first, showcasing painting, sculpture, and engravings, held in 1933, followed by the second, encompassing only mass art, organized in the summer of the next year.

In reviewing the first exhibition, the Polish graphic artist Władysław Skoczylas (1883–1934), an organizer of artistic life in Poland, did not hesitate to claim that Soviet artistic life offered many examples which "might be applied in our country, to the benefit of our art." Other commentators, too, conceded that attempts were evident within Soviet art to come to grips with the same issues likewise being pondered by the Polish artistic community – such as the crisis of art, the role of state patronage, and the social significance of artistic activity.



Władysław Skoczylas' conviction about the need to bring art and society closer together was also visible in his own works of art, frequently portraying scenes of rural customs and labor

The “crisis of art” was a subject of much debate in Poland in the 1930s, as elsewhere in Europe. Critics agreed that it stemmed from a juncture within art itself, which had grown elitist, isolated from “Polish life,” and extremely distant from the needs and capabilities of its audience. “The essence of the conflict,” Skoczylas wrote, “lies in the gulf that has opened up between art and artists on the one hand, and the masses of enlightened society on the other.” He pinned the blame for this upon artists, who without regard for the fact that society did not understand their work, stubbornly remained convinced about the overarching import of such values as individualism and art’s absolute autonomy.

### For the elite or for the masses?

Skoczylas and others who shared his views saw Soviet art as the antithesis of all those negative phenomena. The most valuable element of Soviet art, in his view, was its link to life, something that distinguished it from Western European art, whose practitioners dealt with purely formal problems. Soviet art, on the other hand, through its “substantiveness,” “undoubtedly brings good news, causing a socialization of interest in its manifestations and efforts.” From this observation he drew the conclusion that “in terms of forging contacts between the wide masses of society and art, we can learn a great deal from our eastern neighbor.”

However, for art to find such a link with society, its autonomy must be curbed, the artist’s freedom limited. The artist could work purely under the influence of internal stimuli, since the sociopolitical and mental transformations occurring in the modern world had conclusively undermined the *raison d’être* of “art for art’s sake.” The artist, Skoczylas argued, had to establish stronger contacts to life and its needs. That objective nonetheless requires a readiness to curb individualism: “Increasingly, the individual has to relinquish their individual rights for the good of society. Art created for privileged individuals must be replaced by art created for the masses.”

Skoczylas did not deny that yielding to the demands and level of the audience limited artists’ freedom, yet doing so ensured the material basis for their existence. “In [the land of] the Soviets,” he argued in his review of the IPS exhibition, “the artist is hampered by an imposed theme, he has to tailor the form of his art to the level of the wide masses, so that it can be understood by them, he leads a life that is undoubtedly quite poor, but his art finds application in life, and public commissions do not allow him to die of hunger.”

### “Etatizing” art

Aside from the aim of “socializing” art, the 1930s saw equally intense discussion about the goal of



A Soviet art exhibition showcasing painting, sculpture, and engravings was held in the spring of 1933 by the Institute for the Propaganda of Art (IPS) in Warsaw

“etatizing” art, i.e. putting art under state patronage while at the same time rendering it subordinate to the interests and ideology of the state. The government, acting on behalf of the state – Stanisław Woźnicki argued – should “break with its current passiveness and take an active route, employing artists to perform concretely assigned tasks.” Stanisław Rogoyski noted that although outside intervention was an exceptionally radical means of influencing art, “in a period of spiritual and material crisis, it is good when the state intervenes.” Such a view was also shared by artists, who declared at a convention in Kraków in 1932 that “the only true hope for the fine arts can be found in public commissions, meaning governmental, local governmental, and social commissions.”

Advocates of the Soviet model of art and the organization of artistic life were typically artists of a pro-state orientation – the early 1930s being a moment when the needs of those governing Poland dovetailed with the expectations of some artists. The former wanted an art that served the state’s needs, while the latter, after the experiences of the economic crisis, were ready to sacrifice their independence to obtain economic stabilization. The Soviet example seemed to them to prove that such coexistence between art and the state authorities could be entirely realistic.

Nonetheless, this cultural Polish-Soviet rapprochement would prove to be short-lived, ending with the political shifts that followed the death of Marshal Józef Piłsudski in 1935. ■

#### Further reading:

Chmielewska A. (2006). *In the Service of the State, Society, and Nation: “State-Building” Artists in the Second Polish Republic* [in Polish]. Warsaw: IFIS.