

Woodcarving in Podhale and the Phenomenon of the “School in Zakopane” Sculptures and Design

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Zakopane woodcarving is perceived in a kind of suspension between ethnographic tradition (folk art) and artistic modernity. For almost 200 years now, the patriotic aspect of Podhale’s tangible culture has been an inseparable context of its evaluation. For the Polish people, Zakopane and the Tatra Mountains are a phenomenon which is permanently inscribed in the cultural heritage of their nation. Based on the contemporary state of research and current methodologies, the article aims to revise the methods of researching, interpreting and exhibiting Zakopane sculptures, both historical and contemporary.

Keywords: Zakopane; Polish art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; woodcarving; national style; folk art

Podhale is a mountainous region in the southern part of Poland. In the nineteenth century it belonged to Galicia, and it was incorporated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Zakopane, long ago a small village, and today a famous tourist attraction, is an example of a community that has grown and flourished on an ideological substrate, which was a mixture of the romantic model of nature, and an artistic and ethnographic admiration for people and folklore. The final and important factor was the nascence of modern nations, which was in process in Europe in the nineteenth century. However, in Poland, like in other countries without a state, this casus had its own distinctive character. In this article we will show the tradition and durability of the ideological character of Zakopane’s artistic and craft products. Since the end of the nineteenth century to the present day, “Zakopane style” has consisted of a complex set of artistic, patriotic and sentimental meanings. This context remains an important point of reference for researchers, historians, curators and museologists in the discussion of Zakopane art (sculpture).

Even though the issues discussed in this article may seem local, they are part of the process of the formation of national styles, which was a common phenomenon in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. The discovery and reinterpretation of vernacular architecture and ornamentation took on particular significance in the situation of stateless nations, including those that were part of the Habsburg Monarchy (Poles, Slovaks, Hungarians, Czechs). These analogies allow us to perceive the idea of developing native design in a broader context, as a response to the political situation of the time and an expression of the national aspirations of each national community. At the end of the nineteenth century, a significant change in

the concept of the nation took place. The model of a territorial-historical community (multi-ethnic and multi-lingual) was replaced by the concept of the nation as a cultural-linguistic and mono-ethnic community. The crisis of democratic and internationalist national ideology, which occurred in the mid-nineteenth century (the European turning point was the years 1848–1849, and in Polish lands there was additionally the January Uprising of 1864) led to the modern formula of the nation state.

In 1830, Maurycy Mochnacki, in his work *O literaturze polskiej w wieku dziewiętnastym* (On Polish literature in the nineteenth century), published in Warsaw, was the first in Poland to relate the idea of the development of national community consciousness, the so-called self-knowledge, to the concept of the nation. This factor of consciousness in shaping the nation, borrowed from German philosophy (from Friedrich W. Schelling), undoubtedly influenced the culturalist concepts of the nation and nation-building processes, so important in Polish nationalist thought. Combined with the idea of an ethnically homogeneous nation, they would influence national issues and national culture in the interwar period, in the already independent Poland.¹

Emphasising the link between culture and nation is crucial to understanding European ideas of national style. If a nation was able to create its own culture, it meant that it was capable of surviving, despite a lack of state independence. At the same time, cultural community was most eagerly sought in that which was distinct, homely and free from foreign influences. As the romantic tradition faded, there appeared a positivist zeal for “organic” social work and getting to know one’s own country, with ethnographic activity and collecting following in its wake. National distinctiveness and nativeness were increasingly sought in that which was “folk” – what had survived in peripheral areas untouched by civilisation.

Beginnings

In the nineteenth century, intellectuals and artists, the first explorers from the cities to reach Zakopane, the peripheral centre located at the foot of the inaccessible Tatra Mountains, were romantically enthralled by its nature and its legends telling of treasures hidden inside mountains. In their wake came the medics who found the region’s climate suitable for treating tuberculosis. Among the incoming holidaymakers and patients, soon there were also enthusiasts and experts in construction, ornamentation and artisanal handicraft. It was also the time when the first studies of the local crafts were undertaken and the first ethnographic collections were compiled.² The intellectuals discovered a fascinating world filled with beauty and novelty. They found the Highlanders to be full of virtues such as courage, honour and nonconformity, and above all, patriotism and a love of freedom.

The first mountain trips were organised by priest Józef Stolarczyk (1816–1893), who was the first rector of Zakopane. He was widely recognised for the development of mountain tourism. He also took care of the natives – he taught them about ethics and hygiene and tried to improve education in Zakopane. He also cultivated the language and traditions of the Highlanders. Another legendary figure connected with the origins of the village was Tytus Chalubiński (1820–1889), a doctor from Warsaw, who was known as the King of Tatra. The

¹ For details see: CHRUDZIMSKA-UHERA Katarzyna. *Stylizacje i modernizacje. O rzeźbie i rzeźbiarzach w Zakopanem w latach 1879–1939*, [Stylisations and Modernisations. On Sculpture and Sculptors in Zakopane in the Years 1879–1939]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UKSW, 2013, pp. 50–51.

² The names of Władysław Matlakowski (1850–1895) and also the Dembowski and Gnatowski families are worth mentioning.

first time he arrived in Zakopane was in 1873, when he came to fight the cholera epidemic. He began to work unpaid for the Highlanders, trying to improve their living standards. Thanks to Chalubiński's efforts, Zakopane became a health resort in 1886. Following this it began to grow rapidly and became a place well known by tourists and holidaymakers.

The incomers tried to learn about, describe and protect this new world. But at the same time they wanted to improve the living conditions in the region, bringing the ideas of civilisation and industrialisation. Their sensitivity to the Highlanders' poverty and despair was a feature which distinguished Zakopane from other European artistic and intellectual societies (so-called artistic colonies, popular in the Modernism period). When the Tatra Society was founded by Chalubiński, Stolarczyk and other social activists in 1873, its main aims were research on the Carpathian region, the popularisation of tourism, protection of the Tatra nature and supporting local industry.³ To support the locals, in 1876 the Tatra Society founded the School of Wood Crafts, where the Highlanders from the whole Podhale region could learn crafts (carpentry, building), offering them an opportunity for a better, wealthier life. On June 6, 1876, the Tatra Society signed an agreement with Maciej Mardula (1837–1894) – a peasant from Olcza village – under which he pledged to “set up a school of woodcarving in Zakopane and teach woodcarving to the Highlanders [...] five hours a day, to a minimum of five students, free of any charge”.⁴ The idea was to protect local crafts and tradition, and not to impose external influences, in order to preserve the pristine and national character of folk handicrafts.

Woodcarving and carpentry occupied a prominent place in the everyday life of the inhabitants of the Podhale region. Wood was used in the construction of houses and farm buildings, as well as for the production of agricultural equipment and tools. The relationship between the Highlander culture and wood was noted by the nineteenth-century “discoverers” of the Tatra Mountains, who undertook pioneering research based on their passions for ethnography and collecting. The effects of their activities, together with the ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement prevalent in Europe at that time, led to the development of the Zakopane style, which ascribes ethical, aesthetic and patriotic values to the wooden architecture and ornamentation of Podhale.⁵ The idea of the “wooden Zakopane region” as a variation of the national style was most relevant at the turn of the twentieth century, but it returned with

³ *Statut Oddziałów Tow. Tatrzańskiego uchwalony na walnem zgromadzeniu tegoż Towarzystwa w Krakowie dn. 28 maja 1876*, [The statutes of Tatra Society Divisions, enacted on the 28 of May 1976], article 3, chapter d. On the initiative of the Tatra Society the Tatra Museum was founded in 1888, collecting ethnographical and botanical exhibits.

⁴ *Umowa pomiędzy Maciejem Mardulą a Wydziałem TT*, Kraków 6 czerwca 1876, [The agreement between Maciej Mardula and the Tatra Society Department, Cracow, June 6, 1876], ms., in The Tatra Museum Archive, sign. AR/No/185/6:1876, p. 80.

⁵ The biggest contribution to the mythologisation of Zakopane was made by Stanisław Witkiewicz Senior (1851–1915), painter and art critic, who resided there permanently from 1890. Under the influence of Taylor's theory of survivals, Witkiewicz discerned in Zakopane style the intact values of enduring prehistoric Slavic culture, while the Highlanders' architecture and design were deemed by him the Polish national style. Buildings, both sacred and secular, were erected according to the rules established by Witkiewicz for Zakopane style and the same rules were followed in the furniture and interior equipment designs, costumes and jewellery. Witkiewicz and other Podhale aficionados romantically identified the folk craft and construction with authenticity, sincerity, attachment to the fatherland and tradition. Zakopane presented itself as a source of natural rights and peasants were modeled into mythical heroes embodying the most highly appreciated moral and patriotic virtues. This was the way a unique ethos for the Tatra Mountains was developed, reaching its peak c. 1900, including the recognition of the necessity to restore the unity of nature and man and a messianic perception of the mountains as a place where national redemption and unification could come true.

varying intensity and in different varieties throughout the twentieth century, and wood was raised to the rank of a noble material, embodied with the image of Polishness.⁶

The woodcarving school, since 1891 called the Imperial-Royal Vocational School of the Wood Industry (C.K. Szkoła Zawodowa Przemysłu Drzewnego, hereinafter SZPD), owed much to the goodwill of the Austrian authorities, which tried to raise the level of industrialisation of the monarchy and develop the crafts and artistic industry. The way to achieve this goal was, among other things, organising and supporting regional vocational schools.⁷ According to researcher Andrzej Szczerski, in the history of Austrian crafts around 1900, an important role was played by a long tradition of state patronage (dating back to the Josephinian era). The Habsburg monarchy's involvement in supporting the development of artistic production was largely due to the desire to match the power of the British monarchy. Therefore, in striving for progress and the modernisation of the state, British models proved decisive. They became part of the social reform, consisting, among other things, of creating a strong middle class, which determined the significance of a modern state. In the 1850s, the first institutions were established to reform the Austrian art industry. The actual period of transformation began in the following decade. The final impulse was the International Exhibition of Industry and Art in London in 1862. It exposed the backwardness of the Austrian monarchy in relation to Great Britain and France.⁸

In 1863, the Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie was founded, inspired by the activities of the British South Kensington Museum. It was an institution that acted as an intermediary between artists and industry, which it did primarily through an extensive system of so-called Fachschulen. These schools were located in different parts of the monarchy. They were managed by teachers educated at the Kunstgewerbeschule associated with the Österreichisches Museum in Wien. The reform they implemented was based primarily on models of historical styles, especially the Neo-Renaissance, which in Austria at the end of the nineteenth century was considered a counter-argument to the dominant French models.⁹ These assumptions were also implemented in the Zakopane school, whose management was entrusted to František Neužil (1845–1899), who had previously taught drawing and woodcarving at the vocational school in Grulich (now Kralupy, Czech Republic). Patterns of ornaments, furniture, architectural details and sculptural compositions were brought from Vienna to the school library. They were used during classes with students and in orders fulfilled at the school. Due to the specificity of the mountain region, historical forms were supplemented with Tyrolean motifs. Like other Fachschule, the Zakopane school was visited by Viennese inspectors checking teaching

⁶ GIEŁDOŃ-PASZEK, Aleksandra. Drewno a sprawa Polska: wykorzystanie drewna w poszukiwaniu polskiego stylu narodowego [Wood and Poland: the use of wood in search of a Polish national style]. In: *Studia Artystyczne* 2015, no. 3, pp. 131–138; MUSZKOWSKA, Maria. Ludowość utracona? Strategie instytucjonalizacji sztuki ludowej w Szkole Przemysłu Drzewnego w Zakopanem [Lost folklore? Strategies of institutionalisation of folk art at the School of Wood Industry in Zakopane]. In: *Artifex Novus* vol. 5, 2021, p. 99.

⁷ The School in Zakopane was subordinated successively to the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education (from 1881), and the Ministry of Public Works (from 1910). See: KENAROWA, Halina. *Od Zakopiańskiej Szkoły Przemysłu Drzewnego do Szkoły Kenara. Studium z dziejów szkolnictwa zawodowo-artystycznego w Polsce* [From the Zakopane School of Wood Industry to the Kenar School. A Study in the history of vocational and artistic education in Poland]. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978, p. 43.

⁸ SZCZERSKI, Andrzej. *Wzorce tożsamości. Recepcja sztuki brytyjskiej w Europie Środkowej około roku 1900*. [Patterns of identity: The reception of British art in Central Europe around 1900]. Kraków: TAiWPN Universitas, 2002, pp. 174, 175.

⁹ Ibidem, pp. 179, 180.

standards. Teachers were brought from various areas of the monarchy, mostly from Bohemia and Vienna. They could improve their skills by taking part in training at related institutions, and they were most often sent to a school in Prague.

The school's main output included small objects of a souvenir nature: boxes, chess sets, cigarette holders, pipes, axes, alpine walking sticks, frames, paperweights, needle cases, spoons and forks. They were made of easy-to-process wood: Swiss pine, dwarf pine, maple, ash or lime. Larger orders were also carried out under the supervision of teachers and according to their designs: sets of furniture and elements of furnishings for sacral interiors, including altars with sculptural decoration. As already mentioned, they were maintained in the eclectic style typical of the entire region. However, at the same time, Stanisław Witkiewicz Senior fought a battle for the Zakopane style – treated as a Polish, national version of the native style, derived from Podhale architecture and ornamentation. Witkiewicz was very critical of the School's activities; he did not personally accept the stylistically alien projects introduced by subsequent directors, Frantisek Neužil and Edgar Kováts (1849–1912). Witkiewicz's attitude towards the school was softened only by the appearance of the first Poles on the staff – Jan Nalborczyk and, above all, Stanisław Barabasz, who took over the management of the institution in 1901.

An important aspect of the Zakopane school's activity was the shaping of the local artistic community. It was created by the school's teachers, seasonal guests coming to this fashionable resort, but also Highlanders. Local boys were given the opportunity to gain professional qualifications (in the areas of carpentry, woodwork and ornamental sculpture), and with time they also expanded their skills, which enabled them to develop in creative and individual ways. Among the graduates of the school were the first local craftsmen with artistic ambitions, such as Wojciech Brzega (1872–1941) and Stanisław Gąsienica Sobczak "Johym" (1884–1942), who made their debuts in the first decade of the twentieth century. The individual development of students' talents and competences became particularly important in the interwar period, when in the already independent Poland the school operated under the name "The State School of Wood Industry" (Państwowa Szkoła Przemysłu Drzewnego, hereinafter PSPD). The tradition of sculptural education at the PSPD after the Second World War was continued by the State Secondary School of Fine Arts (now the Antoni Kenar Complex of Art Schools, hereinafter referred to as PLSP and ZSP),¹⁰ and its staff and graduates constituted a significant part of the local artistic community.

The above-mentioned conditions resulted in Zakopane woodcarving being perceived in a kind of suspension between ethnographic tradition (folk art) and artistic modernity. For almost 250 years now, the patriotic aspect of Podhale's tangible culture has been an inseparable context of its evaluation. For the Polish people, Zakopane and the Tatra Mountains are a phenomenon which is permanently inscribed in the cultural heritage of their nation. In this article, we will discuss the mechanisms of constructing the myth of Zakopane as the cradle of national style and state independence. In the context of history and contemporary museum activities, we will try to demonstrate the changes taking place in the reception and interpretation of this cultural

¹⁰ The other institution derived from PSPD in Zakopane was the Construction Trade School Complex, placed in the former Woodcraft School's building on Krupówki Street. It took over the carpentry and construction departments. See: BIAŁAS, Wiesław. Zarys historii Szkoły Zawodowej w Zakopanem z lat 1876–1977 [An outline of the history of the Vocational School in Zakopane 1876–1977]. In: BIAŁAS, Wiesław (et al.). *Tradycje i współczesność. Stulecie Szkoły Zawodowej w Zakopanem 1876–1976* [Traditions and modern times. Centenary of the Vocational School in Zakopane 1876–1976]. Zakopane: Miejska Rada Narodowa i Dyrekcja Zespołu Szkół Zawodowych, 1976, pp.19–62.

heritage of Poland and Europe. We will indicate the most valuable initiatives that have already been undertaken in this direction.

Constructing a myth

In the history of Zakopane woodcarving, its three “founding fathers” should be mentioned: Stanisław Witkiewicz Senior, Karol Stryjeński and Antoni Kenar. The first of them, Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851–1915), belonged to the generation of “discoverers” of the Tatra Mountains. Based on the local carpentry and woodcarving traditions of the region, together with a group of enthusiasts (collectors and the first ethnographers), he undertook steps to create one of the earliest elaborations of the Polish national style. At the same time, he represented the typical nineteenth-century understanding of “style” as a costume built on the basis of a specific set of patterns and forms, used depending on the needs of the moment. Witkiewicz was familiar with and much appreciated the British ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement; he was also close to other pan-European tendencies to search for national features in the tangible and intangible culture of the older eras and native traditions of folk culture. In the case of stateless nations (such as nineteenth-century Poland), developing a formula for one’s own style was particularly important as it was evidence of the existence of the nation and its right to self-determination.¹¹

Within the Zakopane style, Witkiewicz did not reserve a special place for sculpture. The woodcarvers’ task was usually limited to decorative compositions used on furniture and architectural elements. At the same time, it did impose a specific set of motifs and forms. Witkiewicz appreciated the innate sensitivity and abilities of Highlander “builders”, but he also limited their creative freedom by imposing his own concept of form. A bitter testimony to the Zakopane style was left by Wojciech Brzega (1872–1941), a Highlander and Witkiewicz’s faithful student and long-time collaborator, and at the same time a representative of the first generation of Highlander intelligentsia and an artistically educated sculptor. In his memoirs written many years later, he accused Witkiewicz of compilation and a lack of logic as to the forms used, and considered his own efforts, which he had put into the development of the Zakopane style, to be a failure and a waste of time.¹²

Witkiewicz’s relationship with Brzega was a master–student system, strengthened by the association of “Highlander” (peasant) and “lord”. From the perspective of contemporary postcolonial studies, the relations between the explorers of the Tatra Mountains, who were visitors from the city, to the local Highlanders they “discovered”, could be perceived in terms of the colonial appropriation of regional culture by “strangers” and the construction of an “image” of that culture which was intended to serve the “strangers” and their tastes and needs.¹³ In the first period of the history of Zakopane woodcarving (until 1918), this instrumental use of the local tangible heritage was characteristic of both Witkiewicz’s circle and the environment of the Vocational School of Wood Industry, whose successive directors (Franciszek Neužil and Edgar Kováts) developed a concept competitive with the “Zakopane style”, i.e. the

¹¹ CHMIELEWSKA, Agnieszka. *Wymagania polskości. Sztuki plastyczne II Rzeczypospolitej w perspektywie społecznej historii sztuki* [Images of Polishness. Visual arts of the Second Polish Republic in the perspective of social history of art]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2019, pp. 18–24.

¹² WNUK Włodzimierz. Porachunki Wojciecha Brzega ze Stanisławem Witkiewiczem [Wojciech Brzega’s scores with Stanisław Witkiewicz]. In: *Więści* 1968, no. 9 (584), p. 3; BRZEGA, Wojciech. *Żywot górala poczciwego. Wspomnienia i gawędy* [Life of an honest Highlander. Memories and tales]. Anna Micińska and Michał Jagiello (ed.), Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1969, pp. 75–76.

¹³ MUSZKOWSKA, Ludowość utracona... *passim*.

“Zakopane method”. However, in both the style and the method, their “Zakopaneness” was an “imaginary” project, a pseudo-regionalism combining local elements with historical forms, Polish and Tyrolean respectively.¹⁴

After Poland regained its independence (1918), the need for resistance to the cultural and symbolic policies of the occupiers disappeared. It was then that the Highlanders’ region was tasked with representing Poland in propaganda. During the 1925 International Exhibition of Decorative Arts and Modern Industry in Paris, an important place in the Polish Department was entrusted to the Zakopane School of Wood Industry, then headed by Karol Stryjeński (1887–1932). The native version of the Art Deco style presented in Paris combined refined modernity with the tradition of folk culture. The formula of the new style, known as Polish Decorative Art, was intended to testify to the distinctiveness of Polish culture, and thus to legitimise the existence of the Second Polish Republic.¹⁵

Works by students from the PSPD were included among other Polish *objets d’art* in Paris. Created under the direction of Stryjeński, the synthetic figures of Madonnas, Janosiks and Highlander “types” were characterised by expressive forms, and gave the impression of being archaic and exotic. They drew upon the modernist fascination with non-European, primitive and exotic cultures and the myth of “primitivism” created on its basis which, apart from an impulse to search for new forms, was considered as a remedy for the overwhelming experience of modernity and a chance for regeneration. The works of the professional artists presented in Paris served as examples of interpretation of this desired pattern. Works by Jan Szczepkowski (1878–1964), Karol Stryjeński and Wojciech Jastrzębowski (1884–1963) were specific improvisations on folk themes, captured in a decorative rhythmic, sublime, post-Cubist stylisation. In the history of the Zakopane school, the Paris exhibition went down as an unprecedented success in history, which was confirmed by the number of medals and awards won there.¹⁶ The organisers also managed to achieve measurable commercial success. The sculptures were snapped up by collectors during the exhibition, and constituted an important “export product” in Zakopane in the following years. Today they are again being appreciated among collectors and lovers of the Art Deco style.

Karol Stryjeński, the author of the Parisian success, continued Stanisław Witkiewicz’s ideas to a large extent, in the way that he shared his conviction that one could find relics of the old, proto-Polish culture in the Highlanders’ work, which had been preserved thanks to the isolation of the Tatra Mountains and Podhale from the rest of the civilised world. The belief in this attractive myth of the “exotic and invigorating periphery” was almost universal among European modernists at the turn of the twentieth century. The image (also mythologised) of the peasant – a talented artist living in harmony with nature, creating objects of perfect form – was crucial to this belief.¹⁷ In this regard Stryjeński, unlike Witkiewicz, declared that

¹⁴ MUSZKOWSKA, Ludowość utracona... passim; STOBIECKA, Monika. Kolonialny regionalizm. Problemy tożsamości w zakopiańskiej architekturze [Colonial regionalism. The problems of identity in Zakopane architecture]. In: *Miejsce* 2019, no 5, passim, accessed May 1, 2024 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/>.

¹⁵ CHMIELEWSKA, Wyobrażenia polskości..., pp. 161–172.

¹⁶ Zakopane’s School and its teachers obtained: Grand Prix (3), diplome d’honneur (2), gold medals (4), silver medal (1), see: DREXLEROWA, Anna M., OLSZEWSKI Andrzej K. *Polska i Polacy na Powszechnych Wystawach Światowych 1851–2000* [Poland and Poles at the Universal World Exhibitions 1851–2000]. Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2005, pp. 206–209.

¹⁷ JANKOWSKA-MARZEC, Agnieszka. *Miedzy etnografią a sztuką. Mitologizacja huculów i Huculszczyzny w kulturze polskiej XIX i XX wieku* [Between ethnography and art. Mythologisation of Hutsuls and Hutsul in Polish culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries]. Cracow: TAiWPN Universitas, 2013, pp. 25–31.

his Highlander students would be free to choose the topic and forms of their work. And although this freedom was undoubtedly not complete, Stryjeński's undeniable achievement was the introduction of new (modern) teaching methods into the Zakopane school, and above all, the creation of a different relationship between teacher and students, which was built on the basis of dialogue and mutual respect. Stryjeński is considered to be the one who freed the Zakopane school system from the confines of professional and academic standards. It was thanks to him that the path to higher artistic education was opened for the graduates of the PSPD, when, in the wake of their teacher from the Tatra Mountains, his students set off for Warsaw. One of them was Antoni Kenar (1906–1959), today a legendary figure with an authority incomparable to any other twentieth-century sculptor from Zakopane. Kenar returned to the Tatra Mountains in the 1940s, and in this difficult period he taught and managed the school, ensuring its independence during the era of socialist-realist pressures and restrictions. He continued the pedagogical methods, and was the heir to the ethos of Karol Stryjeński. He was actively engaged in consolidating and activating the local artistic community.

After World War II, the discrepancy between the stereotype of the folklore of Zakopane woodcarving and the artistic ambitions of the Zakopane sculptors deepened. The local artistic milieu was made up of graduates of the Zakopane school (pre-war students of Stryjeński and post-war students of Kenar), most of whom continued their education at universities in Poland and abroad (Antoni Rzaśa, Władysław Hasior, Stanisław and Józef Kuloń, Grzegorz Pecuch, Henryk Burzec, Ryszard Orski et al.). Their works represented different formal and ideological concepts, but the art critics focused on what they had in common: their material of choice (wood) and their environment (Zakopane and the Tatra Mountains) – itself burdened with symbolic and patriotic significance – and above all, on the provincial and folk origins of the artists. Such optics allowed for the easy categorisation of their works, and also corresponded to the cultural policy of the state authorities.

By definition, post-war Poland was “of the people” (i.e. the People's Republic of Poland, the official name of the Polish state from 1952 to 1989). The government supported and promoted folklore as the foundations of a uniform nationwide culture and an important element in the policy of unifying society.¹⁸ The centralised system of production and trade in folk art (based on the *Cepelia* Central Folk and Art Industry Centre, established for that purpose in 1949 with a network of regional cooperatives and model workshops) was an important tool in the fight against civilisational and economic backwardness. In local centres with handicraft traditions, so-called creative collectives were organised, which were led by professional artists. As part of the glorious mission of “saving vanishing folk art”, artists, ethnographers and art historians supported folk artists by ensuring prosperity for their products, but also provided patterns, qualified their works and interfered in the creative process. As a result, art which was still referred to as “folk” was no longer produced for the people, but for the needs of the city, and it corresponded to the tastes and aesthetic needs of a sophisticated intellectual recipient.¹⁹

In terms of understanding the folklore and the concept of promoting it, there was a clear continuity between the interwar period and the People's Republic of Poland. The post-war institutional structure was based on previous initiatives, including the pre-war activity of the

¹⁸ KORDJAK, Joanna (ed.). *Polska – kraj folkloru?* [Poland – a country of folklore?]. Warsaw: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2016, pp. 11–23.

¹⁹ KORDUBA, Piotr. *Ludowość na sprzedaż, Towarzystwo Popierania Przemysłu Ludowego, Cepelia, Instytut Wzornictwa Przemysłowego* [Folkness for sale, Society for the Support of Folk Industry, Cepelia, Institute of Industrial Design]. Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013, passim.

Society for the Promotion of the People's Industry. The conviction regarding the relationship between contemporary, national and folk art did not lose its relevance. Let us recall that this idea had already been emphasised by Witkiewicz in the project which developed the Zakopane style, and was then continued by the official Polish representation in Paris in 1925. The linking of the patriotic theme of folk patterns with their "modernity" was also coherent, which was clearly emphasised by the curators of the famous exhibition *Folk art in Poland*, organised in 1937 at the Institute for the Propaganda of Art in Warsaw. At that time, they portrayed the formal relationship between the native artifacts and the works of French modernists. When, after the war, Polish folk art was presented at the Tate Gallery in London and the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1949, the Polish press reported the opinions of French critics who emphasised two fundamental themes: the national character of folk art and its relationship with the works of leading modern Western European artists.²⁰ It is worth noting that the exhibition also includes works made by students of the Zakopane school under the supervision of Antoni Kenar: ceramic products, wooden furniture and toys.

Another event that undoubtedly ennobled the Zakopane artists' milieu was the participation of Kenar and his students in the XXVIII Art Biennale in Venice in 1956. However, also at this time, the criteria for selection followed by Juliusz Starzyński, the curator of the Polish pavilion, were far from contemporary artistic discussions. The choice of the artists from Zakopane was determined by the "folk accent" visible in their works.²¹ The same criteria were successfully used in the 1970s by Aleksander Jackowski,²² which perpetuated the stereotypes of the presentation and interpretation of Zakopane woodcarving. Both the paradigms (national and folk) were applied despite the changing contexts (historical, political and artistic). This led to the fossilisation of a specific "traditionalism" in Zakopane art, as well as its subordination to so-called "high" art which was not described with additional adjectives (as opposed to national and folk art). For the sake of confirmation, let us recall the concept of a recent exhibition held on the occasion of the centenary of Polish independence (2018) at the Zakopane Municipal Art Gallery, with a presentation of "Polish sculptors' significant projects in wood".²³ The curators' intention was to present the native woodcarving in the context of "a mythologised image of the pre-Slavic region with its organically related wooden material and the richness of authentic wooden material culture", thus referring – more than a hundred years after the death of Stanisław Witkiewicz – to the phantasm of the mythical proto-Polish style embodied in wood. At the same time, the selection of participants, the search for work with wood in the

²⁰ T.G. Polska sztuka ludowa na wystawie w stolicy Francji [Polish folk art at an exhibition in the capital of France]. In: *Rzeczpospolita* 1949, no. 26 (1592), p. 3.

²¹ STARZYŃSKI, Juliusz. Polska na XXVIII Biennale w Wenecji [Poland at the XXVIII Venice Art Biennale]. In: *Przegląd Artystyczny* 1956, no. 3, p. 5; SOSNOWSKA, Joanna. *Polacy na Biennale Sztuki w Wenecji: 1895–1999* [Poles at the Venice Art Biennale: 1895–1999]. Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki Polska Akademia Nauk, 1999, p. 101.

²² CHRUDZIMSKA-UHERA Katarzyna. „Barwa drewna”. O kryteriach oceny i interpretacji twórczości rzeźbiarzy zakopiańskich w polskiej krytyce artystycznej i wystawiennictwie od zakończenia II wojny światowej do wystawy Sztuka Ludowa w 30-lecie PRL [“The colour of wood”. On the criteria for assessing and interpreting the work of Zakopane sculptors in Polish art criticism and exhibitions from the end of World War II to the exhibition Folk Art on the 30th Anniversary of the Polish People's Republic]. In: *Saeculum Christianum* vol. XXVIII, 2021, special edition, pp. 122–142.

²³ ROSIŃSKA-PODLEŚNY, Lidia, MAŁKOWSKA, Monika. *Rzeźba w drewnie w twórczości polskich artystów 1918–2018* [Woodcarving in the work of Polish artists 1918–2018]. Zakopane: Miejska Galeria Sztuki, 2018, p. 3.

output of “recognised” sculptors and the emphasis on their resemblance to the Zakopane works revealed a longing to belong to modernity.²⁴

Criteria and interpretation

The purpose of recalling the history of Zakopane woodcarving was to indicate the genesis and mechanisms by which the criteria for its interpretation were defined. Even Stanisław Witkiewicz should be credited with the ennoblement of wood as a material in which patriotic symbolic codes were inscribed.²⁵ Zakopane woodcarving has been permanently included in the set of “images of Polishness” in the national symbolic universe. This relationship is based on the belief in the folk genesis of the work of the inhabitants of Zakopane. At the same time, “folklore” is understood here in two ways: as a source of national stylistic features and as a primary, “primitive” impulse enabling the modernist revival of art and, more broadly understood, the regeneration of society and the individual. In such an approach, the individuality of the creators and the context of individual, lived experiences are generalised or ignored completely. In such ethnographic contexts, the works of the Zakopane school functioned for a long time in the history of art and museum collections. We must begin by recalling that it was the nineteenth-century “discoverers” and lovers of Podhale associated with the Tatra Society who preceded the establishment of the Tatra Museum (1888). The first museum collections (botanical, geological, zoological and ethnographic, and the library) were gathered thanks to the gifts and purchases of private collectors: Róża Potocka, Countess Raczyńska, Maria and Bronisław Dembowski, and Zygmunt Gnatowski. When the new Tatra Museum building was officially opened in the summer of 1922, it housed two exhibitions: ethnographic on the ground floor and natural history on the first floor. In the late 1920s, the then director of the museum, Juliusz Zborowski, planned to create three new departments: modern art, artistic crafts and the history of Podhale. These plans were partially realised only after World War II. Significant changes were possible thanks to the establishment of branches of the Tatra Museum. Thus, in 1993, the Stanisław Witkiewicz Museum of the Zakopane Style in the Koliba villa was opened. In 2007, the Museum of the Zakopane Style – Inspirations, named after Maria and Bronisław Dembowski, was established in the cottage of the Gąsienica Sobczak family, and in 2011, the Gallery of Twentieth Century Art was established in the Oksza villa.²⁶

Separating twentieth century Zakopane art and making it available on permanent exhibition in the Tatra Museum was a response to the growing interest in this period among researchers and collectors. The achievements of the Zakopane school of wood industry and local artists and craftsmen were part of the growing appreciation of the Art Deco style and contemporary applied art. The attractiveness of Zakopane sculptures, souvenirs and furniture began to be noticed. Especially highly valued were their decorativeness and their kinship with the best of

²⁴ In the exhibition catalogue, the following are adjacent to each other: *Christiana* by Antoni Kenar and *Gazing figure* by Grzegorz Kłaman, portraits by Waldemar Cichoń and busts by Xawery Dunikowski, school work by Henryk Morel and *Column* by Adam Myjak, works by Jerzy Bereś and those by Wojciech Brzęga, pieces by Władysław Hasior and by Oskar Hansen, work by Tadeusz Stryjeński and by Maciej Szańkowski.

²⁵ GIEŁDOŃ-PASZEK, *Drewno a sprawa Polska...*, pp. 131–138.

²⁶ The last two branches were established in buildings whose conservation renovations were possible thanks to European Union funds. All information comes from: <https://muzeumtatrzańskie.pl/o-nas/historia-muzeum-tatrzańskiego/> (13.02.2025).

their European counterparts. This trend was confirmed by scientific research and publications,²⁷ and the change in the reception of works of art and artistic crafts was quickly reflected in the art market. Since December 2019, one of the most important auction houses in Poland – Desa Unicum – has been organising annual auctions entitled “Zakopane! Zakopane!” entirely devoted to art and design related to the Podhale region. Initially, the offer included objects from the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. However, this new initiative immediately gained huge interest from sellers and buyers, so over time the scope of the offer was expanded to include art and design from the second half of the twentieth century.

At the same time, academic and museum circles have been developing research to supplement the knowledge about artistic life in Zakopane in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The result was exhibitions promoting Zakopane art not only in Poland but also internationally. In this respect, the exhibition “Young Poland. Polish Art 1890–1918”, organised in a cooperation between the National Museum in Krakow, the William Morris Gallery and the Polish Cultural Institute in London, and the accompanying publication, played a fundamental role.²⁸ Paintings, furniture, fabrics and artistic crafts were shown, which were representative of Polish art at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Modernism period (Art Nouveau), or “Young Poland”. They were shown as co-creating an international movement of craft renewal – along with the Arts and Crafts Movement born in Great Britain. In this context, the Zakopane style and the work of artists and woodcarvers, as well as everyday objects of the material culture of the Highlanders from Podhale, were considered as a key element and source of inspiration.

In the following years, the Tatra Museum undertook further initiatives which confirmed the recognition of the Zakopane timber industry, woodcarving and artistic crafts as a valuable area of art history and visual culture. We are talking about two exhibitions organised in the Museum in the summer and autumn of 2023. The first, titled “Made in Zakopane”, presented Zakopane artistic crafts until World War II. The already well known and appreciated sculptures of the School of Wood Industry were presented, as well as numerous objects by lesser-known or completely forgotten creators and craft workshops and schools.²⁹ It should be emphasised that this was the first exhibition devoted entirely to Zakopane artistic crafts as an important source and component of twentieth-century design in Poland.

The continuation of this initiative, presenting works created after World War II, was an exhibition opened at the Tatra Museum in Zakopane. Its ambiguous and mysterious title, “Urbamistyka” (“Urban-mystic”), was a play on words suggesting the connections between utility design and so-called high art with metaphysical, artistic aspirations. The exhibition included furniture, ceramics, kilims and toys as well as architectural designs, interiors and

²⁷ See e.g.: CHRUDZIMSKA-UHERA, Stylizacje i modernizacje...; CHRUDZIMSKA-UHERA, Katarzyna. Rzeźby Państwowej Szkoły Przemysłu Drzewnego w Zakopanem. [Sculptures of the State School of Wood Industry in Zakopane]. In: CHOLEWIŃSKI Zbigniew (ed.). *Polskie art déco. Materiały V sesji naukowej: Polskie art déco. Rzeźba i płaskorzeźba*, [Polish Art Deco. Materials of the 5th scientific session: Polish Art Déco. Sculpture and bas-relief], Płock: Muzeum Mazowieckie w Płocku, 2015, pp. 170–191.

²⁸ *Young Poland. The Polish Arts and Crafts Movement 1890–1918*, ed. Julia Griffin and Andrzej Szczerski, Lund Humphries, London 2020. The exhibition was presented in 2021/2022 in London (William Morris Gallery) and in 2025 in Kyoto (MoMAC).

²⁹ PITÓŃ Helena. *Made in Zakopane. Zakopiańskie rzemiosło artystyczne do II wojny światowej*, [Made in Zakopane. Zakopane artistic craftsmanship until World War II]. Zakopane: Tatra Museum, 2023. The exhibition was located in the main building of the Museum, lasted from July 1 to October 1, 2023, and was curated by Agata Pitoń.

advertising.³⁰ The curators stated that the exhibition does not pretend to be a comprehensive study of artistic creativity after World War II, nor is it a monograph collecting concepts of local urban planning. Despite this, it was a first and fully successful attempt to claim the place of the Zakopane art industry in the history of post-war design.

The briefly cited facts confirm that Zakopane sculpture and design are slowly but irrevocably establishing their rank and position in the canon. However, the reception by viewers and experts is still too strongly dependent on patriotic-national contexts and the myth of folk art, treated as a “primitivist” regenerative impulse. Today we cannot doubt that such a viewpoint is anachronistic and methodologically inappropriate. The concept of “folk art” was born at the turn on the twentieth century as a result of subjective decisions and judgments. It served to exoticise the representation and construct the desired image of the countryside and its people. The modernist myth of “primitivism”, which was finally exposed on the occasion of the famous exhibition *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York in 1984, has been subjected to a similar deconstruction. At that time, the curatorial concept of this exhibition was assessed as a manifestation of the postcolonial “anxious desire and power of the modern era in the West to collect the world”.³¹

There is no doubt that the history of Zakopane sculpture has yet to be written. By this I refer not only to its post-war history, but also to the need for a broader look at the Witkiewicz and interwar periods. It is necessary to revise the strategies and paradigms used hitherto, which were carried out in accordance with the methodology of grounded theory (basic research), and to take into account the contemporary research contexts of the so-called new humanities: ethnology, history (including social and environmental aspects) and art history (postcolonial studies). Critical curatorial projects showing selected problematic or monographic aspects in a local and supraregional perspective will be helpful in challenging the strongly rooted stereotypes. Their aim should be to define a new framework for interpreting Zakopane sculpture and design in the orbit of its relations to modernism and modernity, the world of nature, tradition, and the individual biographies of artists.

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³⁰ The exhibition was located in two branches of the Tatra Museum – the Oksza villa and the Władysław Hasiór Gallery in Zakopane. It lasted from August 5 to November 12 2023 and was curated by Julita Dembowska and Ania Batko.

³¹ CLIFFORD, James. *Kłopoty z kulturą. Dwudziestowieczna etnografia, literatura i sztuka* [Problems with culture. Twentieth-century ethnography, literature and art.]. transl. Ewa DŻURAK, Joanna IRACKA, Ewa KLEKOT, Maciej KRUPA, Sławomir SIKORA and Monika SZNAJDERMAN. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo KR, 2000, p. 212.

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