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Polish Theater Posters That Provoke

By J.S. MARCUS
September 8, 2006

The year 1983 was a dark one in Warsaw. The Communist-controlled government had cracked down on Lech Walesa's 1981 Solidarity movement, and many of its leaders and followers were in prison or in exile. But a subversive splash of color brought life to Warsaw's streets that year -- a poster announcing a new theater production of "Historia," or "History," by Poland's sardonic 20th-century master, Witold Gombrowicz, first uncovered after the author's death in 1969.

Featuring a preposterous foot with two finger-like toes held up in a "V," the poster was a complex show of defiance. With its cartoonish surrealism, it seemed to be a call for peace as well as for victory and announced that freedom, like the play itself would rise from the dead.



Wilanow Muzeum Plakatu, Studio MM Marcin Michalak

'Historia,' 1983, by Henryk Tomaszewski

Designed by a master of Polish graphic art, Henryk Tomaszewski, the "Historia" poster is one of thousands of remarkable posters produced during the country's decades of Communist rule. Made to commemorate or advertise cultural events, they appeared at a time when there was otherwise little or no advertising, and censorship was in force.

The posters -- which managed to slip under the censors' radar, as they were more concerned with explicit signs of protest -- relieved the gloom of postwar Polish streets, which remained scarred for decades. "The artists used words like 'flowers' to describe their posters," says Andrea Marks, associate professor in the art department at Oregon State University and founder of "Freedom on the Fence," an online documentary on the history of Polish posters (oregonstate.edu/freedomonthefence). The talent of the artists involved and the nurturing personality of Tomaszewski came together to make this movement remarkable, she says.

Known as the "Polish School" of poster art, the movement began after the death of Soviet premier Joseph Stalin in 1953 allowed for a thaw throughout the Soviet bloc. Characterized by highly unusual, often grotesque, imagery, the school flourished until the fall of Communism in 1989. Many experts agree that the artistic high point was reached in the 1960s, when the movement's name came into use, and graphic artists from around Europe made pilgrimages to Poland to study with Tomaszewski, then a professor of design at Warsaw's Academy of Fine Arts.

In recent years, the Polish poster school has established itself as a small, but growing niche market for collectors, who may have discovered the movement while traveling in Eastern Europe, or by browsing and buying on the Internet. "The past year has been the best I have ever had in terms of Polish theater posters," says Martin Rosenberg, a Santa Fe, New Mexico, poster dealer and curator (<http://www.mrposter.com/>).

The Polish poster was an "explosion in design" that produced the most inventive graphic style to emerge from Communist-controlled Eastern Europe, says Jim Aulich, author of "Political Posters in

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Central and Eastern Europe, 1945-95."

Theater posters hold pride of place in the movement because of the role that theater itself played in Communist-era Polish society, says theater historian Tomasz Kubikowski. Theater was a forum where actors, directors and audiences could "express opinions, and, more importantly, emotions that couldn't find any other way of coming out," he says.



'Wozzeck,' 1964, by Jan Lenica

In contrast to the official style of socialist realism in painting and sculpture and the graphic style of official government posters, the posters created by artists in the Polish School of Poster movement functioned as sly commentaries on Poland's political situation and provided opportunities for individual expression, says Maria Kurpiak, director of the Wilanow Poster Museum in Warsaw (<http://www.postermuseum.pl/>).

For collectors now, Polish film posters are a bigger draw (in March, Waldemar Swierzy's 1973 poster for the movie "Midnight Cowboy" sold for £960 (\$1,810), double its estimated value in 1996, says Sarah Hodgson, head of the department for popular entertainment at Christie's in London). Nevertheless, Polish theater posters hold a special place for collectors, says Donald Mayer, whose New York gallery and Web site, Contemporary Posters, specializes in Polish poster art

(<http://www.contemporaryposters.com/>). Mr. Mayer and his wife, Ylain, started out collecting abstract expressionist art from the 1950s and 1960s, which led to an interest in Polish poster art from the same period. Like their customers, the Mayers were drawn to the dramatic stories behind many of the theater posters. "It's the history as well as the art that fascinates us," Mrs. Mayer says.

For instance, "Dziady," or "Forefathers," a 19th-century play by Adam Mickiewicz, is a humanistic plea for freedom that was banned during Poland's Stalinist years. In late 1967, a revival at Warsaw's Teatr Norodowy came under the eye of the censor for drawing too close a connection between the czarist tyrants of the play and Poland's Communist government.

In March 1968, after the production was banned, students marched in protest from the theater to a Mickiewicz memorial, triggering a wave of national unrest. The poster, designed by Roman Cieslewicz, an émigré working at that time in France, was hardly seen on the streets, but it proved prescient. Featuring a stone man about to crumble into pieces, with a hole where his heart should be, the poster brilliantly dramatizes the predicament of a society on the brink of collapse. At Contemporary Posters, the poster is priced at \$375.

In a famous poster designed in 1962 by Franciszek Starowieyski for Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play, "Frank V," a skull is grafted onto a baroque palace, and the cavity where the nose would have been is an open window. (It is priced at €400 (\$512) at the Polish Poster Gallery, www.poster.com.pl, in Warsaw's Old Town.)

Uwe Loesch, a Düsseldorf poster artist, whose work -- like Tomaszewski's -- is in the design collection at New York's Museum of Modern Art, says such strange and even morbid figures are one of the features that distinguish the Polish theater posters. "There are historic reasons for the monsters," says Mr. Loesch, who sees cathartic power in the images. "Poland was completely destroyed after the war. Most of the concentration camps were in Poland. Then came the dictatorship of the Poland's archenemy, Russia. The Poles were traumatized."



Wilanow Muzeum Plakatu,
Studio MM Marcin Michalak

'Dziady,' 1967, by Roman Cieslewicz

After Communism's fall, the streets of Polish cities filled with Western advertising, and with Western tourists. Piotr Syrycki, an employee at the Polish Poster Gallery, credits Western tourists with helping to rediscover the Polish poster school. Increased travel by Poles also has played a role. Ms. Marks learned about the movement from books brought by a student who came to Oregon from Warsaw as part of an exchange program in 1997. "As soon as I saw these books, I was floored," she says.

Originally produced in print runs of around 3,000, Polish theater posters from the Communist era were printed on low-quality paper. The Mayers put the fragile pieces on a linen backing. Their advice to

collectors is to rely on reputable dealers to distinguish between originals and reprints. It also is important to look closely at the texture of the paper, the color of the images and the publisher logos.

Jan Lenica's famous poster for the opera "Wozzeck" is at the high end of prices for the theater-poster genre. Inspired by Alban Berg's modernist opera, the poster recalls the expressionist styles of the 1920s, when Berg's opera premiered, while the colors anticipate the psychedelic hues of the 1970s. The poster won a gold medal for "posters promoting culture and art" at Warsaw's first International Poster Biennial in 1966, at the height of the Polish poster school. The original 1964 version now costs €1,200 at the Polish Poster Gallery and \$850 at Contemporary Posters in New York. However, a "Historia" poster, when in stock could be bought for a modest €120-€150, the Polish Poster Gallery estimates.

The 20th Poster Biennial, held at the Wilanow Poster Museum, is on now through Sept. 17. This year's most acclaimed theater poster, awarded a prize at the Biennial by the Polish Stage Artists' Union, is by Lech Majewski, a professor of graphic arts at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. His poster for "Balladyna," a mid-19th century Romantic drama by Juliusz Slowacki, features a stencil-like image of a woman and a black outline of a knife. It recalls the menacing, figurative tradition of the Polish school, but uses new typefaces and color schemes.

"It is important for the graphic designer to look back as well as look into the future," Mr. Majewski says.

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