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Change and Conformity: To the Rhythm of European Classicisms?

A Review of: Małgorzata Sears: *The Warsaw Group Rytm (1922-1933) and Modernist Classicism*, Cracow: Universitas, 2022. 544 pp.

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Change and Conformity: To the Rhythm of European Classicisms?

A Review of: Małgorzata Sears: *The Warsaw Group Rytm (1922-1933) and Modernist Classicism*, Cracow: Universitas, 2022. 544 pp. ISBN 978-83-242-3764-7

Christian Drobe

In 1925 at the famous Paris International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, a sculpture by Henryk Kuna (1885-1945) stood in front of the entrance to the Polish pavilion, simply titled *Rytm* (Rhythm). The figure depicts a standing nude woman with her head slightly tilted to one side in a pensive pose. The leaning but stable posture of the figure, supported by the cloak's curved lines, indicate a well-balanced rhythm. This brings us to the heart of Małgorzata Sears's book, published in 2022 as an extended version of her dissertation originally completed at the Courtauld Institute. Rhythm and balanced lines, in fact, characterize the style of the Warsaw group of artists who adopted this name and who were active in the interwar period from 1922 to 1932. The group consisted of more than 20 people, some of whom knew each other from their student days in Warsaw and Cracow. Important members included Waław Borowski (1885-1954), Eugeniusz Zak (1884-1926), who died early, and later Ludomir Sleńdziński (1889-1980). Sears presents the first monograph on this group of artists, a work that not only makes an important contribution to the history of Polish art at the beginning of the 20th century, but also addresses a highly ambivalent problem in international studies on modernism. I am referring here to the problem of modern classicism and the question it raises as to how we should deal with supposedly traditional or retrograde art movements and styles in an age of the supposedly radical practices of the avant-garde. Sears attempts to forge a path through the various forms of modern classicism from across Europe and accomplishes the goal of crafting a differentiated image of the phenomenon in interwar Poland. She does so without ignoring the political implications, that is, the potential identification of classical styles with conservative or even authoritarian regimes, as is familiar from Mussolini's fascism or National Socialism in Germany. Examination of the tension between the dynamics of the *Rytm* group within Poland and the overarching development in Europe is a major attraction of the book.

Sears has divided her book into six chapters, the first two of which retell and analyse the history of the group. The first chapter in particular, which outlines the history of the exhibitions staged by the group, provides rich material for future research. The subsequent four chapters gradually unravel the manifold overarching influences, contexts, and references in the group's works, which include, in addition to the political implications in interwar Poland, the influence in particular of the French painter Maurice Denis (1870-1943) and the philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941), each of which is followed by analyses of the works (and the

intellectual environment in which they were produced) of the artists of the group. The book culminates in the question as to the extent to which neoclassical art in the twentieth century can be described as a ‘moderate modernism.’ The comprehensively illustrated volume concludes with a long appendix, which again provides an excellent basis for future research with translated letters and other primary sources.

Humble beginnings

Scholars have studied the phenomenon of modern classicism mainly in France and Italy, presenting a long-lasting gap in research.¹ Other regions have long been neglected, not least east central Europe, but Germany and England too, for example, have also been little discussed.² In order to familiarize an international readership with the little-known material of Polish art, Sears somewhat unusually places a very detailed chronological exhibition history of *Rytm* at the beginning. This has the effect of giving the reader a very structured breakdown of their practical and cultural-political work. Sears makes clear how the group emerged in opposition to other artist associations and secessions in Warsaw and Poland, mainly in opposition to Impressionism, but also in continuation of Formism, which was active as an avant-garde movement from 1917 to 1922. The more conservative of the Formists moved on to *Rytm*.³ All this resulted in a turn to simple clear forms and the eponymous rhythm, as a notion of order and harmony, which was then further developed under the influence of the theories of Henri Bergson and Maurice Denis. The name *Rytm* can be traced back to, among others, the art critic and museologist Mieczysław Treter (1883-1943), who is hardly known outside Poland, and other art critics in the group’s close circle. There was, Sears indicates, a prolonged debate around the term, which was initially used critically, but then gained acceptance and became more deeply associated with the group’s aesthetics, for example, through the critic and promoter of folk art, Janina Orynzyna (1893-1986).⁴ For Orynzyna it was clear, Sears argues, that the choice of the name *Rytm* came with a set of formal, aesthetic and philosophical ideas. Those included the notion of balance and composition spanning not only the visual arts, but also music, dance and poetry. Sears then explains very coherently the highs and lows of the most important exhibitions that took place in Cracow, Warsaw and also outside Poland. The book consequently provides useful insight into the background cultural politics, exploring issues such as the alliances the artists subsequently formed, and highlighting the newspapers and magazines they collaborated with (important examples included *Museion*, *Pani* or *Skamander*), most of which advocated modernism and were politically liberal.

1) Key studies include Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps. The Art of the Parisian Avant-garde and the First World War, 1914-1925*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989; Christopher Green and Jens M. Daehner, eds, *Modern Antiquity: Picasso, De Chirico, Léger, Picabia*, Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2011.

2) Irena Kossowska, ed., *Reinterpreting the Past: Traditionalist Artistic Trends in Central and Eastern Europe of the 1920s and 1930s*, Warsaw: Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2010. Simon Martin, ed., *The Mystic Method: Classicism in British art 1920-1950*, Chichester: Pallant House Gallery, 2016.

3) Sears, *The Warsaw Group Rytm*, 51.

4) Sears, *The Warsaw Group Rytm*, 42-43.

Sears is also able to explain conclusively what political positions this entailed. It will not be readily apparent to readers unfamiliar with Polish history how Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935) came to power after World War I and how his *Sanacja* (Sanation) party developed in the interwar period. It was originally a centre-left party and later tilted towards conservative nationalism especially after the May coup of 1926. His government then turned into a military dictatorship, but one which was still culturally liberal and respected the freedom of the arts, and therefore cannot be compared to other right-wing dictatorships of the time. The artists of *Rytm* were particularly close to Piłsudski and *Sanacja*, and Sears makes it clear that although they saw themselves as state artists as early as the mid-1920s, their modern classicism did not manifest itself in a monumental manner.⁵ *Rytm* appeared as a progressive group formally early on and processed a wide range of influences from all over Europe, for example when they took an interest in the Swiss dancer Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) and his conception of modern dance, central to which was the concept of rhythm. Sears does a good job of navigating the reader through this complex terrain, and, ultimately, she makes clear how *Rytm* as a group asserted itself at the Paris exhibition of decorative arts of 1925 at the latest. With success behind them, its members saw themselves as representatives of the modern state. Somewhat later, their work became visibly more conservative when they fully embraced classicism and the political atmosphere shifted. At times the book suffers a bit from a lack of explanation of many specific details and persons involved, who will not be familiar to a readership unless it is already deeply immersed in Polish literary or artistic history. Overall, however, this is a great contribution to the research of the artists' group, and Sears marks an important milestone in Polish art history by presenting the material to an international audience, which also secures the work of the *Rytm* group for future generations of researchers.

Classicism again and again

Throughout the history of art, there have been many occasions when artists embraced classicism. This was also the case in the period after the First World War, the horrors of which gave rise to what many saw as retrograde art styles throughout Europe; for Benjamin Buchloh this shift constituted a betrayal of the avant-garde.⁶ Only more recently have scholars been more open to the phenomenon and seen it as a typical part of modernism. The 'Rappel à l'ordre' issued by Jean Cocteau in 1926 and the call for a 'Ritorno al Mestiere' (Return to craft) proclaimed by Giorgio de Chirico in 1928 are the most prominent examples of this development.⁷ However, it was not only the war and the watershed of 1918 that favoured the new classicism. A major achievement of Sears's work is to present the continuity of classical aesthetics from before the war, a topic that is rarely addressed in research. The author judiciously describes the transformations of an aesthetic that peaked in the late eighteenth century but

5) Małgorzata Sears, *Rytm, Sanacja, and the Dream of Modern Art Patronage in Poland (1922-1932)*, in Beáta Hock, Klara Kemp-Welch and Jonathan Owen, eds, *A Reader in East-Central-European Modernism 1918-1956*, London: The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2019, 173-189.

6) Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting*, *October*, 16, Spring 1981, 39-68.

7) Sears, *The Warsaw Group Rytm*, 160.

then underwent many variations up to the modern period, often in a different guise. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this mostly involved updates of aesthetic concepts with the ideas of more recent philosophers. With these insights alone for the context of Poland, the author fills important gaps in the research.

All further chapters are basically about these different possibilities and transformations of neoclassicism, which highlight the fact that modern classicists were searching for comparable practices across Europe in an effort to find allies or inspiration. There was considerable exchange of ideas between French and Polish artists, but Italian art was also important. A central, productive, figure in the further adaptation of classical tendencies was, surprisingly, Henri Bergson, whose ideas became popular throughout Europe in the early twentieth century. His well-known concept of *élan vital* was particularly important in this regard, but so was his conception of time as *durée*, in other words, of the experience of time as being a long flow of intuitive perception, which he formulated in his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*.⁸

Although, at first glance, the application of these theories to classicism must be puzzling to the reader, Sears convincingly unpacks the importance of these concepts to the Polish art and literary scene in the 1920s. These included an understanding of *durée* as a notion of life beyond history, and of mortality as an ‘original state of innocence’, as a Polish poet formulated it in the magazine *Skamander* in 1920.⁹ Sears identifies these ideas as a part of a bigger vitalist discourse and also sees the influences in the symbolism of dance, the possibility of uniting two incompatible representation methods such as idealisation and untamed expression, and the refusal of the group to formulate manifestos.¹⁰ In other words, it is a very loose and associative understanding of Bergson’s philosophy, which she traces to formal statements by Polish artists in the 1920s, but also identifies in the group’s art practice. These ideas were also taken up by the Polish lyricist Bolesław Leśmian, among others, and he combined them with ideas from Nietzsche and the concept of rhythm in his poem ‘U źródeł rytmu’ (At the sources of rhythm) in 1915.¹¹ Bergson’s writings found a wide audience in Poland in translation through newspapers and magazines such as *Skamander*.¹² The concept of *durée* well describes the aesthetic of artists such as Waclaw Borowski or Eugeniusz Zak, who was often prone to painting images of Arcadian scenery. Despite the insightful description of the reception of Bergson’s writings, this section turns into more of an iconology of neoclassical art, which, however, is not Sears’s fault, but rather describes the Polish artists’ loose approach to Bergson in the 1920s.

Due to the tense international political situation of the 1920s and 1930s, Polish artists oriented themselves less towards Germany and turned more to France and Italy as the most influential ‘classicist’ countries. One of the major qualities of Sears’s work is the fact that she is repeatedly able to uncover cross-connections, such as when Giorgio de Chirico refers, in his text ‘Ritorno al Mestiere’, to the Polish painter Eugeniusz Zak, who was active in Paris at the time.¹³ In 1919 De Chirico had noted that the Pole was largely ignored by Parisian artists, but

8) Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice*, Paris: Alcan, 1907.

9) Sears, *The Warsaw Group Rytm*, 225.

10) *Ibid.*, 224.

11) *Ibid.*, 229.

12) *Ibid.*, 225.

13) *Ibid.*, 160-161.

he predicted that his neoclassical style would soon gain currency. Sears then explains these and other connections and influences through the lenses of the surrounding philosophical influences. She also highlights the group's use of iconography. Themes included, as often is commonplace in classicism, Arcadian idylls, female nudes, fountains and springs, dancing and the depiction of youth, scenes of primordial innocence and serenity. Sears also observes that their work went beyond traditional classical themes, and encompassed the primitive, the ideas of Nietzsche, vitalist an affirmation of life and youthful energy, and folk art. Her discussion of these issues would have benefitted from comparison with other states in east-central Europe, such as Hungary or Austria, where many artists also explored neoclassical idioms, although this might have gone beyond the scope of the study. Overall, Sears presents the classicism of the *Rytm* group as assembled from an eclectic range of influences. In doing so, she avoids making any particular philosophical direction absolute, and she also shows that *Rytm* developed playfully and shaped their modern classicist art in an almost mannerist fashion.

Maurice Denis

One of the underestimated figures of modern classicism is the French painter Maurice Denis, who became an art writer early on. Known as a representative of Catholic spiritualism, he is often stylistically assigned to post-impressionism, from which, however, he increasingly turned to classical themes. Drawing above all on Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), he developed a classical aesthetic, dedicated to a utopia and rich future for youth by means of education and ideas of social order. It may therefore not be surprising that, as Sears points out, Polish artists, coming from a deeply Catholic culture, turned to this artist and his theories. But it was Denis's conception of Synthetism that was the more important source for the Polish group's aesthetic. Denis referred to the idea of painting as a system of flat, two-dimensional patterns that are assembled synthetically, not naturalistically, by the artist. Evolving out of art movements such as Symbolism and *decadence*, Synthetism also embodied a way of thinking about rhythm and balance. Denis's influence came to Poland in many ways, most notably via the painter Eugeniusz Zak, but also through countless other voices and avenues, such as the art historian Waclaw Husarski (1883-1951), who promoted the French artist's work. Sculptors such as Henryk Kuna (1885-1945) or Edward Wittig (1879-1941) were also inspired by French art. It seems important to emphasize once again Sears's achievement in having expanded these waves of reception to include hitherto little-noticed influences and figures from all over Europe, towards east central Europe, where modern classicism has still not been adequately researched. This includes her discussion of the painter Ludomir Sleńdziński (1889-1980), a native of St. Petersburg who was active for a long time in Vilnius (at that time part of Poland) and who absorbed influences from German New Objectivity, as well as from recent art movements in Italy and in general revisited the art of classical antiquity.

Moderate (modernism) or not?

Lastly, Sears's book raises the question of political responsibility, often a source of controversy in research on modern classicism. Since the *Rytm* group ceased to exist as early as 1932 – it was seldom more than an informal artists' association that issued a few manifestos and staged exhibitions together – the question arises as to whether and how *Rytm* prepared the ground for the distinctly conservative turn artists took in the 1930s with their embrace of a much more traditional aesthetics. This occurred everywhere in Europe, and in Poland, too. Classicism was usurped above all by Italian fascism and the Nazi regime, which cast a long shadow over the art style and almost completely discredited it after 1945. A quality of Sear's study is that she focuses on the wider theoretical concepts of monumentality and totality that often lay behind these developments, rather than the later political consequences. She shows that such universal concepts of art had been in circulation since the early twentieth century, including in Poland, when artists were searching for the appropriate style for the era. Against the background of the fragmented art scene and the many 'isms,' the search for a uniform epochal style was seen as vital for a reform of the art world. Yet, the neo-classicist theories favoured by the *Rytm* group tended to lean towards conservative ideas of order. Maurice Denis's persistence in asserting the need for a 'unified' world, for instance, has been criticized 'as treacherous in legitimising authoritarian power'.¹⁴

As Sears notes, this relationship between art and power is difficult to establish for *Rytm* and interwar Poland. Since Piłsudski's regime showed little interest in culture, it even seems paradoxical that the *Rytm* group saw themselves as state artists. One answer could be that *Rytm* felt obliged to the state without being heard by it, but another would be that the group could not find a new 'monumental style', and no universal symbols emerged (that would suit a new national style, for instance). Sears convincingly demonstrates that this desire for universality and synthesis often failed in modernism, and she rightfully uses the term 'moderate modernism' to describe the paradox of *Rytm*'s 'distanced closeness' to the state and the eventual dissolvment of their utopian dreams. She concludes by stating: '*Rytm* was dissident, but it was not revolutionary; it was pioneering, but also accommodating; inventive, while at the same time conforming'.¹⁵ Again, comparisons to other countries in central Europe could have been fruitful, and Sears could have contrasted the situation in Poland to that in Austria, for instance. Overall, this path saved the *Rytm* group from political exploitation. Sears makes it clear that its forms cannot be placed in the same lineage as the monumental classicism associated with Italian fascism or Nazism in Germany. Nevertheless, she stresses that *Rytm*, by emerging as a representative, 'moderate Left' style for a brief moment in history, likely displaced more progressive positions in interwar Period. Ultimately, this is the story of 'a group which, eager to bring change and modernisation, itself fell into ossification and conformity as soon as it gained influence'.¹⁶

Sears succeeds in showing the diversity of modernist classicism across Europe and her book should be a prompt for research in many new areas. These include analysis of the strong

14) *Ibid.*, 325.

15) *Ibid.*, 329.

16) *Ibid.*, 340.

influences and exchanges between the countries of Europe, which she ably demonstrates here for the first time through the examples of countless artists and critics from east central Europe she discusses. From this, many further research topics are sure to emerge in the future, including, one might hope, questions of gender, the role of private collectors, the art market and the history of taste, parallel literary phenomena, and further interconnections in Europe. Her meticulously researched and superbly illustrated book lays the groundwork for these endeavours and presents a long-understudied part of Polish art history to an international audience.



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