

In Memoriam Jan Białostocki (1921-1988)*

Jan Białostocki, the great art historian and museum curator whose manifold contribution to Polish scholarship and personal integrity gave him enormous authority both at home and abroad, died in Warsaw on December 25, 1988, at the age of 67. Deep sorrow and regret were felt at his death by scholars and artists all over the world¹ — wherever he had lectured, wherever his books, articles, and exhibition catalogues, available in at least a dozen languages, are read and employed as invaluable aids to scholarly research.

His published writings, which have yet to be collected, number well over six hundred.² For almost half a century, from the days of his youth to his no less intellectually energetic last years, his ever broadening interests overlapped with those of philosophers, aestheticians, semiologists, linguists, musicologists, sociologists, and historians; thus he formed close ties with fellow scholars in a wide variety of fields.

For all his international recognition, the incomparable range of Białostocki's activity merits thorough study with regard to its influence on the cultural life of his own country since the Second World War. His books and articles, his educational programs for radio and television, the exhibitions he organized, the lectures he held both at the university level and for the general public — all these efforts and more on the part of Jan Białostocki to popularize the fine arts and the humanities have played a very important role in introducing successive generations of Poles to their European cultural heritage.

The *curriculum vitae* of this eminent art historian was quite unlike that of his contemporaries at universities in, for example, the English-speaking world. Jan Białostocki was born on

August 14, 1921, in Saratov, in the Soviet Union. His father, also named Jan, became a well-known musician and composer in the Poland of the inter-war period. He married Walentyna Wereninow and the couple settled in Warsaw shortly after the birth of their son, but moved to the town of Grodzisk Mazowiecki in 1928.

Like his parents, young Jan was blessed with an exceptional ear for music; combined with the other family trait of industriousness, this musical ability would enable him to master seven foreign languages.

His debut as a writer came in 1938, when a piece he wrote on the German painter Matthias Grünewald was published in *Ignis*, a periodical for secondary-school students in Warsaw. This same text, with some changes and additions, was used as an entry for the 1973 edition of *The McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Art*. All together, Białostocki attended four different schools, receiving his diploma from the Adam Mickiewicz *Gymnasium* in Warsaw, in May 1939. He had wanted to study classical philology at the Józef Piłsudski University of Warsaw, but the war intervened and thus, instead, in 1940 he began his study of Greek and Latin at the wartime underground university, directed by Dr. Maykowski.

The horrific conditions in Poland under Nazi Occupation demanded of a student far more than mere enthusiasm — they required heroism. In addition to his studies, Białostocki had to support himself financially, so from January 1940 to August 1945, he worked as a cashier in a factory. In the spirit of selfless courage which characterized his behavior throughout his life, he helped a friend, Marcin Sarna, the brother of Felicja



Sarna (later Uniechowska), by hiding him in his Old Town apartment during 1941.

In 1942-46, the erstwhile student of classics turned his attention to philosophy, under the guidance of Prof. Tadeusz Kotarbiński and Prof. Władysław Tatarkiewicz. The underground lectures and seminars were held at great risk in the Old Town and various other parts of central Warsaw. In 1943, Białostocki took up drawing and graphic design, studying under Tadeusz Cieśliewicz, Jr. He designed, among other things, the cover for Juliusz Oborski's book of verse in 1944. He also became friends with Andrzej Jakimowicz, an art student who would later be his colleague at the Institute of Art History at the University of Warsaw.

Following the crushing of the August 1944 Uprising in the Old Town of Warsaw, where he was living with his parents, Białostocki and his father were arrested. Jan, Jr., was sent to the Nazi concentration camps of Gross-Rosen, Mauthausen, and Linz III. His father died in Linz I, shortly after the camp was liberated by the Americans in April 1945. Białostocki helped organize artistic and cultural programs for his former fellow prisoners. He worked at the Polish Center in Linz from May 1st to August 5, 1945, and assisted in arranging the repatriation of his countrymen. When he himself finally returned to Poland, his food and clothing were stolen en route.

Back in Warsaw, in November 1945 Białostocki was taken on as an assistant to the great art historian Prof. Michał Walicki at the National Museum. Simultaneously, he began work at the University of Warsaw as an unpaid assistant in Walicki's Institute of Medieval Art History. We still have Walicki's formal request of December 17, 1945, to the faculty council of the History Department for permission to engage Białostocki, though the young scholar was already active at the university.

The degree of *Magister* was conferred on Jan Białostocki in July 1946, upon completion of his thesis entitled "The Role of Knowledge in Experiencing a Work of Art," which he wrote under the supervision of Prof. Tatarkiewicz of the Philosophy Department. The thesis concludes:

This knowledge, the lack of which in general hinders a proper evaluation of works of art, is the knowledge of how to interpret artistic achievements based on the observer's art-historical education. Such information may be difficult to acquire, but it is so necessary for true comprehension that certain works are nearly inaccessible for those who do not possess it. It is not easy to duly appreciate works in different media, from different periods, and in different styles.

Here was a kind of signpost for the direction his own life would take. His early work already reveals a clear and systematic

way of thinking, and above all a strong desire to gain the knowledge that would enable him to undertake a proper — in the sense of being historically grounded — interpretation of works of art.

His involvement in the preparation of exhibitions and their catalogues for the National Museum led Białostocki more and more to the study of Poland's important collections of Western art. He collaborated with Walicki on the production of *European Painting in Polish Collections*, a major work covering the period 1300-1800, which appeared in 1955 in three different languages, and then on the ninth volume in the series *Les Primitifs Flamands: Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux au quinzième siècle*, which dealt with fifteenth-century Flemish paintings held in Polish collections.

As curator of the National Museum's Department of European Painting, he organized, over four decades, numerous exhibitions receiving international attention, among them "Rembrandt and His Circle," "Art at the Time of Michelangelo," "Early Renaissance Landscape Painting," "Ars Emblematica," and "Echoes of Raphael."

Białostocki made the most of his dual position as university professor and museum curator. It enabled him, for example, to train students expressly for curatorial work.

During the Stalinist era, despite the fact that contacts with foreign scholars were sharply restricted, Białostocki worked to bring Polish scholarship in line with current international trends. He thereby rendered a great and by no means riskless service to his field, which the official policy of the time had condemned to stagnation.

Nor was he exempt from the general repression. After Michał Walicki's arrest in 1950, Białostocki, as his assistant, was forced to leave the University of Warsaw. During the 1949/50 academic year, he taught at the University of Łódź, and then, from 1950 to 1957, at the Warsaw School of Drama. Nevertheless, he was able to defend his doctoral dissertation, "Flemish Landscapes in the Mannerist Period (1520-1620): An Attempt at a Synthesis." As a pure formality, the work was officially supervised by Prof. Stanisław Lorentz, replacing Walicki. Białostocki passed his doctoral examination in June 1950. Appointed docent in 1955, he worked for a year in the Department of Architecture at Warsaw Polytechnic. When he returned, in January 1959, to the Institute of Art History at the University of Warsaw, he worked with Prof. Juliusz Starzyński, who held the chair for Art Criticism and Theory. Białostocki received the title of associate professor in 1962, and became a full professor a decade later. In 1971 he was given his own chair in the History of Renaissance Art. As a result of internal conflicts at the Institute, he succeeded to the directorship in 1984. He remained head of the Institute until his death.

As a teacher, Białostocki had enormous influence, educating scores of graduate students in medieval and Renaissance art as well as in art theory. Many of the doctoral candidates who received their degrees from Białostocki after he was put in charge of the Doctoral Examination Board at the University of Warsaw in 1968, have become distinguished figures in their own right, such as Zygmunt Waźbiński (1966); Maryla Poprzęcka (1971); Sergiusz Michalski (1981); Lech Brusewicz (1987); and Małgorzata Szafrńska (1987). The present writer, too, received his degree from Białostocki in 1971. Białostocki co-supervised Irma Weber's doctoral thesis, "Iconography of the Painting of Hans Thoma," at the University of Halle in 1975. He was involved in the habilitation of his students Waźbiński (1972); this writer (1981); and Poprzęcka (1983). He was also invited to be a member of doctoral, habilitation, and professorial examinations boards at various universities in Poland and abroad (in West Germany, the United States, and Israel).

In the course of his almost thirty-year span of activity at the University of Warsaw, Białostocki was involved in many key aspects, administrative as well as academic, of university life. His positions included the following: vice-chairman of the History Department in charge of student affairs (1960-62); member of the Council on Ancient Cultures (as of 1984); head of the Council on Museums (as of 1986); representative of the History Department to the Senate, the self-governing body of the university (1983/84 academic year); head of the Research Council at the Institute of Art History (1975-1984); and leader (as of 1968) of the Institute's Research Team for the History of Artistic Doctrines, which published five volumes of source material.

And, of course, he was a professor at the Institute of Art History, holding seminars and giving lecture courses on the history of art theory as well as on a wide range of other subjects. He had a reputation for being an excellent university teacher who demanded no less of himself than he did of his students — and the effort he demanded was considerable. For instance, his organization of lecture time was legendary: he began to speak as soon as he stepped into the lecture hall, and an hour and a half later, he made his final remarks on his way out the door. His lectures were attended not only by art historians but also by students from other disciplines, even those far removed from the liberal arts — and by actors. The lectures he gave abroad ended with long ovations by the audience, as I can testify from my personal experience in Washington, D.C., in Grenada, and in Vienna, where crowds of students and friends who had come to hear him speak hung on his every word.

Although intensely committed to his professional responsibilities at home, Białostocki spent a good deal of time

traveling. All together, he gave more than 250 lectures in far-flung locations on five continents. In 1947-48 he studied in France on a government scholarship, touring Belgium and Holland as well. Ten years later, a Ford Foundation scholarship made it possible for him to work with Erwin Panofsky at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton University for nine months. In 1963 he was a visiting professor at the University of Leyden; in 1965/66 he was at Yale; in 1966/67 he lectured in Mexico City; in 1972/73 he was at New York University, where he gave the Wrightsman Lectures, and again at Princeton; he was invited to the Collège de France in Paris; he made two trips to Greece in 1977; visited Australia in 1980; returned to the Institute for Advanced Studies in 1983; delivered the Slade Lectures at Cambridge University in 1985; and traveled to Egypt in 1986 (holding lectures in Cairo and Alexandria), and China (lectures in Beijing and Shanghai) and India the following year.

As a representative of UNESCO — he was chairman of the International Council on Philosophy and the Humanities — and, from 1969, vice-chairman of the International Committee for the History of Art, Białostocki took part in innumerable congresses, symposia, and seminars around the world.

In addition to his foreign travels, Białostocki regarded it as a kind of civic duty to tour his native country giving talks and meeting his readers, which he did again and again. These trips, by train and by car, to the smaller cities of Poland, needless to say were exhausting, but the rewarding encounters that resulted, and the inspiring effect he had on his audiences, more than compensated for the physical strain. As I accompanied him several times, I can say with assurance that his lectures on European art — whether he delivered them in Bydgoszcz, or Kielce, or wherever — invariably were on the highest level and, accordingly, were very warmly received.

Białostocki was equally well aware of the importance of the press in educating taste and generating increased appreciation for art. In addition to academic journals, he wrote regularly for many Polish papers and periodicals aimed at a general audience, including *Kultura*, *Polityka*, and *Tygodnik Powszechny*. He had long recorded radio broadcasts; the last one he made was on the occasion of Pope John Paul II's third visit to Poland. Starting in 1948 he was involved in making films about art, writing several scripts himself, and he was quick to grasp the unique opportunity which the new medium of television represented for his tireless efforts to spread knowledge: in the early 1960s he appeared live on television, lecturing on the history of art. His new, five-part series unfortunately was taken off the air following the declaration of martial law on December 13, 1981.

Białostocki became an associate member of the Polish Academy of Sciences in 1976, having long participated in

various of its activities, such as the Art Studies Committee, of which he was secretary (1962-68), deputy chairman (1965-72), and finally, chairman (from 1972 on). He joined the Academic Council of the Art Institute of the Academy of Sciences in 1960, and coordinated many of the research projects undertaken by the Institute.

He had belonged to the Association of Art Historians ever since 1946, serving as its president from 1962 to 1979, and afterwards as vice-president. Perhaps the greatest service Białostocki performed to the discipline of art history in Poland was his organization of the Association's nationwide meetings and the Methodological Symposia that were held almost every year for a more restricted group of interested participants. The papers presented at both the conferences and the symposia were subsequently published, and have since become a true memorial to their instigator and guiding light. Thus he made his influence felt among his colleagues as well as his students, and in turn contributed to the growing authority of the Association, for example at the Congress on Polish Culture, which was disbanded under martial law shortly after opening as an independent discussion forum.

In the politically turbulent year of 1981, he felt obliged to accept the deputy chairmanship of the Coordinating Committee of Artists and Scholars. Jan Białostocki had an acknowledged natural gift for reconciling opposing sides, in addition to his managerial talents. This gift he used to good effect as head of the Steering Committee of the Congress on Polish Culture, when on December 13, at the start of the military crackdown, he did his utmost to secure the quickest possible release of the congress participants who had been interned (including, among others, Prof. Klemens Szaniawski, who was in fact released the same day). Apparently as a result of his courageous initiative, the doyen of Polish art historians was not allowed to travel to the United States the following month. In February 1982, the security police searched his apartment and confiscated all papers connected with the abortive Congress on Polish Culture.

But the list of organizations, foreign as well as domestic, of which Białostocki was a member is still not complete. It also includes the Council on Culture of the Ministry of Culture and Art (1970-81); the Committee for State Prizes (as of 1975, as deputy chairman of the Art Section); the Poznań Society of Friends of Sciences and Letters (as of 1961); the Polish Philosophical Society (as of 1966); the Polish Semiotics Society (as of 1967); the Polish Writers' Association (1965-82); the Union of Authors and Playwrights; the Warsaw Education Society (founding member, 1981-82); the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (as of 1971); the Flemish Academy of Sciences (as of 1972); the Academy of Literature and Science in Mainz (as of 1973); the Accademia Clementina in Bologna (as of 1986);

and l'Académie Européenne des Sciences, Arts et Lettres (as of 1986).

He received, among others, the following Polish prizes: the Minister of Sciences and Higher Education Prize (1969); the State Prize, First Class — for individual merit (1978); the Mieczysław Lepecki Prize of the Polish Pen Club (1979); the Ministry of National Education Prize, First Class (1988).

Abroad, he was the recipient of the Herder Prize, Vienna (1970); Aby Warburg Award, Hamburg (1981); A. Jurzykowski Award, New York (1981); Reuchlin Prize, Pforzheim (1983); the Premio Canaletto, Venice (1988); and the Theo Wormland Prize, Munich (1988).

He was awarded honorary doctorates from the universities of Groningen (1969); Mainz (1973); and Brussels (1987).

Among the honors and orders of merit which he was awarded are — although this list is necessarily incomplete — the *Corona d'Italia* (1947); Chevalier's Cross (1947); Gold Service Cross (1954); the orders of Chevalier of *Polonia Restituta* (1961), Officer of *Polonia Restituta* (1969), and Commander of *Polonia Restituta* (1980); and the National Education Medal.

Białostocki edited the *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* from 1960 until his death. He was also a member of the editorial boards of international art journals such as *Art History* and the Vienna-based *Artibus et Historiae* (edited by his former student Dr. Józef Grabski), and in Poland, of *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* (Yearbook of Art History) and *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* (Bulletin of Art History). As director of the Institute of Art History, Białostocki founded the periodical *Ikonotheka*, editing its three issues himself.

He was the editor of *Ideas and Art. Studies on the History of Art and Artistic Doctrines*, a series of books, some by students of his, published by the State Academic Publishing House.

As it is impossible to present here a thorough analysis of Jan Białostocki's scholarly output, I will only note the most influential of his more than sixty books and catalogues: *Spätmittelalter und beginnende Neuzeit*, vol. VII in the Propyläen Kunstgeschichte series (1972/1984); *Stil und Ikonographie*, collected essays (1966/1981); *The Message of Images: Studies in the History of Art* (1988); *The Art of the Renaissance in Eastern Europe: Hungary, Bohemia, Poland* (1976); *Sztuka cenniejsza niż złoto* (Art More Valuable Than Gold), in four editions; *Myśliciele, kronikarze i artyści o sztuce od starożytności do 1500* (Thinkers, Chroniclers, and Artists on Art from Antiquity to 1500), vol. I (1978/1988); and *Teoretycy, pisarze i artyści o sztuce 1500-1600* (Theoreticians, Writers, and Artists on Art, 1500-1600), vol. II (1985).

Białostocki personally had an enormous impact on the art

historian community, not only because he propagated the latest methodology and lines of research, but above all because he successfully promoted the international exchange of ideas and trends — for example, between Cracow and Vienna, Poznań and Frankfurt, Warsaw and Princeton, or Munich and Paris. This is yet another aspect of the severe loss which his death constitutes for the world of scholarship.

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I would like to recall here the celebration of Białostocki's 60th birthday, held in Warsaw on October 14, 1981. That morning we had heard him deliver his excellent paper entitled "On the Facades of Venetian Churches as Monuments to the Glory of Their Sponsors," at the meeting of the Art Studies Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences. At six o'clock in the Łazienki Palace, he was ceremoniously presented with his *Festschrift* entitled *Ars auro prior*. Following laudatory speeches by Prof. Lech Kalinowski and Prof. Aleksander Gieysztor, and the reading of congratulatory telegrams, Białostocki himself delivered a moving address to his well-wishers. Then there was a chamber-music concert, and finally the guests were served wine — a luxury not easy to come by at the time. Afterwards, Białostocki hosted a supper for the contributors to the *Festschrift* and out-of-town guests at the Association of Art Historians in the Old Town. It was an unforgettable occasion for all.

As the years went by, there was much discussion over what we should do to celebrate the next milestone in Białostocki's life, his 70th birthday. It would have been in 1991, and for a long time he had been saying, with some sadness, that in that year he would have to retire from the university. We thought

of repeating the idea of the 1981 *Festschrift* and reception, albeit on a smaller scale. Work began on the project in the autumn of 1986. The National Museum wanted to publish it as a collection of articles to be written by Polish contributors.

In the midst of a general meeting of the Polish Academy of Sciences on May 27, 1988, Białostocki suddenly became very ill. The atmosphere at the meeting had been tense as the Academy authorities, in defending themselves against the charges contained in an open letter demanding organizational and personnel changes, lashed out at its authors. One of the first signers had been Białostocki.

He was hospitalized for seven months, during which he was in great pain. He was then supposed to be flown to a neurological rehabilitation clinic in West Germany, but on December 22, the day before his planned departure, his condition worsened to the point at which traveling was out of the question. He died on Christmas Day. He is survived by his wife, Jolanta, also an art historian, his daughter, Marta, and a granddaughter.

The death of Jan Białostocki necessitated a drastic change in plans concerning the articles to be assembled in his honor. When Prof. Maryla Poprzęcka and I informed Dr. Józef Grabski, whose Vienna-based publishing house, IRSA Verlag, had just published Białostocki's *The Message of Images*, of the sad news, it was immediately agreed that IRSA would bring out the intended *Festschrift* as soon as possible, as a commemoration of the life and achievements of our former professor. Further details were discussed in early 1989, and art historians in several different countries were invited to contribute to the *Festschrift*, which now bore the title «*Porta Mortis*». In *Memoriam Jan Białostocki 1921-1988*. It is hoped that it will be a fitting tribute to the greatness of the man and the scholar.

* I am grateful to the staff of the Archives of the University of Warsaw for the help I received there in researching this article. I also owe thanks to Felicja Uniechowska for her valuable reminiscences.

¹ Among the first obituaries to appear in the European press following Jan Białostocki's death were: W. Wiegand, "Mitteleuropa als Aufgabe," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Dec. 29, 1988), p. 19; W. Sauerländer, "Kunst ist vor dem Gold," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Dec. 30, 1988); A. Chastel, "Un maître de l'icônologie," *Le Monde* (Dec. 31, 1988); S. Michalski, "Patriot und Europäer im Denken und Handeln," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Jan. 3, 1989); and Lyckle de Vries, "In Memoriam: Jan Białostocki," *UK* (Jan. 18-19, 1989). In Poland,

obituaries were written by the following authors, among others: J. Łoziński in *Życie Warszawy* (Dec. 29, 1988); J. Kossakowski in *Słowo Powszechnie* (Jan. 3, 1989); J. A. Chrościcki in *Polityka* (Jan. 14, 1989); and M. Poprzęcka in *Przegląd Katolicki* (Jan. 29, 1989).

² W. Wyganowska compiled a bibliography of Białostocki's work from 1938-81, for the *Festschrift* in honor of his 60th birthday, *Ars auro prior. Studia Ioanni Białostocki Sexagenario dicata*, Warsaw, 1981, pp. 757-68. The second part of this bibliography, covering the years 1981-90, is currently being prepared for publication in the forthcoming *Festschrift* entitled «*Porta Mortis*». In *Memoriam Jan Białostocki (1921-1988)*, ed. J. Grabski, IRSA Verlag, Vienna.