

*Report of the Committee of the Association of Polish Artists „Sztuka” for the year 1898*

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In the winter of 1897, there arose among a group of Krakow painters an idea to organize a group show that would be set apart from an average exhibition at the Association of [the Friends of] Fine Arts by the selection of the displayed works. The matter was discussed privately; finally, on May 27, 1897 “Special Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures” opened in Sukiennice. It lasted an entire month from May 27 to June 27.

The exhibition filled part of the great hall and the smaller back room. Since the group of artists did not have access to any funds, the installation was exceedingly modest and only special care gave the show a distinct, somewhat sophisticated character.

The outcome exceeded expectations. The public came in droves, expressions of appreciation and encouragement were not spared, and the number of buyers was unusually high. The small income was, in reality, a significant moral success. Material gain could not have been any higher because of the difficult terms dictated by the Association of the Friends of Fine Arts. Those who were not members of the Association had to pay general admission in addition to the admission for the special exhibition, which together amounted to 50 cnt.

Despite that, the exhibition was visited by approximately 6,000 people, a very large number for a city of Krakow’s size.

On the occasion of the first exhibition there appeared a poster, designed by T[eodor] Axentowich, which included names of all the participants and was decorated with an image of a woman’s head inscribed in a circle, through which the word “Ars” was diagonally inscribed. This head and inscription became the emblem of the Association of Artists “Sztuka.”

In the fall of 1897 the group of artists opened an exhibition in Lwow in the building that remained after the National Exposition [of 1894] in Stryjski Park. This location was chosen because the rooms of the Lwow Association of Fine Arts are so meager and dark, that they could not be used for the Exhibition, which included large cartoons for stain glass windows requiring a room with a considerable ceiling height. The exhibition opened on October 1 and lasted until November 1. While one could say that the Krakow exhibition was quite successful, the one in Lwow met with indifference of the local public, for whom it was a collection of bizarre extravagances having nothing in common with “true” art. The exhibition housed in huge, dilapidated rooms of the former “Palace of Art”

appeared very modest. Some members of the public complained. There were instances of a few visitors demanded a refund of the money paid for the admission. Hostile responses appeared in the press. A typical of those was a review by Jan Łada, printed in the *Polish Word* [*Słowo Polskie*], which with uncommon severity and maliciousness branded those pitiful manifestations of contemporary art, the same ones that a while later in Vienna received the acclaim of the local and foreign press.

The financial outcome was such that the amount gained in Krakow was used to pay for the transport of the paintings to and from Lwow. There was no income; no paintings were sold.

At the same time, the first General Meeting took place on October 27, 1897 and the Association “Sztuka” was formed. Józef Chelmoński was selected as the president; the committee was formed by Stanislawski as the vice president, Axentowicz as the treasurer, Mehoffer as the secretary; altogether the Association had fifteen members. It was also then that the decision was made to organize an exhibition in Warsaw in December and January of 1898.

The exhibition in Warsaw gave the members of the Association “Sztuka” an opportunity to fully realize the nature of their relationship with artists and with the Society of [the Friends] of Fine Arts.

It was installed in the building of the Association for the Encouragement of Fine Arts (at the Rezsza Obywatelska), where it took up a portion of the great hall and a second, smaller room. This dark venue has become very unpopular in Warsaw. According to existing regulations, the Association “Sztuka” presented its exhibition as “the Exhibition of Krakow Painters.” We also published the first catalogue, illustrated with rough drawings.

One must distinguish between a material and moral results. Material outcome was not impressive; the number of visitors was rather significant, but should have been much greater in such a large city as Warsaw. The settlement of accounts with the Association for the Encouragement [of Fine Arts] was not in our favor. The Association, which managed our exhibition, did not apply for the exemption from customs duty, which amounted to 400 rub. The payment took our entire income [from the exhibition]. In this way, an exhibition that could have resulted in greatest gain, ended with a deficit. However, the moral success was undeniable. Several Warsaw newspapers included favorable mentions, which emphasized the fact that the efforts of

Krakow painters brought a fresh breeze into Warsaw artistic scene.

Because we were planning to organize a spring exhibition in Krakow in 1898, the committee attempted to negotiate more favorable terms with the Association of [Friend of] Fine Arts. It presented a proposal for a somewhat more favorable contract. However, it encountered a demand of the same terms as in the previous year and had to agree.

The Krakow exhibition opened on June 3 1898 and lasted until July 3. Was it weaker than the one last year? The newspapers reproached us that it did not present finished paintings or larger compositions. We maintain that an exhibition of a group of painters must present an image of their annual creative output. The previous exhibition, which included works produced earlier and over a longer period, must have appeared fuller. The attendance seemed weaker than last year, fewer paintings were bought. However, once again, we did have an income, which allowed us certain freedom to plan further steps along our chosen path.

The illustrated catalogue was given a more refined form; there appeared also a color poster designed by T. Axentowicz.

Above and beyond immediate achievements at home resulting from organizing exhibitions, the Association "Sztuka" received recognition abroad. In the first place, a number of members were invited to join newly formed Association of Austrian Artists (Secession). As members of that association, Polish artists participated in two exhibitions of the Viennese Secession, gaining recognition of German and foreign critics. Mr. William Ritter, a correspondent for the Parisian *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* and *The Studio*, as well as Mr. de Soissons, a correspondent for the English journals *The Artist* and *Black and White* approached Sztuka members with a demand for more detailed information about the Association and with a request for images to illustrate their articles. Among the more prestigious foreign publications, the following presented articles on our artists exhibiting in Vienna: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, *The Artist*, *The Studio*, *Art et Décoration*. In addition, Mr. A. Scala, the director of the Austrian Museum for Art and Manufacture in Vienna, approached Professor Maryan Sokolowski with a request to write an article about Polish artists and asked the Association, through him, to provide photographs and drawings for a special issue of the monthly journal *Kunst und Kunsthandwerk*.

This year, the committee of the Association "Sztuka" received an invitation from the St. Petersburg Imperial Association of Fine Arts calling upon it to organize a Polish exhibition in St. Petersburg.

At the present moment we are pleased to announce the opening of the second exhibition of the Association "Sztuka" in Warsaw (on 19 of March, 1899) at the Salon of A. Krywult. The exhibition will

last six weeks; it contains 105 entries, among others a very large painting by Józef Chelmoński "The Four-in-Hand."

In the near future we will be organizing an annual spring exhibition in Krakow. And, in the fall of 1899, the Vienna Secession will give our Association its building for the purpose of organizing a Polish exhibition. The Secession will finance the cost of organizing the exhibition, which over the six week duration will amount to 18,000 zł.

It remains to characterize the relationship between our Association and the Krakow Association of the Friends of Fine Arts. Some have charged that we threaten its survival, that we want to demolish what already exists. We respond to those charges by pointing to the first paragraph of our statute, which states that the aim of the Association "Sztuka" is to *contribute* to the growth of the artistic life of the country. This report demonstrates that in part, as much as our meager means have allowed, we have achieved this goal. We wish that the Association of Fine Arts remains and continues to develop along the pathway assigned to it by its name: "The Association of the Friends of Fine Arts." To menace it would be a heinous endeavor. We [only] wish that [the Association] could understand our aspirations and did not see in us enemies lying in wait for its welfare.

But the time has come. Polish art has achieved such a level of development that it is no longer satisfied with functioning in only one arena. This art is young, it feels its own strength and it is, in reality, strong. It is stepping out to act on its own.

We conclude this report by describing the goals and ideals of the Association. The aim of the Association "Sztuka" was to organize temporary exhibitions of art in Polish cities and abroad. The participants [in the exhibitions] are, in the first place, the members of the Association, who number close to 17. The contents [of the exhibitions] should give the Association a certain character [and] should bear witness that it consists of people who truly care about progress under the sign of all the young and strong ideals of contemporary art.

Besides members, the Association invites other artists to participate in its exhibitions, [but] in such a way that their participation does not interfere with the special character of the Association's exhibition. Although this character does not exclude, since talent travels along varied and individual paths, it always allows one to understand what the exhibitions of the Association should be.

Jan Stanislawski  
Teodor Axentowicz  
Józef Mehoffer