INTRODUCTION

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THE MODERNIST AESTHETIC
IN POLISH ART: 1890-1914

As a broad art historical term, “Modernism” is problematical because of its varied usages. In the West, particularly in the United States, “Modernism” is usually closely associated with the concept of twentieth-century “avant-gardism” and those nineteenth-century styles that have been identified as its precursors. According to such views, “Modernism” began either with the French Realists at the middle of the nineteenth century or a decade or so later with Manet’s attacks on academic tradition, and it ended with Pop Art sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s when the “avant-garde” was absorbed into an all-encompassing, all-permissive, middle class consumer culture.

In Poland, the term “Modernism” has quite another meaning. It is used as an historical, rather than stylistic, designation for a specific period that began around 1890 and ended roughly in 1914, at the time of World War I. The term is used interchangeably for all forms of art, literature, music, philosophy and so on, that made some kind of break with tradition and espoused one of the various innovative tendencies of the day.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, in Poland and elsewhere, the cognate modern-ism had a derogatory connotation that was used polemically against those who placed the values of modernity above those of classical tradition. During the 1880s, although continuing to be used pejoratively by the anti-modern public at large, the term was redeemed by the advocates of “new art,” whose ranks were rapidly increasing throughout Europe. By around 1900 in Poland, “Modernism” was used by both literary and art critics with some frequency to refer to the flourishing revival in all the arts that had been under way since the beginning of the nineties. In relation to the visual arts specifically, “Modernism” was used more or less synonymously with other terms such as “Secessionism” or “Impressionism,” all of which were applied loosely to address the issues of new trends in general.

In the broader sense, "Modernism" in Polish art embraced a viewpoint that went beyond questions of style. It could be said that the Polish Modernists were at once cosmopolitan in their thinking and nationalistic. They were cosmopolitan in that they studied and travelled extensively abroad, where they came into contact with all of the latest forms and ideas on art; at a time, however, when Poland was still partitioned into three sections governed by Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary (a state of affairs that had continued, despite periodic insurrections, since 1795), they regarded participation in the international arena not simply as an end in itself but as a way to break free of cultural domination by the occupying powers. The spirit of renovation and anti-authoritarianism that was the underlying principle of all Modernism acquired a special meaning in Poland, where it had clearly defined political and sociological aims.

At the same time, a deep-seated conflict arose between the Polish Modernists and the older generation of "Romantics" who, since the first half of the nineteenth century, had sought to defend Polish culture against foreign influences by building a distinct national identity based on historicism and folk mythology. While the Modernists, in fact, retained certain aspects of the Romantic sensibility, they argued that the Romantic preoccupation with Poland's past glories and dreams of heroic (i.e., revolutionary) deeds had become obsolete and self-defeating by the end of the century. They considered direct political resistance futile and instead concentrated on nurturing the life of the spirit. Objecting to what they regarded as a narrow concept of patriotism, they proposed that the best way to serve the nation was through the creation of works of universal value that could compete on an international level and thereby gain recognition for Poland as an independent cultural force. This attitude was summed up by the eminent writer and theoretician, Stanisław Przybyszewski, in an essay published in 1898 in the Kraków journal *Life* (Życie) which, along with the Warsaw journal *Chimera*, was the leading organ of Modernism in Poland. He countered the reservations of those wary of foreign influence who would, in his opinion, build a "China Wall" around Poland, with the argument: "Is it so difficult to conceive that all sorts of currents, thousands of directions, are absolutely essential for art . . . that chaos is necessary in order that a star may be born?"2

In 1898, the term "Young Poland" (Młoda Polska) was coined by Przybyszewski and the *Life* circle as a label for the broad new movement in Polish literature and art that had gone unnamed until that time. The dual meaning of this term seems to have suited Polish circumstances well. On the one hand, it alluded to the national cause by recalling a group of revolutionaries with