Ksawery Piwocki and the Vienna and Lvov Schools of Art History¹

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I

Ksawery Piwocki (1901-1974) was one of the leading Polish art historians of the twentieth century. Born in Lvov (now L’viv), he initially studied architecture at the university, then art history and ethnography. After the Second World War, during which he served in the Hom Army, he settled in Warsaw, where he taught at the Academy of Fine Arts. He was also a long term director of the State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw.

His scholarly research differed from the work of other art historians of his generation in at least two essential aspects. First of all, it took folk and primitive art into account. Secondly, it included contemporary art produced during Piwocki’s lifetime. Both categories were usually shunned by art historians: the former was the domain of ethnography and ethnology; the latter was neglected due to the lack of adequate historical perspective. However, it might also be said that this double exclusion was also the result of certain methodological assumptions. Art history in its typical, average, form, was unable to find the key to interpreting works of folk art by non-professional artists. It was similarly helpless when faced with the avant-garde transformation of art in the twentieth century (Belting 2002: 37-39). Was Piwocki a revolutionary then, was he creating the foundations for a new cognitive paradigm? Obviously not, and therein lies the paradox. Like other contemporary researchers he used traditional tools, but modified them to allow flexibility in approaching both the subject and the scope of research. Hence, he adapted classic concepts of the discipline to new challenges.

Piwocki always found a point of departure in the concrete work of art or in a group of them. With the exception of the work he published during the Stalinist period, he focused primarily on the form of a work of art (Porębski 1972: 269; Kasperowicz 2011: 111; Blaschke 2011: 199-200). However, his approach did not view form as merely a set of elements, nor did he understand it as a fusion of elements aimed at some practical purpose. ‘Since the times of Theodor Lipps,’ he wrote, ‘and thus since the very beginning of the twentieth century, we have realised that every form, even the most abstract or undefined, has content. It lies, stands, falls, has colour – warm, cold, light, dark – and in each case we associate this form with the appropriate mood, which we not only feel, but which we can also name (Piwocki 1970b: 60).’

¹ This represents a revised version of an article originally published as “Ksawery Piwocki a wiedeńska i lwowska szkoła historii sztuki,” Etnografia Nowa, 4 (2012), 137-50.
The problem of the relationship between the form and the content has always been a matter of debate in art history. The origins of the opposition between the two should be sought in the universally held assumption that both terms are separable, or even opposed. Since Johann Joachim Winckelmann introduced the notion of style into research on ancient art, formal analysis has been limited to the morphological qualities of sculptures or paintings. The best explanation for this approach was provided by Heinrich Wölfflin in *Principles of Art History*. He assumed that the human ability to perceive, understood partly psychologically and partly transcendentally (as Kant saw it), fluctuates between two extremes: haptic (or linear) and optical (or painterly) perception (Wimböck 2007: 131). In the first, the interpretation of visual data leads to a singling out of individual elements from their background and clearly juxtaposing them; in the second all shapes melt into an inseparable whole. In art this opposition is expressed by the creation of classical forms (using linear perception) or Baroque (non-classical) forms (using painterly perception). Thus the history of art comes down to the analysis of perception: all periods come in a classical - non-classical sequence and can be described by five pairs of opposite qualities: linear versus painterly, plane versus recession, closed form versus open form, multiplicity versus unity (subordination), and absolute clarity versus relative clarity (Wölfflin 1998: 115-118). Thus art develops autonomically and deals only with one formal problem: how to give shape to the type of perception prevalent in a given era. This means that the researcher does not have to go into the details of the subjects of the analysed works, nor enquire into the impressions caused by those paintings or sculptures. It is enough to focus on a work’s formal qualities, and they will provide information about the time and place of its creation, and allow for stylistic classification.

From the nineteenth century onwards a tension between form and content also appeared, this time in the shape of the dichotomy between style and iconography. When Erwin Panofsky was developing his iconological approach, he wrote: ‘Iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art as opposed to their form’ (Panofsky 1939: 3). ‘Thus there was a difference between research into style - which resulted in dating and attributing the work, as well as defining its artistic origins - and research into iconography, which focused on subject and content explication.

It is clear then that the conviction that there was an inseparable connection between the artistic form of a work of art and its meaning was not common in art history. Piwociki inherited it from his teachers Jan Bołoz-Antoniewicz and Władysław Podlacha, who both worked at Lvov University. Bołoz-Antoniewicz (1858-1922) regarded the history of art as one of the philological - not historical - sciences, pointing out that although a work of art is the result of a creative process taking place both in the studio and the artist’s head, for a researcher it is solely a ripe fruit that has already fallen off the branch where it was growing. Thus an art historian does not have access to the course of history, but to a set of creative results (Bołoz-Antoniewicz 1897: 129-161; Małkiewicz 2005: 42-43; Bałus 2005: 37-40). Consequently historical documents do not determine artistic issues. Art should be researched in a different way, starting with its form and treating it as the locus of its spiritual content, which for Bołoz-Antoniewicz equalled its psychological content.
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(Bołoz-Antoniewicz 1904: 14). Władysław Podlacha (1875-1951) held a similar view. As Piwoki argued:

[Podlacha] based his ideas on [...] the achievements of Dilthey, who coined the notion of structure in the cultural and artistic sciences to further develop his creative ideas. Dilthey recommended systematic study of the core of the work of art, without focusing only on the historical determinants of its creation. I mean full insight into its formal structure (morphology) and its phenomenological description. According to this approach a work of art is the creation of a creative person, an indestructible imprint of their spiritual energy, and as such it possesses a certain structure, internal content and sensual external shape. If we take into account Kazimierz Twardowski’s ideas on distinguishing between the structural meaning (idea) of a work of art and its form which expresses that meaning, we will understand Podlacha’s demands. He wanted to describe a work of art (description theory) paying special attention both to the expressive values that allow us to see its idea, and the psychological reasons that led to the creation of each work of art or a group of works. The second aspect of Podlacha’s research deals with the systematics of form (hence the interest in Wölfflin’s work) and the notion of their psychological interpretation. Thus, one should not only explain how something was created (the genetic method), but also phenomenologically describe the structure of a given work of art (systematic or morphological method) as well as interpret the strength of influence of the psychological energy contained in the work, which also definitely determines the its historical value (Piwoki 1970b: 175-176).

II

The conviction that all artistic forms are meaningful allowed Piwoki to study modern art. For him abstract works were not silent, even though their themes did not draw inspiration from the outside world since, as he argued, ‘their form itself carries the meaning. It is a direct equivalent of feelings and thoughts (Piwoki 1970b: 82-83).’ The focus on meaningful form opened for him the world of folk art. Even before the Second World War, Piwoki was arguing that ethnography could not describe and evaluate the aesthetic value of works made by village "daubers." This is because ‘an ethnologist studying all aspects of a people’s culture, both material and spiritual, trying to put them into a synthetic shape, will inevitably stress the social side of art and omit its artistic values (Piwoki 1970b: 241).’ Only an art historian has the tools that allow him or her to delve into the form of the creations and find the crux of the activity. Folk art is an expression of the folk perception of the world, it also represents a psychological construction typical for that social class. As Piwoki elaborates: ‘Folk art is interesting for us, not because of its ‘crudeness,’ but because of its difference, and through this distinction we gain a glimpse of an artistic outlook on life that differs and diverges from ours.’ By referring to Wölfflin’s concept of perception, but adding psychological arguments,
Piwocki claimed that ‘the people of the countryside see a different reality from us.’ He further specified:

> In primitive reality the objects of the outside world are developed on a plane, since the idea of depth does not exist yet, there is no connection between sight and touch, there is no play of light nor reflections because all the items are separate, not connected by relationships and thus they usually are only in local colours, recreated from memory. Folk artists create directly from memory, through which they perceive nature. They are ideoplastic artists, depicting nature not as we see it, but as we remember it and build it into schematic symbols (Piwocki 1970b: 249).

The separation of ethnological and historical-artistic approaches in relation to folk (European) and tribal (non-European) artistic activities was not solely Piwocki’s idea. As James Clifford wrote:

> Since 1900 non-Western objects have generally been classified as either primitive art or ethnographic specimens. Before the modernist revolution associated with Picasso and the simultaneous rise of cultural anthropology associated with Boas and Malinowski, these objects were differently classified as antiquities, exotic curiosities, orientalia, the remains of early man, and so on. With the emergence of twentieth-century modernism and anthropology figures formerly called ‘fetishes’ (to take just one class of object) became works of either ‘sculpture’ or of ‘material culture.’ (Clifford 1988: 198-199)

It was in Vienna that European folk art for the first time drew the attention of art history. The notion of Volkskunst was introduced to specialist literature in 1876 by Rudolf Eitelberger von Edelberg, the first professor of history of art at the University of Vienna (Johler 2010: 22). The term was analysed in depth at the turn of the century by Alois Riegl, when curator at the Vienna Museum for Art and Industry (Riegl 1894). Riegl explained folk art by referring to the Austrian School of economics (Nationalökonomie) (Muthesius 2001: 136; Vassold 2010: 29-36). In pre-industrial societies handicraft occurred in home crafting, or Hausfleiss. It was in exactly the same environment that actual folk art was created and its relics were still to be found at the end of the nineteenth century in the backwaters of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. In the wake of economic transformation Hausfleiss was replaced with Hausindustrie: home industry, which led to the professionalization of the artistic craft and the disappearance of authentic folk art (Muthesius 2001: 136-138).

Riegl consequently did not perceive folk art as an artistic domain. His concept was the result of Europe’s growing interest in applied arts and their sources (Muthesius 2001: 143-147) but also - paradoxically - it confirmed the romantic status of "high" artists as geniuses in contrast to all creators of lower rank (Bauer 1976: 19-20). Piwocki understood it differently when he wrote, ‘The definition of folk art points out that the art must include items possessing qualities that give them the
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artistic value, thus including them into the more general system of phenomena (Piwocki 1970b: 136).’ He approached the products of folk art primarily in terms of the problem of meaningful form, which was basic for all creative activity. He connected the idea of meaningful form, in turn, with that of style, which he did not question, thereby agreeing with contemporary art historical thinking. For the emerging discipline, style was the most basic tool, guaranteeing its independence and distinguishing it from other humanities (Bialostocki 1980: 18-24). It allowed one to single out the morphological qualities of works, which determined the specificity of expression of individual artists, regional schools and historical periods. Applying its potential as a tool of classification, Piwocki proposed the notion of “folk style” as the most appropriate indicator for folk art. He claimed that all other attempts at isolating the specificity of folk creativity failed. Themes inspired by oral and random tradition may appear in urban products intended for the countryside. Regional systematics do not touch upon the unique artistic qualities of individual artworks. However, the notion of style allowed for the determination of formal qualities, and - thanks to the inextricable connection between form and meaning - also for investigation of the psychological/mental qualities of works, derived from the typically folk way of perceiving the world (Piwocki 1970b: 243-245). ‘The definition of folk art I have provided derives from the product, but all art is created by artists. If academic research is capable of pinpointing the stylistic features of works of folk art, and thus specifying the domain of folk art, the nature of folk art works must also allow one to determine which artist can be a folk artist. The stylistic quality of a product clearly defines the creative attitude of the artist.’ Not every ‘farmer making an item is a folk artist. He needs to have a special creative attitude: the flowers of folk art bloom only on adequate psychological foundations (Piwocki 1970b: 140).’

At the end of his life Piwocki backed out of a uniform international concept of folk style. However, he still believed in the formal approach, since according to him it was the only way of reaching the true meaning of folk art. ‘Acquiring the appropriate knowledge of values that folk art possesses will be impossible for those who cannot decipher expressive values contained in the formal structures understood as signs informing of the work’s mood and revealing its psychological content (Piwoccki 1970b: 155).’

III

Folk art is not an easy subject for historical studies. ‘Anyone who has dealt with products that could be named ‘folk’ realises that it is difficult to grasp the chronological aspect of this art, since folk art does not visibly change over time (Piwocki 1970b: 138).’ In contrast, "high" art has a clear history confirmed by stylistic changes. The notion of style when used to refer to the Gothic or the Renaissance had to find an anchor in a concept that would explain the mutability of forms over time. When dealing with "high" art once again Piwoccki agreed with Alois Riegl, on whom he devoted a separate book, published in 1970 with the title Pierwsza nowoczesna teoria sztuki (The first modern theory of art) (Piwocki 1970a). In the book he specifically focused on the notion of Kunstwollen, which the Austrian scholar had
presented in *Late Roman Art Industry* and which opened ‘the way for researching the totality of cultural phenomena’ (Piwocki 1970b: 81) by moving beyond pure formalism.

*Kunstwollen*, translated as ‘artistic will’ or ‘will to make art’ (Lech Kalinowski objected to such a translation, and for good reason) was - according to Piwocki - a supraindividual determinant of art development.2 A human being has an inborn artistic volition to imitate and reproduce the items perceived by his senses. The senses influence the way in which the reproduced items are presented and how they relate to the surrounding space. Sometimes haptic values dominate and isolate individual forms in space, at other times emphasis is placed on the optical merging of planes and motifs into a unified whole. In different historical periods this perspective changed, resulting in different stylistic solutions. These changes were triggered, Riegl argued, precisely by the *Kunstwollen*, the period’s dominant tendency to shape the formal structure of a work of art (Olin 1992; Rampley 2003: 5-19; Vasold 2004).

Although Riegl never provided a precise definition of *Kunstwollen*, according to Piwocki the notion allowed for justification of the objective existence of individual period styles. ‘One cannot deny that style is not the creation of scholars and that works of one period (with greatly varying ideology or iconography) are interconnected by an elusive network of formal similarities. The saints of Gothic portals are more akin to the devils of those portals than to the saints by Michelangelo, who in turn are stylistically more similar to the devils by the same artist.’ (Piwocki 1970a: 314) Piwocki was thus inclined to accept that style had a real existence. However, the causal origins of new styles were not to be found in the immanent development of art nor in autonomic transformations of “pure sight,” but in changes in the outlook on life. In his article ‘U progu teorii współczesnej sztuki’ (On the threshold of modern art theory) he wrote that:

> the classic art historians of Vienna School, apart from purely formal qualities and as a result of their interpretation, began to promote the stylistic analysis not only of formal feeling (*Formgefühl*) but also of the artistic volition of a given period. Apart from the formal canon of artistic quality, it could also accommodate meaningful elements, for example Early Christian 'psychocentrism' identified by Wickhoff as the most eminent stylistic quality of this art. I do believe that this direction of studies is the closest to historical reality (Piwocki 1970b: 98).

The category of *Kunstwollen* would work only when the understanding of art was not based on referring past periods to a universal aesthetic canon. Thus Piwocki strongly emphasised the importance of Riegl’s axiological pluralism and its significance in the development of modern history of art: ‘An art historian weighs the value of a work of art by taking into account artistic volition, at the time when it

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2 In his review of *Pierwsza nowoczesna teoria sztuki* Lech Kalinowski considered it a mistranslation, since the German word refers to art, not works of art. He thought the English equivalent “artistic volition” was much better (Kalinowski 1973: 197-198). When quoting Piwocki in this work, both the German (in brackets) and Piwocki’s term are used.
was created. He tries to turn off his own aesthetic predilections to justify it and assess it in an impartial manner. Only then can its creation and its correct message be explained and attributed an appropriate value in relation to other contemporary works of art (Piwocki 1970a: 183-184). ‘In ‘The first modern theory of art’ he presented Riegl’s axiology from ‘The Modern Cult of Monuments’ in depth, but his commentary referred practically solely to ‘historical value.’ ‘My comments aim at drawing attention to those elements of Riegl’s value theory which matter for the whole of the theory of art’ and not only activities in the field of the restoration of antiques (Piwocki 1970a: 178). Understanding historical value, i.e. the aesthetic system, craft and the technical qualities of works, allows for the correct identification and evaluation of paintings, sculptures or buildings. It allows for the simultaneous development of objective evaluation, as the elements constituting a given work of art are not studied in the context of their subjective preferences belonging to another period, but in relation to the Kunstwollen of the period the item in question comes from. Such evaluation comes down to including an individual item into a ‘string of historical development of forms and of their expression (Piwocki 1970a: 187).’

The category of the Kunstwollen made it possible for Piwocki to explain the relations between the formal qualities of works of art, the values they fulfilled and meanings they carried, and the dominant ideas of given period. He presented this line of thought fully in an article on ‘Husserl and Picasso’, where he pointed out the parallel aims of the cubists and the creator of phenomenology (Piwocki 1970a: 69-81). Just as Husserl fought against psychologism, so the Picasso broke off from the subjectivity of Impressionism, and Husserl’s concept of eidetic description was the equivalent of the all-around depiction of the subject in cubist painting, akin to simultaneism which also strove to capture the essence of the depicted subject. Moreover, there was no direct contact nor causal link between phenomenology and cubism. It was this separation that allowed for the identification of tendencies dominant in a period, independently directing the action of both philosophers and painters.

The most attuned seismographs of changes in the world are young artists of all art kinds, i.e. people with especially susceptible sensitivity, as well as - in a given period - much older great thinkers, who replace what may perhaps be decreased sensitivity with better and more detailed information and a broader horizon of perception. Even though philosophers’ ideas do not usually reach artists and their groups in their own periods, the approaches of both creative cultural groups are comparable and may shed new light on the actual meaning of the artistic quest as well as on the astounding relevance of thoughts of a philosopher seemingly detached from real life. They can explain the deepest semantic layer of a group of works of art from the given period and at the same time vividly illustrate the seemingly completely abstract disquisitions of a philosopher (Piwocki 1970b: 83-84).
The ideal sought by Piwocki was a comprehensive outlook on artistic phenomena. In relation to the individual work of art, this entailed emphasising the role of form as the factor shaping the structure and essence of the artefact. Form not only constituted the painting or sculpture, but was also the bearer of inner meaning, i.e. the outlook on life and psychological content. That is why Piwocki, armed with Riegl and his Lvov professors’ ideas, opposed the iconological method, which was growing in importance after the Second World War. He claimed that the method restricted researchers (Bałus 2011:).

Art cannot be studied through the analysis of critique, theories, ideologies, etc. contemporary with the work of art. These are important factors, but one must always begin as Riegl did: with the analysis of the work of art’s form. Form carried the meaning at the time of the creation and its structure provided ‘ground’ for the iconography. But form also has the ability to ‘speak,’ today, as well, and to create the ‘ground’ for contemporary interpretative regeneration (Piwocki 1970a: 325).

Piwocki considered iconography to be an external factor, a peculiar and not always necessary addition to a work of art. The iconological method revealed its complete helplessness when applied to abstract or cubist works, in which ‘semantic meaning does not draw on any traditional symbolic theme’ and about which ‘the iconographical tradition has absolutely nothing to say (Piwocki 1970b: 82).’ Piwocki’s comprehensive examination could also be applied on a wider scale, to historical periods and artistic genres, as well as to folk art. That also underlay his interest in Kunstwollen as well as its connection with the notion of style as a ‘supraindividual drive producing the style of a historical period (Piwocki 1970b: 82).’

Following stylistic categories was rather typical for the older generation of art historians. Such an approach defined the analytical horizons not only of Wölfflin and Riegl, but also of art historians in Lvov. However, for Piwocki, adhering to the notion of style had a deeper dimension. In his short article ‘Kultura i forma’ (Culture and form), published in 1949, he wrote about form diminishing as a comprehensive feature of contemporary culture. ‘The lack of social forms, no hallowed legal forms - continuously transforming in the fires of revolutionary change, the lack of what we call lifestyle - all this is typical for our culture (Piwocki 1970b: 56).’ Art was bent on finding new forms, and in this search were embedded ‘undoubtedly budding forms of a new culture’ (Piwocki 1970b: 57). Thus the unity of the whole spiritual universe was for Piwocki an expression of the maturity and stability of a period. He argued that this unity should be seen in style. ‘Painting, architecture and sculpture more and more clearly are searching for form (or, as it is most commonly called - style) (Piwocki 1970b: 57).’

The idea of the search for “a whole,” “a form”, or a unifying “style” was typical for humanist thought after the Second World War. At that time humanist scholars were bewailing the destruction of unified culture (Hofmann 1979: 232). Some even saw in this phenomenon the source of contemporary barbarism and looked with resignation on the Middle Ages as a time of spiritual splendour.
As is well known, Hans Sedlmayr thought that a loss of the centre was the reason for the crisis that engulfed Europe (Sedlmayr 1948; Schneider 1992: 85-91). It should be also said that art historical discourse still utilised the paradigm of grand narratives, i.e. holistic visions of the history of art. And it was no coincidence that in 1947 the young Jan Białostocki published his article ‘W pogoni za schematem. Usilowania systematycznej historii sztuki’ (In pursuit of pattern. Attempts at a systematic history of art) (Białostocki 1947: 225-239; Bałus 2010: 122-125). Although he criticised attempts to create simple classifications based on only a few elements, he nevertheless sided with the holistic synthetic approach.

Isn’t it right to find the types of artistic expressions that would be adequate and common for different artists because of their psychological construction and broadly understood environment? It is not only the mind of the beholder that is inclined to classification. The mind of the artist is also a human mind, and thus a work of art should equal in its structure the classification we desire to find therein (Białostocki 1947: 238).

In such circumstances it is not surprising that the notion of style once again revealed both its offensive and defensive qualities. According to Jacques Derrida, ‘In the question of style there is always the weight or examen of some pointed object (Derrida:37).’ This sharp object could be used for both attack and defence. Thus the style would seem to advance in the manner of aspur of sorts (épéron). Like the prow, for example, of a sailing vessel, its rostrum, the projection of the ship which surges ahead to meet the sea’s attack and cleave its hostile surface. Or yet again, and still in nautical terminology, style might be compared to that rocky point, also called an épéron, on which the waves break at the harbour’s entrance (Derrida 1979:39).’ Thus finding the style of a period was the equivalent of creating a defence mechanism, a protection from barbarity and, at the same time, an active "attack" with its new forms, all instances of passéism and imitation.

Style seemed to be the only thing that could save Europe from imminent nihilism. However - and less attention was paid to this - it could also become a threat if stylistic unity was imposed from outside. Piwocki only realised this danger after the fact, when the tide of the Stalinist unification of culture had subsided. In a note to a reprint of ‘Kultura i forma’ Piwocki wrote, while analysing his own thoughts in the late 1940s, that ‘Although breaking every aesthetical and formal canon accompanies the shapelessness of culture, it cannot rebuild it. Hence the yearning for stabilization of artistic norms, so clearly visible back then, at the dawn of the ‘attack of social realism (Piwocki 1970b: 55).’

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