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# MIECZYŚLAW TRETER, CONTEMPORARY MUSEUMS

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**Abstract:** In 2019, the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections in cooperation with the Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy published the 1917 book by Mieczysław Treter titled *Contemporary Museums* as the first volume in the *Monuments of Polish Museology Series*. The study consists of two parts originally released in 'Muzeum Polskie' published by Treter in Kiev; it was an ephemeral periodical associated with the Society for the Protection of Monuments of the Past, active predominantly in the Kingdom of Poland, but also boasting numerous branches in Polish communities throughout Russia.

The Author opens the first part of a theoretical format with a synthesized presentation of the genesis of the museum institution (also on the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), to later follow to its analysis in view of its collecting and displaying character, classification according to the typical factual areas it covers, chronology, and territory (general natural history museums, general history ones, technological ones, ethnographic ones, historical-social ones, historical-artistic ones); moreover, he tackles questions like

a museum exhibition, management, a museum building. In Treter's view the museum's mission is not to provide simple entertainment, neither is it to create autonomous beauty (realm of art), but it is of a strictly scientific character, meant to serve science and its promotion, though through this museums become elitist: *by serving mainly science, they cannot provide entertainment and excitement to every amateur, neither are they, as such, works of art to which purely aesthetic criteria could be applied.*

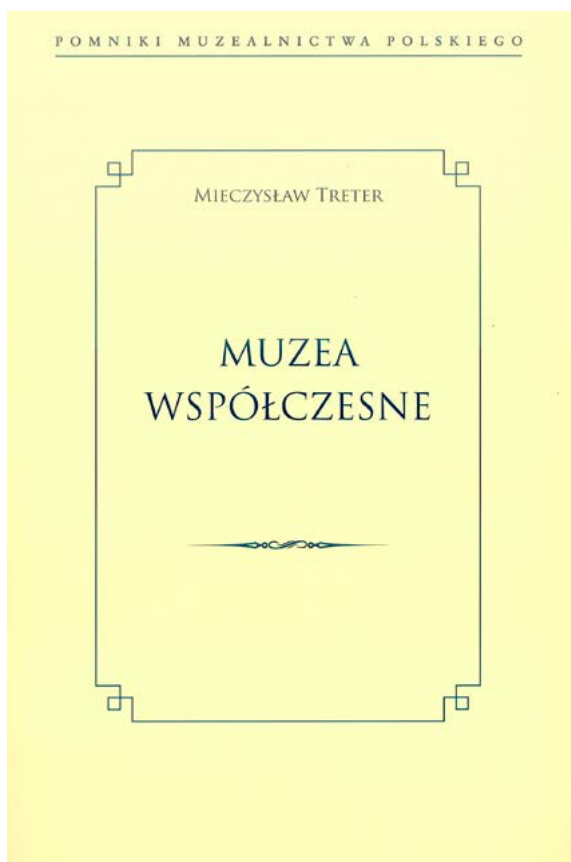
The second part of Treter's study is an extensive outline of the situation of Polish museums on the eve of WWI, in a way overshadowed by the first congress of Polish museologists, and in the perspective of the 'museum world' of the Second Polish Republic. It is an outline for the monograph on Polish museums, a kind of a report on their condition as in 1914 with some references to later years. Through this it becomes as if a closure of the first period of their history, which the Author, when involved in writing his study, could obviously only instinctively anticipate.

**Keywords:** Mieczysław Treter (1883–1943), museum, classification, Polish art, memory culture, public collection.

**Mieczysław Treter, *Muzea współczesne* [Contemporary Museums], Piotr Majewski, *Wszystko już było... Muzea polskie w perspektywie długiego trwania* [We Have Had All That Before... Polish Museums in the Perspective of Long Perdurance (introduction), *Pomniki muzealnictwa polskiego* [Monuments of Polish Museology] Series, NIMOZ–PIW, Warszawa 2019, pp. 192**

In Polish museology 2019 could be declared the Mieczysław Treter Year. In the inter-war period, he was curator with the Prince Lubomirski Museum at the Lvov Ossolineum, an important official working within museology, this including the post of the Director of the State Art Collections, finally an aesthetician and art critic, as well as a museum theoretician, museologist, author of many important papers. Afterwards, however, he was almost entirely forgotten; only

rarely quoted by authors of highly specialist publications, e.g. Kazimierz Malinowski in his book *Forerunners of Polish Museology* (1970). Lately, Treter has been experiencing a true renaissance, this e.g. seen in the recently published monograph by Diana Wasilewska, articles in the present issue of the 'Muzealnictwo' Annual, and anthology of Polish contemporary museology papers prepared as part of the Research Project called *Museum in Polish Memory Culture*



(Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń).<sup>1</sup> Seen in this context, the publication of Treter's major museological study from 1917 released as the first volume in the *Monuments of Polish Museology* Series by the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections (NIMOZ) in cooperation with the Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy Publishing House, and titled *Contemporary Museums* seems to be gaining a peculiar momentum.

The study consists of two parts, originally released in 'Muzeum Polskie' published by Treter in Kiev; it was an ephemeral periodical associated with the Society for the Protection of Monuments of the Past, active predominantly in the Kingdom of Poland, but also boasting numerous branches in Polish communities throughout Russia.<sup>2</sup>

The Author opens the first part of a theoretical format with a synthesized presentation of the genesis of the museum institution, also in the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, where a special role is played by Puławy of Izabela Czartoryska née Fleming, to later continue with an attempt at a theoretical study dedicated to the overall characteristics of the institution, an approach rare in Polish literature at the time. His main goal is to classify museums in view of their collecting and displaying character, which according to the Author had not been done before (today we are considering whether such unambiguous decisions/classifications are really necessary). Treter divides museums into natural history and historical ones, and continues classifying the groups according to the typical factual areas they cover (general natural history museums, general history

ones, technological ones, ethnographic ones, historical-social ones, historical-artistic ones), chronology, and territory; moreover, he tackles questions like a museum exhibition, institution's management, a museum building. In Treter's view, the museum's mission is not to provide simple entertainment, neither is it to create autonomous beauty (realm of art), but it is of a strictly scientific character, meant to serve science and its promotion, though through this museums become elitist (*by serving mainly science, they cannot provide entertainment and excitement to every amateur, neither are they, as such, works of art to which purely aesthetical criteria could be applied*). Therefore, criticism that museums supposedly become 'prisons for art' sounds absurd, and responding to it, Treter quotes a fragment of the monograph on Julisz Kossak by Stanisław Witkiewicz: *Museums are more shrines in which the souls of the deceased, turned into works of art with a spell, commune with the soul of a living man. They are a kind of a Forum where every creator entirely free talks to all, while the listener can either listen to it focused, and let himself be enchanted, or leave, remaining completely indifferent.*<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to this edition of Treter's study, Piotr Majewski emphasizes how topical the issues raised are, since many of their aspects have continued to be of interest to museologists' circles to this very day. He first of all points out to the debate on museum identity, its mission, definition, and the visitor, and the general principles for them operating as an intellectual, emotional, and material space. Majewski's reflections allow to concentrate on the second part of the study, which is by no means secondary to the first one (though evidently not equally topical). It constitutes an extensive outline of the situation of Polish museums on the eve of WW I, in a way overshadowed by the first Congress of Polish museologists in Cracow (1914), and also seen in the prospect of the 'museum world' of the Second Polish Republic. It is as if an outline for the monograph on Polish museums, a kind of a report on their condition as in 1914 with some references to later years. Through this it becomes as if a closure of the first period of their history, which the Author, when involved in writing his study, could obviously only instinctively anticipate. In this case chronology is exceptionally clear, marked out by symbolic dates also in Poland's history: 1918, 1945, 1989.

The first period is the time when the idea of museum was forming in the territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth after the collapse of the state divided into the provinces that differed civilizationally and culturally within separate political entities. For this purpose, the idea covered all the possible diversities: national, religious, social, political, academic, of museum concepts, and messages. Later periods were characterized by more homogeneous nationality and state structures, although both the inter-war period and the years of Communist Poland, implied identity challenges, sometimes extremely acute (both showed little or no tolerance for diversity). Today the issues have not been fully solved; indeed, they have been added new problems resulting from social transformations and modern technologies. Our museology still awaits a thorough and comprehensive analysis, however the earliest stage of its history, thanks to Treter's study, boasts an exceptionally valuable compendium, the one that combines direct testimony to the period with a deeper theoretical reflection.

The list of *public museum collections in Poland*, provided

at the study's end, contains 101 institutions, these including 3 in preparation and 4 Polish museum collections abroad, however the text mentions 7 more: the Museum of the Toruń Scientific Society, F. Chopin Museum of the Musical Society in Warsaw, Museum of the Ruthenian National House, and the T. Shevchenko Ukrainian Scientific Society in Lvov, as well as private collections.<sup>4</sup> Treter classifies them, using his own proposal from the first part of the study, into two extensive groups, including national history and historical museums. There is much focus on the overall issues of national history and tourism museology (with reference to the studies of such Polish experts in the field as Marian Raciborski, Stefan Stobiecki, Aleksander Maciesza); this category also includes ethnographic and technological museums, which would undoubtedly raise numerous objections today. Historically-profiled institutions have been divided into those dealing with universal history, social history, and art history. Some of them, particularly those of a major impact on national culture, are discussed in more detail referring to their history and collections (e.g. Museum of Industry and Agriculture, Museum of the Polish Tourist Society in Warsaw, Lubomirski Museum in Lvov, National Museum in Cracow). A reflection apart is dedicated to several museum projects and institutions that were being organized, e.g. the National Museum in Warsaw, the future museums foreseen to be located at the Wawel Castle, and the natural history museum project that was never implemented.

The research conducted as part of the above-mentioned *Museum in Polish Memory Culture* Project allows to complete and slightly modify the picture. It has shown that in the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1914 there were about 250 museums as well as private or public institutions of museum profile (libraries, schools, university collections, those of cultural and scientific societies, as well as private collections available to the general public).<sup>5</sup> This goes to say that there were twice as many as those discussed by Treter. However, they were not always big institutions with a relatively well-developed infrastructure, richer collections, and some tradition. Actually Treter did discuss such in his study, aptly describing or at least mentioning them (all in all, he dealt with almost all the major institutions). Next to these, there existed collections not really sizeable, hardly profiled, of little coherence. The term 'museum' was not fully stable; it was frequently used to define collections of archival documents, and larger collections of various types: Treter himself applies it in relation to the private collection of Jerzy Mniszech (*entomological museum*).

Furthermore, many of those projects never went beyond the organization stage and preparation for making them available to the public, the latter having never occurred. The Author mentions several of them in his text, though leaves some out in his study; he may not have been familiar with the other ones, or he may have excluded them due to their too modest scale; however, he purposefully leaves some out, since his focus is on Polish museums, and exclusively public ones.

The study contains brief descriptions of only 4 non-Polish museums: two Ukrainian ones in Lvov (Stauropagian Museum and Ukrainian National Museum) as well as two Jewish ones: that of Mathias Bersohn in Waraw and of

Maksymilian Goldstein in Lvov (being organized from 1912, however opened later); in the text, there is also mention of two more, which in the list at the end are put in characteristic brackets. Meanwhile, Treter decisively rejects Russian and German museums as those of the partitioning powers. Such an attitude can hardly be criticized, since it was a must quality of patriotism from the times of *the war for the freedom of peoples* Mickiewicz had prayed for; however, from today's perspective these institutions can be seen differently. Indeed, there were among them unquestionably oppressive ones of anti-Polish character, such as the Antiquity Museum in Vilnius, based at the public library, the Muraviev Museum, or the strictly propagandist Pan-Russian Museum mounted at the Tsarist University of Warsaw by the Czech Professor Teodor Jezbera. All of them, however, formed part of the history of museology in the territory of the Commonwealth, and in some cases, if neutral politically and nationally, they constituted essential elements of artistic culture, such as e.g. museum collections of the Tsarist Łazienki Palace in Warsaw, which periodically opened to the public, and whose core element was the historic painting gallery of Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski. Neither does Treter incorporate in his reflection Orthodox museums in the 'taken territories' (so-called 'davnyoskhovyshcha'), e.g. in Chełm Lubelski, Grodno, Łuck, Mińsk Litewski, Vilnius, Żytomierz, museums of scientific and cultural societies, and those established by provincial authorities in whose establishment Poles also participated. However, it is quite likely that he was unacquainted with military museums of limited accessibility, these being a particular element in old Russian museology, and which existed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at some dozen regiments based in the territories of the Commonwealth, such as the 65<sup>th</sup> Moscow Infantry Regiment in Chełm, or the Leibgardijski Keksholmski, Volhynia, and Lithuanian Regiments in Warsaw. As for the German museums omitted by Treter, interestingly many of them later transformed into Polish institutions, or were incorporated into such, becoming an element in their tradition, e.g. the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Poznań, the City Museum in Bydgoszcz, the Museum of the Historical Society of the Kwidzyna Regency in Kwidzyn, and that of the Copernicus Verein in Toruń.

The group of the discussed museums includes the Prince Czartoryski Museum as an institution generally accessible and of major importance for Polish culture, *although*, as Treter says, *the list included only public museum collections* (Treter's emphasis). However, when speaking of the museums of the Wilanów Palace and the Podhorze Castle, he emphasizes that national mementoes of this quality, (...) *however carefully guarded by their current owners, should be the property of the nation, should be national museums in the fuller meaning of the term*. This ambiguity, visible also in the case of other analyzed private institutions, stemmed from Treter's conviction that in compliance with the positions expressed during the congress of Polish museologists in 1914, museums and their collections (particularly the more valuable ones) should be nation's property. He does, however, describe certain private institutions, but only if they were made available to the general public on relatively regular basis in their sizeable portion: the Dzieduszycki Museum and Painting Gallery, Lubomirski Museum, library collections of the Baworowskis

and Pawlikowskis in Lvov, Branicki Ornithology Museum, collections of the Krasińskis in Warsaw, Starzeński Pokucie Museum in Kolomea.

However, only a brief mention is made of the Gołuchów and Kórnik collections, as well as of the Rogalin painting gallery, all of which were open to public visiting, though the important museums of the Zamoyski and Przeworski Entails' Libraries in Warsaw, and at the Branicki Montrésor Château in France are utterly ignored.

Treter also skipped the network of modest, yet interesting and important for their patriotic role Greater Poland museums affiliated to the People's Libraries Society (TCL) in Kościerzyna, Ostrów Wielkopolski, Pleszew, the open-air type museum in Wdzydze Kiszewskie, as well as tourism museums in Golub Dobrzyń and Olkusz, as well as the Z. Gloger Geological Museum in Dąbrowa Górnicza. He only describes the most spoken-of university cabinets-museums in Cracow (archaeological and history of art), in Lvov (natural history cabinet), and in Warsaw (Skimbrowicz Antiquity Museum). He does not, however, mention other collections, such as the natural history collections of the University of Warsaw (possibly in view of their Russification character after the collapse of the January Uprising), extremely popular and frequently visited by Warsaw's residents; he does not describe the Technological Institute Museum at the Lvov Chamber of Commerce and Industry (organized as of 1898), the Municipal Museum in Grudziądz, and the Upper Silesia Museum in Bytom. One could trace more of such omissions, yet the overview of Polish museology at the end of the partition period is convincing and presented with impressive agility and expertise.

It is, nevertheless, hard to understand some of the statements in relation to historical-artistic museums. *A strange thing, writes Treter, that our private collectors feel the least of attraction to collecting works of native art; they are more willing to cast incredible sums to purchase suspicious to a high degree 'masterpieces' of old periods of painting, Due to this, not until long ago, it was easier here to become acquainted with certain stages of Flemish art, e.g. Dutch, than to get to know Polish 19<sup>th</sup>-century painting. We have not had our Tretyakovs; this has to be sadly concluded.* Meanwhile, even a very superficial knowledge of Polish collectorship shows that reality was completely different. It was precisely Polish art that already in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century became the supreme domain of interest of our collectors, and with time actually supplemented any other.

Ignacy Korwin-Milewski, Edward A. Raczyński, and Feliks Manggha-Jasieński (the latter mentioned by Treter) assembled outstanding collections that today can be regarded as model ones, setting a peculiar canon of Polish art; its other great collectors were Dominik Witke-Jeżewski, Józef Landau, and Edward Reicher (the latter, too, mentioned in the

study). Additionally, apart from the collections they owned, in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> and in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, one could already list twenty to thirty sizeable collections of native painting, while there could have been several hundred of smaller or sometimes quite tiny collections (though of really varied artistic quality).<sup>6</sup> It goes without saying, however, that from the perspective of a painter-beginner, whose works nobody purchased, the situation must have looked differently. Treter repeats this cliché, writing as if he were quoting such opinions of the artists clashing with the wall of indifference, or quoting the biting words of Reymont in his *Promised Land* about the tastes of the bourgeois. However, in Treter's case we are dealing neither with a Nobel-awarded writer, nor with an art beginner, who possibly has for too long remained unappreciated, but with a true expert and an outstanding critic, perfectly updated on Polish art and the Polish 'world of art', whose eminent figure he actually is. Bearing in mind Treter's erudition and his thorough knowledge of museology in the territory of the Commonwealth, it is hardly understandable.

Treter's knowledge was indeed unique. He himself mentioned that the study had been written far away from Poland, from its libraries and other sources: in Kharkov, Crimea, and in Kiev, when he was *in the situation of an almost total lack of printed materials, unable to check anything, forced to be satisfied generally with what from former autopsys (mainly with respect to the capital collections in Cracow, Lvov, Poznan, and Warsaw) his memory had retained.* One, however, is bound to notice the spark of genius which guided him, as even in the face of such serious inconveniences and clear adherence to nationalistic ideologies, almost all the Polish institutions of most impact were included by him, and justly characterized; a similar panorama of museology and collectorship can be found in Edward Chwalewik's *Zbiory polskie [Polish Collections]* (1916, 1926–27), and the *Przewodnik po muzeach i zbiorach w Polsce [Guide to Museums and Collections in Poland]* (1971, 1973, 1982) by Stanisław Lorentz.<sup>7</sup> Treter, though separated from the homeland by world war fronts, had information on Polish cultural events, such as Jerzy Mycielski's 'Legion Exhibition' (Cracow, Zurich, Warsaw); furthermore, he was aware of the latest museum initiatives, such as the National Museum in the Warsaw occupied by the Germans (1915), these yielding gradually more serious hope for the future independent state. However, at the moment of the *Contemporary Museums'* being printed, this remained greatly uncertain, since not so long before had Kielce residents been closing their shutters when the Piłsudski Legionnaires were entering the town. In this context the forecast for the museum-profiled future of the Wawel, generally planned to be the Cracow residence of the House of Habsburg, sounds astounding.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> D. Wasilewska, *Mieczysław Treter – estetyk, krytyk sztuki, oraz „szara eminencja” międzywojennego życia artystycznego w Polsce*, Universitas, Kraków 2019; do wspomnianej antologii został włączony fragment opublikowanego w recenzowanej książce tekstu z komentarzem autorstwa Małgorzaty Wawrzak.

<sup>2</sup> M. Treter, *Muzea współczesne. Studium muzeologiczne. Początki, rodzaje, istota i organizacja muzeów. Publiczne zbiory muzealne w Polsce i przyszły ich rozwój*, „Muzeum polskie” 1917, z. 1, s. 5–32; 1918, z. 4, s. 1–70; wydane także w postaci osobnej broszury (Kijów 1917).

<sup>3</sup> S. Witkiewicz, *Juliusz Kossak*, E. Wende i spółka, Lwów 1906, s. 203.

<sup>4</sup> W dotychczasowej literaturze przyjęło się liczbę omawianych przez Tretera instytucji określać na 99.

<sup>5</sup> W chwili przygotowywania niniejszego tekstu podanie w sposób jednoznaczny liczby tych muzeów nie było możliwe, gdyż trwała jeszcze analiza zgromadzonego materiału (niejednokrotnie bardzo trudnego do weryfikacji).

<sup>6</sup> Zob. T. F. de Rosset, *Malarstwo polskie w polskich kolekcjach prywatnych*, „Muzealnictwo” 2008, nr 49, s. 204–216.

<sup>7</sup> E. Chwalewik, *Zbiory polskie, archiwa, biblioteki, gabinety, galerje, muzea i inne zbiory pamiątek przeszłości w ojczyźnie i na obczyźnie*, Warszawa 1916, 1926–1927, t. 1–2; S. Lorentz, *Przewodnik po muzeach i zbiorach w Polsce*, Interpress, Warszawa 1971, 1973, 1982.

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