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BROKEN HEROES... KITSCH OR ART? RECEPTION OF IGOR MITORAJ'S WORKS

At the moment of Igor Mitoraj's death in 2014 the disputes over classifying his works were silenced immediately. Public debate finished, however it does not mean that its participants found common ground. For this reason the aim of my article is to present works and style of Mitoraj's in confrontation with their reception in his motherland. I perceive this reception as a peculiar social phenomenon, which proves strong connection of art with its outside-artistic aspects. My reasoning is conducted from a time perspective and without engaging into the mentioned debate. I hope being outside of the dispute may help me sketch objectively the situation around the artistic reception of this artist in Poland – the country which finally – after decades of steered cultural politics by communists – entered a period of transformation – not only political or economic, but also artistic metamorphosis.

I divided this article into certain aspects: after presenting the sculptor's biography I shall try to describe the correlation between his art and antiquity which results in Mitoraj's style that uses the poetics of antiquising fragment. In the face of antique-pagan source of inspiration we ask a question about Christian roots of the artist's works. Hence, introduction into the artistic reception of his art in Poland would be commencing the subject of relation between Mitoraj's style and modern art.

Igor Mitoraj was born on 26th March, 1944 in Oederan, Ore Mountains (near Dresden). He was a son of Zofia Makina – deported Polish forced farm labourer –

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and of George – French war prisoner, French Foreign Legion officer. At the very beginning the child got his father's name's Polish equivalent, Jerzy. The artist gave himself the name 'Igor' when he moved to Paris (Mitoraj, Constantini 5).

After the World War II Zofia came back together with her son to her parents in Poland. There she began a new life, got married and accepted husband's name Mitoraj¹. The future sculptor spent his childhood and young years in a picturesque town of Grojec, in the county of Oświęcim. In 2008 Mitoraj visited Grojec. And after his death one of the streets was named after him.

His artistic education started in a High School of Arts in Bielsko-Biała. Afterwards – from 1963 to 1968 – he studied painting in the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, where Tadeusz Kantor was his leading professor. He did not graduate. After many years he commented on this, "I was bored with learning how to paint, and the academy itself was boring. However, working with Kantor was great fun and fascinating adventure" (Sarzyński). And it was this teacher that told him to go abroad "west" to spread his wings. The student listened to his master's advice and left for Paris, even though he knew that would mean eternal emigration because of the Iron Curtain. One of the reasons for leaving his motherland was the need to meet his biological father. The artist found him, but never knocked on his door. They never met.

He preferred to face the difficult reality of emigrant artist's life on his own. As he remembered later, it was not an easy period when he carried heavy grand pianos and furniture to the high floors of Parisian townhouses. His first steps in artistic career were set in the field he studied in Cracow, i.e. painting and graphic arts. But it also was the time of his first attempts at sculpting. He still believed he should develop more and more, and that was supposed to be achieved by studying in Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris.

Unexpected turn in his work – in the direction of sculpting – took place after his one-year travels around Mexico, where he got acquainted with an Aztec art. From this trip he returned to Paris in 1974.

His first Parisian exhibition was held in 1976 in a bookshop-art gallery La Hune in the Latin Quarter of Paris, where, next to his paintings and graphic arts, he presented to the public some small forms of sculpture. All of which were sold immediately (Sarzyński) and that was for a beginner self-educating sculptor signal of

¹ When Igor Mitoraj worked abroad and was not known in Poland, there was a peculiar story of the origin of his last name and that it was an artistic pseudonym. The gossip emerged from the common opinion that Mitoraj longed for the mythical Arcadia – which would explain the etymology of the surname: "mit" (myth), "o" (about) and "raj" (paradise).

a right decision in the new field. After the success of this exhibition the French Ministry of Culture gave him a permit to use the atelier in the legendary Bateau-Lavoir in Montmartre.

Igor Mitoraj did not wait long for an offer of a next sculpture exhibition. The manager of the Gallery ArtCurial in Paris – a nephew of contemporaneous president of France, Francois Mitterand – commissioned him to prepare such a presentation. Mitoraj left then for Pietrasanta – also called “little Italian Athens”, for its famous Carrara marble quarries, loved by artists, who established there quite a specific international colony. This little Tuscan town became Mitoraj’s second home in 1983. The exhibition that he prepared for ArtCurial turned out to be a breakthrough in the career of a young artist. He travelled a lot in 1978 and 1979, and it was in New York that he realized he was a true European and in Greece he discovered that his materials are chiefly marble and bronze (Miziołek 711).

The next significant step into the world of fame was via the exhibition in Roman Museo Nazionale di Castel Sant Angelo in 1985. From that moment Igor Mitoraj’s sculptures and drawings were presented in 150 individual exhibits around the world. His triumphal procession was marked by productions in prestigious places in France², Italy³, Spain⁴, Switzerland⁵, United Kingdom⁶, the USA⁷ and Japan⁸.

² Paris: La Défense, Banque Paribas, Department of National Defence, the Place d’Armes New Fort de Vincennes.

³ Italy: Valle dei Templi, Agrigento; Vatican Museums, Vatican; Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, Firenze; Boboli, Gardens Firenze; Uffizi Museum, Firenze; Olivetti S. p. A., Ivrea; City of Massa Marittima, Massa Marittima; Agusta S. p. A., Milan; Insurance Tirrenia, Milan; La Barona, Milan; Piazza del Carmine, Milan; Rusconi Editore, Milan; The theatre La Scala, Milan; Trussardi S. p. A., Milan; Pope John XXIII Square, Bergamo; Convento San Bartolomeo, Palermo; Centauro Square, Pietrasanta; City Hall, Pietrasanta; Church San Agostino, Pietrasanta; Ministry of Defence, Piombino; Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels and the Martyrs, Rome; Monte Grappa Square, Rome; Fintermica Iacorossi, Rome; Cassa di Risparmio di Roma, Rome; Memmo Foundation, Rome; Valentino, S. p. A., Rome; Seat, Turin; City of Siena, Siena; Museum The Arena, Verona; City of Tivoli, Tivoli; Theatre Puccini, Torre del Lago Puccini.

⁴ March Foundation, Majorca; City of Santa Cruz, Tenerife.

⁵ Musée Olympique, Lausanne; City of Lugano, Lugano.

⁶ Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London; The British Museum, London; Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield.

⁷ Coca-Cola Foundation Atlanta, Hilton International Company Chicago, Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids, County Museum of Art, Los Angeles The M. & I. Rayburn Foundation, New York Rosenkranz Foundation, San Francisco Gateway Foundation, St. Louis Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D. C.

⁸ Japan: Hakone Museum, Hakone, Abuta Sculpture Park, Hokkaido, The Tokyo Sogo Bank, Tokyo, Oya Museum, Utsunomiya.

In 2007 Igor Mitoraj talked to the *Polityka's*⁹ cultural journalist and artistic critic, Piotr Sarzyński about a series of Spanish exhibits:

It is a cycle of eight presentations in the public space of different cities. It's started in Grenada, and then my works were shown in Valencia, Palma de Mallorca, Barcelona. Now, since September, there has been a display in San Sebastian, and later we're going to show in La Coruña and Madrid. Over two thousand people came just in Barcelona and it's been estimated that around five million people visited the exhibits. What is significant, each of these cities buys a sculpture for themselves (Sarzyński).

Critics west of the Iron Curtain noticed the success of a Polish sculptor. Pia Capelli in „Il Sole 24 ore” wrote after the artist's death:

Mitoraj – this is esthetics of a fragment. His art breaks, penetrates, hurts, unsettles. By sculpting enormous bodies, feet, lips he was asking simple questions about philosophy, himself, beauty. He was talented and he wanted to sculpt in a beautiful manner. He created for private collectors and for public institutions. His sculptures are displayed at Trajan's Forum in Rome, Venice, in Valle dei Templi in Agrigento. He is the first modern artist to exhibit his works in Piazza dei Miracoli in Pisa (Capelli).

This known art commentator mentions that the exhibitions of works in Pisa titled *Angeli* were included in the program of celebrating the nine hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Pisa cathedral. This display was opened on May 17th, 2014. Unfortunately, it was the last exhibition of the sculptor while he was alive. There were not only sculptures, but also paintings, drawings and elements of opera scenography – all by Igor Mitoraj – presented to the public. The respect that Italian public pays to Mitoraj's art can be observed also in the fact that a letter from the president of the Italian Republic Giorgio Napolitano was read at his funeral. Their appreciation is marked by numerous academic conferences organized mainly to present the sculptor, e.g. in Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Rome; Italian press compared him to greatest sculptors of all times, such as Michelangelo or Polykleitos (Miziołek 712). And that is the right moment to ask a question about his reception in Poland, his motherland. Perversely however, I am not going to do that now. I am going to analyze Mitoraj's expressive and distinguishable style.

⁹ *Polityka* – one of the leading weekly magazines in Poland. Started in 1957 as an official media outlet of the Polish United Workers Party (PZPR). Today it is a liberal-left, opinion-forming socio-political magazine.

First question: MITORAJ AND THE ANTIQUE

The works of Igor Mitoraj's are commonly associated with huge monuments referring to the Antique. Enormous heroes of the past resurrected after ages to watch without any interest contemporary streets of great metropolitan areas filled with people rushing to nowhere. We shall ask another question about the quality of relation between the source of inspiration and its twentieth century embodiment. The first point is nudity. Greeks preferred a male nudity for very long time. Strongly exhibited nakedness did not have – as it may seem today – any erotic background. They learnt from the nature, which created the human being this way. Fidelity to anatomical details was of the foremost importance. They were as thorough when they depicted a kneecap as when they copied any other part of the human body. Greeks sought perfection and for this reason they idealized their works. This perfection could have been achieved only through harmony. Key elements of harmony were: symmetry, balance, moderation and mathematically measured proportions. Lack of emotions on faces of the statues and their timeless youth go together with harmony of that sense. Achieving perfection was the fuel of achieving anatomical depiction of human body – in its ideal form. Heroes – the characters of myths who did extraordinary acts, and their earthly counterparts – cherished by crowds – the winners of the games, were worthy of being preserved forever in a sculpture. Everything in Greek Arts was saturated with philosophy, and it was philosophy that shaped aesthetic tastes. Greeks were masters of both bronze casts and stone sculptures, in which the most prominent was marble.

From Greek masters Mitoraj acquired the search for harmony through idealization and techniques. Mitoraj's statues stand on the pedestals in a classical contrapposto. Their motionless faces present no emotion (fig. 1). Meaningfully quiet figures stand in their timeless youth exactly as their antique predecessors did. The artist starts a dialogue between these sculptures and antique works, and not just because they are copies of the latter, but his creations are an answer to the longing for qualities admired and cherished by ancient arts. An example of such a conversation may be the relation of Mitoraj's series of torsos with the glorified by Michelangelo *Torso of Belvedere* – a work by Apollonius from the first century B.C.

Second question: POETICS OF THE ANTIQUIZING FRAGMENT

Mitoraj's statues are consequently nude – just like the Greek figures. However, Mitoraj – differently than the ancient masters – presents the human body mutilated: broken off arms, pieces of bodies, empty eye sockets (fig. 2-4). The author

condemns the viewer to experience certain type of concern over the scarred perfection. Mitoraj does not imitate ancient art, although the experience of encountering the work of art is built on the basis of memories and imagination of the viewers – that is his way to introduce a new concept to the public. The interpretation of Mitoraj's creation as antique copies comes automatically from a simple association of the main features. Maybe the source of such associations is the linkage of repetition and memory pointed out first by Søren Kierkegaard (17). Until now the spectators have come into contact with antique patterns of beauty only in the museums that presented whatever monuments were saved through the ages. Often mutilated by time and fate, hardly any preserved in its entirety. Even though, they still amaze. And these were the archetypes – i.e. contemporarily perceived as disfigured antique perfection – which Mitoraj derived from. His broken heroes (fig. 2) relate to the nostalgia for the paradise lost, the mythical land of perfection.

The artist creates a characteristic for himself repertoire of interventions on the bodies of his statues – and that is not found in the Antique.¹⁰ One of the most recognizable procedures is wrapping parts of the statues with bandages. This tactic opens up a list of possible interpretations. For some it may be a symbol of enslavement, for others they may evoke reflections of Ancient Egypt, and yet for another group it may be an invitation to dwell upon the hidden image. Artur Badach, art historian and curator in Art Center in Royal Castle of Warsaw, accurately described emotional load awakened by these artistic measures: “Heads, faces wrapped in shrouds that cover mouths to prevent them from speaking, or eyes to prevent them from seeing – or even, what is more probable, so nobody can notice suffering and complaint in them” (‘Igor Mitoraj – rzeźby i rysunki’).

Mitoraj's intrusion into the statues' bodies by cutting out square niches or hollow openings in which he would sometimes place miniature heads (fig. 3) was also a foreign concept to the Ancient. The author himself explained that in a surprising manner: “[...] there are deep, rectangular openings, windows in torsos, busts or vases. This is also a cinematographic trail, uncovering the hidden desire of framing, shot action, focusing on one aspect of the sculpture, bringing it to a freeze-frame” (Mitoraj, Constantini 32).

The “cinematic” interpretation is an analytical clue given to the viewers by the sculptor. Introduction of the windows – or as the author intended “screens” – becomes the development of the subject raised by the artist. It is his filling in on the content. Here the viewer gets a possibility of an insight into the life of a presented hero who seemed to be hiding the real emotions underneath the superficial stoic

¹⁰ Mentioned – among others – by Lameński 130-131; Miziołek 712.

expression. These windows open the intimate life of the figure to the public. And in parallel they are the confirmation of Igor Mitoraj's ambiguity and illustrate the game of simulacra played by the artist.

Another trick of this kind is placing strange excrescencies or lumps on the statues' bodies (fig. 4). The open question is if they are growing in or out of the main flesh. We may attempt to take upon the symbolic-surreal vision of the birth of an idea. Sometimes they become a riddle for a viewer provoking to questioning and commencing a dialogue.

Mitoraj often dons his statues in wings. As if harmed by their fate Erores, Icaruses, Ikarias unable to fly, despite the wings, nostalgic, broken (fig 2). The spectator feels the drama even stronger when confronted with the forever stoic countenance of the figure (fig. 1). The omen of tragedy preserved in the sculptures does not weaken even when shown to the viewer in the torsos with no arms, heads, legs.

Winged Eros / Eros Alato – both versions, one from 1984 (today is being displayed in the shopping center Stary Browar in Poznan, Poland) and the second, from 2012, exposes the eroticism of woman's body. Igor Mitoraj did not commit the mistake of ignorance alternating the sex of the Olympic god. Quite the contrary – as an Antique culture expert he reached for the Ancient Greek meaning of the very word *Eros* – i.e. the noun that describes unfulfilled desire for something. In Pisa, at the above-mentioned exhibition, in the entrances of Museo delle Sinopie there were displayed *Winged Eros with a hand* and *Winged torso* (both works' versions from 2001). *Winged torso* became the representative of the male element in the subject of Eros. The erotic plot is also visible in the series *Icarus* and *Ikaria* (Miziołek 714).

Emotionlessness and unachievable tranquillity are on faces of gigantic heads – e.g. *Tsuki-No-Hikari, (Moonlight)*, 1994, The British Museum, London; *Testa Ad-dormentata (Head Lulled to Sleep)*, 1983, Canary Warf, London; *Eros bendato (Eros tied)*, 2005, Cracow. The enormous “overscaling” of the faces does not have its counterpart in the Antiquity. This group of works includes also two Roman fountains. One, *Dea Roma*, is located in Piazza Monte Grappa, near the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art. The second one has been described with a distinctive situation humour in *Na dziedzińcu (In the Courtyard)* by Mitoraj's friend, lyrics author Jacek Cygan:

In the courtyard of the Accademia Valentino in Rome,
Near Piazza Mignanelli, Igor Mitoraj's sculpture stands.
Two meter high cast-iron face.
For years water has fallen from the left eye,

It covered the cheek with streaks of grays and browns.

One day I bring some friends over to the fountain.

The water doesn't flow.

- Signore – I ask a guard – why doesn't the water flow?

- We have problems with the drainage of tears (26).

Mitoraj, who did not stop being a painter, was very sensitive to colourful coating of his sculptures. Art historian Lechosław Lameński mentions it this way:

The Polish sculptor sets great store by the 'epidermis' of his sculptures, especially to its texture and colour scheme. One may say that the artist is very painterly in his actions. In the case of sculptures cast in bronze his invention seems not to have limits. Besides the classical patina which gives the statues its characteristic green hue, there are also some effects resembling falling off portions of old daub in the colour of ochre, brushstrokes of half dry brush on a quite smooth surface, or smears with spots of dark brown rust, flowing down the parts of heads and figures. However, when Mitoraj creates sculptures in the high quality Carrara marble, he does not intervene with its natural colouring, but he contrasts the surfaces. One side he would polish to the limits in such a manner that it reflects the sunrays, the other side he would leave rough and porous, made with fine, rhythmic strikes of a little chisel in order to break the beam of sharp light. (131).

Greek masters also used polychrome to achieve the effect of colour. And this fact fades away in the common knowledge, because most of ancient works lost their colourful layers with time. What is more, in the early modern period the stereotype of working with a natural colour of the sculpture material was perpetuated. Mitoraj counters moderately this convention. He uses colour effects not only for the pure delight, but it is mainly a way to authenticate his act of archaization of the sculptures ('Igor Mitoraj. Powrót do ojczyzny' 75-76; Lameński 130). Colour has a function of complementing the text too.

By emphasizing certain elements the artist draws the attention of the viewer to particular aspects of the work, influencing the interpretation. This is a case in the group *Gold Winds* that presents three busts which have different elements emphasized with the means of colour and texture and that influences the textual analysis of the work.

Another element of Mitoraj's art, which connects to and at the same time distinguishes from the Greek sculpture, is the line of the lips. That 'archaic smile' adorned ancient kouroses. Sensual grimaces of slight boredom are engraved in the faces of Polykleitos's and Lysippos's statues. And what is the expression of the

Mitoraj's sculptures' lips? It has been observed that this artist always used one style of lips. For this reason it is perceived as the sculptor's signature. Igor Mitoraj did not find it on ancient figures, but – if I am not mistaken – it is his own line of lips.

Third question: MITORAJ AND CHRISTIAN ART

Mitoraj's winged figures – with the entire Antique art inspiration – seem to have obvious connotations with the Christian images of angels. Archangel Gabriel seems to be sculptor's particularly favourite. We can see him in the scene of *Annunciation*, which found its alternations in one wing of the bronze door to the Roman Basilica Santa Maria degli Angeli (the other wing shows Christ's Resurrection) and in Jesuits' church in Świętojańska Street in Warsaw (fig. 5-6), as well as in the three-dimensional group presented during the exhibition in Pisa. In all above-mentioned presentations the viewer is struck with Madonna's resemblance of Greek Goddesses sculpted in the style of wet drapery (fig. 6). Lure, the eroticism of woman's body seem to stand on the border of tolerance for traditional image of this scene.

This is not the only counter stereotype presentation of the scene – Italian academics emphasize the very moment of the Annunciation. They know the group as *Visita a Maria*. The Italian title seems to be more accurate, if we take into consideration the moment right before the scene described in the Gospel. Francesco Buranelli, director of the Vatican Museums, points out that the artist managed to capture the ethereal moment right before the words "Ave Maria...". He supports his thesis with the fact that the angel's mouth is still closed (AN).

Another example of religious undertaking is an unaccomplished monument of pope John Paul II for the city of Warsaw. Eventually the project was dropped due to the lack of compromise as to the location of the monument. Mitoraj was determined to have the statue placed in front of the Saint Anne's Church.¹¹ The authorities of the city opposed this idea and suggested three different places (Jarco). And not everyone liked the monument. A blog writer – Joanna Jarco asks:

But is it really a beautiful statue? Is it a beautiful sculpture? Isn't it stuffed too much with imagery? A mutilated human being. It seems that the Pope wants to enter the inside of the cross (and in this case is this a symbol of faith or suffering?). Softly supported on one hand, the motion of the left hand suggests an inward direction. And everything based on a relief taken indirectly from Antiquity. I don't know what it

¹¹ Saint Anne's Church is in the historic center of the capital, near the Royal Castle.

means. And what deeper sense it has. They say this apotheosis of Faith... I don't know (Jarco).

Of course there are also admirers of such a vision. Jerzy Miziołek, art historian, reports for the significant magazine *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* [*Bulletin of the Art History*] from the exhibition in Pisa and presents his own interpretation:

The art work unaccomplished in the form of monumental version so far, according to what Igor Mitoraj said in Pietrasanta, shows 'Christ's body inscribed in the cross' which the Pope, dressed in simple clerical clothing, touches with the right hand. Sublimation of the sacrifice on the cross, reference to *Corpus Domini*, focus and monumentalism of this little – so far – sculptured form are unique. The reliefs on the pedestal complement the stories of the mystery of incarnation and the symbol of cross, which is concave at the front of the monument and convex at the back. They are almost exact quotes from the art of Phidias's, the most admired by Mitoraj sculptor. What are the functions of these adaptations of Parthenon's frieze and who are the two, sometimes three, figures talking to each other? Christianity and the Greek world are a vast topic – but wasn't Greek the first language of Christianity? The monument finally was to be located in Cracow but the project was not accepted. Will it ever be accomplished? (719).

And here is what Igor Mitoraj says about the imagery of the project:

"Four-meter high bust of a man stabbed with a cross. And John Paul II is entering this space. The pope is the guide to the cross. And the cross opens up to the man" (Górecka-Czuryło). Surprisingly ambiguous opinions illustrate the difficulty in evaluating Mitoraj's works, especially if taking into consideration the supposed conspicuity and clarity of the form used by the sculptor. The conclusion to contemplations about the presence of sacred element in Mitoraj's creations may be words by Antonio Paolucci: "I am struck by the sacrality of the image in Mitoraj's creations. The idea of eternal and mysterious beauty which might be, or rather surely is, the shadow of God on Earth" (Miziołek 720).

Fourth question: MITORAJ AND MODERN ART

Revolutionary ideas of avant-garde directions from the beginning of the twentieth century challenged perfect – so far – authority of Greece's heritage. The art went through a real revolution in the twentieth century. Aesthetic values that functioned until then became obsolete, and beauty became a synonym of kitsch. Mitoraj's heroes provoke a discussion with modern art, using the means of disa-

greement over currently cherished trends. Mitoraj valued beauty in its classical form and for this reason admirers of modern art saw an epigone of antiquity in him. However, not only of antiquity. Much more serious accusation was never articulated openly, but it influenced the reception of the style presented by Mitoraj very profoundly. In communist era the political entanglement was the cause of a peculiar criterion of artistic evaluation and even today figurative art is ideologically suspicious in Poland. This mechanism may be really vague for inhabitants of Western Europe, unfortunately it is a feature in art of post-communist countries. Polish artistic circles refer more often to the roots of Polish pre-war avant-garde, which derived from constructionism or expressionism and futurism, rather than realism that paralyzed the development of free art for a decade and turned into a nightmare widely known as so-called socrealism. This artificial – because conditioned by political system – paralysis of natural development of trends in art in the period after the Second World War created the need for catching up with the “lost” time. Unfortunately, sometimes it takes a form of “modernity complex” and the feeling that Polish art is provincial in comparison to the Western world’s cultural achievements. Igor Mitoraj’s works, coming out of tradition and proposing rebirth of classical and realistic art which would cherish the beauty of human body, were exactly on the opposite polar of critical art circle activity that built its position throughout the decade of the nineties, i.e. right after the fall of communist regime in Poland (1989)¹².

Fifth question: RECEPTION OF MITORAJ’S WORKS IN POLAND

Mitoraj’s art is unusually consistent, we could say even that without any surprises. In consequent presentations the sculptor continued with determination his own artistic program – he embodied his ideal of beauty and this way he opposed the tendencies and trends contemporary to him. Many art critics rejected Mitoraj’s works because it was so different from the main direction of Polish avant-garde. Art historian, Paweł Leszkowicz writes about it openly in the article *Art and Sexual Restructuring of Polish Public Space. Igor Mitoraj and Let them See us* (Leszkowicz).

A significant part of Polish modern art circles turned against his sculptures, because they perceived them as kitsch and garishness in service of politics and business. The

¹² On 4th June 1989 first partly free elections to parliament took place in the post-World War II history of Poland.

contempt cannot be explained only by envy, because the artist himself earned this negative opinion, when announcing openly his contempt to experimental arts, its ugliness and biologism, and all the commentators, curators and authorities contrasted the beauty of his figures with degeneration of human body and work's matter in current Polish art. Mitoraj's classicism and traditionalism was suggested as a cure for the fall of art, for the art without beauty, as a respite from avant-garde and modernity criticism – and in this manner they gave yet another argument for censors who pursued other artists (Leszkowicz).

Hence, we can note that Mitoraj's consequent artistic program became a sort of provocation. For his colleagues Igor Mitoraj was an outlaw, cursed by the circle of innovators, outcast of the progressive art idea. The conflict hidden from the public grew and finally exploded after the success of touring exhibition – Poznań, Cracow, Warsaw – which was organized by the International Cultural Center in 2004. Mostly he was accused of conformism and commerciality. Again words by Paweł Leszkowicz illustrate it:

In the history of modern Polish art there was no artist sponsored and celebrated to such an extent by political and economic elites of this country, in which, not in the least, the art is ever put in the spotlight. At the moment of Mitoraj's explosion the art has entered the new level of meaning (Leszkowicz).

And further:

There must have been an enormous power assisting such a monumental undertaking as the tour of this artist, especially if one takes into consideration prices, sizes of the sculptures and places of exhibitions. The exhibiton was the President Aleksander Kwaśniewski's initiative; he supposedly 'discovered' Mitoraj's creations during a journey to Italy with the First Lady. The First Couple of Polish business – Jerzy and Grażyna Kulczyk and their foundation – suddenly joined the patronage of the First Couple of Polish politics. The minister of culture, Waldemar Dąbrowski became the executive power. The avalanche began in Poznan, Cracow and Warsaw. Local cultural, economic and political authorities presented themselves in the vicinity of artist's statues. Mayors of these cities joined the triumphal march, and local and national mass media did not stay behind. At the same time three glorifying books about the artist were published – including luxurious Polish and English album *Mitoraj. The Spell of Gorgon* published under the patronage of the President of the Republic of Poland (Leszkowicz).

It must be articulated here as a complementary comment to the mentioned text by Leszkowicz, that the sudden publishing movement about Mitoraj's art was not

stimulated only politically. His works were underestimated in Poland also by the poor number of publications. And the 2004 exhibition was an opportunity to catch up, as Artur Badach informs ('Igor Mitoraj. Powrót do ojczyzny' 73).

The greatest objection against the exhibition took place in Cracow. Fourteen colossal sculptures of muses, heroes and titans displayed in the Cracow's historical Main Square were criticized very sharply. The arguments against the exhibit varied enormously – from an individual complaint directed to the prosecutor's office by an inhabitant of Cracow who was shocked that "the Market was being filled with penises", which was perceived as a form of pornography (GW), to creative and journalistic circles getting involved in the matter. Here is an excerpt from an article in a national newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* by Magdalena Kursa:

"Hideousness, poor copy of a Greek sculpture, pile of scrap metal, gigantic pumpkin with eaten-out pulp", commented Internet users. "A precious gift straight from the heart of a notable countryman, who pays his debts to the beloved city of Cracow. The sign of contemporary times, which will compose with the Main Square and after years will finally become its integral part", murmured national dignitaries in amazement. [...] One of Internet users quite correctly compared the present situation of Cracow to a person who was given a souvenir and is required by the giver to put it in the living room. Inhabitants of Cracow have the right to oppose such a patron of art. And Igor Mitoraj is complaining about the choice of Kolejowy Square, when he should remember that in Paris his sculpture is located in a modern district of La Defense and not in front of the Notre Dame Cathedral. In Poznań his work is displayed in a shopping center *Stary Browar*, not in the central market place. Authorities of Cracow cannot be blackmailed. We do not have to put all the gifts in the living room, even if the Minister of Culture likes them (Kursa).

Nevertheless, it did not happen the way the journalist postulated. Mitoraj's sculpture stayed on the Main Square. I would like to draw attention, however, to the tone of this discussion – leaving out the problem of the sculpture's location validity. In 2007 known Polish modern art critic, Piotr Sarzyński conducted an interview with Igor Mitoraj. The artist was asked directly about the comment on the Cracovian protests against his gift:

P.S.: [...] the sculpture causes passionate reactions in Cracow. Many demand its removal from the Square. Świetlicki¹³ makes fun of your head in his books.

I.M.: Yes, I know the case. But there are not so many people who protest. Only two local ladies, who need a topic to emerge in any way, cause the entire disorder. There are

¹³ Marcin Świetlicki – Polish poet, writer, journalist

also anonymous comments on the Internet, which are reprinted with great satisfaction by the local *Gazeta Wyborcza*. This is typical for Cracow, local little hell, provincial envy, the need to get down someone who succeeded. I love this city, but I don't like everything about it. Although, I appreciate the uproar, because this way my sculpture stirred in this motionless circle. I believe it is better if people argue about art than politics. Am I not right? (Sarzyński).

In the next part of the interview Sarzyński asks: "P.S.: The spiteful say that you display in the streets, because you don't get invitations from serious museums". The sculptor comments his position in the contemporary art:

Rubbish. Just check the list of collections and museums where my works are presented, with the British Museum in the first place. They testify on behalf of my art. But I'll be honest with you, I don't care about being everywhere and pleasing everyone. If serious art today is peeling potatoes in the art gallery, then I'm out. I prefer to be an outsider and not have anything to do with it. A small group of people took over current art. They are arrogant technocrats, who impose the taste and their systems of evaluation, and the only aim they have is profits. Everything is for sale – spirit and body. No limits. And it is art dealers who deal the cards here. All of those "post's" are being given publicity: postmodernism, post-conceptualism, post-beuys, post-ducamp. This type of art cuts away from emotions and real feelings, from our shared roots. I enter the museum and I don't understand what I see. Hanging ropes, scattered bricks, poop on the sheet (Sarzyński).

Debate that took place after the exhibitions in 2004 influenced the placement of Mitoraj's creations in the panorama of Polish art.

Let's return, however, to the question of quality of the experience that accompanied the encounter of Antique works with Mitoraj's works, that is to the "Greek sculpture copy" argument by the opponents of the artist. Nevertheless, the artist teeters between imitation and inspiration, and it raises many differentiated comments about his art. The Mitoraj's art made and still makes doubts. On one hand the consequence of style should be respected, but on the other hand this might be considered as a lack of progress, development. It is easy to observe great analogies, or even repetitions in Mitoraj's manner. There is the third view on his art seting between euphoric admiration and mocking criticism. This judgement is represented by Jarosław Mikołajewski¹⁴, who wrote in *Gazeta Wyborcza*:

¹⁴ Jarosław Mikołajewski – poet, translator from the Italian language, essayist

His art annoyed me with its decorativeness, size and the cemetery aesthetics of the symbolic figures. I don't like monumentalism. I have never liked the head of Constantine the Great at the Capitoline Museum, so even less its stylizations. It's a little shameful for me, but at first I thought of his enormous figures like of garden gnomes. I met the snow white, mutilated heads and torsos everywhere – in Rome, Agrigento, Tuscany, Lombardy. I did not announce my objections because I did not want to join the choir of scoffers. [...] (Mikołajewski).

Another voice in the discussion, which I share, is one by Krzysztof M. Bednarski – a sculptor a decade younger than Mitoraj, but, like him, in touch with the Italian artists circle not in formal but geographical meaning. Bednarski believes that the reason for Mitoraj's financial success took place because there was the need to fill in the gap created by modern art, as the

[...] new artists hide themselves behind the uncommunicativeness, they seem to be programmed to appear incomprehensible. Also the large scale (of Mitoraj's art – note by M. H.-C.) influenced people and somehow was the proof of his endeavour to find beauty. Although, I think it was only a reproduction of beauty, its shadow. I prefer the original works in Greece (Mikołajewski).

Though, I do not belong to the group of Mitoraj's apologists, I believe it is not right that – paraphrasing professor Antoni Pastwa's words¹⁵ – Mitoraj encountered not only a conspiracy of silence, but also a conspiracy of destruction in his motherland (Mikołajewski). Professor Adam Myjak, Warsaw Fine Arts Academy rector, confirms this opinion. He mentioned in the radio interview:

The artist was evaluated very unfairly in Poland, he was destroyed in a way. [...] In Poland he was accused of copying, replicating. All so-called critics and curators teased him during the exhibitions in Poland, what, anyway, he sensed and tried to limit his contacts with the motherland (Myjak).

Since the conflict among Polish artistic opinion-forming circles about Mitoraj's art – that is since the presentation of Mitoraj's works in the touring exhibition in three big Polish cities: Poznań–Cracow–Warsaw ('Igor Mitoraj. Powrót do ojczyzny' 71) in 2004 – the most important protectors have left the public arena. They were ex-President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, whose political career's begun yet in the PZPR – i.e. ruling party in communist Poland, and Jerzy Kulczyk who died

¹⁵ Antoni Janusz Pastwa – Polish sculptor, pedagogist, associated with Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw

recently – one of the wealthiest people in Poland, who started to build his financial empire in times of communist Poland and it multiplied enormously during the political system transformation. And this powerful patronage was one of the reasons of the Mitoraj's art critical opinions in his motherland, which I presented above. It provokes a question if Mitoraj's art was politically intertwined. The reaction of mass media seemed to be exactly like this. But it does not mean it really was so. According to Anda Rottenberg¹⁶ "the nature of politically marked art is that its character is temporary and incidental, though it has been meant to be eternal" (24). It is not simple to match Mitoraj's art with this definition. Political entanglement of art is a broad and imprecise term because of difficulty of defining the level and form of the involvement as they can differ very much. Of course the propaganda and political art are not the question here, because there is a great difference between Mitoraj's statues and Stalin's monuments – for instance. The entanglement in Mitoraj's case has a contextual character based on circumstances beyond art. They are rather socio-political conditions accompanying the promotion of his art in 2004 in Poland. The remarks by Ekaterina Andreeva¹⁷ are more helpful to grasp the character of the conflict:

The power that art gives is as attractive as any type of power. And how does the work of art gain this power? Is it thanks to its perfection, as it was thought before [and this is the case with Mitoraj's works – note by M.H.-C.], or is it the result of mass media activity, which uses art as an information pretext? (33).

In my opinion the exhibition Poznań–Cracow–Warsaw in 2004 was more of such an information pretext than Mitoraj's creations themselves. However, in this case the situation turned against the sculptor and became a disadvantage for him. The political and economic patronage influenced immensely the atmosphere and initiating the non-artistic conflict.

It does not mean that his art was totally cast out in his motherland. A significant group of public was Igor Mitoraj's greatest advocate. Many art historians, sculptors and other people associated with culture expressed their support over the political conflicts. At this point one may notice the second nature of the dispute – i.e. artistic criterion. The most progressing art is the critical art in awakening post-communist Poland. Art that corresponds with tradition, and not with acts

¹⁶ Anda Rottenberg – Polish art historian, critic, art curator and publicist, director of Zachęta National Art Gallery in Warsaw between 1993-2001.

¹⁷ Ekaterina Andreeva – art historian, curator, critic. She created a collection of Russian modern art in Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg.

against it, is by the rule perceived as a backward tendency. This is the reason why accusations of commercialism and populism of Mitoraj's art emerged at all. After Mitoraj's death – on 6th October 2014 – Polish mass media were flooded with teary elegies about the sculptor. Currently the dispute is losing its political and emotional character, not resolving the disagreement, which, I believe, is in purely artistic foundation.

I wish to use the befitting atmosphere for objective analysis and present not only the background of this conflict, but also remind the specific art works by Igor Mitoraj – by some cherished, and for others a particular kind of kitsch.

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BROKEN HEROES... KITSCH OR ART? RECEPTION OF IGOR MITORAJ'S WORKS

S u m m a r y

The article summarizes the reception of Igor Mitoraj's art in his motherland, which he emigrated from in the 1960's.

Mitoraj is one of few Polish sculptors who were celebrated in the world, and what is more, they succeeded financially. His sculptures adorn public areas in Europe, Asia and America. However, re-

ception of his works in his motherland was bipolar – cherished by some and at the same time undervalued by others. The artist was being accused of conformism, creating commercial art, even kitsch.

Then who was Igor Mitoraj? How is his art evaluated almost four years after his death? In this article, besides the summary of his art, I wish to present episodic background of the ambiguous reception of Mitoraj's sculptures in Poland. I use information from articles in professional magazines and from ordinary newspapers.

Key words: Polish sculpture of the twentieth century, figurative sculpture, art reception, Igor Mitoraj.

POKONANI BOHATEROWIE... KICZ CZY SZTUKA? RECEPCJA PRAC IGORA MITORAJA

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi podsumowanie recepcji twórczości Igora Mitoraja w jego ojczyźnie, z której wyemigrował w latach 60. XX wieku.

Mitoraj to jeden z niewielu polskich rzeźbiarzy światowej sławy, w dodatku odnoszących sukcesy finansowe. Jego rzeźby zdobią miejsca publiczne w Europie, Azji i Ameryce. Jednak odbiór prac Mitoraja w kraju ojczystym był dwojaki – przez jednych były cenione, przez innych krytykowane. Artystę posądzano o konformizm, tworzenie sztuki komercyjnej, a nawet kicz.

Kim zatem był Igor Mitoraj? Jak oceniana jest jego sztuka kilka lat po śmierci artysty? W niniejszym artykule oprócz przeglądu dzieł Mitoraja pragnę przedstawić epizodyczne tło niejednoznaczniego odbioru jego rzeźb w Polsce. Korzystam z informacji zawartych zarówno w artykułach publikowanych w czasopismach specjalistycznych, jak i artykułach prasy codziennej.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska rzeźba XX w., rzeźba figuratywna, recepcja sztuki, Igor Mitoraj.



1. A head of *Ikaro Alato*, 2004, Centrum Kultury i Edukacji Olimpijskiej [Culture and Olympic Education Commission], Warszawa; phot. by M. Howorus-Czajka, 2016



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