

Krzysztof Musiał

Collection and Its Meaning : an interview with Krzysztof Musiał

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Collection and Its Meaning

An Interview with Krzysztof Musiał

Ewa D. Bogusz-Bołtuć – *You are one of the foremost collectors of Polish art. You have a Polish background but, these days, you seem to rather be a citizen of the world. Why do you collect modern Polish art?*

Krzysztof Musiał – Even though I have lived abroad for some around 35 years, I have kept in touch with Poland and collecting Polish art is one on my ways of not losing my roots. On the other hand, I believe that I know Polish art best and, hence, I'm more competent in this field than in the contemporary art of any other country.

EBB – *When and why did you decide to collect Polish modern art? Often Polish collectors begin collecting art by gathering paintings with horses and uhlans, which are often regarded as typically Polish motifs. What were your beginnings as a collector?*

KM – I began with art from the region around Kielce. That's where I come from and so I bought because of sentimentality, mainly landscapes, souvenirs from my homeland. It didn't have the characteristics of a serious collection. The paintings, which I bought at the time, are not part of my current collection. They were bought haphazardly, as if by accident. It was only in the middle of the 1990's that I made a conscious decision to focus only on Polish art and create a complete collection. I knew it best and intuitively felt it. I began with the end of the 19th century, so from Boznańska, Pankiewicz, and Fałat, until I went into the 20th century and onwards to modern art. I have only one painting of Juliusz Kossak, but not a typical one, portraying horses. This one is an exception. It's his auto-portrait. He painted it when he was 23, while in Paris.

EBB – *Wiesław Ochman, a Polish tenor and art collector, in one of his interviews, mentioned that in European museums he is able to recognize Polish painters from the XIX century without reading the gallery labels. Do you think that there is a national specificity to Polish art?*

KM – I'm not as great a specialist in Polish XIX century art as Mr. Ochman is, but I guess I could say the same thing about art from the last 50-70 years. I could

easily recognize works by Fangor, Lebenstein, Opalka, Tarasin, Tarasewicz or Bałka, to name just a few, but, unfortunately, there aren't that many European museums exhibiting these artists. On the other hand, I wouldn't be able to tell a Sasnal from dozens of other similar artists.

I think that the 50's and 60's were the most interesting out of the second half of the 20th century. It was then that the most new things were being created. After the exhibit in Arsenal in 1955 Polish artists decided to abandon social realism, and choose their own path. That's when the best paintings by Dominik, Tarasin, Kobzdej or Bogusz were created. That's also when Fangor created his best paintings.

EBB – *However, you mentioned that these works are not being exhibited in European Museums and that they're not widely known outside of Poland. Ewa Izabela Nowak, an art critic active in both France and Poland, gave me a letter for you, and asked me to ask you one question, which touches upon this issue. The question reads as follows: Did you ever desire to contribute to promoting, showcasing or reminding people about one of the prominent artists from your collection, outside of Poland?*

KM – At the exhibition of Alina Szapocznikow, at MoMA, one work from my collection was being shown. I was also at the opening of that exhibit. However, I don't think that's the job of a private collector to promote Polish artists abroad. That's the job of governmental institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture or the Mickiewicz Institute. I have my own gallery, aTAK. There's art there that I appreciate, but I don't use it to promote my own collection. That's not my mission. However, I want to create an exhibit of art from my collection outside of Poland, but it probably wouldn't be an exhibit of just one artist. The curator will decide about the exact form of the exhibit, not me. I'm looking for a curator, and/or an institute, which would be interested in the subject. I will give them what I have. I will open my collection to them and I will say – 'create some scenario, think of something that make sense.' I don't fully grasp what would interest a viewer outside of Poland. The exhibition of works from my collection should be based on a person from there, not here, not by someone from Poland.

EBB – *And the second part of Ewa Izabela Nowak's question: Your gallery, aTAK, has a very good exhibit schedule and presents great, exceptional, artists. Wouldn't you want to present your gallery during one of the many renown European trade fairs?*

KM – There are a few Polish galleries, which regularly attend various art trade fairs and showcase worthwhile Polish artists. Of course, we could do that. I suppose that I haven't undertaken that endeavor for personal reasons. I live in Spain, but I manage a gallery in Warsaw. I travel to Warsaw once a month, for four or five days to keep an eye on the most important matters. Maybe, if

I lived in Warsaw I'd be more involved as a merchant. Besides that, promotion isn't a simple matter. Merely traveling to an art fair doesn't make an artist visible.

EBB – *Currently it's said that a more or less invisible art market decides about what is valuable, and the works of art themselves are only a pretext.*

KM – If you look carefully then you will know that this market is visible. It's known who decides about the price of art works. The connections between galleries and auction houses are well known. I'm not sure however, if it's possible for the art market to work differently. Often the works of efficient, but mediocre, artists reach astronomical prices. That is where an independent critic should step in and show the average collector or auction house buyer the value of the presented works of art.

EBB – *Is there any major aesthetic or artistic idea which guides your collection? How do you choose pieces to include in your collection? To what extent do you rely on experts' opinions?*

KM – What governs my purchasing is my personal admiration for a given work of art, and a conviction that it is a piece with high artistic value. How can I distinguish good art from bad? Well, I guess it's some basic knowledge of art history and a lot of experience. After years of visiting the world's best museums and examining thousands of works of art in auctions and galleries, one develops a "gut feeling", which makes it possible to tell what is good and what is not. Of course, this process is more complex but in a few words, that's how it works. As far as experts are concerned, I certainly listen to any advice I can get but, in the end, the decision is mine.

I wanted to create a holistic collection of art from the middle or end of the 19th century to today. I want to show what changes occurred in Polish art. If I've completely done it, I don't know. I know there are gaps in my collection. Of course that's my subjective opinion. Of course there are artists I value more than others. Some of the artists out of my collection I exhibit more often, because I think their works are more important.

EBB – *These days museums are bigger and more ambitious than ever, but, at the same time, some art theoreticians have expressed their skepticism about a museum's ability to preserve and convey to the public the meaning and understanding of a work of art. What kind of role would you see for a museum in the modern world?*

KM – Recently works from my collection have been presented in the Museum of the City of Łódź, The Poznański Palace. This is a very interesting situation. A public museum has designated an area where works from a private collection have been displayed – The Polish Masters Gallery. Paintings, drawings and sculptures from the collection of Krzysztof Musiał. Most of the older works from my collection are there, from 1850 to about 1940. Not all, but a significant

number. I transferred the works under a fixed deposit. The area where my works are being displayed has been renovated and remodeled by the city.

Only museums can assure continuity and the long term preservation of various artifacts. Individuals are not around long enough to fulfill that task. That's why so many splendid collections get split and sold in auctions. But, on the other hand, that's exactly how so many great pieces of art are made available for purchase and make their way into new collections.

EBB – *You share art you have collected with others and you sponsor a variety of artistic enterprises and activities. Why are these activities important to you?*

KM – I try to share my collection with as many people as I can, through various exhibitions organized by myself or through loans to different museums. I believe that sharing art that one has collected is a duty on the one hand and a source of pleasure and satisfaction, on the other.

Sponsoring artistic activities is a different matter. To me, the most rewarding are workshops for young artists, which I organize in Tuscany, Andalusia or Provence. And of course, it's not only that participants come and paint some landscapes, but that they visit all the major local museums and get acquainted with the region's culture and history and thus charge their batteries for years to come.

Even though I'm unable to have daily contact with all works in my collection (over 1,000 pieces), I have several hundred around me in my home. A large part of the remaining paintings or sculptures is on display in several major Polish museums, so at least other people can admire them. I'm not sure I have just one favorite work in my collection. But I certainly have my favorite core of 50-100 pieces with which I would not like to part. Also, having contact to artists helps enrich my buying experience, mainly on a personal and emotional level. Sometimes it also helps understand what is behind a given piece of art, to learn about its conception.

EBB – *Charles Saatchi says that today art critics are mercenaries, who write at the behest of collectors or auction houses. One can add, as if an excuse, that modern art has no criteria, thus judging a piece is extremely difficult. Do you need art critics?*

KM – I wouldn't fully agree with Saatchi's opinion. Of course, there are those critics who write according to the expectations of collectors or merchants but I wouldn't generalize. However, today it is really difficult to find a criteria list of what's good and what's bad. I'm somewhat traditional in focusing on painting and sculpture. However my younger acquaintances and artists often fret at painting. If they display their paintings, they want to also display photographs or videos. It seems they are convinced that if you don't exhibit art connected with new media you won't be taken seriously. Paintings seem *passé* for them. From my perspective, painting thankfully continues to exist. It won't disappear. Often an artist thinks that in photography or in video he has reached mastery.

I, in turn, often have the impression that it is something banal, something extremely average.

EBB – *Is there a certain type of art criticism that you're especially close to? Two different attitudes are represented by Rosalind Krauss and Jerry Saltz. Krauss describes his reaction to a work of art. She gives diary notes, including dreams, which were inspired by art works. Saltz evaluates works of art, and believes that only such an evaluative attitude, even if the evaluation is fallible and may need some corrections in the future, gives justice to the arts.*

KM – I agree more with the second approach. For me the role of an art critic is that of an educator. An art critic shouldn't write for his circle and art historians, or for refined collectors, because these already have their opinions basically formed. An art critic should show broader groups what is important and what is not, and be a guide to the art world. We definitely need art critics but must be 'critical' in our approach to what they are telling us.

EBB – *Jaakko Hintikka, a Finish philosopher and logician, told me once that he couldn't keep one of the works of art he has in the living room, simply because this work was too intense. Do you believe that art, or some pieces at least, can have such force that some viewers may wish to limit their contact with the given piece? Have you ever experienced something like that?*

KM – I must admit that I have never had this experience but I can imagine that sometimes some works of art may have this kind of influence on viewers. I often have the opposite feeling: I can't get enough of certain works of art.

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