

Orientalism or nationalism? – Jasiński's Japan

Summary

“Let's learn from the Japanese how to be Poles”¹ called Feliks Jasiński (1861-1929), an *enfant terrible* of Polish art criticism of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in a Warsaw newspaper in 1901. This one sentence of Jasiński's encapsulated his artistic credo and ushered the reader into the world of art theory, which remains controversial till this day. In this succinct remark Jasiński combined two apparently contrary philosophical views: orientalism, which is based on fascination with cultural difference, and nationalism that cultivates cultural identity. Who is Jasiński then? What is his disputable artistic programme based on? Is he an orientalist adoring the Japanese art or a nationalist interested in building Polish national art?

A photograph taken in 1902-1904, the first phase of his public activity, features Jasiński in a Japanese helmet and a kimono worn over European clothes [Il. 1]. The frontally captured figure with a very straight posture and an enigmatic smile does not make it plain if this masquerade is a joke or a conscious image. The oriental costume doubtless unveils Jasiński's Japanese interests but it remains unclear whether it symbolically rejects European culture and assumes a Japanese identity or is only a fancy dress with all that Japonisms as a masque only.

Interestingly, unlike Jasiński's activity as an animator of Polish modern culture and his art collection of nearly fifteen thousand objects that have been studied in detail over the past twenty years, Jasiński's art theory with the recurring Japanese focus as well as his engagement in the discussion on creating Polish national art are unknown to the wider public.² This study is an attempt to seek an answer to the challenging question about who that puzzling man was, calling upon Poles to follow the Japanese model. Jasiński's activity is analyzed by reference to a number of manifestos he published, placing those in the context of the ideologies of two mutually exclusive directions in thought: orientalism and nationalism, both of which developed towards the end of the 19th century.

¹ Feliks Jasiński, *Przed I- szą wystawą sztuki japońskiej [Before the First Exhibition of Japanese Art]*, „Kurier Warszawski” 44 (1901), p. 1.

² Jasiński's cultural engagement is presented in Agnieszka Kluczevska-Wójcik's articles (1993, 1994), and the collection itself is discussed in detail by Stefania Kozakowska and Barbara Małkiewiczowa (1989). Jasiński's writings, particularly his monograph *Manggha, promenades à travers le monde, l'art et les idées* (Manggha. Travelling Across the World, Art and Ideas, 1901) were translated and studied by Ewa Miodońska-Brooks and Maria Cieśla Korytowska (1992). The author of this paper devoted her MA theses to the concept of national art created by Jasiński (unpublished, Jagiellonian University Institute of Art History, 1998).