

The Black Dress. The Image of the Polish Woman in the Works of Artur Grottger

Summary

Despite its stylistic diversity, 19th-century Polish art was dominated by the call for the propagation of the glory and tragic fate of a nation deprived of its statehood, yet still steadfast in its struggle to regain independence. The Polish literature and arts of the period were strongly marked by the presence of themes, plots, and motifs full of patriotic sentiment, frequently in the form of allegory or symbol. The era of political enslavement and the need to preserve the national identity were conducive to the need for patriotic heroes, myths, and patterns of social conduct.

Among the most distinct and enduring patterns of attitudes in the 19th century, the three most crucial for determining the Polish woman's model conduct were: the Mother, the Virgin, and the Virgin Heroine. These phantasmal concepts filled the literature and arts of the period, bringing about the mythicization of the image of the Polish woman. The actual standing of the woman in Polish society and the overwhelming impact of political developments obviously had exerted an influence on her representation in the fine arts of the 19th century. The Polish art of the period produced a surprisingly limited number of works depicting contemporary women defined as representatives of their nation. It would be virtually futile to seek therein any non-formulaic flesh-and-bone representations of women as participants in the tragic events befalling their generation. The most suggestive depiction of the 19th-century Polish woman is undoubtedly the one created by Artur Grottger. The artist rendered a representation of the Polish woman which would certainly agree with the socially accepted paragons of the Mother and the Virgin. He thus created an idealized, depersonalized, and sublime allegory of all the patriotic Polish women. In his definition of their national identity, Grottger made use of the mourning code marking women's garments of the period. His works came to epitomize the sacralization and ideologization of the image of the Polish woman. Grottger's approach encompassed the socially endorsed woman's role in the patriotic agenda of the struggle for independence and preservation of the Polish national identity. The artist placed the Polish woman on the pedestal of the national myth, portraying her as the faithful fiancée or spouse, the loving mother, or the mournful widow, and reflecting her tragic predicament as symbolic of the fate of the entire nation. He created the mythologized portrait of a woman completely void of anger and aggression, a silent and impassive victim, guardian of the hearth, and the faithful companion of the embattled Polish insurgent. In his assignment of the Polish woman to this tradition-bound role, he managed to consolidate, in the Polish collective consciousness, her stereotyped image as a mournful lady in black – the priestess of the national religion of patriotism. [MF]