

## **Art and Art Criticism in Poland, or Witch Tortures. Marian Wawrzyniecki (1863–1943)**

### **Summary**

This study paper seeks to have contemporary culture rediscover the work of Marian Wawrzyniecki, a much forgotten painter, draughtsman, set designer, archaeologist, specialist in religious studies and art theoretician, member of the Commission for Art Historical Research and the Anthropological Commission of the Krakow Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was an independent artist of a mission saturated with vision, and of an individualistic understanding of the role of art. He might well be looked at as a trail-blazer of counterculture, a dissenter reviling the passive, conformist attitude of the establishment of his day, and a champion of a broadly-defined freedom that was conceptually akin to the present-day alternative cultures (or the artistic underground).

Wawrzyniecki tried to capture the fleeting phenomena that eluded formulas and have remained on the fringe of interest of researchers to this day. In the partitioned Poland, the only way to manifest pertinent ideas was through symbols, hence symbols were used on principle, and symbolism became the foundation of Wawrzyniecki's art. Wawrzyniecki tried to communicate socially topical issues in an innovative way, yet at the same time had to conceal their deeper meanings from censors, which made his works, ambiguous by definition, still hard to interpret these days; as such have been they treated as marginal in studies whose spotlights fall on widely accepted individualities. Recalling an artist with a different outlook may spark off a revived interest in works once removed from the critical mind, memory and studies. Works that were denied a look or understanding at creation.

In Wawrzyniecki's art, ideas were personified by the wrongfully accused – victims of “narrow minds”. He wanted to divulge the roots of violence and the persistent suppression of “uncontrollable thoughts”, while anticipating further intensification of art censorship and limitations imposed on the artistic creative soul. In his synthetic, decorative, planar and linear paintings, the interrelationship of art and art criticism, disciplines that only appeared to mutually support each other, may be read symbolically as torturing a witch. He defined the concept of art, more specifically of the artist's creative self, using a sign he deemed universal: a woman's body. He believed corporality was one of the blessings of existence. He argued that body was an indispensable element of man's spiritual existence and did not stand in opposition to artistic culture, but naturally rounded it off. This concept shaped his personal language of art.

He projected the contemporary expression of feelings onto Slavic sacred sites, making offerings among Neolithic megaliths, and then onto the Middle Ages with their witch trials. The tortures inflicted on women suspected of sorcery were to him equivalent to the plight of an artist taking up new artistic ideas: any thought that challenged the formulas of acceptable practices and behaviours was immediately punished, pilloried, put in the stocks and burnt at the stake.

Conceptually, the drawings and paintings discussed in this study hark back to Marian Wawrzeński's solo exhibition *Martyrologia czarownic* [The Martyrdom of the Witches] held in September 1905 at Warsaw's Krywult Salon, the only art venue of the day which strove to support innovative experimentations.

The recently found portfolio of drawings *Szkice – pomysły – projekty – pierwsze notaty myśli malarskich* [Sketches – Ideas – Designs – First Notes of Painting Thoughts], 1905–1914, is an important part of his oeuvre, consisting of works prepared for a group exhibition which was intended to sum up Wawrzeński's work in 1914, but was prevented by the launch of military operations.

The study is rounded out by the artist's *Pamiętnik* [Memoir] in the annex, unpublished before and edited by me (from the collection of the Warsaw City Public Library).

The illustrations, mostly published the first time ever, show the artist's wide interests and are also drawn from the collection of the Library; the paintings and drawings come from the collections of the National Museums in Krakow and Warsaw, the Mazovian Museum in Płock and some private collections.