

Witkacy: First of All, a Painter – Searching for an Individual Style

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Nowadays, Witkacy is known as a multi-talented artist: painter, photographer, art theoretician, playwright, but also the author of four novels and a philosopher. However, first of all he was a painter. He painted and drew from early childhood, encouraged by his father Stanisław Witkiewicz, himself a painter, critic and theoretician of art. He not only persuaded his son to pursue painting, but was also his first teacher and critic. He added a small watercolour to a letter, dated 2 August 1890, to his mother Elwira Witkiewiczowa, and called it “the first nature study” by the then five-year-old Staś, although it looks suspiciously more like a drawing made by an adult and then coloured in by a child. Witkacy’s reliance on his father can be also observed in one of his early oil landscape paintings, “Forest Interior”, from around 1892, which is in fact a faithful imitation of his father’s “Forest Pond”. The father prides himself on his son’s progress in a letter to his sister, Maria:

“...for he (Stasiek) is a painter, a good one. He has the feeling for it and the necessary urge. He is working on many studies and paintings. [...] Should this continue, by the time he graduates, he will be creating real and interesting paintings. [...] He takes so much pleasure in nature. [...] He is a landscape painter, hates the city and marvels at each willow, each cloud, and each pile of earth [...]”¹.

Around this time, Witkacy wrote his first plays based on domestic observations and fantasies about kings, queens and soldiers. The same characters can be found in a pack of hand-drawn cards, made by the little artist for his grandmother. Many years later, as a mature painter he depicted bizarre creatures and then brought them to life in plays and novels.

However, for the time being the budding painter takes his father’s advice voiced in a letter: “[...] in autumn evenings, when the blinding twilight is burning in the sky, while the earth is dark and fallen leaves rustle under one’s feet, paintings

¹ Letter from 26.02.1901, Archive of Manuscripts, The Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, nr 24, p. 1479.

grow on their own”². So one of his first independent paintings is “Nocturnal Landscape”, striking with its expressive juxtaposition of a dark foreground and a background of the pink and violet glow of the sunset reflected both in the sky and in the water. Soon after, Stanisław Ignacy explored the subject of early spring in a series of paintings with the motif of fields covered with thawing snow. Clearly, he was already fascinated by transition, change and critical points: day breaking into night and winter into spring; the falling asleep and waking up of nature; dynamics, change, and movement as the opposites of inertia. Again, let us keep in mind the tips given by Witkiewicz senior: “Paintings compose themselves in the late autumn, in the dark – or in the early spring. It is a time when nature is in a dither and a man’s mind works in an odd way”³.

Yet, soon the young artist felt the need for independence. In 1905, he began studies in painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków and, for the first time, he found himself surrounded by his peers. Obviously, his father objected, but in vain. Stanisław Witkiewicz senior, still preoccupied with the old masters of his own generation, such as Stanisławski, Ruszyc, Malczewski, and Fatat, clearly rejected the fact that there had been a changing of the guard in the art world. In Kraków, Stanisław Ignacy met Witold Wojtkiewicz and Jan Rembowski, already representatives of already new, distinct style. He also made friends with Roman Jaworski, the author of weird stories advocating a new aesthetics of ugliness. This friendship led to an important commission. In 1890, Witkacy designed the cover and illustrations to *Historie maniaków* (Stories of Maniacs), a collection of narratives by Jaworski, previously published in a magazine *Nasz Kraj* (Our Country) and illustrated by Wojtkiewicz. Although finally only one drawing by Witkacy was used (on the cover), it definitely helped him make his first appearance in Kraków art circles. Grotesque chalk-drawn representations of characters from Jaworski’s imagination are rare examples of his “monsters”, as his father called them referring to the well-known print “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” by Francisco Goya. The name was later often used by literary critics to define Witkacy’s drawings in chalk or his oil paintings depicting bizarre, monstrous human figures, usually rather ludicrous and often inspired by fictional characters or people he knew⁴.

In 1910, Witkacy painted his first self-portrait, a stunningly convincing bust of an angry young man. A year later he accomplished a synthesis in landscape painting

² Letter from 23.09.1903, cit. after: S. Witkiewicz, *Listy do syna*, eds. B. Danek-Wojnowska and A. Micińska, Warszawa 1969, p. 153.

³ Letter from 23.09.1903, op. cit., p. 153.

⁴ We know these mostly from photographic reproductions made by the young Witkiewicz himself or by his friends, photographers Jan Bułhak and Tadeusz Langier. The collection survived almost intact and is currently a part of Ewa Franczak’s and Stefan Okołowicz’s art collection.

and broke away from realistic representations of nature. Instead, he incorporated natural elements transformed into one-dimensional, almost abstract compositions.

At that time, the artist was fascinated by new artistic movements that rejected the idea of a work of art as an imitation of reality, but rather, as defined by Maurice Denis, the French painter and theoretician, a creative composition. In 1908, Witkacy went to Paris and was hugely impressed by works by Picasso, which he later described as “a decorative perversion” meaning this as a compliment. Also the young Witkacy’s alter ego, the main protagonist of his early novel written between 1910–1911 *622 upadki Bunga* (The 622 Downfalls of Bungo), described his creative struggles:

“It is an expression of the very battle with the impossible. [...] it has the essence of insufficiency, rather than the simple inadequacy of objects and their drawings. It is the banging your head against the wall. The absolute opposite of all kinds of realism. A realist painter turns canvas into an illusion of space and decorates the plane. It has measure. [...] I am not sure how to express it. It is an inherently mad transcendental unity in its impossibility. [...] I will remain on the plane [...]”⁵.

In the novel, Witkacy also dealt with his passionate juvenile love affair with the much older actress Irena Solska, and depicted her as a demonic opera singer Akne Montecalfi, along with an array of other people he knew at that time. Soon after, he painted their portraits, portraits aptly suggestive of their personalities. Some of the most interesting characters are based on the actress Eugenia Dunin-Borkowska (wife of Władysław Dunin-Borkowski; both were Witkacy’s friends from the Academy), as well as Leon Chwistek, mathematician, philosopher, and painter, the artist’s childhood friend, whose father ran a hydrotherapy facility in Zakopane.

Actually, Witkacy made over a dozen portraits of Eugenia Dunin-Borkowska. He used charcoal and oil paint and gave the paintings meaningful titles suggesting the specific roles the model was supposed to play for her painter-director.

An oil portrait of Leon Chwistek, done in 1913, has a witty title: “Independent Bull on Vacation”. The model is smartly dressed in a black jacket, a vest, and has a signet ring, while sitting on an unmade bed among scattered pillows. The juxtaposition of an elegant man and a topsy-turvy background hints at a characteristic sense of humour, later manifesting itself in so many of Witkacy’s drawings and plays.

The crowning work in the first period of portrait painting (up to World War I) is his self-portrait made in 1913. It depicts the artist dressed in a black jacket on a green and red background with an element of still life – a table with flowers in a dark vase surrounded by multi-coloured fruit. It is an exceptional work as it not only proves Witkacy

⁵ S.I. Witkiewicz, *622 upadki Bunga, czyli Demoniczna kobieta*, ed. and introduction A. Micińska, Warszawa 1972, p. 140.

to be a remarkable portrait painter, but also embodies the theoretical premises of his Pure Form theory in terms of color: the juxtaposition of complementary colors.

Meanwhile, Witkacy's personal life also took an important turn as he had met the woman whom he decided to marry, Jadwiga Janczewska. She was the model for many of his beautiful photographs, yet only for a few portraits, most of them done in charcoal. However, their relationship was not a happy one and actually ended in tragedy. On 21 February 1914, Jadwiga Janczewska committed suicide by shooting herself in the heart in the Kościeliska Valley of the Tatra Mountains. Witkacy was obviously devastated. Guilt fuelled suicidal thoughts and almost made him quit painting altogether. We know of only two works in charcoal made that year. Two of them can be seen as curious illustrations of the artist's emotional state and both depict the same scene: a sick or dying woman surrounded by bizarre creatures. What is striking is not only the theme but also its presentation. Despite visible similarities, the two works are different in an essential aspect. The first piece, defined in specialist terms as "figurative", depicts figures in caricature, yet in a plausibly realist manner. The second, which could be called "symbolic", definitely belongs to the world of the imagination, as it shows demons driving the woman to commit suicide. Arguably, the tragic death of his fiancée made Witkacy realize the difference between the world as we see it and its imaginary representations, which are virtually unlimited. This event proved to be a breakthrough both in his personal life and in his career as an artist.

War and revolution

In June 1914, a few months after the tragedy, Witkacy went to Australia with his childhood friend Bronisław Malinowski, then a professor at the London School of Economics, who was to attend an international anthropology conference in Melbourne. Alarmed by Witkacy's letters expressing his bad mental shape and suicidal thoughts, Malinowski offered him the task of documenting the voyage. The artist agreed but their cooperation was challenging. Witkacy was a difficult companion⁶, and when the war broke out on 1 August, he decided to go back to Europe. However, this short trip to the tropics did make an enormous impression on him and resulted in his adopting a new technique of pastel drawing in a number of impressive landscapes as well as in references to a tropical aesthetic in many subsequent literary works, including the play *Tropical Craze* written in 1920.

⁶ Malinowski writes in his journal that "Stas's problem is worrying me [...]. It goes without saying that I admire his art, intelligence and individuality, yet I hate his character". See: B. Malinowski, *Dziennik w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu*, ed. B. Kubica, Kraków 2002, p. 393; entry dated 2.11.1914.

In September 1914, the artist reached St. Petersburg and, with the support of his father's relatives, joined an officers' school preparing students for an elite regiment of the imperial guard. Witkacy's regiment was sent to the front and participated in one of the bloodiest battles of the Great War – the battle on the Stochod, in the Ukraine, in July 1916, where he was wounded in the head. He never went back to the front.

His new fascination with pastels – a fast, yet extremely demanding technique – soon turned into mastery. He drew both portraits and imaginary compositions with fantasy creatures in fictional settings. At that time, painting portraits gave him an income, which he allegedly used to pay his gambling debts, while compositions were a chronicle of his artistic visions, in many cases inspired by theatre. It might have been the time when Witkacy the playwright was born, recording his stage ideas on canvas. However, the origins of his literary inspirations can be found, first of all, in other writers' works, such as *Hamlet*. The scene with the grave diggers done in the autumn of 1916 refers to the famous monolog and coincided with the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. Other compositions from that period are still waiting for interpretation.

Some of the most interesting works are collected in a cycle of astronomical drawings initiated in 1917 and finished in the following year. Unfortunately, only nine pieces have survived: "Antares in Scorpio", "Nova Aurigae", "Caterpillar", "Chameleon", "Gemini", "Leo and Hercules", "The Encke Comet", "Algorab in Corvus", and "Aldebaran and the Hyades". They depict stars, constellations, and astrological phenomena. They are not only spectacular, but also document the astronomical knowledge of those times.

Throughout his life, Witkacy was a voracious reader of scientific literature, including astronomy. Even before World War I, he read fascinating cutting-edge works by the renowned astronomer Marcin Ernst from Lwów, as well as works by Svante Arrhenius and, later, James Jeans and Arthur Eddington. He did not shy away from taking advantage of the famous astronomical observatory in Pułkow, near Petersburg. Officers of the Russian army had their topography classes in the observatory, so it was probably his army training that helped Witkacy discover this place. Also, there were a few Polish scientists working there. One scientific project examined the trajectory of the Encke Comet and kept record of a new star flare in the Auriga constellation (*Nova Aurigae*), and these same phenomena are to be found in Witkacy's drawings. It is a pity that so many of his works done in Russia are lost, as it must have been an interesting and creative period in his life, despite the war and revolution – or maybe because of them?

Formist adventure and theatre romance

Witkacy came back to Poland in 1918 with the support of his aunt's husband-to-be, Leon Reynel, who later helped the artist through various misfortunes. At that time, the first modern art group originally called "The Polish Expressionists" and later renamed "The Formists", operated in Kraków. It was initiated by the Pronaszko brothers, Andrzej and Zbigniew, together with Tytus Czyżewski, Leon Chwistek, Leon Dołżycki, and Jan Hrynkowski. Up until 1942, when the group broke up, it was an informal collective of individuals, rather than a unified group proclaiming one specific dogma. Their only common aim was to make modern art based on their previous achievements and the European heritage of German Expressionists, French Cubists, and Italian Futurists. However, the Formists wanted to go beyond previous experience, always in pursuit of creative freedom. According to them, since Poland regained independence, Polish artists did not have to observe any kind of directives any more. Being a hardened individualist, Witkacy felt at home among the Formists and remained one until 1924.

He continued to paint portraits, and the works from that period are probably the most expressionist in his life. He already started marking them according to a particular type, mainly as "T.C", that is a work of the Pure Form. During that period, he also made expressionist, imaginary compositions, such as "Green Eye" and a playful "Encounter with a Unicorn in the Rocky Mountains". The latter depicts an alternative version of the legend about a unicorn, which can be tamed only by a virgin; in the drawing it clearly helps a man catch the woman he desires.

The war of the sexes never ceased to fascinate the artist. In 1920, he painted another self-portrait in oils with a woman whose identity is still unknown. Two years later, he completed an impressive double portrait of Anna and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. Witkacy was not pleased with this work and called it "a psychological damp squib", estimating its content of Pure Form at zero (and to him, only works replete with it were qualified to be called real works of art). In a letter to Iwaszkiewicz, dated 23 January 1923, the artist quotes Zofia Żeleńska:

"[...] it is so horrid (and I said so too) that should it hang in a living-room with no other significant works of mine; it could speak volumes against me as a painter. Therefore, I must prepare something of significance for you (some composition), but meanwhile, please keep it out of sight"⁷.

These harsh words seem rather exaggerated, as the portrait is undoubtedly one of the most interesting works Witkacy made in that period. It combines the qualities of his Pure Form oil compositions and pastel portraits. The remarkable resemblance

⁷ J. Iwaszkiewicz, "Listy Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza do Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza", *Twórczość*, 1963, no. 2, p. 113.

to the models, notably Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, their expressiveness, and a skilful combination of colors – pale blue and green, juxtaposed with red and yellow – undermine Witkacy's and Żeleńska's criticism.

It is true, though, that the original composition differed in details. Anna Iwaszkiewiczowa's grin was painted over during renovation work. This gave her face a more subtle expression, quite contrary to the slightly demonic look Witkacy probably had in mind. Depicting Iwaszkiewiczowa as a vampire threatening her husband, an artist, was a direct reference to the *femme fatale* stereotype, although it had little to do with the actual, delicate nature of the model. This might have been the reason for calling the work "a psychological damp squib", considering that Witkacy's artistic vision did not agree with the final effect. The teeth were painted over in the 1970s at Iwaszkiewiczowa's request, but the original composition can be seen in an archival photo⁸.

At that time, Witkiewicz was mainly working on oil paintings made in accordance to the Pure Form theory, which he had described in his most recent publication⁹. He finished some compositions he had started during his stay in Russia and went on to new ones. Some of the most remarkable pieces are gathered in the *Temptation of St. Anthony* cycle of roughly four works inspired by Gustave Flaubert's work. Another exceptional painting is entitled "Fairy-tale (Fantasy)", made in 1920–1921, with an array of characters from the plays he was currently working on: Edgar Wałpóra from *The Water Hen* and four little monsters from *Janulka, Daughter of Fizdejko*; their appearance corresponds directly with Witkacy's stage directions.

Witkacy's imaginary world that he had unleashed before the war seems boundless. Reality and fiction mix, and imaginary creatures and scenes can be found both in paintings and plays. Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, a great admirer of the artist, noted in 1928 that his

"[...] painting and theatre are one. Witkacy's paintings are like theatre captured on canvas, and it says a lot about his vitality that the artist has to release the excess through the lungs of actors by putting it into words. At the same time he [the artist] retransforms his theatre into a series of frozen paintings, as if they replayed the meaning of life with their stillness"¹⁰.

Unfortunately, we do not know which paintings Boy-Żeleński was referring to.

Apart from the "Fairy-tale (Fantasy)", none of the surviving works suggests conclusive links to any particular stage piece. However, we can be sure that each contains an anecdote, be it a fantasy based on Witkacy's experiences, a reference to some other writer,

⁸ Repr.: "Pamiętnik Teatralny" 1971, no 3–4, p. 468.

⁹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia*, Warszawa 1919.

¹⁰ T. Boy-Żeleński, "La Théâtre de Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz", *La Pologne Littéraire* 1928, no. 18. Reprinted in Polish in: "Teatr St. I. Witkiewicza", *Życie Literackie* 1956, no. 32, pp. 5–7.

or an early idea for his own works of literature. Moreover, many of the author's titles are lost to us, and they could have given us some clue, maybe even solve the puzzle altogether. The ones we know of are often witty or absurd commentaries on reality, such as "Marysia with the Dog Burek in Ceylon" done in 1920–1921, which is surely connected with Witkacy's trip to Australia in 1914 and his visiting Ceylon on the way there.

Witkacy often alludes to other artists. The best example is the figure of God making a gesture of creation "Come into being!" in the corner of the painting "Creation of the World" (1921–1922), known from the famous stained-glass work by Stanisław Wyspiański in the Franciscan Church in Kraków. Yet, while Wyspiański's work is sublime and dignified, Witkacy focuses on the creation of a curvaceous woman with saggy breasts, surrounded by little monsters. It shows Witkacy's ironic attitude to virtually all subjects, even one as solemn as genesis.

His self-portraits made during that period give us an insight into how the artist perceived himself. A pastel drawing from 1922 titled "en Beau for Mum" depicts Witkacy's smiling face reflected in an oval mirror, while the second self-portrait made at the same time shows him smoking a cigarette with a malicious grimace. Two years later, he painted "Last Cigarette of a Man Condemned to Death", considered his last oil painting before he set up a one-man Portrait Company "S.I. Witkiewicz" and made only pastel portraits.

The "Man Condemned to Death" is the artist himself, wearing a blue prison jacket and with a solemn face half-hidden in the shadow. Similarly to the "Self-portrait" from 1913, there is a red and green drapery in the background; yet this time it is in rolls, as if the artist felt disappointed with his own theory of the necessary harmony between the contrasting complementary colors. The foreground is darkish with a trail of cigarette smoke, and in the top left corner there is a small opening revealing a brighter landscape. So perhaps, he is not a lost case and the opening, letting the sun light up the right cheek and shoulder of the condemned man, may suggest hope.

Witkacy never went back to oil painting, with some rare exceptions, such as a rather dull landscape he treated as means to make some easy money and one portrait painted mimicking the pastel technique.

This period in Witkacy's life ended (excluding "Last Cigarette of a Man Condemned to Death") with his setting up the Portrait Company. He wrote down the *Rules of the Portrait Company*, describing the principles of the new business.

Company mix

The above review shows that Witkacy painted portraits since early youth and they became a significant part of his mature life as an artist. However, only after discovering

pastel technique in 1916, did it begin to dominate his work, the more so since it was potentially a good way of making a living. The financial factor was surely of the utmost importance, as the artist got married on 30 April 1923, and in those times, being married and having no regular income was out of the question. However, the *Rules of the Portrait Company*, drawn up in 1925 defining a number of portrait types depending on the applied style, were not only a peculiar kind of an art manifesto, but also a guide to Witkacy's personal philosophy of art.

At this point, an essential source of inspiration must be mentioned, i.e. the idea of Roman Jaworski, who devised his short story "The Third Hour" (illustrated by Witkacy in 1909) with the character of an art director in a funeral home, who

"[...] during buoyant years of his youth [...] painted miscarried foetuses, vivisections, and dancing or embracing skeletons. He even exhibited his paintings. Currently, he has plunged into applied art and now helps his boss, who despises the sight of corpses, to set up and decorate catafalques. He is quite a master in the field. He never fails to rise to the occasion. Following the director's sketches, he has made intricate models carved in wood set up in a variety of elaborate processions. Like toys, kept in special drawers with separate slots, always ready to humour visitors with their joyful charm. They are somewhat dignified by crude descriptions of particular services and their prices, placed on the arched walls. They facilitate coming to an agreement and discourage unrefined bargains. There are three types of regular funerals [...]. Each type has particular qualities presented in a dozen details available to those willing to pay. There is also one special procession that no money can buy. It is reserved for the exclusive use of ministers, marshals, and, last but not least, for geniuses; yet when in doubt, the director himself adjudicates the right to be counted among the last group"¹¹.

There is an undeniable similarity between the above excerpt and Witkacy's *Rules of the Portrait Company*, as well as the decision to dedicate his life to the so called applied art, in his case – painting portraits. Most notably, dividing portraits into types and reserving one special type (C) offered to chosen lucky ones for free.

The foundation of the Portrait Company was definitely inspired by Witkacy's childhood friend and a member of the Formists, Leon Chwistek. In 1921, he presented a theoretical study about the multitude of realities, in which he distinguished four major types of reality and attributed to each one a certain style in art.¹² Witkacy did not agree with this paradigm, especially with Chwistek's opinion that realities, and consequently art styles, should not be mixed. He personally believed that "when it comes to reality, why shouldn't I use five or six different realities in one canvas with a big wham!?"¹³.

¹¹ R. Jaworski, *Historie maniaków*, Kraków 1978, pp. 110–111.

¹² L. Chwistek, *Pisma logiczne i estetyczne*, Warszawa 1961, pp. 80–100.

¹³ S.I. Witkiewicz, "Krytyka teorii sztuki Leona Chwistka" [in:] *Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia. Szkice estetyczne*, eds. J. Degler and L. Sokół, Warszawa 2002, p. 319.

And so he did, for example in the oil paintings mentioned above, he used a variety of motifs, both in terms of meaning and form, and combined them to build a new quality in painting. Probably the most spectacular (and slightly mocking) response to Chwistek's theory is embodied in the *Rules of the Portrait Company*, which define five basic types of portraits.

A ("spruced up") type is characterised by a hyperrealist, almost photographic, resemblance to the model, with the diversion of a surrealist, so-called exotic background with tropical plants and fantasy landscape. This type was laborious and was usually painted on a large canvas; hence the relatively high price of 350 zloties – the equivalent of what was then considered a decent monthly income.

The next type, B had "more emphasis on a character but without any trace of caricature" and was addressed to an average client. It included no extravagances, had a neutral background, sometimes in the form of a stylised greenish drapery, and cost 250 zloties, also a pretty penny. This type constituted the majority of commissions and ensured the financial sustainability of the company and the artist.

Type C, the most interesting one, made for free mainly for people close to the artist, who painted under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, usually during parties when they also got drunk or high. According to the *Rules*: "[...] subjective characterization of the model, caricatural intensification both formal and psychological are not ruled out. Approaches abstract composition, otherwise known as 'Pure Form'". Type C had many variants depending on the applied drug: "Co" (cocaine), "Et" (ether), "Eu" (eucodal – a morphine derivative), or combinations thereof.

The next type, D was to achieve "the same result without recourse to any artificial means" and was the cheapest, with a price of only 100 zloties. As a result, these portraits were rather *stiff*, heavily constructed, bordering on feigned, as the artist, usually adept at pastel technique, had to simulate an *altered* state of mind.

Type E stipulated "spontaneous psychological interpretation at the discretion of the company". In practice, this type applied mainly to portraits of women whom Witkacy fancied or to effeminate men. They had no fixed price as it ranged between 150 and 250 zloty.

The remaining types were generally combinations of the basic ones, such as B+C reserved for children – "because children can never sit still, the purer type B is in most instances impossible – the execution rather takes the form of a sketch". It was priced like type E. The combination of B+D meant "Intensification of character, bordering on the caricatural. The head larger than natural size. The possibility of preserving *prettiness* in women's portraits, and even of intensifying it in the direction of the *demonic*".

Despite this detailed specification, the artist hardly ever observed the *Rules* in practice. He mixed types at a whim and the final effect seldom supported the theory. The rules did set a certain framework but they primarily satisfied the need of the recipient (be it a client or just a viewer) to order reality, to classify and define – especially with the help of symbols, understood to *insiders*. Additionally, the artist marked his works with various notations: mostly “NP” (not smoking, sometimes with the number of days, weeks or even months of nicotine abstinence) and “NII” (not drinking, along with numbers). There were also others, such as: “herb”. (tea), “cof”. (coffee), “pyfko” (beer), sometimes “Peyotl” or “Mesk. Merck” (mescaline made by the Merck company), “p.p.c.” (almost in the dark), “prz. ok.” (with glasses on), ‘B.Ok.’ (without glasses), “FBZ” ([smoking] a cig without inhaling), “FZZ” ([smoking] a cig with inhaling), “z.z.” (instead of raping [oneself]) and many more, including the initials of people present during painting (however Witkacy made it clear that he did not appreciate this). Quite rightly, he believed that everything we experience, and especially the substances we use, influences our perception of reality and obviously also the creative process.

Works made by the Company were pastel portraits and showed the model’s bust from the front or *en trois-quatre*; at times they were only heads placed on a kind of a stand, on bird’s legs or with an occasional tail or something equally absurd (such as a coquettishly curled up penis). The artist made rare exceptions to include hands or the whole figure of a model and charged more accordingly.

A good example of an untypical large portrait is the so called “False woman – a self-portrait with Maryla Grossmanowa”, set against a fantasy background and done in January 1927. It not only shows the whole figure of the model but also a representation of the portrait session and a statement about the Company’s ideology.

We know from Witkacy’s letters to his mother¹⁴ that he was not inclined to work on that particular commission, but he eventually gave in, tempted by a considerable profit (500 zloties, i.e. twice the price of a regular *Company* portrait). Yet, he could not help himself and had to manifest his attitude towards the requirements of the wealthy client. So he included himself in the painting – with a roguish smile and his left hand clenched into a fist behind his back, thus giving the scene of portrait painting a new meaning. The portrait itself was made in a *spruced up* fashion, i.e. type A with a photorealist resemblance to the model, while the *portrait within a portrait* placed on the easel in front of the artist is marked a D type and meets its criteria. It shows an expressively transformed woman’s face, which is not so much a portrait but rather an independent

¹⁴ “Listy Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza do Marii Witkiewiczowej”, ed. A. Micińska [in:] *Witkacy. Życie i twórczość. Materiały sesji poświęconej Stanisławowi Ignacemu Witkiewiczowi z okazji 55 rocznicy śmierci*, ed. J. Degler, Wrocław 1996, pp. 288–290.

artistic creation in accordance with the principles of Pure Form. This way, the artist not only demonstrated his attitude towards the two-facedness of spoiled women, but most notably presented the subjectivity of the creative process, where the final effect depends of the applied convention.

Including two different portraits of the same person in one composition suggests a multi-level play with conventions and self-awareness in revealing the artifice of art. There can be no doubt about the artist's intention. He is not in the least interested in offering faithful representations of the world, even if he paints in a realist fashion, but rather in creating the world anew each time according to his own principles. "False woman" embodies a clash of two, or even more, worlds, and we can never know which one is real, just as we can never be sure which portrait is more accurate. Can it be that the neatly dressed, beautiful woman has the nature of a wild, vicious beast with a contorted face? Or was it just the artist's revenge and an outlet for his frustration that he had had to succumb to her whim.

Type A portraits are often bigger than usual and exceptionally spectacular. In June 1925, one and a half year before painting the "False woman", Witkacy made a portrait of his wife Jadwiga sitting in a chair against a background of exotic plants, which fully realised the principles of type A. A month later, he painted a similar portrait of Maria Nawrocka, wearing a cocktail dress with a neckline lined with fur.

Among the type B paintings, despite their standardisation as rather objective portrayals (almost like passport photos), there were significant exceptions to the rule, such as the portrait of Dr. Ludwik Kotulski, made in March 1928. Behind the doctor, there is a lying woman covered with a white sheet with her bare feet sticking out, wired up to a strange apparatus. The painting has been often interpreted as clash of the real and the metaphysical world¹⁵; yet the truth is more mundane. Doctor Kotulski specialized in women's health, and the woman behind his back is simply positioned in a gynaecological chair. Witkacy treated her as a professional attribute of his model.

The most impressive and dramatic type C portraits were made under the influence of cocaine, which probably affected the most Witkacy's perception of reality, and at the same time – according to insiders – boosted his energy. The participants in so-called orgies (meetings in the house of Dr. Teodor Białynicki-Birul in Zakopane, who supervised administering the drug) recollected that, on a good night, Witkacy could paint as many as over a dozen portraits. The whole affair was an experiment¹⁶ and most

¹⁵ T. Gryglewicz, "Kuszenie Witkacego", *Folia Historiae Artium* 1986, pp. 129–130.

¹⁶ The subject of drugs in Witkacy's works has been thoroughly examined by Irena Jakimowicz in an article "O poszerzenie przestrzeni wewnętrznej. Z eksperymentów narkotycznych S.I. Witkiewicza", *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie* 1984, pp. 215–272.

of the drug-induced works were kept by the doctor, who managed to collect 300 pieces in the course of a few years. In 1965, 110 were sold to the *Museum of Central Pomerania* in Słupsk, creating the biggest contemporary collection of Witkacy's works¹⁷. However, Witkacy was not on drugs when he painted Bałynicki's portrait, hence the sober D type. Next to his signature he noted "insincere", meaning that the form imitated natural expression, which was characteristic for this particular convention.

The *Company* portraits had many other iconographic variations. Witkacy often painted women as the "Alcoforado" type, i.e. with their heads leaning backwards and eyes squinting, which was supposed to stand for an alcohol induced state. The name of the type stemmed from the seventeenth-century Portuguese nun Marina Alcoforado, who was notorious for writing passionate letters to the man she loved.

Witkacy's models made interesting company – especially those from artistic and scholarly circles. Among the most impressive are portraits of the writer Michał Choro- mański, the actress Prospera Szmuta, the painter Rafał Malczewski, as well as Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński and Irena Krzywicka.

Double portraits made up a kind of their own and had some specific qualities: the models are usually joined by cheeks or are depicted as two heads growing out of one stem. There were also exceptions of triple or quadruple realist portraits.

Witkacy also continued painting self-portraits depicting himself in various roles. Self-portraits are of special significance to artists, especially portrait painters, as they express their self-image, which might be considerably posed, and present their artistic manifesto, or voice a particular message. Witkacy made at least 74 self-portraits. Each of them tells us something about him as a person and as an artist, not only by means of his expressive face with big eyes always looking straight at the viewer, but also by a meticulously orchestrated background and occasional notes indicating current personal struggles.

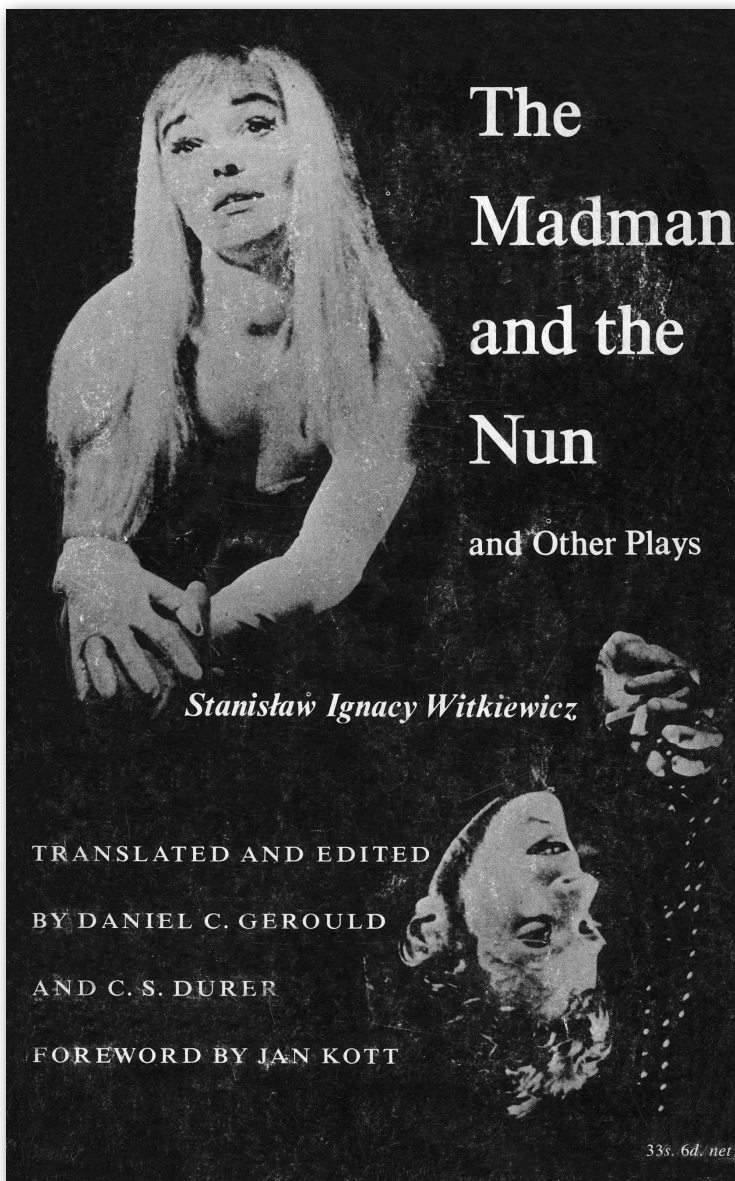
Among his late works, two pastel self-portraits stand out. They were made in the course of one night from 26 to 27 April 1938, and depict Witkacy as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, clearly referring to the short story by Robert Louis Stevenson (as a teenager, Witkacy was also fascinated by *Treasure Island*), exploring the theme of the duality of human nature and an inner struggle between good and evil. As the benevolent Dr. Jekyll, the artist has a pleasant, cheerful face and a gentle appearance, while as Mr. Hyde – the representation of evil – Witkacy's smile is ominous. Both portraits are E types and additional notes inform about a temporary resumption of the cigarette addiction ("Pchw."), consuming beer, and taking cocaine.

¹⁷ See. B. Zgodzińska-Wojciechowska and A. Żakiewicz, *Witkacy. Kolekcja dzieł Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza w Muzeum Pomorza Środkowego w Słupsku*, Warszawa 1996 (also available in English, French, and German; the second edition from 2000 is available in Polish and English).

With that in mind, the next self-portrait painted two months later (24 June 1938) is somewhat surprising. This is a subdued, almost classic bust of Witkacy, *en trois quatre*, with a carefully sketched, slightly tense face and greyish temples; the model is wearing a simple blue jacket, a shirt and a dark tie with white polka-dots. In the background, on the horizon, there are mysterious ruins, resembling castles or maybe factories, with tall chimneys. Dark smoke covers the sky. Factory chimneys emitting smoke were a common motif in paintings, prints, and photographs of that period, also outside Poland. They symbolized industrialization and progress. However, no optimism of this kind is to be found in this piece. Quite the contrary: the penetrating look of the enlarged eyes and the wrinkled forehead, combined with the decrepit state of the buildings in the background and the cloud of fumes, suggest uneasiness and pessimism. This interpretation of the painting corresponds with the catastrophic visions of the future expressed in Witkacy's theoretical and literary works. He prophesied that all feeling of the metaphysical will sink into oblivion as a result of technological progress and the subsequent mechanization of life. As he considered the metaphysical the source of art, then with the metaphysical gone, all artistic expression is lost.

Over a year later, in the night from 22 to 23 August 1939, he painted his last self-portrait. This time there is no role-playing, no symbols or attributes. We can see a run-down face with huge eyes, greyish temples, a tie in colourful stripes, and a glowing blue background brightened by white oblique dashes, as if by rain. According to the notes on the canvas, the artist was had not smoked for three weeks ("NP 3t") but used cocaine ("Co"). A curious fracture (" $\frac{1}{2}$ C") suggests that the work is only *half* Pure Form, so he must have been somewhat disappointed with the final effect.

Yet, should we calculate success – also in terms of artistic achievements – in the amount of generated profit, especially abroad, then Witkacy's pessimist predictions did not come true. For many years, his last self-portrait had been owned by a private collector. It was sold in November 2010, by the Berlin auction house Villa Grisebach, for over EUR 34,000, while in Poland its price is estimated at approximately PLN 50,000.



The cover of an American edition of Witkacy's plays (Seattle and London 1968)

CAHIER

Witkacy et le théâtre

WITKIEWICZ

No 1

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