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**CONTEMPORARY POLISH TEXTILE ART:
A LEGACY IN TRANSITION
Gayle Wimmer**

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(The following is an outline of the above-titled presentation which was based upon 160 research slide images projected simultaneously on two screens).

The observation and interpretation of trends in the visual arts can contribute to a broad-based understanding of the political, economic, historical and cultural developments in a given region and time. This has been particularly true during the past ten years in the countries of East Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. Throughout thirty years of my association with Poland, I have observed and documented the effects of an actively evolving political, economic and ecological environment upon the Polish textile art movement.

In 1999 I returned to Poland on a five-month fellowship sponsored by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. My primary goal was to study the effects of the emergence of capitalism and the market economy upon three generations of textile artists and their work. Although not part of my original research plan, I also became involved in identifying and documenting the social, historical and political factors which were the initial catalysts in the development of this remarkable movement in the arts. I shall begin by identifying some of the elements essential to 20th century urban Polish cultural identity and I will examine the range of their impact upon the work of six contemporary Polish textile artists.

Poland has experienced a painful history, and to that end nationalism has played a leading role in the lives of all Poles. By the mid 17th century the country was disintegrating from within. From that time until 1989 Poland was partitioned and/or occupied by its "neighbors" to the East and West. The only exception was the brief period between the two World Wars in the 20th century, when Poland became an independent country from 1919 until 1939. Keeping this historical framework in mind should be most helpful in understanding the works that follow as models for national identity during the past 50 years:

- The "Syrena" (Mermaid):
Beloved Heroine and defender of the country
- Surviving Pre-World War II Buildings:
Represent the homeland as they designate a sense of place. They uphold the dignity of history. and in sustaining the marks and scars of battle, record the struggle and instill pride in the miracle of survival. These war -torn structures

have been preserved as they were left: to bear witness to past struggle which included wars and the shroud of 45 years of Communism.

- Atlantes and Caryatids:
Popular in pre-World War II architecture; representative of the Polish nation in struggle. They are powerful, imposing, romantic and heroic as they metaphorically support the weight of the nation and its burdens.
- Social-Realist Public Sculpture:
Idealized figures adorning building facades and public arcades, they were the Communist/Socialist interpretation of the Atlantes and Caryatids. Heroic figures such as the steelworker, farmer, teacher, or weaver glorified the role of those working for and contributing to the new society.

I would now like to move forward to THE NEW POLAND for a brief look at the impact of Western influences and the market economy in Poland since 1989. “Communism with a human face” has been replaced with the a turbulent capitalist market economy .

- The surfaces of the ubiquitous “pure” (i.e. socialist) red trams have been hired out and covered with advertisements.
- Smoking, a national custom/habit has undergone revision. The cigarette ad informs us “The more you know” (implied: “The more you know about the dangers of smoking, the more you will choose to smoke my brand”). The chic capitalist “model smoker” has changed in appearance from the pre-war and communist models of powerful hero. He is slender and refined in demeanor. He looks you in the eye. He informs you of the dangers and then advises you of the best choice, his choice, his brand.
- The computer woman and car quite cleverly signify economic and social change in the new Poland. The urgency to learn skills such as computer literacy and English, and the necessity to be mobile and to have access to one’s own mode of transportation are critical in the new economy which is modeled upon Western standards.

It is important to remember that, just as the emergence of the market economy in Poland impacted the visual arts, so too, the demise of communism brought about critical changes. During the communist period, “culture” was spelled with a capital K, elevated to a high level, and made accessible to all members of society. The Communist government was the generous primary patron of the visual arts and was especially supportive of the emergent field of textile art. It is for this reason that large scale textile artworks became so popular. The massive scale of the work perpetuated the heroic notions symbolized by the Atlantes and the social-realist models. The government gave studio and material stipends to artists, and funded exhibitions, the publication of catalogues and the transportation of artwork to the far corners of the world. Museums and galleries within Poland received funding from the Ministry of Culture to purchase works for permanent collections. After the fall of Communism however, there was little funding available for the arts, private patrons had to be found, and most Polish artists were forced to change the focus and the scale of their work.

We shall look at the transition of the legacy of contemporary Polish textile art through the work of six well-established artists. Many of the distinguishing characteristics of Polish textile art since the sixties are metaphorically related to the examples of the Atlantes and Social Realist models in terms of a shifting sense of place, time and politic. The evolution of the work of these six artists directly reflects the political, and economic changes since the demise of communism in East Central Europe and the former Soviet Union.

- JOSEF LUKOMSKI

Lukomski's work stresses the importance of confining elements within a given space.

The simple worn clothing represents the eschatological remnants of human existence.

The work serves as a caution to remember that "we are all human".

All told, a search for traces left by the individual. This concept was particularly relevant to Lukomski from the end of the Second World War and on through the Communist Period until 1990.

Lukomski died in the late 1990's.

- MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ

Abakanowicz tends to explore a concept extensively until she feels she has exhausted its potential.

Working in this way she seeks to reveal the duality of individuality and anonymity existing within one structure.

The use of "poor materials" such as burlap, string and recycled wooden elements reference the human condition.

Her use of heroic scale and multiples strongly reflect the influences of her culture and surroundings, as well as does her search for individual traces among the sameness of human existence.

- JOLANTA OWIDZKA

Owidzka's work becomes looser as she progresses in her search.

For Owidzka, textiles combine the mysteriousness of painting, graphics and sculpture.

Favors working in textile because "In textile work it is possible to build an 'inner space'".

Her work, which has become more experimental in the 90's, addresses the search for the personal in an increasingly more mechanized and standardized world.

- URSZULA PLEWKA-SCHMIDT

The tapestry as diary.

Images are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed using a numerical system and a grid to symbolize the process.

Uses time to chart memory, and memory to chart time by incorporating popular contemporary and historical symbols into her imagery.

“It is an honor to work in an art form that can express the world’s most contemporary issues by means of one of its oldest crafts”.

- **WOJCIECH SADLEY**

Sadley follows the voice of myths as he recounts the story of life and the human condition in his works.

“I desire to create forms capable of responding to the yearnings that accompany man throughout his life”.

Works in a variety of materials and processes. Is interested in transformation through natural process.

Believes that ...”truly good works are never finished. They should have the appearance of being technically consummate, but in fact remain forever unfinished...”

- **ANNA GOEBEL**

“I need to discover the (for me) unknown, and then search (again) to express those discoveries”.

Her earlier work with birch branches carries with it a sense of melancholy for home and place -- birch is a beloved symbol of the Polish landscape.

Goebel’s work from the 90’s and beyond becomes more experimental and attempts to create material transformations, first using paper and then later with the use of leaves and their decomposition.

All of Goebel’s work seeks to transform common material and in doing so to alter its worth as a symbol.