2018

Place-based Textiles in Post WWII Poland

Jane Przybysz
University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Part of the [Art and Materials Conservation Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Fashion Design Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Museum Studies Commons](#)

Przybysz, Jane, "Place-based Textiles in Post WWII Poland" (2018). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1100.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/1100>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

**Textile Society of America 16th Biennial Symposium
Vancouver, Canada — September 19-23, 2018**

Published in *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings 2018*

Presented at Vancouver, BC, Canada; September 19 – 23, 2018

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/>

Copyright © by the author(s).

Place-based Textiles in Post WWII Poland

Jane Przybysz

With the Nazi occupation of Poland during WWII, the German army commandeered wool supplies for its own use and private weaving was prohibited. But Stefan and Helena Galkowski—former students of Eleanor Plutynska, a prominent weaver on faculty at the Warsaw Fine Arts Academy—had taken refuge in the countryside, where they secretly continued their artistic practice. Adapting the local rural tradition of using thick, hand-spun yarn dyed with vegetables, they wove small tapestries visually referencing Polish legends and landscapes.¹ In so doing, they arguably were carrying on a politically-charged Polish weaving tradition that harnessed the place- and materials-based knowledge and craft skills of Poland’s rural inhabitants in the service of nationalist aspirations to create new kinds of textile art.

Since the late 19th century, the Polish intelligencia of the former Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania—which disappeared from the map of Europe in 1795—had looked to cultural, economic and educational strategies for sustaining a nation without a state. They had pursued what Edyta Barucka calls “organic work”—activities at the grassroots level that resisted cultural and economic colonization of the former Commonwealth.² One outcome of this organic work was a network of craft workshops and vocational schools in Galicia in the south of Poland among highlanders who were perceived as a reservoir of authentic Polish culture. Another was the advent of manor museums where Polish nobility displayed family artifacts reminiscent of better times, as well as crafts produced by the rural inhabitants of the former Commonwealth that they’d collected to preserve a historical record of the nation’s cultural inheritance. Finally, there arose numerous organizations dedicated to the marketing and sales of rural arts and crafts.

Room in Villa Koliba, Zakopane Style Museum³

¹ University of Stirling, Scotland, UK, “Stefan Galkowski 1912-1984,” U. of Stirling, accessed 9/13/2008, <https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/faculties-and-services/art-collection/artists/stefan-galkowski>.

²Edyta Barucka, “Redefining Polishness: The Revival of Crafts in Galicia around 1900,” *Acta Slavica Japonica*, Tomus 28 (2007): p. 72.

³ Image from https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g274793-d7291322-i145218611-Willa_Koliba_Zakopane_Style_Museum-Zakopane_Lesser_Poland_Province_South.html.

By the time Poland reappeared on the maps of Europe in 1918, what had become known as the Zakopane style of architecture and interior design in Galicia encompassed an array of highlanders' craft practices that informed a new Polish national style—one that drew on rural vernacular traditions yet was adapted to modern lifestyles. Before WWI, young Polish artists inspired by the arts and crafts' movement's efforts to merge the roles of designer and craftsman had organized the Cracow Workshops in 1913. After WWI, Workshop members rallied to continue their work within the framework of a romantic nationalism not terribly different from that which had inspired late 19th-century Polish intelligencia to found craft schools and collect rural crafts. The emerging nationalist vernacular style developed by Workshop members was showcased at the 1925 Decorative Arts Exposition in Paris. The Polish Pavillion at this event was overseen by commissioner Jerzy Warchalowski, a founder of the Cracow Workshops, and its interior was furnished with objects commissioned from the Workshops.⁴

*Tapestries and rugs in the Polish section of the 1925 Paris Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts.*⁵

Unfortunately, the following year—1926—the Cracow Workshops went bankrupt. But that same year faculty and students at the Warsaw Fine Arts Academy founded LAD (translates as orderliness or harmony), an artisan cooperative whose members sometimes undertook ethnographic work to inform their own experimental craft practices aimed at forging a new national style.⁶ LAD co-founder, Eleanora Plutynska, for example, documented, reinterpreted, and promoted the revival and evolution of a doubleweave textile technique she discovered in the Bialystok region of Poland. Like kilims featured at the 1925 Paris Exposition, her modern interpretations of the doubleweave blankets were highly praised for their visual beauty and resonance with vernacular culture.

⁴ David Crowley, *National Style and Nation-State: Design in Poland from the Vernacular Revival to the International Style*, Manchester University Press (1992): 66-72. As quoted by Ewa Klekot in "The Seventh Life of Polish Folk Art and Craft," *etnoloska tribina* 33, vol. 40 (2010): p. 75.

⁵ This image is from the *Reports on the present position and tendencies of the industrial arts as indicated at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, Paris, 1925, with an introductory survey* Harrow, 1927. According to attributions on the <http://special.lib.gla.uk/teach/century/artdeco.html>, the kilim and rugs were by B. Treter, J. Czajkowski and A. Jastrzebowski, and executed by the Société de l'Industrie Populaire, Warsaw, and Société "Kilim". This contradicts Crowley's claim that they were produced by the Cracow Workshops.

⁶ David Crowley 1992:75 as quoted by Ewa Klekot, p. 76 in "The Seventh Life of Polish Folk Art and Craft".

In the four gobelin tapestries he designed for the 1937 Polish Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Arts and Technology in Modern Life in Paris, Plutynska's colleague at the Warsaw Arts Academy, Mieczyslaw Szymanski (1903-1990), picked up a narrative strand of Polish romantic nationalism. These tapestries—later exhibited in New York in 1939—are now known as the de Ropp Polish Art Collection at the Noreen Reale Falcone Library at LeMoyne College in Syracuse, New York. Woven and embroidered by members of LAD, this tapestry series harkens back to pre-partitioned Poland and commemorates the life of elected King Jan Sobieski, III (1674-1696).

King John and Emperor Leopold after the Victory of Vienna, 1937. Photo by Charles Wainwright.
Courtesy of Noreen Reale Falcone Library at LeMoyne College, Syracuse, New York.

Szymanski also is credited with being the first artist in Poland to use unorthodox but abundant local materials (like the coarse wool the Galkowskis made do with during WWII) such as sisal, hemp, wire and wood in his woven work. It appears this experimental approach to both using place-based materials *and* thinking of weaving as a form of relief shaped the fiber art of the next generation of artists like Magdalena Abakanowicz, who was a student of his at the Warsaw Fine Arts Academy.⁷

⁷ Inga H. Barnello, "de Ropp Polish Art Collection," LeMoyne College, Nov. 2016, <http://resources.library.lemoyne.edu/arts/de-ropp-polish-art-collection>.

In the wake of WWII, the nascent Polish communist government saw in pre-WWI artisan cooperatives a model for post-war economic development consistent with its anti-capitalist stance and aligned with its nation-building goals. Under the auspices of an agency called Cepelia—an acronym for the Center of Folk and Artistic Industry—the government organized a nationwide network of artisan cooperatives charged with producing “folkloric” and “artistic” work. To inform the folkloric work, Cepelia engaged ethnographers and artists-as-ethnographers (especially in the early years, 1949-1956) to document rural textile practices. This ethnography then shaped the production of so-called “folkloric” textiles inspired by vernacular cultural traditions. I would suggest that the ethnographic work undertaken by artists on behalf of Cepelia and other communist cultural agencies also likely informed both the “artistic” work that cooperatives produced in limited editions, as well as individual artist’s experimental work..

Multicolored Tournament, *Helena Galkowski (1911-1992) and Stefan Galkowski (1912-1984), c. 1960, wool, 60" x 117.5".*
Courtesy of Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, Deaccessioned Decorative Art Fund, MH2013.1.⁸

Cepelia marketed and sold both folkloric and artistic work via a nationwide network of retail outlets where they became visual markers of an emerging urban Polish middle class and served as souvenirs that visitors might purchase as mementos of their experience of Poland. Cepelia also exported these same sorts of blankets, kilims and tapestries to retail outlets in the U.S., Germany, the Netherlands, and beyond. Emboldened by new international connections Cepelia facilitated, many Polish textile artists joined a vanguard of fiber artists who entered works that were accepted in the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennials (1962-1995), and who traveled

⁸ According to Tricia Gilson, *Cabinet of Curiosities*, February 6, 2014 Tumblr post, J.Irwin and Xenial Miller purchased this tapestry from Cepelia Corporation in August 1960.
<http://triciagilson.tumblr.com/post/75838871091/detail-of-multicolored-tournament-by-stefan-and>.

internationally to attend the openings of fiber art exhibits and give artist talks and demonstrations at Cepelia's retail stores.⁹

This paper consider how the people Daniel Stone has characterized as “craft activists” at Cepelia supported Polish artists creating place-based textiles that imaginatively responded to post-WWII material constraints, effectively evaded the ideological strictures of communist-dictated socialist

*Cepelia's 15th Anniversary Exhibition, Warsaw, 1965-66,
interior arranged with furniture designed by Josef Kulon, wall textile by Aleksandra Lewinska.¹⁰*

realism, and side-stepped modernist art debates.¹¹ I will suggest that Polish artists often chose to work within and for Cepelia to turn centralized governmental efforts to promote a nationalist Polish identity rooted in so-called “folk” traditions to their own advantage. In the face of the terrible destruction that WWII wrought, textile artists' experiments with non-traditional materials, three dimensional forms, and visual iconographies that alternately referenced rural

⁹ Lisa Hammel, “Seeking Lost Elegance With Crocheting as Art, *The New York Times*, October 27, 1976. This article includes mention that “Cepelia, the Polish folk art shop at 63 East 57th Street, is now having an exhibition of the kilims of Maria Janowska, a top designer of tapestry rugs in her native country, who will be demonstrating her technique each day. Her work seems to combine all the Polish design traditions, from charming folk figures and peasant motifs to bold abstractions...”

¹⁰ Image from Piotr Korduba, *Cepelia, 1949-2014*, Cepelia, Warsaw (2014), pp. 46-47. Wall textile identified as *Wooden Podhale* and woven by Zakopane cooperative in Irena Huml, *Współczesna tkanina polska*, Arkady, Warsaw (1989) p. 89. Podhale is the Polish highlands and source of Zakopane style wooden architecture the textile seems to depict. Lewinska had been a student of Eleanora Plutynska at the Warsaw Arts Academy.

¹¹ Daniel Stone, “Cepelia and Folk Arts Industries in Poland, 1949-1956,” *The Polish Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2009, pp. 287-310. See also David Crowley, “Stalinism and Modernist Craft in Poland, *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 11, No. 1. Craft, Modernism and Modernity, 1998, pp. 71-83; and Catherine Amidon, “Different Voices with Common Threads: Polish Fiber Art Today,” *The Polish Review*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (1998), pp. 195-206.

crafts, pre-partitioned Poland, and 19th-century landscape painting all participated in a process of rebuilding their country and reconstructing a Polish experience of national identity that was not communist and not especially modernist.¹² I believe Cepelia greatly facilitated this tenaciously hopeful process that craft activists and artists undertook after WWII to constitute an art community that enlivened and sustained an under-the-radar, politically charged art movement that continually revisited what it meant to be Polish under communism.

It is important to note that—at this point in my essay—I have used the word “folk” sparingly as an adjective describing rural cultural practices that late 19th century, inter-war and post-WWII ethnographers and artists sought to mine for a myriad of reasons. That’s because in her 2010 essay titled “The Seventh Life of Polish Folk Art and Craft,” University of Warsaw faculty member Ewa Klekot convincingly argues that “Polish folk art has been part of two highly important processes of modernity: imagined community-building and the construction of the modern nation and nation-state, as well as the production of social inequalities both in the modern industrial society and in the late modern industrial one.”¹³ Not surprisingly, Klekot finds Cepelia deeply implicated in these processes. And she is not alone. In the catalog for a 2016 exhibit at Zacheta—National Gallery of Art in Warsaw titled *Poland—A Country of Folklore?* her colleagues join her in un-packing a “multi-threaded story about a longing for things familiar and native, for social advancement, but also about the repression from consciousness of certain phenomena and facts.”¹⁴

While in no way seeking to deny the decidedly negative and perhaps unintended consequences of some Cepelia-sponsored art- and craft-making activities that post-structuralist and post-colonial analyses make apparent, I am interested in the lived experience of artists who, at some point in their lives, worked for or cooperated with Cepelia. I am interested in the visual evidence that kilims and gobelin tapestries Polish artists/artisans created from 1949 to 1989 provide of an art movement that evolved parallel with the emergence of Solidarity as a political force for change. Finally, I am interested in inviting scholars of this material to attend more closely to 1) assessing the economic benefits that Cepelia offered artists living in urban and rural parts of the country over the four decades, 1949-1989, in which it was heavily government supported, and 2) exploring the impact that artists who worked as ethnographers had on the evolution of what has become known as the late 20th century Polish school of tapestry.

With the demise of the communist regime in 1989, the vast majority of artisan cooperatives that had operated under Cepelia’s umbrella were “liquidated,” their inventories and equipment sold or simply trashed when the facilities they occupied were no longer available to them as state-sponsored spaces. What did this mean for the people who worked at or with these cooperatives? What did it mean for the fiber art movement in Poland? While this essay will not answer these questions, I am to suggest the how—at the micro- and macro-levels—Cepelia forged an arts and

¹² Gayle Wimmer, “Polish Textile Art: Photorealism in the Second Generation,” *American Craft*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Feb./Mar., 1986. Wimmer suggests that second generation post-WWII textile artists deployed photographs as the basis for their work because, in “a country saturated with history and destruction, the act of remembering permeates daily life....[a photo-realistic artwork] arrests time and preserves memory, thereby contributing to a process of reconstruction that is both national and personal.” I find Wimmer’s observation relevant to both post-WWII generations of textile artists.

¹³ Ewa Klekot, “The Seventh Life of Polish Folk Art and Craft,” *etnoloska tribina* 33, vol. 40, 2010, pp. 83-84.

¹⁴ Hanna Wroblewska, “Introduction,” *Poland—a Country of Folklore?* Zacheta—National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2016, p. 7.

crafts infrastructure that supported a wide range of place-based artmaking on a relatively large scale that ultimately made possible the innovations now associated with the late 20th-century school of Polish tapestry.

CEPELIA: THE ARTISTS' EXPERIENCE

Jolanta Owidzka is among the better known late 20th century Polish fiber artists. The Textile Museum in Lodz has a substantial body of her work (30+) in its collection and the Jacques Baruch Gallery in Chicago, IL, brought her large scale, mostly abstract expressionist work to the attention of fiber art collectors in the U.S. A student of Eleanora Plutynska and Stefan Galkowski, she worked with Cepelia on multiple occasions over the course of her very long and productive career. When asked how she came to be involved with Cepelia, she explains that, for a time, Hanna Czajkowska was the art department supervisor for all of Cepelia's weaving cooperatives. She was Owidzka's friend because they had attended the Warsaw Fine Arts Academy together. Czajkowska, too, had studied weaving and she invited Owidzka to submit designs for weaving to Cepelia. Of course, it was not just because they were friends, Owidzka notes; Czajkowska was inviting everyone she believed artistically talented to submit designs.

In describing how one of her designs was realized by weavers in Zywiec [in southeastern Poland], Owidzka says she went there for three or so days to supervise the making of the first sample. That was a rule set by the jury of the Central Bureau in Warsaw. The Central Bureau [in Warsaw] juried designs submitted by artists and those that were selected were then sent to the different weaving coops, where the artistic director for that coop would select which designs cooperative members would put into production. How many versions of any given design would be produced was decided in Warsaw as well. Sometimes ten. Sometimes twenty. But never hundreds, Owidzka makes clear, because of their desire to promote the weavings as art.

At the cooperative in Zywiec, the weavers were doing knotted carpets, as well as gobelin tapestries. They had about forty looms for gobelins and ten looms for knotted carpets. Cepelia paid well for the artists' designs. But according to Owidzka, the weavers—who worked fulltime from 8am to 3pm—were always badly paid, much less than the artists/designers, even though they were graduates of a four-year technical school, the best one being in Zakopane. This was a situation Owidzka seemed to find unjust, but that she personally was unable to address.

Owidzka says she submitted designs to Cepelia for “many tens of years,” during which time her designs [for kilim, gobelin tapestries and carpets] were woven by the Wanda cooperative in Cracow, a coop in Bialstok, and elsewhere. “It was money simply,” she explains.¹⁵

Maria Teresa Chojnacka came to prominence in the late '60s and early '70s through the International Biennale of Tapestry in Lausanne, Switzerland. Her monochromatic, large scale sisal and wool, woven and knotted works are highly distinctive. Like Owidzka, she had been a student of Eleanora Plutynska. And like Plutynska, she became an artist/ethnographer. In the early 1960s, Chojnacka was the mother of young children. At that time Cepelia was organizing various textile competitions. In response to one of these competitions, she submitted somewhere in the range of fifty designs. When the winners were announced, it turned out that she had won most of the awards. She still has and shows me the award notification letter from Cepelia.

¹⁵ Author's interview with Jolanta Owidzka, June 27, 2015, Warsaw, Sedziowska 1, Poland.

After she won this competition, the head of the Otwock [14 miles southeast of Warsaw] cooperative called to offer her the position of artistic director, which she accepted. She ended up designing for both the Otwock and Karczew (a town in Otwock County) cooperatives. Together, they had around 1000 weavers working on jacquard looms so it really helped that she had training in jacquard because she was able to adapt and interpret weaving designs to make them easier for the weavers to weave. In effect, she served as both artistic and technical director for these weaving cooperatives. She explains that when she first came to work at Otwock, the weavers there were doing mostly artistic (vs. folkloric) work, producing fabrics for curtains, furniture coverings and tablecloths. Since it took two days of weaving to see what a design actually looked like coming off the loom and assess whether or not the design would sell, she decided to use her day off—Sunday—to undertake this work. The result, she says, was the cooperative started making a profit by getting new patterns into production sooner. For folkloric textiles, she and the other weavers did reconstructions and adaptations of older folkloric forms. “We were professionals,” she adds as an aside to characterize the folkloric work she and her colleagues undertook.

In the summers, when her children were at camp, Chojnacka had time to undertake fieldwork for the Institute of Industrial Design in Warsaw run by Warsaw Fine Arts Academy graduate Wanda Telakowska. Telakowska had wanted to document every and any traditional weaving pattern that could be found in Poland as a design resource for industry. Her ethos was “everyday beauty for all.” And to accomplish this ideal, she supported artists undertaking ethnographic fieldwork to amass an inventory of design resources. Perhaps more importantly, she experimented with assembling teams of academy-trained artists and “folk” artists to collaborate in designing textiles, furniture and other decorative arts used in the home for industrial production.

Unfortunately, these experiments mostly failed because industry had no incentive to work with designs prototyped by artist teams. There was such a scarcity of consumer goods in communist Poland that even poorly designed items would find a ready market.¹⁶ Yet while Telakowska failed in this regard, the trajectory of Chojnacka’s career suggest that the Institute director in some sense succeeded in inspiring artists like Chojnacka with a deep respect for the place- and materials-based knowledge of so-called “folk” artists.

While the Otwock cooperative’s president was not keen on having an ethnographer on staff, Chojnacka was allowed to go to Torun to take courses that prepared her to undertake fieldwork and eventually to work at the coop “half shift” on ethnographic projects. After a year of courses, she did fieldwork in the Opoczno (south central) region of Poland near Lowicz. She still has the fieldnotes and fabric samples she gathered for her research, which—much to her surprise—was sufficient for her to be awarded a degree in ethnography. When Telakowska tried to hire her away from the Otwock cooperative, Chojnacka declined, saying “my work is at the coop.”¹⁷

Bolesław Tomaszkiwicz is professor emeritus at the Lodz Fine Arts Academy. Having been born in a rural village near Lowicz, he’d shown an interest in drawing pictures of family and friends since he was young. Referring to art in his home village, he says, “Art was an everyday

¹⁶ Anne Applebaum, “Iron Curtain excerpt: Anne Applebaum on Wanda Telakowska’s attempt to work with the Polish Communist Party,” *Slate News & Politics* (November 4, 2012). <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2012/11/iron-curtain-excerpt-anne-applebaum-on-wanda-telakowskas-attempt-to-work-with-the-polish-communist-party.html>. Accessed: 9/15/18.

¹⁷ Author’s interview with Maria Teresa Chojnacka, July 28, 2015, ul. Dąbrowiecka 27/2, Warsaw, Poland.

thing. It was around you all the time...the crocheted doilies and woven striped throws.” He explains how the more talented women spun and wove the linen and wool from sheep they grew, while children like him learned to crochet. After finishing high school, he applied for and was admitted to the Lodz Fine Arts Academy. After his third or fourth year at the Academy, he did a “practicum”—the Polish version of an internship, except that students observe more than they do the hands-on work. His practicum was at the Cepelia coop in Lowicz, close to where he’d grown up. He observed that the weavers at the coop produced a lot of woolen fabrics for export and for sale through Cepelia stores.

Asked about the impact Cepelia had on the artisans in Lowicz, he replies, “Cepelia didn’t change how the village worked...the control they [Cepelia] exerted over production did not affect the folk art. No one was going to force anything on Lowicz artisans. Change came from what women felt would be nice [aesthetically]. These women were rooted and flexible in their aesthetic sensibility.”¹⁸

When Tomaszkievicz attended the Arts Academy, painting and weaving were the only programs. After graduating from the Academy, he worked three days a week, 7:30am-3:30pm as a designer for carpet factories all across Poland for six to seven years. Industry designers had workshops separate from Cepelia-managed artistic advisory groups. The other days he worked at the Lodz Fine Arts Academy twenty-four hours/week as a teaching assistant. Eventually he worked only at the Arts Academy in the Clothing Fabric studio, which is where the jacquard looms were located. A student of LAD jacquard weaving master Lucjan Kintopf, Tomaszkievicz became best known for his potato plant pattern, which had begun as a student project. It was a pattern original to him and based on the time he spent summers drawing potato plants in the fields where he also picked potatoes back home near Lowicz.

Now he is best known for his doubleweave textiles. He got interested in this technique after reading of Eleanor Plutynska’s work with this technique. The Academy is about to publish a book on his doubleweave experiments. He has figured out how to master the technique using floor and semi-automatic looms.

Asked what Cepelia meant for folk and fine art, he says mainstream art and Cepelia didn’t compete with each other. Second, a lot of fine artists got jobs at Cepelia and it gave them the chance to produce work. Third, he does not believe regional folk arts suffered because of Cepelia. Urban artists who were snobbish about Cepelia and folk art products comprised a small group of people, he claims. In his view, most artists saw value and opportunity in this work they made for Cepelia, although they tended to conceive of this work as secondary to “their” work.

CEPELIA & CHARGED SITES IN COMMUNIST POLAND

Depictions of kings and queens, places resonant with Poland’s pre-partition past abound in post-WWII Polish kilims and gobelin tapestries produced under the auspices of Cepelia. And while a case certainly can be made that textiles featuring images of sites like Wawel Castle in Cracow Castle in Cracow and of the reconstructed Royal Castle in Warsaw were created simply to appeal

¹⁸ Author’s interview with Boleslaw Tomaszkievicz, 5/28/15, at artist’s home u. Kopcinskiego 93, Lodz, Poland. Ela Stelmaszczyk-Novak, translator.

to tourists who had visited those places, they nonetheless carried on the 19th-century artistic tradition of locating a Polish national consciousness in the country's pre-partition past.

King & Queen, undated, 6'3" x 9'11", designer M. Dudinska; weaver Z. Grzybek, Nowy Targ cooperative, Photo courtesy of Daniel Panasiuk.

*Left: Wawel Castle, undated, 5'7" x 3'4". Photo courtesy of Charles Otto.
Right: Royal Castle, Warsaw, undated, 25" x 35". Photo courtesy of Jane Przybycz.*

In the genre painting-styled textiles designed by Piotr Grabowski, a scene conjuring Poland's distant past appears to elide with the that of a wheelwright and his wife in regional dress as sources of national identity. Similarly, post-WWII kilims and tapestries visually referencing the Polish countryside arguably continued the 19th-century artistic tradition in which "landscape painting became charged with coded emotions and ... [artists] painted the fields, orchards, and wayside chapels..."¹⁹

¹⁹Edyta Barucka, p. 77.

*Left: Untitled, 1982, Piotr Grabowski, 123 x 98 cm. Photo courtesy of Hooper5789.
Right: Wheelwright, Piotr Grabowski, designer; T. Glinierz, Opolska coop. 70 x 100 cm.
Photo courtesy of Maria Romanowska..*

*Left: Rural Landscape, undated, 150 x 70 cm. Piotr Grabowski, designer; Dorota Zlobinska, weaver. Photo courtesy of S.E.A. Hoogakker. Right: Map of the Orchard undated, Jolanta Owidzka designer, woven at Wanda cooperative, Cracow.
Collection of Central Textile Museum Lodz.²⁰*

Other artists designed landscapes around churches. During communist rule, the Catholic church evolved from quietly adapting to the repressive policies of the communist state to openly engaging in political activism that would lead to the end of communist rule. A particular

²⁰Danuta Buczkowska, editor, "Cepelia" in the collection of the Central Textile Museum Lodz, Lodz, Poland (1999):p. 15.

turning point was 1976, when the church supported workers' food price riots.²¹ So while post WWII Polish tapestries depicting churches in the countryside might be regarded as nothing more than textile versions of innocuous landscape paintings, I would suggest that both the art historical precedent in Poland of such paintings serving as "the secret speech of the landscape" enlivening nationalist aspirations,²² and the socio-political context in Poland under communism in which these artworks were made deserve consideration as frameworks for interpreting these works' content.

*Left: Hill, 1981, 99 x 72 cm. Zdzisława Bielewicz, designer; C. Sliwka, weaver. LAD cooperative, Warsaw.
Right: Landscape, undated, 55 x 55 cm. Barbara Kotnurska, author. Photos courtesy of Jane Przybycz.*

CEPELIA'S ECONOMIC IMPACT

When asked what it meant for artists to work at or with Cepelia prior to the end of communist rule, Norbert Zawisza, former director of the Central Textile Museum in Lodz, observed, "No artist will tell you. They are discrete about this. But Cepelia paid very good money for part-time work. ... The price Cepelia paid for one design was equivalent to one month's earnings of a doctoral teaching assistant at the Academy—about 2500 zloty."²³ While a comprehensive assessment of the economic impact Cepelia's activities had in urban and rural communities has

²¹ "The Polish Catholic Church and the State," <http://countrystudies.us/poland/39.html>, Library of Congress source, last accessed 2/19/19.

²² Edyta Barucka, p. 77.

²³ Author's interview with Norbert Zawisza, June 2, 2015, Lodz Fine Arts Academy, Ela Stelmaszczyk, translator. Zawisza clarified that 1000zł was paid for the design and the additional money was for mapping the design for the weaver.

yet to be undertaken, data gleaned from several published sources indicate that the economic advantages Cepelia offered artists working in urban and rural settings warrants greater scholarly attention than it has received to date.

Long before Cepelia began promoting folk and artistic craft, Polish weavers were producing not only for domestic or local use, but for distant markets. A 1923 *New York Times* article offers the following information from a Commerce Report written by Council L. J. Keena, Warsaw.

“The present yearly output of these [Polish “kilim”] carpets is approximately 80,000 square meters, this amount being produced on about 3,000 looms,” the Counsul continues.

“Seventy-five percent is produced in homes by weavers who have learned the art from their ancestors for several generations. The largest workshop has only from twenty to thirty looms. ... The producers have no selling organization, but sell their products in small quantities as they are finished. Prior to the World War the surplus production was marketed in Vienna, but, since 1920, small quantities have been exported to England, France, Belgium, Italy and Switzerland.”²⁴

Founded in 1949, Cepelia became the “selling organization” that interwar weavers lacked. By 1950, Cepelia ran 194 artisan cooperatives and 98 other production centers, and owned 128 retail stores. According to Daniel Stone, “the communist government’s six-year plan projected an increase of employment in factories run by Cepelia or its constituent cooperatives from 23,000 in 1950, to 40,000 in 1953, and 80,000 in 1955, mainly women. Most factories were set up in cities, judging by the preponderance of workers and artisans (47%) over peasants (20%) among employees in 1950.”²⁵ It does not appear that Cepelia met its ambitious employment goals. But in summarizing his research on Cepelia and folk arts industries in Poland between 1949 and 1956, Stone notes that Cepelia “provided work for several thousand peasant crafters as well as numerous professionally-trained urban craft workers and dozens of academically-trained experts. As an adjunct to its main, folkloric activities, Cepelia also provided employment to thousands of other craft, factory and office workers.”²⁶

An undated, post-1960 pamphlet published by Cepelia offers further evidence of the extent to which the organization employed Polish artists and artisans, and in marketing the fruits of their labor both nationally and internationally. The pamphlet boasts:

CEPELIA supervises the cultural, economic and social activities of 82 production cooperatives, 5 unions of cooperatives and 5 regional sales offices. ...

CEPELIA sponsors the work of 800 outstanding folk artists, stimulates their creativeness and offers their works to buyers at home and abroad. The 1000 artists cooperating with CEPELIA have enabled the revival of artistic craft and industry basing on their best patterns and designs. Now, every year thanks to this cooperation CEPELIA can introduce about 500 new patterns and designs [for kilims, gobelins, sculptures, pieces of metalwork, ceramics and furniture] into production. ...

²⁴ “Polish Kilim Carpets. Produced in Homes by Wavers Skilled in Ancestral Art,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1923.

²⁵ Stone, p. 227.

²⁶ Stone, p. 310.

CEPELIA runs 323 shops in Poland and has its centres in New York, Brussels, Paris and in Holland.

CEPELIA employs 18,755 people of which 9,885 work in production establishments and 8,890 are outworkers. A separate group of 6,124 are people who supply pieces of their work to the purchase points.

CEPELIA exports its products to 25 countries in all continents of the world.²⁷

What exactly these figures meant for the women and men—urban and rural—who were engaged in the design and production of textiles remains to be determined. But the scale of art- and craft-related employment that CEPELIA made possible and the dramatic expansion of retail outlets the agency managed over several decades surely helped sustain the ambitious and innovative practice of Polish artists like Jolanta Owidza whom we've come to associate with the late 20th-century, international fiber art movement.

CONCLUSION

The flourishing of post-WWII, place-based textiles in Poland needs to be understood, not only in relation to the pre-war artisan cooperatives' activities inspired by the British arts and crafts movement, but as part of a continuum of politically-charged cultural practices that craft activists and artists had undertaken since the late 19th century to preserve and promote a Polish national identity grounded in the place- and materials-based knowledge that the former republic's rural inhabitants stewarded, and the craft skills they possessed. In post-WWII Poland, many craft activists and artists who were determined to be part of the solution to rebuilding their war-torn country, elected to work for and with Cepelia—the new communist agency tasked with developing craft and arts industries. They used Cepelia to 1) undertake fieldwork to further document rural craft practices, and in the case of textiles, re-value much of what had once been marginalized as “women's work”; 2) construct a nationwide network of artisan cooperatives that fostered urban, university-trained artists working side-by-side with graduates of technical high schools in urban and rural parts of the country; 3) create an international market for work by urban and rural craft artists through hundreds of retail outlets; 4) provide university-trained artists with well-paying job opportunities beyond the arts academies that actually afforded them the resources to make more experimental artwork; and 5) sponsor competitions and exhibitions that raised the public profile of work by Polish fiber artists nationally and internationally. Interviews with artists who, at some point in their careers, worked for or with Cepelia offer new insights into the complex ways Cepelia figured in the lives of both urban and rural craft artists. Greater attention to the specific visual content of kilims and tapestries produced from 1949-1989, and to how the ethnographic work some artists conducted may have informed their more experimental work, potentially offers new interpretative frameworks with which to assess both the less and more experimental works Polish artist produced over this forty year period. Finally, data suggesting the large scope of Cepelia's retail marketing efforts and considerable economic impact should be more fully considered in future analyses of the agency's impact on the evolution of post-WWII textile art.

²⁷ This pamphlet is in author's personal collection. Its contents list Cepelia's East 57th Street, New York, NY location, which opened in 1960. See John Brooks, “Cepelia,” *The New Yorker* (April 23, 1960): pp. 36-38.

Bibliography

- Amidon, Catherine S. "Different Voices with Common Threads: Polish Fiber Art Today." *The Polish Review*, 43, No. 2 (1998): pp. 195-206. Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of the Polish Institute of Arts & Sciences of America. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25779047>.
- Applebaum, Anne. "Iron Curtain excerpt: Anne Applebaum on Wanda Telakowska's attempt to work with the Polish Communist Party." *Slate News & Politics*. November 4, 2012. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2012/11/iron-curtain-excerpt-anne-applebaum-on-wanda-telakowskas-attempt-to-work-with-the-polish-communist-party.html>. Last accessed 9/15/18.
- Barnello, Inga H. "de Ropp Polish Art Collection." Noreen Reale Falcone Library, LeMoyne College. December 2015; November 2016. <https://resources.library.lemoyne.edu/arts/de-ropp-polish-art-collection>. Last updated August 30, 2018.
- Barucka, Edyta, "Redefining Polishness: The Revival of Crafts in Galicia around 1900," *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, Tomus 28, pp. 71-99.
- Crowley, David. "Building the World Anew: Design in Stalinist and Post-Stalinist Poland." *Journal of Design History* 7, No. 3 (1994): pp. 187-203. <https://about.jstor.org/terms/129.252.140.98>. Last accessed 01/16/2019.
- Crowley, David. "Stalinism and Modernist Craft in Poland." *Journal of Design History* 11, No. 1 Craft, Modernism and Modernity (1998): pp. 71-83. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of Design History Society. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1316164>. Accessed: 9/16/18.
- Hammel, Lisa. "Seeking Lost Elegance With Crocheting as Art." *The New York Times*, October 27, 1976.
- Klekot, Ewa. "The Seventh Life of Polish Folk Art and Craft." *Etnoloska tribina* 33, Vol. 40 (2010): pp. 71-85. https://www.academia.edu/7160919/The_Seventh_Life_of_Polish_Folk_Art_and_Craft.
- Kordjak, Joanna. *Poland—a Country of Folklore?* Warsaw, Poland: Zacheta—National Gallery of Art, 2016.
- "Polish Kilim Carpets." *The New York Times*, May 27, 1923.
- Przybysz, Jane. "Interview with Maria Teresa Cjohnacka." At the artist's home, ul. Dabrowiecka 27/2, Warsaw, Poland. Ela Stelmaszczyk-Novak, translator; Anna Romanowicz, ethnographer/translator; Ewa Kaminska, colleague of Chojnacka from a fiber arts workshop in Wroclaw. July 28, 2015.
- Przybysz, Jane. "Interview with Norbert Zawisza." Lodz Fine Arts Academy. Ela Stelmaszczyk-Novak, translator. June 2, 2015.
- Przybysz, Jane. "Interview with Jolanta Odzwiga." At the artist's home, ul. Sedziowska 1, Warsaw, Poland. Anna Romanowicz, translator. June 27, 2015.
- Przybysz, Jane. "Interview with Boleslaw Tomaszkiwicz." At artist's home ul. Kopcinskiego 93, Lodz, Poland. Ela Stelmaszczyk-Novak, translator. May 28, 2015.
- Stone, Daniel. "Cepelia and Folk Arts Industries in Poland, 1949-1956." *The Polish Review* 54, No. 3 (2009): 287-310. Published by University of Illinois Press on behalf of the Polish Institute of Arts & Sciences of America. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25779820>. Accessed: 1/2/19.
- "The Polish Catholic Church and the State," <http://countrystudies.us/poland/39.html>, Library of Congress cited as source. Accessed: 2/19/19.

Gayle Wimmer, "Polish Textile Art: Photorealism in the Second Generation," *American Craft*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Feb./Mar., 1986, pp. 28-35.