

Roman NIECZYPOROWSKI

Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk

THE JOY OF CREATION. TERESA SIERANT-MIKICICZ'S ROLE IN BUILDING THE GDANSK ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS BRAND

In my view, there is no true history of this school without Franciszek Otto and Teresa Sierant. The former was the holocaust of our intelligence - Teresa somehow compensated for that, whole decades of beauty and art she told us about.

From a laudation delivered by Prof. Mieczysław Olszewski on the occasion of a commemorative celebration honouring the sixtieth anniversary of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk.

One can safely say that the history of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk begins with the arrival of seven painters who set themselves the goal of creating an art school in Tri-City. Thanks to them, in the late summer of 1945, the State Institute of Visual Arts¹ was established in Sopot; a few weeks later it was transformed into the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Gdansk with its seat in Sopot.² It often happens, however, that stories concerning the beginnings of the Gdansk Academy of Fine Arts feature its "founding fathers," forgetting somehow that three out of seven people who built the School were women - a case quite rare in the patriarchal world of that time. They were: Krystyna Studnicka, Józefa Wnukowa and Hanna Żuławska.³ Three strong personalities, three great artists. Thus, it can be stated that the feminist theme was significantly present already in the founding act of the Gdansk Academy.

A few years later, this group of women building the identity of the Gdansk Academy was joined by Teresa Sierant. Nevertheless, while

Krystyna Studnicka, Józefa Wnukowa and Hanna Żuławska remain relatively popular, due to their artistic activity, Teresa Sierant is only mentioned in conversations and memoirs of those who have known or met her. Therefore, the aim of this text is to bring to light the figure of Teresa Sierant - associated with the Gdansk Academy almost from the very beginning, and for a long time the only professional art historian employed there. For decades, almost every graduating student at the School had to pass exams and, often, write a theoretical paper. In addition, most of the academic community frequently met Teresa at the academy library which she managed for almost fifty years. Throughout the years, it was her knowledge, attitude and joy of life, that drew paths of personal development for countless students. Thus, one can conclude that along with the end of her employment at the Academy - she retired in 2001, in her seventies - a certain era ended, the era of finest quality joy of life. In a way, everything that led to Teresa Sierant's appearance

at the Gdansk State Higher School of Visual Arts (PWSSP) stemmed from old friendships and wounded ambitions. To explain this properly, one has to go back to the period between 1940s and 1950s. In 1949 Prof. Marian Wnuk, then the Gdansk School Rector, left Tri-City to take over the sculpture studio, and later the position of Rector at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. Then Prof. Jan Wodyński⁴ was appointed Rector in Sopot, only to be replaced in this position by Prof. Stanisław Teisseyre who arrived from Poznań in 1951. At the Krakow Congress of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers in 1945, when the future development of artistic education in Poland was under discussion, the need for a third Academy of Fine Arts, apart from those in Krakow and Warsaw, was noted. This new institution, according to the participants' suggestions, was to be established in Poznań.⁵ At the time when, partly for ambitious reasons, Teisseyre moved to Tri-City, the matter of the third academy was still open. Thus, Prof. Teisseyre made efforts to ensure that the planned increase in rank was assigned to the Gdansk institution. The main difference between the Academy of Fine Arts and the State Higher School of Visual Arts study programs was marked in their approach to the theory and history of art; hence the new Rector's endeavours focused on adapting the theoretical program to the higher academic requirements. Rector Teisseyre's goals were set on teaching art history.

Initially, students at the State Higher School of Visual Arts in Gdansk learned about the history of art as part of classes in art or design studios. In 1947, the course was taken over by Janina Ebenberger-Orzechowska who focused mainly on Italian art.⁶ But the new authorities were perhaps not in her favor because, probably even before 1950, her education was questioned; as evidenced by written testimonials of her former students at the Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv, which confirm information concerning lectures on Italian art conducted by Ebenberger-Orzechowska at her alma mater in Lviv in the years 1935-1939.⁷ No wonder that in these circumstances Rector Teisseyre began looking for an art historian whose person would

not raise any objections. This person turned out to be Teresa Sierant who had been recommended by Jan Chranicki,⁸ then the director of the Pomeranian Museum in Gdansk;⁹ in 1956 she was employed at the State Higher School of Visual Arts.

Teresa Sierant was born on December 5, 1931 in Majków Duży,¹⁰ but soon the family moved to Starogard Gdański, where Teresa's father, Teofil Sierant, got a job at an amplification (relay) station belonging to the state-owned company Polska Poczta, Telegraf i Telefon. There, she began her primary school education, which was interrupted after a year by the outbreak of World War II. The family then moved to Piotrków Trybunalski, where, changing their place of residence several times, they survived the German occupation. In 1945, the Sierants moved to Gdansk and settled in Wrzeszcz. Then Teresa began her education at the Stefan Żeromski V Liceum in Gdansk-Oliwa. Having graduated, she studied history of art at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, in years 1949-1952. She was studying there with, among others, Marian Arszczyński. At that time, history of art was delivered in a two-stage study programme, and the Torun University did not have the right to conduct the second cycle of studies granting the Master's degree in art history.¹¹ In the light of that, Teresa Sierant's talent and scientific potential becomes evident as she was the only person from her year selected to continue studying;¹² thanks to that, in the years 1952-1954, she completed her MA studies in art history at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. There Teresa Sierant found herself in good company - studying with some of the greatest Polish figures in this field, such as Teresa Jakimowicz, Zofia Ostrowska-Kęłowska, Janusz Kęłowski and Piotr Skubiszewski - in her year, and Alicja Kępińska a year below.

For the first few months of her studies, she participated in a Master's seminar conducted by Fr. Prof. Szczesny Dettloff; however, after he was forced to retire in March 1953,¹³ she found herself under the scientific supervision of Prof. Gwidon Chmarzyński and Prof. Zdzisław Kępiński, with whom she defended her Master's thesis which

concerned tenement houses in Gdansk. On June 26, 1954 she was granted the Master's degree in art history and received her Diploma of Completion of the second stage study programme from the Faculty of Philosophy and History at the University of Poznan.

The realities of the time meant that after graduation, in 1954, Teresa Sierant received a work order directing her to Kwidzyn, but thanks to director Jan Chranicki, she was employed at the Pomeranian Museum in Gdansk,¹⁴ at its Scientific and Educational Department. Thus, she naturally entered the community of Gdansk museologists and art historians. No wonder that a year later, on November 24, 1955, she was among the founding members of the Association of Art Historians, Gdansk subsidiary. Jan Chranicki, then director of the Pomeranian Museum, became its president, and Teresa Sierant became the vice-president of the self-education section.¹⁵

Before the war, just after graduating from the art history studies at the Jagiellonian University, Jan Chranicki worked at the Museum in Lviv. In these days, he met Juliusz Studnicki and Stanisław Teisseyre. Thanks to these acquaintances he, in later years, sometimes gave lectures on history of art at the Gdansk School. In addition, "he worked for several Festivals of Fine Arts in Sopot as part of Organizing Committee, he was a member of [...] the Diploma Committee of the State Higher School of Visual Arts [in Gdansk]."¹⁶ Therefore, when Teisseyre was looking for an art history lecturer, he sought the advice of director Chranicki who suggested Teresa Sierant. It so happened that Teisseyre knew also Prof. Kępiński from Poznan, who recommended her as well. And so, in October 1956, while still employed at the museum, Teresa Sierant began giving lectures at the Gdansk State Higher School of Fine Arts. Initially, Rector Teisseyre entrusted her with the students of the I and II year only, allowing her to assist at his lectures for the IV year painting students. As she recalls, the classes led by Teisseyre taught her to look at painting, and talk about the essence of art of a given time; it was then when she began to focus on making her lectures not resemble

those from her studies. In turn, the classes Rector had conducted assisted by Teresa Sierant inspired his trust; thus, in the next academic year she was delivering lectures to students of all years.¹⁷

Working with students became her passion. Thanks to the support of the School Authorities, she took her students on yearly monument-researching tours around Poland, participated in painting and sculpting plein-air. Students adored her, feared her, but most of all respected her. Among proof of the admiration there is, for example, a medal cast for her by a group of students as a thank you, inscribed: AMICAE STUDIORUM - TERESIE SIERANT - SEMPER FIDELI. She values this medal more than the Presidential Bronze Cross of Merit she received in 1996.¹⁸ No wonder that she was always present in stories told by Prof. Andrzej Dyakowski, mentioned many times by Prof. Mieczysław Olszewski, she has remained important for many former students. Krystyna Niznikiewicz (Suwara), appreciates her not only for the knowledge Teresa Sierant passed on to them, but also for teaching them to look at art. Teresa Miszkin, a former student and later professor at the Gdansk Academy of Fine Arts, recalled that, apart from respecting Teresa Sierant's knowledge, women studying at the Gdansk Academy admired her for her courage and joy of life, for her fearless belief in herself, and accepting no imposed limits. To them, she was the example of an intelligent, well-educated yet liberated and beautiful woman. In addition to the all that, Teresa Sierant conducted field inventory research of the monuments of Gdansk Pomerania¹⁹, she wrote scientific and popularizing texts (including the one devoted to Memling's triptych which is presented at the Gdansk National Museum²⁰), she prepared a guide to the exhibition of Flemish and Dutch paintings of the 17th century for the Pomeranian Museum in Gdansk,²¹ she wrote about Gdansk monuments,²² she conducted series of lectures at the BWA Gallery in Sopot. Using her personal contacts, she invited, among others, Prof. Stefan Morawski, Prof. Andrzej Ryszkiewicz and Prof. Jacek Woźniakowski to give lectures at the Gdansk School; and, at the same time, like the proverbial "Strongwoman" from

Stefan Żeromski's novel, she travelled with her lectures on art to schools and community centres in rural areas. Everything indicated that, like the rest of her friends from Poznań, she would become recognized as one of the famous art history professors. She did even make an attempt to write a doctoral dissertation devoted to the Gdańsk Higher School of Visual Arts artistic environment. For that reason, as she recalls, she participated during the early 1960s in the doctoral seminar led by Prof. Roman Wapiński. However, it must have taken place a little later - in the second half of this decade, since Wapiński obtained his habilitation in 1964.²³ Nevertheless, she quickly gave up on this idea - she chose life.

It must be admitted that despite the "communist times," the late 1950s as well as 1960s were an intense and lively period, especially at the School. It still seems to be one of the most colourful and crazy times in the history of Gdańsk academic life - the time of student theatres, with the famous Bim-Bom at the forefront, the numerous faces of Zbyszek Cybulski, Bogumił Kobiela, Jacek Fedorowicz...,²⁴ colourful plain-airs in Dębki, Kadyny, Chmielno; the time of crazy balls at the Gdańsk PWSSP. Teresa Sierant actively participated in everything. Thus, she quickly became an excellent partner for both intellectual conversations and ... dancing. Serenity and joy of life. To many people she was also a "scandalist." Since, in the decisive moment of her life she did not hesitate to bet on love, and in 1972 she married her then student, Romuald Mikicicz. As she herself claims, in spite of everyone, it turned out that it was the best possible decision²⁵.

The position she built for herself over the years at the Gdańsk School meant that almost all Rectors, starting with Prof. Stanisław Teisseyre, valued her opinion. As she declares, the School has always been close to her heart. It seems evident, for instance, when examining her efforts towards building the independent trade union movement in 1980,²⁶ and her later involvement in the first, fully democratic Rector elections held at the Gdańsk PWSSP in spring 1981.

Aware of the passing time, changing artistic

fashions and preferences, at some point she began to "escape" to the privacy of the Academy library which she had created practically from scratch, and then managed for decades. At the same time, as long as she worked at the School, she strove to support new tutors who succeeded her in didactic functions.

It seems that the best summary of Teresa Sierant's role presents itself in the farewell words issued to her - who after having tutored many generations of artists was retiring in autumn 2002 - by the former Rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, Prof. Tomasz Bogusławski:

On behalf of the Gdańsk Academy of Fine Arts Senate and my own, I would like to express my sincere thanks to you for the many years of continuous effort in educating the students of our Academy in humanities, as well as for your commitment and excellence at managing the academic library.

To many generations of students at the Academy you were the guide to the history of art and the curator of all the small, but greatly valuable museums contained between the covers of books. We were lucky to have benefited from your knowledge, experience and invariably kind help, navigating our reaching for beautiful, colourful albums, obligatory and optional reading positions, footnotes, bibliographies and iconographies. Among the bookshelves with hundreds, later thousands of titles, one could always feel your presence so tender towards art, students and books.

For this special kind of presence, which I will allow myself to call PERSONALITY, I thank you with all my heart's warmth and cordiality.

Notes

¹ According to Józefa Wnukowa, the first inauguration of the academic year took place on October 15, 1945, see: Józefa Wnukowa, "U źródeł szkoły talentów i charakterów," *Gdański Rocznik Kulturalny* 10 (1987): 174.

² The ordinance No. L. dz. 1972/V/11022 issued by the Minister of Culture and Art on December 6, 1945, signed by the then Deputy Minister, Leon Kruczkowski, see: Józefa Wnukowa, ed., *Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych w Gdańsku. 1945–1965* (Gdańsk: PWSSP w Gdańsku, 1965), 9. It should be noted that the School managed to keep this name for the first few post-war years, and it was not until the 1950 act that it was changed to the State Higher School of Visual Arts (PWSSP).

³ in fact Anna Klementyna Żuławska née Jasińska, see: Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, Collection: Personal Files of Employees: "Hanna Żuławska," ref. Ż9: *Certificate of birth and baptism*, issued by the Roman Catholic parish of St. Barbara in Warsaw (act no: 462 from 1909).

⁴ After World War II Jan Wodyński was first involved in organizing the School of Visual Arts in Katowice, then he was a painting professor at the University of Torun, Faculty of Fine Arts; since 1947 (until 1953), he was briefly staying in Tri-City where in 1949–1950 he assumed the position of Rector. He came to the Sopot School thanks to an old, pre-war friendship with Jacek Żuławski. Wodyński was a former student of Wojciech Wajs at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow; there he met Jacek Żuławski who was studying under Felicjan Kowarski. When Prof. Kowarski moved to Warsaw, Żuławski followed him to finish his studies at the School of Fine Arts there (it became an Academy in 1932). No wonder the professor saw Jacek as his successor. Wodyński, already living in Warsaw at that time, maintained close contacts with Kowarski's studio. Therefore, after Żuławski had left for Józef Pankiewicz's studio in Paris, it was Wodyński who became Kowarski's assistant.

⁵ See: [Kazimierz Tomorowicz], "Ramowy program szkolnictwa artystycznego plastyki w Polsce. Projekt Związku Polskich Artystów Plastyków," *Przegląd Artystyczny. Biuletyn informacyjny Związku Zawodowego Polskich Artystów Plastyków* no. 1 (September 1945): 4, quoted from: <https://kpbc.umk.pl/Content/215903/Publikacja-WiMBP-070727.pdf>, accessed June 03, 2021.

⁶ Born on June 21, 1894 in Lviv, *ibidem*, she began studying art history before the First World War, which she later continued in Italy, see: Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, Collection: Personal Files of Employees: "Janina Ebenberger-Orzechowska," ref. E1.

⁷ Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, Collection: Employees' Personal Files: "Janina Ebenberger-Orzechowska," ref. E1: Declaration by Zofia Łepkowska, and Statement by Maria Sobolewska.

⁸ Jan Chranicki knew Stanisław Teisseyre from Lviv before the war. Teisseyre was born in Lviv, Chranicki chose to live there, see: Helena Hohensee-Ciszewska, "Jan Chranicki. 1906–1976," *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, R. XXXIX, no. 1, (1977): 110. (110–111); Anna Gosieniecka, „Jan Chranicki 3.II.1906–11.V.1976,” *Gdańskie Studia Muzealne*, vol. 1 (1976): 224. (223–224).

⁹ Currently, since 1972, the National Museum in Gdansk.

¹⁰ Piotrków County, Lodz Voivodeship. Biographical data of Teresa Sierant, see: Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, Collection: Personal Files of Employees: "Teresa Sierant-Mikicicz," ref. S 158: Personal Survey.

¹¹ At that time, only three universities in Poland had such a right: in Warsaw, Poznan and Krakow (Jagiellonian).

¹² Marian Arszyński was admitted to the MA studies in art history in Poznan only a few years later (he studied in years 1955–1958).

¹³ After Dettloff's statement commenting on Stalin's death. As a result, "on March 20, 1953, members of the University of Poznan Senate stated that »the educational influence of Fr. Prof. Dettloff on academic youth is definitely harmful,« and they decided that »further activity of the above-mentioned professor at any Polish University is impossible«, and then issued a request to the »citizen Minister« imploring him to immediately cease the professional relationship with Fr. Prof. Dettloff." Their wish was granted on the same day, quoted from: <https://poznan.ipn.gov.pl/pl7/aktualnosci/179674,Wyklad-Sprawa-księży-profesora-Szczesny-Dettloffa-Poznan-7-marca-2023.html>, accessed June 17, 2023; see: Piotr Grzelczak, "Sprawa ks. Szczęsnego Dettloffa. UAM 1953," *Artium Quaestiones* vol. XXII (2011): 79–99.

¹⁴ She was employed there from November 1, 1954 to March 31, 1963.

¹⁵ Jacek Kriegseisen, *Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki Oddział Gdański 1955–2015. W 60. rocznicę powstania* (Gdańsk: Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, Oddział Gdański, 2014).

¹⁶ Helena Hohensee-Ciszewska, "Jan Chranicki. 1906–1976," *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, R. XXXIX, no. 1 (1977): 110 (110–111); Anna Gosieniecka, „Jan Chranicki 3.II.1906–11.V.1976,” *Gdańskie Studia Muzealne* vol. 1 (1976): 224 (223–224).

¹⁷ An interview with Teresa Sierant, conducted on March 26, 2022.

¹⁸ See: The decision issued by the Polish President on January 18, 1996, concerning awarding decorations, Polish Monitor, 1996, No. 16, item 212.7; cf.: Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, Collection: Personal Files of Employees: "Teresa Sierant," ref. S. 158.

¹⁹ See: Krystyna Mellin, Teresa Sierant, „Kartuzi i powiat kartuski. Stan z września 1958,” in *Zabytki Województwa Gdańskiego*. Table no. 6 (Gdańsk: Muzeum Pomorskie w Gdańsku/Konserwator Wojewódzki Gdański/Okręgowa Komisja Opieki nad Zabytkami), 3–11. MNG Library, DZ-15051, reference number L III 832.

²⁰ Teresa Sierant, "Sąd Ostateczny" *Hansa Memlinga* (Gdańsk: Muzeum Pomorskie, 1959). MNG Library, reference number L II 4354.

²¹ Teresa Sierant, *Przewodnik po wystawie malarstwa flamandzkiego i holenderskiego XVII wieku* (Gdańsk: Muzeum Pomorskie w Gdańsku, 1960). Biblioteka MNG, sygn. L II 4069 [Teresa Sierant, *Guide to the exhibition of Flemish and Dutch paintings of the 17th century*]. MNG Library, reference number L II 4069.

²² Teresa Sierant, *Renesansowe kamieniczki*, from the series: Zabytki Gdańska (Gdańsk: Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, b.r.w.). MNG Library, reference number L II 5146.

²³ Prof. Roman Wapiński received his habilitation degree in humanities in 1964, see entry: Roman Wapiński, https://www.gedanopedia.pl/gdansk/?title=WAPI%C5%83SKI_ROMAN.

²⁴ Who, *nota bene*, was also a student of Teresa Sierant.

²⁵ Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, Collection: Files of Employees: "Teresa Sierant," ref. S. 158: Extract from the marriage certificate - copy.

²⁶ In 1980, she was elected vice-president of the Scholl's NSZZ Solidarność Committee.

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