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**Ethnographic Museum
Branch of the National Museum in Wrocław
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Madness. The Case of Marian Henel – the Lecher from Branice

5 October 2024 – 16 February 2025

Curator: Dr hab. Piotr Oszczanowski

Eleven unusual rugs, also described as *gobelins*, with the largest measuring over 6m in length and 3m in width, as well as dozens of self-portrait and posed photographs are shown in the Ethnographic Museum in the first ever exhibition presenting works by Marian Henel (1926–1993), a long-term patient of the Hospital for Psychiatric and Neurological Disorders in Branice. Henel's work is considered nowadays one of the world's best examples of art therapy treatment carried out in psychiatric hospitals.

Marian Henel, called Maniúś by the hospital staff, and renamed by the press “devil’s brood” or “the lecher from Branice”, was affected by sex-based disturbances, and was an ambiguous and controversial figure. The rugs, drawings and photographs made by Henel are unique representations of the so-called Art Brut, i.e. works of art created by persons with no artistic preparation or suffering from mental disorders.

During his first seven years spent in the psychiatric hospital in Branice, Henel worked in the hospital weaving workshop, making thick cotton and linen fabrics used for sewing underwear for patients.

In 1968 he was accepted in the Workshop for the Expression of Psychopathological Art, founded by Stanisław Wodyński, an instructor in occupational therapy. The activities comprised painting, drawing, sculpture and weaving classes, where the autonomous creative processes undertaken by patients were treated as a form of therapy through art. Henel joined the weaving workshop attracted by the idea of working in a separate room, containing a large three-metre wide vertical loom.

Initially, he produced custom-made rugs according to the provided patterns and specifications. Museum visitors can see his first creation – featuring the coat of arms of a medical school, inscribed “Salus aegroti suprema lex” (the highest law is the good of the patient). A snake draped around a cogwheel, placed against a sombre dark blue background, is perfectly executed, and heralds Henel’s growing artistic talent.



The second piece, also made to order by Henel, is also shown in this exhibition, represents a eulogy of non-pharmacological methods of psychiatric treatment, depicted as a group of three Renaissance musicians, with the inscription “Verbum, gaudium, labor et musica... etiam medicina” (word, joy, work and music... this is also medicine). The theme of this gobelin was imposed on Henel but its form, i.e. ornaments and colours, was chosen by the artist himself, and executed to perfection.

This and the subsequent works were designed using graph paper, where a single box represents each knot of the woven fabric. Later pieces were Henel's own creations, made by him-



self, and they are the most interesting in terms of their composition – natural and harmonious – and content – recognised as indecent, controversial and disrespectful of social norms.

The works featured mainly naked overweight women, rarely men, nurses in their white uniforms and caps, buttocks pointing towards the observer, and erotic scenes. Among the images designed and produced by Henel, there are also images of ejaculation, menstruation, urination and defecation, apart from figures of hanged bodies, witches, ghosts and human-animal creatures. Looking at these pieces of woven art by Henel, „one should bear in mind the fact that perception of the world is different for psychiatric patients, affected by psychotic episodes, delusions and hallucinations” – suggested Dr Anna Stelięga in her essay included in the publication accompanying the exhibition.

These tapestries also feature monstrous animals from fairy tales – frogs and toads, snakes, flies, scorpions, cats and various worms. Stelięga draws attention to their magical aspect, as well as their complex symbolism present in different cultures and religions. A toad is a symbol of lust and pride, but also of a fat woman. A worm means sin, while a beetle suggests darkness and sexual ambiguity. An owl is a symbol of wisdom and loneliness. Bats are the creation of evil spirits or phantoms of the dead, while butterflies bring to mind promiscuity and carelessness.

Henel worked on a frame with stretched warp, tying by hand knots on wool yarn. His weaving materials were leftovers from a carpet factory in Kietrz. Henel looked for the longest possible pieces of yarn in those hefty bales of wool, sometimes weighing over 100 kilograms, and made them into smaller hanks sorted by colour, painstakingly gathering his supplies.

During the period of twenty years spent in therapy in the Workshop of the Expression of Psychopathological Art, apart from creating his gobelins, Marian Henel also pursued his other passion – photography. The exhibition showcases dozens of black-and-white photographs which he took in hundreds, repeatedly correcting takes and frames until he obtained the desired effect. He developed the negatives himself, showing his great creativity in the process, despite the lack of knowledge about technical and optical equipment.

Visitors are able to view photographs showing Henel in erotic poses. He consistently modified his image, aiming towards a male/female chimera. He deliberately ate more to put on weight and obtain a more rounded silhouette. He also created special bras and tights to enhance his

figure, removed body hair, and posed for his photographs wearing nurses uniforms and putting on wigs. Later on he also took interest in the art of animation, using puppets made to resemble himself, which he then placed to mimic different stages of a sexual intercourse.

Details of Henel's life prior to his hospitalisation are mainly known from his own recollections. He was an unwanted child, orphaned at an early age, later escaping from a series of carers who maltreated him. He had six years of primary schooling. After the Second World War, Henel was employed by the then infamous Department of Public Security (UB) in Kluczbork. According to Dr Bożusław Habrat, "although Henel was employed as a stoker in their boiler room, he claimed that he was willingly involved in the torture or even execution of prisoners in ways which shocked other tormentors. It is difficult to judge how much of this was the truth, and how much mere sadistic fantasies, but these stories always made a great impression on his listeners".

Henel was later arrested for burning down a barn in the local state-owned farm (the so-called PGR) and sentenced to over a year in prison, from which he was released on suspicion of mental disability. He was then institutionalised in the psychiatric hospital in Branice, where he remained for the rest of his life.

The exhibition in the National Museum in Wrocław was prepared in collaboration with the medical staff of the Bishop Nathan Specialist Hospital in Branicach, and Doctor Bożusław Habrat, specialising in research on addictions, from the Section of Prevention and Treatment of Addictions at the Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology in Warsaw.

The exhibition is accompanied by a dedicated publication.

Dr Anna Steliża, the University of Rzeszów:

The art-therapy creations of Marian Henel are intriguing for the observer due to their internal discords and contradictions. Along with daring erotic images, they always contain idyllic landscapes and fairy-tale creatures surrounded by elaborate botanical ornamentation. Such a combination of elements, together with the material used to make these works, evoke an atmosphere of sublime perversion. In fact, with the use of a vertical tapestry loom, Henel created his 'intimate diaries'. Their shocking imagery is expressed through the medium associated with cosiness, and which – in direct contact – almost instinctively triggered in me a wish to touch, stroke tenderly, or even... grope. Works created by Henel represent, in the aesthetic forms of gobelins, photographs and fancy dress animations, a projection of his erotic fantasies inspired by violence, crime, rape and licentious sex. Henel found in his art a way to release his sexual tensions and a personalised kind of autotherapy. His works escape any popular classifications, are unique, mysterious and puzzling. His art has remained his own domain.

Dr Bożusław Habrat, Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology in Warsaw:

In Poland, the 1970s were a period of attempting an introduction of the issues of sexuality into the public space, mainly interpreted as exposing nudity under the guise of artistic creations. Erotic themes were often camouflaged, and usually limited to the representations of 'more aesthetic' and 'beautiful' female bodies and heteronormative images. Yet in the meantime, in provincial Branice... Henel gave away his erotic pictures, and later also photographs. And they

were not disguised as being 'artistic', a metaphor, an innuendo, but – literally crude, vulgar, and specific, not subdued, tamed by culture and aesthetic norms, just perverse, lewd and shameless... This was many years before for the Western culture, non-heteronormativity became the point of interest, even particular pride and expansiveness. Some galleries specialising in photography were astounded to discover that one of the pioneers expressing "new, liberated erotic art" turned out to be a completely unknown amateur artist from the provincial Branice.

Dr hab. Piotr Oszczanowski, Director of the National Museum in Wrocław:

The exhibition of works created by Marian Henel is neither an easy nor clear task. It was organised by the Ethnographic Museum, branch of the National Museum in Wrocław, because it is the place which enables the most comprehensive display of the wealth and wholeness of human nature, showing the manifestations of perfection and beauty, as well as deep suffering and demise. Art has curative properties, even when clumsily created, but it is also honest and offers respite. Did Henel find solace in his work, did it allow him to forget about his identity and his everyday experiences? Was it his safe haven, or – just the opposite – another instrument of provocation? Where did he find inspiration for his works of art? Were they a direct artistic representation of his intellectual disability and of the permanent feeling of exclusion which had troubled him since childhood? Perhaps it was a particular figment of his imagination? There is a wealth of similar questions. One thing remains certain – just as in "The Painted Bird" by Jerzy Kosiński, the images of the world depicted by Henel are suffused by cruelty and extreme alienation. However, this world enables us to realise the extent of human capabilities, always and forever a human being.

Marta Derejczyk, Head of the Ethnographic Museum in Wrocław:

In Branice, Marian Henel succeeded in obtaining for himself a large degree of autonomy and unprecedented quality of working conditions for an amateur artist. His status of a psychiatric patient removed him from any restrictions connected with censorship. Thus, Henel operated in a certain way on the periphery of society, in highly particular conditions, where all the common principles of everyday life in society become suspended. The hospital system, by many described as totalitarian, with a clear hierarchical divide between staff and patients, in this singular aspect – presenting content normally excluded from art or expressed in a more covert way – allowed for a greater freedom of expression. Reflection on Henel's art can extend both the scope of what we traditionally interpret as art, and our understanding of humanity in its wide variety of aspects, also those of a dark nature. What can we see looking at Henel's work? Probably, all of us notice something different. Tales that emerged around the famous rugs from Branice are often as fascinating as the artefacts themselves. However, if we imagine that every aspect of diversity is a mirror in which we can see, above all, our own reflection, then it is possible to understand that Henel left us a legacy of a house of unusual, distorting mirrors.

The exhibition is aimed at adult visitors. It showcases exhibits whose contents may be unsuitable for some viewers, such as violence, nudity, eroticism, or may be harmful towards some individuals or groups of people, which do not respect contemporary sensibilities.