National Museum in Wrocław

**The greatest plagiarism of all time. Historicism in furniture making**

**5 November 2024 – 23 February 2025**

**A view from an entirely new perspective on what is the most puzzling, undervalued, or even despised phenomenon in art history. This is the first time that a Polish museum has shown such an extensive assembly of antique furniture from the late 19-th cent. period of Historicism. The exhibition showcases over 200 artefacts (examples of furniture, artistic crafts, and paintings) from the collection of the National Museum in Wrocław, and on loan from other institutions and private individuals. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition is the fruit of a few decades of research conducted by Małgorzata Korżel-Kraśna, a specialist in antique furniture.**

The main purpose of this exhibition is to show the trend of Historicism from a completely new perspective, and prove that it cannot be treated only and exclusively as copying styles from the past.

”Starting from the mid-19th-cent., due to the rapid economic growth, new machines, materials, previously unknown technologies and mass production made their appearance. This posed entirely new demands on artists and other creators”– says Małgorzata Korżel-Kraśna, curator of the exhibition. “In the face of such momentous changes, they adopted an attitude of actively exploring the previously unknown possibilities, and used them to copy and reproduce works of old masters which were treated as perfect models, representing a variety of historical styles: Romanism, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, and Classicism. This approach did not arise from the lack of their own concepts of artistic form but from the need to adapt to the new challenges of the dramatically changing world”.

A valid reason for organising the exposition focused on Historicism is the fact of being now in a similarly breakthrough moment for our civilisation, which the world is currently experiencing.

”We are faced with a question about the human condition, and about our openness towards the use of modern technologies such as artificial intelligence and 3D printing” – says the curator, Małgorzata Korżel-Kraśna. “Future generations will evaluate what was the creative stance we adopted towards our present challenges. Will artificial intelligence take over the artistic endeavours of humanity? Or will it simply support them?”

The collection of furniture dating from the second half of the 19th cent. and the early 20th cent. in the National Museum in Wrocław numbers around 350 artefacts, illustrating the development of carpentry and joinery in the period of Historicism, Secession, and Art déco, mainly from Central Europe. The collection was assembled mostly in the 1940s and 1950s, thanks to the transfers from various institutions and museum repositories operating in Lower Silesia. However, its largest part – almost one-third – was acquired by the Museum in the period 1997–2022 as a result of a purposeful strategy aimed at increasing the collection representing the neo-styles of the period of Historicism. The adoption of this strategy in the 1990s was dictated by the need to increase the Museum’s resources with factory-produced artefacts, which were previously undervalued and dismissed.

The largest group in the collection comprises neo-Renaissance and neo-Baroque furniture, whereas there are fewer examples of neo-Rococo, neo-Classicism, and eclectic style, whilst neo-Gothic is represented by just a few items. Among the latter are a wardrobe featuring a scene of the Last Supper made in the Heinrich Sauermann factory in Flensburg around 1900, a neo-Rococo chest of draws from the Philipp Richter works in Dresden, a perfectly executed neo-Baroque table from Brunswick, and neo-Renaissance armchairs from the Viennese factory of Friedrich Otton Schmidt specialising in this style. One should also note neo-Baroque furniture in the Gdansk style.

The most interesting examples of the 20th-cent. pieces on display include chairs of surprising shape designed by painter Józef Deskur (1861–1915), a sofa from the Fledermaus club by the Austrian designer Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956). Moreover, there are also factory-produced items typical of that era such as: a table from the most famous Thonet furniture factory, and chairs from the Polish factory “Mazowia”. Silesian furniture production is represented by exhibits made in the Cieplice School of Woodcarving founded in 1902, e.g. a set of bedroom furniture.

The exhibition also highlights the role of museums of artistic crafts, first created exactly in the period of Historicism, in order to support craftsmen and the furniture industry through the presentation of their products, exchange of experience and design. They were also meant to favour the new furniture design, and encourage the increased quality of production by comparing output of different manufacturers.

“On 27 November 2024 we celebrate the 125th anniversary of the opening of the Silesian Museum of Artistic Crafts and Antiquities (Schlesisches Museum für Kunstgewerbe und Altertümer) in Wrocław. Although this anniversary is not directly related to the history of the National Museum in Wrocław, yet it is a significant event” – says Dr hab. Piotr Oszczanowski. ”After all, a part of the present day collection of artistic crafts originated from that pre-war institution, which was then one of the most important and best-endowed museums in Central Europe”.

The catalogue accompanying the exhibition, entitled “Meble drugiej połowy XIX i początku XX wieku” [Furniture from the second half of the 19th cent. and the early 20th cent.], constitutes an impressive conclusion of the scientific research and presentation of furniture in the collection of the National Museum in Wrocław, which is also one of its best documented collections.