Zofia Stryjeńska: Women in the Warsaw Town Square. Our Lady, Peasant Mother, Pagan Goddess

Katelyn McKenzie Sheffield

Brigham Young University - Provo

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd

Part of the Art Practice Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Zofia Stryjeńska: Women in the Warsaw Town Square.

Our Lady, Peasant Mother, Pagan Goddess.

Katelyn McKenzie Sheffield

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Martha Moffitt Peacock, Chair
James R. Swensen
Mark J. Johnson

Department of Visual Arts
Brigham Young University
June 2013

Copyright © 2013 Katelyn McKenzie Sheffield
All Rights Reserved
ABSTRACT

Zofia Stryjeńska: Women in the Warsaw Town Square.
Our Lady, Peasant Mother, Pagan Goddess.

Katelyn McKenzie Sheffield
Department of Visual Arts, BYU
Master of Arts

In this thesis I consider the unique position that Polish artist Zofia Stryjeńska (1891-1974) occupied during the interwar period. Lauded during her time as the most popular artist in Poland, the acceptance of Stryjeńska’s female voice in representing a national vocabulary was unprecedented and deserves closer examination. I assert that Poland’s history of oppression created a unique environment where women as archetypal figures often took on masculine roles. These ‘transgressive types’ were visible in the literature and art of the 19th and 20th centuries. Stryjeńska’s art, as well as her behavior, capitalized on these transgressive traditions.

Women played an important role as visual and ideological figures within the national mythologies of Poland, and while these mythologies situated women as authorities in protecting, cultivating, and renewing the land, and by extension the nation, few women actually achieved the status of shaping them. Zofia Stryjeńska was an example of one who did. At the age of twenty-one Zofia cut her hair, dressed as her brother, and, as a boy, enrolled in the academy of fine art in Munich. This act found precedence in the years of Polish imagery and it ultimately allowed her to create a space for herself and her art.

This thesis pays particular attention to Stryjeńska’s part in the 1928 renovation of the Warsaw town square. Like many other artists at this time, she worked in many mediums and employed folk-art motifs and styles in the quest to create a truly ‘Polish’ style. Stryjeńska’s art drew on national images of Polish women as the Virgin Mary, the good Polish Mother, and Pagan Goddess. Idealized tropes, such as these, often represented a disconnect between everyday social norms and the greater ideals of a national identity. Zofia Stryjeńska embodied this juxtaposition. Her art drew on national images of Polish women filled with blurred gender boundaries. These images, prominent for centuries, at once empowered Polish women while also being relegated safely to the abstract realm of legend and myth. These female ideals, therefore, served as less of a threat to the rigid gender expectations that were a par of everyday Polish life. Zofia Stryjeńska was an example of a woman who laid claim to the female ideals of Polish culture. She used myth to define her behavior; her studies in Munich, and by doing so launched her life into the realm of myth, creating a sensationalized image more legend than reality.

Keywords: Zofia Stryjeńska, Polish Art, National Myth, Female Artist, Gender Reversal.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of many people. Most of all, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Martha Peacock. Her enthusiasm and passion for art history drew me to this discipline, and has continued to inspire me. Her example has shaped who I am as a student, a teacher, an academic, and a person. Thank you for having faith in me. I also want to thank the members of my graduate committee for their expertise and encouragement, and my family for their love and support.

My continued study of Polish language and culture, and my research in Poland, were made possible by the federally funded Foreign Language Area Studies (FLAS) scholarship. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the passionate scholars of Polish studies whose excellent research and insights I build upon.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures ............................................................................................................................................. v

Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 1

National Myth, Cultural Authority, and Gender ..................................................................................... 2

Key Events in the Construction of National Myth (966-1918) ............................................................... 7

A Brief Artistic Biography .................................................................................................................. 15

Circumstances of the Interwar period (1918-1939) .............................................................................. 24

Vernacular Craft and National Identity ............................................................................................ 27

Female Precedence ............................................................................................................................. 29

Stryjeńska and Feminist Theory ........................................................................................................ 31

1928 Redecoration of the Warsaw Town Square .............................................................................. 38

Women Carrying Water ...................................................................................................................... 47

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 54

Figures ................................................................................................................................................ 56

Bibliography ...................................................................................................................................... 86
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Jan Matejko. *Polonia*. 1863.

Figure 2. Artur Grottger. *Pożegnania Powstańca (Farewell Insurgent.*) 1866.

Figure 3. Artur Grottger. *Powitanie Powstańca (Welcoming the Insurgent.*) 1866.

Figure 4. Munich Academy of Fine Arts (seated second from the left—Zofia Lubańska/Tadeusz Grzymała). 1911/1912. ARS.

Figure 5. Zofia Stryjeńska. *Boh*. 1917. Industrial Musem, Kraków.

Figure 6. Zofia Stryjeńska. *Pogoda*. 1917. Industrial Musem, Kraków.

Figure 7. Zofia Stryjeńska. *Lelum*. 1917. Industrial Musem, Kraków.

Figure 8. Józef Czajkowski. Outside the main hall of the Polish pavilion, Paris. 1925.

Figure 9. Józef Czajkowski and Zofia Stryjeńska. Inside the main hall of the Polish pavilion, Paris. 1925.

Figure 10. Józef Czajkowski and Zofia Stryjeńska. Inside the main hall of the Polish pavilion, Paris. 1925.


Figure 14. Popular Polish postcard published circa 1981.

Figure 15. Anonymous plate. *Emilia Plater*. 19th century.

Figure 16. Wojciech Kossak. *Emilia Plater w potyczce pod Szwlami*. 1904.

Figure 17. Wojciech Kossak *Orłeta—Obrona cemetnarza*. 1904.

Figure 18. Artur Grottger. *Cykl Lituania—Widzenia*. 1864.

Figure 19. Kamienica Zakrzewski side on the Old Warsaw Square. 1929. Warsaw.

Figure 20. Zofia Stryjeńska. Watercolor of the Zakrzewski side. 1929.
Figure 21. Kamienica Number 13 from Świętojańska street. 1928. Warsaw.

Figure 22. Old Warsaw square under construction, view of the Zakrzewski side. c. 1948-1952. Warsaw.

Figure 23. Murals by Zofia Stryjeńska. Women with Water, number 13 on the Zakrzewski side. 2012. Warsaw.


Figure 25. Zofia Stryjeńska. Śmiesz Dyngus. 1925.

Figure 26. Jean-August-Dominigue Ingres. The Source. 1820-1856.

Figure 27. Wacław Borowski. Nude Woman. c. 1930.

Figure 28. Unknown. Matka Boska Częstochowska/ Czarna Madonna (Black Madonna of Częstochowa). Częstochowa, Poland.

Figure 29. Zofia Stryjeńska. Rodzina rybaka (Family of the Fisherman). After 1935.

Figure 30. Zofia Stryjeńskak. Our Lady of the Rosery. c. 1950.

Figure 31. Wlastimil Hofman. Madonna. 1901.

Figure 32. Zofia Stryjeńska. Prządka (Spinner). 1953.
Introduction

Zofia z Lubańskich Stryjeńska (1891-1974) was one of the most acclaimed artists in Poland during the period between the two World Wars. In the 27 years spanning 1912 to 1939 she completed well over 1,000 individual works, including 25 large commissions. These works embodied a remarkable array of media, and many were endlessly reproduced as illustrations, toys, and wallpapers. In 1928, midway through her career, Stryjeńska was commissioned by the government to design and oversee the renovation of the old town square in Warsaw. Although almost all her carefully planned facade ornamentations, color program, and many murals were destroyed during the Second World War, Stryjeńska's town square project occupies an important and heretofore unanalyzed example of her prominence. The overwhelming acceptance of her art is evidence of what I will define as her ‘cultural authority.’ Stryjeńska drew selectively from Polish history in order to construct a ‘national myth.’ During her own time and in subsequent years Stryjeńska's perceived dedication to promoting a unified national art earned her the highest praise as well as the greatest censure. Her gender played a complex role in the production and reception of this national style. Stryjeńska succeeded in using Polish history, female precedence, as well as current social and political circumstances for the benefit of her art. Her town square project exemplifies the scale on which she was allowed to shape public identity and spaces. My thesis will examine the role that gender played in Stryjeńska’s acceptance as a cultural authority in the creation of a national myth, paying specific attention to her part in the 1928 renovation of

1 In Polish, a woman's maiden name is often written this way. Directly translated, "Zofia z Lubańskich Stryjeńska" means "Zofia from the Lubański, Stryjeńska." Lubański is her family name, Stryjeńska her married one. Also of import is the grammatical modification to name endings. In Polish last names are modified according to gender and part of speech. For example the feminine, Stryjeńska, would be used when referring to Zofia, while the masculine, Stryjeński, would follow her husband Karol's name. Lubańskich, is the plural genitive form of the singular nominative Lubański. Lubańska would be used when referring to female Zofia before her marriage.

2 For the most comprehensive catalogue of her work, see Światosław Lenartowicz ed., Zofia Stryjeńska: Wystawa w Muzeum Narodowym w Krakowie (Kraków: Muzeum Narodowym w Krakowie, 2008).
the Warsaw town square and the two enduring frescos from that same project—salvaged and restored after World War II.

**National Myth, Cultural Authority, and Gender**

The theoretical framework supporting much of my discussion centers on the observation that ‘histories’ are selectively and subjectively constructed. The acknowledgment that the writing of history is mediated by scholars and historians—who operate according to their personal, cultural, social, and gendered biases—has become an important part of post-modern theoretical models. The concept of a ‘national mythology’ seeks to emphasize this interpretive aspect of ‘history production.’³ For my purposes, the term ‘myth’ will not serve as an opposite for ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ but rather will represent a story or image that is posited as real, true, and important. This definition of ‘myth’ parallels the function of Edward Said’s term ‘imagined,’ which is used not to mean ‘false’ or ‘made-up’ but rather ‘perceived.’⁴ The construction and dissemination of ‘myth’ is facilitated by any number of cultural, social, and political factors. This thesis will highlight artistic production, and more specifically, visual images, as one invaluable site of ‘national myth’ creation. The idea of a ‘national mythology,’ or a collection of myths that support a sense of national identity, has become a common concept driving much of recent Polish historical and literary discourse. British historian Norman Davies, the leading authority on Polish history, writes:

> Some nations have more need for their myths than do others. […] Political adversity over many generations seems to have created [in Poland] the sort of imaginative climate in which myths can flourish. Polish culture, and in particular literature, art and historiography, is full of instances where the national imagination triumphs over realism.⁵


Davies traces the narrative of Poland from its beginnings through to its present day, and attributes much of Poland’s ‘imaginative climate’ to the period of partitions (1795-1918) when Poland was divided among its powerful neighbors. More than a century of adversity and oppression found expression in Poland’s grand Romantic traditions. The icons of this period—poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), painter Jan Matejko (1838-1893), and composer Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)—are Davies primary examples illustrating the monumentality of Polish ‘national mythology.’ All three reimagined Poland’s past in order to legitimize its future. To this day these men occupy revered positions in Polish history. The stories and images they created are imparted as real, true, and important representations of Polish history.

While helpful in introducing Poland’s specific predilection for national imagination, Davies’ ideas are somewhat removed from recent developments in the theoretical study of nationalism and national identity production. Benedict Anderson’s book *Imagined Communities* is one such important contribution. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson defines the nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as a part of that group. Nationalism scholar Adam Smith further asserts that nationalists need to be able to tell a particular type of story about the nation and its importance—a story that resonates emotively with people, that glorifies the nation, and that is easily transmitted and absorbed. In short, nations are perceived as cultural artifacts, ‘imagined’ by those they encompass.

These ideas of a socially constructed concept of a collective identity in general, and a national identity specifically, have warranted further revision. Critics have focused on the need for a more conscientious definition and application of these theories. Sociologist Duncan Bell

---

makes an important contribution to the discussion as he focuses more directly on the process of forming national identity. Bell distinguishes between the notions of ‘memory’ and ‘myth.’ Simply put, he defines memory as directly related to individuals, who must be the original source of the memory. This solidification of definition has a direct impact on theories of ‘collective memory’ that dominate the studies of collective identity formation. Bell defines any generational transmission of memory as myth. Therefore, I propose that a more accurate term would be ‘collective mythology.’ Bell also employs a ‘social agency’ approach, asserting that the transmission of myth takes place as memory becomes external to the individual and therefore subject to social selection and interpretation. In other words, as a grandmother shares a memory with her grandchildren, this memory becomes subject to multiple interpretations and social agency is employed. This thesis will likewise maintain the importance of social agency in identity production.

The concept of social agency in the production of an imagined tradition/national mythology leads us to an important question. If, as Bell suggests, agency is involved, who then operates as the agent? While this question opens multiple avenues of inquiry, for now I will simply submit that artists often play an important role as agents of national mythology. This is not because they have more social agency, but because often the results of their social agency—works of art—are made visible to a larger audience. This is perhaps most true of public works of art. As will become apparent, Zofia Stryjeńska was an artist devoted to producing art for the public. I will use the term ‘cultural authority’ to describe Zofia Stryjeńska, an artist/agent who contributed to national mythologies through her works of art. Her work was widely accepted by

---

the people and promoted by the government. In doing so, they acknowledged her authority in shaping and giving voice to a national mythology.

While this application of national mythology is prominent in the field of Polish studies, most scholars have focused on either its production during Poland’s Romantic period (1822-1864), or its influence on the post-World-War-II Soviet era (1944-1989). These discussions effectively bypass the interwar period. This trend is most likely due to an interest in the role of national myth during times of oppression. However, the interwar period provides an equally rich interval that privileges a narrative of unification. Furthermore, most studies have focused primarily on literature and only secondarily on the visual arts. As a part of this trend Davies has identified several prominent mythologies that permeate Poland’s perceived identity through literature. Three of these prominent national myths, put to words by the great Polish Romantic Poets and persistent through the Soviet era, are: the Antemurale myth, that identifies Poland as a bulwark against that which is not European whether it be infidels, nomads, raiders, or communists; the Piast myth, that identifies the Polish people with the soil and the peasantry; and the Polakcatolica myth, that stresses the messianic role of Catholicism in Poland’s destiny.11 These three myths play an integral role in the formation of Stryjeńska’s work in which she demonstrated a remarkable ability to draw from Polish national mythologies such as these for the benefit of her art.

A deeper look into these specific Polish national myths reveals the central role of national female archetypes. These female subjects personify Poland and represent her as a protector,

---


10 Davies, “Polish National Mythologies.”

producer, and rejuvenator. The specific figures of Matka Boska (Our Lady), Peasant Mother, and Slavic Goddess are repeatedly called on to exemplify Poland in literature and in the visual arts. A recent publication titled *Women in Polish Cinema* asserts that such iconic images of Polish femininity can, at times, serve to reverse gender roles. In the case of Poland, oppression over centuries has facilitated gender role reversal in national mythologies. Men in an oppressed nation struggle to provide for and protect their families. In a larger sense this corresponds with their struggle to cultivate and protect their nation. Polska (Poland) as a female personification is often depicted as having an active role while men are often portrayed expressing the futility of their position, stripped of pride and action. Gender-bending personifications will be more fully discussed later as well as their fascinating connections to the figure of Zofia Stryjeńska.

Strong female images are at the heart of Polish national mythologies. Furthermore, by examining these symbolic women I hope to uncover important perceptions of gender that push beyond the reality of myth as they influence the behavior and reception of women in the interwar period. As the partitions came to an end in 1918, women laid claim to the images and ideals of patriotism and freedom that had been so solidly established during the years of oppression. Stryjeńska is an important voice in the new period of freedom. Her art drew on the strong female subjects of national myths. Her women are protectors, providers, and rejuvenators. As a

---

12 For a thorough discussion of this idea, see Carol Coulter, *The Hidden Tradition: Feminism, Women and Nationalism in Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993).

13 In Ewa Mazierska and Elżbieta Ostrowska, *Women in Polish Cinema* (New York: Berghan Books, 2006), one particularly strong example of this is laid forward by the 1928 silent film *Hurricane* (*Huragan*), directed by Józef Lejtes. Ostrowska argues that it presents the whole range of iconic images of femininity, all of which were derived from the Romantic figurations. The film is set during the November uprising of 1863. Several women appear throughout the film exhibiting different virtues connected with patriotism. Women participate in public demonstrations. An old woman forfeits her life by taking in wounded insurgents. A young woman sets aside her youth to act as mother, feeding her emaciated and dying love. Another young woman dresses as a man, rejecting the norms of femininity and participates in the fight. An angry mother calls men to arms, as her son lies dying, cradled in her embrace. These women are idealized images of courage, selflessness, strength, and action.
female artist, Stryjeńska not only claims the subjects of these iconic women as her own, but also capitalizes on the social freedoms they represent. Stryjeńska is a particularly fascinating example of the relationship between concepts of national identity production and gender.

Women played an important role as visual and ideological figures within the national mythologies of Poland. While these mythologies situate women as authorities in protecting, cultivating, and renewing the land, few women actually achieved the status of shaping them. Stryjeńska is an example of one who did. Because of her success, she was given the cultural authority to *re*imagine spaces and myths. She lays claim to these female ideals in her artistic selection and rendering of a national mythology. While this thesis will devote some effort to breaking down the process of constructing a national identity through the use of collective mythologies—as seen in Stryjeńska’s town square renovation and two remaining murals—its primary objective will be to explore the relationship between Stryjeńska’s position as a cultural authority and her gender. Throughout her life Stryjeńska showed a remarkable ability to both fulfill and disrupt gender expectations. This allowed her to create a space for herself and her art as a recognized source of national identity.\(^{14}\)

**Key Events in the Construction of National Myth (966-1918)**

In order to understand Stryjeńska’s town square, key events in the construction of a Polish national myth must be considered. The following events will aid in breaking down the process of constructing a national identity by defining some of the privileged and subjectively

perpetuated events of the Polish past. In keeping with earlier discussion, these ‘myths’ are posited as real, true, and important. They have contributed to shaping Polish national identity. As a whole, the events included in this section will serve to illustrate a myth of division and unification. Most scholarship focuses on the messianic imagery associated with this rise and fall of Polish political autonomy, emphasizing the image of Poland as Christ. Periods of oppression are identified with crucifixion, and periods of freedom with resurrection. While there is abundant evidence to support this messianic theme, I propose that too narrow of a view of this series of events obscures other important avenues for discussion. I will later draw upon these basic events in order to explain Stryjeńska’s specific use of female archetypes as an integral part of Polish national myths.

As an artist, Stryjeńska invented a stunning and articulate visual vocabulary. Through her art she contributed to national mythologies. Many contemporary historians have taken an interest in the aesthetic dimension of nationalism and the role that art played in establishing a shared sense of identity particularly in Central and Eastern Europe during the modern period. Literary scholar David Carroll writes, "It was above all poets, historians, and artists who created the collective ideas and the mythological treasures of the various national movements." Stryjeńska, well aware of the political climate of her day, drew on this historical pattern with overwhelming success, thereby becoming part of this process of creating and transmitting "collective ideas and mythological treasures."

The first important date is 966, when Mieszko I, duke of Poland, consolidated the Polish state and converted Poland to Christianity. This pivotal step of unification led to Poland’s

---

15 See *Ballady i Romansy* by Adam Mickiewicz.
eventual entry onto the Western European stage. Furthermore, 966 has been referred to as the
date of the 'baptism of Poland' and often identified as not only a moment of unification but also a
defensive measure. The title of 'Christian Nation' provided Poland with a solid link to
Christianized Western Europe and blocked the threat of Western invasion for the sake of God.
The devotion of the majority of the Polish people to Catholicism became, and remains, a
principal unifying force of the culture.\textsuperscript{17} From its beginnings, with a declaration as a Christian
Nation at the threat of invasion, unification was at once a matter of sameness and difference.
Religious conversion served to establish similarities and fight against threatening occupation.

Around 1500, Poland entered its “Golden Age” when its economy, parliamentary system,
science, education, and arts were equal to those of Western Europe. It was during this period of
prominence that Poland staved off attacks from the east and north, rebuffing Russia, Sweden,
and the Ottoman Empire, as well as dealing with a series of Cossack uprisings.\textsuperscript{18} These facts
were privileged by centuries of Polish historians, artists, and scholars who served as cultural
authorities as they privileged certain historical narratives and interpreted historical events. In
doing so they at once shaped the past, present, and future. Furthermore, these glorified events
have given rise to a notion of Poland as the savior of the West and the protector of Christianity.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1569, with the signing of the Treaty of Lublin, the kingdoms of Poland and Lithuania
united under a parliamentary system with an elected monarch. This event formed the Polish-
Lithuanian Commonwealth. A powerful nobility and a weak monarchy lead to political
instability and by 1773, the Polish state had weakened while its neighbors grew strong. This

\textsuperscript{17} For further discussion see Alicja Dybkowska, \textit{Polskie dzieje: od czasów najdawniejszych do
\textsuperscript{18} Dybkowska.
\textsuperscript{19} Jakubowska, 12.
eventually resulted in Poland’s status as a pawn on the international stage. Its three geographic neighbors Russia, Prussia, and Austria allied, invaded and divided Poland into a three-way buffer state. For the next 20 years the dividing lines fluctuated. Finally in 1795, the Polish king Stanisław August Poniatowski was forced to abdicate. Poland ceased to exist as a political entity. Divided among three powerful countries, the next 123 years of Polish history were filled with clandestine organizations, secret revolutionary societies, and a long string of insurrections in all three zones (Russian, Prussian, and Austrian). However hard fought, these uprisings were defeated at every turn. The string of failed insurrections lead to the “Great Emigration” of the 1830’s in which thousands of insurgents, including a majority of the intelligentsia, left Poland for Western Europe, particularly Paris. Living in exile they formed conspiratorial groups and continued their revolutionary activities. Several more revolts were unsuccessful as the century drew to a close. Nevertheless, the Poles continued their attempts to create national solidarity.

Today, Poland is proud of its insurrections, and its constant struggle for freedom. There are monuments in every major city inscribed with long lists of dates chronicling uprising after uprising. Despite their failed outcomes these are still celebrated dates and tokens of pride.

Because of their own political nationalist aspirations, all three occupying powers pursued harsh policies for the purpose of eventually eliminating cultural difference within their respective zones. In all three zones, the Polish language was banned from official and public use. During certain periods in the Prussian Zone, for example, the Catholic Mass was required to be said in German—even in Polish churches. Church lands were taken over, monasteries closed, and in some cases peasants were forced to change religions. Estates were confiscated and the Polish

---

21 Dybkowska.
22 Seton-Watson.
gentry forced off their land. Prussia also moved German settlers from the west into the Polish zone. Various Polish publications were allowed but everything was censored. Polish universities were periodically closed or reorganized. For example, the Polish University of Warsaw was established as a token of good will in 1818, closed from 1831 to 1869, and then changed into a Russian University. The nearly century and a half of partitions divided Poland geographically and socially, obliterated her politically, yet served to bolster her cultural unity as a force of resistance, pride, and historical strength.

Poland's process of self-determination was tied up with the idea of division and unification. The forced boundaries imposed by the partitions served to define Poland's intensified need for cultural unity. The clear division and oppression of Poland and its lack of political unity created a void of sorts. The void itself helped define Polish identity as an ever present need and quest for freedom and unification. Even during times of unification, this void was remembered and transmitted. The boundaries created by the partitions divided Poland both geographically and socially and threatened to divide it culturally. In her book “Out Looking In” Jan Cavanaugh suggests that the Polish intelligentsia’s opposition to cultural oppression can be roughly divided into three emphases: “1) preservation of the cultural heritage; 2) arousal of national consciousness; and 3) demonstration of the distinct character of Polish culture as a justification for claiming independence.” All three goals were accomplished through the arts.

One of the main weapons in the Polish arsenal was the study and dissemination of Polish history. The Polish historian Jerzy Maternicki has noted that “nineteenth-century historical studies in Poland tended to be less objective than those undertaken in the West and were either soul-searching analyses of past political failures that had led to the partitions or a glorification of past

---

23 Ibid.  
achievements aimed at stimulating patriotic sentiment.” Maternicki also investigated how Poles circumvented the official educational systems of the partitioning powers. Children of the gentry and nobility normally began formal education at the age of 10 in public schools, where the study of history was denationalized. At home, however, they typically received patriotic instruction from their mothers learning Polish patriotic songs and memorized verses from books.26

Since politics and political theory could not be addressed openly, Poles discussed the problems of the nation under the guise of philosophy, literature, and the arts. The young romantic poets who appeared from the 1820’s through the 1840’s made a particularly important contribution. Słowacki (1809-1849), Krasiński (1821-1859), Norwid (1821-1883), and above all Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), all represented one of the period’s chief trends, the historicist's search for sources of the national culture in the pagan past. Mickiewicz drew particularly on the middle ages and opposed the virtues of Slavic antiquity to the Latin culture of Poland’s oppressors. Breaking with his training in classical literature, he adopted the ballad and other medieval literary forms that were accessible to all levels of society. He combined folk motifs with themes aimed at arousing patriotism in the reader. Mickiewicz transformed religious imagery and ideas into nationalistic themes and motivations.27 He taught that the aim of art was to inspire people to sacrifice themselves to the greater national and social causes of humanity.

Mickiewicz also contributed a great deal to the consolidation of female archetypes as defenders of national identity. In one of his first narrative poems, Grażyna (1822), Mickiewicz

26 Ibid.
27 Adam Mickiewicz, "Księgi Narodu Polskiego i Pielgrzymstwa Polskiego" (Wrocław: Osslineum,1956).
immortalized a female protagonist by the name of Grażyna.28 The story recounts mythical events that would have taken place at the historic battle of Grunewald in 1410 when Poland and Lithuania defeated and expelled the Teutonic knights. In the poem, Grażyna, the imagined wife of a Polish general, takes up arms, leads her husband’s forces against the knights, and perishes.29 Interestingly, Mickiewicz’s *Grażyna* is supposed to have been Emilia Plater’s inspiration for joining the Polish uprising of November 1830. Emilia Plater (1806-1831) was an actual woman and member of the *szlachta* (nobility) who fought and died alongside her countrymen in the uprising.30 Her part in the insurrection, however, was almost immediately mythologized, and her story rapidly became symbolic of the female protector of the Polish nation—a nation that existed only in the hearts of the people. The heroic figure of Emilia Plater became an international symbol of the ‘true heroism of Polish women.’ In her book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), early American feminist Margaret Fuller gave an account of Emilia Plater who cut her hair to shoulder length, put on men’s cloths, and fought the Russians in the insurrection of 1830.31 Fuller’s understanding of events was very much colored by Mickiewicz. Shortly after Plater’s death Mickiewicz wrote another poem titled *Śmierć pułkownika (Death of the Colonel)* where he promoted her to the rank of Colonel and extolled her leadership in battle.32 Not surprisingly, Mickiewicz took credit not just for inspiring her sacrifice, but for immortalizing her afterward.

28 Adam Mickiewicz, *Grażyna: powieść litewska* (Kraków: Krakowskiej Spółki Wydawniczej, 1928)
29 Grażyna
30 Polish literary scholar Halina Filipowicz points out that Plater was not the only woman who fought in the uprisings. She asserts that Plater’s status as a member of the nobility accounts for that fact that her heroism was raised above the others. Halina Filipowicz, “The Daughters of Emilia Plater” in *Engendering Slavic Literatures*, eds., Pamela Chester and Sibelan Forrester (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): 34-58. For further discussion also see Kazimierz Ilłakowiczówna, “Ogródek Emili Plater” in *Trazymeński zając: Księga dygresji* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1968): 14-15.
31 Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980).
32 *Śmierć Pułkownika (Death of the colonel)*

Jan Matejko (1838-1893), like Adam Mickiewicz, provided monolithic images of Poland as a female figure. Matejko was revered as the great history painter of Poland. His mission, much like Mickiewicz, was to valorize Poland’s history and inspire future generations to action. Matejko’s works were monumental in scale, visually rich, and nationally inclined. Each of his paintings contributed to the production of a ‘collective mythology’ by bringing to life those privileged events of Poland’s past. In his work *Polonia—Rok 1863, Zakuwana Polska* (*Polonia—1863, Poland in Chains*) Matejko painted an image of Polonia, the female personification of Poland (Fig. 1). He and others during this period portrayed her in dresses of black or white—symbols of mourning/death and hope/resurrection. In this painting Polonia is clothed in black, forced to her knees, awaiting her chains after another failed attempt at freedom. The blacksmith’s hammer weighs heavy, as Polonia raises her chin in defiance. The men and children melt helplessly into the background. Just visible behind the women in black, a woman in white is being pulled away by a soldier. Similar images are found in works by Arthur Grottger (1837-1867), a painter and a printmaker working at the same time as Matejko. In his diptych commemorating the same failed insurrection, Grottger tenderly portrays a farewell and a homecoming (Figs. 2-3). The dual virtues of mourning and hope shroud each woman’s form. In the first she blesses her insurgent, her rosary dangling like a weapon from her belt. In the second she forgives him and offers him new hope. These strong female images were at the heart of Polish national mythologies. Products of the 19th century, these women (literary and visual) would go on to shape future representations of Poland as well as ideas of women’s place in the narrative.

---

33 Titles of Matejko’s works include, *The Establishment of Christianity* (*Zaprowadzenie chrześcijaństwa*), *The Battle of Grunwald* (*Bitwa pod Grunwaldem*), *The Union of Lublin* (*Unia Lubelska*), *Jan III Sobieski at the Battle of Vienna* (*Jan III Sobieski pod Wiedniem*), *The Third of May Constitution* (*Konstytucja 3 Maja 1791*), and *The Fall of Poland* (*Rajetan—Upadek Polski*).
Furthermore, because of Mickiewicz, the poet came to be revered as the spiritual leader of the nation. The role of spiritual leader extended to the visual artist as well and was so firmly planted in the Polish psyche that it continued to hold sway for the rest of the century. Stryjeńska quite deliberately laid claim to this heritage. The political nature of her art is inherent in large part due to her continual references back to these Romantic poets. Her cultural authority as an artist was linked with this tradition.

The cycle of division and unification is a summation of events that has persisted throughout Polish history, embedded itself in Polish identity, and replicated itself in the arts. Immortalized by artists and poets alike, these events have contributed to Poland's sense of cultural identity and taken their places in the fabric of a national mythology. Stryjeńska, at a moment when unification had again surfaced as a matter of utmost importance, established herself as a cultural authority using her art to perpetuate the continuity of cultural identity.

A Brief Artistic Biography

Because Stryjeńska is so little known outside of Poland, and even within it today, a brief artistic biography will prove important as background. I have selected events from her life that are particularly important to her later reception as a sensationalized public persona, and that illustrate her adroit manipulation of gender stereotypes. The works I have selected to represent her in this selective overview are primarily based around their usefulness in discussing the town square and its murals. Furthermore they represent her unique voice in constructing and perpetuating the ideas of a Polish national myth.

Zofia Lubańska (1891-1974) was born in Kraków—under Austrian control since 1773—to a working bourgeois family.34 Her father's prosperous position as a well-respected and

---

34 When Poland was partitioned by Russia, Prussia and Austria in the late 18th century, the city of Kraków, located on the southern border, became part of the Austrian province of Galicia. Kraków became
successful craftsman and vendor of leather gloves allowed Zofia access to education. At the age of sixteen she graduated from a craft school for women, which emphasized so-called "women's arts" such as sewing, weaving, and embroidery. Zofia would go on to use this conventional education in a most unconventional way. That same year she quickly completed her exams at a teacher’s seminary, and decided to pursue her love of art. In 1910 upon graduating from a fine arts school for women in Kraków, Zofia, her father, and her younger brother Tadeusz traveled to Austria and northern Italy. The grand art galleries she visited in Vienna, Trieste, and Venice made a deep impression on Zofia and sparked her desire for further study. This would not be easily accomplished, however, because during this period neither the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków nor in Munich allowed women students access to the same artistic education as their male counterparts. 

Undeterred and newly inspired by the world of art beyond Kraków, twenty-year-old Zofia stole her brother’s passport, traveled to Munich, and under his name, Tadeusz Grzymała Lubański, was among the 40 applicants admitted to the Munich Art Academy in 1911 (Fig. 4). Unfortunately, almost nothing is documented about this fascinating period of her life. One of the few sources placing her in Munich was her father. In his diary he recorded, the focus of a struggle for national sovereignty in 1846, during the Kraków Uprising. The uprising was put down, and the Austrian Empire again established control. After the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, Austria granted partial autonomy to Galicia, allowing Polish as the official government language and establishing a provincial Diet. Because of its relative freedom, when compared to other Polish cities of the period, Kraków became a Polish national symbol and a center for culture and art. This was the climate during Zofia’s early years.


37 Świetosław Lenartowicz, Polish scholar and curator at the National Museum of Kraków, verified Zofia's registration in Munich as well as documented her receipt for entrance into the Munich Art Academy in 1911/1912. She studied under Gabriel van Hackl, Hugo von Habermann, Fritz Burger, and
Zosia, on the first day of October, left to study painting in Munich dressed as a boy. She cut her own hair, dressed herself in cloths taken in part from Tadzia [her eldest brother] and in part from Stefcia [her youngest brother], and covered with Tadzia's cloak left early in the morning unrecognized by anyone and taking with her over one hundred marks. Her other things, drawings, and paintings were sent by mail. After nearly two weeks of silence, she reported to us that after battling great obstacles, she was accepted to the royal academy of art.\(^{38}\)

She visited home once during the next months, and her mother spent a short time visiting Zofia in Munich. As with her father's statement, all reports from her family seem to be at the very least unconcerned with her eccentric behavior and at times even supportive of her stay in Munich.\(^{39}\)

According to Polish art historian Joanna Sosnowska, there was some precedence in Poland for such behavior. Sosnowska, however, does not qualify her statement, providing no examples beyond young Zofia to support her assertion.\(^{40}\) The figure of Emilia Plater certainly constitutes some precedence. Both young women cut their hair and dressed as men—Emilia to avail her patriotic duty, Zofia for the benefit of her art. Perhaps this explains Zofia’s father’s matter-of-fact account of her doings, his knowledge of her plans and whereabouts, and his calm unruffled response. However, the idea Plater and her behavior itself found some dissonance in Polish society. Halina Filipowicz asserts, “[Plater’s] mold of heroism was seen as a mixed blessing. She made Poles ill at ease precisely because, as a female soldier, she transgressed the

Fritz Burkhard—see Lenartowicz, 41. For a brief discussion of her time in Munich, see Światowlaw Lenartowicz, “O cyklu romans,” 248-250.
\(^{38}\) “Zosia w dniu 1szym października wyjechała na studja malarskie do Monachium przebrana za chłopca. Dała sobie obciąć włosy ubrawszy się w ubranie częścią Tadzia częścią Stefcia, odziała sobą sto kilkadziesiąt marek. Rzeczy inne i prace rysownicze i malarskie zostały naprzód wysłane na poste remain. Po blisko 2ch tygodniach milczenia doniosła nam, że zwalczywszy wszelkie przeszkody przyjęta została do królewskiej akademii malarskiej...” In Polish, first names are often reduced to diminutives by removing the end of the name, softening the last consonant, and adding the letter 'a.' Therefore, 'Tadzia' refers to Tadeusz, 'Stefcia' to Stefan, and 'Zosia' to Zofia. Stryjeńska and Grońska, 35. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
\(^{39}\) These accounts can likewise be found in Stryjenska and Grońska.
boundaries of “respectable” gender norms.” It would be naive to disregard this mixed view, which leads to further questioning. Were there other examples allowing for such an activity within Eastern Europe during this period? Was this deviation from prescribed gender roles facilitated by her relocation from "eastern" Kraków to "western" Munich? Furthermore, what were the future implications for Zofia's career and artistic production upon her return to Poland? Beneath these perplexing theoretical issues rests the fact that this short and shadowy event in the life of twenty-year-old Zofia would soon become a well-publicized facet of her public character—a character that was sensationalized by the press and distributed as widely as her


42 The topic of "sexual deviance" in Eastern Europe at the turn of the century has recently garnered some attention. *The Journal of the History of Sexuality* dedicated their May 2011 publication specifically to "the construction of sexual deviance in late imperial eastern Europe." Although their topics are spread out geographically—ranging from the Balkans, to Poland, to northern Russia—the authors of these articles present a variety of examples of those marked as "deviant." Several of the articles focus primarily on the act of cross-dressing and gender bending, arguing that these individuals "succeed in making claims on their environment through their sexual behavior." Keely Stauter-Halsted and Nancy M. Wingfield, "Introduction: the Construction of Sexual Deviance in Late Imperial Eastern Europe," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20.2 (2011): 215-224. For further examples of “sexually deviant” female behavior see Christine D. Worobec, “Cross-Dressing in a Russian Orthodox Monastery: The Case of Mariia Zakharova,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20.2 (2011): 336-357; and John E. Bowlt, “Natalia Goncharova and Futurist Theater,” *Art Journal* 49.1 (1990): 44-51.

43 While these first two questions extend beyond the scope of this thesis, they represent future avenues of study. Poland as a nation occupies a fascinating position. Poland historically and presently sees itself as the gateway to the West. To Western eyes however Poland is an outsider, an European 'other.' Nowhere are traditional gender constructs more evident than in Poland's representation of itself to the outside world. This representation, to use Homi Bhabha’s term, *mimics* the Western notion of Poland as an infant, passive and female. Perhaps part of what made Stryjeńska successful was the West's view of Poland as female and other. Her art reflected back to the West stereotypes long associated with the East. Stryjeńska's role in perpetuating the Western view of Poland as young, and needing protection had garnered no scholarship and warrants future treatment. For a general discussion of relations of Poland and the West, see Zdzisław Mach, *Polish National Culture and its Shifting Centers* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2010). For further reading on the concept of *mimicry*, see Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question, Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism" in, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routlage), 95.
As a young woman, her bold journey to Munich not only provided her with access to forbidden training outside of her oppressed homeland, but also put her in a unique gender position within her native country—a position that was already a part of the cultural imagination. Furthermore, it contributed to her prominence and success as an artist.\(^4\)

Stryjeńska later recalled that after a year and a half in Munich she returned to Kraków out of fear that some of her classmates suspected her true gender. From Kraków she launched an extremely popular and prolific career.\(^5\) During the next five years Zofia became an integral member of the Kraków Workshop that was established in 1913. The Kraków Workshop, or \textit{Warsztaty Krakowskie}, was a cooperative of artists and craftsmen who saw themselves as an important part of wide-spread efforts to establish a Polish national style through arts and crafts. They drew on the vernacular forms of homegrown folk art as major sources of inspiration.\(^6\) Zofia continued to work through World War I, and although both her brothers were conscripted into the Austrian army, she wrote only that she visited her brother Tadeusz during his encampment in Nowy Sącz located in the south of present day Poland. Her art outwardly expressed none of the horrors of war that were certainly unfolding around her.

In 1916 Zofia met and married Karol Stryjeński— fellow artist, architect, and a leader of the Kraków Workshop—while working on her first large scale commission. They later had three children together. She was hired to decorate a room in the Industrial Museum located at number 44 Dorota Suchocka, “O Sukcesie Zofii Stryjeńskiej,” \textit{Biuletin Historii Sztuki} 4.1 (1981): 411-436.

\(^5\) As an example of her disruption of gender stereotypes, this event will find striking correlation when discussing the complex images of women in the polish national mythology.
\(^6\) Many Polish designers, architects, artists, and intellectuals believed that their national cultural and political identity had been continually eroded by imperial powers, a conviction that had gathered pace in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For further discussion of Stryjeńska's role in the Kraków workshop see Tadeusz Dobrowolski, \textit{Sztuka Młodej Polski} (Krakow: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1963).
9 Smoleńsk Street in Kraków. This early large-scale project epitomized a major artistic theme developed throughout her career, including her later murals in the Warsaw town square. Using wet fresco, Stryjeńska produced images of seven Slavic gods. This initial project introduced a long-term fascination with representing, and at times inventing, Slavic folklore and mythology. Her massive figures overwhelm their frames and each represents something essential, basic, and close to nature (Figs 5-7). An old man stands on a decaying forest floor; leaves and roots entwine with his beard and headdress. He delicately holds a snail up to his ear as if to listen to the slow molder of the earth (Fig. 5). Another figure robed in purple, surrounded by golden rays of glory, and brandishing a long staff, grapples with a serpent binding his legs (Fig. 6). Most applicable to her frescos in the Warsaw town square is a scene that depicts a youth either emerging, or being swallowed up in the hollow of a tree (Fig. 7). Fountains of water issue from her breasts and flow down over her body clothing her nude form and nourishing the tree from whence she springs.

Viewers have often found Stryjeńska's iconography perplexing, for her figures arise more from her imagination than from actual pagan beliefs and practices. This fact, rather than undermining her credibility, situated her as an agent in the creation of a new and modern sense of the past. Furthermore, it positioned at the center of ongoing discussions of art and its purposes during the interwar period. While her figures rarely referred to well-known, or even actual, Slavic gods, she drew from her own sense of Poland's past imbuing it with her personal voice. As discussed previously, the creation of a national mythology through the interpretation of events and images was a longstanding tradition in Poland. Mickiewicz, Matejko, and Gottger

---

48 This commission was part of an effort to support folk craft, and included commissions for the industrial museum and the ethnographic museum. The project is one of the few intact examples of her large-scale interior wall murals; the works however have been relocated in the museum and can be found in the main entrance hall today.
49 Lenartowicz, "O bożkach słowiańskich."
paved the way during the Romantic period. Later, as the turn of the century approached, the patriotic voice of the Romantics found a more modern style in Młoda Polska (1895-1918)—a neo-romantic movement heavily influenced in the visual arts by Symbolism, Impressionism, and Art Nouveau stemming from Paris, Alfons Mucha in Prague, and the Vienna Secession. The voice of Młoda Polska, or Young Poland, remained focused on portraying patriotic sentiments. Stryjeńska’s themes parallel those of her contemporaries.

From this large-scale project, Stryjeńska began work on the even larger three-story decoration for the senate tower in Wawel castle completed in 1917. In this work she weaves together scenes of peasant life and festivities, with mythical animals and decorative foliage. Men, women, and children work and play under the watchful eyes of the Slavic gods painted on the ceiling. This work quickly became known as the ‘Slavic Temple.’ Wawel hill occupied an historic position as the seat of the fifteenth-century Polish monarchy. A site of tremendous cultural importance, Wawel represented the acceptance of Stryjeńska as the modern voice of the Polish past. Her Wawel interior located at the very heart of Kraków's cultural and historical identity, paved the way for her continued success in shaping public identity and spaces.

Beyond these large-scale commissions, Stryjeńska was constantly producing as a painter, graphic artist, book illustrator, as well as a designer of toys, posters, tapestries, stage sets, wallpapers, ship interiors, and costumes for the Polish Ballet. Even as her art reached new heights—as seen in her monumental interior murals—it also poured out in small-scale reproducible designs. She created images to be stamped on chocolate and decorated the borders

---

50 Artists such as Jacek Malczewski (1854-1929), Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907), Józef Mehoffer (1869-1946), Wacław Borowski (1885-1954), and Władysław Skoczylas (1883-1934) lent their individual styles towards depicting patriotic sentiments. A brief discussion of these artists, and their treatments of archetypal female figures in relation to Stryjeńska’s work will follow later.

51 This work known as the ‘Słowiańskiej Świątyni’ has been taken down. The location of the murals is unknown.

52 Lenartowicz.
of mortgage bonds. She produced postcards and illustrated high-priced books. In short, her artistic production not only shaped public spaces, but it also permeated all social classes.

Perhaps Stryjenska’s most acclaimed project, the installation at the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels moderns* in Paris, further illustrates the extent to which her art came to represent Polish identity at home and abroad. The 1925 Polish pavilion was the first significant international recognition of Polish art following the First World War and the establishment of the Second Republic of Poland following the 123 years of partitions (Fig. 8). Designed by Józef Czajkowski and decorated by Zofia Stryjeńska, the Polish pavilion received the *Grand Prix* for its integration of architecture and interior (Figs. 9-10). This project was seen by the government, sponsors, artists, and international public as Poland's opportunity to present a national image of a unified nation. Stryjeńska's voice, already established within Poland, was an obvious choice for the endeavor. Again the publicity both at home and abroad for the Polish pavilion situated Stryjeńska in the role of cultural authority and as a voice for the nation. Her idea for the six wall-sized panels that made up the interior decoration was based on the well-established theme of chronicling the months of the year (Fig. 11). She tied each month to the commerce and labor of an industrious and happy peasant people overseen by the Slavic gods of her imagination.

---

53 Poland sponsored a national pavilion designed by Józef Czajkowski, with paintings by Stryjeńska and complete interior decoration by Jastrzębowski, Karol Stryjeński, Karol Tichy, and a small chapel by Jan Szczepkowski. Kuna's neo-neoclassical sculpture was displayed in front of the pavilion. Jastrzębowski and Marian Sigmund designed furniture; Bogdan Treter, Eleonora Plutyńska, Helena Bukowska, and Lucjan Kintopf designed tapestries; and Rudolf Krzywiec and Julia Kotarbińska produced ceramics. The presentation included works by students of the State School of Wood Industry (*Państwowa Szkoła Przemysłu Drzewnego*) in Zakopane. Polish artists were, thirty-two Diplomes d'Honneur, and forty-three gold medals. Czajkowski, Jastrzębowski, Stryjeńska, Stryjeński, and Szczepkowski were among the most honored artists; in fact, the French government bought Szczepkowski's chapel. For a discussion of the Polish Pavilion at the Paris exhibition, see M. Rogoyska, 'Paryskie zwycięstwo sztuko polskiej w roku 1925', in *Z zagadnień plastyki polskiej w latach 1918-1939*, J. Starzyński ed., (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1963), 21-64; and A.K. Olszewski, *Nowa Forma w architekturze polskiej 1900-1925. Teoria i praktyka* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1967), 147.
The entire pavilion was heavily influenced by the Zakopany style of architecture founded by Stanisław Witkiewicz around the turn of the century. This style emphasized the folk-craft traditions of the Podhale region. The Górale, or mountain people were believed to be more purely Polish because of their isolation. Zofia and her husband Karol lived for a time in Zakopany. She found the inspiration for much of her work there. A memorial still stands in Zakopany honoring her life and work. Her husband, Karol Stryjeński, was a well-known architect working in the Zakopany style. In fact, several of his buildings are still extant in the city today. The promotion of Podhale’s folk art, and its conversion into applied art in order to serve the national cause was very much a product of its time, as will later be discussed.

Stryjeńska’s success in Paris led to her appointment as head of the restoration of the Warsaw town square in 1928. It also lead to commissions for many interiors in private homes, several large murals for the Bulgarian embassy (Figs. 12-13), as well as the honor of producing another large mural as a gift from the Polish government to the Japanese Emperor. She continued to work until the outbreak of World War II when she relocated to Geneva to live with her children. After this, her artistic voice all but disappeared. Although well-known in her time, Polish-American scholar Danuta Batorska suggests that after World War II and the subsequent institution of the Communist regime in Poland, Stryjeńska was “systematically relegated to insignificance,” and her contribution to Polish art ignored.

The details of Stryjeńska’s life illustrate her unique public persona. Her colorful reputation owed much to her early travel to Munich. This early event demonstrated her success in manipulating gender stereotypes. Upon her return to Poland she gained access to opportunities

---

54 Grońska, iii.
55 This was due to Stryjeńska’s refusal to support the new regime. Danuta Batorska explains that her art was used by the communist government, exploiting her name and emphasizing her pagan works. For further discussion, see Danuta Batorska, “Zofia Stryjeńska: Princess of Polish Painting,” Womans Art Journal 19.2 (1998): 24-29.
because of her artistic training, notoriety, and skill as a craft artist. She developed a unique style full of color and movement, which lent itself to the invention of tradition and perpetuation of Polish national myth. Despite her female subject matter and craft associations, the extent of Stryjeńska’s fame necessitated a reevaluation of her role as a female artist by her contemporaries. These issues come to life in her town square design of 1928.

**Circumstances of the Interwar period (1918-1939)**

The character of the interwar period, during which Stryjeńska worked, greatly influenced her art. Stryjeńska's career as a whole ran almost exactly parallel to the interwar period. Her rapid rise to prominence began shortly before World War I and came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of World War II. In 1918, at the close of World War I, Poland regained its political freedom after 123 years of foreign occupation, and the Second Republic of Poland was established.\(^5^6\) Just like Stryjeńska's career, however, the Second Republic of Poland came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of World War II. The circumstances of Poland between 1918 and 1935 substantiated the need for a cultural authority and a stronger sense of national mythology. The new nation was struggling economically. It was made up of diverse groups and faced problems of industrial backwardness. Stryjeńska’s art served to maintain images of Polish identity and reimagine them in a new style that was promoted as ‘truly Polish.’

\(^5^6\) Polish interwar politics were a complicated mess of conflicting interests and strong personalities. Even before its official reconstitution in November of 1918, two different Polish ‘governments’ had been acknowledged—one by the central powers (under Józef Piłsudski) and one by the allied (under Russophile Dmowski in Paris). Furthermore starting in 1916 the partitioning powers (Russia, now consolidated Germany, and Austria-Hungary) attempted to further their own interests by setting up puppet governments and electing leaders loyal to them. Russia supported the Republic of Tarnobrzeg while Germany and Austria established the Regency Council. Thanks to the mediating voice of Ignacy Jan Paderewski, the Second Republic of Poland (II Rzeczpospolita Polska) eventually emerged acknowledged by the allied powers and under the direction of Józef Piłsudski. Internally Polish politics were similarly split and Poland struggled to find any semblance of consolidated leadership, and resulted in political deadlock. See, Hugh Seton-Watson, “Poland: Political Experience, 1918-39,” in *Easter Europe Between the Wars, 1918-1941* (Hambodn CT: Archon Books, 1962): 157-171; and Alicja Dybkowska, “II Rzeczpospolita,” in *Polskie dzieje: od czasów najdawniejszych do współczesność* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007): 224-267.
The 1920's and 30's in Poland saw a rapid call to modernize and unify a nation that had not known freedom since the Enlightenment. It comes as no surprise that this period engendered an outpouring of patriotic art and literature. Groups such as the Kraków Workshop, of which Stryjeńska was an important figure, were promoted and funded by the national government. This call for sudden political unification resonated in the search for a truly Polish style. The concept of creating a pure national style was very much a product of its time. These patriotic sentiments drew heavily on Poland's long history of oppression and unification as well as literary themes developed by Mickiewicz, Krasiński, Norwid, and other Polish literary figures as well as more contemporary figures such as Stanisław Wyspiański, Jacek Malczewski, and Wacław Borowski. These artists of Young Poland, along with Stryjeńska, drew widely from Polish history, and participated in using this history to appeal to a sense of unified national identity—a monumental concern for the short-lived Second Republic of Poland.

Although Poland regained its freedom in November of 1918, the harsh political, social, and economic conditions of the partitions continued, thus greatly limiting Poland’s transformation into a modern nation. With a territory of 388,634 sq km and a population of more than 27 million, Poland was the sixth largest country in Europe. It was however, one of the poorest on the continent, and the gap that separated it from the Western industrial powers widened in the 1920’s and 1930’s. Over 75 percent of the Polish population was employed in agriculture, and only 9 percent worked in industry. Furthermore, the country had an extremely high level of illiteracy and unemployment, and economic problems persisted after the war as Poland became engaged in military conflicts on its eastern border.

58 Seton-Watson
Garrison Walters in *The Other Europe* calculated that 30 percent of the population was surplus.\(^{59}\) This means that with 30 percent less of the population, the same amount of agricultural production could be comfortably maintained. Walters also provides an important definition in considering the economic situation of Poland following World War I. He asserts that the difference between farmers and peasants was that farmers produced something to sell, whereas peasants produced to sustain only their own families.\(^{60}\) Poland, like other East European countries, faced the dilemma of how to modernize a society in which a majority of the population was engaged in an occupation which produced little or no surplus.\(^{61}\) Furthermore, rail lines and transportation connections were all constructed during the partitions. To get from the southern coal mines of Katowice to the northern Baltic port of Gdynia, one had to transverse first a German, then an Austrian, then a Russian, then again a German built rail network. None of these lines were oriented in the proper direction, having been designed and constructed to bring materials and resources out of Poland and into the occupying countries.\(^{62}\) Suddenly thrust onto the stage of economic modernity, Poland was threatened with being dragged down by agricultural backwardness.\(^{63}\)

Furthermore, even as the political lines of the partitions were dissolved, deep cultural and religious rifts were revealed. These internal conflicts were just as effective in parsing up the newly reconstructed Second Republic of Poland. The task of reunification found another obstacle in the treatment and handling of minority groups. In interwar Poland, only 66 percent of the population was Polish.\(^{64}\) East Slavs made up 19 percent, the majority of East Slavs were

---

\(^{59}\) E. Garrison Walters, *The Other Europe* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988).
\(^{61}\) Walters
\(^{62}\) Ibid.
\(^{63}\) Zimand.
\(^{64}\) Seton-Watson,
Ukrainian, but Belarusians, and Russians were also represented in this statistic, Germans 4 percent, and more than 10 percent Jews. The breakdown by religion mirrored the nationality statistics fairly closely. Poles were almost universally Roman Catholic, Germans were Protestant, Jews obviously Jewish. Moreover, the East Slavs were divided: about half were Orthodox and half Uniate. Since proportional representation gave just about any political group a good chance of winning a seat in the Sejm (parliament), the number of parties grew, creating contention and immobility. Inflation went from 10 Polish marks to the dollar before the armistice to an incredible six million to the dollar five years later.65

Vernacular Craft and National Identity

Despite the obstacles, the interwar period validated the need for unification. This call to action was taken up by artists and craftsmen. Stryjeńska, trained as both an artist and a craftswoman, was vocal about her aim to create a national style. In his article "Sources of Modernity: The Interpretations of Vernacular Crafts in Polish Design," Andrzej Szczerski argues that the principal cause of this debate was the association of vernacular crafts with the idea of a national style.66 In other words, this connection was particularly important in a country that did not yet exist on the political map and had struggled to preserve its own cultural traditions for over a century. Furthermore he states,

The discovery of vernacular craft also provided a platform for multifarious discussions reaching beyond the national and encompassing a variety of political and social issues, with respect to both historical and contemporary competing visions of what Polish culture and society should be.67

Szczerski suggests that the complexities of this debate were due to the differing policies

67 Szczerski, 61
of the three partitioning powers, and the ethnic diversity among the former Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. Instead of being relegated to the domain of the timeless and authentic, these regional traditions, known as *sztuka ludowa*, were raised to the status of art in an attempt to present them as valuable sources for a revival of national style. In the hands of professional artists, and often in connection with industrial production, crafts became an integral part of applied art known as *sztuka stosowana*. Many voices arose championing the morality of craft, looking to other arts and craft movements and artists such as Ruskin and Morris. The Zakopnay style was an important force in this discussion.

The debate surrounding vernacular craft and national identity was especially controversial in and around Kraków. The city had enjoyed relative autonomy when compared to the rest of Poland during the partitions, and it had come to stand for freedom and cultural unity. This artistic scene embraced Stryjeńska. Her craft background, western training, unique personal style, and outlandish personality granted her access to male society. During the years to follow, she became the voice for a 'national' and 'applied' art. Her work exemplified the unique and abrupt intersection of the past with modernity that was at the forefront of contemporary political and economic concerns. On the one hand Stryjeńska's art maintained the ideals of longing, of love for the land, and the faces of Poland’s peasants. She quite literally adopted Mickiewicz’s affinity for the Middle ages and celebrated the virtues of Slavic antiquity. Yet, she strikingly, and almost to the point of parody, rendered these Romanic subjects as her own, an unequivocal combination of a new Poland and a fantastical past. In doing so Stryjeńska not only claimed the subjects of these iconic representations as her own, but also capitalized on the social freedoms they represented.

68 Ibid., 56-57.
69 Suchocka, 430.
Female Precedence

Two of the things that make Stryjenska’s images particularly fascinating are the unprecedented acceptance of her female voice in representing a national vocabulary, and her place as a custodian of cultural heritage. In consideration of the historical relationship between women and national identity, we can chart the existence of a precedent for women as the defender of Polish culture and bringer of civilization, which ultimately created a place for a Polish female artist to succeed on such as monumental scale in the 20th century. Historical figures, both actual and legendary, laid the groundwork in the social imagination.

As previously discussed, the powerful figure of the Virgin Mary occupied an important place in the national mythology of Poland. The figure of Mary will play an even more important roll in later discussions. However, an image on a popular postcard first published in 1891 provides an excellent introduction (Fig. 14). This image depicts Christ and Mary comforting each other at the foot of the cross. At first glance this postcard appears to perpetuate messianic imagery that equates Poland with Christ. However, this image creates instead an interesting counterpoint that empowers the image of the Virgin. This postcard is an example of how an iconic image of Polish femininity can serve to reverse gender roles. Mary, clothed in robes of mourning embraces Christ who sits with a book in his lap. Kraków’s Wawel castle is visible in the background. Dates are printed on the cross, as well as attached to Christ’s staff and torn from the book in his lap. Each of these dates commemorates a major event in the life of the nation. A cloth draped around the cross bears the inscription “The Time of Redemption has not yet come.” The dates on Christ’s staff are of the Partitions (1772, 1793, 1795). The dates on the cross’s beam (1791-1891) refer to the signing of the Third of May constitution in 1791, and its 100 year anniversary—the reason for the postcard’s publication. The pages ripped from the nation’s bible,
appearing against the background of Mary’s cloak, mark key national uprisings (1794, 1830, 1848, 1863). In this image, Poland is represented by both Jesus and Mary. The symbolism of the dates further produces meaning. The Third of May constitution was and is an event of great pride for Poland. Signed in 1791, Poland’s constitution was second only to that of the United States. France’s shortly followed. Seen as a symbol of equality and freedom, the Third of May constitution granted rights to the peasants and townspeople as well as the nobility. Poland, however, was permanently partitioned only four years later. The constitution was often lamented as the reason for the partitions. Poland, with its forward-thinking leaders, established a time of freedom and offering prosperity. These virtues were a threat to Poland’s totalitarian neighbors who marched in to destroy its liberty and equality. Christ and his staff of dates represent dates of oppression and defeat. The dates that garnish Mary’s robe are dates of insurrection an action. Both wait for the day of resurrection. The image of Christ crucified by the partitions, and the image of Mary, adorned with battle and fighting for liberation. This is a clear example of how oppression has facilitated gender role reversal in a national myth. Poland, as Mary, is a figure of strength and action, while the figure Christ expresses the sacrificed and powerless nation. Visible on Mary’s left wrist are shackles symbolizing her bondage. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, so did Poland’s period of bondage.

The association with women and the uprisings was further evident in images of Emilia Plater. The image in Figure 15 is taken from a German book of plates published between 1835-1838. It contains the portraits of participants in the Polish November 1830 uprising. Among them is Emilia Plater. This plate represented her in men’s uniform with a pistol at her hip. However, her true gender is unquestioned. Wojciech Kossak (1856-1924) portrayed Plater in the midst of battle, thundering fearlessly towards her foes, smoke from her discharged rifle
spreading into the air (Fig 16). Both images of Plater depict the 1830 uprising as an event characterized by female activity. Wojciech Kossak produced several other examples of female soldiers protecting their nation. In Orlęta—Obrona cementarza (Orlęta—defense of the cemetery) (1926), Kossak paints a scene with soldiers from the first World War lined up to defend a cemetery (Fig. 17). The woman is in the front. She kneels on the graves of the dead, a reminder of the price that has been paid, and the price that will yet be paid. These visual images of women soldiers cemented mythologies that connected women to patriotic activity. While Stryjeńska was not a soldier, her behavior, dressing like a man, was done in the service of her patriotic duty, to unify Poland.

The imposing figure of Mary, and images of Emilia Plater are examples of female archetypes or recurrent themes in a national mythology. The extraordinary acceptance of Stryjeńska’s female voice in representing a national vocabulary owed much to these women. These female ideals became even more synonymous with freedom as the period of partitions came to a close with World War II, and Mary burst her shackles.

**Stryjeńska and Feminist Theory**

Idealized tropes, such as those discussed above, often represented a disconnect between everyday social norms, and the greater ideals of a national identity. Zofia Stryjeńska embodied this juxtaposition. Her art drew on national images of Polish women, who were at once empowered by these images filled with blurred gender boundaries, yet who were also constrained by the rigid gender expectations that were a part of everyday life. Stryjeńska was an example of a woman who used myth to define her behavior, her studies in Munich, and by doing so launched her life into the realm of myth, her sensationalized image. This section will focus on the social situations women artists faced during the interwar period. Many achieved professional
careers, yet none to the extent of Stryjeńska. This section hopes to explore the connection between Stryjeńska’s gender and her position as a cultural authority.

Precedence for the national and international recognition of Polish female artists had been solidly established by the turn of the twentieth century. However, in partitioned Poland as in the rest of Europe, the current situation of women artists had become even more constrained and elitist. During this period, women artists were not particularly successful in challenging the artistic status quo in Kraków. Although the city had an active community of female painters and sculptors, they failed to gain equality with their male colleagues before the war. The Academy was too much of a guardian of elitism. Marek Bartelnik writes,

In general, the situation of women artists in the Polish territories under foreign occupation, compared with the rest of Europe, was both typical and unique. As in other countries, Polish women desired to achieve a high level of artistic excellence beyond gender qualifiers in a society that often prevented, or complicated, reaching that goal. But, when ‘female’ and ‘Polish’ appeared side by side in the name of a group or institution they connoted freedom.

70 For an excellent discussion of the proliferation of Female artists during the interwar period see Sosnowska, Poza Kannonem. She not only discusses the reasons for this influx of female success stories, but also discusses many specific examples.
71 Actual Polish female artists gained remarkable success at home and abroad throughout the course of history. In eighteenth-century Poland, women artists were sought after and promoted. Rosalba Carriera, Elisabeth Louise Vigee-Lebrun, and Angelica Kauffman, developed large clienteles in Poland. The last Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski, not only promoted the art of these female portraitists but also became a devoted patron of women artists from his homeland. He supported the first professional Polish women artists who studied at the royal court in Warsaw, earned monthly stipends, worked on commission and received scholarships to study in Paris. Anna Rajecka (1762-1832), who later became Anna Gault de Saint-Germain, was the first Polish artist of either sex to exhibit work at a Paris Salon. Within Poland Beata Czacka (d. 1824) produced numerous portraits and executed large religious canvases for churches. During this period, amateur women artists of noble birth usually received better educations, traveled more, and had greater awareness of the European artistic trends of the day than most of Poland’s professional artists, who continued to be largely caught in a traditional system of producing art organized around craftsmanship and the artist’s workshop. Furthermore, in the 1880’s, a large group of female students left Warsaw for Paris to study at the Academie Julian. They achieved international approval even at a time when women were uniformly bound by “academic restraints.” Paramount amongst these women were the portraitists Olga Boznańska and Anna Bilinska-Bohdanowicz. For more information see Okonska, Alicja. Malerski Polskie. (Warszawa: Ossolineum, 1976).
73 Bartelik, 181.
Bartelnik's point is further discussed by art historian Joanna Sosnowska who argues in her book, *Poza Kanonem (Beyond the Canon)* that because the country was under foreign occupation, Polish women came close in their status to the position of men. She explains, "the feeling of being enslaved and endangered—and patriotic duties springing from it—united and made them equal."⁷⁴ Perhaps the reality was not quite as rosy as Sosnowska paints it. The fact that women were not admitted to Fine Arts Institutions in the same capacity as men nor were they afforded the same legal rights and social freedoms is evidence. However, the call for women’s rights became synonymous with the need for changes in rights for everyone. The cause of emancipation for women grew stronger in Poland after the end of the nineteenth century and became connected with the fight for freedom. In a rally in Warsaw, Polish women's rights activist Maria Dulębianka, who proudly dressed as a man, proclaimed,

> if it is the work of a nation to fight for the rights of the peasant, and fight for the rights of the worker, and the rights of the child, and the rights of every crowd of people, and it most certainly is…it is hers also to fight for the rights of women, for her unbinding.⁷⁵

It seemed a plausible outcome for women to have a new place in the new country. Women would be an important part in the new order, were promised equality before the law, and were provided the ability to carve out new roles in the social fabric.

After regaining independence in 1918, Poland established voting rights for women. They were also given the right to be elected to office without any restrictions. Before the complete dissolution of Poland in 1775, tax-paying females had been allowed to take part in political life. However, this right was taken away during the years of occupation. With some exceptions, men were also politically stripped of their voices. The first women were elected to the Sejm in

---

⁷⁴ Sosnowska, 88.
1919. These women were active in creating and implementing policy. This newly recognized female authority in the public sphere extended to both artistic and cultural authority. In the case of Stryjeńska, these general trends in women's rights certainly cemented her position as the artistic voice of unified Poland.

Of particular interest in terms of feminist history and theory is Poland's reception of Stryjeńska’s work. One of the arguments Sosnowska makes in her book Poza Kanonem is that due to a male-dominated historical perspective, an emphasis has been placed on male reactions and interpretations of Stryjeńska. This male-centric view of her work often employed catchy condescending phrases such as “Polish princess.” Although meant as praise, this title trivialized her contribution and used her gender to diminish her art by aligning it with the superficial, frivolous, and decorative. On the other side of the spectrum, many male critics praised her art as having nothing feminine about it. Writers from this second camp often declined Stryjeńska's last name in the masculine, which Sosnowska argues, historically stripped her of her femininity. This compound perception of her gender was an example of how her art and notoriety as a public figure facilitated her position as a cultural authority. Although Sosnowska argues that these opinions undermine her gender, I submit that these views reveal a dialogue attempting to juggle her gender because of her social prominence. Furthermore, this duality of gender, in terms of how her art was viewed, can by no means be disconnected from her well-publicized excursion to Munich dressed as a man.

---

In her chapter on Stryjeńska, Sosnowska seeks to level the balance by presenting examples of the reactions of contemporary women to Zofia's art. She argues that these women acknowledged and identified with Stryjeńska's gender. Coming from a theoretically essentialist model, Sosnowska analyzes the female response mostly in terms of an inherent biological disposition for intuitive, nonintellectual understanding of Stryjeńska's creation of a truly feminine language. Stryjeńska utilized subjects Sosnowska identifies as inherently female. These subjects included the elements, the strength of nature, depictions of the seasons, biological cycles, astronomy, and folk rituals connected with the resurgence of spring and life. Other artists of the period such as Waclaw Borowski did the same, but never with the acclaim and effect of Stryjeńska’s sun-ripened fields of grain that rise up to meet the clear blue of water and sky. Sosnowska states that "in Polish art, nature has always been connected with the folk or peasant, and embodies a resistance to technologies, city life, and intellectual culture in favor of biological needs. This supports Sosnowska’s argument for Styjeńska’s “truly feminine art.” I find this endeavor of Sosnowska's an admirable one, yet for me the interest lies not in establishing what is inherently female about Stryjeńska's work, but rather that a female artist, in a style completely unique to herself, could occupy such prominence for both men and women, both intelligentsia and peasant, and both national and international.

Stryjeńska's gender, when looked at in the context of a culturally constructed set of expectations, provides additional insight into her success as a female artist. It is clear that to some extent, in the mind of her audience, Stryjeńska's gender and popularity needed to be reconciled, as seen through the critical reaction to her work. It is fascinating that this negotiation

77 Sosnowska, 79.
78 Borowski, although best known for his woodcuts, was also a painter and a garphic artist. His subjects and style are similar to Stryjeńska.
79 Sosnowska.
of her gender was argued in both directions and her artistic voice was marked at times as male and at times as female. One cannot help but recall her bold trans-gendered masquerade in Munich. It is also interesting to note that after World War II there aired a popular Polish television comedy that centered on the life of a young woman in the 1930’s who bore a striking resemblance to Stryjeńska. The comedy focused on the life of an educated woman who, after receiving a degree in engineering in Paris, returned to Poland and was employed in an automobile factory. While working in the factory, she dressed as a man and promptly fell in love with her co-worker. Her disguise leaded to humorous situations and frustrations. This idea of masquerading as the opposite gender, thereby allowing a character to be more truly themselves while the disguise gets (often comically) in the way of true love, is a well-known literary device used by Shakespeare and many others. However, it is impossible to discount the role that Stryjeńska's sensationalized popularity, at its height in the 1930's, undoubtedly played in the creation and reception of such a program.

Stryjeńska’s larger-than-life figure fascinated the public. In 1962 Hanna Mortkowicz Olczakowa completed and published Pod Znakiem Kloska, a biography of her father Jakób Mortkowicz who was a prominent publisher during the interwar period. Olczakowa spends much of her time describing the various projects her father completed, many of which were publications of Stryjeńska's illustrations. Olczakowa herself later became well acquainted with Stryjeńska and asserted that the innate wildness of her artistic style contributed to her public image.

I do not think to repeat here all of the rumors and anecdotes that circulated at that time in Poland, from Zakopany to Warsaw, and were easy prey for the public, always sniffing out scandal in the artistic world. Her infant locked in a closet, her husband's formal wear

80 Ibid.
cut into tiny pieces, swimming in an evening gown, and the many confrontations with too proud and tasteless art patrons.  

Both the public and Olczakowa were taken with the myth of Stryjeńska. This brash, outspoken, wild woman became a sensationalized celebrity. Stryjeńska's public image, partly perpetuated by the artist herself, certainly contributed to her popularity and success. Her early artistic education in Munich was part of this package. Stryjeńska openly challenged gender stereotypes both with her personality and with her popularity.

While Polish scholars have generally used her as an example of why feminist theoretical arguments are not relevant to Poland, I would assert that gender did indeed play a significant role in the reception of her art. The embellished publicity surrounding her often targeted her alleged failings as a mother and wife and repeatedly associated her artistic genius with her eccentric and transgressive behaviors. While this interwar period both provided a marked increase in freedom for women and fostered a destabilization of gender expectations, the evidence of Stryjeńska's success remains deeply rooted in her 'exception' to traditional gender constructs.  

81 “Nie myślę tu powtarzać wszystkich plotek i anegdot, jakie krążyły w tym czasie po Polsce od Zakopanego do Warszawy i były tanym żerem dla publiczności, zawsze węszącej skandale w malarskim świetlu. Niemowlęta zamknięte w szufladzie, frak męża pocięty w drobne paski, kąpiel w balowej sukni, liczne afronty robione zbyt pysznym i nietaktownym mecenasom sztuki.” Hanna Mortkowicz-Olczakowa, Pod Zankiem Kloska (Warszawa: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1962), 176.

82 For a discussion of women’s roles in Kraków craft workshops see, Szczerski, 62; Sosnowska, 33; Irena Huml, “Stowarzyszenie ‘Kilim’ ” in Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1890-1914 ed. Aleksander Wojciechowski (Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków: Zakład Narodowy, 1967), 195-6. The promotion of the crafts, often presented as a "female domain" by critics, coincided with the changing status of women in society. The first institution of design reform in Poland, the Industrial Museum in Kraków, founded in 1864 by Adrian Baraniecki, ran an educational program for women with courses in the arts, natural sciences, humanities and commerce. Koło Artystek Polskich w Krakowie (the Circle of Polish Women Artists in Kraków) expressed its support for the national revival in the applied arts and looked to folk art for inspiration. The protagonist of the women's liberation movement, writer Gabriela Zapolska, described furnished interior spaces as controlled by women. Numerous women artists in Kraków and Lwów, such as Bozena Rychter-Janowska, worked on various applied arts, mainly weaving and embroidery, merging the iconography of domestic space with the contemporary stylizations of decorative painting.
1928 Redecoration of the Warsaw Town Square

Because of all of the undercurrents involved in the construction of Stryjeńska as a public figure, she was given unprecedented access to important national spaces and themes. One such space was the Warsaw town square. Having been granted statehood again with the end of World War I and the treaty of Versailles in 1918, Poland began its long awaited reemergence as a political entity and desired to again be recognized as a player on the stage of Western Europe. In 1928, to commemorate Poland's 10th anniversary of independence, the municipal government decided to restore the splendor of the oldest district of Warsaw—neglected through more than a century of partitions. A group of artists under the direction of Zofia Stryjeńska undertook the task of decorating the facades of Old Market Square in Warsaw (Fig. 19). Stryjeńska designed the unique color program that served to unify all of the existing Renaissance facades. She also outlined the plan for facade ornamentation. To illustrate her overall ideas, Stryjeńska produced four watercolors, one representing each side of the square (Fig. 20). These sketches, while leaving the details to the assigned artists, were not only crucial to the 1928 project, but aided in the later post World War II reconstruction. Alongside Stryjeńska, several well-known artists worked on and realized the details of the project. Stryjeńska directly produced the facades for four buildings 34, 29, 17, and 13. On building number 13 located on the corner of Świętojańska and Market Street, Stryjeńska created a façade that brought together delicate sgraffito and four

83 The idea of restoration and redecoration as a means of national expression abounds in early twentieth-century Poland. The decoration of public buildings in Kraków such as the Teatr Stary (Old Theatre), by Ludwik Wojtyczko, Edward Trojanowski et al., (1905-1906), the national design of the city council offices and the President's apartment by Józef Czajkowski (1910-1911), which won special acclaim, as it symbolized the status of Kraków as the ancient capital of Poland, and Stanisław Wyśpiński’s production of stained-glass windows for the Polish Pantheon in the Cathedral on Wawel Hill in Kraków (1902-1904) are a few examples. For further discussion, see Irena Huml, Polska sztuka stosowana XX wieku (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1978); and Szczerski, 61.

84 Most of the Archival research has been accomplished by Urszula Zilinska, working for the Heritage commitee of the Warsaw Community.
large murals (Figs. 19, 21). Each mural featured a woman brandishing a vase of water on her broad shoulders. With Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, and the constant barrage of artillery, not to mention Hitler's later campaign to systematically level Warsaw block by block, by 1945 one of the only facades still marginally intact was lucky number 13 (Fig. 22). However, it too was in ruins with only two of the four Stryjeńska frescos salvageable. These two works were removed, conserved, and reincorporated into the 1953 rebuilding (Fig. 23). The 1953 project was similarly enacted, again drawing on individual artists to decorate assigned facades. Stryjeńska, though still alive in Geneva, played no direct role in its reconstruction. Number 13 located on the Zakrzewski side was rebuilt and became a backdrop for the historical remnants of a destroyed past. Both of Stryjeńska's surviving murals were reincorporated in the 1953 design for number 13. Originally the two still in existence were situated as they are today, with two more murals on either side creating a sort of cross plan of the four. Despite its short life, the project of 1928 was an important gesture for the fledgling country trying to hold itself together. The town square space served as the perfect medium to express political solidarity, and Stryjeńska was the ideal artist. The space central to the town square is an important cite and a theoretically rich receptacle of historical, political, and social values.

The understanding that cities are not simply constructed out of walls, streets, and roofs is a long-standing notion. These structures serve to enclose, demarcate, interact and shape the spaces they inhabit. Discussions of space have permeated nearly every academic discipline—philosophy, geography, psychology, history, anthropology, architecture, sociology, physics, etc. Space is a universally recognized component of human existence. More recent scholarship concerning space has been driven by industrialization, urban development, and modern economics. An important figure in this recent scholarship is French scholar Henri Lefebvre who
published his pioneering book *Production de l'espace* in 1974.\(^8^5\) Lefebvre's work is still valued today as a theoretical catalyst for understanding what space is and how it is produced. Lefebvre argues that space is a social product, a complex social construction, based on values, and the social production of meanings, that affects spatial practices and perceptions. His argument implies a shift in perspective from simply discussing space to analyzing the processes of its production. He embraces the multiplicity of spaces that are socially produced and made productive in social practices; he also focuses on the contradictory, conflicting, and, ultimately, political character of the processes of the production of space. When understood in this way, Stryjeńska's 1928 project takes on increased significance.

As with her other artistic endeavors such as the Slavic Temple on Wawel Hill or the Polish Pavilion in Paris, Stryjeńska used Polish history and the already existing accumulation of historical events in the town square space to perpetuate a national mythology. The Warsaw town square is an important site for accumulated historical memory. The Warsaw town square can be divided into two categories: the buildings or objects that surround the enclosed space and the enclosed space itself. By renovating the enclosure that surrounds and defines the interior space, Stryjenska played a vital role in the preservation and perpetuation of the collective identity and mythology stored in the town square space.

The histories of the buildings, or objects, that enclose the town square reveal a process of change. These buildings have been physically altered over time by progress and war. I refer back to the idea of cultural continuity as a self-determining process in order to propose that this idea finds a literal visual representation in the 'time laden' production of the buildings. Sociologist Orlando Peterson submits that identity is a “time-laden process, best understood with the metaphor of a stream. Each observation of an object is a temporal stage in its identity

\(^8^5\) Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Anthropos, 2000).
system. The identity itself is the summation of all such moments, each being only a 'time slice' in a continual process.”86 In the case of the physical buildings surrounding the town square these 'time slices' represent temporal moments, which over time are replaced and reconstructed—thereby creating a continuity. The Warsaw town square is a particularly rich space to discuss this type of continuity. It has been twice ravaged by war, once raised to the ground, and restored and rebuilt at least 3 times.

The buildings surrounding the old market square date back to Warsaw’s medieval beginnings in the late 13th century. These medieval structures, built in the gothic style, were destroyed in the great fire of 1607. They were rebuilt soon after in the late-renaissance style during a time of civic development. The Union of Lublin that united the kingdoms of Poland and Lithuania under an elected monarch and parliament had already been signed in 1569. This time of civic prosperity is reflected in the seventeenth-century rebuilding. The town hall, which was built during the 14th century, was likewise destroyed, rebuilt and then renovated during the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth as a symbol of civic enlightenment. After the final drawing of the partitions in 1795, however, the late-Renaissance buildings fell into disrepair. As a part of the Russian zone, this neglect was the result of Russia's policy of cultural suppression. Similarly, the town hall was pulled down in 1817. It was also during this period of oppression when each of the four rows of buildings surrounding the old market square were named after important political figures of the pre-partitioned state who lived on each respective side: Ignacy Zakrzewski, Hugo Kołątaj, Jan Dekert, and Franciszek Barss. The state of the buildings continued to worsen until Stryjeńska's renovation of 1928, when the structures were repaired and

the facades decorated. Ten years later, it was systematically leveled during World War II, and yet again rebuilt in 1953. The summation of these 'time slices,' constructs a physical identity as well as a perceived identity. The process of construction, destruction, and reconstruction of physical identity contributes to the construction of perceived identity. Perceived identity is constructed selectively, meaning that certain events and ideas are privileged and singled out. This selective past informs present understanding and is often manifested through nostalgia or sense of loss and alienation.

Ecologist Herbert Girardet analyzes the concept of a community-centered vision of the city. “Cities such as Florence, Salzburg, and Prague seem to have been purpose-built for lively interchanges between people. Narrow, human scale streets contrast with well-appointed public buildings and wide open gathering spaces.” Furthermore, Girardet proposes that the qualities he describes above are those absent in cities today. He suggests, "…a history, which constructs the past as an image of the present loss, provides valuable information about the present." He ultimately argues that our contemporary loss of a community-centered vision is a defining principal of present understanding as well as the present understanding of the past. Although Girardet is focused on contemporary city planning and in no way develops his ideas in terms of early twentieth-century Eastern European city renovation, this theory is productive when applied to the concept of reconstruction. Medieval Polish cities become perceived or idealized yet also function as physical spaces. Vestiges such as the medieval walls surrounding the central city remain, though the Medieval square has been replaced by a Renaissance one. Today, the rebuilt Warsaw town square is glibly referred to as the youngest world heritage site, as it almost all

---

89 Ibid.
postdates 1950. This statement is the perfect illustration of how history has constructed an image of the past, in the present. Beyond a few photographs, her watercolor sketches, and two murals, not much else remains of Stryjeńska’s 1928 project. Today’s square is literally the reconstruction of a summation of loss, a past that has been shaped and reshaped into the present. The remnants of loss have been incorporated onto building number 13 and consist of two of the four murals by Stryjeńska and an eighteenth-century corner sculpture decoration of a lion. Although this corner is the most historically intact part of the square, it paradoxically personifies the greatest loss.

The buildings of old town Warsaw create a space that functions differently than the physical structures that protect it. While the history and change of the surrounding buildings at every stage is a process of replacement, the production of the interior space is a process of accumulation. Again, with respect to Peterson's metaphor for the construction of identity, the buildings act as a proverbial dam in the stream of continual process. Rather than the space being destroyed and reconstructed with the progress of time, as is true of the physical structures, the contained space of the town square amasses temporal events or 'time slices.' This amassing of events produces meaning. This accumulation of meaning produces identity. The space produced, is an intersection of history rather than a string of events. It provides Stryjeńska with an even deeper source from which to construct her image of Poland. Three functions of the space that Stryjeńska drew from were: a space for commerce, a space for political solidarity, and a space for religious observance.

Socialist Rob Shields writes, “The city itself can be treated as a representation of the society which constructed and used it.”90 In Poland the town square was a traditional space of

---

community and commerce. It was the center of the city, the oldest part. Cities such as Kraków and Warsaw date their city status to the 11th and the 13th centuries respectively. Both were seats of cultural and economic brilliance dating from their medieval origins. Many anthropologists have treated the medieval city in terms of a social construct. Lewis Mumford, for example, emphasized the idea of a medieval collectivity and community. He claims that the craft guilds "fabricated a whole life, in friendly rivalry with other guilds; and as brothers, they manned the walls adjacent to their quarter."91 Certainly the town square project drew on these old ideas of community, camaraderie and brotherhood, renovating a symbolic space and reviving medieval values with its buildings companionably squeezed right next to each other. Later during the partitions, even though cities were no longer government seats, they and their town squares were used as the staging sites and hubs for revolution and resistance.92 Several churches are located in old town Warsaw just around the corner from the market square. When compared to the large cathedrals located directly on the square in other Polish medieval cities such as Kraków and Toruń, religion may seem to play a lesser role in the Warsaw market square. However, religious processions to and from the Warsaw cathedrals would certainly have traversed the Warsaw town square. These spaces were at once centers of commerce, confrontation, and devotion. All were important themes in Poland's process of self-determination.

Stryjeńska's use of Polish history was at once factual and mythical. Her pantheon of Slavic gods was for the most part imagined. Likewise, her depictions of traditional Polish costumes, although presented as ethnographic, were often embellished using her imagination. This fact establishes her as an agent in the process of identity production. Stryjeńska's vision of space is similarly supported by the filter of her imagination and again points out the uniqueness

---

92 Jakubowska, 12.
of her vision—a vision adapted into a national style. She drew from her sense of Poland's past imbuing it with her personal voice. In the following excerpt taken from her memoirs, Stryjeńska looked back on one of her earliest memories and found in it the passion behind her art.

"...a mass of peasants [...] from different villages surroundings Kraków [...] who in their fantastic, colorful folk costumes created the impression of some magical meadow replete with flowers of the most beautiful colors. We walked among this mass of village people of incomparable beauty and grace, whose gestures and style are not to be encountered in any other place, there in Kraków Rynek the initial images of Slavic gods germinated in my mind, and a distant premonition of a grand Slavic resurrection led by Poland. Later, all my life, I painted these village people, this vision of my first youth, in the midst of which I grew up. It is only to be pitied that my brushes failed to render faithfully their real enchantment, which always remains in my memory. My father called my attention to different types, scenes, details of dress, not because of my ambitions of being a painter [...] but because he himself loved all this. [...] Frequently ostentatious and boisterous peasant weddings, with their music, arrived in front of St. Mary's Church, and on Sundays, in front of St. Barbara's, a procession formed, accompanied by the playing of the drums, and the women in starched skirts, with a wealth of coral bead necklaces, and their high headdresses, reciting the litanies [...] At times at the Mały Rynek [Small Market Square] were drunken happenings so funny that one could burst laughing, especially the fights between the women merchants..."

This passage whimsically describes the importance of the town square as a space for commerce, a space for community, and a space for religious observance. Furthermore it establishes the importance of the town square space to Zofia herself.

Stryjeńska's clear use of imagination to interpret what she regarded as "essentially Polish" correlates with ideas proposed by the fledgling anthropologists who began to distinguish

---

93 “[...] tłumami chłopów z różnych wsi podkrakowskich, [...] którzy w swych kolorowych fantastycznych strojach ludowych robili wrażenie jakieś zacarowanej łąki kwietnej o najcudowniejszych barwach. Przeciskaliśmy się między tym tłumem złożonym z postaci ludowych, tak niezrównanego piękna, wdzięku, gestu, stylu niespotykanego, że tam na tym Rynku bogów słowiańskich i niejasne przeczucie wielkiej kiedyś rezurekcji Słowian, których przodka będą Polska. Całe życie później malowałem ten lud wiejski, tę wizję pierwszej młodości średniowiecznej wzrastałem, szkoda tylko, że interpretacje mych nieudolnych pędzliszków ani się umyły do rzeczywistego czaru jaki na zawsze zostanie mi w pamięci. Ojciec zwracał uwagę na różne typy, sceny, drobiazgi ubiorów, nie ze względów malarskich [...] tylko że sam się po prostu lubował tym. [...] Niejednego raz zajeżdżały przed Kościół Mariacki huczne wesela chłopskie z muzyką, a w niedziele przed św. Barbarą ustawiały się procesje z biciem w bębnę, kumoszki w krochmalonych spódnicach, bogatych koralach, ugurowanych czepcach, zawodząc litanie [...] Tu się nieraz działy przedstawienia pijackie, że do zdech można się było uśmieć, zwłaszcza jak się panie przekupki pokłócily.” Grońska and Stryjeńska, 34-35.
anthropology from other disciplines around the turn of the century. Edward Manouelian writes in his article on invented traditions in turn-of-the-century Polish literature,

Around 1900, Poland saw the outgrowth of a nativist primitivism, one that consciously redefined the periphery as a site of cultural resistance. [...] Within the subject ethnicities of central Europe at the turn of the century, "ideas of the primitive" that were taking shape in the then still-emerging discipline of anthropology were influencing various constructions of national and regional identity.\textsuperscript{94}

This nationalist imperative was emphasized by Jan Karłowicz, who, writing in 1906, argued that:

A people certain of its own existence may calmly study its own folklore from a purely scientific point of view. However, tribes deprived of their independence and living in endless fear of suppression and decay [...] must, while reflecting upon the nature and conditions of folkloric tradition, consider practical questions as a part of such inquiries. For whenever reference is made to national peculiarities and attributes, there constantly arises the question: to be or not to be.\textsuperscript{95}

Stryjeńska exemplified this trend. While her art clearly reflected on folkloric traditions, it also reimagined "the periphery," folk/peasant people, thereby constructing a national identity. She capitalized on peasant folkloric traditions to answer practical contemporary questions of reunification and national solidarity. Her status as craft artist, member of the Kraków workshop and advocate of the Zakopany style placed her in the midst of this search to create a Polish identity through visual art.\textsuperscript{96} Her redecoration of the Warsaw town square brought her folk-inspired style into contact with a symbolic space of cultural memory—one that, it could be argued, was at the heart of what she imagined to be quintessentially "Polish." Stryjeńska's...

\textsuperscript{95} "Naród spokojny o swój był polityczny, może spokojnie też badać ludoznawstwo swoje ze strony czysto naukowej, ale plemiona, wyżute z samoistności [...] muszą do badań takich koniecznie mleszać pytania praktyczne; gdy bowiem mowa jest o właściwościach i odrębnościach narodowych, nasuwa się im bez ustanku pytanie; być albo nie być." Karłowicz as cited in Helena Kapelusz and Julian Krzyżanowski, eds., \textit{Dzieje folklorystyki polskiej 1864-1918} (Warsaw, 1982), 256.
\textsuperscript{96} Explain Zakopany Style
"invention of tradition" is abundantly evident in her own written account of the quintessential town square.97

Perhaps the most striking nuance of her memory of the town square is, however, the overwhelming feminization of the town space seen through Stryjeńska's eyes. She pictures, almost exclusively, women in various roles as peasants, as brides, as religious believers and as merchants. Her vivid description of "everything Polish" takes visual form in the two Women Carrying Water, the remaining murals from her 1928 redecoration.98

**Women Carrying Water**

Stryjeńska's two murals of women carrying water, reincorporated today into the remodeled facade on number 13, in many ways typified her overall body of work. As an artist she consistently produced images to define the Polish nationality. As discussed previously, her role as a cultural authority meant she, like Mickiewicz and others, reconstructed the past to serve the present. Furthermore, she reimagined the regional traditions of lud (the people) in the service of national identity. What truly set her apart, however, was her bold assertion of a woman's place in her representation of Polish national mythology. Her unique vision empowered women, glorified their achievements, and highlighted the active role they played in creating, protecting and cultivating the land, and symbolically the nation. These robust Women Carrying Water spring from female sources of national mythology (Fig 24). Pagan goddesses of life-giving water bring the promise of rejuvenation and fertility, religious paragons protect and guard the traditions and borders of the nation, while peasant mothers cultivate morality and fields of grain.

---

98 Grońska and Stryjeńska, 55.
In her earliest mural project in the Industrial Museum in Kraków (discussed on page 20), Stryjeńska represented a young Slavic goddess emerging from a tree with water springing forth from her body and nourishing the ground (Fig. 7). This early image reappeared in various forms throughout Stryjeńska's career.99 The image of water pouring out onto the ground is echoed in her town square murals. Identified as Lelum, the Slavic youth of her earlier mural project most likely symbolized the deity of the spring sun. This image implied the end of the dark winter and the beginning of the spring thaw. With liquid gushing from her breasts she promises fertility and nourishment for the land (nation). In her town square murals, Stryjeńska likewise depicted women pouring their life-giving water into the earth. The promise of the spring dawn ushered in by a Slavic goddess may have been, for Stryjeńska, what she imagined as "a distant premonition of a grand Slavic resurrection led by Poland."100 Rejuvenation and resurrection were appropriate themes for a 'resurrected' nation that had ten years earlier risen from the darkness of oppression. Stryjeńska's strong association of Slavic antiquity with the triumph over oppressors was a direct reference to Adam Mickiewicz who, one hundred years earlier, championed the Slavic resurgence of virtuous Poland as the savior and leader of nations. Water as a symbol of fertility also finds reference in several of her depictions of the Pagan celebration of Śmigus Dyngus (Fig. 25). In a small work Stryjeńska depicts the folk tradition, still enacted today, of throwing water on a young woman in order to ensure her future fertility. Over time this pagan ritual has become connected to the Christian celebration of Easter. Śmigus Dyngus is the day following

99 Although less pertinent to the present discussion, but nonetheless fascinating, this figure is represented at least four separate times and is labeled "Lelum." In all examples Lelum's gender is somewhat ambiguous. Lelum is always a youth and often accompanied by a badger. The hair is always cropped in a short chin-length style reminiscent of Stryjeńska's own. At times Lelum appears with engorged breasts, at times without, and the genitals are always obscured. This figure is fascinatingly androgynous. Lelum may be Stryjeńska's interpretation of the Slavic god Lej who was the god of the spring sun. He was associated with fighting back the darkness and thawing the ground for spring.

100 Stryjeńska and Grońska,
Easter, further emphasizing the connection with spring, rejuvenation, and resurrection. In her other works, Stryjeńska also portrayed women, both peasant and goddess, in correlation with the element of fire as well as the bounty of grain. Her ever-present use of natural elements to interact with her figures created meaning. Stryjeńska's body of work suggests that *The Women Carrying Water* were part of this effort to draw up associations of life-giving forces and rejuvenation.

Stryjeńska was widely traveled, taking many trips to Paris, Austria, and Italy, not to mention her training in Munich.\(^{101}\) It was, after all, her encounter with western art that fueled her desire to rise to greatness in her own country. She undoubtedly would have encountered many of the 'treasured' works of western art as well during her travels. With this said, the portrayal of women as having a primordial connection with the elements was not a new concept in art, looking back to representations by Ingres and others of *The Source* as an idealized woman balancing the waters of life on her shoulders (Fig. 26). In making this comparison I am not attempting to suggest any direct derivation, but merely to expose such contrasting treatments of the same theme—a theme that has many art historical implications. Stryjeńska's satisfying empowerment of women and their place in her national narrative stands as a sharp contrast to Ingres' *The Source*, where we find an eroticized female ideal. In *The Source*, Ingres paints a nude youth. She sways provocatively; her jug of water spills both erotically and innocently down in thin ribbons penetrating the pool at her feet. She balances her load precariously, her toes flirting with the edge of her reflection. She stares out softly, inviting the viewer's eyes to

---

\(^{101}\) Though beyond the immediate scope of this paper, there are many examples of similarities in composition between iconic western works and Stryjenska's pieces. This fact aligns with the view of her art as seeking to create a 'Polish' voice that at once embraced what was being defined during the period as 'essentially Polish' and a desire to also lay claim to Western traditions.
rake her body. This image is a reference to the seductive and exotic qualities of the elemental woman: mysterious and at once innocent, yet with the coy temptation of Eve in her eye. Even her setting against the delicate split of the smooth rock face whispers secrets that are mirrored in the sweet bloom of the flower to her right. Lush foliage crowns her head and cages her in. This image draws to mind any number of canonized female sexual 'types.' Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* with the frothing sea's bubbling life force, also a pagan image, is again connected to the idea of profane love. Images such as the Water Women of Art Nouveau with their sinuous flowing lines and curling backdrops similarly exemplify the sexualization of the female 'type' and her connection to water. Further examples of this are found in works by Stryjeńska’s Polish contemporaries. Waclaw Borowski’s *Nude Woman* (c. 1930) shows a woman delicately shielding herself with her arms, her thighs pressed modestly together as her drapery falls away (Fig. 27). She glances down at the plant seated next to her. She exhibits both the eroticism of Ingres and the connection to the elements—the burgeoning sapling. Stryjeńska's women, though idealized, provide a stark contrast. Her figures have their feet spread wide giving the illusion of long purposeful strides. They are not provocative innocents. They are laboring. Their vessels of life weigh heavily on their shoulders. Though both Ingres and Stryjeńska provide idealized women, they are vastly different in character and style. Ingres' male view is one of promised pleasure: Stryjeńska's is one of creative force and the dynamic power of regeneration.

Beyond her paintings of pagan gods, Stryjeńska also spent much of her career painting Roman-Catholic religious subjects. The murals of the *Two Women Carrying Water* draw

---

104 The original is lost. Assumed to be somewhere in Russia, it is currently listed on the missing works list on the Ministerstwo Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego.
attention in the sunlight with their reflective gold backgrounds. The flat gold backgrounds draw immediate associations with religious icons and holy, Byzantine images. Although Poland has always been a Roman-Catholic nation, her Eastern Orthodox neighbors have at times influenced her artistic styles. The cult of the Virgin is an abiding feature of Poland both historically and presently. The Madonna occupies a prominent place in the religious iconography and has come to be viewed as a symbol of protection and strength. The degree of fervor associated with the Black Madonna of Częstochowa far exceeds that attached to any other representation of the Virgin (Fig. 28). Her figure conjures a unique image, which is intertwined with the history of Polish sovereignty. Longina Jakubowska notes that the numerous myths about miracles associated with the painting, mark the most traumatic periods of Polish history, specifically times when the country was under foreign occupation and attack. Countless descriptions of her miraculous protection, most often in battle, lead to her identification as the Polish protector in battle and in oppression.¹⁰⁵ Jakubowska concludes,

> The image of the Madonna signifies hope and provides salvation from political and economic injustice as well as resolution to personal problems. It represents the power of the weak. Expressing in a symbolic way the interests of any particular group and transcending them at the same time, it lends itself to cultural manipulation and binds different groups together.¹⁰⁶

The Black Madonna with her radiant gold halo and war wounds on her face has a rich mythology of her own. She was crowned by King Jan II Kazimierz Wasa as "Queen and Protector of Poland" in 1656 because of her victory in battle over the Swedish invaders in the 17th century. This was not the first, nor the last victory attributed to her. In fact her image was reproduced on prayer cards during World War II as the patron saint of the national army. To a lesser extent, this image of female protector can be seen in other national figures such as King Jadwiga who

¹⁰⁵ Jakubowska, 11.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
was venerated as a saint after her death, having exhibited her virtue by raising the dead on Corpus Christi, and Queen Dąbrowa who converted Poland to Christianity. With their gold backgrounds *The Two Women Carrying Water* stand proudly as sentinels, public icons and protectors of the town square.

Stryjeńska herself produced countless images of Mary and the Christ child, the prodigal son, and events of the passion of Christ. In these scenes, as in her description of the town square, Stryjeńska privileges the roles women play in the narrative. Though far from unique, Mary's monumental figure guards and enthrones the Christ Child, thereby protecting the future of mankind. Images of the *theotokos* permeate religious art. Stryjeńska contributed to these established tropes, yet also revolutionized them. In one of her works, peasant-like Mary is seen comforting a forlorn looking Christ as they rock in a turbulent sea (Fig. 29). In another, Mary is alone, crowned and powerful, her rosary raised up as her arms cross to shield her body (Fig. 30). A red robe graces her form and angels adorn her feet. Stryjeńska often presented Mary as the focus even in her works depicting Christ's life. Mary is a figure of power and action. Her role as protector, comforter, and mourner is exaggerated in Stryjeńska's works and is also reflected in the *Women Carrying Water*.

Stryjeńska's *Women Carrying Water* appear to be clothed in simple peasant costume. Upon closer examination, however, their tight bodices and thick skirts seem to be an invention of Stryjeńska rather than any reference to actual peasant women. Nevertheless, these women are undoubtedly tied to the land as they stride purposefully across field and mountain. The invocation of the moral peasant mother was not unique to Stryjeńska. Wlastimil Hofman (1881-1970) was a Polish painter who worked in Kraków around the same time as Stryjeńska. He painted several village (or peasant) Madonnas in the early 1900's. These images glorified
peasant mothers in a way quite different from Stryjeńska's. Hofman’s Madonna of 1909 provides an excellent example of the romantic, pre-reunification model of painting (Fig. 31). In this image, the young mother lovingly clutches her child to her chest for comfort and warmth with a shawl laid across her shoulders. The child hangs one hand on the coral beads suspended against his mother’s chest. The pair’s homespun clothing, the mother’s headscarf, and their dirty faces are emblems of reality. Her expression is transcendent, her love clear. Titled simply *Madonna*, Hofman clearly extols the virtue of this Polish peasant mother; she could be any mother; she could be every mother.107 Scholars have conjectured that the Polish mother has long been considered the foundation, or keeper, of the national heritage.108 Sosnowska suggests that this preexisting notion was further developed during the period of the Great Emigration. As the educated, and mostly male, insurrectionists during the 19th century fled Poland, they left the land to the keeping of the women and the peasants as they conspired abroad.109

In another of her works, Stryjeńska again highlights the role of peasant mother as strong and capable. In *Prządka (Spinner)*, she depicts a Polish peasant family (Fig. 32). In this work a young boy runs to his mother with a water jug, the father with his scythe and yield. Both are turning toward the woman in question. The monumental figure of the woman commands the space. Her yellow skirt trails on the bench and is reminiscent of sun rays and grain harvests, her solid bare feet set her in motion as she twists to acknowledge the boy. Here we see a woman, a peasant, and a keeper of the land. In contrast to romantic invocations of peasants, Stryjeńska’s work rejects the badges of reality. Her peasants are dressed in made-up clothing, filled out by

107 For further discussion see Cavanaugh, 76.
stylistic “robust” features. When laid next to more realistic depictions, her images with their playful illustrative style, serve almost as caricatures. Clothing, settings, and tools, are not researched reproductions, but rather imaginative creations.\(^{110}\) In both examples, joyful peasant mothers cherish and care for their families. They are moral mothers and keepers of the land (nation). Stryjeńska's *Two Women Carrying Water* summon images of laboring peasants living on the land—mothers of the nation.

Stryjeńska's quest to express a Polish national mythology through visual art took shape in the two *Women Carrying Water*. Her town square murals revealed the central role of female archetypes to national myths. Stryjeńska’s *Women Carrying Water* incorporated female personifications of Poland as a protector, producer, and rejuvenator. The specific figures of Matka Boska (Mother of God), Peasant Mother, and Slavic Goddess were called on to exemplify Poland. These strong female images were at the heart of Polish national mythologies. Styjeńska capitalized on pagan, religious, and peasant traditions to answer practical contemporary questions of reunification and national solidarity. Furthermore, they represented the intersecting ideas of past constructions and present situations. One of the mechanisms that accounts for the persistence of these national myths is their continued relevance. As a female artist, Stryjeńska not only claimed the subjects of these iconic women as her own, but also capitalized on the social freedoms they represented.

**Conclusion**

The creation of Polish culture through the arts had always been integral to the assertion of Polish identity. Its roots deeply planted in the Romantic art, philosophy, and literature of 123

\(^{110}\) In this respect Stryjeńska is herself acting as the folk. While many would see in her work an attempt to document reality, the many costumes, the multiplicity of polish culture and regions, she is by no means is scientific about her creations. Her position is rather one of contemporary folk teller, than a folklorist. It is not a preservation of tradition we see here but a celebration and a making relevant of the world around her.
years of partitions. Zofia Stryjenska was fundamental contributor to Poland’s sense of collective identity. Poland’s rich and tumultuous history provided a unique and persistent set of national mythologies, which Stryjeńska helped to shape. Furthermore the history of Poland also offered an unexpected precedence for the recognition and excellence of female figures. As with many of her works, Stryjeńska’s renovation of the Warsaw Town Square at once aligned her with gender stereotypes while also undermining them. Stryjeńska's authority in renovating and reimagining the culturally charged town square space attested to her success as an artist. As in other areas of her art, the overall town square project and her two remaining murals revealed the complex reception of her gender, her ability to use Polish history, female precedence, and current social and political circumstances for the benefit of her art.
Figure 1. Jan Matejko. *Polonia*. 1863.
Figure 2. Artur Grottger. *Pożegnania Powstańca* (Farewell Insurgent.) 1866.

Figure 3. Artur Grottger. *Powitanie Powstańca* (Welcoming the Insurgent.) 1866.
Figure 4. Munich Academy of Fine Arts (second from the left seated—Zofia Lubańska/Tadeusz Grzymała). 1911/1912. ARS.
Figure 5. Zofia Stryjeńska. *Boh*. 1917. Industrial Museum, Kraków.
Figure 7. Zofia Stryjeńska. *Lelum*. 1917. Industrial Museum, Kraków.
Figure 8. Józef Czajkowski. Outside the main hall of the Polish pavilion, Paris. 1925.
Figure 9. Józef Czajkowski and Zofia Stryjeńska. Inside the main hall of the Polish pavilion, Paris. 1925.

Figure 10. Józef Czajkowski and Zofia Stryjeńska. Inside the main hall of the Polish pavilion, Paris. 1925.
Figure 11. Zofia Stryjeńska. *Listopad-Grudzień (November-December).* Interior of the Polish Pavilion, Paris. 1925.
Figure 14. Popular Polish postcard published circa 1981.
Figure 15. Anonymous plate. *Emilia Plater*. 19th century.
Figure 16. Wojciech Kossak. *Emilia Plater w potyczce pod Szwiami*. 1904.
Figure 17. Wojciech Kossak *Orleta—Obrona cemetarza*. 1904.
Figure 18. Artur Grottger. *Cykl Lituania—Widzenia*. 1864.
Figure 19. Kamienica Zakrzewski side on the Old Warsaw Square. 1929. Warsaw.
Figure 20. Zofia Stryjeńska. Watercolor of the Zakrzewski side. 1929.
Figure 21. Kamienica Number 13 from Świętojańska street. 1928. Warsaw.
Figure 22. Old Warsaw square under construction, view of the Zakrzewski side. c. 1948-1952. Warsaw.
Figure 25. Zofia Stryjeńska. Śmingus Dyngus. 1925.
Figure 26. Jean-August-Dominique Ingres. *The Source*. 1820-1856.
Figure 27. Waclaw Borowski. *Nude Woman.* c. 1930.
Figure 28. Unknown. *Matka Boska Częstochowska/ Czarna Madonna (Black Madonna of Częstochowa).* Częstochowa, Poland.
Figure 29. Zofia Stryjeńska. *Rodzina rybaka (Family of the Fisherman).* After 1935.
Figure 30. Zofia Stryjeńska. *Our Lady of the Rosery*. c. 1950.
Figure 31. Wlastimil Hofman. *Madonna*. 1901.
Figure 32. Zofia Stryjeńska. *Prządka (Spinner)*. 1953.


