

A mixed or a national school presentation in the permanent galleries? Warsaw example - summary

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My market table entitled *A mixed or a national school presentation in the permanent galleries? Warsaw example* introduced a new idea of the arrangement of the galleries in the Muzeum Narodowe (National Museum) in Warsaw, which is re-opening its doors in May, after a major refurbishment, for its 150th anniversary. It raised a vivid interest and discussion during both sessions and inspired an idea to organize a CODART *focus* meeting some time next year in Warsaw. The visit to the new galleries would be then additionally accompanied by a temporary display of prints and drawings from Albrecht von Säbisch collection in our Museum (intended by the assistant curator Piotr Borusowski, CODART member, who also had his market table this year). We both are enthusiastic to make the CODART *focus* idea a reality.

Therefore I would like to give some extra information about the big changes in the Gallery of European Old Masters in Muzeum Narodowe in Warsaw. The “revolution” concerns even the topography within the Museum building. Only the uppermost gallery, formerly housing the Netherlandish, Flemish, Dutch and German art remains under our administration, but will now feature another display. The new idea of presentation bases on blending of the northern (Polish included) and southern European art and showing it in groups of themes such as: portrait, history (*storia*), nudes, religious subjects, landscape, genre, still lives and animals, while also stressing various functions and roles of specific types of paintings. The display will follow - quite incidentally reflected also by the architectural framework of our new galleries - the hierarchical pyramid of genres as established by the Renaissance theory of art: the *storia* on the second floor, the landscape in its multiple varieties on the first floor and the genre, still life and animal painting on the ground floor of the building. The portraits from 16th-18th-century northern, southern and Polish schools will be exhibited together in a separate Portrait Gallery.

The new kind of exhibition does not wholly exclude the chronology and traditional geographical divisions. The gallery of the *storia* (i.e. biblical and mythological painted narratives, allegorical and religious painting) opens with some crowded 15th- and 16th cent. scenes: two Italian *cassoni* featuring subjects from mythology and Roman history, a Netherlandish panel of the *Martyrdom of SS Crispin and Crispinian* based on hagiography and a purely historical scene from the battle of Orsza by a German follower of Lucas Cranach. While all of them share a similar multi-figural composition, they also reveal characteristics of their national schools: Italian synthesis, Netherlandish realistic observation, German expressiveness and decorativeness. This introduction is followed by distinct blocks of Venetian renaissance painting and Italian baroque with its impact on Northern artists, presenting the first distinctive group of the dialogue and juxtaposition – that of Italian, French and Dutch caravaggesque paintings. Workshop practice, represented by some *modelli* and *ricordi* is illustrated in a small room at the side. The circle of Rembrandt and the Flemish baroque have each their separate exhibition spaces. They are followed by a mixed display of Dutch, Flemish and French mythological subjects and works illustrating the question of nudity in the southern and northern art, including images of the beautiful and / or Eucharistic body of Christ. A separate exhibition space is devoted to religious art. Groups of paintings serving private devotion, especially those showing Virgin and Child exemplify exchange of influences between North and South. On the contrary, the juxtaposition of monumental Italian altarpieces and Northern triptychs reveals a quite different and individual character of each.

The galleries of landscape, genre, still lives and animal painting present analogical game of similarities and differences. The presentation of Flemish 16th- and 17th cent. landscapes is followed by a panorama of Dutch 17th cent. images of native nature and a group of picturesque Italian vistas. Dutch and Flemish Italianate pictures are intermingled with Roman vedutas by Giovanni Paolo Pannini accompanied by topographic vedutas by two Dutch artists, Isaac de Moucheron and Gaspar van Wittel and followed by a set of architectural *capricci* by Michele Marieschi. The landscape exhibition is closed by magnificent *capricci* and Warsaw vedutas of Bernardo Bellotto. In the ground floor galleries, the section of genre painting presents a set of big, caravaggesque “merry companies” and two interesting theme clusters: a group of *tronie* type half-figures by Jan Lievens, Gerrit Dou and Christian Seybold and cabinet paintings featuring gypsies, soldiers and peasants by Italian and Dutch painters – a real panorama of customs and manners. Two splendid representations of pantries full of victuals by Giovanni Francesco Briglia and Frans Snyders mark the entry to the still life section. Juxtaposition of illusionistic Netherlandish still lives, both flower painting and exquisite or simple meals and vessels, with Italian decorative compositions reveal the unprecedented mimetic skills of the Netherlanders as

opposed to the painterly values characteristic to Italian artists. Animal painting is represented exclusively by Flemish and Dutch painters and shows two extremely rich fauna panoramas in the Paradise (Gillis d'Hondecoeter) and in front of the Noah's ark (Roelandt Savery) as well as hunting scenes and trophies.

A little bit contrary to my expectations (after all we ARE chauvinists of Netherlandish art, aren't we?) most of the colleagues liked this concept of the mixed presentation (elaborated by the chief curator of the Gallery of Old European Masters, prof. dr. Antoni Ziemia), manifesting common tendencies in European art of the past. The participants, provided with portfolios of visual documentation with images representative of each gallery and featuring characteristic clusters of works, found the new arrangement very attractive. However, there were some suggestions to change the display every few years as not to keep too many valuable paintings in the storage rooms. A big disadvantage of such a display is a necessity of a large amount of information texts. One of my questions was how to present the information as not to interfere too much in the design and not to make the audience weary with too much reading. We have been thinking about introducing additional explanations, especially on the iconography, on sheets to be placed in sort of "pockets". One of the precious suggestions was to place them as a multimedia presentation in computers or tablets installed in the galleries, which is a very good idea, but requiring more financial engagement and time to elaborate. Let's hope by the eventual date of CODART *focus* in Warsaw this can be done!