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Rococo, Today in Wrocław

Review of the exhibition:

Rococo Madness! Fascination with Rococo in Silesia (18th-21st c.)

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Our view of the Rococo period has been shaped by films such as Sofia Coppola's "Marie Antoinette" (2006) or Stephen Frears' "Dangerous Liaisons" (1988). At the same time as "Jeanne du Barry" is being shown in cinemas, the National Museum of Wrocław is presenting a blockbuster exhibition dedicated to "Rococo Madness!" in the remote Four Domes Pavilion (Pawilon Czterech Kopuł) exhibition centre.¹

The subtitle - Fascination in Silesia (18th-21st c.) - reveals that not only objects of that period are shown. In curatorial thematic blocks, such as ceremonial feasts, palace balls, or body language meanings, the Rococo is traced. Objects from the Habsburgian and Frederician periods of 18th-century Silesia, as well as works by Italian and French painters, are combined with contemporary artworks, mostly by Polish artists. Little is visible from the 20th century; less space is devoted to the 19th-century painting factory of the Wrocław-based Strachowsky family and the painter and restorer Joseph Langer (d. 1918), but in the exhibition the presence of typical Silesian Rococo is hardly found.

Inevitably, the exhibition design endeavoured to imbue the white cube rooms with a formal idiom reminiscent of this epoch. Combined with marvellous furniture – Wrocław was renowned for its manufactories – the five hundred artefacts in the exhibition unfortunately convey the character of a furniture store that is too densely packed together. Some background information is provided to the artefacts, but a historical overview about the German landscapes after the Thirty Years' War or even the concrete places with Rococo art like palaces or churches of Silesia – like a map, etc. – is missing.

Entering the first room, three martyr statues dance in front of a wall covered with mirror foil and under a sparkling disco ball, accompanied by a kitschy video projection on the two opposite walls. Now, was the 18th century period just a kitschy party? The pastel tones of the paintings, stucco, silk fabrics and floral appliqués of the dresses, the softness of the porcelain, the general playfulness suggests so. Directly adopted motifs of the video projection (integrated portraits of the 18th century, floral forms, ornaments, architecture, etc.) merge into a general indefiniteness in contrast to the works of the Rococo, which strictly

¹ Find information here: <https://mnwr.pl/en/rococo-madness-fascination-with-rococo-in-silesia-18th-21th-c/>
All photos here are made in the exhibition by the author.

followed certain principles. The colourfulness and brightness are particularly striking. However, the limitations of today's animation software cannot be overlooked. A similar phenomenon of bringing Rococo directly into our times is the painted negative colour inversion to Fragonard's famous painting of the swing by Anna Orbaczewska in the next room.² Not that those works are thoroughly tasteless, but it has the quality of a student work in their flat (as well as colourfully and painterly clumsy) execution. What is missed here is a more profound understanding of the period by the artists. Artists in the Rococo lived from commissioned works. Those two contemporary works also seem to have been created especially for this exhibition, but hastily under time pressure and with little empathy. Also, with little imagination, but perhaps rather rejecting principles, as according to director Piotr Oszczanowski, the connection to contemporary art can be established.³

Nevertheless, it is nice to guide the visitors of the 21st century to dance into the exhibition. Even if they danced differently, it cannot be only the feeling of the buoyancy of the garlands or volutes that fascinates us so much about Rococo. This epoch has received less attention in Silesia so far, which is why the exhibition was



fig. 1: Alina Szapocznikow in the exhibition

planned as part of several epoch shows. Between self-confident enlightenment and strict religiosity, the exhibition shows inevitably the duality of that time. It is surprising to see holy martyrs under the disco ball in today's Poland. But the exhibition thinks little subversively. No word to the philosophical background of the times. As Jacques Lacan pointed out that Emmanuel Kant the greatest philosopher of the time was a Sadist, of course no philosophy in the boudoir, not a word about de Sade. Small reminders of perversion and corporeality are shown in the works by Alina Szapocznikow (1966-68), which are somewhat clumsily placed on a foldable Rococo gaming table and depict breasts (fig. 1). The fact that those works allude to breast cancer, from which the artist died in 1973, is not mentioned.

More perversion lies in the treatment of aristocratic kids as dolls. An ambiguity of loveliness and harsh strictness, which can also be seen in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the greatest French philosophers those days, who put all his kids he had with his housemaid to the foundling hospital, while writing his famous book

² Here you can see the artist's instagram post in front of the described work: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CWNZrZGoBce/?hl=de>

³ All the quotes of the director are from that interview: <https://kultura.onet.pl/sztuka/piotr-oszczanowski-o-wystawie-szalenstwo-rokoka-za-tym-szla-wladza/s5kfnej>

“*Èmile ou De l'éducation*”.⁴ With Rousseau's spirit or Kant's (and de Sade's) rationality one can understand the correctness of the patterns seen throughout the exhibition.

However, points of eroticism, sensuality and corporeality are also shown in the sculptures of the young contemporary German artist Yvonne Roeb, even if they would probably have fit better into an exhibition on the *Kunstkammer* (i.e. the 16th century).⁵ Perhaps the idea of using art as decoration is not far-fetched in this choice and this installation, although more space could have been devoted to design, as Wrocław is still well known for it. However, the ideas behind the works of contemporary art in the exhibition hardly coincide with those of the Rococo. Even the corset by Maria Pinińska-Bereś placed next to a display case does little to help us understand the everyday restrictions on movement of the noble ladies of the 18th century – and if they do, then only in a superficial way. Sadistic and masochistic treatment of their own bodies and other people, public codes, diseases like syphilis, sex and gender would be points to figure out with more depth. It's good to have the sketch and the photo of a costume design by Manfred Thierry Mugler worn by his boyfriend and artist Leon Dziemaszkiewicz in the exhibition, but describing it as a “dress [which] loosely refers to Rococo” (as seen in the exhibition) reveals again a good will but unfortunate shallow view on contemporary art.⁶

Concerning possible connection to today, the director of the museum has pointed out that it is about “emotional sincerity and the desire to experience the here and now” because this connects the Rococo with today. The desire itself, or the dream associated with it, often recurred, especially in surrealism. Sadly, this period isn't represented at all. Everything seems to be totally neutral (and it's true that national museums are often forced to be so nowadays, but we don't know the politics behind every case). The decline of the world of the *Ancien Régime* and the decline of all senses in the age of neoliberalism connects our times. We also live today in Europe in a time of luxury and oversaturation, similar to the aristocracy at the eve of the French Revolution. There is a huge dark side of Rococo concerning immense exploitation of serfs, and colonialism that isn't addressed in the exhibition. While peasants got romanticised and the “exotique” inspired artworks praise a “*bon sauvage*”, we must face the political truth behind. In fact, the exhibition lacks a critical view on that historical evidence, then and now. The view on the artworks remains the view of the privileged.

⁴ On Rousseau's life I highly recommend the book by Jean Starobinski, published in several languages. First in French: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *La transparence et l'obstacle*, Paris 1971.

⁵ On the personal website of the artist you find images: <https://yvonneeroeb.de/ausstellung/szalenstwo-rokoka/>

⁶ Here is the link to the artist's intergram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CavXOqzDRNE/?hl=de>



fig. 2: Antoine Watteau painting in the exhibition

Oversaturation is evident in the formal language and theatricality in the appearance of the figures. In Antoine Watteau's paintings (fig. 2), for instance, the figures themselves became beholders of the depicted landscape of the picture they are in, looking for the reference to the stage-like surroundings that they seem to have lost. It seems that they even don't really enjoy their own parties anymore. Everything seems to be choreographed down to the smallest detail.

Corrado Giaquinto's bozzetto of the "Adoration of the Shepherds" shines in his usual Neapolitan style of impasto lighting (fig. 3). At the same time, it is precisely in this that the stagnation that has characterised the art of the time for over a hundred years since Bernardo Cavallino or others is evident. In other words: at least here in his chiaroscuro built up on a brown ground, Giaquinto is still Baroque. The Austrian painter Kremser Schmidt, presented alongside the other two in the exhibition, can accordingly be counted as much less to the Rococo than to the Baroque. Even his dissolved painting style seems oppressive.



fig. 3: Corrado Giaquinto painting in the exhibition

Several similarly large-format religious canvases demonstrate – in a wonderfully arranged but very crowded room – how compositions are planned according to patterns. The religious themes of the paintings seem unimportant, the harmonic expression alone prevails. Only the figures are repositioned. New themes are designed from an existing repertoire of forms. All in all, Rococo also means nothing other than to transfer entrenched Baroque themes, create and confirm canons of forms, adopt motifs with ease and self-understanding and all that often without further questioning. Statuesque and empty, elongated, clean, unapproachable and often materially overdrawn in pastel shades, figures musing in the landscape (in the sense of a late self-pitying Jean-Jacques Rousseau). This is what one would call the essence of Rococo painting.

As a spectator I wish to get formal analyses visualised in its deeper sense. As far as this period is concerned historically, the seminal works of the Wrocław-born sociologist and historian Norbert Elias would have been a nice addition.⁷

The bodies of sculptures are similar to those on the paintings, elongated and must be read in their mostly religious context (i.e. their surroundings). For example, two bishop figures are strongly tilted forward because they used to have an exposed place in a higher location of a façade. In the exhibition, they are immensely fascinating in their movement, because once dislocated, they are placed in the middle of the room (fig. 4). This room's installation is striking despite a huge number of artworks.



fig. 4: installation view

One of the most fascinating in Rococo is its style based on quality and luxurious materials, posture, nobility, etc. Obviously, the most common topic in painting in the 18th century was the portrait, in which the noble dignitaries were represented. Still, one likes to take selfies, or loves to observe oneself in the mirror. Today's world is also about a person's image. Vanity is a quality based on great self-esteem or self-reassurance. When you're dressed in exquisite fabrics and make-up, you probably feel better than before, and if you then have the honour of posing in front of a painter or a photographer, even more so. The two portraits of Mr and Mrs von der Recke from 1760 were photoshopped in 2023 (probably commissioned for the exhibition) by the German artist Volker Hermes and masked with a continuation of their robes.⁸ They could have chosen a painting by Ewa Juszkiewicz too, the now famous Polish artist at Gagosian NY, because she

⁷ My thoughts here are also based on his essay on Watteau: Norbert Elias, *Watteaus Pilgerfahrt zur Insel der Liebe*, Frankfurt 2000.

⁸ It's seen on all of the flyers, posters and the webpage of the exhibition (see FN 1 here). A perfect advertisement for the artist, whose ruff variations of 17th century paintings used to be quite funny. Here his website: <https://hermes.art>

does quite the same for over ten years.⁹ Anyway, what does that masking reveal? Additional over-playfulness of that time that had its fashion and style demonstrated in white, oblong wigs, made-up faces. The mask is also a reference to the portrait itself, to the role of the model, the spectacle, the theatricality. At the same time, Hermes created a fetish discourse. But why? What is he aiming at by using too much of what is already too much? Again, the image veers towards an inner emptiness. It is so overloaded that it no longer tells us anything. It remains a reference to something that is not there. Is it also the desire to recognise something behind it? Encyclopaedists and enlighteners continue the deconstruction of beliefs, customs and the foundations of society which started since the Renaissance. All of that should still be questioned now.

The game of adornment, of carnival, of hiding has always been closely linked to fashion. What is fashion but an underlining of a personality, like a display of harmonious lines, of ornamentation and personified architecture? Never was this more important than in the 18th century. It is far from easy to talk here again about representation, class, nobility and their customs. One cannot do one without the other. For instance, a side table in its entire design, its ergonomics, needs to be understood in coordination with the clothes and their movements. This is certainly visible in the objects at the exhibition, but the question of design – especially from today's perspective – is underrepresented. Art and design have different functions today. In Rococo everything seems to be design, not yet art as we would understand it. Style has always been the outcome of a deeper sensibility for forms, fabrics, and their usage. Still, we can see bad examples of art or fashion nowadays not conscious of qualities, insights, and meanings. Some examples of that were unfortunately included in the exhibition, and they revealed not enough knowledge of contemporary art and its specific qualities.

For exhibition makers the selection of works and their availability is always a problem. Should the aim have been to transfer the question of the overloaded formal language of the Rococo epoch into the actual arrangement of the exhibition, this has been achieved in Wrocław. In the rooms where more space is offered, mirrors or mirror foil are used to enlarge the room and patterns. This idea is very reminiscent of the dreamlike Rococo staging in the architecture after Versailles. Or perhaps it makes you look at "L'Année dernière à Marienbad" (1961) again? Fewer works and thus more in-depth insights into insanely fascinating artworks and style never do any harm.

Like the mask reveals other layers, it would have been nice to explore deeper levels of that fascinating epoch. Overall, the exhibition lacks like so many blockbuster-shows a critical view, and more background information on the Silesian Rococo. Apart from the thematic design, the visitor is given very little help to empathise with the theme, style, or culture of Rococo. Unluckily, an unfortunate selection of contemporary art does not lead to a better

⁹ See at her website, earlier drawings: <http://www.ewajuszkiewicz.com/portfolio/drawings-2009-2011>

understanding of the epoch. With slightly different choices, the concept could have worked quite impressively.

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After studying History, Social Studies and Political Education, Art Education, Pedagogy, Fine Arts and Art History with a special focus on Image Theory and Philosophy at the University of Vienna, the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, and the University of Basel, Marc Michael Moser finished his studies in 2017 with a thesis on Michelangelo. Later he turned his attention primarily onto the mediation, and education of art. Currently he is researching artistic decisions in paintings of the Early Modern Period and working on an iconographic catalogue.

He works as lecturer, teacher, researcher and visual artist.