

What is the Enlightenment? 200 years of the Print Room in the Library of the University of Warsaw

The Print Room of the Library of the University of Warsaw (BUW) was established in 1818, and it contains the oldest public collection of prints and drawings in Poland. Until 1939, it was also the biggest collection of its kind. Despite the heavy losses suffered during the Second World War, the Print Room has maintained its unique position in the history of Polish collections due to the artistic and historical importance of its artworks. The origins of the BUW collection go back to King Stanisław August's own Print Room, which was purchased from the king's heirs in 1818 on the initiative of Stanisław Kostka Potocki, minister of the Government Committee for Religious Denominations and Public Education, who also donated a generous portion of his own collection. The drawings, prints, architectural designs, and volumes were entrusted to the Public Library, which had been created a year earlier in 1817, and operated at the Royal University of Warsaw (the Public Library later became the Library of the University of Warsaw). The traditional name of the king's collection—the Print Room—was now assigned to the department that holds all of the library's artworks. The Print Room became an important artistic, educational, and academic centre for the university as well as the city of Warsaw. It was able to keep expanding its collection thanks to purchases, donations, and the 'legal deposit policy'. After the failure of the November Uprising (1831), the collection was confiscated and moved to Saint Petersburg where it was taken over by the Imperial Fine Arts Academy. It was only returned to Poland in 1923 under the Treaty of Riga, and was deposited in the Library building (today known as the 'old BUW'). The period between 1939 and 1945 was a tragic one—the war brought about the loss of over 60% of the collection, as well as the entire reference library, photo archives, inventories, and catalogues. Thanks to a recovery campaign carried out when hostilities stopped, the decimated and damaged collection was returned to the Library and was again accessible as early as January 1946. In 1955, it was moved to the Tyszkiewicz-Potocki Palace at 32 Krakowskie Przedmieście, and in 2001 it was moved to the new library building at 56/66 Dobra Street.

Currently, the Print Room holds around 50,000 original works, including artistic and architectural drawings, bookplates, single-leaf prints, volumes of prints. The largest part of the collection dates back to the 17th and 18th centuries, with the majority of artists representing Western European schools. The Old Master Drawings include works by such artists as Giorgio Vasari, Pietro da Cortona, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Pieter Paul Rubens, Rembrandt, François Boucher, Jan Chrystian Kamsetzer, Franciszek Smuglewicz, Zygmunt

Vogel, and André Le Brun, among others. Nearly all schools and periods of European printmaking from the 15th to the 18th century are represented, including Italian and German prints from the 15th and 16th centuries (Andrea Mantegna, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Marcantonio Raimondi and his school, Sebald and Barthel Beham, and Albrecht Dürer), prints by masters of the Rubens school, the largest Polish collection of Rembrandt and Piranesi etchings, works by Jacques Callot, as well as French and English 18th century colour prints. A very precious collection of architectural and decorative designs is closely related to Polish history and culture. It contains the 17th century Tylman van Gameren Archive—unique in the world (around 800 items)—and designs from the second half of the 18th century and first half of the 19th century. Most of these belonged to King Stanisław August, others came from the collections of Dominik Witke-Jeżewski, Stanisław Patek, and others. The cimelia (the most precious items) include 53 drawings by Victor Louis dating back to 1765–1766, which concern the reconstruction of the Royal Castle in Warsaw. They are complemented by interior designs created by the painter and decorator Jean-Louis Prieur. The Henryk Grohman collection, including works by eminent European, Polish, and American artists from the second half of the 19th century as well as from the 20th century, constitutes an interesting highlight (Camille Corot, Félicien Rops, Edouard Manet, James McNeil Whistler, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edvard Munch, Leon Wyczółkowski, Feliks Jabłczyński, Józef Pankiewicz, Józef Mehoffer, Władysław Skoczylas, among others).

In the spring 2017, a pavilion designed by the Austrian architect, Adolf Krischanitz, was erected close to the Library of the University of Warsaw. During 2008–2010 it was the temporary seat of the Berlin Kunsthalle, and currently it is being loaned, free of charge, to the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art. Practically in the same moment as the Museum moved to the bank of the Vistula, a bold and extravagant plan was born. Since there was a professional venue so close to the Library a tempting opportunity presented itself—maybe both institutions could work together to create a unique project to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Print Room by creating an exhibition in the pavilion? It also solved the problem of lack of exhibition space in the Library. As both parties were interested in the collaboration, it took only a few meetings to make the decision and take on the challenge. We wanted a novel idea with which to present historical art—which is the essence of the Library's Print Room—but in a context that wasn't obvious, in an entourage of contemporary architecture, with a professional scenario, and an unconventional selection of exhibits that would carry a

conceptual message and expand the scope of the aesthetic experience, and, maybe, lend a new (or maybe reinterpreted) ideological and aesthetic value to this historical collection. We rejected the simplest kind of presentation that is most commonly used for anniversary exhibitions; displaying the most attractive works and artists is typically effective, but boring, and it would not create the effect we were after.

The authors of the exhibition were mainly inspired by Stanisław August's original Print Room from the Age of Enlightenment, which is the monarch's only art collection to have survived until the present day in its original form, in spite of the enormous damage suffered during the war. It was the king's most personal collection, and contained prints, drawings, architectural designs, and illustrated volumes from the 16th to 18th century. The prints (and drawings) were prepared and classified according to their topic, and then glued to white sheets of paper and outlined with a light-green border painted in watercolour along with an engraved frame. The title page of each portfolio was decorated with calligraphic lettering. Groups of works prepared in this manner were then put in decorative gilded calf skin *portefeuilles*, lined with hand-painted paper and marked with the royal supralibros. The collection forms a visual digest of European art from the 16th to 18th century. It has been used as comparative material and inspired new works of art. Its purpose was educational and informative on the one hand, while on the other it had aesthetic, artistic and representative functions. It also recalls an idea of King Stanisław August that never came to fruition—to establish an Academy of Fine Arts that would educate new generations of Polish artists according to the best practices of European art.

On a conceptual and artistic level, the resulting exhibition presents a contemporary vision of the 18th century Enlightenment collection. It raises questions about the collection's origins and importance, but also its present meaning and impact in terms of the aesthetic, philosophical, educational, social, and artistic, because it can inspire emulation or dialogue between the old drawings and prints, and the works by contemporary artists that have been prepared specially for this exhibition. Have we risen to this extraordinary challenge? Will the exhibition spark interest, or initiate a broader debate about the contemporary place and role of historical art collections? The exhibition's popularity, reviews, and public reception will give us the answer.

In closing, I would like to kindly thank everyone involved for their combined efforts and courage—my thanks go, in particular, to Joanna Mytkowska, director of the Museum of

Modern Art; the authors of the scenario, Tomasz Szerszeń, Ph.D., and Łukasz Rodunda, Ph.D.; the Museum team; and all the people from the Library of the University of Warsaw who made a contribution to the exhibition, especially my colleagues from the Print Room (Urszula Dragońska in particular); the Conservation and Protection Department headed by the vigilant Ewa Urzykowska; the Promotion, Exhibition and Collaboration Department with special thanks to Agnieszka Kościelniak-Osiak; and the Targeted Projects and External Funds Department. I would also like to extend my thanks to the City of Warsaw for their financial support, without which the project would not have been possible.

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