
Abakanowicz. Confrontations



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The Royal Library

“Art is not a decoration, but a challenge, a confrontation, and a warning”

Magdalena Abakanowicz

Raw forms of contemporary art displayed in a historic, 18th-century building constitute an unusual collection triggering a whole range of additional meanings.

This is precisely the reasoning behind an exhibition of works of art by Magdalena Abakanowicz, one of the most prominent Polish artists of the second half of the 20th century, exhibited in the historic interiors of the Royal Library, the only fully authentic room of the Royal Castle in Warsaw that survived the 1939 fire.

Magdalena Abakanowicz is the most recognisable Polish name in the world of contemporary art – she was a complete artist, an individualist and innovator, who constantly confronted herself with new areas in the process of her artistic exploration. Her works have become part of the strict canon of the world's 20th-century art.

The evolution of Abakanowicz's body of work began with textiles, which gradually gained their third spatial dimension, as a result becoming abstract sculptures, then moved towards figurative portrayals of sitting, standing, walking, dancing humanoid forms, with or without heads, made of jute canvas.

Abakanowicz's "grey people" are both "passive and intrusive" at one and the same time (Jasia Reichardt, 1995) – seen from the front, they become a crowd ready for confrontation, whereas from the back, they are but empty, hollow figures that seem weak and vulnerable. In her works, she often confronted opposite meanings with each other, opening the way for a variety of interpretations and conclusions.

As part of the exhibition, the monumental and ambiguous forms created by Abakanowicz (including *Crowd III, Backs, Headed*) are moreover given a special context in the form of historic, classicist interiors of the Royal Library – the only part of the Royal Castle historic complex that survived World War II.

The exhibition itself fits in well with the ever more common practice of displaying works of contemporary art in museum-residences already abounding in works of old art. Such facilities, in turn, are most often seats of former monarchs, i.e. sites of great historic and symbolic importance themselves. Museum experiments confronting two seemingly unrelated areas make it possible to take a look at the works of art and the historic context of the interiors in which they are displayed from a different perspective, oftentimes giving them new meanings one would not usually associate with them in the first place.

The works of art put on display have been selected based on the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the associated sense of threat, also clearly felt in Poland. The term "confrontation" itself takes on additional meanings here – it stands for an armed conflict between two states, but also for numerous conflicts of values born out of it: between the instinct of survival and the sense of responsibility, between the love of one another and the will to fight, between the affirmation of life and one's doubts as to its meaning due to the unimaginable acts of violence and destruction.

The items are displayed solely with the use of light, with the historic interiors serving as the exhibition's scenography. All elements seen complement one another, as a consequence developing one common narrative.

The pieces come from the collections of the Marta Magdalena Abakanowicz Kosmowska and Jan Kosmowski Foundation, the National Museum in Wrocław and the Krupa Gallery in Wrocław.

The exhibition has been made possible in cooperation with the Marta Magdalena Abakanowicz Kosmowska and Jan Kosmowski Foundation.

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication illustrated with exceptional photographs, containing essays by experts in the field of Abakanowicz's body of work, published by the Arx Regia Publishing House of the Royal Castle.

Standing figures, eight forms cast in bronze put on display in the Great Courtyard, will constitute both an announcement of and an invitation to the very exhibition at the Royal Library.

Exhibition curators: Dr Mariusz Klarecki, Katarzyna Rogalska (Royal Castle in Warsaw, Curatorium of the Tin-Roofed Palace)

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