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***“At the start of the rebirth of art in Łódź”? The START artists’
oeuvre in relation to modern art***

Regaining of independence by Poland and the resulting new political and social situation sparked discussion that had already taken place in the country about the shape of artistic life, directions of art development, and the goals to be pursued by Polish artists. Even before the outbreak of World War I there had been a clear shift away from romantic and symbolist art, strongly linked to literature, towards new trends: anti-naturalistic and mostly critical of tradition; after 1918, national art, or, rather, the search for its modern formula, gained importance. Łódź remained on the margins of these polemics. The exception was the episodic activity of the Yung Yidish group (1919–1921), whose members consciously defined their identity, joining the trend towards creating modern Jewish culture and art. After the group disbanded, the painters associated with it functioned within the Polish-Jewish environment.

The daily press from the 1920s allows us to assume that the main problem of local artists was the lack of institutional support, which weakened insufficiently consolidated community. After several years of activity, organisation of dinner parties, social meetings, a series of lectures on art, and finally two large exhibitions (1918, 1918/1919), the Society of Artists and Devotees of Fine Arts, established in 1916, clearly dwindled in 1920 (or at least it ceased to be visible in the Łódź press). At the beginning of 1923, an author of art chronicle wrote:

[...] Łódź citizens lack “local patriotism”, ambition to have their own position, their own artistic school [...] cities much smaller than Łódź have been able to gather people of art and put their own stamp on their work.¹

¹ “Kronika artystyczna,” *Republika* 1923, no. 15, p. 4.

The ills suggested in the text were addressed by the establishment of a new artistic formation, *Srebrny Wóz* [Silver Wagon], whose members, headed by Karol Hiller, Witold Wandurski, and Icchak (Wincenty) Brauner, intended to create an artistic guild that would unite all people of the arts in one organisation.² Unfortunately, this valuable initiative proved to be short-lived. While Brauner, Hiller, Marek Szwarc, Ignacy Hirszfang, and Henryk Hirszenberg, who cooperated with *Srebrny Wóz*, as representatives of Łódź, they did manage to present their achievements at the International Exhibition of New Art opened at the end of 1923 in the Casino (their works were exhibited along with works by German expressionists and avant-garde artists from Warsaw and Gdańsk);³ after this event *Srebrny Wóz* probably suspended its activities. Three years later, implementation of its programme slogan was taken up by *Grupa Łodzian* [The Łódź Residents' Group] whose members had previously belonged to *Srebrny Wóz*.

On 1 February 1926, an exhibition of seven painters: Karol Hiller, Icchak Brauner, Ignacy Hirszfang, Samuel Finkelstein, Natan Szpigel, Hilary Kołakowski, and Bolesław Kudewicz opened at 6 Sierpnia Street. The exhibition, described as a "revue of young local forces"⁴ was intended to familiarise Łódź residents with achievements of modern painting⁵ – trends oscillating between "natural realism and experimental formalism."⁶ As Witold Wandurski noted, *Grupa Łodzian* gathered artists around the desire to "go beyond the boundaries of provincial boredom and banality [...]."⁷ The group did not formulate a common manifesto or a coherent programme. The artists involved came from different backgrounds, graduated from different schools, and their artistic visions did not necessarily coincide. According to the newspaper, "the exhibition had an external character of something heterogeneous and divergent. Impressionism often turned into cubism, expressionism into formalism". Formal and stylistic pluralism presented by the exhibited works reflected the artists' dilemmas. In Łódź and other centres of independent Poland, as in Western Europe, artists were looking for new solutions, experimenting with material, colour, composition, and space. As one critic noted:

Let's take such huge talents as A. Derain, Picasso or Matisse. Wallowing in various shades of "isms" in the name of the much-absolving slogan, an experiment, they violated

² Ibidem.

³ "Międzynarodowa wystawa malarska w Łodzi. Ekspresjonizm i impresjonizm – Nerw społeczności w nowej sztuce. Rewolucjoniści zagraniczni i polscy," *Republika* 1923, no. 339, p. 9.

⁴ W. Wandurski, "List z Łodzi. A jednak się kręci...", *Wiadomości Literackie* 1926, no. 12, p. 2.

⁵ "Wystawa obrazów łódzkich malarzy," *Głos Polski* 1926, no. 27, p. 6.

⁶ Rol., "Wystawa obrazów łódzkich artystów-malarzy-plastyków," *Rozwój* 1926, no. 28, p. 11.

⁷ A quotation taken from the exhibition, W. Wandurski, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

established painting forms, only to return to what they themselves called classical, or rather neo-classicism.⁸

A similarly distinct stylistic metamorphosis could be seen in the paintings of Ignacy Hirsztang and Karol Hiller, exhibited at the Łódź exhibition. Hirsztang, a graduate of the Academy in Krakow, a student of Wojciech Weiss, Teodor Axentowicz, and Jacek Malczewski, abandoned symbolism, turned to Expressionism and succumbed to the influence of Andre Derain. Hiller's oil paintings, reflecting urban and factory motifs as well as still lifes, were characterised by perfect drawing and sense of colour, while temperas were charmingly decorative. Pen-and-ink drawings were considered the best works among those presented at the exhibition.

Brauner's oeuvre was seen as a constant search for his own path. The paintings, which resemble sketches, "are a meaningful illustration of the struggle of a reliable talent with the way of grasping new forms."⁹ Still lifes and post-impressionist landscapes by Hilary Kołakowski and landscapes and portraits by Bolesław Kudewicz were well assessed. Other members of Grupa Łodzian, Finkelstein and Szpigiel, were rated more harshly. Szpigiel in particular was accused of drawing deficiencies and improper use of perspective. Grupa Łodzian's existence was as short as that of Srebrny Wóz. In the same year, the group was transformed into the START Association of Artists, an organisation that was going to continue the programme of the former Society of Artists and Devotees of Fine Arts, and thus act not only as an artistic group, but also as a society of lovers of fine arts.

On 12 December 1926, the first exhibition of START opened at 6 Sierpnia Street No. 4. The ceremony was honoured by the presence of military authorities headed by Generals Jung and Ledóchowski, as well as city officials: the president of the city council, Dr Fichna, jurors, and representatives of the local elite.¹⁰ The press announcement encouraging citizens to take part in the event stressed that the group members wanted their work to embrace the influences of contemporary European art with the aesthetic expectations of the Łódź public. The exhibition showed around 200 works representing the oeuvre of 20 artists.¹¹

At the end of the month, *Głos Polski* published an extensive text informing its readers about the newly established group. In reporting on the exhibition, the

⁸ Ja, "Wystawa prac 'Grupy Łodzian'," *Rozwój* 1926, no. 22, p. 11.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ "Wczorajsze otwarcie wystawy grupy Łodzian," *Kurier Łódzki* 1926, no. 33, p. 8.

¹¹ "Wystawa artystów 'Startu'," *Głos Polski* 1926, no. 341, p. 6.

author devoted most of the article to the works of Izrael Lejzerowicz, who “wants to enclose infinity in his works”. Characterising the output of the young painter, it emphasised his desire to find an individual style by “combining old and new art”. As the article noted:

He cannot be pigeonholed into any painting school. Symbolism, Expressionism, Impressionism, a fairy tale, novella, anecdotes, philosophical themes, the excess of content over form or form over content – all these can be found in his works.¹²

The article contains descriptions of several works by Lejzerowicz, such as: a fragment of *The Procession in Grey*, *Sepulchral Song*, *Archpriest* (“With fabulous drawing, it has in his face (...) so much ecstasy that Norwid could put a poem or a novella under it”); *Feast* [Fig. 1, 2] and a project of a poster for the masked ball, whose composition the critic compared to the works by Witkacy [Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz], at the same time described as constructivist and “nobly decorative.”¹³



Fig. 1. Izrael Lejzerowicz, *Feast*, 1926.

Source: Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi, Archiwum rodziny Biedermannów [Biedermann's Family Archive], sign. 39/559/0/-/116.

¹² W. Kel., “Wystawa ‘Startu’,” *Głos Polski* 1926, no. 355, p. 6.

¹³ Ibidem.



Fig. 2. Izrael Lejzerowicz, *Archpriest*

Source: Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi, Archiwum rodziny Biedermannów [Biedermann's Family Archive], sign. 39/559/0/-/116.

Apart from Izrael Lejzerowicz, the text also mentions other START members, who presented their works during the exhibition: Karol Hiller, “an authentic Constructivist, [...] whose subtle deformation makes a nice impression”; Ignacy Hirszfang, a strong and fresh talent, freely using various techniques (ink, oil paint, watercolour, and pastel) [Fig. 3]; Stanisław Notarjusz, who presented prints with industrial motifs; Natan Szpigiel, Abraham Weinbaum, Samuel Finkelstein, Roman Rozentel, Leon Rozenberg. [Fig. 4]



Fig. 3. Ignacy Hirsztang, *Church in Kazimierz*, 1926

Source: *Die Zeit im Bild* 1926, no. 52, p. 5.



Fig. 4. Roman Rozentel, *At the Mirror*

Source: *Die Zeit im Bild* 1926, no. 52, p. 5.

Exhibitors, which is worth noting, included a group of female artists: Dora Rawska-Kon (landscapes), Lora Sołowiejczyk-Dońska, Miss Weinstein, Rega Szenbrun, and Ewa Brzezińska.

Ilustrowana Republika also mentioned participation of Jewish artists: I. Hirszberg and Wilhelm Wachtel.¹⁴ Although in 1926 there were several sculptors and metalworkers in Łódź, this exhibition was dominated by paintings and graphic works. An exception was Chaim Szpigel's sculpture *The Talmudist*.¹⁵ [Fig. 5]



Fig. 5. Chaim Szpigel, *The Talmudist*, 1926

Source: *Die Zeit im Bild* 1927, no. 2, s. 6.

Aware of the artists' different inspirations and aims, the author of the text from *Głos Polski* expressed his hope that START would play an important role in stimulating the cultural life of Łódź, not only among painters and sculptors, but also among the citizens of the city who were interested in art.

¹⁴ "Wystawa malarzy," *Ilustrowana Republika* 1926, no. 348, p. 4.

¹⁵ Illustration published in *Die Zeit im Bild* 1927, no. 2, p. 6; *Głos Polski* 1927, no. 1, p. 5.

The exhibition closed on 23 January 1927. Soon afterwards START hosted a huge costume ball; the poster was designed by Karol Hiller.

Although these early presentations of the artists' work were well received and had, as it later turned out, a considerable impact on the Łódź milieu, the most important episode in START's artistic output was the second Łódź exhibition organised after a nearly two-year break. Opened on 13 June 1929, at 7 p.m. at Piotrkowska Street No. 74, on the first floor, the art show highlighted about 100 works by, among others, Samuel Finkelstein, Ignacy Hirszfang, Józef Kowner, Natan Szpigiel, Karol Hiller, Zofia Lipińska, Antoni Wippel, and Władysław Strzemiński. This time, the artists from the association took care of advertising the event, and the daily newspapers in Łódź publicized the show. Short press notes, generally similar in content, which indicated that the organisers were also the artists, provided general information, such as the date, place and opening hours (daily from 10 am to 10 pm). Such news was published by *Express Wieczorny*,¹⁶ *Hasło Łódzkie*,¹⁷ *Ilustrowana Republika*,¹⁸ *Sztuki Piękne*¹⁹ and *Głos Poranny* – the latter even four times.²⁰ Many of them also contained a sentence which, on the one hand, was a commentary on the current artistic life in the city, and, on the other, expressed belief that a new era of art would make Łódź shine: "The Start exhibition is undoubtedly the most comforting symptom. It proves that, although our city is poor in painters, it is still rich in artistic talents".

In view of the city's apathetic artistic life (especially during the "silly season", which was already beginning in summer), the expectations towards the opening exhibition were high. "The success and recognition enjoyed by the START exhibitions in previous years makes us believe that 'Exhibition 1929' will also be of interest to wide circles of Łódź intelligentsia," wrote the journalist of *Głos Polski*,²¹ attesting that, after several years of activity, the association had already gained certain recognition. It seems that, at least partially, these hopes were fulfilled: *Głos Poranny* reported on 28 June (the only question is to what extent this was an un-

¹⁶ "Start," *Express Wieczorny* 1929, no. 166, p. 4.

¹⁷ "Wystawa obrazów Stowarzyszenia 'Start'," *Hasło Łódzkie* 1929, no. 163, p. 13.

¹⁸ "Wystawa obrazów mal. Stow. 'Start'," *Ilustrowana Republika* 1929, no. 159, p. 4.

¹⁹ "Wystawa obrazów Stowarzyszenia 'Start'," *Sztuki Piękne* 1929, no. 8–9, p. 350.

²⁰ "Ze Stow. Art. 'Start'," *Głos Poranny* 1929, no. 129, p. 6; "'Start'," *Głos Poranny* 1929, no. 132, p. 8; "Z wystawy obrazów 'Startu'," *Głos Poranny* 1929, no. 144, p. 7; "Ostatnie dni wystawy 'Startu'," *Głos Poranny* 1929, no. 157, p. 6.

²¹ "Wystawa 'Startu' – 1929," *Głos Polski. Specjalny Niedzielnny Dodatek Społeczno-Literacki* 1929, no. 156, p. 8.

biased account) that the exhibition was "still enjoying unflagging interest among the cultural public."²² To further increase this interest, it was announced (which was not an isolated practice at the time) that on the last day of the exhibition, 14 July, a lottery would be held, during which 8 works on display would be given to the lucky winners from among those who had bought tickets.²³ Two paintings by Hiller, Hirszfang, and Szpiegel, one by Lipińska and one by Finkelstein²⁴ were selected as prizes. The lottery results were published in the newspapers a few days later and they allow us to estimate the number of visitors to some extent. The highest ticket number for which a prize was awarded was 1,881 – so at least that number of tickets were sold,²⁵ which gives a fairly good average of more than 60 people a day.

However, importance of this exhibition for the formation of the artistic life of the city is evidenced not only by the above mentioned manifestations of public interest, but also by critics' reactions. Two extensive reviews were devoted to the START exhibition: Przemysław Smolik wrote for *Ilustrowana Republika*,²⁶ and Waldemar George for *Głos Poranny*.²⁷ In the absence of a catalogue of the exhibition and dispersal of the works of many of its participants, these texts are the main source that help us reconstruct the list of works presented at that time. They announced that Karol Hiller presented examples of his heliographs, surprising with their innovative technique [Fig. 6], cover designs,²⁸ as well as, among others, *Board 0* and *Board with a Spiral*, which today are considered to be among the most ground-breaking in his oeuvre; as the artworks attempt to combine the icon writing tradition with contemporary experience.²⁹ [Fig. 7]

Ignacy Hirszfang, described as a "pure realist", presented ink and sanguine drawings. A distinctive feature of Szpiegel's works presented at the exhibition was their expressive power, inclination towards the grotesque, and sharp characterisation of street types (e.g. a boorish man or a withered old woman).

²² "Z wystawy obrazów 'Startu'," *Głos Poranny* 1929, no. 144, p. 7.

²³ Ibidem; "Ostatnie dni wystawy 'Startu'," *Głos Poranny* 1929, no. 157, p. 6.

²⁴ "Loteria 'Startu'," *Głos Poranny* 1929, no. 161, p. 7.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ P. Smolik, "Druga wystawa 'Startu'," *Ilustrowana Republika* 1929, no. 170, p. 6.

²⁷ W. George, "'Start' na starcie odrodzenia sztuki w Łodzi," *Głos Poranny* 1929, no. 148, p. 8.

²⁸ This rarely mentioned part of the artist's oeuvre was recalled three years ago by an exhibition at the Miejska Galeria Sztuki [Municipal Art Gallery] in Łódź. Vide: R. Cichy, P. Stachlewski, *Współobecność. Artysty awangardowi w kręgu Władysława Strzemińskiego. Karol Hiller (1891–1939). Kompozycje heliograficzne i grafika projektowa*, ex. cat., Miejska Galeria Sztuki, Łódź 2017, Łódź 2017.

²⁹ *Karol Hiller (1891–1939). Nowe widzenie*, red. M. Bauer, J. Ojrzynski, ex. cat., Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2002.



Fig. 6. Karol Hiller, *Heliographic Composition*

Source: *Forma* 1934, no. 2, p. 23.



Fig. 7. Karol Hiller, *Board 0*, 1928

Source: *Karol Hiller (1891–1939). Nowe widzenie*, ed. M. Bauer, J. Ojrzyski, ex. cat., Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2002, p. 321, p. 205.

Władysław Strzemiński presented very few works in the exhibition: just one oil painting, two drawings, and one watercolour, but even this modest overview earned him, in the eyes of a reviewer from *Republika* the title of "the most contemporary and peculiar in the group and not only in the group in question, but probably also in contemporary Polish painting."³⁰ [Fig. 8]



Fig. 8. Władysław Strzemiński, *Still Life*, 1928

Source: *Forma* 1934, no. 2, p. 18.

Two works by Zofia Lipińska (*Landscape from Kazimierz* and *Composition*) were described as decorative, with vivid and bold colour. Samuel Finkelstein probably presented mainly watercolour landscapes, whose chromatic qualities critic Waldemar George compared to the works of Bonnard.³¹ Antoni Wippel and Józef Kowner were represented only by single paintings: a landscape by the former and a head study by the latter, which did not allow the critics to make a general statement of their oeuvre. In his review, George also mentions one more member of the START group, Roman Rozentel, who did not submit any of his works to the

³⁰ P. Smolik, *op. cit.*

³¹ W. George, *op. cit.*

exhibition, but was valued by the critic as “a serious painter consciously aiming at the heights of perfection.”³²

Although both reviewers differed slightly in their assessment of the painters' achievements, they were fully unanimous on two points. Firstly, the oeuvre of the artists associated with START was not stylistically homogeneous: the works of each of the exhibition participants proved to be individualistic and different in terms of artistic personality. On the other hand, in this diversity of proposed formulas, they both easily found a common denominator, which was modernity. Without doubt, but also without excessive affectation, they praise all the artists in the exhibition for their formal search: bold, innovative, independent, and indifferent to the tastes and expectations of the audience. Although the artists' search encompassed various directions and styles, from colourism, through expressionism, to elements of cubism and abstraction, they were all seen as breaking conventions and striving to create a new artistic environment.

In a review titled “‘Start’ at the start of the rebirth of art in Łódź,” Waldemar George expressed his hope for a revival that the young painters could bring to the city. He wrote:

Disregarding hostility of the public, often completely unaware of the painting issues, the members of *Start* create truly valuable works, not only imbued with original invention, but also complying in every respect with the achievements of the Paris school and belonging to the contemporary art. *Start* does not seek to execute a crystallised and limited aesthetic programme. Each of its members is completely independent and follows a strictly individual line.³³

His words rang with accuracy because this native of Łódź, born in 1929, had already lived for a dozen or so years in France, where he managed to gain recognition as the author of columns devoted to contemporary art, which he called independent. In the 1920s, he was a promoter of cubism, expressionism, and artists associated with the École de Paris. His support for the START group, despite the fact that, as can be presumed, it was to some extent a result of local patriotism and sentiment for the city, constituted a significant distinction; it took place before the 1930s, when, after several disputes he got into with representatives of the Krakow and Warsaw milieu, as Anna Wierzbicka³⁴ writes, he largely lost sympathy of the Polish public.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ A. Wierzbicka, “Polsko-francuski krytyk Waldemar George i jego poglądy na sztukę,” *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 2004, no. 1–2. Also: eadem, *We Francji i Polsce 1900-1939. Sztuka, jej historyczne uwarunkowania i odbiór w świetle krytyków polsko-francuskich*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 330–337.

Meanwhile, in 1929, George not only published a flattering review of the START exhibition, but also gave an accompanying lecture on the current directions of art development. As it can be inferred from the summary published in *Głos Poranny*,³⁵ he focused on analysing fauvism, cubism, and surrealism, which indicates that he understood the category of modernity broadly, both chronologically and in terms of style. In conclusions, he emphasised the experimental, revolutionary mission of art, which is in relation to the positive evaluation of the work of young painters from Łódź. This is particularly interesting, since George's review and the Łódź lecture were written during a period of a breakthrough in his views on art. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, succumbing to the influence of the fascist ideology, he started to reject avant-garde art, which he perceived at that time as an expression of "alienated and liberal" culture. He started to propagate the ideas of neo-humanism growing out of the classical tradition. From an ardent apologist of cubism, he also became its fierce critic, claiming that this tendency is separated from life and reality.³⁶ Texts published in the Łódź press are, however, closer to his earlier views oriented towards innovative, not traditional, forms. And it was precisely this boldness of the artistic search that was one of the features he particularly appreciated in the works of artists associated with START.

In fact, both authors of the reviews of the 1929 exhibition emphasised the important role that the START group should play in the process of developing art in the Łódź environment. Przemysław Smolik concluded his article by expressing his disappointment the exhibition was held in the summer months, which had a negative impact on attendance and, consequently, on recognition of the artists' achievements. At the same time, he expressed his conviction that it should be repeated outside Łódź. And so it happened. On 12 January 1930, the Palace of Art in Kraków hosted a joint exhibition of the Warsaw-based group Bractwo św. Łukasza [Guild of Saint Luke] and START artists.³⁷ In the announcements, participation of the first of these associations was particularly emphasised, due to its considerable publicity and the generally positive reception of its previous Warsaw exhibitions. START was presented as an artistic association "not yet known in Krakow."³⁸ The exhibition included works of Łódź artists who had participated in the association's earlier events: Hiller, Finkelstein, Hirszfang, Kowner, Szpigiel, Strzeмиński, Lejzerowicz, and Lipińska), as well as those who were debuting in this line-up: Konstanty Mackiewicz, Mieczysław Olej, and Zenobiusz Poduszko. In total, the representatives of Łódź exhibited 75 works. [Fig. 9]

³⁵ W. George, "Obecne kierunki rozwoju sztuki plastycznej. Referat p. Waldemara George'a wygłoszony w salach wystawy 'Startu' z okazji pobytu w Łodzi tego wybitnego krytyka," *Głos Poranny* 1929, no. 152, p. 20.

³⁶ A. Wierzbicka, *We Francji i Polsce...*, pp. 243–277.

³⁷ *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1915–1939*, ed. A. Wojciechowski, Wrocław 1974, p. 221.

³⁸ "Wystawa 'Bractwa św. Łukasza' oraz wystawa 'Startu,'" *Naprzód* 1930, no. 7, p. 5.



Fig. 9. Natan Szpigiel, *Water Carrier*

Source: archival photo, repr. I. Gadowska.

However, going beyond the borders of their native environment did not bring the START members the instant success they probably expected. After a wave of positive reviews that their previous exhibitions received in the Łódź press, the Krakow exhibition was received with moderate enthusiasm, although newspapers did report a success in terms of attendance.³⁹ However, the critics clearly focused on the artists from Warsaw. As far as the Łódź artists were concerned, one of the main surprises of the Krakow audience was the fact that “in the commercial world of stock exchange reports” there were painters “who, as we can see, do not paint portraits and *familienbilds* at the request”.⁴⁰ Out of only a few broader reviews in the daily press and cultural periodicals, two (in *Czas*⁴¹

³⁹ “Wystawa ‘Bractwa św. Łukasza’ oraz wystawa ‘Startu,’” *Naprzód* 1930, no. 16, p. 7. After closing of the exhibition, *Głos Poranny* reported that the number of visitors exceeded 8,000, which, with less than four weeks of exhibition duration, seems to be a good result indeed. G, “Sztuka łódzka w Krakowie. Wystawa ‘Startu’ została przyjęta z uznaniem przez Gród Podwawelski,” *Głos Poranny* 1930, no. 76, p. 8.

⁴⁰ T. Seweryn, “Z wystawy,” *Naprzód* 1930, no. 25, p. 3.

⁴¹ FK [Felix Kopera], “Z Pałacu Sztuki. Wystawa ‘Bractwa św. Łukasza’ i zrzeszenia ‘Start,’” *Czas* 1930, no. 18, p. 4.

and *Sztuki Piękne*⁴²) were mostly devoted to Bractwo św. Łukasza members (who were in fact assessed deeply critically and the critics were not particularly impressed with them). The START artists were in both cases only mentioned briefly, and in general terms, although definitely in a more positive way (even if the correspondent of *Sztuki Piękne* reproached them for their school standard). In fact, critic Feliks Kopera clearly had polarising impressions, presenting both expositions as fundamentally antithetical: he accused the Bractwo św. Łukasza of anachronistic form based on the Dutch Baroque patterns and a mannerism devoid of freshness, noticing life and directness in the works of Łódź artists. For him, this contrast was like "a passage from a dark cellar into the light full of sunshine."⁴³ More extensive comments were included in articles by Tadeusz Seweryn writing for *Naprzód*⁴⁴ and Henryk (Hersz) Weber in *Nowy Dziennik*,⁴⁵ and it is thanks to them that we can learn more about specific works that were presented at the time. Both critics emphasise stylistic and formal (but also qualitative) pluralism within the group: in the eclectic melting pot of inspirations and influences, they mention cubism, expressionism, fauvism, but also group Rytm [Rhythm]. They both consider this diversity to be a shortcoming of both the exhibition and the whole group, or rather a lack of artistic maturity of both individual artists who are still in search of their own means of expression, and the whole unconsolidated association. Yet, the general tone of both reviews is rather positive due to the clear potential visible in many works. According to Seweryn, "once the directional crossroads, indecisions, eclecticism, and even insincere compromises with outmoded fashions in art are removed, 'Start' will surely consolidate ideologically and reach for higher levels."⁴⁶ He saw a clear division into two main camps. The first one with Strzemiński (presenting still lifes) in the centre was considered by him, as we can infer from the context, to be more daring "in terms of attitude to the so-called painting reality". He included in this category the works of Zofia Lipińska and the abstractions of Konstanty Mackiewicz, though the latter was not rated very highly. At the other extreme were painters "more closely related to nature": Hirszfang, Olej, and Finkelstein, whose common feature was (besides the topics oscillating around portraits and landscapes) simplification of form and the search for colour effects. [Fig. 10, Fig. 11] The critics' attention was also drawn by the works by Hiller (more highly rated works made with tempera than oil paintings), Lejzerowicz (especially his self-portrait), and Szpiegel's watercolours.

⁴² W dziale "Kronika artystyczna", *Sztuki Piękne* 1930, no. 2, pp. 57–59.

⁴³ FK [Feliks Kopera], *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ T. Seweryn, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–4.

⁴⁵ H. Weber, "Z Wystawy w Pałacu Sztuki", *Nowy Dziennik* 1930, no. 18, p. 8.

⁴⁶ T. Seweryn, *op. cit.*, p. 4.



Fig. 10. Ignacy Hirsztang, *Female Head*

Source: *Sztuki Piękne* 1930, no. 2, p. 70.



Fig. 11. Samuel Finkelstein, *Still Life*, c. 1930

Source: *Sztuki Piękne* 1930, no. 2, p. 71.

To a certain extent, the painters associated with START succeeded in achieving their goal and establishing presence on the national scene, because as the article in *Sztuki Piękne* concludes:

Nevertheless, the fact of founding a painting group in such a non-artistic environment as Łódź should be welcomed with great joy, as it proves that a movement has been initiated there, which will undoubtedly bring positive results. We should therefore wish the most beautiful development to the "Start" group, whose members will undoubtedly find an independent expression of their artistic aspirations in the near future.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, after the Krakow exhibition, not only did the search for formal homogeneity within the whole group, suggested by the critics, fail, but also, the START association was suspended. One of the reasons for the termination of the group's activities could be the economic crisis that hit Łódź in the early 1930s. It should be remembered that START was financed by private people, mainly representatives of the intelligentsia and industrialists – whose businesses suffered in the economic collapse of the city. Perhaps the somewhat archaic formula of the association's functioning as a group of artists, but most of all art lovers, was also exhausted and the creators were looking for more institutionalized forms of support for their activities. In the following years, painters and sculptors associated with START continued to actively (and collectively) participate in the cultural life of the city. Many of them appeared among the members of the Zrzeszenie Artystów Plastyków w Łodzi [Association of Visual Artists in Łódź], established a year later, which was going to gather "all artists-painters in Łódź without exception."⁴⁸ Its board included artists who had previously exhibited with START: Zofia Lipińska (vice-president) and Samuel Finkelstein.⁴⁹ As we know, this community did not last long. The rapidly escalating dispute over the direction of Łódź art, which culminated in reactions to Strzemiński being awarded the City of Łódź Prize in 1932,⁵⁰ led to a split in the community into supporters of the more conservative option and those advocating the avant-garde approach.⁵¹ Among

⁴⁷ "Kronika artystyczna", *Sztuki Piękne* 1930, no. 2, p. 59.

⁴⁸ "Zrzeszenie artystów-malarzy zostało utworzone w Łodzi", *Ilustrowana Republika* 1931, no. 48, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ "Echa skandalu malarskiego. Jak tłumaczy p. Dobrowolski swe wystąpienie w radzie miejskiej", *Republika* 1932, no. 145, p. 3. See also: I. Luba, "Paradoks sztuki narodowej i modernizmu. Władysław Strzemiński laureatem nagrody artystycznej miasta Łodzi w roku 1932", *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 2012, no. 3/4, p. 707–732.

⁵¹ Eventually, the Association broke up into two mutually competitive organisations: the artistically conservative Polish Association of Łódź Visual Artists and Association of Polish Visual Artists leaning more towards modern tendencies. A. Łabęcka, "Łódź – miasto awangardy

the latter there were many former members of START: not only the pioneers of Łódź constructivism, Strzemiński and Hiller, but also Brauner, Finkelstein, Kowner and Szpigiel.

Among the artists associated with the START group, only Władysław Strzemiński and Karol Hiller seem to be clearly modern in the opinion of both contemporary researchers and art enthusiasts. Both of them are not only considered the fathers of the Polish avant-garde, but also enjoy unflagging recognition reflected in publications and exhibitions. The other artists mentioned above may not be completely forgotten as they are mentioned in numerous cross-sectional publications on Łódź art, but they do not arouse such interest. They are also considered to be definitely more conservative, even reactionary artists. The question is: what is the reason for this contemporary division? Is it the effect of time perspective which lets us distinguish the truly interesting and valuable phenomena? Or maybe the unconscious tendency towards anachronism, which makes us unreflectively compare contemporary aesthetic patterns to the artistic situation of almost a century ago? Undoubtedly, the START artists' work was assessed by their contemporaries as innovative and modern. Of course, critics noted differences in intensity and the quality of the artists' output, perceiving Hiller's heliographs or Strzemiński's compositions differently from Finkelstein's landscapes or Szpigiel's types. However, any formal search of an anti-naturalistic nature was assessed as progressive, and any work breaking with academic convention as daring. The artists themselves also perceived themselves as creators of a new art that broke with tradition, which is clearly highlighted by the fact that after 1932 many former members of START (such as Finkelstein, Hiller, Kowner, Kudewicz, Szpigiel, and Kon-Rawska) sided with Strzemiński in the dispute over Łódź art by joining the avant-garde Związek Zawodowy Polskich Artystów Plastyków [Association of Polish Visual Artists] that revolved around him. In this context, it seems justified to consider the members of the START group, following Waldemar George, as one of the precursors of the revival and reinvigoration of artistic life in Łódź.

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Streszczenie

„Na starcie odrodzenia sztuki w Łodzi”? Twórczość artystów z grupy „Start” wobec sztuki nowoczesnej

Mimo że informacje o grupie „Start” i tworzących ją artystach pojawiają się w publikacjach poświęconych łódzkiemu życiu artystycznemu okresu międzywojennego, to zagadnienie ich działalności dotychczas nie stało się przedmiotem osobnego opracowania. Wynika to zapewne z jedynie fragmentarycznego zachowania się materiałów, w tym prac artystów. Wiadomo, że stowarzyszenie powstało w 1926 roku w wyniku przekształcenia działającej wcześniej „Grupy Łodzian” i skupiało artystów reprezentujących różnorodne tendencje współczesnej sztuki. Członkowie grupy zorganizowali w sumie trzy wystawy: pierwsza miała miejsce w grudniu 1926 roku i wzięło w niej udział 23 autorów, druga otwarta została w czerwcu 1929 roku, zaś trzecia zorganizowana została w Krakowie w styczniu 1930 roku. Wydarzenia te były szeroko reklamowane i omawiane w pismach zarówno lokalnych, jak i ogólnokrajowych, a zachowane przekazy prasowe dostarczają wielu nieznanych dotąd informacji, pozwalających na częściowe przynajmniej zrekonstruowanie działalności ugrupowania. Na łamach „Głosu Porannego” bardzo przychylną recenzję ekspozycji z 1929 roku zamieścił pochodzący z Łodzi, znany paryski krytyk sztuki Waldemar George (właściwie: Jerzy Waldemar Jarociński). Jego tekst skłonił autorki niniejszego artykułu do refleksji nad recepcją prac artystów z kręgu grupy „Start” w kontekście ówczesnego życia kulturalnego Łodzi oraz do podjęcia próby odpowiedzi na pytanie, jaką rolę twórcy ci odegrali w kształtowaniu się łódzkiego środowiska artystycznego i czy z dzisiejszej perspektywy można w nich widzieć – za Waldemarem George’em – artystów jednoznacznie nowoczesnych, utrwalających obecność w tym kręgu osiągnięć europejskiej sztuki awangardowej.