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## **Warsaw Art Collecting in the Years Between 1880 and 1939. In Search of a Method**

The topic of my research is art collecting in Warsaw at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The history of Warsaw art collecting at that time is a story of the local elite, the bourgeois and wealthy members of the intellectual class. For the bankers, industrialists, physicians, lawyers and architects of the past, collecting was an obvious way to legitimise their social status, and in the case of collectors of Jewish heritage, a means of reinforcing national – Polish – identity. Paintings by the era's most celebrated artists were highly sought-after by members of potentate clans such as the Kronenbergs, Blochs, Natansons, Bersohns, Lilpops, Lessers, Goldstands and Rotwands. Yet at the same time, collecting, also represented an expression of civic and patriotic leanings, with those harbouring an active interest in supporting Polish art often becoming members of the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Finally, intrinsic to collecting was, of course, the investment arising from the pursuit, not to mention the simple aspect of the need to decorate one's home. In the case of the latter, though, it would be difficult to call such a practice "collecting" in the strictest sense of the word. During my research I have tried to find examples representing the highest calibre of collector, the collecting *genus proximum*, which distinguishes between prosaic gathering and the kind that is an expression of an individual's intellectual activity.

My research consists not only of the historical, but in large scale also of the methodological part in which I analyse the adequate use of philosophical tools, including semiotics, structural linguistics, narratology and some elements of psychoanalysis based on the works of Freud's commentators. Among the texts which had a considerable impact on this part were those by Jean Baudrillard (*The System of Collecting*) Mieke Bal (*Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting*<sup>1</sup>) Krzysztof Pomian<sup>2</sup> and Zygmunt

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<sup>1</sup> See: *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. J. Elsner, R. Cardinal, Harvard University Press 1994, pp. 7-24; 97-115.

<sup>2</sup> K. Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice 1500-1800*, Oxford: Polity Press 1990.

Bauman<sup>3</sup>, not to mention numerous publications by Susan M. Pearce<sup>4</sup>. Another important inspiration was the theory of the ‘turn toward things’, apparent in British and American humanities at the end of the 1990’s, in which – generally speaking – the relation between things and people becomes redefined, and objects are granted the status of active participants in the life process in which they not only exist, but also act.

The expansion of the methodological part of my dissertation was accompanied by general questions: who can be called a collector and what does it mean to study collections? The notion of collecting as a field of human activity and therefore as a proper field for humanistic study is still young. Traditional collecting studies have always concentrated on the provenance and on the meaning of individual items or groups of gathered material rather than upon the significance of the collecting process. However, studying collecting is not only about history of great masterpieces and their former owners, which is usually described in an anecdotal or sentimental (in the poorest meaning of this word) mode. Collecting is a set of things which people do, as an aspect of individual and social practice which is important in public and private life as a means of constructing the way in which one relates to the material world and so builds up his or hers identity. It becomes clear that for the collectors collections are, in Belk’s memorable phrase, ‘the extended self’<sup>5</sup>. They are material autobiography, written as we go along and left behind us as our monument. Studying collecting and collections is essentially an investigation into an aspect of human experience.

The applied methodology raises awareness of problems which until now have not been carefully investigated. The matter which is most important and on which I am going to concentrate my further research is the issue of how assimilated Jews living at that time in Warsaw used collecting as a tool to manifest their sense of belonging to Polish society.

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<sup>3</sup> Z. Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Stanford University Press 1992.

<sup>4</sup> S. M. Pearce, *On Collecting. An investigation in the European Tradition*, Routledge, (London – New York 2001), *The Collecting Culture Studies, See: Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. S. M. Pearce, Routledge, (Londyn – Nowy Jork 1994).

<sup>5</sup> R. W. Belk, *Possessions and the Extended Self*, “Journal of Consumer Research” 15, 1988, pp. 139-168.