

Zdzisław Schubert
polish school of poster



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“From the mid-1950s, for over a decade,
Polish poster designers had their ‘Florence Renaissance’.
They opened up to art not only because the world opened up to them [...],
they caught the world’s attention, in a fierce but also friendly competition
with one another.”

Mirosław Ratajczak, *Personality Poster*,
[introd. in:] *Jan Młodożeniec: the Legend of the Polish Poster*,
ed. Zdzisław Schubert, Państwowa Galeria Sztuki, Sopot 2011
[exhibition catalogue]

Introduction

Poster art caught my eye when I was quite young, and after college – to this day – it has been one of my professional interests. I watched the “Polish School of Poster” closely almost throughout the entire time it functioned. My take on posters combines a subjective fascination, undoubtedly affecting the evaluation of individual works, and an objective view of the phenomenon from the perspective of research techniques of an art historian. The dichotomy also found its reflection in the final choice of posters for this book. Anyway, regardless of the motivation, there are no random posters here.

This album, published two years after the seventieth anniversary of the start of the movement, which went down in the history of Polish visual arts as the “Polish School of Poster”, not only recalls its masterpieces, but also orders the observations on its development, specifies the time line, and attempts to explain a number of misconceptions that arose over the years. At the same time, it is not meant to be too heavy on the theoretical side.¹ The fundamental tool for selecting the posters was the analysis of the technical means – this rudimentary method facilitates the classification of the works according to various composition elements.

In the 1950s, hundreds of poster titles were published annually. Every year, some twenty to forty posters lingered in the collective memory. They were the ones most often reproduced, considered for exhibitions, and rewarded. Not all of them met the criteria of the “Polish School”. Therefore, this compilation, with some special exceptions, contains no socialist realist posters, which were strongly contradicted by the “Polish School”, although it often happened that both types were designed by the same authors.

I intended to limit the choice to the top-notch canon of the most prominent works making up the oeuvre of that period, cumulating

¹ A simultaneous research programme conducted at the University of the Arts Poznań resulted in a special issue of “Zeszyty Artystyczne” in 2021 (issue 39), almost entirely dedicated to the subject of the “Polish School”, but devoid of any visual aids.

the characteristic of the “Polish School” – the *crème de la crème*. In practice, in the selection of the visual materials, it was also required to account for posters that signalled phenomena crucial to this story, but not necessarily complied with the mainstream principles of poster design.

The group of artists designing posters at that time was quite large – amounting to hundreds of individuals. Not all made history with outstanding works, some contributed to the “Polish School” no more than a few pieces, and sometimes just a single poster. However, the input of some artists was so significant that it turned out the primary selection had to be curbed even further – as very good works presented similar solutions. An example is the extensive output of Waldemar Świerzy.

The outlook on the “Polish School” in this book is from today’s perspective. And over time, a number of then-appreciated designs lost a lot of their attractiveness and now they do not incite the same emotions as they did at the moment of creation. But at the same time, the vast majority of the posters featured herein still have it in terms of the visual and intellectual appeal, despite the passing of the years since they were created.

The strongest poster centre was Warsaw, the capital city of the highly centralised country, with all the major poster publishing institutions. In the 1957 album *Polish Poster* published by the Art and Graphic Design Publishing House, among the thirty-one most excellent poster artists, there were only three from outside Warsaw: Jerzy Karolak and Adam Hoffmann from Kraków and Zbigniew Kaja from Poznań. There was also Julian Pałka, born in Poznań, but in the early 1950s, he moved to Warsaw.

For orientation purposes, the book contains a chronological outline of the “Polish School”, presenting its stages of development.

The term “Polish School of Poster” went viral like hardly any other term in the history of Polish post-war visual arts. Widely approved, user-friendly, almost always in quotation marks, often preceded by

the phrase “so-called”, which emphasised its conventional character, because for years, there was nothing finite or unambiguous in it – starting from the time frame, to its subject matter.²

For years, it was commonly believed that the name was coined by Jan Lenica, who published the article *The Polish School of Poster Art*³ in issue eighty-eight from 1960 of the then-most prestigious Swiss periodical on the art of design – “Graphis”. In the following year, the article was re-printed in the Polish “Polska” monthly, presenting Poland in numerous language versions to foreign readers, titled *Polska szkoła plakatu* [Polish School of Poster].⁴ The author does not offer a complete, accurate definition of the trend, but stresses that “The Polish poster is romantic [...] in several keys, from the lyrical to the heroic and pathetic.”⁵ But the term had already been used in earlier publications, also by Jan Lenica. In 1952, in “Przegląd Artystyczny”, pointing to the connections between the interbellum and the early post-war period, the author mentioned cautiously: “Hence, there is continuity in history, and what emerged can even be referred to as a school.”⁶ A firmer statement can be found in the 1956 article about Polish film posters published in the first issue of the “Projekt” magazine:

“[...] but it seems pivotal that they carry on what we can call the ‘polish school of poster’, i.e. a set of distinct features of Polish poster art. The search for a summary, synthesis of a film is common to all, although it is sometimes reflected in the metaphor of symbols and objects, and sometimes in a literary/poetic image.”⁷

² Zdzisław Schubert, *Polish Poster School* [in:] *The Poster Must Sing!*, ed. Zdzisław Schubert, Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, Poznań 2012, p. 96.

³ Jan Lenica, *The Polish School of Poster Art*, “Graphis” 1960, no. 88, pp. 136–143.

⁴ Jan Lenica, *Polska szkoła plakatu*, “Polska” 1961, no. 3, pp. 22–24.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Jan Lenica, *Plakat, sztuka dzisiejszych czasów*, “Przegląd Artystyczny” 1952, no. 5, p. 41.

⁷ Jan Lenica, *Plakat filmowy*, “Projekt” 1956, no. 1, p. 69.



Wojciech Fangor
The Flesh Is Weak (French film)
1952, rotogravure, 70 × 99.5 cm

Realism (1952–1955)



Waldemar Świerzy
Group of Czechoslovak Stage Performers
1955, offset, 85 × 58.5 cm

In order to improve the quality of political posters, the authorities took various actions in the early 1950s. The Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party held several meetings²⁷ to discuss poster art²⁸; in September 1950, the Workers' Publishing Cooperative RSW "Prasa" first appointed the Institute of Art and Graphic Design Publishers, later renamed Department of Art and Graphic Design Publishers (DEWAG), from which the Art and Graphic Design Publishing House (WAG) was separated.²⁹ The publishing priorities of the new institution were evident in the print run of the titles. Political posters were printed in 50,000 up to half a million copies, whereas cultural posters – in barely 600–800 copies³⁰, although there were some exceptions. In order to improve the education of young poster designers, the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw fetched Józef Mroszczak from Katowice and Henryk Tomaszewski from Łódź, who were assigned two new academy departments. And in 1953, the 1st General Poster Exhibition was organised involving a discussion on poster art. The post-conference materials were published as *O plakacie* [About Posters].³¹

"The uncertainty of the authorities with respect to the right look of the socialist realist poster which was to be neither 'formalistic' nor 'naturalistic', made some groups of designers take advantage of the situation and struggle for the right to experiment. A pretext for the struggle were the formal requirements specifying that a poster must stand out against the background of various visual signals of the street.

²⁷ The first conference on "Contemporary Polish Poster Art" took place on 1 December 1951 in the Zachęta Gallery.

²⁸ Copies of typescripts from the discussions, organised by the Department of Culture of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, are stored in the Department of Documentation of the Poster and Graphic Design Gallery of the National Museum in Poznań.

²⁹ Information based on fragments of a research paper on publishing houses in the Polish People's Republic by Jacek Mrowczyk. I would like to thank the author for the access to the typescript.

³⁰ Based on Jacek Mrowczyk's paper.

³¹ *O plakacie. Zbiór materiałów z narad i dyskusji oraz artykułów poświęconych aktualnym problemom plakatu politycznego*, Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne, Warszawa 1954.

Proces przeciw miastu

FILM PRODUKCJI WŁOSKIEJ



CWF

REŻYSERIA: LUIGI ZAMPA · W ROLACH GŁ: AMADEO NAZZARI, SILVANA PAMPANINI, PAOLO STOPPA, FRANCO INTERLENGHI · PROD. FILM CONSTELLAZIONE

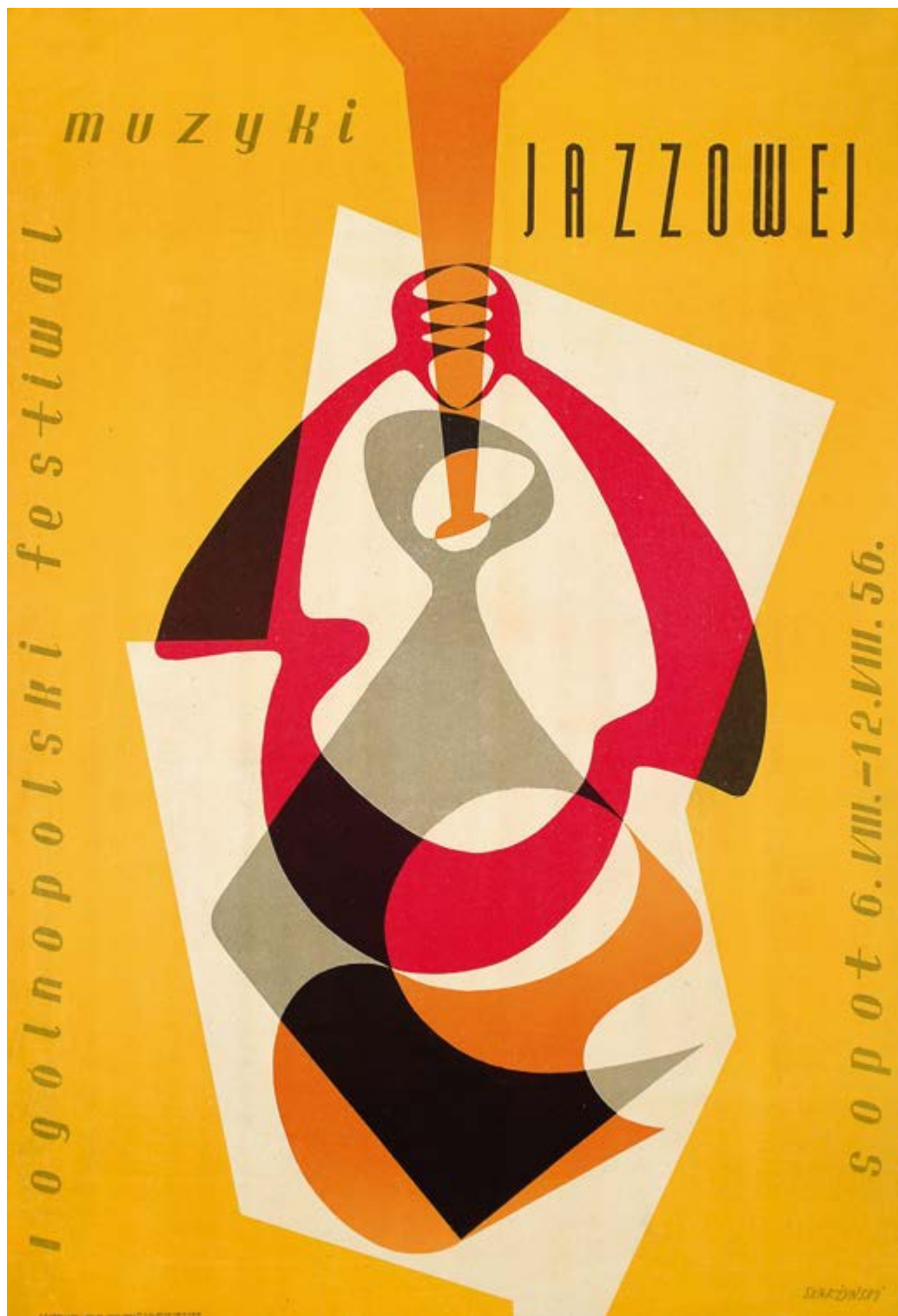
Wojciech Fangor, Wojciech Zamecznik
The City Stands Trial (Italian film)
1954, offset, 58.5 × 83.5 cm

Realism (1952–1955)



Wojciech Fangor
Maclovia (Mexican film)
1955, offset, 85.5 × 59 cm

Realism (1952–1955)



Jerzy Skarżyński
1st Polish Jazz Festival, Sopot, 06.08–12.08.1956
1956, offset, 97 × 66.5 cm

Modernity (1956–1964...1970)

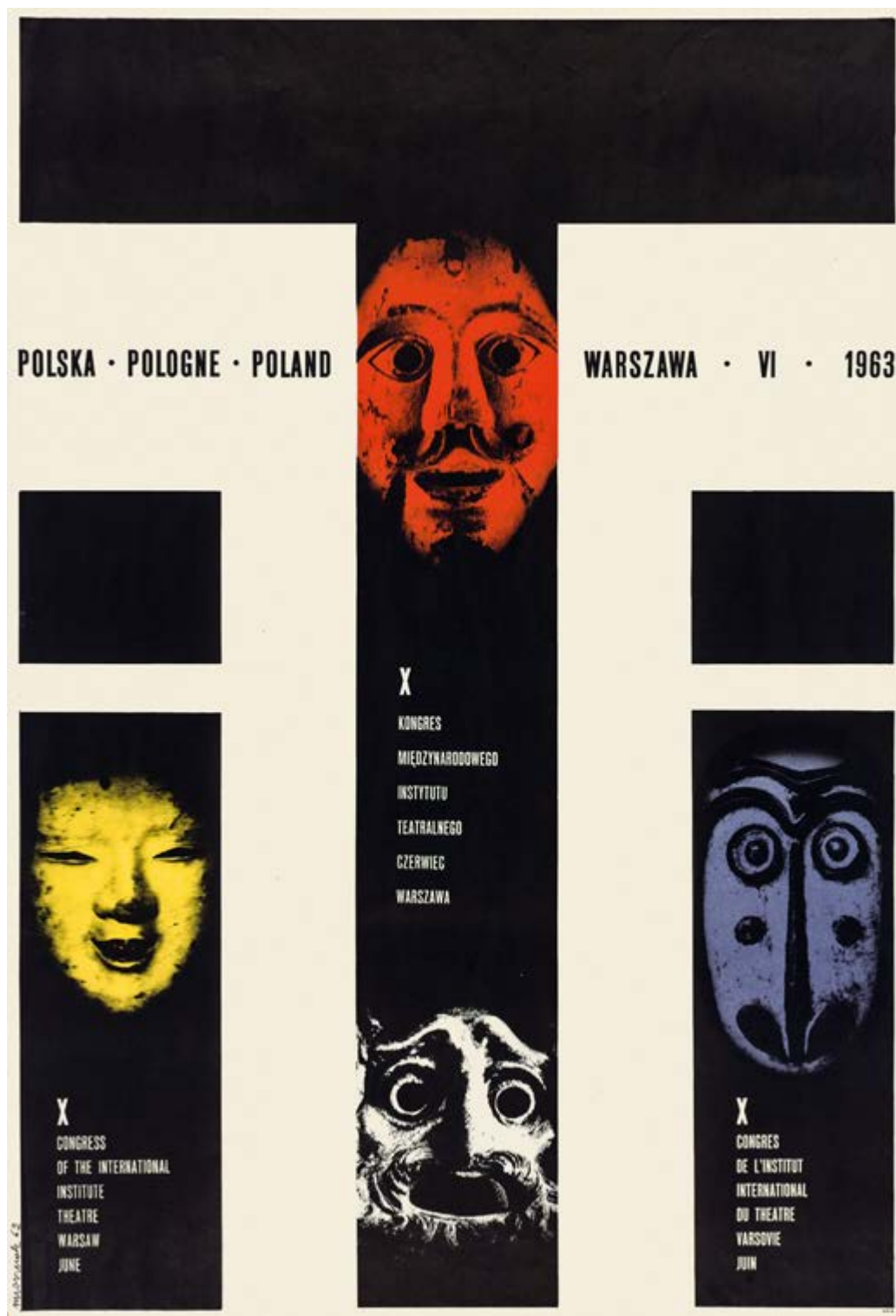


Jerzy Skarżyński
2nd Jazz Music Festival, Sopot, 14.07–21.07.1957
1957, offset, 98.5 × 66 cm

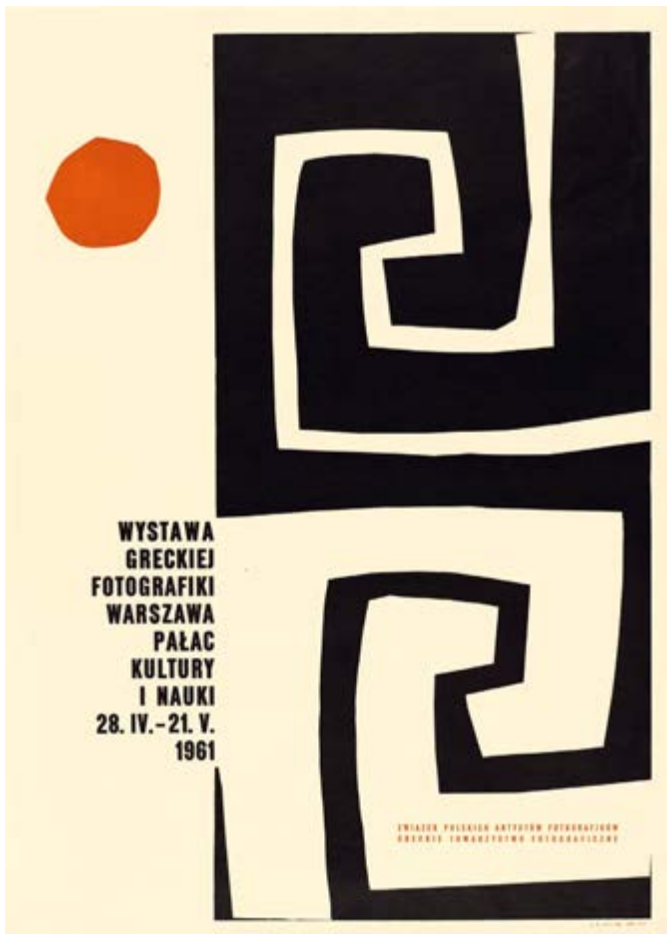
The changes were also facilitated by the World Festival of Youth and Students organised in Warsaw in 1955. This communist-propaganda event, regardless of the ideological ideas of the organisers, was like a breath of fresh air thanks to the contact of Polish society with the incoming foreign guests. On that occasion, the city was decorated in the modern fashion according to the designs made by teachers of the Academy of Fine Arts. One of the highlights was also the exhibition of young visual arts in the Warsaw Arsenal open to the public during the festival, where young artists escaped socialist realistic limitations. The Arsenal vibe inspired Izaak Celnikier's simple-form poster for the Chinese film *Ingeniously Taking Mount Hua*.

As liberalisation gradually increased, more and more modern art tendencies were reaching Poland. Poster art started to make wide use of various abstract art trends (Józef Mroszczak *Neapolitan Carousel*, 1957; Henryk Tomaszewski *Ausstellung Polnisches Plakat*, 1956; Piotr Potworowski, 1958; Roman Cieślewicz *The Crucible*, 1958; Jan Młodożeniec *Side Street Story*, 1958; Walerian Borowczyk *The Seventh Seal*, 1958; Jerzy Skarżyński *1st Polish Jazz Music Festival, Sopot*, 1956; *2nd Jazz Music Festival, Sopot*, 1957; Józef Szajna *The Names of Power*, 1957; Wojciech Zamecznik *Unfinished Story*, 1956; *The Day of the Polish Navy*, 1956; *Poolse schilderkunst van nu*, 1959).

Wojciech Zamecznik was a very restless spirit of that era. He experimented with various techniques, and his endeavours meandered and made unexpected turns. He was among the first Polish graphic artists to make use of photography, meddling more and more with the laboratory system of photographic processing: he drew directly on negatives, treated them with chemicals. In this way, he blurred the contours or achieved soft tonal transitions, which added a particular poetic expression to his designs. The visual effects were often very close to the ones arrived at with a brush and paint by his colleagues. The artist's most prominent works include: *Lost People* (1957), *The Trial Is Postponed* (1959), *Night Train* (1959), *Poolse schilderkunst van nu* (1959), *6th Warsaw Autumn* (1962), *7th Warsaw Autumn* (1963).



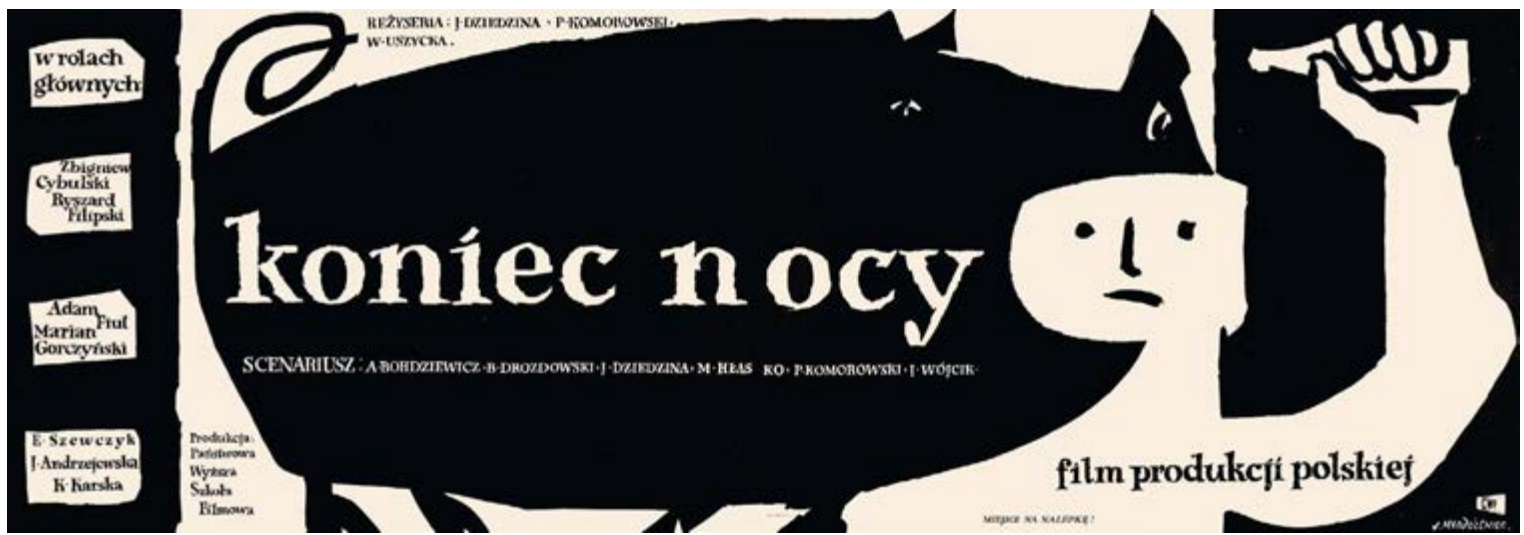
Józef Mroszczak
10th Congress of the International Theatre Institute
 1962, offset, 96.5 × 68 cm



Józef Mroczek
The Bird Seller
 1963, offset, 84.5 × 57.5 cm

Józef Mroczek
Exhibition of Greek Fine-Art Photography, Warsaw, Palace of Culture and Science
 1961, offset, 69 × 49 cm

Józef Mroczek
The Beggar Student
 1961, offset, 86 × 58 cm



Jan Młodożeniec
End of the Night (Polish film)
1956, offset, 58 × 169 cm

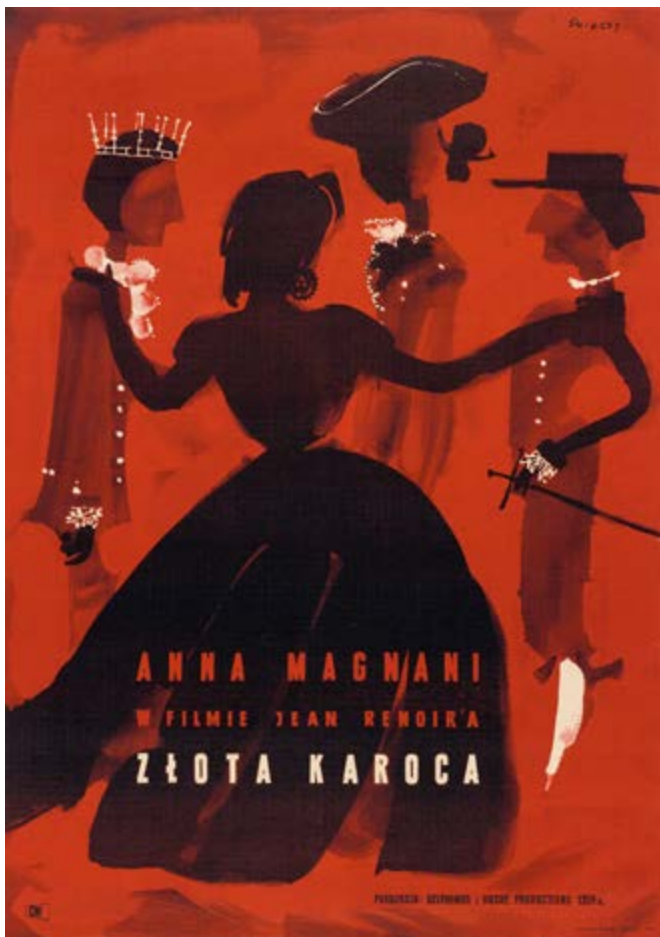
Jan Młodożeniec
Side Street Story (Italian film)
1958, offset, 86 × 59 cm



Jan Młodożeniec
Julietta of Dreams, Georges Neveux
 1957, offset, 99 × 67 cm



Jan Młodożeniec
The Lavender Hill Mob (British film)
 1956, offset, 86.5 × 59 cm



Waldemar Świerzy
The Golden Coach (French film)
 1956, offset, 83 × 58.5 cm

Waldemar Świerzy
Othello (Soviet film)
 1956, offset, 84.5 × 58.5 cm

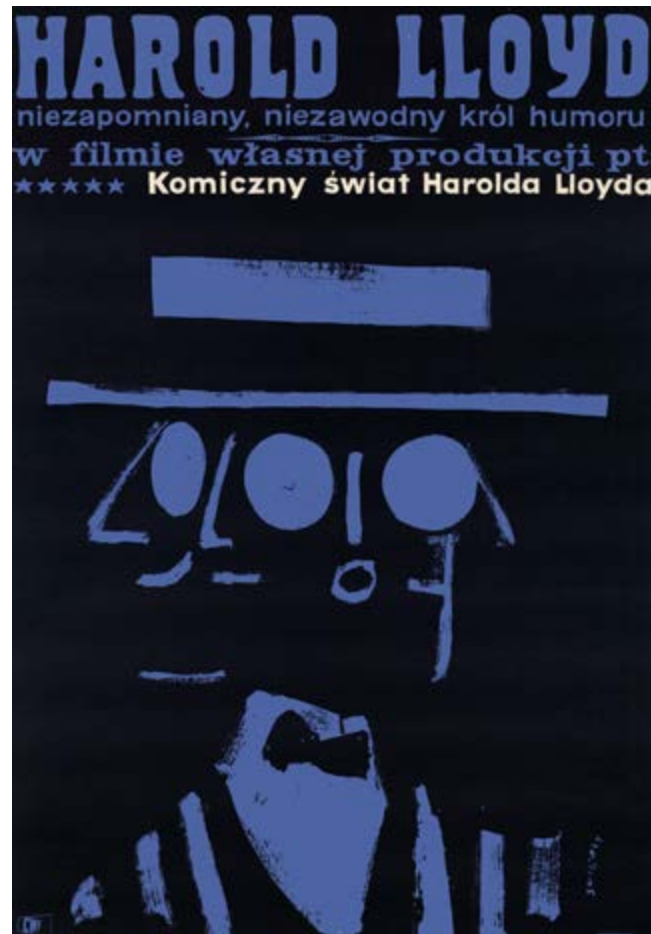
Waldemar Świerzy
The Law Is the Law (French-Italian film)
 1959, offset, 83.5 × 58 cm



Waldemar Świerzy
Sunset Boulevard (American film)
 1957, offset, 85 × 57.5 cm

Waldemar Świerzy
Street of Shame (Japanese film)
 1959, print 1960, offset, 85 × 59 cm

Waldemar Świerzy
Harold Lloyd's World of Comedy (American film)
 1963, offset, 83.5 × 57 cm





Witold Janowski
Nach Polen – zu jeder Jahreszeit (To Poland – Every Season)
 1960, offset, 98 × 67 cm

Witold Janowski
With ORBIS into the World for 40 Years
 1964, offset, 82.5 × 58.5 cm

Witold Janowski
Peintures et vernis, Ciech (Paints and Varnishes, Ciech)
 1st half of the 1960s, offset, 82 × 57 cm



Witold Janowski
Swissair to Poland
1959, offset, 91 × 67.5 cm



Maciej Urbaniec
Come and See Polish Mountains (repetitive poster)
 1961, offset, 96.5 × 65.5 cm

Maciej Urbaniec
European Athletics Junior Games
 1964, offset, 97.5 × 67.5 cm



Maciej Urbaniec
Spartakiad 1964, an Event for Millions (repetitive poster)
1964, offset, 97.5 × 67.5 cm

OHS Posters

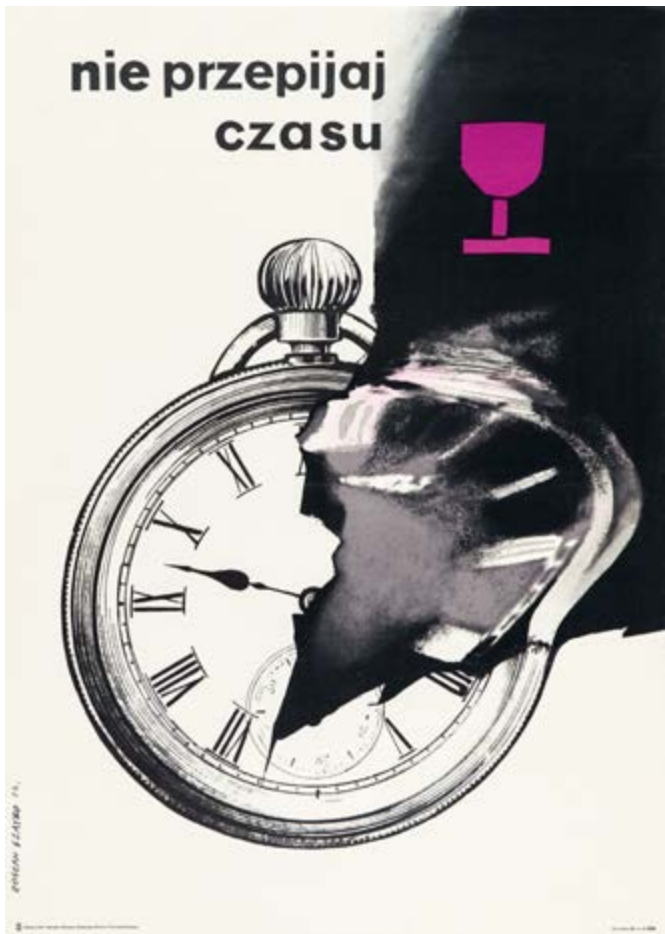
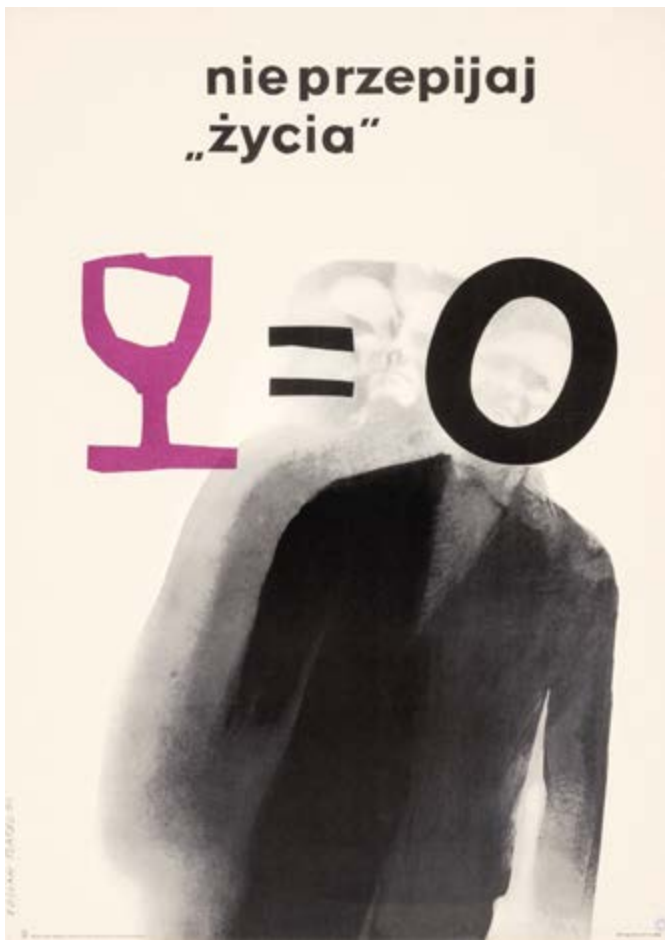
Posters regarding occupational health and safety (OHS for short) were quite successful already in the interwar period, also on the international arena. Their merit rests in the fact that apart from their functional message, they carried added value of the modern graphic form deriving from contemporary art trends. This theme was revived after the war and although most of the designs were dominated by an instructional character using imperatives and prohibitions, there were also works including the aforementioned “added value”, where we find a number of features associated with the “Polish School”. The posters addressed the viewers’ imagination, employing humour or comedy as the medium for quite serious matters, and the scope of the painting techniques introduced an extra element of emotions.

The Art and Graphic Design Publishing House started to publish OHS posters in 1954, the moment a separate OHS editorial office was established. Another publishing house was the Union Publishing House of the Central Council of Trade Unions, which began to operate on a broad scale and print this kind of posters in the late 1950s. The group of artists designing OHS posters was quite numerous, and some specialised in this genre in particular, but the shape of OHS poster was mostly influenced by three designers: Waldemar Świerzy, Maciej Urbaniec, and the aforementioned Rosław Szaybo. They elevated the technical means to a higher level than just the utilitarian. This was especially evidenced by the dramatically expressive, even pugnacious posters by Rosław Szaybo revealing the author’s expressive temperament.



Waldemar Świerzy
The Head Is No Rock...
1956, offset, 48 × 67.5 cm

Waldemar Świerzy
[Bumpers]
1956, offset, 48 × 66.5 cm



Rosław Szaybo
Do Not Waste Your Life on Drinking
1964, offset, 68 × 48 cm

Rosław Szaybo
Do Not Waste Your Time on Drinking
1964, offset, 67 × 48 cm

Rosław Szaybo
Do Not Waste Your Health on Drinking
1964, offset, 67.5 × 48 cm



Rosław Szaybo
Couple Like This to Avoid a Knock-Out
1965, offset, 84 × 58.5 cm

The Apogee – the Warsaw Opera and the Dramatic Theatre (1959–1964)

At the beginning of the next decade, the development of the “Polish School” entered the so-called “baroque” phase, as the poster artists at that time achieved such profusion of forms. The triumph of the “Polish School” was significantly facilitated by two Warsaw stages: the Warsaw Opera and the Dramatic Theatre. In the former, in July 1961, the prominent conductor Bohdan Wodiczko was appointed director, which he remained until the end of 1964. He carried out a radical reform of the ossified institution and its repertoire. He invited a group of the most outstanding graphic artists to design the posters, and gave them unrestricted freedom in devising the opera or ballet vision. A new idea was to publish separate posters for each single-act piece of music that was a complete performance. The result was a set of posters that made history as “Wodiczko’s golden series”. At that moment, the “Polish School” was at its height. Roman Cieślewicz designed ten posters, among them the famous *Persephone*, *The Peaks*, *Oedipus Rex*, all in 1961. In fact, in 1962, Jan Lenica created only four posters, but they are considered his top achievements: *Iphigénie en Tauride*, *Judith*, *The Rite of Spring*, *The Prodigal Son*. In his three posters from 1962 for the Warsaw Opera (*The Red Coat*, *The Three-Cornered Hat*, *The Four Temperaments*), Jan Młodożeniec outdid himself in a nonchalant form that he never managed to recreate. Henryk Tomaszewski added to this collection his poster for *The Tales of Hoffmann* from 1962 – as usual independent in his attitudes, in opposition to the other designs for the Warsaw opera, he foreshadowed the gradual ebbing of the vivacious “baroque” of other authors’ form.

In that period, the Dramatic Theatre had excellent posters by Franciszek Starowieyski for Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s plays *Angel Comes to Babylon* (1961) and *Frank V* (1962), by Henryk Tomaszewski for *Rhinoceros* (1961), *Oedipus Rex* (1961), and *Hamlet* (1962), by Roman Cieśle-

wicz for *Platonow* (1962), *The Laocoon Group* (1962), and *Father Marek* (1963), by Jan Lenica for *Macbeth* (1960), by Jan Młodożeniec for *The Turkey* (1960) and *The Ninth Righteous* (1963), by Jerzy Srokowski for *The Physicists* (1962), *Don Juan* (1964), and *Waste of Moustache* (1964).



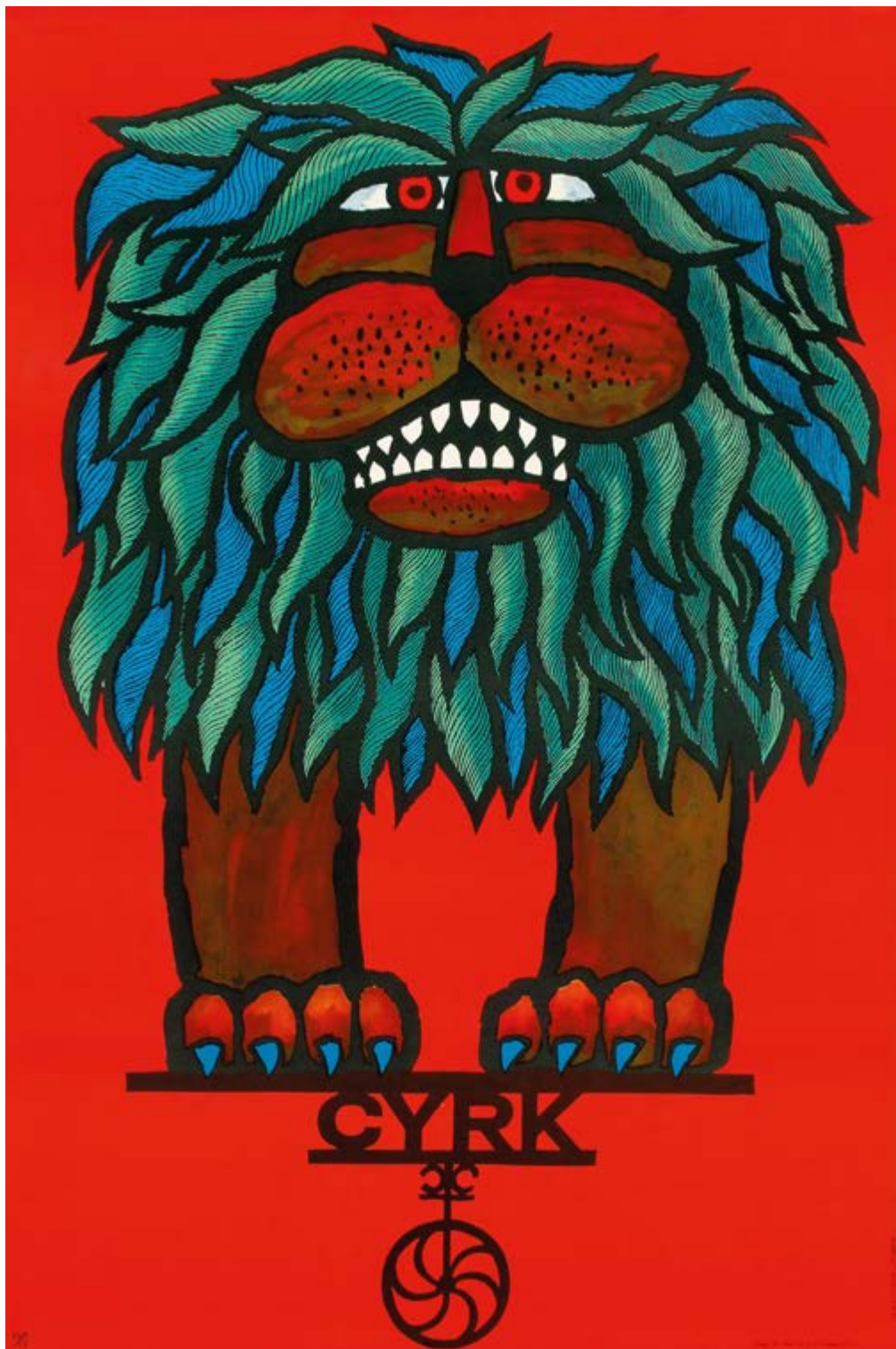
Jan Młodożeniec
The Red Coat, Luigi Nono
 1962, rotogravure, 97.5 × 65.5 cm



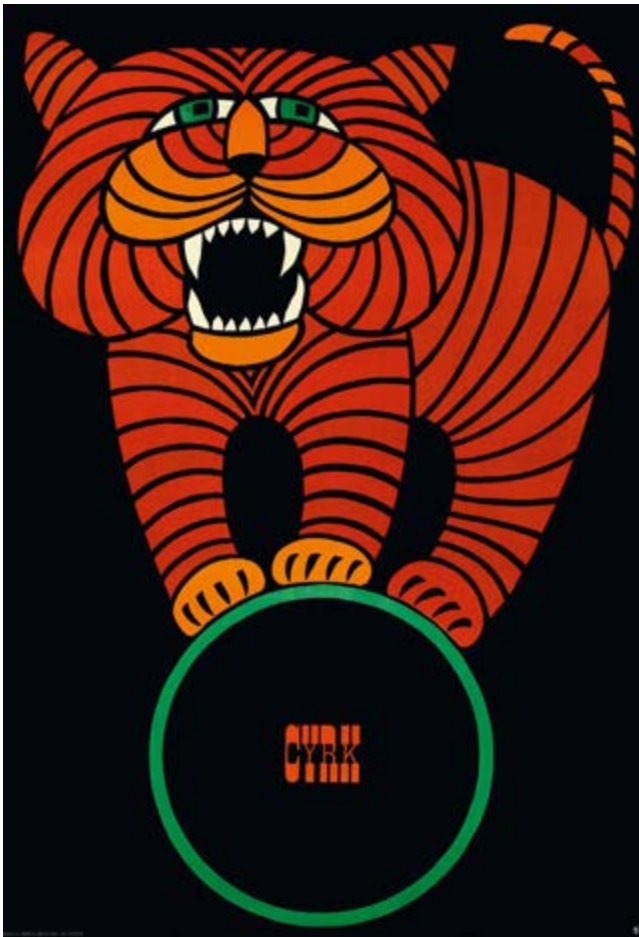
Jan Młodożeniec
The Three-Cornered Hat, Manuel de Falla
 1962, offset, 97.5 × 66.5 cm



Jan Młodożeniec
The Four Temperaments, Paul Hindemith
1962, offset, 97.5 × 67.5 cm



Hubert Hilscher
Circus ("leafy" lion)
1967, offset, 97.5 × 67 cm



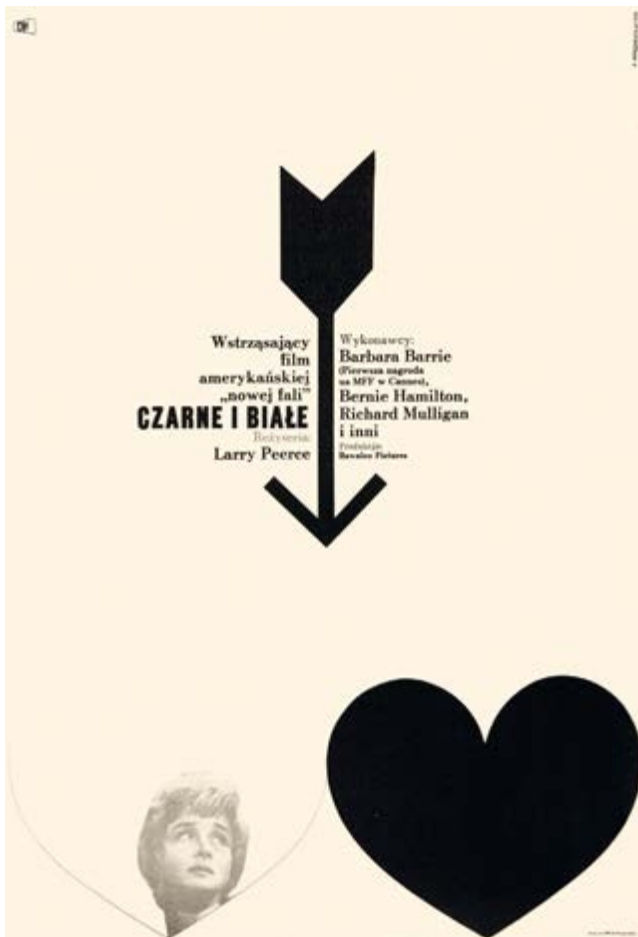
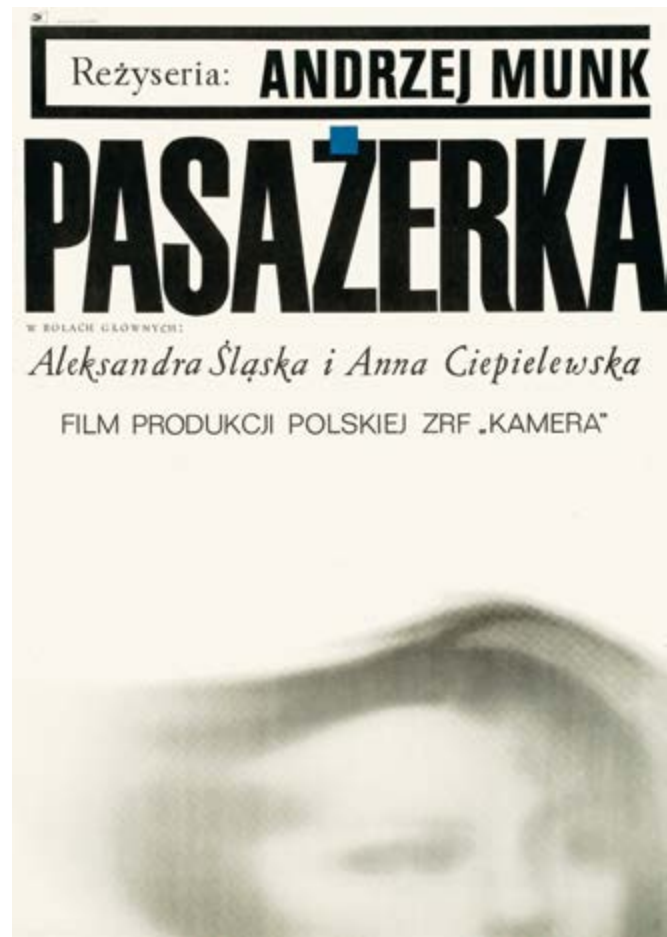
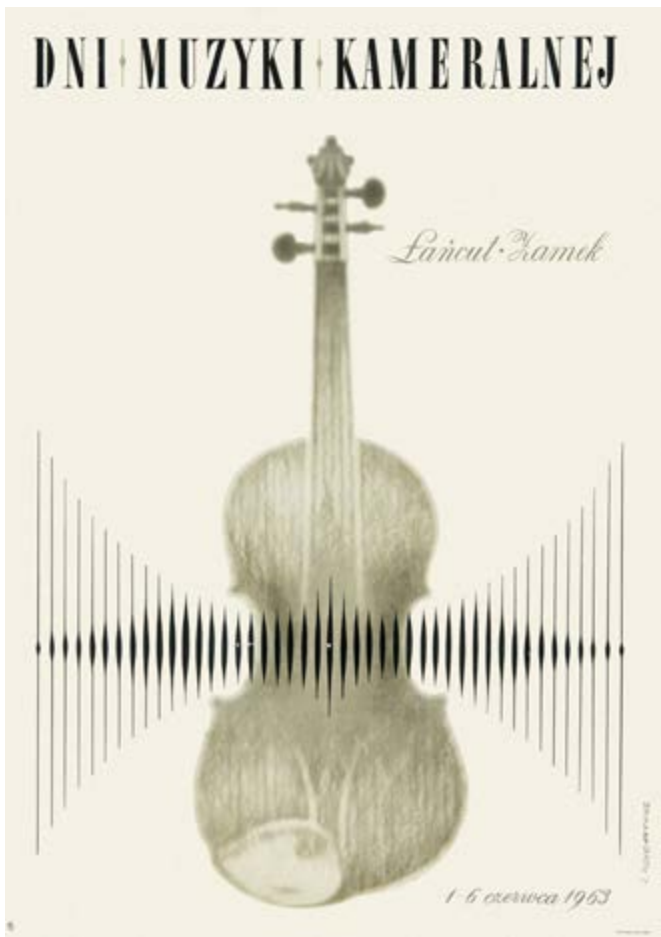
Hubert Hilscher
Circus (tiger on a wheel)
 1966, offset, 98 × 67 cm

Jerzy Treutler
Circus (lion)
 1967, offset, 97.5 × 67.5 cm

Maciej Urbaniec
Circus (equilibrist)
 1966, offset, 97 × 67 cm

Response to the “Polish School” Formula (1962–1969)

A conscious and very consistent response to the “Polish School of Poster” was offered by the young graduates and students of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw – Leszek Hołdanowicz, Marek Freudenreich, and Bronisław Zelek. Inspired by the photography class taught by Wojciech Zamecznik at the Academy, they decided to experiment, change the rules of design, and reject the prevailing painting convention. They visualised the graphic sign by means of black-and-white photographs subject to additional processing. The entire composition was placed on one half of the poster sheet on purpose, intentionally leaving the bottom part blank. The lettering, typeset only, was often an additional medium that carried the message of the poster (Bronisław Zelek *The Birds*; Marek Freudenreich *Harakiri*, *The Man from Chicago*).



Leszek Hołdanowicz
Days of Chamber Music, Łańcut Castle, 1–6 June 1963
 1962, offset, 83.5 × 62 cm

Leszek Hołdanowicz
One Potato, Two Potato (American film)
 1964, offset, 85 × 58 cm

Leszek Hołdanowicz
Passenger (Polish film)
 1963, offset, 82.5 × 58 cm

About the Author

Zdzisław Schubert – born on 13 July 1942 in Poznań. Graduated in history of art from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in 1965. In 1968, he was instrumental in the foundation of the National Museum in Poznań – based on the existing collection of the Print Cabinet – Poster Section, transformed into the Poster Department in 1975, which became the Poster and Design Gallery in 1991 (since 2021, the Poster and Graphic Design Gallery), including a collection of posters and world industrial design, built from scratch. He managed the poster collections constantly until his retirement in 2007.

He has organised (on his own or with the help of others) almost seventy exhibitions in the local museum as well as other museums and galleries in Poland (Ostrów Wielkopolski, Wrocław, Łódź, Sopot, Toruń, Bydgoszcz, Katowice, Szczecin) and abroad (Berlin, Bratislava, Budapest, Moscow, Leningrad, Lahti, Paris, Pécs, Prague, Shenzhen, Stuttgart, Washington). The most important of them include: the retrospective film poster exhibition “**Polish Film Poster 1947–67**” in 1969 in the National Museum in Poznań; in the same museum, a series of solo exhibitions of Polish poster artists: **Jan Lenica** (1973), **Franciszek Starowieyski** (1975), **Jan Młodożeniec** (1979), **Roman Cieśliewicz** (1981), **Waldemar Świerzy** (1986), and **Hans Hillmann** from Germany (1973), accompanied by scholarly catalogues *Henryk Tomaszewski. Posters* (Berlin–Poznań 1993), *The Japanese Poster from the Collection of the National Museum in Poznań* (1994), *The Poster Must Sing!* – for the 2011 exhibition in the National Museum in Poznań presenting the Polish and world posters from the end of the 19th century until modernity housed in the Museum – as well as *The Tip of a Paper Tower of Babel* in 2016 in the Salon Akademii Gallery in Warsaw for the 50th Anniversary of the International Poster Biennale.

The author of the album *The Polish Poster 1970–1978* (1979) and the book *Poster Masters and Pupils* (2008) presenting the history of applied graphic arts in the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in connection to the centenary of the academy.

The author of the book, Zdzisław Schubert, an art historian and museologist, has been interested in the “Polish School of Poster” since childhood, and gradually, it has become the object of his long-term professional research. He is also one of the last witnesses to the birth and transformations of this undoubtedly key phenomenon in Polish post-war visual arts.

In this album, the author not only presents the most famous followers of the “Polish School of Poster” and their most prominent works, but also discusses the most popular topics exploited by the artists, delineates the timeframe of the “Polish School of Poster”, systematises its development, and explains any inaccuracies that have surrounded it. He argues that attempts have been made at extending the duration of this artistic phenomenon to the present day, and some claimed that its founders and followers were designers who became active already after the “Polish School of Poster” had gone down in history.

Painting texture, vivid colours, a cheerful mood, emotional nuances, multidimensional metaphors, personal commentaries of the authors – due to these qualities, the works from the “Polish School of Poster” are unmistakable to enthusiasts of visual arts both from Poland and from around the world. According to Zdzisław Schubert, the “Polish School of Poster” should be protected as part of Poland’s intangible cultural heritage.

BOSZ



Uniwersytet Artystyczny
im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz
w Poznaniu



NATIONAL SCIENCE CENTRE
POLAND

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