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Chinese Inspiration in Jerzy Panek's Prints

One of the fundamental topoi in artists' biographies is the motif of a journey, usually embarked on shortly after art studies and serving as a fundamental and crucial source of inspiration for the artist's further creative activity. Polish artists usually went to Paris, Rome or Munich; more recently they have also traveled to London, Berlin or New York. An interesting phenomenon at the time of the Cold War when trips to the West became virtually impossible, were art trips to the Chinese People's Republic, with which the Polish communist authorities conducted a program of cultural exchange. Due to the long tradition of Chinese art performed on paper, these trips were of special interest to the milieu of graphic artists. The most well known trip to China in the post-war Polish art history was the expedition of Tadeusz Kulisiewicz, who still belonged to the older generation of pre-war graphic artists. The above trip bore fruit in the form of a cycle of drawings entitled *Z notatnika chińskiego* (*A Chinese Notebook*; 1952–1953).

Jerzy Panek (1918–2001), a wood engraver and leading representative of the Krakow milieu of post-war graphic art, who was also a member of the MARG group, embarked on an art trip to China in 1956, right at the beginning of the mature period of his creative activity. "Three days before the October protest of 1956 I flew to Peking (Beijing). It was a shock, similar to a war; only a little different."¹ Panek's merely two-month stay in China exerted a major impact on this artist's biography. The trip became enveloped in a specific mythology which was fueled by the accounts given by the artist himself; some of these are not completely verifiable (e.g. there is an amusing anecdote which says that the artist aroused a sensation already at the airport by his total lack of luggage; apparently he set out on the journey equipped only with a toothbrush).

Panek took full advantage of the possibility to visit a country which was exotic from the point of view of a European. He stayed in the capital Beijing, where he created his works in the wood engraving workshop; later on, he exhibited his works in the local Centre of Culture. It was there that he organized his first individual exhibition which was very favorably received by the press – he obtained very good press reviews. There appeared articles which were illustrated with reproductions of his works. Panek came into contact with Chinese artists. He also visited other cities and cultural centers, such as Shanghai or Nanking. He even obtained an offer of employment at the university in Hangzhou. In Beijing, Panek met Werner Schmidt, a young art historian from the German Democratic Republic (GDR), who specialized in the graphic art of Menzel in the Berlin National Gallery. Panek cooperated with him in the making of a documentary

¹ Panek (1991: 3).



1. Jerzy Panek, *Chinese Porter*, 1957, woodcut, 19,7x18,5 cm

Source: Jerzy Panek. *Werkverzeichnis der graphischen Arbeiten 1939–1993*, hrgs. von Dieter Burkamp, Keber Verlag in Zusammenarbeit mit der edition pro, b.m. 1995, p. 20

film devoted to the famous old print shop of colored wood engravings – *Rong Boozkai*. Schmidt – who writes about his encounter with Panek in the fundamental source on the artist’s graphic art, entitled *Werkverzeichnis der graphischen Arbeiten 1939–1993*, compiled by Dieter Burkamp – contributed immensely to the purchases of Panek’s works when he became director of the Department of Copperplate Engravings in the Dresden Gallery.² Panek brought with him to Poland twenty odd wood engravings executed in China, as well as a sketch-book. As he himself recalls, “I made 24 wood engravings straight away – from palm wood, from pear and from the planed down old engraving boards.”³ Elżbieta Dzikowska, who published an exhaustive account of Panek’s Chinese trip in the magazine *China* in the year 1962, adds ten wood engravings and linocuts “based on Chinese accessories,” such as “‘Chinese Porter,’ or the ‘Elephant’ (the model is to be found in the Beijing Zoo).”⁴ Ewa Garztecka recalls that “as an expression of gratitude for the exhibition, the artist received an original painting of the great Chinese painter – Tsy Paj-sza.”⁵

All those who study and review Panek’s creative activity unanimously draw attention to the crucial significance of the artist’s stay in China. For Danuta Wróblewska, Panek’s trip to China “weighed heavily upon everything in his life,”⁶ for Gisela Burkamp, “Panek’s stay in China, but also without a doubt his contact with different fonts and types in his father’s printing house, were an inspiration for him which found its ex-

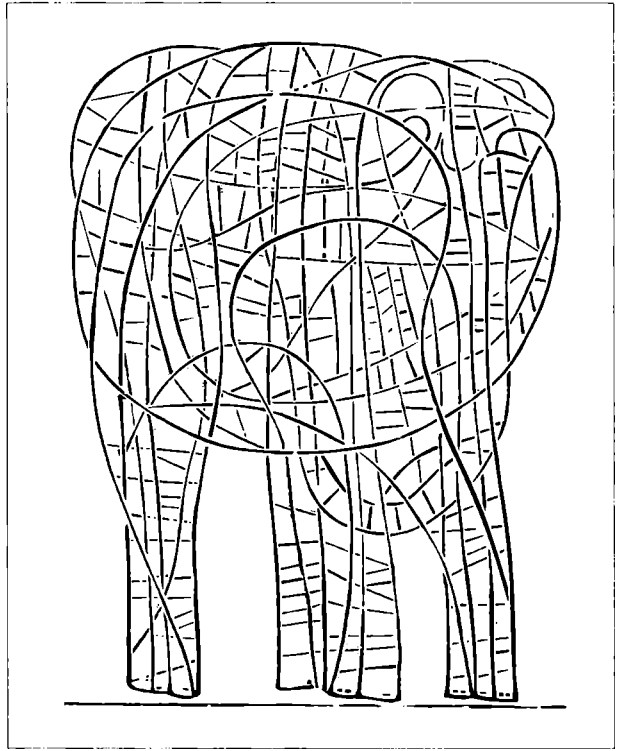
² Schmidt (1995: 21–23).

³ Panek (1991: 3).

⁴ Dzikowska (1962: 8).

⁵ Garztecka (1958: 3).

⁶ Wróblewska (2002: 28).



2. Jerzy Panek, *Elephant I*, 1959,
woodcut, 65x48 cm

Source: *Jerzy Panek. Werkverzeichnis
der graphischen Arbeiten 1939–1993*,
p. 29

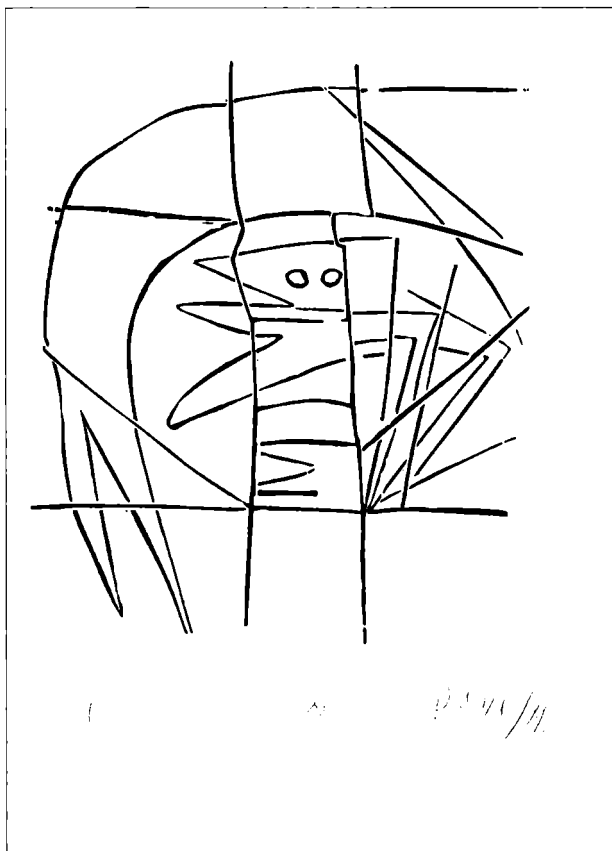
pression in engraving signs reminiscent of letters of the alphabet on wooden blocks.⁷ Similarly, according to Jan Fejkiel “the exotic and the everyday life in China, but also the culture of wood and paper which he had known for a long time, as it were ‘from home,’ exerted a strong influence on Panek. What was new was his coming into contact with the centuries’ old tradition of black and white print and the abstract self-restraint of Chinese seals.”⁸ In the above text, Fejkiel quotes from Wróblewska who wrote about Panek’s Chinese experience: “There he really got hold of paper, of the wooden block and ink, but he did so differently than in Europe. Buddhism, Taoism, the civilization of ideograms, the coming into contact with the scroll as a philosophical concept, the silence of concentration as a threshold beyond which there is cognition.”⁹ Fejkiel continues further his reflection on Panek’s work only to conclude: “A few dozen wood engravings executed on the spot, within a brief moment of time and without prior sketches are the capital which will yield benefit and will initiate profound changes in his art. However it is the works grouped in cycles and focused analytically on a single topic, created already after his return from China that will prove decisive for his future.”¹⁰ One of Panek’s series which the 2007 exhibition in Jan Fejkiel Gallery as well

⁷ Burkamp (2007: 20).

⁸ Fejkiel (2007: 8).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* (8–9).

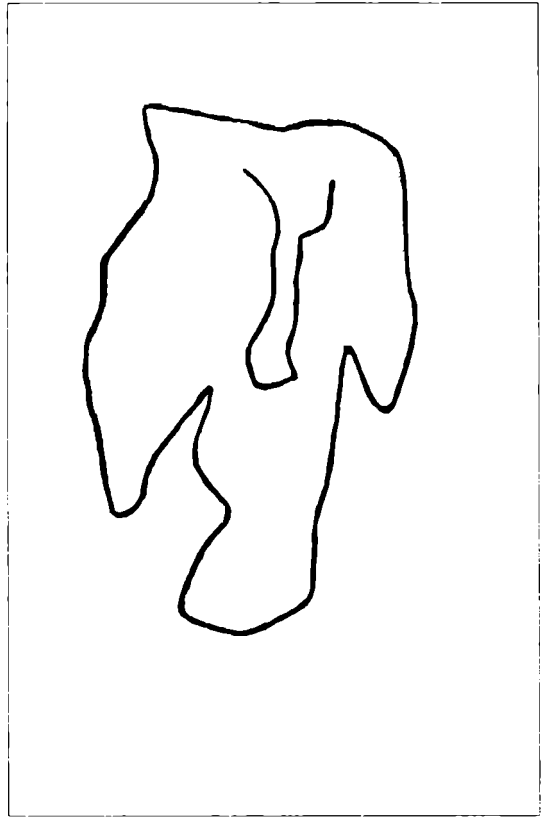


3. Jerzy Panek, *Banner XVII*,
1962, woodcut, 38,5x30,5 cm
Source: Jerzy Panek, *Choraǳwie /
Banner*, Jan Fejkiel Gallery, Kraków
2007, p. 63

as the accompanying catalog were devoted to was entitled *Choraǳwie (Flags)*. It is from the catalogue to this exhibition that the above quotation comes from. Yet the strongest reminiscences of the “experience of Chinese calligraphy [...] of the art of carving seals and the Chinese alphabet in wood” are perceived by him in the series of illustrations to Dante’s *Inferno* which the artist commenced to create in the year 1964.¹¹

Thus, one can conclude that Panek’s stay in the Chinese People’s Republic no doubt played a big psychological role; it opened before him wide horizons onto the world and the cultural heritage whose artistic traditions went back thousands of years. However, at this point one should ask a question whether the immediate result of Panek’s trip to China: the cycle of works which were created there indeed did constitute a radical stylistic turning point in his art. Can we detect in these works any direct influences of the Far-East graphic art? As usual, the answer to the above question is a complex one. In order to formulate it, one has to go back in time and trace back the artist’s achievements from the time before his trip to China. One also has to be aware of the fact that at the time of his departure for China, the artist was no longer young as he was already thirty seven and he had produced a considerable number of valuable art works.

¹¹ Fejkiel (2002: 13).



4. Jerzy Panek, *Dante (Face en face)*, 1965, Illustration to Dante's, *The Divine Comedy - Inferno*, woodcut, 33x20,5 cm

Source: Jerzy Panek, *Dante Jerzego Panka*, Jan Fejkiel Gallery, Kraków 2002, p. 79

Jerzy Panek came from a family of artisans; as has already been mentioned above, his father was a printer. The artist made his first steps as an artist shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. As he himself recollects, "I went back to drawing in 1937 when I was eighteen. I joined the Institute of Fine Arts and I really went the whole way."¹² Subsequently, he continues his education in the Krakow *Kunstgewerbeschule* which operated during the German occupation in the years 1939–1943. A numerous group of art students who after the war created the so called Group of Young Artists and later the II Krakow Group, attended this school as it constituted a cover for the continuation of the activity of the pre-war academy. Panek remembers some of his colleagues: "There are here such special groups of students: among those born in 1918, like me, there were Brzozowski, Hoffmann, Mikulski."¹³

During his studies, Panek dabbled in various graphic techniques; among others, he executed a series of self-portraits and bluntly presented portraits-caricatures of his colleagues and friends. After the war, Panek continued his studies at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts, which he completed without obtaining a diploma in 1948; he did so, so as to be able to take up his professional activity and earn his living. In the years 1948–1955, he created and exhibited linocuts and wood engravings maintained

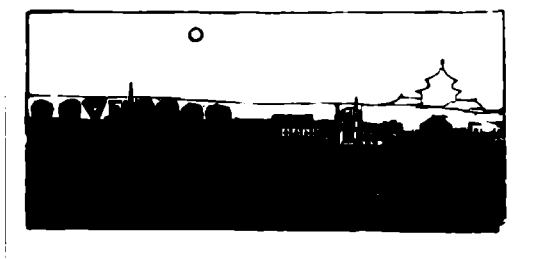
¹² Panek (1991: 3).

¹³ Ibid.



5. Jerzy Panek, *Chinese Stalls – Beijing*, 1956, woodcut, 22x34,5 cm

Source: Jerzy Panek. *Werkverzeichnis der graphischen Arbeiten 1939–1993*, p. 82, no. 91



6. Jerzy Panek, *The Roofs of Beijing in Winter*, 1956, woodcut, 22x34,5 cm

Source: Jerzy Panek. *Werkverzeichnis der graphischen Arbeiten 1939–1993*, p. 83, no. 92

in the Socialist Realist convention. It should be added here that in her essay included in the above-mentioned catalog published by her husband Dieter, entitled *Himself Like a Shepherd. The Image of Man in Jerzy Panek's Wood Engravings*, Gisela Burkamp puts a question mark regarding the Socialist Realism of these works and considering their topics to be a cover for a purely formal search in the sphere of graphic art.¹⁴

Panek returns to the Academy only in 1955 so as to complete his diploma and graduate. In the same year, he takes part in the legendary National Exhibition of Young Artists in the Arsenal entitled *Against War – Against Nazism*, which accompanies the World Festival of Youth; he regards this exhibition as the first manifestation of the young generation which has decided to break away from Socialist Realism imposed on artists by administrative methods. It is also at that time that Panek decides to change his style modernizing the narrative vision of reality in the Socialist Realist spirit, with elements taken over from the language of the Western European avant-garde, mainly from the Cubist geometrization of form, which he became acquainted with in the course of his studies in the forties. Panek was a great admirer of the art of Pablo Picasso, whom he met at the Congress of Peace in Wrocław in 1948.

The works which he created in China are maintained in a similar stylistic convention. An element which petrifies the Socialist Realist narration is their documentary character. Among the latter wood engravings, one finds, among others such works as: *Chinese Stalls – Beijing*. *The Children of Shanghai*, as well as country and city landscapes: *Shanghai*, *Canton*, *The Roofs of Beijing*, or else monuments e.g. *The Great China Wall*. Whereas *The Chinese Cook – Beijing* is a characteristic element of the Socialist Realist poetics presenting the portraits of simple workers.

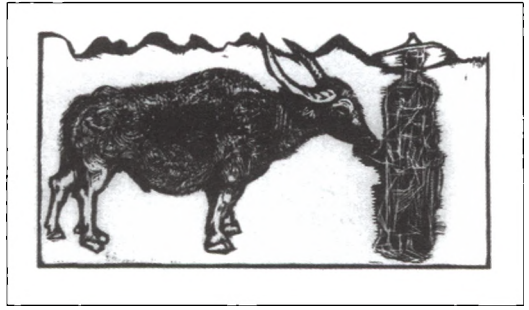
Side by side these more or less realistic presentations, there appeared motifs which heralded an iconography that was typical of Panek. Among the latter, one finds for instance images of animals, in such works as: *A Man from Canton with a Buffalo*, *The Image of a Donkey from Beijing* or some culinary motifs: *The Han-Kau (Hangzhou)*

¹⁴ Burkamp (1995: 42–44).



7. Jerzy Panek, *The Chinese Cook* – Beijing, 1956, woodcut, 29x22 cm

Source: Jerzy Panek. *Werkverzeichnis der graphischen Arbeiten 1939–1993*, p. 84, no. 98



8. Jerzy Panek, *A Man from Canton with a Buffalo*, 1956, woodcut, 22x41 cm

Source: Jerzy Panek. *Werkverzeichnis der graphischen Arbeiten 1939–1993*, p. 82, no. 88

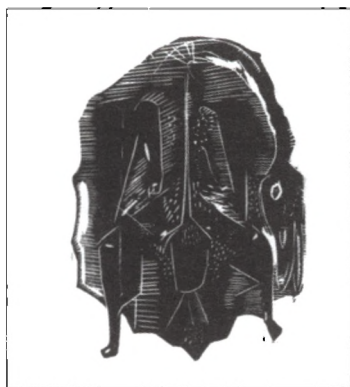
Fish, The Nanking Duck. In the latter wood engravings, there appears the element of deformation, and of abandonment of pure Realism and Narrativism, in spite of the fact that the artist continued in them the documentary convention. The way towards a synthesis is marked out by portraits: *Self-Portrait – Shanghai*, *A Woman from Canton* and especially the portraits of *The Old Woman from Han-Czau (Hangzhou)*. The latter go the furthest in the direction of transforming the image into the structure of a sign. The faces of old women furrowed by a network of wrinkles emerge from the black background, like masks or reflections on the material. In the above-mentioned essay, Giesela Burkamp writes the following about these wood engravings:

For *The Man from Canton* who is pushed to the external, right-hand side of the picture by a huge buffalo, and above all for the faces of Chinese old women, which may be regarded as the most beautiful and the most outstanding works of the artist, Panek devises extremely expressive features made up from squares, rhombs and rectangles which divide, support and build up the image, making us look under the skin and thereby revealing the rhythm of muscles and organs, the strings of nerves.¹⁵

The survival of Socialist Realist stylistics in the wood engravings executed by Panek in China does not surprise one. At that time, Chinese art was also Socialist Realist in character, and what's more, in the spirit of the Soviet realism. On the other hand, what Panek could have learnt in China was technological perfection. As he recalled years later in an interview with Elżbieta Dzikowska, what appealed to him particularly in Chinese art was “respect for craftsmanship. A nation of professionals.”¹⁶ Elżbieta

¹⁵ Ibid. (44).

¹⁶ Dzikowska (1998: 123).



9. Jerzy Panek, *The Nankin Duck*, 1956, woodcut, 29x22 cm
Source: Jerzy Panek. *Werkverzeichnis der graphischen Arbeiten 1939-1993*, p. 86, no. 103



10. Jerzy Panek, *A Woman from Canton*, 1956, woodcut, 29x22 cm
Source: Jerzy Panek, *Kobiety*, Jan Fejkiel Gallery, Kraków 2008, p. 12

Dzikowska also wrote in the above-mentioned article which appeared in the magazine *Chiny* that: “What unites Panek with China is not limited exclusively to memories and some formal influences. In his Krakow studio, Panek often makes use of Chinese tools and he uses exclusively Chinese paper for making his prints; he reckons that the whiteness of Chinese paper is the best in the world.”¹⁷ The technique of wood engraving was taught in Chinese schools at that time. Panek brought with him from China a set of

¹⁷ Dzikowska (1962: 8).



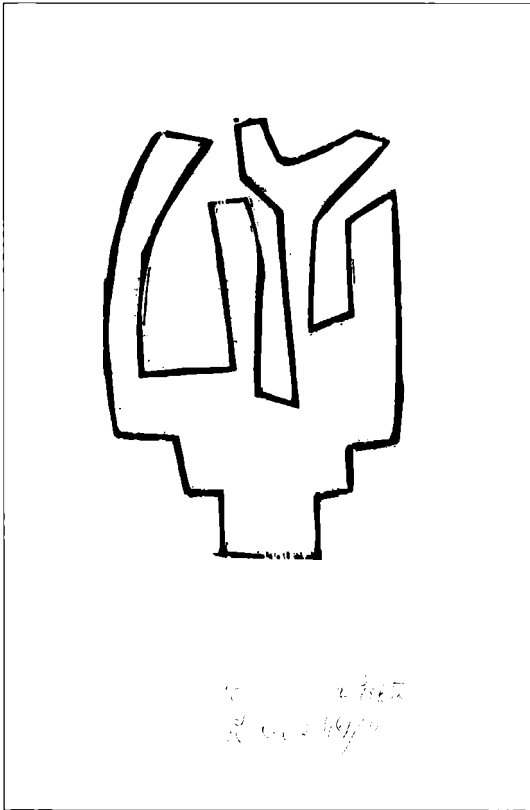
11. Jerzy Panek, *The Old Woman from Hangzhou*, 1956, woodcut, 30x22 cm

Source: Jerzy Panek. *Werkverzeichnis der graphischen Arbeiten 1939-1993*, p. 17

small boards for wood engraving, meant to be used in schools. What is characteristic is that he never used them in his work. Contrary to Dzikowska's suggestions – Stanisław Wejman who tidied Panek's studios after the artist's death, is also of the opinion that Panek never used the inks and brushes which he had brought with him from China. He never made brush sketches and his set of Chinese tools for making prints has also remained untouched. What it was like in reality is difficult to surmise today. It is quite certain however that Panek did not directly resort to the use of far-eastern printing techniques, nor did he use water paints and rice paper, the way it was done by Chinese and Japanese graphic artists. However, during the process of printing, he did take into consideration the texture of paper and wood. In his wood engravings, the black is differentiated within the printed stain, just as in the far-eastern prints, creating the effect, as it were, of an imperfect impression of the matrix. As he himself recalls,

In China I have come across the greatest cult of wood. It was also there that I learnt to perceive black and white more profoundly. The Chinese see things differently than us. Their eyes work better. Apart from that, they have an instinct. They know everything about proportions, about the coexistence of black and white. Good paint for printing has to be 400 years old there. I have also touched some incredible papers. A long time ago, my father taught me how to handle paper, so as to be able to feel it. It was in China that I discovered paper for the second time.¹⁸

¹⁸ Panek (1991: 3).



12. Jerzy Panek, *Head from Hell* (Illustration to Dante's *The Divine Comedy - Inferno*), 1967, woodcut, 27x17,5 cm
Source: Jerzy Panek, *Dante Jerzego Panka*, p. 147

The far-eastern calligraphy became another source of inspiration for Panek. In her article on Panek's stay in China, Dzikowska wrote that:

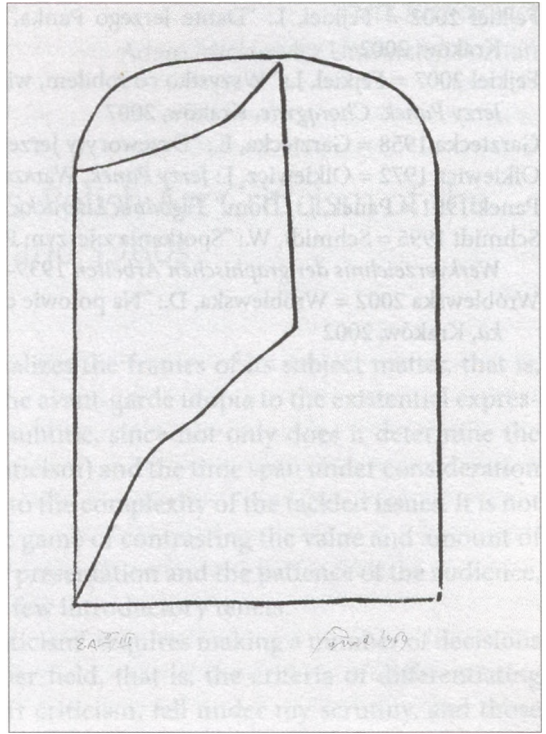
Panek was enchanted by Chinese art, but not by its most commonly known, official varieties, such as painting, sculpture or architecture. It was more its simpler forms, often associated with folk art – New Year images, estampages (rubblings), and especially seals that appealed to the artist more. He liked both the old – imperial and clerical ones – those to be seen only in museums and the contemporary ones which everyone may purchase from a street craftsman-artist, who carves them out on order while we are waiting [...] From the esthetic point of view, the sections of monochromatic, in most cases white-colored background play an equally important role in them as the hieroglyphs cut out on their surfaces.¹⁹

Panek's monographer Jerzy Olkiewicz reiterates after Dzikowska the topos about the artist's inspiration with contemporary Chinese seals, seeing in it "a continuation of this old tradition in the most plebeian form... a form of art without pomposity, without theories, without slogans – an art growing out freely and naturally."²⁰

The succinctness of sign, the free play of black lines against the dominant whiteness of the background which are characteristic of the artist's mature period, to be observed

¹⁹ Dzikowska (1962: 8).

²⁰ Olkiewicz (1972).



13. Jerzy Panek, *Gate of Hell* (Illustration to Dante's *The Divine Comedy Inferno*), 1969, woodcut, 34x22 cm

Source: Jerzy Panek, *Dante Jerzego Panka*, p. 193

particularly in his series *Dante's Inferno* – which Jan Fejkiel wrote about in the above-quoted article – may be derived from the aesthetics of Chinese writing, based on the calligraphy of a pictogram. Yet besides the very broadly understood inspirations derived from the far-eastern aesthetics, it was primarily Panek's own individual ideological and artistic reflection and the collective experience of the whole milieu of Krakow artists specializing in graphic art that exerted an influence on the shaping of Panek's style in the second half of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s; it was particularly the work of such wood engravers as Stanisław Wójtowicz – Panek's close friend, and Marian Malina, whose graphic art exemplifies an evolution of Polish and European art of the second half of the twentieth century, that had helped shape Panek's distinctive style.

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