

# Helena Blum (1904-1984) — a Polish art historian in the gender gap

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This text has two aims: the first is to present a profile of the Polish art historian Helena Blum; the second is to briefly reflect on methodology and to ask about the (in)possibility of writing the historiography of art history anew, taking women into account. For paradoxically — despite feminist-inspired debates — concerning the revision of all sorts of canons, still, in my opinion, no method has been developed for the effective integration of figures such as Blum into the widely known discourse of art history.

Blum, born in Vienna in 1904, called 'Lily', was one of the most influential and famous Polish art historians, working both as a curator at the National Museum in Cracow and as a researcher at the Institute of Art History at the University in Wrocław. In 1922, she began studying art history and archaeology with the best Polish art historians (including Mieczysław Treter, 1883—1943; Władysław Podlacha, 1875—1951) at the University in Lviv. Ten years later, Blum completed her doctorate at this university. Her dissertation *Constructivist Tendencies in Modern Polish Art* was the first dissertation on modern art in Poland. As a student in Lviv, Blum was friends with progressive artists including Leon Chwistek, who praised both her intelligence and her interest in modern and contemporary art<sup>1</sup>, which was not typical of art history students at the time.

In the 1930s Blum also studied in France and visited many museums throughout Europe (Brussels, Berlin, Cambridge, Paris, Dresden and London). She also worked for many years as an art critic and published her texts in all the important art magazines in Poland. Her main research interests were: Polish art of the 19th and 20th centuries, Polish and French graphic art after the Second World War and museology. In 1939, Blum competently reviewed a Paris exhibition of the Surrealists<sup>2</sup> and treated the exhibition itself as a significant medium, which is noteworthy given Blum's curatorial interests. In this review, she also discussed the teachings of the Surrealist movement and expressed her fascination with this current.

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<sup>1</sup> Kornel Filipowicz, *Helena Blumówna. Wspomnienie Kornela Filipowicza*, [online:] <https://web.archive.org/web/20150707155358/http://www.helena.blum.net.pl/wspom.html> (accessed on: 20.02.2023).

<sup>2</sup> Helena Blum, 'Nadrealizm. Refleksje po wystawie paryskiej', *Nike*: II, 1939.



Figure 1 Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa, Portrait of Helena Blum, 1960. Oil on canvas, 100x81 cm. Cracow: National Museum. The Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Cracow.

The black beret on her head and the large, perhaps even too large, blue coat were her trademarks. She was portrayed dressed like this in 1960 by one of the most famous Polish painters, Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa (1897—1988; fig. 1). Blum was a close friend of the painter, so she was portrayed as stopping by the artist's studio for a moment to discuss art and have a cup of tea. The art historian looks attentively at the viewers of the painting, just as she looked at Rudzka-Cybisowa when she posed for the portrait in her studio.

Helena Blum was a dazzling, extraordinary personality who shaped the artistic life of Kraków and Poland in the post-war period. '(...) In the museum [National Museum in Cracow—M.S.] they told many anecdotes about her. Blum always appears to them as a lady detached from reality, living according to her own standards, which come from pre-war Lviv'<sup>3</sup>—wrote Janina Skorupska, who worked with Blum. Not insignificantly, her name functioned in two or even three versions: 'she was called Blumówna, and the nickname *Blumka* was a sign of popularity. The female version of the name that emphasised the status of an unmarried woman was in the past a bit of a challenge and by an ostentatious political incorrectness and anachronism which drifts towards aristocratic character.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Janina Skorupska, 'Doc. dr Blum (1904-1984)', *Rozprawy Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie. Seria Nowa*, VI, 20: 5, 2013, 357.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Hussakowska, 'Helena Blum and Her modern art history – written and exhibited' in Maria Hussakowska, *Talking about Exhibition. An Anthology*, Kraków: Jagiellonian University Cracow 2012, (106-123), 109.

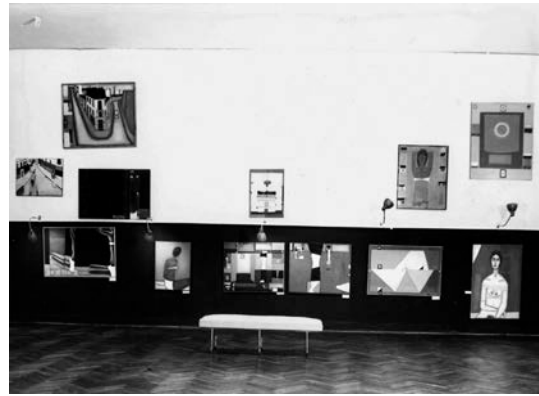


Figure 2 *Gallery of 20th Century Art in the National Museum in Cracow, 1975, view of the exhibition curated by Helena Blum (with paintings by Andrzej Wróblewski and sculpture by Jerzy Bereś). Cracow: National Museum. The Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Cracow.*

Fig. 3: *Gallery of 20th Century Art in the National Museum in Cracow, 1975, view of the exhibition curated by Helena Blum (with paintings by Jerzy Nowosielski). Cracow: National Museum. The Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Cracow.*

Fig. 4: *Gallery of 20th Century Art in the National Museum in Cracow, 1975, view of the exhibition curated by Helena Blum. Cracow: National Museum. The Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Cracow.*

Blum was thus one of the key figures in Polish art history after the Second World War. Although she never became director of the National Museum in Krakow, as curator she built up the collection of Polish art in this museum—a collection that was very much influenced by her own taste. She also curated not only the most important temporary exhibitions held in this established art institution, but was also responsible for the two most significant permanent exhibitions: the first on the history of Polish painting and sculpture from 1900 to the present (opened in 1959 in the main building of the National Museum) and the second on the history of Polish painting and sculpture in the 19th century (opened in 1964 in Sukiennice, another building owned by the National Museum in Cracow). For both exhibitions Blum worked with contemporary artists and exhibition designers from Cracow (including the very progressive and willing to experiment Andrzej Pawłowski, 1925–1986, whom she confidentially named her son). The few photographs of these exhibitions make it clear that Blum liked to hang the paintings at different, sometimes surprising heights, breaking the rule of showing the works at the viewers' eye level (figs. 2-4). Some of the paintings were hung so low that

viewers had to bend over to get a better view. Others, on the other hand, were exposed quite high up, requiring you to straighten up and raise your head. In each exhibition, therefore, we are faced with a situation in which the viewers' bodies are also actively involved in the reception of art, rather than just the privileged sense of sight.

Although she did not comment on these unusual strategies for presenting artworks, it can be hypothesised that she was keen to activate the audience. Like the Surrealists, with whom she had a strong fascination, she tried to move away from the reception of art in the form of contemplation to challenging the exhibition visitor through the surprising arrangement of images in the exhibition space. Interestingly, she therefore had the courage to experiment, with the support of the young artists, in a rather conservative institution such as the National Museum in Cracow at the time. From today's perspective, I would call this mode of perception embodied and somaesthetic, but at the time Blum relied solely on her intuition and her inspiration from Surrealism, which as a direction profoundly revolutionised exhibition strategies, treating the exhibition as a medium.

She was a close friend of the most important Polish artists (including the members of the very important for Polish art scene Kraków Group I and II<sup>5</sup>) and curated many exhibitions of their work in various art institutions. Her distinctive curatorial strategies, scholarly texts for catalogues and artist monographs, and art criticism influenced the so-called canon of Polish art from 1800 to 1970. Although she was very curatorially and scholarly active, her estate has not yet been extensively analysed scientifically.

The state of research mainly comprises biographical texts in which Blum appears as an important but somewhat staid art historian. In the memoirs of Kornel Filipowicz<sup>6</sup>, the husband of her friend and artist Maria Jarema (1908–1958), Blum was given a more human face. He characterised Blum as an active and perceptive participant in artistic life, who visited exhibitions and artists' studios even as a young art historian. She liked to look at the paintings in detail and listened attentively to what the artists and viewers had to say at openings. Sometimes she was reproached—Filipowicz recalls—that her views on art were not always clear and unambiguous. However, the author defends this attitude by saying that Blum was simply aware of the multi-layered and complex nature of artistic phenomena and artworks. He also emphasises that she had an excellent visual memory. She was interested in contemporary art and was always up to date on the latest trends.

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<sup>5</sup> The first Kraków Group formed in 1929-1931, although its name wasn't formally introduced to the art world until 1933 – the year of its first official exhibition. The group was initiated by several students who came out of town to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków: Leopold Lewicki, Henryk Wiciński, Janusz Woźniakowski, Maria Jarema, Jonasz Stern, and Andrzej Stopka. The second Kraków Group was founded in 1957 and has never formally dissolved (leading members: Tadeusz Brzozowski, Maria Jarema, Tadeusz Kantor, Jadwiga Maziarska, Kazimierz Mikulski, Jerzy Nowosielski, Erna Rosenstein, Jerzy Skarżyński, and Bogusław Szwacz). See: <https://culture.pl/en/artist/krakow-group> (accessed on: 20.02.2023).

<sup>6</sup> Kornel Filipowicz, *Helena Blumówna. Wspomnienie Kornela Filipowicza*.

According to Filipowicz: Blum 'was less interested in the classical representatives of artistic trends than in those artists who worked on the border between epochs, who succumbed to successive influences and fascinations, but who never lost the characteristics of their individuality, who did not imitate or become epigones'.<sup>7</sup> The artist appreciated at most her texts on three women artists: Olga Boznańska, Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa and his wife Maria Jarema. There is therefore no doubt that Blum, as an art historian, was looking at ancient art from a contemporary perspective. Today we would call her approach—following Georges Didi-Huberman—as anachronistic, i.e. dialectically linking the past and the present: '[E]verything past is definitively *anachronistic*: it exists or subsists only through the figures that we make of it; so it exists only in the operations of a "reminiscing present", a present endowed with the admirable or dangerous power, precisely, of *presenting* it, and, in the wake of this presentation, of elaborating and representing it'.<sup>8</sup> Blum's exhibitions and texts—even though she herself has never explicitly thematised the issue—updated art history from a contemporary perspective, making her methods very avant-garde for the museum environment in which she moved on a daily basis. However, this thesis is confirmed by Filipowicz's memoirs, as we learn from them that Blum, during the openings, liked to listen to what contemporary artists and the public were saying about the exhibition and the paintings.

The author of the most interesting texts on Blum is undoubtedly a Polish art historian from Cracow, Maria Hussakowska,<sup>9</sup> who considers her a thoroughly modernist art historian. I fully agree with this thesis, even though I would sometimes like to see in Blum a subversive rebel who challenges the patriarchal canon of art history and ocularcentrism. As Hussakowska convincingly argues, women artists were individuals for Blum, whom she located in a male-dominated world and whose full dedication to art she emphasised. In her history of art, the individual—the genius, the artist, who can also be a woman—is given a prominent place.<sup>10</sup> Blum is thus a child of her time, influenced by such concepts as genius, individual, influence, Paris as the centre and all other countries as peripheries, style, seclusion of genius, questions of form, chronology, novelty, originality, teleological development in the direction of pure abstraction, and so on. If I were to answer the following question by K. Lee Chichester and Brigitte Sölch 'What theories, methods and criticisms did the first women art historians develop, and what views and interpretations did they bring to art?', which was recently posed as part of the project *Women Art Historians 1910—1980. Theories, Methods, Criticisms*, I would have to determine that Blum knew many methods, but she did not develop any of her

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<sup>7</sup> Kornel Filipowicz, *Helena Blumówna. Wspomnienie Kornela Filipowicza*.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press 2004, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Hussakowska, 'Helena Blum and Her modern art history – written and exhibited', (106-123); Maria Hussakowska, 'Dwie wystawy' in Maria Hussakowska and Ewa M. Tatar, *Display. Strategie wystawiania*, Kraków: Universitas 2012, (133-154).

<sup>10</sup> Maria Hussakowska, 'Helena Blum and Her modern art history – written and exhibited', 123.



own. Her fascination with Surrealism is also not surprising given the importance of this trend in Poland in the post-war era, and could be even more progressive in her curatorial practice. Hussakowska also raises important questions in the context of her research, which should find answers over time: 'Most of the texts discuss her favourite artists, great personalities. To what extent her own taste – if we manage to define it – resulted from her intellectual background, or was determined by political conditions? Does contemporary perspective on writing on women-authors force us to ask about gender and cultural background?'<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 5: Helena Blum, Maria Wójtowicz, Alojzy Siwecki, Tadeusz Łakomski in the interior, photographic paper, 13.2x17.8 cm, inv. no. MNK XX-f-44309. Cracow: National Museum. The Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Cracow.

Fig. 6: Helena Blum shaking hands with Stanisław Wójtowicz during the vernissage, photographic paper, 12.3x17.5 cm, inv. no. MNK XX-f-44316. Cracow: National Museum. Photo: Anna Olchawska. The Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Cracow.

I would argue that she nevertheless unfolded a style of her own. 'She was interested not only in art, but also in people from the art scene'<sup>12</sup>—emphasises the Polish art historian Mieczysław Porębski (1921—2012). In the archives of the National Museum in Cracow, there are numerous photographs in which Blum can be seen greeting the art people or fervently discussing with them during the various exhibition openings (figs. 5-6). She also liked to visit artists' studios. 'She spoke to them sober and after drinking vodka with them'<sup>13</sup>—Filipowicz wrote in his memoirs about Blum. She was a personality of imposing stature and astonishing vitality. When she greeted the painter Tadeusz Brzozowski (1918—1987), who was not tall compared to her, she is said to have lifted him up so that his legs hung in the air—her co-workers from the National Museum remember. When she had a concept for a new exhibition in mind, she would burst energetically into the room of her colleagues, shouting, 'I have an idea!'—and she began to work systematically.

Since I cannot go into the entire estate of Blum and all the anecdotes about her in my short text, I will focus only on the exhibitions and publications that Blum dedicated not only to male artists but to female artists. I will not calculate exactly how high the percentage of women is in the publications and exhibitions Blum wrote and curated, because it would be very low. My aim would thus be to show

<sup>11</sup> Maria Hussakowska, 'Helena Blum and Her modern art history – written and exhibited', 109.

<sup>12</sup> Mieczysław Porębski, 'Blum 1904-1984', *Folia Historiae Artium*, XXI, 1985, 161.

<sup>13</sup> Kornel Filipowicz, *Helena Blumówna. Wspomnienie Kornela Filipowicza*.

her as an art historian, art critic and curator among women artists, although—I fear—my thesis is that Blum only directed her attention to those aspects of art making that fitted a phallogocentric, perspective shaped by the Viennese school of art history. I suppose she would have considered herself an art historian rather than a woman art historian.

Blum analysed the art work of Olga Boznańska (1865—1940), one of the most famous Polish painters of Post-Impressionism and Symbolism. Blum met Boznańska in Paris in the 1930s. She also worked with women artists who co-founded the 'Paris Committee'<sup>14</sup> in Cracow in 1924 (like Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa) and belonged to the second Kraków group (like Maria Jarema; Jadwiga Maziarska, 1913—2003; Erna Rosenstein, 1913—2004 and Janina Kraupe-Świdorska, 1921—2016). Blum dedicated some of the numerous art-critical texts to women artists, most frequently to graphic artists (including Bogna Krasnodębska-Gardowska 1900—1986) and painters (including Hanna Krzetuska-Geppert, 1903—1999; Danuta Leszczyńska-Kluza, b. 1926 or Maria Markowska 1923—1994), who achieved fame for a short time at the time but are no longer famous today. As curator of the Gallery of Polish Art in the XIX and XX centuries, she bought many works by the above-mentioned women artists. Rudzka-Cybisowa also acted as exhibition designer—together with Witold Taranczewski—at the 1964 Exhibition of Polish Painting and Sculpture in the XIX Century. This was one of the most important permanent exhibitions Blum prepared at the National Museum in Krakow. Anecdotally, however, the collaboration consisted mainly of smoking cigarettes together and strolling through the museum gallery.

A comparison of her texts and curatorial strategies on two very different female artists I have chosen—Olga Boznańska and Maria Jarema—reveals a great deal not only about Blum's modernist-influenced research method, but also reveals her own personal style. My aim is thus to examine the characteristic formulations Blum uses in her texts about women artists. I read her books between the lines, looking for marginal passages that reveal her own femininity and comment on the femininity of women artists, mostly presumably against the author's intention. These particular observations seem incidental, but they sometimes reveal more about Blum than her programme-driven modernist art history. Accordingly, they are fragments in which her own ductus and—as Donna Haraway would call this phenomenon—situated knowledge shine through.

In Blum's eyes—after visiting Boznańska's studio in Paris in 1937—the painter was an incredible mess and a very carefree hostess who completely ignored social conventions. In 1960, Blum curated the first extensive solo exhibition by this painter at the National Museum in Cracow. As part of her curatorial, surrealist-influenced strategy, in which the whole exhibition was seen as a medium, Blum had the Paris studio reconstructed. Hussakowska writes: 'Boznańska's monographic

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<sup>14</sup> Kapists (Polish: Kapiści, from KP, the Polish acronym for the Paris Committee), also known as the Colourists, were a group of Polish painters of the 1930s who were under strong influence of the French Post-Impressionists. They dominated the Polish artistic landscape of the epoch.

exhibition has a special feature and obviously points to more than the artistic value of the paintings. Blum, as curator, explores the medium of the exhibition and believes in its transformative power'.<sup>15</sup> There was even room in the studio for the artist's favourite dog. A corner with high-end furniture, paintings and feminine fabrics scattered on the armchairs represented well Boznańska's social background and deconstructed the myth about her extreme poverty in Paris. In this case, Blum blurred the line between the private and the public for the first time in order to show the recipients, for didactic reasons, the conditions under which the ingenious images were created<sup>16</sup>.

This private sphere became even more visible in Blum's texts and books about Jarema, with whom the art historian was a close friend for many years. Although Jarema was consistently described by Blum as a painter and sculptor, she is also seen by her as a woman, sometimes weak and tired, but always full of feminine charm.<sup>17</sup> 'In all discussions and conversations, Maria's voice was important and decisive. Of course, she did not impose her opinion, because it was too subtle and complicated for that. She became an authority thanks to her intellectual qualities and personal charm'<sup>18</sup> — wrote Blum. She also mentions a carefree compulsiveness of the artist that came into play with her feminine grace.<sup>19</sup> Twenty years after Jarema's death, Blum tries to apologise to her in a review for seeing too many entanglements and influences with and from other artists earlier in her art-making. In the last book she wrote before her death, which again concerns Jarema's art, she presents the artist as an independent genius who was absolutely original — as if she were trying to free her friend from the patriarchal history of art. Blum must therefore have realised that writing about Jarema's work from the perspective of the category of influence does not serve to promote this female artist. Of course, those who influenced are the great male masters (including Pablo Picasso and Victor Vasarely) in the original narrative, and Jarema draws on their styles to create a rather eclectic art of her own. Having understood his mistake, however, Blum still lacks the tools to write about his friend's works without complexes and inscribes her as a genius in a typically male-centric historiography. Regardless of perspective, however, the important thing for Blum was always the paintings themselves, which she viewed repeatedly and in great detail, as Filipowicz mentions: 'When writing about the paintings of my wife, Maria Jaremińska, looking at her paintings and taking notes, she could suddenly surprise me with a question: "and where is that painting of Marysia, you know, the one on the right at the top was an oblong pink form, on the left at the bottom was a green one and on the right was a black, frayed one, I would like to see that painting again"'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Maria Hussakowska, 'Helena Blum and Her modern art history – written and exhibited', 118.

<sup>16</sup> Maria Hussakowska, 'Helena Blum and Her modern art history – written and exhibited', 114.

<sup>17</sup> Helena Blum, *Maria Jarema*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1965, 35, 45, 88.

<sup>18</sup> Helena Blum, *Maria Jarema*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Helena Blum, *Maria Jarema*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Kornel Filipowicz, *Helena Blumówna. Wspomnienie Kornela Filipowicza*.



Some anecdotes say that Jerzy Banach (1922–2005), the then director of the National Museum in Kraków, who was considered haughty, smug and aloof, invited Blum to his office on her birthday in 1974 and handed her her notice. The art historian then came to the painting department and cried... According to Hussakowska, the conflict with Banach was, in the opinion of many of his colleagues, mainly due to jealousy. The museum director hardly tolerated Blum's popularity and her excellent connections in the Cracow art field. The research methods of Banach and Blum were also fundamentally different, as Banach was mainly concerned with iconography. However, unlike Blum, director Banach did not make history, although he did not have to navigate the gender gap. Her armchair, on which she took naps while working at the National Museum, is said to have continued to snore after her retirement.

In retirement, Blum continued to write monographs about artists. At that time she used to say, 'I don't like to talk to my peers because they only talk about illness, so I prefer to talk to younger people'. At that time she was formulating another monograph on Jarema because she felt that her previous book on the artist had underestimated the importance of her war paintings. She did not manage to finish that book. Filipowicz remembers the notes he found scattered on Blum's desk after her death.

In the text published after Blum's death by one of the most important Polish art historians Mieczysław Porębski,<sup>21</sup> he compared her only to men. Porębski, writing from a patriarchal position, considers this a compliment. There were not so many women art historians in Poland at the time who were as visible and successful as Blum—she operated in a real gender gap in the Polish art (history) world of the time. The entire estate of Blum is still waiting for a thorough investigation so that this great Polish art historian can take her rightful place in history.

Finally, I must also express my methodological doubts, because I have an impression that my contribution about Blum is probably important, but unfortunately simply boring. ... If I try to introduce her in more detail to prove that she was a great art historian, then everything remains too general. But if I had otherwise analysed more deeply only a selected exhibition curated by her, then we would have lost the important, general background. The question of the way in which we should depatriarchalise art history and position the great women art historians thus remains open for me. It is particularly open in relation to the history of art in Poland and other post-communist countries, where the position of women and feminist discourse differed from the situation in the so-called West. According to Charlotte Bunch, 'You can 't just add women and stir'.<sup>22</sup> I would also like to paraphrase Lucy Lippard's 1973 question 'Why Separate Women's Art?'<sup>23</sup> today as 'Why Separate Women's Art History?'. Paradoxically, I'm not at all sure Blum would be willing to drink vodka with me if she knew I persisted in calling her an art

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<sup>21</sup> Mieczysław Porębski, 'Blum 1904-1984'.

<sup>22</sup> Charlotte Bunch, *Passionate Politics: Essays 1968-86. Feminist Theory in Action*, New York: St. Martin's Press 1987, 140.

<sup>23</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Why Separate Women's Art?', *Art and Artists*, 8-7, Oktober 1973, 8.

historian rather than a female art historian. From her portrait of Rudzka-Cybisowa, she looks at us very intensely, as if she felt relatively comfortable in the gender gap. My last comment, however, are merely provocations arising from the methodological perplexity and remarks of the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969), who, when he said of someone that he was a great writer, always meant it quite ironically and blasphemously...

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