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## SLAVONIC ANTIQUITIES WITH S AND SH/AN UNIVERSAL UNIT OF SACRUM [1] AS AN APPEAL TO COMMONSENSE THROUGH CULTURES

*The paper analyses the spiritual and aesthetic messages of the artist Marek Sobczyk whose exposition, containing 15 metal paintings painted over aluminum iron (because it produces sounds and reflects light) with the enigmatic title Slavonic antiquities with S and Sh, represents a powerful stimulus for interdisciplinary quests aiming at active resistance against the global, ideological, and moral crisis of modernity and against discrimination of cultures. The exposition is a unique aesthetic attempt at their overcoming.*

**Keywords:** Slavonic antiquities, art, aesthetics, culture, religion, history, science, symbolism, anthropology.

This introductory draft could turn into a large-scale scientific project resulting in a detailed monograph. The exposition has translated into a unique interactive platform for the artist's efforts, where paintings act not only as references to historical resources, archeological findings and cultural facts, but also as stages where contemporary drama is evolving, and where the spectator is involved in vivid discussions. The dialogue is both indirect, through the aesthetic eloquence of the paintings and through the text as a plastic tool and an integral part in most of them, and direct – through the long titles of most of the paintings and through the verbal evocations of the artist - commentaries (statements) to each of the works. Unfortunately, the required number of pages does not allow for an analysis of the symbolism of the paintings, but I will rather pinpoint the most important aspects in some of them. The thorough specialized analysis could be the subject of another research.

This representational cycle is an appeal to rethinking of and counteracting to the global threat of mind manipulation, of authoritarian speculations with terms and categories, of destructive imperatives, which would inevitably influence their producer. The rich array of associations that Sobczyk's paintings give rise to outline some of the basic markers of global crises:

1. Escalating religious intolerance with the following manifestations:

A/ a massive ideological propaganda against the inconvenient religion that is described by means of extrinsic "sins", human hatred, expansive and hegemonic

aspirations (to keep individuals in fear for their existence);

B/ deliberate attachment of negative spiritual and philosophical nature to the targeted-culture<sup>1</sup> with the aim to bring to the foreground its quasi-destructive strategy that would certainly lead to fatal consequences to the entire humankind;

C/ total discredit of the targeted-religion and denial of its right to existence. However, ascribing a demoralizing strategy in the field of the targeted-religion also breeds demoralization (amoral activities) in the field of the targeting culture;

D/ purposeful distraction of the masses' attention from the significant social and economic troubles and from the real cause for their existence; shifting the centre of importance;

E/ attendance to specific political interests which mask the actual reason for the conflict;

F/ relationship of the targeted-religion with a particular ethnos, i.e. "staining" that ethnos with the religious stigma. This neutralizes any possibility for interethnic tolerance and understanding, it causes imbalance and serious disproportions not only in multiethnic, but also in comparatively homogenous societies;

G/ disguising the weaknesses of the "ideal"-religion<sup>2</sup> through permanent attacks against the targeted-religion;

H/ speculations with virtues of the targeted-religion, so that they could be corrupted (described with a negative valency). In support of its own rightness, it gives inappropriate examples, inadequate even, analyzed only superficially, partially, and unfairly,

so that it could impose a certain position. Therefore, the personal amoral behavior is being represented as a just attack against "amorality";

I/ speculation, i.e. desemantization and provisional pre-desemantization of terms such as *freedom, democracy, liberalism*, which should justify somebody's unauthorized actions and cover up religious intolerance (religious discrimination). Mockery of religious relics is represented as freedom of speech and press, as a democratic right of every individual, and the protests against it are characterized as extremist acts against that right.

J/ misleading the world that the "ideal"-religion is the most valuable and the most endangered at that. In its act of a potential "victim", it justifies its urgent "counterattack" against the targeted-religion and camouflages its own intentions for expansion.

2. Stagnation of culture and civilization due to religion. It is caused by pretended self-isolation and resistance of own culture towards foreign culture.

3. Practical impossibility for whatever form of cultural dialogue due to religious antagonism.

If modernity stands for understanding, integration through culture and civilization, a psychological tact, ethics, empathy, democracy, tolerance, freedom of thought and art, then it has obviously been destroyed because of the lack of acceptance and repression towards otherness. One of the most efficient ways to counteract is *art*. The major impulse for that exhibition is *conflict*, i.e. the impossibility for reconciliation that with the help of aesthetics Sobczyk turns

**1** My provisional term for the religion under attack.

**2** My provisional term for the religion who performs the attack.

into miraculous possibility. What means of fight does the artist offer through his paintings:

- unification of people far and beyond on the grounds of common origin, common vision, or because of common cultural ties in particular periods of time.

- active creative participation (cooperation) on the part of the perceiver. The works of the artist represent cultural and aesthetic expeditions down the paths of history, archeology, mythology, religion, symbolism, semiotics, and linguistics, and the viewer is invited to take part, to further develop the artist's invention, to "complete" the painting.

- bringing together various areas of human knowledge in support of the perspective thesis for consolidation and prosperity of humankind.

- syncretism of elements of different order which represent a synesthetic complex as an appeal to intercultural approximation and as a model for ethnic integrity: audiovisual (sound, colour, form), linguistic (verbal, graphic, phonetic), numerological, religiously symbolic, mythological and utilitarian.

- a symbiosis between science, arts and hermeneutics in the perspective of the language as a total creation, as a linguistic universe that keeps all proof for the lack of conflict predisposition.

- the creative and reciprocal power of antinomy which individualizes, specifies, enriches, and accommodates in the perspective of coexistence of opposites.

- a new invention through a new semiotic principle – to represent the image with another name, and not its own, for the needs of visual arts. In the painting *A duck on the table*, the duck is described as an ostrich, i.e. it is both birds at the same time. The analogy to an imaginary prospective integration of ethnicities is obvious. The word *ostrich* (*struś*) in Polish starts with *s* and contains the other letter *ś*. As the artist himself stated, this method confirms and doesn't mislead. The image is confirmed – how the bird actually looked like, the word is also confirmed – what *ostrich* actually means. The paradoxical symbiosis between word and visual image is the result of polyfunctionality of the word: it is simultaneously an

integral "character" of the painting, a stylistic device, a nominative, a semiotic index, and a commutation signal. And the atypical image is as new as is the ancient invention of prehistoric times rediscovered through aesthetic "excavations". The deictic gesture of calling an object with the chosen name (not its own), turns into a symbolic gesture of the beneficial coexistence of opposites; of a multinational unity with total perseverance of ethnocultural characteristics (painting 1).

The partiality towards the similar *s* and *ś*, characteristic for the Slavs (the word *славянство* (*Slav*) starts with *s*, the linguistic unit *слово* (*the word*) – too, and the word *art* in Polish (*sztuka*) starts with *sz*. In Old Bulgarian there were hard and soft consonants, close to present day Polish *sz*, *ś*, *cz*, *ć*, and this could be explained by the search of archetype as a source of cultures and as a symbol of unification. The Slavonic antiquities are becoming the key to understanding all over the globe. Even the so called "barbarianism", as a mark for the smaller peoples that emerged later on the historic scene, is more of a symbol of eternal youth and of a cyclic rebirth rather than of the lack of civilized attitude. It is a repository for the ancient memory of the prehistory of man and for the demiurgic power of the Word.

- recollection and reconstruction of the initial meaning of the word *civilization* according to the interpretation of Adam Mickiewicz. Civilization is not just a technological advancement, but a merited citizenship, and it signifies loyalty and self-sacrifice not only for the country, but also for all the people around the world: "*And the world is like a Country, and its people like all the people. World depends on the people who believe and who are filled with love!*" (Mickiewicz 1934: 226).

- symbolic representation of the unification through the key letters (*S*) and (*Ś*), which consolidate the entire Slavonic world and also include Persian art (and it starts with *SZ* in Polish – *Sztuka Perska*). That synchronization of allegedly incompatible cultures, evident from the allegorical title, is not an ironic whim of the artist, but his endorsement strategy.

- the relationship between religion and the arts: they function through signs and symbols, they use a metaphorical language, they situate themselves out of time, feeding and inspiring each other. Religion inspires art, gives it new ideas and objectives, it fills art with meaning. In the world of religious sentiment, aesthetic experiences are of utmost importance, therefore, every religion strives to become one with



Painting 1



art. Sometimes even the religious act is a direct outcome of the aesthetic experiences, and some people have taken up faith due to purely aesthetic reasons. Sacral art is treated as an ancillary tool for the transfer of religious truths and it performs an instructive and apologetic function.

– similarity of world myths whose structures and main semantic reference points almost overlap, and the universal need of mythologies, as far as the strive for knowledge, organization and adaptation of the world are universal.

– the points of intersection and the universal spiritual tenets of Christianity and Islam.

– the intimacy of Muslim symbolism with Christian symbolic array and the similarity in the spiritual messages of the two religions (the *painting Holy Shia Family (Święta Rodzina Szyicka)* with the meaningful and harmonic alternation of *S* and *Sh*). (painting 2).

– the symbolism of numbers in both religions that overlaps, completes and resonates.

– the generative and transformative role of languages in a historical perspective (Arabic, Greek, Old Church Slavonic).

– the overlapping and complimentary symbolism of colours in both religions (Christianity and Islam). The green in Sobczyk's art is accepted as a symbol of understanding and oneness of nations.

– the symbolism of letters as the link and the phonetic homophony of phonemic orders (paintings *SLA VS 2005 (Slov vian)*, *Whistling (Świßt Świßt)*). The word "Sla vs" in the title of the painting is divided by an inner caesura and is not hinting on the disunity of Slavs (graphically marked conflict), but is implying (by means of the two letter blocks) the feeling of monumentality, balance and stability, and the enormous potential of Slavs that need to become a guarantee for universal unity. The first half of the Polish word „Slov” is associated with „słowo” (word, language) that would guarantee intimacy, since language is the most effective means of communication. In Bulgarian “Слав” (Slav) is associated with “glory”

(old Slavonic glory), and the Polish word „vian” sends the imagination to „wiano” (dowry) and „wianek” (wreath). The dowry as a form of cultural heritage is going to unite the Slavonic union (and through it, the entire world), which will wear the wreath of glory (painting 3, painting 4).

– the word in the paintings.  
– the continuity of the alphabet (Ugarit as an universal unit of culture<sup>1</sup>)  
– semantic universals, including aesthetic ones.

The short overview of spiritual and aesthetic messages of the artist leads to the following conclusions:



Painting 2



Painting 4



Painting 3

1. The ethno-specificity of different cultures is not a foundation for confrontations and collisions, but a condition for successful integration and mutual enrichment.

2. The expected dialogue between East and West should look as a permanent and natural process, just as it happens in Sobczyk's paintings, and not as an effort to abolish competition on the grounds of ruling ideology.

3. The unique symbiosis between matter, image and word in the artist's paintings, and the correlation between the sciences, addressed as a tool to defeat conflict on the one hand, and the art as a suggestive visual image on the other, represent the specific example for that saving possibility.

4. In the spirit of Polish romantic poet-prophet Mickiewicz, Sobczyk takes his idea, brings us back to prehistoric times in order to find through archaic anthropology the Slavonic archetype, to bring it back to live, to reconstruct it, and present it to the world, so that it could

become a part of the universal cultural paradigm.

5. The words in the artist's paintings are of higher sign value – they are bisemiotic constructs with inner co-semioticity. Their designate is the respective term that they represent, but they also point to the ideological and aesthetic concept of the artist.

6. The symbolic interference in Sobczyk's paintings illustrates the convergent impulses of Slavonic and non-Slavonic cultures, united by the aesthetic union of the artist.

7. As the letters of the alphabet coexist, so does the artist seem to tell us ethnicities and cultures should coexist. Man is an anthropological invariant, a taxonomic entity and how different individuals look with respect to form and colour is irrelevant. Geographic areas of the regional mythologies – part of the psychological prevention of ethnicities – they ought not to be turned into mine fields or into third or fourth worlds.

8. Art as a goodwill ambassador and as a mediator of universal understanding between cultures is a guarantee for achieving it.

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