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The Seventh Life of Polish Folk Art and Craft

The article explores the ways folk art in Poland has been socially constructed and used, from the late 19th-/early 20th-century interest among architects, designers, ethnographers and art historians, the People's Republic of Poland's "Cepelia", to the contemporary folk art-inspired gadgets and design. The article maps out some of the circumstances and dynamics of the process of social construction of folk art in Poland, that relate to such central elements of modernity as primitivism and national ideology. It also scrutinizes folk art and craft-inspired tendencies in Polish design of the early 21st c. and the role of ethnographic museums in its promotion.

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The Polish pavilion at the Shanghai Expo 2010 used the motif of a folk paper-cut in its architectonic design; the Young Creative Poland exhibition at the 2009 London Design Festival focused on works inspired by "natural resources" of Polish design, meaning, again, motifs used in Polish folk arts and crafts; and finally in 2009/2010, a "Festiwal Etnodizajnu" was celebrated in Cracow (Kraków) under the auspices of the local Ethnographic Museum. What is conspicuous – at least to the ethnographer – in the media coverage of these events is, on the one hand, the identity message unanimously ascribed to the use of folk inspirations in art and design, and on the other, the similarly unanimous avoidance of Polish vocabulary that would suggest any connection with "folk" (*lud*, adj.: *ludowy*), a lack filled by the omnipresence of the English-sounding term "etnodizajn", which cannot actually be found in any official Polish dictionary. Clearly, "etnodizajn" comes from merging the English (or Greek, to be more precise) terms of "ethno-" and "design" with Polish spelling to make a wholly new word. The term "ethnic design", which does exist in English, has different connotations and meanings, as it typically denotes non-Western household objects, encompassing also folk arts and crafts of European origin, and is often understood as synonymous with "exotic". Now, using a global-sounding term with a local spelling may obviously be interpreted as a conscious effort to appeal to a public sophisticated enough to play the global-local identity game. However, the question that arises to the ethnographer addresses, rather, the reluctance to use the traditional term "folk" (as *ludowy*), while evidently using the vernacular tradition as a "natural resource" in the construction of the whole phenomenon. No doubt, the

name “etnodizajn” makes the whole thing sound more trendy, but it also has another consequence: the folk tradition engaged in its creation is rendered more distant and exotic, apparently more acceptable to the 21st-century Polish public.

“Etnodizajn” is definitely not the first case where Polish designers have used the “natural resources” of folk traditions and arts and crafts. Nor is it the first time that ethnographers’ work has lent them a hand in doing so. Following the turbulent history of social practices in which “folk art” has been engaged in Poland can be illuminating in this regard, as the meaning of *lud* and *ludowy* – as is the case with any meaning – results from the contexts in which the term has been used and the consequences these uses have had. The fact that today “folk art” (*sztuka ludowa*) has to be exoticized in order to be accepted by the contemporary public in Poland draws attention to the processes of different contextualizations and recontextualizations of the objects that contemporary designers have used as their inspiration: the objects and, to a much lesser extent, practices grouped under the name of “folk art and craft” – grouped, of course, not by those who physically made them, but by those who coined the term, “[s]ince it was not the folk that called their art ‘folk art’, but the town people who were ‘discovering’ its meaning” (Jackowski 2002:2).¹

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to trace the social construction of Polish folk art and craft in a chronological order, emphasizing the vivid connections between different sectors of the educated classes (academics, collectors and amateurs, artists, museum workers and cultural activists), who stood behind the making of “folk art”, its “discovery”, “promotion” and high evaluation. I propose that “folk art” is, in fact, less a creation of “the folk” (in this case the peasants) than of the elites, including the folklorists and ethnographers, as the sense-giving process has been dominated by them. Studying “folk art” (be it for “its own sake”, or in search of “traditional values”, or for any other reason) without studying the way it has been created within the elite discourse seems to be searching only for what the student expects to find. Considering it in relation to different elite practices of sense-giving (whether “scientific research” or “artistic creation”) may be more illuminating. The different “lives” of folk arts and crafts, as I here metaphorically call the developments within those sense-giving practices, have greatly varied, beginning with the 19th-century interest in folk crafts as an expression of the folk way of life, through the creative appropriation by the arts and crafts movement, the production of a “national style,” to the omnipresent People’s Republic of Poland’s “Cepelia” products, and finally the early 21st-century “etnodizajn”. I choose the metaphor of “lives” rather than “embodiments,” in order to emphasize the lack of any common essence behind them: “folk art” is not understood here as an idea, or essence that appears through different phenomena; that would amount to a nominalist approach. Those different lives, therefore, are not necessarily sequential, although the chronological order of events has been maintained for the sake of the narrative. What will be scrutinized is, on the one hand, the establishment of “folk art and craft” as a set of value-imbued formal and technical characteristics appreciated mainly by elite artists, art critics, and academics, and, on the other, the accompanying language practices related mainly to the use of the Polish word *lud* (which means “folk”, but also “people”)

¹ If not stated otherwise, the translations from Polish are by the author.

and its derived adjectives, which play an important part in the valorization of objects, practices, and broader cultural forms. Obviously, the social construction of folk art in Poland, and other East-Central European countries is a multi-layered and complex subject, and this article does not attempt to cover the whole area. Rather, my intention is to map out some of the circumstances and dynamics of that process that relate to such central elements of modernity as primitivism and national ideology.

The First Four Lives: From “Discovery” to National Style

Roman Reinfuss, one of the leading Polish ethnographers of the 20th century, commented once that until the end of the 19th century art produced in rural areas had been considered unworthy of the name of art and devoid of original aesthetic values (Reinfuss 1950). The question of “original values” aside, this holds true for figurative art, which began to gain appreciation only after the authority of academic taste and aesthetics had been called into question and artists started searching for formal inspiration in the “primitive,” the “unspoiled” by academic canons, the exotic. However, folk crafts and decorative art attracted attention of educated classes earlier: folk pottery had been displayed at the Domestic Agricultural-Industrial Exhibition in Lwów as early as 1877 (Reinfuss 1955). In the same vein of supporting local “folk industry” the Woodcarvers School opened in 1876 in Zakopane Kenarowa 1978), the largest settlement in Skalne Podhale region and soon-to-be hub of Polish culture, literature, and art. It is of no surprise, then, that the first published works on folk art and craft (which appeared only in the last decade of the 19th century) were dedicated to the folk of Podhale. The first authors were mostly amateurs, artists, and art historians captivated by the aesthetic appeal of the objects they were writing about – to quote some examples, Matlakowski (1892, 1901) was a physician; Warchałowski (1902) – an active member of Polish arts and crafts movement; Sokołowski (1906) – a prominent art historian. Their choice of objects and interests was determined by their background: the late 19th- and early 20th century elite tastes and educated opinions on what the folk and folk art were. As the folk art promoter and student Aleksander Jackowski rightly observed, “the concept of ‘folk art’ was created from the outside, according to what was considered to be the product of such an art, and according to the criteria of evaluation elaborated within the art culture of educated classes at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century; therefore, what was underscored were the decorative and stylistic qualities. Once created and formulated, the term began to function as an equivalent for reality to such extent as to reduce the observation field itself. They searched only for what they were expecting to find” (Jackowski 1975:136).

The cultural baggage of the educated Pole at the turn of the century comprised two main prejudices about “the folk” itself: one was the exoticism of “the folk”, consisting of savage and rough, but noble and picturesque peasants (for a discussion of the exoticization of peasants in early Polish ethnographic accounts see Libera 1995 and Węglarz 1994), the other – the Herderian idea of rural folk as the roots of nations. Exoticization is already present at the beginning of several of the lives of Polish folk art; and so is the notion of identity. Exoticizing strategies, however, seem to have been applied rather unconsciously and as a result of establishing “folk” as an object of scientific observation,

and as a consequence of class prejudices deeply engrained in the feudal relations that characterized the Polish countryside far into the 19th century (serfdom in the Polish territories under Russian rule was abolished as late as 1864, and under Austrian and Prussian rule in 1848 and 1823, respectively). The grounding of national identity in “the folk,” on the other hand, used to be stated openly, and the use of folk art motifs from the Zakopane region in the creation of the so-called “national style” became the subject of a vivid debate (related in Tondos 2004).

Interestingly, the “Zakopane style” created by the artist Stanisław Witkiewicz and later applied by several architects and designers in their works for the affluent urban public, has itself influenced the artistic culture of the whole Podhale region (Frąckiewicz 2009): created by the elites romanticizing “the folk” (“the highlanders’ lifestyle reflected in the highlander arts and craft” being a source of national form), it came back to foster the local peasants’ identity and pride; it was accepted and further developed. At the same time, the Polish ethnographic material for a monumental publication on *Peasant Art in Austria and Hungary* (London 1912, ed. C. Holme) “was supplied by three stalwarts of the Zakopane Style and the Cracow School: Stanisław Barabasz, then Director of the Zakopane School of Wood Industry; M. Nikorowicz, Director of Tatra Museum; and Seweryn Udziela of the TPSS [Polish Applied Art Society]” (Crowley 1992:134). The third of the “stalwarts of Zakopane style” mentioned above, Seweryn Udziela, was one of the founders of the Cracow Ethnographic Museum, its director until his death in 1937, and is its eponym now.

Simultaneously, a Polish version of Arts and Crafts movement had been gaining momentum. In 1901 in Cracow Polish Applied Art Society (*Towarzystwo Polska Sztuka Stosowana*, TPSS) was established by leading artists and art world personalities of the time. The association propagated the use of traditional materials, as well as folk arts and crafts aesthetics for designing and producing material objects for use by the elite. As the British design historian David Crowley rightly observed, “the fusion of Arts and Crafts ideals with [Polish] intelligentsia’s affair with the peasantry, starting from the 1890s, is a prime example of the ‘nationalization’ of pan-European intellectual currents within Polish culture” (ibid.). However, the TPSS artists kept clear the division between designing, done by themselves, and executing their projects, done by local craftsmen. In 1913, the younger generation of Cracow artists, disappointed with this approach, founded another association in the arts and crafts spirit, called The Cracow Workshops. Following the ideology of the Arts and Crafts movement, the association stressed the importance of technique and craft: “in our opinion, without this base the talent and individuality became an unimportant whim devoid of any potential of development”, wrote one of the founding fathers of the association (Frąckiewicz 2009:6). Inspiration in folk craft and architecture was in this case directly related to Arts and Crafts ideology of applying traditional ways of production in order to abolish the division of labor that Ruskin in *Unto This Last* described as the main source of social conflicts in modern society. According to David Crowley, some of the Cracow Workshops’ designs “reflected a range of Arts and Crafts enthusiasms and prejudices (...): from the belief in the essentially humble aspirations of artisan working classes to a notion of the unity of art and life” (Crowley 1992:48).

After World War I the cultural policy of newly independent Polish state encouraged, as expression of national spirit, both the production of art and design inspired in the vernacular (still called Cracow School, although many Cracow and Zakopane artists had now moved to Warsaw to take up different official posts in the field of arts and culture), and the studies and promotion of folk art itself. The highly successful Polish pavilion at the Paris Exhibition of Decorative Arts in 1925 was an accomplished example of this inter-war national style of vernacular inspiration. The commissioner of the pavilion, Jerzy Warchałowski was one of the founders of the Cracow Workshops; the main building was designed by another founding father of the Workshops, Jerzy Czajkowski; it was decorated with paintings by Zofia Stryjeńska, who was among the most acclaimed representatives of this current in art (cf. Zofia Stryjeńska 2008), and furnished with objects commissioned from Cracow Workshops (Crowley 1992:66-72).

At the same time, with the new university-trained generation of students and researchers of folk art, the first theoretical questions appeared, and among them the question of “artist” versus “audience origin” as a criterion whereby the “folk” status of art items was to be considered. One of the best established ethnographers of the time, Eugeniusz Frankowski (1932), advocated labeling as “folk art” only those objects that had actually been created directly by peasants themselves, such as dress and embroidery, paper-cuts, etc. What was left outside of its scope were the paintings or woodcut prints, which required at least minimal training, some tools and room, and so were thought to be made *for* peasants rather than *by* them. The proponents of the “audience origin” criterion – both ethnographers and art historians – pointed to the fact that the authors of the so-called folk paintings or woodcuts could also be of peasant origin, and their style was an expression of “folk aesthetics”, in tune with the “folk spirit”, and arising from the experiences of “folk life” (Piwocki 1934; Seweryn 1937). One of the reasons why the second approach proved to be more widely accepted can possibly be the number of art historians engaged in studying folk art, for whom it was the question of form and style rather than social origin of the artist that was of utmost importance in the attribution of a particular work. The formal analysis of folk art focused on figurative works and prompted a discussion about “folk style” as a valid theoretical term in art research – a discussion that continued after WWII.

The involvement of folk art studies with the question of national identity surfaced also in a much more direct way in the form of efforts to determine the ethnic identity of some prominent folk artists working in ethnically mixed regions, especially in Pokucie. The concept of an “ethnic nation” (as opposed to that of a “political nation”) had been receiving more and more visible political recognition in the years preceding WWII. One of its expressions in the field of academic ethnography seems to have been the need to confirm the Polish (as opposed to Ukrainian) ethnic identity of artists like Aleksander Bachmiński, or Bachmatnik, an outstanding maker of lavishly decorated pottery (the so-called “Huculian” pottery)² and tiles (cf. Seweryn 1925, 1926).

² Huculia, the highland region of East Carpathians (Gorgan and Czarnohora ranges) played a somewhat similar role for Lwów – and to a lesser extent Warsaw – urbanities as the Tatra and Podhale region played for Cracow and Warsaw intelligentsia: it was a highly mythologized primordial paradise inhabited by picturesque noble savages, the Highlanders. Its vernacular crafts appeared in domestic exhibitions of the 1870s and 1880s alongside the products from the Cracow region; its picturesque highlander types were

At the same time the educated classes' interest in vernacular art and craft production resulted in the formation of a new sector in the art market: art and craft objects of rural origin destined for the urban audience. Already before WWI there were initiatives that aimed to encourage this audience to buy products of rural crafts: the Domestic Industrial and Agricultural Exhibitions, or activities of the Society for the Promotion of Folk Industry (*Towarzystwo Popierania Przemysłu Ludowego*, TPPL) was one such organization founded in 1907 in the Kingdom of Poland.³ It sought to establish craft schools for peasantry and helped commercializing the products of village craftspeople. In the independent Poland, initiatives such as Folk Bazaars organized by the TPPL continued, especially as the national style became the overtly state-propagated choice in design. Even the modernist designers, who fiercely opposed the Cracow School and the national style in the 1920s, accommodated some "regionalist" touches in their design a decade later, using folk-produced objects within the modernist interiors (cf. interior designs by Barbara Brukalska quoted by Crowley 1992:112, 125-6).

In 1926, the same year the Cracow Workshops went bankrupt (Crowley 1992:75), a group of professors (many of whom had been involved in the Cracow School) and students of the Warsaw Fine Art Academy formed a co-operative called "Ład" ("harmonious order" would be the closest translation) to design furniture, ceramics, and textiles. "Ład" produced objects and designs of vernacular inspiration but its younger members were just as eager to co-operate with craftspeople and artists of peasant origin. In 1934 Eleonora Plutyńska, one of the student co-founders of "Ład" arrived in the area of Janów Podlaski in Eastern Poland with the goal of studying the production of decorative textiles made using a technique unknown to her; she had previously seen some of them at a local museum in Grodno. She had graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and was working for the Society for the Promotion of Folk Industry, and it was professor Cezaria Jędrzejewiczowa who held the chair in ethnography at Batory University in Vilnius that advised her to take the research trip (see Błachowski 1990). In Janów and the surrounding villages Plutyńska found several weavers working on double-warp looms and producing locally popular decorative textiles with flower designs, different from the ones she had seen in the museum. Fascinated by the old technique and averse to new, popular motifs, Plutyńska decided to delve "in the living powers of the folk", encouraging the weavers to use traditionally spun and dyed yarn she had provided, and design different, "folk" motifs. The ethnographer Aleksander Błachowski provides a detailed account of her work with the local weavers: as an inspiration for the weaver she started collaborating very closely with, she had chosen

painted by the early 20th century painters along with Podhale highlanders and peasants of the Cracow area. More importantly for the Huculia myth in Polish mythology, the region, located far to the South-East of national territory after WWI, had its epos written in Polish: a four-volume novel *Na wysokiej połoninie* [*On the High Uplands*] by Stanisław Vincenz (the first volume was published in 1938, the rest already after WWII in London, as Vincenz went into exile). It portrays the region as a kind of Arcadian land where different ethnic and social groups live in harmonious world of people and nature, regardless of potential conflicts and some rows. However, Huculian motifs did not enter the national style repertoire, remaining attractive to the Polish [middle class?] audience by their both social and ethnic exoticism, in spite of the efforts of the Polish adepts of *Heimatkunde* (*krajoznawstwo*) to make the Hucul ethnically Polish (cf. F.A. Ossendowski, *Huculszczyzna*, series: *Cuda Polski*, Poznań 1936).

³ Part of Polish territory under the Russian Tsars.

a reproduction of a Caucasian carpet he had obviously never seen before. “Where are we going to start from?” – she asked the weaver. “From the claws – said Jaroszewicz (the weaver) – ‘cause such wild beasts have big claws”. And this was the way the prototype of textile later called “Wild Beasts” (*Zwierza*) was created” (ibid.:23-24). In 1938 a double cloth created by Jaroszewicz in co-operation with Plutyńska won the golden medal at the International Arts and Crafts Exhibition in Berlin. In spite of Jaroszewicz’s success, and the growing demand for “folk” double clothes from Janów region, only few weavers decided to work for Plutyńska producing “folk designs”; the rest preferred the more secure (and possibly aesthetically more rewarding for them) production of locally popular flower designs, inspired by patterned textiles made with Jacquard looms. After WWII Plutyńska managed to revive the centre of folk double-cloth production; the weavers, however, kept differentiating between “folk” textiles – produced for the town market, and “our” textiles – produced for the local villagers.

What we are confronted with here is a bizarre multiple exoticization. Plutyńska herself showed exotic motifs as an inspiration to a peasant weaver, not only exoticizing his production from the educated audience (who greatly appreciated this exoticization and awarded him the gold medal), but also alienating it from the rural background, where “the folk” (*lud*) started calling “folk” (*ludowe*) the textiles made for the outside world, for “them”, not for “us”. Certainly, there are several reasons why in this case the local village community did not accept back the elite version of its own tradition and art, as had been the case with the Zakopane style. However, as opposed to the Cracow School artists, what Plutyńska searched for in terms of artistic style and expression was “the archaic”, “the primordial”, and “the primitive” in a more general rather than national form; apparently, the “primitive” and “pristine” identity devoid of national content was not an attractive self-image for the local people. To be a holder of “the essence of Polishness” is a quite different thing from being a holder of “the essence of the archaic”, especially if the forms you are supposed to identify with bear no resemblance to anything you have ever seen in your life.

The People’s Republic of Poland

The legacy of both the vernacularly inspired national style and the rapprochement of modernism and regionalism in interior design were to be happily accommodated by the People’s Republic of Poland. However, the new state was going to soup it up with the omnipresent ideology of “the peasant-worker alliance” and situate it within a landscape of a permanent shortage of consumer goods of otherwise low aesthetic (and any other) quality. The same ideology influenced the development of ethnography and studies of folk art, which itself evolved into a highly politicized concept. The promotion of folk art became one of the official priorities of cultural policy, backed by a bureaucratic apparatus of official competitions and state-founded prizes, as well as state commissions and acquisitions (basically via local ethnographic museums and Cepelia (Central Bureau of Folk and Artistic Industry).

There is also an important detail concerning the adjective *ludowy*: in Polish the noun *lud* corresponds both to “the folk” (understood as peasantry), and to “the people.” The term People’s Republic of Poland (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*) contains exactly the

same adjective form as is used in “folk art” (*sztuka ludowa*), and the name of the peasant party *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*. The semantic field of the word is clear to any native speaker of Polish, but these different meanings of the adjective must have created associations and connotations that would rather not occur to an English speaker.⁴

In the late 1940s and the first half of the 1950s, when the Soviet cultural ideology imposed the style of “socialist realism”, compulsory in all officially approved artistic expression, *sztuka ludowa* (meaning at the same time “folk art” and “people’s art”) was considered politically correct and opposed to cosmopolitan modernism and avant-garde. However, since folk motifs had already been a preference for many designers before WWII, they just continued using them (Frąckiewicz 2009:18-19). Cepelia, established in 1949, actually monopolized folk art and craft, as well as handicraft production in general. It controlled all the co-operatives of handicraft and folk art and craft production, it re-created the Ład co-operative; many private workshops were also transformed into Cepelia’s branches. Aleksander Jackowski, writing more as a sympathetic witness than a systematic researcher describes the situation as follows: “Craftspeople were coming to Cepelia unable to pay the back taxes and offering their workshops for takeover. They preferred to see them pass into good hands than to leave them to decay. Many of them afterwards worked in the co-operatives. The authorities strived to eliminate private craft and commerce. The back taxes were freely imposed in order to hinder the work of private enterprises, or even make it impossible” (Jackowski 1999:29).

The operations of Cepelia prolonged the existence of many centers of folk art and craft production, and even revived some of them, like the pottery centre in Iłża or the tradition of glass painting in Podhale, non-existing at least since the 1880s (*ibid.*:12, 19). Among the initiators of this revival were ethnographers such as Tadeusz Seweryn, or Roman Reinfuss. It was the latter who persuaded the women from the village of Zalipie to decorate the exterior of their houses with flower paintings, thus creating one of the most famous phenomena of “folk art” in post-WWII Poland (*ibid.*:12, 79 note 3).

However, the critical assessment of Cepelia is still awaiting systematic research. Aleksander Jackowski observes in a sympathetic, even slightly apologetic and definitely not a critical essay: “What was new in the concept of Cepelia was its role of a patron both responsible for the fate of folk art and artists, and rendering material support to a crowd of professional artists as well as shaping the artistic culture of the Polish society at large. In order to have the means for this purpose, Cepelia developed a network of different co-operatives whose income supported its basic mission, which was important from the perspective of the nation’s artistic culture but quite often turned out to be unprofitable” (*ibid.*:9). “Centralization created a chance of creating a huge organization, consisting of tens of co-operatives that could finance each other. (...) There were outstanding village craftsmen whose craft and skill had been unutilized in their own communities. It was possible and necessary to use their skills, organize them to work, provide material

⁴ *Lud* (“folk” meaning peasantry; “people”) is only one of the words referring to political and social categorizations that have different semantic fields in English and Polish, other being *naród* (“nation” understood only as population; “people”) and *państwo* (“state” both as a power structure and a nation’s territory), to quote only the most obvious in the context of *lud*. One could wonder to what extent these differences, which originated in different historical experiences of the two language communities, inform the categorizations of current political discourses and influence politics on both the national and European level.

support, and open new markets for their products” (ibid.:16). Frąckiewicz’s view of the broad influence of Cepelia on Polish handicraft and design scene is different: “Cepelia imposed production plans on co-operatives and provided them with materials. Usually, the plans were not realistic, or were against the artists’ common sense, while the materials arrived in wrong quality and quantity. Initially, Cepelia inflicted a lot of harm as it served as a tool of control and supervision over potentially dangerous organizations, like the overly independent and self-determining Ład co-operative. (...) Cepelia items became attractive by contrast: a ceramic bowl, a brightly painted wooden bird, a tablecloth made of real wool or a fuzzy bedspread covering the divan bed added color to the gray households of the time. However, all these products had gradually been losing their original flair. Folk artists had not been creating them for themselves but for the town dwellers, according to their taste, or rather to the taste and requirements of Cepelia employees. Because of Cepelia’s monopoly the objects became increasingly uniform and their quality started to decline (for example, the 1950s Cepelia was the reign of the noble linen, while 20 years later it was cotton that had come to prevail)” (Frąckiewicz 2009:19). However, as another author observed, in the conditions of the socialist economy of shortage “the kilims and clay pots achieved the position of our main weaponry in the ritual pursuit of proving superiority of socialism over capitalism (...) In the times of deep socialism (Cepelia) would be a lifesaver to all the fellow countrymen traveling abroad or sending Christmas parcels to the West. The wooden jewelry boxes, kilims, woolen shawls, amber rings, or Łowicz puppets were the only goods, beside vodka and dried smoked sausage, which could serve as decent gifts in the outside world” (Sarzyński 1999).

The approach to folk art that prevailed in Cepelia consisted in identifying the ethnographic value of an artist’s or center’s production and supporting it with the help and supervision of both ethnographers and professional artists; the latter were also engaged in designing furniture and cloths inspired by traditional motifs and techniques (the mode of work characteristic of the Cracow School and Ład) (Jackowski 1999:19). The approach promoted by the Institute of Industrial Design (*Instytut Wzornictwa Przemysłowego*, IWP) was different; its Wanda Telakowska tended to work in a manner similar to that of Eleonora Plutyńska, “aiming at stimulating the folk artist’s invention in contact with a professional designer” (ibid.). The IWP organized joint designing teams where the peasant artists under the supervision of professionally trained designers created patterns for industrial textile production (Frąckiewicz 2009:20). Therefore, the difference in approaches between the two institutions basically consisted in that, as opposed to the IWP, Cepelia separated the field of professional design from traditional folk artists, who were identified by ethnographers and then supported and encouraged to keep producing their art despite the fact that the village audience no longer appreciated the products and the whole output went to town markets. In contrast to the IWP approach, Cepelia’s attitude seemed therefore to confirm (and petrify) the art world hierarchy of professional and outsider (in this case, vernacular) art.

The political potential of the category of “folk art” proved to some extent beneficial to both academic and field research on the subject. “The favorable bias of the authorities was obvious; there was no lack of money: after all, Poland had been named “Ludowa” (cf. above), and it was a binding statement” (Jackowski 1999:14), recalls Jackowski. In

1947, on the initiative of Józef Grabowski, an art historian who had published on folk art before WWII, the National Institute of Folk Art Research (*Państwowy Instytut Badania Sztuki Ludowej*) was established and charged with publishing the journal "*Polska Sztuka Ludowa*" (Polish Folk Art). The Institute's Roman Reinfuss initiated an organized effort of documenting Polish folk art hoping for the outcome in form of "a photographic picture of the state of folk art" (ibid.:). This modern visual metaphor of knowledge points to tacit questions of control and order inscribed within Reinfuss' methodology in a way similar to Cepelia's all-controlling approach.

In a situation of rapid social change occurring in the village areas, inevitably producing changes in the aesthetic sphere, one of the most efficient ways to evaluate a piece created by a village artist or craftsman as "folk" was by referring to its form and style. The problem of folk style in art and its origins had already been discussed in pre-war times, but the debate developed fully in the 1960s and 70s. Within the academic discourse on Polish folk art there had been attempts since the 1930s to describe its style in psychological (Gładysz 1935, 1938; Piwocki 1934), as well as historical and social terms (Piwocki 1953; Grabowski 1976), which gradually led to questioning the continuity of the phenomenon of folk art after mid-1950s. A question that proved particularly difficult to theorize, was that of change: writers focused either on "historical folk art" with virtually no direct continuation (cf. Kunczyńska-Iracka 1988), or on the continuity of form in contemporary folkloristic production, but dismissing the problem of mannerisms, audience change, as well as the question of the political use of folklore as an efficient way of toning down dangerous differences. In the Polish case those were the social differences between the town and the village, which overlapped with the deeply rooted division and tension between "the lords" ("pany") and "the churls" ("chamy").⁵

The advantage of the "historical approach" consisted also in the possibility of studying religious folk art, which in the case of Polish wood and stone carving, as well as woodcut and painting, formed the majority of the whole corpus. Ethnographically inspired art historians (as Stefania Krzysztofowicz, Ewa Śnieżyńska-Stolot) studied the iconography of 19th-century folk paintings, or historic centers of folk art production located in major pilgrimage sites, such as Częstochowa or Gidle (Anna Kunczyńska-Iracka), providing valuable materials for a new generation of ethnographers (Zbigniew Benedyktowicz, Czesław Robotycki, Ludwik Stomma) that in the late 1970s and early 1980s already called themselves "anthropologists", claimed to work on the "anthropology of the Polish village in the 19th century" or "cultures of the folk type", and aimed at updating theoretical approaches to symbolic culture in general, and "folk piety" in particular.

However, the question of style was important not only to art historians and other academics, but also to ethnographers working for Cepelia and museums, as it was they who were usually employed as judges in folk art and craft competitions, and over-

⁵ Folklorization as an extensively used tool of dealing with potentially dangerous differences in the modern state has been discussed by several authors, both in the context of ethnic and national differences [see e.g. McCrone D., Morris A., Kiely R., *Scotland – The Brand: The Making of Scottish Heritage*, Edinburgh 1995], and social distinctions [see, for instance, G.S. Jones, *The "cockney" and the nation, 1780-1988*, in: D. Feldman, G.S. Jones eds. *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations since 1800*, London 1989, pp. 272-324]. "Folklorize and rule" seems to have been a tacit motto of both the British Empire and the Soviet Union, with its folkloristic parades celebrating "the unity of over 100 nations".

saw acquisitions and commissions. In this way, devising a formal definition of “folk style” led on one hand to the ossification of vernacular production, and on the other to dismissing all the artistic expression of village inhabitants that did not fit into the category of folk art as defined by stylistic criteria. There were disparate attempts to re-establish a concept of folk art based on the audience criteria, that would include the changes in taste, techniques and materials (cf. Ołędzki 1970) but they remained largely unheard, and it was the folk style, either in its historical sense, or as one of the pillars of a folkloristic *preasens ethnographicum* that remained the main criterion of defining what folk art was.

It is therefore hardly surprising to read in 2010 the following statement coming from a journalist: “To an outsider, the word “ethnography” conjured up no pleasant associations. I didn’t remember about the romantic and professional roots of the discipline, described by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* as a vocation, similar to mathematics and music. (...) On the one hand, “ethnography” brought to mind the propaganda of the People’s Republic of Poland, with all its mythology of national “peasant-worker alliance”, and on the other, it recalled the economic reality and aesthetics of the time: a green-and-yellow woolen tablecloth embroidered with flowers, a leaking ceramic flower vase placed on a long, uncomfortable coffee table in a tiny flat – the unifying omnipresence of Cepelia” (Sabor 2010).

Folk Art Going “Ethno”

In January 1990, the Polish transition Parliament,⁶ preparing a new Law on Co-operatives, voted a law that put the Central Union of Folk and Artistic Handicraft “Cepelia” (as was the official name of the organization at the time) into liquidation (the law was published by the “Polish law gazette” on 7/02/1990: Dz.U. 6/1990, poz. 36). As a part of its heritage, the 1949-1990 Cepelia has left its name as a noun used in common Polish to label what is perceived as inauthentic folk art and culture, created mainly for commercial purposes. However, the 1990 law did not end the story of Cepelia as an organization. As early as December 1989, on the eve of its liquidation, a foundation bearing the name of Cepelia was created, and its statute, approved by the Minister of Culture and Arts, stated: “The Foundation’s aims are to protect, organize, develop and promote folk and artistic handicraft, as well as the arts and crafts industry. The activities of the Foundation consist in providing material conditions for creating new and cultivating traditional values of material culture of the Polish nation, strengthening cultural identity of the nation and contributing to the creation of contemporary Polish culture” (<http://cepelia.pl/o-cepelii/fundacja-cepelia/>). The nationalistic agenda is obvious,⁷ however: with the transformation of the political system the rhetoric required substituting “the nation” (*naród*) for “the people” (*lud*).

⁶ Elected in June 1989, it was the first Parliament since the rigging of the 1947 elections to admit opposition candidates.

⁷ To compare, the Foundation for Protecting Folk Arts created in 1993 as an outlet of Polish Folk Artists Association (*Stowarzyszenie Twórców Ludowych*, founded in 1968) states its objective simply as: “assisting the STL in activities for folk arts providing material conditions for their protection, development and promotion in society” [<http://www.zgstl.kei.pl/struktura/fundacja.htm>].

With the new Law on Co-operatives another entity, the Cepelia Folk and Artistic Handicraft Business Chamber, was established along with its associated Foundation. It defined itself as “a business self-government organization bringing together folk and artistic handicraft cooperatives as well as cooperatives of plastician artists and architects. The aim of the Chamber is to represent the business interests of its members in matters related to the pursuit of their statutory activities, support business initiatives of its members, creating conditions favoring the protection and development of the folk and artistic handicraft represented by its members, etc.” (<http://cepelia.pl/en/about-cepelia/the-business-chamber/>; English version by the webpage owner). Simultaneously, a company bearing the name Cepelia was established to run the shops and organize commerce in the products provided by the Business Chamber members. Already in 1994 the new Cepelia was awarded the title of the Company of the Year by the Polish Business Club, and in 2001 it submitted its trademark to the Polish Patent Commission (protection was granted in 2005). Therefore, celebrating its 50th anniversary in 1999, Cepelia was an active and dynamic enterprise of the market economy, “facing normal competition, struggle for survival” (Jackowski 1999:36). One of the tools in this struggle is the 7% VAT on handicraft products with Cepelia attest (in 1993-2004 the VAT for attested products was even lower). Since 2004 such attestations have been issued exclusively by the Cepelia National Artistic and Ethnographic Commission.

The fact that vernacular products needed attesting as “folk” by urban experts did not rise any particular doubts when the law on VAT was voted. Since the beginning, it has been the elite experts who decided, according to their own values, what “folk art” is and what it is not. However, the question was brought to public attention when in 2003 some lace-makers from a highland village of Koniaków started making and selling handmade lace underwear. Being able to sell their handicraft products with the lower VAT depended either on the Cepelia attest, or on the membership in the Polish Association of Folk Artists (STL) open to “traditional folk art and craft producers”. Unfortunately, neither was the case with the enterprising highlanders: Cepelia denied them the attest and declined to sell their underwear in its shops, and the elderly makers of Koniaków lace, members of STL, called the production “a shame to Koniaków lace” (Surmiak-Domańska 2003). Obviously, the question was not the technique, which is the same crochet lace as it has been in tablecloths and napkins used for household and church decoration (which one of the folk artists from Koniaków quotes with pride as the “proper” place for the Koniaków lace), but the “frivolous destination” (Makovicky 2010). Nonetheless, in 2009 when celebrating its 60th anniversary Cepelia organized a competition for a “Souvenir from Poland”; the highest prize in the “tradition” category (the other category being called “inspiration”) was awarded to the Koniaków lace mobile phone case by Beata Legierska. It seems the gadget character of the mobile phone case better fits the Cepelia “folk art” category than the sexually charged string panties.

The example of the mobile phone case also points to a process that has taken place in Polish mainstream culture during the post-socialist decades: the passage from “pop-ethnic kitsch” (to use the term of the art critic and journalist Piotr Kosiewski [2009a]) to the observation that “the vernacular is trendy” made by the art director of one of the largest Polish advertising agencies (Kosiewski 2009b). A copywriter from the same agency talking about a social advertising campaign aimed at encouraging Poles to vote

in European Parliament elections explains that they used “neo-folk music” inspired by Polish and Slavic folklore because they wanted something that would sound “anti-parochial”. They were looking for something attractive to the global inhabitants of the local reality of the 2009 Poland. It seems, therefore, that the change from “folk” to “neo-folk” and “etno” offers an “anti-parochial” perspective searched for by the advertising team; an alternative to the parochial folklorized reality of Cepelia has appeared with the “neo-folk” or “etno” currents in music and design, and with “critical regionalism” in architecture (ibid.), and even Cepelia itself has been trying to align itself with it.

“Festiwal etnodizajnu” organized by the Cracow Ethnographic Museum comprised different exhibitions, open-air art projects, workshops, panels, and other events. One of the exhibits, entitled “Natural resources of Polish design,” presented the new wave of folk inspiration in the work of younger generation Polish designers, while the main show, organized in the museum headquarters consisted in placing new, folk-inspired works of “etnodizajn” in the context of old ethnographic museum exhibits. By this approach the organizers tried to encourage thinking about etnodizajn not only in terms of formal inspirations (which seems to be the prevailing way of thinking about it), but also in terms of the materials it uses and its economy. “The ethnographic museum gives insight into a ‘culture of poverty’ in which objects were highly valued. Our contemporary world is one of a ‘culture of excess’ characterized by an overproduction of objects. (...) In both cultures, the construction of identity is based on objects; however, in a ‘culture of poverty’ it is grounded in the object’s durability, while in a ‘culture of excess’ what counts is the never-ending rearrangement of objects, as their long-term use gradually becomes a sign of poverty. How may we speak about a ‘culture of poverty’ in terms of a ‘culture of excess?’” writes the ethnographer Katarzyna Kulikowska (2009:106). The question of the different ways of thinking about material objects is directly related to another aspect of etnodizajn’s presence in the contemporary cultural landscape: its ecological potential. The concept of folk culture as a “culture of recycling” may be compelling to students of material culture, as well as artists and designers. It can also be a way of transcending the old, affirmative image of exotic rural costume-wearing folk as the bearers of national values in a timeless *presens ethnographicum* of “the quiet Polish countryside” enshrined in old-style ethnographic exhibits. It may, too, be a way for the ethnographic museum (and ethnography in general) to become aware of the “etno” stage of exoticization and more critical about its own role in constructing “folk art” and “the folk” in general, and, hopefully, enter the stage of “critical regionalism”.

Conclusions

The production of folk art is a complex issue. What this article tried to put into relief is its construction through different practices of sense-giving of the educated and the rich in cultural capital. It sought to show that it is not only “folk artists” and “folk art institutions” that create the “the folk art and craft objects”, but also the political, ideological, social and academic context of their production and consumption. In its several “lives”, subsequent and parallel, Polish folk art has been part of two highly important processes of modernity: imagined community-building and the construction of the modern nation and nation-state, as well as the production of social inequalities,

both in the modern industrial society and in the late modern post-industrial one. In the former, the concept of folk craft became important for anti-industrial ideologies, like the Arts and Crafts movement that tried to subvert existing inequalities by abolishing the alienation of labor inherent in factory production. The aesthetic aspect had a political dimension as well, related to the power of distinction made by the judgment of taste (cf. Bourdieu 1984). Modern social hierarchies built on cultural capital that found its expression through taste, made extensive use of artistically defined values of the primordial and the pristine. Those values were supposed to be found in all sorts of “outsider art”, folk art being one of them, along with the primitive, tribal, naïve, etc.

Therefore, the fact that “etnodizajn” does not rely merely on the formal qualities of folk art and craft but assumes their way of understanding material resources, namely material scarcity, can be seen as an affirmative step towards stripping folk art of its primordialist meanings, as well as its social exoticism. However, it is also possible that what is going on here is an “aestheticisation of recycling”: recycling – originally driven by a need resulting from material poverty – becomes a symbolic gesture, a manifestation of the judgment of taste, again perfectly in accordance with modern mechanisms of social distinction unavoidably present in any artistic activity.*

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Sedmi život poljske narodne umjetnosti i obrta

Sažetak

Poljski paviljon na međunarodnoj izložbi Shanghai Expo 2010 koristio je motiv stiliziranog izrezanog papira u arhitektonskom dizajnu; na londonskom festivalu dizajna 2009. izložba naziva Mlada kreativna Poljska (Young Creative Poland) predstavljala je dizajn nadahnut "prirodnim resursima" poljskog dizajna, dakle, ponovno narodnom umjetnošću i obrtom; i, konačno, 2009./2010. Kraków je slavio "Festival Etnodizajnu" pod pokroviteljstvom Etnografskog muzeja. Ovaj članak istražuje načine na koje je narodna umjetnost u Poljskoj društveno konstruirana i korištena, kroz analizu zanimanja arhitekata, dizajnera, etnografa i povjesničara umjetnosti krajem 19./početkom 20. st. (prva "četiri života"), preko života zaklade "Cepelia" Narodne republike Poljske, do suvremenih predmeta i dizajna nadahnutih narodnom umjetnošću (šesti i sedmi život). Očito je kako je društvena konstrukcija narodne umjetnosti u Poljskoj i ostalim zemljama Istočne i Srednje Europe višeslojna i kompleksna te ovaj članak ne pokušava pokriti cijelo područje već naznačiti dinamiku i neke od okolnosti tog procesa, vezane za središnje elemente moderniteta, poput primitivizma i nacionalne ideologije. Članak također analizira trend u poljskom dizajnu u 21. st., nadahnut narodnom umjetnošću i obrtom, te ulogu etnografskih muzeja u njegovom promicanju.

[narodna umjetnost, socijalna konstrukcija, nacionalna ideologija, Poljska, etnografski muzej]