

Wanda Telakowska was a remarkable figure who, through her tireless efforts, organizational prowess, and sheer determination, put forth a vision for the future course of Polish design. She began this work as early as 1945 in newly-liberated Warsaw. That March, she accepted a post on the Ministry of Art and Culture's Planning Commission for the Department of Fine Arts. 'The ministry was odd back then,' recalls Bohdan Tadeusz Urbanowicz. 'It operated without decrees, directives, or bureaucratic formalities. [...] The finest musicians, painters and writers were involved. We cannot really call it a bureau – it was more like a club of intellectuals.' Telakowska swiftly recruited collaborators who shared her views and fervent enthusiasm. Most of them were graduates of the Warsaw Fine Arts Academy, such as Maria Skoczylas-Urbanowicz, Anna Śledziwska and Maria Stieber. They shared Telakowska's interest in vernacular folklore as a wellspring of inspiration for artists adapting design to serve the needs of modern industry. This was the direction they envisioned for an artisan renaissance in Poland.

In June of 1945, Telakowska presented the Planning Commission's concept and vision for reforming Polish arts education and for the new social role of artists. The presentation took place at the 1st Polish Congress of the Arts Education Council in Wilanów. The programmatic opening proceedings prompted no official outrage. However, some months later in Krakow, at the 1st Polish Congress of the Polish Artists Union (ZPAP), a speech by Telakowska was fiercely attacked by the local artists community. Her speech was an appeal to abolish the archaic division between "pure" and "utilitarian" art. She called for bringing art into citizens' daily lives and urged artists to be "stewards" and pioneers by transforming the aesthetics of handmade and industrial products.

In her memoir, Telakowska recalls: 'After my speech, local authorities took turns barraging me with criticism. They mocked my lack of culture and likened my speech to the ramblings of a seamstress. A great tumult followed, and when my friend from Warsaw, Stanisław Zamecznik, boldly praised my speech for its profound social implications, they ejected him from the hall in a most vulgar manner. In the end, it was decided by a nearly unanimous vote that my speech could not be published, for it jeopardised the interests of artists. Unfortunately, Vice-Minister Kruczkowski was so shocked by this coordinated attack that he failed to come to my defence.'

Wanda Telakowska was born in 1905 in Sosnowiec and died in 1987 in Warsaw. From 1923 to 1931, she studied at the Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw under Edmund Bartłomiejczyk. In the interwar period, she worked mainly in graphic design and drew high acclaim, receiving gold medals at the Graphic Arts Exhibition in Florence in 1923 and the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life in Paris in 1937. She was part of Warsaw's bohemian art scene and rubbed shoulders with people like Julian Tuwim, Antoni Słonimski and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. She was also active in public service and worked as a school inspector for the arts. During the occupation, she pitched in as a teacher in underground schools. Beginning in 1945, she helped to build new public institutions that would shape and facilitate the campaign to bring designers into closer contact with industry.

Excerpt translated by Eliza Rose



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BARBARA BANAŚ

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Barbara Banaś holds a PhD in Art History. She is the deputy director at the National Museum in Wrocław and has co-organised and curated several design exhibitions.