



„Na artystycznej scenie rządzi, pod hasłem dążenia do doskonałości, estetyczna dyskryminacja, niewiele różniąca się w swej motywacji od dyskryminacji ze względu na rasę czy płeć. Śmiem twierdzić i podkreślam to z całą mocą, że ten rodzaj elitaryzmu w sztuce to społeczna niesprawiedliwość”.

Monika Weychert

# THE LONGSTANDING ETHNOGRAPHISATION OF THE ART OF PEOPLE WITH ROMA ROOTS

Putting works of artists with Roma roots in an ethnographic context has a long tradition. It is worth taking a closer look from a political and economic perspective: as the use of quasi-colonial procedures. For a long time, Roma visual arts – much like folk art in general – had not been put in the historical perspective by the majoritarian society at all, as Wojciech Szymański writes: ‘While professional European art was subject to the principles of historical development and changes, occurring within it as a result of clashing views and aesthetic ideas, pristine non-European art and European folk art were treated as a permanent relic of the past, a kind of living fossil; if subject to any changes, these are very slow and undesirable, distancing it from the original, primeval source, and caused by external factors (e.g., meeting other cultures, penetration of urban patterns in the countryside), not by self-reflective, immanent pursuit of originality and novelty. While professional European art became the subject of interest in art history and criticism, ‘primitive’ and folk art have found acolytes among the researchers of the folk culture: anthropologists and ethnographers.’<sup>1</sup> In the case of Roma, however, ethnographic descriptions, created since the 18th century, have focused mainly on the differences in physiognomy, customs, and language.<sup>2</sup> The stereotype of music as an age-long Romani artistic profession was also well maintained and frequently confirmed. Romani visual art found itself in a blind spot, a gap between the categories, and became invisible. This was primarily because no suitable description tools were found for that area. The art created by the Roma did not fit entirely in the categories of ‘folk art’ identified, for a long time, only with the work of rural communities, with traditionalism and regionalism considered to be among of its main features. At the same time, it was not considered as ‘exotic art’ either, as its producers were not separated from European researchers by geographical distance; furthermore, it had developed within the circle of European cultural influence. The ethnographisation of Roma people’s art divested it of its authorial, individual trait. In fact, it was only the development of research on art by ‘unprofessional artists’ that allowed the scientists of that time to classify the works of the Roma into a certain category.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, let us recall that the reflection on the art of people

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- 1 W. Szymański, *Od cyganerii do sztuki post-romskiej i z powrotem*, ‘Studia Romologica’ 9: 2016, p. 34.
  - 2 As we know, inter alia, from Lech Mróz’s analyses of scientific texts on Roma-related topics in the 18th, 19th, and even 20th centuries, they were full of stereotypes and prejudices. Besides, that knowledge was not updated; scientists used an inadequate methodology; L. Mróz, *O filistynach, cyganach alias wałęsach. Z dziejów poznawania Romów w Polsce*, ‘Lud’ 78: 1995, pp. 341–356.
  - 3 Cf. A. Jackowski, *Poza modami, poza czasem*, w: *Sztuka bez granic: od sztuki ludowej do art brut: wystawa z kolekcji Leszka Macaka*, Bielsko-Biała 2008, pp. 5-6; idem, *Być artystą*, in: *Sztuka polska po 1945 roku. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*, Warszawa 1987, pp. 359-366; M. Antliff, P.

without specialist academic education developed only after the Second World War. Jean Dubuffet's manifesto *L'Art Brut préféré aux arts culturels* saw the light of day in 1949.<sup>4</sup>

And what was the situation of the Roma in Europe in the post-war period? Fifty per cent of the pre-war population survived the extermination of the Roma. The Roma survivors were immersed in trauma,<sup>5</sup> their traditional culture suffered serious damage as a result of the war events,<sup>6</sup> internal connections had been shattered, the pre-war ties between the Roma and the non-Roma world were broken up. János Bársony and Ágnes Daróczi state: 'The social structure of the Roma broke down (...) and thus, for a long time, the Roma lacked leaders, organisations, allies, political representatives who would document their losses or speak on their behalf.'<sup>7</sup> In addition, the inclusion of representatives of this minority in the civic circulation in post-war conditions did not take place. They were often not given back their citizenship (German, Austrian, Swedish, etc.), which had been taken away under the Nuremberg laws; thus, the Roma were not protected by any state. The borders of their former homelands were closed to the Roma. It seems that two strong terms that have emerged in this context are entirely justified: Sybil Milton's '*persecuting the survivors*' and Alpha Abdikeeva's '*living apartheid*'.<sup>8</sup> Due to the inability to benefit from indemnities or recover pre-war property, and the lack of permissions to earn, the Roma fell into structural poverty. The survivors were often placed in the same concentration camps that had been created for them in Germany during the war. As Milton writes, 'When they found a place to live on their own, they were evicted by the authorities and forced to move [back – com-

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Leighen, *Primitive*, in: *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. R.S. Nelson, R. Shiff, Chicago 1996.

- 4 J. Dubuffet, *L'art brut préféré aux arts culturels*, Paris 1949.
- 5 U. Liedtke, P. Peterson, *Zur Entschädigung Zwangssterilisierter Zigeuner: Sozialpsychologische Einflüsse auf psychische Störungen nationalsozialistisch Verfolgter*, „Nervenarzt“ 1971, pp. 197–205.
- 6 H. Krokowski, *Die Last der Vergangenheit. Auswirkungen nationalsozialistischer Verfolgung auf deutsche Sinti*, Frankfurt am Main 2001, pp. 52–53.
- 7 J. Barsony, A. Daróczi, *Pharrajimos. The Fate of the Roma during the Holocaust*, New York 2008, p. 8; S. Kapralski, *Naród z popiołów. Pamięć zagłady a tożsamość Romów*, Warszawa 2012, p. 152.
- 8 S. Milton, *Persecuting the Survivors. The continuity of 'Anty-Gypsyism' in Post-war Germany and Austria*, in: *Sinti and Roma: Gypsies in German-speaking Society and Literature*, ed. S. Tebbutt, Oxford–New York 1998, pp. 35–47; A. Abdikeeva, *Germany's Policies toward Sinti and Roma: Living Apartheid?*, The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), 7 May 2002, <http://www.errc.org/article/germanys-policies-toward-sinti-and-roma-living-apartheid/777> [accessed 15 September 2017]; idem, *Roma Poverty and the Roma National Strategies: The Cases of Albania, Greece and Serbia*, London 2006.

pleted by MW] to the camp.<sup>9</sup> According to Wolfgang Wippermann, these were deliberate and coordinated activities of a mafia-like character.<sup>10</sup> If the scale of the extermination of the Roma had been admitted and their claims for compensation accepted, an additional financial burden would fall on the German government, and the circle of people liable to punishment for Nazi crimes would have to be broadened. That situation made the Roma part of the ‘subclass’, the ‘margin of society’: they were considered unproductive, superfluous individuals living a parasitic life. They suffered severe penalties and various preventive repressions: from public humiliation (such as washing in chemicals in Hungary), forced settlement (in Poland and England), forced labour and imprisonment, to forced sterilisation (in Czechoslovakia and Sweden). In most countries (except the former Yugoslavia), the Roma were not considered an ethnic minority, they could not cultivate their own culture, develop personally, create political structures, or even, for the above-mentioned economic and political reasons, educate themselves. The formula of assimilation in Central and Eastern Europe, from 1945 to the fall of the Berlin Wall – to the period of transformation, can be presented as a formula: ‘(Gypsy) + (socialist work) + (settlement) = (socialist worker) + (Gypsy folklore).’<sup>11</sup> Folklore was accepted by the authorities; therefore, a kind of self-folklorisation was forced on the Roma as, in many countries, Romani folk groups and traditional craft cooperatives were the only possibility of creating any Roma structures.

Daniel Baker points to the unique feature of Roma visual arts. Visual works have always been directed towards the inside of the Roma environment and have not been shaped under the influence of the outside environment. It served internal communication. Coexistence of function and decoration in visual forms became a basic feature of the ‘Roma aesthetics’, regardless of the part of the world in which the Roma lived.<sup>12</sup> The art created by the Roma was situated outside the mainstream world of art, due to the lack of professional education of the artists. As Tímea Jung-haus writes: ‘The art scene, under the slogan of striving for excellence, is ruled by aesthetic discrimination, which differs little in its motivation from race- or gender-based discrimination. I dare to say, and I stress this with

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9 S. Milton, *Persecuting the Survivors...*, op. cit., p. 37.

10 W. Wippermann, *Compensation Withheld. The denial of reparations to the Sinti and Roma*, [in: *Gypsies during the Second World War, 3: The Final Chapter*, ed. D. Kenrick, Paris–Hatfield 2006, p. 172.

11 This scheme is quoted by Sławomir Kaprański, after articles by Steward and Barany: S. Kaprański, *Naród z popiołów...*, op.cit., p. 256.

12 D. Baker, *W sprawie prowizorki: kilka uwag o estetyce Romów*, transl. I. Suchan, in: *Romano kher. O romskiej sztuce, estetyce i doświadczeniu*, ed. M. Weychert-Waluszko, Warszawa 2013, p. 47.

all my strength, that this kind of elitism in art is a social injustice.’<sup>13</sup> An example can be taken from the story of the ‘discovery’ of János Balázs’ work by art historian István Kerékgyártó and ethnographer Pál Bánszky in 1968. According to these two researchers, his work and talent eluded the notions of folk art, because Balázs’ works were more contemporary, original and individual than traditional, conventional and regional.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Kerékgyártó and Bánszky ignored the people living in the same village as Balázs, Jolána Oláh and András Balogh Balázs, similarly talented contemporaneous creators. It was an expression of a strategy: the researchers wanted to emphasise the uniqueness of their discovery and, at the same time, the uniqueness of Balázs’s work against the background of the Roma community. Meanwhile, later research did not confirm that — the record of Romani artists gathered by the ethnographer and librarian Zsuzsa Bódi at the Hungarian Institute of Culture and Art in 2004 counted more than two hundred people with Romani roots who worked and lived in Hungary, Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, and the countries of the former Yugoslavia.<sup>15</sup>

Despite economic and social exclusion, there were single determined people who attained specialist education. For example, Karol Parno Gierliński (1938–2015) studied at the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Poznań in the years 1957–1963; he was a sculptor and painter as well as a poet and a prose writer. As a social activist, he dealt with popularising work and education; he worked in trade unions and founded a work cooperative protecting traditional Romani professions.<sup>16</sup> Tamás Péli (1948–1994), in turn, studied at the Royal Dutch Academy and was the first Roma man from Hungary to graduate in painting. In the 1970s, he decided to devote himself to showing Romani culture and tradition through art; he began to teach young Romani painters. He was also a politician, activist, and an undoubted influencer on the formation of the Roma social movement in Hungary (along with other Romani intellec-

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13 T. Junghaus, *Obraz i podobiństwo. Rozważania o Romach w sztuce i sztuce Romów*, transl. M. Kołaczek, „Dialog-Pheniben’ 2013, No. 12, pp. 8–25.

14 Ibidem; id., *Artyści romscy*, transl. M. Kołaczek, „Dialog-Pheniben’ 2015, No. 4, pp. 152–168; *Meet Your Neighbours. Contemporary Roma Art from Europe*, ed. T. Junghaus, Open Society Institute, New York 2006, pp. 141–147.

15 Z. Bódi, *Cigány néprajzi kutatások Közép- és Kelet-Európában = Gypsy Ethnographical Researches in Central and Eastern Europe*, Budapest 2001; idem, *Kézikönyv a kisebbségi kulturális tevékenységhez*, Budapest 2000. Bódi’s research did not encompass Poland. Hungary appears as an exceptional place in terms of recognition of these topics: earlier than in other places in the world. The Romani artist known from this period in Poland is mentioned below.

16 Parno (website devoted to the artist’s work) , <http://www.parno.polinfo.net> [accessed 6 August 2022].

tuals and activists, such as the poets József Choli Daróczi and Károly Bari, the writer Menyhért Lakatos, and the activist and researcher Ágnes Daróczi). However, the professional education of some Roma artists has not changed the perception of Roma artists *en masse*. In 1979, the first National Exhibition of Self-Taught Roma Artists took place in Hungary (organised by Ágnes Daróczi at the Pataky Cultural Centre in Budapest). Another such display – also prepared by Daróczi – took place in 1989 at the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest. Daróczi, in order to show the artists of her choice, was forced to give the exhibition a title emphasising, once again, the naivety and lack of professionalism of Roma artists, in accordance with the previous narrative about them.<sup>17</sup> In the advertisement for the event, the public was encouraged to ‘see exotic objects belonging to an alien civilisation.’<sup>18</sup>

In Poland, an example of ethnographisation of Roma artists may be taken from the history of the Romani Art group.<sup>19</sup> It consisted of two professional artists educated at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków: Małgorzata Mirga-Tas and Krzysztof Gil; only Bogumiła Delimata was a self-taught artist. The trio was invited almost exclusively to ethnographic museums (Tarnów, Warsaw, Wrocław) and local cultural institutions remaining, until 2013, outside the institutional world of art. At the same time, it should be noted that, in that period (2007–2013), the works by Mirga-Tas, Delimata, and Gil were not subject to critical review or curatorial selection, the exhibitions of their works did not have problematised narratives and were not arranged like exhibitions of contemporary art (the works were shown on easels, in unprepared rooms). The texts accompanying the exhibitions focused mainly on the artists’ origin, not on their works. Let us recall Adam Bartosz’s text from the catalogue of the Tarnów Romani Art exhibition (2008): ‘Three Gypsies, or rather – as they have preferred to be called for some time – Roma. (...) Three Roma are presenting their work; all from a group of settled Gypsies called Carpathian Gypsies/Roma; migrant Roma – more precisely – former migrant Roma – call them Bergitka Roma (Mountain Gypsies) and treat them with great distance. However, it is precisely this group/tribe that has the largest number of educated people today. Their parents often felt their Romani origins as a burden, as an injustice of fate. Yet they have converted their parents’ ori-

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17 Á. Daróczi, *Autodidakta Cigány Képzőművészek. Országos Kiállítás*, Budapest 1979; idem, *Autodidakta Cigány Képzőművészek II. Országos Kiállítás*, Budapest 1989; idem, *Roma képzőművészek III. Országos Kiállítás*, Budapest 2000.

18 T. Junghaus, *Opór nie wystarczy. Rola romskiej sztuki we współczesnym układzie sił*, transl. M. Kołaczek, ‘Dialog-Pheniben’ 2015, No. 17, pp. 54–73.

19 E. Mirga-Wójtowicz, *Od Romani Art do Jaw Dikh*, ‘Studia Romologica’ 9: 2016, p. 46.

gin, which is also their own, into a source of inspiration, a stream of creative power.<sup>20</sup> This text is characteristic because it was written from the position of an ethnographer, not a representative of the world of art.

Romani artists often critically use subversive tactics towards such classification. A good example is the attitude of Damian Le Bas and Delaine Le Bas, contemporary artists who studied at prestigious London universities and, at the same time, they consciously present themselves as representatives of 'art brut', 'outsiders' art', 'gypsy dada'. As Delaine Le Bas writes: 'I remember the first exhibition my husband and I had in London. No one liked it. I heard it was an exhibition by two outsiders, two Roma, that it could give you a heart attack. We were criticised, among other things, for hanging works with clothes pegs. And yet many people soon began to do the same, and that was all right. It is significant that something that had so far been perceived as specific to a minority is adapted by the majority, enters the mainstream and thus gains recognition. (...) This is extremely important to me because I think that art is for everyone. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to live in culture. Everyone, and not only those who can talk about art or create it in a strictly defined way.'<sup>21</sup>

The fact that, for a long time, art created by the Roma had been only the subject of description and interest of ethnographers can be considered as the quintessence of the colonial relationship, i.e., replacing the original voice with a discourse from the outside, which establishes the structure of power. First of all, the ethnography of the art of people with Roma roots was supported by the belief in the 'people without history', which prevented that community from developing. Or rather, from obtaining external acceptance for internal change and progress. The actual economic and social situation of the Roma was not being taken into consideration. Secondly, the category of 'originality' of works was replaced by the category of 'Romaniness'. This is also a good opportunity to point out the role of the 'discoverers': István Kerékgyártó, Pál Bánzsky, Jerzy Ficowski,<sup>22</sup> and Adam Bartosz whose authority, on the one hand, cleared

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20 *Romani Art. Katalog wystawowy artystów romskich*, Tarnów 2008, <http://www.muzeum.tarnow.pl/multimedia/katalog%20romaniart.pdf> [accessed 8 September 2022].

21 *Sztuka jest dla wszystkich. Rozmowa Moniki Popow z Delaine Le Bas*, „Szum”, <https://magazynszum.pl/sztuka-jest-dla-wszystkich-rozmowa-z-delaine-le-bas/> [accessed 11 August 2022].

22 Similarly to visual arts, literature and poetry were supposedly not the domain of the Roma, and thus something unusual in their case, something we basically owe to the 'figure' of the discoverer. M. Gliński, <Jerzy Ficowski, 'Demony cudzego strachu', <https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/jerzy-ficowski-demony-cudzego-strachu> >

the path to the visibility of Roma artists; on the other hand, it determined what of their work should be shown to the world, where, when, and how. That imbalance in the production of knowledge was based on the fact that representatives of the majoritarian nations of Europe, usually poorly knowing the culture of the communities they studied, created descriptions derived from their images of the culture in question, exoticising the object of the description. In a word, the art created by the Roma had been either invisible or exoticised for a long time. The topics outlined above are hardly studied in relation to the art created by the Roma. That is why Tímea Junghaus and Ethel Brooks postulate writing Romani art history using the tools of post-colonial theories.<sup>23</sup> It would be an analysis of the artifacts and activities of Roma artists in the context of the cultural, social, and political consequences of intra-European colonialism. So far, however, no larger body of texts has been created to implement this desideratum.

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[accessed 23 August 2022]; *Papusza, czyli Wielka Tajemnica*, ed. K. Kamińska, Gorzów Wielkopolski 1992; M. Sobczak, 'Czy bajką było to, czy prawdą?'. *Próba demitologizacji Bronisławy Wajs (Papuszy)*, in: *Miejsce i tożsamość. Literatura lubuska w perspektywie poetyki przestrzeni i antropologii*, ed. M. Mikołajczak, K. Gieba, M. Sobczak, Zielona Góra 2013.

- 23 E. Brooks, *Why It's Time to Reclaim Romani Art History*, 'Frieze Magazine', <https://frieze.com/article/why-its-time-reclaim-romani-art-history> [accessed 5 February 2019].

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**Abstract:**

Putting works of artists with Roma roots in an ethnographic context has a long tradition. It is worth taking a closer look from a political, economic, and cultural perspective: as the use of quasi-colonial procedures. In the article, the author points out several examples of ethnographisation of Roma art and the artists – people with Romani roots – themselves.

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**Keywords:**

**ethnographisation, contemporary Romani art, art of people with Romani roots**

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