

WE LOOK AT THESE PAINTINGS IN SILENCE. ABOUT THE (NON) PRESENCE OF THE BOY IN ANDRZEJ WRÓBLEWSKI'S WORK

Wojciech Grzybała

A lone man with a briefcase and a hat; in front of him arranged on the floor as a triptych: *Child with Dead Mother*, *Execution with a Boy*, (*Execution v*), and *Mother with Dead Child*, placed by the exhibition's designer Andrzej Pawłowski to reveal different perspectives. The man is one of 7,549 visitors to Andrzej Wróblewski's posthumous exhibition at the Palace of Art in Kraków, captured by Wojciech Plewiński, author of the photo reportage from the exhibition published in *Przekrój* magazine. This is how we first meet the young boy—a meeting between the artist and the viewer, both experiencing history. What made him pause in front of these artworks? Did they remind him of his grandson or nephew? He is a teenager, standing against the yellow wall of the artist's studio. Now alone, he sometimes appears among a group of captives and families who are about to be executed; abandoned among the now human-less coats and jackets. He is waiting alone at a bus stop, against a wall, next to a statue of Gudea. The boy is one of the most mysterious characters of Wróblewski's work. At the same time, he was important enough that



EXECUTION OF HOSTAGES, (EXECUTION I)

1949; oil, canvas; 128 x 200 cm
District Museum, Toruń

[SKETCH FOR EXECUTIONS]

[1949]; gouache, paper; 79 x 109 cm
Starak Collection

[SKETCH FOR EXECUTIONS]

[1949]; gouache, paper; 62.9 × 89.9 cm
National Museum, Poznań



for the *Young Generation. Polish Visual Art, Painting – Sculpture – Visual Art [Junge Generation. Polnische Kunstausstellung. Malerei – Bildhauerei – Plastik]* exhibition in Berlin (July 21–August 29, 1956), known as the “little Arsenal,” Wróblewski didn’t submit *Mothers, Anti-Fascists* shown at an earlier exhibition at the Arsenal in Warsaw, but a brand new painting—*Boy against a Yellow Background, Model, (A Boy)*.¹

In this essay I aim to reconstruct a group of artworks in which this boy appears, the timeline of when they were created, and how art historians have discovered them over the past three decades. The theme of the boy was not included among those guiding the previous presentations of the artist’s work. For example, in the catalogue of the monographic exhibition organized by the National Museum in Warsaw in 2007, curator Joanna Kordjak identified the following motifs in Wróblewski’s work: “self-portraits,” “torn man,” “skulls,” “heads,” “phenomena,” “organic portraits.”² There are a dozen works featuring the new motif, “the boy,” including pieces in oil on canvas and board, watercolor and gouache, and drawings. Two of them have not yet been exhibited—*[Boy against a White Background]* and *(Boy)*, *[Boy no. 1062]*—and will be presented to the public for the first time at the exhibition in Ljubljana and are reproduced in this catalogue. The eponymous story of the boy is, from a broader perspective, the history of the (non) presence of Wróblewski’s works on paper *vis a vis* the vast oeuvre of the artist. Using this example, I would like to show how his drawings—“the results of his humble observation of life”³—were discovered.

1 Waldemar Baraniewski, “Dwa świadectwa i dokument,” *Miejsce*, no. 3 (2017), pp. 356–59.

2 Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowska and Jerzy Gmurek, eds., *Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957*, exh. cat. National Museum (Warsaw, 2007).

3 Andrzej Wróblewski, *Introduction*, in this volume p. 357.

I UPHOLDING THE IMAGE: THE PALACE OF ART (1958)

Krystyna Wróblewska, the artist's mother, together with a group of colleagues forming her committee, selected 259 works for the posthumous exhibition that opened on January 5, 1958, at the Palace of Art in Kraków. This choice influenced Wróblewski's public image, promoted over the next decades and systematically consolidated in the public's consciousness.⁴ The audience for the posthumous exhibition and its subsequent editions at Warsaw's Central Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions, the Institute of Art Propaganda in Łódź, and the Central Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions in Sopot saw 49 oil paintings, 11 drawings on card, 164 watercolors, gouaches, inks, and 35 monotypes, of which only a dozen were known during the artist's life.⁵ Apart from solo shows at Warsaw's "Po Prostu" Salon (August 26–September 27, 1956), and earlier at the Club of the Polish Writers' Union (February 10–March 15, 1956), Wróblewski sent single canvases to regional reviews, international exhibitions (Bucharest 1953, Kiev 1955) as well as exhibitions in Poland, *Exhibition of Modern Art [Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej]* (Kraków 1948); *Exhibition of the Self-Educational Team* within the Inter-School Displays of State Schools for Higher Artistic Education [*Wystawa Zespołu Samokształceniowego w ramach Międzyszkolnych Popisów Państwowych Wyższych Szkół Artystycznych*] (Poznań 1949); *The Youth Struggles for Peace [Młodzież walczy o pokój]* (Warsaw 1950–51); *Polish Exhibition of Young Art [Ogólnopolska Wystawa Młodej Plastyki]* (Warsaw 1955). He presented a series of ink drawings commemorating the death of Stalin at the *Exhibition of Polish Caricature [Wystawa karykatury polskiej]* (Warsaw 1953); this last example could actually end the list of the most important exhibitions in which he participated during his lifetime. Until Wróblewski's death, no individual exhibition of his work took place in Kraków. The detailed list of works shown posthumously indicates a significant disproportion between the actual number of works the artist created to those publicly exhibited during his lifetime. In the 1950s, the public recognized Wróblewski as the author of *Executions* and *Waiting Rooms*, an artist who attempted to speak in his own words about the most painful and tragic subjects, a "spectator vitae"⁶ but also a Socialist-Realist moral bankrupt, the author of politically correct, academic compositions, such as the landscape *Road*, presented at the *Landscape Exhibition [Wystawa Pejzażu]* (Kraków, March–April 1954), still lifes such as *Infant Scales* at the *Exhibition of the Kraków District of the Association of Polish Artists [Wystawa Krakowskiego Okręgu Związku Polskich Artystów Plastyków]* (Kraków, October 1954), and *Union of Polish Youth Takes Command of the Air Force* at the *Exhibition of Art [Wystawa Plastyki]* (Nowa Huta, April–May 1954). Later, the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, containing a detailed list of more than 1500 works found after the death of her son, compiled by the artist's mother, exposed the scale of Wróblewski's artistic legacy.⁷ The detailed inventory of his achievements lists the works exhibited and not exhibited at the exhibition, introduces a division into techniques, and presents several dozen reproductions. Thanks to the numbering system placed in the upper right corner of each of the works, this list, although incomplete, is a matchless source of knowledge for further searches,

4 The organizing committee of the exhibition included artists and art historians: Włodzimierz Buczek, Witold Damasiewicz, Adam Hoffmann, Andrzej Pawłowski, Mieczysław Porębski, Jan Tarasin, Andrzej Wajda, Mieczysław Wejman, and Krystyna Wróblewska.

5 The Warsaw edition of the exhibition had the same number of works as Kraków, 259 were exhibited. In Łódź, 206 works were shown (including 60 oil paintings and 146 works on paper). For more, see "Andrzej Wróblewski. Posthumous Exhibition," in *Avoiding Intermediary States. Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–1957)*, eds. Magdalena Ziółkowska and Wojciech Grzybała (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz; Warsaw: Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation, 2014), p. 612.

6 Agnieszka Ławniczakowa, "Spectator vitae," *Nurt*, no. 7 (1967), p. 46.

7 On the role played by the artist's mother in cataloguing, dating, and signing works, see Ziółkowska and Grzybała, "An (Un)orthodox Monograph," in Ziółkowska and Grzybała, *Avoiding Intermediary States*, pp. 648–55.

- 8 There are known works without numbers assigned by Krystyna Wróblewska and gifted by the artist to Andrzej Wajda, Konrad Nalęcki, Mieczysław Porębski, and others.
- 9 For more, see Ziółkowska and Grzybala, "An (Un)orthodox Monograph," in *Avoiding Intermediary States*, pp. 663, 666.
- 10 See Krystyna Wróblewska's 1967 correspondence regarding deposits with the directors of the National Museums in Poznań and Warsaw. Folder no. 1793, Archives of the National Museum, Poznań.
- 11 A regular purchase and loan policy, owing to which the artist's paintings became part of eminent collections, was pursued by Wróblewski's mother shortly after his death. The first transactions were already made during the initial posthumous exhibition in 1958 with works on paper (gouaches and inks), among them (*Chaired Woman II*) and (*Spring at the Academy of Fine Arts*), (*Rooftops*), and the monotype (*Nude*), which were bought by private collectors. The first was purchased by the artists Tadeusz and Barbara Brzozowski, the second was acquired by a professor at the Jagiellonian University, while the latter found its way into a private collection in Pennsylvania, United States. That moment marked the beginning of a decade of intense buying and selling of the artist's work, especially his oil paintings: *Execution against a Wall*, Museum of the Polish Army, Warsaw (1958); *The Queue Continues and Surrealist Execution*, (*Execution VIII*), National Museum, Warsaw (1960); *Execution of Hostages*, (*Execution I*), District Museum, Toruń (1963); *Execution with a Boy*, (*Execution V*), National Museum, Poznań (1966); *Tombstone*, (*Tombstone of a Womanizer*), District Museum, Toruń (1967); *Sun and Other Stars*, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź (1969); *The Lovers*, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź (1974). Quoted from Ziółkowska and Grzybala, "An (Un)orthodox Monograph," in *Avoiding Intermediary States*, pp. 663, 666.
- 12 *Andrzej Wróblewski. Malarstwo*, Gallery Zderzak, Kraków, January 21–February 15, 1994.
- 13 *Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957. Retrospektywa*, Zachęta – Gallery of Contemporary Art, Warsaw, October 31–December 3, 1995, curator: Hanna Wróblewska, and National Museum, Kraków, January 26–March 31, 1996, curator Zofia Gołubiew.

and identification of lost or damaged works.⁸ In the last decade, acting as the Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation, we have acquired almost a hundred privately owned works, adding to the current state of knowledge about Wróblewski's oeuvre. Some of them are reproduced here for the first time: *Sun Worshipers*, [*Figural Composition no. 882*], [*Figural Composition no. 1248*], [*Landscape Composition no. 1046*], *Diluvian Romance*, [*Throne*], and *The Queue Continues*.

Krystyna Wróblewska's professional care was reflected in a policy of promoting and disseminating her son's work on a national and international scale. Oil paintings played a significant part in this and constituted the main deposits with museum collections, as well as works representing Polish art in international reviews. It should be emphasized, however, that there were exceptions; for example, on May 15, 1958, the National Museum in Kraków made the first and one of the most extensive acquisitions of the artist's work, which included ten pieces, among them (*Chauffeur with Red Landscape*), (*Funeral*), (*Kitek by the Window*), (*Gray Fish*), and the two monotypes (*Fish*) and (*Fly*).⁹ The choice of these specific compositions was dictated by the selection made for the *Posthumous Exhibition* [*Wystawa pośmiertna*], which excluded Socialist Realist works, ink sketches depicting the construction of Nowa Huta, political lithographs, woodcuts, and some of the *Executions*. In terms of individual techniques, Wróblewska also made important decisions, choosing just ten large-format drawings on paper—the rest, like many of the oil paintings, which remained in the hands of the artist's family for years, were rolled up and placed in storage. The works selected for the Kraków exhibition consolidated the selection of works available for exhibitions over the following decades. Based on existing correspondence with museum directors, it should be emphasized that Wróblewska played a significant role in the selection of works for exhibitions.¹⁰ The works on paper, on the other hand, played a secondary role in relation to the canvases; usually they only supplemented the exhibition or constituted a "mobile set" for one-room exhibitions. The fact that she influenced the shape of exhibitions and the selection of works, as well as her decades-long policy of placing deposits and selling works, shows the significant role Krystyna Wróblewska played in determining the range of her son's work available to researchers and audiences.¹¹

Exhibitions organized in and after 1994—when both the artist's widow, in whose apartment some of the works were kept, and his mother, passed away—led to a breakthrough. These shows resulted in a significant expansion of the range of available works on paper.¹² Two editions of the monographic exhibition, organized at the turn of 1995–96 at Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw and the National Museum in Kraków, showed dozens of previously unseen works, or works that were last exhibited at retrospective exhibitions in 1958 and 1967.¹³ These two exhibitions included all eight *Executions* and most of the surviving paintings, as well as a significant number of large-format works on paper. The aftermath of this project was a catalogue with a list of all of Wróblewski's oil paintings, a catalogue raisonné of paintings, which showed their priority over works on paper. Following the death of Wróblewski's mother and widow, the artist's daughter—Marta Wróblewska—attempted to further consolidate her father's legacy. The result of this initial period of activity was, among others, the exhibition *Gouaches, Watercolors, Drawings by*



(A BOY), [PORTRAIT OF A SEATED BOY, BOY NO. 1059]

undated; watercolor, gouache, paper;
42 x 29.5 cm
collection of Maria and Marek Polecki

(A BOY), [A BOY NO. 1061]

undated; watercolor, gouache, paper;
42 x 29.5 cm
collection of Hanna and Jarosław
Przyborowski

(A BOY), [PORTRAIT OF A SEATED BOY, BOY NO. 1058]

undated; watercolor, gouache, paper;
42 x 29.5 cm
collection of K. and W. Szafrński



Andrzej Wróblewski. Inedita [Gwasze, akwarele, rysunki Andrzeja Wróblewskiego. *Inedita*], showing as many as 296 works created exclusively on paper.¹⁴ The curator—Joanna Stasiak—focused on landscapes, Tatra landscapes, still lifes, and a very large group of intimate sketches of the artist's wife with their firstborn son. This traveling exhibition, revealing Wróblewski for the first time as father and husband, included two interesting watercolors and gouaches, to which this essay will return later.

Changing the ratio of oil paintings to works on paper was proposed at the exhibition *Transformations. Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957* [*Przekształcenia. Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957*],¹⁵ and in a show commemorating the 50th anniversary of the artist's death organized by the National Museum in Warsaw.¹⁶ The catalogue accompanying the latter exhibition presented the largest number of works on paper to date, arranging them into thematic groups. Even though it did not fully convey the extensive themes of the gouaches, watercolors, and inks created after 1954, it was an attempt to introduce a certain system into this rich body of work and has become a valuable starting point for further research toward a catalogue raisonné of works on paper, which would show the artist's comprehensive achievements beyond his paintings.

II THE REBIRTH OF THE BOY

Andrzej Wróblewski's nine calendars (also known as datebooks) from 1948, in which the artist notes information about meetings with colleagues, participation in university gatherings, academic activities, as well as the titles of films he watched, things he read, and theater and opera performances he saw, provide an indisputable source of historical knowledge about the everyday life and work of the artist. There are also entries about Wróblewski's health, travels, and the progress of his work on paintings, mainly oil paintings. These often abbreviated and laconic personal notes appear with an uneven frequency, and sometimes days of intense creative work are followed by days or weeks without any entries. These calendars were used by Anna Król, among others, to reconstruct the catalogue of Wróblewski's oil paintings,¹⁷ and by us—as the Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation—to verify the earlier lists and dating of the artworks created by the artist's mother. It is worth returning to this original source in order to look for the hero we are interested in here—will we find any information about the works featuring the Boy? Yes, because as early as 1955 and 1956, Wróblewski makes a note about his work on the following pieces:

- ¹⁴ *Gwasze, akwarele, rysunki Andrzeja Wróblewskiego. Inedita*, Gallery In Spe, The Theater Museum, Warsaw, February 4–27, 2002; Office of Contemporary Art, Gorzów Wielkopolski, March 2–31, 2002; Office of Contemporary Art, Olsztyn, April 11–May 6, 2002; Art Center Gallery EL, Elbląg, May 10–June 2, 2002; The Arsenal Municipal Gallery, Poznań, June 6–23, 2002, curator: Joanna Stasiak.
- ¹⁵ *Przekształcenia. Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957*, The State Art Gallery, Sopot, June 3–27 2004; Xawery Dunikowski Museum of Sculpture at the Królikarnia Palace, Warsaw, August 23–October 3, 2004, curator: Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowska.
- ¹⁶ *Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957 w 50. rocznicę śmierci artysty*, National Museum, Warsaw, March 8–May 6, 2007, curator: Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowska.
- ¹⁷ Anna Król, "Katalog obrazów olejnych," in *Andrzej Wróblewski, 1927–1957*, ed. Teresa Rostkowska, exh. cat. Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw; National Museum, Kraków (Warsaw and Kraków, 1995), pp. 32–149.

March 10, 1955: boy

March 12, 1955: draw. boy [drawing of a boy]

March 12, 1955: boy lying down draw. [boy lying down, drawing]

December 1/2/3, 1955: beg. pain. port. boy [began painting portrait of boy]

December, 5/6/7, 1955: draw. boy [drawing of a boy]

December 8/9, 1955: draw. boy [drawing of a boy]

December 13, 1955: fin. boy port. [finished portrait of a boy]

December 14, 1955: proj. boy with a sculpture [project of a boy with a sculpture]
 December 15, 1955: boy stand. ol [standing boy, oil]
 December 16, 1955: draw. boy with sculpture I [drawing of a boy with sculpture I]
 December 17, 1955: draw. boy with sculpture II [drawing of a boy with sculpture II]

The Boy is also mentioned in the last pages of the calendar in Wróblewski's list of works painted in 1955 as:

5. boy standing photo
 6. boy lying down pain. [boy lying painted over]
 24. [2]5 draw. boy with a sculpture [drawing of a boy with sculpture]
 26. portrait boy phot.

In 1956, Wróblewski continues work on the following paintings:

January 11, 1956: ol. boy on yellow background [boy on a yellow background, oil]
 January 12, 1956: ol. boy (1/2) on och. background [boy half on an ocher background, oil]
 January 13, 1956: unsuc. temp. boy on wall back [unsuccessful boy against the wall, tempera]
 January 14, 1956: draw. boy (farmhand) [drawing of a boy (farmhand)]
 January 28, 1956: pain. ov. boy with a background [painted over a painting of a boy on a yellow background]

Let us pause here for a moment, as these lists show the interesting stages in the artist's creative process. First of all, the lists on the last pages of both calendars, Wróblewski's summary of work completed in a given year, indicate different titles assigned simultaneously by Wróblewski to the same artwork. Secondly, there is information that the artist was not satisfied with the final effect of a given work or considered painting it over, which was not uncommon in his practice.¹⁸ The abbreviation "phot." following the title of a work probably means a photographic reproduction of it, which may be confirmed by the fact that two albums with photographs of the artist's works, containing reproductions made both during his lifetime and posthumously, have been found.¹⁹ Will Wróblewski's notes allow us to identify and assign known pieces to the artist's lists? Among artworks in private collections, the following list to some extent corresponds with the artist's notes, and the boys depicted in them combine formal features such as standing or sitting frontal views against an undefined space:

¹⁸ The painting *At the Meeting of the Union of Polish Youth Activists* (1950) was cut into two pieces. On one of them Wróblewski painted *[Sketch for Search – Arrest]* or the painting *[Rooftops]*, painted over an unknown female nude. See Ziolkowska and Grzybała, *Avoiding Intermediary States*, pp. 312–13, 656.

¹⁹ One of them is in the collection of Jan Michalski and the Zderzak Gallery in Kraków, the other in a private collection in Warsaw. See Ziolkowska and Grzybała, "An (Un)orthodox Monograph," in *Avoiding Intermediary States*, pp. 676–79.

1. "Boy on a yellow background" and on its reverse "boy half on an ocher background, oil" are the canvases *Boy against a Yellow Background, Model, (A Boy)*, and *Boy on an Ocher Background, Model, (A Boy)*, 1956; oil, canvas; 70 × 50 cm; private collection

2. "Drawing of a boy (farmhand)" may formally correspond to *(Boy)*, [*Boy no. 1062*], undated; watercolor, gouache, paper; 41.9 × 29.4 cm; private collection
3. "Drawing of a boy with sculpture I" is the work on brown paper *Boy with a Sculpture I*, 1955; mixed technique, paper; 126.5 × 100 cm; private collection
4. "Drawing of a boy with sculpture II" is a work on brown paper *Boy with a Sculpture II*, 1955; mixed technique, paper; 126.5 × 100 cm; private collection



(BOY), [BOY NO. 1062]
undated; watercolor, gouache, paper;
41.9 × 29.4 cm
private collection



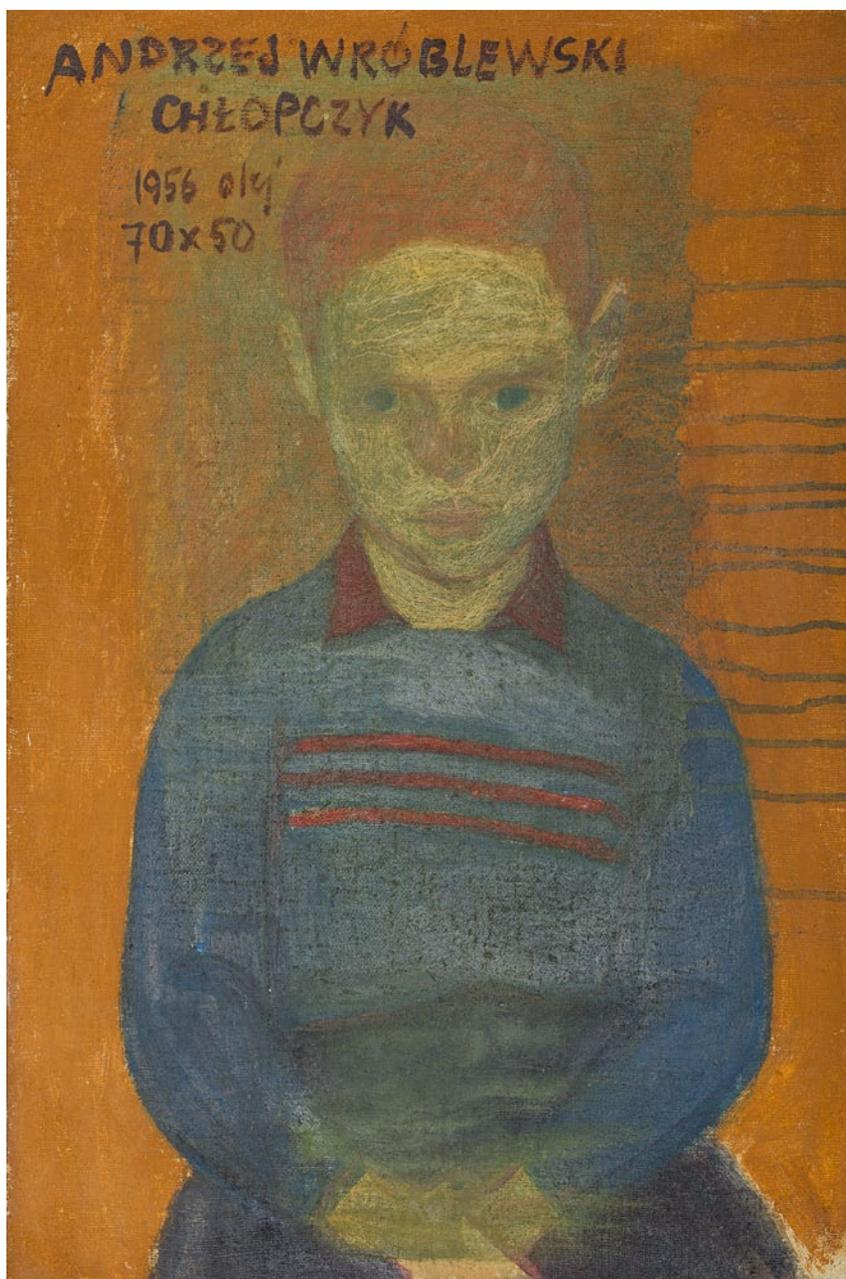
**BOY AGAINST A YELLOW
BACKGROUND, MODEL, (A BOY)**
1956; oil, canvas; 70 × 50 cm
private collection

In addition, the following works were found:

- *[Boy in Gymnastic Clothing]*, 1956; oil, woodboard; 52.4 × 18.5 cm; private collection
- *[Boy against a White Background]*, undated [1955/1956]; mixed technique, paper; 150.7 × 101.3 cm; private collection
- *(A Boy)*, *(Portrait of a Seated Boy, Boy no. 1059)*, undated; watercolor, gouache, paper; 42 × 29.5 cm; collection of Maria and Marek Pilecki
- *(A Boy)*, *[A Boy no. 1061]*, undated; watercolor, gouache, paper; 42 × 29.5 cm; collection of Hanna and Jarosław Przyborowski

**BOY ON AN OCHER BACKGROUND,
MODEL, (A BOY)**

1956; oil, canvas; 70 × 50 cm
private collection



- (A Boy), [Portrait of a Seated Boy, Boy no. 1058], undated; watercolor, gouache, paper; 42 × 29.5 cm; collection of K. and W. Szafrński

The search for the boy, however, does not end with these identified artworks. In the list of works not shown in the catalogue of the posthumous exhibition from 1958, Krystyna Wróblewska included five gouaches of the same dimensions (41 × 30 cm), which she titled “The Boy” (items 1214–18).²⁰ Four of them, numbered 1058, 1059, 1061, 1062 with pencil in the upper right corner, have been included in the above list. The fifth work hasn’t been found yet. We also know of a painting featuring

²⁰ List of exhibited works in *Andrzej Wróblewski. Posthumous Exhibition*, exh. cat. Palace of Art (Kraków, 1958), p. 66.

The Boy, which we are unable to assign to any of the calendar entries—the canvas [*Little Boy*] showing a young boy in a red shirt. The work was mentioned only once, in a catalogue of paintings.²¹ Now let us return to the main focus of this essay, that is, the painting sent to the 1956 Berlin exhibition.

III THE PAINTING AND ITS OWNER

The contemporary history of the *Boy against a Yellow Background, Model, (A Boy)*—an important example of Wróblewski's boy-themed paintings and one of the few canvases exhibited during the artist's lifetime—begins on October 14, 2006, at the DESA auction house in Katowice.²² On that day, the painting was presented to the public for the first time since the artist's monographic exhibition at the Poznań National Museum in 1967.²³ Its fate during the intervening period is unknown. In a study devoted to Wróblewski's work accompanying the Poznań retrospective, Andrzej Kostolowski emphasizes that Wróblewski was an “arsenałowicz” (a contributor to the Arsenal) from as early as two years previously, and “internally overcame an interest in Socialist Realism.”²⁴

During that time, *Boy against a Yellow Background ...* was most likely auctioned, or even sold, at the Warsaw branch of DESA, as evidenced by a stamp bearing the name of the auction house. Once the painting emerged at a public auction, Jan Michalski (who owned the work from 2006–19) wrote his first short essay dedicated to the canvas—*The Boy and his Buyer [Chłopiec i jego kupiec]*, dated mid-October 2007.²⁵ The protagonist of this personal essay is Lucjan Kret—the author's alter ego. In order to understand the circumstances and emotions that the painting provoked in the writer, let us cite the following passage:

The desire to own is associated with a dark instinct, which often causes us to act against ourselves and is not always rational. The sway of desire often follows on from infatuation ... Because of this, I'd rather tell the story of obtaining the desired painting as if it weren't about me, but someone else, someone entirely fictional. Let's say, Dr Lucjan Kret—an art historian, a lecturer at our University.²⁶

The narrative continued like this: one day, the art historian received a previously unknown painting by Wróblewski for expert examination, and although he didn't know the work from any reproductions or written accounts, he conceded that “a note in the painter's diary allows for unambiguous identification and precise dating” of the artwork.²⁷ The author saw in the painting the first modest “signs” of Wróblewski's return to “his own style” following several years of Socialist Realism: “A feeble, somewhat sad boy stood in a corner on a dirty green linoleum, against the background of an unsightly dado rail; on the right there were visible edges of paintings propped against the door, an artist's studio. ... The boy's hair was red, and against his blue face and skin, it appeared fiery orange. The boy seemed to be on fire, like a candle.”²⁸ A few months after Michalski's essay, the painting was meant to go to auction. Initially, this seemed to be without significance; after all,

²¹ On the reverse of the work there is [*A Model in a Blue Dress*], see Anna Król, “Kalendarium,” in Rostkowska, *Andrzej Wróblewski, 1927–1957*, p. 125.

²² DESA Auction House, Katowice, item 75, catalogue, p. 19. Sold price: 180,000 PLN.

²³ *Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957*, National Museum, Poznań, April 10–May 14, 1967, curators: Irena Moderska and Stanisława Kamińska.

²⁴ Andrzej Kostolowski, “O postawie i zaangażowaniu społecznym Andrzeja Wróblewskiego,” in *Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957*, exh. cat. National Museum (Poznań, 1967), p. 24.

²⁵ Jan Michalski, “Chłopiec i jego kupiec,” in ed. Michalski, *Chłopiec na żółtym tle. Teksty o Andrzeju Wróblewskim* (Kraków: Zderzak Gallery, 2009), pp. 73–77.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 73–74.

the scholar “did not like the painting, although he saw it as a pleasant academic discovery.” Several times he went back to look at his research subject, examining it closely and making increasingly extensive comparisons with European and American painting of the last century.”²⁹

Interestingly, the protagonist—as he admits himself—quickly changed his mind about the canvas. Leaving his office one day, he said goodbye to the painting as if it was a person, accustomed to its presence. “Undoubtedly, the painting had a soul,” he wrote, and as soon as he realized that “the space of the image had diverged out into two separate worlds, as did the hapless Berlioz’s apartment at Bolshaya Sadovaya 302-bi, taken over by Woland, as well as the entire structure of Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*. Eventually, he decided to buy the painting.”³⁰ Kret, who described himself as “an expert among art dealers,” knew that he had made a discovery—an unknown painting by one of the greatest twentieth-century Polish artists.³¹ Eventually, “after four months of anguish and waiting, Lucjan Kret got on a train to go to the auction. It was a foggy November day. ... He remembers the bidding as if through the fog, raising his hand and bidding until he heard applause and people started turning their heads to see who he was. Then he got up and ran out.”³²

Jan Michalski, an author and curator associated with the Zderzak Gallery, has devoted many years to researching Wróblewski’s work. His presence and taking part in the auction certainly drew attention to the undisputed quality and symbolic importance of Wróblewski’s oeuvre, but also the material value of the painting.

Besides the semi-biographical essay about the red-haired boy whose portrait adorns the cover of the eponymous *Boy on a yellow background. Texts about Andrzej Wróblewski* [*Chłopiec na żółtym tle. Teksty o Andrzeju Wróblewskim*], Michalski is the author of a number of insightful interpretations of the painting. He sees the boy as a returning spirit; dead during the painter’s lifetime, his uncanny doppelgänger; a comforting presence, pure compassion—*Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*; and even identifies him in Wróblewski’s sketches for *Executions*.³³

It is rare for a buyer to devote a literary text, or several texts, not so much to interpretations and analysis of an artwork, but reflections on authorship and circumstances of the purchase.³⁴ Michalski’s fascination with *Boy against a Yellow Background, Model, (A Boy)* has had direct consequences for subsequent assessments of the authenticity of Wróblewski’s work. Meanwhile, in 2019, the painting went up for auction and again found a new owner.³⁵

IV THE AUTHOR’S VERDICT

The history of *Boy against a Yellow Background, Model, (A Boy)* and its entering the collector and auction market is not the only example a boy-themed work that has joined public circulation in recent years. In 2015, Joanna Kordjak and Agnieszka Szewczyk—the curators of the exhibition *Just After the War* [*Zaraz po wojnie*—introduced a group of Wróblewski’s works as part of the show’s narrative. In this light, the story about Lucjan Kret takes on a different meaning.³⁶ Apart from two

²⁹ Ibid., p. 74.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 76.

³³ Jan Michalski, “Chłopiec na żółtym tle. Przykład obrazu-psyche,” in Michalski, *Chłopiec na żółtym tle*, pp. 21–37.

³⁴ Jan Michalski, “Wizje zbawienia w sztuce AW,” in ed. Michalski, *Krytyk jako dzieło sztuki* (Kraków: Zderzak Gallery, 2019), pp. 667–98.

³⁵ Auction: *Sztuka współczesna Klasycy Awangardy po 1945*, Warsaw, May 30, 2019, auction code: 618ASW06, item 106. Sold price: 900.000 PLN.

³⁶ *Just After the War*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, October 3, 2015–January 10, 2016, curators: Joanna Kordjak and Agnieszka Szewczyk. It should be noted that the exhibition presented several hundred objects from various fields of art, including archival material, emphasizing the relationship between politics and art in propaganda used by the postwar authorities, especially in relation to war ruins, reconstruction, the role of art and iconography in the creation of new national structures.

- ³⁷ See Jan Michalski, ed., *Wróblewski nieznan* (Kraków: Zderzak Gallery, 1993), pp. 127–28 and 231. These works were first reproduced in color in Joanna Kordjak and Agnieszka Szewczyk, eds., *Zaraz po wojnie*, exh. cat. Zachęta – National Gallery of Art (Warsaw, 2015), pp. 110, 114, 115.
- ³⁸ *Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957. Retrospektywa*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, October 31–December 3, 1995, curator: Hanna Wróblewska; National Museum, Kraków, January 26–March 31, 1996, curator: Zofia Gołubiew.
- ³⁹ Following Wróblewski's death, most of the large-format compositions on wrapping paper (also those that were not glued onto canvases or stretchers) were rolled up. Examples of such works can be seen in Marek Sobczyk's photographic documentation from Teresa Wróblewska's house during Sobczyk, Jarosław Modzelewski, and Jan Michalski's visits. See Jarosław Modzelewski and Marek Sobczyk, *Tabela co?; czym? [polityka] / What?; With What? Table [Politics]*, exh. cat. Centre for Contemporary Art Łaźnia (Gdańsk, 2016), pp. 15–18. A dozen or so rolled-up works were deposited by Krystyna Wróblewska at the National Museum in Poznań in 1967 and were kept this way for years, until collected by the artist's heirs in 2001.
- ⁴⁰ Joanna Kordjak, "A Boy with a Statue," in Kordjak and Szewczyk, *Zaraz po wojnie*, p. 92–93.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 93.
- ⁴² The statue is one of twenty-three casts in the collection of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków (inv. No. R38). For more on the collection and its history, see http://m.muzeum.malopolska.pl/en/blog/-/blogs/historia-kolekcja-odlewow-gipsowych-z-akademii-sztuk-pieknych-w-krakowie?p_auth=gxcP3pgll, and for more on this particular cast, see <http://m.muzeum.malopolska.pl/obiekty/-/a/18593031/18665393> (accessed 27 May, 2020). See Krystyna Gawlikowska, *Sztuka Mezopotamii* (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1975), pp. 162–66.

canvases from 1949—*Execution (Execution VII)* and *Husband Killed in the War, Killed Husband*—last exhibited over twenty-five years earlier, the Zachęta exhibition also included works that had never been exhibited, for example, abstract compositions (known only from black and white reproductions in literature) and two large-format portraits of boys with statues.³⁷ Hanna Wróblewska and Zofia Gołubiew, the curators of two editions of the monographic exhibition *Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957. Retrospective [Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957. Retrospektywa]*, were the only people to know them from research conducted with private collections.³⁸ At that time, however, their owner didn't agree to include them in the show. The state of the artworks, stored rolled up after Wróblewski's death, prevented them from being exhibited for conservation reasons. Titled: *Untitled (Redheaded/Red-haired Boy with a Headless Statue)* and *Untitled (Boy with a Headless Statue)*, the works were placed in the room next to *Painting about the Horrors of War (1948)* and the aforementioned *Husband Killed in the War, Killed Husband*, suggesting that they could have been created during the same period.³⁹ However, their dating is significantly different.

The somewhat misleading interpretation of the painting was highlighted by the problematic description included in the exhibition catalogue, interpreting the headless statue as related to antiquity and *homo decapitatus*:

References to antiquity, more or less literal, were an important theme in painting, literature and theater of the 1940s. They served to elevate the war experience and artists often compared the postwar destruction to ancient ruins. ... The headless statue of a woman is another image of a fragmented human body in Wróblewski's work ... The ancient statue of a headless woman also brings to mind the female figure in *Child with Dead Mother (1949)*. The artist employed his characteristic method of framing here, decapitating her with the upper edge of the painting.⁴⁰

It seems that this interpretation goes a step too far, trying to justify the presence of the statue "not just in the context of the postwar crisis in figurative art, but also as a self-reflection of an artist who tries to cut his ties with tradition, his spiritual roots, and the influence of his mother, also an artist."⁴¹ The mystery of the sculpture's origin is much easier to solve than attempting to explain its presence next to the young boy. The headless figure is a plaster cast of Gudea, a priest and Sumerian ruler of the Lagash city-state, in the collection of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków.⁴² The 142 cm high cast was made from the so-called Statue E (ref. AO 6, blue-black diorite), discovered in 1881 by Ernest Choquin de Serzec. The latter led excavations in the Iraqi town of Telo, an archaeological site at the location of the ancient city of Girsu. Interestingly, all known standing figures of Gudea are headless, and the inscription visible on the statue is dedicated to the goddess Bau and sacrifices to this deity.

Placing the boy-themed works next to others dated 1949, their unfortunate interpretation, as well as their public unveiling at the exhibition in Zachęta, resulted in a letter from Jan Michalski to the institution's director, asking for the origins of the artworks to be disclosed. Interestingly, when Michalski questioned Wróblewski's

authorship of these two pieces, he forgot that the exhibition *Just After the War* included, for the first time, other works—the aforementioned abstract compositions.⁴³ This time, Michalski needed more than his own professional intuition and the source in the form of a note dating the painting in Wróblewski's 1956 Calendar, and pointed out by Kret. If Michalski had consulted the 1955 Calendar, he would have easily found an entry about two boys with a sculpture from December 16 and 17. Despite the issued explanation and information about the purchase of the works by the then owner from the artist's widow, Teresa Wróblewska, the critic—in his publication, *Anatomy of a Forgery* [*Anatomia fałszerstwa*], documenting the gradual discovery of a portrait of the forger, the drawings' author—puts forward a theory about the eponymous forgery, emphasizing the criminal liability of a public institution exhibiting these works and providing them with symbolic capital.⁴⁴ “Of course, there is a possibility that both works—once irrefutable evidence of their origin is presented—will turn out to be works by Wróblewski”—Michalski writes at the end of one of the letters to Zachęta. The origin of the artworks was proven beyond doubt, and it was Wróblewski himself who provided the evidence.⁴⁵

⁴³ Jan Michalski, *Falsyfikaty Wróblewskiego w Zachęcie*, <http://zderzak.pl/media/Falsyfikaty%20Wr%C3%B3blewskiego%20w%20Zach%C4%99cie.pdf> (accessed June 20, 2020).

⁴⁴ Jan Michalski, *Anatomia fałszerstwa* (Kraków: Zderzak Gallery, 2016).

⁴⁵ Michalski, *Anatomia fałszerstwa*, p. 12.

Originally published in: *Andrzej Wróblewski. Waiting Room*, ed. Magdalena Ziółkowska, Wojciech Grzybała, Warsaw—Ostfildern 2020, pp. 308–323



Gudea, gypsum casting of ancient sculpture, nineteenth century
Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts,
Kraków