

MUZEUM
museum
of modern art
in warsaw



What is Enlightenment?
200 Years of the University of
Warsaw Library Print Collection

18.05 – 17.06.2018

Museum on the Vistula

opening: May 18th, 7 P.M.

The exhibition attempts to respond to the current debate in Poland and around the world on the “crisis of Enlightenment values.” To what extent is the crisis something new and self-contained, and to what extent is it inherent in the internal dynamics of the Enlightenment? The issue of the Enlightenment is always an issue of the here and now: any understanding of today’s reality without drawing on the sources of modernity will always be incomplete. This is clearly evident in the Polish context, where discussions and conflicts over the approach to modernity, and the role of religion and tradition, the significance of what is public and shared, have remained unresolved since the days of Stanisław August, but continue to drive thinking about a better future.

The dialogue presented in the exhibition generates a vision of the Enlightenment as an era marked by crisis and conflict, but also an era that still endures—not as a phantom or absence, but as a living framework shaping our contemporary world. The Enlightenment will last as long as an attitude of critical thought is pursued.

Two hundred years ago, in 1818, the Commission for Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment purchased the famed Cabinet of Drawings from the heirs of King Stanisław August—a collection of drawings and prints reflecting the modernizing passions and ambitions of the ruler, but also created with an eye to the artistic education of future generations. The king’s print collection at the Royal University of Warsaw, expanded by a gift from Stanisław Kostka Potocki, formed the core of the first public collection of drawings and prints in Polish lands, and functions to this day as the University of Warsaw Print Collection—one of the city’s little-known but publicly accessible treasures. The exhibition “What Is Enlightenment?” thus touches on the identity of two institutions. On one hand, it re-examines the canon of the University of Warsaw Print Collection, and on the other hand contributes to the reflections on modernity carried on by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, embodying the very origins of the notion of modernity.

The exhibition "What Is Enlightenment?" attempts to answer the question: How do we rewrite the history of Polish modernity. To this end, we focus on the Enlightenment sources of the Print Collection. These sources are treated primarily as the deepest level or "archive" of Polish modernity, and as a point of departure for reflections on the complex relation between the historical (seeming to belong to a period in the distant past) and the "here and now," and on what is yet to come: the future, which as a utopian model was such an important point of reference for the Enlightenment project (as it is for any modernizing project). Much as Enlightenment artists, philosophers and collectors, like archaeologists, studied the past to draw conclusions and lessons from it, and create visions and prophecies for the future, in this exhibition as well contemporary artists attempt to decipher current situations and signposts for the contemporary world from the often complex images and symbols of that era. This dialogue between past and present doesn't stress the differences but reveals their shared Enlightenment identity. The Print Collection is examined, among other ways, in the perspective of the conflict between universal history based on human rights and democracy, and particular history, the tension between knowledge and the imitation of knowledge, and also in the context of the genesis of contemporary liberalism, the fight for emancipation, and finally the roots of the "Polish civil war" which has shaped the Polish public sphere for over 200 years. We consider the Enlightenment to be an important touchstone in discussing the systemic transformation of the past thirty years.

A special role is played here by Goshka Macuga, the Polish/British artist nominated for the prestigious Turner Prize in 2008. Macuga returns in this context to the topics of the fate of art in post-transformation Poland (which she explored in her individual exhibition at Zachęta in 2011) and the political nature of prints. Her view of the collection and the heritage of the Enlightenment is steeped in a post-humanistic perspective and forms a commentary on the entire exhibition. In this glimpse from the future, the Age of Enlightenment and our "here and now" coalesce into a single epoch.

Artists:

Anna Boghiguan, Andrea Bowers, Vincenzo Brenna, Pablo Bronstein, Augustin Brunais, Jacques Callot, Olga Czernyszewa, Matthäus Deisch, Camille Henrot, William Hogarth, Ewa Juskiewicz, Nikita Kadan, Johann Christian Kammsetzer, Tadeusz Kościuszko, Jakub Kubicki, Zbigniew Libera, Emanuel Listnau, Friedrich Anton August Lohrmann, Goshka Macuga, Domenico Merlini, Johann Heinrich Müntz, Anna Niesterowicz, Nomadic State (Karolina Mełnicka, Stach Szumski), Jean-Pierre Norblin de La Gourdaine, Ferdynand Pinck, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Jean-Louis Prieur, Roee Rosen, Ephraim Schröger, Franciszek Smuglewicz, Mikołaj Sobczak, Józef Wall, Stanisław Zawadzki, Szymon Bogumił Zug

Exhibition prepared by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and Library of the University of Warsaw. Project co-financed by the City of Warsaw.

Curatorial team

Goshka Macuga, Łukasz Ronduda, Tomasz Szerszeń

Substantive consultations

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Exhibition architecture

Pracownia Macieja Siudy: Jan Szeliga, Maciej Siuda

Graphic design

Piotr Chuchla

Exhibition poster

postNoviki

English translation

Weronika Mincer

Execution of exhibition furniture

S4P Manufaktura Mebli

Realization

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Cooperation

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Organizers:

