

Summary

Lost Masterpieces

The Fortunes of Józef Pankiewicz's Painting *The Vegetable Market*

Poznań's National Museum houses a painting titled *The Vegetable Market*, which is regarded as having been painted by Józef Pankiewicz in 1888. In the bottom-left-hand corner a signature indicates that he is the artist. Pankiewicz is one of Poland's best-known modern artists, and the first to produce Polish Impressionist art. The reason for writing this book about Pankiewicz was the discovery of an old photograph depicting the original of *The Vegetable Market* which differs significantly from the canvas in the Poznań collection. This photograph was taken several months after Pankiewicz completed *The Vegetable Market*. It uses the egg tempera technique, thanks to which it has a sharpness that allows details and brushstrokes to be discerned. In view of this difference, I sought to establish whether the painting in the Poznań collection is the original or perhaps a replica or copy, or maybe even a fake.

First of all, I traced the history of Pankiewicz's *The Vegetable Market* and the fortunes of the canvas in the Poznań collection in order to establish whether the sources available indicate the identity of these paintings. I maintain that this is not the case. The canvas painted by Pankiewicz immediately became part of Ignacy Korwin-Milewski's collection. It was exhibited for the last time in 1890. In the 1920s Milewski's collection was broken up and it is not known what happened to *The Vegetable Market*. For many years the painting was only known in Poland from black-and-white reproductions in publications on this artist. The painting hanging in the Poznań's National Museum was bought by the collection in 1948. According to its museum inventory card, which was produced many years later, this painting is the original, and was found in 1939. However, I have not found any sources that might confirm this information. The story of how the painting found its way into the Poznań collection is also extremely mysterious, and no documents related to this survive.

A technological analysis of the National Museum painting, based on the findings of conservators and photography specialists have produced so far using IR and UV rays, as well as an analysis of how the figures and objects were formed have led me to conclude that the Poznań composition is a fake. I recognize that Pankiewicz could not have created this work, which differs so greatly from the high level evident of that in the photograph and of Pankiewicz's other notable works, in com-

parison with which it exhibits glaring clumsiness. This conclusion is confirmed by an analysis of the signature, which is also forged. Works by Poland's eminent artists, including ones by Pankiewicz, began to be forged from at least the beginning of the 20th century. The Poznań painting is another fake attributed to this artist.

In reaching this conclusion, I strove to answer why in 1948 such a weak painting was deemed to be one of Pankiewicz's. I cannot rule out that the circumstances at the times were decisive, bearing in mind that for the museum collections plundered during wartime by the German occupying forces, every piece recovered from the ravages of war or offered to museums for purchase was greeted with euphoria. Of similar importance is the decision taken by its director at the time, Zdzisław Kępiński, which meant that Poznań's museum was based on collecting contemporary Polish painting. Kępiński was of the opinion that this had its roots in French Impressionism. Pankiewicz's *The Vegetable Market* was painted immediately before the first Impressionist work in Polish art, which was the same artist's 1890 work *The Flower Market*. If we remember that the latter was acquired by the Poznań collection not long after, in 1950, we can understand why *The Vegetable Market's* shortcomings were not noticed. For many years both *Market* paintings were the jewel in the crown of the Poznań collection.

However, due to the lack of crucial documentation and the incorrect information in the museum card inventory, the circumstances in which *The Vegetable Market* was purchased for the Poznań museum are sufficiently unclear as to mean that the explanation presented above, though likely, is not the only one worth considering. The chaos of the initial post-war years provided favourable circumstances for dishonest practices. It was common knowledge that the communist authorities were pillaging whatever landowners' property had survived the war. What is less known, however, is information gathered by the secret services of the time regarding works of art being transported out of the country and fakes being put in their place, which often found their way into state collections. The story of Pankiewicz's lost painting still has missing pieces, and too much time has passed since World War II to get to the truth quickly. However, we cannot rule out that the original of *The Vegetable Market* did not disappear in the interwar period along with many other paintings from Milewski's collection, but was taken out of the country much later, in the first years following the Second World War.

Translated by Rob Pagett