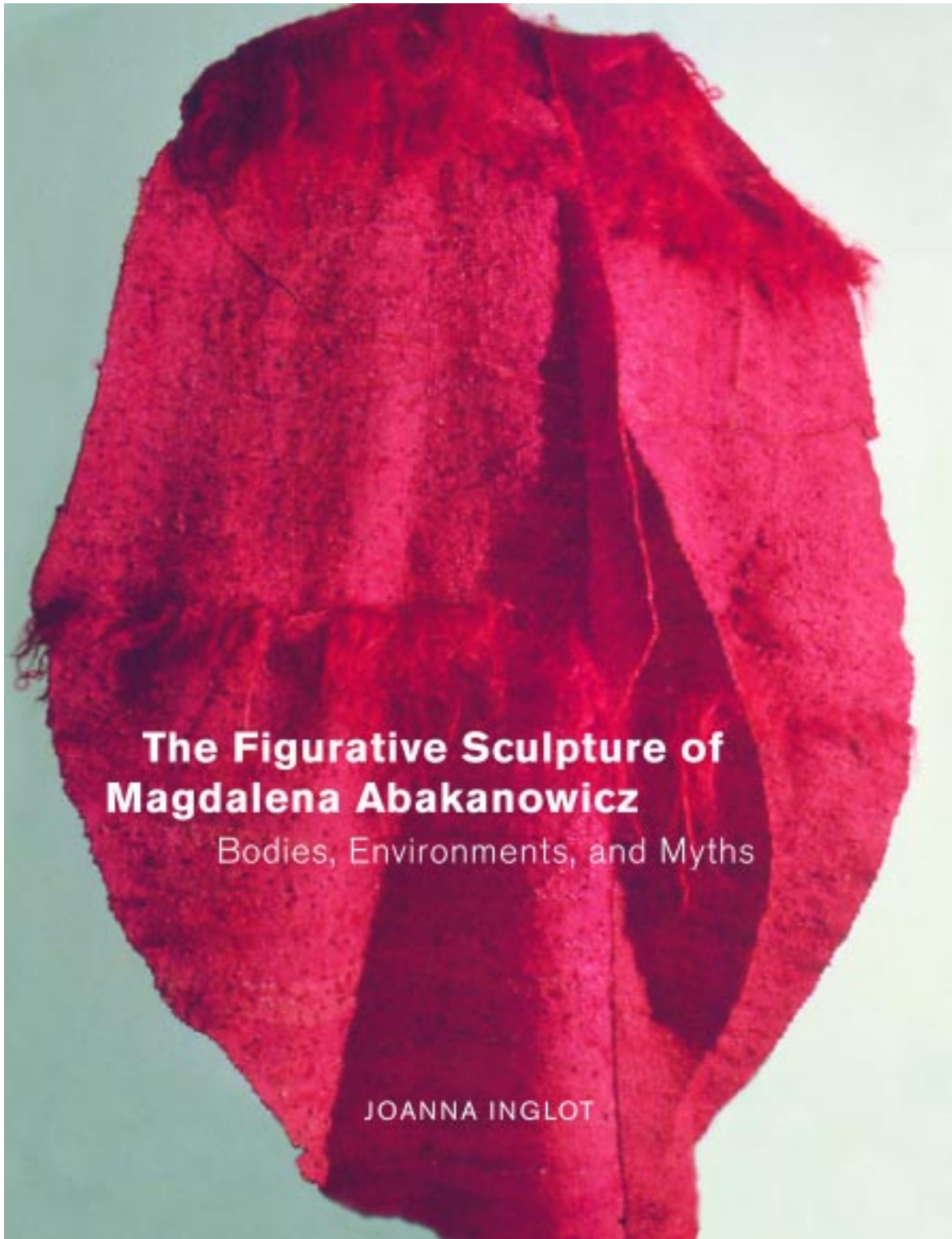


Excerpted from



**The Figurative Sculpture of
Magdalena Abakanowicz**

Bodies, Environments, and Myths

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Abakanowicz's Artistic Beginnings

THE POLISH CULTURAL MILIEU FROM 1945 TO 1960

When the war ended in 1945, Abakanowicz's family left the outskirts of Warsaw and settled in the small city of Tczew near Gdańsk, in northern Poland, where they could start a new life. Their move to the Baltic coast was precipitated by the difficult sociopolitical circumstances they found themselves in during the early years of the Communist takeover of Poland. Almost immediately, the Communists declared many landowners "enemies of the people," confiscated all their property, and forced them to move away from their estates. Already in July 1944, the Polish Provisional Government, which was controlled by the Communists, issued a proclamation of radical land reform to be implemented on the territories liberated from the Nazi occupation. As the new authorities established themselves in the area around Warsaw, they took over large and medium landholdings and instigated a ruthless agrarian revolution,¹ which made it impossible for the Abakanowicz family to reclaim their property.

Like many other people of similar background, Magdalena's parents moved to the territories vacated by the fleeing German population,² where they were able to find a place to live and work. In this new environment, it was easier to hide their true identity and to avoid political harassment. Abakanowicz recalls that her father believed that they should all adapt to these circumstances and

support the changes imposed by the new regime.³ Carefully hiding his background, he managed to get a post as a supervisor in the regional department of agriculture, and later, together with Magdalena's mother, Helena Domaszowska, he also ran a small newspaper kiosk to support his family.

Abakanowicz completed part of her high school education in the *gimnazjum* in Tczew from 1945 to 1947; then she went to Gdynia for two additional years of art school at the Liceum Sztuk Plastycznych w Gdyni. Two of her classmates from Tczew, Janina Piłowska-Włostocka and Janina's brother Jerzy Wojte, who was then Abakanowicz's boyfriend, remember that already in high school Magdalena showed talent in art and that she used to make small sculptures as gifts for her friends.⁴ Jerzy Wojte maintains that Abakanowicz dreamed then of becoming an artist.⁵ This desire crystallized during her studies in Gdynia, especially when she took a school trip to the southwestern city of Wrocław in 1948 to see the widely advertised "Exhibit of the Regained Territories" (*Wystawa Ziem Odzyskanych*). This show was organized by the authorities as a historical, political, and economic overview of Poland's triumphant acquisition of the former German territories in the west, but it also became one of the most important manifestations of avant-garde trends in art after the war.⁶ There, for the first time, Abakanowicz saw large-scale installations designed by such prominent Polish artists as Henryk Stażewski and Stanisław Zamecznik, whom she befriended in later years, and encountered innovative multimedia works incorporating nontraditional materials such as ropes, railroad tracks, and pieces of coal. This experience greatly impressed the young Abakanowicz and awakened her passion for modern art.⁷

Immediately after her graduation from the Liceum in 1949, Abakanowicz entered the Gdańsk Academy of Fine Arts, located then in the nearby resort town of Sopot. Later known as the Sopot School, this institution was established in 1945 by a group of artists who sought to create a new interdisciplinary art program based on a close interaction among painting, sculpture, ceramics, textiles, and interior design. The trademark of the Sopot School was its emphasis on the colorist tradition, which strongly influenced all of the disciplines taught there, especially ceramics and textile design, two areas for which the school became well known. The experimental work in ceramics was directed by Hanna Żuławska, who promoted application of colorful glazes in a gestural and expressionistic way. Textile design, taught by Józefa Wnuk, was treated as a monumental form of painting. Wnuk initiated the production of brightly colored, semi-abstract, biomorphic paintings on large fabrics that she and her students often exhibited hanging freely outdoors.⁸

Abakanowicz maintains that she wanted to study sculpture in Sopot but was denied this opportunity because her sculpture instructor, Adam Smolana, declared that she "did not have a feeling for form" and relegated her to study other disciplines. Such an unequivocal verdict from the leading authority on sculpture, she says, discouraged her from pursuing this medium for years.⁹ But even if Abakanowicz secretly longed to work in sculpture, in Sopot she became deeply engaged in the study of textile design. The large painted fabrics promoted by Józefa Wnuk, in particular, fascinated her and became an important resource for her in the 1950s. Most important, however, the

Sopot experience taught Abakanowicz to think of art as a free and flexible process in which she could move easily from one medium to another or combine media in inventive ways. Such an open and experimental approach gave her courage to break the rigid disciplinary boundaries, an attitude that came to typify her art throughout her life.

Abakanowicz stayed at the Sopot School for a year; then, in 1950, she transferred to the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. She knew that living and studying in the capital would provide her with greater opportunities as an artist. Indeed, next to Kraków, Warsaw was the most important cultural center in Poland. Its stature as an artistic hub grew rapidly after World War II as prominent intellectuals, writers, and artists converged there, supporting the reconstruction of the nation's capital, which had been devastated by the war.

Certainly, the war had brought catastrophic destruction to all Eastern and Central Europe, but the extent of Poland's devastation was unparalleled. Over 80 percent destroyed, Warsaw was the most ruined city in Europe.¹⁰ Restoration of the war-torn country and its demolished capital became a common goal, pursued with determination by the entire society. It also constituted one of the most urgent propaganda objectives of the Polish Communist leaders, who, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, tried to rally national support for the Moscow-backed government. Reconstruction of Warsaw became for them an important phase in the creation of a new political system, a powerful symbol of the "construction of socialism."¹¹ Indeed, the Communists staged regular propaganda campaigns to mobilize the population to participate in the process of reconstructing Warsaw. Ubiquitous slogans, such as "The entire nation builds its capital city" or "Working for Warsaw is a point of honor and duty of every Pole," successfully aimed at instilling a sense of moral obligation and evoking the spirit of national integration in support of the regime's policies.¹²

The socialist ideas were especially appealing to intellectuals and artists, who saw themselves at the forefront of this new historic process. The intelligentsia in Poland, as in other Eastern European countries, had been disillusioned with the pre-World War II reality, especially the failure of previous regimes to promote social equality and to protect the national interest. Soon after the war, numerous artists, scholars, and thinkers, especially of the younger generation, embraced the Marxist-Leninist ideology. They strongly believed that after the defeat of the Nazis only the left-wing progressive forces would be able to abolish injustices of the past, foster progress, and create a better social system. The Communist leadership, in turn, stressed the pivotal importance of artists and intellectuals for its planned sociopolitical and cultural change.¹³ Hoping to play a leading role in building a new society, the Polish intelligentsia responded to the call of making art more accessible to the masses. Although this postwar wave of enthusiasm for the idea of "mass-oriented" culture was brief, it nevertheless affected the creation and consolidation of many artistic circles in Warsaw in the early 1950s.

Abakanowicz's decision to move to Poland's capital was to a large extent motivated by the appeal of this new cultural climate. Recalling her enthusiasm about these years, Abakanowicz stated that "everything was boiling there," so many artists and intellectuals were moving to Warsaw at that

time and she wanted to be part of all this.¹⁴ Despite her family background and the hardships she had experienced as a result of the Communist takeover, Abakanowicz was supportive of the regime.¹⁵ Like many young Polish artists at that time, she embraced the Marxist vision of an egalitarian community. She saw in socialism the means of achieving a new and superior social order that would prevent a recurrence of recent tragic historical events.

But as much as the idea of living in Warsaw while a new political system was forming excited the young artist, her everyday life there was extremely difficult. Living on her own, she could count only on minimal support from her impoverished parents and a small stipend from school. Moreover, in October 1950, at the very outset of Abakanowicz's studies, the Communist government introduced a radical currency reform that substantially devalued individual savings and led to the pauperization of large segments of the society.¹⁶ Like many other students in Warsaw, she had to divide her time among long hours of classes, mandatory political activities in Communist organizations, and a range of menial jobs.¹⁷ At the same time, she had to endure the stress of constantly hiding her family history—for she knew that the discovery of her heritage and association with Piotr Abakanowicz could result in expulsion from the Academy. This experience was probably a large factor in Abakanowicz's subsequent efforts to reinvent herself and to conceal the details of her early years, as she herself admitted in an interview with Michael Brenson: "This was a very difficult moment because we, as a family, lost our identity. We were deprived of our social position and we were, like, thrown out of society. We were punished for being rich. So I had to hide my background. I had to lie. I had to invent."¹⁸

The Academy of Fine Arts was not what she expected, either. Abakanowicz entered the Warsaw Academy at the worst possible time in Polish postwar history. The period of her studies there, 1950 to 1954, coincided with the most severe Stalinist oppression and the attempted imposition of Socialist Realism in the arts. The Stalinist leaders of Eastern Europe, in accordance with the Soviet model, staged total transformations of their societies. In theory, Stalin's propaganda extolled "people's democracies," but in reality the power was monopolized by the Communist Party and its self-selecting leadership. The Communists placed special emphasis on reconstruction and reform of culture and education. Stalin, like Lenin before him, aimed at subordinating the arts to the needs and demands of the party and using them for political agitation, which he achieved by imposing the Socialist Realist doctrine.

The first measure to impose this dogma came in 1932 in the Soviet Union, when Stalin's regime dissolved all existing literary and artistic groups and replaced them with the Artists' Union, designed to control all cultural matters. Socialist Realism was officially proclaimed in Moscow two years later, at the first Congress of Soviet Writers. Andrei Zhdanov, the secretary of the Communist Party under Stalin, announced that Socialist Realism was the only acceptable artistic form for Soviet art and literature, and defined it as a "true and historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development . . . combined with the task of educating workers in the spirit of Communism."¹⁹ Equating art with party propaganda, Zhdanov ensured the party's right to intervene

directly in cultural matters and control them. His decrees had a paralyzing effect on all creative work in the Soviet Union throughout the 1930s. The strict imposition of monolithic views on art intensified after World War II, when these ideas were also forced upon the Soviet-dominated countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

In Poland, Socialist Realism (*realizm socjalistyczny*) was proclaimed as a cultural dogma in 1949. It was first discussed at the Conference of Artists, Architects, and Critics in the small town of Nieborów outside of Warsaw on February 12–13, when the vice-minister of art and culture, Włodzimierz Sokorski, together with the rector of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, Juliusz Starzyński, introduced its fundamental concepts and goals.²⁰ The conference created controversy among artists and critics,²¹ but this did not stop the implementation of the program. The formal acceptance of Socialist Realism in Poland was announced only two months later at the Fourth General Meeting of the Union of Polish Artists in Katowice. Vice-minister Sokorski stipulated the philosophical underpinnings of this new policy, stressing that the goals of “socialist society” could be expressed and realized only in ideologically charged realist art. He also declared that cultural policies would be supervised centrally by the Ministry of Art and Culture. The goal was not only to control the development of Socialist Realism but also to ensure that Polish art followed the canons established in the Soviet Union.²²

The premise of Socialist Realism was that art should be “national in form” and “socialist in content” in all Soviet bloc countries. These concepts were never clearly defined, but the general understanding was that art should reflect the ideology of the Communist Party in a style that was based on the local national tradition and not on Western cultural influences. Modernism in art was categorized as “bourgeois” and “cosmopolitan,” and condemned as harmful to the Marxist-Leninist order. In 1949 Jerzy Albrecht, the head of the Department of Propaganda, Culture, and Education of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, summarized this view in an article published in the official Cominform journal: “The sharpening struggle between the forces of progress, peace, and socialism, led by the Soviet Union, and the imperialist camp has faced us with the urgent task of fighting cosmopolitanism in culture, for it is with the help of this weapon that American imperialism hopes to weaken the people ideologically.”²³

This campaign against “cosmopolitanism” had profound consequences for the development of the arts in Poland during the early 1950s. Modernism in all forms was rejected and a realist mode of depiction, based on the national nineteenth-century academic tradition, was advocated as the only possible form of artistic expression. But realist devices alone were not sufficient. Socialist Realism required an expression of political and ideological content through the portrayal of Communist leaders, workers, and peasants engaged in the daily tasks of “building socialism.” Works of art had to not only celebrate the new political order, but also raise society’s consciousness of the spirit of Communism.²⁴ The party openly condemned all manifestations of modern art and exercised tight control over the implementation of Socialist Realism at various art institutions, including art schools, museums, and galleries, all of which were nationalized.

The Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, the most important training center for young artists, came under special scrutiny. Major decisions regarding the curriculum and the appointment of faculty and staff were under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Art and Culture, which legally curtailed the independence of all institutions of higher education in the arts.²⁵ Courses in drawing and composition stressed clarity of representation and craftsmanship—any ambiguities had to be eliminated. In addition to the heavy load of classes in history and art history, taught in a manner prescribed by the Communist officials, students had to spend long hours studying Marxist-Leninist philosophy.²⁶

Coming from Sopot, where a free atmosphere and experimental artistic climate prevailed, Abakanowicz found the Warsaw Academy shockingly rigid and conservative. She recalls how her drawing instructor, Mr. Tomkiewicz, faithfully attempted to implement the dictates of Socialist Realism: “I liked to draw, seeking the form by placing lines, one next to the other. The professor would come with an eraser in his hand and rub out every unnecessary line on my drawing, leaving a thin, dry contour. I hated him for it.”²⁷

At the Warsaw Academy traditional drawing and painting classes were required of all students, including those in the Department of Textile Design, where Abakanowicz pursued her degree.²⁸ Within her major field, Abakanowicz received instruction in a wide variety of areas of textile design, studying semimechanical jacquard weaving methods and screenprint techniques for utilitarian fabrics with Anna Śledziewska, learning about traditional hand-weaving from Eleonora Plutyńska, and continuing to paint decorative fabrics in the studio of Maria Urbanowicz. In retrospect, it seems, the most important instructor for the development of Abakanowicz’s technical skills as a weaver was Plutyńska, even though she promoted a rather old-fashioned approach to fiber. Plutyńska instilled in Abakanowicz a deep respect for materials, taught her how to use natural dyes and uneven homespun wool, and showed her how to compose “from memory,” directly on the loom, without preparatory drawings or studies. Plutyńska introduced vernacular methods into the weaving curriculum at the Academy, especially the “double weaving” that she had discovered in villages in the Białystok region in northeastern Poland, which later influenced not only the work of Abakanowicz but also such other prominent Polish weavers as Barbara Falkowska, Maria Teresa Chojnacka, Hanna Czajkowska, and Ada Kierzkowska, all of whom studied with Plutyńska in the 1950s and gained international fame during the 1960s for their innovations in fiber art.²⁹

Like all the other students in the Department of Textile Design, Abakanowicz had to learn a wide range of techniques within a rigid curriculum that required, on average, thirty hours of studio work per week.³⁰ This demanding program provided her with all the necessary skills to become a professional textile designer and weaver. Indeed, one of the chief goals of the department, which went hand in hand with the dictates of Socialist Realism, was to prepare students for future work in the newly nationalized textile industry. The party ideologues in charge of cultural policy in Stalinist Poland saw applied arts and handicrafts, such as weaving, as the most suitable medium

for the incorporation of the arts into everyday life and for the revitalization of the national tradition in a form easily received by the masses. Plutyńska's and Śledziewska's studios, with their emphasis on national folk traditions and professional training, embodied this policy.³¹ Thus, it was a logical step for Abakanowicz, after her graduation, to accept a post in the silk factory "Milanówek" as a designer of ties. Yet she worked there only briefly, leaving without much regret in 1956, the year she married an engineer, Jan Kosmowski, who was able to provide her with financial support.

Although in later years Abakanowicz frequently claimed that she was disillusioned with the rigid and dogmatic training she had received in Warsaw, the overall atmosphere at the Academy was not as bleak as she or some accounts of Socialist Realism in Poland indicate. Not all of the faculty submitted to the directives issued by the Stalinist bureaucrats of the Ministry of Art and Culture. As Wojciech Włodarczyk points out in his renowned study on Polish Socialist Realism and its impact on the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, the implementation of specific rules and detailed directives depended greatly on individual professors.³²

Several of Abakanowicz's teachers at the Academy, in fact, managed to circumvent the official curriculum requirements. Most faculty members were prominent artists, many of whom had been educated abroad and had close links with Western modernist trends, and they did their best to avoid accepting any party directives regarding their teaching. For example, Marek Włodarski, who taught Abakanowicz painting, remained a major proponent of Surrealism. He was educated in Paris in the 1920s, and after a year of working in the studio of Fernand Léger in 1925, he came in close contact with André Breton and André Masson.³³ After his return to Poland in 1929, Włodarski explored the Surrealist world of fantasy and imagination, continuing to do so during his tenure at the Warsaw Academy in the 1950s.³⁴ Abakanowicz's interest in the biomorphic and fantastic qualities in the art of Paul Klee, Joan Miró, and Alexander Calder, whose collective influence is detectable in some of her untitled works of the mid-1950s to 1960s (plate 5), was to some extent stimulated by Włodarski and his instruction. Other professors who taught at the Academy, such as Oscar Hansen and Bohdan Urbanowicz in the Department of Industrial Design and Architecture, also worked extensively in France before World War II. From 1948 to 1950 Hansen and Urbanowicz both studied in the studio of Pierre Jeanneret, cousin and partner of Le Corbusier, and together explored the integrative ideas on art formulated by Le Corbusier.³⁵ Like Włodarski, they never really gave in to the pressures of the Stalinist administrators at the Academy.

The most remarkable and inspirational of these professors, who was in many ways instrumental in the early stages of Abakanowicz's career, was the architect Jerzy Sołtan. From 1945 to 1949 Sołtan also worked with Le Corbusier in Paris. He was a codesigner of the Modulor proportional system and collaborated with Le Corbusier on plans for the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles and on urban designs for the cities of La Rochelle and Saint-Die in France and Ismir in Turkey.³⁶ In 1949 Sołtan returned to Poland to accept the position of professor of architecture and industrial design at the Warsaw Academy, hoping to continue the experiments he had started in France. He was especially interested in developing collective housing projects like the Unité in Marseilles and be-

lieved that the new sociopolitical system in Poland would enable him to realize his dream of building housing communities for the masses.³⁷

Transmitted by the Polish architect Szymon Syrkus, the ideas of Le Corbusier had already become popular in Poland during the 1920s.³⁸ They emerged again for a brief time in 1949 due to Sołtan's efforts but were almost immediately rejected and condemned by the Stalinist regime.³⁹ Unable to work openly in architecture, Sołtan concentrated instead on industrial and interior design. Together with Oscar Hansen and other artists, he promoted the "integrationalist" model, calling for the coexistence of all forms of art. Paradoxically, as Wojciech Włodarczyk has shown, Sołtan's integrationalist ideas coincided with the general Socialist Realist preference for the fusion of painting, sculpture, design, and the "applied arts" in the service of industry and architecture.⁴⁰ In this way, Sołtan and a group of talented graphic, textile, and industrial designers who gathered around him were able to avoid a direct clash with the official dogma and to maintain a relatively large measure of autonomy during this difficult period.⁴¹

The Department of Industrial Design run by Sołtan became a niche of freedom and experimentation at the Academy where students could escape the confines of Socialist Realism.⁴² Energetic, witty, and personable, Sołtan was liked and respected by his students. He had an aura of worldliness that attracted those who wanted to learn about the newest art trends from the West. Frequently quoting Benedetto Croce, Sołtan taught that art came from intuition, not from prescribed precepts, and encouraged his students to search for intuitive expression, even during the most dogmatic Stalinist years.⁴³ Abakanowicz never took classes with Sołtan, but she often attended his lectures and listened to his conversations with other professors and students on a range of issues related to modern art.⁴⁴ She was inspired by his fresh and open attitude to art, his nonhierarchical approach to the applied arts, and his enthusiasm for his students. Abakanowicz came into closer contact with Sołtan after her graduation, when he granted her permission to use studio space at the Academy and encouraged her to submit her painted fabrics to interior and industrial design shows in the mid-1950s.⁴⁵ His integrationalist philosophy, which tried to destroy the traditional division between "art" and "craft," helped convince Abakanowicz that her textile work belonged within the language of contemporary art.⁴⁶

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Beginning in mid-1954, the heavy political pressures on art and culture gradually lifted in Poland. One of the first signs of de-Stalinization was the outright rejection of Socialist Realism in the arts.⁴⁷ The political rhetoric was toned down and artists openly began to demand freedom in all creative endeavors. The turning point of this cultural "thaw" was the National Exhibition of Young Art (Ogólnopolska Wystawa Młodej Plastyki) in the recently restored Warsaw Armory in July 1955. Organized in connection with the Fifth World Festival of Youth and Students,⁴⁸ this show, known as the "Arsenał," made history as the symbol of artistic breakthrough, and it acquired an almost

legendary significance for the emerging generation of artists. It inaugurated a revision of the dogmas of Socialist Realism and a dynamic search for new forms of artistic expression. Although works presented in the Arsenal were still permeated with programmatic “socialist content,” their expressionistic and abstracted style signaled a departure from the academic canon of the past.⁴⁹ At the same time, another exhibition of pivotal importance opened at the Old Town Desa Salon in Warsaw. Marian Bogusz, Zbigniew Dłubak, Kajetan Sosnowski, and other artists in the so-called Group 55 showed paintings that demonstrated increasing stylistic and technical freedom and a decisive shift toward metaphoric content.⁵⁰ These two events ushered in a revival of avant-garde art in post-Stalinist Poland.

After six years of cultural repression and isolation from the West, Polish artists were eager to manifest their modernity and embraced every opportunity to “catch up” with the rest of the world. By the mid-1950s, some of them could travel abroad to directly experience developments in Western capitals. The well-known painter and theater director Tadeusz Kantor, for instance, visited Paris as early as 1955 and came back heralding the then-popular French art movement of Tachisme, or Art Informel, influencing many artistic circles in Poland.⁵¹ Polish artists, who eagerly assimilated various forms of abstraction, were especially attracted to the expressiveness of “matter painting” and the formlessness of Art Informel. The Socialist Realist doctrine, a Soviet phenomenon that had never adapted well to Poland’s different cultural and artistic traditions, quickly disappeared.⁵²

Abakanowicz was too young to exhibit at the Arsenal or with any other art group at that time. Her involvement, she recalls, was limited to assisting her former professors and other artists with making colorful and imaginative decorations for the Fifth World Festival of Youth and Students. She painted water lilies and other kinds of flowers that were placed on buildings to decorate the streets. She must have seen the Arsenal as a showcase for her former professors and other mature artists who wanted to manifest their presence on the contemporary art scene. Yet soon, she would seek to expand her contacts with artists in Warsaw and to become part of this newly revived artistic milieu.

Abakanowicz claims that none of her student works have been preserved. Because she was forced to move constantly from place to place, her paintings and drawings were lost or got damaged, with the exception of a few small, delicate drawings of plants in her private collection. Aside from these drawings, her earliest known works are a series of large gouaches and watercolors on paper and sewn-together linen sheets, painted between 1956 and 1959. These biomorphic compositions, including *Fish* (1956–57), *Iris* (1957), and *Butterfly* (1958), depict imaginary plants, birds, exotic fish, seashells, and other biological shapes. They are executed in bold brushstrokes in flat and intense hues of green, blue, red, and yellow, creating a magical organic world, full of life and energy. Some, such as the colorful *Iris* or the expressive *Butterfly*, look more realistic, with clearly defined large forms dominating the composition. Others are more abstract, filled with intermingled, hybridized, and fluid organic forms that seem to spill out from the canvas. These works point to Abakanowicz’s early fascination with the natural world and its processes of germination, growth,

blooming, and sprouting. They seem to capture the very energy of life, a quality that would become a constant feature of her art.

Abakanowicz has remarked that these colorful early paintings provided her with a sense of personal liberation from the constraints of the Academy: “My gouaches were as large as the wall permitted. Depressed by years of study, I was fighting back by making my gouaches for myself. For so long it had been repeated that I could not do it; my response had to be on a big scale. I wanted to take a walk among imaginary plants.”⁵³ Indeed, these abstracted flowers and butterflies, which hark back to the surrealizing tendencies she had observed in the studio of Marek Włodarski, mark an important stage in Abakanowicz’s personal expression. Bold and vibrant, they opened up the doors to her imagination, to the hidden world of fantasy suppressed by the war and pressures to follow the established norm during her studies. They manifested a deeply felt sense of freedom and a desire to make modern art on a large scale.

But these big gouaches and watercolors were also strongly related to the work of the Sopot School where Abakanowicz got her early training. This influence can be seen not only in the bright and colorful palette and organic content, but also in the grandiose scale of the fabrics on which these works were painted. In fact, as Abakanowicz had witnessed, Sopot-style textiles had recently become popular in Warsaw. In 1955 painted fabrics from the Sopot School were shown at the Zachęta Gallery, the most renowned exhibition space in Warsaw, and were enthusiastically received by Polish critics and artists, as well as by the public. Irena Huml, an art historian who is an expert on Polish textiles, remembers these works seeming like an “invasion of modernity” and argues that their impact on young artists in Warsaw was comparable to that of the Arsenal show.⁵⁴ Inspired by this show, Abakanowicz and her fellow students from the Department of Textile Design, among them Agnieszka Ruszyńska-Szafrańska (fig. 3), Krystyna Mieszkowska-Dalecka, and Helena Rogalska, all painted similar colorful fabric works to express their personal creative freedom and “modernity.” Working on a large scale in a gestural manner was liberating to these young artists, who were searching for a more direct and spontaneous form of expression during the post-Stalinist “thaw.”⁵⁵

Abakanowicz originally showed these early paintings as textile designs at various group exhibits set up by the “Ład” (Harmony) cooperative, for whom she had worked since her years at the Academy. Established by a group of artists and designers from the Warsaw Academy in 1929, this cooperative produced furniture and decorative textiles such as jacquards, Gobelins, and kilims for the decoration of households and public spaces. In the 1950s, Ład was directed by many professors from the Academy, including Eleonora Plutyńska, Anna Śledziwska, and Kazimierz Nita, who often recruited their former students to work for the cooperative and participate in their shows. Abakanowicz became associated with Ład while still a student in 1954 and continued to work with the cooperative until the late 1950s on various commissions.⁵⁶ During this time she produced jacquards for decorating apartments, upholstery, book covers, and other designs. In some



3 Agnieszka Ruszyńska-Szafrańska,
Composition I, 1960.

she employed simple geometric motifs and regular patterns that could be easily reproduced, while for others she painted more freely, with designs that seem less fitting for mass production. Still, in the mid- and late 950s, she presented all these works as fabric designs intended for interior decoration. Strongly supported by Kazimierz Nita and Jerzy Sołtan, who often served as judges for various art contests organized by Ład, “Cepelia,” and similar groups, Abakanowicz received recognition and awards for these early projects and was perceived as an exceptionally talented and dynamic figure in this environment.⁵⁷ Yet later, as she tried to distance herself from her association with utilitarian design, she commented: “I was glad to have the prize, but I could already see a

basic misunderstanding. The Cepelia competition was for fabric design, but these plants painted on paper had nothing to do with the designs for tapestry. . . . They simply were. They were not intended for repeats and for decoration.”⁵⁸

If in later years Abakanowicz sought to minimize her engagement with Ład and Cepelia, during the late 1950s she seemed to embrace every opportunity to work for these cooperatives. One reason was that the connection with Ład provided her with an opportunity to earn a living and to obtain various awards and stipends. These opportunities increased beginning with the Second Communist Party Congress in 1954, when the government allocated more resources for such handicraft cooperatives in an effort to revitalize light industry and production of goods for mass consumption.⁵⁹ Another important reason for her connection with Ład was that it enabled her to exhibit her works in a professional context and to be associated with a group of more established artists, from whom she drew support. Praise from artists of Sołtan’s stature must have been immensely gratifying to young Abakanowicz at the outset of her career. At the same time, however, she continued to broaden her connections with the avant-garde circles in Warsaw.

In October 1956 Poland experienced a major political change under the new party leadership of Władysław Gomułka. Gomułka openly condemned Stalinist methods of rule and promised greater democratization of life and culture. Not to be mistaken: the party still claimed a leading role and political control, but it rejected the radical policies of social change modeled on the experience of the Soviet Union. This shift generated widespread public debate on numerous issues, including the situation in the arts, leading to major revisions of cultural policies. The most important of these included liberalization of the form and the content of art, increased creative autonomy for individual artists, and the opening of some exchanges with the West.⁶⁰

Indeed, from 1956 to 1960, foreign contacts and artistic cooperation between Polish and Western artists became part of official government policy, with limited but lively cultural exchanges between Poland and both Western Europe and America.⁶¹ International exhibitions and symposia, travel abroad, and access to new publications on art gave Polish artists a feeling of connection with the Western world. As Urszula Czartoryska has shown, art journals during those years were filled with reviews and entries, indicating that the Poles were well informed about the newest art developments in Paris, Venice, Munich, Amsterdam, and even New York.⁶² Occasionally, one could see in Warsaw exhibitions featuring the graphic work of the American Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline (1958), abstract paintings by the Italian artist Emilio Vedova (1958), or the work of the British sculptor Henry Moore (1959).⁶³

Also, increasingly, the Ministry of Art and Culture began to sponsor group travel to Western countries. In 1957 Abakanowicz went on her first foreign trip to Italy organized by the government-controlled Union of Polish Visual Artists, which she had joined—as did all artists in Communist Poland—immediately after her graduation from the Academy. In retrospect, the most important aspect of this trip for Abakanowicz was a chance to get to know a group of Polish Constructivists, Roman Owidzki, Henryk Stazewski, and Maria Ewa Łunkiewicz. Stazewski and Łunkiewicz, in

particular, with whom she traveled on this trip, influenced her artistic development in the late 1950s. The painter and art theorist Henryk Stażewski was one of the leading figures of the Polish Constructivist movement in the 1920s. He cofounded the groups “Blok” (1924–26) and “Praesens” (1926–30) and actively participated in the international avant-garde movements between the wars. In 1927 Stażewski worked with Piet Mondrian and was a member of Circle et Carré and Abstraction-Création in Paris. Closely associated with Stażewski in the 1950s, Maria Ewa Łunkiewicz, nicknamed “Mewa,” was the guiding spirit and organizer of cultural life in Warsaw. Having studied in Paris before the war, she had extensive contacts in France and was instrumental in stimulating interest in French art among the young generation of Polish artists in the 1950s and early 1960s.⁶⁴ Indeed, Stażewski and Łunkiewicz’s apartment in Warsaw became a gathering place for the most prominent Polish artists, critics, writers, and theater directors.⁶⁵ Abakanowicz frequented their studios after 1957 and developed a deep friendship with Łunkiewicz, who, according to Abakanowicz, provided her with great emotional support during those difficult years as she struggled to survive on her own in Warsaw. Łunkiewicz was also crucial in familiarizing Abakanowicz with the intellectual debates of the time, inviting her to various discussions and meetings. But above all, Łunkiewicz and other members of the group taught Abakanowicz the discipline that she was seeking at that time. Under their influence, she began to consider her earlier paintings too flamboyant and lacking in structure.⁶⁶

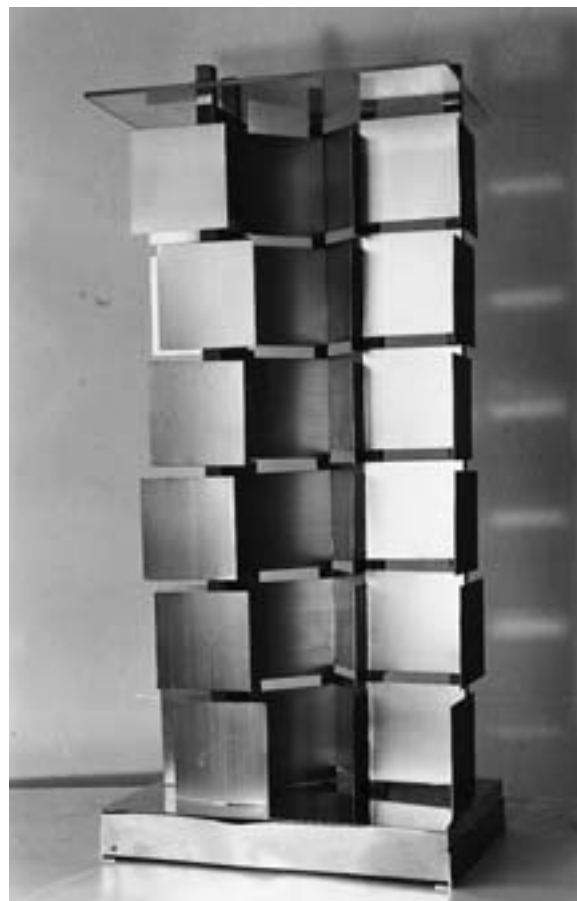
Indeed, after 1958, under the impact of Constructivism, Abakanowicz’s works show stricter compositional principles. In a series of untitled gouaches made from 1958 to the 1960s (fig. 4), Abakanowicz started to employ sparser, less floral imagery. She carefully divided her paintings into distinct color fields and planes, abandoning her rich biomorphic language. She also radically limited her palette to beiges, whites, blacks, and browns, only occasionally using brighter tones. Roman Owidzki, recalling Abakanowicz’s change of style, proudly exclaimed, “We made her loathe those colorful flowers!”⁶⁷ Abakanowicz’s involvement with principles of Constructivism is also visible in her small maquettes for abstract sculpture and abstract reliefs, which resemble some of Stażewski’s works (figs. 5 and 6). Yet, although the Constructivists helped her to discover the value of geometric structuring and extraction of form, Abakanowicz never fully accepted their aesthetic. She was always looking at their experiments from a distance, as an observer rather than a participant. She dreamed of discovering her own artistic language and searched for a way to make her art more tactile, intuitive, and personal.

In the late 1950s Abakanowicz turned her attention to weaving as a possible vehicle for realizing these goals. Since the mid-1950s, weaving had enjoyed renewed popularity in Poland, offering a range of career opportunities for young artists. Abakanowicz decided to return to the studio of her former teacher at the Warsaw Academy, Eleonora Plutyńska, to learn more complex weaving techniques. Plutyńska provided her with a loom on which she could start making Gobelins and kilims. Shortly afterward, another instructor and weaver, Krystyna Szczepanowska, helped Abakanowicz build her own frame and acquire highly desirable weaving materials, such as thick wool from the

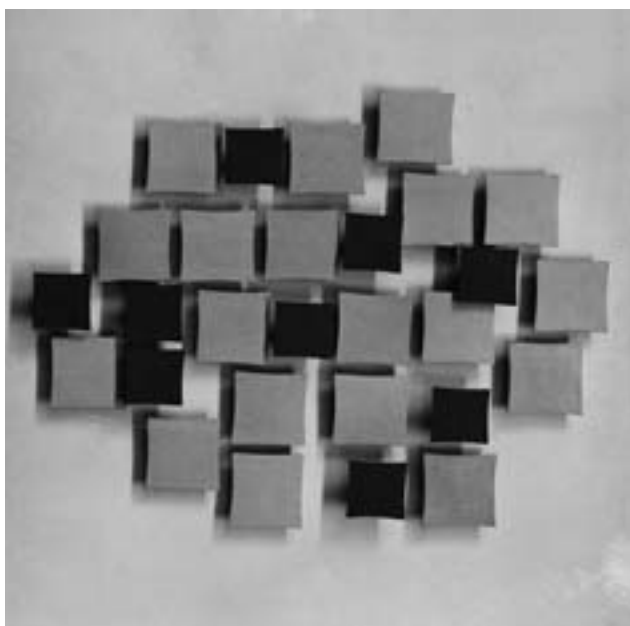


4 Magdalena Abakanowicz,
Composition with Red Head, 1960.

6 Henryk Stazewski,
Untitled, 1966.



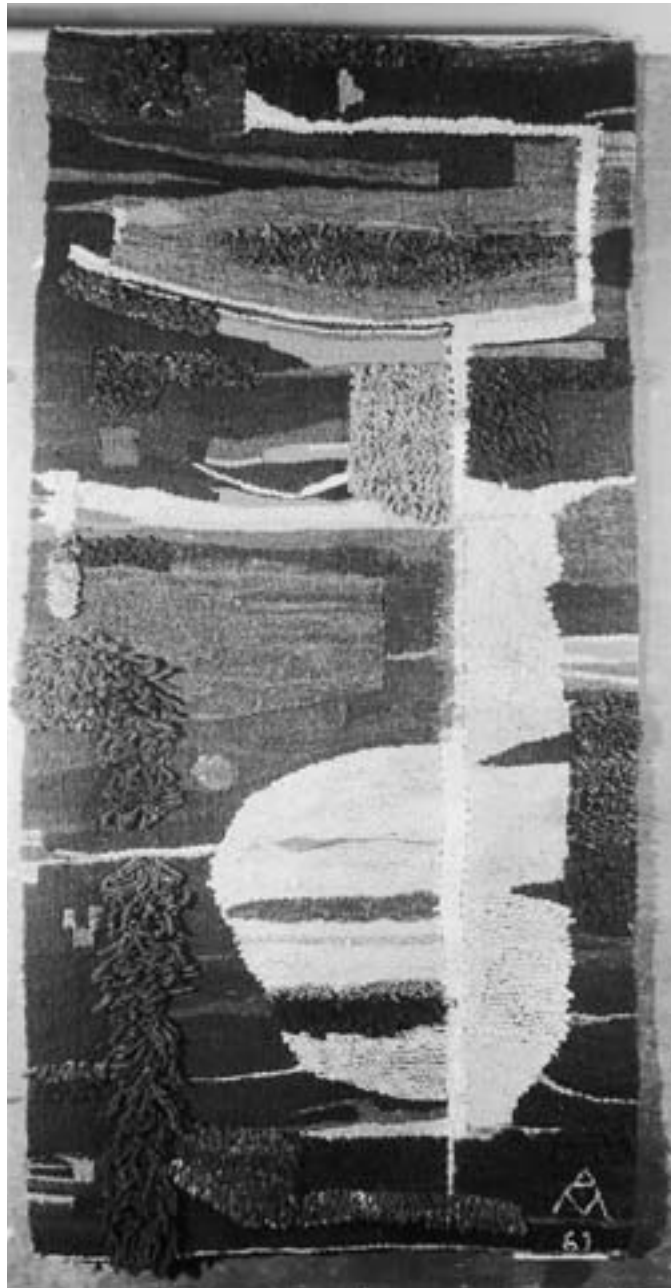
5 Henryk Stazewski,
Untitled, 1963.



mountain region of Zakopane that Abakanowicz especially liked.⁶⁸ At first, Abakanowicz simply transferred her Constructivist-inspired gouaches into Gobelins, even copying one of Stazewski's reliefs, but then slowly she started producing small weavings with simplified organic motifs and geometric shapes (fig. 7) that heralded her own style.

Abakanowicz included four small weavings (fig. 8) and a collection of gouaches and watercolors in her first one-person exhibition, at the Kordegarda Gallery in Warsaw in the spring of 1960.⁶⁹ The scheduled opening of the show was suddenly canceled, however, due to a temporary freeze in cultural policy. Under pressure from conservative party ideologues to revive some elements of the Stalinist dogma, the officials of the Ministry of Art and Culture in charge of the Kordegarda

7 Magdalena Abakanowicz,
Composition with a Cord, 1961.



8 Magdalena Abakanowicz,
Textural Composition, 1960.



Gallery launched a puzzling, but fortunately short-lived, campaign to limit public showings of “bourgeois” abstract painting to 15 percent of all exhibitions in any given year.⁷⁰ After some bureaucratic wrangling, Abakanowicz’s exhibit opened a few days late, after ministry officials conceded that her exhibit represented not so much abstraction per se as fabrics designed for interior decoration.⁷¹ The show received scant critical notice in the press,⁷² but it nevertheless helped advance Abakanowicz’s career. It was noticed by promoters of textile design and fiber work in Warsaw, who later included her on the list of Polish artists to take part in the first Biennale Internationale de le Tapisserie in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1962, an event that opened the way to her international success.