

These Things Are Immortal

The Wanderings of Rembrandt's *Polish Rider*

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[GERDIEN VERSCHOOR]

Gowns like quilts. Moist oysters.

These things are immortal, but don't serve us.

Adam Zagajewski, 'Dutch Painters', translated by Clare Cavanagh

You might wonder as you stand in the richly filled galleries of the Frick Collection and look at Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider*: that lady in the sunglasses, that tourist with the camera on his stomach, that whining child – are they all looking at the same painting? Are they seeing the same rider, the same horse, the same red of the breeches? Do they see the same bit in the animal's mouth, the same hand clasping the war hammer? Do they see that same hammer and the same landscape, half washed away? Do they see the same exotic hat, the same buttons on the cream-coloured *župan*, the same heel of the boot? And what of the Dutch connoisseur, the Polish king, the American industrialist? Did they too see, in places that no longer exist, these same immortal things?

The connoisseur and the count

Since that time, it has not changed, and yet everything there has changed: the landscape that Abraham Bredius looked out at in 1897 from his train compartment. The *k.k. Galizische Carl Ludwig-Bahn*, named after the brother of Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria, was taking him from Krakow to Tarnobrzeg and far beyond: deep, deep into Galicia.

'It was a long way,' Bredius, the director of the Mauritshuis and a Rembrandt connoisseur, reported much later from Moscow. 'And those little branch lines of the Galician railways – it goes so slowly that you could walk alongside at a trot.' Sunk deeply into the burgundy velvet cushions of his first-class carriage – that is how I picture him – he saw the rolling cornfields and the birch forests, the rivers and the watermills, the stud farms and the skies, which stretch much lower above the land in this European border country than in the paintings of the Dutch masters that he knew so well. The onion-shaped cupolas of



Rembrandt, *The Polish Rider*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, 116.8 x 134.9 cm,
The Frick Collection, New York

the Ruthenian Orthodox churches must have seemed exotic to him as well. In that distant Galicia, then a crown land of the Habsburg Empire, Bredius was to make the greatest discovery of his career as a Rembrandt scholar.

This scholar was on a special mission in 1897. He was travelling to Saint Petersburg, Moscow and Kiev to study Rembrandt's paintings in those places, not only in renowned museums but also on the country estates and in the city palaces of wealthy aristocrats. Names such as Zamoycki, Czartoryski and Semenov, families who owned impressive art collections, made his mouth water. He knew of the existence of the Rembrandts in these collections only from reproductions and archive material. Now he had finally undertaken this long journey to inspect the paintings with his own eyes and to determine if they could be regarded as genuine Rembrandts. He was also searching for special works by the Dutch master for the major Rembrandt exhibition that was to be held at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum in 1898 to mark the inauguration of Queen Wilhelmina.



Rembrandt, *The Polish Rider* (details)

On his way to Russia, Bredius made a stop in Berlin, where he met another famous art expert: Wilhelm Bode. 'Ah,' Bode had said to him, 'now that you're going to Krakow anyway, try to see if you can view the Rembrandt at Count Tarnowski's castle, about which there have been such varying opinions; I would like to know if it is genuine.'

And so he did. Bredius took a room at a hotel in Krakow, where he went to see Rembrandt's 'remarkable landscape' in the Czartoryski Museum and attempted to make contact with the Tarnowskis. Fate lent him a hand. 'When I saw a fine carriage driving past my hotel and heard from the porter that it was Count Tarnowski, who had become engaged to the beautiful Countess Potocka some days ago, who would bring him a most substantial fortune, I little imagined that the man was also the fortunate owner of one of the most magnificent works by our great Master. This, however, proved to be the case.' Our connoisseur wasted no time: 'I naturally requested permission to see the paintings at Dzików Castle. Yes, but it would not be easy – it was a long way – so I would just have to stay a night, and everything there would be taken care of for me. In addition, Count Mycielski, the cousin of Count Tarnowski, declared himself willing to come with me and to show me around.' And that was how the museum director from The Hague came to be on the train that took him at walking pace through the fields and past the churches of Galicia.

The residence of the Tarnowskis, with its central section crowned with a tower, its neo-Gothic ornamentation, the majestic square in front: at first sight it must have made quite an impression on Bredius. The whole castle was in a state of commotion because of the arrival of Tarnowski's brand-new bride. Bredius entered the palace to see 'a great deal of trash in this curious build-

ing' alongside a few fine pictures by the Dutch masters that hung on its ancient walls: a Teniers, a Lucas van Leyden, a Cuyp, and a 'spirited' portrait of a woman. But the painting that instantly made a huge impression on him was *The Polish Rider* by Rembrandt.

'I had heard talk of it, yes, that Rembrandt – it is not marked, and various people said it could well be by an apprentice, for example, Aert de Gelder etc. So my expectations were not high. And there it was! Just one glance, and a few seconds' study of its technique were necessary to convince me entirely that, here in this remote outpost, one of Rembrandt's greatest masterpieces has been hanging for almost 100 years!'

There follows a lyrical description of the painting, certain parts of which Bredius finds 'delightfully painted.' 'And for how much longer should such a delicious piece remain hanging miles away from anywhere in an almost inaccessible castle in Galicia? All of my attempts to win it for Holland came to grief. They are doubly attached to this work as it was part of the collection of the last ruler of Poland, Stanisław Poniatowski.'

Because it was not only Abraham Bredius, Count Tarnowski and Countess Potocka who had stood face to face with *The Polish Rider*. For years it had belonged to Stanisław August Poniatowski, the last Polish king.



Hendrik Haverman,
Portrait of Abraham Bredius,
1899, black chalk and pencil
on paper, 23.8 x 20.7 cm,
RKD, The Hague

The king and the diplomat

In the extensive grounds of Łazienki Park, far from the busy centre of Warsaw, is the private palace of Stanisław August Rex. The high windows gaze at themselves in the large pond where the white stone building with its steps and columns appears to float. Here, in 1793, behind the windows of this Palace on the Isle, the king established his *galerie en bas* to display the gems of his painting collection. Within his artistic concept, this gallery formed a highly personal counterpoint to the Royal Palace in the heart of the Polish capital. That was the representative centre of power and therefore the right place for state portraits of the king, gifts and likenesses of friendly heads of state. It was where he had his court and where he was surrounded by his advisors and court painters, his footmen and cooks, his dwarfs and his mistresses.

But at the Palace on the Isle, His Majesty created a very different atmosphere. He invited his friends, who were allowed to call him by his first name there, and he filled the galleries with the works of art that he loved best. There were 145 works to see on the upper floor, with 180 paintings downstairs. The king selected 65 pieces for the *galerie en bas* – his showpiece.



Juliusz Kossak, *The Polish Rider*,
after Rembrandt, c. 1860-1865,
oil on canvas, 55 x 45.5 cm,
National Museum, Warsaw

The linden green walls were adorned with his favourite works by Titian, Rubens and Giordano, in identical gilded frames, decorated with the royal monogram, arranged according to a principle that was popular at the time: the walls covered with paintings from top to bottom, with the smaller works below and the larger ones above. An inventory tells us that the king was very fond of Rembrandt, particularly appreciating his *grand effet de lumière et un coloris vigoureux* – great light effect and powerful colours. In his *galerie en bas*, he displayed six of the twelve Rembrandt paintings in his collection that, according to the royal catalogue, were considered to be genuine. One of those paintings was *The Polish Rider*, which at some point was moved from the *antichambre en haut* to the *galerie en bas*. That work had found its way into his collection via an interesting route.

Like many collectors at the time, Poniatowski made use of a network of advisors, agents, bankers and diplomats who facilitated international art acquisitions. In Italy, the king often purchased works through his court painter and curator Marcello Bacciarelli and his agents, while in Paris the celebrated salonnière Madame Geoffrin was one of his trusted intermediaries. Poniatowski also had his advisors in the Low Countries, of course. But the king did not only expand his collection with purchases. The exchange of gifts was one of the most important rituals of courtly culture. As the king was widely known to be a great art lover, he often received gifts of paintings, sculptures and prints, rather than horses, dogs or jewellery. *The Polish Rider* was one such work that the king received in return for a number of orange trees he had given to Michał Kazimierz Ogiński – *hetman* (military commander) and confidant of the king. Ogiński sent him *The Polish Rider* from The Hague in the spring or summer of 1791. In a letter that was added to the royal archive in ‘*mediis Augusti*’ 1791, Ogiński wrote: ‘Sire, I send Your Majesty a Cossack, placed upon his horse by Rembrandt. During his stay, the horse ate 420 German guilders’ worth at my expense. Your righteousness and generosity allow me to expect that the orange trees will blossom to the same extent. Bowing at Your feet, Your Majesty’s most humble servant, Michał Ogiński, G[reat] H[etman] of L[ithuania].’ The painting became part of Poniatowski’s art collection and was included in the royal paintings catalogue in 1793 as *Cosaque à cheval*, with a value of 180 ducats. The painting soon became known in Poland as the *Lisowczyk*, as the king had recognised the rider’s clothing as the uniform of Aleksander Lisowski’s cavalry.

Three months before Poniatowski archived Ogiński’s letter, Poland had adopted a new constitution, the most progressive in Europe. Russia and Prussia feared a sort of French Revolution in their neighbouring country and so invaded Poland. This led to the Second and Third Partitions of Poland, and the king was forced to move to Russia. A few years later, in 1797, the last king of a great empire that had ceased to exist died in exile in Saint Petersburg. The childless royal had had to leave most of his collection behind in Warsaw. After the death of his heirs, many items from his estate, including *The Polish Rider*, came onto the market. Via dowries and inheritance, *The Polish Rider* eventually found its way to Dzików Castle, where Bredius went to admire the painting precisely 100 years after the king’s death and, with his expert eye, ascertained with ‘one look at the whole’ that it was indeed a genuine Rembrandt.

The queen and the industrialist

Given the remarkable history of the painting, it was no wonder that the Tarnowskis did not want to say farewell to *The Polish Rider*. But Bredius's powers of persuasion must have been strong and the royal context irresistible: they finally gave permission for the painting to travel to the Netherlands, where it was displayed at the exhibition *Rembrandt. Schilderijen bijeengebracht ter gelegenheid van de inhuldiging van Hare Majesteit Koningin Wilhelmina* (Rembrandt. Paintings Brought Together on the Occasion of the Inauguration of Her Majesty Queen Wilhelmina), which took place from 8 September to 31 October 1898 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

It was an international debut for *The Polish Rider*, which was to determine the painting's future. The story of this unusual Rembrandt – the rider, the horse, the landscape in the background – quickly spread amongst collectors. In the early twentieth century, when Count Tarnowski found himself in urgent need of money because he wanted to purchase a large tract of land adjacent to the Dzików estate to prevent it from falling into foreign hands, he sold the work in 1910 to the American coal magnate Henry Clay Frick for 60,000 pounds – much to the consternation of many Polish art historians. To ease his pain a little, Tarnowski had a copy of the painting made for the castle in Dzików before letting the *Rider* go. And so *The Polish Rider* crossed the ocean, where it finally received a place of honour in the famous Frick Collection on Fifth Avenue in New York after it had previously hung in the palace-like residence of Henry Frick.

Jan Lebenstein, *The Polish Rider*,
ink on paper, Private Collection





The Frick Collection, New York

The trenches of the First World War, the Russian Revolution making its way across country estates, the Second World War wreaking havoc on the 'bloodlands', and then Soviet Communism put a permanent end to the fairy-tale existence of the Polish aristocracy on their estates in Galicia. Their art collections were stolen, 'nationalised', or went up in flames. Many of the Tarnowskis' belongings met such fates. The copy of *The Polish Rider*, so meticulously made by the English portraitist Ambrose McEvoy (1878-1927), was destroyed in 1927, when Tarnowski's castle burned to the ground. To this day, the Tarnowskis are still fighting for the return of their nationalised possessions. Perhaps it is in fact thanks to that scandalous sale in 1910 that one can stand before *The Polish Rider* in the year 2018, with those lines of verse by Adam Zagajewski in mind.

Us

When things are immortal, they can move not only physically and within time, but also in our memories and in our imaginations. Bredius remembered his journey to see *The Polish Rider* and those few seconds in which he recognised the work as an authentic Rembrandt. In Stanisław August's memory, the painting was undoubtedly linked to the linden green walls of his *galerie en bas*, Aleksander Lisowski's cavalry and a shipment of orange trees. When they looked at *The Polish Rider*, they saw not only their own wanderings but also the painting's journey.

Sometimes things, including certain works of art, are stubbornly immortal. Then they receive a place not only inside the mind of an individual, but also become part of a shared memory. And this is what happened to *The Polish Rider*: it has gained many new lives.



Jacek Sroka, *The Polish Rider*, c. 2011-2013, ink on paper,
Private Collection

The Polish equine artist Juliusz Kossak made a copy based on the painting in around 1865, although rather than Rembrandt's somewhat unwieldy horse, he painted a noble Arab. Jan Lebenstein used *The Polish Rider* for an apocalyptic work depicting the rider as the messenger of Death. Jacek Sroka took the Rembrandt as the starting point for an ironic object, by pasting, over the top of a wild watercolour in which we recognise our rider, a sketch of a completely different Polish horse rider: the *Lajkonik*, a Tatar warrior who prances through the streets of Krakow on his hobbyhorse on the first Thursday after Corpus Christi. And finally, Simon Vestdijk also took on *The Polish Rider*. In his essay of the same name, he asks despairingly what exactly Rembrandt wanted to say to us with this painting. 'The Polish rider's horse staggers, falling forward, knees knocking, swaying as if walking under water, longing for the knacker's yard, from left to right across the painting, like an intimate riddle.'

And how about me? What does *The Polish Rider* bring to mind for me? I try to look with the eyes of all those who have looked before me – and through their eyes I see the journey the painting has made. If I could step through the frame, I would find myself standing in the *galerie en bas*, listening to the cries of the peacocks and the king's voice telling me in lilting French about this beautiful gift and the path it has taken. Or maybe, on the other side of the frame, Abraham Bredius will take me by the hand and pull me into some aristocratic residence in Galicia. 'We would not have dared to dream,' he says, whispering in the dimly lit interior packed with paintings and tapestries, 'that we would see so many beautiful things, so many unknown things along our way.' ■

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