

POLISH ARTIST AT THE SERVICE OF MAHARAJAS

The outbreak of World War Two and the resultant escape from bombarded Warsaw was the reason for the oriental episode in the artistic career of Stefan Norblin. Travelling with his wife, Lena Żelichowska, through Romania, Turkey and Iraq, in 1940 he reached Bombay in India. From here, after almost four years full of interesting artistic projects, he was invited to Rajasthan by its ruler Umaid Singh to work in the interior of the royal residences in Jodhpur. In the beginning, the Maharaja, like those who had commissioned Norblin earlier, asked the artist to execute a scheme of painted decoration on the walls of the Umaid Bhawan Palace, but later Norblin was asked to design the whole interior of the palace. This happened by accident, because of the sinking of a ship bringing to India furniture which the Maharaja had ordered from the London firm “Maples”. The situation in Europe and the desire to furnish the newly built palace as soon as possible led the ruler to turn to the Polish artist with the suggestion that he design the furniture too.

This almost unbelievable episode was almost wholly unknown to biographers of Stefan Norblin until the 1990s. Research into the artist’s work during his wartime wanderings through India is bringing to light increasing amounts of interesting information and observations. Completely new information also came to light in 2007 during a meeting on the occasion of the conservation of the monumental murals painted by the artist in the Jodhpur palace between a representative of the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage with the grandson of the original patron of the work, the present owner of the Palace, Maharaja Gaj Singh II. The Maharaja mentioned that the Palace collections still contained drawings – designs for the interior decoration some of which were signed by the author of the mural decoration. In the light of such an important

discovery, the Polish partners in the conservation work agreed to cover the additional costs of the conservation of these documents. In accordance with the agreements reached at this time, in June 2008, 23 drawings were brought to Warsaw by the custodian of the Uhmaid Bhawan Palace in Jodhpur in a specially constructed wooden case.

The conservation work was undertaken by a specialist in paper conservation, Monika Bogacz-Walska, who conducted this work in the Conservation and Reprographic Laboratory of the Olsztyn Branch of the National Archive. She describes the state of the objects as follows: almost all the objects were mounted in *passe-partout*, and had Japanese tissue applied, most of them had traces of repair [...]. Some of the 23 [received] designs bore no date, and in three cases these were completely or partially illegible¹⁾. The drawings representing the interior of two palace buildings – the Umaid Bhawan residence and the hunting palace in Sardar Samand – were in a poor state of preservation. The cardboard on which they had been drawn was highly acidic which, to a large extent, had resulted in the yellowing of the colour and brittleness of the support, the latter resulting in damage such as cracks and some missing areas. An additional factor leading to their bad state were earlier, undocumented, attempts to repair them. The traces of these repairs had to be removed, along with the other work of inventorying, disinfection, deacidification, structural reinforcement of the support and reconstruction of the missing areas. Despite the difficulties, as the conservator says: “the intended aim of the conservation work was achieved, and after they were finished, it was once again fully possible to admire the talent of Stefan Norblin”²⁾.

The design drawings were catalogued, their measurements recorded, the materials used and techniques of their execution were defined. Each of the conserved documents received an individual *passe-partout* mount. The whole collection was digitally scanned, and after four months’ work the whole collection was carefully packed and returned to Jodhpur. There part of the collection were placed in cases in the Palace’s Museum, where they are now frequently examined by the Palace Hotel’s guests.

Among the surviving designs for the interior which Stefan Norblin had presented to the Maharaja, there were those which had met with his approval and were fully or partially realised. It was found that in both palaces there was

¹⁾ Bogacz-Walska (2010: 323).

²⁾ Bogacz-Walska (2010: 329).

preserved furniture and interior decoration which had been executed according to the designs of the Polish artist.

Most of the preserved drawings referred to the interiors of the Umaid Bhawan palace. The most important of these was the design for the Throne Room which was in an oriental style, and presented a wide palette of colours in the huge areas of the mural paintings and the textile hangings which separate them. From the notes on the drawing, it transpires that this was one of a series of successive propositions, but from archival photographs documenting Norblin at work on one of the murals, we may conclude that this design did not gain the approval of his patron. The only part of the preserved design that was executed was the concavity of the ceiling, which the artist had delicately sketched in pencil in the lower part of the drawing, and the large format mural decoration and the form of the lamp hanging from the ceiling. The situation was different concerning the design of the Hall. Contemporary photos show that the design we have had obtained the full acceptance of the investor. From the design for the hall leading to the royal apartments, it transpires that it was meant to be filled with the expansive sofas separated by low narrow cupboards which are there today. Just as in the original design, attention today is drawn by the small fountain which decorates the middle of the room.

Among the private apartments is the Maharaja's study, for which we have two preserved drawings, which differ in their colour scheme and viewpoint on the interior. The present appearance of the room shows that both designs were partially executed. They have served the palace's owners well, including the existing upholstered corner chair, settee, desk and coffee table. Of the furniture designed by Norblin for the salon of the Maharaja's spouse, some of it is still in use, such as the armchairs with armrests in the form of fans and the other chairs. There are also three preserved drawings presenting variant versions of the arrangement of the room known as the Private Dining Room. They differ from each other in the colour scheme and the details of the background. The present appearance of the royal dining room matches the proposals of one of the designs in which the space was divided at three-quarters of its length by two columns linked by a wall of curved glass shelves. The chairs still present in the room suggest that the form proposed in this design was accepted and the chairs have since only received a few replacements of their upholstery. Notable among the designs for the private quarters are those for the boudoir of the Maharaja's wife and the beautiful black and gold bathroom. There are drawings showing two possible arrangements for the boudoir, just as in the case of the Maharaja's study, they show two different colour schemes and the manner in which the

cupboards along the walls are designed. The buffet however which projects out into the centre of the room surrounding a small kidney-shaped sofa appears on both designs. In one of the designs for the boudoir can be seen a deep armchair which today can be found in the neighbouring room. This is the royal bathroom mentioned above. We have for this room the original design, and it can be seen that it received royal approval for the inventiveness of the design. This is the room which underwent the least modification, it was created in the way the author of the plans intended: the bath, washbasin and the framing of the mirror and shelves have served successive owners until the present day in its original form and colour scheme.

Among the designs for the interior of the hunting palace at Sardar Samand of especial note is the very effective proposal for the optical expansion of the narrow dining room through the use of a mirrored wall. The placing of the mirrors opposite the windows and the mounting of a small fountain in the centre mounted directly on the mirror has given the room an interesting depth and the whole space an exceptionally spectacular dimension. The fact that this wall is still today a decoration of the Palace dining room suggests that it received the full approval of the Maharaja and his successors. The mirrored wall hides beneath its glass the entry to the salon and bedroom of the Maharaja. The design of the bedroom is an example of the faithful execution of the designs of Norblin. This is evidenced by two design drawings which show its interior from two opposing viewpoints. Due to this we may examine the proposed arrangement of all parts of the room. The current appearance of the Maharani's bedroom confirms that this design also was approved, and the furniture was made according to the drawings, a huge bed with night cabinets built into the line of the headboard a coffee table and the chimney piece have long decorated the interior and served successive Maharanis visiting the palace.

An analysis of the collected material about these designs and the surviving examples of the furnishings that were created on their basis allows us to formulate a number of observations.

In his work on the arrangement of the royal apartments, Norblin fully realised the postulates which suggest that the interior designs should stylistically correspond to the architectonic style of the building which it fills. This is the case with the monumental Umaid Bhawan Palace, designed by the London architect Henry Vaughan Lanchester, which united in its form European modernism with the fairy tale architecture of ancient India. The same goes for the hunting palace erected in 1933 sixty kilometres away on a hill at Sardar Samand, designed by

another English architect George Goldstraw³⁾. The interior arrangements in both these places are spacious and not “overloaded” which was in accordance with the principles propagated at the time which advised filling no more than 30-40% of the total area of the rooms with furniture⁴⁾.

We are not surprised to learn that this furniture was constructed of material of high quality, such as expensive varieties of wood as well as the use of luxury textiles, natural leather, metal strips, glass and mirrors. Dressers were replaced by sideboards, which gave the interiors a lightness and increased the impression of spaciousness which was decorated with the geometric forms of furniture of excellent proportions. The designer seems, as related by the custodians of the Palace Museum collection, to have directly supervised the creation of these items, discussing the details of their execution with the local craftsmen from Jodhpur employed by the Maharaja to make them. This has resulted in the excellent quality and durability of the objects⁵⁾.

The preserved designs and furniture are irrefutable proof that alongside his many other talents, Stefan Norblin was an exceptionally gifted interior designer. The furnishings created by him should be assessed as atypical, and designed for an equally atypical patron, and despite that corresponding precisely to the tendencies of their period.

In reflecting on the factors which allowed the artist to freely operate as an interior designer, we should remember the earlier commissions for costumes and theatrical sets and scenery which Norblin received from Warsaw theatres. The influence of these experiences is shown by the composition of the drawings discussed here in which the interiors are shown viewed diagonally with a clear indication of the foreground and background. The rooms are shown with two depicted walls and the other two merely suggested which gives the representation the overall appearance of an open box situated in an isolated and undefined architectural space. Such a presentation invites associations with a stage set, showing the whole of an interior without going into detail about the objects inside. This manner of presenting the designs confirms the inspiration from the experiences acquired during work on theatrical scenery. The lack of detailed drawings of individual items, for example measured drawings of elements like armchairs, tables and chairs might suggest that the artist, as in the case of the design of stage-sets discussed all the details of construction and selection of

³⁾ Reinhard-Chlanda (2010: 162–163).

⁴⁾ Czyżewski (1937: 4).

⁵⁾ Claus-Ullrich (1996: 3).

materials directly with the chair manufacturer, as mentioned by Simon Claus-Ulrich when discussing Norblin's artistic work in India.

We cannot exclude the possibility that the character of the designs could have been influenced by the international exhibitions of interior decoration organised in Paris in the 1930s. This hypothesis is supported by the form of the design of the furniture in which one can clearly detect the influence of the style of Art Déco represented by the Parisian firm *Süe et Mare*. This is especially visible in the suggested, but unused, design for the Maharaja's bedroom where the bed, in the form of a swan, was a baldachin in the style referring to that of the First Empire. In the same manner one might find clear references to the designs of furniture of Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, a representative of the French designers from the circle of the traditionalists fashionable and especially popular in the 1930s.

A detailed analysis of the individual forms appearing in the drawings of Stefan Norblin allows us to perceive specific items which might have served as inspiration. An example of this are the armchairs which were shown in the design for the blue salon which recall those of Ruhlmann, with their flowing lines and high headrests. Another is in the bedroom designs where the beds have night cabinets incorporated into the line of the headboards. The use by Norblin of clear horizontal divisions and metal bands in the decoration of the furniture and the delicate undulating form of the bases in the sideboards and cupboards, both those in the designs and those actually built, confirm the validity of this hypothesis. Especially noteworthy is the use by Norblin of the channelling which so frequently occurs as a motif on Ruhlmann's furniture. This is clearly seen in the decoration on the furniture from the hunting palace and in the side cupboards in the study in the *Umaid Bhawan Palace*.

Norblin could have admired Ruhlmann's furniture during the Paris Exhibition of 1925, or the Colonial Exhibition also in Paris in 1931, but it is possible that it was not just the designer who was fascinated by the ideas and furniture of Ruhlmann. There exists the probability that the person commissioning the design also desired to have in his home furniture of the same quality and ordered from the French designer that Manik Bagh, the Maharaja of Indore, had recently brought to his luxurious palace built in 1930 and which had aroused the admiration and jealousy of his neighbours⁶⁾.

Norblin's use of a style close to that of Ruhlmann might have had a further source. Future researchers might take into account Norblin's contacts with the

⁶⁾ Hübner-Wojciechowska (2007: 12).

newest tendencies and postulates being propagated in the 1930s in the Warsaw Institute of the Propagation of Art, which were being utilised by contemporary designers of fashionable interior decoration.

The designs that have been preserved and the executed projects are ample proof that Norblin was able to adequately fulfil the task set him by the ruler of Jodhpur of uniting modern furniture of geometricised form with the requirements and tastes of his oriental patron. This chapter in the artistic life of Stefan Norblin was until recently almost unknown, but gives new colour to our image of his activities, revealing new talents and abilities.

The hypotheses presented here seem worthy of further, deeper, investigation to reveal more of the creative genius of Stefan Norblin, an artist who has undeservedly been forgotten for many years, and whose wartime wanderings through Romania, Turkey, Iraq, and India, all the way to San Francisco in the USA are still little known, but today arouse such interest.

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Fig. 1. The Regent of Iraq, his portrait and the author of the portrait, a photo from the Norblin family archives



Fig. 2. Photo Umaid Bahwan Palace in Jodhpur



Fig. 3. The signature of S. Norblin in the picture in the throne chamber, Umaid Bahwan Palace in Jodhpur, photo: A. Kasprzak, 2010

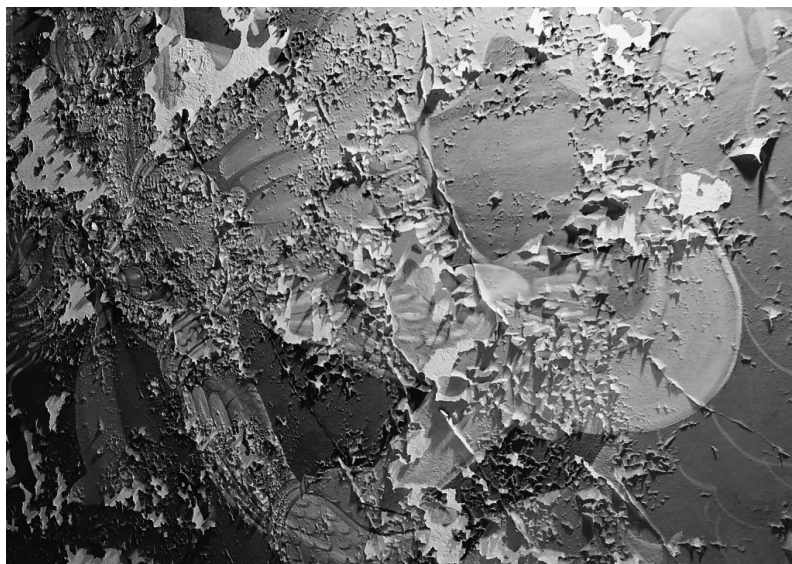


Fig. 4. A fragment of a wall painting, Umaid Bahwan Palace in Jodhpur, photo: J. Stecinski, 2007

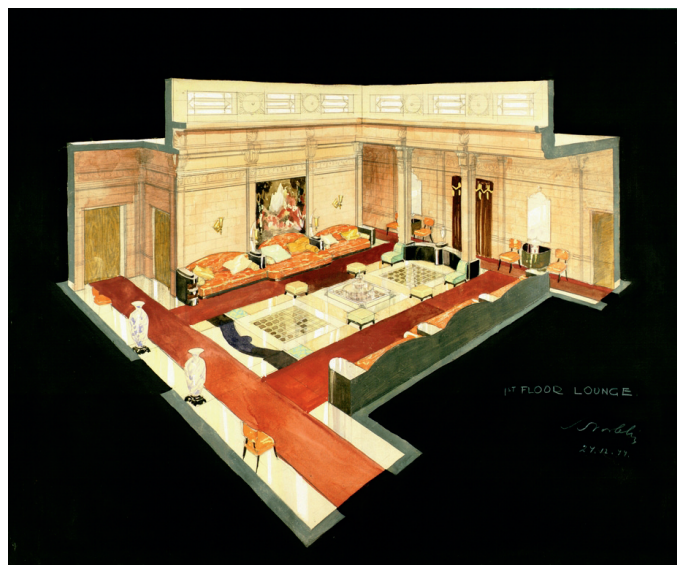


Fig. 5. A design of the hall, Umaid Bahwan Palace in Jodhpur, drawing: S. Norblin, 1944



Fig. 6. A view of the hall, Umaid Bahwan Palace in Jodhpur, photo: A. Kasprzak, 2010

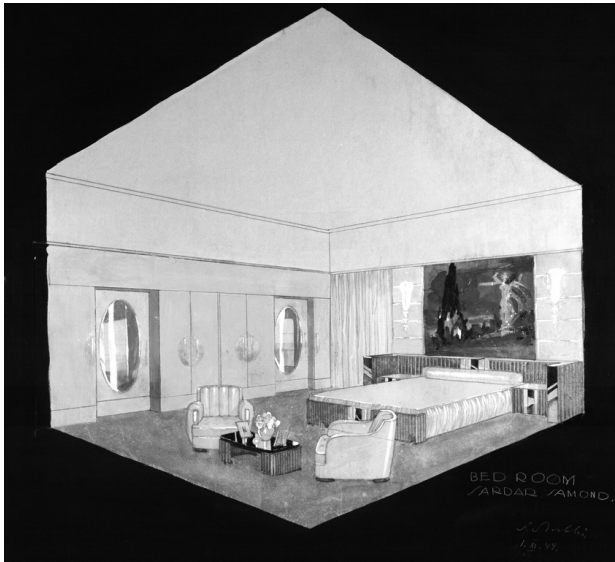


Fig. 7. A design of the bedroom of Maharani, Sadar Samond, drawing: S. Norblin, 1944



Fig. 8. A view of the bedroom of Maharani, Sadar Samond, photo: A. Kasprzak, 2010



Fig. 9. A design of the drawing room of Maharaya, The Palace in Jodhpour (?), drawing: S. Norblin



Fig. 10. A design of the bedroom, The Palace in Jodhpour (?), drawing: S. Norblin



Fig. 11. A design of the drawing room, Umaid Bahwan Palace in Jodhpur, drawing: S. Norblin



Fig. 12. A view of the drawing room, Umaid Bahwan Palace in Jodhpur, photo: A. Kasprzak, 2010