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IN HENRYK SIEMIRADZKI'S *PHRYNE*

“**Y**ou artists fancy that when a figure is correctly drawn, and everything in its place according to the rules of anatomy, there is nothing more to be done. You make up the flesh tints beforehand on your palettes according to your formulae, and fill in the outlines with due care that one side of the face shall be darker than the other; and because you look from time to time at a naked woman who stands on the platform before you, you fondly imagine that you have copied nature, think yourselves to be painters, believe that you have wrested His secret from God. Pshaw! [...] Look at your saint, Porbus! At a first glance she is admirable; look at her again, and you see at once that she is glued to the background, and that you could not walk round her. She is a silhouette that turns but one side of her face to all beholders, a figure cut out of canvas, an image with no power to move nor change her position. I feel as if there were no air between that arm and the background, no space, no sense of distance in your canvas. [...] but, in spite of these praiseworthy efforts, I could never bring myself to believe that the warm breath of life comes and goes in that beautiful body. It seems to me that if I laid my hand on the firm, rounded throat, it would be cold as marble to the touch. No, my friend, the blood does not flow beneath that ivory skin, the tide of life does not flush those delicate fibres, the purple veins that trace a network beneath the transparent

amber of her brow and breast. Here the pulse seems to beat, there it is motionless, life and death are at strife in every detail; here you see a woman, there a statue, there again a corpse. Your creation is incomplete. You had only power to breathe a portion of your soul into your beloved work. The fire of Prometheus died out again and again in your hands; many a spot in your picture has not been touched by the divine flame”.¹ These words from *The Unknown Masterpiece* by Honoré Balzac are spoken by the old painter Master Frenhofer to the other painter Porbus, working on the image of a woman. The painter Frenhofer decides to take up the challenge unfulfilled by Porbus and paint a true and beautiful female nude. Ultimately, however, he fails to render the real beauty of the model and suffers an artistic fiasco – the picture remains impossible.

This short story was quoted from by Stanisław Witkiewicz in his critical article on *Phryne at the Feast of Poseidon in Eleusis* by Henryk Siemiradzki (fig. III).² With this remark, he referred the attentive reader to the artistic context of the representation of the female nude in the 19th century art, in which the representation of a naked woman was an attempt at artistic genius. Of course, the concept had a long tradition in European art, where the nude was a theme connoting art *in se*.³ This was particularly true with regard to the image of a naked woman, most often representing Venus, which had been considered to be the quintessence of beauty since ancient times.⁴ The nude became the basis of academic education, even the term *académie* meant precisely the study of the naked model. There can be little wonder, therefore, that numerous nudes, predominantly as representations of the goddess of love, were exhibited at the 19th -century art salons.⁵

Siemiradzki took up the subject of the female nude on many occasions in his work. Yet, in dealing with this task, he never painted Venus, instead depicting naked women in ancient settings. The only deviation from this rule came with personifications, enforced by the

- 1] Honoré de BALZAC, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, 1 edn. “L’Artiste” 1831, English transl. Ellen Marriage. Accesible online: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23060/23060-h/23060-h.htm>.
- 2] Stanisław WITKIEWICZ, *Fryne*, “Kurier Warszawski”, 1889, no. 180 (2. 07), pp.1-2; no. 181 (3. 07), pp.1-2.
- 3] Cf. classic study of the genre: Kenneth CLARK, *The Nude. A Study in Ideal Form*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1956.
- 4] The popularity of representations of Venus in modern art is evidenced by the study: *The Iconography of Venus*, compiled by K. BENDER, vol. 1 -6, 2007-2018. Accesible online: <https://independent.academia.edu/KBender>.
- 5] Maria POPRZECKA, *Akt – forma nie idealna*, “Przegląd Historyczny”, 2009, no. 100/3, p. 373.

convention of allegory itself. Thus, in Siemiradzki's historical paintings by, there are naked women who either play the roles of ancient deities, as in *The Judgement of Paris* (fig. IV), or act as slaves, e.g. in the paintings *The Vase or the Woman?* (1874), *Isaurian Pirates Selling their Booty* (1880), martyrs, as in *Christian Dirce* (fig. VI), or are dancers, sometimes in the pose of Aphrodite Kallipygos, as in *A Dance among Swords* (1881, 2nd version, State Tretyakov Gallery), sometimes they are shown as bacchantes, or participants of ancient feasts, e.g. *Bacchanals* (1890, Serpukhov History and Art Museum), *The Era of Tiberius on Capri* (1881, State Tretyakov Gallery). Siemiradzki did not paint unreal, mythological heroines, but women embedded in specific historical realities, inscribed in the probability of scientifically understood reality.

The painting *Phryne at the Feast of Poseidon in Eleusis* is not an exception. It depicts a historical Greek hetaera, who lived in the 4th century BC, playing the role of Aphrodite during the Eleusinian Mysteries, famous in the ancient times as well as later. The figure of Phryne was well known in the 19th century thanks to Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting *Phryne before the Areopagus* of 1861 (fig. 32), which depicts an episode from her life when she stood accused of godlessness and was taken to court.⁶ In order to save her from punishment, her defender Hypereides unveiled her naked body before the judges, who, captivated by her physical beauty, acquitted her. The French painter portrayed the hetaera exactly in the moment when she is covering her face from the audience in shame with a gesture of her hands, after her defender ripped off the robe that covered her body. The popularity of Gérôme's painting contributed to the fact that the pose of Phryne – a naked woman in a light *contrapposto*, covering her eyes with shame – filled the visual culture of the time, becoming a model for other paintings, sculptures and even photographs.⁷

Siemiradzki, however, chose a different moment from the life of the Greek hetaera. In December 1886 he wrote to his friend, and the most important artistic advisor, Piotr F. Iseyev "I am preparing a big painting, bigger than Nero's candlesticks. Its theme is Phryne, who plays the role of Aphrodite during the Poseidon feast in Eleusis". He then added, "I have long dreamt of a theme from the life of the Greeks **that would**

6] Gerald M. ACKERMAN, *The Life and Work of Jean-Léon Gérôme with a Catalogue Raisonné*, Sotheby's Publications, London 1986, cat. no. 132.

7] Édouard PAPET, *Phryné au XIXe siècle: la plus jolie femme de Paris ?* in : *Praxitèle: Un maître de la sculpture antique*, eds. Alain PASQUIER, Jean Luc MARTINEZ, catalogue, Musée du Louvre, Louvre Éditions, Paris 2007, pp. 368-370.

give me the opportunity to present the classical beauty in all its glory”.⁸ And so Siemiradzki portrayed the scene of Phryne playing the role of Aphrodite in the Eleusinian Mysteries, as described by Athenaeus in *Deipnosophistae*. In the text it is stated that Phryne “on the solemn assembly of the Eleusinian festival, and on the feast of the Poseidonia, [...] laid aside her garments in the sight of all the assembled Greeks, and having undone her hair, she went to bathe in the sea; and it was from her that Apelles took his picture of Aphrodite Anadyomene and Praxiteles the sculptor, who was a lover of hers, modelled the Aphrodite of Cnidus from her body”.⁹

Thus, playing the role of a goddess by an earthly beauty was an inspiration to create an image with a female nude as the main theme. This motif had been taken up before Siemiradzki by his two greatest artistic rivals – in 1877 Lawrence Alma-Tadema presented his work *A Sculptor's Model* (fig. 51), and in 1882 Frederic Leighton showed his painting *Phryne*.¹⁰ Both compositions, in the format of a vertical rectangle, focus on the figure of a naked woman alone, portraying her after the model of Aphrodite Anadyomene – that is, according to the message of Athenaeus in the pose, in which Apelles depicted the goddess born of sea foam, inspired by the sight of Phryne emerging from water. This work, famous in antiquity, is not known from any iconographic sources. Its extraordinary popularity is evidenced by the fact that the pose of Aphrodite – standing with her hands raised and squeezing her wet hair – became widespread in other forms of art, especially in ancient sculpture, where it appeared in many variations.¹¹ Because of the surviving ancient statues, this type of female nude also became popular in modern painting. Modern artists created their own artistic visions of the work of Apelles, challenging the ideal, as shown in the print *Triumph of the Art Painting* by Bernard Picart, where the Allegory of Painting is holding a picture of Aphrodite Anadyomene (fig. 52). A perfect realization of this theme in modern painting was the

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- 8] Henryk Siemiradzki, letter to Piotr F. Iseyev, december 1886. Отдел рукописей Российской государственной библиотеки (ОР РГБ), Ф. 489, ед. хр. 17, л. 17. Quote after: Татьяна Л. КАРПОВА, *Генрих Семирадский* (Tatiana L. KARPOVA, *Henryk Siemiradzki*), Золотой век, Санкт-Петербург 2008, p. 163.
- 9] ATHENAEUS, *The Deipnosophists*, transl. C. D. Yonge (1854), Book XIII, pp. 590-591. Accessible online: <http://www.attalus.org/old/athenaeus13c.html>.
- 10] Emilia Russell BARRINGTON, *The Life and Letters of Frederic Leighton*, 2 vols, George Allen, London 1906, vol. I, p. 536-540. Accessible online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/35934>.
- 11] The different variations of Aphrodite Anadyomene are described in: Witold, DOBROWOLSKI, *Wazy greckie w twórczości Siemiradzkiego*, “Sztuka Europy Wschodniej”, 2017, vol. V, p. 18.

work of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres *Venus Anadyomene* (fig. 53), which the artist started painting at the beginning of the 19th century during his stay in Rome, and completed in 1848 and presented to the public at the Exposition Universelle in 1855.¹² Thus, both Alma-Tadema and Leighton directly confronted the ancient tradition, challenging Apelles as well as contemporaneous art, competing with Ingres, the master of the idealistic nude himself, and the artist whose name came to be identified with academic orthodoxy. Smooth, slender female silhouettes in elegant but unnatural poses on the canvases of Alma-Tadema and Leighton resemble a classical sculpture rather than a woman of “flesh and bone”. Such anti-naturalistic idealistic treatment of Phryne’s body by Siemiradzki’s rivals places these works perfectly in the conventions of academic art. They show the “fullness of beauty” being the quintessence of “art for art’s sake”, which for Victorian painters and their spiritual likes was embodied by the figure of Venus.¹³

Siemiradzki’s *Phryne at the Feast of Poseidon in Eleusis* is decidedly different from these works. The very composition is different – the artist presented a multi-figure scene, for which he chose the format of a horizontal rectangle. The characters of this representation are shown almost exclusively in the foreground, like actors on a theatre stage, and are divided into three groups. In the centre, on the axis of the composition there is Phryne, taking off her garments with the help of her servants. She is depicted in the pose of Aphrodite Anadyomene, just like in the paintings of Siemiradzki’s rivals, but she is not alone – there is a crowd of people staring at her both from her right and left. The group to the right of the hetaera, shown gathered around a column crowned with a tripod with flowers, consists of a poet, a singer, a shepherd – all of whom seem to be praising the beauty of Phryne, which finds resemblance in the beauty of the bay in the background. On the left side of the hetaerae, the participants of the mysteries are

- 12] Ingres. *In Pursuit of Perfection. The Art of J.-A.-D. Ingres*, eds. Patricia CONDON, Marjorie B. COHN, Agnes MONGAN, Louisville The J. B. Speed Art Museum, Indiana University Press, Louisville [Kentucky] 1983, p. 64. The pose of Venus Anadyomene appears in another works of J.-A.-D. Ingres – *The Source* (1856, Paris, Musée d’Orsay), which was widely reproduced as an exemplar of the *figure d’étude*. Cf.: *Exposed. The Victorian Nude*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Britain, ed. Alison SMITH, Tate Publishing Publications, London 2001 p. 90.
- 13] Alison SMITH, *Nature Transformed, Leighton, the Nude and the Model*, in: *Frederic Leighton. Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*, eds. Tim BARRINGER and Elizabeth PRETTEJOHN, Yale University Press, New Haven, London 1999, pp. 31-38. Cf.: Elizabeth PRETTEJOHN, *Art for Art’s Sake. Aestheticism in Victorian Painting*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London 2007, pp. 130-160.

seen leaving the temple visible in the background. In the multi-coloured crowd, one can see men and women carrying statues of deities, next to them there is a relief depicting the kidnapping of a Nereid, clearly indicating the mythological – and thus religious – context of the representation. Siemiradzki's Phryne is also different from the idealistically portrayed female bodies on the canvases of Alma-Tadema or Leighton. Admittedly, there have been voices praising her beauty among critics. However, the prevailing opinion was one of astonishment at the "somewhat heavy" shapes of the hetaera. Fritz von Ostini writing for *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* even stated that the figure of Phryne by Siemiradzki "is an insult to Aphrodite born of sea foam", and that her "brownish and not-so-young body would probably attract neither Praxiteles nor Hypereides".¹⁴ She was accused of being too real, too heavy-set, and even of not being feminine at all. The choice of this type of beauty is all the more puzzling because Siemiradzki was perfectly capable of painting attractive, sensual women, such as the dancer in *A Dance among Swords*, the slender and embarrassed slave from the *The Vase or The Woman?*, *Isaurian Pirates*, or the almost deprived of materiality martyr from *Christian Dirce*. The choice of Phryne's silhouette may be related to Siemiradzki's immediate pattern, as the massive, common shapes of the hetaera fully reflect the figure of Siemiradzki's model Carlattina Dobler (fig. 54).¹⁵ Numerous sketches for the figure of Phryne have also survived, including an oil sketch of her legs (fig. 55), which were so deeply disturbing to critics because of their "realism".¹⁶ Stanisław Witkiewicz, Siemiradzki's friend and an admirer and propagator of realism did not, however, find realism either in the work or in the beauty of the heroine. Instead, he wrote: "At first impression, as a silhouette, she seems to be a man. Her powerful arms and hands, with such poor, narrow hips and thighs, take away her feminine trait. She is some kind of hermaphrodite, a half-being, whose power of female charm is hard to believe"¹⁷. It is worth considering why Phryne's model of beauty in Siemiradzki's painting also differs from the convention of nudes, defined by such paintings as the already

14] Fritz von OSTINI, "Münchener Neueste Nachrichten" 1890. Quato after: "Przegląd Polityczny, Społeczny i Literacki", 1890, no. 279 (4. 12), p. 3.

15] See the sketch with Carlitta Dobler from National Museum in Krakow (no. inv. III-r.a-6507). Stanisław LEWANDOWSKI, *Henryk Siemiradzki*, Gebethner & Wolff, Warszawa, Kraków 1904, p. 25.

16] TH., *Prasa rosyjska o Siemiradzkiem*, "Kraj", 1889, no. 5 (14.02), pp. 5-6.

17] S. WITKIEWICZ, op. cit., no. 181, p. 1.

mentioned works by Gérôme, Alma-Tadema and Leighton, as well as from other nudes which came out from under the brush of the author of *Nero's Torches* himself. After all, as Witkiewicz boldly observed, "beautiful pose of the woman, pretty flowers, the blue of the sea, the marble, the tiny reflections of sunshine, of which this painting was composed, were completely within the limits of the possibilities of his talent and true preferences", while "[...] Phryne is not womanly enough".¹⁸

In comparison with the canon of the academic female nude, Witkiewicz's statements on the androgenicity of Phryne seem justified. Similar accusations were raised against the female images of the brush or chisel of Michelangelo Buonarroti, which were even called "men with breasts".¹⁹ Michelangelo introduced, or perhaps as others would prefer, revived the genre of the heroic nude, which was supposed to be not so much a source of sensual pleasure, but rather an embodiment of an idea. The women created by Buonarroti were not meant to show sensual beauty at all, but to embody concepts, hence their nudes are far from erotic charm. Similarly, Phryne, placed on the axis of the painting in the pose of the goddess of beauty, embodies the idea of beauty. "What delights us in Phryne is not for the senses; it is an almost abstract beauty as much as the charm of the ancient marble figures of Venus".²⁰ It was even written: "We find [...] in it everything that constitutes the essence of the classical *χαλόν*: a perfect harmony of line, strength, tranquillity, and finally the breath of true poetry, which the ancient world so lovingly fondled in its bosom".²¹ In ancient Greece, the beauty of the body was manifested especially in the presentation of the naked body. Phryne was originally presented "completely uncovered".²² In the collections available to Józef Dużyk, there appeared a photograph of Siemiradzki in front of a painted picture showing naked Phryne.²³ The nudity and carnality of the heroine refers to her purely physical aspect especially that Siemiradzki resigned from showing the gaze of her eyes, the face of the hetaera is turned aside.

18] S. WITKIEWICZ, op. cit., no. 181, pp. 1-2.

19] Seymour HOWARD, *Eros, Empathy, Expectation, Ascription, and Breasts of Michelangelo (A Prolegomenon on Polymorphism and Creativity)*, "Artibus Et Historiae", 2001, vol. 22, no. 44, pp. 94-98. Accessible online: JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1483715.

20] St. R. [Stanisław ROSSOWSKI], *Fryne*, "Gazeta Narodowa", 1890, no. 36 (13. 02), p. 1.

21] Ibid.

22] *Listy Rzymskie*, "Wiek", 1888, no. 61 (17.03), p. 1.

23] Józef DUŻYK, *Siemiradzki. Opowieść biograficzna*, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1986, fig. 98.

The gaze of the depicted protagonist always introduces an element of character psychologization into the representation, the eyes are, after all, the mirror of the soul. This aspect was also highlighted by critics. It was pointed out: “Yes, yes! We want even our Aspasia to have Beatrice’s eyes, to have spiritual charm – and Phryne does not have it, and no Greek woman had it”.²⁴ Phryne presents not her “spiritual” side, but her body. This direct nudity of the body paradoxically “strips” the performance of the eroticism that shocked the critics in the case of the famous *Phryne* by Gérôme, but also Siemiradzki’s *The Vase or the Woman*.²⁵ As Lynda Nead reminds us, “nakedness is a mark of material reality; whereas nudity transcends that historical and social existence, and is a kind of a cultural disguise”.²⁶ Although inscribed in the ancient context, Siemiradzki’s Phryne breaks the canon of presenting a female nude and appears to be a figure “of flesh and bone”.

Similar accusations of the non-canonical, commonplace beauty of the models were made against the female nudes of Gustave Courbet. The “somewhat heavy” proportions of the woman in the painting *The Bathers* (fig. 56), staged at the Paris Salon in 1853, were particularly famous.²⁷ The work was criticized primarily because of the annoying incompatibility of the studied gesture and the model’s commonplace posture. This inconsistency of registers further distinguished what is “real” from the “imaginary” or “artistic”. The same dualism of forms characterises Siemiradzki’s *Phryne*, who combines a statue-like pose with heavy “realistic” shapes of the hetaera. The realism of the living figure is contrasted with the artificiality of her pose, and the same dualism can be observed in the characters around her. The poses of many of them bear references to ancient sculptures, mainly to the works of Praxiteles. The pervasion of the “real” and “artificial” element in *Phryne* was emphasized by critics, who, perplexed at times, called the figures in this composition a ballet.²⁸ The “theatrical” poses of the figures make

24] A-n, *Fryne w Eleusis. Najnowszy obraz mistrza H. Siemiradzkiego*, “Przegląd Polityczny, Społeczny i Literacki”, 1890, no. 41, (19. 02), p. 1.

25] These images met with fierce criticism and censorship. See: Matthias KRÜGER, *Jean-Léon Gérômes Phryne vor dem Areopag. Das Ausstellungsbild als Skandalwerk*, in: *Kanon Kunstgeschichte. Einführung in Werke, Methoden und Epochen*, eds. Kristin MAREK und Martin SCHULZ, vol. III: *Moderne*, Wilhelm Fink, München 2015, pp. 57-75.

26] Lynda NEAD, *The Female Nude*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 16.

27] Maria POPRZECKA, “*Gest, który nic nie wyraża*”, in: Maria POPRZECKA, *Pochwała Malarstwa. Studia z historii i teorii sztuki*, Słowo / Obraz Terytoria, Gdańsk 2000, pp. 130-137. Michael FRIED, *Courbet’s realism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1992, pp.164-167.

28] Wojciech DZIEDUSZYCKI, *Listy ze usi*, “Gazeta Narodowa”, 1890, no. 42 (20.02), p. 1.

the picture become “living art”, which is further amplified by the fact that this work was one of the most frequently staged “living images”.

The theatricality of Siemiradzki's painting was also implied by the manner of its exposition at the St. Petersburg Academy.²⁹ The painting was placed in a room covered with dark curtains, illuminated only by means of electric light, which was supposed to imitate sunlight. Thus, Phryne was meant to appear as a naked woman bathed in sunlight. Let us recall that Cesare Ripa describing the figure of truth, mentions that she is a naked woman holding the sun, which means that its rays must be falling on her. Therefore, Phryne's nakedness can be interpreted allegorically, i.e., shown in full sunlight the hetaera would be an Allegory of Truth – *Verità* or *Nuda Veritas*.³⁰ The idea of truth is also evoked by the figure of Helios, carried by the participants of the procession.³¹ It was, after all, the God of the Sun who revealed to Demeter the secret of Persephone's abduction by Hades. The cult of Helios was also connected with the cult of Apollo, a God of the Sun and light. Thus, again the connection between Beauty and Truth is emphasized, this time by references to mythology.

The combination of two dichotomous elements – nature and art, i.e. the transformation of matter into form – echoes the neoplatonic concept of the duality of the goddess Venus – *Geminae Veneres*. One of the most important representations of the two natures of Venus is the painting *Sacred and Profane Love* by Titian (1514, Borghese Gallery). According to the neoplatonic interpretation it shows two faces of Venus: the heavenly one (*Venere Celeste*) is the undressed woman and the earthly one (*Venere Terrena* or *Venere Volgare*) – the woman in a dress. The semantics of the figures is emphasized by the background, on the one hand referring to religious worship, suggested by the church tower, on the other hand – to earthly power through the

- 29] “Художественное новости” (“Art News”), 1889, no.4, p. 89-95 See: Татьяна Карпова, *У истоков выставочного и музейного дизайна* (Т. Карпова, *At the origins of exhibition and museum design*), in: *Передвижники и П. М. Третьяков в роли экспозиционеров (Peredvizhniki and P.M. Tretyakov as exhibitors)*, Русская галерея, 2. Москва: Панорама. Наука и практика, 2001, pp. 4-10.
- 30] Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia, ovvero Descrittione di Diverse Imagini Cauate dall'Antichità*, Faerii, Roma 1603, pp. 499-501. See: Kathryn Moore Heleniak, *Naked/ Nude*, in: *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art*, ed. Helene E. Roberts, vol. 2, Fitzroy Dearborn, Chicago 1998, p. 644-645.
- 31] Katarzyna Anna Czajkowska, *Wizja antycznej Grecji w obrazie Henryka Hektora Siemiradzkiego „Fryne na święcie Posejdona w Eleusis”*, “Sztuka Europy Wschodniej”, 2017, vol. IV, p. 161.

silhouette of a castle.³² Similarly, in *Phryne*, the background of the painting resonates with the double nature of the woman-goddess. It consists of two separate parts: a landscape with a beautiful bay and a hill with a Greek temple and a relief in the foreground, so there is nature on the one hand and art on the other. Phryne is located on the borderline between these two worlds. Her dual nature would therefore connect the Truth of Nature with the Beauty of Art.

In emphasizing the connection between Truth and Beauty, Siemiradzki also entered into a dialogue with painting contemporary to him. Critics attributed the questioning of this connection and the antagonization of these notions to “realism”. The painting *The Painter’s Studio* (1854-1855) by the already mentioned Gustave Courbet was, of course, the flagship work for this artistic movement (fig. 57). Painted in 1855, it was to be displayed at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. It was exactly what it was meant to be – an artistic manifesto of realism.³³ This monumental canvas is composed similarly to *Phryne* – almost all of the figures in the foreground are divided into three groups, gathered around the central one, consisting of a painter and a naked woman. The artist is turned to her with his back, looking at the canvas in front of him, which depicts a landscape from his home region, a boy is also looking at it. The landscape “absorbs” this group, they seem to almost merge with it. The figures become a living image against the background of painted nature. It is nature that constitutes the power of painting, even the naked woman – the muse is real. This scene is observed by those gathered in Courbet’s atelier, who correspond to various historical figures and models of art (religious, historical, landscape), they “add” to the meaning of the event in the centre, like a choir in a Greek tragedy. Although from the beginning this work has been subject to many interpretations, it is certainly a work about the sources of art, especially painting, which, conversely, has its origins in nature but is created in a dark studio.

Similarly, in *Phryne at the Feast of Poseidon in Eleusis*, the theme is also the birth of art, shown through the canonical Balzacian motif of transforming a real woman into a nude. This scene, developed in parallel to the plane of the picture, consists of a central group – the semantic centre, and two groups flanking it, constituting

32] Erwin PANOFSKY, *The Neoplatonic Movement in Florence and Northern Italy (Bandinelli and Titian)*, in: *Studies in Iconology, Naturalistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, Oxford, 1939, reprinted 1962, p. 152.

33] See among others: Werner HOFMANN, “*Das Atelier*” *Courbets Jahrhundertbild*, C. H. Beck, München 2010.

a “commentary” to the event. Thus, the composition repeats the rhetorical arrangement of Courbet’s flagship work, indicating that this canvas is also supposed to have a clear, persuasive message. Such an ideological character of the work would fit perfectly into the context of creation of Siemiradzki’s painting, which was originally intended to be shown at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889, as was evident from the artist’s letter to Piotr F. Iseyev.³⁴ Preparing a painting for such an important exhibition, the author of *Nero’s Torches* presented his own artistic programme, which stood in opposition to the Courbet’s postulate of “realism” which breaks the link between Truth and Beauty. He wanted – let us recall once again the words from his letter – to depict “the whole beauty of the ancient world”, but he also did not depart from the Truth, taking up the challenge of representing it. In Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato, these two ideas corresponded with each other, along with the idea of Good.³⁵ They constituted the classical theory, which formed the basis for the definition of art from modernity to any theory of art referring to classicism, becoming the basis of academic teaching.³⁶

These academic rules were also questioned in Russia, as there were calls for realistic, “national” art, breaking with cosmopolitan academism. One of the most important figures of this new trend was Vladimir Stasov, the main theoretician of the Association of Travelling Art Exhibitions, which brought together artists postulating realistic Russian art. Siemiradzki clashed with Stasov, while still a student in St. Petersburg in 1869, in the famous discussion at Mark Antokolski’s house. On that occasion the author of *Nero’s Torches* emphasized that there is something more than just vulgar truth in presenting reality, which at the same time does not contradict it, and that such art was created by the ancient Greeks. Stasov, on the other hand, believed that “the counterfeiting of ancient art, which has already passed, and its continuation, work in its spirit is thoughtless and infertile”, it is only “reanimating the dead”.³⁷ The comments from this discussion, recorded in Ilya

34] See footnote no. 8.

35] Tom ROCKMORE, *Art and Truth after Plato*, Chicago University Press, Chicago and London 2013, pp.1-10.

36] Maria POPRZEŃSKA, *Akademizm*, Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1989, pp. 20-71.

37] Илья Е. РЕПИН, *Далекое близкое*, (Илья РЕПИН, *Far and Near*), Художник РСФСР, Ленинград 1982, pp. 189-196. Quoted: Veronika BOGDAN, *Henryk Siemiradzki and the Imperial Academy of Arts*, “World Art Studies”, 2018, vol. 18, p. 30.

Repin's book of reminiscences, *Far and Near* persisted for the following decade.³⁸ A certain change of emphasis in artistic stances took place in the 1880s, when the realistic art of Wanderers (Peredvizhniki) found itself in crisis and many of its members, such as Ivan Kramskoy, became fascinated by the physical beauty, which appeared as a diabolical temptation, ambivalent towards Good and Evil. Against the background of this discussion, Siemiradzki's manifesto resounds even more clearly. In *Phryne*, he showed a beautiful, but also real female nude, not taking into account the dichotomy of Beauty and Truth, raised by Wanderers, but by using the repertoire of painting contemporary to him, i.e. realism, he showed how the two ideas combine, according to Plato's concept.

Thus, the Ideal of Beauty – Phryne, is in Siemiradzki's painting synonymous with Truth, and in this union it is revealed to the crowd. The artistic stance expressed in *Phryne* is particularly clear if we juxtapose it with another painting that shows the limits of the representation – *The Appearance of Christ to the People* (1837-1857, State Tretyakov Gallery) by Aleksandr Ivanov (fig. 58). This work, canonical for the Russian artistic thought, the fruit of several dozen years of the painter's work in Italy, is a compressed expression of his reflections on the possibility of rendering in painting that which is not presented, i.e. the figure of Christ, embodying the absolute, and in it the concepts of Truth, Beauty and Good. In his work Ivanov presented in the foreground John the Baptist, announcing the coming of the Messiah and a crowd of people listening to him. Christ is indeed coming, but almost nobody notices him, because his figure in the depths of the picture, a little to the right of the axis, remains almost invisible. Although Ivanov used models from antiquity and nature to paint his figures, they proved to be insufficient to create the most important figure – the incarnate God. And so, ultimately the artist failed, as it proved impossible to present the incarnation of Beauty, Truth and Good. It is different in Siemiradzki's painting – here an ancient goddess of earthly shapes shamelessly, in all (almost) her grandeur, presents herself on the axis of the painting, making herself explicitly visible and turning this visibility into a spectacle. Phryne's carnality appears as an antithesis of the

38] Татьяна Л. КАРПОВА, *Фрина Генриха Семирадского – манифестация идеи Красоты в художественной атмосфере 1880-х годов* (Tatiana L. KARPOVA, "Phryne" by H. Siemiradzki – a manifestation of the idea of Beauty in the artistic atmosphere of the 1880s), "Sztuka Europy Wschodniej", 2016, vol. IV, pp. 165-176.

ideal of the figure of Christ, but while the representation of Jesus proved impossible, Siemiradzki showed Phryne in all her splendour, which also sacralises her. Where Ivanov's painting questioned the possibilities of mimetic rendering of Beauty and Truth, Siemiradzki's work is an ostentatious display of the possibilities of painting.

Phryne appears like a deity, or maybe even divinity in full glory. The sacred character of this appearance is emphasized by the division of the composition into three parts, the adored Phryne and the ministers of art and religion flanking her. The earthly Phryne in a sculptural pose becomes a sculpture of a goddess, an ancient idol in front of the crowd. As a contemporary idol, Paul Valéry described another painting with an image of a naked woman – Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (fig. 59).³⁹ This work, exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1865, aroused a true scandal, primarily because of the way in which the theme of the nude, which is iconic for painting, was treated. Using the convention of reclining Venus, so well known from Venetian painting, Manet presented a contemporary prostitute, accompanied by a black maid holding a bouquet of flowers, an inseparable symbol of the triumph of the goddess of love. However, *Olympia* playing the role of a deity – as T. J. Clark wrote – seems to be a negation of the convention of the nude, almost its caricature, successively breaking academic rules: the rule of decorum by showing not a courtesan, but a prostitute, the social norm of art reception by exposing its sexual, provocative character, but most importantly, the way of building reception through the inability to establish a coherent point of view.⁴⁰ As Clark stressed, the observer does not have a single viewing point of the composition, his gaze wanders through consecutive points of the composition – the body of *Olympia*, not being able to find a point of support, he does not find the fiction of representation, but only the truth of the canvas covered with colours in an appropriate arrangement. Thus, the view, uncovered with a curtain (in the upper left corner), shows an unreal woman who looks at the observer with a “dead gaze”, while at the same time the viewer's gaze is lost. It is a spectacle of fiction, in which there is no longer any unity between the presented and the presenter. Phryne is completely different – here the viewer has a specific vantage

39] Paul VALÉRY, *Degas. Manet. Morisot*, in: *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, transl. D. Paul, vol. 12, Pantheon, New York 1964, p. 109. See also: FRANCO RELLA, *Il Segreto di Manet*, Bompiani, Firenze-Milano 2017, pp. 17-24.

40] T. J. [Timothy James] CLARK, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art. Of Manet and Followers*, (rev. edn.) Princeton University Press, Princeton 1999, pp. 79-145.

point, although it may be changed, the viewed object is one and the viewer shares it with other characters in the scene. The viewer brings the performance to life with his gaze, although he does not meet the gaze of the hetaera, it is his gaze that brings the heroine to life.

Phryne at the Feast of Poseidon in Eleusis is a spectacle of looking and about looking, its main and only protagonist is revealed in full sight, i.e. in full splendour. Siemiradzki attached great importance to exhibiting the work in sunlight. Light played a key role for him in this work. According to Plato, light constituted the binding force of the idea of Good, Beauty and Truth because, being present in the sensual world, it made a reference to the ideal reality, allowing us to see the Beauty that lifts us towards the Truth and the Good.⁴¹ Light was also the central element of the Eleusinian Mysteries. As Henryk Struve wrote, "Greek people gathered at these celebrations from the furthest reaches, and the pious were initiated by the priests into the Eleusinian Mysteries, into a sacred *drama* that represented, accompanied by cheerless effects of light and music, the emergence of life out of death, joy out of sorrow, light out of darkness".⁴² The celebration of the mysteries emphasized that it is by virtue of light that nature is reborn, that it is stronger than death – darkness. The return of Persephone from the land of darkness heralds vegetation, the rebirth of life. In the myth of Demeter and Persephone, being seen is connected with living, because losing life means going away to the land of darkness, where one becomes but a shadow. Light is therefore also a condition for all visibility. It is in its honour that the Eleusinian feast is held, in honour of its triumph, from which also art is born – poetry, theatre, architecture and sculpture, and above all, painting, and each of these disciplines is represented in the work of Siemiradzki.

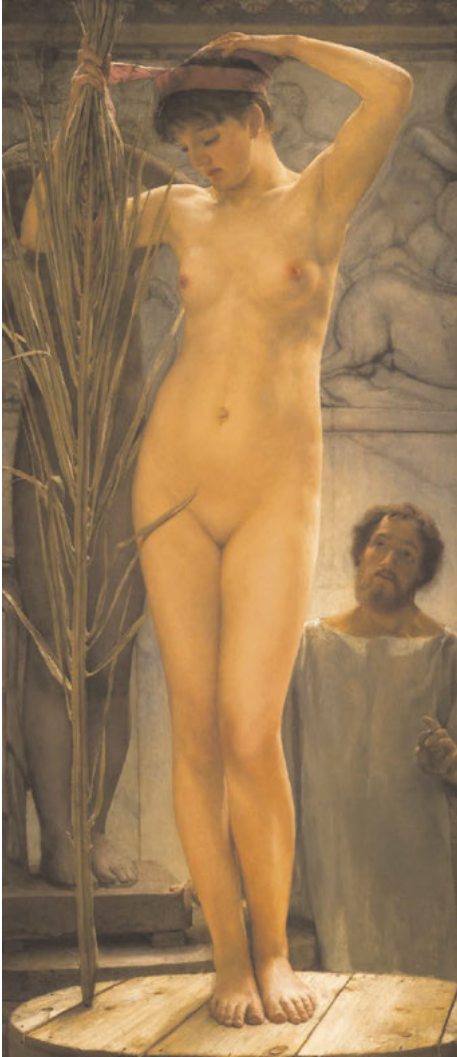
Art, according to Greek anthropology, can also bring back from the land of shadows. It was, after all, initiated by a girl from Corinth drawing her beloved, who was leaving for war to die for his homeland. Thus, art defeats death, leads out of the land of shadows, makes existence visible and alive. Therefore, if Manet's *Olympia* – according to Clark – was a painting about "lack", it was a negative work, then *Phryne* seems to be an affirmative work, ostentatiously showing the spectacle of visibility, and thus the possibilities of painting.

41] Paulina TENDERA, *Światło – Piękno. Platona dwie drogi mądrości*, "Kwartalnik Filozoficzny", 2010, no. 38/ 4, p. 23.

42] Henryk STRUVE, „Fryne”. *Obraz Henryka Siemiradzkiego*, "Kłosy", 1889, no. 1249, p. 359.

Therefore, through *Phryne at the Feast of Poseidon in Eleusis* Siemiradzki took the floor in his contemporary dispute about the possibilities and limits of painting. For this purpose, he used the ancient and contemporary art, clearly proving that painting is possible. He did so in a clear way, confronting what Balzac, but also his predecessors and successors, believed was impossible, i.e. showing the Real Beauty contained in the transformation of a living woman into an image. In this interpretation, Siemiradzki's work appears to be another painter's *paragone* – a rivalry of arts, in which the painter proves his artistic efficiency, since only the painting can show the light, and through it the image.

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51. Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Sculptor's Model*, 1877, oil on canvas, 195,5 × 86 cm, private collections. Photo in public domain.



52. Bernard Picart, *Triumph of the Art Painting*, 1725, etching on paper, 26 × 17.6 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo in public domain.



53. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Venus Anadyomene*, 1848, oil on canvas, 164 × 82 cm, Musée Condé, Chantilly. Photo in public domain.



54. Henryk Siemiradzki, *Carlattina Döbler*, sketch, pencil, paper, 44 × 29.5 cm, National Museum, Krakow, no. inv. MNK III-r.a-6507. Photo Museum.



55. Henryk Siemiradzki, Sketch to *Phryne*, oil on canvas, 43 × 23.8 cm, National Museum, Krakow, no. inv. MNK II-a-1049 (310 454). Photo Museum.



56. Gustave Courbet, *The Bathers*, 1853, oil on canvas, 227 × 193 cm, Musée Fabre, Montpellier. Photo in public domain.



57. Gustave Courbet, *The Painter's Studio*, 1854-1855, oil on canvas, 361 × 598 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo in public domain.



58. Aleksandr Ivanov, *The Appearance of Christ to the People*, 1837-1857, oil on canvas, 540 × 770 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photo in public domain.



59. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 130.5 × 190 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo in public domain.