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AN ACADEMICIAN IN A ROMAN SLAUGHTERHOUSE

*L'homme d'imagination, dans son travail pour élever
le modèle jusqu'à l'idéal qu'il a conçu, fait aussi,
malgré lui, des pas vers la vulgarité qui le presse et qu'il
a sous l'œil.*

Eugène Delacroix¹

The time when art historians marginalized the use of photography by artists as a technical aid has long gone. The whole issue of photography – its history, theory, aesthetics, and the specifics of that medium – currently constitutes one of the most dynamically developing areas of research into the visual arts. The scope of this research is extremely extensive. Beginning with basic analyses of photographic image ontology, such issues as the photograph as a reflection of reality, the role of photography as a document and a “prosthetic memory device” are considered, as well as photography as a way of recognizing and appropriating reality, a tool for power, control and censorship and finally, photography related to symbolic and magical practices. From the art history angle, the question of photography’s participation in the art being created in the new mediums is particularly important. Research also looks at such phenomena as amateur photography and its mass consumption thanks to digitalisation, means of persuasion that are used in photography, and manipulation by means of press and journalistic photography, etc.

The tension between photography and traditional methods of reflecting visible reality arose almost as soon as its invention. Physicist

1] Eugène DELACROIX, *Journal*, vol.1: 1823–1850, ed. Paul FLAT, Paris 1926, pp. 267-268 (19 février 1847).

Joseph Gay-Lussac, presenting daguerreotypes to French parliamentarians in 1839, assured them that this new medium could depict still life with a perfection unattainable by ordinary methods, such as drawing and painting, with a perfection equal to nature itself and that the image drawn by hand is no match for truth and faithfulness.² However, this praise soon turned out to be ambivalent. Considered particularly alarming was what today's reflection on photography describes as "*Sichtbarkeit jenseits der Intention*" (visibility beyond intention).³ Excessive quantities of unselected optical data constituted an argument in favour of rejecting the new medium's artistic pretensions. There was also considerable conflict between the "truth of nature" offered by photography and the requirement that had been imposed on artists for several centuries that they "choose from nature". This requirement was particularly important for artists from the academic formation, such as Henryk Siemiradzki.

Regardless of the contradictory opinions that have arisen ever since the beginnings of the invention – whether photography is the "death of painting" or an inspiring challenge – painters, graphic artists and sculptors, along with scholars, were one of the first groups to become involved in photography, making it an instant and universal tool. An invention enabling one to retain and perpetuate fleeting images of the world proved to be a new, cheap and convenient "model", a perfect sketch, iconographic source, aide memoire, inspiration for the imagination, tool for discovering reality and a means of reconstructing the formal language of art. Photography helped artists remember landscapes that had faded in their memories,⁴ freed them from the lengthy sittings that portraits required, but above all enabled them to simplify and reduce one of the basic stages of the painting *curriculum*, the study of the nude or costumed model.⁵

In recent decades, research and discoveries of new sources, in particular, previously unknown photographic archives of painters and

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- 2] See: Wolfgang KEMP, *Geschichte der Fotografie: von Daguerre bis Gursky*, C. H. Beck, München 2019, p. 21.
 - 3] Sigrid WEIGEL, *Literatur als Voraussetzung der Kulturgeschichte*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 2004, p. 49. See: W. KEMP op. cit., p. 15.
 - 4] See letters of Franciszek Kostrzewski and Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski written in Munich in: *W tej pracowni zamknąłem me życie. Pracownie malarzy polskich XIX i pocz. XX wieku*, ed. Marta ERTMAN, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź 1991, [p. 19].
 - 5] The pictorial aspect of using photography in the 19th century is brought by the exhibition catalogue: *L'Art du nu au XIXe siècle. Le photographe et son modele*, ed. Bruno FOU CART, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris 1998.

sculptors, confirm that photography constituted a significant element of the work of many artists in the second half of the 19th century, including both modernists and traditionalists. It also played a significant and sometimes surprising role in the work of Henryk Siemiradzki.

In 1871, Henryk Siemiradzki left the St. Petersburg Academy as a fully-fledged artist with well-established views on art. Earning a commensurate number of awards for work on set topics and graduating from the Academy with a gold medal for his diploma thesis, the young artist obtained a six-year international scholarship involving a stay in Rome, still considered a necessary complement to one's artistic education. Already in the painting that was actually to be his public debut: *Christ and the Harlot*, painted in Rome in 1872, Siemiradzki applied a procedure that was to become a special feature of his painting. This consisted in adopting plein-air effects for his academic painting. The imagined evangelical scene is played out against the background of a broad landscape flooded with intense southern sunlight. Placing a massive plane tree in the centre of the composition, the painter applied an artifice that was to be repeated in countless other pictures – sunlight seeping through the leaves to cast flickering patches of light and shadow on the whole scene. With its brightness and luminosity, the picture so differed from contemporary, generally dark-toned religious paintings, that some critics saw it as a violation of *decorum* – the principle of propriety. The work, however, brought the painter his first international success. It was exhibited in various European cities, was awarded the Kunst Medaille in Vienna, and finally ensured the artist the sought after title of academician.

On the other hand, his conservatism and traditionalism meant that for several decades Siemiradzki's art failed to undergo any significant changes. It is hard to point to any internal caesuras in his works, just as there were no sudden turns in his life. What is interesting, however, is that while remaining faithful to the principles of academic art throughout his life, the artist made various modifications to it. Siemiradzki's "trademark", already introduced in the aforementioned *Christ and the Harlot*, became the sunlit "impressionistic" illumination of his paintings, an aspect distinguishing them from the late-academic, brown "sauces" of that period and ensuring he is considered by today's history of art as a "modernized academician".⁶ His painting, as well as the technical

6] PIOTR SZUBERT, *Akademik zmodernizowany. Kilka uwag o Henryku Siemiradzkim*, "Sztuka", 1979, no. 4/6, pp. 52-54.

procedures he used, constitutes an ideal way of tracing how academic artistic practice became infiltrated by new tendencies and methods.

In 1979, the National Museum in Krakow received from Henryk Siemiradzki's family a gift consisting of personal items, documents, manuscripts, decorations and materials from the artist's studio: studies and sketches, both oil and cartoons, portfolios of loose drawings, sketch-books and finally, photographs. This gift was shown at an exhibition organized in Krakow's Cloth Hall, the most appropriate of locations, since the painting *Nero's Torches*, donated by the artist in 1879, became the nucleus of that city's National Museum.⁷ The exhibition was a private, if not intimate affair. Not only because it showed such personal items as his "ordinary and tinted pince nez spectacles", "linen tobacco pouch", "silver case holding his honorary membership of the Municipal Casino in Lwów (Lemberg, Lviv) dated 1880", or even "the initials H.S. made of dry flowers held by a ribbon".⁸ Regardless of these everyday objects, always very moving as having been touched by the original owner, the exhibition revealed an unofficial aspect of the artist's creativity, one that in the 19th century was carefully screened from unauthorized view. Siemiradzki maintained this clear division between the revealed and concealed areas of his painting activities by building his own house on Rome's via Gaeta. Enchanted journalists and correspondents describing the artist's villa in national magazines always noted: "On the first floor, a studio come salon for displaying paintings, beautifully furnished; on the second floor – the studio proper, where the master painted and, disliking the presence of strangers while at work, only invited guests on extremely rare occasions."⁹

The working materials obtained by the Krakow museum meant that more than a hundred years after the artist's death, the studio "proper" was made available to viewers that had not been invited by the painter.¹⁰ It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between the

7] *Henryk Siemiradzki jakiego nie znamy. Wystawa daru otrzymanego od Rodziny artysty*, Muzeum Narodowe, exhibition catalogue, Sukiennice Gallery, June-August 1980, Kraków 1980.

8] *Ibid.*, Personal objects, no. 8, 10, 16, 20.

9] Aleksander RAJCHMAN, *Mistrz z via Gaeta*, "Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne", 1888, no. 266, p. 490.

10] Two exhibitions at the Museum of Art in Łódź were devoted to the workshops of Polish artists: *W tej pracowni zamknąłem me życie. Pracownie malarzy polskich XIX i pocz. XX wieku*, ed. Marta ERTMAN, part I, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 1991 and *Ogień niestrzeżony. Pracownie malarzy polskich XIX i początku XX wieku*, ed. Marta ERTMAN, part II, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 1995. At the first exhibition Siemiradzki's studio was shown according to a drawing by Miłosz Kotarbiński (Cat. no. 75).

sumptuously decorated “artistic apartment”, visited by crowned heads that we know from photographs of the period, and the now revealed sphere of “things unmentioned”. This penetration into the most delicate matter – the material of artistic creation, inspiration and its materialization, the impetus and methods used to give it a real existence – is one of the most compelling and at the same time most dangerous challenges to the art historian. In the case of Siemiradzki, the temptation is all the more powerful, because no artist of his calibre has ever in any form manifested this “creative passion”, preferring to protect his personal and artistic privacy behind the blameless public image of someone refined and reserved. Just as Siemiradzki’s two studios were completely different spaces: public and private, so too his completed, exhibited canvases and the “working aids” he used in their creation belonged to completely different worlds. As in theatrical productions, paintings given up for public viewing are like the gala show as compared to the backstage area so devoid of effects. After all, it was not just painters that kept concealed behind the scenes the “dreadful workings of their creative act”.¹¹ These were only to be revealed by the art of the 20th century, ostentatiously bringing out what had previously been concealed and thrust into oblivion...

It was long ago noted that Siemiradzki’s sketches, especially his small landscape studies in oil, infused, glowing, surprisingly fresh, reveal unexpected charms. On the occasion of the Krakow exhibition, the words of the painter’s first monographer, Stanisław Lewandowski, were recalled: “It is necessary to show people studies, colour tests and experiments conducted in the sun, in the air, in the basement or wherever, as the *first flashes of brilliant brush strokes*. Such flashes, such impressions of feelings are *modernism*, because they truly reveal the artist’s bare soul. Such studies by Siemiradzki, once exhibited alone, unaccompanied by any finished works, reveal his naked soul and tell us many things about him that we did not previously know.”¹²

What Siemiradzki’s technique shows is not only the first flashes of brilliant brush strokes” and not just another example of the 19th century problem with the “aesthetics of the sketch” – the dissonance between the spontaneity of the *breve ricordo* and the *fini* that blurs the

11] Andrzej PIEŃKOS, *Okropny warsztat tworzenia. O aurze pracowni artysty po romantyzmie*, in: *Ogień niestrzeżony*, op. cit., pp. 39-47.

12] Stanisław LEWANDOWSKI, *Henryk Siemiradzki*, Gebethner & Wolff, Warszawa, Kraków 1904, p. 87. P. Szubert drew attention to this aspect of Siemiradzki’s output. P. SZUBERT, op. cit., pp. 52-54.

same.¹³ The materials extracted from the corners of his studio do not so much reveal the artist's "naked soul" as the secrets of his craft. Above all, they show what work, procedures and treatments lie behind the decorative flourish, the free brush strokes and academic virtuosity. So here we see the addresses of his models with brief descriptions ("black eyes, poorly built"), tedious and not always well-executed anatomical studies, and scrupulously collected props. However, the most interesting are the photographs. These add another layer to the complicated history of mutual relations between photography and 19th-century painting.¹⁴ The photos from Siemiradzki's studio fall into two categories (fig. 76-77). The first of these are "live images" fixed by photographic techniques, variants of ideas typical of the artist, transferred to another medium. Alongside them are things best described as entirely rough copies of an auxiliary nature. Like many of his contemporaries, Siemiradzki modernized his work methods by using photographs of his models and even purchased ready-made stills specially produced for the needs of painters. Almost all the pictures preserved from his studio were made by the Rome based photographer Michel Mang in the studio or the small adjoining garden.¹⁵ The services of this photographer were also used by Aleksander Gierymski, who too was working in Rome in the 1870's, his photographs even being taken in the same backyard surroundings.¹⁶ The vast majority of photographs made for Siemiradzki were identified as posing models or mannequins dressed in costumes for the paintings *Christ and the Harlot*, *Nero's Torches*, *The Funeral of a Rus' in Bulgar* and finally *Sale of Amulets*.¹⁷

Here, photography is revealed to us as "*die Prosa der Bildwelt*" (the prose of the world of images), quoting David E. Wellbery.¹⁸ Any

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- 13] A. Boime analyzes the sketch-finish conflict as basic for the evolution of painting in the 19th century. Albert BOIME, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, Phaidon, London 1971, pp. 166-181.
- 14] A basic study for that subject remains Aaron SCHARF, *Art and Photography*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1974. Many detailed information regarding the relationship between art and photography in the nineteenth century brings the exhibition catalog: *L'Art du nu au XIXe siècle*, op. cit.
- 15] Wanda MOSSAKOWSKA, *Pomoce fotograficzne Michela Manga do obrazów Henryka Siemiradzkiego (1872 – około 1884)*, "Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej", 1984, vol. XXXII, no. 2, pp. 211-221.
- 16] Anna MASŁOWSKA, *Aleksander Gierymski i fotografia*, in: *Aleksander Gierymski 1850-1901*, exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Warsaw, ed. Ewa MICKE-BRONIAREK, Warszawa 2014, pp. 53 -61.
- 17] That identification was discovered by W. MOSSAKOWSKA, op. cit.
- 18] Quotation after: W. KEMP op. cit., p. 13.

comparison of photographs – recording the commonness and triviality of models, the mediocrity of their costumes, the shoddiness of tattered mannequins that do little to conceal the various supports, scaffolding and ladders used to prop up and maintain the desired poses – with their transformations into paintings illustrates exceptionally well the essence of that requirement imposed on artists for several centuries, which ultimately reached a crisis and died out in 19th-century academism, namely the raising of reality to an ideal.

Among the photographic aids Siemiradzki made use of are two exceptional prints clearly showing that essence of academic creation – photographs taken for the picture *Christian Dirce* (fig. VI). This late canvas, completed in 1897, shows the martyrdom of a young Christian who dies in the Roman arena in a bloody spectacle staged by the Emperor Nero, wishing to recreate the death of the mythological Dirce. Any association with the martyrdom scene of Ligia – the heroine of Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis* – were strongly repudiated by Siemiradzki himself, arguing that the first sketch for the painting, dated 1885, was made many years before the novel appeared.¹⁹ As an aside to these considerations, it may be noted that this earlier sketch (fig. 78), on the same theme, has a completely different composition, one not found in any other of Siemiradzki's paintings. The scene it presents is as if viewed from behind the audience, from a high loge, is a collision of foreground and background, featuring a bull, a bound girl and the figure of a gladiator. The contrast between the two is enhanced by a strong chiaroscuro effect, with the loge and part of the arena sunk in deep shadow, while the opposite side of the amphitheatre is flooded with bright sunlight. This composition, with its similarity to those of Edgar Degas, and its sharp chiaroscuro, comes as a surprise when compared with the highly conventional arrangement of the later picture: one that is composed on almost a single plane, devoid of any spatial complications, and modelled in diffuse, uniform light.

After ten years, preparing to paint the final version of the large (263 × 530 cm) *Dirce* painting, the artist (reversing the image) used a photograph taken in a Roman slaughterhouse. In a 1962 interview the artist's son gave the correspondent of a popular weekly, Leon Siemiradzki recalled: "Father hailed a hansom cab and we went to

19] The issue of relation between Siemiradzki's pictures and Sienkiewicz's novel is detailed discussed by Józef Dużyk, *Siemiradzki. Opowieść biograficzna*, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1986, pp. 465-481.

a butcher's in Trastevere. My father photographed the animal from several angles, and examined it for a long time. It was the same bull that later, in the painting, Nero and his retinue of praetorians can be seen observing."²⁰ Evidence of the unreliability of this reminiscence, not devoid of other errors, is the company seal of the photographic studio located at Via Borgo San Rocco, in Frascati. The photograph was taken by Augusto Arrighi (fig. 79), offering *Ritratti e riproduzioni d'ogni genere* (Portraits and reproductions of all kinds). It can only be added that a worldly and dignified man such as Siemiradzki, would probably not have taken photographs himself in a city slaughterhouse, and certainly would not have taken a child on such an errand. So may this reminiscence stand as a warning against an uncritical approach by art historians to the testimony of artists' relatives and friends.

Arrighi's photograph is not reportage. It is in the nature of a festive souvenir. The slaughterhouse staff – a group of men in blood-stained aprons – solemnly pose around the great fallen bull. The arrangement of the scene is ennobled by its resemblance to the photographs taken on hunting trips at that time, thanks to which the slaughtered bull is presented like a trophy. The tightly pressed group hardly fits in the frame. We can see that two women are trying to squeeze in between the men.

However, the picture from the slaughterhouse turns out to be different from the kind routinely used by painters as an aid to handling some fragment of a painting. On another copy of the same photo, stuck on cardboard, Siemiradzki painted a sketch for the future image with oil paint (fig. 80). With a sharp contour he emphasized the animal's spine, added an outline of the female body bound to it, and attached a strip of paper to indicate the figures of Nero and Tigellinus, the accompanying prefect of the Praetorian Guard. He casually painted in the background. The gouache tinted paints – pinks, umbers and ochres – in places laid on thick, in others thinned, do not fully conceal the photographic backing, which, like synopia, can be seen beneath the brush strokes, so that the butchers seem to hover like ghosts over the body of the bull. The image is suspended halfway between reality and pictorial fiction. Between the actual appearance of the thing mechanically captured by the lens, and the *breve ricordo* executed by the artist's quick hand. Though still a photograph, it is already a sketch for a picture. We are still in the slaughterhouse, but also already in the ancient arena.

20] Jerzy JANICKI, *Tu Siemiradzki! Pronto...*, "Przekrój", 1962, no. 909 (9. 09). Interview in: J. Dużyk, op. cit., p. 477.

The photograph from the slaughterhouse transformed into a sketch for the painting shows how much Siemiradzki combined the disconnected in order to create his picture. Oil paint applied to photosensitive paper can also be seen as various opposing orders being imposed on one another: “life” and “art”, things given visually and “as in the mind”, the mundane and sublime, and finally technique and creativity. The action of the lens is here combined with the work of the human hand, and pigments – with the result of the chemical processes taking place during laboratory processing. The mechanism of a photographic recording – with the artist’s imagination. The everyday reality of animals butchered in a Roman slaughterhouse – with the extraordinary cruelty of Nero’s Roman games as immortalised by Suetonius in *The Lives of the Caesars*. Modern times – with history. And – most importantly – common, visible reality with the ideal created by the artist. We see how the work is born from this meeting of opposites.

Further phases of the picture’s formation, completely in accordance with the then generally accepted technical order, had a more uniform character and were also a gradual accumulation and melding of studied fragments into a single image. A good example is the repeated oil study of a naked woman, separately executed from the model, which at some point became garlands of flowers combined with the body of the bull.

Christian Dirce was Siemiradzki’s last big painting. After this the only large format work was his curtain for the Lwów (Lemberg, Lviv) theatre. “Siemiradzki’s last picture” was critically received what indicated the end of whole epoch in the understanding of art. Back in the 1990s, it had actually already come to a close, but this belated picture from a late academician more sharply marks that caesura. And being able to look into the process of its creation, we see this with particular clarity.

Siemiradzki, with his convictions and his entire *oeuvre*, advocated a set of rules referred to as academic that for several centuries had defined the foundations of artistic creation. The first and the chief among them was that the artist’s task was to sublimate reality, to ensure it was transcended by art. Giovanni Pietro Bellori claimed that the painter’s and sculptor’s idea is this ideal, exquisite model created in the mind, and by means of imitation he makes things that meet the eye resemble this imaginary form.²¹ His ideas were repeated by dozens of later

21] GIOVANNI PIETRO BELLORI, *The Idea of the Painter, the Sculptor and the Architect*, in: *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, eds. Alice S. WOHL, Helmut WOHL, transl. TOMASO MONTANARI, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 55-68. See also: *Teoretycy*,

theoreticians. This view, of Aristotelian genesis, was of “long duration”, becoming the lasting basis of artistic principles. Siemiradzki however, was active at a time when this was questioned and demolished by realism and naturalism in all its varieties. Seen in this context, his hastily made sketch over a photographic print becomes a veritable “manifesto of anti-naturalism.” This one-of-a-kind idea arrests the “moment of creation”. The transformation of reality into art is shown to us visually. Siemiradzki, “a man with his imagination, trying to raise the model to the ideal” took many a step towards the mundane that bore down on him. Using not only imperfect models and photos revealing their imperfections. It would be hard to find a place as repellent as a city slaughterhouse. However – to quote Eugene Delacroix – « *En vérité, qu'un homme de génie se serve du daguerréotype comme il faut s'en servir, et il s'élèvera à une hauteur que nous ne connaissons pas* » (if a genius uses the daguerreotype as it should be used, he will achieve heights unknown to us).²² By painting over a photograph, the artist not only performs a “transformation into art”. Starting from the most trivial and – what’s worse – mechanically fixed image of reality, thanks to it and at the same time in spite of it, he creates his vision. “By means of imitation, he makes things that meet the eye resemble” the idea of a work born in the mind.

In 1897, the year in which *Christian Dirce* was completed, Siemiradzki’s painting was an anachronism, even against the background of contemporary Polish painting, for which that “happy hour” of the Young Poland movement had just struck. Even if it exudes a mood of decadent melancholy,²³ it is a work belonging to a bygone era. And as such – regardless of its variable critical fortunes – it is a farewell to « *les principes qui enseignent à voir les choses, non seulement ainsi qu’elles sont en elles-mêmes, mais encore selon qu’elles doivent ester figurées* ».²⁴

historiografowie i artyści o sztuce 1600-1700, eds. Jan BIAŁOSTOCKI, Maria POPRZEŃKA, Antoni ZIEMBA, Warszawa 1994, p. 219.

- 22] E. DELACROIX, op. cit., vol. 2: 1850–1853, p. 207 (21 mai 1853). In this very interesting note Delacroix contrasts the daguerreotypes of the nudes with the drawings of Marcantonio Raimondi, which had served as templates for painters for centuries.
- 23] The authors of the excellent, comprehensive catalogue note point to these and other features that break out of academic conventions, see note 16.
- 24] Roland FRÉART DE CHAMBRAY, *Idée de la perfection de la peinture démontrée par les principes de l’art...*, Jacques Ysambart, Mans 1662, [5. Partie] p. 20. – R. FRÉART DE CHAMBRAY, *An idea of the perfection of painting: demonstrated from the principles of art, and by examples conformable to the observations...* rendered English by J. Elvelyn], London 1668.

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76. Michel Mang, Siemiradzki's male models, National Museum, Krakow, no. inv. MNK-f-26958. Photo Museum.

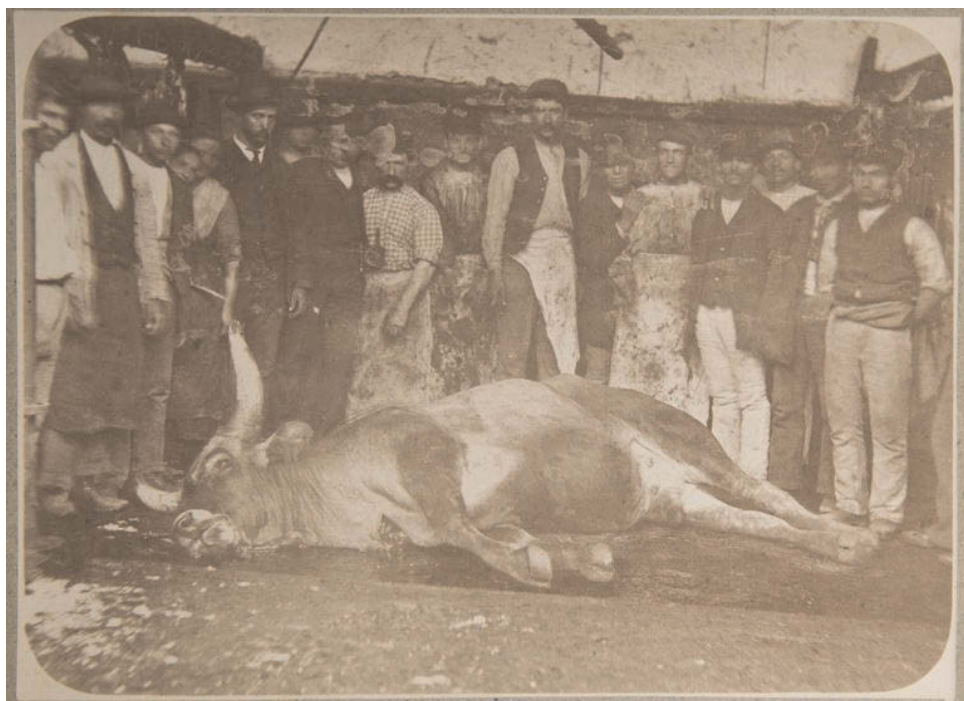


77. Michel Mang, Henryk Siemiradzki and a mannequin, National Museum, Krakow, no. inv. MNK XX-f-26991. Photo Museum.

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78. Henryk Siemiradzki, *Christian Dirce*, 1885, oil on board, 30.8 × 50.2 cm, The Upper Silesian Museum, Bytom. Photo Museum.



79. Augusto Arrighi, Roman slaughterhouse, National Museum, Krakow, no. inv. MNK XX-f-27030. Photo Museum.

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80. Henryk Siemiradzki, oil sketch for *Christian Dirce* made on the Augusto Arrighi's photograph, National Museum, Krakow, no. inv. MNK II-a-1189. Photo Museum.