

## Feliks Jasieński – the greatest benefactor to the National Museum in Krakow



Jacek Malczewski, *Portrait of Feliks Jasieński*  
Photo by the National Museum in Krakow

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**Feliks Jasieński (1861–1929) was one of the most important collectors in Poland and the greatest benefactor to the National Museum in Krakow. He was an outstanding representative of Young Poland Krakow, inextricably linked with this city through his collection, the result of his life's passion and almost forty years of his consistent and hard work. This illustrious collector, aesthete, publicist, art critic, connoisseur and promoter was also a comprehensively educated humanist and talented pianist.**

Feliks Jasieński came from a wealthy landowning family settled in Mazovia. He was born in Grzegorzewice on 8 July 1861. He attended prestigious schools in Warsaw, and in 1881 he undertook studies in the faculty of the humanities at the University in Dorpat (today's Tartu in Estonia). Due to a serious eye disease, which he suffered from throughout his life, Jasieński had to stop full-time education. He continued it as an unenrolled student in Berlin and Paris. His trips across Europe and the Middle East, friendship with artists, knowledge of museum galleries and antique market and his literary tastes, focussed mainly on essays devoted to art, resulted in his own literary output and a passion for collecting. The latter, initially developed during his trips abroad, he indulged in Poland, first in Warsaw and then in Krakow, which he was attached to until his death. He died on 6 April 1929 and was buried in the Rakowicki Cemetery. While in Warsaw, Jasieński became actively involved in the cultural life of the city. He wrote articles and organised exhibitions. In 1901, he arranged a display of Japanese art at the Zachęta gallery, which met with chilly reception in Warsaw (he was told to educate "the taste of Papuans and not Warsaw dwellers"). In response to these unfavourable reviews, he wrote articles criticising the tastes of the Warsaw public, commenting "Not for animals" and "Chinese tea and Japanese art are two different things." This and Jasieński's later publication of an article about Wojciech Gerson provoked a storm. Jasieński left Warsaw in the atmosphere of scandal and headed for Young Poland Krakow.

Jasieński was watched with attention by Krakow's art and literary milieus. His enthusiastically received book entitled

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*Manggha. Promenades à travers le monde, l'art et les idées (Manggha. Travelling across the World, Art and Ideas)*, inspired by Edmond and Jules de Goncourts' Journal, was undoubtedly a strong recommendation for him. The title of his essays and the same pseudonym – Manggha – expressed his great fascination with Japan. The author alluded to a multi-volume album with sketches by one of the greatest Japanese painters, Katsushika Hokusai, entitled Manga.

While in Krakow, Feliks Jasieński also organised exhibitions of works from his collection, e.g. in the Sukiennice gallery and the Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Sztuk Pięknych (TPSP) [Friends of Fine Arts Society]. Being a friend and patron of artists, Jasieński was a regular visitor to the meetings of Krakow bohemian artists, a buyer of their artworks and a frequent guest at salons, antique shops, galleries and exhibition openings, theatre premieres and concerts. He joined the TPSP and the Towarzystwo "Polska Sztuka Stosowana" [Polish Applied Arts Society]. He was one of the sympathisers of the Towarzystwo Artystów Polskich "Sztuka" [Society of Polish Artists "Art"] and initiators of the Stowarzyszenie Polskich Artystów Grafików [Association of Polish Graphic Artists], established in 1902, and the Towarzystwo Miłośników Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie [Society of Friends of the National Museum in Krakow], formed a year later. He held the position of secretary in this last organisation.

"Musée Jasieński" – this is how the collector called the place where he settled "with his collection" in a house on the corner of Św. Jana Street and the Market Square, in the flat with windows and the balcony facing the Square. He stored his constantly growing collection there; here he moved around in his crammed rooms, filled with glass cabinets, *sepet* chests, chests of drawers, wardrobes, desks, glass cases, etageres, armchairs and chairs, acting as a *cicerone* to his guests, entertained by him with the presentations of his treasures, drinking wine and listening to music. Almost from the beginning the founder regarded his unique gallery showing an extensive collection in a private flat – in a way anticipating the act of donation – as a branch of the National Museum and the property of the whole Polish society.

The incalculable value of Jasieński's collection results from the artistic quality of the works of art making it up, which represent a variety of fields and different provenance: Polish, European, Middle and Far Eastern, and date back to the period from the Middle Ages to Jasieński's contemporary time. A special place – on the European scale – is held by an assembly of Far Eastern works of art, mainly from Japan and China. Japanese art, Feliks Jasieński's greatest passion, constitutes the core of the holdings, therefore the whole collection tends to be associated with this particular field. Nevertheless, Feliks Jasieński's holdings include a few remarkable collections of paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, objects of decorative arts, weaving, and even folk handicraft, complemented by a valuable library with precious old prints, literature classics and specialist titles.

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Young Poland paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures by such artists as: Stanisław Wyspiański, Jan Stanisławski, Jacek Malczewski, Józef Mehoffer, Leon Wyczółkowski, Józef Pankiewicz, Wojciech Weiss, Olga Boznańska and Konstancy Laszczka are of unique, fundamental importance. This part of Jasieński's collection was highly valued already during his lifetime. Other precious assemblies are: one of the largest Polish collections of European prints, mainly from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries; a rich collection of Polish, European and Middle-Eastern textiles and clothes from the 15th to the 20th century; a collection of furniture, equipment, ceramics, wooden and metal objects, as well as militaria and musical instruments, all making up a remarkable collection of decorative arts and handicrafts. Manuscripts and archive records – the most personal part of Jasieński's legacy – constitute fantastic source material shedding light on both different stages of the collector's life and the cultural life of his time.

Jasieński's collection, containing some 15,000 items, was transferred to the National Museum in Krakow under the "Donation Agreement" of 11 March 1920, concluded with the Municipality of the Royal Capital City of Krakow (the owner of the Museum at the time). The founder obligated the recipients to take care of the collection "forming a self-contained whole for all times," stipulating that "the collection must not be taken away from Krakow." The Municipality committed itself to allot the Szolayski House to house the collection, undoubtedly in accordance with the donor's wish. It was there Feliks Jasieński wanted to establish a separate branch of the Museum named after him – **The Feliks Jasieński Branch of the National Museum in Krakow**. Jasieński's dream came true in 1934, when a permanent exposition entitled *The Exhibition of Feliks Jasieński's Collection* was opened in the newly-refurbished rooms on the first floor of the Szolayski House, called the Feliks Jasieński Branch.

*KB based on the text by Bronisława Gumińska*