

Design and Construction Innovation in Wicker Furniture Created by Władysław Wołkowski

ANNA RÓŻAŃSKA

Department of Construction and Technology of Final Wood Products, Faculty of Wood Technology Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW

Abstract: Until the second half of the 20th century, wicker furniture was synonymous with outdoor furniture. If the opinion that its design was eclectic seems exaggerated, it was at least traditional. It was only in the interwar period in the circle of the “Ład” artistic group, and later from the 1950s as part of the activity of the Institute of Industrial Design that attempts were made to define the new role of wicker furniture and, consequently, its new forms. Władysław Wołkowski was one of the first artists who designed wicker lounge sets intended for interior use, both in private houses, and in public buildings.

Key words: wicker furniture, wickerwork, design

WICKER FURNITURE DESIGN IN POLAND

There are two interlinked currents in today’s wickerwork: the traditional, folk one, and the new, artistic one. Polish wickerwork has its roots in folk culture. In folk culture, wicker has many symbolical meanings. It symbolises Resurrection. Blessed wicker objects were believed to protect people from lightning, bad weather, bad wishes, and illnesses. Wicker baskets were a symbol of fertility.

At the same time, the interest in wickerwork is related to the ecological trend: ecological design and ecological materials. This movement began in Europe in the 1970s. In the 20th century the status of wicker became higher, which fact was connected with the fashion for informal, separate pieces of furniture which did not belong to a set. Tired with the anonymous character of industrial objects, people longed for handicraft products, for manual shaping, for the decorativeness of natural materials. In the face of an abundance of substitutes, the popularity of wool, linen, and pure wood increased.

In the interwar period, Władysław Wołkowski was the only Polish artist who designed wicker furniture. After the Second World War, Jan Kurzątkowski also started working with wicker, but it was never his main field of interest.

When thinking about the inspirations for Wołkowski’s furniture, we have to consider many factors. Wołkowski familiarised himself deeply with folk tradition in his home village Sulisławice and in the school of Koszycz-Witkiewicz. Studies at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts gave the artist an international perspective and knowledge about the design rules. In 1937, his models of stools won renown at the Art and Technology Exhibition in Paris, and in 1939 – in the USA. Wołkowski cooperated with Polish wickerwork centres. During a break in his studies at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Art, he went to Krzeszów. He also became connected with wickerwork centres in Kraśnik, Biłgoraj, Rudnik, Stolart and Chrościce. He founded a cooperative in Piotrków in the Biłgoraj region. His connection with Rudnik seems particularly important. On the other side of the river, there was a famous Austrian manufacture. Hoffmann, the owner, employed 30 masters, and many products were exported. It was there that the young Wołkowski got acquainted with the old Vienna school of wickerwork (Janneau 1978). Thanks to the favourable attitude of the directors, he managed to work with wicker at every stage of production, learning about the stages of producing a wicker object from the masters. He also spent much time in the local museum, where a collection of wickerwork from various countries and periods was housed.

It was Wołkowski who initiated the interest in wicker among furniture designers, and who created the trend whose outstanding representatives were Witold Gyurkowicz from Poznań, Irena Żmudzińska, Hanna Żarska, and Zbigniew Majchrzak from Warsaw. The promoter, organiser, and the centre of wicker handicraft in Poland became Cepelia. The takeover of five wickerwork cooperatives having important export orders by Cepelia made it necessary to introduce design to wickerwork handicraft. Therefore, in Cepelia Research and Development Centre in Warsaw a design and production studio was created. Its director was Zygmunt Majchrzak, an artist; other artists working there were e.g. Hanna Żarska and Irena Żmudzińska. Artists realised their designs themselves. In the 1970s, Cepelia organised wickerwork workshops in Greater Poland. In 1985 and 1987, International Wickerwork Workshops were organised thanks to Cepelia, a member of the World Crafts Council (Sternińska 1987).

Wołkowski's wickerwork activity raised the status of wickerwork items, and imparted elegance to them. Wicker objects became perceived as our exports of a specifically Polish character. They became our flagship products. Polish embassies were furnished with wicker furniture, and at the Sevilla EXPO '92, wicker furniture filled a large terrace in the Polish Pavilion (together with a wicker installation by Jędrzej Stepak).

THE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF FURNITURE CREATED BY WŁADYSŁAW WÓLKOWSKI

The seemingly complicated technique of weaving boils down to a couple of weaves. The knowledge of the weaving techniques was common. Each of the techniques had their own local varieties, which was why the weaves seemed diverse.

The wickerwork regions do not correspond with the ethnographic regions. They are rather places rich in raw material: along rivers (on the Vistula, San, Pilica, Dunajec, Bug and other rivers) or in forests of the former wildernesses (e.g. the Kurpie Forest, the Sandomierz Wilderness). In Poland one cannot distinguish any specific regions characterised by a particular type of wickerwork. More or less similar forms and techniques were found everywhere (Pokropek 1978). However, there were regions where wickerwork was popular (e.g. Mazovia, Podlasie, the Lublin area, and the eastern Lesser Poland), where it did not gain popularity (e.g. the Carpathians), or where its popularity quickly faded away (Silesia, Greater Poland) (Fryś-Pietraszkowa, Kuczyńska-Iracka, Pokropek 1988).

Wołkowski introduced wickerwork used in craft objects and folk art to decorative art. The difference between the form and the material disappeared in his works. Sometimes the wickerwork only filled larger surfaces enclosed with a wooden frame, but it usually constituted the main part of the item, and dominated the piece with its decorative value. The status of the wickerwork determined the fact to which of the above-mentioned types the piece of furniture belonged. The material used (wicker, cane, sometimes string, straw, or narrow tubes covered with fabric) also decided about the character of the object.

In the first type of furniture, where the wickerwork had a supplementary character (played the role of the back rest or seat), the frame was made of wood or, less often, metal. The clear division into the frame and the material used to fill it was underlined not only by the difference between the materials and their character (soft – hard), but also by the colour contrast.

Chairs, armchairs, stools, and small tables belonging to the second type of furniture, namely furniture entirely made of wicker, had a soft and flexible line. They were made of tightly woven wicker, covering the bent metal frame of the object. The role of the wickerwork was totally different. It did not have various motifs, it was monotonous. It became a part of the construction, not a decoration. The artist modelled the wickerwork perfectly, adapting it to the shape of the human body, and giving it modern forms.

Each set created by Wołkowski had a name given to it by the author. Some were connected with nature (e.g. “Flower Sets”, “Bears”, “Snails”, “Goats”), some with the Polish countryside (“Chochóły [Straw Covering]” – based on Kraków folk themes, or “Kurpie” – using folk motifs from that region), and some with the character of the set (“Hooligan”, “Modern”). Each piece of furniture had its atmosphere. It could belong to the “lazy”, “energetic”, or “cheeky” group. Their shapes, the invisible light construction, and the space contained in the objects were fascinating.



Fig.1, 2. Armchair “Hooligan” (1), before 1957 and chair from the set “Goats” (2), before 1966 - Wołkowski Museum in Olkusz



Fig.3, 4. Armchair “Whirl” (3) and chair from the set “Bachmaty [Tatar Horses]” (4), before 1967 - Wołkowski Museum in Olkusz

CONCLUSIONS

Wołkowski belonged to the tradition of the Polish folk decorative art in which the form resulted from the character of the material and was connected with the purpose of the object (e.g. children's furniture for nursery schools was shaped like the letters of the alphabet). Wołkowski's wicker furniture was very modern. He was both a folk artist and an industrial designer. This was fascinating and not surprising, as the basic composition principle of folk objects was the inseparability of the design and the realisation from their purpose. Folk products were characterised by integration: treating artistic tasks as a whole (Telakowska 1970). Wołkowski's wickerwork was not a transposition of folk motifs; they were rather a source of inspiration. The artist used the material to the fullest extent, and the works were characterised by unity of the form and the material. Wołkowski combined various types of weaves, he contrasted densely woven fragments with openwork fragments, straight lines with arched lines, and broke the discipline with freedom. Only after having acquired the shape given to it by Wołkowski, did wickerwork, woven straw, or any other kind of woven material become a work of art equal to other works commonly recognised as possessing artistic value (Grabowski 1955, 1956).

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Wołkowski to pionier polskiego meblarstwa z wikliny. Nie tylko podniósł rangę niedocenianego dotąd materiału, ale też stworzył z niego kreacje łączące awangardową nowoczesność z tradycją ludową. Dziś meble z wikliny to jedna z czytelnych ikon polskiego meblarstwa współczesnego.

Corresponding author:
Anna Różańska
Faculty of Wood Technology,
Department of Construction and Technology of Final Wood Products,
166 Nowoursynowska str.,
02-787 Warsaw, Poland
e-mail: annamaria.rozanska@gmail.com