

Introduction

Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański: Sculptor, Émigré

Today, in 2026, it is 20 years ago since the individual exhibition of the sculptural work of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, titled *Objawienia w drewnie*, in the Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko¹. This exhibition was not only an artistic event, recognised by critics and experts of contemporary art as one of the most beautiful and most poignant sculpture exhibitions in Poland of the early years of the 21st century, but first and foremost a spectacular artistic return of a Polish artist from Germany to Poland and straight to the exhibition rooms of the most important centre presenting, and dealing scientifically with, the most important accomplishments of Polish contemporary sculpture in the context of the accomplishments of contemporary sculpture worldwide². One year before, in 2005, the works of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański were shown in an exhibition in the Katowice Szyb Wilson Gallery titled *Epiphanies of Nature in Late-Modern World*, about which Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski wrote in the extensive text published in the accompanying exhibition catalogue: “Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański rises from this late-modern opposition to dematerialisation of art; his art is a celebration of materiality, “carnality” of wood. [...] Jan de Weryha [as an artist – remark JWS] remains as much as possible Modern and just like minimal art he is situated in a certain canonical modernist discourse, but he appears to be at its different stage. At the source of his works we will find the always-recurring dispute, present in European culture for a long time. [We speak here of the relation man – nature]”³. It is worth mentioning, that the Katowice exhibition of the works of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański was preceded in 2004 by the first exhibition of the sculptor in Poland since the time of his emigration to Germany in 1981, organised by the Chapel Gallery at the Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko and an individual exhibition of his sculptures in the Patio Gallery in Łódź⁴. The exhibition of one work of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, called “Cube” – shown in the Chapel Gallery in Orońsko – was, therefore, an announcement, as it turned out, of subsequent, earlier mentioned exhibitions of the artist in Poland in the years 2005-2006⁵. “During recent years, my artistic considerations [as stated by the artist during his first exhibition in Orońsko] have concentrated upon exploring wood as a material and upon understanding its structure and its core, leading to the attainment of the highest thinkable state, which has its roots in the celebration of the archaic element in wood. Here, everything begins with the question which technical aids the artist has at his disposal for processing his material, and to which degree. [...] At first sight, the perfect harmony created makes a monotonous impression. Arrive the time, though, when warm colours, reaching from forest honey to gently charred wood, when the diversity of the material, ranging from the bark to the different types of wood, the visible traces deriving from the tools applied, and the resulting light reflections emerge, the situation changes radically to tell a passionate alive and vibrating fabulous tale. [...] These new wall works attract attention especially by means of a highly developed architectural order and

¹ See: https://ksiegarnia.rzezba-oronsko.pl/product_info.php?products_id=86; the catalogue (in German and Polish) of the exhibition in the Museum of Contemporary Sculpture of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, an artist, who, in his works is striving to explore the essence of wood and to show its beauty. The colour photographs are accompanied by an interview with the artist, carried out by Mariusz Knorowski. Retrieved 26 June 2025.

² The Author wrote about the artist in the text titled *Objawienie – nie tylko w drewnie*, in: <https://www.cultureave.com/objawienia-nie-tylko-w-drewnie/?print=print>. Retrieved 25 June 2025.

³ <https://artinfo.pl/pl/blog/relacje/wpisy/jan-de-weryha-wysoczanski-galeria-szyb-wilson2/>. Also: J.S. Wojciechowski, Ch. Weiss, *Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański: Epiphanies of Nature in Late-Modern World, Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański's Objects in Wood*, exhibition catalogue, Katowice: Galeria Szyb Wilson 2005. Retrieved 28 June 2025.

⁴ About the exhibition among others in the master thesis: M. Kościelniak, *Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański. Archiwista drewna*. Master thesis written under Dr C. Woźniak, Rzeszów 2008. See: <https://de-weryha-art.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/polskiKoscielniak.pdf>. Retrieved 28 June 2025.

⁵ See: http://www.sztuka.net/palio/htm1.run?Instance=sztuka&_PageID=850&_cms=newser&newsId=2100&callingPageId=851&_CheckSum=-2130716124. Retrieved 26 June 2025.

powerfully loaded wood structures, closed in concrete rhythms. This strange constellation discloses unexpected forms of expression and allows me anew to define wood as material.”⁶

The spectacular exhibitions of the sculptural work of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański in Poland, their reception and reviews in the specialist press, in particular by the already mentioned art critic and art philosopher Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski, lay at the core of my encounter with the artistic output of the Polish sculptor, who from 1981 lives and works in Hamburg, and whose cultural activity – recognisable and well known in Germany, necessitated entering it for good to the history of Polish art of the 20th and 21st centuries and the attention from a researcher of Polish art originating outside Poland⁷. In the biography of the artist, come together, like in a lens, complicated conditions of political, social and economical nature of Poland from the time when the Solidarność movement was born and dramatical occurrences connected with the introduction of martial law by General Wojciech Jaruzelski in December of 1981⁸. “In the morning of 13 December 1981 [as Piotr Policht wrote] the Poles woke up to a new political reality, which was not without influence on art. Marshal Law was reflected not only in the famous photo of Chris Niederthal or the painting of Edward Dwurnik with tanks on the streets of Warsaw. The whole artistic landscape of the epoch underwent a change”⁹. The awareness of an approaching “looming” mischief, which was difficult to predict in its consequences, became the main cause for the exile of a young, talented sculptor, who was already doing nicely on the art market of his home town Gdańsk. Leaving Poland in 1981, Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański joins the group of thousands of other Polish artists, from earlier post-war emigration waves, in particular those after 1956, 1968 and 1970, who started their artistic careers anew in foreign cultural environments, fighting with multiplied energy for a place for them and their art in their chosen countries of resettlement¹⁰. The “Solidarność emigration”, on the wave of which, besides Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, left for good to European and non-European countries many outstanding Polish artists – painters, printmakers, sculptors, but also architects and urban planners – established a painful loss in the fabric of the contemporary Polish artistic culture. Already by 1945 Polish art irreversibly developed in two directions: national and exile¹¹. The one in the Polish People’s Republic was called “Polish art”, the one outside Poland – with the exception of a few names, mainly because of political reasons, was not of interest “by the Vistula” among creative environments as well as the scientific community¹². It should be noted, that outside Poland there are about 18-20 million Poles and people of Polish descent, including a serious group of artists numbering thousands of names¹³. In 1981, Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, along with wife and a several-year-old son, as Justyna Napiórkowska wrote, set off for Hamburg, “this route was once covered by ships carrying wood from the Polish noblemen republic to the west of

⁶ After: http://www.sztuka.net/padio/htm1.run?Instance=sztuka&_PageID=850&_cms=newser&newsId=2100&callingPageId=851&_CheckSum=-2130716124. Retrieved 24 June 2025.

⁷ Inter alia: <https://www.porta-polonica.de/pl/atlas-miejsce-pami%C4%99ci/jan-de-weryha-wysoczanski>. Retrieved 28 June 2025.

⁸ About the art in Poland at the time of martial law, inter alia: <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/nadeszla-godzina-ciezkiej-proby-sztuka-w-stanie-wojennym>. Retrieved 25 June 2025.

⁹ P. Policht, *Nadeszła godzina ciężkiej próby. Sztuka w stanie wojennym*, in: <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/nadeszla-godzina-ciezkiej-proby-sztuka-w-stanie-wojennym>. Retrieved 25 June 2025.

¹⁰ On the migrations of artists from Poland, including in the time of martial law: J.W. Sienkiewicz, *Plastyka polska na emigracji*, in: *Polska emigracja polityczna 1939-1990. Stan badań*. Edited by Sławomir Łukasiewicz, Warszawa 2016, pp. 145-189.

¹¹ To a great extent, these migrations were caused by political reasons, see: J.W. Sienkiewicz, *Anti-Communism in Polish Culture and Art. Outline of the Issue, State of the Research, and Research Proposals*, in: *Polish Anti-Communism in the 20th Century*. Edited by Piotr Kardela and Karol Saczewicz, Białystok-Olsztyn-Warszawa 2021, pp. 505-516.

¹² See inter alia: J.W. Sienkiewicz, *Sztuka w poczekalni. Studia z dziejów plastyki polskiej na emigracji 1939-1989*, Toruń 2012; the same, *Sztuka w poczekalni. Studia z dziejów sztuki polskiej poza Polską w XX i XXI wieku*, vol II, Toruń 2022.

¹³ See: “Pamiętnik Sztuk Pięknych”: *Sztuka polska 1945-1970/Polish Art. 1945-1979*. Edited by J.W. Sienkiewicz and E. Toniak, Toruń 2015.

Europe. Wood has appeared to be both the fetish and a basic object of artistic pursuits of this contemporary sculptor¹⁴. Especially the œuvre in wood is described and analysed by Dorota Grubba-Thiede in her extensive text *Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański. Relocations – Temporary Structures – Topographies – Mantras*. This outstanding expert of contemporary sculpture perceives inseparable links of the wooden compositions of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański with nature, underlining that “[he – remark JWS] works through and develops concepts of demarcations of space, creating “environments” as specific surroundings, which enchant, emanate warmth, authentic scents of the wooden medium. As if the artist reminded us of acts of building polymorphous nests by migrating birds – finding in himself something of an instinct to generate emanations of supporting energy, the elements of the earth, the air, at the same time of symbolic forms related to fire and water. [...] His spacial realisations seem to carry with them discrete echoes of the pulsating, unprecedeted consequent paintings or drawings of Georges Seurat – the shimmering masterpieces of Neo-Impressionism, breaching the conventional framework of art. In the place of the shimmering strokes of graphite, or the pointillistic many-coloured points of Seurat, which vibrate in the eyes of the beholder, we have morphemes of various kinds of trees, or rocks, twigs or dried flower bundles. Some of them have an effect a bit like symbols of medical herbs, like echoes from medieval gardens in cloister garths”¹⁵.

And although wood is categorically Wysoczański’s main material and creative medium, equally strong in their expression and form are his realisations in stone and concrete, including the monument in memory to the deportees of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. On the 1st of September 2020 I had the opportunity, in the presence of the artist, to participate in the celebrations of laying down wreaths at the monument of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, commemorating the Polish women and men who were deported, after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, to the concentration camp in Neuengamme, a quarter of Hamburg. The monument, created in 1999, as a commission from the Polish side, is made up of 30 hand-hewn granite elements, laid down on a flat stone “surface” in a dense throughout architectural composition/order, in an isolated ascetical zone of remembrance, evoking the anonymous insurgents sentenced to extinction. Through an ascetical form of a vertical concrete block, with an oversized endoscope polished in stainless steel, reminiscent of a “spyhole” in a door to a prison cell, interacts with thousands of passers-by, the second monument, dedicated this time to the victims of the Third Reich deported to forced labour in Hamburg, and placed some years ago in the centre of Hamburg-Bergedorf. In this monument, apart from the code content and a deep message, the Polish artist connected his technical experiences with extremely varied sculptural materials. The concrete structure of the monument, on its outer cubic surface of the walls, “bears” traces of the wooden formwork, whose structures of the “tree rings”, become symbols of indestructibility, remembrance and the power of renascence. The concrete cubic form – through the visible traces of the tree rings of the wood on its surface – becomes an indestructible “structure” as well as a fragile one at the same time – like the human life. Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański seems not to be able to get rid of the wood in his concrete composition. The wood remains the main source of his creative inspiration and his primary sculptural material. He underlines the meaning of the process of exploring wood as a material itself, and the attempt to understanding its structure and its core. But, what is especially delicate and intimate in Wysoczański’s process of “processing” wood and on the way of getting to the final artistic form, is the degree to which it is legitimate to influence the material by means of intervention, as the artist says himself – without interfering with its identity. Forming and assembling the cut or broken often raw, unpeeled, or precisely trimmed wood into larger objects, the Polish sculptor is giving his spacial compositions new life, a new symbolism, a new meaning – full of interpretative possibilities and semantic codes. It is worthwhile complementing this artist statement by an extremely accurate opinion concerning the compositions of the artist from Germany, written by the already cited Dorota Grubba-Thiede, who in 2006 said: “The horizontal settings by Weryha-Wysoczański transfer into the contemporary times the non-defined categories of the earth art and the concrete approach of the minimal art: a phenomenology oriented spirit [...] [the] ephemeral actions by Richard Long, Robert Smithson and other thinkers – wanderers of the former century. On the other hand, he refers to the oldest traditions of the world cultures; creating mandalas or demarcating monastery contemplation zones. [...] unveiling in the cross-sections of the tree rings natural “visualist paintings”. [...] alternately, he puts together and apart, brings back power to dead trees, those broken by the wind or destined to be cut down [...].

¹⁴ J. Napiórkowska, *Tajemnice drewna*, “ARTeon” 2004, no 11, p. 14. Also: M. Popowicz-Bereś, *Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański. Monografia artysty*. Master thesis wrote under Dr G. Ryba, Wydział Sztuki, Uniwersytet Rzeszowski, Rzeszów 2014, p. 13. After: <https://de-weryha-art.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Maryla-Popowicz-Bere%C5%9B-Jan-de-Weryha-Wysocza%C5%84ski.-Monografia-artysty-2014-r.pdf>. Retrieved 27 June 2025.

¹⁵ D. Grubba-Thiede, *Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański. Przemieszczenia – struktury tymczasowe – topografie – mantry*, text in this publication.

Young trees smell beautifully, [...] provoke to reflexion, what significant role they play in the enclosed ecological clock complex, that the lack of them will mark the end of all existence”¹⁶.

I refer, the creation process and the process art sculptures by Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, quite symbolically to my process of scientific research started in 1989 in the field of Polish art created in exile and to developing a full picture of the contemporary history of Polish art¹⁷. We gain it only, through uniting the artistic output created in Poland, with the accomplishments of Polish artists and those of Polish descent – like Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, who had worked and have been still working outside of Poland in European and non-European countries¹⁸. In this new, full corpus of achievements of Polish art of the 20th and 21st centuries, one of the most important names will be the one of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, master of sculptural “revelations not only in wood”¹⁹.

(Translation from Polish to English by Rafael de Weryha-Wysoczański)

¹⁶ D. Grubba, *Gdy postawa staje się formą* (When an Approach Becomes a Form. Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański [...]), translated by Małgorzata Korolko-Zipper, “Exit” 2006/2(66), pp. 4112-4115, the article refers in the title to the exhibition of Harald Szeemann “Wenn Attitüden Form werden [...]”, organised in 1969 by the Kunsthalle in Bern.

¹⁷ I included the works of the artist in 2022 to the presentation of Polish art created in Poland and outside of Poland in the exhibition, curated by me, with the title *Above Borders* in the Polish Pavilion at the NordArt 2022. See: *Biographical notes on 26 artists* (Magdalena Abakanowicz, Maciej Aleksandrowicz, Sylwester Ambroziak, Michał Batory, Robert Bluj, Julia Curyło, Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, Leszek Golec and Tatiana Czekalska, Michał Jackowski, Janusz Kapusta, Justyna Kisielewicz, Grzegorz Kozera, Tomasz Kopcewicz, Sebastian Krok, Wacław Kuczma, Julia Malinowska, Martyna Miller, Janina Myronova, Natalia LL, Łukasz Patelczyk, Tadeusz Rolke, Wojciech Sobczyński, Lubomir Tomaszewski, Paweł Wocial/Kamila Tuszyńska, Agata Zbylut) from the Polish Pavilion at the NordArt exhibition 2022. *International Art Exhibition. 200 Artists from Around the World*, June 4 – October 10, Kunstwerk Carlshütte, Büdelsdorf, Germany, Büdelsdorf 2022, pp. 26-51.

¹⁸ See: J.W. Sienkiewicz, exhibition catalogue, *Nord Art 2025. International Art Exhibition. 200 Artists from Around the World. Special Project Directions – Poland*, June 6 – October 5, Kunstwerk Carlshütte, Büdelsdorf, Germany, Büdelsdorf 2025, pp. 106-123.

¹⁹ See: J.W. Sienkiewicz, *W oczekiwaniu na Narodowe Muzeum Sztuki Polskiej w Świecie. Sztuka polska na emigracji a sztuka w Polsce – historia, współczesność, perspektywy*, in: *Materiały z I Zjazdu badaczy Polonii*. Edited by Jacek Gołębiowski, Marta Furtak, Lublin 2022, pp. 103-144.