

Józef Czapski - painter, writer, essayist, critic, co-founder of the Parisian 'Culture'. Born in 1896 (in Prague) into an aristocratic family as the son of Jerzy Hutten-Czapski and Józefa Leopoldyna, née Thun-Hohenstein. His biography combines the fate of an artist and a witness of the epoch. In 1918 Czapski entered the class of Stanisław Lentz at the Warsaw School of Fine Arts. He interrupted his studies to travel to Russia at the behest of the military authorities, where he was to find officers of his regiment who had disappeared without news. During this stay, he made a close acquaintance with Dmitri Merezhkovsky, under whose influence the painter abandoned his pacifist ideals and took part in the Polish-Bolshevik war, for which he was awarded the Order of Virtuti Militari. After the war, he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. His teachers included Wojciech Weiss and Józef Pankiewicz. In 1924, a group of Pankiewicz's students (including Jan Cybis, Artur Nacht-Samborski and Piotr Potworowski) left for Paris. From that time on, the group was known as the Paris Committee (abbreviated K.P. for Capists). Their stay in France began with in-depth museum studies of early painting. The Kapists were fascinated by the work of Paul Cézanne (Czapski later devoted one of his most important essays to him, entitled "On Cézanne and the consciousness of painting", 1937). In 1931, Czapski returned to Warsaw. He exhibited with the Kapists and wrote his first critiques, and published a monograph on Pankiewicz's work. In accordance with the Kapists' assumptions, he adopted the conviction that the surface of a painting is the place where nature is transposed, a transposition carried out with the use of plastic means, with the prominent role of pure colour at the forefront. From the 1930s, he painted still lifes, interiors, portraits and outdoor scenes in this convention. In 1939, he was mobilised into the army. He then found himself in Soviet captivity. After his release and entry into the army of General Władysław Anders, he was once again given a military mission: he was ordered to investigate the fate of Polish officers who, as it turned out, had been imprisoned by the NKVD and murdered. He gave a harrowing account of his search, first in his *Memoirs of Starobiel* (1945) and then in his book *On Inhuman Earth* (1949). He travelled the combat route with the Anders Army until he reached Baghdad. In 1945, he arrived in Rome and in 1946 settled in France, where he became involved with the Literary Institute. Together with Jerzy Giedroyc and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, he participated in its establishment (he took up residence at the editorial office in Maisons-Laffitte, near Paris). Over the following decades, he was a political commentator in the monthly *Kultura*. There he constantly published essays on art and excerpts from the famous diaries he had kept since the war. "Diaries" - constituting a private chronicle of Czapski's life, published in fragments in print and the remaining manuscripts (which can be found in their entirety in the National Museum in Krakow), enriched by the artist with numerous drawings and sketches, made him no less famous than his rich biography and - having its devoted admirers and collectors (the most serious is Richard Aeschlimann in Switzerland) - art. Living in France and belonging to the circle of Polish wartime emigrants settled there, Czapski also collaborated with other periodicals, including the London-based *Wiadomosci* and the French *Prévues*. His journalistic activity strengthened his high position of moral authority, for which he was recognised both by his readers in exile and at home. After 1945, Czapski was engaged simultaneously in painting and writing (his essays were mainly, but not exclusively, devoted to art - he also commented with insight on literary works, including Marcel Proust's masterpiece and the works of Stanisław Brzozowski; he wrote *Tumult and Spectres*, *Looking, Reading and The Eye*). Czapski's painting oeuvre is diverse and artistically inconsistent. Its heterogeneity was determined by various inspirations, and the painter's temperament from the very beginning inclined him to transgress the dogmatic principles instilled in the Capists by Cybis. He became closer to the masters of expression (Chaim Soutine, Nicolas de Stäel), who emphasised not the intrinsic value of colour, but its inner strength. To bring it out, Czapski outlined patches of vivid, bright colours and introduced dissonances. The expressiveness of the paintings was also emphasised by the composition, usually free, open, with bold framing, as well as deformation: extremely free, sometimes even grotesque, resulting from the abbreviated treatment of elements, especially human figures. After 1945, the main motif of the artist's work was the ordinary, grey, often old and poor man, alone in the hustle and bustle of the big city. Noteworthy are the bold compositional arrangements and blunt colour combinations, which change especially in the last years of his life, when the artist was losing his eyesight. His last works give the impression of being painted hastily and awkwardly, but they are an expression of a fervent belief in art and

artistic determination. The artist died in 1993 in Maisons-Laffitte, France. Following his death, many biographies of Czapski have been published, and research into his extraordinary life and work is ongoing.

The works on show are a gift from Wacław Hwaniuk