

Jan Lebenstein - painter, graphic artist, draughtsman and illustrator. He was born in 1930 in Brześć Litewski. He studied painting at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts (1948-1954) under Artur Nacht-Samborski. He debuted during the National Exhibition of Young Visual Arts in the Warsaw Arsenal (1955), presenting nostalgic landscapes of the grey suburbs of Warsaw, inspired by the paintings of Maurice Utrill. He painted gouaches depicting poor, sumptuously framed interiors. In 1956, he joined the independent Na Tarczyńskiej [On Tarczynska] theatre, which was run in a Warsaw flat by Miron Białoszewski and his friends Ludmiła Murawska and Ludwik Hering. He had his first solo exhibition there. At this time he created drawn figures, then hieratic figures and finally axial figures. These were compositions (drawing and painting) with centrally placed, vertical silhouettes of extremely simplified (in the drawing version sometimes resembling insect-like creatures) human figures, most often female. The originality of this personal figurative painting formula, saturated with existential fears, was recognised by French critics, who awarded L. the Grand Prix at the First International Biennale of the Young in Paris in 1959. From then on, the painter lived in France, living on the sidelines of the Parisian artistic melting pot. He maintained constant contact with the Polish émigré circle (the circle of the Literary Institute, the Parisian "Kultura", the editorial board of "Zeszyty Literackie"). In 1959, he had two exhibitions in Paris: at the Galerie Lacloue and the Galerie Lambert, with which he later collaborated on a permanent basis. Central to this was his own 'lesson in zoology' - a version of the myth of the origin and animalistic nature of man (Leçon de zoologie, 1972). "Human fauna", bizarre creatures of barely legible "human provenance", caricatured, as if pre-evolutionary incarnations of representatives of lost, archaic tribes (Carnet intime series, 1960-1965), he depicted above all in intriguing works created after 1960. In parallel, he created a series of paintings depicting "prehistoric" animals (Creatures abominables series, 1960-1965) and imaginative "vertebrates" (Deux vertebres, 1966). The result was a 'baroque' bestiary from which the artist drew inspiration for his later works from the 1970s and 1980s, executed mainly in gouache and tempera. Lebenstein also illustrated literary works for Éditions du Dialogue: George Orwell's Animal Farm (1974), The Book of Job (1979), The Apocalypse (1983), The Book of Genesis (1995) and the short stories of Gustav Herling-Grudziński, with whom he was friends. He also designed a stained glass window with scenes from the apocalypse for the Palotin chapel in Paris (1970). In 1977, an exhibition of the artist's work was held in Poland, after which he donated a large selection of works to the National Museum in Wrocław. During martial law, his works were shown at exhibitions organised as part of the independent culture movement, mainly under the patronage of the church. In 1976, he was awarded the New York Prize of the Alfred Jurzykowski Foundation, and in 1987 he received the independent Jan Cybis Prize. It was not until eleven years later that he received official Polish state honours: the President of the Republic of Poland honoured him with the Grand Cross with Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta. A retrospective exhibition of the artist's oeuvre took place at Warsaw's Zachęta in 1992, while a year before his death an exhibition titled Etapy (Stages) was shown in Paris and many Polish cities as a symbolic summary of L. He died in 1999 in Krakow.

The works on show are a gift from Waclaw Iwaniuk and Olga Scherer