



*(by Anna Jung – Wojciechowska, sculptor MFA)*

Ryszard Wojciechowski was born the first of seven children in a farmer's family in Slawin near Lublin on January 3rd, 1939.

He had exhibited manual and artistic talents ever since his early childhood and they were duly noted by one of his elementary school teachers. With the teacher's encouragement Ryszard's parents decided to send him to an art school in Lublin. Having graduated from the school in 1958, Ryszard quickly aced his entrance exams to the Department of Sculpture, Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

His supervisors at the Academy were Professor Alfred Jesion and Professor Franciszek Strynkiewicz; simultaneously with his main commitment, Ryszard followed a specialist program at the Department of Painting, in the Murals Section—officially known as Monumental Painting Techniques in Architecture—under the supervision of Professor Witold Miller.

He distinguished himself as a student both by the originality of his artistic vision and by his immense, exceptional dedication and hard work. Coming from a less affluent family and being the only one among his siblings to ever obtain university education, he truly appreciated the privilege of being a student. Still, he would find ample time for life's little pleasures—he was the soul of many a party and his sense of humour was second to no one's: pranks played on his fellow students were a trademark of his; he loved to make good-natured fun of his classmates and most of all, of himself. "Wojtek"—a nickname based on his family name and dating back to his Lublin art school days—was how he would introduce himself then.

I met Wojtek in 1962, when I myself began to study with Professor Strynkiewicz, his supervisor at the time. I was smitten not only by his considerable talent, manifest already then, but even more by his pleasant manner and great sensibility.

He earned his degree with high distinction in 1964 and we got married in the same year. For the time being he accepted a full-time position with the local consumers' co-operative, as a shop window designer—at the same time he launched himself into a period of intense creative activity, expressing himself mostly in sculpture, but also in drawing, painting, and in many other media. His ability to find effective solutions to a wide variety of visual problems became immediately evident in his design work as well—along with a group of artists under his supervision he won the first prize in a competition for the most captivating shop window in Warsaw.

He exhibited his first paintings a few months after graduation; he held an individual exhibit of paintings and drawings at the Debutants' Gallery of the University of Warsaw.

Awaiting, a sculpture in concrete, was awarded the Bronze Medal at the National Festival of Art in Warsaw two years later, in 1966; the Festival was the single most important art competition in Poland at that time. A complete set of Ryszard's sculptural works—Jump Rope, At Dawn, Chords of Fame—received the Gold Medal at the Festival two years later, in 1968. Following these auspicious beginnings, Wojtek continued to participate in exhibitions, competitions and workshops nationally and abroad, amassing an impressive collection of prizes, awards and honourable mentions, which quickly made him one of the leading Polish sculptors.

Ryszard never worked for awards though. Quite naturally, he was an artist, he was real, he was true, and it was simply impossible not to notice his works—works obviously marked with greatness and individuality—whether you personally liked them or not. He not only possessed an extraordinary talent, but also a great artistic temperament which demanded constant realization. His creative imagination was brimming with ideas stampeding to see the light of day—I'm a sculptor myself and I have known many artists, but I have never met an artist so gifted.

He had a good habit of making notes of his ideas, right away, as they were coming to him, in the form of small but very three-dimensional and very specific drawings, designs of sculptures or medals still to come. He would draw them wherever he was—on small pieces of paper, sometimes on napkins at the café—then he would paste them into a larger notebook. The notebook was purchased in 1985 by the National Museum in Frombork and is currently part of the Museum's collection.

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Ryszard simply had to create. The intensity of his creative work never diminished through his entire life, under any circumstances, despite momentous changes or the arrival of other duties. He worked with all kinds of material—stone, wood, ceramics—and with those less dignified, such as cement and artificial stone. He also worked in mixed media, employing and combining freely everything he needed for a particular composition. This was particularly true of smaller sculpture, for which he would use seashells, coral, hardened lace and other textiles, even common rocks he picked up in a field. When he lived in Italy, for example, he would incorporate into his sculptures broken and useless, but nevertheless still beautiful fragments of old furniture or discarded picture frames.

However the source of highest satisfaction for Ryszard was creation of large works in stone, especially in marble. Extracting a shape from the hard rock, a shape placed there by his imagination... The best opportunity for this would come with plein air sculpture workshops—these were beyond doubt the happiest moments of his life. I used to accompany him to the workshops and we would work together; they would become the most precious of our shared memories. Some of his most beautiful pieces were created

in the course of several workshops in Oronsco (currently known as the Polish Center for Sculpture), in Ksiaz and abroad; the sculptures are now in collections in Warsaw (Majesty of the Universe, Mother Earth, Love Recalled—in the National Museum), Lodz (Altar of Being), Kielce (Vow of Love, Gesture of Time), Walbrzych (Gesture of Nature), Oronsco (With a Rose from Life), Varelbush in Germany (The Shepherd) and Avallon in France (Mother Nature).

Still at the beginning of the workshop phase he executed two sculptural works in wood—offering to the Sun and One Life; he would return to wood later, sporadically, in small mixed-media compositions.

The workshops allowed him to perfect another technique, which he would use later on—ceramics. We both used to participate in the Parszow Ceramic Factory workshops near Skarzysko-Kamienna and it was there that Wojtek's seven important early works were born; most of them, such as Chords of Fame, Art of Wonder, Jump Rope, Creative Passions—received awards and one of them, The Sitter, is housed today in the National Museum in Warsaw.

Ryszard's ability to employ mural and other painting techniques, which he acquired as a secondary specialization at the Academy, significantly enriched his later work. He would frequently cover his sculptures partly or entirely—especially those executed in cement—with mosaics, frescoes and sgraffito; the technique was already present in his early sculptures, such as the white cement piece At Dawn (currently in the National Museum in Warsaw) or in another, Rays of Time. In general, the surfaces of Ryszard's works were rarely left smooth and plain—very often the exuberant form was augmented by rich ornamentation and even his marble pieces were typically adorned with bas reliefs. Despite an occasional critique of “oversculpturing”, his creative temperament and his artistry prevailed—thank heavens!

As to the dimensions of his sculptural pieces, his smallest creation, made up of a number of polychrome elements, is 4 ½ cm tall, 3 cm wide and 2 cm deep (it is currently in my personal collection); his largest monumental composition is 4 ½ metres tall (it's exhibited in Vancouver, Canada).

Ryszard would also design and execute monumental sculpture (one very expressive monument, entitled Before the Sun Rose, is currently kept in the Auschwitz Museum), funerary monuments (of which he created five, including that of Kazimiera Illakowiczowna, the poet), and portraits (of Gorecki and Rubinstein, among others—both in the National Philharmonic Concert Hall in Bydgoszcz).

Sacral sculpture was yet another important field of his creative activity. He mostly focused on highly expressive calvaries—his last work executed in Poland was a monumental cross with a figure of Christ the Victor, created for a church in Zalesie Dolne near Warsaw. He would also create medals and countless smaller sculptural works. Many of these, all of utmost beauty, are scattered all over the world.

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Finally, one last type of sculpture he would engage in, as if on the margin of his mainstream activity, where small, charming figurines of folk saints, which he loved to carve whenever he was less busy—after all, and folk tradition was something he could really call his own.

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Ryszard put his artistic career before all other tasks and duties—this was his lifetime goal, the sense of his existence. However, two other kinds of duty would out of necessity take a privileged place in the hierarchy of his activities—these were his academic career and his family.

His career at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw began in 1966, when Professor Witold Miller, searching for an assistant for his Murals Section and remembering Ryszard well as his recent student, offered him a teaching position. Professor Miller never had reasons to regret his decision and when he eventually retired, he confidently entrusted the Section to Ryszard as his own independent assignment (at the time Ryszard was already an Adjunct Professor at the Academy). Wojtek did an excellent job as Section Chair and a reference letter from that period attests to that explicitly—“he is a man of great inventiveness and great imagination, which allow him to constantly expand the possibilities and to achieve rich, interesting effects through novel technical solutions. As a teacher he has a great rapport with the students, he offers excellent guidance and helps them confront their creative problems.”

Ryszard was a demanding teacher, but he was also liked and respected by his students; that's why he was eventually appointed Dean for Student Affairs in 1981, when he was also nominated for tenure. I could see firsthand how much Ryszard loved and appreciated his work at the Academy, how seriously he took it, how carefully he prepared his lectures and classes. An amazing combination of traits: an immense, extraordinary artistic sensibility and at the same time such great organization and reliability—not all artists are messy people, it would seem.

New responsibilities appeared in 1974—our daughter Ewa was born. In 1980 our second daughter, Kinga, arrived. We had always been looking forward to having children; Ryszard was very happy—he loved them, he was a fantastic father. Even though his schedule was incredibly busy those days, he would do everything to find time for the children, to help around the house, especially when the girls were little.

Life was not easy in Poland in the 1980s—the martial law, the trade union unrest—Ryszard was very active politically, along with his students. As a result, he was often followed by the police, interrogated, blackmailed; his art descended to the underground. He was harassed particularly because of his work with the students: he was warned that “evil things might befall his family unless he stopped inciting students to rebellion”. He worked at the Academy then, he would go to his workshop after school and he was

usually coming home late—waiting for him I was constantly afraid that he was arrested again. The tension was slowly building up, in the society outside and inside our family. The children were little; we were both overworked. Ryszard would not hear about taking any rest, taking a break. He was a very good man, but he was also incredibly stubborn and persistent; his own health and well-being meant nothing to him.

After the Chernobyl accident in 1986 I had enough. I seriously began to consider leaving the country. I wanted to save my children from life in constant danger and as to Ryszard, I hoped, indeed, I was convinced, that his extraordinary talent would bear fruit anywhere. Initially he opposed emigration, but eventually we made this decision together. We left for Italy in August 1987. Ryszard was still on sabbatical at the time and frankly, our decision to remain abroad was not yet carved in stone.

We lived in Italy for almost three years. On the one hand, it was an exciting, fascinating period, but then, it was also a very difficult one. When Ryszard finally committed to life abroad, our émigré adventure could finally take off—with all its uncertainties, with all its new beginnings. The beauty of Italy and its cultural heritage made our stay there very meaningful for both Ryszard and myself—it was a practical lesson in art history, a lesson of great importance to every artist. We lived in Rome, but we traveled a lot to all the fascinating destinations throughout the country.

Within a few months Ryszard found a job in the Roman art gallery of Rodolfina Schaller, whose commercial activities also included collection and restoration of antique furniture and paintings. Ms. Schaller provided Ryszard with a studio in one of her suburban mansions, where Ryszard would work on restoration assignments for her and where he would also develop his own artistic vision. In his Italian period he executed a number of paintings, a series of mosaics, two partition screens with sheet metal bas reliefs, and some interesting permanent decorations for Ms. Schaller's gallery, in wood and in sheet metal. In addition to all that, he created about eighty small sculptures, which towards the end of our residence in Italy were collected in Ryszard's individual exhibition at the gallery (we took some of these sculptures with us when we moved to Canada).

A more formal success dating to that period was Ryszard's first prize in the 50th Anniversary commemorative medal competition for the Vatican Radio.

We left Italy for Canada in March of 1990; our destination was Vancouver. Even though the place was completely new to us, our material situation would not be wholly uncertain; our family obtained a one-year sponsorship of the Canadian government and everything had been arranged while we were still in Italy.

In Vancouver Ryszard was able to start his creative work right away. It was possible thanks to the help of a friend, an architect who let Ryszard use his studio. A number of small but very interesting sculptures using mixed-media techniques come from that period.

The following year, again thanks to the assistance of the same friend, Ryszard entered a competition for a public sculpture in North Vancouver. He won the competition, even though he was the only foreign participant in a crowd of Canadian sculptors. The city provided him with a studio, a large space in a freestanding structure, and he worked there for ten months on the 4 ½-meter tall sculpture entitled North Shore Rhapsody—the sculpture represented a woman playing the harp, hence it was frequently referred to as The Harpist.

At the same time he worked on another, smaller piece representing a trumpet and the hand of a trumpeter. Both works were referencing local North Vancouver legends.

Work on Rhapsody sparked a lot of interest in the town. The local press would regularly write about the various stages of Ryszard's work and many people, curious how such a large sculpture was being made, wanted to see the maker at work. Every now and then, we had to open the studio to the public for a few hours, to allow people to see the work that was being created for them.

This was, of course, very convenient for Ryszard, who used the opportunity to organize a permanent exhibition of his sculptures in a small room adjacent to the main working space.

Rhapsody was being executed in concrete, reinforced with metal and dyed in paste—it also contained pure metal elements, for example, the strings of the harp. Sheet metal bas reliefs would cover one side of the harp. It was a superhuman, exhausting effort, which Ryszard carried out on his own, with only limited help in critical moments, when heavier elements needed to be lifted and assembled or when the harp had to be set up vertically. It doesn't mean there was a shortage of people willing to help—it's just that there was no one who could replace Ryszard at this. Of course, all of us, the entire family, were with him all the time, supporting him in all possible ways, assisting him with the purchase and transportation of the raw material needed for Rhapsody. The story of this sculpture would certainly suffice for its own separate article and I'm sure I will write it one day—it would be too long to tell in the present one.

The “Harpist” was completed in May 1992 and installed on Rogers Plaza. It was officially unveiled on the 25th of May, during a ceremony with the participation of the mayor and a large number of invited people; a real harpist gave a live performance. It was a great triumph following days of great struggle.

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Even before he began his work on North Shore Rhapsody, Ryszard participated in another competition for a statue of a fisherman in Richmond. He and a group of collaborating architects won the first phase of the competition; unfortunately, he was not able to participate to the end.

In the meantime he received a sponsorship offer from people impressed by his work, by Rhapsody's success, and by other sculptures he exhibited. An affluent Iranian family, owners of the Fama construction firm, undertook to promote Ryszard's art, to give him a studio to work in, the materials for his work, and the money to support his family. In exchange, he was to work exclusively for the firm, producing works on commission; all of Ryszard's works created during that time would become the property of the sponsor. The offer looked like an amazing opportunity, even though we did perceive some risk associated with it. Running out of money (Rhapsody brought us no profit, as the prize money was consumed entirely by the execution of the project) and fearful for the uncertain future, Ryszard signed the agreement. Initially, everything went well, so well it was hard to believe. The sponsors fulfilled their part of the agreement and Ryszard worked hard on his. However, even before the first year was over the firm withdrew from the contract without notice, leaving our affairs in great disarray; we had to hire lawyers. The only good thing about this adventure was that Ryszard was able to execute several larger sculptures in reasonably good working conditions—we managed to recover one of them and it is now part of my private collection (all the remaining ones stayed with the company that simply disappeared).

Following the first stunning success and the Fama affair we got into all kinds of trouble, mostly financial. We moved twice. All this caused instability in the family and tensions between us. But even then Ryszard would not stop his creative work, although the conditions deteriorated severely. I remember one very interesting piece from that period, entitled *The Vessel of Fate* and created in 1993; it was purchased by a local collector, an admirer of Wojtek's art.

Our family entered a profound crisis in 1994 and many things changed; most significantly we began to live separately. It was a difficult period for Ryszard and his art from that period illustrates the hardships very well. He made many drawings, expressing himself in dramatic compositions full of movement and anxiety. He would not stop his sculptural work either: several interesting imaginary female portraits date to that period, as well as a series of small but very charming sculptural compositions representing feminine grace, executed in various mixed-media techniques.

In those three years when he lived alone many people would come to visit him. These contacts resulted in one more art-related project emphasizing the range of his creative invention: he became the co-founder of Pegasus, a group uniting art lovers and organizing public meetings that allowed people to showcase their talents.

Ryszard would take care of the artistic spirit of these meetings and made fantastic decorations for them. Many of these decorations survived—for example, a set of large painted illustrations to Adam Mickiewicz's sonnets—today they adorn private collections in Vancouver.

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Indeed, many of Ryszard's works are prize ornaments in private homes and public spaces in Vancouver. Every year it becomes more and more obvious, how needed he was here, how he influenced the lives of so many people. Gradually, the sense of his exile is becoming manifest. His émigré art is immensely rich, even though it's so different from what he had created back in Poland—it's still marked with the same individual style and its volume is truly impressive: he created over 300 works in Vancouver alone.

In the last five years of his life he painted a lot, working in a small apartment, which he shared with Maria, his companion. He created a few more sculptures there, too. In 1998 Ryszard executed a memorial portrait of Agnieszka Osiecka—the work is currently in Poland, at the Agnieszka Osiecka Theater in Sopot. Then in 1999 he executed a bas relief portrait of Ignacy Paderewski for the University of British Columbia, the most important academic institution in Vancouver; at that time the school owned a grand piano that had belonged to Paderewski. In the year 2000 Ryszard created two sheet metal busts of Cardinal Wyszyński—one of them is now in Warsaw, the other at St. Casimir Church in Vancouver.

North Shore Rhapsody was moved to a safer place, the Centennial Theatre in North Vancouver, in 2000. Part of the building had to be specifically adapted for the purpose: the floor was dug deeper to allow Rhapsody stay under a roof. Ryszard actively participated in the move and with a huge amount of creative effort he completely renovated the surface of the sculpture.

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The last 1 ½ years of Ryszard's life were marked by severe illness—cancer—which eventually took him away from us on January the 22nd, 2003. He only stopped working two months before he died.

Ryszard Wojciechowski's life and creative work are extraordinary examples of personal triumph—a triumph of talent, character, and spirit over adversity which would have stopped a lesser man on the path to his goal... And his goal was constant exposition through art of the beauty and sense of man's existence in his connection to nature. This is how he himself described this in his artistic credo:

“THE HUMAN BEING...a complex beauty a Great Nature defined by a corporeal shape, the inner self enriched by the profundity of its rebirth. In HIM, the vibrancy of spring, the scent of flowers, the gold of the sun, love and birth – suffering, pain, tears, fear and heroism are mirrored. In HIM time carves deep furrows. Expressing the HUMAN BEING is the essence of my art.”

”Talent was granted and we have to live up to it”

What more can one add to this?

Ryszard took his talent very seriously. He knew very well how gifted he was and he considered creative work his duty, sometimes a very difficult duty. He would say, "talent was granted and we have to live up to it." And he did live up to his, leaving a body of art of extraordinary value for both the Polish and the universal culture. Today, we, all of us who feel and understand this, have to live up to our own duty before the Artist and to present this magnificent opus to the world.