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Birds of Passage

Polish Migrant Women in Turn-of-the-Century European Cabaret

Abstract

At the turn of the century, European cabaret, which became an art form, brought together artists of various nationalities and talents. It provided favorable conditions for migrants to settle in the new environment, enabling them to search for a suitable form of expression and develop their artistic careers. This opportunity was seized by Maria Krysińska and Mika Mickun, Polish-born artists who emigrated as teenagers in search of a space that would allow them to pursue their budding passions. They sought self-emancipation in a foreign environment and without the support of their families. Their ties with the French and German cabaret scenes indicate the importance of this form of activity in their émigré lives, allowing their achievements to be situated at the intersection of personal biography and the broader history of European cabaret.

Keywords

migrant theatre, cabaret, Maria Krysińska, Mika Mickun, emancipation

Abstrakt

Ptactwo przelotne: Polskie migrantki w kabarecie europejskim przełomu wieków

Kabaret europejski przełomu wieków nie tylko wszedł w orbitę sztuki, ale był też miejscem spotkań artystów różnych narodowości i talentów. Stwarzał dogodne warunki emigrantom do osadzenia się w nowym środowisku, umożliwiał poszukiwania odpowiedniej dla siebie formy ekspresji i rozwijanie kariery artystycznej. Skorzystały z tej możliwości również Polki Maria Krysińska i Mika Mickun, które wyemigrowały z Polski jako nastolatki w poszukiwaniu odpowiedniej przestrzeni do realizacji kiełkujących pasji, realizujące projekt swej emancypacji w obcym środowisku i bez wsparcia rodziny. Związki artystek z kabaretem francuskim i niemieckim pozwalają wskazać znaczenie aktywności kabaretowej w ich emigranckim życiu oraz osiągnięcia na tym polu w kontekście sytuacji życiowej i sztuki kabaretowej.

Słowa kluczowe

teatr migrancki, kabaret, Maria Krysińska, Mika Mickun, emancypacja

In the Cabaret Sky

In 1898, Antoni Sygietyński—one of the foremost representatives of positivist theatre criticism—used the term birds of passage to describe

a whole host of itinerant artists, both Polish and foreign, who, as he claimed, eating elsewhere the seeds pecked out here, contributed nothing to the prosperity of their homeland. Worse still, by recklessly instilling poor taste among the masses and within artistic circles, they lowered the level of art—sometimes for many years to come.¹

It seems that while Sygietyński accepted bird migration as a natural phenomenon in ornithology, he failed to see the benefits that artistic migration—analogous to that of birds—could bring both to artists themselves and to the development of art in its various forms, invigorating artistic life at home and abroad. His reflections, deeply rooted in the positivist conception of art as a social mission and in views on the position of Polish art within European culture, provide a valuable starting point for reconsidering the fate of talented individuals who left their native nests to seek opportunities for self-realization and artistic expression elsewhere. The migration of Polish artists abroad was a natural phenomenon throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Cities such as Paris, Vienna, and Munich—major centers of culture and art—attracted both established figures with recognized achievements in their homeland and young artists lured by academies, private schools, and the promise of a swift career. Many of these individuals have since been the subject of extensive research, yet others remain known only to specialists.

For decades, scholars have been reconstructing the complex network of European artistic connections—gradually closing gaps, discovering new threads, and recovering the memory of those who never returned from abroad.² This research

¹ Antoni Sygietyński, "Ptactwo przelotne (final)," *Kurier Warszawski* 78, no. 283 (1898): 2. In the same column, he wrote: "Creative art and the artistry associated with it begin where instinct and experience—inherited from one's ancestors and applied unconsciously—end. Only self-awareness of the idea and the conscious use of artistic means acquired through personal experience mark the true beginning of an artist. An idea or motif may arise, from who knows where, yet the artist cannot realize it fully as a work of art without knowing how to shape it. Without reasoned choice of means, there is no art." The two preceding instalments of the column, published under the same title in issues 278 and 279 of *Kurier Warszawski* (1898), addressed the improvement of musical culture, the promotion of responsible talent development, and the participation of Poles in the creation of culture abroad.

² For the latest works, see Dorota Kudelski and Zdzisław Kudelski, eds., *Rozmaitości emigracyjne: Literatura i sztuka* (Lublin Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła 11, 2017); Dorota Kudelska, ed., *W Wiedniu, Paryżu i Monachium... Artyści poza granicami w XIX i XX wieku / In Vienna, Paris, and Munich... Artists abroad in the 19th and 20th centuries* (Lublin Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła 11, 2020).

has tended to focus on fields of undisputed status, such as literature, music, visual arts, and theatre. Cabaret—bringing together artists of various specialties who first performed in their own closed circle and then in front of other thrill-seeking audiences—did not claim to be a separate and independent art form; instead, it underwent constant transformations from café entertainment to artistic performance to stage shows.³ Nicknamed “*l’enfant terrible of Sub-Parnassus*,” it aspired to be the “eleventh muse,” though few took this ambition seriously. As Élisabeth Pillet observed, cabaret occupied a liminal space between high and popular art, between the center and the periphery, between the international and the local.⁴ In this cultural melting pot, young artists of various nationalities and talents came together, united by rebellion against established artistic canons and ideals of beauty, forming short-lived but emotionally charged communities. In place of the traditional art salon, cabaret became what Lidia Ignaczak aptly terms a “salon of the rejects”⁵: a literary café where personal connections were forged, ideas exchanged, and unpublished works presented. It offered a space to test new concepts and experiment with artistic forms. In a word, it was an “enclave of broadly understood unofficial culture,”⁶ open also to little-known or emerging artists.

This openness to outsiders, to the Other (original, misfit, and undervalued by the mainstream) proved significant in shaping the new cultural paradigm of accelerated exchange of ideas and people. For some, cabaret was merely a transit stop on their artistic journey; for others, a joyous site of creation and play. There were also those who tested their talent there, gained experience in particular modes of creativity, combining music, movement, and poetry into new forms, blurring—and crossing—the boundaries between the arts. I will illustrate how cabaret was used through the examples of Polish migrant artists Maria Krysińska and Mika Mickun, original figures of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cabaret.

One might argue that cabaret played a significant yet underappreciated role in their migration narratives.⁷ Both women emigrated from Poland as teenagers

³ For further variations of cabaret (primarily French), see Lidia Ignaczak, “Tęsknota za Chat Noir i Mirliton: Wokół legendy paryskich kabaretów,” *Acta Universitatis Lodzensis. Folia Letteraria Polonica*, no. 3 (2016): 279–309. Their range extended from café-based entertainment venues to more ambitious forms of artistic synthesis. Alongside literary cabaret, a particularly noteworthy variant was the *pittoresque* cabaret; Polish artists participated in both forms, with Maria Krysińska associated with the former and Mika Mickun with the latter.

⁴ Elisabeth Pillet, “Cafés-concerts et cabarets,” *Romantisme*, no. 75 (1992): 48, http://www.persee.fr/doc/AspDf/roman_0048-8593_1992_num_22_75_6000.pdf.

⁵ Ignaczak, “Tęsknota za Chat Noir,” 285.

⁶ Ignaczak.

⁷ Élodie Gaden succinctly summarized the phenomenon: “Cabaret became a multifunctional melting pot: a place for artists, writers, and politicians to socialize; an exhibition space for painters; a stage for recitals and theatrical performances; as well as an editorial office for struggling periodicals,” quoted in Ewa Małgorzata Wierzbowska,

in search of space to pursue their emerging passions and emancipation, which was not necessarily easy. It was through cabaret, it seems, that they acquired a sense of agency and subjectivity. Cabaret rendered them visible, enabled them to attain a degree of independence and short-lived fame, facilitated their gradual entry into a new social environment, and allowed them to navigate a culture that was initially foreign. Within this space, they were able to construct a complex identity: as women, emigrants, Poles, and artists. In seeking their place and sense of value amid what Rosi Braidotti describes in the introduction to the Polish edition of *Nomadic Subjects* as a “painful tension between the local and the global, between tradition and modernity, between the past and the future,”⁸ cabaret offered a framework in which they could exist, be seen, and experiment with possible forms of selfhood. Its appeal lay precisely in its provisional, non-binding, and extraterritorial character.

The cabaret episode in the biographies of Krysińska and Mickun should not be overlooked. On the one hand, it foregrounds their artistic achievements in this field—achievements that existing histories of cabaret tend to mention only in passing.⁹ On the other, it draws attention to the cabaret’s role in processes of adaptation which, like other forms of socialisation at the time, systematically disadvantaged women. Their path toward subjectivity, and toward its recognition by others, led in part through cabaret. When read together, these two biographical narratives—the condition of migrant women and that of cabaret artists—set against the status of cabaret at the turn of the century, reveal the differing situations the women encountered after leaving their home country. They became not only emigrants but also nomads, in the sense articulated by

Marie Krysińska: “Jako muzyk...” (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2020), 21. The majority of the information concerning Krysińska’s cabaret activity is drawn from this publication.

⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *Podmioty nomadyczne: Ucieleśnienie i różnica seksualna w feminizmie współczesnym*, trans. Aleksandra Dera (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2009), 22.

⁹ In the best-known monograph available on the Polish market—Lisa Appignanesi’s *Kabaret*, trans. Agnieszka Kreczmar (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1990)—these artists are not mentioned. Mickun’s performances are noted by Izolda Kiec in *W kabarecie* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2004), 110. For further information on Mickun, see Helena Karwacka, *Warszawski Kabaret Artystyczno-Literacki Momus* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1982), 46–47, 97–98, 104. Krystyna Moisan-Jabłońska discusses Mickun’s connections with cabaret—while focusing primarily on her sculptural work—in “Mika Karolina Mickun—zarys biografii i twórczości,” *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 58, no. 1/2 (1996): 33–45. On both artists, see Lidia Ignaczak, “Tęsknota za Chat Noir,” 290. Ignaczak devotes particular attention to Krysińska, whose cabaret career she further examined in the article “Między asymilacją a wykluczeniem, czyli o paradoksach emigracyjnego życia i twórczości kabaretowej,” in *Być w mniejszości, być mniejszością*, eds. Tomasz Kaczmarek and Joanna Rażny (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2019), <https://www.press.uni.lodz.pl/index.php/wul/catalog/download/1231/6718/4063?inline=1>. Krysińska has also been discussed by historians of French cabaret and by Polish scholars of her literary work: Maria Szarama-Swolkieniowa, *Maria Krysińska, poetka francuskiego symbolizmu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1972), 194–195; Ewa Małgorzata Wierzbowska, “Szkic do portretu literackiego Marie Krysińskiej,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 109, no. 1 (2018): 81–94, https://rcin.org.pl/Content/66454/wa248_84429_P-1-30_wierzbowska-szkic_o.pdf.

Rosi Braidotti. As she argues, the nomadic subject emerges at the intersection of multiple identities; it is inherently unstable, disrupts established modes of knowing and experiencing the world, and, crucially, resists confinement within socially coded forms of thought and behavior.¹⁰

The implementation of this task presents several challenges, stemming primarily from the scarcity of source material—both biographical data on the artists and descriptions of the cabaret performances in which they participated. These performances survive only in fragmentary reviews, occasional mentions, and reconstructions by historians working from specific ideological positions. It should also be borne in mind that these were young artists who had to struggle for recognition on the art market and who pursued their careers outside their country of origin. As a result, their work attracted little interest in Poland, while their achievements were simultaneously diminished in the countries in which they ultimately settled. In this context, the most viable approach is the one proposed by Ewa Domańska¹¹ and already successfully employed by theatre historians: an alternative, fictionalized narrative in which fiction serves to fill the “blank spaces” and to link surviving traces into a coherent story.¹² This strategy is particularly compelling given that the subjects of this study are, first, women who transgressed the dominant norms of femininity at the end of the nineteenth century; second, female cabaret artists; and third, migrants—in a sense, nomads—who constructed their subjectivity not through reference to their roots, but through other modes of self-fashioning.

Maria Krysińska was for a time associated with Le Chat Noir (Black Cat) cabaret, founded in Paris in 1881. Mika Mickun performed occasionally in cabarets operating at the turn of the twentieth century in Vienna, Paris, and London, thereby acquiring a reputation as an international, “cosmopolitan” artist.¹³ These trajectories prompt a set of questions: what did cabaret mean to these women? What role did it play in their lives, both as a physical space and as a mode of artistic expression? These questions guided my research and the process of reconstructing and supplementing their biographies.

¹⁰ Cf. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 21–68.

¹¹ Cf. Ewa Domańska, *Historie konwencjonalne: Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2006).

¹² This strategy was adopted by Morawski in his biography of the director of the Mazovian Theatre, whose achievements and artistic career had long been marginalized, Piotr Morawski, “Dyrektorka: Przyczynek do (nie)biografii Wandy Wróblewskiej,” *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 69, no. 3 (2020): 76–103.

¹³ This is how Mickun was described in the announcements for performances at the Polish cabaret Momus, see: (sk), “Mika Mickun,” *Świat* 4, no. 10 (1909): 18, <https://mbc.cyfrowemazowsze.pl/dlibra/publication/20085/edition/17826/content>.

Polish Women in European Cabaret

Case One: Maria Anastazja Wincentyna Krysińska, known as Marie Krysińska, pseudonym Martha Bableuska¹⁴

In scholarly literature, the artist's name appears in various forms, most commonly as "Maria Krysińska" or "Marie Krysińska." She is described either as a Polish writer and composer working in French or as a French artist of Polish origin. Her national identity was thus negotiated rather than self-evident or unambiguous. Polish origin functioned in her career in two opposing ways: it could serve as a distinction, but it could also operate as a stigma. During her cabaret performances, Krysińska's otherness acquired an exotic value, emphasized by her presentation as "Marylka Polonaise."¹⁵ However, after leaving Le Chat Noir and embarking on a literary career—most notably her struggle for recognition as an innovator of free verse—her Polish origin ceased to function as a mark of distinction and instead became a source of discredit. Nor was it the only one. In her disputes with Gustave Kahn—a French male poet—over the primacy of liberating poetry from the constraints of traditional versification, a whole constellation of stereotypes was mobilized against her. Krysińska was positioned as a foreigner, a Pole, a woman, and, additionally, as a Jew.¹⁶ As a result, she was denied full participation in the cultural heritage of the country in which she consistently sought to assimilate. Viewed from this perspective, the period of her cabaret activity appears as the least oppressive phase of her career. At that time, she did not encounter overt condescension; moreover, she

¹⁴ Wierzbowska, "Szkic do portretu," 81. Although the author provides two variants of the artist's name and surname, she ultimately adopts the French version. In her view, the nickname *Bableuska* reflected the hostility prevalent at the time toward women actively engaged in the arts and sciences—the so-called *savantes*. It is worth noting that the invariant spelling of the surname also underscores the artist's position at the intersection of multiple national identities, characteristic of a nomadic subject exposed to various forms of oppression, yet willing to adopt the most advantageous identity at any given moment. Perhaps this already points toward a new understanding of European society as composed of transnational, hybrid identities.

¹⁵ Émile Goudeau, *Dix ans de bohème* (Paris, 1888), 194–195. Quoted in Maria Szarama-Swolkieniowa, *Maria Krysińska, poetka francuskiego symbolizmu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1972), 194–195.

¹⁶ The critic Lucien Arrésy described her as "a Polish Jewish woman working in a brasserie, responding with vehement protest to Kahn's successes," Lucien Arrésy, *La dernière Bohème: Verlaine et son milieu* (Paris: Jouve & cie, 1923), 48–49, quoted in Agnieszka Kluba, "Polscy pisarze w symbolistycznej Francji: Maria Krysińska i Théodor de Wyzewa," in *Różne głosy: Prace ofiarowane Stanisławowi Balbusowi na jubileusz siedemdziesięciolecia*, ed. Dorota Wojda et al. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013), 257; see also Maria Szarama-Swolkieniowa, "Maria Krysińska w świetle krytyki," *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego: Prace Historycznoliterackie*, no. 14, (1968): 267.

Maria Krysińska

1880



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developed the courage to cross new boundaries—both territorial and symbolic. She drew attention through her unconventionality and distinguished herself by her independence.

Full of lively temperament, she quickly achieved self-reliance. Travelling abroad—probably between 1873 and 1874—liberated the sixteen-year-old Marie from the conventions of bourgeois culture and from the model of education prevailing in Poland in the second half of the nineteenth century. That model devalued artistic training for young women and treated the study of foreign languages as unproductive, resting on the assumption that women were not to be educated but merely raised.¹⁷ Migration thus transformed Krysińska into a free—indeed, emancipated and self-educated—woman within the world of artistic bohemia. It was in the cabaret that she was “born” as a composer, accompanist, and performer of works by other artists, including Paul Verlaine. Her poems were performed in cabaret venues by Renée Derigny, an actress of the Paris Odéon, and published in cabaret periodicals, among them *Le Chat Noir*. Commonly referred to as “Marylka la Polonaise,” the “Polonaise pianist”

¹⁷ Cf. Joanna Dobkowska-Kubacka, *Przyszłość czas na ruch kobiet poważnych: Kampania o prawo do wykształcenia i pracy zawodowej, w tym artystycznej, kobiet wywodzących się z ziemiaństw i inteligencji w latach 1864–1914 w Królestwie Polskim* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Avalon, 2024).

became, for several years, the muse of Montmartre—“Calliope du Chat Noir.”¹⁸ Cabaret brought her rapid fame, enabled her to secure independence, facilitated new artistic and social connections, and established her position within the French artistic milieu. Significantly, unlike other Polish artists active in Paris (such as Gabriela Zapolska), Krysińska did not seek contact with the Polish émigré community. This raises the question of whether such distance constituted a deliberate strategy—an effort to fashion herself as European and, more specifically, as French, albeit of Polish origin. Although she wrote exclusively in French and married a French painter, she never renounced her Polish roots. When she died in 1908, her obituary in the French press explicitly emphasised her Polish heritage, pointing to the heraldic origin of her surname, Leliwa.

Contacts with cabaret can therefore be viewed from two perspectives: either as a form of artistic initiation—a testing ground for a future poet in which new solutions in poetic language could be explored—or as an expression of trivial, light-hearted, and entertaining creativity that ultimately undermined her artistic ambitions.

According to Maria Szarama-Swolkieniowa, the first researcher of Krysińska's work in Poland, reconstructing the artist's life—especially her youth, the very period of her cabaret activity—poses considerable difficulty. It is known that she was the daughter of Ksawery Krysiński, a Warsaw lawyer. Her date of birth remains uncertain: some sources give 22 January 1857, while others indicate 1860 or 1864, discrepancies likely resulting from the practice of making oneself seem younger, frequently employed by artists and their families. Krysińska's ancestors belonged to a Frankist family originating in Podolia and were ennobled with the Leliwa coat of arms during the reign of Stanisław August. The progenitor of the family, Jehuda Lejb Notowicz Krysa, having converted, adopted the surname Krysinski. His descendants—including Maria's father—settled in Warsaw and became members of the city's legal profession. Over time, the family began to spell the surname as Krysiński. Maria's grandfather, Dominik Krysiński, was a professor of economics at the University of Warsaw, a member of the Society of Friends of Science, and a political figure. Another notable family member was Ksawery Krysiński, who translated Napoleon's articles of war from French.¹⁹ Maria thus came from an intellectual milieu deeply engaged in Polish public life and simultaneously connected to French culture. Her mother, Amelia Maria

¹⁸ Quoted in Szarama-Swolkieniowa, *Maria Krysińska, poetka francuskiego symbolizmu*, 33, 195.

¹⁹ The merits of the family members were recorded by Teodor Jeske-Choiński, *Neofici polscy: Materiały historyczne* (Warszawa, 1904), 83–84, <https://jbc.bj.uj.edu.pl/dlibra/publication/301785/edition/288794/neofici-polscy-materialy-historyczne-jeske-choinski-teodor-1854-1920>.

Krysińska (née Wołowska), died in Saint-Ouen, France (now a district of Paris), in May 1886, leaving behind six or seven children,²⁰ including the eldest Maria.

It is unclear whether Krysińska attended a girls' boarding school, which would have supplemented her home education, or whether she received only the so-called salon education typical for young women of higher social standing at the time. Such an education placed little emphasis on practical skills, focusing instead on French and piano study.²¹ It was perhaps through these music lessons that her artistic talent first emerged—talent she could fully cultivate only while studying abroad, since in Poland at the time, conservatory studies were open exclusively to men.²²

For a prosperous lawyer and official of the Kingdom of Poland, arranging his daughter's education abroad was hardly an obstacle. It may also reflect the progressive outlook of both her parents: by sending Krysińska to study abroad, they did not view her education merely as a means of refining her as a potential bride or providing her with an elegant hobby, but as preparation for a professional career, possibly in music. As Magda Urbańska has noted, it was her parents who determined the course of their daughter's education, for even though the young woman

possessed the most valuable qualities of character and mind . . . , as well as wealth—all this generosity of nature and fortune would have been for nothing if fate had not also blessed her with free-thinking parents who were able to muster enough courage to break the shackles of convention and custom, support her noble aspirations and send their daughter into battle against prejudice and tradition.²³

Maria therefore left Poland, probably in 1873 or 1874, to continue her piano studies at a music conservatory, supported financially in a way that initially allowed her a fairly carefree life. However, she soon abandoned her studies in harmony and composition at the Conservatoire National de Musique in Paris, because “she was surprised by the sight of people reading notes with sharps and flats,”

²⁰ Her father remarried Emilia Wendel, who was only a few years older than Krysińska, and with whom he had several children. The artist maintained no contact with her family in Poland.

²¹ Agnieszka Lisak, *Miłość, kobieta i małżeństwo w XIX wieku* (Warszawa: Bellona, 2009), 21.

²² Not only were music studies largely reserved for men, but so were public performances. Polish female pianists performed less frequently in their own country, instead living abroad and giving concerts primarily in Paris, London, and St. Petersburg, see Cecylia Walewska, *Ruch kobiecy w Polsce: Część II* (Warszawa, 1909).

²³ Magda Urbańska, “Wychowanie i kształcenie kobiet w XIX wiecznej Polsce,” *Saeculum Christianum: Pismo historyczno-społeczne* 18, no. 1 (2011): 13, [https://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Saeculum_Christianum_pismo_historyczne-r2011-t18-n1/Saeculum_Christianum_pismo_historyczne-r2011-t18-n1-s217-230.pdf](https://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Saeculum_Christianum_pismo_historyczne/Saeculum_Christianum_pismo_historyczne-r2011-t18-n1/Saeculum_Christianum_pismo_historyczne-r2011-t18-n1-s217-230/Saeculum_Christianum_pismo_historyczne-r2011-t18-n1-s217-230.pdf).

as Maria Szarama-Swolkieniowa recalls her words, imbued with nonchalance.²⁴ Fascinated by Parisian bohemian life, she forged connections with its artists, engaging with those not yet recognized and often seeking avenues where their talent could flourish outside the constraints of conservative, academic art. “It was precisely to avoid using flats that she chose to leave the conservatory.”²⁵ She then began performing in clubs in the Latin Quarter and at the famed Le Chat Noir cabaret in Montmartre.

Researchers remain puzzled by the phenomenon of Krysińska's popularity, given her average looks, modest piano skills, and lack of prior literary experience or formal studies. She entered the male-dominated artistic community and, as one of only four women attending the meetings of *Les Hydropathes* (the Hydropaths),²⁶ became permanently associated with the group. At just twenty years old, she was certainly not a scandalist and was far less known in artistic circles than figures such as Sarah Bernhardt, the already famous tragic actress of the Comédie-Française; Nina de Villard, the muse of Parisian bohemia; or Marguerite Eymery—pseudonym Rachilde—the eighteen-year-old future author of the daring novel *La tour d'Amour*. Unlike them, Krysińska did not seek friendship with the prominent women, preferring to carve her own artistic path. She participated in the evenings of *Les Hydropathes* and its successive incarnations, *Les Hirsutes* and *Les Zutistes*, more actively than the others, often engaging in discussions on the sidelines with one of the Hydropaths, Mallet de Bassilau.²⁷ According to Lucien Arresy, she made her debut as a pianist in *Les Zutistes*. In subsequent programs, she accompanied Émile Goudeau and Georges Fragerolle on a detuned instrument, interpreted popular Montmartre songs in her own style, and recited poetry, including her own compositions.²⁸ She was the only woman permitted to attend the famous literary Fridays at Le Chat Noir, widely associated with the beginnings of French cabaret in Paris,²⁹ and was one of only

²⁴ Szarama-Swolkieniowa, *Maria Krysińska, poetka francuskiego symbolizmu*, 22.

²⁵ Szarama-Swolkieniowa.

²⁶ A literary club in Paris, active from 1878 to 1880 and briefly revived in 1884, founded by the poet and novelist Émile Goudeau.

²⁷ She was occasionally accompanied by other French women—lesser-known actresses Irma Perroti and Denise Ahmer—who performed at Paul Fort's *Théâtre d'Art*.

²⁸ Krysińska subsequently began publishing poems in émigré magazines such as *Le Chat Noir* and *Le Plume*, as well as in the prestigious *La Revue Universelle*, which only opened its pages to other Poles after 1905. Her assimilation into the French literary scene was thus quickly recognized. She published her first volume of poetry, *Rythmes pittoresques*, in 1890, followed by additional collections in the ensuing years.

²⁹ This is highlighted by Florence Goulesque, “Une femme voyageuse dans les flous artistiques symbolistes: ‘Devant le miroir,’ de Marie Krysińska, trio pour vers, prose et vers libre métissé,” *Chimères* 25, no. 1 (1998): 1, <https://doi.org/10.17161/chimeres.v25i1.6165>.

four singers performing there. She left in 1883, when Rodolphe Salis, the founder of Le Chat Noir, turned it into a business, and the popular cabaret, open to any audience seeking entertainment, ceased to be a haven for original poets.

Within three years, Krysińska had gained fame as an extraordinary performer and composer. Today, we would describe her as having fulfilled herself on stage, directing her artistic creations in a uniquely original way. Her cabaret performances resist classification under a single performing specialty. Considering her later literary activity, researchers have described her work as “stage poetry,” expressed through shouting, singing, musical improvisation, gestures, and facial expression.³⁰ To illustrate Krysińska’s performing art, it is worth quoting the translation of a song by Frédéric Auguste Cazals:

She sits at the piano.
The keys tremble beneath her fingers...
She sings in soprano:
Bravo! All voices cry.
And everyone says: this cry
Is Kry’s cry
And everyone says: this cry
Is Krysińska’s cry.³¹

Florence Goulesque, a scholar of Krysińska’s work, intriguingly contrasts this image with the artist’s poem *Devant le miroir*,³² published in 1884 in the collection *Joies Errantes*:

This poem expresses the difficulty faced by a woman at the end of the nineteenth century in recognising herself within an ideal. To recognise herself in the image reflected in the mirror, in the image of femininity imposed on her by French society, as well as in the ambiguity of her position as an exile and a foreigner. The immigrant’s mirror has three sides, and she wanders along the perimeter of this triangle, or plays in a trio in which the voice of a Polish woman, the voice of a foreign woman, the voice of an expatriate—and also the voice of someone else—can be heard.³³

³⁰ Cf. Wierzbowska, “Szkic do portretu,” 84–85; Ignaczak, “Między asymilacją a wykluczeniem,” 169–170.

³¹ Quoted in Wierzbowska, 84. The original text is available there.

³² Marie Krysińska, *Joies Errantes* (Paris, 1894), 3.

³³ Goulesque, “Une femme voyageuse,” 3.

According to the interpreter, the cultural references in Maria Krysińska's poetry are predominantly French, with traces of Polish culture deliberately effaced. Yet her Polish heritage surfaces subconsciously—in dance, song, musical rhythms, and a preference for the indefinite, for what exists as memory, *avant la lettre*. The artist's initially unstable identity is also reflected in the variety of epithets attributed to her during her cabaret career: “la Sainte Jeanne-Baptistine from the school of liberated verses,” “good devil,” “la diva [adorée] du Chat Noir,” “la Calliope du Chat Noir,” “the brave Polish woman,” as well as “Chopin's pourer” (she was not only a pianist but also a waitress at Le Chat Noir and performed pieces by the Polish composer, likely learned during her music lessons in Poland), “woman of the Scythian people,” “Slavic woman,” and simply “foreigner.”³⁴

The cabaret and its reception allowed Krysińska to engage with the various social roles offered to her by contemporary culture and by circumstance: that of an emigrant, an emancipated woman who, by the standards of her time, had lived remarkably freely, as evidenced by her participation in a short-lived phalanstery—a community of free and equal individuals—organised by Goudeau. Unlike cabaret stars such as Yvette Guilbert and Loie Fuller, with whom she was friends, Krysińska did not remain long in the cabaret world. She was likely limited by her lack of specialised performing skills and showed little interest in the repetitive, formulaic nature of cabaret performances, which she did not entirely abandon (her appearances at the La Bodinière concert hall in 1896 are documented in *Le Matin*) but after leaving Le Chat Noir, she did not collaborate with other cabarets. On 1 October 1885, she married the painter and lithographer Georges Bellenger (1847–1916), through whom she obtained French citizenship. After several trips to the United States, she settled permanently in Paris, where she died in obscurity in 1916.

It is striking that this woman, not yet in her thirties, managed to enter a new environment so swiftly and to secure, at least initially, the acceptance of the French. Almost nothing is known about her contacts with the large Polish community in the capital on the Seine. Perhaps her decision not to seek support from other Polish migrants was a conscious strategy to assert her independence and pursue full acculturation. It is difficult to imagine Krysińska participating in serious academic events organized by the Polish community, which were attended

³⁴ Goulesque, 1. In addition to these epithets, which positioned Krysińska as an outsider, there were also more offensive terms, cited by a scholar of her work in the context of representations of masculinity and femininity in literature, see Laurence Brogniez “Marie Krysińska et le vers-libre: l'outrage fait aux Muses,” in *Masculin/Féminin dans la poésie et les poétiques du XIX^e siècle*, ed. Christine Planté (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2022), https://books-openedition-org.translate.goog/pul/6465?_x_tr_sl=fr&_x_tr_tl=pl&_x_tr_hl=pl&_x_tr_pto=sc#anchor-fulltext.

by artists prominent in their fields (Oberża Pieśniarska—the Singers' Tavern, a sort of cabaret for Polish migrants—was not established until 1909). She did not wish to enter the “enchanted circle of Polishness,” though, as Wierzbowska observed, she did not entirely succeed in distancing herself: “Krysińska was a poet who, according to her French-speaking audience, conveyed the spirit of the Polish language, which ensured the originality of her poetic phrasing, but also contributed to her being treated, despite everything, as a foreigner.”³⁵ After concluding her cabaret performances, she remained highly active: she composed and published poetry collections, wrote one-act plays—such as *Śmierć Kleopatry* (The Death of Cleopatra) or *Kain* (Cain)—and lyrical scenes, which were successfully staged by the French theatres Théâtre de La Bodinière and Théâtre des Folies-Belleville. On occasion, she even took part in these performances herself.³⁶

She was also concerned with issues of women's equality, though she was not a militant feminist. She asserted that “a woman, just like a man, is a being burdened with weaknesses, but a creative being.”³⁷ Crossing boundaries was therefore Krysińska's *modus operandi*, both in life and in art. These boundaries were not limited to national borders; they also included societal expectations of women and the constraints faced by artists seeking connections between different art forms. It is thus unsurprising that she was drawn to cabaret, which emerged as a rebellion against established hierarchies and conventions, offering a space to explore new relationships between literature, music, and theatre. In cabaret, she appeared before a large and diverse audience: she did not merely read poems, but sang, shouted, and improvised, “embodying” poetry at the piano with expressive gestures and animated facial expressions. This performative mode would later be used by the Futurists and, subsequently, the practitioners of Bruitism. For Krysińska, cabaret served as a testing ground, much as it would for Julian Tuwim decades later.

Krysińska constantly migrated between genres and forms, between literary and non-literary writing, and between high and popular art. In many ways, migration was a permanent condition for her. She was an artist who, as is evident from her surviving works written exclusively in French, underwent a process of identification with the culture of the country she had entered as a teenager. Yet her position as a woman and a migrant did not favor her aspirations to be a pioneer in French poetry, leaving her an outsider and long under-appreciated.

³⁵ Wierzbowska, Marie Krysińska: “Jako muzyk...,” 26.

³⁶ Cf. Wierzbowska, 50–55.

³⁷ Quoted in Wierzbowska, “Szkic do portretu,” 82.

However, as Goulesque argued, navigating between two cultures and two realities allowed her to continually renew herself in her work, far from the constraints of a rigid self-definition.³⁸ As a nomadic subject, one might add, she existed at the intersection of multiple identities, constantly searching for her place in culture: a Polish/French woman, a poet, a woman at the turn of the century, navigating a complex and shifting social landscape.³⁹

Case Two: Mika Mickun

Mika Karolina Mickun, also known as Mikun, Mikoun, or Mickoun, was born in Warsaw on 8 September 1886. She was the daughter of an entrepreneur who owned a ceramic tile factory in Janówek—a wealthy man whose support allowed her to take painting and sculpture lessons without concern for cost and to lead a carefree life, as attested in Zofia Nałkowska's journals, a friend from her youth.⁴⁰ She was also able to pursue art studies at private schools in Warsaw. At Halina Tokarzewska's school, she learned to draw from plaster models and from life, as well as painting in both fine and applied arts, sculpture, technical drawing, and artistic embroidery. At Alicja Nowicka's school, she expanded her training to include oil and watercolor painting, tapestry and fan painting, porcelain painting, wood burning, and glass, leather, and ivory painting;⁴¹ in short, students were prepared to practice a wide range of applied arts and crafts.

Mika wanted to continue her education, but opportunities for women in Warsaw were extremely limited at the time. It was not until 1904, when the School of Fine Arts opened its doors to both men and women, that this path became available. Following the example of many predecessors—young women who sought to break free from the narrow confines of local education and customs to explore the wider world—she left for Paris to pursue further artistic training.

³⁸ Goulesque, "Une femme voyageuse," 16.

³⁹ Ignaczak positioned Krysińska within a realm of ambiguity and vagueness, which, she argued, was mistakenly attributed to the artist's foreign origins. She observed: "It seems, however, that her understanding of freedom consisted in breaking the rules, regardless of the gender or nationality they prescribed," Ignaczak, "Między asymilacją a wykluczeniem," 174.

⁴⁰ Biographies most often refer to Zofia Nałkowska's notes, *Dzienniki 1899–1905*, ed. Hanna Kirchner (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1975).

⁴¹ Cf. Irena Huml, "Warszawskie szkolnictwo artystyczne dla kobiet na przełomie XIX i XX wieku," *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 47, no. 4 (1999): 306–307; Ewelina Wejbert-Wąsiewicz, "Edukacja—emancypacja—emigracja: Sytuacja polskich artystek na przełomie XIX i XX wieku," *Acta Universitas Lodzensis. Folia Sociologica*, no. 53 (2015): 110–112, https://dspace.uni.lodz.pl/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11089/15742/105.126_wasiewicz.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

Mika Mickun

PROGRAM KÜNSTLER-CABARET, 1909



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However, there is no evidence that she began her studies immediately. She did not enroll at the Paris School of Fine Arts, which had formally admitted women since 1897, nor at the Académie Julian, run by Rodolphe Julian, which attracted students from across the world, including Central and Eastern Europe; many Polish women studied there in the 1890s and at the turn of the 20th century.⁴² The school's aim, beyond offering instruction from renowned professors, was to prepare students for the competitive art world, instill self-confidence, and cultivate resilience for future challenges. As Catherine Fehrer, a pioneer in the study of the Académie Julian, notes, the institution's advantage lay not only in its teaching but also in the vibrant exchange of ideas within a diverse, international student community.⁴³ Mika Mickun, however, was not among these students. She began her studies with Antoine Bourdelle much later, only in the 1920s, according to her sole biographer in Poland, Krystyna Moisan-Jabłońska.⁴⁴ Earlier, she pursued her studies only intermittently, working "for the great Rodin and the

⁴² They are discussed by Ewa Bobrowska, "Emancypantki? Artystki polskie w Paryżu na przełomie wieku XIX i XX," *Archiwum Emigracji: Studia—Szkice—Dokumenty*, no. 1/2 (2012): 16–27, <https://doi.org/10.12775/AE.2012.001>.

⁴³ Bobrowska, "Emancypantki?," 15.

⁴⁴ Moisan-Jabłońska, "Mika Karolina Mickun," 34.

increasingly prominent Bourdelle, and travelling widely, performing in artistic cabarets,” as reported by the Warsaw-based *Świat* in 1909.⁴⁵

After leaving Poland, she did not settle permanently in Paris but instead travelled throughout Europe, swept up in the whirlwind of bohemian artistic life. Alongside Paris, Vienna functioned as a foreign Mecca for artists, and it was there that Mika entered the artistic milieu, becoming associated with the *Nachtlicht* (Night Lantern) cabaret—an affiliation that opened the way for her subsequent stage and cabaret career. Before achieving success and stardom, however, she had to find the artistic genre best suited to her abilities. Young, beautiful, and artistically gifted, she had not yet attained major recognition in the visual arts, though she was already producing her first sculptures.⁴⁶ When Auguste Rodin saw them in 1908, he sensed in them “flavor and fire.”⁴⁷ It is therefore unsurprising that the temperament visible in the static forms of her sculpture also found an outlet in the dynamic world of cabaret, which combined unconventional artistic play with composite, multi-artist performances. Mickun’s specialty became the live creation of caricatures to musical accompaniment, through which she captivated audiences with her temperament, sense of humour, improvisational skill, and grace—qualities essential to performances that combined painting, rhythm, and fluid movement.

Today, we can only speculate about the nature of Mika’s relationship with cabaret. Apart from a handful of performance programmes and scattered mentions in reviews published in non-German-language periodicals, little is known about the beginnings of her career. Why did she turn to cabaret, how did she enter this milieu, and did she frequent the light-music venues after arriving in France merely as a spectator? In Paris, only memories remain of the cabarets of this type. They were gradually replaced by *variété* theatres, music halls, and revues of an overtly entertainment-oriented character, in which women’s participation was largely confined to girls and already established stars. Rather than foregrounding women’s creative talents, these venues tended to stigmatise them, reducing women to objects of desire and often undermining their reputations. It is therefore hardly surprising that an emigrant Polish woman gravitated instead toward the international artistic milieu from which Viennese cabaret emerged,

⁴⁵ S. K., “Mika Mickun,” *Świat* 4, no. 10 (1909): 18.

⁴⁶ Nałkowska was captivated by her appearance and charm: “She is neither a socialite nor naive—she possesses a distinct type that defies classification. For hours she remains silent, sphinx-like, arranging her exquisite body across sofas and armchairs in aesthetic poses; then suddenly, you hear her burst into laughter, a laugh that is at once delightful and silvery. ... She does not seek to be different, does not attempt to imitate anyone, and does not become lost in defining herself,” Nałkowska, *Dzienniki*, 383.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Moisan-Jabłońska, “Mika Karolina Mickun,” 34.

characterised by elegant humour and imaginative fantasy.⁴⁸ Since Mika was first announced as an artist of the Nachtlicht cabaret, founded in Vienna in 1906 by Mary Delvard and Marc Henry, it may be assumed that she made her stage debut that year. One year later, the cabaret changed both its location and its name, becoming the Fledermaus, with which Mika remained associated for several subsequent years. Among its performers were Peter Altenberg, Egon Friedell, the tenor Hans Strick—Mika's future husband—and Carl Leopold Hollitzer, who appeared on stage as both singer and caricaturist, often wearing uniforms he had collected over the years.⁴⁹ The programmes featured colour woodcuts by Oskar Kokoschka, works by Gustav Klimt and Emil Orlik, and French-style shadow theatre. These forms of artistic expression, realised within the framework of *pittoresque* cabaret, closely corresponded to the artistic inclinations of the young Polish artist. Mika did not sing. Although she certainly spoke German, her foreign accent may have posed an obstacle on stage. Nor would it have been easy for her to produce caricatures of well-known personalities within this milieu; as a recent migrant, she was not yet well acquainted with its social and cultural codes. Instead, she turned to music, which became both her inspiration and her protective framework. Music provided the impulse for her performances, which consisted of drawing images live in synchrony with musical compositions, responding to their themes or exploiting their rhythmic structure.⁵⁰

Her talent for caricature distinguished her from other cabaret artists. While caricaturists readily collaborated with cabarets (the history of Elf Scharfrichter mentions the musical cartoonist Tobiasz Loch, and Stanisław Sichulski was associated with the Polish Zielony Balonik (Green Balloon), there are no records of female caricaturists in the chronicles of such scenes. This absence constituted Mika's particular advantage. It enabled her to combine artistic passion with practical necessity: to practise drawing while securing an additional source of income. The situation of women artists abroad, especially in France, was difficult even for those with modest financial resources and family support. To survive, they had to secure a position in the art market and exhibit frequently; poverty among them was not uncommon.⁵¹ Mickun could not afford to mount a solo

⁴⁸ Appignanesi, *Kabaret*, 63.

⁴⁹ Perhaps Mickun alludes to this when she makes a guest appearance in the Polish Momus dressed in uniform, as discussed later in this article.

⁵⁰ For both Krysińska and Mickun, music became a space in which they could transcend the limitations imposed by their native language and culture. Engaging with the cultural life of their adopted countries enabled them to rise above national distinctions.

⁵¹ Cf. Wacław Gąsiorowski, "Migracje intelektualne," *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, no. 17 (1913): 325–326, quoted in Bobrowska, "Emancypantki," 17.

exhibition. She had little work to present and was, in fact, only at the beginning of her artistic career. Engagement in cabaret enabled her to devote herself to creative practice while earning supplementary income to continue her education—she aspired to become a sculptor and to pursue training abroad—while simultaneously maintaining contact with the artistic community. Zofia Nałkowska, who met her in Vienna at the time, noted in her *Dzienniki* that Micka's situation resulted from her father's impoverishment.⁵² However, financial necessity does not appear to have been the sole factor behind her decision to join the cabaret. It is known that even before leaving for France she had observed early attempts to transplant cabaret culture to Poland, undertaken by her friends, including Leon Kaufmann, Cezary Jellenta, and Tadeusz Ulanowski. The opportunity to perform in a prestigious Viennese cabaret must therefore have been a powerful attraction, as well as an initial test of the abilities required to build an international career as an independent and recognisable artist.

Like Krysińska, Mickun did not maintain close contact with Polish émigré communities in France, Austria, or Germany. She neither sought their support nor attempted to share their collective fate. After leaving Poland, she chose independence. In her case, emigration not only constituted a definitive break with her country of origin but also operated on a symbolic level. Artistic cabaret did not erect barriers for foreigners, yet it was a demanding environment, requiring constant inventiveness and creativity and exposing performers to public judgement. As Catherine Hindson has observed, “the admittance of women to these environments as creative figures tended to be the exception, rather than the norm.”⁵³

Hans Strick⁵⁴—born August Bödl in Munich in 1873—played an important role in Mickun's involvement with cabaret. A writer, singer, and lutenist, he initially studied law before turning to music and training in singing at the Royal Academy of Music. He performed not only at the *Nachtlicht* and the *Zwiebelfisch* (Fish Onion) cabaret in Schwabing (now a district of Munich), but also, early in his career, at the renowned Munich cabaret *Elf Scharfrichter* (Eleven Executioners). This prestigious affiliation appears to have contributed to his

⁵² Zofia Nałkowska, *Dzienniki 1909–1917*, ed. Hanna Kirchner (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1976), 204.

⁵³ Catherine Hindson, *Female Performance Practice on the Fin-de-Siècle Stages of London and Paris: Experiment and Advertisement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 29. For a more detailed discussion, see Agata Łuksza, “Girls: Kobięcość i nowoczesność w polskiej rewii międzywojennej,” *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, no. 124 (2014): 10–21.

⁵⁴ Information found in Judith Kemp, “Ein winzig Bild vom großen Leben”: Zur Kulturgeschichte von Münchens erstem Kabarett “Die Elf Scharfrichter” (1901–1904); *Anhang Ensemble und MitarbeiterInnen*, <https://allitera-verlag.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Ensemble.pdf>.

frequent invitations for guest performances in various cities. Mika Mickun often accompanied him on these engagements. In 1907, they performed together at the Belvedere Hotel in Pola (today in Croatia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), appearing under the banner of the Nachtlicht cabaret. The event was advertised as a “truly artistic cabaret,” explicitly distinguished from vaudeville and thus presented as entirely respectable.

In the first programme, Mickun—described as a “music illustrator”—presented works such as Mozart’s *Minuet*, Boccherini’s *Three Graces*, Rubinstein’s *Asra*, and Schubert’s *Am Meer*, alongside lighter pieces including a *Military March*, *Cakewalk*, and *Cancan*. In the second programme, she appeared in a different role, that of a dancer. Reviews recognised her as a dance artist and noted the warm reception she received from the audience. Her performances of Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* and a belly dance elicited thunderous applause.⁵⁵

Two years later, the pair appeared as guests at the Polish cabaret Zielony Balonik. According to a preserved invitation to Jama Michalika in Kraków from January 1909, Strick was to present an evening of old French and German songs from the repertoire of Jedenaście Katów, Yvette Guilbert, Privas, as well as his own compositions,⁵⁶ accompanied by a *Polish artist* performing a series of rhythmic caricatures to piano accompaniment (including Mozart’s *Minuet*, a waltz by Strauss, and Rubinstein’s *Asra*).⁵⁷ At the same time, Mickun also performed independently in Warsaw. She became the star of the carnival programme of the artistic and literary cabaret Momus, where she was announced as a *Parisian sculptor* and cabaret artist, and as a Polish woman.⁵⁸ During her performance, she created caricatures “to music,” illustrated her own stories and anecdotes,⁵⁹ and presented a narrative about *Aunt Brygida* as well as a topical piece titled *The Robbed Director* in the form of “Chinese shadows.”⁶⁰ A reviewer for *Świat* described her performance as follows:

⁵⁵ See anon., *Polaer Tageblatt*, no. 564 (1907): 1–2, <https://ino.unipu.hr/data/polaer/1907/564.pdf>.

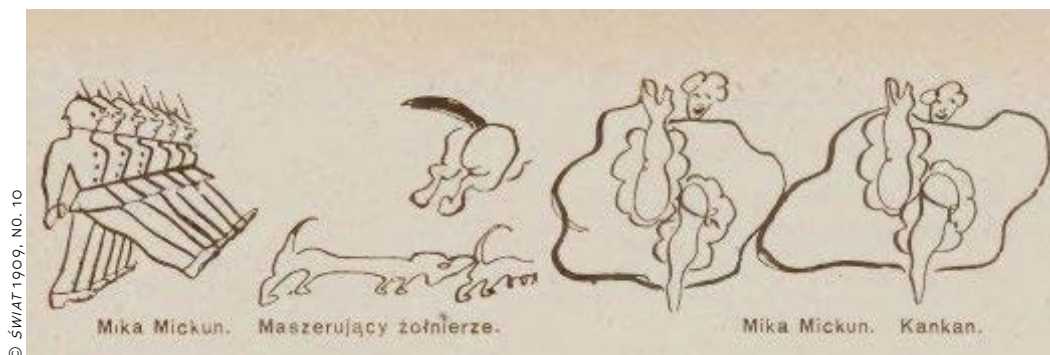
⁵⁶ Henryk Markiewicz, ed., *Boy o Krakowie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1974), 503–504.

⁵⁷ Invitation to Zielony Balonik, Markiewicz, *Boy*, 504.

⁵⁸ The reviewer of Mickun’s performances at Momus highlighted the artist’s ambitions beyond the stage. He wrote: “Ms. Mika Mickun, however, continues to work tirelessly. She wishes to continue her studies, and to raise the necessary funds, she travels the world performing in artistic cabarets. She was recently applauded in Vienna, and now in Warsaw. Yet these successes do not intoxicate the young artist. She dreams of other, more serious accomplishments—of the moment when she can leave public performance behind and return to the quiet of her sculpture studio,” (sk), “Mika Mickun,” 18. At the turn of the twentieth century, the social standing of women in cabaret—especially in Warsaw—was still low, and cabaret art itself was often dismissed as trivial. To bolster the perception of Mickun, photographs of her bronze sculptures were placed beneath her drawings from the cabaret program.

⁵⁹ Karwacka, *Warszawski Kabaret*, 97–98.

⁶⁰ Ludwik Sempoliński, *Wielcy artyści małych scen* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1968), 8.



Mickun's drawings at the Momus Cabaret

Onto the stage appears a charming female figure in a costume from the era of the Second Empire, and to the rhythm of the music she begins to sketch bold caricatures in charcoal on enormous sheets of tissue paper. Quite unexpectedly, the lines take shape, and we see now marching Prussian soldiers, now playful Three Graces, or a licentious cancan. The drawing is free and sweeping. Marked by charm and wit, its subtlety surpasses the usual cabaret displays.⁶¹

Equally high marks were given by Ignacy Grabowski, a reviewer for the Warsaw newspaper *Dzień*, who considered the performance of this “sculptor and illustrator [not a star of European cabarets—D.F.], who draws caricatures on tissue paper to the beat of music” to be the most successful part of Momus’ program. “It is a pleasure to watch this production, where body movement and thought come together as a whole, giving an impression of perfection,” he added, appreciating the artist’s qualities.⁶²

Strick’s absence from Warsaw can be explained by the low popularity of German cabarets in Poland. Especially in the capital, they were associated with entertainment theater and überbrette, which were heavily criticized. French cabaret was considered the only model worth following, which is why, regardless of the actual state of affairs, Mickun’s performances at Momus were advertised with an emphasis on her connection with France, while her activities in Austrian

⁶¹ (sk), “Mika Mickun,” 18.

⁶² Ignacy Grabowski, “Maski,” *Dzień: Bezpartyjna gazeta popołudniowa*, no. 39 (1909): 2, <https://crispa.uw.edu.pl/object/files/710994/display/Default>.

and German cabarets were glossed over.⁶³ Mika did not perform in Poland again, although for several more years she performed artistically in cabarets and revue theatres in Paris, Amsterdam (Circus Carré), Brussels, and London. Only traces of these engagements survive in the incomplete family archive—colorful programs bearing her name, sometimes spelled Mikun. These documents indicate that in May 1913 she performed at London's Palace Theatre alongside the distinguished Anna Pavlova and Laurent Novikoff from Sergei Diaghilev's Russian Ballets. During the four-and-a-half-hour show, she presented a fifteen-minute number entitled *Rhythmic Impressionist*. At Amsterdam's Circus Carré, managed by Frits van Haarlem, her performance—similarly titled *Rhythmische Karikaturiste*—was advertised as a completely new genre (“Geheel nieuw Genre”).

It is difficult to determine from brief reviewer descriptions whether and how Mika expanded her repertoire. Perhaps once she developed a program, she could exploit it over time, adapting it to different stages. Her act was so original, particularly for a woman, that it was enough to establish her as a world-class stage artist. At the turn of the century, Chinese shadow theatre and caricature painting were common features in many European cabarets. As Lisa Appignanesi has noted, shadow theatre was, after all, a quintessential cabaret invention—a miniature analogue of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, combining multiple genres and serving various expressive purposes.⁶⁴ At Le Chat Noir, Henri Rivière was a specialist in this form, creating stage-screen images accompanied by music, choral performance, satirical narration, or actors' interpretations of dramatized characters. By the time Mika was performing, however, Le Chat Noir had closed (1897), so she likely did not witness Rivière's productions. She may, however, have observed Carl Hollitzer painting caricatures on the stage of Fledermaus. It can therefore be recognized that Mika boldly appropriated a form of stage expression traditionally dominated by men, effectively making it her own and earning herself the status of a cosmopolitan star.

By the time she was performing in revue and music hall theatres, Mika no longer relied on Strick, with whom she had travelled to England and married in 1913. Participation in these purely entertainment-oriented productions did not require “cabaret” credentials, but it did demand exceptional skill and originality, even on a small scale. Patronage from a representative of the famous Die

⁶³ Joseph Roach's mechanism of surrogation proved effective in this case. The scholar defines this term as the process of using elements of a given cultural tradition in accordance with the needs and expectations formulated by new users. Contact with French culture reinforced Mickun's credentials as a cabaret star, a Polish woman who also pursued serious art as a sculptor in France.

⁶⁴ Appignanesi, *Kabaret*, 24.

Elf Scharfrichter was unnecessary. Mika was becoming increasingly independent. While these performances did not fully satisfy her artistic ambitions, they brought her closer to achieving them.

She wanted to become a sculptor—a true artist and independent woman. Even while in Paris, she continued to hone her craft, studying under the renowned sculptor and teacher Antoine Bourdelle, a close friend of many Polish artists. In April 1911, she wrote to him from London, expressing fond memories of his studio and her friends.⁶⁵ The flexible pace of cabaret and revue work, assembled from many individual numbers, allowed her to develop her own artistic path without being permanently tied to a single location or repertoire. She could give guest performances at various light-entertainment venues without having to alter the repertoire or commit to a single theatre on a permanent basis. Perhaps most importantly, it also provided the means to finance further education and training in the art of sculpture. Mika embraced this lifestyle, which was effectively nomadic. Eventually, she settled in Paris and devoted herself to sculpture, specialising in glazed busts and heads of women. It was her visual art that brought her recognition in Europe and around the world, through numerous exhibitions held in France, the United States, and China.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to quote Sygietyński once more, who wrote in his earlier column *Ptactwo przelotne*:

Creative art and the artistry associated with it begin where instinct and experience—inherited from one's ancestors and applied unconsciously—end. Only self-awareness of the idea and the conscious use of artistic means acquired through personal experience mark the true beginning of an artist.⁶⁶

None of the migrant women artists of the turn of the century discussed here ultimately tied their careers to cabaret. Maria Krysińska entered history (more French than Polish) as a poet, and Mika Mickun as a sculptor and ceramist. Yet cabaret was not merely a stopover in their artistic and geographical journeys across Europe. Perhaps above all, it was a means of familiarizing themselves with

⁶⁵ Quoted in Małgorzata Dąbrowska, "Postępy w badaniach nad atelier Bourdelle'a," in Kudelska, *W Wiedniu, Paryżu i Monachium*, 69.

⁶⁶ Antoni Sygietyński, "Ptactwo przelotne (final)," 1.

new environments, asserting their presence, and becoming visible. Cabaret—still little known in Poland at the time and often associated with unsophisticated entertainment and Tingel-Tangle—offered them a space in which to test the concept of the free (liberated) woman boldly entering the public stage. It proved especially significant for émigré artists' careers. Within this milieu, they experienced both oppression and privilege, while consciously shaping themselves as cosmopolitan subjects—free, as far as possible, from the constraints of societies that prioritized patriarchal and national values above all else. In cabaret, they were recognized and appreciated as exceptional and distinctive figures. They successfully claimed positions traditionally guarded by men because even in the cabaret of that time, there were no female poets or caricaturists. In doing so, they secured their place in its history as pioneers.

Translated by Katarzyna Szuster-Tardi



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