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CONTEMPORANEITY – ZAKOPANE-NESS – THE HERITAGE OF ZAKOPANE.  
THE ZAKOPANE STYLE IN THE SPACE OF THE CONFRONTATION OF  
NATIONAL STYLES STANISŁAW WITKIEWICZ'S ZAKOPANE STYLE AND ITS  
*DIFFERENTIA SPECIFICA*

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WSPÓŁCZESNOŚĆ – ZAKOPIAŃSKOŚĆ – ZAKOPIAŃSZCZYŻNA. STYL  
ZAKOPIAŃSKI W PRZESTRZENI KONFRONTACJI STYLÓW NARODOWYCH.  
STYL ZAKOPIAŃSKI STANISŁAWA WITKIEWICZA  
I JEGO *DIFFERENTIA SPECIFICA*

**Abstract**

This paper is an attempt at reconstructing Stanisław Witkiewicz's creative method on the basis of his scattered writings. The Zakopane style has become a phenomenon across a broad spectrum of Polish national styles. The inspirations for classical national styles were typically arbitrarily selected sets of forms taken from a specific historical style associated with a given nation or state. It was often an eclectic set – enriched with elements derived from other styles. Stanisław Witkiewicz consistently avoided borrowing and copying, confining himself solely to drawing inspiration from the folk art of Podhale. In the methodology of his architecture, rational elements (exposing the structure, stressing hygiene) interweaved with ornamentation, predominantly featuring floral themes and elements of a specific mythology.

**Keywords:** national style in architecture, the Zakopane style, folk art, vernacular architecture, Podhale

**Abstract**

Artykuł jest próbą zrekonstruowania metody twórczej Stanisława Witkiewicza dokonaną na podstawie jego pism rozproszonych. Styl zakopiański stał się fenomenem w szerokim spektrum polskich stylów narodowych. Inspiracją dla klasycznych stylów narodowych na ogół był arbitralnie dobrany zbiór form zaczerpniętych z określonego stylu historycznego związanego z danym narodem, bądź państwem. Często był to zbiór eklektyczny – wzbogacony o elementy pochodzące z innych stylów. Stanisław Witkiewicz konsekwentnie unikał zapożyczeń i wtórności, wykorzystując wyłącznie inspiracje z ludowej sztuki Podhala. W metodologii jego architektury elementy racjonalne (eksponowanie konstrukcji, nacisk na higienę) przeplatały się z ornamentyką, głównie o tematyce roślinnej oraz elementami swoistej mitologii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** styl narodowy w architekturze, styl zakopiański, sztuka ludowa, architektura ludowa, Podhale

## 1. An apotheosis of a nation or of a people? At the source of the Zakopane style

The genesis of the Zakopane style substantially differs from that of classical national styles. The sources of the inspiration for the remaining national styles were architectural forms associated with specific historical styles. A specific catalogue of selected forms was typically created in an arbitrary manner, defining the precepts of combining them together. Eclecticism – the borrowing of forms from other styles – was allowed to an extent (e.g. Jan Sas-Zubrzycki, apart from the Gothic forms that were essential to the Vistulan style, also used elements of the Romanesque style in the bottom sections of his churches; Franz Schwechten used Byzantine forms in the interiors of the Imperial Castle). The “national” character of those styles was also defined arbitrarily.

From a long-term perspective, the notion of national styles has proven to be a controversial idea. The theses formulated by their authors currently appear enigmatic, and sometimes have not stood the test of time altogether. The fall of the notion of national styles was largely caused by the principle of the arbitrary selection of historical forms.

Stanisław Witkiewicz created the Zakopane style as a national style by referring to the architectural forms of the vernacular architecture of the Podhale region of Poland. During a long-term process, he cooperated with local Gorals, scholars and artists. The methodology of the creation of the style adopted by the architect was comprehensive, logical and consistent. There was no place for arbitrary choices. The selection of forms and reference systems performed by the architect always had a proven origin derived from local forms of vernacular architecture. All of the solutions were verified by practical on-site application, with descriptions performed *ex-post*, after completion.

Witkiewicz's pursuit of a clear and purist deduction of forms solely from Podhale's architecture can be proven by comparing his creative method with that of Dušan Jurkovič, a Slovakian architect who operated on the other side of the Tatra Mountains.

Jurkovič created his own style based on Slovakian vernacular architecture, although without the ambition of creating a national style. In his work, this architect combined the elements of folk art with elements of Viennese secession and English patterns. The integration of these elements is particularly visible in the architecture of his own house in Brno Žabovřesky, called the “House under the Hill” (1905–1906). The architect's villa hosted exhibitions of architecture and applied art. References to Art Nouveau were also present in other works of the Slovakian architect: the tourist shelter complex on the ridge of Pustevna near Radhošť (1897–1899), in the design of the Way of the Cross on mount Hostyn near Olomouc (1903), in the regional house in Skalice (1905), and in the “U Rezku” villa (1900–1901). Witkiewicz ostensibly avoided borrowing from architecture that presented other styles or that had roots in other countries.

In his scattered writings, Stanisław Witkiewicz strived to explain the selection of Podhale's folk art as the reference point and source of inspiration for the architecture he was creating. Initially, this architecture was meant to be a local style of functional, comfortable and hygienic architecture for tourists and resort patients. The creation of a Polish national style later became his long-term goal.

## 2. The methodology of the creation of Witkiewicz's Zakopane style, reconstructed on the basis of his scattered writings

Witkiewicz did not describe his methodology in a holistic manner anywhere. However, we can reconstruct the architect's train of thought from each of his scattered writings. It would be good to investigate them, as they are written in a characteristic style, which gives off the atmosphere of the enthusiasm with which the architecture of the period was being created. This is why I have taken the liberty of quoting long passages from his works.

The reconstructed disquisition would begin by justifying Witkiewicz's choice of the vernacular architecture of Podhale as a reference point and a source of inspiration. This description of Goral architecture as a source of inspiration is preceded by a poetic characteristic of the Gorals themselves. In his work "Na przełęczy. Wrażenia i obrazy z Tatr", Witkiewicz described the uniqueness of Podhale's Gorals. According to Witkiewicz, this uniqueness was a product of two qualities. The first factor that gives them their remarkable qualities is their constant contact with the untamed wildlife of the Tatra Mountains. Second: the Gorals have always been free people and have never been serfs. In the aforementioned story "Na przełęczy", Witkiewicz wrote: "This peasant had never been anyone's subject. He grew free and wild, and he maintained personal dignity and a strength of spirit in all forms of courtesy. He gave and demanded respect, singing to those who wanted to impress him with the habits of serfdom:

Oh lords, oh lords, lords you shall remain,  
But lord over us – that you never will.

In truth, the period of the Gorals' rise in popularity coincided with a lively stirring of democratic notions. It became fashionable to "be closer to the common people". What can then be said of becoming closer with a people whose intellectual and social qualities, and whose life and image were so original, and so different from common, everyday phenomena? "People who were one with such a remarkable land, [...] a people that had many excellent racial characteristics in general" [9, p. 39].

Witkiewicz's description has the character of poetic prose, in some fragments coming closer to a panegyric in honour of the Gorals. Witkiewicz discussed the relationship between the Gorals and visitors at length. An atmosphere of mutual fascination between the two so starkly different social groups was prevalent at the time. In another fragment of his story, he described the legendary characters of the highland robbers – *zbójnicy*. They constitute a quintessence of the characteristics of the Gorals – of their courage and ability to deal with nature.

Architecture created by a people with exceptional qualities should also possess exceptional features. The Goral cottage was, according to Witkiewicz, the archetype of the dwelling. Its timeless features have been defined by: simplicity and functionality, its general proportions and Goral ornamentation. The furnishing of a Goral cottage constituted a stylistic whole with the remainder of the building. Decorative motifs covered the cottage's structural elements as well as its furniture and household utensils. The exceptional characteristics of the Goral cottage were described in the novel *Na Przełęczy* in the following manner:

Even at first glance, the Goral cottage appears something that is full of character – this element of personality that sets both special people and special things apart from the crowd.

The skeleton of the edifice is a box in which man finds shelter, this part of every thing that is used for practical ends is almost equally simple and uncomplicated as in any other cottage. Four walls, two gables, the two inclined surfaces of the roof, with a slight departure from symmetry on one side, underneath which there are additional chambers – such is the entire cottage.

However, all of its parts bear the mark of a certain style, of a certain line motif. From the incision of the beam to its pointed gable, from the pazdur (a form of roof ridge decoration) to the ornaments carved inside, everything has the same character of lines that intersect at quite a sharp angle” [9, pp. 17–18].

The period’s Goral cottage was dominated by dark spaces that were almost devoid of light, the inside of which was messy and dominated by chaos. However, the main room was the so-called *white chamber* – which fulfilled the role of the living room. The Gorals cared for this chamber. It was typically filled with memorabilia and paintings. Witkiewicz, while expanding the concept of the Zakopane style, turned the white chamber into a sort of model of a modern, hygienic dwelling. In his methodology, he used the principle of the maximum preservation of the value of Podhale’s vernacular architecture, although he did eliminate chaotic and unsanitary elements. Witkiewicz expressed his high regard for the white chamber in the following words:

“The chamber to the right, the day room, or the white chamber, is the Goral living room. [...] One of the walls is entirely covered with paintings – horrible, yet original paintings, painted on glass, which stand out from among the neighbouring screaming crumminess of German lithography with their grimness and naivety. [...] The white chamber, almost unchanged, can be relocated to even highly sophisticated and rich dwellings and constitute an excellent dining hall” [9, pp. 21–22].

Stanisław Witkiewicz described the inspirations and principles behind the Zakopane style in greater detail in his *Pisma tatrzańskie I*, in the chapter *Styl zakopiański, Zeszyt II Dom*. He presented his search for a source of inspiration for a national style. It was to be an architecture that was original and without ties to influences of the art of foreign nations. Following these assumptions, Witkiewicz rejected the architecture of old Polish manors as a model for the Polish style in architecture. He believed that their formal expression featured too many elements that were borrowed from foreign architecture. It should be clearly stressed here that Witkiewicz did not condemn the influence of foreign art on Polish buildings, he simply did not want these influences to be visible in the architecture that was to be a source of inspiration for the national style. On the other hand, Witkiewicz eliminated works of vernacular architecture other than those of the architecture of Podhale. They are undoubtedly tied to Polish culture, but, according to Witkiewicz, they had too few compositional qualities to become an inspiring element for a national style. The vernacular architecture of Podhale remains closely tied with Polish culture, having remained in a form of isolation from foreign influence because of its mountainous surroundings. The second factor that predestined it to become a source element for the national style were its links with the primal landscape. The third factor was the high technological and compositional level of this architecture. Combined, all of these three factors led to a situation in which the vernacular architecture of Podhale became the sole bearer of

the potential qualities that made it fit to become a driving force behind the creation of a Polish national style. Let us quote the words of Stanisław Witkiewicz himself here:

Where then is the source of the Polish style in architecture, if this style is not to be and will not be the product of individual creativity, if it is to develop from already existing architectural elements? [...] If we cannot find these forms in the old manor, then if we turn to the old cottage in pursuit of them, can the cottage from the valleys – with its thatched roof and structural forms, smeared with clay and doused with lime – be the starting point for the Polish style in architecture? Hardly. The Podhale cottage has in it the structural and ornamental elements of a higher type, which were also prevalent in all of timber Poland, spreading to adjacent lands along with its culture. This cottage has common characteristics with the Czech architecture of Moravia. However, this type disappears in areas where native German culture has appeared. This makes it west Slavic architecture, whose eastern reach goes as far as that of the influence of Polish culture. Therefore, when developing this building element, we can be sure that we are headed to a source of genuinely Polish historical architecture, while if we had started at the “old manor and the granary”, we would have dressed Poland in a Franco-German style, or have covered it with a flat parochialism in the Biedermeier style [8, p. 313].

In his *Pisma Tatrzańskie*, Witkiewicz described the process of the shaping of the Zakopane style through the construction of successive villas and houses. The basis for this process were modifications of the pattern of the Podhale cottage. They headed towards a direction of designing a functional, sanitary and comfortable architecture. The model of the representative section of the cottage, called the *white chamber*, was used to this end. Witkiewicz wanted to prove the folk, highlander origin of the modifications that he had introduced. When describing the construction of the “Koliba” villa for Zygmunt Gnatowski, he highlighted the comprehensive character of the inspirations derived from the model of the Goral cottage:

“All the architectural, structural or ornamental elements were found in vernacular architecture, either in a state that had been completely developed and fit for higher requirements, or in incipient forms. From the foundations to the ridge, all that a house needed, could be found in the cottage” [8, p. 292].

The shape of the roof was an essential element of Zakopane style architecture. The attic had to house additional living spaces. This required a modification of the form of the roof and its structure. However, the essential shape, along with its distinct steep incline, was preserved. The roof modifications included: the *wyględy*, which have been discussed in greater detail further in the text; verandas, glazed verandas – the so-called *pajty*; the *przyłapy* (porches covered with an extended eave, with the most beautiful specimen found in the “Pod Jedłami” villa), roof gables with balconies (first used in the “Pepita” villa). However, the essential massing, with its characteristic steep roof inclines, has remained. According to Stanisław Witkiewicz, the roof of a Goral cottage was the archetype of the Polish roof. He wrote of the remarkable qualities of the Zakopane roof using the following words:

The Zakopane roof is not a mountain roof – it is a Polish roof, just as the entirety of this architecture, which used to predominate all of Poland. The proportions and form of this roof are a result of the need to give it strength to resist wind pressure, bear the weight of snow and the incline needed to ensure water runoff. Perhaps the Gorals, when faced with the climate conditions of Podhale, reinforced it to a greater extent and perfected it by following their sense of beauty, but in essence, this roof is not the exclusive property of the Podtatrze region [8, p. 300].

During the numerous construction projects and theoretical deliberations, Witkiewicz encountered the necessity to design new elements that had not existed in the peasant cottage. The architect wanted even these completely new elements to be linked with the tradition of Podhale. One example of this mode of operation is the creation of the famous *wyględy*. Witkiewicz adapted the pattern of a primitive technical device – a sort of a roof hatch that was used to throw out hay. This device inspired the architect to create dormers that would jut out of the roof surfaces and be covered with shed roofs. The *wyględy* made it possible to significantly expand the usable space of the attics, to a level comparable with traditional dormers. Gabled dormers have a limited width, while shed dormers, like the *wyględy*, can be considerably wider. The side walls of the *wyględy* were decorated with a radial ornament, referring to the archetypal Goral *stonecko* (a solar ornament). On the other hand, this solar ornament could be read as a metamorphosis of the still prototype of the *wyględy* – an opening roof hatch. As an additional justification of the form of the *wyględy* and their link with Podhale folk culture, Witkiewicz described the fact of the first, primitive adaptation of the roof hatch for residential purposes that had been performed by one of Zakopane's Gorals. The *wyględ* was first built to Stanisław Witkiewicz's design in the "Koliba" villa (1892–1893). The architect described the genesis and advantages of this architectural detail in the following manner:

Apart from smoke hole windows, we have introduced the *wyględy* to the Zakopane roof. In the roofs of their barns, the Gorals have a section that can be lifted and supported by a pole so that hay or straw can be thrown out. With this intent in mind, one *gazda* on Kościeliska Street, in order to fit a room for living in the attic, tilted a portion of the roof upward to let the light in, creating a sort of a balcony covered from the sun, rain and wind. We took this motif and, after giving it a more fleshed-out shape, introduced it into new homes, primarily the *Koliba*, in which almost all of the elements of Zakopane's architecture have been tested and adapted to new conditions. The *wyględ*, as an improvement of the dwelling, is an extraordinary addition. It expands it as it becomes another room during days with warm weather, full of air and in an area where there is always something to look at, and providing the means of looking; it serves as an excellent place for the ill to recline in, as a place of rest for the infirm and for the placement of plants and flowers [8, p. 300].

One of the distinct characteristics of the Zakopane style is the formation of relatively tall ground floors enclosed with a wall made of unsquared or river stones. Thanks to a ground floor formed in this manner, it was possible to increase the volume of the entire building while preserving the proportions typical of a villa. In this case, Witkiewicz also attempted to link the genesis of the tall stone bases with vernacular architecture. He referred to the case of cottages on Mount Gubałówka:

The building of porches, verandas and galleries that encircle the house and rest on stone arches was also observed in the cottages on the slope of Gubałówka and resulted in picturesque elements and, in harmony with the character of the entirety of the structure, in which the roof frame so evidently steps forward and rises to prominence, forming one of the constituent parts of the sensation of the beauty of a Zakopane house [8, pp. 292–293].

The saturation of architecture with ornamental forms became a fundamental characteristic of the Zakopane style. It was one of the manifestations of the intensification of symbolic messaging – a typical phenomenon for national styles. In the case of the Zakopane style,

decorative motifs mainly covered furniture and household utensils (including the famous spoon hangers). Floral motifs were the most common. When employing Goral ornamentation, Witkiewicz used the famous lithographic tables included in the work entitled *Budownictwo ludowe na Podhalu* by Władysław Matlakowski. This book was published in 1892 by the Academy of Learning in Krakow. Of note is the fact that Goral dress was also ornamented. Thanks to this ornamentation, a uniform stylistic space was created in the Zakopane style, integrating architecture, design and interior decoration.

Ornamentation also became an element of building the concept of the Zakopane style as the national style. Witkiewicz wanted to expand the spectrum of floral motifs, traditionally confined to the plants of the Tatra Mountains, to include floral motifs from other parts of Poland. The architect, when discussing the ornamentation introduced in the “Koliba” villa wrote of it as follows:

The railings of stairs, verandas, balconies, the encircling of the first floor with a decorative belt, as in the Koliba, all of these are places where all manners of motifs from the openwork of spoon hangers are scattered, all sorts of stars, *parzenicas*, crosses, cut-outs, animal motifs or chevrons, or where the large visually expressive branches of stylised cut-outs intertwine. We have enriched this folk ornamentation with a number of motifs featuring the plants of the Tatra Mountains, such as those of the *asphodelus*, the *karlina*, the fern and a number of other flowers, whose wealth in the Tatras can provide many other formal elements. The fact that, when initially building in the Tatras, we have used the plants of the area, does not exclude the further development of this ornamentation by introducing plants typical of the lowlands, as the architecture itself, called the Zakopane style, is not meant solely for Podhale and has not originated here [8, pp. 301–302].

The tendency to integrate the arts was a characteristic phenomenon of the period’s artistic trends, primarily those of the Secession. Of note is the fact that a breakthrough was to happen in the art of the early twentieth century – the emergence of a countertendency to eliminate the ornament. In 1908 Adolf Loos published his famous essay *Ornament and crime*. The argument about the role of the ornament, so fundamental to the art of the beginning of the twentieth century, became reflected in the writings and architectural work of Stanisław Witkiewicz. He tried to reconcile his position, close to that of the Secession, of striving for the maximum possible saturation of architecture with ornament, with that of ostentatiously highlighting the structure of a building. He believed that the role of the ornament was to accentuate the structure. He strived to employ this principle in his Zakopane style buildings. He explained this principle in his *Pisma Tatrzańskie*. It is one of the more beautiful descriptions of the Zakopane style:

The fundamental characteristic of the Z a k o p a n e s t y l e is its structural character – it is the exposition of the roof frame and the pursuit of highlighting it through ornamentation. Those lacking a sense for structure, those who do not feel the spirit of this struggle against the inertia of matter, the fight against the force of gravity that every structure personifies – cannot create the forms given to us by folk art. Another characteristic of the Z a k o p a n e s t y l e, which is the product of applying this structural character to timber, is its orthogonal and straight character – with very rare exceptions to this universal, distinct form [8, p. 286].

In essence, Stanisław Witkiewicz did not engage in politics or broadly understood social matters. The architecture he had created through the Zakopane style could have been read as a manifesto of the connectedness or rather the community of the different social classes.



This understanding is compliant with the principles of solidarism that has been ascribed to Witkiewicz. Solidarism, according to the PWN New Encyclopedia, is “a branch of socio-political thought stating the natural community of interest that links individuals regardless of their place in the social structure” [6, p. 935]. Stanisław Witkiewicz defined the social mission of the Zakopane style in the following manner: “The social ideal of every element of culture is for it to encompass all of society, it is bestowing common civilisational characteristics upon all social strata, it is the creation of perfect links between souls, above the crevasses of terrible material inequalities and opposites. The *Zakopane style* has succeeded in this task” [8, p. 287]. It appears that this statement only applies to the visual layer of Zakopane style architecture. By ennobling the traditional cottage, it has also ennobled the common Goral folk. Witkiewicz never took up the challenge of creating genuine social architecture.

When we list the essential characteristics of the Zakopane style and its methodology in a highly condensed form, we can observe the style’s rational foundations. This rationality, in my opinion, set this style apart from other national styles.

- 1) Proper architectural design was preceded by in-depth studies and ethnographical analyses – devoted to studying the Goral folk and analyses of the vernacular architecture of the Podtatrze region.
- 2) The style’s methodology is based on modifying the pattern of the Goral cottage.
- 3) The initial goal of the modification of the Goral cottage pattern was to obtain a functional, comfortable and sanitary architecture, largely of a residential character. The long-term goal was the creation of the Zakopane style as the Polish national style.
- 4) The pursuit of the creation of a comfortable and sanitary architecture led to the necessity of increasing the volume of the buildings when compared with the original pattern of the Goral cottage. The expansion was largely performed by:
  - a) transforming the roof: introducing verandas, glazed verandas, the so-called *pajty*, *wyględy* and *przyłapy*.
  - b) the introduction of a tall ground floor enclosed by a base made from unsquared or river stones.
- 5) The material used in the construction of Zakopane-style buildings was predominantly timber, with stone used to build the bases. Masonry structures were also used during the mature phase of the Zakopane style.
- 6) Rational elements intermingled with elements of a sorts of mythology within the methodology of the Zakopane style. This phenomenon was typical for national styles.
- 7) The saturation of architecture with ornamentation, predominantly featuring floral motifs. According to Witkiewicz, the ornamentation highlighted the structural characteristics of the architecture.

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