POLISH LONE WOLF IN THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON: TRACING THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRANSATLANTIC ART TRADE

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DOI: 10.37935/iha.oan2025.007

ABSTRACT

In the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, there is a modestly sized (36,5x48,9cm) canvas by Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski, a popular Polish painter active in Munich in the nineteenth century. It is catalogued under the title *In a Polish Village*, with the date of its production unknown. The museum's records state that by 1903, the painting had been a part of the collection of a Boston entrepreneur, Eben Dyer Jordan Jr. (1857-1916), and two decades later was gifted to the city's museum by the original owner's son. *In a Polish Village* depicts an innocent genre scene from the Polish countryside, framed in a winter setting, and is strikingly faithful to the painter's characteristic style. Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski was born in 1849 in Suwałki. He initially trained in Warsaw, before relocating to Munich in 1874, where his winter canvases, characteristically filled with Polish countrymen, snow sleighs, and grey wolves, granted him public acclaim and economic success. Wierusz-Kowalski remained a prominent figure in the Bavarian art market until his death in 1915, and today his extensive legacy is spread across public and private art collections in Europe and the USA. The case of *In a Polish Village* presents an intriguing question: why did a nineteenth-century North American entrepreneur and businessman purchase this inconspicuous painting of a snowy, Eastern European village in the first place? Using this inquiry as a point of departure, my paper examines and presents the intricate features of the nineteenth-century Munich art market, by then already largely globalised and influenced by rapidly developing means of transportation and communication, that guided Wierusz-Kowalski's canvas across the Atlantic Ocean. As the world became increasingly interconnected over the course of the nineteenth century, on more than a purely geographical level, I explore how artistic tastes and the economic realities of the global art trade interacted and mutually shaped one another toward the turn of the century.

KEYWORDS

Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski | Art market | Art trade | Eastern Europe | Munich | Boston

1. Note on translations: All translations are by the author.

INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century marked a period of far-reaching transformations in the global art market, driven by the rapid expansion of transcontinental trade and technological advancements that allowed for the easier reproduction and dissemination of artworks (Watrelot, 2023). Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski (1849-1915), a Polish painter active in Munich, established himself as a significant figure during this dynamic period. His evocative depictions of life in the Polish countryside, often centred around themes of winter, snow-laden landscapes, and wolves, captivated audiences in Europe and beyond. Writing about Wierusz-Kowalski, Irena Olchowska-Schmidt described him as 'a lone wolf' (*Samotny wilk*), a term which I borrow for the title of this article (2007). She justified this characterization on two levels. On a more literal level, Kowalski became widely known for his numerous depictions of wolves: solitary individuals, packs, wolves attacking humans, or simply as part of snowy landscapes. On a figurative level, the term represents a painter who worked largely independently. Wierusz-Kowalski never established himself as a teacher or mentor. Although his success made him well known among Polish artists in Munich, he did not seek to have his craft perpetuated by students, nor did he aim for his works to inspire strong nationalistic sentiments.

This article adopts the metaphor of the 'lone wolf' as a point of departure to examine Wierusz-Kowalski's position within the nineteenth-century international art market. His professional independence, stylistic adaptability, and lack of institutional or pedagogical affiliation enabled his work to circulate fluidly across borders, making it particularly responsive to the tastes and expectations of a global network of collectors. One of his numerous works, *In a Polish Village*, now housed at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, serves as a fascinating lens through which to explore the intersection of artistic production, market demand, and cultural exchange during the long nineteenth century. Based on my archival research, as well as recent scholarly works, this paper explores how the nineteenth-century American art tastes and art collecting were influenced by their European counterparts.

To do so, this paper situates Wierusz-Kowalski within the context of the Munich art market, which, in the nineteenth century, evolved from a regional centre into an international marketplace. Supported by Bavarian royal patronage and the city's vibrant academic and artistic institutions, Munich attracted artists and collectors from around the world. It became a nexus for the exchange of artistic ideas and commodities, benefiting from its well-established galleries, exhibitions, and dealers who facilitated the global circulation of art (Ptaszyńska, 2015b). These dynamics shaped the careers of artists like Wierusz-Kowalski and informed the collecting practices of transatlantic patrons such as Eben Dyer Jordan Jr., a Boston businessman whose acquisition of *In a Polish Village* exemplifies the interdependency of European and North American art markets during that time.

I argue that Wierusz-Kowalski's journey from the remote town of Suwałki to Munich exemplifies common in the late nineteenth century migratory patterns of artists seeking training and patronage in cosmopolitan centres (Kudelska; Kuryłek, 2015). I also argue that his success in the Bavarian capital was not merely a result of technical skill but also his astute understanding of the art market's demands. By catering to the newly emerging middle and higher-class tastes for rural scenes, he secured his place among the most sought-after painters of his time. His works, characterised by academic realism and emotional accessibility, resonated with an urban audience nostalgic for the simplicity, charm, and, on occasions, dangers of pastoral life.

The case of *In a Polish Village* exemplifies the function of an artwork as a cultural artefact or a commodity. This paper explores the socioeconomic and aesthetic factors that influenced its production and sale. It also shows how Wierusz-Kowalski's paintings, often created with market preferences in mind, found their way into private and institutional collections. By analysing the historical trajectories of the painting and its creator, this study sheds light on the cultural aspirations and economic realities that defined the late nineteenth-century art world. This ultimately contributes to a deeper understanding of the transatlantic art trade and its ever-present legacy.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY MUNICH AND ALFRED WIERUSZ-KOWALSKI

Munich in the second half of the nineteenth century was a vibrant hub for art and the art market, playing a pivotal role in shaping European artistic culture during this transformative period. The capital of Bavaria, benefited from the direct patronage of its monarchs, the Wittelbachs, who cultivated a strong artistic tradition. Under the reign of the Bavarian royal family, the small town had blossomed at the beginning of the nineteenth century into a bustling international art centre (Stępień, 1990; Liczbińska and Stępień, 1994; Stępień, 2003). King Maximilian I Joseph of Bavaria, who reigned between 1806 and 1825, founded the Academy of Fine Arts and ordered the construction of the National Theatre. His son and successor, Ludwig I of Bavaria, was responsible for erecting and purchasing extensive collections for the *Glyptothek* (1816-1830), the *Alte Pinakothek* (1826-1836), and the *Neue Pinakothek* (1846-1853). For Ludwig I of Bavaria, art was a form of education and a means to elevate national, moral, and religious consciousness in the Bavarian population. (Hagen, 2009). Having also relocated the university from Landshut to Munich, he fundamentally transformed the character of the city, which would eventually earn the nickname 'Athens on Isar' (Witkiewicz, 1899: 598).

By the mid-nineteenth century, Munich was known as a haven for painters, sculptors, and architects. The Academy of Fine Arts in Munich attracted students from all over Europe, particularly from Eastern Europe and Scandinavia (Krempel, 2012). These sought instruction in the German academic tradition. The academy's emphasis on technical skill and historical painting aligned with the common European academic style of the time. The Munich School, a loose grouping of artists known for their naturalistic and finely detailed landscapes, genre scenes, and historical paintings, gained international acclaim during this period (Ruhmer, 1979). The industrialisation and urbanisation of Bavarian society led to the increased importance of landscape painting and a growing appreciation for rural and pastoral themes. This sparked nostalgia for the countryside and folklore among the rapidly emerging middle and upper classes.

The art market in Munich flourished alongside its creative output. Galleries, art dealers, and salons became integral to the city's cultural fabric. The annual art exhibitions held by the *Glaspalast* (Glass Palace), inaugurated in 1854, were central to the art scene, showcasing works by established and emerging artists (Krempel, 2007). These exhibitions attracted buyers from all over Europe and beyond, creating a competitive and dynamic art market comparable to those of Paris or London. Munich's position as a cultural and commercial centre made it an essential stop for art collectors, aristocrats, and bourgeois patrons eager to acquire works that reflected their aesthetic tastes, as well as social aspirations. The process instigated by the Wittelsbachs only gained momentum after Bavaria became a part of the newly unified German state in 1871.

Franz von Stuck, a highly acclaimed symbolist painter and native Bavarian, spoke about the city's attitude towards the creative fields: "The Bavarian court has a great flair for art and supports it wherever possible. The artist communes with the court and is treated on par with nobility and higher officials" (Jooss, 2007: 14). The 1869 First International Art Exhibition, organised by the *Münchner Künstlergenossenschaft* (Munich Artists' Association), placed Munich among the most important exhibition centres in Europe (Jooss, 2007: 17).

A valuable and acute insight into the environment of the late nineteenth-century artistic environment of Polonia in Munich was offered by Olga Boznańska in 1938, then already a well-renowned Polish artist living in Paris. When asked about her early artistic education in Munich,[2] Boznańska wrote for a Warsaw newspaper:

> "In my day, there were two Polish houses in Munich that hosted gatherings: the Kowalskis and the Brandts.
>
> But both you could visit only on Sundays!
>
> There was a quiet rivalry between the Brandts and the Kowalskis. If one Sunday was spent at the Kowalskis, people would later ask the Brandts: who was there, how many people were there, and so on.
>
> Both families were extraordinarily well-off! Kowalski had two enormous studios, apart from his apartment.
>
> He painted horses, sleds, snow, and wolves.
>
> In his studio, he kept four live wolves in a cage as models.[3]
>
> Everything he painted was immediately bought by the Germans. It was said that he earned 40,000 Marks a year!" (Junius [Nowaczyński] 1938, 805)

Wierusz-Kowalski, as mentioned by Boznańska, was among the most successful painters living in Munich in the second half of the nineteenth century. His acclaim was second only to that of Józef Brandt (1841-1915), his older colleague who had arrived in Munich a decade prior and had initially been Wierusz-Kowalski's patron. From the 1870s onwards, both were among the most sought-after and economically successful painters in the Munich art market.

Wierusz-Kowalski was born in 1849 in Suwałki, then a remote town on the northern tip of the Congress Kingdom of Poland that acted effectively as a puppet state of the Russian Empire. He received his art education in Warsaw, Dresden, and Prague before relocating to Munich in 1873. There, he enrolled in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, where he joined Alex Wagner's painting class. When he arrived in the city, the colony of Polish artists was already well-established and successful, with Józef Brandt and Maksymilian Gierymski (1846-1876) already being well-known and respected throughout the city's cultural circles.

Wierusz's style and subject selection were always in flux and responded quickly to the changing demands of the art market. His first canvases were inspired by the works of Brandt and Gierymski, who often inspired their compatriots who had just arrived in Munich (Stępień, 1979). Brandt and Gierymski inspired Wierusz-Kowalski's canvases depicting military scenes from Poland's past, elaborate episodes of small-town life, or hunting settings. However, during the early 1870s, Brandt's or Gierymski's works were already enriched with sublime undertones of suggested deeper feelings and pro-national themes, while Wierusz-Kowalski's early canvases were still simply pleasant scenes inspired by his senior colleagues (Bałus, 2002: 99–119).

2. Olga Boznańska arrived in Munich in 1886.
3. This claim doesn't find support in archival research and is most likely an exaggeration.

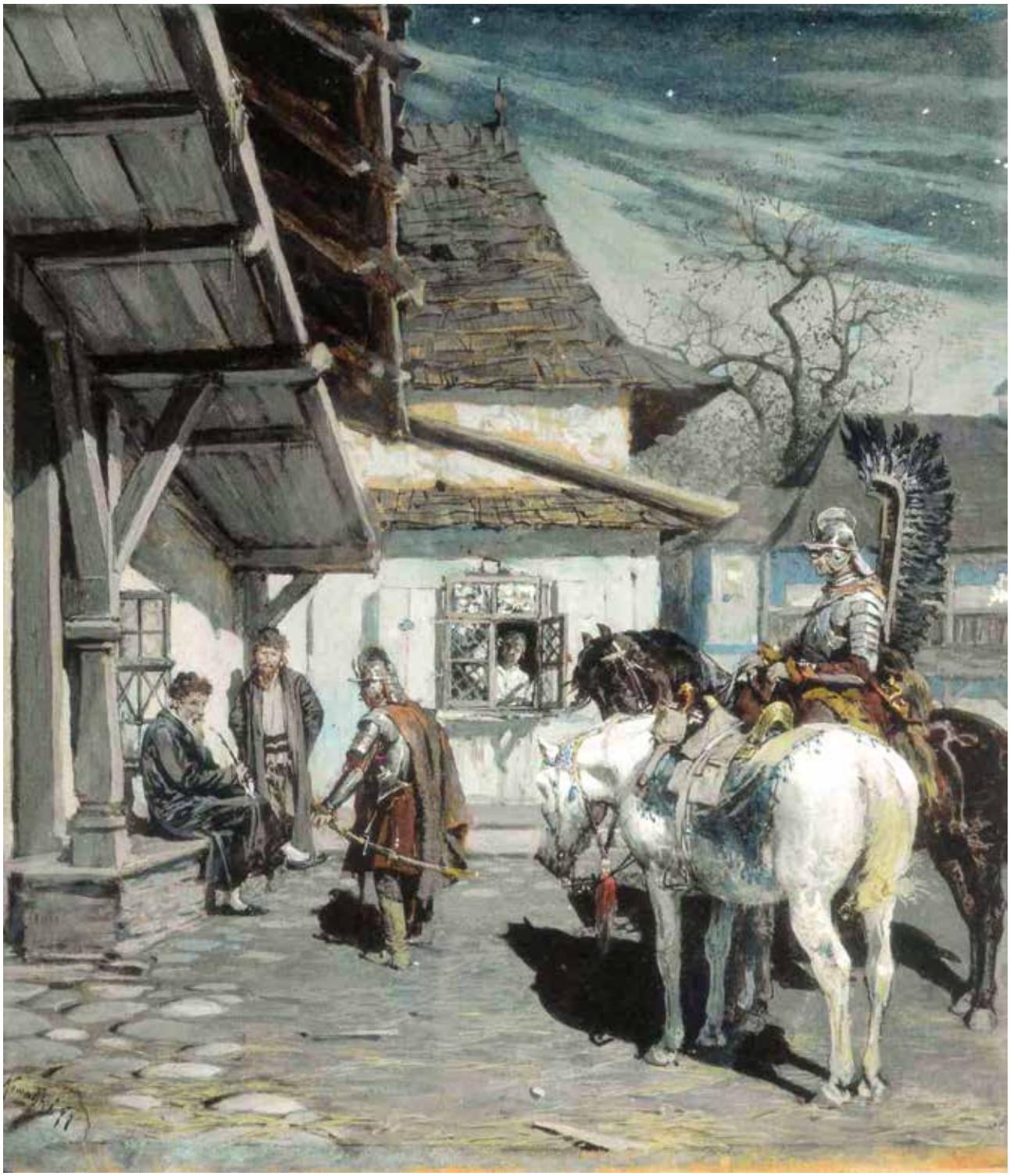


Fig. 01· Na zwiadach (Scouting), 1877, Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski (1849-1915); watercolour and gouache on paper; published in Eliza Ptaszyńska, *Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski* (Olszanica: BOSZ, 2021), 27.

An example of this period is *Na zwiadach* (Scouting), finished in 1877 [fig.01]. It is a small watercolour and gouache picture showing a pair of hussar knights, typical for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth period, and easily identified by the iconic wing-like ornaments on their armour. The choice of a military subject was certainly influenced by his teacher, Brandt, and it very rarely appeared in Wierusz-Kowalski's later career. In the painting, the two knights have stopped in a small village and approached the local folk in hopes of collecting intelligence. The composition of the painting is static and uncomplicated, especially in comparison to his later works. Still, the academic correctness, skilful command of the colour, and the immaculate representation of horses and armour hint at the making of a promising painter. Alfred's early canvases depicting knights or hunting scenes from bygone periods are a statement of the painter's readiness to adopt his teachers' method during his learning years, and his insistence on searching for subjects he could make his own.

Wierusz-Kowalski's style matured around 1880, when he gained confidence and proficiency in depicting wintry landscapes, wolves, wooden sleighs, and peasantry in carriages. He was in his true element with scenes of country life and had found his artistic voice in paintings of villagers embarking on icy, uninviting journeys between towns, hunters being ambushed by wolves during their hunts, or merry wedding pageants. The compositions often featured large wooden sleighs and masterfully rendered blankets of snow, enriched in later works with colourful pastel highlights. Bright orange twilight skies reflecting on the frozen ground, along with vivid red elements of traditional folk clothing, were also common in his canvases.

However, the most recognisable elements of his paintings were wolves. The painter was so inspired by these animals that he kept two stuffed specimens in his studios in Munich. According to some sources, he also kept one male wolf as a model (Hess, 2012). Wolves often depicted in his works quickly became his signature and remained an integral part of his art and his image on the art market throughout his career [fig.02,03].

Fig. 02· Napad wilków (Attack of the Wolves), ca. 1885-1890, Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski (1849-1915); oil on canvas; published in Eliza Ptaszyńska, *Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski* (Olszanica: BOSZ, 2021), 68.

Fig. 03· Wilki w zamieci (Wolves in the Blizzard), ca. 1904-1911, Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski (1849-1915); oil on canvas; published in Eliza Ptaszyńska, *Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski* (Olszanica: BOSZ, 2021), 76.

The rapid success Wierusz-Kowalski found in Munich could only be compared to that of Brandt. After spending a year in his master's studio, the young artist started exhibiting his works at international exhibitions in Munich, Vienna, Paris, Berlin, and Prague. A few years into his career, he began receiving numerous distinctions, like the honorary professorship of the Munich Academy in 1890 and a gold medal for his *Luty na Litwie* (February in Lithuania) at the *International Exhibition* in 1892. Towards the end of the century, his pictures were being acquired directly by Prince Regent Luitpold for his private collection and for the *Neue Pinakothek*.

It should be added that Wierusz-Kowalski's canvases were as popular among Polish collectors as they were among Western European or North American ones. His paintings were readily legible to Western audiences as works of academic realism and genre painting, but their appeal was not limited to foreign collectors. Seemingly apolitical representations of landscape, rural life, and genre scenes could nonetheless acquire a distinctly 'national aura' through reception, particularly among Polish-speaking audiences living under partition, for whom such imagery evoked affective attachments to territory, tradition, and collective memory (Wozniak-Kóch, 2024: 369–374). In this sense, Wierusz-Kowalski's art operated on multiple registers, functioning simultaneously as a marketable product of international academic culture and as a carrier of national meaning intelligible to collectors in occupied Poland. The reception of Wierusz-Kowalski's work within Polish collections, however, falls outside the scope of this article.

Fig. 04· Jeźdźcy marokańscy (Moroccan Riders), after 1903, Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski (1849-1915); oil on canvas; published in Eliza Ptaszyńska, *Wierusz Kowalski: Malarstwo* (Olszanica: BOSZ, 2015), 55.

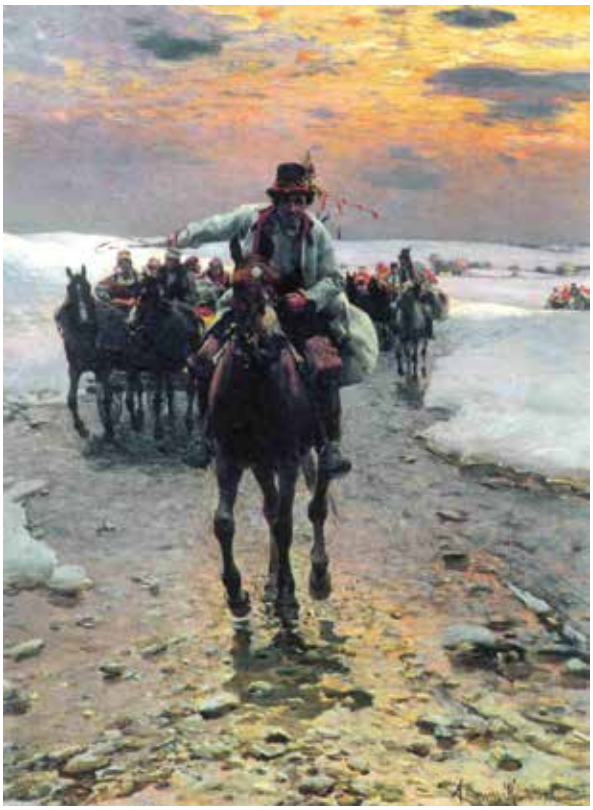


Fig. 05· Wesele Krakowskie (Cracovian Wedding Party), after 1880, Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski (1849-1915); oil on canvas; published in Eliza Ptaszyńska, *Wierusz Kowalski: Malarstwo* (Olszanica: BOSZ, 2015), 30.

Despite the painter's success, the overwhelmingly positive reception of his art also negatively impacted his practice, as it discouraged him from experimenting with new subjects. The motifs of snow, wooden sleighs, and wolves dominated his art throughout his entire life. It was only at the beginning of the nineteenth century that the artist was challenged to explore new ideas, allegedly at the direct request of his biggest client, David Heinemann, an art merchant and the owner of the *Galerie Heinemann* in Munich (Olchowska-Schmidt, 2007: 157–167). At Heinemann's behest, Wierusz-Kowalski embarked on a journey to North Africa to enrich his art with fresh subjects. The trip inspired a little over twenty new canvases. One was the "Jeźdźcy marokańscy" (Moroccan Riders) from 1905 [fig.04], which represented a drastic departure from the usual motifs that art collectors had come to expect from Wierusz-Kowalski. Upon closer analysis of the painting, though, it is easy to notice substantial similarities to his earlier works. When considering the composition of the scene and the painting technique, it appears that Wierusz-Kowalski recycled his well-trained formal solutions and applied them to his new subjects. The horses leaping towards the viewer, the raised arms of the rider, and the bright-orange sky are all elements that Wierusz-Kowalski had been using repeatedly over the previous decades. The "Wesele Krakowskie" (Cracovian Wedding Party) [fig.05], painted twenty-five years prior, is just one of many comparable works. All things considered, his Moroccan series is not very different from his usual works. Although the outfits worn by the characters are drastically different from the usual Polish attire, and the horses are kicking up sand instead of snow, both have been tailored to the demands of the art market by the painter. The Moroccan series remains a distinct occurrence in Wierusz-Kowalski's career, as the painter chose to return to his usual subjects after finishing it.

Fig. 06· Top: In a Polish Village, n.d., Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski (1849-1915); oil on canvas; © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (black-and-white reproduction available on the museum's website). Bottom: photograph of the painting in storage at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photo by the author.

Having provided an overview of the artist's artistic career, the paper will now turn to *In a Polish Village* [fig.06], a painting currently owned by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It is a painting unassuming in both subject and size. Its authorship is confirmed with the painter's standard signature at the bottom right of the picture.[4] Unfortunately, like it is the case with most of his mature artworks, the painting is not dated. Judging by the selection of the subject characteristic of the artist's mature style and his interest in capturing late evening light, we can assume it was painted between 1885 and 1895. To this day, only a limited provenance of *In a Polish Village* could be determined.

The earliest verifiable information states that the painting was a part of the Boston businessman Eben Dyer Jordan Jr.'s (1857-1916) art collection by 1903.[5] It can be assumed that the collector acquired the painting during his visit to Europe or through a North American gallery, although this cannot be verified. Many paintings of Polish painters, predominantly Brandt and Wierusz-Kowalski, found their way into the US art market through the artists' partnership with the Knoedler Gallery in New York (Ptaszyńska, 2021: 84).[6] The Knoedler Gallery was among the leading galleries supplying European artworks to North America at the time and it has played a pivotal role in shaping many major public collections in the US today (Helmreich et al., 2025). Since both the production date and the acquisition of *In a Polish Village* remain unclear, its history before arriving in Boston is challenging to determine. Once it became part of Jordan Jr.'s collection, most likely purchased by him, it remained in his possession until his death in 1916. Thereafter, it passed to his son, Robert Jordan (1884-1932), who gifted the canvas, along with a larger portion of his father's collection, to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, in 1924. *In a Polish Village* has been kept in the museum's storage since then, displayed only briefly between February and May 1992 during the exhibition *European and American Impressionism: Crosscurrents*.

In a Polish Village is unmistakably characteristic of Wierusz-Kowalski's oeuvre. This wintry village scene is a perfect stage for him to demonstrate his skill in capturing snow, winter equipment, and the Polish countryside. The painting depicts a rural winter village scene in the evening light. The viewer's attention is initially drawn to a sturdy, beige-coloured horse standing harnessed to a wooden cart. Its textured coat and taut harness are rendered with meticulous detail, giving the animal a lifelike presence. A man, seated on the hay-filled cart, wears a vibrant red coat that stands out against the muted tones of his surroundings. The redness of his coat is repeated sporadically in the light reflections in the painting. His face, despite being blurry, shows a cheerful expression. He appears to be engaged in conversation with a woman standing nearby. The woman, dressed in a simple outfit composed of earthy tones and a patterned scarf, turns her back to the viewer as she hands the man a small glass filled with translucent liquid. Her posture suggests warmth and familiarity. Behind the pair stand a child and two young women, suggesting that the group could be a family bidding farewell to their father.

Except for the horse, the foreground of the composition was finished without much detail and painted mostly in dark, monochromatic tones. The background of the painting appears livelier as it shows rustic houses topped with snow-laden roofs illuminated brightly by the evening sun. Smoke rises lazily from a distant chimney, adding a sense of warmth and domesticity to the cold setting. The sky is overcast, painted in hues of grey and muted blue. This casts a diffused light over the scene, although some strong red-light reflections are visible on the chimneys, a corner of the building in the background, and a distant rooftop. The ground consists of a mix of frozen earth and melting snow, reflecting the faint light in patches and emphasising the chill of the season. The painting captures a moment of simple everyday life in a village and skilfully balances the harshness of winter with the warmth of human connection.

4. It should be added that, in case of Wierusz-Kowalski's art, his signature does not guarantee that the artwork came from the artist's brush. In reality, in the fashion of painterly workshops, he was known to have employed his cousin trained in the craft or young painters to copy his own canvases (Trzebiński, 1958: 79–81).
5. As per the provenance note on the museum's website, https://collections.mfa.org/objects/32134/in-a-polish-village?ctx=034c52dc-ba6d-4caa-ade1-4a31b6c89bd7&idx=0. (Accessed: 10.02.2026)
6. A Search for 'wierusz-kowalski' in the Getty Provenance Index returns 363 results.

Fig. 07· Halt am Gasthaus (Stop at the Inn), n.d., Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski (1849-1915); oil on board; private collection; © KARL&FABER.

In a Polish Village exemplifies the kind of paintings that Munich art dealers and their clients often wished to purchase, and Wierusz-Kowalski, alongside his contemporaries, was happy to answer to the market's demand. It was far from rare for painters to produce multiple versions of the same subject with little to no alterations to respond to the contemporary appetite. That was also the case for this painting. An alternate version of this piece, much smaller in size as it measured only 9x10.5in. (22,5x27cm), was sold to a private collector in 2023 by the Karl & Faber auction house in Munich.[7] This smaller version was sold under the name *Halt am Gasthaus* (*Break at the Inn*) [fig.07], suggesting a more formal setting for the scene.

While the layout of the compositions in both paintings is extremely similar, there are some major differences between them. For example, the smaller version of the painting features only one young woman in the background, instead of three. It also shows far less of the foreground's hut's wall. Moreover, the light suggests the scene takes place earlier in the day, which means there are no bright evening light reflections visible on the smaller canvas. Lastly, the artist put his signature in the bottom-left corner of the picture, rather than the bottom-right, like in the bigger format.

7. As per information on the auction house's website, https://www.art.salon/artwork/alfred-von-wierusz-kowalski_halt-am-gasthaus-przea-karczma_AID1151625 (Accessed: 10.02.2026)

It could be assumed that *Halt am Gasthaus* was a sketch for *In a Polish Village*. It cannot be ruled out, however, that the former could be a copy of the latter, produced for a quick profit. Since the time of production of neither can be determined, it is impossible to conclude which case applies. As the level of detail of both suggests, these paintings were never meant to represent the artist's skill at international exhibitions. For such events, Wierusz-Kowalski prepared works that were much larger and more meticulously finished. *In a Polish Village* or *Halt am Gasthaus* were meant to be produced and sold quickly. Naturally, such practice was not limited to Wierusz-Kowalski. In reality, many nineteenth-century artists made numerous versions of a single composition, and collectors would commonly commission versions of well-known paintings directly from painters. Just this one instance gives us an insight into the art market of the Bavarian capital, which, towards the end of the century, rapidly evolved from a local to a global one.

Art dealers' salons played a significant role in the nineteenth-century Munich's artistic scene. Although the town was still modest in size at the time, it was home to numerous thriving galleries with well-organised showrooms. These galleries employed various forms of advertising and actively shaped their purchasing policies. They also pursued external expansion, organised exhibitions, and opened branches beyond Germany. Alongside Paris and London, Munich emerged as a major centre for the sale of paintings to the United States. Even the high tax on works of art introduced by the North American government in 1881 did not undermine the city's position (Matuszczak, 2020). In a city where almost everyone was interested in art, gallery owners quickly made great fortunes (Dogramaci, 2015). The exhibition houses acted as museums, as they not only sold art but also organised exhibitions, printed catalogues, and even ordered paintings directly from artists.

The latter practice was documented by Gierymski in his 1872 letter to a friend: "Yesterday I had a *Kunsthändler* (art dealer) visiting who asked me – if I would have any casual pictures painted – to sell them to him at any price (that is to be understood, at the price that I usually demand for my paintings)" (1872, cited in Stępień, 1973: 90). Later on in the same letter, Gierymski wrote: "Altogether, the times are good for painters, if someone's doing well now, it's better than ever before, and at that the Poles are being especially well received" (1872, cited in Stępień, 1973: 91). In 1879, another Polish artist, Władysław Czachórski, noted a studio visit from one of the owners of the Heinemann Gallery and a North American art merchant. Czachórski and Wierusz-Kowalski were supposed to be offered a couple of orders, Wierusz-Kowalski for the total sum of ten thousand Marks (1879, cited in Ptaszyńska, 2012: 113). For reference, an art teacher around that time would earn between two and three thousand Marks annually.

The archives of Munich art galleries can serve as a reliable source of information for determining the kind of paintings that were in demand. Eliza Ptaszyńska is the author of an exploration into the history of the Wimmer Gallery, one of the most prominent ones in Munich during the nineteenth century that still operates today (Ptaszyńska, 2012). The company started dealing with art in 1825 and has since gone through many changes and owners. Already back in the nineteenth century, its owners paid a lot of attention to the advertising of their salons and often travelled around Europe and America to establish new connections and look for potential buyers. Nowadays, the collection of the *Neue Pinakothek* in Munich keeps three large volumes of the gallery Wimmer's sales records, filled with photographs of paintings sold between the 1870s and the 1930s [fig.08]. The albums are not a complete list of all sales made by the gallery during that time, but they do provide valuable information about many paintings, including the names of authors and buyers, the measurements of works, and the price they were sold for. The nature of the works listed suggests that the gallery targeted, above all, middle- and upper-class painting enthusiasts. Art in the nineteenth century was a commodity. It was a commonly available and widely desired object. The paintings offered by the Wimmer gallery were not directly influenced by state authorities like the king or the Academy of Fine Arts' director, but rather by bourgeois art consumers. Examining the gallery's records reveals that Wierusz-Kowalski and Brandt played a significant role in sustaining the gallery's prosperity. They were also, by far, the two most popular Polish painters working with Wimmer, albeit not the only ones.

Fig. 08· Catalogues of the Wimmer Gallery, Munich. Top: Album I, ca. 1877-1881, p. 57. Top left: Niebezpieczna jazda (Dangerous Journey) by Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski, sold in 1891. Top right: work by Józef Brandt sold for a comparable price. Bottom: Album II, ca. 1889-1917, p. 11, featuring two paintings by Wierusz-Kowalski (bottom left and right) alongside other works. Digitized catalogues available at https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/wimmer_katalog (Accessed: 10.02.2026)

This short poem once appeared on the pages of the humorous German newspaper *Fliegende Blätter*. These four lines not only hint at the popularity of art in the lives of the common people but also the distinctiveness of Polish artists among their peers:

> "A bit of Kowalski, a bit of Brandt,
> A bit of snow, a bit of sand
> And when there's also a wolf somewhere in it,
> Then that's the Polish painting for you". (cited in Trzebiński, 1958: 79)

In this context, Polish art was an art that satisfied the audience's various needs. The exotic themes, landscapes, costumes, and dynamics, or, on the contrary, the melancholic mood of the compositions, transported viewers into a different, secret world of subconscious longings and desires (Ptaszyńska, 2015a). Their art responded to a deeply buried need for freedom and indulgence, much like classicist French art depicting purely oriental subjects did for Parisian crowds.

In the three albums of the Wimmer's sales records, only a few names were recorded once. This indicates that the gallery was selective in choosing the artists whose works it was willing to sell. Once buyers were accustomed to certain types of artwork, it continued to collaborate with their creators. The partnership between the Wimmer Gallery and Wierusz-Kowalski, for example, lasted for over forty years. The sales records also indicate that the value of the artists' works reflected their successes in the art world of the city. The price of Wierusz-Kowalski's paintings rose significantly in the 1890s, for example, as a result of his becoming an honorary member of the Academy in 1890 and winning a gold medal at the International Exhibition in 1892.

Eventually, however, subjects that made Wierusz-Kowalski successful in the eighties slowly started gaining negative connotations in the Polish press. Similar scenes repeated over decades, still popular among art dealers, started being labelled as saleable. Artists working in the Munich bubble, and the Polish press writing about these artists, even adopted the German noun *Kunsthändler* (art dealer) and started using it to describe paintings of little artistic value that were predominantly meant to be sold quickly and for a decent sum. The immense popularity of Wierusz-Kowalski's art among the public was often accompanied by criticism from art critics. Henryk Piątkowski, for example, wrote in 1895:

> "Kowalski is an exceptional talent, there is no doubt about that, but it is a talent of the kind that absorbs the aesthetic needs of the collective masses, crystallises them within itself, and produces works that align with the societal level of the time. He does not leap ahead, nor does he feel the burning fever of creating something unknown within himself, something that would, like the voice of artistic genius, resonate in his ear with elusive tones and compel him to move forward in the name of his own deeply felt inspiration". (1895: 164)

The art critic Cezary Jellenta writes about his visit to Ksawery Siekierz's studio in the Bavarian capital, during which he noticed a painting of a large wooden sledge carried by four horses rushing through a snowy Ukrainian steppe (1897: 30). Jellenta does not provide the title or a photograph of the piece in his text but offers an incredibly detailed description of the scene. He admires the artist's craft in capturing the horses in a particularly dynamic composition and points out the wilderness in the horses' eyes and their back hooves buried in the deep snow as they struggle with the weight of the sleigh. Above them towers a man trying to control the animals' "furore with a long whip, his eyes gushing with satisfaction and bigotry of a steppe-living man" (1897: 30). The critic then examines another canvas with the same motif but notices that, in the second version of the painting, one of the horses is painted with its rear legs positioned slightly more towards the back. Yet another canvas from the studio depicts the same sleigh but with only one horse. He adds: "Even though I have been persistent in my visits, I have not managed to find on the easels a motif genuinely distinct; all of them were versions of the one above, because this one, unfortunately, too much suits the *Kunsthändler*'s taste."

Kazimierz Tetmajer, a Polish writer and poet, at the time working for a newspaper in Warsaw, had a similar experience visiting Wierusz-Kowalski's studio in Munich: "Wierusz-Kowalski's enormous atelier looks a little bit like a *Kunsthändler* gallery. A galore of paintings, seemingly painted for sale and in the sellable style, because similar to each other stand in the rows, one after another, one next to the other: look, choose, and buy" (Tetmajer, 1896: 521). This betrays the less creative side of many nineteenth-century artworks, which were often created for financial gain. Just as with *In a Polish Village* and the recently sold *Halt am Gasthaus*, numerous variations of the same subject were known to exist and currently sporadically emerge on the contemporary art market. However, what today could be perceived as a negative aspect of an artist's work was an integral part of the cultural production during Wierusz-Kowalski's time. After all, the painting was the main source of income for artists and their families.

After the Second World War, many of Wierusz-Kowalski's paintings were acquired by Polish institutions and brought back to Poland. Today, the largest collection of his works is housed in the museum in Suwałki (*Muzeum Okręgowe w Suwałkach*). However, many paintings remain in the locations where they were originally sold during the artist's lifetime. *In a Polish Village*, for example, has been part of the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston for over a century. Having outlined the context in which this work was created and sold, I will now turn to the art market in the United States.

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ART MARKET IN NORTH AMERICA

In the mid-nineteenth century, art collecting practices and the art market in the United States were still in a formative phase, shaped by the country's rapidly developing economy and evolving cultural ambitions. Prior to the American Civil War (1861-1865), the New York art market focused primarily on domestic production, and American artists depended largely on local patronage. After the war, however, profound economic and social shifts transformed the North American art world. Industrialists and financiers rose to unprecedented prominence, accumulating wealth on a scale previously unknown in the United States. Increased affluence facilitated travel abroad, where collectors encountered artists, visited galleries and museums, and began to acquire artworks directly in Europe. This postbellum expansion significantly internationalised the American art market. Greater cultural mobility and intensified transatlantic contact encouraged the purchase of contemporary foreign art, while European galleries increasingly addressed American clients through catalogues and correspondence. Jeanne Zalewski has described this period as a "buying frenzy" that extended into the early 1890s, for which she coined the term the *Postbellum Picture Boom* (2019, 100). As the number of collectors grew alongside their purchasing power, European works gained increasing prestige within American collections. It was within this context of intensified transatlantic exchange that paintings such as Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski's *In a Polish Village* entered the North American market, and it is likely that Eben Dyer Jordan Jr. acquired the work during this phase of heightened demand for foreign art.

Boston, as one of the oldest and wealthiest cities in the new republic, played a significant role in shaping early North American art patronage and collection habits. Its elite merchant and intellectual classes, enriched by maritime trade and the rapidly growing economy, began to turn their attention to the arts, viewing art collecting and concert-going not only as a hobby but also as a marker of refinement, education, and social status. Collecting European art, particularly portraits, historical works, and landscapes, became a way to align oneself with the sophistication and traditions of Europe, while also expressing a burgeoning North American identity.

It was a way of asserting cultural legitimacy on par with Europe. Wealthy families amassed collections of paintings, engravings, and decorative arts. Many of these collections were acquired during European travels, which were a common practice among affluent North Americans.

Boston collectors often relied on agents and dealers in Europe to source artworks. The lack of a formal art market in the United States meant that auctions and private sales were the primary means of acquiring art. Books, engravings, and other printed reproductions of famous works also played a significant role in spreading European artistic traditions and educating the public about art. These reproductions were widely collected and displayed in Boston homes, providing a more accessible entry point to art collecting for those who could not afford original works. Collecting prints functioned as its own established activity, with collectors in the United States often subscribing to periodically issued and shipped from Europe journals featuring contemporary artworks.[8] Boston's art market at the end of the eighteenth century, though limited in scale, laid the foundations for the more robust development of North American art institutions and collecting practices in the nineteenth century. It was a time when European traditions heavily influenced North American tastes, yet these early initiatives shaped a uniquely North American cultural identity. Art collecting among Boston's elite signified personal refinement and expressed a commitment to building a cultural legacy for the young nation. By the early twentieth century, leading American collectors not only acquired European works but also shaped public access and cultural prestige through institutional and philanthropic practices (Zalewski 2012). Jordan Jr. exemplified this engagement: as early as 1910, he lent a significant number of paintings by Corot, Fromentin, Dagnan-Bouveret, Detaille, Harpignies, and others to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, enriching the Modern Rooms and making his collection accessible to the public (Museum of Fine Arts, 1910). Wierusz-Kowalski's work was not listed among the 1910 loan.

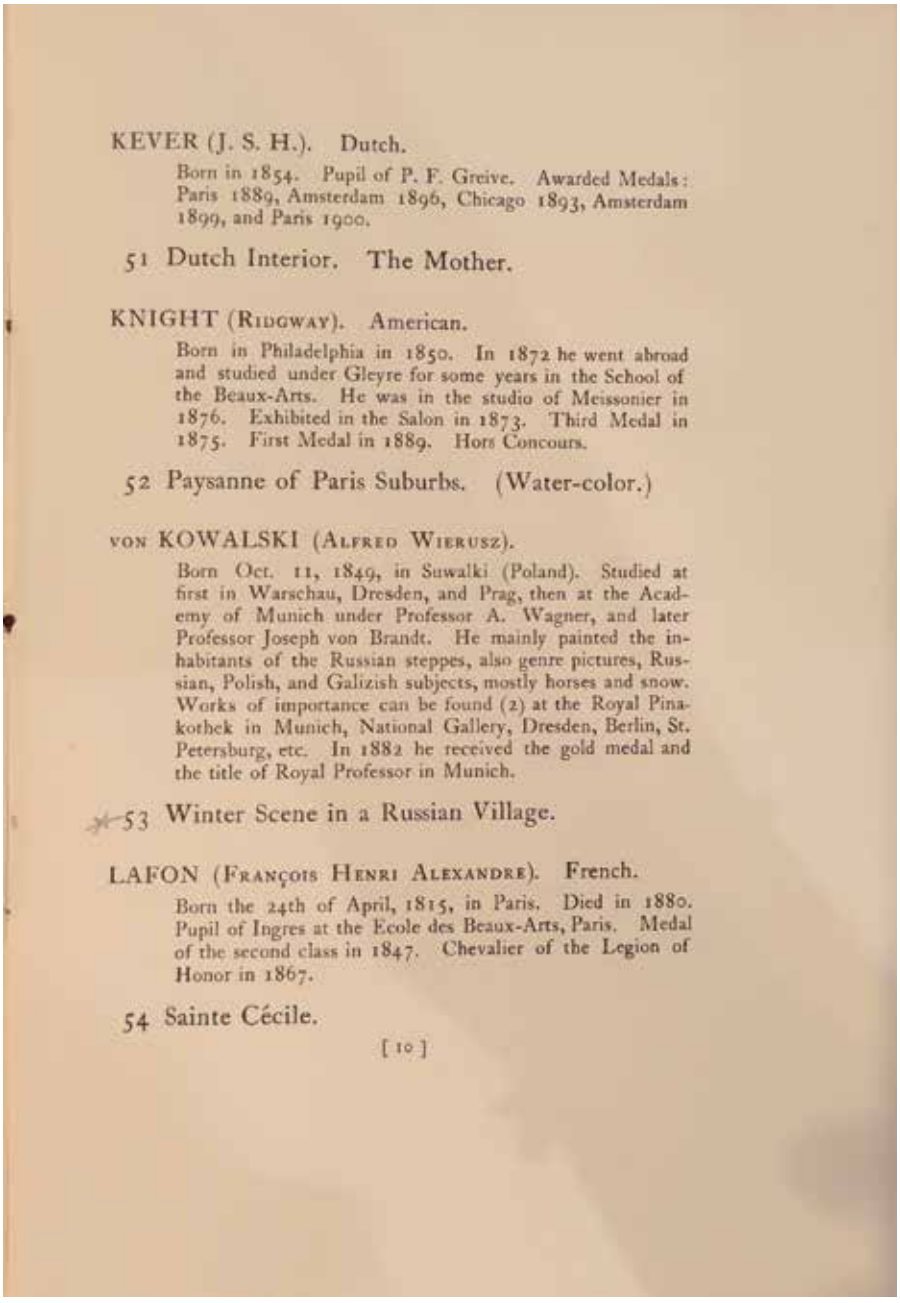
To understand the nature of the nineteenth-century art market in the United States, it is important to examine all agents involved in an artwork's acquisition, its creator, and its buyer. In the case of *In a Polish Village*, the owner of the painting was Eben Dyer Jordan Jr. (1857-1925). Jordan Jr. was a prominent figure in Boston during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was best known as a philanthropist, cultural patron, and businessman, inheriting wealth and influence as the son of Eben Dyer Jordan Sr., the co-founder of Jordan Marsh & Co., one of America's first department stores. He was involved in several philanthropic endeavours, supporting educational and civic institutions. Like many members of Boston's elite, he travelled extensively through Europe, where he would be able to purchase artworks directly from galleries, dealers, and auctions in cultural hubs such as Paris, London, and Munich. His taste in art likely reflected the aesthetic sensibilities of his era, as he favoured works that demonstrated classical beauty, technical excellence, and historical significance. He may also have relied on art advisers, dealers, and established galleries in Boston and abroad to guide his purchases. Prominent European dealers and auction houses were instrumental in helping North American collectors acquire significant pieces for their private collections. While the details of where and how Jordan Jr. acquired individual pieces are not documented, contemporary accounts note that he amassed an impressive and wide-ranging collection. In an obituary following his death, *American Art News* reported:

> "Eben D. Jordan, Boston merchant and patron of music and the fine arts, died Aug. 1 at his summer home at Manchester, Mass., at the age of 59. He established in Boston the Jordan Art Gallery and gave it works by Reynolds, Lawrence, Trumbull, Stuart, Conture, Decamps, Diaz and Leloir among others. Mr. Jordan had many works of art in his city and country homes. One of his most prized was a picture he purchased for $1,000 from his savings when he was 16". (American Art News 1916, p. 4).

This account highlights both the breadth and ambition of Jordan Jr.'s collecting, encompassing canonical European painters, as well as his early engagement with art acquisition. It shows that his collecting practices were not only shaped by wealth and social position but also by a lifelong personal interest and discernment in artworks.

8. In Boston especially, the tradition of collecting prints and reproduction was popularized by Boston Museum of Fine Art's first curator of prints and drawings Sylvester Rosa Koehler (1837-1900). His private collection had been donated to the MFA and features, for example, a collection of issues of a Berlin-printed illustrated magazine *Moderne Kunst in Meisterholzschnitten* (*Modern Art in Master Woodcuts*). Those often featured works by Wierusz-Kowalski.

The biggest source of information about Jordan Jr.'s collection is its catalogue, published in Boston in 1903 (Collection of Mr. Eben D. Jordan). Analysing it provides us with an invaluable insight into his tastes and aspirations, as well as illustrating the collecting practices of the North American bourgeoisie during the nineteenth century. Jordan Jr. owned at least 116 paintings when the catalogue was published. All artworks were recorded under their artists' names, which in turn were arranged alphabetically. Most artists were listed with a very short biography and their nationality [fig.09]. It is not known whether the length of the artist's bio depended on access to information or the artist's importance. The practice of assigning artists to their national 'school' stemmed directly from the European tradition, as it was an integral part of the European art trade since the mid-to-late-eighteenth century (Baetens; Lyna, 2019: 2–3). Looking at the artists' nationalities reveals a collection informed by the European collecting tradition that contained examples of the most important national schools according to nineteenth-century collectors.



KEVER (J. S. H.). Dutch.

Born in 1854. Pupil of P. F. Greive. Awarded Medals: Paris 1889, Amsterdam 1896, Chicago 1893, Amsterdam 1899, and Paris 1900.

51 Dutch Interior. The Mother.

KNIGHT (Ridgway). American.

Born in Philadelphia in 1850. In 1872 he went abroad and studied under Gleyre for some years in the School of the Beaux-Arts. He was in the studio of Meissonier in 1876. Exhibited in the Salon in 1873. Third Medal in 1875. First Medal in 1889. Hors Concours.

52 Paysanne of Paris Suburbs. (Water-color.)

von KOWALSKI (Alfred Wierusz).

Born Oct. 11, 1849, in Suwalki (Poland). Studied at first in Warschau, Dresden, and Prag, then at the Academy of Munich under Professor A. Wagner, and later Professor Joseph von Brandt. He mainly painted the inhabitants of the Russian steppes, also genre pictures, Russian, Polish, and Galizish subjects, mostly horses and snow. Works of importance can be found (2) at the Royal Pinakothek in Munich, National Gallery, Dresden, Berlin, St. Petersburg, etc. In 1882 he received the gold medal and the title of Royal Professor in Munich.

53 Winter Scene in a Russian Village.

LAFON (François Henri Alexandre). French.

Born the 24th of April, 1815, in Paris. Died in 1880. Pupil of Ingres at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris. Medal of the second class in 1847. Chevalier of the Legion of Honor in 1867.

54 Sainte Cécile.

[10]

Fig. 09· Collection of Mr. Eben D. Jordan: Catalogue of Pictures (Boston, 1903), p. 10. Photo by the author.

The collection included multiple examples of contemporary French, Spanish, Dutch, German, and British artists. It should be noted that the national school most prominently featured in Jordan Jr.'s collection was the French one, as was the case for most contemporary North American collections of his time (Zalewski, 2012). Jordan Jr. was also a vivid collector of North American art, with a considerable portion of his collection dedicated to his compatriots. The single most prominent aspect of Jordan Jr.'s collection was its focus on contemporary artists, with only a handful of painters featured in it being born before the nineteenth century. This suggests he was a collector informed about the newly developing art trends, both in Europe and America, who was able to appraise the worth of contemporary art.

In Jordan Jr.'s catalogue, *In a Polish Village* is figured under "von Kowalski (Alfred Wierusz)." Wierusz-Kowalski's nationality was omitted. Additionally, it was listed under the title *Winter Scene in a Russian Village*. The inadequate title suggests that the collector could have purchased the canvas from an art dealer who was likely not very knowledgeable about contemporary European geopolitics, as the artist himself would likely have opposed the Polish countryside he had painted being described as Russian. The artist's biography did state that the artist was born in 1849 in Poland, which at the time was the Congress Kingdom of Poland, and described the artist's academic journey with the German spelling of the cities of *Warschau* and *Prag* (Warsaw and Prague). His mentor, Józef Brandt, faced the same treatment, being presented as *Professor Joseph von Brandt*. The author of the biography then stated that Wierusz-Kowalski "mainly painted inhabitants of the Russian steppes, also genre pictures, Russian, Polish, and Galizish[9] subjects, mostly horses and snow" (10), which would be a fairly accurate description of Wierusz-Kowalski's artistic work, if not for the problematic choice of the wording "Russian steppes". Except for the information about the artist's preferred subjects, the description of the artist and his artwork is considerably misguided, although the nature of the mistakes hints at the author's ignorance rather than a cohesive nationalistic standpoint. The biography of the artist provided to potential buyers could have been modified to increase his attractiveness and fetch a higher selling price.

The analysis of the catalogue reveals that Jordan Jr.'s collection was very eclectic, featuring not only a plethora of nationalities but also a highly varied selection of subjects and artistic media, landscapes, portraits, and historical paintings produced in oil, watercolour, or pastel. Wierusz-Kowalski's canvas had a particular appeal among these works, as it represented a lesser-known national school of painting, which also remained within the scope of conventional European artistic tradition.

The composition of private art collections was not random. On the contrary, collecting high art was a meticulously orchestrated process aimed at representing the collector's knowledge and status. This was also expressed by Jordan Jr.'s collection. As Leanne Zalewski wrote, in published catalogues, "the artists' names, their teacher's names, nationalities, awards and honours, provenances, and additional descriptions or letters to collectors lent cultural and commercial value, provided an artistic lineage and by extension, authenticity, which attested to the internationalization of the market and alluded to the collectors' knowledge and status" (2019: 122). Keeping this in mind, *In a Polish Village* served a much bigger role than a painting in its own right; it enriched Jordan Jr.'s collection with the name of a well-renowned Polish artist and an honorary professor of the Munich Academy. This transforms the painting into a certain type of cultural currency, or 'cultural capital', as Pierre Bourdieu would have called it (Bourdieu, 1986).

9. 'Galizish' refers to subjects from Galicia, the historical region in Central Europe that in the nineteenth century was part of the Austrian Empire (now split between Poland and Ukraine).

CONCLUSION

The nineteenth century was a period of lively cultural exchanges between the Old and the New Continent. Towards the end of the century, growing European cities with centuries-long artistic traditions enriched the growing international art market with a plethora of academically trained artists. Meanwhile, North American individuals, who were rapidly accumulating wealth in the decades following the Civil War, needed the cultural artefacts produced by these artists to represent their newly acquired status. At the same time, technological advancements allowed for a much quicker exchange of information about contemporary art and the dissemination of photographs and reproductions of paintings made by highly celebrated artists. Those advancements' effects, with the privately owned galleries and auction houses in Europe seeking to increase their profits, have extended beyond the Atlantic Ocean, leading to a merger of art markets across two continents, unlike ever before in history. The journey of *In a Polish Village* from Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski's Munich studio to the collection of Boston entrepreneur Eben Dyer Jordan Jr. reflects the growing interconnectedness of the nineteenth-century art world. Artists like Wierusz-Kowalski gained access to markets far beyond their home countries. Munich, already a thriving artistic hub, played a key role in this global exchange, helping artworks travel across continents.

In a Polish Village, Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski and Eben Dyer Jordan Jr. were some of many elements and agents contributing to the newly reshaped realm of art markets. With this article, I have shown that people of the late nineteenth century enjoyed a very cosmopolitan aspect of art dealerships. The three agents represent a high art collecting practice that was very conventional for its time. From almost identical copies of the same paintings to value based on a creator's social status, the nineteenth century laid bare the rational and economic aspects of the art trade, among which the unadulterated appreciation for the artwork's aesthetic, cultural, or educational values was often peripheral, if not inconsequential.

In this reality, artworks from contemporary artists and Old Masters alike took on the role of economic and cultural capital and so were subject to the basic rules of supply and demand, as well as the changing tastes of European and North American upper classes. The 'lone wolf' from Munich was as skilled and perceptive in marketing his canvases as he was in painting them. Thanks to this resoluteness, his paintings of the merry Polish countryside found their way across the Atlantic Ocean and into the private galleries of North American businessmen. Today, many of his and his contemporary compatriots' paintings remain on the North American continent and serve as a reminder of the process of rapid fusion of European and North American cultures. The acquisition of *In a Polish Village* is just one example of how collecting habits reflected this shift. Romanticised depictions of foreign landscapes, like Wierusz-Kowalski's snowy Polish village, resonated with American collectors drawn to European traditions. Wierusz-Kowalski, highly aware of this reality, positioned himself not just as a painter but as a savvy participant in the art trade. His commercial success, and that of his contemporaries, illustrates how the nineteenth-century art market functioned as a global enterprise, setting the stage for the cultural networks that still shape the art world today.

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