

*Through the Eyes of the Soul.  
The Life and Work of Wincenty Sleńdziński  
(1838–1909)*

Summary

This monograph explores the life and work of Wincenty Leopold Sleńdziński, a Lithuanian painter from the second half of the 19th century, who is relatively well-known in Lithuania and Poland. Sleńdziński, a prominent member of the Sleńdziński dynasty of painters, has had his works analyzed in various individual articles in both Lithuania and Poland. However, his entire creative career has never been comprehensively covered in a single book. Previous segments of his life, known to date, have not provided a complete understanding of the artist as a person. This monograph reconstructs his creative biography using the family's legacy, which was taken from Vilnius in 1945 and is now housed in the Sleńdziński Gallery in Białystok (*Galeria im. Sleńdzińskich w Białymstoku*). This includes archival documents, photographs, sketch albums, and literary texts. Additional sources for this reconstruction are the drawings and sketch albums held at the Lithuanian National Museum of Art, as well as Sleńdziński's paintings found in various museums in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine.

The monograph, in addition to the required elements of a scientific book, consists of three main sections: the first part illuminates the artist's life, the second part discusses his works of art, and the third part, the appendices, contains his original writings, including maxims, poems, and vaudevilles.

The first section comprises the chapters "The Beginning," "In Exile," and "In the Hometown." It explores the painter's origins and family history. The artist's grandfather, Marcin Sleńdziński, was a respected merchant in Vilnius who served as burgomaster for some time, and his father, Aleksander Sleńdziński (1803–1878), was a painter known for portraits and genre scenes. Based on church registers of marriages, births, and baptisms, Wincenty Sleńdziński's date of birth is specified as January 2, 1838. Wincenty lived with his parents for a time in Bartony (Borciany) and later in the Bajoriškiai Manor near Raudondvaris (now Kaunas District),

where his father Aleksander found employment with Benedykt Emanuel Tyszkiewicz (1801–1866). Eventually, the family settled in Vilnius.

The artistic and literary atmosphere of Vilnius, imbued with romantic memories of ancient Lithuania, profoundly shaped the future artist's worldview. Together with his father, Wincenty participated in musical evenings at Stanisław Moniuszko's salon, where he received piano and violin lessons. His first art teacher was undoubtedly his father, along with the painter Kanuty Rusiecki, who held drawing classes at the Vilnius Noblemen's Institute (*Instytut Szlachecki*), which Wincenty likely attended with his friend Michał Elwiro Andriolli (1836–1893). Having graduated from gymnasium in 1855, both friends travelled to Moscow to continue their art studies at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture (*Московское училище живописи, ваяния и зодчества*). The school was renowned for its traditions of realist art but was less constrained by the academicist painting canons that prevailed at the St. Petersburg Imperial Academy of Arts (*Императорская Академия художеств*), under whose aegis the Moscow school operated. Sleńdziński spent his summers and sometimes winters in Vilnius, where he painted his first notable works. These early paintings, such as "Old Woman Threading a Needle" (1860) and "Self-Portrait with a Hat" (1862), established his reputation as a painter of psychological portraits already during his student years. Additionally, he created artworks for Catholic churches in Vilnius ("St. Casimir", 1863) and Lower Novgorod (*Нижний Новгород*).

After a few years of studies, Andriolli was pleased to attain the status of a freelance artist and returned to Vilnius, where he actively participated in the national liberation movement. Sleńdziński did not complete his studies either. In 1863, upon returning to Vilnius, he was arrested for his connections with the rebels and exiled for twenty years to Knyaginín, a bleak town in the Lower Novgorod Governorate. We learn about this period of the artist's exile from his sketch albums, which contain not only drawings but also poems, maxims, and vaudevilles (Sleńdziński's original texts are presented in the appendices at the end of the book). These various sketches and writings provide insight into the artist's inner world, his feelings during exile, and his moral stances. He managed to make ends meet by taking on random jobs, including several commissions for paintings and creating some landscapes.

In 1867, likely through the intervention of the new empress Maria Fyodorovna, patron of the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, who had purchased a painting by Sleńdziński in Moscow, he was awarded the title of 3rd-class artist and permitted to relocate to Kharkiv for the remainder of his exile.

The artistic environment of Kharkiv, then one of the main cities of the Russian Empire, was more favourable to the artist's needs. He was invited to participate in musical evenings, which greatly enlivened his life in a foreign land. In Kharkiv, Sleńdziński had more opportunities to earn a living by painting portraits. In addition to private individuals, his clients included various institutions. The abundance of commissions influenced Sleńdziński's artistic style.

Alongside more lively realistic portraits, he produced many dull, photographically accurate portraits that followed a uniform scheme he had devised.

After five years in Kharkiv, Sleńdziński demonstrated his loyalty and was allowed to leave to improve his artistic skills outside the Russian Empire. The painter stayed in Kraków with his brother Józef, who was finishing his studies at the university there. In Krakow, he became acquainted with local artists, including the famous painter of historical scenes, Jan Matejko, and participated in the exhibitions of the Society of Friends of Art in Kraków (*Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie*). Sleńdziński visited Dresden at the invitation of his father's childhood friend, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski. There, he studied the paintings of the famous gallery, painted several portraits and genre scenes, and created two versions of "The Orphan Girl" ("Sierotka"), which were purchased by collectors and patrons Alfons Sierakowski and Wawrzyniec Benzelstjerna Engeström. Thanks to Kraszewski's efforts, a couple of Sleńdziński's drawings were published in the weekly *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* in 1874. Additionally, he was introduced to the famous Poznań collector Jan Kanty Działyński and restored paintings of European masters held in Działyński's gallery in Kórnik, Poznań powiat. Having saved some money, Sleńdziński dreamed of going to Italy. Unfortunately, he was obliged to return to his place of exile instead. In 1875, after returning to Kraków, while exploring the area for painting inspiration, he accidentally crossed the border of the Grand Duchy of Kraków, which separated it from the lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Upon his return to the Kharkiv Governorate, Sleńdziński experienced more freedom this time – he was allowed to travel within the governorate. He chose to live in its two biggest cities, the already well familiar Kharkiv and Sumy, which offered new opportunities. Portrait commissions were even more abundant, and he was able to meet new landlord families in the province and expand his clientele. He also had the chance to participate in the musical life of these cities once again.

Only a few paintings from this period of exile have survived. Some reached Lithuanian museums and private art collections by various means, while the existence of others is known from the artist's own albums, where he not only drew sketches but also captured the general image of the finished paintings.

In 1883, Sleńdziński was finally allowed to return to Lithuania. He had to rebuild his life from scratch. His father had already passed away, his sisters were married, and it wasn't long before his mother also passed away. Vilnius had changed significantly, and very few people he knew from his youth remained – some, like him, were exiled without the right to return to Lithuania, others emigrated on their own, and still others found refuge in provincial mansions. On the other hand, new artists had appeared in Vilnius. The Vilnius Drawing School, established by Russian authorities in 1866, was active, with artists invited from Russia teaching there. This significantly changed the artistic atmosphere of the city, which had been somewhat

stagnant. It was only in the last decades of the century that exhibition activities gradually began to be organized around the Drawing School, and Sleńdziński eagerly participated in them.

In 1888, the artist married Anna Bolcewicz (1845–1925), who had two children from her marriage with Otto de Rotte and two more children from the famous photographer Józef Czechowicz (1818–1888), with whom she shared a house he had built at the foot of Gediminas Hill. Soon, Sleńdziński and Anna had their own children – daughter Johanna (born in 1888) and son Ludomir (born in 1889). The family lived in the late Czechowicz’s house, and Sleńdziński had access to his photographic legacy. He made some paintings by simply reproducing the images captured by the photographer.

Starting a family brought new financial challenges, requiring Sleńdziński to channel all his energy into earning money. In addition to portrait commissions, he painted religious works for various churches and undertook copying and restoration work. Despite these demands, his extraordinary work ethic allowed him to produce a series of memorable, original, and emotional artworks.

Sleńdziński lived a long life, producing over a thousand paintings and numerous drawings. Toward the end of his life, he had difficulty walking and his vision was weak. He died after a long and serious illness on August 6, 1909, in his house in Šnipiškės, where the old Czechowicz house had been relocated. He was buried next to his parents in the Vilnius Bernardine Cemetery.

The third chapter of the book presents the abundance and variety of Sleńdziński’s works. His surviving works, as well as those known only from photographs, are organized into separate chapters by genre. These include portraits (both standalone and those with genre elements), independent genre compositions, landscapes, paintings depicting themes from ancient Lithuanian history and mythology, religious paintings, satirical works, and animalistic images.

Summing up Wincenty Sleńdziński’s entire body of work reveals its non-homogeneous nature. It spans from excellent deeply psychological, skilfully painted realistic portraits imbued with compassion and warmth, to dry photographic-style portraits created on commission. His oeuvre also includes works like the “pre-impressionist” piece “The Ball” and sentimental genre paintings depicting children executed in a manner approaching academicism. He navigated between almost naturalistic views of Vilnius and the challenges of capturing artificial light in works like “The Gate of Dawn.” Additionally, he created excellent multi-figure spatial compositions in religious genres such as “The Lamentation of Christ,” alongside more standardized and repetitively painted works for churches, sometimes showing signs of weariness in execution.

Having explored the vicissitudes of Wincenty Sleńdziński’s life and his extensive visual and written legacy, one can characterize him as a versatile “one-man-band.” He was extremely hardworking, sensitive, and conscientious. His output encompassed a vast array of paintings and drawings, experimentation across various art forms, and attempts at poetry and amateur

dramaturgy written out of desperation during his difficult exile years. Unfortunately, circumstances often constrained him, leading to the partial waste of his considerable talent. Lucjan Uziębło aptly summarized Sleńdziński's approach in one sentence at the conclusion of an article about the artist: "Mr. Sleńdziński belongs to the idealists of art – he always handled it delicately, eschewed grand original ambitions, showed little interest in innovations, and remained faithful to the precision of drawing."<sup>360</sup>

The artist consistently adhered to his "Moscow-style" realism, characterized by meticulous drawing, accuracy, and completeness, which are evident in his official commissioned portraits and religious-themed paintings. His subjects often reflected the influence of critical realism, predominant in Russian art during the latter half of the 19th century, marking the peak of his creative output. A prime example of this approach is the widely reproduced painting "The Old Woman Threading a Needle," which not only conveys the physical features and social status of the portrayed but also captures the mood and the artist's sensitive attention to ordinary people, viewing them through the eyes of the soul. Paintings like this, depicting the lives of the poor, blur the distinction between portraiture and genre painting. The individuals depicted are nameless, yet they embody a generalized image of common folk.

A valuable complement to the artist's work is found in his romantic perception of images and portrayal of subjects reminiscent of national romanticism, a movement that reemerged across many European countries in the latter half of the 19th century. His multi-figure compositions on themes from Lithuania's ancient history, though they didn't survive, exemplify this approach. Equally notable are his sensitive and warm depictions of his fellow citizens and cosy domestic scenes. This romantic worldview, often devoid of critical scrutiny, is also reflected in his poetic works, which brim with love for his homeland. Despite not writing in Lithuanian, Sleńdziński's verses celebrate Lithuania, its people, their daily lives, dreams, and concerns in his paintings. It's no wonder that Sleńdziński earned the title of a bard of everyday life.

The artistic legacy continued in Sleńdziński's genes through his son, Ludomir Sleńdziński (1889–1980), an extraordinary neoclassicist painter of the 20th century based in Vilnius and later Kraków.

---

<sup>360</sup> Lucjan Uziębło, Wincenty Śleńdziński. Artysta malarz Wileński, *Tygodnik Polski*, 1899, nr. 11.