

**RYSZARD KAJA:
POLISH POSTER ARTIST**

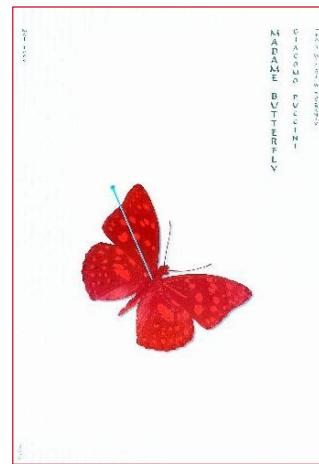


Fig. 1 *Madame Butterfly*, 2000

Kathleen Alston
AVT 418: The History of Graphic Design
Prof. Don Starr
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The Polish art poster movement evolved in the 1890s and quickly became an outlet for expressing the Polish national identity.¹ The artists used international styles from various art movements like Art Nouveau, Social Realism, Jugendstil, Japonisme, Cubism, and from the Vienna Secessionist movement to create their works of art.^{2,3} Many posters were intertwined with national references to Polish traditions, symbolism, historical iconography, and folklore, while other posters focused on propaganda and tourism—all of which later developed in the 1950s and 60s into a “surreal level of self-expression and artistic interpretation.”^{4,5} The *Towarzystwo Artystów Polskich “Sztuka”* (The Society of Polish Artists) aka *Sztuka* (“Art”) was founded in 1897 in Kraków by young avant-garde artists, several of them being poster artists. Due to the poster’s growing popularity, the first International Poster Exposition was held in Kraków the following year in 1898.

Fig. 1 Ryszard Kaja, “G. Puccini, *Madame Butterfly*, Opera Poster, 2000.” *Pegasus – Gallery Polish Poster Music & Film*, 2015. [http://www.pegasus-](http://www.pegasus-shop.de/product_info.php/info/p3972_Mme-Titanik.html)

Fig. 2 Ryszard Kaja, “B.Hrabal/T.Sztukateria, *Mme Titanik*, Theater Poster, 2010.” *Pegasus – Gallery Polish Poster Music & Film*, 2015. [http://www.pegasus-](http://www.pegasus-shop.de/product_info.php/info/p3972_Mme-Titanik.html)

1. Elena Millie and Zbigniew Kantorosinski, *The Polish Poster* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1993), 2.

2. Chris Smentkowski. “Ryszard Kaja Artist Statement” and “Introducing Polish Poster Art”, April 2013, <http://braintransplant.org/floraphallusfauna/Kaja.pdf>.

3. *The Polish Poster*, 3.

4. *The Polish Poster*, 4.

5. Stefene Russell, “Ryszard Kaja’s ‘Flora, Phallus, Fauna,’ Opens This Saturday at The Hinge,” *St. Louis*, April 02, 2013, <http://www.stlmag.com/arts/Ryszard-Kajas-Flora-Phallus-Fauna-Opens-This-Saturday-at-The-Hinge/>.



Fig. 2 *Mme Titanik*, 2010

From the end of World War II to the fall of Communism in 1989, the Polish Government encouraged and sponsored poster art—the nation's leading art form. During this period, the art of Polish posters achieved international fame and Poland became the top designer of contemporary/vintage poster art. After the war ended, Poland was in a period of rebirth and restoration. Construction sites were outlined with wooden fences that were transformed into billboards plastered with posters. The illustrated fences became 'the art of the streets' as a replacement for the missing museums and galleries.⁶ The design of poster art bloomed and developed pronounced characteristics: expressive, intellectual, having vibrant colors, a sense of personality, humor and fantasy, dynamic, along with having a linear quality.⁷ "The Polish poster became a national treasure and the golden era of the Polish School of Posters was established."⁸ With the government as their patron, the graphic artists of the Polish School of Posters created:

strong, original, individualistic images—often intended to surprise, provoke, or disturb the viewers' beliefs and values. They frequently used camouflage and commonly understood ironies to communicate surreptitiously with the public and comment on society.⁹



Fig. 3 *Mitologiczny Cyrk Doktora Papa-Geno*, 2000

Fig. 3 Ryszard Kaja, "Napięcie Theatre, *Mitologiczny Cyrk Doktora Papa-Geno* (Mythological Circus of Doctor Papa-Geno), Theater Poster, 2000." *Pegasus – Gallery Polish Poster Music & Film*, 2015. http://www.pegasus-shop.de/product_info.php/info/p5258_Mythological-Circus-of-Doctor-Papa-Geno.html.

6. "CYRK Story," *Contemporary Posters, Prior Products Inc.*, 2015, <https://www.contemporaryposters.com/story/story.php>.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

Subjects varied from tourist posters, military propaganda, the circus, to those of the early entertainment industries. The style of the artists varied, some preferred realism while others worked in surrealism and abstractism, however all artist where subjected to censorship.

The end of the golden era of the Polish School of Posters came in 1989 with the fall of the Soviet Communist regime. The new demand of the free market was for advertising, and commercialism began to replace creativity. Slowing the artistic level declined and the role of the poster forever changed. However, Polish poster artists found new avenues for their artistic expressions in international poster exhibitions and competitions. Today, many posters from the golden era are houses in private collections and museums.

A descendant of the Polish poster art is Ryszard Kaja (Fig.4), who was born in 1962 in Poznań, Poland during the golden era of the Polish poster. He is a contemporary graphic designer, poster artist, painter, and stage designer who came from a gifted artistic family. Ryszard's father Zbigniew Kaja was also an established poster artist and graphic designer while his mother Stefania Kaja was a painter and ceramist. Zbigniew Kaja was an important leading figure of the Polish School of Posters and Ryszard followed in his father's footsteps.¹⁰



Fig. 4 *Photograph of Ryszard Kaja*

Fig. 4 Wiesław Rosocha, "Ryszard Kaja poster exhibition in Warsaw-- Photograph of Ryszard Kaja," Rene Wanner's Poster Page, May 31, 2010. <http://www.posterpage.ch/div/news10/n100531e.htm>.

10. "Ryszard Kaja," *Pegasus – Polish Poster Gallery: Poster Artist*, 2015. <http://www.pegasus-gallery.de/kaja-poster.php>.

Ryszard Kaja designed more than 100 sets (costumes and decorations) for theaters, ballets, operas, televisions, and films working in opera houses throughout Poland, as well as abroad in France, Germany, Brazil, Argentina, Israel, and Egypt. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań. In 1984 at the age of 22, he received his degree in painting.

Kaja began his career as the main stage designer for the Grand Theater in Łódź (*Teatrze Wielkim w Łodzi*) working there from 1989–2000.¹¹ He also was main stage designer for the Opera and Operetta in Szczecin in 1994. From 1995–2000 he worked as the main stage designer for the Grand Theatre of Poznań (*Teatr Wielki w Poznaniu im. Stanisława Moniuszki*). His distinctive artistic showcase was the combination of painting and stage design. While he preferred working with the opera, he also worked on other major music theater stages. Along with the stage sets, he designed the advertising posters for the shows as well (Figs. 2-3, pages 1-2 and Fig. 5).¹²

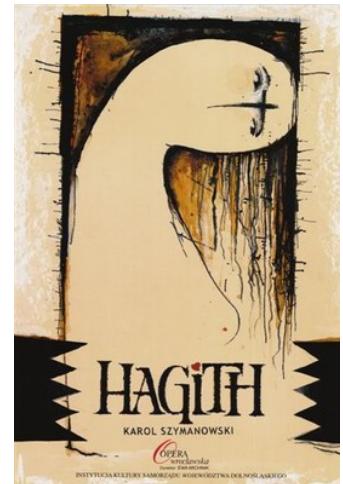


Fig. 5 *Hagith*, 2005



Fig. 6 *Tosca*, 2005/2006

Fig. 5 Ryszard Kaja, “S.Karol, *Hagith*, Opera Poster, 2005.” Galeria Plakatu Polskiego, 2015. http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_hagith/pl

Fig. 6 Ryszard Kaja, “G.Puccini, *Tosca*, Opera Poster, 2005/2006.” Teatr Wielki w Łodzi—Poster Gallery, 2015. <http://www.operalodz.com/subpage.php?id=96>.

11. Wiesław Rosocha, “Ryszard Kaja poster exhibition.”

12. Ibid.

In Poznań at age 35 in 1998 he was awarded the “Medal of Young Art” (*Medal Młodej Sztuki*), an honor presented by a jury for his works associated with the Wielkopolska culture, the local regional culture of Greater Poland. He also was awarded the “Golden Mask” multiple times for his award-winning designs.

Some of the operas he designed sets on are listed below:¹³

- *The Masked Ball, Erani, Falstaff, and Rigoletto* by Giuseppe Verdi
- *Madame Butterfly* (Fig.1, Title Page) and *Tosca* (Fig.6, page 4) by Giacomo Puccini
- *Carmen* by Georges Bizet
- *The Barber of Seville* by Gioacchino Rossini
- *The Magic Flute* by Mozart
- *Don Pasquale* by Gaetano Donizetti
- *Fiddler on the Roof* (Fig.7) by Joseph Stein and Jerry Bock
- *Orpheus in the Underworld* by Jacob Offenbach

A few of the ballets he designed are noted below:¹⁴

- *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* by Tchaikovsky
- *Giselle* (Fig.8) by Adolphe Adam
- *Skrzypek opętany (“The Mad Fiddler”)* by Maciej Małecki
- *Zobra the Greek* (Fig.9, page 6) by Mikis Theodorakis
- *Fantazja na Harnasie (“Fantasy on the Legendary Robbers of the Tatra Mountains”)* by

Fig. 7 Ryszard Kaja, “J. Stein/J. Bock, Skrzypek na dachu (Fiddler on the Roof), Opera Poster, 1993.” Galeria Plakatu Polskiego, 2015. http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_skrzypek_1993/pl.

Fig. 8 Ryszard Kaja, “A. Adam, Giselle, Ballet Poster, 2006.” Pegasus Polish Poster Shop, 2015. <http://polishpostershop.com/posters/ryszard-kaja/giselle-adolphe-charles-adam.html>.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

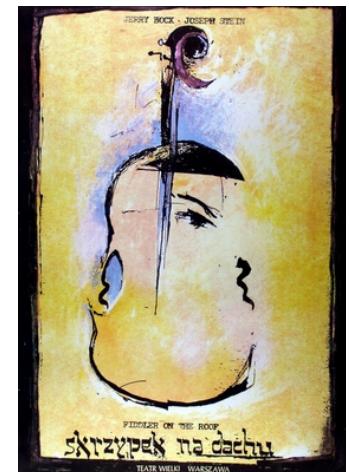


Fig. 7 *Skrzypek na dachu*, 1993

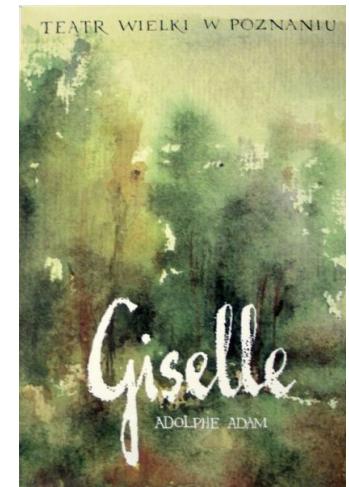


Fig. 8 *Giselle*, 2006

Wojciech Kilar

- *The Afternoon of a Faun* by Claude Debussy,
- *Romeo and Juliet* (Fig.10) by Hector Berlioz

A few of the theater sets & costumes he designed are listed below:¹⁵

- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Fig.11, page 7) and *The Nutcracker* by Shakespeare
- *Two Way Mirror* by Arthur Miller
- *The Road to Mecca* by Athol Fugard
- *Damy i Huzary* ("Ladies and Hussars") by Aleksander Fredro
- *Happy Days* by Samuel Beckett
- *Jacques and his Master* by Milan Kundera
- *Der Kontrabass* ("The Double Bass") Patrick Süskind
- *Plume* by Henri Michaux
- *Boris Godunov* by Modest Mussorgsky
- *La Traviata* and *Macbeth* by Giuseppe Verdi
- *Matka* ("The Mother") by Stanisław Witkiewicz
- *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Ryszard Kaja's art works consist of oil paintings, mixed media on paper, monotypes, and ink drawings. His inspirations for his work as a whole comes from an uncommon perception of the world taken

Fig. 9 Ryszard Kaja, "M.Theodorakis, Zorba the Greek, Ballet Poster, 1995." Pegasus – Gallery Polish Poster Music & Film, 2015. http://www.pegasus-shop.de/product_info.php/info/p2438_Zorba-the-Greek--Poznan.html.

Fig. 10 Ryszard Kaja, "S. Prokofiew/J. Makarowski, *Romeo i Julia*, Ballet Poster, 2009/2010." Teatr Wielki w Łodzi – Poster Gallery, 2015. <http://www.operalodz.com/subpage.php?id=96>.

15. Ibid.

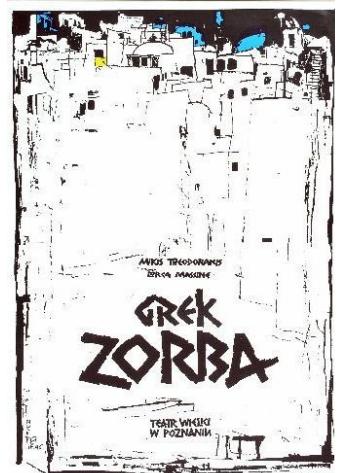


Fig. 9 *Zorba the Greek*, 1995

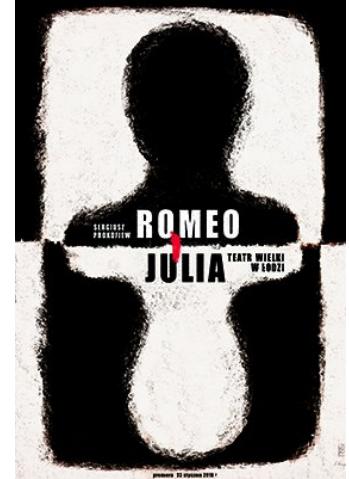


Fig. 10 *Romeo i Julia*, 2009

from the prose of the highly regarded Czech writer, Bohumil Hrabal (1914–1997), along with a captivation for the Baroque style, influences from Polish history and filmmaker Werner Herzog, and from his own personal photographs and journals from his travels.^{16,17} He will draw a series of small painted forms on paper using a mixing technique he coined fondly as ‘Hrabals’.¹⁸ Kaja says Hrabal’s stories enlightened him with a universal truth: “Everything sad has something funny. And everything funny has a touch of sadness.”¹⁹

Kaja’s “courage to be an unfashionable painter is based on his ostentatious individuality.”²⁰ His favorite medium to work in is monotyping, the unique printmaking process of painting or drawing on a non-absorbent surface, which is then transferred onto a sheet of paper using a printing press. By using a non-absorbent surface, the artist can create a subtractive image by removing inks prior to pressing. Kaja drafts and paints all his works by hand, a practice not commonly used in today’s society amongst poster artist.²¹

Fig. 11 Ryszard Kaja, “W.Shakespeare, Sen nocy letniej (A Midsummer Night’s Dream), Theater Poster, 2007.” Pegasus – Gallery Polish Poster Music & Film, 2015. http://www.pegasus-shop.de/product_info.php/info/p2440_Midsummer-Night-s-Dream.html.

16. Ibid.

17. Chris Smentkowski, “Ryszard Kaja Artist Statement.”

18. Wieslaw Rosocha, “Ryszard Kaja poster exhibition.”

19. Stefene Russell, “Ryszard Kaja’s.”

20. Wieslaw Rosocha, “Ryszard Kaja poster exhibition.”



Fig. 11 *Sen nocy letniej*, 2007

Together with his stage designs, Kaja also illustrates books, theater programs, interior designs, catalogs, and posters. However, what spawned his great success are his exceptional posters. His poster (Fig. 12) for the Pegasus Gallery art exhibition in 2010 was amongst the 100-best posters in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.²² A distinguishable trait in his works is “the praise of everyday life and affirmation of commonness.”²³ Consistency, his poster art aesthetically creates a single entity with the subject of the advertisement.²⁴ Artist and musician Chris Smentkowski depicts Kaja’s work as having a “Slavic Baroque esthetic.”²⁵



Fig. 12 *Exhibition Poster for the Pegasus Gallery in Berlin, 2010*

21. Stefene Russell, “Ryszard Kaja’s.”

Fig. 12 Ryszard Kaja, “*Exhibition Poster for the Pegasus Gallery in Berlin 2010.*” Mariusz Bednarski, “Ryszard Kaja exhibition at Pegasus Gallery in Berlin,” *Rene Wanner's Poster Page*, February 03, 2010. <http://www.posterpage.ch/div/news10/n100203.htm>.

Fig. 13 Arthur Korcak, “Poster Biennale—Ryszard Kaja’s Posters for the 22nd International Poster Biennial in Warsaw, Poland, 2010,” *GoPosterBlog*, 2010. <http://goposter.blogspot.com/2010/06/kaja-w-bu.html>.

22. “Ryszard Kaja – Plakaty i Inne Drobiazgi,” *Design Attack*, June 29, 2011, <http://designattack.pl/ryszard-kaja-plakaty-i-inne-drobiazgi/>.

23. Wieslaw Rosocha, “Ryszard Kaja poster exhibition.”

24. Ibid.

25. Stefene Russell, “Ryszard Kaja’s.”



Fig. 13 *Kaja’s Posters at the 22nd Intl. Poster Biennial in Warsaw, 2010*

Today you can see Ryszard Kaja's work at art exhibitions in Polish cities: Poznań, Gniezno, Nowy Tomyśl, and Łódź; as well as in Barcelona and Berlin (Fig.13, page 8 and Fig.19, End Page)²⁶. There is a passage in the Old Brewery Art Center in Poznań that was designed by Kaja. He has also worked with the National Museum in Poznań in preparing the artistic settings for several exhibitions including "Vanitas" and "Sarmatian Traditions in Art & Culture." His interior designs are influenced by the theatre atmosphere and are strongly artistic.²⁷ A few of his works are at the world-renowned Poster Gallery in Kraków, Poland, a favorite spot for poster lovers of all backgrounds and ages.²⁸

He recently was part of a Polish Poster exhibit in St. Louis, MO in April of 2013, which also was his first North American solo exhibition—creatively titled *Flora, Phallus, Fauna*. At the show, his work was

Fig. 14 Ryszard Kaja, "Birch Wood, Poland, Tourist Poster, 2012." Galeria Plakatu Polskiego, 2015.
http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_polska_brezina/pl.

Fig. 15 Ryszard Kaja, "Mazowsze, Poland, Tourist Poster, 2012." Galeria Plakatu Polskiego, 2015.
http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_polska_mazowsze/pl.

26. Wiesław Rosocha, "Ryszard Kaja poster exhibition."

27. Ibid.

28. Krzysztof Dydo and Ewa Pabis S.C., *Galeria Plakatu Kraków – Poster Gallery*.
<http://www.cracowpostergallery.com/galeria2.php>

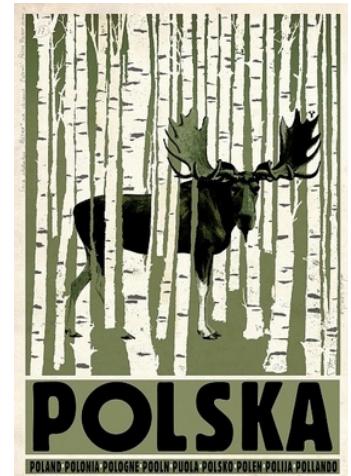


Fig. 14 Birch Wood, Poland, 2012

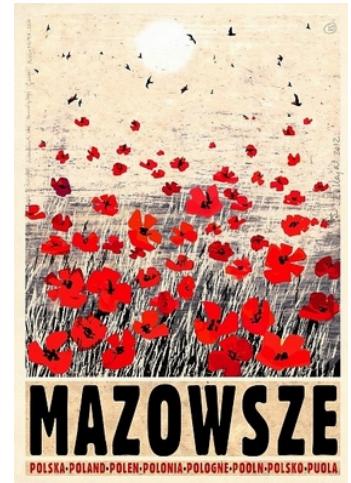


Fig. 15 Mazowsze, Poland, 2012

described as having “a playful, sly eroticism to it.”²⁹ From this exhibit’s artist statement, Kaja describes his poster-making process:

I use everything: pen, pencil, ink, color ink, gouache, coffee grounds, tea, ash—everything that’s around me... Artists try to be international, trendy, cool. I am a little outsider. I have my world and it is a very Polish world. Some posters now are too similar to Western posters, killed by computer programs like Photoshop. Everybody thinks ‘I can do it!’ So many directors think they can make posters themselves in a cheaper way. One click: The colors are beautiful. Second click: The letters look nice. Next click and they are drunk off their own satisfaction.³⁰

Over past few years Kaja has done a series of Polish travel/tourist posters that have similar styles to those by his predecessors (Figs. 14-18 pages 9-11). Relying on traditional Polish icons, Kaja uses symbolism to represent various Polish cities. For example in Fig.15 he uses the poppy flower to illustrate the Mazowsze country, as it is the region’s flower. Where in Fig.16 he illustrates the beloved Polish cartoon character Matołek the Billy-



Fig. 16 *Pacanów* Tourist Poster, 2014

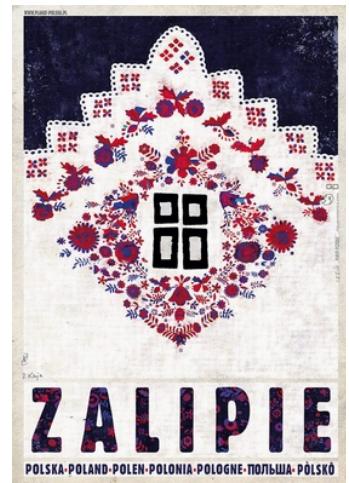


Fig. 17 *Zalipie*, 2014

Fig. 16 Ryszard Kaja, “Koziołek Matolek (Matołek the Billy-Goat) – Pacanów, Poland, Tourist Poster, 2014.” Galeria Plakatu Polskiego, 2015. http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_polska_pacanow/pl.

Fig. 17 Ryszard Kaja, “Zalipie, Poland’s Painted Village, Tourist Poster, 2014.” Galeria Plakatu Polskiego, 2015. http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_polska_zalipie/pl.

29. Stefene Russell, “Ryszard Kaja’s.”

30. Chris Smentkowski, “Ryszard Kaja Artist Statement.”

Goat who is from Pacanów. Similarly Kaja uses traditional Polish folk designs to represent Zalipie in Fig.17 and he stylized water to signify the port city of Świnoujście in Fig.18.

Ryszard Kaja is currently living in Wrocław, Poland, and he is still creating. Kaja states “Art is important because it should explain everything which is not possible to explain by science.”³¹ He has become “one of Poland’s most beloved and prolific contemporary poster designers.”³²

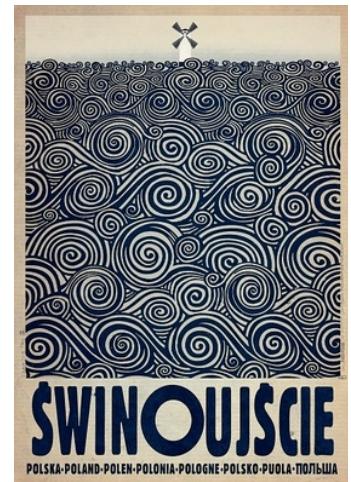


Fig. 18 Świnoujście, Polska, 2013

Fig. 18 Ryszard Kaja, “Świnoujście, Poland, Tourist Poster, 2013.” *Galeria Plakatu Polskiego*, 2015.
http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_polska_swinoujscie/pl.

31. Stefene Russell, “Ryszard Kaja’s.”

32. Chris Smentkowski, “Ryszard Kaja Artist Statement.”

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Fig. 1 Kaja, Ryszard, 2000, “G. Puccini, *Madame Butterfly*, Opera Poster.” *Pegasus – Gallery Polish Poster Music & Film*, 2015. http://www.pegasus-shop.de/product_info.php/info/p2057_Madama-Butterfly-Giacomo-Puccini.html.

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Fig. 6 Kaja, Ryszard, 2005/2006, “G.Puccini, *Tosca*, Opera Poster.” *Teatr Wielki w Łodzi—Poster Gallery*, 2015. <http://www.operalodz.com/subpage.php?id=96>.

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Fig. 13 Korcak, Arthur, 2010. “Poster biennale—*Ryszard Kaja’s Posters for the 22nd International Poster Biennial in Warsaw, Poland, 2010*,” *GoPosterBlog*. <http://goposter.blogspot.com/2010/06/kaja-w-buw.html>.

Fig. 14 Ryszard Kaja, 2012. “*Birch Wood, Poland*, Tourist Poster.” *Galeria Plakatu Polskiego*, 2015. http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_polska_brzezina/pl.

Fig. 15 Ryszard Kaja, 2012, “*Mazowsze, Poland*, Tourist Poster.” *Galeria Plakatu Polskiego*, 2015. http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_polska_mazowsze/pl.

Fig. 16 Ryszard Kaja, 2014, “*Koziolek Matolek (Matolek the Billy-Goat) – Pacanów, Poland*, Tourist Poster.” *Galeria Plakatu Polskiego*, 2015. http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_polska_pacanow/pl.

ILLUSTRATIONS cont.

Fig. 17 Ryszard Kaja, 2014, “*Zalipie, Poland's Painted Village*, Tourist Poster.” Galeria Plakatu Polskiego, 2015.
http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_polska_zalipie/pl.

Fig. 18 Ryszard Kaja, 2013, “*Świnoujście, Poland*, Tourist Poster.” Galeria Plakatu Polskiego, 2015.
http://www.poster.pl/poster/kaja_ryszard_polska_swinoujscie/pl.

Fig. 19 Kaja, Ryszard, 2010, “*Exhibition Poster for the 22nd International Poster Biennial in Warsaw, Poland*.” Wieslaw Rosocha, “Ryszard Kaja poster exhibition in Warsaw,” *Rene Wanner's Poster Page*, May 31, 2010.
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Fig. 19 *Exhibition Poster for the 22nd Intl. Poster Biennial in Warsaw, 2010*

Fig. 19 Ryszard Kaja, “Exhibition Poster for the 22nd International Poster Biennial in Warsaw, Poland, 2010.” Wieslaw Rosocha, “Ryszard Kaja poster exhibition in Warsaw,” *Rene Wanner's Poster Page*, May 31, 2010. <http://www.posterpage.ch/div/news10/n100531e.htm>.