



To arms! Sabre Fencing as Polish National Heritage Exhibition at the Jagiellonian University Museum (Aug-Nov 2018)

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This temporary exhibition aimed at exploring the origin of Polish sabre fencing as a cultural heritage, and at displaying a contemporary discipline of historical European martial art. Compared to previous exhibitions about martial culture which I have visited¹, this one gave a greater space to practice and pragmatical

aspects of fighting. This tendency was already visible with the latest exhibition in Chemnitz (2017), *Die Kunst dye dich zyreß*, where a HEMA researcher and practitioner (Thore Wilkens) was also involved. The Krakow exhibition comes from a private initiative, which has turn into a fruitful collaboration with respected institutions (National Museum of Krakow, History Museum of Krakow, the Jagiellonian Library and the Jagiellonian University Museum). The exhibition itself owes much to Jerzi Miklaszewski (Silkfencing team, Krakow) and Malgorzata Taborska (Jagiellonian University Museum, Krakow). The melting pot of different skills between a museum professional and a martial arts practitioner and researcher held up to some of my expectations about an ideal exhibition dedicated to martial arts, but at the same time left me with some disappointments.

I. THE SPACES OF THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition was organised in five rooms in the beautiful and old collegium of the Jagiellonian University Museum – the oldest university in Northern Europe. One (independent) extra outdoor space in the professor's garden introduced the story of HEMA on five panels with pictures, for the visitors just wandering in the garden independently from the exhibition located in the collegium itself.

¹ Daniel Jaquet, "The art of fighting under glass: Review of museum exhibitions displaying fight books, 1968-2017", *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 6/1 (2018), pp. 47-62.

² Uwe Fiedler and Thore Wilkens (eds.), *"Kunst dye dich zyreß": Fechten als Mittel persönlicher und institutioneller Repräsentation* (Chemnitz: Schlossberg Museum, 2017).

I.1. The sword as a symbol

The first room looked into the sword as an element of status and symbol. Sabres worn by academics at the university (with the regulations of Jagiellonian university and a portrait painting), but also sword used for ceremonies, including polish coronation swords. The displays included some original early modern woodcuts, from the museum's collection.

I.2. The swords' type and related practice

The two main rooms of the exhibition focused on the swords' (mainly sabres') types and history. Tracing the multi-cultural history of the sabre is not an easy task, but the installations managed to guide the visitor through the main lines of origins and cultural encounters which formed the different types of sabres. The rooms included three interactive displays (see below). This interactive experience was put in perspective by many panels with texts, drawings, artwork and charts, and by original sabres, a large number of which were loans from the national museum, including rare and beautifully decorated examples.

Each room had screens displaying either interviews of the curators or HEMA practitioners, or demonstration of historical European martial arts in the beautiful surrounding of the old inner court of the university. An installation worth mentioning was composed of two table cases and panels, explaining the construction processes of the two main types of sabre and the production of "Damascus steel". It included metallographic zoom-ins, allowing to put the concepts into perspective, based on metallurgic studies on the original blades.

I.3. The sword and its books

The last room focused on fight books and the documentation of martial arts practices. The famous early fifteenth and early sixteenth century fight books kept in the Jagiellonian library were sadly not on display, but the facsimile of the "Gladiatoria"³ and pictures of the "Goliath"⁴ were there to evoke them. A few printed treatises, and original documents related to martial practices covered the interrelation between the written word, the drawn figure and the embodied knowledge of fighting.

I.4. Outro

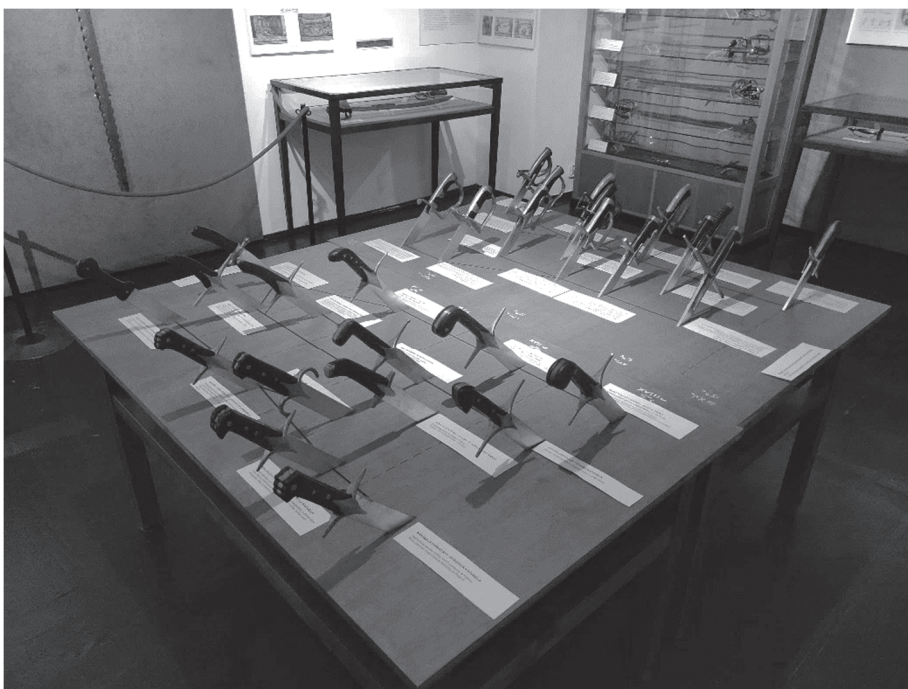
The way out of the exhibition featured HEMA equipment, practice swords and protective equipment, as well as objects and documents telling the story of the turning of sword fighting practices into a sport (in the 19th c. meaning of the term). It included also foils and old fencing masks, next to the nylon swords for contemporary HEMA practice.

³ Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Germ.Quart.16.

⁴ Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Germ.Quart.2020.

II. REVIEW

Some of the main strengths of the exhibition were the interactive spaces with innovative design which allowed the visitor to handle simulators to experience how it actually feels while moving, into a restricted space for security reasons. It was a necessary feature since many of the texts of the exhibition approached embodied knowledge as relevant element playing a decisive role into the form of the objects. This kind of observation usually is dull without the possibility to experience them. Another display presented the evolution of the handle of the “sabre” on a tree-like display where the visitor could take the different type of handle in its hand. This was a welcome addition to the panels displaying more classical typology of sabre blades. No reference was made on the secondary literature used to prepare the display, although the eyes of the specialist can easily pinpoint specific terminologies or connection with reference works.



Display “Functional development of hilts throughout ages”. Photo of the author

The discourses of the exhibition were ambitious, attempting to pave the way to a history of the sabre from late Antiquity (nomadic tribes in Central Asia) to modern times (European and Asian ordinance sabre). The overall definition for this evolutive type of weapon was done in comparison with other types of weapons, namely swords and falchions, which were “closed when hot”, and the long knife which were “closed with pegs or rivets”, like sabres. It then identified different evolution lines in connection with

spaces of encounter between Asian and European cultures, which led to the development of specific forms of guards.

Addressing issues on such a large scope, and dealing with several developments on the side⁵, induced the need for a very large amount of exhibition texts. This aspect represents a downside of the exhibition overall. The ratio of text was too important and sometime repetitive. The bilingual texts (polish and English) allowed international reach, but several typos or mistranslations left on the English version lessened the value of it. Moreover, several editorial choices reflected the influence of the research trends in the communities of HEMA practitioners. For example, referring to fight books with their shelf mark only, instead of the mention of both the location and the shelf mark, is a common habit within these communities, whereas for the lay audience, this represents an issue in identifying the primary sources. Also, many ideas touched upon theories circulated in the same communities, lacking of historical studies to support it. Some of these may well be proven correct, some other not, but that cannot be appreciated without proper studies. For example, the use of concepts taken from the wiki-like platform “Wiktenauer” (www.wiktenauer.com), especially several naming of group of sources or dating is doubtful from a scholarly point of view. The re-use of it should be used with more precaution in a museum exhibition.

In the end, I was very impressed by the exhibition, especially by the range of topics addressed and the focus on martial arts practices throughout. Both the collections of the National Museum and of the Jagiellonian University Museum were cleverly put in value through the exhibition main lines, with a good variety of objects and document to enlighten martial practices. The different foci on functional aspects of weapon use with the interactive installations was a very welcome and refreshing approach, compared to more classical museological practices. The inclusion of the audio-visual material within the rooms was also a nice addition, but could have benefited from more advanced technologies or other types of display to make the most of it. These explorations were another great step on how to display Historical European Martial Arts to a wider audience.

III. PICTURES OF THE SPACES OF THE EXHIBITION

I thank the curators to have provided pictures of the different rooms (photo by Jagiellonian University Museum).

⁵ Some side developments were irrelevant for the main topic of the exhibition, but not for the promotional side of the 21st century HEMA practice. For example, presenting several disciplines such as the Spanish Montante, German longsword or other disciplines, could have been avoided.







