

Olga Boznańska is one of the most renowned Polish painters, classified in the narrow group of the most eminent female European artists. Born in Krakow to a French mother and a Polish father, she began her artistic education in her birth town. Since 1886 she continued to study painting in Munich. Encouraged by her early success, in 1898 she settled in Paris, where her career as a portrait painter flourished.

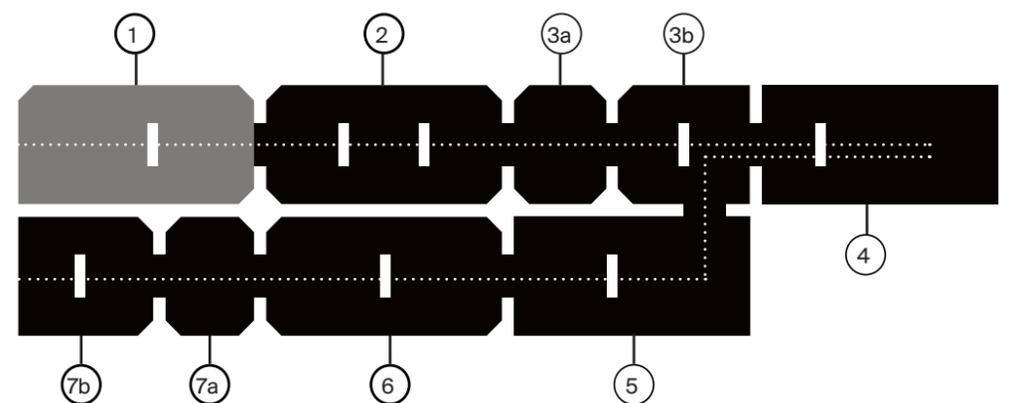
At the exhibition organized on the 150th anniversary of the artist's birth, the National Museum in Warsaw is presenting nearly 150 of Boznańska's works from various periods of her activity and several canvases by other artists, both those with whom she is traditionally confronted and ones opening up new contexts. Contrasting Boznańska's paintings with masterpieces by such names as Diego Velázquez, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Édouard Manet, Eugène Carrière, Henri Fantin-Latour and Édouard Vuillard as well as Japanese woodcuts will place her work within the global artistic context. We are presenting the most valuable of Boznańska's works, not only from Polish public collections and the Polish Library in Paris, but also those, which have never been shown in Poland before: held at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, Ca' Pesaro Gallery in Venice, Telfair Museum of Art in Savannah as well as the Lviv Gallery of Paintings and the Polish Museum in Chicago. Paintings purchased to the collections of these galleries already during Boznańska's lifetime testify to the importance of her art on the international scene. The exhibition is further enriched by works from Polish and foreign private collections, rarely on public display.

The exhibition presents a subject-based arrangement of Boznańska's *oeuvre*, dividing it into portraits, with a designated part devoted to images of children and the subject of motherhood, urban landscapes, workshop interiors and still lifes. Portraiture is a realm in which Boznańska excelled, which is why portraits occupy the largest part of the exhibition. The figure of the artist herself will come to life through a series of self-portraits, photographs, drawings and surviving memorabilia collected in a space meant to reconstruct the atmosphere of her studio.

ROOM 1

A born portrait painter

The exhibition opens with a presentation of **early portraits** created in late 19th century in Boznańska's native Krakow and Munich, where she spent almost twelve years of her life. At the time she painted mostly portraits of persons from her closest surroundings: family members, peers, neighbours as well as close friends or admirers. Her art was influenced by academic education and old masters, whose works she studied in the museums of Munich and Vienna. For her portraits, Boznańska found inspiration in the art of **Diego Velázquez**. In 1890, she created full-figure images that follow realist conventions: the sizeable *On Good Friday* [no. 4] and *In the Orangery* [no. 176, presented at the Gallery of 19th Century Art] as well as *Horsewoman* [no. 8] and *Portrait of Zofia Fedorowicz* [no. 9]. They prove that the 25-year-old artist already had a vast knowledge of world painting trends. By setting her works in a defined interior, Boznańska wanted to demonstrate the entire artistry of her painting. In portraits depicting $\frac{3}{4}$ of the model's figure, she focused mainly on the sitter's face and hands, which would later become a trademark feature of her art. Boznańska's palette evolved from dark shades, through lighter and more diversified harmonies of vermilions and bronzes, to refined, pearlescent greys and greens.



ROOMS 2 AND 3b

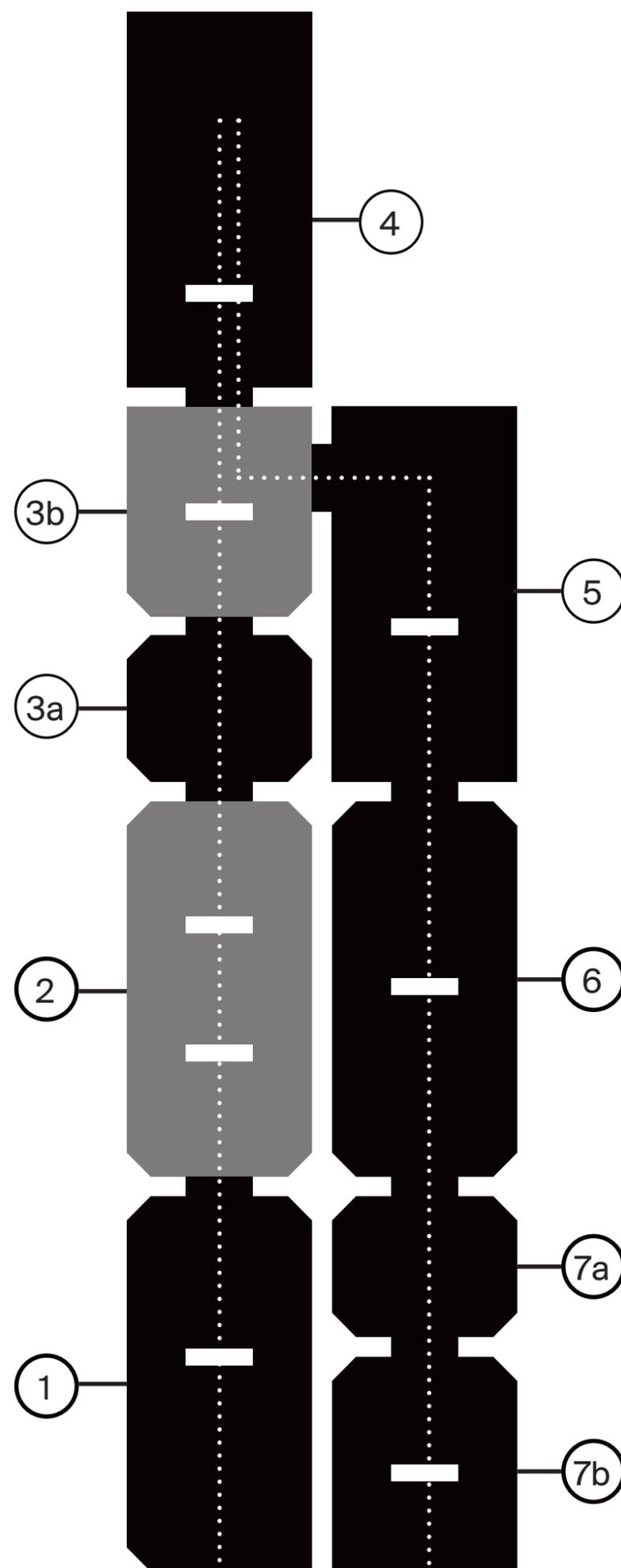
Portraits of children, inspirations and contexts

Images of children are a recurring motif in Olga Boznańska's art, although they absorbed her attention the most during her Krakow-Munich period. The artist depicts children on their own: with pensive expressions, surprised eyes, facing the viewer with reserve. Authors discussing female painters active at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries often exaggerate how they were deprived of appropriate education, which would have enabled them to take up important topics such as historical or religious scenes, and thus forced to depict scenes of domestic life and motherhood. Boznańska achieved brilliance in these works, while such paintings as *Girl with Chrysanthemums* [no. 29], *Two Children on the Stairs* [no. 63] or *Portrait of Helena and Władysława Chmielarczyk* [no. 177, presented at the Gallery of 19th Century Art] are some of her best-known canvases, which have come to represent her *oeuvre*.

In them, the artist also enters in a dialogue with the art of distinguished masters. *Portrait of a Boy in a School Uniform* [no. 26] as well as other images of children allude to the style of **James Abbott McNeill Whistler**, whose art Boznańska became acquainted in Munich. Whistler's masterpiece *Harmony in Grey and Green: Miss Cicely Alexander* [no. 23] is an example of continuously seeking inspiration in the oeuvre of Diego Velázquez. In her series of images of golden-haired girls, Boznańska also refers to the art of the ingenious Spaniard and his numerous portraits of infantas at the court of Madrid.

Boznańska surrendered to the charm of Japanese art, which had fascinated the artistic circles of Europe since the 1880s, already in Munich. Whistler's canvases, abundant in references to Japanese prints, could also have served as an inspiration for such experiments. Boznańska used patterns from **Japanese graphic arts**, painting urban landscapes she saw from the window or refined scenes composed along the diagonal, in which the model was posed against the open window. She equipped her female sitters with props such as a Japanese umbrella, a *uchiwa* fan or a porcelain cup. She often had them dressed in kimonos or had their hair tied in tall buns modelled on Oriental coiffures.

Her depictions of motherhood resonate with the echoes of **Eugène Carrière's** family scenes, although Boznańska's rich colour palette is far removed from the monochrome registers of the French symbolist. The tranquillity and tenderness emanating from these canvases could stem from a longing for family life, which the young artist renounced by devoting herself entirely to art.



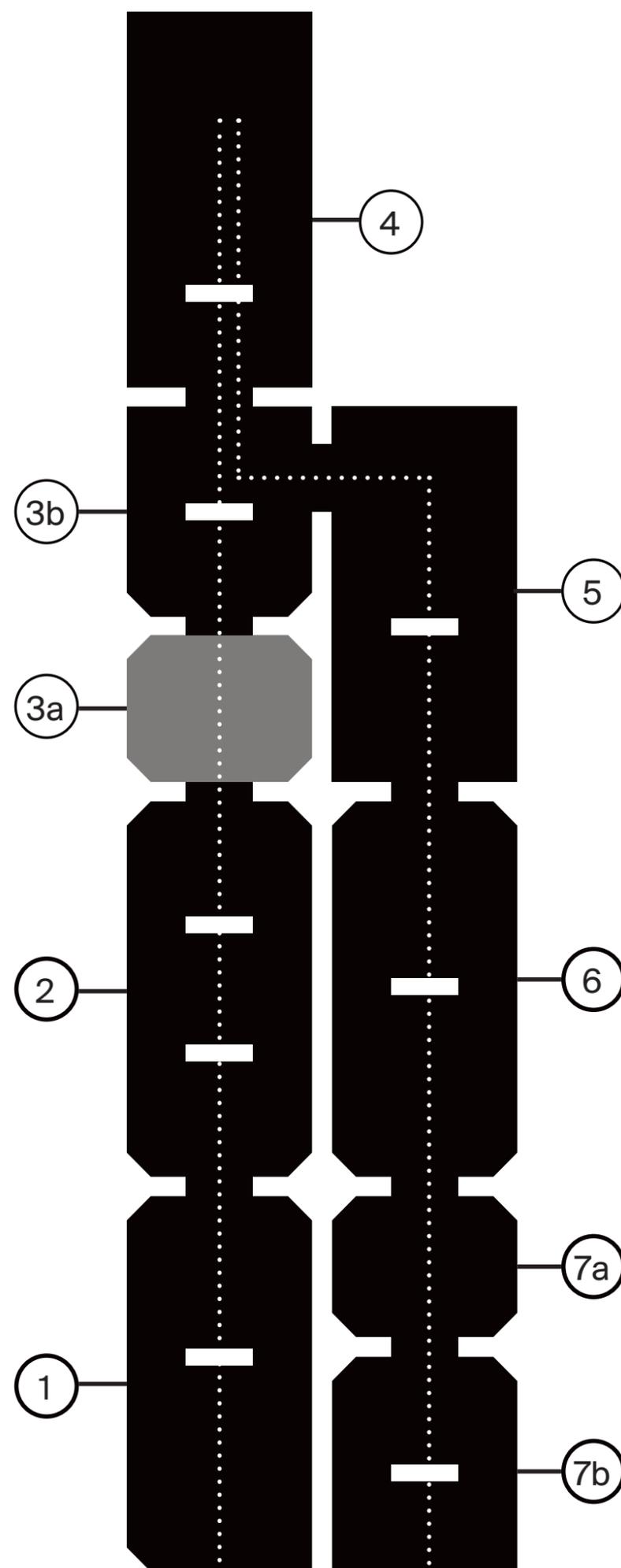
ROOM 3a

Portraits of the city

Landscapes are few and far between in Olga Boznańska's art. The artist was not excessively fond of this painting genre and did not like to work outdoors. However, she employed the age-old trick of painting Nature as a view stretching beyond the window. Even in her early genre scenes, created around 1890, such as *Flower Girls* [no. 43], *Breton Woman* [no. 42] or *Portrait with a Japanese Parasol* [no. 40], the landscape already plays a fundamental role in the composition. Human figures, which the artist places in the window, become a link between the intimate, cosy interior and the – mostly urban – view in the background.

In her earliest urban landscapes – *Landscape Motif I* and *II* [nos. 46, 47] – faint greenery and flaking plasters on the yard of the artist's family tenement in Krakow provided an excuse to introduce onto the canvas abstract patches based on an interesting colour arrangement. A view from a window in Munich onto the street below [no. 48], illuminated by the rays of the setting sun and already lit lanterns, represents – together with a view of the Pisa cathedral [no. 52] – an example of a nocturnal landscape.

In Paris, the artist registers the city looking from the street level towards the perspective stretching towards the elevated point of juncture. When in October 1907 she moved to a high floor of a tenement house located on the busy Parisian boulevard of Montparnasse, she gained a new observation point: on the one hand onto the streets and intersection, on the other – onto a thicket of trees on a neighbouring yard. The quick, brilliant, small landscape studies by Boznańska not only testify to her profound knowledge of Japanese graphic arts, but also to her tendencies of painterly synthesis evolving towards abstraction.



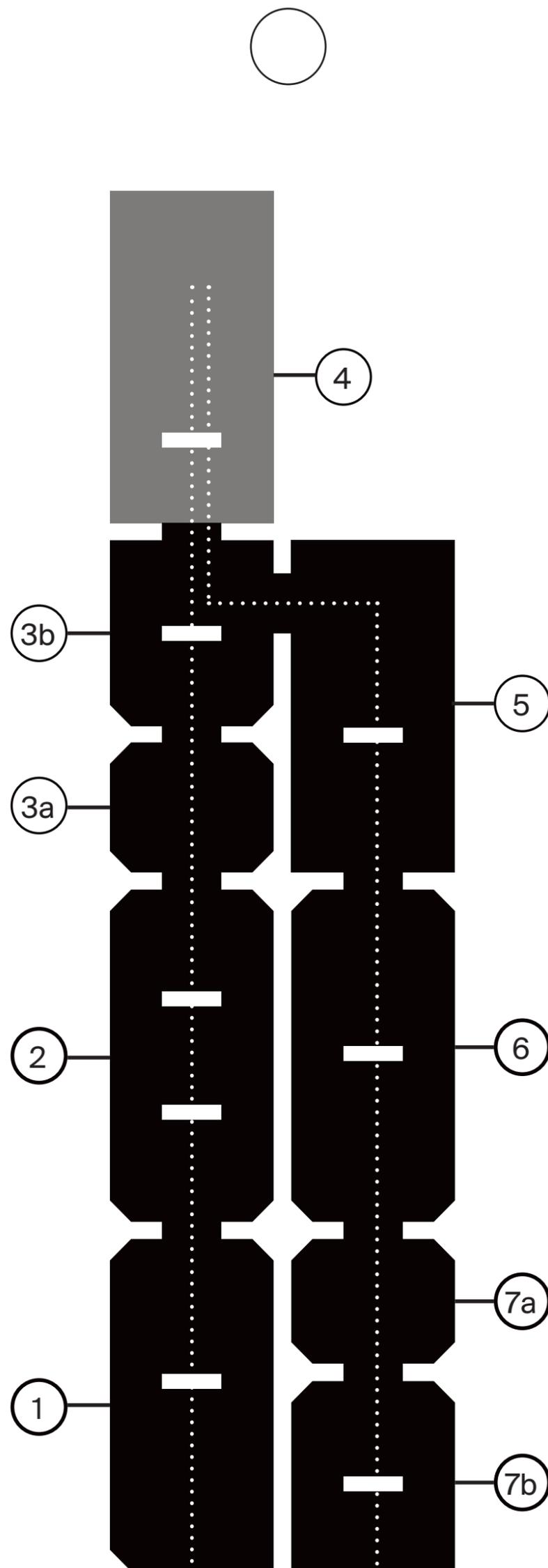
ROOM 4

Self-portraits and views of the studio

A special place in Boznańska's diverse portrait gallery is occupied by **self-portraits**, which not only reflect the passing of time, but also the changing personality of the artist. The claim that Boznańska only painted herself when the sitter failed to turn up to an arranged session seems rather removed from the truth. Over the years, with pride and courage, she created poignant images of herself in the spirit of purely verist, merciless analysis. The attributes of painting are rare in these depictions. Boznańska's early self-portraits, on account of the use of deep black, may suggest inspiration in Old Master paintings as well as the art of **Édouard Manet**.

Scenes from the studio, which acts both as the arena and witness of artistic struggles, are where the artist performs an analysis of her creative process. This is where a work of art is born, this is where the model is stripped – both literally and metaphorically, this is also the place frequented by friends and audience. The studio is also where Boznańska's aesthetic preferences come to the fore: in the form of various attributes, decorations such as Japanese prints or an umbrella, or citations from her own works and those of others, for example Diego Velázquez.

The cosy interior of the atelier, secluded from worldly noise, represents a sanctuary of safety for Boznańska, provoking personal reflections and intimate conversations on art and – most likely – also life. The studio scenes are imbued with the atmospheric mood that evokes the style of the Intimists, with whom the artist would later share exhibition spaces. Atelier interiors featuring people are painted chiefly in the 1890s. With time, Boznańska will relinquish the anecdote and limit herself to depicting the interior of her studio devoid of any human presence. The studio will transform into a still life of sorts, revealing the secret life of objects surrounding the artist.



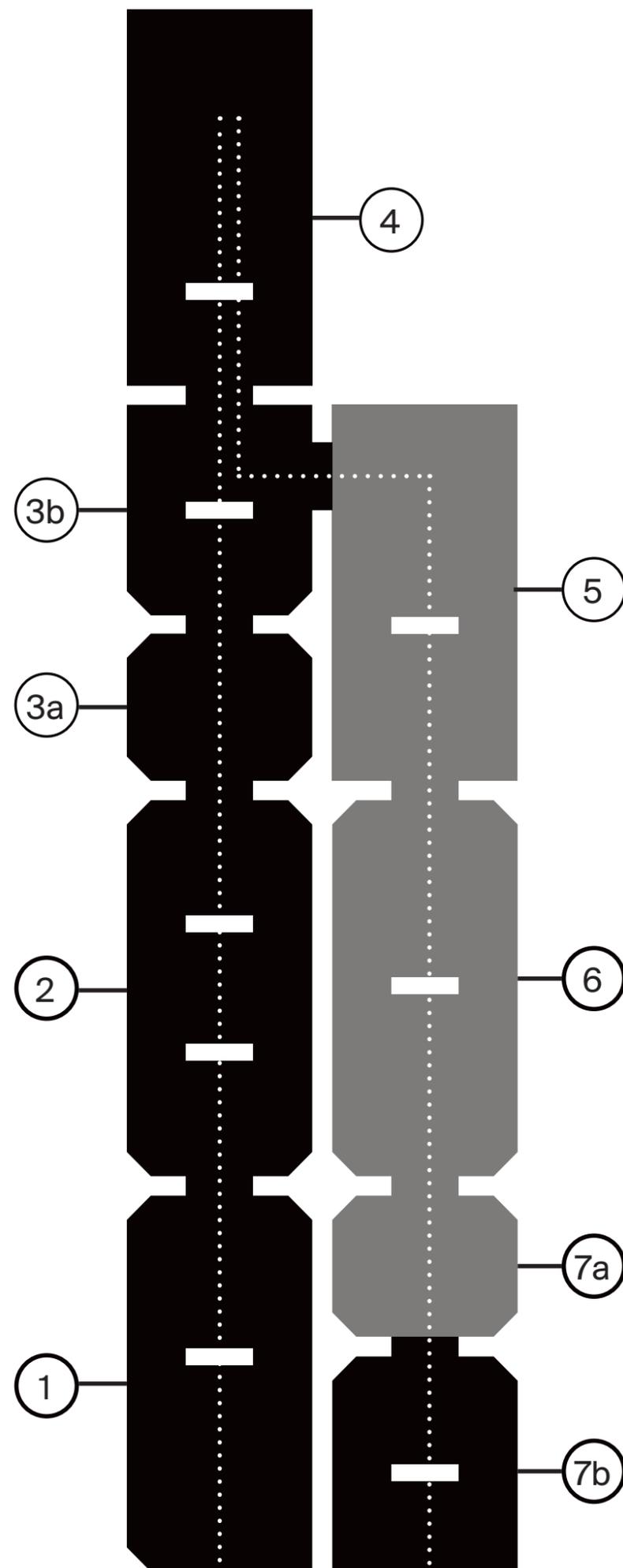
ROOMS 5, 6, 7a

Portraits

Olga Boznańska was first and foremost a portrait painter, whose brush brought to life numerous images – of persons whose identity would now be impossible to discover as well as well-known, often truly famous models. These included many intellectuals, writers, philosophers, artists, musicians and collectors stemming from various countries and cultural circles. Their portraits came to life slowly, in the atmosphere of lengthy conversations, in the course of numerous sessions. Sometimes the artist would return to the same sitter several times, creating insightful psychological studies.

In terms of portraiture Boznańska achieved absolute mastery, making full use of her artistic and analytical skills. These are sheer gems of painting, based on elegant composition and refined colour harmonies. Boznańska always felt chiefly as a colourist; her palette evolved. In the early Parisian period, the artist took to silvery-blue greens; colourful whites came to the fore between 1910 and 1918, only to give way to darker and warmer shades after World War I. Towards the end of her life, the artist introduced bronzes and beiges, at the same time using the natural colour of unpainted cardboard – her favourite support.

The chronological display of portraits enables viewers to discover and understand the stylistic evolution of Boznańska's *oeuvre*. Since she moved to Paris in 1898, her style was often compared to the painting of Eugène Carrière, while the artist herself felt most associated with **Édouard Vuillard**, Intimist and member of Les Nabis. The refined, decorative portraits set in the studio interior, which emanated a poetic and intimate atmosphere, were thus described by the influential critic Alfred Basler: "This is lordly, refined, sophisticated."



ROOM 7b

Still lifes

Olga Boznańska began to paint **still lifes** already during her stay in Munich, drawing inspiration from 17th-century Netherlandish masters, whose works, following the most exquisite traditions of the genre, she saw and copied at the Alte Pinakothek. She also learned from famous Frenchmen: Jean-Siméon Chardin, active in the 18th century, and **Henri Fantin-Latour**, one generation her senior. However, Boznańska's vision is entirely original – it is hard to distinguish any direct models there.

Images of flowers with slightly wilted petals, taking on sublime colours, also form a recurring motif in her art. In these paintings, usually rather small and often presented on various occasions to the artist's friends, Boznańska rarely focuses on botanical details, turning her brush to expert renditions of decorative vases and other vessels. Flowers also appear as an element of portraits or genre scenes, in which sometimes – like in the large-format *In the Orangery* from 1890 [no. 176, exhibited at the Gallery of 19th Century Art] – they form the basic motif.

In the brilliant series of still lifes with a Japanese doll, dated to c. 1918 [no. 169], in which petty objects are depicted with the painterly skill suggesting highly valuable trinkets, the artist takes particular pleasure in analysing the play of lights reflected in various materials, such as glass or porcelain.

