

ANNA RUDEK-ŚMIECHOWSKA



WŁADYSŁAW TEODOR
BENDA

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BENDA

The story of an illustrator and mask-maker



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W.T. Benda in the company of his masks,
photograph, 1920.

FOREWORD

The POLONIKA National Institute for Polish Cultural Heritage Abroad produces numerous publications within its program of broadly envisaged scholarly and research activities, as well as those intended for a wider readership. These publications include monographs aimed at documenting and preserving knowledge on the significant presence of Poles beyond the frontiers of their own country. Among them is the present volume, the first ever book in English on the artist Władysław Teodor Benda (1873–1948).

This volume is the result of research by the author, Anna Rudek-Śmiechowska, conducted in connection with the composition of her doctoral dissertation submitted to the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. The author concentrated her attention on the subject over a number of years, including research in the United States on a scholarship provided by The Kosciuszko Foundation in New York, which made it possible for her to bring together materials and documentation regarding the seventy-five-year life and artistic activities of W. T. Benda, one of the most recognizable American illustrators as well as the creator of theatrical masks.

Benda came from a well-known Kraków family that also boasted the celebrated actress Helena Modjeska (known in Poland by her surname Modrzejewska) among its members. He was born in Poznań in 1873, and had rather a peripatetic childhood and youth, moving with his musician father Szymon Benda to a succession of cities: Kraków, Tarnów, Vienna, and San Francisco. His earliest attempts as an artist were undertaken at the School of Fine Arts (now the Academy of Fine Arts) in Kraków, followed by private lessons in Vienna. In 1898 the artist's father, together with his family (his wife, two daughters and son), joined his sister Helena Modjeska in California. Although this was originally envisaged as just a visit, it turned into a permanent residence. The family settled in the United States, where its descendants still live.

In America W.T. Benda embarked on his life as an artist, initially working on commissions and projects for his aunt Helena, and then independently as a popular illustrator. His illustrations appeared in over forty different periodicals, and he received prestigious commissions from the editors of *Hearst's International*, *Scribner's*, *Collier's*, *Life* and other titles. His drawings featured in books by popular writers (in the years 1918–1924 they included 21 illustrations for works by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) as well as in advertisements and posters, among them a series of recruiting posters for the Polish Army in France. Benda was also “the father of theatrical masks,” producing these in papier mâché and presenting them in revues staged by the most celebrated

director of the period, John Murray Anderson, and elsewhere. He unquestionably earned a place in the history of “the Golden Age of American Illustration” as well as that of American theater.

This volume on W.T. Benda, published here for the first time in English, is illustrated with numerous examples of his work, many of which did not appear in the original Polish edition. It contributes to our knowledge of the endeavors of Poles beyond their own country’s borders, also recording a fascinating period and the activities of an exceptional artistic personality. The present monograph, written with discrimination, examines Benda’s various activities and discusses them against the background of the histories of illustration and masks. The author also summarizes and evaluates the artist’s activities within an American context, which constitutes a significant aspect of this publication while also providing suggestions for further and more intensive research into the subject.