

Material Culture and Polish Chicago (Chicago, 2–3 Dec 20)

University of Chicago, Dec 2–03, 2020

Deadline: May 31, 2020

Agata Zborowska, Warsaw

„What They Brought/What They Changed: Material Culture and Polish Chicago”

International conference at The University of Chicago

This conference concerns Polish Chicago from the perspective of immigrants’ possessions and their material legacy. The majority of Polish immigrants arrived to the Windy City from a land of economic hardship and political oppression, thus they brought very little: common things limited in quantity that answered basic travel demands (trunks, travel documents) and everyday necessities such as clothes or bedding. At the same time, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Chicago Polonia built a number of monumental eclectic churches (the so-called Polish Cathedrals) – the major and lasting intervention in Chicago’s urban space. Thus among the questions the conference will address will be the striking initial disparity between the Polish immigrants’ conditions of labor in the Yards (combined with a simplicity of material ecology at their homes) and the churches’ splendor; in particular, we wish to examine how this incongruence has diminished over time to reflect larger developments in social class (gentrification), material culture, technology (photography, automobiles, etc.), ethnicity, faith, and aesthetic sensitivities, notwithstanding generational differences.

With their tangible belongings, Poles also brought some intangible values – their physical strength and energy to be translated into the city’s work force – including almost ethereal hopes and expectations, memories and anxieties that connected their past with their future, their old home with the new world. Therefore, this conference will discuss how the objects that were brought over or construed here, regardless of their scale and material, either devotional, educational or utilitarian, negotiated the past and the future through a perspective of national identity to forge it anew as a Polish-American iteration of political struggle and economic inequality.

Please send a title and a brief abstract of your paper (300–500 words) before May 31, 2020 to the conference organizers:

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Reference:

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