

Peasant-Mania

The Peasant Home, from Reality to Idealization

Julia Maraj



Józef Chełmoński, *Indian Summer (Babie Lato)*, 1875. From National Museum in Warsaw, Poland.

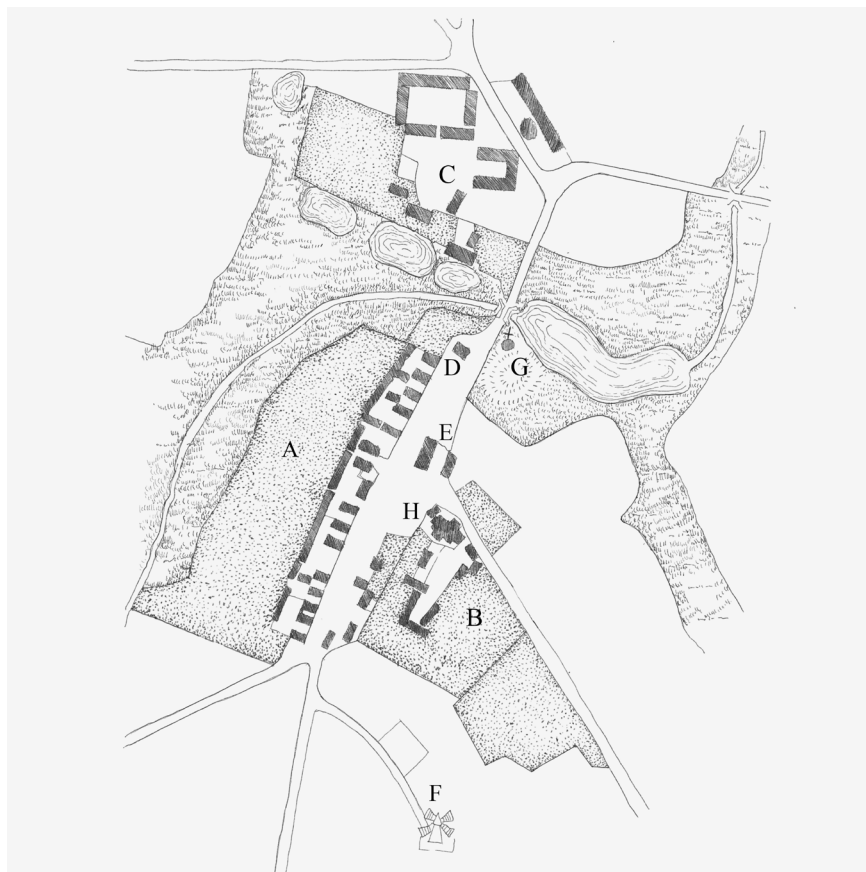
The architecture of Polish peasant homes occupies a space between the lived and the imagined, the material and the symbolic, all contained within the self-sufficient world of the village, where life follows the rhythms of the land, the seasons, and the struggle for survival. In the context of nineteenth-century national trends, this essay examines the Polish village, both as a lived reality shaped by centuries of systematic neglect and as a romanticized ideal celebrated in art, literature, and patriotic messages. This work challenges the notion of “vernacular,” not intended as an expression of heritage but as a signifier shaped by socio-economic conditions and external forces. By uncovering the true dimension of peasants’ existence, it traces the evolution of selected rural environments and their typologies, from forgotten entities to national icons. Employing ethnographic research, historical accounts, and iconography, the essay explores the intersection of folk and high culture. Ultimately, it reveals how the depictions of peasant life, customs and architecture—particularly during the period of “Peasant-Mania”—helped to obscure the realities of poverty and labor while fostering a powerful message of unity in a time of foreign suppression.

THE VILLAGE ROMANCE

The idealization of the rural world stood in contrast to the actual experience of the peasantry, whose lives were deeply rooted in the confines of a single village. Unlike those of any other social group, the lives of peasants were tied to one place, beginning and ending with the borders of the same village. In contrast, even the poorest urban dwellers often relocated in search of better living conditions. The peasant, however, remained bound to the same land—a condition initially enforced by serfdom, which legally

tied them to their village and strictly prohibited them from leaving. To the peasant, the village was not merely a location within the broader landscape but a self-contained universe. It was the site of their birth, life, and death³ a space where not only opportunities for movement were scarce, but where even the desire to travel was virtually nonexistent.¹ As a result, generations of peasants lived in the same homes, cultivated the same lands, and engaged in the same traditions. This isolation shaped not only their physical environment but also the symbolic meaning of the village in the national imagination.²

The Polish village itself was organized according to systems rooted in feudal times that, once established, remained largely unchanged for centuries.³ However, the concept of the “village” extended beyond its physical form to encompass its socio-economic and cultural significance. Far more than a picturesque escape or a *locus amoenus*, the village was a dynamic entity shaped by the realities of rural life. It also served as a subject within both high and folk culture, reflecting the diverse ways the village was depicted—whether as a symbol of national pride or a site of hardship.⁴ Nevertheless, its depiction in literary and historical discourse—shaped by the perspectives of the privileged elites—often portrayed rural life through the lens of condescending romanticism or ideological utility. From Renaissance Idylls inspired by classical antiquity to the Romantic idealization of the “noble peasant,” these portrayals masked the harsh realities of feudal deprivation, economic dependency, social marginalization, and systemic exploitation.⁵



Village plan. Drawn by the author, adapted from Tomasz Czerwiński, *Budownictwo ludowe w Polsce* (Warszawa: Muza, 2006), 42.

1 Kamil Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2024), 6.

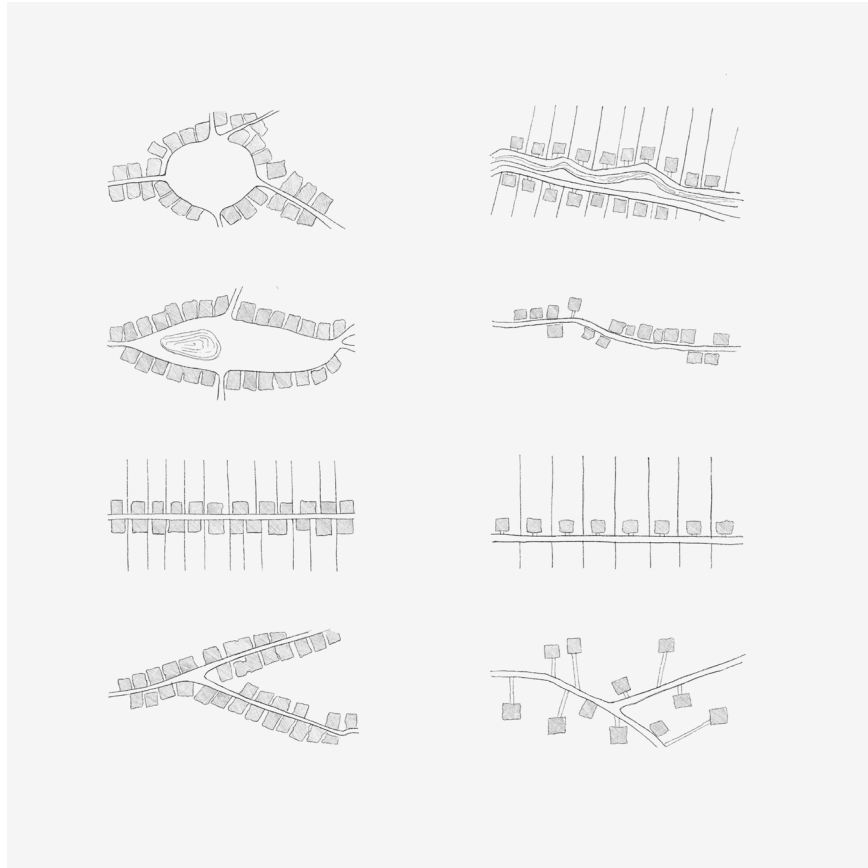
2 Ibid., 8.

3 Tomasz Czerwiński, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce* (Warszawa: Muza, 2006), 42.

4 Andrzej Juszczyk, “Między Ideą a Rzeczywistością: Obraz wsi w Polskiej Literaturze i Kulturze Popularnej,” in *Obce/Swoje: Miasto i Wieś w literaturze i Kulturze Ukraińskiej XX i XXI wieku*, ed. Katarzyna Glinianowicz and Katarzyna Kotyńska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Scriptum, 2015), 12–13.

5 Ibid., 17–20.

In 1864, historian Zygmunt Gloger described the state of the village as he observed it in his work on wooden architecture.⁶ At that time, the village consisted of about fifty small, shuttered homes, mostly built in the eighteenth century, with no hope for improvement. Under serfdom, peasants had neither the means nor the intention to improve their dwellings, as landlords dictated their labor obligations based on the advancement of their households.⁷ An anonymous peasant complaint addressed to the Polish Parliament from 1790 illustrates this reality, as peasants described their dwellings not as “houses” but as “sooty huts.”⁸



Types of the arrangements of peasant farmsteads within different villages. Drawn by the author, adapted from Czerwiński, *Budownictwo ludowe w Polsce*, 43.

These dire living conditions were further documented by both foreign visitors and Jesuit scholars. In the seventeenth century, a German traveler, Uryk Werdum, compared peasant homes to Noah’s Ark, noting that entire families and livestock crowded around the hearth for warmth.⁹ A more critical assessment on the treatment of the peasantry came from Piotr Świtkowski, who addressed the King of Poland in 1782. While the King prioritized funding lavish estates, he neglected his rural subjects, leaving them to live in decaying huts. Świtkowski criticized these conditions as degrading, arguing that even animals deserved better shelter.¹⁰ Similarly, Sebastian Sierakowski explored these themes in his 1812 work on architecture, underscoring the critical role of peasants as the largest segment

6 Zygmunt Gloger, *Budownictwo Drzewne i Wyroby z Drzewa w Dawnej Polsce*, vol.1 (Warszawa: Druk Wł. Łazarskiego, 1907), 146.

7 Marian Magdziak, *Od Chłopskiej Chałupy do Domu Współczesnego Rolnika* (Łódź: Politechnika Łódzka, 2018), 19.

8 Kamil Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2024), 11.

9 Franciszek Ksawery Liske, *Cudzoziemcy w Polsce: L. Naker, U. Werdum, J. Bernoulli, J.E. Biester, J. J. Kausch* (Lviv: Gubrynowicz i Schmidt, 1876), 98–99.

10 Magdziak, *Od Chłopskiej Chałupy do Domu Współczesnego Rolnika*, 22.

of society responsible for feeding the nation, revealing the broader social indifference of those in power.¹¹

The fate of Polish villagers was strongly tied to the country's shifting political landscape, particularly the partitions of Poland (1772–1795), which divided the nation between Russia, Prussia, and Austria, erasing Polish independence for 123 years.¹² In the face of these events, nineteenth-century agrarian reforms marked the first step toward the emancipation of peasantry.¹³ These reforms aimed to expand peasants' personal freedom by limiting *corvée* labor, regulating land use, and granting access to communal resources—ultimately abolishing the obligations of serfdom and transitioning rural communities from a feudal to a more modern economic structure.¹⁴ However, fueled by deep social divisions and tensions within the rural communities, these reforms became a strategic tool for political gain over socio-economic needs.¹⁵

These events also had a great impact on the further development of rural environments. New, larger village types emerged, adapted to updated farming methods and property regulations.¹⁶ With personal freedom and land ownership, peasants lived longer and began investing in larger, more complex homes, as observed by ethnographer Oskar Kolber.¹⁷ Similarly, in 1904—forty years after his initial visit—Zygmunt Gloger revisited a village and reported that only two of the old houses remained, with the rest being replaced by newer, more modern structures. The author was impressed by how fast the freed community could progress when given the opportunity.¹⁸ However, this did not mark the end of hardship. Centuries of oppression had left peasants resistant to change, with many refusing to embrace innovation. Widespread illiteracy made it difficult for them to navigate the legal systems, leaving them vulnerable in the market economy.¹⁹ While the agrarian reforms led to profound socio-economic changes, they also exposed the ongoing struggles of rural communities, from inadequate resources to uneven progress, ultimately defining the architectural evolution of peasant homes, which became central to their way of life.²⁰

THE PEASANT HOME

The peasant home is a building type central to the life of a typical rural homestead. The nineteenth-century dwelling, the focus of this study, was a product of necessity, adaptability, and the generational knowledge of local carpenters. Through continuous repetition of their craft, these carpenters eventually created the distinctive home types found in every village.²¹ Ethnographers, such as Marian Pokropek, identified up to forty regional variations of peasant dwellings; yet those differences were not intentional expressions of regional identity but rather a result of accessibility and immediate needs.²² Despite the variety in design, peasant homes were uniform in their simplicity, serving as shelters rather than as displays of local pride or style, embodying the pragmatic approach of rural communities. Building on this, the following analysis examines their structure, materiality, and spatial organization in order to understand how local conditions and evolving needs shaped peasant homes.²³

11 Sebastian Sierakowski, *Architektura Obejmująca Wszelki Gatunek Murowania i Budowania*. Tom I (Kraków: W Drukarni Akademickiej, 1812), 255–257.

12 G. Shaw-Lefevre, Baron Eversley, *The Partitions of Poland* (London: T. F. Unwin, Ltd, 1915), 5–6.

13 Krzysztof Ślusarek, *Uwłaszczenie Chłopów w Galicji Zachodniej* (Kraków: Historia Iagellonica, 2002), 17.

14 Ibid., 18–21.

15 Piotr Hapanowicz and Mariusz Jabłoński, eds., *Ludzie – Wydarzenia – Tradycja, 1815–1846* (Kraków: Strażnicy Pamięci, 2015), 29–33.

16 Tomasz Czerwiński, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce* (Warszawa: Muza, 2006), 5.

17 Oskar Kolberg, *Lud* (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1888), 210–212.

18 Zygmunt Gloger, *Budownictwo Drzewne i Wyroby z Drzewa w Dawnej Polsce*, vol.1 (Warszawa: Druk Wł. Łazarskiego, 1907), 147.

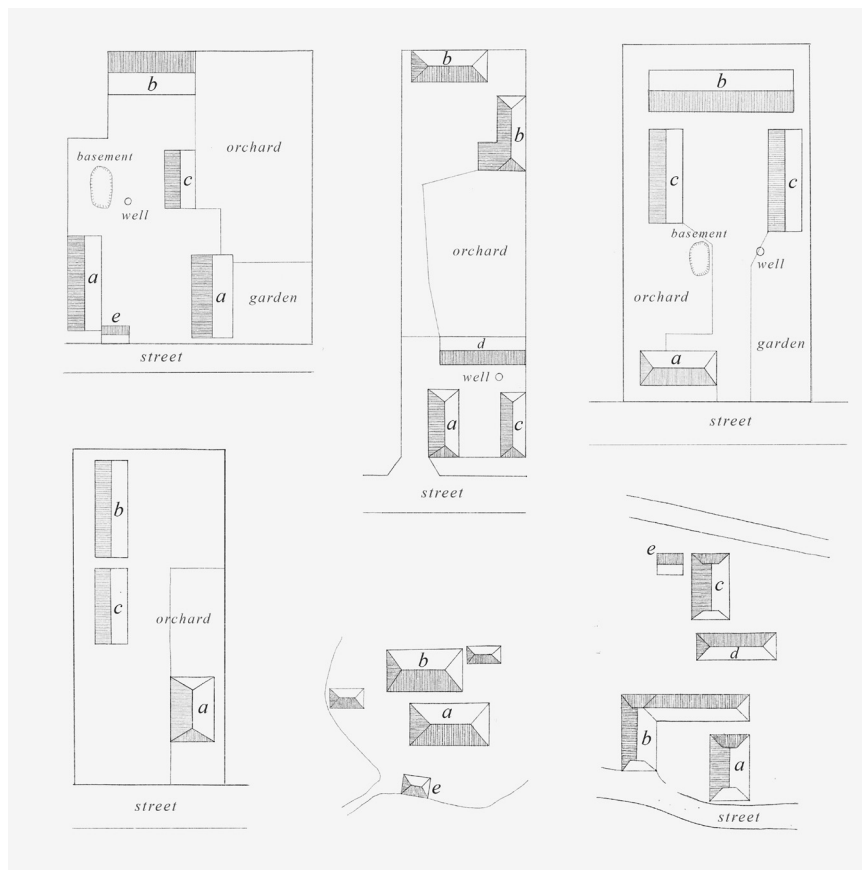
19 Krzysztof Ślusarek, *Uwłaszczenie Chłopów w Galicji Zachodniej* (Kraków: Historia Iagellonica, 2002), 75–78.

20 Ibid., 112–116.

21 Zofia Cybulko, “Dom Mieszkalny w Zagrodzie Wydłużonej Typu Bielsko-Hajnowskiego,” *Biuletyn Konserwatorski Województwa Podlaskiego* 7 (2001): 189.

22 Kamil Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2024), 23.

23 Ibid., 25.



Different types of peasant homesteads. a. home b. barn c. pigsty d. stable e. granary. Drawn by the author, adapted from Czerwiński, *Budownictwo ludowe w Polsce*, 50–59.

The home was an integral part of the broader entity known as the peasant homestead (*Zagroda*), a spatially defined building complex essential to rural economy and agricultural production.²⁴ The peasant dwelling is often symbolically described as the “heart” or “the center” of the farmstead. Yet, it was rarely situated in the farmstead’s actual physical center; instead, the home was typically positioned close to the street.²⁵ As an inseparable part of the peasant’s environment, a farmstead without a home would be a strange creation, described by Zofia Cybulko as a “...dead void without a reason to exist.”²⁶ A typical farmstead established during the time of serfdom consisted of three main buildings: a residential home (*chalupa*), a barn (*stodoła*), and a pigsty (*chlew*).²⁷ Later, artists often depicted homesteads as pastoral spaces surrounded by orchards and gardens, but that was rarely the case. In reality, the typical yard was filled with mud, stripped of vegetation by roaming pigs or hens, with manure near the home, as vividly described by visiting architect Maciej Marczewski in the nineteenth century.²⁸

The peasant’s home was fully constructed out of wood. Due to the scarcity of stone, “wooden” defined the entirety of folk architecture, from simple barns to grand churches.²⁹ With its availability, lightness, and ease of processing, woodworking was mastered by the serfs even if they were not skilled carpenters. This resulted in buildings tailored specifically to the natural limitations of timber.³⁰ It is also important to note that peasants

²⁴ Tomasz Czerwiński, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce* (Warszawa: Muza, 2006), 48.

²⁵ Zofia Cybulko, “Dom Mieszkalny w Zagrodzie Wydłużonej Typu Bielsko-Hajnowskiego,” *Biuletyn Konserwatorski Województwa Podlaskiego* 7 (2001): 191.

²⁶ Ibid., 189.

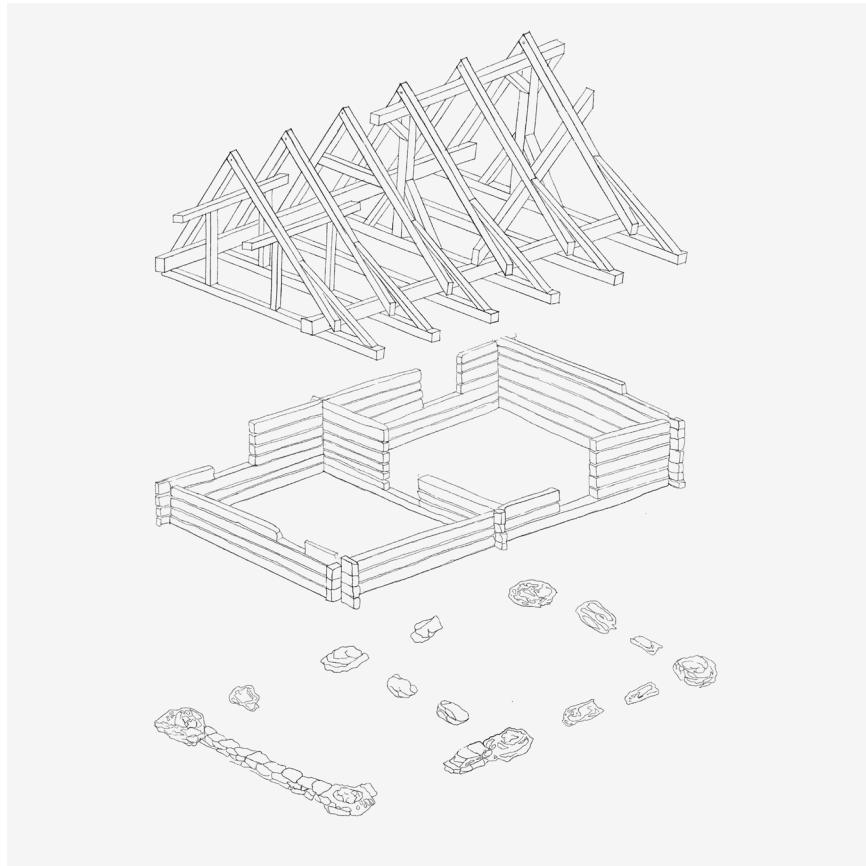
²⁷ Czerwiński, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce*, 50.

²⁸ Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie*, 19.

²⁹ Paweł Pyrzanowski, *Budownictwo Drewniane* (Warszawa: Politechnika Warszawska, 1994), 65.

³⁰ Cybulko, “Dom Mieszkalny w Zagrodzie Wydłużonej Typu Bielsko-Hajnowskiego,” 193.

strongly disliked the stone or brick houses introduced into the villages by Austrian rulers. Zygmunt Gloger notes that these buildings made peasants uncomfortable and even became the subject of mockery by neighboring farmers, who referred to them as “stone dwellers” (*kamienicznicy*). The peasants endured nearly a decade in the brick houses built in Jażewo village until their emancipation in 1864. Although emancipation came before the Austrian annexation of the region, it was only after annexation that peasant communities were no longer bound by imperial mandates. They quickly demolished the brick homes and replaced them with wooden ones, returning to materials and methods long familiar to them.³¹



Axonometry of structural elements of a peasant home. Drawn by the author, adapted from Paweł Pyrzanowski, *Budownictwo Drewniane* (Warszawa: Politechnika Warszawska, 1994), 12–14.

Studies on wooden architecture often dismissed the role of skilled peasants who contributed to it, instead prioritizing the perspectives of historians and academics, which delivered a fragmented understanding of these structures. Jan Sas-Zubrzyński argued that wooden architecture cannot be understood solely through academic analysis, as it requires a deeper understanding of local conditions.³² He further noted that foreign scholars often misinterpret Polish wooden architecture, attributing its origins to Scandinavian or Hungarian influences, thus undermining its importance as a central source of national building tradition. Even though brick homes were safer as compared to wooden structures, they were often destroyed by fire and the elements.³³ While scholars have long studied the wooden architecture of native communities, they have also

31 Gloger, *Budownictwo Drzewne i Wyroby z Drzewa w Dawnej Polsce*, vol., 156.

32 Jan Sas-Zubrzyński, *Polskie Budownictwo Drewniane* (Kraków, 1916), 6–8.

33 Ibid., 12.

begun to examine their spatial organization.³⁴

In the studies of so-called “vernacular architecture,” the development of interior layouts has been of particular interest to scholars. Like the rest of the peasant environment, the domestic spatial arrangement was determined by family needs, practicality, function, and available resources, resulting in various home typologies.

However, certain rooms were present in each home: a vestibule (*sień*), a chamber (*izba*), and a compartment (*komora*). At the end of the nineteenth century, Jan Karłowicz, an ethnographer and folklorist, was the first scholar to categorize two main types of peasant homes according to their layout: one with a frontal entrance (“wide-fronted”), and a second type with a gable-wall entrance (“narrow-fronted”). This division remains relevant till this day; however, over the years, researchers introduced new names and more detailed typologies.³⁵



Different types of peasant homesteads. a. vestibule b. chamber c. compartment d. bed chamber e. stable. Drawn by the author, adapted from Czerwiński, *Budownictwo ludowe w Polsce*, 50–59.

Single-bay layouts, most common for early peasant homes. Drawn by the author, adapted from Czerwiński, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce*, 61.

A more specific classification of peasant homes was introduced in the twentieth century by Kazimierz Moszyński, who categorized them by the number of bays.³⁶ Early homes, particularly from the time of serfdom, often featured single-bay layouts, characterized by a rectangular plan divided by interior walls parallel to the gable wall. Moszyński described this arrangement as the most primitive form of a home.³⁷ The expansion of these homes was limited to horizontal additions along the longer wall. Moreover, the placement of the vestibule was defined by the location of the main entrance door, which could be central or asymmetrical.³⁸ Wealthier peasants often built single-bay homes with two chambers: “the black chamber,” which contained fire devices, and “the white chamber,” a more

34 Tomasz Czerwiński, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce* (Warszawa: Muza, 2006), 79. Cybulko, “Dom Mieszkalny w Zagrodzie Wydłużonej Typu Bielsko-Hajnowskiego,” 192.

35 Jan Karłowicz, *Chata Polska* (Warsaw: Druk J. Rergera, 1884), 25–26.

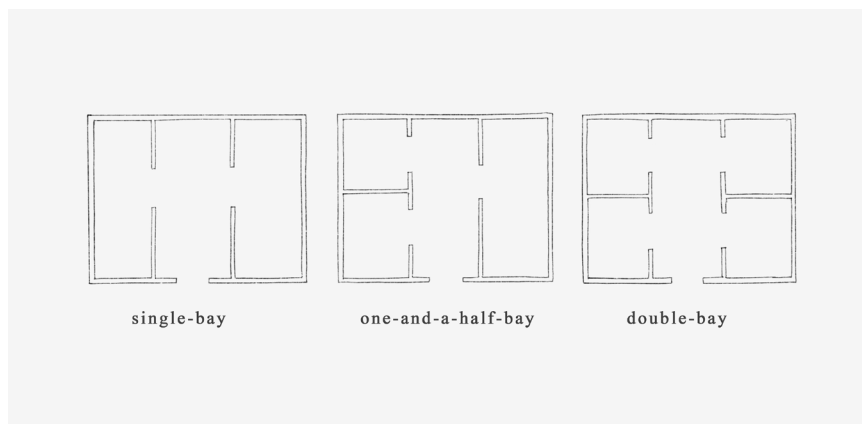
36 Kazimierz Moszyński, *Kultura Ludowa Słowian. Cz. I, Kultura Materialna* (Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1929), 551–558.

37 Ibid., 541.

38 Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie*, 62.

representative, cleaner part of the home.³⁹

The new typology—a one-and-a-half-bay layout—emerged when one of the rooms was divided by a perpendicular wall, creating two smaller spaces. The room that initiated this division was a bedchamber (*alkierz*), a small space intended for the elderly of the household, located near the furnace. Over time, this layout also came to accommodate kitchens or pantries, evolving as needed.⁴⁰ The final two-bay layout became common among the wealthier peasants after emancipation. This spatial arrangement featured a symmetrical interior, divided by a central vestibule, and included two chambers, two compartments, and two entrance doors.⁴¹ Another distinct home type was found among some ethnographic groups like the Lemkos, who developed their living space alongside their livestock, with a stable under the same roof, as the community needed to protect animals from harsh winters and theft.⁴²



Three layout types, categorized by the number of bays. Drawn by the author, adapted from Pyrczowski, *Budownictwo Drewniane*, 8.

When discussing peasant domesticity, it is important to note that the peasant life operated based on two crucial cycles: the agrarian cycle, which dictated the rhythm of work, and the liturgical cycle which regulated the times of religious celebration, (i.e., their leisure).⁴³ These cycles structured daily life and, consequently, the organization of their domestic space. During labor cycles, everyday activities occupied the main room, centered around a furnace and usually dominated by the head of the family. The smaller spaces were reserved for the elderly, or other relatives. The “white chamber,” more common after emancipation, became essential during religious and communal events, such as Christmas Eve, weddings, pastoral visits, or funerals, that belonged to the liturgical cycle.⁴⁴

The furnishing of peasant homes was moveable and prioritized practicality and adaptability to the evolving needs. The furniture arrangement followed two main layouts, diagonal and parallel, which influenced the placement and use of key elements in the main chamber. The diagonal layout was centered around the “holy corner” (*święty kąt*), a space used as a domestic altar, located diagonally from the hearth and placed on the eastern wall. This area was of great importance to Slavic communities, featuring a wooden table, benches, and religious icons, symbolizing the house-

39 Czerwiński, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce*, 62.

40 Gloger, *Budownictwo Drzewne i Wyroby z Drzewa w Dawnej Polsce*, vol.1, 7.

41 Czerwiński, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce*, 65–66.

42 Ibid., 69–70.

43 Katarzyna Kurowska, “Mentalność Wsi w Malarstwie Polskim Drugiej Połowy XIX wieku,” *Zeszyty Naukowe Towarzystwa Doktorantów UJ. Nauki Humanistyczne* 24, no. 1 (2019): 101.

44 Czerwiński, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce* (Warszawa: Muza, 2006), 80.

hold's spiritual protection. This served as a focal point for family prayers or important religious gatherings with only honored guests allowed at the table.⁴⁵ Opposite the "holy corner" were the sleeping areas. However, for most peasant families, individual beds were a luxury as one room was often inhabited by multiple family members. Basic sleeping arrangements included wide benches that doubled as daytime seating, long stools, or simply the warm surface of the oven. Additionally, straw mattresses were used as sleeping areas for children and were rolled up during the day to save space. As for dining space, while the "holy corner" was used exclusively for religious celebrations, daily meals, when available, were eaten on portable tables accompanied by small stools. Due to limited space and food scarcity in the village, the meals were shared from the same pot or eaten directly on the stove.⁴⁶

The parallel furnishing layout emerged later, prioritizing symmetry and functionality. In this arrangement, sleeping areas were placed in the opposite corners or on either side of the doorway, leaving space for a central table, which became a more formal place for daily family meals.⁴⁷ The new layout reflected an improvement in space management and, by the late nineteenth century, industrially produced furniture—such as cupboards, beds, or wardrobes—became more accessible, gradually replacing handcrafted equipment. The new furnishings were highly desired by the peasants and even served as wedding gifts, marking a significant shift toward a commodified interior. Furniture evolved from serving mostly a pragmatic function to becoming a symbol of status shaped by broader market influences. As products of mass production and consumer desire, these items reflected modernity and extended their reach even into the peasant home.⁴⁸

The evolution of peasant home typologies—from their layout to their furnishing—demonstrates the adaption and resilience of the peasant communities to changing social and economic conditions.⁴⁹ While sharing a foundation of practicality and simplicity, regional variations emerged, shaped by geographical conditions, local customs, and the demands of daily life. These differences were not merely functional adaptations but also cultural markers that distinguished one community from another. As described, the peasant home was not a static structure but rather a dynamic expression of rural life. This evolution becomes evident when examining specific communities such as the Podhale Highlanders, whose distinct architectural forms provide an example of how ethnographic and geographical factors influenced the peasant home.⁵⁰

POLISH HIGHLANDERS

The Podhale Highlanders (*Górale Podhlańscy*) are a particularly significant group in the broader discussion on emerging national trends and the later search for identity within native communities. This ethnographic group inhabited the Podhale region of Southern Poland, a land defined by the Tatra Mountains with its shepherding traditions.⁵¹ Compared to other ethnic groups, the mountain dwellers were especially celebrated by intelligentsia for their intricate woodwork, traditional construction techniques, and "unique mountain spirit."⁵² The Podhale region, known for its harsh winters and relentless rains, forced the Highlanders to construct their farmsteads to withstand the unforgiving climate, relying on their

45 Ibid., 81–83.

46 Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie*, 108–109.

47 Czerwiński, *Budownictwo Ludowe w Polsce*, 86.

48 Cybulko, "Dom Mieszkalny w Zagrodzie Wydłużonej typu Bielsko-Hajnowskiego," *Biuletyn Konserwatorski Województwa Podlaskiego* 7 (2001): 203–206.

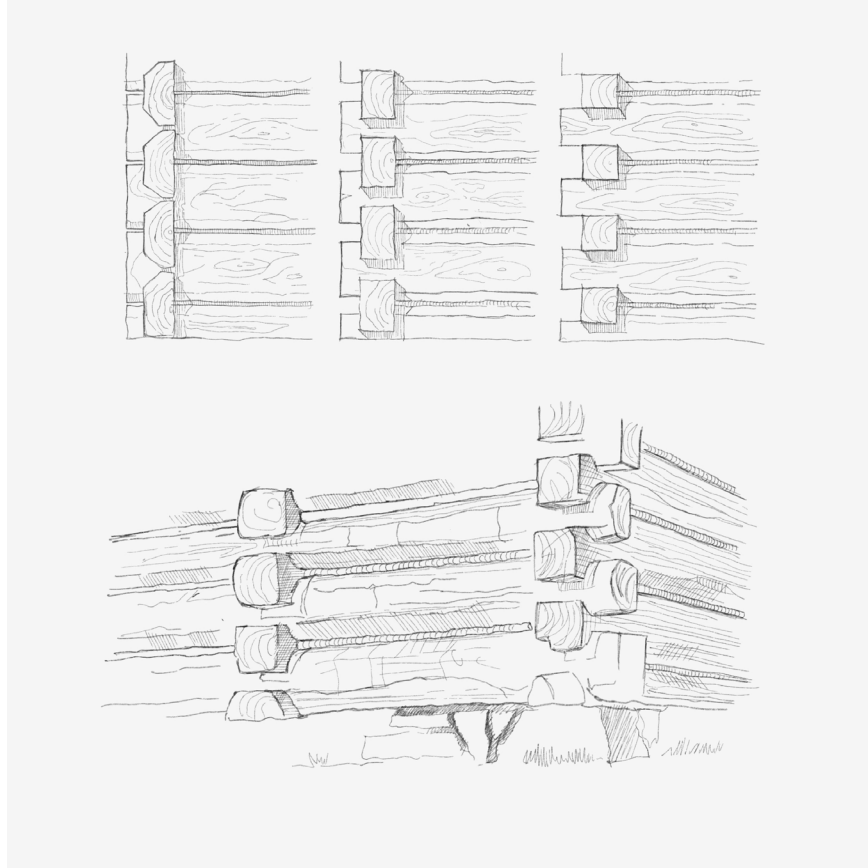
49 Ibid., 190.

50 Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie*, 24.

51 Roman Reinfuss, "Podhalański Fenomen," *Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 42, no. 1/2 (1988): 9–16.

52 Marian Magdziak, *Od Chłopskiej Chaty do Domu Współczesnego Rolnika* (Łódź: Politechnika Łódzka, 2018), 37.

corner-joint construction method. Their homes were strategically built to maximizing sunlight exposure and arranged to shield courtyards from the southwestern winds.⁵³



Highlanders' timber construction techniques. Drawn by the author, adapted from Zygmunt Gloger, *Budownictwo Drzewne i Wyroby z Drzewa w Dawnej Polsce*, vol.1 (Warszawa: Druk Wł. Łazarskiego, 1907), 106.

Their homes, known as *izba*, closely resembled other serf dwellings in terms of their interior elements. The *izba*'s most significant space was the black chamber, named for the soot and smoke that darkened the walls over time. This room, well-insulated for harsh winters and equipped with a hearth, served as a hub for all daily activities, including cooking, eating, and sleeping.⁵⁴ The hearth was more than just a heat source; it shaped the entire layout of the home, distinguishable even in the most modest homes as a habitable space rather than a mere element of shelter.⁵⁵ Traditional hearth systems occupied up to one-third of the room and included various fire devices.⁵⁶ However, the most advanced solution was the chimney, which replaced the archaic ceiling holes. This improvement significantly reduced fire risks while also preventing the accumulation of smoke on the walls, which encouraged ornamentation of the interiors.⁵⁷ Despite its many functions, this space was often overcrowded, with up to eight people living in a single heated room. To maximize the usage of space, each corner was densely packed with various items.⁵⁸ Furniture in these homes was scarce, as cabinets or wardrobes were ex-

53 Ibid., 20.

54 Władysław Matlakowski, *Budownictwo Ludowe na Podhalu* (Kraków: Nakład Akademii Umiejętności, 1892). 29–30.

55 Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie*, 75–77.

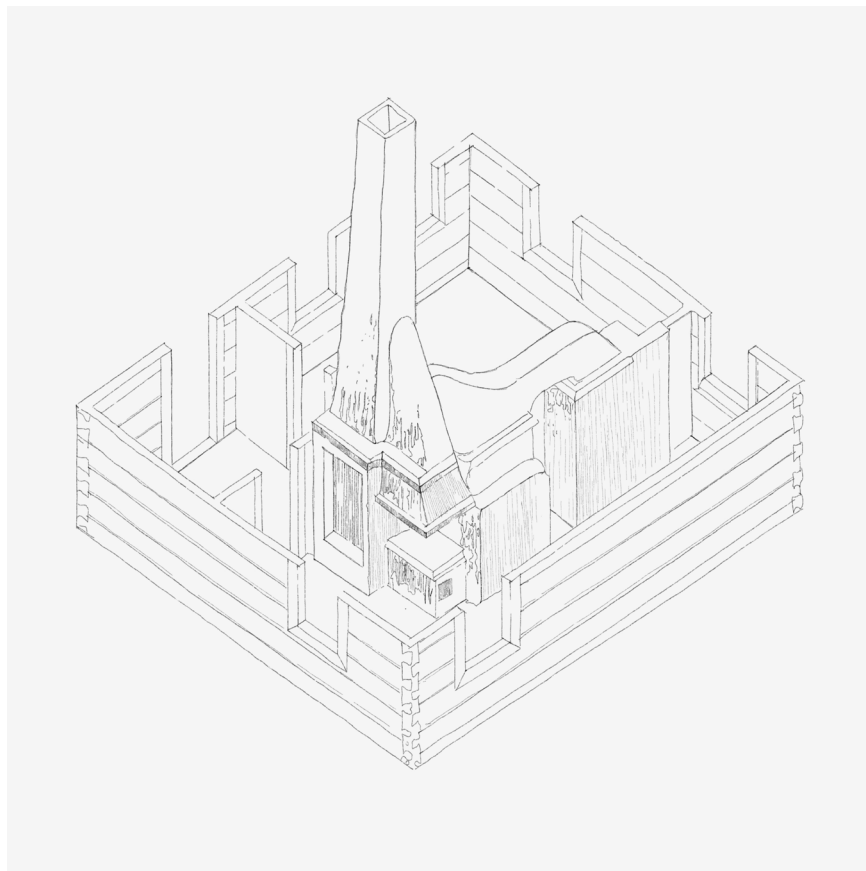
56 Ibid., 73–74.

57 Zofia Cybulko, "Dom Mieszkalny w Zagrodzie Wydłużonej Typu Bielsko-Hajnowskiego," 206–208

58 Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie*, 78–79.



Section, elevation, and plan of a wealthy Highlander home. Drawn by author, dapted from Władysław Matlakowski, *Budownictwo Ludowe na Podhalu: Tablice* (Kraków: Nakładem Wydziału Wydawniczego Stowarzyszenia Bratniej Pomocy Studentów Wydziałów Politechnicznych A.W., 1948), 15.



An axonometry of a Highlander hut, showcasing its log construction and typical hearth placement. Drawn by the author, adapted from Moszyński, *Kultura Ludowa Słowian. Cz. 1, Kultura Material-na* (Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1929), 543.

pensive. Instead, the Highlanders stored their belongings in handmade baskets or hollowed-out tree trunks. According to Klementyna Kozyra, peasant furniture prioritized simplicity and the use of inexpensive, locally available materials.⁵⁹ One exception to this rule was trunks (*skrzynia*) placed near the sleeping areas. These trunks were used to store the most valuable items and gained particular importance in peasant homes, especially during the eighteenth century, when were primarily used to store the bride's dowry. Their size and decoration were meant to display the family's wealth and the bride's suitability as a match. They were often painted with floral patterns and filled to the brim—sometimes deceptively, with stones at the bottom. After marriage, the trunks were displayed in the main room and, in some cases, left open to be admired by visitors.⁶⁰



Examples of decorative trunks. Drawn by the author, adapted from Klementyna Kozyra, "Krótka Charakterystyka Skrzyń Wiannych ze Zbiorów Muzeum Wsi Radomskiej w Radomiu," *Muzeum Wsi Radomskiej w Radomiu*, tom 10 (2022).

Beyond these functional considerations, the Highlanders' homes also stood out for their unique ornamentation, which strongly contrasted with the utilitarian simplicity of other peasant dwellings. Ornamentation in peasant homes has long been prioritized in literary discourse, contributing to an idealized image of the peasantry. Joyful folk motifs, colorful facades, and walls filled with iconography remain elements commonly associated with rural living.⁶¹ In reality, however, its presence in serf homes was minimal or non-existent. As Józef I. Kraszewski noted in 1858, peasant cottages were primarily pragmatic structures born out of necessity

59 Klementyna Kozyra, "Krótka Charakterystyka Skrzyń Wiannych ze Zbiorów Muzeum Wsi Radomskiej w Radomiu," *Muzeum Wsi Radomskiej w Radomiu*, tom 10 (2022): 156.

60 Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie*, 26.

61 Beata Pranke, *Nurt Chłopotomanii* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2003), 78–79.

and poverty, rather than artistic endeavors. Even basic elements, such as curtains, were regarded as unnecessary luxuries or “caprices.”⁶² This was not the case for the Highlanders, who distinguished themselves from other peasant groups and drew the interest of artists and scholars in search of native traditions. By the nineteenth century, advancements in carpentry tools enabled Highlanders to create intricate openwork patterns in wooden planks, decorating interiors, doors, and window beams with geometric and plant motif carvings.⁶³

The 1893 study on Highlander homes by Matlakowski documented their transformation under the influence of changing societal values and external styles. He observed that the increasing adaptation of modern techniques posed as a threat to their distinct character.⁶⁴ Matlakowski's research marked the very first systematic documentation of Highlanders' “vernacularity,” emphasizing the unique character of their architecture, recognizing its importance as a “cultural treasure” at risk of dilution or even disappearance. He further called for efforts to preserve and promote this legacy, highlighting the need to protect Polish “native styles” for future generations. His work also sparked a broader interest in the architectural heritage of Polish peasantry, leading to the phenomenon of Peasant-Mania and the creation of the new national style inspired by the mountain dwellers. This growing appreciation for Highlander architecture soon led to a broader fascination with native communities and their gradual integration into national and cultural discourses.⁶⁵

THE ZAKOPANE FIXATION

At the end of the nineteenth century, a peculiar phenomenon referred to as the “Zakopane Fixation”—a term first introduced by Aleksander Świątochowski—emerged. The term described the growing fascination with the Tatra Mountains and its native communities.⁶⁶ Zakopane, the region's informal capital, attracted numerous visitors, drawn by Władysław Matlakowski's writings on the vernacular traditions of the mountain dwellers. His work sparked widespread interest, encouraging intellectuals to further explore the cultural heritage of the region.⁶⁷ Among these intellectuals was Stanisław Witkiewicz, an artist and architect, who would become a central figure in popularizing and formalizing peasant homes.⁶⁸

Witkiewicz, captivated by the aesthetic of a Highlander cottage, believed it to be an exemplary embodiment of all Polish features combined into a single structure.⁶⁹ Despite their distinct identity as pastoralists, Highlanders endured the same hardships as other peasants, and their architecture remained largely similar to typical serf homes in both materials and floor plan.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Witkiewicz continued to develop his architecture theory based on the vernacular forms found in the mountains. This culminated in the creation of the Zakopane Style, which he believed represented the very essence of “authentic Polishness” and should therefore be announced as Poland's new national style.⁷¹ The culture of Podhale was viewed as a model of dignity, freedom, and exceptional pride—qualities that, for Witkiewicz, exemplified national resistance. In his work *Na Przełęczy* (On the Pass), he described the peasants as free and untamed individuals who refused to submit to the feudal mentality, writing “Lords,

62 Janicki, *Życie w Chłopskiej Chacie*, 15.

63 Matlakowski, *Budownictwo Ludowe na Podhalu*, 48–50.

64 Ibid., 80–83.

65 Ewa Baniowska-Kopacz, “Folk Architecture of Podhale,” *Ethnologia Polona* 35 (2014): 95.

66 Marian Magdziak, *Od Chłopskiej Chaty do Domu Współczesnego Rolnika*, 28.

67 Ewa Baniowska-Kopacz, “Folk Architecture of Podhale,” *Ethnologia Polona* 35 (2014): 79–80.

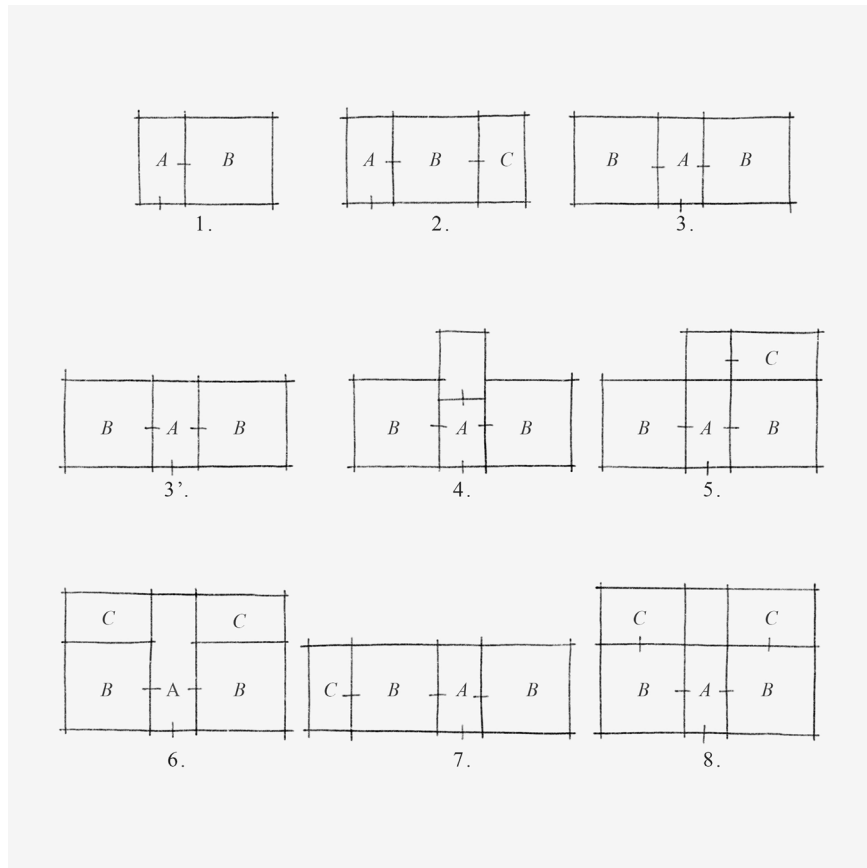
68 Magdziak, *Od Chłopskiej Chaty do Domu Współczesnego Rolnika*, 38.

69 Ibid., 37.

70 Matlakowski, *Budownictwo Ludowe na Podhalu*, 13–14.

71 Emilia Pomiankiewicz, “Ślady Ukryte w Harmonii Stylu Zakopiańskiego, Willa Oksza a Twórczość Kolonii Artystycznej Zakopanego,” *Prze-strzeń, Ekonomia, Społeczeństwo* 12, no. 2 (2017): 80.

lords, you may remain lords, but you shall not rule over us.”⁷²



Eight layout types of Highlanders homes, identified by W. Matlakowski. A. a vestibule B. a chamber C. a compartment. Drawn by the author, adapted from Władysław Matlakowski, *Budownictwo Ludowe na Podhalu* (Kraków: Nakład Akademii Umiejętności, 1892), 65

Witkiewicz's development of the Zakopane Style emerged in a unique historical context when art, architecture, and literature shared common message of unity and resilience against the backdrop of Poland's partitions.⁷³ He believed that the geographical isolation of the Tatra Mountains had fully preserved folk designs from any external influences, making them a pure expression of national heritage. By adapting the construction methods and ornamental details of Highlanders' homes into formalized residential buildings, he sought to create a style that would distinguish Poland's identity and challenge the prevailing dominance of Western architectural styles. Furthermore, as described by Andrzej Szczerski, Witkiewicz called for an integration of "superior" fine and "inferior" applied arts, challenging the hierarchical division between them.⁷⁴ He envisioned the style as a unifying force capable of bridging class divisions, arguing that a national art form, rooted in folk traditions, could resonate with all social classes, from peasant homes to villas.⁷⁵ However, what ultimately distinguished the Zakopane Style was its direct adaptation of vernacular traditions, completely separating the style from the revival of historical forms.⁷⁶

The newly established style gained its momentum as Witkiewicz's con-

⁷² Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Na Przełęczu*, translation by author (Warszawa: Nakład Gebethnera i Wolffa, 1891), 39.

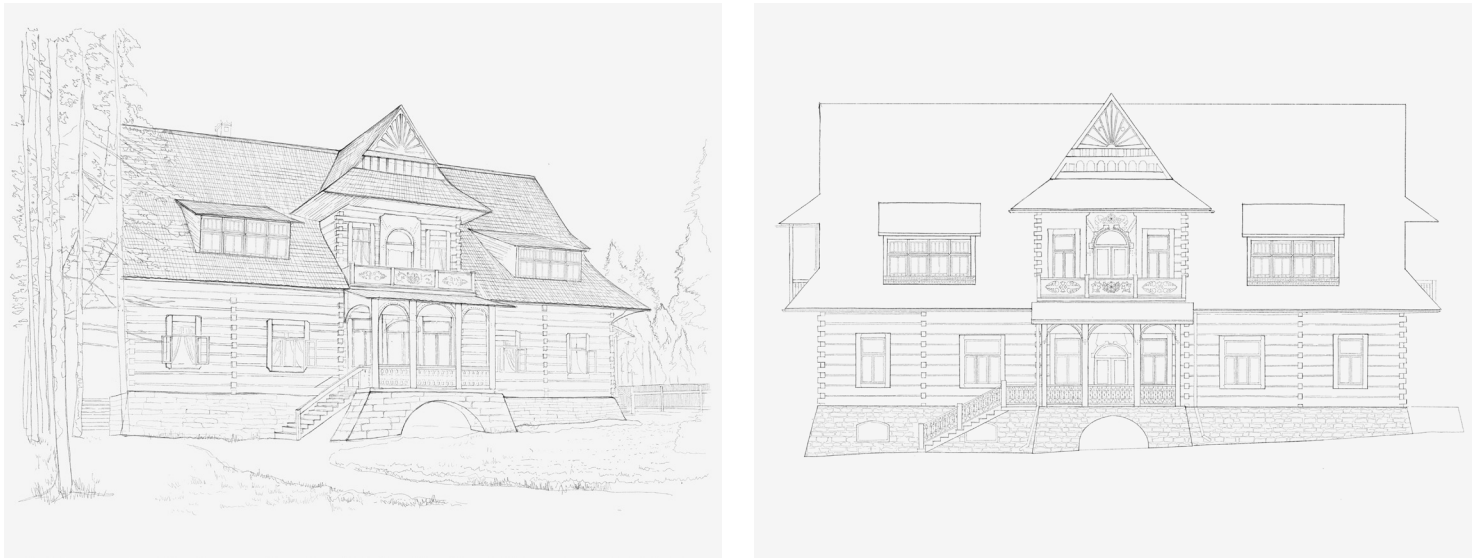
⁷³ Roman Reinfuss, "Podhalański Fenomen," *Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 42, no. 1/2 (1988): 11–13.

⁷⁴ Andrzej Szczerski, "Stanisław Witkiewicz and the Zakopane Style," in *Poland—China: Art and Cultural Heritage*, ed. Joanna Wasilewska (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2011), 80.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

nections within elite social circles brought him many commissions, securing its influence on Polish architecture.⁷⁷ The most prominent example of the new national style is Willa Oksza, the third villa designed by Witkiewicz. Constructed in 1896 following the canon of the Zakopane Style, the villa was built in Zakopane by native carpenters.⁷⁸ While the building was influenced by the Alpine chalet, it incorporated borrowed ornamental and constructional elements borrowed from Highlanders' homes to create something "truly Polish." The villa's exterior featured openwork planks and arched windows, while its interiors featured pine wood carvings and Tatra motifs common in Highlander homes—all adjusted to modern, formal settings.⁷⁹ However, a peasant's home had neither means nor intention to function as a formal residence as envisioned by Witkiewicz.⁸⁰



Exterior and façade of *Willa Oksza* in Zakopane. Drawn by the author, adapted from an archival photograph of the villa dated 1896, collection of the Tatra Museum in Zakopane, Poland.

The Zakopane Style developed alongside broader artistic movements, particularly Young Poland, whose creators contributed to the development of a significant artistic community in Zakopane.⁸¹ Its proximity to Krakow attracted artists who, like Witkiewicz, romanticized native folk culture, with many settling permanently in the heart of Podhale. Even during the First World War, Zakopane remained an artistic center, hosting notable figures who found there both refuge and inspiration.⁸² Ultimately, the Zakopane Style became a symbol of cultural pride for a grieving nation.⁸³ While the style was ideologically rooted in Highlander tradition, its core principles corresponded well with elitist tastes.⁸⁴

PEASANT MANIA

- 77 Emilia Pomiankiewicz, "Traces Hidden in the Harmony of the Zakopane Style: Oksza Villa and the Creative Output of the Artist Colony in Zakopane," *Przestrzeń, Ekonomia, Społeczeństwo* 12, no. 2 (2017): 79–95,
- 78 Ibid., 80.
- 79 Pomiankiewicz, "Traces Hidden in the Harmony of the Zakopane Style: Oksza Villa and the Creative Output of the Artist Colony in Zakopane," 81–82,
- 80 Krzysztof Kwiatkowski, "Styl Zakopiański Stanisława Witkiewicza i Jego Differentia Specifica / Stanisław Witkiewicz's Zakopane Style and Its Differentia Specifica," *PUA* 1, no. 1 (2020): 58.
- 81 Magdziak, *Od Chłopskiej Chałupy do Domu Współczesnego Rolnika*, 37.
- 82 Pomiankiewicz, "Ślady Ukryte w Harmonii Stylu Zakopiańskiego, Willa Oksza a Twórczość Kolonii Artystycznej Zakopanego," 83.
- 83 Ibid., 87.
- 84 Kwiatkowski, "Styl Zakopiański Stanisława Witkiewicza i Jego Differentia Specifica / Stanisław Witkiewicz's Zakopane Style and Its Differentia Specifica," 63–64.

The Young Poland (*Młoda Polska*) movement emerged alongside Witkiewicz's development of the new national style. This movement brought together significant literary and artistic figures who looked to rural communities as a source of national identity and artistic renewal during a time of cultural suppression. Inspired by the earlier works of Matlakowski and Witkiewicz, the movement celebrated the music, attire, and customs of Polish villagers—a phenomenon later referred to as “Peasant-Mania” (*chłopomania*). During the period of statelessness, the simplicity of peasant life and the reassuring imaginary of village homesteads offered a sense of belonging and a broader connection to national heritage.⁸⁵ In this context, national identity is described by Józef Zabielski as an individual and collective construct deeply rooted in historical and cultural contexts. It serves as a moral and existential framework that allows individuals to position themselves within a shared narrative while shaping the broader consciousness of a nation.⁸⁶



Interior fragment of Willa Oksza in Zakopane. Drawn by the author, based on a site visit in 2024.

Interest in peasant themes first appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, with Jan Norblin as a pioneer in incorporating rural themes into Polish art. However, the art of this period mostly focused on significant historical events, leaving depictions of peasants relatively irrelevant to the society of the time. By contrast, artists of the late nineteenth century embraced a wide variety of symbolism, using Polish peasantry as a means of

⁸⁵ Beata Pranke, *Nurt Chłopomanii* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2003), 5–7.

⁸⁶ Józef Zabielski, “Tożsamość Polaków w Kontekście Jednoczącej się Europy,” *Polonia Sacra* 11(29), no. 21/65 (2007): 6–9.

expressing a national message.⁸⁷ One such artist was Józef Chełmoński, widely regarded as one of the best representatives of the Realist School of Art and a precursor of Peasant-Mania. Although born in Poland, he created most of his work in Munich and Paris, where memories of the lost homeland inspired canvases illustrating the daily lives of Polish peasants.⁸⁸ A recurring motif in Chełmoński's work was the village tavern, which played a central role in the social fabric and daily rhythm of rural life. While often associated with drinking, the tavern functioned as a vital social hub—akin to a cultural institution within the peasant community. In an era when most peasants were illiterate, taverns became essential spaces for the distribution of local news and gossip that relied on oral communication.⁸⁹



Józef Chełmoński, *In Front of the Tavern (Przed Karczmą)*, 1877. From National Museum in Warsaw, Poland.

In his *Przed Karczmą* (*In Front of the Tavern*, 1877), Chełmoński uses the tavern, not just as a compositional element, but also as a thematic narrative. In the painting, the tavern acts as a background to peasants engaged in expressive folk celebrations. The artist deliberately places the villagers outside, emphasizing the inseparable bond between communal joy and the village. A large portion of the canvas features rough, disturbed soil—an unusual choice at the time, as such elements were considered unworthy of fine art. This compositional decision symbolized the peasants' deep connection to labor and earth.⁹⁰ While the genre scene captures a joyful celebration, the muddy ground and melting snow introduce a somber tone.⁹¹ A similar motif appears in *Oberek* (1877), where Chełmoński once again portrays an outdoor celebration. The vibrant reds of the dancers create a dynamic contrast with the surrounding environment, described by Katarzyna Kurowska as fleeting moments of joy. The melancholic landscape heavily contrasts with the celebratory scene, mirroring Poland's

87 Andrzej Juszczyk, "Między Ideałem a Rzeczywistością: Obraz Wsi w Polskiej Literaturze i Kulturze Popularnej," in *Obce/swoje: Miasto i Wieś w Literaturze i Kulturze Ukraińskiej XX i XXI Wieku*, ed. Katarzyna Glinianowicz and Katarzyna Kotyńska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Scriptum, 2015), 21–22.

88 Marcin Kępiński, "Rodzinna Wieś – Nostalgiczne Źródło Malarzkich Inspiracji Mariana Kępińskiego," *Zeszyty Wiejskie* 28, no. 2 (2022): 78.

89 Katarzyna Kurowska, "Mentalność Wsi w Malarstwie Polskim Drugiej Połowy XIX wieku," *Zeszyty Naukowe Towarzystwa Doktorantów UJ. Nauki Humanistyczne* 24, no. 1 (2019): 102.

90 Katarzyna Kurowska, "Mentalność Wsi w Malarstwie Polskim Drugiej Połowy XIX wieku," *Zeszyty Naukowe Towarzystwa Doktorantów UJ. Nauki Humanistyczne* 24, no. 1 (2019): 103.

91 *Ibid.*, 104.

political despair. The depiction of folk dance in these works becomes a powerful symbol of resilience and escape, embodying the ability of Polish people to find moments of hope amidst their painful reality.⁹²

Another notable painting, *Babie Lato* (*Indian Summer*, 1875), portrays a young peasant girl lying barefoot in a field, peacefully playing with delicate strands of silk. This seemingly simple genre scene depicts a fleeting yet deeply symbolic moment of rural life. The girl's relaxed posture and a calm pastoral setting suggest a moment of personal freedom, and a departure from social hardship. The muted tones of the landscape contrast with the vibrant yellow handkerchief. Zofia Ożóg-Winiarska describes the artist's attention to detail of the human figure as a link to rural existence and nature's cyclical rhythms.⁹³ The painting reflects freedom, resilience, and enduring connection between people and their land. The image of a peaceful peasant, physically bonding with their native soil, was recognized as a profound expression of cultural and national belonging.⁹⁴

Another key figure of the Young Poland movement—and therefore of the Peasant-Mania phenomenon—was Włodzimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, a painter, poet, and independence activist. Tetmajer was one of the “Five Peasant Enthusiasts,” whose work was characterized by a deep admiration towards the Polish peasant world and its symbolic significance for the national imagination. The group formed during their studies at the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts; united by shared passion for rural themes, resulting in idealized depictions of peasant environments.⁹⁵ Despite his noble upbringing, his life was strongly connected with the world of the village due to his controversial marriage to a peasant woman, Anna Mikołajczykówna, which strongly influenced his works. Their union, between two members of different social classes, caused shock and a public scandal, temporarily removing Tetmajer from elite social circles and forcing him to move to the village.⁹⁶ His village mansion, Tetmajerówka, eventually became a place for hosting marriages between his colleagues and peasant women, as well as a cultural hub for discussions on art, national resistance, and future independence movements.⁹⁷

One of his most recognized works is the painting *Święcone* (1897), which captures the tradition of blessing Easter food. The celebratory scene depicts a crowd of peasant women and children gathered around a priest in a village square.⁹⁸ Tetmajer's use of Impressionist techniques softens the contours of the village homes, contrasting with the vibrant depiction of women in traditional attire. His use of rich reds highlights the richness of folk life, securing its role as a national treasure while emphasizing the vitality of village religious celebrations.⁹⁹ However, Tetmajer's work deliberately avoids any signs of poverty, consistently presenting colorful idyllic scenes. His approach aligns with the Young Poland's myth of the countryside as a source of strength and renewal for the nation. Moreover, Tetmajer was a passionate advocate for Polish independence, and his work played a crucial role in translating his political beliefs.¹⁰⁰

Later portrayals of peasants find a parallel in Stanisław Wyspiański's play *Wesele* (*The Wedding*, 1901), which offers a more critical perspective on the notion of Peasant-Mania. The drama explores this phenomenon by highlighting the Polish elite's fascination with the peasantry while exposing their failure—or reluctance—to truly understand the mentality

92 Ibid., 112.

93 Zofia Ożóg-Winiarska, “Babie Lato na Obrazie Józefa Chełmońskiego i w Poezji Michaliny Chełmońskiej-Szczepankowskiej,” *Kultura i Edukacja* 3, no. 109 (2015): 219–231.

94 Beata Frydryczak, “Babie Lato, Czyli Zmysłowość Wiejskiego Krajobrazu,” *Kultura Współczesna. Teoria. Interpretacje. Praktyka* 116, no. 4 (2021): 119–130.

95 Beata Pranke, *Nurt Chłopomanii* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2003), 78–79.

96 Stanisław Dziedzic, “Włodzimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer: W Dziewięćdziesięciolecie Śmierci Artysty i Polityka,” *Niepodległość i Pamięć* 21, no. 3–4 (47–48) (2014): 22–25.

97 Pranke, *Nurt Chłopomanii*, 23–24.

98 Kurowska, “Mentalność Wsi w Malarstwie Polskim Drugiej Połowy XIX wieku,” 107.

99 Pranke, *Nurt Chłopomanii*, 55.

100 Kurowska, “Mentalność Wsi w Malarstwie Polskim Drugiej Połowy XIX wieku,” 108–109.

and struggles. Unlike other depictions, Wyspiański presents the peasants as uninterested in forming alliances with the elites. Instead, they take a stand, advocating for radical changes to serve their own interests.¹⁰¹ Despite contemporary criticism, Wyspiański remained influenced by nationalist discourse. While *The Wedding* questions rural communities' role in Poland's independence struggle, it ultimately expresses skepticism about class unity, ending in missed opportunities and unresolved tensions.¹⁰²



Włodzimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, *Blessed (Święcone)*, 1897. From National Museum in Krakow, Poland.

The Young Poland movement marked a visible shift in Polish literature and artistic endeavors, transitioning from positivist ideals to symbolism, aestheticism, and existential themes. According to Radosław Okulicz-Kozaryn, Polish artists were influenced by European modernist currents, particularly those of Baudelaire and Verlaine.¹⁰³ Moreover, Piotr Korduba, in his analysis of the issues of folk art, emphasizes its origins as a product of elite tastes and judgments rather than an authentic expression of rural life. Korduba argues that the Polish intelligentsia created a timeless yet romanticized image of the “folk” to promote both national message and Poland’s international image as a land of vibrant culture. Furthermore, this chapter addresses the commercialism and strategic adaptation of these artists, who tailored their work to align with urban patrons’ aesthetic preferences and market demands at the expense of accurately portraying Polish heritage.¹⁰⁴

CONCLUSION

The artistic and literary fascination—or even fetishization—of the peasantry at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in romanticized rural landscapes while marginalizing the reality of peasant existence. The peasant home came to symbolize a tension between lived experience and symbolic representation, reflecting the struggles of a stateless nation in crisis. Peasant-Mania functioned not only as an aesthetic movement but also as a cultural strategy, translating national values

101 Walery Gostomski, “Arcytwór Dramatyczny Wyspiańskiego ‘Wesele,’” *Pamiętnik Literacki: Czasopismo Kwartalne Poświęcone Historii i Krytyce Literatury Polskiej* 7, no. 1/4 (1908): 310.

102 Andrzej Juszczyk, “Między Idealem a Rzeczywistością: Obraz Wsi w Polskiej Literaturze i Kulturze Popularnej,” in *Obce/swoje: Miasto i Wieś w Literaturze i Kulturze Ukraińskiej XX i XXI wieku*, (2015): 22.

103 Radosław Okulicz-Kozaryn, “Rok 1894. Właściwy początek Młodej Polski,” *Wiek XIX. Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego im. Adama Mickiewicza* 47, no. 1 (2012): 15–16.

104 Piotr Korduba, “Jak Elity Wymyśliły Ludowość: Kłopoty ze Sztuką Ludową,” *Stan Rzeczy* 2, no. 23 (2022): 292–294.

through pastoral fragments of folk existence. However, the selective focus on the picturesque and folklorist elements vividly obscured the peasants' true heritage, which was defined by systematic neglect and a need for survival—an existence never intended to be an expression of regional pride or dignity.

Ultimately, the fascination with peasants' "true vernacularity" and their lived environments—when viewed through the lens of nineteenth century national trends—brought forth both romantic ideals and a sense of deep disconnection between social classes. The tension between authenticity and idyllic portrayals not only shaped the aesthetics of artistic and literary works but also underscored the broader struggles of a nation striving for unity. This reinvention of a peasant environment and the accompanying nostalgia for the simpler times offered a vision of hope in times of foreign oppression. It served simultaneously as a national message and a form of escapism. The peasant home, once a pragmatic response to serfdom and extreme poverty, was suddenly elevated to the status of a cultural artifact, celebrated for its supposed purity and dignity—a perception that, as this work stresses, was far removed from reality.

In times of crisis and loss, the symbolic return to the vernacular became a means of reclaiming continuity in a fractured cultural landscape. Stripped of its defining qualities, the peasant home became the projection of national aspirations. Yet this idealization—rooted in nostalgia and myth rather than reality—has cemented the image of vernacularity that persists to this day as a nostalgic fantasy of an "authentic" and "untouched" rural world. Tied to nationalist ideologies, the vernacular has been adopted as a political and cultural tool to construct a reassuring sense of tradition. However, the ongoing idolatry of the vernacular is fueled not only by the nativist ideals but also by class dynamics. The rural and the peasant are fetishized by urban audiences, who remain removed from the struggles and inequalities that define rural existence. The upper classes consume vernacular forms as cultural commodities, celebrating the aesthetics of village environments, while presenting a sanitized symbol of heritage conveniently reinforcing class privilege. One must critically engage with the vernacular to confront the myths it preserves and the ideologies it serves. It is not enough to celebrate the vernacular as a symbol of tradition or identity; it must be understood as a continuous tool in shaping cultural, political, and economic discourses, often framed as a longing for authenticity in an increasingly changing world.

AUTHOR

Julia Maraj is a master's degree candidate in architecture at EPFL. Her paper builds on the research project *Peasant-Mania*, which she conducted under the supervision of Pier Vittorio Aureli (TPOD, EPFL) and Michela Bonomo (TPOD, EPFL).

COPYRIGHT

©2025 Burning Farm, ©2025 The Authors.
All content can be shared, distributed, and reproduced provided the original author and source are credited.