Solar Symbolism in Stanisław Wyspiański’s Design for the Medical Society House in Kraków

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Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907) est l’un des artistes polonais les plus polyvalents du tournant du XXe siècle. Il a apporté une contribution durable tant aux arts décoratifs qu’à la littérature. Ayant étudié l’art à Cracovie et à Paris, il rejoint la Sécession viennoise en 1897.

L’une de ses créations les plus fascinantes est la décoration intérieure de la Maison de la Société médicale de Cracovie (1904), qui est également un rare exemple polonais d’œuvre d’art totale (« Gesamtkunstwerk » en allemand). Placée sous le patronage de Nicolas Copernic, elle fait référence au système héliocentrique et célèbre le pouvoir de guérison du soleil. Pièce maîtresse de cette création : le vitrail qui représente Apollon attaché à sa lyre dans une position évocatrice de l'iconographie de la Crucifixion. L’article met en évidence les références symboliques de la création de Wyspiański en lien avec son œuvre littéraire.
Stanisław Wyspiański has a unique position in Polish culture, which rests equally on his contribution to literature and to the visual arts. While he was a prolific playwright, poet and translator, it is his contribution to decorative arts and book design that makes him stand out among his contemporaries. Wyspiański’s lifespan was very short — he died at the age of 38 — but he left an impressive legacy of works and projects [FIG. 1]. The lack of understanding he often encountered in his native Kraków was counterbalanced by the steadfast support of a few dedicated friends and patrons. There are themes and references running across his writings and decorative schemes that make his entire œuvre intricately interconnected.¹ This is also the case with the interior decoration of the Medical Society House in Kraków, whose symbolism can only be properly highlighted in the broader context of Wyspiański’s other literary and decorative works.

As an artist Wyspiański was dedicated to the idea of the unity of the arts and the Wagnerian concept of Gesamtkunstwerk.² Like William Morris in the British Isles, he expressed himself in different media, explored the artistic potential of crafts, and was interested in the protection and restoration of old buildings. He was a skilled draughtsman and a designer of stained-glass windows and murals, theatre stage sets and costumes, and interiors, private and public. One of his most consistent contributions was to the revival of book design and typography.³ On a monumental scale he is best known for his stained-glass windows, a few completed and others drafted on paper but never executed. Though he was well-travelled and spent a few years in Paris, both his short life and his work are associated with Kraków, the city in which he was born on 15 January 1869 and in which he died on 28 November 1907.

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In Wyspiański’s lifetime, the historic seat of Polish kings and, until the mid-16th century, capital of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Under the rule of the House of Habsburg the Royal Castle on Wawel Hill was transformed into barracks for the Austrian garrison and there were plans to use Wawel Cathedral, place of royal burials and coronations, as a garrison church. For Wyspiański the Castle and the Cathedral were the repository of Polish history and tradition, and Wawel Hill was a reference which lay at the heart of his work. His attitude to that tradition was complex and sophisticated: while drawing inspiration from the past he also challenged the national life in the spirit of nascent modernity.

The first formative influence on Wyspiański was that of his father, Franciszek, who was a sculptor. As a child Wyspiański spent a lot of time in his studio in Kanonicza street, among busts and statues of historical figures. Years later he recalled that experience in a poem: “At the foot of the Wawel Hill my father had a studio / a spacious chamber, vaulted and whitewashed / peopled with a huge crowd of figures from the past / I used to go there as a small boy and what I felt I later shaped into my art.” [FIG. 2] Among Franciszek Wyspiański’s fellow artists was a historical painter named Jan Matejko, whose huge canvases represented scenes from the national past and prominent figures, such as Nicolaus Copernicus. Matejko later became a mentor and teacher to Wyspiański at the Kraków School of Fine Arts, and his vision and interpretation of Polish history weighed heavily on Wyspiański’s imagination. [5]

In 1890 Wyspiański embarked on a European “Grand Tour” lasting seven months, during which he visited Northern Italy, Germany, Switzerland, France and Bohemia. It was a voyage of discovery that opened his eyes to the works of old masters as much as contemporaries, Holbein as well as Böcklin and Puvis de Chavannes. In France he visited the Gothic cathedrals of Chartres, Rouen, Amiens and Reims. [6] On return, like many other European artists at that time, he decided to pursue his studies in Paris, where he attended the Académie Colarossi for intermittent periods until 1894. The impact of those years is clearly seen in his oil painting from 1894 featuring the interior of Saint-Étienne church in Paris, in which a large stained-glass window is represented as a luminous flood of patches of bright colour as if indiscriminately poured onto the canvas. The focus is on the overall impression, rather than the antiquarian rendering of historical detail and features.

What Goethe wrote about the importance of foreign languages — “Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own” — applies well to Wyspiański’s artistic experience. The years of studies, travelling and exposure to art and architecture abroad enhanced his awareness and understanding of the culture and tradition in which he grew up, and on his return he grounded himself in Kraków.

WYSPIAŃSKI IN KRAKÓW

In 1895 Wyspiański received his first major commission for murals in the chancel of the Franciscan church in Kraków, followed by an invitation to design stained-glass windows for the same church in 1897. The result was what is now considered his magnum opus in visual arts. Wyspiański’s decorations are a celebration of vegetal life and forces of nature. The figures of saints and angels are embedded into the theatre of plants. Iconographically, his work in the interior, culminating in a figure of God the Father making a gesture of Fiat, is a powerful hymn to the forces of Creation [FIG. 3].

4 [https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/U%@C%c8%b3p, accessed 10 January 2019; translated by the author.]
5 Estreicher, K., op.cit., p. 13.
6 Wyspiański’s travels, first in Eastern Galicia (now Ukraine) and later in western Europe are discussed by Romanowska, M., Stanisław Wyspiański, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Kluszczyński, 2004, pp. 13–16.
Kanonicza Street in Kraków, where Franciszek Wyspiański had a studio “at the foot of the Wawel Hill”. Post-war postcard © Stanisław Kolowca.
Stanisław Wyspiański, God the Father — Let There Be stained glass window above the main entrance in the Franciscan church in Kraków, 1905 (completed) © Paweł Mazur.
FIG. 5  Stanisław Wyspiański, Apollo: the Copernican System, stained glass window in the main staircase in the the House of the Medical Society in Kraków, 1905 © Paweł Mazur.
FIG. 4 View of the central staircase designed by Stanisław Wyspiański in the House of the Medical Society in Kraków, 1905 © Paweł Mazur.
The last decade of Wyspiański’s life was immensely productive and marked by multiple activities. In 1897 he was a co-founder of the Polish Artists’ Association, “Sztuka”, and in the same year he joined the Vienna Secession group together with several members of “Sztuka”; in 1901 he sat on the founding board of the Polish Applied Arts Society. In addition to his writings and design work he produced multiple portraits, mostly in pastels, of his family, fellow artists, and friends and patrons, such as doctors Józef Raczyński and Julian Nowakowski. Raczyński carried out research on the beneficial impact of sunlight for the prevention of rickets in children; Nowakowski was one of Wyspiański’s most committed supporters. As President of the Medical Society in Kraków, he was responsible for Wyspiański’s commission for the interior design of its newly built House.

THE MEDICAL SOCIETY HOUSE

The work on the interior of the House started in 1904, a breakthrough year for the Cracovians when the decision was taken to withdraw the Austrian garrison from the Royal Castle and restore it to its former, residential function. As the debate started on the redevelopment of Wawel Hill, Wyspiański proposed that the past should be revisited and the former royal seat transformed into a centre of renewed cultural and political life — a Polish Acropolis. He believed that Polish national life lay dormant in its past and needed to be reinvigorated with a new spirit of modernity.

The philosophical underpinnings of his idea were much more radical and expressed in his play Acropolis, also published in 1904. The action of Acropolis takes place on Wawel Hill on the night of the Resurrection. Its plot is essential for the interpretation of the decorative scheme in the Medical Society House. In the first two acts, the figures of Polish kings carved on the cathedral tombs and the characters from the Iliad represented in the 16th-century Flemish textiles that decorate the castle, are brought to life to rehearse their respective life stories, royal and mythological. In the last act the cathedral is filled with a tune heralding the imminent recovery of national independence. At dawn the god Apollo arrives in a golden chariot and on the ruins of the old cathedral a new order is founded. In Wyspiański’s vision Apollo is like the attribute or emanation of Christ the Redeemer, the source as much of light and political life — a Polish Acropolis. He believed that Polish national life lay dormant in its past and needed to be reinvigorated with a new spirit of modernity.

The symbolism of the interior decoration of the House reflected its function. Since the patron of the Medical Society was Copernicus, the interior was designed to highlight the relationship between Kraków, medicine and the heliocentric theory. The central feature of the staircase, which itself was painted yellow, is the stained-glass window Apollo: the Copernican System. In the figure of Apollo Wyspiański combined his roles as a god of the sun and a patron of healing. The wrought-iron railing with its motif of lilies and the chestnut blossoms painted in the frieze running along the staircase enhance the symbolism of light. Apollo as god of sun and light is a reference to Copernicus’s treatise De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestis (1543), while as god of healing he alludes to the Medical Society itself. The planets revolve around the solar deity, in a dynamic, whirlwind motion. The lyre to which he is tied reminds us that he is also the god of music, poetry and song. The positioning of Apollo’s body in this work echoes that of Christ in many Crucifixion scenes, while his lyre is represented as the equivalent of Christ’s cross. One explanation is offered by the last scene of Acropolis, in which Apollo turns up as Christ the Saviour, who abolishes the old order in the name of new radiance, spiritual and modern. Further evidence comes from Wyspiański’s 1899 drawing of the head of Christ, now in the collection of the University of Heidelberg Library.

7 The links of Polish artists with the international milieu are discussed in illuminating detail by Cavanaugh, J., Out Looking in: Early Modern Polish Art, 1880–1918, University of California Press, 2000, pp. 77–97.
8 This was the subject of his earlier play, the hugely successful Wedding Party, premiered in Kraków in 1901.
11 There are several references to Apollo with a lyre, which cannot be discussed here in detail. Wyspiański’s illustrations to Homer’s Iliad are one of them, another is Copernicus’s own seal representing Apollo with a lyre; the latter has been discussed and illustrated by Nowakowska-Sito, K., op.cit., 165–168.
of the National Museum in Warsaw, which anticipates the positioning of Apollo’s head in the sketch for the stained glass.

CONCLUSION

Wyspiański’s immersion in the history of Antiquity and his deeply felt experience of Christianity seem to have been filtered through his engagement with modern art and the quasi-heroic position it allocated to artists. Therefore, on a more personal level, his Apollo can also be seen as a symbolic statement on the position of the artist, who — in bondage to his art — is either awaiting the moment when he will be able to unleash its healing and redeeming power or, like a Promethean figure, suffering eternally for the gift of light that he has brought to humanity.

Wyspiański’s interest in the figure of Apollo and his highly individual use of the solar symbolism in the House may also be linked to his philosophical readings, not least of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), and to his interest in scientific discoveries. Through his friendship with doctors he may have stayed well informed of the advances in early 20th century medical sciences and the discoveries on the role of sunlight.13

Thus, it seems fair to conclude that Wyspiański’s iconography and symbolism in the House of the Medical Society in Kraków is rich and complex in its selection of sources and references, whether they be literary, philosophical, visual or scientific. The way in which he successfully fused ancient and Christian traditions in a syncretic vision, firmly anchored in his native city of Kraków and derived from his own literary and visual work, is modern in its unity and coherence, both aesthetic and intellectual. ■

13 Such as Neils Finsen’s Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1903.