

S tanisław Wyspiański, the Versatile Artist

Maria
Śliwińska
Poland



Self-portrait
Stanisław Wyspiański
1902
Muzeum Narodowe,
Warszawa

Stanisław Wyspiański was born on January 15, 1869 in Kraków, the city with a unique *spirit of place*, capital of Poland from 1038 until the beginning of the 17th century, when King Sigismund Vasa moved it to Warsaw. Even then, regardless of having lost its administrative power, Kraków, with its Wawel Castle, was still the location of royal coronations and funerals of the most outstanding personages from the

political and cultural worlds. As a child, Wyspiański lived close to the Wawel Castle, and visited it frequently with his father Franciszek, a talented sculptor and member of the 19th century *bohème*. Unfortunately, when he was only seven years old, his mother Maria died of tuberculosis; thereafter he was raised by his aunt Joanna Stankiewiczowa, who together with her husband Kazimierz was an integral



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Book illustrations Stanisław Wyspiański, Source: http://www.pinakoteka.zascianek.pl/Wyspianski/Wysp_Inne.htm



part of intellectual society in Kraków. They were frequently visited by prominent intellectuals such as the historian Józef Szulski, the art historian and museologist Władysław Łuszczkiewicz, the famous bibliographer and director of the Jagiellonian Library Karol Estreicher, also known as a theater critic, and the most famous Polish painter Jan Matejko, who took the talented young boy under his wing. Young Stanisław spent all his free time at his father's workshop.

In Wyspiański's time, Poland was under partition (from 1772 to 1918), with Kraków being under Austro-Hungarian rule since 1795. Although it was a liberal regime, the official language - including education at schools - was German. However, one school *Imperial and Royal St Ann's Gymnasium*, with traditions going back to the 16th century - was an exception, as education could be delivered there also in Polish. Its program not only was on the highest level, but also included patriotic elements. In this school Wyspiański's classma-

Chochoły
Stanisław Wyspiański
1904
Muzeum Narodowe,
Warszawa
Source:
http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:Wyspia%C5%84ski_Mulchs.jpg



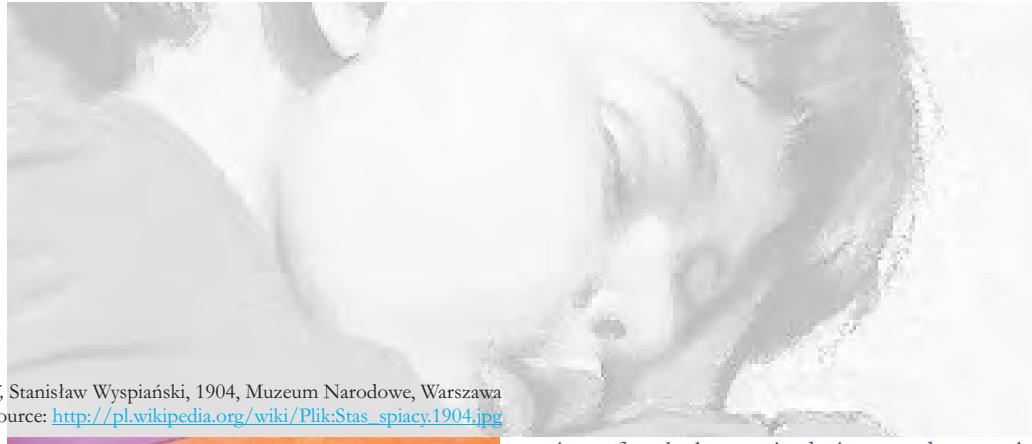
Stained glass window
God the Father
 Stanisław Wyspiański
 1897 - 1904 ca.

St. Franciscans church, Kraków
 Photograph by Piotr Kozurno



tes, among others, were Józef Mehoffer, Lucjan Rydel, Stanisław Estreicher, Henryk Opieński and Jerzy Żuławski, to mention just those who later became nationally known painters, musicians, writers, and poets. This school aroused his interest in theater.

Wyspiański's fascination with the theater continued to develop, and while still of school age he created a dramatic interpretation of Matejko's painting *Bathory at Pskov*, representing the battle between the Polish-Lithuanian King Stefan Batory and the Russian army. His interest in theater continued during his travels to Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Prague, and France in 1890-1895. In Paris he had a unique opportunity to attend famous theatrical performances of Sarah Bernhardt. During his stay there, he wrote the subsequently published dramas *Daniel and Meleagra* (1898) and *Return of Odysseus*, based on the antique tradition. In addition, he wrote other dramas like *Legend* (1897), *The Queen of Polish Crown*, and the most famous one from that time, *Warsavian Anthem* (*Warszawianka*), which premiered at the Kraków City Theater stage in 1901 with the famous Polish actress Helena Modrzejewska. Aside from *Warszawianka*, Wyspiański's best-known drama is *The Wedding*, with which each average high school student in Poland begins his acquaintance with Wyspiański. In *The Wedding*, the author presents a critical yet sarcastic picture of a powerless society of the 19th century. This drama was censored and put on a clandestine literature list, but it was still possible to stage it at the theater in Kraków, and from time to time at other theaters (although with limited success because of watchful censorship). Some other dramas written by Wyspiański, including *Liberation*, have been staged at many Polish theaters to this day. His literary activities included also poetry. In one of his poems, he expressed his



Sleeping Stas, Stanisław Wyspiański, 1904, Muzeum Narodowe, Warszawa
Source: http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:Stas_spiacy.1904.jpg



critical opinion about classifying his works as a Secession. His open and creative mind could not stand any classification. Apart from writing his own dramas, he also translated works of Pierre Corneille (*Le Cid*) and Voltaire (*Zaïre*).

Wyspiański cooperated closely with the City Theatre in Kraków. He served as the stage designer and designed furniture for theatre performances. Then he staged various dramas, and even applied for the post of City Theater director, but for some reason was not appointed.

However, Wyspiański was not only a writer and playwright. His main activities concentrated on the fine arts: drawings and paintings. He was well prepared for this by his father (whose work he had observed), his aunt's guests interested in the young boy, and his education. After completing the St. Anna Gymnasium he enrolled in the Jagiellonian University to study philosophy and took classes in art, history and literature. At the same time he enrolled in the School of Fine Arts (to which he had been accepted three years earlier under special conditions) to study not only history and theory of art but also methods and practice. The dean of the school was Jan Matejko, who invited him and Józef Mehoffer to cooperate in the cre-

ation of polychromatic designs, and to work on stained-glass windows in the Mariacki Church in Kraków, which was as famous as the Wawel Castle cathedral. In that way, he not only studied but also practiced under supervision of the famous artist who valued his talent.

When at age 21 he received a grant for his tour and studies abroad, he entered the private atelier Académie Colarossi established in Paris in the 19th century as an alternative to the conservative École des Beaux Arts. In Paris Wyspiański met many young artists finding their own paths through the art world. Among the artists he met were Paul Gauguin and Alfons Mucha when he visited Kraków. Wyspiański was a gifted artist who painted portraits of many personalities, family members, and friends, as well as landscapes, architecture, and herbs. His herbs were precisely elaborated and based on studies whose results can be seen in a special notebook his own herbarium with a collection of detailed sketches of all kinds of



Madonna in Folk Costume

1904.

Muzeum Mazowieckie w Płocku.

Source: http://www.pinakoteka.zascianek.pl/Wyspianski/Wysp_Inne_2.htm

plant specimens. As he was allergic to oil colours, he mostly used coloured pastels. Wyspiański gave away many of these painted pictures as gifts, whilst he himself suffered from poverty.

Among his artistic works there were polychromes. One of the most impressive, which he started to plan in 1894 with no certainty of receiving an order, was the decoration of the Franciscan church in Kraków that had to be renovated after the fire. Fortunately, in the next year an order came from an architect and from the convent's guardian. Within half a year he created his theosophic vision of the church decoration. In addition to the Mother of God with Jesus, dressed in Polish folk costume, other figures and angels, and a gallery of Polish eagles (forbidden national emblem of the lost state), he decorated the walls with many Polish herbs and flowers in Art Nouveau style. Unfortunately, the Franciscans found this polychrome to be too innovative and he could not finish the work, which luckily was not removed and has survived to the present. Another order came from a church in Biecz. The other polychrome ordered from St. Cross church in Kraków was never realized because, during preparatory work for the polychrome, Medieval and Renaissance frescos were discovered. They were preserved as important cultural heritage under Wyspiański's supervision.

Aside from polychromes, Wyspiański created a number of stained glass windows for churches. Some of them, such as those at the Medieval Dominican church in Kraków, were damaged during reconstruction; but in the others, the original ideas of the artist prevailed. Among these many works, the most breathtaking are those from the Franciscan church, to which he had been invited again in spite of his polychromes being judged as "too modern".



Pansies

Fragment of polychromes

Stanisław Wyspiański

1895

St. Franciscans church, Kraków

Photograph by Piotr Kozurno



Again, the stained glass windows created by Wyspiański were not traditional, but in Art Nouveau style, and very moving. In addition to Saint Francis and Blessed Salomea, Wyspiański planned to represent the four classical elements, and two of them were created: two windows representing Fire, and two representing Water. However, the most remarkable and soulful is *God the Father* creating the world from chaos. It was most probably inspired by the frescos of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, which the artist had visited during his Grand Tour, and yet it is completely different. Wyspiański not only prepared cartoons for these stained glasses but also selected the glass from the best workshop in Innsbruck.

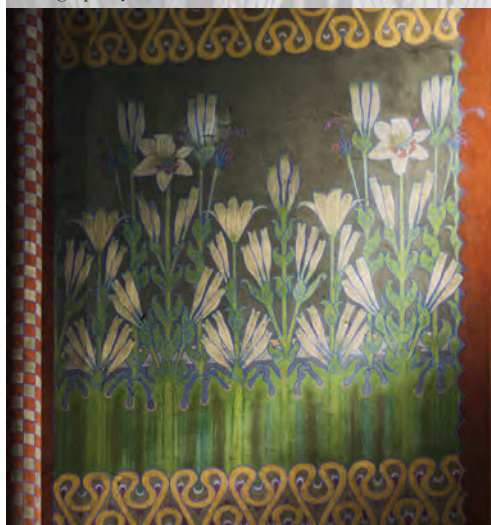
None of the other stained glasses can compete with *God the Father*, but also very expressive is one from the Medical Association in Kraków, representing Apollo as the Sun in the Copernican heliocentric system. For this association, in addition to stained glasses, Wyspiański also designed an entire set of interior elements, including floor, stairs, polychrome, and furniture. It was the first complete interior design



Nasturtium
Fragment of polychromes
Stanisław Wyspiański
1895
St. Franciscans church, Kraków
Photograph by Piotr Kozurno



Lilies
Fragment of polychromes
Stanisław Wyspiański
1895
St. Franciscans church, Kraków
Photograph by Piotr Kozurno



provided by a single artist. The other order he received from a public institution was from the City Archive. However, his project was not accepted, even though he offered it without any fee for his work.

Wyspiański was respected as a typographer. He illustrated all his own books, as well as those of some other writers and poets, and collaborated with some journals. Among the most important of these collaborations was his position as art director of the literary magazine *Życie* (*Life*), created in Kraków in 1897 but closed in 1900 as a result of censorship, with frequent confiscation of published issues before distribution. In this work, quite contrary to his artistic and visionary imagination, he undertook pedantic and precise mathematical calculations of typography, with extreme care for the format, type of print, and paper quality. At the exhibition of Applied Arts in 1904, ten percent of the exhibited works came from Wyspiański. He was awarded the silver medal.

Stanisław Wyspiański earned his position in professional circles. In 1897, he was the

cofounder of the Association of Polish Artists *Sztuka* (*Art*) together with well known Polish artists like Teodor Axentowicz, Józef Chełmoński, Jacek Malczewski, Józef Mehoffer, Antoni Piotrowski, Jan Stanisławski, Leon Wyczółkowski, with Julian Fałat and Włodzimierz Tetmajer who joined the following year. In 1904, he was chosen as the Secretary General of the Association, and in the next year selected as its president, with Józef Mehoffer as vice-president. He was also active as a cofounder of the association of Polish Applied Art, established in 1901, which was interested in collecting all types of Polish applied arts, including folk art.

In addition, in 1905 he became a town council member, where he was active in the Committee of the National Museum. He put much energy into his work on the site development plan for Wawel Hill, which had been left behind by the Austrian army. Together with architect Władysław Ekielski, he prepared a complex plan whose main objective was the preservation of its historical substance, but with a visionary extension of functions. This plan was pub-

Stained glass window
 Four classical elements: *Water*
 Stanisław Wyspiański
 1897- 1904 ca.
 St. Franciscans church, Kraków
 Photograph by Piotr Koźurno



lished in the journal *Architekt* but never realized. In addition, it is worth mentioning that together with his wife Teofila, he prepared a new dress for *The Lajkonik*, one of the unofficial symbols of the city of Kraków, ordered by the Society of Friends of Kraków History and Monuments. His professional work was valued by the Polish Academy of Science, which officially honored him more than once.

His knowledge and experience were well exploited in research and education. In 1901, he was invited by Julian Fałat to the Department of Religious and Decorative Paintings in the

Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. However, when he received an official nomination from Franz Joseph I, Emperor of Austria, for the docent position in the Department of Decorative Art, he rejected it with the comment that he did not need a nomination from the Austrian Emperor to work in a Polish school. He accepted this post only after receiving a direct invitation from the Polish heads of the Academy.

In 1905 when Polish later Marshall Jozef Piłsudski started with the organization of the Polish army, a circle of eminent members of Polish society supported the planned action of liberation. When Wyspiański learnt from writer Stefan Żeromski about this action he immediately submitted his resignation from the position at the Academy, as he could not imagine that someone who was being paid by the official administration could be active on a different front as well.

This brings us to a wistful assessment of the difficult life of the genius who is ahead of his time. The traditional ways of thinking of the sponsors prevent the realization of valuable art of these imaginative minds. In addition, quite often, as in the case of Wyspiański, creative people are not easy. They argue; they have strong points of view; they sometimes need too expensive materials to implement their ideas. Wyspiański was not an easy person, and did not have an easy life. He suffered from the early death of his mother, and from having an artist father who could not take proper care of him and did not have the resources to fulfil his artistic needs and existence. Even with the generous support of his aunt and some grants he obtained to learn abroad, he still did not have enough resources to fulfill his dreams, to return to Paris, to learn more and to see more. He married a woman from the lower classes,



a shock for the society of those days, and did not have a proper atelier for a long time. Yet in spite of many difficulties, he considered his life to be marvelous, as he could display his imaginative ideas in his numerous artistic works. It was so important for him that in many cases he worked without pay, just for an idea.

His situation improved a bit just a few years before his much too early death at the age of 38. Wyspiański's funeral attracted thousands of citizens from Kraków as well as the most important figures from all over Poland, and was transformed into an enormous patriotic manifestation.

Wyspiański worked fast and left many works of art. However, not all of them survived. Some of his works he destroyed himself; some have probably been lost or destroyed by their owners who received them as gifts. Nevertheless, many survived and can be seen in museums today. The National Museum in Warsaw and the National Museum in Kraków possess the biggest collections. The Polish Parliament proclaimed the year 2007 as the Wyspiański Year, celebrating the 100th anniversary of his death.

Stained glass window
St. Francis of Assisi
Stanisław Wyspiański
1897 - 1904 ca.
St. Franciscans church, Kraków
Photograph by Piotr Koźurno





Lajkonik

Design: Stanisław Wyspiański

Costume: Teofila Wyspiańska, Photo by ImreKiss

Source: <http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lajkonik>



