

Matejko, Jan

Jan Alojzy Matejko (1848–1893) was a Polish painter, draughtsman, portraitist, and representative of historicism and academism in European painting. He created numerous religious and sacred paintings, and was the originator of the national Polish school of historical painting.

Matejko initially wanted to become a religious painter and considered sacred painting his calling. However, after the defeat of the Polish January Uprising (1863/4), he turned more towards historical painting – a move significantly influenced by Józef Szujski, co-founder of the so-called Kraków School of History.

Matejko made numerous artistic journeys, visiting the following art centers in Europe: Paris (in 1867, 1870, 1878, 1880), Vienna (in 1866, 1867, 1870, 1872, 1873, 1882, 1888), Istanbul/Istanbul (1872), Prague and Budapest (1873), and Venice, Rome, and Florence (1878/1879 and 1883). He successfully exhibited his paintings many times at public exhibitions outside Poland, in major cities of Europe, including Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London, Prague, Budapest, and St. Petersburg.

Matejko's "religious" paintings can be divided into three groups. Firstly, he composed several dozen historical paintings (including large format

paintings) with interwoven historical and philosophical religious threads – thereby showing God’s action in the history of humanity or depicting God’s action through the presence of symbols from Christian iconography, including biblical symbolism and figures of saints combined with a given historical event. Secondly, he produced well over a dozen sacred paintings, including *Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary/Saint Mary’s Church* (Kościół Wniebowzięcia Najświętszej Maryi Panny/Kościół Mariacki) in Kraków, and so forth. Finally, he created several dozen paintings with strictly sacral themes: evangelical and hagiographic scenes with biblical symbols.

The “iron” historical canon of Matejko’s works (i.e., the first of his paintings that gained international recognition) include, among others: 1) *Skarga’s Sermon* (Kazanie Skargi, 1864, currently on deposit at the National Museum, Warsaw), depicting a Jesuit royal preacher in the Wawel Cathedral in Kraków preaching a sermon on God and delivering warnings for Poland, followed by a procession with the cross of Jesus; 2) *Rejtan – Fall of Poland*, aka *Reytan at the Warsaw Sejm of 1773* (1866, now at the Royal Castle in Warsaw); 3) *Lublin Union* (1869, Lublin Museum), which shows the Bible on which the Castellan of Kraków, Marcin Zborowski, takes his oath in 1569, and the Polish king Sigismund II August erecting a crucifix during the solemn act of merging Poland and Lithuania into the Republic of the Two Nations; 4) *The Battle of Grunwald* (1878, National Museum, Warsaw), where Stanislaus the Martyr (Stanisław of Szczepanów) rises above the battlefield, and the painting’s central figure, Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania (1354/1355–1430), wears a miter with a cross motif on his head; 5) *Prussian Homage* (1882, National Museum, Kraków), in which Prince Albrecht Hohenzollern (1490–1558) of Prussia is seen putting his hand on the pages of the Bible as he promises loyalty to the king of Poland; 5) *Jan Sobieski near Vienna* (1883, Vatican Museums), depicting his military triumph over the Ottoman Turks outside Vienna in 1683, in which the triumphant Sobieski is accompanied by a white dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, and the rainbow as a biblical, HB/OT sign of the covenant between God and human beings (in the oil sketch from 1879, Matejko added a fiery cross in the sky over the Polish hussars as a sign of Christian victory given to the Polish king from God, following the example of the sign given to the Roman Emperor Constantine); 6) *The Constitution of May 3, 1791* (1891, Royal Castle, Warsaw). In total, Matejko painted over three hundred oil works (portraits, paintings with historical, religious, biblical, and allegorical content), several hundred separate drawings, and several thousand sketches for paintings.

Matejko created several dozen paintings and drawings on religious topics, with elements refer-

ring indirectly to the Bible (e.g., crosses, churches, priests, paintings of the Virgin Mary, images of saints of the Catholic Church, scenes of prayer to God), or directly, with biblical, evangelical motifs: e.g., scenes from the life of Jesus and his mother, prophets, apostles, etc. These works include, among others:

- 1) *The Flight into Egypt*, painting (1853, Jagiellonian University Museum, Kraków);
- 2) *Mother of God with the Child*, painting (1857, collections of the Serafiński family in Koryznówka in Nowy Wiśnicz, near Kraków);
- 3) *Ecce Homo*, painting (1857, with motif of Jesus in a halo, a thorn crown, standing in front of Pilate [John 19:5], collections of the Serafiński family in Koryznówka in Nowy Wiśnicz);
- 4) *Mother of God with Child, St. Leonard, and St. John*, painting (1858, private property in Bronowice in Kraków; drawing sketch for this painting has been preserved in the Jan Matejko House, National Museum, Kraków);
- 5) *Henryk Pobożny’s Departure from Legnica*, painting (1865, National Museum, Poznań), painting with a motif of the Catholic Servant of God, Silesian Piast Prince Henry the Pious (1196–1241), with a large cross in his right hand instead of a sword (i.e., advancing in the name of Christ), riding a horse, and going into a battle against the invading armies of Tatars near Legnica in Silesia in 1241;
- 6) *Resurrection of Lazarus*, painting (1867, Plebania [a House of the Priest] Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Nowy Wiśnicz), based on John 11:43;
- 7) *Assumption of the Mother of God*, aka *Coronation of the Mother of God or The Mission of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (1875, Jan Matejko House, National Museum, Kraków);
- 8) *Our Lady as the Refuge of Sinners*, aka *Our Lady and Child Surrounded by the Artist’s Family Adoring Her* (1881, now considered lost);
- 9) *Resurrection of Christ* (1884, National Museum, Warsaw), though commonly known as *Ascension* (*Wniebowstąpienie*; see → plate 1), depicts Jesus in the white shroud of the resurrection and ascending to heaven; above his head, the Holy Spirit appears as a dove. Both are shown against the background of a burning golden-purple cloud in the shape of a heart, supported by angels. Below the burning heart, an angel in a green robe (a biblical symbol of hope for the Resurrection and God’s mercy for people) sustains the plate from the Savior’s empty tomb, while pain is symbolized through the instruments of the Passion, the so-called *arma Christi*;
- 10) *Kordecki on the Walls of Częstochowa, Begging for God’s Help*, sketch (1884, lost), presenting the prior of the Catholic monastery on Jasna Góra

- with a flag during the siege of this monastery-fortress by the army of Protestant Swedes in 1655;
- 11) *The Luminous Mount as the Queen of Poland, floating above the monasteries during the siege by the Swedes*, aka *Mother of God over the Jasna Góra Monastery*, painting (1885, Pauline Fathers' Monastery, Jasna Góra, Częstochowa), including motif of Mary in the sky over the sanctuary in Częstochowa, wearing a robe and holding a golden crown in her hands (as queen of not only Poland but the entire world);
 - 12) *Mother of God with the Child as the Queen of the World*, also referred to by Matejko as *Mother of God with the Child as the Queen of the World*, oil sketch (n.d., treasury of the Pauline Fathers' Monastery, Jasna Góra, Częstochowa), presenting Mary with strings of pearls on her neck, a crown on her haloed head, a scepter in her right hand;
 - 13) *The Queen of the Polish Crown*, pencil drawing (1885, private property), showing Mary standing with a dove (= the Holy Spirit) above her head, and a wreath of twelve stars on the mandorla which surrounds the figure of Mary (symbol of the Woman of the Apocalypse of John);
 - 14) *Maid of Orléans*, aka *Entry of Joan of Arc into Reims*, painting (1886, National Museum, Poznań), with motifs of the archangel Michael with fiery sword and saints, including John the Baptist, with Margaret giving Joana palm branch (symbolizing martyrdom) and Catherine of Alexandria giving Joan a lily (symbolizing purity and innocence);
 - 15) Triptych entitled *Queen of the Polish Crown* (1887–88, private property in Vienna), featuring the motif of the Blessed Virgin Mary as Queen of Poland, and representing – among numerous other religious and biblical motifs – the throne of the Madonna with the Child, with a scepter in her hand and a crown at her feet; and an image of John the Baptist;
 - 16) *Christening of Lithuania*, painting (1888, National Museum, Royal Castle in Warsaw), including the motifs of cross and baptism;
 - 17) *Introduction of Christianity [to Poland]*, painting (1889, National Museum, Warsaw), depicting the motif of the Great Cross and baptism;
 - 18) *Mother of God with Child, St. Wojciech/Adalbert, and St. Anne* (1890, Roman Catholic parish church of Adalbert in Stary Wiśnicz near Kraków), in which Mary stands on a crescent moon, and Wojciech's face is a self-portrait of Matejko. Matejko designed the whole picture, but only painted the head of Mary and personally corrected the remaining faces of the saints in the work painted by Florian Cynk (1838–1912);
 - 19) *St. Kinga Praying Among the Sącz Mountains*, painting (1892, Saltworks Museum in Wielicz-

ka, near Kraków), showing the holy Hungarian princess kneeling on a lump of salt, with a rosary in hand, and a prayer book and pastoral at her feet by the white lilies (a biblical symbol of purity), with the mountains (Beskid Sądecki) in the background

Jan Matejko created (1882/83) a series of eleven drawings entitled *History of the Civilization of Humanity* for the auditorium of the Lviv Polytechnic (Lviv, presently Ukraine), including certain biblical allegories drawn in pencil on paper (1882–83, National Museum, Kraków): e.g., *Holy Trinity*; *Human Genius between Faith, Hope, and Love*; *Human Genius Receives the Book of Revelation from the Angel's Hand*; *Human Genius Falls as Victim to Bad Tendencies* (showing the fall of the first humans from paradise); *Satan's Triumph*; *Mother of God, the Refuge of Sinners*. Based on his black-and-white drawings, Matejko created oil paintings in color from this series, which were painted by his students.

In 1888, Matejko designed thirty paintings with a biblical program for the iconostasis of the presbytery in the church of the Ukrainian-Byzantine rite, the Greek Catholic Church of the Elevation of the Holy Cross in Kraków. The construction for this iconostasis was designed by architect Tadeusz Stryjeński (1849–1943), and all thirty icons were painted in 1892–1895 by several of Matejko's students according to Matejko's sketches. One of the icons showing the prophet Jeremiah (lost during the communist period, after the dismantling of the iconostasis in 1947) was reconstructed after 1998 by Sotyrys Pantopulos (b. 1970). The original icons in the unique iconostasis were originally installed in 1896, i.e., after Matejko's death (1893), and depict Moses and various HB/OT prophets and kings, NT apostles, various scenes from the lives of Jesus and his mother Mary, etc. All original drawings of Matejko, which were created in 1888 for this iconostasis, are now in the Jan Matejko House, National Museum, Kraków and the National Museum in Lviv.

In 1893, Matejko designed one of the high stained glass windows, entitled *Holy Patrons of Poland*, for the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, aka the Latin Cathedral, in Lviv. Matejko made a sketch for the project with ink on a lithographed diagram of a window, which shows (among other images) the cup of the Blessed Sacrament, and images of (1) Merciful Jesus or (2) a Flagellated Jesus (two different, Polish names of one image: [1] *Jezus Miłosierny* or [2] *Ubicowany Jezus*), Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn, and John the Baptist. This stained-glass window is preserved in its entirety.

Matejko also designed stained glass with biblical and hagiographical themes for the Latin cathedral in Przemyśl (stained glass not preserved); the Latin cathedral in Prague (sketches preserved in the National Museum, Kraków); and the crypt of Leon-

ard under the Wawel Cathedral in Kraków (drawing preserved in the National Museum, Kraków).

The most famous of Matejko's students were eminent masters of Polish art: Maurycy Gottlieb (1856–1879); and the Polish modernist painters (co-creators of Art Nouveau): Jacek Malczewski (1854–1929), Józef Mehoffer (1869–1946), Włodzimierz Tetmajer (1861–1923), and Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907), all of whom developed Matejko's work on biblical themes.

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See also → Malczewski, Jacek; → Wyspiański, Stanisław