

REVIEW ARTICLE

Discovering herbalism through art. Plants in Polish symbolic painting (1890–1914)*

ANITA MAGOWSKA

Chair of the History of Medical Sciences
Poznan University of Medical Sciences
Przybyszewskiego 37A
60-461 Poznan, Poland

e-mail: anitamagowska@yahoo.com

Summary

The article focuses on the historical link between herbalism and art at the turn of the twentieth century. The aim of this investigation is to recognize medicinal plants shown as symbols in Polish painting between 1890 and 1914 and find some cultural context of their presence in artworks. In this qualitative study online art galleries and museum collections were analyzed to select Polish symbolists' artworks including plant images. Next, their botanical classification and medicinal context were examined. Twenty wild-growing plant species were recognized. Some of them had been used in traditional medicine (*Alcea rosea*, *Angelica archangelica*, *Artemisia abrotanum*, *Betula pendula*, *Carduus marianus*, *Convallaria majalis*, *Crocus sativus*, *Lilium candidum*, *Matricaria chamomilla*, *Nuphar lutea*, *Paeonia officinalis*, *Papaver somniferum*, *Pelargonium hortorum*, *Populus nigra*, *Primula veris*, *Sorbus aucuparia*, *Taraxacum officinale*, and *Verbascum thapsus*) and two species grown in the Carpathians (*Digitalis purpurea*, *Lilium bulbiferum*) at the time. Used to paint realistic objects, the symbolists made free-hand drawings in nature and in this way they recorded some wild-growing plants typical for surroundings of the town of Cracow and the Carpathian Mountains. Artistic images of plants were not intentionally aimed at taxonomic identification, however, sometimes classification was possible.

Key words: *herbalism, botany, pharmacy, wild growing plants, Symbolism, Carpathians, nineteenth century*

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INTRODUCTION

The borderland between art and herbalism dated back to antiquity when Dioscorides, Theophrastus, and Pliny the Elder wrote treatises on *materia medica*. Some anonymous artists fitted them with illustrations of plants to show their appearance. In the following centuries plants were presented mainly in still-life paintings and sacred art, however, their images in narrative pieces of art are the most interesting ones. Such works came into being at the end of the nineteenth century, when strong impulses to redefine the theoretical premises of art became: disappointment with the scientific-technical revolution, popularity of the theory of subconscious, and the subjectivity of perception. Realism and naturalism were rejected and the conviction that the world is two-dimensional, both material and spiritual, became the foundation of the symbolic language of art to express the metaphysical contents, abstract concepts, mysterious and intangible states of mind. Notwithstanding, symbolists presented an imaginary reality by means of real objects [1].

The article focuses on medicinal plants shown by Polish painters between 1890, when the first Polish symbolists, Józef Pankiewicz and Władysław Podkowiński returned from Paris to Warsaw, and 1914, when the First World War broke out. This interdisciplinary study aims to recognize the complex relationship between herbalism and culture. The online museum collections were analyzed to select masterpieces representative for the Polish Symbolism and including images of medicinal plants which symbolic meaning, use as traditional remedies, and sites were examined [2].

SYMBOLISM AND POLISH PAINTERS

At the late nineteenth century, symbolic meanings of plants were not a novelty. At first, symbolic meanings were attributed to plants in the ancient Chinese art, although all old civilizations assigned symbolic meanings to colours, not only those of flowers. From the Far East, plant symbolism reached Europe in the Middle Ages, henceforth influencing fine arts. Another and important wave of interest in plant symbolism which had a considerable impact on European art and literature was released in the first half of the nineteenth century under the influence of the reports of travellers to China and Japan [3].

As a new artistic movement, Symbolism developed in France in 1886, when Jean Moréas expressed its premises. Five years later, Albert Aurier presented this new artistic trend as an opposition to the physical world, sobriety and objectivity. His followers emphasized the role of imaginary and subjectivity in painting. Symbolism reached the territory of Poland with some delay, justified political and social obstacles (from the end of the eighteenth century Poland was partitioned by Austria, Prussia and Russia), through young Polish graduates of the École des Beaux-Arts and Colorossi Academy in Paris who also regularly visited Paris, Munich, and Vienna. At first Jacek Malczewski, later Władysław Podkowiński, Józef Pankiewicz, Józef Mehoffer, Stanisław Wyspiański, and others learnt the impressionist manner and the symbolic language of art in France [4]. They returned to their motherland entirely changed as adherents of artistic individualism, experts

in the psychology of the subconscious, and enthusiasts of art detachment from everyday life. Inspired by the Polish landscape, folklore, and tradition, they gave rise to new aesthetic ideas exposing the Polish context of a message. Polish symbolists used plant images to express the irrevocability of death, altruistic love, and such states of mind as: melancholy, obsession, despair, fear, etc. Often presented nudity, especially naked women and children with flowers in hands, were readable symbols of the short duration of life and proofs of the close relationship with famous Union of Austrian Artists, which some of them were members in fact [5].

PLANTS AS ARTISTIC SYMBOLS

The multicolour and subtleness of flowers were attractive artistic means in expressing that life is ephemeral, the key concept for Leon Wyczółkowski (1852–1936) who painted a series titled “Dreams about Flowers”, in which, maybe unconsciously, he presented popular medicinal plants, i.e. cowslips, peonies, mulleins, and poppies. He focused on their natural beauty, treating them as universal symbols of vitality and the fugacity of life [5].

Józef Mehoffer (1869–1946), who learnt new theories of visual perception in the fine arts academies in Paris and Vienna, treated the whole world as a beautiful illusion [4]. Such a reality is present in his painting “Strange Garden” where garden mallows occupy the foreground. The composition is completed with a naked child, two women (one of them resembles the artist’s wife) and a large and little incongruous dragonfly understood by art critics as a symbol of metaphysical dimension of life or the immortal soul. The purple mallow in the hand of the naked child reminds the transience of life [6].

The aforementioned Władysław Podkowiński (1866–1895) learnt painting in Warsaw, St.Petersburg, and Paris where he earned a living as an illustrator of French magazines. After returning to Warsaw, he demonstrated enthusiasm for impressionism, but soon turned to symbolism. Although plant symbols are rarely found in his paintings, the piece from 1892 entitled “The Mayflower” presented a naked and provocatively sensual model with a mayflower, the symbol of naivety, purity, and waiting, in her hand. Podkowiński also emphasized tree species characteristic for the Polish landscape: willows and poplars. Similarly, Jan Stanisławski, a graduate from the art academies in Warsaw, Cracow and Paris, used poplars to symbolize Poland [5].

Józef Pankiewicz (1866–1940), a professor of the School of Fine Arts in Cracow, was a renowned portraitist and enthusiast of flower symbols. For instance, he painted his wife in a Japanese kimono with a background of peonies, the Japanese symbol of mature femininity [5]. In another piece of art, Janina Oderfeldowa was pictured with her daughter, Anna, holding an exotic orange, a symbol of altruistic love.

A graduate of the Paris Colorossi Academy in 1891, Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907) stayed in the capital of France for a few years. After returning to Cracow, he enjoyed popularity as a portraitist and author of secession stained-glass

windows for churches and decorative vignettes for Polish magazines [4]. In the religious pieces of art he used conventional flower symbols, e.g. Holy Mary holding white lilies, from the Minoan period a symbol of innocence [5]. In some portraits, Wyspiański replaced a neutral background with plant motives, e.g. white geraniums, a symbol of hearth and home, in a piece entitled “Maternity” and showing his breastfeeding wife.

Kazimierz Sichulski (1879–1942) presented spring as a triptych filled with figures of praying village children and lilies (*Lilium bulbiferum*), in fact occurring in the Valley of Orawa in the Carpathian Mountains in Poland. Sichulski usually worked in a studio, but used field sketches, hence, he could document this rarely growing species. In the Partition period children holding lilies were readable symbols of hope for political revival and independence of Poland [4, 6].

The most creative Polish representative of Symbolism and revered painter was Jacek Malczewski (1854–1929). Almost all of his pieces referred to the martyrdom of Poland because he was influenced by his father, Julian, who introduced him to the Romantic literature, and his long-termed guardian Feliks Karczewski, who got him interested in the beauty of Polish landscape. As a child, Malczewski witnessed the anti-Russian January Uprising of 1863 and the exile of thousands of its participants to Siberia [7]. From 1876 until 1877 he studied painting in Paris. In the following years he went on a tour of Italy (1880, 1890), Greece and Turkey (in 1884 he was an illustrator for the archaeological expedition organized by Karol Lanckoroński) to see treasures of ancient art. The fashion for such travelling was started by Sigmund Freud who announced that exploration of the Greek archetype of art could be useful in examining the subconscious and discovering meanings deeply hidden in the mind. Indeed, Malczewski’s works confirm that art can derive a metaphysical depth from Greek mythology. He introduced into his paintings figures borrowed from Greek myths, such as nymphs and fauns, and evoked spiritual tension in audiences showing them in typical Polish mountainous meadows and boundary strips covered with dandelions, foxgloves, large sagebrushes, burdocks, angelics, and mulleins [8].

In his paintings, the Polish features of the landscape were marked by rowans, birches, willows, poplars, poppies, yellow water-lilies, chamomiles, chicories, and thistles. Usually the artist presented single plant species, e.g. the title water nymphs danced near mulleins in one piece, and on a background of yellow water-lilies in another [9].

In the piece entitled “The Polish Hamlet” and presenting an oddly dressed Aleksander Wielopolski, a grandson of margrave of the same name who in the second half of the 19th century manoeuvred between the interest of Austria and Polish society, a chamomile flower, from which petals were taken off one by one, symbolizes the necessity to make a political choice. Two women accompany the margrave; one is the allegory of passive behaviour leading to slavery and symbolized by the yoke impossible to shake off. The other, decorated with the red poppy flowers (a symbol of relief from suffering), naked and breaking off the chains, brings hope for liberation [4].

Malczewski mixed epochs and introduced mythical figures from the antiquity into the real world. The uncommon clothing of these persons enhanced the ambiguity and provoked the viewer. Symbolizing the sacredness of Poland angels filled up the roads and mythical beings similar to the Greek god Pan, the guide between the world of the dead and the living, prayed under the statue of Holy Mary (“Ondines”, 1887–1888). Putting together non-feasible figures with this statue often in the Polish landscape, Malczewski pointed out the mythologization of the collective experience of Poles, and the universal truth that humans are inclined to mythologize own life [8].

In 1911, he analyzed the metaphysical dimension of human existence in a separate series of works entitled “Thanatos”, like the name of ancient Greek god of death. One piece presents death as a beautiful girl with a scythe and cut crocuses, ones of earliest spring flowers symbolizing a premature death [10]. In the “Music of the Fields” (1907) an ear of wheat symbolizes passing and rebirth with references to a Eucharistic transformation and the future mystical transformation of Poland. The sacral content of the painting is enhanced by a goldfinch symbolizing the death of Christ on the cross due to the red spot on the wing, i.e. the presumed drop of Jesus’ blood fallen on the wing when the bird took out a thorn from the Crucified’s eyebrow.

One of his famous works is the piece entitled “Motherland” from 1914, where Malczewski portrayed Maria Bal, a Polish baroness and his exceptionally beautiful lifelong muse. Maria is presented as a mother looking after two children within the typical Polish flat landscape with blue chicories and thistles somewhere. The woman is dressed in a white shirt and a red coat, the national colours of Poland, and has hair decorated with a flower of thistle, a readable symbol of suffering [11].

The most of plant symbols found in Polish symbolic painting appealed to intuitive or conventional associations. For instance, an orange was the symbol of unselfish and altruistic love, a thistle meant dislike or pain, a peony symbolized serenity and femininity, a mullein – goodness, a sunflower – insolence, a mayflower – innocence and naivety [3]. Although in 1890-1914 wild-growing plants became means of symbolic meanings, after the First World War their attractiveness as symbols diminished.

SYMBOLIC PLANT AS TRADITIONAL REMEDIES

Some of plants included in symbolic artworks had been used in folk medicine. For centuries, the inflorescence and herb of the mayflower (*Convallaria majalis*), still growing wild in the whole territory of Poland, had been used as an indigenous cardiac and antiepileptic remedy. Hieronim Spiczyński, the botanist and author of the herbarium reissued after his death in 1568 in Cracow, emphasized its unusual power. The first research on mayflower was carried out just in 1881 [12] and resulted in a discovery of new glycosides, convallarin and convallamarin [14]. In 1909, a standardized alcoholic mayflower extract was invented in France and from then became a popular remedy against some cardiac disorders [14].

The flowers of cowslips (*Primula veris*) were a traditional sweat-inducing folk remedy [13]. The mallow painted by Mehoffer was a representative of a magnificent species of garden mallow (*Alcea rosea*), which dried flowers have been used in throat, respiratory and stomach diseases for ages [15]. Folk belief in the power of herbs against demons and to boost the mood were present in Poland, on the other hand, in the ancient Greek and Roman medical treatises. E.g., the miraculous power of the mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*) brew was described by Hippocrates, Dioscorides, Pliny the Elder, and Galen. According to mentioned above Spiczyński's herbarium from 1568 (reissued by Marcin Siennik whose name appeared in the volume), the tincture of mullein flowers protected against demons [12]. Mullein flowers were panaceas for centuries, hence, the process of their drying was described in 1836 in the Polish journal "Pamiętnik Farmaceutyczny Krakowski" [16] and in the interwar period they were analyzed in the Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry of the Poznań University in Poland [14].

The roots and fruits of angelic (*Angelica archangelica*) stimulate digestion and urination, and moreover, act as sedatives according to the herbarium from 1568 [17]. For Szymon Syreniusz, the author of herbarium published in 1617, its smell was very nice and really angelic. Among four species of angelic described by Syreniusz, the best one for pharmaceutical use grown in Switzerland. In 1818 Jan Wolfgang found that roots of angelic could be mistakenly or consciously forged by roots of water hemlock (a genus *Cicuta*) [18].

Burdock (*Arctium tomentosum*) with its characteristic purple flowers collected in ball-shaped baskets, provided folk medicine with a panacea for digestion and dermatological diseases [15]. The pistil stigmas of crocuses (*Crocus sativus*) were used as a sedative and anti-spastic remedy in Poland for centuries, however in China, as a digestive medicine. Chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*) flower was used in infusions as a popular anti-inflammatory folk remedy and is still used nowadays [12].

The bark of various willow species (a genus *Salix*), in the past a tree believed by peasants to be inhabited by ghosts and witches, was acquired as a pharmaceutical raw in the late eighteenth century when its anti-inflammatory properties had been tested and proved in Scotland [15]. The leaf buds of the poplar (*Populus nigra*) served to prepare anti-inflammatory drugs, and birches (*Betula pendula*) provided not only drugs against urinary system diseases, but also materials for the production of tar, a folk substance used to disinfect skin and digestive tract. The fruit of the rowan bush (*Sorbus aucuparia*) was traditionally used to produce homemade preserves and tinctures against urinary calculi [13].

Although the root of peony (*Paeonia officinalis*) was described by famous ancient doctors, Dioscorides and Theophrastus, as anti-epileptic medicine, its flowers and seeds (taken from peonies cultivated in gardens) were used in Polish traditional medicine to improve digestion [13].

The immature poppy heads (*Papaver somniferum*) were dried and used as a pain-killer just in ancient Greece. The plant was common everywhere where crops were grown. During centuries, mothers used poppy heads to prepare an infusion for infants to make them quiet and sleeping. In 1836, researchers proved that



Figure 1

Flower of *Matricaria chamomilla* in the painting “Polish Hamlet” (1903) by Jacek Malczewski (1854–1929), National Museum in Warsaw, Copyright expired.



Figure 2

Fruit of *Citrus sinensis* in the painting “Lady with Child” (1899) by Józef Pankiewicz (1866–1940), National Museum in Warsaw, Copyright expired.



Figure 3

Flower of *Lilium bulbiferum* in the painting “Spring – Triptych” (1909) by Kazimierz Sichulski (1879–1942), National Museum in Warsaw, Copyright expired.

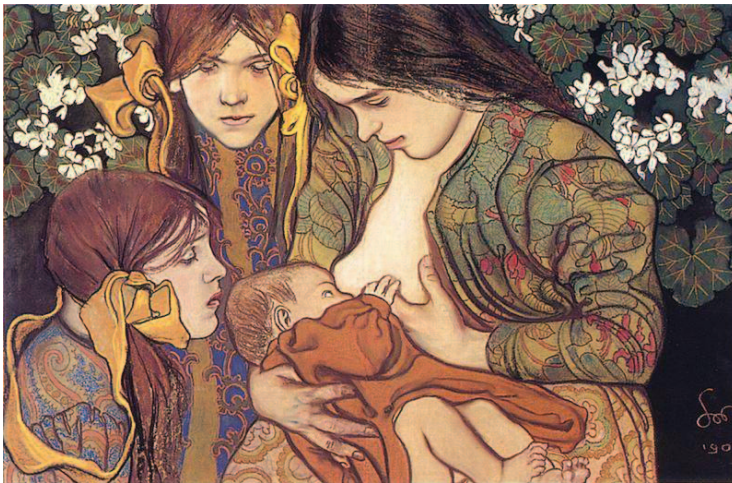


Figure 4

Flower of *Pelargonium hortorum* in the painting “Maternity” (1905) by Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907), National Museum in Warsaw, Copyright expired.



Figure 5

Thistle (*Carduus L.*) and chicories (*Cichorium intybus*) in the painting “Motherland” (1903) by Jacek Malczewski (1854–1929), National Museum in Wrocław, Copyright expired.



Figure 6

Flower of *Alcea rosea* in the painting “Strange Garden” (1903) by Józef Mehoffer (1869–1946), National Museum in Cracow, Copyright expired.

domestic production of morphine at the territory of Poland was possible [14]. The petals and juice from the heads were acquired to prepare intoxicant mixtures [13]. In 1934, the League of Nations published the guideline of analysis of morphine which was implemented in Poland in the following years [14]. From oranges (*Citrus sinensis*), surprisingly easy accessible at the time, healing remedy called *Confectio aurantii corticis* was prepared in home medicinal cabinets. The aromatic healing oil was produced from geranium (*Pelargonium hortorum*) [19]. Moreover, sagebrushes (*Artemisia abrotanum*), yellow water-lilies (*Nuphar lutea*), and foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*) were Polish traditional remedies as well [14]. This is the very concise historical-pharmaceutical characteristics of the most frequently painted medicinal plants which were recognized in symbolic art pieces.

CONCLUSIONS

Symbolists critically looked at Realism and created an alternative vision of the world, in which images of wild growing plants played an important role as symbols of vital forces of the Polish nation. Some of these plants were used as folk remedies at the time, hence, there is the question whether the mentioned above artists knew that the plants they painted had healing properties. It is highly probable, as at the turn of the twentieth century treatment with by herbal remedies was still popular in Poland because of the shortage of pharmacies and delayed industrialization.

Painters drew inspiration from Polish folklore, however, they recorded flora of the Carpathian Mountains of those days as well. Artistic images of plants did not intentionally aim at botanic identification, however, some of them are very detailed and can be classified. Taking into account this investigation, the analysis of Polish symbolic paintings provides some knowledge on the status of natural environment more than one century ago. More than twenty medicinal plant species can be recognized. Almost half of them had been used in traditional medicine (*Alcea rosea*, *Angelica archangelica*, *Artemisia abrotanum*, *Betula pendula*, *Carduus marianus*, *Convallaria majalis*, *Crocus sativus*, *Lilium candidum*, *Matricaria chamomilla*, *Nuphar lutea*, *Papaver somniferum*, *Primula veris*, *Taraxacum officinale*, and *Verbascum thapsus*). The painters made free-hand drawings in nature and by chance recorded two species growing in the Carpathian Mountains: *Digitalis purpurea* and *Lilium bulbiferum*, endangered at the present time.

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ODKRYWANIE ZIELARSTWA W SZTUCE. ROŚLINY W MALARSTWIE POLSKICH SYMBOLISTÓW (1890–1914)

ANITA MAGOWSKA

Zakład Historii Nauk Medycznych
 Uniwersytet Medyczny im. Karola Marcinkowskiego
 ul. Przybyszewskiego 37A
 60-461 Poznań

e-mail: anitamagowska@yahoo.com

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia historyczne powiązania między ziołarstwem a sztuką na początku XX wieku. Celem badania jest rozpoznanie roślin leczniczych pokazanych jako symbole w malarstwie polskim w latach 1890–1914 oraz znalezienie kulturowego kontekstu ich obecności w dziełach sztuki. W niniejszym badaniu jakościowym przeanalizowano internetowe galerie sztuki i kolekcje muzealne w celu wybrania prac polskich symbolistów zawierających wizerunki roślin. Następnie opracowano ich klasyfikację botaniczną i kontekst medyczny. Rozpoznano 20 gatunków dziko rosnących roślin leczniczych, z których część znajdowała zastosowanie w medycynie tradycyjnej (*Alcea rosea*, *Angelica archangelica*,

Artemisia abrotanum, *Betula pendula*, *Carduus marianus*, *Convallaria majalis*, *Crocus sativus*, *Lilium candidum*, *Matricaria chamomilla*, *Nuphar lutea*, *Paeonia officinalis*, *Papaver somniferum*, *Pelargonium hortorum*, *Populus nigra*, *Primula veris*, *Sorbus aucuparia*, *Taraxacum officinale* i *Verbascum thapsus*) i dwa gatunki występujące wtedy w Karpatach (*Digitalis purpurea*, *Lilium bulbiferum*). Przyzwyczajeni do malowania rzeczywistych obiektów, symboliści przygotowali szkice w plenerze, utrwalając w ten sposób wizerunki roślin leczniczych typowych dla okolic Krakowa i Karpat. Artystycznych wizerunków roślin nie sporządzano w celu ich identyfikacji taksonomicznej, ale niekiedy jest ona możliwa.

Słowa kluczowe: ziołarstwo, botanika, farmacja, rośliny dziko rosnące, symbolizm, Karpaty, dziewiętnasty wiek