Symbolic meaning of medicinal plants in Polish painting (1890-1914)

Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century a strong impulse to redefine theoretical premises of art was the disappointment with the scientific-technical revolution and the theory of subconsciousness. Positivism was traversed and the conviction that the world is two-dimensional, both material and spiritual, became the foundation of the symbolic language of art to express metaphysical contents, abstract concepts, and states of mind.1

The aim of this article is to recognize and describe medicinal plants shown as symbols in Polish painting from 1890, when the first Polish symbolists, Józef Pankiewicz and Władysław Podkowiński returned from Paris to Warsaw, until 1914, when the First World War broke out. The online Polish museum collections were analyzed to select symbolists’ masterpieces with medicinal plants, next, their symbolic meaning and use as indigenous remedies at the time were examined.

Symbolism in Polish art

Symbolism was a French artistic movement which appeared at the late nineteenth century. Its premises were firstly presented by Jean Moréas in 1886 and five years later were developed by Albert Aurier who presented the new artistic trend as an opposition to realism, sobriety, and objectivity. His followers emphasized the role of imaginary and subjectivity in art, because only ideas and concepts are reliable. Nevertheless, painters had to show abstraction and notions by means of images of real people and things, among them medicinal plants. The new artistic movement reached the territory of Poland with certain delay, justified political and social obstacles (from the end of the eighteenth century Poland was annexed by Austro-Hungary, Prussia and Russia, which blocked a development of culture there), through young Polish graduates of the École des Beaux-Arts and Colorossi Academy in Paris. At first Jacek Malczewski (1854-1929), later Władysław Podkowiński (1866-1895), Józef Pankiewicz (1866-1940), Józef Mehoffer (1869-1946), Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) and others learnt impressionist technique and the symbolic language of painting in Paris.2

2 Tadeusz Dobrowolski, Malarstwo polskie ostatnich dwustu lat, Ossolineum Wrocław 1976, pp. 100-117.
They returned to motherland as enthusiasts of the symbolic language and art detachment from everyday life. Their paintings featured a rich symbolism expressed by realistic means, sometimes plants being Polish indigenous remedies to expose a Polish context of message. Symbols pictured the spiritual dimension of the real world and allowed to present irrevocability of death, affirmation of life, and such states of mind as: melancholy, despair, fear, etc. Obsessively presented nudity, especially naked women, and wild growing medicinal plants were readable symbols of life and its short lasting.

**Medicinal plants as universal symbols**

In 1890-1914, the period of development of symbolic language in Polish art, painters used plant symbols of universal character and appealed to intuitive or conventional association. Multicolor and subtleness of flowers were attractive artistic means to express that life is ephemeral. Leon Wyczółkowski (1852-1936) painted a series titled “Dreams about Flowers”, in which he presented popular medicinal plants, i.e. cowslips (*Primula veris* L.), mulleins (*Verbascum thapsus* Meyer), and poppies (*Papaver somniferum* L.). He focused on their natural beauty, treating medicinal plants as universal symbols of vitality.

Józef Mehoffer studied the fine arts in Paris and Vienna, where he learnt new theories of visual perception that induced to treat the whole world as a beautiful illusion. Such reality is presented in his painting “Strange Garden” where robust mallows (*Malva*) occupy the foreground. The colorful mallow in the hand of the naked child reminds about the elusiveness of happiness and fugacity of life.

Władysław Podkowiński studied painting in Warsaw, Petersburg and Paris where he earned a living as illustrator of French newspapers. After return to Warsaw he 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 (*Convallaria majalis* L.), the symbol of naivety and patient waiting, in her hand.

Józef Pankiewicz was known for such enthusiastic approach to French art that in 1925 he was even transferred to Paris to take the position in the branch of Cracow School. He was a renowned portraitist, willingly introducing flower symbols to his paintings. For example, he painted his wife in a Japanese kimono on the background of peonies (*Paeonia officinalis* L.), the Japanese symbol of mature femininity.

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3 Dobrowolski, pp. 107-117.
4 Dobrowolski, p. 104.
6 Trapp, pp. 394-395.
7 Trapp, p. 458.
8 Dobrowolski, p. 113.
9 Dobrowolski, p. 104.
10 Trapp, pp. 380-381.
12 Dobrowolski, p. 108.
Graduated from the Paris Colorossi Academy in 1891, Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) became a famous portraitist and author of secession stained-glass windows for churches and decorative vignettes for magazines. In some portraits Wyspiański replaced neutral background with plant motives intentionally, e.g. white geraniums (*Pelargonium roseum* L.) in a painting entitled “Maternity” showing his breastfeeding wife.

**Medicinal plants as symbols of Poland**

Almost all impressionist symbolic paintings by Jacek Malczewski referred to the history of Poland. As a child he witnessed the anti-Russian January Uprising of 1863 and exile of thousands of its participants to Siberia. From 1876 until 1877 he studied painting in Paris, however, a stronger impact on his works had a following journey to Greece and Turkey to see the ancient pieces of art. Malczewski’s works confirm that art can derived a metaphysical depth from the Greek mythology. He introduced into his paintings figures borrowed from Greek myths, such as nymphs and fauns, and evoked spiritual tension in audience showing them on the typically Polish meadows and boundary strips covered with blowballs (*Leontodon Taraxacum* L.), foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea* L.), large sagebrushes (*Artemisia abrotanum* L.), burdocks (*Alium ursinum* L.), angelics (*Angelica Archangelica* L.) and mulleins (*Verbascum Thapsus* L.).

A chamomile flower, from which petals were torn off one by one, symbolizes the necessity to make a choice in the painting entitled “The Polish Hamlet” and presenting oddly dressed Aleksander Wielopolski, grandson of margrave of the same name who in the half of the 19th century maneuvered between the interest of Austria and the Polish society. Two women accompany the margrave; one is the allegory of slavery and yoke impossible to shake off, and the other, naked and breaking off the chains, brings hope for liberation.

Malczewski mixed epochs and introduced symbolic figures borrowed from the ancient times to the real world. Uncommon clothing of the presented persons enhanced the ambiguity and provoked the viewer. Putting together mythical figures with Polish plants, Malczewski pointed out the mythologization of collective experience of the Poles, and the universal truth saying that each man is inclined to mitologize his or her life.

Władysław Podkowiński emphasized tree species characteristic for the Polish landscape: willows and poplars. Similarly, Jan Stanislawski, student of painting in Warsaw, Cracow and Paris, used poplars to symbolize Poland. Inasmuch in 1890-1914 wild growing medicinal plants inspired artists and became valuable vehicles of metaphysical and abstract contents, after the outbreak of the First World War their attractiveness as symbols diminished.

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14 Wiorogórski, Zająckowski, pp. 908-909.
15 Dobrowolski, p. 121.
16 W. Mitarski, Jacek Malczewski, 1923, p. 7.
17 Tadeusz Chruciścik, No title, [in:] Mitologia Malczewskiego, ed. Teresa Grybkowska, Muzeum Czartoryskich, Kraków 1995, pp. IX-XIX.
18 Dobrowolski, p. 117.
19 Chruciścik, pp. X-XVIII.
20 Dobrowolski, p. 134.
Plants occurring in symbolic paintings as indigenous remedies

All plants and their parts painted by Polish representatives of symbolism could be found in Poland, mainly in the Carpathian Mountains and their surroundings. Evidently symbolists used field sketches while painting in their studies. This way their works became a kind of artistic herbal including plants popular in the south of Poland and used as indigenous remedies. Hence the inflorescence and herb of mayflower (Covallaria majalis), still growing wild in the whole Poland, had been used in folk medicine as cardiac drug for ages. Marcin Siennik, the author of a herbal printed in 1568, called mayflower “a plant resurrecting the dead”. The plant was recognized by scientific medicine just in 1881.21 Cowslips (Primula veris L.) flowers were an old sweat-inducing indigenous remedy.22

Flowers, roots and leaves of various mullein species (Verbascum) described by Galen as early as in the 1st century AC belong to the most remote drugs in both scientific and folk medicine, used as “consoling herbs” and “scaring demons away”23. The roots and fruits of angelics (Archangelica officinalis L.) stimulate digestion and urination, and act as sedatives24. Burdock (Arctium tomentosum) with its characteristic purple flowers collected in ball-shaped baskets, provided folk medicine with panacea for digestion and dermatological drugs.25 The pistil stigmas of crocuses (Crocus sativus) served as sedative and antispastic medicines. Chinese medicine still uses them as digestive drug26. Chamomile flower (Matricaria chamomilla) was and still is used as anti-inflammatory drug27. Crop seeds were used to make pills and cataplasms.28

Paeonia officinalis L., which root was used as anti-epileptic medicine and was described by Dioscorides and Theophrastus.29 Although common peony (Paeonia officinalis) was also grown as decorative plant a hundred years ago, its flowers and seeds were used in digestive problems as antispastic and improving secretion of digestive juices, as well as antiepileptic drug30.

Folk belief in herbs’ power protecting against demons and having cheering properties was present not only in Poland, but also in ancient and Renaissance medical-botanical works. E.g. the miraculous power of mullein (Verbascum thapsiforme) brew was described by Hippocrates, Dioscurides and Pliny the Elder. Marcin Siennik in 1568 wrote about vodka made of mullein flowers with properties protecting against demons.31 Therefore, the presence of mullein in symbolists’ paintings seems cannot be considered incidental.

22 Trapp, p. 383.
23 Encyklopedia, pp. 122-123.
25 Macká, Krejča, p. 378.
26 Encyklopedia, pp. 536-537.
27 Encyklopedia, p. 527.
28 Trapp, pp. 470, 475.
29 Trapp, p. 61.
30 Encyklopedia, p. 435.
31 Encyklopedia, p. 123.
Poppy (*Papaver somniferum* L.) immature capsules were dried and used as pain-killer just in ancient Greece. Poppies (*Papaver Rhoeas*) have been known for ages for their therapeutical value. The plant was common everywhere where crops were grown. The petals and juice from heads were acquired to prepare intoxicant mixtures. This is the concise pharmacological characteristics of the most frequently painted medicinal plants.

Conclusions

At the present, Poland is one of European leaders in the production and use of herbal drugs. The popularity of herbs and herbal drugs results from the traditional folk medicine. Images of plants by Polish symbolists were not aimed at botanic identification, however, they allowed for the recognition of certain types and species of wild growing or cultivated in gardens medicinal plants. In the mid-twentieth century some of these species were covered with legal protection, which made impossible picking up and use them according to the folk tradition. In light of the shortage of physicians and pharmacies in the Partition period people kept herbs and homemade herbal drugs (for example, tinctures) in medicine cabinets.

32 Trapp, p. 458.
33 Trapp, pp. 385-386.