

Kazimierz Stabrowski's Esoteric Dimensions Theosophy, Art, and the Vision of Femininity

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Studies of the influence of esoteric motifs on art are always liable to the risk of interpretations that find coded symbols where there are none, or attribute a plurality of additional meanings to the content intended by an artist. On the other hand – it is known that esoteric motifs had a great impact on the history of art and on contemporary artistic works. Those influences are often understudied or even omitted on purpose.² Well aware of both sides of the problem, we attempt here to outline the esoteric, and especially Theosophical inspirations in the works of Kazimierz Stabrowski (1869-1929), focusing on the issue of femininity, which was important at a certain time in his artistic life. In the case of Stabrowski, a radical shift in his artistic inclinations coincided in time with his engagement in organizational activities in the Theosophical Society. The paintings which will be presented here were created during a period of an intensified interest in Esotericism. That interest later had negative consequences for Stabrowski's career.³

The painter was one of the most important and influential people among those interested in Esotericism and Occultism; he was also instrumental in the formation of esoteric circles in pre-World War I Polish lands. Many artists and painters were engaged in esoteric milieus at the time. Some of them, however, kept their interests private or did not manifest them in their work. This is not the case of Stabrowski, who referred to esoteric inspirations in various of his activities, from illustrations for book covers to his most important paintings, although he did that in subtle ways. He was also known to organize Spiritualist séances, and for his later engagement with Anthroposophy. His main interests, however, lay in modern Theosophy. The approach to the idea of femininity in the Theosophical current was a distinctive feature that set it apart from other esoteric ideas of the time. Our claim is that Theosophical inspirations can be directly traced in Stabrowski's art, and that they have also impacted the way he represented femininity.

¹ The research project was financed from the sources of the National Science Centre, Poland, awarded on the basis of decision no. DEC-2013/11/N/HS1/04812.

² See the remarks on relations between Theosophy and the Arts in Massimo Introvigne, "New Religious Movements and the Visual Arts," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* Vol. 19 No. 4 (2016): 3-4.

³ Radosław Okulicz-Kozaryn, *Litwin wśród spadkobierców Króla-Ducha* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2007), 177.



Fig. 1. Portrait of Kazimierz Stabrowski's published in *Sfinks* [Sphinx] journal in February 1910.

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The article is divided into three parts. The aim of the first part is to introduce Kazimierz Stabrowski, and the most important elements of his biography that are relevant to his later work. The second part will consist of a characterization of Stabrowski's relations with esoteric milieu and of the main inspirations for his work. In the third and last part we will present some of Stabrowski's paintings, which will allow us to track the esoterically inspired visions of femininity that are a part of his artistic output.

Stabrowski's life and artistic career

Kazimierz Strabowski was born in 1869 in Kruplany in the Vilnius area, in Russian territory that had earlier belonged to Poland and is now a part of Belarus.⁴ The political situation in the country at that time is frequently a reason for misunderstandings regarding the national origin of artists in that time, and in consequence, regarding also the specific character of national motifs in their art. It also explains the membership of many among the Polish intellectual elite at that time in various lodges (Theosophical, Freemasonic) in different European countries.



Fig. 2. Kazimierz Stabrowski, *A view on Taormina* (1901).
Courtesy of National Museum in Warsaw.

⁴ The Polish state had been divided and annexed by its neighbors in late 18th century and did not regain independence until 1918.

Stabrowski's early education took place in a *Realschule* in Białystok; in 1887 he entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Petersburg. In connection with his work on a diploma in 1892 he traveled via Odessa, Constantinople, Athens, Rhodes, Smyrna, Beirut and Jaffa to Palestine (Jerusalem) and then to Port Said, Alexandria and Cairo. He obtained a Master's degree with a painting entitled *Mohammed in the Desert* (known also as *Escape from Mecca*) and was awarded a golden medal for it.⁵

During his studies in the Academy and his journey to Palestine, Stabrowski developed religious, metaphysical and Theosophical interests, which determined his later work. His passion for travels is also important, as it supplied him with inspiration and fueled his interest in the esoteric East. Both in the Romantic period and in the Young Poland movement (at the turn of the 20th century) the Far East was known in Poland through the mediation of occultist trends coming from both Western and Eastern Europe. Therefrom emerged a vision of Far East as a vessel of esoteric content and a place from which occult knowledge comes.⁶

Stabrowski's art during his years in the Academy was inspired by motifs present in Russian painting, especially in the works of Ilya Repin (1844-1930). Under the influence of Russian Theosophy, symbolic, fantastic and mythological elements began to appear in his work. Romantic landscapes such as *Silence in the Countryside*, *First Snow*, *A White Night in Finland*, *A White Night in Petersburg*, *Princess of Happiness* (lost, known from reproductions) belong to this period. During the same time Stabrowski painted an academic nude *The Model* (1895) and his first portraits: of his fiancée Julia Janiszewska (1896), of his father, and *Miss P.* (1898 – the latter two lost, known from reproductions).⁷

In 1902 Stabrowski moved to Warsaw and joined the Polish Artists' Society "Sztuka" [Art]. He made efforts to establish an artistic academy in Warsaw, relying on his connections from Petersburg and a visit card with the signature of the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich (1857-1905) and a promise of fulfilling the painter's every wish. Thanks to this the Governor General gave permission to establish the Warsaw School of Fine Arts. Stabrowski founded the organizing committee and wrote the academy's statute, which was ratified by the Russian administration in September 1902.⁸

The most important idea included in the statute and promoted by Stabrowski was the need "to know one's own artistic nature". This postulate was considered by him to be more fundamental than the learning of composition or the technique of sculpture; he favored an individual development of each student.

⁵ Lija Skalska, "Kazimierz Stabrowski – lata studiów i początki działalności twórczej," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, 19 (1975): 575-657.

⁶ Anna E. Kubiak, "Kształtowanie się obrazu i percepcji kultury Dalekiego Wschodu w Polsce," in *Ruchy pogranicza religii i nauki jako zjawisko socjopsychologiczne Vol. IV*, ed. Tadeusz Doktor (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1990): 90-93.

⁷ Lija Skalska-Miecik, "Echa sztuki rosyjskiej w twórczości warszawskich modernistów," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, 28 (1984): 125-172.

⁸ Ksawery Piwocki, *Historia Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie 1904-1964* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1965): 15.

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Above all, however, he put stress in the statute on the value of applied art and its function in the education of Polish society.⁹ Stabrowski combined his efforts towards fostering of artistic education with independentist ideas and he wanted to serve the Polish nation through the promotion of fine arts. The Warsaw School of Fine Arts was officially opened on March 17, 1904. Stabrowski became its first director and the first professor. Among its teachers were such prominent artists as Xavery Dunikowski (1875-1964), Ferdynand Ruszczyc (1870-1936), Konrad Krzyżanowski (1872-1922), Karol Tichy (1871-1939).



Fig. 3. Kazimierz Stabrowski with his painting *Roses bloom*. Opening of artist's exhibition in Poznań in 1927. Courtesy of The National Digital Archives.

Open air artistic events, social meetings, and annual carnival balls were organized by the school. It is important to note that the Warsaw School was the first artistic academy in the Polish territories where women were granted the same privileges as men. In 1932 it was closed and reorganized into the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.¹⁰ Numerous artistic events were held in the School. The

⁹ Cf. Okulicz-Kozaryn, Piotr Kopszak, "Čiurlionis i warszawska Szkoła Sztuk Pięknych," in *Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis – tvėrczoč, osobowość, środowisko*, (Kaunas: Nacionalinis M.K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus 2001), 177.

¹⁰ Okulicz-Kozaryn, Piotr Kopszak, *Čiurlionis...*, 178.

most famous of them, one that became a part of the history of Polish art, was the “Young Art” ball that took place in 1908 in the building of the Warsaw Philharmonic. It is documented by Stabrowski’s portraits of the participants of the ball,¹¹ which will be shown in the last part of this article. The balls became a tradition of the school for many years.

The interpreters of Stabrowski’s work underline the fact that his best-known and most successful works were landscapes, inspired by Russian painting, and filled with motifs related to his travels, such as his diploma piece from Petersburg. Today, however, we would like to focus on a short, but very significant period in his artistic biography, which is sometimes referred to as his “visionary–mystical period”, and in particular we want to focus on the prominent role of femininity in Stabrowski’s works from this time. As we can learn from his biography, a turning point in Stabrowski’s artistic interests coincides with his return from Petersburg to Warsaw. At this time he was fascinated with Esotericism and engaged in organizational activities in the Theosophical Society.¹²

Esoteric influences

The available information relating to this field of Stabrowski’s activity is scant. From what we were able to find out, there emerges an image of a gifted and widely appreciated artist with extraordinary organizational talents, but also of an unpredictable, sometimes eccentric man, who induced his students to engage in occultist practices. Few of the biographical sources mention Stabrowski’s dismissal from the Academy, and even fewer speak of its reasons. One of them were his esoteric interests.¹³ On the other hand, Stabrowski’s dismissal was also related to the poor financial condition of the School that was blamed on his bad management.¹⁴

Stabrowski held regular “wild strawberry tea” meetings at his home, which were in fact mostly Spiritualist séances. They were frequented by such prominent figures as Tadeusz Miciński (1873-1918), or Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875-1911), who sometimes also played the role of a medium. Stabrowski was also a regular guest at similar meetings which were held in the poet Edward

¹¹ Anna Sieradzka, “Bal Młodej Sztuki” w 1908 roku i jego reminiscencje plastyczne i literackie,” *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 42 (1980), 187-198.

¹² Skalska, *Kazimierz Stabrowski*, 575-657.

¹³ Jadwiga Siedlecka, *Mikołaj Konstanty Čiurlionis 1875-1911. Preludium warszawskie* (Warszawa: AgArt 1996), 47-48. It is not the first such story in the history of Polish academia – another example is Julian Ochorowicz, the forerunner of experimental psychology in Poland, who, because of his interest in Mediumism and related topics, was denied habilitation at the University in Lviv and as a result moved for a time to Paris. The entry “Kazimierz Stabrowski” in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, 41 (2002), 275-278, refers to an article by Stabrowski in which he defended himself against the accusations (see 276).

¹⁴ Okulicz-Kozaryn, Piotr Kopszak, *Čiurlionis...*, 178.

Słoński's (1872-1926) home, where the medium was the famous Jan Guzik (1875-192).¹⁵

Stabrowski and Miciński were friends, and they inspired each other's work. Some of the most influential ideas at the time were those connected with Eastern Knowledge and mysteries. In the cultural circles at the time there were attempts to look for connections between Poles and Aryans, and it is easy to find those reflections in Polish literature at the turn of the 20th century. They were also present in Stabrowski's circle. The Poles were supposed to play a special role in the spiritual awakening of humanity; this kind of Messianistic influences were present in esoteric movements since Romanticism.



Fig. 4 and 5. Book covers projected by Stabrowski. Courtesy of the National Library of Poland.

Stabrowski's interests in this area and his engagement in esoteric ideas, especially those related to Theosophy and the East, can be clearly seen, for instance, in the book covers he designed. One of them (on the left) – which includes an Eastern swastika – is a cover for Miciński's book *Nietota. Księga tajemna Tatr* [Nietota. The Book of Tatra Mystery]. The Tatra mountains were compared to the Himalaya; traces of Aryan culture were supposed to be found there. The other cover is for Hanna Krzemieniecka's *Fatum* [Fate], published in 1904.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ludwik Hass, *Ambicje, rachuby, rzeczywistość. Wolnomularstwo w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej 1905-1928* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1984), 90.

¹⁶ Urszula Makowska, "Wiedza tajemna Wschodu. Tendencje okultystyczne w kulturze polskiej na przełomie XIX i XX wieku," in *Orient i orientalizm w sztuce. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Kraków, grudzień 1983* (Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1986), 323-338.

The figure in the image, emerging from a dark background, is probably a metaphorical representation of fate; a sign above her face – a hexagram composed of white and black triangle, is the same as the one used in the official symbol of the Theosophical Society. It represents the unity of the opposites: a spiritual and a material principle. Hanna Krzemieniecka (pen name of Janina Furs-Żyrkiewicz) was also a part of the Theosophical lodge.¹⁷ Another book that Stabrowski illustrated for her is a rare example of its kind in Polish literature – an occult romance – titled *A gdy odejdzie w przepaść wieczną... Romans zagrobowy* [And when he leaves into the eternal abyss... A romance beyond the grave].¹⁸

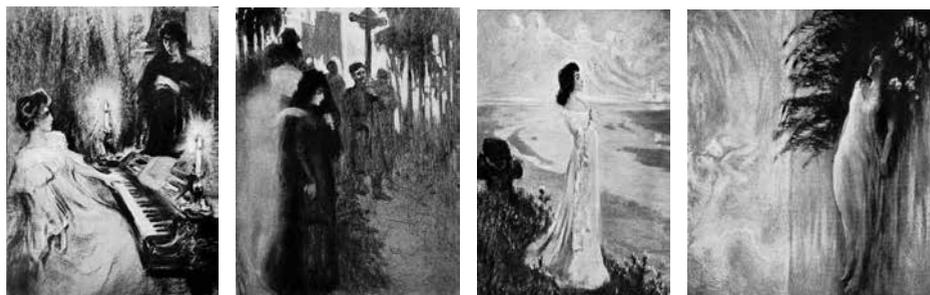


Fig. 6-9. Chosen Stabrowski's illustrations for the novel *A gdy odejdzie w przepaść wieczną... Romans zagrobowy*.
Courtesy of the National Library of Poland.

Those are not yet the last points on the list of activities where Stabrowski could employ both his artistic workshop, and esoteric interests. Similarly to Čiurlionis, Stabrowski was also an author of scenography. In case of this kind of activity, it is of course hard to analyze it out of the context of the spectacle itself, or a director's thoughts. There is however no doubt that Stabrowski constructed a very interesting interpretation of the background for Juliusz Słowacki's *Lilla Weneda*, that was performed in the City Theater in Kraków in 1904. The list of Stabrowski's paintings for the scenography includes such works as *Grota Wróżki* [Fairy's cave] – 2 versions, *Pole i las koło Gopła* [Field and forest nearby Gopło Lake], *Hala w zamku Lecha* [Hall in the castle of Lech] – 6 versions, *Pobojowisko* [Battlefield], *Monument druidyczny w lesie* [Druidic monument in the forest] – 2 versions.¹⁹ Stabrowski became also known as a writer, in particular, he published essays in several journals.

¹⁷ We'll focus on this in the next section.

¹⁸ Hanna Krzemieniecka, *A gdy odejdzie w przepaść wieczną... Romans zagrobowy* (Warszawa: Laskauer 1910).

¹⁹ *Lilla Weneda* Poster, 23 May 1904 (Kraków: Dyrekcja Teatru Miejskiego, 1904).



Fig. 10. A fragment of Stabrowski's scenography for a drama by Juliusz Słowacki – *Lilla Weneda* performed in the City Theater in Krakow in 1904. Courtesy of the National Library of Poland.

A very important topic in the context of European Esotericism that has not been explored in the literature so far, is the connection between Stabrowski and the above-mentioned Čiurlionis. Čiurlionis, who became a famous painter and composer, played an important role in the Polish–Lithuanian dialogue. Kraków and Warsaw were important centers of education for Lithuanian elites in the late 19th and early 20th century. The painter's wife, Sofija, studied at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.²⁰ Čiurlionis was a member of the social circles in Warsaw. From 1894 to 1899 he studied at the Warsaw Musical Institute, and in the years 1904-1906 at the Warsaw School of the Fine Arts. He was in contact with important Polish painters – besides the School's director, Stabrowski, also Ferdynand Ruszczyk and Konrad Krzyżanowski, to name just a few. He found friends and patrons, among others, in the family of Mrs Bronisława Wolman, a physician Józef Markiewicz, and a composer Eugeniusz Morawski.²¹

²⁰ Jacek Purchla, "Lithuanian Tale in Krakow," in *M. K. Čiurlionis. Litewska opowieść* (Cracow: International Cultural Centre, M.K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art in Kaunas 2015), 7.

²¹ Rasa Žukienė, "Shades of Lithuania in the work of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis," in *M. K. Čiurlionis*, 9.



Fig. 11. A photograph of professors and students of the School of the Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1904. Stabrowski (detail above) is sitting in the middle, Čiurlionis (detail below) on the photo is above and slightly to the right of Stabrowski. Courtesy of the National Library of Poland.

It should be noted here that when Čiurlionis joined the School of the Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1904, he was already 29, and thus one of the oldest students. As he was closer in age to many of his teachers, he befriended some of them.²² During this time he also developed his wide interests and encountered the ideas of Theosophy, as well as the subjects of hypnosis and occultism. As has been mentioned earlier, the composer was a guest of the “wild strawberry tea” meetings, organized in Stabrowski’s house. Besides the already mentioned participants, other figures of importance to Čiurlionis appeared there, Zenon Przesmycki (1861-1944) also called Miriam or Jan Zagiel, the editor of *Chimera* journal, Artur Górski (1870-1959), whose series of articles titled “Young Poland” gave the name to the current, or Bolesław Leśmian (1877-1937), a renown poet, as well as Stanisław Franciszek Michalski, Stanisław Wyrzykowski, Or-Ot, Stefan Jaracz, Jan Lemański, and Jan Lorentowicz.²³ It was also there where he acquired his first experience with Spiritualist séances.²⁴ Stabrowski’s (or more precisely both brothers’, Kazimierz and Juliusz Stabrowskis’) salon was a setting in which popular topics of conversation included literature, music, Indian philosophy, and the Egyptian cult of the Sun – all of which was congenial to the artistic interests of Čiurlionis.²⁵

Matters such as theosophical (with and without a capital T) and occultist conceptions or Kabbalistic transcendental states were also debated there.²⁶ As some

²² Žukienė, *Shades of Lithuania*, 12.

²³ Siedlecka, *Mikołaj Konstatnty Ciurlionis 1875-1911*, 63.

²⁴ M. K. Čiurlionis, 232.

²⁵ Žukienė, *Shades of Lithuania*, 24.

²⁶ Vida Mažrimienė, “Traces of the work of Sandro Botticelli and Jan Matejko in the drawings of

authors claim, these and similar topics were part of the historiosophical and apocalyptic climate characteristic of many intellectual circles of the time.²⁷ Under the influence of the Young Poland movement, Čiurlionis read Polish philosophers and poets – Mickiewicz, Słowacki and others. He was impressed by the mystical works of Miciński, and among occultist literature he was especially interested at that time in Rudolf Steiner's treatise *Theosophy* (1904) and Annie Wood Besant's and Charles W. Leadbeater's *Thought-Forms*.²⁸ During the time in Warsaw he also engaged in writing himself.²⁹ Although he never joined the Theosophical Society (and died young) the painter's allusions to Theosophy are very clearly recognizable in his works.³⁰

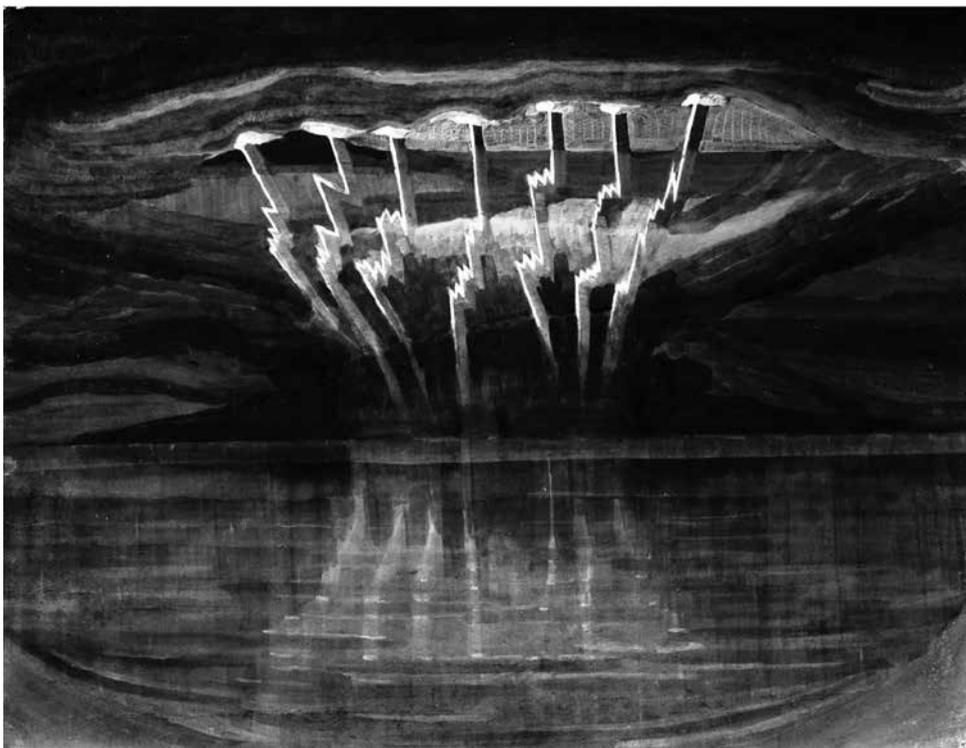


Fig. 12. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, *Lightning* (1909).

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis,” in *M. K. Čiurlionis*, 45-46.

²⁷ Mažrimienė, *Traces of the work*, 45.

²⁸ Mažrimienė, *Traces of the work*, 46.

²⁹ With Stabrowski's recommendation, he gave one of his works for review to the editor of an important literary journal *Chimera*, Przesmycki, whom he considered an authority. See Natalia Żak, “Community of imagination. The idea of the synesthesia of arts in the context of the work of M.K. Čiurlionis,” in *M. K. Čiurlionis*, 102-103.

³⁰ See Massimo Introvigne, “Čiurlionis' Theosophy: Myth or Reality?” (paper presented at the conference *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy and the Arts in the Modern World*, Amsterdam, September 26, 2013).

No one who knows the basics of the Theosophy of Helena P. Blavatsky will have any trouble noticing, for instance, that the painting *Lightning*, showing a storm with seven thunderbolts, directly alludes to the “Mystery of the Seven Thunders” described in *The Secret Doctrine*.³¹

Examples like this are easy to find. In Stabrowski’s works, on the other hand, mystical and Theosophical allusions are also present, but not as clearly and directly recognizable. Before we go on to discuss those that center around the idea of femininity in his “visionary–mystical period”, let us first have a look at some of his lesser known paintings which are often considered to be related to the philosophical conceptions of Theosophy.



Fig. 13. Kazimierz Stabrowski, *Kompozycja fantastyczna* [Fantastic Composition] (around 1924).
Courtesy of National Museum in Warsaw.

The *Fantastic Composition* presents a nude couple surrounded by angelic choirs. The crowd of spiritual beings resembles the visions of Angels from the tradition of Christian Art,³² choirs from visions of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772),³³ or some visualizations of the heavenly circles of Dante.³⁴ Light plays a

³¹ See also Joscelyn Godwin, *The Mystery of the Seven Vowels in Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press 1991).

³² Cf. eg. 15th century vision of the *The Assumption of the Virgin* with the nine orders of angels by Francesco Botticini.

³³ Cf. *De Caelo et Ejus Mirabilibus et de inferno. Ex Auditibus et Visis* (1758).

³⁴ See the works of Gustave Doré (1832-1883) or Franz von Bayros (1866-1924).

crucial role here – as it is also a central element in the painter's other works of similar topic.

Further examples can be found in *The Consoler of Monsters* and *Angel and Monsters*. The two paintings are very similar, and most probably two versions of the same idea. Both show angels raising light over a group of “monsters” – the latter depicted as deformed human beings.



Fig. 14. Kazimierz Stabrowski, *Pocieszyciel monstrów* [The Consoler of Monsters] (around 1920).
Courtesy of National Museum in Warsaw.

In the context of Theosophy and mystical Christianity we can consider these paintings from the perspective of broadly construed conceptions of the body, its deformation and perfection. The light in the angel's hands is of cosmic provenance, it permeates the universe. We can see that if we look closely at its colorful rings, among which we can see different planets, including a characteristic image of Saturn. Its vertical orientation is also not accidental. However, in both paintings the light is diffracted at the edges and creates a rainbow; its shape remains round or oval. An image like this is known in mystical Christianity as well as in Tibetan Buddhism (from which it found its way into Theosophy³⁵), and it is related to a kind of subtle body (in Christian Esotericism it is the body of resurrection) – the rainbow body, characteristic of persons on a high level of spiritual development.



Fig. 15 and 16. Kazimierz Stabrowski, *Aniol i potwory* (1920-1922), and *Wizja III – szkic do „Zwiastowania”* (before 1910). Courtesy of National Museum in Warsaw.

One of the possible interpretations of these paintings is therefore as representing the idea of a development of the imperfect, crippled earthly body, through the transformation of cosmic and divine energies and light, into the angelic, rainbow body. We should also add that associations between the rainbow and angelic choirs are also later to be found in the lectures of Rudolph Steiner,³⁶ whom Stabrowski admired. In general, the motifs of angels and of light are prominent in the visionary art of the painter. It should be added here, that besides those works, the rainbow also appears in Stabrowski's painting *Brama życia* [The Gate of Life], where it occupies the central position.

³⁵ Cf. Charles W. Leadbeater, *Man visible and invisible* (Wheaton, ILL., Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House 1902), 271.

³⁶ Rudolph Steiner, "The Hierarchies and the Nature of the Rainbow," (lecture in the series "Colour", Dornach, January 4, 1924).

Stabrowski travelled a lot and during his visits abroad he also made a lot of connections with esotericists. As the head of Polish Theosophical group he took part in some meetings and corresponded with Theosophists from other countries. There is an interesting story told by Kazimierz Kalinowski (1874-1940) in his brief book *K. Stabrowski: sylwetka malarza-poety* [K. Stabrowski: a portrait of the painter-poet] connected to Stabrowski's involvement in the Theosophical Movement. Kalinowski cites information about Stabrowski's participation in the international Theosophical Congress in 1911 in Sweden. What he refers to has to be the 7th Congress of the European Federation of the Theosophical Society in Stockholm, but the event took place two years later, in 1913. The story is probably exaggerated, but some of its elements might be true. Stabrowski, as the Polish delegate, instead of a paper, brought his paintings to the Congress. He took a room next to the lecture hall and presented there 30 of his mystical works. He didn't give them any titles, but instead asked everyone to propose titles and interpretations. After the Congress was closed, he was given a whole book of long answers from Theosophist around the world.³⁷ According to Kalinowski, all those paintings are lost. Some other works which revealed Stabrowski's esoteric interests, but of which only titles (probably named after the meeting) remain, were: *Promienisty* [Radiant], *Larwy* [Larvae], *Na granicy niewidzialnego* [On the edge of the invisible], *W astralu* [In the Astral] and others.³⁸

The Theosophical circle of Stabrowski in the first decade of the 20th century seems to be strongly influenced by Theosophy of Rudolph Steiner. At the time Steiner was a member of the Theosophical Society, sharing its universal, perennial ideas and at the same time a charismatic teacher emphasizing esoteric dimensions of Christianity. His teachings were still received as Theosophy. He was very influential in Poland and his Anthroposophical schism had great impact on the Polish Theosophical movement. Many of its members chose Steiner's side, but Stabrowski hesitated for a time, although he was also later considered to be a follower of Steiner, and both Theosophy and Anthroposophy at one time.

A few details from his biography may confirm his involvement in Anthroposophy, as well as his paintings. But unfortunately, some of his works related to the esoteric ideas are known mostly from a small number of reproductions and apart from that only from their titles. Works such as *Knights of the Saint Grail* or *Dies irae*, which are supposed to present esoteric elements, were never reproduced. Those two paintings were presented by Stabrowski at the above mentioned congress in Stockholm. After that, he took them to Berlin, where he left them with Rudolf Steiner's family, so that the teacher could see them. Stabrowski was also probably commissioned to create a cycle of paintings for the first Goetheanum in Dornach, but this part of his biography needs further research. It is so far unknown what happened to the paintings he left in Berlin. His relations with

³⁷ Kazimierz Kalinowski, *K. Stabrowski. Sylwetka malarza-poety* (Poznań: Wielkopolski Związek Artystów Plastyków 1927), 5-6.

³⁸ Makowska, *Wiedza tajemna Wschodu*, 332.

the ideas of both Steiner and Blavatsky are also manifested in his interwar activities in an esoteric milieu not only in Poland. As Alojzy K. Gleic claimed, he also became interested in Rosicrucianism, Astrology and Kabbalah.³⁹ It is known that he was in contact with Russian esotericists for all the time, although in the time of organizing the Theosophical lodge, he strongly endeavored attempts to establishing an independent Polish branch. His interest in mysticism also led him to establishing in 1922 – in the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts in Warsaw – an ephemeral group “Sursum Corda.”⁴⁰

Early Theosophical movement in Poland

In Warsaw (both during his time as the director of the School of Fine Arts, and after he left the office) Stabrowski gathered around him a circle of artists and intellectuals interested in broadly construed Esotericism. Already in 1905 his Theosophical group existed in Warsaw, and it was quickly transformed into the “Alba” lodge. “Alba” was also the pseudonym of a well-known Russian theosophist, Anna Kamensky (Kamenskaya), who visited Poland with her lectures and befriended Stabrowski. Stabrowski became the Secretary of the lodge.⁴¹ A letter survived which he sent in 1910 to the Theosophical Society’s headquarters in Adyar regarding an independent status for the Polish lodge.⁴²

This was nothing out of the ordinary, that the Polish lodge belonged to the Russian section, since a part of Poland (including Warsaw) remained at that time under Russian administration; the Theosophical Society did not form an exception from the rule. But there are many materials based on which it is doubtful whether this lodge can be considered as Russian. The political situation was very complicated at this time and Stabrowski’s circle was formed before the National Section of the TS in Russia, and after registration it did not remain a part of its structures for long. This can be supported with several fragments of unpublished documents from the Archive of Science Archiwum Nauki PAN i PAU [the Archive of Science of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences] in Kraków.

The fragments indicate that members of the pioneering Theosophical lodge later joined the followers of Rudolf Steiner. Władysław Bocheński wrote: “In 1908 there was a Warsaw Theosophical Society, to which belonged, among others, Miciński, Stabrowski, Zosia Wojnarowska, Żyrkiewiczowa.”⁴³ Wanda

³⁹ Alojzy K. Gleic, *Glossariusz okultyzmu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Wawelskie 1936): 75.

⁴⁰ Morawińska, *Symbolizm*, 210.

⁴¹ Hass, *Ambicje, rachuby, rzeczywistość*, 88.

⁴² Kazimierz Stabrowski, (letter in Archiwum Nauki PAN i PAU w Krakowie, Kazimierz Tokarski 1930-2007, KIII-180:19).

⁴³ Information copied from the library of Lodka Piekarska by Władysław Bocheński, see “Początki Towarzystwa Teozoficznego,” (Archiwum Nauki PAN i PAU w Krakowie, Kazimierz Tokarski 1930-2007, KIII-180:19, 991R), 1.

Dynowska, the secretary of the first registered Polish section, wrote in her essay *History of Polish Theosophy*: "Before World War I there was in Warsaw a Lodge of the Theosophical Society, which belonged to the Russian section. Its members were predominantly half-Polish or half-Russian. The group then joined the Steneirian group, already before the end of the war."⁴⁴ Similar information is provided by Ewelina Karaś.⁴⁵

In April 1912 the Alba lodge was renamed and registered as the Warsaw Theosophical Society, and its statute ratified by the Governor General.⁴⁶ The proper establishment of the Theosophical Society in Poland took place over a decade later, that is in 1923,⁴⁷ when the Polish Theosophical Society, registered since 1921 as an official society, became a branch of the Theosophical Society in Adyar,⁴⁸ with Wanda Dynowska as its Secretary general.

Theosophy, Eastern tales, and the idea of Femininity

Echoes of Russian folk tales and legends reverberate in Stabrowski's paintings alongside motifs from Polish and Lithuanian history. In the context of Young Poland art, he represented a symbolist and Art Nouveau tendency but was relatively close to realism.⁴⁹ His art is characterized by fantastical style and decorative elements. An important part of his work is constituted by the above mentioned landscapes, but also by symbolic-fantastic compositions, among which the best known is the cycle *The March of the Tempest* (1907-1910), interpreted as a prophetic vision of Polish history, which was unfortunately lost and is now known only from a series of colored postcards. The cycle is often compared to the works of Čiurlionis.⁵⁰ Stabrowski exploited motifs from Lithuanian mythology as well, for instance in *Eagle-Queen of Snakes* (before 1900) or *Krewe-Krewejtó* (lost).⁵¹

In the context of late 19th century Esotericism a significant proto-feministic turn took place. There were connections between Spiritualism and Women rights movements, and Theosophy played a great role in those connections too. Among other

⁴⁴ Wanda Dynowska, "Historia polskiej Teozofii," (Archiwum Nauki PAN i PAU w Krakowie, Kazimierz Tokarski 1930-2007, KIII-180:16, 6T).

⁴⁵ Evelyn Karas, "The Theosophical Society and Theosophy in Poland," (a talk given at the School of The Wisdom, Adyar, March 1958). Includes note: "For private circulation only" (Archiwum Nauki PAN i PAU w Krakowie, Kazimierz Tokarski 1930-2007, KIII-180: 20), 1.

⁴⁶ Bocheński, "Moje wspomnienia z okresu należąca do Polskiego Towarzystwa Teozoficznego w latach 1922-1939," (Archiwum Nauki PAN i PAU w Krakowie, Kazimierz Tokarski 1930-2007, KIII-180: 16 and 20).

⁴⁷ Bocheński, *Moje wspomnienia*, 2.

⁴⁸ For more detailed information, see Karolina M. Hess, "The Beginnings of Theosophy in Poland: From Early Visions to the Polish Theosophical Society," *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture* 13 (1/2015): 53-71.

⁴⁹ Agnieszka Morawińska, *Symbolizm w malarstwie polskim: 1890-1914* (Warszawa: Arkady 1997), 210.

⁵⁰ Skalska, *Kazimierz Stabrowski*, 575-657.

⁵¹ Skalska-Miecik, *Echa sztuki rosyjskiej*, 125-172.

scholars, Marco Pasi⁵² and Per Faxneld⁵³ discuss the consonance of occultism with contemporary feminism. It is beyond doubt that in the perspective of Esotericism a change in the perception of femininity was paramount. Women started to take roles in esoteric societies that previously were only taken by men. As Monika Rzeczycka wrote:

A characteristic phenomenon for the first decade of the 20th century was the penetration of artistic environments by mature, educated women – animators of esoteric movements. On the one hand they played the roles of emissaries of arcane knowledge, bestowed upon them by more or less mysterious teachers, or of guides into the worlds unavailable to ordinary mortals. They were often “catalyzers” of creative activities with an esoteric background. Most often their activities were connected to the Theosophical Society, although they represented various trends within this international movement: the traditional one led by Annie Besant, in which elements of Far East religions dominated, and the German line, under the direction of Rudolf Steiner, inclined towards Christian neo-Gnosis. Russian animators of Theosophy appeared usually in the role of initiates as worthy successors of Madame Blavatsky – a woman who, despite unfavorable opinions of her critics, became a symbol of the occultist renaissance of the turn of the century.⁵⁴

At the turn of the 20th century female protagonists and heroines populated various forms of art – from paintings to operas. There were many models of those figures – from *femme fatale*, through angelic beauties, to biblical Salome.⁵⁵ Motifs from legends and myth were also very popular. Theosophy – together with Lithuanian, Russian, and generally Slavic tales, with all their connections to Romanticism – became a great inspiration for Stabrowski’s vision of women. The painter, as well as his Lithuanian student Čiurlionis, were fascinated with the mythology of Balts and its female heroine – Jurata.

One of the inspirations for the vision of femininity in Russian thought of this period is undoubtedly the philosophical system of Vladimir Soloviev. One of the most important parts of his philosophy, Sophiology, was largely inspired by the thought of Valentinus. Femininity becomes here the allegory of unrestrained freedom; Sophia itself is an important determinant of thinking about femininity – also in view of spirituality – in the next few decades. This idea of femininity as freedom, arising in Eastern Europe seems to stand in contrast to the influence of psychoanalysis and the idea of pervasive oppression of what is internal, popular already at this time in the West.⁵⁶

⁵² Marco Pasi, “The Modernity of Occultism: Reflections on Some Crucial Aspects,” in *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years’ Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Joyce Pijenburg (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2009), 64.

⁵³ Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism. Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2014).

⁵⁴ Monika Rzeczycka, *Wtajemniczenie. Ezoteryczna proza rosyjska końca XIX – początku XX wieku* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego 2010), 47.

⁵⁵ Żak, *Community of imagination*, 72.

⁵⁶ Bartłomiej Dobroczyński, *Kłopoty z duchowością. Szkice z pogranicza psychologii* (Kraków: Nomos 2009), 73-98.

Stabrowski's most important female portraits were inspired by a series of artistic events – the “Young Art” balls. They picture other artists in fantastic outfits, however not unrelated to the fashion of the time. The best known portraits from this period are *In Front of Stained Glass – A Peacocke*, *The Princess of the Magic Crystal* and *The Story of the Waves*.⁵⁷



Fig. 17. A costume of Zofia Jakimowiczówna from “Young Art” ball 1908. Fig. 18. Kazimierz Stabrowski, *In Front of Stained Glass – A Peacocke*. Courtesy of National Museum in Warsaw.
Fig. 19. Another peacock motif in Stabrowski's *Nude*.

The Peacock (In Front of Stained Glass) 1908 is probably the most famous painting of Stabrowski. Stabrowski was inspired by the ball gown of Zofia Jakimowiczówna, a student of Fine Arts. She had studied in Stabrowski's studio since 1905. But it was not the only portrait where the motif of the peacock appears, as it belongs to one of the favorite elements of modernist art. The peacock often symbolizes immortality and indestructibility of the soul. In Hindu mythology, the peacock's tail dotted with eyes represents a starlit firmament. It is also a symbol of divinity and kingship. It is a very important symbol in Theosophy and Alchemy. In the portrait Stabrowski skillfully exploits all the advantages of the costume, showing the model against the background of a colorful stained glass window, with her back to the viewer to show the decorations of the dress and especially the wavy train. The face of the model, visible from the half-profile, radiates with pride and confidence.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Sieradzka, *Bal „Młodej Sztuki”*, 191-196.

⁵⁸ Cf. Sieradzka, *Bal „Młodej Sztuki”*, 192.



Fig. 20. Kazimierz Stabrowski, *The Story of the Waves* (1910), Courtesy of National Museum in Warsaw. Fig. 21. Michail Wrubel, *Princess of the Swans* (1900), public domain.

Another portrait is *The Story of the Waves*, showing Emilia Auszpitz, painted in 1910. Against the background of the waves Stabrowski shows the figure of a young woman dressed in a celadon–pink gown with wavy ruffles. The entire dress is decorated with pearls; the woman also holds in her hands a casket full of pearls. All women portrayed by Stabrowski seem to have secrets or even they are themselves the secret, inaccessible and distant from the viewer; they seem to come from the fabled lands⁵⁹. The portrait of Emilia Auszpitz shows an affinity with the work of Mikhail Wrubel and a group of Russian artists “Mir iskusstva”.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Sieradzka, *Bal „Młodej Sztuki”*, 194-195.

⁶⁰ Skalska-Miecznik, *Echa sztuki rosyjskiej*, 125-172.



Fig. 22. Kazimierz Stabrowski, *Princess of the Magic Crystal*. Courtesy of National Museum in Warsaw. Fig. 23. Wanda Malinowska-Osterwina In the costume of Revolution, the Project of F. Ruszczyk, Young Art Ball, 1908, public domain.

Another portrait inspired by the same event was a painting of Zofia Plewińska represented as *Princess of the Magic Crystal*, painted before 1910. The pastel colors of the image, a fairy, pink dress of translucent fabric, a veil surrounding the model's head and a crystal ball in her hands do not remove the impression that the woman's pose is rigid and hieratic and her face – serious. Femininity is consistently presented here as gentle and kind. This is reflected not only in the fact that we can see what costumes the painter chose for his women, but we also know which costumes he decided not to paint. The choice of costumes in his series is significant insofar as he in fact rejected the most important, triumphant costume of an angel with a broken wing and bloodied sword, which was an allegory of revolution and was designed by Ferdynand Ruszczyk (whose work was for a long time an inspiration for Stabrowski).⁶¹

The most important thing for him as a painter was – in harmony with his program – showing through art the inner nature of human being. He wrote down a few impressions from the Spring exhibition at the Academy of Fine Arts in Petersburg, published later in the article *The Painting of Today*. He wrote:

When we familiarize ourselves with a new work of the creativity of human spirit, we are first of all drawn by a spiritual element expressed in it: an incarnation of subjective

⁶¹ Sieradzka, *Bal „Młodej Sztuki”*, 190-191.

feeling and of thought that is a distinct characteristic of every artist. A work of art is a part of the spiritual 'I' of the artist; we expect it to reflect his temperament, feeling, his conception of beauty in nature, an inclination for color combinations that evoke a certain mood. The mood in a landscape is this very expression of a subjective feeling, aroused in the artist by nature. Similarly, in music: to reflect a specific harmony, accords not accidental, but certain, precisely thought out and felt, are chosen. The evolution of subjectivism constitutes the most prominent characteristic of the young art of today. Among the young generation of artists, there are growing inclinations for topics in which feeling and sensations prevail, for fantastic day-dreaming which represents as if a different, better world. The representation of this fairytale world in the world of art is as a protest, born in the womb of the society, and directed against the spiritual slavery of the individual, the imprisonment of thought and feeling in the formulas of trends and routine, the imperialistic growth of cold materialism.⁶²

Several pieces of information indicate that the vision of femininity represented in the paintings from the "Young Art" ball was not only a way of documenting the society event, but a comprehensive project. First of all, the work on the paintings from the first ball took three years, even though the event was repeated annually. Each of the balls was meticulously planned and filled with mythical and esoteric symbolism, from the decorations of the rooms to the thematic elements of the costumes of students taking part in the procession. Stabrowski did not choose the most important costumes or those that won in the competitions, but ones that agreed with his more subjective criteria. And finally - the school's message was to express the soul, the internal reality, that is, in the case of this particular painter (to allude to the name of the first Theosophical Lodge in Poland), that which is bright, feminine and mysterious.

Conclusion

It has been written about Stabrowski: a lively nature, sensitive, impulsive, capable of taking interest with a freshness of a child in various domains of life, in which he immediately actively engages. Now he turns his studio into a factory of paint and pastels; now he's absorbed in studying ceramics. Arcane knowledge and extraordinary phenomena of unknown natural forces have diverted the mind of the artist from painting and from his most important work.⁶³

Had his esoteric interests indeed divert Stabrowski's attention from painting and other artistic work? The present paper demonstrates that this was not the case – however they had certainly led him onto new paths of artistic and spiritual explorations.

Stabrowski, both as a person and as an artist appears as a unique figure against

⁶² Kazimierz Stabrowski, "Dzisiejsze malarstwo (Kilka wrażeń z wiosennej wystawy w Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Petersburgu," *Kraj* 22 (1900).

⁶³ Eligiusz Niewiadomski, *Malarstwo polskie XIX i XX wieku* (Warszawa: M. Arcta 1926), 311.

the background of the Polish artistic milieu of the turn of the 20th century. In the first place he wanted his works to contain spiritual truths. In the scenes of *The Annunciation*, the artist employs bright, luminous colors and a soft glaze. In this way he achieves an effect of unusual brightness and the impression that light is coming from the canvass, that the painting itself is beaming with light. The women shown in these canvasses become the mediators, who – being in touch with the spiritual world – lead the spectator on the way to truth.

Femininity manifests in Stabrowski's art in a characteristic, original way. Female figures appear as beings from a different dimension, who have no physical body but only a spiritual one. Their faces are serene and angelic. Clad in ornate dresses which underscore their beauty and majesty, their function is to focus attention on universal, timeless values. Stabrowski uses those feminine figures to show a kind of kind, womanly force which overcomes all barriers and heals – as it does in *The Consoler of Monsters*. Women are also shown as those who possess the keys to deciphering secret meanings and foreseeing the future (*Princess of the Magic Crystal*).

The artist's biography show that many factors influenced his art. He travelled the world and drew inspiration from the traditions of both East and West. One can recognize in his paintings the influence of Russian and Lithuanian folk tales and legends, as well as allusions to contemporary European art. However, for Stabrowski painting was also a medium to present his own philosophy and advertise his spiritual teachings. This fact is evidenced not only in the topics of his work and the formal means employed in them, but also in his cooperation with other artists involved in various esoteric movements, and in particular in the Theosophical Society.

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