

SLAVIC BESTIARY



Fig. 1. Covers of books „Bestiariusz Słowiański” (2018), „Bestiariusz: Zwierzęta” (2020) by Witold Vargas, Paweł Zych; „Mitologia Słowiańska” (2017) by Jakub Bobrowski, Mateusz Wrona

At the beginning of the course, I read a couple of books which kick-started my fascination with Slavic folklore (From left to right: „Slavic Bestiary”, „Bestiary: Animals”, „Slavic Mythology”) – at first, it was mostly connected with the beasts. I mostly referenced these books and the internet in my search for knowledge of my Slavic roots – those being the symbolic meaning of different animals and plants, as well as Slavic gods and myths themselves.

POLISH FOLK AND ART BRUT



Fig.2. Brunon Jasiński, „Inwazja Potworów na Sanatorium Bukowiec”, 1973



Fig.3. Stanisław Marcisz, „Zając”, 1984

I was at first inspired by Polish naive artists such as Brunon Jasiński and Stanisław Marcisz in their portrayal of Slavic folklore invading the contemporary world in the form of monsters – additionally, their simplification of animal forms, which are both primitive and conventionally ugly, yet extremely expressive was very much appealing to me – especially Marcisz’s sculpture’s eyes.

SEARCH FOR VIVID COLOR

My own exploration of the beast „Bies” as compared to the image in the book „Bestiariusz”. I drew two versions of it, as I was searching for vibrant colors that would allow me to really express depth and vividness of folklore. The initial version was made in ink and watercolor, but it seemed faded, and thus in the second try I used colored pencils – they yielded a satisfactory result, but I found that using them was too straining for my sick wrist. However, I was not satisfied with the composition of the piece – which I later on found out was because I loved symmetry.



Fig.4. Witold Vargas, Paweł Zych, „Bies”, 2018



Own work: „Bies 2”, 2020, colored pencil

Own work: „Bies 1”, 2020, ink and watercolor

SYMMETRICAL BALANCED COMPOSITION

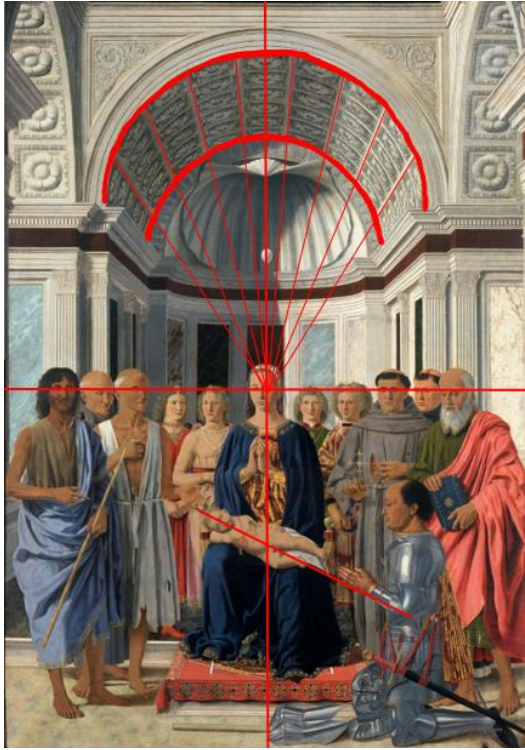


Fig.5. Piero de la Francesca, "Brera Madonna", c. 1472

During our lessons we conducted a formal analysis of Piero de la Francesca's „Virgin and Child". I found the composition of this piece to be highly appealing – although it was not perfectly symmetrical, it was still very much balanced due to an equal amount of people in the background on each side of Mary, as well as the architecture. The arches also stood out to me as creating a sense of harmony – later on, I started using them in almost all of my works.



Own work: „Blueberry and the Beasts", digital drawing, 2021

In this sketch I explored the Slavic version of Baba Yaga – her name comes from „Jagoda", which means „blueberry". At this point I realized that I was more interested in the relations between human figures and animals rather than „beasts", since it is better reflected in my own life. Additionally, here I started using the balanced, yet not exactly symmetrical composition. I tried to create an arch through the branches with the title, but it did not yet feel complete to me – now I realize that the arch was not circular enough and broke the flow of the picture. My growing fascination with flowing rhythm can be seen in the smoke behind the wolves. This work was also one of the early pieces in which I expressed my love for nature by making trees an integral part of the composition.

GEOMETRIZATION OF NATIVE PLANTS



Own work: „Coniferous Tree Study", pencil on paper, 2020



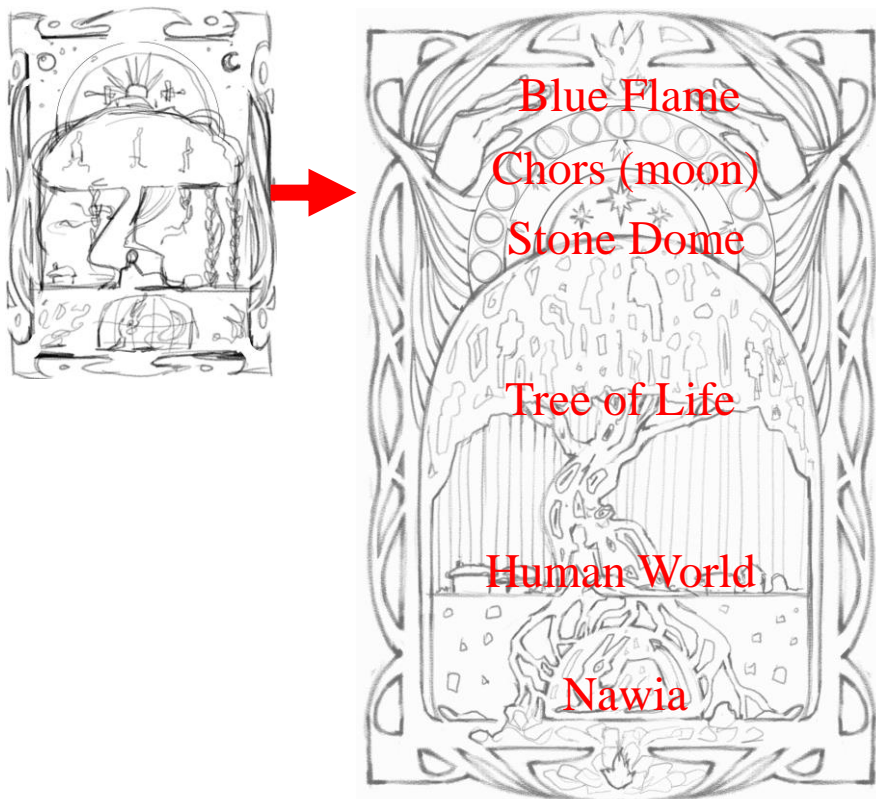
Own work: sketches of *Gallium mollugo* from my backyard, 2021

As my passion for forests and plants grew, I started to draw more and more of them. I started by realistic drawings of trees, but prompted by my VA teacher I turned to common plants, mostly overlooked, yet full of their own kind of beauty. After that, I started to try to geometrize them and find my own style when drawing Flowers and other plants – this is a prevalent theme in all of my exhibition works, as I use the symbolic use of plants to convey my message most of the time.



Own work: design for batique, based on plants from my School's garden, 2021

INITIAL IDEA AND SKETCHES

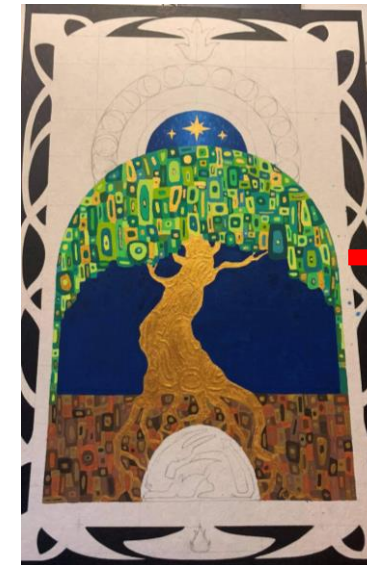


Our VA teacher assigned us to create a piece based on a modern art. Trend - the piece I decided to create is a representation of the world according to Slavic mythology, inspired by Art. Nouveaux. It consists of the Nawia (underworld), with the Great Dragon locked in a cage made of roots and it's ruler- Weles, symbolized by a flame; the world of mortals guarded by the Tree of Life and goddess Mokosz, the Tree of Life itself (with Rodowe Souls inside- represented by golden pieces floating upwards from the houses), the Stone Dome creating the sky, with holes in it being stars- openings for the Blue Flame to shine through, as well as hands representing Perun, the god of the sky. The phases of the moon represent the god Chors travelling over the world during different times of the month- slowly thinning during the time of his fasting.

EXPLORATION OF MODERN ART MOVEMENTS

FINAL RESULT

As far as the final piece, I'm not sure how to feel about it- I am disappointed about the fact that I ended up simplifying certain aspects of the initial sketch and as if it took away from the symbolic meaning. I do like, however, how I used the features of Klimt's and Mucha's works and created something that, to a certain extent, feels mine – especially taking Mucha's way of creating frames and making my won. I used acrylic gouache for the first time, and it allowed me to create truly vibrant colors, and were much easier to use as opposed to my previous trials with color pencils. What's more, they can be blended more comfortably, allowing for a bigger range of colors to be created.



Own work: „The Tree of Life”, acrylic on carton, 2021

ANALYSING ART NOUVEAUX

Still, I feel that I will later on use the inspiration I used from Mucha (arches, flowing rhythm, symmetry) and much less so the tiles that are Klimt's style – I do, however, intend on later on using golden paint, as I believe it can bring a lot of vibrancy to a painting and make it look more distinguished.

Thick layer of golden paint creating a texture

Geometrized shapes

Textures created by „tiles”/varying repeating shapes

Arches, circles- geometrical forms; border created from organic lines



Fig.6. Gustav Klimt, "The Tree Of Life, Stoclet Frieze", 1905



Fig.7. Alphonse Mucha, "Zodiac", 1896

BOOK ILLUSTRATION EXPLORATION

One of our assignments during the course of the Visual Arts program was to create a book illustration. With my interest in Slavic paganism, I of course chose one of the myths – that about Strzyga, a monster which ate farm animals and children and was formed from a witch killed while she was pregnant. The people of the village tried to get rid of the Strzyga through a ritual of burning goods. I started this assignment out by planning a symmetrical composition, but at first I wasn't sure what I should include in the border. Most of the time, in my process, I start out with the central piece and only later on think of what will fit it as the border, in order to give more meaning to the whole of the piece.

INSPIRATION



Fig.8. Adam Kilian, "Dawna Polska w Anegdocie", 1968

I was inspired by Adam Kilian, a Polish illustrator, in his portrayal of monsters – it is monochromatic, gritty and overtly dramatic. Additionally, his style was what inspired me to make borders / frame the center of my illustrations with smaller elements, which add to the meaning – although it later on turned out that his technique of creating small squares was not as compatible with me, it had a lasting impact on my works.

INITIAL SKETCH

Wypadek Raclawy nie był jedynym, jaki zdarzył się tej wiosny. Znajdowano rozszarpane kozy i owce. Niekiedy na wracającym z pastwisk bydlę widywano krwawe ślady i głębokie rany, jakby coś poilo się ich krwią. O strzydze nie tylko nie zapomniano, ale zaczęto szczerze wierzyć, że bies wioskę nawiedza.

Pewnego wieczoru ludzie zebrali się licznie przed chatą starca, który w osadzie pełnił rolę żyrzecz. Składał ofiary i wotyły. Do niego zwracano się w trudnych dla osady chwilach. W chwilach takich jak ta. Stary żyrzec nie był do końca przekonany, że to bies napadł na Raclawę i bydlę. Próbowal przekonać zebranych, że wszystko wyjaśnić można inaczej. Przestraszeni ludzie nie dali się jednak zbyć, więc starzec namówił ich do złożenia bogom ofiary.

Każdy z mieszkańców przyniósł ze swej chaty, co miał najlepszego. Były to misy zboża, garnce miodu i kury. Zanim żyrzec zdążył rozpalic święty ogień, rytuał przerwała Nawojka. Wpadła między zebranych ludzi i roztrącając ich na boki, stanęła przed starcem.

-Widziałam- wysapała. -Widziałam na własne oczy! Strzyga w oborze!

-Coś widziała? - przemówił żyrzec. - Mów!

-Mąż mnie posłał do zagrody- opowiadała- bo chciał jagnię na ofiarę. Wiedzie, że ja brzemienna, to Żyrosław chciał bogom co lepszego naszykować, żeby dziecko od złego chronili. Wechodzę do zagrody, patrzę, a tam siedzi potwór. Na grzbiecie owcy wlezała i krew jej chłupie jeźorem długim, co z dzioba jak u ptaka wisiał. Dojrzała mnie. Skrzydła wielkie rozłożyła i syczy. Krzyk podniosłam, bo myślałam, że się i na mnie rzuci. Ale strzyga się już chyba nasyciła, bo nagle wleciała w górę i przemieniła w sowę. Co tak patrzycie? W sowę zwykłą się przemieniła i odleciała. Mówię, com widziała.



The first more specific sketch I made for the illustration. It is made digitally, as at that time I preferred to sketch that way to change things more quickly. This was the first time that I included elements typically associated with religion in my drawing – the figures are praying for help in getting rid of the monster.

FINAL RESULT

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Own work: „Strzyga”, ink on paper, 2021

The finished piece, in which I used a vertical symmetrical balanced composition – achieved through mirroring the left and right side with slight differences. In the end I drew it on brown, grainy paper to create a more primitive, aged and rough look. It is drawn with black and white ink. In the end I changed the upper parts into squares, since the blood seemed too obvious to me (instead I drew geometrized guts). Additionally, the upper parts of the border symbolize the darker parts of the story, as well as in general living in a village or rural area (darkness, loneliness), while the lower parts show warmth and connection to nature. I added a geometrized shape on the Strzyga's belly to symbolize the way it was created from a woman killed during pregnancy. While this project was one of my darkest ones, it made me want to explore more the intersection between folk culture and religion, as well as try to create more pieces which were achromatic or almost-neutral, which later on lead to me experimenting with pyrography, as I found that sometimes drawing without worrying about colors made me more creative and helped me get through creative blocks.

SLAVIC BESTIARY CONT.

SHADOW THEATRE



Own work: „Big Bad Wolf”, shadow theatre, 2021

After the book illustration, I began to look into other techniques which would allow me to create precise, achromatic or near-neutral pieces. I decided to try to create a shadow theater, which resulted in a piece titled „Big Bad Wolf”. I really liked the results, but there were limitations on the number of elements in a shadow theater which could be included before the piece became overcrowded – additionally, I felt like the effort of cutting out pieces was not equal to the outcome.



OIL TRANSFER DRAWING MONOTYPE



Next, I started experimenting with monotype. Our teacher brought us fruits and asked us to create a drawing based off of their organic shapes – this part of the assignment I loved, since geometrization of plants is one of my favorite activities. I made drawings of seals, and later on made one of them into a monotype – that was not a very successful attempt, as I felt that the technique did not allow me to create precise enough drawings. However, despite that, I decided to try the medium again with a design made specifically for it.

I created a design inspired by tarot cards – the initial sketch is shown below. In it, I again created a symmetric balanced composition, in addition to a radiating rhythm. The sketch was once again balanced almost symmetrically, as almost all of my later art was. Despite that, after this second attempt at monotype, I still felt that the medium did not allow for a level of precision that would be suitable for my work – the edges were just too blurry.



Own work: „Death”, oil transfer drawing monotype, 2021



Own work: „Death”, digital drawing, 2021

FASCINATION WITH WOOD



Fig.9. Unknown author, „Szopka Krakowska”, c.1960

During our trip to Cracow, we went to the Ethnographic Museum, where we saw the „Szopki” – stables representing the one in which Jesus was born. I fell in love with most of the woodwork we’ve seen, and the one shown here especially, and decided to use it as inspiration to create a „Chram” – a type of Slavic temple or church. I decided to use the silhouette of this Szopka, but decorate it with folk patterns and add other elements typical of my work, such as geometrized plants. On the right is my initial sketch in which I studied the build of this Szopka.



 **Muzeum Etnograficzne**
im. Seweryna Udzieli w Krakowie
Instytucja Kultury Województwa Małopolskiego

After the trip, I was bent on working with wood in some way. I tried to create wooden sculpture, but that was too hard with just a wood knife and without appropriate equipment (not to mention my hurt wrist, which held me back from exerting too much power when trying to chop off the wood). Thus, I decided that I will buy wooden slices and experiment with painting on wood.



INTRODUCING WOOD AS A MEDIUM, PAINTING ON WOOD

First I had to use tracing paper to transfer the drawing to the wood (the one I used was Chestnut wood). After that, I painted the parts that I wanted to color afterwards with a couple of layers of white acrylic paint (in order to let the colors be more vivid afterwards, and so that the gouache paint didn’t soak into the wood, damaging it and becoming bleak). Afterwards, I started by creating just the church itself, painting the base blue. Later on, I added the pattern and changed the floor to a green color. It was difficult staying inside the areas painted with white acrylics at first, since the background of wooden knots could not be painted over afterwards if I made a mistake. Afterwards, I added angels, as well as two-headed birds. It still felt too empty, so I additionally painted a burning heart in a South American Baroque style, using golden paint (as I tend to) and stylized white lilies. Yet, I found that I was still not satisfied with the piece – it was not only too simplistic due to how hard it was to paint on wood, but I additionally felt that it did not do justice to the piece of wood that I used – it did not enhance its qualities or do anything that I couldn’t do better on watercolor paper. Thus, I started looking for other ways of utilizing wood in a way that would feel not only more natural to me, but also that would allow me to feel closer to the piece of material I use – since woods is a material full of its own spirit.



Own work: „Chram”, acrylic gouache on wood, 2021

FIRST EXPLORATION OF PIROGRAPHY

After my experiments with painting on wood, I discovered the technique called „pyrography” – its made using a tool with an extremely hot iron tip, with which parts of the wood are burned. Above are my first experiments with pyrography on a piece of plywood – I was using a pyrograph without temperature regulation, so the results weren’t perfect – on the photo I included my second pyrograph with heat regulation which I used for my exhibition pieces.



UTENSIL PYROGRAPHY EXPLORATION



Own work: „Flower Utensils”, pyrography, 2021

After I bought a pyrograph with heat regulation, I started creating presents for friends with it – for one of my best friends I created a set of kitchen utensils with different plants which held a particular symbolic meaning – after that, I realized that I could use this technique of applied art for my exhibition, as this type of art is extremely popular in folk culture, where usefulness is combined with aesthetic qualities.



Fig.10. Gladiolous flower



Fig.11. Salmon



Fig.12. Lilac



Fig.13. Catfish

SYMBOLIC INSPIRATION

Salmon here represents power, as does the gladiolus flower, and catfish and lilac symbolize psychic abilities, combined representing religious beliefs.

EXHIBITION PIECE



Own work: „Kitchen Utensils:Ichthys”, pyrography, 2022

The above imagery was used in my exhibition piece „Kitchen Utensils: Ichthys”. The imagery of fish was first used by pagans as a symbol of fertility – later on it meant Jesus Christ, but was also used as a secret code for Christians to identify each other. It shows how, while symbols can change their meaning, applied art stays the same, its value doesn’t diminish because it’s universal. I was satisfied with this piece, as it allowed me to create something not only useful, but also aesthetically pleasing. However, my problem with creating pyrography on utensils was that I did not have enough space to include all the elements I wanted to – and as such, my creativity was limited. Due to that, I returned to the bigger slices of wood I have bought previously – although I could use only some of them, as hard woods such as Chestnut or Pear are not suitable for pyrography – soft wood, such as the bamboo used here, are much better for this medium.

PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN MYTHOLOGY: THE STAG MOTIF



Fig.14. Ashlyn Rudolph, "The Two-Headed Calf", 2021

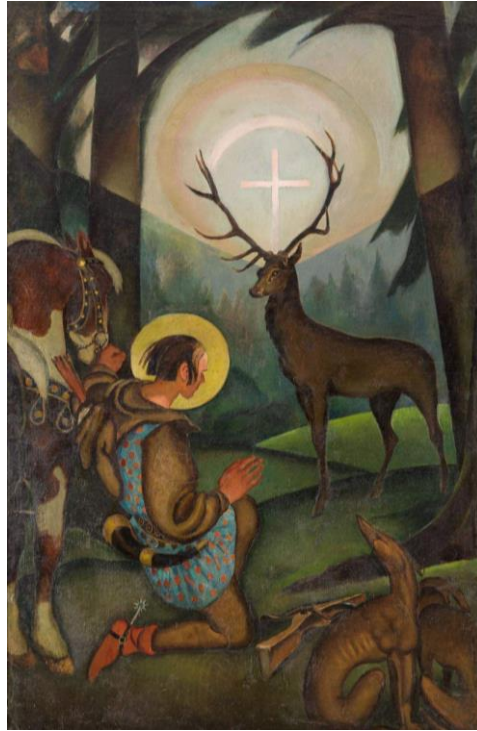
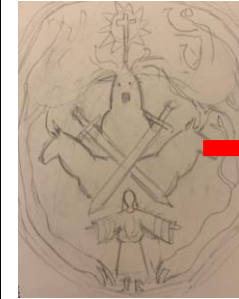


Fig.15. Kazimierz Sichulski, "Wizja Św. Huberta", c. 1920

The artwork shown of the left is what initially inspired me to create pyrography. The artist, Ashlyn Rudolph, creates the most beautiful pyrography I have ever seen and was kind enough to help me with my own work. I wrote to her when I was feeling that I did not really understand why my pyrography did not come out the way I wanted it to, and she helped me choose the right kind of wood, understand how the grain of the wood influences how I should lead my strokes and most importantly, to be patient with myself, as pyrography is not an easy technique at all. The work shown here is the first of hers that I saw and made me try pyrography on slices after getting better on plywood and utensils – all smaller scale projects. The second artwork, by the Polish artist Kazimierz Sichulski, is what made me interested in the connotations of deer in Slavic folklore – although the myth shown here is different from what I portrayed (this is Saint Hubert, while I portrayed the traditions connected to Saint Elias' Day). I loved the intersection of folklore and Christianity – represented by a cross – and as mentioned before, this turned out to be the final subject of my exhibition.

INITIAL IDEA AND SKETCHES

In the sketches I made for this piece, I wanted to portray the celebration of Saint Elias' Day – a day in which a stag was sacrificed in order to ensure the potency of magic. The celebration was by no means unified across Slavic communities, and in some accounts it is said that the priest himself turned into the stag, or that the stag was the god of the forest, bearing a burning cross between its antlers – I wanted to portray all of these versions in a single piece. On the left my first sketch, and the second one I made digitally are shown.



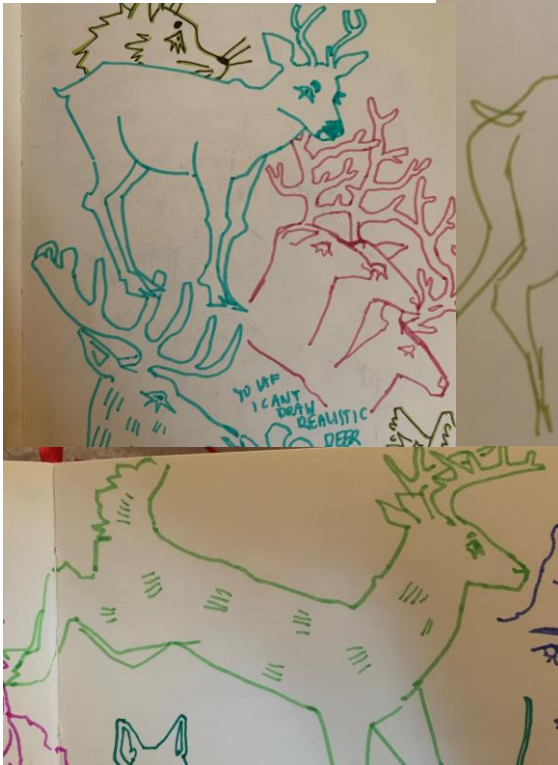
EXHIBITION PIECE

This piece shows how Christian and pagan rituals merged over the time that Poland was rapidly Christianized. I included swords, as they are both an item I love to draw, but could also be used to slay the stag. The trees surround the picture to show the connection to forests that the celebration represented – as again, the stag was sometimes thought to be the god of the forest. This is not my greatest pyrography piece technically, as it was my first made on a wooden slice and I did not yet know that the grain had to be treated differently – yet, I liked it very much conceptually, as well as the illustration itself was one that I was fond of – especially that it was part of a diptych.



Own work: part of diptych „Saint Elias' Day”, pyrography, 2021

EXPLORATION OF STAG ANATOMY



Compared to the first part of the diptych, this pyrography included the full body of a stag, hence I had to study deer bodies – I mostly did quick sketches (most of them really bad) to grasp the anatomy.

In this artwork, I once again wanted to use the symbolic meaning of plants. Hyssop included in this work symbolizes sacrifice, as it was thought that one life had to end in order for others to continue – the sacrifice of the stag was in reality unwilling, of course, but some of the myths recalled that the stag came, in fact, voluntarily – I thought that honoring that by including the hyssop was the right thing to do.



Fig.16. Hyssop

INITIAL IDEA AND SKETCHES

The first sketch did not involve the hyssop, as I made it before I got so much into geometrizing plants. Additionally, only after transferring the sketch did I find out that I have not plan out the sketch space properly, as the actual slice was a different shape. The slice that I used had some natural discoloration (can be seen on the right photo, brown spots near the upper hooves). I ignored it at the time and simply drew over it, and I think that it adds to the picture in a way – yet, if I were to sketch this again, I would try to work around it instead.



EXHIBITION PIECE

In the end, I was very satisfied with this piece – it was the first one I created fully after receiving tips from the artist Ashlyn Rudolph, mentioned before. Thanks to her, I now knew that I had to lead my strokes in a concentric way – following the knots of the wood, so that I could avoid getting stuck at the grain – this also inspired me to create a spiral composition for this piece, somewhat different from my usual style of vertical symmetry. Additionally, I felt that as the second part of the diptych, it complemented the first one well – while the first one was more about the celebration of Saint Elias' day itself, this one shows its aftermath – both the death that it brings to a single being, but also the way that this single life could help „restore magic”, as shown by the little star fragments littered between the guts. Yet, while I like this diptych a lot, I felt that working with wooden slices was maybe too hard for me as a beginner – so, at the recommendation of Rudolph I bought some slabs instead.



Own work: part of diptych „Saint Elias' Day”, pyrography, 2021

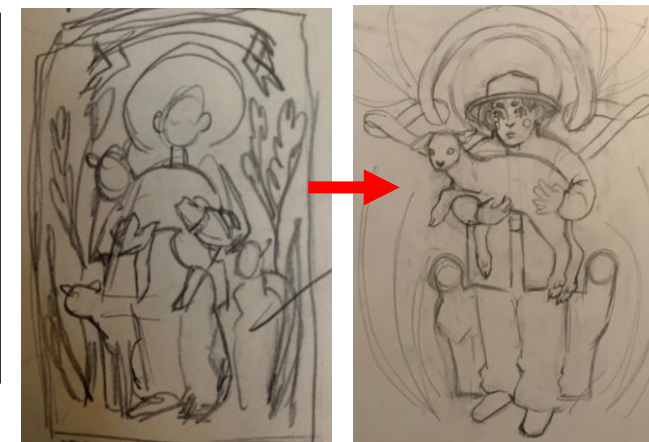
FINDING OPTIMAL MATERIAL FOR PYROGRAPHY

After I decided that I wanted to try working with slabs instead of slices, I bought a few in different sizes. This time the wood I chose was Linden tree – known for being great for carving, since it is very soft, but that very quality also made it excellent for pyrography. As visible on the photo below, the quality of my strokes became much better and softer than before, when I was using Birch wood, slightly harder than Linden.



THE GOOD SHEPHERD MOTIF

Imagery from Podhale is abundant in Polish artwork, and so it was obvious to me that the motive of a shepherd with their sheep paralleled the Christian one. I wanted to create this equation to draw parallels between my pagan and Christian heritage.



SYMBOLIC INSPIRATIONS



Fig.17. Lily of the Valley



Fig.18. Unknown artist, "Three Hearts of the Holy Family"

EXHIBITION PIECE

This piece again equates motifs in folklore and Christianity, striving to create a coherent image of the Polish heritage – using a traditional material like wood completes that idea – it was one of the first materials ever used, we are surrounded by it everyday, and I have a very strong emotional connection to it as the house I've lived in my whole life is located in the woods. Here, again I used the symmetrically balanced composition, while also creating flowing rhythm and movement with stylized plants and a ribbon. Yet, although this piece is bigger than the utensils, and came to me more easily than the wooden slices technically-wise, I still felt that at the length and width of 20 centimeters, it was too small for me – I wanted to create a grander kind of work, something where I could include (or maybe even hide) a bigger amount of symbolical elements, which could be interpreted in more different ways.



Own work: „The Holy Lamb”, pyrography, 2022

Lily of the valley means, most commonly, purity and sweetness that is associated with children, but also rebirth and renewal – this renewal means the way that I try to reintroduce myself to my heritage. . The three hearts in this work come from South American baroque and symbolize Jesus (the shepherd), Mary and Joseph.

PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN MYTHOLOGY: VIRGIN MARY AND MOTHER MOKOSH



Fig.19. Kazimierz Sichulski, „Matka Boska Leśna”, 1926

Sichulski's work was a source of inspiration to me as a whole – as he took Christian themes and remade them in a way which suited his folklore aesthetics. However, this particular one – „Matka Boska Leśna” („The Blessed Virgin of the Woods”) is one that particularly resonated with me. The use of radiating rhythms, as well as outward movement created from the central figure (Mary) were very appealing to me. Additionally, this piece inspired me to use the motif of praying parishioners in my own work.

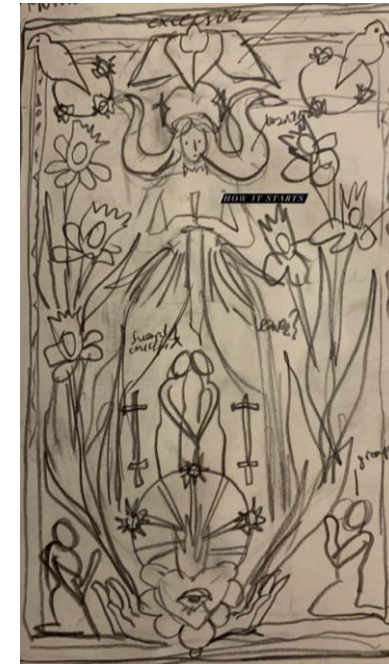
The Lombard bas-relief depicting Jesus was one of the artworks which made me interested in discovering how to create pieces with a symmetrically balanced composition. It was especially relevant for this work however, as it also used a single central silhouette, surrounded by geometrized plants and other bodies used to create a kind of border – the angels are stylized so that they resemble shapes more than anatomically correct bodies. This made me more interested in stylization of characters and using them as elements enhancing the compositional lines.



Fig.20. Unknown artist, „Christ in Glory”, c. 740

INITIAL IDEA AND SKETCHES

The first sketch for this piece was very messy and involved many elements – actually, it was more of an idea than an actual sketch. The first actual sketch was already made in the same size as the wood, so that I had a better grasp of the space. Afterwards, I used ink to trace the definite lines of the sketch, so that they were darker and thus easier to trace onto transfer paper. Actually, for this piece, transferring was rather hard, as I did not have transfer paper bigger than A4, so I had to do it in parts – thankfully, at least the linden wood was easy to transfer onto, as it has a very light color and almost non-existent grain. I wanted to make the composition almost symmetrical, as in the case of Sichulski's „Matka Boska Leśna”, yet introducing an asymmetrical element through the floral motifs of narcissus flowers – while in the case of the aforementioned artwork it is the trees and figures below Mary and Jesus. Aside from that, I have carefully looked for elements which would help me convey the meaning of this piece fitting the name: „Mother Mokosh with Humanity in Tow” – representing a maternal figure which could be a patron to every single human being without exceptions – although, truthfully, I did focus on women in my work, as I identify with their struggles more.



INCORPORATING CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM

THE BLEEDING HEART

I am very interested in fashion as well, yet I felt like I could rarely exhibit this in my VA work, as I am not focusing on contemporary garments as of now – however, sometimes I found that I could be inspired by small things I found beautiful – such as in this case of a heart included in a garment from Guo Pei Couture Fall 2019.



Fig.21. Guo pei, gown, 2019

THE DOVE

In this piece, I wanted to include doves, as a dove is considered to be the symbol of peace. „The Dove of Peace” mosaic gifted to the UN by the Holy See, however, includes not only the promise of peace, but also shows the hardships one has to go through and the struggle to find peace, through the dark background suggesting a hostile environment. I felt that, as in this piece I wanted to discuss the whole of humanity – and a divine „Mother” to mankind – this more universal portrayal of peace would be more fitting.



Fig.22. Vatican Mosaic Studio, „Dove of Peace”, 1796

CHRISTIAN KNIGHT ETHOS: THE SWORD MOTIF

The pose in the lower corners are modeled directly after N. C. Wyeth’s „Death of Orlando”. It portrays a moment after the death of Orlando’s friend as well as his horse, and after the war is over, feeling that he has fulfilled his duties to the king, he decides that he wants to return to the Lord. I thought that this illustration showed the loss that everyone experienced, but also the calmness that came from a life well lived and having finally accomplished one’s duties.

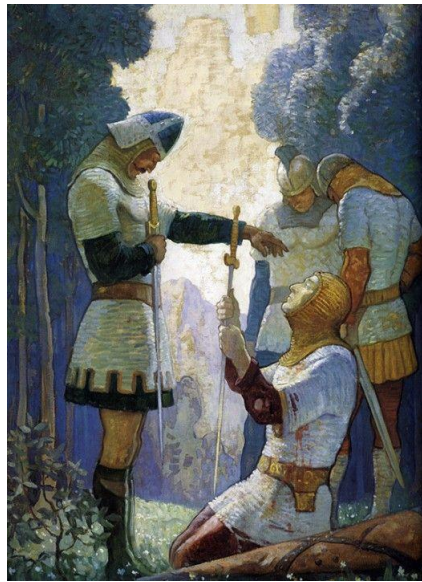


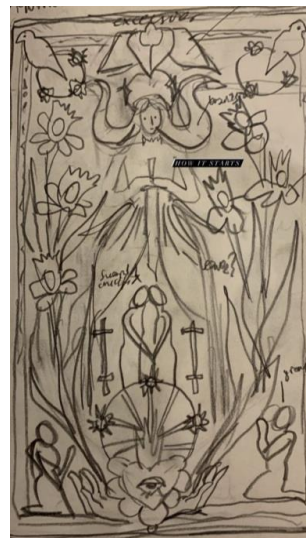
Fig.23. N.C. Wyeth, „Death of Orlando”, 1924

„Orlando fixed his eyes on the hilt of his sword as on a crucifix, and appeared like a creature seraphical and transfigured, and bowing his head, he breathed out his pure soul”

- From „Legends of Charlemagne”, „The Battle of Roncesvalles”

FINAL SKETCH AND FULL PROCESS

In the final sketch, I included a frame around the whole composition – yet, after tracing it, I decided that I did not want it. I feel like the simple, square border would break up the very organic, fluid composition that was created thanks to the narcissus flowers – the wood’s bark already plays the role of a frame of some sorts. Additionally, in the end I decided that all the figures I will portray will be women – that is due to the fact that I identify as a women myself, but also because I feel that women do not get enough representation in religious art. As powerful figures – thus I drew them with swords, symbols of typically masculine strength. In the pictures below is shown my whole proces, from first sketch to finished pyrography.



SYNTESIZING EUROPEAN AND NON- EUROPEAN TRADITIONS

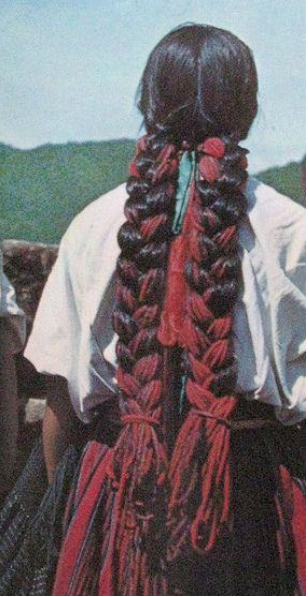


Fig.24. Unknown author, Mixe woman's braids, 1971

The braids of Mokosh were actually inspired by the Mixe women from Chichicastepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. It involves weaving red thread into the braids to make them appear thicker. Although this is not a Slavic tradition, it was fascinating to me, since two braids are also one of the traditional Polish hairstyles. Additionally, red thread was a prevalent theme in my exhibition (I even hung it all over the exhibition space), as it shows up in many other of my works. That is due to it being a symbol of fate.



Fig.25. Narcissus

Narcissi are flowers known for many meanings – they can either bring wealth or misfortune, symbolize vanity, but also forgiveness, creativity and inspiration – a fitting flower for humanity, which as a whole is neither bad nor good, deserves neither protection nor scorn. I feel like, lately, with all the catastrophic things happening in the world, it is more important than ever to be aware of the difference between humanity as a whole and individuals – especially when it comes to nationalities.

EXHIBITION PIECE

This work is inspired by the portrayals of Madonna, which here is renamed Mokosh, the most important Slavic goddess – she was thought to have made the first humans from mud and wild grass. Making my own portrayal of such a patron figure, and renaming it after a Slavic goddess made me feel closer, as an atheist, to my roots – both Catholic and Slavic – from which I felt disconnected before. In this artwork I have utilized the symmetrically balanced composition, as well as flowing and radiating rhythms inspired by Sichulski's piece. This piece shows how the search for a guiding, maternal presence can be universal across both Christianity and paganism, but also focuses on the importance of women, and their perspective, as far as belief systems. Of course, this does not mean that I am at perfect peace with my own heritage now – it is still an emotionally tumultuous area to me, especially with my identity specifically as a Polish person, taking into account all the things that are going on in my country right now. However, before, I felt like Christian imagery was something inaccessible to me due to my aversion to institutionalized religion.



Own work: „Mother Mokosh with Humanity in Tow”, 2022

INITIAL INTEREST



Own work: „Dreamspace”, digital drawing, 2021

Since before the VA course I was very interested in the idea of marches and parades. In my mind and memories they hold a gleeful and warm quality of celebration. As visible in an auto portrait I created in the first year of the course, I believe them to be a part of my „dream space” – this parade however, consists of different versions of myself.

REINTERPRETING POLISH FOLK: ZOFIA STRYJEŃSKA AND THE PARADE MOTIF



Fig.26. Zofia Stryjeńska, „Lipiec-Sierpień (Korowód III)”, 1925

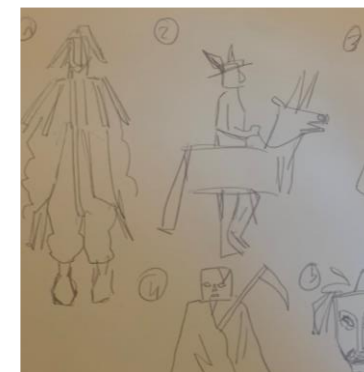


Fig.27. Zofia Stryjeńska, „Listopad-Grudzień (Korowód I)”, 1925

During the IB Visual Arts program I was introduced to the Polish artists Zofia Stryjeńska – later on, her art had a great impact on me. In this case, I was inspired by her portrayal of folk parades – a so called „korowód” (procession). What I loved most about them was how densely all the characters were located, in some way creating a unified whole – this is achieved through a harmonious color scheme, allowing for all the diverse elements to become more cohesive. I was additionally inspired by Stryjeńska in the use of traditional Polish wear and costumes, as well as traditional props. Her use of color and geometrization of characters is another thing I took notice of – while the colors are very vivid (she used gouache, just as I do), they still fit together very well – especially in the second piece the use of complementary greens and reds is easily noticeable. I decided that I wanted to create my own version of such a procession with a folk background.

INITIAL SKETCHES AND EXPLORATION

Here are the initial sketches for costumes and the whole piece I created. I wanted the characters to be located more densely, as Stryjeńska did, as compared to the parade in my auto portrait. Additionally, as I really love borders, I wanted to include one, yet at the time I was not sure what I wanted it to be – I was thinking of some geometrized folk pattern, yet later on decided on geometrized plants – which, as mentioned before, are a prevalent theme in my work.



POLISH FOLK COSTUME INSPIRATIONS



Fig.28. Charles Freger, "Strohmann", 2010

Chochół – a traditional Polish character created for Christmas – it was later on exchanged for a Christmas tree, but it is quite well known and thus I thought it would be good to include it.



Fig.29. Jan Świdorski, "Koza", 1957

Koza – a character made in Rzyki, Małopolska region. I found this photo in a Ethnographic Museum in Cracow during our VA trip and I loved the pagan and rough quality it had – in my representation I took creative liberty when coloring it due to a lack of color in the photo.

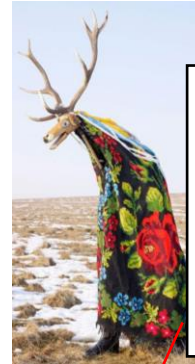


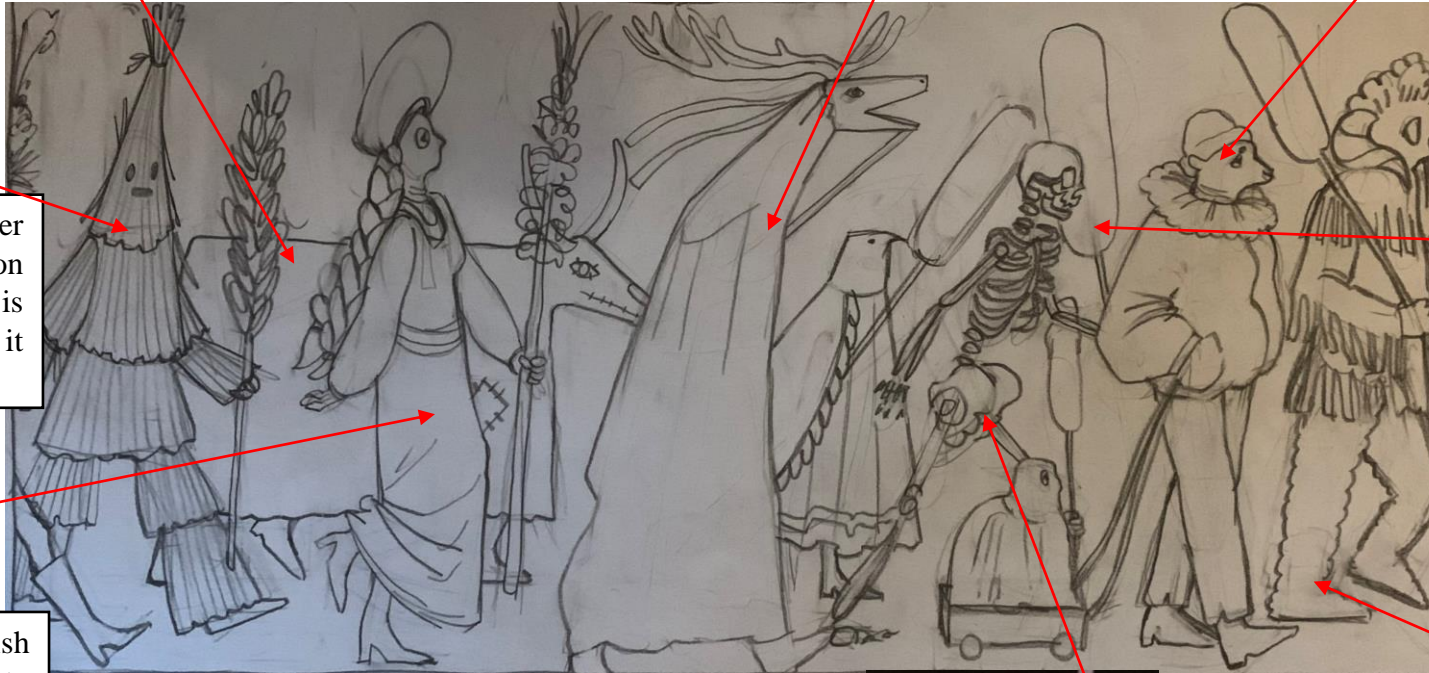
Fig.30. Charles Freger, "Stag", 2010

Koziorożec – traditionally used for warding off evil spirits, I really liked its silhouette and the fabrics used for the costume – I additionally am a fan of antlers, so this felt like a great center part for this piece.



Fig.31. Unknown, "Maska Żyda", 1958

Jew – although the name is not something to be proud of, I found the visual qualities to be very interesting, as well as the idea of portraying humans as animals (although I doubt the intentions were good in this case).



Palemka – a decoration made for Easter. I decided to unite all these costumes in a march held during Easter, thus they hold Palemki.



Fig.32. Palemka Wielkanocna

The Devil – a costume made in Śląskie Region, it seemed very primitive yet strangely charming with how much work must have gone into creating it.



Fig.33. Jan Świdorski, "Diabeł", 1957



Fig.35. Unknown, „Typy Polskie”

A traditional Polish Dress. I wanted to include a simple ethnic cloth, yet modified to cover the face as well to look like a costume.



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Fig.34. Jan Świdorski, "Śmierć", 1958

Death – represented as a skeleton. I decided to incorporate an actual skeleton to rise the question of whether they are all actually costumes.

REINTERPRETING POLISH FOLK: THE EASTER PARADE



Fig.36. Boxwood

While at first I wanted to create the border for the central parade from many different objects representing Easter in Poland, at the end I decided that it would take the viewer's attention away from the procession itself. Thus, I decided to go with my usual route and create a border from geometrized plants – this time it was boxwood, a plant typically associated with Easter time, as it is placed in baskets along with food eaten during Easter and taken to the church to receive a blessing. Most of the time, the palemki are taken along as well.

A lamb is typically the symbol of Christ. It is used on Easter, of course – in Poland in the form of a small sugar sculpture also put in the basket with food. In my artwork, I included a ribbon of red thread along its neck, to again reference its meaning as a symbol of fate.



Fig.37. Easter Lamb

COLOR INSPIRATION



Fig.38. Andre Derain, "The Trees", c.1906

In my use of color, I was heavily influenced by the Fauvists. The members of this art movement were the first to use paint straight out of a tube, to achieve truly vivid colors. Especially in the case of this painting, I felt that conveying the joyfulness of a procession, as well as Easter itself, had to be done through the use of many bright colors and patterns.

EXHIBITION PIECE

In this piece I have created a balanced, yet non-symmetrical composition (as the parade does not mirror itself, but I tried to keep the elements equally weighty). I created a color palette which focuses on the complementary red and green, but used the whole color wheel for the parade to draw attention to it. I created a radiating rhythm from each corner of the work through the boxwood, pointing towards the center, as well as incorporated many random and alternating rhythms in the costumes. Just as Stryjeńska, I tried to achieve unity through using a similar color palette for each character – even if by including only small elements tying them together. Additionally, I bought a frame and painted it gold myself – I feel that those golden frames, which I used for every one of my gouache paintings, as well as the print outs of digital works, are an inherent part of those works, as that's what makes them cohesive.



Own work: „The Easter Parade”, acrylic gouache on watercolor paper, 2022

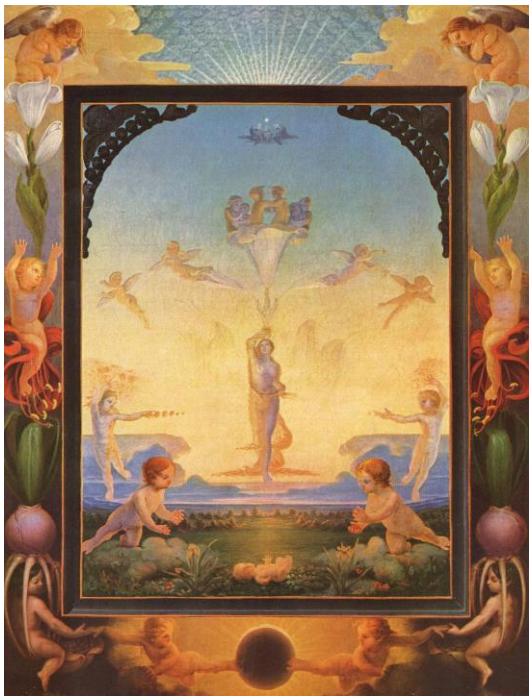


Fig.39. Philipp Otto Runge, "The Small Morning", 1809

Runge's „The Small Morning” is a piece that I first came into contact with a few years ago – and it has had a deep impact on me in terms of its composition (symmetrically balanced), use of space (somewhat dividing the artwork into two separate spaces – the center piece and a bordering one), its use of symbols (mostly the language of flowers, which is one of my favorite symbolic languages), as well as utilization of rhythms (mostly flowing and radiating). Although it has impacted me in many ways, I feel that it is most visible in this piece – especially since I used the motif of flowers and their bulbs without at first being conscious where I got it from – that is how deeply ingrained in my mind it was.

SLAVIC ROOTS – THE PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG POLE



Fig.40. Unknown, "Czapka Draba Noworoczny", c.1920

A New Year's „Drab” hat from Rzepiennik Strzyżewski, Małopolska region, is one of Poland's traditional headwear. It has many variations, but its generally made from straw. I wanted to juxtapose the traditionality of such a hat with the, in some way, globalized look of a young man wearing Adidas.

A „Seba” or „Sebix” is a stereotypical Polish young man. They are thought to mostly wear Adidas sweatpants and jackets. They are an archetype of the brashness, lack of culture and „blokowisko” culture (block housing estate). I wanted to contrast this low stereotype with something higher – like beliefs.



Fig.41. Unknown, „Random Sebix Adopt” 2016

In many cultures herons are considered spiritual guides – as this was a work about spirituality and belief, I felt that it was fitting to include it.



Fig.42. Grey Heron

INITIAL SKETCHES AND EXPLORATION

My first idea for this work was very vague – I wanted to create a portrait of a young man (at the time I wasn't sure what to make of him), painting a frame around that portrait, to make it look like a picture inside a picture. I was sure I wanted to incorporate flowers, birds and some bones (I was in a bone phase, to say the least). But to make it all work I had to imagine a single concept for all of it to fit into. After I chose the elements I wanted to incorporate, I started research sketching – as visible on the right, of the heron for example. I wanted to stylize everything perfectly, in a way so that they could all be a unified whole. I also had two potential designs of the drab hat, but in the end used the second one.



SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS USED CONT.



Fig.43. Teeth

Teeth in many cultures are a symbol of wisdom, but in the case of this artwork I paired them with a bed's headrest and a pillow to indicate the tooth fairy. Although the tooth fairy is present in many cultures, there is no set image of how it looks – and it is by no means a Slavic myth (it most possibly came from Norse cultures, where children's teeth were considered valuable luck talismans – thus they were worth the reward that the child got from the „fairy”). Yet, it is more well known in Poland than our own myths – I thought that this was analogous to the situation between the Adidas sweatsuit and the Drab hat – our society doesn't know our own roots, yet is very quick to assimilate all the things coming from other cultures.

Overall, deer have many symbolic meanings depending on the culture – happiness, guides in the woods, Intelligence and creativity. But deer skulls themselves are thought to be symbols of death and the remains of what one used to be – as in the case of what Slavic culture used to be as compared to now. Additionally, deer bones are used in divination.



Fig.44. Unknown, "Skull Model", 2018



Fig.45. Laura Heffron-Clark, "New Week, New Bloom", 2017

A tulip is a flower both commonly seen in folk art – being easy to geometrize, but also one of the most commonly sold flowers on the streets of Warsaw, in supermarkets and grocery stores. It is so common that it is sometimes easy to forget their history and how precious they could be in the past during Tulip Mania (costing as much as twenty times a skilled worker's annual income). This remind me of how the value of one's own culture can be forgotten. Orange tulips additionally symbolize understanding and affection.



I had a hard time trying to find what element I should put at the very bottom of the composition – I left the spot bare until the very last moment. In the end, a house felt relevant – it is where all our beliefs come from .

EXHIBITION PIECE

In this piece, inspired by Runge, I created a frame within a frame. I used tulips to achieve a flowing, upwards movement, as well as red thread that added to the flowiness. The piece is vertically symmetrically balanced, yet the lower part is much more static than the upper part, thanks to the rectangular shape of the elements. I created the focal point – the young Pole's face – through location, putting it at the center of the piece, surrounded by all the other elements. Again, I included a frame I painted golden, as it completes the composition of a picture within a picture.



Own work: „Young Pole”, acrylic gouache on watercolor paper, 2022

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM” THE ANGEL MOTIF



Fig.46. Alfonse Mucha, "Madonna of the Lilies", 1905

Alfons Mucha's „Madonna of the Lilies” is a painting that captured me with its ethereal nature. Although at first I was not sure which woman was supposed to be the Madonna (I thought that the figure on the right was maybe supposed to be the Holy Spirit), now that I know that the figure on the right is actually Mary, I feel like it carries more meaning. The girl on the left holds a wreath of ivy, which symbolizes remembrance. Her slavic clothes are what initially caught my attention and made me intersted in this piece. Yet, I feel like my initial mistake also gave me some kind of inspiration – I wanted to try portraying religious figures in traditional Polish clothing. Even though Roman Catholicism obviously does not stem from Slavic cultures, I wanted to create a more approachable (to myself, mostly) version of its characters – especially since as an atheist I do not feel a deep connection to them originally.



Fig.47. Mural in Bazylika Franciszkanów, Kraków

I saw this wall decoration in Bazylika Franciszkanów during our Cracow trip. I was enamored by the depictions of four angels, each one with a different face, yet complementing each other compositionally. This gave me the idea to create my own depcitions of them – I chose the four anrchangels for this (although I'm not sure whether these depictions are of archangels)



In a store, I found really cute tiny frames – I decided that they were perfect for this work. Thus, as visble on the picture, compared to my fingers, the paintings were tiny (5 x 7 centimeters)

INITIAL SKETCHES

I decided that for each of the archangels' depctions, I had to create a distinct character with their own attributes. From left to right are: Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, Uriel. Each one creates a piramidal composition – wide at the bottom and narrow at the top, with their heads and a halo (the halo incldes a little star to symbolise the patron of which side of the world they are). This composition is broken by their attributes. It was a struggle to paint such small canvases, and in order to do that I had to buy very small brushes.



INSPIRATIONS AND RESEARCH



Fig.48. Poulakis Theodoros, „The Archangel Michael”, c.1650

MICHAEL

For Michael, the attributes which I found important were their sword, with which they pierce the devil (in my piece symbolized by a snake), as well as them being a patron of the East. Their name in Latin is „Quis Ut Deus”, which means „Who[is] like god?”. I made their portrayal somewhat resemblant of Joan of Arc, another great warrior



Fig.51. James Powell and Sons, “St. Uriel”, 1888

URIEL

Uriel was the archangel of whom I was the least sure – they are the only one that are interchangeable of the four in different cultures. They are thought both to wield a book, as well as the flame sword, guarding Eden. Uriel’s name in Latin is „Dominus illuminatio mea” – „The Lord is my light”.

RAPHAEL



Fig.49. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, “Saint Raphael Archangel”, 1842

As far as Raphael, I found that one of their attributes was the caduceus – however, from this portrayal I wanted to include their fair, blonde hair. Raphael is also the patron of the West. Their name in Latin is „Deus Sanat” – „God Heals”, which is directly connected to their role as a healer – and thus the caduceus. I wanted Raphael to be the most elegant of the four.

GABRIEL



Fig.50. Luca Signorelli, “The Archangel Gabriel”, Early Renaissance

Gabriel is often portrayed with a white lily – symbolizing Mary’s virginity. I exchanged their curly, blond hair to a warm brown. I wanted Michael to be the kindest looking one. They are the patron of North, and their name in Latin means „Dominus fortitudo nostra” – „The Lord is our strength”.

EXHIBITION PIECE

For each of the archangels I created a dress inspired by traditional Polish garment. Although none of them represent any particular region’s clothes, I was inspired by the general looks of many different costumes. Each of the archangels additionally wears necklaces of red beads – the traditional Polish „korale”, sometimes made by children from rowanberry. Although I wanted them to be rather androgynous, as canonically angels do not possess any gender, I gave them female clothing – in contradiction to how they are normally portrayed looking more masculine, I felt that this would be fair.



Own work: Tetraptych „Archangels”, acrylic gouache on watercolor paper, 2022

REINTERPRETING CHRISTIAN MOTIFS



Fig.52. Wit Stwosz, „Ołtarz Zaśnięcia Najświętszej Marii Panny”, c. 1480

When we went to Cracow on our Visual Arts trip, I was able to see the recant altar in Basilica Mariacka. It was one of the most beautiful altars I have ever seen. Here I have shown only the central piece of the altar, but it consists of five parts telling different stories. For this particular work I was inspired not only by the arches, but also by the gothic style itself. Due to this, I decided to create a church scene with that kind of aesthetic – thus, the confessional I referenced when drawing the drawing also was a gothic one. Additionally, this piece gave me the idea of creating a church scene in the first place – as much as I was ready to reclaim Christian imagery, I think that before seeing this piece, churches themselves were somewhat beyond my sphere of desired themes.



Fig.53. Cody Swanson, „Adam”, 2006

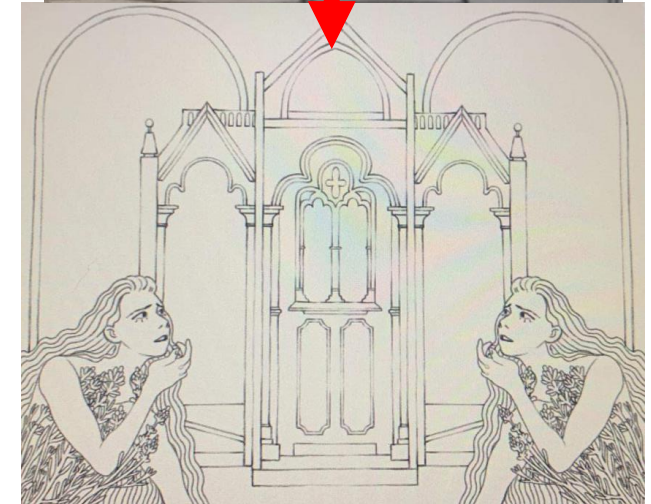
This sculpture is „Adam” by Cody Swanson. I was gripped by the emotion portrayed in it – I am rarely moved by sculpture, yet this one induces in me feelings of pure sadness, grief and agony – the face is so expressive. I decided that I wanted to reference it when drawing the women in my artwork – although my art style is not as expressive as anatomically correct ones, I still wanted to at least try to show some of the emotion hidden in the body of this „Adam”.



Fig.54. Confessional

The confessional is a very curious object to me – it is the place of, as the very name suggests, confessions, giving up one's sins and secrets. However, the person that receives them in nothing but human themselves – what is the point of this confession? Does saying that a sin is absolved actually make it okay just like that? Why is the person receiving the confession able to decide which sins are forgivable and which are not? As in the recent case of a woman confessing that she had had premarital sex, and the priest calling her profanities instead of absolving her. This whole ordeal seems somewhat mystifying to me, with how little I understand it – what's more, I felt that I had to comment on its social implications.

INITIAL SKETCHES AND EXPLORATION



As always, my initial sketch and the almost finished one are drastically different – the first one indicated only two figures mirroring each other, a confessional and some plants. Later on, I decided for the women to create a pyramidal composition with their hair, pointing to the confessional, as well as added two arched windows/doors behind the confessional itself, as I felt that otherwise the composition would be too simple.



Fig.19. Kazimierz Sichulski, „Matka Boska Leśna”, 1926

Here, I was again inspired by Sichulski's „Matka Boska Leśna” – though this time in a more formal manner rather than conceptual, as I found the color palette used here quite beautiful – I have referenced it for the whole of my piece, but for different elements than Sichulski did, apart for the forest, which I have observed very closely in order to achieve a similar look.



Here is the photo of this work printed and framed for the exhibition itself. It was 50x40 centimeters, and once again, I painted the frames golden myself. I mostly went for textured frames, which I felt would suit every painting. I feel like this one, with an almost tribal, primitive pattern, contributed a lot to this piece.

EXHIBITION PIECE

In this work I wanted to comment on the way women are often treated in Christian communities and by the church – despite the confessional being theoretically a safe space, even there women still have to face discrimination. The woman's nudity is covered by lavender, which symbolizes devotion, purity, but also silence, all things a woman is expected to be – and also how she is expected to treat her own carnality, as a thing to be hidden: not only to be modest, but also to „protect” herself. The women confessing wear „appropriate”, folk clothing, as a confessional requires that, yet their feet are naked, as in some cultures that is a symbol of mourning. They stay in the darkness of the confessional, hiding away their sins – despite that, all of the girls are connected by the red string of fate – no matter how they act, their acts will always be part of a bigger definition of „femininity”. I additionally incorporated a forest instead of a church beyond the doors to show the connection to nature that all humans have, as well as the serenity that nature can bring, but that is ignored in the light of social conventions, urging everyone to become more and more uptight, rather than just do what makes them happy.

SYMBOLIC INSPIRATION

Lavender has always been one of my favorite flowers – although by some it is seen as common, it has a beautiful color, smells divine, and when in big quantities can create the most beautiful scenery. Aside from that, it also has a meaning which made it fit perfectly into this artwork: it represents purity, silence, devotion, serenity, grace and calmness. All of those adjectives are ones that could be used for what some perceive is an „ideal woman”.



Fig.55. Lavender



Own work: „Confessional”, digital drawing, 2022

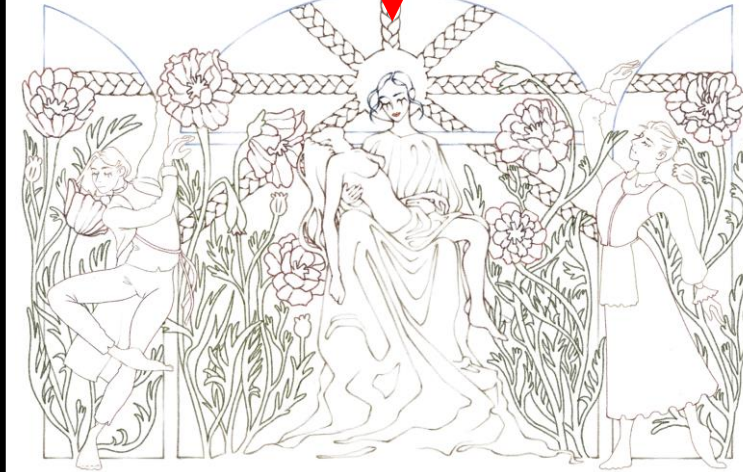
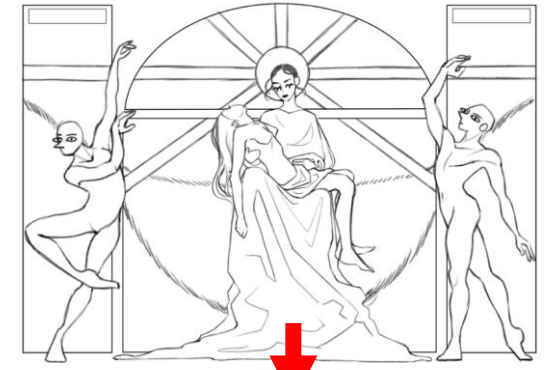
INSPIRATIONS FOR „PIETA”



Fig.56. Michelangelo, "Pieta", 1498-1499

Michael Angelo's pieta is the most famous pieta in the world – and although there are many others, and personally I don't favor any of them, this one I hold dear to my heart, as it was pretty much the first artwork ever that I have thought more deeply about. For an assignment to receive a scholarship to study abroad I had to choose what I would show to aliens if I were to explain to them what humanity is in a single day. I chose the Vatican Pieta – my reasoning then was that it perfectly showed the spectrum of human emotions. The death of a child, or any person close to us, is the most conflicting event one can experience – love for that person mixes with grief, with anger, helplessness, even going as far as feeling nothing, except a void that has appeared with the disappearance of that person. Since then, I thought about the pieta once in a while, and during the VA course thought that it was finally a chance for me to express all that I felt thanks to that piece by creating my own pieta.

INITIAL SKETCHES



In the initial sketch, I wanted to make the dancing figures be statues, while the background were simple fields of rye. However, I changed my mind a lot when making this piece and in the end clothed the dancers into garments of opposite gender – to show human diversity – and exchanged the rye for poppies, the national flower of Poland. Additionally, I rounded the side pieces not to break the flow of the whole composition.



Fig.57. Ballet Dancer

When creating the figures surrounding the central pair, I referenced ballet dancers. I've always loved dancing, yet ballet is really something more than that – I don't think I've ever seen body lines as clean and graceful as in ballet dancers. I wanted to include this, as dancing in itself is associated with joy and celebration, but when it comes to ballet, it has a hidden sadness and desperation to it – aside from, of course, how delightful it was to draw such dynamic poses.



Fig.58. Stanisław Wyspiański, Stained Glass in Bazylika Franciszkanów

For the composition of this piece, I was inspired by stained glass pieces, especially those by Wyspiański that we saw in the Basilica Franciszkanów in Cracow. Wyspiański is not only a master of the flowing rhythm and movement, but I also fell in love with the way he filled the arches and how he geometrized flowers of all kinds.

SYMBOLIC INSPIRATION

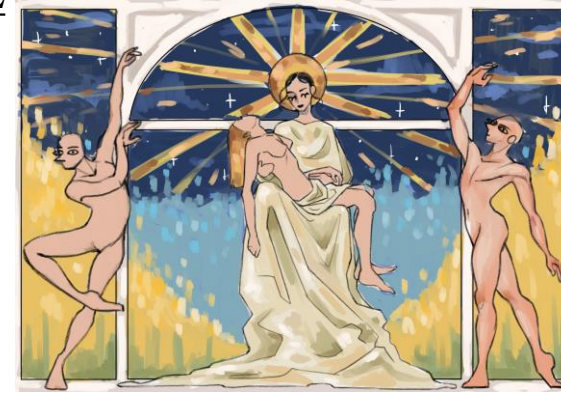


Fig.59. akład S.G. Żeleński, "Witraż z Makami", 1914

I was additionally prompted to include the poppies by a stained glass piece that we've seen in Cracow. It was located in a staircase of a tenement house and was done by the same workshop that the Wyspiański stained glass was – the Żeleński Cracow Stained Glass Workshop.

INITIAL COLOR PALETTE

In the initial sketch, this was the color palette that I planned to work with. However, not much from it has made it to the final version (mostly the central figures and the halo). I figured that it was too pastel and bright for me to work with digitally, as on screens I always prefer darker colors.



This is a photo of the work printed and framed during the exhibition. I once again painted the frame gold myself (it was all the same golden acrylic paint, so that the frames matched). I felt that it not only went great with the „golden” halo, but also made the work look even grander, as the print was already 60x40 centimeters, but the frame added around 10 centimeters to length and height both. As it was the final work in my exhibition, I wanted it to really catch the eye.



EXHIBITION PIECE

The pieta is a common motif in Christian art – however, I decided to twist its meaning. While the original pieta is about mourning and maternal love, I made mine about protection and romantic love. I included a poppy – the national flower of Poland – which in itself retains the original meaning of the pieta, symbolizing remembrance and death. The dancers wear traditional folk clothing of the opposite gender to show the changing gender norms and how they can be embraced while keeping tradition alive. This piece, as the final one, is a summary of all the ideas visible throughout the exhibition.



Own work: „Pieta”, digital drawing, 2022

List of Figures

- Covers of books „Bestiariusz Słowiański” (2018), „Bestiariusz: Zwierzęta” (2020) by Witold Vargas, Paweł Zych; „Mitologia Słowiańska”(2017) by Jakub Bobrowski, Mateusz Wrona; retrieved from: <https://www.ceneo.pl/58885001> ; <https://www.ceneo.pl/91799867> ; https://www.ceneo.pl/53593276 ; accessed 10.04.2022
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