

# MALCZEWSKI – THE MOST VALUABLE POLISH PAINTER

Up until this point in time only the works of a few Polish painters have been sold for over one million dollars, and **Jacek Malczewski's** are topping that list. During his lifetime, he created over 2,000 amazing paintings, including over 800 works not catalogued, so it is worth searching for them.

He was born on July 15, 1854, in Radom, at that time a part of the partitioned Poland under Russian occupation. His father Julian Malczewski was a secretary of the local Credit Society of Landlords. His mother was the daughter of an officer who served Napoleon Bonaparte and for true love married his family's maid Broncia.

Jacek spent his early years with his parents, and then in 1867 he was sent to his uncle's property in Wielgie, where he continued his home school education under the supervision of the famous tutor and writer Adolf Dygasiński. The patriotic atmosphere in the homes of his father and uncle strongly influenced young Jacek Malczewski. At the age of 17 he was sent to Cracow to attend high school. At the same time he studied, as a freelance student, at the Cracow School of Fine Arts. However, just after a year, Jan Matejko, who recognized the artistic talents of Malczewski, encouraged Jacek to drop out of high school and join his school.

During his years of studies at the Cracow School of Fine Arts, Malczewski also traveled extensively abroad to master his painting techniques. In 1875, he went to Paris where he studied for a year at École des Beaux-Arts and also attended the Académie of Suisse. After returning to Cracow in 1877 he continued his studies under the mentorship of Matejko and completed studies at the SFA in 1879.

In 1880, Malczewski traveled through Italy and then visited the old Eastern Polish land of Podole. He became a friend of Count Karol Lanckoroński with whom he participated in an archeological expedition to the Middle East. In his early paintings Malczewski explored realistic and emotional portraits [*Matka Boska (Our Lady)*, *Portret Heleny*



*Self-Portrait in White (1914)*

*Marcell (Portrait of Helena Marcell)*, *Portret narzeczonej (Portrait of the Artist's Fiancée)*, *Umywanie nóg (Washing of Feet)*], as well as serene views from his childhood [*Wspomnienie młodości (Memory of Youth)*, *Słoneczniki (Sunflowers)*], or themes of Polish patriots sent to exile in Siberia [*Śmierć na etapie (Death on the Way to Siberia)* and *Wigilia na Syberii (Christmas Eve in Siberia)*]. Soon, he added to his realistic paintings the heroes from ancient mythology or ones from Polish folklore. This fantastic mixture of the real world and fantasy developed into a very original, symbolic style. Malczewski's pictures expressed a new cosmology, where historic time merged with the contemporary portrait adding to his pictures multiple meanings.

After the death of his father in 1884, the motif of death became frequent in Malczewski's artistic works, expressed in the cycle of paintings with



*Wigilia (Christmas Eve in Siberia, 1892)*

Thanatos (depicted as a half-naked woman with a scythe), or in the series with Ellenai inspired by lectures on Juliusz Słowacki's masterpiece *Anhelli*. But death by Malczewski always had elements of sexuality provoking discussions of the philosophical dichotomy of human life defined by Eros (love) and Thanatos (death).

In 1887, Malczewski married Maria Gralewska, a daughter of a wealthy Cracovian pharmacist. The most famous pictures by Malczewski: *Błędne koło (Vicious Circle)*, *Melancholia (Melancholy)*, *Natchnienie malarza (Painter's Muse)* were created in the 1890s. There is a rumor that his young model, the beautiful baroness Maria Bal (née Burnicka), posing for numerous nude pictures, including *Bacchante*, *At the Source*, *Sleeping Harpy*, *Finis Poloniae*, and many more, became his passionate mistress. From 1897 to 1900 and 1912 to 1921 Malczewski was a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, and also served as a rector



*Vicious Circle (1895-1897)*

at that artistic college in 1912.

The artistic works of Malczewski were presented at exhibitions in Vienna, Munich, Berlin, Petersburg, Chicago, Paris, London, Venice, and Brussels bringing him numerous awards and international recognition as the major Symbolism painter in Europe. A very interesting part of his paintings were portraits including over 100 self-portraits of the artist. The drama of WWI found artistic expression in Malczewski's paintings exploring religious motifs, like in *Przepowiednia Ezechiela (Prophecy of Ezekiel)*, or contestation of the artist's life *Moje życie (My Life)*. In his artistic journey Malczewski played not only with motifs and fantastic forms of depicted themes, but also experimented with a wide palette of colors. Some of his works are close to the brightness of Impressionistic views, as in *Portret syna Rafała (Portrait of the Artist's Son Raphael)*, *Portret kobiety (Portrait of a Woman)*, *Ślepy faun (Blind Faun)*. Some are enriched by bright spots of light as in *Moje modele (My Models)*, *Pastuszek i Chimera (Shepherd and Chimera)*. In other ones the domination of one color defines the atmosphere of a picture, like in *Portret siostry artysty (Portrait of the Artist's Sister)*, *Autoportret w białym stroju (Self-Portrait in White)*.

The wild fantasy of Malczewski is often compared to those surrealistic visions of Salvador Dali. Some of his paintings are certainly an example of Expressionism, like *Święta Agnieszka (Saint Agnes)*. In Malczewski's paintings the background is often in strong contradiction to the main subject, and creates an unusual expression or explanation of the picture. A very specific example of it is the *Portrait of the Mother-in-Law*.

Jacek Malczewski became blind at the end of his life. He died on October 8, 1929, in Cracow. There is a museum named after Jacek Malczewski in Radom. His artistic legacy is still alive, and his works are selling at high prices.

An interesting selection of his work is presented at: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Jacek\\_Malczewski](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Jacek_Malczewski)