

The Supper at Emmaus in Jacek Malczewski's Oeuvre. Changes in Pictorial Tradition in Light of the Modernist Crisis of Christian Faith

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ABSTRACT

Religious themes related to Christianity hold a significant place in Jacek Malczewski's art. This paper analyses all known oil paintings by the artist depicting the Supper at Emmaus. In most of them, Jesus and his disciples wear military greatcoats, and in some, Christ bears Malczewski's features. Until now, these works have been interpreted as an expression of the artist's hope that his work could awaken Poles' hopes for a restoration of their country's independence – just as Christ, by appearing to his disciples after his Resurrection, renewed their sense of the meaning of life. However, it has not been previously considered that the disciples in Malczewski's paintings do not show signs of recognizing the Saviour. The earliest version, dating from 1897, shows diverse reactions to Christ's gesture of breaking bread. In later works, however, the disciples gaze at the bread without perceiving it as a sign of transformation, or they avert their eyes in confusion. This text investigates why Malczewski's paintings so evidently depart from traditional iconography. The author suggests that they refer to perceptions of Christ contemporary to Malczewski's time, shaped by the revised meaning and historical role of Christianity in the era of biblical criticism – particularly the works of Ernest Renan – as well as the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. The final painting in this series, created around 1925, has been interpreted as a summary in which Malczewski visualized the idea of the evangelical Eucharist as a mystery whose meaning can only be experienced in the liturgy.

KEYWORDS

Jacek Malczewski, Supper at Emmaus, modernism, religious art, religious iconography, Ernest Renan, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fritz von Uhde

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Religious themes related to Christianity occupy an important place in Jacek Malczewski's oeuvre. Throughout his creative life, the artist repeatedly revisited evangelical motifs in his sketchbooks, the face of Christ and the Crucifixion scene being perhaps the most frequently depicted ones.¹ He also created numerous renditions of the Supper at Emmaus, devoting as many as seven oil paintings to that theme, in addition to the sketches. Current knowledge of the artist's oeuvre allows the conclusion that the 1897 version is the earliest, while the last one was painted in the final years of Malczewski's life, circa 1925. To date, a monumental triptych from 1909² (fig. 1) has received the most attention. The work belongs to a series of religious paintings – or rather, paintings inspired by the Gospels – created in 1908–1912, in which Malczewski depicted Jesus with his own facial features. This peculiar practice has been subject to many interpretations. Here we will discuss only the one referring to the aforementioned triptych.

The resurrected Christ is holding slices of bread, which alludes to the following verses from the Gospel of Luke: 'And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight' (Luke 24:30–32).³ The disciples are wearing Russian

military greatcoats; Malczewski often depicted Polish insurgents, exiled to Siberia, wearing such coats. It was argued that the reference to martyrdom in the scene of Christ meeting his disciples at Emmaus was intended to build an analogy: just as Jesus inspired his disciples' faith in his resurrection, so the artist arouses the Polish insurgents' faith in the resurrection of their Homeland.⁴ What symbolizes hope in this painting, is the greatcoat that Christ throws off his shoulders. Malczewski's works were intended to empower the freedom fighters in a belief that it was not in vain that they took up arms and then paid the sacrifice of captivity.

In Malczewski's painting, however, the disciples show no signs that they might have recognized in the man sitting between them the one who restores meaning to their lives. What further reinforces this observation, is a comparison with almost every other portrayal of the Supper at Emmaus: from Renaissance paintings by Caravaggio and his followers to works by Delacroix and Malczewski's contemporaries, with the most notable being Jan Matejko's sketch for the iconostasis of the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Kraków (fig. 2). As the climax of that scene, painters usually chose to convey the agitation of the disciples who, struck by the recognition of the Lord, fold their hands in prayer, raise them towards their



fig. 1 Jacek Malczewski, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1909, National Museum in Warsaw
photo National Museum in Warsaw

hearts, spread them out, grasp at the table or the armrests, lean towards Christ or violently away from him, rising from their chairs. If one of them does not do so, it is because he is pouring wine and looking down. Yet, in Malczewski's painting, the disciples, transfixed on the bread in Christ's hands, do not make any gestures. Their behaviour would be understandable if Jesus were no longer between them, as in Jan Steen's painting of the Saviour's distant spectre (circa 1665–1668, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Because of this particular divergence from pictorial tradition, the above interpretation of the triptych, hitherto accepted as valid, should be revised. The direction of this revision will be verified in an analysis of Malczewski's other paintings illustrating this theme, from the artist's early and later periods alike. It will close with considerations for possible further research on the subject, rather than with conclusions.

The artist's first rendition of the Supper at Emmaus, painted in 1897, also shows deviations from traditional approaches (fig. 3). What it does have in common with the triptych, though, is that the figures of disciples accompanying Christ are also portrayed as Polish exiles; one of them has a military greatcoat thrown over his shoulder.

The painting was rightly linked with the works of Fritz von Uhde, who, since the 1880s, repeatedly modernized various biblical themes, including Christ's journey with his disciples to Emmaus.⁵ When considering the purpose behind the modernization of religious themes in the German painter's art – in the context of the increased activity of socialist movements of that era – it was emphasized that portrayals of poor people meeting Christ were not a political accusation of condoning social

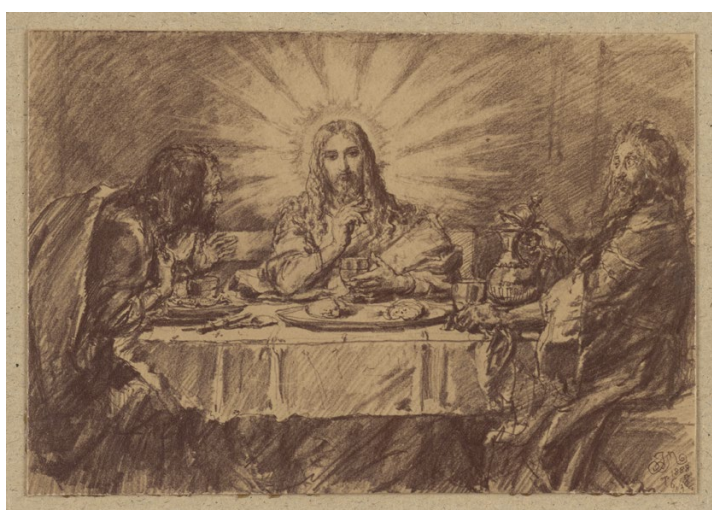


fig. 2 Jan Matejko, *Christ and His Disciples at Emmaus*, sketch for the iconostasis in the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Kraków, 1888
photo National Museum in Kraków



fig. 3 Jacek Malczewski, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1897, National Museum in Warsaw
photo National Museum in Warsaw

injustice, aimed at the current political system, but a depiction of the poor filled with faith in the redeeming work of Providence. The painter's works, critics wrote, show the 'human mind's ability to transcend all adversity and burdens through the strength of its faith in the reality of Christ's promise' to those who 'weep' and 'crave justice'.⁶ This faith in the Resurrected Christ is also expressed in the *Supper at Emmaus* (1885), where the situation is presented inside a farmhouse from Uhde's times, 'painted convincingly down to the finest details, such as herring in a bowl'⁷ (fig. 4).

It was since the very first presentation of Uhde's composition that its connection to Rembrandt's *Supper at Emmaus* (Louvre; fig. 5) was observed. Uhde noticed how the Dutch master differentiated the disciples' reactions to Christ's gesture of breaking bread, showing one of them with raised arms, and the other one in a way that would suggest that he 'is slower to notice the miracle than his friend'.⁸ In both of these disciples whose reactions are delayed, a single hand is the indication of

a nascent emotion: in Rembrandt's painting the man has an open hand, whereas in Uhde's he clasps it tightly over his knee. It has been observed that while in Rembrandt's composition the disciple who is slower to react 'literally swallows the image of the Saviour with an indescribable gaze', in Uhde's rendition, the gaze of the disciple shown from behind remains unseen, and thus his behaviour becomes more akin to 'an ordinary human reaction to the unfathomable (*Unbegreifliches*)'.⁹

This change in relation to Rembrandt's canvas should also be regarded as an element of the German painter's attempt to update the subject, in accordance with the conventions of nineteenth-century painting, already widespread at the time. The figure in the foreground, shown from behind, serves as a 'personal vehicle of identification', through which the painting establishes contact with the viewer.¹⁰ The observer, whose gaze reaches deep inside the depicted space, joins that disciple. Their attention is immediately drawn to the other disciple, visually 'fused' with the



fig. 4 Fritz von Uhde, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1885, Staedelmuseum, Frankfurt am Main
photo public domain

first one, standing on the opposite side of the table and distinguished by his placement close to the centre of the composition. While the reaction of the man seated with his back to the viewer still remains unclear, it finds its development in the devout posture of the other figure, speechless upon seeing the Saviour. A correspondence is thus created between the situation of the viewer, who is not immediately aware of the meaning of the depicted scene, and the reaction of the disciple who is sitting with his back turned. This device allows the viewer to instantly recognize the figure by which the disciples are transfixed. More attention is being devoted here to Uhde's canvas because Malczewski employs similar means of narration and composition in his 1897 painting: the disciples' postures are clearly differentiated, and the painting seems to invite the viewer into its space – the table is extended in their

direction, creating a place they can virtually occupy, thus joining the supper.¹¹

Malczewski decided not to depict the interior of the inn, and limited the setting to a blank wall in the background. As a result, the differentiation of the disciples' postures has become the main focus of the painting. Compared with Uhde's work, this difference appears to be even more distinct. In the painting by the author of *Melancholy*, one disciple, who has already received the bread (which can be seen in his right hand), raises both of his arms and leans towards Christ, emphatically expressing the moment of his internal transformation, which happened when 'his eyes opened and he recognized him'. The other man is staring at Christ, but the viewer does not see his eyes, similarly to Uhde's depiction of the disciple who realized later than his companion that a miracle was happening. In Malczewski's rendition, however,



fig. 5 Rembrandt, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1648, Louvre, Paris
photo public domain

this man rests his head on his hand, indicating pensiveness, as though still listening to the blessing recited by Christ before breaking the bread and handing it to the disciples. In this man's case, however, these words have not caused 'his eyes to open'; or it is as if he is gazing at Christ, trying to discern the reason for his companion's reaction, but not finding anything that would justify it. The sense of his behaviour is summarized in the gesture of his left hand, placed in the very centre of the composition. Christ is looking at that hand, hovering over a glass, fingertips tracing its edge, waiting, as though not ready to receive the bread. If that disciple does indeed recognize Christ, the nature of that realization has nothing to do with surprise and astonishment, but is more akin to cold analysis of the obtained information concerning the identity of the observed figure.

In Malczewski's painting, an important element of the characterization of the pensive disciple is a military greatcoat draped over the

man's right shoulder and falling onto the bench in such a way that he seems visually trapped between the table and the coat. Here we hypothesize that the divergence from iconography and the presence of the greatcoat, introduced as a means of modernizing the theme, serve to problematize the understanding of the evangelical message from a historical distance determined by the socio-political context.¹²

The above hypothesis will be verified by analysing the 1909 rendition of *The Supper at Emmaus*. The peculiar nature of that work did not go unnoticed by Malczewski's contemporaries. A reviewer from the magazine *Sfinks* criticized the painting for 'failing to explain clearly enough that Christ "possesses neither power nor divinity"'; that the work, rather than expressing a 'dramatism' adequate to its subject, is shrouded in 'ideological coldness'.¹³ He did not suspect, however, that all these inconsistencies with pictorial tradition had their

justification. The work presents Christ between two disciples, seated on both of his sides, at a table covered with a white tablecloth. The table is brought closer to the viewer by showing only the back part of the tabletop. Invited in this way to join the supper, the viewer is at the same time confronted with the monumental form of the triptych. The figure of Christ is distinguished by being placed at the centre of the composition; in the typical perception of painted triptychs, the viewer's attention is drawn to the image in the middle. The side panel placement of the disciples, whose gazes are directed towards Christ, fulfils in an exemplary manner the requirement that creators of triptychs 'subordinate the side panels to highlight the centre', to quote the words of Klaus Lankheit.¹⁴ The figure of Christ is also distinguished by the fact that he appears to be throned. His exaltation is at the same time at odds with the behaviour of his companions, who show no reaction to the gesture of breaking bread. The pieces of bread that Christ has already broken and handed to his disciples are simply lying next to them. He is breaking off yet another piece, but the men remain unmoved and fail to recognize any sign in this. They stare at Christ's hands, or perhaps only at each other, even though Christ himself has not disappeared. His presence is explicitly emphasized by the numerous, almost excessive, layers of clothing.

Christ, who is looking neither upwards towards God, nor at the bread, nor at the disciples, nor at the viewer – therefore diverging from pictorial tradition – lowers his gaze and directs it somewhere over the table, but not at anything in particular, and seems to be aware of the disciples' lack of reaction. His hands become strangely stiff and frozen, as though resigning from breaking the bread. An attempt at opening the disciples' eyes is made with the use of a vast halo radiating towards them. Shimmering with shades of yellow, celadon and blue, it surpasses even the size of Christ's tremendous halo in Jan Matejko's *Last Supper* from the iconostasis of the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Kraków, where, immediately around Christ's head, the halo forms a solar (radial) corona. Its shape is in accordance with tradition derived from the Gospels, upheld by

the fathers of the Church and later exegetes. The tradition is firmly rooted in Christianity, which interprets Christ's entire life as 'the great mystery of the true Sun (*Sol verus*)' and gives him the title of the Rising Sun (*Oriens*), 'the Sun of the Resurrection',¹⁵ which also remains closely related to the portrayals of Christ at Emmaus. What is also important in the image at hand, is the relationship between the solar corona and the halo's outer rings. Seven rays of the corona spread out from the ring immediately surrounding the head, whereas in the outer rings, shown on the side panels, the number of rays increases and their rhythm becomes more dense. The interrelation between the main panel and the side panels evokes an effect of optical multiplication and intensification of the rays: it seems that its purpose is to increase the effect of the halo on the disciples and to amplify the power of its flare.

On the other hand, the disciples in Malczewski's triptych are not 'shrouded in the rainbow of spiritual power, surrounding their master's head', nor are they 'contemplating the burden of their future task'.¹⁶ Although the halo does indeed spread onto the side panels, its glow is unable to dim the daylight that falls on the disciples from the left and right sides (perhaps through the windows). The dishes on the table, as well as the disciples' hands, resting on the tabletop, all cast shadows directed towards Christ. The shadow of the disciple on the left even falls on Christ's halo. In the aforementioned painting by Matejko, the extension of the halo allowed its rays to encompass at least three of the apostles, whereas in Malczewski's triptych, the halo barely reaches the disciples. In this context, the manner in which the figures are posed acquires particular significance. The inventiveness of Malczewski's predecessors in depicting the Supper at Emmaus tended towards differentiating the disciples' poses. In the Polish painter's rendition of the Supper, however, their figures create mirror images of each other: closer to the viewer rest the hands of the disciples, palms against the edge of the table, while further away from the viewer the disciples rest their forearms on the tabletop, thus creating symmetrical diagonal lines which meet the last ring of the halo. The characters'

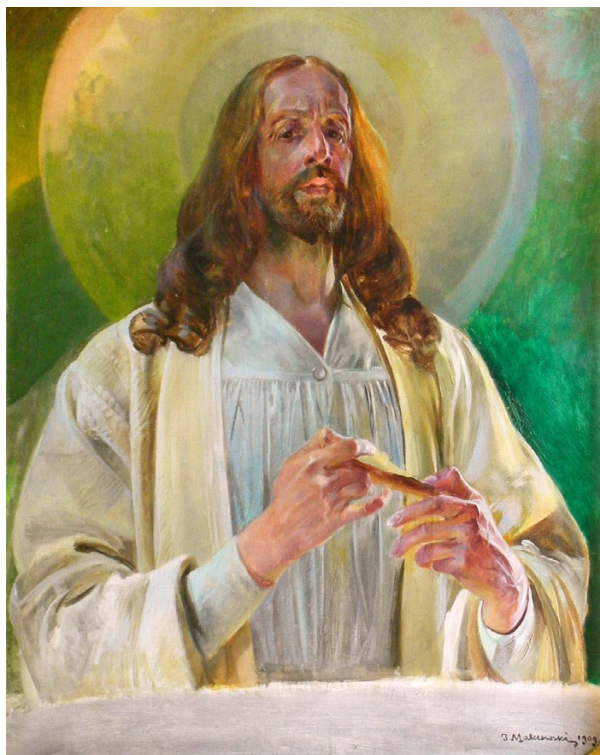


fig. 6 Jacek Malczewski, *Christ at Emmaus*, 1909,
Borys Voznytskyi Lviv National Art Gallery
photo Borys Voznytskyi Lviv National Art Gallery

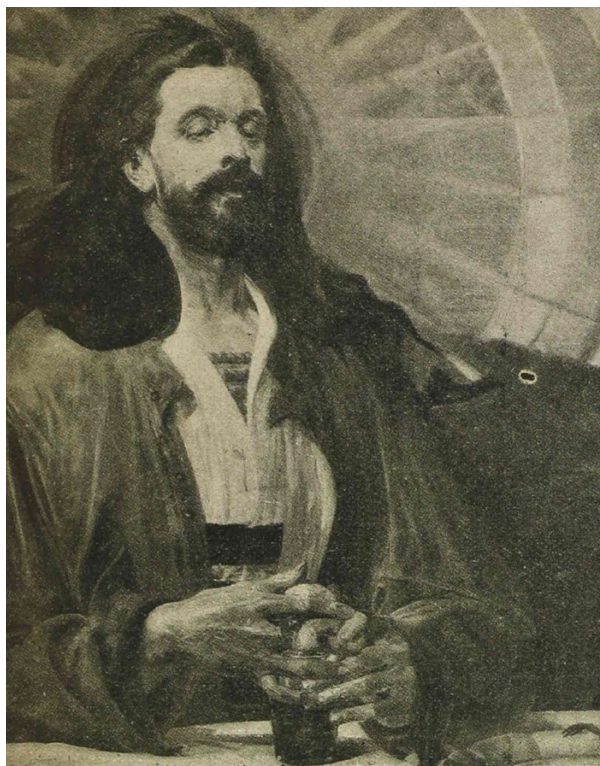


fig. 7 Jacek Malczewski, *Christ at Emmaus*,
1909–1911, whereabouts unknown
photo from Stosław, 'Wystawa Malczewskiego
w Wiedniu', *Świat*, Ann. 6, no. 46 (1911), p. 7

individual reflexes and emotions are suppressed in favour of the figures being inscribed in a regular structure which – due to the grey-brown colour of the greatcoats, among other reasons – resembles two earthen ramparts meant to stop the approaching light. It is indeed effective, as the halo, upon reaching the disciples, loses its intensity of colour; the last circle becomes as brown as the clothes worn by the disciples. The halo thus appears as an attribute whose monstrous size results from the efforts to 'open the eyes' of the disciples. The men, however, do not surrender to this influence, and remain trapped in their coats, unable to move away from the table and chairs.

Considering the relationship between the figures and the awareness emanating from Christ's face of remaining unrecognized, the placement of Christ in the central panel may be regarded not only as a means of distinguishing this figure, but also of isolating him from the disciples. This isolation is further intensified by two visual peculiarities. The rings of the halo do not create continuity between the central panel and the side panels. The rings on the side panels do not run parallel to the ring on the central panel; they deviate from it and thus lose their cohesion with the central part. The separation of the figures is further intensified by the different method of framing the scene on the central panel, as its bottom edge runs higher than the bottom edges of the side panels. Only a small part of the table is visible, making that fragment similar to a *parapetto*, known from Italian or Dutch Renaissance portraits. As a result, the viewer develops a different attitude towards the figure of Christ. They no longer perceive this figure as the most distant of all; on the contrary, they feel the direct proximity typical of portraits with the *parapetto* motif. Christ's relation to the figures on the side panels is the opposite of his relation to the viewer – the isolation towards the disciples is replaced by the immediacy of the encounter between Christ and the viewer. The evolution of the renditions of the Supper at Emmaus is aimed at initiating a specific question in the process of perception, namely, who Jesus Christ is for the viewer. This explains why Malczewski later painted two new versions of only the triptych's central panel

(again depicting Christ at Emmaus with his own facial features) (figs 6, 7).¹⁷

The relationship between Christ and the viewer is the main subject in a work not yet considered in the interpretations of Malczewski's oeuvre, namely, the 1912 diptych *The Supper at Emmaus* (fig. 8). In approaching the analysis of this work, it is necessary to recall the difference between a triptych and a diptych, as it extends beyond the mere difference in the number of representations.¹⁸ A triptych focuses attention on a central image framed by two side images and in this way presents itself as complete. It suggests that all that is important has been represented in it. The perception of a triptych consists of absorbing only that which is depicted in it and which is at the same time perceived as complete. What is decisive in the perception of the diptych, however, is the combination of two panels, both of which remain equivalent to each other. The tension associated with what occurs between the two individual images becomes crucial. The relationship

between them is open to a third element, which is only constituted in the viewer's consciousness. Attention is focused not only on the images, but also on what they make possible, on a virtual space where the viewer's imagination reigns and the inner image emerges.

In the work in question, as in the triptych from 1909, the figure of Christ is also separated from the disciples. Christ is shown on the left wing, *en trois quarts*, while the disciples are on the right wing *en face* (the disciple on the right has the facial features of Rafał Malczewski, the author's son, who was 20 years old at that time). The diptych presents the figures sitting at a partially shown table, to which the viewer is invited by Jesus, who is looking in their direction and turning towards them. It seems that Christ is also offering them his wine-filled tankard, placed on the right-hand panel, cropped by the lower edge of the painting and facing the observer with its handle. A plate of bread, partly visible in the lower corner of the right panel, is also extended towards them.



fig. 8 Jacek Malczewski, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1912, private collection
photo National Museum in Warsaw

Its placement is reminiscent of the way in which the table and painting tools are displayed in Malczewski's earlier painting, *Melancholy*. Accepting the invitation, the viewer sits virtually in front of the pupils, towards whom their gaze is also led by the convergent perspective of the chequered pattern on the tablecloth. At the same time, due to the specificity of diptych perception described above, the viewer inevitably relates to the figure of Christ. In doing so, they regard the disciples as their equals, which may lead them to notice a reinterpretation of iconographic tradition. If they do recognize that their encounter with these figures also involves what is occurring between the two individual images and what is constituted as a space stretched between the figures of Christ and the disciples, then this is the space that must be filled with an appreciation of this reinterpretation's purpose. The starting point should be the observation that the disciples' behaviour in no way corresponds to the reaction known from the pages of the Gospels.

In his right hand, one of the disciples holds a slice of bread, presumably received from Christ. This does not, however, elicit any 'eye-opening' reaction indicative of 'recognition'. The man rests his crossed hands on the table, leaning over it, lowers his gaze and seems to cower, not sure what to do with the received bread. Due to his lack of reaction, he becomes merely a 'prop' to his companion, who has him at his disposal and effortlessly tilts him to the left. The other disciple, meanwhile, holding a tankard of wine in his left hand and a bowl (plate?) in the other, does not behave in a way which would show his desire to receive the bread. He does not lean forward in order to extend his hand towards Christ. He 'climbs' on his companion, perhaps to satisfy his curiosity as to what Christ is doing, to no avail, however, as his companion keeps obscuring his view.

Faced with his disciples' failure to understand his gestures, Christ turns to the viewer, holding the bread in his hands. However, he does not break it, but holds two slices, presenting them to the viewer, rather than serving them. Is this gesture and its meaning clear to the observer? Christ's gaze does not express any such certainty. The bread lying on the plate

on the other side of the table, and thus on the border of the pictorial space, encourages participation in the represented event. The observer's encounter with Christ initiates a question concerning the relationship between the sign of bread shared during the supper at Emmaus – the sign by which the disciples recognized the Risen One – and the viewer's present.

Malczewski once again approached the subject of the Supper at Emmaus in a group of sketches from 1917, although they did not serve as the basis for an oil painting, as far as it can be currently ascertained (figs 9, 10). In these drawings Christ is clad in a blue robe and a red cloak, the same attire as in *Ezekiel's Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones*, a series of paintings created in the same period (from 1914 onwards). What these sketches have in common, is a big table, separating Christ from one of the disciples. The front edge of the tabletop is very distinctly drawn, which distinguishes this composition from the renditions discussed above. The gestures the figures make, however, are imprecise and it is impossible to clarify whether the change in the depiction of the table is in any way related to them. Still, it cannot be ruled out that the paintings from the first half of the 1920s, which also show the tabletop offset from the lower edge of the painting and expose its surface to an equally significant degree (figs 11, 12), are a product of the discussed sketches, albeit considerably reworked. The table has been cleared of all dishes, and its empty, rough top corresponds with the blank cracked wall to which the view of the interior is restricted. The table's compositional meaning also derives from the fact that it defines the plane which connects all the figures. Their profiles do not overlap. Considering also that Christ is seated in the middle, with the two disciples at his sides, the composition can be regarded as a reminiscence of the 1909 triptych.

Mieczysław Gąsecki posed for the figure of the disciple on the left, while an anonymous labourer posed for the figure on the right.¹⁹ The person that posed for the remaining figure was Father Jan Jasiak, the vicar forane of Zakliczyn, and also the artist's confessor. The disciple on the left stares intently at Christ's



fig. 9 Jacek Malczewski, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1917, National Museum in Poznań
photo National Museum in Poznań



fig. 10 Jacek Malczewski, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1917, National Museum in Poznań
photo National Museum in Poznań

fig. 11 Jacek Malczewski,
Christ at Emmaus, 1921,
whereabouts unknown
photo from *Sztuka i Artysta*,
Ann. 1, no. 1 (1924), p. 11



fig. 12 Jacek Malczewski, *Supper at Emmaus*, c.1925, Archdiocesan Museum in Tarnów
photo Archdiocesan Museum in Tarnów



hands holding the bread, supporting his head with his left hand. In a later version of the painting, he also grasps the corner of the tabletop with his right hand. The effort to comprehend Christ's action emanates from the man's entire being, whereas the labourer sits further to the side and seems completely uninterested in Christ's gestures. The priest is different. He sits opposite Christ, leaning towards him. With his head turned, the gesture of breaking bread

still in mind, he comments on its meaning by the manner in which he positions his own hands. He rests his hands on the tabletop near Christ's hands, and together they form a semicircle, connecting Christ with the viewer's space. He holds onto the table with his hand, but in a different way than the other disciple. He does not cling to it, but only lightly hooks four fingers on its top, while placing his thumb underneath it. Thus, his palm is placed beneath the tabletop,

allowing him to gesture towards the viewer with his free right hand over his left. With his gestures, the priest conveys Christ's actions onto the viewer, and creates a continuum between the breaking of bread and the space in front of the painting, presenting himself as an intermediary between Christ and the viewer.

The question of this mediation becomes crucial, because the distribution of bread is not the main point of the depicted situation. Under the table, the figure of Christ is blurred, and the cracks in the wall can be seen through it. The figure is gradually disappearing. The artist's last rendition of *The Supper at Emmaus* shows Christ's gesture of breaking bread as an inconceivable, unfathomable reality – as expressed by the disciple on the left – and is made present only through the priest's mediation. What links the previous versions of *The Supper at Emmaus* with the work in question is the fact that it expresses a reflection on the significance of the temporal distance between the time of the Gospels and contemporary times in regards to the understanding of the Gospel truths.

Fritz von Uhde's and Jacek Malczewski's religious paintings both invite the question of the relevance of Christ's teaching in the modern era. Early commentaries on the German painter's work indicated that his belief in this relevance was based on his strong emotional identification with the evangelical message. Uhde's religious paintings were described as 'created out of an inner drive rather than out of speculation', 'as if under inspiration, [the artist] felt irresistibly drawn to the figures of Christ and Mary'.²⁰ This opinion was echoed by the author of a posthumous tribute to the artist, published in the *Krakowski Miesięcznik Artystyczny* magazine in 1911: '[t]oday, one rarely encounters an artist who would create religious paintings so intuitively, from the very depths of his being'.²¹ Malczewski's religious works diverge too much from iconographic tradition for the above assessments to cover them as well.

In the case of Malczewski's paintings of the Supper at Emmaus, it is the military greatcoats worn by the figures – not only the disciples, but Christ as well – that indicate a historical

distance separating the observer of the painting from the events described in the Gospel. According to the most common interpretation, the military coat in the artist's works symbolizes the political captivity of the Polish nation. However, numerous testimonies of the great positive significance of religion in the lives of Poles imprisoned in Siberia make one doubt the validity of upholding such an interpretation in relation to the discussed paintings. Adam Szymański's sketches, published in the years 1887–1890, are, according to Bogdan Burdziej, 'the fullest and most insightful description of the religious experience of deportees to Siberia in all the exile literature of the nineteenth century'. They show a world where 'the only defence is [...] an ethical act which rebuilds the human community', and 'consolation reaches its full extent when God, invoked in prayers, songs and involuntary sighs, becomes present in the dialogue of individuals, giving hope to all who ask Him for it: prisoners and sinners'.²² God does not make His presence known to the heroes, clad in greatcoats, depicted in Malczewski's paintings discussed above. Therefore, we should consider the hypothesis following the research postulates put forward by Dorota Kudelska,²³ that in this case, the coat becomes a symbol of enslavement, but in a dimension other than political.

The verification of this hypothesis must strictly refer to the situations imagined in the artist's works. In the 1897 painting, two reactions of the disciples are depicted, and while one is in line with the Gospel text, the other represents an attitude where the gesture of breaking bread is treated as requiring reflection; an attitude of analysis, typical of examination and verification of the historical past. In the 1909 triptych, the two disciples do not recognize Christ. This theme is further developed in the 1912 diptych: it shows one of the disciples looking at the gesture of breaking bread, with a desire to satisfy his curiosity, but not assuming that the meaning of the gesture – that is, the teaching of Christ's Resurrection – can directly concern him as the object of a religious experience.

Interpreted in this way, the paintings encourage reflection on their relation to those

phenomena in European culture that led to a religious crisis, questioning the legitimacy of recognizing the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, known from the pages of the Gospels. Regarding the figure of Jesus, the book that had the widest impact was *La vie de Jésus* (1863) by Ernest Renan, representing research aimed at scientific criticism of the Bible and negating the dogma of resurrection. Its Polish translation was published in 1904. Renan's treatise was inspired by, among other things, the criticism of Christianity that questioned the credibility of the evangelical message and the Church's dogma-based teachings, which were undertaken by so-called Catholic Modernism and present in Polish culture from the late nineteenth century onwards.²⁴ Since it negated Christ's divinity, Catholic Modernism was condemned by Pope Pius X in the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* in September 1907. Is the greatcoat, therefore, also a symbol of spiritual enslavement, which excludes the possibility of recognizing God in Christ?

The purposefulness of isolating the figure of Christ in Malczewski's 1909 triptych, as well as the painting of two works that reduce the subject of the Supper at Emmaus to a depiction of only this figure, should also be considered in the context of the religious crisis of the

time. For the viewer, the fact that Christ has the artist's facial features raises the question of whether in the painting they see Christ, or also Malczewski as Christ. These questions need to be examined in the context of a phenomenon originating from the philosophy of Nietzsche, namely the cult of artist as priest and as demiurge equal to God. Malczewski was critical of art contemporary to his time. In 1906, he expressed the opinion that 'great art [...] seeks God', while 'contemporary art seeks only itself'.²⁵ A hypothesis requiring verification emerges: that by presenting the viewer with a choice between recognizing the depicted figure as either Christ or the artist as a new god, Malczewski acted against the ideas proclaimed in, among others, *Confiteor* (1899) by Stanisław Przybyszewski, who regarded the artist as *Deus et omnia*.²⁶ In this context, it would be possible to see the 1925 painting of *The Supper of Emmaus* as an artistic response to dilemmas related to the realities of faith and as a portrayal of this evangelical event – and with it the teachings of the Resurrection – as a mystery experienced in the liturgy. A task for the future is to also map the modernist renditions of the motif of evangelical imaginings of Christ incorporating the artist's own facial features.²⁷

NOTES

- ¹ This statement is based on the analysis of Malczewski's 80 sketchbooks from the years 1885–1927 (Print Cabinet, National Museum in Poznań).
- ² The triptych was first shown in October 1909 in the Palace of Art, home of the Kraków Society of Friends of Fine Arts (TPSP). See *Nieustająca Wystawa Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie, październik 1909* (Kraków, 1909), p. 11; *Nowa Reforma*, Ann 28, no. 465 (1909), p. 1.
- ³ This fragment was added to the description of that painting when it was first presented at the exhibition in the Kraków TPSP. Ibid. The quoted verses come from the King James Bible.
- ⁴ Jadwiga Puciata-Pawłowska, *Jacek Malczewski* (Wrocław, 1968), p. 175; Aneta Biały, *Wieczera w Emaus Jacka Malczewskiego (1909)*, NMW – Digital Collection, <https://cyfrowe.mnw.art.pl/pl/zbiory/444972> [retrieved: 12 Jan. 2024]. Recent publications that adopt this interpretation include, among others: Agnieszka Skalska, “‘Ein lebendig Ding’”. Zur Tradition und Religion in der Malerei des Jungen Polen, in *Stille Rebellen. Polnischer Symbolismus um 1900*, eds Roger Diederer, Albert Godetzky, Nerina Santorius (Munich, 2022), p. 158; Paulina Szymalak-Bugalska, *Malczewski. Zbliżenia* (Warsaw, 2023), p. 202.
- ⁵ It was Jadwiga Puciata-Pawłowska who associated Malczewski's painting *The Supper at Emmaus* with Uhde's works. See Puciata-Pawłowska, *Jacek Malczewski...*, p. 175.
- ⁶ Otto Julius Bierbaum, *Fritz von Uhde* (Munich, 1908), p. 51.
- ⁷ Georg Voss, 'Münchener Maler in Berlin', *Die Gesellschaft. Realistische Wochenschrift für Literatur, Kunst und öffentliches Leben*, Ann. 1, no. 41 (1885), p. 770.
- ⁸ Hans Rosenhagen, *Uhde* (Stuttgart, 1908), p. XXX; Bettina Brand, *Fritz von Uhde. Das religiöse Werk zwischen künstlerischer Intention und Öffentlichkeit* (Meinz, 1983), p. 96.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ The author uses a term introduced by Wolfgang Kemp in his research on the aesthetics of the reception of 19th-century painting. See Wolfgang Kemp, *Der Anteil des Betrachters. Rezeptionsästhetische Studien zur Malerei des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1983). See also Mariusz Bryl, 'Obraz i widz. O nowej książce Wolfganga Kempa', *Artium Quaestiones*, 4 (1990), pp. 140–151.
- ¹¹ Considering that in Malczewski's painting Christ is also wearing a blue coat, one cannot rule out inspiration from Uhde's work.
- ¹² In some respects, the composition of figures in the Polish artist's work bears resemblance to a painting by Léon-Augustin Lhermitte (1892, Boston Museum of Fine Arts). A comparison of these two works would lead to the same conclusions that can be drawn comparing the triptych with Uhde's work.
- ¹³ Jan Kleczyński, 'VI Doroczna', *Sfinks*, fasc. 1(25) (1910), pp. 150–152.
- ¹⁴ Klaus Lankheit, *Das Triptichon als Pathosformel* (Heidelberg, 1959), p. 33.
- ¹⁵ Jerzy Miziołek, *Sol verus. Studia nad ikonografią Chrystusa w sztuce pierwszego tysiąclecia* (Wrocław, 1991), pp. 25–29, 43.
- ¹⁶ Leon Kowalski, 'Ostatni tryptyk Malczewskiego', *Krytyka. Miesięcznik poświęcony sprawom społecznym, nauce i sztuce*, Ann. 9, vol. 4 (1909), p. 327.
- ¹⁷ One of these versions is held in the Borys Voznytsky Lviv National Art Gallery. The other one, reproduced in this paper, is only known from a black-and-white photograph. Its reproduction was featured in reviews of an exhibition titled XXXIX. *Ausstellung der Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs Secession* (Vienna, 1911/1912) – Stosław, 'Wystawa Malczewskiego w Wiedniu', *Świat*, Ann. 6, no. 46 (1911), p. 7; Omega, 'Z krainy piękna', *Biesiada Literacka*, Ann. 26 no. 4 (1912), p. 67. The exhibition catalogue, however, does not include this painting in the list of displayed works (XXXIX. *Ausstellung der Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs Secession*, Vienna, 1911). Neither is its reproduction featured among the 19 photographs of Malczewski's

- paintings, stored in a folder with the artist's documentation, prepared for this exhibition and available at the Archives of the Vienna Künstlerhaus – Dorota Kudelska, 'Malczewski i Wiedeń – Nowe Ustalenia', *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, vol. 65, fol. 4 (2017), p. 57. However, that folder does not contain all the photographs, as the exhibition featured as many as 40 paintings by Malczewski. Additionally, it contains photographs of paintings not accepted for the exhibition, so the rendition of *The Supper at Emmaus* that was reproduced in the Polish press could have been previously included in the folder.
- ¹⁸ The inspiring remarks listed in this fragment are summarized after: Wolfgang Ullrich, 'Autoritäre Bilder. Die zweite Karriere des Triptichons seit dem 19. Jahrhundert' in *Drei. Das Triptychon in der Moderne*, ed. Marion Ackermann, exh. cat., Kustmuseum Stuttgart (Stuttgart, 2009), pp. 16–17.
- ¹⁹ Mieczysław Sterling, 'Jacek Malczewski (Jego stanowisko w sztuce polskiej)', *Sztuka i Artysta*, Ann. 1, no. 1 (1924), p. 11.
- ²⁰ Bierbaum, *Fritz von Uhde...*, p. 47.
- ²¹ [W.M.-i], 'Fritz v. Uhde', *Krakowski Miesięcznik Artystyczny*, no. 3 (1911), p. 30.
- ²² This opinion remains in accordance with the position of the vast majority of critics from Szymański's time. Bogdan Burdziej, *Inny świat ludzkiej nadziei. „Szkice” Adama Szymańskiego na tle literatury zsyłkowej* (Toruń, 1991), pp. 79, 162; id., 'Doświadczenie religijne w literaturze zsyłkowej', in *Problematyka religijna w literaturze pozytywizmu i Młodej Polski*, ed. Stanisław Fit (Lublin, 1993), pp. 170–171.
- ²³ Dorota Kudelska, *Dukt pisma i pędzla. Biografia intelektualna Jacka Malczewskiego* (Lublin, 2008), pp. 738–756.
- ²⁴ For further information on Catholic Modernism and its reception in Polish culture, see, among others: *Studia o modernistach katolickich*, eds Józef Keller, Zygmunt Poniąkowski (Warsaw, 1968); Mieczysław Żywczyński, 'Studia nad modernizmem katolickim. (Jego charakter i geneza)', *Życie i Myśl*, no. 11 (1971), pp. 18–55, no. 12, pp. 13–49; Tomasz Lewandowski, 'Młodopolskie spotkania z modernizmem katolickim', in *Problematyka religijna w literaturze pozytywizmu i Młodej Polski...*, pp. 197–252; *Modernizm potępiony przez papieża*, ed. Marcin Karas (Sandomierz, 2010).
- ²⁵ Jacek Malczewski, [survey response], *Przegląd Powszechny*, Ann. 23, vol. 90, no. 23 (1906), p. 80.
- ²⁶ Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, 'Bóg, ofiara, clown czy psychopata? (O roli artysty na przełomie XIX i XX wieku)', in ead., *Symbolizm i symbolika w poezji Młodej Polski* (Kraków, 1994), pp. 289–308.
- ²⁷ Further reading on this subject in the context of Polish culture: Wojciech Gutowski, *Wśród szyfrów transcendencji. Szkice o sacrum chrześcijańskim w literaturze polskiej XX w.* (Toruń, 1994); id., *Mit-Eros-Sacrum. Sytuacje młodopolskie* (Bydgoszcz, 1999); id., *Z próżni nieba ku religii życia. Motywy chrześcijańskie w literaturze Młodej Polski* (Kraków, 2001); *Chrystus w literaturze polskiej*, ed. Piotr Nowaczyński (Lublin, 2001); Dariusz Trzeźniowski, *W stronę człowieka. Biblia w literaturze polskiej (1863–1918)* (Lublin, 2005).

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