

Article

The Colors of the Ineffable—Jerzy Nowosielski’s Monumental Works as a Contemporary Search for Sacred Space

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Abstract: The subject of this work is the monumental art of Jerzy Nowosielski (1923–2011), one of the most outstanding contemporary Polish painters, who combined modernity with the orthodox icon aesthetics. This work discusses the monumental realizations of Nowosielski, especially the architectural polychromes made by the artist in Catholic and Orthodox churches in Poland in the years 1950–1999. The aim of the inquiry is to present his work theoretically and place it in a broader artistic context. The research shows that Nowosielski’s monumental works results from a strongly defined artistic concept aimed at ‘mystagogy of space’. Nowosielski’s work is an original synthesis of the modernist avant-garde and traditional canons of religious art. The analysis of the problem was carried out in two areas: (1) analysis of the artist’s theoretical statements; (2) analysis of the artistic form with particular emphasis on the color aspect, based on the example of selected churches in Wesoła, Tychy, and Biały Bór. The work uses comparative references to the ideas of Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, and Le Corbusier.

Keywords: Jerzy Nowosielski; color; polychrome; architecture; sacral architecture



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1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of the Work

The subject of the article is the work of Jerzy Nowosielski, a painter counted among the most important Polish artists of the 20th century. The research covers the area of monumental artworks, i.e., decorations of architectural objects—frescoes, color schemes, and architectural concepts, implemented in the years 1952–1999.

The aim of the inquiry is to enrich the existing literature with the synthetic approach and to present Nowosielski’s work as an expression of a coherent and original artistic concept, to discover its origins and fundamental assumptions. This concept, described here as introduction to ‘sacred space’, emerged from Nowosielski’s personal experience and combined elements of the ecclesial tradition with the ideas of the modernist avant-garde.

The work focuses on the analysis of artistic means in Nowosielski’s art, with particular emphasis on color. References to certain trends in modern art were used as an aid in interpretation. Due to the lack of sufficient literature in a language other than Polish, it was necessary to provide general information showing the artist’s profile and his ideological formation. The features of Nowosielski’s monumental works were analyzed based on his selected works.

1.2. State of Research

Nowosielski’s work—both monumental and easel—received numerous discussions and comments during the artist’s lifetime. These include, for example, the study by Mieczysław Porębski, a leading art critic in Poland in the post-war period, in which the author presents a broad perspective on the work of the Krakow artist. So far, this work remains the most complete English-language source of information about Jerzy Nowosielski (Porębski 1989).

With the decline of Nowosielski's creative activity at the end of the 1990s, systematic research of his legacy began. The first two decades of the twentieth century resulted in the compilation of basic sources: an anthology of the theoretical texts of the painter (Nowosielski 2013), collections of interviews (Czerni 2012), the artist's biography (Czerni 2018a), painting albums (Czerni 2006; Szczepaniak 2019), and catalogs of religious works (Czerni et al. 2019; Czerni and Curzydło 2015). Systematization of Nowosielski's output—still incomplete—allows for more detailed studies.

A significant part of the research concerns the painter's worldview and concept of art. These works are based on extensive source material—numerous texts and statements by Nowosielski himself. The aspects discussed include the problem of the artist's ideological formation (Czerni 2018b), theological perspective (Hajduczenia 2019; Kosmulska 2019; Paprocki 2019), or Gnostic–Manichean threads in his thought (Czerni 2019a; Poprzęcka 2019).

A separate stream of studies concerns the perception of Nowosielski as a continuator of the Byzantine tradition and the problem of the canonicity of his art (Janocha 2019; Tarkowski 2016).

Research devoted exclusively to the problems of the artist's monumental artworks is also being developed. They concern such detailed aspects as Nowosielski's abstract-figural "bilingualism" (Czerni 2021) or the painting techniques and materials he utilized (Kapka 2017, 2018).

It is also worth mentioning the studies of contemporary Orthodox Church art, e.g., works on architecture (Manic et al. 2015) or the role of color in icons (Justiniano 2013). These and similar works unfortunately completely ignore the work of Jerzy Nowosielski.

Summarizing the state of research, it should be stated that the thematic range is relatively large. There are still no works that combine theoretical problems with a more detailed analysis of individual works, which would allow for the formulation of more probable conclusions. It should also be pointed out = that some of the cited publications were only published in Polish, which makes them difficult to access for international readers.

2. Characteristics of the Art of Jerzy Nowosielski

2.1. Short Biography of the Artist

Jerzy Nowosielski (Figure 1) was born in Kraków; he was the son of a Ruthenian father and a Polish mother with Austrian roots. He started his artistic education during the German occupation, in 1940–1942 at the State School of Artistic Crafts in Krakow (Kunstgewerbeschule). In the years 1942–1943, as a novice, he was in the Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Uniów near Lviv belonging to the Greek Catholic Studite Order. Soon after, he left the monastery for health reasons. After the war, he completed his education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow and joined the reactivated Krakow Group, one of the most important avant-garde artistic formations in Poland. During the period of socialist realism imposed by the communist government, he temporarily withdrew from official artistic life and worked as a scenographer at the Łódź Puppet Theater. He represented Poland at the Venice Biennale in 1956. At the end of the 1950s, after a decade of declared atheism, he joined the Orthodox Church. He co-founded the reactivated Krakow Group. In 1962, he took the chair at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. He remained active as an artist until the end of the 1990s and left behind a rich and diverse artistic legacy. The main themes of Nowosielski's work included: geometric abstractions, nudes, landscapes, still life, and architectural fantasies. Along with secular painting, he dealt with religious art: icons, polychrome, and church architecture (Czerni 2018a). Jerzy Nowosielski was an artist with broad intellectual horizons and an exceptional level of artistic awareness, which is why it is difficult to indicate all of the stimuli that shaped his painting style. His development was undoubtedly influenced by the Krakow avant-garde milieu and its prominent members, such as Tadeusz Kantor, Maria Jarema, Jonasz Stern, or Tadeusz Brzozowski. He was inspired by, first of all, old icon painting, as well as works by Utrillo and Modigliani, naive painters, e.g., Nikofor Krynicki, cubism, constructivism and surrealism, and even the painting by Francis Bacon—somehow defining himself in opposition to him. As a painter

who situated himself on the border between east and west, he also admired the figure and art of El Greco.

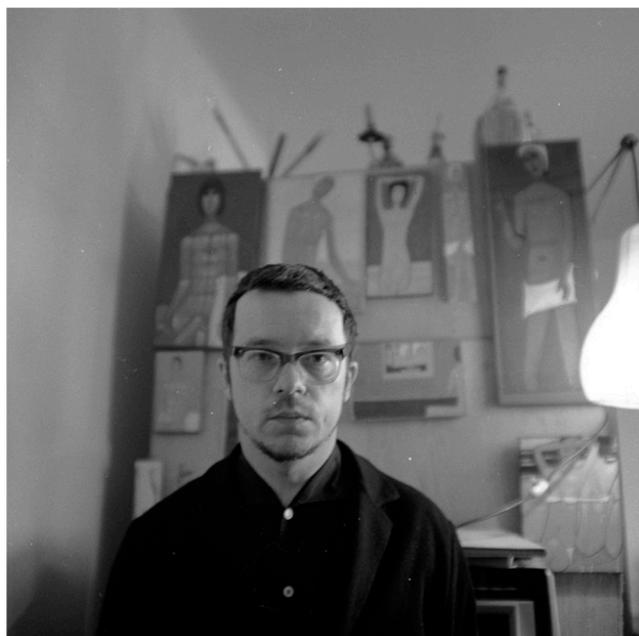


Figure 1. Jerzy Nowosielski in 1966. Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo by Eustachy Kossakowski. Reproduced with permission.

2.2. Artistic Attitude—Art as a Tool of Transformation

Nowosielski's aesthetic, philosophical, and religious reflection is too extensive to be presented here systematically. However, the artist's views on the nature of art are crucial for the considerations below.

For Nowosielski, "art, all art, is sacred in some way. By nature, it belongs to the domain of the sacred" (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 159–66). Sacredness here means anticipating a certain spiritual reality and externalizing the artist's *private theology*. This description concerned—which should be emphasized—only authentic art, i.e., art created, in accordance with the words of Kandinsky, out of *inner necessity* (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 95–101). In Nowosielski's statements, the category of *empirical reality* often appeared, usually associated negatively—with confinement, inanity, suffering, and evil (Paprocki 2019). This recurring theme of throwing a man into a hostile world was a Manichean trait of the artist's beliefs. Nowosielski considered art a form of therapy that allows us to perceive another reality: "a method by which we discover, formulate and convey secrets otherwise inaccessible to consciousness" (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 95–101).

The first decade after World War II was a key period in shaping the artist's worldview. As a result of the overwhelming experiences of the war, Nowosielski lost the religious faith he had taken from his family home. As he himself wrote: "I was a perfect atheist. So I didn't believe in anything. Nothing but matter. Nothing beyond empirical experience" (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 424–27). The 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s were a time of internal struggle for the young artist. Pictures and drawings from this period are often dark, full of scenes of physical and mental violence, even of a sadomasochistic basis (Figure 2). Overwhelmed by the topics of sexuality and suffering that haunted him, Nowosielski was looking for an artistic escape. At the end of the 1940s, he discovered geometric abstraction for his painting, which he soon began to attribute spiritual content to:

"at one point I felt weary and terrified of the limitations and gravity, so to speak, downwards, towards the abyss, towards passing, towards nothingness. Therefore, with hope, I embraced the new possibility of free painting creation. It gave me a way of spiritual liberation, transition to the world of beings that

existed more slowly, more independently, not aging, and therefore perhaps not subject to the accursed law of passing and death” (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 62–70).



Figure 2. Jerzy Nowosielski, Execution, 1949, oil on canvas. National Museum in Krakow. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission.

From then on, the characteristic “triangular” abstractions, intended to present the world of angelic *subtle beings*, were a constant theme of Nowosielski’s paintings (Figure 3). The need to transcend the visible reality, and to open it to a *new dimension*, was reminiscent of the search by the pioneers of abstract art, such as Kazimir Malevich (Henderson 2018).



Figure 3. Jerzy Nowosielski, Big triangles, 1958, oil on canvas. National Museum in Warsaw. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission.

Nowosielski did not abandon figuration, however. Struggling with the recurring Manichean obsessions, the artist tried to transform his perception of empirical reality, “lifting it” to a spiritual level: “anticipating the resurrected reality, that is, a reality that exists more firmly, more confidently than the reality with which we have contact in our physical, biological experience.” (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 5–14). Searching for a suitable painting formula, he used the plastic language of the Ruthenian–Byzantine icon known from his youth. This inspiration allowed him to create an original painting style in which abstraction and figuration are combined into one vision. Having abandoned verism, the painter simplified the modeling, applied perspective distortions, and sharpened the colors. Characters, cities, and landscapes in his works became unreal, devoid of individual features, idealized and frozen in absolute peace. They were no longer representations of people and objects, but objects–symbols existing in a different, timeless sacred space (Figure 4). As the artist himself said: “Painting pictures is preparing a space in which we will have to live after death, it is building a dwelling for ourselves.” (Maciuszkiewicz 2018). Understanding Nowosielski’s work as a spatial phenomenon is key to capturing the essence of his activities in the field of architecture.

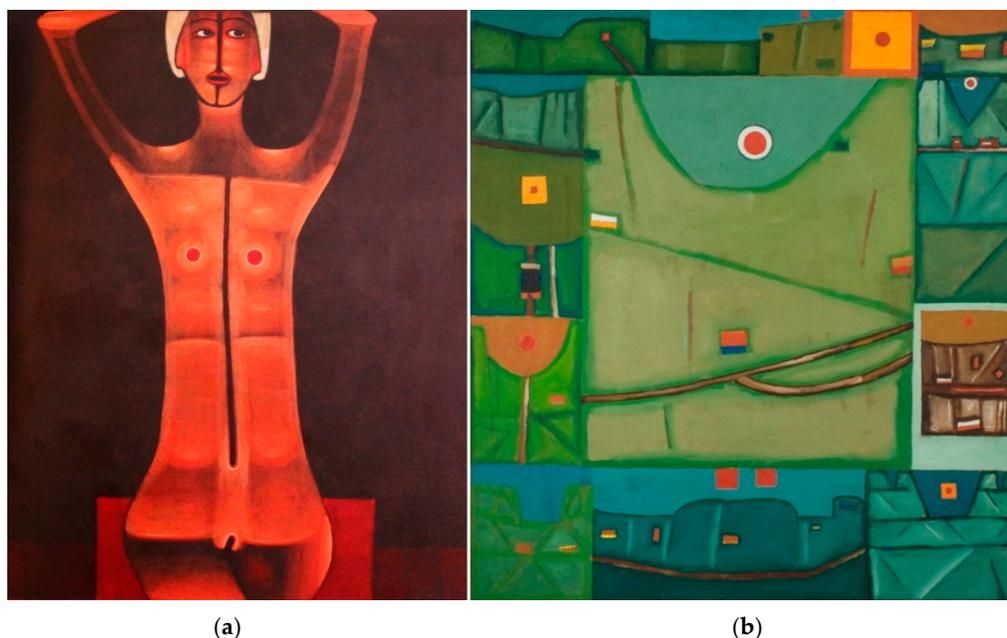


Figure 4. Jerzy Nowosielski: (a) nude in a bonnet, 1976, oil on canvas. National Museum in Wrocław. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission. (b) Sunrise in the Bieszczady Mountains, 1963, oil on canvas. Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission.

2.3. Attitude towards the Canon

Jerzy Nowosielski was brought up in the tradition of the Eastern Church, and during the war in the novitiate of the Studite Order, he also learned the canonical principles of “writing” icons. However, it was the modern painting that was the artist’s first youthful fascination. The rediscovery of the icon by Nowosielski took place through the prism of the modernist achievements, and above all: the dynamic perspective in the works of Cézanne and in cubism, the autonomy of form and color in abstractionism, and the surrealist imperative of seeking inner truth. For the Krakow artist, iconography was not a dead convention or what Patriarch Athenagoras called “pious archaeology” (Nowosielski 2013, p. 165). The icon appeared to him as a current language, or even a synthesis of the problems of modern painting: “Everything that all modern art gives in analytical fragments, was accomplished in the heyday of Byzantine painting in synthetic unity.” (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 26–37).

In the Orthodox sense, an icon is a reality belonging to the entire church and communicative to all believers. The iconographic canon is a deposit of spiritual content that should be guarded no less than dogmas expressed in the language of theology (Hart 2011, p. 48). Nowosielski shared this belief. In his works intended for the liturgy, he operated within traditional composition patterns. The icons of the Krakow artist almost always found their prototypes in old paintings, but were not copies of them.

The first difference was the narrative reduction. Nowosielski removed details, secondary props, ornaments, and decorations, simplified the drawing, bringing out the very essence of the canonical representation. The second difference was the expansion of the color range. The artist used pure, saturated colors, located almost on the circumference of the color circle, and enhanced the contrasts of complementary colors (Figure 5). These modifications led to the weakening of narrative values and a stronger influence of pure plastic matter—form and color (Czerni 2021).

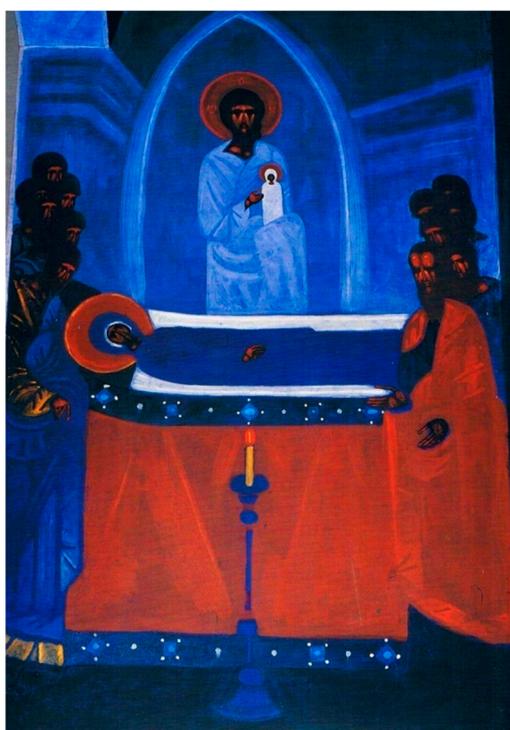


Figure 5. Jerzy Nowosielski, Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Polychrome of the Greek Catholic church in Lourdes, France, 1984. Photography by the author.

Similar comments apply to the shaping of religious interiors. Nowosielski's spaces differed from typical Eastern rite churches, rich in narration and combining different, not always coherent means of expression. Nowosielski strived for a clear, unambiguous, and total artistic composition. The iconographic program of his works was simplified and subordinated to the overall color concept. The visual aspect dominated over the narrative aspect. Art historian and Catholic bishop Michał Janocha even pointed to a certain "over-aestheticization" of Nowosielski's church interior (Talarowski and Janocha 2018).

A significant difference concerned the application of gilding. In the Byzantine tradition, gold has a primary symbolic meaning. As early as in the 6th century, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite considered gold as the superior color, being a reflection of heaven and a sign of God himself (Dionysius the Areopagite 1897, pp. 62–63). The outstanding Russian theologian Pavel Florensky wrote: "Look into the sky, (. . .) it is a light-bearingness, a saturation of space by light, a depth of light that can be expressed only in gold—and which would become flat, muddy, and opaque were paint to be used to express it." (Florensky 1996, pp. 125–26). Eugene Troubetzkoy, one of the main repre-

representatives of the theology of the icon, wrote in his work *Theology in color* that “Gold is the color of the sun, the only color of the Divine world; all the other colors are peripheral.” (Trubetskoy 1973, pp. 47–48). Nowosielski knew these and similar texts perfectly well, but he consciously gave up the use of gold. He made an exception only once—for compositional reasons—he completed the icons in the 19th-century Krakow iconostasis, in which the preserved representations already had golden halos (Czerni and Curzydło 2015, p. 141). Contrary to Troubetzkoy, Nowosielski did not consider gold to be a color, and, as he claimed, “all painting is created with the use of colors” (Czerni 2012, p. 372). He obtained the effect of light using painting methods—color combinations, the texture of color spots, and their intensity.

The artist did not shy away from contemporary and ‘non-canonical’ techniques and materials, such as synthetic dyes and acrylic binders (Kapka 2018). Thus, he did not follow the technical guidelines of old textbooks, such as *Hermeneia* (Dionysius of Fournia 1974), which would be another manifestation of “pious archeology” for him.

Nowosielski’s distraction with the Orthodox Church convention resulted in accusations of non-canonicity. There was often a barrier of incomprehension between the artist and the majority of his art recipients, resulting from the difference in artistic awareness and the notion of canon. The Orthodox and Greek Catholic faithful, often displaced from the eastern territories of Poland (see Section 2.5), considered canonical what they knew from their youth (Czerni 2018a, pp. 304–9), i.e., most often naturalistic, pseudo-Renaissance icons, and multi-story gilded iconostases. Nowosielski’s style was closer to the medieval Russian icon, e.g., the Novgorod school, and the iconostases he designed—low and openwork—resembled early Christian forms.

Another novelty introduced by Nowosielski was the element of darkness in sacred paintings. Nowosielski was accused of not having the “light of Byzantium”, so typical of conventional Orthodox icons. The tendency to dark colors can also be associated with Nowosielski’s theological pessimism, his deep experience of evil and doubt bordering on Manichaeism (Czerni 2019a). However, a different interpretation can be proposed. The traditional method of writing a saint’s icon is to put a dark layer of proplasma on the face, then gradually add lights to “reveal” the image. Nowosielski’s saints emerge incompletely, leaving the truth of faith to be discovered by oneself. As he himself said: “I believed that in art one should move back a little into a certain unknown, into a certain vagueness, at least for a while” (Czerni 2012, p. 374). Nowosielski did not deny the death of God, which took place in contemporary consciousness. The darkness, the twilight of disbelief, was the starting point for him, which had to be transcended. In this way, Nowosielski, as Irina Jazykowa accurately points out, overcame Malevich’s “Black Square”, perceived as “a naked, unframed icon of his time” (Tarkowski 2016, p. 35).

Nowosielski’s designs were often rejected by the commissioners, the iconostases were dismantled, and the polychromes were repainted. The artist, however, was known for not succumbing to pressure in artistic matters (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 300–10). As a spiritual student of Andre Breton, he adhered to the principle of rejecting external conventions and discovering the unconscious (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 140–50). He interpreted the surrealists’ demands through his faith: the inner truth of the artist was to be God’s inspiration. He treated concessions to a dead convention and popular tastes as false, “a lie in the shape of obsolete forms” (Nowosielski 2013, p. 13).

2.4. Relations between Art and Religion

The philosophical reflection of Jerzy Nowosielski is mostly concerned about relationship of religion, liturgy, and art. As already mentioned, for Nowosielski, every authentic art is in a certain sense religious. Similarly, he believed that art was an inherent (not contingent) component of religion. This unbreakable bond is expressed in the liturgy, in public worship. Nowosielski was aware of the special importance of the liturgy in Eastern churches: “Orthodoxy is not such a coherent doctrinal system as Catholicism seems to be today. It manifests itself and crystallizes as a whole not in the realm of doctrine,

but in the realm of worship. Hence, its most commonly used name. Its etymological interpretation is shallow and random: as fidelity to the articles of faith. Rather, it is a matter of a “righteous”, “correct” display of glory [gr. *doxa*] of God, not to work out a flawless doctrine.” Moreover, in another place: “For Orthodoxy, the liturgy is the very core of this confession and its *raison d’être*.” in: (Czerni 2012).

Christina M. Gschwandtner, analyzing the function of the Eastern liturgy, distinguishes two basic concepts, already present in the teachings of the Church Fathers: liturgy as *mimesis* “helping us remember and celebrate Christ’s salvific action”, and liturgy as *metamorphosis*—“meant to unite and transform the whole cosmos; an eschatological anticipation of what will be” (Gschwandtner 2017). Jerzy Nowosielski definitely leaned towards the latter vision: “For us, experiencing this mystery of the Eucharist is not only a memory, but also an anticipation of the future feast in the Kingdom of God” (Nowosielski 2013, p. 105).

In the concept of *metamorphosis*, the ordinary empirical reality is elevated to a supernatural level, e.g., the daily activity of eating and drinking becomes the sacrament of the Eucharist in which God himself is present. For Nowosielski, the essence of the liturgy is to transform the world into a supernatural reality in the consciousness. Incidentally, it was the iconographic canon Transfiguration that was often taken up by Nowosielski as a painting topic. He called it “a vision of overcoming tragedy”—the drama of existence imprisoned in an empirical reality. (Nowosielski 2013, p. 386).

In the liturgy, the supernatural world is to be visualized “here and now”, and space and time are to acquire completely new properties. As Nowosielski writes, “It is sacred time, sacred space-time, and as such it is an ever-current event. It takes place in the reality of a supernatural being, but at the same time it is realized in the depths of our consciousness and subconsciousness (. . .), both as individuals and as collective” (Nowosielski 2013, p. 182). There is no passing away in such a space, but everything is final. That is why Nowosielski calls his art “eschatological realism”—as an attempt to access those final issues directly.

This sanctification of reality originates in the incarnation of Christ, the archetypal encounter between God and creation, and the connection of empirical and supersensory reality. This is also the deepest function of the liturgy and, at the same time, of religious art, the encounter with Christ. For Nowosielski, the function of art is to open the door of perception and to take off the veil of the senses. Art is not a background for a mystical experience, but its condition, because it is artistic forms that transform everyday reality into a sacred space in our consciousness. These forms also make it possible to live the faith in a community of the Church, because, thanks to art, the experience of the sacred is intersubjective. Art in the liturgy is for Nowosielski “art best used, art most in its place, art in its full rights, in its true homeland” (Nowosielski 2013, p. 311). Such an important role of art sets high demands on it. Since good art leads to a direct encounter with God, bad art must lead us astray spiritually. The hypocrisy of art leads to the hypocrisy of the soul; hence, Nowosielski’s emphasis on authenticity and “internal necessity”, as well as condemnation of religious kitsch.

According to Nowosielski, in the modern age, the bond of art and religion has been weakened. Post-Renaissance art turned to empirical reality; thus, its initiatory (mystagogical) role disappeared. In the religion of the West, paintings, polychromes, etc., have become accessories, or decorations rather than essential elements for a mystical experience. Nowosielski notes, “The very distinction between religious and aesthetic experiences is a fairly recent date in the consciousness of nations. Old Testament prophets were the authors of literary and poetic works of the highest artistic rank; the authors of Greek tragedies conveyed metaphysical values. Participating in a theatrical performance had the character of experiencing a mystery” (Nowosielski 2013, p. 105). Nowosielski’s ambition was to re-establish the old bond. That is why he particularly studied the problem of the influence of the painting and its experience as a process of initiation. At this point, it is worth quoting a fragment of one of the most important theoretical essays by Nowosielski, entitled “Between the Kaaba and the Parteneon”:

“The mystagogical action of the icon takes place only in the layer of painting. Painting in the broadest sense of the word, that is, representing a specific subject and object, but only in combination with other aspects of the impact of the art. The moment we are no longer able to understand and receive these sacred images, we immediately descend to the level of anecdote, to the level of *biblia pauperum*. Of course, as a result of this there will be no more mystagogical message or initiation into the Gospel of the Kingdom, and it will simply be an auxiliary and essentially unimportant addition to evangelization” (Nowosielski 2013, p. 173).

What are these “other aspects” that are the conditions for the proper reception of painting, together with the representational function? Nowosielski distinguished two basic layers in a painting: the first is “a set of features that make up a painting illusion”—that is, a relation to an object existing in nature, and the second—“an internal abstract principle”. As Nowosielski states, abstraction is an element of every painting, while it gained autonomy, for example, in the art of Islam and in the abstractionism of the 20th century. Referring to his youthful discoveries in the painting of “subtle beings”, Nowosielski wrote: “The abstract painting created the possibility of the emergence of completely unique qualities (. . .) Whoever has any sensitivity to the values of the ‘supermaterial’ order, feels that abstract art creates opportunities for contact with spiritual quantities.” (Nowosielski 2013, p. 175). This allows for a new interpretation of the theology of an icon. Christianity in the crisis of iconoclasm found itself between two great artistic currents—Islam with its spiritual ornamentation, and the Greco–Roman pagan heritage, with its naturalism and exuberant figuration—“between the Kaaba and the Parthenon.”

As Nowosielski wrote, the incarnation of Christ—who is himself an icon of God the Father—and the person of Theotokos—the icon of the Holy Spirit—were for St. John Damascus an argument to restore the cult of images. The icon, however, is not a simple return to Hellenic naturalism, but a new synthesis. In the icon, the ineffable reality permeates the reality of creation. This is possible through a special visual language: “In the icon, these two elements meet on a plane in the same proportions and in the same, maximum, so to speak, concentration. Here, apart from the incredibly strong illusion of the object, it cannot be said that abstraction exists internally, that it is the “other bottom” of the painting. Its presence is as obvious and evident as the presence of the illusion of the object.” (Nowosielski 2013, p. 138). The key role of the abstract layer, especially color, will be further investigated in the section devoted to the “alchemy of color”.

2.5. Nowosielski and Architecture

Monumental projects are—apart from easel painting—an important part of Nowosielski’s creative achievements. The artist gained his first experience in this field back in 1943, when, as a novice of the Studite Lavra, he worked on the frescoes of the church in Bolekhiv—presently in Ukraine (Czerni 2018a, p. 85). The post-war period brought a huge demand in Poland for restoration works on damaged sacred buildings. The situation of the Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic rite was special. After the Polish borders were shifted to the west, the communist government forced the resettlement of people of Ukrainian origin to the western territories and to Warmia and Mazury. Since Catholics and Protestants previously predominated in the new territories, there were no churches suitable for the Eastern Rite.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Nowosielski started working with an experienced painter and restorer, Adam Stalony-Dobrzański. Together, they created polychromes of Orthodox churches in Gródek, Jelenia Góra, and Dojlidy. In 1954, Nowosielski completed his first independent commission at the church in Kętrzyn. Throughout his life, he made nearly 30 polychromes, dozens of iconostases, icons, and liturgical crosses. Two new churches were built according to his design (in Hajnówka and Biały Bór). He undertook commissions for the Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Roman Catholic churches, which, as he emphasized, resulted from the belief that art played an important role in the reconciliation of various Christian denominations. These projects are located all over Poland, as well as in France—

in the Greek Catholic church of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Lourdes, where there is a polychrome from 1984 (Czerni 2006, pp. 209–16). Many of Nowosielski's plans were not implemented, for example, the bold designs of the polychromes of the academic church in Lublin (Czerni 2015). Others were significantly changed without the author's consent, such as the interior design of the church in Hajnówka (Figure 6) (Czerni 2018a, pp. 304–5). Towards the end of his life, Nowosielski summed up bitterly: "I made church projects, albeit to a limited extent. The Church actually wasted my capabilities. After all, I realized only 10 percent of what I could do" (Czerni 2018a, p. 304).

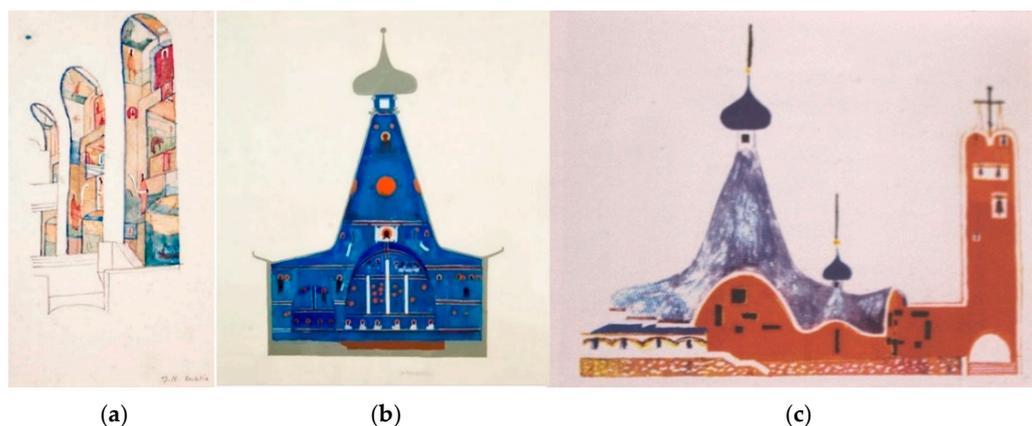


Figure 6. Jerzy Nowosielski: (a) conceptual sketch of the polychrome of the church at the Catholic University of Lublin, 1962. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission. (b) The original color scheme of the Orthodox church in Hajnówka, 1972—interior (c) facade. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission.

Jerzy Nowosielski throughout his life was keenly interested in architecture. He willingly drew existing and imaginary churches, transformed them in the spirit of abstraction, including architecture in the scenery of the "sacred space" in his paintings (Figure 7a). He was a connoisseur of early Christian, Byzantine, and old Russian architecture (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 91–97). Nowosielski was also familiar with modern architecture. In the late 1950s, he participated in the Artistic and Research Workshop (ZAB) at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and took part in experimental conceptual projects of new religious architecture in the team of Jerzy Sołtan, a close associate of Le Corbusier (Czerni 2018a, p. 191). It is not difficult to see a trace of these experiences in Nowosielski's later architectural concepts. (Figure 7b). For instance, the "flowing" forms of the church in Hajnówka and the characteristic free arrangement of small openings in the gable walls resemble to some extent the forms of the Corbusier's Ronchamp chapel.

Of course, Jerzy Nowosielski cannot be considered a professional architect. He had no formal architectural education or practice in designing buildings. There is also no evidence that he actively followed contemporary architectural trends. Nevertheless, his works were appreciated by professionals. Stanisław Niemczyk, an outstanding Polish postmodern architect, designer of the church in Tychy said: "Nowosielski is the only painter who can deal with space. And on every scale. If someone shows me who can do it today, I would like to meet him. This is the truth about Nowosielski. This is a fresco painter. It will be very difficult to find artists who can create sacrum on such a scale." (Czerni 2018a, p. 315).

Nowosielski's approach to architecture is inseparably connected with his painting and seeing space in a painterly way. It was influenced by Cezanne, Utrillo, and icon painting, in which autonomous form and color are more important than the laws of classical perspective and the illusion of three dimensions. Architecture is seen as a direct visual impression rather than as a three-dimensional, abstract model used by the architectural imagination. It is shown by post-war urban landscapes, scenographies from the Łódź period, as well as studies of modern churches drawn only for oneself. Their apparent

naivety does not result from inability, but rather from the unity of perception of painting and architectural issues (Figure 8).

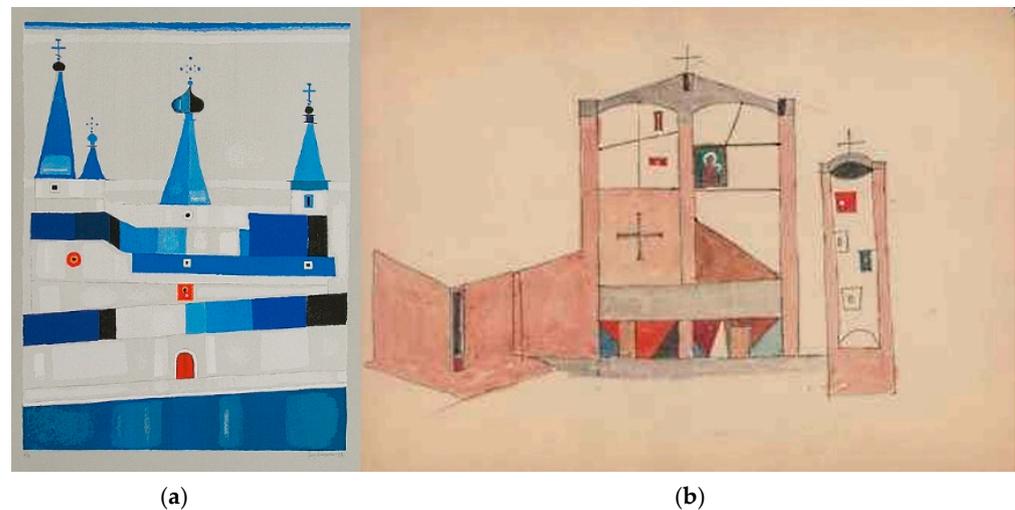


Figure 7. Jerzy Nowosielski: (a) “Church”, 1997 color serigraphy. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission. (b) Project of the church in Sochaczew. Color scheme of the facade, 1958. Museum of Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw. Reproduced with permission.

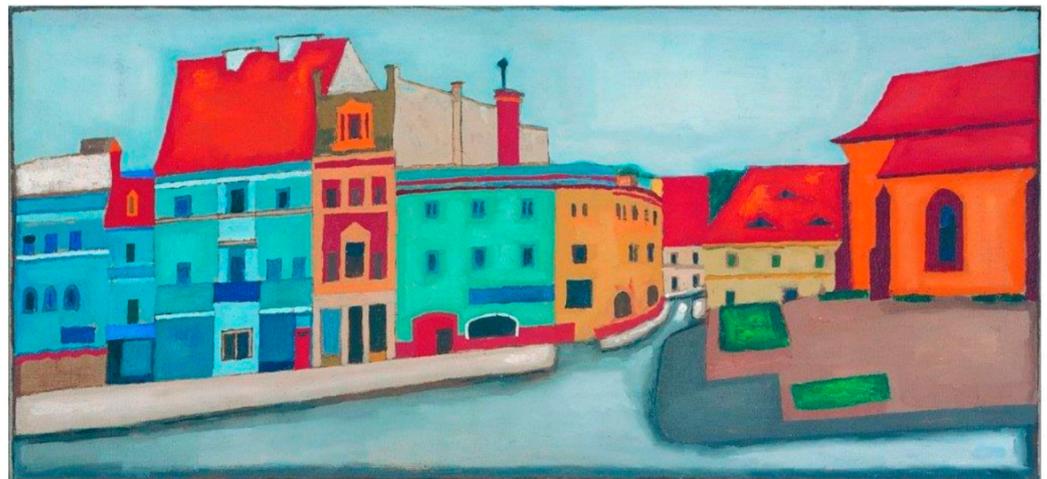


Figure 8. Jerzy Nowosielski: City landscape, 1956. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission.

The ahistorical nature of architectural vision is also characteristic of Nowosielski’s work. In sketches of sacred architecture from the 1950s, tradition is intertwined with modernity in an unhindered way (Figure 9). Axial symmetry is combined with asymmetry and traditional forms with abstract minimalism. Nowosielski searched for the essence of liturgical space, and extracted its archetype. He rejected any style identification and attempted to make a synthesis of tradition and modernity. This approach, developed in the first decade after World War II, seems to be a completely original and self-generated phenomenon. Aldo Rossi’s theoretical work and the achievements of the La Tendenza group, to which similar ideas can be attributed, appeared many years later. Unfortunately, Nowosielski did not have the opportunity to develop these ideas. It was only at the end of his activity that he was able to implement his approach in the church in Bialy Bor.

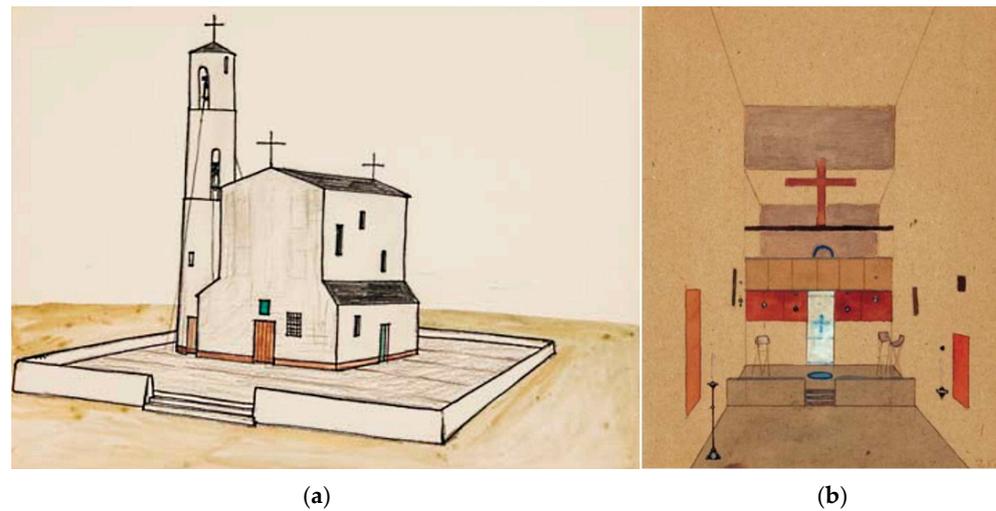


Figure 9. Jerzy Nowosielski: (a,b) sketches of imaginary churches from 1950. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission.

3. Analysis of the Selected Projects

Three objects in which Jerzy Nowosielski had the greatest freedom to implement his artistic vision have been analyzed in detail. These are the Roman Catholic Church of Divine Providence in Wesola near Warsaw, the Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Spirit in Tychy, and the Greek Catholic church of Nativity of the Holy Mother of God in Biały Bór. All three objects are listed in the Registry of Cultural Property in Poland and are legally protected due to their special artistic value. Jerzy Nowosielski's realizations in the space of Gothic churches will also be discussed.

3.1. Church in Wesola

The church in Wesola was erected in the years 1937–1939 in the neo-Romanesque style according to the design of the architect Luigi Malgherini. It is a small church with one nave covered with a flat-coffered ceiling and closed with a semi-circular apse. The interior design, designed by Jerzy Nowosielski, was carried out in the years 1975–1979. Nowosielski designed a new layout of the chancel, the polychrome of the apse, vestibule and ceiling, the altar cross, the floor, chandeliers, stained glass windows and the Stations of the Cross. The apse depicts the Mother of God in the orans posture, and below a number of saints appearing in the prayer of the Roman Canon (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Roman Catholic Church in Wesola: (a) overall view of the interior. Photography by Iwona Bal. (b) stained glass window. Photography by the author.

The artistic expression of the interior consists of figural representations and a number of abstract motifs. The floor and the stained glass windows were designed as geometric patterns based on a square theme. The freely dimensioned and arranged Stations of the Cross themselves make up an abstract composition on the sidewalls.

The composition of the apse refers to Byzantine models. The direct inspiration could have been the Church of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello on the Venetian Lagoon, built in the 7th century, to which Nowosielski referred to several times in his texts (Nowosielski 2013, p. 185). The arrangement of the icons in the apse (Theotokos above the ranks of saints) could be modeled on Torcello.

Warm colors dominate in the apse. The apse's vault was painted in ochre yellow, which was probably a reference to the traditional golden background in the Byzantine apses lined with mosaics. The walls of the apse are covered with horizontal stripes darkening downwards in red ochre and umber. The Theotokos robe is a purple-brown color obtained with the hematite caput mortuum pigment, while the saints' robes are dominated by whitened pink. The colors are bright, but not uniformly applied on large surfaces. The artist used a wash technique, tapping or scraping the applied paint. These effects were also used by Nowosielski in other monumental projects (Kapka 2018), as well as in easel painting, but rarely to the same intensity as in Wesola. It was, as you might guess, another deliberate reference to early Christian architecture. The artist intended by means of painting to obtain the effect of color vibration present in Byzantine mosaics.

The small narthex of the church was filled with biblical scenes and kept in a cool, dark tone. Dark blue and grey dominate. The nave is a transition zone in which tonal elements of both zones coexist. The dominant features here are the white walls, hematite ceiling with elements of yellow, and the white, red, and hematite floor. The colors of the Stations of the Cross are muffled, almost achromatic, or "gloomy" in the words of the painter himself. The stained glass windows create contrasting, warm, and cold color combinations. The colors of individual elements are therefore presented in a clear scheme, consisting in contrasting opposite spaces—the narthex, which, according to the artist's assumptions, expresses the "Advent character of the Old Testament" and the presbytery with an "evangelical atmosphere" (Nowosielski 1975). The contrasts of the complementary colors therefore have a strictly defined symbolic dimension (Figure 11).

The church in Wesola is the only Catholic church in which Nowosielski had full control over the layout of the presbytery. The layout to the liturgical practice after the Second Vatican Council. The altar is moved forward to allow the celebration of the Mass *Versus populum*. The tabernacle was placed centrally on the back wall of the apse, and on its sides, there are benches for liturgical service. The most characteristic, however, is the way of connecting the chancel and the nave, which is based on ancient Christian traditions. It is a row of stone columns connected with an architrave, with the large crucifix above. The semicircular ambo and the low wall form the lower part of the partition. These elements refer to the *templon* in late antiquity and Middle Ages. The *templon* can be considered an early form of today's iconostasis from the Eastern churches. The use of this form, like the Roman Canon in iconography, is a reference to the common Catholic–Orthodox heritage of the first millennium of Christianity. Nowosielski saw the post-conciliar reform as an opportunity for elements of Eastern Rite art to penetrate the West. In his own words: "the interpenetration of two liturgical traditions in the present period of a certain lack of a well-developed and established aesthetics of the Western rite (. . .) would give an opportunity to enrich the still poor and aesthetically indefinite reformed Western liturgy" (Nowosielski 2013, p. 226).

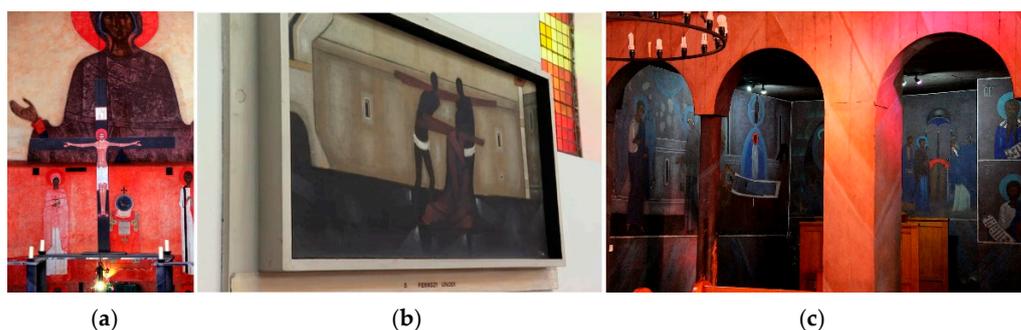


Figure 11. Roman Catholic Church in Wesola: (a) detail of the presbytery; (b) Stations of the Cross; (c) view from the nave into the narthex. Photography by Iwona Bal. Reproduced with permission.

3.2. Church in Tychy

The polychrome in Tychy (1983–1986) is one of Nowosielski's most spectacular projects (Figure 12a). The modern church of The Holy Spirit was built in the years 1978–1982 according to the design of Stanisław Niemczyk, in the form of an asymmetric pyramid, the roof of which rests on four trapezoidal reinforced concrete frames. The roof slope areas between the structural frames were lined with wooden paneling, which is the substrate for the polychrome. Nowosielski developed a rich iconographic program related to the name of the church, presenting, in the artist's words, "Cosmic Pneumatophania, or the activities of the Third Divine Person in the entire historical area of the Economy of Salvation" (Nowosielski et al. 2003, p. 641). The central place above the altar wall is occupied by the figure of Mary Theotokos in the orans posture. The side areas are filled with great scenes of the Crucifixion and the Transfiguration. "I fill the remaining fields of the huge plane of the truncated pyramid with the great, medium and small figures of the God's saints in all their diversity and individual uniqueness" (Nowosielski et al. 2003, p. 641).



Figure 12. Catholic church in Tychy. (a) View of the interior. Photography by the author. (b) Jerzy Nowosielski, Variants of the polychrome, 1983. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission.

The color of the interior of the church in Tychy was dominated by the color of the base of the polychrome. In the early variants of the project, Nowosielski planned to cover them with his characteristic "angelic" pattern of triangular abstraction (Figure 12b). Ultimately, however, he gave up this idea, appreciating the visual qualities of natural wood: "I intend to respect the delicate grid of the wooden structure, not to violate its clearly outlined abstract divisions, on the contrary, to locate figural paintings in close connection with the already existing plastic structure of large planes of raw wood." (Nowosielski et al. 2003, p. 641). The use of the natural texture of the material as a plastic value is known, for example, from the late work of Le Corbusier and his concept of "natural

polychrome” (de Heer 2013, pp. 188–89), which Nowosielski could have known thanks to cooperation with Jerzy Sołtan.

The color range of the paintings was significantly limited—it consisted mainly of primary colors (cinnabar, two values of blue and yellow), secondary colors (orange and, occasionally, green), as well as dark brown, white, and black. The colors are bright and pure; there are practically no tonal gradations, except for the very limited modeling of the robes or hair of the saints.

The dominant tone of the substrate determines the function of each color spot. Some elements of icons are assimilated by this dominant, while others are very strongly contrasted with it. Therefore, for example, the elements like the red of Mary’s halo, the circular flames of the Holy Spirit or the interior of the fiery furnace of the Three Youths seem to merge with the warm color of the background, giving the entire composition a “fiery” expression, enhancing its theological significance. On the other hand, the dark hematite robe of Theotokos, crosses in the Golgotha scene, black cartouches with inscriptions, and above all, dark brown complexions of saints strongly stand out against the light background (Figure 13b). This specific pictography of Nowosielski brings to mind the hieroglyphic interiors of Egyptian tombs. Given the form of the pyramid and Nowosielski’s interest in ancient Egyptian art, it could have been a deliberate reference. The flame-earth tone is broken by sparingly dosed cool accents—a blue stripe with the image of the Dove descending on Theotokos, halos of “rank” saints, and especially the enormous mandorla of Christ in the scene of the Transfiguration on the sidewall (Figure 13a). Moreover, the stains of white—scrolls of writing, some garments, or the Veil of Veronica in the central lantern—seem cool in combination with the warm color of the ground. Together with the blues, they are a counterbalance to the hot, flaming, and earthy tone of the whole.

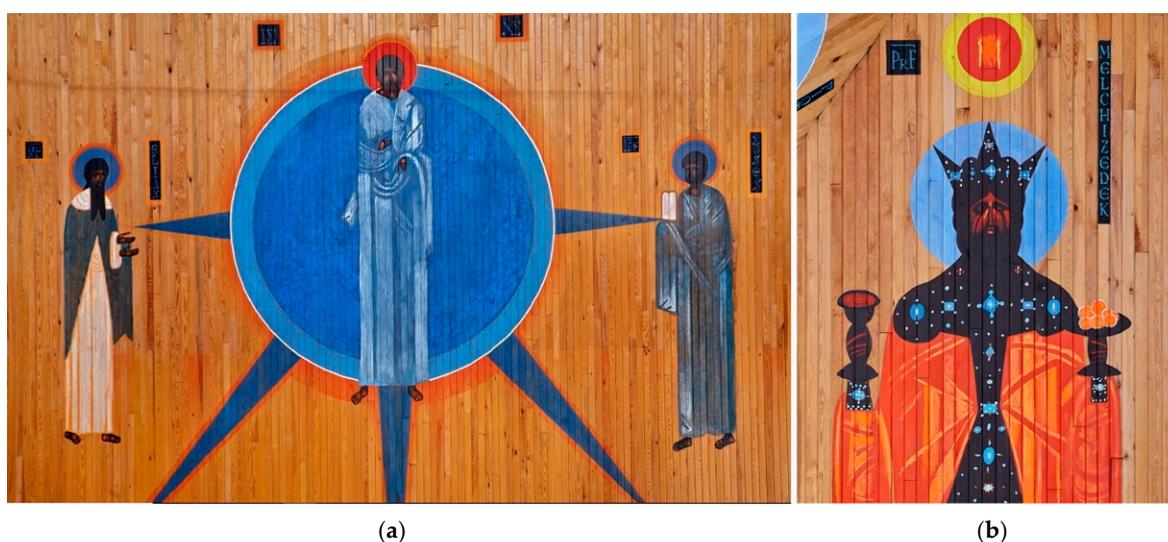


Figure 13. Church in Tychy—details of the polychromy: (a) Transfiguration; (b) Melchizedek. Photography by the author. Reproduced with permission.

The function of the polychrome in Tychy goes beyond the usual religious narrative. It can be read as a gigantic abstract—or even suprematist—composition affecting the viewer through geometric forms and color. Flames, halos, mandorlas, and other elements create a game of color spots with its own rhythms and climaxes. These elements function separately from individual images and make up a monumental whole.

3.3. Greek Catholic Church in Biały Bór

The Greek Catholic Church in Biały Bór in West Pomerania is the only structure, built entirely according to the guidelines of Jerzy Nowosielski. The artist was the author of the architectural concept, polychrome, and interior design. The technical design was prepared

by the architect Bohdan Kotarba. The church was established in 1992–1997 on the initiative of the local Greek Catholic community (Czerni 2019b).

The church is a small, oriented, freestanding three-nave basilica with an asymmetrical two-tower west facade. It can accommodate about 400 people. During larger holidays, for which the faithful come from far away, services are held outside, and the facade acts as an iconostasis.

On the semi-circular gables of the façade, there are images of archangels, and in the outer vestibule, like in the internal iconostasis, images of Christ and Mary. The center of the facade is accentuated with the Mandylion.

The white massif of the facade shining in the open landscape of the West Pomeranian village contrasts with the catacomb-like interior of the church. It is dark and illuminated by small square windows in the clerestory and in the walls of the aisles. It is of symbolic significance: the outer function of the Church as the evangelical *light of the world* corresponds to her inner mystical reality.

The spatial arrangement of the interior was inspired by the late antique patterns. The main space is a narrow and high main nave, covered with a flat ceiling with a small dome. The nave, preceded by a vestibule, is framed with low aisles and separated from the chancel by an openwork iconostasis. The nave floor is lowered in relation to the other parts of the temple and fenced off with massive balustrades, which may be a reference to baptismal basins in early Christian baptisms. This arrangement can also be read as a reminiscence of the ancient theatre—the aisles as theatron, the nave as the orchestra, the space in front of the iconostasis as a skene, and the iconostasis itself as a proskenion (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Greek Catholic church in Biały Bór. (a) View of the façade. Photography by Arek Łuszczczyk. (b) Jerzy Nowosielski, Early design sketch of the façade. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission.

The interior colors were arranged according to a simple and extremely clear scheme (Figure 15). The dominant set of colors is a deep, malachite green covering the walls and ceiling, and the blackness of columns, the edges of the steps and railings. These colors create an impression of stillness and weight, building a mood of solemnity. This catacomb-like character of the interior was broken by the bright vermillion of the main liturgical elements: the three doors of the iconostasis, the central tetrapod, and the altar in the depths of the presbytery. Against the background of dark walls, these elements seem to burn with a red flame, “coming out” towards the viewer and giving the interior dynamics. The composition is complemented by white accents appearing in the dome, window jambs, and in the horizontal strip of the balustrade.

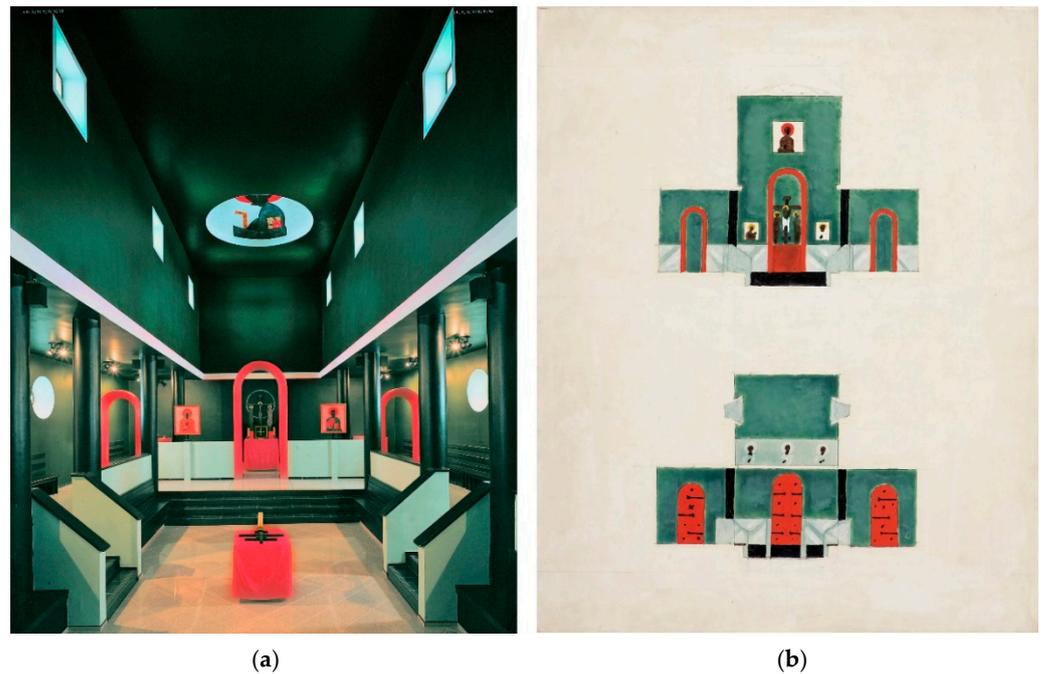


Figure 15. Church in Biały Bór. (a) Overall view of the interior. Photography by Wojciech Kryński. (b) Jerzy Nowosielski, color scheme of the interior. Photography by M. Gardulski/Galeria Starmach. Reproduced with permission.

The iconographic program of the interior has been kept to a minimum. There are only two icons in the iconostasis (the Mother of God in the Hodegetria type and Christ Pantocrator). The image of Pantocrator is also found in the dome. Behind the iconostasis and the altar, there is a scene of the Crucifixion. In the choir, above the narthex, images of St. Paraskeva, St. Mary Magdalene and St. Anastasia. As in the examples discussed earlier, the tone of individual figural representations is strictly subordinated to the colors of the entire interior. The images of Theotokos and Pantocrator in the iconostasis reproduce the overall color scheme, but in inverted proportions (Figure 16a). The colorful dominant of these paintings is defined by vermilion and Pompeian rose. Thanks to this, the icons, such as the altar and other liturgical elements, mark their importance in the interior. The carnations of Mary and Christ, on the other hand, are dark greenish, echoing the tones of the walls and columns. This also applies to the icon of Pantocrator in the dome (Figure 16b).

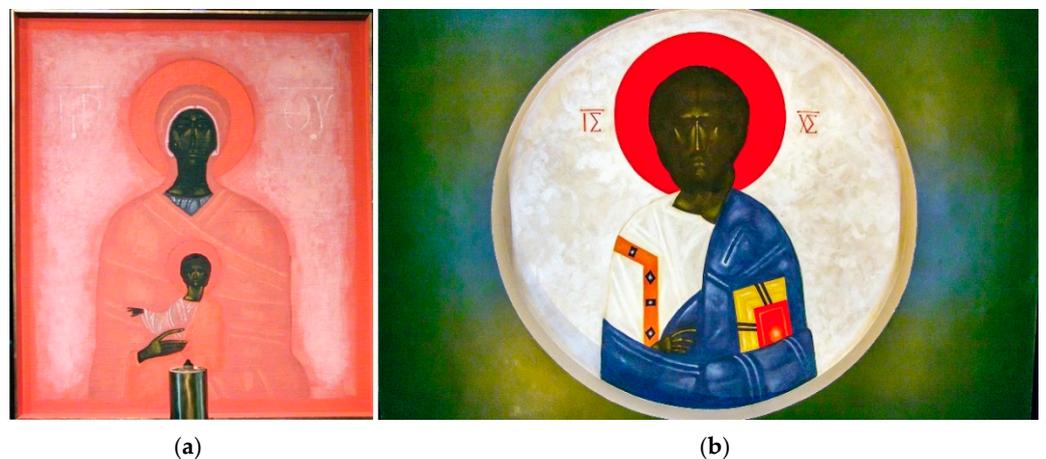


Figure 16. Jerzy Nowosielski, icons in the Church in Biały Bór: (a) Theotokos in the iconostasis. (b) Pantocrator in the dome. Reproduced with permission.

3.4. Nowosielski and the Gothic Architecture

An interesting theme in Nowosielski's work are the interior designs of Gothic churches. After World War II, several disused Protestant or Roman Catholic churches, including Gothic ones, were often arranged in Poland for the purposes of the Eastern Rite. Several of these arrangements were carried out by Nowosielski: three projects in Wrocław (Orthodox Cathedral, 1963–1969; Greek Catholic Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, 1984–1989; Greek Catholic Cathedral, 1997) and in Górowo ̇aweckie in Masuria (Greek Catholic Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, 1984–1986).

Jerzy Nowosielski knew well the possibilities of polychrome in Gothic interiors. For example, he appreciated the 19th-century decoration of St. Mary's Church in Kraków by the outstanding Polish painter Jan Matejko (Nowosielski 2013, p. 341). He was also inspired by the frescoes of the so-called Jagiellonian foundation, which was made in Gothic spaces by 15th-century Ruthenian painters brought to Poland by kings Władysław Jagiełło and Kazimierz Jagiellończyk (e.g., in the Castle Chapel in Lublin or the Chapel of the Holy Cross at Wawel in Krakow). In the opinion of Krystyna Czerni, Nowosielski's polychromes "worked" much better in Gothic interiors than, for example, in baroque ones (Czerni 2018a, p. 318). Following the example of 15th-century Ruthenian artists, the Nowosielski skillfully combined Byzantine paintings into the Western architectural style.

In the Orthodox Cathedral in Wrocław, arranged in the Gothic church of St. Barbara, images of saints, cartouches, and circles with inscriptions create an abstract composition harmonizing with the triangular pattern of the vaulted fields (Figure 17a). Nowosielski also made an iconostasis with a row of 12 icons of the great Orthodox feasts.

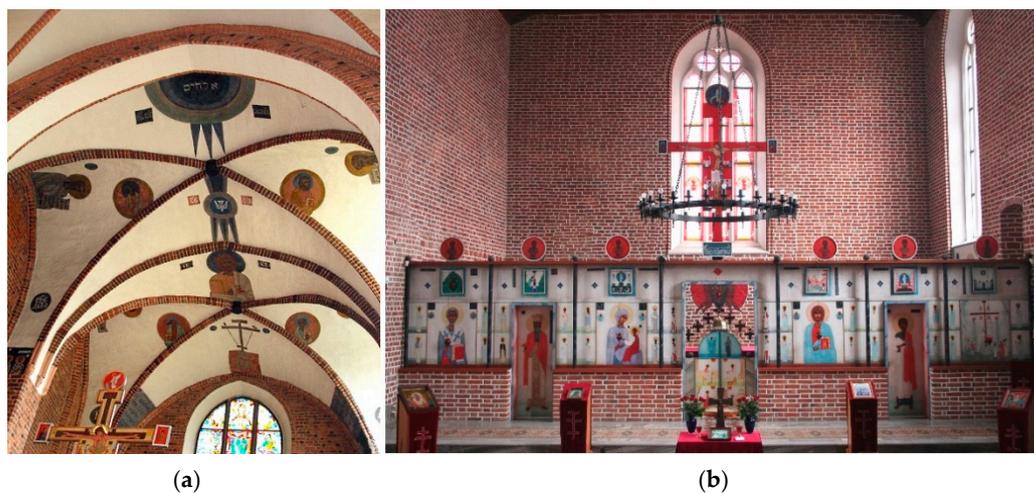


Figure 17. Nowosielski's polychrome of gothic churches: (a) the Orthodox Cathedral in Wrocław. (b) Greek Catholic church in Górowo ̇aweckie. Photography by the author.

In Górowo ̇aweckie in Masuria, the artist adapted an unused post-Evangelical aisleless church built in the Gothic style around 1367 (Kapka 2018). A characteristic feature of the existing interior were raw brick walls in a cool red color with a contrasting pattern of white joints. Nowosielski designed an iconostasis and polychrome of the walls (Figure 17b). The iconostasis was located on a plinth identical to the walls. The color scheme of paintings reflected the existing interior colors, but in inverted proportions: the dominant color is white contrasted with red elements—small circular icons and a cross crowning the iconostasis, as well as a large halos that is a part of the Mandyllion on the back wall of the chancel. The palette is complemented by sparingly dosed blues, yellows, and browns of saints' complexions. The project in Górowo ̇aweckie shows Nowosielski's extraordinary abilities to use the existing qualities of the interior. Thanks to this, he was able to achieve spectacular artistic effects with modest means.

When discussing Nowosielski and Gothic architecture, one should mention an altar cross for the Church of St. Dominik in Warsaw made in 1998–1999 (Figure 18). The church, belonging to the Dominican congregation, was built in 1982, according to a design by Władysław Pieńkowski, and is considered one of the best religious projects of this period in Poland. The form and structure of the church, although modern, refer directly to the aesthetics of the strict Gothic architecture of mendicant orders.

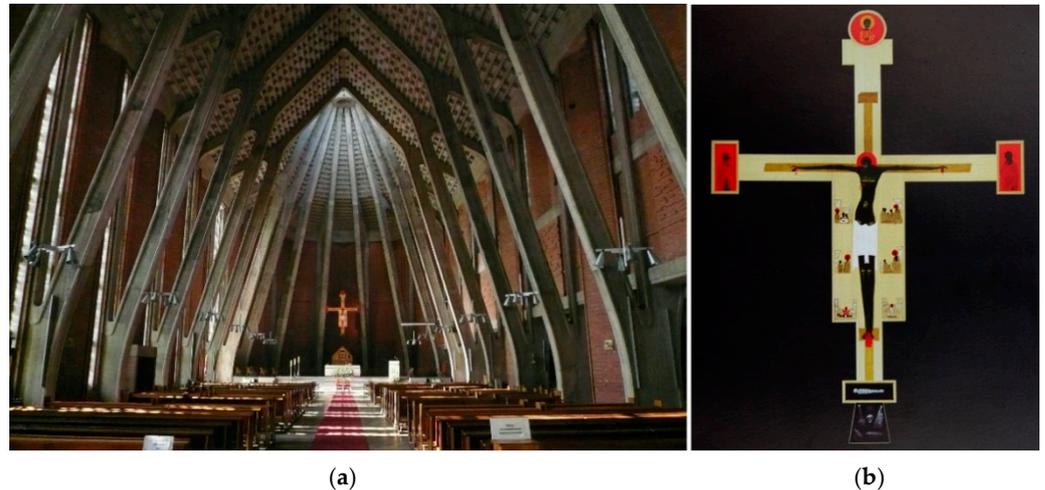


Figure 18. St. Dominic church in Warsaw: (a) overall view. Photography by Traper Bemowski. Image in the public domain. (b) The altar cross—designed by Jerzy Nowosielski. Photography by the author.

The Warsaw cross is modeled on the medieval Italian-Byzantine icon-crosses, e.g., the Romanesque San Damiano cross of Assisi or the 13th-century Giunta Pisano and Cimabue crosses. Nowosielski's cross retains the general layout of the prototypes—the icons of Mary and St. John are located at the ends of the horizontal beam, and the Pantocrator in the circle above. At the base of the cross, the Holy Sepulcher and the bones of Adam are depicted. On the sides of the crucified figure, there are evangelical scenes: Angel at the tomb, Unfaithful Thomas, Appearance to the Apostles, Lamentation, *Noli me tangere*, Emmaus. The arrangement of Christ's body expresses the suffering of agony; the figure is unnaturally elongated and slim, even compared to medieval representations. The artist used an extremely contrasting color scheme, which is based on a juxtaposition of the dark green and black complexion of Christ and vermillion accents—the icons of Mary and St. John, Pantocrator, halos, and the wounds of Christ. The background for these elements is natural, light linden wood, on which the figure of the Crucified appears even darker.

Nowosielski's cross, hung above the altar, complements the architecture of the interior as its central element. On the visual level, it is undoubtedly a masterpiece in which the tradition of Christian art and modernity are perfectly united. It is also a representative work for Nowosielski himself, which contains all the characteristic features of his art. This cross is also the last religious work of the artist.

4. An Attempt at Synthesis

Based on the case studies, we can certainly say that Jerzy Nowosielski's monumental works are a coherent artistic activity and indicate their common characteristics:

- The use of tonal and value contrast as the basic means of organizing space;
- Expanding the range of colors, using pure and intense colors;
- Incorporation of existing elements, such as the texture and color of the substrate, into the overall composition of the interior;
- Combining figurative representations with geometric abstraction or enhancing the abstract impact of these representations;
- Subordination of all elements to a strongly outlined artistic concept.

Below, an attempt is made to reconstruct the ideological assumptions underlying the system outlined in this way.

4.1. *Harmony of Opposites*

Jerzy Nowosielski has repeatedly emphasized the “mystery” nature of his works: “I often think that I am a magician. It means that with the help of certain actions I cause certain spiritual effects” (Nowosielski 2013, p. 152). What precisely were these ‘actions’ and their ‘effects’?

Although the available collection of writings by Jerzy Nowosielski is extensive, we rarely come across descriptions of his creative process. The artist himself raised this topic reluctantly, and when asked, he was evasive. This is especially true of the problem of color in his art. The artist declared that he would not conform to the established canons in this respect: “I do not pay attention to the symbolism of geometric forms or colors”. Such statements should be treated with some reserve. First, there is some evidence of a conscious use of elements of color symbolism by Nowosielski (Orant’s hematite robe, “Advent-Gospel” opposition in *Wesoła*). It is also apparent, that he respected and emphasized the key traditional patterns (e.g., the whiteness of Christ’s garments in the scene of Transfiguration in *Tychy*, the blackness of the grave on the *Warsaw crucifix*, etc.).

However, Nowosielski’s radical statements were consistent with the professed artistic program—the “eschatological realism” discussed earlier. Nowosielski wanted to distinguish himself from many “icon schools” that were established in the 20th century, especially in the Orthodox world, but also in the West. These schools were preoccupied with studying and scrupulous copying of old patterns, including color schemes, basically eliminating the creative element (the “pious archeology”). Nowosielski assessed these trends harshly “They made a dogmatic and religious canon out of the formal canon of a historical icon (. . .) To paint an icon, you have to paint a picture, you have to be a painter, and these are not painters, but ideologists.” (Czerni 2012, p. 243). For this reason, Nowosielski emphasized the creative and intuitive aspect of icon painting, while deprecating canonical patterns and color symbolism. Porebski in his analysis seems to follow this path when he states, “Nowosielski treats color with freedom, not to say nonchalance” (Porebski 1989). Such opinions are questionable, as they suggest the kind of approach expressed by Picasso’s famous bonmot, “When I run out of red paint, I take the blue one.” This is definitely not the case of Nowosielski. In his mature works, such as the church in *Biały Bor* or the *Warsaw crucifix* (which Porebski did not yet know when he wrote his study), the rigor of the color scheme is almost striking. On the other hand, we have the artist’s statements, such as the one from 1998: “I don’t choose colors at all. They choose me by themselves, it happens somehow intuitively” (Czerni 2012, p. 244). We are therefore faced with an interpretation problem: in what key to read Nowosielski’s art of colors, since he himself seems to deny the existence of such a key?

First, one should note that relying on intuition does not in any way imply freedom, let alone nonchalance, in choosing a color scheme. Rather, it specifies a method that is not strictly rational. Another statement by Nowosielski puts the matter in a different light: “If someone drastically limits the color range of his paintings, it means that he knows perfectly well what color is. The limitation of the color scale means that the color is more intensely present in the painting. Because if something is limited, it means that it is well felt”. Thus, for Nowosielski to feel a color has to do with its conscious use and understanding its function. Feeling a color is a form of non-discursive knowledge, high sensitivity to its emotional impact. Feeling is the only tool through which we gain access to the color itself.

These views are reminiscent of the idea of Wassily Kandinsky, the author of the most famous theory of color in modern art, which undoubtedly influenced Nowosielski as well.

Nowosielski often used rhetoric borrowed from Kandinsky, talking about “internal necessity” as the final instance of creativity. He described Kandinsky’s theory itself, by no means depreciatingly, as “bordering on the occult.” This is no mistake—Kandinsky’s con-

nections with Theosophy, his acquaintance with Rudolf Steiner, and the esoteric foundation of his theory are well known. Nowosielski's ideological formation was partly derived from the same source. Like many intellectuals of the first half of the 20th century, Nowosielski showed a strong interest in esotericism. According to Czerni in the artist's biography, his youthful worldview was greatly influenced by the brochures of the Swiss occult painter Bô Yin Râ, and then by the books of the creator of modern theosophy, Helena Blavatska and Rudolf Steiner. (Czerni 2018a, p. 124) He himself says: "When I regained my faith, it was not the same faith that I inherited from my parents. Rather completely different. It was preceded by some information and experiences from the occult community" (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 425–26). For these reasons, the analysis of Nowosielski's work through the prism of Kandinsky's theory seems legitimate. Even if he did not draw from it directly, he undoubtedly knew it and represented a similar type of intellectual formation as Kandinsky himself.

In Kandinsky's speculations, color—like sound—was a generator of emotional response called "vibrations of the soul". Kandinsky tried to describe these vibrations using a series of metaphors, which are by no means an established symbolic code, but an attempt to express emotional states. It is a description of the ineffable by the artist and researcher with an extremely acute sensitivity, e.g., "Black is something extinguished like a burned pyre, something immobile, corpse-like", vermilion "is like a relentlessly glowing passion, a solid power within itself, which cannot easily be surpassed but which can be extinguished by Blue, as glowing iron is put out by water" and so on (Kandinsky [1911] 1946). An artistic work in which there is a proper color alignment can generate emotional harmonies similar to tonal harmonies in music. Moreover, the structure of the possible vibrations is polar. The spectrum of colors is stretched between pairs of polar values, i.e., heat and cold, and light and dark. The color scheme of the church in Biały Bór seems to be a model illustration of oppositions from Kandinsky's famous book "Über das Geistige in der Kunst". Deep green, expressing indifference and stillness has been juxtaposed with red meaning passion, feeling, and movement. Black ("nothingness", "eternal silence without future and hope") was juxtaposed with white ("beginning—yet unborn", "silence looking to eternity") (Kandinsky [1911] 1946, pp. 59–78).

These similarities do not mean that Nowosielski made direct use of Kandinsky's descriptions, but rather that he understood the problem of color system in a similar way—as combinations of bipolar stimuli. The role of binary opposition in Nowosielski's thought is shown in the following text—an analysis of the iconographic canon of Anastasis "Descent into Hell" (Figure 19):

"There is one more moment that an analysis based on the psychology of depth can specify in this icon. It is connected with Jung's concept of "individualization"—a synthesis of the opposing elements of our interior (. . .). The secret of the spiritual synthesis of reconciliation of analogous, but spiritually opposing heavenly and infernal elements, the place of such reconciliation is the middle zone of the body—the solar plexus, which in many esoteric depictions corresponds to the heart. The vertical layout of our icon resembles this strangely. In the crucible of the great central circle with the risen Christ, an alchemical transformation of individual elements of our personality takes place" (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 181–82)

It is obvious that, not only the geometry, but also the color scheme of the icon express alchemic/Jungian *coincidentia oppositorum* (navy blue in Mandorla and Adam's robe—pink-red in the robe of Eve and the saints of the Old Testament; the blackness of the infernal abyss and the white robe of Christ).

Looking for an analogy of such an approach in modern painting, we find it in the doctrine of the De Stijl movement. Jerzy Nowosielski admired the work of Piet Mondrian. He declared that the paintings of the Dutch artist, together with the works of Malevich, could be considered modern icons and can be placed in the church (Nowosielski and Podgórzec 2014, p. 159). According to Mondrian, art allows a person to resolve internal

conflicts and come closer to the absolute, i.e., total unity and harmony. In Mondrian's theosophically inspired system, the nature of the absolute is polar, composed of opposites in a state of balanced tension, or, in Mondrian's language, defined relationships. This determined the means of expression of the De Stijl painting (vertical–horizontal, line–plane, color–not color) (Bris-Marino 2014).

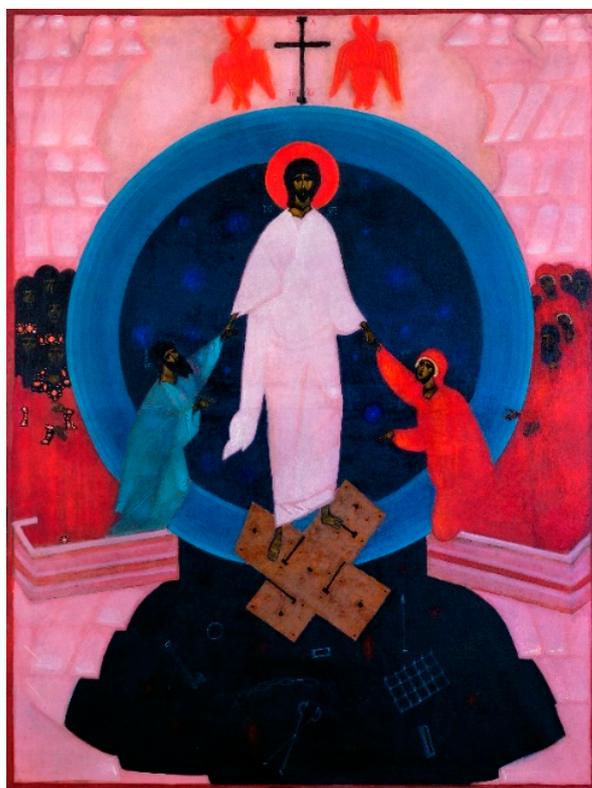


Figure 19. Jerzy Nowosielski *Anastasis*, 1978, Orthodox Church of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Kraków. Photography by the author. Reproduced with permission.

The idea of reconciling opposites in the art as the path towards inner human harmony seems close to Nowosielski. It was already noticed by Tarkowski, for whom Nowosielski's art is "shaped on the basis of contrasts, which causes an excess of tension, a struggle of spiritual powers into which the viewer is also drawn." (Tarkowski 2016, pp. 31–32). The aim of the collision, however, is a positive value, a new synthesis, as the artist himself expressed: "Complexity disappears and suddenly some new unity arises. It is unity in multiplicity, and just as miraculous and incomprehensible, yet real is our view of the simple Trinity, so incomprehensible but very real is seeing a new, clear unity of what a moment ago was a tangle of opposites—on the brink of the abyss" (Nowosielski 2013, p. 599).

Reconciling the "struggling powers" and "seeing unity" give meaning to the entire creative process and set the direction for painter's intuition. Since painting colors is experiencing emotional and spiritual vibrations, their plastic harmony must also have spiritual consequences for both an artist and a receiver of the art. In that sense, painting is a form of esoteric practice, which might explain Nowosielski's puzzling statement about "being a magician".

4.2. *Mystagogy of Space*

In Nowosielski's monumental works, the artistic impact is achieved through the synergistic interactions of various elements. We can speak of the mystagogy of the entire space of the church. Architecture, icons, frescoes, furniture, and even liturgical vestments are subordinated to a strongly defined compositional principle—above all to the color scheme. Abstract and representational functions of the polychromes interpenetrate with

each other. None of these elements can be changed without compromising the overall composition—the creation of space is total. The result of such a strong aestheticization of all sensory stimuli is a feeling of unreal, the transformation of ordinary space into a different a ‘mystical environment’, as defined by Krystyna Czerni (Czerni 2015).

This can be compared to other ‘*Gesamtkunstwerk*’ ideas of 20th century, like utopian de Stijl visions or Le Corbusier’s ‘ineffable space’, who in 1948 wrote about the synergistic effect of well-chosen artistic means: “Then a boundless depth opens up, effaces the walls, drives away contingent presences, accomplishes the miracle of ineffable space. I am not conscious of the miracle of faith, but I often live that of ineffable space, the consummation of plastic emotion” (Corbusier 1948, pp. 7–8). The holistic understanding of the space is also a characteristic of Byzantine art with its concept of “entering into the image”. As Otto Demus, an eminent researcher of Byzantium, wrote: “The Byzantine church itself is the “picture-space” of the icons. It is the ideal iconostasis; it is itself, as a whole, an icon giving reality to the conception of the divine world order. Only in this medium which is common to the holy persons and to the beholder can the latter feel that he is himself witnessing the holy events and conversing with the holy persons (. . .) He is bodily enclosed in the grand icon of the church” (Demus 1955, pp. 13–14).

Referring to the issue of “over-aestheticization” raised by Janocha, it should be emphasized that Nowosielski’s compositions are by no means “art for art’s sake”. His designs are strictly subordinated to their liturgical function, and contain a hierarchy, which emphasize the key liturgical elements or a specific theological content. In Bialy Bor, these are the focal points of Byzantine liturgy—the altar, tetrapod, Royal and Deacon’s Doors, and the icons themselves. All the otherwise mysterious colors of the interior are used to bring out the elements, make them shine and emphasize their meaning. In Wesoła, on the other hand, the culmination of the entire composition is the presbytery zone, a place of Eucharistic celebration, which focuses the attention of the congregation, a place to which the faithful gradually approaches through the symbolic zone of waiting and purification (narthex) and through listening to the Word of God (naos). It is similar in Tychy, where numerous representations of saints, expressing the diversity of the church community, point to the central figure of the Mother of God, who, according to the artist himself, is a symbol of the church as a whole.

This prompts reflection on the meaning of symbolism in Nowosielski’s works. As already mentioned, Nowosielski was skeptical about this issue. Nevertheless, theological symbolism referring to the dogmas of faith or the Gospel is definitely present in his works. However, it is about symbolism, which is directly experienced, not just intellectually understood. As Łukasz Hajduczenia writes, Nowosielski is rather interested in “the symbolism of reality”, because “God can be seen in reality that is reachable for us” (Hajduczenia 2019).

5. Conclusions

The monumental work of Jerzy Nowosielski is an original artistic phenomenon in the history of 20th-century religious art. It is an original combination of forms and means of expression typical of modernity with the centuries-old tradition of Christian art. It is the result of a clearly defined artistic program—the so-called eschatological realism, which the author tried to implement in both religious and secular works.

The basic assumptions of this concept are:

- Linking aesthetic and religious experience;
- The fundamental role of art as a means of introducing into the spiritual reality (mystagogy), which concerns both the recipient of art and the artist himself;
- Changing the perception of space in the consciousness of the recipient, anticipating the supernatural reality—creation of the “sacred space”;
- Complementarity of abstraction and figuration as an expression of the interpenetration of spiritual and bodily reality.

The character of Nowosielski’s creative process is more difficult to determine due to the lack of clarity in artist’s statements on this subject. However, by analogy with

certain currents of modern art, we can better understand its structure and dynamics. It has been suggested that Nowosielski understood painting and art in general as self-initiation through artistic experience. Artistic gestures served as a reflection of the spiritual process, resolving internal conflicts and entering a higher level of consciousness, which may resemble a kind of esoteric practice.

For Polish artists, as for Kandinsky, Malevich, or Mondrian, art was an area of extrasensory exploration. In this sense, although younger, he belonged to their generation. In 1967, postmodernist Bruce Nauman created an ironic neon “The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths”. It could also apply to Jerzy Nowosielski.

Classifying Nowosielski as a representative of a particular artistic movement or era is difficult. The primary artistic language of the artist belonged to modernity, which distinguishes him from the painters of the “icon revival” in the 20th century, such as Leonid Uspensky, Grigory Krug, Julia Reitlinger, Photis Kontoglou, or Isaac Fanous.

Nowosielski was also, in a sense, a traditionalist, but he rejected the notion of tradition as a historically defined canon. For him, tradition was rather a living reality that a modern artist has access to at any time. Nowosielski rejected conventional religious aesthetics, but at the same time he constantly referred to history—to the Old Russian icon, to the Palaiologos dynasty period, to the early, undivided Christianity, to the art of the catacombs—and sometimes even further—to ancient Greek theatres, Dionysian mysteries, and the ancient Egypt, to the archaic spiritual experiences of mankind. His attitude seems to embody the paradox of modern art—breaking the continuity of historical development on the one hand, and restoring the sense of the elementary, primal, and most universal on the other. It is a paradoxical work, combining the opposites: east with west, abstraction with figuration, spirituality with corporeality, and archaism with modernity, which makes it unique in comparison to other artistic phenomena of the 20th century.

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