

## Right hand of God in the stained glass "God the Father – Stan sie" by Wyspiański, reflecting the discovery of Roentgen's radiation

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### Summary

Discovery of new radiation brought a lot of ideas how to make use of this phenomenon in medicine and other sciences. It also inspired artists. The author is making an attempt to find the relationship between Roentgen's discovery and a design of a famous stained glass window completed in 1904 by Stanisław Wyspiański "God the Father – Stan sie" (God creating the world out of chaos) in a Franciscan Church in Cracow. The artist presented in an unusual way the right hand of God as if it was the x-rayed image. In this way, Wyspiański wanted to pay attention to the act of creation as a process that is triggering extraordinary physical phenomena. Having in mind artist's interests in the natural sciences and his contacts with the medical society of Cracow, we may assume that he deliberately used Roentgen's discovery to expose the unique character of the process of creation in the stained glass.

In 1897 Stanisław Wyspiański designed the stained-glass windows ordered by the guardian of Franciscan friars for the decoration of the chancel of their Cracow church. He also carried out one more project voluntarily – for a big window over the west entrance (Figure 1). The last project was turned into a stained-glass window only in 1904, i.e. five years after the chancel windows [1]. The author described it as 'God the Father' or 'Stan sie' (Come into being!). It was also called 'God creating the world out of chaos'. Against the background of a dark, slightly waved surface of the sea, there rises an enormous, S-shaped figure of the bearded, white-haired Creator. His left arm depicted in warm, yellow colours, raised upwards, with his hand held open in a dynamic gesture above the head. The right arm was shown differently: the sleeve of the coat covered at the level of the arm with some yellow, red and black tongues, as if it was burning. From beneath His fingers, yellow flames flying out, arousing fire and ruffling the sea water. To the left of them (from the observer's side) we may see the spherical and star-shaped forms, as if placed partially at the end of the smoke moving downwards from the flames on the sleeve (Figure 2). Zdzisław Kępiński called these forms "elements from which the world originated" [2]. Extraordinary is the way in which the right hand was shown (Figure 3). As opposed to the left hand, it is warm, furrowed with the lines upon the fingertips, white and with bones and joints well marked, which can be especially well noticed within the thumb, depicted as a separate bone, even at a point where it should be already covered with the skin connecting it with the rest of the hand. At the back of the hand, the artist marked blood vessels in orange. Characteristic for the left hand is the absence of the skin and the underlying muscles.

On 28 November 1895, Wilhelm Konrad Röntgen discovered the previously unknown rays. The information about the discovery was published in the Cracow magazine 'Czas' ('Time') on 8 January 1896. Intrigued by the news, professor Karol Olszewski managed to repeat Röntgen's experiments in Cracow with a good result. Among the first successful images taken in January, there was a radiogram of the hand of the professor's assistant, doctor Tadeusz Estreicher (Figure 4). Cracow was living and breathing the extraordinary discovery. Furthermore, the scientists quickly realised that the discovery could be used in the field of diagnostics and yet in February 1896, the first radiological laboratory in Poland was opened in the building of the Medical Clinic of the Jagiellonian University [3].

It should be noted that Wyspiański was highly interested in natural sciences. In 1895, in return for the permission to study birds in the Zoological Museum of the Jagiellonian University, he drew a chart depicting the process of mitosis – the division of the cell coming from the epithelium of the fire salamander [4]. It is also worth noticing that Tadeusz Estreicher was the younger brother of Stanisław, a close friend of the artist. If we interpret the right hand of God, the Father, as an artistically expressed system of bones and vessels, we may then assume that the artist used the novel scientific information in his piece of art. This is of course not proved. However, knowing the social, scientific and 'spiritual' life of Cracow of those days, we may surely make such an assumption.

Showing the 'x-rayed' right hand of the Creator could only aim at one thing: to present the act of creation as a process triggering remarkable physical phenomena. As we all know, the biblical Book of Genesis is very laconic about the

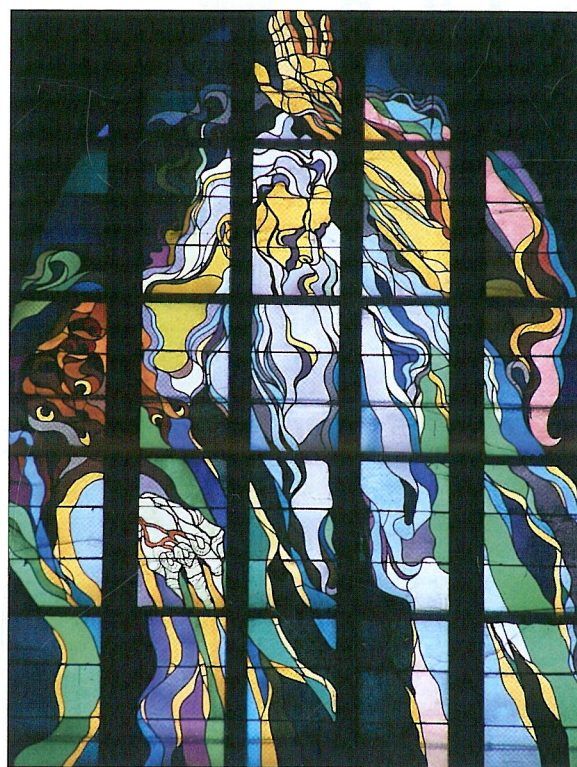




**Figure 1.** Stanisław Wyspiański, *God the Father – Stań się! (Come into being!)*, the stained-glass window in the western part of the Franciscan Church in Cracow, 1897 (1904).

process of world's creation. The piece of art by Wyspiański may be connected with the first verses of chapter I: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and the darkness was upon the face of the deep: And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." (Chapter I, 1-3). However, the 'elements from which the world originated' inform us about the fact that the stained-glass window shows something more than merely the separation of the light and the darkness. This is actually the quintessence of the whole act of creation understood as leading the entity out of the chaos, once and for all.

When looking for an inspiration to present the act of creation in a dynamic way, Wyspiański had to reach to other sources than the Old Testament. Maybe his attention was drawn by the poem *Genesis from the Spirit* by Juliusz Słowacki, the great Polish romanticist. The poet mentioned in it the participation of magnetic and electric forces in the process of emanation of the material world out of the



**Figure 2.** Stanisław Wyspiański, 'the elements from which the world originated', part of the stained-glass window *Stań się!*

spirit [5]. It is also possible that the artist had in mind the words of Camille Flammarion, a French astronomer-mystic, when creating his masterpiece: 'Light, warmth, electricity, magnetism, attraction, affinity, botanic life, instinct, intelligence, they all have their origins in God' [6].

Wyspiański did not reflect the mystic concepts of Słowacki and Flammarion in his stained-glass literally. However, their idea of magnetic and electric forces could have excited his imagination. It allowed for the translation of those insubstantial words 'stań się' ('come into being') into an attractive artistic form. An additional impulse was unquestionably provided by Röntgen's discovery. In the article on X-rays, published in the magazine 'Tygodnik Ilustrowany' (Illustrated Weekly), we may read the following: 'All physical laboratories of the whole world have in their possession so called Geissler tubes, filled with a thinned air. Every student could admire striking, incredible light phenomena, induced by sparkles from induction coils. (...) Meanwhile, quite unexpectedly, professor Roentgen presents sensational news to the world: that among the visible rays of the Geissler tube there are also the invisible ones' [7]. Colourful rays coming from beneath the Creator's hand could therefore be a reminiscence of the radiation visible in the Geissler tube, while the 'X-rayed' hand and the surface of the sea, ruffled by the forces not shown in the stained-glass window, could be a result of the invisible rays. Röntgen's discovery accounted for the moment of creation understood (after Słowacki) as a release of an extraordinary energy together with its unusual properties by the *Logos* of God.





**Figure 3.** Stanisław Wyspiański, the right hand of God, stained-glass window *Stać się!*



**Figure 4.** Plain X-ray of the hand of Tadeusz Estreicher, 1896.

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