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## Arcabas's paintings in the Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette

“One of the few today’s painters who constantly grapple with themselves. The artist of the Bible’s most mysterious leaves.”<sup>1</sup> These words by François Bœspflug are an adequate description of Jean-Marie Pirot, a contemporary religious painter nicknamed *Arcabas*. Although totally unknown in Poland, the artist’s works can be admired today in many churches in France, but also in Europe, North and South America or even in Asia, both in public and private collections. Arcabas’s *œuvre* is tremendous, difficult to catalogue and estimated at over three thousand items.<sup>2</sup>

Pirot’s works reveal amazing freedom in intertwining the sacred with the profane.<sup>3</sup> For some, Arcabas’s art is controversial, yet others delight in it and admire the painter’s artistry, craft and skill. His works raise many questions, being not only provocative, but also thought-provoking. We can see the artist’s fluid transition from the literal to abstract meaning, and even combining both in a single work of art. All of this causes Arcabas’s works to be received enthusiastically on the one hand, and to be criticized on the other.<sup>4</sup>

In Polish language literature there are no reliable sources concerning Jean-Marie Pirot and his output.<sup>5</sup> In this article we would like to present, in brief, the profile of Arcabas, describing synthetically and chronologically six of his paintings located in the heart of the Congregation of the Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette in France.

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<sup>1</sup> F. Bœspflug, *Quand le mystère invite*, [in:] *Arcabas. Une invitation au Mystère. Église Saint-Pierre-le-Vieux. Strasbourg. 23 Novembre – 18 Décembre 2009*, Strasbourg 2009, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> F. Bœspflug, *Arcabas. Saint-Hugues-de-Chartreuse et autres œuvres*, Grenoble 2010, p. 12; L. Hochart, *Éléments biographiques*, [in:] *Arcabas. Une invitation au Mystère...*, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> G. Zanchi, *I colori della Bellezza. Jean-Marie Pirot detto Arcabas*, Bergamo 2010, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> F. Bœspflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 12–13.

<sup>5</sup> *Łaska La Salette*, red. P. Dzierzak MS, Krakow 2002, p. 39.

Jean-Marie was born on 26 December 1926 in Trémery (France), as one of the Pirot's five children. His mother was German, and his father, a teacher by profession, was French. Jean-Marie spent his childhood in Metz. During the Second World War he was conscripted into Wehrmacht, deserted the army and concealed in Paris, where he started studying at École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. When studying in France, he experienced his religious conversion, which dramatically altered his view of the world and attitude towards people. For Jean-Marie Pirot, the Bible has been inspiration in artistic choices and activities ever since.<sup>6</sup> Having received his diploma in 1950, he went on to work at École des Arts Décoratifs in Grenoble, where from 1960 to 1969 he taught painting. It was then that his students gave him the nickname *Arcabas*.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile he married Jacqueline, with whom he had two children: son Jean-Etienne and daughter Isabelle.<sup>8</sup> Arcabas's paintings were presented at many exhibitions in France, Germany, Belgium, Mexico, Italy, Luxembourg and the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Arcabas's greatest achievement is his work in Saint-Huges de Chartreuse church. The decoration of the church lasted from 1952 to 1991. Since 1984 the church has been a museum of sacred art, and keeps a considerable part of the artist's output.<sup>10</sup> In 1961–1972 Arcabas created scenographies and costumes for various theatrical plays.<sup>11</sup> Invited by the Canada Council for the Arts, in 1969 the artist moved to Canada, where he established and managed *Atelier collectif expérimental* at the University of Ottawa. After three years he returned to France and set up a visual arts atelier *Élog de la Main* at the University of Social Sciences in Grenoble, which he managed until 1992. Later he ended his career as a lecturer and devoted himself entirely to painting.<sup>12</sup> Since 1986 he has lived and worked in Saint-Pierre-de-Chartreuse near Saint-Huges de Chartreuse church.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the painter himself, faith poured upon him like a bucket of cold water. F. Böespflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> G. Zanchi, *I colori della Bellezza...*, op. cit., p. 12; L. Zink MS, *Dialog in La Salette. Zwiegespräche mit den Bildern von Arcabas*, Paris 2013, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline became not only Arcabas's life companion, but also his impresario and adviser. We can also find her in many paintings by the artist. F. Böespflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> L. Hochart, *Éléments biographiques*, [in:] *Arcabas. Une invitation au Mystère...*, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> F. Böespflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 11–12; G. Zanchi, *I colori della Bellezza...*, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *The dance of death* by Johan August Strindberg, *The diary of a country priest* by Georges Bernanos, *The Just* by Albert Camus or *The soldier's tale* by Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz. G. Zanchi, *I colori della Bellezza...*, op. cit., p. 12; F. Böespflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 11–12.

<sup>12</sup> L. Hochart, *Éléments biographiques*, [in:] *Arcabas. Une invitation au Mystère...*, op. cit., p. 45; F. Böespflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 12.

The shrine at La Salette is linked to a Marian apparition. On 19 September 1846 the Virgin Mary appeared to two children, Melanie Calvat and Maximin Giraud to convey the message of repentance and atonement to the world. Five years later the apparition was approved by the Church.<sup>13</sup> In 1852 Bishop of Grenoble, Philibert de Bruillard decided to build the church at La Salette.<sup>14</sup> On 19 September 1879 the church was consecrated and declared Minor Basilica by Pope Leo XIII.<sup>15</sup> The church building is made out of stone, a blend of Neo-Romanesque and Byzantine styles, quite popular in France in early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup>

In 1975 major maintenance and renovation works were carried out in the basilica. The then superior, Daniel Charmot MS, put forward a proposal to convert the interior. Bishop Gabriel Matagrín instructed him to contact Arcabas, a famous artist of global recognition and renown.<sup>17</sup> The painter accepted Charmot MS proposal and commenced work in 1987. Its result are six images by Arcabas in La Salette, of which four are monumental paintings.<sup>18</sup>

The first one, located in the left-hand aisle of the basilica, presents a scene from the Gospel of John, namely the *Wedding at Cana*. The painting was made in 1989 in the painter's studio in Saint-Pierre-de-Chartreuse.<sup>19</sup> Made with acrylic paint on canvas, the picture consists of two parts. The first, main one, 260 by 300 centimetres, culminates with a smooth arc and presents centrally seated Jesus with Virgin Mary and wedding guests at a wooden table, covered with a tablecloth in a multi-coloured checker pattern. A small white cloud on the horizon at the left-hand side signifies the discreet presence of God the Father. The flames of the candles on two ornately carved candlesticks stand for the Holy Spirit. The Saviour

<sup>13</sup> J. Stern MS, *La Salette. Documents authentiques. Dossier chronologique intégral. Septembre 1846 – mars 1847*, vol. 1, Paris 1980, p. 34–41.

<sup>14</sup> The shrine is situated at the level of 1800 m above sea level, between Plateau (1804 m) and slopes of Gargas (2208 m) and Chamoux (2198 m) mountain. J. Stern MS, *Mgr de Bruillard, évêque de Grenoble au moment de l'Apparition. Biographie et étapes de la reconnaissance du fait de La Salette*, Strasbourg 2010, p. 72–73.

<sup>15</sup> A. Avitabile MS, G. Matteo Roggio MS, *La Salette. Znaczenie i aktualność. Nowe spojrzenie na teologię i duchowość zjawień maryjnych*, Warszawa 1998, p. 32; *Łaska La Salette*, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Basilica's length 44.5 m, width 15 m, height 18.8 m. The church can hold about 800 seated persons. E. W. Roetheli MS, *La Salette. Geschichte der Erscheinung*, Freiburg 1990, p. 72–74; *Łaska La Salette*, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> F. Böspflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>18</sup> V. Bettega, R. Reymond, *La grande aventure du pèlerinage de la Salette de 1846 à nos jours*, Grenoble 1999, p. 233.

<sup>19</sup> Arcabas started painting this work in 1987. P. Laudet, *Arcabas. Notre Dame de La Salette*, Paris 2006, p. 12.

is clad in a white robe, over which he wears a red himation hanging across his left shoulder. Christ's hair is long and brown and his facial hair is dark. Jesus raises his right hand for blessing, while his left hand is resting on the table, holding a transparent cup. At the bottom of the picture we see bare feet of the Saviour and the newlyweds. The table at which the guests are seated has neither beginning nor end, extending beyond the frame. The Mother of God is presented in a blue dress with a dark-blue veil that covers her head and falls freely on her shoulders. She is standing behind the bride's back, who is dressed in a golden dress with elaborate embroidered patterns. Between Mary and Jesus we see a gold cross, which divides them, but at the same time connects them in a mystical way.<sup>20</sup> Mary's concerned look seems to notice the lack of wine. This is also suggested by almost empty goblets, as well as the apprehension in the eyes of the newlyweds. To the right we can see a young man, clearly worried with the situation, leaning over the bride's arm, clinging to the table and ruffling the tablecloth. The eyes of those sitting at the table follow the Saviour's gesture, anxiously anticipating the words he is going to utter.<sup>21</sup> The painting's background has many colours – blue, cyan, gold, white and sometimes blue/red. The second part is composed of three smaller paintings sized 80 x 80 centimetres, situated below the larger picture. In the foreground we can see Virgin Mary speaking to three servants; her entire figure radiates calm. First, Mary dispels the servants' doubts and encourages them to act on everything that Jesus says. Between Mary and the servant there is a light-blue sign reading *Faites tout ce qu'il vous dira* (Do whatever he tells you). Next to Mary stands a little boy holding a small jug in his hand and listening attentively to her words. The second in the series of smaller pictures presents three servants carrying out Jesus' instruction. Two of them are hurriedly pouring water into five stone vats, and the third is rushing into the room, holding a bucket in his right hand. In the third painting we can see the master of ceremonies, tasting water transformed into wine like a connoisseur. The scene is witnessed by three characters: a surprised servant holding four jugs in his hand, the bridegroom with a goblet, clearly disconcerted and disbelieving, and the little boy leaning against the table, on which a wine jug is standing, with a few plates to the right. In the background there are five wedding guests, anxiously looking at each other

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<sup>20</sup> P. Laudet, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 47–59.

<sup>21</sup> V. Bettega, R. Reymond, *La grande aventure du pèlerinage de la Salette...*, op. cit., p. 233. According to Françoise Dolto, at Cana we see a second Nativity, in which Jesus is born for his mission. The miracle reveals the glory of Jesus and his love for people. P. Laudet, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 47–59.

in anticipation of further developments. In the bottom right corner of the larger painting there is the painter's signature in black – *arcabas* (fig. 1).

In 1989 Arcabas painted another picture, entitled *Mourning at Calvary*. The work is painted with oil on a 260 by 300-centimetre canvas placed in the right-hand aisle of the basilica.<sup>22</sup> This image presents the suffering of the people who witnessed Christ's death at Calvary and who were in deep mourning. It is Arcabas's own vision, a follow-up to the scene beneath the cross from the Gospel of John.<sup>23</sup> In the foreground we can see Our Lady of Sorrows in light-blue dress with a dark-blue veil on her head, in a swoon, dropping a white handkerchief. Mary is surrounded by a group of women of various age. On the right there are two women looking with sadness at Mary, and a little girl in a red dress, clutching a teddy bear in her right hand. The girl is the artist's daughter Isabelle. On the right side the artist painted three women and a crowd of onlookers. One of them, wearing a green dress, is holding swooning Mary. Another one, in a yellow tunic with white head covering, arms crossed, weeps, is helplessly looking at the whole scene. The third one has a white handkerchief in her hand, with which she wipes tears that fall down her face. Behind Mary's back stands St. John, holding Virgin Mary in a gesture of filial acceptance. All characters are placed against white background.<sup>24</sup> In the distance can see an overcast sky. This is the background against which Christ is shown dying, crucified between two villains. On his right, next to the good villain, we can see a gold cross: the sign of the hope for resurrection. In the sky, visible in various shades of light and dark blue, there are small white clouds. The top of Jesus' cross is surrounded with a gold band reading *Mère voici ton fils; et toi voici ta mère* (Woman, here is your son. Son, here is your mother). All lines in the picture are curved and slanted like after an earthquake. The darkness is covering the world, and the cross casts its intense shadow on the ground.<sup>25</sup> In the bottom right corner the painter added his black signature: *arcabas* (fig. 2).

In the conch of the apse of the main nave of the La Salette basilica we find another monumental work by Arcabas, 600 x 800 centimetres, presenting Christ as Pantocrator – the Lord and the Judge of the Universe.<sup>26</sup> It was painted in 1991 on the wall with polyvinyl acetate paint. Arcabas was inspired by a 12<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>22</sup> V. Bettega, R. Reymond, *La grande aventure du pèlerinage de la Salette...*, op. cit., p. 236.

<sup>23</sup> P. Laudet, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> F. Bœspflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> P. Laudet, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 70–77.

<sup>26</sup> M. Janocha, *Pantokrator*, [in:] *Encyklopedia katolicka*, t. 14, Lublin 2010, col. 1241–1243.

mosaic of Christ Pantocrator in a Roman cathedral Cefalù in Sicily.<sup>27</sup> The figure of Jesus was presented by Jean-Marie frontally, placing him in the central part of the main nave.<sup>28</sup> The Saviour is dressed in kingly robes: a red tunic with a blue and brown himation cast over it. The colour of the robes symbolises love, suffering and Christ's humanity. Looking at Pantocrator in the painting one may notice certain asymmetry. His left side is more delicate, with his hand raised for blessing somewhat longer, more slender and feminine, which stands for divine mercy. The right side is definitely more masculine, symbolising divine justice. In the image of Christ there is a brown cross – a symbol of suffering and death.<sup>29</sup> The Saviour's look penetrates us wherever we are in the basilica, there is no escape from it. Looking from distance, at first glance, the countenance of Jesus may seem alien to the point of being horrifying. However, the closer we approach the painting, we do notice that Christ's face brightens up, becomes less intimidating, his look becomes benign. This optical illusion is caused by the apse's curvature.<sup>30</sup> The eyes of Jesus, his entire figure emanates with majesty, dignity, but also with calmness. In this image, there is some part of *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*, in the words of Rudolph Otto. Christ has dark-brown hair, eyebrows and beard, and his lips and nose have Greek features. His broad, massive neck indicates his strength and power. The Saviour's mouth is tightly shut. On the left-hand side of the apse, Arcabas included his monograms (IC), to the right XC – for Jesus Christ. The Saviour's head is surrounded with a double halo; the inner halo is cruciform and gold, and the outer one has the form of a rainbow, symbolising reconciliation and covenant with God. White and green diamond-shaped tesserae are reminiscent of a mosaic form the background of the painting (fig. 3).<sup>31</sup>

The fourth painting by Arcabas displayed in the shrine in La Salette was made in 1991 on the wall, with polyvinyl acetate-based acrylic paints. The work is oval-shaped, 430 x 600 centimetres, and stretches on the apse vault in the presbytery. In the work the painter combined the symbols of the four Evangelists, referring to classical early medieval tetramorphs. Arcabas used personifications derived

<sup>27</sup> The work was made by masters brought from Constantinople. F. Boespflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 106; V. Bettega, R. Reymond, *La grande aventure du pèlerinage de la Salette...*, op. cit., p. 233.

<sup>28</sup> This act of the artist refers to the apparition in La Salette, with Christ is placed in its centre. Mother of God holds on the chest a cross, which radiates light surrounding her figure.

<sup>29</sup> L. Zink ms, *Dialog in La Salette...*, op. cit., p. 12–13; P. Laudet, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 94; *Laska La Salette*, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> P. Laudet, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 82–89; V. Bettega, R. Reymond, *La grande aventure du pèlerinage de la Salette...*, op. cit., p. 233.

<sup>31</sup> L. Zink ms, *Dialog in La Salette...*, op. cit., p. 14–15.

from the Book of Revelation as well as from the Book of Ezekiel.<sup>32</sup> All characters were placed against a brick-red and brown background, reminiscent of an Oriental carpet, with a mandala in the middle, which stands for God's throne.<sup>33</sup> The winged human symbolizes the Gospel of Matthew. He's holding a red book of Scriptures, marked with initials *MT*. A lion with two wings, his right paw on a Bible with monogram *MC* signifies the Gospel of Mark. A winged ox, his left front leg on a book of Scriptures marked with initials *LC*, refers to the Gospel of Luke. Last but not least, there is an eagle with a red volume of Scriptures in his claws, with inscription *JN*, symbolising the Gospel of John the Apostle. The colour palette of the four characters is strikingly similar; blue, green and brown colours seem to dominate the images. The fact that the tetramorph was placed in the La Salette basilica above the figure of Our Lady of La Salette is not coincidental, as the evangelists are heralds of the Gospel, and Mary's mission is to remind the people of the Gospel in her apparition and her message of La Salette (fig. 4).<sup>34</sup>

The fifth Arcabas's work in La Salette was created in 1995, a gift from the painter to the then superior of the French province Daniel Charmot *ms*. Until 2015 it was displayed on the left-hand side, on a wall in the Encounter Chapel, the interior of which was also designed by the artist. Currently the work is located in a private monastic chapel on the sixth floor.<sup>35</sup> Arcabas painted the picture with oil paint on a canvas sized 50 x 100 centimetres. The artist dedicated the work to his mother, as visible in a white sign in the bottom left corner: *À ma mère Marie* (To my mother Marie). Below is the painter's black signature – *arcabas*.<sup>36</sup> The painting depicts the Crowned Madonna with Child Jesus. Mother of God is dressed in an orange, gold and brown tunic and a red apron; she is sitting with infant Jesus (in a white shirt) on her lap. The child holds his right foot in his hand, as if casually playing with it. In his right hand there is a coil of paper. Jesus'

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<sup>32</sup> Revelation 4:6–8; Ezekiel 1:4–10. 26–28; the symbols have biblical justification. St. Matthew's symbol is a figure of a human being, as he opens his Gospel with presenting the lineage of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark starts with the acts of St. John the Baptist, *A voice calling in the wilderness*. Hence the lion as the symbol of St. Mark. St. Luke also speaks of John, who became a gift from God to childless and aged priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. At that time, the ox was a symbol of fertility. Meanwhile, in the Gospel of John, the voice of the mighty Holy Spirit can be heard. His words soar, and it was from above that the Word descended upon the earth, depicted symbolically as the eagle. P. Laudet, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 102–108.

<sup>33</sup> L. Zink *ms*, *Dialog in La Salette...*, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> V. Bettega, R. Reymond, *La grande aventure du pèlerinage de la Salette...*, op. cit., p. 233.

<sup>35</sup> P. Rak, *Conversation of 7 February 2016*, Krakow [recording in the author's archive].

<sup>36</sup> F. Böespflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 14–15; P. Laudet, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 132–138; L. Zink *ms*, *Dialog in La Salette...*, op. cit., p. 38–39.

head is surrounded with a halo, which merges with a wide gold belt, starting at Mary's head and stretching towards the right side of the picture. Mother's left arm embraces her Son with great tenderness, while her right arm is supporting him. The face of Mary is the shade, suggesting the greater role of her son, whose face is fully lit. Mary's right foot rests on the ground, while the left one is invisible, situated in a different space, indicating that the Kingdom of Jesus is out of this world. Above Mary's head there are two angles, which stand for Mary's happiness; in their hands there are green laurels, a symbol of the crown of the Queen of Heaven and Earth. To the left, we can see a wide brown cross, which directly touches Mary's right arm. The background colours of the painting are varied. The right side and the upper section of the work is dominated by white, whereas to the left a dark-brown plane morphs into dark blue (fig. 5).

The sixth painting, entitled *La Salette – the encounter* was painted by Arcabas in 2015. The picture was painted with oil on a canvas sized 103 x 135 centimetres. In the bottom right corner there is the painter's signature in red – *arcabas*. The story of the work dates back to 2014. In connection with the forthcoming 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparition of Virgin Mary at La Salette, the rector of the Shrine. Manuel dos Reis Bonfim MS requested a painting of Our Lady of La Salette. Until then Arcabas had not painted any image of Our Lady of La Salette. On 23 April 2014 rev. Bonfim together with Deputy Communications Director Piotr Rak arranged their first meeting with Arcabas. The painter welcomed the curator's idea with understanding and interest. In order to familiarize the artist with the history of La Salette, the site of the appearance and of the La Salette Message, another meeting was arranged for 4 July 2014, to which Jean Stern MS, a long-standing archivist of the congregation, was invited.<sup>37</sup> After conversation, Rev. Stern suggested that he could send to the artist the authentic documents on Our Lady of La Salette.<sup>38</sup> Having studied the material, Arcabas started work on the picture. On 12 June 2015 Rev. Bonfim paid a visit to the artist to see the work, which was nearly complete. The date of the reception of the work was agreed for 9 September 2015. Upon its delivery to the shrine, the painting was installed in the Encounter Chapel, replacing the *Crowned Madonna with Child Jesus*. On 19 September 2015,

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<sup>37</sup> P. Rak, *Conversation of 7 February 2016*, op. cit.; P. Rak, *Letter of 16 February 2016 to Rev. Piotr Szweda MS*, [typescript in the author's archive].

<sup>38</sup> J. Stern MS, *Septembre 1846 début mars 1847*, [in:] *La Salette. Documents authentiques...*, vol. 1, op. cit.; J. Stern MS, *Le procès de l'apparition fin mars 1847 – avril 1846*, [in:] *La Salette. Documents authentiques. Dossier chronologique intégral*, vol. 2, Paris 1984; J. Stern MS, *Confirmation de la grâce de la Salette par l'Église 1er mai 1849 – 4 novembre 1854*, [in:] *La Salette. Documents authentiques. Dossier chronologique intégral*, vol. 3, Paris 1991.



the day commencing the celebration of the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparition of Our Lady at La Salette, the painting was solemnly unveiled and blessed by superior general Silvano Marisa ms. Among those present at the ceremony were members of the General Council, international community of La Salette Missionaries at La Salette, La Salette Sisters, diocesan priests, monks, volunteers, employees of the Shrine and pilgrims.<sup>39</sup> The painting depicts Virgin Mary sitting on a massive red bench. Mary is dressed in a wide-sleeved white dress edged with a gold ribbon. Virgin Mary is bent forward, her elbows resting on her knees. Her right hand has dropped unintentionally on her dress, and behind her left hand Mary is hiding her face, overcome with sadness and wet with tears. Her eyes are looking down. On Mary's neck hangs the gold cross with instruments of Christ's torture, the hammer and tongs, which symbolize, respectively, sin and repentance. Her head is covered with an off-white veil trimmed along the outer edge with a gold ribbon. The light falling from the left onto the figure of seated Mother of God casts two shadows of children. These are the visionaries who saw Mary in exactly the same form on 19 September 1846. To the left is Maximin Giraud, with a stick in his left hand; to the right fifteen-year-old Melania Calvat, also leaning on a stick. In his original vision, Arcabas placed the source of light on a side, which does not fully conform to the account of the two shepherds who saw Virgin Mary. According to them, the light radiated from the cross hanging on Mary's neck. There are spots of gold in dark grey shadows, representing tears falling from Mary's eyes which are transformed into drops of gold in the light. To the right, in the central area of the canvas, the artists placed the golden cross, which signifies resurrection, and also the golden rectangle with a semi-circle carved out in the middle. In the upper section of the painting, on both sides, we can see a green mountain meadow with scattered white flowers. Above Mary's head is a golden halo of irregular shape. On two sides of the golden sky there are two little clouds. The colours in the background are varied: red, orange, yellow and gold seem to dominate, which is typical of Arcabas (fig. 6).

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The above article is a brief presentation of a profile of the French painter Arcabas. In addition, six of his paintings in the shrine of Our Lady in La Salette (France) are described synthetically and in a chronological order.

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<sup>39</sup> P. Rak, *Conversation of 7 February 2016*, op. cit.; P. Rak, *Letter of 16 February 2016...*, op. cit.

Jean-Marie Pirot is a versatile artist, a painter of the visual, who prefers to speak to the viewer through colours, at the same time looking for harmony and beauty as the Creator's humble follower. In his works, in which scenes from La Salette are transferred onto canvas, he introduces his audience to a wholly different artistic dimension, examples of which can be seen in the paintings at La Salette.<sup>40</sup> Arcabas's output contains strong links to traditional eastern and western Christian art. The painter himself is not satisfied with merely becoming part of the long artistic tradition and drawing on themes from the repertoire of the past. Arcabas is not a slave to traditional figurative art, although his works contain references to this tradition; instead, he demonstrates his creativity, always coming up with something new. The subjects of his paintings are never temporary; in fact they are independent of the sociological and cultural context.<sup>41</sup>

Arcabas's conversion in his twenties determined the basic direction of his artistic output, provided a new creative impulse and new inspirations, but above all had an impact on the entire concept of his paintings.<sup>42</sup> Looking at Jean-Marie Pirot's painting in the La Salette Shrine, we may have the impression that they are the result of his contemplation of God.<sup>43</sup> His paintings at La Salette are examples of mature art, which in its simplicity encourages the audience to reflect and contemplate their own existence.<sup>44</sup>

Arcabas's works evoke a wide spectrum of reactions, from negative to positive. This is because his output is not easy to understand, being far from explicit or straightforward. However, it holds a mystery that intrigues, invites and encourages us to look deeper. His paintings are thoroughly mature. Jean-Marie Pirot's paintings are exceptional among French works of art, as they derive from his personal experience of God. Arcabas does not cease to confront his work with deep meditation of the Gospels, permeated with a clear testimony of the Catholic faith, which seems exceptional in today's Western Europe, especially in France, a country gradually abandoning Christian values. Arcabas's works in the Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette are not tacky pictures, but outstanding examples of contemporary art.

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<sup>40</sup> J.-M. Pirot, *Avant-propos*, [in:] *Passion Résurrection*, Paris 2007, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> F. Boespflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 185.

<sup>42</sup> G. Zanchi, *I colori della Bellezza...*, op. cit., p. 10–11.

<sup>43</sup> E. Bianchi, *Artisan de la beauté*, [in:] *Arcabas. L'enfance du Christ*, Paris 2010, p. 22–23; G. Zanchi, *I colori della Bellezza...*, op. cit., p. 9; P. Laudet, *Arcabas*, op. cit., p. 47–59.

<sup>44</sup> F. Boespflug, *Arcabas...*, op. cit., p. 13, 183–184; G. Zanchi, *I colori della Bellezza...*, op. cit., p. 9–11.

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## Abstract

Acting under the nickname *Arcabas*, Jean-Marie Pirot is a contemporary French religious painter, totally unknown in Poland. Arcabas's artistic output is enormous, albeit difficult to catalogue. Today his works can be admired in many churches in France, in other locations across Europe, as well as in North and South America, or even in distant Japan. Our article presents a synthesis of the artistic path of Arcabas as a versatile painter who likes to influence human senses by colours while looking for harmony and beauty as God's humble follower. In his works he transfers biblical scenes to canvas, transforming them into visual art. Moreover, we analysed six Arcabas's paintings exhibited in the cradle of the congregation of Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette, i.e. in the shrine of Our Lady of La Salette in France: *The Wedding at Cana*, *Mourning at Calvary*, *Christ Pantocrator*, *The Symbols of Five Evangelists*, *Crowned Madonna with Child Jesus*, *La Salette – the Encounter*. The artist's smooth transitions from the literal to the abstract, and even combining both in a single work cause Arcabas's works to be greeted with enthusiasm on the one hand, but criticized on the other. Jean-Marie Pirot's art is far from clear or easy to absorb; it is rather challenging and ambiguous. It holds a mystery that intrigues, invites and encourages us to look deeper. It contains strong links to traditional Christian art, both eastern and western. The painter is not satisfied with merely becoming part of the long tradition and being inspired by themes from the repertoire of the past. He is not a slave to traditional figurative art, although his works do contain references to this tradition; instead, he demonstrates his creativity, always coming up with something new. In addition, Arcabas's output demonstrates exceptional freedom in intertwining the sacred with the profane, sometimes suggesting that the very division should be rejected. His works, including those displayed in the shrine in La Salette, raise many questions, and provoke deep thoughts and many feelings, ranging from negative to positive. It should be emphasized that Arcabas's paintings in the shrine of Our Lady of La Salette are not kitsch, but exemplify brilliant art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Keywords

Jean-Marie Pirot, Arcabas, La Salette, Our Lady, Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette, Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette

## Abstrakt

### Malowidła Arcabasa w sanktuarium Matki Boskiej w La Salette

Jean-Marie Pirot, działający pod pseudonimem *Arcabas*, to współczesny francuski malarz religijny, w Polsce zupełnie nieznan. Dorobek artystyczny Arcabasa jest ogromny, choć dzisiaj trudny do skatalogowania. Jego dzieła można podziwiać w wielu kościołach we Francji, a także w innych miejscach w różnych częściach Europy, w Ameryce Północnej i Południowej czy nawet w odległej Japonii. W naszym artykule ukazaliśmy w sposób syntetyczny drogę artystyczną Arcabasa, malarza wielostronnego, lubiącego działać na zmysły przez kolor, szukającego przy tym harmonii i piękna jako skromny naśladowca Stwórcy. W swoich dziełach przenosi on sceny z Pisma Świętego na płótno, czyniąc z nich sztukę malarską. Przeanalizowaliśmy ponadto sześć malowideł autorstwa Arcabasa znajdujących się w kolebce Zgromadzenia Księża Misjonarzy Saletynów, w sanktuarium Matki Boskiej w La Salette we Francji: *Wesele w Kanie Galilejskiej*, *Ubolewanie na Kalwarii*, *Chrystus Pantokrator*, *Symbole czterech Ewangelistów*, *Ukoronowana Madonna z Dzieciątkiem*, *La Salette – spotkanie*. Swobodne przechodzenie artysty od sensu obrazowego do abstrakcyjnego, a nawet łączenie obydwu w jednym dziele sprawia, iż realizacje Arcabasa z jednej strony przyjmowane są z wielkim entuzjazmem, a z drugiej krytykowane. Twórczość Jean-Marie Pirola nie należy do łatwej w odbiorze, jednoznacznej i czytelnej. Zawiera w sobie tajemnicę, która intryguje, zaprasza i zachęca do odkrywania. Widać w niej mocne odniesienie do tradycyjnej sztuki chrześcijańskiej, tak wschodniej, jak i zachodniej. Jego sztuka nie zadowala się wpisywaniem się w długą tradycję i czerpaniem tematów z repertuaru przeszłości. Nawiązując do figuratywizmu tradycyjnego, nie pozostaje on jego niewolnikiem, ale tworzy i wynajduje coś nowego. W twórczości Arcabasa można dostrzec ponadto niezwykłą wolność w przenikaniu się tematów *sacrum* i *profanum*, sugerującą niekiedy, że taki podział należy odrzucić. Jego dzieła, także realizacje malarskie eksponowane w sanktuarium w La Salette, rodzą wiele pytań, prowokując do myślenia, wywołując u widza wiele różnych odczuć – od negatywnych po pozytywne. Trzeba więc podkreślić, że malowidła w sanktuarium Matki Boskiej w La Salette autorstwa Arcabasa nie są kiczem, lecz stanowią przykład wybitnej sztuki współczesnej XX wieku.

### Słowa kluczowe

Jean-Marie Pirot, Arcabas, La Salette, Matka Boska, misjonarze saletyni, sanktuarium w La Salette



1. Arcabas, *Wedding at Cana*, 1989, oil on canvas, 260 x 300 cm, La Salette (France), Shrine of Our Lady, published by consent of the author



2. Arcabas, *Mourning at Calvary*, 1989, oil on canvas, 260 x 300 cm, La Salette (France), Shrine of Our Lady, published by consent of the author



3. Arcabas, *Christ Pantocrator*, 1991, wall painting, polyvinyl acetate, 600 x 800 cm, La Salette (France), Shrine of Our Lady, published by consent of the author



4. Arcabas, *Tetramorph*, 1991, wall painting, polyvinyl acetate, 430 x 800 cm, La Salette (France), Shrine of Our Lady, published by consent of the author



5. Arcabas, *Crowned Madonna with Child Jesus*, 1995, oil on canvas,  
50 x 100 cm, La Salette (France), Shrine of Our Lady, published  
by consent of the author



6. Arcabas, *Meeting in La Salette*, 2015, oil on canvas,  
103 x 135 cm, La Salette (France), Shrine of Our Lady,  
published by consent of the author