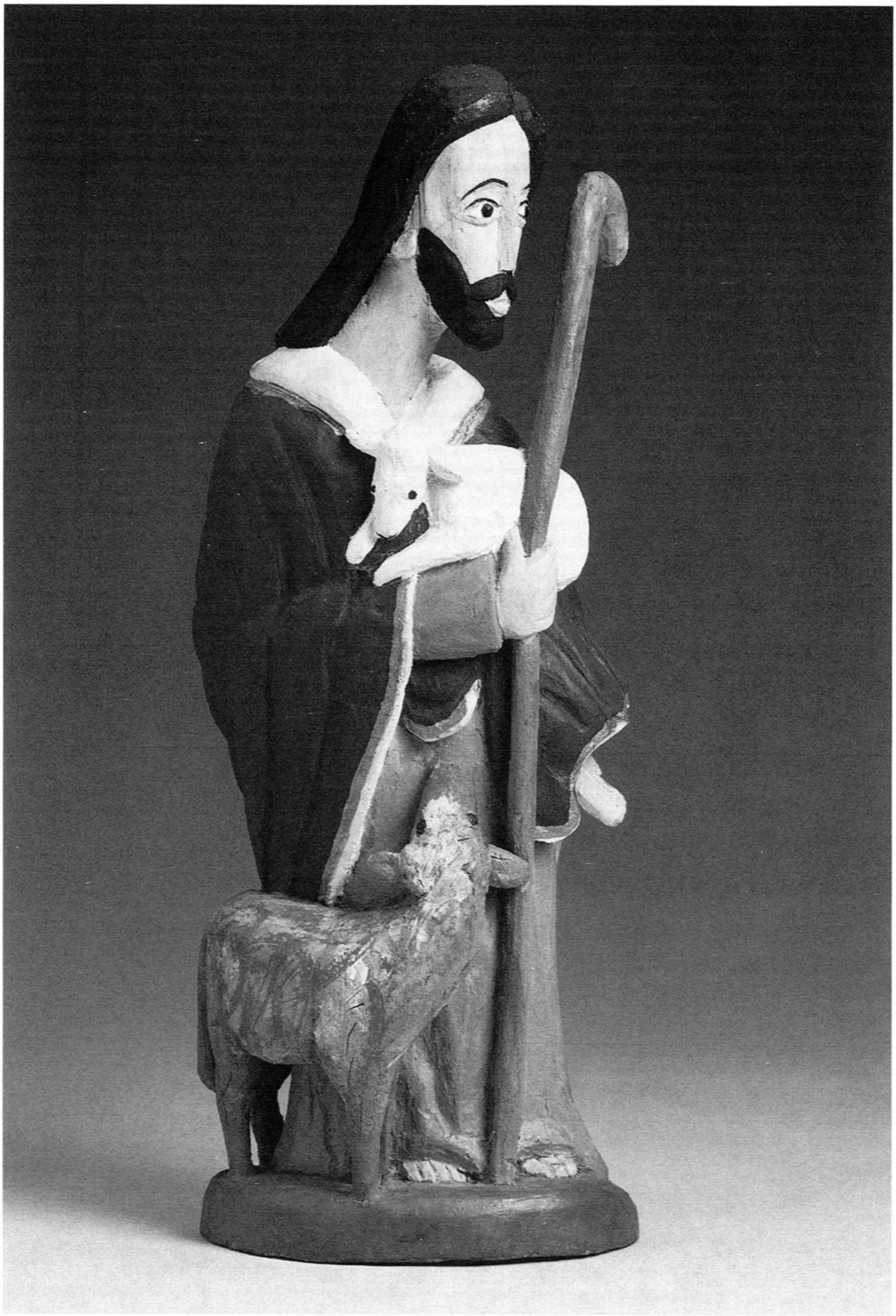

Plate 1. Wacław Suska (b. 1922), *The Good Shepherd*. Polychrome wood, height 13".

Polish Religious Folk Art: Gospel Echoes from a Disparate Clime

Compelling testaments of faith and goodness, the Polish woodcarvings in the Whipple collection feature masterful compositions infused with an other-world spirit.

Doris R. Dant

When Walter Whipple first viewed Polish folk sculptures, he was not impressed. The woodcarvings seemed "primitively simple, painted with unattractive colors, too bright, too garish, not finished off around the edges, fraught with lack of perspective, the proportions out of sync."[1] Furthermore, the "Catholic" aspects of the art—the gold work and the halos—seemed foreign to him. What would a sophisticated American serving as a Latter-day Saint mission president in Poland ever want with such figures?

What he ended up wanting was to put together the most comprehensive collection of Polish religious folk art in the United States. Whipple soon gained an appreciation for "the universal goodness" of the Polish sculptures and in 1991 began to avidly acquire representative pieces from the best contemporary artists. The sculptures pictured in this issue and on exhibit in 1998 at the Museum of Art at Brigham Young University are from the collection that resulted.

Early on, Whipple sensed that the Polish art to which he became so attracted "is part of the gospel." He cites Brigham Young: "All that is good, lovely, and praiseworthy belongs to this church and Kingdom."[2] The Latter-day Saint religion, President Young stated on another occasion, "embraces all truth, wherever found, in all the works of God and man."[3] In other words, Latter-day Saints should value—not fear or slight or exclude—the virtuous found in other faiths and climes. It is part of the good news given by the Lord of all,

for "every particle of truth that every person has received is a gift of God."[4] That a Mormon mission president would feel a kinship with Polish Catholic folk art is therefore not surprising.

This art has much in common with the spirit of Latter-day Saint art. LDS art "evokes a sense of the goodness of God and of a belief in his eternal plan for mankind."[5] One of the hallmarks of the Polish folk carvings is a profound reverence for religious traditions[6] that transforms a seemingly simple, carved piece of wood into a symbol of the creator's faith. Although the specifics of the Polish Catholic folk tradition differ from those of the Mormon tradition, the underlying faith and religiosity of many of the Mormon and Polish folk artists links the two aesthetics. For many artists in both traditions, faith is not simply a Sunday matter but rather forms the substance of their lives. And because it is foundational to their being, it is also basic to their art.

Grounded in faith, such an artist is often what Hugh Nibley terms a "mantic," an artist or other person who receives revelation or inspiration from an other-worldly source. The mantic person, Hugh Nibley writes, "accepts the other world, or better, other worlds, as part of our whole experience without which any true understanding of this life is out of the question."[7] Artists from both the LDS and Polish traditions openly acknowledge the mind behind the beginnings of mortality and a reality beyond the naturalistic universe. To them, supernal beings are real, not mythological. In Bolesław Parasion's *The Seven Days of Creation* (plates 3–9), the moving force behind this planet's birth is not chance but God, not an abstract or "threatening" figure, but a "dignified, gracious, warm person"[8] who seems grateful to rest on the seventh day. On that day, surrounded by angels and his creations, glory emanating from his body, he nonetheless sits with head down, hands slack across his lap, feet resting upon his footstool—earth—and his toes peeking out from under his robe (plate 9).[9]

Some artists from both the Mormon and the Polish folk cultures pray for inspiration, to be tools in the hands of the Almighty and thereby create art pleasing to him. Some may go so far as to see creation as dependent on literal inspiration[10] and help from above (as opposed to being "inspired" by an earthly object or experience). For example, while Minerva Teichert, a prolific LDS

artist, was painting the Jaredites crossing Asia, she "sure prayed to see it."[11] Another time she wrote to her daughter, "Pray for me. I need it. I want health, eyesight, and inspiration" (for the Manti Temple world room murals).[12] The great Polish folk artist Wacław Suska (see plates 16–17) once said, "I take my work seriously. I cross my chisels and pray to God and the Virgin Mary for guidance. When I finish a piece, I offer thanks." He added, with the characteristic satisfaction of a frugal man, "That way I have never ruined a block of linden wood."[13] Roman Śledź (see plate 20) characterizes his inspiration as "a message from [my] wood," a message he must receive before he lifts his chisel.[14]

One intriguing way in which such inspiration has played out in Polish folk art is seen in Parasion's *Noah's Ark* (plate 10). Although the biblical account of the flood does not explicate God's role once the rains descended, Parasion depicts a thoughtful God guiding the ark with his hands. In the book of Moses, an LDS scripture not available to Parasion, Enoch sees a vision in which the Lord holds the ark "in his own hand" (Moses 7:43).

While mantic artists seek guidance through prayer, the act of artistic creation itself becomes a service that brings them closer to their Creator: it is "a profoundly religious experience."[15] In other words, their art comes to them from their Maker and then takes them back to him. And it can do the same for the viewer. Whipple notes that the Polish folk carvings can "elevate and rejuvenate the spirit in a remarkable way" and change one's life; he believes he is a better person for having had this art around him. This ability to influence the viewer for the better is what drives the didactic quality in Mormon art as well.[16]

To be worthy of receiving the requisite inspiration and to be true to their religious beliefs, mantic artists strive to live moral lives, to be fit instruments.[17] Note these descriptions of two of the Polish folk artists Whipple knew well:

> Wacław Suska was a composite of desirable Christian virtues: he was kind, generous, honest, humble, industrious, and faithful. He attended mass regularly and observed personal devotions. Above his door hung a small crucifix. On his walls were framed prints of Christ the Good Shepherd and the Virgin Mary. It upset him that the younger generation 'blaspheme the very name that makes money for them' whenever they hit their fingers with the mallet.[18]

> When you're with Śledź, you can tell you're in the presence of a spiritual man. He's a quiet, believing man, extremely humble and hardworking in supporting his four children.[19]

Another connection between an artist's life and work was posed by Teichert, who said, "'A true artist cannot paint anything he does not feel.'"[20] Her statement holds true for the Polish folk artists, according to Whipple: "The artist cannot hide behind his medium. . . . This is certainly true of folk artists. I believe the personalities of the artists are evident in their work. I'm talking about the entire Suska family,[21] the Krajewski family, and Dużyński."[22] "All of [Stanisław] Dużyński's pieces radiate something very good that's inexplicable to me."[23]

Artists from both the Polish folk and Mormon traditions belong to "a fellowship of 'the People of the Book,' because of their belief in inspired books."[24] They believe that the biblical stories actually occurred and that the people in these accounts were real. For example, acknowledging her own orthodoxy, Teichert wrote, "There was a flood, the real baptism of mother earth, [and] she shall have a confirmation of fire, and then her rebirth of the spirit."[25] Nonetheless, in the hands of mantic artists, biblical stories may "undergo fascinating transformations that are guided by the individual experience and religious feelings of the artist."[26]

In the *Holy Family* by Jan Krajewski (plate 19), the child Jesus, cradled in Mary's arms, reaches for Joseph, who hovers over the mother and child with his cloak spread to protectively envelope Mary from three sides, the red of the cloak's lining reminding us of the love this humble man felt for his royal family, of how he held them closely to his heart. His shepherd's crook symbolizes not only the watchful care Joseph gave the Christ child at a vulnerable time, but also the tender mercies of other human fathers and of the Father who watches over all.

Certainly this portrayal of historical people derives in part from the feelings Jan has both for his son Krzysztof, who, because of an illness his mother suffered during her pregnancy, was born with a deformed hand, and for his wife, who bravely carried the child to term against the advice of the doctors. In spite of Krzysztof's disability, Jan taught his son in his workshop at an early age how to carve wood. Some of the feelings the son returns to his father are

captured in Krzysztof's *Saint Joseph with Jesus* (plate 18), a tender vision of the older man encouraging Jesus with a loving caress while guiding the boy's work in the carpentry shop.

One theme depicted almost universally by Polish folk sculptors is the Sorrowing Christ, but each figure is individualized, often modeled after the artist's own experience with emotional pain: "The artist often portrayed his own plight in this figure, for he, too, was downcast and downhearted through no fault of his own."[27] Susan Thompson of the Museum of Art notes some of the differences between Janus Mostył's *Sorrowing Christ* (plate 2) and that of Wacław Suska (plate 17):

> While Janus's sculpture appears to rely heavily upon the influence of Dürer, it is also very personal and reflects his own vision. The exaggerated size of the hands and feet on the carved figure seems to be something with which he is familiar. These are the hands of a working man—strong and accustomed to labor. Perhaps he even looked at his own hands and feet as he modeled his Christ figure.[28]

Suska, on the other hand, Thompson says, dressed but did not crown his sculpture, "thereby making [it] more accessible for identification as any man who feels sorrow."[29] This image, the last sculpture of Suska's career,[30] is a restrained piece, using only a few details to depict the Lord's grief—the face half covered and shadowed, the weight of the head dragging against the hand, thereby distorting the mouth, the eyes closed in pain, shutting out the world.

The Pietà, Mary mourning for her crucified son, is another widespread religious image with which Polish folk artists personally identify, having themselves lost so many children to disease and strife.[31] Jan Krajewski's *Pietà* (front cover) is of a woman grown older and heavier. Withdrawn, eyes swollen almost shut from weeping, she supports her son's limp, sagging body between her legs and, unable to hold this adult man in her arms, cradles what she can—his head and one hand. This Pietà has not been prettified, for death and sorrow are not glamorous.

Because of their belief in the literalness of Bible stories, the Polish folk artists, Whipple notes, have "a real power to illustrate and embellish on a scriptural text, bringing it much more to life and really making me think about the event." For example, every time Whipple looks at Stanisław Suska's *Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem*

(back cover), he thinks of the people "spreading the palms before his feet and singing hosanna to the son of David. For just that brief moment, Christ was recognized for who he really was after so much persecution."

That the mantic impulse in Polish folk art has much in common with that in LDS art can be seen from Martha Peacock's description of Mormon artists:

> Their quest consists of the attempt to translate their religious ideals into their various mediums. Their search thus takes them on a different path from that of many other artists and attempts to lead them to the spiritual sources of their beliefs. Feeling that they will reach their goals only through direct access to this spiritual source, LDS artists seek inspiration as a means of attaining this quality in their art. For them, painting or sculpting is a private activity imbued with purpose that affects more than their artistic lives. By conducting their lives with a sense of truth and integrity, they hope to be brought closer to this spiritual core.[32]

In the best of the Polish woodcarvings, the portrayal of a religious principle or narrative is not merely a didactic exercise. The art is aesthetically pleasing, as it is in the best of LDS art. For example, Dużyński's *Expulsion from Eden* (plate 15) depicts a dejected angel, sword drooping, shoulders slumping, ejecting Adam and Eve from the garden. Eve hides her face behind her hands. Holding up one arm as if to ward off a blow the viewer knows is not coming, his other arm draped over his eyes, Adam strides out ahead of Eve. This sculpture, as do the others in Whipple's collection, presents "a paradox of naiveté and deep sophistication."[33] The paradox can be seen in the uncompromising vertical lines repeated over and over in hair, wings, sword, robe, and skin garments. It is evidenced in the base, a stark, brown block of wood, the world Adam and Eve are entering, a world no longer automatically lush and productive, a world that will require the sweat of their brows to turn green. Dużyński, according to one of the most experienced dealers of Polish folk art, "has never produced a careless sculpture."[34]

Śledź's *Christ Nailed to the Cross* (plate 20) is another good example. It is roughly hewn and unsanded, yet the chisel strokes are carefully placed to help us feel the agonized stretching of Christ's arm, to sense the turmoil and unease of the scene, and to understand, through the slackness of Christ's body and the drooping of

his head, that, in spite of all his suffering, the Redeemer, rather than resisting the will of the Father, is yielding to it.

The aesthetic sense of the Polish mantic artists, most of whom lead simple, rural lives, isolated from urban sophistication and education, is captured in this anecdote about the last encounter between Whipple and Wacław Suska:

> I presented [Suska] with an oversized picture album entitled *The Bible in Painting.* He immediately put on his glasses and began studying the reproductions, slowly leafing through each page. One picture in particular caught his attention. "This is the work of a very talented artist," he said, pointing to a work of Rembrandt. "Notice the excellent composition, the balance, the lighting, how the robes flow off the shoulders. . . ." Although Wacław Suska probably doesn't know Rembrandt's name, he instantly felt a kinship with the Dutch master.[35]

By opening our souls to those things that are good, lovely, and praiseworthy, regardless of who produces them, we can be blessed by experiencing yet another aspect of the gospel, broadly defined. "Our Catholic friends in Poland made beautiful art that uplifts our spirits," Whipple argues. "They have enriched our lives." Just as Suska recognized a kinship with Rembrandt, Latter-day Saints can recognize a kinship with this Polish religious folk art.

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NOTES

[1]Unless noted otherwise, quotations are from Walter Whipple, interview by Paul Anderson and Doris Dant, Provo, Utah, January 21, 1998.

[2]Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 11:375, April 8, 1867.

[3]Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 10:251, October 6, 1863.

[4]Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 19:50, May 27, 1877.

[5]Martha Peacock, "Art in Mormonism," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 volumes (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:75.

[6]See Stefania Szczurkowska, "The Art Itself: Spectrum and Context" (Provo, Utah: Museum of Art, forthcoming).

[7]Hugh Nibley, *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled,* vol. 10 of The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1991), 382, 316.

[8]Whipple, interview.

[9]I thank Dawn Pheysey, curator at the Museum of Art, who called my attention to the toes peeking out.

[10]Nibley, *Ancient State,* 325.

[11]Minerva Teichert to Laurie [Eastwood], [February 1952], in *Letters of Minerva Teichert,* ed. Laurie Teichert Eastwood (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, forthcoming).

[12]Minerva Teichert to Laurie [Eastwood], November 18, 1946.

[13]Walter Whipple, "Human Goodness: The Faces behind the Art" (Provo, Utah: Museum of Art, forthcoming).

[14]Walter Whipple, labeling, *From Heart and Hand: Polish Religious Folk Art,* exhibit at Museum of Art at Brigham Young University, 1997–98.

[15]Nibley, *Ancient State,* 326.

[16]Peacock, "Art in Mormonism," 73. Richard G. Oman, "Introduction," in *Images of Faith: Art of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 2.

[17]Nibley, *Ancient State,* 327, 328.

[18]Whipple, "Human Goodness."

[19]Whipple, *From Heart and Hand.*

[20]Robert O. Davis, "I *Must* Paint," in *Rich in Story, Great in Faith: The Art of Minerva Kohlhepp Teichert* (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1988), 40.

[21]Wacław Suska (b. 1922), his older brother Bolesław Suska (b. 1919), his son Stanisław Suska (b. 1954), and his sons-in-law Adam Wydra (b. 1953) and Mieczysław Gaja (b. 1953). Wacław taught himself to carve, then shared his knowledge with the others.

[22]Jan Krajewski (b. 1935); his wife, Alfreda Krajewska (b. 1938); and his son Krzysztof Krajewski (b. 1970).

[23]Whipple, *From Heart and Hand.*

[24]Nibley, *Ancient State,* 317.

[25]Minerva Teichert to Laurie [Eastwood], November 22, 1942.

[26]Stefania Szczurkowska, "The Art Itself." Szczurkowska is referring specifically to Polish folk art.

[27]Szczurkowska, "The Art Itself."

[28]Susan G. Thompson, "Sorrow and Apprehension: Northern Renaissance Influences on the Art" (Provo, Utah: Museum of Art, forthcoming).

[29]Thompson, "Sorrow and Apprehension." According to Thompson, the Sorrowing Christ motif is likely based on Isaiah 53:3–5.

[30]Whipple, "Human Goodness."

[31]Szczurkowska, "The Art Itself."

[32]Peacock, "Art in Mormonism," 1:75.

[33]Campbell Gray, director, Museum of Art at Brigham Young University, conversation with author, December 1997.

[34]Pani Lucyna Żakowicz, quoted in Whipple, "Human Goodness."

[35]Whipple, "Human Goodness."

Plate 2. Janus Mostył (b. 1952), *Sorrowing Christ.* Polychrome wood, height 18".

Plate 3. Bolesław Parasion (b. 1950), *The Seven Days of Creation* (plates 3–9). Polychrome wood, height 17".

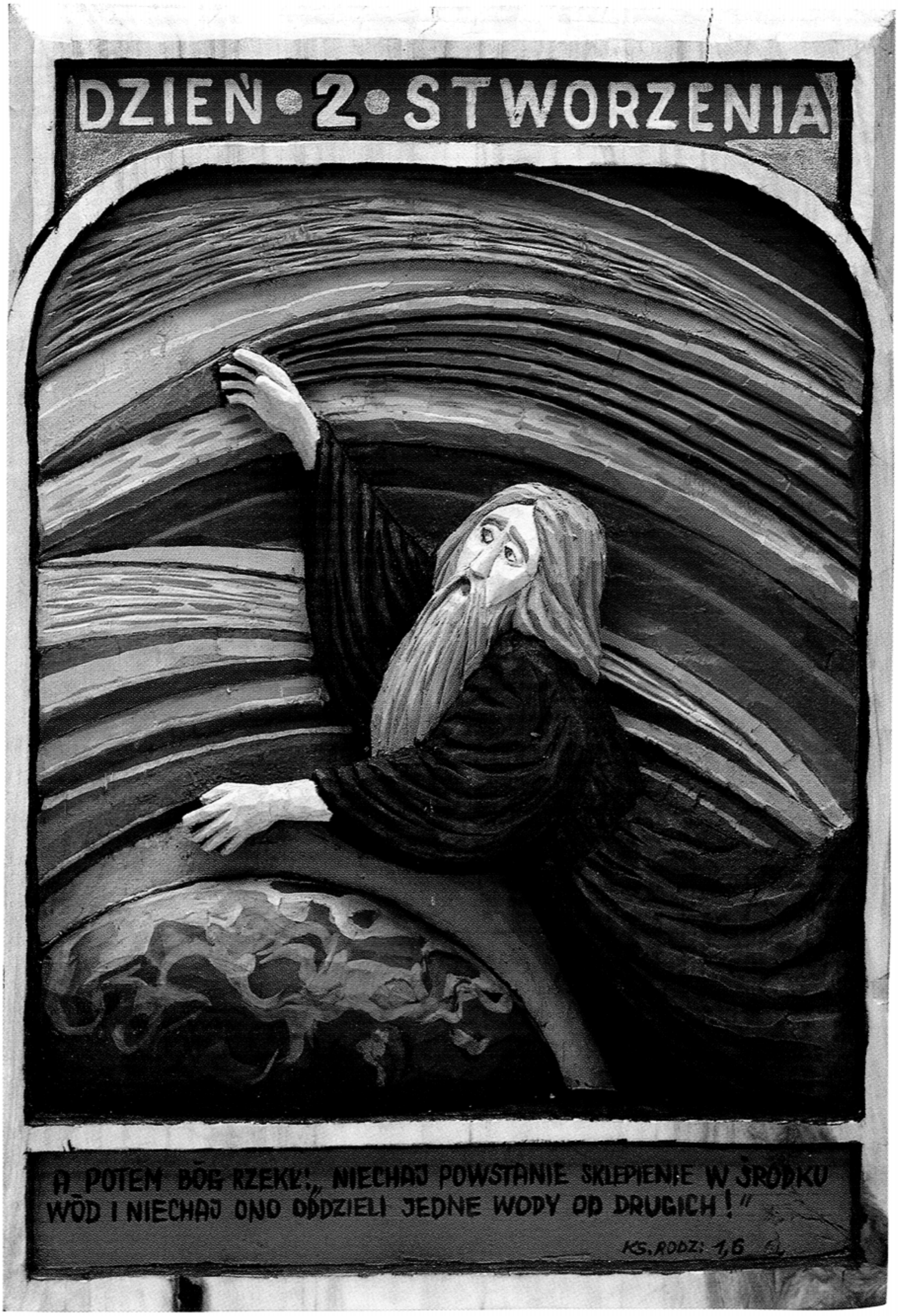
DZIEŃ • 2 • STWORZENIA
A POTEM BÓG RZEKŁ: „NIECHAJ POWSTANIE SKLEPIENIE W ŚRÓDKU WÓD I NIECHAJ ONO ODDZIELI JEDNE WODY OD DRUGICH!"
KS. RODZ: 1,6

Plate 4.

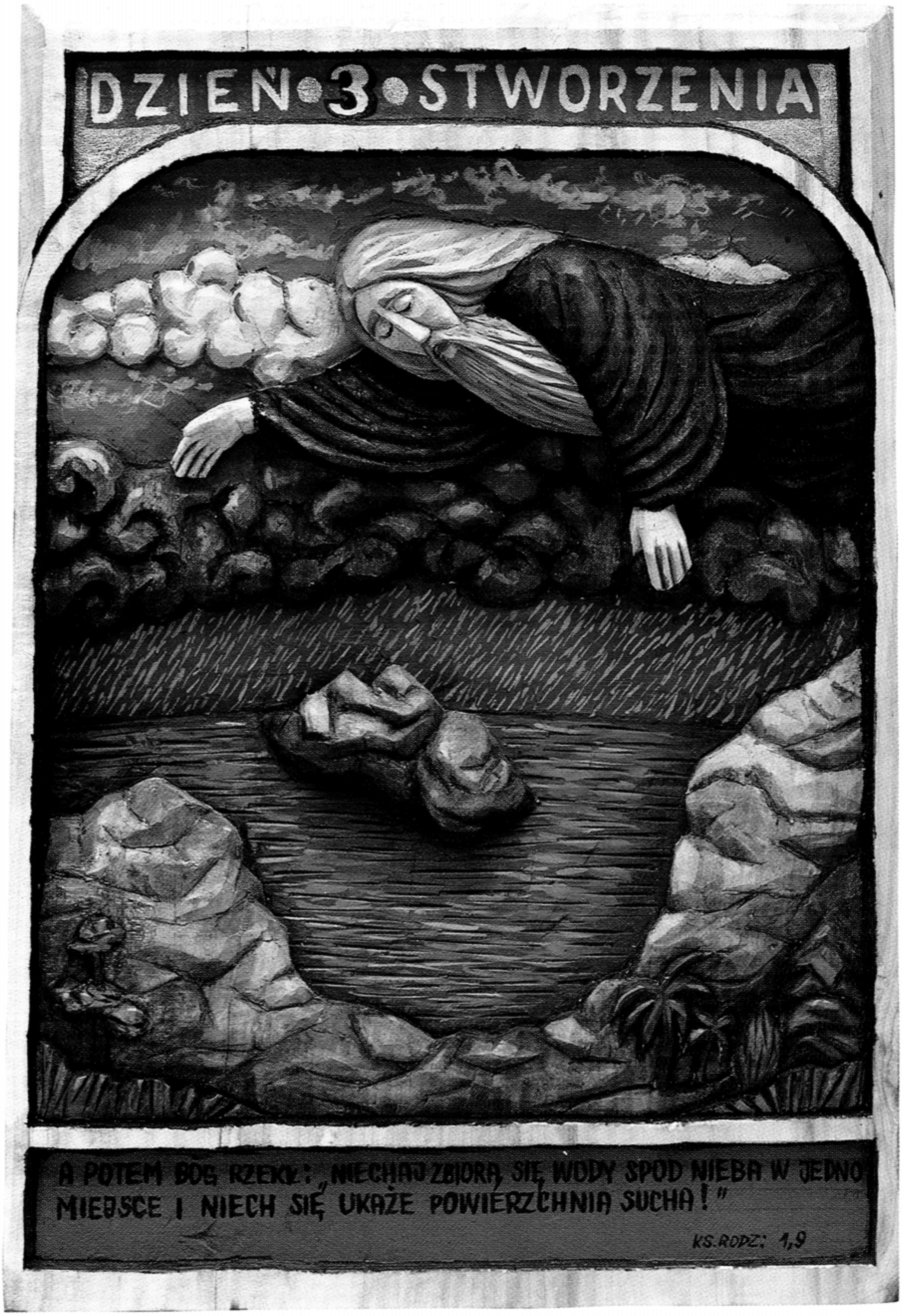
DZIEŃ 3 STWORZENIA
A POTEM BÓG RZEKŁ: „NIECHAJ ZBIORĄ SIĘ WODY SPOD NIEBA W JEDNO MIEJSCE I NIECH SIĘ UKAŻE POWIERZCHNIA SUCHA!"
KS. RODZ: 1,9

Plate 5.

DZIEŃ 4 STWORZENIA
A POTEM BÓG RZEKŁ: „NIECHAJ POWSTANĄ CIAŁA NIEBIESKIE, ŚWIECĄCE NA SKLEPIENIU NIEBA, ABY ODDZIELAŁY DZIEŃ OD NOCY, ABY WYZNACZAŁY PORY ROKU, DNI I LATA
KS. RODZ. 1,14

Plate 6.

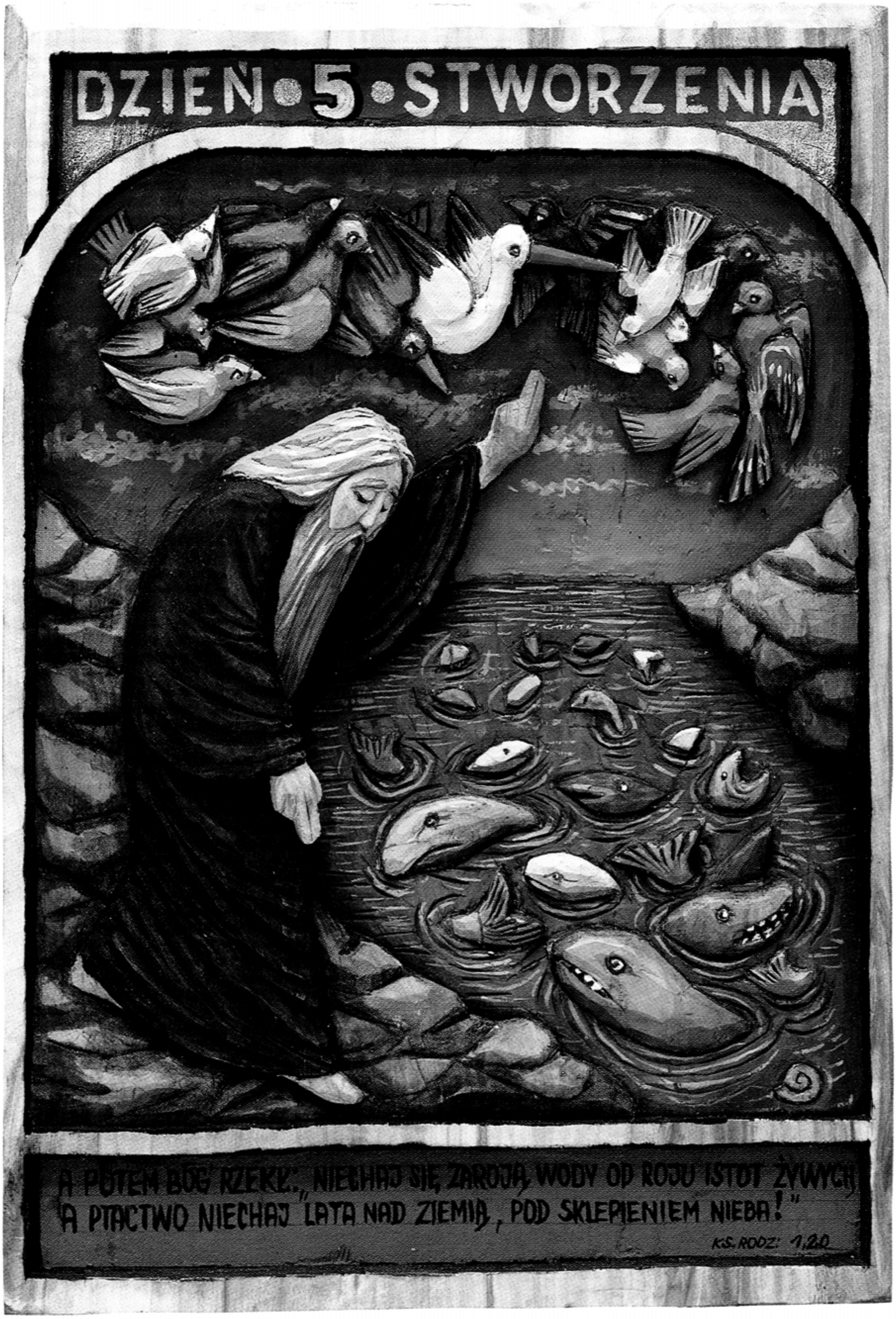
DZIEŃ • 5 • STWORZENIA
A POTEM BÓG RZEKŁ: „NIECHAJ SIĘ ZAROJĄ WODY OD ROJU ISTOT ŻYWYCH,
A PTACTWO NIECHAJ LATA NAD ZIEMIĄ, PODD SKLEPIENIEM NIEBA!"
KS. RODZ: 1,20

Plate 7.

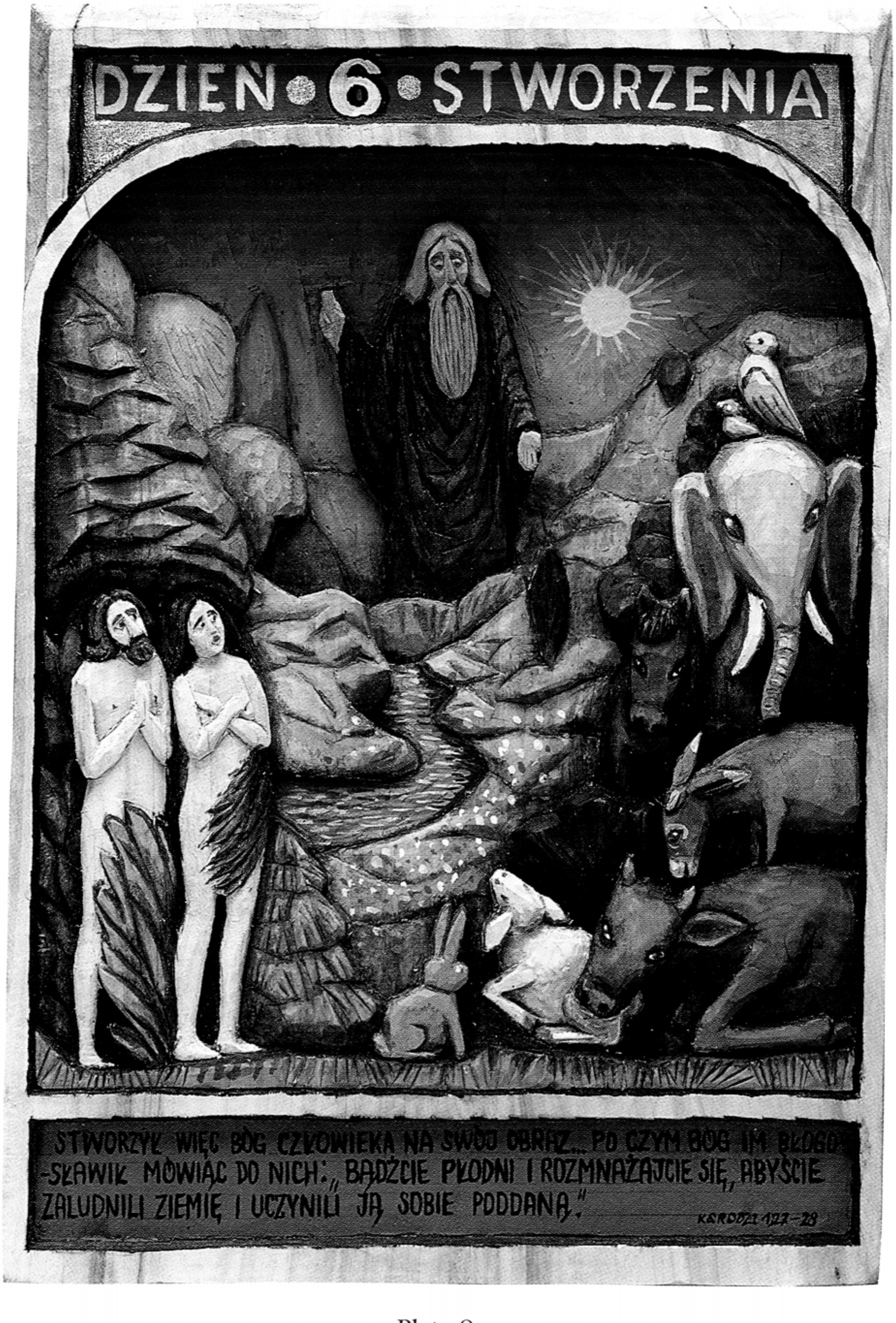
DZIEŃ • 6 • STWORZENIA
I STWORZYŁ WIĘC BÓG CZŁOWIEKA NA SWÓJ OBRAZ... PO CZYM BÓG IM BŁOGO-
-SŁAWIŁ MÓWIĄC DO NICH: „BĄDŹCIE PŁODNI I ROZMNAŻAJCIE SIĘ, ABYŚCIE
ZALUDNILI ZIEMIĘ I UCZYNILI JĄ SOBIE PODDANĄ."
KSIĘGA RODZAJU 1,27-28

Plate 8.

ODPOCZYNEK DNIA SIÓDMEGO
A GDY BÓG UKOŃCZYŁ W DNIU SZÓSTYM SWE DZIEŁO, NAD KTÓRYM
PRACOWAŁ, ODPOCZĄŁ DNIA SIÓDMEGO PO CAŁYM ŚWYM TRUDZIE
JAKI PODJĄŁ.
KS.RODZ. 2,2

Plate 9.

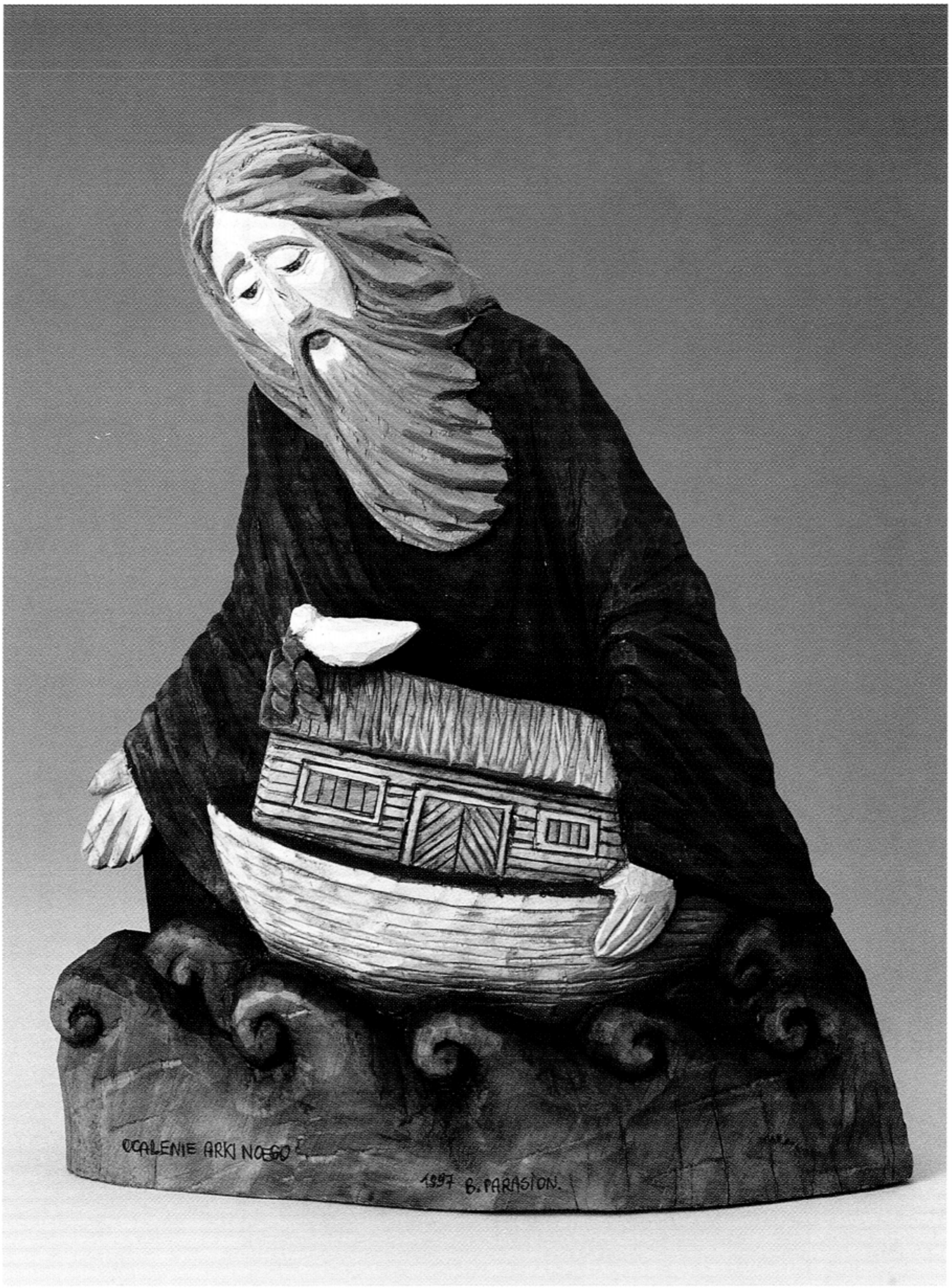

Plate 10. Bolesław Parasion (b. 1950), *Noah's Ark*. Polychrome wood, height 13 1/2".

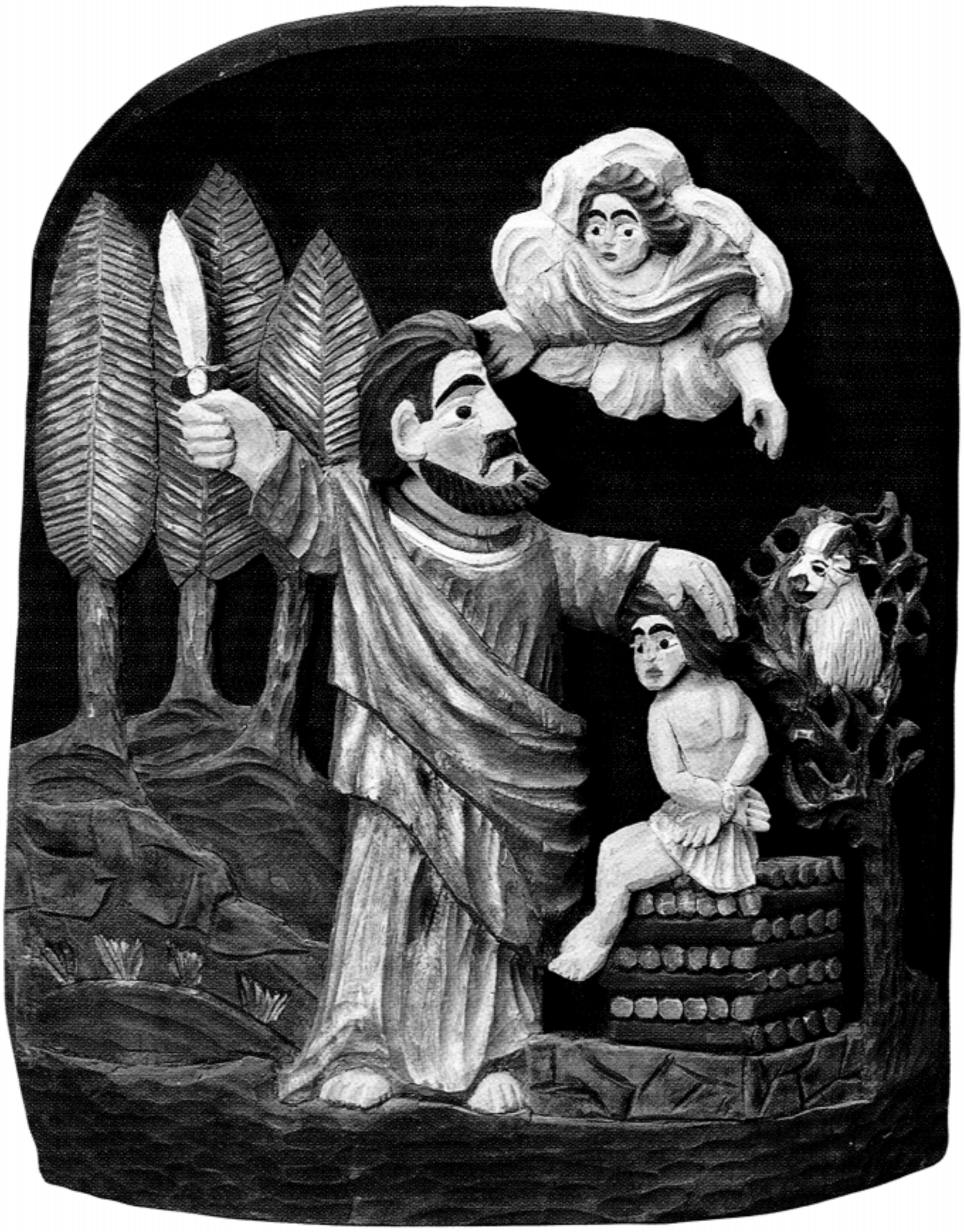

Plate 11. Bronisław Bednarz (b. 1925), *Abraham and Isaac*. Polychrome wood, height 26½".

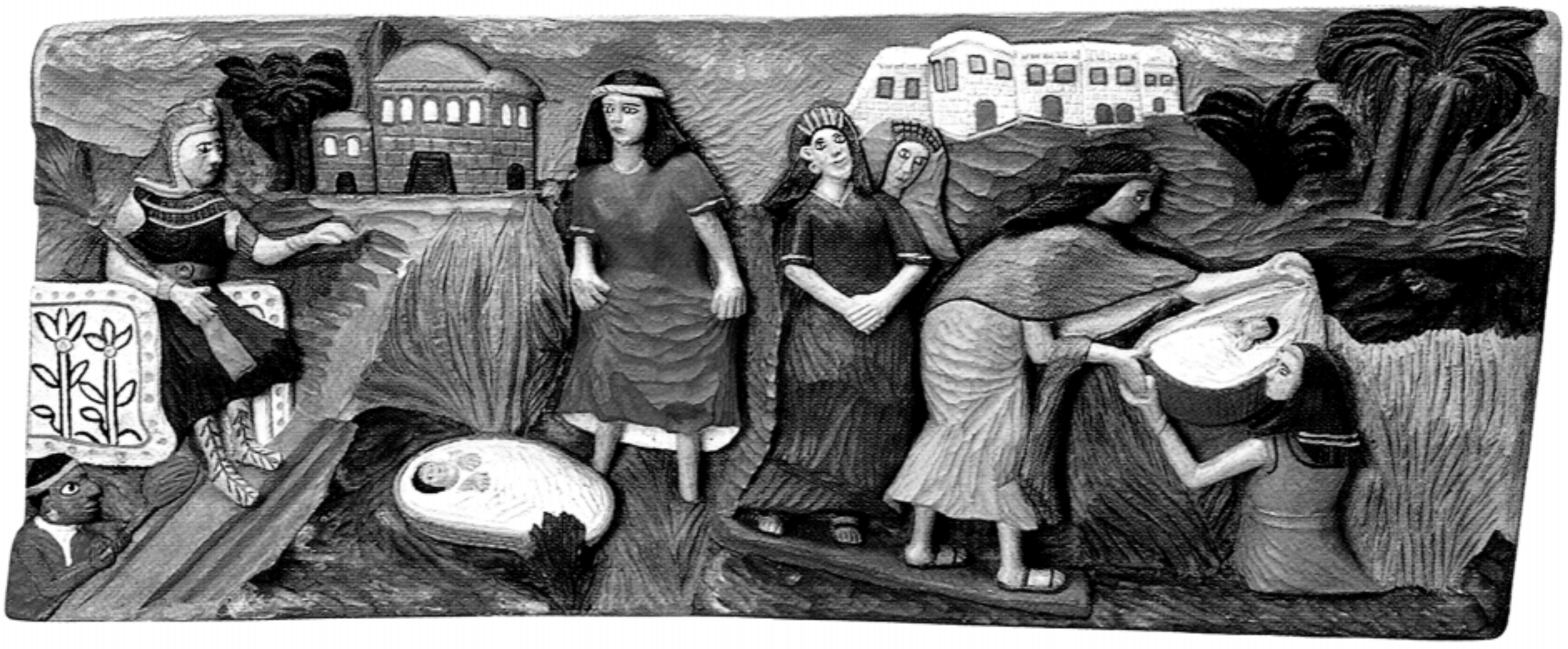

Plate 12. Konstanty Marcinkowski (b. 1921), *Moses*. Polychrome wood, height 12".

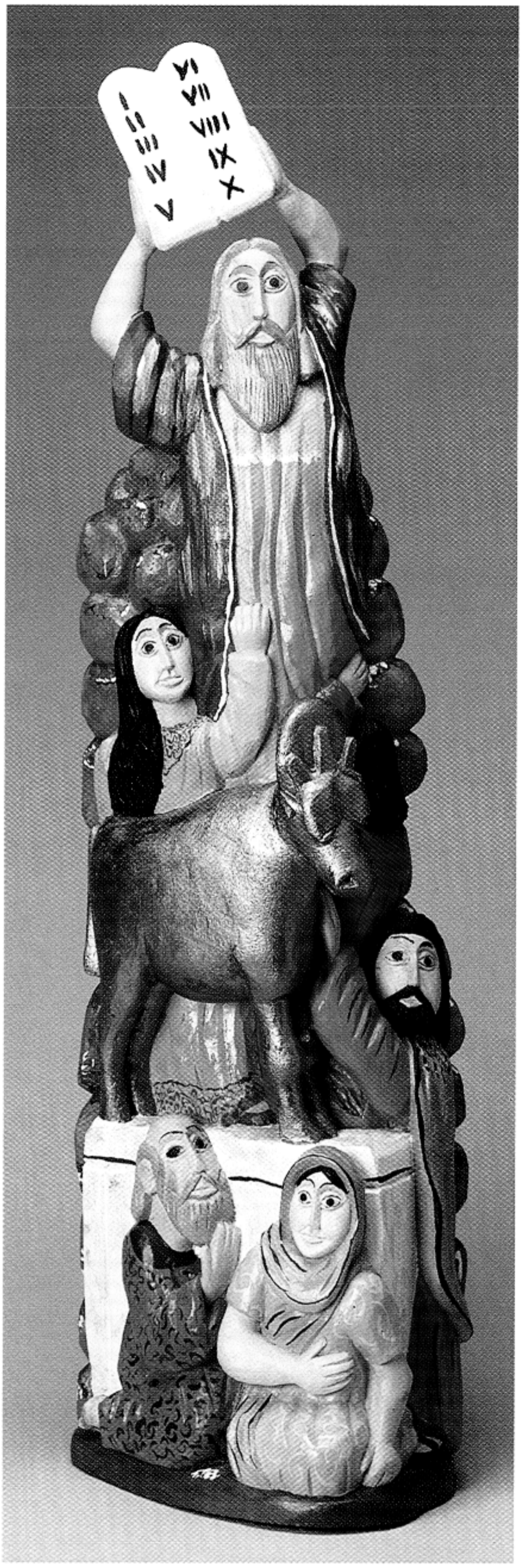

Plate 13. Adam Wydra (b. 1953), *Moses*. Polychrome wood, height 31".

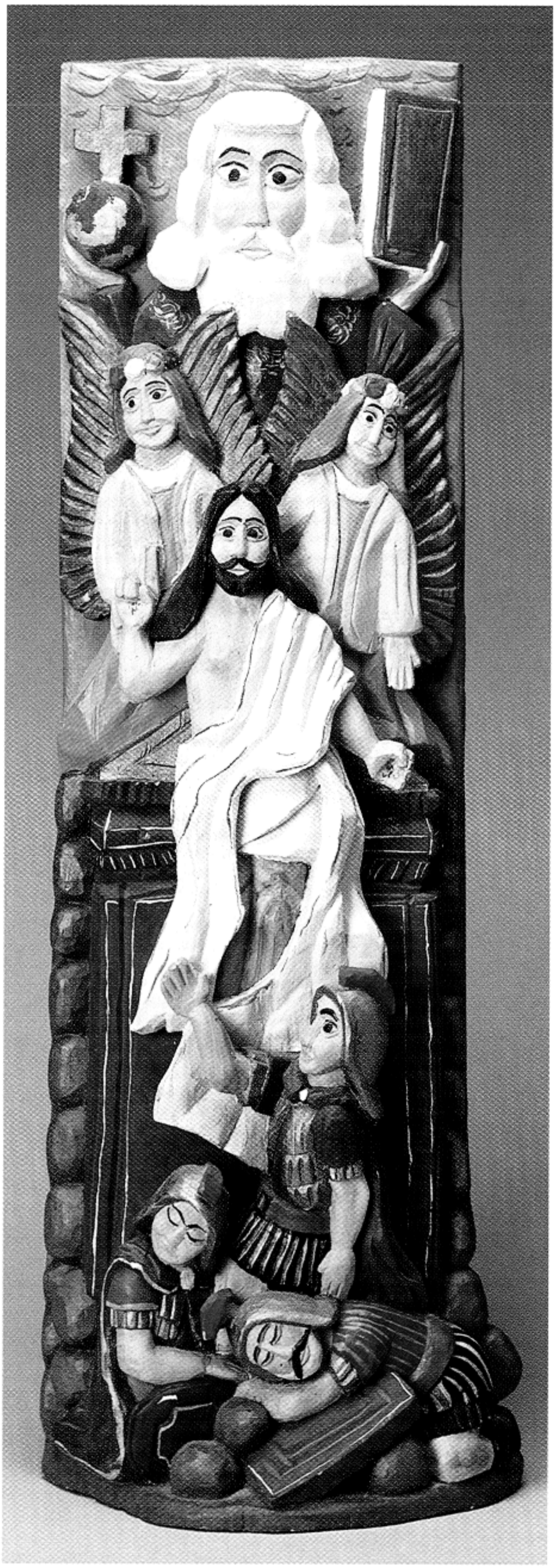

Plate 14. Adam Wydra (b. 1953), *Resurrection*. Polychrome wood, height 32".

Plate 15. Stanisław Dużyński (b. 1923), *Expulsion from Eden.* Polychrome wood, height 12".

Plate 16. Wacław Suska (b. 1922), *The Prodigal Son.* Polychrome wood, height 9½".

Plate 17. Wacław Suska (b. 1922), *Sorrowing Christ*. Polychrome wood, height 10".

Plate 18. Krzysztof Krajewski (b. 1970), *Saint Joseph with Jesus*. Polychrome wood, height 20".

Plate 19. Jan Krajewski (b. 1935), *Holy Family*. Polychrome wood, height 13 1/2".

Plate 20. Roman Śledź (b. 1948), *Christ Nailed to the Cross*. Polychrome wood, height 11".