

Coins

The St John's Night – The Polish Calendar of Traditional Customs and Rituals –



face value	20 zł
metal	Ag 925/1000 and hologram
finish	proof
diameter	38.61 mm
weight	28.28 g
mintage	65,000 pcs

Obverse: On the right-hand side, an image of the Eagle established as the State Emblem of the Republic of Poland. Below, an inscription 20 / ZŁ. In the central part and above the Eagle, images of girls and boys dancing around a bonfire, against the background of fronds of fern. At the bottom, a semicircular inscription, RZECZPOSPOLITA POLSKA, and the notation of the year of issue, 2006. The Mint's mark, $\frac{m}{w}$, under the Eagle's left leg.

Reverse: In the central part, a hologram with a stylized image of a fern flower, changing colours depending on the angle of vision. On the rim, against the background of a decorative low relief, stylized images of two dwarfs. At the bottom, a semicircular inscription, NOC ŚWIĘTOJĄSKA (St John's Night).

Coin designer: **Robert Kotowicz**



face value	2 zł
metal	CuAl5Zn5Sn1 alloy
finish	standard
diameter	27.00 mm
weight	8.15 g
mintage	1,000,000 pcs

Obverse: An image of the Eagle established as the State Emblem of the Republic of Poland. On the both sides of the Eagle, the notation of the year of issue, 20-06. Under the Eagle, an inscription, ZŁ 2 ZŁ. On the rim, an inscription, RZECZPOSPOLITA POLSKA, preceded and followed by six pearls. The Mint's mark, $\frac{m}{w}$, under the Eagle's left leg.

Reverse: An image of a dancing girl holding a garland of flowers in her hand. Below, stylized leaves of fern. Above, a semicircular inscription, NOC ŚWIĘTOJĄSKA (St John's Night).

On the edge: An inscription, NBP, repeated eight times, every second one inverted by 180 degrees, separated by stars.

Obverse designer: **Ewa Tyc-Karpińska**

Reverse designer: **Robert Kotowicz**



Coins struck by the Mint of Poland plc. in Warsaw.

Printed by NBP Printing Office

On May 25, 2006, the National Bank of Poland is putting into circulation the *St John's Night* coins of the following face values:

- 20 zł – struck in proof finish, in silver;
- 2 zł – struck in standard finish, in Nordic Gold alloy.

The St John's Night

This is the shortest night of the year, on June 23 to June 24, falling on the eve of St John the Baptist's Day. In the Polish tradition, it is dubbed "noc świętojańska" (the Night of St John), "palinocka" or "sobótka", or "kupalnocka", "kupalnica", "kupafa".

The festivities of the St John's Night, or the Midsummer Night, are linked to the ancient rites of welcoming the summer and were connected with cults surrounding the sun and the forces of nature as well as with purifying rites of fire and water and accompanying agricultural ceremonies and rites of love and fertility which – according to ancient beliefs and customs – took place during the summer solstice, i.e. in the time of tremendous light, long-shining sun, the full bloom of nature and life. Before Christianity was adopted, such rites and rituals were known and performed in nearly all of Europe. Afterwards, however, they were linked to the cult of the great saint of the Church, John the Baptist and to the calendar of Christian holidays.

Nonetheless, numerous relics of ancient beliefs and rites of welcoming the summer have endured many centuries in the Polish, especially folk traditions linked to celebrating the midsummer night, while the Christian flavour to these celebrations was very weak. It was a general belief that during this strange, short and mysterious night wonders happen: the earth is opening up revealing hidden treasures; water, fire, bonfires' embers are being enchanted, as are plants, especially healing herbs and love-bringing plants. It was believed that the usually barren fern is blooming for a while at midnight, while its big and beautiful flower, shining through the night, has incomparable power.

Water was one the crucial attributes and at the same time one of folk symbols of the midsummer night's celebrations. Throughout Poland, bathing in the rivers, brooks or lakes was forbidden before June 24 and prior to the midsummer night. An earlier bath could end up in drowning, kidnapping by water goddesses or spirits of the drowned, or else in being bitten by a water reptile or in falling prey to various diseases. It was only after the water was "christened" by St John and "thundered through" during summer thunderstorms and rains (which were dubbed midsummer storms and rains), warmed up and purified by daylight mirroring in it, when it became safe and filled with life-giving powers: it ensured strength, beauty, charm; it healed, mainly from skin diseases and even from possession; it supported love practices. In the whole of Poland, it was a common practice to bathe, plunge, wade in the water during the midsummer night or to roll around on the ground stark naked, at night and with no witnesses – which was sometimes done by girls longing for love.

A fixed tradition of the midsummer night's celebration was to float flower garlands by maidens in love. The garland (the symbol

of virginity) – hand-made from seasonal herbs and flowers, fastened to a wooden board, lit by a burning candle put inside it and floating at night with the current of water – was not only the attribute of various girlish love fortune-telling. It became also a gift for the chosen boy, a sign of devotion and love. And when the boy did not hesitate to jump into the water to fish out the garland, declared reciprocated feeling and desire, and sometimes also more serious matrimonial plans.

Fire was said to be gaining special protective, life-giving, magical and purifying features during the midsummer night. Hence, big bonfires, dubbed "sobótkas" or "palinockas," were lit in the fields, communal pastures, hills, forest clearings, and near water. The boys who lit them always stroke the sparks with wooden boards (this is an old technique of lighting a fire by friction).

"Sobótkas" were surrounded by girls clad in white, wearing garlands on their heads, tying sagebrush (*Artemisia vulgaris*) around their hips. This picturesque tradition was immortalized in the 16th century by Jan Kochanowski who devoted a poem dubbed "The Song of St John's Eve." This poem includes also information on acknowledged protective characteristics of the midsummer night's fire.

According to the oldest beliefs, the midsummer night's fire was supposed to tame the elements, the rain, the storm and gales. It was also supposed to frighten and drive away witches, especially if it consumed herbs (first of all, sagebrush and wormwood) which were thought to have magical powers.

Priests strived for fighting off lighting "sobótkas," night-time festivities and casual, erotic behaviour of the youth which were permitted for this one night by tradition and customs; they saw these rituals, and not without just cause, relics of pagan practices. Instead, they were urging the believers to become pious and to take to religious practices in memory of the holy man John. Still, each year, the bonfires attracted throngs of people, mostly the young: maidens and bachelors, but also adults: grown-up men and married women who – just like the girls – tied sagebrush around their hips, believing that this would save them from diseases, pains in the back and aching bones during the hard work at haying and harvest and that it would ensure that they would be fertile and give birth easily. By making a circle around the bonfire, women were singing and tossing bunches of herbs into the fire.

Another regular item on the agenda of "sobótka" gatherings and celebrations was jumping over the flames of bonfires, by means of which boys showed off, trying to impress the girls present at "sobótka." And this was an important, tradition-provided, part of their courtship. Besides, a successful, high-reaching jump over the flames foretold heated, reciprocated, happy love and fast-coming marriage.

According to folk beliefs, plants gained special power of healing, magical and aphrodisiac (erotic) kind during the midsummer night. Therefore, they were used in wide array of magical practices. Foremost among them was the already mentioned sagebrush deemed to be a powerful amulet and an infallible measure against witches, spells, diseases and every kind of evil. Women tied it around their hips during the midsummer night, they tossed this plant into the fires, they sewed it into the hems of their skirts and

wore them throughout the year. Apart from that, bunches of sagebrush were tossed on the roofs, hang on the walls of houses and stables, put into the bed covering of women in labour, used to burn incense at ill people and animals. Similar in capabilities and use were rue (*Ruta graveolens*), northern grass of parnassus (*Parnassia palustris*) and burdock (*Arctium*), which were used – alongside boughs of hazel, linden and maple – to adorn houses for welcoming the summer and were dug into the ridges of patches with a view to good growth and harvest of corn and vegetables, as well as a protection against thunderstorms and hailstorms which could jeopardize their farming. On the eve of St John's Day, various herbs well-tried in home-made healing trade were collected, first of all, St John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), thyme (*Thymus pulegioides*), anise (*Pimpinella*), flowers of black elder (*Sambucus nigra*), European wild ginger (*Asarum europaeum*), sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) and many others.

The most well-known and widely used midsummer-night's love-related plants included the southern adderstongue (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*). During the daylight, girls were seeking its bushes, usually situated on the outskirts of forest clearings, and at midnight, naked, bathing in night-time dew drops, they plucked the plants whispering the incantation known throughout Poland. Helpful in the midsummer night's love labours was also the popular lovage (*Levisticum officinale*), added by girls in love to their boys' vodka so as to stir up their passion.

However, the most important plant in the midsummer night's ceremonies was the fern flower – the flower that exists only in legends, folk tales and fairy tales. As a matter of fact, in reality, fern does not bloom. This mythical flower, with breathtaking colour and glitter, purple, sky blue or golden, which is believed to be blooming during the midsummer night, in the backwoods, in inaccessible wilderness precisely at midnight and only for a fleeting moment, was empowered with unspeakable magical force, as the legend has it. Therefore, the fern flower was sought during the midsummer night in belief that the one who finds it, plucks it out skilfully and manages to take it with them, will be rewarded by it with happiness in love, unusual wisdom, tremendous riches, as well as being shown the way to the treasures hidden deep down the earth, being sure of success in their all undertakings, and even being blessed with the gift of second sight and, if need be, the gift of invisibility. However, to find and win the fern flower was a prospect attainable only for people of great courage and integrity, first subject to difficult tests and only after they come across various dangerous obstacles.

In the Polish, but also the European tradition, the legendary fern flower has thus become the most important and most distinctive symbol of the midsummer night's celebrations and all the miracles of the Eve of St John's Day.

Barbara Ogródowska,
the State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw

All coins issued by the NBP are legal tender in Poland.