

INTRODUCTION

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The Hungarian avant-garde of the early twentieth century may appear to be an esoteric subject, particularly to Western audiences. Indeed, its manifold achievements and contributions to the history of modern art and aesthetics have been largely unheralded in Western scholarship, even if many of its artists and theorists are now accepted as principal figures in the genesis and reception of modernism. Many American collections are enriched by works of Moholy-Nagy, Breuer, Molnár, and any number of other Hungarian modernists. Nevertheless, of all the European (and American) protagonists in the drama of modern art, the Hungarian avant-garde played a distinctive role that today is among the least known and most undervalued.

This relative obscurity contrasts oddly with conditions three-quarters of a century ago when the Hungarians were creatively shaping the character, defining the meanings, and determining the implications of modernist artistic expression. Contemporary journals of the 1910s and 1920s from London to Leningrad were filled with articles by and about these Hungarian pioneers of modern aesthetics and art. Names of artists such as Kassák, Bortnyik, and Uitz, and of critics such as Kállai and Kemény, were common copy in the advanced periodicals of their time. Moreover, contemporaneous art history and philosophical debate themselves were influenced richly by the contributions of other Hungarians — Károly (Charles) Tolnay, Arnold Hauser, Frederick Antal, Leo Popper, and György Lukács, to name a few—who advocated in their writings and lectures the progressive aesthetics (and often politics) of their countrymen.

In large measure, the momentous shift from ready recognition early in the century to relative obscurity is the consequence of tumultuous political and cultural events during the last seventy-five years, a turbulence that not only submerged the thriving cultures of "Mitteleuropa," but moved their historical presence from the center of European consciousness to the periphery of Western awareness. In this violent dislocation, Hungary — like so much of East-Central Europe — was assigned to a Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe, where until relatively recently its free contacts with the West were severed and its essential connections to its own avant-garde past degraded. Thus, the Hungarian artists (and their apologists) best known in the West are those such as László Moholy-Nagy who elected emigration or whose work entered early the international modernist mainstream. Unfortunately, the signal achievements of those important artists who chose in the mid-1920s to return to or remain in Hungary (or to emigrate to the Soviet Union) have been largely erased from popular recognition.

Some responsibility for the eclipse of the Hungarian avant-garde rests with the nature, attitudes, and actions of the artists themselves. Always standing in the political

opposition—to the Habsburg monarchy, to successive revolutionary regimes, to the ultramontane government of conservative reaction, to the German occupiers, and to the post-World War II communist system—progressive Hungarian artists rarely saw their work broadly endorsed or their accomplishments seriously studied or fairly assessed. In fact, it has only been in the last decade or so that the rich heritage of the avant-garde has been fully acknowledged by Hungarian scholars and its art widely exhibited to the public.

Unlike almost every other contemporaneous art movement, the Hungarian avant-garde tolerated, at times even appeared to encourage, diversity in style and breadth in outlook. While the Dutch De Stijl group or the Russian suprematists insisted on a purity of formal expression, the Hungarians adopted a much more heterogeneous perspective, not infrequently promoting concurrently expressionism, futurism, cubism, and constructivism. One finds represented among the Hungarian Activist painters, for example, a panoply of early twentieth century styles, yet adherence to a relatively uniform, if somewhat vague, socialist world view.

With such diversity, it was always difficult for the Hungarian avant-garde to speak with a single voice, despite the authoritative claims of Lajos Kassák, Béla Uitz, Sándor Bortnyik, and others. Thus, historians and critics found the movement difficult to characterize easily or succinctly, despite the numerous texts authored by the artists themselves. Furthermore, many of the important documents written by and about the avant-garde appeared in Hungarian, which posed a language barrier between the artists and the vast majority of Western scholars and audiences. Most Hungarian avant-gardists spoke additional languages, primarily German. However, during their formative years in Hungary and, later, their early years in exile in Vienna and Berlin, all sought to maintain contact with one another and with their homeland. To do this, they frequently employed the Hungarian language.

Finally, the Hungarians often served as the link or bridge between the dynamic developments in Eastern Europe and the West. For the Hungarian artists themselves, this was both a singular advantage and a definite drawback. On the one hand, they benefited directly and early from the aesthetic innovations taking place in Russia and throughout much of Eastern Europe. On the other hand, their unmediated (though selective) embrace of these new trends too often was misunderstood in the West, and distinctive and significant Hungarian accomplishments frequently were attributed to those other artists and movements whose work, ideas, and achievements the Hungarians promoted and adapted to their own needs.

In the light of the dynamic and world-shaping developments of 1989 in Hungary and its Eastern European neighbors, it seems particularly fitting that the 1990s should bring a new appreciation and assessment of the remarkable character of the aesthetics and intentions, successes and limitations of the Hungarian avant-garde through which to reclaim from historical obscurity the movement's essential influence on the development of international modernism. This assessment is undertaken, then, not as a celebration of cultural or national chauvinism but as a responsible step in integrating into the rich and complex history of modern art and aesthetics one of its most important elements: the Hungarian contribution.

The scope of this assessment is an ambitious one: It requires study not only of the avant-garde movement and its principal protagonists, but also of the social, political, and historical backdrop for their unfoldment and activity. Integration of the movement into the international arena then demands an appreciation of the interplay among the other avant-garde movements, artists, and literary figures with whom the Hungarians came in contact.

In view of the profound scope of this undertaking, it was necessary for reasons of clarity and impact to select from a vast profusion of artistic works, interpretations, writings, and other documentation those examples that best serve to enhance our understanding of the development of Hungarian avant-garde aesthetics, intentions, and applications. By focusing on painting, for example, with ancillary attention paid to graphics and selected documentary material, this book acknowledges the primacy of two-dimensional work within the Hungarian movement as compared with the relatively restricted role of Hungarian achievements, however noteworthy, in the three-dimensional media.

Unlike the (largely paper) architecture and sculpture of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde movements, these media constituted largely a secondary mode of expression for Hungary's progressive artists and commentators. With some exceptions, particularly among Hungarian artists in German exile who were affiliated with the Bauhaus, there was relatively little opportunity for architectural work owing to the harsh circumstances of voluntary exile and domestic conditions that discouraged commissions for political radicals. Furthermore, such versatile artists as János Mátty Teutsch, Lajos Kassák, and (especially) László Moholy-Nagy, for whom architecture and sculpture had particular importance, often expressed their aesthetic constructs equally well in two-dimensional works.

Another carefully considered decision was the exclusion of photography from our undertaking. Of all the visual arts of the mature period of Hungarian avant-garde activity (and after), photography is the most widely known and often exhibited in the United States. In recent years there have been several important studies and exhibitions devoted to the photography of André Kertész, Brassai, Kepes, and Moholy-Nagy. In fact, the widespread appreciation of modern Hungarian photography receives important, if indirect, support in this study, which investigates the artistic and cultural environment from which Hungarian photography emerged and to which it so creatively responded.

This study focuses primarily on Hungarian artists who were instrumental in articulating the avant-garde's varied objectives and expressing them pictorially. Not included are those significant artists of Hungarian nationality or extraction whose art or activities had little direct bearing on the course of Hungarian modernism and its contribution to the international avant-garde. Thus, Vilmos Huszár, for example, who played an instrumental role within the Dutch De Stijl group but who had little association with, or direct influence on, the Hungarian avant-garde, is not represented.

This interpretive assessment of the Hungarian avant-garde focuses principally on the years between 1908—when a group of eight Hungarian painters with emphatically progressive aesthetic, social, and stylistic tendencies coalesced—and the year 1930, by which time the heroic period of experimentation, accomplishment, and dissemination had essentially run its course. These two decades embrace the period of greatest accomplishment for the avant-garde, for it was roughly in these 20 years that the artists and their apologists developed a progressive means of expression and concomitant political and social world view that achieved a stunning degree of clarity and forcefulness. Moreover, it was exactly in this period that Hungarian avant-garde aesthetics had its decisive impact on the evolution of modern art.

Almost no historical phase, modern or otherwise, can be said to emerge or conclude decisively at a single moment. Indeed, the following essays acknowledge the rich artistic and cultural background out of which the first truly avant-garde artistic group emerged. Nor did progressive Hungarian art cease abruptly in 1930. By this date, however, conditions in Hungary compelled artists who had been its leading figures to reappraise

their assertive role in avant-garde activity. Many withdrew from engaged aesthetics, thereby paving the way for a new generation of artists who would soon distinguish themselves by their formal experimentation. For members of the Hungarian avant-garde who had elected to remain abroad, 1930 marked the approximate end of their close association with their fellow countrymen as joint participants in a collective movement. By 1930, many who had moved to the West had begun to distance themselves from a strong identification as Hungarian émigré artists, and a significant number had established close ties with other modernist movements.

Like most pioneers and impresarios within the international avant-garde, many Hungarians by 1930 experienced a profound disappointment with their inability to restructure reality through art. As a consequence, one readily detects among a great number of Hungarian avant-gardists a tendency to jettison (or at least to moderate) long-held ideological commitments and idealistic world views. This was especially true among those who had elected to return to their homeland during the 1920s to find contemporary political and social conditions increasingly hostile toward the propagation of the tenets and forms of modern art. Thus, by the end of the decade, the most innovative phase of Hungarian avant-garde expression was over.

For those Hungarians whose radical social commitment remained undiminished and who sought asylum and opportunity primarily in the Soviet Union, the 1930s turned out to be a period of comparatively restricted activity, limited artistic experimentation, and frequent disappointment. The freedom and responsibility they sought to exercise in the service of socialist aesthetics ultimately proved anathema to Stalin's conception of radical art.

The Hungarian avant-garde left a profound legacy despite its brief quarter-century span of mature creativity. The innovative formal solutions avant-garde artists brought to the fine and applied arts have fundamentally shaped the morphology of modern art as well as helped to determine the very image of the contemporary world. Furthermore, the passion and intelligence with which these artists participated in the international discourse on art have affected the very way in which we think, write, and speak about modernist aesthetics. These are laudable accomplishments; how Hungarian painters endeavored to achieve them is the essential subject of the present volume.

It is both timely and fitting that a large-scale study on the Hungarian avant-garde be undertaken in America, drawing on the scholarship of both American and European art and cultural historians. During the period 1908-30, the Hungarians themselves sought direct contacts with American artists, collectors, museums, and scholars, and they valued their connections with American journals and writers. Moreover, an idealized image of America as a country of limitless energy, innovation, and progress occupied a privileged position in their own world view, as is evidenced in several of their publications. This conviction, though shared broadly by almost all participants in the international avant-garde of the early twentieth century, was to play a consequential role a decade or so later. In the 1930s when affiliates of the Hungarian avant-garde felt compelled to emigrate once again, it was primarily to the United States that László Moholy-Nagy, Marcel Breuer, György Kepes, Andor Weininger, and dozens of other Hungarian artists brought the passion, commitment, and experience that they had acquired during the preceding two decades. In America, they found conditions favorable to their ideas and art, and there they created what might be recognized as the final phase of their progressive "new vision" of a modern art for modern man, an ideal image first articulated in an earlier time and place by the Hungarian avant-garde.

TO ACQUAINT THE READER with the historical, political, and cultural background from which the Hungarian avant-garde emerged, this volume opens with an overview of Hungarian social history by István Deák of Columbia University. Professor Deák attends closely to the dynamic events in nineteenth and twentieth Hungarian history that shaped profoundly the aesthetic and social perspectives of the avant-garde artists.

The character, objectives, and achievements of the Hungarian avant-gardists are next assessed in my own essay, in which the history of Hungarian modern art is substantially reinterpreted in light of recent scholarly studies and from the perspective of an American art historian.

Júlia Szabó, a senior researcher at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, next examines trends and techniques in Hungarian painting at the turn of the century and their influences on the visual experiments of the avant-garde.

John Bowlit, professor at the University of Southern California, investigates the remarkable role and contributions, as well as connections and interactions between the Hungarian avant-garde and Russian art, both progressive and conservative, during the first third of the century.

In a complementary essay, Krisztina Passuth of the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris surveys the connection between Hungary's avant-garde painters and apologists and those of other progressive movements in East-Central Europe.

The volume concludes with two particularly useful sections compiled by Oliver A.I. Botar: a substantial comparative chronology of significant events within the Hungarian avant-garde, international avant-garde, and political spheres; and an extensive selected bibliography embracing primary and secondary sources.