

Prologue

In 1898, the first painting which bore the characteristic marks of Art Nouveau was produced in Hungary. The painting in question is the *Golden Age* by János Vaszary (Plate XXI, Fig. 34), and although other Hungarian painters such as Károly Ferenczy and József Rippl-Rónai had earlier shown tendencies towards an Art Nouveau style, *Golden Age* can be acknowledged as an inaugural piece of work. At the same time it is a mature painting in which—if we examine both its form and meaning—we may understand the circumstances and peculiarities surrounding the birth of Art Nouveau in Hungary.

In the picture, the intertwined forms of two lovers stand before a backdrop of bushes in a garden furnished with antique statuary receding into the dim background. The muscular body of a young Apollonian and the marble-smooth figure of a veil-clad woman emerge from the lower edge of the painting. Her left hand rests in the man's palm, while her right reaches toward the sensuously rich censer, strewn to the brim with roses. Yellow ribbons of smoke rise from the calyces of the blossoming rosebuds. The dispassionate calm of the statuesque Classicist nudes creates an uneasy tension with the Romantic setting of the secretive and mystical garden. An opalescent green tonality pervades the entire pictorial surface. An elaborately sculpted surrounding frame is actually worked into the picture itself. The frame's gilded ornamentation forms an intoxicatingly attractive and yet somehow alienating setting.

The spatial structure of the composition and the academic treatment of the nudes are accomplished in a traditional manner; similarly, there is nothing innovative about the handling of colour, which relies heavily on the play of light and shade. Nonetheless, the use of these seemingly traditional elements does not result in an academic or realistic work but rather in a fantastic, exotic creation which mingles naturalistic details with implausible elements: the splendid musculature of the youth is rendered true to life, whereas the decorative silhouette of the bush behind him is as lifeless as a paper cutout. The natural gesture of the embrace is contradicted by the studied artificiality of the censer filled with roses, while the canvas, which strives for an illusion of spatial depth, is surrounded by a frame which is a veritable showcase of applied art, and which, with its affected, sinuous ornamentation and banal heart-shaped motifs, strips all semblance of verisimilitude and credibility from the mythological Golden Age. The suggestive emotional power of the picture is much enhanced by the fact that the painter, quite arbitrarily and without regard for the locale and motifs of his subject, chooses one dominant colour: an unnaturally pale and chilly green, the light of which, emerging from the depths, robs all other natural colours of their qualities.

The various "happenings" in Vaszary's painting do not exhaust the range of characteristics to be found in Art Nouveau. For one thing, the Art Nouveau style itself turns out to be a heterogeneous concept, with plenty of room for the inclusion of a deepening emphasis on reality and a heavy mysticism, as well as elements both of naturalism and

stylization. But this heterogeneity is itself already a stylistic feature, at least as regards the Secessionist painting of Germany and Austria. Yet more is at stake here than mere eclecticism; this is something quite different. The new quality, the new style manifests itself where Classical, Romantic, academic and decorative elements fuse pictorially to form a novel entity, a new meaning which turns out to be the vehicle for a whole range of formerly unknown moods and intoxicating aesthetic sensations. And *Golden Age* possesses nearly all of these novelties.

Numerous stylistic traits of Art Nouveau originate in the *fin de siècle* attitude that mankind is the helpless plaything of unknown cosmic forces, and that in this chaotic, anxiety-ridden condition, "art is the great longing of the nineteenth century, its ideal, its solace, and, at least for a while, the all but supreme standard of existence".¹ Therefore, the typical mind of the age was most susceptible to the experience of art as a narcotic, while the artist of the time did his best to conjure up this narcotic quality through sensuous, voluptuous forms, a veritable luxuriance of such a boundless crescendo of hypertrophied decorations intended to shock the senses, the ornamental motifs playing, as it were, a spellbinding role. In Vaszary's painting the winding wisps of smoke, the sensuous petals of the opulent roses and especially the fleshy lianas which gently interlace on the two sides of the frame, all of these cloying, swelling gilt ornaments produce an enervating narcotic. Moreover, as if in consequence, this picture presents certain other characteristics of Art Nouveau: an international aestheticism which at times borders on affectation, and a striving for theatrical effect which renders the depicted scene "unlifelike". But these extreme features—no matter how typical and universal they are—still do not reveal much about the form-creating aspects of Art Nouveau, about the aesthetic discoveries which led to the formation of its decorative pictorial approach. Yet it is precisely this dichotomy—the links with a Romantic-Classical pictorial mode on the one hand, and the suggestion of new meanings through the forms which have a traditional appearance but are employed with complete licentiousness, on the other, which makes this painting so typical in an Art Nouveau sense. It is the tension arising from this dichotomy, its eclectic chaos, which qualifies it to recall the ambience of its epoch, to point out its contradictions, the seemingly impenetrable fabric of its problems, and to come to our aid in the mapping out of those factors which determine the human and artistic physiognomy of the turn of the century.