

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

Doctoral dissertation

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János Major (1934–2008)
Monograph and Œuvre Catalogue

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Budapest, 2016

The subject matter of the dissertation

This doctoral dissertation explores the œuvre of János Major (1934–2008), an important member of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde and the so called Iparterv-generation, dedicating special attention to the analysis of the works created in the 1960s and the 1970s. The thematic focus of the dissertation – the result of both the œuvre and the author's choice – provides a prominent place within the graphic and the conceptual periods for the works dealing with Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, the Tiszaeszlár blood libel, and the Holocaust. These works constitute outstanding examples of the reception of the Holocaust and Jewish identity in Hungarian art.

Monograph and œuvre catalogue

The mention of monograph *and* œuvre catalogue in the title does not only denote the content of the dissertation, but it also points out the methods employed. According to the author, sound interpretation can only be built upon solid data; the database – including the œuvre catalogue – therefore constitutes the background of and the basis for the monograph. Data included in the appendix are often uninteresting by themselves, yet they are essential for the reconstruction and the interpretation of a work, a group of works or an exhibition. Without these data, solid deductions cannot be made.

The structure of the dissertation

The monograph follows both a chronological and a thematic approach, it discusses all the periods of the artist and all his important works. The main parts of the dissertation, denoted with roman numerals, show the chronology and separate the main periods of the œuvre. The first introductory part includes chapter 1, which concerns the theoretical and methodological framework of the dissertation – including illuminating case studies – and chapter 2, which gives a review of the œuvre's historiography.

The second part covers the life and art of the artist up to obtaining his diploma. Chapter 3 describes his family background and early years with special attention given to the Holocaust, which influenced Major's life and works to a great extent. This chapter also gives a review of his education at different institutions including the reconstruction of the story of his removal from and re-admittance to the Academy of Fine Arts. Chapter 4 deals with the artist's early etchings, the influence of Dürer and his contemporaries on 1950s' Hungarian graphics and the 1956 revolution. It also covers his diploma works, the general status of graphic artists in the period and works created either on contractual basis or for sale, described in the dissertation as a parallel œuvre.

The third part concerns Major's 1960s etchings. Chapter 5, besides discussing terminology, is dedicated to stylistic questions (the so-called surnaturalism, direct realism, abstraction, pop art and photorealism) and issues related to artistic approach (perspective, body image, existentialism). Chapter 6 covers the most important part of the œuvre, namely drawings and etchings thematising Jewish identity, anti-Semitism and the Tiszaeszlár blood libel.

Part four covers tombstone photographs and conceptual works created in the first half of the 1970s. One of the three chapters – continuing the topic of chapter 6 – analyses works connected to Jewish identity and the Holocaust, while chapter 7 introduces the tombstone photographs and conceptual works built upon these photos. Chapter 10 discusses different border situations. It describes 1969 as a transitional year considering exhibition possibilities and analyses works

dealing with the issues of power and bureaucracy, as well as works situated at the border of private and public sphere. Furthermore, the chapter discusses works related to popular culture, to the relationship of the West and the East as well as different layers of the public sphere and the importance of personal networks in reaching these levels.

Part five covers the periods following a major break in the œuvre in year 1976: the reconstructions of the Buda castle gothic sculptures, the artist's work at the Budapest History Museum and the works created after 1985. The last chapter discusses the artist's influence: works created in collaboration with others, his role in education, and the reception of the artist and his œuvre in contemporary art.

The dissertation is amended with an extensive appendix: the artist's complete bibliography and the cited literature is followed by Major's selected bibliography, containing only the main titles. The database includes the transcription of the artist's student records from the Academy of Fine Arts, the list of his awards as well as his solo and collective exhibitions. The œuvre catalogue contains all the artist's known works together with their physical and bibliographic data (exhibitions, reproductions, literature). The catalogue aims to be complete, yet due to the scattering of the œuvre and the passage of time it is natural that such a work cannot ever be considered finished.

Main topics and proportions of the monograph

Two chapters are dedicated to the issues of Jewish identity and anti-Semitism, the one discussing the graphic works is double in size of an average chapter. It is not a coincidence that this topic – excluding the introductory chapters and the epilogue – takes up one third of the discussion of the œuvre. János Major had been an excellent draughtsman and a major figure in Hungarian conceptual art, yet in both domains he had artists of equal standing among his contemporaries. However, when it comes to the question of Jewish identity, Holocaust and anti-Semitism, his œuvre seems unparalleled: he created consecutively high quality, pioneering works dealing with such issues.

Two further prominent parts of the œuvre, the 1960s etchings and the tombstone photographs along with the conceptual works, are also analysed at length. On the contrary, contracted works and prints created for sale in the 1960s–1970s are only discussed from the perspective of the sociology of art. As from an art historical point of view Major's works created for the museum are – with the exception of the reconstructions of the gothic sculptures – of little interest, they are only discussed briefly. Similarly, only a half chapter is dedicated to the period following 1985, as contrary to the high number of existing works from the mid-1990s their quality declined considerably.

A number of topics discussed in the monograph contribute – beyond Major's work – to the better understanding of the period. The 1950s operation of the Academy of Fine Arts could be important for the history of institutions, while the status of graphic arts and draughtsmen contributes to a sociological perspective. The introduction of three 1969 shows – among them the first “self-financed” exhibition –, all connected through Major's person, offers a contribution to exhibition history. The extension of the concept of surnaturalism to etchings and the analysis of the importance of Dürer and his contemporaries in 1950s Hungarian art contributes to the history of graphic arts. The notion of direct realism introduced in the dissertation might be used in the future not only for graphics, but also in the domain of painting and sculpture.

Some topics, which provide wider contexts for Major's works are discussed as excursions, such as the artistic reception of the Six-Day War and the cultural reception history of the Buda castle gothic sculptures. Further topics, offering broader contexts for the artist's œuvre are also discussed: the reception history of the Tiszaeszlár blood libel case, the expressions of Jewish identity along with the theme of the Holocaust in fine arts as well as the relations of art and existentialism. Nonetheless, the full investigation of these issues could not be implemented here, given the topic and scope of the dissertation, but the main traits of these phenomena were characterised, building upon the author's related publications and ongoing research.

Position and methods

It appears necessary to briefly outline the position of and the methods used in the dissertation. In their own time, the public had limited access to Major's works, therefore the number of available contemporary sources is very low. From the 1960s and the 1970s only two interviews are available; the artist did not write a diary, contemporary writings and notes are virtually non-existent. Further interviews with the artist were made in the 1990s and 2000s, but in this period one must consider both the distorting effect of the passage of time, and that of paranoid schizophrenia that the artist had been diagnosed with – especially in the case of a longer manuscript.

It is exactly due to this limited number of sources that the monograph builds upon the existing ones extensively, doing this with the caution and critical approach demonstrated through case studies in chapter 1. The quantity of oral historical sources had been increased significantly by interviews conducted by the author, and to a lesser extent by others. In order to illustrate and to alleviate the verification of the arguments, the sources are not just referenced but quoted in their entirety in the text, separated by block quotations.

Considering the position of the dissertation it seems important to note that although relations of art and power and repressive measures directed against Major and his works are discussed at a number of occasions, this had been done out of historical interest rather than for providing an argument for canonization.

While treating visual, textual and oral sources, the dissertation is characterised by micro-philological interest and – according to the aim of the author – a similar precision. During the analyses the reconstruction of the original cultural, social and political contexts of the works were considered to be of eminent importance, as the significance of these works can only be judged in relation to these contexts. Although the analyses were executed from today's perspective, they first and foremost aim to explore the original meaning and context of the works, building upon research and knowledge accumulated about the period.

This monograph covers an œuvre which could only reach the public in its own time in a restricted and fragmented way and never in its entirety. The dissertation provides the analysis of the œuvre and its different periods and defines their place in art history. Furthermore, the monograph also offers a contribution to the 1960s–1970s reception history of Jewish identity, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in fine arts and aims to advance a nuanced discourse about these phenomena.

Publications concerning János Major

Book

“A halottak élén” – Major János világa / “Leading the Dead” – The World of János Major, Budapest, Magyar Képzőművészeti Egyetem / Hungarian University of Fine Arts, 2013.

Study, article

“Zsidó identitás, antiszemitizmus és holokauszt: Major János sírkőfotói és konceptuális művei (1969–1974)” (Jewish Identity, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust: János Major’s Tombstone Photographs and Conceptual Works, 1969–1974), *Ars Hungarica* (2017, forthcoming).

“The Strange Case of Existentialism and Franz Kafka in Hungarian Art” (with Mari Árvai), in: Ljiljana Kolečnik (ed.): *French Artistic Culture and Post-war Socialist Europe*, Zagreb, 2017 (forthcoming).

“»Véletlenségből lettem grafikus?« Major János hatvanas évekbeli sokszorosított grafikái” (János Major’s Etchings in the Sixties), *Ars Hungarica* 40:2 (2014), 257–268.

“Gothic Masterpieces in Modern Disguise”, in: Marjeta Ciglenički és Polona Vidmar (eds.): *Art and Architecture around 1400. Global and Regional Perspectives*, Maribor, 2012, 325–332 [Major: 326–328].

“Biboldó mosakszik, 1967” (The Yid is Washing Himself, 1967), *Élet és Irodalom* 56:43 (2012. 10. 26.), 22.

“Major János sírkőfotóiról” (János Major’s Tombstone Photographs), *Műemlékvédelem* 5 (2010), 354–359.

Thesis

Medievalism in Contemporary Hungarian Art (1990–2010), MA thesis in History, Budapest, Central European University (CEU), 2010 [Major: 29–31].

Major János (János Major), MA thesis, supervisor: Annamária Szőke, Budapest, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Institute of Art History, 2009.

Curated exhibitions

La Shoah et les arts: histoires hongroises (1945–1989), Paris, Hungarian Institute, 2014.

A halottak élén – Major János világa / “Leading the Dead” – The World of János Major, Hungarian University of Fine Arts, 2013.

Further publications

[Discussing only some of Major's works, or rather topics providing contexts for them.]

Cultural history of the Tiszaeszlár blood libel

“The Tiszaeszlár Blood Libel: Image and Propaganda”, in: *Nineteenth-Century Anti-Semitism in International Perspective*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017 (forthcoming). Hungarian translation: „A tiszaeszlári vérvád: kép és propaganda”, *Apertúra* (2016/2017, forthcoming).

“Vérvád és zene: Erdélyi József versének kontextusa és recepciója” (Blood Libel and Music: the Context and Reception of József Erdélyi's Poem), in: Ádám Ignác, Anna Szemere (eds.): *A populáris zene és a kulturális politika viszonya Magyarországon*, conference publication, Budapest, MTA BTK–Rózsavölgyi, 2017 (forthcoming).

“A Sakterpolkától az Egészséges Fejbőrig: a tiszaeszlári vérvád zenei szubkultúrái” (Polka and Skinheads: Musical Subcultures of the Tiszaeszlár Blood Libel), *Múlt és Jövő* 1 (2016), 81–103.

Iván Sándor: “Szembenézni a magyar történelemmel. Véri Dániel interjúja a *Tiszaeszlár* című drámáról és a hatvanas-hetvenes évekről” (Iván Sándor: Facing Hungarian History. Daniel Véri's interview about the drama Tiszaeszlár and about the sixties-seventies), *Jelenkor* 6 (2015), 662–667.

“»Szembenézni a magyar történelemmel« Véri Dániel interjúja Sándor Ivánnal Tiszaeszlár című drámájáról és a hatvanas-hetvenes évekről” (“Facing Hungarian History” Daniel Véri's interview with Iván Sándor about his drama Tiszaeszlár and about the sixties-seventies), in: Sándor Iván: *A tiszaeszlári per és 2015* (The Tiszaeszlár Blood Libel and 2015), Budapest, L'Harmattan–Könyvpont, 2015, 215–226.

“A tiszaeszlári vérvád zenei feldolgozásai: hagyományok, interpretációk, narratívák. (Németh Hajnal: Hamis vallomás; Fischer Iván: A Vörös Tehén)” (Musical Adaptations of the Tiszaeszlár Blood Libel: Traditions, Interpretations, Narratives // Hajnal Németh: False Testimony; Iván Fischer: The Red Heifer), *Múlt és Jövő* 2 (2014), 23–36.

“Tiszaeszlár: The Site of an Alleged Ritual Murder” in: *The Challenge of the Object. 33rd Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art: Post Graduate Program*, Nürnberg, 2012, 150–151.

Holocaust and the arts, Jewish identity

“Holocaust and Jewish Identity” / „Holokausz és zsidó identitás”, in: Edit Sasvári, Sándor Hornyik (eds.): [Volume written by the 1960s–1970s research group at Kassák Museum / A Kassák Múzeum hatvanas-hetvenes évek kutatócsoportjának tanulmánykötete], London, Thames & Hudson / Budapest, Vince Kiadó, 2018 (forthcoming).

“Holokausz és zsidó identitás a magyar grafikában (1944–1961)” (Holocaust and Jewish Identity in Hungarian Graphic Art, 1944–1961), in: Gábor Pataki, Emese Révész (eds.): *Grafika változó időkből. A magyar grafika 1945–1961 között* (Graphic Art in Changing Times. Hungarian Graphic Art 1945–1961), Miskolc, Herman Ottó Múzeum–Miskolci Galéria, 2017 (forthcoming).

“Művészet és emlékezet. A magyar holokausz hetvenedik évfordulója” (Art and Memory. The Seventieth Anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust), *Ars Hungarica*, 41:1 (2015), 74–96.

“1967: Hungarian Art and the Six-Day War”, *Shibboleth 1967/1968* conference, Warsaw, Polish Academy of Sciences, 2015 (manuscript).