

Eötvös Loránd University  
Faculty of Liberal Arts

DOKTORAL THESES

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**FATE TURNED ORNAMENT —  
THE CREATION OF HOME  
IN THE ARTISTIC AND LITERARY  
LIFEWORk OF ANNA LESZNAI**

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## I. Summary of the research topic

For Anna Lesznai (1885-1966), a philosophy that took shape over long decades formed a system that became the basis of her worldview, her outlook and artistic and human creed. At the centre of this philosophy lay the concept of *ornament*. This system, with strict formal principles and metaphysical-spiritual content, had an effect on her graphic and applied art creations, her literary oeuvre, her pedagogical activities, even her personal relationships. Indeed, it is a constant presence in every segment of her lifework. The *ornamental outlook* played a decisive role in her activities – starting with her first applied art designs, journal entries and tales; continuing through the 1920s, in her poetry and genre paintings of peasants; finally appearing in the pedagogical summary of her years in America, as well as the birth of her epic work, the novel entitled *In the Beginning Was the Garden*. According to Lesznai, ornamentation was more than just an artistic pursuit or one possible aspect of everyday existence. Abiding by her own expression, it represented a fully-achieved life.

The present dissertation reconstructs, outlines and defines this ornamentalist philosophy through Lesznai's artistic legacy and journal entries, as well as her handwritten notes expounding on aesthetic and theoretical themes. This system fundamentally determined her identity as an artisan and a person. In addition, these data serve as a time-sensitive interpretation of the concepts *ornament* and *ornamentalism* in both Hungarian and European contexts, contributing to our understanding of the period's thinking about ethics, aesthetics and art.

Besides the ornamental outlook, *home* and the *creation of home* assumed conspicuous importance in Lesznai's lifework, playing an integral role in all her artistic and communal pursuits. Her entire creative work and every aspect of her oeuvre is conceived in the spirit of belonging somewhere, the creation of a practical and spiritual home or community, the discovery of her own medium, a cosy and intimate sphere. She wished to make the world liveable and inhabitable, even strived to furnish it. As a result of this mindset and idiosyncratic lifestyle, the search for Paradise became a constant motif in her work – the fashioning and formation of an insular world obeying its own set of laws, an idyllic Home.

Anna Lesznai needed the ornamentalist worldview. Through working with ornament, she made these principles her own, and they eventually influenced all her artistic and human endeavours. She found a belief and a home in forms. Her commitment to her own ornamental outlook practically grew into a religion, with the tenets of her philosophy becoming articles of faith.

Ornament, home and faith – the very pillars of this systematic worldview – provided a consistent methodology and basis for inquiry in the writing of this dissertation, in order to reveal, analyze and assess the life and lifework of Anna Lesznai.

## **II. Research methods and uncovered sources**

The present dissertation makes up for what is lacking in the general research by treating rather important, though previously unrevealed portions of the legacy – especially those in connection with ornamentalist philosophy, the creation of home, and faith or questions of religion. Thus, through artwork and written documents, we have been able to reconstruct changes and modifications in Lesznai's artistic and creative outlook from the beginning of the 1910s all the way to the conclusion of her lifework in 1966. The dissertation uses material from 12 separate art collections, public collections and archives in Hungary.

As far as Lesznai's artistic legacy, the Hatvany Lajos Museum in Hatvan provided the basis for research. The bequest housed there is not the only Lesznai collection to be found in Hungary's public collections. Nevertheless, the bequest in the Hatvan museum consists of approximately 2,400 items accompanied by other documentation of distinct significance spanning her entire lifework. Additionally, there are a multitude of sketches which provide insight into aspects of her studio work. Also at our disposal are several alterations to the plans of finished works, providing a glimpse into her design and composition principles as well.

With respect to research into the dissertation's themes, besides the legacy of artistic work, we primarily relied upon archive sources housed in the Petőfi Literary Museum, in the manuscript archive at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and to a lesser extent in the Széchényi National Library's archive.

Within this category of material, Anna Lesznai's journals stand out. Registered as a journal under Item No. V.3670/43/1-20 in the Petőfi Literary Museum's manuscript archive, there is a bundle of writing made up several notebooks and loose sheets that approaches the subcategory of working journal. These notes document Lesznai's spiritual and intellectual development. At the same time, they served as base material for her works (tales, theoretical writing, criticism and novel). The personal and private references fade into the background, as the journal contains an abundance of ponderings over intellectual questions that occupied her at the moment, as well as her attempts at solving them. She dealt with the following themes: ethical life, mission, destiny, *Werk* theory, vocation, faith in love (all recognizable concepts and propositions of the Sunday Circle), the nature of ornament, ornamentalist philosophy, questions of art pedagogy, abstraction, dilemmas of visual perception (employing a collection of examples from the oeuvre of Brueghel, Cranach and Cézanne) and romantic love.

In the sphere of primary sources, conversations made in recent years with family members, descendents and acquaintances who had a personal relationship with Lesznai provided the research with important and valuable information of an emotional nature, too. Among others, Pál Réz, Gábor Mihályi, Péter Jászi, Tamás Repiszky, György Litván, Erzsébet Vezér and Magda Csécsy (Mrs Sömjén) recollected their own or their family's Lesznai-related experiences and memories.

Among the secondary sources, most of the relevant information was supplied by published material quoting the journals and correspondence of artists and scholars who belonged to Lesznai's circle of family or friends – for example, journals by Béla Balázs<sup>1</sup> and Oszkár Jászi<sup>2</sup>, collected letters of Lajos Hatvany<sup>3</sup> and Lajos Fülep<sup>4</sup>, as well as a volume containing recollections from the Petőfi Literary Museum's vocal recording archives<sup>5</sup>. The museum catalogue for "The Eight" exhibition<sup>6</sup> illuminated numerous intellectual links and connections to the period, as did the volume documenting the Sunday Circle<sup>7</sup>, edited by Erzsébet Vezér and Éva Karádi. Among the newest published material, we must single out

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<sup>1</sup> Balázs, Béla: *Journal*, vol. I-II. Compiler and editor: Anna Fábri. Facts and Witnesses series, Magvető Publishers, Budapest, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> *Oszkár Jászi's Journal, 1919–1923*. Editor: György Litván. MTA Történettudományi Intézete [Historical Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences], Budapest, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> *Lajos Hatvany's Letters*. Szépirodalmi Publishers, Budapest, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> *Lajos Fülep's Correspondence II, 1920-1930*. Editor: Dóra F. Csanak. MTA Könyvtára - MTA Művészettörténeti Kutatóintézet [Library and Art History Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences], Budapest, 1992; and also *Lajos Fülep's Correspondence VI, 1951–1960*. Editor: Dóra F. Csanak. MTA Művészettörténeti Kutatóintézet, Budapest, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> *Recollections I*. Literary Museum, Budapest, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> *The Eight*. Catalogue. Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> *The Sunday Circle*. Documents. Editors: Éva Karádi and Erzsébet Vezér. Gondolat Publishers, Budapest, 1980.

Issues 51-52 of the periodical entitled *Enigma*<sup>8</sup>, not to mention the previously unpublished tales by Lesznai, edited by Judit Szilágyi<sup>9</sup>.

### **III. Contents of the dissertation**

The dissertation consists of eight large parts. Following the introduction, we summarize the theoretical framework of Lesznai's ornamentalist philosophy. Then, by reviewing and analyzing the dissertation's two other main pillars – the creation of home and spiritualism, the commitment that grew into a religion – we come closer to an exposure and an evaluation of Lesznai's life and lifework.

The fourth chapter examines Lesznai's model for viewing the world, its basic principles and conceptual make-up. These are divided into two large groups: first, the stylistic principles of form and content that follow from the model; and second, the resulting tenets in terms of philosophy, ethics, general education and pedagogy.

After a presentation of Hungarian and international parallels (primarily the work of fellow artists connected to The Eight and thinkers from the Sunday Circle, as well as the views of art historians analyzed in the journals, such as Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin and Max Dvořák), the next step is an investigation of the ornamental outlook's manifestations in Lesznai's graphic and applied art pieces in connection with her illustrations, designs and typographic work, in addition to the genre pictures of peasants.

Lesznai channelled the ornamental outlook into her art pedagogy work. The following chapter deals with the theoretical conclusions (the 1919 syllabus, the volume entitled *The Art of Design*) and the practical results (the painting school in New York and the Atelier Studio for Artistic Design).

The last chapter scrutinizes Lesznai's literary oeuvre – tales, lyrical poetry and the novel entitled *In the Beginning Was the Garden* – for content and formal elements that reflect the ornamentalist philosophy.

Completing the dissertation are separate appendices (“Biography of Anna Lesznai”, “Anna Lesznai's Philosophical Model”), pictures and a bibliography.

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<sup>8</sup> *Enigma*, vol. 51-52 (Anna Lesznai-themed), 2007. Guest editors: Petra Török and Judit Szilágyi.

<sup>9</sup> Lesznai, Anna: *Time Decoration – Tales and Drawings*. Editor: Judit Szilágyi. Petőfi Literary Museum – Hatvany Lajos Múzeum – National Textbook Publishers, Budapest, 2007.

#### **IV. The dissertation's main points and findings**

Lesznai worked at rounding the world into form, making fate an ornament. According to the animist notion, not only people, but all living entities possess a soul. Even manufactured objects contain messages locked within themselves. There exists an eternal absolute, outside time and space, that incorporates all that ever was and will be. From this ancient standpoint, life and art overlap; they are one and the same. At root, material, intellect and spirit all meet. However, things cannot remain in this archaic condition; they must be realized, assume forms, change into matter – they must be self-actualized. This miracle, the realisation, can be the result of creation, the product of a breakthrough between the artisan's personality and the All. Creation is nothing more than a recollection of the ancient, the absolute. Out of this experience, a new object is born. A form endowed with perfect harmony synthesizes the technical gesture's perfection in its content. The most basic and yet most perfect fulfilment of this is the ornament. Every form created this way is a closed totality, blending harmoniously into the grand Unity, yet complete in and of itself.

Her entire life, Lesznai painted, embroidered and wrote (in verse and prose) this ornamental order she so longed for. Thus, on account of the longing to belong somewhere, the search for and creation of home, a world obeying its own set of laws, became the main goal of her creative activity. It is no accident that Lesznai turned to interior decoration – pillows, runners, wall hangings, clothing accessories, wallpaper patterns – and executed her most significant designs in this genre. She wished to make the world liveable and inhabitable, and she endeavoured to furnish it with diverse forms. In her plans, drawings and craft work, she gave rise to home decorative items with a profusion of fruit and floral motifs. She searched for and created homes in the intellectual and spiritual sense in the highlands of Körtvélyes (now Hrušov, Slovakia); in her family's country mansion; in salons on Bálvány, Csaba and Falk Miksa Streets; at gatherings of the Sunday Circle in Budapest and Vienna; and later as a pedagogue in art classes from Budapest to the United States. She also created a personal world in her epic novel, drafting a monumental fresco of Hungary at the beginning of the century. This distinct world is highly coordinated, where everything and everyone occupies a prescribed and ordained spot as undeniable and irrevocable parts of the universe. This orchestrated world without any superior or subordinate relationships, free of hierarchy, is simple and natural and does not recognize tension.

Lesznai's favourite genres were those very territories where both artist and audience enjoy the greatest freedom. Tales commune with wonders; when poetry is composed, the human heart simply fills with longing and overflows; and ornamental pictures signify a world of supreme freedom.

Lesznai elevated her ornamentalist outlook to the status of a religious conviction or an elaborate belief system. This attitude, which amounted to piety, is demonstrable in the philosophy's comprehensive and significant impact upon her entire life. She was devoted to it and busied herself with it on a practically liturgical level, which even showed in her style of expression and choice of words. For a number of personal and artistic psychological reasons, Lesznai desired this order and the strict formal principles which this philosophy-cum-religion could provide; for, otherwise, they would have been painfully absent from her life.

#### **V. Brief summary of the scholarly results**

Ornamentation or ornamentalism is a central precept in Lesznai's entire lifework, an axiom that applied to every genre. Her total creative output was based upon it. It was neither a method nor an approach nor a formal or programmatic technique, it was more than that. For Lesznai, ornamentation was a worldview.

Among her contemporaries, many spoke frequently about the need for a new type of religious faith, but Anna Lesznai was a true religious founder. She was the one who melded her outlook into a consistent creed of transcendental content. With deep, unwavering conviction, she professed ornamentalism – that the perfect materialization of form and content surpasses itself, connecting us to the absolute, the world-creating will and knowledge from beyond. The goal, then, is an aspiration to completeness: the birth, formation and realisation of a new unity. Lesznai considered this endeavour the sole and exclusive meaning of human existence, and religion was merely a means of striving towards that end. For her, dogmatic religions were not adequate to leap the boundary between the Self and the All, since everyone has a unique tie to totality. Hence, Lesznai shifted the responsibility of fulfilling one's destiny to the individual – for example, through art, love, birth or other forms of creation.

Only those with no alternative path found religions or create new creeds. Lesznai was torn and suspended between two worlds, deprived of her ancestors' faith and alienated from

her formally existing religion. She yearned for order and transcendence. To substitute for these missing values, she created a new religion, and that was ornamentalism.

It was her personal tragedy to be granted a true home for only a brief time. This represented the order, tidiness and assured balance she had always yearned for. Besides the practical difficulties of two emigrations, her life in several domiciles, her roving, scattered, dynamic creativity, and a personality prone to procrastination did not allow for constant, consistent work. These conditions were unfavourable for the enforcement of a precisely determined, well-considered and well-planned life program – indeed, inner and outer Order. With her capabilities, talent and artistic potential, she seemed predisposed to fulfill a successful life and create of a towering lifework. Still, she lacked the necessary qualities to realize this. Her personality was neither consistent nor disciplined nor goal-oriented enough, the economic environment was unsuitable, and she missed the peace and stability of Home. Without these factors, her lifework, although it possessed a captivating variety, remained fragmented and inconsistent. Meanwhile, she produced certain pinnacle achievements such as her novel *In the Beginning Was the Garden*, her ornamental designs or even her pedagogical work.

By analyzing different aspects of Anna Lesznai's lifework, the dissertation demonstrates the constant and decisive presence of the ornamental outlook and its transformation into a philosophy of religious conviction, in which the artist found a virtual home, in lieu of a real one.



## VI. Publications related to the dissertation's scope of themes

### Independent booklet:

- Török, Petra: *World Rounded into Form. Anna Lesznai's Art and Legacy in the Hatvany Lajos Museum in Hatvan*. Hatvany Lajos Museum's booklets, vol. 16, Hatvan, 2001, pp 1-105.

### Editions:

- *The Self Unstamped by Fate. Selected Journal Entries of Anna Lesznai*. Petőfi Literary Museum – Hatvany Lajos Museum, Budapest, 2010, pp 1- 536.
- *The Work and Art of Anna Lesznai Anna*. In: *Enigma*, vol. 51-52. Thematic issue's guest editor: Petra Török. Co-editor: Judit Szilágyi. Main editor: Csilla Markója. Budapest, 2007, pp 1-173 and 1-181.

My studies and published material that appeared in the two *Enigma* issues:

- “This woman is so brutally rich, you must love her.” Editor's notes as a preface to the Anna Lesznai edition. In: *Enigma*, vol. 51, pp 20-24.
- “It's difficult to be the village poet.” Anna Lesznai's letter to Ödön Mihály. In: *Enigma*, vol. 51, pp 42-45.
- “...just an angle, light and a fragment. Like this journal.” Anna Lesznai on her journal entries. In: *Enigma*, vol. 51, pp 46-63.
- “The journal is pebbles washed ashore.” Excerpts from Anna Lesznai's journals. In: *Enigma*, vol. 51, pp 64-106.
- “As though it were the word of God.” Anna Lesznai's letter to Miksa Fenyő. In: *Enigma*, vol. 51, pp 145-150.
- “Are you not coming home?” Anna Lesznai's letter in verse to her son, from 1932. In: *Enigma*, vol. 52, pp 37-39.
- “I'm the rag-picker of the past.” Information about the genesis of her novel, *In the Beginning Was the Garden*. In: *Enigma*, vol. 52, pp 40-45.
- “Playing hide-and-seek alone, I seek myself.” Anna Lesznai's preface to *Love Storybook*. In: *Enigma*, vol. 52, pp 128-129.
- “I must endeavour to write what I know about □ story metaphysics.” Story theory and formal analyses in Anna Lesznai's journal entries. In: *Enigma*, vol. 52, pp 146-159.

## Studies:

- “Anna Lesznai, Lady of the House for the Eight.” In: *The Eight*. Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs, 2010, pp 482-494.
- “...portion of the magician’s infinite carpet.” Anna Lesznai’s textile work, embroidery and forgotten handicrafts. In: *A gödöllői szőnyeg 100 éve* [Centennial of the Carpet in Gödöllő]. Editor.: Cecília Nagy (Mrs Öri). Gödöllő, 2009, pp 76-85.
- “World Rounded into Form. Reflections of Anna Lesznai’s Ornamentalist Philosophy in Her Literary and Artistic Heritage and Journal Entries.” In: *Ornamentika és modernizmus*. Ernst Museum’s booklets, vol. II. Editor: Ágnes Szikra. Budapest, 2006. pp 42-49.
- “Arriving at the Land of Happiness. Introductory Thoughts to Anna Lesznai’s Journal Entries.” In: *Ezredvég*, October 2006.
- “*Jardin Paradis* in Körtvélyes. Anna Lesznai’s Arcadia in the Highlands” In: *Kalligram*, April 2003, pp 27-57.
- “Granite in the Wailing Wall. I struck the tune on Hungarian lips.” Excerpts from Anna Lesznai’s journal and an accompanying study. In: *Múlt és Jövő*, 2001/1, pp 59-74.