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Romanticism and Popular Taste in Art in Hungary 1820–1850

Summary of PhD thesis

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1. Research aims

In the traditional periodization of 19th-century Hungarian art the label 'Romantic' is usually attached to the third quarter of the century, even though Romantic tendencies can also be discovered in the previous decades. The aim of the dissertation is to draw up some characteristics of Romantic art in the period ca. 1820–1848, reinterpreting Hungarian Romanticism outside the usual framework of 'national Romanticism' by taking into account phenomena like Gothic imagery or the reflections of the Romantic concept of love in art. These can often be traced in artworks and writings intended for a wider audience; thus, examining them can shed light on the views and interpretational strategies that shaped the general understanding of art in the Hungary of the time.

2. Research methods

The scholarship on Romanticism can be divided into two large groups: some authors treat originality as the main feature of the Romantic artwork, which means that only the greatest, most significant artists can be regarded as Romantics. Others, however, emphasize the importance of those lesser – often trivial – works which, instead of shaping Romantic concepts, merely used and popularized them. My dissertation follows the second course. This is the approach best suited to the examined material: due to the late emergence of the institutions of the modern art world, Hungarian art of the time lacked significant, original artistic personalities. The dissertation examines artworks that could become objects of popular taste because they were in the public eye – either at exhibitions or as prints. Following the approach taken by visual culture studies, the main question is what could be seen at the time, regardless of artistic quality. This also means that no distinction is made between the works of Hungarian and international artists if they were available to the Hungarian public. The study emphasizes the beholder's side, problematizing the interaction between the artwork and its viewer – the beholder's 'gaze', drawing on international scholarship.

The research is based on contemporary texts published in popular periodicals, and uses these sources to reconstruct the context of the examined pictures. A special importance is placed on fictitious stories about artists; the artworks described in these texts are also treated as belonging to the visual culture of the age.

The study aims to be interdisciplinary, and is partly based on the newer results of research in the field of literary history.

3. The main conclusions and results of the dissertation

The dissertation defines popular taste as an 'imaginary popular taste', meaning that – for want of sources – it does not directly describe what the audience preferred; instead, it examines what the art critics of the time thought of the taste of the wider public. For this reason, it is important to analyse the categories which were often used to describe the preferences of 'less refined' viewers, the most common of which are 'effective' and 'material' (the latter is often juxtaposed with 'poetic'). In the individual chapters, these categories are examined in relation to different aspects of Romanticism.

The chapter follows the process through which (between the 1820s and 1840s) the imagery of terror was ruled out from the representation of national history. The texts popularizing history published at the beginning of the period, often describing ruined castles and the legends connected to them, drew on the practices of popular Gothic literature. Pictures of castles were also routinely interpreted in this context. The motifs of terror were, however, gradually banished from the canon, which was due to two factors. First, Hungarian 'national character' became commonly defined as 'sober', while supernatural motifs were connected to 'Germanness'. Second, the imagery of terror aimed at making an instant, un-intellectual effect on the beholder (in line with the aesthetics of the sublime), and was thus regarded as contradictory to intellectual, poetic art which had to be viewed in deep contemplation. The chapter concludes that the characterization of Hungarian Romanticism as 'sober' is rooted in the self-description of the period, and can be qualified by taking into account the Gothic elements. Although these were banished from the canon of national art formed by professional critics, they were still alive in more popular art forms and in the interpretational strategies that could be used by the audience.

Chapter III: The Figure of the Romantic Artist in Hungarian Culture of the Period

The chapter shows that – although extreme individualism, the flight of fancy and Romantic spleen was regarded as alien to the Hungarian spirit – the figure of the Romantic artist was still well known in Hungary at the time. One subchapter analyses a character in József Eötvös' novel *The Carthusian*: the painter Arthur, while the following subchapter draws on a wide selection of stories about artists published in magazines. The main conclusion is that members of the public could often encounter Romantic views about the artist's extraordinary personality, his antagonism to society, albeit not in professional texts on art, but rather in literary fiction. In some of the stories the artist is a Gothic figure, who commits horrible deeds due to his passionate character.

Chapter IV: Art and Love, or: On the Body and Soul of the Art Lover

When condemning an artwork for its superficial, 'effect-chasing' nature, critics often divide the artwork's material and spiritual side, that is, its body and soul. This way of thinking is reflected in the fact that in texts on art and on love published in the magazines the two topics often serve as each other's analogies. The over-abundance of materiality threatens art in the same way as pure love is threatened by the excesses of the body. The thoughts on the ideal as the main component of art are rooted in the old tradition of Neo-Platonism, but the opposition of body and soul is not free of problems – and here we are able to discern the Romantic concept of love. The analysis of these sources, which were not examined in scholarship before, is complemented by the discussion of a recurring motif in the stories about artists. The artist paints a portrait of his beloved, and the picture arouses vulgar desires in a man who then tries to seduce her. This motif is interpreted as a subtle symbol of a good and a bad (deep and superficial) way of appreciating art.

The last subchapter shows how this rich discourse influenced the interpretation of the so-called female ideal portraits. A comparison of the sources shows that the critics' choice of words and general approach is connected to the views discussed in the previous subchapters. The genre of the female ideal portrait was regarded by certain critics as an alternative way of

creating a 'school' of national art: instead of focusing on the depiction of national subjects, this approach aimed to elevate the genre of the portrait to a higher, more general, *ideal* level.

Chapter V: The Taming of Romanticism: Summary

The last chapter proposes a definition of the Romanticism of the second quarter of the 19th century that treats the *biedermeier* as late, 'tame' Romanticism. The images created in the period are often not sublime, Gothic or Romantic, but – as evidenced by the landscape illustrations discussed in Chapter II – they were treated as such by the interpretations attached to them. The dynamism of Romanticism and the *Biedermeier* is the dynamism of changing contexts. This is exemplified by illustrations published in almanacs, which were usually ordered by the publishers from an international trading network, the accompanying texts being written later – thus the same picture could be published with different interpretations. I show this through some relevant examples based on research in Britain.

The summary also includes the interpretations of two paintings created in the 1850s, that can be connected to the critical discourses examined in the dissertation. *The Dissatisfied Painter* (1852) by József Borsos thematizes the opposition of superficiality and depth, juxtaposing motifs symbolizing material and the ideal. In the still-life-like way the picture is painted – a characteristic of Borsos' work for which he was often scolded by the critics – material prevails, deconstructing the traditional opposition of body and soul. *The Dream of the Fugitive* by Viktor Madarász draws on Gothic motifs – ones that were known to the public from prints. When it was shown at the exhibition of the Pest Art Society in 1856, the painting was not discussed as a history painting by the critics (although, as it turned out, it represented a significant personality of Hungarian history), but as a playful product of artistic imagination. This was due to the fact that the imagery of terror was not compatible anymore with the representation of history, but counted as symbols of irregular genius – just like in the stories about artists.

The candidate's publications in the subject area of the thesis

Barabás Miklós, Petőfi Sándor és az Utazó cigánycsalád. Egy közös motívum a 19. századi magyar képzőművészetben és irodalomban. Művészettörténeti Értesítő 51 (2002) 3–4. sz. 265–286.

A Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum másolási naplója. Ars Hungarica 33 (2005) 2. sz. 305–313.

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