

PhD thesis

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The development of the concept of Szentendre art

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It was in 1965 when Éva Körner rightfully pointed out the following and also raised the question: 'It is approximately 40 years that the Szentendre Painters' Society has existed. However, Szentendre painting as a concept has only been mentioned in the very recent years...why is it that only 40 years after the establishment of the Szentendre colony of artists and 30 years after the drafting of the characteristic Szentendre programme "Szentendre art" does become a matter of common knowledge?'

She gave more reasons for the delay of the concept becoming common knowledge: on the one hand the Szentendre Painters' Society did not have a joint programme, and although Vajda and Korniss did have a definite programme linked with Szentendre, they remained isolated. On the other hand constructivism, which according to Körner was the joint effort of two distinct groups of artists working in Szentendre was considered less significant by critics in the 1930s, and in the 1940s and 1950s even suspicious. That is why it was not possible to theoretically formulate the concept.

If we continue her raising the issue of the causes of delay the question almost directly evolves, and this is the one I have chosen to be the topic of my thesis: *how* the concept of "Szentendre art" became a matter of professional common knowledge, how the need to clarify it prevailed in the 1960s and, in a broader sense, what Szentendre meant in the art history writings in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although there were a lot of people who made their comments on the issue of Szentendre there are three well defined definitions. Éva Körner defines two groups. The basic experience of both groups was the view provided by Szentendre, which in itself is enough to motivate an artist to construct a picture. Both groups resolve the view and then reconstructs it. But while the first group (Barcsay, Czóbel, Ilosvai) builds the composition by the solid framework of the picture the other one (Vajda, Ámos) subordinates all this to an invisible principle, a spiritual force.

Éva Körner wrote her analytical essay as a discussant and her work was preceded by the conceptual clarification of Lenke Haulisch. Haulisch in 1963 defined that Szentendre painting is a dual concept: that of topography and also of style. The topographical concept involves artists belonging to Szentendre only nominally. She finds it possible to outline a Szentendre style, which is characterized by certain stylistic marks, choice of theme and professional approach. Not only do Barcsay, Korniss, Vajda and Ámos belong to this group but several of the young artists, such as Pál Deim, László Balogh and László Kósza Sipos. She excludes Béla Czóbel and János Kmetty from this group because, as she points out, they had already had their established style by the time they arrived in Szentendre.

In 1968 in his book *Modern Hungarian Art* Lajos Németh devotes a separate chapter to Szentendre painting. He discusses the essence of Szentendre art using a great deal of factual knowledge, the significance of the colony of artists, the three types of stylistic aspirations (postimpressionism, constructivism and surrealism), then determines the position of Szentendre in the history of art by analyzing the oeuvre of Lajos Vajda, the Szentendre programme and the art of the colleagues of Vajda thinking similarly to him. His final conclusion is that it was in Szentendre where Hungarian constructivism and surrealism developed, which also form the two poles of the Szentendre school. Barcsay and Lajos Vajda characterize these two trends.

It is notable that in the latest monographs about the history of art in the 20th century the concept is used in a more reserved way and the issue of Szentendre is also discussed in a different touch.

In writings today even when the colony of artists and some painters working there are mentioned the emphasis is laid on the art of Lajos Vajda and then on Dezső Korniss, who was working with Vajda for a short time, on their Szentendre programme, their colleagues and the young artists following the heritage of Vajda. (*Hungarian Art in the 20th Century*, 1999, Corvina; *Hungarian Art from 1800 until today*, 2002, Corvina).

Perhaps this simplification has something to do with the fact that the concept of Szentendre art in interpretations so far can hardly be used to characterize the complex phenomenon which developed in Szentendre after 1968. It happened exactly in that year that the open-air exhibitions started the participants of which formed the core of the prospective Vajda Lajos Studio, and a year later, in 1969, the painters and sculptors moved in the New Colony of Artists some of whom did not feel it compulsory to follow the traditions of

Szentendre. The definition formulated in the 1960s seems to have become a historical category by today.

In my opinion we can follow the development of the concept of Szentendre art on a “double track”. In one respect in theoretical writings: how the need to define Szentendre art history appeared in the art writings and art history works of the era and how they were able to cope with the task. It is enough to refer here to the article of Lajos Németh in *Új Írás* opening a debate in which, among other things, he elucidated that to be able to outline the evolution of modern Hungarian art it is essential to describe the oeuvre of Vajda and Ámos, to evaluate the latest achievements of Béla Kondor, Korniss and Barcsay, to analytically undertake surrealism and constructivism, to understand the historical status of the European School discontinued in 1949 and at the same time to see the gist of abstract art. There was a need to outline the evolution of modern Hungarian art anew, which Németh did in 1965, this time integrating the Szentendre artists: he put them – Czöbel, Kmetty, Paizs Goebel, Vajda, Ámos, Barcsay, Piroska Szántó, Géza Fónyi, Pál Miháltz, Miklós Göllner, János Pirk and László Balogh – in line with Csontváry, the Group of Eight, Nemes Lampérth, Uitz, Derkovits and Egry.

Both Éva Körner and Dénes Pataky viewed Szentendre artists as ones who continued the heritage of the Group of Eight and that of the activists. With Vajda, Korniss and Ámos present, the 1930s role of Szentendre was risen in value. Lenke Haulisch also built these progressive conclusions into her chain of thought, however, her Szentendre concept of style is vulnerable on several points.

Besides the comparative analysis of interpretations it is also necessary to mention the pre-1945 “official Szentendre image”, what heritage the literature of the age left to art writing after the liberation. What is worth examining in this respect is the organization of the colony of artists, the enthusiastic reception by the cultural policy especially during the years after settling down, the presence of the guest artists, the two exhibitions in Budapest (1930 and 1939) presenting the Szentendre colony of artists and the one and only comprehensive writing of the era, by Erzsébet Turchányi, about the Szentendre colony of artists.

Great interest was shown in Szentendre as early as in the first year of its official existence in 1926. This interest was mainly of the cultural policy, as they saw it as the substitution of Nagybánya, which had already been disannexed by that time. Szentendre got publicity mostly in daily newspapers, the attention concentrated on the colony of artists, the work and life there. Between the two world wars the colony of artists was presented at two exhibitions in Budapest and the press of the era portrayed the work of the exhibitors according

to their artistic endeavours. So the name of Szentendre was intertwined with the colony of artists, and it was present in common knowledge, too. During these years we can see a split between the artists working at the colony of artists: the “right wing” ones conformed to Rome, and the “left wing” ones with post-impressionist aspirations. It is important from the point of view of this work because the historical reviews of the 1960s take into consideration the existence of the artists conformed to Rome, but in their conceptual definitions exclude their work from Szentendre art.

In addition to the theoretical classification we should also take into account the sensitive, lively atmosphere of Szentendre that the artistic community meant and means these days, too.

The other part of my research is therefore dedicated to the summary of the exhibitions which were generally called Szentendre art exhibitions. In 1951 these local exhibitions were started as a local initiative at the Ferenczy Károly Museum, which was established at that time. These exhibitions were arranged every year until 1971 with only a three-year interruption after the 1956 anniversary colony of artists’ exhibition. In the 1970s there was a transformation in the structure of the Szentendre exhibitions. The new wing of the Ferenczy Károly Museum was built, the Old Colony of Artists was reconstructed and a new gallery was added to it and then in 1979 the Szentendre Art Gallery was inaugurated in Fő tér. Each showroom developed its own special profile gradually. It was in 1979 when the Szentendre art exhibitions were organized in the sense we use the expression these days. The proclaimed objective of the exhibitions was to give an opportunity for the local artists to present their work to the public every two years in the new Szentendre Art Gallery. These exhibitions, the home of which, among other places, was Székesfehérvár (1963 and 1969), were organized from 1951 with different titles (Szentendre colony of artists, Szentendre painters, artists living in Szentendre, autumn/summer exhibit of Szentendre painters, Szentendre art) in the 1950s.

The local exhibitions, like a seismograph, indicate the “comings and goings” in town in an excellent way: who are the artists present for a long time, who has just arrived or who has just moved out. With that we can not only examine the events in Szentendre but also the realignment in the setup of the exhibitions, which show the shifting in stress in the interpretation of Szentendre painting. The majority of the art historians who have their say in this topic took part in one of these exhibitions either as the organizer and/or the author of the catalogue linked to the exhibition.

The introduction of the concept of Szentendre art is connected with the catalogue of such an exhibition. Although it was Károly Lyka who used the expression Szentendre

painting as early as 1930 its use did not really become common. We can see expression like the following in the 1950s: Szentendre-likeness, Szentendre character, the art of Szentendre. In the introduction of the catalogues mentioned above we can see the expression Szentendre school in 1959, Szentendre painting and Szentendre style in 1963 and Szentendre art in 1964.

The name of Szentendre was so much identified with that of the colony of artists that it was the main task of the theoreticians taking a stand in the Szentendre issue in the 1960s to clarify that the expression Szentendre painter does not only refer to those working at the colony of artists. As a consequence of that at the exhibition in 1963 the works of Vajda and Ámos were present beside those of the masters alive for the first time.

I also find it necessary to sum up the exhibitions because they represent the high-standard work of the artists living and working in Szentendre, which those art historians - Lajos Németh, Éva Körner and Lenke Haulisch – who were the most active in the clarification of the concept always took into account and they included the lessons learnt in their theories. Also, the catalogue introductions linked with the exhibitions predicted or even summarized the definitions appearing on a bigger scale and also indicated the stages of the concept of Szentendre art becoming part of professional knowledge.

I structured my paper with the chapters below. After the Introduction and Review of literature I summarized the pre-1945 “official Szentendre art” with a brief history of events and the description of the daily press in chapter III. In the IV. chapter I dealt with the period between 1945 and 1956. In the following chapters, IV. and V., I analyzed the theoretical writings together with the exhibitions in a chronological order. Here the different stages of the exhibitions showed where the chapters should begin.

While reviewing the exhibitions I differentiated the periods 1956-1971 and 1972-1979 from each other. It was in 1959 when the need to provide a definition for Szentendre art first appeared in the exhibition catalogue and in the review. In the period lasting until 1971 the conceptual clarification was happening parallel both in art writing and in the exhibitions in Szentendre. As I mentioned earlier after 1971 the character of the Szentendre exhibitions changed. I selected the closing date of that second phase to be the year 1979 for different reasons. In the second part of the 1970s several events took place which raised the Szentendre issue once again. The controversy around the issue of Szentendre was getting stronger once more when in connection with the exhibition of contemporary artists in the National Gallery in 1976 the unfulfilled expectation emerged that the organizers of the exhibition would have been able to put an end to the debate on the Szentendre issue by the right choice of the concept of the exhibition. Using the topographical and stylistic differentiation of Lenke

Haulisch some asked why artists who were connected to Szentendre only nominally were present at the exhibition and with the same vehemence made it clear that without Vajda or Ámos there is no Szentendre painting (Géza Perneckzy and Gyula Rózsa). This kind of notion may be traced from the end of the 1960s.

It was in 1977 when the comprehensive reference book of Lenke Haulisch was published about Szentendre art. Her candidate's thesis defended in 1971 formed the basis for this work. Zsolt Ráth in his review also expected Haulisch's book to close the debate on the issue. In 1978 another historical exhibition took place with the aim to indicate the areas of research and the conception of a future permanent exhibition, and with the expectation of describing and revealing thus far unseen links collected the artists who had ever worked in Szentendre. In 1979, for the first time, the members of the Vajda Lajos Studio appeared at the Szentendre exhibition, and this way established were integrated in the overall picture of Szentendre, and although they produced a showy trooping out of the 1987 exhibition they rather stretched the limits of the Szentendre concept. After the period examined, that is between 1956 and 1979, another important study was published in 1985 by Éva Körner, with the title: "The Szentendre programme and the related initiatives", which may be considered to be the summing up of the conceptual foundation which started in the 1960s. It was Éva Körner herself who, in one of her earlier studies, transferred this whole range of issues into a broader Central-European perspective. (Szentendre and Central-European avant-garde, 1971.)

To sum it up my paper, as well as providing a philological review, is firstly a history of art criticism, and secondly brings to light the art history thinking in the 1960s and 1970s, the aim of which was to describe modern Hungarian art, to rehabilitate the inheritors of Hungarian avant-garde. One of its neuralgic points was, among others, the lack of the description of the Vajda oeuvre.

A lot of artists are attached to Szentendre. Listing them, frequently mentioning them would make reading more difficult. Beside the famous artists there are always less well-known names. That is why the classification of Lajos Németh was good, as the three styles described by him provided the opportunity to categorize all the other artists with more or less compromise.

For the sake of being more clear I compiled the chart at the end of this paper to show who and when appeared at the exhibitions from as early as 1946, when the first recorded collective exhibition took place. The order of the list of names is according to the official list of membership of the Szentendre Painters' Society (1928), and when the Society discontinued (1951) the names of artists are put in the order of their arriving in town. Among these latter

there are some who became members of the Old Colony of Artists, and then after the opening of the New Colony of Artists 12 new names appear in the list, while there are artists moving in town, and another big increase is caused by the members of the Vajda Lajos Studio. The Szentendre exhibitions in a lot of cases gave an opportunity to organize commemorative exhibitions within their framework for deceased colleagues or, by the arrangement of an art historian, to provide the clarification of Szentendre art. This way the list of names in the chart became more and more ample as it does not only record the state of affairs of the time in Szentendre but also the character of the art history description and attitude. The chart is supplemented with the list of the most important exhibitions and their reviews in Szentendre.