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The „Roman” Trend of Modern Sacral Fresco Painting in Hungary, 1930–1950

Theses of the Ph.D. dissertation

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In search of the common traits of several themes, the dissertation explicates the complex historical phenomenon summed up by the title and illumines it with analyses of art works, interpretation of artistic careers, picture concepts, press debates and the description of general historical processes.

The themes addressed include:

1. Sacred art (its „revival”)
2. Representation of the Catholic Church (renewal of the cult of saints)
3. Ideological and political history of collectivism in Hungary
4. Question of the genre of fresco painting in the studied period
5. Wall painting conceptions of artists granted the Roman scholarship.

Methods

1. The basis for the exposure of the above themes is the material research that has elaborated the sacral frescoes by Roman scholarship holders made in 33 venues in Hungary (and their fresco plans for another 7 venues). Vilmos Aba-Novák painted frescoes at 4 venues (and had plans for another 4), Ernő Jeges at 10 (and 2), Béla Kontuly at 11 (and 3), Pál Molnár-C. at 3 (and 3), István Szőnyi at 1 (and 1), Kálmán Istókovits at 1, Jenő Medveczky at 5, Ferenc Chiovini at 3, József Bánáti Sverák at 1, Dénes Ősz at 1 and János Pleidell at 1 (and 1) venues. There were 12 artists winning Roman scholarship between 1928 and '43 (the first period of the scholarship system) who were commissioned by the church to paint frescoes in 1930-50. (György Leszkovszky is not discussed in this group since his stylistic tradition and world view are tied to the Gödöllő masters and he did not participate in the collective events of the rest of the scholarship-winners.)

2. The dissertation probes into the titual historical phenomenon by collating sources within institution-historical frames. It examines the institutional functions that precipitated the

creation of the works by the Roman scholarship-holders, enabled discussions about them and the presentation of these works to a wider public, brought them out from the closed sacral spaces and even promoted them as a collective of artists, a school, perhaps the shapers of a new style, with their combined fine and applied *Gesamtkunstwerke*.

Institutions promoting the modernization of sacred art:

1. National Council of Church Art and Central Office of Church Art (1929-1950)
2. Ecclesiastic festivities, cult of saints, reviving frames of religious life
3. Sacral art in exhibitions and art competitions
4. Disputes covered by the press
4. Institution of the jury (crisis of the identity of authors).

3. The exposition of the themes starts out from the basic hermeneutic situation that their complex examination was interlaced with moral and aesthetic value judgments and even political-ideological preconceptions already from the 1930s. Owing to extreme, contradictory (negative) evaluations, the activity of sacral art and the Roman scholarship holders has not been liberated from the weight of the *wirkungsgeschichtliche* dissonance even today. This weight puts the analyst to the test of first understanding and differentiating the concepts of the Roman scholarship-holders, the opinions of the critics and recipients about the completed frescoes, the views on the role of the fresco and on the relationship between image and sacrality. That means the relegation of the question of style into the background for the time being.

Major theses

In the „modernization” of sacral art and its popularization, the efflorescence of the cult of saints in the 1930s-’40s played a salient role in Hungary. This cult – and the series of commemorative years mobilizing hundreds of thousands with various religious events of saints of the Árpád Dynasty representing Hungarian historical constitutionality and legal continuity as well as the foundation of the christian church in Hungary – was initiated by the Hungarian Catholic Church in 1930 proclaiming it the year of Saint Emeric. The set of cultic events inspiring intense spiritual and communal life spanned the whole studied period (1930-’38-’42-’43-’46) and ended with the commemorative year of Saint Gerhard in 1946.

As a conscious donator, the Catholic Church wished to modernize sacred art (to adjust it to the requirements of the age) from the angle of function embedded in the cult, while it endowed the cult of saint with a new meaning in concert with its responses to the social-political and moral questions of the age. The new concept of the church as *ocumene* united in the Mystic Body of Christ showing up a spiritual goal as against the era’s mass culture built on carnality declared the mysteries of Christ’s kingdom, love and self-sacrifice in the eucharist as the fundamental ties of human collectivity. It defined the essence of sacred art in terms of its relation to rules of the collective cultic acts, first of all the liturgy and the christian theological and moral traditions. In other words, it emphasized its functional, „applied” character.

The new critical-advisory institution on matters of art – the National Council of Church Art (and its executive body, the Central Office of Church Art) directly under the jurisdiction of the newly appointed curial prince primate Jusztinián Serédi – was organized upon the model of its Vatican counterpart in the autumn of 1929, which recommended (mainly after the death of its first director Ottó Szőnyi in 1936) Roman scholarship winners for major ecclesiastic commission. The clear aim of the Office was to bring the centralizing

regulations of the Holy See to bear in art. Its critical authority covered the whole country; the parishes and episcopal offices were obliged to submit the plans to it. In spite of that, it was not efficient enough as it only had licence of counseling. Apart from historic monuments, its main effort was to control contemporary sacred art and integrate it in the system of liturgical and theological requirements.

The cult of saints controlled by the Catholic Church integrated art in three ways, embedded in three forms of institution. Parallel with the central events of the cult exhibitions were staged for religious devotional pictures of individual invention, also including fresco designs. This far more concentrated presence than in earlier decades can be conceived as a kind of evangelization within secular art, within the sphere of elite art controlled by modern aesthetic consciousness.

A different institutional form comprised the fresco and altar picture competitions which were announced regularly (also on themes connected to the cult). (The competitions were called by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education in charge of both ecclesiastic and artistic matters, the Catholic Church and sometimes the local authority of the capital.) The submitted works were sometimes created and occasionally reworked within the self-contained critical system of a church decoration, and sometimes displayed at national exhibitions of commemorative years and reviewed as such, but the prizes won did not imply the possibility of implementation.

Since the main programs of the cult were organized centrally and purposively for a span of several years, frescoes and decorations ordered for the theme were also executed in several churches (St Anne's church of Felső-Víziváros, St Florian's church, the Városmajor church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus). The jury sometimes monopolized the initiative to such an extent that one tends to interpret this development as the crisis of artistic identity. The increasing creative zeal of the jury shaped the finite work sometimes by modifying the whole

arsenal of artistic tools. The history of the ceiling fresco in the St Anne church does question the evidence that the source of a work of art is the artist. Sometimes an art work identified more with the historical circumstance, linguistic context, institutional structure, scope of possibilities and requirements. It is not only identifiable with the diversity of creative intentions but also with the dynamism of the web of interests that sometimes assumes impersonal control over decisions.

Mention needs to be made of the separate institutional form of media publicity, the theoretical debates around the first major sacral works of the Roman scholarship-holders, and of the group of new critics who helped the favourable reception of the criticized works. The first to raise their voice in support of rational church construction and a new type of sacred decoration advocating simple form creation in harmony with the used materials were Tibor Gerevich and his pupils: art historians István Genthon, Jenő Kopp, János Jajeczay, Zoltán Nagy and Ernő Molnár (the latter the director of the Office of Church Art from 1937, the former all held scholarships to Rome, Genthon was the director of Collegium Hungaricum in Rome from 1940), as well as parish priest Antal Somogyi in the diocese of Győr and priest Géza Dácei of the Vác diocese.

It was a moot question in the age to what extent the practice of religion required art at all and how it incorporated art. The unambiguous catholic answer was that art should be fitted to the liturgical rules, theological teachings and christian traditions and customs. In addition to the phrase „religious feeling” and these functional frames, there were no other restrictions. „In all the rest” sacred art was considered identical with secular art. There were no prescriptions as to style. In his order concerning art in 1924, Pius XI only stressed moderation, simplicity, dignity as the favourable qualities and proposed the use of noble and durable materials and the adaptation to the local specificities. In his speech delivered at the inauguration of the new building of the Vatican Gallery in 1932 he criticized the extremes of German modern sacral

decoration and defined the essence of a work of art as the moral improvement of man, which did not allow for the representation of any distorted form or elementary state of mind. This wording provided the grounds for the condemnation of Aba-Novák's frescoes at Jászszentandrás painted in 1933, which ramified to become a national press polemic, the great trial of fresco painting after the press polemic of modern church architecture in 1932-33.

The conception of admittedly the most important sacral fresco painter Vilmos Aba-Novák, which regarded wall painting (collective or communal art) as a new phase in the development of modern art, evolved in 1929-31 and became further elaborated in several press statements between 1931 and '40. In this program, three senses of collectivism were united: 1. art for the collective ideas, 2. unity of art and its recipients, 3. unity of the branches of art. In the 1930s all who felt committed to creating religious works put this program on their banner.

The statements by fresco painters often touch on the question of the search for communities, which cannot be separated from some actual form of the ideal of political collectivism prevalent in the social publicity of the period. For the scholarship-winners collectivism did not only mean the professional, religious, racial or class groups of people but also implied the integration of art in everyday life. It had been a much-discussed topic in the press since the turn of the century how widely artist and his audience were separated, how deep the misunderstanding between them was. After 1920 this was clearly blamed on the modernist trends and individualism. The much faster spread and popularity of movies and photos than elite art was also sensed. That also motivated the idea of levelling out work and audience entertained by the Roman „school”. The search for an audience led them to the communal genres including the fresco. As civil painters, they did not wish to desert the modern arena of exhibitions providing for elite art. They regularly presented their wall painting plans there. Moreover, under Gerevich's guidance they developed a popular form of

installation which was a quasi architectural space at a salient spot of the exhibition space in which the sacral works could be presented in a setting modelling the original functions. This was meant to demonstrate the necessity of the liturgical function, and besides, it aptly illustrated the singular system of genres and art branches and the interplay of meanings which might be brought about by the ensemble of objects, and which was the goal of the „applied” aspect of art.

Though members of widely different artistic associations, the winners of the Roman scholarship sought each other’s company, which did not only mean table societies but also participation in collective commissions, trying to harmonize the different branches of „applied” art under the guidance of architecture.

The path that led artists from panel painting to frescoes was diverse. Aba-Novák’ and Jenő Medveczky were ushered to fresco painting, to the monumental-decorative form of the picture, by inner development, technical interests, changing frame of mind. Ernő Jeges elaborated his program on the revival of history painting already in Rome (based on his conviction that the suggestiveness of the picture was more instructive than verblability) and that obviously needed the monumental form and communal context. Béla Kontuly was turned toward fresco painting by winning the scholarship to Rome, but only after the execution of several commissions could he developed a mature wall painting style around 1937. Kálmán Istókóvits’ caeer is typical: he took part in competitions of sacred art from 1926 yet only managed to execute his first fresco in 1948 because during the evaluation processes neither Tibor Gerevich nor the Office of Church Art supported his submitted plans of great painterliness and individual visions.

Finally, it can be asserted that in the 1930s there were fundamental changes in the spread of the collectivist idea and the representation of the Catholic Church in Hungary which influenced art, while art itself had also undergone transformation owing to rationalist

architecture, modern abstract picture construction and the spread of mass culture. The applied aspect of art was revalued thanks to media publicity and the collectivity of the art branches was again accepted. Thus the liturgical function became decisive for sacred art combined with the ideal of the simplicity and material-consciousness of form interpreted as the need of modern life and compared to the spirituality of early christians.

This complex interaction of the discussed factors explains why the dissertation has tried to present the historical process of the revival of religious wall painting via this multi-layered interpretative system.