

PhD Thesis
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THE LIFE AND WORK OF FERENC EISENHUT (1857–1903)

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1. Abstract

The primary aim of this thesis is to reconstruct the biography and disclose the opus of Ferenc Eisenhut (Német-Palánka, 1857 – München, 1903), set up a complex chronology and compile a catalog. Being the first monograph written on the work of this artist, it presents, rather than interprets data, but also places the works of art in the context of history and art history, and deals with stylistic and iconographic analysis of some of his works.

Eisenhut belonged to a circle of Hungarian painters living and working in Munich. The dominant feature of his work was oriental painting, a highly ranked discipline at the Munich Academy, similar in status to history painting. Part of this research is thus dedicated to the development of Eisenhut's oriental painting, its phases, features and social background – the circumstances of its evolution and its reception in both Hungarian and international context.

Special attention is given to his painting called *The Death of Gul Baba*, which made him the first man to win the Great National Gold Medal founded by the Hungarian National Fine Arts Association; furthermore, it deals with the social context of the content of his mature works of oriental art, such as *Slave Fair, Before Doom, A Dream*, or later works such as *Jollities in the Caucasus*.

Another cornerstone of Eisenhut's oeuvre is connected to historic art that evolved around the preparation for millenarian festivities. The popularity of Eisenhut's most published work, the *Battle of Zenta*, painted in 1896 and still found in Sombor (former seat of Bács-Bodrog County), casts a shadow on his oriental painting. The objective of this thesis is to restore the balance in the approach to his work, as well as provide additional data on the formal and iconographic features and the background of the *Battle of Zenta*. Another piece of his work related to the millenarian festivities is the *Deference Procession* cyclorama. This cyclorama is one of Hungary's last existing works of this kind and has not been dealt with yet; this thesis therefore aims to reveal the circumstances and data of its creation.

A further objective of the thesis is to document and interpret the artist's often neglected landscape painting, and also present other aspects of his life (as a familyman, his activities supporting Hungarian artists in Munich, his aspirations supporting German artists exhibiting in Budapest, etc.).

2. Background

This is the first monograph written on the life and work of Ferenc Eisenhut - only partial data and reviews have been published so far. Tamás Szana was the first to provide a biography and brief review of his work in 1889, in which he highlighted the early years of the artist's work, and the time of his initial success. It is a genuine bulletin including drawings and paintings that help us reconstruct the period between 1883 and 1889.

Longer reviews that appeared around the time of the artist's death, mainly the writings of Dezső Malonyai and Dezső Abrozovics, also provide a valuable contribution to Eisenhut's

biographic data. Malonyai writes about the artist with friendly empathy, tells us about his mental constitution and introduces him as an admirer of the Orient. Ambrozovics reveals several data from Eisenhut's last letters that were available only to his close contemporaries, and also sets up the chronology of thirty-one paintings for the first time.

The first quasi-retrospective exhibition set up by art historian Kornél Divald in Budapest in 1903, provided a brief and accurate synthesis of data and works of art, and thus a possibility to accurately interpret the artist's work. Divald's writing has been forgotten for a hundred years, yet I cite it on a number of occasions.

Another source of my research was the article on Eisenhut published in the *Hungarian Art History Lexicon* by János Szendrei and Gyula Szentiványi in 1915, in which they list the awards he was given and the exhibitions he had, and provide a detailed bibliography.

Eisenhut's art regains public attention in the early 1950s, in the course of reviews made on Hungarian painting in Munich and Vojvodina. Károly Lyka, in his book *Life of Hungarian Artists in Munich 1867-1896*, writes in a broader context about Eisenhut's aspirations in supporting Hungarian artists to participate in exhibitions in Munich, and provides a description of his studio. He also notes that one of the keys to Eisenhut's success was the reproduction of his paintings by various institutions. According to György B. Szabó, Eisenhut's works were also exhibited at the Vojvodina Hungarian Artists' Exhibition held in 1952 in Palić. György B. Szabó also gives a brief, but positive appraisal on the artist's sense of composition and painting, and his drawings.

The first monograph-like research was done in the early 1950s by Béla (Adalbert) Müller – Polyato, a German artist and teacher born in Bácska. A brief form of his research was published as a pamphlet in 1966 in Vienna under the name *Franz Eisenhut – Ein donauschwäbischer Maler orientalischen Lebens*. In this writing he cites the obituary of Dezső Ambrozovics published in 1903. Owing to Müller, numerous photographs and letters were preserved, as well as details of his personal life, obtained from his widow Adrienn Eisenhut Raichl (1879–1965), and other family members. Even though the letters and photographs did not appear in the pamphlet itself, owing to the descendants of Béla Müller, I could use them in my research.

3. The structure and results of the thesis

The thesis is divided into several chronologically organised parts, each of which ends with a conclusion providing the results of the research in the given field. In the *Introduction* I present the topic and aim of the research, as well as the main stages of my research.

In *The Beginnings* I deal with his family background, his studies in Budapest (1875/76, 1876/77) and in Munich (1877–1885), his first and second Caucasian journey (Batumi, Tiflis, Gönib, Derbent, Dagesztán, Baku; 1883, 1884), and the first years of exhibiting his work (1882–1884). In this initial period the artist enjoyed the support of Károly Telepy, the financial support of Károly Mezey, a solicitor, and the Hungarian state, and he was under the influence of the paintings of Mihály Munkácsy. Eisenhut was one of the many students of Hungarian origin in Munich to receive scholarship in the years after the Conciliation. His first two academic trips were supported by the scholarship of the Hungarian Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education.

In his early work we can see the influence of genre painting taught at the Munich Academy. He painted his first successful works on his two Caucasian journeys: *Healing through the Koran* (1883) received a positive appraisal at an exhibition in Budapest, and the Royal Treasury purchased it. The *Tatar School in Baku* (1885) received a silver medal from the Munich Academy and was bought by an art dealer from London. The painting shows some similarity to the works of Munkácsy (*Death House*, *Yawning Servant*), and presents the motif of punishment, a characteristic feature of his work. (*Disgraced*, 1889, *Before Doom*, 1890, *Sharing Prey*, 1901).

The chapter called *The Time of Success* covers the period of slightly more than eight most successful years of Eisenhut's career. It begins with *The Death of Gül Baba* (1886), which

brought him the Great National Gold Medal and a membership at the Eisenhut Fine Arts Council. The painting shows the influence of the Parisian Salon, that is Jean-Léon Gérôme: the use of lighter and richer colour effects and the size of the painting. From that time on, Eisenhut remains in the scope of French oriental art for a time. From 1888, through international exhibitions and their outcomes, he becomes even more successful – Munich (1888, 1892, 1897, 1901) Vienna (1888), Berlin (1891, 1892, 1893, 1895), Antwerpen (1892), Madrid (1892), Paris (1895). At the international exhibitions Eisenhut presents his work within the department of the Hungarian National Fine Art Association. Two of his works receive several awards: *School in Cairo* (Munich, 1892, Berlin, Paris, 1895) and *Before Doom* (Madrid, 1892). In this period he travels to North Africa (1886/1887, 1891, 1892, 1894), and Italy (Naples and the Vesuv). Later he goes on academic trips to Egypt and Syria, which was a popular route with his Hungarian contemporaries as well (Dezső Malonyai, Béla Iványi Grünwald, Miklós Zsolnay, etc.). A whole chapter is devoted to Eisenhut's studio in Munich, and his part in organizing Lenbach's exhibition in Hungary.

The mature oriental art of Eisenhut's successful period continues the painting of themes of oriental genre paintings – school, religious life, streets – on which we can see almost exclusively men. However, from 1888 on women also appear on his paintings, and these paintings can be divided into two groups. The first group that starts with *Slave Fair* (1888), shows analogy to Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting *Slave Trade* (1867): the inspection and selling of the naked, defenceless woman by men around her. This motif is related to new sexual practices that emerged among the English and French urban gentility in the 19th century, and its consequences, such as prostitution, but it also refers to a woman's social status in a men-ruled world. The following works also belong to this group: *Trophy* (1889), *Disgraced* (1889), *Before Doom* (1890), *Slave Women in a Bath* (1898). *Before Doom*, beside the motifs of slavery and punishment, also shows the idea of lesbian love. The composition of the painting is similar to Fernand Cormon's painting *Jealousy in the Harem* (1874), but its content relates to Gustave Courbet's *Dream* (1866). Lesbian love was one of the themes that occupied men's conversations about women relations in the harem, and the literature and fine arts of the century.

The second group of Eisenhut's oriental paintings showing women presents the harem, the pastimes of the women, their entertainment, or the harem woman on her own - which were some favourite themes of 19th century oriental painting. Some examples: *At the Harem* (1888/89), *A Dream* (1891), *Dolce far niente* (1892), *Darling* (1893) *Buying a New Veil* (1892), *Introducing the New Favourite* (1893), *Nautch-girl* (around 1891), *The Story-Teller* (1903), *Daydreaming* (1903), *The Waking Guard* (1893). *The Dream* is his most prominent work of art, the surface of which is currently darkened and can not be viewed in its original form. The presentation of women is close to Gabriel Max's *Lady Macbeth* (1885), and its colours fit in the purple and blue dominated style of the Munich Salon of 1891. The psychological use of colours on Eisenhut's paintings and dealing with dreams relates the artist to contemporary symbolic ideas. Towards the end of the 1880s, this painting became fashionable in Munich; it belongs to the so called 'frontal window' type of painting.

The end of Eisenhut's successful oriental period is marked by his African journey in 1894 and the *Cock-Fighting* (1894) genre painting he painted there, on which the work's illustrative, narrative and objective statements are of great importance to the artist. At the same time, this painting also marks the beginning of his late paintings presenting mass scenes (e.g. *Tea Drinking Company in Szamarkand*, 1899/90, *At the Outskirts of an Oriental Town*, 1899/90).

The first part of the *Millenarian Fever* chapter deals with the creation of ceiling paintings at the New York Café, which were made according to the plans of Hungarian Gusztáv Mannheimer (1894). The major part of the chapter is devoted to *The Battle of Zenta* (1896) – how it was ordered, created, presented and placed. It also deals with the analysis of the painting itself. The research revealed the importance of the History Association of Bács-Bodrog County, which played a crucial role when selecting the painter and theme for this thesis. While painting, Eisenhut followed the tendencies of academic historical painting of the 19th century, he drew on

his knowledge about the time and art of the event and the people, and applied characteristic baroque composition techniques (diagonal structure, repoussoir figures, the victorious army general appearing above the Turkish soldiers's corpses and the trophies of the battle). As a tableau, it was painted mainly on the basis of the painting of Jan van Huchtenburg, the court painter of Jenő Savoyai army general. He also used the gravure of his widely-known battle scene, as well as the gravure based on the drawing made by József Barzellini. Critics in the capital could not accept the painting at the time, except for the writing of Gusztáv Keleti; however, in Sombor, his final seat, it is one of his first quasi-profane, publicly exhibited pieces of work, the influence and success of which has not faded with time.

The last two parts of the *Millenarian Fever* chapter discuss the creation of the *Deference Procession*, cyclorama, as well as the presentation of his less known works he made during his long stay in Budapest (e.g. *St. László Chases the Kun, Krstbajer Villa in Újlak*). While painting the cyclorama, according to his contract with the Feszty Hungarian Cyclorama Association, Eisenhut hired assistants (Lajos Márk, Ferenc Zich, Ágoston Meissl, László Wankie, Ferenc Olgvai, Lajos Szlányi, Dániel Mihalik, József Mály). The cyclorama was on show in the Feszty Cyclorama Palace from August 1898 until September 1899, as the last cyclorama to be seen in this place. The time of this genre was over, and the cyclorama palace was pulled down.

The chapter called *Time of Changes* deals with sudden turns in the artist's private life and career, the last years of his life, his first independent exhibition (1903), and the afterlife of his bequest. Prior to his last big academic trip, Eisenhut meets ethnographer János Jankó and asks him for advice. With his wife and child he is guest at the court of the Buharan Emir (1899). Since his child dies during their stay there, they do not continue their journey, but return to Europe with his wife and the couple settles in Munich for good. He gives up travelling, and thus one of his crucial sources of artistic inspiration. From the last period of his creative work we discuss three paintings in detail: *Jollities in the Caucasus* (1900), *Fighting for Prey* (1901), *Hunyadi's Outbreak at Nándorfehérvár 1456* (1902). The dynamic compositions were not a success in Hungary. The main motif of a number of his works is dancing, a timely theme – the first Hungarian motion picture film had the same title (*A táncz*, 1901). The end of his painting career is related to changes that occurred on the Hungarian art scene, but Eisenhut played a crucial role in the promotion of contemporary Hungarian art abroad. In Munich he received official recognition for representing and supporting Hungarian artists, the record of which can be found in his correspondence with Elek Lippich. Eisenhut became a member of the "Luitpold-Gruppe" founded in 1896, which helped him in his activities.

The approach to his work improved after his post-mortem individual exhibition in October 1903, where a large number of his works and sketches could be seen for the first time.

The underlying assumption of the *Conclusion* is that the artistic activities of Ferenc Eisenhut do deserve attention because in the last two decades of the 19th century he was the only Hungarian orientalist painter in an international context who gained international recognition and represented Hungarian fine arts with his orientalist painting. Relying on the existing Hungarian orientalist- and genre painting traditions of the romantic period, as well as the Hungarian Orient-consciousness, he contributed to the developing artistic life of Hungarian towns and helped improve the international status of Hungary in the world of art. His supporting and organising activities concerning Hungarian art in Munich are especially noteworthy. Ferenc Eisenhut had an excellent sense of composition, technical knowledge, a specific approach to themes, and a humble and enduring artistic consciousness. Researching his biography and work does not always reveal new results concerning art history, but it does bring up data regarding social history, local history and art sociology. His art is a valuable and integral part of Hungarian art history. Only a few of the works of art discovered during the process of research could be observed in reality. I could see a number of them only as a reproduction or a photograph. Through the revelation of his less known works of art, the activities of contemporaries he can be connected to, and through other examples of local orientalist painting from the second half of the 19th century, Eisenhut's work can be reinterpreted and placed into a new context.

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