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Treatment of Miklós Ligeti, sculptor's oeuvre

1. Grounds for the choice of subject

Hundreds of the compositions of our sculptors are strewn about the shelves of the various Hungarian museum depositories, among which a few pieces arrive to museum exhibitions, as the exemplary citations of artistic processes considered from a determined point of view, selected from the bearings of the whole of a lifelong oeuvre.

Numerous factors have hindered the evaluation and elaboration of the life-work of the sculptors. A constituent of this condition that the inclination for collecting was less directed toward their works. Thus, collection itself was less likely to inspire the cataloguing of oeuvres. Much more important than this in the approach to art is the impact of changes that ensued. The respect for the strict aesthetic qualities worked out through the basic principle of autonomy became deeply ingrained for a long time in the accepted opinion of Hungarian art history, with this obstructing numerous sculptural phenomena of 19th century outside of art. This also disheartened domestic research – among others – taking into account the sculpture born at the turn of the 20th century. Alongside this, after 1949, the commonly known ideological limits only further narrowed the terrain for investigation. In Hungary, from the first half of the 80s, sculpture became a subject of research, and not exclusively art historical research, but it was primarily the public monument that arrived to the foreground of interest, as a borderland of art which demonstrated a close connection with the history of politics and ideas of each era, as well as the shifts in general taste. As a result of the new type of approach, countless studies and exhibitions striving for synthesis were born. In the exploration of the oeuvres of artists – among them, sculptors, however, little happened.

This dissertation has undertaken to fill in the gaps of such a loss.

2. Why exactly Miklós Ligeti?

In the classified catalogue which survived in manuscript form the 19th century exhibition at the Hungarian National Gallery, engaging in turn-of-the-century sculpture, in 1990 I wrote first on – among others – the artworks and oeuvre of Miklós Ligeti. At this time, a couple of his works: a few portraits, figural groups, sepulchral monuments and the *Anonymus* sculpture called my attention to this sculptor and his life-work.

Surveying his oeuvre, it became indisputable that we were not kept waiting for the rediscovery of the life-work of a forgotten genius sunken into oblivion. Ligeti's career embracing almost half a century, nevertheless, appeared to be extremely far-reaching, taking into account that he worked in nearly every branch of sculpture, and he also was close to ceramics and the applied arts, engaging in many subjects, and responding with sensitivity to the various stylistic transformations, so that the treatment of his life-work provided not only an opportunity to become acquainted with the artist's own motivations, but also proffered a glimpse into the issues that engaged the artists of the era.

3. The Researches

When I commenced the exploration of Ligeti's oeuvre, I was aware of merely a single comprehensive writing, the dissertation written by Mrs. Jenő Kerényi in the early 1950s.

But unfortunately, it was lost. In this way, only the longer essays that were published during the artist's lifetime could serve as a guide.

I carried out my research on two levels in parallel. On the one hand, I expanded my general knowledge of the epoch in several institutes of art history and museums at home and abroad.

I considered as my goals the compilation of the works of Miklós Ligeti – including also those compositions that are destroyed or missing, as well as the augmentation and precision of his biographical details.

For this, alongside the review of the contemporary magazines and newspapers, I carried out my research in several libraries and archives and the artist's legacy – with his own compiled collection of articles included – furthermore museums and cemeteries too.

In 2001, a biographical summary of the sculptor was published by the hand of László Prohászka at the request of the Ligeti family. The historian accomplished thorough research, naturally following a path extremely close to that of my own, and so I can only refer to this where in the disclosure of details, he obtained data which I had not. This published writing further reinforced my earlier intention, based on the multiplicity of his oeuvre, by which, in the course of treating the artworks, rather than employing the traditional chronological approach, I preferred to group according to chiefly the sculptural branches and thematic units. This created the possibility to place the artworks in a wider art historical and more succinctly summarised cultural historical context. I found it unnecessary to include all of his works and every biographical detail in such a form of treatment. I indicated these in part on the basis of documentation in a summarised biography, in part in the oeuvre-catalogue. I had no preference for one art historical method or another, with the data and documentation at my disposal determining the approach to be employed. In this way, the viewpoint of art-sociology seemed to be most promising in the chapters focusing on the sculptor's studies or his portrait sculptures, while in the case of his self-portraits or symbolic compositions it was the iconographic approach, and with the sepulchral monuments, the aesthetic approach.

All the way through, it was important to me to gain closer access to the personality of the artist, and – to the extent that it was possible – I have also mapped out his personal connections and relations. I felt that this was necessary because only a few direct utterances demonstrating Ligeti's individual way of thinking have survived. I obtained one of the most important documents among these, his subjective biographical recollections written in the late 1930s, during the last phase of my work, through the good offices of his family.

Sadly, no drawn sketches have survived from the artist, nor sculpture studies of a notable number, through which the evolution of his ideas could have been traced. Many hundreds of his drawings fell victim to the mistaken judgment of his family members, who, in the cultural-political situation following the war might have thought that there would not be any chance to present his oeuvre as integrated into Hungarian art. I do not know which of his works were placed in a private safe during World War II as planned by the artist, but it is common knowledge that the valuables preserved in these were hardly spared in the course of wartime plunder, and these works have most probably been destroyed. Thus, the discovery of a large number of Ligeti's artworks is not anticipated; at most, we might hope for the reappearance of pieces that belonged to private collections at some point.

All of this further convinced me to draw the boundaries of Ligeti's intellectual universe and spiritual hinterland not merely by direct influence, but also with the aid of analogy. This method also revealed a great deal about his creative practice.

It is true that I took more care in analysing the first phase of his oeuvre, without denying the value of his quality late works. It seemed to me that at this time, the pieces of his life-work that should be considered not only in a Hungarian context, but also from an international perspective were born. In my treatment, I did not separately touch upon his activity with architectural ornamentation, and I barely touched upon his ceramic work, whereas the discovery of additional objects and the tracing of information aiding in their dating would be necessary for deeper analysis. It is a platitude that research is never complete, but only interrupted. The arrangement of compiled data results in a snapshot, in this case, on the oeuvre of Miklós Ligeti, which I attempted to place in a new light with his compositions and to nuance the sculptor of *Anonymus*, as the evolved image of a Rodin follower, all the while avoiding the obstacles leading to apologetic art history-writing.