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**A History of Hungarian Socialist Realist Painting
1949–1956
Ideology and Existence**

Abstract of a PhD dissertation

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Objectives and Methodology

The twenty-odd years that have passed since the political turnabout of 1989-1990 still lack a history of socialist realism, i.e. the official art trend set by the previous political regime. (Attempts at such a treatment had also failed in the 80s.) In sculpture and architecture, we can rely on some stopgap publications containing a fair amount of basic research, but the treatment of socialist realist painting has been merely confined to exhibitions and popular publications.

It is the objective of this dissertation to fill this gap in Hungarian art history, i.e. to analyse the official painting of the one-party state that arose during „the brief fifties”.

The greater part of my research has been taken up by getting some elementary basic research done, i.e. surveying archival material as well as the contemporary press in order to set up the history of the period's events and institutions. Coupled with, and based on this, I then interpreted some particular works of art in order to come to certain clearly-defined units of style. As to the former, I aimed at a reconstruction of the textual field of reception history, and as to the latter, I tried to outline the main stylistic categories and a history of ideas background so that I can interpret the art history of the period.

My dissertation is couched in a post-modern, „neutral” theoretical outlook independent of totalitarian ideology, only sporadically influenced by the „bitter” experiences of historical basic research. (One of the darkest periods of Hungarian history, i.e. the 1950s do prompt one to moralise; nor is it easy to survey the artistic output of socialist realism without emotions and early conclusions especially in view of the personal careers behind the works of art.) The rhetorical analyses intended to be neutral (*ideology*) are coupled here

with the personal fortunes of the artists (*existence*); it is this dual approach that has supplied the subtitle *Ideology and Existence* for my dissertation. Chronologically, the two approaches overlap rather than make a perfect fit; the years between 1950 and 1953 are discussed predominantly by means of an ideological and rhetorical interpretation, while the years between 1953 and 1956 are much rather discussed in terms of the artists' personal disillusionment and their precarious existential situations.

In the first half of my dissertation I make an attempt at defining the ideological framework of newly arriving socialist realism, i.e. the textual field that supplied a background to the perception and reception of works of art. In order to be able to do that, I carved out a few basic rhetorical units, recurring clusters of metaphors, cognitive stereotypes and technical procedures like e.g. citing high authorities' dictums, the cult of the personality, planning in society, the building of socialism, the narrow path of socialist realism, the Soviet model, the sense of impending war, the new Man, the cult of quantified achievements, and the duplicity of criticism.

We can approach the art of the 1950s primarily from the vantage point of the classical pair of concepts image and text. With the school of the history of styles fading away, iconography, iconology, semiotics etc. had gradually become the most productive and acceptable trends in 20th century history of art which is fortunate from our own vantage point since Marxism had always been enchanted by the authority of texts, and the entire operation of the Socialist state was logocentric from Party decrees and committee meeting minutes right on to informers' reports. No other period of the history of Hungarian art has produced such a wealth of first-hand written records as that of one-party rule.

I have primarily relied on the minutes of art administration

committee meetings and printed press pronouncements. These texts can be placed half-way between mundane opining and aesthetic treatises. The authors are docile scribes of the censored press, compromised fellow-travelling intellectuals, bureaucrats merely translating from the Russian, and artists allied in some way with those in power. Their vision is shaped at once by aesthetic clichés they inherited from modernism and fragments of thought they borrowed from dogmatic Soviet theoreticians. Most of the texts are mere period pieces that can, however, help disentangle the time present of this peculiar aesthetic thinking completely forgotten by now. While analysing particular works of art I have repeatedly attempted to reconstruct the horizon of expectations spanning much of the 1950s, interspersing one or two reflective and critical external comments only when needed.

I could not avoid making a distinction among three historical driving forces. The first of those was a thorough knowledge of the Soviet model or the Soviet “mould” which could be made to explain anything. Under duress exerted by the Red Army and built up with the active participation of the Hungarian party elite, the regime tried to copy the original stereotype in all of its minute details if possible. Pinpointing a Soviet thread, however, does not go all the way in explaining everything. The internal logic of developments, e.g. conflicts on the regional level was quite similar to but not identical with the logic of central developments. Along with the Soviet model and a measure of local internal logic, we can also reckon with individual alterations. Each protagonist of the art scene had his/her own way of responding to the uniform doctrine of a socialist realism. It is ultimately due to some key figures of the Hungarian art scene that Hungarian socialist realist art can claim to have possessed a measure of individual flavour.

Basic Tenets of History

After 1945 Hungarian artists could nurture the illusion of freedom for a few years; the first official art policy statement of the Hungarian Communists' Party did not appear until the summer of 1948. It was in the unification programme declaration of the HCP, after it had incorporated the rival Social Democratic Party, that the basic tenets of their aesthetic creed were first announced. The exhibition named *Towards Communal Art* opened in the autumn was imbued with the Communists' hatred for art for art's sake, but this sentiment alone was soon found insufficient amid the all-inclusive nationalisation of cultural life started immediately after the Communists had acquired total control. In the second half of 1949 a "cultural revolution" was launched in a bid to accomplish a Stalinist turn in art policies. Standing at the helm of the revolution was the newly established Ministry of Mass Education headed by József Révai, a powerful party chief who was to govern culture policies right until 1953. Playing a key role in mobilising artists was the state-run Association of Fine and Applied Artists founded on 24 September, 1949. The founding assembly proclaimed no less than "the artistic founding principle of the Association is socialist realism". The Association was simultaneously ideological and meritocratic; while relentlessly pressing the official brand of socialist realism, it also welcomed well-respected older artists pursuing other styles. After launching such important new institutions as the Ministry and the Association, and revamping such other institutions as the art academies and the museums, those determined to sovietise the country's culture still pressed on by replacing the country's free art market by a state-run National Enterprise for Handling Works of Art.

The first important duty of the Association was to stage a big, national exhibition. It opened ceremoniously on the first

anniversary of the enacting of Hungary's Stalinist Constitution, i.e. on 19 August, 1950. With the *First Hungarian Art Exhibition* the paradigm change in art history, i.e. the accomplishment of a "cultural revolution" was complete. Following the Soviet model, by 1950 the Hungarian art scene had radically changed. By excluding the heritage of the classical avant-garde, a novel professional common ground came about uniting culture politicians of the Communist Party (now called the Hungarian Workers' Party), left-wing artists, widely acclaimed bourgeois artists of the interwar period, and a multitude of adaptable second- and third-rank artists. Their common denominator was the Stalinist concept of socialist realism conveniently renamed as "thematic art". With the complete paradigm change accomplished, the year 1951 brought little in terms of novelties. The Association first staged its thematic exhibition named *Hungarian Soldiers for Liberty*, and then, on 3 November another grand national socialist realist parade, the *Second Hungarian Art Exhibition* was launched.

In 1952, institutions of art active only for one and a half years were up for more reforms. In order to eliminate its structural deficiencies, culture politicians set about reforming the state-run art trade: in March 1952 the Fine Art Fund of the Hungarian People's Republic was launched. It was to handle financial (fundraising and distributing) affairs centrally, and transparently as far as the state was concerned, so that the Association could focus on issues of ideology and quality. Although unable to fully execute the duties entrusted to it, the Fund soon became a decisive institution of the art scene. The *Third Hungarian Art Exhibition* was the last grand show in Hungary while Stalin was alive, i.e. it was the last opportunity for Stalinist socialist realism to manifest itself in its pure form. However, on 5 March, 1953 Stalin died which led in the summer of 1953 to the Hungarian Party leadership condemning

“the cult of the personality” as well as the “detrimental influence” of an all-powerful foursome of party chiefs which included Révai. With Rákosi’s hitherto unscathed power crumbling, Imre Nagy was put at the helm of the government with his new political line for a new era. As to culture and the visual arts, without any unequivocal party instructions, the transformation was rather slow in occurring; for one thing, the disagreements among various aesthetic creeds did exacerbate. For all the slow-movement political shifts, however, the *Fourth Hungarian Art Exhibition* launched on 19 December, 1953 was still steeped in the hangovers of the cult of the personality.

The year 1954 introduced a lot of aesthetic and financial novelties. Early in 1954 the Council of Ministers decreed that 0.2 per cent of the money spent on new construction projects should acquire works of art; it also distributed HUF 8 million among administrative institutions for purchasing art, and it loosened up the art trade hitherto dominated by the state. The Fund, founded only two years before, was revamped into a half-capitalist professional organisation distributing works of art and remuneration. Existentially, the art scene had at last become well-organised. With the *Fifth Hungarian Art Exhibition* opened late in 1954, the shift into a new era became palpable: “thematic painting” was pushed into a back seat with a-political post-Impressionism regaining most of its earlier prominence.

In 1955 the aesthetic paradigm change was again stopped from becoming complete by high politics even though the restoration of Rákosi’s rule failed to reinstate the earlier absolute dominance of socialist realism. In culture policies, the communist “core” of the art scene was again favoured at the expense of artists’ groups on the fringes, which explains why the Association was unable to radically transform the outlook of a thoroughly pre-designed *Sixth Hungarian Art Exhibition* opened on 17 December, 1955.

By the autumn of 1956, parallel with the unrest of intellectuals at large, most artists had come to a view of “let any flower bloom freely”. The stage was set for another reform of the art scene; the communist “core” of the Association was replaced by a new leadership; new jurors were appointed for the preparation of the next national art exhibition; and even the idea of an abstract art exhibition was approved. The internal transformation of official art administration was not influenced in any decisive way by the revolution that broke out on 23 October, 1956. The idea of a new national art exhibition to be staged in several parallel “salons” was realised at the *Spring Exhibition* of 1957, just weeks after the revolution and freedom fighting was finally crushed. The *Spring Exhibition* proved to be a watershed between the 1950s and 1960s. Although no new art history period was envisaged yet in 1957, the dogmatic, Stalinist art practice of the 1950s had certainly come to a close.

Stylistic Conclusions

With getting the basic historical tenets right, one can draw the appropriate stylistic conclusions. In light of our knowledge of the facts, it is clear that the term socialist realism had two meanings. First, in a wider sense, it covered the entire official art of the one-party state including thematic socialist realism, socio-poetic painting, socialist modernism as the style of the whole period, works by the communist “core” along with other phenomena not discussed here. Second, in a narrower sense, it only referred to a Stalinist “thematic art” as suggested by Kaufman. Chronologically speaking, it was this last mentioned stylistic trend that first emerged, in 1950, as officially propagated socialist realism, a trend that came to mark the official art of the entire Eastern-European bloc decisively. In 1954, it got into a back seat in Hungary in the wake of

domestic political developments, only to re-invigorate itself in 1955 without fully regaining its earlier positions, however. After the revolution of 1956 it re-emerged only sporadically. *Thematic socialist realism* was tightly bound up with totalitarian Stalinism. While it had its Stalinist parallels in all branches of art, it is only in painting that the thematic adjective is apt. Its forerunners were the “critical realists” of the 19th century identified first of all with Mihály Munkácsy. Thematic art can best be described by consulting theoretical-ideological texts while applying the text-image concept-pair and related methodology of the iconographic school. As far as quality is concerned, the thematic art of the 1950s failed to stand up either to 19th century “progressive traditions” or contemporary Soviet paragons. The approaches applied most often today to thematic Hungarian art tend to refer to humour, the grotesque, and an allegedly “camp” character. More scientific approaches making more intellectual effort, however, tend to apply the hermeneutical twist of the adage of “the victory of realism”. They tend to turn the works of art originally executed for propaganda purposes into so many mirror images of the cruel oppression of artists.

Coming under a wider interpretation of socialist realism is what we can call a *socio-poetic kind of painting* that emerged from the inevitable mix of mandatory thematic socialist realism with the Nagybánya or Gresham kind of post-impressionism prevalent at the Academy of Art. It only became a trend to be reckoned with on the official art scene from 1953, but it remained influential even in the 1960s. Suited mainly for smaller sized paintings, this style duly expanded to conquer the world of monumental murals. Its output can best be interpreted by applying Wölfflin’s category of “painterliness”, i.e. the aesthetic effects of the painters’ mimetic brushwork. Although it did rely on the “Moscow impressionist” version of socialist realism for more legitimacy in a Soviet-style one-party state, it

remained an out-and-out Hungarian movement carrying on as it did, with inevitably different political overtones, the genuinely Hungarian traditions of the Nagybánya school and the Gresham circle of painters. Socio-poetic painters have produced works of classical quality that have stood the test of time and are appreciable even today. No steps have been taken by art historians to re-discover or re-evaluate them.

Along with socio-poetic paintings, in 1955 and 1956 another new but short-lived style was produced by what we can call the *communist “core”* of the Association. What they did was cautiously modernise thematic socialist realism, primarily in painting and sculpture. Their parallels can be pinpointed in various euro-communist artists and Mexican muralists, and they can also be shown to have drawn heavily on the output of the expressionists, and, more specifically, Gyula Derkovits. This particular style had failed to become a major and typical trend of the period since it was brought about by the will of the Ministry of Culture rather than a palpable, finished stock of exemplary works. Also, it was eliminated by the revolution of 1956 even though some of its traits (and protagonists) did manage to melt into the “socialist modern” style, impossible to discuss at length in this dissertation, which was to follow.

Selected publications in the topic of the dissertation

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