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Pictorial Language of Hungarian Poster Art, 1900-1914

My doctoral research focuses on applied graphic arts in late-19th-century, turn-of-the-century advertising, mainly poster art. Special emphasis is put on the changes in Hungarian poster designs of the period and to those Western European (French, British, German) parallels and differences that can be traced in its development. This comparative approach implies both a historical focus (a positioning) and a theoretical one that intends to outline general trends in this *visual communication genre*'s pictorial language. Furthermore, the research requires various disciplinary approaches (of cultural and social studies, art history and aesthetics), since this genuinely modern, applied genre occupies, by definition, a place on the verge of art and industry, and thus it is deeply rooted both in the period's socio-economical modernization and its artistic modernisms. The close relation of applied and fine graphic arts is apparent in the era, and so is their mutual influence on each other's pictorial language. To use Adorno's famous expression, the *Verfransung* (enfringement) of the arts very much involves the applied arts as well.

When researching early Hungarian poster art (from its beginnings in the 1880s to 1914) it is necessary to connect it to the European context. Firstly, because the ever more international nature of capitalism in the era provided a more or less similar (if at times belated) framework for production, commerce and advertising throughout Western Europe. Secondly, because the main modernist art and design centres (Paris, London, Munich, Vienna) influenced the region. The major Hungarian, Austro-Hungarian poster artists also received education or lived and worked for certain periods of time in Paris (Marcell Vértés, Róbert Berény, Géza Faragó), London (Mihály Biró), Munich (Hellmann Mosonyi-Pfeiffer), Berlin and, of course, Vienna, where they met and learned from notable modern artists and also appeared in periodicals (*Das Plakat*) and competitions (*The Studio*). Thirdly, there were actual "design imports" that influenced the Hungarian scene: the use of so-called bianco-posters (to which only the texts were added in Hungarian) from mostly Austria and Germany, or the employment of French or

British designs or designers for certain exhibitions (e.g.: Lancelot Crane's design for the Walter Crane exhibition of 1900).

However, there is a certain historical belatedness in the development of Hungarian poster art, observable both through socio-economical and stylistic factors. On the one hand, the economic upheaval of this region happened somewhat later (after the Compromise of 1867) than in France or England, regarding especially the mass factory production and widespread consumption. It was only by 1900 that Budapest became a modern city of urban entertainment and commerce, which naturally also belated the development of modern advertising.

On the other hand, the visual language or style of this art remained academic in the first decades. The first Hungarian poster, which dates from 1885 (Gyula Benczúr, poster for the General Exhibition), used an overdecorated, framed composition; but the designs made for the various cultural events of the 1895-6 Millennial Festivities (of Hungarian land-taking) still applied a historicist, pathetic, allegorical style (partly because of the historical nature of the event). Until the late 1890s the pictorial language mostly remained romantic or eclectic, illustrative, full of details, modelling colours, perspective views and allegorical figures. After the foundation of the Hungarian Museum of Applied Arts in 1872, the Hungarian School of Applied Arts in 1880 and the Hungarian Applied Arts Society in 1885, which institutions facilitated the development of poster design as a *profession* (with competitions, exhibitions and organised international connections), there were still debates about the requirements of the genre at the end of the century. The most modern experiments that used Symbolist and Art Nouveau elements were those of the art exhibition posters designed by artists such as József Rippl-Rónai, János Vaszary or Adolf Fényes (all lived and/or schooled for certain periods abroad).

The new style of plain and limited colours, simplified forms and a visual reference base that was easy to understand by the wide public (instead of the decontextualised and often misused allegorical, mythical references) was not unequivocally accepted. Some critiques claimed that art nouveau colours were too harsh and the praised new style of *Jugend* or *Simplicissimus* was even called radical. However, the results of modern graphic arts were soon consolidated in commercial poster art as well. The modelling and realistic colours were changed to pure colour patches of accentual silhouettes; the perspective views were flattened to surface-blocks and associative references; and the allegorical figures and settings gave way to the modern, urban scenes and character types (the café, restaurant or cabaret, the dandy, the gentleman or the demi-mondaine, just like the "cherettes" of Jules Chéret in Paris). Following this

transformation, the Hungarian commercial poster's belle époque was between 1900 and 1914 with a considerable liberalism, a jovial, optimistic mood and a spectacular stylistic transformation through the decorative stylisation of Secession (and its domestic folk tones) in the 1900s, the characteristic Sachplakat and the typographic poster in the 1910s (after German influence, mostly of Bernhard, Hohlwein and Behrens) and even towards early abstraction. The workshops of the applied arts movements, the schools and groups of modernism, and the general Verfransung between the arts and between fine and applied (or decorative) art had immense impact on both of their pictorial language by the early-20th-century avant-gardes. In addition, it also influenced how we are able (or at times unable) to distinguish and define these fields. In any case, the late-19th-century and early-20th-century (before the professionalization of graphic design) was a turbulent and exciting period of close interconnectedness, *mutual* borrowings and a strengthening "cosmopolitanism" of artistic production. Regarding the so called modern pictorial language, the statement of Maurice Denis (from as early as 1890) that "a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude, an anecdote or whatnot, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order" clearly represents the general change in visual "manners", in painting just as much as in poster art. And apart from a certain belatedness, the same considerations and changes presented themselves in the development of early Hungarian poster art.