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In the Swirl of Changing Styles and Tastes – The History of the Hungarian Masterclasses for Painting

In Hungary plans were forming to set up an art academy in the 19th century, but it remained merely a dream due to various circumstances. It only became possible in 1882 to set up a masterclass dedicated to giving professional assistance and instruction for trained artists. Gyula Benczúr, professor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich at that time, was appointed as the director of the new institution, which ceased to exist in 1920. In 1897 a second masterclass for wall painting started under the guidance of Károly Lotz, one of the most renowned masters of this genre at the time. After his death in 1904, another one of the great painters of Hungarian historicism, Bertalan Székely taught the students there until 1910.

In my talk, I would like to trace back the origins of the “masterclass system”, which Erwin Panofsky called the biggest innovation in the history of the European art academies in the 19th century. This reform plan was implemented primarily – but not exclusively – in German speaking countries, and probably served as a model for the Hungarian versions. Secondly, I would like to sum up the results of the researches I conducted in Munich and in Vienna in order to find out more about the teaching ideas and methods of Karl von Piloty and Carl Rahl, former masters of Benczúr and Lotz. Supposedly the experiences that the directors of the Hungarian masterclasses gathered during their education could serve as pattern or orientation for their own methods. What is more, both Piloty and Rahl made a huge impact through their students on the painting of the whole Central-European region in the second half of the 19th century. Thirdly, it would be necessary to highlight that the principal aim of the masterclasses was to help the students’ integration into the Hungarian art scene. Benczúr and Lotz passed some of their own commissions onto the students to work on. Free model, atelier, specialised literature, costumes and accessories were at their disposal as well. In the last two decades of the 19th century the Hungarian art scene went through a very quick development. The masterclasses not only profited from the improving circumstances, but also contributed to the flourish. Some case studies could shed light on how the years spent under the guidance of Benczúr and Lotz influenced the later career of the students. A database from the artworks painted in the masterclasses could clearly demonstrate that although the style of the professors had an impact on some of those that attended the schools, most of the 82 students were also affected by the fashionable genres and styles of the time (realism, naturalism, Pre-Raphaelites, plein air experiments etc.).

During my PhD project many methodological problems have emerged that could be seen as typical of researches about art institutions. First of all, the sources are either too subjective (recollections), or too formal (academic regulations, curricula) to provide thorough information about the highly personal methods of teaching art. What is more, most of the artworks created in the masterclasses are lost or can only be found in private collections. Secondly, the modernist artists and critics pillorized the masterclasses as old-fashioned institutions that fostered only second-rank artists. It should be taken into consideration that they fought for acceptance and exhibition opportunities, so they often made a much sharper distinction between "the academicians" and the "moderns" than it was in reality. It also should be pointed out that as long as crucial institutional and oeuvre researches are failing, we cannot get an overview about the art scene of the second half of the 19th century either nationally, or regionally.