

# „BOLDER THAN PAINTING” THE MODERN HUNGARIAN COMMERCIAL POSTER 1924-1942

– COMMON EXHIBITION OF THE NSZL AND  
THE MUSEUM OF APPLIED ARTS –



*On April 24<sup>th</sup>, in the Museum of Applied Arts, opened a large-scale exhibition based on the exceptional graphic poster-collection of our Collection of Poster and Small Prints.*

One of most prosperous period of the Hungarian poster art had started in the middle of the 1920's, with the event of modernism. The many times corny, sentimental and comic scenes of the Art Nouveau



Detail from the exhibition

posters on the streets were replaced by truly modern, constructivist compositions almost overnight. One of the reasons of the change was the appearance of a new art group. In 1925 amnesty was granted to those artists who participated in the Soviet Republic, which meant that the most important representatives of the Hungarian avant-garde could return home. During the 5-6 years long exile, many of them had been travelling in the centers of modern art: Lajos Kassák in Vienna, Róbert Berény in Berlin, Sándor Bortnyik in Weimar. Thus, the strongest influence was that of the Bauhaus with its constructivist mentality.

What does it mean „modern poster”? The art of the Bauhaus starts with function, which, in the case of the poster, it means understandable, transparent and effective communication. Objects were represented as simply as signs; the modern block letters succeeded in

typography; and the achievements of the modern art prevailed in composition. It belonged to the Bauhaus concept that they aimed at the unity of life and art; in other words they preferred those genres which had an important role in social life also. For example applied graphics, which was not important for artist only as a good source of income. The modernism represented by Berény, Bortnyik, Kassák and their students, who were politically improper and because of this had limited possibilities of exhibition, realized their new ideas in commercial advertising. And the renewal was welcomed in this field also. This is the source of Kassák's emblematic remark that, in this age, the advertising is „bolder than painting.” When, around 1930, the modernist graphic came to a halt, a new grand master arrived home from Palestine: István Irsai. The artist, who accomplished half of his oeuvre in Israel, was an important representative of modern Hungarian and Hebrew typography, and excellent posters were signed by him, like the Nor-Coc or Lampart products'. His works were exhibited at the same time as the main exhibition also at the Israel Cultural Institution, in a chamber exhibition.

Kassák sent home his first modernist poster in 1924 from Vienna (Magyar Hírlap) [Hungarian Newsletter], and this was followed by an almost explosive change. The Modiano cigarette paper factory was the first brave contracting party who employed Bortnyik. This was followed by different companies like: Tungsgram, Flora, Standard, or Frutti. The modern poster connected first of all to the novelties of modern life. A new metropolitan life-style was about to be formed, which was beyond the previous world of the salons. New products and new activities showed up: electric appliances, house wares, mobile and comfortable furniture, livable and clear apartments, and new forms of activities appeared, like the sport.

Many things had preceded the exhibition, and it was not an easy task to accomplish its present success. The selection of the 101 posters was exhibited in Spain,



Róbert Berény's poster for the Art of Book and Advertising Exhibition from 1930, which was also organized in the Museum of Applied Arts



# MAGYAR HIRLAP

HÉTKÖZ NAP

**1000K**

VASÁRNAP

**2000K**

EGY HÓNAPRA

**30** KORONA

KIADÓHIVATAL

ANDRÁSSY-ÚT 47

The poster of the *Magyar Hírlap* (Hungarian Newspaper) created by Lajos Kassák was the first modernist poster in Hungary

for first time, in 2009. The Modern Art Museum of Valencia (MuVim) presented it. From here, the selection went to a presentation in Seville. The curator of the exhibition was Katalin Bakos, the art historian of the Hungarian National Museum, and Balázs Tamási, then director of the collection, organized it. Ildikó Csillag restored the posters. The international fame of the exhibition is well demonstrated by the fact that 20 posters were borrowed from the collection for a large scale exhibition of poster-history in Malaga. This collection of about 170 posters was meant to present the first blooming period of the history of universal poster-art between 1898 and 1938. The fact that 20 out of the 170 posters were Hungarian is a great recognition of the Hungarian poster art.

After a lot of waiting, a long institutional complication and after looking for a proper place, finally in 2014, we were able to present the collection at home, too. We could draw in the project as partner the Museum of Applied Arts thanks to the Directorate of Research and Academic Affairs, which provided a perfect location also, even symbolic. They presented here the „Exhibition of Book and Advertising Artists” in 1930, which was the greatest introduction of modernist graphics at the time. Two posters announced the exhibition (created by Berény and Bortnyik), and enlarged photos of the one-time interior brought to the attention the identity of the location. The main curator was Katalin Bakos once again, and from the Museum Dóra Reichart, while from the library the writer of these lines helped as co-curator.

We wanted to compile a richer exhibition for the audience from home than the Spanish one. The posters represent the metropolitan life between the two world wars, and this is what we focused on. We tried to find as many object as possible from those present on the posters, thus we borrowed radio, wash-machine, stove from the Electrotechnical and Technological Museum of the Hungarian Traffic Museum; swimming dress, Modiano cigarette paper, Flora soap from the Hungarian Commercial and Catering Trade Museum and so on... We projected in a separate room the

newsreels of the Manda Collection; here the BNVs and other items evoked the past. We used the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts also: the furniture of Lajos Kozma represented the modern home; the pavilion- and cigarette store-plans of Zsuzsa Kovács the modern urban life. Original design-plans of Kató Lukács were on display also, as well as the catalogs of swimming caps and shoes of Tihamér Csemiczky, from the Collection of Posters and Small Prints. One could leaf through the digital versions of catalogs and magazines. Our goal was to draw attention to the one-time professional and art-world working with posters and graphic design. Thus we presented school publications, professional magazines, for example Bortnyik’s magazine entitled *Poster*, which we borrowed from a private collection, since it is so rare that we cannot find them in public collections. We emphasized the process of poster-making from hand painting, through printing, to posting. Here György Konecsni’s and Gyula Macskássy’s original poster-plans could be seen borrowed from the National Gallery.

René Grohnert, art historian, director of the Poster Museum from Essen, held a speech at the opening, highly evaluating the Hungarian art of poster of the age. The exhibition was open from the end of April to the end of August, and had more than 23.000 visitors. There were interactive museum-pedagogical occupations, systematic guided tours, and professional workshops also. On the 2014 Night of the Museums, a huge crowd was present. Herewith, I would like to thank all those who helped us: in the organizational work Edina Szilárdi and Ágnes Kopcsay; the support of László Boka director of Research and Academic Affairs and Zsombor Jékely, assistant director of the Museum of Applied Arts, and all the coworkers at the Poster and Small Prints Collections; and for the perfect and prompt work of the restorers, Orsolya Koppán, Pál Horváth, the photographers, Ádám Ackermann and Lajos Karasz.

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